100 Razor Blades

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In Mocho Arriba, Doña Maira spreads out her tools: a boiled razorblade, a length of string—these are for the cord—and pair of latex gloves scrubbed in the pila. The health workers told her, don’t reuse the blades. She’s used this one three times. Understand:

They give Doña Maira 100 razorblades and tell her to cut the cord with nothing else. She knows about germs and HIV. She knows about rust the way she knows chewing carrot leaves will stop my headache. But if she delivers 200 babies a year?

The midwife in the documentary calls birth magic: It used to take care of itself, but now we ruin it with science. An anthropologist would say, she thinks the blades themselves are magic.

Don’t talk to me about science when a baby’s perfect head breaks through like a whale at the surface. Don’t talk to me about magic when a baby goes grey, system grocked by tetanus, straight shot from the rusty blade to the umbilical vein to the heart.

I’m not telling it right. Listen. Doña Maira showed me the birthing room in her house. The stethoscope hung on a nail. The flour scale. The stripped bed by an open window. On the wall ahead, a print of Jesus, crowned in light, descending to touch his mother’s face. Their first night alive, they sleep here, she said. And if they want to look out the window, they can see the world. And if they want to face forward, they can see the truth.