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EYES OF SEA AND SKY

By Olga Nolla

This story begins in a town in the Old World. If we dust our map of Spain and lay it out flat on our memory, pressing with our hands the most stubborn folds, we will see that Almería is located on the southern edge of the peninsula; on one side soars the Sierra Nevada, and on the other, passing Cabo de Gata, the very long coast of the Spanish Levant. The towns in Almería are white, like those of Tunisia, and I draw a white town with two or three streets where women dress in black and live cloistered in their houses. The sky is intensely blue and the air is scented; maybe it is the aroma of the oleanders which overflow the walled gardens, grateful for the painstaking attention their caretakers lavish on them; maybe it is the perfume of the sprigs of wild grass of Andalucía. The inhabitants of the small town will make a living from agriculture, probably from the cultivation of olives and cereals, and life will go by without serious mishaps, each day identical to the next. In this town time is an illusion; people are born, grow old and die without altering one bit the natural order of things: baptisms are always held at three in the afternoon and weddings are celebrated in June. Knowledge of other worlds is vague and imprecise: once in a while a young man will do his military service, and upon his return will talk about the big cities, the subterranean trains and the war ships in the port of Cartagena. But the town listens to him as they listen to the wind blow in winter and with time the young man grows old and dies and his story is told by old men sitting in the sun in front of their houses in the long summer afternoons.

This is the town where José Antonio Fernández is born and where he grows up going out with his father to till the soil as the sun rises, and returning to town with his father and brothers when the sun returns to the kingdom of shadows. When he turns twenty, he marries a woman with almond-shaped eyes and very black and abundant hair because she is beautiful, but against the will of his parents and relatives since she does not add arable lands to the family's patrimony. She is an orphan since childhood and has been raised by a charitable aunt who will die soon. Eleven months later and already pregnant—let's call her Maricarmen—José Antonio leaves her in the care of his mother—we will call her The Mother, and embarks on the adventure that boils in his blood: emigrating to America. He has heard tales of riches without end. A century ago there were *indianos* in the region; they came back rich and bought the best lands. They returned to their towns to die in the midst of admiration and envy. To be envied could very well be a life's goal: maybe José Antonio considered that model preferable to other alternatives. In any case, his departure did not constitute a challenge to the collective memory and the afternoon he boarded the train destined for Cádiz there began a wait with a centuries-old tradition rooted in the hard reality of the *Reconquista*.

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The Mother locked herself in her house to await her son's return and locked in her daughter-in-law: close the doors, close the windows! She told her: Now to wait!: One woman to a man, and that's it! Then, instead of crying, she covered the whitewashed walls with photos of the missing one: tall and strong, with blue eyes and browned skin, abundant brown hair, powerful profile. To drive away forgetfulness, she said, because it enters first through the eyes, like sin.

When he said goodbye, Jose Antonio felt a deep, opaque pain that began behind his ribs and climbed to his throat, later to install itself in the most remote part of his viscera. But the excitement tickled his stomach and hands, and as he passed the white towns sprinkled on the hills and valleys planted with olive groves and vineyards, the fresh and clean air penetrated his inner recesses, freeing the spirit. If he had known that he was seeing them for the last time, remorse would have crushed him. The clamor of the battle, the splendor of the hooves glistening on the field, would not have been enough to tempt him. But he did not know it, as Roland didn't know that he would die sighing for Doña Alda and sweet France and as Ruy Díaz didn't know that dishonor awaited his daughters. The town disappears in the distance white in his memory as he moves across the translucent landscape of Alora-the-Well-Fenced and the lyrical abyss of Ronda.

He could have considered going to the Caribbean, since there was work for Spanish workers in Cuba; Galicians went there to cut sugar cane. But he didn't have a permit, nor a passport, neither did he have relatives in Puerto Rico or Venezuela. Then he decided to gamble with his fate, armed with the courage of his innocence and his splendid youth, and boarded a freight ship as a stowaway. The cooks help him. They hide him behind drums of olives and boxes of chorizos. They bring him food and sometimes even wine. He doesn't know where he is going nor does he ask, and on several occasions will think of his white town and his bed so clean and of the beautiful Maricarmen opening her legs to him. The cooks grow fond of the youth and fooling the vigilance at the port take advantage of the early morning silence to smuggle him out. José Antonio is grateful, kisses their hands, cries. Hispanic brotherhood is their shield against the world, and he does not know it yet but he has arrived in New York. Then they take him to a place full of illegal Spanish immigrants and he embarks on his true adventure.

It is not difficult to trace those first years in New York. He is Andalucian, young, full of grace like the Hail Mary, those who saw him could never forget him. He hustled. He sang on the flamenco *tablaos*. He washed dishes and clothes and found women to help him. One look from those eyes made of sea and sky and they were instantly vanquished. Spanish, Irish, Jewish, and Italian women fed him, clothed him, found him work and taught him English. Then he met a widow with a face that sparkled like that of a saint: Good Heavens! He couldn't help it, he fell conquered at her feet. She was from Puerto Rico and five years older than him. She had five children and a contagious happiness in her voice and in all her movements. She made love laughing and clapping and adored her children. She made decisions unhesitatingly and worked untiringly. And to top it off, she cooked rice like an angel from paradise, with peppers and coriander and other miraculous herbs she obtained from her countrymen. José Antonio the Andalucian was captivated for life by that Puerto Rican

flower. He tells her he has a wife back in his white town and a son with his name and his eyes to whom he sends money. The Mother is the one who writes: Maricarmen doesn't know how. They await him; he will return: It is my duty, my love, he tells his new love: when I save enough money I will return. He kisses her. They kiss for a long time. She undresses him and kisses him . . . Meanwhile, he remains to live with you, Puerto Rican flower, enjoy today: a whole lifetime concentrated in a day of love.

In his town they still await him. The Mother is now a widow. She devotes her life to caring for the dead and waiting for the missing one; taking care of Maricarmen and her grandson: she's raising him herself, every day she shows him his father's photos on the wall. He is five years old and just like you, my darling, my love, I remember you curled up on my lap, you had nightmares and couldn't sleep; I rocked you: Oh The Mother Oh. *The moon is a small well, flowers are not worth a thing, what matters are your arms when they embrace me at night.* Oh, Lorca.

And in the meantime you, Puerto Rican flower, gift from life, your belly grows, you give birth, a son like the father: with blue eyes and perfect health, full of grace and spirit; lively like no other. His name is José Antonio; the father insists, like him, just like his brother in Spain whom he has never seen, he does not want to look at his photos, now he has a son to take care of in America, he will work for him, so that he will study and be a man worthy of the name. All the tradition of love for his children, of male pride for his fruit and creation—another strong and healthy male to perpetuate the lineage—comes to the surface: José Antonio Fernández, the third, illegitimate child, grows adored by his parents. José Antonio Fernández, the second, legitimate heir of his house and his lineage, the Spaniard stranded in the whitest town I find in the images stored in memory, grows towards remembrance.

At this point in the story, a subtle hinge, a turn, unpredictable because it's involuntary: there's a Civil War in the Mother Country, a cruel spectacle where vigorous hordes of very Christian knights wield rifles and swords against the specter of social change, against the irreducible disorder of freedom. In that white town lost in the hills and valleys of Andalucía life follows its course, the very best of the nation dies, sacrificed to the altar of blurred and imprecise gods, but the floor is kept swept and one goes out to the fields to reap the wheat, one goes to church. One fine day some soldiers arrive and install a military post. Another fine day they leave. Except that someone leaves with them: she does not want to go, but she cannot hear his voice, it's as if she had drunk a bottle of anisette and fallen asleep on a bedspread of roses, her chest is rotten from waiting. Maricarmen the chaste wife elopes with a soldier. He was probably one of the troops freshly-arrived from Ceuta: let's call him The Soldier. Oh what wail, what fire, climbs to her head! Oh what madness! I don't want to: *with you neither bed nor dinner matter, and there is not a minute of the day when I don't want you near me:* but you sweep me away and I go, and you tell me to go back and I follow you through the air like a blade of grass. She is consumed like fire on fire. Maricarmen and The Soldier flee inflamed, burning with so much loneliness accumulated while waiting. Maricarmen follows the troops through the towns, they cross the Sierra to Granada. There she will witness the most horrendous crimes; beatings and executions embitter the sweetness of love, she lives through terrible days where the proximity of death feeds the passion that devours the lovers: when he enters her she hears again

the cries of the fallen; he fires his rifle automatically, then he hides away to cry. He cries in Maricarmen's arms; she always opens her body for him, thankful for his tears and his cowardice. It is a love affair at the edge of the abyss: difficult times. Maricarmen clings to The Soldier's love but the specter of her guilt haunts her, she has violated the sacred vows of marriage, she is a dishonored woman and feels that everyone points at her and curses her even though in Granada she pretends to be The Soldier's wife; she launders his uniform and shines his boots, and cares for him. In the afternoons she walks through the city and climbs the red walls of the Sultans' palaces and strolls through the gardens and she even feels glad that José Antonio emigrated.

About three years will go by. Then The Soldier dies in the battle of Barcelona. Maricarmen has followed him there ironing clothes to earn their bread, risking her life on the roads heading north, amidst the bombs and the trucks loaded with the wounded. The Soldier dies and Maricarmen weeps and despairs: because you are dead forever, like all the dead on Earth, like all the dead forgotten like piles of lifeless dogs! She could have lost herself in the slums of Barcelona or in a brothel, turning her back forever on her former life but for the memory of her son, and the hunger and misery of daily survival infuse her with unbelievable courage and she sets out on her way to the southern sun. She arrived at the whitest town I find in the archives of my memory around two o'clock in the morning and she walked to The Mother's house: the white-washed walls, the small garden with the oleanders and the roses: nothing has changed. She has changed: the ravages of love and war are evident on her face and her body. Drowned in tears she cowers in front of the door to wait: humble like a dog: without honor or money: in the most abject poverty: devastated by her memories. The Mother hears the sobs behind the door and thinks, who knows, of an animal or an orphaned boy, of a wounded fugitive: she doesn't expect Maricarmen, she has cursed her to the winds night after night, she has buried her name in a grave with the rest of the war-dead, under the earth, under layers and layers of hard earth and stones over her name, shame has descended for ever on her house and lineage. The Mother opens the door: she finds Maricarmen curled into a ball, the cold piercing her bones, shivering from hunger and fear. The Mother is caught unawares: rage and pride seize her will. She wants to strike her, she wants to cut her face with the razor hanging from her belt. She insults her: Maricarmen begs her: she wants to see her son: she begs, for pity's sake, a piece of bread, to be able to sleep a little. And The Mother doesn't understand why she can't hate her and gives her bread. The son looks at her with hostility, he lets himself be embraced: she covers his head with tender kisses, he has grown, he is now a handsome youth, tall and strong like the father and oh! he also has eyes of sea and sky, the Mediterranean Sea captured in his eyes. He looks at her, embraces her with pity, with compassion, but doesn't forgive her. The Mother doesn't forgive her either. They allow her to remain to sweep and clean; to sew, to cry for the rest of her days by the hearth: she must expiate her guilt, every day is a stone thrown against the flaccid flesh of the adulterous woman.

In America, José Antonio the First suffers the humiliation of dishonor: he feels the bitter poison of rancor in each red drop of his Andalucian blood. He also feels a relief he doesn't name, that he doesn't, couldn't, accept; but the Puerto Rican flower does know and thanks life and the war and the selfishness of men: he will no longer be able

to return to the white town, he no longer wants to, he can't return since the shame is too much to endure. He will remain in America forever. But he does not write this to The Mother, who dies waiting for him. After that there are no more letters. José Antonio the second knows that he has a father he adores and because of him he does not forgive Maricarmen although he takes care of her, and keeps her in his house; when he marries Remedios, with her almond-shaped eyes and very black hair, he will entrust her to Maricarmen.

Here it is necessary to pause a moment to catch one's breath: to draw a glass, of wine, a palm tree, maybe a beach: a walk on the beach with guitar-music in the background: a musical interlude: in Puerto Rico: and we see the Puerto Rican flower surrounded by her sons and walking on the wet sand, her sweet happy feet treading upon the soft surface. I drink my wine while I hear the crystal bells of children's laughter: an unpublished photograph: a publicity poster: instead of the bald old man with the umbrella, the Puerto Rican flower with her children. In the memory of José Antonio Fernández, the Third, time is a bell: it tolls and re-tolls atop a belfry. With all that music he has embroidered the bouquet of flowers that he hands me, a knee on the ground: Knight of the sea he seems, Amadís of shining armor polished by his squires. I can't go on: I draw a house atop a solitary mountain: there I will sleep, I think. But he seeks me out, he insists that I go ahead and inquire and reveal to him what happened. He tells me that he was well loved; his mother, the Puerto Rican flower, was very loving. José Antonio the Third was also raised with great love by his father: he talked to him about Spain and about his town: he took him to the beach and to baseball games: responsible fatherhood: catholic education: another poster.

Then you will study at the University and will graduate with honors and will get a job at the United Nations and travel throughout the world. You will go to Spain and will learn that you have a brother in the whitest town in Andalucía and you will not dare seek him out for the sake of the respect you owe your father; you will go to the town and will wander aimlessly through the deserted streets, the whitewashed walls will pain you and you will feel nostalgia for the aroma of the oleanders and the roses. You will return to the town several times in the course of the years: you don't reveal your name; the suspicious, surprised eyes of the old men seated in front of their houses in the long summer afternoons follow you with wonder. They talk to you, they point at you: it's the American. Then you take the train back to Granada or Málaga without asking any questions, more alone than the stones. At a town close to the end of the journey you dare ask for José Antonio Fernández without revealing your name, you assume a false name, you remain silent and listen: he is a truck driver and is married and has male children, three sons, like colts. The innocent question makes immediate news: it reaches the other town: they suspect, they inform José Antonio the Second, who believes, thrilled, that maybe it is the father coming back, asking for his son.

José Antonio the First does not know about your travels to white towns. After discussions and deliberations, speeches and considerations, they have decided to move to Puerto Rico to warm the old bones because she wants to return to her native land. The Puerto Rican flower wants to suffocate at the market square in Río Piedras and eat mangoes on the highway between Añasco and Mayagüez: the years didn't

even scratch the crystal of her laughter, the tone of her happiness: José Antonio Fernández the First, the day of his death at the age of seventy, still loved her like a madman. He died in her arms without suffering, blissful and blessed by the great love he felt. I don't exaggerate: truly I don't exaggerate: if you tell me I write it down: what else? You tell me: now we must write about the voyage: you will go to Spain to meet him, of course, and first you will have written informing him of the death, letting him know that our father has died in a condoling and very formal letter: you receive a surprised, euphoric reply: he thanks you and he sends his love, your brother José Antonio. Then you will write wishing to meet him, free at last from your respect to the deceased, you know it: what united the brothers also separated them.

And you will take the train from Madrid to Granada like Jason embarking on his voyage, like Teseus: the anxiety is dark, oh dark night of the soul, "dark night of the Niño Avilés." And you arrive, that beautiful afternoon, at the station of the last moorish kingdom in Europe and when you get off the train you know it immediately: it's your eyes, the same build with the same strong arms and wide chest, your mirror, your loneliness: some arms embrace you, a woman's arms, she kisses you tenderly, she looks at you: it's Remedios. She has recognized you without a photo, it's only natural. He looks at you from ten meters apart, three, two, he embraces you; and you separate and look at each other embarrassed by emotion. Then they take you to their house of white-washed walls, the three of you in the truck head for the town and for several weeks you must tell him about his father, it's your duty. José Antonio the Second listens to you absorbed and shows you the photos of his father at twenty: you look at each other in recognition: you are identical. One day he takes him to meet Maricarmen: old and absent-minded, stooped by pain, he has never forgiven her: she swears loyalty to the memory of his father: she swears she would have killed him—The Soldier—she swears, if he had not died. As if it had been yesterday. Maricarmen does not listen: neither does she recognize: she has forgotten everything please, it's hopeless, she didn't even have the comfort of her son's forgiveness. It doesn't matter anymore: time is an illusion and does not exist: the sky exists and the earth is there: it gives birth, it nourishes.

He will invite him to come to Puerto Rico: to see the tomb of our father in the old cemetery in San Juan, facing the sea, next to the Castle of El Morro. And he will come next year with Remedios. They stay with his mother: the Puerto Rican flower looks after them, generous and motherly: she stuffs them with pasteles and rice with gandures. José Antonio the Second is fascinated, he lives, hypnotized, by the Puerto Rican flower. He finds it difficult to return to the white town in the environs of Almería: how big the world is! how beautiful Puerto Rico! Remedios talks and talks about it and never stops talking. José Antonio returns to his truck, returns to transporting wine and olives to the port of Cádiz, to Seville, and surrenders to the reverie of that other world on the other side of the sea: . . . *and even on this Island I saw cloths of cotton woven like mantillas, and the natives are verie lyvely and the women wear in front of their bodyes a thyng of cotton that barelie covers their nature: It is the Island verie green and flat and verie fertyle, and I do not cast doubte on the fact that all yeer they plant and gather corne, and other thynges like that: and I saw manye trees, verie different from ours, of them manye that had branches in manye shapes, all standing, and one little branch is one way*

and the other another; and so different in forme, that it is the greatest marvel in the World how much dyversitye ther is from one to the other . . . His enchantment continues to increase, day after day in the truck, one road after the other, the days threaded like transparent and impossible glass beads. And the year after, when José Antonio the Third visits them, reunited at last with his family, surrounded by the affection of the nephews, nieces and relatives, collective idol of the town with the option to buy the best lands: he buys them so his brother can administer them: and the brother consents and feels asphyxiated by the impregnable walls of remembrance since he already has his eye, his soul, on something else. One year and then another go by and he doesn't dare ask, but one day he does dare, and he dumps it on your lap: he wants to emigrate to America, find me work in Puerto Rico, you will sign my official papers.

And here the story stops. I write down the final period and look at you, my love, and you also look at me with your eyes of sea and sky: I cannot continue: you have remained entranced, without the voice I have invented for you. José Antonio looks at me with his eyes like pieces of Andalucian sky and he kills me with his deep mouth and we caress each other softly, slowly, the rhythm of his body and my body turned into one long single wait; and then, we make love again, seeking each other in the most remote corners, pursuing even the slightest hint of a clue to ourselves in the humid basements and the loftiest towers, breathing every minute from his skin and my skin, when we see a shadow move across the window, we saw it streak by like the wind: the blinds open and close blinking as it passes and then I must ask you to start again, we must tell the story again, we must invent it again because we have forgotten some fact, some path, it's something you haven't mentioned, I know, and that something cannot remain obscure, and because of that we will tell it again, you will tell it to me again, José Antonio, I will create you again until I truly find you, until the words are able to penetrate the mystery.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert