

Clara

I SAT ON THE stool for about half an hour before touching the beer that had appeared before me. I had fled from the house, away from the wailing woman who used to be my mother but who had, in the forty-eight hours since my brother's murdered body was discovered in the apartment above her own, proclaimed herself alone in the world and the mother to no one. My three sisters and I were simply the girls whose presence was a practice round for when the important one, the boy, had been born some twenty-eight years ago. I don't mean to be harsh; we all loved him, my sisters and I as much as my parents; and he was the baby to all our attentions, especially when my father's midlife crisis propelled him from our little apartment on Main Street and into the arms of a younger woman. I was not much older than Raoul, but I always thought of him as Mijo—*Mi hijo*, my child, the name we all took to calling him when we passed around the squalling baby night after night and then later, when we patched up his boo-boos and searched the neighborhood for him, "Mijo, Mijo!" until he'd emerge, sheepish, from some other woman's kitchen, cookie crumbs soiling his rosy cheeks and rumpled clothes. Who knew that our attentions, our games with dress-up and dolls, would lead to the smirking disclosure from the police that Raoul was, in fact, dressed in "women's undergarments" when they found his mutilated body. I guess we all assumed that his exploits in the Navy Seals, his machismo in whatever combat the government assigned, was vindication that my father's predictions and threats were unfounded: growing up in a house of all women was not going to ruin Mijo.

My father worked at the naval base for years as a dishwasher. Living in the shadows of a transient world, friends came and went with a regularity I took for granted until I left home and discovered people who'd had friendships for their entire lives. At least we stayed put in town and didn't have to move around the country all the time. Our roots were the church and each other, with girl- and boy-friends passing through like the measles or mumps: everyone had to get them once in a while, but eventually you got over it and got back to normal. Only Marisol had trouble with the "getting over" part, constantly falling in love with enlisted men and the young wives who often accompanied them, causing fear and outrage from my parents with every true love she announced at the dinner table. After Maria got knocked up and thrown out of the house, I was wary of men and the heat they provoked. One by one they got in trouble and got married, my sisters, leaving me and Raoul to stand by Mama until the Navy got him hooked and I ran away. Mama started a keen on the day he enlisted, his eighteenth birthday, a wail so bone numbing and sad that all the dogs in the neighborhood joined in the howling. She

cried for days, past even the day he boarded a ship and headed to sea, the day I threw my suitcase into the back of my Vega and headed South on I-95. That was the last day my mother spoke my name, as far as I know. Now instead of calling me by my given name, Clara, I'm simply known in the family as *ese*, "that one."

They found Raoul's body three days after his death, according to the preliminary reports based primarily on the staggering number of flies found in the room. Mama had complained for two days about the constant buzzing she heard, and Carmen, the good daughter who lived in the building next door, dismissed the complaint with her usual shrug and rolled eyeballs. She checked the refrigerator for spoiled goods after noticing a strange smell in the apartment, gave Mama a few more of her stash of Valium, and turned up the afternoon programs while fanning her with a church bulletin. It was perfect fall weather, brilliant blue skies with the occasional fluff of white drifting by, the second week of what would turn out to be a long September in 2001.

On the third day, the eleventh day of September, when the buzzing was unrelenting and there was a definite weight to the smell, Mama saw the stain. She'd been glued to the television all morning, watching smoke and flames and bodies falling, and then the towers themselves toppled, and in the middle of it all, a rusty drop fell from the ceiling.

I was waiting for the subway at Forty-Second Street, checking my messages and trying to discover what was delaying the train. Before the realization of the drama playing out just a few miles south at the World Trade Center, I indulged in a short daydream about how perfect September was in Jerome, about the cool breezes that sometimes came in off the Sound to flutter the curtains in Mama's little apartment on Main Street, and how the days like this always made my heart skip with joy.

I came out of the subway station in a crowd of disbelieving people, my cell phone buzzing before abruptly going dead. I recognized my brother's number, and I knew it was not good. Most people getting calls from their family on that day were accustomed to their relatives checking in when disaster struck, but that was never the case for me. Through years of service in the FBI, when all kinds of crises affected me and my surroundings, never once did my phone ring with a call of concern from my family. Never. This time, again, it wasn't them checking on me. I found out later that it was the police pressing the redial option on Raoul's phone.

I don't know anything about biology or chemistry except in the purely sexual and therefore metaphorical sense, but I wonder how much blood there is in a human body and how long it takes to drain. I wonder what would take so long for the liquid to soak its way through a cheap mattress, a plain wooden floor and some thin insulation, through the ceiling tiles and finally, painfully and yet inevitably, to drip once—and only once—precisely onto the framed picture of Raoul himself centered above the massive RCA television in Mama's living room. I probe these thoughts much like a child is compelled to pick at a scab, despite how painful and often physically ill they made me feel. Was it some kind of liquefaction of the body that caused the

fluids to keep coming, when most of the blood must surely have pumped out of him when his penis was severed? He didn't die right away, it seems, but bled to death there above his childhood home. I think I'm the only family member, and perhaps the only person outside of the police, who knows the entire story of my brother's death—the penis severed and shoved into his mouth, his arms and feet bound with silk stockings to the iron bedpost. The brassiere and panties—pulled down to his knees—are being tracked by police investigators snickering about what appears to be expensive Belgian lace underwear. I know all the details, or at least I think I do, but I don't accept the theories the police drop casually about motive. They're not even talking about suspects, just cackling like schoolboys whenever local talk shifts from killing the towelheads to discovering Raoul's naked body tied to that bed. I can tell they are not really investigating the murder—and have no intention of doing so.

"We're on red alert here, ma'am," they say to me. "We don't have the resources to devote to a murder investigation right now and anyway, it seems, well, it seems like a crime of passion. We believe that no one else is really at risk for injury, and therefore it's not a high priority at the moment." They shrug: embarrassed about the crime, about their lame excuses not to investigate. When I arrived in Jerome, after a hellish day trying to get off the island of Manhattan, I found the town in a virtual meltdown, everyone and every building locked down tight. Men with machine guns drove through the quiet streets in military jeeps and stood sentry next to barbed wire unrolled along the isolated road to the base.

The Navy police have been around, though. These guys are not the same ones locking down the base and worrying about terrorism. I know those guys—their eyes are almost always flicking back and forth between the blue sky above and the faces around them. These other investigators are hovering on the fringes of our conversations. I know the witch-hunt has begun and will be conducted in deep secrecy. I am afraid that Mama had no clue Raoul was even in town, and I am certainly not going to be the one who tells her. She's linked his death in her mind to the events in New York, believing him to be the victim of terrorists and a casualty of war. I'm afraid that might be closer to the truth than she realizes, but not in a good way.

I had not been surprised to learn that Raoul was working "off the books" for the FBI. The last time I saw him, he told me a little bit about what he was doing, and where. It scared both of us. He'd been posing as a Muslim, an easy task with his dark, ethnic good looks; running with some pretty fanatical characters. He must have been on to something. How he ended up dead in a small town on the Connecticut shore—that's the mystery here.

Back at the Eagle's Club, I felt the power of the blood flowing through the thick veins that crisscrossed Guy's hand and looped under his arm. The coppery hair on his arm glimmered in the flickering neon Budweiser sign over the bar, and I traced the path of his ropy muscles with an unsteady fingertip. The bar was getting crowded, and I thought I heard Raoul's name in the noise. People were nervous,

some sad and others pumped up with bravado, ready to enlist and “go over there to whoop some Arab ass.”

“Wanna dance some more?” I asked, circling my hand around a hunk of bicep.

“To this?” Guy jerked his head at the sound of rap coming from the speakers. He looked at me, lowering his eyelids and barely moving his lips. “Let’s get some fresh air.” His breath came close to my ear and I shivered at the promise it held.

The door slammed behind us, and the music was replaced by the mating calls of a thousand crickets.

“Oh, I never hear this in Manhattan,” I murmured. “And look at how many stars there are.” Planes had just started to fly again and I watched a thin silver line bisect the sky.

I leaned back until the darkness seemed to come closer, and the brilliance of the stars swam in front of me. Guy was slightly taller than I, and his hand was entangled in the mess of brunette curls that tumbled around my shoulders. His slight pressure on my back kept me from falling over as we walked together to the picnic tables. I fit under his arm, my body engulfed in his. My thumb caught his belt loop as he pulled me around to his mouth.

Lying on the grass, looking into the night sky, every hot summer night of my childhood came back: the makeshift tents we created on the roof, the elaborate ghost stories and, later, smoking pilfered cigarettes with Jaime from 2B, drinking whatever he could sneak from the refrigerator. The same sense, I hadn’t lost it yet, waiting for something to happen, the magic—all that goddamned Prince Charming shit we’d been spoon-fed as children, and here I was, still waiting. The stars were obscured by the insistence of those lips, the head bobbing over me, and the soft clicking of a zipper being disengaged. A shaft of light cut across the darkness and then a voice, “Guy. Ya out here? Your wife’s on the phone,” and the slamming door, the night full with our frantic breathing.

Alone again, I listened to the quiet and the crickets humming their little sex songs. “Sex songs,” that’s what Raoul used to call them; he chanted some rhyme about the birds and the bees and the crickets rubbing their knees. I smiled, thinking sadly about what a sweet little boy he’d been. Mijo. I hadn’t been able to recognize him in the blood-soaked body the police found.

The last time I saw him alive, only his eyes and their defiance were the same. I kept flashing back to his face when he showed up at my apartment a few months ago. I tried to shake off the scene—the tense darting eyes of my brother as he asked me for help. His frustration when I dismissed his story as paranoid nonsense, when I’d agreed with his handlers that he was just imagining things.

“Didn’t you learn anything from my mistakes?” I’d asked him. I could still see the tension that gripped his jaw as he spat hateful words into the air between us, the stiffness of his proud back as he disappeared into a night portentous with fog and muffled gunfire.

“What happened to you?” he’d asked. “You know how important this is—or at least you did when it was your ass on the line.” He turned away then. “Just because you fucked up, doesn’t mean that I’m not right,” he said, walking away.

“Wait,” I’d yelled at his back. “All right, tell me what you need.” I’d run after him, tried to pull him back to my apartment, away from prying eyes, where I could talk sense into his stubborn head. Where I could find out what he was up to, and try to limit the damage. He flipped me off and vanished into the darting crowds on the sidewalk.

I shook my head and got up slowly, taking one last look at the stars. I trailed a finger over his tense back as Guy hunched over the pay phone just inside the door. Sliding onto an empty stool, I signaled for another beer. The old man sitting next to me held out his cigarettes. “No thanks,” I smiled.

“Heard about your brother,” he said. “Sorry for your loss.” He did not meet my eyes.

“Did you know Raoul?” I asked.

“Can’t say that I did,” he replied. He looked away and inhaled deeply.

No one spoke, no one looked at me. The patrons seemed intent on watching the bartender dry glasses. Her fingernails each blossomed with a painted yellow daisy floating on a chartreuse background. Guy mumbled into the phone behind me, and I let the beer flow down my throat. I leaned my head on my hand and examined the faces around the bar. A few of the older men looked familiar, faces from the days I’d visited this smoky hall with my father and, much later, with Raoul. There were several white guys, some older and others looking depleted from a day of hard labor. A couple of elderly black men, ashy faced and dressed in shiny black suit jackets, a younger black woman sitting with them, humming cheerfully into her makeup mirror. Two white women, about my age, leaned against the bar near me, one of them unable to focus her eyes as she sipped from a frothy orange drink. The other one tapped on the bar a rhythm unrelated to the music pounding from the jukebox. She snapped her gum and her eyes came to rest on me for a moment and then jerked away.

“What about you?” I asked. “Did you know Raoul?”

She pointed at herself and mouthed “Me?” I nodded. She paused. I signaled the bartender for another beer and turned back to the gum-snapper. She sighed heavily and shook her head. “Yeah, I knew him,” she admitted. “He used to come in here all the time, especially in the last few weeks. Seemed like he was here at closing time every night.”

“Yep,” the bartender chimed in. Her round face was serious, the dark eyes thoughtful. “He was always waiting in the parking lot when I came to open up in the afternoon. Came here every day after work, like most of the guys.”

“Was he alone?” I asked.

“Mostly, he kept to himself,” she said. “Although...” she paused. “He always got a phone call, almost like clockwork, around ten every night. And then he was gone.”

“And you never saw him with anyone?” She shook her head. “Are there any...” *How to say this and be politically correct?* I thought. *Hell, I'm in Jerome, no one is politically correct here.* “Do you have any Arabs around town?”

She smiled, then opened her mouth and said the hateful things I was expecting. “Nah, we had some towelheads around, a pair of 'em got beat up last week, but they's not A-rabs. They're Pakis, I heard. Big meeting about tolerance and all that whatnot down at the churches, but hell, those people would just as soon kill you as look at you, I say. Lock 'em up, just in case.” She looked at me, continued. “I never saw Raoul with none of them.” She paused again. “He could pass though, he had the same look. He could pass.”

The snapper chimed in, cheerfully oblivious to the discussion about terrorism. “That's where he was usually sitting,” she pointed to my stool. “Funny you chose that spot, too.”

I felt a shiver and looked away. The bartender made some clucking noises and put a bowl of peanuts in front of me before returning to her towel. I could see the local news on the television screen at the other end of the bar, but the sound did not penetrate the other noises in the room. The news took a break from the story about the continuing effort to recover people from the Trade Center site, cutting away to Raoul's picture with the word “Murder” dashed across the screen in brilliant red. I wondered how much of the story had leaked out by now, but I did not want to hear the news in the presence of so many strangers. I'd keep my appointment with Detective Barkowski and hope I could find out if the police had any leads on the identity of the killer.

By now, Barkowski would probably have figured out my relationship to the “deceased,” so it was unlikely he'd be as talkative as he'd been when I showed him my press credentials. I shut my eyes against the recurring pictures on the television screen, the buildings falling over and over, a body bag carried out, and a screaming woman covered in ash flashing in the red and blue lights of cop TV. I'd been on the scene downtown when my sister had finally reached me, hysterical. It all ran together in my head now. Which part was the burning hole where the towers once stood, and which was the bloody bedroom where Mijo was being wrapped in plastic? My camera had protected me from the horrors, a professional barricade that kept a distance between the bad stuff and me. How had I stood just outside that scene and talked with the cops so calmly? Tonight I was having trouble just sitting on this stool, avoiding the television and the probing eyes around the bar. I longed to slip my arms around Guy's waist and lose myself in his aroma. I almost got off the stool then, but stopped when I heard the sharpness in his voice.

I looked around. It was my turn to avoid people's eyes. The gum chewer slipped in next to me. “I'm real sorry about Raoul,” she began. “I didn't mean to upset you, about the chair and all, you know. I just, well, I wasn't sure about you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked dully.

“Well, you know, if you were cool or not, you know?” she moved closer, her sour breath warming my cheek.

“So is there something you want to tell me?” I asked again. I didn’t want to alienate her, but I was impatient to get to the point. “Were you friends with Raoul?”

“Oh,” she laughed. “No. Not in that way. You know, he was kind of quiet and he didn’t really talk to anyone here. I tried though.” She laughed again. “He was a real looker, your brother. Man, those eyes. We did spend one night together, a long time ago, but ever since then, it’s just been casual, like, you know? He wasn’t interested in relationships, I guess.”

“I see,” I said. I did see, because it had happened for his entire life. All the Quiñones kids shared the same features, but somehow they were more attractive in Mijo. Women loved him; they cooed over his big brown eyes with luxurious lashes and sensually curved brows. They naturally smiled when they saw his dimples, deeply embedded in rosy cheeks that framed the full lips, the perfect white teeth. He was always handsome, from the early days when his head was covered in ringlets, to the shaven head required by the service. He was stubbled, thin, and sallow when I last spoke with him, his cheekbones highlighted by the dark shadows playing on his face. But his eyes were always compelling and attractive.

I jerked back to the woman leaning on my arm. “Listen, ah...what was your name again?”

“Shelly.” She stuck out her hand.

“Shelly. Right. Nice to meet you. I’m Clara.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to me. “Did Raoul say anything to you? Did you see someone threatening him?”

She shook her head, slowly, and then leaned even closer. Cigarettes and whiskey fogged the air between us. “Well,” she whispered. “I think he was in some kind of trouble.”

This was not much of a leap, considering he’d just been brutally murdered, but I bit down the sarcasm and patted her arm. “What makes you think that?” I asked.

She shrugged, looked around the room, and then began hunting through her purse.

“Please, if you know something, please tell me,” I said quietly. “Even if it’s a little thing, it might help us find out who killed him.”

“Ha,” she said. My head snapped back as if she hit me, and I tightened my grip on her arm. “Here it is,” she shoved a filthy piece of paper in my hand.

“What is this?” I turned it over and tried to read the smeared writing.

“He dropped it on the floor the last time I saw him,” she said.

“Was he alone? Did you talk to him?” I pressed.

“Nah—he was really out of it that night, hardly lifted his head off the bar,” Shelly said. “He was wasted on something before I got here, and he didn’t stay too long.”

She paused, looking at the bar with unfocused eyes. “He did get a call, I think, just before he left, but I didn’t see anyone else with him that night.”

“A phone call? On this line, or the public phone?”

“The main number,” she confirmed. “Old man Peterson was working the bar that night, I think. He took the call.” She paused. “His usual calls, like Marian was saying, he got on the pay phone. This was different, he was real nervous after that call, headed out of here right quick.”

“Thanks, thanks a lot,” I could’ve kissed her. “This Peterson, is he here tonight?” I slipped the paper in my back pocket.

Shelly shook her head and sniffed loudly. “Nah, he don’t usually stay unless the night bartender don’t show up.”

“But he’s here in the daytime?”

“Yeah, mostly.” She was getting agitated. “Got any cigarettes?”

“Oh, no, sorry,” I said. “Let me buy you a drink, though.” She accepted with a smile and a wave to the bartender.

“Can I bum a couple of bucks off you?” she whispered. “I need a smoke real bad, and I’m tapped out.”

“Oh, sure.” I put a ten on the counter and watched it disappear along with the shot of whiskey that chased her beer. She wiped her mouth then leaned back over my way.

“You know, he wasn’t gay,” she whispered.

“What?”

“They’re saying in the papers, his murder was a gay thing. But he wasn’t, you know, that way,” Shelly said. Her eyes would not meet mine.

“I know that. I think someone’s trying to cover up what really happened,” I replied.

She nodded vigorously. “He fucked a lot of girls in here; he was definitely not gay,” she said. “Don’t know why they’re putting that shit in the newspaper.”

I was about to answer when a loud group of twenty-somethings erupted into the bar, and Shelly turned away, preening under the flickering bar light. The talk around the bar turned to war again, the kids bragging about signing up and shipping out. Shelly moved away and I sat alone for a while, finishing my drink. Occasionally I glanced back to check on Guy, who was still hunched over the phone.

I slid off the stool and took a breath, trying to adjust to the rolling floorboards. “Ya okay to drive?” the bartender squinted at me.

I waved my hand vaguely before pushing through the door where gulps of crisp air broke some of the beer frothing behind my eyes. It was easy to recognize the bland sedan with the New Jersey plates. I slipped behind the wheel, taking my memories along with the blaring radio and my taillights flickering down the road back to the hotel.