

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz  
4110 Faith Ct.  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(703) 472-6463  
[mtravies@gmail.com](mailto:mtravies@gmail.com)

About 2987 words

**The Satchel**  
by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*There are two types of people in this world. People who hate clowns...and clowns.*  
D. J. MacHale

We have to be careful when we walk in the open. There are always bad people on the lookout for the likes of us, and if they catch us (as happened once, not long ago) there will be loud insults, kicking and punching, or worse.

The kids have been told to be wary of us, for we will try to lure them away for some evil purpose. They must run, and they must warn their elders so they can pursue us, cudgels and pitchforks at the ready. We are only safe by dropping back into the forest or reaching the foot of the mountain where there are sheltering caves. We need to avoid being seen during the day and only venture out at night to forage in the fields, catching small animals or plucking fruit from trees, and sometimes stealing eggs from hen houses. It is a miserable and dangerous life, made necessary by our own deeds and the cruelty of men.

It was not always like this. Before, I could stroll among crowds hardly drawing attention from anyone. But of late I needed to start wearing gloves and had to make a rough covering for my face out of thick canvas. We tried to make it more human-looking by stealing dyes from the tannery and turning the piece into a white oval over which we painted large smiling red lips, black eyes set below black eyebrows, and an orange ball for a nose. As my overflowing dark hair shot out behind and around the mask, the composite became the face of a jester, and not a good looking one.

Reflected on a rain puddle, the image of the mask was terrifying. We had a sudden impulse to throw it away and start all over again. But there was no guarantee that a new mask would be less hideous, and at any rate the mask was intended to conceal, not display my true self.

Now winter was approaching and living off the land was getting increasingly difficult, so we had to move south to milder lands. A pass through the mountains was guarded by border patrols of two nations, but we managed to elude them in the dead of night, thanks to a violent storm that had the guards abandon their stations in search of shelter. The trip through the highlands past the border was very difficult, with the cold winds cutting through our garments and food turning from scarce to non-existent. We nearly froze or starved to death until, by the grace of God, the last mountain pass was surmounted and the land dropped gently to a region that was much warmer and where grasses grew and some fruits still hung from trees. We rushed down to find a respite from the cold and sample what the land had to offer; fish were found in abundance in gentle rivers, and field mice and squirrels were available for trapping and eating raw, for we hate fire and will eat nothing that requires us to cook it.

A few days after reaching the warmer region, we came to a hamlet where people seemed less violent than those across the mountains. We spied on the local inhabitants for a few days before deciding that it might be safe to approach them. Late one afternoon, as the sun started to drop behind the hills, we approached slowly a hut that was set apart from the others, and waved hello to an old man who sat on a bench at the hut's entrance. He was taken aback by our appearance, including the dirty rags that barely covered my body, the filthy cape, the large pilgrim satchel slung over one shoulder, the beard that protruded from below the mask, the frizzy hair, the gloves, and the mask itself. Even though startled, the old man waved back hello and made a summoning sign with his arm, inviting us – me and the satchel – to come closer.

Reluctantly, we did, even though friendly gestures are rare and need to be received with suspicion. The man began talking in an unknown language, but seeing that I did not understand he mimicked a question. He rubbed his stomach and then pointed at us, asking if we were hungry. I nodded vigorously. The man got up, opened the hut's door, and beckoned us to follow.

Inside, it was all very rustic, plain wood table and chairs, earthenware pots and dishes, wildflowers in a blue glazed vase. There were framed religious prints on the walls and a small bookcase with dusty books on half-empty shelves. A faded yellow curtain on the back of the room seemed to lead to other rooms. On the stove, a pot of cooked polenta was slowly cooling. An old woman was bent over the counter adding butter to a saucepan containing sautéed mushrooms. A jug of wine sat next to the saucepan.

The old man grabbed my arm and led us to the table. The woman took four wooden bowls out of a cupboard and ladled the semi-solid polenta into each of them. She set the bowls

on the table, spooned the mushrooms over the polenta, and added grated cheese to each bowl. She did all of these with practiced ease, as the man filled glasses with wine.

I was focusing on the feast about to be served and did not notice that the back curtain had parted and a young girl, no more than sixteen, had entered the room and approached the table. She uttered a piercing scream when she saw us and cowered, covering her face with her hands.

The old man and the woman rushed to the girl, seeking to calm her down. We became afraid of what might follow and took advantage of the momentary confusion to pick up a bowl, run to the front door, and disappear into the evening. Once a good distance away from the hut, I savored the polenta, my first real meal in months. But we missed the warmth of human interaction, no longer to be had.

That night we sneaked into a sheep barn and, skirting the mildly protesting animals, found a quiet corner where to catch a few hours of sleep. Early the next morning, before daybreak, I stole a young lamb to be devoured later, and ran away into the still darkened countryside as dogs started to bark their threats.

It took only a few days to determine that the people of the south were no different than those beyond the mountains. A few folk caught glimpses of us as we roamed the fields and invariably shook their fists or made the sign of the cross. Once we had to run away, pursued by a rainstorm of rocks.

After two months of fugitive life in this foreign land, we could not stand it any longer. We came upon a village and headed for the church, which was recognizable as the only building with more than one story. The wooden doors were closed, as it was well into the night. I pounded on them, demanding admittance. After a few minutes a disheveled priest on a night robe opened the door part way and inquired:

“What brings you here at this late hour?”

“Father, I need to have you hear my confession.”

“Can’t it wait until the morning?”

“Please, father, I must unburden myself!”

The priest sighed and opened the door. “Come and sit for a few minutes while I get dressed.”

A little later, I was kneeling at the confessional. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned” I said. “How long has it been since your last confession?” “One and a half years, Father.”

“What are your sins?”

“My sins are many, but I would start with the most serious ones. I have killed or caused the death of several people.”

There was an audible gasp. “How did you do this?”

“My wife Coralina and I were mimes, traveling with a circus. Another mime, Domino, was also part of our act. Coralina gave birth to a beautiful girl with whom I fell in love right away. The afternoon of the child’s first birthday our circus was pitched on a clearing some distance away from a small town. Coralina asked me to go to the village to buy a torte and other goods to celebrate the occasion. I was halfway out on the route to town when I discovered that I had left the purse with my money behind. On returning to our tent to retrieve it, I heard noises inside which were clearly the sounds of lovemaking. I did not need to get in to learn that my wife and Domino were having intimate relations.

“I was seething with rage but restrained myself, partly because of deep shame at having to acknowledge Coralina’s deception and also because Domino is much bigger than I and could hurt me badly if it came to a fight. I retreated to the ringmaster’s tent and asked him to lend me

some money, which I promised to repay before the day was out. The ringmaster was surprised by my request but gave me a few coins. So, I left for the village again, as a plot to avenge myself started to take shape in my head.

“My first stop was at the town chemist. I complained to him that I was having trouble getting to sleep and was looking for something strong to help me get the rest I needed. The chemist said this was a common affliction and the best cure he knew of was valerian, which had been used for centuries to treat insomnia. He produced a copper tin full of brownish shavings of different sizes. ‘This is ground valerian root, the best sleep-inducing agent’ he said. ‘You can use it to make tea; a couple of cups of valerian root tea will put you to sleep in minutes. But beware: it has an unpleasant taste, like that of weeds mixed with dirt. I recommend that you add a lot of honey to the brew to mask the bad taste. As an alternative, you can use alcohol in any form, like wine, to dissolve the root slivers and disguise their flavor.’

“I thanked him and bought a pouch of the ground root. I then went to the wine merchant, from whom I bought a bottle of coarse red wine and a large flask. After leaving his shop, I emptied the entire pouch into the flask, filled it almost to the top with wine, and shook it thoroughly so that the ground root would dissolve. I took a small sip of the mixture: it tasted off but one could think it was just the poor quality of the wine. I completed other purchases and returned to the circus as night was falling.

“That night Coralina, Domino and I had a modest feast with chicken, cold meats, fruits and the birthday torte. As she served the dessert, I poured two generous cups of wine and handed them out. I gave myself a cup also, but only pretended to drink it. Coralina made a face when she first sipped the wine, but before she could protest, I explained: ‘It is wine from the foot of the Atlas Mountains. It takes a bit to get used to the taste, but believe me it is quite good.’

Domino let out a great guffaw and said: ‘It tastes like the cheap wine it is, but I like it’ and proceeded to drain his cup and presented it to me for a refill.

“Less than an hour later, the valerian had done its work. Domino was hunched over the table, snoring loudly. My wife had managed to stay sitting on her chair, her head sunk on her chest, also snoring.

“I took from my pilgrim satchel several lengths of rope that were part of the day’s purchases and tied Domino’s legs to his chair, and Coralina’s to hers. The ropes would slow the lovers down for at least a few critical moments.

“I then glanced at the crib, where the baby lay quietly. What was I going to do with her? She was for sure Domino’s child, not mine. All of a sudden, I hated her. Should she be spared? The answer was no.

“I proceeded to the last step in my revenge. I tore a sheet into pieces, soaked each piece in cooking oil, and set each on fire, tossing them into all corners of the tent, and ran out for safety as the flimsy structure started to go up in flames. I was only out a few steps when I heard the loud wail of a baby in distress. I had a sudden pang of conscience, rushed back into the burning tent, found her bellowing with her clothes on fire, and rushed out with her in my arms, screaming as the fire licked into my face and hands.

“Inside, Domino and Coralina had woken up. They tried to free themselves as the flames closed in on them. They failed, and their desperate screams resonated in the silence of the night. Help rushed in from the other tents, but the rescuers arrived too late.

“I ran until I reached the woods that surrounded the village. There I made a stop to rest for a moment. For the first time I noticed that I was in great pain from burns over the exposed areas of my body. Turning to the child I held against my chest, I made another discovery: she

was not breathing. I shook her tiny body, pinched her cheeks, tried to breathe life into her mouth. She was dead. I have no idea how, but she had perished in my arms, and it was all my fault.

“When my mind cleared somewhat from the pangs of pain and grief, I realized that I was the prime suspect for the deaths of Domino and Coralina and it would not be long before they started chasing after me with riders and hunting dogs. So, we ran further into the wilderness. In time, I made this mask to cover my burned face, put on gloves to hide the burns on my hands, and went into hiding, always carrying with me the remains of my daughter. See?”

I opened the pilgrim satchel. Immediately, an intolerable stench of decay filled the small church. Peering inside, the priest saw a clutch of small bones, some with shreds of rotting meat attached to them. He convulsed and retched. After a while, he recovered enough to continue administering the sacrament.

“Your sins are grievous and call for retribution from God as well as man. You should surrender yourself to the authorities and abide by their judgment. As for...”

I interrupted: “But Father, my crimes were committed in another country. Justice would not be served if I am punished here.”

The priest continued. “What to do about the justice of men is between them and you. As for the mercy of God, you must do a very demanding act of penitence.”

“Like what?”

“Half an hour down the road that goes east out of town is a holding encircled by a tall fence. The fence has an entrance with a gate and a sign that reads “House of Lazarus.” You must go to that gate and ring its bell seeking admittance. When they come in response to the bell, tell them that you want to serve the community. They will let you in.”



“What kind of a place is it?”

“A leper colony. What we call a lazar house.”

“What if I refuse to go?”

“God will not grant you absolution for your grave sins without the required penitence.”

I motioned towards the satchel and we rose as if to leave. The priest watched as the satchel closed. He added: “And, since this confession has not been completed and your sins have not been forgiven, I will feel obliged to tell the town’s constable what you have told me and let him decide what to do with you.”

I thought the priest was bluffing, and considered wringing his scrawny neck and bolting out of this accursed village. But we were tired. Very tired. So, I replied:

“Very well. I will go to the House of Lazarus.”

The priest’s face broke into a wan smile and, raising his right hand, he intoned: “Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen. Go in peace and sin no more.”

So it was that, as night gave way to dawn, the satchel and I found ourselves at the gate of the House of Lazarus. The bell, as I swung it, rang with great force filling the morning with metallic echoes. There was a long silence and I was about to swing the cord again when slow steps sounded as an attendant approached the gate.

“How can we assist you, brother?” said the attendant, a wizened small man who seemed bent with age and fatigue. “I have come to serve the community” was my response, as directed. The old man sighed and produced an iron key, but before inserting it on the lock he demanded: “You must remove your mask before entering this place. Here nothing can be hidden, for the worst deformities of the lepers have to be observed and accepted without shame as God’s will.”

Those words seemed to lift a heavy burden that had been weighing on my soul for months. I removed the clownish mask and let the morning breeze caress my scarred face. As the key turned into the lock and the gate slowly opened, I dropped the satchel in the woods behind me and walked in, seeking redemption.

“What was that?” asked the gatekeeper, noticing how I had discarded the satchel.

“Nothing much. The bones of a young lamb that I consumed a while back.”

T H E   E N D