

Extract from *La mujer de Isla Negra* by María Fasce

Translated by Kit Maude

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Details stand out better in the darkness. Images and sounds appear clear and untrammelled amid the blackness and silence. Footsteps, for example. No-one sees footsteps in the daytime and you can barely hear them. You can't see a hand touching another hand or a knee. Important things get lost. In the dark, you know when a shoulder strap falls, when a body stumbles backwards or when lips touch. Laughter is leavened by light but in the darkness it is as startling as lightning. The woman was laughing. She wasn't laughing like my mother, or any woman I had ever heard laugh: her laugh was harder and more high-pitched.

She'd taken off her clothes. Her back was tanned and her buttocks were large and sagged slightly. But her legs were muscular, like dancers' legs. There was a dark mark on her left calf the size of a plum. Her dress had pooled around her ankles like a pond on which her golden bra and panties floated.

Pablo wasn't naked. He went to the window and I heard the creak of a chair: he had sat down to take off his shoes and clothes and now he was walking towards the bed. His chest hair climbed all the way up to his shoulders and continued in a pair of strips down his back.

"Turn around," she said giggling. She was lying on the bed, a black triangle between her legs.

"What are you laughing at?" Pablo asked.

"You have the body of a baby: a tiny little bum and an enormous head."

The woman continued to giggle but Pablo threw himself upon her and muffled her laughter. He pulled the sheet over them both.

Now all I could hear was sighs like the kind animals made and, a little later, the woman's piercing moans, as though he was hurting her. Then there was a muffled scream, and then nothing. I held my breath, terrified that I might disturb the clothes on their hangars. It was only then that I noticed the perfume. Jasmine perfume.

For a moment, I wondered whether the woman had died. Then I saw her stick her head and arms out from under the sheets. He did the same. They lay still, looking at the ceiling.

She got up and crouched down next to the dress. Her red hair and large breasts touched her knees. She put on her bra and panties and her body recovered its pear shape.

Pablo slapped the pillow and she went over to him. She got back into bed and they fell asleep.

That was on my third day at Isla Negra, during the siesta. I had gone up to tidy Pablo's room and heard the laughter on the stairs. The wardrobe was open and it was big enough for me to get into. I closed the door after me. The doors had tilted slats that

allowed me to look out without being seen.

The dress was still on the floor. Pablo's snores mingled with the ticking of the clock on the bedside table. The woman didn't snore, but her body rose and fell rhythmically under the sheets.

I opened the wardrobe door carefully and snuck out. The scent hit me immediately: a sweet, sticky smell that was new to me.

I went to my room and stood looking out the window. A little while later, Pablo went out with the woman through the back door. They were walking towards the trees.

I went into the kitchen to wash my hands. I'd been gathering fallen twigs in the woods. I'd brought pine needles too: Pablo sprinkled them over the fish, he said that it gave it a special flavour.

My mother had her back to me. She was bent over the sink with her hair tied up into a bun. She didn't hear me come in because of the noise of the running water. Her red fingers were struggling with the sheets. They were the white sheets we'd put on Pablo's bed yesterday. Was she crying? No, my mother never cried.

I left my basket with the kindling under the window and walked around the house.

I sat on one of the figureheads in the garden and stayed there for a long time, clinging to the pointy breasts of the wooden mermaids. When would mine grow? I was twelve years old but they were still just a pair of insignificant pebbles.

“Why do they call it Isla Negra? We didn’t cross over any water.” I asked my mother. “Is it because of those black birds? What are they called?”

“Yes, yes,” she said absent-mindedly. “Because of the crows.”

She was making things up. Those birds weren’t crows. You don’t get crows by the sea. I’d been keeping an eye out through the window and then suddenly there it was: the sea gleaming in the sunlight like a shiny ribbon stuck to the landscape.

“I think we’re almost there,” said my mother.

The beach was filled with rocks and algae, there were black stains in the sand.

“Isla Negra,” shouted the driver.

We got out along with a couple with a baby, a fat man in a beret and an old woman with her hair split into two braids.

My mother asked the driver something and he pointed to the right, even though there was nothing there. She picked up her suitcase and bag, I grabbed my two plastic bags and we walked in the direction the driver had pointed.

We’d dressed up like when we went into the centre. I was wearing a white dress that was a little wrinkled by the journey. In Temuco, I’d sunbathed on the terrace, so the white suited me, but my mother’s skin had a greenish tinge. She’d let her hair down and the parting was to one side. I liked it when it was up and the parting was in the middle, the way it usually was. She was wearing sandals and had put on lipstick. She almost never wore make-up: the red accentuated her pale skin and the wrinkles on each side of her mouth, it made her lips look thinner. I’d secretly tried the cherry-coloured lipstick and looked at myself in the mirror: I was someone else, a fifteen year old girl with lighter eyes. I’d have liked to take a photo of myself but I put it back in the medicine cabinet and wiped my lips with wool. If mummy had left the lipstick in the medicine cabinet, would we go back to get it? Or would we never be going back again?

A warm, wet breeze was blowing. Beads of sweat stood out on my mother’s lips and every time she raised her arm, an acid smell escaped that made me hungry.

We walked down a path through a garden. Above was a stone staircase and a stone house.

The path was steep, it was hard to walk up, but would be easy to go back down. The mosquitoes were bothering me and I kept thinking that my white shoes would be covered in dirt by the time we arrived.

We passed in front of a fountain with seahorses and went up a narrower path. It looked like the witch’s house from Hansel and Gretel. I’ll bet there are dogs here, I thought.

My mother put her suitcase and bag down next to a tree, a few metres from the house. A dog appeared in the path with its tongue hanging out as though it was too heavy for its mouth. It barked and ran straight towards my feet. Dogs and cats are different that way: dogs always run to rub up against people who are afraid of them

while cats ignore them.

My mother was standing in front of the door, she didn't dare to knock. She was fixing her hair.

A tall man in shirt sleeves came over to the window. Then he opened the door and they shook hands. They looked at me.

The man looked up as though he'd just remembered something.

"Elisa," he said.

He came over to where I was standing.

"Hello, Elisa. I'm Pablo," he gave me a kiss and his beard scratched my face. He pointed to the other side of the house. "There's something you might like over there."

The wind shook the leaves. This garden was larger than the one in front and at the end, beyond the bushes, logs and fallen branches, were the woods.

Five bells hung from three planks of wood arranged in the shape of a triangle. A large bell hung above the others, which were smaller: a family of bells. I couldn't help touching one, I'd get back luck if I didn't. I stretched out to reach the bell-pull and rang the same bell twice; ringing all the bells could also bring bad luck. To the left of the bells were a pair of wooden mermaids with bare breasts that pointed to each side.

Pablo waved to me. I was embarrassed that he'd seen me ring the bells, it seemed as though he'd been there for a while. He was alone, my mother wasn't there. He came over and the white pool of sunlight slipped from face, which was large and dark.

"Do you like it?" he asked spreading his arms.

"What?"

"Everything. This place, Elisa," he said my name again as though he were trying to learn it, as though he liked to say it.

"It's all yours?"

"Yes."

"The sea too?"

"That too," he turned around. "Chu-Tuh; come."

The dog went over to his hand and bowed its head. Pablo stroked its back. He looked at me, waiting for me to stroke the dog too, but I didn't. Chu-Tuh was a strange name for a dog.

"Why do they call it Isla Negra if it's not an island?"

"Come here," he said. He put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me forward. "See?"

I looked where he was pointing: a large black rock in the middle of the sea, like the shell of a giant tortoise.

"But if you like we can change the name to Isla Roja. Because of the poppies."

I looked around:

"What poppies?"

He looked for them too.

"There were poppies when we got here," he suddenly seemed disappointed.

“Delia looked after them, she brought them. We’ll have to tell her that they’re gone. But now we’re going to raise the flag.”

He went into the house and came back out carrying a piece of fabric. He walked to the end of the path and waved to me to follow him.

The mast was next to a stone bench and an anchor. We raised the flag, which was blue with a fish inside a circle surrounded by the word Neruda.