



Solitud

Víctor Català

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XI. Cabin Fever

All summer a stream of visitors made their way up to the hermitage, rescuing Mila from what would otherwise have been a cruel or languid season.

Sometimes they were hunting parties from Barcelona, wearing new hats, weighed down by luxurious gear, their bodies crisscrossed by rifle slings, leading packs of sleek purebred dogs whose rolls of fat shook as they ran. Men and beasts charged about, laughing, barking, and filling the air with stray shots to the dismay of more seasoned hunters. Though only by miracle did those model sportsmen occasionally catch something, they descended upon the house like a ravenous hurricane. There were never enough eggs for all the omelettes they ordered, nor could Mila kill and cook chickens fast enough to satisfy them. And while each ate enough for four, she watched them having the time of their lives, admiring their handsome outfits and bellicose airs, bragging about their exploits with an eloquence that would have done Cyrano de Bergerac credit. She enjoyed observing those mischievous kids playing hooky, and in her mind she compared them to the local hunters, who returned with one pantleg hanging down and another rolled up above their knees, cartridge belts tied with rope, and worn-out espadrilles, but with blood-stained pouches and the muzzles of their weapons ragged as lace from years of spitting so much lethal fire.

Other parties were more peaceful and moderate: devout families who, with their parish priests, came to celebrate Mass at the hermitage in fulfilment of some desperate and hasty vow. Those groups, once the service ended, also laughed and made merry, but with a different sort of merriment, calmer and more pleasant than the hunters'.

[...]

Except for those cheerful or gloomy visitors, who always brought distraction and a little money, Mila was alone, spending her mornings around the house and her afternoons either in the garden or sewing in some shady spot. Baldiret and Gaietà pastured their flock in the mountains, and Matias headed for the plain, where he made the rounds of all the villages.

St. Pontius' festival had left them utterly destitute. In addition to their losses, Mila learned of infinite debts slowly revealed by Matias: debts for things borrowed from the hotel in Murons, debts in stores and taverns for food and drink he had obtained on credit, debts to the rector for hymns and pictures printed in Girona: a swarm of petty debts that buzzed and bit like mosquitoes and that, as Mila learned of them, provoked endless fear and anxiety. She dreamt of nothing but those debts and how they might pay them, and thus she swallowed her shame about Matias' begging and even agreed to use the proceeds.

"With a little luck, we'll get back on our feet again, and then I'll pay it all back, every last cent..." she told herself each day to ease her conscience, but her face fell whenever Matias returned from his wanderings, showed her his pouch, and suggested how they might spend the money. She wanted to clap her hand over his mouth, make him feel the infamy of his deeds, and at all costs keep the shepherd from learning of their disgrace and condemning them. But Matias understood nothing, and

Gaietà listened and judged. His judgment was silent, a judgment she knew he would never reveal in word or deed, but no less severe and implacable for all that. And she who, without realizing it, would have liked to wear a halo in that man's eyes, saw furiously and despairingly that his judgment damned her, placing her on a lower level than bandits, for bandits risked their lives to rob men, whereas she and Matias stole from the very saints at no risk to themselves.

But that desired stroke of luck, which never materialized, seemed to grow more distant with each passing day, while her burden of shame and worry only grew heavier. As autumn approached, the visitors stopped coming, and with them went the better part of her earnings. In September, when the Sun still warmed the meadows at midday but cold winds had begun to chill the shadows, only a few solitary strollers from nearby villages, an occasional hunter who asked for a shot of whisky, or, once in a while, a well-to-do gentleman and his wife, who bore a candle in one hand and a picnic basket in the other, climbed the mountain to that isolated hermitage.

The hunters paid for their drinks, and the others, after making her show them everything and wearying her with silly questions, threw a few cents in the poor box, gave her a few more, and congratulated themselves on their splendid generosity.

Finally, even these stopped coming, and with a shiver of fear Mila watched winter sweep down upon the barren mountain, threatening the poor hermitage with its empty larder, its breadless oven, and its ill-suited inhabitants.

Then the woman's placid disposition began to crack, and her black, bitter moods rained down on Matias, normally the world's calmest and most Devil-may-care fellow, poisoning his good humor and making him uneasy. She was always after him, nagging, scolding, literally shoving him out the door in search of a little cash, while he, both annoyed and cowed by that constant pressure, kept yielding till at last he obeyed her almost blindly. He leapt up at the crack of dawn, and with the little shrine on his back, began his long journey down to the plain. The results of this unwonted activity were soon apparent: his lazy fat melted away, the folds on his neck disappeared, his shoulder blades again were visible, the dimples that had made his hands like an abbess' vanished, and the rope that held up his trousers no longer left a red mark around his waist. Even his movements quickened, and his face became alert like other men's.

Mila would have thanked God for these improvements, had they been accompanied by others more financially beneficial, but while Matias' obedient zeal waxed, his earnings waned.

[...]

And neither then nor all the other times he failed to return did she dare to scold him for staying with Anima, lest he use her words as an excuse to stop begging. But after a few more weeks, his two- and three-day trips became so frequent that the woman began to worry, thinking it was time to clip his wings a little. Matias seemed taken aback by her first warnings and, in the confused, broken words he usually employed, he vaguely promised to improve: "Well, yes... Well, good... I'll see to it... Fine..." And that was all. He continued to behave just as before. Mila then went from warnings to lectures and from lectures to orders, but the effect was always the same: he seemed to yield, but in fact he resisted passively like a reed in the wind, righting himself as soon as the tempest had passed. He set out earlier and earlier, and when she made him promise to return before dusk, he readily agreed, but at dusk he was still absent, and often the following day as well. It was useless to try to detain him with chores around the house. He shipped away like an eel, and when she looked for him he was gone. His lethargy seemed to have vanished with his fat, and she found him swift as a chamois arid cunning as a fox. She had to admit that the change was greater than she had supposed, that something or other had been stronger than herself, that some new element had entered his life,

toppling those walls of dull indifference and estranging the two of them even more than before.

The woman raged against this new defeat, and at night in their empty bed, she lay on her stomach biting the damp, cool pillowcase.

And to make her rout more complete, she noticed that the more he stayed away, the poorer he returned and the more eager to leave again. Finally she asked the shepherd's opinion, and he replied: "I try not to think the worst of people, and it's kind of hard to say... but anyhow, I don't think your husband's begging like he says... The other day I was up near Roepass when all of a sudden I spotted two specks in the distance, beyond Olivebreath, near Wild Goat Falls. They were too little to make out, but I'd have sworn it was him and Anima... Olivebreath's not on the way to town, and it's no use asking the birds for charity. So they couldn't have been begging. I reckon the other one took him along to trap rabbits, and your husband's the kind... that doesn't like to argue. But don't say anything till I know for sure. I'll keep an eye out... all right?"

Mila kept quiet, but her spirits sagged beneath the weight of this new trial, and her loneliness deepened, freezing her soul like a glacier. October ended and the sunsets came earlier and earlier, trimming the brief days with shadowy scissors. Matias spent only two nights a week at the hermitage. Arnau hadn't visited her since that encounter in the yard, and Anima had disappeared after St. Pontius' festival. The mountains seemed empty except for those women from Ridorta, always bent beneath their bundies of firewood, nor did Gaietà return for a midday nap as he once had, but kept his flock out at pasture from ten to four every day. Then, instead of settling himself in the kitchen, he took Baldiret's hand and led him to Murons, where the boy could receive an hour's instruction till the winter came, at which time he would return home and spend all day in the classroom. Gaietà hoped thus to prepare Mila for the shock of losing him, but it did her little good. Alone in the house, waiting endlessly in that dark, deserted kitchen, without real tasks to occupy her idle hours, she felt a deep and painful sadness steal over her. That morning she had given Gaietà and Baldiret their lunch. Her own was simmering on the fire, and free of all necessity or desire to act, she pressed against the kitchen window that looked out on Roquis Mitjà or leaned on the railing around the terrace that faced east. Then she saw the flock set out, preceded by Baldiret's cries, guided by Mussol's barks, and followed by the shepherd with a sheepskin pouch slung across his dark wool jacket, his cap pulled down and a cape over his shoulders, holding out his crook, stamping his heavy shoes solemnly and slowly, but without the slightest trace of laziness or exhaustion.

The grazing sheep spread across the mountain, covering its black, wet earth like a shifting patch of snow. Baldiret ran here and there, turning after each leap to smile back at Mila and call out his goodbyes, while the man also usually turned a few times and waved to her with his staff... till that patch of snow disappeared in the distance, insubstantial as a cloud of dust, and Mila remained at her lookout with glistening eyes, stand there till two tears fell upon her crossed arms.

[...]

Gaietà was alarmed by the woman's state.

"Hermitess!" he cried one day when he found her weeping and she had to admit she didn't know why. "You've been sick for a while and we'd better find some medicine, but not the kind you can get from a doctor... You're not happy up here, and the only cure is to have some fun, though it's true there's not much to do in these parts. First of all, you can't stay here like a bat in a cave. No one can live without company, y'know? Tomorrow we'll lock the hermitage and you'll come with us. Not a soul ever visits you except your husband, and if he finds you gone, he can wait or go back where he came from. He's not much use to anyone now..."

And sweetening his solemn words with a smile, he announced, without consulting Mila, that she would accompany him the next day: “You’ll see it’s not so bad... and if you don’t feel like waiting, ask the boy.”

Mila meekly acquiesced, as though her will had been taken from her, and tagged along behind the flock like an obedient child. Gaietà entertained her with his stories, they stopped to eat beneath the Husk, she watched Baldiret shoot his slingshot and later helped him study his ABCs from a primer the shepherd carried in his bag...

As they descended Roquís Mitjà’s whale-like back, while the sheep played tag around them on their way to the hermitage, she realized with amazement that for the first time in many days she hadn’t counted the hours. A cool and pleasant breeze, announcing the evening, seemed to dissipate her torpor and rouse her sleeping energies.

Translated by David H. Rosenthal