Home

Autumn 2009

Summer 2009

Spring 2009

Autumn 2008

Summer 2008

Spring/Summer 2008

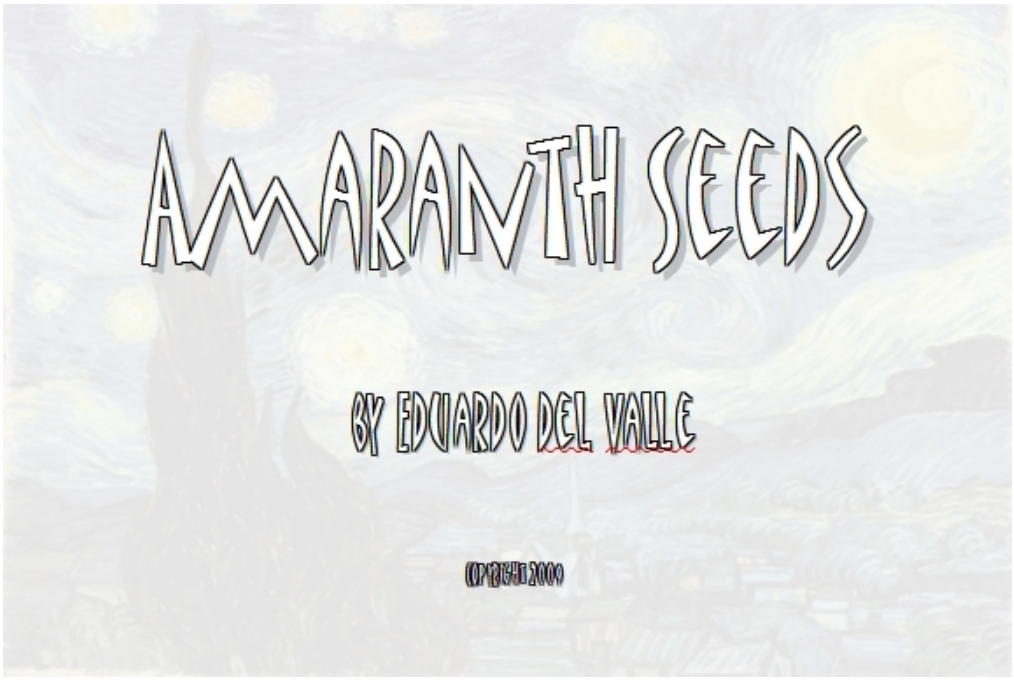
Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

SNR's Writers

Contact



The dead woman used to live upstairs from her daughter, Vivian, and Henry, the son-in-law, on 49th Street, about halfway up the block between Bergenline and Palisade, in the last bastion, as she'd say, of their kind in this town. Over the years, she'd grown fragile; her bones were brittle, so brittle she broke a few before she gave up the ghost. A couple of weeks ago she fractured her hip but not before breaking the left tibia, and even before that, just about a month now, she would've broken a rib or two had it not been for her withered breast. And there was that other time, too, when she broke her left arm; no one knows exactly how Carmita, the old woman, broke it, she never said; that was the first mishap and it happened a few days after the bereavement of her beloved husband. Yet in spite of these mini-cataclysms she took each form of affliction as nothing more than another step on the sequence towards the inevitable, oftentimes managing, in the process, to prompt enough of those unintended perceptions—of haughtiness or moral narcissism—-which others had so readily taken the liberty to assume.

Clearly, she understood the meaning of these little calamities, for it wasn't like the old woman had two left feet; she'd always been careful and never suffered bodily injury before she broke her arm. It was she, the catta, Reina, the olive-eyed tabby who for each mishap had bore her part, yet Carmita had never mentioned it, wouldn't say a thing to anyone. Not even to Vivian, her only and childless child, did she ever say a thing.

Reina had seldom ever bothered with anybody but Manolo, who was Carmita's husband and Vivian's father. And since the old man passed away several months ago, Reina hasn't been the same. "I swear that cat's in mourning," Vivian had said one day. "Or possessed," was Henry's retort.

It had always been very obvious: the only creature Reina ever loved, as far as feline love goes, was Manolo. It was he who had brought her home from the shelter. She was a sickly-looking kitten, less than a pound, eyes covered with gummy pus when he picked her out from behind the pane of the glazed-in pen, in the feline section. The attendant at the shelter had mimed the sign of death, his strong brown fingers stretched, shaped like a blade, razor-sharp fingernails shimmering, moving side to side across his throat. Manolo held her, coiled in his big arthritic hand, Carmita and Vivian standing beside him, anxious to get out of that pee-stinking place. "Manolo, mira, he says it's going to die, look at him, viejo," Carmita had said. "Bobería. We'll take her." He knew it was a catta, somehow and without looking. And he nursed her to health, administering medication with an eyedropper, cleaning her eyes of the

oozy stuff at least twice a day for two weeks, his gouty fingers trembling but steady with purpose.

She would purr; sing her song of seduction only when Manolo was around, sleep on his side of their bed, curled in the crook of his legs, watch the Yankees on top of his belly, forelegs stretched, squint-eyed, pawing and kneading the tiny pillow he'd place on his groin, just for her. Playing dominoes she would sit on his lap, her olive eyes peering above the edge of the table, attentively behind the two rows of chips. When he wasn't home she would vanish, and then she would reappear, rematerialize out of nowhere just as he stood at the stoop unlocking the kitchen door, keys jingling, and she would sing and camber in cattish happiness as he'd come in. There were times when Carmita felt jealous of Reina, of her splendiferous and youthful fidelity, that form of devotion which, after five decades of marriage, the old woman was no longer able to so readily dispense, which is not to imply that feelings for her husband had withered away, but Reina had her ways, the power to wake that green-eyed monster in her.

After the old man passed Reina was rarely seen around the house, eating and drinking from her dual chromed bowl in the dark; pouncing from her hiding places and startling Carmita and hissing at Henry more than once; doing bad things she had never done while Manolo was alive.

"Stop!" said Carmita, standing at the threshold of the living room archway; palm of her hand on the jamb she bent and pulled the furry hot-pink slipper from her left foot. "Stop! Stop it! ¡Te mato, cabrona!" the old woman hollered, as Reina sharpened her claws on the couch, tearing with feline gusto into the plastic covering that covered the purplish-red fabric. (Manolo wouldn't have it, refused to have her de-clawed. He'd found a wooden spool by the abandoned cable factory, where he used to work, stapled a remnant of low-pile moss-green carpet around it, and this contraption Reina had used for clawing until the day Manolo died.)

The old woman hurled the slipper and Reina whisked away, over the round glass tabletop by the couch, grazing the mauve tassels dangling from the lower rim of the plastic-covered lampshade, knocking down the porcelain matador, a figurine Carmita had bought over thirty years ago at El Encanto, which used to be on Bergenline and 34th Street, before the place was sundered into a remittance shop on one side and a pupusería on the other.

Into the dining room the old woman went, ambling after the catta, but couldn't find her without ado; she saw the tip of the tail, squirming, quivering on the slate-blue rug, out from underneath the chair—-Manolo's chair—-at the head of the table, which had only been used for traditional dinners and special occasions (always Noche Buena of course, and eventually, after Vivian's first year in grade school, Thanksgiving, and a few special times thereafter, such as late afternoon dinners on occasion of Vivian's first communion and confirmation; or the evening after Cacho, Carmita's brother, and his wife Elena and Cachito, their mongoloid son, arrived from Havana, and three years later on the evening of Cacho's funeral; all other times they'd eat at the kitchen table.) Calmly and quietly, Carmita approached the catta's hideaway, underneath Manolo's chair. Reina didn't move, her tail jiggling, inveigling; it was then Carmita sprung a swift kick. But Reina was too fast. Carmita's tibia broke on impact, on the front stretcher of Manolo's chair. This was not an unprovoked attack, and yet, later, Carmita couldn't tell her daughter why she had been so inclined as to aim a kick at the cat, "Don't know...I was suddenly taken over by an impulse...y así fue, ¡fuacata!" Nor did the old woman ever tell her daughter that it had been Reina, less than two weeks earlier, who'd caused her to trip from the third step as the catta zoomed by, flying down the stairs from the attic between her feet. She broke the fall on her breast, bashing the newel.

* * *

"Mima, cuántas veces have I told you?"

"Told me qué?"

"Not to chase her—-"

"Aaaah."

"—-or go upstairs or downstairs or outside, don't do nada así when you're home alone. Haven't I—-"

"Mi casa is not a prison; tu padre had enough of that for all of us."

"Why won't you ever listen to me?"

"You're my daughter, y yo tu madre. Mi casa is not a prison. You're not my jailer. Tú no me dices what to do."

"A few months back you broke an arm—-"

"La izquierda."

"Few weeks back you break a leg...kicking the—-"

"La cabrona wouldn't listen to me."

"—-and now you've got stainless steel pins in your hipbone—-"

"¿Y qué?"

"¡Vieja cabezona!—that's que."

There were two beds in the hospital room, sockets and buttons on the walls; it was cold and Vivian twined her arms, trying to keep her plum nipples warm. The other bed was vacant, the curtain drawn. A nurse came in and they cut the talking; she made some chitchat in her Marinduqueño lilt. "Comemierda," Carmita mumbled as the nurse left the room.

"Te lo dije when you called. I was in the middle of a class and still took the call y te lo dije, didn't I?"

"Don't know what you mean," the old woman said.

"I had already fed her that morning, like I do every morning. ¡Te lo dije, carajo!"

"So you did, ¿y qué?"

"There was no need for you to feed her again, that's what; no need for you to bother with her at all."

"I had no intention of feeding her."

"Why then—-"

"I wasn't looking for her to feed her. I was looking for her because..." and like a child Carmita

bunched her shoulders, glanced at the cast on her leg.

"And now look at you," said Vivian, "mirate, less than—-just weeks after breaking that leg, you go on the stairs, lugging that cast. ¿Por qué, coño, por qué? Give me a good reason, Mima," she paused, took a deep breath. "No, espera, no, come to think of it, olvidalo—-there's no good reason—-"

"I heard noises upstairs."

"Noises—-?"

"Scratchy noises."

"Probably squirrels, pero afuera, they're not in the attic, not anymore they're not."

"Those rodents are devouring my house; they're in the walls the roof the attic, and that good-for-nothing husband of yours no hace un carajo—-"

"Please Mima don't try to change the subject."

"Had our tree chopped down, that's what he did—-nada más. If your father were alive he would've fixed the squirrel problem, and he would've nunca, jamás, taken down our tree, because he knew how much we loved it...and the garden—-they trampled all over our garden..."

It'd been their garden for years, of course, a strip of dirt on this Union City homestead which for so long had held them in a state of suspension—-there'd always been, for years, next year, the year things would change and they'd go back to their real home, La Habana Vieja—-but, unknowingly, inevitably, this town had already become home--and was it too late? Union City, New Jersey, a place in flux now, of cha chas and nacos and cholos (Ay, Mima, please!); of extremes, too cold, too hot, too far, too close; of things in obverse, of freedom and solace, compulsion and affliction; of front yards drowned in concrete and blacktop, backyards but a strip of dirt.

"I told you, no hay ningún problema, nothing needs fixing, Mima"

"That was a man, tu padre. Always there, to fix it all, sometimes even before things broke, on top of everything, taking care of the manly business all hot-blooded—-"

"We don't have squirrels in the attic, ¡ya no más!"

"I heard the scratchy noises, Vivy, no me digas what I heard or didn't."

"Squirrels aren't coming in the house anymore. Henry resolvio el problema. Don't you remember when—-"

"He did nothing of the sort, te lo dije ya, that useless husband of yours, all he knows how to do is delegate. Delegate, delegate—-"

"Y ahí va—-"

"The exterminator trapped the critters and that drunkard from Santa Clara, tu sabes perfectamente quien, the one who lives around the corner—-coño, no me mires así—-ese mismo, he patched the hole on the wall, and then he got those pintsized Ecuadorians to chop

down the tree—-"

"Okay, okay, ya está bueno—-"

"—-and they trampled all over our garden, and the amaranths. ¡The amaranths, carajo!"

"—-pero Mima, ¿qué—-"

"Tu padre would've done everything himself, but never chop down our tree, nunca, jamás—-"

"Mima, Henry hasn't got the time—-"

"No es cosa de tiempo."

"No? Okay, fine—-"

"It takes red-blooded temperament to be the type of man que tu padre fue."

This was true. For fourteen years up until 1977 Manolo, the olive-eyed Creole, had survived on little more than the stuff of his mettle. He made it through these years because he had it, "red-bloodedness," as Carmita would, whenever the opportunity came up, say so herself. His manliness was a thing of legend among friends and acquaintances and even strangers. Manolo's story had been told in one of the Union City weeklies; Congressman Menendez, who was eventually elected Senator, met him once at a patriotic event at El Club Cubano, shook his hand; "La gran puta," Manolo would say later to friends, wiping his hand on the lapel of his jacket. Pride oozing out of her eyes, Carmita always said her husband was, owing to the things she knew he'd intended to do before he was jailed, the greatest of ex-prisoners-of-conscience in this whole world of exiles, greater even than Matos himself, for that one too was a whore. And when he was finally let out of prison on that Thursday morning, in August of 1977, everyone thought Manolo would die within a day or two; the only reason those cabrones at La Cabaña had pardoned him, Carmita had oftentimes said, was because the prison doctors were sure her Manolo was already practically dead and they didn't want him dying in the infirmary. So near was he to the gates of the grave, she was shown the completed death certificate sans the signature of the chief medical officer, who, she was told, was on vacation in Moscow and due back on Monday. So she was told to take Manolo home and come back on Monday afternoon with the local director of her CDR (the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution), who would attest to Manolo's death before release of the death certificate.

But Manolo had gone off for four days and five nights and, on the brown banks of the Lethe, had made a pact with the angel of death. And on the sixth day, the CDR director set out to report el gusano's miraculous recovery, only to find his wife screaming, her back flat on a desk, legs clasped and thighs quivering around the nape of the district politburo patrón. Love-wounded, the CDR director never reported the miracle of Manolo's revivification, and so it was by the power of love's umbrage that Manolo was saved, and he went into hiding for a couple of years, before sailing across the Florida Straits.

* * *

"I'll be by tomorrow—-"

"¿Cómo?" Carmita bawled.

"—-to pick you up and take you home," Vivian said.

"Why can't I go home now?"

"Porque el doctor ha dicho mañana."

"I hate this place. I want out of here, now."

"Mima, mañana."

"¿Y cuándo mañana?"

"By no later than one."

"That late?"

"I couldn't get anyone to cover my classes any earlier. Mañana. Okay?"

"Okay."

But she never got to go back home; Carmita passed away yesterday, a heart attack. So she died, with a broken leg, her breast still bruised, pins screwed into the hipbone. And now Vivian idles at a traffic light; she's on her way to the funeral home, sees the sidewalk ensembles, steadily shrinking along Bergenline Avenue but still at their chore: "La pobre; couldn't live without Manolo." "The Almighty doesn't make them como ella anymore." And, "For almost fifteen years espero por Manolo, la santa." "Lo fue a ver every month at La Cabaña." "Would've served the sentence with him, si los cabrones had allowed it." Across the street, by the new taquería, at the corner, where Habana Bakery used to be, "Manolo era un héroe, los cojones he had." "Y coño Carmita, los cojones on her!" "Where's the wake?" "Don't know." "Probablemente the same old place." "The same dump."

Vivian turns onto 41st Street from Bergenline Avenue and parks in front of the funeral home, goes up the tawny brick steps, looks back from the stoop, under the slate-grey half-moon arch, and walks across the veranda, through the thick glass door, into the rococo anteroom. She feels nauseous in this place, always has; all those funerals strewn about, like dust bunnies in the corners of her mind.

"Good afternoon Missus Martin. Glad to see you again." She ignores the young man's malapropos salutation, and says, "Where's your grandfather?" "Well, he's—-" "I'd only make the arrangements with the funeral director." She waits for almost an hour and the funeral director finally shows up, dressed up as always in his sooty three-piece suit, white shirt and, today, a rotten eggplants necktie.

"Ay Vivian, cuanto lo siento," his hands on the shoulder pads of her navy blue cardigan jacket, his lips skimming over that obtuse forehead of hers.

"Thank you," she says, "y a propósito, you may want to give your grandson some lessons in exequial etiquette." She doesn't take off her coat, shoulder bag hangs from the crook of her arm; her eyes two black moons.

"¿Oh?" he says.

"Never mind. Let's get this over with. I'm running late." She waits for him to go first, a few steps ahead, and follows him upstairs, to his office.

In the office he asks, beckons with an open hand telescoping out of the sooty sleeve for her to take a seat, and she sits, on the same wing chair her mother had sat when they were both

here last, doing this for the old man, she now sits, puts down her shoulder bag on the adjacent armchair, the one she'd taken next to her mother's but a few months before. She glimpses around as he turns, sees something new on the desktop, a miniature pewter casket, looks like a paperweight; the 'Have You Hugged Your Funeral Director Today' sticker framed, "Regalo de mi nieto," the funeral director says, sitting down at his banker chair, "he ordered it online and framed it himself. Adorable, isn't it?" She says nothing, warps her eyebrows with an air of accustomed disbelief.

A big picture window hangs behind him. Vivian produces the papers but that isn't necessary, he tells her; your father had made arrangements for everything, three years ago in fact. And so, el viejo had already prearranged everything, the plot had already been purchased; problem is he'd been sold a duplex, but he thought he was buying a double, died thinking Camita would one day be laid to rest next to him, would've never agreed to this she-on-top-of-he arrangement. Knowing him as Vivian did, it isn't hard for her to figure this is not how the old man would've ever intended it; he'd been had, duped, for it's certain he would've never approved, his wife interred on top of him like that. Now, upon learning of this interment arrangement, it's too late and she resigns herself to her parents' sepulchral fate (the plots on either side of the Prado duplex are already sold). From the caskets to the memorial cards, the whole business the old man had already planned, for both he and his wife, the whole thing paid for ahead of time, the final payment made at least six months before he died. Always the optimist, always planning ahead, not even La Cabaña could take that away from him; he passed on and left not a debt unpaid; this was so important to him, Vivian knows.

"I've gone to the hospital and personally arranged for everything," the funeral director tells her, in that funerary demeanor that funeral directors possess.

She begins to wander into the window; the funeral director has a special manila folder labeled 'Prado' and pulls it from the bottom desk drawer.

"Bueno, Vivian, as to the obituary, this is what—-"

She must be downstairs already, the thought crosses her mind, as she gazes through the chalky glass, the fawn clapboard siding across the driveway blocking but a sliver of sky. They'll have to remove the cast, she thinks.

"—-from two to four and seven to nine—-"

From the crook off the gutter dangles a white downspout. No squirrels there, I bet. Not a hint of a tree in sight.

"—-and raised in Marianao—-"

We'll sell the house now. No need for a two-family anymore—-we'll move to the suburbs, faraway, Little Falls...

"—-lived in Union City for—-"

...further yet, Oak Ridge...like Mari and Gladis and all the rest

"—-beloved wife of the late Manolo—-"

Have to pick out her clothes, the dress, her shoes, her necklace, the studs.

"—-is survived by her—-"

"No," she cuts in now, "it ought to read 'Survived by her daughter Vivian, parenthesis nee Prado close parenthesis Martin.'"

"But that's not how he'd—-"

"Do it."

"Okay, sin problema. Anyone else? Being survived, I mean. Still no grandchildren, I presume."

"Correct."

"The last paragraph then—-"

Cabrón. He knows There won't be any—-"Instead of flowers say the family prefers donations to the Osteoporosis Society or Foundation, or is it Association? I can't remember, but it is O-s-t-e-o-p-o-r-o-s-i-s something or rather. You may want to have your nieto look it up online."

"I'll make sure he does."

"My husband will stop by tomorrow with the dress and the shoes, and the jewelry."

"Wasn't he your student?"

"Who?"

"Mi nieto."

"Oh, sí, he was."

As he signs a form a smirk splays on his face.

"Will you remove the cast?" she says.

"The cast?"

"Yes—-the cast—-"

"Oh, sí, sí, I'm sorry. Por supuesto—-"

Done she gets up, realizing he hasn't even seen her mother yet, much less "personally arranged" for anything himself. Better this way, she thinks; the thought of him seeing her mother naked perturbs her.

"Would you like coffee?" the funeral director says.

"No. I'm already late for my afternoon classes."

"Working today?"

"Yes. I'll see you tomorrow."

The funeral director walks her to the stoop. From inside the car she looks back at this edifice, for the first time after all these years: above the half-moon arch, exposed butt purlins span

between open rafters, thick and heavy, each braced with robust double-up collar-beams—-Such sturdiness, she thinks, must be necessary for such a place—-and projecting from the right front corner, an oriel on a corbel of tawny bricks, black glass oilcanning on the curved sash, and now, hands hanging from the wheel, lone witness to this spectacle of architectural pomposity, she's swept by a gale: For some time the expectative desolation he'd left behind was excruciating, but not for Mima, she took it upon herself to make and execute all the preparations and everyone was in awe because she'd handled everything so well, with such composure and exactitude, such resolve and focus, there was no detail she neglected, and all the while unaware, la vieja had no clue, he'd done it all, made all the arrangements for her too, planned the next step towards their life in the afterlife, and he's been waiting since, mi viejo, and perhaps not as patiently or peacefully as most would think. She takes a sidelong glance at the empty passenger seat, grins melancholically, stares into the rearview mirror, tweaks it just that way and pulls out of the curbside parking space.

Driving back on Bergenline they wave hello; she waves back, and on goes the chorus with its ode. "Viewing hours are the usual, I guess." "Well, I'll be stopping by mañana, después de las siete" And, "That's a heck of a woman, una mujerona." "Como su madre." And, "Oye, by the way, did you hear the latest?" "What?" "Fidel's dead." "Again?"

* * *

It'd been a long night and now she sits by the window, sipping black coffee, strakes of sunlight splaying on the parquet floor, bending and twisting on the spindles of the Windsor chairs, over the edge and across the shiny, cherry-plated tabletop.

"I'll drop off the things at the funeral home on my way in...Will they be open so early, you think?" Henry says. Vivian utters nothing in reply, tightens her lips and nods no. He grabs the usual mug and fills it three-quarters full.

"I'll call from the office and find out when—-"

"I should've taken it...she needs to be ready by one."

He screws his eyes, checks himself, blinks with mollifying intent

"You kept tossing and turning all night—-" he cuts himself off, sips from the mug, making that slurping sound she still hates. He had a hard time when Manolo passed too, not knowing what to say, or do. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she says, staring out the window; takes another mouthful of the black unsweetened coffee, inaudibly, hears the subdued swallowing sound inside her head, her aimless stare fixed on the vacant schoolyard, the three-foot strip of dirt in the foreground.

"They weren't squirrels," she says.

"What?"

"She said she'd heard scratchy noises and that's why she went upstairs. It couldn't have been squirrels."

"No, not squirrels for sure, not in this house."

"Not since you had the tree chopped down."

"Oh, Viv, let's not start that again, please." He puts down the mug.

"They had planted that tree when they first bought the house."

Henry looks into the black hole of coffee, steam rising, melting in the sunlight. He's thinking of a thought he'd had when this whole tree-chopping debacle first broke, keeps it to himself, again.

"No one else around here has trees in their backyards, just look around, hon," he says, trying sensibility.

"I know."

"Only the schoolyard has a few of those small shade trees. There isn't enough room in any of these backyards for trees, Viv, much less an oak."

She's oblivious to his spiel.

"Fully grown, those trees have huge canopies," Henry's saying, "the one we had had already gotten too close to the house, that's why squirrels got in the attic."

"I know."

"Besides, the trunk was hollow inside, rotting from the inside out—-"

"Pipo..."

"—-the thing was bound to tip over with a strong wind one of these days. It had to be taken down, Viv, it wasn't safe and the insurance inspector had said—-"

"I know all that," she says. "It's just that it was the tree they'd planted when we moved in, that's all; saw him digging the hole, both of them setting the burlap ball in it, making it plumb —"

"I understand, but it was the wrong tree. Should've—-"

"Got it, Henry, I got it." She swallows the last gulp of coffee; gets up and stands in front of the kitchen sink, facing the double-hung window. Opens the faucet and rinses the mug. He's looking at her from behind, her thick black ball of hair gleaming, the reedy neckline, the arcs of her shoulders blurring in the glare; her fleshly undulations bleeding through the baggy T-shirt; the flute between her shoulder blades down to the small of her back, the two dimples above her cheeks, the collops cleaving from the cleft between them, that wholly cock-kindling rondure of her rump.

Faucet trickling, eyes on the spout, she says, almost whispering, "Have you seen the cat?"

Putting his mug in the sink, he says, "No, not since the day before yesterday," and embraces her from behind, his crotch brushing her.

His lips skim down her neck, under the bob of her hair.

"Pipo...let's put the house on the market," she says.

He tightens his embrace, left arm across her ribcage, under her breasts, the other crossways,

his right hand undulating down her navel. She feels him swelling on her.

"You'll be late," she says.

"It's okay."

* * *

"Don't worry about taking her stuff," she tells him.

"You sure? I'll leave the office early, I'll make time," Henry tells her, doing his necktie, looking at her through the mirror.

"No, I'll take her things myself. You're already running late."

"It's not a problem—-"

"Just make sure—-please be there by no later than one-thirty." She cranes her neck and kisses him on the mouth.

Henry gone she starts sobbing, nothing in particular starts her this way, she just sobs, methodically, meaninglessly. And then another thought, Seven years married, fucked a thousand times. No child. Survived by no grandchild, none to offer or be mentioned in the obit, no one beyond her and Cachito left in her mother's bloodline; with Cachito the name dies.

After taking a warm shower she gets dressed, heads for the kitchen and opens the refrigerator door, bows down into it; right hand clasping the handle, arm hanging, eyes closed and tears dribbling again, she revels the cold draft splashing her face. She'd seen Carmita do it, those years before Manolo rejoined them and by then, he'd grown the oldest she'd ever see him and everything about the old man was suddenly different, except for his eyes. Manolo had insisted the two of them leave without him, immediately upon issuance of the visas; the comrade had attested and Carmita now a widow visas were issued within a month, after an eight-year wait, and it was all thanks to the spitefulness of the love-wounded communist, so Manolo gave him the toolbox he'd bought at Sears back in the late fifties, a Snap-On Diorama in mint condition; the least, all in fact Manolo could offer for the communist's kindness. I'll follow soon, Manolo had said to Carmita, they've forgotten about me, I'm a dead man, and I'll be able to leave without worry of escaping the spies, I just need to find the means to Cayo Hueso, and that's easy And now Vivian was doing the refrigerator thing for the first time, just as her mother had done all those times back in the years.

Opening her eyes, Vivian sees a light yellow piece of paper taped to the underside of the freezer compartment; it could only be seen from this vantage point, bowing low, hanging on to the door handle as Carmita used to do. She pulls it, feels damp. In the crisp script she's known all her life the missive reads:

I'd hoped you never find this note, but now that you have, get yourself out of the icebox. Go to the Pico can, in the pantry, and sow the amaranth seeds, on the sunny corner of the garden, away from the stump.

Love,

Tu Mima y Papi.

P.S. Don't bother looking for the cat.

She smiles, sobs.

The schoolyard's come alive; the muffled sounds of children playing pull her to the window. She gets up and slides up the lower sash, the storm sash; eyes shut she takes in a lungful of crisp morning air. Tomorrow she'll bury Carmita, and wonders, How will it be, missing them both?

"Hi Missus Martin," it's a child's voice from the schoolyard.

She opens her eyes, "Good morning Gabriel."

"Are you sick, Missus Martin?"

"No. I just couldn't make it to morning classes yesterday."

"Why?"

"Personal reasons, Gabriel. Go back with your friends. The bell will ring soon. I'll see you in a couple of days. Go on now."

* * *

The two-to-four viewing was quiet, much more than she'd expected, acquaintances and some friends of her mother's, few colleagues from school Vivian had gotten to the funeral home early, just before eleven; they were waiting for her to dress her mother (her cast removed) so she was ready now, naked, on a stainless steel dais, this is how Vivian had imagined it—- blue dress on a hanger; the studs, the pantyhose and bra and underskirt, the black shoes and the necklace all in the overnight valise—-while waiting in that hideous rococo anteroom until they rolled her out in the casket, a replica of Manolo's. Vivian lips pressed, something surged in her nose; Henry had just walked in as they were setting her on the pedestal. She asked to see her, Open it, she said, and they did. Leave it like that, she said; they nodded and walked away. It was quiet, Carmita's stillness so unlike her. Certainly quiet. But of course, what an awful thought; it just sprung from her head, the thought of unnatural quietness around her mother. Henry was quiet, too; he knelt next to her, on the kneeler. He whispered, "She looks good." "She's dead." "She's with him now." "She's gone." She didn't cry. Didn't know why, and then realized she had never cried over her father's death in Henry's presence either.

At the stroke of seven, people start arriving. It was the same way with the old man; like bats, they'd throng in after dark. She sits on the same mauve, floral-motif damask-upholstered Brothers Adam sofa she had sat at next to Carmita a few months before. Henry sits next to Vivian now, holding her left hand over his right knee. Carmita looks sedately at ease, and earlier Vivian had conjectured how the pseudo beads could stay so neatly in place, forming a perfect loop around her mother's neck, as if defying gravity over her mother's breathless bosom.

People file into the wake room from the central hallway and each waits for a turn, extends sympathies; they queue for turns at the kneeler in front of Carmita's casket. Most kneel closed-eye, cross themselves; then each picks a chair among the rows facing the coffin, or sits on one of the sofas or settees against the back or side walls; above the line of the pall, Carmita's face and bust are discernable, one stud and an arc of beads. Some lounge on comfortable couches, chesterfields and loveseats, clustered around the gas-lit fireplaces in the two parlors on the opposite side of the hallway.

Vivian sees it all from where she sits, even those sitting in and across the hallway; there's

Cachito, in the same tight charcoal suit (Why did she bring him?), sitting on the bench against the wall and waving his chunky little paw at all who come in, his huge tongue hanging out of his mouth.

Those rowed up in front of Carmita are the quietest of all, seemingly absent in her presence. The rest have been talking nineteen to the dozen: "No lo creo. It's another trick." "They're fucking with us again." "It's true this time, te lo digo." "Coño don't you remember lo que paso in o-six, cuando el State Department—-what was his name?" "Negroponte—-" "—-right, ese mismo! Cuando él cabrón dijo, 'Fidel has months, not years to live.' ¿No te acuerdas, coño?" "¡Sí! 'Terminally ill—-' me acuerdo como si fuera hoy." "Y de pronto él hijoehputa got up y pissed on their shoes again." "No es maraña ahora, not when—-" "It's another trick, no seas comemierda tú!" Yet another quintet, clustered around another fireplace, "Ay, the day ese hijoehputa really dies—-" "Fidel's been dying por años now." "No, but now it's for real." "Ahora sí estiro la pata." "Sure, otherwise Raúl would've never—-" "Aaah, todo el mundo knows que ese blood-thirsty maricón is just—-" and on it goes.

The funeral director is making rounds now. "Oye, I just got off the phone with Miami, Fidel esta muerto," he murmurs, "just announced by Raúl on TV." "¡Confirmado!" says another. "¡Radio Martí lo acaba de decir!"

Vivian cannot bear it anymore. She excuses herself and goes up the stairs, passes the funeral director's office, enters the private parlor, slams the door closed and turns off the phony Tiffany lamp. The gas-lit fireplace annoys her. She stands behind the oriel, the oily glow from the streetlight silhouetting her in the dark. She starts sobbing again.

A knock on the door, she ignores it. Henry walks in, stands by her side; she chokes, stops sobbing.

"Are they gone?"

"The priest is here."

"The nerve," she says.

"They're all crazy."

And then she smiles, points outside, "Look! Reina, across the street, sitting on that brick post, there, by the railing. See her?"

"But how—-how did she—-is it—-"

"It is her, my olive-eyed cat."

"The priest's waiting, downstairs."

This story is **Eduardo del Valle's** first published work. Born and (mostly) raised in Havana; he has lived as an adult, where he went to high school and college, in Northern New Jersey. He's an architect by

training but has always been a writer at heart.