



The Blue Pearls

MATIAS F. TRAVIESO-DIAZ

Celia always waited for him, sitting on an uncomfortable chair that barely fit on the wrought iron balcony, one eye affixed to the spyglass that scanned the glassy surface of the sea. A real life Madame Butterfly, she knew nothing of the armies of wives, fiancées, lovers, and mothers that had preceded her and would follow in her steps through the centuries, all with the same yearning for the return of some long gone man, all blind to the likely futility of their vigils. She would regard without seeing, the collapse of each evening as it sunk in violet spasms below the horizon and ushered in another dispirited night, another day of fruitless waiting gone. Her free hand, which she was barely able to see in the

deepening dark, caressed the pendant which was the only jewel she allowed herself; the pendant that she had made to house the dusky blue pearl he had given her as a farewell token. “Wear it always,” he had admonished, “because it will bear witness that I am always thinking of you.”

Celia had smiled when Marcos uttered those words, which sounded like an endearment, not a real promise. But he hastened to add: “No, really. It is part of a set that I bought in a fishing village in one of the Greek islands, during the campaign against the Moors.” He took out a small pouch he kept over his chest and, opening it, dropped in his hand another blue pearl, identical to the one he was giving her. “They say the blue

ones are the rarest of all pearls, and those of a dusky color have mystical powers. If you get two of them as a set, they will forever search each other out and will find a way to reunite no matter the time or distance.”

She had smiled again, indulgently, and asked with just a touch of sarcasm: “And where did you get that fine story?” If he detected incredulity in her question, he chose to ignore it, and replied in earnest: “There was an elder at the village, a soothsayer consulted by people from all corners of Greece, who told me the story of how Penelope and Ulysses had matching blue pearls just like these, and they were reunited after a decade of separation because of the pull of the pearls.” “And you believed him?” “Why not? I had already paid for the pearls to a local fisherman. The seer had no incentive to tell me a lie. Anyway, whether true prediction or fairy tale, I mean it when I say that I will return to you, unless Death takes me first. I swear it by my faith as a Catholic and my honor as the last member of the Bazan family.”

For a while after his ship took sail Celia had kept the pearl in the casket where she stored the trinkets she owned. But one year went by, and then another, and one day she took the blue pearl out of the casket and had it mounted on a simple silver pendant. Thus she transferred her hopes to the pearl in the pendant, and silently leveled heathen prayers at the pearl seeking its help in bringing in its sister, and with her the long departed Marcos.

Celia’s prayers remained stubbornly unanswered, and a decade went by without news of her lover. Family and friends pestered her for years trying to persuade her to forget her probably dead (or if not, deserting) fiancé and seek a new life. She had rejected all pleas and, one by one, the voices that counseled forgetfulness became themselves silent and abandoned her to the fate.

So it was that, in a late summer afternoon in the fourteenth year of her wait, Celia’s spyglass scanned the emptiness of the waters as she sighed discontentedly. A heretic thought was forming in her mind, dulled by inactivity and longing. Should she give up her wait? After all, she was no longer in the budding bloom of her youth, but was more like a withering rose shedding, one by one, every petal of beauty and joie de vivre, leaving only a charmless husk, an old maid fit only to be pitied. She was starting to course through those dangerous inner waters when she noticed with a start that the waters outside were no longer empty. A ship of a type she remembered well was making a lumbering approach towards the harbor. It was a frigate, a square-rigged warship like the one that had carried Marcos away.

It was too soon to identify the vessel, but just the same Celia hurriedly changed into her best clothes and rushed out towards the harbor, where a crowd had already gathered. As the ship maneuvered towards the pier, Celia’s heart began an irregular pounding; it was the Medusa, the frigate in which

Marcos had departed towards the North Sea, to make war for the glory of the Crown. The ship had suffered much from war and adverse weather: most of its rigging had been blown away, and only the lower foremast, lower mizzenmast, and bowsprit remained operational. The crew had experienced similar ravages, with many sailors appearing wounded and those that remained intact ambling about lifelessly.

Celia was able to corner a disheveled officer as he set foot on the pier: “Officer, is Don Marcos Bazan part of your crew?” “Err... si, señora,” was the polite but evasive sounding answer. “Where is he?” “He is below deck. He was seriously injured in our last engagement with the Brits and has not recovered. But...”

Celia did not wait for him to finish, and ran up the plank before he could stop her. She went the length of the main deck, skirting all the obstacles on her path, and went down the narrow stairs to the area under the prow that housed the sick bay. The sight she encountered was appalling: the sick or wounded were slung up to the beams in hammocks, subjected to the ship’s deafening noise, in constant collision with other swinging beds, and exposed to the heat and odors of cooking from the nearby galley. Instead of quietude, ventilation, and natural light, the area beneath the water-line that served as sick bay was close, dark, and dismal. The stench, the noise and the heat were indeed unbearable.

Standing at the edge of the confusion, Celia asked as loudly as she could over the surrounding din: “Does anyone here know where Marcos Bazan is?” There was an abrupt silence, and then out of the middle of the room came a feeble voice: “He is here, next to me.”

Celia followed the voice, which kept repeating “Here,” until she found herself close to the back wall, near a point where several hammocks coalesced into an uninterrupted mesh of rope. The voice, she now saw, belonged to a dirty looking sailor with a leg on a cast. With great effort, the man half rose on his hammock and pointed to his left: “There is Marcos.”

The hammock to the left of the sailor was occupied by a dark hulk of humanity that appeared oblivious to the world. Celia approached the body and cried out: “Marcos, my love! It is I, Celia, come to rescue you!”

This declaration elicited no response. Celia repeated her cry again, now with a tinge of desperation in her voice. Again, no response. Turning to the sailor in the next hammock, she questioned: “What’s wrong with him? Why doesn’t he answer?”

The response came from behind her. The officer she had ditched had finally caught up with her and had seized her arm, seeking to lead her away. “He suffered a head wound in our battle with the English privateers. His body seems to be healing, but his mind is gone.”

Celia swallowed an anguished cry and, making an effort to regain her composure, asked: “What is the Royal Navy going to do with him?”

“Our ship is badly battered, as you can see. We will have to stay in port for months to get it repaired. He will remain onboard while work on the *Medusa* is ongoing. If by the time we are ready to depart he has not recovered, we will leave him behind in some institution. I am sure some order of nuns runs a hospice or a hospital for the disabled here.”

“Is it possible for him to be released to me now, rather than waiting many months? I am his fiancée and would take care of him better than any institution.”

“I will need to speak to the Captain. Bazan was a brave soldier and a fine seaman, not to mention a nobleman who volunteered for service to the King, and we want to make sure that as good a care is taken of him as is possible. His papers do not list any family members or other relations to whom we could transfer his custody. Your suggestion may be well received. Of course, we would need to know more about you...”

“Of course” she replied haughtily. “I am Celia de Roxas, direct descendant of one of the first Spanish governors of this island. Our family is famous for its rectitude and loyalty to La Corona. We are not wealthy – never were – but our piety and good works are well known throughout the colony. Ask anyone.”

“Madame, I meant no offense. It is only that we bear some responsibility to the men under our command...” Celia cut him off. “No offense taken. But please talk to the Captain and let’s take care of this matter as soon as possible.”

It did, however, take more than a few days for Marcos to be turned over to Celia. The ship doctor insisted that he should be kept under medical care until his physical wounds were sufficiently healed. The Captain had demanded a stiff bribe to consent to generate the necessary paperwork, and it took Celia a bit of effort to round up the money from her friends and relatives. Finally, one bright but unusually cool late November morning Celia led Marcos down the pier and into a carriage she had hired to bring them home. Marcos walked hesitatingly, like a small child or a drunk unsure of where to set his foot next. His gaze was unfocused and there was a vacuous smile on his lips. His beard, so heavy it obscured most of his features, was speckled with gray.

“Yes, my dear, you are a mess. But I will take care of you” announced Celia brightly. When the carriage deposited them at the door of Celia’s home in the old section inside the walls of the city, Celia took him firmly by the hand, made him climb the three stone steps that led to the threshold of their dilapidated mansion, and pushed him indoors as Matilde, the old Indian slave, opened the heavy mahogany doors. As they entered, the bells in the nearby cathedral announced the hour. It was eleven in the morning, and all was well – no pirate ships or English corsairs were in sight.

“First thing we are going to do is give you a bath and get you into new clothes. I will be glad to burn the stinking rags you are

wearing.” He nodded, but it was not clear whether in agreement or as an automatic response to her commanding voice.

Between Matilde and Celia they disrobed Marcos, sunk him in a huge copper bath that saw use only on Easter and Christmas Day, lathered his body with precious Castile soap, and poured bucket after bucket of hot water to wash away months of grime from his body. Marcos did not protest, even when Matilde accidentally doused one of his eyes with soapy water; he merely rubbed the liquid away with a mechanical grunt. Indeed, he let them scrub and rub and poke at him, until he was as clean as a hairy forty year old sailor could ever be. “You have been baptized again” declared Celia with satisfaction. “Now, for the next step, we are going to trim your beard.” She took him by the hand and led him into the parlor.

She then produced a large cast iron straight razor that had belonged to her father. It was wide at one end and tapering into the handle, and very heavy. She thought for a moment of sending Matilde out to get a barber but decided she could do this herself, if she was very careful. She soaped Marcos’ beard thoroughly and set to work, trying to eliminate as much of the excess hair as possible and still leave a fashionable moustache and pointed goatee, in the style of reigning King Philip IV. However, her skills with the clumsy razor were limited and she failed to achieve an even moustache, or a presentable goatee. So she ended up giving Marcos a totally clean shave, except for a few cuts here and there for which she stanchd the flow of blood the best she could.

Celia then stood back to admire her handiwork and did a double take. The man whose face she had cleaned and shaved was deeply tanned, with wide set eyes and thick black brows that nearly touched and made the face look slightly sinister. Looking at him closely, Celia also noted that his pupils were lighter than Marcos’ – amber rather than brown. This man was NOT Marcos!

“Who are you?” she shrieked, and started to shake the man as if trying to dislodge the truth from him. At first, there was no response, but after a short while the man let out a big sigh and replied: “No, I am not Marcos, but he was my friend.”

“What do you mean he was your friend? Where is he?”

“He is dead. He was killed in 1624 during the siege of Breda in the Netherlands. I was by his side when he fell.”

“How did he die?”

“We were in the Royal Navy together and were sent as reinforcements to the army laying siege to the city. At first our army, composed largely of pikemen, was unaccustomed to facing the large numbers of musketeers fighting for the Dutch. As a result, we took many casualties at the start of the siege, and Marcos was one of them. He was hit in the chest by a musket shot and perished.”

“But why did you steal his name?”

“He was a nobleman and I am a nobody, son of a slattern from the back alleys of Burgos. I was a deckhand on the

Medusa, he a gunner. Despite the differences in class, we had become very close friends. I realized that he no longer had need for his name or rank, and I could make more of myself by becoming respected Marcos Bazan instead of low class Ramon Garcia. I took the personal papers he had on his person, deserted, hid in the countryside for a few days, and finally returned to the *Medusa* impersonating him. I got some strange looks at the beginning but I had grown a full beard, was of similar size, and knew him so well that I was able to fool everyone. Luckily, my skills as a gunner were never really tested until we ran into the Brits.”

“And you thought you could fool me too?” asked Celia angrily. “Did you think you could continue to pretend to be an imbecile, and I would never know any better?”

“No” he replied, lowering his head in shame. “I was in fact suffering from some mental disorder on that day you met me. I later recovered but kept the pretense since I knew you were taking steps to free me from my indenture on that hateful ship. I was hoping to keep you in the dark for a while, before revealing myself. It was not meant to be,” he finished ruefully.

“And, apart from getting me to rescue you, did you have any other purposes in mind? Maybe you intended to murder me or steal the little I own?”

“Well, I did have another purpose. See, he had told me all about himself and you. When he was shot and lay dying, he asked me to find you and tell you that he had loved you to the very end and only Death had kept the two of you apart. Also he had something for me to give you... But where is my scapular?”

“Do you mean the brown scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel?”

“Yes.”

“We took it out to bathe you. It is in the kitchen, on the table next to where we put the copper bath tub.”

“Can I have it back, please?”

Celia was incensed at Garcia’s deception, but she went back to the kitchen and brought back the scapular—two wool squares of cloth, connected by woolen strings. One square contained a leather bound image of the Lady of Mt. Carmel, the other showed a picture of the Holy Heart of Jesus. She handed the scapular to the man, who carefully pulled apart the square containing the picture of Jesus, tilted and shook a hidden receptacle, and drew out an iridescent, dusky blue pearl. “He asked me to give it to you to always remember him by.”

Celia’s eyes clouded with tears. She lamented: “Yes, one blue pearl will always find her sister. But not always carried by the same man.” And, more acidly: “Not even similar. You are only a common thief. I shall denounce you for impersonating a member of the Spanish nobility.”

“You certainly could. But please consider this: turning me over to the King’s justice will not bring Marcos back, and you will die as you currently are, bitter and alone. Let me stay

with you as your servant and, if you allow, your companion. I promise to be your friend as I was the friend of Marcos. He trusted in me, why will you not give me a chance to prove my worth?”

Celia was indignant at Garcia’s request. “You are vile and brazen and I will see you punished as you deserve.” She turned her back on the man, started to walk away, and called her slave out: “Matilde! Please come here at once!”

Garcia begged again with mounting agitation: “My lady! Please give me a week to prove myself. If you are dissatisfied with me in any manner, I will walk over to the mayor’s office and ask to be placed in chains. In the meantime, let me honor the memory of the man we both loved. Let me serve you. Please!”

Celia stopped. If Marcos had trusted this man with a priceless pearl and he had delivered it, perhaps he deserved a chance, maybe as a servant. She turned to him: “I can’t pay you and have only menial tasks for you to perform. If those conditions suit you, I will not turn you in, at least for a week. But be aware that you are on trial, starting now.”

“Thank you, my lady. I don’t need money. I will get my pending wages ... er, Marcos,’ from the ship’s paymaster. Indeed, I will contribute to this household expenses.”

At that point, Matilde entered the parlor. “Did you call, Miss Celia?”

“Yes. I heard the bell in the cathedral strike three. Can we have dinner now?”

“Yes, Miss Celia.”

“Then, let us have a celebration to give thanks for this reunion,” she said ironically.

And so it was that Ramon Garcia came to stay in the old house of Celia de Roxas and, as time went by, proved more than satisfactory in every way. Later, Celia would re-introduce him to her family and friends as Don Marcos Bazan, returned after many years of absence. And, one day, they married and went to live in Marcos’ manor house in Navarra, where they lived happily ever after. And each of them kept a perfect dusky blue pearl as a token of their undying love.

Matias is a Cuban American attorney. He retired recently after four decades of law practice, during which he generated a large number of writings, including books and published articles, which were well received by critics and the public. After his retirement, he have redirected his efforts towards creative writing and have authored a number of stories of various lengths and genres.