

PAULETTE JONGUITUD

## Mildew

*translated from the Spanish by the author*

**C**editions

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MILDEW

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**N**ever forgive, I said that morning just as I do every morning, by the window, waiting for dawn. Never forgive. Whom? Constanza? Which one of them? Never forgive her, the young Constanza, or myself, the old one? I did not know, all I knew was: I was never to forgive.

‘It hasn’t been that long, mother, it’s normal if you feel lonely,’ my daughter Agustina had said a few days before. I don’t feel lonely, it’s this house that suddenly has an echo.

The dark sky was melted with the fence, the tree, the houses of the neighbourhood. Things were not yet solid. There, out of focus, I could be young again, my flesh could be firm, I could imagine the house full of family, I could imagine my children, Leonel and Agustina, asleep in their beds.

Once the house was always full of people but now it was an exhausted shell, restless before dawn, a deep silence barely disturbed by the dogs barking. The dogs, the only crew members that hadn’t jumped ship.

In darkness everything is the same, everything is safe. Later: who knows. The sun comes up, the city grows noisy, the shadows are just imitations of form. Darkness

was beginning to crack. With light comes reality. It was the start of a day of false calm, or that's what I thought: twenty-four hours for the house to sleep before it opened its doors to an army of workers with tents, tables, dance floor: Agustina's wedding.

When the sky grows orange, colour invades every object and transforms it, the curtains catch fire and the grass tries to shimmer as much as the sky does. I don't like dawn. I said goodbye to darkness the way one does when leaving a shelter to walk in the rain.

I went into the bathroom and undressed in front of the mirror. I did not find in my reflection the young woman I had been just seconds ago. I examined my body, a personal audition that I fail every morning. Big feet, varicose ankles, wide thighs.

A slight prickling in the pubis made me look down and I found a green spot, half hidden by pubic hair. It looked like a mole, irregular in form and velvety to the touch. It seemed to be covered by grey powder. I scratched but it did not go away. If anything the spot looked even larger.

I went into the shower, under very hot water. I scratched, I rubbed, I scraped: the spot was still there. I tried every cleaning product I could find, pouring them over myself. Nothing changed. Then I attacked the spot with a metal nail file: the skin got irritated but the spot was undisturbed. I cut myself with the tip of the file. The blood looked black over the green spot.

I covered the wound with a cotton ball. I don't like surprises and since the last one had been an affair between

my husband and my niece, I was not feeling in the mood for another one.

Six months earlier I had designed the costumes for a production of *Macbeth* and there, in the bathroom, all the bad omens came to my mind and for a moment I convinced myself that I had been struck by a curse: *Out, damned spot! out I say!*

When the bleeding stopped I removed the cotton ball to find that the green mole had grown towards the leg. It was getting wider and solid. I examined it carefully: it was dark in the centre, olive green, and its edges were lighter. I separated the skin where I had cut myself and saw that the green went down and into the flesh.

Do not cry.

The spot got wider and wider, it grew before my eyes, it developed white filaments like a dandelion. When I moved my leg the filaments swayed: fragile tips, firm roots, like a miniature field. I wet my finger with the tip of my tongue and ran it over the spot, then I licked it again: the mole felt like flour and had no taste.

I still smelled of cleaning products and alcohol but the voice of my mother rang through the empty bathroom: *Look how dirty you are!* My mother from before, the one who was not yet a widow, my once useless mother who was incapable of ironing a shirt, the one who knew how to cook only beef stew and flour tortillas. That mother who used to walk around the house as if she were asleep and who only came alive to say: clean your shoes, fix your braids.

When my father was still alive my mother did nothing around the house, she only cared for herself. She never asked if the children had eaten, if we had done our homework. We had other people for that. *Look how dirty you are!* My sister Nilda used to escape through the back door and hide in a neighbouring orchard just to see how long it took mother to notice she had gone, but Nilda always came home, starved and angry, before anyone had noticed her absence. I don't like to think about my mother like that, combing her hair in front of a mirror without a thought for her nine children. Nine. I have only two and they drive me insane. Three. Do I have three children? No. Two. Only two that count.

I don't like to remember that decorative mother. I prefer to think of her as she was when I found her after the funeral: physical, real. She was functional and ashamed for not knowing how to handle my father's inheritance. She soon lost everything in bad investments. She lost the shoe factory which had taken my father a lifetime to build, she lost our house, she lost it all. I have always tried not to see her as a failure and I prefer to look at her strong sons instead, at her useful daughters trained not to repeat her mistakes.

Oh, mother, if only you could see me now.

**M**y father had a stroke when I was nine years old. We lived in Chihuahua, in a house that I found enormous even though it was only a one-storey building. My brother Tavo and I were the youngest of nine and when my father got sick we soon became a nuisance, like old furniture that always gets in the way. Tavo was a small and skinny boy with spiky hair and large front teeth. I think I was the only one who loved him, at least I was the only one who took care of him. 'Did you eat?' I used to ask him and his answer was always 'No' so I took him to the kitchen and fed him bean burritos. Maybe that is why today he is still a child, a forty-five-year-old child who spends the day in his workshop, buried in machinery, with that fanatical attention to detail that only autistic children seem to have. When my father got sick some of the machines from the factory were brought to the house, where they soon occupied the garage. Tavo spent a long time playing with them. Today it is hard to catch him without grease on his fingers, without a screwdriver in his pocket.

I have a lot of memories of my father but of one of those memories, the crucial one, I am uncertain. If I don't think about it that much I know that I saw him that day, the day

he had the stroke, I know I did. But then I doubt it. My father was always the first to wake up and he walked through the house, singing loudly, to wake everyone else. It seemed to me that he had a different song for every day of the year. We started our day to the sound of his footsteps and the sound of his voice. In this memory it is early in the morning and I hear my father's footsteps, I open my bedroom door and I see him walking by: his eyes seem sunken, a hand on his chest, the hat about to fall from his head. He looks at me. Maybe he wants me to help him. No, it is a fact, he is asking for my help. I look down at my bare feet, my nightgown, and I close the door. A doubtful memory. The next time I saw him he was lying in bed.

When my dad got worse, when he could sing only one verse of a single song, when he could not recognise his own hands and woke up startled by the sound of his own breath, my mother came to me and said: 'You will be going to a new school.' I was delighted: new uniform, new shoes, even new underwear. My sister Flor was also coming and we got in the car together, happy to leave behind a house where we could no longer play: *shh, Dad is sleeping*. The school was in an ancient hacienda building and I loved its great stone walls, its quince trees. It had a garden where large tomatoes grew, overlooked by a set of swings I promised myself I would spend hours on every day. The dark hallways were cold and the yard seemed endless. A nun showed us the dormitories and I assumed they were for the staff. That first day went very fast among a whirlwind of nuns' habits, girls' shouting and the promise of an

escape into the pantry. But the day became afternoon and then night and no one came to pick us up. We spent two years in that boarding school.

I never knew who packed my bag to take me there, who embroidered my name on the new uniforms, who forgot to pack the doll with a sucker. Had anyone told Tavo that we would no longer play in the bathtub, that we would no longer tell stories to one another through the garden hose? I never knew who forgot to pack my toy tea set. No dolls, no story books, no box of memories. Everything was left behind. I had only my fear.

When I was finally happy at boarding school a nun dragged me out of class and two hours later I found myself, dressed in black, standing in line with my eight brothers and sisters by my father's coffin. 'Who is in that box?' asked Tavo. I didn't answer. Maybe I was not sure.

My mother, my sister Flor, Tavo and myself left Chihuahua shortly after the funeral. We had lost the factory, the house, Chihuahua. My first train ride was bitter. We got to Mexico City and found an apartment with no quince trees, no garden, nothing.

**T**he prickling in my thigh kept growing stronger and the spot looked bigger. I looked around the bathroom: the shower, the curtain, the dark stain under the pipes from which water dripped to the floor. I lost my breath for a second and then rushed to that dark stain on the tiles. It was an exact replica of the spot that grew on my leg. I compared them slowly: tile, leg: identical. It was the same green, the same vegetation. Twin spots.

Mildew.

Was that even possible? Of course not, you have lost your mind. No, I am not insane, I am angry, that must be it. That healthy anger that makes you strong. That had to be it. After all, this mess between Felipe and Constanza had to affect me somehow, right? That had to be it, the asshole in love with Constanza, the young one. The man who sings songs to her over the phone, who writes poems and dreams of taking her out to dinner. Pathetic.

I always wanted a man who was like my father, at least as I remembered him: a big man with a deep voice and hair on the back of the hands. Felipe was nothing like him and I won't deny that for years I held against him the fact that he could not fill my father's shoes. A father with whom

I lived for less than ten years. A father I had made up from a patchwork of memories.

I licked the mildew on the floor – same feeling, velvety and tasteless. Shit. I should at least call a doctor. But I felt like lying on the floor and shouting: How dare you, in my own house? Do not cry. Was I crying for her? For him? So far these wounds seemed not to hurt me. It made me sick to think that someone could feel sorry for me: Poor Constanza, did you hear what they did to her?

I had to work on a plan of action. I was not going to spend all day locked in the bathroom with Agustina's wedding hanging over my head. Twenty-four hours to reconstruct myself, not a minute longer. First: I had to learn as much as I could about the invader. Mildew. The name was a start, a possibility.

Naked, I left the bathroom. The sun had already set every corner of the house on fire.