

MONSTER



IN THE



MIDDLE

TIPHANIE YANIQUE

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THE LIVING SEA

THE STORY OF STELA'S MOTHER



Puerto Rico

1981

A road of sand separated the seas. Just a thin band of sand—that was the real bitch of it. The beach of death on the right was calm, encircled as it was by a wall of rocks. The beach of life, to the left, opened wild to the ocean. We went every Sunday after Mass. Those who could swim proper swam in life. But I could not fucking swim, so I always soaked in death.

Nineteen eighty-one is the year I manage to make myself a new family. But before that Vega Baja was my home for some stupid fucking years. Enough years for me to learn to swim, to curse even when it wasn't called for, and to meet a boy. Though not at all in that order, I must say. The boy, of course, was Martin. Spelled without the accent, but still pronounced Mar-tee-n. There were many of us there at the home in Vega Baja. The boundaries of the region were not as they are now.

The Caribbean waters was highways, not fucking national borders. So we children went and came. Children from Tortola, from Antigua, even from as far away as Trinidad. I came from Saint Thomas. Lost children, we was. Orphaned. Martin was from San Juan—a native. Still, he was an abandoned motherscunt, just like us rest.

Martin was not a mystery. No one was. The island was American, but Spanish was the language of public school instruction. As far as us picky heads could say, we would all be Puerto Ricans from here on, so before each child's arrival the women would offer the new one's personal history in Spanish. The woman with the private school education and gentle manners would translate the basics into English. This way all of us could be ready with our empathy—no bullying or nastiness. In truth, I still cannot believe they did that shit to us. The women. They did not understand a child's need for secrets, the child's desire to tell her own story and make herself new. When Martin finally came it seemed he was a man, not a lost child at all. But there he was. Sleeping on the boys' side of the house.

"My mother is not dead, como dijeron las mujeres," he clarified to anyone who asked anything at all. "Ella es en San Juan." But what was worse—a dead mother or a living mother who didn't want you? "Es verdad, I do not know my father. Pero él quería conocerme. It is just that my mother wanted to keep me as hers, solo."

It made no fucking sense, of course, but I believed him. He did seem like someone who had been loved most of his life, loved recently. In that way, he was different. We was all in awe of him, jealous, to be truth.

We march to Mass every Sunday without fail. Then the Vega Baja beach after, always. Like church and beach was both holy—same, same. But none of us was allowed to climb the rocks on the beach. A local boy had died jumping. He had dived safely, feet first, but still had not come back up until he was fucking floating facedown. And then be-

fore anyone could save his body, it had been swept through life and out into the ocean. Besides our chores around the farm, this was the only rule at the home. No climbing the *maricones* rocks. Easy for me. I was scared to fucking death of the water.

The women slept in one room together, despite the large farmhouse. Us children slept in the house, too, separated into the female side of the house and the male. The kitchen and parlor connecting us easy. The women had never had children of their own, and so did not remember their own childhoods, as parenthood may cause one to do. We was all at least five when we came; we could cook simple meals, wash our own clothes, iron them, even. We could communicate in complete sentences, most of us in Spanish *and* English. And so the women did not expect our innocence, our wildness, our curiosity, our fears. And of course we did not speak up to explain. We were grateful, all of us, that they had taken us in. Even Martin was fucking grateful, I know.

I was the middle girl. Thirteen years old. The elder girl, Darleen, kept a bag of what she said were her own baby teeth around her neck. She was just too fucking odd for regular school, so she did her high school classes via correspondence. The baby girl was six—besides the burns she was normal, not even coonoo with water like me. Her parents had died in a fire and she didn't yet go to school at all. I alone went to the municipal middle school along with the stupid small boys. On school mornings one of the women would braid my hair.

Martin was the only one of us who walked the hour to the high school in the morning. He was the eldest boy—fifteen. He would walk me and the small boys to the small school, then carry on. From the very first day, he held my hand—like my elder brother would have done if he hadn't drowned along with my everyone else. Besides braiding my hair, no one had taken this kind of care with me; no one had even held my damn hand in years.

It was on these walks that Martin told his crazy-ass version of how he came to us.

He had been leaving his school in Río Piedras and seen his mother at the gate. He was fourteen then, and she had stopped picking him up from school years before. Now here she was holding a board with words write on it. In English: THEY HAVE STOLEN MY SON FROM ME. I WILL KILL MYSELF. PLEASE HELP! Martin was a good student, well known by the teachers and staff for his diligence in all subjects, evidenced most by his neat penmanship. Now everyone watched as he walked up to his mother. But his mother did not behave as if she was seeing him. He stood in front of her. "Mamá. I'm right here. *Mira*, I'm right here." And he shook his face in front of hers until she met his eyes.

"Ay, Dios mío. Estás aquí. They gave you back. Now I can live."

For fucking real.

He took the sign from her, ignoring the teachers and students who looked on, unsure of whether to help this good boy or hamper his crazy-ass mother. His mother had been looking for him, so she said, for weeks, even though he had just left her that morning for school. "Mamá, everything is fine. Estoy aquí. I was at school."

The next morning she was herself again. But now Martin noticed that herself was fucking strange. Something he had never considered before. She had always been a woman who talked to herself, but he had never before asked about it.

"Yo practicando," she said now. Practicing? He didn't want to know for what. She had been practicing for this his whole life.

When he left for school that next morning, she kissed him on the mouth. Again, this was something she had always done. But he knew this was not normal. Had maybe known so for a while. She took his chin in her fingers and kissed his mouth gently. And for the first time ever he felt a tremor in his charlie, and he pulled back from her. Out-

side the door, he pressed the flat of his hand against the front of his pants until it calmed.

But after school there she fucking was again. At the gate, only this time she was shouting. "They have taken my son! I'm going to kill myself! Kill my whole self!" He rushed to her and grabbed her face until she stayed there in his eyes and knew him. The students and teachers tittered around.

On the third day, she was crying and she had a next sign with more crazy-ass words. The headmaster came out, but talked to Martin and not his mother. "She cannot do this again. We will call the police. Maybe you need to take some time off from school." Like Martin was a man. They spoke in English to make it officious.



It turned out that one of the women of our home in Vega Baja was Martin's aunt. The Spanish-speaking bitchy one with the mustache who wore pants and boots. The one who rode the horses and never milked the cows. The women had taken him in as family, so he wasn't even a proper orphan. "Martin's mother is dead," both women had told us—a fucking falsehood, we now assumed. We began to wonder if they had told us other lies. If the baby girl was not from Trinidad but was full Taino, as she looked. If Joseph was the five years old he appeared to be and not the ten the women claimed. If Darleen would inherit the orphanage house and all the land like she was always saying, or if she was just straight *loca* like she seemed.

"Mi madre esta viva," Martin said. "Very alive."

On Sundays after Mass the women walked us to the seas; sometimes we would skip the whole way. Sometimes we would sing. All the children swam in life, except me. Even Baby Girl, who was the youngest. I stayed in the death. There, I could walk out to the mountain of

rocks and still the water only came to my hips. My brother had known how to swim, but it hadn't saved him.

But on Martin's first Sunday with us he came up behind me in the shallow water. He placed his arm on my back and bent to cradle my legs. I didn't squeal as I knew strange Darleen would have—she was almost seventeen and had *novios* who were always leaving genips under our windowsill. I let Martin lift me and then gently lower me until I floated in the still water, his hands holding me up. I lay out stiff as a corpse and felt the sun above me.

I knew what my body looked like. Nothing like curvy Darleen. I was straight and flat as a board in all directions and now in the water I imagined myself to be a board. Floating, floating in the dead sea. What waves there were were gentle, and more gentle. Martin's hands below loosened. And then loosened more. I felt the coolness of the water between his hands and my body. I kept my eyes closed up tight. A board, I told myself. A mother's-cunting board. I steadied my breathing. The water beneath me warmed. I moved my arm to feel for Martin. But he wasn't fucking there, and I opened my eyes in a panic and flayed like a fucking fool. But my feet hit sand quickly.

I looked around and saw him, across the sand dune in the living sea, standing against the heavy waves and speaking with tiny Joseph, who was squatting in the water. Only Joseph's head came above the sea line; it bobbed like it was the only part of him. I looked away, scared as shit and stupid.

How long had Martin left me? How long had I floated on my own? At my feet little sparkling fish swam in circles. I laid my head back, stretched myself out, and then I just floated. I didn't think about my actual older brother. I thought and thought only of Martin.

The next Sunday Martin taught me how to kick. He crouched down and put my palms on his shoulders so that our faces were close, close. And I kicked and kicked. After a month of Sundays I could actually

fucking swim. Like I had been doing it my whole life. Like no one I loved had ever drowned.



The boys' side of the house was not forbidden to the girls, nor was ours to the boys. It was an arrangement, but not a rule. It was a regular thing that one of us would fall asleep in the living room, laid out on the rug. On our side the girls all shared a room and the women had the other one. On the boys' side, Martin had his own room, like he alone was equal to the women.

On the night of the day I finally swam, I left my bed as soon as the other girls slept. I walked through the kitchen and parlor, which were dark. The women always turned in early. Martin's door was locked when I jostled the knob. I stood in front of it. I just stared at the door, until it fucking opened. His room was moist and black, his windows closed and curtained. When I found his bed, he was in it. He took my chin with his fingers and kissed me on the mouth, his tongue stiff. I thought then that I was the sea, and he was a board and he would just float in me.

"Náyade," he said into my mouth. I wanted to say something back to him, but "shark" was all I could think of. And I didn't know how to say it yet in Spanish. His body was hot as he turned onto his back and took me with him. Me in my nightie and his whole naked body beneath mine. "If you love me," he said, "we will get married. But only if you really love."

I tried to look into his face, but it was so dark. "Okay," I said.

"When I am awarded my high school diploma," he said. "When I secure a job. When you have la edad suficiente."

"How old will I have to be?" I asked.

"Dieciséis?" he said like a question. Girls regularly left school at sixteen, started work. Sometimes married. There wasn't a girl over seventeen

still at the orphanage. Darleen was almost like one of the women herself. "Little sister," she used to call us girls; "little brother," she called the boys. Which used to piss me off. But truth was that Darleen was the one we all told our histories to, if we told anyone. If we remembered.

"Can it be when I am fifteen?" I asked Martin. Two years was too fucking long to wait. I needed to make him my family faster than that.

"We can try," he said. And then he lifted my nightie. And it began. His wet fingers, then his wet mouth, then the tip of him already slick. There was a tightness and then a sudden relinquishing and then warmth.

"Mi madre," he said afterward, "loves me very much." I understood. My mother had loved me, too, until the water took her.

When I left his room, the women were already up and out tending the horses and cows. The other children feeding the chickens and gathering eggs. "Dormiste bien, hermanita?" Darleen asked when I rushed to the feed pail. "I'm not your sister, *puta*," I said. "And I haven't slept as yet." I didn't want to tell anyone, but I didn't think it was necessary to lie either.

The radio was on the news. Those years I was in Vega Baja all the islands down the chain was becoming sovereign: Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada. But that morning "Margreet Satcher!" the Spanish-speaking anchor kept hollering. But then Thatcher's voice itself came over the airwaves. Speaking in an English that sounded stern but sweet, like a kind mother might sound when scolding. The woman without the mustache sat me down in front of the couch to do my hair. Every morning she'd tackle my head. And every damn morning she complained about it. My hair wasn't *conquista* hair like Darleen's or coolie hair like Baby Girl's. But I always held my face stiff against crying, the woman's tight fist at my roots, the comb raking through the ends. But today the woman was too focused on the news.

"There is a woman head of England," she said. "And it is time, *negrita*, that you did your own hair." Right then it seemed to me like a woman taking over England might be the same fucking thing as Grenada getting free. Had me thinking about what that might even fucking mean, free woman. How did the woman without the mustache see that something had changed in me? Was it the woman become the boss of a bossy country, that made it clear? Or was it just clear that I was more grown, more of a damn woman myself, than I had been the morning before?

"Puedo trenzar su cabello," Martin said. "I always did my mother's hair." He sat beside the woman. I didn't see, but I felt her get up and then Martin straddled me between his legs and I felt the brush in my hair gently and the comb sliding. On TV, the woman prime minister spoke with her small lipsticked mouth and her coiffed hair. Everyone on the TV and there in our home seemed proud of her, and I felt jealous. But Martin focused on me, motherfucking me only. Took so long with my hair that the younger boys left for school without us. Martin twisted instead of braiding—so that my hair looked like gentle puffs on both sides of my head, and not the fierce plaits the woman had always forced.

And that was how it was. Me in his bed every night. Him doing my hair every morning. Us walking to school together and alone now, him holding my hand. And then on Sundays, just us in the death. He never touched me in the water, but any fucking *idiota* could see I was being touched somehow, sometime. There were my breasts suddenly. There were my hips. Getting curvy as Darleen. But in the water, underneath the sun, I would touch him. The water was perfectly clear and I liked to see my hands on him. "Náyade. Sirena," he called me as I moved my wrist. Mermaid, mermaid. Right there for everyone to see. For me to see, gazing into the clear water, watching him, watching my hands. Except no one saw but us. Only we were on the dead side.



My birthday was a thing I knew, but that neither of those bitch women took notice of—it was this way for all of us. It was weeks after I had turned fourteen that Martin sat me down to twist my hair. He leaned in and whispered into my neck, “You are a woman now.” It was true that blood had been on his sheets that morning. I had noticed, but that was how it was sometimes with us. Sometimes it was milk, sometimes it was blood. “No,” he said into my ear. “This is your real blood.” Did this mean we would marry now? That he could be my family?

On the walk to school he explained, “We cannot continue. You will become pregnant. I will be seventeen in just over a year, but you are not close to fully grown.” I didn’t remind him that we were getting married. It was the first time I felt he could abandon me. I let my hand go limp in his, but he squeezed hard.

That night I did not go to him. I wanted to, but I was fucking refusing him and myself. I lay in bed and wondered what I would do if he left me. I would stay here at the home. I would be like the women, sleeping with other women and working the farm. Perhaps raising other people’s children because I didn’t have any who belonged to me. The other two girls slept as they usually did. In her sleep Darleen always gripped her pouch of teeth, like it was precious. But after not a minute Darleen sat up. She looked at me as though she was quite awake. “No le vas?” she asked. And I realized that everyone must have known. “She got her period,” Baby Girl said, even though that little burnt bitch had also seemed well asleep. “Muy malo para ti,” Darleen said, lying back down, clutching the pouch again. “Little sister, now all the fun in your life is over.”

So my life was over. Again, it was mother’s-cunting over. But then the knob rustled and Martin opened the door. Our room was more lit

than his, the girls' windows always open with the large moon shining in. "Sirena," Martin called in a whisper. And I got off the bed and went to him.

Instead of going to his room, we walked to the beach with the tide-pulling moon above. It was a school night, so Mass, and beach after Mass, were still days away. It was the wrong day and it was also too late at night, but still we walked into the water. We went to the living side, which we never did. Which I had never done before. And we did what we'd always done in the death—only now when I touched him he had to hold me with both his hands, so our bodies would not be taken by the waves. Afterward we sat in the sand and watched the big moon and he said, "We can still marry, mermaid." I leaned my head on his shoulder and he put his arm around me. But he had more. "My mother is getting out of the hospital." He said this with his gaze on the two lobes of life and death. "Volveré a San Juan. I will go back to being a boy with a mother," he said. "I am not a man. Realmente no."

"You are seventeen." I managed to say this, though I was scared as shit.

"No. I still have almost a year," he said. "And my mother is still my mother. And now that she is better, yo soy de ella."

I began to cry. I hated my baby-ass self for crying. Martin held me until I wrenched from him. I walked through the familiar dead water, stepped onto the road of sand, and then began to climb the forbidden rocks. And if you know anything about how stories work, you know I was heading to those fucking rocks all along.

I did it like I'd gone to Martin's room that first night; I did it without thinking. One finger of blood was crawling down my thighs because I'd left the cloth the women had given me. The rocks were sharp and hurt my feet and I couldn't always see. I stepped on something slimy—I slipped. I felt blood come to my leg, a different blood. But

still, I climbed until I saw the other side. Really, I could hear it more than see it. I could hear the spitting spray and I could hear the wind wheezing. And all I could see was the white frothing of the waves, gleaming like teeth in the moonshine. It meant something, to have climbed that rock. It meant something that there, just there, was the true swallowing ocean. But, fuck, I didn't have the words for the meaning. I was a woman now, but I was still, mostly, a girl. A baby mermaid.

I stood there for a damn long time. Then I turned back to the shore, to sight Martin. But he wasn't there. I looked into the waters of life and death, and he wasn't there either. And I looked down the rocks and didn't see him climbing after me.

Don't forget that it was the middle of the fucking night. It was a half-hour walk, at best, from the women and the other children. My mother and father and brother had all died by drowning four years before. And now I was high up on the rocks at the beach. I mean. I was only fourteen fucking years old.

I opened my eyes wide and tried to see. Was that another person on the rocks now? A bad person coming to steal me? A wild dog coming to bite me? No, it was just a casha bush shivering in the wind. What was that in the water below? A hungry chupacabra swimming? A shark surfacing? I knew the word for shark by now—*tiburón*. Like someone's last name.

Maybe that would be me, Sirena Tiburón. Mermaid Shark. But not fucking really. Maybe I was a mermaid, but I would never be a shark. My disposition was too warm, especially given my hot mouth. I sat on the summit of the rocks and I cursed louder than the sea. I wanted anything living or dead to know that I could scream. I thought of all the bad words I knew: fuck, shit, bitch, motherscunt, *maricón*, *puta*, *cabrón*, *pendejo*. I shouted them, but the tears also came. I did all that until I was tired. Then I waited. Not for Martin. I waited for the sun.

The sun, at least, would return, and then I would be able to see and climb down and then I would wade through death. And then I would go back to the home and go be a little orphan girl again. A girl who didn't belong to anyone.

I waited for hours. My throat was burning from the tears I swallowed.

I saw him, my *tiburón*, just when the sun started to rise. He was walking along the beach, calm and cool and his body sloping. It was then that I really noticed that something was not normal about him. That he was not a normal boy. He had, maybe, what his mother had. He didn't resemble a grown-up at all. The woman with the mustache was more man than he.

We hadn't known then that I would be taller than him by the time I stopped growing. We hadn't known then that I would call him Papito, for his small size. But Martin was sick, that would become certain, and I would love him because he was all I had until I had you. A mermaid love for my shark man. Even when the sickness began to spin him into frenzy, even when he was the frenzy. But that day, simply by returning for me, Martin had done everything I would ever need. Made you possible. Made this whole fucking future possible.

He stood at the shore until I climbed down and waded out. He had packed his things. He had packed my things. They were in the same one bag he carried. In the bag also was the comb and brush used to do my hair, which meant he'd gone into the women's room as they slept. Fucking stolen them. And finally, there was Darleen's tiny bag of baby teeth, which he alone knew I coveted. The motherfucker had to have taken it right off of Darleen's neck.

"Can you be in San Juan?" he asked, as if he wasn't sure I could exist anywhere else but there between life and death. I nodded. I could be wherever he was.



And that is what we did. We went to San Juan and retrieved his mother. But we weren't like before. We were brother and sister now, neither of us orphans. He slept on the couch and I in his old room. Sometimes at night he and his small mother, smaller even than he was, would sleep on the couch together. Sometimes I would walk out and see them. They would be embraced, maybe like a mother cradled her baby, only this baby could carry her. Hateful bitch, I would think of her but never say. We never spoke of her sickness. We never spoke of my odd arrival—a sudden sister, a sudden daughter. He and I barely spoke at all. He was steely and quiet. Like he was waiting, like a shark waiting. It was like I had always been there, but that I had always been the less loved child. I did my own damn hair now, with the stolen brush and comb. It made me feel close to Martin, remembering he'd taken it for me, despite his quiet distance. We went to Mass, as always, but there was no more beach.

Martin would do his mathematics and literature into the night. And sometimes in the morning he would still be there at the table, erasing and redoing—that perfect penmanship. On those days, I would sit him between my legs and comb *his* hair. Wavy boriqua hair, like our old ocean. I would tell him how sharp and strong his letters were, how architecturally fine his algebraic fucking equations. He would relax his cheek into my thigh, and I would know he still, somewhere inside that *coño* broken brain, still loved me. I was learning how to really love him, I suppose. The way I would always love. With care. Carefully.

But his mama, she was still sick. If we were ever alone, she would often ask me what I had said, even when I had said not a damn thing. And my Martin was also strange. Sometimes I would reach for him, as I used to. But he would turn an empty look on me and gently step

away. He never called me anything but Mermaid. And so that was what Mama called me, too. They said it in English, though my Spanish was good by then. Puerto Rico was still, always, seesawing Spanish to English and back—national language versus official. But in our home it was clear. Martin and Mama were nationalist with each other—officious with me.

Some nights I lay in bed and touched myself with one hand and held the bag of baby teeth with the other. In the morning I would raise my fingers to Martin's nose and he would wrinkle it as though he didn't know the scent. "You stink," he would say. Like any older asshole brother.

I was no longer a board in the sea. I was no longer the sea with him in me. There must have been an ocean somewhere near, but nestled in our neighborhood, we never went to it. Boys at the school noticed me. I was more developed than the other girls my age. And now when we walked to school, I lurched my hand out of Martin's. I stepped away from him. I had been touched too early. Abandoned too early. There was a difficult future ahead of me.

But it motherfucking happened, again, just like Martin had told. Mama came to our school with the placard. Only this time it read: THEY HAVE STOLEN MY SON AND MY DAUGHTER! I WILL SLASH MY WRISTS! I WILL HANG MYSELF! This time the headmaster didn't wait for us to even step out of the school doors.

"Mermaid," Martin said to me as we watched the ambulance swim away. "I am graduating from high school in just a few weeks. We can go back to the dead sea. Or we can go to where you are from."

So, I took that boy back to my island, Saint Thomas, where my mother and father and brother each had a stone in the western cemetery, though their bodies had never been found. Never went back to the Vegas. Never back to those fucking seas. We took a boat. Held each other like captives all the way.

Soon after we left Vega Baja, Martin's mother hanged herself in the Ramón Marina crazy-people place. She'd braided the rope from palm leaves—an art project, the nurses had thought. What I thought was: Crazy bitch, but brilliant. That's how we women are, I guess.

Martin and I married a week after Princess Diana did. We watched the whole thing on TV like it was a fucking tutorial. We'd never seen a wedding before. On our day, other girls and boys were lined up at the cathedral like getting married was in style. No one had a dress like Diana's; mine seemed simplest of all. A white dress I'd made myself of cloth I'd stolen from a woman whose house I cleaned. That was my life then. Lots of stealing to get what we needed for love. Not like the life Dad and I have made for you and your brothers. But regardless of my plain dress and thieving ways, my Martin looked only at me, like I was a princess. I was fifteen years old. I cut a hole in one of the baby teeth. Wore it like a pendant, and I was fucking sure it looked good as mother of pearl. Every Sunday of our marriage we went to Mass and then to the beach. Our ritual. That was our formal family-making.

Together we, shark and mermaid, had you. Took us some time to get to that. Something about him, his man parts, made it hard. But it was good we managed it, you, because I knew I wouldn't have Martin for long. He would be wild for a week, wander the streets, bare his teeth if I signed a check sloppy. Then he would get contrite. Start in with his Jonah death wish. Always trying to find a reason to get himself killed. "Throw me over so you don't have to deal with me," he would joke when we took the ferry to Saint John's for a day trip. Given both our histories, I would take that shit seriously, hold his body close to mine. I would have carried him inside me if I could. He even tried to join the army, but he answered their questions with more questions, kept his head low like hunting. They wrote on his paperwork that he was dimwitted. Good, I was glad of it.

You were born ten years into our marriage. By then I really was a

fucking woman, and I was desperate for you. The doctor, a woman, too, had warned that I might feel sad a bit, in the postpartum time. The happy hormones leaving me all at once, when your body left. But it wasn't me who was overcome with the wave of sadness. "Save yourself and the baby. Throw me in," Martin would say. Until he climbed a mountain, of course, jumped in the water, and swam away. Or drowned. Either way.

Who is to ever fucking know if I did the right thing, marrying so young to my shark boy? We were together just more than a decade. Was he keeping himself alive just so you could come? Would he have stayed alive if you hadn't come? Well, I suppose there are entire histories that arrived before he and I even met, pushing us like currents toward each other. To now.

But I decided to live, you hear? College, I thought, and it wasn't so fucking hard then as it is these days. Didn't cost so much, and if you were smart it could cost less. So, I left Saint Thomas for the States. Did well in college, finished so fast you don't even have any memories of Atlanta—though that is where you made your first steps, learned your first words. It was there that I fast found another love to love. A good man, the one who raise you—Dad. He already had his sick-and-tired old-man ways when I met him. Felt like he could be more father than brother, which was pretty much what the fuck I needed. And I can't lie, the man was patient and steady—no shark in him to speak of. He and I had the boys, your brothers. Settled into a real family fast as we could.

Yes, it's true I was vexed to not have Martin with me. Vexed that he'd finally left me and for good. That is how death fucking works. In Saint Thomas I put up a stone for Martin beside my parents and brother.

And now I am glad to have given you my story. Shit as it is. Of how I was afraid, but how love made me brave. And for me, that has been a good enough way to live.