



# THE UNDISPUTED COLOR OF THE IMAGINATION

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Do you remember when you first saw the trailer for *Volver* in the theater? They throw the duct-taped refrigerator into a hole and there is whispered talk of secrets, and then it goes quiet. Penélope Cruz leans forward and claps her hands while she says, “tacating tacating tacating.” Someone looks under a bed. A woman’s singing swells like a lullaby. We know before seeing the movie that whatever the secrets are, they are somehow bloodied, but this is not a horror movie.

Red is everywhere. It pools against blue. It is worn in every shot, in checkers and v-necks, like a not-so-subtle joke. Paper towel soaks it in the same way you’d see in a commercial, first through the imprinted pattern. A man who knocks at the door wants to know what’s smeared on Penélope Cruz’s neck. “Women’s troubles,” she says, not exactly lying.

And what are the secrets? A daughter is a sister. A mother is not dead. All the wrong people screwed. The bodies have been hidden, scattered along the boundary between the living and the dead. A talk show host bribes a woman to disclose what she knows with the promise of cancer treatment. Penélope Cruz belts out singing in what everybody listening knows is somebody else’s voice.

Somehow, the trailer contains all of this. It takes very little to suggest that secrets connect women like blood. Or, that blood is a secret that women share. A stylist stirs the brown muck of hair dye with a red brush and it makes a sticky sound, just like it does for women washing out their underwear every month in the sink.

If Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* were a film, I can imagine a similar kind of trailer. Furtive glances between women. So much talk of

blood. The sigh, the not sound, of a body falling out the window. In one scene, three white-looking women laugh with terror as the racist man to whom one of them is married (he is in the dark) makes a joke about how funny it would be if she were a nigger.

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My white mother crawled across the brown carpet of our Los Angeles apartment for a cup of Earl Grey tea when she went into labor with me. My Black father jumped in the shower. I recently discovered the contact sheet from the roll of black and white film my father shot the next morning. In a series of tiny frames, a white woman in a striped shirt with huge glasses and curly brown hair pushes a tiny brown life out of her body with her legs up in stirrups. Just some people in a room in the eighties. My first day of life with a “Where’s Waldo?” vibe.

Upon discovering the images in a filing cabinet, I held the piece of thick photo paper like it glowed. Then I passed it to my mother. “Best day of my life,” she said cheerfully, scoffing at the suggestion that the day had been, in any way, a struggle. Years later, I would drive up and down Beverly Boulevard just to pass the hospital. I looked up at the windows with the same reverence you might feel toward a tombstone or a church.

I was born a month premature and immediately diagnosed as jaundiced. I ended up getting a blood transfusion. It was eventually discovered that between the years 1981 and 1985, Cedars-Sinai gave at least two hundred infants blood from donors infected with HIV. I was just barely not one of them.

The randomness at the heart of this fact hits me with the same shock of inevitability as the contact sheet: I was born. I could have gotten a different bag of blood. My mother wore very thick glasses.

Collage has about it an air of “oh shit.” The silk-screened photograph of JFK is on the upper right hand corner of Rauschenberg’s canvas, next to an eagle and above a parachute. The undone feel of the composition, the realness of the image and the roughness of the paint, suggest the ways in which we can’t go back. Just like how the house can’t be un-robbed. The bike can’t be un-struck. And if you want to get political about it, your great, great grandmother can’t be unborn into slavery. Your parents can’t uncross the border. Now what.