

FROM

Afterlife

BY JULIA ALVAREZ

Today, the magnet on her fridge proves prophetic: *EVEN CREATURES OF HABIT CAN SOMETIMES BE FORGETFUL.*

You said it, Antonia agrees. She has just poured orange juice into the coffee in the mug she brought back from one of the fancier hotels. Must have been a special occasion for Sam to have chosen to stay there and for her to have allowed the expense.

You'd think you were born with money in your family, she liked to tease him.

I never had it to begin with, so I'm not afraid to spend it, Sam responded. He was always quick with a comeback. Used to get him in trouble with his dad growing up. Being fresh, it was called back then. Oh, the stories he told her.

Sam spoiled her, or tried to, and got scolded as his thanks—but it was the kind of scolding that must've made him suspect she liked being made something of.

There'll be no more of that now.

She is keeping to her routines, walking a narrow path through the loss—not allowing her thoughts to stray. Occasionally, she takes sips of sorrow, afraid the big wave might wash her away. Widows leaping into a husband's pyre, mothers jumping into a child's grave. She has taught those stories.

Today, like every other day, you wake up empty and frightened, she quotes to herself as she looks at her reflection in the mirror in the morning. Her beloved Rumi no longer able to plug the holes.

Late afternoons as the day wanes, in bed in the middle of the night, in spite of her efforts, she finds herself at the outer edge where, in the old

maps, the world drops off, and beyond is terra incognita, sea serpents, the Leviathan—HERE THERE BE DRAGONS.

Countless times a day, and night, she pulls herself back from this edge. If not for herself, then for the others: her three sisters, a few old aunties, nieces and nephews less so. Her circle used to be wider. But she has had to pull in, contain the damage, keep breathing.

As she often tells her sister Izzy, always in crisis, arriving for visits with shopping bags full of gifts and a broken heart: the best thing you can give the people who love you is to take care of yourself so you don't become a burden on them. No wonder Izzy's ringtone for Antonia is church bells.

Actually, all the sisters have followed Izzy's lead and assigned that ringtone to Antonia. The secret got out. The secret always gets out in the sisterhood. Our Lady of Pronouncements, Mona said by way of explanation. Good old Mo-mo, no hairs on her tongue—one of their mother's Dominican sayings. Tilly was kinder. Sort of. It's because you started going to Sam's church. It's how Tilly used to describe their denomination, to avoid using the word *Christian*. Now she avoids Sam's name. *Your* church. As if Antonia would forget that Sam is gone unless someone reminds her.

They're just jealous, was Sam's theory about the ringtone profiling. All your years of teaching. You've picked up a lot of wisdom. A head full of chestnuts.

Full of B.S. That's what the sisterhood would say.

Who now to champion her way of being in the world?

She empties out the ruined coffee and starts over.

THE LITTLE PHONE SHE IS CARRYING in her pocket begins ringing. She hasn't set special ringtones for anyone, except Mona, who insisted on dogs barking. Not just any dogs, but Mona's five rescues, which she set up on Antonia's phone.

Today it's Tilly calling. A few days ago, Mona. Izzy weaves in and out. The sisterhood checking in on her. You take her this morning. I'll call her this weekend. The frequency has dropped off the last few months, but it has been sweet.

How are you? they ask. How are you doing?

Come visit, they all say. Knowing she won't take them up on it. She is the sister who hates traveling even during the best of times.

It's beautiful here, Tilly brags. Why do you think it's called the *Heartland*? They have an ongoing rivalry. Vermont or Illinois. Who gets spring first, who has the worst snowfalls?

As she chats with her sister, Antonia hears plates clattering in the background. Tilly cannot abide being still. What are you doing? Antonia confronts her sister.

What do you mean what am I doing?

Those sounds.

What sounds?

How easily they slip into bickering. It's almost a relief when Tilly brings up Izzy. I'm worried, Tilly says. Izzy has been increasingly erratic. She is selling her house just outside of Boston, or not—they can't be sure. She is sleeping in friends' spare rooms or on their couches while she remodels her house.

But you're selling it, aren't you? the sisters try to reason with her.

It'll bring in more money if it's perfect.

Perfection takes time, not to mention money, which Izzy is always saying she doesn't have. Didn't she stop seeing her shrink because she said it was too much money? But you have insurance, don't you? The sisters again, the Dominican Greek chorus they become when some sister, usually Izzy, is headed for a downfall.

I don't want some insurance company knowing I'm going to a shrink. A shrink seeing a shrink! It would ruin my professional standing.

That bridge was burned a while back, according to Mona. Izzy is no longer at the mental health practice she helped start. Even master sleuth Mona isn't sure what all came down.

And she's also stopped the meds she was on, Tilly adds. Mona says you can't do that with those kind of meds. Tilly sighs, eerily still for a change, and then says, They had a huge fight. Those two, I tell you.

Antonia imagines Tilly shaking her head. It is odd that Izzy and Mona, the two therapists in the family, can't apply their professional skills to getting along. You said it, Antonia agrees, so as not to append something negative and quotable that will get back to the others, bring on more bickering.

Anyhow, sister, screw them. How are you doing?

I'm okay. Antonia's mantra of the last year. Somewhere she read that *okay* and *Coca-Cola* are the two most universally understood words. It depresses her to think the ties that bind are so flimsy. Even silence would be better.

But silence is all she gets when she addresses Sam these days. What she wouldn't give for his voice coming from the afterlife, assuring her that he's okay.

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by Julia Alvarez

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