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LOVE, SWEET LOVE

THE TOWN TEEMED WITH VIVID scents and rich aromas, though not all of these could be considered pleasant. People here burned the household trash in backyard barrels, tossed it into the street from their door, or left it in this or that empty lot to rot. Tin cans, glass bottles and all variety of plastic items, as well as less easily definable and possibly more exotic objects, lurked among weeds that at night transformed into a territory for dogs and rats to scavenge, nostrils quivering. Too, the local sewage system was inefficient. Besides a lingering perfume of backed-up pipes and drains there existed pronounced olfactory proof that waste was not washed away as far or as completely as might have been desired. Some residents kept chickens and pigs behind their houses; these creatures of God made their own contribution to the symphony of smells that played continuously through the streets. Tropical temperatures and humidity cooked all odours into a more intense offering for the senses: meat on hooks before the butcher's, lavishly decorated with flies, emitted putrid waves that pulsed through the afternoon air. Mixed with such aromas, however, were the more enjoyable ones of home cooking, inexpensive perfumes, the salt-laden sea, blossoms in the plaza. The latter influenced the air particularly after dusk, and evenings in the square were always sweet and charming. During the rainy season, scents both pleasant and offensive assumed a thickness and weight that suggested solidity: it seemed then that from within the soaked earth was being risen every odorous molecule, which during dry weather slips down through cracked ground or becomes trampled into the dirt. One noticed this phenomenon especially on passing the graveyard, neglected and overgrown, at the edge of town. Through the course of these long wet months the perfume of the jungle that surrounded the town often proved overwhelming. Travelers of the path to the next village would sink to knees and sprawl helplessly for hours on emerald grass, beneath dripping vines, as if under the influence of opium, or in a swoon of love.

This constant barrage of scent did not prevent the townspeople from noticing when an especially strong and unpleasant emanation began to be produced by the Aquino house one afternoon. They wrinkled noses and coughed as they passed the place. During subsequent days the odour became more pronounced and less tolerable. It soon reached the point that neighbours complained first among themselves, then to anyone who would care to listen. "This is no way to live," they said.

Esmerelda Lopez advanced on the house in question, along with some of the less important ladies on the block. Although Carmen Aquino had not been seen for several days, there was nothing exceptional in that. The unfortunate woman often hid from view for extended periods.

Ask Carmen the time, how she was feeling, if she'd heard the latest news, and the answer would be: What? The simplest question was apparently so fraught with difficulty and danger for this woman that she was wary of committing to an answer which might, if incorrect, imperil her life. Carmen had never been brilliant. But anyone to suffer her life would have been rendered a fool.

"What?" she stuttered again, peering from eyes one of which was swollen nearly shut and discoloured by a vast purple bruise similar in tint to other markings on her face and arms. Looking levelly at Carmen, Señora Lopez tried to breathe only through her mouth, and blessed the fact that she had doused herself with a generous splashing of Peach Passion perfume. At the same time, she fought a temptation to reach out and touch the most spectacular of Carmen's bruises, just to know what it felt like.

The husband was the culprit of this crime, as Señora Lopez and everyone else knew only too well. If not the most sensitive soul, Felipe Aquino was at least consistent. His pattern remained the same. The drunk would disappear for several days, maybe a week, before returning home to compel Carmen to produce a night's worth of screams not dissimilar in pitch and tone to those made by several dogs being boiled alive in oil. The next day Felipe would vanish again and Carmen would emerge black and blue to do her shopping. "What?" she replied, if someone wondered what had happened to her—though with time few bothered to make this inquiry, just as they didn't ask why the earth was wet after rain, why boats sailed between ports of stars. "I fell," the ungifted liar would finally aver with a curious mixture of pride and shame.

Certain women marveled that Carmen didn't bother with the stratum of concealing her bruises with powder or of wearing a long-sleeved

blouse to hide an especially ugly welt on her arm. It was almost offensive how she would wait in line before the tortilleria and hum a love song as if there were nothing amiss in her situation. Every moment or so Carmen would break off her wordless song to stammer eagerly about her husband. It was Felipe this and Felipe that. He had done such a thing and he had said another thing; every breath Felipe drew was fascinating to his lover, and in no way did she ever imply he was less than a living idol. One might suspect Carmen of returning from The Honeymoon Hotel just the other day, not some fourteen years earlier.

While others shifted away from Carmen at such moments, as if her troubles were as catching as a common cold, Señora Lopez was frankly interested in the woman, sometimes leading her on to recount further details concerning the remarkable Felipe. Although Señora Lopez's own marriage was in no shape or form a bed of roses, it perhaps lacked the ingredients necessary for gripping melodrama, and at home she had been known to create controversy out of the thinnest air. Her peace-loving husband would remove himself to a more tranquil landscape, leaving her alone with a passion the source and shape and significance of which she couldn't begin to comprehend. This was when Esmerelda Lopez was still at the early stage of her life-long study into the nature of love, a pursuit that for many years would be misunderstood and maligned by contemporaries, and she was unable to avoid gazing at Carmen's battered body with an expression akin to admiration.

Once or twice she visited the victim, on a day following an appearance by Felipe, to find her humming brightly around a tidy kitchen, tenderly setting the table for two, preparing an excellent meal from modest ingredients. "He should be home any minute," Carmen would confide, brimming over with pleasurable anticipation, in her happiness nearly losing her stutter—despite the fact that Felipe never returned home quickly after he departed, and that her bruises were still fresh, flaming reminders of what inevitably occurred when he did come back. That evening Señora Lopez would make a point to pass by Carmen's again. The Aquino woman waited in a chair before the doorway, her damaged eyes darting hopefully up and down the road, attempting through sheer force of desire to make Felipe appear. It did not require genius to perceive that the expression on Carmen's face was one of absolute love—but exactly the same genus of love that Señora Lopez would spend her existence investigating. Walking quickly away, Esmerelda was aware that her neighbour had failed to notice her,

because she wasn't Felipe, and aware also that the pity which rose from her heart was, in truth, pity for herself.

Carmen would not leave the man. She wouldn't admit he was less than an ideal lover. "What?" she replied, obviously baffled, when Señora Lopez once suggested she abandon the sinking ship of this marriage. Many a mystified lady proposed that Felipe must be some kind of stallion in bed: yet they were doubtful, for the man was small and skinny, with a body so ravaged and weakened by liquor that at times he could scarcely walk. (Señora Lopez often mused on the reason why Carmen wasn't able to defend herself successfully against such a poor physical specimen.) There was a chilling look to Felipe's perpetually bloodshot eyes: people remained a determined distance from him, and no one was quite able to confront him with his poor treatment of his wife. To avoid the man was simple: since he chose not to bathe or change clothes, one could smell Felipe from several blocks. His greasy hair was usually matted where he had fallen unconscious into a pool of his own vomit.

"Love is blind," suggested Señora Lopez, biting her lip, when town ladies wondered what the attraction was. They recalled that Carmen had once been a romantic girl fond of writing poetry, collecting wildflowers, and pacing the moonlit shore. She'd been someone's bridesmaid, the recipient of deepest girlhood secrets, a best friend. Never any beauty, she remained pretty enough despite the toll taken on her appearance by a hard life. Yet she had somehow moved beyond other women into a land of love they had no desire to visit, never mind reside in permanently: between Carmen and them existed a boundary as clearly defined and difficult to cross as the border between this country and California; in that exotic land flourished ways of being with no relation to customs here. Among all the ladies only Señora Lopez felt for Carmen that complicated mix of emotions experienced on waving farewell to a wanderer who sets out on a difficult journey: abandonment at being left behind, relief at being spared disturbing encounters with the unknown.

"At least there are no children," sighed town ladies, seeking to view the story from its best angle. Any of them would have provided Carmen with safe harbour if she had come sobbing to their door in the middle of a violent night. Unfortunately, physical abuse of wives was commonplace in the town and, lacking effective legal recourse to this problem, women were obliged to offer each other the refuge they might one day need themselves. That Carmen didn't make even discreet mention of her husband's flaws,

as if she were superior to such complaint, or existed on a plane where the terrible was transformed into the best of blessings, only alienated other women further. Still, they left food at Carmen's door from time to time. Felipe didn't work: he drank up every peso he could beg, borrow or steal. Even if Carmen was mad about the man, no human being had survived on a diet of love alone.

"There was a dead rat beneath the bed," Carmen admitted at last, facing the town ladies on her doorstep with a cross between defiance and fear. "I just got rid of it the other minute."

"And Felipe?" asked Señora Lopez. "Where's he?"

"What?" stammered Carmen.

The town ladies retreated, convinced that if a rat was the root of this smelly affair, it went by the name of Felipe Aquino. "Something's fishy here," thought Señora Lopez, especially puzzled. Her husband and daughters found her distracted and irritable for the rest of the afternoon, and well into the night.

No fruit of the sea had been known to smell as foul as the odour wafting from the Aquino residence during the next several days. This scent intensified by the hour, as did discussion concerning its probable source. There was no glimpse of Carmen or Felipe; their house stank in silence. Town ladies finally enlisted husbands to help dig to the bottom of this affair. One knocked on Carmen's door; when there was no answer, the other forced it open.

Inside the first sight was that of a candle burning beneath the Virgin on the wall. Then the men noticed that Carmen sat on a chair beside her marriage bed. She was holding the hand of Felipe, who lay prone beneath covers despite the considerable heat. Carmen gazed pensively into his wide-open eyes and seemed oblivious to the intruders behind her. Even Marco Marquez, the strongest fellow in town, was forced to retreat hastily when he tried to advance toward the bed. All the men stumbled choking and gasping from the house to inform their waiting women that Felipe was not only dead, but quickly decomposing.

Several moments later Carmen appeared in the doorway. She smiled vaguely at the crowd. "He's taking a nap," she explained, one hand darting to caress a bruise on her left cheek that was changing colour from purple to green. She didn't appear affected by the stench of her husband's rotting corpse; perhaps long proximity to his live being had blunted her sense of smell. Sara Lopez noticed that there was nothing disheveled in Carmen's

aspect. By the look of it the woman had recently done her nails.

“He’s tired,” Carmen explained further, raising her voice slightly. “We were up all night, I’m afraid. First we strolled on the shore beneath the moon. Afterward Felipe serenaded me with love songs on the sand at Christmas Bay. He’s always had a beautiful voice.”

Several things occurred to Señora Lopez. First, there had been no moon the previous night. Second, the tide had been at its highest point of flow, covering the sand on which lovers might otherwise stroll and serenade. Also, Señora Lopez had heard Felipe’s drunken singing more times than she cared to recall, and it was never a pretty sound.

“He sang my favorite one,” continued Carmen, now looking dreamily at the crowd. “It begins:

*Why are your eyes like the stars
When I cannot see ...”*

The woman turned abruptly into her house and bolted the battered door.

Less than thirty minutes later a band of twelve men, led by Marco Marquez, burst into the Aquino house again. This time they were better prepared: covering their mouths and noses were bandanas drenched with their wives’ strongest perfumes. Beside the bed, Carmen still clasped her husband’s hand. Close observation revealed that Felipe must have gained a good deal of weight prior to his last breath, or bloated considerably after it.

“Shhh,” whispered Carmen, requesting quiet with one index finger across her mouth.

Blessing Peach Passion more fervently than ever, Señora Lopez moved forward to lead Carmen, unresisting, into the kitchen. At once the widow picked up a rag and began to wipe the counter, singing as she worked.

*Why are your eyes like the sea
When I do not know how to swim*

Señora Lopez watched Carmen intently, as if studying a specimen beneath a microscope. Where had she heard this song before? Had someone sung these words to her long ago on the white sand at Christmas Bay, beneath the moon and million stars, before a spangled sea? Señora Lopez pushed the uncomfortable question aside. “I still don’t know the first thing about love,” she thought, despite her decade-long marriage and three daughters. She felt suddenly exhausted by the realization of all that remained to be learned about the subject.

In the other room the men wore thick work gloves to remove the corpse. Flesh seemed to slide off bone as they tried to lift Felipe from the

bed. Finally he was shifted onto a sling, more or less in one piece, then carried directly to the graveyard. There a host of housewives, hastily attired in black, hovered around a just-dug hole, waving paper fans while squinting to get a last look at Felipe.

The cause of death was never known. The town boasted neither doctor nor coroner, and the veterinarian who examined human corpses in special circumstances refused, on account of his notoriously weak stomach, to go near Felipe. Certainly it might have been difficult, given the time apparently lapsed since death, and the decomposition to occur in that period, to determine whether the man had met a peaceful or violent end. If the latter were true, and if Carmen were responsible, no one felt inclined to blame her. The corpse was dumped into its grave and covered with dirt before the priest's arthritic fingers had finished buttoning his fancy robes.

Everyone remarked later on how the air was now fresher, cleaner and sweeter not only near the Aquino house but at the distant side of town, too. Along with Felipe had been buried, it seemed, all unpleasant odours without regard for why they existed. In spite of this, women splashed more than usual amounts of scent upon themselves during the following weeks, and all the men in town, including the least fastidious, were constantly beneath the shower. At evening, handsome couples in freshly laundered clothes, with skin scrubbed until it shone and hair still damp from washing, promenaded sweetly around the plaza, amid unfolding flowers.

They would stop in their tracks when Carmen appeared. "What?" the widow asked, not with her former tentativeness, but quite sharply, when neighbours offered condolences or hinted that she was better off now. Night after night Carmen wore purple heels and a multi-flounced dress of canary yellow she had last been seen in at a Sunday dance fifteen years ago, when Felipe was a smiling, sober youth courting her with an invitation to The Honeymoon Hotel. She plucked a flower from a shrub, sniffed it critically, stuck it in her hair. Townspeople stared after her as she strolled from the square in the direction of the graveyard. Her song hung behind her like perfume in the air.

*Why are your eyes like the night
When I am afraid of darkness*

Yes, this was the season of dry, clear nights when breeze lifted suggestions of salt from the sea, and moon and stars cast clean light upon the town. Señora Lopez set the evening meal on the table, took off her apron, then left the house without explanation for her husband and daughters,

who were well enough acquainted with such sudden exits that their appetites failed to suffer. Esmerelda walked alone at the shore, brooding at sight of lovers nestled together on the sand. Slowly crossing the plaza, she permitted her gaze to rest on boys wrapped around girls amid an aphrodisia of flowers. The graveyard at the edge of town lay unlit, and moonlight only created confusion between objects and their shadows. Señora Lopez stood at the edge of the cemetery, as if halted by a border she was unable to cross.

Before her, Carmen Aquino stumbled on purple heels between crosses and stones until she found the most recent grave. Sitting beside the plot without concern for her yellow dress, she allowed her gaze to wander past the figure of Señora Lopez without giving a sign. The last bruises left by Felipe on his widow's face had faded and left no mark behind. Now her eyes were clear; in their expression remained none of the former confusion, or defiance, or fear. "What?" she suddenly asked, as if someone nearby had spoken. The graveyard was silent; voices from the plaza couldn't travel this far. With an awkward motion Carmen laid herself on her husband's grave, face pressed against the earth. Her hands reached into the ground, not as if she were trying to dig, but as if she wished to embrace the grave and to wrap her arms around all it contained. The smell of earth was rich and strong, like thick musk or incense, but still sweet. The scent of love rose through six feet of earth, slivering between tightly packed particles of dirt, ascending through pores in the skin of the ground. In his grave a lover cried out complaint against hunger and cold, loneliness and thirst. The sound swelled above the graveyard, silencing crickets and owls.

"What?" asked Señora Lopez, still poised at the fence, still straining to see what lay before her. She waited a moment for an answer. Smiling, she turned swiftly and walked back toward the town, singing as she went.

Why are your eyes like distant places

When I am afraid to travel

In the place Señora Lopez had left behind, wild dogs, wary and desperate and starving, smelled the woman stretched on the grave, and remained a respectful distance from this danger.