

ARIEL DOREFMAN

SHORT STORIES

MY
HOUSE
IS ON FIRE



MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE

A R I E L D O R F M A N

Translated
from the
Spanish
by
George
Shivers
with the
author

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

NONFICTION

How to Read Donald Duck

The Empire's Old Clothes

FICTION

Widows

The Last Song of Manuel Sendero

Mascara

POETRY

Last Waltz in Santiago

These
stories
are for
María
Angélica,
who was
simply
there.

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FAMILY CIRCLE

ORESTES: Don't expect to have a more faithful friend than I.

ELECTRA: Foreigner! Would you mock my misfortune!

ORESTES: I would be mocking my own.

Aeschylus,
The Libation Bearers

AGAMEMNON: Even so, you will have to sail, and then you'll remember your father.

IPHIGENIA: Will I be sailing with my mother or alone?

AGAMEMNON: Alone. Without either your father or your mother.

Euripides,
Iphigenia at Aulis

Any sonofabitch would have better luck than I do. The first bus I take in a year and instead of María Eugenia, who should be the one and only member of the reception committee sitting there on the bench at the bus stop no less, as if he knew that I was on the bus? Who should be giving the fucking eye to every sonofabitch passenger who got off? Who, huh?

Up until a year ago I would've jumped off the bus while it was still rolling; I would've let go with some war whoops that would've burst the eardrums of every living soul on the other side of the hill; and what a hug me and the old man would've given each other.

But now all I had to do was see him through the window as the driver came to a stop and I could tell by his stiff expression and the way his legs were sprawling that today had gone just as badly as yesterday and the day before and every other day of the month I had been away, that his legs had been holding out since dawn looking for a job that not only no one wanted to give him but that, with things as bad as they'd been lately, nobody even had to offer. All I had to do was see him there, that stern, somber hulk, leaning against the back of the bench, and I started feeling like a real piece of shit all over again, so uncomfortable right from the start that I almost considered the idiotic alternative of staying on the bus and going back to the barracks, which at that point was obviously impossible, but any wild idea occurs to you at a time like that, anything not to have to face the old man before I had a chance to talk things over with María Eugenia.

Any sonofabitch could beat my luck! The old man would've had to have a pact with the devil to have known that I was coming on

that particular bus, because I hadn't even known it myself, since up until a little while before, my leave was supposed to start tomorrow, Saturday, in the morning, and I had thought, during the train trip, that I would walk home like always, just to save a few cents, for all the good they'd do me.

But there I was in the street in front of the station, with that heat that was determined to do me in right there on the spot shrinking my pores and drying up my arteries, and it was like I couldn't get my breath, I was so anxious to see my family right then, and there came that beautiful little bus, rolling up like a red temptation, with its windows maliciously wide open, and just thinking about it, in pure pleasure, I could feel the breeze already rewarding my hot neck and cooling my face, turning my throat into a crystal-clear waterfall, and loneliness was roasting me so bad I thought I'd never come out of it, and then I leaped on like an acrobat, like somebody mounting a warhorse, I leaped on, what else was I going to do? It was impossible to explain all this to the old man for the simple reason that the old man wasn't speaking to me, not a single, solitary syllable for the last seven months. But he still knew me better than I knew myself: in mid-afternoon he had sniffed out my act of treason against the family economy, even before I committed it and consequently had chosen to point his shoes in the precise direction of this bus stop to witness, judge and condemn the appearance of the black sheep of the family. It could have been María Eugenia. That peach of a girl—her eyes, as moist and soft as a mirror, happy where mine were melancholy—could have been the one who ripened into my welcoming committee. Why the hell wasn't she the one there, her hoarse little stream of a voice full of greetings and gossip? She could've been the one to guess instead of him, couldn't she?

Or mama. It was mama, after all, who had given me the dough a month ago. A bill so wrinkled it looked like she had been saving it since prehistoric times. I didn't want to take it from her. It seemed crazy to me. For the girls, I said. For milk or tea. But she stubbornly insisted; she stuck that good old bill in my hand as a farewell offering. As though that cunning old lady realized that no doubt I'd be bringing back some miserable news from the regiment; and in those cases, the best thing is to hurry it along, there's no enemy worse than sadness to keep you company during a hostile hike of

several miles. For the bus, the old lady had insisted. So you'll come back soon. Keep it for the old man, I protested, trying to return it. For you, she corrected me.

I waited for the rest of the passengers to get off, and only then, when the driver turned around and looked at me like I was some kind of leper, did I decide to disembark.

The old man saw me right away, but for all the importance he gave to the event, it might have been a stone that got off the bus. He must have been surprised, but he didn't give so much as a sign of recognition. He let the people disperse, so the two of us were there separated by a few feet of emptiness and silence, as if somebody were filming us and I were a criminal just arriving in town and waiting for the right moment to draw my pistol and blow him away. A minute must have passed, maybe less, and only then did he deign to raise his eyes from the ground to examine me, or, I should say, to examine my uniform. Because, as for me, Lucho, it was like I wasn't even there; he just wanted to fasten that eagle eye of his on every last inch of my patriotic soldier rags. He took his time, looking me over from top to bottom, like morning inspection, or as if I had no more life than some mannequin in a showcase in a military museum. That's the way coat hangers must feel. I didn't know where to hide myself, what to do with the uniform, I felt like tearing it off then and there and hoped we'd both disappear as quickly as possible. I held on to my duffel bag and tried out a few words.

"Hi there, papa," I said to him. "How's things around here?"

Still not standing up, not taking his eyes off me, he started to slowly brush off his pants. First he patted the right leg and a fine spray of yellow dust rose. He kept on working on his pants right down to his shoes, never taking his eyes off me, while the dirt fell away like dry bubbles, all the dirt that had accumulated during his fruitless day of searching in factories, standing in line with the rest of the jobless, just to stand in another line five hours later, then the mansions up in the posh neighborhoods to see if they needed someone to cut the grass or to wash windows or to walk the dog, finally the municipal gardens just in case some friend who had managed by hook or crook to get into the minimal employment plan might be able to help him out, and from time to time a trip through the downtown area, full of roving beggars and well-stocked

stores, from pillar to post, walking the city like a pariah. It was as if the old man had crossed the Sahara. He was carrying enough dust to smother an army. Then he repeated the whole operation with the left leg. There wasn't even the hint of a breeze in the midst of that infernal heat, so the dust just hung there, dizzy, orphaned of any support, floating in that withered air, until it would fall by its own inertia, reabsorbed by the pants, the shoes, the ground.

That was the moment to jump into the match, to spit out a ton of dust from every cell of my being, to dig it out even from under my tongue, but just this afternoon I was as clean as the day I was born, I didn't have a single glorious drop of sweat, not one sign of suffering, not even a gnarled throat to offer. I could have laid the bad news on him, of course; I could have explained that I was here on a Friday and not on a Saturday because the worst thing that could happen had happened, the thing that we had been expecting silently for months, but I had a feeling that wasn't going to stir up any pity in the old man. On the contrary, it was more likely that he would be overcome with rage, like a mad colonel, and would lay his curse on me then and there forever. So I coughed once, twice, three times, to see if that would at least loosen the knot in my throat and allow me to share with him, if nothing else, the dryness of this wasteland in which we were stuck, to see if it would remind him, even if remotely, that I had spent the whole damned year swallowing dirt, facedown, with my nose in a hole, practicing war exercises under the command of an all-powerful animal of a sergeant, on the receiving end of kicks by the dozens, lonelier than a skeleton, eating shit. Wasn't that enough for him?

The old man stood up suddenly and, like an officer, beckoned with his head for me to follow him. A sign that at least some bond still joined us. He didn't need to tell me that the distance that separated us at this moment was perfectly fine, that I should keep that distance, at least six feet between him and me, as if a contagious disease were hanging in every scandalous pocket of my uniform. He didn't need to tell me; because he had already made it brutally clear every time I had come back for a visit, in every one of the seven months since that night when I had decided that I couldn't avoid the draft, and I had to show up the next day for military service. As for María Eugenia, she could walk arm-in-arm with me,

as embarrassing as that was not only to him and the family, but in fact to the town and the party and to the country as a whole. As for him, he at least had a little dignity left and he wasn't about to let anybody throw it up to him that he had consented to walk in public with or even close to an accomplice of those murderers and traitors and the worst sons of bitches the world had ever produced, so I should stay six feet, nine feet, a thousand feet, a thousand miles behind, if possible; I was not to speak to him as long as I was wearing those clothes. At least he hadn't burned all the bridges; he had left the door open to reconciliation once my military service was over. I knew his instructions by heart, so I didn't think of even approaching his shadow. When I saw his back at a prudent distance, I started following him.

The only hope left to me was that we would still come across María Eugenia, and she would alter the situation with one tempestuous toss of her dark hair. She was a real princess, even capable of taking me by one arm and the old man by the other and dragging us up the hill. She paid him no mind at all. From the very first day she proclaimed to the four winds that papa was wrong, and that nobody could refuse to do military service, that it made no sense for somebody to get himself shot just like that, and that, besides, a year goes by fast. It was her influence that kept the old man from closing the house to me completely. So now I was counting on María Eugenia's charm to find the old man's weak spot and to confront him at the proper moment with the little problem I was bearing. It would take her less than two minutes to convince me things weren't that bad. She would grab my head, looking for gray hairs. Old dog, she'd say to me, you were born old and sad and worn out, and you're still not twenty-one. I'm going to pull out your gray hairs for you, so you'll stop all these crazy thoughts. That was the way she cast sorrow aside: with belly laughs, practical jokes, tickling, dances running over with vitality. That's the way it had always been; it was as if she had been given all the joy and all I got was the uncertainty. She always said that no problem was so important that it deserved even half a tear, not one iota of a tear, she would say. Difficulties just slipped off that pretty back of hers, passed her by; she simply refused to recognize that anything could be worth the worry. You're an old dog, a crafty old dog, she would say. That's why in the neighborhood they called her the Alka-

Seltzer Girl. Because of her bubbly nature, the bewitching sparkle in her eyes, that way she had of relieving sorrows by insisting that they didn't exist. She became a mascot for the neighborhood, for the union, for papa, for the Mothers Center, here comes Miss Super Vitamin, the potion that puts an end to grief and gets rid of rats, here comes our little Alka-Seltzer. And so she had kept on growing, like grass that instead of turning yellow just keeps getting greener.

I shut my eyes and imagined that when I opened them she would be standing in front of me.

But María Eugenia failed to appear.

The old man, on the other hand, didn't need her to change his mood. No sooner had he stepped into the shantytown than his attitude changed as if by magic, as if one of his dead friends had risen up within him like a well of spring water. His stride became long, determined, convincing. I saw the way he squared his shoulders, raised his head, drove out his own fatigue. Just as I always had, I automatically changed the rhythm of my own stride to match his, so that, even at that distance, the frozen abyss he had placed between us would remain. The old man crossed the shantytown like a ship that refuses to go down. No one would whisper behind his back that they had seen him defeated or even depressed. Forget it. He knew every child by name, and he greeted them all as he went, laughing, mussing their hair with his hand, kicking an old can, until he had a flock of kids following behind him. He had a kind word for everybody, lifted the spirits of each and every grandmother with a joke, reminded neighbors, in passing, that tomorrow there was a meeting of the unemployed, congratulated one who had found work, made flattering remarks to the dark-eyed girls who came out to giggle at the doors of their houses. A half-smile played at his lips, somewhat tender, somewhat proud, perhaps epic.

That was my papa, that's the way I always wanted to remember him, that's the way I had grown up beside him. My papa, returning now from better streets, future or past, bursting with a combination of energy and calm that had nothing to do with that moment either, but rather had been inherited from other marches and other songs, for a moment an invisible banner seemed to unfurl in his hands, it wasn't just two feet striding there but thousands, my papa, sowing himself as he advanced. There was the old man, unbroken, as

though he had never been in prison, as though he had never had to lower his eyes to the ground the day his boss had come back to the textile mill that the workers thought they had expropriated from him forever, as though all the corners in that city still belonged to him and his *compañeros*, the old man walking through town like a general celebrating a victory, almost as if the *compañero Presidente* were still alive and not buried in some hole in a forgotten cemetery by the sea. My old man. Except that back then he had held my hand, I had felt his magnificent shadow protecting me. The whole family had marched, not a single one missing, horizon to horizon, side by side. Shit, it was the same old man now, leaving a constellation of hope in his wake, raising the spirits of the doubters, renewing the confidence of the faithful, blowing on the most hidden ashes until the flame was rekindled, my incredible old man, passing through the slum like an eagle. So much enthusiasm, so much generosity, and nothing for me.

I limited myself to being a spectator. I stopped every time he did and contemplated the scene as if it were unfolding on a screen. There I was, an anonymous intruder among the shacks where I had been raised, where I knew the heartbreaks and the satisfactions of each and every neighbor, the mysterious pleated skirts of every female, the lies and the bravado of every male, me, part of the landscape, the prescribed six feet of distance, too far from the circle of his holy words to be reached, to be included, to be sheltered by them, me, a lamppost, a deflated balloon, a birthday cake that nobody put in the oven, a cactus, me, his soldier-boy son.

Till we got to the foot of the hill and he started to talk to no less a personage than Nilda Paredes herself. I liked her a hell of a lot; she'd been something of a sweetheart of mine and her lips proffered kisses like succulent grapes, while the warmth of her body against mine promised even greater and better and more marvelous things. And when I had come back for my first visit, she had told me, unbuttoning every button with her eyes, melting my lapels like ice, taking my breath away with every square inch of material, her unbelievably fragrant skin so far away: "With you?" she had said. "I wouldn't be seen on the same street with you . . ." And then those little muscles moving that glorious ass away from me as quickly as possible . . . And since then it was as if she had become papa's main ally, because she wouldn't even speak to me.

María Eugenia said that she was a fool and that I should pay no attention to her, that she was probably jealous because women like guys in uniform, and that in a few more months everything would return to normal. But what did María Eugenia know about love? What did she know about my glands? When she was always running around with a flock of guys in her wake and she wouldn't give the time of day to any of them? I couldn't wait to see her the day she fell head over heels for one of them and he gave her the brush; then we'd really cry on each other's shoulder.

They started to talk in low voices, and it was impossible to make out a word they were saying. At first I thought it would only be for a minute, but the time passed and there they were, still chewing the fat, stretching the whole thing out beyond the bearable. All of a sudden I caved in, my defenses came tumbling down, and every pore in my body was sick and dying. It was like he was the youth and I was the old man, as if I was the one who had worn out those endless avenues with my goings and comings, returning with empty pockets, and he was the one who had gotten off the bus ablaze with a look of relaxation worthy of better times, as if he were Nilda's guy and I were some sterile, worn-out rival, so at that point I had no choice but to pull out of the show, to get away from there that very instant and go on ahead to see mama and my sisters, hugging the old lady for fifteen eternal minutes, feeling the way her arms understood me, her fingers, her heartbeat, her touch, feeling the buzzing warmth of the girls, still in awe of the family's only male child, all fluttering around me. Then a long walk with María Eugenia, with no need to explain anything, not even to fill in the lost experiences of this month of separation, not even to compensate with words for the weeks in which we hadn't seen each other, going on with the song as if the two of us had been humming it soundlessly all this time under water and it was enough to come up for air at the same moment to recapture the shared melody. Let Nilda and papa go on gossiping till Judgment Day, if they wanted to. I was splitting.

I grasped the handle of my duffel bag tightly, and remembered for just an instant Nilda's pretty neck, a little gazelle she was, and without so much as a good-bye, I turned and marched up the hill. Papa seemed to take note of my absence, he seemed to realize that his one-man audience had abandoned the stadium without