

The Siege of Troy

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Do not expect, Hera, to know all my thoughts, even though you are my wife. What I find fitting to reveal, no god or man will know before you. But beware of finding out what I dream up away from the gods. —The Iliad

The truth is, I was never convinced he was coming for a wife. There are always girls in the branch who hope that some missionary is going to come back for them, but it never happens. Rebeca told me once that of the three hundred or so missionaries who had served in Trenque Lauquen over the past twenty years, only three had ever come back, and those three came back already married—one even brought his children.

So when Sister Ortega announced during our presidency meeting that Elder Allen was coming to visit and that he was still single, I didn't know what to think. It had been two years since he had finished his mission, and the fact that he still hadn't gotten married after all that time—well, as I say, his coming back didn't necessarily mean he was looking for a wife, but I can see why someone might wonder.

We have our presidency meeting every Wednesday. Rebeca is the Relief Society president, I'm the first counselor, and Sister Ortega is the second. When Rebeca called me to be the first counselor, it came as a shock, me being nineteen and barely starting college, and Sister Ortega, her second counselor, being a grandmother; but Rebeca quoted the scripture that says "let no man despise thy youth" and said that, while Sister Ortega's wisdom and experience would be always there when needed, she needed a young and energetic person as her right hand. We had our presidency meetings in the Biblioteca Municipal, because Rebeca is the librarian. And since no one ever goes there, it's a lot quieter than any of our

homes. We were in the middle of our meeting one Wednesday when Sister Ortega told us about Elder Allen. She even showed us the letter he had sent her. The letter said he would arrive on Tuesday the 17th on the train from Buenos Aires and, if possible, he wanted to stay with Sister Ortega. He had signed the letter "Troy." We always used to call him Elder Allen, but in fact his name was Troy, and I thought when I heard it that Troy was a beautiful name.

It was good we were the first ones to find out. We have a responsibility toward the sisters in the branch, especially the girls my age, who are young and dreamy, and would sell their souls to marry a gringo. Victoria Ayala, most of all, who we all agree is worse than the plagues of Egypt. She studies English at the Instituto Británico, and because she's so stuck up, we call her Queen Victoria.

Rebeca told us she knew perfectly well what was going to happen when the girls in the branch found out. They would start screaming like lunatics, and Church meetings would become utter pandemonium. Rebeca proposed that we keep Troy's upcoming visit quiet, but Sister Ortega said that in her opinion not telling anyone was like curing a headache with a guillotine. Rebeca thought that over for a while and told Sister Ortega that she was right, and even though Queen Victoria was worse than the plagues of Egypt, Rebeca told Sister Ortega to call Her Majesty and give her the news as something confidential, and she added something about the importance of knowing how to appease the hunger of starving beasts during the days of famine.

So that's what we did. And I bet between that day and the 17th, Queen Victoria burned off her eyelids studying more English than ever, so she could impress Elder Allen when he arrived. That Sunday when she greeted me, she looked at me as if she knew some high-priced secret, and I tried to picture what her face would look like on Tuesday when she got to the train station and found out she was not the only one there to welcome Elder Allen.

It happened pretty much like I imagined. On Tuesday, Her Majesty showed up at the station in high heels and what I was pretty sure was a new dress, looking as pleased as a princess who knows that Prince Charming is about to come carry her away. When she saw me standing there, though, she went from Snow White to Snow White's stepmother in two seconds flat. She asked if I was waiting for someone; and when I told her Elder Allen, I could tell she was trying to figure out how to ask me how I

knew he was coming. But then the train arrived, and she was too busy looking out for Elder Allen to talk.

We didn't recognize him at first, because he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and carrying a backpack like a hitchhiker. That was somewhat disappointing, because I remembered how nice he used to look in his suit. Elder Allen hugged and kissed each of us on the cheek, and he explained that he was no longer Elder Allen, and we had to call him Troy. Even though he wasn't a missionary anymore, I was so used to just shaking his hand that kissing him felt almost like doing something unnatural and forbidden.

Then I told him, right in front of Queen Victoria, that I had already hired a cab to take us to Sister Ortega's. Victoria realized there wasn't anything she could do about that, so she kissed Troy goodbye and invited him for dinner, and then I loved what happened, because Troy replied he was somewhat tired and unfortunately he wasn't going to be able to make it, and Her Majesty made a face I'll never forget. I don't think he was too tired, though, because as we approached the cab he thanked the driver, gave him a good tip, and told him we preferred to walk. So we went by foot. I was walking next to Troy, and the whole town was looking at me as if saying, "A gringo came for you, and it was about time. Marrying and breeding is all those Mormons do."

I was so nervous I didn't know what to say. I asked him to tell me something about his life, and he told me he was a student in Brooklyn or Berkeley—that part I didn't get clearly—and he told me he was majoring in literature. I asked him if the name Troy had any meaning, and he told me that Troy was a famous old city that the Greeks had laid siege to for many years, without success, till they finally built a wooden horse, hid inside, and that's the trick they used to get inside the city. Finally it dawned on me that Troy was the city that in Spanish we call Troya. All the English I knew was what I had learned in grammar school; I was agonizing over the thought that Victoria could speak English fluently, and not only speak it, but also understand it, and write it, and read it, and the more I thought about Queen Victoria the angrier I got. When we finally got to Sister Ortega's, I quickly said goodbye and headed to the library, almost in tears.

Rebeca advised me not to worry. Victoria is smart, she said, but we are clever, and cleverness is often worth more than knowledge. She told me that Troy was an enigma we had to solve, and she went right to the phone to call Sister Ortega. Had Rebeca told Sister Ortega to throw her-

self into the Trenque Lauquen River, I think she would have done it—that's how obedient she was—but all Rebeca told her was to get into Troy's room when he was away, and take a peek at his papers, and to tell us on Wednesday what she found.

So on Wednesday we had our presidency meeting, and Sister Ortega gave us a report. She told us she had found several papers, and some of them looked like poems and some others like letters, but they were all in English. And there was also a book that Troy apparently read at night, but it too was in English. Sister Ortega had written down the name of the author, because she was afraid of forgetting it, and at that point she gave us a little piece of paper she had folded in two. Rebeca and I thanked Sister Ortega for all she had done and Rebeca said, "All right, the meeting is over," which was a nice way to tell Sister Ortega to leave us alone.

When she left, we unfolded the paper, and we read the words "D. H. Lawrence." That name didn't mean anything to me; I had never heard it before. But Rebeca looked at me as if saying, "I smell a fish." She told me that in the old days they used to have a D. H. Lawrence novel in the library, but the Catholic bishop complained so much that they had withdrawn it. I asked Rebeca if by any chance they might have any other work by D. H. Lawrence. Rebeca thought about it for a while, and then she grabbed an anthology of American poetry (which fortunately was translated into Spanish), and we found there a poem that could well be the only thing written by D. H. Lawrence in all of Trenque Lauquen.

The name of the poem was "*Los elefantes tardan mucho en aparearse.*" It was a peculiar title, but not as peculiar as the poem itself, which I read several times with growing impatience, wondering about its meaning and why would anyone choose to write a poem about the mating habits of the elephant. I begged Rebeca to read the poem with me and explain it to me, because this poem was the only clue we had to solve the enigma that was Troy. So Rebeca put on her reading glasses; and as she read the poem with me, she knitted her brow. She said something about what gets lost in the translation, and she added that quite often poetry has absolutely no meaning, or the meaning is too subtle to explain. She said that explaining a poem is like dissecting a frog. In order to understand it, you must first cut its guts wide open, and when it's perfectly explained, it's also perfectly dead. So I was left in the dark about the poem, but I made a copy anyway and took it home with me, and I read it many, many times, till I finally learned it by heart, because it was possible that I would have a chance to be

alone with Troy, and it's a well-known fact that when a young couple is alone, the first thing they do is recite poetry and in five minutes they're madly in love.

The opportunity came much earlier than expected. Troy had left a message at my home inviting me to go to Sister Ortega's that very evening, because they were going to bake *empanadas*. When I got there, I almost dropped to the floor. Victoria was there. She was talking to him in English, non-stop, talking and talking, and I had no idea what in the world she was saying. But when Troy saw me, he brightened up like a Christmas tree. He hugged me and kissed me and told Queen Victoria that he was sorry, but he had to go because we had a date. Her Majesty smiled and told us to have fun, but I bet we could have used her blood to boil a chicken.

Troy took my arm, and we headed out. As we were leaving, he thanked me for rescuing him, and that made me laugh out loud, because it dawned on me that, even though he had been listening to her politely, all Troy wanted to do with Victoria was get rid of her. So while Her Majesty stayed at Sister Ortega's to bake *empanadas*—or went home to have a fit, I don't know which—Troy invited me for an ice cream. We walked to the ice cream parlor, and then we walked across the street to Plaza San Martín to eat the ice cream and talk. That was the first chance I had to be alone with him, and I was terribly nervous. But Troy was so calm—he talked to me about many things, his life in the university, and the friends he had, and the things he did.

Troy asked me if I liked to read and if I had read anything good recently. I told him I had recently read something by D. H. Lawrence; and when I said that, he looked at me with his eyes wide open. He asked me what I had read, and I told him that I had read the poem about the elephants and that, in all truth, it was all the D. H. Lawrence I knew. Then I told him how we used to have a novel by D. H. Lawrence in the library and how the Catholic bishop complained and got it withdrawn. Troy thought that story was really funny. He told me that D. H. Lawrence was his favorite author and that he would have given me one of Lawrence's novels as a gift, but unfortunately it was in English.

Then I told him I had learned the poem about the elephants by heart—in Spanish, anyway—and that I could recite it if he wanted, but he didn't seem too excited about that. He asked me if I knew any Spanish poetry but the only poem I could remember was "Romance Sonámbulo" by Federico García Lorca. So I began:

*Verde que te quiero verde,
verde viento, verde ramas.
El barco sobre la mar
y el caballo en la montaña.*

As I started to recite the poem, I realized that it was as much of an enigma as D. H. Lawrence's poem about the elephants. I had learned the words in school, and I knew the poem was famous, but I had never thought about what the words meant, and I realized now how strange they were: *Green, I love you green; green wind, green branches*—what does that mean? And what do the ship and the horse on the mountain have to do with anything? But as I recited it, it was as if someone had cast a spell, Troy was listening to me so attentively.

When I got to the middle of the poem I forgot how it went, but I couldn't have continued anyway, because at that point Troy was overcome by his emotions, and he began to cry. He was crying and sobbing and apologizing over and over. Gringos are like that. They don't like to lose composure; and when they do, they always apologize, and then you don't know whether they're crying for what they were originally crying for, or whether they're crying out of embarrassment for not being able to stop.

I didn't know what to say or think, but when he calmed down I decided it was the right moment for a joke, so I asked him where were the *empanadas*. He started to laugh and discreetly wiped off his tears, and we returned to Sister Ortega's and ate *empanadas*, and then we said goodbye as if absolutely nothing had happened.

The morning after, I went to the library, and I was telling Rebeca what had happened the night before with Queen Victoria, and everything about Troy, and the ice cream, and the tears, when all of a sudden the phone rang, and it was an urgent message from Sister Ortega telling us that Troy had decided to leave that very day on the 11 o'clock train. When she called, it was about a quarter to 11, so I dashed out of the library and ran those seven blocks like the wind and got on the train and started to look for him. And there he was, staring out the window and slumped in his seat. Gringos are like that—they love to droop all over the seat, and if there's another seat for the legs, that's even better.

When Troy saw me, his eyes flashed as if we were accomplices in something very beautiful and very secret. He stood up and invited me to sit across from him, and I was so bewildered and breathless that I didn't

know what to say. I asked him why he was leaving so suddenly, without even saying goodbye, and he replied it was like in the poem by Federico García Lorca. Everything has its place, he said, the ship upon the sea, the horse on the mountain, and his place was at the university in the United States. Then I asked him why it had been more than two years since he had finished his mission and he was still single. Troy thought about that question for a while. And then he started to recite another part of "Poema Sonámbulo," where it says,

*Bajo la luna gitana,
las cosas la están mirando
y ella no puede mirarlas.*

But I'm not sure whether he was talking to me or thinking out loud, because for a second it seemed to me that he was staring out the window, ignoring me. Rebeca's right, I thought: Troy is an enigma. Then we heard the train whistle, so we hugged and I told him I would miss him a lot, and also I told him to write to me. But the train was about to start moving, so I didn't have time to ask him for his address, and since he hasn't written again to me or to anyone else in Trenque Lauquen (not even to Sister Ortega), we're not yet sure whether he lives in Brooklyn or Berkeley.

The branch was a hotbed of gossip for a while, and Victoria was so furious that she ignored me for weeks. But when she realized Troy was gone for good, she came and apologized, and finally we became friends. Rebeca called her to be the Relief Society secretary, so now the presidency is complete. Rebeca is so wise. She tried to comfort us about Troy, and she has such a special way of putting things.

But the truth is, I was never convinced he was coming for a wife. I know gringos are like that. They always promise they are going to come back, but they never do. And when they do come, they leave you so confused that you wonder whether they should have come at all.