

Eva Is Inside Her Cat

by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

All of a sudden she noticed that her beauty had fallen all apart on her, that it had begun to pain her physically like a tumor or a cancer. She still remembered the weight of the privilege she had borne over her body during adolescence, which she had dropped now--who knows where?--with the weariness of resignation, with the final gesture of a declining creature. It was impossible to bear that burden any longer. She had to drop that useless attribute of her personality somewhere; as she turned a corner, somewhere in the outskirts. Or leave it behind on the coatrack of a second-rate restaurant like some old useless coat. She was tired of being the center of attention, of being under siege from men's long looks. At night, when insomnia stuck its pins into her eyes, she would have liked to be an ordinary woman, without any special attraction. Everything was hostile to her within the four walls of her room. Desperate, she could feel her vigil spreading out under her skin, into her head, pushing the fever upward toward the roots of her hair. It was as if her arteries had become peopled with hot, tiny insects who, with the approach of dawn, awoke each day and ran about on their moving feet in a rending subcutaneous adventure in that place of clay made fruit where her anatomical beauty had found its home. In vain she struggled to chase those terrible creatures away. She couldn't. They were part of her own organism. They'd been there, alive, since much before her physical existence. They came from the heart of her father, who had fed them painfully during his nights of desperate solitude. Or maybe they had poured into her arteries through the cord that linked her to her mother ever since the beginning of the world. There was no doubt that those insects had not been born spontaneously inside her body. She knew that they came from back there, that all who bore her surname had to bear them, had to suffer them as she did when insomnia held unconquerable sway until dawn. It was those very insects who painted that bitter expression, that unconsolable sadness on the faces of her forebears. She had seen them looking out of their extinguished existence, out of their ancient portraits, victims of that same anguish. She still remembered the disquieting face of the greatgrandmother who, from her aged canvas, begged for a minute of rest, a second of peace from those insects who there, in the channels of her blood, kept on martyring her, pitilessly beautifying her. No. Those insects didn't belong to her. They came, transmitted from generation to generation, sustaining with their tiny armor all the prestige of a select caste, a painfully select group. Those insects had been born in the womb of the first woman who had had a beautiful daughter. But it was necessary, urgent, to put a stop to that heritage. Someone must renounce the eternal transmission of that artificial beauty. It was no good for women of her breed to admire themselves as they came back from their mirrors if during the night those creatures did their slow, effective, ceaseless work with a constancy of centuries. It was no longer beauty, it was a sickness that had to be halted, that had to be cut off in some bold and radical way.

She still remembered the endless hours spent on that bed sown with hot needles. Those nights when she tried to speed time along so that with the arrival of daylight the beasts would stop hurting her. What good was beauty like that? Night after night, sunken in her desperation, she thought it would have been better for her to have been an ordinary woman, or a man. But that useless virtue was denied her, fed by insects of remote origin who were hastening the irrevocable

arrival of her death. Maybe she would have been happy if she had had the same lack of grace, that same desolate ugliness, as her Czechoslovakian friend who had a dog's name. She would have been better off ugly, so that she could sleep peacefully like any other Christian.

She cursed her ancestors. They were to blame for her insomnia. They had transmitted that exact, invariable beauty, as if after death mothers shook and renewed their heads in order to graft them onto the trunks of their daughters. It was as if the same head, a single head, had been continuously transmitted, with the same ears, the same nose, the identical mouth, with its weighty intelligence, to all the women who were to receive it irremediably like a painful inheritance of beauty. It was there, in the transmission of the head, that the eternal microbe that came through across generations had been accentuated, had taken on personality, strength, until it became an invincible being, an incurable illness, which upon reaching her, after having passed through a complicated process of judgment, could no longer be borne and was bitter and painful . . . just like a tumor or a cancer.

It was during those hours of wakefulness that she remembered the things disagreeable to her fine sensibility. She remembered the objects that made up the sentimental universe where, as in a chemical stew, those microbes of despair had been cultivated. During those nights, with her big round eyes open and frightened, she bore the weight of the darkness that fell upon her temples like molten lead. Everything was asleep around her. And from her corner, in order to bring on sleep, she tried to go back over her childhood memories.

But that remembering always ended with a terror of the unknown. Always, after wandering through the dark corners of the house, her thoughts would find themselves face to face with fear. Then the struggle would begin. The real struggle against three unmovable enemies. She would never--no, she would never--be able to shake the fear from her head. She would have to bear it as it clutched at her throat. And all just to live in that ancient mansion, to sleep alone in that corner, away from the rest of the world.

Her thoughts always went down along the damp, dark passageways, shaking the dry cobweb-covered dust off the portraits. That disturbing and fearsome dust that fell from above, from the place where the bones of her ancestors were falling apart. Invariably she remembered the "boy." She imagined him there, sleepwalking under the grass in the courtyard beside the orange tree, a handful of wet earth in his mouth. She seemed to see him in his clay depths, digging upward with his nails, his teeth, fleeing the cold that bit into his back, looking for the exit into the courtyard through that small tunnel where they had placed him along with the snails. In winter she would hear him weeping with his tiny sob, mud-covered, drenched with rain. She imagined him intact. Just as they had left him five years before in that water-filled hole. She couldn't think of him as having decomposed. On the contrary, he was probably most handsome sailing along in that thick water as on a voyage with no escape. Or she saw him alive but frightened, afraid of feeling himself alone, buried in such a somber courtyard. She herself had been against their leaving him there, under the orange tree, so close to the house. She was afraid of him. She knew that on nights when insomnia hounded her he would sense it. He would come back along the wide corridors to ask her to stay with him, ask her to defend him against those other insects, who were eating at the roots of his violets. He would come back to have her let him sleep beside her as he did when he was alive. She was afraid of feeling him beside her again after he had leaped over

the wall of death. She was afraid of stealing those hands that the "boy" would always keep closed to warm up his little piece of ice. She wished, after she saw him turned into cement, like the statue of fear fallen in the mud, she wished that they would take him far away so that she wouldn't remember him at night. And yet they had left him there, where he was imperturbable now, wretched, feeding his blood with the mud of earthworms. And she had to resign herself to seeing him return from the depths of his shadows. Because always, invariably, when she lay awake she began to think about the "boy," who must be calling her from his piece of earth to help him flee that absurd death.

But now, in her new life, temporal and spaceless, she was more tranquil. She knew that outside her world there, everything would keep going on with the same rhythm as before; that her room would still be sunken in early-morning darkness, and her things, her furniture, her thirteen favorite books, all in place. And that on her unoccupied bed, the body aroma that filled the void of what had been a whole woman was only now beginning to evaporate. But how could "that" happen? How could she, after being a beautiful woman, her blood peopled by insects, pursued by the fear of the total night, have the immense, wakeful nightmare now of entering a strange, unknown world where all dimensions had been eliminated? She remembered. That night--the night of her passage--had been colder than usual and she was alone in the house, martyred by insomnia. No one disturbed the silence, and the smell that came from the garden was a smell of fear. Sweat broke out on her body as if the blood in her arteries were pouring out its cargo of insects. She wanted someone to pass by on the street, someone who would shout, would shatter that halted atmosphere. For something to move in nature, for the earth to move around the sun again. But it was useless.

There was no waking up even for those imbecilic men who had fallen asleep under her ear, inside the pillow. She, too, was motionless. The walls gave off a strong smell of fresh paint, that thick, grand smell that you don't smell with your nose but with your stomach. And on the table the single clock, pounding on the silence with its mortal machinery. "Time . . . oh, time!" she sighed, remembering death. And there in the courtyard, under the orange tree, the "boy" was still weeping with his tiny sob from the other world.

She took refuge in all her beliefs. Why didn't it dawn right then and there or why didn't she die once and for all? She had never thought that beauty would cost her so many sacrifices. At that moment--as usual--it still pained her on top of her fear. And underneath her fear those implacable insects were still martyring her. Death had squeezed her into life like a spider, biting her in a rage, ready to make her succumb. But the final moment was taking its time. Her hands, those hands that men squeezed like imbeciles with manifest animal nervousness, were motionless, paralyzed by fear, by that irrational terror that came from within, with no motive, just from knowing that she was abandoned in that ancient house. She tried to react and couldn't. Fear had absorbed her completely and remained there, fixed, tenacious, almost corporeal, as if it were some invisible person who had made up his mind not to leave her room. And the most upsetting part was that the fear had no justification at all, that it was a unique fear, without any reason, a fear just because.

The saliva had grown thick on her tongue. That hard gum that stuck to her palate and flowed because she was unable to contain it was bothersome between her teeth. It was a desire that was

quite different from thirst. A superior desire that she was feeling for the first time in her life. For a moment she forgot about her beauty, her insomnia, and her irrational fear. She didn't recognize herself. For an instant she thought that the microbes had left her body. She felt that they'd come out stuck to her saliva. Yes, that was all very fine. It was fine that the insects no longer occupied her and that she could sleep now, but she had to find a way to dissolve that resin that dulled her tongue. If she could only get to the pantry and . . . But what was she thinking about? She gave a start of surprise. She'd never felt "that desire." The urgency of the acidity had debilitated her, rendering useless the discipline that she had faithfully followed for so many years ever since the day they had buried the "boy." It was foolish, but she felt revulsion about eating an orange. She knew that the "boy" had climbed up to the orange blossoms and that the fruit of next autumn would be swollen with his flesh, cooled by the coolness of his death. No. She couldn't eat them. She knew that under every orange tree in the world there was a boy buried, sweetening the fruit with the lime of his bones. Nevertheless, she had to eat an orange now. It was the only thing for that gum that was smothering her. It was the foolishness to think that the "boy" was inside a fruit. She would take advantage of that moment in which beauty had stopped paining her to get to the pantry. But wasn't that strange? It was the first time in her life that she'd felt a real urge to eat an orange. She became happy, happy. Oh, what pleasure! Eating an orange. She didn't know why, but she'd never had such a demanding desire. She would get up, happy to be a normal woman again, singing merrily until she got to the pantry, singing merrily like a new woman, newborn. She would, even get to the courtyard and . . .

Her memory was suddenly cut off. She remembered that she had tried to get up and that she was no longer in her bed, that her body had disappeared, that her thirteen favorite books were no longer there, that she was no longer she, now that she was bodiless, floating, drifting over an absolute nothingness, changed into an amorphous dot, tiny, lacking direction. She was unable to pinpoint what had happened. She was confused. She just had the sensation that someone had pushed her into space from the top of a precipice. She felt changed into an abstract, imaginary being. She felt changed into an incorporeal woman, something like her suddenly having entered that high and unknown world of pure spirits.

She was afraid again. But it was a different fear from what she had felt a moment before. It was no longer the fear of the "boy" 's weeping. It was a terror of the strange, of what was mysterious and unknown in her new world. And to think that all of it had happened so innocently, with so much naivete on her part. What would she tell her mother when she told her what had happened when she got home? She began to think about how alarmed the neighbors would be when they opened the door to her bedroom and discovered that the bed was empty, that the locks had not been touched, that no one had been able to enter or to leave, and that, nonetheless, she wasn't there. She imagined her mother's desperate movements as she searched through the room, conjecturing, wondering "what could have become of that girl?" The scene was clear to her. The neighbors would arrive and begin to weave comments together--some of them malicious--concerning her disappearance. Each would think according to his own and particular way of thinking. Each would try to offer the most logical explanation, the most acceptable, at least, while her mother would run along all the corridors in the big house, desperate, calling her by name.

And there she would be. She would contemplate the moment, detail by detail, from a corner, from the ceiling, from the chinks in the wall, from anywhere; from the best angle, shielded by her bodiless state, in her spacelessness. It bothered her, thinking about it. Now she realized her mistake. She wouldn't be able to give any explanation, clear anything up, console anybody. No living being could be informed of her transformation. Now--perhaps the only time that she needed them--she wouldn't have a mouth, arms, so that everybody could know that she was there, in her corner, separated from the three-dimensional world by an unbridgeable distance. In her new life she was isolated, completely prevented from grasping emotions. But at every moment something was vibrating in her, a shudder that ran through her, overwhelming her, making her aware of that other physical universe that moved outside her world. She couldn't hear, she couldn't see, but she knew about that sound and that sight. And there, in the heights of her superior world, she began to know that an environment of anguish surrounded her.

Just a moment before--according to our temporal world--she had made the passage, so that only now was she beginning to know the peculiarities, the characteristics, of her new world. Around her an absolute, radical darkness spun. How long would that darkness last? Would she have to get used to it for eternity? Her anguish grew from her concentration as she saw herself sunken in that thick impenetrable fog: could she be in limbo? She shuddered. She remembered everything she had heard about limbo. If she really was there, floating beside her were other pure spirits, those of children who had died without baptism, who had been dying for a thousand years. In the darkness she tried to find next to her those beings who must have been much purer, ever so much simpler, than she. Completely isolated from the physical world, condemned to a sleepwalking and eternal life. Maybe the "boy" was there looking for an exit that would lead him to his body.

But no. Why should she be in limbo? Had she died, perhaps? No. It was simply a change in state, a normal passage from the physical world to an easier, uncomplicated world, where all dimensions had been eliminated.

Now she would not have to bear those subterranean insects. Her beauty had collapsed on her. Now, in that elemental situation, she could be happy. Although--oh!--not completely happy, because now her greatest desire, the desire to eat an orange, had become impossible. It was the only thing that might have caused her still to want to be in her first life. To be able to satisfy the urgency of the acidity that still persisted after the passage. She tried to orient herself so as to reach the pantry and feel, if nothing else, the cool and sour company of the oranges. It was then that she discovered a new characteristic of her world: she was everywhere in the house, in the courtyard, on the roof, even in the "boy" 's orange tree. She was in the whole physical world there beyond. And yet she was nowhere. She became upset again. She had lost control over herself. Now she was under a superior will, she was a useless being, absurd, good for nothing. Without knowing why, she began to feel sad. She almost began to feel nostalgia for her beauty: for the beauty that had foolishly ruined her.

But one supreme idea reanimated her. Hadn't she heard, perhaps, that pure spirits can penetrate any body at will? After all, what harm was there in trying? She attempted to remember what inhabitant of the house could be put to the proof. If she could fulfill her aim she would be satisfied: she could eat the orange. She remembered. At that time the servants were usually not there. Her mother still hadn't arrived. But the need to eat an orange, joined now to the curiosity

of seeing herself incarnate in a body different from her own, obliged her to act at once. And yet there was no one there in whom she could incarnate herself. It was a desolating bit of reason: there was nobody in the house. She would have to live eternally isolated from the outside world, in her undimensional world, unable to eat the first orange. And all because of a foolish thing. It would have been better to go on bearing up for a few more years under that hostile beauty and not wipe herself out forever, making herself useless, like a conquered beast. But it was too late.

She was going to withdraw, disappointed, into a distant region of the universe, to a place where she could forget all her earthly desires. But something made her suddenly hold back. The promise of a better future had opened up in her unknown region. Yes, there was someone in the house in whom she could reincarnate herself: the cat! Then she hesitated. It was difficult to resign herself to live inside an animal. She would have soft, white fur, and a great energy for a leap would probably be concentrated in her muscles. And she would feel her eyes glow in the dark like two green coals. And she would have white, sharp teeth to smile at her mother from her feline heart with a broad and good animal smile. But no! It couldn't be. She imagined herself quickly inside the body of the cat, running through the corridors of the house once more, managing four uncomfortable legs, and that tail would move on its own, without rhythm, alien to her will. What would life look like through those green and luminous eyes? At night she would go to mew at the sky so that it would not pour its moonlit cement down on the face of the "boy," who would be on his back drinking in the dew. Maybe in her status as a cat she would also feel fear. And maybe in the end, she would be unable to eat the orange with that carnivorous mouth. A coldness that came from right then and there, born of the very roots of her spirit quivered in her memory. No. It was impossible to incarnate herself in the cat. She was afraid of one day feeling in her palate in her throat in all her quadruped organism, the irrevocable desire to eat a mouse. Probably when her spirit began to inhabit the cat's body she would no longer feel any desire to eat an orange but the repugnant and urgent desire to eat a mouse. She shuddered on thinking about it, caught between her teeth after the chase. She felt it struggling in its last attempts at escape, trying to free itself to get back to its hole again. No. Anything but that. It was preferable to stay there for eternity in that distant and mysterious world of pure spirits.

But it was difficult to resign herself to live forgotten forever. Why did she have to feel the desire to eat a mouse? Who would rule in that synthesis of woman and cat? Would the primitive animal instinct of the body rule, or the pure will of the woman? The answer was crystal clear. There was no reason to be afraid. She would incarnate herself in the cat and would eat her desired orange. Besides, she would be a strange being, a cat with the intelligence of a beautiful woman. She would be the center of all attention. . . . It was then, for the first time, that she understood that above all her virtues what was in command was the vanity of a metaphysical woman.

Like an insect on the alert which raises its antennae, she put her energy to work throughout the house in search of the cat. It must still be on top of the stove at that time, dreaming that it would wake up with a sprig of heliotrope between its teeth. But it wasn't there. She looked for it again, but she could no longer find the stove. The kitchen wasn't the same. The corners of the house were strange to her; they were no longer those dark corners full of cobwebs. The cat was nowhere to be found. She looked on the roof, in the trees, in the drains, under the bed, in the pantry. She found everything confused. Where she expected to find the portraits of her ancestors again, she found only a bottle of arsenic. From there on she found arsenic all through the house,

but the cat had disappeared. The house was no longer the same as before. What had happened to her things? Why were her thirteen favorite books now covered with a thick coat of arsenic? She remembered the orange tree in the courtyard. She looked for it, and tried to find the "boy" again in his pit of water. But the orange tree wasn't in its place and the "boy" was nothing now but a handful of arsenic mixed with ashes underneath a heavy concrete platform. Now she really was going to sleep. Everything was different. And the house had a strong smell of arsenic that beat on her nostrils as if from the depths of a pharmacy.

Only then did she understand that three thousand years had passed since the day she had had a desire to eat the first orange.