

“Divine Treasure” by Inés Garland

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I like his face. I'd like to touch it. With the tips of my fingers at first, and then with my palms, molding my hands to its shape. Slowly. There is such craving there in my hands that my body feels fragmented. I watch him leaning over his desk, absorbed in his work, and in my heart something happens.

“Fabian.” I like saying his name. “Do you like Antonio Gades?”

I don't know why I ask. Last night I decided I wouldn't. When I saw the promo on TV, I thought about how much I wanted to ask him out on a theater date, but then decided I wouldn't. I always feel naked whenever he is around, naked and with a hollow pang between my legs.

But there is another woman inside me who is apparently of a different mindset and she has just contradicted me.



Renowned flamenco star Antonio Gades.

“I think he's brilliant,” he says, lifting his gaze up from his illustration and looking at me with those clean eyes. How much longer does he have left in his life to look through eyes like those? “He's going to be at the Ópera.”

Exactly. I'm not going to say it.

“Why don't we go see him?”

I just did. I just used the first person plural, placing him and me in the same sentence and asking him out despite having decided I wouldn't, and he is saying yes and looking at me with a smile. Fabian has the most absolute smile I have seen in my life. With his eyes, and even with his body, he is making a proclamation of intense joy, a joy that should be considered a cardinal sin. I feel stupid.

He goes back to his drawing and I turn my back to him to make some phone calls. I look out the window. I see his reflection in the glass. He gets up and walks over to the reception desk—to say something to Sandra, the receptionist, no doubt. Sandra is his age, with never-ending legs and full lips that look like a red jellyfish on her wrinkle-free face, and a somewhat dumb expression, with this surprised look that she especially puts on when she is making eyes at Fabian. Playing the innocent lamb. When he isn't looking, nothing seems to surprise her much.

On the other side of the glass partition, they are laughing and I feel a chill on my back, as if Fabian's absence lowered the temperature in the office. I can't work like this. I turn the chair to look at him through the door. His silhouette lifts up its arms, crosses its wrists and pirouettes. Olé, says the lamb.

I press the button on the intercom.

"Sandra, can you order me sashimi from the sushi place?" I say, and it comes out in that German guard's voice that I hate. "You two order yourselves lunch, too," I add, trying to soften things.

"I'm like Woody Allen," says Fabian as he enters the office. "I want my food dead. Not sick. Not wounded. Dead."

"Sashimi isn't alive."

"But it looks it."

"You never tried it."

"Give me *milanesa* and french fries. Sandra!" he runs over to the door again and walks over to reception, his back to me. I check out his butt while he asks Sandra to order him a burger from McDonald's. He turns around. He smiles.

"You're blushing."

"Hamburger," I say and wave my hand disparagingly and feel I'm blushing even more.

"What an attitude. Is a burger that bad?"

"No, it's not that bad. But you caught me checking out your butt," I don't say.

Fabian's butt is just like Romeo's in the Zeffirelli movie, in the scene following their first night, when Romeo gets up at dawn and opens the window and sunlight floods the room, illuminating Juliette's sleeping face—so young, Juliette—and Romeo, his back to the camera, has the firmest and most perfect

butt in cinematic history. Romeo's butt. Romeo and Juliette, so young that they think they can't live without each other and that their love will last forever. But I imagine them, had they not had the good sense to die for love, sitting at an immensely long table, Juliette fatter and wrinkled, and Romeo with a belly and a shriveled butt, in a silence that is occasionally broken by short phrases that lead to a banal, mean-spirited fight in which Romeo makes some matrimonial remark. It always amuses me to imagine him saying, "Just like a Capulet!" with that habit married people have of blaming everything on their in-laws. That's why I remain single. I despise mean-spirited arguments and oversimplifications.

Fabian half-closes his eyes, lowers his chin, raises an arm behind his head and lets out a poor imitation of a *cante jondo* as he stamps his way to his desk.

"Cut it out, Gades. The people from the agency are here." Sandra's blonde head pops in, with her hair carefully undone and her red jellyfish.

They both laugh. I hate it that he smiles at her with those eyes I so want to kiss.

The man from the modeling agency walks in engulfed in a cloud of tart perfume, kisses me on the cheek, lays books out all around me and sits on my desk with a cold-eyed smile.

For an hour, he and Fabian discuss the models for the ad. They baptize them with names like The Dyed Blondie, Tiny Butt and Legs; Fabian wants to make a collage using the face of one, the legs of another, and the eyes and lips of a third, and I see him standing atop a pile of women's torsos, arms and lips, a small impassioned, fierce Napoleon. And the entire time he is standing next to me and his jeans brush up against my arm and I, all of me, is reduced to that little bit of arm that he touches.

When we are alone, he looks at me with an expression I can't decipher and very softly brushes something off my face. He shows me a small paper circle.

"You're very quiet," he says.

"I'm thinking about the ad," I lie.

Before we say our goodbyes for the day, I confirm our theater date. It is a week away. The longest week of my life.

The day finally arrives and as I lean out over my balcony, my heart stops with every car that parks on my block. I see men and women get out. From above, their legs seem long and their torsos short; ants in a hurry, and not one of them is Fabian. I retreat back inside the apartment and look at myself in the wardrobe mirror. If I keep walking back and forth from the mirror to the balcony, I'll wear out the carpet. I don't dare even think about what I'll do after the show. I won't let myself think beyond my yearning to touch his face.

The doorbell rings and I jump. In the elevator I look fixedly at my own reflection. I'm more asymmetrical than ever. Can it be that asymmetries become more pronounced with age? Fabian is leaning up against the car, waiting for me. He's wearing jeans and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and he gives a brief

and somewhat self-conscious foot-stomping performance before opening the door for me. I pretend not to look at him as he drives. He smells as if he just bathed and the hair on his nape is still wet. I'd like to sit sideways and look at him unabashedly. I bite my lips because I feel I'm about to lick them. In an unfortunate association, Romulo and Remo's she-wolf comes to mind. I cross my legs and my arms.

"Isn't it a little late for that?" says the German in my head.

We arrive early. We take our seats and he slumps down a bit into his and reads the program.

"Sandra was green with envy," he says.

"Poor thing," I say. "If I'd only known."

What a lie. I don't even finish the sentence. Fabian looks over at me and I could swear he has this conceited expression on his face.

Later, when the lights dim and we ready ourselves for the show, I feel his arm against the length of mine. Music erupts and a red wave of dancers floods the stage, stomping their feet with their arms raised high. Voices are raised and lowered and the dancers face each other, provoke one another, hate the other. Fabian doesn't take his eyes off them. In the half-light, his eyes shine and from time to time he moves his head to the rhythm and his hands dance without his realizing it. I want to straddle him.

Afterwards, we search for the car in the parking garage, dancing among the columns. We dance the entire length of the second sublevel and back again. I'm stomping like mad. When we make it to the car, I think for a moment that he is going to take me in his arms, but he just opens the door for me, and as I climb inside, I just barely feel his warm hand brush my bare arm.

At the restaurant, I order wine. Fabian says he's not used to drinking and sits there looking at me as I down a glass in a single shot.

"Bottoms up," I say, thinking that I'm going to get drunk and then stop mentally wandering all over his body and release the she-wolf prowling inside me.

We talk about Gades. Then comes silence. He asks me about my life and I realize that we barely know anything about each other. My life seems very long to me. I don't want to talk about my childhood or my school or my exes. I can't think of anything to talk about at all.

Drink. Drink a man under the table. An English expression that means to drink with a man until he ends up under the table. It's not in the dictionary. Taken literally in Spanish, it means to drink a man up from under a table. I imagine us down there, and me drinking him up, drinking Fabian up in big gulps. I order another bottle. He protests, and his speech slurs slightly. Everything seems to spin around. The conversation, the food, my desire to touch his face, so persistent. Have I become obsessed with his face? I look at him with an intensity that must be making him uncomfortable. I can see that, but I can't take

my eyes off him. I don't know what we are talking about. I'm making a huge effort to keep from touching his face, and at the same time I know that's what I've set out to do, that I'm going to invite him up to my place and that I don't know what will happen because my imagination is running wild, but he isn't doing anything. I can't read his body language and I also can't really hear what he is saying when he sprouts a second head and I can't tell if he is smiling at me or if I just saw his pointy tongue part his lips. He insists on paying. He takes out a wad of ten peso bills from his back pocket, counts them, blushes slightly, and says he added it up wrong, his head's no good. His heads, I think, and I'm suddenly laughing all by myself. He looks at me, puzzled.

At the entrance to my building, I invite him up to my apartment.

"Do you want to come up for a nightcap?" I ask, and I almost burst out laughing again. "A nightcap." Who would say such a ridiculous thing at a time like this.

"Do you want to come up and see if we stop beating around the bush and have sex already?" I don't say.

"Pervert," the German calls me. "Perrrvert."

Fabian holds the door open for me and follows me in without touching me.

I impeccably play the part of the sober one in charge of the situation. We are sitting on the floor. My back is leaning up against the edge of my bed. He's leaning up against my closet door. Our legs form an L. He just asked me for a whisky. He doesn't think mixing drinks will mess him up. I serve him one.

"What messes you up is the amount," he says, and throws his hands open in a helpless gesture.

I open another bottle of wine for myself. My body feels flush all over, my feet are heavy and my head is light. My eyes and skin are burning. I want to be nude before him, very close to him, with my legs spread. I'm going to kneel before him and kiss his eyes, the bridge of his nose, his cheeks, and I'm going to sniff him as if he were my pup and kiss him on the mouth until I'm drenched, and avenge all the wounds he inflicted on me. I'm going to run my fingers through his hair and make him rove all over my body, smell me, touch every inch of my bare flesh. He will return my body to me, piece by piece, until I feel whole again. He stirs his whisky with a finger and takes a sip.

"I'd die to travel like that," he says, slurring his words. He drags out his vowels as if vowels were more comfortable for him than consonants.

"Like how?" I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Like a backpacker."

I hear myself say that those adventures are worthless.

"I had that same dream," my voice is telling him. I have no desire to speak about what happened twenty years ago and no desire to speak about anything else.

He stares at me blankly. I'm going to stand up and undress. That's what I'm going to do. In the candlelight, the color of his eyes seems darker.

"Please," I'd beg him.

But I look at him and see two blurry Fabians. I stretch out my legs and my ankle ends up against his shoe. The rough sole against my skin. If he took off his shoes, he could caress me with his feet, he could mold the sole of his foot around my ankle and maybe then kneel where my feet are and begin to touch me. My four feet. My two feet. With great effort, I join the two Fabian's into one.

He takes another sip of whisky. The glass hits his teeth. The images and sensations of a dream I had two nights ago come back to me. I was talking with Fabian when suddenly I felt a tooth come loose. I was certain that if I kept talking, I would spit it out. I pulled it out discretely and looked at it, white and small, hidden in the palm of my hand. I pressed my lips together to conceal the gap in my mouth. In the dream, Fabian kept talking to me and I became aware that more of my teeth had come loose. I touched them lightly with my tongue. One by one. All of them were loose. I discovered in horror that I was about to lose them all. I turned my back on Fabian without excusing myself and rushed out into a corridor between two columns, where I pulled them out one tooth at a time. All of them. They came out easily, with a slight sound, a soft snap, a light sensation in my gums. I looked at the teeth in the palm of my hand. My teeth. I awoke and ran my tongue across them, confirming with relief that they were still there, that I wasn't feeling soft, empty gums. I feel the angst of that dream once again.

I stand up. Fabian looks up at me. His expression is earnest. I think to myself that, before it's too late, I'm going to unzip my skirt and let it fall to the floor.

"Well, I'm going to go," he says.

"Where?"

"I'm going to start in Spain."

He says Spain and turns deathly pale and looks at me with his dark eyes wide open, and in a single, quick movement, he bends over and vomits, a warm, yellow vomit that spreads to my feet. Instinctively, I step back.

He doesn't look at me. I see him crouched at my feet and I feel he is very far away. If I stretch out my hand I won't be able to touch him. It lasts only for a moment. Then I say it doesn't matter. My voice just aged twenty years.

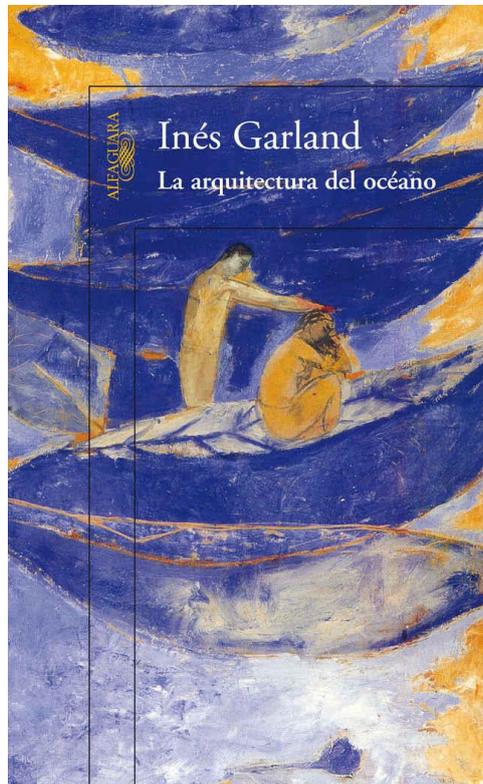
I get a bucket and a rag and clean it all up.

"What a mess," he says. He tries to take the rag from me. Not looking at me. He is very pale and a tuft of hair is stuck to his forehead. "I'm such an ass."

Now I do touch his face. I feel his cold sweat on the tips of my fingers. I brush his hair back.

"It doesn't matter at all," I say again. I'm not lying.

When he leaves, I lie down in bed with my arms and legs spread out. There's a bitter smell. In the building across the street there's a party going on and people are out on the balcony. A girl with her back to me is hugging a boy. They kiss. They must think they can't live without each other.



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Inés Garland is a writer from the City of Buenos Aires. Her published novels include El rey de los centauros (2006), Piedra, papel o tijera (2009), which received the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (German Youth Literature Prize), El jefe de la manada (2014) and Los ojos de la noche (2016). She has also published the short story collections Una reina perfecta (2008) and La arquitectura del océano (2014). Additionally, her stories have appeared in various anthologies. Garland is also a translator and has written scripts for art documentaries in the past.

In this Spanish-language interview with the public television program Los 7 locos, Garland discusses her literary work, particularly La arquitectura del océano.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2uXInP_3zM

Lastly, I leave readers with this clip of an Antonio Gades performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L18b3UQQ49I>