

*Ana María Matute*

## SIN OF OMISSION

*Translated by Michael Scott Doyle*

**H**IS MOTHER DIED when he was thirteen; she was the last thing he had left in the world. He found himself alone. It had been at least three years since he had stopped going to school, because he had been forced to take on odd jobs here and there. His only relative was Emeterio Ruiz Heredia, a cousin of his father's. Emeterio was the mayor, and he owned a fine, two-storey house facing the town square, round and reddish under the August sun. Emeterio also had two hundred head of cattle grazing on the slopes of Sagrado, and an unwed daughter who was close to twenty, dark, robust, cheerful, and a bit dumb. His wife, lean and hard as a black poplar, had quite a tongue and knew how to give orders. Emeterio Ruiz never did get along with his distant cousin, and he helped his widow to come up with some extra income only because it was the least that could be expected. Afterward, even though he did take in the orphaned boy, who lacked inheritance and skills for a trade, Emeterio ignored him, just as he did the rest of his household.

The first night that Lope spent in Emeterio's house, he bedded down under the granary. He was given dinner and a glass of wine. The next day, while Emeterio was tucking his shirt into his trousers, the sun rising with the crowing of the roosters, he called Lope through the stairwell, frightening the hens that slept there: "Lope!"

Lope descended barefoot, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was small for a thirteen-year-old, and he had a large, shaved head. "You're going up to Sagrado to work as a shepherd."

Lope found his boots and put them on. In the kitchen, Francisca,

the daughter, had warmed some peppered potatoes. Lope swallowed them quickly, his aluminum spoon dripping with every bite.

"You know what to do. I believe you spent a spring up in the hills of Santa Aurea, with the goats of Aurelio Bernal."

"Yes, sir."

"You won't be alone. Roque el Mediano is up there, too, somewhere. You'll work together."

"Yes, sir."

Francisca put a large loaf of bread into his leather pouch, an aluminum canteen, some goat grease, and dried beef.

"Get going," said Emeterio Ruiz Heredia.

Lope looked at him with his two big black eyes, round and bright.

"What are you staring at? Let's get a move on!"

Lope went out, with the pouch over his shoulder. On his way, he picked up the staff, thick and glossy from wear, which he kept leaning against the wall.

As he was climbing toward the slope of Sagrado, don Lorenzo, the schoolteacher, saw him. That afternoon at the tavern, don Lorenzo rolled a cigarette while he sat with Emeterio, who had stopped to have a glass of anisette.

"I saw Lope," he said. "He was on his way up to Sagrado, poor kid."

"Yep," said Emeterio, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "He's going up to work as a shepherd. You know, no free lunch these days. Life's tough. That pathetic Pericote didn't leave him a damn thing."

"The bad part is," said don Lorenzo, scratching his ear with a long yellow fingernail, "the kid's got potential. If he had the means, he could amount to something. He's smart, very smart. In school..."

Emeterio cut him short with a wave of his hand:

"Okay, okay. I'm not saying he couldn't. But he has to earn his keep. Life's tougher everyday."

He ordered another anisette. The schoolteacher nodded his head in agreement.

Lope reached Sagrado and shouted out Roque el Mediano's name until he found him. Roque was slightly retarded, and he had been working up there for Emeterio for about fifteen years. He was close to fifty, and he hardly ever spoke. They shared the same mud

hut, sleeping beneath the oak trees, embraced at night by the protruding roots. The hut was barely big enough for them to lie down in, and they had to enter on all fours, halfway between a crawl and dragging themselves. But it was cool in summer, and warm enough in winter.

Summer passed, and fall and winter. The shepherds didn't go down to town, except on the day of the fiesta. Every two weeks a lad went up with their provisions: bread, jerky, goat grease, some garlic. Sometimes, a skin of wine. The peaks of Sagrado were beautiful—a deep blue colour, terrible, blind. The sun, high and round like an imperturbable eye, reigned supreme. Lope would wake up very early, with the mist of dawn, before the buzzing of the flies or any other sound, and the first thing he would see was the mud ceiling close to his face. He would lie still for a while, and feel the dumb bulk of Roque's body pressing against his side. Then he would crawl out to the corral. In the air, crisscrossing one another like fugitive stars, myriad noises came and went, loud and useless. God alone knew where they would end up, falling from the sky like stones. Like the years that went by: one year, two, five.

After five years had passed, Emeterio sent word that he wanted to see Lope. He had him examined by the doctor, and saw that he had grown strong and healthy.

"Like an oak!" said the new doctor. Lope blushed, and did not know what to answer.

Francisca had married, and she had three little ones, who were playing in the entrance to the square. A dog, its tongue hanging out, went up to Lope. Maybe it remembered him from somewhere. Then he saw Manuel Enríquez, an old school chum who had always been second to him in class. Manuel had on a grey suit, and he was wearing a tie. He passed by and waved at them.

Francisca commented: "A good future ahead of him, that one. His father is sending him to school and he's studying to be a lawyer."

When he went to the fountain, Lope saw Manuel again. Suddenly, he felt an urge to call out his name. But the shout stuck in his throat like a ball.

"Eh!" he managed to say, or something like it.

Manuel turned to look, and he recognized him. Imagine that: he recognized him, and he was smiling.

"Lope! Lope, old buddy!"

Who could understand what he was saying? How strange the accent of men, how odd the words that come out of the dark holes of their mouths! A thick kind of blood began to fill his veins, as he listened to Manuel Enríquez.

Manuel opened a flat little case of polished silver, with the whitest and most perfect cigarettes he had ever seen. He offered him one, smiling.

Lope reached out his hand. Then he noticed how thick and rough it was, like a piece of dried beef. His fingers lacked dexterity, they couldn't perform the task. How strange the hand of Manuel: a fine hand, with fingers like large white worms, agile and flexible. What a hand, wax-coloured, and with shiny, polished fingernails. An amazing hand, the like of which even the women couldn't boast. Lope's fingers fumbled awkwardly. Finally, he took out a cigarette, white and delicate, so strange between his heavy, clumsy fingers: useless, absurd, in his fingers. The blood stopped between Lope's eyebrows. He could feel a clot forming there, quiet, fermenting. He crushed the cigarette with his fingers and turned away, unable to contain himself even before Manuel's surprise. Manuel kept calling him: "Lope! Lope!"

Emeterio was sitting on the porch, in shirt sleeves, watching his grandchildren. He smiled, resting his eyes on the eldest, and relaxing from the day's labour, the wine-skin within easy reach. Lope walked directly toward him, and saw his quizzical, grey eyes.

"Let's get a move on, boy. Time to get back to Sagrado."

On the square was a reddish, rectangular stone. It was the size of a melon, like the stones kids find around crumbling walls. Slowly, Lope picked it up. Emeterio, settled comfortably on the porch, watched him with mild curiosity. His right hand was nestled between his belt and stomach. He did not have enough time even to take it out: the muffled blow, his own blood sprinkling across his chest, and death and surprise, like two sisters, rising to greet him. That was all.

When they led him away, handcuffed, Lope was in tears. And when the women, howling like wolves, tried to strike him, and followed him with their mantles raised above their heads, in a show of grief and indignation, "My God, the one who took him in. My God, the one who made him a man. My God, he would have starved to death . . .," Lope could only weep and repeat:

"Yes, yes, yes . . ."