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Out
of the
Mirrored
Garden

EDITED BY
Delia Poey

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For
Alexandria
&
Gabriela

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Turn off the light now because the neighbors are about to come back to their houses, and be careful you don't stain your clothes with whiskey like that other time; come on, finish up, because when you finish we'll have to write

THE END

to start again to shoot the film, for the lights and the shadows to come alive; the shadows of silence and your silence and mine will cover everything and the scene with my round face will begin when I speak and I say that everything will start on a greenish day in which, at the same time, four identical cars will approach the Phase Number One of Villa Atenas housing development, which will have been built by now, with identical white houses on each block, one beside the other, one beside the other.

Translated by Carmen C. Esteves

Teresa
Jrene

ANGELA
HERNÁNDEZ

She had just turned three when she disappeared for the first time. It happened on the very same day her father died. She was so little—the youngest of nine children—that no one noticed her absence, busy as they were in casting off their grief.

They were stewing a calf in huge cauldrons. The relatives attending the funeral awaited their share of the tender victuals in the spirit of a feast rather than a wake. The promise of free food nurtured a dark sympathy with death. Confronted with the news, however, their better natures instantly blossomed; forgetting their stomachs, they all spilled out in an expansive search.

The alarm had been raised at dinnertime by a distant relative as they were getting ready to serve the mourners, starting with the children. She had questioned them first. They knew nothing. She made the rounds of the house, asking left and right. No one had seen her for hours.

They looked under the beds. They searched the barn, the cupboards, the yard, the eaves, exploring every likely or unlikely corner. They lit rosewood torches, hurling them down the latrine. The nauseating bottom exposed the immutable ebb and flow of a nest of worms.

In any case, the hole was too deep, a man observed—he had helped the father dig it out—and with the years it had been in use, traces of any bulky shape piercing that undulating tide of filth would be immediately obliterated. Chea, the girl's godmother, cried out, horrified, falling onto the floor as if stabbed by a dagger of wind.

For the moment the deceased was disregarded. The girl's mother, having suffered consecutive attacks of pain ablaze with fury, seemed to recover with the news of her daughter's disappearance. Her torture had hit bottom, unveiling an unyielding clearheadedness. She divided the people in small groups to search the surrounding area. Meanwhile, accompanied by Blanca, the eldest daughter, and by her brother Berto, she followed the path to the river. A dark hope guided

her intuition toward the deepest and farthest corners, toward the deep pool where the children were prohibited from bathing.

It was deceptively crystallike. It sparkled like a gigantic diamond pierced by the sunlight filtered through the tall branches of its venerable cupola. From the shore one could see the bottom in great detail. It was easy to trace the path of a timorous crayfish along the white stones of the crystal-clear riverbed.

The best swimmers approached the pool of the Jaquey Crossing, as it is known, with caution. Its bed was traversed by underwater currents forming treacherous whirlpools whose circular rages were unfathomable from the surface.

She was at the bottom. Her very short hair mingled with the naturalness of the algae. Lying slantwise on a current, her white satin skirt flowed invariably to the right. Otherwise, a perfect stillness formed the elements of the tableau. Blanca screamed, suffocating the tremors threatening to overcome her: She's dead. Berto anticipated his mother's reaction, grabbing her with all his might. She looked peaceful, watching the childish tattoo on the bed of the pool, as if it were the consummation of an inexorable dream.

In a matter of seconds the diamond of water was surrounded by people and sobs. The most varied opinions displaced the initial surprise: She may be alive for all we know. Why is she not floating? Find Genaro, he knows all about drownings. Take the mother away from here. Bring some rope. Don't let anyone jump in without tying them securely. Pull that boy away from here.

I don't need any rope, Genaro said as he dove in with the ancient grace of a proven winner. He never returned.

Two old men arrived with the rope, the only two to have remained in the house with the body. They took over the task of rescue with the patience that comes from self-assurance. The deceased remained behind, enjoying the tranquil silence. Death was long; life possessed the urgency of the ephemeral.

They pulled the girl out, but Genaro disappeared among the caves carved by the deep currents.

Her eyes were open. She looked without surprise at the tens of relatives and neighbors watching her with solemn amazement. She breathed naturally. I want milk, she said, and she yawned as if she had slept too much. At that very instant they discovered the eyes of Teresa Irene, or, better yet, they understood what they saw. They are pink, they are green, bluer than the sky, they are the color of the afternoon as it vanishes. Unsure of their own perceptions, they had nonetheless no choice but to admit the evidence before them; Teresa Irene gathered all colors in her eyes. Grains of water and light; the rainbow in them. Except that unlike the rainbow, the colors in her eyes alternated, configuring a disk in whose radial stripes it was impossible to determine the space occupied by the violets, blues, oranges, or any other components of the naked light.

Teresa Irene, naturalness itself in her acts, was interpreted, thought about, X-rayed from supernatural or abnormal points of reference. Her mother hung a jet-stone charm from her neck and an amulet with a clove of garlic on the wrist of her left hand. One of her brothers followed her every time she strayed farther than two hundred meters from the house. At the same time they kept all the other children away from her, so she learned to entertain herself with the chickens and the other birds in the yard, following meticulously the swimming lessons of the ducklings in the pond. She spoke little, but observed everything with an acute innocence disconcerting to the adults.

More than once they stopped her on the narrow path that led to the river. They excused her from fetching water and she was never allowed to accompany her sisters when they went to the bath. With time they stopped marveling at her rapture when they found her leaning against the water basin or with her ears glued to the earthen jar, as if she were listening attentively to a message. She seemed to

enjoy sun showers in her own particular way and laughed, fascinated, at the tales of weddings between witches and princes with which Ana Inocencia adorned those moments.

When she was seven she disappeared again. Without hesitation, the mother and two of her sons set out for the Jaquey Crossing pool. The mother walked ahead, teary-eyed and strong, carrying the weakness of her eyes in the vigor of her long legs, hardened by the farmwork and the everyday bustle. She recalled the episode of four years before, she remembered old Genaro, and an icy furor stirred up her nerves.

Alarmed and sweat-soaked, they traversed the bank of the river, scrutinizing in vain the bed of the pool. The translucent diamond displayed its usual inhabitants.

With her skirt tucked under her knees the mother skipped along, her gaze buried in the water. From day to day she had been steeling herself against something uncertain concerning Teresa Irene. The obsessions, the questions fixed on the girl, who nonetheless kept growing oblivious to agitations and lubrications, had inspired in the mother an overflowing love. She loved her more and more; she loved her with a love mixed with pain that was beyond her understanding, a love exacerbated by the enigma, by the misfortune of seeing her hovering over the threshold of a world where she yielded no influence. She adored her with the unconfessed notion that her late husband blossomed in some way in the rainbow of her gaze.

Her spirit prey to an unendurable despair, she prayed to God not to take her away, not now, because it would be unbearable not to see her again, never to see herself reflected again in the purity of her chronic circles, not to hold tightly against her the small body that returned each caress with warm fervor. No, not now, my God, please; holiest of virgins, protect her, and I vow to have her wear a habit, I will drape her in purple as a constant reminder that she belongs only to you.

They found her in the stream, on a stretch closer to the house than the mouth of the river, lying at a precarious intersection of the water flow. She was asleep under the shelter of the bouquets of braided shadow.

In the eyes of Ana Inocencia, a year older than Teresa Irene, her sister was an exquisite being. Together they invented games and figures, sharing a language made of graphics drawn on the ground; queries about the intricacies of the birdnets; drawings made of pebbles and an entire arsenal of begonias, baby eggplants, pear and almond seeds, and fragments of china and stripes of fabric discarded by their mother.

Yet, even in their complicity, they were different. A difference notable to the adults but insignificant to those whose ages predisposed them to amazement.

Seated on the ground, they took pleasure in modeling clay figurines. They experimented for a long time before they achieved stable mixtures. Sometimes excessive water led to a weak mud with which they painted pieces of rock and branches. At other times, believing to have achieved the perfect combination, they molded figurines which, when exposed to the sun, turned porous and brittle. Ana Inocencia did not disguise her disappointment, turning over molds and crumbling the primitive effigies with her feet. With absolute serenity, Teresa Irene reorganized the ingredients, arranging them to start again, as if the amusement rested precisely in the experimentation and not in the final result.

Small pots, round-headed dolls with cigarlike arms, were proud works for Ana Inocencia. Teresa Irene, on the other hand, molded inexplicable figures which, even today, more than twenty-five years later, are kept in a handful of houses of the old and now-changed community. Inverted prisms sustained by solid planes, from whose surfaces rose multitudes of bushes of equal size and identical leaves;

houses burdened by the weight of oranges, papayas, sapodillas, and other fruits; guinea hens blindfolded with pieces of mirrors, and necklaces of butterflies, lamps placed on the headboard of a sleeping child; balls with multiple parameters shifting toward a post on whose top there is a two-petal flower; colts, peacocks, and dogs warming themselves in front of a fire; and many other figures with unexplainable and harmonious contours, sprinkled here and there with spots of turquoise-colored earth.

In a commonplace child, the conglomerate of heterogeneous figurines would have been seen as the product of a prolific childish fantasy. In Teresa Irene it was a confirmation of her exceptionality. With time she would begin to understand that people who are different from most are forced to act in a more ordinary manner than others. But when she came to understand this, she didn't care anymore.

The first and most painful warning of her isolation came with her sister's gradual withdrawal. Once childhood was behind them, the wordless complicity in play and exploration was no longer possible. Ana Inocencia wanted to share the secret of the hardening buttons flowering on her chest, the dark wool appearing under her arms, the itching of a maturing sexuality. She approached Teresa Irene with a certain mischievousness, inquiring about the mystery unfolding in their bodies and its relation to their mother's prohibition against eating fruit: "I am about to develop soon. You still have a long way to go. It is as if I were being set aflame from many sides. You still have neither hair nor tits." Teresa Irene replied with a sweet gesture of the mouth. She did not formulate any comment, however. Their circumstances were inevitably diverging.

In her early teenage years Teresa Irene conceived the notion of becoming a saint.

Except for a certain degree of muscular subtlety, her develop-

ment was normal, but relatives and neighbors were bent on attributing oddities to her. The word spread that water flowed from her breasts. Her first period came when she was fourteen. Instead of blood, she menstruated warm water. As her cousin Emilio attested, when her mother tried to extract a chigger from a swollen toe, her face was splattered by a fine sand, little fish laid in the pregnant toe. Instead of hair under her arms and on her pubis, she had threads of algae. Teresa Irene didn't even suspect what was said about her.

The truth was that, at a glance, the only unusual thing about her was the color of her eyes. Having grown up in solitude—Anacencia had been her only friend—it never occurred to her to boast of this distinction, as she never expressed annoyance at wearing light purple all the time, while her sisters displayed an ample spectrum of colors in their clothing.

The visitors that came to her house to see her had multiplied with the installation in the neighborhood of a subsidiary of the national oil industry, to whom the peasants came to sell their peanuts. Many came by the house with the pretext of asking for a glass of water or to use the outhouse. This perturbed her.

That was when she decided to become a saint. Not with the purpose of featuring in altars, or having devotees or aiding the destitute, or of being closer to God, but a saint so that she would not rot and could stay in the water and remain intact, to return to the water crystals and see the world eternally filtered through them, perfumed by their freshness.

Through its beneficial crystals the greens homogenized themselves into oblique sensations, the stones softened peacefully, the chamomiles diluted in immaculate stains. They assimilated the rumors of suffering, the urgency of hunger and loneliness, imprinting a timeless rhythm to everything that lodged behind its hospitable curtain.

As the visitors snooped into her eyes, she studied the Virgin of

Miracles, the Virgin of Alragracia, the Virgin of All Saints, of Lourdes, of Carmen, of Fatima.

Wearied of the daily siege and devoid of a clear formula for sainthood, she began to disappear at dawn, returning at dusk. On these occasions her eyes dimmed into black and no one pursued her to look into them.

She discovered a singular place where she spent her days, submerged in the deepest spot, hidden by branches bending over the very surface of the water. An enormous pine tree grew tall nearby; a bit farther off a saman spilled over. Lilies floated on the banks. In routine navigation, leaves and light flowers flowed by in slow advance. Besides the unfolding greens there was the expansion of corollas, the barks metamorphosing into unimaginable graphic combinations; besides the hint of a breeze hidden in the wings of a mockingbird, and of the winged humility of the *rolitas*, she would have liked to see people, to enjoy their company, hear their laughter mingle with the flow of the water. To see brilliant and fervent glances, like those of the huge water crystals when they sacrifice themselves to the sun. To see in human hands the planetary geometry of the barks.

She knew it to be impossible. People cannot look without asking, they cannot observe without seeking ciphered messages that predict the course of their existence; they cannot live according to the whims of nature.

She ceased wearing shoes and ingesting food just when she turned sixteen. She roamed in the open sun through the thorniest areas. Those who managed to see her, extremely thin, on her wanderings amid brambles and bush, with her long, tangled hair covering her back, with her eyes like a display of the finest gems, with her elegant forehead and her tattered purple clothes, with her leathery skin and her hands groping the air as if she were blind, with her mouth like a conjunction of antique smiles, said that she looked less

like a saint than an extravagance of the forest, another offspring of the pine trees and the ironweeds, a new species of comfrey, a prolongation of the cascade, the materialization of some delirium.

She grew so thin she almost disappeared; she was seen outlined against the trees like a spark in a ruined dawn. On the thirty-first day of December, as the arrival of a new year was celebrated, she took the path to the Jaquey Crossing pool. She was so weak that she crawled part of the way. They didn't look for her until the following day.

As thirteen years before, the mother organized a search party. In the same way as before, she took the path to the river accompanied by Blanca and Berto. The waters of the big diamond looked the same as ever: still, blindly crystalline. A few lilacs floated on the opposite bank. On the waterbed there was the purple tattoo of a sleeping lady. The long mane detoured to the right, as if carried away by an invisible current.

The neighborhood people arrived; they wanted to bring rope to bring her up. This time the mother demurred. Instead, she lit candles, recited the Creed, and improvised an altar with white sheets over the bushes.

By the next day Teresa Irene had disappeared from her aquatic bed.

Since then the place has been called Ciguapa Pool. The mother dislikes the name, it seems pagan and inconsiderate to her. But she is calm and accepting. She thinks her daughter is intact somewhere. Besides, she became convinced a long time before that Teresa Irene could appreciate the world only through water crystals.

No person would ever again bathe in the Ciguapa Pool. The diaphanous lagoon was consecrated exclusively to the rainbow. The people know that the light is thirsty. When the tense indoor dryness becomes stifling, she sheds her clothes, confidently displaying her dawns, and ventures to take a drink of water.

Subsequent generations were privileged to hold one secret fewer

and one more landscape. Under the drizzle, hand in hand with their grandparents, children watch the trajectory of the thirsty light, until they catch her diving in to take a long drink.

Once her pretensions broke all grounds. She went to drink water and resolved to remain dressed in the eyes of a girl called Teresa Irene.

Translated by Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert