

Little Gray Head

By Rosario Castellanos



## LITTLE GRAY HEAD

### Rosario Castellanos

Señora Justina stared, as if hypnotized, at the portrait of that desert, with strawberries and meringue, which illustrated (in all its color) the recipe from the magazine. It wasn't for the hurried moments—when the husband gets home at 10 at night with guests for dinner; work colleagues, the Boss who was in a good mood and just happened to not have another engagement; some old friend from childhood whom he'd run into on the street—the moments when one had to adapt in accordance with the circumstances. No, the recipe was for those big occasions: the formal invitation of the Boss whom one thought to ask for a raise or promotion; the final blow to the legendary culinary prestige of the mother-in-law; the battle to recapture the husband who's begun to drift astray and wants to test his seductive power on the girl young enough to be his daughter's classmate.

"Hey mom, I'm home."

Señora Justina pried her gaze from that grand illusion which helped fuel her diabetic-on-a-regimen hunger and carefully examined her daughter, Lupe, with the same disappointment as always. No, she didn't seem, not even remotely, like those daughters in the movies who, if they arrived at this hour it was because they'd gone for a stroll with a guy who'd tried to seduce them but didn't achieve more than to mess up their hair a little, or with a suitor so respectful and with such good intentions that he produced the protective effect of a final spritz of hairspray on the elaborate hairdo, sedulously mounted at the beauty salon. No, Lupe didn't arrive...disheveled. She arrived exhausted, bored, fed up, as if she'd been to a church ceremony or had gotten a bite to eat with a few girlfriends who were just as lonely, just as lacking in things to say and do as she was. Even so, Señora Justina felt an obligation to clamor:

"You don't have the slightest bit of respect for this house— you come and go whenever you please, as if you were a man...like this was a hotel...we never know what you're up to...if your dad was still here..."

Fortunately, her poor father was dead and buried in a deluxe grave in the Panteón Francés. Many criticized Señora Justina for being excessive but she felt it wasn't the moment to get hung up on expenses when it came to such a unique and, what's more, solemn occasion. And now, good and buried, it wasn't in bad taste to invoke his memory from time to time, above all because it would permit that Señora Justina compare her current peace with her prior distress. Situated right in the middle of the double bed, without the worry of if her companion would arrive late (flicking the lights on left and right and making a racket as if it were business hours) or if he wouldn't arrive at all for having been in an accident or having fallen into the talons of some floozy that would drain his physical power, his income, and his attention—already scarce enough as it was—away from the legitimate woman in his life.

It's true that Señora Justina had always had the virtue of preferring a spouse more dedicated to his sex's proper duties out in the world than one of those stay-at-home types who look over the grocery bill, lift the lid of the pot to taste the seasoning in the stew, the ones who have a knack for finding those dust bunnies in the corner and who decide to experiment on the kids with the latest pedagogic doctrines.

"A husband in the house is like a mattress on the floor. You can't step on it because it isn't proper and you can't jump over it because it's too wide. Nothing will do but to put it in its place. And a man's place is at work, the cantina, or at the mistress's."

This is what her sister, Eugenia, thought, embittered as all spinsters are and without any idea of what marriage was all about. The proper place for a husband was the one where her deceased Juan Carlos now rested.

For her part, Señora Justina had behaved as a lady should: two years of rigorous mourning, slow and continued recovery, then the standard black-and-white checkered phase and now the living incarnation of conformity with the designs of Divine Providence: all serious colors.

"Mom, help me unzip, please."

Señora Justina did what Lupe asked while taking advantage of the moment to assign weight to an importance her children tended to diminish.

"When I'm not around anymore..."

"There'll always be someone to accommodate me, don't you think? Someone to unzip me, even if it's only out of interest in the gift I'll give him?"

We have here the result of following the advice of human relations specialists: "More than a mother, be a friend; an ally, not a judge." Very well. And now what was she supposed to do with this unprovoked response? Scream as loud as all get-out? Reassure Lupe that she'd leave enough in the will for her to get herself a satisfactory zip-down service? By God, in her day, a young woman could never let on that she knew about certain subjects out of respect for the presence of her mother. But now, in Lupe's time, it was the mother who couldn't let on that she knew it was her daughter's turn to know these same certain subjects.

How the world turns! When Señora Justina was a girl, it was assumed she was so innocent that she couldn't be left alone with a man without him feeding the temptation to show her life's realities by lifting up her skirt or something. She had used, throughout all her single womanhood and especially in times of courtship, a sort of thick fabric reinforcement that allowed her to resist any possible attack on her purity until outside help arrived. And it would also let her family know with certainty that, if the attack had been successful, it could only be because there was consent on the part of the victim.

Señora Justina had always resisted the devil's tricks with bites and scratches. But there was one time where she felt that she was about to collapse. She got comfortable on the sofa, closed her eyes... and when she opened them she was alone. Her seducer had fled, ashamed of his behavior which was right about to push an honorable young woman off the deep end. He never attempted to find her again but when chance would bring them together, he would stare at her with intense scorn and if he was close enough to be able to say something in her ear without anyone hearing but her, he'd say: Whore!

Señora Justina thought of the convent as the only refuge from the weakness of the flesh but it entailed a dowry that her father's modest earnings—blessed as he was by the heavens with five single daughters—made impossible. So, she settled for affiliating herself with various pious associations and it was in a joint reunion with the Mexican Catholic Youth Association where she would meet the man who would wed her.

They loved each other in Christ from the very first moment and gave each other weekly spiritual bouquets: "Today I refused the helping of cocoda that was to be my desert and when my mom insisted that I eat it, I faked a stomach ache. They took me to my room and gave me chamomile tea, so bitter. Oh, but bitterer yet was the bile they soaked up with the sponge that hovered near the lips of Our Lord and Savior when, crucified, he complained of thirst."

Señora Justina felt put to shame by Juan Carlos's sheer range. The cocoda part anyone could have thought of, but the sponge... She began to review the Catechism but she never quite came up with a link between the mysteries of the faith or the divine history of salvation and everyday, quotidian occurrences. Which helped her, at the end of the day to confirm (for that evangelical precept that those who humble themselves will be praised!) that the various paths of Providence are inscrutable. Thanks to her lack of imagination, to her inability to compete with Juan Carlos, Juan Carlos fell hard for her. Whatever he said would always bring out an Ah! of admiration, as much from Señora Justina as from the docile echo of her four single sisters. It was with that Ah! that Juan Carlos decided to marry her and his decision couldn't have been more on the mark because that echo remained audible, unwavering in all their years of matrimony and it was never interrupted, not by a question, a comment, a judgment, or a dissenting opinion.

Now, from the safe port of widowhood—set in stone, given that she was faithful to his memory and that she had inherited an adequate pension for her needs—Señora Justina thought maybe she would have liked to have broadened her repertoire with a few other exclamatory reactions. One of horrified surprise, for example, when she saw for the first time, naked right in front of her and frozen for who knows what reason, a man whom she hadn't seen except for in a suit and tie and singing the praises of the patronage of San Luis Gonzaga, to whom he'd entrusted to keep watch over the integrity of all his youth. But her lips were sealed by the sacrament that, along with Juan Carlos, she had taken only a few hours prior, back in the Church, and the timely warning of her mother who, without going into details of course, filled her in on the fact that, in matrimony, all that glittered was not gold. That it was full of snares and dangers that would put the fortitude of the wife's character to the test. And that the supreme virtue one had to practice if one hoped to be deserving of the palm of martyrdom (given that the palm of virginity had been renounced automatically by entering into matrimony) was the virtue of prudence. And señora Justina understood prudence as silence, assent, submission.

The night of the wedding when Juan Carlos went crazy and demanded that she perform certain acts of contortionism she hadn't even seen in the Circo Atayde, Señora Justina made the extra effort to keep him satisfied and she would keep getting better and better at it, the more she practiced. But she had to calm the scruples of her conscience in confession (was she not contributing to a sickness that might have been curable, worsening it by yielding to Juan Carlos's nocturnal whims instead of bringing him to see a doctor?). There, the old priest calmed her down, assuring her that the attacks were not only natural but transitory and that, over time, they would become less intense and less frequent until they disappeared completely.

The minister of the church's mouth was that of an angel. After the birth of his first child, Juan Carlos began to show signs of relief. And thank God, because with his health almost fully restored he would be able to dedicate more time to his job which was now more than he could handle; they even had to get him a secretary.

Often Juan Carlos was unable to make it home to have lunch or dinner and would remain in board meetings until dawn. Or his bosses would put him in charge of keeping an eye on the Company's branch offices and he would go for a week, for a month, but never without saying to the family that they take care and be good. Because about that time the family had already grown: after the boy, two little girls were born.

The little boy was the oldest and if it were up to Señora Justina, she wouldn't have ordered another creature because the pregnancies were a veritable cross to bear, not only for her, who had to endure them firsthand, but for everyone around them. At ungodly hours of the day or night guanábana ice cravings would hit her and there was no remedy but to go searching for whatever could be found. Because nobody could have the baby be born with some spot on its face or some kind of bodily defect as a consequence of a lack of attention to the mother's desires.

Ultimately, Señora Justina had no reason to complain. There were her three good, healthy children and Luisito (after San Luis Gonzaga, to whom Juan Carlos remained devoted) was so cute that they rented him out as baby Jesus in Nativity season.

He was a real sight all gussied up with his ceremonial robe of lace and his blonde festoons which they wouldn't cut until he was twelve years old. He was very serious and formal. He didn't muck about like all the other little boys his age, he didn't roll in the dirt, or look for puddles to splash in or trees to climb. No, not him. His clothes no longer fit him and it was a shame; they didn't have holes in them, nor stains, it didn't even look like they had been worn. They just didn't fit anymore because he'd grown. And he was a model of perfect behavior. He took communion every first Friday, he sang in the church choir with his soprano, so clean and well-trained that, luckily, it never went away. He read, without being told, edifying texts.

Señora Justina wouldn't have asked for more but on top of it all, God did her the favor of having Luisito be so caring and affectionate with her. Instead of going out partying (as would his classmates at the college, and a priest college at that! Imagine!) he stayed home, chatting with her, holding the roll of yarn while she rolled it up, asking her what the secret was for making the rice soup turn out so delicious. And when it was time to go to bed, Luisito would ask her, every single night, to tuck him in and bless him just like when he was a boy. And he'd make the most of the moment when Señora Justina's hand was right near his mouth by stealing a kiss from it. Stealing it! When she would have loved to have given him thousands and thousands of kisses and eaten him up out of pure love. She'd held back so as not to make her other daughters jealous and, who could believe it, to not have an argument with Juan Carlos!

Who, with age, had become a total jerk. He would yell at Luisito for any reason whatsoever and one time, at the table, he said to him... What did he say to him? Señora Justina couldn't remember anymore but it must have been something truly ugly because even she, restrained as she always was, lost her patience and jerked the tablecloth and all the plates and glasses fell to the floor and the broth splattered all over Carmela's legs who screamed because it burned and Lupe took the opportunity to have a fainting spell and Juan Carlos got up, put on his hat and left, utterly dignified, and he would not come back until payday.

Luisito... Luisito had left home because the situation was intolerable. He'd found a well-paying job in a decoration business. The job should have shut his father up but— such high hopes! He continued to spout out horrible things until Luisito chose to go visit Señora Justina only when he would be sure to not find himself confronted with his lunatic of a father.

This wasn't too difficult. Señora Justina was alone for most of the day, with the girls right on track in very decent office jobs and with the husband God knows where. Getting into some kind of trouble, surely. But better not to speak of that because Juan Carlos would get irritated when his wife didn't know what she was talking about.

Once, Señora Justina received an anonymous letter from someone "who thought highly of her," who filled her in that Juan Carlos had gotten his secretary a house. Señora Justina stood there for a long time, looking at those uneven letters, so rudely written, which meant nothing to her, and she wound up tearing the paper up without ever mentioning anything to anyone. In cases like those, good Christian kindness prescribes not jumping to rash conclusions. Of course, what the anonymous person said could be true. Juan Carlos was no saint but rather, a man, and as all men, quite material. But so long as nothing was lacking in her home life and he would give her the place and respect of the legitimate wife, she didn't have the right to complain nor cause a commotion.

But Luisito, who was up to date on all the details, thought that his mom was sad for having been so abandoned and on Mother's Day he gave her a portable TV. The things they show, my God in heaven! The people who write those comedies really don't know what to make up anymore. Broken families where everyone is out for themselves and the kids do whatever they feel like doing and their parents none the wiser. Men cheating on their wives. And the wives, who couldn't be any dumber if they tried, walked up in their houses, still believing what they were taught as little girls: that the moon is made of cheese.

Please! And what if those stories were to occur in real life? And what if Luisito were to find himself mixed up with some brat who would make him marry her? Señora Justina didn't rest until her son formally promised her that never, ever, ever would he get married without her consent. Besides, why was she worried? He didn't even have a girlfriend. He didn't need one, he'd say, hugging her, as long as he had his mommy with him.

But he had to think of the future. Señora Justina wasn't going to be around forever. And even if she was. It wasn't okay for him to live like a vagabond.

To disabuse her of this notion, Luisito brought her to see his apartment. How lovely he'd arranged it! It wasn't for nothing that he was a decorator. And as for help, he'd gotten a young man, Manolo, because maids were so helpless, dirty, and all women, except Señora Justina, his mother, were bad cooks.

Manolo seemed quite attentive: he offered her tea, arranged the couch cushions she was about to sit on, removed the cat which was determined to rub up between her legs. And, what's more, he was pleasant, handsome and well-cut together. It was the least he could do. He'd won the lottery with Luisito who treated him with as much consideration as he would an equal: He let him eat at the table, sleep on the living room couch because the quarters on the roof, which was where he was supposed to sleep, got such good light and was being used as a studio.

The only catch was that Luisito and Juan Carlos had never reconciled. The father's harshness and the son's pride weren't going to give until the occasion of a final illness. And Juan Carlos's went on for so long it put both the doctors' science and the patience of all the relatives to the test. Señora Justina took good care of her husband, who never had the mettle to withstand his afflictions and who now couldn't handle the pain and discomfort without taking it all out on his wife, finding her suggestions inept, her care, unless, her sleepless nights, not good enough. He would only put on a good face for visitors: visits from his co-workers which at first were quite frequent but by the end were more like a passing comet. The only constant was his secretary (the poor thing! So old now, so gray, so defeated! How was it possible that someone would go to such lengths to ruin her reputation by defaming her?) who always generously brought something nice: magazines, fruits that Juan Carlos praised with such insistence that his daughters left the room annoyed. Bad girls! On the other hand, Luisito kept his composure, well-raised as he was, and tactfully, given that he wasn't sure how his father would react, the first time he gave him a gift he didn't do it personally but rather, asked Manolo to deliver it.

It was like this that Manolo entered, for the first time, the house of Señora Justina and he knew well enough to make himself indispensable to all, to the degree that nobody really cared whether or not he came with Luisito. He knew how to give injections, made surprise snacks after the last television program of the night and saw the secretary back to her house which, luckily, wasn't too far away—just one or two blocks—and was easy to walk.

At Juan Carlos's wake Manolo seemed more like a family member than a helper and no one found it inappropriate that he would receive condolences dressed in a black cashmere suit that Luisito had bought him specially for this occasion.

Happy times. They hardly lasted the whole novena and afterward the house was empty again. The secretary went to live in Guanajuato and between work and play, the girls didn't have the time. The only one left—who, for as busy as he was always managed to make the time to give her a kiss on her "little gray head," as he lovingly called it— was Luisito. And Manolo would stop by from time to time with a bouquet of flowers, more than anything to stay on the good side of Señora Justina (she wasn't dumb, this didn't escape her), to show off some flashy diamond ring, a gold tie clip, a pair of cufflinks so gaudy they would scream that their owner had never had any money before and had no idea how to spend it.

The girls would tease him and tell him to go easy on them, not to give them competition, and they would make it known that if at some point they got boyfriends, they weren't going to introduce them to him so as not to run the risk that they'd leave and run off with the competition. Manolo laughed a funny, forced laugh and when Carmela, the oldest, told the family she was going to get married to a man she worked with and that they had organized a little gathering to formalize the relationship, Manolo signed himself up to help out in the kitchen and serve the food. And so it went, but Carmela forgot Manolo in her introductions and Manolo walked right in and out of the living room where everyone was chatting as if he were a servant or simply didn't exist.

When the guests were saying their goodbyes Manolo was crying at the stove, splattered with stew grease. Carmela entered, happily clapping because she'd won the bet. Didn't he remember what they'd agreed upon? That if at some point she had a boyfriend she wouldn't introduce him to Manolo? Well, she'd kept her word and now she demanded Manolo keep his because besides, he'd deserved it for being both arrogant and flirtatious. Manolo cried even harder and left, slamming the door. But he came right back the next day with a box of chocolates for Carmela and ready to be part of the ever-detailed church decoration and wardrobe planning discussion for the wedding.

Poor Carmela! She was so excited making all the preparations! And from the day she got back from her honeymoon onward she would not know peace: it was such a difficult pregnancy with a premature birth at exactly seven months so as to push the husband away, already a deadbeat dad as it was, who would wind up leaving her and taking a job as a travel agent where no one would know how to find him.

Carmela remained alone and asked Señora Justina to help her take care of the kids. But once old enough to go to school they grew further and further apart until they didn't see each other more than at Señora Justina's birthday, Christmas, and Mother's Day.

It bothered Señora Justina that Carmela would be so extravagant as to get all dressed up and that she was always so nervous. It didn't matter how much she yelled at the kids, they wouldn't obey and when she threatened to hit them, they threatened her right back with telling their uncle what time she'd arrive the night before and with whom.

Señora Justina could not understand for the life of her why Carmela feared him so much. It seemed whenever they said "Uncle Luisito" she would surrender and let them do whatever they wanted. To fear Luisito, who was a lady and who was currently traveling in the U.S. with Manolo, was absurd; but when Señora Justina tried to discuss it with Lupe she responded with nothing more than a roar of laughter.

Lupe was hysterical, naturally, because she'd never married. As if getting married was the be all end all. Few had the luck Señora Justina had in finding a good, responsible man. Couldn't she just see herself next to her sister, who was always broke? Lupe, for her part, could bury herself in her earnings with clothing, perfume, jewels. She could spend it on weekend outings, big trips, or by spreading it to those in need.

When Lupe heard this last bit she exploded with insults: She was the one in need, she who never had anyone who loved her. Names flew like foam from her mouth, jumbled up names, dirty stories, soaring complaints. She didn't calm down until Luisito—who returned from the states in a terrible mood for having lost Manolo—landed on her a few well-placed wallops.

Lupe cried and cried herself to sleep. Later, as if she'd forgotten it all, she was quiet. She passed her free time knitting and watching TV and didn't lie down without first having a cup of tea with a splash of medicine, which was quite good for... for what, again?

Where was her brain! Señora Justina had mixed up everything and it was no surprise, either. She was old, sick. She would have liked to have been surrounded by grandchildren and children, like you'd see on old picture cards. But that was like a sort of dream and the reality was that no one came to see her and that Lupe, who actually lived with her, would regularly tell her she wouldn't be home for dinner or that she'd be sleeping over at a girlfriend's house.

Why didn't Lupe ever respond to all these invites by having her friends come to her house? To not bother her mother? But it wasn't a bother at all, it was just the opposite... But Lupe no longer heard the ramblings of her mother, running downstairs, down the steps in such a hurry, flinging the door open to the street.

When Lupe did stay, because she had nowhere else to go, it was still impossible to speak with her. She responded in barely audible, single syllables and if Señora Justina cornered her to make her talk, she adopted a tone of such insolence that it was better not to speak with her at all.

Señora Justina would complain to Luisito, who was her handkerchief, with the hope that he would rescue her from that hell and bring her to his place now that Manolo didn't live there and he couldn't seem to keep a servant: some were thieves, others overly familiar, all of them unreliable; they were killing him. But Luisito's arm couldn't be twisted: he wouldn't get married (it was past time for it, his hair was already a little overhauled), he wouldn't go back to his mother's house (which she would have welcomed with open arms) and he wouldn't ask her for help, which Señora Justina would have happily given. Because just as she had washed her hands of Carmela and just as she was willing to abandon Lupe (at the end of the day they were women, they could handle themselves), she couldn't reconcile the thought of Luisito not having someone who would take care of him like he deserved and that, so as not to bother her—because with the diabetes she did tire very easily—he wouldn't even have her over to his house.

But what he never failed to do was stop by, daily, always with a little gift, always with a smile. Not with the grimace of a poorly paid shoe shiner, nor with that shooting-daggers glare with which Lupe would peer into Señora Justina's bedroom door to say goodnight.

Translated by Stanish Adair  
February 2020