

El chiclero

María de Lourdes Victoria

El repique de campanas acompaña el andar pausado de Don Perfecto. El anciano camina encorvado, cargando en el pecho su cajón de chiclero. Lleva años vendiendo chicles, cacahuates y dulces en la plaza del pueblo.

Don Perfecto acostumbra llegar temprano, antes que los barrenderos, a ese parque umbroso, rodeado de fresnos y laureles. Le gusta mirar a las tórtolas y a los zanates, chapotear en la fuente, platicar con el bolero, ayudar a Don Julián a colgar periódicos en su puesto, y soplar las brazas del comal de Chenchá, que siempre le agradece el gesto con una quesadilla – y con una sonrisa. Pero lo que más disfruta de sus mañanas el anciano, es mirar la alborada y divisar a lo lejos la silueta pequeña de su nieto, cuando sube por la calle empedrada. El crepúsculo dibuja su inocente trote en un lienzo de color naranja, rosa y púrpura. Está aprendiendo a ser chiclero, su nieto. Ya carga su propia caja.

Hoy, Don Perfecto camina agobiado. Los huesos le duelen. El cuerpo le pesa. Es la vejez, piensa, esa arpía despiadada que en un descuido me gana el pleito. O quizás es el mal tiempo, y para averiguarlo, alza la mirada esculcando el cielo. Las nubes sombrías se contorsionan compartiendo su malestar. Aún así, Don Perfecto reanuda su paso, arrastrando los huaraches. resuelto a ignorar sus múltiples achaques de viejo.

En la plaza, se respira un aire diferente. Los pájaros no cantan. Se ocultan en los árboles; su apagado murmullo estremece las ramas frondosas. Solo el chillido estridente de dos cuervos envenena la risa de la fuente. Hacia allá se encamina el chiclero, atraído por su escandaloso aleteo. En la superficie del agua los pájaros se disputan a picotazos un objeto - algo que lanza al cielo destellos de arco iris, como confeti. Entre tanto jalón lo sueltan y cuando cae le salpica la ropa. Es entonces que Don Perfecto descubre el origen del codiciado botín: un anillo ensartado al dedo de una mujer muerta.

El chiclero tarda en desenmarañar la bruma de sus cataratas. Se concentra, afilando la vista y cuando el cuadro esclarece, se sostiene en el borde de la piedra fría. El peso de aquello que sus ojos revelan amenaza botarlo al suelo.

El cuerpo flota boca abajo, plácido e hinchado como un saco de mazorca, impávido al asalto de las aves negras que sin piedad resumen el picoteo del dedo inerte. La aureola de cabello largo se mece en el agua, vaporosa, como crin de yegua suelta, desatrampada. Las faldas se encaraman revelando la intimidad de muslos jóvenes, caderas amplias, tobillos frágiles. Formas rígidas y enceradas de maniquí. Don Perfecto de pronto la reconoce: es la chica de las noticias. La reportera.

Los narcos llegaron el pueblo.

The Street Vendor

María de Lourdes Victoria
translated by Martin Boyd

The ringing of the church bells accompanies the slow-paced steps of Don Perfecto. The old man walks hunched over, carrying his wares in a box on his chest. For years he has been selling gum, peanuts and candy in the town plaza.

Don Perfecto usually arrives early, before the street sweepers, at this shady park ringed with laurel and ash trees. He likes to watch the turtledoves and grackles, splash around in the fountain, chat with the shoeshine man, help Don Julian hang up the newspapers at his stand, and fan the embers under Chench's *comal*, for which she rewards him with a quesadilla... and a smile. But what the old man enjoys most is to look into the first light and see the tiny silhouette of his grandson in the distance, as he makes his way up the cobbled street. The dawn light paints his carefree gait on a canvas of orange, pink and purple. His grandson is learning how to become a street vendor. He already has his own box.

Today, Don Perfecto finds it hard to walk. His bones ache. His body feels heavy. "It's old age," he thinks, "that ruthless old witch who could finish me off in an unguarded moment. Or perhaps it's the bad weather..." and to confirm his theory he lifts his gaze and searches the sky. The gloomy clouds writhe and twist, sharing his discomfort. Even so, Don Perfecto walks on, shuffling in his huaraches, determined to ignore his many ailments.

The air in the plaza feels different. The birds aren't singing. They're hiding in the trees, their muffled murmur rustling the leafy branches. Only the shrill screech of two crows poisons the laughter of the fountain. The street vendor walks towards it, drawn by its noisy fluttering. On the surface of the water the birds are pecking each other as they fight over an object – something that shoots rainbow sparkles at the sky, like confetti. In the middle of their tug of war, the birds drop the object and when it falls it splashes his clothes. It is then that Don Perfecto sees what the coveted prize is: a ring attached to a dead woman's finger.

The street vendor takes awhile to see through the fog of his aging eyes. He looks hard and when the image clears, he has to lean against the edge of the cold stone. The weight of what he sees threatens to hurl him to the ground.

The body of a woman is floating face down, peaceful and swollen like a sack of corn, unperturbed by the attack of the black birds that mercilessly resume their pecking at the inert finger. Her halo of long hair drifts softly on the water, like the mane of a wild, unbridled mare. Her skirts are riding up, revealing the intimacy of young thighs, ample hips, fragile ankles. Stiff shapes with a mannequin shine. Suddenly, Don Perfecto recognizes her: it's the news girl. The reporter.

The narcos are in town.