

'Potent'  
*Guardian*

Prayers For

The Stolen

Jennifer Clement

'Vivid'  
*The Times*

'Luminous'  
*Sunday Express*

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## About the Book

'Now we make you ugly,' my mother said. 'The best thing you can be in Mexico is an ugly girl.'

The Narcos only had to hear there was a pretty girl around and they'd sweep onto our lands in black SUVs and carry the girl off. Not one of the stolen girls had ever come back, except for Paula.

She came back a year after she'd been kidnapped. She held a baby bottle in one hand. She wore seven earrings that climbed the cupped edge of her left ear in a line of blue, yellow and green studs and a tattoo that snaked around her wrist.

'Did you see that? Did you see Paula's tattoo? my mother said. You know what that means, right? Jesus, Mary's son and Son of God, and the angels in heaven protect us all.'

At the time, I didn't know what that meant. But I was going to find out. Guaranteed.

## About the Author

Jennifer Clement was born in 1960 and has lived in Mexico since 1961. She is a graduate of New York University. She is the author of the memoir *Widow Basquiat* and two novels: *A True Story Based on Lies*, longlisted for the Orange Prize and *The Poison That Fascinates*. She is also the author of several books of poetry, and is co-founder and director of the San Miguel Poetry Week. Jennifer Clement was awarded the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) Fellowship for Literature 2012. She was also President of PEN Mexico from 2009 to 2012 and is a member of Mexico's prestigious *Sistema Nacional de Creadores*. She lives in Mexico City.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

A True Story Based on Lies  
A Salamander-Child  
The Poison that Fascinates

NON-FICTION

Widow Basquiat

POETRY

The Next Stranger  
Newton's Sailor  
Lady of the Broom  
New & Selected Poems

For Richard and Sylvia

# Prayers for the Stolen

Jennifer Clement



HOGARTH  
LONDON · NEW YORK



# Part One

# One

NOW WE MAKE you ugly, my mother said. She whistled. Her mouth was so close she sprayed my neck with her whistle-spit. I could smell beer. In the mirror I watched her move the piece of charcoal across my face. It's a nasty life, she whispered.

It's my first memory. She held an old cracked mirror to my face. I must have been about five years old. The crack made my face look as if it had been broken into two pieces. The best thing you can be in Mexico is an ugly girl.

My name is Ladydi Garcia Martínez and I have brown skin, brown eyes, and brown frizzy hair, and look like everyone else I know. As a child my mother used to dress me up as a boy and call me Boy.

I told everyone a boy was born, she said.

If I were a girl then I would be stolen. All the drug traffickers had to do was hear that there was a pretty girl around and they'd sweep onto our lands in black Escalades and carry the girl off.

On television I watched girls getting pretty, combing their hair and braiding it with pink bows or wearing makeup, but this never happened in my house.

Maybe I need to knock out your teeth, my mother said.

As I grew older I rubbed a yellow or black marker over the white enamel so that my teeth looked rotten.

There is nothing more disgusting than a dirty mouth, Mother said.

It was Paula's mother who had the idea of digging the holes. She lived across from us and had her own small house and field of papaya trees.

My mother said that the state of Guerrero was turning into a rabbit warren with young girls hiding all over the place.

As soon as someone heard the sound of an SUV approaching, or saw a black dot in the distance or two or three black dots, all girls ran to the holes.

This was in the state of Guerrero. A hot land of rubber plants, snakes, iguanas and scorpions, the blond, transparent scorpions, which were hard to see and that kill. Guerrero had more spiders than any place in the world we were sure, and ants. Red ants that made our arms swell up and look like a leg.

This is where we are proud to be the angriest and meanest people in the world, Mother said.

When I was born, my mother announced to her neighbors and people in the market that a boy had been born.

Thank God a boy was born! she said.

Yes, thank God and the Virgin Mary, everyone answered even though no one was fooled. On our mountain only boys were born, and some of them turned into girls around the age of eleven. Then these boys had to turn into ugly girls who sometimes had to hide in holes in the ground.

We were like rabbits that hid when there was a hungry stray dog in the field, a dog that cannot close his mouth, and its tongue already tastes their fur. A rabbit stomps its back leg and this danger warning travels through the ground and alerts the other rabbits in the warren. In our area a warning was impossible since we all lived scattered and too far apart from each other. We were always on the lookout, though, and tried to learn to hear things that were very far away. My mother would bend her head down, close her eyes and concentrate on listening for an engine or the disturbed sounds that birds and small animals made when a car approached.

No one had ever come back. Every girl who had been stolen never returned or even sent a letter, my mother said,

not even a letter. Every girl, except for Paula. She came back one year after she'd been taken.

From her mother, over and over again, we heard how she had been stolen. Then one day Paula walked back home. She had seven earrings that climbed up the cupped edge of her left ear in a straight line of blue, yellow and green studs and a tattoo that snaked around her wrist with the words *Cannibal's Baby*.

Paula just walked down the highway and up the dirt path to her house. She walked slowly, looking down, as if she were following a row of stones straight to her home.

No, my mother said. She was not following stones, that girl just smelled her way home to her mother.

Paula went into her room and lay down in her bed that was still covered with a few stuffed animals. Paula never spoke a word about what had happened to her. What we knew was that Paula's mother fed her from a bottle, gave her a milk bottle, actually sat her on her lap and gave her a baby bottle. Paula was fifteen then because I was fourteen. Her mother also bought her Gerber baby foods and fed her straight into her mouth with a small white plastic spoon from a coffee she bought at the OXXO shop at the gas station that was across the highway.

Did you see that? Did you see Paula's tattoo? my mother said.

Yes. Why?

You know what that means, right? She belongs. Jesus, Mary's son and Son of God, and the angels in heaven protect us all.

No, I didn't know what that meant. My mother did not want to say, but I found out later. I wondered how did someone get stolen from a small hut on a mountain by a drug trafficker, with a shaved head and a machine gun in one hand and a gray grenade in his back pocket, and end up being sold like a package of ground beef?

I watched out for Paula. I wanted to talk to her. She never left her house now but we had always been best friends, along with Maria and Estefani. I wanted to make her laugh and remember how we used to go to church on Sundays dressed up like boys and that my name had been Boy and her name had been Paulo. I wanted to remind her of the times we used to look at the soap-opera magazines together because she loved to look at the pretty clothes the television stars wore. I also wanted to know what had happened.

What everyone did know was that she had always been the prettiest girl in these parts of Guerrero. People said Paula was even prettier than the girls from Acapulco, which was a big compliment, as anything that was glamorous or special had to come from Acapulco. So the word was out.

Paula's mother dressed her in dresses stuffed with rags to make her look fat but everyone knew that less than one hour from the port of Acapulco, there was a girl living on a small property with her mother and three chickens who was more beautiful than Jennifer Lopez. It was just a matter of time. Even though Paula's mother thought up the idea of hiding girls in holes in the ground, which we all did, she was not able to save her own daughter.

One year before Paula was stolen, there had been a warning.

It was early in the morning when it happened. Paula's mother, Concha, was feeding old tortillas to her three chickens when she heard the sound of an engine down the road. Paula was still in bed fast asleep. She was in bed with her face washed clean, her hair roped into a long black braid that, during the night sleep, had coiled around her neck.

Paula was wearing an old T-shirt. It hung down below her knees, was made of white cotton and said the words *Wonder Bread* across the front in dark blue letters. She was also wearing a pair of pink panties, which my mother always said was worse than being naked!

Paula was deeply asleep when the narco barged into the house.

Concha said she'd been feeding the chickens, those three good-for-nothing chickens that had never laid an egg in all their lives, when she saw the tan-colored BMW coming up the narrow dirt path. For a second she thought it was a bull or some animal that had run away from the Acapulco zoo because she had not expected to see a light brown vehicle coming toward her.

When she'd thought of narcos coming, she always imagined the black SUVs with tinted windows, which were supposed to be illegal but everyone had them fixed so the cops could not look inside. Those black Cadillac Escalades with four doors and black windows filled with narcos and machine guns were like the Trojan Horse, or so my mother used to say.

How did my mother know about Troy? How did a Mexican woman living all alone with one daughter in the Guerrero countryside, less than an hour from Acapulco by car and four hours by mule, know anything about Troy? It was simple. The one and only thing my father ever bought her when he came back from the United States was a small satellite dish antenna. My mother was addicted to historical documentaries and to Oprah's talk shows. In my house there was an altar to Oprah beside the one she had for the Virgin of Guadalupe. My mother did not call her Oprah. That is a name she never figured out. My mother called her Opera. So it was Opera this and Opera that.

In addition to documentaries and Oprah, we must have watched *The Sound of Music* at least a hundred times. My mother was always on the lookout to see when the movie would be programmed on a movie channel.

Every time Concha would tell us what had happened to Paula, the story was different. So we never knew the truth.

The drug trafficker who went to the house before Paula was stolen only went to get a good look at her. He went to

see if the rumors were true. They were true.

It was different when Paula was stolen.

On our mountain, there were no men. It was like living where there were no trees.

It is like being a person with one arm, my mother said. No, no, no, she corrected herself. Being in a place without men is like being asleep without dreams.

Our men crossed the river to the United States. They dipped their feet in the water and waded up to their waists but they were dead when they got to the other side. In that river they shed their women and their children and walked into the great big USA cemetery. She was right. They sent money; they came back once or twice and then that was that. So on our land we were clumps of women working and trying to raise ourselves up. The only men around inhabited SUVs, rode motorcycles and appeared from out of nowhere with an AK-47 hanging from their shoulder, a bag of cocaine in the back pocket of their jeans and a pack of Marlboro Reds in their front shirt pocket. They wore Ray-Ban sunglasses and we had to make sure we never looked into their eyes, never saw the small black pupils that lay there and was the path inside their minds.

On the news we once heard about the kidnapping of thirty-five farmers who were picking corn in fields when some men with three large trucks drove up and stole all of them. The kidnapers pointed guns at the farmers and told them to get into the trucks. The farmers were in the trucks standing pressed together like cattle. The farmers returned to their homes after two or three weeks. They had been warned that if they talked about what had happened, they would be killed. Everyone knew they were stolen to be field hands and pick a marijuana crop.

If you were quiet about something then it never happened. Someone would write a song about it for sure. Everything you're not supposed to know about, or talk about, eventually turned up in a song.

Some idiot is going to write a song about those kidnapped farmers and get himself killed, my mother said.

On weekends my mother and I went to Acapulco where she worked as a cleaning lady for a rich family who lived in Mexico City. The family went to the holiday resort a couple of weekends a month. For years this family used to drive, but then they bought a helicopter. It took several months to build the helipad on their property. First they had to fill in the swimming pool with dirt and cover it up and then move the new swimming pool over a few feet. They also relocated the tennis courts so that the heliport would be as far as possible from the house.

My father had also worked in Acapulco. He was a waiter at a hotel before he left for the States. He came back to Mexico a few times to visit us but then he never came back. My mother knew that it was the last time when the last time came.

This is the last time, she said.

What do you mean, Mama?

Look at him hard in the face; drink him up, because you're never going to see your daddy again. Guaranteed. Guaranteed.

She liked to use that word.

When I asked her how she knew he was not coming back she said, You just wait, Ladydi, you just wait and you'll see I'm right.

But how do you know? I asked again.

Let's see if you can figure it out, she answered.

It was a test. My mother liked to give tests and finding out why my father was not coming back was a test.

I began to observe him. I watched the way he did things around our small house and garden. I followed him as if he were a stranger that could steal something from me if I looked away.

One night I knew my mother had been right. It was so hot even the moon was warming our piece of the planet. I went



outside and joined my father as he smoked a cigarette.

God, this place must be one of the hottest places on earth, he said as he exhaled the tobacco smoke from his mouth and nostrils at the same time.

He placed his arm around me and his skin was even hotter than mine. We could sear into each other.

And then he said it.

You and your mama are too good for me. I don't deserve you.

I passed the test with an A.

Son of a bitch, my mother said again and again, for years. She never said his name again. He was Son of a Bitch forever after.

Like many people on our mountain, my mother believed in hexes.

May a wind blow out the candle of his heart. May a gigantic termite grow in his navel, or an ant in his ear, she said. May his penis be eaten by a worm.

Then my father stopped sending us a monthly stipend from the USA. I guess we were also too good for his money.

Of course the USA to Mexico rumor road was the most powerful rumor route in the whole world. If you did not know the truth, you knew the rumor and the rumor was always a lot, lot more than the truth.

I'll take a rumor over the truth, my mother said.

The rumor that came from a Mexican restaurant in New York to a slaughterhouse in Nebraska, to a Wendy's restaurant in Ohio, to an orange field in Florida, to a hotel in San Diego, then crossed the river, in an act of resurrection, to a bar in Tijuana, to a marijuana field outside Morelia, to a glass-bottom boat in Acapulco, to a canteen in Chilpancingo and up our dirt road to the shade of our orange tree was that my father had another family 'over there'.

'Over here' was our story, but it was also everyone's story.

Over here we lived alone in our shack surrounded by all the objects my mother had stolen for years. We had dozens

of pens and pencils, salt shakers and eyeglasses, and we had one large plastic garbage bag filled with little sugar packets she had stolen from restaurants. My mother never left a bathroom without taking the roll of toilet paper hidden in her bag. She didn't call it stealing, but my father did. When he was still with us and they used to fight, he said he lived with a thief. My mother believed that she was a borrower but I knew she never gave anything back. Her friends knew they had to hide everything. No matter where we would go, when we returned to our home the stuff was going to appear from out of her pockets, between her breasts and even from her hair. She had a knack for pushing stuff into it. I'd seen her pull small coffee spoons and spools of thread from her frizzy mane. Once she had a Snickers chocolate bar she'd stolen from Estefani's house. She'd pushed the candy bar up under her ponytail. She even stole from her very own daughter. I gave up thinking that anything belonged to me.

When my father left, my mother, who had never placed a lock on her mouth, said, That Son of a Bitch! Here we lose our men, we get AIDS from them, from their US whores, our daughters are stolen, our sons leave, but I love this country more than my own breath.

Then she said the word Mexico very slowly, and again, Mexico. It was as if she licked up the word off a plate.

Ever since I was a child my mother had told me to say a prayer for some thing. We always did. I had prayed for the clouds and pajamas. I had prayed for light bulbs and bees.

Don't ever pray for love and health, Mother said. Or money. If God hears what you really want, He will not give it to you. Guaranteed.

When my father left my mother said, Get down on your knees and pray for spoons.

## Two

I ONLY WENT to school until the end of primary. I was a boy most of that time. Our school was a little room down the hill. Some years teachers never showed up because they were scared to come to this part of the country. My mother said that any teacher who wanted to come here must be a drug trafficker or an idiot.

Nobody trusted anyone.

My mother said that every person was a drug dealer including the police, of course, the mayor, guaranteed, and even the damn president of the country was a narco.

My mother did not need to be asked questions, she asked them herself.

How do I know the president is a drug trafficker? she asked. He lets all the guns come in from the United States. Why doesn't he put the army on the border and stop the guns, huh? And, anyway, what is a worse thing to hold in your hand: a plant, a marijuana plant, a poppy, or a gun? God made the plants but man made the guns.

My school friends were the friends I've always had. There were only nine of us in first grade. My closest friends were Paula, Estefani, and Maria. We went to school with our hair cut short and in boys' clothes. All of us except for Maria.

Maria was born with a harelip and so her parents were not worried that she would be stolen.

When my mother talked about Maria she said, The harelip rabbit on the moon came down from the moon to our mountain.

Maria was also the only one of us who had a brother. His name was Miguel, but we called him Mike. He was four

years older than Maria and everyone spoiled him because he was the only boy on our mountain.

Paula, as we all said, looked like Jennifer Lopez, but more beautiful.

Estefani had the blackest skin ever. In the state of Guerrero we are all very dark but she was like a piece of the night or a rare black iguana. Estefani was also tall and skinny and, since no one in Guerrero was tall, she stood out like the tallest tree in a wood. She saw things I never could see; even far-off things like cars coming down the highway. Once she saw a little black-red-and-white-striped snake curled up in a tree. It turned out that was a coral snake. These are snakes that want to drink the breast milk of sleeping mothers.

When you grow up in Guerrero you learn that anything that is red is dangerous and so we knew that snake was bad. Estefani said the snake had looked at her straight in the eye. She only told this to Paula, Maria, and me, just the three of us (her three best friends) because she knew it meant she was cursed. And she was, of course, as cursed as if the snake had been the evil fairy godmother with a wand who said your dreams will never come true.

When Maria was born with the harelip everyone was shocked. Her mother, Luz, kept her daughter inside the house and her father walked out the front door and never came back.

My mother liked to tell everyone what they should do. She did not mind her own business. So, she walked over to Maria's house to take a good look at the baby. I only know this story because my mother told it to me many times over. She looked at little Maria lying in Luz's arms covered by a white veil of gauze. She lifted the cloth and looked down at the baby.

She was born inside-out, like an inside-out sweater. You just need to get her turned back around, Mother said. I'll go and register her at the clinic.