The Middle of the Night
Author:
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Magdalena Laparra is a troubled soul. Born and raised in comfortable circumstances, she lives in San Sebastian, Spain, with her sister, mother, and father, whom she adores. The feeling is mutual. After getting married and giving birth to a daughter, her husband takes them to Cuba, where he has been hired to manage a rum distillery. Magdalena is miserable there. Despite a terrible family secret that is literally driving her mad, she misses her old life and cannot settle into her new one. After her son is born her husband allows her to return to Spain for the summer, promising to join them very soon. Back in San Sebastian, in 1926, she accompanies her family on their annual vacation up the coast in the French town of Biarritz. One day on the beach she takes her children and wades into the sea. She drowns her son and would have drowned her daughter if seven-year-old Elsa hadn't managed to break away and swim ashore. Elsa's father arrives in time to bury his son and take her back to Cuba. Magdalena is placed in an asylum where, a short while later, she takes her own life.

The story then fast-forwards seventeen years. Elsa's loveless marriage has collapsed, and she decides to go to San Sebastian to see her grandmother and visit her brother's grave. She sails in late 1943; the Atlantic is teeming with German U-boats, but she makes it. The family secret has taken its toll on her grandmother, whom Elsa finds embittered and vengeful. The old lady gives Elsa a folder stuffed with the letters Magdalena wrote to her from Cuba, telling her to read them so that she will know the truth. Elsa wants to be alone, so she takes the letters to Biarritz, thus coming full circle to the place where her mother committed the unthinkable all those years ago. With the town occupied by German troops, Elsa finds a modest pension where she settles in to read her mother's letters and come to terms with her past. She is introduced to a German officer with whom she becomes romantically involved. Then she meets a member of the resistance, a fish vendor whose coarse demeanor is in stark contrast to the refined veneer of the lieutenant. Her trysts with the German pale by comparison with the erotic fireworks she experiences when bedded by her new lover, who introduces her to levels of extasy she has never known.

Magdalena's letters to her mother, which are interspersed with chapters that describe Elsa's days and nights in Biarritz, gradually reveal the details of the secret that brought tragedy and shame on the family. Elsa realizes that what she has learned and experienced has changed her, making it impossible for her to return to her previous life. But where can she go now? She is not particularly interested in politics, but the war thrusts her into situations that force her to make decisions and do things she never would have thought she'd be capable of doing. As the story builds to its climax in early 1944, allied planes fly over the town to bomb the local airport that the Germans use for training. Not all the bombs hit their target, however, and before the dust settles Elsa must decide whether to embrace a new future or remain trapped in the past.

This book is a page turner. Montero's writing is fluid and engaging as she introduces the reader to

the geographical triangle—Havana, San Sebastian, Biarritz—that forms the basis for the romantic triangle she weaves for her protagonist. Set against the backdrop of the Second World War, it's the story of a young woman's attempt to make sense of the madness that destroyed her mother. It is also an exploration of the darkness that lies in wait for those who cross the lines that human society draws for its own protection.

Mayra Montero, whom Julia Álvarez calls "One of the most exciting and interesting writers of the Americas, North and South," was born in Cuba but has lived in Puerto Rico since the mid-1960s. A journalist and author, she writes in Spanish but has a following among English readers; several of her books have been translated by Edith Grossman, the leading contemporary translator of Spanish and Latin American literature.