

Puro Amor

The animals would always be there for her

By Sandra Cisneros

Missus Rivera fed the animals in the courtyard as soon as she got up.

They made an awful racket, her animals, especially on the days she most wanted to sleep in, when her back bothered her. During the summer, the season of afternoon rain, the animals misbehaved the most, and on rainy days her bones misbehaved as well.

The neighbors claimed Mister and Missus had as many animals as if they came from a ranch. And the animals claimed the same. This was not a compliment coming from people, but the animals were more generous and civilized and saw things differently.

The animals were only a part of a long list of Mister and Missus's eccentricities. The way they lived, for example, with poor people's furniture when they could've well afforded better. The light fixtures in their rooms, ugly naked bulbs dangling from dusty cords. The outside walls of their house painted a gaudy cobalt blue, a hue so bizarre everyone in the colonia knew the address simply by saying "la casa azul."

Mister, after all, was an artist known across the republic and beyond. A circus of admirers arrived at all hours and left at all hours singing in Russian, Chinese, English and French. Sometimes gunshots were heard, for it was well known in all of Coyoacán that Mister liked nothing better than to fire his pistol in the air when he was feeling content after his mezcál.

And that was not all. ¡Ay, no! It was a fact the Mister and Missus were not believers. They lived dissolute lives. Hollywood starlets, the wives of millionaires, as well as the mistresses of powerful politicians posed for their portrait naked in front of the Mister. And this with the Missus's knowledge and approval. A barbarity!

Oddest of all, Mister and Missus had no children, though they were well into middle age. This was why they could indulge and overindulge themselves with animals. More than some thought healthy.

Some animalitos were rescued from the streets because they looked, to Mister Rivera's eyes, like ancient Olmec pottery. Some were abandoned on their doorstep with flaccid bellies after giving the world too many gifts. Some Mister and Missus had given to each other, and some Missus fell in love with in secret, on excursions into the countryside, scooping them up and helping them into the car herself when her husband wasn't looking; he was jealous. These Missus Rivera loved the most, because their eyes were filled with grief.

Among the animals living in the household was a bad-tempered Guacamaya macaw, passionate, possessive, who flew into rages, scattering seed cups and upsetting his water, cursing in several languages.

There were the six hairless dogs who waited patiently for Missus to rise before beginning their day, warming her back, radiating heat like meteorites, and when she moved, their intelligent heads alert, their ears fluttering gently like the wings of a butterfly, greeting her always with infinite joy.

Cats — there were several varieties, feral as well as tame. One as fat as a Buddha, one as elegant as a carved Egyptian, one who looked like a dirty bath mat, and one who repeated all day, “Me, me, me, me.”

“There was a little fawn who tap-tapped her way throughout the house like a blind woman, ears and nose swallowing air.”

There was a little fawn who tap-tapped her way throughout the house like a blind woman, ears and nose swallowing air, a lovely creature with a silvery coat flecked with hail. And there were, at various times, many others, elegant and inelegant, some adoring and some indifferent, who shared their residence with the Mister and Missus. Tempestuous monkeys, nervous tarantulas, lethargic iguanas and on occasion, most troublesome of all, orchids, as imperious and spoiled as an emperor’s favorite courtesan.

The animals consumed more than food. They devoured Missus Rivera’s attention from the moment she opened her eyes. Even before she opened her eyes. The dogs pawed and rubbed themselves on her belly and spine. They slept on her starched pillow embroidered in silk thread — “Amor Eterno.” They brought dirt into her bed, nosed their way under the blankets, curling themselves in the nook behind the knees, the swell of her stomach, the soles of her feet. They insisted and insisted. And when she locked her bedroom door, they scratched and pawed and pleaded, destroying the wood with their urgent devotion, peeling the paint from the doors, swatting and rattling the doorknobs, hobbling and then dodging the servants’ brooms, and kneeling outside her door like the adoring Magi before the just-born Christ.

When she had been well, Missus cooked her husband’s favorite meals and brought them to him in a basket wrapped with embroidered dish towels and bougainvillea blossoms, and sometimes wrapped the desserts in banana leaves. “You Are My Sky,” the dishcloth said. She had embroidered it herself. The meal was her handiwork as well. On occasion Missus Rivera picked up a pencil or paintbrush and ventured to draw pictures of her life, because she was the subject she knew best. The Señora liked to make things. Embroidery. Sewing. Baking. Gardening. Flowers arranged in Oaxacan black pottery. Fruit placed in pyramids like in the market. The colors of the walls and the colors of the furniture, she mixed and painted these herself so that they would turn out just the right hue of mamey orange, Manila mango, xoconostle magenta.

“What a lot of bother!” people said. “What a lot of trouble and work!” But work is something you don’t want to do, and the things you enjoy are not work but the day’s best moments. Missus Rivera liked to make her special meals for her husband, to paint the walls, her nails, do her hair in elaborate braids adorned with flowers, arrange the house so that when her husband raised his eyes from his soup, he would feel happy, he would feel he was in his home.

This was her gift to him. People hissed this was too much. “He’s spoiled.” “He’s a fat toad.” “He’s always chasing after women, the Mister.” But his wife saw only too clearly his flaws and loved him anyway.

This is how much I adore you, this much, ay, how much. As if he were her little boy and not her husband.

He was used to being adored, to have her look at him the same way the animals looked at *her*, with devotion and gratitude, as if they were all sunflowers radiating light.

She had to do this. Her husband was famous.

“Ay, qué lata ser famoso,” Mister would say at first as a joke, and later because it was so very true, it is a lot of trouble being famous. Because Missus Rivera was not famous, she had time to make sure her husband was taken care of, so that he could go on working. He left at dawn and he came home late. Sometimes he did not come home at all, but slept at work in his clothes, pobrecito. This was why Missus Rivera did not mind taking him a clean change of clothes and hot lunch herself. She did not send the servants. He worked hard painting frescoes taller than their blue house. She dressed so that she would be a flower, too, radiating light.

Because I love you, I cannot be with you. You are like a rabid dog I can only watch from a distance. You bite and hurt me, even though you do not mean to hurt me.

Sometimes she locked herself away from him, but she could never lock him out, because love is like that. No matter how much it bites, we enjoy and admire the scars.

Sometimes Missus lacquered a table, and sometimes she smoked her cigarritos de yerba mala, and sometimes she cooked, and sometimes she crossed her arms and sat on a step in the garden and exhaled and rubbed the ears of her favorite dog, Chamaquito. And sometimes she drank her tequila and swore and made sure she swore like a man, so as to fortify herself and keep the world from thinking her too fragile because of her ill health.

“You son of a mother who ...” And the parrot would finish the phrase.

When Missus was young, she’d worn trousers like her husband and helped him with his work. But now that she was ill, she stayed indoors more and more, only going out to the garden. Only preparing some portion of her husband’s meals. Sending the girl out to the market, and not shopping for the food herself. She’d learned to cook from his former wife, because she knew if she didn’t, he’d go back there hungry for more than food.

On the days she did not feel well enough to rise, Missus stayed in bed, and her husband came into her room and sat on the edge of the bed. His weight was familiar to her and was as much a part of her life as the garden and his work and the food they ate together.

“My little girl,” he would say, but it was really he who was her little boy. “My little boy,” she would say, because this was true. They took turns being mother and father, instead of man and wife, because that part of their life had passed already, and with both sets of parents dead, they were orphans in the universe, and they needed and wanted each other as much as children.

Today Mister had left without sitting on the edge of the bed. He often did not come in anymore, and she often did not even notice this. They went on living with each other, and sending their love to one another through the things they loved in common. A slice of watermelon. The dog Señor Xolotl. A plate of steaming green rice.

On the days when the sky was the color of pewter and the clouds hurried by like women on their way to the market, when the afternoon rains began in thin drizzles and then finished so hard they bent the calla lilies at their stalks, she did not feel like working at anything but sleep.

She would've stayed in her room and asked for a little broth and a corn tortilla rolled tight as a Cuban havana, but the dogs were waiting for her to walk with them. Missus Rivera was not in a mood to walk. She ate what she could, and then she let herself be combed, and the dogs adjusted and readjusted themselves as she rolled about, always making sure they were touching her when they resettled.

When she finally rose from the bed, they leapt like acrobats, they pirouetted like dervishes, they made her laugh. And when she laughed she did sound like a girl.

Missus Rivera could look at photos of herself when she married her husband and say with complete honesty that back then, she was just a girl. But now, though her hair was only beginning to silver, and her teeth were rotten stumps, and all the organs and bones had been simmering and broken and aching, she could admit she was sliding into decline.

Visitors asked, “How are you?”

“Well, I’m still here, no?”

So it was.

The truth was that the Mister had always been dishonest. Not with his feelings but with his heart. He would be the first to tell you how honest he was about his dishonesties. He was like a chronic bed-wetter; he could not control himself. He would always be a bed-wetter even if he were not given a drop to drink. He had no wish to overcome this weakness. A big overgrown child indulging in whatever he saw, his eyes bigger than his pajarito.

And so Missus Rivera surrounded herself with animals. For what could be better than creatures when one has been betrayed, what finer emblem of loyalty and steadfastness and pure love.

Puro amor y amor puro. That’s what each pet gave her, pure and clean. Pure love and only love. Who wouldn’t want that?

“¿Quién quiere amor?” Missus called out. It was as if she was giving away treats and not simply love, for the creatures rose from all corners of the house and courtyard.

The little deer hobbled forward on slippery tiles, protruding her gentle snout timidly through the doorway as if asking permission to enter. Sleepy tarantulas scuttled across

the garden as if startled from a delicious hibernation. Dappled orchids nodded their graceful heads from elegant stems in approval. Cats clambered down from secret hiding places and approached gingerly as if asking, “¿Mande usted?” You commanded? Iguanas, hidden behind a fence of organ cacti, shook their prehistoric manes and all the colors of the rainbow glinted from their flesh. Monkeys set the tallest trees trembling and sent down a fine snowstorm of dung dust.

The Guacamaya, who had the most acute hearing of all the household, stretched out his feathered neck, revealing flesh as pink as a toreador’s stockings, batted magnificent wings, bobbed like a prizefighter, the black orbs of his eyes growing larger, then smaller, larger, smaller, until finally he shrieked with wicked pleasure, “¿Quién quiere amor?” in the voice of a crone, as if making a mockery of the Missus.

The click-click-click of their nails announcing them, the six xolos burst into the Missus’s room, exuberant as clowns through paper rings, leaping onto her ruffled bed without waiting for an invitation.

“*Whew!* What a lot of work it is to love you,” the Missus said. “What a lot of *lata*. *Son necios*. Troublesome.” She brushed each dog, wiping the night from the eyes of each with the hem of her nightgown. “Hold still, Señor Xolotl,” Missus instructed. “Come to me, Chamaquito. Paricutín, what a terror you are. Ixta, Orizaba, Xichu! Tell me the truth. ¿Quién los quiere? Who loves you?”

They raised their obsidian eyes to Missus and answered without answering.

Sandra Cisneros is the author of “The House on Mango Street,” a novel, and more recently “Have You Seen Marie?,” a fable for adults illustrated by Ester Hernández, and the nonfiction “A House of My Own: Stories From My Life,” to be published in October by Alfred A. Knopf. She lives in Mexico.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/style/2015/08/06/the-2015-fiction-issue/>

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