

Luz at Midnight

a novel by

Marisol Cortez



FLOWERSONG
PRESS

It seemed to me, quite early on, that there's stability, there's inertia. So I tried, using statistical techniques, to document the inertia, to uncover the constants that make science possible. It is because there are constants that we can understand things. But I've also tried to explain why things are the way they are.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology is a Martial Art*

The public and the politicians want to blame a culprit for each blackout, because they imagine a Newtonian world of cause and effect, of crime and punishment. Occasionally, flagrantly guilty parties such as Enron deserve to sit in the dock. But without malicious intent or incompetence a blackout may still occur.

—David E. Nye, *When the Lights Went Out:
A History of Blackouts in America*

I could hike faster and stronger while manic. On a hike, I remember looking from the top of a viewpoint over the city and freeway, thinking 'it's all magic.' That isn't too crazy of a realization, since we know from advances in physics that things really are glued together with a sort of magic at the deepest level.

—Internet Blogger Jim G, "My First Manic Episode - 1999"

PROLOGUE

Improbable

On Arrival: Manhattan, Kansas
Early September

Improbable: everything was stacked against it, everything you could possibly imagine. The fact that I was married, with a two-year-old child. That I had been offered a job here in Kansas, two states away, and was poised to leave San Antonio again, lugging behind me in a moving truck entire geological eras of sedimentation. Hector, the high school friend I had married; la Nena, our daughter, just barely not a baby anymore; a degree, the calcified accumulation of years of schooling. The fact of Joel's eviction: from his apartment, but from something else too, something totalizing, an absolute eviction from everything. Something he knew, because he told me; something I knew, because I'd seen it. His illness or holiness or genius, or whatever it was. The fact of Joel's promotion as the *Volt* went digital, making it unlikely he'd follow us north. The fact of Luz's disappearance just before we left town, as mysteriously as she'd appeared.

Regardless. It was as though the difficulty, the seeming impossibility, made it all the more imperative that we continue to talk, to figure out what it meant. A love so powerful and terrible it could not be ignored. When I met Joel—really met him, met him all the way down—everything I'd assumed I wanted suddenly seemed wrong. So ill-fitting I had to divest myself. And once I had taken off the cicada shell of my previous life, I could not put it back on again. So not two weeks after Joel and I went to the coast together, I told Hector I wanted to divorce. Can you believe that crazy shit?

Actually, Hector asked me if we should, and I said yes, and we were both relieved. We had finally spoken aloud what we'd long feared was best, the knowledge we had most strenuously avoided, and we had survived its speaking. It was okay. It was better than okay—it was right, it was right at last. I try to explain this to others and it sounds impossible, but that's how it happened. A part of me had been absent from the beginning, and this absence had been a presence in our midst for a long time, both of us hoping that not talking about it could change its meaning. Neither of us wanted it to mean what it meant.

When I agreed to marry, after my surprise pregnancy and the birth of Nena, I thought, *Someday I will meet someone and fall in love, and then what will I do?* But I had immediately dismissed the thought because it *was* so reasonable: no sense worrying since it wasn't happening right then. And maybe it would never happen; or, if it did, maybe I could choose to ignore it, make it go away, rationalize desire as impractical or illusory—a delusion, to think a life together with someone could be grounded in anything other than the economic arrangement it would inevitably become. I had reasoned so in the past, when I—or Hector—had crushed on a classmate or work buddy, breaking up to chase after what we would come to conclude was mirage or fantasy, before getting back together.

And so I figured I had immunized myself against the improbability of love, having chosen to have a child and then very deliberately to marry for pragmatic reasons. We were wed in a courthouse ceremony in Califas when Nena was four months old; two years later, on arrival in Kansas, we would notarize our divorce papers in a UPS store, the notary and counter guy

trying their hardest not to eye one another, then us, in disbelief as they watched us conversing and cracking jokes. The ways Hector and I married and unmarried each other says everything about the reasons we both stayed—and later left.

All of which makes those ten years sound like an offense, a drudgery or a disrespect. You could see it that way, and I wouldn't fault you. But those years were also friendly and companionate. We were cousins from the same provincial village who had clung to one another as we navigated strange new planets of alienated adulthood, who tried for ten years to change the meaning and course of our connection. Who had a child and married for not unreasonable reasons. Though it hadn't been right, who could say it had been wrong either, taking in the soft curve of Nena's full cheek, the liquid black of her watchful eyes, the miracle of her tiny hands and teeth?

But then I encountered the crazy brilliance of Joel, blue and beautiful amid the confusion swirling around the node mining, the petition drive, the intrigue of city scandal. And I realized that the situation I had discounted had arisen much sooner than anticipated, and that everything I had wanted, that had laid the foundation for the massive edifice of my life, was not in fact what I wanted, what brought me deepest joy—and sorrow. What it opened in me was a fullness, a capacity for both incredible gentleness and incredible ferocity that I had not known was there.

Something in me had broken open—like the hidden gas line beneath that old refinery, severed by hapless construction crew, tripping an explosion that spelled out the end of an era. It was about Joel and not about Joel at all, I knew that. Joel had

only unstoppered it. Not that it could have been anyone. But for some reason I didn't understand, it was Joel who had that power, who awakened a longing so wide and deep it crashed to my surface like oil or water, creating a river unfordable, a shallow sea. It shot through me, the flaming tail of a meteorite, cracking my rib cage open like thoracic surgery. It drew a cry from so deep it split my skin like the fragile membrane of a ripe persimmon, its orangey flesh concealing juice rich and dark as iodine. But I knew it had always been there, an ancient, secret source in an underground cavern, searching for the right time, the right hand.

Each time Hector and I had broken up previously, sex had thrown us back together. And in continuing our physical relationship, we'd had to work backwards from there and figure out what the rest of our partnership meant. This time, after we decided on the divorce, when Hector inquired about the possibility of ex sex, I refused.

I have to tell you something, I said.

Oh. I don't want to hear. He shook his head, turning his face away.

No. It's not like that. At that point Joel and I had not even kissed. He had looked at me sideways and I had burst into flames, on a day we ran into each other at the street theater action outside City Hall. A few days later, we sat silently together in a makeshift lean-to on the Gulf Coast, craftily fashioned from an old sheet and some bamboo rods. Joel had cut slits into the sheet to fortify it against the wind, and we sat beneath eating slices of South Texas melon lightly salted with sand, Luz at Joel's feet sweeping her patient tail from side to

side—watching us, presiding over something. We had sung songs together, sitting on the floor of Joel's apartment. When I sang for him I heard my truest voice appear in spite of myself, the voice that sang clear and strong, unselfconscious, as it did only when I was alone. That's how I knew.

What it is—I'm in love with Joel. As I said it, the three of us—Hector, Nena, and myself—were sitting together at the table eating a late pancake breakfast as though it were any other Sunday morning. The apartment was a wreck, moving boxes strewn everywhere as we prepared to leave San Antonio again, so soon after we'd arrived. I felt sick inside, a queasy, oily panic in my chest spilled atop the impassable gulf had I wrenched open between my life and my longing.

Hector had stopped chewing, looking at me. Is it...the kind of thing you feel at the start of any new relationship? The excitement, you know, when you first like someone? Or...is it something you've never experienced before?

Never before, I had whispered.

Oh. Now at my admission came a look of wonder from Hector—a respect, a deference to something that in its very improbability could not be controlled or reckoned with or understood. I'd had to respect it too, to lay down my will, to recognize that it was agency and not love that was delusional, my overschooled notions that one could direct life according to mental blueprints, steering clear of crisis of any kind. My life with Hector had been a level-headed one, without intensity or volatility, and I had needed that for a long time. But now it seemed I no longer did.

When Hector heard me, he saw it too, the finality of my knowledge. The knowingness of knowing. Even though it had

not been two weeks since the beach trip. But when he heard it, he lay down his will next to mine, and we let each other go without bitterness.

I know it sounds crazy. But that's how it happened.

I. Form from Nothing

Three Months Earlier:
One Weekend in Early June
San Antonio, Texas

CHAPTER ONE

Black Sun

Friday, June 4, 12:14 P.M.

The smoke drifting over the highway, at the tipping point of spring into summer, reminds Citlali of birds. Like that one time she saw a swirl of starlings, as she stood on the edge of a cornfield somewhere—where?

Imagine this: the secret logic of a flock of birds in flight, swooping, swerving according to their own inner time signature. Somewhere, someone with the right knowledge must have traced its architecture, plotted it carefully, unwound its inner springs to reveal the mechanism, the rhythm, the organization. It couldn't be random, she had thought at the time, eyes trained to the aerial zigzagging of hundreds of starlings, a protoplasm of birds swelling and contracting in a single body like an ever-changing Rorschach blot, like pointillistic thumbprints smudging the sky. *A murmuration*. That was the name for it, mentioned in an NPR feature she heard years later about a massive cloud of birds that appeared before sunset in Denmark during spring, a seasonal skydance halfway across the world. Was there a leader or navigator, Lali had wondered, a conductor who indicated which direction to take? Or were they all followers, of one another or something else, attuned somehow to what each other individual was thinking and feeling? *Scale-free correlation*: the scientists on the radio said at first they'd thought murmuring starlings were like flying avalanches,

with each bird a snow particle poised tippy-tippy-toes at criticality, capable of shifting speeds as a single body. But now the scientists, particle physicists, knew that starlings were more flying magnets than avalanches, simultaneously shifting not only speed but position. They were electrons, they said, pulled into synchronous orbits under the spell of magnetization. As one bird veered right it signaled seven of its neighbors to do the same, who signaled to seven more and seven more, a lightning game of telephone without static or degradation. *Low signal to noise ratio*. It was an anti-predator tactic sparked by the peripheral approach of a falcon or hawk, the starlings banding together to form a collective more powerful than any individual could be. But how did that first bird trigger the movement of the whole if each member of the flock was busy responding to every other member? Was there a first bird to speak of? How did it all shift all at once, how did it burst spontaneously into total transformation, as if from nowhere or nothing?

Somewhere, someone knew the principle of organization.

But not me: I don't have the language to say how it works. I can only watch and marvel.

That is what she thought then, watching starlings swoop and pulse as one body as she stood outside a gas station half a lifetime ago, on the edge of a field at the center of the continent.

Not the dazzle of synchronized starlings this time, just regular grackles headed North with an urgency, fleeing something. Lali is distracted, driving to the credit union on a lunch errand—trying to gun it so she can be back at the Centro office for a 1pm conference call with the youth climate funders—so it

doesn't occur to her what they might be fleeing until she turns on the radio, NPR again. She hears the report like a premonition before she sees it for herself, uncanny, the heavy cloud of black smoke blowing over the highway from the southwest, from somewhere near the river.

An explosion at the old refinery, says the radio.