

The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow

and almost as beautiful, and he wore a plaid jacket and a baseball hat. Unlike his wife, he was tall and athletic and had the iron jaw of a timid thug. But what best revealed the status of them both was the silver automobile whose interior exhaled a breath of living animal; nothing like it had ever been seen along that impoverished border. The rear seat overflowed with suitcases that were too new and many gift boxes that were still unopened. It also held the tenor saxophone that had been the overriding passion of Nena Daconte's life before she succumbed to the disquieting love of her tender beach hoodlum.

When the guard returned the stamped passports, Billy Sánchez asked him where they could find a pharmacy to treat his wife's finger, and the guard shouted into the wind that they should ask in Hundaye, on the French side. But the guards at Hundaye were inside a warm, well-lit glass sentry box, sitting at a table in their shirtsleeves and playing cards while they ate bread dipped in large glasses of wine, and all they had to see was the size and make of the car to wave them on into France. Billy Sánchez leaned on the horn several times, but the guards did not understand that he was calling them, and one of them opened the window and shouted with more fury than the wind.

"Merdel! Allez-vous-en!"

Then Nena Daconte, wrapped in her coat up to her ears, got out of the car and asked the guard in perfect French where there was a pharmacy. As was his habit, the guard, his mouth full of bread, answered that it was no affair of his, least of all in a storm like this, and closed the window. But then he looked with more attention at the girl wrapped in the glimmer of natural milk

AT NIGHTFALL, when they reached the frontier, Nena Daconte realized that her finger with the wedding band on it was still bleeding. The Civil Guardsman, a rough wool blanket covering his patent-leather tricorne hat, examined their passports in the light of a carbide lantern as he struggled to keep his footing in the fierce wind blowing out of the Pyrenees. Although the two diplomatic passports were in perfect order, the guard raised the lantern to make certain that the photographs resembled their faces. Nena Daconte was almost a child, with the eyes of a happy bird, and molasses skin still radiant with the bright Caribbean sun in the mournful January gloom, and she was wrapped up to her chin in a mink coat that could not have been bought with the year's wages of the entire frontier garrison. Her husband, Billy Sánchez de Ávila, who drove the car, was a Year Younger

front of her. He wore nothing but a pair of fake leopard-skin string briefs, and he had the peaceful, elastic body and golden color of those who live by the ocean. Around his right wrist he wore the metal bracelet of a Roman gladiator, and around his right fist he had coiled an iron chain that he used as a lethal weapon, and around his neck hung a medal with no saint, which throbbed in silence to the pounding of his heart. They had attended the same elementary school and broken many pinatas at the same birthday parties, for they both came from the provincial families that had ruled the city's destiny at will since colonial days, but they had not seen each other for so many years that at first they did not recognize one another. Nena Daconte remained standing, motionless, doing nothing to hide her intense nakedness. Then Billy Sánchez carried out his puerile ritual: He lowered his leopard-skin briefs and showed her his respectable erected manhood. She looked straight at it, with no sign of surprise.

"I've seen them bigger and harder," she said, controlling her terror. "So think again about what you're doing, because with me you'll have to perform better than a black man."

In reality not only was Nena Daconte a virgin, but until that moment she had never seen a naked man, yet her challenge was effective. All that Billy Sánchez could think to do was to smash the fist rolled in chain against the wall and break his hand. She drove him to the hospital in her car and helped him endure his convalescence, and in the end they learned together how to make love the correct way. They spent the difficult June afternoons

on the interior terrace of the house where six generations of Nena Daconte's illustrious ancestors had died; she played popular songs on the saxophone, and he, with his hand in a cast, contemplated her from the hammock in unrelieved stupefaction. The house had countless floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the feid stillwater of the bay, and it was one of the largest and oldest in the district of La Manga, and beyond any doubt the ugliest. But the terrace with the checkered tiles where Nena Daconte played the saxophone was an oasis in the four-o'clock heat, and it opened onto a courtyard with generous shade and mango trees and banana plants, under which there was a grave and a nameless tombstone older than the house and the family's memory. Even those who knew nothing about music thought the saxophone was an anachronism in so noble a house. "It sounds like a ship," Nena Daconte's grandmother had said when she heard it for the first time. Nena Daconte's mother had tried in vain to have her play it another way and not, for the sake of comfort, with her skirt up around her thighs and her knees apart, and with a sensuality that did not seem essential to the music. "I don't care what instrument you play," she would say, "as long as you play it with your legs together."

But those ship's farewell songs and that feasting on love were what allowed Nena Daconte to break the bitter shell around Billy Sánchez. Beneath his sad reputation as an ignorant brute, which he had upheld with great success because of the confluence of two illustrious family names, she discovered a frightened, tender orphan. While the bones in his hand were knitting, she and Billy Sánchez

"I did it on purpose," she said, "so you'd notice my ring."

In fact, the entire diplomatic mission marveled at the splendor of the ring, which must have cost a fortune, not so much because of the quality of the diamonds as for its well-preserved antiquity. But no one noticed that her finger had begun to bleed. They all turned their attention to the new car. The ambassador's amusing idea had been to bring it to the airport and have it wrapped in cellophane and tied with an enormous gold ribbon. Billy Sánchez did not even notice his ingenuity. He was so eager to see the car that he tore away the wrapping all at once and stood there breathless. It was that year's Bentley convertible, with genuine leather upholstery. The sky looked like a blanket of ashes, a cutting, icy wind blew out of the Guadarrama, and it was not a good time to be outside, but Billy Sánchez still had no notion of the cold. He kept the diplomatic mission in the outdoor parking lot, unaware that they were freezing for the sake of courtesy, until he finished looking over the smallest details of the car. Then the ambassador sat beside him to direct him to the official residence, where a luncheon had been prepared. En route he pointed out the most famous sights in the city, but Billy Sánchez seemed attentive only to the magic of the car.

It was the first time he had traveled outside his country. He had gone through all the private and public schools, repeating courses over and over again, until he was left adrift in a limbo of indifference. The initial sight of a city other than his own, the blocks of ashen houses with their lights on in the middle of the day, the bare trees, the

distant ocean, everything increased a feeling of desolation that he struggled to keep in a corner of his heart. But soon he fell, without being aware of it, into the first trap of forgetting. A sudden, silent storm, the earliest of the season, had broken overhead, and when they left the ambassador's residence after lunch to begin their drive to France, they found the city covered with radiant snow. Then Billy Sánchez forgot the car, and with everyone watching he shouted with joy, threw fistfuls of snow over his head, and wearing his new coat, rolled on the ground in the middle of the street.

Nena Daconte did not realize that her finger was bleeding until they left Madrid on an afternoon that had turned transparent after the storm. It surprised her, because when she had accompanied the ambassador's wife, who liked to sing Italian arias after official luncheons, on the saxophone, her ring finger had hardly bothered her. Later, while she was telling her husband the shortest routes to the border, she sucked her finger in an unconscious way each time it bled, and only when they reached the Pyrenees did she think of looking for a pharmacy. Then she succumbed to the overdue dreams of the past few days, and when she awoke with a start to the nightmarish impression that the car was going through water, it was a long while before she remembered the handkerchief wrapped around her finger. She saw on the illuminated clock on the dashboard that it was after three, made her mental calculations, and only then realized that they had passed Bordeaux, as well as Angoulême and Poitiers, and were driving along the flooded dike of the Loire. Moonlight filtered through the mist, and the silhouettes of