

A ROUGH OUTLINE OF TEMPERAMENT
(“Un boceto del natural”)

I

During the season of baths, I happened to find myself at a seaport. Thanks to my long acquaintance with a family who, though living in Madrid, liked to spend summers at the sea, I was able to establish a relationship with some people I met there.

After having suffered from a rather unfortunate love affair, I took advantage of the opportunity during that time to become friends with several women I happened to meet. Following my plan to cultivate a more successful relationship, among the women with whom I spent some time were two who were quite beautiful and very modest, in spite of the fact that one of them was somewhat capricious, and the other was sometimes rather sentimental.

This difference of temperament was, for me, one of their greatest attractions; so when I felt in the mood to laugh, I spent time listening to the bizarre things that were said by Luisa, which was the name of the more spirited one, and then, when I was in a melancholy mood and unable to avoid it, I spent time chatting with Elena, as the other was called, about some vague forebodings, some mysterious sorrows, some nameless desires, and other kinds of ordinary sentimentalism.

So, joking and laughing with the former, whispering quietly with the latter, or speaking indifferently with both of them about music, books, fashions, and other every-day things, we spent a great deal of time together, sometimes at their house, while we were walking through different parts of the town, or while we were on our way to the baths, where I accompanied them almost every afternoon.

One afternoon when, as usual, I went to go with them to the baths, I found the house in a state of confusion; the servants were anxious, a night bag was here and a suitcase was there; everything, in short, looked like a journey was imminent.

“What’s going on?” I asked Luisa, who was the first to come out to meet me; “are you getting ready to go somewhere?”

“No, certainly not” she answered; “it’s only that my cousin Julia has just arrived and is coming to spend some time with us.”

“Well then, it looks like we will have a new companion for our gatherings and our excursions.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Luisa agreed, “we will certainly have a new companion, however, a rather strange one.”

When she said this, she accompanied her words with a certain mischievous smile.

“But... come on in,” she hurried to say, as she noticed I was still standing uncertainly on the threshold with my hat in my hand. “Go on into the parlor, because even though we won’t go out this afternoon, we can chat for a while, and you can get to know Julia, who is in the dressing room with Elena and will come out as soon as she is dressed.”

Saying this, she made a sign to the servant to take my hat and, as she led me into the parlor, she made a graceful curtsy, saying politely:

“Now you must excuse me if I leave you by yourself for a moment, because I also have to get myself dressed up a little.”

“That was a puzzling remark,” I said to myself, when Luisa had disappeared. “What does she mean when she says she is strange? Strange in appearance, or in her character? Yes, I certainly want to meet her. Strange! Because none of the women I know could really be thought of as strange. Is she ugly? Is she stupid? None of those things are unusual but, unfortunately, quite common. Lord! What type of character could she have that makes her so different from other women?”

And, engrossed in these thoughts, I leafed absentmindedly through an album belonging to Elena that I found on the table. In that album, among a group of pathetic figures and banal poems, I saw several pages on which some of Elena’s school friends, as if to leave her a remembrance, had written their name at the end of a crude poem, under which there were several lines of awkward prose in which they extolled their friendship and the beauty of the album’s owner, or else they repeated one of those poetic ideas that romantic young women always have in their minds. I was about to put down the album, when I turned one of the pages and happened to notice a few scribbles made so carelessly that, only when you studied them carefully could you see they were actually letters, and that they spelled the name of a woman.

In fact, on that page Elena’s cousin, her brevity contrasting with the chorus of crude remarks made by her other friends, had written only the name, *Julia*; no poetry, no prose, and no fancy signature; just *Julia*, and that, looking as though she had written it without looking at it, and without any adornment except for a few ink spots that one might leave on the paper when writing carelessly, as well as too quickly. I have read somewhere that there are certain things one can learn about the character of a person by seeing the way they write. Even though there are experts who have difficulty doing that, in sciences like phrenology or physiognomy, there is still no doubt that we have some sort of instinctive feeling, so that when we see a signature it gives us a vague impression of the character of the person to whom it belongs. In spite of the that, I know there are people who write like that because they are nervous, and those who do not, because they are sluggish; even though I know those who are melancholy write one way and those who are happy write differently, all of my calligraphic-moral expertise was based on the analysis of that name, which had five letters: the first was narrow and dangling, another was larger and rounded, while the last one had hardly any form, or was indicated more by the intention, than by the features.

At first glance one might think the person who put her name on that sheet of paper did not know how to write. But to stop at that point of induction would be only to touch the surface of this mystery. I had become caught in the land of suppositions, and in these unequal flourishes I thought I saw an obvious sign that Julia didn’t write very often, and that when she did, she didn’t do it routinely, but with the same amount of order, of slowness or of quickness, with which she spoke; when she writes, there must be a close relationship between her hands, her features, and her intelligence. After all the silliness and nonsense in the rest of Elena’s album, when I saw that large white sheet with only five letters written so carelessly, I could imagine that there was some form of superior intelligence, Byron or Balzac for instance, in the style of an impertinent woman who, not being able to avoid the obligation, had scribbled only her name with disdain.

“There is no doubt,” I thought, as I tossed the album back on the table where I found it; “if I go on trying to resolve this enigma, I will end up creating another one of those crazy fantasies which I often get caught up in... Fortunately, the reality is near.”

As I thought this, I stood up to greet my friends whose elegant silk dresses could be heard rustling in the hallway, as they approached the parlor where I waited.

II

Luisa and Elena walked into the room, accompanied by their cousin. I stared at the new visitor with an intensity which was probably rather rude but, hopefully, might be excused by my eagerness to see her, even though I had not met her.

Julia was tall and slender, with light skin and dark brown hair. She had pronounced cheekbones, a refined aquiline nose, thin red lips, black eyebrows that almost joined each other, a slightly raised forehead, and thick, curly hair. I have known other women who looked like that, but I have to say that I have never seen anyone with eyes like hers. They were dark, but so large, so remarkably open, so focused, so surrounded by mysterious shadows, so full of strange clarity, that looking straight into them made me experience a sort of hallucination, and I was forced to lower my eyes.

But even though I did that, it seemed like those two eyes, so bright and so large, became detached from her face and continued floating before me, like the brilliant shards of light that remain in your eyes when you look too long at the sun.

When I had recovered from my momentary stupor, I shook hands with Elena, and I greeted Julia, whose face was brightened by a smile, as she nodded her head in response to my greeting.

After seeing her, my first thought was to search for something gallant to say that would be appropriate for the arrival of our new companion; but as I looked at her face for the second time, I saw that the smile which lit her face for a moment had disappeared, and I found myself looking at an impassive face, with the same large eyes that seemed so huge one had the impression that they almost covered her entire face.

The words I had been about to say now seemed inappropriate, so I closed my mouth and said nothing. I immediately stopped looking at her eyes, and instead, I examined one of the jewels in her watch chain, even though I hadn't the slightest interest in it.

I had intended to observe that woman and ascertain her intelligence through her words, to study her as an unusual phenomenon, in short, to analyze her feelings, certain that my analysis would be accurate. But she must have decided to do the same with me, and her attitude seemed to indicate that she was waiting to hear me, in order to judge me.

The thought that this woman might form a negative opinion of me began to worry me. The first thing that occurred to me was to find some way to escape gracefully, but then I thought that when you think too much beforehand about what you are going to say or do, you stand a good chance of saying or doing something clumsy or rude.

Fortunately Luisa was there, and once Luisa starts talking she doesn't stop. She asks questions which she answers herself, and she is capable of continuing to speak endlessly, always thinking of something new to talk about.

So it was Luisa who broke the embarrassing silence, asking me to sit down, and to treat her cousin in the same way that I had always treated her and her sister. We sat down; Luisa, next to the balcony which looks out over the garden; Elena, next to the piano, where she began to spread her fingers absentmindedly over the keys; and Julia, almost in the rear of the room.

I got up out of the straight-backed chair where I had been sitting and searched around for an easy-chair. I don't know how to explain this foolishness but, for the first time in my life, I had the feeling that sitting in a narrow, straight-backed chair would somehow make me appear grotesque.

Then, once we were all seated, we began to talk about different things. As usual, Luisa began the conversation and kept it going. Elena spoke once in a while, and I had only a few words to say. As for Julia, we never got anything out of her, except for one or two monosyllables. I confess, frankly, that this disdainful silence bothered me more than I could say.

The presence of Julia was becoming an obstacle to the usual friendly relations between us. I felt less accepted, in a house where I had always felt at home; Elena seemed to be worried about my obvious withdrawal, and Luisa, tired of speaking when no one else was responding, finally got up and went to the Venetian blinds on the balcony and began to entertain herself by untangling the strands of a climbing vine that had spread through the slats, after growing all the way up from the garden below.

The sun had already set; in the garden one could hear the chatter of birds that is typical of an evening in the summer; the breeze from the sea was slowly rocking the tops of the trees, carrying the pleasant aroma of acacias and, coming through the open windows of the balcony, it entered the parlor and filled it with fragrance and freshness.

The shadows of twilight began to cover all the objects, blurring their lines and erasing their colors; in the soft shadows in the back of the room, the two eyes of Julia glowed like two motionless, bright stars. I tried not to look at her, because I wanted to show her the same disdain. In spite of that, my eyes continued to glance at hers. Then, finally, Elena broke the silence:

“What a beautiful afternoon!”

“Yes, very beautiful,” I agreed automatically without knowing what I was saying, in order to say something.

But when I said these words, I thought about the fact that, after keeping silent for so long, we were unable to find anything better to talk about than the weather. The weather! That old crutch which everyone uses when they don't know what else to say. When this idea struck me, I immediately looked at Julia once more.

I can't be sure, but it appeared to me that her lips were spreading imperceptibly, that she was laughing at our banality, and that this mental laughter was reflected in a strange way in the expression on her face.

Once I seemed to see this indication of her mute irony I realized that, no matter how I felt, I would have to respond to Elena, who had begun to tell me about the sweet songs of the birds, the purple clouds, the poetic vagueness of dusk, and a few other foolish things of that sort.

“Why don't you play something for us?” I exclaimed, turning to my sensitive friend, with the purpose of using this brusque interruption in order to escape from the dangerous reference to poetry she had just mentioned.

Elena opened the first songbook she happened to find, with the evident intention of playing whatever she came across.

“Now, all we need is for the devil to make her choose some ordinary zarzuela in order to put a crown on our banality,” I thought to myself, as I prepared to listen with as much interest as I could muster.

Luckily, the book was a collection of different selections, and Elena began to play a waltz by Beethoven, a waltz from a concerto which had a strange melody and an unusual rhythm, strange in its composition, and even stranger with its change of keys and its unusual use of chords. When Elena finished playing and the final note had vanished from our hearing, Luisa, who was still on the balcony removing the vines from the Venetian blinds, turned to her sister and said:

“You can say whatever you like and think that I am ignorant and have bad taste, but I have to tell you, frankly, that I don’t know what merit there is in these German tunes they say are waltzes, which, for the life of me, I don’t see how anyone could dance to.

When I heard what Luisa said, I couldn’t help but smile, and before Elena could try to explain to us what she thought about the beauty of that particular type of music, I turned to Julia and asked her abruptly:

“So what about you... did you like that waltz?”

It was no longer going to be possible for her to avoid giving a direct response and to express her opinion about this delicate subject. “Give me a place to stand on, and I will move the earth,” Archimedes said. “Tell me one fact about the character of that woman, and I will ascertain the rest,” I thought, as I congratulated myself for having finally found the way to make her reveal something about herself.

Julia smiled again, with the same small smile had that worried me a few moments ago, and said only:

“I know very little about music.”

III

The failure of my strategy to produce the result I hoped for left me in such a bad mood that, under the pretext that my recent arrival had left me feeling tired and I needed to rest, I cut short my visit and marched out into the street.

I had to breathe some fresh air, to coordinate my ideas, and to take some time to think about what was happening to me. When I said goodbye to Luisa, she told me I should not fail to join them the next morning for a walk along the beach. Although she didn’t say whether or not Julia would accompany them for their walk, I thought that she would most likely be tired after her journey and not want to get up that early, so that made me accept the invitation.

The tell the truth, I was afraid to come face to face with that woman again, unless I knew more about her character and her personal history, and I thought that no one could explain that better than Luisa, since it was she who had said she was unusual when she first announced her arrival.

That night I was unable to sleep, because my mind continued to be filled with all sorts of wild fantasies, and soon after the sky outside my balcony began to turn blue, I jumped out of bed and dressed quickly, after which I went into the street to wait until the time we had agreed on, so that I could breathe some fresh air, while many absurd ideas still were seething inside my head.

I don’t know how long I walked, wandering here and there like some somnambulist, talking to myself, and bumping into people I happened to meet; but when I arrived at my friend’s house, they were already dressed and had been waiting for over an hour.

“And what about your cousin, is she still sleeping?” I asked Elena.

“No, not now,” she answered. “Since we are going to leave later than we expected, she decided to get up and go with us.”

Just then, Julia came out of the house, and she looked like a totally different woman; nothing could be more bright and elegant than her simple, pink dress, nor more fresh and graceful than her straw hat from Italy, with its gold and white straps that were tied with a large knot under her chin. Like the day before, she looked rather pale, but her features were so delicate they almost seemed transparent in the daylight. Her immense eyes, whose pupils had been wide open during the shadows of twilight, were now half-closed, as if she were trying to protect them from the bright light of day. On her thin, red lips which, when I saw her before, there seemed to be an ironic expression, there was now a smile as open and innocent as that of children while they sleep because, as mothers say, they see little angels flying over their heads.

This unexpected transformation completely destroyed all the castles in the air which I had erected on the basis of her disdainful expression, her haughty silence, and the strange and unusual countenance of her face. I had expected to encounter the same emotionless and enigmatic woman of the previous day, and to see this new Julia, suddenly converted into a smiling young woman with charming features and spirited manners, instead of encouraging me, made me feel even more apprehensive and fearful.

It is clear that that woman had come into my life in order to confuse me and drive me to desperation.

We set off on our walk and headed for the beach; as we walked, we talked about trivial matters. My idea was to make Julia participate in the conversation, but to do it indirectly. In order to do this, I was careful not to say anything to her, so that my desire to hear her speak would not be obvious. But that ploy did not produce any results. Accidentally or deliberately, she never said a word, in spite of the fact that on several occasions I saw her lips move, as though she were about to speak, but changed her mind and said nothing.

Often when I have found myself in the presence of people who, because of a difference in character, education, or ambitions, were not likely to understand what I was thinking about, I was able to stop myself before saying something, and this sudden silence may have seemed disdainful. Could it be this woman believes her intelligence is so superior to ours that she thinks there is no one among us who could understand what she has to say? This thought, which occurred to me after all my plans were frustrated, damaged my self esteem so I could not help but feeling confused and humiliated. “There is no doubt,” I thought, “I am definitely at a disadvantage; Julia hears me speaking of trivial matters and silly things with her cousins who, after all, are just ordinary women, and from the heights of her superiority she thinks that I am either as frivolous as Luisa, or as sentimental as Elena. Oh, if I were only able to speak with her by myself; if I could only make her understand that here in my heart and in my head there is something that might not be particularly grand, but is certainly not vulgar or ordinary!”

At that point we arrived at the end of our walk where there was a small, white country house, situated on the top of a hill from which we could see a large part of the coast, and also the sea, which extended into the distance until it merged with the sky.

“Look,” Luisa said, when we had scarcely arrived, as she pointed toward the horizon. “Look at what beautiful marks the sun is making on the water! Why, it looks like the sea is filled with little flecks of gold that are dancing around.”

“How beautiful the sea is!” Elena agreed. “I can tell you, frankly, I could spend my entire life here in this country house, listening to the murmur of the waves, and breathing in this wind that seems to caress us as it passes.”

If fact, the spectacle that stretched out before our eyes was truly magnificent.

I looked out at the vast sea with its immense poetry, feeling like I was about to break into a hymn. Luckily, at the same moment my imagination was struck by the thought of Julia, and I seemed to see her smile with the same ironic expression that had bothered me so much on previous occasions, so I restrained myself and fixed my eyes on her to see if I could ascertain her reaction from the expression on her face.

She had removed her hat, and a strand of her hair that was unbound was floating in the breeze. Her face had undergone another transformation; her huge eyes were wide open once more, her pupils were dilated as they were when I first saw her, and she was looking around at the sunlit waves that covered the horizon like a blanket of gold, without settling on a single point.

A hymn to the sea!... Foolish me; I had thought for a moment that I could create one, but no. The real hymn, the word of poetry made flesh, was that beautiful woman, immobile and silent, whose sight never settled on one place, whose thoughts must not fit within any form, and whose vision enclosed the entire horizon, absorbing the light and reflecting it back. Until I saw them, one in front of the other, I hadn't realized the true majesty of those three immensities: the sea, the sky, and the fathomless eyes of Julia. Such gigantic images could only be captured by those eyes. “Oh!” I thought, as I looked at her, “if only I were God and was able to sense, inside her mind, the vibrations of her intelligence, which must be filled with such immensity, such light, and such harmony!”

.....

Julia continued to stand there, motionless and silent; I watched her intently until Elena walked over to her and, pulling her out of her reverie, asked her emphatically:

“So, what do you think of the sea?”

I thought she probably would not answer. That question, directed at a woman of her character, didn't really deserve any answer but silence. In fact, Julia seemed to doubt for a moment, but then she smiled again with the strange smile that was so typical of her, and she answered only:

“Yes, I think it's very pretty.”

The sea is pretty! Oh, what irony there was in that phrase! When I heard her say that, I realized how very frivolous she must have considered me, when she said to me earlier: “I understand very little about music.”

IV

After we returned from our walk, I waited for an occasion to find myself alone with Luisa. I don't know if I was really in love with Julia, but the truth is that the thought of her caused me great anxiety, and it was absolutely necessary that I find out more, because another day of this uncertainty was going to drive me completely mad.

When I saw Luisa by herself for a moment, I told her about what was happening to me, and I asked her to help me get out of the labyrinth of confusion I had become trapped in.

Luisa listened to me with attention, and when I had finished telling her about my crazy thoughts, she looked at me with a certain expression of mischief.

“Don’t you fall in love with that woman; don’t fall in love, because...”

“But why?” I interrupted.

“Because you would be very unhappy. Didn’t I tell you that she was a very strange woman?”

“Yes, you did,” I agreed, “and it is obvious that there is nothing ordinary about her. But what I want you to explain to me is why she seems to feel such disdain for us, and why she always keeps that mysterious silence.”

“For the simple reason that her mother, who is a very talented woman, has urged her not to speak in front of other people.”

“Her mother?” I exclaimed flabbergasted, without understanding a single word of that nonsense which Luisa had told me; “And why on earth would her mother have told her such a thing?”

Luisa hesitated for a moment, as if she were doubting what to say; then, looking out of the corner of her eye at Elena and Julia, to make sure that they would not be able to hear her, she said to me in a low voice:

“Because she is stupid.”