



Temptations

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TEMPTATIONS

by José Alcántara Almánzar

The day she moved into a top-floor apartment in our building my serene days as a well-preserved man of forty-something came to an end. I lead a relatively cozy existence, my troubles and vexations being no worse than those of others in my class. I have a stable job, and my work, by force of habit, has turned into a routine that hardly ever varies, whose details I have mastered to perfection. I satiate my humble craving for prosperity in the warmth of a home where Mónica awaits me every afternoon—Mónica, whom I no longer know if I love, to whom I may just feel beholden for some of my sense of security, despite the fact that she has never given me a child, which is what I most desire in the world. I have always wanted a child to fill the house with joy, a child to play and agitate the tedious silence that oppresses us so, to greet me with an innocent smile and embrace me as he calls me Papá.

On the day she arrived, I was installing some light bulbs in the parking-lot fixture, which had been broken by hoodlums during our last carnival. Some months ago the tenants had appointed me superintendent, a sort of honorary manager entrusted with solving communal problems and preventing disasters. Since then, in my spare time, I assume tasks no one else wants, although they all agree on their vital importance to the basic functioning of the beehive we inhabit.

As the truckers unloaded the newcomer's belongings, she stood before me, a good dose of coquettishness and curiosity in her countenance. She greeted me and, before I had time to react, hurried away down the palm-flanked corridor, followed by four men carrying a heavy piece of furniture. After advancing a bit, as if she had suddenly recalled something she had forgotten, she stopped, turned halfway around, and gave me a glimpse of a face pulsating with slyness. That marked the beginning of our singular relationship. One fine day, as if by chance, a stranger and I were brought together and nothing was ever the same again. Without warning, some inward mechanism of mine had altered. A simple encounter in the building's parking lot marked the beginning of a transformation unleashed almost imperceptibly, at first treading softly over a wreath of interlaced bits of everydayness, over unavoidable chores and tiring lulls, and later, vertiginously, on sunny days or under a rain that drenched the balconies in the cruelest summer of which I have any memory.

I went up to my apartment, not sparing much thought for what occurred in the parking lot. Nevertheless, I carried the image of the new tenant deep within me, the trace of her perfume boring down into my nose, the jingle of her voice reverberating in my ears. If Mónica—who is very intuitive—had looked at my face when I arrived, dripping sweat and fatigue, she would have guessed what ruminated in my mind; but

she was busy in the kitchen, nurturing a *pastelón* of ripe plantains, my weakness. I went into the bathroom and tried to shower to placate my anxiety and forget the female who had just perturbed my unenviable superintendent's routine. I ascertained immediately, not without frustration and rage, that the shower was dry. Water is *rara avis* on the fourth floor, which is where my wife and I live. So I had to content myself with a few cupfuls of a turbid liquid which I ladled from a pan placed at the end of the tub.

During dinner, Mónica, unusually talkative, chatted about one of the many national disgraces to which we have grown accustomed as if they were some sort of public burlesque, and savored with particular pleasure the dessert of gossip circulating from lip to lip among the building's tenants. Realizing I was pensive and absent, she stopped talking and stared at me, scrutinizingly, trying to guess what was happening to me. The silence of our home—it is fair to say—has grown almost solemn, quasi-sepulchral, seldom breached by events, be it conjugal squabbles, sorrows, or tiny joys. Mónica and I, after so many years together, have reached that nirvana of peaceful cohabitation where nothing interesting ever happens, except for calamities reaching us from the outside, threatening our exemplary harmony.

My perdition began hopelessly, unavoidably, although I was perfectly conscious of the dangers lurking around me, the very same day Carla, the new neighbor, arrived in the building, loaded with sumptuous, stridently-colored furniture, with cages of fidgety whistling birds and countless pots of plants and flowers. I tried to follow her daily routine step by step. At the beginning I did nothing but ascertain what she did from dawn to dusk. I wanted to approach her, to tell her what I desired, sway her, but I had no valid pretext or justification that didn't immediately appear ludicrous and inadequate. Carla walked past me, swaddling me in a dazzling smile that utterly unsettled me, making me perspire and pant noisily, leaving me dazed on a hallway or stunned halfway up a staircase, incapable of uttering a word, although every so often I mustered the fortitude to say "so long," waving in the air a hand she would not even see because she was already hurrying up the stairs to lock herself in her apartment till morning.

In my dreams, or in my placid Sunday-afternoon siestas, Carla and I conversed as if we had known each other all our lives. She told jokes, straightened my shirt collar, uncoiled my curly hair and said goodbye, planting an unexpected kiss on my mouth. I would then clutch her until I hurt her, telling her I adored her, that I was dying for her, that I was ready for anything if only she would let me come into her apartment, listen to me, unconditionally accept what I offered. She swooned in my arms, offering no resistance to the pressure of my arms encircling her like two enervating tentacles, to the frenzied kisses suffocating her, leaving her unable to breathe. In the delirium of my illusion, Carla would suddenly begin to vanish, vaporizing in my arms, fading into a chimera of smoke. When I opened my eyes, I would find Mónica watching me with a penetrating gaze that understood everything, as if she could read what went through my mind in those moments following the dream. It was tantamount to saying, wordlessly, that there is nothing worse than a forty-something man gone astray.

Each dream transgressed a limit, overflowing the bounds set by reason and common sense. Carla, who at the beginning had greeted me at her apartment with the door ajar—although not without cordial demonstrations of interest—would later let me in with the excuses of my helping her move a lamp or fix a washer in a leaky faucet. When I finished my work, she would ask me to sit on the sofa, turn on a recording of instrumental music, and talk to me about her job and interests. That’s how I learned that she loved literature and devoted her leisure time to reading poems by her favorite author. She would pick up the clothbound volume she had left on the coffee table and read verses I remembered having memorized in high school:

My chest is big enough for your heart
 My wings will be sufficient for your freedom
 My lips will bring forth to heaven
 That which lays dormant in your soul.

Followed by another stanza chosen at random and then another and another. Between stanza and stanza night would overtake us. We would move to the balcony where, sitting very close together, we proposed to enjoy the avenue below, the Caribbean Sea in its eternal ebb and flow, the cars driving past the sea wall against the dying red glow of the early evening.

But my real life was very different from these escapades of my imagination. As I reached the paroxysm of my delirium for Carla and my need for her became unbearable, the silence grew between Mónica and me. We communicated through monosyllables, or paid no attention to what we told each other laconically, or went mute. Long and ominous silences dug a grave between us in which to bury what remained of that love that had bound us for so many years. Mónica, I believed, was perfectly aware of my transfiguration. I could read it in the intense radiance of her brown eyes, in the security of her measured and melodious voice, the fleeting rancor in her lips when she whispered reproaches in our moments of love. For the most part Mónica kept a prudent silence, with the composure that has always characterized her, tender when flushed with transitory confidence, or distant when struck by a growing conviction that wounded her to tears.

One day I presented myself at Carla’s apartment with a book and a bouquet of flowers and didn’t know what to say when she opened the door. At last, after a few seconds that seemed never-ending, Carla said—with a smile somewhere between compassion and perversity—that she could not accept my gift nor was she accustomed to embarking on relationships with married men. I offered her the flowers and the book of poems I had purchased that very afternoon, and she left me there, with my arms extended, whispering in my ear without a pinch of indignation:

—*You reminded me of the world in your gesture of submission . . .*

—*I am the despairing one, a word without an echo, the one who lost everything, the one who once had everything*—I managed to defend myself with a thread of a voice.

Past the door I saw a mustached fellow puffing up his cravatted chest, with a carnation in his buttonhole and a silk handkerchief in his jacket pocket, sitting on the living-room sofa, waiting patiently for Carla. I lacked words to describe the slashing

effects the scene produced in me. I was on the verge of vomiting, disappointed at the sight of this man at whom I almost hurled the book and the flowers, but I was afraid of ruining everything. Carla closed the door with extreme delicacy, so as not to deepen my wound, and I stood there, like a disoriented adolescent, wanting to knock again, dying to smash the door down, kick out the ornamented vermin lounging on the couch, and remain long hours in Carla's apartment. The complete opposite occurred. I returned home with uncertain steps, dragging the bouquet of mistreated flowers and the book under my arms, while I felt these heartless verses piercing my breast:

*Oh, love is a voyage with water and stars,
With drowned air and sudden tempests of flour:
Love is a battle of lightnings
And two bodies defeated by a single honey.*

When I returned, Mónica was waiting for me in that sort of fury that knows how to contain impulses long enough to await the optimal moment for the fatal blow.

She took the flowers from me and threw them in the kitchen garbage bin with unaccustomed energy. I kept the book because it was all that was left of an attempt at amorous conquest which, its failure notwithstanding, had not been devoid of emotion.

From that evening on I was tormented by the most absurd obstinacy. The mere thought of Carla unsettled me, and a shiver would run through my body; my flesh, jolted by the most atrocious convulsions, escaped my control. Carla, on the other hand, was a fleeting fish, a delicate and nervous gazelle who kept me on tenterhooks, amid gentle rejections, smiles, glances meant to lull me and give rise to new expectations.

"You resemble no one since I love you," I would tell her each time I saw her, putting aside all rancor, trying to gain her confidence.

Perhaps because I don't possess her, I love her still; but it is too late, I have lost all hope. In those days, however, I was incapable of understanding what I have come to absorb by dint of humiliations and disillusionment since. During that unbridled ride my obsession had grown stronger the more she spurned my advances with a firm amiability that knew how to prevail on every occasion, proposing sanity where there was only overflowing passion, offering friendship to one who yearned for the delights of her body.

Shortly afterwards, events revealed to me the futility of my attempts. Carla took pains to kindle my passions with a seductive conduct she knew how to dole out very carefully, raising barriers when she sensed the impending repercussions of what she had provoked. She tempted me without cease, she knew how to lay come-hither traps at every turn, smiling at me with that succulent mouth for which I would have given my life.

With the pretext of Mónica's birthday, and breaking our tradition of intimate celebrations, I organized a party to which I invited several neighbors. In the throes of an alarmingly impudent euphoria, capable no longer of assessing the degree of folly that bringing Carla to our house entailed, I invited her also. To my surprise, Mónica

raised no objections and Carla came, although from the very moment of her arrival she did her best to stay away from me. She drank little, and it was obvious that she was making an effort to avoid me.

As I consumed drink after drink, not allowing myself time to absorb the liquor pouring down my gullet in abundant quantities, Carla and Mónica chatted like old friends on the terrace. My wife behaved with dignity. Frankly, I did not expect less from her, although I knew she was torn; prudence helped her attend to our guests, lavish smiles all around, affect a gaiety that was poisoned by jealousy. Towards the end, when the only ones remaining were Carla and the neighbors from the second floor, the former announced her intention to retire. I had accompanied all the other guests to their doors. Carla was not going to be the exception. She and Mónica said goodbye with a conventional kiss and I hastened to open the door. I insisted on walking her to her apartment despite her cordial refusal. When we reached her apartment and she proceeded to discharge me with a simple "good night," I embraced her with untamed tenderness, crying "I adore you" with the anxiety of a voyager fated never to return. Carla didn't reject me categorically. "It cannot be," she repeated, as she allowed my arms to encircle her, my impatient lips to kiss her recoiling face. When she was able to react, she hurled at me something worse than a frosty warning:

"It is the time for parting, the bitter and cold hour that the night wills to its purpose."

I didn't want to let her go. I remained there, cleaving to that tempting body I thought of as mine without its being so, the body of someone who yielded more out of compassion than interest. Without saying goodbye I slowly descended to the fourth floor, desolate and ill-at-ease, while I listened to Carla's door closing behind me. Mónica was not awake when I got back. How much time had elapsed since I had left to walk Carla to her apartment? My wife had turned off all the lights and had gone to bed before my return. Once again silence denied us the possibility of a dialogue, closing the path to understanding or discord.

The last time I saw Carla, I suffered one of the most painful humiliations of my life. After the get-together to celebrate Mónica's birthday, my senses became altered and Carla's image ruled my mind. One evening of scorching heat, I could contain myself no longer and, taking advantage of Mónica's absence (she had gone to Santiago to visit her parents), I went to Carla's apartment. I rang the bell several times and, after a pause that seemed endless to me, she appeared. She opened the door just a tad. There was a visitor seated on the sofa. This time it was an athletic mulatto, a very different type from the conceited chap of the time before. I asked Carla to let me in. She resisted my entreaties and suggested waiting for some better opportunity. I lost control of my voice, I screamed, I tried to push the door open. The guy got up from the sofa and came to confront me. I felt a rush of heat go through my body and threw the first punch. Suddenly we found ourselves entangled in a fight, oblivious to Carla's pleas.

We climbed to the roof, throwing furious punches at each other. The mulatto hit hard, drawing blood with every blow. My disadvantage was obvious, but I continued to struggle, sustained by pride before the woman I coveted. A *coup de grace* brought me down. I wanted to get up but couldn't. Carla and her friend—I ignore exactly when—must have run away in fear when they saw me knocked out and bleeding. I think I was unconscious for a few minutes. I had attempted several times to get up

only to collapse on the warm pavement of the roof. It started to rain, and the first drops fell over my beaten-up and bruised body like a blessing. The rain quickly became a torrent, but I remained there, lying like a rotten log, inert, in a putrid puddle.

Several hours went by before I could get up and go down to my apartment. My eyes were swollen and my head ached. I threw myself on the bed without taking my clothes off and fell asleep. At dawn I felt the first symptoms of pneumonia. Fever devoured me: I knew it because of the shivering and the thirst. I tried to call Carla on the phone, but I was so weak that I could not reach the phone or dial the numbers. I wept, I wept from rage and impotence in those hours in which my solitude became absolute and tearing. It is the last thing I remember before entering a phase of real delirium.

Mónica must have found me gravely ill when she returned from Santiago and took me immediately to the clinic, where I remained for a week. Now a great portion of my days is spent on the balcony, under the shelter of the shadows projected by the climbing vines. Mónica has kept a silence that wounds me. It is her best punishment and worst revenge. She watches me watching Carla's terrace, but the apartment has remained closed since the evening of the fight.

I will soon return to my former routine, to my job and my accustomed duties in the building. Carla's absence—she has perhaps moved away without leaving an address—has opened a gap of emptiness within me, a well filled with temptations. I have nothing left but memories and the verses of an unforgettable book where I have found a formula to alleviate my despair, a driftlog to keep me afloat after the shipwreck. The formula is terrifyingly simple and goes like this:

Anxiety that sliced my breast with a knife blow,
it's time to follow another path, where she no longer smiles.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert