THE TREE

Maria Luisa Bombal

The pianist sits down, coughs from force of habit and concentrates for a moment. The clusters of lights illuminating the hall gradually dim until they glow like dying embers, whereupon a musical phrase rises in the silence, swells: clear, sharp and judiciously capricious.

Mozart, maybe, Brigida thinks to herself. As usual, she has forgotten to ask for the program. Mozart—or perhaps Scarlatti... She knew so little about music! And it was not because she lacked an ear or the inclination. On the contrary, as a child it had been she who demanded piano lessons; no one needed to impose them on her, as was the case with her sisters. Today, however, her sisters could sight-read perfectly, while she... she had abandoned her studies after the first year. The reason for the inconstancy was as simple as it was shameful: she had never been able, never, to learn the key of F. "I don't understand—my memory serves me only to the key of C." And her father's indignation! "Would that I could lay down this burden: a miserable widower with children to educate! My poor Carmen! How she would have suffered with such a daughter! The creature is retarded!"

Brigida was the youngest of six girls—all endowed with different temperaments. She received little attention from her father because dealing with the other five daughters reduced him to such a perplexed and worn-out state that he preferred to ease his burden by insisting on her feeblemindedness. "I won't struggle any longer—it's useless. Leave her alone. If she chooses not to study, so be it. If she would rather spend her time in the kitchen listening to ghost stories, that's fine with me. If she favors playing with dolls at the age of sixteen, let her play." And so Brigida had kept to her dolls, remaining almost totally ignorant as far as formal education was concerned.

How pleasant it is to be ignorant! Not to know exactly who Mozart was—to ignore his origins, his influence; the particularities of his technique! To simply let oneself be led by the hand, as now...

For in truth Mozart leads her—transporting her onto a bridge suspended above crystal water running over a bed of pink sand. She is dressed in white, tilting on one shoulder an open parasol of Chantilly lace, elaborate and fine as a spider's web.

"You look younger every day, Brigida. Yesterday I ran into your husband—I mean: your ex-husband. His hair is now completely white."

But she makes no reply, unwilling to tarry while crossing the bridge Mozart has fabricated toward the garden of her youth.

Tall blossoming spouts in which the water sings. Her eighteen years; her chestnut braids that, unbound, cascaded to her waist; her golden complexion; her dark eyes so wide and questioning. A small mouth with full lips; a sweet smile; and the lightest, most gracious body in the world. Of what was she thinking, seated by the fountain's edge? Of nothing. "She is as silly as she is pretty," they used to say. But she did not mind being silly, nor acting the dunce at parties. One by one, her sisters received proposals of marriage. No one asked her...

Mozart! Now he conducts her to a blue marble staircase on which she descends between two rows of ice lilies. And now he opens a wrought-iron gate of spikes with golden tips so that she may throw herself on Luis, her father's intimate friend. From childhood, she would run to Luis when everyone else abandoned her. He would pick her up and she would encircle his neck between giggles that were like tiny bird cries; she would fling kisses like disorderly raindrops on his eyes, his forehead and his hair—which even then was graying (had he never..."
been young. "You are a necklace," Luis would say. "You are like a necklace of sparrows."

That is why she had married him. Because at the side of that solemn and taciturn man she felt less guilty for being what she was: foolish, playful and indolent. Yes—now, after so many years; she realizes that she had not married Luis for love; yet she cannot put her finger on why, why she left him so suddenly one day.

But at this moment Mozart takes her nervously by the hand, drawing her into a rhythm second by second more urgent—compelling her to retrace her steps across the garden and onto the bridge at a pace that is almost like fleeing. And after stripping her of the parasol and the transparent crinoline, he closes the door on her past with a note at once firm and sweet—leaving her in the concert hall, dressed in black, applauding mechanically as the artificial lights rekindle their flame.

Again shadows, and the prelude of silence.

And now Beethoven begins to stir the lukewarm tide of his notes beneath a summer moon. How far the sea has retreated! Brígida walks seaward, down the beach toward the distant, bright, smooth water; but all at once the sea rises, flowing placidly to meet and envelop her—the gentle waves pushing at her back until they press her cheek against the body of a man. And then the waves recede, leaving her stranded on Luis's chest.

"You have no heart, you have no heart," she used to say to him. His heartbeat was so faint that she could not hear it except in rare and unexpected moments. "You are never with me when you are by my side," she would protest in their bedroom when, before going to sleep, he would ritually open the evening paper. "Why did you marry me?"

"Because you have the eyes of a startled fawn," he would reply, giving her a kiss. And she, abruptly cheerful, would proudly accept the weight of his gray head on her shoulder. Oh, that silvery, radiant hair! "Luis, you have never told me exactly what color your hair was when you were a boy. Or how your mother felt when you began going gray at the age of fifteen. What did she say? Did she laugh? Cry? And you—were you proud or ashamed? And at school—what did your classmates say? Tell me, Luis, tell me..."

"Tomorrow I am sleepy, Brígida. Very tired. Turn off the light.

Unconsciously, he would turn away from her in sleep, just as she unconsciously sought her husband's shoulder all night long, searching for his breath, groping blindly for protection as an enclosed and thirsty plant bends its tendrils toward warmth and moisture.

In the mornings, when the maid would open the Venetian blinds, Luis was no longer next to her. He had departed quietly without so much as a salutation, for fear the necklace of sparrows would fasten obstinately around his neck. "Five minutes, five minutes, no more. Your office will not disappear if you are five minutes late, Luis."

Her awakenings. Ah, how sad her awakenings! But—it was curious—no sooner had she entered her boudoir than the sadness vanished as if by an enchantment.

Waves crash, clashing far away, murmuring like a sea of leaves.

Beethoven? No.

It is the tree outside her dressing-room window. She had only to enter the room to experience an almost overpowering sense of well-being. How hot the bedroom always was in the morning! And what harsh light! By contrast, in the dressing-room even her eyes felt rested, refreshed. The faded cretonne curtains; the tree casting shadows that undulated on the walls like cold, moving water; the mirrors refracting foliage, creating the illusion of a green and infinite forest. How enjoyable that room was! It seemed a world submerged in an aquarium. And how that huge rubber tree shattered! All the birds in the neighborhood took refuge in it. It was the only tree on that narrow, falling street that sloped from one side of the city directly to the river.

"I am busy. I can't be with you... Lots of work to do. I won't be home for lunch... Hello... yes, I am at the club. An engagement. Eat and go to bed... No. I don't know. Better not wait for me, Brígida."

"If I only had friends!" she would sigh. But she bored everyone. "If I tried to be a little less foolish! Yet how does one recover so much lost ground at a single stroke? To be intelligent, you must start very young—isn't that true?"

Her sisters' husbands took them everywhere; but Luis—why had she denied it to herself?—had been ashamed of her, of her ignorance, her shyness, even of her eighteen years. Had he not urged her to pretend...
that she was at least twenty-one, as though her youth were an embarrassing secret they alone shared.

And at night—he always came to bed so weary! Never paying full attention to what she said. He smiled, yes—a mechanical smile. His caresses were plentiful, but bestowed absentmindedly. Why had he married her? To continue their acquaintance, perhaps simply to put the crowning touch on his old friendship with her father.

Maybe life for men was based on a series of established and continuous customs. Rupturing this chain would probably produce disorder, chaos. And after, men would stumble through the streets of the city, roosting on park benches, growing shabbier and more unshaven with each passing day. Luis's life, therefore, was patterned on keeping occupied every minute of the day. Why had she failed to see this sooner? Her father had been right; she was retarded.

"I would like to see snow sometime, Luis."

"This summer I will take you to Europe, and since it will be winter there, you shall have your snow!"

"I am quite aware that winter in Europe coincides with our summer. I am not that stupid!"

At times, to rouse him to the rapture of true love, she would throw herself on him and cover him with kisses: weeping, calling, "Luis, Luis, Luis..."

"What? What is the matter? What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Why do you cry out my name like that, then?"

"No reason. To say your name. I like to say your name."

And he would smile benevolently, pleased with the new game.

Summer came—her first summer as a married woman. Several new business ventures forced Luis to postpone the promised European trip.

"Brigida, the heat will be terrible in Buenos Aires shortly. Why don't you spend the summer on your father's ranch?"

" Alone?"

"I would visit you every week, from Saturday to Monday."

She sat down on the bed, primed to insult him. But she could not find the hurting words. She knew nothing, nothing—not even how to offend.

"What is wrong with you? What are you thinking of, Brigida?"

He was leaning over her, worried, for the first time in their marriage and unconcerned about violating his customary punctuality at the office.

"I am sleepy," Brigida had replied childishly, hiding her face in the pillow.

For once, he rang her up at lunchtime from his club. But she had refused to come to the phone, angrily wielding a weapon she had discovered without thinking: silence.

That same evening she dined across from him with lowered eyes and nerves strung tight.

"Are you still angry, Brigida?"

But she did not answer.

"You know perfectly well that I love you. But I can't be with you all the time. I am a very busy man. When you reach my age, you become a slave to a thousand obligations."

"Shall we go out tonight?"

"No. Very well, I will be patient. Tell me, did Roberto call from Montevideo?"

"What a lovely dress! Is it new?"

"Is it new, Brigida? Answer me. Say something."

But she refused to break her silence.

And then—the unexpected, the astonishing, the absurd. Luis rises from his chair and slaps his napkin on the table, slamming the door as he stomps from the house.

She, too, had gotten to her feet, stunned, trembling with indignation at such injustice. "And I... and I...?" she stammered, "I, who for almost an entire year... when for the first time I take the liberty of lodging a complaint... ah, I am leaving—I am leaving this very night! I shall never set foot in this house again... " And she jerked open the armoires in her dressing room, strewing clothes furiously in all directions. It was then that she heard a banging against the windowpane.
She ran to the window and opened it, not knowing how or from where the courage came. It was the rubber tree, set in motion by the storm, knocking its branches on the glass as though calling her to witness how it twisted and contorted like a fierce black flame under the burning sky of that summer night.

Heavy rain soon began to lash its cold leaves. How lovely! All night long she could hear the rain thrashing, splashing through the leaves of the rubber tree like a thousand tiny rivers sliding down imaginary canals. All night long she heard the ancient trunk creak and moan, the storm raging outside while she curled into a ball between the sheets of the wide bed, very close to Luis.

Handfuls of pearls raining on a silver roof. Chopin. Etudes by Frédéric Chopin.

How many mornings had she awakened as soon as she sensed that her husband, now likewise maintaining an obstinate silence, had slipped from bed?

Her dressing room: the window thrown wide, the odor of river and grass floating in that hospitable chamber, and the mirrors wearing a veil of fog.

Chopin intermingles in her turbulent memory with rain hissing through the leaves of the rubber tree like some hidden waterfall—so palpable that even the roses on the curtains seemed moist.

What to do in summer when it rains so often? Spend the day in her room feigning sadness, a convalescence? One afternoon Luis had entered timidly. Had sat down stiffly. There was a long silence.

"Then it is true, Brigida? You no longer love me?"

A sudden joy seized her. She might have shouted, "No, no! I love you Luis. I love you," if he had given her time, if he had not almost immediately added, with his habitual calm, "In any case, I do not think it would be convenient for us to separate, Brigida. Such a move requires much thought."

Her impulse sank as fast as it had surfaced. What was the use of exciting herself? Luis loved her tenderly, with moderation; if he ever came to hate her, it would be a just and prudent hatred. And that was life. She walked to the window and placed her forehead against the cold glass. There was the rubber tree, serenely accepting the pelting rain. The room was fixed in shadow, quiet and ordered. Everything seemed to be held in an eternal and very noble equilibrium. That was life. And there was a certain grandeur in accepting it thus: mediocre, like something definite and irremediable. While underneath it all there seemed to rise a melody of grave and slow words that transfixed her: "Always. Never."

And in this way the hours, days and years pass. Always! Never! Life! Life!

Collecting herself, she realized that her husband had stolen from the room.

"Always! Never!..." And the rain, secret and steady, still whispered in Chopin.

Summer stripped the leaves from its burning calendar. Luminous and blinding pages fell like golden swords; pages also of malignant dampness like breeze from a swamp; pages of furious and brief storms, of hot wind—the wind that carries the "caratation of the air" and hangs it on the huge rubber tree.

Some children used to play hide-and-seek among the enormous, twisted roots that pushed up the paving stones on the sidewalk; and the tree overflowed with laughter and whispering. On those days she would look from the window and clap her hands; but the children dispersed in fear, without noticing the childlike smile of a girl who wanted to join the game.

Alone, she would lean on her elbows at the window for a long time, watching the foliage swaying—a breeze blew along that street which sloped directly to the river—and it was like staring deep into moving water or the dancing flames in a fireplace. One could kill time in this fashion, no need for thought made foolish by peace of mind.

She lit the first lamp just as the room began to fill with twilight smoke, and the first lamp flickered in the mirrors, multiplying like fireflies eager to hasten the night.

And night after night she dozed beside her husband, suffering at intervals. But when her pain tightened so that it pierced like a knife thrust, when she was besieged by the desire to wake Luis—to hit him or caress him—she tiptoed to her dressing room and opened the window.
Immediately the room came alive with discreet sounds and discreet presences, with mysterious footsteps, the fluttering of wings, the sudden rustling of vegetation, the soft chirping of a cricket perched on the bark of the rubber tree under the stars of a hot summer night. Little by little her fever went down as her bare feet grew cold on the reed mat. She did not know why it was so easy to suffer in that room.

Chopin's melancholy stringing of one Etude after another, stringing of one melancholy after another, imperturbably.

And autumn came. The dry leaves hovered an instant before settling on the grass of the narrow garden, on the sidewalk of that sloping street. The leaves came loose and fell. The top of the rubber tree remained green but underneath it turned red, darkened like the worn-out lining of a sumptuous evening cape. And now the room seemed to be submerged in a goblet of dull gold.

Lying on the divan, she waited patiently for the dinner hour and the improbable arrival of Luis. She had resumed speaking to him; had become his again without enthusiasm or anger. She no longer loved him. But she no longer suffered. On the contrary, an unexpected feeling of fulfillment and placidity had taken hold of her. Nothing, no one could hurt her now. It may be that true happiness lies in the conviction that one has irrevocably lost happiness. It is only then that we can begin to live without hope or fear, able finally to enjoy all the small pleasures, which are the most lasting.

A thunderous noise, followed by a flash of light from which she recoils, shaking:

The intermission? No. The rubber tree.

Having started to work early in the morning without her knowledge, they had felled it with a single stroke of the axe. "The roots were breaking up the sidewalk and, naturally, the neighborhood committee..."

Dazed, she has shielded her eyes with her hands. When she recovers her sight, she stands and looks around. What does she see?

The concert hall suddenly ablaze with light, the audience filing out.

No. She is imprisoned in the web of her past, trapped in the dressing room—which has been invaded by a terrifying white light. It was as if they had ripped off the roof; a crude light entering from every direction, seeping through her very pores, burning her with its coldness. And she saw everything bathed in that cold light: Luis, his wrinkled face, his hands crisscrossed with ropy discolored veins and the gaudy cretonnes.

Frightened, she runs to the window. The window now opens directly on a narrow street, so narrow that her room almost brushes against a shiny skyscraper. On the ground floor, shop windows and more shop windows, full of bottles. At the corner, a row of automobiles lined up in front of a service station painted red. Some boys in their shirtsleeves are kicking a ball in the middle of the street.

And all that ugliness lay embedded in her mirrors, along with nickel-plated balconies, shabby clotheslines and canary cages.

They had stolen her intimacy, her secret; she found herself naked in the middle of the street, naked before an old husband who turned his back on her in bed, who had given her no children. She does not understand why, until then, she had not wanted children, how she had resigned herself to the idea of a life without children. Nor does she comprehend how for a whole year she had tolerated Luis's laughter, that overcheerful laughter, that false laughter of a man who has trained himself in joviality because it is necessary to laugh on certain occasions.

Lies! Her resignation and serenity were lies; she wanted love, yes, love, and trips and madness and love, love...

"But, Brígida... why are you leaving? Why did you stay so long?" Luis had asked. Now she would have to know how to answer him.

"The tree, Luis, the tree! They have cut down the rubber tree."

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Translated by Richard Cunningham and Lucía Guerra