

EL ESPEJO DE LA MUERTE

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The poor thing! It was a treacherous malaise which day after day overcame her whole body. She had no desire to do anything, no appetite to live, and so lived almost out of duty. It was difficult for her to get out of bed in the mornings, and to think! It was she who always rose in time to watch the sunrise! The housework seemed more and more daunting with each passing day.

To her, spring didn't seem like spring anymore. The trees, free of winter's frost, sprouted their light down of green, new birds arrived to perch upon them, and everything seemed to be reborn. Everything but her.

"This will pass!" she would say to herself. "This will pass!" hoping to believe it through sheer repetition. The doctor reassured them it was simply a crisis of aging: some sunlight and fresh air, that's all. And to eat well, or as well as she could anyway.

Fresh air? What might be considered fresh air they had all around them flying free, sunny, smelling of thyme and aperitifs. From the house, one could find earth's horizon in every direction, an earth so plump and lush it was itself a blessing from the God of the farmlands. And light, there was plenty of light as well. But when it came to eating—"But Mother, if I've no desire to—"

"That's enough, child. Eat. Eat that which, praise the Lord, we are not lacking—eat," her mother repeated, imploring her.

"But I told you, I have no appeti—"

"It matters not. Eating is how one gets an appetite."

The poor mother, even more upset than her daughter and fearing that her little girl, the ultimate consolation in her early widowhood, would soon slip through her arms, had resolved to fatten her up like a turkey. She even went so far as to make her gag, but it was all to no avail. The girl still ate like a little bird. And so, the poor widow herself fasted as an offering to the Virgin, so that she might give to her poor daughter the appetite to eat, the appetite to live.

And this was not the worst that had happened to poor Matilda. Even worse than the listlessness, the pale complexion, and the shriveling and withering away of her body, was that her boyfriend, José Antonio, was colder and colder with her each day. He was seeking a way out, this much was certain; he searched for a way to break free, to leave her. First, he claimed, and with great urgency, that matrimony was imperative, as if he feared losing something, and when she responded with: "No—not yet, not until I'm better. I can't marry you like this," he would simply frown. He even told Matilda he thought a wedding might help her feel better, that it could cure her, he said, but sadly: "No, José Antonio, no—this isn't about love, it's something more: it's about life." And José Antonio would hear it all, crestfallen and displeased.

The boy kept attending their dates, as if by some obligation, all the while distracted, absorbed in something distant. He had ceased to speak of plans for the future, as though the future had died for them. It seemed now that these lovers had only a past.

Looking at him as if into a mirror, Matilda said, "But, tell me, José Antonio, just you tell me, what's happened to you? Why are you no longer the man you were before—"

"The things you think of, girl! And who then, might I be?"

"You listen to me: if you're tired of me, if you've found another girl, leave. Leave me, José Antonio, leave me alone and alone I'll remain! I wouldn't want you to sacrifice yourself for me!"

"Sacrifice myself? And just who would have told you, little lady, that I would sacrifice myself? Stop with this nonsense, Matilda."

"No, no, don't hide it, you don't love me anymore—"

"Oh, I don't?"

"No, no, you don't love me like before, not like in the beginning—"

"Well, in the beginning—"

"It should always be like the beginning, José Antonio! Love should always be just beginning. One should always be at the start of love."

"Come now, don't cry, Matilda, don't cry, you're going to get worse."

"Worse? Worse than what? Then you admit I'm in a bad way!"

"Bad way—? No! It's just—you think too much."

"Look, you listen to me. I don't want you to come around just because you think you have to—"

"Are you getting rid of me?"

"Me get rid of you, José Antonio?"

"You seem to be making an effort to run me off—"

She broke down crying even harder, the poor girl. And later, locked away in her room with such little light and little air, Matilda looked at herself in the mirror, over and over again. "It doesn't matter much," she told herself, "but my clothes are bigger on me every day, looser. This bodice is so loose on me now I can fit both hands inside. I've had to cinch my skirt. What is this? Dear God, what can it be?" and she cried and she prayed.

But later, the passage of time would triumph, her mother would prevail, and Matilda would dream of life once again; of a fresh, verdant life, sunbathed and airy, full of light, love, and the fields; of a distant future, a house overflowing with chores; dreams of children and, who could say, maybe even a few grandchildren. And there they would be, the little old couple, warming the dessert of life under the sun!

José Antonio began to miss their dates, and once, at the repeated demand that he leave if it were true that he'd ceased to love her as he did in the beginning, if he wasn't at the start of love, he answered back with eyes fixed on a pebble on the ground: "If you want it so badly, then yes—" and she broke down crying once again, to which he said with a male brutishness, "If you're going to give me this spectacle of tears every single day, then yes, I will leave you." José Antonio never did understand tearful love.

One day, Matilda came to learn that her suitor was courting another, one of her most intimate friends. She told him so, and José Antonio never returned.

And she said to her mother, the poor thing, "I'm so ill, Mother! I'm going to die!"

"Nonsense, my girl. At your age, I was in a much worse way than you. I was nothing but skin and bones and look at me now. This is nothing. Of course, you insist on not eating . . ."

But later, alone in her room shedding silent tears, her mother thought: "That brute! No, he's worse than a brute! Why couldn't he just hold out a little longer . . . not much longer . . . just a little . . . he's killing her . . . sending her to an early grave."

And the days passed, each the same as the one before and taking with it a little piece of the life of Matilda.

The Day of Our Lady of Fresneda approached, the day on which the whole town went to the hallowed chapel where each of them would pray and ask that their needs be fulfilled. It was a pilgrimage, this day, accompanied by dances, romps, songs, and howls of joy. The boys would dance to and fro, arm in arm with the girls, embracing, singing, skipping, yelling, and frolicking about. It was a day of stolen kisses, brushing bodies, and flirtatious pinches. And the older folks would laugh, remembering and longing for their own adolescence.

"Look, my dear," Matilda's mother said to her, "The Day of Our Lady is near. Get your best dress ready; you're going to ask her to give you an appetite."

"Would it not be better to ask for good health?"

"No. Appetite, my girl. With appetite comes good health. It doesn't behoove us to ask too much, even of the Virgin. It's necessary to ask little by little; today a morsel, tomorrow another. For now, appetite, and with that, good health, and then—"

"And then what, Mother?"

"And then a more decent and grateful boyfriend than that brute, José Antonio."

"Don't speak poorly of him, Mother!"

"It's you who tells me not to speak poorly of him? To leave you, my little lamb, and for who? For that plain girl, Rita?"

"Don't speak poorly of Rita either, Mother. She isn't plain. She's more handsome than I am, now. If José Antonio doesn't want me anymore, why should he keep coming to spend time with me? For pity, Mother? For pity alone? I'm in terrible shape, I know, just terrible. And to see Rita so colorful and fresh-faced pleases—"

"Hush, child, hush! Colorful? Like a tomato, maybe. That's enough! Enough of this!"

And her mother left the room to weep.

The day of festivities arrived. Matilda dressed herself as best she could, even applying rouge to her cheeks, the poor thing, and mother and daughter left for the chapel. At times, the girl had to support herself with her mother's arm. At others, she simply sat down. She looked at the field as if to say goodbye, and this she did without even knowing it.

Everything around her was joyful and green. Men and trees alike were laughing. Matilda entered the chapel and, in the corner, with her knee bones pressed into the stones of the floor and the bones of her elbows supported by the wood of a bench, she prayed and prayed and prayed, in longing, holding back tears. Her lips muttered one thing, her thoughts, another, and she could just barely see the radiant face of Our Lady reflecting the votives' flames.

They left the gloom of the chapel for the luminous brilliance of the fields and started back home. The boys were back, like wild colts, satiating appetites they had built over months. The children ran about, the girls exciting the boys with their shrieks, igniting pursuit. There was nothing but flirting, pawing, and poking, all under the light of the sun.

And a saddened Matilda saw it all. And even sadder still was who else would see it: her mother, the widow.

"I couldn't even run if they were to chase me so," thought the poor girl. "I couldn't excite them and set them after me with my running and my shrieks . . . this is no longer for me."

They came upon José Antonio, who passed them while accompanying Rita on a walk. All four of them lowered their eyes. Rita went pale and a last blush lit in Matilda's cheeks, deep as dusk where the breeze had blown the rouge away.

The poor girl felt all around her a regard as thick as molasses; a horrible, tragic regard, inhuman and unspeakably cruel. What was it? Was it compassion? Aversion? Fear? Oh, indeed: fear maybe, maybe it was fear! She had instilled in them a great dread. She, just a poor girl, merely twenty-three years of age! And in thinking of their subconscious fear, a fear which she also subconsciously guessed to be in the eyes of those who stared as they passed, another more terrible fear took hold inside her and turned her heart to ice.

Back home, she blew through the threshold of the solarium without shutting the door; she let herself fall on the bench, burst into tears, and exclaimed with death on her lips:

"Oh, Mother—Mother, how must I be! How must I be that the boys won't even frolic about with me! Not to flatter me, not even out of compassion, like they do for the others, for the ugly girls! How must I be, Virgin saint! How! For they won't even play with me—the boys won't frolic with me like before! Not even for pity's sake, like with the ugly girls! How must I seem, mother! Oh, how must I seem to them!"

"Barbarians, barbarians, bar— worse than barbarians!" the widow thought. "Monsters! Won't run about with my girl! Not even a little! How hard could it be? And then they go and do it with those plain-faced girls. Monsters!"

And she became furious to a degree usually reserved for sacrilege, which was fitting, as frolicking on these saintly holidays was indeed a sacred ritual.

"How must I be, Mother! How must I be that not even out of pity would they frolic with me!"

She spent the night crying and yearning, and the following morning she didn't even want to see herself in the mirror. And three months later, Our Lady of Fresneda, Mother of all compassion, having heard Matilda's pleas, took her away to frolic with the angels.