

THE LIME TREE

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The lime is a small, elegant tree with a slender trunk, seemingly blessed with eternal youth. On the Plaza in Pringles, as well as ten thousand normal lime trees, there was also, by some strange quirk of Nature, one that had grown to an enormous size: it looked ancient, with its twisted trunk and impenetrable crown, and it was bigger than twenty of the others put together. I nicknamed it The Monster Lime Tree. I regarded it with a certain awe, or respect at least, but also with affection, because like all trees it was harmless. No one had seen such a big lime tree anywhere else, and we thought of it as a monument to the singularity of our town. It was an aberration, but superb, with all the exotic majesty of the unique and the unrepeatable.

My father, who suffered from chronic insomnia, would go to the Plaza with a bag at the beginning of summer to collect the lime's little flowers, which he then dried and used to make a tea that he drank at night, after dinner. The lime's calming properties are universally acknowledged,

but I'm not sure that they reside in the flowers, which grow in little bunches and are yellow in colour, barely distinct from the green of the leaves. I seem to remember that the flowers close to form a fruit, which is like a little gothic capsule. Or maybe it's the other way around: the capsule comes first and opens into a flower . . . Memory might be playing tricks on me . . . It would be easy to clear this up, because lime trees haven't changed, and here in Flores, where I live, there are plenty that I could inspect. I haven't (which shows how totally unscientific I am), but it doesn't matter. I can't remember if my father used the flowers or the leaves or the little capsules; no doubt he did it in his own special way, as he did everything else. Perhaps he had discovered how to extract the maximum benefit from the lime's well-known calming properties; if so, I have reason to regret my distraction and poor memory, because whatever the recipe or method was, it died with him.

It might also be that the natural processes of flowering and fruiting had undergone some transformation in that unique specimen that grew on the Plaza in Pringles: The Monster Lime Tree. That was the tree from which my father took his harvest; he considered it lucky. No other substance in the universe, he claimed, not even the powerful sedatives used to commit suicide, could have sent him to sleep like that lime-blossom tea. If its powers were due to a genetic mutation of The Monster

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Lime Tree, my efforts to remember his method are pointless, because there would be no way to source the key ingredient.

Writing this now, I realise that all these years I too have believed implicitly in the effectiveness of the beverage, but not because of any solid evidence: it might have worked like a placebo on my father's system because of his belief (which I have inherited); or perhaps it didn't work at all. Nothing is more controversial than the action of psychotropic substances, whether natural or synthetic.

There is no way for me to verify the specially calming properties of The Monster Lime Tree because it no longer exists; it was cut down in an irrational act of political hatred, the final act of a legendary local drama whose central figure was The Peronist Boy. One night, the boy took refuge at the top of the tree, and a band of furious fanatics who were pursuing him hacked at its trunk with axes . . . The boy, who was my age, so I can fully identify with him, became a symbol, for family reasons. 'The Peronist Boy': how absurd! Children can't be identified politically; they don't belong to the left or the right. He wouldn't have understood what he was representing. The symbol had infected him like a fateful virus. But it's true that childhood, as reflection or analogy, can stand for anything. And Perón himself promoted the idea that the evolution of society would necessarily produce Peronist children: there was a biology of Peronism.

The strangest thing was that the band pursuing him was a commando unit of the Peronist Resistance, led by Ciancio, the mattress maker. A complex series of misunderstandings had led them to misread the (positive or negative) ‘coefficient’ of the symbolism conveyed by the boy. This suggests the complexity of our political quarrels, which later simplification has tried to reduce to black and white.

That cruel midnight, the sound of the axe-blows went on and on, like a terrifying tom-tom . . . I said that I was the same age as the boy, and nothing could prove it better than this: the only book that I had as a child, or the only one I remember, was *Sambo*, a lovely little volume whose pages, instead of being rectangular like those of other books, were cut into the shape of a tree (what wouldn’t I give to have it now!). The Peronist Boy must have had that book too, or he must have seen it, because it was very popular at the time, I don’t know why. *Sambo*, the little black boy, hid from the tigers in the top of a tree, and the tigers came and circled around the base until they melted into butter, as I remember. The Peronist Boy translated the fable into reality, although in its symbolic way the story remained an animal fable. After all, weren’t the anti-Peronists called gorillas? And gorillas build their nests in trees, don’t they?

Axe-blows, and midnight’s dome over the Plaza, with its dark ecliptics tracing interplanetary routes to all the



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nameless horrors of life, to all the figures that would one day come to be art. To other worlds, worlds in reverse, where Peronists and anti-Peronists changed places.

Since then, whenever I put my ear to the pillow, I hear those tom-tom blows in the darkness; not that I could actually hear the axe at the time, except in the stories that my mother told me about the events of that night. I now know that what I have been hearing all these years is the pulsing of my blood, but it makes no difference; the pulses still symbolise that threat . . . So I have to change position and lie on my back, which is uncomfortable and keeps me awake. This is the cause of my cruel insomnia, which leaves me feeling that life is unbearable.



Although these events have been adorned, deformed and enveloped in the prestige of legend, they really happened. It's hard to believe – they seem made up – and yet they happened, and I was there, not at the top of the tree, but there in those days, in that town, in that world, which is now so far away. My whole life has taken on the unreal colour of that fable; since then I have never been able to find a footing in reality.



Books, art, travel, love, all the hackneyed wonders of the universe have served as multicoloured distractions from that legend and everything that floated in the dark sea over The Monster Lime Tree. I have used them to sublimate my lack of a real life . . . and have even come to think of myself as privileged. But the disappearance

of that giant therapeutic tree from the symbolic system has had its effects. The nervous disposition that I have inherited is a torment: there is a vibration at the centre of my being and when it reaches my skin (as it does constantly, because it never goes away, not even for a minute), the anxiety that it provokes is larger than thought itself . . . and I feel that I can't go on living . . . I think about death, which, given my nature, is the last thing I should be thinking about. Inevitably I have sought relief in alcohol and drugs, especially alcohol, which breaks over me like a wave of despair . . . Getting out of bed in the small hours, unable to withstand the anxiety a moment longer, wandering around the dark apartment until I confirm once again, as every night, that there is no getting away from it. Death is no solution because my corpse would get up too . . . What can I do? It's beyond my control, I can't help it . . .

There must be some active principle in lime-blossom tea if my father went on drinking it, religiously, every night for all those years. And he clearly needed it, for he was the most excitable of men. Behind his back, my mother used to call him 'Live Wire,' or 'Boilinmilk,' the name of a character in a funny cartoon strip. Because as well as being excitable, he was extremely quick-tempered, always about to fly off the handle, a powder keg. All it took was a word, an expression, and he would be shouting like a furious madman. Much less than that, in fact,

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could make him lose control. He had magically refined the causes: the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Japan could bring on one of his attacks in Pringles. He was perpetually wound up, wired: eyes flashing, lips trembling, hair bristling, the veins almost popping out of his neck, limbs in constant agitation, his torso continually swivelling this way and that, as if he were inhabited by an animal on the lookout for enemies. My father's enemies were imaginary, or rather his enemy was the world; or, to resort to a commonplace, he was his own worst enemy.

I don't know how intentional this was, but I notice that a couple of metaphors from a branch of applied physics (electricity) found their way into the previous paragraph. They are apt, not because of my descriptive powers or my (deficient) literary skill, but because of an incidental fact: my father was an electrician by trade. Sometimes it happens that way: an 'electric' man is an electrician. It happens especially in small towns, where everyone knows everyone else, and these 'real jokes' become a conversation topic and constitute a kind of traditional lore, handed down from generation to generation. I remember at some point feeling proud to have a famous father; I think it was the only time there seemed to be anything positive about his terrible nerves, which made daily life such a minefield. Later on, I would change my mind and come to hate those small-town reputations, when I discovered their unpleasant tendency to

encourage embellishment: gossips can't resist adding to them, giving the victim a reputation for something else, and something else again, for no other reason than to pass the time and exercise their malevolence. It's a well-known mechanism and by no means limited to small towns: reputations grow, and since they need to be fed with new materials, invention becomes inevitable.

But my father had a certain right to notoriety, prior to the electric-electrician coincidence. History is crucial here, so I should give some dates to make myself clear. I was born in 1949, at the climax of the Peronist regime. My parents weren't very young; I wasn't one of those automatic children of the proletariat, born out of biological necessity as soon as their progenitors emerge from childhood themselves. In my case, there was family planning, as indicated by the fact that I was an only child. All my friends in the neighbourhood were only children too: we were the generation – produced, precisely, by the Peronist social laws – with which the idea of ascending to the middle class lodged itself in proletarian minds. The first step in this project was to keep reproduction within the bounds of affordability. There was, however, a limit to this rationalism, namely that everyone wanted a boy; so that if the first child had turned out to be a girl, they would have been prepared to shoulder the burden and try again. I'm using the conditional because this didn't actually happen: they all had a boy first off and then

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stopped. There was something magical about Peronism, something like wish fulfilment. Psychic predisposition might also have played a role: they say that something similar happens when there's a war; and maybe back then, in Peronist eternity, the deep layers of the popular mind could already intuit the wars to come.

When I say, 'They all had a boy . . .' I'm exaggerating, of course. That was what I saw around me, but my experience was very limited. With time, I began to realise that there were girls as well, although I had failed to notice them in the bewilderment of early childhood, with its anxious choosing of friends, its initiatory games and adventures. Then a curious fact made them all the more conspicuous: there was never just one girl, or a girl with brothers; there were always three of them, three little sisters one after the other. This was because the couples whose first-born child had been a girl tried again, and when they had a second girl, they took another chance . . . But they stopped after three, because it would have been crazy to go on . . . And that was how the poor neighbourhoods of Pringles came to have their curious demography: a large majority of families with one boy, and a few families here and there with three girls. There were no cases of mixed offspring. There was something magical about Peronism, but it was an implacable magic. Or perhaps Nature activated some mysterious safeguard, intervening in History to protect the species.