



Suzanne Ste. Therese

## Los Verdes

A family with small hands and small feet sit in a row in a pew, praying, their hands turned upright on their laps. Every one of them is mental, and every one of them wears green. They each mumble small chants to quell the anxiety they feel being so small in a large world. Their feet dangle, not reaching the kneeler, which they rarely use because they cannot see over the pew's height to pray to the cross. They sit rocking like a ripple, each forty-two inches high, bobbing heads with brown, green-burnished hair, green eyes, and pale skin the color of the shallow sea's foam in Bahia de Los Angeles, where they are from. They have made the long journey to Southern California up Mex 1 on the Baja Peninsula, hiding under a tarp in a truckload of blue-green cabbages. They rub their skin with leaves to disguise their human smell.

Los Verdes, the Green Ones, they are called, are experts at making bricks. Being so close to the ground, they easily transform clay earth into the rectangular pieces that are then made into fine patios for churches and homes across Mexico.

A very rich sponsor decides their craft needs to be in the United States after seeing their work in Cabo San Lucas. There, a wide expanse of brick meteorological patterns, clouds,

hurricanes, lightning, tornados, all rendered into a single weather phenomenon, overlooks the incandescent brightness of the sea.

Two sets of four siblings and four parents, age seventy-six to thirty-one, the elders are not eager to move their business from the small fishing village. They like the pace of travel in their old pickup to places nearby. Younger adults sit on the bricks in the back, while the older ones take the front cab. They often stop for coffees or colas and bathrooms, snacking when they want at places that don't mind their appearance.

The eldest, Mama, goes to the preserve in Bahia to consult the sea turtles about California. The turtles swim from the Sea of Cortez thousands of miles to Africa's coast and always return. Mama can only imagine the long way and wonder what they learn moving such far distances with their bulky ease.

She makes her descent into the blue-green waters wearing all her clothes, a dress and shoes, and holds her breath to great depths as she has since she was a child. She finds Turtle the Younger by the dizzying patterns of his flippers leisurely stroking the seawater. He's not very busy and inclined to take a nap after a gliding contest with his brothers. "Papa? I'll get him." Turtle the Younger nudges a giant gray whale, who emits a deep organ-pipe pulse penetrating the thick saltwater, and soon Turtle the Elder lumbers toward Mama. She has been patiently dog-paddling in the sea.

"Elder! What do you think of your long travels?"

"Why do you ask, Mama of the Green?"

"We have been invited to make bricks in California for some churches and homes by a very rich man."

"Hmmm. Could be interesting, like diving deep into a shipwreck without touching the rusty parts."

"Have you done this?" Mama demands.

"Yes and no. Maybe when I was a lot younger, but maybe when I was older too."

Mama dives to the bottom of the sea and sits on Elder, bubble-humming, "Elder, I need advice."

"I would say make the dive, take everyone, and stay together so you are always swimming in the same sea. That way, you'll be safe while you make your bricks."

“Thank you, Elder.” Mama still has plenty of air left and takes her time swimming to the surface. She tastes the salt on her lips and smells the fish and the gulls, the sand and the seaweed, and knows she will miss this place.

Mama, the eldest, the most stout and buoyant of all of Los Verdes with her ability to swim, imagines their brick patterns and is deeply respected by the rest of the family. After her turtle swim and without complaint, the family shuts up the brick house where they live, lending the key to the neighbors for their guests.

They each pack one satchel and make arrangements with a cabbage farmer in the north to ride in his truck to California. They had paved his yard with phases of the sun, and he never tired of it. Transportation is the least he can do to repay such artistry.

When they arrive in San Diego County, they pool their money and make an offering for protection at the Parish of Saint Stephen, patron saint of bricklayers. They have a coveted card upon which is written a single phone number—their patron’s—and the thirty-one-year-old who speaks the best English calls from the church. They find their sponsor has a “3/2” guest house waiting for them on his property in Beverly Hills. He sends a van to pick them up.

Their first job is on the wide expanse of concrete plaza at the Cathedral de Los Angeles, where the archbishop wants the stations of the cross embellished in brick for Lenten services. Mama draws on the concrete bed the patterns just as Los Verdes are to replicate it. The provided bricks, however, are several millimeters too large, and each must be patiently trimmed by four middle children, their nails pale green against the cobbled red. They lay the trimmed bricks in rows one foot apart for ease of selection by the older masons who make their mortarless flush fit for each seam. It takes them six months—they work hidden behind plywood sheeting and only attend church when everyone else is gone. After all, they are the small green people and do not want to cause a stir.

When they finish the cathedral’s fourteen stations to great accolades, they kneel down in their living room, each mumbling their nonsensical chants. They have made plenty of money to live comfortably in Bahia but feel their mission is not yet complete.

Mama speaks up. “We must take a deep dive into the water of Spirit without distraction or insult and see what comes up.” Eleven heads nod, blinking hard, not understanding a word Mama says, but they change their gibberish into prayers for a miracle.

The cardinal observes their work at the cathedral and learns they are looking for more. His project is much smaller and a tribute to his first parish as a priest located across from the police station in South Central Los Angeles. This commission requires new skills, working with bluestone and glass. It will be pie-shaped with each slice representing a righteous way like “good,” “joy,” “peace,” and “listen.” At the center of the pie will be a small meditation bench that casts shadows with the sun’s rays like a timepiece.

Mama is worried. Glass? Bluestone? They only know the alchemy of brick, making its rough, unyielding form like liquid to create their patterns. It is their magic from many generations.

Mama boards the van and comes home one day with a heavy grocery sack, spreads a dish towel onto the living room floor, and lays out the bag’s contents. Crystals, sharp-edged and glowing, will be used to spell out the virtues on each slice. Mama’s wrinkled forehead concerns everyone. Then eleven sets of hands grab the particles and begin to fit them together like cracked puzzle pieces. They are tossed back and forth between Los Verdes. Edges begin to dissolve into smooth shapes. “Listen,” spelled perfectly in smooth block letters, appears on the dark blue dish towel. The light on the crystal backlit by the blue gives them their answer: They will dissolve the bricks and inlay bluestone, over which they will fit, very tight, crystal words. This method is their miracle.

It takes their tiny, dexterous hands four months to create the mural, the forty-foot circumference outlined with half-cut brick, soldier course brick defining the triangular sliced edges with running bond rows in between. The crystal words on bluestone are inlaid at each piece edge, while the bench sits at the center, shaped like a butterfly’s wing.

The cardinal blesses the space, Los Verdes bowing their heads, mumbling antiphons of faith and longing. After they depart, the mural becomes a cult-like secret for only the most devout, a parish underground for the poor who pray. They believe in the mural’s healing powers and the legend of the green people who made it.

Los Verdes belong with the gifts of the sea, not these blessings. They thank their patron profusely and make him a small and intricate plaque that they mount at the sidewalk’s center leading to the guest house door. Gracias, it says, thank you. Whenever the patron feels especially selfish, he goes and looks at this talisman, stroking its beaded surface of crystal, bluestone, and

brick, and feels better, more magnanimous.

Los Verdes return to Bahia de Los Angeles. On the rare occasion a person seeks them out for their artistry and maybe just curiosity, they cannot be found. Eleven months in the big world have taught them to stay away, stay silent, separate from the noise and temptation of new forms of alchemy. They believe their patron from God is a selfish saint wanting them only for the brick. So St. Stephen hides them, and, one by one, they die, taking their secrets with them.

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