

Maria Callas in the Rafters

The sky opened and it rained, only the way it can rain near the ocean and the equator in South America, with ferocity and will. Agricultural workers, men and boys, huddled beneath a tin roof, a shack with no walls. Around them broad banana tree leaves bent under the storm that had come upon them like a thief. The men wore straw hats and thick moustaches, and the boys, 16 to 18, wore pants cut below the knees and nothing else. Their brown chests glistened with sweat and rain and they looked surly and put-upon, poor mimics of the older men who had worked the fields for decades and whose faces had relaxed into poverty and earth. The boys' suffering now was mere braggadocio, innocence, awkwardness and doubt.

One boy, older than the rest, was ill-content and unready to accept the toil and peasantry that stretched like an unbroken highway in front of him. He hated the poverty. They all hated it, but unconsciously they valued it too: it was their destiny and identity and salvation. It was their heritage and subconscious vow, their road to grace and the grave, this peasant life. This was borne out in the gentleness and peace of the men who had acceded to the inevitable struggle and the last station of their Lord. Death. But it did not preclude hate of the condition. This older boy denied his future, he denied the spiritual capital the years had written on the old faces, and he failed to love the manhood.

“Julio?” a man called to him and the older boy turned.

“Que?”

“What are you dreaming about now?”

“Nothing”

“You're not thinking about pussy, are you?”

The other boys laughed.

“No”

“Don’t lie to me. That’s all God allows a boy to think about at your age...dark juicy delicious pussy just waiting for you to take a bite:”

“Or the contrary,” a man mumbled.

The other boys laughed again, but nervously. They knew Julio’s distance and anger, his reluctance to accept agricultural work, his collection of stolen knives and his disinclination to talk with them about the things that concerned them, mostly pussy. Julio withdrew and avoided the man’s wide laughing eyes that focused on him like headlights

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That afternoon when they broke for lunch and sat on dry rocks and boards under the green canopy that kept a boiling sun off their brown backs, the veterans spoke of the patron for the boys’ knowledge.

“He will come out and ride the land to talk with Pablo (the foreman) every couple months and he will nod to us from atop his black mare”—(which was rumored to have the intelligence and jealousy of a woman). The black mare knew the patron loved his wife like few men do after the age of fifty, an endurance and longevity found more often in Latin-American men who discover mysterious truths about women.

“His lineage,” another man added, “...is said to go back to the conquest.”

“I heard his grandmother was Mestizo.”

“I heard Indigenous...a woman of surpassing grace and loveliness.”

“Legend has it her beauty and treachery deposed a king.”

“The true treachery is your pecker’s stupidity,” one old toothless man observed and they laughed at him.

The family had been on the same piece of land for centuries. Coups though, civil wars, avaricious monarchs, tin despots, revolutions, invasions and insanity had diminished the

landed estate. Yet through it all the family fortune survived everything the turbulent, blood-saturated South American political landscape was capable of—did in fact thrive.

These men of course did not have all the details but they were not far off the mark with their stories of treasures and European fortune—and they took a vicarious pride and status and were vain in that their patron had more money than a neighboring landowner. If another were said to have more money, they would point out how their patron was more of a gentleman and conducted his life and affairs on a more dignified plane.

Julio, however, seethed quietly and grew indignant and imagined the patron's wealth had been won on the backs of his own ancestors—which to a certain extent it had been. He plotted. That evening when he returned home he took a detour and passed the hacienda.

The house was grand but unpretentious. Posterity lay on it like a lattice of vines. It possessed an aesthetic austerity, a simple integrity of line reminiscent of French provincial but not so self-important. It was as refined and understated as the third son of an impoverished aristocrat. The Spanish influence was strong, but not dominant. The architect had asserted his independence from convention, which is why it suited the patron, and his father before him.

It was built of white brick and rock and bore the regality and age of its occupants: tropical hardwoods ornately carved by craftsmen who knew how to take a chisel and lay its edge against the challenge of time and art. Old trees framed its soft angularity. It was set a short distance off a highway which was not a paved route when the house was built. A dirt driveway led to the exterior pillars (these columns rose three stories), then circled back to the highway.

Unlike the grounds and mansions of other patrons up and down the long valley, it was not fenced, nor were the windows barred with iron. This was a most amazing facet of it because the poverty rate in the last five years had skyrocketed and ironworkers, those who

barricaded in the rich and poor alike, were some of the few who worked steadily with guaranteed wage. Robbers had become an all but unionized profession. The patron, however, refused to succumb to the change. He refused to hire armed guards. And *this* had become the boom business of the land: low paid guards with a bizarre and savage looking array of weaponry of dubious discharge to ensure gentry safety—or lend that impression. The patron would have none of it.

“Screw it!” he uncharacteristically exploded when a foreman had mentioned the security issue.

He did though take the precaution of barring and locking the stalls where he stabled his horses.

Inside the mansion were antiques and artwork brought from the Old World over the generations, as eclectic a gathering as a fine arts auction in Bavaria—centuries-aged woodwork with patinas as sleek and mirror-like as the surface of jungle pools, black-leathered chairs and sofas of sinful and luxurious comfort into which the maids would sink and bask, their sandals discarded, their bare toes wriggling ecstatically, this when the patroness was driven into town or napping—though the latter was more dangerous for she was apt to appear unexpectedly, drowsily inspecting the progress being made.

“What is this?” she would inveterately say, sans nuance of complaint or encouragement, and run her finger over a tabletop, the maids lazily reshoeing themselves.

The patron moved through the rooms and garden and back and forth to his horses in a white shirt, untucked, and no tails. He raked silver hair straight back over his high brow and head, nodding hawk-like, his blue-blooded nose seemingly catching a stray exotic scent that had crept into the patrician air. He implemented his movements with care and foresight, every one crafted according to his will so that it appeared as if too brusque an action would upset an equilibrium wrought by lineage. At the stables the horses would hear his steps and lift their heavy heads and strain their muscled necks to watch him approach. They would nuzzle his pockets for the apples and carrots he brought.

“Hello, my queridas (darlings),” he murmured softly to them and let them take enormous though delicate bites from the apples in his hand; and never, despite their capacity for cruelty, would he suffer nips from the powerful teeth.

He drove a ten-year-old Cadillac purchased from the French consular in Rio Flores, the provincial capital. It suckled him with its sumptuousness so much so that his horses believed they competed with the vehicle and not his wife. It met his criteria for rule and proprietorship: dependability, comfort of ride and trouble-free management. He always drove it himself through the littered poverty-stricken countryside, past the houses on stilts—safe from floods and serpents but murder on drunks—and into the nearby village where his wife would go to have her fortune read by the indigenous witch of indeterminate age who had set up shop in the town square. This had caused a stir among the few bourgeoisie wives of lawyers, storeowners, and a physician who saw this as blasphemy against the monolithic power of the Catholic Church. To be fair, she did attend mass most Sundays, imperiously, but not pretentiously, alone and aloof to the stares and whispering and vapid comment, pristine in her vestments. The townspeople, those who realized they were fortunate in having the unofficial ladyship a half tone off key, saw in her their own indiscretions of faith and worship.

The locals, lounging sedately as felines in the shaded heat and malaise of the low plains, would watch the Cadillac pass and mark its passage as one of the more visible and dependable highlights of their days. The dust kicked up by rubber tires settled gingerly on their cigars and souls. Some of the old men who knew the great lord and master, as they sarcastically referred to him after they were drunk to hide their affection, would bet on the hour of his return. But he was as unpredictable in his habits as the wind.

He thought of his wife while he drove, the dreaminess and distance that had invaded her eyes the last year. Mystery had enthroned her since she began going to the nature witch, since her children had grown and moved to Europe.

“You spend more time with your horses than you do your wife,” she observed dryly that morning, without admonition, and he regarded her steadily with his dark Latin gaze, lowering his eyebrows until she dismissed him with a wave of her hand and said “phfff,” and he walked to her and kissed her offered cheek and said, “Mi Querida.”

He drove toward Rio Flores and felt idle, contemplative, free from the overweening burden of poverty, which he could scarce imagine: the weight of its manifestation would bow his head. In his youth he had faulted his father (and secretly won the old man’s heart) for not doing more for the squalid masses that bordered and defined their affluence.

“They will resist their own desires.” His father intoned.

Years later when he came into his inheritance, defying his father’s wisdom, he constructed a schoolhouse and imported a maestro, a supercilious and fatuous man with impeccable credentials and one eye. But the aphrodisia and eternal ripeness of the equatorial climate ate the building’s foundations and perpetually fondled the maestro’s balls until a local girl easily seduced him and was impregnated. He took her away to the city, which was what she had wished.

The patron passed the decaying schoolhouse and sighed, on the threshold of deferring to the absurdity of fate—but he was not yet ready to concede what he had left of free will to immortal whim. Good works, he mused cynically, though the breath of angels, are as volatile and indiscriminate as time bombs.

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The boy walked past the estate that evening after work, pulling his bicycle along like a pit bull eager for a fight. He turned his head to gaze at the mansion, his eyes dark with unrewarded malice. No one was visible in the yard. No cars parked in front or on the side. He heard a horse nicker from the rear. He wasn’t a fool. He knew there was a cook who lived in the house, an old woman of 65. Her husband had died when she was 49. She had been 25 years without a man but she had not forgotten the feel of that aggressive hirsute flesh pumping away atop her, the grunting and sighing, and once, weeping. Dios mio! He had

allowed her to cradle his head. He had been drunk and mourned his father. He wouldn't weep for his mother! A man will refuse to do that, full of misplaced blame. The next day he struck her with an open hand to reassert his mastery.

The boy knew where the cook's room was, and that there was a back door beside it. What he did not know was that the door was left open at night because the patroness was a sleepwalker who must not be constrained. He knew the handyman and watchman, Arturo, had been employed there for 50 years, ever since the bloodless coup of 1955 drove him from the capital. His duties, like those of royalty, were mostly ceremonial and unstated. He had profound secrets, like they all had, of course, sharing none, hoarding them as if they were jewels or private dreams.

Arturo had endured as much as anyone had: though much of what anyone bears is imagined—and though this does not make it any less real in the minds of the sufferers, it also means it can be pacified. Genuine suffering is not privy to this boon and gathers in the corners of the soul where it rages silently against the injustice and, if one is not careful, manufactures bile. Arturo's suffering was without artifice; there was no self-deceit to imitate his God and thereby enrich his soul. His pain had aged and fermented and now he was empty and colourless and wandered the grounds like a sixth sense.

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The boy obsessed about the estate and took to walking by at all hours of the day and night. He arrived from his home of rough-hewn slatted planks balanced on stilts, a corrugated tin roof marked by spots of black tar to keep the incessant rains out. He lived with his mother and little brown siblings who trod beneath the shack in the shade, patrolling with sticks, sometimes swatting at the lazy frogs which sunned by the stagnant pool that rarely dried.

Once, he left his bike at home and walked the distance to the patron's, but not down the highway—rather he took to the network of trails that crept through the jungles and swamps and cultivated fields and came out at multiple unpredictable points throughout the province.

He took up post across the road from the mansion and returned again the next evening and watched for a week.

“Where do you go at night?” his mother, bold from fear and anger, and obese from a carbohydrate diet, demanded of him one morning.

“Out,” he muttered within the shadow of his stalking thinness.

She slapped him and he narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t have a girlfriend,” she ordered. This much she knew because of her heightened sense of smell. That would be too much: a pregnant girl spewing out open needy mouths.

“Where do you go?” she demanded again.

“Nowhere,” he lied to his mother, a venial sin in his mind.

“You are never out of Senor Jesus’ eye,” she admonished.

Senor Jesus can just piss off, he thought. El Senor gets in the way of everything worthy of minimal effort, sex primarily among them. Constantly he was tormented by guilt. Guilt for whacking off in the woods after ogling the heavy-lidded, melon-breasted women posed in the magazine he had stolen from a blind vendor on a city sidewalk. Guilt for the hate that raged in his heart for the moneyed, for the lord and the lady of the estate upon whom his meager livelihood depended and upon whom his desire for vengeance grew. Guilt for the larceny. Guilt for the knives he pilfered, the food, the bicycles he took from neighboring towns on weekends and threw atop the travel-battered busses for the ride to the Rio Flores where he would sell them in the thieves’ market for a few dollars. His face took on the furtive, darting expression of criminals who search constantly for prey or policia, the light draining from their eyes.

This boy’s days were rife with guilt and longing and anger, but little fear because the hate emboldened him: it gave him power over others, mostly the other boys who shrank from the primeval angst blazing in his eyes. The grown men infuriated him with their dismissal of his growing power. Only murder would impress them.

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The patron entered the outskirts of the city. At a stoplight a beggar woman carrying an infant wrapped in a filthy shawl came up to his window, hand out, her eyes pathetic and moist, everything about her passive and supplicating. The child's face was dirty, spotted with rash, its eyelids shut heavily. He chose not to ignore her; rather, he stared blandly into her eyes and measured her need, the act effected for alms. He pushed a button and the electric window whirred down and he handed her a bill and studied the child. He wondered what drug the indigenous woman had given it to cause this condition.

In his age Centro, the heart of the capitol, had gotten to be too much. In the city center polio victims were splayed on sidewalks beside tin cups, deformed limbs and drooling mouths. The torments of the earth spilled onto the streets: elephantitis, swollen craniums, shrivelled limbs, torsoes on boards with wheels. Toddlers mewled on urine-soaked bedsheets. The blind, the deaf, huddled for comfort, gesticulated wildly. The mind shut down and good sense challenged compassion. To care threatened one's own survival and self and faith. Only a true Christian could endure it, and that would lead to sainthood, and sainthood leads to isolation and ostracism, banishment from the tribe, and, not ironically, to martyrdom. The Rio Florens were much too social to jeopardize this—and it of course created the inevitable psychological conflicts and hypocrisy.

The patron could see that clearly enough and steered clear. Missionary zeal was too radical for his palate. Let me love the saints' sacrifice, he prayed now and then, but dear Lord don't let me be like them. When he was a boy and his father held his hand and they came upon his first beggar in the city, the old man had ceremoniously produced a crisp note from his wallet and told the indigent he would give it to him if could spell his first and last name. The beggar looked strangely at his would-be benefactor and shuffled off without a word. In perennial retrospect the patron was still bothered by the seeming cruelty. Mightn't the man have been deaf or mute or singled out unfairly by fate?

The patron parked down the street from his club and got out. He adjusted his step to reposition a crick in his hip but it nagged at him the block he walked to the iron and rosewood door. He inserted a card in a slot and the latch and door smoothly let loose. He clutched the railing as if it were a boa constrictor. In his club was a collection of anachronisms, old men mostly, but a few pushing out of middle life. They advanced into their golden years with a horrid and bemused elegance, granting to time its dictates with grace but retaining their posturing and status and bank accounts which, to their minds, assured them immortality through their sons.

“Javier you are limping more than usual,” Ignacio Ortiz, a retired financier observed.

He ignored the man. This is a windfall of age, to dispense with the courtesies that are the glue of civilized society. Death is too close. Ortiz took no offence, nor would the patron if the situation were reversed. Slight would be forgotten, rudeness forgiven; otherwise no one would ever again speak to the other in their little club. These antiques consummately played a game of no written rules.

The patron took a seat in a lush, cracked and brown leather chair. He sighed from the comfort. The waiter, an old, unforgiving deaf-mute, stood in front of him and stared as if to say: You will be dead one day. It was his only retribution for poverty and decay.

“Cognac” the patron mouthed at the waiter and the other left without a word. He delivered the glass of dark liquid, held it out and the patron took it and shot a sharp glance at the mute. The waiter discreetly disappeared. He sipped the drink and swirled the liquor in his mouth until it numbed his gums and then he swallowed. He looked around to see who else might be buried in a chair and for the thousandth time wondered why he continued to come to this specious sanctuary. Rarely did he carry on a conversation there—but then, rarely did he converse with anyone. He and the other patrons were beyond words, all but the most basic. He supposed his longest conversations were with the groom, and the discussions he held with his horses. He spoke to the lead foremen once a week about agricultural matters, but that was work, not talk. He was though, a patient listener and he learned the power of this: the men

and women who would burden a receptive ear well past the point of discretion, regret it later and then avoid him: the payoff of the exchange.

Deep in his drink and his comfort he could sense his enemies waiting for him, adversaries who wielded not weaponry, but philosophies of wealth and power, ideas and perversions and appetites for gratification. The struggle of good and evil is waged at every social level, most strategically among the rich, the overlords, the manipulators of the social realm. Intellectually, when calm, the angry poor understand this, but they are more driven and ruled and deceived by emotion, seeking respite in the violent irrationality that brings release but follows with whopping hangover. These were his thoughts, the oblivion and thanklessness of his charges.

“The poor will always be with us,” his father said and, anticipating his son’s scorn for the cliché, added cryptically, “If it weren't for us they would still be building pyramids.”

He measured the weight of the glass in his hand and erased his thoughts and lifted the alcohol to his lips, grateful for the exquisite second sip, which would draw him deeper into sensation and out of thought. His blood rose in heat, the nerve endings shivered with delight. The image of his son came to mind and he fought the Polonius in himself. He knew the futility of words as opposed to action or inaction. The moral vigour of his distant son, purportedly studying in Spain, was of paramount concern. It was he to whom the patron refrained from explaining life and wealth’s subtleties and responsibilities. He ordered himself not to spy or impose himself upon this unserious boy of 26, to not overtly influence the display of his seed, to be content with the infrequent, late night phone call timorously sounding out financing of one or another misadventures or ill-advised buys. Let him indulge now and learn for himself, the patron sagely decided. It was infinitely better to wait out dissolution, than repair bitter estrangement. He relaxed deeper into the leather. He swirled the liquor and downed the last of the snifter and closed his eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep. This is where he fought his dragons, asleep in the power center of the city.

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Meanwhile Julio, face perpetually set in an angry scowl, toiled in the fields and plotted. He knew fences in the city, hard, disreputable men with Mafioso ties who would buy his thefts. He swung his machete and his eyes fogged with malevolence and indignity. His bitterness choked him.

“Do you want to end up like your father?” his mother later asked him. His smallest sister, a thumb-in-mouth-waif, bare toes kneading the floor, stared wide-eyed, uncomprehendingly at him. The door behind her was open, the ten-foot drop to the hard packed earth a constant in the back of her mind.

“What kind of question is this?” Julio shot at her.

“It is a question that needs to be asked.”

“It is an accusation.”

“Take it as you will. The answer is clear.”

He turned abruptly, brushed past his sister and hurriedly descended the ladder. His mother framed the open doorway. He knew this without looking back. A clod of dirt splattered against his back and he whirled. His little brother, on the edge of flight, glared triumphantly at him from beneath the shack. Julio’s fury tore through him like a storm. He grabbed his bicycle by the grip and yanked the bike up.

“Where did you get that bike?” his mother yelled at him.

He looked up at her and a slight pain stung his heart. He glanced at his half pint brother, wary and sly, hiding among the shadows and pilings, and he felt himself poised above a precipice, a fateful decision lay before him, and it was frightful and damning. But contained in it too was dark promise. Fuming, he jumped on the bike and pedalled furiously down the road. His path would lead him toward the patron’s mansion. He was filled with loathing for the man he had never met. He rode into a tiny village. Tired and hot, seething and thirsty, he stopped at a store. A wood counter, stained and faded to the color of dry mud, extended across a narrow width of storefront. They sold noodles, motor oil, underwear, ice cream, sodas, and other staples.

It was odd, Julio thought. Though this store had been here for years, he had never stopped before. It was like that though. He wouldn't look under his bed to find the football he knew had to be there. It was more satisfying to curse and thwart his luck. Then, just as expected, just as it was written, a black-eyed girl stood behind the counter and impudently asked him what he wanted. Infatuation begins with the sort of look she gave him: inward, shy, sensually bold, mocking, magnetic and dismissive. She lifted her right forearm under her breasts and it thrust them up. With her left hand she pulled at her hair. She loosed her poison at this boy who approximated her father's frustration and rage, whose month of unshaven hair gathered beneath his nose like the shadow of a rock, whose mouth was melon bite, whose blood ran as strong as his emotion.

Julio had too much dark purpose to be immediately smitten. He drank his soda while she drank his soul. There was no way they would talk to each other now, suffocated by adolescent angst and insouciance and blasé and curiosity. He drank his soda and rode away with diminished abandon and did not think about her, but her scent had insinuated its way into his brain. Before he got to the patron's house he dismounted and let the air out of a tire and walked slowly in front of the mansion. He shoved the kickstand down and sat cross-legged across the road. He removed the tire and tube and surreptitiously studied the layout of the hacienda. That night he would enter and seize what he believed was his and his ancestors' due.

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"Senor." A club employee was at his elbow. "I'm sorry sir," he said. "...but you asked me to wake you at five."

"Yes. Yes. Thankyou."

The patron blinked and pulled himself out of the chair and considered this progress, and walked to the bar, a long solid block of highly polished mahogany. There he greeted an old acquaintance.

"Juan Carlos," he stated dryly.

“Javier?”

They let the knowledge of one another reassert itself and neutralized whatever rancour that lay hidden. The patron understood Juan Carlos took wealth seriously. As he himself did. It was not a commodity to be taken lightly. It carried responsibility and duty and knowledge of how to keep it safe from the greedy drunken soccer masses who would squander it, as did the last populist government, boys unprepared for power and quick rife with corruption, seduced by the jaded leftovers from previous regimes who were absolutely necessary for running the machinery, but who plotted the entire time the overthrow of those upon whose benefaction they relied.

“This new government will ruin us,” Juan Carlos offered.

“You’ve said that about the last three in the last eight years.”

“This latest one looks as insane as Castro has gotten.”

“I’m sure your money is safe.”

“I wish I had your certainty, Javier.”

“It is not a question of certainty. It is a matter of practicality. Your money, like my own, is gathering interest overseas.”

“Not very patriotic are we?”

“I do my share.”

The patron got quickly bored. The fool had overplayed his hand. This was the problem of conversations as worn as the tread on a hallway carpet. He felt Juan Carlos had gotten lost in his hubris, that he considered his humanity to be a necessary evil, slowing his descent into perdition.

“I would take my money out of rice,” Juan Carlos advised.

“I have no money in rice” The patron did not try to conceal his weariness of the conversation.

“That is fortunate then.”

“I have to go,” he said by way of leave-taking.

The patron, unobtrusive in the city’s streets, walked to the parking garage. Out here the poor looked daily to the gun for recourse to alleviate suffering. They waited, forgotten, yearning within their explosive, inebriated calm. They looked to the bottle, to music and sex, to revolution and to God. An oppressive ache struck the patron. Philosophy provided no sanctuary from it, only inhumanity, or refuge in Satan, who suffered his own demons, could inure him to the agony he found in the streets.

His clothing was comfortable and rich but casual and drew no attention. He might have been anyone’s uncle. A brown felt western hat covered his great brow and white hair, which he had concealed in secret leather fold in case the occasion arose for magic. He lowered a bold, aristocratic nose. He tipped the man who had watched his car (a minor extortion), and with a sigh of pleasure eased into the leather seat. On the way home he bypassed the village, knowing the men bet on his return.

It was evening when he walked into his home, the time of day when maids contemplated turning on lamps to dispel the gloom—and make themselves useful. He hung his hat on a rack and stopped to listen. He cocked his ear to one side and heard the house breathe but could not discover his wife. After many years of marriage she could still elude him. Somewhere in the small mansion she waited. Having heard his Cadillac arrive, she would anticipate his footfall draw near.

The vast open-beamed kitchen at the rear of the house was his first stop. Purportedly he sought his wife, but invariably he drew a beer from the refrigerator, gently pulling the door open like the folds of her flesh.

“Why is there no beer?”

The only one who heard him was the cook, who stirred awake from her nap, her territory invaded. With calculated and infuriating deference she set out to expel the interloper.

“Let me get something for you,” she said, hovering about him like a grandmother.
”No. I’m fine. Thank you.”

Out of his element and thrown off of his game, he fled.

He found her on an upstairs balcony that overlooked a garden, her book open on a table. She sipped a sweet tea that was her succour. The fading day lay on her face like a veil; soft shadows revealed her moods, which with time had diminished. Yet her heart still leapt when his hand cradled the doorhandle, not an overhand grip, but a taking underneath as if it were a soft peach. He would enter without affect. She loved that in him: when his emotions fell from him and he came to her empty to be filled. His gentle ranch worker’s hand would tenderly cup her chin and cheek.

“How was your club?”

“They are bores.”

He took a chair across from her and they sat silently in the growing darkness,

“You look tired dear,” she said to him, though she knew he slept like a crocodile mistaken for a log. That they dreamed apart had always troubled her love for him. It was she who did not sleep, every night waking to prowl the house, an impermanence drawing breath among ageless antiquities and immortal time. Restless, lost, her husband run off to dream field, she listened closely and exhumed her many pasts. She intuited clandestine pasts with her inner sight. She played opera quietly on an old phonograph, Maria Callas—the voice penetrating the mansion with an irresoluble poignancy and nostalgia.

“I sleep fitfully,” he admitted. “I constantly wake.”

She patted his hand. “Poor dear.” He slept like a riverbed buried in mud, she knew.

They sat in silence in the deepening dark until the bell rang for dinner.

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Julio had planned on hiding in a cornfield until the robbery but hunger drove him back to the village and the store of the dark-eyed girl. He pedalled determinedly—but the girl was

gone. In her stead was an overweight man with swollen fingers and black, distrustful eyes. Julio recognized the man at once to be the girl's father. They glared at each other in silent estimation and understanding.

“What do you want?”

Julio searched the shelves and counter for what he could afford.

“This candy.”

“Thirty centavos.”

He paid. The man knew the boy had come to see his daughter and was ambivalent. The girl got progressively more expensive and disobedient and her cheek drove him into a rage at least once a week. That coupled with the collusion of her mother against him. He had another, younger daughter but no boys. Still, he hoped, mostly in vain. It would take a crowbar to pry apart his wife's legs for another child.

“Anything else?”

“No,” Julio muttered and edged back into the evening.

“Come back,” the man said, not unkindly, surprising the boy.

“All right.”

Julio loitered in the village until the night absorbed the shadows and he rode back to the patron's manor. Every time headlights approached he hid in the brush along the road. The problem with avoiding detection wasn't with motorized vehicle, but with burro, and pedestrian traffic. Night-farers appeared out of the dark like truth, preferring it that way: silent, practicing invisibility and death.

“Julio.” A voice called out, startling the thief.

“What?” It was Juan, a man he worked with.

“What are you doing out?”

“Nothing.”

“You are too far from home to be doing nothing.”

Guilt compelled him to lie. “I am visiting a friend.”

“Your are not going to rob me, are you?”

“I told you.”

“Because if you are planning on becoming a highwayman, I should warn you. Though it is romantic and often lucrative, it is a futile and dangerous and brief. Your reputation will live the longer the younger you die.”

“I’m not a highwayman,” he blurted out but Juan had disappeared down the road.

Julio reached the manor and checked his watch. It was nine: thirty. He would crouch across the road until two a.m. He knew how to wait. Time for him, as for all his countrymen, was no burden. He could spend the hours grieving about injustice. Now and then he checked his watch, stolen from a street vendor. It was cheap but had an illuminated face. He imagined the treasures waiting: silverware, jewellery, cash.

Eleven-o-clock and a truck rumbled past. Then he heard voices, a man and a woman.

“Wait,” the man said and the brush stirred near Julio’s hiding place. A trickle of water commenced.

“Oh, Miguel” a woman’s voice called coquettishly. “You don’t have to hide it”

At midnight something passed that Julio judged to be non-human. Superstition precipitated his fear. He was no fool and was quick to disavow mother church in favor of appeasement of supernatural phenomenon. Religion only served to hold inexplicable, inexorable fact at bay. Prayer offered solace but little protection against what passed on the road. His heart rose to his throat when the grunting and shuffling stopped. He fought the urge to beseech God and held his breath until finally the menace moved off.

At one: thirty the moon fell behind the trees and it was as black as mortal sin and he extracted himself from the cave in the brush and stretched and walked to the center of the

road and turned his gaze to the stars and, on impulse, spun around like he did when he was a child, until the stars spun in a dizzying blur and he fell onto his seat on the asphalt. The clod his little brother threw had been done with foolish bravura. Julio had pounded him for considerably less. He thought about the sultry girl in the shop and was slightly angered, excited. He slapped his hand softly on the road and pushed himself up and fortified his resolve with an indignation that had suffered some diminishment, and he moved toward the manor.

Bugs screeched in the brush. No electric lights shone. He felt no fear setting foot on the horseshoe drive, the mansion coalescing out of shadow. He would creep to the rear and pry a kitchen door or window open. He passed stealthily through a slatted wooden gate into the gardens and Arturo, who had been waiting a week for the boy, opened one eye and watched the figure pass. He closed his eye and returned to sleep.

Julio gingerly stepped over the grasses and when he came to the corner he stopped to listen. A gentle nickering issued from the stable, the stomp of a hoof on the hard-packed floor. Then silence. He swung his small canvas pack off and extracted a screwdriver and made his way to the kitchen door. He inserted it into the doorjamb, then, on sudden impulse, tried the handle and the latch released. Flawless, sturdy in design, the old hinges swung the door silently open and the boy entered, his eyes wide and black. He pulled a penlight from his pocket and shined a narrow beam around the kitchen—but the cocina concealed no gold. He had to penetrate further.

He pushed open a door that led to the dining room. A ten-foot mahogany dining table with high-backed chairs dominated the space. A giant sideboard was pushed against a wall, beneath a mirror. The reflection frightened the boy when he shone his light in it. It was too much like another world, one of transparency and nothingness. Averting his gaze from it he opened a drawer. Nothing but linen. He slid open another, the flashlight gripped in his teeth. Photo albums and candles. The bottom drawer contained the silverware and he lifted the case out and set it on the table. This met his expectations, but he left it there and planned to return for it later. The oppressor would have a private room that contained treasure. Julio passed

priceless tapestries and expensive rugs, and brushed against centuries old furniture of inestimable value. Paintings of European masters hung from the walls. The boy searched for precious yellow metal in compact form. This was his vision of wealth.

He found his way to the library. On three walls, books filled floor to ceiling shelves. Trembling slightly he moved behind the patron's rosewood desk and sat in the massive leather chair. He dropped his skinny wrists on the wide arms. The chair came alive and embraced him with power and darkness, with a terrible and resplendent fatalism he had no word for. The depth and appeal of it threatened to overwhelm and consume him and he leaped up as if burned or possessed.

Standing, he slid open a desk drawer and shone the penlight in. Only papers. Same with the lower drawers. Frustrated and angry, he was on the point of spilling all the contents on the floor when he froze. In the mansion's stillness he thought he heard a sound. Footsteps. A door opening. His hand instinctively fell to the knife in his pocket, a switchblade with a wicked tip.

Then a woman's voice, high and pained, pierced the quiet. It keened begged wept rejoiced and inspired. It awoke an alien emotion and Julio was loosed into chaos. Transfixed, he listened. Then a beating of wings pounded in his ears, his stomach imploded and he could not expel his breath. A white-robed figure appeared briefly in the open doorway. He believed he had witnessed a ghost. Some moments later the apparition danced past the doorway again. He saw the eyes, not hollow fiery pits as he feared, but the eyes of tragedy and peace and gentle madness. The eyes of the patroness. An operatic paean emitted from a world he would never know. Compelled by external force and bereft of will he walked automaton-like out of the library.

*

In her self-hypnotic trance the mistress was conscious of the rooms, the furniture, the candles she had lit, conscious of Maria Callas. Conscious too of the ghosts, ancestral family, those both close and extended. Former servants, builders, guests drawn to the house in life

and death, children who had died young, all manner of spirit were attracted by her operatic séance. They hovered, reclined, disposed themselves in a variety of postures and attitudes: cavalier, curious, lost, angry, forlorn, beseeching. All commingled in various states of materialization, all in vain.

Some of them were no more than shadows, no more than thought. Purposeless and purposeful, apathetic and intent, they were everything they were in life. Confused, frightened of death they believed had not yet caught them out; or, aware of their circumstance and struggling to return to the living. Some viewed the situation philosophically. Disembodied spirits, they inhabited a way station with Maria Callas and the patron's dancing wife. Some envied her her flesh, while others were disinclined to re-cloak themselves in carnality. Their limbo had purged them of delusion. They remembered more clearly than others the horrific burden and tragedy of life.

Julio left the library and entered a high-beamed living room where Maria Callas was suspended in the rafters. He was a floating mind. He registered the glow of the candlelight, but was intent on recapturing a familiar sense of self. He felt bodiless. His eyes saw but were unattached to form. What vulture had eaten him? What vampire had left him empty? More a presence with a sense of survival than a wilful being he returned to the dining room and sought escape. Several spirits, like drunken family members pressing into a camera frame, gazed at him from the mirror. Just then the mistress pirouetted out of the kitchen. She saw him and stopped.

“Ohh...” she whispered, pressing a forefinger to her lips which formed a perfect O.

Behind Julio a spirit frantically waved spectral arms at the patroness, as if warning drivers an accident lay ahead. Wide-eyed, the boy stared at her and his mouth fell open. A wooden dummy's jaw unhinged. He attempted to speak and a fly flew out.

“Ohh...” the mistress repeated. But this was different from the first in pitch and inflection.

Julio spoke but all he emitted was a gargle. “Aggh Argh,” which he believed to be intelligible.

The patroness leaned her head to the side like a bird looking with one eye at an enigma. And then she laughed, a bright and airy crystal laugh at which every phantom turned not ear but attention to. She danced past Julio into the living room.

The boy walked into the kitchen and out of the house and into the night. He walked past the napping Arturo to the road and his hiding spot and he got on his bike and rode home. Dawn broke as he climbed into his bed. He stopped stealing and married the black-eyed girl and had his own child and he worked in the patron’s fields and lived on less money than you I would believe possible.

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