

The Hand of St. Teresa

Franco's headquarters were at Salamanca. In February, 1937, after the fall of Málaga, Franco received a looted item stolen from a convent in Ronda and found in the baggage of a captured republican. It was said to be the hand of St. Teresa of Avila. Franco kept it at his bedside as a talisman.

David Mitchell, The Spanish Civil War

It was all because of my reverence for you, most holy Teresa, whom I love above all the saints, that I took the risk of offending the Generalísimo, should he, in spite of the great care I took, discover my impulsive action. But what I did seemed to me in those few moments a sanctified act that could only have been inspired by you, yourself, Teresa. It's true that Franco is a very great man, but even a great man and the protector of our Faith might have felt that I had trespassed his personal and holy sanctuary, and might have been very angry indeed. But I was blessed, Teresa, and my action was not discovered.

But hear me, Teresa, before your tender heart judges me. There I was in the Generalísimo's room; I had been abruptly ordered by Franco's aide to lay down the clean laundry I had brought—*there*, on Franco's very bed—and then to exit by a side door. The aide assured me he himself would later store the laundry where it belonged. For perhaps a minute, then, I was in your beatific presence: gently I lifted

the coverlet of Franco's pillow and beheld your blessed hand. A flood of light entered my very soul—the radiance from your Light, no doubt—and I was inspired to lay one of Franco's spotless handkerchiefs across your hand, and I swear I saw (or felt) the outline of your hand stir beneath mine. For me it was a confirmation of the rumor (which most people believed to be true) that General Franco, the bravest man in Spain, slept every night upon the holy relic of your hand, that he took it with him wherever he traveled.

When I arrived home with the precious imprint of your hand, I prayed for guidance as to what to do with it: nowhere in my humble home, which I have sorely neglected since Eusebio's death eight years ago, seemed to me to be holy enough for such a sacred relic. So I kneeled at the small altar I maintain near the stove where it is warm even on the coldest nights here in Burgos. This altar, as you know, has been such a comfort to me, especially when I return from our church where I have been trusted for several years now to carefully dust the saints before early morning Mass. But your image, Teresa—a painting by a local artist rightly called "Paradiso," as everyone remembers him—I keep on the wall nearest my bed, and the encouragement and sometimes exhortations that seem to issue from your bright visage lighten my loneliness. And on this memorable occasion my prayers were answered more swiftly than I could have dreamed of, and certainly more encouragingly than I deserve, with—as it seemed to me—your personal assurance that I was right to try to preserve the shadow of your beloved hand.

On the very next day, while shopping at the market, I had a conversation with señora Gracia Vallecilla, whose husband died during the raising of the siege by Franco at the Alcázar, and whose son—along with many Italian soldiers sent by our ally, Mussolini, to help us fight the enemy—had been captured by the Republicans at the Battle of Guadalajara. You know señora Vallecilla well, Teresa; she has endured much for our cause. On that morning she was wearing a simple wooden crucifix that gleamed like gold against the sorrowful black dress of our widows. When she noticed with what admiration I was

gazing at it—an admiration greatly subdued, because it is, after all, a sacred image, not a mere adornment—she said quietly: “Yes, it’s beautiful, isn’t it? And the irony is that it was made by one of *them*, a former carpenter named Salvador Sempere Bartomeu, now in the Penal de Burgos.” When I expressed my surprise, she went on to say that she had entered into a correspondence as a *madrina de guerra* with one of the prisoners in the Penal who had once been a family friend, but who was now condemned to *cadena perpetua*, and that she had begun taking food to him to help alleviate his suffering and perhaps bring him back to our Faith. “One must succor even those who despise us,” she added. “But one day when I took him some cheese and a loaf of bread, I heard this strange thing: that there was also in the Penal a prisoner—a carpenter who is also a talented artisan, one who used to carve statues of saints and repair holy figures, mending the fingers and feet of the saints. Imagine, Concepción,” she exclaimed with a sad sigh, “a *rojo* who used to carve saints . . . Ah, there are many mysteries,” she continued, with a helpless gesture of despair and resignation at what this war had done to us all. “And by this act of charity, Concepción, I pray that God will find a way to do the same for my son: I have heard that when the Italians in the Republican army encountered the Italians in the Nationalist army at Guadalajara, there was much jubilation and both sides embraced their long-lost brothers. Let us at least hope such things are still possible . . .”

At that moment, Teresa, I knew what I must do. Thank you, blessed saint, for revealing the answer to my troubled question: was I in a state of dire sin for having “stolen” the image of your hand—or had this action actually been inspired by you, the shadow of your hand being a symbolic prelude to what you meant me to do?

I decided at once that I should visit this carpenter who carves saints as soon as possible to see if he might, from the outline I had quickly drawn upon my return home from delivering Franco’s laundry, create for me an exact replica of your hand. The prison is over two kilometers from my home, but I decided that if the weather were fair, the next morning after my work at the church, I would set out, walking slowly:

since, after all, when one is carrying out a mission of God there is no need to rush—He will lead the way, surely enough.

That evening I prepared a basket of food. We at the northern front, and especially here in Burgos where support for the Nationalists is strongest, we are not lacking in provisions, as the Republicans are. In addition, we can eat fish of all sorts and we have plenty of wheat, so there is no shortage of flour. We are not like our enemy, whose children, I have heard, are begging, shoeless, in the streets of Madrid for a few *céntimos* to buy beans and a bone for soup. So I prepared a nice loaf of wheat bread and pieces of sausage and a bit of lettuce. (There is, I admit, a scarcity of fresh vegetables even among us, since there are far fewer men to work in the fields. Nearly all able-bodied men are at the front; there is not a man in this city of forty thousand souls who would not give his life to “save civilization,” as Franco so rightly tells us.)

But as you yourself have written, Teresa, “Satan has many devices,” and that night as I lay thinking about my wonderful plan to duplicate your hand, I began again to have doubts. What would General Franco do if he knew what I had done? And that remarkable coincidental meeting with señora Vallecilla at the marketplace: was it really a message sent by you, Teresa? My spirits sank so low as even to question the wisdom of señora Vallecilla’s action in befriending a *rojo*. But finally I remembered that when you had written the story of your life, you told don Pedro de Castro, the Canon of Avila, that you had wanted to call it *Of the Compassion of God* rather than *The Life of Mother Teresa*. And since compassion is the golden thread that weaves together all the actions of your *Life*—even to founding a new convent—I decided that even if all the talk about this miserable prisoner being such a fine carpenter and sculptor turned out to be mere gossip, I would nevertheless go and take him some food to alleviate his condition. At the same time I could not help remembering your warning: “It is a great evil to be alone in the midst of such great danger”—so I continued to ponder whether suffering the presence of an enemy of our Faith was not a dangerous act of presumption on my part . . .

But on my way to the prison the next morning, my doubts vanished. It was a beautiful morning. A soft breeze seemed to have wafted toward Burgos all the way from the Bay of Biscay. The sun shone like a holy medallion in a sky as flawless as the purity of your soul, Teresa. And then, as if to confirm my belief that you approved of my visit, just as I neared the prison, I saw, flying low enough for me to make out the markings on his wings, an exquisite dove. At once there came into my heart and head, like the sudden flare of an altar candle, your familiar words when you, too, were troubled: “*I saw over my head a dove . . . I heard the rustling of its wings. My spirit grew calm.*”

But suddenly, Teresa, there was another dilemma for me. As I approached the entrance to the prison, the guard stopped me, barring my way with his rifle. He looked at me long and inquiringly, as if he knew me. Then, after looking into my basket of food, he asked, quite politely, I felt: “Are you a *madrina de guerra*?”

Then I did indeed hesitate, Teresa, tormented by the strange necessity of lying—since, after all, I was not really a sponsoring “god-mother” who had been writing letters of consolation and piety to the prisoner. But fortunately, still another of your “illuminations” came to my aid. At that very moment I recalled how you, Teresa, had tried to save Avila from the attacking Reds by *lying*: how it was that you appeared in a dream or vision to that wretched *rojo*, Colonel Madraga, and by *falsely* telling him that Avila was totally without arms and had no Nationalists there to defend that holy city, Colonel Madraga delayed his attack on Avila . . . so in that instant, I decided: if the blessed saint can lie in a good cause, why not I?

But perhaps you meant to save me from the necessity of lying, because what happened was this: I had wrapped the loaf of bread in the *Diario de Burgos*, which of course the guard recognized as *our* Nationalist newspaper (I saw how he took special note of it), and then suddenly he exclaimed, with a slight chuckle, “Ah yes, I know you, you are señora Galindo Morales, the *beata* who cares for the saints in the church.” Now, I didn’t exactly like being called a *beata*—I have em-

ployment besides caring for my beloved saints—a necessity for me, really, since Eusebio’s death: He left me with virtually nothing. But I simply nodded my assent—I was, after all, the very woman he had recognized. I thanked him as he lowered his rifle and inclined his head toward me in a somewhat dubious bow, as if he were still confused as to why a *beata* would be bringing food to an enemy prisoner.

Moments later I was shown into a windowless room whose concrete walls had clearly not been white-washed in many years. Across its surface cracks were spreading like a sort of demented scrawl. I stood alone in the room, waiting. There were no chairs.

Sempere was soon brought to me by two guards—so I wondered at first how I could possibly speak of my real purpose for this visit in their presence. But rather to my surprise, they left the room, and after exchanging a few greetings with the guard who had barred my way, returned to their duties. As there was no place to sit, Sempere and I stood contemplating each other for a few minutes.

He was quite tall and emaciated, but with fierce gray eyes. To tell the truth, I was rather frightened by the intensity of his gaze—I could feel myself tremble—but I managed to control my fear in pursuit of my objective. He had not spoken a word, but as he glanced down at the basket I had brought him, I saw him draw in a quick breath: the aroma of bread filled the dank room. However, I did not immediately hand him the food. I wanted first of all honestly to explain why I had come—which I did, Teresa, rather quickly, stumbling on my words, but I think you would have approved.

He looked at me as if I were mad. “Permit me to understand you, señora,” he said, with sardonic amusement. “If I heard you correctly, you want me to carve the hand of a saint from the model”—he paused in disbelief—“a model based on the *shadow* of this Teresa’s hand?”

I tried to explain how it was that I had first perceived—or “received”—the shadow of the saint’s hand on the handkerchief, and that I had at once traced a faint outline of it (most *reverently*, I wanted to add, but I did not).

“I see . . . ,” he said, rubbing his eyes. A faint sound rose from his throat that perhaps was simply an incredulous laugh, the laughter of the Unbeliever, but sounded like a throttled sob. I waited silently.

After a moment he shrugged, then said mockingly: “‘A shadow,’ ‘an imprint,’ ‘an outline’—whatever you say, señora. . . . Very well. Fine. I thank you for the food,” he concluded abruptly, glancing at the basket.

I took the bread and cheese from the basket and placed them in his outstretched hands. I noticed that they were red and swollen, and I averted my gaze. I promised I would return the following week. Then I handed him a clean white cloth onto which I had sketched an outline made from the original, now-sacred handkerchief, which I had left on my altar at home. I dared not stay any longer, but as I turned to leave, I saw that he had already torn a piece of bread from the loaf and was devouring it like a starving man.

The following week I came again as I had promised. This time the same guard, recognizing me at once, waved me on. I entered the visiting room alone. To my surprise, someone—perhaps the sympathetic guard—had placed a single chair in the room, meant no doubt for myself, but I preferred to stand.

On this visit Sempere explained to me that although he was willing to try to create “a replica” (he could not suppress the irony in his voice as he said the word), he could not begin work on my request because prisoners were permitted to use only paper or cardboard for their “prison art”—he said the words as though they burned his lips. He went on to say, however, that if I could bring him food—he hesitated on the word “food” as if it humiliated him to speak of his terrible need—in a wooden box, and leave the box with him, he would be able to use it in carving the hand. Even for this, however, he did not have the necessary tool; but, he added quickly, with an anxious glance at the door, he could make such a tool himself from an empty sardine can. So, if the next time I came, I would bring him a can of sardines, he would begin work at once on the hand.

“They are very careful here,” he explained with biting sarcasm, “not to let us keep any metal utensils, because we might make some weapon out of them with which to attack the guards—or to commit suicide,” he added bitterly. He hesitated a moment, glancing at me for my reaction, then continued in a torrent of contemptuous rage: “They don’t want us to do that—they don’t want us to die, because then they can’t torture us . . .”

I stared at him in disbelief. “But why might they want to do such a thing?”

“Not ‘might.’ *Did*,” he said harshly. For a moment I felt he could attack me. But his facial expression softened as I asked in a barely audible voice if he himself had ever attempted—I could not bring myself to utter the word “suicide.”

Silently he showed me his wrists—the slash marks were still raw. “A nun at the hospital took care of me,” he said. “She was horrified. She said it was the worst thing I could ever do. She said that even if this life seemed Hell, it was not ‘eternal’ . . .” He fell abruptly silent, as if he felt he had said too much. Perhaps to overcome his feelings, he suddenly broke off a piece of bread, assuming a calm and intimate manner, as if he had known me many months, his gray eyes observing me intently as he did so. I waited in silence, feeling anything I said might provoke him again. He chewed very slowly, as if he were a gentleman at ease in his own home—not at all like the hungry man I had witnessed devouring his food. Then, glancing at the door where the guard had begun to pace back and forth, he began to speak hurriedly.

“No, it’s true—your holy nun was right. Why bother to kill ourselves? We don’t need to commit suicide: they are simply killing us all one by one. We are dying of hunger. . . . We are dying of loneliness. Very few of us here have anyone . . . ,” he paused and looked at me strangely, “anyone who comes here, like you . . .” His voice grew husky, and he rushed on as if fearful that either I or the guard would interrupt him. “If we are sent to peel potatoes for their army, we watch intently for the precise moment when the guard may turn his head so

that we can swallow a piece of raw potato, because if they catch us ‘stealing potatoes,’ as they call it, we are put in punishment cells—in complete darkness . . . no space to stretch out . . . No, no, suicide is not the answer: I have learned that.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Like the nun who had saved him, I felt such a death would be the most horrible fate any human could inflict upon himself.

He began to pace the room nervously, threshing the air with the bread like a scythe as he burst out: “But I’m still under threat of execution, don’t you know that? Don’t you understand? You talk about ‘*shadows*.’” He grimaced contemptuously. “One day it will happen. Like those who have gone before me. Simply: someone will come to my cell door, just like this”—he parted his hands widely—“and he will call out to me, ‘Salvador, get ready!’ How do you like *that*?” he demanded fiercely, his voice edged with burrs. “No time to repent, eh? *Your* guys don’t wait around for that, eh? No—the only way we know if one of us has been executed is that we hear the shots. Have you seen Goya’s painting—over a hundred years ago—of the men in Madrid waiting to be shot by the French? Well, that’s us. Nothing has changed—the way of execution is the same. Men waiting to be shot. Men waiting in terror for their names to be called. . . . They have died by the hundreds: in the sports stadiums, in the bullrings, wherever we used to have joy, now we have executions. Is that what your Franco means by the New State?” He sank into the chair, burying his face in his hands.

I looked down at his bowed head. The hair had been cropped as close to the skull as possible, but nevertheless one could see the gray sprouts, like seedlings planted in the scarred skin. His eyebrows, too, were streaked with gray like the early feathers of a fledgling. I wanted to comfort him, to place my hand on his shoulder, but there was such energy radiating from him, as from some tormented saint or devil, that I could not move. I stood spellbound by a new wave of understanding, as though bound by a ring of fire.

“Look at me,” he said in despair, raising his eyes to mine. “I am twenty-four years old . . .”

For the first time I dared to look at him directly. On his hollow cheeks, sunken from hunger or from the horrors he had witnessed, he wore already the whorled knots of age, rather like the silent etchings marking the years in the heart of a tree—only his were sharper, fresher markings, as if each whorl were a recent scarring, swelling outward in blood and pain.

“Most of the prisoners here are even younger than I,” he continued. “I have seen them so transformed after a month of solitary confinement in a punishment cell that, like me, they look twenty years older than their age.” His voice had become hoarse and he had begun to speak very slowly. He stopped altogether for a moment, touching his mouth. “Excuse me, señora, my teeth . . . all of us here are suffering from scurvy.” As he said this he tried to smile—a terrible grimace, like the silent shriek of a skeleton. Then in an apparent effort to regain his composure he added in a scathing tone: “You, señora, on the other hand, while not much older than I, seem still very . . . young. . . .”

I saw clearly that he meant no compliment but a moral judgment. If the years had weighed less heartily upon me—he wanted me to know—it was because my life had been *comfortable*, and it had been comfortable precisely because it was without moral purpose. I would, therefore, never look like him or his friends, ghouls hovering over their own open graves.

But, Teresa, in spite of this gratuitous insult, I wanted to help him. More than that, I wanted to *save* him: I felt there was much that was good in him, and that with help, he could be saved and brought back to our Faith.

But he rose abruptly to his feet, angry and confused: evidently he had said too much. He made a pained effort to bow in dismissal of my visit—a parody of a courtly bow. As he did so, I glimpsed fresh welts on his neck and purple bruises on his forearms. “I thank you again, señora . . . for the food.”

With tears in my eyes I said simply, “*De nada*.” I added that I would bring him what he needed next week. And every week after that.

Outside the room I stopped to give the guard ten pesetas. He, too, seemed to me suddenly old and tired, as if our war had turned our youth into a nation of old men.

The following week I came with the wooden box Sempere had asked for, along with a can of sardines, some cheese, and a loaf of bread. He seemed to be more cheerful. He said they had just come from *la rueda*. “And what a wonderful thing, señora, to feel the sun on your head, to scare the lice off your clothes, to feel your legs again as if you were a shark in the sea, with all your muscles alive. Ah, . . . you can’t imagine. But forgive me, señora. I’ve been rude. Thank you for the box . . . And that’s a nice little scarf on your head. But woe! Why do you women *insist* on wearing nothing but black, from head to foot? It’s a kind of bondage . . .”

“You know very well, Salvador”—it was the first time I had called him by his first name. “It is our custom. It is a sign of mourning.” I had almost said “perpetual” mourning, but I could not say that: my widowed loneliness was mournful, but I was lonely even when Eusebio was alive. “I have been a widow now nearly eight years.” My voice trailed off.

“Ah . . .” His keen gray eyes stared at me in silence a moment, as if he were seeking some secret significance in this revelation. Then he added with his customary bitterness, “Well, at least he didn’t kill any Spaniards like us. And what did he . . . ?”

“Heart attack,” I said briefly. I did not want to talk about Eusebio. Instead, I asked the question which I had had in mind from the moment he had mentioned “the wheel.” “And what exactly is this *rueda* you spoke of? What kind of a wheel?”

While he began with exaggerated attention to look into the box of food—this I saw as a way of avoiding the risk of the sort of emotional breakdown he had suffered on my last visit—he murmured, “Ah, the ‘wheel’ . . . Yes. . . . It’s our little social club, you see. Once a week they take us out and walk us around, or, rather, we walk ourselves around.”

“‘Out’? Out where?” I was confused. The prison yard was quite small, and to have taken them elsewhere merely to walk would be unthinkable.

“Do you know what *la ganta* is?” he asked in a more mollifying tone. “Do you grasp the idea of an axis?”

I nodded silently, stifling the temptation to say, “*Of course I know what an axis is!*” But that seemed the most selfish of vanities under the circumstances. I remained silent.

“This is how we get our ‘promenade.’ We are led outside and ordered to stand one by one—separated from each other by about a meter. Then we prisoners walk our skinny legs around the axis. Woe unto any prisoner, señora, who in that little exercise turns his head to look directly into his fellow prisoner’s eyes—or worse, if he were to move his lips—even in prayer.” He could not resist the jibe, but his voice had swelled into a solemn tone, rather like plainsong. “But at least out there in the wheel—or *on* the wheel, if you think of the Inquisition—I see friends I haven’t seen since the war began . . . How painful to see them, these new prisoners, yet how good to see them still alive.” He began to cough, as if having difficulty breathing, but I could see he was choking with tears. “There are eighteen hundred prisoners in this place—doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers of every subject in the known world and beyond. Firemen, and shepherds, too—even carpenters like me. Do you really think all these condemned men are against God and a menace to civilization? Why, who was it that bombed Vizcaya? Who was it that bombed civilians in Durango—people with not so much as a rifle in their hands? This killing of civilians—dive-bombing, they call it—bombing and machine-gunning any human target . . . Whoever heard of such a thing in the entire history of humankind? And they killed nuns too, their Condor Legion did. In Durango over a hundred nuns died. But who counts how many they kill? They kill for target practice, as a pastime. Even one of your own generals has described your German *allies*”—the word seemed wrenched from him in a burst of fury—“as ‘beasts of prey.’”

I was silent. I could not explain the bombing of Durango. Who can explain the suffering of the innocent? I felt my heart would break with sorrow as I listened, but I dared not speak.

Then in a sudden savage outcry he shouted: "And what about those nuns who right now, during the reign of your Generalísimo"—a tiny froth of rage appeared on his cracked and swollen lips as he spat the word—"your *Head of State*, right now have been imprisoned, some of them with tuberculosis? And, for what reason, Concepción? Only because those unhappy women are loyal above all to their God and to Truth. *Truth*, Concepción, not this hell of lies published every day just for the prisoners"—he pulled a folded copy of *Redención* from his pocket and, advancing slightly toward me, ripped it apart. "These 'servants of God,' as even your Primate of Toledo would call them, have refused to lie, have refused to swear that it was the *Republicans themselves* who bombed Guernica, just to win sympathy for their cause. No, no, Concepción, it was not we who bombed Durango, killing a priest who was in the very act of lifting the Host—"

But I could listen no longer. Sobbing, I fled from the room, thinking, "I will never come back. I must not believe him."

That night I could not sleep. The godlessness of the world seemed to have invaded me. All night long I heard the screams of Guernica, saw the bodies falling, destroyed, saw nuns, their broad white wimples flaring into flames, like burning birds set afire in the sky. Over and over I asked myself: can all this be the lies of those who would destroy our Faith? As you wrote in your *Life*, Teresa, Satan himself is a lie. But then I reflected: even if Sempere is lying about these killings and tortures, if it were later found to be true that a single human being created in God's image had been subjected to such pitiless cruelty, then would it not poison the validity of our crusade against them?

And then, too, Teresa, must we not consider redemption? Even though they are Reds, can they not be saved? I have heard of a fierce anarchist who, after smashing the statue of Our Lady, sobbed brokenheartedly, and began praying fervently to the shards of Our Lady to forgive him . . . Is there not hope for such a man? And may there not be many others like him? What, for instance, of those two Reds who broke down the door of the Caserio in Alicante to save the priceless

holy statue of Santa Faz from destruction? At the eleventh hour of the New State, shall they too not be saved from destruction?

All week long my peace of mind was ravaged with questions, exhortations, guilt. I knew I was in a state of sin, because I had failed to go to my confessor about my visits and had not taken communion in nearly a month. Nor had I been to our church to care for the altar statues. Soon, someone, I was certain, becoming concerned for my health, would come to my door, asking questions. But it is *I*, Teresa, who have the questions. Why are they unanswerable?

I argued with myself futilely. My arguments were filled with false learning, with presumption, with guilt. Finally, in the calmest manner possible, as if I were Mary Queen of Scots going to the scaffold for her Faith, I packed a basket of food for Sempere: sausage and bread and olives and fried fish, and two small oranges brought to the north all the way from Málaga.

Sempere came into the visiting room slowly, walking somewhat unsteadily. His right shoulder, I noticed at once, was held higher than the other, as if it pained him. He made no attempt to apologize for his outburst the previous week, but said simply, as I handed him the food, “Thank you,” adding softly, “I was afraid you would not come back.”

“It’s not easy to forget what you say . . .” I murmured. “I had many doubts.” And for the first time in our visits I sat down in the chair the guard had left for me. But this simple action seemed suddenly intimate and forbidden. I rose to my feet again quickly.

We talked about the food for a few moments, after which he mentioned that during the week he had had the good fortune—“or bad,” he added forlornly—to discover that there were here in the prison two good friends who had been with him at the Battle of Bricia. He went on to say, with a strange laugh, that these two friends were among only a handful of men who, along with himself, had attacked the enemy cavalry. “I was accustomed to fighting men,” he exclaimed, “but it’s quite a different battle when it’s horses. They are so powerful, one can’t imagine overcoming their magnificent strength. And somehow it’s still

a shock to have to kill a beautiful animal just because he's in your way: you've got to bring the rifleman down and you've got to destroy the horse along with the enemy. And these horses were terrified," he added with a strange sort of melancholy, "perhaps more frightened even than I . . . It was an amazing sight, really: in spite of my fury with the enemy, I could see my men tearing at the stirrups, thrusting at the horses, wrapping their arms as far as they could around the beasts, crushing themselves against those formidable kicking legs, while the whole battle seemed lit up by those remarkable equine eyes. Ah . . ." he added with helpless envy, opening his hands as if to show the emptiness he held, "it would take a *master* to paint such a scene . . ."

I was not sympathetic. Not only was this the first time I realized that he had been some sort of leader ("*my men*"), but I saw his sorrow over the killing of horses, rather than over the killing of men he believed to be his enemies, as one more sign of his corruption. I decided I should listen to no more of this sort of sentiment and should leave at once. But then, suddenly he added with a boyish pride which surprised me, "You should have seen me. I was *welded* to the horse as if we were one creature. It was the most fierce battle of my life. And we lost the battle . . . So, you see me now . . ." He shrugged. "Every day after that, it seemed, we lost. Santander fell. Thousands of us fleeing the destruction and nowhere to escape for most of us except by sea. And in the Bay of Biscay there was hardly a rowboat even for the fleeing civilians. It was terrible: people with no place to go jumped into the sea. But there was a car . . . And four men, my *friends*, Concepción, jumped into this car, they accelerated it, and shouting to the silent 'democracies' of the world, '*¡Viva la República!*' they drove into the sea. They were gone in minutes . . . minutes . . ."

I could not bear to hear any more. Only God knew what he would tell me next. I did not even remember to ask if he had been able to work on your hand, Teresa; I was shivering with cold, like someone threatened by some deadly disease. I fled the room, I ran home like a demented woman, a cold wind whipping my hands, my empty basket beating at my side like my pounding heart.

That night I dreamed of angels—more like centaurs than angels—smiling strangely, galloping their horses through the heavens, like a horde of rebel angels Satan had lured to the edge of the world, plunging them into Hell.

Time and time again my sleep was broken with these wild dreams. Then toward morning I dreamed that my bed was on fire. I leaped from the imagined flames, bathed in sweat: it was bitter cold in my room. And perhaps for the first time in my life, Teresa, I cursed. I heartily *cursed* this war which has divided us all, brother against brother, father against son, sisters in travail, mothers weeping over their destroyed and broken children. And I began even to question the final justification for it all, recalling suddenly how years ago a great monsignor had come to our church on Christmas Eve and given a sermon in which he said that there were four conditions for a just rebellion. I've forgotten what the other three were, but one of them came to me with strange clarity that bitter cold night as I sat sweating and shivering: "that the probable harm done by the revolt must not be greater than the probable harm done by the absence of the revolt." So where are we today, Teresa, with all our dead, with foreigners on our soil killing Spaniards?

This time I stayed away for three weeks. Even the sculpture of your hand—forgive me, Teresa—had become irrelevant. I cursed Sempere again and again for plaguing my life. Let the infidel be damned, I said, for insinuating himself into my thoughts, for creating occasions for sin and provocation for chaos, disorder, obsession . . . But finally I decided that you would want me at least to have the sculpture of your hand that had so inspired me. I would go to him once more only. This time, however, I prepared a very sparse basket—only a few oranges for the wretched infidel's teeth. I cursed him again even as I placed the fruit in my basket (you see, Teresa, how sinful I had become).

On this visit I noticed at once that there were new bruises above his eyes. Were they beating him? I wondered, and what new occasion would his guards have had for doing so? But I immediately suppressed such thoughts: if I were to believe a single one of his sad stories, then I would have to believe them all. And I refused to do this, now that at

last I had convinced myself that at best his stories were exaggerations, and at worst, deliberate lies. But he did in fact seem much changed since my last visit. He was for the first few minutes of this visit grave, distant, and for the most part silent. If it were possible, he was even more emaciated than ever: a strong wind would have bent him like a reed into the sandy beaches of the Bay of Biscay.

“You were gone a long time,” he said at last.

“Not so long,” I retorted defensively.

“Meanwhile,” he went on, ignoring my denial, “I have been removed from the labor battalion—for ‘bad behavior’” he said with a sad smile, adding, “and worse than that: I am very sorry for this, but I could not complete the sculpture. I did manage to make an excellent tool by crushing the sardine can and sharpening it to a fine point on the cement floor of my cell. But just last week as I was working on the index finger—I had carved it so that it pointed directly at the viewer—they confiscated my tool, accusing me of having a concealed weapon. Worst of all, they have destroyed the hand—a work of art . . .”

“Perhaps God willed it. Perhaps it was not meant to be . . .” I said sadly. I rose to my feet somewhat shaken with disappointment. Automatically I handed him the basket, but he did not even look at it. So I placed the basket on the chair. As I prepared to leave, I noted that he was looking directly, searchingly at me. There was a long silence in which I was torn between pity for his ravaged countenance and the need to flee at all costs from the alluring risks of my compassion.

Finally, he said, “Yes . . . I have done it right,” and handed me a scrolled sheet. “It is a portrait,” he said shyly. “Of you . . . I used what colors I could get . . . or make—there are not many. It is my gift, my thanks—I have no other way. You have . . .” He paused uncertainly. “You have fed me, body and soul . . . You have saved me from . . .” His throat tightened with emotion and he could not continue. He stood gazing in silence at the wall near which we stood, his eyes fixed on the cracked and peeling surfaces as if he were looking for a place on a map.

But I was determined to summon up my spiritual strength at last and resist the temptations of pity. I had seen how the seduction of evil

companions could lead to dreams of apocalyptic angels falling from the edge of Heaven. Thanking him, but without opening the scroll, I removed the oranges from my basket and laid them on the chair as carefully as if I were preparing an altar. Then I placed the scroll in my basket and turned to leave.

“May God be with you,” was all the compassion I conceded to him on that visit. As I moved quickly toward the door, murmuring excuses for my hasty departure, I looked back. He stood in the middle of the room—alone, exiled from Earth, excluded from Heaven. In the crepuscular light of the windowless room, the oranges gleamed grotesquely, like a pair of lost souls floating headless through space.

I shut the door behind me. The guard who had been leaning against the wall stood erect. “Buenas noches, señora Galindo,” he said respectfully. I gave him all I had—twenty pesetas.

When I arrived home I placed the scroll on my kitchen table without opening it. I was—how shall I say, Teresa?—afraid to see it. But after praying before the altar, I carefully unrolled it.

Teresa, I was stunned: I was beautiful. He had created of my hair glossy black wings above each ear. My eyes gleamed a bright cinnamon-brown, their pupils lit by a kind of terror, as of a frightened horse . . . I dared not ask myself where he had managed to get the colors: the soft carnelian of the lips, the black scarf lit up by a scattering of bright red drops with the transparency of rain. For some reason he had portrayed me looking upward, in a sort of annunciatory trance, rather like a Zurbarán. I pressed my mouth to the red drops on the scarf from which so much light emanated. The bitter taste of blood flooded my throat, and I wept . . .

Teresa, here is my ultimate confession: I studied the painting; I pondered it. Alas, I ended by loving it: for the first time in my life I felt I was being caressed as a woman. Teresa, Eusebio was a good man. I was his *wife*, whom he respected, but he did not desire me. I did not evoke his passion or his praise: the difference was suddenly revealed to me by Salvador’s portrait. And I wept for my childless widowhood.

Finally I turned the portrait over. There he had written in a large, confident scrawl: "For Señora Concepción Galindo Morales, From Salvador Sempere Bartomeu." I scrutinized the shape of the letters as if they were some ancient rite of divination. The appearance of his name so close to mine caused in me a rapturous tremor. I began to realize in that moment that I was lost . . .

I spent the following week praying and asking myself whether I should not, after all, return to bring him food: subsisting on his prisoner's rations, he would soon surely starve or succumb to some fatal illness. I decided, finally, that to discontinue these acts of charity was against our common humanity. Having made my decision, I promptly packed a basket—this time with a large round loaf of bread, several hard-boiled eggs, and a bit of cheese. I had no more oranges.

It was a beautiful morning. The compassionate sun wove through the few clouds in garments of gold. A few brave flowers, not knowing the rites of season, bloomed ahead of their time. I walked toward the prison in a sort of rapture such as you describe, Teresa: blessing every man, woman, and child in the world. It seemed I had no room in my heart for hatred or for fear of enemies, and as I walked along, gently swinging my basket like a young girl, I recalled suddenly the words of St. Francis, "Let me bring love." But the recollection of the Saint speaking to the birds brought something remarkable to my attention. It seemed as if there were absolute silence in the world: not a voice echoed, not a church bell rang; no birds sang. I halted in the path to the prison entrance, struck by this unprecedented phenomenon: it was as if I were suddenly immersed in Eternity, where there was no need to speak, to explain or exult, no other sound but the voice of God. I put my basket down for a moment and listened to the silence, as if I were awaiting God's Word . . .

The silence was soon broken: I heard the scraping sound of a metal door against concrete: I picked up my basket and walked slowly to the prison entrance.

To my surprise the guard who had been there on all my previous visits was gone: there was a new guard, his heavily lidded eyes staring

at me with cold contempt as I came to the door. At once, with military speed, he raised his rifle and barred my way: "You are not permitted to enter," he said, narrowing his eyes with suspicion. "You will hand over your basket." He did not address me by name. With an angry gesture, he flung back the napkin covering the bread; then with mathematical precision, as if working from a diagram, he broke the bread open at three points and pushed his hand into the soft flesh for several silent moments. Finally he grunted, as if still unconvinced that the bread held no hidden weapons. But he did not return the basket.

"You are not permitted to enter," he repeated. "Sempere has been executed. He and two others were plotting an escape. The others, too, will doubtless be executed. Your former guard has been arrested for accepting bribes—from you and others. . . . Our commander will let you know when you are to appear to give us information about the prisoner. Until then, you are not to leave the city."

My knees buckled; the sky darkened. I managed to stagger away from the prison gate and into a nearby street before I fell to the ground, sobbing. When I rose to my feet, I made my way blindly homeward—seeing no one, speaking to no one, moaning like a broken animal. When at last I arrived home, I flung myself face downward on the floor, like a penitent. I wept; I pounded the floor. Teresa, I felt I should have gone to Franco on my knees as Salvador's mother would have done, and begged for his life. I felt that like that priest, Aixti, who offered up his life for a Republican prisoner who had not yet confessed and received absolution, I too should have gone to *someone*—the guard, the commander, to Franco himself, and offered up my life: would they have accepted it? I, at least, could have confessed my sins. . . . But, Teresa: to kill a man while his soul is yet condemned to eternal damnation—I ask you, which is the greater sin—to let an unbeliever live or to kill him unrepentant? You, yourself, have said, "Cursed be the loyalty which reaches so far as to go against the law of God."



And now, though many days have passed, I think only of my loss. I no longer go to the church to care for the saints. I no longer pray for

forgiveness for my sins—for my pride, for my lack of humility, for my failure to understand Salvador's suffering: his poverty, his mother's anguish, the desperate outcries of the bereaved, the impoverished and destitute of the earth. . . . Think, Teresa, how he was tortured, how his friends were chained and taken away in a coffle like slaves to labor for fifty *céntimos* a day. My failure to understand all this, when he tried to tell me, now seems to me my grossest sin. . . .

Now I am in perpetual torment. I am inconsolable. I am in despair. I *hate* the world because he is no longer in it . . . I think only of him, of him . . . Is this love, Teresa? Have I saved him from Hell or do I follow him there for all eternity? Tell me, Teresa. Tell me. . . .