

INTRODUCTION

A word of caution about the Spanish language itself. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing. The differences between the *castellano* spoken in most parts of Spain and that of Latin America are at least as great as those between American and British English. In addition, while the United States have evolved as one nation with a common history, the countries of Latin America have been entirely separate from each other since the early nineteenth century. This has had its effect on the spoken language. What is more, while Argentina, for example, has incorporated many idioms of Italian origin into common usage thanks to large-scale Italian immigration, Peruvians among others have taken many expressions of Andean Indian origin into their Spanish. So do not be surprised when certain words which occur in this book prove unintelligible outside the particular story's country of origin. The explanatory notes should deal with any difficulty a medium-sized Spanish-English dictionary cannot be expected to solve.

Finally, I would like to thank the authors and their publishers for permission to use the various stories and the translators for the way in which they have coped with a difficult task. Many thanks also to Carlos Barral and Jaime Salinas, who have done more than any other publishers in recent years to boost Spanish and Latin American contemporary literature, for their initial guidance.

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THE MAN WHO REPENTED

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EL ARREPENTIDO

El café era estrecho y oscuro. La fachada principal daba a la carretera y la posterior a la playa. La puerta que se abría a la playa estaba cubierta por una cortina de cañuelas, bamboleada por la brisa. A cada impulso sonaba un diminuto crujido, como de un pequeño entrecocar de huesos.

Tomeu el Viejo estaba sentado en el quicio de la puerta. Entre las manos acariciaba lentamente una petaca de cuero negro, muy gastada. Miraba hacia más allá de la arena, hacia la bahía. Se oía el ruido del motor de una barcaza y el coletazo de las olas contra las rocas. Una lancha vieja, cubierta por una lona, se mecía blandamente, amarrada a la playa.

— Así que es eso — dijo Tomeu, pensativo. Sus palabras eran lentas y parecían caer delante de él, como piedras. Levantó los ojos y miró a Ruti.

Ruti era un hombre joven, delgado y con gafas. Tenía ojos azules, inocentes, tras los cristales.

— Así es — contestó. Y miró al suelo.

Tomeu escarbó en el fondo de la petaca, con sus dedos anchos y oscuros. Aplastó una brizna de tabaco entre las yemas de los dedos y de nuevo habló, mirando hacia el mar:

— ¿Cuánto tiempo me das?

Ruti carraspeó:

— No sé . . . a ciencia cierta, no puede decirse así. Vamos: quiero decir, no es infalible.

— Vamos, Ruti. Ya me conoces: dilo.

Ruti se puso encarnado. Parecía que le temblaban los labios.

— Un mes . . . , acaso dos . . .

— Está bien, Ruti. Te lo agradezco, ¿sabes? . . . Sí; te lo agradezco mucho. Es mejor así.

Ruti guardó silencio.

— Ruti — dijo Tomeu —. Quiero decirte algo: ya sé que

THE MAN WHO REPENTED

The café was dark and pokey. The front overlooked the road and the rear the beach. The door leading to the beach was hung with a reed curtain swaying in the breeze. With every gust of wind it crackled a little like a slight rattle of bones.

Old Tomeu was sitting on the doorstep, leisurely stroking a well-worn tobacco pouch of black leather. He was gazing beyond the sands and out over the bay. The engine of a lighter could be heard and the slap of waves against the rocks. An old launch covered with canvas rocked gently to and fro, tied up to the beach.

‘So that’s it,’ said Tomeu thoughtfully. His words came slowly and seemed to fall like stones to the ground in front of him. He raised his eyes and looked at Ruti.

Ruti was a thin young man with spectacles. His eyes shone blue and innocent behind his glasses.

‘That’s it,’ he replied. And he lowered his gaze.

Tomeu fumbled in the bottom of the pouch with his thick brown fingers. He rubbed a scrap of tobacco between his fingertips and spoke again, still looking out to sea:

‘How long do you give me?’

Ruti’s voice was hoarse:

‘I don’t know . . . I’m not sure. You can’t be sure like that. Look here: I mean, it’s not bound to happen.’

‘Come on, Ruti. You know me: out with it.’

Ruti turned scarlet. It looked as though his lips were trembling.

‘A month . . . maybe two . . .’

‘Fair enough, Ruti. I’m grateful to you, you know . . . Yes, I’m very grateful to you. It’s better that way.’

Ruti kept quiet.

‘Ruti,’ said Tomeu, ‘I want to tell you something: I know

eres escrupuloso, pero quiero decirte algo, Ruti. Yo tengo más dinero del que la gente se figura: ya ves, un pobre hombre, un antiguo pescador, dueño de un cafeticho de camino... Pero yo tengo dinero, Ruti. Tengo mucho dinero.

Ruti pareció incómodo. El color rosado de sus mejillas se intensificó:

- Pero, tío . . . , yo . . . ¿no sé por qué me dice esto!

- Tú eres mi único pariente, Ruti - repitió el viejo, mirando ensoñadoramente al mar -. Te he querido mucho.

Ruti pareció conmovido.

- Bien lo sé - dijo -. Bien me lo ha demostrado siempre.

- Volviendo a lo de antes: tengo mucho dinero, Ruti. ¿Sabes? No siempre las cosas son como parecen.

Ruti sonrió. (*Acaso quiere hablarme de sus historias de contrabando. ¿Creerá acaso que no lo sé? ¿Se figura, acaso, que no lo sabe todo el mundo? ¡Tomeu el Viejo! ¡Bastante conocido, en ciertos ambientes! ¿Cómo hubiera podido costearme la carrera de no ser así?*) Ruti sonrió con melancolía. Le puso una mano en el hombro:

- Por favor, tío . . . No hablemos de esto. No, por favor . . . Además, ya he dicho: puedo equivocarme. Sí: es fácil equivocarse. Nunca se sabe . . .

Tomeu se levantó bruscamente. La cálida brisa le agitaba los mechones grises:

- Entra, Ruti. Vamos a tomar una copa juntos.

Apartó con la mano las cañuelas de la cortinilla y Ruti pasó delante de él. El café estaba vacío a aquella hora. Dos moscas se perseguían, con gran zumbido. Tomeu pasó detrás del mostrador y llenó dos copas de coñac. Le ofreció una:

- Bebe, hijo.

Nunca antes le llamó hijo. Ruti parpadeó y dio un sorbito.

- Estoy arrepentido - dijo el viejo, de pronto.

Ruti le miró fijamente.

you have your scruples, but I want to tell you something, Ruti. I have more money than people think: you know, a poor man, a retired fisherman, proprietor of a little roadside café . . . But I've got money, Ruti. I've got lots of money.'

Ruti looked embarrassed. His pink cheeks were getting pinker.

'But uncle . . . I . . . I don't know why you are telling me all this!'

'You are my only relation, Ruti,' repeated the old man, gazing dreamily at the sea. 'I've always been very fond of you.'

Ruti seemed moved by this.

'I know that very well,' he said. 'You've always proved it.'

'Getting back to what I was saying: I have lots of money, Ruti. Things aren't always what they seem, you know.'

Ruti smiled. (*Perhaps he is going to tell me about his smuggling days. Can he possibly think I don't know about it? Perhaps he imagines that everybody doesn't know it? Old Tomeu! Quite well known in certain circles! How else could he have paid for my training?*) Ruti smiled sadly and put his hand on the old man's shoulder.

'Please, uncle . . . Let's not talk about it. Don't, please . . . Besides, as I said: I could be wrong. Yes, it's easy to make a mistake. You never know . . .'

Tomeu stood up abruptly. The warm breeze ruffled his mop of grey hair.

'Come inside, Ruti. Let's have a drink together.'

He drew aside the strands of the reed curtain and Ruti went in ahead of him. The café was empty at that time of day. Two flies buzzed noisily in mutual pursuit. Tomeu went behind the bar and filled two glasses with brandy. He passed one across:

'Drink, son.'

Never before had he called him son. Ruti blinked and took a sip.

'I've repented,' said the old man suddenly.

Ruti stared at him.

- Sí - repitió -, estoy arrepentido.

- No le entiendo, tío.

- Quiero decir: mi dinero, no es un dinero limpio. No, no lo es.

Bebió su copa de un sorbo, y se limpió los labios con el revés de la mano.

- Nada me ha dado más alegría: haberte hecho lo que eres, un buen médico.

- Nunca lo olvidaré - dijo Ruti, con voz temblorosa. Miraba al suelo otra vez, indeciso.

- No bajes los ojos, Ruti. No me gusta que desvíen la mirada cuando yo hablo. Sí, Ruti: estoy contento por eso. ¿Y sabes por qué?

Ruti guardó silencio.

- Porque gracias a ello tú me has avisado de la muerte. Tú has podido reconocerme, oír mis quejas, mis dolores, mis temores . . . Y decirme, por fin: *acaso un mes, o dos*. Sí, Ruti: estoy contento, muy contento.

- Por favor, tío. Se lo ruego. No hable así . . ., todo esto es doloroso. Olvidémoslo.

- No, no hay por qué olvidarlo. Tú me has avisado y estoy tranquilo. Sí, Ruti: tú no sabes cuánto bien me has hecho.

Ruti apretó la copa entre los dedos y luego la apuró, también de un trago.

- Tú me conoces bien, Ruti. Tú me conoces muy bien.

Ruti sonrió pálidamente.

El día pasó como otro cualquiera. A eso de las ocho, cuando volvían los obreros del cemento, el café se llenó. El viejo Tomeu se portó como todos los días, como si no quisiera amargar las vacaciones de Ruti, con su flamante título recién estrenado. Ruti parecía titubeante, triste. Más de una vez vio que le miraba en silencio.

El día siguiente transcurrió, también, sin novedad. No se volvió a hablar del asunto entre ellos dos. Tomeu

'Yes,' he repeated, 'I've repented.'

'I don't understand, uncle.'

'My money, I mean. It's not honestly come by. No, that it isn't.'

He downed his brandy in one gulp and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Nothing has given me more satisfaction than to have made you what you are, a good doctor.'

'I shall never forget that,' said Ruti in a faltering voice. He looked down at the floor again uncertainly.

'Don't look down, Ruti. I don't like people looking away while I'm talking. Yes, Ruti: I'm pleased. And do you know why?'

Ruti kept silent.

'Because thanks to your training you've been able to warn me of approaching death. You've been able to examine me, listen to my complaints, my pains, my fears . . . and finally to tell me: *perhaps one month, or two*. Yes, Ruti: I'm pleased, very pleased.'

'For goodness' sake, uncle. I beg you. Don't talk like that . . . it's all so distressing. Let's forget about it.'

'No, there's no reason why we should forget about it. You have warned me and I'm easy in my mind. Honestly, Ruti, you have no idea how much good you've done me.'

Ruti held his glass tightly and then he also drained it at one go.

'You know what I'm like, Ruti. You know very well what I'm like.'

Ruti smiled wanly.

The rest of that day passed like any other. Around eight o'clock the café filled up with the men coming back from the cement works. Old Tomeu carried on as usual, as though he didn't want to spoil Ruti's holidays, his very first since graduation. Ruti seemed ill at ease, gloomy. More than once he saw the other looking at him in silence.

The following day, too, passed without incident. Neither of

más bien parecía alegre. Ruti, en cambio, serio y preocupado.

Pasaron dos días más. Un gran calor se extendía sobre la isla. Ruti daba paseos en barca, bordeando la costa. Su mirada azul, pensativa, vagaba por el ancho cielo. El calor pegajoso le humedecía la camisa, adhiriéndosela al cuerpo. Regresaba pálido, callado. Miraba a Tomeu y respondía brevemente a sus preguntas.

Al tercer día, por la mañana, Tomeu entró en el cuarto de su sobrino y ahijado. El muchacho estaba despierto.

- Ruti - dijo suavemente.

Ruti echó mano de sus gafas, apresuradamente. Su mano temblaba:

- ¿Qué hay, tío?

Tomeu sonrió.

- Nada - dijo -. Salgo, ¿sabes? Quizá tarde algo. No te impacientes.

Ruti palideció:

- Está bien - dijo. Y se echó hacia atrás, sobre la almohada.

- Las gafas, Ruti - dijo Tomeu -. No las rompas.

Ruti se las quitó despacio y se quedó mirando al techo. Por la pequeña ventana entraban el aire caliente y el ruido de las olas.

Era ya mediodía cuando bajó al café. La puerta que daba a la carretera estaba cerrada. Por lo visto su tío no tenía intención de atender a la clientela.

Ruti se sirvió café. Luego, salió atrás, a la playa. La barca amarrada se balanceaba lentamente.

A eso de las dos vinieron a avisarle. Tomeu se había pegado un tiro, en el camino de la Tura. Debí de hacerlo cuando salió, a primera hora de la mañana.

Ruti se mostró muy abatido. Estaba pálido y parecía más miope que nunca.

them brought the matter up again. Tomeu seemed gay even. Ruti on the other hand looked grave and worried.

Two more days went by. An intense heat smothered the island. Ruti went out boating along the coast. His pensive blue gaze strayed over the wide sky. The sticky heat made his shirt damp, so that it clung to his body. On his return he was pale and silent. He kept on watching old Tomeu and replied curtly to his questions.

On the third day in the morning, Tomeu went into the bedroom of his nephew and godchild. The young man was lying awake.

'Ruti,' he called out softly.

Ruti groped hastily for his spectacles. His hand was trembling:

'What is it, Uncle?'

Tomeu smiled.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I'm going out, you see. I might be some while. Don't get impatient.'

Ruti turned pale.

'All right,' he said. And he sank back on his pillow.

'Your glasses, Ruti,' said Tomeu. 'Mind you don't break them.'

Ruti took them off slowly and lay gazing up at the ceiling. The hot breeze and the sound of the waves came in through the small window.

It was midday already when he went downstairs to the café. The door to the road was locked as if his uncle had no intention of serving any customers.

Ruti helped himself to some coffee. Then he went out of the back door to the beach. The boat was rocking gently to and fro at its moorings.

At about two o'clock they came with the news. Tomeu had shot himself on the road to Tura. He must have done it when he went out first thing that morning.

Ruti gave the impression of being extremely downcast. He was pale and seemed more shortsighted than ever.

- ¿Sabe usted de alguna razón que llevara a su tío a hacer esto?

- No, no puedo comprenderlo . . . , no puedo imaginarlo. Parecía feliz.

Al día siguiente, Ruti recibió una carta. Al ver la letra con su nombre en el sobre, palideció y lo rasgó, con mano temblorosa. Aquella carta debió de echarla su tío al correo antes de suicidarse, al salir de su habitación.

Ruti leyó:

«Querido Ruti: Sé muy bien que no estoy enfermo, porque no sentía ninguno de los dolores que te dije. Después de tu reconocimiento consulté a un médico y quedé completamente convencido. No sé cuánto tiempo habría vivido aún con mi salud envidiable, porque estas cosas, como tú dices bien, no se saben nunca del todo. Tú sabías que si me creía condenado, no esperaría la muerte en la cama y haría lo que he hecho, a pesar de todo; y que, por fin, me heredarías. Pero te estoy muy agradecido, Ruti, porque yo sabía que mi dinero era sucio, y estaba ya cansado. Cansado y, tal vez, eso que se llama arrepentido. Para que Dios no me lo tenga en cuenta - tú sabes, Ruti, que soy buen creyente a pesar de tantas cosas -, dejo mi dinero a los niños del Asilo.»

'Can you think of any reason why your uncle should have done such a thing?'

'No, I can't understand it . . . I can't imagine. He seemed happy.'

The following day, Ruti received a letter. When he saw the handwriting of his name on the envelope, he turned pale and tore it open with trembling hands. His uncle must have posted the letter before committing suicide, after leaving his bedroom.

Ruti read:

'Dear Ruti: I know very well that I am not ill because I didn't feel any of the pains I told you about. After you'd examined me I went to a doctor and was completely reassured. I don't know how long I would have lived on with my enviable good health, for, as you so rightly say, one can never tell. You knew that if I thought my days were numbered, I would not wait to die in bed and that I would do what I have in fact done, in spite of everything; and that at long last you would inherit my money. But I am very grateful to you, Ruti, because I knew that my money was tainted and I had grown weary. Weary, and possibly what they call repentant. So that God won't hold it against me - you know, Ruti, that in spite of so many things I'm a good believer at heart - I'm leaving my money to the orphanage.'