

# Shrove Tuesday

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**E**ustaquio was reluctant to move to his aunt and uncle's house in Veracruz, but they were his only remaining relatives after his parents' death. At the age of fifteen, changing one's home is a frightening experience, and the fact that he would have to go to a new school, in a place where the climate was so different from Mexico City, did nothing to improve his frame of mind.

His uncle and aunt were very different from his parents. Uncle Ernesto, obsessed with the punctuality of his thirty-seven clocks, spent the whole day making sure they were wound up so they would ring every quarter of an hour. Aunt Lucha took little notice of her family. Most of her time was occupied with breeding dogs and she was nearly always holding a puppy in her hands. Grandmother was a forgetful old lady; when she was not asleep, she spent the time with her dolls, human beings seemed unreal to her. Eustaquio found all this highly unusual and the family's eccentricities helped to distract him from his nostalgia.

His cousin Fabiola was the best thing that happened to him. He realized that her presence chased his sad thoughts away. Since she was always joking, he too laughed more often.

When Fabiola walked, the rhythm of her swaying hips made her breasts bob under her cotton blouse. Eustaquio was embarrassed to look at her, but stole glances at her, especially when she was taking a siesta in the hammock. He would sit nearby so he

could watch her. His cousin had inherited the Arab taste for hidden gardens, Spanish features and the reticence of the Olmecs, disguised as lightheartedness that hid her constant encounters with her own lust.

Though he had never touched more than her hand, Eustaquio would embrace her as he fell asleep. He would imagine that he kissed her from head to toe. When he came to her head, he enjoyed undoing her braids and playing with her silky black hair. It was as if he knew the taste of her tongue and the warmth of her body. Fabiola was always at his side and he never left her, even when he was asleep. She inhabited his dreams and was his constant companion.

Fabiola introduced him to all her friends at school and managed to have Eustaquio stay behind a year so that they would be in the same class. She taught him to enjoy himself on the beach with their classmates; he was swept along by the warmth of her easy laughter. She did not seem to mind that her cousin was not very talkative; her vitality was enough for both of them. Eustaquio tried not to stay away from her any longer than was necessary. He felt as though he was in the eye of a hurricane; there was no time to remember the past and it was as if every day were the night before a party. Every morning, when he woke up, his body felt different, and he experienced new sensations in both his head and groin. He grew sensitive to smell and could tell when his cousin was approaching, even if she made no noise, because he could sense the

perfume that emanated from every pore of Fabiola's body. Eustaquio seemed to be in perpetual motion, like the pendulums of his uncle's clocks.

The whirlpool accelerated during preparations for carnival. Using gauzy material she had found in her grandmother's trunk, Fabiola made herself a tunic that covered her like mist, from her tall pointed hat to her golden sandals. She found a Phrygian cap for Eustaquio and a velvet cape that made him perspire.

On Shrove Tuesday, Fabiola, Eustaquio and their friends went to the most crowded street. They were pushed along by the crowd that surged like a river of laughter and music. The cousins let themselves be carried along. Eustaquio felt his feet lifted off the ground and his only thought was to prevent anyone from getting between him and Fabiola. He had never been so close to her and noticed her smell of talcum powder and sweat. With his arm around his cousin's waist he was only aware of her warm flesh.

Fabiola and Eustaquio were separated from their companions by the jostling crowd. Suddenly, they found themselves in the midst of a group of young men in fancy dress. Some were dressed as women, others disguised as devils, the leader clad in a white tunic with a pointed hood covering his entire face except for the eyes that glistened from behind two vertical slits.

They were blindfolded with a black cloth and dragged along, almost flying, in spite of their shouts of protest that mingled with the crowd's yelling.

The voices of the street soon died away. The only sound was the soft murmur of the boys who had carried them to the garden of a deserted house near the beach. They could hear the noise of the waves crashing against the beach; the breeze had a slight salt taste.

Amid threats of "Shut up or we'll cut out your tongues with this knife," the cousins stopped their protests when they were placed in the middle of the circle of men dressed as women, devils and the hooded figure. Fabiola stared at the ground, so Eustaquio could not catch her eye when the young men began to strip her. He tried to break free of the arms holding him, but the knife at his throat forced him to keep still. When the filmy blue gauze hung in shreds, revealing Fabiola's pale breasts, Eustaquio shut his eyes, not daring to look at her. His knees felt weak and he would have fallen if the arms holding him had not pulled him up, with a threatening, "Coward!" whispered into his ear by moist lips that kissed and insulted him at the same time, while several hot hands began to tear off his clothing. Wrapping his clothes into a bundle, with the velvet cape on top, they threw them onto the ground and dragged him toward Fabiola.

They had forced her against the trunk of a jacaranda tree and now shoved Eustaquio against his cousin's body, so they were facing each other. He would have embraced her to console her, but they had fastened his arms to his sides when they tied them to the tree. The cousins felt cold sweat sticking their bodies together, the acrid smell filled their nostrils. They could not see each other's faces, since the rope tied around their necks had made them into a single head, with their

profiles touching. When Eustaquio covered Fabiola's nakedness with his own, they felt less ashamed.

When their bodies merged, Eustaquio and Fabiola no longer heard the voices around them and the noise of the waves died away; they could hear only the rush of their blood and their deafening heartbeat, resounding like a bell in the depth of their bellies. Sweat no longer came out of their every pore and they breathed a deep satisfying peace. "Don't be scared," Eustaquio whispered softly, so that only Fabiola could hear.

The devils placed dried branches at their feet. Laughing, they threatened to roast them alive, like fresh caught fish. The devils were lighting a torch made of strips of the velvet cape when a violent tropical downpour put an end to the ceremony.

Eustaquio and Fabiola murmured tenderly to each other, making promises of love that lessened the gravity of the incident. Sometimes they fell silent, fatigue making them drowsy. Their legs hurt and their bodies were sore from the bruises caused by the ropes. They were only aware that hours had gone by when daylight pierced their aching eyes. Their bodies, bound together, breathed in unison, and their minds were like a calm summer sea.

The police found them in the morning, soaking wet from the cloudburst that had flooded the city. The devils' callous deed and the fright they had caused the couple gave rise to widespread indignation and the authorities pledged to find those responsible so they could be duly punished for a prank that might have caused their death.

From that day on, Fabiola and Eustaquio spoke only to each other. No one could tell what they said. They did not utter a word to others. Their noisy laughter and their friends' lively company disappeared. The only sound in the house was the puppies' barking, the clocks' ticking and grandmother's lullabies as she rocked her dolls to sleep.

The cousins spent most of their time by the sea. When they were in the house, they whispered so no one could hear them. They lived in a world of their own, like two ghosts, inseparable night and day. They did not seem to notice that grandmother's dolls disappeared at the same time as her lullabies. Nor were they surprised when uncle Ernesto's clocks stopped chiming in unison every quarter of an hour, or that the pendulums hung still. One day Fabiola said she was glad there were no more noisy puppies in the house, but she never mentioned her mother's absence. Eustaquio did not find this strange; he was only aware of a single presence, his cousin's.

The palm trees are gone from the beach. There is now an apartment building where the abandoned house once stood. Curious passersby notice a man and a woman walking along the beach. The woman has grey hair and a deeply lined forehead, the man moves stiffly, his shoulders hunched. When they reach the rocks, they stand very straight, facing each other, their arms at their sides, their cheeks touching. They stand thus for a long time, two bodies fused into one, until the tide comes in and wets their feet and the waves' caresses seem to wake them from a deep sleep 

