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IN THE MOUNTAIN LIES THE TREASURE (A Mirage)

by Viriato Sención

To my brother Haroldo, who told me the tale. To the poet Federico Jovine Bermúdez, with whom I shared it one bohemian evening.

THE CHIMERA

They were resting now. They had taken a break from the road on the banks of the Tumbaca stream. From that serene spot they could no longer see the houses in the town below, which as they traveled uphill had slowly become a set of indistinct signposts in the increasingly indistinct valley. All they could see above them was the thick forest, and, hammering on Dolores Peralta's mind, the faraway mecca of the coffee-growing district. That, the coffee district, was where Dolores Peralta was heading with her seven women and Lolito, her young assistant.

They were ready-to-trot-women (the phrase was Haroldo's), the best whores in Dolores Peralta's stable.

The mule, released from its harness by young Lolito, shook its head, grazed docilely on the field, drank water from the stream, and then, satisfied, sprawled under the shadow of a carob tree. The group got ready to enjoy the first meal of the day. They had bread, sausage, and a pot of spaghetti. The road itself would furnish them with meat: a hen or chicken out of those ranging free on the hills near country villages. They all felt so happy; it was the rest, the snack, the illusions Dolores Peralta had sown in the minds of her girls when she had talked to them of the money they would make in the coffee district. Diligently, they spread out a broad square of perforated canvas on the moist grass. Dolores Peralta captained the meal with egalitarian frugality. Lolito took his ration away in a hamper to the banks of the stream and sat on a stone, his feet dancing in the water as he ate.

They had left town before the cocks crowed. Following the bustle of preparations, they marched on in silence through the sleeping streets. Once beyond the last houses, as they began to vanish in the horizon, they broke into a song; but after a while the journey consumed their strength, and they had moved on, hill after hill, hurling complaints, until Dolores Peralta allowed them to rest.

Callaloo 23.2 (2000) 1025–1037

An hour later they resumed their journey. A long and arduous hike awaited them. Up there, they did not know precisely where, they would find the brigades of peasants picking coffee in the plantations owned by Petronio Peralta and Salvador Lluveres. The harvest was good and money was plentiful. They would return with pockets overflowing.

"Gold is gushing out up in Las Cajas; there are more than a thousand men working Don Petronio's and Don Salvador's plantations," Dolores Peralta had overheard someone say a few days before.

Not stopping to inquire further, she picked out her girls. Things weren't going well in town. Money was scarce, and the pimps spent their time frolicking in bed with the whores. *Get ready, girls, we're gonna put those bodies to work. Our boon is up there*, she had said, signaling, with a gesture of her index finger, that they were heading up the hills vanishing in the distance.

The hours went by, as if pushed on by the fresh and whistling breeze. The small troop, on the other hand, advanced more and more slowly. Unaccustomed as they were to stomping through the hills, by four o'clock they were undone. Dolores, the only one to have ridden the mule till then, proposed they not stop. Darkness would soon come, and she wanted to move on, but the girls begged to stay there till morning. She agreed, and they prepared the surroundings so they could spend the night. Lolito appeared an hour later with two dead blue-billed *ciguas* and a live chicken, and was greeted by the women's cries of jubilation.

"Good, Lolito, you can work magic with that slingshot! You're a wizard, boy!"

They dressed the birds, improvised a fire, and there was stew with bread for dinner.

They slept under the stars, on blankets spread here and there around a bonfire that defended them from the cold and the sting of the mosquitoes. At dawn they brewed coffee, and in it they soaked the hard bread they still had left. Lolito got the mule ready, and the women helped put their stuff in the satchels. The disc of the sun was still out of sight; all they could see was its frail light spreading slowly over the mountain peaks. Haze, mist, and far away, the coffee district. The town had been left behind, submerged in the depths of the hills.

They climbed up and down, painfully zigzagging up and down the rough cattle track. Around ten o'clock in the morning they stopped by a thread of water flowing across the path, blocked by what appeared to be five mules loaded with sacks on their backs and rumps. The pack was driven by two young men, barefoot and naked from the waist up. They stood still, suddenly, struck with wonder at running so unexpectedly into the group of women.

"We're heading for the plantations of Don Petronio and Don Salvador," Dolores said after her greeting. "People say this has been a good coffee harvest, that there are many men working there. How far do we have to go?" The woman lifted her eyes to the spot where the sky and the most distant of the mountains merged.

Instinctively, the muleteers directed their gaze where Dolores Peralta had pointed, and for a few seconds they all remained as if transfixed, their necks fully extended, staring at a vague, distant point, there, at the furthest corner of the world.

"We're from the La Laguna neighborhood," one of the men said, "and we're heading to town with this load of coffee. We've never been where you say, ma'am."

And the man unhooked his gaze from the distant sky.

Carmen, known as the Redhead, walked away from the group, taking two of her companions with her. They took something out of one of the satchels, and in a few minutes vanished out of sight. They were hidden behind some rocks that formed a small waterfall. Lolito tried out his slingshot against a tree trunk and then vanished amidst the hills. Dolores and the remaining women stayed behind chatting with the men, now more at ease.

"Yes, we've heard of the plantations of Don Petronio and Don Salvador, but we've never been down that way. And what takes you there, if I may ask?" The one who spoke encompassed the group of women, all young except for their leader, with a suspicious glance; he watched Dolores as he waited for an answer.

"Oh, my sons, we're going to entertain the harvest workers a bit; they must be quite bored. And you, why don't you pay me a visit when you come to town? Ask for Dolores Peralta and you'll be well served." The woman gestured with her hand, as if to display the delicate morsels around her, her eyes searching for the missing ones, without finding them.

It was only then that the men suspected what type of women they had come across. Their eyes met and they smiled nervously. Dolores Peralta approached them, and with a picaresque wink, as she pinched one of them on the left nipple, said, "Tell me, sons, do you have something to eat with you? We've run out of what we brought with us, and the distance seems long." The two men looked at each other again.

"Yes, ma'am, we do," said the one who had spoken before, "only it has to be cooked. We have root vegetables and herrings."

The men, helped by one of the women, prepared a fire by the side of the road, peeled manioc and yams, and waited a long while for the water to boil before throwing them in the pot with four herrings. The women took turns stoking the fire, their skirts rolled up to their thighs.

Dolores Peralta recalled the three missing women and decided to call them: "Reeedhead, Trinaaa . . ." and heard when one of them replied that they were coming. Magnified, the voices vanished, tumbling over the breasts of the hills. They all chased the echoes, as if they formed an invisible trail pointing to them the path to the coffee district. Behind the voices came the Redhead and her two companions. The latter, not the Redhead, were transformed: one was wearing a dress with yellow flowers and green fruits on a white background; the other a dress of an intense blue; their lips glistened in flaming red, their cheeks were daubed with rouge, their hair wet, and behind the ears, stuck in their hair, they had purple flowers of the sort that grew profusely in their surroundings. When they reach the group, they all felt the tart scent of their perfume.

"Eh, girls, where's the party?" the women greeted them in unison, and in unison they went on singing a *bolero*, *Amor perdido . . . Lost Love*.

The men got a bit uneasy when the newcomers parceled them out among themselves, kissing them, and then sitting on their laps. They did not complain, but nonetheless greeted the caresses without much enthusiasm.

"Come, my love, let's go for a walk before we eat," the one with the blue dress whispered very syrupily to her man. "There is a cool and delicious stream behind

those rocks. Come, come on, my sweet, come," she insisted, pulling him by the arm.

The one with the flower-print dress was similarly enticing the other man, and they finally went up the hill, by the path running alongside the stream. The other women remained on this side, feeding the fire with dry twigs, gossiping, playing cards and singing *boleros*. Only Dolores Peralta remained distant, transported beyond her surroundings, imagining an army of men working the coffee harvest. *We will go back to town with the mule's satchels loaded with pesos,*" she thought.

A woman with large and intelligent eyes, with skin the color of cinnamon, Dolores Peralta was nearing fifty; but she was still mistress of those bewitching eyes with which she had beguiled so many men. She had consecrated her life to fostering the happiness of those around her. She was indifferent to the allure of money, but it tore her heart to hear rumblings of hunger in the her girls' bellies. She had confined her ambitions to laughing and eating. And laughter consisted in the full enjoyment of the body, in the abandonment to pleasure, in bed, in the sumptuously sensual dance, in the daily rhythm of existence; mockery of everything and boisterous self-mockery; absence of tears, in short. That is why, as she meditated, her thoughts distant, her sudden determination to guide her girls towards such an uncertain and singularly perilous journey did not fail to astound her. But things were very difficult in town: there was hunger, hopelessness . . . and she built chimeras in her mind, searched for paths, knitted and unknitted the tracks of life . . . Until that overheard conversation put the coffee district into her head, the naive gold mine that was the mountain peasant, emptying his pocket in exchange for a girl's flesh. Then there would be food and laughter for a long time. True, candid laughter—resounding, mirthful laughter.

The sun was already high, and the world was full of color: the woods bursting with hues, the water, the earth on the path rising in yellow sparks. The November breeze was pleasant.

Almost an hour had gone by since Lolito had left, and neither he nor the women who had taken the men away had returned. The isolated voices of the birds and the steady rumble of the stream contributed, in a certain way, to accentuate the silence of the forest. Sheltered under the shadows of the trees, the women rested peacefully. They had eaten, and now waited gently, drowsily, thoughtfully, their mouths closed.

The song in the woman's voice sounded as if lost in the immense thicket; one could make out the melodic tune, but not the words. Then it became clear: *Amor perdido . . . lost love . . . Que viva el placer—long live pleasure—que viva el amor . . . long live love . . .* And out of the clearing in the forest, along with the voice, came the two couples. The one singing was riding on the back of her man, the other was holding hands with hers. When they joined the group, the song became a chorus, and the chorus became an echo, and the echoes rumbled over the hills, until they dissolved into the farthest reaches of the world.

The muleteers had to move on. They had a bite to eat and then said goodbye.

"Remember, my sons, don't fail to look us up when you come down to town. Ask for Dolores Peralta, and you will be well treated, I can assure you." She exploded into a gigantic burst of laughter and embraced all the women with a sweeping gesture of her right hand.

The men remained as if enraptured, their gaze vacant.

"Why don't you turn back?" she said to the one who seemed older. "Come with us. If you get caught in the rain, you're going to run into trouble. Even the goats plunge down the ravines in these hills when it rains. Come with us . . . Come."

But the men left by themselves. In the distance, the pack of mules dwindled into specks, into flecks of dust disintegrating around the bends bordering the gorges.

Lolito showed up around one in the afternoon. He was out of breath, a dead rolón in his hands.

THE ANGUISH

They renewed the march immediately. The men had left them some food: a good-sized pumpkin, two herrings. They also had the rolón Lolito had killed. They marched ahead ever more slowly, taking frequent turns riding the mule, to be able to keep going. They no longer sang and appeared sad and disoriented. The sun was sinking behind them, and it seemed to them they had lost all connection to human life. Right then the best they could wish for was to run into some people, someone who could point to them the way back, anyone who could give them a roof under which to spend the night. They decided to camp out on a hillock, which was like the center of infinite hillocks. Hollows and swelling earth, peaks and abysses, and the grey of the night upon them, and then the long hours of despair waiting for the day to come, for the light to open their eyes . . . And then they recalled, as if they belonged to another life, the voices of the men as they said goodbye, the pack of mules as it disappeared behind the bend of the road.

Standing a bit apart, hidden behind a tree, Dolores spread out her arms like a cross, as if summoning attention to the enormity of her plight, and implored God (the God who lives in every sinner) not to allow this venture she had led them on to bring great sufferings to her girls. Strengthened by her prayer, she gave them a harangue which did not lack incoherent words of courage, and which for the moment dispelled the hopelessness hovering over them.

Dawn found them even more disoriented than the previous evening. It seemed to them as if they were stranded in a completely foreign world. They made breakfast with what little they had left, but when they decided to resume the road they didn't know what direction to follow. The paths led nowhere, and they hesitated on whether to go left or right, this way or that.

Finally, Dolores Peralta chose any path whatsoever. And that's the way they went. Now they only carried water, a bit of instant coffee, some spices: granulated salt, oil, garlic . . . and the hope that Lolito would catch something on the way.

Despite the furor and the tribulations, they maintained the dignity of their appearance. They bathed every day, and in a ritual proper to their trade dabbed their necks with drops of perfume and sported the customary blood-red on their lips.

It was mid-morning, they were hungry, and a black cloud was swelling rapidly in the very center of the sky. They trampled ahead, as if fleeing ghosts threatening them with their thunder, snaking their way upwards towards the sky, opening crevasses

through which bad water would soon flow down, the sort that turns the roads into soap. The rains arrived before noon, barely enough to settle the dust, scatter the birds, and reawaken the agony of the bellies. They all looked imploringly at Lolito who, squatting, his slingshot ready to fire, concentrated all his attention on a tree branch, following the movements of a bird that promptly vanished. Ceaselessly, minutely, he searched the fronds of the other trees, fruitlessly, and ended up firing at random. Two birds flapped their wings in the foliage and flew away, alighting a bit further off, on a yagrumo tree. The boy understood that they were beyond his reach, but he armed his slingshot anyway and fired. The birds didn't even move. At that very instant, stubborn, almost with rage, Lolito the boy rose as a man and from his boyhood sprung a resolute command: "Don't move from here until I come back. I will bring food." And his hard eyes met the sad eyes of the Younger One.

The women obeyed submissively. They had nowhere else to go, in any case. They dropped anchor there, and little by little, as the hours drifted by, were overcome by vexation. Lolito had not come back, and they feared the coming dusk, the disquieting shadows of another night of hunger and wandering. One of the women burst into curses. Dolores Peralta approached her and addressed to her soft rebukes, hugging her, holding her against her chest. Dolores did not like to give in to lamentations and was already afraid of panic setting in, so she asked the girls to sing a happy song. Between blood-red half-smiles and gesticulations, they intoned an *habanera*. The voices, dissonant at first, finally came together, and it was like a divine invocation, since when they finished Lolito burst into the group with two chickens held by the neck, and yelling the good news: he had found a village some kilometers away. He handed the birds to The Younger One, as if they had been a trophy offered in her honor. They went on singing by the fire, and there was a sumptuous stew for dinner.

They were no longer in a rush, nor were they afraid. They delayed their re-encounter with civilization till the following day since now, suddenly, they thought they were in paradise.

The night hastened away in trifling memories; something made them avoid the topic of the coffee district. Grouped around the fire, the boy Lolito leaning against Dolores Peralta, and the glow of the flames sparkling in their eyes, they recalled the afternoon one of them, a squalid little runt, almost a baby stammering a familiar drama whom they christened the Younger One, appeared in the patio of the cabaret asking for Dolores Peralta; and of how all of them sheltered her from male assault until she gained the shape of a woman, until her breasts were ripe fruit. And the night slipped by, cloudless, sleepless, and it occurred to the Redhead to tell stories about the dead; like that dawn when a pimp, stabbed to death a year before, appeared naked, his face livid, the eyes gone and his guts in his hands, imploring her to help him put them back in their place. And then the tree branches seemed like apparitions, and the screeching of the owls became the voice of the Malignant One, and they buried their heads under the rags until, not knowing how, the light of the morning came and with it the true face of things.

THE ARRIVAL

They woke up in high spirits.

They felt the relief of knowing, for the first time in days, that they were sure of something; they would go to the hamlet Lolito had discovered, supply themselves with food, and return to town from there.

The rest would all fade into anecdote.

The place was not as near as Lolito had said; at least that's how it seemed to them on their agonizing hike of almost two hours. They had their first indication that they had reached an inhabited spot when they ran into an interminable barbed-wire fence. A bit ahead they came across a rider with a wide-brimmed white hat and a revolver worn ostentatiously in his holster, his demeanor that of a master who, from his mount, stationed by the side of the road, shouted out orders to some laborers in the horse pastures. The man, when he finally saw them, thought they were people from a neighboring plantation out on an excursion. But he rejected that surmise when he observed them at closer range. They were not from around there. They appeared to be town women, although it seemed impossible for them to have come practically on foot from so far off. The mule counted for little, there were so many of them. When they found themselves face to face and he realized that they were all very young and good looking, his confusion increased.

"Good morning, sir," Dolores Peralta introduced herself.

The rider hissed a reply to the greeting between his teeth.

"We come from town," Dolores went on, "we were going to the plantations of Don Petronio and Don Salvador in Las Cajas, but we have gotten lost, sir. Now we want to go back . . . Buy a bit of food . . . and go back."

"And what were you hoping to find in those farms?" The voice was malicious.

"Well . . . you know, sir. They told us there were a lot of men picking coffee there . . . that there was a good harvest . . . you know." The woman winked and smiled.

The man appraised them with his eyes, one by one, as if he were judging cattle. He paid no attention to the little thin black boy with the baseball cap accompanying them.

"Well, you are on the district; it's a bit ahead," the rider said, pointing his finger in the direction. Then he took his hat off and remained silent, watching them, while he scratched his head.

The women did not move, as if awaiting orders. In the meantime the man's eyes dove into one of them, the Younger One, with an insidious gaze that seemed to gnaw at her flesh.

"And where do you plan to stay around here?" the man said, breaking the silence.

"We don't know where and we're hungry, sir," the Redhead burst in.

"We were not thinking of staying here, sir. All we wanted was to find some food and then return to town," Dolores Peralta explained. "But if you say that the farms are nearby, maybe we should try. What do you think?" The woman winked again.

"Stay here then; we're having a celebration tonight. You can decide tomorrow." The man seemed more relaxed now. His eyes once again fixed themselves poisonously on the Younger One, and he invited them to follow him: "Come, I'm going to find you a place to stay."

The village was bigger than they had imagined. The man took them to an old wooden building, a sort of unused warehouse and that's indeed what they called it, the Warehouse, in the heart of a shabby neighborhood.

Next door there was a cantina with high sidewalks, into which laborers came and went in a never-ending bustle, bearing on their shoulders heavy cardboard boxes unloaded from packed mules outside; inside, women bustled about with brooms in their hands, emptying buckets of water on the floor, complaining about the workers' lack of manners.

The hustle stopped when they saw their boss arrive with that party of strangers.

"Come on, don't be nosy, go on working! I want you to have everything ready early, it's going to be a big party," thundered the boss above the neighing of his chestnut-colored mare.

"My Whimsy Bar," the newcomers could read on a crude tin sign spanning the double doors of the establishment.

They had arrived there by skirting the village. From the road they could see, here and there, rickety huts thatched with straw or roofed with rusty zinc eaves, and what could be called streets: cracked, zigzagging, traced by the whim of circumstance. The people gaped at them as they went by from the threshold of their disjointed doors. A band of naked children followed them where the man led them.

The musicians started arriving in the early evening. It was a *perico ripiao* merengue group. An accordion, a güiro, and a bass drum, a *tambora* made up the instruments already arranging themselves in a corner of the dance floor. The curious were gathering outside, chatting, listening to the preambles of the dance in the tuning of the bellows of the accordion.

Next door, in the old warehouse, Dolores Peralta was helping her girls, who were taking pains with their toilettes. They had bathed and were well-fed. They had gotten hold of a tank of water, a tub, mattresses on which to work and sleep, two kerosene lamps, a steamer, and even a coal iron with which to press their clothes. They spoke cheerfully of their good luck. The man they had stumbled across at the entrance to the village, Don Cesáreo Portillo, had ordered some neighboring woman to take good care of the visitors. Through them they found out that he was a very important man in the place. They couldn't complain. They had unwittingly reached the antechamber of the harvest, and now their own harvest was about to begin. *We will return with the mules' satchels replete with pesos*, Dolores Peralta thought while she listened to the girls singing *Amor perdido*.

Word of their arrival spread throughout the region.

In the huts of the plantations of Don Petronio and Don Salvador, the men's lust stirred when they heard the news. Many resolved to attend the grand fiesta, and searched for their most splendid garments, so as to appear before people as God commands. They arranged to carry showy daggers and knives, either borrowed or their own, symbols of power, guarantors of respect, which they would bring into the bar with them, half-concealed under their shirts.

THE PARTY

Dolores Peralta, who had heard of these improvised country celebrations, instructed her girls in prudence and astuteness. They listened attentively and with even a bit of anxiety. “. . . Behave like docile sheep, my daughters, gently, gently. Avoid provocations, from the men as well as the women; the hearts of these peasants are like sweet bread dough, but at the slightest provocation they will fly at you like a swarm of bees. Entice the chumps, bring them here, and dispatch them as soon as possible. And raise the fees. Let them pay for all our travails. Drink little and work fast. Let’s go, hurry up, the dance floor is already heating up! and you, Lolito, go to bed early at the neighbor’s. Don’t stay out there blabbing and telling tales to the guys. No! No such thing, damn it! Do as I tell you. Listen, Lolito! But what’s the matter with this little devil tonight? Come here and don’t make faces at me, damn it, don’t you hear me calling you? Did you get grass for the mule? Don’t grumble, I’m telling you this for your own good. Remember, girls, come down two at a time . . .” As she spoke, Dolores Peralta moved from one end of the room to the other, arranging the bowls of water, the towels, the rosewood soap. “Remember, girls, one goes to bed here, in the corner, and the other one goes into that little room there. Redhead, go see who’s knocking! Ah, it is you, Don Cesáreo, come in, come in . . . here we are, you see, preparing for the festivities. Well, of course, Don Cesáreo, take your pick.” And Don Cesáreo took away the Younger One. “It doesn’t matter, he paid in advance. Let’s see what else we can get out of him. Well, remember, girls. You go ahead, I’ll be in in a while. I haven’t had the time to tidy myself up! I’ll be in soon, remember.”

They were all on the street already when Dolores Peralta called to them from within. The women returned.

“Are you carrying blades? Well, then, come, give them to me. In places like these one shouldn’t even feel the need to defend oneself.”

When Dolores entered the salon, she glimpsed her girls immediately. They were seated at the same table, their glasses of rum half drunk. Only a few couples were dancing. In the back, in the semi-darkness, one could descry some tables occupied by silent men, their bottles of rum before them. Others were drinking standing at the bar. There weren’t very many people. It was still early. One had to shout to make oneself understood. The music, and the noisy, electrical generator in the yard, which produced energy for the three light bulbs in the place, drowned all conversation. Dolores Peralta had supposed that the Younger One would be already back at the dance, but the girls told her that they hadn’t seen her. Suddenly, while she pondered her absence, the room appeared smaller. It darkened with men and women, as if they had come to an agreement to come in at the same time.

“Now is when the revelry starts,” Dolores Peralta said to herself, as her eyes searched for Don Cesáreo and the Younger One. “Where the hell could he have taken her?” she muttered, ill at ease.

To describe what happened after that moment is to tell a tale of vertigo.

Downed in great gulps, penetrating cleanly through the throats, the rum acted on the peasants’ judgment like a tenacious rush, as if urging rancors to awaken, inciting desire, and unbinding inhibitions.

From an alley, concealed by darkness, Lolito had watched the riders arrive, followed soon after by the wave crashing against the doors; then he heard the racket, not knowing if it was a dispute or an excess of jollity. He didn't see the Younger One return, nor the man who had taken her away. After a while he saw Trina go out, accompanied by a man. No sooner had they crossed the warehouse door than he saw the thin figure of Sofía, with her intensely blue dress, leaving the cantina embracing another man and heading in the same direction.

A frail arch of moonlight, level with the horizon, failed to dispel the darkness in which small groups of peasants, in another sort of dance, squatted here and there outside, swilling rum straight from the bottle. Lolito approached a group he had overheard gossiping about the party, about those new women who had arrived. The boy squatted beside them, joined the conversation, and shortly afterwards was sharing their bottle.

The couples rushed by at dizzying speed, flooding the atmosphere with their strong emanations. The eyes of Dolores Peralta alternated between the door, through which she had long been awaiting the return of Trina and Sofía and the arrival of the Younger One with Don Cesáreo, and the long knives that etched sharp hunches on the backs of the dancers.

At last she saw Sofía and Trina come in. They were alone. They were overcome by fatigue and complained to Dolores Peralta of those brutes they couldn't get to come, even when they jiggled like blenders, their things were this big, and look at this, Dolores, look at the pittance they give you afterwards.

"Get paid in advance, damn it! Don't let them take you for fools!"

No sooner had they finished grumbling than she glanced towards the spot where she had seen two of her girls only seconds before, each having come to terms with men to go to the warehouse; but they were there no longer and she just caught a glimpse of them as they streaked out of the room.

"Goddamn it!" she said. "At this rate we're not going to get anywhere, even if we work till kingdom comes."

Dolores Peralta grew troubled again when she felt that it was getting late and the two who had left had not returned. Then the Redhead approached her and said something that calmed her down: "As soon as the girls come back, I'm going to sleep with that one there. He's an old-timer, and look, he paid me in advance." And she showed her seven peso bills.

"Good, with four like those we'll break even. I'm going to take a walk down by the warehouse to see what's going on."

Fearing that she could see him, Lolito slithered onto the ground when he caught sight of Dolores Peralta on the high sidewalk of the cantina. He followed her with his glance. He could distinguish her silhouette fanning her fist against the wood of the warehouse doors. They opened, she entered, and a few minutes later came out accompanied by Linda and the one they called Changó, followed immediately by the men whom she had seen going in with them such a long while before.

The men slid down an alley, and Dolores Peralta advanced hesitantly. No sooner had the women entered the cantina than Lolito saw the Redhead go out with another man. *What the hell's going on?* he thought.

One of the women, who had been chatting with a potential customer with whom she had already danced a few numbers, withdrew protestingly to Dolores's table.

"This one will neither decide to go to bed nor pay for his time. I might as well stay here," she complained.

"These brutes don't know about such things. Stay here and let's wait for the Redhead. This is all fucked up, this is not fair, damn it."

It was late. The music, the electrical plant, and the ruckus of the drunks had turned the place into a delirium of unchained demons. Dolores Peralta, in despair at the Redhead's delay and the absence of The Younger One, was on the point of getting up to go back to the warehouse when a commotion broke out outside.

Some of those who were at the dance went out, and so did Dolores Peralta and all her girls.

In front of the warehouse, the Redhead and the man with whom she had gone in were arguing hotly. Many had gathered around them and seemed to have joined the fray. Dolores Peralta made her way through the crowd like a fury, stood between them, and demanded to know what was going on.

"This asshole wants me to give him his money back after an hour on top of me," the Redhead said. He hadn't finished, damn it, the man argued in return; either she lets him finish or she returns his dough.

The argument seemed to have no end, and just when it seemed that all hell was going to break loose, right in the nick of time, the puisne judge made his appearance, saying, make way for the law, damn it, what's going on here, and the woman told her tale, and the man told his, and the opinion of the crowd was divided, and the puisne judge, who besides being an officer of the law was a hunk of a man, said, stand back, damn it, you bunch of troublemakers, I'll take care of this, you say you haven't finished, and you say he did, you see, ma'am, if the man hasn't finished he has a right under the law to finish, and listen here, sir, this business of not having finished has to be proven. And it was thus that the puisne judge, demanding a demonstration, sent one of those present to get the *tambora* from the dance floor and took the man and woman, and Dolores Peralta and the man who had brought the *tambora* as witnesses, into the warehouse; he closed the door and demanded, come here and prove that you have not finished, take out your cock, grab it in one hand, and beat a roll of castanets on the hide of the *tambora* with it; and the man, full of confidence, said, yes, of course, mister judge, only give me a bit of time to rouse it up . . . you see, there it is, mister judge. And all hell broke loose.

Many of those outside declared that above the roar of the crowd and the judge's strident proclamation—I declare that this man has not finished: He may go on!—they heard the thing beat so robustly, so vibrantly, that they even started dancing to the throbbing of the drum.

THE RETURN

The cocks were already stirring when Dolores Peralta and the rest of the girls decided to go to bed.

The dance was dying out, and they had lost all interest in taking any more risks with that sort of men.

A dispute that ended with long blades withdrawn from waistbands sent them out in retreat.

They rushed to the warehouse. The man was still there, fighting his chaotic battle, a battle that came to be known as *the war of the dry faucet*. It was finally Dolores Peralta herself who, tired and with eyes glued shut from sleep, suggested a transaction that the peasant accepted, although with a certain degree of surliness: to split the seven pesos.

They only slept a few hours. All the women agreed when Dolores proposed leaving as soon as the Younger One returned.

"There's nothing to look for here," she declared.

With her right hand shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun, Dolores Peralta headed for the neighbor's house in search of Lolito. But the woman told her that the boy had not slept there. More than worried, raving at what she considered an act of disobedience on the part of her helper, she headed for the patio of the warehouse, where she supposed the mule could be found. It wasn't there. Both the animal and Lolito had disappeared. In a very bad mood, she canvassed the neighborhood with the Redhead to see if anyone had seen the boy. Someone assured them that he had left at dawn with two men who worked on a farm Don Cesáreo owned down La Barranca way. They added then that it was a far way off.

It was past noon when Dolores managed to find the puisne judge. It was her last recourse. But when she asked for help to locate Don Cesáreo, who the night before had taken one of her girls and look how long it's been and they hadn't returned, the man smiled.

"Ay, ma'am, don't even look for her. He may have her in La Barranca, which is where he takes them when he does his wickedness. He is like a red-tailed hawk who doesn't let go of his prey. If I were you, I would forget about her. That's my advice, you'll do what you think best. And tell me, how did that business last night end?"

Dolores Peralta didn't even reply.

She returned to the warehouse, and the rest of the women, although a bit miffed, agreed to delay their departure until the following day.

"Maybe they'll show up by then," Dolores said, with a gesture of her mouth that sketched her hopelessness.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in the warehouse, playing cards lackadaisically, speculating on Lolito's disappearance, lamenting what Don Cesáreo Portillo, who had seemed such a decent man, had done, wondering where the Younger One could be. In the early evening they dined on boiled yams and fried eggs the neighbor cooked for them and almost immediately threw themselves on the mattresses, as if they needed to rest from an exhaustion of centuries. They had already learned that a pack was leaving for town at dawn. Faced with Dolores's request, the owners readily agreed to let them accompany them.

CALLALO

They left long before dawn.

They left, saddened by the failure of their excursion, and above all, by having lost Lolito and the Younger One. As their distance from the village grew, they turned their heads back from time to time to toss one last glance at the mountains now dissolving in a blue-green mist, there, at the farthest reaches of the world.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert