

Marie Rosa Maria

By: Vanessa Flores

Marie Vallejo walks out of the front double-doors of Resurrection Academy with the man of her dreams and her husband is right there watching. It's the last afternoon in May. The Santa Ana's are fanning a wildfire across the San Gabriel Valley; its smoke cloud is climbing in the distance. It feels like everybody and their mother is watching and the air seems charged with something like trouble and thrill.

What do I do? Her husband thinks. You can see it all over his face. His mouth is twitching, his chin is quivering, and Carmen, who is standing right next to me as we watch all this, starts to get the damn giggles. *SHHH!*

Well, you can't phone a friend, Cabrón! Elsa says. *Get to it. Start moving. Is it fight or is it flight?*

He can't hear you, stupid! Says Carmen.

All of us office girls are here. We're all watching from behind the big tree at the front of the school, all waiting to see what's going to happen next. But right now nothing is happening. Oscar's hands aren't even in big fits yet. His mouth is just twitching, his chin is just quivering.

C'mon, man. C'mon.

Oscar Vallejo is the graveyard shift manager at the FedEx shipping grounds in the City of Industry and normally, at this hour, he's asleep. But what kind of man can sleep

when he thinks, no, when he *knows* his woman is playing him? And Oscar knows. He *knows* Marie. Marie is trouble. Marie's been trouble since the day he started getting with her and that was back in high school. All the way back in high school and that fool still loves her. After all this and he still takes her back. It's the kind of drama nobody understands because it's the kind of drama nobody can believe. Not from a man like Oscar, not from a big Mexican like him. His bro's all can't believe he's still with her. Can't believe he can get into fights at the card clubs on Saturday nights then go off with his girl. But maybe this time he's had enough.

The first of Marie's crushes (the guy on her high school baseball team named Marcos) he let that one be. He shrugged that guy off like nothing. He was all confident then. He knew he could get her back and he did. That's when their love was still new. Oh and he had no big beer belly then neither. The second time, with the guy named Paul—she worked with him at Macy's—he watched that one closely, but from a distance. And the third time, yeah there was a third time too, he made sure he never left Marie's side. Didn't let her go out without him. That was a close one. Almost lost her that time. Marie said she was feeling all smothered-like. Like she couldn't breathe. She told Carmen the little flame in her almost went all the way out. And those were those times.

This time, Oscar is wide awake when he's supposed to be asleep and Marie is out when she's supposed to be at home. We can't even believe Oscar found out about this one.

Who told him? We whisper. How's he know?

But Oscar's good like that. He's a man who gets to the bottom of things.

And what's that saying they say?

For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light.

They say that in church. Oscar knows it. He's a church guy. Every Sunday he's in Sacred Heart with Marie. They get there late but that's of nothing important because they get there. They bless themselves with the holy water at the back of the church and make their way towards the last rows of pews, Marie's heels clicking as they walk down the aisle. Before they enter the pew, Marie does a little curtsy and Oscar lunges. They make the sign of the cross and sit. Then Marie scoots all the way in, pulls down the kneeler and begins to pray. They look good from far: Marie with her curls and her dresses, Oscar in his nice button-ups. The ladies can smell his cologne from the front. That's how his mother knows he's arrived.

After church it's breakfast with la suegra. She's a widow and Oscar is her only son, so he is always taking care of her and she is always treating him like he just bought her a gift. She hangs off his large arm as they walk slowly from the church to the car and from the car to the restaurant. She pats him and kisses him and says, *thank you mijo, thank you*, and Marie is always looking away.

We can all tell Oscar doesn't want Marie to see him. If she sees him, he'll have to do something—and the dummy still doesn't know what to do. He wasn't expecting this. He wasn't expecting a white guy. None of us were. Nobody saw it coming. He's used to Marie buying dresses when she has a crush, but this time she's been buying books.

And this time sancho's name is Nick Malone. Oscar doesn't know that yet. He hasn't asked around. But as he sits there staring, it's clear he's figuring things out. He's picking up on the clues. He's looking at the way this guy is dressed, a tie, his sleeves are rolled up at his elbows. He looks like he just wakes up and throws on his clothes. His hair is messy in that way that made us ask: *does he even own a comb?* But no, this fucker is handsome. He looks like kind of guy who would star in a sitcom and play the teacher.

DING, DING!

By the look on Oscar's face, he gets it now.

Carmen is pumping her fist; Margie has her hand to her forehead. We want to tell Oscar everything. We have all the details and he has none. We know all about his girl and we know all about Nick Malone. We know the whole story. We saw it all play out.

We know Nick teaches at Resurrection Academy. We know he teaches fifth grade English. We know Marie's been seeing him in the lounge since her promotion. Normally, they don't even work in the same building—Marie works with the nuns and the rest of us in the back administration office in building One. She's an attendance clerk. Her mornings are busy, but she spends her afternoons playing solitaire at her computer. We know Marie watches Nick as he leads his fifth graders towards their classroom in Building Two, or as he play-fights with the kindergartners when he has yard duty at recess. There are two large windows to the left of her desk and she's almost always looking out them.

That September, when he arrived brand new, she watched him cross the playground and said: Look! Look how his hair matches the leaves. It's like he's in a painting! And the girls in the office rolled their eyes and Sister Mary told her to hush.

He was walking fast. He had one of those messenger bags across his chest. The leaves were scattering below him, a reddish-brown just like his beard and the top of his head. The rest of him was grey. He looked straight out of a GAP catalogue and the office girls laughed and asked Marie if she wanted to fold his sweaters. She laughed too. She thought it was funny.

But anyone could see something was happening with her. She was always staring at him like that, like he was a figure in a painting. Sometimes an office girl would elbow her and tell her to stop drooling, but the truth is, everyone stared.

On campus, Mr. M was a minority among minorities. One of the few non-Hispanics and blacks at the school. And everyone stared because he was always smiling. Because his hair matched the color of the leaves, because he was so damn young (Marie's age—twenty-four) and when he got to the school things felt fresh or shocking. The way cilantro bites when mixed with dull greens, or the way color pops in a sea of black and white. Which is ridiculous because he *is* white. But that's what Marie wrote. Which is also ridiculous.

Yeah, she's a writer. I mean, she thinks she is, so guess she is. She sits at her desk by those windows and writes in her journal every single day. One afternoon, we took the journal from her desk drawer and snuck behind the building and spent our lunch break laughing while Marie was off in the lounge.

The journal said she was bored. That she wanted to go back to school to become an art teacher. It was one of the reasons she was so excited when she got her promotion. The original Office Coordinator Denyse Garcia quit to join the Army, and the tasks of the position were split—half to Marie and half to me. And the stupid thought it meant something. That it meant she was closer to becoming a teacher just because she was in the lounge.

Marie stocks the lounge. That's what she does in there. She fills it up with things like construction paper and stickers. She also has to make the coffee, run the dishwasher, and clean the fridge out every Friday. No one envies her even though she thinks so. She wrote that she feels *privileged* that she gets to see Mr. M in the lounge. *Privileged* to see him plan his lessons and loosen his collar and roll up his sleeves. The girls all wanted to say: *No one gives a shit about that Marie.*

But we didn't say that. We couldn't. We just kept shaking our heads waiting for things to get more interesting. And that's exactly what happened.

Months went by and the journal got real good. Like novela day time soap good. Instead of solitaire, Marie spent her time writing. All the girls would look over at each other, giving nervous smiles like: *here comes the next episode!* After she was done she marked her place with a bookmark that read:

LIVE WELL

LAUGH OFTEN
LOVE MUCH
LIVE WELL
LAUGH OFTEN
LOVE MUCH

Twice like that too. As if it was a chant or something, and before each new episode that's what us girls would do, chant it together like:

LIVE WELL!
LAUGH OFTEN!
LOVE MUCH!
LIVE WELL!
LAUGH OFTEN!
LOVE MUCH!

And then go.

In her first week in the lounge, Marie was surprised by how quiet it was. It was her job to sharpen pencils but the sound made the teachers turn and look and it made her embarrassed so she didn't do that task. The copy machine was loud too, beeping at her when she didn't understand what to do. She decided to stay after school to do these loud things. Even if she got home later, it wouldn't matter because Oscar would still be asleep. She kept this up when she learned that Nick stayed late too.

It's how the two of them got to talking.

One day he introduced himself. She wasn't sure if he was talking to her or not so she looked around like a dummy. She introduced herself to him. He nodded. He asked her what

her job was. She told him she was an attendance clerk with a few tasks in the lounge everyday and he chewed on his pencil and said *cool*. He asked her if she'd ever called a parent only to learn that the kid had already been dropped off.

“I imagine that would make the day a whole lot more interesting,” he said. Marie liked the way he said *day*. Just the thought of a day made her think of a night. How much more romantic night is than day. Like maybe she had some other sort of self at night. Marie said no, no missing kids. No amber alerts. She wrote that she wished she'd had an interesting experience like that, just so that she could tell him the story.

In October he asked her about her education. She wrote that she just had to lie. She told him she finished college, though, she did say it was at the local JC. She said she wanted to go back though, said that she wanted to study art so that she could teach it and she noticed that he sat up straight. He asked her all kinds of questions then. What kind of art did she like? All kinds she said. How does one answer that question? she asked, and he seemed pleased by that. She wrote that he made her feel good. She wrote that he made her feel smart.

She told him she heard he was a great teacher, the best English teacher the Academy had ever had, though she wrote that she made that part up. He laughed and then showed her the stack of papers he had to grade. He showed her the ones he'd already looked over. He explained to her what his marks meant. They sat together when he did this, side by side at the large table in the lounge. She wrote that their arms touched. She wrote that his arm was *smoothish*.

He joked that he'd hand the papers off to her so that he could actually get some sleep. I'd be glad to take them from you, she said, and she wrote that he smiled, and he bit his pencil and he raised his eyebrows "all cute like" and she felt like throwing her face into a pillow so that she could scream. Later, saying that he took up all her time, he helped her fill the dishwasher in the lounge and sharpen all the pencils.

When she got home it was nearly evening and Oscar was awake. She wrote that when she was in the lounge she that he was calling her cellphone but figured she'd explain when she got home. Although she didn't know what she would say. She wrote that she was cloud nine on her drive home, that she was filling like a million bucks. But when she got home Oscar was pissed. He said he was worried as shit.

She wrote that they fought about the house being a mess. She was sick of seeing the path of his morning to afternoon from the door to the couch. His shoes, his socks, his pants, his shirt. Whenever she got home and he was awake he was sitting on the couch in his underwear. His music was always too loud—always with angry rappers rapping about how rough they had it. She wondered what kind of music Nick listened to. She decided to ask him that question. She needed more questions to ask, she wrote that she was running out.

She wrote a list of possible questions. It looked like this:

Question 1: What is your favorite song right now?

Question 2: What movie do you recommend?

~~Question 3: Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon?~~

Question 4: Have you ever been in a fight?

~~Question 5: Do you have any brother or sisters?~~

Question numbers three and five were all crossed out. *Of course he's been to the Grand Canyon, stupid!* She wrote beside it.

She collected Oscar's clothes from the ground and was pissed about doing that. I'm picking up after you, she said, and she walked into their room and dropped the pile of his stuff on the floor next to his side of the bed. He followed her and asked her what was wrong with her, lately. She said nothing and he pressed on so they argued. He walked out of the room and she reclined on the bed and fell asleep.

These days she was always taking naps or watching the news for things to talk about with Nick. The Occupy Los Angeles protests were always being covered and many nights she'd watch the crowds march through the streets, wanting to be one of them. *I should be one of them!* she wrote. I should pull Oscar from the couch and we should go marching.

When she woke he was stroking her forehead. Let's go out for dinner, he said.

Anyone could tell the Vallejo's were not well if they were at Mario's for dinner. It was Oscar's favorite place. He'd make reservations and he'd tell Marie to get all dressed up and he'd open the doors for her and pull out the chair and he'd spend the whole night holding her hand from across the table. It was his favorite way to spoil her.

No, she told him. We can't. It adds up. She told him they needed to stop going out to dinner so that they could save money because she was serious about going to school.

The next afternoon, a Saturday, she told Oscar she was going to go to a café. What do you want coffee for? he said, all pissed. I'm going to do research, she said and slammed the door.

She walked along the path that led her to her uncovered parking spot. A neighbor was out washing his car. There were children yelling, playing in the complex's community pool. She wrote that she could see their brown bodies jumping from the diving board. She heard the splashes as they slapped the water. She reversed the car and headed for the school. She drove past Resurrection. She saw the parking lot empty. She saw that the huge double-doors to the front of the school were locked, a chain through the handles. She drove just under the San Gabriel Mountains where she knew the biggest houses were. She tried to imagine the kind of place Nick lives. She pictured him in a two, three story home all to himself. It would have clean and modern furniture. There'd be books everywhere but no clutter. He'd have a large desk where he spent his time grading his papers, or maybe where he sat and thought of his afternoons with her. He'd have a long sunlit hallway; he'd have photographs of his family, his smiling parents, maybe some nieces and nephews, all of them with white teeth and blue eyes.

She drove through the neighborhoods. There was nobody outside of them to see her driving around again and again and she wrote that it was silly, but she looked for Nick's silver car. She looked for something even similar to his car but saw nothing like it.

She did this for a while, the girls called it filler. I told them to hold still. Wait for the finale build up, you know? And sure enough. Things started getting way more interesting. Oscar told one of his boys about Marie and her crushes—all those other guys. A mistake if I ever knew one. His boys all have big mouths and they told their wives or girlfriends and their wives or girlfriends told their friends and we're their wives' and girlfriends' friends or the friends of their wives' friends or the friends of the girlfriends' friends, so now it's like everybody knows. Things get around. We talk. What do they expect? There's little else for us to do.

Once Marie told Oscar she had a hard time getting along with women. She told him they were all mean to her. That it had always been that way, even as a girl. Said she'd be standing in line at the grocery store and look up to see another little girl sticking out her tongue for no reason. Cruel to me, she said, cruel for no reason at all.

Oscar told his boys he knew something was up with Marie this time because she started coming home later and later. When he arrived home from his shift she was already awake, curling her hair. But here is the real kicker: One night, after they'd been arguing, when he thought she was taking a nap, he found her in their bedroom, sitting in front of her vanity having a conversation with herself. Sometimes she giggled. Other times she was real serious. As if she were talking politics or something. She nodded toward her reflection and agreed with everything she said.

So naturally, Oscar being hot headed can't-kee-it cool- Oscar, straight up asked her: WHO YOU WANT NOW, MARIE? And she turned and said that she was leaving. She wrote

that her heart was racing. She grabbed her book bag from the closet. It was still filled with papers from her JC: resources for financial aid, campus maps. She'd gone the first two weeks before dropping out. She wrote that this was her biggest regret.

Just like Oscar, Carmen said.

Ouch! Lupe said.

She said it I thought it, said Veronica

Ya'll went there. I said.

That last afternoon in May, while Marie was gathering her things to head to the lounge and the rest of us were heading out to get drinks, I heard a pssst! and I felt a nudge on my shoulder. We all looked up and out of the window by our desks in Building One and saw Nick Malone practically running across the playground and through the grass and somehow we all knew he was coming for her.

We looked at each other. We looked at Marie. She was staring out the window watching him come closer. She looked scared as shit.

And it was like seeing your favorite show jump out of the TV.

She started playing with her hair. Brushing it again and again behind her ear. And we didn't know if we should help her or if we should slap her. *YOU'RE MARRIED, STUPID. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? GO GET HIM!*

We heard a knock at the door.

Nobody here but us chickens! Carmen said. And I elbowed her in the ribs to shut up.

And then Angeline said, “Didn’t he ever see your damn wedding ring?” And Marie, she looked at all of us, so confused, and we all felt guilty and shook our heads and clicked our tongues at Angeline.

Marie looked around at each one of us and we stared back at her and her face looked as if we were all sticking out our tongues.

Marie grabbed her things and put her purse over her shoulder. She was about to head for the back door—the one Nick was not knocking at. But then we heard him say: “Hi!”

He was talking to Angeline, who had run towards the front desk to open the door to greet him.

“Hi, Mr. M, something wrong?” She asked.

Marie stood in the hallway just around the corner, listening, still and silent. We all stood still and silent. We were all wondering the same thing. Was he going to ask her to step outside? If he did, we’d hover near the door and stay real quiet or we’d follow them out. Hide behind some bushes to watch. We were all waiting for it. All of us and Marie.

But then...another twist!

When Nick responded he wasn’t asking for Marie at all. He was asking for someone named Rosa and all of us, Marie included, gasped in horror: *No!*

Rosa?

Marie was a minority among other minorities or in this case, just another minority. Oh, Marie. Oh, Rosa. Wherever and whoever you are.

“We don’t have a Rosa here, Mr. M,” Angeline said, “maybe she’s in building Two? Maybe she’s new and I don’t know her?”

“No, no,” Nick said, “she’s been here a while, she told me she worked in Building One.” There was a pause and it was like a little light bulb went off in stupid. He was calling Marie by the wrong name. He didn’t even know Marie’s name.

We all heard Nick, his voice sounding dropped like Marie’s heart and our stomachs. He was suddenly nervous, excused himself by saying he must have the wrong building, and he thanked Angeline for her help. Angeline came back into the room and without speaking, we all watched Nick hurry back across the playground, just as hurriedly as he’d come.

“C’mon,” I said, “we’re going to get drinks. Levántate, Marie.”

“No,” she said, “I have to clean the lounge.”

“Okay then,” I said, “we’ll help.”

“I’m not going in there now,” she said. “you guys go.” And she took out her journal to write. She opened it up. We watched. The bookmark. We almost said it aloud:

LIVE WELL
LAUGH OFTEN
LOVE MUCH

LIVE WELL
LAUGH OFTEN
LOVE MUCH

Maybe we're bitches 'cause we waited and watched. Maybe we're something like friends, I don't know. But we decided to skip drinks and after an hour or so, when she thought that dummy was gone already, she crossed the playground towards Building Two.

Angeline shook her head. *She should have checked the parking lot. Ay, yai, yai!*

Dios mio!

We know that when Marie walked into the lounge Nick was inside. I walked down the hallway and looked in the window. The cabrón was sitting there waiting for her, chewing on his damn pencil.

And it was like our TV went out. We couldn't hear or see a thing. So this part we had to imagine:

When Marie walked into the lounge Nick was there sitting at the large table in the center of the room, chewing on his pencil. He looked up at her when she entered. He was smiling what Marie considered an embarrassed smile. Marie said hello and went toward the fridge to begin.

Nick told Marie, her back to him, that he was hoping he'd run into her, that he had wanted to ask her a question.

"Oh, yeah?" Marie said, knowing Nick would not mention the part where he'd gone to look for her in Building One, having asked for her with the wrong name, a completely different

name. And she was right. Nick said he was hoping he'd run into her all day, but before telling her why, he asked her how she was.

“Good,” she said, smiling, a big fat-lie smile. Her heart was so broken.

Nick smiled and nodded and then looked around the room in an exaggerated way of showing he was making sure no one else was in it. Was he still going to ask her out? Marie couldn't wait to tell him no. She couldn't wait.

“Truth be told,” he said, already in confession (or was it profession Marie thought) “I was commissioned to write a smallish article for the local newspaper on all the protests that have been going on and,” he dragged out this last word out and when he was done dragging it, he bit his lip. The protests. She knew about those. “I was hoping to get your insight, your opinion on all that's been going on, being that you're a Hispanic woman and all this anti-immigration reform is happening in Arizona, while the Occupy movement is happening here. I imagine you must feel a lot right now.”

Marie looked up and smiled.

“I'd love to help.” She said. She meant it. She felt that if she took her time, did her research, there'd be a lot she could say. She felt good. She felt needed. She felt important.

“Really?” he said, surprised. “Thanks, Maria, let me know when we can get together.”

Maria?

MARIUH.

MARIUGH.

Later, long, long after this, when she told us this we laughed. She laughed. She thought it was funny.

She told him she'd love to help, but that she was late, and she needed to get home to her husband. Nick nodded, told her he was leaving too and that he'd walk out with her.

Previously on Marie, Rosa, Maria, Carmen says.

Marie Vallejo walks out of the front double-doors of Resurrection Academy with the man of her dreams and her husband is right there watching. It's the last afternoon in May. The Santa Ana's are fanning a wildfire across the San Gabriel Valley; its smoke cloud is climbing in the distance. It feels like everybody and their mother is watching and the air seems charged with something like trouble and thrill.

What do I do? Her husband thinks. You can see it all over his face. His mouth is twitching, his chin is quivering.

Well, you can't phone a friend, Cabrón! Elsa says. *Get to it. Start moving. Is it fight or is it flight?*

Finally, Oscar looks like he's going to make a move. His mouth has stopped twitching. His chin has stopped quivering. He's making the face he makes right before it goes down at a card game. He takes a step forward. He's moving toward them. Marie still doesn't see him. She's nodding at the conversation. She's not saying anything. She's letting

Nick go on and on. Marie's back is to him. Oscar is listening to their conversation. He hears this guy talking to his wife about politics. He hears this guy call his wife Maria. *Maria?*

What kind of shit is this?

Oscar thinks he's got it wrong, that this is the wrong guy.

Oh no, you don't Cabrón. You got it way right. Keep listening. Keep waiting.

He watches the guy hug his wife. He makes eye contact with the guy. The guy looks away. Oscar watches his wife walk to her car, watches her get in the driver's seat. The guy drives away, using his blinker as he leaves. Oscar watches his wife sit in the car, in the parking lot. She's holding onto her steering wheel. She's crying.

Oscar watches her for a long time. Angeline wipes away her own tear. Oscar moves to leave when all of a sudden Marie looks left and sees him.

DRAMA!

Marie puts her hand to her chest. We put our hands to our chests.

For a long time there's nothing. Just the smell of the fire in the distance—and we can't tell if it's misery or BBQ.

But then Marie smiles. She laughs. She's laughing and crying at the same time. And then Oscar laughs.

Look! He's crying too! Says Carmen.

And we all laugh and cry with Marie and Oscar. We get so loud with our laughing (Carmen cackles) that Oscar looks in our direction and so we shut up.

We want to stick our heads in pillows and scream.

But we don't do any of that. We just shake our heads and we laugh about it. We laugh about all of this.

Till next time, folks! I say.

And then we all go and get drinks.