

**RODRIGO REY ROSA**

## The Truth

The rain had stopped and the sunlight, tempered by the translucent curtains, shone into the spacious dining room. A man, seated at the head of the table, a woman, and three small girls were eating their dessert in silence. It was a heavy silence. To the father's right, there was an empty chair, a half-eaten pastry.

“You're a liar,” the father had said. The son had glanced up at him without saying anything. Black hairs stuck out of the man's nostrils. He looked at the child almost scornfully. Not allowing himself to cry, the boy had left the table and gone to his room. He lay down on the bed and opened a book, hoping to lose himself in its pages.

Somewhat later he stood up and looked into the mirror. For some time now his face had begun to please him. His lips, which had always struck him as being too thick, now seemed to suggest an expression of strength and humor. He had brown eyes that, half shut under the dark brows, were like those of a man. He combed his hair and stepped out into the corridor. Softly he went down the stairs and into the garden, using the back door.

The stable was only a short distance from the house, a building of concrete blocks with a tin roof. The light entered obliquely through a skylight, skeins of garlic were hung here and there to keep out the bats, and the air smelled of bran and urine. One of the horses snorted when he became aware of the boy. He went into the stall of a black mare and saddled her.

Once in the saddle he ceased being his father's son, to become a warrior. He trotted out along the dirt lane, and rode toward the mountains that surrounded the city. Barefoot children, washerwomen, beggars and drunks watched him go by — envy, hatred, desire, admiration. Soon the huts had been left behind, and he began to climb a path among the trees. The far-off noise of traffic on the highway was a hostile sound. It was the road of the white man. The red sun went behind the clouds. When he got to the top he pulled on the reins and stood up in the stirrups to look around him. Then he went at a gallop toward the gap crossed by the ancient aqueduct, for from there he could, without being seen, watch the winding highway below.

He hitched the mare where he always left her when he came up here, hidden behind some evergreen oaks, and went down the hill to the footwalk. In the middle of the bridge he stopped and leaned over. There were stones missing

from the wall here, and through a crack he could see the army of cars which the city spewed out each afternoon. The old stones were dangerously loose. A few days ago the idea had occurred to him, the idea of letting a stone fall, and, like a god from on high, changing the life of a mortal.

“Why did you do it?” the owner of the long black car chosen by the rock, would ask him. “Why?” He would try to break free of the chauffeur's grip. At last, giving up, he would say: “If you'll allow me, sir, perhaps I can explain.”

“I've been coming to this part of the bridge for some time, to watch the cars go by. It's something worth seeing, if you manage to forget everything else, forget yourself and the bridge and the road, so that there is nothing but the stream of lights, the two streams, one red and one white. The other evening I was thinking: God knows who might not be going by underneath me at this minute — a murderer, or a saint. Someone with the key to the puzzle of my life, or of my ruin. But, sir, who are you? Why did my stone land on your car?”

The rock he was leaning on was covered with moss. It moved slightly. He scratched off the moss with a fingernail: the stone was porous. It was beginning to get dark, and the drivers of the cars had turned on their lights. What would happen if the car that was hit by the stone were driven by a woman? The car would be red; he did not manage to picture the woman. His fingernail was black, and the rock had no moss on it. Perhaps an evil angel was lurking nearby, because he thought: Push it. Now. But the voice he heard was his own. He pushed the rock.

There was a squeal of brakes, and then the noise of cars colliding — two, three, four. For a moment there was silence. He jumped up and began to run, bent over, hidden by the parapet. When he got to the end of the aqueduct he looked down. From the chaos in the middle of the road, a man raised his hand and pointed to where he stood.

“Hey there!” he shouted.

He jumped down to the path and went on running. The men were yelling; two of them began to climb the cliff behind him. He was running and slipping; the shouts were missiles being shot at his back. If he succeeded in reaching the oak grove before the men got to the level of the bridge, he would be safe. It struck him as strange that while he was bending all his efforts to avoid the roots and holes in the path, he was thinking that he would rather not have been alone, that it would have been good to have someone with whom he could discuss it afterward. He stumbled and rolled on the ground. He could not see the men, but their voices sounded near. He got to the grove and stopped to catch his breath. It was dark here among the trees. He came to the

mare, and was starting to unhitch her, when a voice, that of a hoy, made him turn.

“I saw you,” it told him.

He looked at the other as if he did not understand.

“I saw you throw the stone.” It was the voice of blackmail.

The mare's mane was twisted; a fly lit on her ear; she flicked it away. The reflection in her black eye gave him the answer. He and the other boy both wore white shirts.

“You saw me,” he said, letting go of the reins. They were the same size; he was wearing boots and his enemy was barefoot. He lowered his head. His father's words were being borne out. The mare champed at the bit, and he jumped upon the other, who fell on his back on the ground. He sat astride him and said between his teeth:

“You didn't see me. I saw you.”

He punched the other in the mouth, and squeezed his knees together more tightly. The boy squirmed.

When the two men arrived, out of breath, he stood up.

“I saw him,” he said, pointing. “I saw him push the stone.”

The boy spat blood and raised his hands to his mouth. One of the men, whose forehead was bleeding, seized the boy by his shirt and kicked him.

“Get up,” he told him. “We'll see if you've killed my wife, you whelp.”

The boy was crying. He tried to defend himself, but it was hard for him to speak with his mouth full of blood. He had not said three words before the man hit him. The mare lifted a leg and set it down. Her master put his foot in the stirrup.

“What's your name?” the other man asked, when he was astride her.

He told him. His voice had an uncomfortable ring to it. He hastened to add: “I'm sorry about your wife.”

The two men, with the barefoot boy, went out of the grove.

He turned the mare around and started ahead slowly because the path was narrow and there was no light.

Even though he told himself that there was nothing to fear, and that his word was worth more than that of the other, his legs trembled and he was worried. "There was no other way," he thought, and on the other hand: "You're a liar," his father insisted.

It was a good thing that it was night, and that the mare was black, and that in the world of men nothing was certain. From a curve in the path he caught a glimpse of the city with its lights, it was as though he had returned from somewhere far away. The jaunt had almost come to an end. Smoke rose from the huts, and the mare hastened her step.

When he dismounted he felt vulnerable. He took a handful of salt from a pail and gave it to the mare: he liked to feel her rough tongue on his palm. He patted her neck and chest, and ran toward the house.

Dinner was on the table. Everyone seemed to be in a good humor.

"How far did you go?" his mother asked him.

"Not very far," he said. He looked at his sisters and began to cut his meat. He did not want to be asked any more questions.

No one would believe him if he told what had happened. He would have liked to discuss it with someone, but it was good too to have a secret. It made him feel like laughing to think that his secret was impenetrable, that not even he would be able to betray it.

His father was staring at him.

"Look at your hands," he said.

The black fingernail stood out against the white tablecloth.

"What were you doing?"

He raised his hand as if he wanted to see it in a stronger light. Turning toward his father, he thought:

"I'm not a liar," and he realized that he was going to tell him the truth. "I'm not sure," he said. "I think I killed a woman."

His sisters laughed.

“It's not a joke,” he said. “I let a stone fall off the bridge, and she was underneath.”

“Swear it's the truth,” said his youngest sister.

“I swear.”

“Why do you enjoy telling lies?” asked his father.

He wiped his lips and looked at the napkin. He did not intend to answer. Folding his arms, he sat back in his chair.

His mother passed him the bowl of fruit.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked him.

He imagined the other, who was paying for him: a damp cell, the dark.

“Nothing,” he answered.

There was a short silence. Then they finished eating their supper.

Translated from the Spanish by Paul Bowles

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