

Doña Juana

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PART ONE

It had already started to get dark, and the beams from the lighthouse were intermittently and monotonously blinking away the shadows of the late summer evening, the beams' dazzling whiteness accentuating themselves, making the darkness surrounding them appear ever denser.

Juanita's house was situated close to the lighthouse, and its flashing dressed the house first in light, then in shadow. It was as if an immense black hand immediately followed by an equally immense white – quickly, repeatedly and alternately – tried to protect the place from whatever the other hand represented.

There was a party going on inside Juanita's house, and much of its interior was so well lit up that one could not notice the lighthouse's beams – that more often than not managed to penetrate no further than to the gardens that surrounded the house.

Perhaps it was in retribution for this that the music from inside the house – excellently performed, yet somewhat monotonous – was not allowed to reach the lighthouse but only to the rocks that made up its garden. The music from inside Juanita’s house came from an orchestra that had been given no other instructions than to entertain and try to make it as difficult as possible for the guests not to dance. This bridge between lighthouse and Juanita’s house – a bridge made up of music, and light – stretched out through the night to cover the patch of land that separated them. Amidst this coming and going of sound and light, the night was gathering momentum, and its ever more powerful darkness seemed to make the lighthouse’s beams grow ever longer and more powerful.

The trees of the house’s garden – experiencing one false sunrise after the other in which the chirping of birds was replaced by the sound of the orchestra – must have felt annoyed by the light and the sound, because they waved their branches angrily in the evening breeze. Though the part of the lighthouse’s rock garden that faced away from the sea could not help but listen to the orchestra, the music was not strong enough to reach the lighthouse itself, overpowered as it was by the sound of waves pounding the shore below. To a lighthouse keeper, the orchestra would have come across as little more than the song of a distant mermaid, complaining about the lack of wooing sailors.

On the ground floor of Juanita’s house was situated a room that was not at all lit up from inside, something that allowed the

lighthouse' intermittent beams to penetrate through the windows. It was the library, which for the whole day, probably because of the party, had been deserted. Not a single person had sat down in any of its armchairs to read or relax; nobody had even crossed its threshold. Perhaps that was why Juanita chose it as her refuge: she felt unwell.

It was already quite late when, silently pushing open the door, Juanita entered. She was still wearing the dress that she, with much care and caution, had put on for the party many hours earlier; she could not decide whether she was more tired, angry, bored, or anxious. The orchestra was still playing along, but Juanita simply could not bear listening any longer. For a moment, in the darkness, she just stood there, indecisively, behind the door that had silently closed behind her. She raised her hand to reach for the switch, and she turned on the light.

The large chandelier, made up of white and purple glass prisms was suddenly lit up, but the glaring light from the powerful electric light-bulbs was so strong that it hurt her eyes and without even having let go of the switch, she turned it off again. Then, back in the darkness, she went across to one of the bookshelves where she tried to locate the book she was looking for, by nothing but the faint light of the lighthouse. She stayed there for several moments, leaning her forehead against the spines of the books, trying to read the titles. Her hand was held high – hovering like a

hawk above, waiting for a rabbit to break cover – ready to pull out the title she was looking for. However, in the poor light, it proved impossible to make out the hardly visible gold letters of the old titles to locate the book she was looking for.

She went over to a side-table where she turned on a small portable lamp, and carrying it along she returned to the bookcase; she held it up in front of her to better see the titles, and she soon found the book she was looking for. Once she had it in her hand, she pushed it to her bosom. *I so wish you were here to help and guide me*, she thought; then she returned to the table, and put the lamp on top of it, and sat down. With a sigh of satisfaction, she put the book down in her lap and stretched out her legs. A few moments later, though now feeling much better, she decided that her shoes were too tight and – almost without moving, and with great care – she half released herself of them, using only the wiggling of her toes.

Now, feeling a whole lot better, she leaned back in the armchair and rested her head against it, but as she did, her bun bothered her. She rubbed the back of her head against the chair's headrest with increasing force until she managed to undo it, and as her hair fell over her shoulders, she decided that she probably felt as well as she could hope to feel this wicked night. She sighed once more, took some large tortoiseshell glasses out of her pocket and put them on. She then opened the book – *Now, Don Juan*,

let's try to find out whether you intend to help me or not – and began to read.

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Juanita did not have time to read for very long because suddenly there was an approaching murmur of voices that made her pay attention. Someone was coming down the stairs that led into the adjacent room, and she swiftly put out the light to make herself invisible. That turned out to be a wise thing to do because the couple stopped right in front of the entrance to the library.

It was Juanito, her fiancé, and The Girl that, hand in hand, were escaping the company of the other guests; they too obviously in search of a refuge where, without witnesses, they would be able to resolve a situation whose importance was reflected in both their faces and it had been so the entire day, as well as the previous.

They were both dressed in black ties; she wore a white dress that emphasized the childishness of her figure, but an overcoat draped over her shoulders, and a gray crocodile skin handbag both tried to send a message suggesting the opposite. They had come down the steps silently, and now they let go of each other's hands.

‘So...’ asked The Girl, turning to him and giving her question a sense of both concern and resolution. ‘So...?’

‘So what?’ he asked, pretending to be distracted by something at the top of the stairs.

‘Have you decided?’

The question had been too specific not to receive a clear and definitive answer. ‘I can’t,’ answered Juanito, in a voice that was as suggestive of stubbornness as it was of discomfort.

It seemed as if she was about to start crying as she asked. ‘So you’re not coming?’

Juanito, following The Girl into an adjacent room, answered, now more softly, ‘But sweetheart, don’t you understand that one cannot resolve things by simply running away from them?’

Deeply hurt by Juanito’s words, The Girl shouted with sudden disdain, ‘Oh, for Pete’s sake! I’m not trying to force or oblige you to do anything... I mean if it’s too much for you... I..., I mean, at the end of the day, it wasn’t I that started all this.’

‘What do you mean, ‘you didn’t start all this!’”

Juanito had raised his voice, speaking nearly violently, and in the library, Juanita could clearly hear that the sentence had been formed much more like an exclamation than the question that the word order suggested it to be. She trembled as she – barefoot, and making sure not to make a single sound – tiptoed up to the door that separated the living room from the library; she put her ear against the door so as not to miss a single word.

‘Don’t be so insolent!’ exclaimed The Girl. ‘Do you hear me? Ah! You just proved that what we think about you Spaniards is

all perfectly true. You talk, and you talk, but that's all. You all seem full of passion and love and then, then what? Nothing!' Finally managing to contain herself she added, 'This very afternoon, at the tennis court, you assured me that you would come with me: that you would follow me, and that you would do so to the World's End if necessary. And I, the poor fool, believed you! If you had been serious, you would have arrived with your passport in your pocket.'

'Don't be like that! I haven't been dishonest with you! I really have decided to come with you... To elope with you to...' he hesitated for a moment and then, suddenly in a much warmer voice – a deep and burning voice that Juanita had never heard him use before – he added; 'Here's my passport,' patting the back pocket of his trousers, 'but... I've thought it over, and it can't be tonight. I can't run away with you tonight: I simply cannot.'

'Don't you want me anymore?'

'"Want you?" M... me?' he stammered for a moment and then added decidedly, 'I've never said I wanted you.'

The Girl, apparently totally taken aback, shouted, 'What!'

'I'm in love with you, deeply in love,' Juanito explained, 'but I don't want you. Those two are not the same thing.'

'Where's all this coming from?' The Girl asked, sarcastically, and she immediately went on, now in an even more cynical voice, 'And her, your precious Juanita, are you in love with her as well?'

‘Well no, but her I really want, and that’s sort of the problem.’

‘Well, you’re not explaining yourself properly! And as I’ve never known you to try to be subtle, that makes me suspicious.’

At first, Juanito did not answer, and as he finally did, it seemed as if he was talking to himself rather than to The Girl, ‘We’ve been betrothed since we were children. We had hardly started to walk and now...’ at this point, it seemed as if he suddenly recalled that he was talking to The Girl, and, seemingly surprised; he went off in a fit of rage, ‘How could you possibly understand these things? The one thing I’m sure about is that I can’t just go up to her – coldly, uncaring, with a suitcase in one hand, my passport in the other and a smile on my lips – and say, ‘Listen, Juanita, I’m leaving... Yes, I’m running away with this girl that I’ve only known for five or six days. Can I have your blessing?’ or something along those lines.’

‘You’re suffocating yourself under a pile of old-fashioned, sentimental rubbish,’ replied The Girl with disdain. ‘We’re not in a museum, are we? And the arguments you’re making are full of contradictions. In any case,’ she added, ironically, ‘don’t worry; I won’t force you to walk away from this posh mansion, and I’ve never proposed you’d do such a thing. But if I wanted to say something important, then I would say, ‘Now the time has come for you to choose between love and want, assuming there is such a great difference between them!’ And worst of all is that I’ve already spoken to Daddy about you, and he has prepared a cabin

for you on our yacht, sending an important actor home by airplane, and as we are assumed to arrive in Gibraltar tomorrow, you'll have to be on board no more than half an hour after he signals us. And now I'm going; I don't want them to worry about me. I'll send a car to collect you,' and then she held out her hand, 'Well, I suppose I'll either see you later or never again then. Your move, darling.'

'Please, honey!' shouted Juanito, trying to contain himself, 'If you keep going on like that, as much as I love you...' but then, seemingly realizing that he might have gone too far, he added softly, 'I'm just asking you to give me some time, not much, just forty-eight measly hours. Leave and don't worry about it; I'll get everything sorted out, and we'll meet in Gibraltar. But you have to understand that whatever my feelings are, I will not behave like a pig.'

'No my darling,' replied The Girl, 'and I am not trying to make you act like one; on the contrary, I'm trying to make you act like a proper man.'

'Now listen!' shouted Juanito, again furiously.

The Girl looked at him, seemingly realizing that she had replied unbecomingly and, trying to erase the effect that her words had produced, she started flirting with him and, trying to flatter him, she continued, 'Come on, don't be like that. I didn't mean to offend you, just to make you understand that every time

that something good in the world has been achieved, it's been out of love and not out of consideration or pity. What's more, you know that as well as I do.'

'Well,' replied Juanito, still upset, 'all that is very good, but you need to understand that we've spent our entire childhood and adolescence together: that we've always been there for each other, one for the other, in a way that has been so special, so special that... We were sweethearts, and we've always been sweethearts: do you understand? And that's how, together, we've grown up. At the end of the day, she's never stopped being the one thing in my life that is steady, decent, and pure. No matter what I've gotten up to – whether I was in the military, flying around in airplanes, entering competitions, or simply out rumbling all night – there has always been an image of certainty living deep inside me. Inside me has lived an image without a single shadow: and that image is of her, Juanita, deep in some book, trying to find answers to whatever bothered or interested her, with her enormous tortoise glasses. And though I wouldn't always think of her, she has always been living there inside of me; I carry her with me because she's a part of who I am.'

Juanita hadn't missed a single word of the conversation, and she had looked intently at the door that separated the library from the living room. Then, as Juanito uttered those last words, she couldn't help but lower her head. All her emotions, everything she felt at that moment, was reflected in that slight

head movement, yet what in particular it was that had caused it was something that she herself wouldn't have been able to explain. It could be the humiliation that she had undergone as she had heard him make his feelings clear, but it could equally well have been resignation or even a feeling of tenderness as she had noticed a certain sweetness in those last words that Juanito had spoken, especially when he had referred to her myopia and her glasses.

‘And her, do you love her too?’ asked The Girl.

Juanita again lifted her head to pay attention.

‘I want her!’ answered Juanito, ‘I’ve already told you that!’

‘Is she in love with you?’

‘Of course, she is!’

‘What do you mean ‘of course’?’ asked The Girl. ‘A moment ago you were telling me about how big a difference there is between wanting someone and being in love with them.’

‘Don’t dissect my words, woman!’ Juanito exclaimed. ‘When I’m distinguishing between want and love, I’m talking about men. Women are very different. With them, it’s impossible to make a distinction.’

At that moment, the hoarse sound of a yacht’s siren could be heard ringing out cleanly and clearly over the sound of the orchestra.

‘Daddy must be getting irritated,’ said The Girl, ‘I have to go now, but I’m very sad that I’m about to lose you for no other reason than your silly stubbornness.’

‘The day after tomorrow I will be in Gibraltar,’ answered Juanito, trying to put an end to the argument.

‘We’re leaving at around midday tomorrow, so the day after tomorrow we will be well on our way to the Azores because he has to be in New York next Monday. So... Well, let us know what you decide...’

Juanito, unable to control his impatience, yet did his best to do so.

She ran her fingers through his hair and while adding, ‘What a situation! But let’s be clear about whom it is that’s creating it!’

‘You are so incredibly unfair!’

‘If she loves you as much as you say she does – and if you can speak to her in total confidence, as you say you can... – then, not only would she completely understand, but also, she would be urging you to leave with me.’

For a moment, Juanito considered the possibility that what The Girl was suggesting could actually be true, ‘Yes, perhaps Juanita would understand my feelings and accept it. Do you really think so?’ he asked. ‘Perhaps...’

‘Do you want me to talk to her?’ she asked, sweetly and swiftly. ‘Where is she?’

‘I don’t know. Probably in her room,’ The Girl got ready to go upstairs, when Juanito stopped her, ‘No! Don’t! I’ll tell her.’

Then the yacht’s siren sounded again; this time even louder and more impatient than before. The Girl was trying to say something when Juanito took her arm, ‘You just leave. Don’t worry. Send a car as soon as you get there. I’ll be on board with my suitcases and, God willing, her pardon, within an hour.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Totally.’

‘That’s why I love you!’ she exclaimed, happily. The two of them embraced and, then, breaking up the embrace, she added, ‘I must leave now! Goodbye, Juanito!’ She looked back at him from the door; smiling, she wrapped herself theatrically in her overcoat and said, as she raised a hand, ‘Goodbye Juanito, see you soon Don Juan!’

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In the library – as she could hear them leave: first The Girl and then her fiancée – Juanita went back to her seat and took off her glasses. The tremendous sadness that she was experiencing reflected itself in her short-sighted eyes, and as her tears fell onto the book that she had come to gather advice and inspiration from, they peered into the dark surrounding emptiness, and she

whispered in a desperate voice, ‘Don Juan’... Is that really who you are?’

At that moment, from the other end of the library, a clear, if slightly drowsy, a voice responded, ‘Yes that is who I am.’

Juanita had felt certain that she had been alone, and she was equally sure that no one could have entered the library while she had been eavesdropping. Startled, she looked around, but everything remained in darkness and blurriness. She put on her glasses, lit, and then raised the lamp, leaned forward, and pointed it towards where she figured the voice must have originated.

The man, with both hands protecting his eyes from the light, responded, ‘Stop that! What are you on about?’

Though Juanita couldn’t identify her interlocutor, she could see that he, apart from being handsome, was dressed in tails, quite appropriately.

As he began to approach her, she again asked, ‘Who are you?’
‘Don Juan.’

‘What Don Juan?’

‘Well... just Don Juan.’

‘I would like to know more precisely who you are.’

‘The majordomo told me the same thing when he let me in.’

‘And what are you doing here?’

‘Sleeping.’

‘In the library?’

‘I’m one of those rare individuals who have a conscience light enough to sleep in a library even in the dark. Also, it’s been at least a century since I frequented this place, and I’ve returned despite the fact I am not at all certain that it’s a very good idea.’