West End

José Morella

Sample translated from the Spanish
by Charlotte Coombe

The night is beautiful,
so the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
so the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Langston Hughes

1

Getting your house in order is not easy. We often delude ourselves; we say we are organising things but really, we are just hiding them away, putting them out of sight. We file loose receipts, pick up a piece of clothing, or place the books we left strewn on the sofa back on the shelves. True organisation has nothing to do with that. It is a rare occurrence and requires great strength of character. We come up against many things. I might find photos and letters from an ex-girlfriend, certificates and notes from university, postcards from old friends I never see any more, unpublished manuscripts of poetry collections and novels, a Scrabble set I bought to play with my brother when he was still a child, and I no longer was. Considering the existence of such things means acknowledging a number of dead Josés. The mind tends to make us believe that our identity is something concrete and well-defined. That we are solid and stable. But it is not that simple. The rebellious, foul-mouthed, obstinate student of 1994 has vanished from my life completely. He's a corpse. The inexperienced teacher who taught philosophy to a second-year high school class is a stiff. The man who was my ex's partner, and to some extent resembles me, passed away ten years ago. I keep a not inconsiderable number of objects in my house just so that I can kid myself and carry on ignoring the fact that all those Josés are nothing more than mental images. Entities whose reality is comparable, at best, to that of fictional characters.

Sorting out what I know about Nicomedes Miranda's life is also like that. Everything is full of loose, incoherent elements that dissolve before my eyes as soon as I pay attention to them. Stories fossilised through being repeated dozens of times within the family. Mythologised places, exaggerated anecdotes, disjointed memories of my childhood and teenage years. The difference being that all these things, when put

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together and viewed with a degree of distance, seem to tell me something new. Something that leads me to harbour the hope that the whining, complaining, questioning child that exists inside me will finally shut up.

'I'm going to write a book about grandfather Nicomedes,' I tell my mother over the phone. 'Grandfather?' she says, as if she has forgotten the meaning of the word. She is silent for a moment and then, full of enthusiasm like so many Mediterranean mothers devoted to their idealised first-born sons, says to me, 'That's great, dear, I think that's a wonderful idea.'

One day, when he must have been about seven years old, Nicomedes' mother sent him down to the river to water the mules. One of the mules got spooked and refused to go any further. Most likely it saw a scorpion or a snake cross its path. Nicomedes heaved on the rope as hard as he could. The mule remained motionless, as if its legs were rooted to the ground. When the mule got fed up with having a small boy tugging at him, he sent Nicomedes flying with a sharp flick of the neck. The boy stumbled against the flank of the other mule and fell face first onto the ground. He received the blow just as he was about to sit up. The animal's kick landed a few millimetres above his left eyebrow. No bones were broken, but the flesh was torn off. His eyebrow and part of his eyelid were left dangling. Blood poured from his eye socket and down his cheek onto the ground. 'Mum, that's enough,' I tell her. 'Let's move on to something else.' 'No, dear', she replies. 'You want me to tell you the story, don't you? Your grandfather hid all day. They didn't find him until the evening. Scared to death, holding his eyebrow pressed to his flesh.'

'Why?' I ask her. I don't get it. Any other child would have run home, with some clothing or a rag wrapped round his head, and would have fallen into his mother's arms, bawling. He did the exact opposite. 'What do you mean, why?' she replies. 'Because he was afraid his mother would give him a beating. That's why.'

I remember the time I slipped on moss-covered rocks at the beach and split my chin open. I must have been about fifteen. Right after the impact, I felt my body temperature suddenly plummet, and a flicker of disconnection from reality. The world seemed to stop. For a second I thought all the blood running down my chest and belly was not mine. Accidents like that give us glimpses of the truth: our body is not ours. Sooner or later, it will break down. We glimpse this for an instant and then we forget it. We urgently need to close up the wound, but even more urgent is the need to shut out this clear vision of our nature.

Nicomedes' mother, my great-grandmother, is known as Mama-Carmen to her grandchildren. Mama-Carmen always had this belt that hung over the back of a wooden chair. Always visible and within arm's reach. That was what awaited Nicomedes when he came home. A whipping with the belt. My mother says that Mama-Carmen was a good person. 'Mum', I say to her, 'she might've been a good person, but this story about the mules and the belt is pretty harsh, isn't it?' 'Not at all, dear,' she replies. 'It's just that in those days everyone was like that. Children were beaten. Mama-Carmen really was decent, take it from me.'

Although I know that in those days hitting children wasn't as frowned upon as it is now, I can't help but feel disgust at the thought of Mama-Carmen's belt. It is something visceral. It bothers me that it's in this story. I want to censor the subject, to spare the readers and my family from it. To spare myself from it.

He didn't have stitches. He repositioned his eyebrow on his forehead as best he could and went into the river to clean himself. He pressed his T-shirt against the wound

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to stop the bleeding. He was alone. He did not cry. The eyebrow did not heal in its natural position, but a little higher up. This can be seen in several of the photos we have of him, but it is most obvious in the photo that's in the family album, taken shortly before he got married in 1945. He was thirty-three years old. His face shows a profound lack of confidence. His mouth is half-open. He looks as if he is about to express astonishment but doesn't quite manage to do so. His naivety is a physical trait, easily recognisable, like the colour of his eyes or the shape of his ears. His left eyebrow, distinctly higher, adds to his air of innocence. It looks like some strange slave marking, something put there to be seen, so that others can recognise Nicomedes by his character, his way of being in the world, his *problem*.

I am struck by the fact that the animals in the story were mules. Donkeys, mules and hinnies are more resilient than horses, but less sensitive. When they are distressed, horses might show signs of agitation to their riders. They try to communicate that something is happening to them. Donkeys do the opposite. They are able to hide physical pain and display no outward signs of discomfort until they are on the verge of total exhaustion. Beneath their apparent confidence lies an almost suicidal imprudence. To survive, it is better to be like the horse. Ask for help when necessary. Trust others. Show vulnerability. Soft is better than hard. It seems that there are mule people and horse people. Mule children and horse children.

2

Something that can be said fairly objectively about the island is that for centuries, people have been going there in search of something. Adventurous, confused, hopeful, worn out, dissatisfied, lost people. All searching. Some without even knowing what they are looking for and many others believing they know what they are looking for when they don't. My father has told me things about when he arrived. He worked as a waiter, as an electrician, and as a door-to-door encyclopaedia salesman. A local policeman who used to drink in the bar where he worked suggested he should take the exam to join the force. 'Go for it, Pepe,' he advised him, 'it's a steady job. They're opening a police station in San Antonio and you'll be the first policemen there.' My father passed the exam with the highest mark. He was the only applicant who had finished primary school. They were all outsiders. No islander wanted to be a policeman.

They were called *porreros,* because in the early days they didn't carry a gun, only a *porra,* or truncheon. My father was born in Barcelona and was the only policeman in his class who could drive his Land Rover out to the houses in the middle of the countryside, miles from anywhere, and make himself understood in the native language of the islanders. That made things easier. It established trust. If a road needed tarmacking, for example, or a landowner had municipal taxes to pay, or someone had died and a relative needed to identify him, they would send Pepe el Catalán. But trust isn't something that is earned overnight. On one of his first visits, he was greeted with a shotgun firing salt-filled cartridges. Another time he was set upon by four or five dogs. He raced back to his Land Rover and locked himself inside. He could hear his own heart thudding in his chest, and the barking of the dogs as they circled the vehicle. These were country folk: decent, but tough. With plenty of reasons to be wary of moustachioed strangers in uniform who they didn't know from Adam, coming around with their truncheons, telling them what to do, or what not to do.

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The island at that time was fairly similar to the Wild West. The mayor of the town where I grew up would be the equivalent of the Sheriff. He carried a gun strapped to his torso, hidden beneath his jacket. His hair was white, not exactly clean, and hung down to his shoulders. He was always sweaty, his grey moustache was yellowed by nicotine, and his tie hung loose and crooked around his neck. A slow but steady drinker of whisky and gin, he had a laugh that made people feel threatened. Apparently, the hippies who made the island famous at the time soon stopped coming to San Antonio. They were everywhere in San Vicente, in Jesús, in Benirràs. But as soon as they showed up in the town, the mayor himself greeted them all guns blazing, then roared with laughter as he watched them run away.

I can't help imagining him as a caricature, like a wacky character out of a Francisco Ibáñez comic. Or perhaps like one of those dirty old men in the Spanish erotic Destape movies: revolver in hand, firing shots into to the air and chasing a couple of young women, not sure himself whether he's running after them to scare them away, or to touch them up.

Rumour has it that he strangled a personal enemy of his in a fit of rage, then hung him from a tree to make it look like suicide. Then he called the coroner and an hour later there they both were, together with an officer of the Guardia Civil, standing in front of a carob tree with the dead man swinging from it. The bruise on the man's neck was out of proportion to the fine twine he was strung up with. The head was in a position not consistent with hanging, with no dislocation at the base of the head. The coroner grimaced in surprise and spent the next few minutes examining the body and making comments: this looks odd, there's something not right here, the body really should be taken away for analysis, we should call the duty judge. The mayor lost his patience and literally grabbed him by the ear like a small child. He dragged him by the ear to another tree a few metres away and pushed him up against the trunk. He rammed his arm under the coroner's chin and spoke to him about half an inch from his face. He pulled the gun from inside his jacket and held it to the coroner's temple. The man cried out in alarm. The civil guard looked on, amused by the scene. You could not hear what the mayor was saying because he was whispering, but you could tell that the whispers were filled with rage. If there is such a thing as whispering a shout, or shouting in a whisper, that is what the sheriff was doing. He also almost choked the coroner. When he took his arm off his neck, the man cowered and trembled. Whimpering, he gasped huge gulps of air. The gunslinger was still pointing his pistol at him. 'There you go, get some air,' he said. He fumbled with his briefcase, opening it as fast as he could. He took out a piece of paper and signed it but was so frightened that the signature looked like a child's scribble. The mayor made him do it again. They walked over to the car so he could rest the document on the bonnet, and the coroner scratched the pen across the paper once more and handed it over. He did not take his eyes off the ground and chose to stagger down the road rather than get a lift with them in the car. His legs were shaking, and he was reeling in fear.

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