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MILAGROS, MERCURIO STREET

By Carmen Lugo Filippi

The white Little Red Riding Hood is dead.
—Evaristo Rivera Chevrement

After having worked in elegant salons, with hairstylists of the sort that compete every year in New York or Paris, the change in atmosphere had depressed me to no end, but I tried to adapt to my new surroundings, telling myself that it was better than working for hire, taking orders all day for a salary and tips that were no compensation for the madhouse schedule of “social Fridays” and tumultuous Saturdays, when a throng of locals and tourists alike invaded the ritzy shop at Isla Verde in search of their lost beauty. The tourists amused me a lot, particularly the Spaniards. Junito let me take care of them because he said I treated them with class. Let’s just say that yours truly was the only one there with three years of college behind her and experience abroad, and that gave me the upper hand among Junito’s ten assistants. Of course, such consideration had at first led to a lot of resentment from the girls, resentment I was only able to allay by dint of many smiles and kindnesses. Maybe what calmed them down was the sincerity of my protestations: three years of comparative literature don’t guarantee anyone a spot in lofty intellectual circles, especially if one hasn’t completed the blessed degree. In some measure I sweetened the bitterness of their frustrations by assuring them that many women with brand new degrees in literature were forced to get jobs at airports or work as stewardesses if they didn’t want to starve. You earned more with some hairstyling courses than with three years of literature or languages . . . Thus I worked my way around their resentment, and they left me alone to stew over my own frustrations, which were plenty.

Yes, because I had never been able to forgive myself for leaving college so hurriedly to marry Freddie. I should have gotten my degree, I should have continued writing, I should have, I should have . . . After I won second prize in that literary contest at the Ateneo, everyone kept telling me that I had a lot of talent. I’m still asking myself what the hell blinded me. Maybe it was the fear of becoming an old maid: diehard old maids horrified me, especially when I thought of my poor aunt, enslaved to the care of my grandmother and uncle Manuel. The truth is that when Freddie appeared on the horizon I lost my cool: he promised me the moon and the stars: we would live near the Torrejón base in Madrid, where he would be transferred the following year. Travels, what a treat! From Madrid it would be easy to go to France, where I would be able to practice my two years of French, and from there it was but a tiny leap to the most beautiful Italy.

Those dreams never materialized because Freddie could not leave for Madrid and

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I got pregnant. By the time the baby turned one, I was already on the verge of a breakdown. The domestic routine crushed me; I needed room to breathe and, more than anything, I needed to talk to someone who could understand me. Freddie would only talk to me about his goings-on at the military club and that only when he felt like it. Mili, the girl who did my hair, took pity upon my awesome loneliness and asked me to help her shampoo hair in the afternoons. That's how I got my initiation into the hairstyling arts; I discovered that my fingers possessed uncommon abilities, and my imagination spilled over with ideas for extravagant styles. Mili assured me that she had never met a stylist of my caliber. She forced me to take an intensive course in makeup and hair-styling. I did not disappoint her: I took top honors in the class.

That was the time of my boom. I worked contentedly in an extremely elegant salon on Avenida Goya. All the poor little employees were astonished at my learning: the polyglot, they called me. Not only did I dazzle them with the gringas, but I also sparkled in front of the French tourists. I had never truly felt so important.

Even though my marriage was not going well, work made up for the boring company of my insipid husband, who only knew how to bet on horses and hang out at the Officer's Club.

When he came to me with the story of a transfer to Alabama, I knew without a doubt that I didn't give a damn about his military career. I packed up my belongings and gave him a "see you later" that later became a definite goodbye. It was the best for both of us.

Work at Junito's salon distracted me. I used to amuse myself with the absurdities of some of the customers, perfect dopes trying to pass for great ladies. I could spot them at a glance and would surrender eagerly to the pleasant task of mortifying them. A seemingly innocent barb, a discreetly critical comment, and finally, zap! I would put them in their place just by correcting their horrendous English . . . I was so good at clipping their wings that even Junito marveled at my "savoir faire." When they clamored for a "fabulous setting" I would arch my brows and articulate with perfect enunciation and solicitude: spray for oily or dry hair? And that was nothing. When they asked for "professional spray," I would lean majestically, like a Miss Clairol model, and innocently point to the newly-arrived aerosol spray with proteins. The results didn't make themselves wait: they would deposit in my pocket generous tips, sometimes up to 15%, and I even got furtive glances of respectful admiration.

I would have stayed there if it hadn't been for my mother, who nagged me into opening my own business on the ground floor of her house in Ponce. "You'll do well, honey, you'll see," she repeated constantly. "You'll have an assured clientele, don't be silly, remember that you will not have to pay rent."

And that's how I got to Mercurio Street, more to please my mother than because I really wanted to go. At the end of two weeks, I was already settled on the first floor of our modest house. The place looked really cute with its freshly papered walls, the "collages" of cuts and hairdos that I myself had put together on black plywood, and its three identical dryers, lined in front of a plainly framed mirror (I hated the pretentious golden trimmings of the mirrors sold at Woolworth's).

I didn't have to wait for the customers: at graduation time I had a full house for three long days. The parade consisted above all of ninth graders with their respective

mothers, some for haircuts and styling, others for hair dyes and permanent waves, and a considerable number for hair straightening.

The atmosphere was on the whole on the humble side (the regular weekly customers were four or five nurses, two school-teachers, eight secretaries and plenty of factory operators and department-store clerks). I didn't have much to complain about since I made my bit of cash without killing myself and besides I was with Mom, a great help in those days of loneliness. I was saving all I could to be able to go back to the University, my only ambition then.

It was just around this time that I saw Milagros for the first time. I remember her so vividly, as if I had been watching a Spanish movie in black and white, one of those terribly somber ones set in a small town in the middle of nowhere, where the svelte, long-haired heroine walks slowly towards the camera, which suddenly moves towards a close-up; a perfect, somewhat parsimonious close up that glides down the extremely pale face and delights itself on the inexpressive features—above all, on the languishing and vacant eyes.

She walked by punctually at four, on her way back from school, dressed in her beige and brown uniform, impassive, looking like she wouldn't give anyone the time of day, her head held high, the shoulders perfectly balanced, probably to maintain the harmonious coordination of movement in her lower limbs, a prodigious mechanism of exactitude through which shoulders and legs advanced leisurely, without losing for a single instant the initial rhythmic momentum.

Watching her awakened in me a strange phenomenon of correspondences: movies, literature, painting and music blended confusedly to render back to me the eclectic image of a strange, mysterious creature that by no means belonged to that common and good-natured street. I imagined the girl stirring up Junito's salon with a surprise entrance, inciting looks of envy from more than one dieting lady and igniting Junito's covetous admiration; he would, without a doubt, offer her fame and fortune on a silver platter to get her to model his latest style in a hair-styling contest in New York.

Yes, because to you Milagros' hair was a true challenge. You even had fantasies of possible haircuts, true masterpieces worthy of appearing in *Hair and Style* and *Jours de France*. That's why one afternoon I couldn't stand it anymore and said to Doña Fefa by way of gossip: "How sad, it's such a pity, Milagros doesn't take care of her hair, she's going to ruin it." And Doña Fefa, who is a very kind soul, replied that the girl's mother was to blame for that atrocity, since she had forbidden her to do anything to her hair, that old woman is such a Pentecostal "Alleluia," you have no idea, Marina, the extremes to which fanaticism can lead.

Then you understood why she never wore any makeup and why she always, even in the middle of summer, wore those conventional blouses. You spurred Doña Fefa on—she was herself a progressive Baptist—and in the blink of an eye she told you the lives and deeds of the family in question. "Watch them, around seven, as sure as sin, they will walk by on their way to the cult."

It was you, Marina, who, sure as sin, stationed yourself on the porch to observe Milagros' crepuscular pilgrimage. The mother marched ahead, her Bible under her arm, her apocalyptic seriousness contrasting with the comic-grotesque gesture of literally dragging along a six or seven year old little girl, a girl whose strong resemblance to Milagros led you to conclude they were sisters. Milagros followed a

step behind, not altering in the least her rhythmic trot. She also carried a book, although a much thinner one—perhaps a prayer or hymn book? Watching her sober image plunged you into grave cinematographic recollections of the time when you still possessed the intellectual preoccupations of a third-year university student, with perfect attendance at the university film-club (Buñuel, Bardem, Pasolini, and their disciples). A typical Buñuel scene, you pronounced that Tuesday, gloating in the feeling of superiority offered to you by your cinematographic culture and your once customary discussions with the pretentious small clique in the hallways of the Humanities Building at the University—how well you remember them all!—squatting in a corner of Pedreira Hall, pretending to know it all or adopting postures of olympic cynicism. For a moment you wished they had all been there, watching the moving figures from the university tower, so as to be able to elaborate the most abstruse theories and, in passing, engage in animated existentialist discussions. But there was only you.

From that Tuesday on you continued your twilight watch in order to add hues to your already-formed image. You noticed, for example, that Milagros always lagged behind and, because of it, her mother had to wait for her for a few minutes at the corner of Victoria Street before crossing the intersection. You also noted the slight changes in the girl's attire: a discreet V-neckline, a skirt a bit tighter than usual, a pair of cheap but somewhat coquettish sandals.

I couldn't control my growing curiosity any longer, and one Wednesday I followed them at a distance with the secret purpose of sneaking in among the faithful and thus being able to enjoy at first hand the mysterious rituals practiced by those punctual women. My mad imagination associated them with hysterical trances, where the tearing of hair and the frantic waving of hands and arms followed in frenzied succession. I could not conceive the deliberate Milagros in such a state of vulgar frenzy.

What I witnessed that evening impressed me a lot, so much so that later I often caught myself recalling the scenes; especially the deafening "Fire and brimstone, Oh Lord, Fire and brimstone!" suddenly drowned by the unexpected explosion of a tambourine, whose peal of jingles lasted a few seconds, like a musical background to the sporadic shrill screams of Alleluias and Glorias, sprinkled with doleful moans and broken sighs. Milagros' mother transformed herself: her stature rose (maybe she was standing on the tip of her platform shoes?) while she swung her arms left and right with such vehemence that several times I feared Milagros would end up knocked down on the church pew. But what really exasperated and even amused me because of the contrast, was the image of the girl, watching the spectacle, hieratic, tilting her head with that magnificent gesture of indifference.

A few days later, a Saturday to be precise, I was greatly surprised to find both of them waiting for me at the entrance to the shop. The mother came forward and, without beating around the bush, let me know that her daughter was losing her hair and urgently needed one of those treatments I gave.

I examined the sphinx's scalp with an expert's caution and diagnosed an acute psoriasis. The treatment would take about three weeks, since Milagros' abundant hair would make the massages more difficult, especially since it would be a veritable odyssey to fit that pretty mane of hair into a hot cap. I was forbidden to cut one single

hair so the task became quite a nuisance, except for the unexpected opportunity of watching so closely the little madonna's expression. Did those San-Juan-fashion-model airs conceal a case of mental retardation?

While she was there with her mother she did not say a word. She remained seated, staring at her own image in the big mirror, almost without blinking.

She came back on Tuesday for the first treatment. This time she came alone. She was dressed in her school uniform and looked paler than usual. I greeted her cordially and asked her "How's school?" to which she answered with a laconic "fine". I took no notice of her silence and continued my monologue, warning her of the risk she ran of going bald if she didn't get a haircut in time, of the need to take care of her hair. "It is like a plant, my girl, you have to trim it," a cliché that seemed pertinent. I stood behind her and, with a professional hairstylist's gesture, gathered her strands in a soft cascade, forcing her to look at herself in the mirror, and with a casual, "look, how cute you look, so different, you look like a movie star," I placed on her hair one of those combs that were fashionable just then, full of pink and yellow forget-me-nots. She was moved, there was no doubt about it, because she leaned vehemently towards the mirror and stared deeply and admiringly into it, as if the reflection didn't belong to her. Then, smiling, she glanced at me, at a loss as to what to say. I got her some magazines that showed different types of haircuts, and while I placed the hot cap on her head, I suggested that she pick the one she liked best. "I'm not allowed to cut my hair," she said drily. Still, she lost herself in the contemplation of the pictures.

During the third treatment session, Milagros seemed less withdrawn. She even asked me for magazines and *fotonovelas*, essential reading material in any beauty shop. I remember lending her that issue of *Vanidades* which had a long illustrated article on how to apply makeup to suit your facial type. Every once in a while the girl would interrupt her reading to ask me a question about one term or another. The precise way in which she formulated her questions revealed an incisive and intelligent mind. I took advantage of the opportunity to find out what she would do when she finished high school, but her comments were evasive. She lost herself in the contemplation of the photographs and quite a while went by before she opened her lips again.

Once, I don't know if it was on a Tuesday or Thursday, Milagros arrived at the salon around three. I didn't have any customers that day, due to the normal slack around the middle of the month, so I left her alone for about half an hour, while I went to the supply shop to make some urgent purchases, a few boxes of placenta, I think.

When I came back I was surprised to hear music, because I had not left the radio on. I came in noiselessly and caught Milagros with her back to me, in front of the radio, which she had placed on an improvised shelf by the back door. I was pleasantly surprised to hear her repeat with a timid contralto voice the latest hit: "Your love is yesterday's newspaper / an affair that became a full-page headline." But I was even more amused when, swinging rhythmically, Milagros repeated over and over again in a falsetto: ". . . and who wants to read yesterday's paper / who wants to read yesterday's paper." I didn't interrupt her, quite the contrary, I left her immersed in her swaying. She seemed embarrassed when she saw me. I pretended not to pay attention to her and continued the mechanical arrangement of products on the shelves. With an

indifferent gesture I indicated that she could go on listening to the music. It was useless. Not even the salsa-beat refrain of “. . . life is full of surprises, surprise is the name of the game . . .” could pull her out of her sudden withdrawal. Her sudden stiffness made me feel pity for her.

The treatments came to an end with excellent results. She said goodbye on a Tuesday, full of gratitude, taking with her a package of magazines in a brown paper wrapper.

Every day, on her way home from school, she would stop for a few minutes to say hello. I noticed, however, that during the last weeks of November she came by around five o'clock. I thought it was due to a change in schedule and didn't give it another thought. In those days I was very busy with fabrics and seamstresses because my daughter was going to be a flower girl in my cousin's wedding.

That first Monday of December, I went out to run some errands for my cousin—picking up the bouquets and some other trinkets to decorate the tables for the reception. I followed the shoemakers' commandment and never opened the shop on Monday. Between one errand and another, I got home around five. No sooner had I turned the corner than I noticed that something was going on. I perceived from the distance four or five neighbors gathered in front of Doña Fina's house. They were gesticulating ostentatiously, from which I gathered that something really big was cooking. I walked straight up to them and I must say that they welcomed me in their sacred bosom with an expression of . . . malevolence? conspiracy? complacency? pious consternation? Doña Fina let the cat out of the bag without my having to make the slightest effort to get the story out of her. “It happened around four, honey, I was sweeping the leaves of that blessed kennip tree when I saw the patrol car go by. I wondered who's been held up?, you know, Marinita, there's so much crime around, it's the first thing you think of. . . The car stopped in front of the Alleluias' house and out came Rada, my nephew, the one who's a cop, you've seen him. And do you know who they took out of the patrol car? Milagros, honey, Milagros! I thought she had had an accident and I ran to see, to help out. But, honey, I couldn't believe what I was seein', I almost fell flat on my ass! Milagros didn't look like herself, she looked so different, all daubed up, all smeared up. . . ! They took her inside and I followed them in because Doña Luisa was struck dumb at the door. Rada waved me out of the house. What a mess, Marinita, all hell broke loose, just imagine it, you could hear the screams as far as Reina Street, I wouldn't have believed how many foul words Doña Luisa knew, cause she gave her a tongue-lashing of four-letter words, calling her a whore and I don't know what else. . . I would be embarrassed to repeat all the things she said, honey. She even called her Satan's child!”

“I came over here to wait for Rada, you know he always comes to drink coffee, so I sat on the porch and a little while later he came by, all red-faced and nervous. What a tale he told me, Marinita! I'm tellin' you, still waters run deep! You can't trust anyone, honey, Milagros always so proper, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and look what she was up to after school, nothin' other than strippin' in a club on the road to Guayanilla, strippin', can you believe it? Strippin'!”

She took a deep breath and looked at all of us, enjoying our obvious stupor, our unbelieving and yet pleading stares. With abundant satisfaction she stretched out the

transition clause, the one that would introduce us to the sinful den of iniquity, the magic password, the verbal key that would open the mysterious enclosure to let us watch the priestess' ritual. . . .

"Rada went in the patrol car to that club in Guayanilla because someone had snitched that a bunch of rich old men from Ponce got together there to see young girls strippin', what they call stripped-ease . . . He and two other cops caught them by surprise, red-handed, 'cause they came in quietly and Rada said that everything was dark like a witch's cave, they say the only thing you could see was a big table with those lights that go around, of course since it was there that they did the dirty things, of course there were lights, big ones . . . All the dirty old men, droolin' all over, all this with music and drinks, the pack of degenerates, there were even doctors and lawyers in the brouhaha. . . ."

And while Doña Fina, now irrepressible, describes the scene, you, Marina, recreate every detail, fascinated before the abyss opening before you at that moment, letting yourself be swept by the ease with which the suggested images take form and fade out, a visual vertigo that forces you to lean against the kennip tree to be able to maintain in sequence the jumble of scenes that flow uninterruptedly before you.

There is Rada sneaking in by the discreet door that a false curtain of blue beads insists on concealing. He penetrates without great difficulty, but the sudden darkness forces him to grope ahead, until he suddenly perceives in front of him another heavy curtain similar to the first one; he separates the beads softly so as not to betray his presence and slips his plump-cheeked face through the improvised opening . . . Not one voice could be heard. Only heavy panting above the sinuous melody unfolding in slow motion. Renewed clouds of smoke accumulate around a vague focus that appears and disappears when the capricious light of the giant reflector stops for a few seconds. Rada advances towards the group and, peering ahead, captures the ephemeral moment when the bluish light uncovers an extremely pale vibrant mass which curls to the beat of the plaintive notes of a saxophone. He can no longer tear his eyes away from the improvised altar and, hypnotized like the rest of the sexagenarian acolytes, he awaits the return of the light. Yes, because now, very slowly, the reflector takes pleasure in mischievously perusing the graceful foot that raises itself as the cymbals burst joyfully time and time again. The milky mass starts its sensual swaying, and the catching refrain of the melody imposes itself. This time the indiscreet light chases the convulsive movements and Rada grows excited as he watches the serpentine figure straighten itself, with her back to them, displaying with deliberate slowness two perfect roundnesses that contrast with the flat geography of the soft torso. And like that, from behind, the kittenish figure lifts her arms to her neck awaiting the decisive cymbal burst, the one that will indicate to her when to take off the barrette holding her hair, an indispensable movement that precedes the frontal and magnificent final turn, revealer of the most intimate nudity. The panting seemed to have stopped under the influence of that perfect moment simultaneous conspiracy of flashed hungry glances that strike the defenseless image of the nymph-goddess in unison. And there is Milagros, before the surprised eyes of Rada, now blinking incredulously; before Rada, now rubbing his eyes to awaken and find those milky thighs still before him, thighs crowned by a small mound of hair covered with

coquettish forget-me-nots. Oblivious now to the hoarse giggles, to the libidinous entreaties of the sexagenarian priests, to the obstinate trumpet-blasts which accompany Milagros' rising to her feet, Rada cannot tear his eyes away from the small breasts which begin to float, and only the final deafening blast of the cymbals brings him back to reality.

That's the way it must have been, Marina. The rite was accomplished and Milagros was acclaimed despite the screams of the once-again indignant Rada, who, back on duty, ordered, gun in hand, to turn on the lights. "And all hell broke loose, Marinita, a tremendous stampede, but since they were a bunch of shitty old men they calmed down fast, those who were lawyers tried to scare Rada with their judge friends and I don't know what. The thing is, nothin' was going to happen to them, you know that here things like that are hushed up with politics and money . . . and since Rada didn't want to harm Milagros he let them go without arrestin' them so he could bring the Alleluia to her Ma. He is such a decent kid . . ."

You watch, Marina, the silent little house at the end of the street and ask yourself in what corner Milagros will be found licking her wounds awaiting the implacable bruises that will flower as the evening wears off.

From nightmare to nightmare, you ford the intermittent wakefulness and the dawn surprises you with the obsessive image of Rada in a trance before the sinful altar. And during this somber Tuesday, in your comings and goings in the shop, the scene haunts you, and no matter how much you try to dispel it, you can't, because it adheres obstinately to your viewing screen.

That's why you haven't noticed that it is almost eleven and you still haven't arranged the rollers and the bobby pins. You are so impressionable, Marina, that snotty-nosed kid has altered the order of your sacrosanct routine! You carefully polish the formica of the improvised dressing tables and with a damp newspaper sheet, you wipe the mirrors that suddenly render you the reflection of Milagros, yes, Milagros herself, could you be dreaming? But no, there she is by the door, looking at you parsimoniously, without blinking, leaning sideways a bit because of the suitcase she is carrying in her left hand . . . Without turning, you watch her in the mirror. Yes, it's her, there's no doubt about it; a bit different because of her attire, which consists chiefly of a pair of tight burgundy jeans. "What do you need, Milagros?" you almost whisper, incapable of turning to face her, but continuing to look at her through the mirror. She takes a decided step forward and takes a brand-new twenty dollar bill out of her pocket, a bill she brandishes, self-assuredly, and with a soft but firm tone, she makes her demand: "Make me up in shocking red, Marina, and cut my hair any way you like!" Almost imperceptibly, a tremor begins to take control of your knees, but even then you can't manage to tear your eyes away from the mirror where Milagros grows bigger, gathering colossal dimensions, coming towards you, yes, coming towards you in search of an answer, of that answer that she demands and you will have to give, you can't postpone it, Marina, look at yourself and look at her, Marina, what will your answer be?

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert