

THE MOST HANDSOME DROWNED MAN IN THE WORLD

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The first children to see the obscure, stealthy promontory that approached in the ocean believed that it was an enemy ship. But then they saw that it carried neither flags nor spars, and they thought it was a whale. But when it ran aground on the beach they peeled off the thickets of seaweed, the jellyfish tentacles and the rest of the tattered cloth and driftwood it carried, and only then did they discover that it was a drowned man.

They had been playing with him all afternoon, burying and unburying him in the sand, when someone happened to see them and cried the alarm in the village. The men who carried him to the nearest house noticed that he weighed more than any dead man they had ever known, almost as much as a horse, and they said that perhaps he had been adrift so long that water had seeped in between his bones. When they spread him out on the floor they saw that he had been much bigger than any other man, for he hardly fit in the house, but they thought that perhaps the ability to continue growing after death was in the nature of certain drowned men. He smelled of the ocean, and only his form allowed them to suppose that it was the body of a human, for his hair was covered with an armor-plating of remora and mud.

They didn't have to clean his face to know that he was from elsewhere. The village had barely twenty houses made of planks, with flowerless stone porches, scattered across the back of a deserted cape. The earth was so barren that mothers always went in fear that the wind would carry off their children, and they had to throw their deceased, continually taken by the years, from the cliffs. But the sea was tame and bountiful, and all of the men fit in seven boats. So, when they found the drowned man, they had only to look one to the other to realize that they were all accounted for.

That night they didn't go out to work on the sea. While the men checked whether or not anyone was missing from the nearby villages, the women remained caring for the drowned man. They removed the mud with clumps of grass, untangled the submarine burrs from his hair, and scraped off the remora with descaling knives. As they did so, they noticed that the vegetation was from far-off seas and deep waters, and that his clothes were in tatters as if he had navigated through mazes of coral. They also noticed that he bore death with dignity, having neither the solitary semblance of the other drowned men from the sea nor the squalid, needy aspect of those who drowned in rivers. But only when they finished cleaning him did they become conscious of the sort of man he was, and then they remained, breathless. Not only was he the tallest, strongest, most virile and best-equipped man they had ever seen, but as they watched him he didn't even fit in their imaginations.

They couldn't find a big enough bed in the village to lay him on nor a table solid enough to hold vigil. The festival pants of the tallest men didn't fit him, nor did the Sunday shirts of the fattest, nor the shoes of

the best planted. Fascinated by his disproportion and beauty, the women then decided to make him pants with a piece of gaff sail, and a shirt of fine linen, so that he could continue in his death with dignity. While they sewed seated in a circle, contemplating the cadaver between stitches, it appeared to them that the wind had never been so sustained nor had the Caribbean been so unsettled as on that night, and they supposed that these changes had something to do with the dead man. They thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the tallest roof and the firmest floor, and the frame of his bed would have been made of giant timbers with iron bolts, and his wife would have been the happiest. They thought that he would have had such authority that he could have taken the fish from the sea by only calling them by name, and he would have put such effort in his work that he would have brought forth springs from between the driest rocks and would have been able to sow flowers on the cliffs. They compared him in secret to their own men, thinking that they would not be able to do in a lifetime what that man was capable of in a single night, and they ended up repudiating them in the depths of their hearts as the most squalid and paltry beings in the earth. They went on distracted by these labyrinths of fantasy, when the oldest of the women, who by being the oldest had contemplated the drowned man with less passion than compassion, sighed:

“He has the face of one who’s called Esteban.”

It was true. For most it was enough to look at him once more to understand that he couldn’t have any other name. The most stubborn, who were the youngest, maintained the illusion that upon clothing him, laid out among flowers and with charcoal shoes, he could be called Lautaro. But it was a vain illusion. The canvas turned out too small, the poorly-cut and worse-stitched pants fit him tightly, and the hidden forces of his heart made the buttons of his shirt burst. After midnight the whistling wind diminished and the sea fell into a mid-week stupor. The silence did away with the last doubts: he was Esteban. The women that had dressed him, those that had combed his hair, those that had cut his nails and shaved his beard could not suppress a shudder of compassion when they had to resign to leaving him tossed on the floor. It was then that they understood how unhappy he must have been with that colossal body that got in the way even after death. They saw him condemned in life to pass sideways through doors, splitting his head open on crossbeams, to remain standing during visits without knowing what to do with his tender, red hands, while the woman of the house searched for the most resistant chair and pleaded, dead with fear, sit here Esteban, do me the pleasure, and him leaning against the walls, smiling, don’t worry ma’am, I’m fine here, with heels worn raw and back burning from repeating the same thing so often in his visits, don’t worry ma’am, I’m fine here, only to spare the embarrassment of breaking the chair, and perhaps without ever knowing that those who told him don’t go Esteban, wait until the coffee boils, were the same that later whispered, finally the great fool’s left, thank goodness, finally the stupid bloke is gone. This is what the women thought before the body, just before daybreak. Later, when they covered his face with a headscarf so that the light wouldn’t bother him, they saw him to be so finally dead, so defenseless, so similar to their men, that the first cracks of tears opened in their hearts. It was one of the youngest that started to weep. The others, sitting around her,

passed from sighs to laments, and the more they wept the more they felt the desire to cry, for the drowned man was becoming to them more and more Esteban, until they wept so for him that he was the most helpless man on the earth, the most meek and obliging, the poor Esteban. It was such that when the men returned with the news that the drowned man wasn't from any of the nearby villages either, the women felt a space of joy between their tears.

"Thanks be to God," they sighed: "he's ours!"

The men thought their gesticulations to be no more than womanly frivolities. Exhausted from the torturous inquiries of the previous night, the only thing they wanted was to rid themselves once and for all of the nuisance of the intruder before the fierce sun of the arid and windless day rose. They improvised stretchers from the remains of foremasts and booms, and tied them with mast stops so that they would resist the weight of the body until they reached the cliffs. They wanted to tie a ship anchor to his ankles so that he would be staid without mistake in the deepest waters where the fish are blind and divers die of nostalgia, in such a way that the bad currents would not deposit him on the shore, as it had done with other bodies. But the more they pressured, the more things occurred to the women to use up time. They went around like frightened chickens pecking at treasure from a chest, here some getting in the way because they wanted to put scapulars on the drowned man that would bring good wind, there others tarrying to fasten a wrist compass, and after so much get out of here woman, go where you won't be in the way, look how you almost made me fall over the dead man, the men began to get suspicious and to grumble, to what end such lavish hardware for a foreigner, for all the odds and ends he carries he'll just be eaten by sharks, but the women continued digging up their cheap relics, carrying and bringing, tripping, going with sighs if not tears, until the men ended up ranting, since when was there ever such a fuss for an adrift body, a drowned man belonging to no one, a filthy stiff. One of the women, mortified by such insolence, then took off the headscarf from the cadaver's face, and then the men too remained breathless.

He was Esteban. It wasn't necessary to repeat for them to recognize it. If they had said Sir Walter Raleigh, perhaps, they might have been impressed by his foreign accent, by the macaw on his shoulder, with his arquebus for killing cannibals, but there could only be one Esteban in the world, and there he was tossed like a river herring, without booty, with tiny pants and stone-hard nails that only a knife could cut. It was enough for them to take off the headscarf from his face to realize that he was ashamed, that it wasn't his fault for being so large, nor so heavy nor so handsome, and if he had known that this was going to happen he would have searched for a more discrete place to drown, honestly, I would have moored myself with a gallon anchor around my neck and would have stumbled up the cliffs like someone who doesn't want all of this, to not come now getting in the way with this damned corpse, like you say, to not bother anyone with this filthy stiff that has nothing to do with me. There was such truth in his mode of being, that even the most suspicious of the men, those that felt bitterness during the long nights at sea that their wives would become tired of dreaming of them to dream instead of drowned men, even these, and still others who were much harder, shuddered to the marrow with the sincerity of Esteban.

And so it was that they held the most splendid funeral they could conceive for an abandoned drowned man. Some women that had gone to look for flowers in the nearby villages came back with others who did not believe what they had been told, and these went for more flowers when they saw the dead man, and they brought more and more, until there were so many flowers and such a crowd that one could barely walk. At the final hour it pained them to throw him orphaned into the sea, and so they chose a father and a mother among the best for him, and others made themselves brothers, and uncles and cousins, until through him all of the villagers ended up relatives. Some mariners who heard the crying from a distance lost their course, and it was later learned that one tied himself to the mast, calling to mind ancient fables of sirens. While they disputed the privilege of carrying him on their shoulders up the steep incline of the cliffs, the men and women became conscious for the first time of the desolation of their streets, the aridity of their courtyards, the narrowness of their dreams, before the splendor and the beauty of their drowned man. They released him without anchor, so that he could return if he wished, and when he wished, and everyone held their breath during the fraction of centuries that it took for the body to fall into the abyss. It wasn't necessary for them to look at one another to realize that they were not complete, nor would they ever be again. But they also knew that everything would be different from then, that their houses would have wider doors, taller roofs, firmer floors, so that the memory of Esteban could walk everywhere without running into the crossbeams, and so that no one would dare to murmur in the future, finally the great fool has died, what a shame, finally the stupid bloke is dead, because they would paint the fronts of their houses with joyful colors to eternalize the memory of Esteban, and they would break their backs digging springs from the rocks and sowing flowers on the cliffs, so that in the dawns of the coming years the travelers on great ships would awaken suffocating on the aroma of gardens on the high sea, and the captain would have to come down from his quarter deck in full uniform, with his astrolabe, his pole star and string of war medals, and signaling the promontory of roses on the Caribbean horizon would say in fourteen languages: look there, where the wind is now so gentle that it stops to sleep beneath the beds, there, where the sun shines such that the sunflowers don't know where to turn, yes, there, is the village of Esteban.