

The Birthday of the Infanta

I

As a girl, I went an entire day once without eating to walk with the Duke in the Queen's perfect, geometric rose garden, my waist no larger than the clasp of his hands. When we walked in the garden, the Duke kissed me, a brush of his whiskers near my face drawing me into his world of tobacco and male scent. This man who would give me fifteen children and become my comrade for decades, was older than my oldest brother Diego, but I did not mind. He was polite, and I knew marriage to be my duty; besides, I thought in my child's mind, he will die and then I will have my children to play with and a palace to dance in, where I will strew rose petals of every color in the rainbow.

It is alive in me today, this time so long ago in the past. Is it because I am dying? I watch my breath travel in and out of my ancient lungs and know that soon all this will end. The wise men say that when we die, we return to the place of our birth, though the priest told me I will travel to heaven or hell, according to the life I have led. And what of that life, which will be my fate? As a child, I thought nothing of death, only the future that lay before me like some great green meadow, the sun on my young skin, with no thought of what comes after.

You may marry a man or the Lord Jesus, my dears, the Holy Mother told us. She was a good woman, kind in her black robes and paper-white skin. At night when the convent was silent and only lit by the moon, a girl named Maria showed me her playing cards and laid them around us in a circle. She giggled so in the moonlight, yellow curls on her cheeks. My God, how beautiful she was! An angel does not describe her fairness. We each chose a different card,

mine snarled with a snake and a shining star, hers with the Lord Jesus. So that was our destiny—I would take the path of the world and the serpent, she of God. We brought our lips together to seal our fortunes and swore to be friends forever. I held her face in my hands and looked deeply into her eyes.

“You are my sister,” I said. “I will love you as no other. I swear to this.”

We pricked our fingers and tasted each other’s blood, though by the time I walked with the Duke in the garden, I had forgotten her. For a girl of my station, the preparation for marriage took months. I prayed often as the nuns instructed me in my duties—to my children, my husband, God. After my walk with the Duke in the Queen’s garden, there were more prayers and recitations. I was so famished that day, and was forced to wait until the sun sank below the mountains and my servant unwrapped my engagement dress from my body. How good to be unsealed from that coffin of lace and feel a breeze against my naked skin. I took a sip of chocolate, my first food of the day, one chicken wing, a basket of cherries. My mother said I was too fat and needed always to allow the Duke to encircle my waist with his hands. Other girls were more slender, their breasts small.

Once when we played at the ocean, I saw Maria’s breasts silhouetted against the sky, and her beauty left me breathless. I could have been taken for a boy, were it not for my head of brown curls and small lips. Still, in the garden, the Duke said I was a bird, a starling or a humming bird. “I am marrying air,” he said. For the hundredth time that day, I wondered if I would be frightened when he came to me, or if, like a sea captain, I would ride the waves of my destiny into very old age, when Maria and I would meet again, never breaking our promise of love.

I saw my future husband one last time before our vows, on the day of the Infanta’s birthday, when gifts from all the royal courts of Europe were opened and my brother’s painting of the Infanta unveiled. I wore the same dress that day, black lace cinching me tightly at the waist, ruby jewels around my neck, and when the Duke gazed at me, I felt excitement for this new world I would inhabit, led by the serpent and the flesh.

But now, when I remember that day, I think mostly of my brother's painting of the Infanta: the tiny child in her white satin dress, standing out hard and straight from her body, dogs and dwarfs playing at her feet; the King and Queen at the door, anxiously peering inside. Diego's canvas was huge, rising all the way to the ceiling, and he had put all of them in it, including himself. "Why not?" he told me. "They were here each day when I painted the picture—the musicians, the dwarfs, the King and Queen, *Las Meninas*, the ladies-in-waiting. It was a carnival. Why should art end simply because of a picture frame?"

II

“¿Quiere su chocolate ahora, señora?”

A girl stands before me with a pitcher of steaming chocolate and I nod. I have come to the palace one last time, to sit in my place before my brother's painting and ponder its meaning. So much has changed since he painted it. Philip is dead, I am in my eighth decade, and Spain is no longer the center of the universe. Once Philip's empire stretched three billion hectares to every corner of the earth, but no longer. The English have supplanted us, though the fame of my brother's painting only grows. Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez, knighted to the court of Spain for his service to the King. Painters as far away as Italia and Inghlaterra come to view it, to study his greatness and learn from his work.

Diego was ambitious. To qualify him for knighthood, a tribunal of the Inquisition had first to investigate our lineage, to show no Moorish or Jewish taint. The ordeal took seven years—the *auto-da-fé* waiting—that yearly spectacle where heretics are burned alive to cleanse the faith. Today people gather in greater and greater multitudes to witness the pitiable sinners. It is Spain's holiday, to which knights and representatives of neighboring cities are invited, the windows of the houses closest to the burning reserved for the most wealthy. The autos last from seven in the morning till deep into the night. I went only once, where I saw two sodomite lovers burned alive. Those gallant souls could not touch, but they looked into each

other's eyes and remembered the time they had shared, knowing that love like that is always worth death. Later the Tribunal flayed a child alive for refusing to bear witness against its parent.

Our family was proven spotless, thank God. Philip was glad. He told my brother that he once saw a Medici cardinal torture a mouse on a tiny rack for stealing cheese, and after that he wanted none of it. He would be the Planet King: his dominion stretched to every corner of the earth, and besides, he was the fourth Philip just as the sun was the fourth heavenly body to encircle the earth. He surrounded himself with artists and dwarfs, filled his castle with dancing bears and giants imported from Russia. Every spring theatricals were held, and my brother was given a private residence in his court. Philip admitted all to celebrate the birth of the Infanta Margarita Teresa, from scrubwomen to lepers, and now she was five.

On the day of her birthday and of the painting's unveiling, all were in attendance: the dwarfs, the lepers, the ladies-in-waiting, even a family of gypsies that lived outside the castle and had been invited to read the Infanta's birthday fortune. The woman predicted only rosy children and gold-tinted clouds for the child. How could she do otherwise?

A servant pulled a cord and a curtain slid to reveal the canvas. Philip stood before it for several seconds, then asked Diego for a small brush dipped in red so that he might make a final flourish, painting his family's coat of arms on the chest of Diego's self-portrait, knighting him in the painting as he would soon do in real life.

Slowly a smile spread on Diego's face, and he laughed. He grabbed Doña Isabel, one of the Meninas, the ladies-in-waiting, bent her backward, and kissed her. It was clear they knew each other well. For the remainder of the afternoon, she sat on his lap as he and Philip drank wine and ate from a celebration table heavy with all manner of food and libation.

Four years later, my brother died of a fever. He accomplished so much in his lifetime: over one hundred canvases of royalty and humanity and this masterpiece of the King's child that stares at me each day daring me to decipher its meaning: why does Diego show

us this world inside his canvas that is like the real world and at the same time not? It is a hall of mirrors. He has put himself in the center of it, brush in hand, peering at those who come to view his artwork from behind the back of a huge canvas. The Infanta stares with him, the Dwarf, Las Meninas. A nun and others cluster about.

There is no separation between art and life, Diego once told me. Is that its meaning?

Behind all of them, reflected in the glass that Diego has put at the rear of this invented world, are the Infanta's mother and father, King Philip IV and Queen Isabella of Spain. How Philip loved his daughter. Though the gypsy gave her endless decades, she only lived to twenty-one, the Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, before dying from the birth of her sixth child. Her husband who adored her was beside himself with grief. And I have outlived them all.

III

I will leave this body soon, this shelter that cloaks my soul. At night, I do not sleep. The girl has moved my bed next to the window, so that I can gaze at the moonrise and watch the transit of stars.

A year after my marriage, I saw the young novices walk toward their vows, their pale bodies dressed in white, faces lifted to God. The girls chanted as they walked, looking into their future, toward all I would never know. I was not jealous, for was not my path equal to Maria's, and does not all life lead to God? But now I am not so sure, and I wonder if Maria's life was not the luckier, spent in her devotion. The Duke was a respectful husband and we enjoyed each other. I will speak of it frankly. The seas we rode together were warm. He gave me so many children that on my celebration day, I am surrounded by generations—the smell of leather boots and young boys' tousled hair; the frothy petticoats of girls.

But what is that next to the mystery of the universe? There is a natural philosopher in Italia, I have heard, who has looked at the heavens through a special device that tells him the earth is not the center of all there is, that instead we are no better than any object in the sky whirling in the blackness, and if that is so, only God can

explain our meaning. The Tribunal does not burn him, but they have imprisoned him and destroyed his work, and still he will not recant.

Diego told me once that he painted the picture as he did, because his purpose was to capture the truth of the girl in the studio, the dogs, the dwarfs, *Las Meninas*, rather than concoct a deception.

What we see is sacred, he said, because it is true and where truth is, God is. Truth, he said, is a reflection of the divine.

“The Birthday of the Infanta” is a work of fiction inspired by the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, 1656, oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid.