

SUN, STONE, AND SHADOWS

20 GREAT MEXICAN
SHORT STORIES

TEZONTLE

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The Dinner

ALFONSO REYES

The supper, that delights and enchants.

St. John of the Cross

I had to run through unknown streets. My journey's end seemed to roll just ahead of my steps, and the appointed hour was already throbbing on the public clocks. The streets were desolate. Snakes of spotlight beams danced before my eyes. At every moment circular brick flower beds sprang up, and in the artificial light of night their greenness took on a surreal elegance. I think I had seen a multitude of towers—I don't know whether in the houses or in the flower beds—displaying to the four winds, four round spheres of clock faces illuminated from within.

I was running, spurred on by a superstitious feeling about the hour. If the clocks strike nine, I said to myself, before my hand is on the door knocker, something awful will happen. And as I ran frantically I remembered having run through that place at the same hour and with a similar yearning. When?

Finally the pleasure of that false memory so absorbed me that I resumed my normal pace without realizing it. From time to time, from pauses in my musings, I saw I was in another place, and new views unfolded before me: glowing spotlights, little plazas with flowers, illuminated clock faces . . . I don't know how much time elapsed while I slept in the dizziness of my anxious breathing.

Suddenly, nine resounding peals trickled over my skin with

metallic chill. As a last hope my eyes fell upon the closest door: that was my destination.

Then to put myself in the right frame of mind, I went back over the reasons for my being there. In the morning the mail had brought me a brief and suggestive invitation. A street address was handwritten in the corner of the piece of paper. The date was yesterday's. The letter merely said:

"Doña Magdalena and her daughter Amalia await your presence to dine, tomorrow at nine p.m. Ah, if you could come!"

Not one word more.

I always consent to experiences of the unexpected. Moreover, the situation offered a unique attraction: the invitation's tone, both familiar and respectful, with those unknown ladies remaining unnamed; its deliberation: "Ah, if you could come!" so vague and so sentimental it seemed suspended over an abyss of confessions, all helped make up my mind. And I arrived with the anxiety of an ineffable emotion. Sometimes in my nightmares, when I recall that fantastic night (with its fantasy made of daily things and its ambiguous mystery growing from the humble root of the possible), it seems to gasp for breath through boulevards of clocks and tall towers solemn as sphinxes pointing toward some Egyptian temple.

The door opened. I was facing the street and suddenly saw a rectangle of light fall on the ground, throwing the shadow of an unknown woman next to mine.

I turned around. With the light behind her blinding my eyes, the woman was only a silhouette to me, on which my imagination could paint various sets of physiognomy, none corresponding to the outline, till I spluttered some greetings and explanations.

"Come in, Alfonso."

Then I stepped in, surprised to hear myself greeted as at

home. The entrance hall was deceptive. The romantic words of the invitation (at least they seemed romantic to me) had given me the hope of coming across an ancient house, full of tapestries, old portraits, and throne-like chairs; an old house without style, but full of respectability. Instead I found myself in a tiny hall with a fragile, graceless staircase, which in turn promised tight, modern proportions in the rest of the house. The floor was of polished wood; the few pieces of furniture had that cold luxury of things from New York, and on the wall, papered in light green, as an unpardonable sign of triviality, two or three Japanese masks grimaced. I even began to doubt. But I raised my eyes and calmed down. Before me, dressed in black, svelte, dignified, the woman who had appeared to greet me showed me to the door of the salon. By now her silhouette had colored in with features; her face would have been insignificant to me, if not for a marked expression of piety. Her brown hair, brushed somewhat carelessly, just then caused a strange conviction in my mind: that her entire being seemed to unfold and form itself on the suggestion of a name.

"Amalia?" I asked.

"Yes." And it seemed to me that I myself had answered.

The living room, as I had imagined, was small. But the furnishings, in answer to my wishes, clashed terribly with the entrance hall. There were the tapestries and great respectable chairs, the bearskin on the floor, the mirror, the fireplace, the decorative vases; the piano full of photographs and tiny statues—the piano played by no one—and, next to the main drawing room, the easel with a larger-than-life portrait (obviously altered) of a gentleman with thick, slack lips and a forked beard.

Doña Magdalena, who was already waiting for me in an enormous red chair, was also dressed in black and wore on her

breast those hideously large jewels of our parents: a glass ball with a portrait inside, encircled with a gold ring. The mystery of family likeness suddenly absorbed me. My eyes went, unconsciously, from Doña Magdalena to Amalia, and from the portrait to Amalia. Doña Magdalena, who noticed it, aided my study with some timely explanation.

The most appropriate thing would have been to feel uncomfortable, show my surprise, bring about some explanation. But Doña Magdalena and her daughter Amalia hypnotized me, from the first moment, with their parallel glances. Doña Magdalena was a woman of about seventy; thus she consented to leave to her daughter the details of the introduction. Amalia chatted; Doña Magdalena watched me. I was resigned to my fate.

It was up to the mother—according to social custom—to announce the dinner hour. In the dining room the conversation became more general and topical. Eventually I convinced myself that these ladies hadn't wanted anything more than to invite me to dinner, and by the second glass of Chablis I felt immersed in the perfect self-centeredness of a body filled with spiritual generosity. I talked, I laughed, I extolled with all my ingenuity, trying inside to fool myself about the strangeness of my situation. Till that moment the ladies had managed to seem friendly toward me; from then on I felt it was I who was good company to them.

At times the pious air of Amalia's face repeated her mother's face. And the satisfaction, utterly physiological, of Doña Magdalena's face occasionally reverted to her daughter's. It seemed that these two motifs floated in the ambiance, flitting from one face to the other.

I could never have anticipated the pleasures of that conversation. Although she vaguely suggested I don't know what

recollections of Sudermann, with frequent recourses to the problematic area of domestic responsibilities and—as was natural in spirited women—sudden Ibsenesque lightning bolts, still I felt as at ease as in the house of some widowed aunt, next to some cousin, a childhood friend now in early stages of spinsterhood.

At first, the conversation centered entirely on matters of trade and economics, with which the two women seemed pleased. There is no better topic when we are invited to dine in some house in which we are not comfortable old friends.

Later, things took another turn. Every phrase began to flit away as if accompanied by some distant request. Each led to an end which even I did not suspect. Eventually there appeared on Amalia's face a sharp, disturbing smile. She began to combat visibly against some internal temptation. Her mouth trembled, at times, with the anxiety of her words, and she always finished with a sigh. Her eyes suddenly dilated, staring with such an expression of fear or abandon on the wall behind me, that more than once, surprised, I even turned around myself. But Amalia seemed unaware of the discomfort that it caused me. She continued with her smiles, her starts and her sighs, so that I shuddered each time her eyes looked over my head.

Finally a real dialogue of sighs began between Amalia and Doña Magdalena. By now I was growing uneasy. Toward the center of the table, and, incidentally, so low that it was a constant annoyance, hung a lamp with two lights. And on the walls it projected the colorless shadows of the two women, in such a way that it was not possible to determine the correspondence between shadows and people. An intense depression came over me, from which I was saved by this unexpected invitation:

"Let's go into the garden."

This new perspective made me regain my spirit. They led me through a room whose spare cleanliness made me think of hospitals. In the dark of the night I could make out a small artificial garden, like that of a church cemetery.

We sat under the trellis. The ladies began to tell me the names of the flowers that I wasn't able to see, relishing the cruel delight of quizzing me afterwards on their recent instruction. My imagination, unsettled by such a long session of eccentricities, found no rest. It scarcely let me listen and almost didn't let me answer. The ladies were now smiling (I guessed as much) in full awareness of my state. I began to mix up their words with my fantasy. Their botanical explanations, when I recall them today, seem as monstrous as delirium: I think I heard them talk of flowers that kiss; of stalks that tear themselves from their roots and climb up your body, like snakes, up to your neck.

The darkness, the weariness, the supper, the Chablis, the mysterious conversation about flowers I couldn't see (and I still don't believe there were any in that stunted garden), were all conducive to sleep; and I fell asleep on the bench, under the trellis.

"Poor captain!" I heard when I opened my eyes. "He left for Europe all full of illusions. For him the lights are extinguished."

In my vicinity the same darkness reigned. A warm breeze made the trellis tremble. Doña Magdalena and Amalia were talking next to me, resigned to my silence. It seemed to me they had exchanged places during my brief sleep; so it seemed to me.

"He was an artillery captain," Amalia told me. "Young and handsome as any."

Her voice wavered.

And at that point something happened that in other circumstances would have seemed natural, but that startled me then and sent my heart to my throat. Until then the ladies had only been perceptible to me by the sensation of their voices and their presence. At that moment someone opened a window in the house, and the light fell unexpectedly on the faces of the women. And—good God!—I saw the faces suddenly lit up, suspended in the air—the black clothing absent in the darkness of the garden—with the expression of piety recorded even in the hardness of their faces. They were like the illuminated faces in the paintings of Echave the Elder, huge and fantastic celestial bodies.

I leaped to my feet before getting control of myself.

"Wait," shouted Doña Magdalena, "the worst is yet to come."

And then, to Amalia:

"My daughter, go on; this gentleman cannot leave us now and go off without hearing it all."

"So then," said Amalia, "the captain left for Europe, he went through Paris at night, he was in such a hurry to get to Berlin. But his greatest wish was to know Paris. In Germany he had to do I don't know what studies in some cannon factory. The day after arriving, he lost his sight in a boiler explosion."

I was going crazy. I tried to ask; what would I ask? I tried to talk; what would I say? What had happened there next to me? Why had they invited me?

The window closed again, and the faces of the women disappeared again. The daughter's voice rang out:

"Oh! Then, and only then, he was taken to Paris. To Paris, which had been his greatest desire. Imagine him going under the Arc d'Étoile, guessing at everything around him . . . But you

will speak to him of Paris, won't you? You will talk to him about the Paris he couldn't see. It will do him such good!"

("Ah, if you could make it!" "It will do him such good!")

And then they hauled me to the living room, carrying me by the arms like an invalid. Around my feet the vegetable tendrils had entwined; there were leaves around my head.

"Here he is," they said, showing me a portrait. He was a military man. He was wearing a soldier's helmet, a white cape, with silver stripes on the sleeves like three bugle calls. His beautiful eyes, under the perfect arched eyebrows, had a singular authority. I looked at the women: the two smiled as if relieved after completing a mission. I contemplated the portrait again; I saw myself in the mirror; I verified the similarity: I was like a caricature of that portrait. The portrait had a dedication and a signature. The handwriting was the same as on the unsigned invitation I received that morning.

The portrait had fallen from my hands, and the two women looked at me with comic piety. Something resounded in my ears like a crystal chandelier smashed against the floor.

And I ran through unknown streets. Electric beams danced before my eyes. The clocks on the towers, clogged up with light, were spying on me . . . My God! When I reached the familiar panel of my door, out of breath, the night was shuddering with nine resounding clangs.

On my head were leaves; in my lapel, a modest little flower I had not cut.

Translated by Rick Francis