

The Ebony Horse

translated from Spanish (Cuba) by Erik Noonan

The *Ebony Horse*, a tale retold from *The Thousand and One Nights*, portrays Gonzalo, a protagonist who believes he's destined for fame and fortune, but only pursues fantasies of being a high-ranking army officer, an exceptional musician, a prelate, and a celebrated author. Gonzalo's life, which the novel traces over four decades—from adolescence in a Costa Rican town to maturity in New York City—is shaped by a rampant imagination that, predictably, leaves a trail of failures in its wake, as he ignores his modest achievements in the emotional realm, mixing them up with his inexhaustible sexuality. Narrated at a dizzying pace that compresses novelistic space into a dense plot, *The Ebony Horse* tells the story of a noble but illusory life, not by following a straightforward path, but by laying out a puzzle for the reader to put together.

Chapter 3

For years there existed in Alajuela a military band that marched on feast days and performed at nighttime tattoos in a city park. With the abolishment of the Army, the Alajuela National Band, like the country's other military bands, preserved its structure, venue, and uniforms, although it no longer represented the armed forces. It was based in the former Army barracks, now reduced to a mere precinct, which Gonzalo had not gone back to since he began the formalities of his recruitment more than a year earlier, to which he now returned, determined to be admitted into the band.

The director, a man whose prominent jowl accentuated a kindly face, asked him to play something, and he reproduced some reveilles and marches he'd learned at the military academy; he also mentioned that he could read music. The man agreed to listen to some exercises on a dented trumpet and stopped

him now and then to ask him to repeat or lengthen a phrase. After a while he seemed satisfied.

"That's good. You still have a lot to learn, but that could come with effort. We barely have any budget, but we can give you something, eighty colons, a hundred at most. If you apply yourself, you'll outdo the others in no time. We're in need of new blood."

Gonzalo returned home cured of any trace of depression. He was very animated that day as he recounted to his parents how, amid the bustle of the encampment, he had discovered the musical passion he now knew was the most authentic propensity of his whole life.

"Don't fret, father. This is what I was born to do. I'll make you proud."

A new day dawned for him, after some months spent prostrated by doubt. There would be no more camps to go back to, nor shocking reveilles, nor morning drills, nor abusive lieutenants, nor paunchy colonels. Now he was free to dedicate himself to music, surrender to it totally, although he was nothing more than a novice.

He practiced daily and participated with subdued enthusiasm in all the band's other activities. He felt very much at ease, moreover, in the relaxed atmosphere, somewhat bohemian, of that group of musicians who, notwithstanding their apparent lack of discipline, were able to rehearse on their instruments for hours and hours without the least sign of fatigue. All his new comrades were older, and they adopted him without misgivings, though perhaps with some condescension. Unlike the military school musicians, who used to praise his precocity and achievements, the ones in Alajuela insisted on how much he still had left to learn, the strength he would need in order to be like them, and the dedication that would be required of him if he wished to overcome certain defects. Perhaps they envied the favor

he'd so quickly found with the director; but in truth they were strict, despite the fact that most of them didn't even aspire to a seat in the San José Philharmonic.

By now Gonzalo had gone back to dreaming big, not about a military career that would bring him fame and fortune, but about his artistic development and the trumpet that, in his fantasy, was going to justify his presence on the foremost stages of the world. His bandmates shared their plans to sign contracts with the orchestras in the capital, the jazz groups that were starting to become popular, and he remained hidden by cloaking himself in modesty, perhaps through an instinctual shame or because he didn't want to hurt them by confessing his immoderate aspirations.

He did not hold back, however, from considering the long hours of study he would have to subject himself to, in order to transform into a musician of the first rank. The steps interposing themselves between him and fame were not a concern but a stumbling block to his imagination, which situated him, without explaining how, in a trumpet concerto with the Pittsburgh or Vienna Symphony Orchestra. He could almost hear the thunderous ovation with which an auditorium full of men in tails and bejeweled women would overwhelm him in constant warm receptions.

"We would like it very much if you stayed with us for a while at our house in the Tyrol, especially at Christmastime. The mountains are marvelous. It's all so noble, so quiet, so fragrant, so clear. The parish children would like it very much if you brought your trumpet. We have a little castle where you can practice to your heart's content."

Without a change of scene, another lady now pressed on:

"You're coming with us to Saratoga Springs this summer, aren't you? The Saratoga races are truly an event, and not just for the horses. The people in attendance there are hardly ever seen together anywhere else. We'll have a word with the authorities, so you can play at the stadium, and start the races off."

"I'm the President of Genoa Bank," a person could say, who appeared unannounced in another of his triumphant scenarios, which differed very little from the previous one. "How would you like to accompany me to the Mediterranean, next time around? I've got

friends on just about every one of the islands. It will be a tour through history and cuisine: Capri, Sicily, Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus. How does that sound? You'll be astonished when we get to Ithaca and you see it's just as green now as it was when Ulysses set eyes on it again more than three thousand years ago. We could even trace Ulysses' route. I'm sure your trumpet won't let the sirens' song drive us crazy."

He accepted all these invitations, of course, and his imagination placed him, with no contradictions to bar his way, in some elegant hotel that could just as well have been in Salzburg as in the Riviera, Oslo, or Waikiki, ever the object of flattery from splendid hosts who celebrated a virtuosity that was still far from showing up, or even promising to.

Juan, the trombone player with curly hair and a perpetual roguish smile, was the only one he could share his plans with. He would never know, when he looked back long afterwards, whether Juan had been an active accomplice, or whether he had just gone along with it, even enthusiastically, out of affection, because he'd grown fond of Gonzalo's company, on account of the tender friendship Gonzalo expressed for him, which Gonzalo's mother—who instinctively discovered anything that promised to cast a shadow across the confused world of her emotions ("That Juanillo is such a strange sort")—could barely stand.

Although the two went to brothels on weekends, and spent what little they made on drinks and women, they both knew the affection that had sprung up between them was much nobler and stronger than the occasional relations they procured. Juan, who was a few years older, treated Gonzalo like a dear brother, whose solicitude grew more vehement and compromising when he got drunk.

"Gonzalo, you are what I love most in the world," Juan would say almost in his ear, as they stumbled arm in arm down a street where no one passed by at the midnight hour.

"Don't exaggerate," Gonzalo replied, with false sarcasm and intense desire, whose excessive sentiment Juan reciprocated. "Are you trying to tell me you love me more than your father?"

"More than my father, kid, a lot more." And Juan took the opportunity to stroke Gonzalo's face with the back of his hand, the way film actors did with females they liked.

This caress disturbed Gonzalo so much that he rejected it.

"Quit acting faggy, Juan. Someone might see us and get the wrong idea."

"What wrong idea?" the trombonist asked, in a mischievous drunken tone. "It would be nothing but the whole truth."

"Let go, quit screwing around," Gonzalo repeated, unable to prevent Juan, midway between tenderness and lust, from fondling him.

Gonzalo, who drank less, would accompany Juan to his house, then return home, to be met by his mother, who had waited up, and went on the attack, to the point of rudeness, against his friendship with the musician.

"Out with little Juan again, were you?"

"Yes, what's wrong with that?"

"Everything. People are going to say the worst."

"And what's the worst they could say?"

"Don't play innocent with me, anyone can see how you look at each other."

"Leave me be, I'm worn out."

Sometimes he added a curse and went to bed without wishing his mother goodnight; but when he was in bed, where he invariably masturbated before going to sleep, Juan ended up imposing himself on every other erotic vision his memory or his imagination furnished. At times Juan's face superimposed itself on that of a woman Gonzalo slept with on weekends, after which his desire became more intense. It was the moment he ejaculated, in disbelief that his legs and Juan's were not entwined. He fell asleep to that face, as if he could inhale the other's alcoholic breath, flooded by a feeling of tenderness that, however, could not dispel his confusion.

The next day, Gonzalo couldn't get around his embarrassment when he saw Juan at rehearsal, but his friend's sympathy always chased discomfort away.

"Look at that face, Gonzalo! What's the matter?"

"Nothing. What ought to be the matter?"

"I know what—and I know the cure for it, too."

Once, when Juan had been insisting more than was prudent, and Gonzalo had been refusing more brusquely than usual, the trombonist grew bold.

"Me and you have already been together—at practice."

Gonzalo reacted as if Juan had read his mind.

"That's right. Practice. Didn't you notice I always sleep with the Gypsy right after you do, without even giving her time to clean up?" Juan's laugh struck Gonzalo as pathetic.

"You're a pig."

"That's true—but I like the taste of it."

The remark caused Gonzalo to go and masturbate in one of the bathrooms, pricked by the revelation that his best friend had had him, through the intermediary of a whore.

From that day on, he couldn't look at Juan without recalling this act of deliberate promiscuity, which, in his mind at least, had altered their relationship. He was now conscious of an "intimacy," somehow completing the erotic fantasies in which Juan always intervened. Juan was someone he already shared bodily fluids with, albeit through a third party.

One night when he'd drunk quite a lot, and Juan was being more insistent than usual, Gonzalo stayed and slept with his friend in the ancient half-ruined house where Juan's family had lived for generations. Later he'd always recall its musty smell, mixed with the scent of leafy jasmine that grew in the central courtyard amid the galleries onto which the bedrooms opened. Juan's room was large and cool, with a predictable disorder: books, clothes, sheet music, faded maps, lead soldiers, empty bottles, and a gramophone from the turn of the century that contrasted with a shiny new radio receiver on the nightstand. The bedstead was iron, with an ancient mattress that was beginning to sink slightly in the center, under wrinkled sheets that were obviously not clean, but that didn't stink either. Someone's carnal reek emanated from them—the same someone who now devoted himself to undressing Gonzalo as if he were a child, while he sleepily gave in, having fallen face down in the middle of the bed, where he gazed at the worn brickwork of the room and the iron paws that held up a slab of pink stone Juan used as a desk.

"Turn off the light, Juan."

"No, let me look at you," Juan said, in the tone he always used, between serious and mocking; but Gonzalo had already drifted off.

The voice of Juan's old nanny, as she sweetly scolded him and came in bearing coffee, woke Gonzalo.

"Juan my child, I see you don't just bring women to the house, you also let them stay here. You don't respect anyone anymore."

Juan answered this with a laugh.

"Now she's gone blind. Woman? What woman? Mama Julia, can't you see it's Gonzalo? He got too drunk to go home. Please bring him a little coffee, let's see if he revives."

"All right, but tell him to get dressed. At my age I have no interest in the sight of a naked man."

When the nanny came out, Gonzalo got out of bed, to find that he didn't even have his socks on.

"Juan, where are my clothes?"

"What clothes? You stripped in the street and had to evade arrest."

When the nanny came back with the coffee, Gonzalo was urinating in a chamber pot that Juan kept under a colonial washbasin. This time the old woman called out at the door.

"Come on in, Mama Julia, if you want to watch a man piss," Juan said; but the nanny handed the coffee to him through the half-open door.

"So insolent—have some respect for the woman who raised you."

Gonzalo finished using the chamber pot and put it back with a mechanical motion. As he rose from bed he was bathed by a ray of sun that came in through a high window and transfigured his body. He suddenly felt an unaccustomed levity and freedom, and he tried out a light-footed dance step, without going beyond the narrow cone of light.

"Don't turn me on, Gonzalo. Watch out, or I won't let you leave this room. Last night was just a rehearsal, and you hardly caught on."

The remark tore Gonzalo out of his daydream and he looked at Juan, who was watching him hungrily, half-dressed, bare-chested.

"What the hell are you talking about? You groped me while I slept?"

More than anger, his voice betrayed a growing, unbearable embarrassment, in which several conflicting emotions fought to emerge, and overpowered him.

Instead of dodging this, Juan met it head-on with his usual good humor.

"I did more than grope you. But you didn't do your part. I hope you behave better next time."

"Son of a bitch!"

Gonzalo spat this insult through his teeth when he'd gotten almost face-to-face with Juan, and began to punch him in the face, chest, and arms. Juan did not defend himself, avoid the blows, or lose his composure. The stronger of the two, Juan constrained himself to holding Gonzalo by the arms as he put up a useless fight. After a few seconds, Juan let his left arm go, and grabbed him by the hair, which had grown out a bit, and drew him closer, until Gonzalo felt Juan's beard scratch his face.

"Come on now, handsome, stop this foolishness." Although Juan's voice was more serious, it contained the raucous spirit Gonzalo knew so well. Juan held still for a moment. Shoeless, they stood about the same height. With Gonzalo unable to prevent him, Juan brought them closer still, and tilting his head slightly, covered Gonzalo's lips with his own, and greedily began to bite them.

The contrary emotions that had troubled Gonzalo a moment before swept over him now from all sides: rejection and surrender, understanding and confusion, frustration and fulfillment—along with tenderness and fury toward his friend, who seemed as if he were about to devour him, to whom Gonzalo clung, from whom he recoiled, in the same impulse. He felt as if his intelligence had faltered. Certain zones—where reason abandoned him to forces in opposition, where he lost control of his being, where humiliation and exhaustion commingled, where neither pain nor pleasure could articulate itself—lay shrouded in fog. His erect sex, unaffected by the tremors that shook him, acquired a life of its own as it rubbed up against Juan's body. At a pause from Juan's lips, on the verge of bursting in the midst of this confusion, Gonzalo began to sob like a child faced with a conflict.

"Calm down, calm down, they'll think I'm murdering you." The irony had vanished from Juan's voice, which sounded to Gonzalo like a mixture of affection and alarm. Juan had stopped restraining him now and simply caressed him with both hands. Gonzalo didn't resist. Then Juan did something even more unsettling and unusual: he began to lick Gonzalo's face, wiping away the tears with his tongue as they went streaming down. Gonzalo's arousal ran wild as Juan kissed him

slowly on the eyes. At Juan's touch Gonzalo let himself go in a rising frenzy, with a heat and strength that imposed themselves on his muddled impulses. A moment later he ejaculated onto Juan's belly.

"The way this boy takes advantage!" It was Juan speaking in his ear, once again with that customary jesting tone. Gonzalo felt the scratch of his beard and smelled his body, the scent of sweat mixed with a faint trace of lavender.

