

## ROSALBA

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*O Lola c'hai di latti la cammisa / si bianca e russa comu la cirasa,  
Quannu t'affacci fai la vucca a risa, / biatu pilu primu cu ti vasa!  
Ntra la puorta tua lu sangu è spasu / ma nun me mpuorta si ce muoru accisu...  
E si ce muoru e vaju 'n paradisu / si nun ce truovo a ttia, mancu ce trasu.  
(O Lola, your dress is white as milk, / You are white and red like a cherry,  
Your lips smile when you look through the window, / Blessed is he who gives  
you the first kiss!  
Your threshold is sprinkled with blood, / And I don't care if I'm killed there.  
And if I die and go to Paradise, / If I don't find you there, I will not even enter.)  
—Pietro Mascagni, Cavalleria Rusticana, Scene 1.*

I leave home at daybreak. I get on the dirt road by the hut and go on a steady uphill walk towards the ruined town. I take no notice of the scurrying little beasts that seek to end a night of foraging without becoming prey to an owl or a falcon. As I advance to higher ground, the dark barren hillocks the locals call *calanchi* come into view. Their stark beauty is all too familiar and I ignore them.

At the town's gate, which is boarded to keep intruders away, I run—as I often do—into the shepherd boy who leads his goats, and the mule he calls Clarissa, crosstown toward the pastures to the west. He cannot be older than nine and has the striking, mixed-race looks of the natives of Basilicata. He bends his head respectfully (perhaps fearfully) and mutters a greeting or a prayer I do not hear. I wave at him and move on.

I cross the overgrown streets of the ancient town, avoiding the debris that covers the ground, always going uphill. I pass structures fallen into ruin; decrepit palaces and churches still showing remnants of the shutters, railings and frescoes that once graced them. At last, I arrive at the chosen meeting place. Rosalba awaits me, standing by a stone slab that serves as a bench, at the entrance of the highest structure in the city: the long-abandoned Norman Tower. She is pale, but her features remain as beautiful as ever.

“You are late,” she complains, in a voice laden with recrimination.

“I am not,” I reply flatly and sit next to her.

I try to hold her hand but, as always, Rosalba shies from my touch. “What do you have to say for yourself?” she asks with asperity.

“Nothing much,” I reply. “I spend most of the time thinking about you, about us, about the life we used to have.”

“Bah!” replies Rosalba dismissively. “Even in the best of times, our life was nothing to brag about. You worked the fields, I cared for our home, we went together to Sunday Mass and to the festival of Saint Vincenzo in October. One boring season after another, year after year.”

“But there was always love.”

“Perhaps at first. Then your jealousy destroyed all we had.”

“There was a reason for jealousy. Can you deny that the town men made eyes at you, that you returned their glances and flirted with them?”

“Well, a woman always likes to be admired. It was not my fault to be pretty. But in my heart, I was always faithful to you.”

---

“Always?”

“Always.”

“How can you say that? You know it is not true. I caught you right here in the arms of Tulio, that filthy baker from Potenza.”

“Tulio meant nothing to me. Only a passing fancy, though there was more than that on his part. He was handsome and virile and treated me with respect. Every day he would bake a wonderful loaf of Pane di Matera for us and bring it over to our hut, as a gift.”

“And you sold yourself to him for a loaf of bread!” The fury that never goes away fills my mouth with bile.

“Not so. I felt I owed him a few kisses in exchange for his kindness. We came to this abandoned tower to be away from the town gossips. I never lay with him, never touched him, before you caught us—”

“I can’t believe you still claim you were faithful to me! Putana!” I rise from the stone slab and wave a menacing fist at her.

Rosalba utters a thin laugh. “You can’t hurt me any more than you did.”

“I did what I had to do,” I groan.

“You found us together in this tower, and murdered us both.”

“I had been following you, and by the time I got here I was too angry to control my actions.”

“You knifed Tulio twice on the chest and that was that for him. He was almost peaceful as he died in my arms. But what you did to me...”

“Please, stop!” I beg.

Rosalba goes on, implacable. “You butchered me, and buried me while I was still not quite dead!” Her voice rises in a dark torrent.

---

“Please, stop!” I beg again, in vain.

“You dug a hole in the dirt and dumped me there. That mound marks the spot.”

“I know...” I whimper.

“I lie there, on the cold earth, without a Christian burial, without a hearse, food for the wolves and the maggots, like a dead animal.”

“I had to bury you. I feared I would be charged with murdering you if your body was discovered.”

“At least you dragged Tulio’s body away and dropped it on the main road, where he would be found. He rests in peace. But I...”

“I would love to remove you from the earth and give your remains a proper burial, if I only could...”

“You cannot, and I forbid it.”

“But then, please, release me from these encounters!” I beg. “I cannot endure the torment.”

“Yet you feel no remorse for your actions. You still think your murders were justified. You regret nothing!”

“It’s too late for regrets,” I cry.

Our bickering continues, in endless repetition, through the day and into the late afternoon. As the sun starts setting, Rosalba says with finality: “You are beyond redemption. So, I will never release you. I command you to return tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

Rosalba’s figure becomes immaterial, translucent, almost invisible as it sinks to the earth beneath the little mound. I remain sitting on the stone slab, watching without seeing how my long-dead wife disappears for another day. A cloud drifts across from the late

afternoon sky and everything is suddenly engulfed in darkness. A gust of the wind that always blows on this hill elicits groans and creaks from the deserted houses below.

I have lingered too long in my daily dispute with Rosalba's ghost: the last strands of pink sunset light fade from the tops of the calanchi. I get up slowly and go inside the building. Finding my way by touching the walls, I ascend a long set of stone steps that take me to the square roof of the tower. There I remain for a long time, watching as night creeps over the countryside. It had been painful for me to watch from this vantage point when the townspeople had to move away because the landslides and quakes made it unsafe for them to remain.

The view of the deserted town below, cast in shadows in the fading twilight, envelopes me like a shroud of melancholy. What is left for me? All that I once loved was gone, taken away by my own hand. I should go away forever, as the townspeople did.

I climb onto the parapet that encircles the top of the tower, and balance myself against the rising evening wind. Should I do it? Why not? What is there to linger on for?

As I crouch to gather momentum for the fatal plunge to the cobblestones below, I have a strange sense of familiarity, as if the muscles of my thighs are readying for a practiced exercise. I take a deep breath and leap.

Midway through the air, though, I remember—as I do every night at this moment—that the release I seek is forever being denied me.

Like many previous jumps, this one cannot possibly kill me. The first one, years ago, already did.



*MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ is an engineer and attorney, born in Cuba and retired after half a century of professional practice. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various lengths and genres. Over forty of his stories have appeared or are scheduled to appear in paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts.*