

VAMPIRE IN LOVE

SELECTED STORIES

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SHEFFIELD

A PERMANENT HOME

I never knew much about my mother. She was killed in our house in Barcelona, two days after I was born. The murder remained a mystery, until I thought I had solved it on my twentieth birthday, when my father, on his deathbed, demanded to see me and told me that, now the moment was fast approaching when he would be permanently silenced, he wanted to tell me something before that happened, something he felt it was important I should know.

‘Eventually even words abandon us,’ I remember him saying, ‘and that’s all there is to it really, but, first, you should know that your mother died because I arranged it.’

I immediately imagined a hired killer and, once I’d recovered from the initial shock, I began to believe my father’s confession. The image of a bloodstained axe was enough for me to feel as if the ground were swallowing me up, leaving behind, like so many pathetic doodles, all the scenes of joy and plenitude that had made me idealise my father and create the mythical figure of a man always up before dawn, still in his pyjamas, a shawl around his shoulders, a cigarette between his fingers, eyes fixed on the weathervane on some distant chimney, watching the day begin, and devoting himself



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with implacable regularity and monstrous perseverance to the solitary ritual of creating his own language through the writing of a book of memories or an inventory of nostalgias, which I always assumed would, when he died, become part of my tender, albeit terrifying, inheritance.

However, on my twentieth birthday, in Port de la Selva, any tender feelings that had previously attached to said inheritance vanished, and I felt only the terror, the infinite horror, of thinking that, along with that inventory, my father was bequeathing me the surprising tale of a murder, whose origins, according to him, could be found in early April 1945, a year before I was born, when, despite having already experienced two resounding matrimonial failures, he nevertheless felt he was still young and emotionally strong enough to embark on a third such adventure. He therefore wrote a letter to a young woman from the province of Ampurdán in Catalonia, whom he had met by chance in Figueras and who, he felt, had all the necessary qualities to make him happy, for not only was she a poor orphan – which made things easier for him, since he could offer her security and a not inconsiderable fortune – she was also beautiful, gentle and had the most sensual lower lip in the entire universe; above all, she was extraordinarily naive and docile, which is to say that she had a proper sense of woman as man's subordinate, a quality he particularly valued, given his two previous hellish conjugal experiences.

You have to bear in mind, for example, that my father's first wife, in a freak attack of rage, had bitten off part of his ear. He had been so very unhappy in his two earlier marriages that it should come as no surprise to anyone that, when he considered finding a third wife, he wanted someone who was both gentle and docile.





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My mother possessed both those qualities, and he knew that all it would take to entrap her was a carefully drafted letter. And so it proved. So passionate and so skilfully written was his letter that, shortly afterwards, my mother turned up in Barcelona, in the Barrio Gótico's labyrinth of narrow streets, where she knocked on the door of the old, soot-begrimed mansion owned by my father, who, it seems, either could not or chose not to disguise his emotion when he saw her standing there in the rain, clutching a small blue suitcase, which she put down on the carpet before asking, in a tremulous, humble orphan's voice, if she could come in.

'I could never forget that rain,' my father said from his deathbed, 'because when I saw her cross the threshold, it seemed to me that the savage rain was actually there in her hips, and I was filled by the most intensely erotic impulse I have ever felt.'



That impulse seemed to know no bounds when she told him that she was an expert at dancing the *tirana*, a long-forgotten medieval Spanish dance. Beguiled by this slightly anachronistic hobby, my father ordered her to perform the dance immediately, and, eager to please him in every way possible, my mother danced until she dropped, ending up, exhausted, in the arms of a man who, without a moment's hesitation, affectionately ordered her to marry him at once.



That night, they slept together for the first time, and my father, afflicted by the sentimentality that accompanies certain infatuations, had a sense that, just as he had imagined, making love with her was like making love with a bird, for in bed she trilled and sang, and it seemed to him that no other voice could possibly match hers, and that even her bones, like her lower lip and her songs, were as delicate as those of a bird.



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‘And you were conceived that very night, beneath the murmuring Barcelona rain,’ my father said suddenly, his eyes very wide.

A long, slow sigh, always so troubling in a dying man, preceded a brusque demand for a glass of vodka. I refused to give it to him, but when he threatened not to continue his story, I was so afraid he might carry out his threat that I raced into the kitchen and, making sure Aunt Consuelo wasn’t looking, filled two glasses with vodka. I realise now that I need not have taken these absurd precautions because, at that moment, Aunt Consuelo was entirely absorbed by her desire for a particular painting in the living room, a dark picture representing some angels flirting celestially as they climbed a ladder; she lived only for that painting, and her obsession doubtless distracted her from another: the constant anguish of knowing that her brother was dying, laid low by a gentle, but implacable illness. And he, at that moment, was entirely absorbed in feeding the illusion of his story.

Once he had slaked his thirst, my father went on to explain that they had honeymooned in two cities, Istanbul and Cairo, and that it was in Istanbul where he noticed the first anomaly in the behaviour of his sweet, docile wife. For my part, I noticed the first anomaly in my father’s story, in that he was confusing those two cities with Paris and London, but I preferred not to interrupt when I heard him explain that my mother’s anomalous behaviour wasn’t exactly a defect, but more of a strange obsession. She collected bread rolls.

Right from the start, visiting Istanbul’s bakeries became a kind of strange sport. They sampled various bread rolls, quite needlessly as it turned out, because they weren’t destined to be eaten, but only to add to the weight of the large bag in



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which my mother kept her collection. My father protested and asked rather irritably why she was so enamoured with bread.

‘The troops have to eat something,’ she replied succinctly, smiling at him like someone humouring a madman.

‘What do you mean, Diana? Is this some kind of joke?’ my bewildered father asked.

‘I think you’re the one who must be joking by asking such absurd questions,’ she replied absent-mindedly, adopting the gentle, dreamy look of the myopic.

According to my father, they spent a week in Istanbul and by the time they arrived in Cairo, my mother had about forty bread rolls in her bag. Since it was late at night, he knew he was safe from the bakeries of Cairo, and walked happily along, even offering to carry her bag. He did not know that those would be his last moments of conjugal bliss.

My father and mother dined on a boat anchored in the Nile and ended up dancing and sipping pink champagne by the light of the moon on the balcony of their hotel room. A few hours later, however, my father woke in the middle of the Cairo night and discovered, to his great surprise, that my mother was a sleepwalker and was standing on the sofa frenziedly dancing the *tirana*. He tried to remain calm and waited patiently until, utterly exhausted, she came back to bed and fell into the deepest of sleeps. Once asleep, however, she gave him still more reason to feel alarmed, for my mother began talking in her sleep and, turning to him, said something that sounded for all the world like a categorical, implacable command:

‘Fall in!’

My father still hadn’t recovered from the shock of that first command, when he heard her say:



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‘Right turn. Break ranks.’

He didn’t sleep for the rest of the night and began to suspect that, in her dreams, his wife was deceiving him with an entire regiment. The following morning, my father had to face reality, which, as far as he was concerned, meant accepting that in those last few hours, she had danced the *tirana* and behaved like a deranged general, whose sole concern seemed to be issuing orders and handing out bread rolls to the troops. He took consolation from the fact that, during the day, his wife reverted to her usual gentle, docile self. Not that this was much of a consolation, though, because, while on their remaining nights in Cairo there was no repeat of the sleep-dancing episode, the issuing of orders only increased in regularity and in vigour.

‘And reveille,’ my father told me, ‘became a real torment, because every day, minutes before your mother woke, her snoring appeared to be imitating the unmistakable sound of a bugle at dawn.’

Was my father delirious? No, on the contrary, he was perfectly aware of what he was saying, indeed, it was impressive to see how, at the very gates of death, he still retained his usual sense of humour. Was he making it up? Possibly, which is why I tried fixing him with an incredulous stare, but this didn’t seem to put him off in the least. Grave-faced and impassive, he continued his story.

He described how, on waking, my mother would instantly become her usual gentle, docile self, except, occasionally, near a bakery, or when she was simply strolling down the street, she would shoot strange, melancholy glances at the soldiers standing guard behind barricades erected on the banks of the Nile (at the time, of course, Cairo was on a war footing).



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One morning, she even tried out a few dance steps in front of the soldiers.

More than once, my father was tempted to confront the problem directly and speak to her, saying, for example:

‘You appear to have at the very least a dual personality. You’re a sleepwalker and, quite apart from standing on sofas and dancing the *tirana*, you’ve turned the marital bed into a military parade ground.’

He said nothing, however, because he feared that if he did broach the subject, it might work to his disadvantage and he would succeed only in revealing to her a hidden aspect of her character: a certain talent for giving orders. But one day, while they were out riding camels near the pyramids, my father made the mistake of telling her the plot of a short story he was planning to write:

‘It’s the story of a very well-matched, even exemplary couple. However, like all happy stories, this would be of no interest at all, if not for the fact that, at night, in her dreams, the woman turns into a soldier.’

He had hardly finished speaking when my mother asked to be helped down from the camel and then, shooting him a defiant glance, ordered him to carry the bag full of Turkish and Egyptian bread rolls. My father was absolutely terrified, because he realised that, from that moment on, not only would he be condemned to carrying around that nightmarish collection of foreign baked goods, he would continue to receive order after order.

On their return to Barcelona, my mother was already issuing orders with such authority that he began to think of her as a general in the Foreign Legion, and the oddest thing of all was that, right from that very moment, she appeared



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to identify totally with that position, for she would go into a kind of trance and say that she felt she was lost in a universe adorned with heavy Algerian rugs, with strainers for making pastis and absinthe and hookahs for marijuana, and she was scanning the desert horizon from an oasis village in the luminous night.

When they arrived in Barcelona, back in my father's mansion in the Barrio Gótico, any friends who visited were astonished to see my mother smoking like a man, with a lit cigarette hanging from one corner of her mouth, and to see my father, his features hard and blunt as pebbles polished by the waves, half-blinded as if by the desert sun, and transformed into an old legionnaire flicking through ancient colonial newspapers.

At this point in the story, the only thing I understood completely was that – quite astonishingly for someone on the verge of dying – my father, true to his constant need to tell tales, was continuing ceaselessly to invent. Not even the proximity of death could take from him his taste for making up stories. And I had the impression that he wanted to bequeath to me the house of fiction and the pleasure of taking up permanent residence there. And that is why, springing onto the running-board of his carriage of words, I said:

'You are clearly confusing me with someone else. I am not your son. And as for Aunt Consuelo, she is merely a character I invented.'

Before responding, he looked at me with a degree of unease. Then, deeply moved, he squeezed my hand and gave me a broad smile, that of someone who knows his message has reached safe harbour. Along with the inventory of nostalgias, he had just bequeathed to me the house of eternal shadows.





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My father, who had once believed in many, many things only to end up distrusting all of them, was leaving me with a unique, definitive faith: that of believing in a fiction that one knows to be fiction, aware that this is all that exists, and that the exquisite truth consists in knowing that it is a fiction and that, nevertheless, one should believe in it.