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EVA'S OBSESSION

by José Alcántara Almánzar

My daughter had been a normal girl until that first stain appeared. I recall, as if it were today, that I had gone to wake her up, to make sure she wouldn't be late for work, and found her wrapped in the sheets, her face buried in the pillow, as if to avoid the light and fend off my habitual chitchat.

"Get up, Eva, it's getting late."

She pretended not to hear me, as was her wont, but was betrayed by an involuntary movement. She clutched the pillow, searching for a comfortable refuge in those last few minutes of sleep, while I opened the bedroom window, letting in a glaring summer sun that blinded me for a moment despite the early hour.

Then I went to the bed, sat on the edge, and called to Eva again; she finally lifted her face, blinked, looked at me through half-closed eyes, a look of displeasure on her face. Through the years I have learned to handle my daughter, that is, I always get my way in the end, although in return I must indulge many of her whims and tolerate on occasion the impertinence typical of her young age. So I ignored that gesture of impudence and confined myself to reminding her that she would be late getting to the bank.

I went back to the window to give her a chance to stretch herself out and shed the sluggishness of eight hours of sleep. The sun was burning bright. I closed my eyes and wondered what would happen if I weren't home to attend to these matters.

Eva finally got up. I turned around, opened my eyes, and watched her stumble into the bathroom. I went on with my routine, straightening out the room, taking out the underwear, shoes, and dress that Eva would wear to work. She liked me to help her choose her clothes, that way she didn't have to rack her brain to avoid repetitions that led to gossip at the office, or outfits in bad taste to feed the malicious prattle of officemates who lived in envious agony because she was pretty and had had incredible success in a short time. Eva pretended not to notice the comments; she said they only proved people's mediocrity—"I'm above tittle-tattle," she would say, "the only thing that concerns me is doing a good job and completing my university degree." I knew deep down these things mortified her; I could read it in the way she shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, and moved on to another topic—recipes, the latest fashion, or some trivial incident at school.

When Eva came out of the bathroom, I had her clothes spread out on the bed and had found the shoes that best matched the white dress that went so well with her tanned skin. She hardly ever rejected the clothes I picked out for her; that's why it shocked me to see her stare at the dress with an expression of annoyance at facing something unexpected.

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“You didn’t notice the stain, Mami.”

There was a trace of distress and contrariness in her words. For a brief second I was upset with myself for not having noticed, remembering that Eva spent most of her salary on clothes and now one of her best dresses was ruined by a mere stain. Then I picked up the dress, inspected it front, back, all over, and found nothing unusual anywhere.

“Ay, Mami, you’re going blind, look right here, by the neckline.”

I thought perhaps I was losing my eyesight, because despite my best efforts I could not see the stain my daughter had discovered so effortlessly. There was, according to her, a small, irregular stain on the fabric, like red rust, dried blood, or those indelible blemishes left by *cajuil* nuts or green plantains.

One of two things: either I was tottering on the verge of senility, or Eva wanted to make me feel guilty for her own carelessness. Well, it was neither one thing nor the other. I don’t even wear glasses and have always been proud of my excellent eyesight, despite having spent my life knitting and embroidering, and Eva may have her flaws, but she wasn’t about to start torturing me with nonsense, with something that wasn’t really on her dress. She spoke very naturally, without a trace of mockery, and, so as not to make her waste any more time, I said, “Leave it there for me—I’ll see what I can do.” She went to the closet, took out a navy blue suit she had asked me to make for her a week before, and put it on without further ado.

We barely spoke during breakfast. Eva eats little, chatters constantly, and is generally in a good mood. This morning she seemed distracted, distant, almost absent, and only drank half of her orange juice. Even Danilo noticed and asked her, “Is something the matter, my little one?” She spoke of a troublesome exam, of things pending with her boss at the bank, and I think she managed to bamboozle her father, who treats her as the apple of his eye.

Danilo and I were most proud of our daughter—she was affectionate without being submissive, got very high grades at the university, and was doing a splendid job at the bank. In two years she had been promoted several times, and her new boss treated her with every consideration, letting her leave early when she had a difficult exam, and bringing her home if she worked late, to the despair of Eva’s boyfriend, a typical insecure man who could not bear this sort of attention. They argued about it, and about other things I didn’t dare ask about, perhaps out of a desire not to stick my nose in her business.

My daughter’s past had always been as pure as a blank page, clear as the light of day, transparent like water, although Eva had her willful side, and could be quite aggressive if provoked, or if she felt like she was being manipulated or was approached tactlessly, or when she felt someone had tried to abuse her good faith, her happy nature, her devotion to others, or that ability of hers to resolve problems and remain as jovial as ever. That’s why it breaks my heart to see her in such a state, to see the condition to which she had brought me.

The first stain set into motion an unstoppable torture machine.

Sometimes one confers meaning on insignificant things, one worries too much about nonsense at home and ends up half hysterical, arguing with one’s husband about trivialities, firing the cook because she burned the beans, or quarreling with

one's best friend without any reason at all. I am not like that. At my age I know how to give each thing its proper weight, and I can even endure impudence if circumstances require it, like when Danilo had that thing going with that woman, some months ago. I bore his infidelity so as to preserve the peace in our family, so my daughter would not have to bear the shame of her parents divorcing because of an iniquity of which she was blameless.

This time things have been quite different. I started by not paying much heed to Eva's false impressions. I assumed that her perfectionist urge made her see stains where I saw none, and that it would soon pass if I took personal charge of tending to her clothes. I thought it was her way of seeking more attention, an appeal for special care. Of course this is often the case with only children, who get used to getting all they want and, never having enough, always demand more. I dedicated myself to washing and ironing Eva's clothes myself, examining every item in great detail.

But one morning a new stain appeared on a yellow dress, identical to the previous one, only bigger, according to Eva. I didn't know what to say. I scrutinized the fabric, ran my fingers over the insolent smear only my daughter was capable of seeing. Instead of contradicting her or trying to prove she was mistaken, that her yellow dress looked perfect, without the slightest stain to spoil its beauty, I fell again into a "Leave it to me, I'll take care of it, I'll see how I can remove it." In that way I became my daughter's accomplice in something that existed only in her mind. And all to avoid contradicting her. Now I know she was telling the truth. I didn't say anything to Danilo; men don't understand such things, and he would have thought me bonkers were I to ask him about stains that did not exist.

When Eva returned from the bank, I showed her the yellow dress, which I had soaked in detergent and a special stain remover, just to humor her. Her disappointment showed in her face, and before I could explain to her what I had done to repair the damage, her eyes filled with tears, and she wailed words that left me wondering.

"The stain is just as it was, Mami, look at it, intact, another one of my expensive rags ruined."

I promised to do what I could to save the stained dress. Eva remained silent and began to undress, and without looking at me or complaining, as if she had been thinking about something else, said she didn't feel like eating today—"Mami, I'd better rest for a while." She lay down in bed, and her face disappeared into the pillow. I felt the urge, the impulse to force her to eat something light, to bring her a piece of fruit or a glass of milk, but Eva is stubborn, and I knew she would refuse to take a single bite no matter how much I insisted.

I was disconcerted. I had never seen my daughter behave in such an obstinate way, inventing an evil to torment me and punish me in turn, as if I had no other sources of concern. I felt the urge to run and tell Danilo everything, but I contained myself. What would he think, what would he say about the feminine minutia that fill women's minds and spirits with foolishness, leaving them no energy for more important things?

I spent a long while in Eva's room. Without her knowledge, I went through the closet and inspected everything: the blouses, the skirts, the suits, the evening gowns. I didn't find anything out of the ordinary. I would have to do a more thorough check

during the weekend. In any case, what I saw was enough to prove to me that her clothes were impeccable, as clean and well-cared-for as ever. My legs wobbled, and the darkness and the heat of the closet stifled me. I started to sweat and lost my balance a bit. I had a sensation of dizziness; I walked to the window, opened it, and took a deep breath, letting the breeze help me return to the surface. The sun was on the other side of the building, so I could remain there, under the protective shadow, without disturbing Eva, alone with the uneasiness my daughter's hallucinations awakened in me, seeking answers to what still seemed no more than pure nervousness, perhaps fatigue from working or studying too hard, or just an inconsiderate way of demanding attention. The murmur of the traffic rose. When I glimpsed my first-floor neighbor watering her plants, I recalled that I should be doing the same instead of ruminating on my daughter's turmoil, making the situation worse with my anxiety. Before leaving I ascertained that Eva was sleeping, vanquished by fatigue.

Mornings became wearisome ordeals, pitting me against Eva's folly every single day. The stains continued to appear regularly on my daughter's clothing. Eva deplored the matter with more distress than I could feel. She would take a dress from the rack, examine it, and quickly see another offensive stain, a blotch that ruined the dress's immaculate appearance. She would then break into silent tears. They were to me brutal stains that tortured Eva and devastated our domestic peace, horrible stains that made me feel tired and foul-tempered. I couldn't see them, it is true, but their appearance in those fabrics I myself had sewn for my daughter with such solicitude had an atrocious meaning that I didn't dare confess, even to Danilo.

That's how part of the best Eva owned remained cast at the bottom of the closet, many of the dresses that had made her the bank's most elegant employee for many years running: the dusty-rose one with the festoons that made her look so youthful, the beige one she wore first at the Christmas party, the one of sky-blue cambric, the white-linen one. In short, I have lost count, and it drives me to despair to think of all that money fruitlessly spent. Eva refused to wear any stained item again, no matter how much I spoke to her of my efforts to wrest out the indelible dirt. She would leave it in my arms with an I-can't-possibly-wear-it and would find something else to put on.

Eva would leave for the bank in the morning as if dressed for a funeral, in black from head to toe. On the infrequent nights when her boyfriend visited—things were not going well between them and any prospect of an engagement was fast evaporating—she received him in a dark housecoat, with the expression of a brand-new widow resigned to the inevitability of fate. Sometimes I lay awake waiting for her, even though she had telephoned to tell me that she was working late and her boss would drive her home. Ten o'clock, eleven, would come and go, and no sign of her, while insomnia and impatience wore me out. Danilo had returned to his old tricks and spent his nights out, fortunately. I don't know what he would have done if he had seen his daughter arrive at midnight, the apple of his eye in a stranger's car—her boss though he may be—wrapped in black as someone from a night funeral unconcerned about her parents' apprehensions.

I had vowed to root out whatever it was that condemned my daughter to the monotony of lugubrious hues and kept me on tenterhooks, devoid of any desire to bother with anything but the damned stains.

One day I took advantage of Eva's having gone out to inspect her closet. I practically dismantled it. I piled up the shoes in the middle of the bedroom, hung the belts behind the door, took out the boxes of cosmetics, the necklaces and trinkets that Eva had kept since high school, and then, with extreme care, one by one, inspected each item without finding anything out of the ordinary, other than the smell of clothes piled up in dark closet corners, traces of dust, and some cobwebs in those nooks rarely visited by the broom. Then, to do the job properly, I looked for traces of vermin, spilled paint, or leaks. I spent several hours taking everything apart, only to place things back as I had found them.

I will not deny my disappointment was less intense than my uneasiness. I asked myself where Eva's insistence in seeing nonexistent stains would end, or where my own stupid determinations to convince myself that I was mistaken and she was right would lead me.

Quite without my noticing—I was flustered in those days—Eva's behavior began to change. At the beginning it was her tardiness, her difficulty in getting to the bank on time, as she had invariably done since she was hired. She seemed indolent, did not want to get up, claimed that she had nothing to wear—I'm always wearing the same thing, and they all look at me, mocking me under my very nose. It took an enormous effort of will to make herself presentable, have breakfast, and be ready by seven thirty. My daughter was losing her self-respect, letting herself be consumed by apathy without doing anything to overcome it. It alarmed me to see her eat so little. She barely touched her favorite dishes and would twist her face in disgust and rise from the table without a word. She had grown thin and pale, and reminded me of a consumptive cat; clothes began to hang on her. "Let's go to the doctor," I suggested one day, and she looked at me as if I were mad.

"It's my job, Mami. I'm under too much pressure at the bank."

I didn't know whether to believe her and leave her alone—I know what it is like to work and go to school at the same time—or if I should force her into a consultation as soon as possible. Unfortunately, I have never been the overprotective-mother type, and I left Eva to her downhill slide, surprised at her meager achievements at school and work, tormented by her thinness and negligence.

"I'm going to withdraw from school this semester, Mami."

The words hit me like a blow. I couldn't allow Eva to abandon her studies without trying to stop her. I made an effort to convince her that she should stay in school until she completed her degree, pointing out how important it would be to her job at the bank. Eva looked at me sadly, not because of the dress I was scrubbing in silence—we had by then grown used to this kind of situation, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world—but because of my tenacity in feeding a dream that seemed no longer to make sense for her.

I waged my final battle on my daughter's behalf with my foot on the sewing-machine pedal, making her new dresses to cheer her up and restore her self-confidence. Since Danilo had temporarily abandoned our home without explanation—he had gone back to his woman—Eva moved into my room. We brought her new clothes there, and my stubborn and incurable naiveté made me believe that things would be different from that day on. I myself was worn out and looked older than I should, my grey hair disheveled, like that of someone who doesn't even have the time to brush.

The illusion did not last long. The stains continued to appear on Eva's clothes, and she began to give in to crying fits. She would scream so loud that I had to give her sedatives to calm her down. She would refuse to receive her suitor when he came in the evenings, and I would have to excuse her with unswallowable apologies. The boy came less and less frequently; occasionally he would phone to ask if he could visit, but he finally got tired, and we haven't heard a word from him since. Eva's boss, on the other hand, seemed more than ever attentive to her; he sent flowers and called with any excuse, growing concerned if she was late or failed to show up at work, and continuing to drive her home when she worked nights. I trusted in him to help justify her frequent absences from the office.

The night before last I went to bed early, exhausted from so much turmoil in the house. Eva took advantage of this and returned to her room without my noticing it. When I woke up, it surprised me to find the bed on which she had slept made, and I thought she would be in the bathroom. When I didn't find her, I started looking for her throughout the house. She was in her bedroom, lying down, trembling, feverish, refusing to tell me what the matter was. Each time I asked her if anything hurt, she would wrinkle her face, taking refuge in her pillow. It was not that she didn't want to get up but that she was too weak to do so. I spoke of calling the family doctor and even began to dial the number. But Eva grabbed my hand and between screams begged me not to torture her so. When she sat up, I saw the stains, detestable red stains on the sheet and on my daughter's nightgown. I understood that it was not a fantasy: my eyes and nose could not deceive me. I shuddered, overcome by an inner malaise that surpassed that of my daughter. I felt betrayed, and wished myself dead. At that moment, when I saw the blood on the white sheets and on Eva's white nightgown, I understood many things I would rather have gone to my grave before witnessing—I would rather have died than see the horror before my eyes. Without a word to her, without reproach, driven by the jolt, I went to the bathroom in search of other proofs, of other traces, so not even a shadow of a doubt would remain. Eva sobbed under the pillow, like a defenseless child, afraid perhaps of what I would do. But she is, after all, my daughter, and I thought that I had no option but to continue to wipe out stains as I had always done, in the complicity of silence.

I helped my daughter get up and change her underwear and nightgown. I put clean sheets on the bed, washed the dirty ones and then, with all the serenity in the world, told her we would go to the doctor, even if I had to tie her up to take her. She realized I meant it.

The doctor confirmed the loss and gave us a certificate so Eva could stay home from work for a few days. I had never felt as forsaken and absurd, wanting to cry, to scream with all my might, but I checked myself. I didn't know what to tell the doctor, nor could I imagine what he could be thinking, he, who has known me for so many years. Before leaving his office he looked at me compassionately, trying to offer comfort, telling me not to worry, take good care of her and she will be fine soon. Eva remained silent, as if she were not concerned in the matter, stupefied. She knew that she had pitched all our efforts overboard, but I was sure she couldn't feel more miserable than I. The women in the waiting room stared at us. We must have looked like two witches, one old and grey, without a desire to live; the other one young, thin, pale, with her entrails destroyed, with her life before her, ruined in advance.

The first bunch of roses from Eva's boss arrived today. At first I considered throwing them in the trash, but thought better about it, deciding it wouldn't help the situation. So I placed them in a pretty vase on a small round table in Eva's bedroom—to which she has returned without a word—to brighten the atmosphere. Danilo returned when he heard his daughter was sick. He's acting like a beaten-up puppy, speaking softly, apologizing for any little thing. I still haven't deigned look at him, but it is all a matter of time, because he too has a right to live here, after all, and his foibles are no worse than ours.

Since the day before yesterday I have lost all interest in life. I feel a sort of undefinable void. It is as if something has broken within me; I'm walking around like a dimwit, doing things mechanically, without will. I had quite forgotten about myself, except this morning, when I opened my closet, searching for a new dress I had finished for Eva just a few days ago—meant as a surprise now rendered meaningless—I discovered a red stain, a heinous stain on the bodice, which convinced me that Eva has always been right, from the very beginning. Yes, I had been blind, but now I can see the stain, a stain as real and palpable as life itself.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert