

The Women of the Medina Family

María Fornet

Characters

Main characters

MANUELA, the daughter

DOLORES, the mother

ESTRELLA, the cousin

JUANA, the neighbour of the finca since time immemorial

VALME (and her two girls), Manuela's best friend in the town

REMEDITAS (and her six boys), Manuel's old neighbour from up north

ESTEFANÍA AND ELVIRA, the two maids at the Medina family finca

Secondary but by no means less important characters

DON LORENZO, the parish priest of Santa María Magdalena

DOCTORA MILAGROS, the local doctor

Only mentioned, but still playing a major role

AUNTIE INMA

UNCLE ÁLVARO

GRANDMA AMPARO

Other

WOMEN AT THE COVERED MARKET, WOMEN WORKING THE FIELDS, BUS DRIVER, CAR DRIVER, REMEDITAS' HUSBAND, MILKMAN, POSTMAN, GYPSY AND MANY MORE.

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ACT I
DENIAL

I

The story goes that when the girl came into the world, not a single moan was heard. Nor when the grandmother left it, at the exact same moment, in the next room. It was only the bells of the church of Santa María Magdalena, chiming life and death, that dared to defy the white silence that morning, in the finca belonging to the women of the Medina family.

According to Dolores, the mother, Manuela opened her eyes just as her grandmother's closed, and that was when she knew she had lost her. She knew it in the mind of her soul, which Dolores always said was the only thing a woman could trust. And although the pain was intense, so too was the conviction that, with a grandmother dying and a daughter being born, everything was starting anew.

Dolores always said that the morning they lost a mother and gained a daughter, the sky went pale. The long curtains at the windows of the finca were kept open, as her mother had always wanted them to be on the day she died. Because death, like life, had to be faced in broad daylight and with a clean face. But the sky was so overcast, that no sunlight made it through the glass.

According to Dolores the room behind the pantry, the one which was always her bedroom, was lit only by the flames of the candles. She remembers the blood red wax dripping onto the marble nightstand at the foot of the bed, surrounded by the faded pictures of all her saints. The golden tips swelled and shrank in the reflection of the mirror, breathing to the rhythm of what was happening in the rooms, keeping step in a dance of arrival and departure, both outside and inside.

The story goes that neither mother, nor grandmother, nor daughter made a sound, because the women of the Medina family knew there was no point making a fuss, and that all that could be heard were the words of the rosary litany uttered by Juana, praying with self-righteous faith beside the grandmother's bed; they say nobody cried or moaned in pain when she went, just as no sounds were uttered by Dolores the mother, nor Manuela the daughter, at the same moment in the very next room. And that stoic silence was a point of pride for those women, who did not waste their time with suffering and misery, who knew life was simply a revolving door and accepted it as such.

Manuela had heard this story so many times that she could no longer tell which part was true and which belonged to the collective memory of the women of the Medina family. Theirs was a porous memory, cunningly letting their triumphs and misfortunes slip through, and artfully blocking the way for their own faults and sins. But that was the way she'd been told it, and that was how she liked to remember it, thought Manuela, as she sipped her black coffee to try and stave off the wretched nausea she'd been experiencing for several days now.

According to Juana - the only person who could really say what happened when their grandmother died, because nobody else was there with her - the last thing Grandma Amparo saw as her granddaughter was born was the rippling white of the sheets hanging on the washing line against a background of white sky, and that she seemed to smile just before her eyes closed, although Manuela never believed that part because Dolores said that smiling was not something they often saw grandma do. Although Manuela thought that if you had to choose a time to smile, death would be as good a time as any, or surely, at least, the last chance you got.

The story matched the version told by Dolores, who said that everyone saw how the sheets stopped rippling at the very moment Manuela came into the world and the bells of the Santa María Magdalena church rang out, and that that was the last thing she remembered before she looked into her daughter's eyes for the first time. Everything changed after that. Nothing would ever seem the same to her: the colour of the sheets, the smells of the candles in the bedroom, the scent of olive that seeped into every piece of furniture in the *finca*, the headboard of the bed, the wood of the built-in

wardrobe, her long nightgown. Nothing tasted the same, or smelled the same, or was the same colour as it had been before she looked into Manuela's eyes.

'She has the eyes of an old woman,' said Juana, coming in and seeing the baby already latched onto Dolores' breast. And when Dolores lifted her head from where she lay on the mattress serving as both a bed and a cot, the one on which she too had come into this world, she realised that it was true, those eyes were more like a mother's than a daughters': they were old woman's eyes. Juana nodded, blew out the candles flickering in the thin, dry air, and sent for more clean towels. The midwives and maids who had attended the birth left the room, to make space for the grief, which, in the end, never came. Because grandma had already been ill for a long time, that perverse sickness eating away at everything: her bowels, her mind, her teeth, the sheets, the walls of that room, and relationships, it had also changed the tone of relationships, making Dolores believe she had something with Grandma Amparo that she did not really have. Grandma had been gone for such a long time by then that Dolores had already suffered the pain of the death that was only just descending on the finca. So once Dolores was finally alone with Manuela, all she said was, 'Juana is right: you have the exact same gaze as your grandmother'.

Now, finally alone together as mother and daughter, Dolores smiled. She smiled like she had not smiled for many months, or maybe years. She realised that everything now smelled different. Tasted different. Sounded different. She felt the smell of sickness and cold sweat disappear, giving way to the scent of new skin. She always used to say that she looked into Manuela's eyes and her fear fell away; that the weight which had been growing in her belly for the past forty weeks, which had robbed her of her calm and her sleep, suddenly grew light. She was no longer afraid of being alone. She thought, she could do this, she could. Because deep down, as Dolores liked to say, women were never alone. But Manuela thought the opposite: that was exactly what they never stopped being.

This is what Manuela was thinking as she looked in the mirror, into her own eyes, the eyes that her mother had said looked like an old woman's, reminding her of how similar they looked and how different they were in every other way. She was thinking about this just before she closed the window of the dilapidated attic to stop the rain coming in, the phone in her hand. She was thinking about it when she put the phone down after hanging up on her cousin Estrella, and it was as she looked at her old woman's eyes and went to close the old window of her old attic, that Manuela realised, 'This is going to change everything'. And she was right.