

## DEAD STARS

by Paz Marquez Benitez

THROUGH the open window the air-steeped outdoors passed into his room, quietly enveloping him, stealing into his very thought. Esperanza, Julia, the sorry mess he had made of life, the years to come even now beginning to weigh down, to crush--they lost concreteness, diffused into formless melancholy. The tranquil murmur of conversation issued from the brick-filled azotea where Don Julian and Carmen were busy pattering away among the rose pots.

"Papa, and when will the 'long table' be set?"

"I don't know yet. Alfredo is not very specific, but I understand Esperanza wants it to be next month."

Carmen sighed impatiently. "Why is he not a bit more decided, I wonder. He is over thirty, is he not? And still a bachelor! Esperanza must be tired waiting."

"She does not seem to be in much of a hurry either," Don Julian nasally commented, while his rose scissors busily snipped away.

"How can a woman be in a hurry when the man does not hurry her?" Carmen returned, pinching off a worm with a careful, somewhat absent air. "Papa, do you remember how much in love he was?"

"In love? With whom?"

"With Esperanza, of course. He has not had another love affair that I know of," she said with good-natured contempt. "What I mean is that at the beginning he was enthusiastic--flowers, serenades, notes, and things like that--"

Alfredo remembered that period with a wonder not unmixed with shame. That was less than four years ago. He could not understand those months of a great hunger that was not of the body nor yet of the mind, a craving that had seized on him one quiet night when the moon was abroad and under the dappled shadow of the trees in the plaza, man wooed maid. Was he being cheated by life? Love--he seemed to have missed it. Or was the love that others told about a mere fabrication of perfervid imagination, an exaggeration of the commonplace, a glorification of insipid monotonies such as made up his love life? Was love a combination of circumstances, or sheer native capacity of soul? In those days love was, for him, still the eternal puzzle; for love, as he knew it, was a stranger to love as he divined it might be.

Sitting quietly in his room now, he could almost revive the restlessness of those days, the feeling of tumultuous haste, such as he knew so well in his boyhood when something beautiful was going on somewhere and he was trying to get there in time to see. "Hurry, hurry, or you will miss it," someone had seemed to urge in his ears. So he had avidly seized on the shadow of Love and deluded himself for a long while in the way of humanity from time immemorial. In the meantime, he became very much engaged to Esperanza.

Why would men so mismanage their lives? Greed, he thought, was what ruined so many. Greed--the desire to crowd into a moment all the enjoyment it will hold, to squeeze from the hour all the emotion it will yield. Men commit themselves when but half-meaning to do so, sacrificing possible future fullness of ecstasy to the craving for immediate excitement. Greed--mortgaging the future--forcing the hand of Time, or of Fate.

"What do you think happened?" asked Carmen, pursuing her thought.

"I supposed long-engaged people are like that; warm now, cool tomorrow. I think they are oftener cool than warm. The very fact that an engagement has been allowed to prolong itself argues a certain placidity of temperament--or of affection--on the part of either, or both." Don Julian loved to philosophize. He was talking now with an evident relish in words, his resonant, very nasal voice toned down to monologue pitch. "That phase you were speaking of is natural enough for a beginning. Besides, that, as I see it, was Alfredo's last race with escaping youth--"

Carmen laughed aloud at the thought of her brother's perfect physical repose--almost indolence--disturbed in the role suggested by her father's figurative language.

"A last spurt of hot blood," finished the old man.

Few certainly would credit Alfredo Salazar with hot blood. Even his friends had amusedly diagnosed his blood as cool and thin, citing incontrovertible evidence. Tall and slender, he moved with an indolent ease that verged on grace. Under straight recalcitrant hair, a thin face with a satisfying breadth of forehead, slow, dreamer's eyes, and astonishing freshness of lips--indeed Alfredo Salazar's appearance betokened little of exuberant masculinity; rather a poet with wayward humor, a fastidious artist with keen, clear brain.

He rose and quietly went out of the house. He lingered a moment on the stone steps; then went down the path shaded by immature acacias, through the little tarred gate which he left swinging back and forth,

now opening, now closing, on the gravel road bordered along the farther side by madre cacao hedge in tardy lavender bloom.

The gravel road narrowed as it slanted up to the house on the hill, whose wide, open porches he could glimpse through the heat-shrivelled tamarinds in the Martinez yard.

Six weeks ago that house meant nothing to him save that it was the Martinez house, rented and occupied by Judge del Valle and his family. Six weeks ago Julia Salas meant nothing to him; he did not even know her name; but now--

One evening he had gone "neighboring" with Don Julian; a rare enough occurrence, since he made it a point to avoid all appearance of currying favor with the Judge. This particular evening however, he had allowed himself to be persuaded. "A little mental relaxation now and then is beneficial," the old man had said. "Besides, a judge's good will, you know;" the rest of the thought--"is worth a rising young lawyer's trouble"--Don Julian conveyed through a shrug and a smile that derided his own worldly wisdom.

A young woman had met them at the door. It was evident from the excitement of the Judge's children that she was a recent and very welcome arrival. In the characteristic Filipino way formal introductions had been omitted--the judge limiting himself to a casual "Ah, ya se conocen?"--with the consequence that Alfredo called her Miss del Valle throughout the evening.

He was puzzled that she should smile with evident delight every time he addressed her thus. Later Don Julian informed him that she was not the Judge's sister, as he had supposed, but his sister-in-law, and that her name was Julia Salas. A very dignified rather austere name, he thought. Still, the young lady should have corrected him. As it was, he was greatly embarrassed, and felt that he should explain.

To his apology, she replied, "That is nothing, Each time I was about to correct you, but I remembered a similar experience I had once before."

"Oh," he drawled out, vastly relieved.

"A man named Manalang--I kept calling him Manalo. After the tenth time or so, the young man rose from his seat and said suddenly, 'Pardon me, but my name is Manalang, Manalang.' You know, I never forgave him!"

He laughed with her.

"The best thing to do under the circumstances, I have found out," she pursued, "is to pretend not to hear, and to let the other person find out his mistake without help."

"As you did this time. Still, you looked amused every time I--"

"I was thinking of Mr. Manalang."

Don Julian and his uncommunicative friend, the Judge, were absorbed in a game of chess. The young man had tired of playing appreciative spectator and desultory conversationalist, so he and Julia Salas had gone off to chat in the vine-covered porch. The lone piano in the neighborhood alternately tinkled and banged away as the player's moods altered. He listened, and wondered irrelevantly if Miss Salas could sing; she had such a charming speaking voice.

He was mildly surprised to note from her appearance that she was unmistakably a sister of the Judge's wife, although Doña Adela was of a different type altogether. She was small and plump, with wide brown eyes, clearly defined eyebrows, and delicately modeled hips--a pretty woman with the complexion of a baby and the expression of a likable cow. Julia was taller, not so obviously pretty. She had the same eyebrows and lips, but she was much darker, of a smooth rich brown with underlying tones of crimson which heightened the impression she gave of abounding vitality.

On Sunday mornings after mass, father and son would go crunching up the gravel road to the house on the hill. The Judge's wife invariably offered them beer, which Don Julian enjoyed and Alfredo did not. After a half hour or so, the chessboard would be brought out; then Alfredo and Julia Salas would go out to the porch to chat. She sat in the low hammock and he in a rocking chair and the hours--warm, quiet March hours--sped by. He enjoyed talking with her and it was evident that she liked his company; yet what feeling there was between them was so undisturbed that it seemed a matter of course. Only when Esperanza chanced to ask him indirectly about those visits did some uneasiness creep into his thoughts of the girl next door.

Esperanza had wanted to know if he went straight home after mass. Alfredo suddenly realized that for several Sundays now he had not waited for Esperanza to come out of the church as he had been wont to do. He had been eager to go "neighboring."

He answered that he went home to work. And, because he was not habitually untruthful, added, "Sometimes I go with Papa to Judge del Valle's."

She dropped the topic. Esperanza was not prone to indulge in unprovoked jealousies. She was a believer in the regenerative virtue of institutions, in their power to regulate feeling as well as conduct. If a man were married, why, of course, he loved his wife; if he were engaged, he could not possibly love another woman.

That half-lie told him what he had not admitted openly to himself, that he was giving Julia Salas something which he was not free to give. He realized that; yet something that would not be denied beckoned imperiously, and he followed on.

It was so easy to forget up there, away from the prying eyes of the world, so easy and so poignantly sweet. The beloved woman, he standing close to her, the shadows around, enfolding.

"Up here I find--something--"

He and Julia Salas stood looking out into the she quiet night. Sensing unwanted intensity, laughed, woman-like, asking, "Amusement?"

"No; youth--its spirit--"

"Are you so old?"

"And heart's desire."

Was he becoming a poet, or is there a poet lurking in the heart of every man?

"Down there," he had continued, his voice somewhat indistinct, "the road is too broad, too trodden by feet, too barren of mystery."

"Down there" beyond the ancient tamarinds lay the road, upturned to the stars. In the darkness the fireflies glimmered, while an errant breeze strayed in from somewhere, bringing elusive, faraway sounds as of voices in a dream.

"Mystery--" she answered lightly, "that is so brief--"

"Not in some," quickly. "Not in you."

"You have known me a few weeks; so the mystery."

"I could study you all my life and still not find it."

"So long?"

"I should like to."

Those six weeks were now so swift--seeming in the memory, yet had they been so deep in the living, so

charged with compelling power and sweetness. Because neither the past nor the future had relevance or meaning, he lived only the present, day by day, lived it intensely, with such a willful shutting out of fact as astounded him in his calmer moments.

Just before Holy Week, Don Julian invited the judge and his family to spend Sunday afternoon at Tanda where he had a coconut plantation and a house on the beach. Carmen also came with her four energetic children. She and Doña Adela spent most of the time indoors directing the preparation of the merienda and discussing the likeable absurdities of their husbands--how Carmen's Vicente was so absorbed in his farms that he would not even take time off to accompany her on this visit to her father; how Doña Adela's Dionisio was the most absentminded of men, sometimes going out without his collar, or with unmatched socks.

After the merienda, Don Julian sauntered off with the judge to show him what a thriving young coconut looked like--"plenty of leaves, close set, rich green"--while the children, convoyed by Julia Salas, found unending entertainment in the rippling sand left by the ebbing tide. They were far down, walking at the edge of the water, indistinctly outlined against the gray of the out-curving beach.

Alfredo left his perch on the bamboo ladder of the house and followed. Here were her footsteps, narrow, arched. He laughed at himself for his black canvas footwear which he removed forthwith and tossed high up on dry sand.

When he came up, she flushed, then smiled with frank pleasure.

"I hope you are enjoying this," he said with a questioning inflection.

"Very much. It looks like home to me, except that we do not have such a lovely beach."

There was a breeze from the water. It blew the hair away from her forehead, and whipped the tucked-up skirt around her straight, slender figure. In the picture was something of eager freedom as of wings poised in flight. The girl had grace, distinction. Her face was not notably pretty; yet she had a tantalizing charm, all the more compelling because it was an inner quality, an achievement of the spirit. The lure was there, of naturalness, of an alert vitality of mind and body, of a thoughtful, sunny temper, and of a piquant perverseness which is sauce to charm.

"The afternoon has seemed very short, hasn't it?" Then, "This, I think, is the last time--we can visit."

"The last? Why?"

"Oh, you will be too busy perhaps."

He noted an evasive quality in the answer.

"Do I seem especially industrious to you?"

"If you are, you never look it."

"Not perspiring or breathless, as a busy man ought to be."

"But--"

"Always unhurried, too unhurried, and calm." She smiled to herself.

"I wish that were true," he said after a meditative pause.

She waited.

"A man is happier if he is, as you say, calm and placid."

"Like a carabao in a mud pool," she retorted perversely

"Who? I?"

"Oh, no!"

"You said I am calm and placid."

"That is what I think."

"I used to think so too. Shows how little we know ourselves."

It was strange to him that he could be wooing thus: with tone and look and covert phrase.

"I should like to see your home town."

"There is nothing to see--little crooked streets, bunut roofs with ferns growing on them, and sometimes squashes."

That was the background. It made her seem less detached, less unrelated, yet withal more distant, as if that background claimed her and excluded him.

"Nothing? There is you."

"Oh, me? But I am here."

"I will not go, of course, until you are there."

"Will you come? You will find it dull. There isn't even one American there!"

"Well--Americans are rather essential to my entertainment."

She laughed.

"We live on Calle Luz, a little street with trees."

"Could I find that?"

"If you don't ask for Miss del Valle," she smiled teasingly.

"I'll inquire about--"

"What?"

"The house of the prettiest girl in the town."

"There is where you will lose your way." Then she turned serious. "Now, that is not quite sincere."

"It is," he averred slowly, but emphatically.

"I thought you, at least, would not say such things."

"Pretty--pretty--a foolish word! But there is none other more handy I did not mean that quite--"

"Are you withdrawing the compliment?"

"Re-enforcing it, maybe. Something is pretty when it pleases the eye--it is more than that when--"

"If it saddens?" she interrupted hastily.

"Exactly."

"It must be ugly."

"Always?"

Toward the west, the sunlight lay on the dimming waters in a broad, glinting streamer of crimsoned gold.

"No, of course you are right."

"Why did you say this is the last time?" he asked quietly as they turned back.

"I am going home."

The end of an impossible dream!

"When?" after a long silence.

"Tomorrow. I received a letter from Father and Mother yesterday. They want me to spend Holy Week at home."

She seemed to be waiting for him to speak. "That is why I said this is the last time."

"Can't I come to say good-bye?"

"Oh, you don't need to!"

"No, but I want to."

"There is no time."

The golden streamer was withdrawing, shortening, until it looked no more than a pool far away at the rim of the world. Stillness, a vibrant quiet that affects the senses as does solemn harmony; a peace that is not contentment but a cessation of tumult when all violence of feeling tones down to the wistful serenity of regret. She turned and looked into his face, in her dark eyes a ghost of sunset sadness.

"Home seems so far from here. This is almost like another life."

"I know. This is Elsewhere, and yet strange enough, I cannot get rid of the old things."

"Old things?"

"Oh, old things, mistakes, encumbrances, old baggage." He said it lightly, unwilling to mar the hour. He walked close, his hand sometimes touching hers for one whirling second.

Don Julian's nasal summons came to them on the wind.

Alfredo gripped the soft hand so near his own. At his touch, the girl turned her face away, but he heard her voice say very low, "Good-bye."

II

ALFREDO Salazar turned to the right where, farther on, the road broadened and entered the heart of the town--heart of Chinese stores sheltered under low-hung roofs, of indolent drug stores and tailor shops, of dingy shoe-repairing establishments, and a cluttered goldsmith's cubbyhole where a consumptive bent over a magnifying lens; heart of old brick-roofed houses with quaint hand-and-ball knockers on the door; heart of grass-grown plaza reposeful with trees, of ancient church and convento, now circled by swallows gliding in flight as smooth and soft as the

afternoon itself. Into the quickly deepening twilight, the voice of the biggest of the church bells kept ringing its insistent summons. Flocking came the devout with their long wax candles, young women in vivid apparel (for this was Holy Thursday and the Lord was still alive), older women in sober black skirts. Came too the young men in droves, elbowing each other under the talisay tree near the church door. The gaily decked rice-paper lanterns were again on display while from the windows of the older houses hung colored glass globes, heirlooms from a day when grasspith wicks floating in coconut oil were the chief lighting device.

Soon a double row of lights emerged from the church and uncoiled down the length of the street like a huge jewelled band studded with glittering clusters where the saints' platforms were. Above the measured music rose the untutored voices of the choir, steeped in incense and the acrid fumes of burning wax.

The sight of Esperanza and her mother sedately pacing behind Our Lady of Sorrows suddenly destroyed the illusion of continuity and broke up those lines of light into component individuals. Esperanza stiffened self-consciously, tried to look unaware, and could not.

The line moved on.

Suddenly, Alfredo's slow blood began to beat violently, irregularly. A girl was coming down the line--a girl that was striking, and vividly alive, the woman that could cause violent commotion in his heart, yet had no place in the completed ordering of his life.

Her glance of abstracted devotion fell on him and came to a brief stop.

The line kept moving on, wending its circuitous route away from the church and then back again, where, according to the old proverb, all processions end.

At last Our Lady of Sorrows entered the church, and with her the priest and the choir, whose voices now echoed from the arched ceiling. The bells rang the close of the procession.

A round orange moon, "huge as a winnowing basket," rose lazily into a clear sky, whitening the iron roofs and dimming the lanterns at the windows. Along the still densely shadowed streets the young women with their rear guard of males loitered and, maybe, took the longest way home.

Toward the end of the row of Chinese stores, he caught up with Julia Salas. The crowd had dispersed into the side streets, leaving Calle Real to those who

lived farther out. It was past eight, and Esperanza would be expecting him in a little while: yet the thought did not hurry him as he said "Good evening" and fell into step with the girl.

"I had been thinking all this time that you had gone," he said in a voice that was both excited and troubled.

"No, my sister asked me to stay until they are ready to go."

"Oh, is the Judge going?"

"Yes."

The provincial docket had been cleared, and Judge del Valle had been assigned elsewhere. As lawyer--and as lover--Alfredo had found that out long before.

"Mr. Salazar," she broke into his silence, "I wish to congratulate you."

Her tone told him that she had learned, at last. That was inevitable.

"For what?"

"For your approaching wedding."

Some explanation was due her, surely. Yet what could he say that would not offend?

"I should have offered congratulations long before, but you know mere visitors are slow about getting the news," she continued.

He listened not so much to what she said as to the nuances in her voice. He heard nothing to enlighten him, except that she had reverted to the formal tones of early acquaintance. No revelation there; simply the old voice--cool, almost detached from personality, flexible and vibrant, suggesting potentialities of song.

"Are weddings interesting to you?" he finally brought out quietly

"When they are of friends, yes."

"Would you come if I asked you?"

"When is it going to be?"

"May," he replied briefly, after a long pause.

"May is the month of happiness they say," she said, with what seemed to him a shade of irony.

"They say," slowly, indifferently. "Would you come?"

"Why not?"

"No reason. I am just asking. Then you will?"

"If you will ask me," she said with disdain.

"Then I ask you."

"Then I will be there."

The gravel road lay before them; at the road's end the lighted windows of the house on the hill. There swept over the spirit of Alfredo Salazar a longing so keen that it was pain, a wish that, that house were his, that all the bewilderments of the present were not, and that this woman by his side were his long wedded wife, returning with him to the peace of home.

"Julita," he said in his slow, thoughtful manner, "did you ever have to choose between something you wanted to do and something you had to do?"

"No!"

"I thought maybe you had had that experience; then you could understand a man who was in such a situation."

"You are fortunate," he pursued when she did not answer.

"Is--is this man sure of what he should do?"

"I don't know, Julita. Perhaps not. But there is a point where a thing escapes us and rushes downward of its own weight, dragging us along. Then it is foolish to ask whether one will or will not, because it no longer depends on him."

"But then why--why--" her muffled voice came. "Oh, what do I know? That is his problem after all."

"Doesn't it--interest you?"

"Why must it? I--I have to say good-bye, Mr. Salazar; we are at the house."

Without lifting her eyes she quickly turned and walked away.

Had the final word been said? He wondered. It had. Yet a feeble flutter of hope trembled in his mind though set against that hope were three years of engagement, a very near wedding, perfect understanding between the parents, his own conscience, and Esperanza herself--Esperanza

waiting, Esperanza no longer young, Esperanza the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive.

He looked attentively at her where she sat on the sofa, appraisingly, and with a kind of aversion which he tried to control.

She was one of those fortunate women who have the gift of uniformly acceptable appearance. She never surprised one with unexpected homeliness nor with startling reserves of beauty. At home, in church, on the street, she was always herself, a woman past first bloom, light and clear of complexion, spare of arms and of breast, with a slight convexity to thin throat; a woman dressed with self-conscious care, even elegance; a woman distinctly not average.

She was pursuing an indignant relation about something or other, something about Calixta, their note-carrier, Alfredo perceived, so he merely half-listened, understanding imperfectly. At a pause he drawled out to fill in the gap: "Well, what of it?" The remark sounded ruder than he had intended.

"She is not married to him," Esperanza insisted in her thin, nervously pitched voice. "Besides, she should have thought of us. Nanay practically brought her up. We never thought she would turn out bad."

What had Calixta done? Homely, middle-aged Calixta?

"You are very positive about her badness," he commented dryly. Esperanza was always positive.

"But do you approve?"

"Of what?"

"What she did."

"No," indifferently.

"Well?"

He was suddenly impelled by a desire to disturb the unvexed orthodoxy of her mind. "All I say is that it is not necessarily wicked."

"Why shouldn't it be? You talked like an--immoral man. I did not know that your ideas were like that."

"My ideas?" he retorted, goaded by a deep, accumulated exasperation. "The only test I wish to apply to conduct is the test of fairness. Am I injuring anybody? No? Then I am justified in my conscience. I am right. Living with a man to whom she is not

married--is that it? It may be wrong, and again it may not."

"She has injured us. She was ungrateful." Her voice was tight with resentment.

"The trouble with you, Esperanza, is that you are--" he stopped, appalled by the passion in his voice.

"Why do you get angry? I do not understand you at all! I think I know why you have been indifferent to me lately. I am not blind, or deaf; I see and hear what perhaps some are trying to keep from me." The blood surged into his very eyes and his hearing sharpened to points of acute pain. What would she say next?

"Why don't you speak out frankly before it is too late? You need not think of me and of what people will say." Her voice trembled.

Alfredo was suffering as he could not remember ever having suffered before. What people will say--what will they not say? What don't they say when long engagements are broken almost on the eve of the wedding?

"Yes," he said hesitatingly, diffidently, as if merely thinking aloud, "one tries to be fair--according to his lights--but it is hard. One would like to be fair to one's self first. But that is too easy, one does not dare--"

"What do you mean?" she asked with repressed violence. "Whatever my shortcomings, and no doubt they are many in your eyes, I have never gone out of my way, of my place, to find a man."

Did she mean by this irrelevant remark that he it was who had sought her; or was that a covert attack on Julia Salas?

"Esperanza--" a desperate plea lay in his stumbling words. "If you--suppose I--" Yet how could a mere man word such a plea?

"If you mean you want to take back your word, if you are tired of--why don't you tell me you are tired of me?" she burst out in a storm of weeping that left him completely shamed and unnerved.

The last word had been said.

III

AS Alfredo Salazar leaned against the boat rail to watch the evening settling over the lake, he wondered if Esperanza would attribute any significance to this trip of his. He was supposed to be in

Sta. Cruz whither the case of the People of the Philippine Islands vs. Belina et al had kept him, and there he would have been if Brigida Samuy had not been so important to the defense. He had to find that elusive old woman. That the search was leading him to that particular lake town which was Julia Salas' home should not disturb him unduly. Yet he was disturbed to a degree utterly out of proportion to the prosaicness of his errand. That inner tumult was no surprise to him; in the last eight years he had become used to such occasional storms. He had long realized that he could not forget Julia Salas. Still, he had tried to be content and not to remember too much. The climber of mountains who has known the back-break, the lonesomeness, and the chill, finds a certain restfulness in level paths made easy to his feet. He looks up sometimes from the valley where settles the dusk of evening, but he knows he must not heed the radiant beckoning. Maybe, in time, he would cease even to look up.

He was not unhappy in his marriage. He felt no rebellion: only the calm of capitulation to what he recognized as irresistible forces of circumstance and of character. His life had simply ordered itself; no more struggles, no more stirring up of emotions that got a man nowhere. From his capacity of complete detachment he derived a strange solace. The essential himself, the himself that had its being in the core of his thought, would, he reflected, always be free and alone. When claims encroached too insistently, as sometimes they did, he retreated into the inner fastness, and from that vantage he saw things and people around him as remote and alien, as incidents that did not matter. At such times did Esperanza feel baffled and helpless; he was gentle, even tender, but immeasurably far away, beyond her reach.

Lights were springing into life on the shore. That was the town, a little up-tilted town nestling in the dark greenness of the groves. A snubcrested belfry stood beside the ancient church. On the outskirts the evening smudges glowed red through the sinuous mists of smoke that rose and lost themselves in the purple shadows of the hills. There was a young moon which grew slowly luminous as the coral tints in the sky yielded to the darker blues of evening.

The vessel approached the landing quietly, trailing a wake of long golden ripples on the dark water. Peculiar hill inflections came to his ears from the crowd assembled to meet the boat--slow, singing cadences, characteristic of the Laguna lake-shore speech. From where he stood he could not distinguish faces, so he had no way of knowing whether the presidente was there to meet him or not. Just then a voice shouted.

"Is the abogado there? Abogado!"

"What abogado?" someone irately asked.

That must be the presidente, he thought, and went down to the landing.

It was a policeman, a tall pock-marked individual. The presidente had left with Brigida Samuy--Tandang "Binday"--that noon for Santa Cruz. Señor Salazar's second letter had arrived late, but the wife had read it and said, "Go and meet the abogado and invite him to our house."

Alfredo Salazar courteously declined the invitation. He would sleep on board since the boat would leave at four the next morning anyway. So the presidente had received his first letter? Alfredo did not know because that official had not sent an answer. "Yes," the policeman replied, "but he could not write because we heard that Tandang Binday was in San Antonio so we went there to find her."

San Antonio was up in the hills! Good man, the presidente! He, Alfredo, must do something for him. It was not every day that one met with such willingness to help.

Eight o'clock, lugubriously tolled from the bell tower, found the boat settled into a somnolent quiet. A cot had been brought out and spread for him, but it was too bare to be inviting at that hour. It was too early to sleep: he would walk around the town. His heart beat faster as he picked his way to shore over the rafts made fast to sundry piles driven into the water.

How peaceful the town was! Here and there a little tienda was still open, its dim light issuing forlornly through the single window which served as counter. An occasional couple sauntered by, the women's chinelas making scraping sounds. From a distance came the shrill voices of children playing games on the street--tubigan perhaps, or "hawk-and-chicken." The thought of Julia Salas in that quiet place filled him with a pitying sadness.

How would life seem now if he had married Julia Salas? Had he meant anything to her? That unforgettable red-and-gold afternoon in early April haunted him with a sense of incompleteness as restless as other unladen ghosts. She had not married--why? Faithfulness, he reflected, was not a conscious effort at regretful memory. It was something unvolitional, maybe a recurrent awareness of irreplaceability. Irrelevant trifles--a cool wind on his forehead, far-away sounds as of voices in a dream--at times moved him to an oddly irresistible impulse to listen as to an insistent, unfinished prayer.

A few inquiries led him to a certain little tree-ceilinged street where the young moon wove indistinct filigrees of light and shadow. In the gardens the cotton tree threw its angular shadow athwart the low stone wall; and in the cool, stilly midnight the cock's first call rose in tall, soaring jets of sound. Calle Luz.

Somehow or other, he had known that he would find her house because she would surely be sitting at the window. Where else, before bedtime on a moonlit night? The house was low and the light in the sala behind her threw her head into unmistakable relief. He sensed rather than saw her start of vivid surprise.

"Good evening," he said, raising his hat.

"Good evening. Oh! Are you in town?"

"On some little business," he answered with a feeling of painful constraint.

"Won't you come up?"

He considered. His vague plans had not included this. But Julia Salas had left the window, calling to her mother as she did so. After a while, someone came downstairs with a lighted candle to open the door. At last--he was shaking her hand.

She had not changed much--a little less slender, not so eagerly alive, yet something had gone. He missed it, sitting opposite her, looking thoughtfully into her fine dark eyes. She asked him about the home town, about this and that, in a sober, somewhat meditative tone. He conversed with increasing ease, though with a growing wonder that he should be there at all. He could not take his eyes from her face. What had she lost? Or was the loss his? He felt an impersonal curiosity creeping into his gaze. The girl must have noticed, for her cheek darkened in a blush.

Gently--was it experimentally?--he pressed her hand at parting; but his own felt undisturbed and emotionless. Did she still care? The answer to the question hardly interested him.

The young moon had set, and from the uninviting cot he could see one half of a star-studded sky.

So that was all over.

Why had he obstinately clung to that dream?

So all these years--since when?--he had been seeing the light of dead stars, long extinguished, yet seemingly still in their appointed places in the heavens.

An immense sadness as of loss invaded his spirit, a vast homesickness for some immutable refuge of the heart far away where faded gardens bloom again, and where live on in unchanging freshness, the dear, dead loves of vanished youth.

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