Ladydi: Portrait of a Mexican Girl in Danger
by Lucina Kathmann

Who is Ladydi García Martínez? From one point of view, she doesn't exist. She is a character in *Prayers for the Stolen*, a novel by Jennifer Clement. But that is not a good answer, because Ladydi's life is reality for many young Mexican women with extremely restricted resources and well-grounded fear, who face adolescence and womanhood soon.

That answer is not quite right either. Not every girl in line to be stolen and sold has an alcoholic, kleptomaniac, embittered, wisecracking idiot-savant of a mother who loves her unconditionally. This crazy woman sometimes even lets her love show. Though she is a disgrace and a distraction, she is often an asset.

Ladydi has to make sense of all this and, once we see what “all this” means, we may wonder if it is possible.

To understand her, we have to accept Ladydi as she is. We have to ride over all the little barriers between reality and fiction to find out what is going on in the lives of many adolescents, by no means all of them Mexican, who face the realities of violence against women wherever they are. In this case it is a hot tropical mountain outside Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico, a formerly intact town from which all the adult males have left, ostensibly to earn money, and which has been split in two by the construction of a highway. The local school functions only when some apprentice teacher is forced to go there to do his or her year of social service. Often they run away before the year is over. The only species that flourish in the situation are reptiles and insects.

The most terrifying problem is the periodic advent of sinister Cadillac Escalades with tinted windows and no license plates which roar in like ravenous beasts and take the girls away. The girls never return. Women on this mountain try to protect their daughters. They pretend their daughters are sons as long as this is possible to maintain; they paint out their teeth and try to make them look repulsive, and they dig holes in the earth like bomb shelters where the girls hide when someone sees or hears the SUVs coming.

What does this do to girlhood? Though they know very well what danger they live in, they still have the interests of normal girls. They dream the dreams they get from magazines and television. Though they have few other services, satellite dish television works. They have seen what things are supposed to look like elsewhere---clean, fair and perfect. The girls dream of lipstick, painted nails, long hair, beautiful braids and chignons, sweeping waves, curls. They can never have these things, for their own survival. Ruth, who runs the beauty shop on the mountain, complains that she is actually in charge of an ugly shop.

The women and girls can only receive telephone calls from the one place on the mountain that sometimes gets cell coverage. This small clearing is always full of women moving around and holding cellphones up in the air, hoping. By the end of the book, her mother will certainly be in that place with her phone held high, and Ladydi will need the signal to work.

Like most of the men from the mountain, Ladydi's father abandons his family. He starts out with good intentions, sending money from the United States and coming home to visit sometimes. Eventually he makes another family where he now lives, so the money for Ladydi and her mother dries up.

Ladydi's mother takes the abandonment very badly. She is always obsessed with her husband's infidelities and, after he leaves for good, holds on to her hatred and sense of betrayal as though it were the essence of her being. She wants to murder him and at one point does shoot the person on the mountain who looks most like him, his illegitimate daughter Maria.

Ladydi too has trouble with what her father has done. Why, no matter what his history with her mother, does her father abandon her as well? She is disappointed with him for his infidelities, but she still loves him and really wishes she could see him again.

Other families on the mountain have equally unsatisfactory stories about how ultimately their men left them. When it becomes undeniable on one of his visits that his wife is dying of AIDS, despite his certainly being the source of her disease, Ladydi's friend Estefani's father calls his wife a whore, beats and deserts her. So much for Prince Charming and "happily ever after."

And yet, as so many girls from so many different situations, the girls still dream of romantic love. No matter what happens, even though what happens is not at all what happens to regular girls, Ladydi is still a regular girl, a regular girl to whom extreme things happen. In a society in which she might well soon be sold as a "slave mistress" and forced to have whatever sexual relations her owner decrees, nonetheless she dreams of her first kiss. This kiss is actually bestowed on her by a young schoolteacher. By this point she has turned 13, he is 23. He is returning to Mexico City in hours. It is sort of a goodbye gesture. She reports that this kiss "tasted like glass windows, cement and elevators to the moon."[1]

Though Ladydi is the voice for the stolen, she is not actually herself stolen. She comes very close. The hole in the backyard saves her. Her mother hears the SUVs, Ladydi hides, the criminals ride right over where she is hiding, shoot up the house and finally depart in a cloud of exhaust fumes which choke her--but they are also the sign of her salvation.

Not so Paula, the most beautiful girl in the world, according to Ladydi, whose mother doesn't hear the SUVs in time. The criminals shoot their dogs and sneak up on them. They take Paula away.

As the book opens, Ladydi is 11 or 12 years old. We soon know that her strange name evokes Lady Diana of England, not because her mother admired that woman, but because Lady Di was wronged. A girl is somebody who will be wronged. The name itself is a sort of revenge Ladydi's mother has taken against her husband.

Ladydi describes herself very briefly: "I have brown eyes, brown skin and brown frizzy hair, and look like everyone else I know."[2] A teacher tells her that the people in Guerrero are Afro-Indian. Near the end of the book, Ladydi, now in prison, is 16, still a minor. She compares herself with a fellow prisoner, "She was a small dark brown Mayan Indian from Guatemala with straight black hair. I was a medium-sized dark brown mix of Spanish and Aztec blood from Guerrero, Mexico, with frizzy, curly hair which proved that I also had some African slave blood. We were just two pages from the continent's history book. You could tear us out and roll us into a ball and throw us in the trash."[3]

Women can easily be removed, thrown away, discarded. Ruth, the beautician, is actually a garbage baby, she was found in a trash can, as were many others whom a benefactor took in. But Ruth too is stolen and disappears. As one of the neighbors comments, "A missing woman is just another leaf that goes down the gutter in a rainstorm."[4]

Like the young of so many species, Ladydi has to learn from her mother. Her survival depends on it. She plainly has already understood some of the features of their situation. One day while returning home her mother finds the body of a young man who has clearly been murdered. Ladydi's analysis of what might be a complex situation is simple and identical to her mother's: the body is too close to their house. Vultures will call attention to it and may bring on the dreaded Escalades. They have to do something, not for the young man but for their own survival. They have to bury him.

They do this and that is the end of the matter. As far as they know, nobody knows what happened and nobody looks for him. Violent death happens all the time.

As a teacher of life skills, however, Ladydi's mother is not uniformly reliable. For example, she believes that if you want something very much, you must pray for something else, something irrelevant. “If God hears what you really want, he will not give it to you. Guaranteed.”[5] When Ladydi's father leaves them, she tells Ladydi, “Get down on your knees and pray for spoons.”[6]

Ladydi learns this. Later on, after she is taken to prison and desperately needs to contact her mother, she prays for a glass of water. When she falls in love with a young man and is desperate for his attention, she prays for ladders.

Along with this peculiar theology and a great deal of bitterness and cynicism, Ladydi learns that her mother will support her to the end. She knows this long before her friend and half-sister María brings to the prison a message from Ladydi's mother: “Love is not a feeling. It's a sacrifice.”[7]

Though Ladydi learns well, she doesn't learn everything she has to learn. She lands in prison because of a failure to learn what everybody who comes from the mountain should know: Don't hide important things under your mattress; that's the first place the invaders will look.

Ladydi isn't guilty of the homicide she is in jail for. She is in jail because when María's brother Miguel is driving her to a job in Acapulco he found for her, he stops and leaves her locked in a broiling hot car while, as she discovers later, he kills an important narcotrafficker and his child. When Miguel is picked up by the police, he implicates Ladydi. Any hopes of denying her involvement are dashed when police find a large brick of heroin under her mattress. It is in a package Miguel asked Ladydi to hold for him.

Before she leaves the mountain, Ladydi learns more than she possibly could from her mother or schoolteachers. She finds out more than anybody else on the mountain knows. She finds out what happens to the stolen girls, the girls who never come back, who are never heard from again. She is able to find out because of her loving relationship with Paula.

Something very amazing happens with Paula. One year after her abduction she comes back. This has never happened before. One day Paula stumbles home in a state like the walking dead, unable to talk, unable to account for what happened to her. Her body is covered with cigarette burns and tattoos. Her mother takes her in and treats her like a baby, feeds her baby foods and milk from a bottle. Time goes on and Paula never seems to improve. Yet one magic day, Ladydi finds her alone and is able to get her to talk. Paula tells Ladydi what nobody ever heard before, a disgusting story of stolen women, the goods and property of big time narcotraffickers and their obscenely luxurious lifestyle.

We already know that if Paula can talk to anyone, it will be to Ladydi. From the beginning of the book Ladydi has gentle, loving friendships with the girls of the mountain. Not only Paula, Ladydi loves María as well, and Estefani. Where did Ladydi get the gentle, loving ways she demonstrates with her

girlfriends? From her beloved father? From a hidden soft shadow behind her mother's cynical exterior? Is it an ironic strength of the all-female environment on the mountain? Does it come from coping with her mother's erratic and embarrassing ways? Is it simply her character, an inexplicable gift of nature? Later her ways put her at an advantage in the harsh society of the women's prison. Though Ladydi doesn't seem to work at it, she knows how to behave with other women, no matter how extreme their situation or hers.

It would be wrong to conclude that because Ladydi has this gentle side, she is either an empty slate, a young person who could be imprinted with anything that comes her way, or a Sweetie Pie. Ladydi also angers and seeks revenge. She is a worthy scion of the people of her state, Guerrero, of which her mother says "This is where we are proud to be the meanest and angriest people in the world."[8] A taxi driver makes an obscene proposition to Ladydi when she is trying to get María to the hospital emergency room. She soon takes revenge: "I squirmed forward in my seat. Then I reached around my back and lifted up my skirt. I peed deep through my underwear and into the black cloth seat of the taxi."[9]

Who is Ladydi? This study is an effort at a portrait. It does not relate principally to what happens to her but rather who she is. Ladydi is a girl in adolescence, a period of learning for everyone but especially important for Ladydi. She has few sources of information so mostly she must learn from her mother. She knows her mother is an alcoholic because her mother has passed out in situations that have embarrassed her, but she doesn't understand the ways in which her mother is crazy. She uses what she has gleaned from her mother and their situation, but she also adds to it from her own character and the few important experiences she has had apart from her mother.

Ladydi is a poor girl. If Miguel had not killed someone rich and important, nobody would have come for her, much less put her in jail. While police are picking Ladydi up, they shoot the servant woman Jacaranda to death and nobody even mentions the matter. But Miguel killed a drug lord, and the government cares about that. The book does not detail how the drug lord is involved with the police and the civil authorities, but that is taken for granted. In Mexico police and government always side with the rich. Some of them are actually narcotraffickers themselves, others are just complicit.

Ladydi is certainly herself; no commentary should or could limit that. However watching her situation unfold, her many efforts to learn and cope, we have to be reminded of the many other girls who run risks like Ladydi wherever the complex trade of narcotics and human trafficking flourishes. Ladydi is from Guerrero, but there are other girls, some of whose bones now litter the northern desert more than 2000 km. away, outside Ciudad Juárez in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. And there are others from Russia, Nigeria, Thailand and every corner of the globe. Some are no longer in their countries, they have been trafficked internationally; others are still captive somewhere near home. Some, like Ladydi, have for the moment escaped the kidnappers' clutches. The neighbor from the mountain says the girls are "just leaves that went down the gutter in a rainstorm," but once we know Ladydi, we aren't going to feel comfortable about that.

END

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