

PENELOPE'S SILVER WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

Rima de Vallbona

The preparations for the party have created an atmosphere of anxiety, you'd think we were going to be entertaining royalty. Maybe something exciting is finally going to happen in this sleepy place. Even I'm restless. I try to fit the nervous hours into my daily work, but it's no use. Everything breaks away from the habitual routines, the well-defined limits and rolls on towards the unexpected. Damn it! Will it happen? What?

A party's a party, fool. Relax those nerves. They're tightening like violin strings. Don't jump every time the china clinks as Julia, the old housekeeper, washes it.

"To think that I once held her in my arms when she was just a tiny little thing. Look at her now! I never would've believed that I could hang on for so many years. It's just incredible!" Julia goes on whistling her litany through the black gaps in between her few remaining teeth. She washes and washes, conducting a kitchen symphony of porcelain, crystal, silverware and running water. That unbearable garlic and fried-food smell pervades the air and turns my stomach. Though I really can't tell if it's the smell or what may happen tonight.

The noise, the smell of cooking mixed with the piercing aroma of

jasmine, roses and gardenias all nauseate me and open chasms between me and the things I normally handle with ease, almost with disdain. It's as if I were desecrating a sacred object. When I picked up a teaspoon, I dropped it superstitiously. Damn nausea! The cigarette I was about to light seemed alive in my mouth, so I let it fall and then lacked the energy to pick it up.

In the next room Charito and Laura sing while they make their beds. Magical, impossible sailboats form in the air as they flap the fresh, clean sheets whose whiteness dazzles in the sunlight. As I lie unraveled on the couch, their young arms invite me to enter their intimate circle of laughter and song, to taste their kissing. "They're your cousins, David, orphaned cousins, and you must love and respect them always. You're bad, David! You'll pay in hell for what you've done. You have to go to confession and never sin with them again!" How soft and tender was their skin in the river waters! Never again have I experienced such complete and total paradise: the multicolored vegetation cascading into the water in a transcendental suicide of branches thickened with parasites and bulrushes. And the silence pierced by a thousand noises, bursting into a locust's soft whir, or into the plop of a ripe peach striking the earth, or into the river's rush, or the rush of the blood laden with new, healthy pleasure. "You'll be damned to hell! That's a mortal sin!" Ah, but it was paradise, Mom, the paradise which opened its doors to me at fourteen. The taste of moist virginal flesh inviting me to joyously sample it like a fresh, crisp apple! Swollen with pleasure, their young bodies would sway in the river waters. I closed my eyes and let myself go . . . let myself go . . . let myself go . . . They allowed me to penetrate the boundaries of their sensuous arms and legs that wrapped around my body like a fleshy net. There I surrendered myself to the magic of release after long nights calming the hard, shameful pain in my groin. Surrender was paradise. Hell was each night in my bed as I suffered the sinful swelling. That was hell.

But Mom—such a good woman, poor thing—was unable to understand then as she is now, that games, bicycles, marbles, desks, books and multiplication tables aren't everything. There she sits knitting on the sofa next to the window—waiting for something? Knitting, always knitting. She's waiting for something. I know she is waiting for some-

thing. Every quick, nervous movement of her needle says that she is waiting. She's been waiting for so long! What has she knitted all that time? She must have collected a roomful of bedspreads, pillows, sweaters, booties, hats, scarves. Where does she find room for them all? Now, amid the bustle and getting ready for the party—damn it—Mom's knitting is making me strangely uneasy. Where on earth could she put all those things if she has never worn them or given them away? Is there a secret stash somewhere in the house? Where? White wool, always pure white. Ever since I was a child, I would watch her knit by the window, humming some sad old waltz, and then she should kiss me as she shook with anguish. "Why do you knit so much, Mom?" She would just keep knitting, and a teardrop trickled down her cheek whenever I asked her. "Where's that white sweater you knitted last week?" Then she would silently rise from the sofa and go to check on Julia's dinner preparations. I always asked her about it but Mom's knitting never bothered me as it does today. The very first words I can remember her saying to me were "Sinful boy! You'll go to hell! You're a bad boy!" Then she would trail off muttering "Sausage, potatoes, beans, laundry, roses, knitting. I must knit, I must finish these booties." As she intones "I must," it's as if everything alive in her drains off into the grave and she goes on making soup or kneading dough.

When she hears a love song or the canary's warble, something suddenly seems to stir within her . . . but then she starts up again talking about the same old things as if life were routine and just a household chore. Dad just tolerates the chatter; it isn't coherent, not at all. Strings of words, apparently meaningful, but not really. The funny thing is that each word sounds as if she carried the thing named right there in her mouth.

"Leave her alone, David, she's happy there in her own world, a simple woman's world. Married twenty-five years and not a single complaint, not one. She's happy just to knit, cook, arrange flowers and move the furniture around. If the real world were like that, everything would be a bed of roses. Look, look here at this gray hair—that's what you get chained to a desk all day."

Mom doesn't have a single gray hair but her eyes suggest grave-stones and the life entombed inside. In the mornings when she awakes

her complexion is moist, as if the dew had watered the slight wrinkles that are starting to appear around her eyes. Not a single gray hair. Shining hair, always clean, done up in an elegant bun. As long as she doesn't open her mouth—*bring the potato salad, Julia*—you'd think she had popped out of a museum painting of some royal family. But once she starts talking about everyday things in her unpretentious way and with that peculiar accent from her home town, she seems crude and common. It makes you want to muzzle her, hide her in a corner, plug your ears and block out the awful sound that clashes with her beauty and elegance. Why can't she leave the bananas, cabbage and vegetables alone? Mom, Mom! How many times has she embarrassed me with that *Oh, these tomatoes are overripe!* and *Mmm, what tender green beans!* They look at me and shrug their shoulders, unable to understand her simple world, and then resume their conversation . . .

Today's party. What for? What is it that's bothering me? Just another party. I feel like gagging. Is there any more room at all in Mom's knitting room? Is she going to stay by the window? White wool, white wool, white wool . . . "Oh, those nights at the Opera House, the Music Hall . . . to take in the splendor of the chandeliers! To dance every night until your shoes wore out, a new pair every night, just to wear them out." When did she say all that? No, she never did. I just dreamed it in one of those childhood daydreams that so easily pass for reality. "And the girls were always jealous of my dance card. All the boys wanted to dance with me." A vague remembrance of hearing it from her lips. Maybe it wasn't her. Someone else. Probably one of those vain old bags that always talk your ear off when they visit. White wool, kitchen—nausea, nausea—its the same little world she'll never escape. Poor thing. Just like grandmother and all the others, no wings to fly away towards the endless horizon, no dreams of conquest . . . Oh hell, what a bunch of tripe. It's all so dumb, the knitting room, the fragile little woman, a shadow, empty inside . . . What silly thoughts!

Charito is warm, vibrant as she trembles against me for a moment and then slips away like a fish. She is so tender pressed against me, alive with unquenchable ardor in her beautiful, perverted virginity. "You'll suffer in hell! You're bad!" Mom said that because she just doesn't understand how Charito feels when she rubs up against me and we go

for it. Mom doesn't know anything about that. I wonder if she has ever felt it with Dad—or anyone? No way. She's different, all she cares about is white wool and kitchen. Strange, when the teacher would talk about the Tinoco dictatorship I would think about Mom, vivacious and laughing, with curly hair and a low-cut dress—*Pelico Tónico made a pass at me too, but I...* It's absurd, she's not that old and besides she's my mother, who can say...

The party finally starts, guests arrive. Little by little the pretense, lies and gossip penetrates and solidifies in the interstices between them. Laughter, greetings, all bullshit. Nausea haunts me, will Mom start stuffing herself with bananas, tomatoes, stew and pies? She looks so beautiful in that black dress that sets off the reddishness in her hair, just regal. If she would just keep quiet, stay away from the commonplace. What? What are they saying? She's going to make an announcement? Everyone's eyes are on her. Dad is dumbfounded. This can't be happening! She has never spoken to a crowd before. With all those vultures waiting around for someone to slip up, how could she dare to speak up?

"Mom, for crying out loud... why did you have to have that damn drink, you know what it does to you. Come on, let's go..."

"No, I have an important announcement for my friends. Let me go, David, and tell your father I haven't had a drop to drink."

"Mom, please shut up for the love of God!"

She climbed up on a platform and majestically silenced everyone. She had the most marvelous, regal air about her. If she could just stay that way and be quiet...

"I would like to be candid with all our dear friends, you who have known us all our twenty-five years of marriage. How could I celebrate our silver wedding anniversary without sharing *my* happiness with you?" (Why did she emphasize *my*? What about Dad? She's drunk, she just can't handle champagne.)

"Can you imagine what it is like to be married to a cruel, selfish, stubborn, lecherous man for twenty-five years,—*God damn it, she's gone crazy!*—the sleepless nights and exhausting days working, living by his side?—*Christ, this is unreal! Nightmare! This can't be happening, she's no good at expressing herself, she's drunk, get her out of here!*—I won't bore you with

the details, all the tears I've shed during the past twenty-five years . . . What's that murmuring? I just want to share with you why I'm so happy. Well, here it is: David is now a man and no longer needs me. As for my husband . . . Today I celebrate my freedom. Have you ever seen a prisoner who has just paid his debt to society? Well, you're looking at one now.—*I can't take any more, everything is coming down around my ears*—Today I am throwing off the yoke of marriage. I am now free to dispose of my time as I please. No more crummy trips to Galveston or Freeport while he takes his mistress to Acapulco, Capri and Biarritz! I'm going around the world.—*She's crazy, crazy, crazy!*—And the best thing about today is the end of the silence that practically destroyed me. Drink up; drink, my friends, to freedom, to this joyous day for both me and my husband!—*Dad, poor Dad, how humiliating!*—Right dear, isn't that a relief? I'm the one that made the stink so you can play the suffering husband, just as always. Let's just drink to it, no bad feelings, good friends like we've always been."

The feeling of unreality that had pursued me since morning hit me with such force that I thought the martinis had finally done me in. I had the strangest sensation that the distance between other objects and myself were somehow sacred. Material objects which I once touched without noticing now disappeared from sight. They shunned contact, slipping away into nothingness, vanishing in the nightmare.

Mom was still on the platform when I noticed the black dress had a very provocative neckline. Her neck—I'd never seen it that way before—was firm, young, like Charito's, disquieting. No, for Christ-sake, what's happening to me? She's my mother. There she is, laughing . . . laughing . . . laughing with that good-looking gray-haired fellow. They gaze at each other raptly, lustfully, whispering things I can't even imagine. The martinis . . . I'm plastered. Mom, Dad, twenty-five years, the anniversary, that man: Dr. Manzione, yes, it was Dr. Manzione the one that pulled her through that long illness. He saved her life . . . now he's saving her from . . . hell . . . slut . . . She's bad just like all the rest . . . They're just looking at each other . . . And Dad? It's the martinis, I can't even remember my name.

She can't. She can't leave the salads, tortillas, soups . . . Dammit! Let her keep knitting by the window! I'll buy her all the white wool she

wants so she'll fix that sinful neckline and stop staring at Dr. Manzione that way. She was born to knit.

"I still have the rest of my live to enjoy, just for me. Why not now while there's still time? Slavery is illegal now, isn't it? (She's no good, she's looking at Dr. Manzione like Charito looks at me when we're together. She's gone to hell. My clean, pure mother, tireless knitter of useless things. This is pure hell, I thought that . . .)

Things got even stranger when she produced her knitting (white wool, white, white everywhere!) and started passing it out among the guests: they all got into it and started putting things on until they were completely covered in whiteness, white, white wool . . . finally fusing into a white mass of arms, legs, a shrieking, frenzied confusion of freedom and lust.

TRANSLATED BY MARY G. PARHAM