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Features

Angelica Gorodischer



Angélica Gorodischer (b. 1928) is well known in Argentina but less so among English-speaking readers. She has published science fiction, crime fiction, historical fiction, feminist fiction—the list might continue. All of these labels are accurate, yet her work also pushes the boundaries of such categories. Like Trafalgar Medrano, protagonist of *Trafalgar*, Gorodischer lives in Rosario, a city of some 1.5 million people on the banks of the Paraná River. And while Trafalgar travels enormous distances in the course of his work (he is a salesman—tractors, comic books, lumber, musical instruments; you name it), he is very much a denizen of his hometown, well-connected, respected, a fixture at the Burgundy, where he relates the most interesting of his adventures to his friends.

Trafalgar's adventures are curious, funny, sometimes hair-raising, always thought-provoking. His stories are sought after, traded among acquaintances, shared sparingly by those lucky enough to hear them first hand. And the importance of the storytelling process is always evident. Trafalgar loves to tell a tale—and he loves to draw it out, pausing for another cup of coffee, petting a friend's cat, playing hard to get; his

listeners prod him impatiently, but he will not be rushed.

Trafalgar Medrano is the storyteller in each of these tales. That is, the stories are his. But the stories are not always relayed directly to the reader. Sometimes a narrator repeats the story he or she heard from Trafalgar on a particular occasion. At other times the listener is unidentified, and only in Trafalgar's scattered interjections—*More coffee? Don't mind if I do.*—indicate another presence in the room. In "Josefina and Trafalgar," the narrative is doubly-distanced, as Josefina tells her niece (an unnamed woman who seems to have much in common with Gorodischer) the story Trafalgar had previously told to her.

And so it is with the translation: Angélica Gorodischer writes Trafalgar's stories, in Spanish; for the reader, Trafalgar's voice is filtered through varying layers of narration. As translator, I retell the stories yet again, this time in English, adding a further layer, a further filter. But keeping, I hope, the sense of a story one might to share, and the distinct pleasure of telling and retelling adventures among friends.

—Amalia Gladhart, University of Oregon

"Trafalgar and Josephine"

by Angélica Gorodischer

Translated from the Spanish by Amalia Gladhart

To the memory of my aunts

*Paula, Rosario, Elisa
and Carmencita.*

*and to my aunts Laura, Manena,
Virginia and Pilar.*

My Aunt Josefina came to visit me. He who has never met my Aunt Josefina doesn't know what he's missing, as Trafalgar Medrano says. Trafalgar also says that she is one of the most beautiful and charming women he has met and that if he had been born in 1893 he would not have married her for anything in the world. My aunt came in, she looked the house over and asked after the children, she wanted to know if I was ever going to decide to move to an apartment downtown, and when I said no, never, she hesitated over whether or not to leave her jacket somewhere and decided to take it with her because there might be a little breeze in the garden later. She's eighty-four years old; wavy hair the color of steel, a couple of tireless chestnut eyes as bright as they say my criolla great-grandmother's were, and an enviable figure: if she wanted to, if she went so far as to admit that those coarse and disagreeable things should be used as items of clothing, she could wear Cecilia's jeans. She said the garden was lovely and that it would look much better when we had the ash trees pruned and the tea was delicious and she loved scones but they turned out better with only one egg.

"I drank a very good tea the other day. Yes, I am going to have a little more but half a cup, that's good, don't get carried away. Isn't it a little strong? Just one little drop of milk. That's it. And they served me some very good toast, with butter and not that rancid margarine they give you now everywhere, I don't know how you can like it. In the Burgundy. And I was with a friend of yours."

"I already know," I said. "Trafalgar."

"Yes, the son of Juan José Medrano and poor Mercedesitas. I don't understand how she allowed her only son to be given that outlandish name. Well, I always suspected Medrano was a Mason."

"But Josefina, what does Freemasonry have to do with the Battle of Trafalgar?"



"Ah, I don't know, sweetie, but you can't deny that the Masons purposely gave their children names that didn't appear in the calendar of saints."

"Doctor Medrano was probably an admirer of Nelson," I said, pinning all my hopes on Trafalgar's old man's interest in the great events of history.

"What I can assure you," said my Aunt Josefina, "is that Mercedes Herrera was a saint, and so refined and discreet."

"And Doctor Medrano, what was he like?"

"A great doctor," she opened another scone and spread orange marmalade on it. "Good-looking and congenial as well. And very cultured."

There was a quarter-second silence before the last statement: the word cultured is slippery with my Aunt Josefina and one has to step carefully.

"Trafalgar is also good-looking and congenial," I said, "but I don't know if he's cultured. He knows a ton of strange things."

"It's true, he's congenial, very congenial and friendly. And very considerate with an old lady like me. Now, I think good-looking is an exaggeration. His nose is too long, just like poor Mercedes'. And don't tell me that mustache isn't a little ridiculous. A man looks much tidier if clean-shaven, thank goodness your sons have gotten over the beard and mustache phase. But I have to admit that the boy is elegant: he had on a dark gray suit, very well cut, and a white shirt and a serious tie, not like some of your extravagant friends who look like. I don't even know what they look like."

"Would you like a little more tea?"

"No, no, please, you've already made me drink too much, but it was delicious and I have overdone it. That was Thursday or Friday, I'm not sure. I went into the Burgundy because I was fainting with hunger: I was coming from a meeting of the board of directors of the Society of Friends of the Museum, so it was Thursday, of course, because Friday was the engagement party of María Luisa's daughter, and you know Thursday is Amelia's afternoon off, and frankly I had no desire to go home and start making tea. There weren't many people and I sat down far away from the door, where there wouldn't be a draft, and when they were serving my tea the Medrano boy came in. He came over to say hello, so kind. At first I couldn't place him and I was about to ask him who he was when I realized he was Mercedes Herrera's son. It was so unsettling, seeing him standing there beside the table, but although I am old enough to do certain things, you understand that a lady never invites a man, even though he's so much younger than she is, to sit at her table."

An "Oh, no?" escaped me.

My Aunt Josefina sighed, I would almost say she blew out air, and great-grandmother's eyes stopped me cold.

"I do know customs have evolved," she said, "and in a few cases for the better, and in many others unfortunately for the worse, but there are things that do not change and you should know that."

I smiled because I love her a lot and because I hope I can get to eighty-four years old with the same confidence she has and learn to control my eyes the way she does although mine aren't even a tenth as pretty.

"And you let poor Trafalgar go?"

"No. He was very correct and he asked my permission to keep me company if I wasn't waiting for anyone. I told him to sit down and he ordered coffee. It's appalling how that boy drinks coffee. I don't know how he doesn't ruin his stomach. I haven't tasted coffee in years."

She doesn't smoke either, of course. And she drinks a quarter glass of rosé with every dinner and another quarter glass, only of extra-dry champagne, at Christmas and New Year's.

"He didn't tell you if he was going to come by here?"

"No, he didn't say, but it seems unlikely. He was going, I think the next day, I'm not really sure where, it must be Japan, I imagine, because he said he was going to buy silks. A shame he devotes himself to commerce and didn't follow his father's path: it was a disappointment to poor Merceditas. But he's doing very well, isn't he?"

"He's doing fabulously. He has truckloads of dough."

"I sincerely hope you don't use that language outside your home. It is unbecoming. Of course, it would be best if you never used it, but that's evidently hopeless. You're as stubborn as your father."

"Yes, my old man, I mean my father, was stubborn, but he was a gentleman."

"True. I don't know how he spoke when he was among other men, that doesn't matter, but he never said anything inappropriate in public."

"If you heard Trafalgar talk, you'd have an attack."

"I don't see why. With me, he was most agreeable. Neither affected nor hoity-toity—no need for that—but very careful."

"He's a hypocritical cretin." That I didn't say, I just thought it.

"And he has," said my Aunt Josefina, "a special charm for telling the most outlandish things. What an imagination."

"What did he tell you?"

"Obviously, maybe it's not all imagination. It gives you the impression that he is telling the truth, but so embellished that at first glance you could think it was a big lie. I'll tell you I spent a very entertaining interval. How is it possible that when I arrived home Amelia was already back and was worried at my delay? The poor thing had called Cuca's house, and Mimi's and Virginia's to see if I was there. I had to start in on the phone calls to calm them all down."

I got serious: I was dying of envy, like when Trafalgar goes and tells things to Fatty Páez or Raúl or Jorge. But I understood, because my Aunt Josefina knows how to do many things well; for example, to listen.

"What did he tell you?"

"Oh, nothing, crazy things about his trips. Of course, he speaks so well that it's a pleasure, a real pleasure."

"What did he tell you?"

"Sweetie, how you insist! Besides, I don't remember too well."

"Yeah, tell me what you remember."

"One says 'yes,' not 'yeah'. You sound like a muleteer, not a lady."

I ignored her.

"Of course you remember. You catch cold with a constancy worthy of a greater cause and your stomach is a little fragile, but don't tell me you have arteriosclerosis because I won't believe you."

"God preserve me. Have you seen Raquel lately? A fright. She was at the Peñas', I don't know why they take her, and she didn't recognize me."

"Josefina, I am going to go crazy with curiosity. Be nice and tell me what Trafalgar told you."

"Let's see, wait, I'm not really sure."

"For certain he told you he had just arrived from somewhere."

"That's it. It must be one of those new countries in Africa or Asia, with a very strange name I have never heard before or ever read in the newspaper. What surprised me was that they were so advanced, with so much progress and so well organized, because they always turn savage: look what happened in India when the English left and in the Congo after the Belgians, no? Your friend Medrano told me it was a world—a world, that's what he said—that was very attractive when one saw it for the first time. Serprabel, now I remember, Serprabel. I think it must be close to India."

"I doubt it but, anyway, go on."

"Nevertheless, almost certainly, yes, it must be near India, not only because of the name but because of the castes."

"What castes?"

"Aren't there castes in India?"

"Yes, there are, but what does that have to do with it?"

"If you let me tell you, you're going to find out; weren't you in such a big hurry? And sit properly, it's so obvious you are all used to wearing pants. There are no elegant women anymore."

"Tell me, in Serprabel, are there elegant women?"

"Yes, according to the Medrano boy, there are splendid women, very well dressed and very well bred."

"It doesn't surprise me; even if there's only one, he'll find her."

"A shame he never married."

"Who? Trafalgar?" I laughed for a while.

"I don't see what's funny about it. I'm not saying with a foreigner, and from so far away, who may be a very good person, but have different customs, but with someone from his circle. Don't forget, he comes from a very well connected family."

"That one's going to die an old bachelor. He likes women too much."

"HMMMMM," went my Aunt Josefina.

"Don't tell me Medrano Senior did, too!" I exclaimed.

"Be discreet, sweetheart, don't talk so loud. In fact, I can't confirm anything. A few things were said at the time."

"I can imagine," I said. "And Merceditas was a saint. And on Serprabel Trafalgar was looking for romance, just as his father would have been."

"But how can you think that? He wasn't looking for romance, as you say. And if he were, he wouldn't have told me. One can see he is a very polite boy. What he did, or what he says he did because it was most likely nothing more than a story to entertain me for a while, what he did was to try to help a poor woman, who was very unfortunate for many reasons."

"Ay," I said, and once again thought that Trafalgar was a hypocritical cretin.

"Now what's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, go on."

"Well, it seems that there they maintain—following those eastern religions, no?—a caste system. And there are nine. Let's see, let me think: lords, priests, warriors, scholars, merchants, artisans, servants, and vagabonds. Oh, no, eight. They're eight."

"And everyone has to be in one of the castes."

"Of course. Don't tell me it isn't an advantage."

"Oh, I don't know. What does one do if one is an artisan and has the vocation to be a merchant, like Trafalgar? Do they take an exam?"

"Of course not. Everyone lives within the caste to which they belong and they marry people from their own caste."

"Don't tell me: and their children are born within that caste and die within that caste and the children of those children and so on forever."

"Yes. So no one has pretensions and everyone stays in their place and they avoid disorders and revolutions and strikes. I said to Medrano that, paganism aside, it seemed to me an extraordinary system and he agreed with me."

"Ah, he agreed with you."

"Of course, he even told me that in thousands of years there had never been any disorder and they had lived in peace."

"How nice."

"I know it must sound a little old-fashioned to you, but Medrano says the level of development in everything, color television and airlines and telephones with a view screen and computer centers, is impressive. I'm surprised they don't advertise more to attract tourism. I myself, if I were inclined to travel at my age, would be very happy to go for a visit. Listen, he says the hotels are extraordinary and the service is perfect, the food is delicious, and there are museums and theaters and places to visit and splendid, just splendid landscapes."

"I don't like that caste thing. I wouldn't go even at gunpoint."

"Nor I, believe me, I would not enjoy such a long plane trip. But the caste thing is not that important, because anyone can govern."

"What did you say?"

"That anyone can govern. Above everyone is a kind of king who lives in the center of the capital, because the city is a circle and in the middle is the Palace which is all marble and gold and crystal. Anyway, that's what your friend says. I don't doubt that it's very luxurious, but not that much."

"And anyone can become king? I mean, everything else is hereditary and that, specifically, is not?"

"That's what Medrano told me. So you see, if the highest authority can be elected, everything is very democratic. The king is called the Lord of Lords and governs for a period of five years; when it's over, he can't be reelected, he goes back home and then the Lords elect another."

"Wait, wait. The Lords? So then the others don't vote?"

"Nobody votes, sweetie. The Lords meet every five years and elect a Lord of Lords and look how nice, they almost always, or always, elect him from among the inferior castes, you see?"

"Heck yes, I see. And the Lord of Lords governs everybody?"

"I suppose so, that's what he's elected for. Although your friend Medrano says no, he doesn't govern."

"I thought so."

"Oh, sure, if he says it, it's holy writ."

"Fine, but what is it he says?"

Another of my Aunt Josefa's virtues is that she can't lie: "He says he's a puppet of the Lords who are the ones who really govern, so as to keep everyone happy with the illusion that they or someone of their caste might become king, but that the Lord of Lords is the ultimate slave, a slave who lives like a king, eats like a king, dresses like a king, but is still a slave."

And one of her defects consists in believing only what she wants to believe: "You see that can't be. Surely the Lords form a kind of

Council or Chamber or something like that and your friend took one thing for another. Or he probably invented it to spice up the story."

"Yes, just probably. I warn you, Trafalgar is capable of anything."

"He also told me, this seems more reasonable to me, that the inferior castes are the more numerous. There is only one Lord of Lords. There are very few Lords, I think he told me there are a hundred. A few more Priests, many more, I think around three hundred. Many more Warriors and even more Scholars, he didn't tell me how many. Many, many Merchants, Artisans, and Servants, especially Servants. And it seems there are millions of Vagabonds. It must be a very populous country. And anyone of any caste, except the Lord of Lords, of course, can be Owner or Dispossessed."

"Having money or not having money? Rich and poor, let's say."

"More or less: he who has land is an Owner; he who does not is Dispossessed. And within each caste anyone who is an Owner is superior to the Dispossessed."

"And can one go from being Dispossessed to Owner?"

"Yes, so you already see that it's not as terrible as you thought. If one puts together enough money, one buys land, which is very expensive, just like everywhere. It seems to be a very rich country."

"The Vagabonds can buy land, too?"

"No, no. The Vagabonds are vagabonds. They don't even have houses, I don't know how people can live like that."

"I don't understand. Now tell me what happened to Trafalgar on Serprabel."

"It's a little cool, don't you think?"

"Do you want to go inside?"

"No, but help me put the jacket over my shoulders," not that my Aunt Josefina needs help to put on her jacket. "That's it, thank you. According to him, some of everything happened. He went there to sell jewelry and perfumes. He says he didn't do too well with the perfumes because they have a good chemical industry and flowers, you should see the flowers he described to me, very heavily scented ones from which they make extracts. But as there are no deposits of precious stones, he sold the ones he took very well. Of course, he had a few problems, believe me, because anyone who goes to Serprabel has to become part of a caste. They considered him a merchant and he had to use vehicles for Merchants and go to a hotel for Merchants. But when he learned that there were superior castes with better hotels and more privileges, he protested and said he was also a Scholar and a Warrior. He did the right thing, don't you think? Of course, since there one can't belong to more than one caste, they had to hold a kind of audience presided over by one of the Lords who had the strangest name, that I'm really not going to be able to remember, and there he explained his case. Oh, he made me laugh so much telling me how he had disconcerted them and remarking that he was very sorry he couldn't say he was a Lord, and that he would also have liked to say he was a Priest, which is the second caste. The bad part was he didn't know anything about the religion and he doesn't have mystical inclinations. Although I think he was educated in a religious school."

"That he has no mystical inclinations remains to be seen. So what happened?"

"They accepted that in other places there were other customs and they reached an agreement. He would be a Warrior but one of the lowest, those of the Earth, although an Owner, and with permission to act as a Merchant."

"What's that about those of the Earth?"

"Well, each one of the four superior castes has categories. For example, let's see, how was it, the Lords can be of Light, of Fire, and of Shadow, I think that was the order. The Priests can devote themselves to Communication, Intermediation, or Consolation. The Warriors act in the Air, the Water, or on the Earth. And the Scholars are dedicated to Knowledge, Accumulation, or Teaching. The others are inferior and don't have categories."

"What a mess. And each one can also be Owner or Dispossessed and that influences their position?"

"Yes. It's a little complicated. Medrano told me that a Lord of Light, an Owner, was the highest rank. And a Warrior of Air but Dispossessed was almost equal to a Priest devoted to Consolation but an Owner. Understand?"

"Not really. Anyway, they gave Trafalgar a very passable rank."

"He was very satisfied. They took him to a very superior hotel and that's even though he says the Merchants' hotel was very good, and they set four people to attend him exclusively, aside from the hotel personnel. The fact that he had jewels to sell also must have had some influence, because they are a real luxury. He says a delegation of Merchants went to see him and that although they couldn't enter the hotel, which was solely for Warriors, they spoke in the park and offered him a very well located shop where he could sell what he had brought. A few wanted to buy one or another piece of jewelry so as to sell it themselves but they were very expensive and the Merchants, although they aren't exactly poor, aren't rich, either. Only one of them, who was an Owner, and of a lot of land, would have been able to buy something from him, but Medrano didn't want to sell him anything; he did well, because why make such a long trip and end up splitting the profits with another? In any event they had to give him the location even though they didn't end on very friendly terms, because every caste has its laws and among the Merchants one can't go back after having offered something verbally or any other way, but above all verbally. Another law for all of the castes—which frankly, I don't know what result it would produce—seems very silly to me, it says no one can repeat to those of his own caste nor to those of other castes something he has overheard a member of another caste say, although they can repeat what members of their own caste have said. Of course this is hard to control, and no one speaks gladly to someone from another caste but only out of obligation, but every so often they catch an offender and the punishments are terrible; anyway, I don't know if it's really worth all that."

"But listen, more than silly, that's dangerous, because it's very vague, there aren't any limits. If you take it literally, no one can talk to anyone from another caste."

"There's something of that, as I said. But as the Lords, who are very intelligent and very fair, act as judges, there are no abuses. What is happening is that from caste to caste, the language is becoming more and more different. I forgot to ask Medrano what language they spoke and if he understood it. Would it be some dialect of Hindi? In any case, with a little English one can make oneself understood anywhere in the world."

"Trafalgar speaks excellent English. I expect he sold the jewelry."

"To the Lords, of course. The store fronts, the shops, those are public places where anyone can go, except for the Vagabonds who can't go anywhere, but when a Lord or a number of Lords enter, everyone else has to leave. Those that aren't Lords, because those that are Lords

can stay. In any case, a crowd of people paraded through to see what Medrano had brought."

"I'd bet a year's paychecks he sold it all."

"I don't know what you were going to live on because he didn't sell everything. He had a pearl necklace left over."

"I don't believe you. No. Impossible. Never."

"Seriously. Of course it was because of everything that happened and anyway he was the one who decided to leave it, but he didn't sell it."

"I don't understand any of this, but it seems very unusual in Trafalgar."

"Well, the Lord of Lords governing at that time, and who had been elected by the Lords less than a year before, was a man not at all well-suited to the office. Listen, he had been a Vagabond, how awful."

"Why? Don't they elect the inferior castes as king?"

"Yes, of course, but seldom Vagabonds who are illiterate and don't know how to eat or how to behave. But Medrano says they had elected him because he had the face and the poise of a king."

v "High class liars, those Lords."

"Sweetie, so vulgar."

"Don't tell me they aren't a bunch of liars and something worse, too."

"I don't think so, because from what Medrano told me they are irreproachable people. And it seems to me very democratic to elect a Vagabond as king. Even a bit idealistic, like something out of a novel."

"A cock-and-bull story."

"The fact is, the poor Lords made a mistake. Of course, an ignorant person, without education—what could you expect?"

"He left them in a bad state."

"He fell in love, can you believe, with a married woman."

"A Vagabond?"

"No, I think the Vagabonds don't even get married. Worse: he fell in love with the wife of a Scholar, and one of the best, the ones devoted to Knowledge and who for that reason was often at court. And Medrano found that out because he heard the Lords discussing what had to be done in the jewelry store he had opened. But as he didn't know that one can't repeat what members of a caste that isn't your own have said and he was—at least so long as he was there—a Warrior, he mentioned it to a Scholar in conversation. I don't remember what category he belonged to, but Medrano says he had been looking at the jewels and that he was a very interesting man who knew a great deal about philosophy, mathematics, music, and it was worthwhile listening to him speak. He couldn't buy anything: only the Lords had

picked up a lot of things, because the prices were very high for those of other castes, but he stayed until quite late, and as the two were alone and they had talked about the cutting of stones and of goldsmithing and of music, they started to talk about other things, too, and Medrano praised the country and the city and the other asked if he had seen the gardens at the Palace and they talked about the Lord of Lords and there your friend committed an indiscretion."

"He mentioned the Lord of Lords' affair with the woman."

"He said he had heard the Lords talk about that and he didn't realize he had said something he should not: he was just surprised when the Scholar became very serious and stopped talking and said goodbye very coldly and left."

"Trafalgar acts like a know-it-all but he never learns. He always sticks his foot in it."

"My goodness, what a way to speak."

"I promise to be more refined, or at least try to, but tell me what happened to him."

"When you want you can speak correctly. The thing would be for you to always want to. That day, nothing happened to him. The next day he sold what he had left, always to the Lords, save for a pearl necklace that must have been beautiful, truly beautiful: a very long string of pink pearls all the same size. Natural pearls, as you can imagine. It must have cost a fortune."

"That was the one he left?"

"Yes, but wait. When he had nothing left but that necklace and was about to sell it to a Lord, the police came in and arrested him."

"It looks like there are police on Serprabel."

"Why not? They belong to the Servants caste. And they took him directly to the Palace of the Lord of Lords. There he had to wait, always under guard, with the necklace in his pocket, until they made him enter—shoved him, he says, how unpleasant—enter a courtroom. As repeating things said by someone from another caste is a serious crime, the judge wasn't just any Lord but the Lord of Lords. Of course, assisted by two Lords. The one who acted as prosecutor was another Lord, who put forward the accusation."

"And defender? Did he have a defender?"

"No, he had to defend himself. I will say it does not seem fair to me."

"Not fair at all. A filthy trick, forgive the term."

"It may be a little strong, but you're right. They accused him and he defended himself as well as he could. But note, they had to say what it was about, what it was Medrano had repeated. And it was nothing less than the illicit affairs of the very king presiding over the tribunal."

"Poor guy, my God."

"That boy really had a bad time."

"No, I mean the Lord of Lords."

"He had it coming, and don't think I don't feel sorry for him. But a person of quality does not stoop to such things."

"Oh, no, of course, why don't you read Shakespeare and Sophocles?"

"That may be all very well for the theater, but in real life it is not suitable. And things got worse when, after the accusation and the defense, the prosecutor detailed Medrano's crime and the Lord of Lords, who until then had been very much in his role, very serious and dignified and quiet on his throne, stood up and started to speak. It was not the conduct expected of a king, because everyone and above all the Lords, Medrano explained to me, everyone was so scandalized that they couldn't do anything. They were frozen with their mouths open, staring at him."

"And what did he say?"

"A speech."

"A speech?"

"A parody of a speech. Medrano says he didn't even know how to speak, he stammered and pronounced the words wrong and repeated phrases."

"And what did they expect? The Demosthenes of the underworld? But one could understand some of what he said, I imagine."

"He said—there in front of everybody, because trials are public—he said it was all true, can you believe what poor taste, talking about things that are not only private, but illicit. He said he was in love with that girl and she with him and he didn't see why they couldn't love each other and he was going to stop being king and he was going to go away with her and walk naked and barefoot through the fields and eat fruit and drink water from the rivers, what a crazy idea. It must have been so unpleasant for the Lords to see the same king they had elected sniveling and drooling like a fussy child in front of the people he supposedly had to govern. How could it be that no one moved or said anything when the Lord of Lords got down from the throne and took off his shoes which were of an extremely fine leather with gold buckles, and took off the embroidered cloak and the crown and, wearing only in a tunic of white linen, walked over to the exit?"

"And no one did anything?"

"The Lords did something. The Lords reacted and gave the order to the police to seize him and they carried him back to the throne. But what a strange thing, no one obeyed and the Lord of Lords kept walking and left the courtroom and reached the gardens."

"But, and Trafalgar? What was Trafalgar doing that he didn't take advantage of the chance to escape?"

"He didn't? Sweetie, it's as if you didn't know him well. As soon as the Lord of Lords started to talk and everyone was watching him, Medrano backed up and put himself out of the guards' reach and when the king left the room and some Warriors and the Lords yelled and ran out, he ran, too."

"Well done, I like it."

"But he didn't go very far."

"They caught him again?"

"No, luckily not. In the Palace gardens, where there were always a lot of people, there was a big stir when they saw him appear barefoot, wearing only his underclothes. And then, Medrano was able to see it all well, then a very young, very pretty woman embraced him, crying: it was the Scholar's wife, she of the guilty passions."

"Oh, Josefina, that's a phrase out of a serial novel."

"Is it that way or is it not? A married woman who has a love affair with a man who is not her husband, is blameworthy, and don't tell me no because that I will not accept."

"We aren't going to fight over it, especially now when you leave me hanging with everyone in such a foul predicament. Did Trafalgar do anything besides watch?"

"Quite a bit, poor boy, he was very generous. Mistaken, but generous. The Lords and the Warriors and the Scholars—not the Priests, because none of them were there, they lead quieter lives, as is proper—tried to get to the Lord of Lords and that woman, but all the people of the other castes who were in the garden and those who came in from outside or came out of the Palace to see, without knowing very well why—because many of them hadn't been at the tribunal; just out of rebelliousness or resentment I imagine—started to defend them. Of course, that turned into a plain of Agramante and there was a terrible fight. The Warriors and the Lords had weapons, but those of the inferior castes destroyed the gardens, such a shame, pulling out stones, taking iron from the benches, chunks of marble and crystal from the fountains, branches, railings from the gazebos, anything with which to attack and give the Lord of Lords and the woman time to escape."

"And did they escape?"

"They escaped. And your friend Medrano after them. He says his private plane, he doesn't call it private plane, what does he call it?"

"Clunker."

"That's it. He says his private plane wasn't very far away and he wanted to get to it, very sensible it seems to me, and take off immediately. But meanwhile the Lords and Warriors got organized, they called in soldiers, who I think are from the Warriors caste, too, but are doing their apprenticeship, and they chased the Lord of Lords and the woman. That was when Medrano caught up with them and dragged them with him to the airplane."

"Thank goodness. You were starting to scare me."

"Go ahead and get scared, now comes the worst."

"Oh, no, don't tell me more."

"Fine, I won't tell you more."

"No, yes, tell me."

"Which is it?"

"Josefina, no, I promise I wasn't serious."

"I know, and anyway I can't cut the story short now. They had almost reached the plane, with the Lords and Warriors and the Scholars and the soldiers chasing them and behind them all those from the inferior castes who were throwing stones but no longer tried to get close because the Warriors had killed several, they had almost reached it when the Lords realized where they were going and that they were about to escape and they gave the order to the soldiers to fire. They shot, and they killed the Lord of Lords."

I said nothing. Josefina observed that it was getting dark and I went inside and turned on the garden lights.

"Medrano," said my Aunt Josefina, "saw that they had put a bullet through his head and he grabbed the woman and pulled her up into the plane. But she didn't want to go, now that the Lord of Lords was dead, and she fought so hard that she managed to free herself and she threw herself out of the plane. Medrano tried to follow her and take her up again, but the Warriors and the Lords were already upon him and they kept firing and he had to close the door. They killed her, too. It was a horrible death, Medrano said, but he didn't explain how and I didn't ask. He remained locked in, on the ground but ready to take off, and saw they weren't paying attention to him any longer. In the end, to them he was no more than a foreigner from whom they had bought jewels, who perhaps understood nothing of the country's customs and so had done things that were not right. They went away and left the bodies. Those of the inferior castes had to be obliged to retreat at bayonet point because they wanted to come close at all costs although they were no longer throwing stones or anything else. And that was when Medrano left the pearl necklace. When he saw that he was alone, he got down from the plane, at great risk, it seems to me, but he was very brave and it's very moving, he got down from the plane and he put the string of pearls on the woman, on what remained of her, he said. Afterward he climbed back up, locked himself in, washed his hands, lit a cigarette, and lifted off."

"How awful."

"Yes. So long as it's true," said my Aunt Josefina. "I don't know what to think. Might it not be nothing more than a fairytale for an old lady all alone drinking her tea?"

"Trafalgar doesn't tell fairytales. And you're not old, Josefina, come on."

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