Missionaries

The missionaries came to our village, El Sauco, in the summer of 1936, just before the civil war began. I was six years old, and had recently gotten engaged to be married. The engagement had started as a joke—my betrothed, Pepe, was my second cousin, nineteen like my brother, Eliseo.

Pepe's family (many children and a tiny, rocky sliver of land) had sent him twenty miles over the mountains to work on our farm in exchange for meals. We were rich for peasants, with three *rubio* cows for cheese, chickens, a pig and a burro. El Sauco, with its stone church, municipal building and grocery, was exactly what Pepe had imagined Madrid to be like, he said. My brother burst out laughing, though he'd never been to Madrid, either.

Pepe joined in, but the tops of his ears reddened. So many things about our family surprised him: that our animals didn't sleep on the ground floor of our house, for example—they had their own building in the corral. Or that he could have a whole egg for himself at supper. Or that our parents didn't beat us—though my mother sometimes threatened Eliseo. Then my brother would grab her scarf and run away with it; the more she shouted after him, the merrier he became. My cousin watched this with amazement. He'd sit down at the table and look around expectantly, as if a puppet show were about to begin.

He was the first person I remember seeing whom I hadn't known all my life. The peddlers who came to El Sauco were always the same grizzled, wiry men who'd memorized the twists and turns of the mountain roads as well as the names of the housewives most likely to be tempted by a shiny aluminum basin. There was a small circus that appeared annually, too, with a drowsy bear on a chain and a moth-eaten, angry monkey. Were they always the same bear and monkey? Maybe not, considering their exhausting, itinerant lives, though the scat they left behind in the plaza—the monkey's hard little droppings, the bear's great, soft piles—was always the same.

"Bear shit! Monkey shit!" the village children would shout, as they ran excitedly through the town. I say "they" because I wasn't allowed to run loose; my mother kept me wherever she was, in the house or the cheese shed or vegetable garden. She called me her little *tesoro*—treasure—and I was always very clean and well-dressed. When we walked in the street she held me tight by the hand. I didn't rebel; I enjoyed the way the other women admired the berets and cardigans she'd knitted for me, and kissed and pinched my rosy cheeks. Meanwhile, their own kids were running around filthy and ragged—not because they were unloved but because it was impossible, with so many children and such backbreaking work, to dote.

My mother was older as well as more leisured than the others because she'd lost six babies between my brother's birth and mine; the year Pepe came she must have been nearly forty. Her face was lined and she was losing her teeth, and her bosom sloped gently down to her waist, like foothills.

She didn't know exactly how old she was and she couldn't read, though she was proud that I was learning. After the 1934 elections that got rid of King Alfonso, the Republic declared that a free, secular education must be available to all the children of Spain. The only literate woman in our village was the priest's sister, Miss Encarnación, who lived with Father Ramon and kept house for him, so she became our teacher. My brother was grown by the time the school opened, but I was in the first class of students. We met in an old shed where there was still the strong ammonia smell of cow piss, and where we couldn't have candles on rainy days because of the straw on the floor.

Miss Enca was gentle, plump and slow-moving. She had a sickness that made her fall asleep suddenly; even before she became a teacher she'd sometimes fall to the ground in the street with her baskets and have to be carried back to the priest's house. So between the dark, smelly classroom and her frequent siestas, we weren't getting a top-notch education. Still—Madrid was aware of us and was thinking about us, and that was new, for El Sauco. The Socialist government sent us pencil boxes stamped with the crest of the Ministry of Education, and packets of notebooks with snowy white pages. A wasteful extravagance, Father Ramon said, in his homily: slates could have been made by the villagers themselves. I already had a slate that my father had made for me, with which I was kept quiet drawing little pictures, and now I began filling up the pages of my notebook with drawings. When my mother saw them and asked why I was wasting paper, I said that the pictures were to remind me what the letters meant.

I figured that she wouldn't find out the truth because she rarely spoke to Miss Enca, who was widely disliked in the town. People said that she didn't look one

bit like Father Ramon, though I thought that was lucky for her, as he had a small, ugly head like a wizened apple.

My parents did look similar, and being both from El Sauco, they'd known each other always. But they liked each other, still. My father would sneak up behind my mother and slap her bottom, and she'd whirl around and throw an onion at him. Not realizing that this was a game, Pepe rushed to put himself between my parents before any bones got broken. One of his mother's arms was crooked and did not function properly, he explained.

Then one evening, as we were preparing to climb the ladder to the sleeping-loft (Pepe slept in one bed with Eliseo, and I with my parents in the other) he burst into tears—a great man of nineteen. "I don't want to ever go home," he sobbed.

"Why don't you marry my sister?" Eliseo said. "Then they'd have to let you stay."

He was teasing Pepe, whom he enjoyed mocking as a bumpkin, but my cousin brightened at once. He asked for my hand, while I hopped around like a flea, tugging at my father's sleeve. I had no idea, of course; I simply liked being the subject of conversation. My father replied that Pepe might as well have asked to marry one of our chickens, it was that silly. But I kept up the jumping and the noise, and at last he said, "For now, yes—but not now."

He said this to calm a six-year-old so she'd go to sleep. But Pepe always claimed that was the moment he saw our future: our own grocery store, with scrubbed counters, neat rows of canned goods, and me with my hair in a ribbon to attend customers.

And it turned out that Pepe hadn't been so wrong to compare our village to Madrid. Early in July, a truck from the capital arrived in town, piled high with city objects: a film projector, a windup phonograph player and recordings of opera, framed copies of paintings from the Prado Museum, a trunk of theatrical costumes and another of books. All this was part of the government's Pedagogical Mission, a program that sent university graduates out to the remotest provinces in order to enrich forgotten corners of Spain with culture.

I was in the street with my mother when the truck pulled into the plaza. Our new Socialist mayor was there--waiting for the Mission, actually. He'd received an official letter about it, but had said nothing because he hadn't known how to explain it. It didn't sound quite like a circus.

Out of the truck's cab climbed three young ladies with short hair and short print dresses. A breeze blew their skirts and raised goose pimples on their arms. Such lovely, clean air, one of them said.

I asked my mother how air could ever be dirty, because if you threw dirt into the air, it fell back down on the ground.

One of the strangers bent down, so close that her curls brushed my face. Her hair smelled of soap and a jumble of different flowers. "You're a clever little thing," she said. "What's your name, my love?"

Since everyone in the village knew me, no one had ever asked me that question before. "*Rosa"* sounded so strange coming out of my own mouth, as if I were suddenly not myself. It made me tremble a little.

“Oh, she’s timid,” the young ladies said to each other, which was not true. My face grew hot with frustration as they smiled at me. I had an idea that they were teachers, and Miss Enca had told us that a teacher must never be contradicted.

Moments later, plodding over the final ridge of the mountain, came half a dozen mules carrying young gentlemen wearing suits, neckties and soft leather shoes. They dismounted, the mayor shook everyone’s hand, and the truck’s cargo was unloaded and carried into the municipal building.

That night, everyone was invited to the movies, which were projected onto a sheet hung from the rafters of the municipal building. The only villagers who didn’t come were Father Ramon and old folks who were too weak to leave their beds. It wasn’t as if anyone had other evening plans. At night, when the light left the sky along the western rim of the mountains and the wind picked up, blowing through the empty street, the people of El Sauco stayed inside with the shutters pulled tight. There were no street lights; no reason to leave the house except to attend to a birthing calf or a neighbor who was having a baby or dying. Though I do remember going out in the dark to greet the new moon, and counting the tiny yellow blooms of candlelight from the other houses gleaming through chinks in the wood. I’d exclaimed that there were so many, many houses in our village—more than I could count on my hands. And beyond the mountains, my father had said, there are more villages, and beyond them even more—think of that.

I think of it often now, looking out my apartment window at the bright lights of Miami.

The first film that we saw that night was a newsreel about Madrid, showing cars, omnibuses, paved streets, splashing fountains, people swarming in and out of the buildings like insects. At one moment there appeared a woman walking among trees, leading a small dog with a strap around its neck, exactly like a family pig being led innocently to market, and this made several people laugh nervously at the thought that city people ate dogs.

The newsreel ended and, unsure of the etiquette, we filed out in silence, like after mass. The missionary who'd been operating the projector ran after us. "Please stay for the feature film," he pleaded. "You'll surely enjoy this one more--it's Charlie Chaplin."

The name "Charlie Chaplin" meant nothing to us, but we filed back inside. Later we would understand that Charlie's mishaps were intended to be humorous, but on that first night, some of the women began to weep at all his suffering, his dreadful loneliness.

"It's not real," my brother called out. "It's just circus people behind that cloth, making shadows." He strode up and lifted a corner of the sheet. Behind it was the bare whitewashed wall of the municipal building. The light of the projector cast the pictures onto Eliseo's face.

This broke the spell of grief in the room and people hooted and shouted.

"Who's the bumpkin, eh?"

My brother scowled and sat down. Probably he wasn't the only person there who figured the movies must be some kind of puppetry, but he was the laughing-stock, the town sacrifice. I believe that he turned against the Republic in that moment.

To be thought a fool is a great fear of country people. In El Sauco we realized that there was a lot of the world with which we were unfamiliar. But this is different from

stupidity—not knowing how to conduct your own life. So we were wary of the missionaries until we saw what they didn't know. They were all quite tall, with tender, smooth skin, and the young ladies were constantly washing themselves, like cats. This my mother heard from the women at whose houses they stayed—the rule of the Mission was that they could not lodge in homes with grown sons. The young gentlemen pitched tents and camped in a meadow, and early one morning the movie-projector went out to take a piss and a bullock that had got loose became curious and followed him as he ran all the way into town.

"Movie-projector thought he was being chased by a bull!" everyone laughed, and the incident helped break the ice between us and the missionaries. The idea that they'd come all that long way in order to show us the things they liked best: films and paintings and music and theatre and books—and not charge us one centavo—made it impossible to maintain a stony heart.

Every night for the next week, we wept with laughter at Mickey Mouse, and screamed in terror when Frankenstein came to horrible life. We declared that the Italian opera sounded like Galician bellowed through a thick door (my mother) and that Goya's *Majas* looked like sprawled, grinning farm girls (my father). The missionaries egged us on, asking the town's opinion on everything. "Art is for the people, and all criticism is valid," they said.

On market day they set up a stage in the plaza and put on *Lazarillo de Tormes*, wearing costumes similar to our own clothing, but made of satin and velvet. We were much more at ease by then, cheering the unlucky Lazarillo, whistling at and insulting his tormentors, who included a priest and an archbishop.

Afterwards, the players gathered onstage to sing hymns to the democracy. All week they'd tried to get us to address them informally, insisting that we were equals, all Spaniards together. None of the villagers could get their tongues around calling the young ladies and gentlemen "tu," but we did hum along with the songs, which lovingly praised the Republic, as if it were a person.

That was exactly the problem, the priest complained the next day in his homily: the Republic has become the god they worship. "When the good people of El Sauco jeer at the holy fathers, we are reminded why the Church teaches us that books can be dangerous," he said.

Nevertheless, the next day, the mayor granted permission for the missionaries to set up a free library in the municipal building. The young ladies visited our school to explain how the borrowing would work. Anyone in town could take a book home if he or she washed hands first and then left a signed card in its place on the bookshelf. When I described the procedure at home, Eliseo said, "I can do that."

"And what size book would you ask Miss Beatriz for, with your clean hands—a big one or a small one?" Pepe laughed. Miss Beatriz was the curly-haired missionary who'd spoken to me on that first day.

Eliseo cuffed him on the shoulder. "All I said was that I can write my name."

"They have children's books," I said.

"Then we can ask for a book for Rosa," Pepe said.

"I will ask," Eliseo said, and after the midday meal was over, he walked with me to the municipal building.

The library was the Mission's last project; as soon as it was finished, the missionaries would move on to their next village. Eliseo and I stood in the doorway watching the young gentlemen inexpertly hammering together a shelf while the young ladies knelt on the floor, sorted the books into piles. They were all too busy to eat a proper meal, but were passing around sausage sandwiches and a skin of wine. When they noticed us, they called out cheerfully (they were always cheerful, and they drank a lot of wine) for us to come closer.

Eliseo turned around quickly and said that he would wait for me outside.

"Don't be timid," I said.

"Shut up. I'm not."

I hesitated for a moment in the doorway, but when they called, "Look, it's Rosa! Come here, Rosa!" I rushed forward like an excited puppy: I was a clever little thing! They loved me!

Miss Beatriz even held me on her lap while she showed me the children's books. I nestled against her soft body, breathing in her flowery smell, and when I pulled one of the books close to sniff the ink of its pages, she laughed and said, "You're exactly like a beagle, Rosa! Don't you own a handkerchief? Never mind, take mine."

At last we chose a book about a fairy queen that had blue cloth covers. In addition to washing my hands, Miss Beatriz said, I was to blow my nose before I looked at the pictures. "It's got a lot of long words, but maybe your brother could read those to you."

"He can't read," I said.

The missionaries exchanged glances. “How shameful for our country, in the twentieth century.” Miss Beatriz said.

“That will soon change,” said Movie-projector firmly. “Literacy is a priority for the Republic.”

Eliseo and I walked home along the silent street—the siesta was not yet over. “Let me see the book,” he said.

“Are your hands washed?”

“They’re clean.”

“Miss Beatriz said that you might read it to me, but I told her that you didn’t know how. And she said that was shameful.”

Something struck the back of my head, and I flew forward to the ground. Dirt was in my mouth, and tiny red drops beaded out of scrapes on my hands. My big toenail was torn and bleeding. I began to wail, and doors and windows opened along the street. Heads popped out. “Everything’s fine,” Eliseo told them. “My sister fell and is making the greatest possible noise about it.” He knelt on the cobbles and gently brushed me off.

“The book hit me,” I said. “You hit me.”

My brother’s eyes were filled with tears. “No, Rosy. You tripped over this stone. See? Luckily I was carrying the book. Otherwise it might have gotten dirty.”

He carried me the rest of the way home. Although Eliseo could be moody and a tease, he’d always been gentle with me, letting me swing on him like a monkey and making sure I got the tenderest pieces of meat at lunch. So by the time we reached our house, I felt that what he’d said must be true. I repeated his version to my mother as

she bathed my scrapes. She clicked her tongue and agreed with Eliseo: “You’re lucky the book didn’t get dirty. It’s the property of the Republic.”

MIss Beatriz’ lace-trimmed handkerchief was lost, too.

The missionaries had packed the truck in preparation for leaving, so that night there were no movies or music or art exhibitions. The evening felt gray and chilly; our house cramped. Eliseo didn’t want to see my book or hear another word about Miss Beatriz and her delicious smell.

When night fell, we went to bed, as we had in the days before the Mission arrived. Everyone else began snoring the moment they laid down their heads, but my mind was still full of the pictures of the fairy queen, who seemed to move and speak in my memory as if she were in a film. I wanted to see her again, so I climbed over my sleeping parents and back down the ladder.

The book lay in the middle of the table. The pictures were barely visible in the last shreds of daylight. Then the moon rose, and they brightened, bathed in silvery light. I bent closer. On the final page, where the queen rode a bear’s back into the forest, I realized that the picture was indeed moving, the bear’s hind legs taking slow, slow steps into the woods. The trees in the distance parted to reveal snow-capped mountains, and suddenly I was in the picture, soaring over the treetops like a hawk. I fetched my pencil box from the cupboard and began to copy the picture onto the blank page opposite, making a mirror reflection of it.

I didn’t think about what I was doing. I worked for what felt like hours, certain that I was dreaming. At last I dream-climbed back up the ladder and into bed. I must be

dreaming, I thought, because pressing my cold feet against my mother's warm body didn't wake her.

Then it was morning, and she was standing over me, shouting. The book was ruined. It could not be cleaned and made as it was. It belonged to the government, and who knew what would become of us now? Perhaps the whole family would be arrested.

I don't know whether my mother believed what she was saying, but I do think that the sight of the defaced book made her realize that she'd spoiled me. She'd neglected to teach her little treasure how to be a peasant: humble, obedient, fearful of authority. Now I must learn.

The sleeping-ladder trembled under her feet as she descended to the main floor of the house. "You have to beat her," she said to my father.

I got out of bed and stood at the top of the ladder in my nightdress. My father was sitting at the table, eating his breakfast of cheese and bread. The library book was still propped open with my pencil, and even at this distance, I could see that my copy of the illustration was an ugly mess. And it had looked so perfect in the night, in the moonlight.

My father gazed up at me. "Well?"

"Eliseo has stolen Miss Beatriz' handkerchief," I blurted. My mother stormed back up the ladder, and there indeed was the handkerchief, wadded up beneath Eliseo's pillow.

Theft was a serious crime in El Sauco—maybe the worst. In a village, a murder is the tragic result of a quarrel between two people, but a thief will steal again and again if he's not stopped. In a place where there were no police, and where faraway magistrates

had no patience for listening to what one peasant has filched from another, thieves ended up falling off mountainsides, drowning in creeks, or accidentally setting themselves on fire. Even I knew this, though I'd never been allowed to go with the other children to look at a corpse, left where it had died for the buzzards to eat.

So Eliseo would have to be beaten, too.

He and Pepe were already out, herding the just-milked cows into the high meadow, and when my father called him into the cheese shed, my brother entered there trustingly, without any fear. My mother and I were waiting in the corral. I heard Eliseo scream and I crouched down in my nightdress, blocking my ears with my fingers. Then the pig and the burro and the chickens began squealing and braying and squawking, and Pepe came running. When he reached the fence, my mother held up her hand for him to come no further.

I saw Pepe take in the whole scene—the yelling and the crack of the strap, my mother's grim expression and me with my hands over my ears. I saw his face change as he realized that our family was no different from any other.

Eliseo emerged from the cheese shed, followed by my father. Both had red, tear-stained faces. But Eliseo kept going, running out the gate of the corral and up into the hills. "Let him go," my father said. "Let him cool down."

Even when my brother hadn't returned at nightfall, my father said we mustn't worry. The summer nights were warm, and Eliseo knew how to snare a fish or a rabbit and cook himself a fine supper under the stars while he got over being mad. It was what he himself had done years ago, my father said, after his father had beaten him.

What nobody in El Sauco knew—not even the missionaries—was that on the previous day, General Franco's rebel troops had sailed from North Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar to Andalusia, starting the three-year war which would kill half a million Spanish people. Galicia, the General's home as well as ours, had already joined the rebels. Eliseo had cooled down and was returning home by the main road when he boarded a recruiting truck filled with men who were enlisting in Franco's army.

Perhaps he didn't have a choice. Lumbering behind that truck was the Mission truck, driven now by rebel soldiers. The missionaries were all jammed into the back, along with the movies and paintings and costumes, all evidence proving that they were agents of the Socialist government. On the way south, Movie-projector and Lazarillo would be shot trying to escape. Miss Beatriz was probably imprisoned with the others at Salamanca, Eliseo thought.

I learned all this because before he died in the war my brother wrote to me. He learned to read and write in the army, in the desert of Morocco, where he had long stretches of hot, empty time between battles. They'd killed dozens and dozens of Moors, Eliseo wrote, and stuck their severed heads into the sand outside their villages as a warning to all the others.

Eventually I got letters from Pepe, too. He'd gone to Madrid to fight for the Republic, was taken prisoner, and wasn't released from the work camp at Burgos until 1947. By then I was seventeen, skinny and ugly from the food shortages, with dark rings under my eyes. Still, he wanted us to marry. What kept him alive, he told me, was dreaming about our grocery. He'd met some American volunteer soldiers during the war, and now he was determined to open our store in their country. Pepe's optimism—so

strange and foreign in those grim years—wore me down, and at last I agreed to go with him.

"Now Rosy, your turn," my father said, after my brother had disappeared into the woods. He took me by the hand and led me into the cheese shed. And I, who all my life had made the greatest possible noise about the smallest possible thing, resolved not to make one sound.

The first strike across my calves wasn't terrible--like accidentally brushing against a nettle bush. I counted the rows of curing *tetilla* cheeses lined up along the wall. The strap whistled through the air and slapped the bench. "Scream," my father said, and I did. Again it slapped the bench. Again I screamed, as my father wept.

"Such a fuss you made, and it's hardly anything," my mother said afterward, rubbing honey into the faint pink marks on my legs. "You should have seen what my father used to do to me."

Then she washed Miss Beatriz' handkerchief and ironed it dry. As the man who would one day be my master, Pepe promised to ensure that I returned it and confessed to spoiling the library book. He grasped my hand firmly as we set out for the plaza, but when I pulled away, he let me be.

The square was full of people. Many of the villagers had left their fields and animals in the middle of the morning in order to see the missionaries off. Miss Beatriz, wearing loose trousers and espadrilles like a peasant man, was rushing this way and that. At last I got close enough to tug on her sleeve. During the week in El Sauco, her face had become browned by the mountain sun.

"My hankie—what a little dear you are!" she said, and stuffed it into her trouser pocket.

I held up the ruined page for her to see. "Why, you've drawn in the book—that's *very* naughty of you, Rosa." She nodded at my picture. "I have to say it's pretty good, for a six-year-old. Give me a kiss, then, and don't ever forget me."

I kissed her, but my heart and lips were of stone. Miss Beatriz was leaving us forever. In her mind, she was already over the mountain, on to the next remote village, and the condition of El Sauco's library books was no longer her concern. (Two weeks later, after the mayor was arrested and sent to prison at Salamanca, Father Ramon would order the villagers to carry the books to the plaza and burn them).

Miss Beatriz climbed into the driver's seat of the cab and shifted the truck into gear. Riding high, she steered the truck slowly down the street, waving her brown arm in her man's shirt. Behind her went the young gentlemen astride the mules, and behind them walked the people of El Sauco.

We followed the missionaries as far as the crest of the first hill. There was a great, slow-moving crowd of us marching, so it was easy for me to keep up. The sun climbed higher, and Pepe swung my hand in time to our steps. A simple thing like a cloudless sky made him happy, and in this way he never stopped being a bumpkin, not after forty years in America. I think of him whenever I look out my apartment window and see a bright morning, which in Miami is almost every day. As I have dreamed of Eliseo night after night since the missionaries left us. In my dream I'm looking up into the hills where my brother ran after the beating I'd caused. I'm moving fast; nearly flying, hoping to glimpse him walking among the trees.

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End