



# LITANY OF SAINTS

..... A TRIPTYCH

Diana Rojas

### Praise for *Litany of Saints*:

“In this engrossing collection, characters walk a tightrope between Costa Rica and the US, attracted and repelled by both countries. They see the flaws and aspirations of each, and Diana Rojas tips the balance in surprising ways. Who will protect us—our family, saints, government—or are they our downfall? Compassionate and achingly realistic.”

—Mary Kay Zuravleff, author of *American Ending*

“If our secrets make us sinners, can keeping another’s make us a saint? Like the blue morpho butterfly, whose iridescence is a trick of light that simultaneously shows and conceals its truth, the characters in this triptych of tales mesmerize and surprise. They are unforgettable, as are their stories, which in the end is their salvation . . . and ours.”

—Laura Scalzo, author of *American Arcadia*

“In Diana Rojas’ outstanding debut, tradition and the challenges of belonging are the background to a deep and compassionate exploration of migration and change. The families in these stories deal with cultural, social and political environments they no longer know. Sometimes the main characters resist, but in all cases, they have to learn the rules of engagement of two countries in constant evolution: the United States and Costa Rica.”

—Uriel Quesada, author of *Los territorios ausentes*

“*Litany of Saints* is a richly imagined debut collection. With shimmering intelligence and emotional veracity, Diana Rojas tells stories about people who left Costa Rica for the United States and ones who returned home. Her characters yearn to escape the cages that entrap them, some of them created by their own making and others by an ever-shifting set of social, familial and political circumstances. Rojas is a natural storyteller, and the specificity of these tales poses universal questions about what it means to be a Costa Rican, an American, an immigrant and a human being.”

—Michelle Brafman, author of *Swimming with Ghosts* and *Washing the Dead*

“Inventive and engaging, *Litany of Saints* is a colorful exploration of identity from the shifting, chameleonic perspectives of Costa Ricans both at home and abroad. Diana Rojas paints an unflinching portrait of gender, duality, personal agency and the explosion that happens when cultural conservatism crashes against a changing world.”

—John Manuel Arias, author of *Where There Was Fire*

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By Diana Rojas

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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*To my mother, Clara Rodríguez Rojas, who  
filled my ears with stories.*

*To my father, Fernando Rojas, who wanted  
me to tell them.*



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## THE LIVES OF SAINTS

Felipe always said the green wool sweater made me look like an old lady. It wasn't nearly cool enough for it, but I wrapped it around my shoulders out of spite and sat down next to the open window to watch the last of the fireflies frolicking in the end-of-summer breeze. I wondered if it would hurt a lot if I let myself roll out two stories down to the flagstones below. That would be one way to end it. At that moment, it seemed like the most peaceful way out of my decades-old marriage.

It had been pouring when we met my daughter Amalia and her kids at the Denny's on the interstate. We were supposed to have picnicked at the lighthouse beach, but the summer storm rolled in changing our plans. It had been Amalia's suggestion, one of her "Wouldn't it be great?" ideas that she'd get overly enthused about.

"Just like when we were little," Amalia had said. "And my kids can see where you and Dad would take us to play at the beach."

I wasn't going to ruin her wistful recollection by reminding her that the water there had been so polluted that I never let them even put their toes in when they were little. Or that we hadn't really gone all that often since Felipe preferred the

coastal beaches to the harbor. Nor had she seemed to realize that when they were teenagers and I'd insist on walking with them over to the lighthouse on an occasional Saturday afternoon, it was usually to get away from one of Felipe's benders. I just went along with her sentimental get-together.

Felipe had been morose that whole day. He'd scowl whenever I tried to strike up a conversation. It wasn't because of the rainstorm. The downpour didn't start until we had pulled out of the driveway to meet Amalia. At the beach parking lot, he pulled alongside Amalia's car, the kids in the back all smiles and waves.

"Don't worry, let's just take this party to Denny's," she said. "The kids love that place! All day breakfasts! It'll be almost as good as the beach to them."

She didn't notice that her father was barely listening.

"You remember where it is, right?"

Felipe didn't respond. Just nodded in her direction.

At Denny's, he perked up a bit as soon as Amalia and the kids sat down.

It didn't take her long to notice Felipe's mood. "What's doing, Dad? Why so sad?"

She talked and arranged the toddler in his seat and doled out the giant menus to the other two, all without taking her eyes off Felipe. "We're not bothered by the rain. Don't worry."

He smiled a sad smile.

"Did you hear about the governor? The Jersey guy?" he asked, with a humorless chuckle.

"Oh, jeeezus!" she laughed. "What a jerk. It takes him this long to figure out he's gay, and then he asks his beleaguered bride to stand by his side while he announces her humiliation to the world. Did you see her face? What a dope

she was! I'd have said, 'No way, dickhead, you're on your own here.'"

His voice was gentle. "Well, Amalia, you know, those of us like the governor know how hard it was to do. Most of us would never do it."

Amalia heard him. I know she did. Her sharp eyes focused for a split second on him, then moved over to me. She only glanced, but she read my anguish. She changed the subject, moved on to something about the baby. But she was knocked off kilter for the rest of the lunch. Her conversation became stilted. I knew she couldn't wait to get out of there.

"Those of us!" Those of us? Felipe was a merciless flirt with waitresses. He'd had affairs on business trips, bringing home shirts smelling of perfume. This was classic Felipe, seeking attention in the most outrageous ways. But this new revelation was the most absurd: pretending to come out to his daughter at a Denny's. Who was the dope now, Amalia?

For some time now I had become the beleaguered bride standing two steps behind with a frozen smile on my face. Felipe wasn't gay, I wanted to say to her. Her father was a jerk who in the past several years had taken up the sport of finding new and more shocking ways to embarrass me, as if daring me to leave. Like telling me he'd be leaving me as soon as the kids grew up . . . over our romantic anniversary dinner, no less. Or badgering the maid of honor at a friend's wedding on the dance floor so much that she looked to the bridegroom to save her from the pervy neighbor. Or letting his twenty-something lover call me to challenge me about who loved him more. She had claimed he was sitting right there next to her. I didn't demand to speak to him.

I had never taken him up on his dares. I had never left. I was his wife. And now, he was supposedly gay, in the closet

all these years. I didn't believe it for a second, and I knew I wouldn't muster the courage to walk out the door either.

My marriage had become an embarrassment in my middle age. Amalia might have understood, but she'd never mention it. She'd wish to spare me the shame. Her brothers, Eddie and Henry, played oblivious. The rest of the greater family would chalk it up to his drinking.

I found myself on the window seat that night, battling the desire to roll out, knowing I never would. I had become a cautionary tale: Ruth thought she could change Felipe, but she should have known that in marriage, what you see is what you get.

I think I got duped.



A few days after the rained-out beach picnic, Felipe was in high spirits for the gathering at Joaquín's. Álvaro, my sister Lucía's oldest, was in from Costa Rica, and it was a typical family get-together to fête the visitor. Amalia and her kids rolled in last. By the time they arrived, Felipe was already drunk, lips stained purple by the wine. I saw Henry and Eddie greet her with raised eyebrows and a nod of the head in their father's direction, warning her. Amalia kept her distance from him; maybe it was his drunkenness. Or maybe she just didn't know how to segue from Denny's.

Felipe kept drinking. He laughed louder and louder. Earlier in the day, when the sun was high, he was, as usual, the life of the party. Even I enjoyed his company at times like that. He'd remembered so many jokes. His wit was so quick, turning common conversations into laughable feasts. The laughter in the yard competed with the jollity of the music

from the speakers, but by then, Felipe was becoming a drunken bore.

“Felipe, I don’t feel well. Can we go now?” I lied because I knew my embarrassment would mount as the sun set. Felipe was so sloshed that he didn’t actually put up a fight. Henry, Amalia and Eddie nervously followed us to the front yard to see us to our car. I knew why.

“Dad,” said Henry, flexing his maleness, “Mom’s going to drive.”

This had been an ongoing battle. Felipe was the best drunk driver I had ever been in a car with, but as soon as the kids had become teenagers, they started battling him about taking the wheel after boozing. I’d play the meek wife because I loathed the recriminations after having forced myself to be the driver. But when they were watching, I was helpless to resist. They wouldn’t let me.

Felipe rebuffed Henry, the keys dangling loosely from his hand.

Henry snatched them and gave them to me, a little too forcibly, I thought. Then he moved his father to the other side of the car, where he opened the door and shoved him in. Felipe swatted Henry’s hands away from helping him with the seat belt. Amalia and Eddie, meanwhile, stood with their arms crossed, blocking me like football guards, ready to block Felipe should he lunge for me or the keys.

I slipped into the driver’s seat and noticed that Joaquín and my younger brother, Tony, were watching from the side gate, pretending they were engaged in a conversation. I smiled, as if nothing was amiss, and waved at them. Our children walked toward their uncles as I pulled out. Felipe’s eyes were already half-cast, and I figured he’d be asleep by the time we drove off that street.

I was wrong. Once we were out of sight of Joaquín's house, he started in. I can't even remember his complaints. But I still remember the smell of wine in his spittle as it landed on my cheek. We had an hour's ride ahead of us. By the time we merged onto the interstate, only five miles in, his voice was thundering. He was banging on the dashboard, demanding I pull over and let him drive.

"YOU HAVE HUMILIATED ME IN FRONT OF OUR CHILDREN FOR THE LAST TIME," he roared. "Pull over. Pull over this minute and stop being a bitch. PULL OVER!"

I kept my eyes glued on the highway. I ignored him, as Amalia had advised me to keep us safe. I prayed to Saint Christopher. Saint Christopher, protector against car accidents, *ruega por nosotros*.

Felipe would not be placated by my prayers or my silence.

"PULL OVER, I said," he spat at me.

Then, he did the unthinkable. He opened the passenger door on the highway and was preparing to leap out of the moving car.

"FELIPE!" I screamed. I was in the slow lane and screeched to a halt on the shoulder as he stuck one leg out.

The car had barely stopped at an angle, when both his legs were out. Cars whizzed by, horns blaring.

Felipe stuck his head in the car through the open door. "NOW. GET. OUT." he hissed.

"I won't," I managed to say.

He slammed the door and walked away, the tail of his shirt flapping in the breeze created by the passing cars.

He walked away! On the shoulder of a major interstate highway!

"Come back!" I hollered, craning my face toward the open passenger door.

I was afraid of getting hit from behind, so I straightened out the car as he walked away in the opposite direction. I watched him recede in the rearview mirror as I rummaged through my bag with nervous hands, searching for my cell phone and then fumbling to open it. His gait was steady, he was walking with purpose and seemingly unaware of the danger he was bringing upon himself. He did not turn around to look at me.

I called Amalia. “Your father! He’s walking up the highway! Amalia! He’s going to get killed! What do I do?”

“Mom,” she said, her voice tight, “just drive home. I’ll go get Dad.”

I heard later that Álvaro had volunteered to go with her to hunt for Felipe on the interstate. They spotted him and pulled over. Álvaro wrestled with him on the shoulder, overpowering him with his youth and sobriety. He shoved him into the back seat and sat there with him on the ride back to our house. Felipe was strapped into the back seat, subdued and slumped in a drunken stupor. Without saying a word to me, Amalia and Álvaro helped Felipe into the house, jumped back into the car and went home.

I cried to myself and for myself in bed that night. I called my sister Lucía and told her what had happened. She was the only one I ever told these things to because her husband had been worse. At least Felipe had never pulled a gun on me or our kids, like her husband had. But Lucía had gotten lucky: he died before his time, if you can call twenty years of a shitty marriage “before his time.”

“I’m drowning,” I told Lucía. “Every day, he just gets worse. He could have killed us both today! Some days, I just hope he leaves and never comes back. But he always returns. And sometimes, he promises he’ll change. I just don’t think



he loves me anymore. Most days, I'm sure he doesn't even like me."

"Do *you* like him?" she asked me.

"I don't know. I'm tired. I've told him he could go, but he doesn't leave, and it would be so wrong for me to walk out. I am his wife. I can't," I said. "You should hear the things he comes out with some days, Lucía. It's humiliating!"

"Leave him," she said. "Maybe you have to, even if just for a little while, before he kills you both or you strangle him *por pendejo*."

We made plans that night, Lucía and me. She had spare rooms. We'd be roommates, like we were as girls in Costa Rica, before she'd gotten married, before we had moved to the United States.

Henry, Amalia and Eddie would watch over their father, she assured me. "Don't worry," she kept saying.

That night with Lucía delivering me from evil, I knew I'd finally leave him. I was no longer worried. When at last I started falling asleep, I felt as peaceful as if I'd rolled out the window, and it hadn't hurt at all.

Felipe slept it off on the sofa for most of the night. It was in the wee hours when I heard him go into the kitchen. I heard him open the cabinet and take out a glass. I heard the tap go on, then a crash, the glass falling, and another bigger crash, his body falling to the hard tiles.

He had his first seizure that night.



"May I?"

I heard his voice but didn't react. I didn't even stop writing. But my heart started pounding.

"Pardon, Ruth. May I?"