

Milagros SOCORRO

From the novel *El abrazo del tamarindo*
[The Embrace of the Tamarind Tree]

Desamparados Pontón had pictured himself many times sliding on the ballroom floor. Glistening with sweat and joy in the midst of a crowd of dancers. His idea of happiness was to see himself making arabesques in the golden atmosphere of a village meeting hall. All his muscles obeying the will of the music. His blood boiling within a body that had been freed by an endless rhythm, setting into motion the scaffolding of his bones. In his dreams he saw himself with outstretched arms, in a draft of wind like the wings of a swan, a rudder of skin and tendons, chest heaving with the howling of the trumpets, the waist undulating with the crazed heat of the maraca seeds. His legs were columns broken by the blows of the drum. His feet were attached to the glossy floor for mere seconds, to then leap lightly, chasing the whisper of a charrasca. All this he was doing with his mouth open. Teeth flashing in a night of vague moves so very close to his hips, hiding those of a woman, rolling to the sound of his shivers. Just closing his eyes, Desamparados could see himself taking over the largest ballroom imaginable, weaving the story of his life, dreams, desires, moving almost weightlessly, mesmerized by a conga drum. He would forever be one with the invisible braid the music unleashed in the middle of a room, its soft underfoot made for dancing.

While all this was descending upon him, Desamparados pursued the secret mathematics of a cumbia cleaning the stables at Caña Negra, the farm where he was a stable hand. He had designed a device that allowed his tiny transistor radio to remain stuck to his ear while he dealt with the mounds of cow dung, leading his buttocks through the constrictions of a vallenato. Those who watched from afar simply saw a tall black man, eyes half closed and head tilted back, in a gentle embrace with a broom stick, moving his waist in time, with a calculated pleasure. Sometimes, at night, the other peons tuned their radios to the same frequency and made the rounds to see him become a god, a dark bird cruising horizons of accordion music and rum. Desamparados stretched out his arms. From his knees to his chest he became a trapeze, his hips flew in a vital triple jump that seemed like the waves of the sea, the milk journeying to the cooling tank, the neck of a chicken that's going to die twisting like a drill. His fingers curled slowly until they grasped a vacuum that could hold his dreams, and those of everyone else. There was not a single worker in the nearby haciendas that was unaware of Desamparados' gifts and who did not wish for him to glide over the fences, above the exhaustion and the remoteness of his homeland, across the border. The vision of Desamparados surrendering to his music was the closest thing to deliverance.

One afternoon, after several months of absence from the hacienda, the truck of don Roque Mendez could be seen coming down the road. A rare visit because don Roque had left his affairs in the hands of his son Samuel and retired; recently he was complaining of headaches and a burning sensation in his ears. The moment the old man announced the transfer of the hacienda's management, Samuel made some changes and decisions were taken without consulting his father, who had not set foot there again. But something happened to that determination. Don Roque Mendez had gone to consult a doctor for whatever it was that was causing his dizziness and turning his ears red. The doctor examined him, took his blood, made several stress tests and at the end, asked him to get dressed and come to his office.

—Don Roque -said the doctor while he straightened up the frames that he had on the desk. What you have is very common. It usually occurs among retired people. You are a victim of the stress of leisure, a particular form of stress resulting, paradoxically, from the lack of obligations. I

think you should do some light exercise, something that does not produce fatigue. Tell me, what do you usually do in your spare time?

–Nothing.

The doctor held his pen in the air. He looked at don Roque and said-- nothing? There must be a sport, some distraction that you have practiced in your life.

–Mountain life is very different from city life, said the patient. There we spent the day, every day, holed up the forest. No time for more.

–Let's see -the doctor rose from his chair and sat on the edge of the desk near don Roque-. Do you play pool?

–No.

–Boules?

–No.

–Do you like swimming?

–When I was a boy.

–Do you like to go for long walks?

–When I was in the back country I walked miles. Now I avoid it.

–Pardon me, don Roque, but there must be some activity that you can practice. I assure you that right now it is vital to your health. Let's see... do you like to dance?

The trip to the hacienda did the patriarch much good. He saw that the corrals were green. The cattle looked healthy. Even the picket fences were firmly fixed along the edges of his goods. Driving his father's truck Samuel explained the improvements he had made, and those to be done. The old man listened with much attention. Of course he was in complete disagreement with his son but when he had decided to give away the property he had done so with the knowledge that all his plans would be turned around. Rosita, Medellín, La Tigra, Cañaguatera and Diabla would lose their names to make way for a card with a number. No more sounds of the hoofs' rattle on the ground of an evening, as the cows' heat would now be quenched with the "little jerk," as the put-down for the catheters used to inseminate them went. And next to the stables, an aseptic testimony of the generational revolt, an automated milking system would be installed. Everything was as don Roque had foreseen: disgusting. His son tried to tell him about everything full of enthusiasm and faith in technology, but the old man showed no interest in his explanations. Giving up, Samuel took a box they had brought in the trunk of the truck and sent for Desamparados.

The next day the dancing sessions began. The sound system that don Roque had brought was installed at one end of the stables, polished clean for the occasion, and powerful loudspeakers were placed on its both sides. At eight o'clock don Roque arrived on the scene. Desamparados was there already; reluctantly he put a cassette into the best device he had ever seen. A dream, thusly. Don Roque approached and put his arm around the worn-out back. The magic tongues began to flow from the marvelous box. Desamparados fell into a trance. Under the peon's shirt back muscles stiffened, adapting to the rigid beat of the merengue. The aroma of cow dung mixed with the smell of detergent reached Desamparados, mixed with the vapors of wreckage arising from his partner.

Don Roque barely touched the floor. Desamparados floated on the huge dance floor as if it were a piano, lightning furrowing his spine and shooting through his shoulders. His legs were crossing the length of the stable as if giant needles were weaving an invisible crochet. His eyes were closed. Don Roque, drowned, let himself be carried away ---anything for his health. Desamparados dreamed of the biggest dance floor imaginable, he at its center, flying, free yet submissive, a captive to the chorus; confused by an ancient call that sounded from deep within his body, spreading over its surface, bristling his skin.

Three days after my period, Desamparados was summoned to my room. The boldness with which I decided to put an immediate end to my virginity had left me, and the hours before the appointment became torture. I tried to read and could not concentrate, I tried to write down some notes for a new song, but it was useless. To top it off, Liduvina and la Valier vanished early in the afternoon and I had no one to talk to. I regretted having undertaken such an absurd mission but lacked arguments to dismiss the whole mess that this night would take to nail down.

The nightgown Liduvina had found in a closet barely reached down to my knees. I looked into the mirror, which confirmed that my condition was ruinous: a weedy kid, breasts halfway done growing, bone-thin in an old shirt, a kind of clapper in a silk bell.

The arrival of Desamparados was arranged for eight, so from half past seven I set aside my reading and kept as quiet as possible in my bed. In a show of majesty, the groom arrived with maddening punctuality. Lying in the darkness of my room I heard his footsteps on the stairs, they were decisive, thundering like a drum at dawn. Outside, the branches of the tamarind tree filtered the light.

Desamparados nudged the door and a voice came out of my throat like a whisper. In the dark his figure barely registered against the background. He approached the bed and sat down. He said nothing, held out his hand and touched my face, then noticed, we noticed, I had begun to cry. Directing my own hands he wiped the tears and then started to kiss my fingers one by one, so slowly it seemed that was his sole mission.

I stopped crying but my mouth still had a salty taste when he ran his hand around my neck and kissed me on the mouth. His breath warmed me, and his smell, a mixture of limes, oregano and roses, brought me to a state of softness and dreaminess. He covered my face with kisses, stopping at my forehead, right on the line where the hair begins, and that caress made me shudder. I put my arms around his neck and confessed my fear. No answer. He hugged me tight, as if I was his little girl and lying next to me he froze. Soon I fell asleep.

It must have been two or three hours. When I woke up I was startled by his very white eyes looking in the dark. He had settled on his side to contemplate me without disturbing me. I closed my eyes and felt his hand moving under my nightgown, he brushed my thighs as if afraid of scratching them. He slid his hand across my belly up to my breasts and a sigh escaped him. With slight pressure he opened my mouth and his tongue tangled with mine as he pressed my nipples gently. He put his hand between my legs and began to stroke. Boldly and unexpectedly I flexed my knees and parted my legs. He sank just one finger in, then pulled it out to smell. He licked my neck and armpits, nibbled the skin uncovered by the nightgown until he took it off to spread the touch of his lips over my whole body. He joined my mouth, sucking it like a cashew apple, and then I felt the heat: he had entered with his finger while rubbing my belly with the palm of his hand, and it came out bright with blood. I felt a vague sorrow mixed with anxiety that made me hold him very close. The sheet was already stained. Nothing was in the way now to my inclusion in the group. Then he pulled away and asked in a growl that I hardly understood: should I go?

I pressed my face into the pillow, my profile ashamed. With my eyes closed I refused his leaving. Only then did he take off his clothes, and his chest shone like a wall of muscles to which I was bound.

Having been offered full evidence for the armistice, la Valier accepted her new responsibilities, and proceeded to take charge without pausing for chitchat. The work sessions would be held every Saturday, starting at three in the afternoon. At that hour, on the dot, she took her seat and, tilting her head, eyes half-closed, she stretched the accordion until she forced out all of its soul, and her own soul, and the soul of everyone else. She spurred on the

participants, blasting them for being childish and shit-scared: their instruments should thunder, dive deep into the ground like a drill and shake out skeletons, minerals and water from the ground. You had to concentrate, wield all the hate, love, and deferred dreams there was. You had to remember the failures, the slaps in the face, the dry spells and all the moments of abundance, the drunkenness, the highs you got from drugs. You had to kill yourself. And we immolated ourselves. But the neighbors were not so keen on a holocaust, at least not those whose tranquility was being sacrificed. The music was heavenly-- indeed even those most frantic did not question it, but that was not the point.

One day the doorbell rang again. And there he was: in the absence of a more official authority, an envoy of the prefect. He was wondering if I was attending school, and what adult was in charge of me. It turned out that Liduvina did not qualify to be my legal representative.

I dreamt that I burned in a foul broth. In the last few nights I hardly slept, partly because after our first encounter Desamparados' visits were repeated daily, and also because the intense heat of September weighed on us at all hours, covering us with sweat, turning our clothes into sticky shrouds. There was, moreover, not a square inch of my body that was not sore.

At eleven o'clock I was woken up by Liduvina screaming at me something I could not understand. She ran from one side to the other, peering out the window and pointing something out, but I remained splashing in the pool of my dreams, stirring in bed to relieve my numb limbs. Shortly after, la Valier came in and shook me by the shoulders, as calm as ever, her three hairs carelessly combed. She ordered me to get up and go to the window. Liduvina reached me the nightgown that had slipped under the bed; rubbing my eyes I did what I had been told to do. Right in the middle of the front yard was a swollen dog, his four paws raised up into the air like thick rotting masts. The air trembled transparent, a brilliant sun whipping everything into a shine: the cadaver thrown onto my property looked like a deformed turkey the stars had put out to brown. I didn't know whether it was due to the painful luminosity or to my exhaustion, but I had the impression that the corrupt mass was stirring from the inside. It had been a long time that I had been at the window, and I was surprised to find that the old repulsion had given way to a good, warm feeling about how close it was. The mountains looked so green, yet showing alarming scars where plumes of smoke were billowing. I imagined terrified deer running in all directions, bush pigs roasted before they could escape. The aroma of the Sierras would have been, in some ways, very similar to the stench nauseating my street right now.

Liduvina and la Valier sprayed the dog with lime and wrapped it with one of the sheets with embroidered monograms my mother had treasured in her closet. Then they dragged it into the street and left it next to the trash bins. Attentive like a lookout I saw the neighbors' windows open and close, some of them hiding their faces behind a handkerchief. During all the action, la Valier kept a cigarette in her mouth, one eye half closed; if she didn't make a grimace of disgust, that was possibly because all of them had already been taken by Liduvina.

At three in the afternoon I went down to lunch. A mountain of fried potatoes crowned the big table whose exquisite wood gleamed free of tablecloths, napkins, cups or candlesticks. Dolores, who did not see that it might be desirable to wait for the rest of the party before attacking the food with her usual appetite, had moved the platter to one end and sat to eat directly from it. We had no choice but to lift the potatoes out of her plate and put them on ours. As Liduvina had decided not to speak in front of la Valier, and the languor I had fallen prey to some time ago had still not left me, the meal passed in silence. When there was no more food to stuff down their bottomless gullets, la Valier wiped her fingertips on the edge of her faded skirt, not sparing us a burp.

–We will be leaving on Monday, she declared, and went in to her room.

[...]

Translated from the Spanish by Daniel Duffaud