

Sasha Pacino was born on the Sunshine Coast in 1988. In her twenties, she travelled to Cairns where she heard the story of José Paronella. *After the Tempest* is her first novel. She lives in Queensland.

AFTER THE TEMPEST
THE MEMOIRS OF
A CATALAN IMMIGRANT

SASHA PACINO



BOOBOOK PRESS

BOOBOOK PRESS

Boobook Press acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia, and we pay our respect to Elders past and present. We honour more than sixty thousand years of storytelling.

First published in Australia in 2026 by Boobook Press

Copyright © Sasha Pacino 2026

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity (including Google, Amazon or similar organisations), in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available
from the National Library of Australia
<http://www.catalogue.nla.gov.au>

ISBN 978–1–7646478–0–9

Typeset in 12.5/17.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Penny Gilbert
Printed and bound in Australia by IngramSpark

Cover design by Rosie Little

Cover images feathers: brgfx/Magnific (formerly Freepik); umbrella: drobotdean/Magnific; bees, Buick, cane toad: macrovector/Magnific; beetle, butterflies (blue), hot-air balloon, pastry, plane, snake: Magnific; first-aid kit: pikisuperstar/Magnific; bicycle, bow tie, butterflies (flying), candle holder, cassowary, clock, crown, globe, hibiscuses, hourglass, knife, moth, olive branch, owl, palm frond, picture frame, rainbow lorikeet, rat, rifle, rooster, roses, sugar cane, sun, table, tomatoes, weathervane: rawpixel/Magnific; suitcases: sofind/Magnific; clouds: svstudioart/Magnific; candle light/burning: upklyak/Magnific; José Paronella: sourced from Wikimedia Commons: File:Jose paronella.jpg, circa 1921, original author unknown, uploaded by PK Reynolds, public domain; Paronella Park: sourced from Wikimedia Commons: File:StateLibQld 1 119188 'Paronella Park' castle at Mena Creek, Queensland, 1948.jpg, 1 November 1948, original author unknown, uploaded by SLQbot, public domain; moon: xadartstudio/Magnific

Boobook Press
PO Box 601, Woodgate, Queensland 4660 Australia
www.boobookpress.com.au

For the dreamers



A NOTE ON SPANISH LANGUAGES

Spain is home to five official languages: Aranese, Basque, Castilian Spanish, Catalan (Valencian) and Galician. This work primarily uses Catalan as well as Castilian Spanish, depending on which province the narrative is set in. Although different languages, many words used in this work are the same or similar.

CONTENTS

PART ONE	1
An Unstable Atmosphere (1887—1913)	
PART TWO	105
The Eye of the Storm (1913—1924)	
PART THREE	203
The Eyewall (1924—1926)	
PART FOUR	287
Alchemy (1926—1939)	
PART FIVE	323
A Depression (1939—1948)	

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: Oh, my only
Light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

George Herbert, *The Flower*

PART ONE

An Unstable Atmosphere

(1887—1913)

Els catalans de les pedres en fan pans.
Catalans make bread from stones.

Catalan proverb

CHAPTER ONE

I am Born

I was born during a tempest. There was a squall outside—the storm—then a squall inside—me, red-faced and crying. It was a February storm, and I have been told—for I was too busy mewling to pay attention—that it was the worst one of 1887. The women of Casa Paronella swaddled me in blankets and thanked God Mare had survived her sixth childbirth, a mortal gift many *senyores* were not afforded back then despite the progeny of prayers sent to Heaven. After a little pondering—my quintet of siblings had exhausted the familial name pool—Mare and Pare christened me José Pedro Enrique Paronella, or as the immigration officer said many years later, ‘Quite a mouthful.’ Our pecking order was as follows: Pere and Fruitos, the girls Enriqueta and Dolores, then Teodoro and finally me, the twitching tail of the family, rushed forth with the frantic wind.

We lived in an old two-room cottage like penned rabbits. Mare was a strong, capable *senyora* who moved with ease from the *casa*

to the olive groves where she helped Pare in the hot, dry summers when the *petit*, bitter fruit grew abundantly—too abundantly. ‘A poor man can drown in olives,’ Pare lamented every summer solstice—and there were many varieties to drown in: Picual, Hojiblanca, Empeltre and Arbequina, to name a few. Pare drowned in Arbequina, courtesy of the Duke of Medinaceli, Lord of Arbeka. According to history—though it might just be legend—the Duke of Medinaceli brought the first Arbequina seeds from Jerusalem to Spain in the Middle Ages.

Pare was a tanned man, the suntan a currency of his labour in the fields, with a mop of curly hair the colour of the black Arbequina olives he picked. His countenance wore a resigned look set in like a perpetual winter fog. He dreamt of vernal change, a rebirth from the cold-hearted life of a peasant. He wished to own the farm he laboured on instead of working for another *senyor*, a rich *senyor*. But it was a dream reserved for night. His wealth of experience could not be exchanged for *pesetas*. We were as poor as the mice scurrying about the village church.

We lived a simple, hand-to-mouth existence. But we Catalan peasants have a saying, *Els catalans de les pedres en fan pans*. It means, Catalans make bread from stones. And it was true. Mare and Pare, like their *mare* and *pare* before them, had turned the solid non-metallic mineral into bread for decades. There was always food on the table, any hunger pangs were soon swallowed. So, despite my humble beginnings, I suckled like a lamb and grew accordingly. I gobbled my chicken, reluctantly nibbled the vegetables, relished Mare’s *fuet* and *botifarra*, which she made for special occasions, and grew even more. ‘Like a sprout,’ Àvia—Mare’s *mare*—said. I was an active boy, and everyone called me Pep, a diminutive of Josep, like José.

Every evening, after dinner, Àvia would relax, invite me onto her bony lap and narrate a fable before bed. I, being the youngest and most *petit*, was the only one allowed to sit there, as my dinky frame did not aggravate her rheumatic limbs. Àvia’s lap was bony, for she had shrunk in old age, as is the curious habit of the elderly. A habit, I must admit, I am conforming to these days.

Àvia was a severe-looking woman with a face as hard as the iron the village boys nailed onto the hooves of the once wild horses. One of her steely looks, and you obeyed like a hound. She need not utter a word; the look spoke volumes. Like most womenfolk in the village, she dressed only in black as though in mourning for the hard life she had endured—Àvia was a widow; I never got to meet Avi, for he died before the worst tempest of 1887 and my birth—and her long hair, blue grey like a Chartreux cat, was always fastened in a tight bun, lifting the drooping skin on her forehead up a good centimetre.

One tepid spring night, in the dim light of the oil lamp, Àvia told me a Catalan fairy tale called ‘*L’aigua de Vida*,’ ‘The Water of Life.’ The fable was about a quartet of poor but spirited children—a trio of brothers and a sister—who, through a chasm of black-and-white magic, changed the tune of their humdrum existence to end up living in a castle like the *noblesa*. After first hearing it, I begged her nightly—‘Àvia! “*L’aigua de Vida*!” “*L’aigua de Vida*!”’—to tell me the story before bed. I always imagined it would be us living in a castle one day. It was a naïve thought, but then again, children specialise in naiveté. Like the way they believe in the *Tió de Nadal*, the Christmas Log, that defecates presents.

I think my saving grace was that I belonged to a generation where children were seen but not heard. I never voiced my dreams

out loud so was never laughed at or told no. I believe that moment—when Àvia told me ‘The Water of Life’—was when the seed of hope was sowed in my blue-sky thoughts. And how it grew over time—in part to Àvia’s nurturing!

When my Piscean mind was old enough to understand—six, maybe seven—Àvia imparted two pieces of folk wisdom. Firstly, she told me the Tempest’s Child leads an interesting life, and that my *vida* would be full of adventure like a Miguel de Cervantes story. I was destined to travel in many different directions like the wind that cold winter’s night, the night of my birth and the worst tempest of 1887. And secondly, she told me José meant ‘God will increase,’ and that I must always take the high road in this adventurous *vida*.

She was a wise *senyora*, my *àvia*, and I wanted to believe her, but I was sceptical. Nothing ever happened in La Vall de Santa Creu. It was—still is, I presume—a *petit* olive-farming village, a hamlet barely warranting a dot on a map. But then, one day, I was corrected. Something did happen, and it began a ripple effect. It set events in motion with the rapidity of lightning, and I learnt the hard way that the *petit* world I lived in was unpredictable and fragile: unstable like the atmosphere. I learnt there is not always a happy ending like in ‘The Water of Life,’ that *vida* can be sad and unchangeable, set in stone like the caves the wild bees make their hives in.

CHAPTER TWO

My Life Truly Begins

It was high summer, and I was picking ripe tomatoes in Mare’s vegetable garden when screams rent the warm air. Never in my short life had I heard anyone scream like that. The screams did not belong to children playing silly games or a maiden stumbling across a scorpion or tarantula. They were unbearably shrill. I had no doubt: something bad had happened. I dropped the basket of tomatoes, the fruit rolling down one of the village’s many slopes, and darted towards the sound. Dolores abandoned the fowl she was about to wring, and Àvia discarded the socks she was darning inside the cottage. We had to hurry. There was nobody else. Only us.

La Vall de Santa Creu was so *petit* few roads led inside its cocoon. In fact, there was only one road—a twisted track. I had never traversed it, but Pare had throughout his *vida*. One afternoon, when he was in a rare moment of ease and joviality instead of solemn exhaustion, I asked him about that lonesome road. He said it was two-donkeys narrow and passable only by foot or mule—and,

he added as a footnote, mules were for *senyors* with money, meaning not us. Never us. We were poor. He said the road's mood changed with the seasons, that it was stolid in the dusty summers, and fickle and rutted in the wet, muddy winters. And he said an old stone wall bordered one side. When I asked why only one side had a wall, Pare explained it was for safety, for the road wended its way down a steep hill and a *senyor* could get blown over the edge in bad weather, and I gasped, for what a way to go—death by squall. After he told me that, I both revered and feared that narrow road that connected our *petit* village to the outside world, and given what Àvia had told me about my *vida*, I wondered if the Revered and Feared Road would ever feature in my story, if it was the high road she had spoken of.

It was not until I was older that I understood taking the high road meant being honourable, and I must admit, I have not always done the honourable thing.

Due to that lonesome road, to our isolation, it was up to us villagers to help one another, to dispense our own brand of medicine using the sage knowledge passed down between generations and whatever was on our shelves, in our herb gardens. When Enriqueta's stomach ached every full moon, it was Àvia who concocted a potion to ease the pain; when Teodoro injured his working arm, it was Àvia who healed it with a poultice and a prayer; and when the old widower at the end of the street got a fever, it was Àvia who nursed him back to health with a tincture, the fever passing in twenty-four hours. But neither Enriqueta, Teodoro nor that old widower had screamed in such a horrific way, so I knew the owner of those screams was going to have more than an ache, an injury or a burning temperature.

Much more.

The screams continued long and loud, so loud they could wake the dead. I sprinted down the lane by the cottage, through the green gate, leaving it open like an astonished mouth, and regarded the cobblestone street for a split second. The screams were coming from the neighbour's cottage.

Only a stone wall separated our dwellings. Their cottage, like most in the village, was a crudely built white-stuccoed mud hut with a terracotta roof. It contained two rooms: one for living, the other for sleeping. Though, I must say, our cottage was slightly more substantial; it boasted stone.

I wrenched open the neighbour's gate and hurried down the lane towards the front door. I knew I would be too *petit* to help, but my short, skinny legs hurried anyway. Deafening shrieks cut through the heavy air. I grabbed the handle—it was unlocked, as always—the village was too *petit* for crime—burst into the cottage and surveyed the room. To this day, I remember what I saw. It was a ghastly, confronting sight. Even the usually impassive Dolores failed to stifle a gasp.

Our neighbour, Senyora Soler, was wailing and mumbling a prayer as she darted anxiously around a foreign disfigured man. Her movements were so full of anxiety none were complete. They hung unfinished in the sultry air like questions begging to be answered. I wondered if the man was a pedlar who had unwittingly ventured up the Revered and Feared Road. He was not a local, of that I was certain. I had never seen him before, and La Vall de Santa Creu was an omniscient village where everyone knew everyone, a place where any new characters soon became known. Our hamlet was a world within a world: a cocoon.

'*Ai* God, please! Please, God!' she implored.

Senyora Soler had a shock of wavy raven hair that formed a widow's peak, and despite her labouring, she remained a pinch rotund, for she, like Mare, had given birth to a sextet of infants: three boys and three girls. The childbearing had given her wide hips, an ample bosom and a penchant, like all womenfolk in the village, for knowing the right prayer for the right *problema*. But I was unsure a prayer existed to help correct such a grave deformity.

Her daughter, Matilde, stood in the corner of the room weeping as she nursed her squalling baby sister, Margarita. The eldest sister was married and, like Pere and Fruitos, her brothers had left home. Matilde was only a year younger than me. She possessed the same hair as her *mare*. Sometimes I passed her when I walked the four miles to school—sometimes for I attended sporadically. I was usually at home doing chores, a necessity that eclipsed enlightenment.

I must admit, I did not like Matilde much as a boy. One afternoon, while we were playing hide-and-seek in the lanes between the olive groves, she told me I had big ears; that was how she had found me. I imagined my elephantine ears sticking out past the olive branches. After that, I took to pressing my pair of hearing organs back each day for a minute in hope of resculpting them like an unfired clay artwork. But Mare's kiln had done its job. They still stick out a little to this day.

The disfigured man, groaning with pain, sat slumped in an old wooden chair in the corner of the room. His skin was inflamed with so many wheals they joined to make one big lesion the shape of Man. He was as red as fire, and I imagined touching him would cause the second party a severe burn. It was almost as if someone had committed the unnatural crime of treating him like a balloon, blowing into his mouth until he inflated, until he got bigger and

bigger, puffier and puffier. His lips were bloated; his eyelids so swollen they buried his chinks of vision in the enlarged folds of skin like a coffin in the ground; and his thick fingers touched one another, making his hands look like a pair of winter gloves. I wondered who the man was, what had happened to him.

'*Ai, amor meu!* Oh, my love!' Senyora Soler wailed.

Upon hearing the affectionate term, I realised the disfigured man was no stranger; he was her husband. Senyor Soler was a beekeeper who often traded honey for vegetables from Mare's garden. Only the other week he had given Mare a jar of the sunny liquid in exchange for a basket of tomatoes I had picked. He was normally a spry, limber man like Pare, but that day he looked like he had stumbled out of the Underworld, not from among the wild oak trees.

'What happened?' Àvia asked.

'B-bees. They—' A sobbing Senyora Soler tried to speak, but the words got caught in her throat. '—a-attacked him.'

As soon as she said the words 'bees' and 'attacked,' my eyes shot to the open window. Through its mouth, I saw a swarm of the insects moving as one, as a devilish apparition, hovering around the bushes. Their harrowing buzz, though distant, possessed a strange, thunderous quality. Witnessing the damage they had inflicted upon Senyor Soler, I thought it only just of Mother Nature to decree the stinging insects die after such assaults. Except, of course, for the queen bee. Always different rules for the *noblesa*.

'Pedro,' Senyora Soler quavered, 'was retrieving honey from the hive, b-but the bees became agitated and a-a-attacked him.' She paused for a moment, stomach heaving, body trembling. 'They stung him from head to t-toe.' She shook her head in disbelief. 'Even through his c-clothes.'

My young eyes flitted to Senyor Soler's garments. I do not know what I expected to find. Perhaps thousands of holes from the stings in the material, but they merely looked like the average farmer's rags, soiled with dirt and sweat. My mind conjured up an image of his person becoming black with a colony of bees. To think it had happened while I was picking tomatoes. I was surprised I had not heard him cry out in pain, but shock, as I now know firsthand, renders you motionless.

Just then a torrent of knocks boomed, and a woman's voice yelled, 'Is everything okay?' The adults exchanged brief, knowing glances. No one looked at me. I was only a boy. But they looked at Dolores. She was old enough to be included, to be considered an adult. Senyora Soler put her head in her hands and wailed. Àvia, seeing the woman was in no state to answer her own door, assumed the role of host. Behind the wooden slab stood a group of villagers, their presence, despair and curiosity only adding to the disorder in a burst of queries:

'What happened?'

'You need help?'

'I'll go get Senyora Borda.'

Senyora Borda, a sort of *curandero*, a healer, lived on the outskirts of the village. Her weathered cottage was crammed with folk medicines to cure every ail. She consulted books written in Latin, though not a soul knew how she had mastered the foreign tongue. Some said she had learnt it on her travels, others that she was born knowing it, that she possessed a curious gift for seeing things mortals were blind to.

But Àvia declined their offers, assured them everything was under control and suggested firmly—she never 'ordered'—they be

on their way. The villagers acquiesced. She was a difficult person to say no to. How can you say no to a face as hard as iron?

So, one by one, the villagers left, lumbering down the lane, good intentions in tow, but not before telling Senyora Soler to call if she needed anything, anything at all. Senyora Soler, too distraught to reply, stood snivelling. After the last do-gooder departed, Àvia walked over to Senyora Soler and whispered something in her ear, but she remained stunned. Àvia gently squeezed her limp arm, squeezed the thoughts out of her, squeezed her back to reality—or tried to. Senyora Soler merely nodded while staring vacantly into space. I looked at that space, expecting to find something. But there was nothing, just a scratched wall, a clawed floor: an injured void. That peculiar place between the severance of calm normality and shocked disbelief.

Àvia turned to me: 'Pep, close the windows.' Then, to Dolores: 'Help Senyor Soler to bed.'

Without another word, Àvia disappeared in search of medicine to soothe the wheals, ease the pain, and reduce the swelling. She would heal the malady just as she had fixed Enriqueta's stomach pains, Teodoro's injured arm, and the old widower's fever. Like the villagers, we obeyed. I hurried over to the window and grabbed the latch, but it was difficult to shut. Proportion rendered my arms as short and skinny as my legs, and I feared that despite being the help, I would need to ask for it. I pushed and pulled, pulled and pushed. It took all my might to close that window, and when it clunked shut, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Dolores was by Senyor Soler's side helping him up. For a moment, I thought her slender frame was going to buckle under his weight, but Senyora Soler followed suit, shouldering her

husband's other half. Together they awkwardly transported him to the bed in the second room of the cottage. He was oblivious to being carried like a helpless child. A veil of shock had been yanked over his soul, making him detached from reality, from the people and movements around him. They eased his swollen body down on the straw mattress, Dolores supporting his torso and Senyora Soler adjusting his legs. Once he was arranged, Senyora Soler sat by her husband's side and recommenced praying, prayer being the only remedy within her immediate control. She prayed until Àvia returned a few minutes later with a poultice. Dolores helped her apply it. Àvia was already passing on her sage knowledge to my sisters, just as she had to Mare. Senyor Soler groaned when the poultice touched his inflamed skin. His wife watched on, hands shaking uncontrollably, tears blinding her eyes.

When the poultice was finished, Àvia rose, brushed her skirts, then placed a hand on Senyora Soler's shoulder, leant down and said to call if needed. With that, she turned and headed towards the door: we were leaving. We Paronellas had done everything within our power to help. All we could do now was pray. I was still unsure the right prayer existed for such a *problema*, but if anyone knew the right prayer, it would be Àvia.

That afternoon, we returned to Casa Paronella a solemn lot. Àvia finished darning our socks, Dolores wrung the fowl that Fate had ordained to live an extra hour, and I picked up the bruised tomatoes, replacing them in the wicker basket before continuing to pick the ripe ones. But nothing was the same. Everything was different. The fruit's red epidermis and plump flesh reminded me of Senyor Soler's inflamed skin, and I wondered if he could recover from a trauma so grave. I thought about it so much, with such

nervous energy, I was surprised to learn I had soon picked every ripe tomato in the garden.

I took the basket to the kitchen, a separate building at the rear of the cottage, and set it down on the shelf next to a half-empty jar of honey. That sticky, yellow substance had now acquired an ominous feeling. I would not knock on the door of Casa Soler on the morrow to exchange tomatoes for the syrup. Nor the next. Something told me it would not happen for a long time.

Later, as the summer sun bade us farewell, I helped Dolores kindle a fire with split wood, then she boiled a pot of water and plucked the fowl, its feathers gumming to her. We had no running water or electricity. Our water came from a crystal-clear stream that flowed down the mountain and was channelled to a spout for drinking and a communal pool for washing clothes. In the hot, dry summers, the stream was thirsty for rain, while in winter, it froze over. After darkness had descended upon the hamlet, our light came from oil lamps and candles, but we used both frugally. Staying up late and talking or reading was an indulgence not afforded to us. We had to rise with the morrow's sun and begin a hard day's work all over again. Such was our simple, hand-to-mouth existence.

Dolores hastily basted the fowl and roasted it, the wafting aroma making my tummy rumble. Everything Dolores made was delicious. Mare had taught her and Enriqueta how to cook, just as Àvia had taught Mare, just as she had imparted her wisdom of folk medicines.

That evening, when Mare and Pare returned from the olive groves, Dolores served the roasted fowl for dinner. But as we ate, instead of talking about olive groves, olive presses and olive oils, all we spoke of was Senyor Soler and the tragedy that had befallen him. Àvia relayed the event: the screams, the stings, the poultice.

‘Bees,’ Mare said, ‘who’d have thought?’

‘I’ve never seen a man so red—’ I prattled on. ‘—so swollen. He—’

‘*Pst!*’ Mare hissed. ‘Let Àvia speak.’

Head hung low, I retreated to my plate and swallowed the words with a mouthful of chicken; the dead fowl did not scold me. When Àvia had finished, Dolores gave her version. With each account, Mare, Pare, Enriqueta and Teodoro listened intently and shook their heads in disbelief. As I sat there, I could not help but notice they had omitted a lot of description, but I said nothing and swallowed such opinions with my chicken too. I would tell Teodoro when we were alone. He was the closest in age to me and would appreciate my detail.

That night, I fell into a slumber thinking about what I had witnessed. As I slept, nightmares swarmed. I heard Senyora Soler’s screams, saw Senyor Soler’s disfigured body, then realised it was me: I had been stung. Wheals rose up on my skin. I tossed and turned. As the sun rose on the morrow, shrieks awoke me with a start.

I was no longer dreaming.

It really was Senyora Soler.



We hurried next door to find Senyora Soler crying and gesticulating wildly. Upon seeing us, she disappeared inside the cottage. Àvia, Mare, Pare, Enriqueta and Dolores followed, Teodoro and I behind them. Matilde, her face like a grey sky about to burst, stood in the corner of the first room cradling baby Margarita. In the second room, the adults spoke in hushed tones over Senyora Soler’s cries.

I searched their countenances for an answer as to what was happening. Their faces were as white as the snow-capped Pyrenees in winter, and white is not only the colour of shock but the colour of truth, for shock has neither chance nor time to lie. Whatever had happened was worse than the day before. Senyora Soler seemed to sense this, for suddenly long, loud sounds of lamentation filled the cottage. I stepped forwards, wriggled and pushed my way through the knot of limbs and torsos, and peeked around the doorframe. There, I saw a lifeless man’s body. His skin was pasty, his joints as stiff as wood. One leg was buckled so uncomfortably it begged for correction.

The man was Senyor Soler.

He was dead.

Mort.

Lightning had struck. I was young, merely a boy, and certainly not versed in the intricacies of death. I knew only that it happened to the fowl in the chicken run, that it happened to the goats, sheep, cows and pigs; and I knew it had a finality about it, for the animals were as still as statues and never resurrected from the dead. Instead, they morphed into meals. They became our dinner and the *fuet* and *botifarra* Mare made for special occasions that I devoured without a hint of guilt.

Àvia tried to help a distraught Senyora Soler sit down, but shock had rendered her inconsolable, unable to move. She could do only one thing: keen. Matilde wept, and baby Margarita cried; she cried for her *mare* but had to settle for her sister. There, in that domestic mausoleum, we all crossed ourselves. That morning, I returned home with two new sisters; Mare had offered to mind Matilde and Margarita while Senyora Soler—with her sister’s help—tended to the funeral arrangements.

‘A wife! A wife and six children!’ Àvia said to Mare, who was kneading dough in the kitchen. Àvia shook her head in disbelief and crossed herself between bounces, one hand bobbing baby Margarita up and down while the other assumed the religious rites of her upbringing. ‘One minute you’re smelling the flowers, next they’re the dozen at your funeral.’

I looked out the window; Matilde was walking with Dolores in the garden. It had never occurred to me bee stings could be fatal, but it seemed it had not occurred to anyone else either, for Senyor Pedro Soler’s death was a great shock to the village. People died of *other* things, of illnesses, heart attacks, knife wounds and shying horses.

Not bees.

Never bees.



That night, I asked Àvia about those murderous insects. She invited me onto her bony lap and told me a fairy tale inspired by the ancient Near East. She called it ‘The Spirits of the Gone.’ All these years later, I cannot recall the actual story, only the myth behind it. There are cultures, Àvia said, on this earthly plane that believe bees bridge the Natural World to the Underworld, the place where the spirits of the gone go. I knew by gone she meant dead—*mort*—for the fowl that was alive at dawn, killed by noon and gracing our plates by evening was gone, never to return. When I asked her why bees were bridges—why not butterflies or beetles?—she said it was because wild hives were almost always located in caves, and caves were mortal entrances to the immortal Underworld.

The story was meant to comfort me, but as I lay on the straw mattress that night, I came to the conclusion that death only frightened me more. So, in addition to the Revered and Feared Road, I also came to fear caves and the wild hives I found in the cracks of rock walls, for it meant an entrance to the Underworld was nearby, and although I could not see it, I had no doubt it existed, just like the air I breathed. Whenever I saw one, I would gasp and run as fast as my short, skinny legs would carry me.



Every *casa* in the village heard the bells tolling. To their macabre *ding-dong, dong-ding* we made the pilgrimage to the *petit* church in town. The bell tower’s body was like a trigger finger pointing at the Heavens. My eyes followed its long figure up to the low-slung sky. I hoped to see a celestial sign—of what I did not know. Perhaps confirmation of Senyor Soler’s arrival up there, in Heaven. Something that made me fear the finality of death less. But I saw only gloomy clouds begging to break.

When the service began, ululations of grief, the shrillest belonging to Senyora Soler, echoed throughout the building. Tears streamed down Matilde’s cheeks and dripped onto little Margarita’s head. Margarita was too young to know what was happening and would be too young to remember that *senyor* called *pare*.

I soon became restless on the hard wooden pews and wriggled about. Àvia nudged me, told me to be respectful and listen to the priest. She told me with one word—*pst!*—and one look—the look as hard as nails. I obeyed, gluing my eyes to that consecrated man who officiated death.

I mention the beekeeper's passing not only because it was the day I lost my naiveté of the world and comprehended the twin workings of Life and Death, but because it was the beginning of a series of events that would bind the Paronellas and Solers together for a lifetime.

CHAPTER THREE

I Have a Change

One morning, one full moon after Senyor Soler's death, Mare was in the kitchen kneading dough, the weight of her body leaning into the mixture as she transformed it from stones to bread like we Catalans do, when she said:

‘Pep, go collect your *mòmia* some eggs.’

‘Sí, Mare.’

Outside, I poured water into the hens' trough, opened the chicken coop and, while they squabbled over who was first, went in and gathered their eggs. When I returned with a full basket, Mare clapped her hands together, the flour dusting the counter like falling snow, then wiped the stubborn remains on her smock and beckoned me over. I placed the basket next to the honey and followed. She pulled out a chair and scooped me up onto her lap. It was warm and thick with middle age, not bony like Àvia's. Then she combed her fingers through my unruly black curls. It was a rare gesture, and I relished being so close to her, inhaling her scent: flour, herbs, soap.

‘Soon,’ she said, ‘you’ll have a little brother or sister. But—’ She held up her index finger. ‘—don’t tell anyone. Not yet.’

I nodded uncertainly. ‘*D’acord, Mare.* Okay, Mother.’

Mare had spent a good portion of her married life either pregnant or in a period of convalescence after childbirth or a miscarriage. Looking back, I consider it a feat of biology Mare and Pare managed to have so many children. They seemed to set eyes on each other only at dinner, and the darkest hours of the night did not even belong to them, for we all slept crammed in the same *petit* room.

Mare kissed my cheek, then next I was standing on the ground, and she was back kneading the dough. It was not until evening, when I overheard Mare and Pare talking, that I understood why it was a secret.

‘My goodness,’ Mare said, ‘Senyor Soler loses his *vida*, and we get blessed with a *nova vida*.’

Pare agreed. ‘The timing’s not good.’

‘What should I say? Before long, I’ll show.’

‘The truth. She’ll find out sooner or later, no?’



Time disappeared like rain into a deep, dark well. Summer departed, and autumn arrived with shortened days and leaves the colour of terracotta, moss and mustard. Senyora Soler started leaving Casa Soler and doing the things she did before the beekeeper’s death, and slowly the womenfolk in the village, Mare and Àvia included, stopped helping her, ceased bringing food and minding the Soler girls.

Mare’s stomach was now bloated with new life. She looked like she had swallowed a melon. I was surprised to learn the melon moved. One afternoon, while Mare was resting her swollen feet and aching back, she placed my hands on her stomach, and I felt a kick.

‘Does it hurt?’ I asked.

She laughed. It was a loud, uninhibited laugh. ‘No, Pep. It feels like ripples under the skin.’

Ripples, I thought. ‘Like when the wind blows the stream?’

‘*Sí.* Only under your skin.’

But the melon was hatching a sickness inside her, and I came to think of it as poisonous, like the wild red berries in the Iberian forests. Her symptoms only worsened until, one evening, everything came to a head. We were seated around the old wooden table finishing dinner when Àvia swallowed a forkful of chicken, looked squarely at Mare and urged her to stop working until the baby was born:

‘If you’re unwell, the baby will be unwell.’

But Mare dismissed such a notion with the wave of her hand. ‘I’m fine. Besides, there’s too much to do. The fowls won’t wring themselves, the eggs won’t collect themselves, and the bread won’t knead itself.’

I wanted to tell her I would happily collect the eggs, like I did that summer’s day she told me I would have a little brother or sister, but I stayed silent, for Àvia was about to speak. But before Àvia could utter a word, Mare heaved her bloated body up, one hand on her lower back, the other on the tabletop. Once standing, she picked up her plate and headed to the basin. She was halfway there when a wail shot out of her mouth, and she doubled over in pain. The hand holding the crockery darted to her abdomen, and

the plate and cutlery fell to the floor, the dish smashing and the utensils landing with a clang. The colour drained from her face. There was no trace of her usual tan from labouring in the garden. For a moment, I thought she might faint, but instead she hunched over and vomited, the pungent odour suffocating the *petit* room. We shrieked:

‘Mare!’

‘Maria!’

We rushed to her. Mare remained on her hands and knees, vomiting until only bile came up. We looked at Àvia. Only she understood what was happening to Mare, to her daughter. Only she knew what to do.

To Pare and Teodoro, she said: ‘Help her to bed.’ Then to Enriqueta and Dolores: ‘Come.’

But Àvia said nothing to me. I was too *petit* to help, though I desperately wanted to. ‘Should I get Senyora Borda?’ I ventured, thinking of the *curandero*.

‘No.’

Àvia’s answer was curt, and I felt bad in the stomach for having asked. Mare, weak and vulnerable, clasped Pare’s arm with one hand, her abdomen with the other, and shuffled, stopping every few steps to cry out in pain. Blood trickled down her legs onto the floor. I yearned for the stern matriarch to return. I wanted the same Mare who had scooped me up a few months ago, the Mare who had combed her fingers through my unruly hair.

In the second room, Pare and Teodoro helped her lie down. Her swollen ankles were streaked with blood, and her sullied skirts were like a stage curtain revealing a provincial drama. Hurried footsteps echoed. Àvia, Enriqueta and Dolores, all carrying old

remedies—nettle, rue, artemisia, boiling water—entered and set everything down on the old dresser, then got to work making poultices and potions. Such was the precarity of time, it seemed like I only blinked and the sheets were dyed red with blood. Mare was pallid, the paleness a stark contrast to her black hair, the only sign of age the grey streaks stroking her temples. She was sweaty too, but it was a cool night. A draft stole through the open window, making me shiver. Àvia dabbed the salty moisture from Mare’s forehead with a damp rag.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked.

‘The baby is leaving your *mare’s* body.’

I nodded. I was a country boy and had witnessed many a farm animal give birth, but that was different. Very different.

The rag soon became wet with sweat. Àvia wrung it out, then turned to Teodoro and I and said, ‘Go to bed.’

We obeyed. We were in the way. We dragged the second mattress into the corner of the first room and lay down head to toe, but I was too worried to sleep.

‘Mare will be okay, won’t she?’ I whispered to Teodoro.

‘Of course. Àvia will heal her.’

‘But she didn’t heal Senyor Soler.’

‘That was different.’

‘How?’

‘Senyor Soler was attacked. Mare is sick.’

He spoke with certainty, and I wanted to believe his reasoning. I did believe him. Again, I reminded myself how Àvia had healed Enriqueta’s stomach pains, Teodoro’s injured arm and the widower’s fever. Yet I worried. I could not stop thinking about Mare, about the baby, about how I had felt it move with my own hands. *Like ripples*,

she had said. This thinking eventually wearied my mind... my blinks grew slower and heavier... and I drifted off... It was a light slumber, and between snatches of sleep I heard Àvia, Enriqueta and Dolores tending to Mare, but despite their efforts, the blood flowed like a vermillion stream. Two shades of red showed time like a clock: the new blood was bright, the old blood tinged brown. I heard the words ‘hem’ and ‘rage,’ but I was too young to understand their meaning. So was Teodoro.



I awoke to a shadow hovering over me with a candle burnt almost to the wick. Outside, the midnight moon hung like a clock in the violet sky.

‘Pare?’ Rubbing my eyes, I edged my body upright and looked around the *petit* room. Teodoro was gone. I studied Pare’s countenance in the dying candlelight. Upon witnessing his furrowed brows, watery eyes and downturned mouth, I knew something bad had happened. The message was written on his face like the day of the beekeeper’s passing. ‘The baby,’ I said, ‘it didn’t make it?’

Pare, swallowing tears, shook his head in shocked disbelief and stared at the floor as though the words he wanted to say had fallen there. I followed his gaze but found no letters, only darkness. A pregnant silence hung in the stagnant air for what seemed like an age.

‘It’s your *mare*...’ His voice was *petit*, peculiar: unrecognisable. ‘She’s—she’s gone. She and the baby.’

Gone. I thought of Àvia’s fairy tale, ‘The Spirits of the Gone,’ of bees, the bridge and Underworld. More silence, more stillness followed. It hung in the suffocating air like a ghost: invisible but

ever-present and strongly felt. In that moment, despite the draft, despite the chill rattling my bones, a foreign heat pulsed through me, burning away flesh and muscle, leaving me feeling light and seeing black. As I tried blinking away this blackness, Pare’s face contorted and a strange noise escaped his mouth, a high-pitched sound of distress, almost hysteria. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach. The sight scared me. I had never seen Pare cry before, and I did not want to. It confirmed what I did not want to know—that Mare was gone.

Pare was an unyielding man, hardened by labour, by the universe’s inability to grant him the dream of owning a farm, of some sort of lenience like a reprieve from the drudgery of everyday life. He was a *senyor* who yelled, not cried. Pare seemed to sense my shock, for self-consciousness suddenly seized him, and his hand shot to his face to try to mask the grief. I averted my eyes. I could offer no other comfort. Without another word, he walked out the door and disappeared into the darkness, the dying candle extinguishing in the draft.

All I heard was crying. Everyone was crying. Sobbing. Weeping. Wailing. Plumbing the depths of sadness. Àvia was loudest. She paced the cottage as she keened for her lost daughter, her voice raw and primitive. Every few steps, she stopped and looked up at the ceiling as though there, in that quarter of the *casa*, she would find either God, Mare’s spirit or an answer to the tragedy that had just befallen us. As she focussed on a spot, she mumbled a prayer, crossed herself and said, ‘Oh my dear Maria.’ Then her eyes shot to the floor, the Devil’s quarters. Ritual completed, she shuffled a few more steps before repeating the process. Her visceral voice, coupled with her movements, only added to the ethereal feeling the *casa* possessed that

fateful night. She received no answer. None of us did. The cottage was no longer a home but a coffin, and Mare had died at its edges. I walked over to her body, the shell of her being, reached out and touched her cheek: it was as cold as winter. The rusty, metallic smell of blood and the sodden straw mattress suffocated the *petit* room.

‘Mare,’ I cried. ‘*Mare.*’

Lightning had struck.

It had struck us just like it had struck the Solers.



I awoke in a daze, my face sore, puffy and tight. The only sounds of life were the warbling birds and moulting trees rustling in the breeze. Then it hit me like an equine kick. I remembered last night, remembered the darkness, blood and relentless crying that had pushed me to sleep in the early hours of the morning. My body was heavy like a grave of dirt was on top of me, holding me down, suffocating me.

My eyes darted around the room. The walls were the colour of honey. In seeing the glaring sunshine, I expected to find everything normal, untouched by God’s hands, to find what had happened a nightmare and nothing more. To find the sun glimmering and Mare breathing, or a tempest raging and her breathless, would have made sense, but that was not the case. Nature’s—life’s—ability to continue was, I felt, insulting to her memory. It was as though the world had never needed her. But I did.

I needed her.



Mare was buried as swiftly as her death, too swiftly for understanding. The day of her funeral was respectfully overcast, unlike the morrow of her passing. Even the birds whistled sombrely. Again, my eyes followed the church bell tower to the low-slung sky. I hoped to see a sign of Mare’s arrival in Heaven, but I saw only gloomy clouds.

The service was a black blur. I remember seeing my brother, Pere, and his wife, Antonia—they had travelled from the nearby city of Girona where they lived—and I remember seeing Fruitos. Next, I was back at Casa Paronella, the cottage as quiet as the church graveyard. It was no longer a home, merely an upside-down hole as cavernous as a crater that no soul, try as they might, could hope to fill.

That afternoon, Senyora Soler brought over a dish of food: it was now our turn to receive succour. Àvia wept at the curse of Eve women must bear, and Senyora Soler knew better than to offer comforting words as hollow as the ancient tree trunks in the Iberian forests. Other women in the village brought food too. Their entry and exit from the cottage was like a funeral procession, only in lieu of flowers was cuisine. But we were not hungry; our bodies were bloated with grief.

Mare’s death on the physical plane haunted us, and a pall of misery hung over the cottage. At night, when the moon was high in the violet sky, I thought of her. My mind floated with the breeze to her resting place in the *petit* church cemetery. Though only the shell of her being remained there, I could not shake the image of her sunken face, her uninhabited body. In winter, when it rained or snowed, I imagined her longing for shelter, for the warmth of the fireplace; in summer, when her headstone was

burning hot to touch, she was sweltering, in want of a cooling breeze; and in autumn, when dead leaves rained down on her, she prayed for a zephyr, for someone to brush them away so she could see the world. *Spring, I thought, when the orange blossoms bloom, is the only time she will be at peace.*

CHAPTER FOUR

I Begin Life Alone, And I Don't Like It

As the seasons passed, an incipient fuzz sprouted from my upper lip, and my voice changed from countertenor to bass: the beginnings of manhood. The fuzz looked like duck down, and my voice lacked operatic talent. I was now too big to sit on Àvia's lap and listen to 'The Water of Life.' But having heard the tale so many times, I knew it by heart, and despite my age, I often told it to myself of an evening, lying in darkness waiting for sleep to come—especially on nights spent thinking of Mare. The story was like warm milk to a baby; it nourished my dreams.

More responsibility, more chores, came with the fuzz and bass, and I attended school less, if that was possible. I was a sporadic pupil at the best of times, but after Mare's death, I became a stranger. One less pair of hands equalled twice as much work. Since Mare's passing, the weight of the domestic burden had fallen on Enriqueta and Dolores' shoulders. Àvia helped as much as she could, but being older, her contribution was confined to a chair.