

THE HAPPY JUMPING WOMAN

ROBIN CATESBY

Set, stitch, pass along. Set, stitch, pass along.

The pee would run down her leg. Even if she held it tight as a pebble in her dark palm, even if she took just one step down the aisle of broken women through the thread-spool forest and touched the door handle of the room with two-way mirrors, the pee would run down her leg. She had to go that bad.

El Gallito, the short guard, round, bald, mouth lost in chins, eyes always squinting, strutted the aisles that ran from east to west. The one they called Monstruo, his mustache twitching like a black bark twig in hurricane wind, moved from north to south, slinking along the edges of her work station, breath always too close, always hotter than the air of the factory floor. At the sixth hour, they would switch. She could hold it till then.

Set, stitch, pass along. Set, stitch, pass along.

She had to pee, had to not think about peeing, and so instead, Mari sang. An old song came to her head, from the time before the bulldozers scarred her jungle hills. She hummed it, half-remembered, no words, only the frantic chant of notes that fit the rhythm of the piecework.

The others—Altagracia, Florinda, and even the almost fair-skinned Joli—joined in behind her; a low hum that built from Mari's gut and became a chorus. In short time, the hum became louder than the din of machines; so loud that the guards heard and threatened with canes to make them stop.

“No sing! You stop sing now!” they shouted in their disjointed words. They'd been brought in from somewhere—some other country, where was it? Thailand? Bangladesh? Mari couldn't remember and knew only that they were strangers to this island, more alien than she.

Set, stitch, pass along.

Hold the bladder till the sixth hour. Just minutes more and Mari would be safe to raise her passcard, safe to take the trip, escorted by el Gallito, to the bathroom.

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Just five minutes, four collars per minute. Just twenty collars stitched in blue and yellow with labels that said ALICE WEAR and Made in USA and Wash separately with like colors. She wondered what she would look like in Alice Wear, in bright stretchy fabrics and jeans that hugged her skinny legs like a mami's promise. She'd look bronzed, not dark, maybe even North American, though she'd have to cover her kinky hair and she could never wear her wishing stone, that hung so safe between the new swell of breasts.

Set, stitch—

A wave of pain hit her belly, and then cold, as if she'd shed her skin and exposed her bones to the night air. Mari shivered as she worked the fabric, and a heaviness grew inside her.

No, not now, I don't want this now.

-- pass along.

She had nothing with her to stop the bleeding, so she waited till Monstruo had passed her station, then slipped an Alice Wear collar off her table, into her lap, and into the pocket of her skirt.

One more collar, set, stitch, and the guards would trade places, fat and silent el Gallito walking her aisle instead. They said that Monstruo once punched a woman so hard she lost her baby, said to never let him be the guard at the bathroom, not after he's watched you change from girl to woman. Not even before.

Pass along.

Mari gripped her card, waiting for the switch to raise it full in the air. The two guards met four rows behind her. She could hear their muffled exchange, even over the chatter of machines. She sensed the hesitation that always came at this hour when they'd swap places, heard el Gallito's footsteps approach as she raised her card.

A thin hand took the card from her fingers. Monstruo. The switch had never happened. He eyed her. She hesitated, unwilling to commit to the card's request, but in the end she knew she had no choice.

Mari felt the hot breath of Monstruo behind her as she moved down the aisle. She'd pushed the gathers of her skirt toward her waistfront to hide her hand that, inside her skirt's pocket, clutched at the front of her crotch to keep from peeing. In her other pocket she gripped the shirt collar she'd stolen and hoped it would be enough.

At the bathroom, the guard stuck his foot in the door to hold it open.

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“You do a show for me?” he said.

Mari shook her head.

Monstruo stepped inside and let the door swing closed behind him. He rubbed his palm across his chin. Beads of sweat slipped onto his fingers from his black twig moustache.

Mari backed toward the toilet. “I can’t,” she said, “I bleed.” She held out her hand, now stained at the fingertips from menstrual blood that had seeped through her pocket.

Monstruo grunted, said “too bad,” then stepped back outside.

Someone had left a magazine in the bathroom. A glossy multi-colored thing in English, with photos of women in bright clothes and make up, photos of huge houses with patios the size of churches, and, in the back, photos of food Mari had never seen before, shiny cube-shaped food in the colors of mangos, limes and the blue of Alice Wear’s collars.

And, near the front of the magazine, Alice Wear herself. Mari knew this because Florinda had told her, said, go look at the woman whose shirts we sew. The Happy Jumping Woman.

In the photo, Alice jumped. She’d been caught by the camera in mid-air, her straight copper hair in a fringe of motion, her blue striped Alice Wear shirt and short white pants spotless new. Her smile was huge and Mari was certain she was ready to smother the world in hugs and fabric. And there, on the next page, Alice again, only this time, Alice serene. Alice cross-legged on a wooden floor, eyes closed, hands to her sides with only her thumbs and middle fingers touching. Alice, a saint of USA.

Mari left the magazine where it lay and did what she could with her strip of knit collar fabric to keep the flow in check. She knew she’d have to worry about this later, about getting blood on her hands, blood on the garments, blood on the bright blues and yellows of the Happy Jumping Woman’s clothes.

She saw the blood and thought of it dripping, spot by spot, then bringing life to the fabric in a great conjure, so that the threads lifted themselves up, one by one, dancing with new found joy under a tropical sun, and then Mari too saw she was dancing, up on a mountainside, cool breeze from the ocean hitting her, pulling her up into the sky, trails of blood behind her like streamers of chiffon, satin, fabrics she’d touched but never worn, fabrics wrapping around her in a tender shroud and carrying her up, over the green islands and north toward this place called USA.

She saw the blood and then looked up from her seat in the dirty stall of the

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sweatshop where she'd sat for too long, where she was overdue to return to work. She saw the blood, then saw, across the tiny room, the half-clear figure of el Gallito, his fat face grinning just behind the glass of the two-way mirror.

They called her Chopa or No Home Girl or sometimes just Wander from when she'd wandered into the campo from somewhere to the west. Mari didn't know where she'd come from either, and didn't much mind the names so long as she had a place to sleep and enough pay to buy her food. But she did mind the guards, their touching, hot breath, tongues that darted out from thin lips like lizards. She'd thought el Gallito was safe, thought he'd not want to force himself on her like the others, slide his fat hands up between her clenched legs, even with the blood.

The men of the Campo kept apart, mostly, spending the cool evenings out on Joli's patio, slapping dominos, drinking beer, the almost imperceptible sway of their movements matching the nearby radio and the breeze-hit branches of the canopy overhead.

Mari watched from her spot at the base of a coconut palm. The women were nearby too, talking in low voices, glancing her way, and the Happy Jumping Woman smiled up from her glossy pages in Mari's lap. Mari had stolen the magazine as she'd fled the bathroom, slid it under her shirt and covered the bulk with her shawl, convinced that this woman from USA could bring her comfort and something nearing peace.

"Look at this one," Joli said, now standing a foot away.

"So happy," Altagracia said.

Mari thought they were talking about her until Florinda squatted and pointed to the cross-legged Alice Wear.

"I read she has her own church inside her house," Florinda said. "She's some sort of priestess. Iyalocha."

"No, she just sells the clothes we make," Joli said.

"Why is she jumping like that," Altagracia asked. "Could her clothes make her that happy?"

"She's happy she doesn't have to sew her own clothes," Joli said.

"She's happy she's allowed to pee more than twice a day," Florinda said.

Mari just watched the picture until Florinda put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Hey, you okay?"

Grief poured out of Mari like rain. She collapsed into the arms of the women

and sobbed.

“Hush, child,” Florinda said. “We know, we know. We’ll protect you. We’ll teach them how to stay away.” She brushed hair from her face, then her fingers grazed the wishing stone that hung from Mari’s neck. Her hand pulled away quickly and Mari saw the uncertain glance Florinda shared with the others.

These are not my saints, not the spirits I left behind when I stumbled out of the jungle some ten years back, remembering so little of what came before. I carry my little pebble, my wishing stone with me, but when I ask it things, it only answers in whispers.

Mari wrapped herself into a ball outside the entrance to the ileocha, protecting her limbs from the chill night air while the others trafficked in and out the doorway, carrying fruit, gourds, jugs of steaming liquid, and hot coals from the smokehouse grill. She’d been told to wait six days, until well after her bleeding stopped, and now an hour more, until the women were ready and had called to their spirits without the intrusion of outsiders.

When the time came and Altagracia opened the door and beckoned, Mari stepped into the room backwards, as she’d been instructed, and allowed the touch of hands and mix of smells—cinnamon, garlic, rum, a burning cigar—to guide her to the edge of the circle.

A dozen women of the campo were there, or so it seemed as Mari turned and saw faces lit by candlelight and coals from the altar. Their voices welcomed her and she saw in their eyes a bond that she’d only just begun to share.

She felt warmth in her hands and looked down to see a cup and Florinda’s hands wrapped around hers, guiding it to her mouth. The liquid was thick and sweet, coconut milk and honey and herbs she couldn’t name. She drank, and then Florinda poured more of the liquid on the ground, then more on the altar’s brazier, calling out words Mari didn’t know. *Illa mi ile oro, illa mi ile oro.*

These are not my spirits.

Brown sugar bubbled and cracked on the coals, candles guttered and sent up motes of gold light that ricocheted off the altar’s mirrors like tiny angels. A drum, deep and constant, met and held with the rhythm of Mari’s heart while above, two more drums chattered and sang with the voices. Her breath caught as she was pulled into the dance.

She moved through waves of sunset color, fierce whites, green fingers of coconut palm, till she came face to face with Florinda, who embraced her and placed a collar of yellow beads around her neck.

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“Oshún protect you,” Florinda whispered, and spun off into the flurry. Between her breasts, her wishing stone grew hot.

The beads were cold against her neck, slippery. They rattled with a life of their own. Mari looked down to find a snake. She took hold of the head in one hand, the tail in the other, and lifted it over her head. The snake hissed. Its tongue flicked toward Mari’s face but it didn’t lunge. Instead, it smiled. It smiled and grew larger until Mari’s hands were too small, until all she saw were scales; a snake’s belly that wrapped around her and squeezed until her limbs dissolved and she became the snake.

She danced on her tail and opened her mouth to sing but the voice was not her own. A thousand other voices echoed through her. Muertos, voices of her ancestors, women working in the fields, cooking for their families, carrying their children proud through dark jungles and bright sunshine untouched by the concrete and barbed wire of the maquilas.

She sang in a thousand voices, but under this, the one snake voice, the voice inside that burned a hole in her chest, lifted her up and out through the smoke hole of the ileocha, across hillsides, but not to the sea cliff of her dream, not north to a place called USA, but east, only a few miles, to a gathering of houses and the men who slept inside. *This is the one*, her invisible companion whispered. *This one here*, it said and Mari reached out a spirit hand and gripped the thin man’s heart inside his chest.

Like canvas ripping, the snake scales fell away and were replaced by soft white. Mari lay on the ground, the others huddled around her, their fearful breaths on her cheeks, her neck, in her ears. Someone fanned her from above. She reached for the white and pulled a cotton handkerchief away from her face. Altagracia stared at her from behind the fan. “Damballah,” she whispered, and the others backed away.

“Hush, hush,” Florinda’s voice now, “you don’t know this.” She appeared at Mari’s side with a cloth and a bowl of water. “Here, child. Cool yourself.”

Florinda poured water over Mari’s arms and legs and laid the cloth gently against each cheek and then across her forehead. Tiny rivers ran down Mari’s temples and into her ears. She pressed the cloth to her skin and sat up. “What have I done?” she asked.

“Nothing, child. Only that you’ve been chosen. Oshún is a picky one, but she’s chosen you. You have the gift of an Iyalocha.”

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Mari shook her head. “No. I’m not a priestess. I don’t even understand this magic.” *These are not my spirits. These are not my saints.*

With Florinda’s help she rose to her feet, steadied herself, and moved out of the heat and smoke toward the door. Altagracia stood outside, a sheen of sweat still on her despite the night air. She took a step back when Mari approached her.

“I saw it,” Altagracia said. “I saw the serpent Loa. Be careful how you use this gift.”

Mari shivered and wrapped her arms around her chest. She remembered Monstruo’s house and his heart and wondered if she’d not used her gift already.

Set, stitch, into the bin.

Nothing had changed. Same heat, same noise, same guards patrolling the aisles. Mari’s stone was cold, safe in her pocket.

When it came time to pee, she raised her card without thinking. It didn’t matter anymore which one took her; the distinction between dangerous and safe had been wiped away in one brutal moment a week earlier.

Monstruo took her card and followed her down the aisle. She expected it to start early this time—hot breath on the back of her neck, a brush of his hand against her thigh, but instead, nothing. Could this be Florinda’s gift? The protection of her spirits? Mari’s hand touched her neck. The collar of yellow beads was gone. She must have lost it in last night’s frenzy. She reached into her pocket and gripped her wishing stone.

A woman on the cuff and sleeve line glanced up, a puzzled look on her face. Then another two rows down, and another.

She heard a noise behind her. A strange gurgling gasp of a sound, like a boiling pot or a dying animal. Terrified to turn, she kept moving. The sound grew and almost became words. Then, the sound of metal hitting the floor. A pair of scissors skittered in front of her feet. She bent to pick them up and then turned.

Monstruo was leaning against one of the workstations, one hand on the table, one clutching his chest. His face, redder than usual, was frozen in a grimace, mouth in an open rectangle so that his mustache was a straight black caterpillar speckled with dots of white foam. Mari thought of the old films she’d seen once when the peace workers came to visit. Old comic films in black and white with mustached villains and women trapped on trains.

This villain was dying before her. He reached out a hand, his mouth working to speak. Mari stepped back. Monstruo fell forward, slamming to the floor. She heard

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screams, heard the heavy steps of the other guards behind her, the clatter of chairs, the wail of the shop's alarm.

"You! Why not at your station?"

A supervisor Mari hardly recognized stepped in front of her. She stood dumbfounded, grabbing at air with her jumbled thoughts, then at last said, "Bathroom. I was on my way to the bathroom."

"Card?" the supervisor snapped. He held out his hand.

"I gave it to—" She saw Monstruo's hands as he was lifted onto a stretcher. They were empty, lifeless.

"No card," the supervisor said. He followed her gaze to the hands, the floor, under the nearby workstations.

"No card," she said.

"No card. You suspended. Two days, no pay. Go finish your shift."

Fearful of snakes and dreams, Mari sat the entire night outside the shack she shared with four other women from the maquila. She'd found shelter from the steady rain under the half-roof of the patio and listened to the drumming of water on zinc above her head. It reminded her of the bala drums from the night before and that in turn reminded her that she was now a murderer.

In the morning, the others passed her on their way to work. She scuffed her church-donated sneakers against the cement and played with the frayed edges of her shirt but most of the women didn't give her as much as a glance. Joli and Altagracia, leaving together, took the long way around the yard, whispering to each other and touching their hands to their hearts.

She started when Florinda knelt beside her. The older woman turned Mari gently to face her. "I don't know what you did, or even *if* you did, child," she said, "but remember, if you do harm, your own harm comes walking behind."

"I did nothing," Mari said, though she knew she had to be lying.

Midday, Mari rose from her spot and stepped back inside where the magazine, open to the pictures of Alice Wear, lay on her bed. She sells the clothes we make, Joli had said.

So, this was the woman who owned the maquila? All the way up in USA? That explained the tags Mari sewed into the collars each day. Made in USA. The Happy Jumping Woman named Alice Wear owned where they worked, so where they worked had to be part of the USA. Not in the country of course, but part of it like

property. Like a possession.

Which meant, Mari realized, that Monstruo, too, worked for this Happy Jumping Woman.

“I’m sorry,” Mari said, and placed a hand on the photograph.

It did no good. She couldn’t just speak to a photograph to ease her mind. No, she was going to have to travel north to USA, find the Happy Jumping Woman, and beg forgiveness.

She stepped into Florinda’s house, past the infants and younger brothers who were gathered around a woven mat playing with green plastic soldiers. They gave her inquisitive looks, but said nothing. It was not unusual for the women of the village to borrow from one another. Mari left with pockets of black twisted root and candles and handfuls of brown sugar.

Into her room she brought coals from the stove, and the rum she’d found in the trunk where the men kept it. She ringed herself with candles, and at her front built an altar of root, herb, shell, a bowl of corn pudding, a plantain, a collar from the maquila, and the magazine picture of the Happy Jumping Woman.

Mari drank rum and squeezed brown sugar through her fingers and onto the coals. She remembered names—Oshún, Chango—but couldn’t remember the words. She remembered the snake—Damballah—but knew he was only a guise; scales hiding something deeper, carved from her home soil.

She held beads, white and red ones she’d found at Altigracia’s. She rocked back and forth but felt nothing.

With fingers still sticky from sugar, she held her wishing stone. It had grown warm on her breast and the leather cord that held it twisted in her hand. It fattened, grew scales that became leaves, leaves that dissolved and became voices that sang songs from her childhood. The wishing stone flicked its tongue at her in greeting.

Mari turned to the face from the magazine. Alice Wear. She felt her toes lift from the floor, graze the coals, but only enough to sting a brief moment. She was floating, up, out the door, over the village, down the dirt road where all the women sat joined to machines at hands, wrists and feet. Up then, and over the mountains toward the sea cliff, then swift, across green waters and onto dust, land and dust and grinding beasts of metal and city streets and air thick as pan grease. Then down, into lush land of green lawns, tall palms, paved streets, brick walls, free of barbed wire.

The wind that carried her took her toward a great house. A house as wide as a town, and tall, with many rooms, each with its own roof; all angles and towers, red

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roofed tiles, and arched windows like the village church only this was a home. The home of the Happy Jumping Woman.

She flew through a window and came to rest in a large empty room.

Mari looked down. The hardwood floor glistened with a fresh layer of polish. Her reflection was but a mere wisp of herself. She smelled botanica, and across the room she saw bowls of flowers, incense that burned from gleaming elephants, and a photograph of a smiling old man who'd somehow placed his feet behind his head.

On a mat, in front of the altar sat Alice Wear, the Happy Jumping Woman. She wasn't wearing one of the ugly shirts with bright stripes and scratchy collar, but instead was dressed all in white silk and her arms and legs shimmered bronze. She had a silver anklet of tiny bells and rings on two of her toes. Her earrings glinted in hot summer sun that bounced off the mirrored wall behind the altar. Her pink, painted lips formed a smile of peace and serenity.

Mari's spirit self caught her breath. The Happy Jumping Woman must be an Iyalocha! Why else would she have an altar? Why else such a church in her own house!

Alice Wear opened her eyes and smiled.

"You're here again," she said. "My little Latin girl."

Again? Mari wondered. Had she traveled this far before and not known it? Was this Iyalocha so powerful as to reach all the way to the maquila?

"I am here to beg forgiveness," Mari said. "I have done harm."

The Happy Jumping Woman's smile grew. "I know. We have done harm in the past, but that's over now. We can step through this into the light together."

"I killed a guard," Mari said, not sure what to make of the woman's words. "At the maquila. Where your shirts are made."

The Happy Jumping Woman reached out and her hands tensed, as if she gripped Mari's spirit hands tight, but Mari felt nothing. "I don't know this word, 'maquila'" she said, "but I understand about guard. It's okay that you do these things. You are part of me. Remember? We are all on this joyous path together."

Mari did not understand. She struggled to find the right words to explain what had happened, but the Iyalocha just shushed her with a finger to her lips.

"The details aren't important. Don't dwell on them. You are merely an aspect of my guilt—just an element of my subconscious, remember?"

"I am your dream?" Mari asked, puzzled at the words that made no sense.

"I knew this would happen when Baba Sri Maa helped me work through these

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issues,” the woman went on. “He found so many aspects within me. Be happy that you are one, my little Latin girl”

“I should be happy?” Mari asked. “Though I have killed a man?”

“Oh no,” said the Happy Jumping Woman. “That is just a representation of my guilt over the consolidation of the Francie Ann clothing line into my Alice Wear brand. Baba told me that these issues would manifest in strange ways, but I have learned that is it perfectly acceptable, what I did. He assured me that it is no great greed on my part. That rejoicing in the material world is not a shameful act, but spiritual. Why just look at this place!” She let go her imaginary grip and waved her hands. “Have you ever seen such a sanctuary? It wouldn’t have even existed without my acquisition of the Francie Ann clothing line.”

Mari looked around the room. Yes, indeed it was a large sanctuary for the spirit. She could imagine the Happy Jumping Woman opening the doors on Sunday and welcoming Florinda, and Altagracia, and Joli and her entire village, and there’d be room and food for everyone.

“This is a gift to my spirit,” the Iyalocha said. “Just as you are a gift to my spirit, even though you may feel guilty about our past choices.” She reached up and again gripped the air.

“But do not feel guilty. You made the right choice. What you do is part of me, so I will not stand in the way.”

“Then I did no wrong?”

“Of course not,” the Iyalocha said. “You keep doing what you are doing. I am so proud of you. Your power is a gift. Use it well. Use it often.” Tears glistened on her cheeks. “I feel so whole now,” she said. “So alive and at peace and whole.” She started to cry. “Oh, thank you Baba Sri Maa.” She picked up the photograph of the contorted man and kissed it.

Mari floated up over the altar. She watched the Happy Jumping Woman cry tears of joy and hug the photograph to her chest. Mari did not understand much of what the Happy Jumping Woman said, but she knew this: she was not guilty of a crime. The Iyalocha rejoiced in her power. She blessed Mari’s deeds.

This is my saint. This is my spirit.

She left Alice Wear alone in her church and floated up out of the room, out past the perfect lawns, the tall palms, and south through dust and grind to jungles and green waters, then over mountains and back to her little tin shack where the coals were just about out.

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A day later, she returned to work. For the first time in a long time she gazed out the windows of the big yellow bus, watching the hills and counting each maquila as they rumbled past—dozens upon dozens of white domes, like blisters on the green-skinned land. But the land would heal soon, she knew. The Iyalocha, the Happy Jumping Woman, had granted her the gift to do what she needed, to change what she pleased.

The bus pulled up to the gate and Mari stepped off. She shuffled, one of many in a tight line, and watched as men with rifles roughly patted each woman, then sent her forward and into the blister rows.

I will visit his house too, she thought as the man touched her. And his, and his. And feel no guilt, for the Iyalocha has blessed me so.