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Sanora Babb

WOMAN ON A BALCONY



IT WAS AFTERNOON, a little past one o'clock, in the first summer after the war. The air held the sharp, homely scent of wild tobacco, sumac and castor beans, growing gigantic on the hills, saturated with sun. The powerful life of the sumac asserted itself under the thickly entangled parasite of yellow witch's hair, or, love-vine. A gentle wind up the canyon made the day's heat mild. White houses with red tile roofs clung to the great hill-sides along brief tortuous streets. El Ramo Way which curved round a hill, branching off the steep Viento Road, enclosed a eucalyptus bordered lot. There the children played their reflective games.

The very atmosphere, even in these quiet hills, was tainted with the insidious torpor of a world caught in evil, endless shock.

The open lot was pitted with shell holes and sundry marks of battle, and one huge open dugout with steps and a long seat

shaped into the earth. This was the deserted site of the African, Russian, and European theatres. Jungle conflict had been simulated in the scrub growth of the hills. The afternoons of the war years had been noisy with the children's imitative cries. Their voices were enlarged and carried far by the formation of the deep ravine.

Surrounding balconies looked down upon the abandoned debris of their fantasies. Other games and moods had had their season since, and for a reason unknown to adults and possibly to the children themselves, several weeks passed when no one came onto the lot, and boys wandered about the hill streets in separate and lonely state, whistling sad, incomplete tunes or simply appearing restless and glum.

A young woman standing on her balcony noticed that five of the boys had again gathered on the lot. They were six and thirteen and years in between. They moved aimlessly. One of them found an old grenade and threw it without interest. The youngest ones shouted with no purpose. One started a game reducing their ages, saying, "You are four, you are two, you are none." "None" giggled. Suddenly they all sang, "O, Columbia the Gem of the Ocean" and "The House I Live In" so lustily that it seemed the game today would be singing. The songs ended abruptly and finally. Someone called out, "Let's play Cloak-and-Dagger." The others called in unison: "Naw-o-o-o." A very little boy shouted, "Hey! I've got a lizard!" A big boy said, "That's nothing." Another said, "Only a Gila Monster or a Rattlesnake counts." One said, "Gila Monsters are in New Mexico and Arizona, what's the matter with you? Oh, boy! I saw one on our trip!" None appeared curious. A fat boy came down Viento Road as if he wished to descend into the city, but he joined the others.

The tall refugee boy who wore glasses and spoke French and German, and English unlike the others, came up the hill carrying two books which he put down on a stone as soon as he saw his companions. He was fourteen, shy and often solitary. He

appeared too old for some of the games but he played them all with passionate intensity. His war record was chiefly espionage, but one afternoon when he was commanding officer he had granted a pass for one of the boys to attend the circus, and was executed the next day by a firing squad.

The young woman on Viento Road had witnessed it all from the balcony.

Now there were seven boys but still they hung about in an aimless way, and were unable to settle upon any game. They moved to the shade of a mimosa tree and only one of the smaller boys was interested enough to climb it.

El Ramo Way coiled round their lot up another hill past the front doors of large and beautiful Spanish homes whose several floors climbed down the canyon sides. The boys three hundred feet below stood defined in unreal clarity by the reflection from the gleaming white of the Spanish walls.

Suddenly into the quiet from this upper road came a loud, rough voice which carried through the canyon but at first was indistinguishable, so quickly and surprisingly had it startled the dull afternoon.

One of the boys said, "Maybe the scissor and knife grinder."

"Where's his bell?" asked a little boy.

The voice was already known not to be that of the old knife-sharpener. It was too loud, and its tone offered no service, but rather was clearly divided into two declamatory announcements. It was unusual that such raucous advertising should be allowed in these streets, but the boys accepted it as such and waited. The noise was coming nearer; there was no need even to walk over to the eucalyptus trees for a better view.

The words now became clear, and the voice shook with rage and viciousness, and seemed to be an entity, disembodied from the speaker, his presence no longer necessary to its existence. It rocketed against the canyon walls and back into all the windows and doors, and it fell upon the boys with the other-worldliness

of a Cyclopean thunderbolt. They remained strangely quiet and looked at each other from curious eyes into startled faces.

The young woman had come back onto the balcony at the sound of the voice, and now she too waited and watched up the road and listened for the boys to speak.

The voice said: "I hate everybody."

A strong, middle-aged man, handsomely dressed in sport clothes, came into view. He was walking in an ordinary steady way, and for this reason he made good time around the hill. He stopped often, however, shook his fist cosmically, and shouted with confident and giant anger: "I hate everybody! I'll kill everybody!"

The boys made a run for the dugout and leaped in. The woman on the balcony could see their crouching bodies and their heads raised cautiously for a brief view. They whispered together and were silent.

The man now came into full sight and neared the junction of El Ramo Way and Viento Road, down which he could reach the city. He stopped and raised his arms and made a little bow to no one at all, and he commanded: "Look at me! Me! I can conquer you all! I despise you all!" Then he walked on, well pleased, but suddenly he stopped again, put a hand to his forehead in a gesture of remembering something forgotten, and although this time his tone was gentle, his voice was still keyed to a primal roar.

"No! No! I don't! I love everybody. That's it! I love everybody." He sounded piteous now, and pleading. He gazed round with an attitude of compassion, but spoke in a sly, maudlin voice: "See! I love every little beast of the fields and every bird in the sky. I love the sheep—even the sheep. *I love!*" He began to sob in a lost and helpless way.

Abruptly his sobs ended, his body stiffened, and he once more raised his angry fist and bellowed his hatred. It clapped and echoed against the canyon walls.

A small woman, apparently his wife, came resolutely round the hill, wary not to overtake him but to keep watchfully behind. When he stopped, she stopped. He came to the end of the Way where he must decide now whether to go up or down the main road. He deliberated quietly.

The wife looked searchingly up at the houses around her, and seeing the young woman on the nearest balcony, she called up to her discreetly, "Will you come down and help me hold him?" When the young woman did not reply at once, she added, "It just happened, all at once, a few minutes ago." The young woman was trembling violently and crying although she made no sound. She turned her head apologetically from side to side and leaned against the wall for support.

Other women came onto their balconies having seen the wife's appeal from their windows.

The man turned down the hill toward the city. He stopped to shout alternately his hatred and his love—love that was not at all like love but self-pity, love that was not exalted or ennobled with joy or tragedy, but sad and defensive.

A small flock of women appeared suddenly like pigeons in the street and surrounded the man. He shrieked in hunted terror and at once began to thrash about as if he were being bound although none had touched him. He threatened them, but they were not afraid. Either their maternity or their curiosity had overcome their horror. His wife caught up with them.

The boys came out of the dugout and watched.

An open car came down the hill and the women stopped it, and all together they began to force the man into the back seat. His blows of despair and rage struck them in vain. It was necessary for all of them to press into the car and hold him. One called out to the driver, "Go to the Emergency Hospital!" But the wife, who was standing on the running board, screamed, "No! No! Take us home. Back up! Drive up El Ramo Way!"

The driver obeyed the desperate wife. The young woman saw



from the balcony the frightful struggle taking place in the back seat.

The children began to talk excitedly in low impersonal tones, and once more they retired to the dugout.

The shattered peace of the warm afternoon became whole again. Bird voices embroidered the silence, and the tragedy in the big house was mysteriously shut away. The women did not return at once, but when they passed the dugout, the boys hid themselves securely.

The silence was splintered in less than an hour by the crashing of furniture and the breaking of glass. Great blows of a fist on a locked door sounded in the now alerted stillness of the little streets.

Then the voice came, a changed voice, monstrous with fear—hideous, animal, howling. Words were no longer, nor despair, nor hate, nor love. Only fear. The fear was traitorous, exposing the man's blackest, deepest pool of knowledge at war and afraid.

The winding streets in the cup of the mountains were listening-silent, and they held dread—of themselves, the unknown in each of them.

The boys now came out of their dugout with unnecessary stealth; they scattered, leaped into the heavy wild growth and began climbing the precipitous hillside, closing in slowly upon the house from which the howling screams came almost without respite. Only the tall refugee boy remained in the dugout, waiting.

A small tow-headed child was the first to return. He wore the dignity of his war days, but he did not salute as he went down the earthen steps and stood before the tall boy.

"Doctor," he said, "we've reconnoitered. We've found your man, but it will take some time to get him out. He's violent."

"Violent?" asked the doctor coolly.

"Yes sir. He's off his beam."

The others returned one by one, and were dispersed again to keep watch and report. This game went on all afternoon. Their human prey screeched his civilized chaotic agony.

At four o'clock, a young woman very big with child, came out on a balcony high up on Isabella Drive. Her hands were clasped over her ears. She waited for a moment of silence against the piteous and abhorrent monotony of sound, and then she screamed clearly over the canyon below, "For God's sake, why don't they take him away! If no one else will call the police, I will. I will this minute!" She went indoors and after a short time, a police ambulance came up the hill and slowed along El Ramo Way locating the voice.

The boys from their close observation posts, signaled the doctor below. The young woman who was always watching saw two

men bring out a drugged and secured man, and drive away with him down the hill into nowhere.

The scouts came back to report and rest, sprawled on the ground. One jumped up with a shout of joy and ran to the dugout. The others followed. They all conferred.

The new game began. They divided into two sides as usual. The doctor remained in the hospital.

As the leaders chose, one said, "You. You're a nut. And you, I'll take you. You're cracked, see? Now, remember. You gotta act really crazy like that old guy up there. O, boy! was he off his beam! Come on, fellas. *Okay!*"

The other leader said, "You guys are sane, see? You're on the beam. We'll get to be the crack-ups next. Okay, fellas, after 'em."

The demented shouting and screaming and chasing went on until one side had the other in the hospital. There the doctor began at once to psychoanalyze the quiet ones. The rest were drugged into ambulant stupors. One was beaten. All the imitations were painfully adept. The mothers did not interfere. Windows closed in the big house on El Ramo Way. The boys changed sides and repeated the fun until their mothers called them to dinner.

That evening the canyon was strangely quiet. The young woman went out on the balcony in the late dark. Lights blazed from every window of the house on El Ramo Way. No shadows passed the bright panes. The city below was jeweled in faraway, deceptive elegance. One tall, white flowering yucca glowed on the dim hillside like the ghost of reality fled. At times a little wind came up Viento Road carrying a brief reminder of the sea. The night air was tropic-sweet with jasmine.

A woman's crying drifted faintly through the evening under the crickets' song.