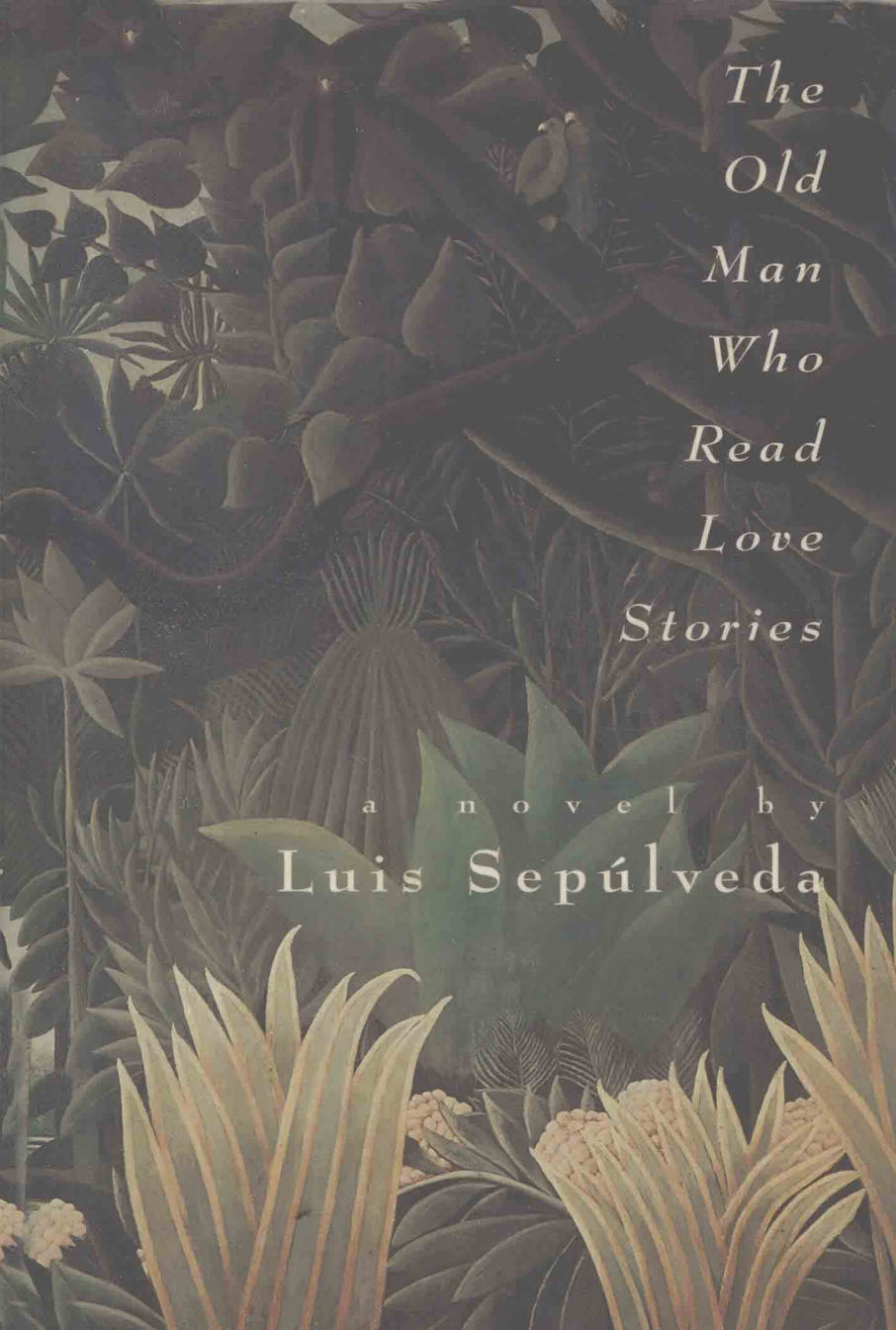
The Old Man Who Read Love Stories
a novel by
Luis Sepúlveda

LUIS SEPÚLVEDA

The Old Man Who Read Love Stories

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A B C D E

For my distant friend Miguel Tzenke, Shuar union leader from Sumbi in the upper Nangaritza and great defender of Amazonia.

On a night of magical storytelling you revealed to me aspects of your unknown green world, which later, in other lands far from Ecuadorian Eden, helped me create this story.

L. S.

While this novel was being read in Oviedo, Spain, by the members of the panel who a few days later awarded it the Tigre Juan Prize, thousands of shameful kilometers away, a gang of armed murderers paid by other, bigger, criminals, men with smart suits and manicured nails who claim to act on behalf of "progress," ended the life of one of the most distinguished defenders of Amazonia and one of the most outstanding and principled figures in the worldwide Ecological Movement.

This novel will never reach your hands, Chico Mendes, dear friend of few words and many deeds, but the Tigre Juan Prize also belongs to you and to all those who continue along your path, our collective path in defense of the only world we have.

L. S.

The Old Man Who Read Love Stories

CHAPTER ONE

THE sky was a donkey's swollen paunch hanging threateningly low overhead. The warm, sticky wind swept up the scattered leaves and violently shook the stunted banana trees that graced the front of the town hall.

The few inhabitants of El Idilio and a handful of adventurers from the surrounding countryside were gathered on the quay, waiting their turn to sit down in the portable chair belonging to Dr. Rubicundo Loachamín, the dentist, who used his own peculiar brand of oral anaesthetic to relieve his patients' suffering.

"Does that hurt?" he would ask.

His patients clung tightly to the arms of the chair

and responded by gazing at him wide-eyed and sweating like pigs.

Some tried to pull the dentist's insolent hands from their mouths and give him the earful he deserved, but their efforts clashed with the dental surgeon's strong arms and authoritarian tones.

"Calm down, you idiot! Hands off! I know it hurts. Whose fault is that? Come on! Is it mine? No! It's the government's! Get that into your thick skull. It's the government's fault your teeth are rotten. It's the government's fault you have a toothache."

The afflicted closed their eyes or nodded meekly in agreement.

Dr. Loachamín hated the government. Each and every government. The illegitimate son of an Iberian immigrant, he retained his father's intense loathing of anything that smacked of authority, but the reasons for that hatred were lost in youthful drinking sprees, and his ragtag anarchism became a moral reflex which gave him a certain charm.

He harangued both the government of the day and the gringos who sometimes came from the Coca oil fields, uncouth intruders who didn't ask permission before photographing his patients' open mouths.

Nearby, the *Sucre*'s small crew was loading bunches of green bananas and bags of coffee beans.

Piled up on the quay were the crates of beer, Frontera rum, salt, and bottles of butane gas they had unloaded earlier in the day.

The *Sucre* would get under way as soon as the dentist finished patching up jaws, and continue up the waters of the Nangaritza, out into the river Zamora, and, after four days of slow progress, finally reach the river port of El Dorado.

The boat, an ancient floating tub propelled by its skipper-mechanic, the efforts of two burly crew members, and the tubercular persistence of an old diesel engine, wouldn't return until after the rainy season, now heralded by the overcast sky.

Dr. Rubicundo Loachamín visited El Idilio twice a year, like the postman, who rarely brought anyone any correspondence. Only official documents for the mayor or solemn portraits of the latest governor, discolored by damp, emerged from his threadbare mailbag.

The people awaited the arrival of the boat expecting only to replenish their supplies of salt, gas, beer, and rum, but they were genuinely relieved to welcome the dentist, especially the malaria survivors, who, tired of spitting out remnants of teeth, wanted to have the splinters cleared from their mouths so they could try out one of the sets of false dentures arrayed on a purple cloth which immediately brought Cardinals to mind.

While ranting against the government, the dentist would clean the last bits of teeth from their gums and then tell them to swill out with rum.

"Now then. How about this set?"

"It's too tight. I can't close my mouth."

"Hell! What a delicate bunch we are! Come on, then, try another one."

"It's too loose. It'll fall out if I sneeze."

"Well, don't catch a cold, you fool. Open your mouth."

And they obeyed.

After trying out different dentures, they'd find the most comfortable and haggle over the price while the dentist disinfected the others by submerging them in a pan of boiled chlorine.

Dr. Loachamín's portable chair was quite an institution to the people who lived on the banks of the rivers Zamora, Yacuambi, and Nangaritza.

It was in fact an old barber's chair, with white enameled pedestal and arms. The muscle power of both skipper and crew of the *Sucre* was needed to lift it up and plant it firmly down on a yard-square platform which the dentist called his "clinic."

"Hell! I'm the boss in this clinic. Here, you do what I say. When I get done, you can call me tooth-puller,

nose-poker, tongue-twister, all the names you like, and I might even let you buy me a drink."

There was intense pain on the faces of those waiting their turn, and those who'd had their encounter with the extracting forceps looked no happier.

The only people with smiling faces in the vicinity of the clinic were the Jibaros, who squatted down and watched.

The Jibaros were natives rejected by their own people, the Shuar Indians, who regarded them as degenerates corrupted by the customs of the Apaches, or whites.

Dressed in the cast-off clothes of whites, the Jibaros accepted without protest the nickname of rustic inflicted on them by the Spanish conquistadors.

There was a huge difference between a proud, haughty Shuar, who knew the secret regions of the Amazon, and a Jibaro, like those gathered on the quay at El Idilio, hoping for a spare drop of liquor.

The Jibaros smiled and flashed their pointed teeth, sharpened on stones from the river.

"And what are you gawking at? One day you monkeys will fall into my clutches," the dentist threatened.

When they realized this was aimed their way, the Jibaros responded cheerfully.

"Jibaros having good teeth. Jibaros eating lots of monkey meat."

Sometimes a patient let out a scream that frightened the birds and knocked the forceps away in reaching with a free hand for the handle of his machete.

"Take it like a man, you ninny. I know it hurts, and I told you whose fault that is. Don't take it out on me. Sit still and show you've got spunk."

"But you're tearing my soul out, doctor. Let me have a drink first."

The dentist finished with his last patient and heaved a sigh. He wrapped the dentures that hadn't found a customer in their cloth of Cardinal purple, and was disinfecting his instruments when he saw a Shuar canoe come floating along.

The native was rowing smoothly, standing in the stern of his slender vessel. As he neared the *Sucre*, he splashed his oar twice to bring him alongside the boat.

The skipper's bored face peered over the side. The Shuar began explaining something to him, gesticulating with his whole body and spitting constantly.

The dentist finished drying his instruments and packed them away in a leather case. Then he took the container of extracted teeth and hurled them into the water.

The skipper and the Shuar walked past him on their way to the mayor's office.

"We've got to wait, doctor. They're bringing us a dead gringo."

The news didn't please him. The *Sucre* was an uncomfortable contraption, particularly on return journeys, when it was loaded down with green bananas and bags of half-rotten, end-of-season coffee.

If the rains caught up with them, as seemed very likely, since they were already a week late thanks to various breakdowns, then cargo, passengers, and crew would have to share the shelter of a canvas awning, with no space to hang up hammocks, and if a corpse was added to all that, the journey would be doubly uncomfortable.

The dentist helped lift the portable chair on board and made for the far end of the quay. Antonio José Bolívar Proaño was waiting for him there, a leathery-skinned old man, apparently unconcerned by the burden of so many fine-sounding names.

"Not dead yet, Antonio José Bolívar?"

Before replying, the old man smelled his armpits.

"Doesn't look like it. I don't stink yet. How about yourself?"

"How are your teeth?"

"They're in here," the old man replied, putting a hand to his pocket. He unfolded a faded handkerchief and showed the dentures.

"Why don't you wear them, you old fool?"

"I'll pop them in right away. I wasn't eating or talking, so what was the point of wearing them?"

The old man eased in his dentures, clicked his tongue, spat out a generous gob, and offered him the bottle of Frontera.

"Thanks. I think I've earned this."

"You certainly have. Today you took out twenty-seven whole teeth and a pile of bits. But you didn't beat your record."

"Do you always keep count?"

"That's what friends are for. To celebrate other people's good fortune. But don't you think it was better when the young settlers were still coming here? Do you remember that Montuvian peasant, the one who had all his teeth out just for a bet?"

Dr. Rubicundo Loachamín tilted his head to sift through his memories, and finally came to the image of a not particularly young man dressed in the Montuvian style—all in white, barefoot, but wearing silver spurs.

The Montuvian had come to the clinic along with some twenty very drunk individuals. They were gold prospectors of no fixed abode. People called them the

wanderers, and they weren't fussy whether they found gold in rivers or in other people's saddlebags. The Montuvian collapsed into the chair and gave him a stupid look.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Take the whole lot out. One by one. And line them up there on the table."

"Open your mouth."

The man obeyed, and the dentist saw there were a lot of teeth left around the ruins of his molars, some with holes and others still healthy.

"You've got a quite a few good ones left. Can you pay to have so many out?"

The stupid expression faded from the man's face.

"Well, you see, doctor, my friends here don't believe me when I tell them I'm really macho. I've told them I'll have all my teeth taken out one at a time without a murmur. We've made a bet, and you and I will share the takings."

"The minute he starts pulling, you'll shit in your pants and start crying for your mother," bawled out one of the group, and the rest joined in with loud guffaws.

"Better go have a few more drinks and think some more. I don't like playing silly games," the dentist said.

"All right, doctor, if you don't let me win this bet, I'll cut your head off with my little friend here."

The Montuvian's eyes glinted as he caressed the handle of his machete.

And so the wager went ahead.

The man opened his mouth and the dentist did a fresh tally. There were fifteen teeth, and as he announced the total, the protagonist lined up fifteen nuggets of gold on the Cardinal purple cloth displaying the dentures. One for each tooth, and those betting for or against covered their bets with other golden nuggets. The number rose considerably after the fifth tooth.

The Montuvian endured the extraction of the first seven teeth without moving a muscle. You could have heard an insect land. Then, as the eighth was being pulled, blood suddenly filled his mouth. The man couldn't talk, but gestured to Loachamín to pause.

He spat several clots of blood out to the platform and took a long swig that made him writhe with pain in the chair, but he didn't complain, and, after spitting once more, signaled to the dentist to continue.

At the end of the butchery, toothless, his face swollen from ear to ear, the Montuvian wore a shocking expression of triumph as he divided the winnings with the dentist.

"YES. Those were the days," muttered Dr. Loachamín, taking a long swig.

The sugarcane liquor burned his throat, and he scowled as he returned the bottle.

"Don't look like that, doctor. This stuff kills off the parasites in your belly," Antonio José Bolívar added, but he didn't go on.

Two canoes were approaching, and over the side of one lolled the lifeless head of a fair-haired man.