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OCTOBER 26, 1949, was not a day filled with important news. Maestro Clemente Manuel Zabala, editor in chief of the newspaper where I learned the essentials of being a reporter, concluded our morning meeting with two or three routine suggestions. He did not assign a specific story to any writer. A few minutes later, he was informed by telephone that the burial crypts of the old Convent of Santa Clara were being emptied, and with few illusions he said to me:

"Stop by there and see if you can come up with anything. "

The historic convent of the Clarissan nuns, which had been turned into a hospital a century earlier, was to be sold, and a five-star hotel built in its place. The gradual collapse of the roof had left its beautiful chapel exposed to the elements, but three generations of bishops and abbesses and other eminent personages were still buried there. The first step was to empty the crypts, transfer the remains to anyone who claimed them, and bury the rest in a common grave.

I was surprised by the crudeness of the procedure. Laborers opened the tombs with pickaxes and hoes, took out the rotting coffins, which broke apart with the simple act of moving them, and separated bones from the jumble of dust, shreds of clothing, and desiccated hair. The more illustrious the dead the more arduous the labor, because the workers had to rummage through the remains and sift the debris with great care in order to retrieve precious stones and articles of gold and silver.

The foreman copied the information that was on each stone into a notebook, arranged the bones into distinct piles, and placed a sheet of paper with a name on top of every mound to keep them all separate. And so the first thing I saw when I entered the temple was a long line of stacked bones, heated by the savage October sun pouring in through the holes in the roof and with no more identity than a name scrawled in pencil on a piece of paper. Almost half a century later, I can still feel the confusion produced in me by that terrible testimony to the devastating passage of the years.

There, among many others, were a viceroy of Peru and his secret lover; Don Toribio de Cáceres y Virtudes, bishop of this diocese; several of the convent's abbesses, including Mother Josefa Miranda; and the bachelor of arts Don Cristobal de Eraso, who devoted half his life to building the coffered ceilings. One crypt was sealed with the stone of the second Marquis de Casaldueiro, Don

Ygnacio de Alfaro y Dueñas, but when it was opened they found it empty; it had never been used. The remains of his marquise, however, Dona Olalla de Mendoza, had their own stone in the adjacent crypt. The foreman attached no importance to this: It was not unusual for an American-born aristocrat to have prepared his own tomb and be buried in another.

The surprise lay in the third niche of the high altar, on the side where the Gospels were kept. The stone shattered at the first blow of the pickax, and a stream of living hair the intense color of copper spilled out of the crypt. The foreman, with the help of the laborers, attempted to uncover all the hair, and the more of it they brought out, the longer and more abundant it seemed, until at last the final strands appeared still attached to the skull of a young girl. Nothing else remained in the niche except a few small scattered bones, and on the dressed stone eaten away by saltpeter only a given name with no surnames was legible: SIERVA MARÍA DE TODOS LOS ÁNGELES. Spread out on the floor, the splendid hair measured twenty-two meters, eleven centimeters.

The impassive foreman explained that human hair grew a centimeter a month after death, and twenty-two meters seemed a good average for two hundred years. I, on the other hand, did not think it so trivial a matter, for when I was a boy my grandmother had told me the legend of a little twelve year-old marquise with hair that trailed behind her like a bridal train, who had died of rabies caused by a dog bite and was venerated in the towns along the Caribbean coast for the many miracles she had performed. The idea that the tomb might be hers was my news item for the day, and the origin of this book. GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ Cartagena de Indias, 1994

ONE

AN ASH-GRAY DOG with a white blaze on its forehead burst onto the rough terrain of the market on the first Sunday in December, knocked down tables of fried food, overturned Indians' stalls and lottery kiosks, and bit four people who happened to cross its path. Three of them were black slaves. The fourth, Sierva María de Todos los Ángeles, the only child of the Marquis de Casaldüero, had come there with a mulatta servant to buy a string of bells for the celebration of her twelfth birthday.

They had been instructed not to go beyond the Arcade of the Merchants, but the maid ventured as far as the drawbridge in the slum of Getsemaní, attracted by the crowd at the slavers' port where a shipment of blacks from Guinea was

being sold at a discount. For the past week a ship belonging to the Compañía Gaditana de Negros had been awaited with dismay because of an unexplainable series of deaths on board. In an attempt at concealment, the unweighted corpses were thrown into the water. The tide brought them to the surface and washed the bodies, disfigured by swelling and a strange magenta coloring, up on the beach. The vessel lay anchored outside the bay, for everyone feared an outbreak of some African plague, until it was verified that the cause of death was food poisoning.

At the time the dog ran through the market, the surviving cargo had already been sold at reduced prices on account of poor health, and the owners were attempting to compensate for the loss with a single article worth all the rest: an Abyssinian female almost two meters tall, who was smeared with cane molasses instead of the usual commercial oil, and whose beauty was so unsettling it seemed untrue. She had a slender nose, a rounded skull, slanted eyes, all her teeth, and the equivocal bearing of a Roman gladiator. She had not been branded in the slave pen, and they did not call out her age and the state of her health. Instead, she was put on sale for the simple fact of her beauty. The price the Governor paid, without bargaining and in cash, was her weight in gold.

It was a common occurrence for a stray dog to bite people as it chased after cats or fought turkey buzzards for the carrion in the streets, and it was even more common during the times of prosperity and crowds when the Galleon Fleet stopped on its way to the Portobelo Fair. No one lost sleep over four or five dog bites in a single day, least of all over an almost invisible wound like the one on Sierva María's left ankle. And therefore the maid was not alarmed. She treated the bite herself with lemon and sulfur, and washed the bloodstain from the girl's petticoats, and no one gave a thought to anything but the festivities for her twelfth birthday.

Earlier that morning, Bernarda Cabrera, the girl's mother and the untitled spouse of the Marquis de Casaldueiro, had taken a dramatic purge: seven grains of antimony in a glass of sugared rosewater. She had been an untamed mestiza of the so-called shopkeeper aristocracy: seductive, rapacious, brazen, with a hunger in her womb that could have satisfied an entire barracks. In a few short years, however, she had been erased from the world by her abuse of fermented honey and cacao tablets. Her Gypsy eyes were extinguished and her wits dulled, she spat blood and vomited bile, her siren's body became as

bloated and coppery as a three-day-old corpse, and she broke wind in pestilential explosions that startled the mastiffs. She almost never left her bedroom, and when she did she was nude or wearing a silk tunic with nothing underneath, which made her seem more naked than if she wore nothing at all. She had already moved her bowels seven times when the maid who had accompanied Sierva María returned but told her nothing about the dog bite. She did, however, comment on the scandal at the port caused by the sale of the slave woman. "If she's as beautiful as you claim, she might be Abyssinian," said Bernarda. But even if she were the Queen of Sheba, it did not seem possible that anyone would pay her weight in gold.

"They must have meant in weighed gold pesos," she said.

"No, as much gold as the black woman weighs," the maid explained.

"A slave two meters tall weighs at least one hundred twenty pounds," said Bernarda. "And no woman, white or black, is worth one hundred twenty pounds of gold, unless she shits diamonds."

No one had been more astute than Bernarda in the slave trade, and she knew that if the Governor had bought the Abyssinian it could not be for something as sublime as serving in his kitchen. Just then she heard the first hornpipes and firecrackers of a fiesta, followed by the furious barking of the mastiffs in their cages. She went out to the orange grove to see what it could be.

Don Ygnacio de Alfaro y Dueñas, the second Marquis de Casalduero and Lord of Darien, had also heard the music from his siesta hammock hanging between two orange trees in the grove. He was a funereal, effeminate man, as pale as a lily because the bats drained his blood while he slept. He wore a Bedouin djellaba in the house, and a Toledan biretta that increased his forlorn appearance. When he saw his wife as naked as the day God brought her into the world, he anticipated her question and asked:

"What music is that?"

"I don't know," she said. "What's the date?"

The Marquis did not know. He really must have felt quite puzzled to ask his wife anything, and she must have felt complete relief from her bilious attack to reply with no sarcasm. He had sat up in the hammock, intrigued, when the firecrackers exploded again.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Can it be that date already?"

The house adjoined the Divina Pastora Asylum for Female Lunatics. Agitated by the music and fireworks, the patients had appeared on the terrace that