

The Big Faith

by Valeria Godines

He kept talking but Maria couldn't hear a sound. She looked over his shoulder and noticed his family photo — a blonde wife in a crisp white blouse and white slacks and two little girls dolled up in white cotton dresses. Dr. Richards, wearing a white button-down shirt and white shorts, was staring back at her from the photo with a toothy grin. Their bare feet had a powdered look.

She snapped back to Dr. Richards, and she wished she had a translator. She understood snippets, and he couldn't seem to slow down. She heard something about how it had spread and she had about a year left to live.

She sighed heavily and struggled to her feet. He gave her an awkward side hug. The office assistant helped her to her car, a maroon 1992 Taurus. The assistant said they would be calling soon. She wore rainbow feather earrings down to her shoulders and sparkling blue eyeshadow. Maria thought she looked downright unprofessional.

When she got into her car, Maria noticed the office assistant waved a heartfelt goodbye, as if Maria had boarded for a very long journey.

Maria eased her car into the Catholic Church parking lot. The church, white stonewashed, was 150 years old and right near the river that separated Mexico and the United States.

She walked into the fundraising committee room, which always smelled of cinnamon and tamales, and, as usual, found chaos.

Lupita was attempting to disguise a gossip session into a group prayer. “We must pray for Janet's pregnant 16-year-old daughter, who is looking a little plump these days. We must pray for Elizabeth, whose husband left her for the town whore. And we must pray for Padre Ramon, who says it's just arthritis but I think it's more serious.”

“Amen,” the women declared.

“Maria!” exclaimed Linda. “Thank God you're here. We're fighting over which flowers to use at the big bingo night.”

“I want the plastic sunflowers and these old bags want the crushed red velvet roses. So tacky,” Linda said, holding her hands up helplessly. “What do you think?”

“Toss a coin,” Maria said as she left the room.

The 20 women looked shocked. They could depend on Maria for every last detail.

Maria entered the church, which was cool and smelled of incense. A few parishioners scattered about, mostly ancient ladies with black lace scarves over their heads. Maria took her favorite spot, smack in the middle of the fourth center pew. The pew creaked as she settled herself into it and flipped down the knee rest.

She took out her rosary, knelt, crossed herself and couldn't think of a thing. Her mind was utterly blank. It's not as if she didn't have things to pray for her — her death sentence, her two daughters in unhappy marriages, her friend Dolores, who suffered from cancer herself.

Padre Ramon entered. Maria quickly looked down and pretended to be in fervent prayer. The portly priest was in his 70s and this was his last stop in a long chain of churches that he had served. He gave a little wave to Maria before disappearing into a confessional.

That's when she felt sick to her stomach. She bolted to the bathroom in the back. She entered a stall and slammed it shut. Sweat streamed into her eyes, stinging them terribly. Her heart raced. Her hands trembled. Her chin quivered and the tears spilled. No, they flooded.

She didn't want anybody to hear her heaving and crying. She frantically pulled as much toilet paper as possible and stuffed it into her mouth so her sobs would be silenced. Then she slid against the wall next to the toilet and landed on the concrete floor. She dropped her head between her knees.

Lupita, the part-time janitor, entered the bathroom and stopped when she heard the muffled noise. "Hello?" she asked timidly. She was in her 60s, about Maria's age, and very quiet. When Maria heard her, she curled into a ball trying to disappear.

Lupita ducked her head and looked under the stall door. She saw Maria, one of the church's main leaders, curled up, toilet paper trailing out of her mouth. Lupita bit her lower lip hard. How could this be?

Maria helped give the holy bread at Mass. Maria organized bingo nights, car raffles, tamale gatherings. In Lupita's eyes, Maria was a shoo-in for heaven.

Yet there she was, curled in her fetal position, writhing in pain. Lupita was tiny and crawled underneath the stall door. Maria looked up, terrified, waving her head no furiously. Lupita kept crawling until she sat next to her.

Lupita gently removed the soggy toilet paper from her mouth and dumped it in the trash. She sat Maria up. Then she took Maria's face in her wrinkled, brown hands and simply stared into her eyes.

