

GRACIETA AND RAMON.

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A piece from a longer sequence entitled *Once Remembered*.

The barber's shop was even more crowded than on an ordinary Friday afternoon, because on that June weekend there was going to be a big wedding in the neighborhood, and half the men who lived in it went to Quimet's to get their hair cut. Some peeked through the door and asked how long it was going to be until Quimet or Martí could do them. Upon hearing the answer, they would take their watches out of their breast pockets and either walk away with a "I'll be back" or go in and sit in one of the very modern, very functional, rotating chairs Quimet had just installed. Some were store keepers like himself, others were factory workers, and a few wore Falange or police uniforms. There were political magazines available, most of them satirical, and a mildly porno tabloid out of the children's reach called *Patufet*. In an old chair, the cat—whom Martí had named "Mistinguet" after a much celebrated music-hall starlet—twitched in her dreams. The men who had waited long were getting restless.

"Say, isn't Antonieta around today?" (Most people called little Antonia by this diminutive.)

"Yeah, how come she's not out here? I've got something for her if she'll sing to us." The man who said this had a kindly ruddy face and a moustache that made him look like a seal. Unbeknownst to him, Quimet's boy called him "The Valiant One." One Sunday morning that he had knocked on the upstairs door to beg Quimet to trim his whiskers, Antonia had opened and yelled in the direction of her parents' bedroom:

"It's The Valiant One!" The big man was startled for a moment, and then said:

"Devil of a girl! Did you hear her? She just called me The Valiant One!"

Despite or because of that incident, The Valiant One was one of Antonia's most devoted fans. Not that she didn't have plenty of them. Every man and woman who came to the shop—for Quimet also cut women's hair—had seen her do one number or other. She sang out of tune, but that had never stopped her. Her voice was as erratic as it was powerful, and she did her routine with a seriousness and self-assurance that earned her a lot of praise and other more tangible rewards. At the time she was about four, and perfectly aware of which piece of her limited repertoire the audience expected on a particularly busy Friday afternoon. She leaped from behind the curtain, dressed in a navy-blue and white suit and

matching cap, holding the tip of the pleated skirt and quick-stepping sideways, as she sang:

"Here comes madame, dressed in sailor costume..." Everybody laughed, even Quimet couldn't resist a quiet smile. She had never tripped on any of the obstacles in her path or slipped on one of the tufts of hair lying across the floor. She just raced from the curtain to the door like an arrow, past the gaping customers wrapped in ample white clothes, her head tilted up, her movements precise and determined. When she finished, she curtsied once and went to The Valiant One, who had stretched his gigantic arms towards her. Flushed from the exercise and with her black curls in disorder, she climbed onto his lap and dug her fingers into his breast pocket. She turned to the audience with an expression of triumph on her face, holding a handful of candy. Once she was on her feet again, she began to suck a piece of candy with her habitual seriousness.

While everyone's attention was focussed on Antonieta's act, Gracieta, holding a handkerchief to her nose, had walked briskly into the shop and disappeared up the stairs. Francisqueta was by herself preparing supper. The little barber hadn't come back from school yet. Suddenly, Gracieta began to sob so violently that her sister turned around, alarmed.

"What in the world is the matter with you?"

She wiped her hands with her apron and went up to Gracieta, who was shaking uncontrollably.

"Oh, the most awful, awful thing has happened to me!"

"Don't you feel well, have you hurt yourself?" Gracieta kept shaking her head.

"Then it must be that husband of yours. Have you heard from him? Have you seen him?"

More denials. "You're very pale. I'll give you some brandy. Calm down, if it's none of the things I've said it can't be so bad." And she got her a little glass of brandy.

They both sat at the kitchen table and Gracieta, swallowing her tears along with the brandy, began:

"You know that since... since I sent Ramón away a year ago I've been going to church more than I used to..." She blew her nose. "To the Church of the Sea, you know the one..."

"Yes, go on."

"I needed some help, some guidance... I'm no big churchgoer, but I didn't even know if I was doing the right thing sending Ramón away, if God would forgive me..."

"Gracieta, Ramón was running around with every woman who came his way, taking you for granted all the time. You have no children to worry about, so don't feel bad about it, he's the one who did wrong." Francisqueta shook her head sympathetically. "You've always been such a good soul!"

After another rush of tears, Gracieta resumed her story.

"Well, there's a priest there, Father Robert, do you know him?"

"No, I don't. You know I don't go to church much."

"Anyway, I had seen him say Mass before, but since Ramón left he's also been my confessor. I've been confessing with him once a week. He's been so good, so gentle, he seemed to understand the situation so well..." Another sob. "Until, yesterday, I went to confess, as usual—I go every Thursday evening, when the church is quiet and there aren't too many people nosing around—and he... he asked me if I knew where he lives... I said yes, that is, I thought I did... He lives close to the cookie factory, in a little one-floor house with an old housekeeper who sometimes also helps in church... So he asked me if I could stop by after eight thirty, which is when he gets home after the last confession, he would give me a little picture of Our Lady of Consolation to put on my nightstand and say my prayers to... three Hail Marys every night, before going to bed."

"And did you go?"

"Well, why shouldn't I? I trusted him, he's a religious man, a... how does he put it? A *minister* of God. I went to his house; I had no trouble finding it, even though it was already dark. At first I was a little surprised that he opened the door himself instead of the housekeeper, frankly... But I thought she was in the kitchen fixing supper, maybe, since he had just got back from work. So I asked if he would kindly give me the picture of Our Lady of Consolation that he had told me about. He took me by the arm, and then I looked around and realized we were alone..." Gracieta sobbed again. "And I think I was a little afraid... So I don't know how, I made up some excuse, but he was still holding my arm, so tight it still hurts..." She had begun to cry again. "And then he said I couldn't be in any hurry, since there was no one at home waiting for me... He spoke so softly, just as in confession... And all the time he was pulling me in, and I saw his bed through the half open door. Oh! How frightened I was. He never stopped talking, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what he said... I only heard a word here and there... A man alone, serving God day after day is hard, a poor sheep like me left to wander without her shepherd... Then he begged 'please...' I couldn't break off, his grip was so tight, and he was breathing so close to my face... Finally I pleaded, I think I was crying, and begged 'please let me go, let me go...' And it seemed as if he had come back to his senses, at least a little, and he looked around in the dark and then at me, and sort of let me go. And I just ran, and ran until I got home. I didn't get any sleep the whole night, I just lay in bed with my eyes wide open, thinking I was hearing noises every minute. I even got out of bed and went for the cane, you know that heavy one that had belonged to Ramón's dad -may he rest in peace. I thought if somebody had come in and was going to attack me I could grab the cane and let him have it... Or if I heard more noises I could knock three times on the floor and the neighbors downstairs would hear

me. But then the sun came out, and I wasn't so frightened any more. Oh, Francisqueta, if I hadn't taken advantage of that moment when he let go of my arm, I don't know what would have happened!" She blew her nose vigorously and, without transition, passed from fear and self pity to anger, which in Gracieta's case was always a little comic. "Who does he think he is, ha! And who does he think I am? Some... some fallen woman, ready to throw myself at the first unscrupulous man who comes around, just because I'm... temporarily separated from my husband? The shameless... He had no right, no right!" And, realizing that her sister didn't seem at all surprised, she asked. "Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

"Me? You've said it all. Gracieta, Gracieta, one would think you'd been born yesterday... A thirty-five year old married woman..."

"Thirty-four!"

"Pardon me, thirty four. What did you think priests have under those skirts? Our Lady of Consolation! Some consolation he had in mind! And you, you little fool, should have guessed as much. Didn't it dawn on you when he asked you to go to his place after dark?"

"Now it turns out I'm to blame! Really..."

"No, no, don't get mad at me. I understand your being upset. It's just that I'm not so shocked: I don't expect priests to be saints... Look at you." Francisqueta took a hard glance at her younger sister and felt inclined to forgive the priest. "You're in your full strength, beautiful, and to boot I bet you wore this same outfit to go to church yesterday."

"What's wrong with this outfit? You're not gonna tell me it's indecent? A light coat and..."

The coat was a shade of green specially becoming to Gracieta's fair complexion. She wore a matching small hat with a black net, which she had lifted to blow her nose and wipe her tears.

"No, it isn't indecent, it's gorgeous. Now, if this is a young priest, and something tells me he is, and you're a young woman, and he knows you're without a husband at the moment, sleeping every night with your head on that *long* pillow, as they say..."

"Francisqueta!"

"Yes, Francisqueta! Don't you think all these thoughts went through his head? Week after week, you innocent, in all those confessions you were pouring heavenly music in his ears. D'you know what I'm talking about? You were giving him slow poison, like an apho... aphro—I'll be darned, I can't say it. God knows what you told him! That you felt lonely, perhaps? That you missed Ramón very much? That you had bad thoughts some nights? Don't give me that look, I bet that's what you told him! The man, for that's what he is, in case you didn't know, a man of flesh and blood, must have gotten all worked up and must have

thought 'here's a chance.' Because, no doubt, he has tried this business of the picture before and it has worked."

"Oh!"

"Listen, with this sort of thing you should never trust a priest. You know how the saying goes: 'Man is fire, woman straw. The devil comes along, and blows.' Why didn't you talk to me in the first place?"

"Oh, I don't know, I was embarrassed, ashamed..."

"You were embarrassed to tell me and you weren't embarrassed to tell the priest?" Francisqueta rolled up her eyes. "The Lord have mercy!"

"See, I thought that's what priests were for... But I guess I'll talk to you the next time."

"That's a girl. Listen, now that you're here why don't you give me a hand with these potatoes? Mama was helping me but she had to go get the little barber at school. When he arrives he'll be hungrier than a whole army. And you're staying for supper."