

The Vinegar Scent of Books

For Yuknow

In her mind, the child's disease came from the time of her pregnancy when she had found refuge in the library's basement. It was during that time that she started to hate the smell of books, as well as the smell of rain, like ripe fruit almost to the point of being spoiled. "*Putas* smell to apples," her father always had yelled when he was drunk.

Apple was the smell on her skin when her mother opened the door of her bedroom. "Marisol, your father already knows that you are in disgrace. He killed Almandro. He is drinking now to get up the courage to kill you," her mother had warned. It was the rain, the fog, the cloudy darkness that saved her, running from porch to porch. Marisol escaped with a small bag and nowhere to go, not even the church. She remembered what the priest had said one Sunday at mass, "An impure woman cannot step into God's temple."

Watching the dripping water from a gutter, she prayed, touching her stomach, the same one that her lover Almandro had bitten. The tiny bites around her navel still made her blaze—each pore, each mole, and even the stripes that her father's belt had left on her butt. With the creamed remains of his pleasure he had written the word "apple" around her navel.

"You know apple seeds have cyanide. The most delicious of fruits can kill you as well. Like you." His words were like a prophecy: The love for her killed him. She had tried to convince him not to tell her father, but Almandro said that he was a man who could take care of her. It would have been easier to steal a boat and just escape. She knew that her father would never accept a crier and a poet for a suitor of his daughter. On this night, darkened by tears, Marisol came across Doña Rosa Jimenez, the woman sent from Bogotá to set up a library. She

would call that meeting “damned luck” for the rest of her life. Except for short conversations with Doña Rosa, her only companions for the next seven months were a candle and shelves of old, rotten books that seemed to sweat a thick essence of vinegar. In terror, she listened to her father’s horse, shots, and cries as he ripped up the houses looking for “*La puta*.” A caravan of his cowboys followed him, convinced that Marisol could not have escaped from a town in the middle of the Magdalena River, reached by a steamboat only once a week.

Marisol sometimes thought about her mother, the Indian woman that her father had abducted. She was the one who allowed her to ride the horses at night. She was the one that rubbed slices of beets on Marisol’s cheeks to give them some pinkish color. She was the one that appeared one night holding a candle when Marisol was kissing and hugging Almandro. Her mother took her gently by the hand and put her finger on her lips saying, “Your father is up with insomnia, so better go to sleep now.”

In the library with fear, she still had hope. The hope to witness a blink of the eyes of the creature whose body pulled out from her navel. The hope to play with tiny fingers that would become hands, grabbing objects and writing words. The hope to hear baby’s cries, words, or songs. The hope to escape.

Twenty-two days after Flavio was born, Doña Rosa gave her some news. That morning she came with two bottles of *aguapanela con leche*, a hot sugarcane beverage that makes women produce more milk. Doña Rosa waited, staring at Marisol in silence for a long time, without the usual rush to head back upstairs.

“*Hija*, have you finished feeding the boy?”

“Yes, but he may want more.” Marisol rested the baby on a nest of blankets on the floor

and pinched his nose saying, “This baby likes to eat.”

“No, you cannot feed him until two hours after what I am going to tell you.”

“What—”

“The milk is going to get bad.” She said gently, nodding, and went on, “Your father...last night...he killed himself.”

Marisol felt as if all the shelves of books collapsed over her head, and Doña Rosa rushed to hold her in her arms.

“*Hija, hijita*, don’t cry like that. He would have killed you. People in town said that his last words were that the crocodiles saved the honor of his family.”

Doña Rosa convinced Marisol to take the boat that arrived the next morning, precisely at her father’s funeral. It wouldn’t be wise to see her mother. Her uncles would blame both of them for their brother’s death. Marisol touched the dark mole that she had next to her right nipple—the mark of a common destiny between mother and daughter. Marisol tried to hold back the tears, even though Doña Rosa told her: “Don’t cry anymore and read something nice. Do it for the milk at the very least.”

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Before the doctor told her, before the baby Flavio said his first word and started with endless speeches, Marisol knew that something was wrong. The vinegar smell from the books remained on his skin throughout the boat trip and the entire year that she stayed at the house of Doña Rosa Jimenez’s family in Bogotá. No cream, lotion, or perfume could erase or cover Flavio’s smell. *The same smell from books, a cleansing breath, refreshing my tonsils. My milk has a different aroma, close to the overnight rice and sweet, but without the sweetness of the*

aguapanela, Marisol always thought.

In the beginning, it was a matter of admiration from neighbors that came to see how the baby pronounced with perfect clarity words like “mother,” “bottle,” “milk,” and “dog.” When he was six months old, he was already narrating experiences with a voice and words that seemed, not even from an adult, but from an elderly person. “*Parece un viejo,*” people said, but Marisol wished that her son would be as silent as her own mother.

Days after his tenth month he began walking, and by then he could hold conversations with adults. Soon his vocabulary was rich, but his speech patterns became noticeably strange—without pause, without interruption, a toneless, endless voice. This was what called the attention of Dr. Gregorio Hernandez, a famous physician who came from Venezuela to visit the Jimenez family.

For Marisol, the doctor embodied both a saint and a strange creature. Always wearing a black suit, Dr. Hernandez observed the baby intensely, even staying a whole morning to listen to Flavio speak. He then asked for permission to examine the baby and perform some tests. Dr. Gregorio washed Flavio’s head and noticed how the water became a Dijon color. Then, with his fingertips around Flavio’s head, he pronounced some long words: anthropology, neuroscience, hippopotamus. With each word Dr. Gregorio modulated each syllable; Flavio’s skull waved, showing small bumps that quickly disappeared when Flavio took a breath and repeated the exact same word without a mistake.

In the library of the house, Dr. Gregorio explained the diagnosis with words that Marisol could not understand. He thought for a moment and said, “Look at the typewriter. His brain is like a piece of paper. Usually, the piece of paper has space for all the words we want to write. In

his case, he is overwriting. And if you write over and over on the same paper..."

He shook the page in the typewriter. Marisol ventured to say, "Nothing written there can be understood."

"Exactly, and even worse, the more words he absorbs, the more erratic he will be."

"God! What can we do?"

"I do not know. It is a degenerative illness. There is an Austrian doctor, Freud, very famous, that argues that a catharsis, meaning..." he paused as he made circles with his hand. "Meaning that a regression to a difficult emotional moment could cure a problem, but in his case..." He tipped his chin three times with his index. "He needs to burst out, create an emotional *explosion* of such a nature that will make all the information flow, something like what Saint Paul suffered when he became blind."

Marisol wanted to say something, but he ignored her. Dr. Gregorio stood up, looked at the sun behind the Monserrate mountain and said, "Of course, very few human beings had *the privilege* of that miracle."

"But there should be something we can do," said Marisol as she wrung her hands.

"I do not know, madam. Maybe if he is subject to a complete silence without ever learning how to read, that may stop the process." He lifted his two palms like he was asking clemency from heaven. "I really don't know."

Marisol looked with wrath at all the books around her. She stood up and ran out of the house crying.

* * *

The Jimenez family strongly suggested Marisol take a cell in a Conceptionists' convent

in the cold city of Pasto. A nun had died and none in the family wanted to take vows, so the heritage of the cell remained without use. The enclosed monastic life and the mandatory silence assured not only a way of living, but also Flavio's isolation from the world of words. Marisol imagined the time when the Jimenez family would kick her out from their house. What she could do in the streets? She never learned how to cook; her father didn't allow her hands to touch the raw vegetables, saying, "I don't want my daughter to smell like a kitchen, the sweet bitterness of spoiled fruit." She feared to see herself as the prostitutes standing on the street with lipstick and rubbing slices of beets on their cheeks.

"Would the nuns allow me to stay there with my son?" She asked.

Doña Silvana, Rosa's mother, patted her twice on her lap, "*Hay mija*, start calling him Flavia. He is so small, nobody is going to know the difference."

Marisol took the vow of silence with hope to cure her son and joined a group of illiterate nuns who worked in the kitchen. In that way, she maintained a distance from the library and all of the liturgical services.

For five years, before the *ding dong* of the first morning bell, her day started by removing the tips of cotton that she had placed in Flavio's ears the previous day, replacing them with fresh ones, so he could not listen to the chorus, the mass, or the occasional readings in the weaving room. She bathed Flavio every three days in absolute secrecy until the day she got pneumonia. She almost died. Later, she felt it would have been better if she had, thus never knowing that Flavio was adopted by a General. The Reverend Mother told her that the adoption was a better solution rather than abandoning the boy to his own luck.

"A boy grows and becomes the devil himself. We can't have him here in the heart of

purity."

Not only did it take her ten years to get a release from the convent, but it took her three years more of pleading to learn the name of the General: San Clemente from Popayán.

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Still wearing her black habit without the veil, Marisol came to Popayán trying to find the whereabouts of General San Clemente and his adopted son Flavio. The mansion of San Clemente, a wreck for the lizards, had only scattered books left under its falling walls. An old woman passed by, muttering a prayer and blessing the decayed house. Marisol asked the woman about the San Clemente family.

"Are you a relative?"

"A distant one. I used to be a nun and I want to know about my family."

The woman bit her lip, made the sign of a cross and said, "We believe that liberal guerrillas did it."

"Did it?"

"It was two years ago. I am sorry, miss...They found the bodies of the General, his wife and all the servants."

"And the child..." Marisol ventured to say, "Flavio?"

"That was the only body they could not find. Some said that he may have escaped. Others that—" She grimaced in pain. "You know what those barbarians do with boys...make him," she lowered her voice, "*piccalilli*." Then she looked away trying to remember. "Flavio was the tallest, the strongest, and the handsomest boy. So young, he spoke seven languages in addition to the Indian dialects and played the piano and the violin like *no one else*. Even better, he was the

most agile and graceful at the dances.” She studied Marisol’s face attentively, “What is your name, dear?”

“Marisol,” she hesitated, “...San Clemente.” She lied.

“San Clemente,” she reassured.

“God has him in his glory.” said the woman as she pointed to the sky. “The old general found his death as he was reading the Bible in his precious library.”

* * *

Marisol continued moving north with the hope of finding her son anywhere.

“He must be alive. He must,” she repeated to herself in a low monotone voice. “I just want to feel him, mine in silence, the silence that made me and made *you* during my pregnancy... I want you to feel my hands and feel that you can be cured.”

Her inquiries meandered from each town’s market, to the church, to the whorehouses, and back to the church. In Sevilla, she heard a town crier tell the story of a young man who came to the village of Caicedonia and killed the priest, and later sat to read all the birth, death, and wedding certificates. The people in Caicedonia blamed the liberal guerrillas, and as the new priest said to Marisol, “Who else wanted to kill a representative of God? The devil himself.”

Months later, a rice merchant of Riosucio told her a slightly similar story. “A strong man knocked down the clerk window of the cable office, and from a single blow sent Don Argemiro, the clerk, to his death.” He looked at Marisol’s clothing, her scapular, her sandals. “You must forgive me, ma’am; but this was likely the work of a fanatic conservative that wanted to destroy the progress of civilization.”

Her response to all these stories was the same indifferent silence. She stood up sluggishly

and kept staring at the person telling the story. Then, without saying thank you, she would walk, dragging her feet without shoes but wrapped in bandages.

In Marisol's long trip across Colombia, she found that politicians, pawnbrokers, and monks repeated the similar stories that always ended with the fatal death of a librarian or an archivist. In any case liberals set off on a manhunt, and conservatives crusaded to find a devil who always left a strong smell of vinegar.

Nothing brought satisfaction to her. Neither food for the appetite in the mornings, nor cold water for heat at noon, nor the light soup for dinner that always fell heavy to her stomach. Her face seemed to be frozen without any smile. Almandro's playful words, even his tickles that made her burst into laughter, were archived inside her brain. The sensation of feeling like a plant sapping milk from her breast when Flavio was sucking was buried in her past.

Marisol hoped that the sole encounter would bring her son to sanity. *My own scent mixes with his in a hug, a liberation for him and for me.* She hoped to be liberated from the nightmares of her father's horses galloping across her head, of her breast seeping a thick mustard, her body sleeping in a bed made of nails that formed words.

Almost forty years after the killings had stopped, Marisol traveled to Amalfi to talk to a famous vinegar trader who possibly had information about the killer, whose fame had been all but forgotten by this time.

Among bottles of the most ancient balsamic, apple cider, and Chinese rice vinegars, Don Ramon Palenzuelo took out his horned-rimmed glasses to look in the eyes of Marisol. "I had the privilege to be there in Cayetano, a town in the south of Bolívar." He bit the frame of his spectacles and placed his eyes on a cloud over the mountain. "If I had not been there, I would

never be buying and selling vinegar now.” He hesitated, and appraised her habits, but ventured to say, “Miss San Clemente” and went on, “I was a boy then—well, big enough to play pool and smoke a cigarette—when they came with the news of having captured the beast, the ‘Vinegar Devil’ as they called him.” He shrugged.

“What can I tell you? We all wanted to see the beast even more when liberal and conservatives got together to execute him. Let me tell you. I have never seen anything like that,” he said as he moved his index finger. “I expected to see a man with a thick beard, dirty, smelling of urine, but there was nothing at all. We saw a tall man wearing the cleanest white shirt I have ever seen. It gleamed with the afternoon sun.” He wore his glasses again and bent, resting his hands on the counter. “He never stopped talking. I thought he was telling jokes, and I laughed until my belly hurt. The weird thing is that it seemed that everyone heard something different. The priest told me that the Vinegar Man was praying, a politician heard the man giving a speech, the chorus director heard him singing, and even Mr. Bouillon, the French teacher, said the man was actually speaking in French.” He shook his head. “Who knows? But that was not the miracle. At the moment when the platoon commander cried out ‘fire,’ this devil man yelled so strongly, with so much terror, that his saliva gushed all over like a rain.” He closed his eyes. “You may not believe me, but the people in Cayetano lived that, lived the miracle. The blind started to see, the invalid to walk, and infertile women got pregnant.” He lifted his palm saying “Wait,” then went behind the store, returning with a carboy that contained a purple liquid. He put the bottle on the counter, whispering, “This is he, my fortune. The commander gave me a part of the Vinegar Man’s brain that I kept in his natural blood, this apple cider-like vinegar. I believe that it can cure anything.”

Marisol caressed the glass with the tip of her finger, with the same tenderness that she had done when her baby Flavio had not yet spoken a word. She opened the jar and probed it with her finger. Gently, she touched her breast with hope to be cured of her own bitterness.

Jhon Sanchez is Colombian born and obtained political asylum in the USA. He received a JD/LLM (IU-McKinney) and MFA (LIU). Nominated for The Best of the Net (2016) and for a Pushcart Prize (2015-16). He would like to thank Sam Ferri, Nan Frydland, Emma Komlos-Hrobsky and Martha Hughes for their editorial comments.