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Five Cowries - Matias Travieso-Diaz

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1

As a cook, Tomasa Bacán was a disaster. Her main dish was a mixture of boiled root vegetables, like yuca and malanga, supplemented by chicken feet, necks, livers, and other offal. She also knew how to make a tasteless okra stew, a nondescript plantain *fufú*, and a pallid *sancocho* whose only flavor came from the large quantities of chili peppers she dumped in the soup.

Evaristo Bulunga could barely down the insipid food she prepared, and that was the source of the first major fight between the newlyweds. After the fourth or fifth *sancocho*, he protested:

"Tomasa, my dear, can you make anything else?"

"Evo, forgive me, but mammy taught me how to sew and wash and iron, but never got around to give me cooking lessons. The little I know I learned by watching our maid fix her own lunches."

"Do you think that if I get you some goat meat you will be able to prepare a *chilindrón* for me?"

"What's that?"

"Goat creole in spicy tomato sauce. It's my favorite."

"I wouldn't know how to make it."

"You could ask your mother."

"She almost does not talk to me since our wedding. My family doesn't approve of our marriage, you know."

"And your lady friends?"

"They all have given up on me. That is, all except Eulalia, but she knows nothing about cooking, either."

"Couldn't you get a recipe somewhere, maybe in the public library in Sagua? At least you know how to read, you ain't illiterate like me."

"All right, I'll see how I can find a recipe." But she never did, for fear of venturing to try cooking difficult dishes, so she went on serving the tasteless sancochos.

Evaristo would complain to his friends, between gulps of burning rum and puffs of a cheap cigar: "You know me. I'm a simple guy. I like cock fights, playing dominoes and dice, and women with nice hips. I eat anything but would kill for chilindrón. I'm not getting none of the things I like at home."

One or another of the friends would reply something along these lines: "We all warned you. She's wrong for you. She's skinny, almost white, can read and write, and believes in the Catholic Church and its saints more than in the *orishas* of our religion. She's too high and mighty for you, a rough lumberjack, illiterate, and superstitious. What made you fall in love with her is beyond me."

Evaristo would confess sheepishly: "I dunno. I thought she would be good in bed." To which the inevitable follow-up question would be "Well, is she?"

Evaristo would blurt: "She was fine at first. But after a few months she seemed to lose interest and just lay there as if she didn't care. I've got enough fire for both of us, but am gettin' turned off by her lack of interest. The worst part is, much as I've tried, I haven't been able to get her pregnant, and I want kids!"

2

Two years into their marriage, Evaristo started going out with his cronies every night to drink rum and play dice. He would stumble back to the bohío in the early morning hours, barely conscious. Sometimes he would leave the hut after dinner and would not be back until the following day; occasionally he would be gone for two or three days.

Tomasa faced the disintegration of her marriage with a degree of equanimity, but not in silence. Little by little her complaints became more strident, and at the end she was greeting her husband with screams when he returned, dead drunk, as the cocks crowed.

The night of their fifth wedding anniversary found them sitting across each other at the dinner table. Evaristo was sober for a change, staring blindly at the empty wall in front of him. Tomasa's face was puffy and reddish, as if she had just finished crying. They stared silently at each other for a long time, as if neither dared start the conversation. At large, Evaristo swallowed hard and started:

"Tomasa, this ain't living. We can't stay like this. I'm going to get us a divorce."

Tomasa uttered a harsh gasp, as if squelching a sob. "Evaristo, as a Catholic I don't believe in divorce. I beg you, let's try some other way of dealing with things."

"What are we going to do? The years are piling up. I wanna enjoy life in the time that's left. I'm thinking of moving to Santiago to live with my cousin Yumiel and becoming a construction worker like him."

"Please," replied Tomasa, choking. "Why don't we give it a try, make an effort to get past our problems, let bygones be bygones?"

"What do you want us to do?"

"Maybe take a vacation, try a change of pace, something that will make us feel better."

"A vacation, where?" asked Evaristo skeptically. "And how is we going to pay for it?"

"Let's go to La Habana. I've been saving all these years for a layette for when our daughter Odalys is born, but she isn't arriving in the near future. Better to invest that money in ourselves, and if kids do come, we'll figure out what to do."

"I didn't know we had any money. I've never been anywhere, not even Holguín, let alone the Capital. I don't know anyone there, and wouldn't know where to go."

"Don't you remember my cousin Caridad, the one I mentioned to you several times? She lives in Santiago de las Vegas, which is near La Habana. She has offered to put us up. Other than transportation, the cost of the trip won't be all that much."

"I don't know, I don't like them adventures. I'm a country folk and cities scare me."

Tomasa let out a short laugh. "Didn't you say you were moving to Santiago?"

If Evaristo had not been such a dark man, his face would have turned all red. Instead of visibly showing embarrassment, he shook his shoulders and replied tentatively:

"I'm not leaving this place without a consultation. Many things can happen if we venture out far on them roads."

"Mmmm..." replied Tomasa, pretending to think about it. "Fine, although I don't believe in *consultas*. But if we are going to do it, we should cast the cowries, as Yemayá, the Great Mother of the Yorubas, teaches. Yemayá invented the use of the shells of sea snails to divine the future."

Evaristo rejected resorting to Yemayá to judge the matter. "No, I don't trust the words of women, which are always false. We better go to a Santería priest of Ogún, the *orisha* who rules metals and tools, and war. The priests of Ogún are serious people."

Tomasa pursed her lips in displeasure, but gave into his choice.

"Well, you go and find in Sagua a santero of Ogún, and in the meantime I'll write Caridad to start planning the trip."

3

As it turned out, after searching through Sagua de Tánamo's eighteen neighborhoods, Evaristo was unable to find an Ogún santero to handle their consulta. He had, therefore, to settle for a santero of Eleguá, who is the *orisha* to whom many consultas are directed. Evaristo did not like the change, because the adepts of Eleguá have the reputation of being unscrupulous. Tomasa reminded him, however, that those engaged in reading the cowries have a duty to faithfully interpret what the *orishas* say, not what is profitable for the reader or preferable to the one making the consultation. Thus, they agreed to consult an Eleguá reader.

The reader they selected came recommended by a Changó *babalawo* for whom Evaristo had high regard. The reader's home was in the Naranjo Agrío district, on the road from Sagua to Guantánamo. Evaristo and Tomasa went there on an early Monday morning, astride Isabel the mule.

The house in question was a wooden affair with a thatched roof. For a city person it might have seemed like a poor man's dwelling, but to Evaristo, who was used to living in a *bohío* with earthen floors, it appeared almost like a mansion. However, the décor inside the house was strange. The walls were covered with dark red paint, and the readings were made on a large ebony table covered by a variety of objects, including jingle bells, a guayaba cane, *maracas* painted red and black, and a pile of small copper coins.

They were met at the door by the reader, who announced that his name was Edelmiro, "but everyone calls me Pupo." He was a light skinned mulatto of medium height and precise movements, with hair that would have been kinky were it not rendered straight by an

ointment that released an acrid smell. He wore black pants and a crimson jacket, as well as a tall red hat adorned with sea shells. He wore a wooden necklace of large, alternating red and black beads.

Pupo asked them whether they had come for a consulta. Evaristo answered respectfully: "Yes, Your Eminence. We're planning an important trip and want to know if the omens for it are good."

Pupo answered right away, rapidly: "You did well in coming here. As you surely know, Eleguá is the prime orisha, he owns all roads and rules all destinies, he opens or closes the astral plane bringing happiness or misfortune to human beings. He must be taken into account before undertaking anything. He is the doorkeeper for all travels, whether for pleasure or driven by need." He said all of this without a pause, as if repeating a well-practiced speech.

Tomasa clarified: "Our trip is one of pleasure, but is very important to us."

Pupo closed his eyes and stated, in the same manner as before: "Then we must follow the *Eleguá Alá Lu Banshé*, which is the path of Eleguá that rules destiny. On that path, the orisha rules and is lord over all that is planned, the situations that may come up, and the actions that might be taken. Let us pray that Eleguá will lead us to good fortune on that path."

Then, in a different tone, he asked Evaristo: "What offerings do you bring before the orisha?"

"We are poor, and all we have is a jutía that I trapped the other night," replied Evaristo, opening a bag to display the corpse of a large rodent whose head was crushed and bloody. "They told me that a jutía is one of Eleguá's favorite offerings." Pupo did not hide his distaste, and replied in a cutting voice: "Generally, for an important consulta like this one, the offering is a goat or at least a couple of chickens. I'm not sure Eleguá will be pleased with yours."

"We have no money for that," answered Tomasa tartly. "If our offering is not sufficient, I guess we'll have to leave." She had turned towards the door when Pupo replied: "It's not an ideal offering, but maybe Eleguá will look at you with compassion. Let's go ahead with the consulta."

"Thanks, Your Eminence, many thanks" said Evaristo.

"Let me explain briefly how we are going to proceed," continued Pupo, assuming a professorial tone. "I've already purified myself, so I'll now pray to Eleguá to seek his guidance." Without more, he took two steps towards an altar on the back of the room that contained an image of the orisha, and intoned reverently: "*Laroyé Eleguá!*" Then he spilled a bit of water on the board where he would cast the shells and called out: "*Omí tutu Ana tuto Tutu larolle Tutu ilei,*" which he translated as "fresh water to purify the house."

Then he took from the altar a number of small shells from sea snails and, turning toward the couple, explained: "Eleguá calls for 21 cowries, although in a consulta we use only 16, which are called the *Dilogún*, and the rest are the *Adele*, which are set aside to serve as witnesses to the reading. Each cowry has an open side and a closed back side, and when I throw them if the open side is showing one says that the cowry is talking. Only the cowries that talk matter to the reading. I can cast all sixteen, but am qualified to read the message from only the first twelve. The rest can only be interpreted by a *babalawo*, who is not present today. I will cast the cowries twice, to make sure to get a precise reading." Saying that, he shook twelve shells within his hands and dropped them on the board. Five cowries were shown open. He picked up the cowries carefully, enclosed them in his hands, and after

shaking them cast them one more time. Again, five cowries talked. With a deep frown, Pupo whispered: "*oshé melli*."

Evaristo and Tomasa said in unison: "What does that mean?"

"Normally, one would need to prompt the orisha for further clarity by doing an additional throw using an *igbó*." "And what is that?" cut in Evaristo, exasperated. "An *igbó* is a method for determining whether the answer to the original question asked of the orisha is yes or no, that is, whether the prediction made by the shells is positive or negative. But in this case the answer is clear, and is not good. Five and five, '*oshé melli*,' means bad news, death, destruction. Blood will run, the doctor will come. Eleguá says that one of you two, or both, will face a grave risk of death if you take your trip."

Evaristo and Tomasa looked at each other apprehensively. Tomasa had turned pale and was starting to tremble. Evaristo woodenly asked: "Is there anything that can be done about this?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Pupo, but his voice had an evasive tone. At a glance, Evaristo concluded that Pupo was not willing to do anything else for just the price of a *jutía*. "If you want, I can recommend another reader or a *babalawo* who can give you a more detailed reading."

"Thanks, we'll think about it," replied Tomasa and turned her back on him.

4

The moment Pupo had closed the door, virtually on their faces, the argument began. Tomasa was disdainful: "We should pay no attention to this Pupo, who's just a charlatan." Evaristo was dubious. "As you said, he is a man of the gods and is bound to tell the truth. We need to get another consulta."

"Not in your life. I have no more money left to throw away on superstitions."

Over the next few days, Evaristo considered the situation, to the extent he was capable, from all possible angles. Tomasa gave him no peace; instead of writing, she had gone to the Sagua de Tánamo City Hall to use its phone to call Caridad long distance, and Caridad had reiterated that she would receive them with open arms whenever they showed up. Given this, Tomasa started to make trip preparations, asking her cousins to come from time to time to feed Isabel, the chickens, and the pig, which they were fattening for Christmas. She went back to Sagua to ascertain the train schedules and bought herself a new dress, modest but well-tailored, to wear on the trip.

After a lot of hard thinking, Evaristo was able to boil the problem down to three questions, which he repeatedly asked himself. "First, were the results of the consulta trustworthy? Second, was the foretold catastrophe inevitable or was it just a possibility that might not take place? Third, and most difficult, do I dare go and take a chance with Tomasa's life?"

None of the questions had an easy answer. He did not trust the oracles of Eleguá, that most dishonest god, particularly when Pupo had behaved in such a shifty manner. On the other hand, he had been able to confirm with the Changó santero that the result they had obtained by the casting of the cowries pointed to the existence of a grave danger. After a lot of doubting, he concluded that the most responsible thing was to assume that the reading was legitimate and, if the orishas were to be believed, was the prediction of a great impending disaster.

The second question was complicated by not knowing whether the results of a throwing of the shells were totally determinative or only indicative of a possibility that could be avoided. He also did not know if the danger was already there or had occurred only because they were to go on that trip, so that it could be avoided by staying home. After a few

sleepless nights, he concluded that since they had made a consulta with reference to a planned trip, and given that Eleguá was the god who could better predict what would happen once they got on the road, the more conservative course of action (that is, the least risky) was to stay home, regardless of Tomasa's protests.

But then there was the third question. He did not mind so much putting his life at risk, but how about hers? His feelings towards his wife were conflicted. He was certain that he did not love her any more, indeed could hardly stand her, but what would happen if they took the trip and she died? Would agreeing to go on the vacation be an indirect way of getting rid of her? Could he undertake the trip in the cynical hope that something bad would happen to her? And, if it did, could he live with the guilt?

He felt it was his duty to protect his wife from coming to harm. After four days and nights of mental torture, he made a final decision: give up on the trip, hoping that it would be the best (or least bad) alternative for both of them.

Tomasa became unhinged when he announced his decision. "You are an ignorant and a savage. A superstitious fool who believes what a charlatan dressed like a candy bar tells him. If you want to stay, you'll stay alone. I no longer want to go anywhere with you. Tomorrow I will return to my parents' home and from there I will go to La Habana by myself."

Evaristo tried to explain the reasons for his decision, but Tomasa stomped on the dirt floor so hard that earth flew everywhere, and screeched: "I'm willing to take my chances! I want this vacation more than anything I ever wanted! If you don't agree for us to go, I won't stay another day with you. I will now go to my parents' home, and I'll divorce you."

Evaristo was taken aback by the vehemence of Tomasa's demands. He racked his brain for a proper response and finally came up with this: "Are you willing to risk your life just to take this vacation?"

Tomasa spit her answer with an emphatic "YES!"

Against his better judgment, Evaristo conceded. "Alright. We'll go. But don't blame me if anything bad happens."

"Don't worry, I won't."

5

The trip to La Habana was uneventful. Tomasa enjoyed herself tremendously, spending hours chatting with her cousin Caridad, pacing through the broad avenues lined with ceibas and blooming framboyanes, gaping in disbelief at the mansions of the sugar barons, visiting parks, stores, and museums, walking along the interminable seawall and filling her lungs with pure, salty air. Caridad cooked for them and they feasted like they never did at home in Sagua. It was all wonderful, and Tomasa never wanted it to end. Their stay was to last only for a week, and at the end Tomasa and Caridad embraced and wept together as if they were sisters about to be separated forever.

Evaristo did not enjoy the trip at all. Every minute of the vacation he fretted about the impending disaster the gods had predicted. When he went on walks with Tomasa, he spent all his time looking over his shoulder for the monster that lay in wait to pounce on them. Not even the delights of Caridad's cooking – she made for him a chilindrón that was fit for a king – could dispel the gloom that enveloped him like a shroud. He hardly slept during that week and, when he did, he woke up every hour with a start, as if an apparition was lurking in the shadows.

When they went back to Sagua, things went back to normal, perhaps even more dismally than before the vacation.

They came to terms with their situation a couple of weeks after their return. Unlike before their trip, Tomasa was not urging that they find a way to get their marriage back on

track. She was the one who reopened the topic, during a meal in which Evaristo hardly touched her sancochos:

"I still think the vacation was a good idea. It's a pity it didn't work."

"No, it didn't" replied Evaristo curtly.

There was a long silence, and Tomasa ended the conversation and the marriage: "Tomorrow I'm going to Sagua to start work on the divorce papers. Rather than coming back here, I'll stay with my parents."

Evaristo nodded his assent: "Fine by me."

Evaristo left for his friends while she packed, so he missed her getting on Isabel and trotting to the town to meet with a notary about their divorce and then to her family.

6

It was only a few days later that Evaristo learned that the fish with which the family had toasted Tomasa on her return home were infected with the cigüatera toxin. Tomasa's parents, brothers, and sisters in law, all came down with diarrhea, vomiting, numbness, dizziness, and weakness, and were very ill for some time but recovered. Alas, Tomasa sunk into a coma from which she never emerged.

The news of Tomasa's death left Evaristo with renewed doubts. "Was it my fault that Tomasa had died due to my giving in and agreeing to take the trip? But the trip itself had gone fine."

"If we had stayed home and not left for Havana, would it not have somehow ended the same way? Maybe the perilous travel was not the one to Havana, but Tomasa's return to her family?"

"If future is predestined, can it be avoided?"

"Are the gods' spokesmen mere charlatans and the five cowries that talked meant nothing?"

After a while, Evaristo told himself "I better stop wasting my time like this. The fact is that Tomasa has disappeared from my life, and I'm free again!"

He finished a cigar and went out to join his drinking buddies.

7

Evaristo did not stay in mourning long. In a few weeks, he met a woman much like himself – dark, earthy, with generous hips, a good cook, endowed with a loud voice and an infectious laughter. It is unclear whether they married, but all the same she bore him six healthy children who filled the bohío with their joyous noise.

Evaristo never strayed away from Sagua for even a mile, and had no occasion or desire to consult the gods about anything again.

Matias Travieso-Daiz is a Cuban-American engineer and attorney, retired after half a century of professional practice in Washington, D.C. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various lengths and genres. His stories have appeared or are scheduled to appear in over thirty paying short story anthologies, magazines and podcasts in the United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. A collection of some of his stories has also been accepted for publication.



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