

# The Visitation

by Fernando Sorrentino

In 1965, when I was 23, I was training as a teacher of Spanish language and literature. Very early one morning at the beginning of spring I was studying in my room in our 5<sup>th</sup> floor flat in the only apartment building on the block.

Feeling just a bit lazy, every now and again I let my eyes stray beyond the window. I could see the street and, on the opposite side, old don Cesáreo's well kept garden. His house stood on the corner of a site that formed an irregular pentagon.

Next to don Cesáreo's was a beautiful house belonging to the Bernasconis, a wonderful family who were always doing good and kindly things. They had three daughters, and I was in love with Adriana, the eldest. That was why from time to time I glanced at the opposite side of the street - more out of a sentimental habit than because I expected to see her at such an early hour.

As usual, don Cesáreo was tending and watering his beloved garden, which was divided from the street by a low iron fence and three stone steps.

The street was so deserted that my attention was forcibly drawn to a man who appeared on the next block, heading our way on the same side as the houses of don Cesáreo and the Bernasconis. How could I help but notice this man? He was a beggar or a tramp, a scarecrow draped in shreds and patches.

Bearded and thin, he wore a battered yellowish straw hat, and, despite the heat was wrapped in a bedraggled greyish overcoat. He was carrying a huge, filthy bag, and I assumed it held the small coins and scraps of food he managed to beg.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. The tramp stopped in front of don Cesáreo's house and asked him something over the fence. Don Cesáreo was a badtempered old codger. Without replying, he waved the beggar away. But the beggar, in a voice too low for me to hear, seemed insistent. Then I distinctly heard don Cesáreo shout out, "Clear off once and for all and stop bothering me."

The tramp, however, kept on, and even went up the three steps and pushed open the iron gate a few inches. At this point, losing the last shred of his small supply of patience, don Cesáreo gave the man a shove. Slipping, the beggar grabbed at the fence but missed it and fell to the ground. In that instant, his legs flew up in the air, and I heard the sharp crack of his skull striking the wet step.

Don Cesáreo, ran on to the pavement, leaned over the beggar, and felt his chest. Then, in a fright, he took the body by the feet and dragged it to the kerb. After that he went into his house and closed the door, convinced there had been no witnesses to his accidental crime.

Only I had seen it. Soon a man came along and stopped by the dead beggar. Then more and more people gathered, and at last the police came. Putting the tramp in an ambulance, they took him away.

That was it; the matter was never spoken of again.

For my part, I took care not to say a word. Maybe I was wrong, but why should I tell on an old man who had never done me any harm, After all, he hadn't intended to kill the tramp, and it didn't seem right to me that a court case should embitter the last years of don Cesáreo's life. The best thing, I thought, was to leave him alone with his conscience.

Little by little I began to forget the episode, but every time I saw don Cesáreo it felt strange to realize that he was unaware that I was the only person in the world who knew his terrible secret. From then on, for some reason I avoided him and never dared speak to him again.

In 1969, when I was 26, I was working as a teacher of Spanish language and literature. Adriana Bernasconi had married not me but someone else who may not have loved and deserved her as much as I.

At the time, Adriana, who was pregnant, was very nearly due. She still lived in the same house, and every day she grew more beautiful. Very early one oppressive summer morning I found myself teaching a special class in grammar to some secondaryschool children who were preparing for their exams and, as usual, from time to time I cast a rather melancholy glance across the road.

All at once my heart literally did a flipflop, and I thought I was seeing things.

From exactly the same direction as four years before came the tramp don Cesáreo had killed - the same ragged clothes, the greyish overcoat, the battered straw hat, the filthy bag.

Forgetting my pupils, I rushed to the window. The tramp had begun to slow his step, as if he had reached his destination.

He's come back to life, I thought, and he's going to take revenge on Don Cesáreo.

But the beggar passed the old man's gate and walked on. Stopping at Adriana Bernasconi's front door, he turned the knob and went inside.

"I'll be back in a moment," I told my students and, half out of my mind with anxiety, I went down in the lift, dashed across the street, and burst into Adriana's house.

"Hello!" her mother said, standing by the door as if about to go out. "What a surprise to see you here!"

She had never looked on me in anything but a kindly way. She embraced and kissed me, and I did not quite understand what was going on. Then it dawned on me that Adriana had just become a mother and that they were all beside themselves with excitement. What else could I do but shake hands with my victorious rival?

I did not know how to put it to him, and I wondered whether it might not be better to keep quiet. Then I hit on a compromise. Casually I said, "As a matter of fact, I let myself in without ringing the bell because I thought I saw a tramp come in with a big dirty bag and I was afraid he meant to rob you."

They all gaped at me. What tramp? What bag? Robbery? They had been in the living room the whole time and had no idea what I was talking about.

"I must have made a mistake," I said.

Then they invited me into the room where Adriana and her baby were. I never know what to say on these occasions. I congratulated her, I kissed her, I admired the baby, and I asked what they were going to name him. Gustavo, I was told, after his father; I would have preferred Fernando but I said nothing.

Back home I thought, That was the tramp old don Cesáreo killed, I'm sure of it. It's not revenge he's come back for but to be reborn as Adriana's son.

Two or three days later, however, this hypothesis struck me as ridiculous, and I put it out of my mind.

And would have forgotten it forever had something not come up in 1979 that brought it all back.

Having grown older and feeling less and less in control of things, I tried to focus my attention on a book I was reading beside the window, while letting my glance stray.

Gustavo, Adriana's son, was playing on the roof terrace of their house. Surely, at his age, the game he was playing was rather infantile, and I felt that the boy had inherited his father's scant intelligence and that, had he been my son, he would certainly have found a less foolish way of amusing himself.

He had placed a line of empty tin cans on the parapet and was trying to knock them off by throwing stones at them from a distance of ten or twelve feet. Of course, nearly all the pebbles were falling down into don Cesáreo's garden next door. I could see that the old man, who wasn't there just then, would work himself into a fit the moment he found that some of his flowers had been damaged.

At that very instant, don Cesáreo came out into the garden. He was, in point of fact, extremely old and he shuffled along putting one foot very carefully in front of the other. Slowly, timidly, he made his way to the garden gate and prepared to go down the three steps to the pavement.

At the same time, Gustavo - who couldn't see the old man - at last managed to hit one of the tin cans, which, bouncing off two or three ledges as it went, fell with a clatter into don Cesáreo's garden. Startled, don Cesáreo, who was halfway down the steps, made a sudden movement, slipped head over heels, and cracked his skull against the lowest step.

I took all this in, but the boy had not seen the old man nor had the old man seen the boy. For some reason, at that point Gustavo left the terrace. In a matter of seconds, a crowd of people surrounded don Cesáreo's body; an accidental fall, obviously, had been the cause of his death.

The next day I got up very early and immediately stationed myself at the window. In the pentagonal house, don Cesáreo's wake was in full swing. On the pavement out in front, a small knot of people stood smoking and talking.

A moment later, in disgust and dismay, they drew aside when a beggar came out of Adriana Bernasconi's house, again dressed in rags, overcoat, straw hat, and carrying a bag. He made his way through the circle of bystanders and slowly vanished into the distance the same way he had come from twice before.

At midday, sadly but with no surprise, I learned that Gustavo's bed had been found empty that morning. The whole Bernasconi family launched a forlorn search, which, to this day, they continue in obstinate hope. I never had the courage to tell them to call it off.