

**The Thief**  
Nicolás Cabrera

A middle-aged woman quietly opened the door while her husband and son closed the wooden gate. Television light glowed on residents' faces, most nodding off amidst the mundane life of wheelchairs, geriatric creams, and sporadic visits. The television's hollow noise echoed throughout the nursing home decorated with Christmas trees, stockings, and lights to brighten a dull December 31.

The son thought, *How many of these poor souls would see another year?* Nobody knew.

"Hello auntie," said the woman as she kissed her cheek. Her thumb blessed her aunt's forehead in a small cross. "Do you know who I am?"

The aunt opened her eyes only slightly and mumbled "no." A small lump formed in the niece's throat. "Soy María."

"Oh, María," the aunt said. A weak smile broke over her face as she repeated the name.

"We came to visit. Do you want to go to your room?"

"Sí," answered a fragile voice.

Moments later, they were gathered near the bedroom window by a small, unlit Christmas tree on a nightstand. Outside the sun began setting, leaving orange clouds and black tree branch shadows.

"Buenas tardes," said the husband, embracing her.

"Who are you?" she barked cold and apprehensively.

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"I'm her husband, Manuel."

The aunt ignored him.

"Who's that? What's his name?" she said to the son.

"That's Nicolás. He's my son."

"Oh," she answered softly.

Then, she closed her eyes, leaving only the tiniest of slits open to peer at her guests. Nicolás got up and talked to her in Spanish. As he kissed her and gave his blessing with his thumb, her response was still icy. They were strangers to her and she kept her eyes closed and sat still.

"Did your brother visit today?" asked María.

There was no response.

"Did my mom come today?"

The aunt's lips feebly released, "I don't know."

"Did my sister visit?"

"No sé," she responded, defeated.

For a while, they silently sat as María rubbed her aunt's cold hands on her lap. The commons area television was still audible and the visitors guessed what movie was showing. Nicolás tried to light the Christmas tree while Manuel deciphered who had left a note on the door. They asked their aunt questions, trying to strike up a conversation.

"Who brought you this?" asked María as she caressed a soft, warm blanket she had brought for Christmas.

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"I don't know," answered the aunt.

"Did so-and-so come visit?"

"I don't know."

"Did you have a good Christmas?"

"I guess."

"Are you hungry?" asked Manuel.

"Yes, I am!" she answered. Her eyes popped open and she sat up a little. At 93, she was always hungry!

"Don't ask her that!" scolded María. "My dad says she's always hungry because she doesn't remember when she last ate."

"But they are feeding her, right?"

"Of course. He said they feed them well here."

More moments of sad silence followed as the clock slowly ticked forward. Everyone knew more than just the year was quickly drawing to a close; the only certainty was when the year would finish.

"Am I your goddaughter?" asked María after singing villancicos, Spanish Christmas songs.

"I don't remember."

Sighing, María laid her head on her godmother's shoulder. Moments later, María started singing again but was scolded in Spanish and told to hush. Other earnest attempts to make conversation were fruitless. The thief had already gotten away; he was an enemy worse than death.

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An hour later, it was time to leave. The smell of supper filled the halls and staff decorated tables with party streamers and noisemakers. Each resident had a hat sporting "2016" in glitter. More than hats, they were badges of honor and symbols of long lives – eight, nine, even ten decades with wars, depressions, booms, and busts. Perhaps the worst tragedy of all was the happy memories the thief had already taken.

One by one, the three visitors bid farewell as the aunt's eyes slumbered again. Their kisses and blessings showed love while her closed eyes slightly twitched to say she loved them, too. The thief hadn't taken everything.

"I love you," said María as she wheeled her to the dining room. "Wow, you're having a New Year's party without me!"

María's lip quivered as she fought tears; her throat clenched because the thief hadn't stolen her memories. She recalled New Year's Eve slumber parties at her aunt's house, marking the end of dreary Decembers with warmth and happiness. The aunt, a barren widow of fifty years with no children, never let that gloom overshadow her light.

María's sister caught them at the door and they chatted over the clinking and clanking of supper. As they left, they closed the wooden gate while a sunset kissed them with a faint trail of gold light.

**Dedicated to Mary Trujillo (1922–2016)**