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“White Blouse”

María de Lourdes Victoria
Translation by Wendy Call

This short story was originally published in Quercus Review's 10th Anniversary Issue: "Without Camels: A Caravan of Latino Writing."

Señora Joan is willing to tolerate the fact that Aurora always arrives late, that she seems incapable of adequately dusting the shelves, that she doesn't make the beds with hospital corners, and that she will not—not even by accident—lift the rug to sweep the damned marble floor. But *this*—the way that she takes the laundry and throws it in the basket without folding it, the fact that she couldn't care less if the sweaters are in knots and the pants wadded up like fried pork rinds—*this* makes her blood boil. The clothes wrinkle, and no matter how much they are ironed later, the wrinkles remain. And she, an executive in a very important law firm, can't allow herself to be seen with a bunched-up skirt covering her rear end. Nor can she waste her time on housework. This is why she pays that woman such a fortune. So that the clothes will be ironed as God commands. But that woman, rather than kiss her feet for offering this work that so many illegals would want, goes around trashing the place.

Aurora won't be returning to work in *señora* Joan's house. At the end of her day, when she says goodbye, the *señora* hands her an envelope with the rest of her two weeks' pay. She also gives her a black plastic bag filled with clothes.

“Don't even worry about coming back tomorrow, my dear.” She says, in that English that Aurora hardly understands. “And if you don't want this, please feel free to give it away. I hope that you enjoy ironing it.”

On the bus back home, Aurora opens the bag and finds the same clothing that she had left to air dry. The *señora*'s elegant and complicated machine scared her. She never understood which of the buttons she was supposed to push and she feared that the clothes would shrink. She didn't want to ask the *señora* about it, either, because of her bad temper. She gets so angry when Aurora doesn't understand. "You need to improve your accent, the *señora* hectors. "You are in this country, learn to speak properly. I don't understand a word of your Spanglish."

Aurora has spent months going to classes at the church to learn how to speak properly, but even more, to please the *señora*. Twice a week, every Monday and Wednesday, she goes with her neighbor, another *norteña*, to the Santa Luisa parish church, where a sweet old woman explains the tangle of that language to them. They go to class after they tidy up their houses and put the children to bed. They go, but only when their husbands are in good moods. The problem isn't the classes, but the homework. Every time Aurora sits down to study vocabulary, her eyelids close and she falls asleep. But the worst part isn't how tired she is, but that there just doesn't seem to be space enough in her gourd. In Mexico, she'd never attended school. And now...well, none of this matters. *Señora* Joan has fired her. This must have happened because she is as dumb as a *burro*. Because she is lazy.

Aurora gets off the bus and walks the ten blocks to her house. Her bag feels like dead weight. She makes slow progress, shifting it from arm to arm. The afternoon wanes; the rain comes down harder. At the sixth block she stops to rest her feet, which are puffed up like pork *tamales*. At the next bus stop, she takes refuge from the rain. Sitting on a bench, she opens the bag again and examines the clothes more carefully. At the bottom, she finds that blouse that the *señora* likes so much. Snow-colored and soft, it has a label that reads *Liz Claiborne*. Impulsively, she takes off her coat and puts it on, over her threadbare dress. The lace on the sleeves is lovely, as are the pearl buttons. It smells of expensive perfume.

The bus is late, so by the time she gets to her house, her angry husband confronts her. "You're late, again," he yells. And then, "Hurry up, woman, we're hungry!"

Aurora's husband is willing to tolerate the fact that his wife keeps the house like a pigsty, that she doesn't know how to make a sorry pot of beans, and that she can't take care of the children—who run around the neighborhood like little wild animals. He tolerates all this, and even more. It has been months since his wife opened her legs. Night after night she brays about her aches and pains, how tired she is, as if he himself didn't bust his ass working in the fish packing plant—that hellhole. Yes, he has plenty of aches and pains when he comes home, the stink of rotting fish all over him. He forgives her all of this, even her snubs, but what he isn't willing to tolerate, what he simply can't stand, is the fact that his wife doesn't have a shred of pride. Putting on her *patrona's* used clothing, as if she were a beggar, as if she didn't have a husband who takes care of her, this infuriates him. Like they say, a monkey dressed in silk is still a monkey. And the monkey, standing there dressed in that expensive rag, rather than show her gratitude to him for everything he has given her—they're poor, it's true, but they've never gone without—she goes around so full of herself, showing off those charity clothes, probably to flirt with someone. She's probably been opening her legs for someone else—since she hasn't for him. That's for sure. Which explains why she always comes home late. That slut, wrapping her legs around some good-for-nothing on a street corner.

Aurora wouldn't see the white blouse again. Her husband, maniacally angry, tears it off of her. Two pearl buttons roll across the floor. He grabs the plastic bag from her, ripping it. When he leaves the house, he slams the door so that the windows rattle. A scandalous squeal of tires from his pick-up truck alerts the neighbors that it's another one of those days, and they better close their blinds and their doors. They better not even come close, unless they want to suck the barrel of his shotgun. When he arrives at the Goodwill deposit box, he smokes his brakes on the pavement, gets out of

the truck and flings the bag into the green container. He kicks the box for good measure. The white blouse lands on a beat-up lamp.

Jacinta Mextzin is returning to Mexico tomorrow. They say that *la migra* is building walls all along the river and she's far too old to go around climbing walls. Yesterday, finally, she bought her bus ticket. It was painful to give up the blessed bills that she had kissed so many times, each time she received more, as she carefully rolled them up in a rubber band. Five years of hard work and sacrifice at the hands of that man with eyes like a vulture—it's better that she forgets him. That man who should have helped her bring her daughter Lupita al Norte. But instead, just when she had saved enough, it turned out she, herself, had to return. But such is life; only God knows why things happen as they do. "Your daughter has cancer," the doctor said, "and before you are separated from her forever, by this wall or something worse, God forbid, better that you return home." Because of this, Jacinta is returning to her *rancho* by the same path that she left it. The only thing that Jacinta asks from *la Santísima Trinidad* is that He not yet take Lupita to the heavens. Let me give her a blessing, merciful *Señor*, she prays to the Omnipotent One, reciting another *Our Father*....

In the Goodwill store Jacinta finds Aurora's white blouse. She tries it on; it feels so soft and smells so good. It's size "M"—just Lupita's size. She imagines her daughter in white, black braids resting against the lapels. She counts the loose change in her wallet and sees that yes, there is enough. A dollar for the blouse and fifty cents for the two buses that bring her to the trailer she shares with her niece Herminia in White Center. Jacinta gets off at the last stop with her paper bag that says *Safeway*. The afternoon is waning and the rain is coming down harder. When she finally opens the front door and takes refuge inside her home, her niece confronts her, scolding. "There you are, *tía*, buying more junk," she yells, punching Jacinta's overstuffed duffel bag. "Now let see where you'll put this, along wit everythin else you gotta carry. Don' think the bus driver is gonna help you, they ain' like they are down there. Here they ain' any *mulas* t'help ya!"

The niece has put up with so much from her *tía* Jacinta. She's put up with her snoring, her constant bitching, and her candles, rosaries, incense, old wives' tales, and the whole collection of virgins and saints. All for who the hell knows what. For nothing. Herminia had put up with all of this, out of respect for her gray hair, and now because her *tía's* daughter is dying. But what she could not tolerate, not for one more minute, was the way the woman went around criticizing how she earned her living. "Ask God to forgive you, *m'ija*," Jacinta said to her all the time. "There are other ways to put tortillas on the table."

As if the old woman were better than everyone else. "All work is dignified work, *señora*," Herminia had to throw back at her. "Even bein' *a puta*. Jus so you know, I don't need God's pardon. I do it outta necessity and so it's not a sin. You don't need to go around crossing yourself, cuz if it wasn't for my work, you wouldn't have had a place to live, or food to eat, or anything to pay that damn bus to take you back t'your little *rancho*. That miserable twenty bucks they pay you a day to chase aroun' those snot-nosed brats wouldn't even be enough for you t'go round the block."

Lupita will never wear Aurora's white blouse. When Jacinta finally crosses the bridge over the brook, just half a kilometer from her *rancho*, she finds her granddaughter, María, scrubbing clothes on a rock. Jacinta sees the black ribbons twisting through her thick braids and she knows she has arrived too late. María lifts her eyes, discovers her grandmother and runs to greet her. Jacinta wraps María in her arms and plants on her damp forehead the blessing she has been saving for the young one's mother. She doesn't have to bend down to offer it. María is no longer a girl. She is a tall, beautiful young woman, the image of Lupita. The grandmother pulls the white blouse from her duffel bag and hands it over. It is just her size. María has never touched cloth so soft and perfumed.

Octavio Reynoso puts up with everything about María because never before has he laid eyes on a *Chamula* as tasty as her. That's why, the day this *Chamula* showed up at the *maquila* looking for work, he hired her

immediately. It made no difference that the teen hardly spoke Spanish and he didn't give a damn that she had shown up in his office without an appointment, wearing huaraches and a peasant's *huipil*, wrapped up in a shawl that reeked of burned sugarcane. Underneath the thick embroidery on the rough fabric, Octavio could see those juicy melons and knew that no one else had nibbled them. At that moment he decided to take them as his own. Since then, Octavio has tolerated everything about the *Chamula*: that she shows up late for work, that she breaks the thread on every seam, that she sews the buttons in the wrong place, that she can't get the pleats straight. But what he absolutely cannot tolerate, the thing that boils his blood, is that every time he wants to charge her for her carelessness with an innocent little nibble or a quick grope at the sweet thing under her skirt, María reacts as if she were a society woman and not some servant who is lucky to be his employee. No. Octavio is not willing to tolerate her snubs for another minute. Who knows what she thinks, that little snot, but it's high time to ride her on all fours, to tame her once and for all, because that's the only way ungrateful dogs like her understand. He has to educate her, teach her some respect, to accept her place in the *maquila*. At first she'll grumble; they're all the same. As soon as they develop a taste for his untamable animal, he can't get them off of him. Damned whores.

María will not sew even one more blouse in the *maquila*. As soon as her trembling hand sews the final stitch in the tag of the *Liz Claiborne* blouse—a blouse identical to the one that her grandmother Jacinta brought her *del Norte*—she rises from her seat, walks over to the office, and she requests her final two weeks' pay. She flees the building without looking back in tears. On the bus to her *rancho*, María opens the window and throws the white blouse, still soft and perfumed, to the wind. The fabric opens and cartwheels, a kite that, for an instant, resembles a white dove. Little by little it descends, zigzagging, until it is lost in a cornfield. The vast countryside, the color of straw, opens and envelops the dirty rag, thrown away, without a

label. One more garment exposed to the sun, to the rain, and to the night dew.