

Songs

Lisa Madsen de Rubilar

MARTA PILLAHUEL WAS VERY OLD. She lived in the country with her pigs on one side and her chickens on the other. Her wooden house leaned to the east and let in the weather—a warm breeze in the summer, a bit of storm fine as sea spray in the winter.

The outside boards were green and slick from Valdivia rain, and the inside boards were gray from cookstove smoke. There were two rooms—one for cooking, for eating, and for talking hours and hours on cold afternoons with the teapot boiling and with a *maté* cup to pass from hand to hand; the other room was for sleeping and for praying.

Now that she was old, Marta Pillahuel lived nearer town. Not that she had moved: the neighborhoods just kept sneaking closer, like a dog sliding his rear end out of the cold in to where he knows he doesn't belong.

By the road, it was now only a half-hour walk from Marta Pillahuel's house to the first neighborhood block. But through the fields, as Marta Pillahuel went, even in the wet, in her cracked rubber boots, it was only fifteen minutes to the nearest church. Even God was closer now than he used to be. Some of the eviler mouths, on cold afternoons, said Marta Pillahuel blasphemed against the baptism of her birth so she wouldn't have to walk so far. After more than half a century of mass every Sunday in the cathedral downtown, Marta Pillahuel now took her wrinkled face and listening eyes to a little box of a church, all cinderblock and windows, where her boots paced strangely on white linoleum floors and her fuzzed coat moved like a shadow there where

A native of Colorado, LISA MADSEN de RUBILAR now lives in Provo, Utah, with her husband, Roberto, and son, Alexander. She works as a technical writer at a computer software company.

everything still smelled chalky and new. Inside the church there were even toilets with doors on the stalls, and shiny sinks with metal faucets, and a giant mirror all uncracked.

This was where, on the morning of her first sacrament meeting, Elena García met Marta Pillahuel for the first time. Their glances connected in the uncracked mirror as Marta Pillahuel rinsed the soles of her boots under the tap and Elena García brushed her long black hair.

"Congratulations," Marta Pillahuel said, "and welcome." She knew that Elena was Andrés Espinoza's bride and was not surprised that Elena was exactly as she had imagined her. Elena nodded and smiled but quickly shifted her gaze elsewhere. It rested on the door that opened into the font where she had been baptized the day before her marriage. Her mother had come to the wedding anyway, a black scarf tied over her head; but her aunts, her cousins, her grandmother, and her godmother had not. Elena was two weeks married, and everything was new—her family, her home, her bed, her body, even her church.

Marta Pillahuel's eyes snatched at hers once again in the mirror. "I would like you to come to my house for scones and honey," she said. "Can you come tonight?"

That evening Elena and Andrés walked out through the fields to Marta Pillahuel's house and returned late, stumbling against each other in that moonless night, laughing with the darkness. That was the first time Elena García went to Marta Pillahuel's.

The second time, she went by way of the road and she went alone, except for the baby growing large inside her. It had rained, and the hedges were still raining. She tapped the curved limbs of the wild blackberry with the tip of her umbrella as she passed. The blackberry branches were intertwined as a child's curls, each one making a perfect arc that straightened just a bit as Elena's tap let drops fall heavy and straight to the ground. Elena could not see over the hedge. She could see only the sky, blue and cloudy, the tips of the giant firs up ahead, and the swan necks of the wild blackberries.

Where the road curved suddenly to the left, the sandy soil that turned silver with each step gave way to a mire. Elena stopped. She could take off her shoes and wipe her feet later on the wet grass, but Andrés would be angry. He would say, "Think of the baby." He would want her to turn back.

The grass along the edge of the road was just as well churned by hooves, feet, and wheels as the road itself, so Elena decided to walk straight down the middle of the road between the deepest ruts. She walked carefully, up on her toes, watching for the firmest spots; but despite her caution, her shoe came off in the mud. She lost her bal-

ance and muddied her hand before she could get her foot back in. "I couldn't help it," she said aloud.

When Elena looked up again, there was a shining hill—green and perfectly curved—lying ahead, and wide green fields on either side. The road appeared to end right there at the foot of the hill. But Elena knew the illusion—how in reality it veered off to the left at the last moment and looped right past Marta Pillahuel's door.

The hill was greener now, just past the winter rains, than it had been when she and Andrés had come nine months before. And the road was longer. It was too long. She shouldn't have come. Elena crouched at the side of the road to relieve the weighted pain in her abdomen. Leaning forward on one hand, she supported the baby's weight on her thighs.

She looked up the road once more at the shining hill—green against blue against the clouds' gray-white. Then she looked down where her hand tingled against the soil. Tiny purple flowers grew between her fingers. The baby made three quick thuds there where her womb pressed against her thigh, and Elena García laughed right out loud. "Come out, baby," she said. "Come out and see the sunshine!"

She stood and walked again, singing a song about the Christ child. Marta Pillahuel was going to help her with the Christmas songs the Primary children would sing at the front of the chapel in two weeks. The children sang everything very loudly with their arms stiff at their sides. They had been taught to sing this way in school. "Pretend you are angels," Elena told them. "When you sing about the Holy Child, do not shout." But the children continued to sing in the way they had been taught.

"They are angels anyway," Elena told Andrés, who responded, "I'm sure the angels had to shout at the sleeping shepherds."

The children's favorite song, the one they yelled loudest toward the ceiling, was about the donkey María rode to Bethlehem. The donkey was tired, but he let María sleep in the only empty stall in the stable; he was hungry, but he let Jesus sleep in his manger filled with soft hay.

Elena liked the song, too. Sometimes she hummed it while scrubbing Señora Ovalde's jeans with a plastic brush. But one day she said to Andrés, "I think that María walked to Bethlehem. She and José were poor and could not buy a donkey."

"Maybe she walked part of the way," Andrés said. "But they had friends and cousins and uncles and aunts. Maybe her cousin or her uncle let her ride his donkey."

"But nobody saw how tired she was because María and José were far behind," Elena insisted. "That is why there was no room when they finally got to the inn."

Now, as she passed below the heavy green of the giant firs, Elena conceded to herself that María would never have reached Bethlehem if she had walked. She crouched once more at the side of the road and thought how some kind old man, on seeing María resting in the dust, had offered her a ride on his donkey. Or perhaps José saw kindness in the man's wrinkles and had stopped him on the crowded road to ask for help. Elena picked up a small green cone and twirled it in her fingers; the fir trees hissed above her head. The hill, still shining, was closer now. She could see where the road twisted off to the left. José must have loved María very much, she thought, as her eyes followed the road's curve out of sight.

Marta Pillahuel did not expect Elena until the afternoon, or maybe not at all, since the road was wet. But she was standing in the doorway as she often did after rain when Elena García climbed up over the road embankment. "Here is the lady to sing," Marta Pillahuel said to her grandson Carlito, who was sitting under the table with a kitten in each hand.

"Sing! Sing!" Carlito cried and ran barefoot into the mud outside the front door. He stopped there in wonderment, then sat down.

"You are a monster," Marta Pillahuel told him as she swung him up on one hip without stopping on her way across the yard. And to Elena she said in greeting, "We'll put your shoes under the stove to dry." She rested her cheek against Elena's and kissed the air.

On the way back to the house, Carlito stretched his hand out across Marta Pillahuel's shoulder. Elena touched his fingers, and he squeezed her thumb tight, not letting go until the three of them reached the door. "Sing! Sing!" Carlito said.

"We'll sing, love," Marta Pillahuel told him. She put Carlito on the floor and reached for a bucket by the door. "But first we'll warm up Sister Elena." She took the top off the charcoaled teapot and shut one eye to measure the water as she filled it clear to the top. After she put more wood in the stove and placed the teapot on top, she pulled Carlito onto her lap and started scrubbing at his feet with the gray rag she kept to wipe the stove top. "What are you going to name that child?" Marta Pillahuel asked Elena.

"We do not know yet. We cannot agree. Andrés wants Mercedes for a girl, after his mother. But I say that Mercedes is a Catholic name, and now our faith has changed."

"María if it is a girl; José if it is a boy," Marta Pillahuel said. "It is almost Christmas."

Those were Catholic names, too, the ones the priests always gave if the parents let them choose. Elena did not say this out loud, but Marta Pillahuel knew what she was thinking. "When we change, all

things do not need to change," she said to Elena, and to Carlito she said, "Sit quiet so I can get between your toes."

After fumbling a little longer with his pumping feet, she carried him into the bedroom and came back shaking out a pair of men's wool socks. These she worked over Carlito's toes and pulled up to his thighs. Wiping his nose with her sleeve, she set him on the floor. "Poor little man has a cold," she said. She placed her hands on her thighs for a moment and smiled at Elena. For an old woman, Elena thought, she had a lot of teeth.

"Your shoes, please," Marta Pillahuel said. Elena took them off, and Marta Pillahuel rubbed them with the rag she'd used on Carlito's feet. Then she put them under the stove. Disappearing again into the bedroom, she returned with another pair of socks. She made Elena put them on.

Then Marta Pillahuel became very busy. She set the table with two thick saucers from the board above the water basin, a jar of red jam, a bowl of sugar. For herself she put on a wooden box filled with the *yerba maté*, her tin *maté* cup, and a plastic glass; for Elena she set out a can of grain coffee and a heavy mug. She remembered from last time that Elena did not drink *maté*. Elena had said that sugar could not conceal the *yerba's* bitter taste.

Marta Pillahuel wiped two spoons and two knives on her shirt front before setting them on the table. Unwrapping the dusty cloth from a round slab of bread, she cut the bread into thick slices. Once everything was in place, she held out her hand to Elena. "You can sit here, and you can bless the food." Then Marta Pillahuel bowed her head over her hands.

After Elena said the prayer, Marta Pillahuel opened her eyes before raising her head. They rested on the kittens whose round bellies Carlito was kneading under the table. The kittens reminded her again that Christmas was near. She had found them two weeks before as she knelt in the corner of the chicken shed to place her tiny *crèche* figurines in the straw. She had watched the warm scraps of life worm over each other searching with sealed eyes for a teat, had remained motionless until her knees ached and the she-cat no longer minded her presence. Then she had wreathed the wriggling circle of fur and flesh with wooden figures. Marta Pillahuel's mother had bought the carved dolls from Blind Enrique seventy years before and taught her to hide them every year somewhere close to the animals, where no one would find them. "Jesus was not born in a chapel," Marta Pillahuel's mother had said. "This is to remind you."

So the cat had watched as Marta Pillahuel ringed her with shepherds, kneeling kings, sheep, camels, oxen. It seemed right to place

María, her hands clasped before her breast, and the tiny Christ child in his manger, so close to the bitter scent of new motherhood. This was what Marta Pillahuel thought of as she watched Carlito knead the kittens' bellies.

When she looked up, she saw that Elena was waiting, her hands resting on her round abdomen. Elena smiled, and Marta Pillahuel said out loud the words that had formed in her mind: "Every mother is María."

Elena did not know what Marta Pillahuel meant, but the words felt comfortable. Elena pried the lid off the grain coffee and emptied two spoonfuls into her mug. Marta Pillahuel hefted the blackened kettle and filled it for her. While Elena added sugar and stirred, Marta Pillahuel spooned the fine *yerba* flakes into her own tin cup until it was almost full. She added water until the *yerba* was covered. Then she placed the back of the spoon against the *yerba* and pressed hard as she poured off a green-brown juice into the plastic glass. She did this so that the dust in the *yerba* would not clog up her liver. Marta Pillahuel worked her metal *maté* straw down to the bottom of the cup, sprinkled the dark green surface of the *yerba* with sugar, and added hot water. Sucking the bitter and sweet liquid into her mouth, she motioned toward the plate of bread. "Serve yourself!" she said.

Elena was blowing on her spoon like a child. As Marta Pillahuel studied her cheeks and pursed baby mouth, something occurred to her. "You will have your baby at the same time María's baby was born," she predicted.

"Tell me what it is like to have a baby," Elena said. She asked this of every woman she talked to, and each woman told her a story. Marta Pillahuel said, "No person can tell another. It is like knowing God by the Holy Ghost."

Still, Elena waited; but Marta Pillahuel became busy sucking the last drops from her *maté* cup and said no more. So Elena said, "I have learned that María could not have walked to Bethlehem."

Marta Pillahuel looked up. "You were tired when you arrived here," she said.

"The baby is very heavy now."

"As María's was."

Marta Pillahuel added more sugar to her *maté* cup. It shone like sun sparks on a dark green sea. She added more water. Carlito whined, pulling at the bottom of her shirt. Catching him under the arms with her forearm, she pulled him up onto her lap, then leaned over him to suck at the straw. She broke off a piece of bread and gave it to him.

"How many babies did you have?" Elena asked, spreading thick red jam on the thick bread.

"I had seven babies," Marta Pillahuel answered. She pushed the *maté* cup beyond the range of Carlito's fingers and sat up straight. "That's why my stomach's all out here and not packed behind my bones." Marta Pillahuel patted the round mound of flesh resting on her skinny thighs. Carlito squirmed around to finger the loose skin at the base of her neck.

Elena nodded complacently. She had talked to mothers of eleven, or even fifteen. Seven was not so very many.

"I will tell you how the Blessed Virgin appeared to me after my first baby was born," Marta Pillahuel said abruptly. "My baby, named Elías after my grandfather, a big strong baby that almost killed me to be born, died unbaptized at three days old. My husband was in the beet harvest, and I was in my bed bleeding and crying when María came and stood by my shoulder with her long black hair and her black eyes. 'Your perfect son has died,' she said, 'and I cry with you.' Drops ran from her black eyes into her black hair. Then she said to me, 'Do not cry, Marta. Your son is with my son.'"

Elena curved her fingers tightly around her cup, bending close enough to breathe the steam. She was not sure that she should believe, now that she was Mormon, that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to Marta Pillahuel.

Carlito twisted onto his stomach and thrust his feet toward the floor, so Marta Pillahuel set him down and pulled his shirt down over his belly. "You see me Mormon now because my son died unbaptized at three days old. And the Blessed Virgin said to me, 'Do not cry, Marta. Your son is with my son.'" She slid the *maté* cup over the rough board and added more hot water, more sugar. She placed the silver straw between her teeth and said, "All of my children are good children. Not one is in jail or in the gutter. I raised them decent. But I have just one perfect son."

Elena's attention shifted inward to the methodical thumping against her hipbone. "The baby has hiccups," she said.

Marta Pillahuel laughed. Her teeth were strong and gray. "I know all about that! You see me here with crooked bones and breasts like old figs, but I know all about those things. I remember."

Elena placed her hand low on her abdomen and smiled. "I think she wants to come out and eat with us."

"Ah! You think it is a woman!"

"When I dream, it is always a girl. But Andrés thinks a man will be born."

"Carlito! Soon you will have a new little friend. Soon a new little friend will come and play with you!"

"She wants to play now!" said Elena. "See how she jumps. Come here, Carlito. Let me show you how she wants to play with you."

Carlito stopped in the middle of the floor and looked at Elena with round eyes.

"Go on," said Marta Pillahuel. Elena held out her hand to him, but Carlito ran to Marta Pillahuel and flung his face against her thigh. She laughed again and rubbed his back.

"Are you going to keep Carlito always?" Elena asked.

"I won't get him grown before I die; but I'll get him along far as I can." The rough spots on Marta Pillahuel's palm caught on Carlito's shirt as she rubbed up and down. "My daughter says she'll come get him when she saves enough. She's working in Copiapó. But she won't come until I die. She has a man there." Marta Pillahuel shut her eyes to take a long suck on the silver straw. When she opened them she said to Carlito, "Ya! Go play with your kittens."

"I hope my baby has fat cheeks like his," Elena said.

Marta Pillahuel surveyed Elena's round breasts. "Your baby will have nice and fat cheeks. You'll have lots of milk for your little one," she said. But she was still thinking about her daughter, who would not come until she died. "You know," she said after a time, "I taught my boys to respect the women. I taught my boys respect, that's all." Marta Pillahuel chose a fat piece of bread and coated it thickly with jam. When she looked up she said, "Have some more bread, Elena. Serve yourself! Serve yourself!" Elena nodded, and Marta Pillahuel went on without taking a breath. "Of course my oldest son has a second family now. But at least he sends his first woman something every month. I know he at least does that." She nodded and rubbed her hands on her thighs. When her eyes met Elena's she said loudly, "Serve yourself!"

"My baby and I don't want to eat all your bread," Elena answered.

"Eat it all! Eat it all! My father always said that people who save food show God they do not trust him."

Elena laughed. "Then I will help you trust in God." She took the last piece.

"My father gave food to every beggar that passed his door," Marta Pillahuel said. She was happy again. "But he never gave a thing to the priests that came collecting with their big leather bags. 'Those priests have two legs and two arms,' he used to say.

"I was seven when my father died, but I remember all the things he said, and I remember the big mustache that he scratched against my neck, and I remember his big old Sunday boots that he polished up nice for Easter mass and for cattle auctions. He had an eye for livestock; he picked out every horse, cow, and pig the master owned.

Worked forty years for the same man and never owned a pinch of ground. But we planted a patch at the edge of the master's land.

"My father would come and get me before sunup and carry me on his back out to the field. I remember his warm back, and sometimes I fell asleep. Then he'd set me down on the cold ground, and I was barefoot. He'd dig up the cold ground, and I'd follow with the seeds. I put them in one by one and pushed the cold ground over the top. Then the sun would come up, and my father put me on his back again to go home. He told me I was the best person he knew to put seeds in the ground.

"Now, my tiny woman, you are playing the part of a man. You are planting seeds where they can grow. When you are big, you will play the part of a woman; you will be the soil and the sun. It is nice to be a woman, to make life grow. I think sometimes I would like to be a woman.'

"After he died, I said his words to myself at night because they were soft and quiet. That is why I remember what he said, even though I did not understand. And in seventy-nine years I've never heard another man say words like those. No man ever wishes he were a woman."

"I think it is nice to have a baby inside," Elena said. "It is nice to feel it kick inside."

"It is good to be soil and sun," Marta Pillahuel said. She looked hard into her *maté* cup. She worked the bitter leaves with her silver straw. "You will know María better after your baby is born," she said at last. "You will be astonished by her pain, and you will be amazed at her blood. You will know she looked on her newborn's face and said, 'This is God, the perfect one.' And you will say to the baby in your arms, 'This also is the perfect one.' Every mother is María."

Elena nodded. She understood. She had learned that María could not have walked all the way to Bethlehem. And she was learning now that María had been afraid. "Tell me how bad it hurts," Elena said.

"Do not worry how bad it hurts," Marta Pillahuel said loudly. Then she added, softer, "All mothers know harder pains than those. María's son died to save us from the harder pains. I cried when my perfect son died, as María cried for hers. But I have also cried for the living ones. For them I have also cried."

Two small tears beaded in Marta Pillahuel's eyes, fell away, traveled her cheeks' furrows, met on her lips. Marta Pillahuel tasted the wet and salt of them and nodded as if in agreement. It was right that Jesus had left her those two tears—two small tears for her daughter who would not come home, for her son who'd left his first woman and found another, for all her sons and daughters with all their griefs and

badnesses—two tears to remind her what Jesus had done to save her from the harder pains, the bloodless, harder pains.

Marta Pillahuel thought about this as she wiped her lips dry and rose to put the teapot back on the stove, to fling crumbs from the bread plate out into the mud for the chickens.

Elena had seen the tears flower in Marta Pillahuel's eyes, and the fear that had wedged in tight between the baby and her heart gave way to something beautiful and sad. She stood up, stacked the plates, and carried them to the wooden counter.

"Leave those things," Marta Pillahuel said. "It is almost Christmas. Let us sing our songs."

Marta Pillahuel took Elena's hand between her palms and pulled her near her, in front of the stove. Her hands were warm and rough on Elena's hands. Carlito, seeing them that way, crawled out from under the table and wiggled between them, pressing his nose against his grandmother's leg.

Elena said, "I have taught the children the words to the song called 'María's Cradle Song,' but I do not know the melody."

"I will teach you how beautiful it is. This is how it goes." Marta Pillahuel hummed gently, tapping out the beats on Carlito's head with one hand and squeezing Elena's hand every fourth beat with the other.

"Now sing it with me," she told Elena when she finished. Then Elena sang along, squeezing Marta Pillahuel's hand every fourth beat; and Carlito hummed, rocking his head back and forth against Marta Pillahuel's leg in time with the words.