

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE*

ADVANCE READER'S EDITION

SWIFT AS  
DESIRE  
A NOVEL  
LAURA  
ESQUIVEL

S. J. TORRES

ALSO BY LAURA ESQUIVEL

*Like Water for Chocolate*

*The Law of Love*

*Between Two Fires*



UNCORRECTED PROOF

# SWIFT AS DESIRE

A NOVEL

LAURA ESQUIVEL



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## INTRODUCTION



YOU CAN FEEL THE NORTH. It takes hold of you, marks you. No matter how far you move from its center of gravity, you are invariably drawn to it by an invisible current, like water droplets to the earth, like a needle to a magnet, like blood to blood, desire to desire.

My origins are in the north, in the first look of love between my grandparents, in the first brush of their hands. The project I would later become was begun with the birth of my mother. I had only to wait for her desire to be united with my father's for me to be drawn irrevocably into this world.

At what precise moment did the powerful, magnetic gaze of the north meet that of the sea? Because the other half of my origin comes from the sea, from the origin of my origin. My father was born near the sea. There, before the green waves, my grandparents' desires became one: to give him a place in this world.

How long did it take for desire to send the right signal, and for the anticipated response to arrive? There were many variables, but it is undeniable that the entire



process began with a look. A look which led the way, a suggestive path that the lovers would walk upon later, again and again. Could I have witnessed that first look exchanged between my parents? Where was I when it happened?

I can't stop thinking of all this now as I notice the lost look on my father's face, as his mind wanders, unconscious, through space. Could he be looking for other universes? Fresh desires? New looks, to entice him into another world? I have no way of knowing. He can no longer speak.

I would like to know what he hears, what call he awaits. To know who will draw him into the next world and when. What will the departure signal be? Who will give it? Who will guide him? If women are the doors to life in this world, are we in the next? What midwife will come to his aid?

I like to believe that the incense I keep burning in my father's room is creating a link, a life, a cord by which he will receive the help he needs. The billowing columns of mysterious, heavily scented smoke continuously rise up into the air in spirals, and I can't stop thinking that they are forming an umbilical cord that will connect my father with the celestial strata to take him back to the place from which he came. What I don't know is where that was. And who, or what, is waiting for him out there?

The word "mystery" scares me. To counteract it I cling to memories, to what I know about my *papá*. I imagine

that he, too, is fearful, since his blind eyes cannot discern what is waiting for him.

Since everything begins with a look, I worry that my father won't be able to distinguish other presences, that he won't want to take the first step down another path. How I wish that he will soon be able to see! How I wish for his suffering to end! How I wish for some desire to draw him forward!

"Dear *papi*, you don't know what I would give to be able to light your way. To help you on this journey, just as you helped me with my arrival into this world, do you remember? If I had known that your tender embrace would sustain me so, I wouldn't have waited so long to be born. But how was I to know? Before seeing you and my mother, everything was dark and confusing. Perhaps similar to how your future seems now. But don't worry, I'm sure that wherever you are going, someone is waiting for you, just as you waited for me. I have no doubt that there are eyes that are longing to see you. So go in peace. You are leaving only good memories here. Let these words accompany you. Let the voices of all those who knew you resound in the space around you. Let them open the way for you. Let them be the speakers, the mediators, those who communicate for you. Let them announce the arrival of the loving father, the telegraph operator, the storyteller, the man with the smiling face.



## Chapter I

**H**E WAS BORN HAPPY and on a holiday. Welcomed into the world by his whole family, gathered together for the special day. They say his mother laughed so hard at one of the jokes being told around the table that her waters broke. At first she thought the dampness between her legs was urine that she had not been able to contain because of her laughter but she soon realized that this was not the case, that the torrent was a signal that her twelfth child was about to be born. Still laughing, she excused herself and went to her bedroom. As she had gone through eleven previous deliveries, this one took only a few minutes, and she gave birth to a beautiful boy who, instead of coming into the world crying, entered it laughing.

After bathing, Doña Jesusa returned to the dining room. "Look what happened to me!" she announced to her relatives. Everyone turned to look at her, and, revealing the tiny bundle she held in her arms, she said, "I laughed so hard, the baby came out."

A loud burst of laughter filled the dining room and

everyone enthusiastically applauded the happy occasion. Her father, Librado Chi, raised his arms and exclaimed "*Qué júbilo!*"—"What joy!"

And that was what they named him. In truth, they could not have chosen a better name. *Júbilo* was a worthy representative of joy, of pleasure, of joviality. Even when he became blind, many years later, he always retained his sense of humor. It seemed as if he had been born with a special gift for happiness. And I don't mean simply a capacity for being happy, but also a talent for bringing happiness to everyone around him. Wherever he went, he was accompanied by a chorus of laughter. No matter how heavy the atmosphere, his arrival, as if by magic, would always ease tension, calm moods and cause the most pessimistic person to see the brighter side of life, as if, above all else, he had the gift of bringing peace. The only person with whom this gift failed him was his wife, but that isolated case constituted the sole exception to the rule. In general, there was no one who could resist his charm and good humor. Even Itzel Ay, his paternal grandmother—the woman who, after her son had married a white woman, had been left with a permanent frown etched on her forehead—began to smile when she saw *Júbilo*. She called him *Ché'ehunché'eh Wich*, which in the Mayan language means "the one with the smiling face."

The relationship between *doña Jesusa* and *doña Itzel* was far from good until after *Júbilo* was born. Because of race. *Doña Itzel* was one hundred percent Mayan Indian

and she disapproved of the mixing of her race's blood with dona Jesusa's Spanish blood. For many years, she had avoided visiting her son's home. Her grandchildren grew up without her being very involved in their lives. Her rejection of her daughter-in-law was so great that for years she refused to speak to her, arguing that she couldn't speak Spanish. So doña Jesusa was forced to learn Mayan in order to be able to speak with her mother-in-law. But she found it very difficult to learn a new language while raising twelve children, so communication between the two was sparse and of poor quality.

But all that changed after Júbilo was born. As she desired with all her soul to be near the baby, his grandmother began to visit her son's house again which had never happened with the other grandchildren, as if she had no great interest in them. But from the first moment she saw Júbilo, she became fascinated with his smiling face. Júbilo was a blessing to the family, he appeared like a gift from heaven that no one expected. A beautiful gift that they didn't know what to do with. The difference in age between him and the youngest of his siblings was several years, and a few of his older brothers and sisters were already married and had children of their own. So it was almost as if Júbilo were an only child, and his playmates were his nieces and nephews, who were the same age as he. Because his mother was busy simultaneously fulfilling the roles of mother, wife, grandmother, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Júbilo spent a lot of time in the company of the servants, until his grandmother adopted

him as her favorite grandchild. They spent most of the day together, taking walks, playing, talking. Of course his grandmother spoke to him in Mayan, which meant that Júbilo became doña Itzel's first bilingual grandchild.

And so, from the age of five, the child became the family's official interpreter. This was a fairly complicated matter for a small child, as he had to take into account that when doña Jesusa said the word *mar*, she was referring to the sea in front of their home, where the family often swam. On the other hand, when doña Itzel said the word *K'ak'nab*, she wasn't referring only to the sea, but also to the "lady of the sea," which is the name given to one of the phases of the moon and is associated with large bodies of water. Both of these entities have the same name in Mayan. So, as Júbilo translated, not only did he have to be aware of these subtleties, but he also had to pay attention to his mother's and grandmother's tone of voice, the tension in their vocal cords, as well as the expression on their faces and the set of their mouths. It was a difficult task, but one which Júbilo performed with great pleasure. Of course he didn't always translate literally. He always added a kind word or two to soften the exchange between the two women. Over time, this little trick managed to help them get along a little better each day, and they eventually grew to love one another.

This experience helped Júbilo to discover the power of words for bringing people closer or pushing them apart, and that the important thing wasn't what was said, but the intention behind the communication. This

sounds simple, but it is in fact very complicated. When Júbilo's grandmother gave him a message to translate, generally the words didn't coincide with what she really wanted to say. The tension around her mouth and vocal cords gave her away. Even to an innocent child like Júbilo, it was obvious that his grandmother was making an effort to swallow her words. But, as strange as it sounds, Júbilo heard the silent words clearly, even though they had never been spoken. And he understood that this "voice" that remained silent was the one that truly represented his grandmother's desires. So Júbilo, without thinking much about it, frequently translated those imperceptible murmurings instead of the words she spoke out loud. Of course, it never crossed his mind to do this to be naughty, just the opposite, his ultimate objective was always to reconcile these two women, both of them so beloved and important to him, to say out loud the magic word that neither of them ever dared to speak, the word that had to do with repressed desires. The frequent disagreements that arose between his mother and his grandmother were a clear example of this. Júbilo had no doubt that when one of them said black, she really meant white, and vice versa.

At his young age, what he didn't understand was why these two women made their lives, and as a consequence the lives of everyone around them, so complicated, since any argument between them had repercussions on all the rest of the family. There was never a strife-free day. They always found reasons to fight. If one said that Indians



were lazier than Spaniards, the other would say that Spaniards smelled worse than Indians. There was no shortage of arguments, but without a doubt, the most sensitive were those that had to do with the life and customs of doña Jesusa. Doña Itzel had always worried that her grandchildren would be brought up in a lifestyle that, to her way of thinking, wasn't appropriate for them. This had been one of the main reasons why she had avoided coming to the house in the past. She had wanted to avoid seeing how her daughter-in-law was raising the grandchildren like little Spaniards, but now she was back and was determined to save Júbilo, her favorite grandchild, from the loss of his cultural heritage. So he wouldn't forget his origins, she was always telling him Mayan stories and legends as well as accounts of the battles the Mayan Indians had been forced to fight to preserve their history.

The most recent was the War of Castes, an Indian insurrection in which approximately twenty-five thousand Indians lost their lives, and in which as it happened Júbilo's grandmother herself had played an important role. In spite of the Indians' ultimate defeat, something good came out of that battle, because her son Librado was placed in charge of one of the country's largest exporters of *henequen*—the fibers from an agave plant used for making rope and other materials. He had then taken the unusual step of marrying a Spanish woman. *Mestizaje*, the mixing of races, was not as common in the Yucatán Peninsula as it was in other regions conquered