

A COLD WINTER NIGHT

It was a cold winter night. I was walking home after the party and the town was deserted. I could only hear my steps and my heartbeat. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there she was. I stopped dead.

At first, I hardly recognised her. Shy lampposts and a thick fog allied themselves with the darkness of that night. It was impossible. It couldn't be her. As soon as I looked there again, silence and stillness surrounded me. Maybe it had been an illusion. In fact, I had had some similar episodes those last days so I went to my family doctor and he told me there was nothing to worry about.

Once I had calmed down after that scary episode, I sped up although I wasn't in a hurry. The truth is I have had too many in the party and it was better for me to walk carefully. I wanted to arrive home as soon as possible and sleep like a baby.

But that unexpected surprise hadn't finished yet. This time, she was waiting for me above my stairs. I would have sworn she had been looking at me since that first warning and now she was smiling in a strange way like she did long time ago.

My mind flew quickly to those times when we were young and we thought the world was there just to be eaten, conquered by us. We were convinced that life had no limits so everything was possible and Martha Beldham was the top believer. Without a doubt, she was born to succeed. She was the smartest, the most observer and determined girl at college. Everybody loved her but James Farmer was the one who finally won her. Well, that was what I thought until I saw her again in front of my house.

At that time, I was crazy in love with her and she knew it. Even so, she never did any sign of special attention to me. Quite the contrary, it seemed she loved making me feel bad. Once, our group was in a party drinking beer like fishes, watching a boring basketball match, smoking like chimneys, joking and telling horror stories. We were nothing but fools. I remember Martha sat on top of James. I would have bet all my fortune that the scene wasn't real; with her one always had the feeling she was acting like the best actress all around the world. She was looking here and there, paying attention to her admirers and hiding her intentions. Every time our eyes met she smiled at me, turned towards James and kissed him passionately still staring at me. She did it slowly, enjoying greedily my embarrassment. And, as usual, I didn't know how to respond to her presence. It still hurts me today.

It had been twenty-eight years since we saw each other for last time. She wore a nice flowered dress in yellow and blue tones. I remember I said to her, maybe with ridiculous words, how beautiful she looked and how those colours matched her blonde hair and sea-like eyes. She was going to marry James and I was sure I would not see her again. A few years later, after a long period of illness, he had died. A friend of mine told me that while James was losing his health day after day, Martha seemed younger and more attractive than ever. Some years later, in my cousin Patrick's wedding, I had a conversation with a priest that I haven't forgotten.

- In fact - the churchman confessed me- what James had lost was his soul from the first moment they shared life.
- Why do you say this? - I asked him fearing his answer.
- Your lovely Martha, my dear John, hides a terrible secret that will make unhappy any man who gets near her. Keep away from her, please. Whatever happens in the future, promise me you will keep away from her.

I didn't know what to reply. I was shocked. Today, his words still boom in my brain. Even more fiercely than then.

When I arrived next to her, incomprehensibly, all my senses were uncontrolled. Nothing seemed to be in its place. ¿What was she doing there so many years later? ¿How did she know where I lived? ¿How could she look like thirty years ago, exactly the same? ¿Why was she smiling that way?

- ¿Martha? - I asked her. Meanwhile I bated breath. At close range, she was even nicer than I remembered.
- iHow long, my dear! - She answered. Her voice was delicious and disturbing at the same time.
- Yes, yes...- I was blocked. I couldn't articulate a word. If I had been on guard I would have seen the emptiness of her eyes but unfortunately I was just trying to control such an embarrassing situation.
- You seem frozen, my dear. ¿Shall we go in? We'll be warmer inside - She held my arm firmly, pushed the main door open and brought me to the dining room of my own home. I never left the door opened and I had only one key, so how had she opened the door?

She didn't switch on the light at any moment when she went to the kitchen and came back with some coffee. My astonishment increased little by little. She moved like if she had been living there during all her life and I had just been a simple guest.

Her influence on me had always been as powerful as a Queen's domination over her subjects. I wasn't able to do anything by my own; my will was kidnapped and nothing made me think that I was going to recover it. Neither sooner nor later.

At that moment, a deep thought began to take possession of me. Everything was unexpected, shrouded in mystery. But she acted with absolute normality. It was me who...

No. No. iIt is impossible! I repeated to myself. Am I being bewitched? Am I living inside an unreal world that someone has built without my consent? No. No. It is a damn barbarity. I am not crazy. I am a reasonable, serious and objective man. I have always been so. I need to reconsider my decisions twice at least. I analyse every situation with rational arguments, it doesn't matter how difficult it is. This senselessness can't be happening to me. No, not to me. Calm down, Johnny, keep calm. Breathe! Breathe slowly! You can. Just remember what you learnt in your yoga classes long time ago. It's easy, isn't it? Well, yes, yes. It's easy. I did it quite well then and there's no reason to do it wrong now, isn't it? Yes, I just have to breathe, in and out. Yes, it's easy Johnny. But, but... What the hell is going on? iOh my God! I can't. I can't deny I've seen her looking at me, smiling at me, waiting for me. I can't obviate she is now right here, at my home, on my sofa, besides me. If I reached out my arm I would touch hers. I can smell her fragrance, hear her voice, see her blue eyes. Yes, she is real and I'm afraid she has come to take me far away. I don't understand what's going on. Is it possible that my self-identity is being stolen and I can't do anything to avoid it? Can Martha invade all my desires, all my intentions, all what I am? I can't realize what she is doing. I see her and I lose my mind. Do I do everything automatically? Have I lost my self-control? Is she my owner?

The priest words still crushed my resistance. Who is Martha truly? Who was and who is she? 'She hides a terrible secret', he had said. What kind of terrible secret? Madness? Any of the Seven Capital Sins? If so, which one? Which? Which? ...

Oh my God! I can't believe it. No, no. What did I say? I said which but maybe I wanted to say... Is that it? Is she...? W-I-T-C-H? A halo of stupefaction travel from my head to my feet, tensing my back like a rope of an arch. I was terrified.

- What's wrong, my dear? It looks like if you have had an electric shock- She laughed at me but she wasn't smiling. She kept her hieratic look and, now I see it clearly, her perturbing intentions. She was winning.

- No, nothing, no. Nothing at all Martha – I tried to conceal my panic, sketching out a project of smile but I was just able to babble some monosyllables.
- Someone told me you had talked with Priest Martin in your Cousin Patrick's wedding. It's that true, my dear? – Once again, as she did when we were at college, she was enjoying the situation. And, as usual, I was helpless against her.
- Yes. We met by chance. Yes – I continued with my hateful awkwardness. Even worse, I was being paralyzed. I couldn't move any part of my body. I was immobilized. Completely and irreparably immobilized. And I didn't know that those were going to be my last words.
- Poor Johnny. So polite, so perfect. You never realized, did you? Or maybe it's more accurate to say you never wanted to realize about me. You put up with my incitements. You fought all your life against your suspicions. You resisted with courage and patience. But you were, you are weak. You have always been too much of a coward to accept your past, your present and, of course, your future. Oh, poor Johnny. You have lost your life waiting for someone you feared. Well, for your information the waiting is over. I've just come to set you free, my dear. You don't have to thank me for that. All merit is yours. And your last winter has arrived.

I could hear and see her. I felt my breathing and my heartbeat. I was still alive, or that's what it seemed to me. But I couldn't move at all. I was my own prisoner and she was my jailer. No, not my jailer; she was my executioner. 'She had a terrible secret' Priest Martin had said. Yes, she has it. A terrible secret that I have discovered tonight and I will never and ever forget.