

**Excerpt from *Inheriting Our Names*  
by C. Vargas McPherson**

I was born on the only day God is dead. Jesus is crucified on Friday, and he is forever and eternally resurrected on Sunday, the third day. But the interminable Saturday between, that second day, he is stone cold dead, in the tomb, behind that great rock they rolled over the entrance. It is the ultimate Sabbath, when all things cease and give way to a great sadness, a great stillness and silence. And in Sevilla and amidst the staunch Catholicism and tyranny of Franco's Spain, it was a day between despair and hope. A day of watchful waiting.

On the day I was born, this church, the Basilica de la Macarena in Sevilla was cloaked in black. Ordinarily aglow with strong Spanish sunlight, the windows were draped with long black veils, the statues and paintings were overlain with shrouds, and my grandmother, my *abuela* Aurora, wore *traje de mantilla*, with a black *mantón* covering her head. That Saturday, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, my grandmother prayed the *Mater Dolorosa*, the rosary of Mary's Seven Sorrows. Those Seven Sorrows that trace the life Mary witnessed as Her son was hunted, lost and then found, wept over, crucified, buried, and anointed, were always my *abuela's* entry into the Virgin's heart and, eventually, into her own.

That Holy Saturday, my *abuela* Aurora sat in this darkened church, at the feet of the Virgin de la Esperanza Macarena, the effigy of the Holy Virgin artfully carved from sweet-smelling sandalwood and ancient cedars. Carved as if its heart were flesh, and on it were etched all the expressions of human grief. I can almost hear my grandmother ruminates on how in 1658, nearly complete, the statue lacked only one last intercession when the artist, la Roldána, finally administered the special preparation. Carefully, la Roldána measured, mixed, and dispensed the elixir known as *encarnado*, a color that gives the impression that the wood has become incarnate. Here, in la Macarena, are the Seven Sorrows made flesh in a mother's body.

That day, my *abuela* sat quietly in this church, in the Macarena *barrio* of Sevilla, reflecting upon all that had come before: the years of war, of hunger, of continued oppression under Franco, of want and need, and finally, what constitutes enough. She thought of her children: those who survived, the one who didn't, and her daughter – my mother – who tried to escape the ghosts of home but found she carried the haunting always with her. My *abuela* imagined me as well, on this day in which the greatest mourning is being transformed into the greatest joy, as a butterfly is created within the milky quiet of its chrysalis. Quietly and unseen.

In this sanctuary, the day I was born, the air was thick and heavy. And although the candles remained unlit on that day, the cloying scent of melted wax from all the many that had burned the day before lingered in the solemn still air. The fragrance of glossy-leafed orange trees in bloom and from the creamy carnations that adorned the processional floats, added top notes to the multilayered perfume. My grandmother rocked back and forth on the wooden pew until she remembered what brought her here, again, to the feet of the Virgin. Twisting each bead of her rosary, murmuring softly words only la Macarena could hear, she whispered her fears. “This baby will not save her from her sorrow. She must save herself. We can only save ourselves.” She knew full well the vast sadness of her daughter's heart because it reflected her own – as hers reflected la Macarena's.

Peering into the eyes of the elaborately jeweled and clothed statue, my grandmother beseeched, “*Señora*, she is all alone there. Her letters reveal nothing. I think she is trying to protect me.” My grandmother pulled in a ragged breath and reached out to the Virgin. My *abuela* knew that she and I would never meet. She would never hold her second grandchild. We were an ocean apart, but also a lifetime. Her lifetime.

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Pooled in my palm as I sit in her church – my mother's church and my grandmother's church, but not my own – are the blackened rosary beads my *abuela* Aurora fingered almost every day of her life. But they are foreign to my touch; I roll

them as an archeologist might, hesitantly, detached, but respectfully. I am just beginning the prayer cycle of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the *Mater Dolorosa*. I am trying to learn how to use the Seven Sorrows as a map, some kind of chart where I can pinpoint the few facts I know and follow the paths toward some understanding, some meaning from this family legacy of unspoken grief. This, too, is an inheritance from the years of Spain's stifled secrets.

Here in Sevilla, I am seeking something familiar, something that could explain our family and the distance and space between us. I am seeking all my grandmother buried, all my mother rejected, all that Spain has silenced since its brutal civil war. It is my mother's abandoned life – her family, home, and country – that draws me like an anthropologist or an historian to this place where I follow in her footsteps, stare through the bars on the gate of her girlhood school, walk through the bank that was built upon the wreckage of her family home, and wonder how and why. Here in Sevilla, I am seeking my inheritance.

So, without any claim or passport or inherent sense of *patria*, I have traveled across the Atlantic to witness the pageantry of Holy Week in Sevilla. For one week, I have followed my *abuela's* beloved Virgin de la Macarena through Sevilla's marigold-strewn streets. I've walked my mother's *paseo* of acacia trees. And I am piecing together a history of a time before my birth. Today, I will sit here, like my grandmother, twirling these beads, reciting the *Mater Dolorosa* like an incantation, calling on all the ghosts. On this Holy Saturday 45 years after my grandmother pleaded with la Macarena, I will sit vigil for these lives that have gone before. And in my own Holy Saturday, I will attend to the quiet and unseen transformation and pray that the metamorphosis is happening within me as well.

Stored in the names of my family are an historical memory held back by the clench of a nation's teeth, the hardened jaw, and ulcerated gut of generations sentenced to silence. This is my fiction derived from few facts. Here is my handful of names. And it seems only right that this story begins with the beginning, the dawn, with Aurora.

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My grandmother first gives her heart to la Macarena on December 18, 1925, when the first *Besamanos*, the ceremony to kiss the hand of the Virgin, is celebrated. Aurora is fourteen, thoughtful and mostly kind. Though she is tall for her age, her gait is not ungainly; she is not awkward or uncomfortable in her body. She carries within an abiding knowledge that she is fully loved.

Aurora watches the world around her, wondering about those things that can't be seen. She is earnest and without judgment. Curious. Constantly questioning why things are such as they are, why things are done the way they are done, why these parents, this family, this city, this *barrio*. She could have been anyone, anywhere at all, but she is Aurora. She is her mother's wild child: always asking questions, always, "why can't I go to school like my brothers? Why do they always get the bigger portions at meals? Why do we give money to the Church when they are already so rich, and we are not?" Aurora's mother is often exasperated. So many questions.

At the *Besamanos*, the statue of the Virgin Mary la Macarena is wearing Her gold crown, a white *saya* embroidered in gold, as well as Her long luxurious black lace *mantilla*. She stands quietly as the mass is performed, yet la Macarena is not rooted on Her high altar. Instead, She is standing outside Her church, still within the gates of the courtyard, yet on the terra-cotta tiles amongst Her people. It seems everyone in the Macarena quarter has come to kiss the Virgin's hand, and from before dawn, the line snakes all through the working-class *barrio* in Sevilla.

Aurora waits in line, not patiently, but dancing on her toes to catch a glimpse of the Virgin as She extends Her hand to be kissed. Aurora's initial reticence has been replaced with a growing excitement. She sees that her friends are in line, everyone is. Even the men are waiting for this first ever opportunity to gaze, eye-to-eye, into the face of la Macarena. But the line is so long, and time is passing so slowly. Aurora starts a prayer, a mantra, to sing under her breath. "*Estoy aquí. Vengo,*" more to remind herself that she is here, in this historic moment, the first *Besamanos*. Aurora is imagining touching Her hand, resting her lips however briefly upon

Her sacred fingers when Ana joins her. The two begin whispering back and forth just as they used to when they were in school together, before each had to start working in the dress factory.

“Does la Macarena have hair beneath Her *mantilla*?” asks Aurora as she flips her own dark curls with the backs of her fingers.

“Does She have ears?” Ana giggles in reply.

The girls are harshly shushed by the adults around them. So, they gather their restless hands in a knot between them and place their foreheads together as they imagine seeing, up close, the delicate stitching on Her robes, and wonder whether they might be able to touch the fabric, feel the heft. How will the embroidery compare to their own handwork? Perhaps someday they could get work in the famed Elena Caro Embroidery Studio, where the delicate *mantilla* for their beautiful Virgin was created.

Ana’s mother calls and the girls kiss before she skips off leaving Aurora once again to her thoughts. The swelling crowds, the slow pulsing movement forward, the low hum of whispered prayers begin to fill Aurora. She rocks slowly, feeling the rounded curves of the cobbles beneath her feet, the soles of her espadrilles conforming to the stone.

It has been three hours, and Aurora is still waiting in line. Thankfully it is not raining, and it is not too cold. But still Aurora sways upon the hard stones beneath her rope-soled shoes, perhaps from fatigue, perhaps from her intent and purpose. She struggles to remain focused on her slow pilgrimage forward. “*Madre de Dios*,” Aurora continues chanting, “*estoy aquí. Vengo*.” Over and over Aurora tells la Macarena that she is here, she is coming. Soon the words are not touching her lips, not moving her tongue, but simply swelling with her breath. The words become her breath. Aurora breathes in, “I am here.” She breathes out, “I am coming.” While shadows lengthen, Aurora continues breathing the words, “I am here. I am coming.” She becomes less aware of time. There is a stillness within. She steps forward when the line moves forward. Yet she is still, completely still, even as she steps forward.

From an unfathomable distance and yet so near as to seem inside her, words. *"I hear you. Not much farther. You are nearly with me."* The words sing softly in Aurora's ear. She feels the scented breath against her cheek, moving her hair.

Aurora turns to see who might have spoken to her, but there is no one. The women around her are either whispering quietly amongst themselves or they are locked away in their own private reveries. These women, stout black bundles bracing themselves on the ancient city walls or rocking upon the cobbles, seem oblivious to Aurora. Yet the words she heard were clear, unmistakable.

*"Señora?"* asks Aurora in the smallest whisper. A rose-scented breeze lifts, and the women around her pull at their shawls and tug at their beads. Aurora feels the perfumed air fill her lungs, an easy breath, nourishing.

Again, quiet but clear, *"I hear you. You are nearly with me."*

She cranes her neck and peers over the shoulders of those ahead of her. Even in the movement, Aurora feels foolish. She thinks that she must be hungry or more tired than she realizes. She's hearing voices, smelling roses, and now looking over the shoulders of those ahead of her, to see what? Whom?

But as soon as she sees the Virgin she knows. La Macarena de Esperanza is looking right at her. Her eyes are steady, penetrating, as though seeing something important in Aurora. And She winks! There is no mistake.

That evening, at eight, the order comes from the Bishop to close the gates of the church and prohibit entry to any more people. But his edict is futile for there are over 1,000 people still waiting to pass through the Macarena Gate and into the church courtyard.

As Aurora nears at long last, she wonders if the wink she saw was perhaps light glancing off one of la Macarena's crystal tears. She watches the Virgin's face, studies the shadow and light as it caresses Her jaw and glints off Her cheekbones. She admonishes herself for these doubts, but still she wonders, "why me? Who am I?"

Creeping closer and closer, she waits. As each person ahead of her takes their turn, Aurora looks for a sign that will prove beyond doubt la Macarena saw *her*, spoke to *her*.

At last she arrives, and she can hardly breathe. She is surprised to discover that she and the Virgin are nearly the same height. La Macarena always seemed a tremendous figure, a larger-than-life representation of Mary, the Mother of God. And yet here She is. Her hand reaching out to Aurora. Her posture slightly inclined as if to embrace. La Macarena's crown towers above them both, and it is at this gold aura that Aurora is staring when she feels la Macarena's eyes searching out her gaze, pulling her in. *"I am not this gold crown. I am not this fancy dress. Aurora, I am here. With you."*

"You know my name?" her voice barely a breath.

*"I have always known your name."* La Macarena is smiling an invitation.

Aurora is quaking now. She is afraid to take the statue's extended hand, but somehow, holding her gaze to la Macarena's tender face, Aurora reaches out and bends low touching her lips to the outstretched fingertips. She feels a tremble and a warmth radiate to her lips. Again, she smells a sweet perfume not unlike the roses in the María Luisa Park. Aurora feels the push and shuffle of those behind her in line. They have waited their turn and are nearly unable to contain themselves. They are so close. She hesitates perhaps a bit too long, and low grumbling begins.

*"Hija, anda."* Voices are urging her to move along. *"Muévete."*

She wants to turn to them, apologize and ask them to wait just a moment more, but her voice is lost to her and she can't take her eyes off those of her beloved Macarena. Aurora's breath is hinged in that moment between inhale and exhale when she hears the quiet voice again. *"Go now. Go home, and we will talk later."* And with a slight nod from the Virgin, Aurora is released.

The way home is difficult. Aurora's legs threaten to buckle, and she leans heavily on the remnants of the stone city wall. Many of her neighbors are in tears, overjoyed at their own intimate exchange. Everyone is talking about the scent of roses that surrounds the Virgin, about the warmth of Her touch that seemed much too tender to their callused hands. Aurora, too, smelled the rose perfume, she too felt the warmth emanate from the Virgin, she too feels close to

tears. But she doesn't hear anyone mention they heard la Macarena's voice.

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It is estimated that more than 10,000 *Sevillanos* went through the gate to kiss the hand of la Macarena in 1925, and my *abuela* was one. It was the beginning of a relationship that would span decades. For Aurora, the *Besamanos* was the dawning of a sisterly bond that would sustain and guide her for the rest of her life. For the remaining 40 years of Aurora's life, she will come to la Macarena to tell Her everything. Not as a confessant, not seeking absolution or forgiveness, but as a friend might whisper secrets and concerns to her closest confidant. As Aurora chooses a husband, as she marries him in front of her family and friends, her most important witness is la Macarena. As each of Aurora's children is born, she will bring them to meet la Macarena. They will be christened beneath Her gaze, and She will be their most important godmother, their very special *madrina*. Through marriage, children, war, hunger, death, and dictatorship; through all of her life, la Macarena is here.

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Aurora's beads are now in my hand, and I clumsily and self-consciously caress each one trying to recite the first sorrow of the *Mater Dolorosa*. The beads are uneven, handmade from boiled rose petals that were rolled, then dried, and carefully strung with simple silver decade beads. A slender, silver cross with only the pierced hands and feet of an ebony Jesus is still attached. These beads, or others very like them, were effortlessly twirled in the fingers of every woman in my mother's family.

I read the first sorrow from the little book I purchased in the gift shop, Simeon's prophesy of the sword that will pierce through the mother's soul so that many thoughts out of many hearts may come to light. I wonder what this means for those in my family, and in all of Spain, who have left so much buried in the past, unspoken, unnamed, unclaimed, unresolved, unabsolved. Looking at la Macarena's tear-stained face, I wonder why, despite being troubled by the



prophesies, She kept all these things buried, pondering them only in Her heart.

I imagine that when my *abuela* held these same beads that Holy Saturday the year I was born, the rosary slipped easily through her fingers. The silver decades cool between her callused fingertips in the late afternoon sun, and she rocked almost imperceptibly while her breath shaped the words of the first sorrow. “Behold, this child ... and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.”

A slight shudder passed between her shoulders, and she wrapped the black fringed shawl tighter before moving to the first rose petal bead and the Hail Mary, “... *Santa María, madre de Dios, Ruega por nosotros, Ahora y en la hora de la muerte. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres. Bendito el fruto de tu vientre, Jesus.*”