

***Ghost Horse***

**By Karina Sosa Castañeda**

**Translated by Ellen Jones**

My mother died six hundred days ago. I haven't been able to cry. Today I came alone to a hotel that used to be a convent. An ex-convent where Italo Calvino wrote: "'Oaxaca' is pronounced 'Wahaka'..." – the opening lines of "Under the Jaguar Sun."

I've been thinking about absences. I'm ruthless: my mother's death is basically a pretext for my writing. Just another way of easing my distress. I'm here because of this impossibility of mine: I don't have anyone to cry with, and "what is death without tears?"

In this hotel I look like a distracted tourist. I booked a room where I'll spend the night. I have a pair of black trousers in my bag and some blue velvet shoes. I think of Miyako Ishiuchi, a Japanese artist who paints series of objects. She could do a series that collects all the objects belonging to my absent mother. Perhaps all her belongings have evaporated from the world. I wish. I wish that when people died all the objects that accompanied them in life would vanish from the earth.

I didn't bring a picture of my mother with me to this hotel. Nor did I bring a book. Only the diaries I've written over the past ten years, the ones I've titled *An Unimportant Woman*. I make notes:

"I want to hear those silent tourists up close, the ones whose voices are creating the barest murmur that rises from the balcony to my bed. I want to drink anis with coffee beans. Like Onetti did.

Onetti smoked constantly, and he always spoke slowly, making sure he had silence. Mum's dead and she's left me an idea: the idea that her life was intimately connected with the lives of horses."

I've never known anything about my mother. All I knew was her name. I knew we were separated because it was for the best. Because she was fragile, because of my father's temperament, because, according to my mother I belonged to another life. My father's life.

But I only really felt her absence, the absence of my mother, when I was given the news: *Your mother is dead*. Never before.

Mum had her reasons. And my father never wanted to talk about it. That's how we grew up, my father and I, together, knowing that an absent, ghost-like woman had brought me into the world. And that was all we needed to know.

I'd like to say that I'm going to have a cigarette and put up a sign that reads: Gone out. But smoking isn't permitted in this hotel. And besides, no one's going to come looking for me. Especially not here. I write a phrase of Onetti's down in my diary: "It's true that I don't know how to write, but I write about myself."

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Curzio Malaparte, *Sangue*:

"What has most made me uneasy, ever since I was three or four years old, was a sense of being surrounded by mysterious objects. From morning till night, every time I opened my mouth it was to ask for some mystery to be explained: 'Who made the wall? Who made the horse? Who made the car? Who made the sky?'"

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The first time I thought properly about following the horses' trail was the day that N disappeared from my life forever.

Perhaps N is a ghost. I say this to console myself. But I know I'm lying. It's clear N exists: he has a body, he moves through the world, like those images in my memory of horses curled up asleep on the stones, their breath warm, that's who, like some distant echo, N's voice and hands come and go between my memory and empty space.

In my insignificant notebooks there are a few things about N. But his absence seems heavier than him.

My diary contains poems I've copied from old books, quotations from things I've read, photographs, cuttings, words, notes, shopping lists, to do lists, wish lists, lists of birthdays, lists of phone numbers. Addresses for people I no longer see.

My father hates lists. He says they serve no purpose in the world. I make lists to wind my father up. I wind him up in secret.

My father, like most of the rest of the world, knows nothing about me.

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Can someone who inhabits you briefly, for barely a moment, exist in you for the rest of eternity?

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I think N shares a birthday with Sándor Márai. I'm always reading Sándor Márai's diaries. I think of his final years, suffering his wife Lola's slow agony. I think about the day when Sándor Márai decided to kill himself, about how you come to the realisation that today is the day.

I don't want to understand Sándor Márai. I think of him walking through Vérmező Park while his driver smokes in the street. Márai would go into a café to read some newspaper or other and sit quietly.

Outside, the driver and his horses await him. The driver's horse is practically motionless, like an old mountain of black velvet stones.

A horse is also a pile of black velvet stones awaiting movement.

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It's been days since my father started eating dinner in silence. Sometimes I lie to him. I tell him I've almost got enough money to get out of this country. My father makes an enthusiastic face and says there's no need to save up, I can go wherever I want, that that's what he's worked for.

*You deserve everything. You'll see,* he says and then I tell him more lies. I talk about Kevin. My father likes the idea of Kevin by my side for the rest of my life. That's what I tell him. I lie repeatedly, to make my father happy.

My father has no idea about my search. He doesn't know I've been nosing around, asking questions about the dead, ghosts, lies, horses...

I want to impose a long sentence that will shake him. That will make my father summon up the courage to give me an answer. Any answer.

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*Do you like horses? Your mother loved horses.*

The man who accompanied my mother for the last twenty years of her life says this to me. I think about how they met. I think about it in this brief instant. I can smell paraffin, we're at a wake that's too big, the carpet is the colour of human blood. In another room there is apple cake, coffee and chocolates, gifts for those attending the vigil. I think of the Ganges, of food stalls and death floating in the water. I feel like I might vomit. I'm drugged. I took a Lexapro

before I came – I've taken it a few times. I feel like I might pass out any second but something inside me resists.

I look at that man, at my mother's widower, and I know he is not a ghost. His words are slurred. He can barely speak to me, and I try not to hear him. His green eyes and the stiff body. What brought them together? A television actor and my mother.

I think about this man's tears. Who was my mother? What is a horse in the world? What is a horse to me? A horse in the world...

In her coffin, my mother looked like a sweet woman. Her eyes were closed. I would have liked those eyes to look at me. Her clasped hands reminded me of my own hands. Her black dress looked like it belonged on a solemn old lady.

What did that small woman, always ill, always breathless and nervous, have to do with horses?

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When I finished university and returned home, Dad insisted I go and live with him. I did, for a week, while I found a new flat.

On 15 September, I moved to Calle Hidalgo. It wasn't necessary to hire movers. I gave away the books I'd bought during my four years at university, mostly to friends, though I left some for the new tenant – an odontology student, according to the owners. All I kept was an oldish edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. That and my clothes. My old black boots.

How many objects can you take home in a suitcase?

What objects would you take with you to a desert island, in Oaxaca?

A book, some boots, and a coat.

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It was quite rainy, that September in Oaxaca. Three weeks and I still didn't know what I was doing there.

Some nights, that first month, I'd wake up thinking I was in my flat in the other city.

I'd think about the old mirror facing the bed, missing the yellow light cast by the lamp I'd bought in an antiques shop shortly after arriving in the city. I was twenty-three back then.

In the student flat I had there, I felt like I was in a cave. There was damp in the walls. I liked my room, and the narrow living-dining area with a new sofa bed I sometimes slept on.

Kevin slept on it too, on other occasions. I remember I'd bought, in addition to the lamp, a couple of pillows, spoons, plates, a (cheap, rickety) bookcase with three shelves and a blue plastic curtain to separate the shower from the toilet.

I liked that place, where sometimes I'd display flowers. Where smoking wasn't prohibited, although I didn't smoke.

I liked that it was a house inside another house: down the stairs, at the end of a corridor decorated with artificial plants, lived the owners.

I liked being somebody else, between those blue walls.

In Oaxaca, in that large, well-lit flat where I could smell the lemon tree from the courtyard at night, I missed my cave, the damp, being an outsider in a city where everyone is a ghost, where everyone is always alone. I missed that: not belonging.

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March, and I was trying to make everything feel normal. It occurred to me I should try to find an escape route.

The office, where I had started work thanks to a recommendation from a friend of my father's, was an air-conditioned building with ten small cubicles in which each of the young architects replicated the idea of home designed expressly for the survivors of this ruined country.

I'd been there for six months, my new life.

The guayacanes were flowering, those yellow trees that bathe everything in a bright light. I thought about Kyoto. I discovered that a few streets from my flat there was a silent library whose courtyard had a bougainvillea canopy that caught all the whispers from outside.

There was a section on entomology, another on gothic art, another on Italian painters. It was like entering an infinite labyrinth. I thought about Alexandria.

I wasn't interested in building a social life, but I sometimes went drinking in La Independencia bar. I could pass for someone else there. There, nobody asked questions. Everyone was doing their own thing, drinking cheap drinks and eating simple snacks – pickled sausage, nondescript fried food – and singing Sinaloa banda. You could go off the rails there and the next day nobody would say a word about it.

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I would have liked to have pets: fish, for example. A round glass fish tank on the table, next to the fruit bowl. But that was absurd, my mind was full of the idea of escape, of fleeing. Pets are a connection to a city, they never end up being happy elsewhere. There are no fish, nor is there a fruit bowl on the table.

May was a particularly hellish month. Perhaps it was the heat. Perhaps it was because the firm was commissioned to plan a government building. Huge budget. The lead architect said he wanted something *novel*. I thought of Zaha Hadid. She was in vogue. I liked her. The architect said no. He showed us a sketch: a round building, with windows. Round cement. Like a cement cake. I thought of Doric columns. I mentioned them, in jest. *Doric columns in the hallway*. The architect said *you're a genius*. I was embarrassed. I looked at his teeth, white, one gold one. I was scared of spending the rest of my days as an architect who is content to design white elephants.

It was around that time that the karaoke thing happened, when N and I met for the first time.