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MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

The Neighborhood

A Novel

Translated from the Spanish
by Edith Grossman

ff

FABER & FABER

Contents

1. Marisa's Dream 1
2. An Unexpected Visit 12
3. Weekend in Miami 20
4. The Entrepreneur and the Lawyer 30
5. The Den of Gossip 37
6. A Wreck of Show Business 47
7. Quique's Agony 57
8. Shorty 67
9. A Singular Affair 74
10. The Three Jokers 83
11. The Scandal 92
12. The People's Dining Room 105
13. An Absence 114
14. Conjugal Disagreements and Agreements 128
15. Shorty Is Afraid 139
16. The Landowner and the Chinese Woman 150
17. Strange Operations Regarding Juan Peineta 162
18. Engineer Cárdenas's Longest Night 178
19. Shorty and Power 186
20. A Whirlpool 204
21. Special Edition of *Exposed* 236
22. Happy Ending? 251

Marisa's Dream

Was she awake or dreaming? That slight warmth on her right instep was still there, an unusual sensation that gave her gooseflesh all along her body and revealed that she wasn't alone in bed. A confusion of memories came rushing into her head but then began to fall into place, like a crossword puzzle that one fills in slowly. The wine after their meal had made them a little tipsy, while their talk passed from terrorism to movies to gossip, when suddenly Chabela looked at her watch and jumped up, her face pale: "Curfew! My God, I can't get to La Rinconada in time! How the hours have flown." Marisa insisted that she stay and sleep there. It wouldn't be a problem, Quique had gone to Arequipa for a board meeting early that morning at the brewery, they had the Golf Club apartment to themselves. Chabela called her husband. Luciano, always so understanding, said it was fine, he'd make sure the two girls left for the school bus on time; Chabela should just stay at Marisa's, that was better than being stopped by a patrol if she violated the curfew. The damn curfew. But, of course, terrorism was worse.

Chabela stayed and slept in the bed with Marisa, and now Marisa felt the sole of her friend's foot on her right instep: a light pressure, a soft, gentle, delicate sensation. How had it happened that they were so close to each other in a bed so big that when she saw it, Chabela joked: "But tell me,

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Marisita, tell me how many people sleep in this gigantic bed?" She recalled that both had lain in their respective corners, separated by at least half a meter. Which one had moved so much in her sleep that Chabela's foot was now touching her instep?

She didn't dare move. She held her breath so she wouldn't wake her friend, in case she pulled back her foot and the delicious sensation that spread from her instep along the rest of her body, making her tense and concentrated, disappeared. Gradually, in the dim bedroom, she was able to make out a few strips of light through the blinds, the shadow of the bureau, the door to the dressing room, the bathroom door, the rectangles of paintings on the walls, Tilsa's desert with the serpent-woman, the chamber with the Szyszlo totem, the floor lamp, the sculpture by Berrocal. She closed her eyes and listened to Chabela's breathing, very faint but regular. Chabela was sleeping, perhaps dreaming, so she was the one, no doubt about it, who had approached her friend's body in her sleep.

Surprised, embarrassed, wondering again whether she was awake or dreaming, Marisa finally became aware of what her body already knew: she was aroused. That delicate sole of a foot warming her instep had set fire to her skin and senses, and she was sure that if she slipped a hand between her legs, she would find it wet. "Have you lost your mind?" she asked herself. "Getting excited by a woman? How long has that been going on, Marisita?" She had often been aroused by herself, of course, and had masturbated at times, rubbing a pillow between her legs, but always thinking about men. As far as she could recall, never a woman, never! And yet now here she was, trembling from head to

foot with a mad desire for not only their feet but everything else to touch so she would feel, just as she did on her instep, the closeness and warmth of her friend all along her body.

Moving very gently, her heart pounding, simulating the breathing of someone asleep, she turned slightly to the side so that, although she didn't touch her, she could feel that now she was just a few millimeters from Chabela's back, buttocks, and legs. She could hear her respiration more clearly and thought she felt a hidden vapor emanating from the body that was so close, and reaching her, enveloping her. In spite of herself, as if she wasn't aware of what she was doing, she moved her right hand very slowly and rested it on her friend's thigh. "Blessed curfew," she thought. She felt her heart beating faster: Chabela was going to wake and move her hand: "Get away, don't touch me, have you lost your mind, what's the matter with you?" But Chabela didn't move and continued to seem submerged in a deep sleep. She heard her inhale, exhale, and had the impression that the air was coming toward her, entering her nostrils and mouth and warming her inside. In the midst of her excitement, how absurd, she continued to think about the curfew, the blackouts, the kidnappings—especially Cachito's—and the terrorists' bombs. What a country! What a country!

Beneath her hand, the surface of that thigh was firm and smooth, slightly damp, perhaps because of perspiration or some cream. Before she went to bed, had Chabela put on any of the creams Marisa kept in the bathroom? She hadn't seen her undress; she had handed her one of her nightgowns, a very short one, and Chabela had changed in the dressing room. When she returned to the bedroom, Chabela

already had it on; it was semitransparent and left bare her arms and legs and a glimpse of buttock, and Marisa recalled having thought: "What a nice body, how well preserved in spite of two children, it must be because she goes to the gym three times a week." She had continued moving millimeter by millimeter, with the growing fear of waking her friend; now, terrified and happy, she felt, to the rhythm of their respective breathing, momentary bits of thigh, of buttock, of the legs of both women touching lightly and instantly moving apart. "No, she's going to wake up, Marisa, this is madness." But she didn't withdraw and kept waiting—what was she waiting for?—as if in a trance, for the next fleeting touch. Her right hand continued to rest on Chabela's thigh, and Marisa realized she had begun to perspire.

And then her friend moved. She thought her heart would stop. For a few seconds she stopped breathing, closed her eyes tightly, and pretended she was asleep. Chabela, without moving from her place, had raised her arm and now Marisa felt, on the hand resting on the other woman's thigh, Chabela's hand resting. Was she going to move her hand away? No, just the opposite, gently, one might say affectionately, Chabela, entwining her fingers with Marisa's, with a slight pressure and keeping hand to skin, was moving that hand toward her groin. Marisa didn't believe what was happening. On the fingers trapped by Chabela she felt the hair of a slightly raised pubis and the wet, palpitating opening against which her hand was being pressed. Trembling from head to toe, Marisa leaned in and pressed her breasts, belly, and legs against the back, buttocks, and legs of her friend as with all five fingers she rubbed Chabela's sex, trying to find the small clitoris,

scratching, separating the wet lips of her sex swollen by yearning, always guided by the hand of Chabela, who, she felt, was also trembling, adjusting to her body, helping her to become entangled with her, to unite with her.

Marisa buried her face in the thick hair that she pushed aside with movements of her head until she found Chabela's neck and ears, and now she kissed, licked, and nibbled them with great pleasure, no longer thinking about anything, blind with happiness and desire. A few seconds or minutes later, Chabela turned around, searching for her mouth. They kissed avidly, desperately, first on the lips and then, opening their mouths, entwining their tongues, exchanging their saliva, while their hands removed, tore at, their nightgowns until they were naked and embracing; they turned from one side to the other, caressing each other's breasts, kissing them, and then armpits and bellies, while they rubbed each other's sex and felt them throb in a time without time, so infinite and intense.

When Marisa, in a daze and satiated, felt unable to avoid sinking into an irresistible sleep, she managed to tell herself that during all of the extraordinary experience that had just occurred, neither she nor Chabela—who also seemed overcome by sleep now—had exchanged a single word. As she sank into a bottomless void she thought again of the curfew and believed she heard a distant explosion.

Hours later, when she awoke, a grayish daylight, barely screened by the venetian blinds, came into the bedroom, and Marisa was alone in the bed. Embarrassment made her tremble from head to foot. Had it all actually happened? It wasn't possible, no, no, it wasn't. But yes, of course it had happened. Then she heard a noise in the bathroom and,

feeling frightened, closed her eyes, pretending to sleep. She opened them just a little, and through her lashes she saw Chabela already dressed and ready to leave.

"Marisita, I'm so sorry I woke you," she heard her say in the most natural voice in the world.

"Don't be silly," she stammered, certain her voice was barely audible. "Are you leaving already? Don't you want some breakfast first?"

"No, darling," her friend replied: her voice certainly wasn't trembling and she didn't seem uncomfortable, she was the same as always, without the slightest flush on her cheeks and an absolutely normal gaze with no touch of mischief or impishness in her large dark eyes; her black hair was somewhat disordered. "I have to rush so I can see the girls before they leave for school. Thanks so much for your hospitality. We'll talk, here's a kiss."

She threw her a kiss from the bedroom door and left. Marisa curled up, felt desperate, was about to get out of bed but curled up again and pulled the sheets over her. Of course it had happened, and the best proof of that was that she was naked and her nightgown wrinkled and half off the bed. She raised the sheets and saw with a laugh that the nightgown she had lent Chabela was there too, a little puddle next to her feet. She began to laugh but suddenly cut it off. My God, my God. Did she feel sorry? Absolutely. Chabela had such presence of mind. Could she have done things like this before? Impossible. They had known each other for so long, they had always told each other everything, if Chabela had ever had an adventure like this she would have told her about it. Or maybe not? Would she trade this for their friendship? Of course not. Chabelita was her closest

friend, more than a sister. What would their relationship be from now on? The same as before? Now they shared a tremendous secret. My God, my God, she couldn't believe it had happened. All morning as she bathed, dressed, had breakfast, gave instructions to the cook, the butler, and the maid, the same questions whirled around her head: "Did you do what you did, Marisita?" And what would happen if Quique found out that she and Chabela had done what they had done? Would he be angry? Would he be jealous and make a scene as if she had betrayed him with a man? Would she tell him about it? No, never in this life, no one else should know anything about it, how embarrassing. And yet about noon, when Quique came back from Arequipa and brought her the usual pastries from La Ibérica and the bag of large green peppers, and as she kissed him and asked how things had gone at the brewery board meeting—"Fine, fine, Blondie, we've decided to stop shipping beer to Ayacucho, it isn't worth it, the percentage that the terrorists and pseudo-terrorists are demanding is ruining us"—she kept asking herself: "Why did Chabela say nothing at all and leave as if nothing had happened? Why else, idiot? Because she, too, was dying of embarrassment, she wanted to play the innocent and to dissemble, as if nothing had happened. But it did happen, Marisita. Would it happen again or never again?"

She spent the entire week not daring to phone Chabela, waiting anxiously for her to call. How strange! Never before had so many days passed without their seeing each other or talking. Or, perhaps, thinking about it carefully, it wasn't so strange: Chabela must be feeling just as uncomfortable and surely was waiting for Marisa to take the

initiative. Could she be angry? But why? Hadn't Chabela made the first move? She had only put a hand on her leg, it could have been something accidental, without purpose, with no bad intention. It was Chabela who had taken her hand and made her touch her there and masturbate her. How daring! When that thought came to her she felt a mad desire to laugh, and a heat in her cheeks, which must have turned bright red.

She was this way for the rest of the week, distracted, focused on that memory almost without realizing that she was following the routine determined by her schedule, Italian classes with Diana, the ladies' tea for Margot's niece who was finally getting married, two working lunches with Quique's partners to which wives were invited, the obligatory visit to her parents for tea, going to the movies with her cousin Matilde, seeing a film to which she paid no attention at all because she didn't stop thinking about it for an instant and at times still wondered whether it hadn't been a dream. And that lunch with her classmates from high school and the inevitable conversation, which she only half followed, about poor Cachito, who had been kidnapped almost two months ago. They said an expert from the insurance company had come from New York to negotiate the ransom with the terrorists, and that poor Nina, his wife, was having therapy to keep from going crazy. How distracted she must have been when, one night, Enrique made love to her and she suddenly realized that her husband had lost his enthusiasm and was saying to her: "I don't know what's wrong, Blondie, I think that in the ten years we've been married I've never seen you so uninterested. Is it because of the terrorism? Let's go to sleep."

On Thursday, exactly one week after the thing that had or had not happened, Enrique came home from the office earlier than usual. They were having a whiskey on the terrace, watching the sea of lights of Lima at their feet, and talking, naturally, about the subject that obsessed every household in those days, the attacks and kidnappings of the Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, the MRTA, the blackouts almost every night because electrical towers had been blown up, leaving entire districts of the city in darkness, and the explosions the terrorists used to awaken Limeños at midnight and at dawn. They recalled having seen from this same terrace, a few months earlier, on one of the hills on the outskirts of the city, the torches light up in the shape of a hammer and sickle, a prophecy of what would happen if the Senderistas won this war. Enrique said that the situation was becoming untenable for businesses, security measures were increasing expenses in an insane way, the insurance companies wanted to keep raising premiums, and if the bandits had their way, Peru would soon be in a situation like Colombia's, where businesspeople, driven away by terrorists, apparently were moving en masse to Panama and Miami to run their enterprises from there. With everything that signified in complications, extra costs, and losses. And just as he was telling her, "Perhaps we'll have to go to Panama or Miami too, sweetheart," Quintanilla, the butler, appeared on the terrace: "Señora Chabela's on the phone, señora." "I'll take the call in the bedroom," she said, and when she stood up, she heard Quique say: "Blondie, tell Chabela that I'll call Luciano one of these days so the four of us can get together."

When she sat down on the bed and picked up the receiver,

her legs were trembling. "Hello, Marisita?" she heard, and said: "I'm glad you called, I've been swamped with so much to do and planned to call you first thing tomorrow."

"I was in bed with an awful flu," said Chabela, "but I'm better now. And missing you terribly, darling."

"Me, too," Marisa responded. "I don't think we've ever spent a week without seeing each other, have we?"

"I'm calling to give you an invitation," said Chabela. "I warn you that I won't take no for an answer. I have to go to Miami for two or three days, there are some problems at the apartment on Brickell Avenue and they can be solved only if I'm there in person. Come with me, I'm inviting you. I already have tickets for the two of us, I got them free with the miles I've earned. We'll leave on Thursday at midnight, we'll stay there Friday and Saturday, and come back Sunday. Don't say no, because I'll be furious with you, sweetheart."

"Of course I'll go with you, I'd be delighted," said Marisa; she thought her heart would leap out of her mouth. "I'll tell Quique right now, and if he has any objections, I'll divorce him. Thanks very much, darling. Great, terrific, I love the idea."

She hung up the phone and remained on the bed for a moment until she calmed down. She was overwhelmed by a feeling of well-being, a joyful uncertainty. That things had happened and now she and Chabela would leave next Thursday for Miami and for three days they'd forget about kidnappings, the curfew, blackouts, the whole nightmare. When she returned to the terrace, Enrique made a joke at her expense: "Whoever laughs alone is remembering her wicked deeds. May I ask why your eyes are shining like that?" "I won't tell you, Quique," she flirted with her

husband, putting her arms around his neck. "Even if you kill me, I won't tell you. Chabela invited me to Miami for three days, and I told her that if you won't let me go with her, I'm divorcing you."

An Unexpected Visit

As soon as he saw him walk into his office, the engineer Enrique Cárdenas—Quique to his wife and friends—felt a strange discomfort. What bothered him about the reporter who approached with his hand extended? His Tarzanesque walk, arms swinging and shoulders swaying like the king of the jungle? The ratlike little smile that contracted his forehead beneath hair that had been gelled and flattened against his skull like a metal helmet? The tight purple corduroy trousers that clung to his skinny body like a glove? Or those yellow shoes with thick platforms to make him look taller? Everything about him seemed ugly and vulgar.

"Delighted to meet you, Engineer Cárdenas." He extended a soft little hand that perspired so much it left Enrique's hand damp. "Finally you'll allow me to clasp those fingers after so many requests on my part."

He had a shrill, high voice that seemed to be mocking him, small shifty eyes, a rachitic little body, and Enrique even noticed that he smelled of underarms or feet. Was it his odor that made him dislike this individual so much from the very start?

"I'm sorry, I know you've called very frequently," he apologized, without much conviction. "I can't see all the people who call me, you can't imagine how crowded my schedule is. Please, have a seat."

"I can imagine very well, Engineer," said the little man;

his high-heeled boots creaked when he walked, and he wore a very tight blue jacket and an iridescent tie that seemed to choke him. Everything about him was tiny, including his voice. How old was he? Forty, fifty?

"What a fantastic view you have here, Engineer! That hill in the background is San Cristóbal, isn't it? Are we on the twentieth or twenty-first floor?"

"The twenty-first," he specified. "You're lucky, the sun's out today and you can enjoy the view. Normally, at this time of year, the fog makes the whole city disappear."

"It must give you an enormous feeling of power to have Lima at your feet," the visitor joked; his little gray eyes darted about, and it seemed to Quique that everything he said revealed a profound insincerity. "And what an elegant office, Engineer. Allow me to have a look at these pictures."

Now the visitor walked up and down, calmly examining the mechanical drawings of pipes, pulleys, water tanks, and gasoline pumps with which the decorator Leonorcita Artigas had adorned the walls of his office with the argument: "Don't they look like abstract etchings, Quique?" The charm of Leonorcita, who at least had alternated those impersonal, hieroglyphic drawings with attractive photographs of Peruvian landscapes, had cost him a fortune.

"Let me introduce myself," the little man said at last. "Rolando Garro, a lifelong journalist. I'm director of the weekly *Exposed*."

He handed him a card, always with that half smile and a shrill, high-pitched voice that seemed barbed. That's what bothered him most about his visitor, Enrique decided: not his odor but his voice.

"I know who you are, Señor Garro." The businessman

tried to be pleasant. "I've seen your television program. It was canceled for political reasons, wasn't it?"

"It was canceled because it told the truth, something not tolerated in Peru today, or ever," the journalist stated bitterly, but still smiling. "They've already canceled several of my radio and television programs. Sooner or later they'll also cancel *Exposed* for the same reason. But I don't care. It's part of the job in this country."

His shifty little eyes looked at Enrique defiantly, and Enrique regretted having agreed to see this man. Why had he? Because his secretary, sick of so many calls, had asked him: "Shall I tell him then, Engineer, that you'll never see him? If you'll forgive me, I can't stand it anymore. It's driving all of us in the office crazy. He's been calling five or six times a day, every day, for the past few weeks." He'd thought that, after all, a reporter could sometimes be useful. "But dangerous, too," he concluded. He had a presentiment that nothing good would come of this visit.

"Tell me what I can do for you, Señor Garro." He noticed that the journalist had stopped smiling and stared at him with a glance both submissive and sarcastic. "If it's a matter of advertisement, let me say that we're not involved with that. We have a subcontract with a company that takes care of all the publicity for the group."

But evidently the visitor didn't want ads for the weekly. The little man was very serious now. He said nothing and observed Enrique in silence, as if searching for the words he would say next, or maintaining suspense in order to make him nervous. And in fact, as he waited for Rolando Garro to open his mouth, Enrique began to feel not only irritated but uneasy. What did this vulgar little man want?

"Why don't you have a bodyguard, Engineer?" Garro asked suddenly. "At least, there are none to be seen."

Enrique was surprised, and he shrugged.

"I'm a fatalist, and I value my freedom," he replied. "Let whatever has to happen, happen. I couldn't live surrounded by bodyguards, I'd feel like a prisoner."

Had this person come for an interview? He wouldn't give him one, and pretty soon he'd kick him out.

"It's a very delicate subject, Engineer Cárdenas." The reporter had lowered his voice as if the walls could hear; he spoke with studied slowness as, in a somewhat theatrical manner, he opened the faded leather briefcase he was carrying and took out a portfolio held shut with two thick yellow bands. He didn't hand it to him immediately; he set it on his knees and again fixed his rat eyes on him, in which Enrique thought he could now see something obscure, perhaps threatening. Whatever had possessed him to make this appointment? The logical thing would have been for one of his assistants to see him, listen to him, and get rid of him. Now it was too late and perhaps he would regret it.

"I'm going to leave this dossier with you so you can examine it carefully, Engineer," said Garro, handing it to him with exaggerated solemnity. "When you look at it you'll understand why I wanted to bring it to you in person and not leave it with your secretaries. You can be certain that *Exposed* would never publish anything as vile as this."

He paused for a long time, not moving his eyes away, and continued in his falsetto voice, which became lower and lower:

"Don't ask how this came into my hands, because I won't tell you. It's a question of journalistic obligation, I suppose