Sanctuary

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“I know who you are,” said Mother Sophia. His hair hung loose instead of pulled back in a slick ponytail, and he had wispy hairs on what had always been a clean shaven face, making it just look dirty. But it was unmistakably Esteban Moya, son of Carlos Moya, the dictator recently deposed.

“I hope that I have entered a Christian place, where there is mercy and compassion before vengeance,” he said, showing that despite his disheveled appearance he still spoke with the assurance that comes with privilege.

“I thought that your father’s revolution had no place for Christianity?” she said.

“You are wrong.” Then Esteban decided to be more measured: “Forgive me for correcting you, but my father said that there is no place for the Church in politics. He has never shared his faith with the public. For me also, my faith is private. But do not assume that we do not believe in God.”

“I will not ask you what you believe, Senor,” said the nun. “I only ask that you respect the sanctity of this place if you are to stay here, and that you keep your presence here a secret.”

“That is exactly what I want,” said Esteban. “I just need a place to hide. I cannot expect you to protect me from those who might come to find me. I just need a little time for the hatred and anger to subside, and the I promise, I will be gone from this place.”

“Your problem may not be from the outside,” she said. “My sisters will not say anything, but we are in the minority here. The problem is that there are many women who visit or who are resident in this convent, who are your victims. Well, if not victims of you, then of the culture of abuse that you represent.”

“What are saying?” Esteban was becoming worried.

“This is the modern Church,” complained Mother Sophia. “At 54 I am one of the youngest nuns. Only two are younger than I. And we care for the very few that remain, some in their eighties. There are no replacements, and I can hardly blame your father’s Godless regime. It is the way of many Catholic countries in the Europe and Latin America. Rome recognizes that orders devoted to prayer must adapt to the world as it is. In our case we are not trained or equipped as a school or a hospital. We can pray, but we can also accommodate the oppressed. In our case we have had to open our doors to the women who have suffered at the hands of you and your followers. I can ask them to be silent as to your presence, but I cannot promise that they will be.”

“Reverent Mother,” said Esteban. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“I will not turn you away from a house of God,” she said. “But you must do exactly as I say.”

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He looked in the mirror and he was not convinced. Somehow Mother Sophia had been able to remove his beard completely, and now that the initial inflammation had subsided, his skin was smooth and pale. She had trimmed his eyebrows, but they still appeared natural. His hair she had combed and trimmed, but it was still long. As a novitiate it was visible under the head covering. It was still him.

He had a sign around his neck reading ‘I am observing a vow of silence’ and was instructed to keep his head down, and walk with small steps, but he wondered if he could convince anybody. It was explained to him that he was not pretending to be a woman, just not to be a man. There was no room for a man in a convent.

When he was out of his room he carried a bible and a rosary, and stuck to the shadows. In the dining hall he had a place with the nuns on the table below the window, with his back to the young women. The nuns were old and quiet and spoke only of prayer or administration issues when they did speak. Whereas behind him the young women who there for refuge rather than prayer were in raucous conversation and occasional laughter.

They would recognize him immediately if he did not keep his head down. To hide in his room was not an option. Only the old and the sick would not take their meals in the dining room.

The other place where he could go without fear of recognition, was the chapel. There he could sit in the front row with the nuns and keep his head down. It was peaceful and cool. He did not pray. He did not believe in God. God had not saved him from the mob. He had done that himself. He believed in himself.

When it came down to it, his entourage had gone. There were those who could (perhaps) deny that they knew him and seek forgiveness from the mob. And there were some who were too deep in, to close to him and too much in the public eye, to get away with that. They were bound to leave the country. Many of them could count on family to shelter them along the way. But not Esteban. All of his family were marked for vengeance. And he knew it.

Carlos Moya was dead – lynched by the mob. Strung up in the Capital’s main square. Even if he believed I God, Esteban doubted that he would pray for the soul of his father. He was just as cruel to his youngest son as he was to his people.

Of course, Esteban had enjoyed the trappings of power. More than enjoyed them, he had sought them out and relished them. Immunity from rape charges had encouraged him to break simple rules of decency, that was true. But what had driven him was anger. He was angry at his father; angry at the pathetic public who had supported him for so long; angry at those who had not stepped in sooner. His father’s personal actions should have goaded the security forces into acting earlier. But the old man knew who to look after in order to stay in power.

His older brother was dead too. Killed in battle. A rear-guard action at the palace on the hill. So typical for him to go out like a hero. Esteban chose the palace on the coast which allowed a getaway by sea, before a run to the border. Now here, still 30 miles short. And by now being allowed refuge in any neighboring country seemed problematic. No nation welcomed a member of the Moya family.

What was needed was time. He needed to keep his head low.

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“So, you know its him?” There was rising anger in the voice of Susanna Marques, the recognized leader of the women taking refuge.

Mother Sophia looked at her charge intently. She explained: “My problem is that he has requested sanctuary, and I have given it, in the same way that I protected you when his father ruled this country. If you tell anyone that he is here, then there are people who will break down our doors to seize him. I must resist those people, even if I dislike him and everything he has done. If necessary I will die holding the door. The sanctity of a House of God must be protected.”

“If you won’t let us exact a penalty then I cannot answer for the others,” said Susanna. “Two of them have been raped by him personally. If they cannot take their revenge then they will tell the people, and open the door for them too.”

“I did not say that you cannot take a penalty,” the nun said.

Susanna stared at her, a little confused. She said: “Are you saying that we can kill him provided that we tell nobody?”

“Goodness, no” said Sophia. “There will be no life taken in this place, other than by God himself. There is another penalty that you might consider. It is because we allow only women in this place, and some of us are uncomfortable that there is a man here, dressed in the robes of a woman – a nun. We cannot mutilate him, but we feel that God will forgive those who might be justified in taking such an action.”

Susanna was shocked.

Sophia continued: “Such an action would need to remain within these walls. The identity of the target individual would need to remain secret for the protection of everybody, and for this house of God. If you wish to extract your revenge, you must leave God’s creature to God. As an order we would have honored our obligation of sanctuary, and he will rendered unable to do further damage. Then ‘she’ would be able to stay in the convent as long as ‘she’ may need. Perhaps, in time, with prayer, God might allow ‘her’ entry to heaven.”

“As you know, one of our number has some surgical skills,” said Susanna. “But you cannot make a man into a woman with a machete. You understand that?”

“What you do is your business,” said Sophia. “But I suggest that you should not be so violent. I am only offering you the offending organ.”

To Sophia it was offensive. While she had fought her hatred as a sin before God she had always hated men. Ever since her father had raped her as a child she had been repelled by even the thought of the male organ. In her life she had dealt with men only by deliberately shutting out the thought of their bodies. At the earliest opportunity she had sought to become a nun, and live a life without men. She had succeeded until the arrival of Esteban Moya. Now his presence, or the presence of his maleness, consumed her. Susanna could cleanse the convent, without taking a life.

“To make him a woman would be too good for him,” said Susanna. “We are women and proud to be so. But it seems that we are too often prey for people like him.”

“I suggest that you fix that,” said Sophia. “Perhaps he will never understand what you felt. Maybe if he were a woman in a man’s world, outside these walls, he may know the fear that you know. Or perhaps that is impossible. How can you fear for your life without valuing your life through self-respect? And if he has no virtue, there is no value in losing it.”

“Are you suggesting that we give him a vagina?”

“Praise God, in these times all seems possible”. Sophia raised her eyes to the ceiling.

Susanna was not sure whether the Mother Superior was very wise, or insane.

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“What have you done?” The person who had once been Esteban Moya was feeling the bandage in his groin. There seemed no volume to his package, although the pain in his penis was excruciating, and it should have been swollen accordingly.

“I have done nothing,” said Mother Sophia. “Unfortunately you were recognized and some of the women staying with us have decided to take some revenge. It would appear that they may have injured you where you injured them”.

There was a catheter coming out from the bandages, but it seemed to him to be in completely the wrong position. It was way down low. Right between his legs.

He suddenly thought: ‘Have they taken my balls? What kind of monster could do that?’ He was tightly bandaged and started to tear at the material.

“You should take care,” the nun told him. “There is a risk of bleeding. There has been major surgery performed on you. After you were assaulted we had the surgeon from San Aurea do the work he is most renowned for.”

“What have they done?” asked Esteban, with a look of horror on his face. He knew about the clinic in San Aurea.

“You are a woman now, my child,” said Sofia. “You can now stay here as a real novitiate if you wish. You can put all the past behind you now. Nobody can touch you here. You can give your life to God. And we would welcome you.”

“You must be crazy,” cried Esteban, as the enormity of what had been done to him started to bite. “I am not here for religion. I am trying to escape.”

“You have escaped,” she said. “You have escaped your past. Even those who have done this to you are happy to leave you here, as they may now return to their homes. You are no longer a threat. It is over.”

Esteban Moya threw back his head and wailed.

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Sister Isabel had been growing her hair under her wimple and had kept it in a braid as she had seen her sister weave many times in the distant past. With the benefit of the mirror in the guest toilet she could unwind it and see how long it now was.

It was down well past her shoulders. Had it been that long? She had intended to put some time between the fall of the regime of Carlos Moya, her father, and this day, the day that she would leave the convent. She decided that she would need to visit a beauty salon, maybe in San Aurea?

There was no doubt now that she would never be Esteban Moya again. She stood naked before that mirror, her pale body devoid of hair and muscle that male hormones promote, and instead showing the fat on her chest and hips even with female hormones being introduced. And there, just visible in the mirror when she stood back, was her new genitalia. Now not so new.

Like some of the younger nuns, she occasionally pleasured herself. The surgeon from San Aurea was indeed a man of some skill. From the wreckage he had been able to fashion a deep and still open passage, with such sensitivity that a few minutes with a warm candle could bring her to ecstasy.

Isabel smiled at the thought. It was sinful, and that pleased her the most. She was a bad nun. Although Esteban had been heterosexual and a renowned rake, Isabel had been wondering for some time what it would be like to have a man inside her.

On the chair were the clothes that Mother Superior had bought for her: Panties and a bra, a slip, and a simple patterned dress. Shoes with a small heel. She has practiced walking on the balls of her feet in anticipation of something higher. She knew that her smooth calves would look spectacular in heels. She was looking forward to it.

When she completed dressing, she stepped out. Mother Superior was waiting.

“You can always stay, my child,” she said. “You know our problem. We need young women to continue or work. We have a world of sin to pray for. You can never have children. You have a place here.”

“I was never cut out for holy orders, Reverend Mother,” said Isabel. “I think you know that. I was not cut out for womanhood either, but that is no excuse for staying here.”

The older nun looked at her seriously, to impart her last words: “My dear, be careful of men. They are driven by urges that place all women in peril. I do not approve of the dress you have chosen. You should be more modest. Modest women are safer. In this bag there is money and a few things from our last novitiate. Be careful. Be frugal. Pray every day. Respect God and the church.”

“I will,” lied Isabel.

There was a kiss on the cheek and then Isabel stepped through the gate, into the sunlight.

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“The [password],” Isabel spoke clearly into the microphone, in the high tones that she had become accustomed to using. The big gate opened to a large compound concealed by the high wall. On the far side stood an imposing entrance to a majestic home. In the heart of the city, something of the grandeur of the past regime had been preserved. That lifted Isabel’s heart.

She had barely reached the portico when the door opened. A man she did not recognize stood there. Not a servant. A bodyguard perhaps. She looked her up and down and asked: “Who are you?”

“I am here to see Edgar Hurtado,” she said with confidence verging on disdain. “Tell him that a member of the Moya family wishes to see him.”

“Wait here,” he said, ushering her into the entrance hall and leaving her there.

There was a full-length mirror there. She had learned to value these mirrors. She used them all the time. She looked at herself with admiration. Since her first visit to the salon at San Aurea she made a habit of going once a week, as she had done that day. Her abundant hair hung about her shoulders where it was in soft curls. Her shaped eyebrows and thick dark lashes featured in her perfect makeup. She flicked a clump of lipstick from the corner of her mouth with a long painted fingernail. She turned slightly to check the line of her dress across her ripe bottom. The dress hugged the shape that had developed so well, and the line continued down her legs to her calves and ankles and her 4 inch heels. She turned back to cup her breasts in the cups of her underwire bra, which showed off the cleavage that had become her meal ticket

She approved.

Edgar Hurtado walked into the hall. He looked at her suspiciously.

“Do I know you, Senorita?” he asked.

“You knew me once,” she said. She used her best Isabel smile. The smile that had kept her alive since she had left the convent. “But not like this.” Her hands indicated her body, and she posed slightly. “I was … Esteban Moya, the son of your leader.”

He seemed startled, then incredulous, then there was the creeping recognition. Then a laugh. A full throated, side slapping laugh.

“And who are you now, Esteban?”

“Isabel,” she said. Was he laughing at her? She was annoyed. “It is the name the nuns gave me. I have been hiding in a convent for almost 2 years.”

“Isabel … my dear,” said Edgar. “You don’t mind if I call you ‘my dear’ do you? ‘My boy’ is what I used to call you, but now … not quite right.”

“Yes,” she said. “Many things have changed. I am happy to be addressed as a woman these days. It was hardly a choice, but I live with it now.”

“It is no surprise to me that you survived,” said Edgar. “You were always the resourceful one.” He ushered her into the large living area. It had a deep comfortable sofa that he pointed at, but Isabel knew that to sit there might not show her off to her best. She chose a chair. He took one too.

“Well,’ said Isabel. “I have to say that I was surprised to find out that you were alive. And obviously with your wealth intact. The benefits of your long loyalty to my family.”

“That I cannot deny,” said Edgar. “So, you are looking for my protection?”

“No, but thank you,” she said. “I am, I think you agree, unrecognizable, so I can disappear in plain sight. But I do need money. I have been able to survive through the favors of people who admire me, but that is not the life I seek. Sadly perhaps, two years in a convent has not taught me to love poverty. I still have those expensive habits that the Moya regime drummed into me. A little changed as to their direction, I suppose. It costs money to look good.”

“Well, you do look good, Isabel. Very good indeed.” There was no mistaking the look he gave her. It was lecherous. She felt uncomfortable.

“I think that you owe my family something, given all that you have,” she said.

“Of course, I do,” he said. “Come with me Isabel. I have something for you upstairs. Something that will set you up for the rest of your life. Just what you need. Just what you are asking for. Come.”

He rose and led her up the massive staircase to the next level. They walked down a hall to a large chamber. It was a bed chamber, but there was also a desk in the corner. Instinctively, she walked towards that. And then she heard the lock on the door being closed. She spun around.

“Uncle Edgar,” she said. He was not really her uncle, but Esteban had called him that from an early age. “What are you doing?”

“It is what I am going to do, my dear,” he sneered. “I am not sure what you have between your legs, but I do not care. I am going to fuck another Moya today, in the proper way. I could only fuck your father by turning him over to the new regime. What I have here is not from your father, but my payment for that. Now I can use my cock to fuck you, Isabel or Esteban, or whatever you are, you are the last of the Moyas. So take off that dress, or I will tear it off you.”

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She stooped outside the gate. Her arms and thighs were bruised, and her vagina was sore, but that was not the pain. It was the humiliation. She now knew rape. When she had given her body before it had been her using men. She got what she wanted, and they got what they wanted. It was not like this.

She also learned just how weak she was. Somehow, she had felt that the strength of Esteban might come through in a pinch. She was completely wrong. Edgar was old and fat, but still so much stronger than she was. She knew it from the moment that he had her pinned down on the bed. She took off her dress to keep it intact, but she never yielded to him. That is why she was bruised.

Thankfully he had not bashed her face. She rummaged in her bag for a compact.

“Are you alright?” she did not look up. A man was standing over her, and she could not find her mirror. “I think you had better come with me,” the man said. “We are watching this house. We are watching Edgar Hurtado. What were you doing in there?”

She looked up and saw Sebastian Fraga for the first time. He was tall, and strong, and handsome. He had wavy hair and a carefully trimmed beard. His clothes seemed simple but expensive. His eyes seemed to warm her to her very soul.

“He owes my family some money,” she said. If it was a whimper it was genuine. She felt degraded and very small. “He … he …”. She was not going to say it: He raped me. She was ashamed.

“You are hurt, I can see,” he said. “Come with me. We are in the building across the street. I have some ice for these bruises. You are safe now.”

Safe. That word. Not since she left the convent had she felt safe. She had walked away from that place equipped for survival, or so she thought. She had, partly by the easy good looks of the Moya family and partly by her own efforts, the physical assets to achieve success, coupled with the intelligence and deviousness of Esteban. But she had lived by her wits. She was not safe. She sought safety in enough funds from her father’s chief lieutenant. She now knew that he was a traitor to his friend and master.

She followed Sebastian up the stairs and into a small apartment. There a man was watching CCTV screens at a desk. By the window there was a large pair of binoculars on a tripod. It was a watching station. Watching the home and compound of Edgar Hurtado.

“There is a bedroom in here,” said her rescuer. “Go and Lie down and I will make up an ice pack. You have been through a lot, I can see. But do not worry, we are close to arresting this man. Very close.”

That seemed happy news, given what he had done. But then she was concerned that Edgar might point a finger at her she he be arrested. Could he seek an escape by telling them that he knew of a surviving member of the Moya clan?

“Arrest?” she said. “I will not be happy unless he is dead.”

Sebastian looked at her with a shocked expression, but that quickly faded.

“You are not alone,” he said. “There are plenty who that that even the current government are protecting him. His crimes while a servant of the Moya regime are not the subject of this investigation. We are looking into current crimes. Drug dealing, money laundering, loan sharking. All this just in the last two years.”

She suddenly felt the pain in her legs and lay down on the bed. Sebastian went to the kitchen area to make an ice pack and returned with that, plus a sandwich and a glass of water. She took the water and the ice. He stayed by her.

A man appeared in the doorway behind him and said: “Am I relieved, Boss? Your shift starts in 20 mins, but, if you don’t mind?”

“Go Manolito,” he said. “The night shift starts now.” Turning to Isabel he asked: “Can I my officer take you home?”

“I have nowhere to go,” she said. “I have only just arrived here today, and I was expecting to get my money from that bastard.”

“Stay here,” he said. “I will not be sleeping while I am watching, so the bed is yours. And I would appreciate the company. We can still talk while I watch.”

And they did.

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She awoke early, before him. The light coming in was from the strip on orange on the horizon – the first light of dawn. He was still sleeping. Her pale, bruised, fragile arm was draped across his well-muscled hairy chest. His wonderful eyes were closed, his breathing now gave her the comfort she needed.

They had not made love. Was it concern for her injuries or respect for her modesty? All she knew is that she now craved it – she craved him.

She remembered the first time. The first man who had entered her. It was the day that she went to the salon in St Aurea. The day that she first looked at herself and she knew that she was beautiful, the day that she learned that beauty had value, but the price that needed to be paid was to yield her body. But she also learned that yielding her body can feel good.

That first man had been gentle. To him she was not a whore. She was a woman he had met who was more beautiful that he could have imagined any woman who might lie with him, could be. And he treated her like that. He was gentle and generous. And she felt him, and it felt good. It was not love. She still had not felt sex with love. But perhaps this man? The man she was lying with.

He stirred. She was not concerned to wake him now. She stroked his beard. Who would have thought it. She was once a man with a beard. Now the thought disgusted her. But on him, it was perfect. It spoke of his masculinity, something she was now well rid of, but somehow craved in others.

He opened his eyes.

“Good morning,” he said. “This is a good morning. What a sight to wake up to.”

She smiled. “Hello, Sebastian,” she said. She loved that name. She wanted to say it again and again.

“I am sorry if I was a little forward in lying with you last night,” he said. “It was not even a date. I should not have taken advantage of you. Perhaps tonight could be our first date, if you are no busy.”

“Would you take me to you house? To meet your children?” she asked, almost begging.

“Would you like that?” he said. There was expectation in his voice. He would like it, even if she did not.

“More than anything,” she said. “I feel I know them already, as I know you.”

“I talk too much,” he said. “Actually, I don’t. But there is something about being with you that opened me up. For the first time since my wife died I feel able to open up to somebody. Open up to you. You are a special person, Isabel. I feel it, and yet I still know nothing about you.”

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| “I told you. An orphan. Raised in a convent. In a small village near San Aurea. A woman who dreamed of a life in the city as a sophisticated woman. The woman I was dressed as yesterday. The woman you rescued.”  “I adore that woman,” he said. “But I should warn you that I am not a city boy. My family have a large estate in the mountains, and that is where my heart is – in Chokanata.”  “That’s an interesting name,” she said.  “It’s a Quechua word. You know Quechua, the language of the Incas? It means sanctuary.”  “That’s where I want to live,” she said. “With you.”  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019 | 100% alpaca cardigan, 'Paracas Mystique' - Inca Glyphs on Brown Alpaca Cardigan with Zipper  My alpaca wool cardigan with Inca glyphs |