

THE SWEAT FROM A BROW

by Dulce Maria Menendez

And God told Adam and Eve as they were expelled from Eden, "the sweat from your brow will now be the water for your garden."

My parents never gardened.

I never saw my mother's brow gleam in the sun or her apricot painted fingernails filled with topsoil. She smelled of hairspray, Ivory soap and perspiration which accumulated around her neck from the weight of her hair. My fondest memory of my mother is that of her hair. How it moved when she walked to San Juan Bosco church with me and my sister on Sundays in her sleeveless flowered dress.

She let her hair grow for years until it finally reached her hips. The top would be pulled up and tied with a pretty ribbon the color of her dress. Sometimes she would use tortoise colored barrettes that matched her sunglasses. My mother balanced her life with accessories. She would cut the same pattern and use the same material for me and my sister's dresses even though my sister and I were a year apart.

Strangers would stop my mother on the street and ask if my sister and I were twins even though it was obvious we were not, it was an edge for these strangers to ask my mother the twin question just to get closer to her and hope some of my mother's beauty would fertilize them.

My mother grew her hair as a promise to San Expedito or it may have been another saint. In return the saint was to heal my father from his psychosis - whichever psychosis he was going through at the time. Some shrinks labeled him as manic-depressive. Others said worse. They gave him prescriptions and experimented on him as if he were a new species growing amidst the Congo or the Amazon instead of Miami.

Mami did not tell us that she was growing her hair for my father's sake. She told us it was a promise to Santa Barbara or whatever saint it was to free Cuba from the hold of Fidel's regime as if the island had been held captive inside a greenhouse and only Castro had the key.

My sister and I knew better. Even at the age of 10 and 9, we understood how she planted seeds. She was planting love of country and respect for father at the same time.

My mother lost her religion and her memories went white in the summer of 1975 during the divorce proceedings after my father's manic depression tried to kill the three of us.

The promises not delivered were kept in the form of a cut pony tail tucked away for years in her closet. I am afraid I may run into the corpse of a saint's failure after her death.

My father died in a mental institute three years after my mother cut her hair.

I remember my father's scent as that of linen and sweat he would bring home after walking the downtown streets of Miami in his suit. My father always dressed well even when we could not afford it. He was from the Bobbie Darrin era where tuxedos and trench coats were the normal attire for any gentleman.

When his craziness would sink in, he'd buy himself suits the color of mustard and put on his pinky rings, have his hair shaved before it was fashionable to be bald. Then he'd take off to New York.

During his absence I remember going into his closet, for my parents had separate bedrooms, and let the smell of his wardrobe overcome me. His Florsheim shoes would be spread out on the cool Floridian floor and I would polish and brush them to a shine. The black butane of the polish settled on my fingertips just as if I had planted perennials.

When we were making arrangements for his funeral, my grandmother blurted out to all of us, in all her grief, what her philosopher poet son once told her while under the influence of lithium or thorazine. He told her to send him flowers while he was alive and not at his death.

At his funeral, my father wore a brown suit. The smell from the wreaths in the air-conditioned 50 degree funeral home replaced the scent of his memory.

I had never seen so many wreaths and so many people show up at a funeral. Everyone loved him and remembered him as the bloom among them. They remembered him as the prime rose from their generation. For even at his manic moments, he spoke their truth. He was the one they used as the example of "only the good die young" as they kept the truth about his crazy moments as the thorns.

Perhaps God had pity for Adam and Eve and created sweat from a brow as compensation for labor. Or perhaps in his bitterness he actually told us the truth. The truth being that we are our own garden.

Today, I do not let my hair grow more than an inch from my scalp for promises are delivered at death and the last time I received flowers, they were bought by me.

(Note on quote from God: taken from Didi Menendez' point of view and does not express a quote from any Bible.)

