RED FLAGS

Nahal Suzanne Jamir

You can bring cats back to life. You can walk two miles on a narrow wall, defeat massive armies, leap oceans. Eat up all the ugliness in the world, chew it to death, and spit it out at the feet of the god who let it be.

Growing up in Spain, you dreamed in black and white, but now you dream in color. Sometimes in Technicolor. You've been in America for twenty-one years, and for almost as long you dreamed in English. In colorful American dreams, you rescue your daughter from natural disasters, nameless pursuers, gigantic machines, wrathful or indifferent gods.

During waking hours, you worry about her constantly. Question and forbid, like the *madre despótica* you never wanted to be. But you must protect her. She has always been tragic to you, perhaps because she is your only child and the mere possibility of losing her would entail such despair that it is real without being so. You have already lost her and will never allow it.

She also has a lyrical way, your daughter. Poetic. For years, you thought she'd be a writer, but now she is in New York studying to be a psychologist. She once told you that your family was "plagued by misplaced ambition." You wanted to tell her your family was plagued by cancer, lupus, rheumatoid disease.

For instance, your younger sister got breast cancer eleven years ago and got rid of the cancer along with her left breast. She decided not to have children because of the inevitability of medical complications and the chance of passing on the disease. Still, she never worried about her femininity. Her husband was a fat man who could care less about children as long as he had a wife.

She had a silicone breast implanted. An unnecessary risk. Last year, she got the implant removed in the wake of all the fuss about silicone leaking, but then got a saline one put in. Salty like the ocean you crossed, like the tears you've never shed for your sister. You were tired of the anxiety and medical opinions. The second time around you didn't even go with her to the hospital. You let her fat husband take her.

You feel guilty because she has been sick again this past month. She is tragic like your daughter, except in a physical, diagnosable way. She's been losing weight. Twenty-six pounds and counting. She needs surgery to remove the saline breast. Her doctor says it's the wrong size—too big. You picture a balloon filled with water getting bigger and bigger until it explodes. But the doctor says remedying the problem is a "minor" surgery.

The surgery, you are afraid, will kill her. You volunteered to take her to the hospital tomorrow morning, since her fat husband is out of town doing contract construction work. He has to take jobs when he can because few have been offered lately due to the recession. The mode of employment strikes you as unreliable. Only a fool could stand by it as legitimate, and your sister's fat husband does just that. He is no smooth rebel, though. Just lazy. You would try to help your sister out, but there is no fixing him. People cannot be saved from themselves. You raised your own daughter to be diligent and trustworthy. Hopefully, she will never settle for weakness as your sister did.

Though you should be strong for your sister, you are unnerved, and drink orange tea to soothe yourself.

Your husband comes from work just as you sip from a fourth cup. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you tomorrow?" he asks. He knows the disadvantages of being a short, old, foreign woman in situations where respect, communication, and doctors are involved.

"I'll be fine," you say, and begin making him coffee.

You will be fine. You understand American slang and sneaky condescensions. Your daughter taught you well. Those doctors don't stand a chance.

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That night at eight o'clock, your daughter calls. Your husband alternates between reading and watching you talk.

"I'm going on a date tonight," she says. "A guy named Landon."

"What does he look like?"

"Brown hair. Blue eyes."

"Blue?"

"Wintery-blue."

Winter fades color. Eyes like a winter sky—a pale blue, almost white. "*Hija*, you don't need a boyfriend."

"I want one," she insists.

"But you're so strong. *Fuerte*, like me. All the women in our family"

Your daughter exhales, air leaking from her mouth. She is upset. You have this conversation every time your daughter tells you about a boy. There have been so many boys—all of whom have eyes worth describing—that you've begun to wonder if they really exist.

Your daughter lives in New York alone, though she is only twenty years old, the age you were when you came to America. She has always been angry and rebellious but in the past two months has pierced her nose and dyed

her hair red. The hair reminds you of the muleta—so delicate really—that matadors wave at the bull to lure him, anger him. And she is the matador, as you taught her to be. Still, you wonder what attracts your daughter: a big city, fake boys, herself.

Your husband doesn't mind the new hair color. Then again, he is an unpredictable father. Sometimes he won't fight your daughter at all. Sometimes he gives in to her after ten minutes, sometimes after twenty, sometimes never. But your daughter still loves him more.

When your daughter was in high school, she wanted two hundred dollars for a prom dress and he said, *One hundred, max*. After two weeks of arguing, she realized he was sticking with his decision and refused to talk to him. Her silence lasted for two days. On the second day, she walked into the living room, forgot what she had come for. As she stood in the middle of the room, your husband handed her a coin and said, *Penny for your thoughts*. She left the room furious but trying not to laugh. She spoke to him later that night, sat on the couch and talked to him for an hour. You admired your husband's timing. He always knew when to tell a joke.

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That night caffeine keeps you awake as your baby daughter once did. You dream you are sitting in the bathtub, water from the showerhead hitting your body. Your legs do not reach the other side but are extended and spread apart. The clear water on the floor of the tub appears to be coming out of you. This pleases you, being the source of a clear, broad river. Then, it turns red, and it is your daughter's fault because she is coming again, being born again.

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The next morning you get up at six-thirty to take your sister to the hospital.

"I can call in sick and go with you," your husband suggests.

He works for a high tech company and is a white-collar man through and through, meaning he is dispensable and tries to make up for it by making himself necessary at home. You refuse. You won't let him go with you, call for you, fight for you. It hurts his feelings. You are a strong, independent woman of the New World, and your husband must pay the price.

He leaves at seven-thirty, and you drive to your sister's house. She is watching morning television, looks very interested in it. She is calm. You

sit next to her and watch, too, but are not interested or calm. You don't want your sister to die—an obvious and natural sentiment that nonetheless surprises you.

After a few minutes, you go into the kitchen and brew tea. But neither of you drinks any.

At eight-thirty, the morning show is half over, the tea cold. You and your sister drive to the hospital in silence.

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Your sister married her fat husband on a July day that many claimed was "filthy hot." Your daughter was a reluctant flower girl. She wore a wine-colored dress, the sleeves puffy and shimmery, gold sequins all over the long skirt. Her hair was fastened in two gold barrettes that had matching red stones. You curled her hair, then dark brown and long. She wore shiny black shoes with black bows, red socks with white lace. She was beautiful.

Your sister's wedding dress was white, of course.

When they cut the cake, the bride and groom guided pieces into each other's mouths. Your sister accepted her forkful gracefully, not getting any icing on her lips or chin. Her fat husband accepted his gracefully as well but started laughing and cake crumbs flew from his mouth. Some landed on your sister's face. You knew then he was weak, not right for your sister at all.

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The hospital is so white. In waking life, as in dreams, lack of color makes you nervous. You fidget as they prepare your sister for surgery. You fidget as you talk to her right before they cart her off to the operating room. You fidget as you wait.

Thirty minutes later, a doctor approaches to let you know how things will proceed, how long the operation will take. Dr. Ashburn is young and has brown hair the color of good almonds. He is enthusiastic, the kind of man who grins from ear to ear while speaking of general anesthesia.

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You love your daughter more than anyone, and she seems to belong to you in exclusive ways. Feeling the weight and privilege of her place in your life, she calls often, sometimes tells you important things, like who she kissed or where her life is headed.

Lately, she has not been happy. She called you crying two months ago—the only time she's ever done so—and you were scared then, felt her pain and weakness as your own. She hasn't cried since, though.

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Last month when your sister started losing weight, you went to see Dr. Heatley. Without an appointment or a tumor, you managed to slip into the oncology unit. You found him at the nurses' station.

"Dr. Heatley," you said.

He did not recognize you. You told him your sister's name, then described her cancer. He nodded, seemed to place you.

"My sister's losing weight. Eleven pounds," you said, then paused for effect.

He squinted and you felt malignant.

"And she has terrible diarrhea ten or eleven times a day. Everything she eats goes right through. I tried to schedule an appointment for her, but they said you were busy. My sister is very sick."

"Calm down, Mrs. Spinoza. Your sister just had surgery. She's going to be weak for a while."

"A while?" you asked.

"Yes," he said. "You should really talk to her reconstructive surgeon about details pertaining to her operation."

You stared at the tiles on the floor, wondering at their illusion of rough texture.

"Is there blood in her stool?" Dr. Heatley asked, chin to chest as he looked down at you.

"No."

"I understand that you're worried about her, but, really, she's fine." He patted your shoulder, smiled and turned to leave.

You called after him. "Aren't there procedures to see if the cancer is back?"

"It's not," he said, slicing the air horizontally with both hands. Always cutting. "We checked before the surgery."

"Why not after?"

"Mrs. Spinoza," he said. "Your sister is fine."

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As a child, you were close to your sister. You were eighteen months older. When you were twelve, you developed breasts and your sister was fascinated, mainly because she didn't have them yet. She touched them. Sisters are allowed to touch each other. It didn't strike you as odd that when you gave her a piggyback ride, she held onto your breasts instead of your shoulders. After you turned fifteen, you two barely talked and certainly didn't touch.

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The reconstructive surgeon Dr. Ashburn says your sister is fine. You don't trust that word but are inclined to trust him. More than you trust Dr. Heatley.

"They're just finishing up, but she'll be in Recovery shortly," Ashburn says. "You can sit with her until she wakes up."

You find the room assigned to your sister just as they're rolling her in. In her sleep, she looks frightened. After a few minutes, a doctor arrives. He checks her pulse and walks out of the room. You do not recognize this doctor but follow him into the hall.

"I hope you put the right size in this time," you say. "Her breast almost exploded."

He shoots you an appropriately sterile glance. You can tell he's tired of being nice, of patronizing. That's okay because all you want is the truth about the mistakes he's made and your sister's condition, which cannot be *fine*.

"No, it didn't," he says, glancing at his clipboard. "She experienced minor discomfort.

"She hasn't been able to hold food down for a month," you say. "She can't walk for more than two blocks without getting exhausted. Accept the blame."

"For what?" he asks, and scribbles something on his clipboard.

You look at his coat for any kind of identification, wonder why doctors don't wear nametags, decide blame can rest with the unknown as well as with the known. "Apologize."

"I'll be back to check on her in an hour."

"Fuck you."

He stands there, relaxed and writing away, as if old Spanish women say "fuck" all the time.

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That night, lying on a cot next to your sister's bed, you dream of your daughter. She waits in the middle of a field. A tornado and a hurricane arrive on scene simultaneously—blowing down trees, sucking the flatness of the field into hills. Your dreams are usually multi-disastrous. Your job, as usual, is to save your daughter, which you always barely manage. There is something more heroic about barely making it.

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The next morning your husband takes you and your sister home. She lies on the couch, her chest bandaged with a plastic tube attached for draining fluid from the operated area. She doesn't complain, just watches her soap operas and sucks air through clenched teeth. She has always refused painkillers.

You don't want her to be in pain.

Your sister stays with you all week because her fat husband is still out of town working. She spends all of her time on your couch, and you bring her food on a tray. Once, you even hug her carefully—the first time you've touched her in years.

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On Friday afternoon, your daughter calls from New York. "How do you feel about your own mortality?" she asks.

She's so inconsiderate, you think, *like a bull*. And *mortality*—the word sounds ugly enough to hate. "Your aunt just had surgery," you say. "Worry about how she feels."

"You avoid the issue."

After you've hung up, you realize you forgot to ask her about her date with Landon.

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Your dream-daughter is five years old and waiting at a bus stop in a crowded city. She is speaking to you in her child voice, which is different from how her child voice sounded in real life. The pitch is inconsistent, too high and then too low.

She speaks Spanish. *Estoy enferma*, she says. *What?* you ask. *Use English, hija.* In trying to decipher what she is saying, you barely notice the bus stopping in front of you. You and your daughter have not moved and she is still

talking to you. *Speak in English,* you yell. *Eres antipática*, she says.

A young man gets off the bus. He has white skin, hair, eyes, and stands to your right. He must be what they call albino—another ugly word. Finally, you understand your daughter say, *How do you feel about your own mortality?* You have an answer—*Estoy soy vieja, pero quiero vivir*—but you must say it in English, must translate. As you try to do so, the white-haired man picks up your daughter and turns to run. You stick out your foot and trip him, save your daughter. As you comfort her, she cries, *Mortality*, and the almost-kidnapping bears true witness to the hideous word.

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On Sunday, your sister's fat husband calls to say he will be home tomorrow afternoon and pick up your sister. But on Monday morning your sister dies.

Your husband finds her on the couch. You walk in on him checking her pulse. He sits on the edge of the couch, holding her limp wrist. He looks up at you and you know there is no pulse.

"She's—" he begins.

You don't move or blink or exhale.

"She's," he ends.

She finally looks comfortable as she must have when she was younger, a visage you cannot recall. Him finding her dead before you do strikes you as adulterous somehow. Here, half of the scandal is dead, and your husband, instead of justifying or excusing makes definite moves to remedy the situation. He takes charge, makes the necessary calls. Your husband is in command. Running the show. Congratulations are in order. You remain calm—the thing to do in emergencies.

The coroner comes for the dead body. In the midst of all this—the questioning, the paperwork, your sister's body covered with a sheet—you go to your daughter's room.

The walls are pink. She hated that color at the end of her senior year in high school, said it was "a weak hue." With your daughter not living at home any more, your sister dead, your husband taking charge—you hate pink, too.

Her weights sit on the floor. Little blue weights to make her arms stronger. She used them all the time when she was sixteen. Now, they are obsolete. She's abandoned this kind of strength for abstractions, representations. Yes, red hair makes her more the *muleta* than the matador. The *muleta* doesn't even represent anything but merely signals the *suerta suprema*. Will

she kill the bull or flap in the wind while another does? You want to tell her to fight, to say it aloud—*Fight, hija*—but something cold drains you of anger.

On the nightstand there is a framed picture of you, your husband and your daughter. You put it there the same month your daughter left. You sit, not crying, frozen like the happy picture-family. You wish you could have saved your sister. *Perdóname*, you whisper, but the empty room neither accepts nor rejects your apology.

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After sitting in your daughter's room for a few minutes, you leave for the hospital to find Dr. Heatley. There's unfinished business. You must confront him, even if you are sad and tired. On the way out, you ask your husband to call your sister's fat husband.

You find Dr. Heatley at the nurses' station as you did almost exactly one year ago. He looks down at his clipboard.

"She's gone." His head jerks up so quickly that a couple nurses look up, too. "My sister. Dead. Because of you."

Dr. Heatley begins to compose himself at the same moment you began to unravel—upon saying *dead*.

"At home," you say, "on the couch."

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Why didn't you tell her to leave the silicone in?" you ask. "Why make her go through another surgery?"

"The surgery was necessary." He looks down at his clipboard, then moves closer to you. "Why don't you let me take you downstairs to talk to one of our counselors? Or get coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee," you say. "Admit your mistake."

"I don't believe I did anything wrong," he says, gesturing with one hand the way successful men do. "I didn't even operate."

"It was your opinion, though."

Dr. Heatley's expression transforms from calm to dismissive. "If you want to pursue this matter further, we'll have to do so in the presence of legal counsel." He returns his attention to his clipboard.

You could kill him. You try to kill him with a look because you've heard it can be done. After staring for five minutes, he is still alive and your eyes merely hot and achy from the effort. He doesn't even glance up at you, just keeps on scratching out words that are supposed to heal but which fail sometimes, often.

Pain comes now in forceful waves, matching the anger you feel drop for drop. Your sister is there in the clear water, in her white wedding dress, promising to love forever. Waves crash and foam red instead of white, as if the water, when meeting with sand, is wounded. The stained liquid goes back out with the tide and soon nothing is clear. But she is also there in the blood, naked and promising to return. Then, the waves recede and take her, everything—cake crumbs, implants, pink walls—to the safety of salty depths.

But something is left. A rage that makes you want to take Dr. Heatley by the neck and throw him through the Plexiglas surrounding the nurse station. Lacking the physical strength to do so, you think of all the vulgar American words you know. None of the four-lettered filth will do. You ponder those with more than four, but give up because words weigh too much and you are tired of being careful. You yell, "Toro," loud enough to break all the teacups in China. Forget the tea for now. And the bulls.

He drops his pen.

You win.

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Your daughter's red hair is caught in a big coffee grinder. Soon her head will be pulled in and crushed like a bean. You struggle and ask *Why?Why, hija?* Once you've freed her, she looks up at you and says, *Lo hago para olvidar*. Just then a flash flood sweeps you both away. After a battle with murky water and forceful currents, you find yourselves washed up on a green field. Your daughter, unconscious, lies next to you. You pick her up and head for Emerald City, where the Wonderful Wizard lives. He will make everything better, once and for all. *Ding-dong, the silly bull is dead*, you hum to your daughter. You keep your eyes on green majestic towers, which you can see a few miles in the distance along with two tornados. The green and the gray clash like armies on the horizon; the traditional, safe sky-blue is gone, forgotten.

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The next morning after your husband leaves for work, you sit down to tea. Green to match the dream from the night before. You call your daughter. You've memorized her schedule and know she has an early class today. She's probably drinking coffee in New York as you drink tea in Indiana.

"Why are you calling so early?" she asks.

You should tell her about her aunt, but you have saved your daughter's life every night this week and are exhausted. Besides, it is too early to talk about death. You'll tell her tomorrow and then make arrangements for her to fly home for the funeral.

"To see how your date went Friday night," you say. "If you liked the boy with the wintered-blue eyes."

"*Wintery*," she says. "Wintery-blue eyes. And I didn't really like him."

"Doesn't matter. You don't need a boyfriend. You're strong."

"I'm not."

She sounds upset. You say nothing to avoid upsetting her more, and there is a pause, a beat missed, because you have skipped your turn.

"I'm going out again tonight," she says. "Guy named Addison."

"What does he look like?"

"Blond hair. Brown eyes."

"Brown?" you ask.

"Like mud," she answers.

As you watch morning television, you hope your daughter doesn't like Addison. In fact, the name is so odd that you don't feel silly for hoping that he doesn't exist. These men, these boys, with their names and eyes, are harmless, and she is strong. You don't know why you worry about her so much.

The doorbell rings. Your husband has forgotten something. It happens a lot. He usually leaves the keys in the ignition, the car on, and rings the doorbell for you to let him in. You are frustrated, don't want to deal with him anymore. He has been coy, like Dr. Heatley, ever since he found your sister dead.

You saved your sister, honored her, by destroying Dr. Heatley. It has left you a little stunned. As you walk to the door, you think you will tell your husband all this—how you went after Dr. Heatley, exactly what you said to him, and that *you* are the hero. There will be a celebration then with fireworks of every color. Your daughter will come home and bring the boy with the eyes like mud. The clear tide will come back in. You can feel the currents swirling even now.

You open the door. It is not your husband but your sister's fat husband. He looks neither fat nor married—tired, maybe. He says nothing, but stands there silently begging you with dry, brown eyes to save him, too.