

LAS LÁGRIMAS DE SHIVA

(The Tears of Shiva)

by César Mallorquí

© of the translationa Lawrence Schimel

The translation of this sample
has received a grant from Acción Cultural Española

AC/E

Acción Cultural
Española

KOCH'S BACILLUS

Once, a long time ago, I saw a ghost.

Yes, a specter, an apparition, a spirit: you can call it what you will, the fact is that I saw it. It happened the same year that mankind landed on the moon and, although there were moments when I was very afraid, this story isn't what is usually called a horror story.

It all started with an enigma: the mystery of a very valuable object that was lost for seven decades. The Tears of Shiva, that's what this missing object was called. Around it there were crossed vengeance, and forbidden loves, and strange disappearances. There was a ghost, yes, and an old secret hidden in the shadows, but there was also much more.

Sometimes, without knowing quite how or why, things happen that change us inside and make us see the world another way. Often, these are trivial incidents, events that, when they happen, we barely give them much heed, but which over time wind up taking on unexpected transcendence. That was what happened when my father fell sick.

A microscopic entity, the bacillus discovered by a German named Robert Koch, set off a chain of events that would wind up leading to that summer of 1969. And that summer was very special: my father grew sick, I left home, men reached the moon, I saw a ghost, and I deciphered an ancient mystery. Yes, many things happened that year, but the most important of all was meeting them: the four flowers. That's how her mother named them: Rosa, Margarita, Violeta, and Azucena. My cousins. They showed me a secret and intimate world, a reality that was close by and everyday, but which until then had been completely alien to me.

All this happened a long time ago, of course. Back then there were no personal computers, nor video games, nor satellite television. To tell the truth, there wasn't even color TV. It was a black and white time, a time of changes, at least beyond our borders. In other countries, students took to the streets demanding a better world, the hippies adorned their long hair with flowers, women demanded the same rights as men, the young mobilized against the Vietnam war, girls wore miniskirts and bikinis, boys imitated Paul, John, George and Ringo.

That happened in France, in England, in Holland, or in the United States, but in Spain things were different. There was a dictatorship; old general Franco still controlled with an iron fist everything that happened in the country, dictating—he was a dictator—what we could or couldn't do, see, or say. As the world overflowed with creativity and new ideas, Spain slept on in a long siesta that had already lasted thirty years and from which it seemed it would never awaken. Of course, back then, I wasn't very aware of all that. At home we never talked about politics—nobody in the country did, at least not aloud and without fear—and I think that I didn't realize how unfair things were until Margarita showed me the true meaning of the word *freedom*.

But it's not politics I want to talk about, but a ghost and mysterious disappearances, an empty tomb and old family quarrels, and a secret long hidden.

Papa fell ill at the beginning of the year, shortly after Christmas. He'd been feeling poorly for a while—coughing a lot and his chest hurt—but Papa was terrified of hospitals and I think that, if it weren't for Mama's insisting, he would never have gone to see a doctor. In any event, he wound up going, and the doctor, after performing various tests, diagnosed him with tuberculosis. Fortunately, this illness had been caught in time and had an easy cure, although the treatment would be a long one.

At the end of January, Papa was admitted to a sanatorium located in the mountains, some 70 kilometers from Madrid. The pure air, it seemed, was highly recommended for his recovery, and that was the reason why he absented himself from home for five months. I missed him a lot during that period, since, in order to avoid contagion, neither my brother nor I could go and visit

him and, although we usually spoke with him on the phone, we were impatient for his return. However, when that finally took place, I wasn't there to greet him.

Mama visited him twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays. After leaving my brother Alberto and me at school, she got behind the wheel of her tiny 600 and set off for the Sierra, to return late in the afternoon after spending the entire day at the clinic.

One Thursday, halfway through June, Mama returned home a little earlier than usual and summoned my brother and me to the living room to tell us something very important: "Your father is much better. He will return home at the end of the month."

My brother and I happily welcomed this news, but my mother, instead of joining our enthusiasm, kept silent and circumspect. After a few seconds, she announced, "There is a slight problem. Your father is still not recovered fully, and there is still risk of contagion." She left a long pause, before continuing. "Therefore, we have decided that you shall pass the summer away from home. You, Alberto, will live with uncle Esteban. As for you, Javier, you'll go to the house of Aunt Adela."

I was left with my mouth gaping, moving from surprise to horror in mere seconds. Uncle Esteban was my father's brother and lived in Madrid along with his wife and three sons. But Aunt Adela...

"But Aunt Adela lives in Santander!" I protested.

Although Mama smiled at me, behind the kind expression on her face I could spy an unwavering determination. I was sure she knew that I would protest and I was just as sure that she wasn't going to budge an inch.

"Santander is a lovely city," she said, "and you can go to the beach all summer. Besides, my sister has four children..."

"Four daughters," I corrected her, placing much emphasis on their gender.

"Yes, four daughters. And one of them, I think it's Violeta, is exactly your age, so you'll have a little friend to play with."

I could have told her that I was already too old to play with anyone, and even less a girl; I could've told her that the idea of having a "little friend" made me sick to my stomach; I could have told her that I was sick of being the low man on the totem pole in our family... Yes, I could have told her all that, but I didn't, for I knew it would have been useless.

"Why can't I also go to Uncle Estebán's house?" I insisted. "That way I wouldn't have to leave Madrid and I could be with Alberto."

"There is only one bed free in Uncle Estebán's house," Mama explained patiently.

"Well, then why do I have to go? Why can't Alberto go to Santander and I stay in Madrid?"

Mama sighed.

"Because Alberto is too old to live in Aunt Adela's house."

Too old? Alberto would turn seventeen in June, and I was fifteen; that wasn't much difference in age.

"What does his being older have to do with anything? I don't understand."

"You will in two years."

"But..."

Mama shook her head and crossed her arms.

"Please don't insist, Javier. Your father and I have discussed this long and hard and we've made our decision. When you're through with classes, you'll go to my sister's house, and believe me, you'll spend the best summer of your life there. Now, go back to your rooms and keep studying I've still got a thousand things left to take care of."

I was about to protest, to tell her how unfair and arbitrary that decision seemed to me, but any attempt at rebellion was doomed to failure, because it's simply impossible to change her mind once Mama she gets an idea in her head. So I adopted my best expression of offended dignity and, together with Alberto, headed to our bedroom.

"How lucky you are, you bastard!" my brother spat, as soon as we'd entered our room. I looked at him with suspicion. Was he pulling my leg? One of Alberto's favorite pastimes was to make my life impossible; however, he seemed to be sincere right now, as if he truly envied me. "You're the one who's lucky," I replied. "You get to stay in Madrid, whereas I'm shipped off to the back of beyond."

Alberto shook his head from side to side, as if I were a lost cause and he a well of knowledge. "You're more babyish than a kilo of comics," he said with derision. "Why did Mama say that I'm too old to go live in Aunt Adela's house?"

"How do I know..."

"It's because it's a house full of chicks, doofus. The Obregón sisters, our cousins. We were in Santander five years ago, don't you remember them?"

I tried to remember, but could only summon a blurred image of braids, braces and patent leather shoes.

"They were just babies," I objected.

"Sure they were, five years ago. But now they've grown up, you dimwit, and they've got tits, asses and everything they're supposed to have. Besides, I've seen recent photos of them," he wiggled his eyebrows up and down, with an air of complicity. "The oldest girl is hot stuff, my man. And the next one is also a dish. She wears glasses, but take them off her, and she looks like a Swedish girl. Even the one who's your age is sexy. A bit plain, but pretty. And the little one... Well, she's still very young, but the others are fit to be eaten. That's why Mama doesn't want me to go there. It would be like setting a rooster in the hen house." He sighed. "And that's why you can, dork, since you're such a baby you wouldn't even know how to find your dick in a dark room..." he shrugged. "But maybe you'll catch sight of them in their underwear. And listen, if you see them naked, you better tell me all the details."

My brother lived in a permanent state of lust. He was a virgin, of course, and had as much experience with women as a bedouin does in cross country skiing. But he was obsessed, and four out of every three thoughts he had were devoted to sex.

"You're a pig," I told him

"A filthy one," he nodded, with a satisfied smile. "And you, a wet blanket. And of course, God gives a handkerchief to who doesn't need to sneeze. Go on, baby, go play with your toy soldiers."

Alberto gave me a look of disdain. Then, giving up on me, he turned toward his desk and, after shaking off the lascivious ghosts that lurked in the hallways of his brain, he returned to studying his math textbook.

I also tried to study, but I was distracted and couldn't concentrate. The news that I would spend the summer in Santander, which had so horrified me at first, no longer seemed so terrible to me. In the end, it wasn't like I wanted to go; I would have preferred to have remained in Madrid, of course, with my family and my friends. However, I started to feel curious about those northern relatives who I'd barely seen twice in my life and about whom I knew so little. In particular, there was something that, perhaps because of my brother's enthusiasm, intrigued me more and more. Who were these girl cousins of mine and what were they like?

Tests turned my stomach. I'm serious: they unsettled me so much I got diarrhea. Invariably, before starting a test, I had to go to the bathroom and, after them, I spent the rest of the day aching. Fortunately, the time of exams was behind us and we were entering that strange limbo of those days just before the end of the year. All of us, teachers and students both, wanted to

get out of there, nobody did anything, but some sadistic ministerial rule forced us to remain hand in hand, sunk in the tedium of those dark classrooms.

I took advantage of those dead hours to reflect. Not on anything specific; I thought of my father, of the summer, of Santander... and of the girls. Women were an enigma to me, a kind of riddle that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't manage to decipher. At that time, schools were not mixed. There were schools for boys and schools for girls, so it was rare for us to mix with people our own age but of the opposite sex. Until recently, I hadn't been the least bit interested in girls. They weren't interested in soccer, they didn't know how to skim rocks, they didn't pee standing up; so, to my way of seeing things, they were strange and boring creatures.

Nonetheless, little by little, things had started to change and girls began to interest me; at first, vaguely, then with surprising intensity. It even began to worry me, that with the years, I'd turn into a hyper-hormonal cretin like my brother, although deep down I harbored the hope that I would never sink so low.

The problem was that I didn't know how to behave around girls... No, that wasn't the real problem. If I want to be honest, I should acknowledge that girls frightened me. Every time I was in front of some girl my age I got cold sweats, my mouth felt dry, and I am sad to confess, I fell apart. It was like taking an exam

And now, suddenly, I was going to live in a house of women.

The curious thing is that the idea, although it still unsettled me a bit, also left me more and more excited. I'm not referring to excitement in the sense of my brother's erotic delirium; it was more a kind of expectation that we feel when contemplating the unknown, like when I started to read a science fiction novel and the promise of a universe of marvels opens before me.

Finally, the limbo dissolved into the void from which it had arisen and the end of school arrived. I passed everything and with good grades. Mama was so proud of me that she called Papa on the phone to tell him how clever his son was. I also spoke with him, and I listened to his congratulations down the line, and I felt such an urge to hug him and kiss him, maybe because he was far away and it had been so long since I had seen him; but it might also be because, ever since I felt older, I had stopped kissing him. It's strange: why do we men, as we grow older, feel more and more ashamed to show our feelings? Because we're idiots, I suppose.

That afternoon I stayed at home. Alberto, who had also passed everything, went to celebrate with his friends, but I felt... I don't know, strange, melancholic, and I didn't feel like going out. After lunch, I read for a while, until around five thirty, when I went into the living room. Mama was there, seated on her favorite bench, darning some of Alberto's socks. The blinds were closed, but the sun snuck through the cracks in the form of threads of light and drew a series of shining parallel lines upon the parquet. The radio on top of the sideboard was playing *Lola* by Los Brincos. I sat on the sofa and listened to the song for a while as I watched Mama sew.

"I've already bought your train ticket," she said suddenly, without taking her eyes off her needle and thread. "You'll leave for Santander next Friday."

"Okay," I answered.

I guess Mama was expecting some resistance from me, because she looked at me out of the corner of her eyes and asked, "Is anything the matter?"

"No, I'm fine." I left a long pause and added, "What's Aunt Adela like?"

"We were in her house a few years ago, don't you remember?"

I shook my head. "The only thing I remember is she was very pretty."

"And she still is." Mama arched an eyebrow. "When we were young girls, she got all the looks. It was exasperating; my older sister stole all my beaux."

"Did you not get along?"

"Not when we were younger; I guess I envied her. Later, we learned to respect one another and everything was better between us."

"But you don't see one another often."

"We write and talk on the phone often. What's happened is our lives have taken different paths. She married Luis, moved to Santander, and little by little we lost the habit of seeing one another."

"And uncle Luis, what's he like?"

Mama smiled wryly.

"Luis Obregón belongs to one of the oldest families of Santander. Now he's gotten a bit plump, but when he was younger he was a real heartthrob. He's very nice, although he's always been a bit mad and, with the years, he's become more and more eccentric. You'll like him, you'll see."

"What does he do?"

"He's an industrial engineer. A few years ago he invented something or other and now he lives from the income his patents produce."

Wow, so I had an uncle who was an inventor...

"And what are his daughters like?" I asked with calculated indifference.

Mama rested the sock she was darning on her lap. "This spring, Adela sent me a photo of the girls." She pointed to the bookcase. "It's in that green album. Bring it here, please."

I grabbed the album and handed it to Mama. She opened it and turned the pages until she found what she was looking for. "Here it is. Take a look at them."

I looked at the photograph my mother showed me: four girls in a garden, in front of a venerable, three-story mansion. All of them were blonde and—Alberto was right!—they were all stunningly pretty.

"This is Rosa, the eldest," Mama said, pointing at the picture. "She must be eighteen now."

Rosa was the tallest of the four, and although she wore a full dress that reached her ankles, one could tell she was thin and svelte. She had long hair, blue eyes, and a harmonious face. I thought I had never seen such a beautiful woman before.

"And this is Margarita," Mama pointed. "She's sixteen... No, she must have already turned seventeen now."

Margarita was a little shorter than Rosa. She wore corduroy pants and turtleneck sweater. Her hair was the same color as her older sister, but she wore it shorter, shoulder length. She wore round, metallic glasses, like John Lennon's.

"This is Violet," Mama continued, sliding her index finger a few centimeters to the right. "She's the same age as you. She was born in February of 54, I remember it well; two months before you."

Violeta had darker hair than her sisters and she wore it very short and tousled. She dressed like a boy—jeans and a tartan shirt—but her face was too pretty for there to be any confusion as to her gender. She was the only girl who wasn't smiling; her eyes, also blue, shone with disdain, as if she didn't like being photographed.

"And finally, Azucena, the youngest of the family. If I remember rightly, she has just turned twelve."

To a certain degree, Azucena was the prettiest of them all, but her beauty was still a promise to be confirmed, for she still had not developed fully. She wore a white blouse and a pleated skirt, with her hair pulled back in a pony tail. She had enormous eyes and smiled shyly at the camera. So these were my cousins... I stood looking at that group photo a few seconds, trying to imagine how their voices would sound, what each would smell like, how they would act. All of them looked very alike, but at the same time different from one another, as if they were different versions of a single theme. I pointed to the building behind them and asked, "Is that their house?"

"Yes, Villa Candelaria. We stayed there when we were in Santander. Don't you remember?"

I shrugged. "A little," I said. "It looks very old."

"It's ancient. It was built over a century and a half ago."

Mama closed the album and put it down on the table. Then she picked up Alberto's sock and started to darn it once more. A few seconds later, she mentioned, "Did you know, at the start of the century the Obregón family were very wealthy."

"And they aren't any more?"

"They were ruined during the war. It's not like they're poor; quite the opposite, Luis earns a very good living. But the Obregón surname no longer has the luster of those earlier years."

"What happened to them?"

Mama gave a final stitch to the sock and cut the thread with her teeth.

"Have you heard it said that all families have a skeleton in the closet?" she asked, as she tucked the darning egg into her sewing box. "Well, the Obregón's skeleton is called The Tears of Shiva."

"The Tears of Shiva..." I repeated. "What's that?"

Mama gave an enigmatic smile and looked at me slyly. "It's a very old and very mysterious story," she said. "But I am not going to tell it to you; when you're in Santander, ask them about it. And also ask them about Beatriz Obregón. But it would be best if you do so with great tact, for it's a matter that, even though it happened almost seventy years ago, still rankles."

The week before my departure was marked by that gentle and sensual boredom that, with the start of summer, began to invade everything little by little. I woke late, watched television (my favorite series were *The Avengers* and *Jim West*), read on the terrace, and hung out with my friends.

Back then, my two best friends were Tito and José Mari. We knew each other since kindergarten, had grown up together, and had become an inseparable trio. We usually went together to the cinema or the pool, we played billiards, or just took long rambling walks through the city, talking about everything and nothing. I don't know how much of me there is in them, but I am sure that their friendship contributed to a large degree to make me the kind of person I am today.

Thursday afternoon (the night before my journey to Santander), we went out for a walk. For an hour we wandered lazily through the streets, without doing anything in particular nor saying very much. For some reason (perhaps because of our imminent separation) we were taciturn and listless, and in the end we wound up sitting on a bench, arguing which was the best comic: *The Masked Man*, *Asterix*, or *Flash Gordon*. José Mari also proposed *Mortadelo y Filemón*, but I put an end to the debate by declaring that the best comic of all time was, without a doubt, *The Adventures of Tintin*. We all agreed that this was the One Truth and, after that, we fell into a prolonged silence.

After five long minutes, Tito had a startling idea: to have a bottle cap race. We hadn't played at bottle caps since we were kids but, suddenly, that seemed like the best possible plan. So, with a piece of plaster, we drew an intricate circuit on the asphalt and spent the next hour trying to make sure our Coca-Cola bottle caps were the first to cross the goal line.

Then something strange happened. It was as if, suddenly, we had returned to our childhood. Our dejection dissolved into an explosion of joy and we spent the rest of the afternoon doing those same things we used to do when we were eleven or twelve. We played leapfrog, hung from the scaffolding, were chased by angry doormen, held a football match with a can, and even practiced our throws in an empty lot, using rubble.

I think it was the last time I enjoyed life as a child, without any concerns and with a complete innocence. Later, when, after that summer, Tito, José Mari, and I came together again, things were very different. Both they as well as I had grown inside and our interests were increasingly distant from what we enjoyed when we were kids. There were other good moments, of course,

but none as radiant, so bursting with joyfulness, as that afternoon we spent together, playing at being young once more.

At ten that night, after saying goodbye to my friends (with that brusqueness we men use when we get sentimental and don't want anyone to notice) I came home. Mama had already packed my clothes, so I just had to stuff a few dozen books into a suitcase. I chose novels by Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Clifford D. Simak or Frederick Brown, and I thought those readings couldn't be more appropriate because, to a certain degree, that summer would be a summer of science fiction. In July of 1969, Man reached the moon.

I went to bed shortly after dinner. I was tired, but it took me a long while to fall asleep. I felt restless and noted a sort of hollow in my stomach. It was as if I'd been robbed of something and, at the same time, an extraordinary gift were waiting for me in some uncertain corner of my future.