

THE QUARRY

Judith Mendoza-White

Mornings with Doves

When José María opened his eyes to the new morning, he knew this would not be an ordinary day. Apprehension tightened his eyelids as he snoozed the alarm, struggling to face the dim light of the early autumn sun and dismiss the irrational foreboding that kept him curled up under the blankets.

The ominous feeling tightened the pit of his stomach into a knot while he stood in the shower, lathering his body with soap and water to wash away the vague sensation of discomfort and fear. The dream came back to him with the sudden sting of the after-shave lotion: a dark, uncanny dream, as real as the water running down the sink. A dream in which he, José María, knew he was dead.

During breakfast, he tuned in to loud music on the radio and chatted to his wife and daughter, who were getting ready for work and school and only

contributed absent-minded answers to his incessant, unusual small talk. Eventually, alone with his thoughts in the overcrowded suburban train, he was forced to face the idea. He knew this was the last day of his life. The feeling, which had started as a mere aftertaste of last night's dream, had now become an absolute certainty.

He walked the first of the three blocks that separated the underground stop from the insurance company where he worked, but stopped before reaching the busy intersection ahead. It was stupid to continue plodding along the noisy downtown street as if this was yet another ordinary weekday, avoiding the hurried passers-by who elbowed their way past him, the offending odour from last night's garbage bins climbing to his nostrils. Wasting the last day of his life in front of the paper-crowded desk, just like every weekday of the last twenty-five years, would be even more absurd.

Retracing his steps, he turned the corner and walked to the nearby park where he often ate his lunch on warm, sunny days like this. In what felt like a split second he found himself sitting on a sunny park bench, a large pot of chocolate ice-cream on his lap. Half a dozen doves cooed and picked at the gravel around him. José María stared at the half-eaten ice-cream. He did not remember buying it; it might as well have materialised in his hands by magic. The eerie sensation increased. How did he even get to this park? It did not look at all like the one where he usually sat during lunch breaks away from the office.

This dream has been playing up with my head, he concluded. With a sigh of exasperation, he pushed the ice-cream carton away.

He felt unusually tired. Leaning back on the bench, he thought of his wife and daughter. If this was indeed the last day of his life, shouldn't he be spending these last hours in their company? He remembered Cecilia was doing a Math test that morning; she had mentioned it during breakfast. He imagined her eagerly jotting down figures at the school desk, the unbecoming uniform creased, her thick brown hair tied back in the usual careless ponytail. He smiled at the vision, which appeared so vivid that his fingers moved as if he could reach his daughter's worried frown. At this point his daughter looked up and smiled at him, as if she could feel his eyes on her.

The image soon faded, and José María stretched his legs under the warm autumn sun that bathed the park, empty and still at that early morning hour. With a start he realised someone else was sitting at the opposite side of the bench.

‘Rodríguez?’ José María gasped, ‘Rodríguez, from General Villegas High School?’

The newly arrived nodded and smiled. The world was indeed a small place; what with running into an old high school friend in a small hidden park, lost in the hustle of downtown Buenos Aires. He had not seen his classmate, or thought of him, since the day his family moved away from the small country town almost thirty years ago. As he went to say this out loud, Rodríguez opened his briefcase and took out a crumpled paper; a page torn out of a school copybook. It was an unusual briefcase; it reminded José María of the school bags they both used to take to class. Rodríguez pointed at the figures on the paper.

‘The Math exam, do you remember? We both failed, like your daughter Cecilia.’

Irritated, José María thought that Rodríguez could not possibly know his daughter’s name, even less the result of the test she’d be doing this very minute. He went to say this, but instead heard himself telling his old school friend about last night’s dream.

Rodríguez listened in silence and then replied in a calm, matter-of-fact tone: ‘We are brought up in the fear of death; that’s the problem. Yet it is nothing but another form of life. A crossing... a transition, that’s all.’

A white dove fluttered its wings over José María’s shoulders, distracting him from the conversation. He threw his arms up in the air to scare it away. When he turned to his school friend, he found that he had left without a word of goodbye.

Shaking his head at Rodríguez’s lack of manners, José María thought that since the bench was now empty, he might as well lie down for a while and enjoy the sun before starting the walk home; perhaps even put a hint of tan on his white-collar, middle-aged skin.

When he tried to lie down though, he found the park bench was no longer a bench but a narrow, uncomfortable bed. No, it was a stretcher, a hospital

stretcher; and the doves around him had turned into men and women dressed in white who leaned over him, placed weird gadgets on his mouth and his bare chest. His wife's teary face flashed amongst the others; José María tried to call her name, but the words refused to leave his dry, sandy throat. Cecilia stormed in, still wearing the ugly dark-green uniform. She pushed her way through the figures clad in white that surrounded him, trying to reach him, her voice breaking into sobs.

'Dad! Daddy!'

Her mother put her arms around Cecilia, pulled her away from the scene. A sudden pain, sharp as the tip of a knife, stabbed José María's chest as the voices and the faces around him faded in the distance.

He opened his eyes to Rodríguez's soothing voice in his ears.

'Nothing wrong with a good cry, my friend.' Rodríguez's hands were on his shoulders; an incorporeal, yet comforting gesture. 'I used to cry my eyes out as well; at the beginning, that is. You miss them all so much, it's only natural to see them in your dreams. You'll get used to it soon enough, though. Sooner or later they'll all cross the border and end up here, anyway. It's only a matter of time. And time on this side, let me tell you, goes by real fast...'

Wiping away his tears, José María looked into Rodríguez's eyes. They were the same eyes that used to smile at him in class, decades ago. It was then he realised he was staring at Rodríguez's teenage face; smooth, unlined, unchanged.

Leaning back on the park bench, José María closed his eyes and allowed the white doves and the new knowledge to descend upon him. In this way he learned, while his eyes dried out and the last tears disappeared down his throat, that the dead dream too.