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## Hungry Morning

Alvaro de Silva

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*Alvaro de Silva*

## HUNGRY MORNING



**O**NE MORNING early I sat on the cold grass in the patio a long while and waited to be given breakfast. Near the open drain Rosa was scrubbing linen with a yellow brush. The sun hung high over the arbor and shone on the vine leaves and the white grapes. The fat cook sat on her heels, smoked, hummed and scrubbed. When the cornleaf cigarette burnt down and began to kink and spark in her mouth she spat out the butt.

"Pull, pull, oxcart driver,  
Pull, pull . . . never stop . . .  
Pull for the orchard of old man Ampuero,  
Pull for the hot bread-man . . .  
Ay si ay-ay-ay . . . !"

Rosa sang the words of this cueca-song and washed. The sun hit the great washtub. Rosa put the straw hat on her head, lit another cigarette, hummed the tune through her nose and let the smoke swirl about her. She lifted the dripping scrub brush and winked at me. The ground was cold and damp and I felt hungry.

Aleli's bedroom door was shut. When she was up she always saw that I had something hot to drink the first thing because she was my nurse. This morning I had got out of bed too early, afraid of missing the servants' breakfast. We would have *ulpo* porridge, warmed over beans, and maté in the painted gourd.

## HUNGRY MORNING

323

The maté tasted sweet and bitter, and burnt your tongue a little as you sipped it through the *bombilla*.

No sound came from the house. The painters with their big flat brushes had splashed pink paint on the climbers on the wall. My brothers and sisters and my Mama were all asleep. My Mama would stay in her bed until the cannon sounded at noon. A maid had said, "To make Señora Esperanza rise you need a pair of oxen." Another girl had said, "Only an earthquake can wake her in the morning."

Pancho was away. He had driven the carriage for my Papa. They had gone to the farm. If Pancho was here he would find two stale rolls and some little onions, which we liked to eat with salt.

The servants—except for Rosa, who took no sides—were all for my Papa and against my Mama. It was my Mama, though, who most approved of my staying in the patio behind the house. The free air made a boy strong like Andino the cook's boy. My sister Elena was weak and had to be given goat's milk. The other children except for Pichita and the baby had to remain indoors almost all the time because they took lessons from Lauriata. When they were set free they came out and played among themselves.

Grownups seldom came down to the back patio. One day Godmother Tobías had suddenly appeared in the patio when Andino and I were on our knees eating with our hands from a split watermelon. Though I had wiped my face and swallowed a mouthful of seeds, she had not spoken to us but limped back into the house disgusted. Godmother Tobías was always catching me doing things she didn't believe I ought to do. She had it against Andino. She didn't believe I ought to be with him.

One hot day Godmother Tobías had come out while Andino was doing something he was not supposed to do at all. He was up in the tank of drinking water bathing.

Andino was a wild boy. On Friday mornings when Pancho

went to the beach to buy fish, Andino would go with him. While Pancho did the bargaining, Andino dived and swam in the sea and tried to catch fish by hand. One morning Pancho had brought him home weak and shivering. He had always stuttered a little but that day he could not say a word. Had it not been for a fisherman who had gone under the water and fished him out, Andino would have drowned. Rosa never let him go to the beach again but pretended not to see when he got into the water tank in the patio.

I remembered the hot day Godmother Tobías almost caught him. She was talking to me so I could not signal to him. Then he stood on the edge of the tank, naked, saw her and jumped back into the water. Suspicious Godmother Tobías stayed on and Andino remained hidden in the water so long I was afraid he might be drowning. Suddenly I called out loud "Andino!" Godmother Tobías could not understand why I had to yell and asked me if I was sick. I called him again and ran to the stairs. When I came back to the patio I saw Andino was up a tree drying himself with a kitchen towel. Godmother Tobías called from a window that I ought to play with my own brothers.

My Papa stayed more and more at the farm. When he was home, he would come down of a sunshiny morning and sit on the mill stone.

"Good day, Don Pedro."

"Good day, girls."

Rosa the cook, the chambermaid, the dining room girl and Alelí, would all talk with him about earthquakes, miracles, and thieves. If Alelí said something they all listened because my Papa favored her. She liked to talk about the thieves and fights that the policeman on the corner told her of. Once she, who always wore shoes, showed my Papa some steps of the cueca. She raised her skirts to show him the steps. At the heel tapping and waving of the handkerchief, my Papa clapped so loudly that Rosa looked in the direction of the house and signalled

## HUNGRY MORNING

325

him to keep the clapping down. He put up his hands to his black beard and made a face. My Papa was not serious, he always made us laugh. Afterwards Alelí said, "Don Pedro is a fine gentleman."

"You ought to know, girl!" said Rosa. They all teased Alelí and laughed at her.

My Mama would seldom let herself be seen in the patio. If she did, it was to talk to Pancho about something. He was devoted to my Mama. Holding his hat in front of him, he would listen to her while the maids stopped what they were doing and stared from a distance. Because my Mama's name was Esperanza, after she had left, the maids would nudge each other and say, "*¡Qué esperanza!*—What chance have we, girls!"

Pancho liked to tell how he had come to work in our house. When a young fellow, he had been a daredevil and a chicken thief. One evening he descended into our patio and as he started to make away with a pair of hens, Mama came out with a gun and ordered him to climb down the wall. At first he believed the Señorita was only fooling and kept climbing up. But when he had reached the top of the wall, a bullet hit one of the dead chickens. After a bullet had gone through the crown of his hat, Pancho dropped back into the patio. My Mama made him chop some wood and afterwards forgave him and let him eat with the maids in the kitchen. He stayed on and became the coachman. Everybody said that he would give his life for my Mama.

Pancho had a beautiful voice. He liked to sit near Alelí and sing. "Look at me," he said to her one day. "This song is for you, Alelí." "Don't waste your tune on me, man," she answered. The girls giggled. They knew Pancho was foolish about Alelí.

One Sunday afternoon when Pancho was singing in the patio, my Mama asked him to sing for the company in the house. He turned his dark face toward the open windows of the second floor and sang,

"The love of my nag and my girl awaits me yonder.  
Oh . . . glorious land of Argentina!  
I long to see thee once again."

The maids teased Pancho. "If you've got your nag and your girl over there in Argentina, man, you must be a Gaucho and not a Chilean."

"Don't be foolish. That's only a song," said Pancho and moved away in his creaky boots.

My Mama asked him to teach me to sing. He would bend down with his friendly, horsy smell and say, "Listen, Diego, like this. . . ." And as he patted my shoulder keeping time to the tune, I tried to follow. It's all right for a boy's voice, Señora Esperanza," he would say to my Mama. "But he's got to sing louder to be heard up in the house."

I wished I had a voice as loud as Andino's. He was not good at talking, but when he sang, his voice was as loud as a burro's. Pancho taught us to sing "Beautiful Fruit" together.

"How pretty the fruit looks up on the branch!  
If I throw a stone, it's got to drop.  
It is not mine! I know it's not mine!  
Yet I want to eat that beautiful fruit."

"Kids, you sing 'Beautiful Fruit' just like water," Pancho had said.

It was a long time since Rosa had removed the copper cauldron, put the kettle on the fire and taken two trips to the kitchen. The wind blew among the trees and shook the cold dew onto the grass. The big kettle never boiled and Rosa never finished the washing. The kettle sat on the red bricks like the black brooding hen. Andino was up. After a run beyond the little yellow house in the rear of the patio, he was crouching beside the kettle. He stuck kindling between the logs and blew from below until the wood gave off sparks and flames. The kettle spout began to hiss.

HUNGRY MORNING

327

"Rosa, Rosita, make the *ulpo*, please!" he pleaded.

Rosa shifted the weight of her body.

"It's got to boil first, *niño*," she said.

I wondered how much longer we would have to wait. As she slapped and squeezed the linen she was washing, she turned her round face to me and smiled.

"This is the last water, the water of the bluing."

She lifted her two hands full of water and let it drip into the tub to show the water with the bluing.

The good smell of burned beans came from the kitchen. Rosa stood up as Andino ran to the kitchen. His mother stopped him at the door, chased him away and he leapt back to blow and pant under the kettle.

"Rosa, Rosita, look! It's whistling!" he shouted. He looked over his shoulder to see if Rosa had gone back into the kitchen. Andino was afraid of his mother because she had already been drinking wine. From the distance he chanted,

"The tailless hen laid an egg in the kitchen. She laid one, she laid two, she laid three, she laid four, she laid five, she laid six, she laid seven, she laid eight and she got bread and she got cake."

Pancho, who had taught us "The Tailless Hen," said you could add any number of eggs as you grew up, up to a hundred.

Rosa tilted the great tub and the bluish water ran smoothly into the drain. Soon she would be squeezing underwear and bedsheets and talking of snakes and dragons and hanging them on the line. But as she looked down at me and up at the long clothesline tied to the avocado tree, the mimosa, the almond tree and one leg of the large iron water tank, she shook her head and began to pile the squeezed linen in the tub.

"I'll hang the snakes and dragons on the rope after I've given Diego his *papita*," she said.

*Ulpo* was wheat flour mixed with hot water and sugar. When

they gave it to me they called it *papita* because I was small. Rosa was the one who toasted the wheat in the earthenware dish. It smelled sweet. Rosa would put the toasted grains on the flat stone, crouch over and grind them with the stone grinder. If somebody made her laugh when she was grinding the flour, it would fly up in a cloud and her brown face and bosom got powdered with it.



I heard the sound of windows being opened. The maids shook out the feather dusters. I was cold and I wished I was indoors. Soon my brothers and sisters would be in the dining room. There would be a cup of tea with hot milk and a buttered roll before each one.

Rosa, who came out of the kitchen to fetch the kettle, said on leaving:

"What's the big matter, boy? You certainly got the hunger face this morning. You'll get yours now-now, Diego."

Breakfast was getting nearer.



## HUNGRY MORNING

329

Sooner than I expected, Rosa's big figure came out of the kitchen. She was walking toward me at a slow pace with a bowl of *ulpo*. She churned the steaming bowl with the spoon and smiled. I wanted to stand up and go and get it but I didn't because I was wet and because the sound of wild feet running in the house had upset me. One morning my brother Antonio had caught me walking with my pants muddy, with mimosa flowers stuck onto them. He had called the others and they had cried out:

"Look! He's got flowers on his behind."

I had blushed and run. They had chased me and laughed.

"Diego climbed the cherry tree! Red cherries! He's up the cherry tree!"

Aleli had come to the rescue.

The sun had disappeared and the trees had grown dark. The air was colder.

Rosa moved slowly and she was about to cross the board bridge over the drain when the bowl flew from her hands. She fell on her knees, beat her breast and cried out.

"The earth is trembling, O Lord! Have mercy, have mercy on us, Lord!"

The ground pressed under me. I jumped up. My legs wouldn't carry me, so I seized the trunk of the mimosa tree. I held the trunk tight, the branches swayed and I trembled with the tree while a shower of deep yellow mimosa fell all over.

My Mama's shout "Children run straight to the center of the patio!" filled the air. I turned round. They were all rushing out. As my Mama emerged from the house, tiles fell from the second story roof and broke about her feet. At last Aleli came over, I threw my arms round her neck, and we quickly joined my Mama and the children in the center of the patio. The servants were there too. They were all praying. My Mama's blue eyes were wide open as if she wanted to see us all at once. Her brown hair covered the whole back of her beautiful red dressing

gown. While Alelí hugged me, my Mama turned her big white face toward me and kissed me. She also kissed Pichita and baby sister, who were held by their nurses, and asked them if they were all right. I broke into tears. Other children were crying too.

When my Mama said, "It's all over, children!" everybody scattered. Alelí put me down. Palomo, the black dog, was frightened, and trembled and sniffed the grass. A few of us lingered around sister María, who looked with great interest at the floripondio tree that grew from the middle of a thick adobe wall. She picked up several of the funnel shaped milky white flowers which had fallen off and said she loved that perfume. "Look!" she said pointing at the roots of the floripondio that showed through a large crack in the lower part of the wall. "They're like a net."

Soon all my brothers and sisters had gone back to the house. The maids gathered near the kitchen to eat. Andino and I got fresh bowls of *ulpo*. Alelí set the steaming bowl between my legs. The first spoonful burned my mouth, but this *ulpo* was sweet, beautiful *ulpo*. I tried to imitate Andino who could make such a big noise with his thick lips. "I make it sing, see?" he said. Rosa had put her straw hat on the ground close to the dark ball of her feet and was sipping *maté*.

As soon as I finished my *ulpo* Alelí came over. "It's drizzling," she said and picked me up. She asked me if I wanted to take a little siesta with her. I was cold and tired. We went into her room and Alelí shut the door. The room was night dark. Alelí undressed me and put me to bed. Then she undressed and got into bed with me. I was supposed to take my siesta in my own bed but I still liked to sleep with my nurse.