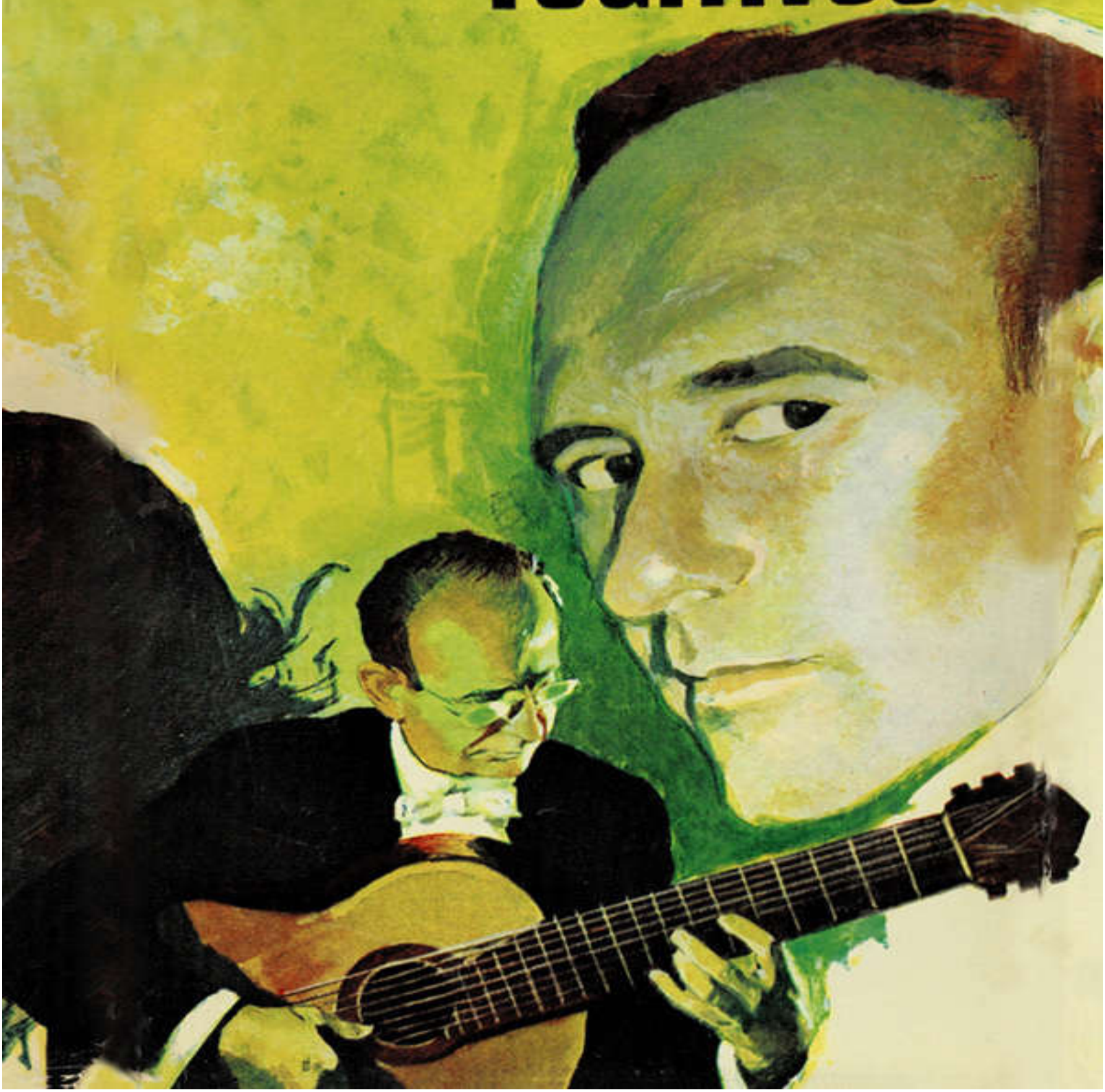


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**José María
Gironella**

TODOS SOMOS FUGITIVOS



(*Phantoms and Fugitives*)

JOURNEYS TO THE IMPROBABLE

by José Maria Gironella

translated by

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Three Plates on the Table *(Desire Becomes Flesh)*

I

Always standing in front of the blackboard, with the chalk in his hand. No one knew what he was trying to prove. And it was useless to wait for him to intersperse, between the numbers and symbols, a caricature of a childish house with a chimney, symmetrical windows, lambs around it and, somewhere, a spring time. While he worked—and he did for hours and hours—he never ever gave in to this kind of impulse. He was a man of modest science, domesticated, for himself alone, but he took it very seriously. To be diverted from algebra or from the simplest arithmetical operation would have been to transgress a beautiful law.

The stove-pipe perforated the top pane of a large window. When smoke appeared from this tube, the neighbors thought to themselves, "He's working." The mischievous boys said he was smoking. That he was smoking away his good humor, the possibility of seeing bridges and rivers and traveling on a railroad, that he was smoking away his life. And this was because they did not know that those four walls, his home, sufficed the man of modest science. Within

them was everything that satisfied him. There was his brain, his blackboard; in each corner were fragments of memories; in the garret, dreams of childhood; in the ash can, his sins. In the closets he kept old mufflers, the stained smocks of the intellectual, some photographs. No railroad, no ship, no airplane could take him to such a place as that one.

And if this was not enough, within those walls—and very often in his own workroom—there was his daughter. A girl of ten, slightly cross-eyed, but with blonde braids and an even blonder smile. A girl that would come into the room cautiously, in spite of all the prohibitions, and who, approaching from behind, would cry out, startling him, “Papa, do you want a candy?” A girl with a capacity for tenderness comparable to that of autumn. Always barefoot on the wooden floor. With a little metal brace over her front teeth that rebelled against being straightened. With dolls and everything there was to be had. Bursting with questions and strange thoughts. Jumping from her bed like a small violin that would escape its case. Pitying the ice in the icebox because it was melting. Looking out at the street from the window to convince herself that not everything ended there, that there were other blonde girls in the world and election posters pasted on the walls and boys with schoolbags razzing the town’s old taxi cab, and a tranquil fountain in a corner of the graceful park across the street which was the first thing she had seen of the outside world.

Yes, the modest man of science had this daughter, ten years old, and he asked himself many times if, had she not existed, he would have continued drawing symbols on the

blackboard. His daughter was his anxiety, his daily miracle. When he took her under her arms and lifted her into the air—now he couldn't do it, she weighed more and more each day—he felt that that flesh was like one of his own severed members which, therefore, owed him a blind allegiance and was obliged to make him happy. And when he sat her on his knees, he felt the child's face so close to his own that he could count her pores one by one, her eyelashes, her teeth with the metal brace and even the pink of her cheeks. There were moments when the man concentrated so fully on this task that he was sure he could see her soul, down her throat. Luckily, the child would unexpectedly pull a hair from his eyebrow or suddenly burst out laughing and everything would be returned to its place. Oh, yes, it was fortunate for him that the girl laughed so much, that her ignorance of the things of life and her eagerness to grow should be summed up in this, in happiness! Had it not been thus, who would make him laugh in his turn? And who would so often convert the objects in the room into little bells?

The man was not so dense as to ignore that the child had made him scandalously selfish. If ever someone hurt her, took her away from him . . . His look was already murderous. And he was confident that he would never lack the necessary money—if need be he would sell the furniture piece by piece—to continue nourishing that little body. That's it. Transform everything into nourishment, into clothes, into what was needed for her education. Above all he dreamed of being able to buy her those toys with mechanisms inside

that made them dance. Because he realized that he lived an excessively retired and solemn life, and that his example could harm the child: it was evident that a girl could not live on abstractions. In a house so full of formulas and x's and astronomic calculi, it was indispensable that there should be little monkeys playing cymbals, and also clowns and miniature kitchens that functioned like real ones, electrically.

Perhaps the exaggerated love for his daughter was the fruit of his fortunate childhood. His parents were of a robust nature and they enveloped him in an atmosphere healthy for the body and for the spirit. A hundred times they said to him, "Prolong our stock, which has not received honors of any kind, but which sows peace." Thus it was that that child responded completely to this convention. Because she was by nature good and simple, with only the oddities proper to her age. At school she always finished her classes airily; and all the neighbors on the block had affectionate words for her when she passed. As for her presence in the house, enough has been said of that. Every day the girl discovered something new or played a new joke on her father, as, for example, to tell him that she didn't love him, that she didn't love him at all, or that she had pulled from her finger the cigar band he had placed there the evening before, as a form of engagement.

Well, actually, this ten-year-old girl, with all that she represented, was the great lie of that silent and hard-working man, mathematical and gray. The blonde braids of the

girl, just as the pleasure he experienced explaining the value of a word or winding up her toys, were the personification of a great desire that had never been realized. The child did not exist and the strict truth was this: in the workroom of the man there was nothing but a blackboard, a table, a divan, a wastebasket and the wood-stove. Never bare feet, nor "Papa, do you want a candy?", and much less little bells! The child's teeth, her arms and the violin case were nothing more than desires, sainted and pure desires, that died like tobacco or like the voices of the real children who were let out of school in mid-afternoon. It was the child "that could have been." And if the man had imagined her cross-eyed it was to concede some defect and, through compassion, to love her a little more.

II

The only true consolation of the modest sage, his only effective company, was his wife. And the invention of the daughter had been in fact their joint idea. The two would have wanted to have her and they spent years awaiting the event. The other women of the town promenaded their pregnancy with double sentiments of modesty and insolence. Thousands of large and minuscule things were born in the town—suns and moons, frogs and flies—but the daughter was not born. There were moments when, simply with the opening of a window, one could hear the crackling of an immense fecundity on all sides. Stamen on the flowers, leaves like hands on the trees, cats under the eaves and

men, vigorous and powerful men, in the bedrooms. One day, even the old taxi of the town brought a woman to the pharmacy who gave birth right there. But in that one house, nothing was fundamentally renewed. The curse of sterility. Much love, much interrogating of each other, long silences, the kitchen, the blackboard . . .

Sometimes it seemed to him that he was resigned. Because he loved his wife and also because in the mutual proximity, in the mutual solitude, there beat a consolation and even a motive for life. His wife was a woman who never laughed, but neither did she ever despair. She occupied much space sitting, like a large parcel, but when she stood up one could see how small she was. She had not changed at all since they were married, on August 12th of 1918. Only her hair. Her hair had saddened and the line that parted it was now a more uncertain path down the center of her head. But the rest, all intact. The same clear look, the same sunken cheeks. She always seemed to wear the same blouse and the same skirt, except on Sundays, when she tied a bow here and another there. She always seemed to walk on sandals, even when she returned from the street with her shoes full of mud. And when she opened a drawer, one would have said she was looking for a glove. Besides, the man was convinced that his wife had a lovely voice, that she could have sung like the angels, but that she had not even wanted to attempt it because she preferred not to modify things, not to disturb. In fact, the great passion of the woman was to go unnoticed. She had a premonition that her husband was accomplishing meritorious work, and that was enough for her. Pressing

his trousers she would say to herself, "I am helping him." Besides, she was very ascetic and immunized against ostentation. At school she came to realize that even the great emperors also end by dying and she conformed her spirit to this idea.

The man loved her deeply, spontaneously, without ever asking himself why, nor supposing that it could be any other way. All day long he had for her a thousand small attentions, like going to the wall of the kitchen and knocking three times with his fist, or leaving written on the blackboard in large letters, "I love you." His specialties were to nudge her foot under the table and, every morning at breakfast, to drop the usual two lumps of sugar into her coffee cup. He played as though he bargained with her and finally, when he allowed them to slip into the liquid, he would lean back with the air of having consummated a premeditated and difficult act. He could not evoke the image of his wife without experiencing an intense tenderness, and in this radiated the secret of so much solicitude. He forgot her defects as one forgets a yawn. Hardly did he hear her sneeze than he would stop dead and for a moment hate the wind, the draughts and all that was cold and humid, and he would imagine himself armed with shields, with fumigators and antibiotics, defending his wife's lungs. He even forgave her not having given him the girl, that is, forgave her the curse of sterility. Impossible to go further!

On his part, he knew that he was loved fervently. In fact, when he met his wife she had not yet awakened from a strange childish lethargy. She lived in the last house of the

town, or, from another point of view, the first. Her horizons had been the wheat fields and a stretch of road on which the priest walked during the week and the couples on Sunday. To groom herself she hung a mirror at the window, so that instead of seeing the street she saw herself. Her sisters paid little attention to her, and the only flirtation of her life had been with a black cat with white spots, or white with black spots. She knew how to read and multiply, nothing more. Then he erupted in her eyes, in her brain; he became master of one and the other as of an easy problem, and the girl's blood began circulating. It circulated so, that her body developed, although not much. She understood that she was a woman, a complete and equilibrated person, capable of accepting or rejecting. She understood that in a certain sense her existence was necessary and that, undoubtedly, without her the town would have been smaller, and that without her even the stars would have found something missing.

The man knew about all this created love in her and knew that, after thirty years, it continued inundating her as a drop of water inundates the sea. And in this love, why not, he took refuge and consolation for his frustrated paternity. Besides, it was beautiful, beautiful in all senses to see them walking under the same umbrella, stopping occasionally in front of any inaccessible shopwindow. They were a couple with an aureole, that was it. They were like two slow clouds, two parallel rivers, like the first couple that existed, like the one that will survive after the great cataclysm. He, with the chalk in his hand; she, sneezing, humble, not wanting to sing, pressing trousers; they were

an example, and surely the ten-year-old girl they had invented would have been happy at their side, between the two of them; although they, loving her so much, at some time would have imagined that they could even see her soul.

Well, the fact is that this humble wife, born near the wheat fields, was the second great lie of that man, a bit grayhaired and sentimental. This wife didn't exist either and was also the personification of his other great desire, of the desire for company. In reality, in that house—in the kitchen, in the corridors, in the bedroom—no one lived but he, he period, with some furniture, the blackboard and the window. The lumps of sugar melted without glory in his own coffee and there never existed the possibility of a warm voice budding at his side. There didn't even exist the sad hair, nor the 12th of August of 1918, nor even the black cat with white spots, or the reverse. He had simply wished so much for a wife like that, whom he supposed he would have awakened and given joy to in her everyday and eternal life, that when the wind murmured outside—threatening the lungs—or when it rained drearily, it was not strange that for a few seconds he should actually believe that he was, in fact, married, that in the room next to his a woman, who was his, sewed or pressed for him. And many times, at dawn, when he opened his expressionless eyes in the darkness, he felt extreme emptiness in all that his thoughts could encompass, and he asked himself if his breathing and the symbols on the blackboard had an end.

III

Alone in his solitude. With fifty-five years on his back. He knew all the noises of his house and of his own body, from his cough to the creaking of his bones. He could do nothing that would surprise him. Even his improvised gestures seemed natural to him, and his shadow on the wall, dwarfed or enlarged, was irremediably his. It did no good to affect some strange headgear or some extravagant pose.

Fifty-five years with himself, seeking he knew not what, without wife, without daughter. Born right there, near the cemetery, whose trees grew at the pace of the new guests that came to the enclosure. Oh, yes! it was curious to continue upright while so many things died around him. Sometimes it was enough to open the window for a moment to listen to the immense crepitation of death in the town, the death of the voices of the children when they left school in the afternoon, the slow death of the old taxi's motor, the death of the election posters. Fifty-five years tolerating himself, seeing other deaths, reading his own name on the invincible name plate of the door.

The man felt exhausted, although he attributed it to a passing relapse of his organism. He took up smoking. His room became an ashtray. The mischievous boys were right, of course, in imagining that he was smoking away his humor and the possibility of seeing other towns and traveling on a railroad, that he was smoking away his life. In fact, without realizing it, the man rolled his cigarettes as though each one

were his last. And he licked the paper as though there were no more saliva left in him. He had never called himself an old stub; and yet, sometimes he went up to the mirror, anxious to assure himself that by drawing in hard his eyes still became bright.

He also took up drinking milk. He did not have expensive liquors, nor red wine, nor beer. He drank milk, lots of milk. He sank his lips in the foam and its white color reminded him vaguely of some happy moment or dream. He became drunk on milk until he burped like a baby and rolled his eyes like a glutton. Soon he would double up his elbows and fall asleep; and then he really looked like an old man.

The neighbors could not explain the change that had come over him. It was all too sudden. It was rumored that he experimented with the milk and the tobacco. To the devil with the gossip! Did he kill rats . . . ? Was he discovering the formula for irrigating without water? He was simply a man defeated by solitude. Perhaps, simply, his turn had come and the trees of the cemetery were beckoning him, agitating their branches. On the other hand, what was peculiar about the mathematician's becoming bent? After so much scrawling and so much astronomic calculi . . . How much better to have married, to have worked in the open air like other men of the town, and to have had sons.

The man was aware of the general compassion he inspired. Nevertheless, when the tobacconist hesitated to provide him with more tobacco, he admonished him, bringing his forefinger to his lips. He did not want contradictions. He wanted things to develop in silence, to become drunk, at

peace with the whole world, to have things happen when they had to happen, not before, not until the savoring of the last glass of foaming, pure milk.

Little by little, the old house took on the appearance of a fort, of an ancient and gloomy castle. Had this situation been prolonged, the youngest of the schoolchildren would have woven imaginative legends around him. And in the meantime, in his rooms, the man lived as though, in truth, there did exist his wife and his daughter. It was no longer a matter of imagining tinkling laughs or his wife pressing in an adjacent room. Now it was a matter of putting three plates on the table, three glasses and three napkins. Now it was a matter of asking the postman, "Is it for me or for my wife?" And of wondering why the text books for the next semester should be so much more expensive and why an epidemic of measles should be coming from the east.

With all this there came an unexpected moment of mental clarity in front of the blackboard. As with the contraction that precedes the avalanche, he found that operations that he had scrutinized for years were now, as he attacked the final stretch, resolved in one swoop, as though he were copying. The man was astonished. He called his two possible companions, the two columns of his being, and explained with enthusiasm what that particular x signified, and that $2:4$. His wife and daughter opened their mouths in admiration and they clung to the long smock that conformed to his body, as though they were birds, numb with cold.

To sum up, he grew old and exhausted, but he felt

happier than ever before. The compassion of the town was ridiculously useless. And it was also useless for his friends, among them the constable, to take periodic turns down his street, peering inside through the window, fearful of discovering his body fallen face down or hanging from a rope. Actually, he was strong, he was an oak, thanks to his parents and because he had always lived a correct life. He would see his name on the doorplate for a long time, and who knew whether, before he repaired to the call of the trees in the cemetery, he would not, to everyone's bewilderment, in fact hit upon the key to the extermination of all rats or the irrigating without water of the immense arid lands of the world. Oh, yes, he would last a long while, because, besides everything else, milk nourishes tremendously!

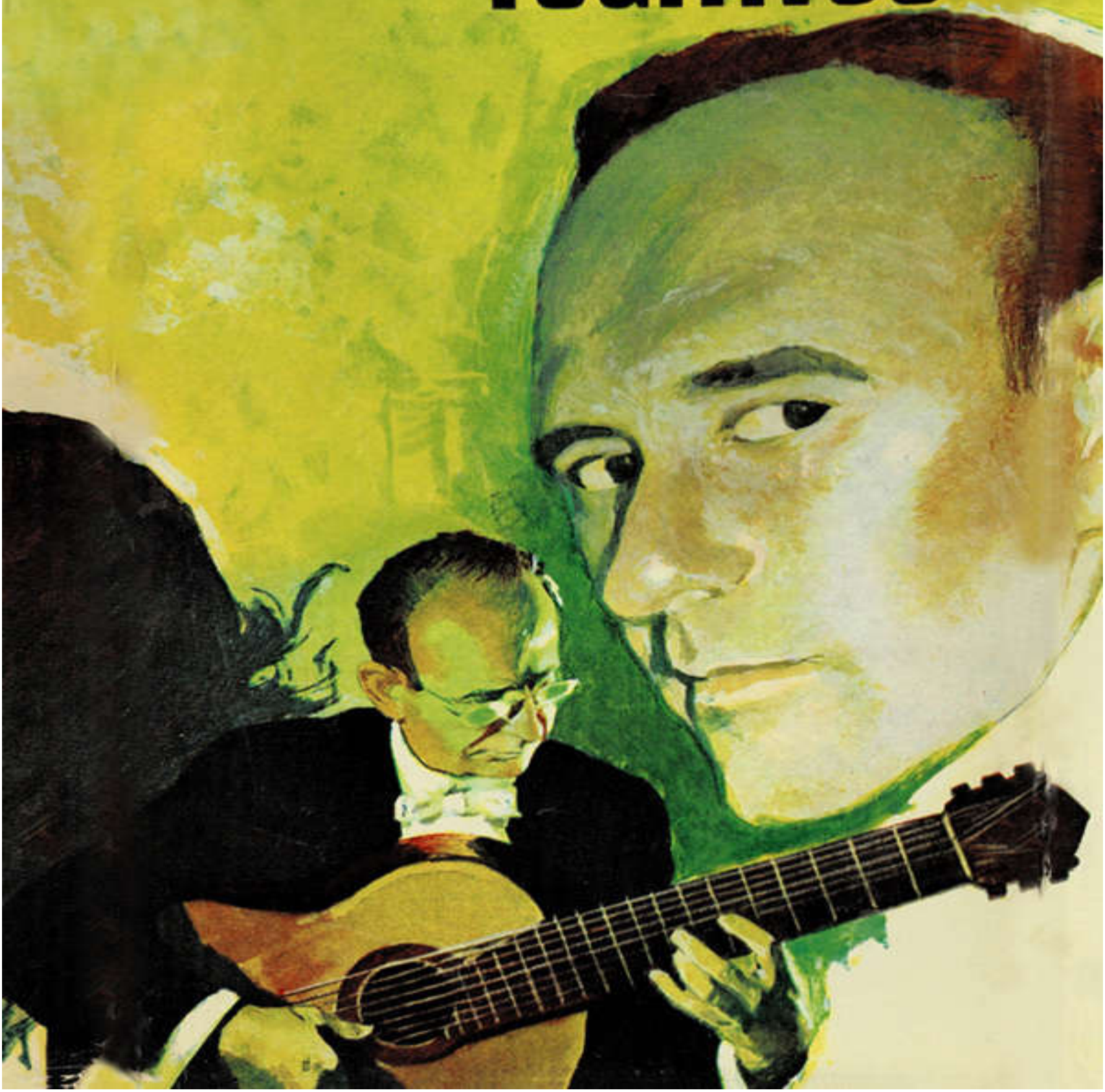
Well now, it's necessary to confess that this man did not exist in the town, either. His humility, his gray hair, his silhouette in front of the blackboard and his impetuous interior anxieties were nothing but the personification of a great desire of the neighbors in that solitary street, tired of seeing an empty and smelly lot in front of the fountain in the graceful park. Yes, often, when the wind murmured outside or when it rained drearily, they had thought about that lot—where the weeds grew raggedly and where passersby dumped their rubbish—and they had wished for a modest building to rise there, with a smoking stove-pipe perforating the upper pane of a window. The oldsters and the children—especially a cross-eyed boy with a splendid set of teeth—had gone further: in dreams they had more than once

imagined what the inhabitants of that building would be like. And among the innumerable possibilities that had crossed their minds like gusts of wind, the image of that domestic intellectual, grayhaired and sentimental, who went out with his wife under the same umbrella and who lifted his daughter into the air, holding her under the arms, had been miraculously repeated.

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TODOS SOMOS FUGITIVOS



TRES PLATOS EN LA MESA

(EL DESEO SE HACE CARNE)

I

Siempre delante de la pizarra, con la tiza en la mano. No se sabía lo que quería demostrar. Y era inútil esperar que en un momento dado intercalase entre los números o signos alguna caricatura o una casa ingenua con chimenea, ventanas simétricas, ovejas en torno y en algún lugar la primavera. Mientras trabajaba — y lo hacía horas y horas— no cedía jamás a esta clase de arrebatos. Era un hombre de ciencia modesto, doméstico, para sí, pero lo tomaba con gran seriedad. Distraerse frente al álgebra o frente a la más simple operación aritmética hubiera sido transgredir una hermosa ley.

El tubo de su estufa perforaba uno de los cristales superiores del gran ventanal. Cuando de este tubo salía humo, los vecinos pensaban: «Está trabajando». Los chiquillos traviesos decían que fumaba. Que se estaba fumando su humor, la posibilidad de ver puentes y ríos y viajar en ferrocarril, que se estaba fumando su vida. Y es que no sabían que al modesto hombre de ciencia le bastaba con aquellas cuatro paredes, con su hogar. En el interior de éste había todo cuanto pudiera apetecer. Allí estaban su cerebro, su

pizarra; en cada rincón, pedazos de memoria; en la buhardilla, los sueños de la niñez; en el cubo de la basura, sus pecados. En los armarios guardaba las viejas bufandas, los tiznados batines de intelectual, alguna fotografía. Ningún ferrocarril, ningún barco o avión podía conducirlo a un lugar como aquél.

Por si fuera poco, entre aquellas paredes —y muy a menudo en su propio cuarto de trabajo— estaba su hija. Una niña de diez años, ligeramente bizca, pero con trenzas rubias y una sonrisa más rubia aún. Una niña que entraba en el cuarto cautelosamente, pese a todas las prohibiciones, y que, acercándosele por la espalda, le gritaba, asustándolo: «Papá, ¿quieres un caramelo...?». Una niña con una capacidad de ternura comparable a la del otoño. Siempre descalza sobre el piso de madera. Con un aparatito metálico en los dientes delanteros, rebeldes a alinearse. Con muñecas y todo lo que hay que tener. Hinchida de preguntas y de extraños pensamientos. Saltando de su cama como un pequeño violín que saliera del estuche. Compadeciendo al hielo de la nevera porque se iba derritiendo. Mirando a la calle desde el ventanal para convencerse de que no todo terminaba ahí, de que en el mundo había otras niñas rubias y propaganda electoral pegada a los muros y niños con carpetas escolares abucheando al viejo taxi del pueblo, y una tranquila fuente en una esquina del parque señorial que tenían enfrente, que fue lo primero del exterior que ella vio.

Sí, el modesto hombre de ciencia tenía esta hija de diez años y muchas veces se preguntaba si de no existir ella seguiría él trazando signos en la pizarra. Su hija era su estremecimiento, su milagro cotidiano. Cuando la tomaba por las axilas y la izaba en el aire —ahora ya no podía, cada día pesaba más—, sentía que aquella carne era como un miembro suyo desprendido, que, por tanto, le debía a él obediencia ciega y tenía la obligación de hacerle feliz. Y cuando la sentaba en las rodillas, sentía tan próximo el rostro de la niña que podía contarle uno por uno los poros, las pestañas, los dientes con el aparato metálico y hasta el rosa de las mejillas. Había momentos en que el hombre se concentraba de tal modo en

esta labor que estaba seguro de que, a través de la garganta, podría verle el alma. Por fortuna, la niña, de pronto, le arrancaba un pelo de las cejas o inesperadamente soltaba una carcajada y todo volvía a quedar en su lugar.

¡Oh, sí, era una suerte para él que la niña se riese tanto, que su ignorancia de las cosas de la vida y su avidez de crecer se resolviesen en eso, en alegría! De no ser así, ¿quién conseguiría que él riese a su vez? ¿Y quién convertiría tan a menudo los objetos del cuarto en campanillas?

El hombre no era tan burdo como para ignorar que la niña lo había vuelto escandalosamente egoísta. Si alguien le hiciera algún daño, se la quitara... Su mirada era ya asesinato. Y confiaba en que nunca le faltaría el dinero necesario —a ser preciso, vendería poco a poco los muebles— para seguir alimentando aquel cuerpecito. Eso es. Todo convertirlo en alimentó, en ropa, en lo necesario para su educación. Sobre todo soñaba con poderle adquirir esos juguetes cuyo mecanismo interno les permite ponerse a danzar. Porque se daba cuenta de que él llevaba una vida excesivamente retirada y solemne, y que su ejemplo podía dañar a la criatura. Era evidente que una niña no podía vivir de abstracciones. En una casa tan llena de fórmulas y equis y cálculos astronómicos era indispensable que hubiese pequeños simios que tocasen los platillos, así como payasos y cocinas-miniatura que funcionaran como las de verdad, eléctricamente.

Tal vez el exagerado amor por su hija fuera el fruto de su infancia afortunada. Sus padres fueron de complexión robusta y lo rodearon de una atmósfera sana para el cuerpo y para el espíritu. Cien veces le dijeron: «Prolonga nuestra estirpe, que no ha obtenido condecoraciones de ninguna clase, pero que siembra la paz». He aquí que aquella niña respondía en un todo a esta conveniencia. Porque era de suyo buena y sencilla, con sólo las rarezas propias de la edad. En el colegio salía siempre airoso y no sólo el último trimestre, y todos los vecinos de la calle al verla pasar le dedicaban frases cariñosas. En cuanto a su presencia en la casa, ya se ha

dicho sobre ello lo necesario. Cada día la muchacha descubría algo nuevo o le gastaba una nueva broma a su padre, como, por ejemplo, decirle que no le quería, que no le quería en absoluto, o que se había arrancado del dedo el anillo del cigarro habano que él le había colocado la víspera, a modo de compromiso.

Bueno, en realidad esta niña de diez años, con todo lo que significaba, era la gran mentira de aquel hombre silencioso y trabajador, matemático y gris. Las rubias trenzas de la muchacha, lo mismo que el placer que él experimentaba precisándole el valor de las palabras o dándole cuerda a los juguetes, eran la personalización de un gran deseo que no se había realizado jamás. La niña no existía y la verdad estricta era ésta: en el cuarto de trabajo del hombre no había sino una pizarra, una mesa, un diván, una papelería y la estufa. Jamás pies descalzos ni «Papá, ¿quieres un caramelo?» y mucho menos campanillas. Los dientes de la niña, sus axilas y el estuche de violín no eran más que deseos, santos y puros deseos, que morían como el tabaco o como las voces de los niños reales que salían de la escuela a media tarde. Era la niña «que había podido ser». Y si el hombre la imaginó bizca fue para concederle algún defecto y para, a través de la compasión, amarla un poco más.

II

El único consuelo verdadero del modesto sabio, su única efectiva compañía era su esposa. Y la invención de la hija había sido de hecho idea común. Los dos hubieran querido tenerla y se pasaron años esperando el acontecimiento. Las demás mujeres del pueblo paseaban su embarazo con un doble sentimiento de rubor y de insolencia. Nacían miles de cosas grandes y minúsculas en el pueblo —nacían soles y lunas, y ranas y moscas—, y la hija no nacía. Había momentos en que con sólo abrir la ventana se oía por

todos lados como el crepitar de la inmensa fecundación. Botones en las flores, hojas como manos en los árboles, gatos en las azoteas y hombres, hombres vigorosos y poderosos, en los dormitorios. Hasta el viejo taxi del pueblo llevó un día a la farmacia una mujer que allí mismo dio a luz. En cambio, en aquella casa nada se renovaba fundamentalmente. La maldición de la esterilidad. Mucho amor, mucho interrogante, largos silencios, la cocina, la pizarra...

A veces al hombre le parecía que se resignaba. Porque amaba a su esposa y también en la mutua proximidad, en la mutua soledad sin más latía un consuelo e incluso un motivo de vida. Su esposa era una mujer que no se reía nunca, pero que tampoco se desesperaba nunca. Sentada ocupaba mucho espacio, como un gran bulto, pero cuando se levantaba se veía lo pequeña que era. ¡No había cambiado nada desde que se casaron, el 12 de agosto de 1918! Sólo el pelo. El pelo se le había entristecido y la raya que lo partía era ya un camino menos seguro en mitad de la cabeza. Pero el resto, todo intacto. El mismo mirar claro, los mismos hoyuelos en las mejillas. Siempre parecía llevar la misma blusa y la misma falda, excepto los domingos, en que se ponía un lacito aquí y otro allá. Siempre parecía andar con sandalias, incluso cuando regresaba de la calle con los zapatos llenos de barro. Y al abrir cualquier cajón se hubiera dicho que buscaba un guante. Además, el hombre estaba convencido de que su esposa tenía una hermosa voz, de que hubiera podido cantar como los ángeles, pero que ni quiso intentarlo porque prefería no modificar las cosas, no alborotar. La gran pasión de la mujer era, en efecto, pasar inadvertida. Tenía el presentimiento de que su esposo realizaba una labor meritoria, y ello le bastaba. Al plancharle los pantalones se decía: «Le estoy ayudando». Por otra parte, era muy escéptica e inmunizada contra la ostentación. En el colegio se dio cuenta de que también los más grandes emperadores acaban muriendo y conformó su espíritu a esta idea.

El hombre la quería de una manera honda y espontánea, sin jamás preguntarse el porqué ni suponer que podía ser de otro modo. A lo largo del día tenía para con ella mil pequeñas atenciones, como

acercarse al tabique de la cocina y golpearlo tres veces con los nudillos, o dejar escrito en la pizarra con gruesos caracteres: «Te quiero». Aunque sus especialidades eran tentarle un pie por debajo de la mesa e introducirle en la taza del café, cada día después de almorzar, los dos consabidos terrones de azúcar. Hacía como que se los regateaba y por fin, cuando los dejaba deslizar en el líquido, se echaba para atrás con aire de haber consumado un acto premeditado y difícil. No podía evocar la imagen de su mujer sin experimentar intensa ternura, y en ello radicaba el secreto de tanta solicitud. Olvidaba sus defectos como se olvida un bostezo dado a escondidas. Apenas la oía estornudar se detenía en seco y por un momento odiaba el viento, las corrientes de aire y todo cuanto fuese frío y húmedo, y se imaginaba a sí mismo armado con escudos, con fumigadores y con antibióticos defendiendo los pulmones de su mujer. Le perdonaba incluso que no le hubiera dado la niña, es decir, la maldición de la esterilidad. ¡Imposible llegar a más!

Por su parte, se sabía también amado con fuerza. De hecho, cuando conoció a su mujer, ésta no había despertado aún del extraño letargo infantil. Vivía ella en la última casa del pueblo, o sea en la primera. Sus horizontes habían sido el trigo y un tramo de carretera por el que entre semana paseaba el cura y los domingos las parejas. Para acicalarse colgaba el espejo en la ventana, de modo que en lugar de ver la calle se veía a sí misma. Sus hermanos le hacían poco caso, y el único *flirt* de su vida había sido un gato negro con manchas blancas, o blanco con manchas negras. Sabía leer y multiplicar, nada más. Entonces irrumpió él en sus ojos, en su cerebro, se adueñó de unos y de otro como de un problema fácil, y la sangre de la muchacha empezó a circular. Circuló de tal modo, que su cuerpo se desarrolló, aunque no mucho. Comprendió que era una mujer, una persona completa y equilibrada, capacitada para aceptar o rechazar. Comprendió que en un cierto sentido su existencia era necesaria y que indiscutiblemente sin ella el pueblo hubiera sido más pequeño, y que sin ella acaso les faltara algo incluso a las estrellas.

El hombre sabía que todo esto creó en ella el amor y que, al cabo de treinta años, éste seguía inundándola como una gota de agua inunda el mar. Y en este amor, ¿por qué no?, se refugiaba y se consolaba de su paternidad frustrada. Por otra parte, era hermoso, hermoso a todas luces verlos caminar por la acera debajo del mismo paraguas y detenerse de pronto ante cualquier escaparate inasequible. Formaban una pareja con aureola, eso es. Se parecían a dos nubes lentas, a dos ríos paralelos, a la primera pareja que existió, a la que sobrevivirá después del gran cataclismo. Él, con la tiza en la mano; ella, estornudando, humilde, sin querer cantar, planchando los pantalones, era un ejemplo, y a buen seguro que la niña de diez años que habían inventado hubiera sido feliz a su lado, entre los dos, aunque ellos a fuerza de amarla, en un momento dado imaginaran que podían verle incluso el alma.

Bueno, el caso es que esta esposa humilde, nacida cerca del trigo, era la segunda gran mentira de aquel hombre un poco canoso y sentimental. Esta esposa tampoco existía y era también la personalización del otro gran deseo suyo, del deseo de tener compañía. En realidad, en aquella casa —en la cocina, en los pasillos, en el dormitorio— no habitaba sino él, él escuetamente, con algunos muebles, la pizarra y el ventanal. Los terrones de azúcar se disolvían sin gloria en su propio café y jamás existió la posibilidad de que a su lado brotase una voz cálida. No existía siquiera el pelo triste, ni el 12 de agosto de 1918, ni siquiera el gato negro con manchas blancas o lo contrario. Simplemente, había deseado tanto una esposa como aquélla, para quien él hubiera supuesto despertar y júbilo, la vida de cada día y eterna que cuando el viento murmuraba fuera —amenazando los pulmones— o cuando llovía con mansedumbre no era raro que por unos pocos segundos llegase a creer efectivamente que estaba casado, que en el cuarto contiguo al suyo una mujer, que era suya, cosía o planchaba para él. Y muchas veces, al amanecer, abría sin expresión los ojos en la

oscuridad, sentía una extrema oquedad en todo lo que podía abarcar su pensamiento y se preguntaba si su respiración y los signos de la pizarra tenían objeto.

III

Solo en su soledad. Con cincuenta y cinco años a la espalda. Conocía todos los ruidos de su casa y los de su propio cuerpo, desde la tos al crujido de los huesos. Nada podía hacer que le sorprendiese. Incluso sus improvisados ademanes le parecían naturales, y su sombra en la pared, enana o gigante, era irremediablemente la suya, la que debía ser, sin que sirviera para nada encasquetarse algo raro o adoptar posturas estrafalarias.

Cincuenta y cinco años consigo mismo, buscando no sabía qué, sin esposa, sin hija. Nacido allí mismo, cerca del cementerio, cuyos árboles crecían a medida que nuevos huéspedes llegaban al recinto. ¡Oh, sí!; era curioso mantenerse enhiesto mientras tantas cosas morían alrededor. A veces bastaba con abrir un momento la ventana para auscultar la inmensa crepitación de la muerte en el pueblo, la muerte de las voces de los niños al salir de la escuela a media tarde, la lenta muerte del motor del viejo taxi, la muerte de los carteles de propaganda electoral. Cincuenta y cinco años soportándose, viendo morir, leyendo su propio nombre en la invencible placa de la puerta.

El hombre se sentía agotado, aunque lo atribuía a una pasajera quiebra del organismo. Le dio por fumar. Su habitación se convirtió en cenicero. Los chicos traviesos acertaban, por supuesto, imaginando que se fumaba su humor y la posibilidad de ver otros pueblos y viajar en ferrocarril, que se estaba fumando su vida. En efecto, sin advertirlo el hombre liaba los pitillos como si cada uno fuese el último. Y mojaba el papel como si ya no le quedase dentro más saliva. Jamás se llamó a sí mismo colilla; sin embargo, a veces se acercaba al espejo, ansioso de comprobar que chupando fuerte todavía le resplandecían los ojos.

También le dio por beber leche. No tenía licores caros, ni vino tinto, ni cerveza. Bebía leche, mucha leche. Hundía los labios en la espuma y su color blanco le recordaba vagamente algún estado o sueño feliz. Se emborrachaba con leche hasta eructar como un bebé y entornar viciosamente los ojos. ¡De pronto sus codos se doblaban y se quedaba dormido!; y entonces parecía de verdad un viejo.

Los vecinos no se explicaban el cambio que se había operado en él. Todo aquello era demasiado repentino. Se rumoreaba que con la leche y el tabaco hacía experimentos. ¡Al diablo con las habladurías! ¿Mataba ratas...? ¿Descubría la fórmula de regar sin agua? Simplemente acaso le hubiera llegado el tumor y los árboles del cementerio lo solicitasen agitando sus ramas. Por otra parte, ¿qué de particular que el matemático se encorvase? Después de tanto garrapatear y tanto cálculo astronómico... Más le hubiera valido casarse, trabajar al aire libre como los demás hombres del pueblo y tener hijos.

El hombre se daba cuenta de la compasión general que inspiraba. No obstante, cuando el estanquero dudaba entre suministrarle o no más tabaco, él lo conminaba llevándose el índice a los labios. No quería contrariedades. Quería que todo se desarrollase en silencio, emborracharse en paz con todo el mundo, que todo llegase cuando tuviese que llegar, no antes, hasta saborear como otro cualquiera el último vaso de leche espumeante y purísima.

Poco a poco, el caserón fue tomando aspecto de reducto, de castillo antiguo y hosco. De prolongarse aquella situación, los colegiales más jóvenes tejerían en torno a él sugestivas leyendas. Y entretanto, en el interior de sus habitaciones, el hombre vivía como si de verdad existiesen su esposa y su hija. Ahora ya no se trataba de imaginar risas cantarinas o que la esposa planchara en la habitación contigua. Ahora se trataba de poner *tres* platos en la mesa, tres vasos y tres servilletas. Ahora se trataba de preguntarle al cartero: «¿Es para mí o para mi mujer?». Y de preguntarse por

qué los libros de texto del próximo curso serían mucho más caros y por qué avanzaba por el este del país una epidemia de sarampión.

A todo ello se produjo un inesperado momento de claridad mental frente a la pizarra. Al igual que en la contracción que precede al alud, operaciones que sólo había atisbado durante años, ahora, atacada la recta final, las resolvía de carretilla, como si copiara. El hombre estaba asombrado. Llamaba a sus dos posibles compañeras, a las dos columnas de su ser y les explicaba con entusiasmo lo que significaba aquella X y aquel 2:4. Su esposa e hija abrían la boca admiradas y se restregaban en su larga bata conformada a su cuerpo, como si fueran dos pájaros ateridos de frío.

En resumen, envejecía y estaba agotado, pero se sentía feliz como nunca. La compasión del pueblo era ridículamente inútil. Y también era inútil que amigos suyos, entre ellos el alguacil, se diesen periódicas vueltas por la calle y husmeasen dentro a través del ventanal, temerosos de descubrir su cuerpo caído de bruces o colgando de una cuerda. En realidad, él era fuerte, era un roble, gracias a sus padres y porque siempre había llevado una vida correcta. Durante mucho tiempo, pues, vería su nombre en la placa de la puerta y quién sabe si, para universal perplejidad, antes de que acudiese a la llamada de los árboles del cementerio daría en efecto con la clave para exterminar todas las ratas y para regar sin agua los inmensos eriales del mundo. ¡Oh, sí, duraría aún mucho, porque además la leche alimentaba horrores!

Bueno, es preciso confesar que tampoco este hombre existía en el pueblo. Su humildad, sus canas, su silueta frente a la pizarra y sus impetuosos estremecimientos interiores no eran sino la personalización de un gran deseo de los vecinos de aquella calle solitaria, cansados de ver un solar vacío y maloliente frente a la fuente del parque señorial. Sí, muchas veces, cuando fuera runruneaba el viento o cuando llovía con mansedumbre, algunos de ellos habían pensado en aquel solar —en el que crecían irregulares las hierbas y al que los transeúntes arrojaban cuanto les estorbaba

— y habían deseado que se levantase allí un modesto edificio, con un tubo humeante que perforase el cristal superior de la ventana. Los viejos y los niños —sobre todo un niño bizco que tenía una espléndida dentadura— habían llegado a más: en sueños se habían representado más de una vez cómo serían los habitantes de tal edificio. Y entre las innumerables posibilidades que habían cruzado como ráfagas sus cerebros se había repetido milagrosamente la imagen de aquel intelectual doméstico, canoso y sentimental, que salía con su mujer debajo del mismo paraguas y que izaba en el aire a su hija asiéndola de las axilas.