

“The Decapitated Chicken” by Horacio Quiroga

All day long the four idiot sons of the couple Mazzini-Ferraz sat on a bench in the patio. Their tongues protruded from between their lips; their eyes were dull; their mouths hung open as they turned their heads.

The patio had an earthen floor and was closed to the west by a brick wall. The bench was five feet from the wall, parallel to it, and there they sat, motionless, their gaze fastened on the bricks. As the sun went down, disappearing behind the wall, the idiots rejoiced. The blinding light was always what first gained their attention; little by little by little their eyes lighted up; finally, they would laugh uproariously, each infected by the same uneasy hilarity, staring at the sun with bestial joy, as if it were something to eat.

Other times, lined up on the bench, they hummed for hours on end, imitating the sound of the trolley. Loud noises, too, shook them from their inertia, and at those times they ran around the patio, biting their tongues and mewling. But almost always they were sunk in the somber lethargy of idiocy, passing the entire day seated on their bench, their legs hanging motionless, dampening their pants with slobber.

The oldest was twelve and the youngest eight. Their dirty and slovenly appearance was testimony to the total lack of maternal care.

These four idiots, nevertheless, had once been the joy of their parents' lives. When they had been married three months, Mazzini and Berta had oriented the self-centered love of man and wife, wife and husband, toward a more vital future: a son. What greater happiness for two people in love than that blessed consecration of an affection liberated from the vile egotism of purposeless love and -what is worse for love itself- love without any possible hope of renewal?

So thought Mazzini and Berta, and, when after fourteen months of matrimony their son arrived, they felt happiness complete. The child prospered, beautiful, radiant, for a year and a half. But one night in his twentieth month he was racked by terrible convulsions, and the following morning he no longer recognized his parents. The doctor examined him with the kind of professional attention that obviously seeks to find the cause of the illness in the infirmities of the parents.

After a few days the child's paralyzed limbs recovered their movement, but the soul, the intelligence, even instinct, were gone forever. He lay on his mother's lap, an idiot, driveling, limp, to all purposes dead.

"Son, my dearest son!" the mother sobbed over the frightful ruin of her first-born.

The father, desolate, accompanied the doctor outside.

"I can say it to you; I think it is a hopeless case. He might improve, be educated to the degree his idiocy permits, but nothing more."

"Yes! Yes...!" Mazzini assented. "But tell me: do you think it is heredity, that...?"

"As far as the paternal heredity is concerned, I told you what I thought when I saw your son. As for the mother's, there's a lung there that doesn't sound too good. I don't see anything else, but her breathing is slightly ragged. Have her thoroughly examined."

With his soul tormented by remorse, Mazzini redoubled his love for his son, the idiot child who was paying for the excesses of his grandfather. At the same time he had to console, to ceaselessly sustain Berta, who was wounded to the depths of her being by the failure of her young motherhood.

As is only natural, the couple put all their love into the hopes for another son. A son was born, and his health and the clarity of his laughter rekindled their extinguished hopes. But at eighteen months the convulsions of the first-born were repeated, and on the following morning the second son awoke an idiot.

This time the parents fell into complete despair. So it was their blood, their love, that was cursed. Especially their love. He, twenty-eight; she, twenty-two; and all their passionate tenderness had not succeeded in creating one atom of normal life. They no longer asked for beauty and intelligence as for the first born -only a son, a son like any other!

From the second disaster burst forth new flames of aching love, a mad desire to redeem once and for all the sanctity of their tenderness. Twins were born; and step by step the history of the two older brothers was repeated.

Even so, beyond the immense bitterness, Mazzini and Berta maintained great compassion for their four sons. They must wrest from the limbo of deepest animality, not their souls, lost now, but instinct itself. The boys could not swallow, move about or even sit up. They learned, finally, to walk, but they bumped into things because they took no notice of obstacles. When they were washed, they mewed and gurgled until their faces were flushed. They were animated only by food or when they saw brilliant colors or heard thunder. Then they laughed, radiant with bestial frenzy, pushing out their tongues and spewing rivers of slaver. On the other hand, they possessed a certain imitative faculty, but nothing more.

The terrifying line of descent seemed to have been ended with the twins. But with the passage of three years Mazzini and Berta once again ardently desired another child, trusting that the long interim would have appeased their destiny.

Their hopes were not satisfied. And because of this burning desire and exasperation from its lack of fulfillment, the husband and wife grew bitter. Until this time each had taken his own share of responsibility for the misery their children had caused, but hopelessness for the redemption of the four animals born to them finally created that imperious necessity to blame others that is the specific patrimony of inferior hearts.

It began with a change of pronouns: your sons. And since they intended to trap, as well as insult each other, the atmosphere became charged.

"It seems to me," Mazzini, who had just come in and was washing his hands, said to Berta, "that you could keep the boys cleaner."

As if she hadn't heard him, Berta continued reading.

"It's the first time," she replied after a pause, "I've seen you concerned about the condition of your sons."

Mazzini turned his head toward her with a forced smile.

"Our sons, I think."

"All right, our sons. Is that the way you like it?" She raised her eyes.

This time Mazzini expressed himself clearly.

"Surely you're not going to say I'm to blame, are you?"

"Oh, no!" Berta smiled to herself, very pale. "But neither am I, I imagine! That's all I needed...", she murmured.

"What? What's all you needed?"

"Well, if anyone's to blame, it isn't me, just remember that! That's what I meant."

Her husband looked at her for a moment with a brutal desire to wound her.

"Let's drop it!" he said finally, drying his hands.

"As you wish, but if you mean..."

"Berta!"

"As you wish!"

This was the first clash, and other followed. But, in the inevitable reconciliations, their souls were united in redoubled rapture and eagerness for another child.

So a daughter was born. Mazzini and Berta lived for two years with anguish as their constant companion, always expecting another disaster. It did not occur, however, and the parents focused all their contentment on their daughter, who took advantage of their indulgence to become spoiled and very badly behaved.

Although even in the later years Berta had continued to care for the four boys, after Bertita's birth she virtually ignored the other children. The very thought of them horrified her, like the memory of something atrocious she had been forced to perform. The same thing happened to Mazzini, though to a lesser degree.

Nevertheless, their souls had not found peace. Their daughter's least indisposition now unleashed - because of the terror of losing her - the bitterness created by their unsound progeny. Bile had accumulated for so long that the distended viscera spilled venom at the slightest touch. From the moment of the first poisonous quarrel Mazzini and Berta had lost respect for one another, and if there is anything to which man feels himself drawn with cruel fulfillment it is, once begun, the complete humiliation of another person. Formerly they had been restrained by their mutual failure; now that success had come, each, attributing it to himself, felt more strongly the infamy of the four misbegotten sons the other had forced him to create.

With such emotions there was no longer any possibility of affection for the four boys. The servant dressed them, fed them, put them to bed, with gross brutality. She almost never bathed them. They spent most of the day facing the wall deprived of anything resembling a caress.

So Bertita celebrated her fourth birthday, and that night, as a result of the sweets her parents were incapable of denying her, the child had a slight chill and fever. And the fear of seeing her die or become an idiot opened once again the ever-present wound.

For three hours they did not speak to each other, and, as usual, Mazzini's swift pacing served as a motive.

"My God! Can't you walk more slowly? How many times...?"

"All right, I just forget. I'll stop. I don't do it on purpose."

She smiled, disdainful.

"No, no, of course I don't think that of you!"

"And I would never had believed that of you...you consumptive!"

"What! What did you say?"

"Nothing!"

"Oh, yes, I heard you say something! Look, I don't know what you said, but I swear I'd prefer anything to having a father like yours!"

Mazzini turned pale.

"At last!" he muttered between clenched teeth. "At last, viper, you've said what you've been wanting to!"

"Yes, a viper, yes! But I had healthy parents, you hear? Healthy! My father didn't die in delirium! I could have had sons like anybody else's! Those are your sons, those four!"

Mazzini exploded in his turn.

"Consumptive viper! That's what I called you, what I want to tell you! Ask him, ask the doctor who's to blame for your sons' meningitis: my father or your rotten lung? Yes, viper!"

They continued with increasing violence, until a moan from Bertita instantly sealed their lips. By one o'clock in the morning the child's light indigestion had disappeared, and, as it inevitably happens with all young married couples who have loved intensely, even for a while, they effected a reconciliation, all the more effusive for the infamy of the offenses.

A splendid day dawned, and as Berta arose she spit up blood. Her emotion and the terrible night were, without any doubt, primarily responsible. Mazzini held her in his embrace for a long while, and she cried hopelessly, but neither of them dared to say a word.

At ten, they decided that after lunch they would go out. They were pressed for time so they ordered the servant to kill a hen.

The brilliant day had drawn the idiots from their bench. So while the servant was cutting off the head of the chicken in the kitchen, bleeding it parsimoniously (Berta had learned from her mother this effective method of conserving the freshness of the meat), she thought she sensed something like

breathing behind her. She turned and saw the four idiots, standing shoulder to shoulder, watching the operation with stupefaction. Red...Red...

"Senora! The boys are here in the kitchen."

Berta came in immediately; she never wanted them to set foot in the kitchen. Not even during these hours of full pardon, forgetfulness, and regained happiness could she avoid this horrible slight! Because, naturally, the more intense her raptures of love for her husband and daughter, the greater her loathing for the monsters.

"Get them out of here, Maria!" Throw them out! Throw them out, I tell you!"

The four poor little beasts, shaken and brutally shoved, went back to their bench.

After lunch, everyone went out; the servant to Buenos Aires and the couple and child for a walk among the country houses. They returned as the sun was sinking, but Berta wanted to talk for a while with her neighbors across the way. Her daughter quickly ran into the house.

In the meantime, the idiots had not moved from their bench the whole day. The sun had crossed the wall now, beginning to sink behind it, while they continued to stare at the bricks, more sluggish than ever.

Suddenly, something came between their line of vision and the wall. Their sister, tired of five hours with her parents, wanted to look around a bit on her own. She paused at the base of the wall and looked thoughtfully at its summit. She wanted to climb it; this could not be doubted. Finally she decided on a chair with the seat missing, but still she couldn't reach the top. Then she picked up a kerosene tin, and, with a fine sense of relative space, placed it upright on the chair -with which she triumphed.

The four idiots, their gaze indifferent, watched how their sister succeeded patiently in gaining her equilibrium and how, on tiptoe, she rested her neck against the top of the wall between her straining hands. They watched her search everywhere for a toehold to climb up higher.

The idiots' gaze became animated; the same insistent light fixed in all their pupils. Their eyes were fixed on their sister, as the growing sensation of bestial gluttony changed every line of their faces. Slowly they advanced toward the wall. The little girl, having succeeded in finding a toehold and about to straddle the wall and surely fall off the other side, felt herself seized by one leg. Below her, the eight eyes staring into hers frightened her.

"Let loose! Let me go!" she cried, shaking her leg, but she was captive.

"Mama! Oh, Mama! Mama, Papa!" she cried imperiously. She tried still to cling to the top of the wall but she felt herself pulled, and she fell.

"Mama, oh, Ma-----" She could cry no more. One of the boys squeezed her neck, parting her curls as if they were feathers, and the other three dragged her by one leg toward the kitchen where that morning the chicken had been bled, holding her tightly, drawing the life out of her second by second.

Mazzini, in the house across the way, thought he heard his daughter's voice.

"I think she's calling you," he said to Berta.

They listened, uneasy, but heard nothing more. Even so, a moment later they said good-by, and, while Berta went to put up her hat, Mazzini went into the patio.

"Bertita!"

No one answered.

"Bertita! He raised his already altered voice.

The silence was so funeral to his eternally terrified heart that a chill of horrible presentiment ran to his spine.

"My daughter, my daughter!" He ran frantically toward the back of the house. But as he passed by the kitchen he saw a sea of blood on the floor. he violently pushed open the half-closed door and uttered a cry of horror. Berta, who had already started running when she heard Mazzini's anguished call, cried out too. But as she rushed toward the kitchen, Mazzini, livid as death, stood in her way, holding her back.

"Don't go in. Don't go in!"

But Berta had seen the blood-covered floor. She could only utter a hoarse cry, throw her arms above her head, and, leaning against her husband, sink slowly to the floor.