

XVI PREMIO DE TRADUCCIÓN

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Voices of the Old Sea

When I went to live in Farol the grandmother who owned the house gave me a cat. ‘Don’t feed it,’ she said. ‘Don’t take any notice of it. It can sleep in the shed and it’ll keep the rats away.’ Farol was full of cats, for which reason it was often called Pueblo de los Gatos – ‘cat village’. There were several hundred of them living in whatever accommodation they could find in the village, and in caves in the hill behind it. They were an ugly breed, skinny with long legs and small, pointed heads. You saw little of them in the day-time, but after dark they were everywhere. The story was that Don Alberto, the local landowner who was also a bit of an historian, claimed that they had always been there and produced a fanciful theory, based on some reference made to them by an early traveller, that they had some connection with the sacred cats of Ancient Egypt. Mentioning this, the fishermen of Farol would screw their fingers into their temples and roll their eyes in derision as if to say, what will he come up with next? Their story was that the cats had been imported in the old days to clean up the mess left when they degutted fish on the spot before packing them up to be sent away. No one in this part of the world would ever kill a domestic animal, so their numbers soon got out of control. In addition to scavenging round the boats, they hunted lizards, frogs, anything that they deemed edible, including fat-bodied moths attracted to the oleanders on summer evenings, which they snatched out of the air with their paws. Whenever the cat became too old or sick to have about the place it would be put in a bag and taken to the cork forest and there abandoned. The people who owned this part of the forest lived in the village of Sort, about five kilometres away. They had no cats but were overrun by dogs, and as they, too, were squeamish about taking life, they brought down unwanted animals, borrowed a boat, and left them to die of hunger and thirst on an island a hundred yards or so off-shore.

It soon became clear that the Grandmother was a person of exceptional power and influence in the village. All the domestic aspects of life – and largely the financial ones too – came under the control here of the women, ‘dominated’, to use the local word, by the Grandmother, just as the males were dominated by the five senior fishermen owning the major shares in the big boats. In each case the domination was subtle and indirect, a matter rather of leadership accorded to experience and vision.

The Grandmother had gathered a little respect in deference to her money but most of it was based on sheer spiritual qualities. She was large, dignified and slow-moving, dressed perpetually in black, with the face of a Borgia pope, a majestic nose and a defiant chin, sprouting an occasional

bristle. A muscular slackening of an eyelid had left one eye half-closed, so that she appeared at all times to be on the verge of a wink. Her voice was husky and confiding, although in a moment of impatience she was likely to burst into an authoritarian bellow. Everything she said carried instant conviction, and the villagers said that she was inclined to make God's mind up for him, because whenever people left a loophole of doubt about future intentions by adding the pious formula 'if God is willing', she would decide the matter there and then with a shout of '*Sí que quiere*' – of course he's willing.

As a matter of course the Grandmother meddled in family affairs of others. She provided instruction on the mechanics of family planning, investigated the household budgets of newly married couples to decide when they could hope (if ever) to afford a child, and put forward a suitable name as soon as it was born. All the names suggested for male children were taken from a book she possessed on the generals of antiquity, and the village was full of inoffensive little boys called Julio César, Carlos Magna (Charlemagne), Mambró (Marlborough) and Napoleón. And one luckless child was doomed to go through life bearing the name *Esprit de Cor* (*esprit de corps*) who, someone had assured the Grandmother, was the greatest commander of them all.

Above all the Grandmother was an expert on herbal remedies, and the villagers saved on the doctor's fees by prescriptions provided after a scrutiny of their faeces and urine. '*Mear claro y cagar duro*' (clear piss and hard shit), she claimed – quoting a saying attributed to Lope de Vega – were at the base of health and prosperity. She also offered a sporadic supply of the urine of a woman who had recently given birth, locally regarded as effective in the treatment of conjunctivitis and certain skin ailments – although in a village where the birth-rate must have been one of the lowest in the world, it was rare for a donor to be available.

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