

**THE TREE**  
(El Arbol)

By Maria Luisa Bombal

*To a great artist, Nina Anguita, a wonderful friend  
who gave life and reality to my imaginary tree, I  
dedicate this story that, without realizing it, I wrote  
for her, even long before I knew her.*

The pianist sits down, coughs out of habit and thinks for moment. The streams of light that illuminate the hall begin to deepen into a dim splendor until the moment when a musical phrase rises into the silence and begins to expand, clear, direct, and joyfully capricious.

“Mozart, perhaps,” Brigida thinks. As usual, she has forgotten to ask for the program. “Mozart, or maybe Scarlatti...” She knew so little about music! And it wasn’t because she didn’t have an ear, or a fondness, for music. As a child, it was her who insisted on taking piano lessons; no one had to make her do it, like her sisters. Her sisters, however, now played very well and were able to read music easily, while she... She had stopped taking lessons less than a year after she started. The reason for her inconsistency was as simple as it was shameful: she had never been able to learn the key of F. “I don’t understand, I don’t remember anything more than the key of G!” The indignation of her father! “I could have given the task of teaching several daughters of an unfortunate widower to anyone. Poor Carmen! She must have suffered a lot with Brigida. That creature is retarded”

Brigida was the youngest of six daughters, all with different characters. When the father finally came to his sixth daughter, he was already so perplexed and exhausted by the first five that he preferred to simplify things by saying she was retarded. “I am not going to struggle any more, it’s useless. Just ignore her. If she doesn’t want to study, okay. If she wants to spend her time in the kitchen listening to fairy tales, that’s her problem. If she wants to play with dolls at age sixteen, so what.” And Brigida kept her dolls, and remained totally ignorant.

How nice it is to be ignorant! Not to know exactly who Mozart was, Not know his background, his influence, and the special features of his technique! Just to let herself be led by his hand, like now.

And Mozart leads her, in fact. He leads her across a bridge suspended over crystalline water that flows through a bed of pink sand. She is dressed in white, with a parasol as broad and smooth as a spider web opened over her shoulder.

“You look younger every day, Brigida. Yesterday I saw your husband, your ex husband I mean. His hair is completely white now.

But she doesn’t answer, nor does she stop, and she continues crossing the bridge that Mozart has extended for her toward the garden of her younger days.

There she saw tall fountains where the water sings. Her eighteen-year-old body, her chestnut tresses that drop to her ankles when they are untied, her golden complexion, her dark eyes, wide open and questioning. A small mouth with full lips, a sweet smile, and

the most lively and graceful body in the world. What was she thinking about, sitting on the edge of the fountain? Nothing. "She is as foolish as she is pretty" they said. But she didn't worry about being foolish or "being awkward" at dances. One by one they asked her sisters to marry, but no one asked her.

Mozart! Now he offers her a blue marble staircase where she descends between a double row of frozen daylilies. And now she opens a gate of bars with golden tips so she can throw herself at the neck of Luis, an intimate friend of her father. Since she was a child she would go to Luis, when the others neglected her. He picked her up and she wrapped her arms around his neck with little giggles and planted kisses on his eyes, his forehead, and his hair that was already grey (wasn't he ever young?) like a disorderly rainstorm. "You are a necklace," Luis said. "You are like a necklace of birds."

That's why she married him. Because, when she was with that solemn, taciturn man she didn't feel responsible for being the way she was: foolish, playful, and lazy. Yes, now that years have passed she knows she hadn't married Luis for love; nevertheless, she still doesn't understand why, why one day she left him, suddenly...

But then Mozart takes her nervously by the hand and, dragging her along with a rhythm that gets faster and faster, making her cross the garden in the opposite direction, going back over the bridge in a race that is almost an escape. And after having stripped her of her parasol, and her transparent skirt, Mozart closes the door to her past with a chord that was sweet and firm at the same time. And that leaves her in the concert hall, dressed in black, clapping mechanically while the light of the street lamps grows brighter.

Once again the half-light, and a moment of silence. And now Beethoven starts to stir up the warm sound of his notes, under a springtime moon. How far away the sea has gone! Brigida advances through the beach toward the sea spread out in the distance, refulgent and gentle, but then the sea rises up and calmly grows larger and, coming closer to her, covers her with soft waves that start pushing her, pushing her from behind until she feels her cheek pressing on the body of a man. And then it moves away leaving her, forgotten, on the chest of Luis.

"You have no heart, you have no heart," she used to tell Luis. It was beating so far inside her husband that she could only hear it unexpectedly, on rare occasions. "You are never really close to me when you're by my side," she protested in their bedroom when, before going to sleep, he always looked at the afternoon newspapers. "Why did you ever marry me?"

"Because you have the eyes of a frightened little deer," he answered, and kissed her. And she, suddenly happy, gladly accepted the weight of his grey haired head over her shoulder. Oh, the bright, silvery hairs of Luis!

"Luis, you haven't ever told me exactly what color your hair was when you were a child, and you also haven't told me what your mother said when your hair turned grey when you were only fifteen years old. What did she say? Did she laugh? Did she cry? And were you proud, or were you ashamed? And your friends in school, what did they say? Tell me, Luis, tell me..."

"I'll tell you tomorrow. I'm sleepy, Brigida, I'm very tired. And turn off the light."

He unconsciously moved away from her to go to sleep, and during the entire night she unconsciously leaned on her husband's shoulder, searching for his breath, trying to live

under his breath like an forgotten, thirsty plant that spreads its branches in search of a more propitious climate.

In the morning, when the housemaid opened the curtains, Luis was no longer by her side. He had gotten up stealthily, without telling her good morning, fearing that his “necklace of birds” would capture his shoulders again. “Five minutes, just five minutes. Your office won’t disappear just because you spend five more minutes with me, Luis.”

Her awakenings. Oh, her sad awakenings! However, it was strange that as soon as she went to her dressing room, her sadness dissipated, as if with an enchantment.

A wave surges, it moves very far away, rustling like an ocean of leaves. Is that Beethoven? No.

It is the tree rubbing against the window of the dressing room. It was enough for her to enter the room for her to feel a great surge of wellbeing pass through her. How hot it always was in the morning in her bedroom! And the harsh light! Here in her dressing room, though, even the light was restful and refreshing. The pale chintz curtains, the tree that spread shadows like cold, roiling water on the walls, the mirrors that reflected the leaves and spread out into an immense green forest. How nice it was to be in this room! It was like a world sunken into an aquarium. How this giant rubber tree chatters! All the birds in the neighborhood come to live in it. It is the only tree on that narrow, sloping street that goes all the way down to the river from the edge of the city.

“I am busy, I can’t go with you... I’ve got too much to do, I won’t be able to go to lunch... Hello, yes, I’m at the club with a commitment. Go eat and take a rest... No, I don’t know. It would be best if you didn’t wait for me, Brigida.”

“If she only had a few friends,” she sighed. But everyone seemed to be bored with her. If she tried to be a little less stupid! But how to cover so much ground in such a short time? In order to be intelligent, one has to start when you’re a child, isn’t that right?

Her sister’s husbands take to them to interesting places, but Luis, “why not admit it?” was ashamed of her, of her ignorance, of her timidity, and even the fact that she was only eighteen years old. Hadn’t he asked her once to say that she was twenty-one, as if her youthfulness was an unpleasant secret of theirs?

And at night, how tired he always was! He never really listened to her. He smiled, yes, but she knew that his smile was mechanical. He showered her with caresses from which he was absent. Why had he married her? To continue a custom, or perhaps to strengthen his old friendly relationship with her father.

Maybe for men life was a continuous series of accepted customs. If one happened to be broken, it must cause confusion and chaos. And then men started to wander through the streets of the city, to sit on a bench in the plaza, dressed more poorly every day, and with their beard even longer. Luis’s life, therefore, consisted filling every minute of the day with his job. How had she not realized that before? Her father was right in saying she was retarded.

“I would like to see it snow sometime, Luis”

“This summer I’ll take you to Europe and, since it will be winter there, you’ll be able to see it snow.”

“I know it’s winter there when it is summer here. I’m not that ignorant!”

Sometimes, to wake him out of his rapture into real love, she would throw herself over her husband and cover him with kisses, crying and calling him:

“Luis, Luis, Luis...”

“What? What’s going on? What do you want?”

“Nothing.”

“Why did you call me like that, then?”

“No reason, I just wanted to call you. I like to say your name.”

And he smiled, accepting that new game with benevolence.

Then summer came, the first summer after they were married. New duties kept him busy and prevented him from keeping his promise of a trip to Europe.

“Brigida, the heat is going to be awful this summer in Buenos Aires. Why don’t you go to the farm with your father?”

“By myself?”

“I would go to see you every week, from Saturday to Monday.”

She had sat down on the bed, feeling like insulting him. But she searched in vain for words to shout at him. She knew nothing, nothing at all. Not even how to insult.

“What’s wrong? What are you thinking about, Brigida?”

For the first time, Luis came back after he left and leaned over her with concern, letting the time pass when he was supposed to arrive at his office.

“I’m just tired...” Brigida had answered childishly, hiding her face in the pillows.

For the first time he had also called her from the club during lunchtime. But she had refused to answer the phone, furiously brandishing the new weapon she had found: silence.

That same night she had eaten supper in front of her husband without raising her eyes to look at him, with all of her nerves tensed.

“Are you still angry, Brigida?”

But she didn’t break her silence.

“You know very well that I love you, my necklace of birds. But I can’t be with you all the time. I’m a very busy man. By the time you reach my age, you have become the slave of a thousand different obligations.”

Silence.

“Do you want to go out tonight?”

Silence.

“You don’t want to? All right then. Tell me, did Roberto call from Montevideo?”

Silence.

“What a pretty dress! Is it new?”

Silence.

“Is it new, Brigida? Answer, answer me...”

But she still didn’t break her silence.

Then right away, unexpectedly, astonishingly, absurdly, Luis rose out of his chair and, violently throwing his napkin on the table, he left the house, slamming the door.

She rose up with astonishment, trembling with indignation after such injustice. “And I, and I,” she stammered disoriented, “I, who for almost a year... when, for the first time I let myself make a complaint... Well, I’m leaving, I’m leaving this very night! And I’ll never set foot in this house again...” And she opened the closets in her dressing room with fury and frantically threw her clothes on the floor.

It was then when someone, or something knocked on the window.

After that, without knowing why, or what made her do it, she ran toward the window. And she opened it. It was the tree, the rubber tree that a large gust of wind was rocking so its branches rubbed against the window, that was summoning her from outside so she would see it twist itself into an impetuous black flare under a sky that was full of stars on that summer night.

It wasn't long before a heavy downpour began to fall on its leaves. What a delight! All night long she was able to hear the rain pouring on the rubber tree and flowing off the leaves like a cataract. All night long she heard the trunk of the old tree creak and moan, telling about the bad weather, while she was curled up under the sheets of the large bed, next to Luis.

Handfuls of pearls that pour in streams, falling on a roof of silver. Chopin, *Nocturnes* of Federico Chopin.

How many times had she awakened early to find that her husband, now also stubbornly silent, had silently slipped out of bed?

The dressing room: the window wide open, the smell of the river and the pasture floating through that beneficent room, and the mirrors blurred by a halo of mist.

Chopin and the rain that falls on the leaves of the rubber tree, sounding like the noise of a secret waterfall that even seems to drench the roses on the curtains, and mingles with her turbulent nostalgia.

What to do in the summer when it rains so often? Stay in her room all day, pretending she was recovering from depression? Luis had quietly come in one afternoon. He had sat down next to her, looking tense. There was a moment of silence.

"Brigida, is it true that you no longer love me?"

She had foolishly cheered up for a moment. She could have shouted, "No, no, I love you Luis, I love you," if only he had waited, if he had not seemed so pleased by her unusual calmness.

"Whatever it is, I don't think we ought to separate, Brigida. We need to take plenty of time to think about it.

Her the feelings shut down just as quickly as they had appeared. Why get excited uselessly. Luis loved her with tenderness and care; if sometime he ever came to hate her, it would be justified. And that was how life is. She went over to the window and pressed her forehead against the cold glass. There the tree was peacefully receiving the rain that fell on it calmly and regularly. The room became immobilized in the systematic and silent darkness. Everything seemed to stop, permanently and quietly. That's how life is. And there was a certain grandness in accepting it that way, mediocre, like something definite and unchangeable. Meanwhile, a melody of serious and dignified words seemed to rise from the depths of things, and she remained there listening: "Always." "Never..."

And thus time passes by, the hours, the days, and the years. Always! Never! That was how life is, that was life!

Once she recovered, she realized her husband had slipped out of the room.

Always! Never!... And the rain, secret and tranquil, still kept on humming notes of Chopin.

Summer stripped the sheets off its burning calendar. Luminous and blinding pages fell off like golden swords, as well as pages of unhealthy humidity like the breath of swamps;

also falling were the furious pages of a brief storm, as well as pages of a hot wind, a wind that brings the “flower of the air” and hangs it on the immense rubber tree.

Some children were playing hide-and-seek between the enormous convulsed roots that rose up so high they lifted the paving stones, so the tree was filled with laughter and whispering. Then she leaned out of the window and clapped her hands; the children scattered away fearfully, without noticing the smile of the girl who would have also liked to participate in their game.

She stayed by herself for a long time, looking out the window, watching the branches rock—on that street that sloped down to the river there was always some wind—and it was like sinking her eyes into moving water, or in the restless smoke from a chimney. One would be able to spend hours, drained of all thoughts, feeling the enchantment of that well-being.

The room had scarcely begun to be filled with the dim light of dusk when she lit the first lamp, and the first lamp was reflected in the mirrors so that it was multiplied like a firefly that wanted to hasten the arrival of night.

Every night she slept next to Luis, suffering by fits and starts. But when her pain increased until it struck her like a stab wound, or when she was seized by a desire to wake Luis and slap him, or caress him, she would slip out of the room on tiptoes to her dressing room, and open the window. Right away the room was filled with discreet sounds and discreet presences, with mysterious footsteps, with delicate fluttering, with the rustling of foliage, and with the gentle chirp of a cricket that was hidden beneath the bark of the rubber tree that was immersed in the stars on that warm summer night.

Her fever dissipated as her bare feet cooled, little by little, on the floor mat. She didn't know why it was so easy to suffer back there in that room.

The melancholy of Chopin was spilling out in one movement after another, and also in one melancholy after another, unfazed.

And autumn came. The dry leaves fell off and floated around before falling over the grass of the small garden, or over the pavement of the sloping street. The leaves broke off and fell... The top of the tree was still green, but further down the tree was turning red, and then darkening like the worn lining of a sumptuous dancing cape. And now the room seemed to be sunken into a sad golden cup.

Lying on the couch, she was waiting patiently for supper time and the unlikely arrival of Luis. He had started speaking to her again, and she had resumed being his wife again, without enthusiasm, and without anger. She no longer loved him, but she no longer suffered. On the contrary, an unexpected feeling of plenitude and tranquility had taken possession of her. Now, no one or nothing could hurt her. Perhaps true happiness lies in the conviction that that one has irremediably lost all possibility of happiness. Then we begin to live a life without hope or fears, finally able to enjoy all the small pleasures that are the most enduring.

There was a tremendous noise and a white flash that knocked her back, trembling. Is it the intermission? No, it's the rubber tree, she knows it must have been.

They had brought it down with a single blow of an axe. She had not heard the sound of the work that had begun early that morning. “The roots had been lifting up the paving stones of the street, so naturally, the neighborhood commission...”

Dazed, she has placed her hands over her eyes. When she recovers her vision, she sits up and looks around. What does she look at?

The concert hall suddenly lighted up, where the people are leaving?

No, she has been trapped in the roots of her past and can't leave her dressing room. Her dressing room now invaded by a terrifying white light. It was as if they had torn off the ceiling of her room and a harsh light came in from all sides, leaking into her pores, burning her with coldness. And she saw everything in the light of this cold light. Luis, with his wrinkled face, his hands that are covered with thick discolored veins, the lurid colors of the chintz curtains.

Terrified, she rushes to the window. The window now looks out over a narrow street, so narrow that her room almost touches the façade of a dazzling skyscraper. On its ground floor, windows, and more windows filled with bottles. On the corner of the street a string of cars are lined up in front of a service station that has been painted red. Some boys in shirt sleeves are bouncing a ball in the middle of the pavement.

And all that ugliness had entered into her mirrors. In her mirrors there were now nickel-plated balconies, clotheslines with hanging rags, and cages with canaries.

They had destroyed her intimacy, her secret; she found herself naked in the middle of the street, naked next to an old husband who turns his back to go to sleep, who has never given her any children. She doesn't understand why, until now, she has never wanted to have children, or how she had come to accept the idea that she was going to live all her life without children. She doesn't understand how she could stand the laughter of Luis for a whole year, his laughter that was too jovial, that false laughter of a man who has trained himself to laugh, because on certain occasions it is necessary.

Lies! Her resignation and her calmness were lies. She wanted love, yes love, as well as trips, and doing crazy things, and love, especially love...

"But, Brigida, why are you leaving? Why did you stay here?" Luis had asked her.

Now she would have known how to answer him:

"The tree, Luis, the tree! They have cut down the rubber tree."

**The End**