



RYAN PEREZ

# Tell Me Something

MICHELLE CACHO-NEGRETE

**On a shelf** in my home I have my brother's record albums, their covers worn with handling, sticky residue evidence of his fondness for candy. Johnny Mathis, Frankie Lyman, the Drifters, Martha and the Vandellas: "Oh, Jimmy Mack, when are you coming back?" On the dull black vinyl of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, a fingerprint offers itself up like a message from the past. As I slide the record back into its jacket, a photograph tumbles into my lap: my brother, perhaps twelve, eyes closed, pretend microphone in hand, body leaning into the music. I can hear his off-key voice trying to be like Smokey's: "I'm on the outside looking in, and I don't want to be." Everything else in the picture is blurred, as though my brother were the only solid thing.

Everything of my brother's fits on a couple of shelves: boxes of records, books, a few photographs. When you're killed at eighteen, you don't leave much behind.

**In December** 1968 I was recovering from the birth of my first child three months earlier. A hemorrhage during delivery had left me anemic, and the days had turned hallucinogenic, constructed of jagged shards of color. My brother had shipped out to Vietnam in October. My marriage was faltering. My mother was angry at me for not having married a Jew. My Cuban husband worked six twelve-hour days a week at Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation, a leading military contractor. The rent on our Queens apartment would be raised in January. He wanted to buy a house in an isolated section of Long Island, but I'd always lived in the city and had never learned to drive.

Vietnam permeated everything that Christmas. Even the carols seemed part of the national deception: "Peace on earth, goodwill to men."

My anger at my husband had deepened over his views on the war; his cavalier attitude about working for Grumman; his support for the president's policies; his lack of support for me. I dragged myself through the gray-lit days in a stupor. We argued over Vietnam, my exhaustion, his late hours, the mutual hate between my mother and him, whether to have a Christmas tree or a menorah, to move or accept the rent increase. He said I was weak; his grandmother had had fourteen kids and after each birth had gone back to the fields to cut sugar cane. I paced, took iron pills, told him he was unfeeling. I snuck out of the apartment to smoke cigarettes. Finally we agreed to a temporary truce. We agreed to postpone the arguments until an easier time. We agreed to pretend.

**It was just** before dawn: The baby slept. My husband showered. I stared out the window at the Manhattan skyline ablaze with holiday lights, as if the city were on fire. A Christmas tree twinkled in front of our apartment complex. Dirty snow rimmed the streets, and pigeons rested on windowsills, casting ominous shadows against the panes. A chorus of salt-spattered cars backfired and honked below. The apartment air was oppressive, close. That sorrowful, pleading carol "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" played on the radio: "We'll have to muddle through somehow."

The phone rang. A man with a husky voice gave a name I don't remember, confirmed who I was, then cleared his throat and recited by rote, "We regret to inform you . . ."

I remember little things: The coffee left brewing too long; its bitter, weary smell. Half-browned bread popped up in the toaster. How the streetlights flickered, then went out as the sun began to crack open the early-morning sky.

The man on the phone, who was calling from my mother's home after having delivered the news to her in person, advised me to "come now," as my mother screamed, "No! No! No!" in the background.

I hung up.

"My brother is dead!" I yelled into the recesses of the apartment. I drifted up from my seat, my body threatening to collapse. I was entering the baby's room to wake him when my husband stepped out of the bathroom, encircled by mist, and said, "What? I couldn't hear you."

**My mother** came to stay with us as we waited for the body to be brought back to the U.S. She and I fed the baby, played with him, took him on long walks. My husband went to work. ("Staying home isn't going to change anything.") Friends dropped by with deli sandwiches, baskets of fruit, cookies, chocolate. We received official documents from the military: commendations, explanations, letters of sympathy signed by generals: "A barrage of gunshots . . . mourned by his fellow marines . . . bravery . . . Purple Heart." In bed at night, I conjured a memory of my brother at my wedding: He's standing beside my husband's cousin, whom he has a crush on. His eyes are bright, and he's slimmed down from the chubby child he once was. He says something that makes the cousin laugh, sees me watching him, and winks.

My brother and I had lived much of our lives apart. After having battled with my mother over a phone bill as a teen, he'd gone to live with his father, my stepfather, somewhere in Brooklyn. I didn't know much about how he'd spent those years, but I kept reaching for the sparse memories I did have of him.

When my brother was twelve and I was eighteen, the police left a message that they'd arrested him for stealing a car. My mother wasn't home from work yet, and I ran the eight blocks to the station. The squad room was overheated and stank of sweat and some unidentifiable food. I remember cells, doors leading to shadowy rooms, accused men proclaiming their innocence. The police wouldn't let me see my brother. They stood over me menacingly and called me "street cunt." I went outside and sat on the front steps to wait for my mother. The cops walking in and out glanced at me, nightsticks swinging against their legs, their holstered guns passing me at eye level. A couple of men on the other side of the street shoved each other and screamed in Spanish. Gulls wheeled overhead on the winds off the East River.

When my mother arrived, she straightened her shoulders, said, "Wait here," and went inside.

My brother had been an unsuspecting passenger in the stolen car, but he was sent to a group home for a year anyway. I remember taking the train from Grand Central Station to

Pleasantville, New York, to visit him, but I don't remember the visits.

My memories of my brother are disconnected, without contiguous flow: he is two, he is six, he is ten, he is twelve, he is fifteen, he is dead.

**When his body** finally arrived from Vietnam, they told us it was too perforated with bullet holes to be shown to family members. We stood before the closed coffin at the funeral parlor as if before a holy icon, though the coffin itself was nothing special: standard military issue, as common as M16s. Four marines in crisp blue uniforms and shining brass guarded the body. The proper time to have guarded it, I thought, would have been while it still breathed. As we stared at the coffin, a fantasy seized me: my brother was still alive somewhere in Vietnam; the marines had lost track of him and fabricated this cover story. That Christmas it was easy to disbelieve the government.

I wore a leftover black maternity dress, belted at the waist, and felt unwashed and gritty despite the two showers I'd taken that day. My feet were freezing in tights, wool socks, and scuffed boots. My mother sat crumpled on a chair, a loose arrangement of bent limbs and bowed head. My stepfather, whom I hadn't seen in years, greeted me by saying, "I'm still the handsomest man in Brooklyn, aren't I?" We hugged, and any animosity over his divorce from my mother, after he'd gambled away the rent and food money, was forgiven. A death accomplishes that.

My husband, handsome in the suit he'd worn for our wedding, whispered to his aunts and cousins in the back of the room. The cousin my brother had been attracted to sat in the front row, weeping silent tears beside my mother. I felt as if I were in a foreign movie, something Greek or Italian where everyone wore black and spoke too fast for me to understand. I stared at the coffin and thought about how I'd once had no idea where the Mekong Delta was.

I accepted my share of blame. I'd complained about the war but hadn't protested it. I had been too caught up in my marriage and finding temporary work (I'd been fired when my pregnancy had begun to show) and trying to push through the postpartum exhaustion. I hadn't written letters, gone to demonstrations, participated in sit-ins. I'd done nothing to try to end this war.

**The snow was** falling heavily when we left for the cemetery, wind whipping up white ghosts. The body was loaded into a hearse with pale satin curtains in the windows and a stealthy engine. Our car skidded and slipped all the way to Long Island National Cemetery, where we stepped onto a plain of squat white stones that must have been churned out by the hundreds. There were fewer of us here than at the funeral parlor: my mother; my husband; a handful of friends, aunts, and cousins; the rabbi assigned by the funeral home. We advanced toward a hole in the ground covered by a black tarp. A couple of men in heavy clothing stood at a distance, shivering. One, in a black wool hat and army jacket, nodded in sympathy to me. My stepfather was already standing over

the grave, a slight figure in a skullcap.

As the rabbi moved between the rows, he looked carefully at each name as though making a list. He turned to my mother and said, "Out of the question."

Leaning on my husband's cousin's arm, she stepped around the rabbi the way you'd circle a rock or another nonsentient object in your path. The snow coated the rabbi's black coat and hat as if intending to bury him also.

I waved my husband on and stopped to talk to the rabbi alone. "What are you saying?" I asked. The wind blew the words back into my face.

"There are non-Jews buried here," he said. "How can I pray?" He asked this as though it were a reasonable question.

As I battled my desire to strike him, I thought of my husband's accusation that I would always be a hoodlum from the streets, that anybody could see it. At that moment, I hoped he was right.

I put my face close to the rabbi's, and he took an alarmed step backward. "You *will* pray here," I whispered close to his cheek. "You will pray here because God — the real God, not the one you've made up — mourns every dead child. You will pray here, because otherwise I won't let you leave." I put my hand on his wrist and smiled at him. My lashes were coated with snow, and my scarf flapped around me like a black flag.

The yeshiva had not prepared the rabbi for this threatening woman who would bend him to her will. He glanced from side to side. Nobody was watching. We could have been alone in an alley. Finally he nodded and walked to the graveside. His dark beard caught the pristine snow. He leaned over the coffin and prayed in a low voice, his eyes fixed on the hole in the ground.

*(end of excerpt)*