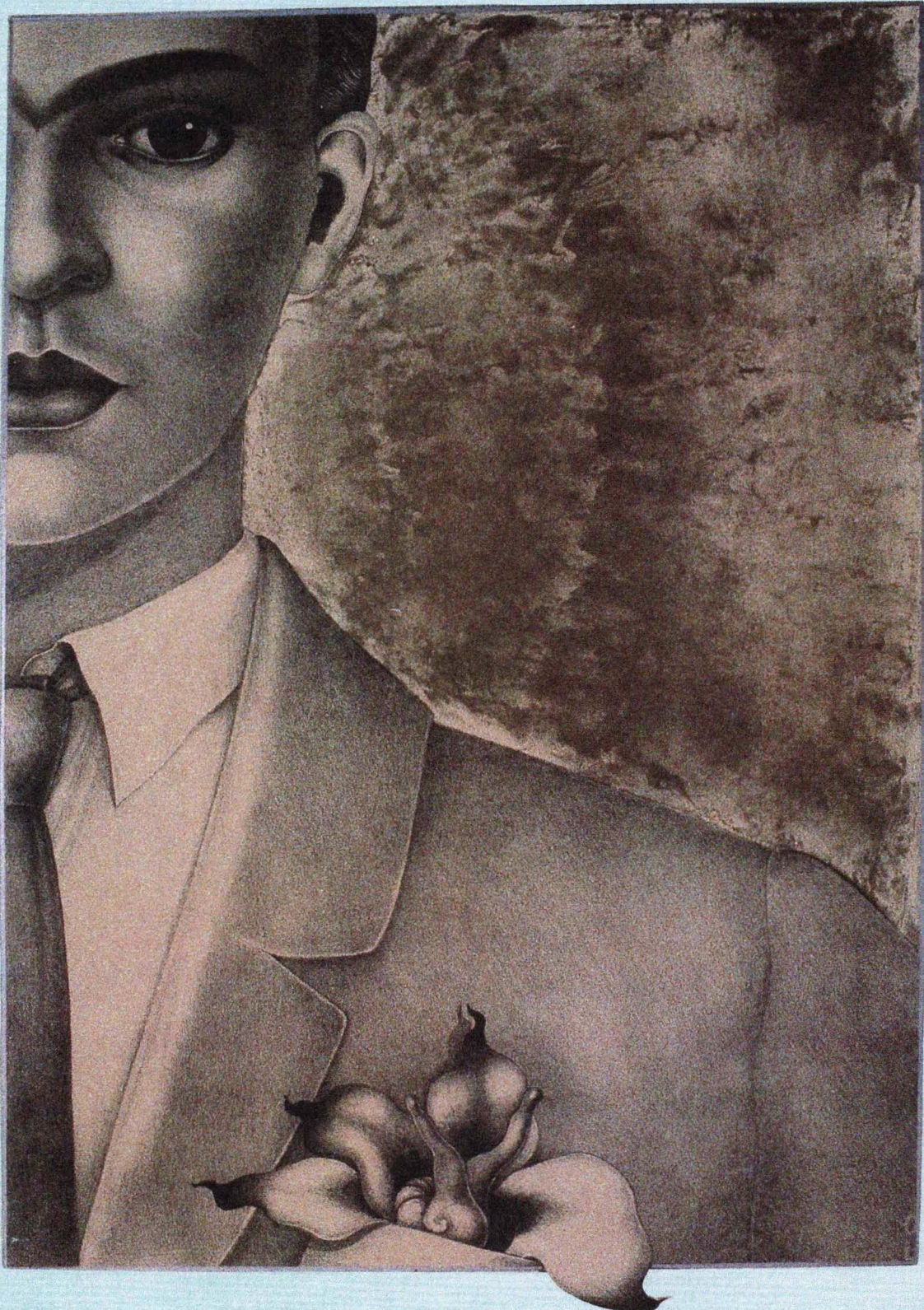


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Ana María Matute

THE CONSCIENCE

Translated by Michael Scott Doyle

She could not bear it any longer. She was certain that she would no longer be able to endure the presence of that loathsome vagabond. She had decided to put an end to it, to finish it once and for all, no matter what the outcome, rather than put up with his tyranny.

She had been wrestling with it for nearly fifteen days. What she could not understand was Antonio's tolerance of that man. No: it truly was strange.

The tramp had asked for a night's hospitality: precisely the night of Ash Wednesday, when the wind was kicking up a blackish dust, whirling, which lashed the windowpanes with a parched crackling. Then the wind stopped. A strange calm came, and she thought, while closing and adjusting the shutters:

"I don't like this calm."

In effect, she had not even bolted the door when that man arrived. She heard him call from out back, at the small door to the kitchen:

"Landlady . . ."

Mariana gave a start. The man, old and tattered, was there, hat in hand, with a beggar's attitude.

"God be with you . . .," she began to say. But the vagabond's little eyes were looking at her oddly, in such a way that she was cut short.

Many men just like him had asked for the favor of her roof on winter nights. But there was something about that man which terrified her for no reason.

The tramp began to sing his song: "For just one night, would they let him sleep in the stable; a piece of bread and the stable: nothing more. A storm was brewing . . ."

In effect, Mariana heard the rain drumming outside against the wooden door. A mute rain, thick, announcing the coming storm.

"I'm alone," she said drily. "What I mean to say . . . when my husband is on the road I don't want strangers in the house. Move along, and God be with you."

But the tramp stood still, staring at her. Slowly he put his hat on, and said:

"I'm a poor old man, Landlady. I've never done anyone any harm. I'm not asking for much: a piece of bread . . ."

At that moment the two maids, Marcelina and Salomé, entered running. They were coming from the garden, with their aprons over their heads, shouting and laughing. Mariana felt a strange relief upon seeing them.

"All right," she said. "All right . . . but just for tonight. I'd better not find you still here when I wake up tomorrow . . ."

The old man bowed, smiling, and recited a strange ballad of gratitude.

Mariana went upstairs and went to bed. During the night the storm lashed against the bedroom windows and she slept poorly.

The next morning, upon going down to the kitchen, the clock on the dresser struck eight. On entering she was surprised and irritated. Seated at the table, calm and well rested, the tramp was feasting on a sumptuous breakfast: fried eggs, a large chunk of soft bread, wine . . . Mariana felt a wave of anger, perhaps mixed with fear, and she confronted Salomé, who was working quietly in the kitchen:

"Salomé!" she commanded, her voice sounding harsh, hard. "Who told you to give this man . . . and why didn't he leave at dawn?"

Her words were cut short, they became muddled, because of the rage sweeping over her. Salomé stood widemouthed, holding her skimmer on high, which was dripping on the floor.

"But I . . .," she began. "He told me . . ."

The tramp had risen to his feet and was slowly wiping his lips on his sleeve.

"Madam," he said, "Madam, you do not remember . . . last night you said: 'Give the poor old man a bed in the attic, and give him whatever he wants to eat.' Didn't Madam Landlady say that last night? I heard it very clearly . . . Or does she regret it today?"

Mariana wanted to say something, but her voice had suddenly frozen. The old man was staring at her intensely with his black and

penetrating little eyes. She turned away and anxiously went out through the kitchen door, toward the garden.

The day had dawned gray, but the rain had stopped. Mariana shivered from the cold. The grass was soaked, and in the distance the road was being erased by a subtle mist. She heard the old man's voice behind her, and, without wanting, she pressed her hands together.

"I would like to have a word with you, Madam Landlady . . . Nothing important."

Mariana remained still, looking toward the road.

"I'm an old tramp . . . but sometimes old tramps find out about things. Yes: I was *there*. I saw it all, Madam Landlady. I saw it, with these very eyes . . ."

Mariana opened her mouth. But she was unable to say anything.

"What are you talking about, old dog?" she said. "I'm warning you that my husband will arrive with the wagon at ten, and he doesn't put up with this kind of nonsense from anybody!"

"I know, I know he doesn't take any nonsense from anybody!" replied the tramp. "That's why you won't want him to know about anything. . . anything I saw that day. Isn't that right?"

Mariana turned away quickly. Her fury had vanished. Her heart was pounding, confusedly. "What's he talking about? What does he know . . .? What did he see?" But she held her tongue. She just looked at him, full of hatred and fear. The old man was smiling with his bare, ugly gums.

"I'll stay here for a while, my good Landlady: yes, for just a while, to regain my strength, until the sun comes out again. Because I'm old now, and my legs are very tired. Very tired . . ."

Mariana began to run. The fine wind hit her in the face. When she reached the edge of the well she stopped. She felt like her heart was leaping out of her chest.

That was the first day. Then Antonio arrived with the wagon. Every week he brought goods up from Palomar. Besides having the inn, they owned the only business in the village. Their house, large and wide, surrounded by the garden, stood at the entrance to town. They lived comfortably, and the townsfolk thought Antonio was wealthy. "Wealthy," thought Mariana, annoyed. Ever since the arrival of the loathsome vagabond she had been pale, lethargic. "And if he weren't, would I have ever married him?" No. It was not hard to understand why she had married that brutal man, fourteen years her

senior, a sullen and feared man, solitary. She was pretty. Yes: the whole town recognized this fact, and said as much—even Constantino, who was in love with her. But Constantino was a simple sharecropper, like her. And she was tired of being hungry, of working, of grief, yes, fed up with it. So she married Antonio.

Mariana felt a strange trembling. The old man had taken up residence nearly fifteen days ago. He slept, he ate, and he brazenly deluded himself in the sun, when it was shining, by the garden gate. On the first day Antonio asked:

"What's he doing here?"

"I felt sorry for him," she said, pressing the fringes of her shawl between her fingers. "He's so old . . . and the weather's so bad . . ."

Antonio did not say anything. It looked to her like he was going over to the old man to throw him out. She ran up the stairs. She was afraid. Yes: she was very much afraid . . . "What if the old man saw Constantino climbing the chestnut tree, under my window? What if he saw him jumping into my room, on those nights when Antonio was away with the wagon, on the road . . .? What could he be talking about, if not that, when he says *I saw it all, yes, I saw it with these very eyes?*"

She could no longer bear it. No: she had reached her limit. The old man was not just living in her house. Now he was asking for money. He had begun to ask for money, too. And the strange thing was that Antonio did not speak of him again. He simply ignored him. Only, from time to time, he would look at her. Mariana could feel his large eyes fixed on her, black and shining, and she would begin to tremble.

That afternoon Antonio was going to Palomar. He was yoking the mules to the wagon, and she could hear the voice of the stable boy mingling with that of Salomé, who was giving him a hand. Mariana felt cold. "I can't bear it any longer. I simply cannot. Going on like this is impossible. I'll tell him to leave, he must leave. I can't go on living under this threat." She felt ill: sick with fear. The thing with Constantino, because of her fright, had stopped. She could no longer see him. The very idea made her teeth chatter. She knew Antonio would kill her. She was sure he would kill her. She knew what he was like.

When she saw the wagon vanishing from view on the road, she went down to the kitchen. The old man was dozing by the fire. She looked at him and said to herself: "If I had the courage, I would kill him." She saw the iron tongs, within easy reach. But she would not do it. She knew she

could not bring herself to do it. "I'm a coward. I'm a big coward and I love life." This was her weakness: "This love for life . . ."

"Old man!" she exclaimed. Although she spoke in a low tone, the vagabond opened one of his sly little eyes. "He wasn't asleep," Mariana thought. "He wasn't sleeping, the crafty old fox."

"Follow me," she told him. "I have to talk to you."

The old man followed her to the well. There Mariana turned to look at him.

"You can do whatever you like, you old dog. Tell my husband everything, if you want. But you are getting out. You are leaving this house immediately . . ."

The old man was silent for several seconds. Then he smiled.

"When does Master Landlord return home?"

Mariana was white. The old man observed her beautiful face, the dark rings around her eyes. She had lost weight.

"Get out!" she told him. "Leave here at once."

She had made up her mind. Yes: the vagabond could read it in her eyes. She was determined and desperate. He was experienced, and he knew those eyes. "There's nothing can be done," he said to himself philosophically. "That's it for the sunny weather. There go the nourishing meals, the mattress, my shelter. Let's go, old dog, let's get a move on. Time to hit the road."

"Okay," he said. "I'm leaving. But he will know about everything . . ."

Mariana remained silent. Perhaps she was a bit more pale. Suddenly the old man felt a slight tremor: "This one is capable of doing something bad. Yes: she's the kind to hang herself from a tree or something like that." He felt pity. She was still young and beautiful.

"Okeydoke," he said. "Madam Landlady

wins. I'm going . . . what else can I do? To tell you the truth, I never really had high hopes . . . Of course, I enjoyed myself here. I won't forget the stews prepared by Salomé nor the wine of Master Landlord . . . I won't forget. I'm on my way."

"Right now," she said quickly. "This very moment, leave . . . And you can start running if you want to catch him! You can start running, old dog, with your filthy tales . . ."

The vagabond smiled sweetly. He picked up his walking stick and his leather shepherd's pouch. He was on his way out when, from the palisade, he turned to say:

"Naturally, Madam Landlady, *I never saw anything*. I mean, I don't even know if there was something to see. But I've been on the road many a long year, so many years on the road! Nobody in this world has a pure conscience, not even children. No: not even children, my lovely Landlady. Look a child in the eye and say to him: "I know all about it! Be careful . . ." And the child will begin to tremble. He will shake just like you, lovely Landlady."

Mariana felt something strange, like a crackling in her heart. She did not know whether it was bitter or full of a violent joy. She could not tell. She moved her lips and wanted to say something. But the old man closed the palisade gate behind him, and turned to look at her. His smile was malignant as he said:

"A bit of advice, Landlady: watch out for your Antonio. Yes: Master Landlord also has his reasons for allowing the idleness of old beggars under his roof, excellent reasons, I would swear, by the way he looked at me!"

The fog on the road grew thicker, and it was sinking low. Mariana watched him leave, until he was lost in the distance. □