

The Black Spot

1949

All the mothers on our block used to pass by No. 1 Hermosilla Street, one of the finest addresses in Madrid, and mutter a curse at the porter's boy who was leading their sons astray. "Let Nicolás go to hell," they'd say.

I was the leader of the neighborhood boys. No one disputed my right to be leader, because I was the worst kid. I wasn't as big as Carlitos, whose father was a contractor or master workman as they called them in those days, nor was I as well dressed as Tomasín whose father owned a clothing store on Serrano Street, nor was I from a bourgeois family like Luísito whose father taught philosophy at the University, nor from a rich and powerful family like Enrique, who lived upstairs. I was merely the least afraid or maybe the least willing to admit to fear. I had a bit of imagination and could see possibilities for fun in everything.

I was the one who stole the wine vessel and a pocketful of sacred hosts from the Church of the Santísimo Cristo del Salud and held High Mass in the vacant lot down the street, with bastard Latin and Mama's bathrobe for a vestment. Every one of my gang took communion, and we swore to be comrades forever. We were eight years old. After mass I took the vessel, which looked like a bottle for holding olive oil or vinegar, and sneaked it back into the sacristy before Father Bernardo noticed it was gone.

We called Father Bernardo Padre Borracho (Father Drunk). My fault. My Papa was only a porter, but he had connections, he was religious, and he and Padre Borracho were drinking buddies, so I got stuck as altar boy for a while. Then, one Sunday morning during Mass I poured just two little drops into the chalice for the old priest to transmute. "More, more, you little whoreson, more!" I looked up at him and smiled what I hoped was an angelic smile as half the congregation giggled. My little joke didn't liberate me from having to attend Mass every Sunday, but at least I didn't have to wear that lace dress any more or smell Padre Borracho's breath.

It was me who brought Chiqui into the gang. His father was a chauffeur. Chiqui had broken his hip when he was a baby, and the leg had never developed, so he wore a shoe with a four-inch cork sole to even out his legs and help him walk. The limp was pretty ugly, but he was a good guy, and I'd have punched anyone who laughed at him.

What we liked best was making and playing chapas. We'd search for bottle caps (chapas) on the floor of the taverns, ones that hadn't been misshapen when pulled off the bottle, then we'd peel out the cork lining and insert a little photograph of a bicyclist's face we'd cut out of a magazine. We'd cover that with a piece of glass made round by rubbing the edges smooth on the wrought iron gas street lamps. A guy would have to be careful not to break the glass or get icy slivers in his fingers. We dribbled candle wax around the glass to hold it in the chapa. I was good at making chapas, and my pictures even had a ring of brass—a washer or something from Papa's workroom—framing the glass. Each of us had his special pieces. I had a sack full. Sometimes we traded them, but most often we'd show them and play a game. We'd line them up and flip them with thumb and forefinger along a twisty, hilly little road we'd made in the dirt at the vacant lot. If you flipped one off the road you lost your turn. The one who got all his chapas to the end first won. The game wasn't like marbles—none of us but Enrique could afford marbles anyway, though to be fair he always shared his stuff—because you didn't confiscate the other guys' chapas, you just won the honor of being the best.

We didn't fight much, but if someone from another block trespassed on our street and dared us, we'd fight. My Uncle Domingo had been the middle weight boxing champ of Salamanca before the war, and after he taught me how to box, I taught my gang. I was only a porter's son, but they all wanted to be like me, especially Enrique. The more their mothers wore out their rosaries praying for my downfall, the more my pals seemed to like me.

At home, I was the littlest kid, the one who came along nine months after the Civil War ended in 1939 with Franco's troops goose-stepping into Madrid and Papa returning home with exciting stories and a bag full of fascist medals and worn-out clothing. During the war, my family had lived in a poor neighborhood far from Hermosilla, and it had been heavily bombarded. All of them had big misgivings about the war and its outcome, but they were thankful that Papa had fought for the winners and come out alive.

Home again, Papa made me and he made merry, as merry as anyone could in a city cowering in the religious frenzy of the new government. But, Papa was a drinker and a lover, and his side had won. Now and then Mama would give him an evil eye and comment that all his "winning" the war got us was a basement apartment in a rich man's building far away from their old friends and a huge furnace to stoke day and night with

coal so that the wealthy families living above us would be warm and safe. Mama had stayed in Madrid throughout the war, under the bad influence of the loyalists. Whenever Papa got drunk and sang royalist songs, she'd laugh and trill *The Internationale* in that husky contralto of hers that I loved so much. They'd argue. I'd run for my big brothers, because Mama was so much cleverer than Papa that in order to shut her up he had to beat her. My brothers would have never hit Papa, but they'd hold him back and take him for a walk.

I saw clearly that Papa may have been the big guy with the belt but Mama was the boss. That's why I never let girls into my gang. Underneath the grand double staircase of No. 1 *Hermosilla* me and a neighborhood girl might examine our differences, or I might run up to the school girls passing by and lift up their skirts just to hear them scream and giggle, but I knew better than to invite any of them into the gang. That would have been giving up leadership without a fight.

I loved my friends, I loved being popular, I loved being the leader, I loved being my family's favorite, and the handsomest kid on the block (making forays under the double staircase a sure thing). Being poor meant nothing. I couldn't buy marbles, my shoes were lined with cardboard, my sweater was always torn no matter how much Mama repaired it and scolded, but there was food on the table and friends with chapas on the street. Life was heaven.

And heaven collapsed under me like an old ladder, when I was nine. One icy winter day a light bulb in the foyer of No. 1 *Hermosilla* burned out. "Señor Portero," one of the aristocratic ladies from upstairs called out to Papa as he swept, "there is a light out on the chandelier, it must be changed, thank you so very much." I can see those women even now. They always wore fur, even a little stole in summer, and ropes of real pearls, and doeskin gloves.

Papa got the wooden ladder from the back of the garage, waited until the lady's chauffeur had backed out her *Hispano-Suizo*, and then hauled the ladder into the foyer. Sure enough, the bulb on the right hand side of the crystal chandelier had blown out. Papa went downstairs to get a spare from his workroom. He had organized the workroom in a coal dusty, cavernous area set off from our basement flat by a thin wall always warm to the touch. Next to the big furnace he had a table and shelves with tools, light bulbs, other household supplies like brass rings and washers. He coughed, as he always did when he

entered there. He had been coughing a good deal that year. Winter had been extreme, and he had a cold, undoubtedly from going back and forth from furnace room to street, Mama said. The winter air of Madrid is famous for its stillness and deathly chill. “Won’t blow out a candle,” Madrileños say, “but it’ll kill a man.”

He returned to the foyer with the globe, propped the ladder beneath the chandelier and climbed up. He had done the task a hundred times before, but maybe that day he had had one too many glasses of rioja at lunch, or maybe the ladder was just getting old, like him, or maybe God was calling in the chapas on my blasphemy in the vacant lot. The ladder broke, crying out like the tree that had been felled to make it, and Papa hit the marble floor. He lay there a moment, the ladder in brittle pieces all over him, and then Mama came running out at the echoing sound of his fall. The neighborhood being so fine, there was no waiting for the ambulance that took him to the Municipal Hospital at the end of Atocha Street, the big hospital next to the morgue and the medical school. (It’s a museum of modern art nowadays.)

They X-rayed him all over. No broken bones, just bumps and bruises, no reason not to go back to work, but hold on, some quack must’ve said, what’s that? When one of the upstairs families sent their chauffeur to bring their guard dog porter back home, the chauffeur also brought back a little secret between Papa and the doctor that he’d overheard them discussing. The chauffeur told some maid he was courting, she told a housekeeper, the housekeeper told her employers, and they told all the other families in the building: their porter had a “tubercular focus” on the his lung, a black spot. The doctor had asked the porter to take more tests, and the porter had refused.

A few days later, the morning’s traditions were progressing normally: I finally gave in to Mama’s urgings and got out of bed, dressed, swallowed some day old bread dipped in milky coffee, and rushed out to join my friends so we could all walk to school and be late together. Usually Chiqui, Tomásín, Luísito, Carlitos, and even Enrique, who walked with us to our public school then continued on to his private school, were outside, waiting for their leader. Sometimes one or another might arrive later than me, but that was considered bad form, and he had to apologize and pay a penalty of ear pulling, friendly punching, and tickling.

That day no one waited outside. I stopped at the doorway, surprised. Was it Sunday? A woman walked down the street, her black shawl wrapped tightly around her,

her crocheted shopping bags over her arm. “Señora, excuse me, do you know where Chiqui is?” Chiqui’s mother stared at me for a moment, pulled her shawl over her mouth and mumbled, “In school, where he ought to be.”

They had all gone on without me.

Understand, my friends were only doing what their parents had ordered, on pain of a whipping. We were all bad boys, but even so, our families were the center of our existence. And tuberculosis—well, we lived in a country where there was no penicillin after the war because a blockade was on. Having TB was like having leprosy. It was a shameful, frightening, infectious disease that made its sufferers outcasts. We were afraid to be in the same room as a tubercular, afraid to touch them, afraid of their breath, their sweat. But I knew nothing about my father’s black spot, and when my friends, my cohorts in mischief and youth, street brothers who stuck up for one another, suddenly cut me out of the action like that it was unbelievable. Nor did my friends understand their parents’ reasons. One night they got their orders and that was that. They couldn’t face me at school. They ran away from me and that first day I fought several battles, all by myself. To top it all, my teachers, civilians who were Falangists or fanatic Catholic laymen, had often slapped the ruler across my palms and now could gloat over my humiliation and abandonment.

My parents couldn’t tell me what had happened either. I never mentioned the situation to them, because you didn’t discuss such things with your parents, you didn’t talk to your parents, you listened to them, you respected them, you never questioned them. Your papa was “Señor,” and you asked his permission to speak at the table. Your mama was a goddess, a Madonna, a saint, and you worshipped her, but you didn’t confide in her.

Even rich people were afraid of TB. It struck poor families sooner and worse, but it struck the rich too, and the families upstairs were afraid. No one said a word, not a word, until they asked Papa to leave and take us with him, but a twilight fell on our existence, and only my father knew what was happening. Being a strong Catholic and a believer in authority, he said nothing and waited.

Enrique finally told me. He met me under the staircase one day, where I was sitting alone fighting tears and rage. I told him to go away, but he broke down and cried, and I

let him stay. I suppose that had I known the truth about Enrique and the fate he had to suffer, I might have treated him just as the others treated me. It was a shitty world. We were dumb kids, we had to do what we were told, and we were ignorant.

By the time we were fourteen, the realities of our country would have broken up the gang, and I knew that even when I was nine. Enrique would go on to preparatory school for the university, Tomásín would go into his father's shop to learn the business, Carlitos would work with his father till he too could be a contractor. Chiqui and I would apprentice to some tradesman. That's how it was. But even so, until that time when the adult rules took over, we were free to play and like each other. Losing this little happiness so early seemed a great injustice.

After Enrique told me that my father was stricken and the families upstairs so afraid they might ask us to leave, I went to my biggest brother, a grown man of seventeen. I could trust him not to let anyone else know, and thereby not shame the family or my father. That was the worst for me, that I might cause my father shame. Luís took me to a tavern and we talked. He didn't know much, but he knew the business of the black spot was very bad. I listened. My life was being torn to pieces, and still I didn't understand.

"But does he have tuberculosis?" I kept my voice low so no one else but my brother could hear the awful word.

"We can't be sure and Papa won't take any more tests. We have to wait. If he gets worse, they'll kick us out fast. Then we have to take him somewhere, but no one will rent to us if they find out we're tuberculars —"

"What do you mean, are we all like that?"

"Not yet, Nicolás, but once one gets it—well, maybe not, if we stay well fed and fat."

Our family is tall and slender. Attractive people, elegant and straight-backed if I may brag. We had no fat on us. I sat there, nine years old, staring at my big brother across a scarred and wine smelly table, sawdust under my feet, a haze of sunlight through the doorway giving a momentary glow to the old dark tavern. I had to comprehend that not only had I lost my position and friends, but that I might also lose Papa, and as afraid of the old man as I was, I loved him.

After a few months, the rich people upstairs made their move. They liked my Papa, the war hero, they liked all of us, even me, the little Gypsy with the big eyes who was

always causing a scandal in the neighborhood and making them laugh. Now fear was ruining their pleasure in us. They gave my Papa a generous pension, sent him off to a sanitarium for three months, and bought the family a lifetime lease on a flat in a poor neighborhood where people worked hard and asked few questions. By that time, most of my friends had sneaked around to say goodbye and tell me they were sorry. They showed courage doing that, and I was proud of them, my “men,” my gang, they had the cojones to defy their parents and their fear of the disease to come and make peace.

Chiqui’s abandonment had hurt the most. He was the last to confront me, because he was so embarrassed by his betrayal. He’d limp by now and then, as I sat outside on the broad marble steps or played by myself in the vacant lot, and he would glance at me then stumble off. On the day we moved, he appeared across the street, then he crossed the street, shoved his bag of chapas into my hands without a word, and ran off. If you could call that clumsy shuffle a run.

I had to attend a different school, in a different neighborhood. I had to fight every rough guy that didn’t like my looks until I proved myself. I had to bully and push to get a place in the order of things, I had to talk girls into liking me, and most of all, I had to be careful not to say a word about my father. No one could know. Even worse than that, no one could be near Papa much. Not that he was the kind of guy who hugged you or anything womanish like that, but we couldn’t eat from the plate he ate from, he had to sleep by himself, and Mama even had to wash his clothes separately. After a while, he began to look like a man who walked with a ghost, his own.

A few days after we moved, Enrique came by. He’d taken a taxi, then asked till he found our house, a third floor flat in a rundown building with no heat and damp walls. We didn’t even have a balcony. Enrique had the porter bring me down. He must have given the old guy a big tip, and he looked absurd in that neighborhood with those fine clothes his parents always made him wear. We sat on the front steps, and he told me how the guys were doing.

“It’s just not the same without you,” he said. I admit that made me feel better. Then he gave me a Bible, leather bound. It’s funny to think about now, but Bibles were censored in those days, you couldn’t buy one, only a priest could get you one and that with the good parts like the story of David and Bathsheba cut out. Later when I was a

teenager, the nineteen-fifties' movie "David and Bathsheba" was banned in Spain by the priests who ran the Ministry of Culture. Adultery was worse than TB.

"It's good luck," Enrique said. "Try to read it, but don't worry if it doesn't make much sense."

I was moved that he'd give me his good luck. I wasn't crazy enough to actually try to read the damned thing, but I kept it. I still have it, in fact.

The lucky Bible didn't save my father, but it wouldn't have helped out Enrique any either. By the time Enrique was sixteen, no luck could change the fact that he had a "disease" worse than TB or the inflammatory stories in the Bible. He was condemned, damned to hell. He threw himself from the top of No. 1 Hermosilla, eight stories down onto the spears of the wrought iron patio grill. His family never spoke of it. His mother died a year later; his father refused to believe that his only son and heir was a pervert and a suicide, both mortal sins.

Me, I survived. The funny thing is, now that the years have passed and I've gotten more of the story out of my family, I realize my father probably had emphysema from the coal smoke of the big furnace, not TB. It doesn't matter. One or the other killed him, and who knew in those days what a black spot meant?