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Fragile Saints

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FRAGILE SAINTS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Mary-Claire Ibarra

2016

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Mary-Claire Ibarra, and entitled *Fragile Saints*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Les Standiford

Meri-Jane Rochelson

Debra Dean, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 28, 2016

The thesis of Mary-Claire Ibarra is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

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DEDICATION

For my daughters Celia Rose and Carmen Florencia–

may you always find life's magic.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

FRAGILE SAINTS

by

Mary-Claire Ibarra

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Debra Dean, Major Professor

FRAGILE SAINTS is a magical realist novel set in contemporary Peru. Elsa is struggling with her recent divorce and childhood memories of her family's silk-producing farm haunt her, so when Elsa's dying grandmother requests to see her, she visits Peru. There, Elsa learns she has inherited a country house, near the old family hacienda, which is haunted by a dark secret. Elsa is intrigued with the house, its caretakers, and her new lover Gustavo, yet she encounters disturbing ghostly visitors.

The novel is written primarily from Elsa's point of view, as she discovers her purpose, but an omniscient narrator is employed as well, taking the reader into the family's past. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude" and Isabel Allende's "The House of the Spirits," FRAGILE SAINTS uses magical realism to create a family saga where ancestral mishaps and the natural world influence the present day characters, making them vulnerable and yet also indomitable.

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Chapter 1–

Elsa flipped through the essays piled on her small desk. She had to grade finals, but her mind was still reeling from the student conference she had just had. The student was angry about failing, but he hadn't attended class for the past three weeks. He had pounded his fist on her desk before storming out.

The fluorescent lights in the office gave her a headache. The artificial light seemed to have its own wiry energy field, and it drained her. She peered out the window of the office and could see that it was still raining. There was a blanket of green stretching out beyond the campus and then a wall of redwoods, which stood like an ancient fortress in the distance. Elsa longed to be inside the forest, where the smell of rain and the green could nourish her.

“Hey there. Heard you had a rough conference.” Gary stuck his head inside and looked over Elsa. He added, “Our meeting probably didn't help things. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” Elsa could see the look of pity in his eyes, and this infuriated her. She didn't need his sympathy.

At the meeting, the faculty had been enlightened to the fact that enrollment at their small community college was way down and that major cut backs were in the works. Elsa was informed that she wouldn't have any classes over the summer.

“I'm fine. I'm heading home now.” Elsa rose and put the stack of essays into a manila folder. She grabbed her purse.

“Come on, Elsa. I know you better than that. Why are you being so cold?” Gary stood in the doorway, blocking her exit. His black hair was slicked back, and his green eyes glistened like a cat’s on the prowl.

“Listen, Gary. I know you’re expressing concern, but I’m really tired. It’s been a long day.” Elsa squeezed by him and strode away. She stopped, turned briefly, and said, “Gary, your good intentions often come too late. But thanks for trying.”

Her ex-husband Charles and Gary were best of friends.

Their marriage had ended when Charles had an affair with a student. He wasn’t even reprimanded by the school. Elsa had stubbornly stayed at the college, thinking, why should she be the one to leave if she did nothing wrong? Charles should have been fired. Hadn’t he broken some kind of ethical code?

Elsa made her way down the hallway and headed toward the elevator. Her heart started pounding. She always felt sure she would bump into him. His office was just around the corner.

Soon she was walking down the dank stairwell. This was the best way to avoid an awkward encounter. They had been divorced for a year, and she had become accustomed to slinking down hallways and rushing through the parking lot.

Elsa got into her car and took a deep breath.

She made her way along the winding road. It was dusk, and the rain made the drive slow. Once she pulled onto the dirt road and approached her cabin, she could see the porch light glowing dimly. She had survived another day, and the cabin was her refuge—even if she often felt lonely there. She walked up the wet wooden steps and entered the warmth of her home.

Elsa was pouring herself a glass of wine, when the telephone rang. It was her mother, Josephine.

“Honey, I wanted to let you know that your grandma has taken a turn for the worse,” her mother explained in a soft voice. Angelica, Elsa’s grandmother in Peru, had been declining in health over the past few months.

Josephine continued, “She is in hospice now, and she has requested to see you. How would you feel about going to Peru with your dad?”

Elsa felt moved that her grandmother wanted to see her. It had been several years since she last saw Angelica. Elsa reminded herself that she now had the summer off from teaching. Maybe it would be a chance to break out of her rut since Charles left. Elsa agreed to accompany her father Miguel to Peru.

The rain beat down on Elsa’s cabin in the redwoods while ancestors visited her in strange dreams. Real memories of visiting Peru as a child and those haunting dreams were hardly distinguishable. She recalled her grandmother Angelica’s large, old house in Lima, and also the country house in the Andes where her great-grandmother lived.

Elsa remembered following her great-grandmother Lucía into the adobe sheds in the backyard of the country house. Beds of silkworms in various stages of their life cycle filled the dank rooms. Moths, dull and gray, laid tiny specks of eggs, smaller than grains of rice. Those specks would hatch into pure white worms that rapidly grew monstrous as they gorged themselves on fresh, green mulberry leaves.

After their ravenous feasting of leaves, and at some instinctual moment, the worms would rise and begin their search for a suitable twig. Elsa’s great-uncle José spread out

thin branches on the plank beds, and out of their own body's machinery, the worms constructed cocoons resembling perfect, alabaster eggs.

Indian women sat by the fire in the courtyard, while the cocoons were carefully boiled in cauldrons of water, and one cocoon could produce a single silk thread stretching miles, leaving only a dried pupa behind to be used as animal feed.

Six-year-old Elsa would toss the dried out insect larvae to the chickens in the pen. Some cocoons had to be separated out, allowing moths to emerge and mate and then lay fertile eggs before they quickly died, keeping the cycle going indefinitely.

Elsa watched her great-grandmother Lucía, bent and crooked as she spun the wooden spool, winding thin, wispy raw silk into thread. Lucía would ask Elsa to help her untangle the bundles of thread, so Elsa sat on the floor beside her as the old woman rocked back and forth rhythmically in a creaking chair.

And one night, Lucía magically spun her dead husband, Salvatore, out of the silk piles resting at her feet. As she rocked in the old chair, the wooden spool cast him out, and she worked with tired, stiff hands to reel him back in. Salvatore had become a determined, stubborn man.

But his gentler, softer form billowed above her left shoulder, and he cried, "Lucía, Lucía, how could you be so indifferent to that cancer eating away at my stomach, my liver, at all of my pitiful guts?" His figure of silky threads swayed and stretched.

Elsa watched in amazement and fear, crouched by her great-grandmother's side.

"It was the guilt that made you sick," Lucía replied. "It was guilt that ate away at your insides. My conscience is clear." And to that, his tenuous form quivered, and the threads collapsed into a heap on the floor.

Elsa then helped Lucía gather up the silk bundles from the cold tiles. Lucía tossed them into her basket and slowly made her way through the courtyard strewn with passion fruit vines, past the laundry hung to dry on chords, past the chicken coop and dog’s shed. And Elsa watched as Pastor, the three-legged dog, came out of the shadows and followed the shuffle and thump of Lucía’s cane up the staircase to her tiny room with its single bed. Lucía’s daughter, Angelica, appeared then. Elsa’s grandmother was plump and soft, and she had sparkling blue eyes. She took Elsa’s hand and led her to bed, tucking her in with a kiss to the forehead. Even after Angelica’s warm touch, the ghost of her great-grandfather and those strange, pale worms haunted little Elsa’s dreams.

One week later, Elsa and Miguel landed in Lima. They took a taxi from the airport. Lima at dawn looked grim and dirty; the desert-like terrain left everything covered in beige dust. They passed the section of beach used as a dump, and Elsa shuddered as she saw children trek across the smoking mounds and the dark green waters foam yellowish white. Elsa watched out the window of the taxi at the auburn visages of people walking down bustling streets and literally dangling out of crowded, dilapidated buses.

She noticed the dry desert cliffs running above the seashore, which they had navigated to get down to the beach when she was a child. She then remembered the smell of the mounds of burning garbage on the street corners, which her *abuela* had cursed at when the city's trash collectors went on strike.

“Ay, *Dios mio*, we are a poor country; they call us third world.” Angelica had cursed them when they passed the stinky, black smoking mounds on the sidewalks. “It’s the