

The Hair and the Heart WordPress current version.

Alain Duprés, a student of musicology and great passions, son of a wealthy patrician, and a distant cousin of mine, left Paris for Morelia early in 1913 in search of the Claude Laurent crystal glass flute that had belonged to Mexico's French Emperor Maximilian. That poor man had so treasured the instrument that when he was facing his firing squad on a hill above Querétaro, the Cerro de las Campanas, on the 19th of June 1867, he asked Juarez, head of the rebelling power, to have the flute placed on a velvet-covered table to one side, so he could be watching the morning sun fall across its silver keys at the moment the bullets took away his breath.

President James Madison had once owned one of these flutes. So had Napoleon. So had Emperor Franz I of Austria. Alain Duprés, my distant cousin, loved things that were historical, beautiful, and fragile. He abhorred violence and was glad to be leaving a Europe that was cantering joyfully toward war. That he chose Mexico is not entirely comprehensible because not far south from Morelia's central plaza, the rugged volcanic mountainsides were astir with revolution and banditry.

Still, he rented a room for a few pesos a week and looked for a teacher, so he could improve his Spanish. He found Miguel Angel, a medical student, who wanted to improve his English. They walked along the old city aqueduct and talked about

Cervantes, Rousseau, and Goethe – in a mixture of English, French, and Spanish. After a few months, they spoke only in Spanish.

Miguel Angel told him about Claudia and showed him a daguerreotype of a young woman who he said was the most beautiful woman alive and that there wasn't a poet alive who would not fall in love with her. That is when Alain Duprés started to write things down, convinced that he too – since he was so affected by the photograph – must have traces of literary talent.

Miguel Angel liked to visit his Aunt Elena in Erongarícuaro, a mostly Purépecha village on the western shore of Lake Pátzcuaro. Sometimes he and Alain took the train from Morelia to Ajuno, then the Ajuno-Pénjamo line to Erongarícuaro. Sometimes they got off early and walked along beside the shimmering lake through fields of corn, wild cosmos, sunflowers, and marigolds.

Miguel Angel rode in the hills, sometimes with his aunt, sometimes with Alain. When he wasn't riding, he studied the rich bird life near the lake in front of the town. Claudia lived in a large adobe house at the edge of the marsh. Her mother was Mexican. The previous year, her German father had died of tuberculosis. Claudia liked to sit on the balcony of the house overlooking the lake. Men in carriages and on

horseback took detours away from the center of town and followed the dirt road between the walls of the house and the marsh, looking up under the broad brim of their hats, hoping to catch a glimpse of her high cheek bones, dark eyes, and light skin.

Miguel Angel said they had been brought together by technology. He watched the birds with a marine spyglass, a birthday gift from his father, purchased in an antique shop in Le Havre. Once, following the flight of a Lesser Black Egret, he swept the glass past the big adobe house and caught a glimpse of her on her balcony – combing her long chestnut hair. The next time he looked, he saw that she was looking back at him through another spyglass, also made of brass and glinting in the sunlight.

They looked at each other. He touched his hat, put down his glass, and wrote large block letters in his notebook, with many dips in his ink well, *Estoy observando a los aves, no espiándole*, “I’m watching birds, not spying on you.” He held it up but saw that she had stopped looking. He took off his jacket and pinned the sign to the back of it, then put the jacket back on.

When he looked again, there was a sign propped up on the wall of the balcony, “Do men really carry pins?” Miguel Angel

replied with, "Do women carry spy glasses?" He pinned this to the back of his jacket and entered farther into the marsh.

He asked his aunt to accompany him bird watching, and she agreed to go, because he spoke with such passion about the birds he was painting. But when they had set up his easel and watched the great squawking Blue Herons and the Lesser White Egrets for a while, and when she had watched him sketch a heron quite badly, she thought, compared to his usual work, two women – one older and one younger – approached them. In the younger one's eyes she saw the same intensity she had seen in Miguel Angel's eyes; and in that moment she understood that she had been invited as facilitator, decoy and, probably most important of all, as trustee of a young man's love.

Over time, and with the help of his Aunt Elena, Miguel Angel began to court Claudia. And over still more time, that young woman gave him a thick lock of her chestnut hair. With a wry look that unnerved him, she said there were other things to give him, but that this was what was available now – a token, so to speak, of what would soon be his. In a moment nearly religious for him, he tucked the hair into a vest pocket, where it made a slight bulge over his heart.

Miguel Angel liked to ride in the hills above Erongarícuaro. He followed the carriage tracks to the railroad tracks, crossed

them and often continued on up the mountain rather than turning right to go to the station. One afternoon, while riding high above the town and approaching the tracks, he happened on lumber merchant Doña Herminia, who was hauling four of her prized pine boards behind her donkey Burra, dragging them at a slant, their ends on the ground bumping over the ties of the railroad and the blue-grey gravel underneath.

She was a handsome woman of forty with flashing dark eyes and an ironic twist to her mouth, and the afternoon was bright and hot. She noticed the bulge and asked him whether his heart was swelling and whether it was creating complications. He explained it was a thick lock of his love's hair. None of which she heard—because she was deaf—but understood anyway, through lip reading and inference.

She said that was good, especially since he didn't have to stuff it somewhere else, which some men sometimes did out of pretense; and that he had discovered the true way to use one swelling to produce another. And the whole time she talked, she stroked Burra's haunches with her hand, or caressed the tooth marks on her boards that gleamed yellow and new in the afternoon sun.

The sound of the bees and the fields of wild marigolds, the pine pitch from the boards, Doña Herminia's bright teeth and

her square goat's eye pupils, the way she touched Burra and moved her hips when she talked about the connection of one thing to another—all this made it difficult for Miguel Angel. And then she tied Burra to a tree, brought out tortillas and an avocado and ripe nísperos – loquats – and arranged all these on a Purépecha shawl with stripes in cobalt and cerulean blue, all this in the shade of pirules – pepper trees, in a place overlooking the lake but hidden from the railroad tracks, the station road, and any path.

Miguel Angel tied off his horse and sat down to eat with her. She took a níspero, put it in her mouth, and chewed till she had extracted the two of its shiny, smooth, almost indecent looking seeds. She spit them onto her hand and passed them to him, then with a finger slowly pushed them back and forth across his palm. With her mouth full and chewing, her fingers explored first the bulge with Claudia's hair and then the spot she claimed was influenced by it.

All this made the afternoon lie heavy and spinning with first the sound of bees, then the rumble of a passing train, then the sound of hooves moving over trails they could not see—the wind whispering in the upright swaying drying corn. With her large brown eyes fixed on him, she bent his head toward her. She smelled of roasted corn, chewed avocado, níspero juice, wood smoke, and lavender. From her long, smooth,

black Purépecha braid, which she laid around his neck, came the smell of burro and something older, much older, that he couldn't identify. When she laughed, her body jiggled like congealed chicken blood. Globes of tortillas and avocado appeared and disappeared in her opening and closing mouth. Then, beneath him, she packed everything into one cheek and crooned, "She's my Burra, but you are my burro!" – all this to encouraged his snorting, which she could see but not hear. Her own half-choked calls of Jale!—the command for a horse to move forward—drew out and became a soft braying. Soft, because this was still a dangerous countryside to be lying about in, and having your mind on something else.

Afterward, as Miguel Angel slept a drooling deep sleep, Doña Herminia slipped out the balled lock of the chestnut hair, put some of it in a pocket of her dress, and replaced the rest.

The four newly sawn pine boards were for Silvestre Vernal, who was an enemy of the great hacienda that occupied the broad mountain basin three miles above them. This was a Spanish family that had ruled in the area as long as anyone could remember. The revolutionary chieftain José Inés Cháves García also operated around Pátzcuaro in 1913, defying federal troops under Huerta and causing concern at the hacienda, to the extent it felt compelled to raise its own militia.

Silvestre Vernal was not a revolutionary. But he was a man with a strong sense of justice. He worked alone, breaking horses and mules for people of modest means. At night, when his sense of justice grew keener, he was a bandalero social who took cattle from the hacienda owners and distributed the meat to the hungry. He was about Miguel Angel's size, but darker. He cherished his wife and his ten-year old boy Marco. When he and his son rode together, bareback, he would reach back and pat the boy on the thigh and feel a great surge of love for the boy.

By day, the hacienda's private troop, federalized by the Huertista government, descended on the town, looking for conscripts – boys fifteen and older – beating those who refused, occasionally hanging anyone suspected of revolutionary activity, and always looking for Silvestre Vernal. Sympathetic railway workers stopped trains and unloaded one or two steers at a time in places where they knew Silvestre was waiting. Soldiers, with their horses and Mauser rifles, began riding the trains, to protect the interests of the hacienda. The leader of this contingent was the handsome Lieutenant Solorio Cortés, the son of the hacienda owner, who felt God had meant him to have the lovely Claudia for his wife. Claudia's brother Ruben disliked Miguel Angel because he was a medical student with a future more certain than his

own, and for that reason he argued for the candidacy of Solorio as his future brother-in-law.

It was not long after this that Miguel Angel invited Claudia ride with him, but her brother Ruben would not allow it. There was no engagement, he said, and there never would be. Besides, the mountains were filled with soldiers and bandits. It was no place for a young woman of good family; that Miguel Angel continued to ride there showed lack of judgment and said a great deal about his character.

Miguel Angel asked Claudia to be his novia – fiancée, and she put her hand on his chest, above his heart, on the somewhat diminished bulge of her chestnut hair, and nodded her head yes, and then crossed herself – but not before looking around to see who was watching, because such things were still dangerous. The former Díaz government had declared it illegal to practice Catholicism. Plus, she was superstitious and feared that a private act done publicly could bring the civil war to her doorstep, along with yellow fever and cholera and knew what else that drifted in on the lake's mist.

If they were to be together, said Ruben, it had to be in front of the house, between the lower garden wall and the marsh, where he could watch through the spy glass and that way protect her virtue. And so that was where they walked, beside the lake, each time pressing farther into the reeds, choosing

areas where the marsh cane was the tallest and thickest. They found an old dugout canoe that Miguel Angel caulked with tar and kept hidden. The marsh was laced with channels, and they used the canoe to reach a hidden floating island made from a mass of dried cane. It was here they spent afternoons when Ruben was away. They lay on their backs, hand in hand, floating, listening to the rustling of animals they could not see. Once, when they had begun to explore each other, a young Black Angus bull waded nearby, grazing up to his belly in the dark water, snaking his blue tongue out to the lilies he could otherwise not reach. They listened to chickens back on land laying eggs and to burros braying songs of love and distress.

Claudia's long chestnut hair began to replace the power of what was left of the lock he carried in his vest. It had the usual effect on him but also greater because there was so much more of it. And so they placed their clothes in the canoe, where they would be dry, and lay entwined on the floating island. The warm swamp water seeped up to touch their bodies. When she looked up at him, she saw the clear Mexican sky, strange sounds came out of her mouth and brought out in him what Miguel Angel supposed was the burro – and sent rings of waves rippling far into the marsh.

One afternoon, when the sun was warm and the wind in the pines sounded like a distant train, Miguel Angel dropped down from the mountain and came out into a field of marigolds above the railroad line. Far below him he saw the adobe church tower of Erongarícuaro. Closer in front of him, in the middle of the train tracks, he saw Doña Herminia moving south with Burra toward Ajuno, dragging four of her fine boards, with her colt Burrita trotting along behind. Farther to the right, hidden by the curve, he saw the "Porfirio Díaz," coming from Ajuno, billowing out black smoke as it accelerated on the last stretch before the curve. Burra had stopped, perhaps because she felt the railroad ties trembling. Doña Herminia was upset and pulling on the lead rope. Her back was to the train. Because she was deaf, she could not hear it. She was craning her neck to see if the boards had caught on something. The track made a long curve around the field. Miguel Angel spurred his horse forward. For a few moments, at one point, he was rushing along beside the train. He could see in the windows. He saw Claudia, who was returning from Pátzcuaro. She was wearing Solorio Cortés's khaki military hat, with its crimson band. He saw her laughing. He saw Solorio sitting next to her. He saw Solorio look across at him.

Miguel Angel cut the curve and reached Doña Herminia before the train. He told Alain later, he saw the recognition in her

face, followed by her wicked smile. She dangled in his face the piece of Claudia's hair she had stolen from him. The engineer saw two people, a burro and a horse on the tracks ahead of him, and pulled the brake with all his force.

Doña Herminia yelled, "Hey, Burro! Look what I have!"

Miguel Angel leaned forward in his saddle to grab her wrist. Delighted, she fought him off and twisted away to keep the hair from his grasp. His horse wheeled and broke away. The colt trotted away from the tracks. Burra stepped off the tracks. The engine hit the boards, now turned sideways, with the sound of a canon shot, and wood flew in all directions. Miguel Angel's horse hurtled forward in panic. Doña Herminia disappeared under the train.

The train personnel found her under the last car of the three cars, where Solorio Cortés' soldiers rode in one half, their horses in the other. One foot lay by itself outside the rails. Burra and her colt grazed on marigolds that grew beside the tracks. A splinter roughly the size of a machete had passed through the back of Doña Herminia's head and come out her mouth, giving her two tongues. Her mouth had frozen in a smirk. Clenched in her right fist they found a nest of chestnut hair.

Miguel Angel's horse eventually stopped running and slowed to a walk, then wandered unguided across the mountain. Miguel Angel thought about Solorio Cortés's officer's hat on Claudia's head. That was when Silvestre Vernal, bareback and with Marco behind, came out of the trees and approached. Miguel Angel knew who he was and was not afraid. He told Silvestre what had happened. They talked for a while and agreed that it was a terrible thing

The train personnel carefully moved the train half a car length forward. All fourteen passengers stood around Doña Herminia's body. People presented conflicting stories, but the dominant one, supported by the driver, was that a man on horseback had been fighting with the woman now dead on the tracks. It had been a heated discussion, and she broken away. Then he had wheeled his horse and knocked her down intentionally and fled.

It was murder.

The locomotive driver was concerned for any responsibility he might have in the matter, and so he was relieved when he saw something in Doña Herminia's hand and, playing the role of detective, plucked out the nest of chestnut hair and placed it in his own palm. No one said anything. It was not Doña Herminia's hair. Hers was Indian black, the color of the

urraca, the Boat-Tailed Grackle; and as for the other, there was only one person in the town who had chestnut hair.

Claudia – who had also been standing there – turned and walked away on a path toward town, by herself, without saying good-bye. The other thirteen passengers watched her leave and discussed what it all meant. Lieutenant Solorio Cortés agreed it was murder. He and his troops threw down the gangplank on the last car, led off their mounts.

Far down the line, toward the station, Silvestre's son Marco saw them mounting. Both Silvestre and Miguel Angel assumed they were coming for Silvestre. They moved into the trees. Miguel Angel also had a sense of justice, and he suggested they switch hats and vests. Silvestre thanked him, and said they should switch horses as well, for the full effect. Marco said he would ride behind Miguel Angel. And then they spurred their horses ahead.

Miguel rode fast toward town. Silvestre raced on toward the station, where there was a trail that slanted up across the mountain.

When Miguel Angel looked back, he saw the troops pursuing Silvestre, and he did not understand. He stopped to watch. Marco gave a cry, then jumped down and ran across the fields toward the station. Miguel Angel heard the shots and saw

Silvestre go down and cursed God for allowing such a lucky shot. He saw his Aunt Elena's horse continue for a bit, then stop. Marco hurried on toward the station, leaping the furrows of the last the last plowed field.

A few days later, in Pátzcuaro, Alain Duprés, my distant cousin, paid 2 centavos for the Saturday, November 1, 1913 edition of the Catholic newspaper La Actualidad. He found the article he was looking for. The author had not signed his name, probably because he was not sympathetic to the Huertista government, nor to the Huerta-sympathizing officer he was describing.

"Erongarícuaro: Last week, on a warm October afternoon, Federal militia under the command of the young, perhaps short-sighted Lieutenant Solorio Cortés captured a man who he said was the cattle thief Silvestre Vernal Blanco. His troops marched the prisoner, hobbled and wounded, through a brilliant carpet of wild marigolds, up to the wall of Erongarícuaro's train station, where he slumped down to a sitting position, his hat falling forward over his forehead, waiting for the troops to have a late lunch of cold tortillas and avocado.

"According to sources, the lieutenant sat off to one side, attended by his orderly, as if he wished to avoid contact with a common criminal. The train from Ajuno, delayed by an

accident, finally stopped in front of the station. Four passengers got off. The prisoner sat on the southern side of the station. He did not turn his head. The four passengers looked at him quickly and then climbed into the wagon that would take them down into the town. "

"While they ate, not far from the prisoner, the young troops cut the tip off of the one bullet each would soon use, in this manner forming the blunted Bullet of Mercy. When they had wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands, they emptied the bullets out of their magazines, put them away, then levered the special bullet into their chambers, and stood up."

"They propped Silvestre Vernal up against the wall he had been sitting against, smoothed his hair and arranged his hat. The prisoner held a hand over the wound on his shoulder. They saw him gaze left and right along the trees bordering the railroad track, as if looking for someone—where a face did appear, it is said, in a stand of pirules, some distance away, just as a ray of sunlight fell across it, as if God had chosen a boy as witness to what was about to happen."

"When the lieutenant saluted downward with his sabre, two of the rifles misfired, but eight others did not, and the bullets of Mercy danced the bandit Silvestre Vernal against the station wall and left him sitting again, with a look of surprise, until his

head fell forward, as if he wanted to study the marigolds which were all about him. "

"The lieutenant coughed asthmatically from the blue rifle smoke, waited for it to drift to one side, then walked slowly through the marigolds, in regulation boots, which were highly polished, so that they squeaked when, according to witnesses, he approached the sitting body. It is said the officer held his arm stiffly at his side and that it trembled. Then he raised his it up and pointed the long-barreled Smith & Wesson, nickel plated, at the soft top of the bowed head, took one large step back to keep from soiling his uniform, and pulled the trigger, therewith delivering the coup de grace."

"Officer Cortés then leaned over, gripped the man by his hair and brought up the head to see whether the bullets of Mercy had hit their target, which was the prisoner's chest. Then he leaned still farther forward, lifted his round metal-rimmed glasses with his gun hand – still holding the Smith & Wesson – looked more closely, and saw that the chest had been ripped open and that there was hair growing on the prisoner's heart."

"It is said, by the same witnesses, that he was at first moved that God had chosen this way to confirm the evil that had been resting in the man's soul. Then he rambled along about how disturbed he was to see that the hair was chestnut

colored and then, indiscreetly, that the man he had executed was in fact the cattle thief Silvestre Vernal and not a certain medical student from Morelia.”

“In less chaotic times, this writer would hope that a judicial authority would investigate these matters. But there is no such authority beyond Morelia’s city walls, and humanity is so much the worse for it. That the prisoner had hair growing on his heart, the Church, it is thought, on that matter is unlikely to take a position.”

The rest Alain knew because he was there in the back of the crowd when the body was brought into town. It had been tied over a saddle, and the wounds had bled over the face, making the corpse unrecognizable except for what was left of the vest. Claudia was already in front of the Presidencia where the body hung. Friends held her as she sobbed.

News had spread quickly that the murderer of Doña Herminia, the medical student from Morelia, had pushed her in front of the train during some kind of lover’s spat and had already met his fate and now hung head-down in the arches so close to the door of the Presidencia that you could hardly enter without brushing against him.

Doña Herminia herself lay just to one side on two striped Purépecha shawls of cobalt and cerulean blue, her severed

foot placed close to the leg it belonged to and her head on a child's chair, to accommodate the machete-sized pine splinter that otherwise would have tilted her head forward at an awkward angle. Someone had placed the chestnut hair she was found with in her open palm.

People pushed forward to see the miracle of the hair growing on Miguel Angel's exposed heart, the same hair – one could not help noticing – that could be seen in Doña Herminia's hand. The famously flirtatious board merchant, everyone knew, was a few months pregnant, and the child inside her – people agreed – was very likely alive inside her at that very moment. Claudia listened to all this, and sank deeper and deeper into shock. She could not comprehend that the man she loved was dead, nor that her hair—a lover's pledge—seemed to be everywhere.

Just when she was about to collapse, the boy Marco came up beside her, pulled at her sleeve and through his own sobs tried to tell her that those were his father's hands and no one else's. Then Marco's mother appeared and confirmed, wailing, that it was her husband Silvestre Vernal who hung in front of them. The women who had held Claudia now held Marco and his mother – who held each other and wept.

The crowd ringed them, in silence, and waited while a bowl of water and some rags were brought to wash the corpse's face

to reveal his identity once and for all. And then, just when Claudia saw that it was not her lover, someone tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned to see Miguel Angel standing in front of her, with tears in his eyes.

Alain said it was then he learned what passion was, for Claudia's face turned from pale to blotches of red; and her right hand came out and slapped Miguel Angel so hard that he stumbled backward and had to be supported by the crowd to keep him from falling. Then she turned on her heel and marched home without looking at anyone.

She did not talk to anyone for a month. She would not talk to Miguel Angel for a year and only let him approach when she decided that the little girl she had given birth to—with chestnut hair—needed her father. Gradually, she forgave him. He became a doctor. They bought an old colonial house Morelia, with a lovely courtyard garden, and moved in.

Alain, my distant cousin, visited them from time to time. He lost interest in Maximilian's glass flute, since the story around it seemed pale in comparison to the one he had witnessed in Erongarícuaro. Claudia and Miguel Angel had three more children, all of them girls, and all of them with chestnut hair. The man and wife grew very close to each other and lived into their seventies. In strict confidence, they sent Marcos and his

mother money, and later sent Marco to the Escuela Libre de Derecho, in Mexico City, to study law.

Solorio Cortés kept his distance from Claudia after the events described above. The locomotive driver, when deposed, reported, in retrospect, that Miguel Angel had tried to pull Doña Herminia away from the tracks, and no case was brought against him. Two years to the day after Lieutenant Solorio Cortés executed Silvestre Vernal against the south wall of the Erongarícuaro train station, his own body, still uniformed, was found hacked by machetes into four pieces, each of which was suspended by a separate rope from the same beam from which Silvestre Vernal's body had hung, and this time completely blocking the door to the Presidencia. Someone had stuffed two separate lumps of carefully arranged chestnut hair into his mouth, which led to years of speculation about whether it was, in fact, the original hair that had been found in Doña Herminia's hand, as well as that which had been growing on Silvestre Vernal's heart.