

## **Blood on the Stoop—Four Tales**

by Evelyn Martinez

### I

Fat maroon spatters cascaded from the second-story entrance of the Victorian house where I lived on 15th Street to the sidewalk, coalescing into a splashy blob at the front curb, almost dry and shockingly vivid against the grungy cement.

We lived one block from Notre Dame Grammar School. My guardian, Antonia, did not trust me to travel to and from school on my own. Class dismissed at 2:45 pm, and I'd shoot out the door, out the gate, and into the beige 1953 Mercury double-parked out front. While the other girls sauntered out in chatty clumps, I'd be tripping over Antonia's sharp knees to slither into the back seat behind a grumpy Arturo Hill, her current husband. They were old. I was ashamed of them and of myself.

On that afternoon I skidded to a stop outside the school entrance, confused. Where were they?

I waited and waited. Something was wrong and I had no clue how to respond. Daring to walk home was risking Antonia's rage.

3:30 pm. The last straggling student had rounded the corner. What should I do? Home was just a block away. I took off running. Running like Antonia's friend Satan was after me. Panicked, almost sobbing, I arrived home to the maroon stain at the curb, more stains on the sidewalk, on the front steps, on the doorknob ... there was blood everywhere. The house silent, forbidding, desolate, I banged on the door. I cried. I yelled, "Mama! Arturo!"

I rang the first-floor tenants. No answer. I shuddered on the bloody stoop sensing a brutal assault, a death, my abandonment. I was thirteen years old, but I had lived a regimented life Antonia controlled and had no decision-making skills. Who could help me?

Sister Catherine Dolores, our principal—she'd know what to do. I ran back to school, tore into her office, and blurted out my frantic story. She took my hand and listened. Alarm flickered in her gray eyes.

My emergency contact list contained one name, Dr. Jorge Arguelles, a dentist in San Francisco. Antonia claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of a prominent Nicaraguan politician, the father of Dr. Arguelles. She called Jorge her brother. “Not true,” he had once whispered to me. “Antonia is mistaken.” Nevertheless he “went along” with her story.

Dr. Arguelles and his wife appeared within the hour. We swung by the house—empty, its bloodstains blurred by darkness. They took me to their fancy home in Forest Hill and fed me a snack.

I had experienced their generosity previously, their gifts of beautiful books and art materials. On this evening they conversed quietly but nervously in the kitchen. I cringed under their curious pitying stare.

We knew what Antonia was capable of. I envisioned Arturo slashed to pieces in a knife attack and Antonia behind bars. The Arguelles' first call was to SFPD. They tracked her to SF General Emergency where she had been treated for severe cuts to the hands. She'd lost considerable blood but refused admission. Once they'd stitched her up, she'd ordered her husband to take her home.

We got back to the old Victorian just as Arturo was easing a wobbly, shrunken Antonia out of the Mercury. His face was pinched and sad. His hands shook. The tale that emerged was grisly, but true to Antonia form. The two had been battling. As usual she grabbed her always-handy butcher knife and went after him. Fleeing Antonia's crazed fury Arturo stumbled down the narrow stairwell to the front stoop. She caught him and attacked, jabbing at his face and chest—a scenario I was familiar with. But then he did something astonishing—he snatched the big knife out of her hand. Outraged, reckless, she seized it back with both hands, blade up. Antonia and Arturo grappled. She would not surrender her knife even as it sliced deep into both upper palms, nearly severing the fingers. Arturo let go, horrified as blood spurted over the two of them.

From that day on Antonia and Arturo shared a quiet truce. He nursed her with a

tenderness that astounded me and made me jealous. Antonia never regained full arrogant control of the household.

Her hands lost the strength to grasp a knife. Her desire to clutch me tight slipped away and she even allowed me to walk to and from school by myself.

## II

Two years prior it had been my blood splattering the front stoop, my ride to the ER. Once I was past docile childhood and capable of both talking back and running fast, the fights between Antonia and me turned vicious, loud, and physical. That evening Antonia locked everyone in for the night. As usual, Arturo was confined to his tiny room, while she and I were secured within the front rooms of the flat. Our area consisted of a living room and bedroom separated by French-style glass doors.

The fight was a typical exchange of threats and demeaning insults. She'd yelled something about my being "la hija de la puta mas grande" and "una maldita, una ingrata." Storming out of the bedroom, she threw open the multi-paned door. I was at her heel cussing furiously back when she slammed it. Caught in the threshold I reared back, my left arm shielding my face. My arm shattered a glass pane and was slashed to the bone from wrist to mid forearm. I swooned at the gaping cut, the geyser of blood. Antonia grabbed a towel, wrapped my arm, and roused Arturo out of bed.

The closest ER was at Mary's Help Hospital a few blocks away.

Terrified, in shock, I barely heard Antonia concoct a story of innocent youthful rambunctiousness on my part. I did not contradict.

The stitching would be done under local anesthetic. As the masked and gowned surgeon approached, I started thrashing and yowling. Angrily he called out, "Hold her down!" They tried and I fought them. Then, gentle hands on my shoulders, a soft soothing male voice. It was a young doctor—an angel, I thought. He cradled my head and stroked my greasy hair. My body stilled and the testy surgeon finished his job. I spent the night at Mary's Help. It was nice to be in a clean gown in a clean bed in a peaceful place.

### III

Knife fights were routine occurrences during my grammar school years. Antonia kept a rough assortment of men in the house—generally either on their way to prison or just released. I confess the distinction of having visited every state prison in California by the age of nine.

Antonia's men hung around the rear of the house drinking and smoking. They carried weapons, as did Antonia. She had a stash of knives, hatchets, lead pipes and at least one gun. She shared her arsenal with her male associates. The cops were frequent callers to our home—generally stomping through the front door while one or two of her friends climbed over the back fence and escaped via the neighbors' yard.

16th Street in the Mission—especially the blocks between Guerrero and South Van Ness were notorious drug- and alcohol-fueled sites of gang and personal warfare amidst a string of sleazy bars and liquor stores. Families and decent folks stayed away after sunset.

We once had a young guy staying at the house—late teens, early twenties. He'd scandalously become involved with the mother of the downstairs tenant. The tenant and his wife were professionals working long hours and the tenant's grandmother had come to help with their kids. But she spent more time canoodling in Antonia's kitchen with our young guest—was she in her forties, fifties? One night this young guy succumbed to the temptations of 16th Street, left the house and Grandmother's arms.

Late that night piercing cries for help from the sidewalk yanked us out of our sleep.

Antonia and I ran to the front window. The boy was crawling up the stoop, one hand pressed to his left side, a stream of blood in his wake. Antonia flung our door open. I crept down the steps and found Grandmother in her nightgown kneeling on the cement, embracing the boy. Perhaps she had tried to drag him up the stairs. I crouched alongside not offering much help.

Meanwhile, Antonia flap-flapped down to the street in her ratty "chanclas" and surveyed it right and left. Assured that no one had followed the boy, she dashed back up to call an ambulance. She forgot about me. I watched, fascinated as

Grandmother/lover tried to comfort the whimpering boy.

Something thick and ropy slid out of a jagged hole under his ribs. Grandmother squealed, “Que es eso?” “Que te metieron?” She pulled on what looked like puffy rolled cotton trimmed in bright red, and he screamed. Peering closer, “Hay—tus intestinos, mijo!” She quickly started shoving it back in.

Finally, the distant wail of a siren. Then a chorus of sirens. As the ambulance screeched around the corner, she kissed and soothed the boy now passed out in her arms. Antonia tromped downstairs briskly pushing men out her door, grabbed me by the arm, hauled me inside, and turned the bolt.

Stealing one last glance, I saw Grandmother clutching at the boy while her son pulled her towards their flat.

Cops were everywhere. The son—his English clear, precise: “We know nothing, officers. I have seen the young man in the neighborhood on occasion. Never talked to him.”

Antonia in broken, but highly indignant English: “Just a boy I helped out one time. He said his name was Juan. No, he doesn’t live here.”

He was taken to SF General Emergency. Grandmother visited him in the hospital. We heard he survived and was deported. Grandmother’s son sent her back to Nicaragua. The tenants divorced and moved out after a series of nasty scenes. I watched their two small kids being packed off somewhere. They looked lost and miserable, a feeling I knew too well.

#### IV

The bland faced Victorian on 15th Street thrived as a gang-related war bunker while Antonia lived and maintained health and cash. We who survived there were all battle-scarred, without mercy in our hearts. The most notorious incident—earning a shocking front page headline along with mention of our address—occurred on a Friday night in winter, on my ninth birthday.

Antonia and Arturo picked me up after school and we headed for Victoria Bakery in North Beach to buy my “special” birthday cake (actually Antonia’s favorite), rum with thick white icing. Pink green swirls and pastel rosettes wished me, “Happy Birthday,

Abelina.”

Then we rushed home to tidy up the living room. Antonia had invited some of the neighborhood kids and their moms. I was dreading the whole thing and the crinkly too-big dress she'd bought me for the party.

The house, as always, was full of her men friends drinking and carousing in the kitchen and on the back porch. She ordered them to settle down and shut the kitchen door. Then she locked Arturo in his room. The party was a mild disaster. The few invited kids and I stared at one another. Nobody enjoyed the cake except Antonia. Loud rude laughter burst out of the kitchen. The parents looked at one another and hustled their kids home.

There we sat with most of a melting lopsided cake. I wrestled out of the hated dress and jumped under the covers with a book, grateful to be alone and confined to the front rooms. Antonia joined her men in the kitchen in the back of the house. I must have fallen asleep. Sirens wove through my dreams—an odd but familiar lullaby. My lullaby got wildly insistent and I jarred awake. The strident wails were converging on our street. Yet again, cops bashing open the front door. Followed by yelling, stomping up the stairs, the back porch door slamming open and shut. More thumping down the back stairs. Heavy boots running down the hall and out the back.

“Stop, you are under arrest. Stop or we'll shoot.” I heard a crash in the backyard. Peeping out the side bedroom window overlooking the neighbors' yard, I saw a man straddling the fence. He was quickly dragged down by half a dozen uniformed cops with drawn guns. The walls shook as they wrestled him down the hall, down the stairs, and out the entryway. I ran to the front window and recognized one of Antonia's men, handcuffed and flung into the back seat of a squad car. Other cops stuck around talking to Antonia. There was no sign of the other men. Her English was extra poor that night, her voice deferential. “I know nothing.” “No se nada.” She shook her head. She shrugged dramatically.

It made the headlines on all three newspapers—Chronicle, Examiner, and Call-Bulletin. “Man Shoots and Kills Wife in Front of Six Children.” And the crime-scene photo—shocking, lurid. A small flat on Capp Street. A bleak, narrow, untidy room, a door framing tunnel-like darkness beyond. Two touselled beds on each side of the room.

Five or six dark-haired children caught by the camera lens—a wide-eyed toddler in draggy diapers, small half-dressed bodies huddling on the cots, clinging to the walls. By the far door a girl about my age pressed against the threshold, eyes downward. On the linoleum floor, from behind the right bed frame sprawled two bare legs, one foot in a “chancla.” The edge of a flowered skirt peeked out. The rest vanished into the shadows.

The body on the floor was the mother of the children, shot to death by her estranged husband who gave his current address as our flat. After a night of drinking he had decided to “have a talk” with his wife, stopping to pick up a gun along the way. The wife became “unreasonable.” Enraged, he shot her to death in front of their children and fled back to our house. Back to 15th Street where he and Antonia were working out a plan when the cops showed up.

I was mortified—and still stunned—at school on Monday. The nuns were extra kind and patient with me that week. Antonia admitted without remorse that she had lent him her revolver: “Didn’t think he would do something crazy. But that wife of his was a whore, and probably had it coming to her. Too bad about the kids.” That’s all she had to say.

Arturo, for once, expressed concerns about how his pension funds were being spent. Antonia may have listened. Fewer men came round the house. The murderer was sent to San Quentin. Antonia and I went to see him once or twice. He was released after a few years and headed to our house, but didn’t stick around. I don’t know what became of those orphaned children.

The rest of the blood stains on the plain-faced 15th Street Victorian—a victim in its own right—fell in drabs, dribbles, and smears. The house witnessed suffering—bludgeoned mice, impaled canaries, tortured chameleons, neglected dogs, cats, bunnies and turtles, aborted fetuses, abused humans. Much of it simply categorized as collateral damage in the ongoing war that was Antonia.

I have been drawn back to the house periodically. One day I encountered a young woman coming down the front stairs as I gaped at the dingy shingled facade. I blurted, “I grew up in that house” and joked about it being haunted. Neither of us laughed. She lived on the second floor—where the worst mayhem was enacted. Certain rooms felt oppressive, indeed haunted, she said. People refused to share the flat for

more than a few months. She and her new roommate were trying to exorcise these brooding restless spirits, but they were tenacious. The young woman invited me up. I had last been inside that house thirty-three years previously. It could not hurt me. My body grew heavy and my gut twisted as she led me up those familiar grim stairs into the old bedroom, and to the closet that opens up into the attic. Malevolence and its unleashed anguish slammed into me. I knew that what the young women sensed was real. But I was useless to help and wished them luck as I fled down the steps and into the sun-washed street.

### **Epilogue**

The house I grew up in was a two-story dour Victorian with faded tan shingles in San Francisco's Mission District. My current home is a Hollywood-style bungalow painted a delectable orange sherbet with raspberry trim. It is a half a block from Ocean Beach in San Francisco. I was a helpless prisoner within the walls of my childhood house. I am a free individual within my home. I leave and return as I please.

The Victorian on 15th Street had seven rooms—high-ceilinged, narrow, with stained enamel walls. Its dusty, cluttered rooms had sharp, shadowy corners and lined a bleak hallway. The door to each room had two locks—a latch and a deadbolt. Doors remained shut and locked at all times.

Shabby nylon curtains drooped over the few tall, dirt-streaked windows. Delightfully, the back porch boasted the one large west-facing window in the house. I savored rare moments on that porch soaking in late afternoon sun and sky. My childhood house was bordered by cement cracked, chipped, and devoid of the tiniest green weed.

My home by the ocean is one wide, flowing, light-infused space with no staircases. The only locked doors lead to the outside world, to be opened at my discretion. My back wall is no wall but a series of windows that gaze upon and open into my garden. My front and back yards are lush with blooming succulents and flowering bushes.

Wood, shingles, and plaster do not utter words, but they remember. And if walls could talk? Might not the battered old Victorian groan and splinter into shivery fragments

of misdeed and sorrow? My home by the ocean speaks softly, openly of peaceful things.



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