



2023 WINTER READ

***Sabrina & Corina: Stories* by Kali Fajardo-Anstine**

This award-winning short story collection follows Chicana characters of Indigenous ancestry and the land they inhabit in the American West. They navigate the land the way they navigate their lives: with caution, grace, and quiet force. These stories are moving narratives of unrelenting power and explorations of the universal experiences of abandonment, heritage, and an eternal sense of home.

“Sugar Babies” (22 pages)

Eighth grader Sierra Cordova takes part in a school project in which she and a classmate must take care of a “sugar baby,” a bag of sugar, as an experiment in parenting and responsibility. At home, Sierra's mother—who has come and gone, eager to live a bigger life than she was given in the small town of Saguarita, Colorado—returns yet again. Sierra's project partner, Robbie Martinez has also stumbled upon indigenous remains outside of town and an archeological dig has sprung up to unearth the community's ancestors. The dig is eventually closed after a petition from one of the Native groups; Sierra's mother leaves (perhaps for good this time); and the sugar baby “dies” from its randomly assigned disease. At the end of the story, Sierra and Robbie stand together overlooking the now-closed archeological site and give Miranda, their sugar baby, over to the earth.

Major themes: Landscape of the American West, being a part of something bigger, roots, memory, how sorrow manifests in individuals and communities, motherhood, new life

“Sabrina & Corina” (22 pages)

Sabrina and Corina Cordova are cousins in Denver who have grown up together. From the beginning of the story, we know that Sabrina is dead, strangled by an intimate partner. Corina works at the makeup counter at a department store, and her grandmother asks her to prepare her cousin—who is severely bruised and swollen—for the funeral viewing. We learn more about Sabrina as the story unfolds: about her unique beauty, her white father, her pride, dropping out of high school, working at bars and spending too much in them with increasingly dangerous men. Corina has taken a very different path, pursuing education and a skill, implored by her father to ‘not follow the path of other women in the family.’ We learn how Sabrina became unknowable to Corina, emanating a sadness and feeling that without her beauty she was worth nothing. At the end of the story, Corina remembers the last time she saw her cousin: outside a party, as Sabrina sped away from the pain in her life.

Major themes: Family, multi-generational stories, societal expectations, tradition, faith, death, community, desperation, absence, worth and beauty, family myths, value and treatment of women, intimate partner violence

“Sisters” (23 pages)

Sisters Doty and Tina Lucero live together in their duplex on the Northside of Denver in the late 1950s (they are great aunts to Sabrina & Corina). We know from the opening line that Doty will have her eyesight “stolen” from her. One morning Doty finds flyers posted outside about a young local Filipino girl who has gone missing. Doty recognizes Lucia Barrera from church and the local dance hall, remembers the moment she first noticed her and how “something like heat spread across the center of her dress” when the two shared a silent secret. The sisters, now in their late teens, left home to flee a preying Anglo man who had become their mother’s partner. The sisters’ relationship is beginning to shift as Tina dates a white man named Randy and endeavors to set Doty up with someone. Doty isn’t interested, but goes on several dates with Joey Matthews, an arborist, at her sister’s insistence. Tina becomes engaged, and soon after Doty finds herself alone and isolated with an increasingly pushy Joey after a night out. He throws her after she tries to run away from him, and a head injury blinds her. Joey creates a different story for the accident and claims to have saved her from a worse fate. Lucia, the missing girl, is found. Tina marries, and at the reception Doty speaks with an unnamed young woman. “I bet people say you’re lucky it wasn’t worse,” the young woman says about Doty’s “accident.” “As a matter of fact,” said Doty, “no one says anything about it at all.”

Major themes: Invisibility, intimate partner violence, missing women of color, worth and beauty, exoticizing women, family myths, environment, LGBTQIA+ issues, theft

“Remedies” (16 pages)

Eleven-year-old Clarisa meets her younger half-brother Harrison, with whom she shares a father that is no longer a part of either of their lives. Clarisa’s mother Millie takes it upon herself to connect with Harrison, whose mother is an addict like the children’s father was. Clarisa is disgusted by Harrison’s living conditions, and hates him for giving her lice multiple times, but especially for how much he resembles their father. Estrella, Clarisa’s great grandmother, brackets the story. In the beginning it is Estrella’s remedies that promise some hope of curing the physical infestation of lice, and in the end, it is her advice to Millie to not overstep her place that ends Clarisa’s time with Harrison. The very end of the story jumps ahead a decade and a half or so: Estrella has died and left her booklet of remedies to Clarisa, and Clarisa sees Harrison sometimes and they share a connection, even if from a distance.

Major themes: Family, tradition, tradition vs. modernity, shame, letting go of others’ choices

“Julian Plaza” (19 pages)

Alejandra and her older sister Cora spend time at their father’s workplace: Julian Plaza, a senior home in Denver where he is the maintenance man. Their mother Nayeli is inching toward death just like the elderly people they know at the home, dying from breast cancer. Nayeli is being taken care of by Miss Cynthia, a woman who runs a daycare out of her home and who the girls’ father pays by selling electronics stolen from the senior home’s deceased occupants. Cora, the older daughter, is attuned to their father’s wrongdoings, while Alejandra can’t yet believe her father would do something bad in order to do something good. Cora is determined to bring their mother home and take care of her, and the girls disastrously attempt to take her from Miss Cynthia’s house. Shortly after, their father’s store of goods in the garage is stolen, and they can no longer pay Miss Cynthia and must bring Nayeli home

anyhow. The story ends with the girls playing in Julian Plaza again, presumably one of the last summer days before they will be taking care of their mother at home, seeking pleasure in their old games. Alejandra remembers a time they helped their mother—before she was sick—bring pies to the residents, and how happy her mother made these lonely people.

Major themes: Dreams, family blood/heritage, family, death, sisters, aging, illness, caretaking

“Galapago” (14 pages)

Pearla Ortiz is a widow who has lived on the same street—Galapago—for more than 60 years. She has lost her husband, Avel, as well as an adult daughter, Mercedes. Her granddaughter, Alana, urges her to move as the Westside neighborhood of Denver is beginning to gentrify. The home was broken into several times before Avel died, including once by a small child; there are bars on the home’s windows, and Pearla had the small window in her bedroom completely covered after these events. An incident in which Pearla shoots and kills a young white man who breaks into her house is the final straw. Alana takes her to visit a community home and makes the arrangements for her grandmother to move into the facility, away from Galapago—a home more than a street, now changing.

Major themes: Gentrification, safety, tradition, sympathy for those who hurt us, stolen homes/memories, faith, dreams, forgetting, loss

“Cheesman Park” (21 pages)

Liz is a young adult who moves home to Denver from California following an abusive relationship that leaves her badly bruised in the face. She returns to live with her mother in their apartment overlooking Cheesman Park. Reminiscences of Liz’s violent father and generational violence rise throughout the story. One night while smoking on the building’s roof Liz meets Monica, a young widow. The two women find a needed companionship as they both process grief at lives lost. One night in the park, a drunk Monica beats a homeless man who’s wearing one of her husband’s old jackets that Liz threw out for her. Liz remembers her father’s face in Liz’s “blank” eyes as she beats the helpless man. The story ends with Liz remembering a phone conversation with her mother before moving home: her mother is wondering if her own eyes have always had a “dull light” that she sees in old photographs, where that dullness came from, how she worries others will recognize her sadness, and ultimately her forsaking of being loved.

Major themes: Intimate partner violence, generational violence, alcohol/drug use as escapism, suicide, death, tradition, friendship, pain and healing, faith, invisibility, scars, dreams

Note: This story does include depictions of violent sex.

“Tomi” (23 pages)

Cole has just been released from a correctional facility and comes to live with her brother Manny and his son Tomi. Their family house, left to Manny when the siblings’ parents died, is in an-increasingly gentrified area of Denver. Tomi spends most of his time playing video games—his father works, and his mother walked out on them. All the house’s pillows are mysteriously missing. Cole, now sober after a bad accident, had started reading while in prison and takes Tomi to the bookstore so he’ll take a break

from gaming. They pick out a book together and begin reading it aloud at home. Cole realizes how far behind Tomi is in reading proficiency, researches ways to help him, and tutors him. They go to the library to get more books, but Tomi wanders off and goes to his mother's boyfriend's house, setting off a panic in Cole as she searches for him. The entire family convenes at Natalie's boyfriend's house, and the two women physically fight, their pent-up dislike of each other manifesting. Cole feels badly afterwards, though, aware of how ashamed Natalie is of her life. Cole, too, is ashamed of her decisions, how she's hurt her family. The story ends with a meditation on the family house, which has been a living and breathing character throughout, and the stories we share within such spaces.

Major themes: Drug use/incarceration, gentrification, literacy, shame, family, home, storytelling/power of fiction, teen pregnancy

"Any Further West" (17 pages)

Neva, a Saguariita-born girl, moves west with her mother Desiree Leticia Cordova, a woman who has struggled with alcohol, drugs, and dependence on men. Desiree has a history of taking "ecstatic breaks" from the sadness of her life, sweeping her daughter off to try out different lives. When Neva is twelve, they move to San Diego, where her mother begins dating their landlord, a white man named Casey. Without her mother working, the two struggle, even resorting to stealing from the grocery store for the picnic celebrating Neva's thirteenth birthday. Neva's grandmother, who they left in Saguariita (Colorado), worries for her daughter and granddaughter, stays tied to them through phone calls and letters, urging Desiree in particular to remember her father: "He allowed the world to fill up his sadness." In the end of the story, Neva—who only wants to return home to Saguariita—realizes that her mother "was forever caught in her own undercurrent," unable to rescue herself from the sadness that consumes her.

Major themes: Dislocation, family of women, suicide, scars, home, belonging, family stories, dreams

"All Her Names" (14 pages)

Michael and Alicia are friends, once high school sweethearts, who spend time together tagging train cars in the Denver rail yard. Alicia is married to an older white man and auctioneer, Gary, who leaves town often for work. Alicia is also pregnant and wants to end the pregnancy with herbs from a trusted, local shop, Botánica del Cobre. We learn that she also had a pregnancy in her teens—a child that would have been Michael's—that her Abuela Lopez helped end through the use of herbs. After they go by the Cobre, Michael and Alicia go to the train yard. Two policemen, one white and one Latino ("a boy with a name like Mendoza, perhaps a cousin of a cousin") find them and chase them out. Michael tells her that he can't see her anymore, and the story ends with a remembrance of Gary taking Alicia to a cabin in southern Colorado—a cabin he bought, but which is near her family's home in the San Luis Valley. She is looking for the north star, which she's always been able to find, but finds that she cannot see it.

Major themes: Pregnancy/abortion, gentrification, remedies, tradition, language, history of place, movement, making a mark

“Ghost Sickness” (16 pages)

Ana is a college student, studying the history of the American West in a summer school class and preparing for her final. Her boyfriend, Clifton, has left town to visit family on a New Mexico reservation. He tends to disappear and reception is spotty, so Ana isn't concerned when at first she can't reach him. Ana struggles to study for her exam, confusing the dates, her mother teasing her about their family's deep history in the West and 'how could she be struggling in *history* class?' Her mother jokes that Ana inherited her memory from a white man (her father). Ana, meanwhile, wonders at the history right around her and how no one seems to care—Who used to live in that neighborhood? What were their names? Her teacher discusses “ghost sickness” one day: “a culture-bound syndrome of the Navajo and other southwestern tribes,” taught as an “imaginary illness.” The final exam contains an extra credit question about the origin story of the Navajo, which Clifton—who she knows in her gut is dead by the end of the story—once told her while trying to calm her down as he removed a tick from her head. She knows she will remember the story for the rest of her life; it is, as Clifton once said, “our story of everything.”

Major themes: History of the American West, invisibility of Indigenous women, violence, storytelling, gentrification, family, naming, remembering/forgetting, memory, motion, environment, landscape