

ALL THE
CROOKED
SAINTS

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*For David,
finally*

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I

You can hear a miracle a long way after dark. Miracles are very like radio waves in this way. Not many people realize that the ordinary radio wave and the extraordinary miracle have much in common. Left to their own devices, radio waves would not be audible for much more than forty or fifty miles. They travel on perfectly straight paths from their broadcast source, and because the Earth is round, it does not take them long to part ways with the ground and head out to the stars. Wouldn't we all, if we had the chance? What a shame that both miracles and radio waves are invisible, because it would be quite a sight: ribbons of marvel and sound stretching out straight and true from all over the world.

But not all radio waves and miracles escape unheard. Some bounce off the ceiling of the ionosphere, where helpful free electrons oscillate in joyful harmony with them before thrusting them back to Earth at new angles. In this way a signal can leap from Rosarito or Nogales, knock its head on the ionosphere, and find itself in Houston or Denver, stronger than ever. And if it is broadcast after sundown? Many things in this life work better without the sun's meddlesome attention, and this process is one

of them. At night, radio waves and miracles can caper up and down so many times over that in some unpredictable cases, they eventually reach transmitters and saints thousands of miles away from their sources. In this way a small miracle in tiny Bicho Raro might be heard all the way in Philadelphia, or vice versa. Is this science? Religion? It is difficult even for scientists and saints to tell the difference between the two. Perhaps it doesn't matter. When you cultivate invisible seeds, you can't expect everyone to agree on the shape of your invisible crops. It is wiser to simply acknowledge that they grow well together.

On the night this story begins, both a saint and a scientist were listening to miracles.

It was dark, true-dark in the way it gets in the desert, and the three Soria cousins had gathered in the back of a box truck. Above them, the bigger stars had been pushing the smaller stars out of their heavenly home in a pretty little shower for about an hour. The sky beneath was pure black all the way down to the greasewood and rabbitbrush that filled the valley.

It was mostly quiet, except for the radio and the miracles.

The truck was parked in a vast stretch of scrub several miles from the nearest town. It wasn't really anything to look at, just a faded red 1958 Dodge moving truck with a somewhat optimistic expression. One taillight was fractured. The right front tire was ever so slightly flatter than the left. There was a stain on the passenger seat that would always smell like cherry Coke. A little wooden alebrije that was part skunk and part coyote was strung

up on the rearview mirror. The truck had Michigan plates, although this was not Michigan.

The radio was playing. Not the one in the cab—the one in the cargo area, a teal-blue Motorola unit taken from Antonia Soria’s kitchen counter. It was playing the Soria cousins’ station. Not the one they liked to listen to—the one they had created. The box truck was their broadcast studio on wheels.

They, their. Really, it was Beatriz Soria’s truck, and Beatriz Soria’s radio station. This is every Soria’s story, but it is hers more than anyone else’s. Although it wasn’t her voice playing over the AM radio waves, it was her complicated and wiry heart powering them. Other people have smiles and tears to show how they feel; enigmatic Beatriz Soria had a box truck full of transmitters in the Colorado desert. If she cut herself, wherever she was, the speakers in the box truck bled.

“. . . if you’re tired of singin’ only to swingin’,” the DJ promised, “you’ll find us after the sun goes down but before the sun comes up.”

This voice belonged to the youngest of the cousins, Joaquin. He was sixteen years old, took himself very seriously, and preferred that you did as well. He was suave and clean-shaven, with headphones pressed against a single ear to avoid spoiling his hair, which he had oiled into an Elvis pompadour of considerable height. Two flashlights illuminated him like golden, premature spotlights, leaving everything else in purple and blue and black. He wore the same shirt he had been wearing for two months: a short-sleeved red Hawaiian-print number with the collar popped.

He had seen a shirt worn similarly in the single film he had managed to see in 1961 and had vowed to re-create the look for himself. A garden of soda bottles filled with water grew by his feet. He had a phobia of dehydration, and to combat it, he always carried enough water to moisten him for days.

After dark, he did not go by the name Joaquin Soria. In the mobile station that roamed the high alpine desert, he called himself *Diablo Diablo*. It was a DJ name that would have scandalized both his mother and grandmother had they known, which was the point. Truth be told, it scandalized Joaquin himself a little. He enjoyed the thrill of danger each time he said it, superstitiously believing that if he whispered a third *Diablo* after the name, the devil might actually appear.

Here was a thing Joaquin Soria wanted: to be famous. Here was a thing he feared: dying alone in the parched dust outside *Bicho Raro*.

“... some more of that dancing and dreaming,” *Diablo Diablo*’s voice continued, “the hottest sounds of ’62, from *Del Norte* to *Blanca* and from *Villa Grove* to *Antonito*, the music that’ll save your soul.”

The other two cousins in the truck, *Beatriz* and *Daniel*, raised their eyebrows. This claim of covering the entire *San Luis Valley* was certainly fraudulent, but Joaquin’s interests tended more toward things that would be nice if they were true rather than things that actually were true. No, the station did not cover the valley, but what a kind place the world would be if it could.

Daniel shifted position. The cousins were knee to knee in the back of the truck, and because of this cramped proximity, Daniel's long foot couldn't help but unsettle one of Joaquin's water bottles. The metal cap burst across the floor, skittering on its rim as if pursued. The wires on the floor shrank back from the water. Disaster whispered briefly. Then Joaquin snatched up the bottle and shook it at Daniel.

"Don't break the truck," he said. "It's new."

It was not new, but it was new to being a radio station. Before the truck had been pressed into its current role, it had been used by Ana Maria Soria's brother's wife's sister's family to transport the Alonso brothers from painting jobs to bars. The truck had grown weary of this tedium and had broken down, and since the Alonso brothers preferred painting and drinking to lifting the truck's spirits, it had been left to grow weeds. In fact, during this time, it had collected enough moisture for a crop of swamp timothy and sedges to grow fast and thick over its roof and hood, completely transforming the truck into a wetland in the middle of the desert. Animals came from miles to live in this oasis—first a beaver, then twelve leopard frogs with their creaking-rocking-chair calls, then thirty cutthroat trout so eager for a new home that they walked to the truck across the valley. The final blow came when four dozen sandhill cranes arrived—as tall as men and twice as noisy. The chaos of this swamp kept everyone awake, every hour of every day.

Beatriz had been tasked with driving the animals away.

That was when she had discovered the truck beneath it all. Her slow restoration of the truck had evicted the animals so gradually that the new marsh hardly noticed it was being asked to leave, and soon most of the Soria family did not remember that it had even been there. Even the truck seemed to have been mostly forgotten. Though the wooden planks of the floor were still stained with rust-red circles from paint cans, the only reminder of its time as an ecosystem was an egg Beatriz had found under the gas pedal. It was enormous, hand-sized, mottled like the moon and light as air. She'd made a gauzy hairnet hammock for it and hung it in the back of the truck for luck. Now it swung to and fro over Korean War transmitters, third-hand tape decks, broken turntables and scavenged tubes, resistors and capacitors.

Diablo Diablo (*Diablo!*) crooned, "Next we're gonna spin a pretty little number by the Drifters. This is 'Save the Last Dance for Me' . . . but *we're* not done dancing, so stay tuned."

Joaquin did not, in fact, spin a pretty little number by the Drifters, though it did begin to play from one of the tape decks. The entire broadcast had been pretaped in case the station had to take off in a hurry. The Federal Communications Commission took a dim view of America's youth establishing unlicensed radio stations in their free time, particularly as America's youth seemed to have terrible taste in music and a hankering for revolution. Fines and jail time waited for offenders.

"Do you think they might be tracking us?" Joaquin asked

hopefully. He did not want to be pursued by the government, but he wanted to be heard, and he longed so badly for the second that he felt it was his duty to assume the first was inevitable.

Beatriz had been sitting by the transmitter, fingers hovered vaguely over it, rapt in her own imagination. When she realized that both Joaquin and Daniel were waiting for her to answer, she said, “Not if the range hasn’t improved.”

Beatriz was the second-oldest cousin. Where Joaquin was noisy and colorful, Beatriz was serene and eerie. She was eighteen years old, a hippie Madonna with dark hair parted evenly on either side of her face, a nose shaped like a J, and a small, enigmatic mouth that men would probably describe as a rosebud but Beatriz would describe as “my mouth.” She had nine fingers, as she had cut one of them off by accident when she was twelve, but she didn’t much mind—it was only a pinkie, and on her right hand (she was left-handed). At the very least, it had been an interesting experience, and anyway, it wasn’t as if she could take it back now.

Joaquin was in the box-truck station for the glory of it, but Beatriz’s involvement was entirely for intellectual gratification. The restoration of the truck and construction of the radio had both been puzzles, and she enjoyed puzzles. She *understood* puzzles. When she was three, she had devised a retractable, secret bridge from her bedroom window to the horse paddock that allowed her to cross barefoot in the middle of the night without being stabbed by the goat’s head burrs that plagued the area. When she was seven, she had devised a cross between a mobile

and a puppetry set so she could lie in bed and make the Soria family dolls dance for her. When she was nine, she had begun developing a secret language with her father, Francisco Soria, and they were still perfecting it now, years later. In its written form, it was constructed entirely from strings of numbers; its spoken form was sung in notes that corresponded to the mathematical formula of the desired sentiment.

Here was a thing Beatriz wanted: to devote time to understanding how a butterfly was similar to a galaxy. Here was a thing she feared: being asked to do anything else.

“Do you think Mama or Nana are listening?” Joaquin (Diablo Diablo!) persisted. He did not want his mother or grandmother to discover his alternate identity, but he longed for them to hear Diablo Diablo and whisper to each other that this pirate DJ sounded both handsome and like Joaquin.

“Not if the range hasn’t improved,” Beatriz repeated.

It was a question she had already posed to herself. The signal of their first broadcast had reached only a few hundred meters, despite the large TV antenna she had added to the system. Now her mind ran along each place the signal might be escaping before it got to the antenna.

Joaquin looked surly. “You don’t have to say it like that.”

Beatriz did not feel bad. She hadn’t said it like anything. She’d just said it. Sometimes that was not enough, however. Back home at Bicho Raro, they sometimes called her *la chica sin sentimientos*. Beatriz did not mind being called a girl without

feelings. The statement seemed true enough to her. “Anyway, how could they? We took the radio.”

They all peered at the transistor radio pilfered from Antonia Soria’s kitchen counter.

“Small steps, Joaquin,” Daniel advised. “Even a small voice is still a voice.”

This was the third and oldest cousin in the truck. His given name was Daniel Lupe Soria and he was nineteen and his parents had both been dead for longer than he had been alive. On every knuckle but his thumbs he had an eye tattoo, so that he had eight of them, like a spider, and he was built a little like a spider, with long limbs and prominent joints and light body. His hair was smooth and straight, down to his shoulders. He was the Saint of Bicho Raro, and he was very good at it. Beatriz and Joaquin loved him very much, and he loved them as well.

Although he knew of Beatriz and Joaquin’s radio project, he had not previously accompanied them, as he was usually very busy with the matter of miracles. As the Saint, the coming and going of miracles occupied most of his thoughts and actions, a task he took great pleasure in and greater responsibility for. But tonight he grappled with a matter of personal importance, and he wanted to spend time with his cousins to remind himself of all the reasons to practice caution.

Here was a thing he wanted: to help someone he was not allowed to help. Here was a thing he feared: that he would ruin his entire family because of this private desire.

“Even a small voice is still small,” Joaquin countered crossly.

“One day you will have become famous as Diablo Diablo and *we* will be the pilgrims, going to see you in Los Angeles,” Daniel said.

“Or at least in Durango,” Beatriz revised.

Joaquin preferred imagining a future in Los Angeles to a future in Durango, but he didn’t protest further. Their faith was enough for now.

In some families, *cousin* doesn’t mean anything, but that wasn’t true for this generation of the Sorias. Even as the relationships between the older Sorias rubbed sand into pearls, these three Soria cousins remained inseparable. Joaquin was fanciful, but in this truck, they enjoyed his outsized ambition. Beatriz was remote, but in this truck, Daniel and Joaquin did not need anything more from her than what she easily gave. And everyone loved the Saint of Bicho Raro, but in this truck, Daniel was able to be simply human.

“Here. I’ll check the range now,” Beatriz said. “Hand me the radio.”

“Hand it yourself,” Joaquin replied. But Beatriz merely sat quietly until he passed it to her. There was no point trying to wait out Beatriz.

“I’ll come with you,” Daniel said quickly.

Back in Bicho Raro, there was a pair of twin goats named Fea and Moco who had been born under notable circumstances. It is common for goats to have twins and sometimes even triplets, so it was not notable that Fea and Moco were twins. What was

unusual was that Moco was born first and then Fea's mother decided that she did not have the energy or interest in giving birth a second time in the same night. So although Fea would have been just as happy being born minutes after her twin, she remained in her mother's womb for months while her mother worked up the motivation to birth again. Finally, Fea was born. Her additional time in the womb, away from the sun, had turned her coat jet-black. Although to the outside eye, Fea and Moco appeared to be merely siblings or even unrelated, the two of them remained as close as twins, always attentive and fond of each other's presence.

This was the way it was with Beatriz and Daniel. As close as Joaquin and Beatriz and Daniel were, Beatriz and Daniel were closer still. They were both quiet on the inside and outside, and they both had a hungry curiosity for what made the world work. But there was also the closeness created by the miracles. All of the Sorias were gifted with the ability to perform miracles, but into every generation, there were born a few who were more suited to the task than others: They were stranger or holier than other people, depending upon whom you asked. Daniel and Beatriz were the most saintly at the moment, and as Beatriz wanted desperately to not be the Saint, and Daniel wanted little else, balance was achieved.

Outside the truck, the cold desert sky pushed up and out and away, a story without ending. Beatriz shivered; her mother, Antonia, said she had the heart of a lizard—and it was true that she had a reptile's preference for the claustrophobia of heat.

Although Beatriz had a flashlight tied up in the hem of her skirt, she didn't retrieve it. She was not remotely worried about the FCC, but she nonetheless did not want to call attention to their location. She had a strong feeling, in the way a Soria does sometimes, that there were miracles afoot, and she had been told, in the way all Sorias are told, that there were consequences for interfering with miracles.

So they walked in the near-dark. The light of the partial moon was quite sufficient to pick out the silhouettes of spiky bayonet and spindly manzanita and raggedy creosote bushes. Juniper released a damp, warm smell and Russian thistle tugged at Beatriz's skirt. Far-off light from Alamosa browned the horizon, looking natural from this far away, like a premature sunrise. From the radio, Diablo Diablo said look, said wait, said listen, here's a single you're not going to believe, a hot little number that hasn't gotten enough play from the big guys.

Inside Beatriz Soria's mind, thoughts turned busily, as they always did. As she and Daniel moved through the dark, she thought about the casual ingenuity of the portable radio they carried, and also about a time when people had imagined the night air was full of nothing, and also about the expression *dead air*. And now she thought instead about how really she was pushing through a crowded atomic city of invisible chemicals, microorganisms, and waves, the last of them detectable only because she held this magic box capable of receiving them and spitting them back out for her mortal ears. She leaned into these invisible radio signals as she would a heavy wind, and with one

hand she snatched at the air as if she might feel them. This was an impulse that she often had, to touch the invisible. She had learned after years of childhood correction to reserve it for moments when no one else was watching. (Daniel did not count as someone else in this regard.)

But she felt only the slow creep of an approaching miracle. The radio's signal had begun to fray; another station was gulping a syllable here and there.

"Beatriz?" asked Daniel. His voice sounded a little hollow, a cup with no water in it, a sky without stars. "Do you think consequences are meaningful if we haven't seen them for ourselves?"

Sometimes, when a question is about a secret, people will ask a different but related question, hoping to get an answer that will work for both questions. Beatriz realized at once that this was what Daniel was doing now. She did not know what to do about the fact of his having secrets, but she answered as best as she could. "I think an untested consequence is a hypothesis."

"Do you think I've been a good saint?"

This was still not really the question in his mind, and in any case, no one who had spent even a minute in Bicho Raro would have possibly spoken against Daniel Lupe Soria's devotion. "You are a better one than I would be."

"You could be a fine saint."

"The evidence doesn't agree with you."

"Where is your science?" Daniel asked. "One piece of evidence is not science." His tone was lighter now, but Beatriz

was not comforted. He was not ordinarily troubled, and she could not forget the sound of it in his voice.

Beatriz turned the radio slightly to reduce the crackling. “Some experiments only require one result for proof. Or at least to prove it’s not responsible to perform them a second time.”

Loudening static hung between the two cousins, and eventually, Daniel said, “Did you ever think that maybe we’re doing it wrong? All of us?”

This, finally, was a real question instead of a hidden one, although it was not *the* real question. But it was too big a puzzle to be answered in only one night.

Further conversation was interrupted by a shudder in the shrub before them. It twitched and shivered again, and then a shadow roared out of it.

Neither Beatriz nor Daniel flinched. This was because they were Sorias. In their family, if you were going to leap at every shadow that suddenly appeared, you needed to plan on some fine calf muscles.

The roar resolved into great, hushing thud of wings, and the shadow resolved into an enormous bird in flight. It flapped close enough that Beatriz’s hair moved against her cheek: an owl.

Beatriz knew many things about owls. Owls have enormous and powerful eyes, but these remarkable eyeballs are fixed in place by bony protuberances called sclerotic rings. This is why owls must move their heads in all directions in lieu of flicking their eyes from side to side. Several owl species have asymmetrical ears, which allows them to accurately pinpoint the origin of

a sound. Many people do not realize that, in addition to possessing powerful vision and hearing, owls are very attracted to miracles, though the mechanism that draws the birds to them is poorly understood.

Daniel leaned close to turn off the radio. The quiet hurried around them.

On the other side of where the owl had appeared, distant headlights came into view. In a place like this, you could go all night without seeing another vehicle, and so it was with interest that Beatriz watched the two tiny lights travel from right to left. It was far too distant to hear, but she knew the sound of tires on the gravel so well that her ears pretended they caught it. She lifted her hand to see if she could feel the sound with her fingers.

Daniel closed his eyes. His mouth moved. He was praying.

“Headlights! Are you two stupid?” Joaquin had grown bored waiting for them to report and now called to them from the open back of the truck. “*Headlights!* Why didn’t you say right away! The FCC!”

Beatriz closed her fingers and lowered her hand. She said, “They aren’t headed this way.”

“How can you know!”

“They’re going to . . .”

She lifted a vague hand and allowed that gesture to serve as the rest of the sentence.

Joaquin sprang back inside to rip wires from the battery, then leaped back out and began to tear up ground wires with a

great and fearful energy. But Beatriz was right, as she often was. The headlights continued on their distant path without pause, illuminating motionless antelope and clumps of grass. The vehicle was headed unerringly toward Bicho Raro. It was hunting not for a radio signal but for a miracle.

Daniel opened his eyes. He said, "I need to get to there before they do."

There would be no miracle without a saint.