

Murder of a Different Stripe (Excerpts)

by Alicia Plante

translated by Andrea G. Labinger

From the opposite corner of the living room, El Gallego stared at him intently. He pretended to turn away, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and looked at him again: no, there was no doubt about it, for some reason El Gallego was watching him. That corner of the room was half in shadow, contrasting with the stream of light that fell on him and Daniel through the transom of the front door, isolating them from the rest. Surely that was the reason he hadn't noticed. But how long had El Gallego been staring at him in that strange way, and why? He watched an old woman who looked like a relative take a seat on the couch next to El Gallego and lean forward to whisper something to him, possibly imagining that the old man couldn't hear her. And he must have felt something: those penetrating eyes, squinting as though they were counting the money in his pocket, must have been sending him some kind of message, because suddenly he turned his head right in El Gallego's direction. It was odd, he thought, for El Gallego to be scrutinizing him so closely, because he had always ignored him, and besides, today his house was full of people he probably never saw. Wakes always had a way of turning into a final, polite gesture on the part of the deceased, who generously offered themselves as an excuse for people to conceal their fear of death by talking nonsense. He didn't go over to the casket, not out of fear, but rather because of an uneasiness he'd never been able to shake completely. Besides, El Gallego's wife had always been a remarkably ugly woman, and surely death hadn't improved her. And if it was a question of unattractive displays, his bathroom mirror every morning was more than enough.

He averted his eyes and focused once more on Daniel: he really did look quite distraught at his mother's death. He clearly remembered him pedaling his tricycle on the opposite sidewalk, the boy's body bent over the handlebars as if he were running a race against life. Sometimes, as he crossed the street to catch the bus to high school, he would make Daniel laugh by pretending to be afraid of an enormous approaching vehicle that threatened to run him over. The boy's tow-headed, childhood mane had darkened, and yet, he thought, it was the same today as back when it had dangled charmingly over his blue eyes. A good-looking kid, Daniel, skinny and quick as a young cat, with a white, toothy smile and an unexpectedly deep voice. Raúl heard him discussing his professorship at the university, where he had been appointed Director of Applied Studies, and thought that, on top of everything else, he had turned out to be intelligent. As for Raúl, nothing could have induced him to take up a career that would never earn him a dime. The kid, on the other hand, didn't seem to care much about money, but hey, he thought, with all the loot he was going to inherit the day El Gallego croaked . . . under those conditions, anyone could cope. Now Daniel was talking about reorganizing his work with the students; he wanted to set up teams, take advantage of group dynamics – these were things he believed in, he said. As he watched him go on with such enthusiasm, a flicker of discomfort began to diffuse throughout Raúl's body. He tried to mock Daniel silently, but he couldn't keep it up. Daniel might have been an idealist, but he was nobody's fool. He himself had never felt that way, proud and enthusiastic. He thought of his film scripts and stifled a bitter smile: yeah, his work was really something to get excited about! Right now, for example, he should be in his apartment working on a new one instead of sitting here, wasting time with that jerk and his dreams, or wondering why El Gallego wouldn't stop eyeing him. A quick turn to the right confirmed that the man still had his gaze fixed on him. He was standing next to the casket now, half hidden behind two very bereaved

women.

Raúl's mother and the dressmaker from the row house on the corner were drinking *mate* in the kitchen, ensconced in El Gallego's chairs. He had left them there before sitting down to talk with Daniel, but now they'd have to finish up the neighborhood gossip because he wanted to leave. Unless, of course, his mother was prepared to stay on by herself. It wasn't likely: after all, hadn't she asked him to drop by and pick her up so that they could walk across the street together? Neither one of them was especially fond of the García Mejuto family, but she had wanted to pay her respects to her neighbor across the way.

He searched out El Gallego's eyes again; he had moved a couple of feet to the right, and Raúl could have sworn he was trying to get a better view of them. He noticed him gazing over at Daniel and back again, and he wondered if he was about to come over, but no – conversation wasn't what El Gallego was after. He wanted to keep observing something that Raúl couldn't even imagine. He had always been an odd duck: evasive, unpleasant, almost aggressive. Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that El Gallego's loyalties might have remained behind in the little Spanish village he came from and to which he'd never attempted to return, that maybe in this country, in this neighborhood where he'd lived for over forty years, he still felt like a stranger just passing through, and that he didn't give a damn about his neighbors. That's why it was unusual for him to be paying such close attention to Raúl today. He glanced at him again out of the corner of his eye: he imagined it bothered El Gallego to see them together, to see Daniel talking to him. Surely he would want to interrupt them, herd him toward the front door, something like that . . . It was a ridiculous thought, of course, but he suddenly wondered if the man had been reading their lips.

He took leave of Daniel with a pat on the shoulder and a "So long, man, I'll give you a

call one of these days.” They both knew it wouldn’t happen, but he said it loud enough for El Gallego to hear, just to piss him off. He passed him on the way to the kitchen without acknowledging him. She, Raúl’s mother, was leaning toward the dressmaker in a delicately conspiratorial manner, possibly confiding something about her son, the new girlfriend that she still hadn’t met but whose name he had mentioned a few times, a good boy, you can’t imagine . . . he helps me out with a few pesos once in a while, and it’s got to be hard for him, but what can I do, I had to ask him for the money, you understand how it is, Doña Elvira, when a person is widowed . . .

“I’m leaving, Ma, I have to go to work. What do you want to do?”

* * *

He was turning off on Avenida Bullrich toward Palermo when the Higher Power turned on the faucet, unleashing a downpour that blurred the Renault’s windows in a matter of seconds. He ran the back of his hand along the windshield, but he still couldn’t see a thing. He was lifting his foot off the gas pedal when for no apparent reason anguish flooded his mind and took root in the most defenseless parts of his body. A strange, formless anguish, almost as if it belonged to someone else and yet at the same time was exclusively his own. It was because of the rain, he thought; the feeling would disappear as soon as he got home, and suddenly El Gallego’s face was there again, now linked to a horrifying moment from his childhood. There had been a sudden downpour, like this one, he recalled, and in a single instant all the facts and sensations of that night, especially the anguish, returned and hit him like a blow. All at once, at first without analyzing it, he realized that there, in that recalled scene, in the way the events had turned out, was the reason El Gallego had been scrutinizing him so closely as he talked with Daniel. And he

also realized, with completely certainty and an excitement that made him clamp down on the steering wheel, that this discovery was about to change his life.

He must have been around ten. It would be easy to verify the exact date: his mother's sister, her husband, and his two cousins had arrived from the U.S. the day before, and that night they were all having dinner together in the house in the Vicente López neighborhood. He vividly remembered how his mother had been cooking all morning; it must have been Saturday or Sunday because on a weekday he would certainly have been in school. The tension had started early: his father was driving her crazy; he was in a bad mood, complaining about everything; naturally he wasn't too happy about their visit; he didn't get along with his sister-in-law's husband, a big, hulking, red-faced guy who had made a lot of money in Los Angeles and whom he must have envied with all his heart. He, Raúl, on the other hand, liked the man. He imagined he could still hear his laughter and that deep voice of his, a jolly guy who was enthusiastic about everything. Compared to him, his father seemed even darker and more sinister, and all day Raúl had feared a dramatic explosion. That fear was translated into a familiar sensation: his stomach knotted up like a fistful of wood and his ears started to buzz. At one point his mother asked his father in that tiny voice of hers, the one she used when she was scared, if he didn't feel like going out to play some billiards with his friends from the bar; after all, their visitors wouldn't arrive for a few hours yet. His father became enraged. He started shouting, pacing up and down the dining room, and cursing her out with an assortment of vulgarities, as if his own screaming incited him even more. He said that she just wanted to get him off her back, that she didn't respect him, that he wouldn't allow it, and who the hell did she think she was . . .

Raúl ran up to the veranda. He always did that whenever his father started yelling at his mother. When he had it out with him, it was different. Raúl froze; panic turned him to stone; he

couldn't even speak. He didn't utter a word in response when his father cornered him with questions, and he almost wished he would take off his belt once and for all, start the lashes right away and get it over with. He recalled that his father was worse than usual that day, and how there, up on the veranda, in the corner farthest from the staircase, with half his body leaning over the ledge, he had started talking to a little bird that peeked at him sideways from the tree down on the sidewalk. He raised his voice to block out his father's shouting and only when he saw the back of him disappear around the corner did he run back downstairs to look for his mother.

She was sitting on a little bench in the kitchen, her face practically touching her knees. She cried silently, her mouth half open as if she was gasping for air, her arms wrapped around her waist, rocking gently back and forth. He approached her slowly and placed his arm on her shoulder, but she jerked her body away, startling him. Several days later he saw her from behind as she emerged from the bathroom in her slip, and the image of those enormous bruises congealed the venom that flooded his heart.

It took him many years to realize that his father, in addition to being cruel, was clever: he never hit either of them where it would show. That day his mother didn't say anything; she never complained to him; instead she went to lie down in the darkness of her bedroom and didn't return to the kitchen until hours later. His father came home late; they were all sitting at the table and had started eating. He was buzzed, as he usually was whenever he returned from the bar. Sometimes after one of his violent outbursts, the booze would calm him down to the point where he almost acted sorry, but that night, maybe because they hadn't been expecting him, he exhibited such a display of bad temper and vulgarity that he managed to ruin everyone's evening. At a certain point, following an especially offensive reply to his wife, Raúl's uncle had cut him off and his father backed down, halfheartedly apologizing. Raúl felt all his blood well up in his

ears and in his face, and he fervently wished for his uncle to deliver the wallop he would have wanted to administer himself, but no – everyone just got up and walked away.

His father went to bed to sleep off his drunk, intensified by the wine he'd gulped down with his dinner, and Raúl helped his mother wash the dishes, remove and put away the table extensions, and tidy up the house. Neither of them mentioned what had happened. They shuffled back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen without looking at one another, but Raúl could imagine his mother's feelings: she hadn't seen her sister or her nephews in two years and now, with this incident, and her brother-in-law's outrage, what would happen?

Later, as he tossed restlessly between the sheets, he heard her get out of bed, open the front door, and close it gently behind her. The sound of her sobs reached him, intermingled with the thunder of the storm that had been threatening since midday. Suddenly his intense concentration on everything that was happening outside and inside the house focused on the wind whistling in the pine trees next door, and a few seconds after that, on the fury of a torrential deluge that seemed to bring the sky down along with it. Concerned about his mother but not daring to follow her, he imagined she must be outside, beneath the little overhang on the porch, and he assumed she hadn't turned on the light in case some neighbor passed by; no one would see her crying, not even him. As he hung on every sound, trying to imagine what she was thinking, what she was feeling, he heard a car brake to a halt in front of the house and thought it must be his uncle coming to rescue them and take them to live with his cousins in Los Angeles, forever far from the fear and violence, the blows, the shame.

He got up, barefoot and silent, and mentally repeating over and over the few English words he knew, he ran to the front door: for a few months now he'd been tall enough to reach the peephole. He carefully opened that little metal slot so that his mother wouldn't hear him, and

beyond her darkened silhouette he saw that the car was, in fact, a taxi, but it wasn't his uncle getting out of it in that downpour – it was El Gallego from across the way, Señor García Mejuto. He carried a big bundle in his arms, and when the taxi vanished he saw him struggling with the keys as he tried to open the lock on the wrought iron gate single-handedly, passing the bundle a few times from one arm to the other. And suddenly, rising clearly above the noise of the wind and the rain, he heard the squalling protests of a baby.

Just then García Mejuto finally managed to open the gate, and Raúl saw him run across the garden in the rain and disappear into his house. The lights went on at once, and he went back to bed before his mother could open the door.

Raúl smiled. Today he'd had a long conversation with that baby. After so many years he no longer thought of Daniel, the son of El Gallego and his wife, as an adopted child; surely none of the other neighbors did either. It was a fact that lay dormant in the depths of their collective memory, a partially real, but inactive, bit of neighborhood lore: almost thirty years had gone by, and although the kid no longer lived with his parents, he was considered an unquestionable resident of the block.

And yet Raúl had always possessed an exceptional memory and clearly recalled a conversation his mother and father had one night, imagining that he was still in the little room on the terrace. He remembered it all: the monotone of her voice, her insistence that she didn't buy the García Mejutos' story; she didn't believe that their blond, blue-eyed boy, as white as the inside of a split loaf of bread, could possibly be the child of some young girl who was unequipped to raise him and had put him up for adoption. Besides, the way El Gallego had showed up with the baby in the rain, in the middle of the night . . . That, she said to her husband

without further explanation, was really very strange.

From his spot in the kitchen, completely motionless in the doorway, with a glass of water clasped firmly in both hands, Raúl couldn't see them, but he recognized every little sound they made. His mother was sewing at the dining room table, and every few minutes she laid down her scissor or opened the lid of her sewing box or smoothed the cloth between her hands. He knew which chair she was sitting in because he recognized the special way each one creaked, just as he had always been able to distinguish the sound each drawer produced when it was opened, anywhere in the house. His father, who was reading the evening paper at the time, wasn't concentrating on any article in particular; he kept flipping the pages. Raúl imagined that what she was saying would provoke him, and his fear of a reaction made him anxious. That was the only occasion when she had dared go one step further in constructing a theory: the baby had been stolen. She'd heard about things like that; she had friends from church who knew those women that had joined forces to look for their disappeared children, young boys and girls, most of them students or laborers who hadn't supported the military coup . . . She'd heard that they robbed the newborns of the pregnant women and kept them for themselves . . . And García Mejuto, who had been a Franco supporter – she'd found out from the owner of the hardware store – had some very unpleasant friends: “You've never seen them because they come on weekdays, at noon, but they look to me like military in plainclothes,” she added. Seeing that he didn't respond, his mother grew bolder and at last suggested that they ought to do something, file a report, something like that . . . The sound of the newspaper as his father slammed it shut and hurled it to the floor startled him. He wasn't going to listen to any more bullshit, he said, dragging the chair as he stood up; he would do nothing of the sort; he wasn't about to make enemies with a neighbor who had every right . . . It was always the same thing with her – she was an idiot, a lunatic. How

could you even think . . . If the kid is really the son of terrorists, he's better off with El Gallego and his wife. Don't you see? They've done the right thing by taking him away from them and raising him properly, in a respectable family. . .”

All that previous summer – it was '76, '77 at the latest – he and his mother had often seen the Ford Falcon stop by the García Mejutos' house at midday, and had watched as four men in dark suits, always the same ones, got out of the car and went inside. Through the master bedroom windows, he and his mother saw them emerge from the car with supermarket bags, and then their bodies moved back and forth among the flowerpots on El Gallego's terrace until the smoke from the barbecue had nearly dissipated. Afterward they would gather in the enclosure to eat the roast. The music and explosive laughter would resound for hours in the silence of the summer afternoon siesta. One afternoon, around the time they had that German shepherd who occasionally crossed over in order to explore other sidewalks, he had discovered a cardboard box filled with empty wine bottles leaning against El Gallego's tree, and he bent down to count them: there were seven.

The boss – or more accurately, the one who seemed to be the most arrogant and gave orders to the rest – “Go park the car in the shade,” “Carry the bags up the back stairs,” “Don't forget the charcoal” – that sort of thing – sat up front in the Ford Falcon but never drove. The driver was a small, lame guy. Raúl clearly recalled the boss's waxy face; he was a thin, fairly young guy with deep pockmarks on his cheeks, rather short hair, and a huge Videla-style mustache. “All those damn soldiers,” she had remarked, “want to look like Videla.”

One day they showed up while he was sitting in the doorway of his house in the shade of the chinaberry tree on the sidewalk. Raúl was scraping the dry flakes off a scab on his knee with his fingernail. It was a delicate operation because if he peeled off the center, much thicker and

deeper than the rest, it would hurt and probably bleed, but he never could manage to resist the temptation of advancing inward from the edges. He had already scraped off too much and it was starting to hurt him, but he couldn't stop, and he was concentrating so hard that he didn't see the Falcon pull up. Suddenly he perceived something and slowly raised his head: the guy with the pockmarked face was standing in the middle of the street, leaning against the open door of the car, and he was looking at him with a half-smile. A sort of smug expression.

Raúl remembered that look; he especially remembered how he'd stood up and retreated across the front lawn. At the time he couldn't have imagined how many years would go by before circumstances would once again place him before the eyes of that individual whose name he never even knew.