

*La Crisis*

(Excerpt)

My lover's sister Paz could never sleep, so she watched self-proclaimed clairvoyants sort out the sentimental and economic woes of women named María who called in to *La Línea de la Vida*. A couple of times, while I still thought there might be a way for both of us to be happy, I watched it with her. We shared a joint and argued about whether Sandro Rey, the new TV psychic, was for real or not. I have something of a sixth sense for frauds and forgeries, and he looked like a fraud to me, but Paz was sure he could talk to the dead.

I'd first seen Sandro Rey a couple of months before I met Paz, when I was recently arrived in Madrid, jet-lagged and too tired to sleep. I was also unsettled: that morning my librarian had been absent from his habitual post in the rare books reading room in the Biblioteca Nacional. Instead, an indifferent, crisp-faced attendant accepted my reader's card, gave me the orange *ficha* with my desk number on it, and brought me my stack of manuscripts. Though scholarly consensus said none survived, I was searching for correspondence between Juana de Austria and her brother, Felipe II of Spain.

That day, I found only letters from the king's advisers concerning the suspected heresy of Santa Teresa de Jesús. The sweetish smell of the slowly decaying bindings and the certainty of my hand as it replicated the florid scripts of the sixteenth century failed to hold my attention as they usually did (copying the scripts was not necessary for note-taking; I did it simply because I could). By lunch time I had tired of the inflated accusations, the sly insinuations—was the

venerated mystic really a crypto-Jew?—so I returned my materials to the desk. Feeling every one of my forty-three years like lead weights inside my chest, I walked back to my hotel, disquieted by the cloying scent of the jasmine, the bright colors of the azaleas and bougainvillea, in the secreted garden surrounding the library.

By midnight I was most of the way through a bottle of Rioja, hoping to lure my mind and body into sleep, but at two I gave in and switched on the television.

In his dun-colored suit jacket with satin lapels over a black shirt, Sandro Rey was a gypsy Jesus: shiny black hair waving to his shoulders, long, fine-boned face with a small mole on the apex of his left cheekbone. A thin scar ran from just beneath his right nostril and disappeared into the flesh of his upper lip, giving him an air of unjust suffering. His eyes were concerned or hopeful or sorrowful, fluid like a shallow creek sliding over round stones worn smooth.

Paz always said he could see through the television screen, right into your soul—she could feel it. But Paz had a drug habit.

Sandro Rey didn't look the type; all the clairvoyants on TeleCinco were women. But that year the economic malaise in Spain was at its nadir. You saw a lot of people working at things they didn't seem particularly well suited for—waitresses clumsy with their trays; shell-shocked street-sweepers and janitors who curled their shoulders around brooms or mops, staring at the ground as they performed their tasks.

The callers all wanted to talk to Sandro Rey. He'd deposed Carmen, a veteran and a specialist in matters of the heart, who was now relegated to a small box at the bottom right of the screen. Defeated, she no longer bothered to dress the part. Her hair was secured haphazardly with

a pink scrunchy in a careless bun, as though to keep it from getting wet in the shower. She wore a pink velour warm-up suit and drank something, probably booze, from a mug stamped with hearts, her narrowed eyes trained on Sandro Rey.

On the show a band in black polyester played easy-listening flamenco. There were close-ups of fingers rolling over keys and strings while Martirios, the *presentadora*, repeated the telephone number, dangling economic recovery and second chances at love, reciting a litany of *desgracias* and misfortunes that might induce viewers to call. Her voice had urgency built into it from decades of smoking—she'd likely already caught glimpses of death.