

"TomblessLand"

(Based on a real case)

A short story by **Ana Valentina Benjamin**

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Translated by Christopher Rollason

No cradle had she for the lifeless child, nor any tomb for the father who never was.

Patricia, the mother who was no mother, the lover struck down on the path of a forking night, entered her house: cradle, memorial stone, hole dug by blackened hands, on a dark morning on the 20th of October. A home that had expelled her from home since it had become a trap, that had deprived her of protection since it had promised her a cradle and had promised her a garden for the corpse, should it ever appear (it was the promise above all that tormented her). It hurt to have witnessed the metamorphosis: from home to hell. It hurt to rock the empty basket (fatherless, the unconceived child unborn). But what hurt far more was the unhomed vow. House and cradle hurt, but far more distressing was the presence of the absent tomb.

Patricia lay down by Lucas' side and closed her eyes. In the pictures that she traced on the pillow, they kissed. Lucas said: "I feel you next to me, my love", and she replied: "Me neither". She opened her eyes and gazed at Lucas' silhouette in its imprint, stuck to the mattress (piously, it might be, treasuring in its geography the recollection of another anatomy). Patricia touched the sheets and felt the warmth of her man. So he had been there at some point - or else not. In the bathroom, two accusatory towels dripped still. So he had shared a bath with her, a few moments back ... or else never. Or they had shared some past tempest, when the cradle was still a pledge, home had not become a trap, and no promise loomed of a tomb. Or again, Lucas was still there.

She picked up the phone and dialled a number from memory, a figure keeping them in touch, in other words far from each other, or was it near, or maybe it didn't even remotely bring them together. The number was Lucas' parents' (grandparents of the child whose conception had been denied by the October spectres); their house, the place of upbringing of someone who had still not finished dying, even today. He had been expatriated to TomblessLand, taking with him the whole works, everything Patricia's child would have needed).

Awaiting her, an answering machine. Yes, Lucas' voice still existed, for there it was awaiting her. Or it thinned out into silence; a frail voice, bewailing the absence of its source. Dire words that said: "I'm not at home, please leave your message after the signal". And the only signal was the loss that no-one could mourn. Patricia left no message: she had no message. Nor did Lucas.

She caressed her pubis. Her body had the feeling of having made love recently (or a thousand years in the past); she felt Lucas' flayed hide on her stomach, still. Collapsed over the cry of the child who, on that final day's final night (final, unknown to itself) had not been conceived (being sure there would be another opportunity), its parents drank each other's health? For there were empty cups, too. And there was no food left in the larder. And there was an overflow of unconcluded love. Lucas had been a man full of desire. Athirst for the sea (an irreverent poet), a glutton for bread, insatiable for justice, hungry for Patricia. Or indigestible to hands brimful with violence (voracious are the October spectres).

The following day, or the next week, or perhaps years after that October (or perhaps time had not passed at all), Lucas reappeared, exiled in a dream. Smiling, a bronzed smile, eyes alight behind a pair of gleaming lenses. Patricia was not suntanned, she was not hiding behind glass, she was not smiling. It seemed to his woman that her exiled love had returned, and yet he was not in the kitchen when she woke up. Yet nor was he a dream; not even a waking dream. Tomblessness blurred the location of his soul and the identity of the bodies. Nowhere, yet there at every moment. Or not a soul. Or scarcely a body. Or Lucas' poetry, forced to journey: from the paper to the darkness (into the macabre arms of the spectre and the collapsed arms of his wife). A dweller in the land of nightmare. Dead or dying under his captors' watch. Living in the phantasmagoria of Patricia's dream.

The mattress, in its compassion, gave them an hour's home. Patricia felt the bittersweet taste of Lucas. His absence was not pure bitterness (hope was seasoned by faith in his return); nor was it pure sweetness (he had not deposited a child in her womb); nor was it pure insipidity (each memory tasted of something ... tremendous, though, when it tasted of Nothingness, for there it was dwelt Lucas). Perhaps for that reason, Patricia confused her own traces with the signs of that absence; the identity of her grief with Lucas' features, glimpsed down in some hollow.

Patricia felt it all impinge on her. Lucas, neither. Yet still there he was near, repeating, again and again, the one message: No. Had Patricia listened as she should, there would have been no ...

"I'm not at home, please leave your message" - still speaking, the silenced voice. So it was they communicated, waiting for the signal on one side, the message on the other. For "the silent lover, the one who speaks, always finds the sentient loved one, the one who listens just in time", felt Patricia. "The black hand claws deep into the man it flays, yet crime is there none that can stop the merging of the lovers", thought Lucas, perhaps. "No son can be born with a father confined", crowed, for sure, the spectre (the flesh-eater standing guard on the threshold of TomblessLand).

Patricia went on searching for years. Even when another man had made her a grandmother, it was still Lucas who owed her motherhood.

But she never imagined she might confront the October ghost. And yet there he stood, one day when she least expected it: the spectre was signing copies of his book, thanking his

flatterers and smiling at his applauders. Patricia was seized by panic. Or else fury. Nor surprise.

Where she had envisioned chains, she saw applause; where she needed to see justice, she witnessed adulation. Could time really have injected people with such madness? Could the hand that had flayed poets alive now be decapitating poems? Could none of these readers read between the lines? Did no-one scent the abominable stench of blood that rose up from the book?

She joined the line of restless acolytes and awaited her turn. She took advantage of the wait to leaf through the book. Would she find Lucas there, interred and bound? Yes, there he was, and she, and the child conceived (there only) in that pen's stillborn rhyme. There was Lucas, his flesh annihilated, resuscitated in the entrails of the paper, killed in the sepulchral plagiarism of a book. An unadorned and fateful tomb. Which had lopped off the poet's hand and then stolen his lyric grace.

At last it was Patricia's turn (and her child's too). Nor the father's.

-Please dedicate it to Lucas- she told the book-signing assassin - Lucas could have been the father of my children, but ...

-He disappeared, I know-, interrupted the man, unperturbed - that's what my book is about. You should read it, it's really something special, it's ... -he paused, then added triumphantly - It's the beauty of death.

Patricia brought her mouth up to the executioner's ear, and hissed:

-Why don't you spare me reading it and tell me the details yourself?

If the fake writer had spoken in time ... If the murderer had fallen silent in October ... If Patricia had found some other way to claim Lucas ... Or if, perhaps, the memory of their living bodies, perspiring or weeping in the kidnapped nights had proved of sharper steel than the weapon in this woman's fist, on this afternoon of bloodstained books. But no. Not doubt, either. Nor even memory. Or grief demanding the body. But it did not find the bodies, only their dwelling-places: coffin and cell. The coffin for the criminal with the all-killing pen; the cell for the mother who could not be a mother, who decided on that afternoon to turn the killer of her man into the godfather of the child who died before being born. Godfather not of the child, but of its death.

Patricia wakes up, and the pain becomes unbearable. Twice they have outraged her man: first corporally, then spatially. They have built a palace on bloodstained ground. There it is dwell the spectres, there it is they plagiarise others' hurricanes and concoct their windy publications. Patricia stares at herself in the mirror. Her wrinkles are furrows which can only (and forever) lead her to Lucas. She admits that she is more than her man's avenger, she is his protector in the darkness, the guardian of the soul. And she admits the reason why she has not committed murder; she could not bear the idea of Lucas and his killer inhabiting the same place; never could she support such contiguity. She would rather keep them far

apart: Lucas in the furrows of her face and in the unhomed ether (perhaps in the water, perhaps in the heavens, perhaps), and the spectre in the Earth, alive ... but mortal. And she: the attentive witness, the spectator of the sentence that soon should consign the spectre to a hole under the ground, to hear the yells of the darkness from his cell. ...

But it doesn't happen. And so Patricia chooses exile ... And she needs to be the guardian of her own soul. And she would rather have it far away: her soul, the witness of what Does Not happen, far from her native land that bleeds from its unstaunched wounds.

No, it is not the blood of the disappeared. It is the spectral corpses, smiling as they walk down the streets of Wounded Humanity.

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The original Spanish-language version of this story received a prize at the International Narrative Competition "Hucha de Oro".

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Author's note, 10 January 2011:

On 22 December 2010, the Argentinian dictator jorge rafael videla and other spectres (they do not even deserve capital letters) were sentenced to life imprisonment by the Court of First Instance No 1 of Córdoba, in Buenos Aires province.

Had the story 'TomblessLand' referred only to those sentenced, it might have deserved the following change, to read thus:

'And she: the attentive witness, the spectator of the sentence that, NOT SOON BUT MOST CERTAINLY WITH TIME, WILL consign the spectre to a hole under the ground, to hear the yells of the darkness from his cell. AND SO IT HAPPENS. AND Patricia DOES NOT CHOOSE exile ... And she needs to be the guardian of her own soul. And she would rather have it NEARBY: her soul, the witness of what DOES HAPPEN, CLOSE TO her native land that bleeds YET STAUNCHES ITS wounds. No, it is not the blood of the disappeared. It is the spectral corpses WHICH NEVER AGAIN WILL SMILE! as they walk down the streets of Wounded Humanity'.

The sentences now handed down represent a triumph (welcome, however late), but many more are needed in Argentina ... and in the world. The story concerns that country in particular, but, as has been said, it is intended as a homage beyond borders, reaching out to other cultures that also know the victims of spectres which still, smiling, 'walk down the streets of Wounded Humanity'.

Therefore, the sentences elicit a shared celebration, but the narrative remains intact and waiting ...

AVB