

A BAD END

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*Translated from the Spanish by
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For Pote Huerta, to the poison of literature

... and let us reflect,
how when the drama persists and the false
sorrow
turns true in our hearts,
that nothing can be done, that the end
we fear is imminent,
that, naturally, our adventure will end,
as it must, as it is written,
as it inevitably must.

Ángel González
Entr'acte

ONE

I've known an endless string of bastards in my lifetime and not wished a single one a bad end. I won't make you an exception. Human beings roam this world blissfully unaware of the tragedy that's lurking around the corner. Some invent gods to help soften the pain, others, meanwhile, seek out the immediacy of pleasure to keep the inevitable at bay, but all are finally measured by the yardstick of death. I'd been warned about my fate, but I never thought it would happen the way it did.

I know why you've come, but I'm good. Till now I'd never faced up to the implacable advance of nonexistence, and that's why your presence belittles rather than terrifies me. I now realize that from the very beginning my life had pointed to our meeting, that my steps were doomed to reach this moment, that I couldn't possibly escape my fate, however ridiculously hard I tried, that nobody, not even those I have loved, will ever be able to mourn my departure. I know you have come to relish the spectacle of my death, I've seen that in your rust-veined eyes, in your grisly fascination, but I no longer fear the end. People say that at the moment of death, scenes from one's life dizzily return like the stills of a film. They say that once you have seen them, consciousness shuts down. That may be true, and right now I

may be witnessing the accelerated passage of memories of a blurred past. The likenesses of the faces of the dead underline the continued presence of the spirit and can help the living unpick the conundrums posed by awareness of their finite nature. That will be where I will overcome. Nothing else matters; it's idle chatter and conjecture.

I know you're here to seek diversion in the staging of my death and that it's futile to invoke pity, tenderness, or compassion. I also know you don't harbor any bad faith or hatred and that you only hope to use me to satisfy your curiosity before the inexorable finale. So be it; here you find me wide open, like a book you've just picked up: my every hour its pages, my memories the reason to read, my extinction the final full stop.

I've known a variety of bastards in my lifetime and not wished a single one a bad end. My brother Tranquilino, however, copped it badly. A goods train did away with his first-born rights. It happened one drought-ridden July. He was so happy he'd just made it to fifteen, then, before he realized what hit him, the engine had crushed his forehead. His brain spurted and trickled along the sleepers, where the ants had a field day. Ants store supplies up to guarantee a trouble-free winter, forward planners that they are, and then die just like crickets, that being the wretched lot of nature. My brother Tranquilino enjoyed burning them. He'd chop the heads off a whole box of matches in the entrance to an anthill and set fire to them. Enthralled, he'd watch the chitin burn up, endlessly delighted by the hellish smell scorched lives give off, until the smoke evaporated up his nostrils and his slaver ran out. He was polishing off the town's anthills one by one until that train engine stripped away his life with a hollow thud that echoed beneath the interminable sky of La Mancha.

My brother Tranquilino was so blissfully simpleminded, he was unaware everyone awaits the final transit Providence has assigned, and though some people who insist that they are free might disagree, that's how it is, like it or not. Everyone is welcome to his self-deceit, to his measly cowardice. In the end, it makes no odds. It's in man's nature to rebel against his fate, but he will die anyway. The ants snacked on my brother's brain, but they were only doing what ants have to do. It could have been worse, though it wasn't. Events unravel as they do and not as one would wish. I'm a good case in point—a dwarf from topknot to toe, tiny hands, bandy legs, flat head, a real freak of nature, though respected now thanks to the deference endowed by the tinkle of cash. My mother burst into tears the instant she saw me emerge from her womb. It was nighttime, and she went into labor suddenly and hard. She cried first because of the pain and then out of sorrow. My head tore the flesh yoking the female anus and vagina. The vet later let it be known that she howled like a mountain wolf that's been shot to pieces. When my mother gazed at me, she saw at once how deformed I was. "This one's not come out right, either, has it, Don Gregorio?" Still dangling me by my ankles, the vet simply nodded and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead. She asked him to break my neck, but the vet benignly ignored her request, cleaned off the slime with lukewarm water, and dressed me in the dusty-pink bodice my mother had bought from a tinker as part of the first outfit for the baby girl she was hoping to give birth to. "He looks better now," he replied, while my mother sobbed, her heart distressed by the spectacle of the male dwarf—not female baby—she'd engendered. Otherwise, she'd have called me María. María, and not Gregorio, after the vet who'd brought me into the world.

Life has always loomed large over us dwarves. Some take to it like a fish to water despite their diminished state and are even happy, while others tramp along the shores of existence like dogs driven wild by urban detritus, licking the sores of their own resentment, tempered by the terrible lash of indifference, as they tumble and stumble toward their tombs.

The gift of violence is usually placed in the clutches of the despairing, the dispossessed, and the demented, but in the end all are done to death by the same bludgeons they use to kill. My brother was a natural bastard; I mean, it was in his blood. His brain was sweet licorice the ants didn't appreciate. The train engine sent the poor fellow flying when he was crossing the line on his way to the miniscule orchard my father owned by the cemetery wall. I reckon that man was never my father. More than likely my brother's, but mine, no way. My father must have been some random bastard who happened to shoot his seed and genetic shortcomings into my mother's womb. Perhaps one of those truck drivers on their way to Valencia who stopped for lunch at El Paquito's, on the outskirts of town, on the far side of the highway. My mother worked there. She cooked stews, washed up, looked after the bar, and did a little bit of the other when she felt like it or they paid for the opportunity. She could be a touch flirty and whorish, like so many women who'd just suffered in their young flesh the shortages brought on by the war. They say she met her husband on the way to the coast when they were being evacuated from Madrid, at a toilet stop in the village made by the Red Aid convoy in which she was traveling. She was a busty sixteen and grabbed him when he appeared over the riverbank where she was crouching, emptying her bladder over a wall reduced to rubble. That was her piece of luck; only two trucks in that

convoy made it to Valencia. The other four were blown up by a hail of mortar fire that descended from Franco's heavens.

At El Paquito's the truck drivers could eat beans and pig's ear and then have a nap, alone or with my mother, in the spare room on the mezzanine, away from the blistering sun, their stomachs stirred by digestive gases. I reckon the man who sowed the seed of my life must have possessed a rotten set of chromosomes and belonged to the subsoil of the species, otherwise I can't explain my ravaged face, my ruin of a body propped up by the most grotesque of cornerstones. At the time, my putative father was very ill with tuberculosis, so much so that he passed on a mere three weeks after I was born. He coughed up a gob of sputum, threw up a piece of lung, and collapsed on the sweat-soaked pillow where he'd been resting his enfeebled body. Before he died it's very likely he saw the awesome breasts of the angel of death up by the ceiling, because his eyes bulged wide open when he stared into that flaking void of plaster. My mother wasn't a bit put out by her husband's demise. She was too busy with her cleaning chores and wayward acts, and besides, widowhood granted her moral sovereignty over her own acts. As we all know, the flesh is weak, and hers, being no exception, got lumpier and bumpier. El Paquito's was her base. I hardly saw her. She left me in an esparto-grass basket, diaper cloths carelessly knotted around my middle, and come noon went off to deal with the meat stews, pleased to be rid of the sight of me and eager to toil. "Take a look at him now and then and clear the flies off, so they don't lay their eggs on him," she bid my brother, who nodded back. There I was, in the suntrap of the kitchen floor, stewing in my own soft shit from her first milk, which I champed and gorged on when it was on offer, lest she steal it from me for some traveling salesman still

fond of sucking tit. In my heart of hearts is lodged hunger immemorial, the immemorial hunger of Spain. My huge appetite or the insect-like way I clung to her nipples scared my mother, and with every mouthful she gave me, she became more convinced she'd engendered a satanic beast that should have been strangled the minute it poked its bonce into this world. Her milk tasted of angel water perfumed with civet, of savory, nutritious tears, and even of anisette cream, so no wonder I hung rabidly to her glorious breasts and no human brawn existed capable of decoupling me.

My monstrous appetite terrified my mother, and I expect she thought I was going to suck her guts out, because she'd go spare and pinch my nostrils so I gasped for breath, opened my mouth, and dropped from her nipple. She didn't love me. That was fair enough, but at the time, I lacked the acumen to grasp why. Her husband threw a coughing fit simply watching my birth and was struck speechless. I tell you, he died three weeks later. A third gob of spit complete with a blood clot stuck in his soft palate like a posthumous stalactite of snot.

By now, my real father must be offering up his flesh to the worms if that's what Providence decreed. I never met him. I never knew who he was, and that dearth of knowledge was the little I had in common with my mother. She effortlessly turned her back on me to devote herself diligently to El Paquito's clientele. She perfected her beans with pig's ear and became a dab hand at preparing other dishes from La Mancha, like greasy fried breadcrumbs, and bacon soup, which swamps the stomach and thickens the intellect. She took great pains waiting on tables, polishing saucepans, and making and unmaking beds, whether drowsy after a relaxing siesta or in a vinous, nighttime haze. She was a real boon to the owner, a yokel from Motilla

del Palancar whose business she eventually propped up with the loot deriving from her servile habits.

The milk she gave me tasted of velvety petals, hidden juices, and still seems warm in memories driven by the white venom of nostalgia. If I clung to her and bit her, it was because I sensed that the next ration might be a long way off or might never come at all. I didn't do so out of spite, I assure you, but from hunger, that hunger that I tell you is part and parcel of me. A man is the hunger he has suffered—whatever the hunger, whoever the man. My brother Tranquilino watched me suckle with the high hopes that flush the faces of fools and sully their looks with a crystalline flow of dribble. The poor lad met his end in the first flower of life, when he was on the threshold of youth, with his semen just beginning to seep. A goods train rolled him over. Bits of his brain fed ants over a whole winter, those same ants he brutally set light to and morbidly watched squirm in the fire, spark in the flames, and in the process perfume his nostrils with the acrid smell of their scorching holocaust. He'd now be sixty-one if he'd not been splattered through the air when he crossed the track on his way to our orchard by the cemetery wall. Of course, there are more horrific deaths, but that was the one my brother copped, and there's no changing that now.