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Fog Splitters

Embers never seem to go out. They burn on, like ideas. They reproduce in the most unlikely places, like down-town La Candelaria, the old Spanish quarters of Santa Fe de Bogota.

1948 was a year of embers. The year of the great violence—La Violencia as it became known, a title like that of an Italian opera, an opera of blood.

La Puerta Falsa restaurant owned by the Povedas for many generations, had been built with Spanish enthusiasms of settlement in the 1580s, down near the main square. Heavy dark-scented floorboards, a stumpy staircase with steep ascent over the counter where food was prepared and sold—tamales, sticky-sugared coffee, breads, cocoa milks hot and thick. The wattle-and-daub walls reeking of centuries of the wood-fired oven bursting like a pregnant stomach into the small inner courtyard.

Today, with the smoke of battle all around the city, La Puerta Falsa was closed. The first day in many years when the Povedas did not yawn and pull shutters from windows. Today, the day the country died, the day after Gaitan's body had been carried in vain hope of life above the many hands of crowds, today, the restaurant was closed.

What was the use of opening it? There were days of fear ahead. And yes, even in days of fear, people have to eat. But with no Gaitan, what was the point? What would food do for a body that had lost its appetite for freedom? So, the doors stayed shut, and the Povedas ate in silence around their kitchen table.

Only Blanca dared to speak, 'Papa, please, say something, say a prayer for us.'

'Prayers will not save our souls now, my little dove,' said Claudio.

Grandmother Eloise, fingering rosary beads, knew better. 'Life goes on. To deny life is to deny God. Do as your girl asks, and lead us in prayer.'

Claudio sighed, looked around at his five children, then at his mother, with her sharp eyes and wispy hair. His wife, Pilar, was in the courtyard sniffing the air and holding back tears. 'Pilar!' he called. Silently she came in. 'May the Lord forgive those who murdered the only man of hope. May he punish them!' Claudio lifted his eyes quickly to his mother's for admonishment but her eyes were closed. 'Lord, keep our family safe in these days ahead. Amen.' Pilar rose to clear the plates.

'Sit down, Pili,' he said, gently touching her arm. 'Blanca, take the children to the courtyard.' Blanca nodded and seeing that her grandmother was keen to leave the room, she helped her out of her seat.

Claudio waited for them to be alone before speaking with his wife, 'My love, I don't know what is ahead. But my heart tells me there will be terrible times. Are we ready for this?'

'If you mean food and fuel, Jorge,' said Pilar in a low voice, for she always called him by his second name, 'then we are ready for bad times of several weeks. But if you mean what might come to the shop front, I am not certain.'

Claudio nodded. Despite all these past years and troubles

with money, they were fond of each other. He could feel it in her caresses, and that was evidence enough for him. 'We will stay together until we need to know more.'

The rest of the morning was spent in quiet preparation: filling buckets of water, boarding up windows, soaking the lichen-covered roof tiles. Blanca worked in silence to her father's commands. But her mind was in flight elsewhere. Anxious to leave, and knowing her father would forbid it, Blanca was desperately calling to Jose in her mind, willing him to come to her. If her father knew of Jose, of the fact that Blanca at seventeen had a secret political life and a love, he would kill her. So far, she had swept all traces of Jose from her body as if with a broom. There were times when Blanca felt her grandmother's eyes on her, suspicions alive. She gave those eyes no heed.

Jose had been an emerald trader, but now he was a slave to the whims of the gringo Miller. He had been reluctantly ferrying Muisca antiquities to Miami for many months. Blanca was never certain when he would walk through the door again. She remembered their first meeting when she had served Jose and Miller upstairs in the restaurant.

'Would you be needing something else, sir?' she had asked when Miller left.

'Only your name,' said Jose, surprised at his own forwardness.

'Blanca Poveda, sir.'

'Jose Paris, but please call me Pepe.'

Blanca laughed, 'It is a pleasure to meet you, Pepe.' She leant down to collect the dishes. Jose noticed her fully-rounded earlobes, pierced with small golden frogs holding emeralds to their stomachs. It was the Chibcha frog, symbol of the Indian gold and emerald traders of old.

'The Chibcha frog,' Jose said, pointing with his lower lip, 'Your earrings.'

'My great grandmother's,' said Blanca standing aside to let Jose stand up in the small space. 'She came from the lake.' Jose understood this to mean the lake of Guatavita, the lake of El Dorado. Then she must be Indian like him. He felt pleased that she was not ashamed to say so.

Without thought, Jose fell into a recitation from an Asuncion Silva poem:

It passed, perfuming our dreams
with strange essences
so that we landed in a bygone era
where all was beautiful.
Of this, the poet sings,
Perfumes of old things.

Jose felt victorious as never before. He fled quickly down the stairs leaving Blanca astounded, standing with an armful of plates.

These months later, the smell of smoke rose from burning buildings, wood, lime mortars, thick paints, glue, stored food, children's clothes, all burning, all alight with the fervour of the mob. Claudio and Blanca both halted their work to lift their noses to the odour of violence. Claudio was thinking about how his family would survive this nightmare. Blanca was thinking about Jose.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez