

*A dark crime thriller that tells the journey of a conflicted disconcerting transgender woman, convicted of murder, who escapes imprisonment in the Philippines and travels to the U.S. where she becomes a police officer. Here, she confronts toxic masculinity and cruelty as she tries to seek justice for victimized children in the system.*

# **A Woman Like Me**

by Francine Rodriguez

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**A  
Woman  
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FRANCINE RODRIGUEZ

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*You are never as different as you feel*

## **Prologue**

I know now this is the last chance I'll have to tell my story. This isn't the whole story, but it's the only real account you'll probably hear. I need to tell it now because I think my waiting is almost through.

You know I've lived so many lives that I'm not even sure now if this one's my real life, but I know it's my last. And because I've lived so many lives, I know one thing for a fact; there's freedom in not caring. When you don't care, you can do anything you want. Anything, because you don't care about the consequences.

I know I never cared about the price of freedom before. Just yesterday, I was planning to head straight to Mexico before they found me. But I think now I changed my mind. I'm too weary to start over again in another strange place, listening to another foreign language I don't understand and knowing that one day when I'm not expecting it someone will spot me. Besides, where do you run to when you run away from a place that's heaven compared to so many other places in the world?

Now I'm just lonely and worn-out, sitting here and waiting. The memories are unwavering; they cling to

me demanding attention, in an endless loop. I awoke as soon as the light started streaming in this morning. I sit on my bed and stare out of the dirty window in my tiny rented room downtown. Yesterday I sat here all day. I didn't realize I did until I saw that the sky turned dark. If I pass through this day again, I'll finish another bottle, and go back to sleep to wait for another tomorrow. Somebody will show up for me eventually or I'll take the easy way out and shut down those memories forever.

Maybe once you've heard how it all happened, you might even see it from my point of view; but I shouldn't kid myself; you probably won't. I am sure though, that you'll most likely agree with me on this; I'm really no different from anybody else locked away doing time. The blue uniform and the badge let me collect a paycheck and whatever other advantage I could grab. In exchange, I kept my mouth shut and my eyes turned away just like I was told.

Actually, you could say that I just continued down the path I'd already begun in another place far away, when I was someone else. Who you really are doesn't change, no matter what you look like on the outside. So, in the end, I realize you won't feel much sympathy for me once I finish telling you how it all happened. Really, you shouldn't, because I'm sure I'd do it all again if I could start over.

## Chapter One

When I was a little boy and we lived on the outskirts of the slums near Manila, my mother used to point her finger at certain people to single them out. “You see him?” She’d demand glaring down at me and shaking me with her free hand to get my attention.

I would follow her thin brown index finger pointing to a drunk who had passed out in his own vomit or one of the prostitutes with blackened eyes and a ripped dress, carrying her scuffed up stilettos in one hand and staggering under the weight of her abused body. “They were born bad.” She assured me with a shrug of worldly wisdom. “Even if they weren’t poor, they would live like that. Don’t ever feel sorry for any of them.”

She would spit over her shoulder in their general direction as she dragged me and my sister Florencia, down the alley, toward the dump to see what we could find to sell. We went regularly then, when she didn’t have enough customers to pay rent. The dump was really a large cesspool, a dumping ground for the cities’ garbage and broken, unwanted items. We collected mostly plastic bottles, pieces of cardboard and sometimes scraps of metal that we fished out from the stinking garbage.

On good days, we sold what we found to an old man, who was missing all but his two bottom teeth and

one of his ears. He separated out the better finds and bagged them up in large trash bags. He dragged around a large wire cage mounted on bicycle wheels that he used to transport the bags to another man who sold them to a recycling plant.

He was different from the other scavengers at the dump, who were left to sell whatever wasn't stolen from them by force at the end of the day. The other scavengers and thieves avoided him as if by non-communicated understanding. People said he recovered ten times more than what he paid us for our trash, because he had witnessed the man who ran the recycling plant, murder somebody high up, who worked for the government. My mother said that he would be getting his hush money for years to come.

Those kinds of opportunities were few and far between. Everybody envied him. If he hadn't had that stroke of luck, he'd be picking up trash just like everyone else that scavenged in the dump. The only one luckier, was an old woman, in her late sixties, who trudged around with him in a man's dirty work shirt and beat-up work boots when the days weren't particularly steamy, which were about the only times she could walk bent over with her crippling arthritis.

Rumor was that she had some kind of "inside connection with the local charities," and was able to get her hands on the used clothes that were donated to the children in the orphanage. She sold them in the street as secondhand rags. I heard my mother talking sometimes about all the corruption. As best as I could understand, it was just the way the world operated and

at least I understood the reason things were the way they were. Even then, I tried to take advantage of what I could learn in a situation and not ask anyone for anything. As far back as I can remember the rule was; if you wanted something you had to get it any way you could.

My mother taught me two important things in those years; she said often and loudly, “You’ll never meet anybody whom you can’t speak badly about.” This is something I took to heart and followed through the years. The only problem was I didn’t speak badly about them soon enough.

She also taught us by example, how to wait around endlessly, just watching the people you knew, waiting for somebody to slip up or let their guard down so you could rush in and grab something you needed.

Although most of our waiting was in long lines for some charity hand-out, being able to wait for an opportunity to take advantage of someone is a straight up skill for survival and not just a requirement for living when you’re poor. If I stop and think about it, it always worked out that way for me.

Even at that age, I decided that what my mother said about people “just being born that way,” must be true, because my sister, Florencia, who was younger and the ugly one...they all said so, was quiet and never caused any trouble. She hardly ever said anything and never complained even when we were hungry. She was that way as far back as I could remember, a small ugly brown baby lying in her basket, watching and waiting.



She always reminded me of a little field mouse with big ears and small eyes, except she wasn't as cute.

And me? I complained and talked back all the time, no matter how many times they told me to shut up or smacked me in the face. I kept arguing, insisting on what I wanted, even if it didn't do any good. I didn't just argue and talk back; I struck out and hit or kicked my mother or any adult who tried to bring law and order into my young life. I didn't care if I got the worst beating later. The point was that I'd left teeth marks in some adult's arm. That was satisfaction enough for me.

## Chapter Two

Even before I started school, I was stealing. I think I started at the same time I realized that if I wanted something, I would have to take it. Nobody was going to get it for me. At first, I stole small things that I could snatch and run away with, pocket candy, fruit, and cheap glass jewelry. I stole money from my mother's purse and from her glass bottle savings jar whenever she wasn't watching. I was expert at it from an early age; taking only a few coins at a time so they wouldn't be missed from the bottom of the coin jar lined with torn rags. I always left the jar, so it still appeared almost full.

Later on, I started stealing girl's clothes from the department store, a long bus ride, and an even longer walk away from our house, and hiding them down the front of my baggy pants and in the pockets of my jacket, that was several sizes too big.

Before I hit my teens, I was an expert at stealing makeup, even better than any of the teenage girls who stole in my school. I practically skipped down the aisles dumping bottles and tubes into a large canvas bag that I started to carry. I always kept the dresser drawers stuffed with bottles of liquid make-up, nail polish, lipstick and various colored eye pencils. I was generous though, at least in those days and gave my mother first

choice of anything I stole. She couldn't buy it herself and never asked where it all came from.

Of course, I lied too when it suited me; and yes of course I still do. When I was really young, I mostly made up things up about Florencia. I wanted her to get a good beating like the kind they gave me.

Later, I got more creative and when older teenagers refused to buy me the candy or sodas that I whined for, I made up lies about seeing them touching each other without their clothes. I told on them, using what I seen happen firsthand, in parts of the city where I wasn't supposed to be, giggling in shock, watching naked men and women behind a glass window.

The smaller kids, like me, snuck inside these theatres in the city and stayed hidden behind the curtains that pulled open or closed. We hid below the different windows where the men and women performed, or we hid at the back of the seats facing the stage, watching, until the men who were owners of these places, finally spotted us there hiding behind the men jerking off in their seats and threw us out.

Lying to get back at the older kids made me giddy with happiness and I enjoyed it so much when those snotty teenagers got in trouble.

In school, I liked to tell the girls that made fun of my poor clothes and my untrimmed hair, that some other girls in our class had said something bad about them. That always started a fight and left one or two of them crying, with handfuls of hair pulled out and bruised eyes. I laughed like crazy every time, especially when they scratched each other leaving thin bloody

lines on their legs and arms or when some of the older ones pulled out razors.

I cursed at grownups, using the foulest language I could, calling out their mothers, because I liked to see their shocked faces when the bad words rolled off my tongue. They would reach out to smack me, but I was always too fast for them and ran away.

I was always taller and bigger than the other children were. I guess you would say I was always the largest boy in my class, so I slapped and punched the others to keep them in line. If a child was particularly small and weak, I'd grab them from behind and twist their skinny little arms behind their back until they screamed and gave up whatever I wanted.

We didn't have any toys of our own, so I took other children's, if I saw something I liked. One day little Manny, who sometimes visited the front room of the shack we shared with the old lady who lived there, didn't want to let me play with his soccer ball. He chose another kid to kick it around with in the oily gravel outside. I guess he knew that once I got my hands on it, he'd never see it again.

I waited till he started walking home through the large sewer pipe that ran from the dump to the ally. I could see he was in a hurry and probably had to get home before his mother found out he was missing. He wasn't paying attention and didn't notice that I was following him for a distance to make sure that no other kids joined us.

I forced him down on the ground, put my hands around his stringy little throat, and squeezed. He kept

yelling that he couldn't breathe. I squeezed harder, until his face was bluish. At the same time, I picked up a big rock with one hand and hit him in the head with it a few times. Blood gushed out in rivets staining the concrete. I backed up because I didn't want to get it on my clothes. I've always been squeamish about blood. If I hadn't seen the blood, I would have kept on going. As it was, Manny had trouble speaking, and he was slow thinking after that day, but he always let me have whatever I wanted to take from him.

Florencia and I lived with my mother in one back room we rented from a family who owned a little shack that leaned crazily against the back of a hill, not too far from the dump. All the little shacks on our dirt road leaned against each other in varying angles as if they needed each other's support to keep from collapsing. In the bright sunlight, the corrugated metal that made up their walls gleamed and shone burnished shades of green and rust-red. When I didn't know any better, I thought those walls were the most beautiful sight anybody could see.

The living area behind the dump was always overcrowded. Not enough space for so many people surviving on little or nothing, packed closely together with no space or privacy, where their emotions were like their body odors, unattended and likely to start a clash when triggered.

One of the consequences of the crowding was that everybody was somehow related in the little neighborhoods, either by blood or by familiarity. The smaller children ran shrieking down the alleyways

from the time they woke up, ducking into any of the shacks they chose along the way. There wasn't much in the way of work, so there were usually adults home all day. They shared food, helped each other with childcare, and took care of each other when someone was sick.

My mother never traveled far from the makeshift neighborhood where we lived. She never seemed to notice the black smoke that hung low in the sky or the acrid smell of the burning tires beyond the dump.

I heard when she was younger, she hustled the bar scene in the Capital. From what I know, that meant hand jobs in the dark booths and quick sex in the alleys behind the building, where you had to step carefully around the running sewage.

That's where she met my father, on leave from the U.S. Army. Blond, blue-eyed, and pale-skinned, he was her physical opposite and she fell in love immediately. My mother claimed he was crazy about her, spent two weeks with her in her cramped room on a sagging bed and never went out with any other woman. She said he wanted to marry her, but that he was re-stationed somewhere else and that was the only reason he left. She said she didn't bother to tell him about being pregnant with me. She never said why.

As I grew, I started to hear the word, "*Tisoy*," used whenever I was around. When I finally figured out that it referred to me, I questioned my mother about what it meant. She told me that it meant that she and my father were in love and that was why I was born. Later, I heard that it referred to a "mixed race child," born to a

Filipino mother and a white soldier. The older people whispered about the mothers of *Tisoys* and called them sex workers. *Tisoys*, I gathered were not really liked very much by either race.

It always seemed that everybody wanted to make sure I knew just how much I wasn't liked. I got it right away. Maybe that's why I lack those nice qualities that everybody else has.... the caring they show each other. It's what makes them more human. I hardly ever feel that way, except maybe for small children and sometimes old people. I figure it's not the children's fault yet; they haven't had enough time to turn into the assholes that adults become.

When I got a little older, I asked about my father all the time. I wanted to know why she didn't tell him about me, especially if he loved her so much. Didn't that mean he would love me too? I'd seen my birth certificate, it wasn't hidden that well; and I was able to figure out that she had given me his last name, but she never referred to it after I was born. From there forward, she gave me her last name and registered me that way for school and church.

Whenever I asked about my father, she always told me to shut up and said that, she'd moved on to another man, Florencia's father. Florencia's father disappeared too, somewhere along the way. I wasn't disappointed about that. He had burnt leathery skin with pock marks and watery red eyes. He came home drunk every night. One day I came home from school and found that he'd killed my little black and white mutt I called Pepe. He hit him on the head with a hammer because he didn't

like the dog following him around begging for attention. He said the dog was annoying and he didn't like animals anyway.

I loved that ugly little dog, more than my sister, Florencia, and probably more than my mother too. I was pretty sure he was the only living thing that loved me, no matter how bad I was or how much I was hated. Pepe was the only reason I looked forward to coming home at the end of the day. I carried his body out to the alley and sat holding him in my lap, crying, until it was late at night and his body was cold and hard. My mother just shrugged when I told her what happened and said she'd told me we shouldn't take that dog in anyway.

Once when I was ten, Florencia's father got into an argument with my mother because she said he was cheating with another woman. He was sitting at the table, naked from the waist up, waiting for her to iron his shirt so he could go out that night.

Suddenly, he had my mother down on the floor and was banging her head on the concrete. She was screaming and so I ran to the kitchen and grabbed the hot iron from the board and pressed it against his neck. He let out this horrible shrill scream. I felt good when he screamed, remembering how he'd killed my dog. He let my mother go though and ran out into the darkness. He didn't come home for a long time after that.

The first time they threw me out of school my mother sat in the Mother Superior's office and cried and sobbed, rocking back and forth in the stiff cane chair and pulling at her uncombed hair. She promised to beat me until I said I was sorry and would never



throw a book at one of the nuns again. She begged the woman to keep me in her school, but the nun told my mother she couldn't be responsible for that, so I was sent to another school further away where nobody knew my reputation.

After two days there, I tried to climb out of a window to escape when the nun's back was turned facing the blackboard, but the custodian, a burly little yellow-skinned man, with wide shoulders and short heavy arms, saw me and grabbed my ankles, forcing my hands off the ledge.

I dropped to the ground and wrestled him to the dirt. I was larger framed, and stronger than he was, and I would have kept the fight between us, except that another nosey nun intervened and tried to pull me off the custodian. I punched her in the stomach as she tried to hold my arms.

Then I grabbed a mounted glass cross off the wall and threw it at the door. It shattered into a million bright slivers and shards that reflected the light from the open window in turquoises and vermilions. The sound of shattering glass and the explosion of color stopped us both. We stared at each other, and she dropped her arms to her sides. I pushed her away and ran as fast as I could.

The nuns told my mother they wouldn't let me back in school unless I changed my behavior and she paid a steep fine for replacing the cross. My mother laughed and said she wasn't paying any fine and she didn't really care about whether I went to school or not. She

told the nuns that I was getting near the age when she could get me a factory job.

What was really upsetting her was the clothes I was bringing home. When I first started bringing home girls' clothes, she was happy and excited because she thought they were for her and she got the first pick. She liked everything and took most of it greedily, storing it in her makeshift closet. I didn't care because I couldn't really wear the clothes outside anyway and I was happy just trying them on and imagining how I would look in a complete outfit parading around.

Our small room was cramped with just the three of us and when my mother had her "gentleman visitors," she would wake us up, and half-drag and half-carry Florencia to the front room to sleep in the corner of the old woman's bed. My mother would send me outside. When I was small, she usually left me to my own devices, telling me to sleep in the corner or to sit in front of the house till she was done. I'd sit down in a corner and usually fall asleep.

When I was about nine or ten, I decided that I wanted to see for myself what happened in there. The muffled panting and stifled cries triggered my interest, especially since she threatened me with a beating if I didn't get out and stay out. I heard the neighbors said that it was a good thing that the old woman living there was almost totally blind so she couldn't see my mother, "a woman of the street," bringing her trade into the house.

The first time I hid to see what was going on and what the nosey neighbors were squawking about, I

wedged myself behind the tall plywood box where she hung her clothes and waited until my mother dug her lipstick and powder out of the shoebox she kept under the bed. I watched her paint her face and put on a very thin dress that was once white but was now yellow and faded, and so worn you could see right through it. I noticed right away that she didn't have on any underwear.

A small bald fat man entered the door a few minutes later. I remembered he smelled like cigars and old beer. I watched shocked as my mother took off the white dress and bent over the bed. I couldn't see what was going on because the man was directly behind her on his knees blocking my view. All I could hear was the sound of wet flesh slapping against flesh. Sweat was dripping down his back, which was covered in part by thick matted black hair and I watched it darkening the bedspread. Then the man stretched out on the bed to lie on his stomach. I saw that his face was bright red as he turned his head from side to side, looking around the room.

My mother took out what looked like a long thick stick, the color of a white person's skin and began to rub the man's buttocks. He started to wiggle around and stick his butt in the air. I watched amazed, my hand over my mouth, as my mother slowly made the stick disappear inside of him. Probably I was overcome with everything going on, because I must have made some noise. My mother jumped up and yelled, "Who's there? You damn well better not be in here!"

I scrunched down and kept quiet, and when she turned back to tell the man he had to leave, I crawled along the wall and was out of the door in seconds.

After that, I only watched a few times more. When I saw her coming up to the house with a nice-looking young man, I always wanted to watch them together. During those times, my mother smiled and the sour expression she generally wore disappeared. Sometimes I thought that maybe she was pretending that she was on a date and that the good-looking man with her was a boyfriend. At the time, those meetings seemed romantic to me and I looked on with awe, hoping that someday I could have a boyfriend who wanted to hold me and touch me in the same way.

The good-looking ones were an exception though. The men for the most part were ugly, scarred, and dirty. They used bad words and left a foul smell in the room after they were gone. My mother sprayed window cleaner, all around the room making us gag. After seeing my mother with a few more of these guys, I started to feel uncomfortable and made it a point to leave when I saw her bringing somebody to her bed.

I usually changed in the tiny space behind the bed where we slept. The plastic shower curtain that hung from two hooks screwed into the ceiling separated about a foot and a half of space between the bed and the wall and gave me some privacy from Florencia.

I'd started pushing back my junk as things started changing down there, trying to flatten out the bulge between my legs and imagining how it would look when I could get rid of it for good. I would get lost in

the feel of material, particularly the polyester underwear that I believed felt like real silk because back then I didn't know the difference. When I'm focused, I shut out everything else.

So, that day I was stroking the material between my legs, concentrating on how smooth it felt compared to the rough sack-like cloth of my regular underpants. I didn't see my mother's fist flying toward my face. I think I felt the sting first, even though she didn't have much strength in her hands or much of a swing for that matter. She did have an advantage because I was backed against the wall and all I could do was fending off her blows.

"You crazy son of a bitch. You freak!" She screamed while she struck out at me. Spit flew from her mouth while she stared at the bulge between my legs covered in pink polyester.

Part of me knew I should be ashamed of wearing the underwear, but part of me felt that it was the most natural thing in the world. My mother threw herself on the lumpy bed she shared with Florencia and began sobbing and beating the thin worn-out pillow they shared. "The devil is in you. It's the devil's work," she shrieked. "You're crazy like your father."

She opened the first drawer of the broken blue plywood dresser that we shared and dumped out all the clothes that I'd given her over the last few months. Most of them still had their tags because she had nowhere to wear them either. "Do you want to wear these too?" She was sobbing, taking deep gulps of air. "How can you do this to me? What will the people

think? It's the devil! It's the devil, I know it." She gave one last shudder and sat up, wiping her eyes. When I think of her now, she is always crying, wailing, declaring her victimhood.

"Don't you bring home any more clothes!" She shrieked. "They're not for me. You're possessed by the spirits. I need to burn the demons out of you!"

I stared at the tangle of pastel polyester bras and panties and slowly began to gather them up from the floor.

My mother picked her head up and wiped her eyes. "Don't you put them back in there. Don't put any of your things in this house again! Tomorrow we go to see Father Raymundo. He can take this thing out of you. Make you human."

"What thing?" I wanted to know.

She didn't bother to answer, just stamped out the door, and hurried down the alley. I picked up the underwear and stuffed it into two plastic bags that I pushed under the bed. I was beginning to feel warm all over, my cheeks flushed, and my fists kept clenching. I dragged out the bag and selected a pair of purple nylon panties. As soon as I slipped them on, I felt my muscles relax a little.

I made sure nobody was around and snuck into the front room and pulled the old woman's bed away from the wall. The half-filled bottle of whiskey was still there hidden, the way she left it. I took a big gulp just like I saw the adults do all the time. The taste was horrible and burned all the way down to my stomach. I was going to put the bottle back but decided there

wasn't that much left anyway. Besides, the old bitch had hit me with a broom that morning. So, I finished it choking and coughing. I can still remember how strong and happy I felt after those first mouthfuls, like I owned the world and it was perfect. There was nothing to stop me from getting whatever I wanted. I don't remember ever feeling that good again when I drank. Like they say, "It's never as good as the first time." I think it's the same the very first time you really get drunk, as well as the first time you have sex; really good sex. From then on, you keep trying to feel the same thing again, but you never can.

Then, of course, a few minutes later, the flying, spinning, dizzy, out-of-this world-feeling began to fade and I began to gag. I barely made it to the back of the house so I could vomit in the dirt, until my stomach heaved, and driblets of water splattered onto the dirt. I wiped my eyes which were red and running and dragged myself back to my bed in the corner.

Now that I think about it, I can't stand seeing a half empty bottle of booze anywhere. It's like an exposed secret, an unfinished story. Why did somebody's evening end too early? I always feel like I need to drain the bottle and get rid of the evidence. Without the incriminating bottle, everything is normal, calm, and all the secrets are back below the surface where they belong.

But my last thought that night was happy. I didn't have to go to school tomorrow. In fact, I didn't have to go to school ever again.

## Chapter Three

The light was just starting to creep through the little slated window in the back bedroom when I felt the shock of cold water hit me, followed by two slaps across my face.

“You wake up now I said.”

I blinked and rubbed the water out of my eyes. My lip ached from the slap. “What’s wrong?” I sat up and looked at my mother bending over the bed. She was dressed in a high-necked blouse and a long skirt. I’d only seen this outfit on the few occasions that she went to church. Her didn’t have any makeup on and she looked pale and wrung out. I swung my legs over the bed and looked across the room. Florencia was already up and hustling out of the room, her head bent, and her shoulders hunched.

“Where are you going?” I called out. She shook her head and hurried forward, nearly running into the black figure standing in the doorway.

The cold water was starting to warm on my skin heated by the sticky early morning air.

“Get up. Put on your pants! He’s here.” My mother hurried to the other side of the bed and hurriedly tucked the bedspread into the mattress to hide the side that had burned when one of her visitors had forgotten to put out his cigarette before he fell asleep.



I rubbed my eyes trying to make out the figure standing in the doorway, while the shadows blocked my view. I could make out the outline of Father Raymundo, in his long black coat, and behind him, peeking around the corner, the old woman, who was out of bed hours earlier than usual for this special occasion. Florencia peered over the old woman's head. I recognized the large silver cross she always wore hanging around her neck.

"My son," Father Raymundo approached the bed and made the sign of the cross. "Please stay there."

I sat back down, thinking that I really needed to go to the bathroom. That was usually my first move in the morning when my bladder felt close to bursting. Light was beginning to flow through the window in the front room. Normally I made it a point not to listen to anything they told me to do, but something was making me curious.

I could see Father Raymundo's face up close, he moved toward the bed. His skin was creased, a ruddy brown and pock-marked, everywhere except his nose which was covered with a complex intertwining of small red and blue vessels. Every time I saw him, I stared at the craters of various sizes and depth on his face. They looked to me like the pictures of the moon's surface that they showed us at school. I imagined that if I were a very small ant, I could crawl into them and peer out over the rim. I could hide there forever. My mother told me he hadn't been vaccinated in the orphanage where he grew up and had a bad case of the pox when he was little. She said it had left him so ugly

that he couldn't find any woman to sleep with and very few men.

Father Raymundo motioned me to sit back and so I pulled the frayed blanket up to my neck and waited. He took out a small vial from his cassock and sprinkled some liquid that looked like water on me. He began muttering a prayer that I could not understand. My mother who was watching from the doorway started to sob, so he stopped and told her curtly to leave. Then he closed the curtain between the bedroom and the front room.

After we were alone, he got out his Bible and began to chant something else in a language I could not understand. As he chanted, he turned toward each of the corners of the room and flicked some of the water in each direction. Then he kneeled, clasped his hands, and began to pray. "Pray with me, my son. Pray to God to cast the evil spirit out of your body. Tell it to leave!" he commanded, looking to the sky.

I closed my eyes and sat still for once, and I could feel my heart crashing with each beat against my chest. I could hear my mother sobbing from the other side of the curtain and Florencia, of course, was wailing her prayers in unison.

After a few minutes, Father Raymundo stood up and raised his hands toward the ceiling and began to chant again. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and began to read from a worn red-leather covered Bible. I wondered if he knew that my mother brought men here to this bed and that they gave her money. The old woman had stopped talking about it, but now the

neighbors, and of course, their children, had picked it up. I knew they teased Florencia to make her cry, but they knew better than to say anything to me now that I was bigger than most of them.

Father Raymundo didn't seem to know or maybe he didn't care, because he kept reading, underlining the passages with his finger. When he stopped reading, he stood up and made the sign of the cross. Spittle had collected at the corners of his mouth and I watched as it ran down his chin.

Then he touched his fingers to my forehead and told me I had been blessed. He lowered his voice and said from now on I would not want to do any of the things that my mother had told him about and I would behave like a proper son. He assured me that the evil spirits were now a thing of the past and that all the exorcisms he'd performed had been successful. He made me promise to go to church that Sunday before he left.

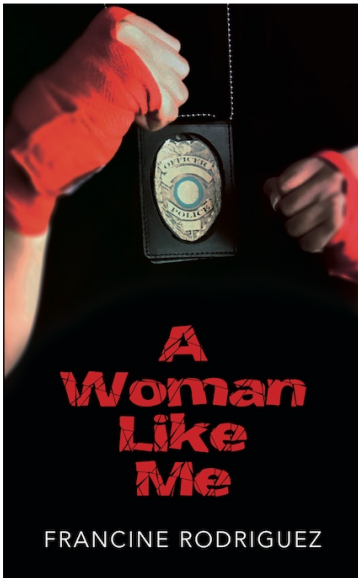
I was almost fully awake when he walked away from the bed and my mother ran in, her face wet with tears. "God has healed you for me," she sobbed. "He is merciful. You are now a real man."

I stared at her, trying to understand what she meant. I could see she was happy; drying her eyes on the hem of her worn skirt, so I shrugged and nodded.

After everybody finally stopped coming in to see my miraculous transformation, I sat alone with the thin patched blanket pulled up to my chin. A few minutes later I hurried out to the bathroom, my bladder throbbing and relieved myself in a long steady yellow

stream that ran down the corrugated walls of the inside of the shed where we used the bathroom.

Then I went back into the house and dragged out the last bra and panty set that I had stolen and slipped into it, comforted by the slick feel of the rayon on my skin. I felt that someone inside me was awake now, someone who was the real me was free and would never go back to sleep.



*A dark crime thriller that tells the journey of a conflicted disconcerting transgender woman, convicted of murder, who escapes imprisonment in the Philippines and travels to the U.S. where she becomes a police officer. Here, she confronts toxic masculinity and cruelty as she tries to seek justice for victimized children in the system.*

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