

# AN OLD WOMAN FRYING EGGS



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That particular morning, she wanted a honeydew melon. She would always demand one thing or another and I was bound to find it somewhere in Seville. If she wanted fresh fish, I'd stand in the river, slacks rolled up, for hours at times, waiting to catch a carp with my bare hands, for she found fishmongers filthy and greedy. If she wanted oranges, I'd have to jump over señor Álvarez's brick fence just before dawn, whilst the darkness is still thick enough to hide me, for the oranges grown in his orchard were the juiciest and sweetest in the street. Hiding behind these ridiculous instructions on how and where to find and steal our food was a simple lack of money in her pocket, which she would never confess to and instead made up principals which stopped her from buying low quality products from local merchants. So I would trespass and steal oranges and an occasional eggplant, so as to avoid putting her in a situation where she'd have to borrow silver from our neighbors.

A honeydew melon, on the other hand, I had no other way of obtaining that Thursday morning, so I headed for the market with a couple of eggs and hope that someone would exchange them for a mid-sized melon in a particular shade of yellow.

The carping old woman, who provided me with a roof over my head and the sun-faded clothes I was wearing in return for my servility and loyalty, whose impromptu decisions and whims and wishes I obeyed without objection, who loved me unconditionally but hardly ever let it show, was my grandmother. Her full name was Candelaria Andalita Maria de la Fuente, wife of the late señor Diego Esteban de la Fuente and mother of presumably late Rosalia Maria de la Fuente. The street called her Bruja. I'm sure the average reader can see why.

That particular morning, I was headed for the market. The Sun had not yet entirely come out, which didn't stop the temperature from rising so high I was covered in sweat within minutes. The street, the short trees, the villas in the richer part of the town which were not quite as ostentatious as their owners would like them to be but still far more extravagant and comfortable than I could ever dream of owning, the face of a passer-by, everything around me was as orange as señor Álvarez's oranges. The entire town was bathed in golden Andalusian sunlight and the air was carrying the scent of night-blooming jasmine, of blossom from various citruses, of dried grass and dust. I had seen this morning a thousand times. I had smelled it a thousand times. I had imagined my mother walking down this street a thousand times.

I've always lived in Seville. I've always been an orphan.

Like all the other orphans, I spent my childhood in an old orphanage in the south-west of Seville, known to most as the bad part of town, the part of town children are told not to wander off into and wealthy looking to stay out of trouble avoid at all costs. I don't remember what my life was like before the orphanage, I couldn't possibly remember, seeing as my parents left me there when I was just over a year old. They never even gave me a name.

The orphanage was an old house in a state of complete disrepair. We children had 2 big rooms on the second floor with improvised beds and a roof that felt like it would collapse at any time. I wasn't able to find out much about my parents there. The other kids in the orphanage didn't know anything, they never knew anything, they never seemed to care about their lives or the world outside the small, muddy patch of land we called the back yard. Oh, how I despised them. The women running the orphanage didn't tell me either. There were 3 of them. I remember Margarita, the youngest one. She would always look at the ground when I asked about my parents and start to stutter awkwardly before quickly changing the topic, but she was nice to us. I don't remember the names of the other 2, but they were the very opposite of nice. They were older, uglier and looked at all of us in the orphanage like we were worthless, sometimes even going after Margarita for taking care of us. I remember how one of them made us clean the floors every day while ranting on endlessly about how much she hated us. She was the only person I managed to get to talk about my parents, but she would do so only when I got her really angry, then she would shout about how they were useless drunks and that nobody in Seville had any respect for them. I still don't know whether she was telling the truth or not. After all, they did leave me here. Would any caring parent do that to their child? I tried not to think about it.

The thing one of the older women at the orphanage used to say most often was "I don't know why we bother with ya', you'll all end up growing up to become thieves and beggars anyway". As it turns out, being a thief is what saved me from that horrid place. It all happened in one night, but it took me weeks, maybe even months to muster up the courage to do it. The task was simple, I had to steal the spare keys from Margarita's room while she was looking after the other kids, wait until it gets dark enough and make my escape through the back door and then through a set of gates. I had stolen things before, mostly food, because what they gave us was never enough, so we always went to bed hungry. Stealing was something most of the kids there were used to, but none of us would even dare to imagine doing something as audacious as stealing the keys to the orphanage and just running off. Yet there I was, creeping past the main room late at night, while the 3 of them were arguing loudly over the "lost" set of keys. Their loud argument had only made my escape easier and I quickly found myself on the other side of the yard, fiddling with the gate's old, rusty lock. It took me what felt like an eternity, but was realistically barely 2 minutes to unlock it and when I finally shoved it open, I found myself standing outside of the orphanage, outside of the dreadful

place that kept me trapped for almost 10 years. A few moments of silence followed. I felt as if the air around me had changed, as if I wasn't just stepping into a dark street in the bad part of town, no, to me this was a whole new world. To me, this was freedom. I remember the smell of that hot summer's night, the sound of crickets in the bushes next to me and dogs barking in the distance. For those precious few moments, I indulged in the feeling of being simply overwhelmed, as if I was experiencing these senses for the first time in my life. The reality of my situation caught up to me soon enough and I quickly turned around and locked the gate again. "I'm not going to let them catch me off guard, not now, not when I'm this close"

I gave the old run-down orphanage one last look. "Tomorrow they'll find these keys, but they'll never find me... at least I hope so" I thought to myself before threw the keys over the gate and ran off into the night. I was wondering through the city alone with nothing by my side except excitement and joy of finally being my own man. It was not long after that I felt tired from walking all these hours on empty streets listening to people snoring through the open windows. They had to keep them open as the heat was unbearable even in the cold August moonlight. As I approached to what seemed an abandoned park bench my feet gasped as something wonderful was bestowed upon me by God himself. I decided to stay here and try to fall asleep which my half-shut eyes needed.

"Fish today seem to be hiding", I thought to myself in my dream, where I was a common fisherman living in a small shack on an abandoned beach near Roquetas de Mar. That particular place was meant to be a holiday reserve for tourists. However, one can find himself to lead a quite happy life, mingling once in a while at Roquetas' market, offering fresh fish to apartment renting visitors.

The next morning I was woken up by tremendous heat and intoxicating smell of sunlit rosemary. The next thing I remember was me walking below the old town fortress thinking to myself what I could possibly find to eat, as breakfast in the orphanage was already served, but I promised not to mention the orphanage anymore, it was my past life that I no longer have. Many older citizens haven't even noticed me on the streets as I was somehow a ghost of the past, only the children gave me freezing judgmental looks. No sooner have I found myself at the market, with my eyes as big as fruit giving out a typical fresh scent. "Since no one would even care to acknowledge me, I might as well help myself to a shady meal", this thought gave me strength and motivation to do what I do best. Needless is to say that my so called improvised plan failed. I found out that market vendors are very meticulous and even a slight distortion caused by my hand on their precious stands would alert them. I managed to escape into the masses and had to face a sad truth that I was being ignored rather than unnoticed. I walked aimlessly for the next half an hour trying to figure something out so as to not starve myself to death. As I was walking away

from the market, I stumbled upon a big, beautiful house with a large front yard and a orange, lemon and apple tree in it. I stared longingly at the fruit and in a split second decided to just take a couple of apples and oranges, surely no one will notice or miss them. As I was reaching my hand towards the tree, the front door of the beautiful house opened and a woman graciously stepped out. "What do you think you're doing?", she asked me. I stared back at her dumbfounded, not knowing what to say. "Well?", she spoke again. As I stood there frozen with my hand in the air, she was slowly walking towards me and in my state of panic, I did the only thing I could think of. I ran. Can't a kid catch a break? After I was sure no one followed me, I slowed down and found myself on a meadow, still starving and with no food in sight. I decided to take a breath there and just sat down on the grass, looking up at the morning sky and the shining Sun, already high up above. It was a nice day to be out, but then I realised that after sundown I will have nowhere to go and that frightened me.

The clouds were swaying way up in the air making all sorts of inexplicable shapes. Yet, two of them resembled two very familiar faces. Although I am sure I have seen these faces many times in my dreams, it felt like I knew those people for my whole life. After seeing those clouds I wasn't even sure whether or not I have seen these people in real life.

As a bee swirled across my face, so have those clouds lost shape, and immediately I lost their picture from my head. I remembered that I still had to find a place to stay, so I had to leave these Elysian fields and return to the cold, corrupted streets of Seville. Drifting the streets of Seville, I looked for any possibility of spending the night with a roof over my head. Other than a shopkeeper who gave me a peach as payment for throwing out the garbage, no one even threw the slightest glance at me. The benches in the park suddenly began looking warm, in comparison with the people strolling the streets. The stars and Moon will once again be my only companion during this night. I suddenly remembered the clouds I had seen earlier that day and the face-like shapes in them. The stars, when connected the right way seem to resemble the same two faces. There was no way I could fall asleep with having noticed that curious phenomenon. I woke up the next morning, and not so far from me, there was an old lady blankly throwing crumbs on the pavement, presumably for the pigeons to eat. Despite having the feeling that she would just ignore me as everyone else, I walked up to her and asked if she needed help with the crumbs. She shrug her shoulders coldly and gave me some crumbs, as if she said: "If you must...". Yet, something made me feel she had just been pretending to be so cold.

She was wearing a flamboyant dress and a matching hat. However, one could see that those might be the only valuable things that she possesses. Nothing could hide her mended shoes which seemed not to even be the right size.

After a minute or so, I started asking her some typical questions any stranger would ask someone they had just met. Although her replies were short and seemingly indifferent, she was the only person to have talked to me in two days, other than the aforementioned shopkeeper. As we kept on talking, if you could call it that, I told the old lady about myself. There probably was no need to explain that I was an orphan, judging by my looks, however, I did it anyway. She managed to find out a great deal about me, yet I knew nothing about her. After a brief moment of silence, she told me: "Listen, young man. Thank you for the talk, but I must be going now..."

"No! No! Please, stop!" She turned around lazily, she had probably despised me by now. She had probably wondered when I am going to go away and stop bothering her. Unfortunately for her I was not the easiest person to get rid off. I forgot to tell her how hungry I was, how tired, how much in need of a bed and someone's warmth. She looked at me with disgust, as if I was just a lost, stray pup which Seville was flooded with, making everyone to hate them like rats.

"Why would I stop? I only help people who can be of help to me and seeing you are close to nobody..." I knelt before her which seemed to had stunned her enough to stop talking. I was begging for a place to stay and in return I was ready to do anything it takes. I was tired of being a nobody, of being just an orphan, easy to ignore. Ready to prove myself, my words were ringing with confidence like they were an announcement told by the king, and not a little promise told by the little me.

Eventually, Bruja's heart softened and she has been providing me with a roof over my head ever since. And it is as a sign of gratitude towards her that I had this painting painted, to always remember the changing nature of people.