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MANUEL DE LOPE

The Wrong Blood

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
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VINTAGE BOOKS
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One

THE WEDDING

IT WAS THE MONTH OF MAY, or the month of June, in any case summer was near, and within only a few weeks the war would break out, although nobody knew this at the time, and those who had premonitions couldn't go so far as to believe them, because fear rejects what the intuition accepts, and they wouldn't have been able to convince anybody anyway. And so it was the month of May, or the month of June, in wedding season. The midday sunlight exaggerated the radiance of the meadows on the banks of the Bidasoa River. The mountains retained their thick semi-darkness, and the waters of the river were subsiding to their lowest level. On one of the sharpest curves in the road from Irún to Elizondo, a curve of most unhappy memory, the huge roses climbing up the façade of Etxarri's Bar proudly displayed themselves to the sun. People who know about roses maintain that rosebushes with large flowers were fashionable for many years, and that roses as plump as a wet nurse's breasts bloomed in the gardens; and such a plant had sprouted up on the façade of the big, rambling inn, which stood with its back to a riverside meadow. The building had been a roadside inn for mule drivers and carters until 1924, and then a cheap stopping place for truckers and automobilists when the road was partly cobbled and partly blacktopped around 1933. By then, rosebushes bearing

large roses had gone out of style, and visitors to the Etxarri inn were always surprised by the size of the roses on its front wall, because diminutive tea roses were the current fashion in every garden.

Three men dressed as if they were on their way to a wedding arrived in a black Citroën II, which had been washed that same day or at the latest the day before, for its chrome parts shone like mirrors, its waxed metal surfaces gleamed, and its windscreen and windows dazzled. Its whitewall tyres, quite rare on this model, looked as though they had been scrubbed with a toothbrush. The dust of the road had deposited only a thin, velvety veil that extended no higher than the vehicle's fenders. Its occupants, who had been riding with the windows down so that air would circulate, alighted at the door of the bar. One of the passengers was a rich man from the town of Vera de Bidasoa. Of his two companions, there was little to say, but the proprietor of Etxarri's Bar knew the rich man from Vera. He owned a hardware store as well as a half interest in a paper factory.

As the three men, sheathed in their wedding finery, entered the café, they wiped their faces with their handkerchiefs. The rich man from Vera, a tall, fat person, continued without stopping across the half-lit room, heading for the dark door of the latrine, where he intended to urinate. 'Let me have a glass of water,' he said as he walked. The other two men stepped up to the bar and shooed away flies. The bartender, the owner of Etxarri's, always kept a loaded double-barrelled shotgun within reach under the bar. As he fetched three glasses from the cupboard, he thought that those men could be going to

a wedding in Lesaka, and he also thought that they could be going to a wedding in Irún, and in any case, he thought, no one would have washed and polished his car like that if he didn't intend to go to a wedding. For the same reason, no one on his way to a wedding seems like a dangerous man, and experience taught that dangerous men can come *from* a wedding, after the dancing and the drinking and the horseplay, but that men are not dangerous before going *to* a wedding, and so the owner of Etxarri's Bar gave no thought to his loaded shotgun. He let the water run for a few seconds until it flowed cool from the tank. When this modern cistern was built, the inn's water had begun to take on a ferruginous taste, because of the pipes or because of the tank itself, which had been manufactured out of anodized sheet metal, but many people liked the rusty taste, and some thought the rust might be beneficial to bones and teeth. Without waiting for the rich man from Vera to return, one of the other two took a drink from his glass and smacked his lips in delight.

Two or three minutes passed, and the rich man from Vera who had gone to the latrine did not reappear. The owner of Etxarri's Bar figured that it must have been two or three minutes, enough time for the flies to start landing again here and there. The bar was submerged in semi-darkness, like a sacristy. The only window had a southern exposure and let in a great rectangle of sunlight half filtered by the rosebush that spread over the façade. Those who knew Etxarri's in those days say that the stuffed head of an African buffalo hung on the wall right next to the window. Even some years later, the African buffalo's head was still there, surmounted by its great helmet

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of horns, with long, almost feminine eyelashes above big brown glass eyes, parted lips revealing four yellow teeth, and a thrusting snout, black and shiny, as if the animal had plunged it into honey or marmalade. New visitors to the bar would raise their nostrils and admire the gigantic head, which almost touched the ceiling, and ask how the head of an African buffalo could have wound up in the valley of the Bidasoa. Regular customers, on the other hand, would contemplate the African buffalo's head with consummate naturalness, as if it were the head of a fighting bull, and make rude jokes about its horns. What's certain is that the innkeeper either didn't know where the head had come from or never cared to give an explanation of its provenance. He would talk about an uncle of his who had been a sailor, and on other occasions he would talk about another, much less probable uncle who had been a hunter. The bar top was made of coloured artificial stone. Near the window, there were two wooden tables, placed end to end and furnished with benches, where the truckers used to eat and where the mule drivers had eaten before them, and where the Romans may have eaten long before the mule drivers; but after the war, the wooden tables and benches were replaced by normal tables with four places and tablecloths. In the rear part of the house, next to the cow barn, facing the meadow, and under a kind of porch that had once been a hayloft, one of those long tables could still be seen, transformed into the back wall of a henhouse or rabbit hutch, with boards forming the side walls and roof and a metal screen covering the front. An arch behind the bar framed a mirror and the glass shelves where the liquor was kept. The rarest bottles, containing spirits

no longer to be found, stood on the top shelves, out of reach. On the right-hand side of the bar, nickel-plated and gleaming like a Rolls-Royce, was the coffee machine.

The second visitor did not appear to like the ferruginous water from the sheet-metal tank, the same water that others praised as the most unusual of mineral waters, and it was evident from this that he was an outsider. 'This water tastes terrible,' he muttered in a low voice. Many people, including some of the locals, thought the same thing the stranger did, and the owner of Etxarri's Bar didn't bat an eye.

'We're on our way to a wedding,' said the first visitor, crossing the room and admiring the rosebush from inside the window. 'May I pick a couple of roses when we leave?'

'Of course,' the innkeeper said.

The third glass of water remained untouched. The rich man from Vera who had gone to the restroom seemed to be in no hurry to come out. In those days, the man who ran the Etxarri inn was in his early forties, and there were some who knew he was not an Etxarri, that is, he wasn't a member of the Etxarri family, although he was known by that name because he presided over the inn, and the name of the inn could not be changed. Whether or not this man's uncle had sailed the seas or hunted buffalo was a question of little importance. The master of Etxarri's Bar was distrustful by nature, as keepers of inns often are, and when the old-style roadside inns and taverns went out of existence, the innkeepers' distrust passed, by the same right and the law of communicating vessels, to the proprietors of the small, cheap hotels known as *hostales*. He was an ugly man, with an apron perpetually tied round

his waist so that he could dry his hands, and he cared little about the roses on the façade, because they were his wife's department. His wife was not in the bar on that day. She herself was indeed an Etxarri, a member of the family that had established the inn in the days of the mule drivers, or in the days of the Romans, and the man she called her husband, even though he wasn't, had formed the habit of acting as though the inn belonged to him. But that wasn't what was important, nor would he cite it some years later, when it was a matter of taking legal possession of the property without any more right to it than what might have accrued to him from sharing a bed, that is, without any right supported by documents or implied in his name; but the war had caused so many difficulties that few people raised questions about any property rights to the ruins of the inn. No one knew for sure whether there might be titles or documents somewhere, or whether the inn and its meadow and the half-dozen oaks that constituted its share of the forest could belong to anyone who didn't bear that name, nor could any civil-law notary testify to any of this, and the upshot was that the innkeeper was called Etxarri, too, although he wasn't a member of the family. He had a stepdaughter, that is, the daughter of the woman who shared his bed and a previous man, but that day the stepdaughter wasn't in the inn, either. The girl had recently reached her sixteenth birthday, and from time to time her stepfather opined that she needed some discipline, which took the form of blows, administered either with his hands or with his belt. Of course, no one imagined that the war would break out in a few weeks or that the girl, María

Antonia, would suffer what she suffered, which will be related in due course. On that day, the owner of Etxarri's Bar was alone. He drew back slightly from the counter. At this point, he felt more curiosity than distrust in regard to the three men, who he was convinced were on their way to a wedding, even though he had only two of them in his sight, because the rich man from Vera de Bidasoa, whose name, the innkeeper knew, was either Leonardo or Leopoldo, was still in the restroom. Five minutes passed, and the innkeeper shooed away the flies again with a corner of his apron. One of the men, the one who looked the youngest and who had asked about the roses, turned towards his friend. 'What's your uncle doing?'

But the innkeeper knew that mature men have bladder problems or worse. He didn't know whether the men were going to pay for their three glasses of water, even though one of them was untouched and the other two only half empty, nor did he consider asking them to pay if they didn't; it was free, his medicinal water. Behind the house and the meadow, the mountainside rose in a steep slope to the spring whose water was carried from there to the cistern, and laying the requisite pipes and building the tank by means of which running water passed from the spring to a tap in the inn had entailed an investment, which it was only just that the innkeeper would attempt to recuperate, at least in part, by charging for a glass of water. He would see about that later, or he wouldn't see about it at all. The shooed flies had taken over the rectangle of sunlight that came in through the window. The man who looked like a boy stepped through the curtain of light and flies and stood by the window again. For a moment,

he contemplated the automobile. Then he looked around the bar. He raised his eyes to the buffalo's head and examined it with indifference, as if he were a frequent visitor to the inn, or as if his young life had been replete with buffaloes. After that, he returned to the right side of the bar. And then he lost patience. 'Don't you think something's happened to him?'

Ordinarily, no one requires more than a couple of minutes to urinate, although it's said that women take longer than men and that obese men take longer than women, and there are probably scientific reasons that justify this point of view. When the young man asked his question, the three of them – that is, the two customers and the innkeeper – simultaneously turned their heads towards the rear of the bar and started moving towards the toilets. Light entered this area through glass panes on a door that faced the luminous green meadow and opened under the porch, where a rabbit hutch was kept. There were no ladies' and gentlemen's rooms, there was only one latrine, and generally anyone could urinate for as long as he or she wished. Although the drinking water from the spring was connected to a tank and the tank to a tap, the toilet facilities had not been connected to a septic tank, so that waste water was carried directly into the river after passing through a proper toilet, a white porcelain bowl stamped with the calligraphy of the Manufactures Villeroy Frères, of Bayonne. One may suppose that in those places and those times, even toilets were smuggled. The nephew stepped up to the latrine door and rapped on it discreetly with his knuckles. At the other end of the bar, the buffalo thrust his snout forward.

'Is everything all right, Uncle?'

The door was neither open nor locked, and they had great difficulty pushing their way in. Inside, the rich man from Vera de Bidasoa was lying on the floor, wedged between the door and the toilet bowl, with his fly open and his eyes rolled up, dead or almost dead from a stroke. They had great difficulty opening the door because the rich man's body was obstructing it, but in the end they managed to haul him out of the latrine and drag him a few feet into the dining room. It was unthinkable that a rich and ample man should die in such a confined space as that privy. But to say that he was a rich man back then is not the same as to say that someone is a rich man now, when much more capital runs through the veins of the valley, although that's no reason why anyone, even in those days, should have had to die in a latrine. His travelling companions loosened the starched collar of his wedding shirt, while the innkeeper opened the back door, the one that faced the meadow, and then hurried to open the front door as well, so that air could circulate. Nobody thought about closing the rich man from Vera's fly. He was still breathing. They put damp towels on his forehead and concluded at once that they urgently needed to get him out of there and take him to where he could be helped.

There was a wooden bench that had been used as a butcher's table for quartering pigs and as just a bench ever since pig-slaughtering days had come to an end, and in any case there were no pigs at the inn, because rabbits and chickens were considered more profitable and required less work. The man's