

In the Village of Mourning

MARK BRAZAITIS

Outside the Purulhá market, where the bus had left her, Olivia stared at the mountains to the north of town. Pine trees adorned their peaks and sheer, scarf-like clouds curled down their sides. The vista appeared otherworldly in its serenity, and Olivia understood why Angela, her sister, said she could have lived here forever.

Turning from the mountains, Olivia walked south and stopped in front of Esmeralda's house, having remembered its dried-blood color from photographs. The house's front door was open, and Esmeralda was standing in the doorway, wearing a white cotton dress and no shoes. No photograph, Angela had often said, could do justice to the beauty of Esmeralda's face. Her face was round and bright, a full moon, and her eyes were like twin brown stars.

Esmeralda strode down the dirt path lined on one side with blooming roses – reds, pinks, yellows and whites – and on the other by wild tangles of bougainvillea and spread her arms and welcomed Olivia with an embrace. Esmeralda was warm, as if she'd been sitting in the sun or in front of a fire, and she smelled like coffee.

"Angela," she said into Olivia's ear. "We were afraid. We thought... We were worried... But, gracias a dios, you are safe."

Olivia, separated in age from her sister by fourteen months and in experience by Angela's two years here, felt thrilled to hear Angela's name spoken, thrilled to have her sister alive again.

"When we heard what happened in New York and to the building where you worked..." Esmeralda didn't finish the sentence, but

smiled in relief.

Olivia found herself being embraced again, and she looked down to discover two children, a boy and a girl half her height, holding her around the waist. They were Pablo and Milena, Esmeralda's five-year-old twins.

"They know you, even if they've never met you," Esmeralda explained. "I've told them all about you."

"And I think I know them," Olivia said, speaking the words her sister might have spoken – no, would certainly have spoken.

A minute later, Olivia was seated on a wooden bench in the front room of the house, a mug of coffee in her hand. Esmeralda sat next to her on the bench; the two children sat cross-legged on the floor. Esmeralda smiled at her, a joyful smile of reunion. "Tell me what your life is like now," she said.

Olivia hesitated over whose life to speak of, her own or her sister's, and now, she thought, was the time to confess, to articulate the sad, prescribed words again the way she had to her sister's college friends and David, the married man with whom Angela had had a long, painful affair. But when she opened her mouth, she told Angela's story, speaking in the first-person of the hours she'd spent at her office in the tower, listening to presentations by start-up companies, their executives sometimes a decade younger than she but seeming even younger, like boys in high school, some with acne, others puffing out their chests to be bigger than they were, the women in heavy make-up, hiding their baby fat behind blush.

She talked, too, about the apartment she and her sister shared on 116th and Broadway or SoHa, as they'd named it, South of Harlem.

Angela earned enough to live in SoHo or any other area of the city, but she used a generous portion of her salary to fund women's development projects in Guatemala, Haiti, Fiji and, her latest effort, South Africa; besides, she liked the neighborhood. This year, when they both had found themselves without boyfriends or suitors of any kind, they started a Saturday night ritual of candlelight dinners in their narrow kitchen. They drank a bottle of wine, always a Merlot no matter the meal, and if they hadn't collapsed with exhaustion, they ordered a movie, and the Jamaican boy on the red one-speed dropped it off and said, whatever the film, "Good choice." And they watched it or they didn't, and whoever woke first the next morning made the coffee, and the smell, the warm, delicious smell, roused the sister who wasn't asleep and they drank coffee and ate bagels and read the Times and the Post (because it had comics) until it was dark and they were hungry again and they had to think about the week ahead.

They weren't twins, although they'd been mistaken for them, especially as they'd gotten older; they had the same reddish-brown hair, the same oval eyes, the same wide hips their mother always praised as "child-bearing hips," although neither she nor Angela seemed destined to bear children. Angela was thirty-six, Olivia thirty-five, and with no man "in the picture," as their mother liked to phrase it (usually with a question mark), and no desire to have a child without a father, well, what good were such large hips? They would laugh sometimes about how they were going to be a couple of old maids living together into their dotage, eccentric sisters, the stuff of Southern fiction and bad sit-coms, and maybe they would have...yes, they would have, certainly, they would have been happy together into

their eighties if a plane hadn't come racing across the sky, piloted by men from halfway around the globe, and sliced the world in half.

In her senior year in college, Angela had applied to the Peace Corps, and the summer after her graduation, she was assigned here, under the cloud-crowded mountains. Olivia moved to New York to become an actress, and she'd had luck early – two TV commercials, an understudy's role in an off-Broadway play, a trio of cameos in a TV drama set in the Bronx – all this tying her up so she couldn't visit Angela in Purulhá, as she'd promised. After Angela returned to the States, she earned an M.B.A. at Columbia, then started working on Wall Street. At age thirty, Olivia saw her acting stock fall. Her callbacks declined, then ceased. She turned a temp job in the public relations department at World Rock, an international development organization, into a full-time job. On the day Angela died, Olivia was driving alone to a recruiting event in upstate New York, and she heard about what happened only at noon when, finished listening to an audio tape of the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," she turned on the radio.

"How did you escape?" Esmeralda asked, and Olivia shook herself from her reverie, unsure when she stopped talking or what, exactly, she had told Esmeralda. "I flew," she thought to say, as Angela. She had wondered whether Angela was one of the people who jumped out of a window, hoping a wind might lift her to safety or a god or fire-fighter might catch her in impossibly strong, impossibly gentle arms or hoping only to make her death a choice, to jump and die rather than burn or wait to be crushed by concrete. Instead, she answered, "When I heard the plane hit, I ran down the stairs as fast as I could. Outside, I looked up. I saw fire, and I didn't look up again."

“Thank God,” Esmeralda said, and Pablo and Milena repeated their mother’s words.

Esmeralda brought her more coffee, and when she was settled again in her seat, she asked Olivia how long ago she was here last. Olivia knew she couldn’t retreat from being Angela now, and the thought brought her relief – more – a rush of happiness. “Five years ago,” Olivia answered, “when I came to see how the cooperative was doing.”

“Yes,” said Esmeralda, who followed this with a knowing smile, “and to see Celestino.”

“Who?” Olivia wanted to ask, but, remembering, she returned Esmeralda’s smile. “Yes,” she said, “and to see Celestino.”

Angela had had a boyfriend in the Peace Corps, a fellow volunteer who lived on the other side of the country from her, but she was friends with Celestino, a medical student. Sometimes she accompanied Celestino to villages outside of Purullhá. He would treat patients and Angela would work with women’s weaving groups, teaching them accounting skills and encouraging them to form a cooperative, and at dusk they’d walk back to Purullhá together. At the end of one day, they were stopped by a handful of guerrillas, and the situation might have become perilous if Celestino hadn’t volunteered to give check-ups to the men. As, by flashlight, Celestino looked down their throats, Angela tried to entertain them by reciting the plotlines of Hollywood movies she’d seen, a superfluous task, as it turned out, because they’d seen all the movies she’d seen and could describe them in greater detail and with more animation.

But Olivia hadn’t known that one of Angela’s motives for returning to Purullhá half a decade ago was to see Celestino. This would

have been during the time she, Olivia, was living with Paul, who'd had an enviable gig as Macavity in "Cats." She and Paul were planning to marry in the spring, although what spring was never clear and became irrelevant when Paul left her for one of his feline co-stars.

"The week before you came, Geronimo was assigned to oversee a construction crew in the Petén, where he continues to work three weeks in every month," Esmeralda said of her husband. "You had broken off with the man in New York, and you thought...you thought Celestino might..." She smiled sadly. "But when you came, Celestino had just gotten married."

Olivia remembered Angela telling her about comforting Esmeralda over her husband's distant work assignment. And she remembered, too, how for weeks after returning to New York, Angela seemed especially quiet, aloof and wistful. Olivia had thought Angela was mourning David, but was she also ruing her missed chance with Celestino? It pained Olivia to think her sister had kept this from her.

"I had written to tell you about Celestino's marriage," Esmeralda said, "but you hadn't received my letter before you came."

The light outside the window behind her was suddenly cut off, as if curtains had been pulled, shades drawn, and Olivia heard the patter of rain on the tin roof. There was a single lamp in the far corner of the room, and it cast a yellow glow on Esmeralda in her chair and the two children on the floor, sitting cross-legged and quiet, Buddha-like.

"Celestino's wife died four months ago," Esmeralda said. "She was giving birth to their second child, but neither she nor her child lived."

"I'm sorry," Olivia said. She felt surrounded by grief, and she looked around, as if to find an exit, an escape. It was raining harder

now, the patter a small torrent. She gazed down at the children, their eyes as bright and soothing as their mother's. She breathed deeply, and there was a sedative scent in the air, the calming smell of coffee, roses, the very earth.

"Celestino isn't the way he was," Esmeralda said.

"No," Olivia said, shaking her head. "How could he be?"

Esmeralda asked her if she'd like to join her in the kitchen the way she used to, and Olivia followed her. The kitchen was as narrow as the kitchen she and Angela shared in New York. In the far corner, near a window the size of a small picture frame, was a two-burner gas stove, and Esmeralda lighted one of the burners and put a flat pan on it. A moment later, Esmeralda handed her a ball of corn dough –masa, she called it – and said, "Do you remember how to make a tortilla?"

Olivia said, "I don't think so."

"It will come back to you," Esmeralda said. "It will be like – what did you always tell me? – like riding a bicycle." She laughed softly. "Of course, I never learned to ride a bicycle, despite your lessons, so I don't know if this is true."

Olivia watched how Esmeralda smacked the tortillas in her hands, quickly patting the dough into a thin roundness. She imitated her, and at first the dough felt heavy, sticky and unmanageable. "Put a little water on your hands," Esmeralda suggested, and after Olivia dampened her hand with water from Esmeralda's sink, she had an easier time shaping the dough into a tortilla. It was as if her hands remembered what she didn't know they'd learned.

Esmeralda put her tortilla onto the flat pan. "Go ahead," Esmeralda said, and Olivia placed her tortilla beside Esmeralda's.

When the pair of tortillas were ready, Esmeralda removed them from the pan without burning her long-fingered hands. "We'll make more," she said. "But the first two we must eat in celebration."

After they had eaten beans and tortillas and, as desert, plantains in cream, they sat in the living room, listening to the cassette tapes Angela had left Esmeralda as a goodbye gift a decade ago. Olivia knew the songs well; she'd listened to them in high school, and the music conjured up parties ended abruptly at midnight by parents returning from the movies, old boyfriends and one Christmas when she and Angela, bored with the festivities and the parade of relatives at their house, slipped outside to the tool shed with a boom box and a couple of joints, a present from Angela's college roommate.

Angela was a freshman, Olivia a senior in high school, and it was the first time Olivia had ever tried marijuana. But even after smoking the joint down to a stub, she felt no high, only vaguely ill, as if she'd stood too long around a pile of burning leaves. Angela, who had grown quiet after her first drag, turned down the music and spoke as if from a dream: "I miss you in the next room, you know? I didn't think I would. I thought I'd be distracted with new people and classes. But sometimes in bed at night I'll close my eyes and imagine I hear you rehearsing your lines from 'Twelfth Night' and I'll want to shout, 'Shut up, will you?', but only to annoy you because the truth is I always liked listening."

Although Angela never mentioned their conversation again – indeed, Olivia feared she'd forgotten it in her marijuana haze – Olivia decided to go to the same college Angela was attending, although

she'd intended to go to a smaller school with a better drama program. They'd ended up rooming together during Angela's last two years and minoring in the same subject, Spanish, and spending a semester and a summer together in Spain. Then Angela was off to Guatemala and, a year later, Olivia graduated and moved to New York.

As the music played in Esmeralda's living room, Olivia felt grief seep into her, like rainwater into a permeable roof, and as, heavy and unavoidable, it collected in her stomach, she felt she would need to run to the bathroom or out into the night, but Esmeralda spared her the scene by speaking again: "Last month, the women voted me president of the cooperative." She was, it seemed, trying to hide her smile and the pride it displayed, but Olivia, distracted back to the present and her role, knew it was something to praise, and she knew that she, too, deserved praise because it was she, Angela, who had founded the weaving cooperative more than a decade ago.

"That's wonderful," Olivia said, clapping her hands to emphasize the point. Pablo and Milena imitated her gesture and laughed and clapped again. "How many women are part of the cooperative now?" Olivia asked.

"Fifty-two," Esmeralda answered. "We are weaving more than güipiles. The women are making tablecloths and baby clothes and shawls. We are selling in Cobán, of course, in the same market stall you helped us find. But we are also selling to merchants in the capital and Quetzaltenango. And a man from Mexico comes four times a year to buy our products, which he sells in the United States."

"Marvelous," Olivia said. And it was. But she found herself frowning. "What's wrong?" Esmeralda asked.

Olivia called up a smile, a generous smile. "Sometimes so much can come of so little," she said. But she thought: Sometimes so little can come of so much.

So little? No, nothing. They hadn't recovered Angela's body or any part of it.

Esmeralda said, "It's late. You've had a long journey."

Ten minutes later, Olivia was lying in Milena's bed in a small, square room. Moonlight pressed against the curtains in front of the lone window. In a pen outside, chickens rustled.

Olivia closed her eyes, hoping to dream the dreams Angela would. She dreamed of fiery buildings whose shattered pieces did not fall or rise, but hovered, suspended between the perilous ground and the wide blue sky.

Early the next morning, filled with Esmeralda's breakfast – eggs and tortillas and sweet bread and Corn Flakes in warm milk – Olivia walked with Esmeralda to Celestino's house. Although Esmeralda spoke to her on the way, Olivia only half listened. She was thinking about how Celestino would recognize her or, rather, fail to recognize her. But when Celestino opened the door of his blue house, he said, with a hint of joy, "Angela?"

"It's me," she said, smiling. He invited them inside. Esmeralda excused herself, saying she needed to return to feed Pablo and Milena. She touched Olivia on the back, a warm, encouraging hand.

Celestino was taller than she, and his skin was a color darker than cream and lighter than coffee. His eyes were striking, a bright mix of gray and blue.

“I am supposed to be in El Ángel at noon,” he said. He gave her a shy, questioning smile, and she guessed it was supposed to convey some mutual history connected to the place, and she wondered what Angela did with him here. Or was his smile only to acknowledge the similarity of the village’s name to Angela’s?

When he asked if she’d like to come with him, to help him, she nodded.

He looked at her with a gentle, appraising gaze. “Your hair is different,” he told her.

“Shorter?”

“And with fewer curls.”

“They’ll come back in the humidity here.”

“And your eyes...”

“Yes?”

He licked his lower lip. “Well, could they be green now instead of blue?”

“It’s because of the landscape here. Everything’s green.” She smiled at him. “You look the same.”

“Thank you. But in certain light, I see more gray hair than black.”

They walked east out of town, and when they reached the base of the mountain, they began a long, slow ascent. To his questions about her life, she told him what she told Esmeralda, her conversation coming in fragments as she labored in the thinning air. He told her about his wife. His son was four years old, he said, and one morning he’d found him huddled in a corner, gazing at one of his old medical textbooks. Celestino hurried toward him, worried he might be staring at photographs of patients with malformed limbs or body-covering

burns. Instead, he was tracing his finger across the large first letter in the word “médico” on the book’s title page and saying “M’ como en María.”

“María?” Olivia asked.

“His mother’s name.”

Olivia was about to speak words of sympathy, but she couldn’t catch her breath, and Celestino told her about the end of the country’s civil war and the celebrations and the subsequent disappointment when, instead of soldiers and guerrillas, the people of Purulhá and everywhere now had to fear thieves and kidnapers, ex-soldiers and ex-guerrillas with no war to fight but still carrying guns.

They stopped in a grove of pine trees to drink water. In the mountains, the air was cool, and Olivia didn’t feel at all thirsty. But when she lifted the bottle to her lips, she found she couldn’t stop. Drinking the water was like tasting air, and if she didn’t finish what was inside the bottle, it was only out of politeness. “It’s all right,” Celestino said to her. “I have more water in my bag.”

From his backpack, he pulled sandwiches and fruit, but a cheese sandwich was all she could eat. “I’ll save the apple for you,” he said, returning it to his bag.

An hour later, they reached the mountain’s peak, well-worn ground no larger than a sidewalk square; in its center was a small heap of smooth stones, a humble altar. Turning behind them, they could see Purulhá and several towns around it, even Cobán, the large town forty-five kilometers distant. From this height, everything looked diminished, hemmed in by lush green mountains. In front of them was the village of El Ángel, a scattering of adobe houses and a soccer field with goals made of crooked tree branches.

Angela must have shown Olivia pictures of this village, because she recognized it – the short brick fence surrounding the white wooden church, the dirt trails running like veins between houses and past cornfields and down the other side of the mountain.

“Here we are again in the Village of Mourning,” Celestino said. “But I think it will be less sad than when you last saw it. In the past year, there have been three births, and some of the boys who escaped or were spared during the massacre are now grown men. So El Ángel is no longer entirely a village of widows and children.”

They descended to the church, where a line had formed, mostly of old women but also a few children and one young man, perhaps twenty years old, with a straw hat and cabbage-shaped nose. When the old women saw Olivia, they shouted Angela’s name and raced up to her, holding her hands, embracing her. In quick words, they told her about the cooperative and the sales in Cobán, the capital and the United States.

Celestino set up his examining room behind a screen in the church. A broad window allowed in light. There were three chairs and a long, thin table. Celestino handed her a three-ring binder, on each section divider the name of a patient.

Before he examined a patient, he asked her to tell him what he’d written down previously about the patient and to write down what he said now. There was a rush of patients, and she barely had time to look up from the notebook, a relief because she was spared the sight of yellowed eyes and breasts burdened with lumps of cancer. Three hours passed, and she was putting down a final note when Celestino said, “There will be a few more patients when the men who are working in the fields return.”

She stood up and looked behind the screen; the church was empty.

“I think I’ll lie down for a few minutes here,” Celestino said, indicating the table. “But if you would like to rest here, I’ll sleep in one of the pews.”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’m not tired.” This wasn’t true; her limbs were heavy. But she didn’t think she could sleep.

She handed him the binder, and after gazing at a couple of the pages, he said, “I used to need a magnifying glass to read your writing, remember? Either my eyes have improved or you remembered my complaints and have humored me with larger letters.” He smiled at her, although his eyes scanned her face, as if exploring it for the truth. Quickly, she stepped outside. Clouds surrounded the village, but the soccer field, where a handful of boys and girls were playing, was sunlit. Olivia sat on a slope above the field, watching the game. When a boy scored a goal, he turned to Olivia, and when she applauded, he smiled and waved.

She left the field and climbed to the mountain’s peak. Too tired to stand, she sat down beside the stone altar. The clouds had converged over El Ángel, but behind her, the sun’s light fell in a long blanket over Purulhá, giving even the dark green trees surrounding the town a golden cast. She wished the mountain had a steeper precipice or, better, a sheer cliff, so she might step to its edge and feel a little of what Angela felt so far above ground, so she might reach across the emptiness of air and catch her sister in the sky and hold her hands until, together, they either fell or flew. She had imagined Angela’s death every day, but she couldn’t imagine Angela dead. And she couldn’t now, not here in the Village of Mourning. Angela wouldn’t

ever be dead here because she, Olivia, would be Angela. It would be her greatest role, and it would be effortless because it would be nearly true, as easy as pretending to be oneself.

The sky everywhere was cloud-covered now, rain was imminent and a wind shivered across the soccer field and rose to touch her, but she wasn't cold. She was Angela.

Five days after the towers had collapsed, when they were told there was little hope of finding Angela alive, her mother, distraught, exhausted, asked Olivia to call their relatives and Angela's friends, to confirm what they feared. She obeyed, even phoning David, the married man, at his office, and she and her parents had sat in a church six blocks from her parents' house, a Methodist church they'd stepped into no more than twice before, and heard a minister they didn't know quote the Bible and speak Angela's name as if he'd seen her every day. When it was Olivia's turn to speak, she did, in brief, elegiac words she'd penned as if writing a scene. She didn't believe what she was saying. She couldn't. It wasn't right to give Angela up this quickly, this easily. At the funeral, Olivia was acting again, and badly.

Even if no one had ever called to respond to the posters she'd hung in subway terminals and on telephone booths and on every empty wall she could find, Angela seemed more alive in the posters than dead in the anonymous rubble. The photograph on the posters made Angela seem like the actress, with rose-colored lips and eyes to see a man's soul and break his heart.

It was after she'd found Angela's letter to Esmeralda in her desk – undated, with this line: "I hope to come see you, maybe before the new year," with a signature even – that she conceived her idea. She

mailed Angela's letter instead of the letter she'd planned to write Esmeralda. She'd had her hair cut like Angela did when she'd last come to Purulhá; she wore Angela's clothes; she'd adopted Angela's quiet laugh. In one place, at least, Angela would still be alive.

Olivia stood up, feeling grateful and excited. You're here, Angela, she said. We never left each other. She placed both her hands on her chest. We're together.

But even determined to see her performance last her lifetime, to preserve Angela in her living body, Olivia felt something fall on her, something heavier than the rain, which had begun tentatively, a few drops expelled from the sky. "Oh, God," she said, knowing this wasn't what she was supposed to say. "Oh, God."

She heard footsteps and turned to see Celestino climbing toward her with a happy quickness. Even in the gray light of the cloud-covered day, his eyes were bright. "Here you are, Angela," he said.

She knew what lines she should speak. Although they would be weighted by fatigue, as they should be after such a long day, they would show pleasure at his having found her here and at what their latest reunion promised. Nothing, it seemed, had been lost, not even the hope of Celestino's love.

But when she opened her mouth, something other than what she intended left it, something halting and in a lower octave, choked and whispered. It was something like the first syllables of her name and Angela's run together.

Olivia saw the rain sweep across El Ángel, beating the tin roofs, pitter-pattering against the grass of the soccer field.

"Here you are," Celestino said again, although this time without

Angela's name and in a less jovial voice, a voice, perhaps, of accusation. Or was it of concern, of pity?

When she didn't reply, couldn't reply, he looked at her without suspicion, only a piercing tenderness. She wondered if he'd known her secret from the beginning, his grief unveiling hers.

"You must be hungry," he said, his words as soft as water. After reaching in his backpack, he pulled out an apple and placed it gently in her trembling hand. □