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From "O Meu Mundo"

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FROM O MEU MUNDO*

The House breathed through the cracks in the roof where the nests of brown rats had multiplied by the dozen and the rodents dawdled at night in the spaces between the slats. That breathing could be heard through the mutilated windows that the wind battered sadly from frame to frame, even through the iron of the beds and the mildew of the rotten wooden floor around the beds. The House was a kind of lung of mildew and salt and water, a lung with a sickly look, as if all humanity had been transferred inside its walls. And there was a breath that smelled of latent porosity. When it rained that breath would increase in all the rotting matter, in its apparent thickness. And all of that had the name of ruin.

The general feeling of such unexpected decrepitude made João-Maria move his eyes along the tiles of the roof. That look moved slowly from board to board, was wounded grit; then it flew over furniture and walls and ground and once more walls and ground, and their hollows; it hung down from the twisted beams, measured the space between the knots in the wood like the space between the wrinkles on his face; it dug in when it came upon the foundation and found the stone. When the stone was found the look wept from inside the salt of the earth. And when it finally discovered the worms and black ants it communicated deeply with the earth—and wanted to die.

He'd heard of the possibility of making death depend exclusively on the will to renounce life. For example, a man would look around him, say goodbye to everything that had once been his, and announce to his family: "I'm going to die." It would be enough to control the flow of waters, invert all pulmonary movement until bones and organs fell apart, and that was dying.

He'd withdrawn into a corner. He'd crossed his legs and, leaning his back against the wall, was letting his body slide down until he was sitting on the floor. He thought WHAT CAN DEATH BE LIKE? I don't know if it hurts or if it's simply darkness. I don't know if it will just be the untying of cords and the undoing of knots, or if there's the solitude of a great bird with its wings open and floating in the air. What aches in the teeth from worms and perhaps

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its obvious sobless weeping, that taking over of the wailing when death begins to be a silence that hurts and is afterwards prolonged in the gelatin voices and cursing of priests. I don't know, besides, how to cross through a night with only trees; I always needed Sara's hand, the hands of the little ones, the way I used to need and still need today my mother's hand in the dark. . . .

Sara's eyes went against the very idea of separation. They'd filled with the same despair, it was true, but they rejected panic. They were calm there in front of the mirror in which she was surprised at her husband's terror. João-Maria went off with all his despair in search of some cane liquor and he guzzled down the bottle to the dregs. And he got drunk. From then on he assumed the preoccupation of having that pint bottle with him, the neck of which came to be sticking out of his jacket pocket all the time. He developed a great loss of appetite, lost interest in his wife's body, stopped listening to his sons.

One day Sara came across him filling up the cows' manger with sheaves of corn as if he were preparing a bed. The woman fluttered around him for a while, intrigued with the metallic whistling that was coming out of the corners of his mouth, but she didn't dare ask him anything. Her husband had been grumpy to all sorts of interrogation of late. He pretended to be unaware of all matters and she no longer knew of any way to untie the knot of his tongue so he could put his heart in his hands. She was certain, furthermore, that her husband was not only going about in a state of permanent drunkenness, but that he'd lost his speech completely, trying to go mad. Maybe he'd even ceased to recognize people and to love her and their sons. Resigned, she took charge of the house. From that moment on she began bringing him a plate of pork rinds and a thick crust of yellow cornbread at his express request. At first he rejected the chowders, the baked beans, and the steaming broth—and he demanded fried yams and blood sausage. After a few days, declaring himself to be sick of everything, he recommended to his wife that she only bring him pork rinds and some sprigs of fennel to chew on along with some sips of cane liquor. Sometimes he would look at his meal in such a strange way that Sara had to accept the fact that he'd lost his memory of things. She experimented then at spoon-feeding him. Beard and grease would become mixed together on his face in the same way that the straws of a broom pick up oil or rust. His look ended up striking fear in the children to the point that they left off visiting him. They would spy on him from a distance, however, and their eyes would open wide with surprise, for their

father wasn't just changing in his habits, he was even changing in his looks. The little ones couldn't figure out the secrets that motivated the man's withdrawal into the darkness there, lying at the bottom of the manger, sleeping insatiably in the place for cattle and, always with monotonous avidity, draining the same bottle of liquor, filled repeatedly at Capão's store at the imprecise hour of dusk.

Sara decided, finally, to remove herself somewhat from her husband's behavior. She got all fussy inside in a sage domestic burst of energy. She began to get up earlier and earlier, long before the sun came up, possessed in the groin by a kind of early-morning wrath, and right then and there she went into a complete revolt: she emptied the wash basins in the trough for the pigs and chickens, she poked around in the nests for the eggs laid the night before, she busied herself cleaning and clearing paths and fills and dumped the stagnant water onto the dungheap. Then she would bounce to the fountain with a jug on her head and supply all the vessels in the kitchen. If some herdsman surprised her in the middle of the street and stood there following the trot of her mahogany clogs with his eyes, she would quicken her step, her head down, as if she feared rape from that look. She would quickly slip into the first doorway, hiding so that no one would ask her any questions about her husband's disappearance. His despair had also become closed up inside her body. It was a worm that was secretly sucking down to her bones and an overdue curvature began to make her lean over and curved her back. The inevitable little blue veins finally broke into sprays of vessels and ended up giving her skin the look of an old woman, trembling slightly. Every morning that creature would run about in a lively, infernal sweat, thinner and thinner, but ever more energetic. Her face was filling with hollows, shadows, and wrinkles, and her beautiful blue eyes disappeared behind a bony nose that was like a stick sharpened with a razor. Until a gray cough feverishly took over her mouth and never left it again.

The sons also began to slosh on forward, always in a hurry, sent out for thistle and yams for the animals and brushwood for the fire. Forbidden from going to Professor Calafate's school, clothes torn but immediately patched, they experienced the weight of a hoe, a scythe, and an adze. Sara had a real obsession with cleanliness and order, and she'd decided to turn that house of rats and vermin, smelling of mud and *bagacina*, upside down. She decided to begin by closing up the attics and redoing the ceiling, threadbare where some slats were rotted by rainfall. She even departed from her normal ways and

backed up her new matriarchal authority with the use of her broom handle on the back of the older boy, whose face already had a bristling of fuzz the color of rocks when they become covered with moss. José-Maria had turned reddish almost as suddenly as a phenomenon of transfiguration, while his blue eyes maintained their liquid incandescence of a strong liquid. They were already staring beyond people in a kind of sensual restlessness, capable of undressing the first passing female. As for Jorge-Maria, the younger one, he was only a child who was still quite bothered by snot. But the same blue eyes as his mother's and brother's also seemed to pass through walls and communicate strongly with the mysteries of stones.

Sara had begun to be worried because the young ones had entered the age of growth and were devouring inconceivable amounts of food at every chance. There was no more stew or salted fish left. Immediately thereafter, as if thrown into a funnel or a drain, all the products in the house were disappearing in the face of such voracity. She'd reduced her own food to the minimum so that nothing would be lacking for her husband and sons—and hunger filled her eyes with a feverish and pensive glow. When everything was used up she cooked kale and greens and began the killing of the hens. She was going to do the same with the pig when she remembered that the dog had died a month earlier. And she decided to dig him up. It was on a moonlit night, when everybody was asleep, that she dug in the garden and scraped the animal off. He smelled of rotten intestines and hairs poisoned and cooked by the earth, but, even so, he could be boiled for several hours and compensated with extraordinary doses of peppermint, garlic, paprika, and fennel—and the youngsters not only didn't find the taste strange but didn't even dare inquire as to what kind of animal it was and where she'd found it. In that way, for a week, she hung onto the illusion of the survival of the last animal, the pig, even though she knew that she would have to kill him too. When the time to do it arrived she faced the hog's reddish eyes with anguish and broke out into sobs of pity for the animal, for herself, and for everything that was left in that house without a man.

João-Maria could hear all the sounds from the house in the distance, but he let those drunken days run by, stretched out in the manger. Lying like that, upside down on the sheaves, it was as if he were laid out in profile in that diagonal space among plowshares, mahogany ox-bows, rakes, harnesses and ropes. The space between things was filled with cobwebs where fat, tin-colored spiders strolled about. When the rain came, the thick, dirty morning

rain of the Island, the dampness descended along invisible cords. Then the rats would dig holes in search of kernels of the now crumbled corn, would look for bread crumbs lost in the grass and squeaked as they attacked each other with their teeth. João-Maria would amuse himself by watching the way the rats gnawed at some tasteless shinbone. They would attack it with their velvety paws, then grapple with their teeth, and it was sad to see them chew at the hair because the rats' eyes were generally of a liquid blue, feverish for death. João-Maria felt a vague joy when the animals discovered a crumb of his yellow cornbread or the pulverized remains of a piece of pork rind. He was almost dazzled at being able to witness the diligence of the hairless rats, from the grandfather rats down to the small white ones with ash-gray eyes; he would hold his breath and, as motionless as someone dead, with eyes wide open, he discovered that the haste of the rodents was that of an afflicted and frail last moment of life. At first they would face him from quite far off, their snouts sticking out of the walls, and they would be frightened at his slightest movement. Little by little, however, an intimacy inspired in mutual acquaintance grew up between him and the animals until out of that approach all that was left was the fear of fears. He knew not that they had fixed hours for appearing and that hunger was repeated like clocks in belfries or the cries of the shearwaters at night. The fire of the liquor burned his throat, scraped all the walls of his mouth, and exploded like poison in his stomach, wrapped in saliva. Once more, with the appearance of the rats, he would hear their steps in the silence and would repeat the muffled shout of death to himself inside.

"I've got to die very soon," he thought, "so these rats and the worms can devour me." The mother rat might begin by gnawing at his clothes, opening a passage to his body, and she would most certainly dive into his thighs in search of the spongy food of his testicles; she would walk over his eyelids and suck out his eyes, the way needlefish do to corpses lost in ocean plants. He was a bit horrified by the idea of his own body being sucked up: the horror of a scalpel opening his flesh or even the heat of the earth in the bite of worms. But it was as sure as the Bible that creatures, all creatures, depended on each other and nothing could apparently change that balance.

His hair stood on end from the shock of such imaginings. It was sticking out to the four corners of his head, with grease, pieces of leaves, and awns all mixed together. His beard, too, because it was so thick, had the gleam of fat and sandpaper. When the rats withdrew to their lairs, he would remain with his ear cocked for the steps of Sara and his sons, and then an old, misty

tenderness seemed to emerge and announce his love for them. A sluggish love, he had to admit, a slow love, never urgent, for he'd decided on his eternal separation. From time to time, in order to keep it alive, Sara would visit him in the manger and, in silence, offer him her punished body. Finally, when he found out from her that his sons were working from sunup to sundown and been left without a childhood, João-Maria made the decision to deny himself the desire to touch and possess his wife's skinny body, and he stopped speaking to her. None the less, the unsophisticated heat of her vagina lingered with him, her huge, superior grandeur of a woman with a narrow nose and a mouth as round as an apple, always avid for one more death in love after love, her white legs that grew quite thick toward her buttocks. He hungered to squeeze her tightly and fill his hand with the dampness and smell of that half-open flower and just one more time, very deeply, sink his penis into her soft and urgent belly. His courage would begin to hesitate and his blood would throb under his fingernails, and once more his penis would come out of its animal repose and stand up toward his navel, very tall. Something was breaking up behind that force and João-Maria would let himself go in sobs of rage. He was annoyed with the rats and the spiders and he took the phallus in both hands to masturbate. It was raining and he hungered all the more to roll about on Sara's thin body. It was a rain of soot, however, which was breaking apart and thickening into scabs of water.

WHAT CAN DEATH BE LIKE? He was thinking it could be like the darkness of his eyelids, the pain and darkness of his dead eyelids when, rising up a little in the manger, he saw, without any surprise, that his body was changing into a gigantic, yellow, citron-colored rat. His hands and feet were cased in velvet, his face was snout-shaped and a little worried, and his stomach was as smooth and trim as the keel of a ship out of water. Even his nails, longer and hard down to the limits of their thickness, made his hands longer, giving them the terrible look of claws almost. All he needed was to grow a tail, no matter how small, in order to be able then to consider himself a perfect rat.