

The Revenant

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Doctor Berto came with a new stethoscope to check Victoria's heart. He was shocked to learn that she had died.

After examining Rafael, the surviving twin, he sat with Señor Pico in the parlour, while Señora Valencia took her infant son upstairs with her for a siesta.

'I don't understand it,' Doctor Berto said as I served them each a cup of coffee. 'She was gaining weight, getting bigger.'

'What about Rafael? How does he seem now?' Señor Pico asked about his son. 'When I look at him, I see a sadness that a child shouldn't have.'

'There is nothing physically wrong with him.'

'I tell you, there is this sadness. I saw it yesterday.'

'Perhaps he misses his sister. They grew in the womb together.'

'Will it go away, his sadness?'

'I don't see the sadness. You're his father, you see it. Perhaps you're right. If he's indeed sad, it will pass. Children are very malleable.'

'Are you certain?'

'I'll wager everything I know about human nature on this.'

'I loved my little girl. Does that surprise you?'

'I think you and I often misjudge each other.'

'I loved her more than I thought I would.'

'Why didn't you send for me sooner?'

'There were no signs of sickness.'

'You should have sent for me after she died.'

'Could you have brought her back to life?'

'If you lose a child, I lose a patient. At least I would have come for the funeral.'

'We buried her quickly, just among us. None of this matters now.'

Señor Pico stroked the sleeves of his uniform. He lit a thick cigar and handed another one, unlit, to his friend.

'You have my deepest condolences,' Doctor Berto said, biting the end of his cigar. 'I would have come yesterday, had I known.'

'That clinic of yours takes a lot of your time.'

'For your family, I would always come.'

'Valencia and I wanted it this way. Father Romero was here. She had her rites. It's finished now.'

'I am very sorry for both you and Valencia.'

'And how is your clinic?'

'Don't change the subject so quickly.'

'Is your clinic lagging? Is it flourishing? Does that kind of place flourish?'

'Very well,' I heard Doctor Berto sigh, 'if you really want to know, a lot of people have been coming to us in the worst condition. It's like an epidemic: accidents, cuts, beatings.'

'*Los con gozos?*'

I hated that term. It was one of the many phrases Señor Pico liked to use. He called us Haitians *los con gozos*, the ones with joy, like jolly pets or simple-minded imbeciles who knew only how to be happy.

'You've watched the border before,' Doctor Berto said. 'You've patrolled there. You know most of my patients are Haitian. Cane workers, many of them.'

'What are you doing for them?'

'Usually we have ten or twelve to see, with digestive illnesses or malaria. Yesterday we had a hundred and ten. We had to put sheets on the grounds around the clinic to lay them on, to care for them outside, in the open. Most of them have machete wounds. Some of them are missing limbs. They say they were ambushed in the night, attacked by soldiers.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'You wouldn't think so if you saw them. People don't tell lies on their deathbeds.'

'Such accusations are insane,' Señor Pico laughed. 'They're delirious.'

'They're being attacked, and it's purposeful.'

'They've been attacking us for years, slowly invading our culture, tainting it with theirs. In many places it's hard to tell who's Haitian and who isn't,' said Señor Pico.

'You put people close together in a place like this, you can't expect them to stay unchanged. When will you forget the past?'

'I'm not talking about my own experience. I'm talking about the nation, the brutal invasions that darkened the pages of our history. Which side are you on anyhow?'

'I'm not on either side.'

'One day you'll have to choose. What if it comes to dying with the Haitians or living with us?'

'Do you think the people who attack them represent the national will?'

'Maybe the Haitians are simply killing each other. Why are you so quick to accuse others?'

'Because I see the proof. They're running—'

'Good.'

'But the people who are chasing them won't let them escape. They try to kill them first.'

'And when and where do your phantom killers attack?'

'In the hills, at night. Always at night. Some have made it across the border and have died in my clinic. I've buried many of them myself. What's going on Pico?'

'Do you think I'd tell you the state's business?'

'Killing Haitians? Is this state business?'

'I am a soldier.'

'We're friends—'

'I don't know where your loyalty lies. Are you a friend of the nation?'

'Who is the nation, if not you and me?'

'Right now, in this conversation, it's just me.'

'Be careful, Pico. I tell you this as a friend. Tomorrow it may be your head on the guillotine. You remember Gilio Peyna?'

'The poet?'

'He was just found in the mountains, his body in pieces, his nose sliced from his face. His wife was pregnant. They shot her twice, in the stomach.'

'These things only happen to Haitians and the traitors among us,' Señor Pico said.

'You're still very naïve, Pico. The Haitians, who have they betrayed?'

'They've betrayed themselves. They should stay in their own country.'

'A lot of secrets may be kept even from people in your position. Have your orders come down from the top? From the General himself? When I cross the border and I see you, I want you to look at me, then at the dead Haitians and list the crimes that merited such a death.'

'The border is quite long. Maybe we'll never see each other. I'm tired of you always preaching. It only displays your own selfish need to be a saint. Show loyalty for once. Show some loyalty to something you know rather than something you wish you knew.'

'This is something I know. This is my life.'

'You've made it your life. I don't have to follow you along that path. Now please let's talk about something else, something more cheerful. When will you marry? I think you need a wife.'

'There's no place in my life for one.'

'You have to make the space. You should leave behind this madness of helping the Haitians and get married.'

'You've tasted the honey and you want everyone to run to the hive.'

'You never know how much love you can feel until you marry and have children. I know you think you love the Haitians in your clinic, but it's not the same.'

'I know that altruism differs from romance.'

'I wonder if you do. What is it you do to entertain yourself?'

'I read and study. I learn.'

'You make friends with stray communist poets who put their lives and their families in jeopardy. When are you going to enjoy yourself and find a good woman to share your life?'

'Please, no more about my phantom wife. How is Valencia taking the baby's death?'

'She's sad. How would you feel if you were in her place?' Señor Pico put his cigar out in his coffee cup. He got up and gave Doctor Berto an abrupt handshake. 'Keep a very close watch on my son. I will join Valencia now.'

'I'll ask your maid to give me a glass of water and then I'll leave,' Doctor Berto said. 'I'll be back soon to give Rafael his vaccination.'

Doctor Berto watched as Señor Pico walked upstairs.

'You listen to everything that's said in this house, don't you?' he whispered to me in Creole.

'I was only waiting for the coffee cups,' I said.

'Be honest. You have every right to listen. You listen for a reason. You listen for survival.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Listen now and please heed my words,' he said, moving closer. 'You must leave this house as soon as possible. If you want, I'll take you. I'll go first, then we'll meet further down the road. I'll drive you across the border.'

'Why?'

'It will soon be very dangerous here.'

'I can't leave now.'

'You heard what I said. They're killing Haitians on the roads at night. They want all of you gone from this side of the island. It's just a matter of time before they come into this valley. Do you think Pico will hesitate to hand you over? That's if he doesn't take you himself.'

'Señora Valencia won't let him.'

'Are you certain?'

'Señor Pico is your friend.'

'In some ways he is, in other ways he's not. You had better know that he's not your friend in any way at all.'

'Who is they anyway who want to kill everyone? Who gives them the right?'

'The National Guard? The government? I don't know. In any case, it's growing into an organized movement, a night campaign to purge this country of people like you.'

I was frantic inside but I did not want him to know it.

'What about the sugar cane?' I asked.

'They're not worried about the sugar cane now,' he said. 'They want all of you out of this territory, back on your own side.'

'And the people who have been here for generations? What will they do with them? What about their children who have never even seen Haiti?'

'I don't know what they'll do with them. I don't know the answers to your questions.'

I wasn't sure what to do. Hearing him and Señor Pico talk had frightened me. But I couldn't leave fifteen years of my life behind because a man I barely knew, a man who had no reason to care for my safety, thought I should.

Besides, I had no one to go back to in Haiti anymore.

'If you come with me,' he said, 'we'll go to my hospital. We would come up with a solution for you there. You could start your life all over again.'

'As what? A beggar on the street?'

In my own country I'd be an outsider. The thought of that was much harder for me to take than being a foreigner elsewhere.

'What do you have here that truly belongs to you?' he asked. 'People start from nothing all the time. You delivered the twins. You could become a midwife. I don't know all the answers. I just know you should leave this place. Things are very serious now. Recently I've been seeing

Haitians chopped up with machetes like they were meant to be shredded. Do you walk alone at night?’

‘I don’t often have reason to.’

‘You seem very occupied with the work of this household. They’re trying to take all they can from you, like the people who own the sugar plantations where many of my patients work. I have been telling everyone, you need to leave and get out of here.’

He seized my arm and made me look at him.

‘Last week, an old woman was brought to me,’ he said. ‘She had worked in the home of a Dominican colonel for forty-nine years. The colonel had just been to his stable, and one of his horses had been stolen. He made up his mind that the thief was Haitian so he plunged his table knife into the old woman’s heart. Is that how you want to end your life?’

‘Señor Pico might hear you. Let me be.’ I pushed him away.

‘That woman died in my arms,’ he continued. ‘I fought to save her. I asked myself whether I should take out the knife and risk a hemorrhage or leave it in and try to operate. All this by the light of a hurricane lamp while a priest stood over her giving her last rites.’

‘You have a terrible job, doctor.’

‘I simply observe. I don’t have to participate. I am afraid that one day I might find you in my clinic as a patient. I wouldn’t want to know you dead before I’d known you alive.’

‘I will die only when it’s my time,’ I said.

‘I used to think the same way,’ he said.

‘And now? Now you’d like to be a saint.’

‘It’s not polite to repeat the insults of others,’ he said. ‘Now I have begun to realize you can’t let things just sweep over you. You have to take action. In my old truck it takes three hours to reach the border. On foot, crossing the mountains might take you the whole day. If you want to leave now, I’ll wait for you.’

‘You need not wait, doctor.’

‘Remember, I warned you.’

‘Thank you.’

After Doctor Berto left, Señora Valencia came into the kitchen with her sketchbook and pencils. Her colours—crimson, mango, amber, pinks and greens—brought the kitchen to life.

She attacked the paper, breathing heavily as she drew the outline of a baby girl crouched in the same protective pose that Victoria had assumed after her birth.

‘Amabelle, I’ve been thinking since we buried Victoria, maybe it was my fault that she died.’

‘Don’t punish yourself that way, Señora.’

‘I fed her too much. I nursed her three times as much as her brother. I wanted so much to save her life. I killed her with my desire to see her thrive.’

‘That isn’t true, Señora. Fate was against you.’

‘What fate? My fate? My mother’s fate? Maybe it was her name that killed her. I never looked at her once without thinking of my mother. Maybe it was passed on to her, from woman to woman, my grief. It poisoned her. She looked so well the night before and even that morning as I fed her.’

‘She was only meant to be with us for a while.’

‘Amabelle, I’d like you to be Rafael’s godmother. We could not make it obvious in the church. You’d have to watch from a distance, but no one else will stand in the godmother’s place. Rafael will be your godson. It seems only fitting, since you and I gave birth to him together. We won’t tell Pico, but that’s the way it will be. Sharing Rafael with you will make me less sad about Victoria.’

It would be awkward having a godson I couldn’t even touch.

‘Are you certain you want to do this, Señora?’

‘This is the way it will be. Yesterday, when I dressed Victoria for her burial, I saw fingermarks on her body. She still had bruises from where you and I held her to pull the caul from her face and to tie the umbilical cord. I was so surprised. Those marks had not even had time to heal. How can I so easily forget what we owe you?’

Before putting her son to bed, Señora Valencia checked his neck and body for fingermarks, but found none.

I went back to my room, listening to the soft breeze blowing through the trees outside. I had barely closed my eyes when I sensed someone standing over me. I saw that it was a woman dressed in a long, three-tiered ruffled dress inflated like a balloon. She was holding necklaces made of painted coffee beans. Around her face she wore a muzzle, and on her neck there was a collar with a lock dangling from it.

I got up from the floor to see her better. I was a skinny eight-year-old girl and I was naked. I reached down to cover myself. The woman pulled my hand away from my crotch.

'Don't worry,' she said, her voice muffled by the muzzle which hid half her face.

'I am ashamed.' My voice, too, was a shy little girl's.

The woman grabbed her skirt and skipped back and forth on the porch, like an earth-bound bird. She seemed to be dancing a *calenda*. My mother and father had often danced the *calenda* together in the yard behind our house at night.

The woman locked arms with the air, pretending to kiss someone. As she danced, the chains on her ankles made a rattling noise.

'Don't worry.' She stopped, breathless. 'You can be naked. You're still very young and you're dreaming.'

'I am not young,' I told her. 'I'm twenty. What are you doing here, in Miseria?'

'I am visiting you.' She laughed, a metallic laugh which echoed inside the mask.

'You're making fun of me,' I said.

'Yes, I am making fun of you.'

'Why?'

'You think life is hard. Wait until you are dead.'

'I'm afraid to die,' I said.

'I'm insulted. Years after my death I'm forced to walk the earth between the mountains and the cane fields but lately I have grown to like it because I can visit with you.'

'Why do you have that thing on your face?' I asked.

'You mean this?' She tapped her fingers against the muzzle. 'Someone strapped it on me a long time ago so I wouldn't eat their sugar cane while cutting it.'

'Are you a slave? Will you go through eternity with that muzzle on your face?'

When I looked down I was myself again, lying on my mat. I had extended my hand to touch her, but she suddenly disappeared.

I woke up sweating. I lit my castor-oil lamp and drilled three small holes in a bamboo reed with a knife.

When I blew into the stem, the wind that came out of the other end was raw and low like a moan. I tapped the reed against the ground and blew again. I puffed without stopping. The sound peaked, becoming like the shrill cry of a cicada. With low, quick breaths, my mouth forced out the sound of a flash flood washing a row of trees downhill. This I made to honour the memory of Victoria who did not live long enough to either see or feel the rain.

