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A SUNNY PLACE
FOR SHADY PEOPLE

Stories 2

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
MEGAN McDOWELL

GRANTA

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A SUNNY PLACE
FOR SHADY PEOPLE

MY SAD DEAD

But now it's time for you to come back.

You have been away long enough.

—LYDIA DAVIS, *Can't and Won't*



First, I think, I should describe the neighborhood. Because the neighborhood is where my house is, and my house is where my mother is. You can't understand one thing without the other. You can't understand why I don't leave. Because I *could* leave. I could leave tomorrow.

The neighborhood has changed since I was little. These houses, originally for workers, were built along these narrow streets back in the '30s: stone houses with lovely little gardens and tall windows with iron shutters. One could say that it was the residents themselves who gradually ruined the houses with all their innovating: the air-conditioning units, the tiled roofs, a tacked-on upper story made of different materials, exterior facings and paint jobs in ridiculous colors, cheaper knockoffs replacing the original wooden doors. But aside from the residents' poor taste, the neighborhood suffered because it became an island. On one side we're bordered by the avenue: it's like an ugly river we have to ford,

and there's nothing much along its shores. To the south we have the housing projects, which have grown ever more dangerous, with kids selling crack on the stairways and sometimes pulling guns on one another when they fight, or firing into the air if they're mad after a soccer loss. To the north is a tract of land that was supposed to be developed into some kind of sports field, but that never happened, and now the area is occupied by very poor houses, the best ones made of concrete blocks, the more precarious ones of tin and cardboard. The housing project and this slum merge to the east of our neighborhood.

I understand how things go: if misery is stalking you the way it does everyone in my country and my city and you have to resort to crime in order to survive, then that's what you do. There's more money in crime than in lawful work. In any case, there isn't much lawful work available, not for anyone. And if living a better life entails risk, well, it's a risk many people are willing to take.

Few of my neighbors—the inhabitants of this island of little houses built when the world was different—think the way I do. I want to be clear: I get scared sometimes, too. I don't want a stray bullet to hit me, either, or my daughter when she (rarely) comes to visit. I don't want to be regularly robbed at the bus stop or whenever I'm in a car waiting at a red light on the corner by the projects. I, too, go home crying when a teenager pulls a knife on me and snatches my phone. But I don't want to kill them all. I don't think they're a bunch of freeloaders and immigrants and miscreants and dead-beats, all expendable and unsalvageable. My ex-husband,

who works for an oil company and lives in Patagonia, tells me that the neighbors are just afraid. I tell him that fascism generally starts with fear and then turns into hatred. He tells me I should sell the house and move to the south to be closer to him. We're divorced, but we're friends. We've always been friends. His new wife is delightful. I tend to use our daughter, Carolina, as an excuse for staying here, but it's just an excuse. Carolina lives far away from me and from this house, and she works as a fashion editor at a glossy magazine. She doesn't need me.

I stay because my mother lives here. Can I say that about a dead woman? She's *present*, then. Ever since she first appeared to me, I've understood that word better. She was here, she occupied a physical space, and I sensed her presence before I could see her.

My mother was a happy woman until she got cancer and came home to die. Her agony was long, painful, and undignified. It's not always like that. The wise patient with bald head and yellowed skin who sits in bed imparting life lessons is a ridiculous romanticization, but it's true that there are people who suffer less. It has to do with physiology, and also temperament. My mother was allergic to morphine. She couldn't use it, and we had to resort to other, impotent painkillers. She died screaming. A nurse and I did what we could for her. It wasn't much. I'm a doctor, but I haven't worked with patients in a long time; instead, I do administrative work at a private medical company. At sixty, I don't have the energy, patience, or passion for hospital work anymore. Also, it's true, for a long time I denied (denial is a powerful drug) a

fact that I finally had to come to terms with when my mother appeared. Namely, that ghosts exist, and I can see them. Though they seek me out, I'm not the only one who sees them: in the hospital, the nurses used to go running. I tried to reassure them, saying, "Come now, you're imagining things."

It was morning when I first heard my mother scream. Not the wee morning hours under cover of night but the full-on sunlight of day, so ill-suited to haunting. The houses in the area, though very pretty, are built close together in a semi-detached style, and noise carries. My next-door neighbor Mari, who hardly ever leaves her house because she's terrified she'll be robbed and murdered and who knows what other phobic fantasies, leaned wide-eyed out her window that looks into my little front yard just as I was going out to see if there was someone in the street. It was a stupid, knee-jerk reaction driven by my own panic: I couldn't believe that I was hearing my dead mother's cries, and I thought maybe it was someone outside. An accident, a fight. Mari remembered my mother's real screams, too, and she was shocked and dumbfounded.

"It's the TV, Mari. It's okay," I told her.

"It's just—you realize what it sounds like, Doctor?"

"It really does. I can't believe it."

And I went back inside.

Since I didn't know what to do, I started looking around the house for the source of the cries, and asking my mother, as if I were praying, to be quieter. I didn't urge her to stop wailing entirely—just a little discretion, that was all I asked

for. I'd made the same request of other ghosts, first at the hospital and later on at a clinic. Sometimes that pleading worked. My mother always did have a sense of humor, and my appeal to turn down the volume made her laugh. I didn't find her that day—which I took off from work—but I did that night, sitting on the floor of the room where she'd died, which is now a storage room for furniture I never take the time to toss or give away. She was thin, but thin like she'd been at the beginning of her cancer, not the brittle and feverish wraith of her final months. I didn't dare approach; leaning in the doorway, my knees shaking, I sang to her. And as I sang I sank down until we were seated face-to-face, me with my legs crossed, her kneeling. I sang the song I used to sing when her pain had been unbearable, the song that used to soothe her, or so I chose to think. That night, she didn't scream.

But ghosts, I've learned, get upset. I don't know what they think, if they think at all, because it's more like they repeat themselves and the repetitions seem like thoughtless reflexes, but some of them do talk and have opinions and bad moods. My mother wanders the house. Sometimes she seems to know I'm there, and other times she doesn't. Sometimes it seems that the fury returns to her, the fury of her degraded body, the colostomy bag, the humiliation; she used to be so elegant, and I remember how she cried, "The smell, the smell!" Sometimes it was worse than the physical suffering. So she screams, and her screams can be pure rage. I have several ways of calming her down, but there's no reason to go into them here.

The interesting thing is what started to happen around the neighborhood. It made me realize I wasn't crazy—I'd considered the possibility, as anyone would after seeing her dead mother climbing the stairs—and also that my mother wasn't the only ghost around.

My neighbors have "safety" meetings. They don't accomplish much. There have been break-ins around the neighborhood, some violent muggings, an old lady beaten. It's awful, the stuff that happens here. But the neighbors are even worse. They go to those meetings and yell about how they pay their taxes (which is only partly true: they evade everything they can, like most middle-class Argentines) and how they've bought guns and are taking classes on how to use them. And they describe what they think the police should do to criminals: always the suggestion of murder, or humiliation, medieval torture, an eye for an eye, that sort of thing. There's one man I don't know, a little older than me, who declares that the police should display the heads of these "illegals" on stakes, like in colonial days. No one opposes him, or even rolls their eyes. All the meetings end with the neighbors invoking their grandparents, such good people, all those European immigrants who arrived with nothing but the shirts on their backs, who came to find honest work, who were poor but dignified, who were white. Just another myth. The immigrants of that era were, in many cases, poor and thieving; others were anarchists running from the police, and most of them became dishonest merchants who prioritized earning money over assuming any kind of ethical responsibility. But

I don't argue anymore, if I ever did. I'm resigned to that worldview they all share. It's a lie, but arguing against a credible lie is a task for titans.

I go to the meetings because I want to know what they're planning. I want to know in advance if they're going to close off the street, for example. One time, they installed an alarm system unbeknownst to me, and I accidentally set it off when I leaned against a door to check my phone messages. They also mounted a camera at my house without my permission, but I have to admit the thing has been helpful. At least it lets me see if someone tries to pick the lock, which has already happened, in fact, a couple of times. The camera is broken now, and I haven't found the time to fix it. I can just hear my daughter: "Mom, your stubbornness is going to get you killed and I'll be the one to find you lying here dead and I hope you've saved money for my therapy because I'm not spending mine."

The emergency meeting they called in mid-July was a real shitshow.

A horrible thing had happened, and the neighborhood was full of TV cameras, from the regular stations and from cable and every other kind of media. Three teenage girls had been coming back from a party in the early morning. They had to cross our neighborhood to reach the projects, and someone shot them from a car. They didn't even have time to run. They died in the street. They were young, all three of them fifteen years old, and they'd been walking along holding hands and huddled over a phone to look at messages. And that's how they appear in the photo: huddled together

but fallen, one on top of another, with their cropped shirts showing their flat stomachs, their leggings bloodied, and their sneakers brand-new. One girl's face was destroyed by the bullets, and she stared up at the treetops with what remained of her eyes. The others, beneath her, bled to death right there. The identities of the murderers were still unknown when the neighborhood meeting was called, but it was clear enough to us what had happened: one of the girls must have been the daughter or relative of a more or less important criminal—an asphalt pirate, a mini-narco, a pimp. That person had offended someone or owed money: it was revenge. As the days passed, this theory was confirmed. A yellow police cordon blocked off the corner where the girls had been killed, but all around it people left bouquets of flowers, cardboard hearts, and teddy bears, a street-side grave with offerings more appropriate to little girls than teenagers.

I saw them one day at dusk as I was returning home from work. My taxi dropped me off right at the corner with the police cordon and the tributes to the girls. "Lu, we love you always!!!!!!!" "Justice for Natalia." "My little angel, you were gone too soon." They were taking photos as they walked: the three heads squeezed into the frame, pierced tongues sticking out (why do girls like to stick out their tongues so much?); a second round of pictures with duck-bill lips, that premature, phony sensuality. It had seemed especially grotesque in the real photographs of the girls that had appeared in the newspaper articles, pictures that had been posted on Instagram or TikTok, as my daughter explained to me: I

didn't understand those images with dog noses or bunny ears, and then I found out they were "filters."

The ghost girls were laughing as they walked. At that hour, almost nighttime, my neighborhood is deserted. "The night is dark and full of terrors," says a priestess in the epic series that my daughter watches with true fanatic zeal, and that I can't get into because it has too many characters (though its violence, which other people find disturbing, doesn't bother me). The ghost girls couldn't get the flash to work, and that made them laugh harder. They were incredibly compact—there's no other way to put it. They seemed like living girls doing the things that fifteen-year-olds do: oblivious to what's happening around them, wearing clothes a size or two too small for their bodies, their hair dyed and colorful, a jostling whirlwind of blue, green, black streaks. The neighborhood's windows opened timidly, and the silence rang out like a gunshot. Then someone in the house closest to the girls screamed. They were still about fifty meters away from me but I could already see them clearly, and I understood. One of them was bleeding from the neck. The blood flowed slowly down, and she wiped it away distractedly as if it were rainwater, or beer that some clumsy boy had spilled on her at the party. Another girl, the one whose face was destroyed, was taking photos unconcernedly, and the smallest one, skinny to the point of illness, had three red holes in her abdomen. I didn't want to look anymore; they reminded me of my mother and her cancer, her moribund thinness.

Then the girls started to look at the photos they had

taken, and what they saw made them cry. "No, no, no," they said, and they shook their heads and looked at one another, looked at the photos, and saw the purplish green of putrefaction, and the blood, dried and fresh, the bullet wounds baring white bone, the blind eyes. The photos broke the spell of friendship and teenage immortality. Then they started to run. The ghost girls ran in desperate circles, and their wailing was truly terrifying. Their confused desperation. Had they only just realized that they were dead? How unfair: usually the dead have the good fortune not to see themselves decompose, even when they return as ghosts. My mother, for example: her image doesn't decay. But ghosts take different forms. I wonder if the shapes they take are determined by the dead people themselves or by those of us who see them—maybe those images are a collective construction.

The neighbors started to scream, too. It was madness. I heard a voice shout that someone had fainted and needed an ambulance, but who was going to call it with the girls right there, rotting in the lovely golden twilight? One of them, the one with blood running down her neck—the bullet had hit an artery—reminded me of Carolina. I don't know why. It wasn't her clothes: this girl wore the kind of cheap shirt and leggings you can buy in the neighborhood, maybe even at the supermarket. But there was something in the way she wore all that cheapness that reminded me of my daughter's unexpected flair (I say "unexpected" because I certainly don't have the gift of knowing which color goes with which, or what pants can make my legs look longer). Yes, the girl's leggings were cheap, made of black Lycra, but her white shirt draped

prettily over her buttocks, just so, and, with some bulky sneakers that were possibly men's, the outfit gave her a style—an “urban chic,” as my daughter would say—that was very particular. Her shoes were a brash royal blue, and around her bloody neck hung a little chain with a Victorian pendant that broke the street style with an ironic touch. As I describe her, I believe I'm imitating my daughter, who always adds a brief explanatory note to her fashion layouts. In any case, maybe because that girl made me think of Carolina, she was the one I approached.

Of course I was scared, my heart reverberating in the pit of my stomach as if it had relocated there. And I'm no longer of the age for that kind of fright: I'm already at risk for an arrhythmia, or even angina. Also, the neighbors were watching. But I couldn't just leave the girls like that. Did I know I would be able to calm them? I knew. One just knows these things. In the hospital, when I pacified my first ghosts more than ten years ago now—I knew then, too. But at the hospital they didn't calm down much. There were too many of them, and they fed off each other. Hysteria is contagious among spirits as well as humans. The phenomenon will never be studied, of course, because no one would believe it. I'm embarrassed myself. I think about this thing I do and I'm reminded of those cable series, disgraceful, false productions about Hollywood mediums and ghost hunters. TV programs spawned by the crisis of ideas and the economic crisis, made with bad actors and worse scripts, all identical, all ignorant, not even entertaining. That's not what I am, I tell myself; but I am also that, in a way.