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The Transparent Sun

BY LINDA T. CASPER

"THAT WOMAN is back," Zenaida said, her voice at the near edge of contempt. She swung away from the window that looked across to the governor's office in the provincial capital. Before the full-length mirror on the wall, she stopped to check her teased hair. Her knees were white and smooth beneath the tight pink jersey. Then she entered her room, pulling the door severely.

A plaster crucifix near the entry trembled with the closing. Her cat, a ball of petulant sun, jumped up onto the piano stool and with pink eyes peered timidly about the long hall adorned with old portraits so faded they looked like sun stains on the shellacked walls.

Don Julio glanced up from the morning papers which had just come from Manila, and looked after the closing of the door, trying to decide what his wife had said. The precise click of the door-lock alerted him. He had married each of his three wives when they were barely twenty but now at seventy, he could no longer understand youth or Zenaida, a white skinned mestiza who had been cashier at his theatre, the only movie house in the capital. She must have been provoked by something he had said: by his silence?

"What is it?" he asked, leaning forward on the rattan chair against wide armrests of narra, the newspaper creased between his belly and knees, his fingers marking the obituary page which he always consulted first and last to follow the demise of friends long scattered about the islands.

"That woman," Zenaida shouted from her room, her voice clear and sharp as claws.

Don Julio lifted himself above the windowsill and peered through the vines of pink and white *cadena de amor* that hung over the window grilles like the scattering hair of the woman who stood at the gate, in plain brown skirt, faded overskirt and loose white *camisa*. Her feet, encased in brown plastic slippers, were trying to find balance over the gravel driveway.

"Open the gate," Don Julio called to a servant and replaced the newspaper on the table, now carefully folded on the page of obituaries. A quick eye disclosed the death of Don Esteban. . . . Esteban had repaid him with good money for a wartime debt that friends insisted could be annulled in court. Esteban had said, a debt of honor binds a man more strictly because it is the measure of his life. Don Julio's interrupted glance read: . . . *fallecio en Manila . . . se ruega no envien flores. . . .*

Don Julio walked over to his wife's room and stood outside. "It's my cousin. Don't call her 'that woman'." He waited awhile for her answer. When none came he took courage to try her lock. Her room was open.

The smell of stale perfume crumbled about his face as he looked around to see where Zenaida was. He saw the yellow drapes, sun-streaked and brittle, salvaged from past housekeepings to shut the room from malicious eyes at the capital. He avoided the large dresser mirror; he no longer relished any sight of himself. On the hall outside he could tolerate the pictures of his youth, the young face waxen in the perpetual pose of forgotten reveries. He saw Zenaida brushing her fingernails, with her back against an impressive collection of jerseys printed in the colors and foliage of some overripe garden.

"Don't call her 'that woman'," he said in the same voice he used to coax her to bed.

Zenaida continued brushing her fingernails, now and then glancing at the newspaper pictures of society ladies beaming past each other on the floor below her feet. She could model clothes as well as any of them, if Don Julio would permit. . . . She looked up at him, around him to the huge wedding portrait: Don Julio secure on a red cushioned chair and she, the young succulent wife, looking to the side, distracted.

"She's your cousin, not mine," she finally said, blowing at her cuticles and dangling a leg over the newspaper ladies, a pink satin slipper caught deliriously over her toes, an amused smile playing on her face.

"Return the necklace," Don Julio said, approaching his wife slowly so as not to startle her, a hand extended to touch the hair that was brittle with applications of hairspray, a special concoction of beer and essences smuggled from Jolo.

Zenaida flounced her eyes at him.

"Return them, *hija*, and I will make it up to you. The necklace is old anyway. Old and tarnished. . . . Of what use can it be to you? It does not become you. . . ."

"What necklace?" Zenaida sprung away from the intended touch, leaving Don Julio poised to caress the vacated air. She laughed at his discomfiture, a tiny, kitty laugh that properly disclosed her fine teeth and exquisite darting tongue. "She must have told you lies. I know of no necklace . . . that belongs to her, you say, to an old woman?"

Zenaida continued to move away, tying and retying the pink ribbon sash around her body, moving along the window where through the transparent drapes the sun glowed into her arms.

Don Julio restored his hands to his sides, groped for the pockets of his purple dressing gown, worn pink at the hem and cuff; the waist sash, tied indifferently, sagged over his hips.

"Give it back to her, *hija*; you do what I tell you now and you will receive something several times in value . . . something young and precious, something new. . . . You can choose it yourself."

"I still don't know what necklace." Zenaida paused before the dresser to pat her hair and spray her ears with Gloire de Paris. The spray hit her eyes. She grimaced and rubbed them hard, like a child waking up from an afternoon sleep. She peered at herself. No lines on the forehead, none around the eyes. She was barely twenty, barely beginning to live. She smiled at herself, her eyes glinting as though to coax a secret lover who provoked her even in the presence of the old man.

Suddenly the mirror wings of her dresser disclosed Don Julio still struggling across the distance between them. She moved away from their reflections on the dresser mirror. She watched him, amused at the way his wrinkled feet slid in and out of his purple slippers when he walked. Had he ever been young?

"Listen, *hija*," Don Julio said, standing still so Zenaida would not move further away. "You tell me what you want in return . . . anything at all . . . a trip to Manila . . . to Baguio . . . we can stay as long as you want. . . ." To emphasize his generosity Don Julio raised a hand loose with flesh.

"Baguio gives you asthma and no one is there except during summer." She pouted at him, then slipped into the golden jersey silk with drastic bamboo prints. "Do you like it?" she asked, luring him with her small kitty voice.

"What do you want then? Anything. . . ." Don Julio hunched his shoulders to restrain his lungs. He leaned on to the back of the chair Zenaida had sat on, unable to lift his feet further.

"This," Zenaida said, opening the wardrobe with the dragon lock, her fragile fingers long and white against the mahogany.

Don Julio looked up, his eyes consumed by the gold filigree necklace, by the glass pendant, by the crucifix inlaid with green bits of mirror.

Zenaida held it up, swung it before him; watched him follow with frayed eyes the flaring trace of sun it left in the air.

"IT'S AN OLD NECKLACE," Don Julio said, as he looked at his cousin Sepa who sat at the edge of her chair in the living room, her old face more faded than the portraits on the walls. He could not recall her young face. He had not seen her in years, not since his first wife, Gloria, had died.

Sepa did not speak, as though to hold intact the pieces of her face. Head inclined to one side, she stared at the cup of chocolate before her, not even following the flight over it of a large green fly, not interested in anything that fell outside the fixed arc of her sight. She laid her hands on her lap, rubbed the fingers slowly as though trying to feel the texture of her own skin. She sighed and inclined her head to the other side and closed her eyes against the glint of sunlight on the waxed floor.

Sepa came prepared to redeem the necklace. A month before, she had come to the house to pawn. She could have gone to one of the *agencias* in the capital but she had no trust in them. She told her granddaughter, Antonia—two sons were lost in Corregidor, the only daughter to smallpox at infancy—"Julio will give me more and the necklace will be safe with him." She had sold various pieces of her inheritance, but the necklace, the only piece left, the one she had coveted from childhood, she could only pawn. She had pledged it once to Gloria, Julio's first wife. They had all grown up together.

At her earlier coming, Julio had not been at the house. Zeniada, in his stead, had generously offered the money and accepted the necklace. Sepa had watched her try it on, negligently view herself with it on the full-length mirror. "Take your time repaying, Sepa," the young wife had said. "We trust you. And come any time you need us. If you have any more old pieces . . . jewels that have been in your family for years . . . I would like to see them." The long white fingers had en-

closed the gold filigree necklace that hung wantonly from the white neck, the way Sepa had often dreamed of its hanging on herself. But she never had dared to put it on before others. . . .

"Is there anything you need?" Don Julio was asking. "Antonia may want to study in Manila. The universities are excellent there. I can support her through school. My son, Gloria's firstborn and mine . . . you remember Federico . . . he is now a school superintendent and Antonia can easily secure a position through him at my slightest word . . . so let her have the necklace."

"I have come to redeem it," Sepa said, her voice quiet and apologetic. "One should never pawn . . . it's my very. . . ." She pulled out the handkerchief that was attached to the inside of her camisa by a large safety pin. She looked at it for sometime, then she started to loosen the knotted ends. Carefully she unrolled it, pressing the corners down on her lap. Tight as little dried worms the folded money emerged. One by one she placed them on her palm, balanced them there tentatively. She contemplated the exposed designs, shades of brown and orange and white that were becoming blurs in her eyes. Quickly she brought the creased handkerchief to her face, rubbed it with both hands into her eyes. Sobbing quietly, inwardly she rocked herself at the edge of her chair.

"Stop, Sepa, you're too old for that," Don Julio said, glancing about the hall, his eyes darting to the room of Zenaida. The door was closed. No longer menaced by fear, he reached over to pat Sepa's arm. "Don't cry, Sepa. Let us talk this over. I can give you a sum, not modest by any means . . . it will be between us. Then you won't have to sell mats in town. A life of hardship does not become you. . . ."

"I have sold mats since my husband died; beginning with our own," Sepa said. "I raised my children on my peddling. What few jewels I inherited were lost during the Sakdal uprising; all those buried by Father were never recovered, those we carried in flight disappeared with the servants . . . you knew that, Julio. . . ."

Don Julio sat back to rest his body. He looked at the portraits on the wall. Without seeing them clearly, he knew the one over the piano was Sepa's father, Don Macario. "I remember your father," he told Sepa.

"He was dead not long after the uprising . . . my husband followed," Sepa said, her fingers afraid to close upon the rolled money in her hands, the money Don Julio would not accept.

"Don Macario was good to me . . . he used to take me in his *quelis*, the horses golden with bronze harnesses . . . remember, Sepa, when everyone would look up and after us when we passed? I remember his silver hilted sword, the collection of pistols, the table in the hall before the image of San Antonio where he counted the silver brought by harvests. It was not his wealth, but the richness, the perfection of his devotion, his attending to the smallest. . . ."

Don Julio looked up to the next portrait, Sepa's mother. When Don Macario's house burned, Gloria had asked for those portraits, borrowed them until another house could be built of sufficient grandeur to compliment the gilt-edged portraits. . . . Don Macario died without erecting another house. Often, Gloria claimed Don Julio's nonexistent ancestry through those portraits, in order to impress newly acquired friends. Don Julio, himself just becoming rich, would not disclose the fact that he was brought to Don Macario's house as a servant, a distant relative whom Don Macario raised as a companion to an only son.

"I remember your mother," Don Julio said. "All the vats of preserved lime and santol that her cooks prepared, the legs of ham curing over her kitchen stoves, her silverware so pure that spoons bent almost from touch. . . . She was good to me. . . ." Don Julio began to revel in recollections almost forgotten. The more he recalled, the more he felt revived, assured and restored. "See the portrait of your mother, Sepa, see how well it is preserved in my house."

Sepa turned on her chair, pushing her feet back into the brown plastic slippers that rubbed her toes raw in a single morning's peddling. She turned to the portrait. In the slant of light upon the floor she could not fix her eyes steadily. But in her mind she saw the portrait again, remembered the delicate face that had been widely sought in marriage and whose features only her older sister had inherited, and around the slender neck, the necklace, reproduced in tempting shades of gold like a ritual sun simultaneously buried and being unearthed.

"You remember, Julio" she said, rising slightly from the edge of her chair, recalling how she had always desired that necklace, as recompense for the beauty she did not inherit. Suitors had come for the older sister, but for her, only one who therefore had to be accepted. She had her father's face, broad and mild, generous with faults. But now, her grandchild, Antonia, reproduced her mother's beauty. She desired the necklace, now for Antonia, more fiercely than she had for herself.

"I came to redeem the necklace," she said, no longer tempted by Don Julio's offer.

"It cannot matter that much to you, Sepa, not any more," Don Julio said. "I have offered you much more than it's worth because I owe it to your father. How else can I ever repay him? But Zenaida needs this jewelry. She's young, we must be patient with her. She has never enjoyed the things you had. Let us be good to her, Sepa. You have been luckier, your own father and mother had provided for you. . . ."

"Remember, Julio, when Mother died and her jewels were being distributed among us?" Sepa asked, her fingers tight around the money in her palm. "I asked only for that necklace but Ate, being older, received it. Remember, you said you would get it back for me?"

Don Julio sat back to recall. Once, his slingshot had raised a welt as large as a hen's egg on Sepa's forehead but Sepa refused to name him and thus condemn him to flogging, undressed before all the servants. In gratitude he had felt indebted to her, as well as to Don Macario; had intended to be her protector though she was several years older than he was. When the jewels were being partitioned, he had promised to get it for her somehow. Though he was barely thirteen then, the pride of growing manhood had demanded that much of a gesture of gallantry.

"Remember, Julio, you bought that necklace from Ate with the first big money you made? It was your wedding and you laughed as you handed it to me, and said, instead of my giving you a gift, you were giving me one. That's why I pawned it to you, first, when Gloria was still alive . . . then now."

Don Julio saw the warped fingers extending the tightly rolled bills. He felt his deformity and he looked away quickly. Sternly, a man bent on repaying a debt of honor, he walked over to Zenaida's room. The lock would not turn.

"Zenaida," he shouted. "Bring that necklace. Now."

Zenaida remained in her room.

Don Julio's hands clutched the knob, tried to rattle it. It sounded like his bones knocking. He released the knob, started to turn away. Then, unable to look at Sepa, he knocked again, softly with his head bowed against the door.

"Zenaida," he said, his voice crumbling against the wall. "Someone is here to see you."

Then he walked over to his own room, across the hall, and waited for Zenaida's clear voice, like sharp claws tearing the long hall's silence.

✿ LINDA T. CASPER, who lists her occupation as wife, mother, and writer, has published one novel, *The Peninsulars*, and has another, tentatively entitled *The Stranded Whale*, in progress. She had a story in the spring 1965 issue of *NMQ*, and she has published numerous pieces of short fiction, essays, and book reviews. Born and reared in Manila, Mrs. Casper has traveled widely throughout Southeast Asia, western Europe, and the Mediterranean.