

## OF LOVE AND OTHER ILLS

All went as it had for fifteen years in the Rivera González household until the day Matilde saw José Juan coming home from school with vomit on his lips, his skin so pale she thought he was a ghost. Matilde hesitated, but decided to open the door after concluding that, if that pallid personage who resembled her aunt Catalina—God bless her soul—was a messenger of death, she wouldn't put up resistance. She was ready to bid farewell.

No one had seen her so determined since she yelled at her husband in the consulting room of Dr. Guardado demanding that they perform a caesarean section because suffering didn't suit her. What embarrassment José Ignacio felt passing through the waiting room where other patients and families pretended not to hear anything, hiding behind gossip magazines and old newspapers. That was Matilde.

“José Juan, what happened to you?” she asked.

“Leave the kid alone.” Doña Juana, her mother-in-law, appeared from behind. Looking at Matilde she said, “What happened to *you*?” She patted José Juan on the shoulder with her right hand as she reached for her lower back with the other. Doña Juana was a hunchback.

José Juan had walked a few meters when doña Juana sighed. “Must be the maladies of love.”

Still recovering from the shock, Matilde stared at her. *Superstitious old woman*. She went to the kitchen and grabbed some Valerian herbs to calm herself.

“Just look at that pale skin and chapped lips. Next it'll be insomnia and diarrhea.” The prophetic tone in her voice made the house tremble and think about the sleepless nights to come.

The news of José Juan's sickness spread over the town in less than a couple hours. That's how it works in Bagojo, a town of 433 people.

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Bagojo Colectivo is an *ejido* located near the coastline of the Gulf of California. Just beside it stands Olas Altas. In the times of the Rivera González the inhabitants had not yet agreed where Bagojo ended and Olas Altas started. To make matters more interesting, when it was time to decide if Pacífico Brewery, Corona, or Mexicali Brewery would sponsor the local improvement committee, the men tried settling the dispute through fistfights while the women resorted to airing each other's dirty laundry in public. As the saying goes, "Pueblo chico, infierno grande" (*Little town, big hell*). Out of this mess, three smaller neighborhoods with equally ridiculous names emerged: Perro Muerto, La Vida Nueva, and La Cuchilla—the latter on the other side of the road.

"These divisions are plain bullshit," my dad would say in every committee meeting.

Everyone knew he was right, but they were too proud to admit it.

"Your beer is bullshit," a man replied once, followed by a sequence of obscenities.

You see, in this town good arguments were as abundant as paved roads, social graces an unseen trait, and superstition the daily bread.

This is a peculiar yet common town. This is the town of the Rivera Gonzálezes.

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"Tell me about her," doña Juana commanded José Juan, hoping that talking about his beloved would help him recover.

He didn't reply—he hadn't spoken in two days.

In accordance with doña Juana's foretelling gifts, José Juan didn't sleep. Matilde said, "It's just food poisoning."

When the vomiting continued and the diarrhea began, doña Juana replied, "You must have never loved." José Juan blinked every five seconds, his eyes directed at the ceiling. By the third day, the blinks came at ten-second intervals. Still no sleep. Dark skin surrounded his tired eyes and contrasted with the pale, sickly skin of his face and body.

"Dr. Guardado is on his way," said José Ignacio. Matilde, doña Juana, and he sat in the living room watching TV. "He said it would take him about ten minutes."

Doña Juana shook her head. "That man doesn't know a thing about the maladies of love."

"Can you please stop your goddamn nonsense?" Matilde's patience was gone. "Let's just wait for the doctor."

The next minutes brought more urgency as José Juan could not keep the breakfast down and he defecated right on the bed. Upon entering, Dr. Guardado struggled to keep his cool, the stench making way down his throat.

"How are y'all doing? I hope I didn't make you wait long. Is he in the room back there?"

José Ignacio nodded and walked Dr. Guardado to the back of the house. The doctor took out his stethoscope and asked José Juan for some deep breaths. He delivered them with the little strength he had. Then the doctor checked eyes, ears, and throat. By now, his own olfactory system had adjusted to the smell.

Dr. Guardado returned to the living room. "For now, give him some Bismosal for the diarrhea. It is important that he gets enough fluids. Between meals, make him drink small amounts of fruit juice without pulp and, if you have any, prepare some tea with honey at night.

You know where to find me if anything happens. I'll be back in two days to check on him. Oh, and . . . clean him up."

When the doctor left, Matilde turned to José Ignacio and said, "Hurry, go get the medicine! We don't want him to die on us."

"Nobody dies from love. Lovesickness hurts, but doesn't kill," Doña Juana said from her rocking chair.

Desperation took hold of Matilde as it did every other day since she experienced the early signs of pregnancy. "Shut the fuck up. We don't care about your damned superstitions. Keep them to yourself." The matter was settled and José Ignacio walked out. *Vieja pendeja*, she thought.

That night José Juan spoke and his skin recovered some of its color. Matilde brought him chicken broth, which he finished with two gulps and asked for more.

"How are you feeling?" she said with an affection seldom seen.

"Fine."

The next day when Matilde came into José Juan's room, she found him in his uniform with his backpack over his left shoulder.

A puzzled look crossed her face. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To school," he said and passed her by and off he went.

Hours later when Matilde saw the ghostly figure she knew it was her son. He came in and went straight to his room without responding to any of the questions his mother asked. *Now what?* she thought as José Juan moved with such fluidity, as if not touching the ground. Anyone, except Matilde, would've said he was floating. *It's okay. The doctor will come back tomorrow.*

Later that day, however, his skin looked as pale as aunt Catalina's did in the coffin and his mouth was so dry that doña Juana had to pour water into it every ten seconds. By the time Dr. Guardado arrived early the next day, José Juan could not pass any food or liquids. Quickly, with the help of doña Juana and Matilde, the doctor moved the patient in his car and drove to Ahome, the closest city. José Juan spent two days at the *Hospital General* where the doctors could not figure out what was wrong. Some said it looked an awful lot like cholera, but the known remedies didn't have any effect. When they administered Suero Oral, José Juan's color returned, but faded as soon as the electrolyte solution ran out. The hospital administration decided to transfer José Juan to a better-equipped branch in Los Mochis.

During this time, Matilde found a piece of paper in José Juan's uniform pants while removing the vomit stains from that fateful day that puked on the Rivera Gonzalezes. The paper had once been sweaty, but apart from the wrinkles and the slightly smeared ink, the declaration of an insatiable desire prevailed. With graceful cursive writing, as graceful as a 14-year-old boy's handwriting can be, José Juan revealed his romantic interest, starting timidly and concluding with such sexual remarks it made Matilde feel prudish. It did not take her long to realize the object of his affections was his Spanish teacher Amelia.

The story about José Juan's crush quickly spread over Bagojo and Olas Altas. Matilde confided in her *comadre* Francisca and made her promise not to tell anyone. Francisca then informed a trusted friend, who in turn shared the story with some equally trustworthy women until the matter became the primary subject of gossip at the grocery store. Oh, the magic of a small town!

When the Rivera Gonzálezes decided to bring José Juan back home, everyone offered Matilde advice as to what else she could try. Following a recommendation, she called Marina,

the local fortuneteller, who could only express her condolences. “His spirit wants to go,” she said. Finally giving in to the idea that José Juan was afflicted with the maladies of love, she took him to the *teibol* to get a lap dance, expecting it to bring life back to him—or at least to a part of him. Not even the prostitute she hired could inspire him. *The dead have more to hope for*, the townsfolk thought.

After two months, José Juan’s body gave up. No one knew the cause of his sickness, but the symptoms killed him. Many bought surgical masks in case bacteria flourished. Doña Juana laughed at them; she claimed the bacteria was love and said that it had proven to be fatal after all.

Thanks to doña Juana, José Juan’s epitaph read, “This one here died of love.”

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A few days after his last breath, José Juan walked to school. Everyone turned as the door opened. José Juan entered and sat at an empty desk in the back. Ms. Amelia stared at him for a second but continued her lesson. After the students left and as she turned the lights off, she looked at him once more. He would not leave.

Every day José Juan sat on a desk and wrote love letters for Ms. Amelia. *There’s nothing to lose*, he thought. He handed in the ones he deemed appropriate for her to read during recess and at the end of the day, but she wouldn’t reply. José Juan moved from copying Jaime Sabines’ *Me tienes en tus manos* and Octavio Paz’s *Los novios* to writing original sonnets and free verse poems. On many occasions, at least in his early drafts, Neruda dominated his romantic endeavors. *The Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* provided him great material to borrow from. Soon a poetry collection sat on Ms. Amelia’s desk.

In June, before the school year ended, he turned in a daring note. With the umpteenth confession of love, José Juan described Ms. Amelia's long black hair and her mesmeric smile. He followed her slim figure from her firm yet delicate calves to her big brown eyes. In a moment of desperation he mentioned his yearning to press his head upon her small, pointed breasts. His pubescent passion turned into a desire to touch and kiss her neck and torso and move down to her legs and feet. The light brown color of her skin awoke his most primitive desires. It made him feel like an animal. But he dared not mention her intimate parts; he dared not even think about their name. After all, she was a *señorita* and twelve years his senior.

One day, the principal called Father Artemio to convince José Juan to return to his grave. As he stepped in, Father Artemio took out a piece of paper and read, "Holy Mother of God, Holy Virgin of virgins, all holy angels and archangels, all holy orders of blessed spirits, all holy apostles and evangelists, all holy martyrs, intercede for us." His hands shook as he skipped several paragraphs. Without knowledge on how to deal with ghosts, he tried an exorcism prayer. "Let the enemy's iniquity have no power over him, let it do no harm.

"I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, tell me the day and hour of your departure. I command you to leave and return to your hellish dwelling; you shall not harm in any way this creature or any bystander." He crossed himself. "Amen."

Unmoved and with the air of a man of high stature, José Juan replied, "With all due respect, Father. I'll stay. You have to allow me that."

Years passed. José Juan went through all the books in the classroom library. He read the classics—Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* represented his one semester study of Russian

literature. As expected, he studied the Mexican literature from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's poetry to Carlos Fuentes' novels. He became fond of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and the short story collection *El Llano en llamas*. Through Gabriel García Márquez, he became convinced of the magic of the Spanish language and its poetic superiority. Just as it had happened with poetry, José Juan started to experiment with fiction in short story form. "I started living after I died," he told himself. On a piece of paper he wrote, "Wisdom comes to us when it can no longer do any good," and knew how right García Márquez had been.

Ms. Amelia dated five men during this time, but none of them stayed when she told them, "I'm saving myself for marriage."

"I don't beg anyone," one said.

Another replied, "You're not even that hot."

Over and over again her mother told her, "Men don't want an independent woman, Amelia."

The last suitor, Mr. Villaseñor, almost convinced Amelia to marry him, and she would have done it had her father not discovered that Mr. Villaseñor had a wife in Guadalajara and was also engaged to another woman in La Vida Nueva. The maladies of love lasted about a month, and once recovered from them she vowed not to marry in this life and wait for death to settle the matter. Her mother made Amelia wear a silver hummingbird around her neck, she said, to attract lovers and good fortune. But after a while, when she had lost all hope of marrying her to a good prospect, the mother would go around town repeating, "You know what they say, 'Better unwed than badly wed.'"

She had to admit, José Juan kept her alive. The thought of even appreciating his attentions seemed disturbing at first, but after six years it felt so normal that she began to enjoy it.



Of course she would not admit to feeling anything special, although the fluttery feeling in her stomach whenever she met his gaze felt like a never-ending butterfly migration. She resumed her poetry writing and sent thank you notes that later turned into love letters. However, they did not talk. Amelia's mother told her not to converse with ghosts "because they're not the talker type." Indeed, José Juan had not uttered one word since Father Artemio's prayer year before. Even when his parents visited him on the Day of the Dead, he would sit there eating his *pozole de res* while Matilde went on and on about recent events like doña Juana's death. She had walked up to the roof to move the TV antenna so she could watch her *telenovela*, tripped on a cable, and fell hard to the ground. In a week she was back up saying she had never felt as agile and wanted surgery on her hunchback so she'd look like the maiden she was inside. The operation failed and she bled out.

José Juan sighed.

On March 13, as she was leaving the classroom, Ms. Amelia stared at her teenage lover and mouthed, *Soon*. Ms. Amelia read one of José Juan's poems as she walked through the hallways and through the gate. Turning her head left and right, she began crossing the road to her home in La Cuchilla.

*If I could say all I think and feel and tried to write it as a poem, it would be the worst one,* Ms. Amelia recited the poem by memory when a bus drove up the small hill onto the two-lane blacktop. The driver looked at the rearview and felt a little bump on the road. He stopped to look out the window and saw a mass of people, mostly women, forming behind the bus.

*Soon*, she'd said. As if enjoying the pain, a smile formed on Ms. Amelia's face. *Soon, soon we'll be together.* The 32-year-old teacher's body lay on the road. Two broken ribs, a dislocated leg, a pool of blood, and a smile with radiant eyes.

Her ghost stood and walked back to Bagojo with a serene look. The small crowd followed her with their eyes and saw her pass through the school's gate. *She must have loved her job*, they thought as they left the scene ready to tell their husbands all about the accident.

Amelia stood in front of classroom 12 and closed her eyes. The day had finally come. Before turning the doorknob, she grabbed her breasts to make sure she was herself. To know this was real.

José Juan slept on his left side with his back turned to the door. She tiptoed and knelt beside him.

"José Juan," she whispered in his ear.

Slowly, he rolled over on his back and looked at her with an intensity matched only by their thirst for each other. She began to unbutton her blouse and he could see the flesh colored bra that covered the mountains he was ready to explore. He saw her bare shoulders and could barely contain the longing to touch her. Amelia clutched his hand and sensed his confusion.

"It's me. I'm here," she said and guided his hand to her breasts.

The overflowing hormones, the anticipated encounter, could not be satiated by anything less than the exploration of a new world. That night they traveled to the jungle where José Juan lost himself in the waters of Amelia's lips and the rivers of her hips. They embarked on a journey to the unknown with pleasure as their compass. They traveled east and west, north and south, until ecstasy invaded their whole beings. The gap between heaven and hell became smaller; they could be citizens of both provinces. Lying naked on the floor, their bodies covered in sweat, they looked at the vast sky and knew this was the beginning of their odyssey.

The next day, the school's principal came into the classroom to substitute for Amelia and found her and José Juan on the floor naked, his head resting on Amelia's stomach. The principal ran back to her office and called the police.

"I only know how to deal with the living," said Officer Romero. "Let me call Father Artemio. He might know what to do."

Reluctantly, they both appeared at the school and, after crossing themselves as good Catholics do, entered the classroom. José Juan and Amelia had put on their underwear.

"Who knew ghosts were so randy," said Romero.

Father Artemio, badly aged by the nonsense he dealt with every day, sat down near them and said, "Children, you have to understand. The community will be disturbed by your presence. Can you go somewhere else where you will be undisturbed and our parishioners won't live in fear?"

"We won't disturb anyone, Father. Just let us be here," said Amelia.

Father Artemio felt powerless. To be at peace with himself, although void of conviction, he repeated the same prayer he recited to José Juan six years before. The priest withdrew from the room relieved that his duty was over.

Aware of how useless pleading with José Juan and Amelia proved, Officer Romero ordered the closing of classroom 12. With wooden strips, they drew a veil over the windows and doors. Posted on the door, a sign read, "NOTICE of CLOSURE." The literature class was moved to room 15 and room 12 would, little by little, be forgotten. Over the next few years, some children came home telling their mothers they heard noises in the mysterious room. "Mind your own business, kids," the mothers would reply. Since then, a few adventurous youngsters have tried to enter the classroom yearning to be the first to reveal the mystery of the lovers. The

school is now abandoned, but kids still play soccer there and some teenage couples break in to enjoy a quick getaway.

Some say they still hear José Juan and Amelia making love. Others deny the story ever happened and go on to say the closest they came to fulfilling their love was being buried next to each other.

*What do I think? you ask. I say we should leave the dead to themselves.*