

# The Mourner

## Carlos René Padilla

Translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

When I got within a few metres of my nana's corpse, my legs stopped obeying me. I gulped. Tried again. Nothing. My mother must have realised what was going on, because she quietly sidled up behind me and put her mouth close to my ear, so that only I could hear her. Don't stop halfway there, she choked out, streaming tears and snot. She's waiting for you to say goodbye to her. I didn't move. My feet were rooted to the ground. I was a saguaro cactus entrenched in the middle of the desert, whipped by sandstorms and unable to do anything about it. My mother couldn't persuade me to go near the coffin. First she begged me. Then she told me how important it was to say goodbye to my grandmother. Finally she threatened to not let me see my friends for two weeks. None of it worked. I silently vowed that I would never go near a coffin again in my whole life. Not after I'd watched cancer gnaw away at my nana until she became a semi-waking corpse. That was when I was fourteen. My mother didn't understand what an ordeal it had been for me to watch those bones clinging to the skin that had once been so soft and had cradled me all throughout my childhood.

Three years later it was my paternal grandfather's turn. He had a heart attack just before setting off to work on his allotment. He slumped face-first into the plate of machaca and vegetables that was his breakfast that morning, alongside a tortilla sobaquera and a cup of well-steeped coffee. My grandmother, between sobs, wiped the meat, onion and tomato residue off him before the local doctor arrived to certify his death. Months later she went too, from diabetes. To avoid pressure from my parents and relatives, I spent the entire wake outside. I barely set foot in the living room of the house, where it was customary for people to hold a wake because there was no proper funeral home in Bavispe. I resisted my father's barrage of attempts to coax me up to the coffin to say goodbye to my grandmother for the last time. All I got out of it was that I spent the whole summer cooped up inside, while my friends swam in the river every day.

I was spared my maternal grandfather's wake because he died before I was born. My mother told me that he was among those who disappeared in

the town's earthquake in 1887. There were further opportunities for me to overcome my aversion to funerals: an aunt who didn't survive an operation on her womb, my dad's buddy who fell off a horse on his way home, drunk, and broke his neck; and even a high school friend of mine, whose poorly treated flu turned into angina and who, in less than a week, ended up in the cemetery. Not even that cavalcade of Grim Reapers constantly hovering nearby could make me change my mind, and by the time I was thirty-five I'd managed to keep the promise I made to my teenage self, to never see a dead person in a coffin.

But all that changed the night of the wake held for my neighbour Conchita, who died following complications from appendicitis. I decided I was finally old enough to break my vow to stay away from the dead. I no longer wanted to be the village weirdo who didn't want to say goodbye to her loved ones when they were laid out in their coffins. I wanted to rid myself of the panic, to overcome that aversion. Just like when I was fourteen, I gulped, and stood up. My neighbour's living room was small, so they were holding the wake outside on the veranda. The rows of chairs – rented for parties as well as funerals – took over half the street, but no one cared. I spotted my husband Mariano standing under a tree with other friends, swigging beer, and telling long-winded jokes. I could tell by the way he was laughing. Mariano had this way of baring his front teeth like he was about to bite into a corn cob, while slapping his thigh.

I approached the plain wooden coffin with its rough splinters visible. It was flanked by four candles which threatened to blow out at the slightest provocation. I feared I would get stuck halfway there, just like at my nana's funeral, but this time my feet did as they were told. The lid was open. I looked at Conchita's face. Her excessive makeup made her look like an amateur clown at their first show. She reminded me of the ones I used to see at the circus that came to town from time to time. I was worried I'd start laughing but I managed to control my facial expression. Then, as if someone had brought down a concrete dam behind my eyes, I started to cry. And I didn't understand why, either, since I didn't even like my neighbour Conchita that much. Always poking her nose into other people's business. Always giving her opinions left, right and centre, when nobody had asked for them. On several occasions we'd even fallen out over trivial things. Many people in Bavispe were aware that I bitched about her whenever I got the chance, so I could understand why they looked so shocked when I let out my first bellow.

Because that's what it was, a bellow, like a cow struggling to bear a calf. The tears tumbled down onto Conchita's chest and face. My sobs threatened to wash away the caked-on cosmetics and leave her looking worse than she already did, so I shuffled back slightly. It was better for the wet droplets to fall on the floor rather than on her face. People might think she had vitiligo or something. I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I turned. It was her sister, Lourdes. She hugged me, even though she usually didn't give me the time of day. It seemed she had instantly forgotten the way she treated me at primary school. How she whispered behind my back whenever I went for walks with Mariano down by the river. How she used to look the other way when we bumped into each other at the festival of Saint Michael Archangel, the town's patron saint. I let myself go. I nestled my face into the crook of her neck and continued to whimper there, letting the tears flow for several minutes. Then she led me over to a metal chair. I wept as I walked the three metres to my seat. With every step I took, it felt like glass was embedding itself into the soles of my feet. I sat there all night, sighing and wailing as if there was no room for any air in my body, and I had to get it all out. Whenever it seemed my tears might dry up, I would just stand up, look at Conchita's poorly made-up face, and the snivelling would start again. That whole time, I thought of anything. Not about the arguments we had over her not returning a dish I'd lent her, or about her not paying into the community kitty on time, and me having to pay her share. I wasn't even asking for forgiveness, or for her soul to be at peace, or for Saint Peter to come out to greet her with much fanfare and a trio of blonde, pot-bellied little angels. It was just a mental void. A white noise inside my head. A waterfall cascading inside me, drenching me with light.

I remember that I didn't close my eyes all night. I also wasn't afraid of being left alone with the dead woman. I told Mariano to go home, that I'd be back later. He was drunk and wanted to sleep, so he decided not to kick up a fuss and staggered off. When the rooster started crowing, I was sitting in front of my neighbour Conchita's coffin. In the morning, the house gradually filled up again with relatives and friends. By noon they'd agreed to take the body to the cemetery for burial. We formed two lines, straighter than the one we were made to stand in at primary school to pay homage to the flag, and we walked to the cemetery, gently chanting the rosary aloud.

At the graveyard, it was a different story. Or rather, a different sob story. People kept coming up to me, saying how sorry they were for my loss.

No one could mistake me for a family member, but when they saw my supposed grief, they didn't hesitate to embrace me, to comfort me a little. Once the final spadefuls of dry earth had covered the coffin, the tears stopped flowing from my eyes. Then everything was calm inside me. My interior was a river of still water. A fluttering of hummingbirds in my soul.

I got home. I knew Mariano was still at work and wouldn't be back until later. Maybe not until the early hours, if he was meeting friends at the bar. I went to bed and instantly fell sound asleep. I didn't dream about anything. Not about Conchita. Or about the sadness life brings. I had no trouble getting to sleep, no tossing and turning in bed, no need to get up every couple of hours.

The next day, I was different. Even Mariano commented that my skin looked a different colour and my usual expression, like I'd just caught a whiff of something nasty, was gone. Instead of making some snarky retort, I just slowly nodded. There was no need to argue. I looked in the mirror and confirmed that yes, the dark rings under my eyes had faded, and I had a big smile on my face. A satisfied expression. Mariano finished his breakfast. Happy, he said goodbye at the door before he set off to work in the fields. Ten days passed and my mood began to sour again. I could feel it happening. The quarrels with Mariano over him not doing what was needed around the house, him going out drinking with his buddies or him making comments about some blouse that made me look a little fatter than I was... they crept back in. Yes, everything slipped back into the routine of the last fifteen years in which, after an argument, Mariano would slap me, slam the door and go to spend the night at his parents' house. He always came back a couple of days later. With a litany of apologies and promises, which I would also make, but which we both knew, deep down, we would never keep.

One afternoon as I was hanging out the laundry in the courtyard, there was a knock at the door. It was Pedro, standing there motionless, with his Resistol cowboy hat in his hands. He kept turning it around like the steering wheel of an invisible car. He didn't say anything. I told him that if he'd come to see Mariano, he was out, probably getting wasted at the Ace of Hearts, so he should look for him there. I was about to slam the door in his face when he finally managed to get the words out. He wanted to know how much I would charge to go and mourn at his mother-in-law's wake. I looked at him blankly. Pedro explained to me that everyone in Bavispe was talking about Conchita's funeral, about how I'd mourned her death, and most of them knew that we

didn't even get on very well. Laura, his wife, had sent him to fetch me for the funeral of her mother, Doña Ruperta. Seeing that I was still reluctant, he offered me fifty pesos a night, plus dinner. I told him to give me time to change, put on a black blouse, find my shawl and see if I had any rosary beads lying around in the bureau drawer, so that everything would look nicer. He nodded and said he would meet me at their house. Before he left, he handed me the money. So that I wouldn't get cold feet, he said. Pedro never knew that I would have even done it for free.

Dressed in my mourning clothes, I made my way over to Doña Ruperta's house. Before leaving home, I left Mariano a note telling him where I was. On the way to the funeral, I was worried I wouldn't be able to play the part. I thought that what happened with my neighbour Conchita might have been a one-off. But it wasn't. As soon as I saw the hazelnut-coloured coffin in the centre of the room, surrounded by candles, I started all over again. I didn't even wait until I was sitting down. Without any warm-up, I burst into tears. The funeral-goers didn't notice the slight smile that appeared on my face because I covered it with my hand. A little grin, then I got to work. I stayed all night, sobbing constantly. I paused only to eat two servings of menudo, drink three cups of freshly brewed coffee and four litres of water because I was afraid of getting dehydrated. It all went perfectly. They kept offering me their condolences, perhaps even more so than to Laura, the daughter of the deceased. At one point I thought about dropping to my knees when they lowered the coffin into the bowels of the earth, but I restrained myself. I think it was for the best. Bawling my eyes out already gave me enough of a leading role, I shouldn't steal the whole show. I had to leave something for the relatives.

Soon, word got round about Pedro's offer and people began to hire me for funerals, not only in Bavispe but also in nearby towns such as La Galerita, San Miguel, La Morita, Bacadéhuachi and Bacerac. I was delighted. After every burial I would return home refreshed. The combination of the pine-scented coffin, the pungent aroma of half-dried varnish, the fresh-cut carnations from the countryside, the funeral wreath made of Kraft paper and stinking of glue, the coffee freshly brewed in the pewter pot, the menudo simmering over a wood fire in the courtyard... it was as if it was a healing balm that enveloped me completely. A new energy flowed through my entire being. Sunsets looked more beautiful, birds chirped at the perfect volume and the food I prepared was not bland or over-salted as Mariano liked to accuse

me of, but just right. The arguments with him instantly stopped, too. I was no longer bothered by the smell of his feet when he kicked off his work boots. I could stand that smell, a mixture of rotten milk and cow dung emanating from his extremities. I could also stand him pawing me like I was one of the sheep he herded. Not to mention the times he almost bashed down the door and I had to get up and open it because he was too drunk to do it. Then he would demand sex from me, as he slobbered all over my face. I frantically wiped off the saliva but that didn't deter him. Mariano claimed he'd gone too long without touching me. If I saw him clench his fists, I knew it was best to obey. So, wearily I would agree, so as not to prolong the scene. I lay down on the bed while Mariano unbuckled his belt and tugged his trousers and underpants down in one go. I closed my eyes. He climbed on top of me. I was a morsel of food and he was a hungry man who had never been taught how to eat properly. He stuck it inside me and started rapidly thrusting. He was a rabid animal, humping away, oblivious to my occasional whimpers of pain. He would often fall asleep on top of me before he finished. His breath, stinking of Bacanora liquor and vomit, engulfing me. Seeping into my pores. Absorbing his scent and diluting mine. I chose to endure it. To not move at all. To stay absolutely still. Keeping my breath as shallow as possible so he wouldn't wake up and try to repeat the whole sordid business.

The next day Mariano went off to the fields. Proud as punch. Feeling like a true stud, he said. I could stand all of that if I had been at a funeral. All of it. It was like wiping dirt away with a rag. I was revitalised and born again, like ripened corn.

I found that people looked at me differently as well. With admiration now. I was the town mourner. The official mourner. The finest Magdalena that Bavispe had ever had. The woman who shed tears for her dead so that they could enter heaven faster and not become tormented souls, condemned to wander through the town at night. At the market, stallholders would offer me the freshest fruit, the butcher the juiciest sirloin, and I never got given a rotten vegetable again. Sometimes they wouldn't even let me pay for my shopping. And I accepted. I was happy. On my way home, there was always some guy who would offer to carry my bags while he made small talk with me. It was always the same. They would tell me about themselves, about how well they were doing in their lives. How they helped out their neighbours. How they were better than their neighbours. I reckon they thought I had a direct line to death. They treated me respectfully because they didn't know

when they might need my services. They noticed that without even knowing much about the deceased, I cried my eyes out, so I imagine they thought that if they were nice to me, I would be even better. Especially the old people who sensed that death was hovering around them like a pesky, impertinent fly. No matter how much they shooed it away, it never went very far. They even got up from their chairs when they saw me walking past their houses. It pained me slightly to see their bodies, wracked with arthritis, making such an effort to stand up and greet me. Not even the municipal president had that kind of power.

Mariano never got involved in my new profession, he let me get on with it. He could also see the changes that came over me after every funeral. If he heard about a death in the area, he knew I'd be spending that night in front of the coffin and he was free to go out drinking with his friends without an argument later on at home. He knew that after a funeral I would get up early to make him breakfast. Mariano also came to expect his reward when he got home from work. He wouldn't need to force me to have sex and I would cook him up a nice gallina pinta broth, his favourite. Ten months went by like this. Happily. I also realised that the colour of mourning suited me; it made me look slimmer. I remember Mariano saying, when we were first dating, that my skin looked like a flour tortilla freshly cooked on the griddle, and now, I had discovered that I looked paler.

But suddenly everything came to a standstill. It seemed as if the Grim Reaper had lost his way in these parts, or, like an irksome relative, was no longer prepared to travel up as far as the Sonora mountains. I wasn't worried at first. I mean, people die every day around the world, this unlucky streak couldn't last long, I thought. But it did. There weren't even any deaths in La Galerita, Bacerac, Bacadéhuachi or La Morita for the next two months. Eight weeks and zero deaths. Sixty days cold turkey. Nobody else noticed. In my prayers, I even asked for another earthquake like the one that happened all those years ago. As long as it doesn't come knocking on our door, we all close our eyes and pretend that death doesn't exist. It's not until you hear about the death of a family member that you remember the Grim Reaper. The rest of the time, you bury him – ironically – in the depths of your being, so he can't be invoked, and take away someone else dear to you. Everyone goes about their normal lives. They carry on working in the fields, buying vaccines from the vet, opening their grocery stores, visiting friends in the afternoon for coffee and cake. Everyone, that is, except me.

Mariano says he can't stand me anymore and I tell him the feeling is mutual. When he gets home, he finds me just pacing round and round the kitchen. I don't lift a single pot or light the stove to make food for him. Two days ago he yelled that I was more useless than a mare with broken legs.

Day sixty-five without a wake. I marked it on my calendar. The stress of waiting for someone to knock on the door and bring me news of a funeral has shredded my nerves. Chamomile, mullein and passionflower teas all have no effect on me. The slightest noise on the veranda and I'm smoothing down my skirt, fixing my hair and rushing to open the door. Often it's just the wind shaking the tree branches, causing them to bang on the wood like someone desperately knocking. In the end I had to take Mariano's machete and chop off a branch so it would stop playing with my imagination. My anxiety is so extreme that I haven't been to the market in over a week; I don't want someone to come looking for me and not be able to find me immediately. It might seem silly; in this town you can find whoever you want in under half an hour. But I don't want to risk it.

The one person I go to visit every day is Mario, the carpenter. But not without leaving a note on our front door first. Mario, a chubby man with a scraggly moustache, supplies coffins to all the local towns and villages. At first he laughed, telling me that although this lack of deaths is odd, it happens sometimes and I shouldn't despair. At first he said it teasingly. Now every time I go into the carpentry workshop he turns pale and before I can ask him anything, he shrugs his shoulders, points to the shells of two dusty coffins and confirms that he hasn't got any bodies to put in them. Then he stares at the saw and the wood, as if I'm not there.

After my visit to Mario, I always hurry straight home. I don't talk to anyone, although everyone says good morning to me. I just look up and give them a slight wave. I don't want to stop. In case someone knocks on my door and I'm not in, and they then go and find another mourner. Because that's another fear of mine: what if someone else is crying better than me? What if some other woman is offering her services for a lower price, or has a more diverse range of sobs? I decide that next time I'm hired I'll hurl myself into the grave, at least once the coffin is lowered enough. I'm not going to let anyone compete with me. I just need another burial. So I can show them how versatile I can be. Ask them how they want me to act. I can cry like a rich lady, with a few restrained tears that barely trickle down my cheeks, or like a



broken woman, with bellows that last all night long. If they want, I can even pray the rosary and the novena for them, all included in the price.

I stare at the calendar hanging in the living room. The crosses drawn on it show me that today, sixty-seven days have gone by without a single funeral in the whole region. Too many days. I look towards the bedroom. I can hear Mariano's abhorrent snoring. He obviously doesn't give a damn about my suffering. I decide I can't take this agony any longer. I get up and head for the kitchen, looking for the sharpest knife I can find to put an end to this death drought.