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Author(s): Pedro Peix and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

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THE GHOST OF EL CONDE STREET

by Pedro Peix

One Monday afternoon, they saw a man in armor on El Conde Street, sword in hand, his visor lowered, dragging a heavy chest. And then they heard him climb up the stairs of a tall building and lock himself in his room with a resounding slam of the door.

That night, they espied him roaming Las Damas Street, a wedding gown under his arm, knocking on doors, shattering glass panes, demolishing walls with his jousting mace, digging up patios and foundations, tearing cornices and balconies down stone by stone, searching for the only woman who had ever loved him, the one who had waited 500 years to marry him.

Like a sleepwalker, they saw him again at dawn prowling the courtyard of the Fortaleza, climbing the Tower and rummaging each cell with a quivering candle in one hand and a rusty sword in the other, stabbing the night.

On Tuesday, the morning well on its way, almost everyone saw him stalk across the Park to hurl abuse at the statue of Admiral Cristóbal Colón, and then they heard him muttering an unnamable blasphemy as he stared at the admiral's mausoleum in the Cathedral.

He traversed the streets in great strides, with impudent serenity, oblivious to the cars honking their horns, deaf to hawkers of U.S. dollars and biblical preachers, disdainful of the foreign signs and the impersonal logos on the façades, totally insensible to the multitude following him at some distance as he walked alongside the embankment, listening to him rant and rave against the hotels, the tourists, the political posters, the lewd women he encountered on his way.

Thus, hurling curses and spittle, he reached San Jerónimo Castle, and finding only its rubble, began to strike the rusty stones with his gauntlet, growing steadily more wrathful as it dawned on him that another imperial power had taken over the city.

Then, unhinged and enraged, beholding in the far horizon galleons with unfamiliar standards, and despondent at the thought of never again finding his beloved, he invoked the name of a much-yearned-for Morgana to find him a steed and a new set of weapons with which to do battle for honor and glory.

He had to wait only a few seconds to find himself astride a knight's steed and, his lance on its socket, rush at the tall and naked posts of reinforced concrete which held the electrical cables, roaring frenziedly that they were enemies of the city.

After lancing four or five columns, he collapsed with a dusty and metallic clamor, falling headlong onto the pavement, horse and all. They surrounded him immediately, took off his helmet and armor, but did not find his body.

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They didn't think twice before rushing to his room at 15 El Conde Street. They forced the door of his purported dwelling and found his shadowy credentials on a mahogany table: Generoso, Balmoral, smuggler of dews into lands beyond the sea. Next to the various blueprints and survey maps, they found and read the love letters he had exchanged with his beloved throughout five hundred years. In the first, dated 1498, she expounded on the greed and lawlessness of the colonizers, and in the last, dated 1987, she disclosed to him the sordid siege of the invincible Knight of Coin.

It was under the table that they found the heavy chest. Only after an hour of tugging at the chains and chipping at the locks did they succeed in lifting the cover, finding at the bottom a freshly-cut island, begetter of purity, fragrant with whistles. They thought it was the wedding gift the man in armor had brought with him. But, disappointed at not finding golden fleeces, jewels, or money bags, they decided to pitch the trunk into the water.

Suddenly, before they could turn away, they heard the voice of the beloved, seeming to come from her charnel house of moss: "I am now covered by the spoils of an undesirable lineage, buried by the lords of profiteering, conjured from my idylls by black coffers of power, tyrannized in my dreams for having taken to my bosom a princely armada from a primeval forest unable to sharpen its darts, still absorbed in my dowry of flags and corals, maimed after so many epic battles, given up for lost in my muddy depths."

No one saw the man in the armor ever again. But they all understood that she, his beloved, was the city.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert