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## LILIANE'S SUNDAY

By Ana Lydia Vega

Out of respect for myself, I will not interrupt the silence of the dead. And I will keep my tale free of names in all references to those who were the main actors in the Ponce Massacre; because most of them already stepped beyond the frontiers of life and my remembering their deeds seems to me to be enough sorrow for those few still alive, awaiting their turn to depart and slipping away like shadows fleeing their past.

—Rafael Pérez-Marchand, *Historical Reminiscence on the Ponce Massacre*

Each time the memory of that day reawakens in me, I relive the unchangeable ritual that marked the beginning and end of all the weeks of my childhood.

Every Sunday we went to *La Concordia*, my grandfather's farm in the Real Abajo district of Ponce. In the back seat of the square Packard my three sisters, my brother, and I fought over the windows. No sooner had we left Hostos Avenue behind to drive across the city to the Juana Díaz detour, than we went through a thousand contortions before settling down, while Mother scolded us because of the commotion and Father watched us, amused, in the rearview mirror.

I liked going around the Plaza de las Delicias, watching the young girls showing off their new dresses and the ladies entering and leaving the cathedral with their veils and fans. But I preferred crossing it on foot with Father on those afternoons when he allowed me to accompany him to the barbershop; on those days we always stopped at Eusebio's cart to buy the best vanilla ice cream I have tasted in my life.

That Sunday we left a bit later than usual. The night before Father had taken us against Mother's wishes to the Teatro la Perla to see a zarzuela: *The Chaste Suzanna* was, according to her, "too strong" for our tender ears. We had gone to bed well past ten, which in my house was considered, not only a risk to the children's fragile health, but a real abuse of trust.

We had a light breakfast in anticipation of Mamina's Chicken with Rice in the country. While Mother laid on my bed the pink pinafore with its little lace collar, I did my exercises with Father in the lean-to in the yard. At eleven we were on our way, asking in unison to stop at the Square for ice cones. People walked by with their holy palm branches in their hands, which made us redouble our entreaties and tripled our longing. But with the pretext of our delay there was to be no stopping and certainly

no ice cones. Through the rearview mirror, Father gave me a wink of consolation which didn't amuse me one bit.

As we drove past the Pila Clinic, we saw a large number of policemen walking on the street and, naturally, we asked if there was to be a parade. "The nationalists are coming," Mother said, quickly changing the topic. And that was the end of that.

Angel was coming from El Tuque. He had spent the entire morning at the beach gathering shells to make bracelets and necklaces for the girls. He had found many pretty ones, rimmed in pink and violet. He was carrying them in the basket on his bicycle, in a paper sack pressed between the coffee jug and the tin bowl.

He was eager to catch a glimpse of those nationalists who had announced their meeting with such fanfare. He didn't much like those sorts of things, but, after all, there was nothing better to do to kill death-bound time on a Sunday afternoon in Ponce.

He tried to make his way into town up Marina Street. The policemen who had placed barricades on several intersections would not let him through. He made an attempt at Aurora Street, but almost before he reached the first corner they made him go back. Then he hit on a master plan. He left the bicycle leaning against a tree in front of the Asilo de Damas, and putting the bag of seashells between his chest and undershirt, limped across the street to ask the guard with the long carbine pacing nervously up and down the entrance to the Alvarado Garage to let him through to the Pila Clinic to tend to his twisted ankle. The guard threw him a malicious glance and, shrugging his shoulders, allowed him through.

The road was paved, a rare thing in the 1930s, and the flamboyant trees growing all along it must have been scandalously red to have remained etched in my memory for such a long time. That day, by dint of arguments and shoves, I had earned the fiercely sought-after window. As we neared Coto Laurel, I could comfortably watch the furious geese of *La Constanza*.

Father was singing old ballads and *danzas* with Mother providing the chorus. We contorted our faces in incredible grimaces, trying to repress our laughter, which burst without warning, the more clamorous the more we tried to suffocate it.

From the balcony of the Amy Family home, on a second floor on Aurora Street, the view was perfect: the ideal spot from which to take sensational photos. In any case, it was pointless to look for another: there was not a single balcony that was not crammed.

Carlos climbed the steps two by two. He had the pleasant surprise of finding the door open. As he made his way to the balcony across the living room crowded with the curious, he noticed with growing ill temper that the best spots were already occupied. If he had not had to park the car so far away, if the walk had not been so long . . . But the police had cordoned off the neighboring streets and not even his press pass from *El Imparcial* had been enough to get him the necessary dispensation.

He took a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and lighted it with the last match he had left. Between puffs of smoke he began to study the faces around him, hoping to

recognize some friend who would help him further his cause. On the first row, the ladies had placed stools on which to rest their buttocks, a noble and considerate gesture which allowed those on the second row to enjoy the panorama. There, between two men discussing the merits and demerits of Governor Winship, was final proof of the fact that, on that day, luck was definitely not with him.

We were still far from the curve with the pumpkins when I began to feel that vague anxiety that always gripped me when I anticipated its approach. Mother had diagnosed carsickness but the sensation was not the same. It resembled more the queasiness that gripped my stomach when, playing hide and seek, I was about to be found.

The spot of my dread finally appeared, with its wooden crosses, mementos to the victims of the highway. Knowing my vulnerable point, Father left *Happy Days* unfinished to intone, in a deliberately lugubrious voice, *Don't Bring Me Flowers*. I surreptitiously reached for Lolín's hand, which I did not let go of until the irresistible attractions of the road captured my eyes again.

Climbing the fence that separated the hospital from the convent was not an easy task. The privet hedge bordering it presented an additional obstacle. The nuns, moreover, were looking out their windows. But, thank God, too absorbed in what was going on on the other side. Angel concentrated, dug his fingers as hooks on the wall, and hoisting up his torso, accomplished the jump that brought him down on all fours on holy ground.

The removal of a neighbor by hammock to an unknown place, which could be none but the hospital or cemetery, forced my father to slow down his speed while the cortege passed by. I remember that we could only glimpse, at one end of the hammock, a pair of skinny yellowish feet sticking out. As she hurriedly rolled up the windows to protect us from mysterious viruses floating in the air, Mother explained to us that water was probably to blame and that that was precisely why it had to be boiled for ten minutes by the clock before we dared drink it.

The Inabón river now bordered the road. Lent had revealed the intimacy of its rocky bed and dried its wide and foamy pools. Father stopped so I could toss out the window the garden pebbles I had brought in my pocket to measure the depth of the water.

Crafty Conde had arrived early, had sneaked between the ladies by dint of gallantries, and was already happily shooting with his camera over the crowd on the sidewalk awaiting the beginning of the parade. *El Mundo* had its front-page photo more than assured. Carlos was biting his tongue with rage.

Just then a young girl, small and round, with lips as red as the hearts sprinkling the ruffles of her skirt, said very near to him, forcing him to lower his eyes:

"Are you a professional photographer or an amateur?"

The question stunned Carlos, who had been, in view of his present predicament, pondering that very same question. Fortunately, his masculine pride replied for him and the girl was suitably impressed.

We were not very far from the farm, when the startling spectacle of what seemed to me a house moving by itself across the fields made me exclaim, in alarm, that the earth was shaking. Father's burst of laughter dislodged his spectacles, and Mother had to replace them on the bridge of his nose. It is not an earthquake, he said when he recovered his voice, it's simply a move.

Fascinated, we followed the house's progress, as it was pushed, riding on rollers, by more than twenty men. I wanted to know why, instead of moving the furniture to another house, they chose to go through the trouble of moving the house. But I didn't dare ask, afraid of being ridiculed and provoking my sisters's eternal mocking laughter.

Once in the yard, Angel meant to go out quite nonchalantly by way of the alley that separated the convent of the sisters of Mercy from that of the sisters of Joseph and take a peek out the gate, armed with the genial excuse of being nothing less than the Lord Bishop's messenger. But a nun who had been keeping her eye on him from the moment she saw him climbing the fence yelled out the window. Luckily, with the din coming from the street, he could pretend not to have heard.

The big iron gate with the *hacienda's* name emerged through the breadfruit trees. As we drove past the payment shack, we saw the overseer's raised hand and noisily returned his greeting. The Packard found its habitual spot under the shadow of a carob tree.

Mamina and Papiño were anxiously awaiting us on the immense porch of the wooden house. Why were we so late? Had that thing in Ponce already started? Was there a lot of traffic? The questions alternated with the kisses and embraces. In the kitchen, Ursula was giving the final touches to the gigantic *mofongo* reigning supreme on a tray by the fire.

My brother left with my father to converse with the sharecroppers who had come out to greet us. Ursula and Grandmother started to take the dishes and silverware to the table on the *bohío*, the palm-thatched hut in the middle of the grapefruit grove. Accustomed to Corsican gastronomic rites, Mother would have preferred to have her lunch comfortably inside the house. But we would not accept another dining room but that of the *bohío*. My sisters went to the swings. I lost myself amidst the coffee bushes, sniffing and exploring the aromatic mysteries of the berries. And I so truly lost myself that when it came time to sit to table, Mamina had to come looking for me.

The conversation did not end there. The girl offered him a sip of her raspberry ice cone, red as the mark of her lips on the white ice she was sucking. Pleasantly surprised, Carlos accepted, and the ice cone bridged the space between the two youths, whose hands lightly touched.

Suddenly, the irritating click of his rival's camera worked like an alarm clock waking him from his nirvana. Carlos remembered the sacred mission which had brought him with such difficulties from San Juan.

"Why don't we find another spot?" the girl then said, her face slightly blushing from the reflection of the ice cone. Carlos, who couldn't have hoped for anything

better, bowed to her desire as if it had been an order and joined the compact mass vainly craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the street. When he realized she had not followed him, he looked behind him and saw her standing, with arms akimbo and the expression of an impatient bride, at the end of the living room. Confused, Carlos thought she was signalling him to return. He attempted to justify himself, pointing a finger at the camera. But she shook her head insistently, and, torn between pleasure and duty, he stood still for a few seconds, undecided, before retracing his steps, as fast as he could, towards the girl.

Without a word, she conducted him to the entrance door, from which she pointed, with quite a mischievous smile, to another closed door. Making sure that only Carlos and no one else accompanied her, she took out of her pocket a ring of keys and put the smallest one in the keyhole.

Atop a staircase, a slice of blue sky crowned his confidence. Closing the door behind them, they ran triumphantly to the roof.

After lunch, no matter what and come what may, the grandparents always took a siesta. Father let himself down in the hammock on the veranda with a sigh of satisfaction. Mother lay down, with a novel she had had the wise precaution to bring, on the sofa in the living room.

Lolín took advantage of the adults' withdrawal to search at her ease in the small odds-and-ends room. From there she returned with an album full of old unglued photographs which unleashed a fury of sneezes that almost betrayed her. Carmen and Lina grabbed hold of it and devoted themselves, to my great boredom, to perusing it.

The sky was so perfectly blue and the afternoon so dazzlingly white that I couldn't resist the primitive call of the animals. I approached the chicken coop with great caution and full of bad intentions to steal the eggs. But the ruckus of the guinea hens immediately defeated my plans.

Then I slipped towards the pens where the rabbits grew and multiplied biblically. And I spent a lot of time pestering them, sticking them with a lemon-tree branch and hiding their food. I chased the goats, tried to milk the cows, and I didn't ride the horses because crafty Papiño had locked them in the stable. Emboldened, I carried my audacity to the barrel of landcrabs. With a long stick with a curved hook used to knock down loquats, I lifted them one by one to bring near my eyes the bluish threat of their claws and then dropping them, from that height, on the resigned carapaces of their companions.

When, due to an excess of repetition, I grew tired of doing mischief, a gluttony for fruit beckoned me to climb trees. Soon, the ground was carpeted with the last oranges and grapefruits of the season. The mangoes, still green, climbed grudgingly off the branches. But it was the guavas which accomplished their revenge. Not only were they all full of worms, but the thorns of a lemon-tree bodyguard they had next to them left my fingers as if I had spent the morning grating plantains.

Angel had already reached the gate and was in the very act of sliding the latch to glide discreetly onto the sidewalk when he was surprised by a clarion call which made him stop dead in his tracks. Immediately, the martial chords of *La Borriqueña* imposed

themselves by beat of cymbals and trumpets. Making sure no one was watching, Angel considered for a moment removing his hat as a sign of respect. A guard's frowning gaze, nailed on the musicians, forced him to reconsider. The nationalist cadets clutched their black berets against their chests while their lips formed the words of the banned anthem.

The aroma of the coffee Ursula was brewing wafted over the farm announcing the proximity of the mid-afternoon snack. Although the fruits had turned my intestines inside out, the image of the sweet buns, meekly lined up on the kitchen table, made me start on my way back.

Amidst a melancholic ballad, my father's powerful tenor hovered in the still air:

There's no heart like mine  
suffering without complaint  
a heart that suffers in silence  
a heart that suffers in silence  
is not found everywhere.

It was his favorite song, the one he asked me to sing to him when he returned tired from the courthouse at seven o'clock at night and dropped himself on the wicker rocker. I paused on the narrow space that separated the storeroom from the mill and, projecting as far as I could my weak girlish falsetto, I replied with the responding couplet:

I had a little dove  
which was my amusement  
it flew out of my little cage  
it flew out of my little cage  
though I had always treated her well.

Father applauded and yelled enthusiastic bravos from the veranda. At that moment, not knowing yet why, my eyes welled with tears and my chest tightened up.

Carlos felt his ill humor dissolve away, and a smile tickled the corners of his mouth. The girl had sat on the edge of the white wall, posing coquettish, her legs crossed, inviting a photograph. With his usual skill, he pressed the shutter release to please his guardian angel and, with the pretext of seeking an angle, moved near her.

*La Borinqueña* rose to the sky on the wings of the breeze. Shy or maybe just curious, who knows, the girl turned her head and evaded the kiss destined for her lips. He saw the nationalists standing at attention with their wooden rifles; he saw, behind them, the women dressed in white. And he saw also the line of Thompson machine guns, like a dark frontier between life and death, like a frozen river.

"Look at that, it's an ambush," he said, tracing a broad circle with his raised finger.

Carlos spread his legs, squared his body, and took a step forward to take his first

photograph. A voice gave the order to march. Two sharp detonations were heard. A piteous chorus of cries and moans took possession of the air.

Before the buzz of a bullet forced them to throw themselves on the ground, Carlos was able to press the shutter and imprison in the exorbitant eye of his lens that scene of horror he would never be able to tear from his memory.

Wounded on the head, Angel barely had time to crawl to the tall grass of the patio. His pierced cap covered his face. A long line of split seashells extended from his last hiding place to the convent gates.

Mamina was calling me. The sudden irruption of a butterfly of all colors had distracted me, prolonging my return. It was then that the black car with a policeman at the wheel and the police insignia on the rear bumper entered the gate, like a huge scarab of ill omen. The insistent croak of his claxon made my mother drop the steaming cup of coffee and run down the steps.

A veil of grey smoke was floating over Ponce when the black car parked at the intersection of Marina and Aurora. It must have been six o'clock of an afternoon prematurely darkened. The few people on the streets walked hurriedly with heads bent. The long carbines kept watch over the streets. Only the ambulances mocked with their shrill sirens the stillness of the beleaguered city.

The Prosecutor had to lean against the door that was held open to remain on his feet as he faced the overwhelming smell of death that rose from the stained cobblestones. The muffled buzzing that filled his ears drowned the words of the Colonel, whose thin hands moved gracelessly accompanying his high-strung description of the "attempt." When the Prosecutor was finally able to formulate, with a wisp of a voice, something as simple as "what happened?" or maybe a hopeless "were there any deaths?" and embark on the macabre tour through the entrails of a bad dream, his bewildered eyes discovered, in the bluish light of Ponce's twilight, the words painted in red on the white pediment wall of the convent:

LONG LIVE THE REPUBLIC  
DOWN WITH THE ASSASSINS

The Prosecutor had the foreboding that those words, traced with the waning strength of a dying hand soaked in blood, had the power to turn his life upside down, a life that never again would run its course as placidly as his day at the countryside every Sunday.

*Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*