

At the Heart of All Beauty
Curt Eriksen

*that circumstance,
of which the speech is poetry.*

William Carlos Williams

I

There's still time, that's what María keeps saying, "you're not finished yet." I could come clean and tell her, couldn't I, before it's too late? Wouldn't that make me feel better, wouldn't it be a relief? And doesn't she know how to keep a secret? Hasn't she proved that much to me?

Of course I never doubt her intentions. At least I can trust her as far as that. But her words are sweetened with a gratitude that remains suspect, if only because she is still so young and I am now so very old.

And weary too, but never of living. My time *will* come, soon enough, but such matters are better left to resolve themselves without my intervention. My pains—the physical pains—are minimal, and to be expected. I've lived with most of them since I was her age, still very much in the prime of my life. They are acute reminders, as if such a thing were necessary, of the length and hardship of any real undertaking.

And certainly that is what my life has been: one undertaking after another, a veritable sea of stiffs, *rigor mortis abundare*, more than I could ever count.

You might think that there wouldn't be much in it, just a great deal of brooding, more metaphysics than money. But it all depends on the clientele, the degree of necessity and one's own flair and disposition, by which I mean scruple, or lack of it, in the face of grief and similar urgent circumstances. Besides, for years I provided the only funerary services in town.

But enough of such tedious reflections. I can smell the coffee and hear María moving about in the kitchen, opening and closing the cupboard doors. Soon she will climb the stairs with the silver tray—a gift from the widow of Mayor Ortega—balanced in her hands. When she gets to the top of the staircase and enters the bedroom she will set that tray, which has four ornate feet, small as the paws of a kitten, on the mahogany desk by the window. That's the window with the widest view of the valley, the one I used to sit at, where I had once intended to write my memoirs. Convinced that I am still dreaming, María will soundlessly raise the pleated blinds and the tenuous yet promising light of dawn, preceding her cool kiss upon my forehead, will chase all the ghosts away.

§

They didn't used to bother me so much, not when we slept together. Not that they didn't come, it was just that they never stayed for long. By the time María would begin to stir, turning to me and exhaling a groggy *buenos días* without opening her eyes, they were usually gone. They instinctively fled from her animal warmth, that of her solid peasant's body and earthy mind. Of course she believes in the unseen more wholeheartedly than I do; or at least her beliefs are more thoroughly conditioned than my own by the icons of Catholic devilry. But I worked for sixty years in the presence of spirits, and always within hours of their being severed from that form which had permitted them a stake in the life we all know and cling to. Their distress was

palpable, even when death was a relief. How could it be otherwise, when their day of reckoning had come at last?

You might imagine that you don't believe in such things, but it's hardly a matter of choice—of belief or imagination. We have five senses that we can count on the fingers of one hand and the world of being is much wider than any net that hand can cast. Perception is precisely that, what we *can* perceive, and that's a fact worth bearing in mind.

I remember, for example, the first ring I removed from a cold finger. It was only eighteen carats, a simple heirloom, slim and unadorned as a wedding band. The gold was nicked and tarnished but it was gold. Delgado knew the surname and he told me that the man's entire family had been dispersed or destroyed by the war. There were no relatives to locate and worry about.

I remember that the man's stomach was bloated and threatening to burst the buttons on a shirt that was frayed along the collar. There was a trace of dried vomit, with a fleck of blood in it, crusted on his chin, and the stench was already making me gag. Someone had found him in a ditch and we weren't sure how long he had been lying there. According to his *carne de identidad* he was forty-nine when presumably his liver—devoured by bootleg alcohol, solitude and who knows what other demons—had finally given up. But the ring had survived, and no one would miss it.

Still, as I forced the ring over a hardened knuckle, I knew I was being watched. I hesitated—who wouldn't? I was sixteen, the job was a piece of luck that had landed like a brick in front of me, and I'd only been at it for a few weeks. If it was that nosey bastard Delgado who had just left me alone in the *cámara* I'd be on the street again sifting through the rubbish bins. It required more courage than I had

ever mustered to turn around and look over my shoulder, and see that no one was there.

That was the first time, but it wasn't the last. That ring was a trifle, more symbolic—or indicative—than vital. I got fifty pesetas for it, and even then fifty pesetas didn't last long. But my life was changed in the only way a life can change: in essence, in awareness. The flaw in my character—that slight imperfection that ruins the appraisal of a precious stone—had clearly revealed itself, and I couldn't deny it.

Until then I had thought of myself as just like any other kid on the block. In the evenings, if there was a ball, we would kick it around in the vacant lot next to the ruins of the bottling plant. There was broken glass scattered among the clumps of dusty weeds and none of us had shoes, but that was part of the challenge. Young as we were we knew that risks like this were to be expected and taken for granted. There was only one boy in our gang, Felipe, whose dad was still alive, and he was doing hard labor, somewhere, on chick peas and filthy water.

Nonetheless that somewhere had a romantic aura about it. But having lived through the war none of us could romanticize Felipe's dad breaking up granite with a sledge hammer for what little remained of his life. We had seen enough senseless brutality in the streets to convince us—everyone but Felipe—that his old man would never be coming back. But somewhere was still elsewhere, it was still somewhere else, and that elsewhere transfixed our imaginations which, though scarred, were still impressionable.

One of our favorite haunts was the train station on the western edge of town. A corner of the building had been blasted away during the first fierce days of the fighting, and the walls that still stood were pockmarked with holes the size of golf

balls. The master beam had been hit by a fifteen centimeter shell, causing the roof to buckle and spill. Shattered tiles littered the floor where you might find a singed and weathered ticket stub with the barely legible date of the uprising stamped upon it. It was dangerous, and forbidden, to go in there and root about among the debris, but that was all the more reason to do it. Once Felipe found a pocket knife with a rusted blade, but before he could pry the blade open Ortega, who we used to call Manu, took it from him without a struggle.

We had nothing to do all day, since we weren't allowed to go to school. School was only for the sons and daughters of the victors, and we had been born to the losers. So we spent our time roaming the streets, scouring the sidewalks for cigarette butts and running away from the municipal police. When we had filled our pockets, a job that could take us all morning and most of the afternoon, we would go to the train station and sit on the platform where we would lay the dirty butts out before us, end to end. From where we sat we could see the tracks stretching away across the fields that were being plowed again. Taking turns, according to a hierarchy that had naturally established itself among us, we would choose a butt and start a story, embellishing it for as long as we were able to suck any smoke from the shreds of tobacco. There was only one rule, and that was that the story should be the story of what our lives were *going* to be. None of us had ever touched a girl, but every story involved a mysterious, radiant and beautiful woman. Ortega and I were the only ones who came to realize this dream, and it turned out to be the same woman, but Felipe was long gone before I could explain to him what a nightmare loving her had become.

II

Don Alfonso keeps his eyes closed until he feels the slight pressure of María's lips on his forehead. This is a ritual, and rituals are sacred. When he opens his eyes she wishes him a good morning and then she busily sets about puffing up the pillows so that he can sit comfortably in the bed and eat his breakfast. This is always a small glass of squeezed orange juice, a pot of black coffee and one slice of buttered toast. María would have him eat more than this, but he refuses. They have argued about this many times, but the last time they argued Don Alfonso lost his temper and reminded María of her place. The rebuttal stung so deeply that since then she offers no further advice.

Instead she chats amiably while she sets the tray with the glass and cup and pot and plate and fork and knife and spoon on the bedside table. She likes to listen to the radio downstairs when Don Alfonso's not around, which is all the time now that he's taken to bed. The local gossip, national news and popular songs fill María's head. She has no ambitions for herself and no family anywhere to yearn for. She started working for Don Alfonso long before he had this house built and left his business in the hands of a pair of reliable *socios* and retired with her to the sierra. From the big *salón* of the penthouse he used to own in the center of the town, María could see the mountains on bright afternoons when the visibility was good; and she used to sit in the armchair by the window where she watched the mountains grow indistinct while she waited for Don Alfonso to come home every evening. Now, from this house, where she lives as if sequestered, she can see the colorful lights of the town, scintillating in the dark pool of the valley at night.

María doesn't miss the life in town, not particularly. Curiously enough she and Don Alfonso were born in the same neighborhood, and in each of their cases it was a piece of luck—the sort of thing people in that neighborhood never expect—that provided them with a way out. Having come from the same neighborhood it didn't surprise her much when Don Alfonso placed his hands on her for the first time. She was scouring out the bathtub and he came into the bathroom and silently shut the door behind him, before rutting her like a ram. It was rape, but María couldn't think of it in those terms. She was seventeen at the time and Don Alfonso was fifty-six. They had come from the same neighborhood but he had risen to the status of a man who was untouchable in town, having acquired so much influence as a result of so many people owing him so many dubious favors.

María was primarily concerned about her job, about what the Señora would think when she found out. She knew Doña Leticia would find out because she was certain that Don Alfonso wanted his wife to find out. María was being used in a careless way that left her no dignity at all, but she soon realized that Don Alfonso not only wanted her—having come quickly to relish the taste of her, the taste of that neighborhood they had both come from—but that he needed her as well.

This realization caused a revolution in their relationship, since it allowed María to take some initiative and make a couple of demands. One was that he be more gentle with her, a request that resulted in a deepening of the intimacy they shared and an illusion of equality. The other was that he allow her to wear Doña Leticia's lingerie and shoes.

So that became another ritual. When the Señora was out of town, shopping in Madrid or lying in Ortega's big bed on one of his many *fincas*, Don Alfonso would leave work and knock on the door of the penthouse he owned with its famous view of

the sierra. María would totter to the door in any of the many pairs of impossible shoes Doña Leticia collected, her firm peasant's ass lifted high and barely covered with a slip of silk. She would look out through the peep hole and ask who it was. Don Alfonso always whispered, his voice quaking with excitement, that the gas man or the electric man or someone from the census bureau had come by to ask her a few questions.

“Nothing personal, I hope.”

“Very personal indeed.”

María always dragged out this part of the exchange as long as she could. It was the experience of power that intoxicated her, to be able to open the door to this man—whose verdicts were more far-reaching than those of any judge—or to keep it closed. She demanded to know what sorts of personal questions, couldn't he be more specific? He certainly could, and this always led to some hurried and muted dirty talk that culminated with a noisy and violent drawing of the bolts.

§

It was sex that had brought them together and led them to where they were, and it was sex that kept them apart now that Don Alfonso had finally given himself up as hopeless. Not only sex, of course, as if sex were separable from the whole range of sometimes contradictory and always bewildering emotions that are associated with copulation. But sex was at the core, burning like incense. Sex was the playing field upon which a seventeen year old girl and a fifty-six year old magnate could meet and gamble, a field that was almost level, since most of his advantages were annulled there.

Soon after they became lovers Don Alfonso started telling María about the prostitutes he had long frequented. She didn't know then that he owned the *puticlub*,

that the prostitutes were effectively *his*, but that was why he told her. When he mentioned these encounters she became very quiet, but after a while she said, “Don’t talk to me about women like that.”

She said this as seriously as she could so that it would sound like a threat. She lifted herself and tried to get out of the bed but Don Alfonso forced her down again, pinning her shoulders against the mattress.

María turned her face away from him and hissed, “Is that what you think?”

Don Alfonso couldn’t understand this reaction. María was so new to him, until then she was nothing but a play thing, and a potentially costly toy, or perhaps another investment. But the hurt in her voice, much deeper than the indignation, alarmed him. He realized he had transgressed some inviolable boundary, but he didn’t understand how or when or why.

“Of course not, it’s only...”

Don Alfonso released the pressure on María’s shoulders and she twisted her body away from him, covering her breasts by folding her arms. It was the first time she allowed her tears to fall in front of him. Her pain wasn’t as real as she would have liked it to have been. Her aunt, the one who had raised her, had told her plenty of malicious stories about her own mother, but there came a point at which María realized that these stories had very little to do with her. That realization cost her a great deal of agony—it was a final and bitter separation from an illusion she had deliberately nursed, but once she had accepted it she felt liberated from the accident of her birth. Now she was more concerned with the stains on the satin pillowcases, wondering if they would still be there when the Señora returned, and whether or not she should change the set of sheets or leave them as they were. And whether the other

woman, who was no better than a whore herself, would be able to smell María's presence once she had cleaned and aired the bedroom.

“It's just that they're all so very...”

Don Alfonso didn't know how to finish the sentence, and he couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Is that *all* we have in common?”

María was asking him the same question every non-professional asks the man she has just given herself to, one way or another.

When Don Alfonso took María that first time he was immensely conscious—without being inclined to examine his conduct—of the projection of his will upon her. Mayor Ortega had a copy of some amateur's clumsy rendition of Titian's *Europa* on one of the walls of his office in the *ayuntamiento*, and both he and Don Alfonso naturally identified with Zeus. But Ortega was even more practical than Don Alfonso and consequently there wasn't much poetry in Ortega's passion. Or at least that's what Don Alfonso always told himself, since it mitigated some of the humiliation he felt when he imagined Ortega mounting his wife. Don Alfonso was convinced that Ortega lacked the fatal yearning for self-knowledge that guarantees tragedy: he was no hero, and his affair with Leticia had more to do with his sense of competition than it did with a sincere interest in Don Alfonso's wife.

María, on the other hand, was unalloyed affection and human vulnerability incarnate, but how could he explain this discovery to her? It seemed to have come so late in his life. How could he tell her that it wasn't a matter of status or experience, and certainly not of beauty, that there was no price for something like this. María made the blood in Don Alfonso's veins quicken, the thought of her always aroused him, made him feel young and vigorous again and desperate to live forever.

He touched her cheek with the back of a finger and smeared the snail's trail of tears. Bending low, close to her ear, he brushed her hair aside and told her that he loved her, even though he didn't believe this could be true. Neither did she, but since he gave her with this simple declaration some of all that she could possibly hope to gain from him, she turned to him and they embraced again. While they were making love though he steadily shed the tender feelings she had stirred and, taking her from behind, watched in the full-length mirror set in the door of the wardrobe, encouraging her to look as well. He couldn't imagine what she might see—he was no stallion, not any more, not at fifty-six, and she was definitely a filly. But by looking at the image in the glass he managed to distance himself from the terror of his own tears.

III

Eventually María runs out of the gossip and chatter. She knows that though my hearing remains remarkably keen, most of what she says goes in one ear and out the other. Her glib careless manner is a mask she wears to conceal her loneliness and disappointment in me. She used to pour her heart out, telling me what she really thought and felt. Her attempts at being articulate were endearing to me. It was obvious that I was the father she had never known but had always imagined, and it didn't seem to embarrass her to be lying in my arms. What could be more natural? She actually suggested the possibility one afternoon. "After all, my mom might have worked there." I didn't flinch, even though I had already tried and failed to remember. I had even asked one of the managers to look into it, but he couldn't come up with anything either. I never confessed to María what I really thought: that her

mother's infamy was much exaggerated by an embittered, older and uglier sister, and that her mother was little more than a common slut.

Now that we have finished with the ritual of breakfast, now that the glass of orange juice is empty and the coffee pot has cooled and nothing of the toast but crumbs remain, María stands up, smooths her skirt, places the knife, fork and spoon on the plate and picks up the silver tray. But before she turns to go I grab her wrist.

“Won't you sit with me? For a little while?”

I have to force myself to say this. It's as close as I can come to an apology. I was much too harsh with her the other day. When she kept nagging about the food I snapped at her and said the sort of thing that always hurts the most—the truth. It was a reflex, as automatic as batting an eyelid. Leticia used to go on and on, she had a tongue she wielded like a whip until I silenced it, and Leticia remains a point of reference for me, long after I laid her out and dressed her for the viewing. The two women couldn't be more unlike, but sometimes they still merge into one. When I lost my patience with María I immediately cursed myself for having opened my mouth, but once the damage was done I had to leave it at that. This was a lesson I learned early: never admit to your mistakes.

“Is there something you want to say to me, Alfonso? Something you would like to tell me?”

“No,” I sigh. “Nothing in particular.”

“I've got some ironing...”

“And all day to do it?”

María won't look me in the eye, and even though I'm staring intently at her face I appreciate her discretion. It's pathetic of me to beg. Slowly I relax my grip and

withdraw my hand, the arthritic cadaverous fingers beneath the pale withered skin so weak now that I can hardly believe they were ever capable of strangling a man.

María turns and leaves the room as if dismissed, without another word. I listen to the retreat of her heavy tread on the staircase and remember the way Ortega groveled in the end. And something he said to me once—the last thing I would have expected from the man, a truly remarkable reflection, shortly after he had won the elections for the first time and assumed office and began his long affair with my wife—resounds in my mind with the fading of María’s footsteps: “At the heart of everything we most desire, Alfonso, lies something inhuman, a contradiction we will never resolve.”

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