

# THE SHE-DEVIL IN THE MIRROR

HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA

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TRANSLATED BY KATHERINE SILVER

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## CONTENTS

1. The Wake	1
2. The Burial	35
3. Novena	53
4. The Balcony	71
5. Thirty Days	93
6. The Terrace	113
7. The Crash	133
8. The Stampede	149
9. The Clinic	167

*To Tania Mata Parducci, Otoniel Martínez  
and Patricia Ardón, Lucrecia Ardón, Ana Tomico*

1

## The Wake

How could such a tragedy have happened, my dear? I just spent the whole morning with Olga María at her boutique in the Villas Españolas Mall, I went with her to check on a special order. It's unbelievable. I still can't believe it; it's like a nightmare. I don't know why they're taking so long to get her ready: it's already five thirty, and they still haven't brought her out. It's that magistrate, he took his sweet time. He's a disgrace. The poor thing, stretched out there on her living room floor, everybody and his brother coming and going through the house. How horrible. They let me know right away: Sergio, Olga María's brother, called my house and said something terrible had happened, Olga María had been "mortally wounded" during an attempted robbery. That's what he said: "mortally wounded". I couldn't believe it – I'd been with her just an hour and a half earlier. We left the boutique and walked to the parking lot together. She said she was going to pick the girls up at school and then she'd call me in the afternoon. No wonder Sergio's call caught me totally by surprise. I asked him which hospital they'd taken her to. He said she wasn't in a hospital, she was lying dead on her living room floor, and Marito had taken the girls to Doña Olga's. I was in shock. I couldn't even react. Then I said, "I'm on my way." I drove like a madwoman, like I was on drugs, my dear, I don't know how I managed to avoid an

accident. So many images of her raced through my mind, and the last words we'd exchanged that morning, about how happy she was that sales at the boutique were up and about how she was trying to patch up her relationship with Marito. And then something like this – it's so unfair. Anyway, their house is in Colonia La Sultana, and I live in Santa Tecla, so it took me only ten minutes to get there. The police were already there. I dashed out of my car, I wanted to prove to myself that it wasn't true, Olga María was still alive, and everything had been a terrible mistake. But there was her body, stretched out on the living room rug next to the sofa in a pool of blood, covered with a white sheet. I knelt down and lifted the edge of the sheet: the hole in her head was small, but all her brains had poured out the back. Oh, my dear, I felt horrible – I even felt like vomiting. But I was too upset to even cry. I covered her back up. Sergio placed his hands on my shoulders and told me he needed me to be with the girls, they'd killed her in cold blood right in front of them, they were still in shock when Marito came to get them. Imagine that: those murderers killed Olga María right in front of the girls. It's unforgivable. They're taking their sweet time, they should bring her out any minute, a lot of people are starting to arrive. We chose a black satin dress for her, very elegant. I want to see how it looks. Doña Olga had her doubts, but finally she followed my advice: it is her prettiest dress, it'll look best on her. Sergio insisted I go to their mother's to help her with the girls, because Marito had to get back to the house to deal with all the legalities, after all he is her

husband, the owner of the house, he's the one who's responsible for everything. Poor Marito, he's devastated. I didn't see him till later. We must have crossed paths, he on his way back to the house and me on my way to Doña Olga's. I was so eager to give the girls a hug, protect them, somehow make them forget what they'd seen. But halfway there, I broke down, it was horrible, my dear, I was choking and I couldn't breathe; I managed to pull off the road, then I started crying uncontrollably – my forehead on the steering wheel, I was crying for Olga María, for the girls, for Marito, for myself, because if I didn't get it off my chest it would only get worse later. When I got there a doctor was talking to the girls. Doña Olga seemed composed, strong, she wasn't even crying, though you could see in her body how tortured she was. She told me they'd just given the girls a sedative, they were very upset, the best thing for them now was to get some rest instead of going over and over what they'd seen, that's what the doctor recommended. I hugged them, trying to control myself: I didn't want them to see me falling apart. Little Olga just turned ten, she's so grown up, so pretty, just like her mother, the same expressions, intelligent like her, too; Raquelita looks more like Marito, and she's a bit withdrawn, maybe because she's the youngest. They've always called me Auntie, even though we're not related, Olga María taught them to call me that: Auntie Laura. We were best friends, had been ever since we started at the American School – imagine that, twenty-three years ago. Finally, they're bringing her out. Come on, come with me,

let's see how she looks. Look at those gorgeous flower arrangements: Marito's advertising agency sent them over. I told you that's her best dress – don't you think she looks gorgeous, they did a good job on her, you can barely even see the hole in her head. Life is a catastrophe. How could this have happened to her? You went to her last birthday party, remember? She was so happy to be turning thirty – she said the best part of life was just beginning, always so optimistic, so vivacious. Those sons of bitches, those cowards, they should all be killed. Doesn't her hair look great? It's just like she used to wear it for parties, Mercedes herself came from the beauty salon to do it. They're truly evil, all they wanted to do was kill her, they didn't steal anything, they didn't even try to. That's what little Olga told me this afternoon: he snuck up on them in the garage as they were getting out of the car, then forced them into the living room and there, without a word, he shot Olga María in the chest, then one to the head to finish her off. Disgraceful. Makes me so angry. More people are starting to arrive – let's go sit down. Look, here comes Marito. Sergio said he was going home to change clothes. Doña Olga and the girls will be here around seven, those poor dears, those girls have behaved so well, it's amazing how grown up they are. The one I'm worried about is Marito, he seems fragile, I don't know what he'd have done without Sergio. It's been a crazy afternoon. I spent about an hour at Doña Olga's, trying to distract the girls until the sedatives kicked in so they'd fall asleep. That's when little Olga told me about the murderer and how all he wanted

was to kill Olga María: she told him to take the car, whatever he wanted, just don't hurt them, especially not the girls; but he didn't want anything, he just wanted to kill her, like someone had sent him, like he'd been given explicit instructions. Something smells rotten, because Olga María couldn't have any enemies. That's exactly what I told those insolent policemen who came to Doña Olga's asking for the girls; they wanted to question them, they said, because they were the only ones who saw the killer, they urgently needed a description of the murderer so they could make a composite sketch – they kept insisting it was very important. But the doctor said the girls shouldn't be disturbed – I told them – and anyway they were already asleep, so they'd better put off their questioning till tomorrow. But they were pigheaded, especially the boss, the one who said his name was Deputy Chief Handal, what a pig of a man – that's why we're in the mess we're in: the police spend their time harassing defenceless little girls instead of catching criminals. That's what I told him. No reaction. He just repeated that the sooner they got a description of the suspect the easier it would be to organize a manhunt and capture him. But I wasn't going to let those rude men wake up the girls. I stood my ground and told them they would have to wait a couple of hours until the girls woke up, and if the girls ended up with some permanent psychological damage, I would hold them responsible – Handal and that other nasty man who said his name was Detective Villalta – and that wouldn't be the end of it because I'd sue them, and

I'm not just some nobody, they couldn't mess with me, they'd better be very careful and show more respect or they'd soon find out who they were dealing with. But little Olga hadn't fallen asleep yet, she was lying down and dozing – a bit dazed from the sedatives – and what with the ruckus those policemen were making, she woke her up. She got out of bed and appeared in the doorway and asked what was going on, maybe she got scared that the policemen were murderers, like the one who'd just killed Olga María. These two gentlemen, I explained to her, were policemen investigating her mother's death, and she should go back to bed because they were just about to leave. But this Deputy Chief Handal shoved his way in front of me and started interrogating little Olga – such a snake, they've got no respect for anybody, the pig – and they took advantage of little Olga's innocence to get her to tell them what she'd already told me: that the murderer didn't want anything, all he wanted was to kill Olga María. The deputy chief asked little Olga to repeat every detail of the story three times, and he kept asking her questions – what a degenerate – then he called in some creep with a moustache, who was supposed to make a sketch based on the girl's information. Little Olga said the murderer was tall and heavy-set, a big huge guy, clean-shaven, with very short hair, like a soldier's, and he was wearing blue jeans and white tennis shoes, like the kind astronauts wear, she said. The deputy chief asked her if she remembered any other details, anything out of the ordinary that would help them identify the suspect. Little

Olga said he walked like Robocop, that robot policeman on television. I warned the deputy chief to leave the girl alone, not to take advantage of her, who knows what damage it could do – she'd just taken a strong sedative. But that Handal creep kept at it: Was he alone? Did little Olga see the car he drove away in? Was she aware of anybody else in the street? Did the housekeeper show up before or after the crime had been committed? Oh no, not her, not our Julita, how could they possibly suspect her, I butted in, what a pig, Julita's practically raised Olga María, and now she's almost fifty, what are they thinking, she's worked for Doña Olga and Olga María her entire life, she's totally trustworthy, how could he be such an idiot. Doña Olga agreed. Little Olga explained that Julita came into the living room after the shots were fired, she was in the laundry room in the back of the house – she was the one who called Marito and Sergio and Doña Olga, and she was the one who ran to get help from the neighbours. You see those people coming in now: they work at Marito's agency – don't they look young? The tall one in the brown suit with curly hair and little round glasses, yes, the good-looking one, that's the new marketing director Marito just hired. Olga María told me about him; and she was right, he's very handsome. Anyway, as I was saying, once they finished with little Olga, this Deputy Chief Handal said he wanted to ask me a few questions, alone, seeing as how I'd known the victim so well, how I'd been her best friend, maybe I could help him, give him a few leads he could follow up on to find out what happened.

But I suspected he had something nasty up his sleeve, people like that – so crass, so degenerate, so dirty-minded – I’ve always known about policemen like him, that’s why I was on my guard, I didn’t want him to think he could catch me off guard. And it was just as I’d feared: the deputy chief asked me if I knew of any enemies Olga María or Marito might have, or maybe they had a big debt, or if there was an employee who’d threatened them after getting fired, or, with all due respect – those were his words, brazen man, “with all due respect” – if Olga María had had any extramarital relationships, maybe there was a disappointed lover, someone who might want to hurt her. That’s when I got furious: he was a total idiot, I shouted at him, a complete boor, whatever made him think I was going to talk about my best friend’s private life to some nobody like him, where could he possibly have gotten such an idea, how could he suspect such an honest honourable woman, someone so devoted to her family and her work, what a scandalous insinuation; Olga María didn’t have any enemies, nobody would ever dream of wanting to kill her, it had to have been a mistake or the act of a madman. I almost threw them out of the apartment, that’s how dreadful they were, like mangy dogs. That’s when Cuca, Sergio’s wife, arrived: she was crying her head off, asking if the girls were alright, if Doña Olga needed anything. Here come Cheli and Conchita, Olga María’s assistants at the boutique, you know them, don’t you? They look so *comme il faut*, they adored Olga María, they’ve been working for her ever since she first opened

the boutique, who knows what'll happen to them now. Marito will have to decide, or Doña Olga, whether to sell or not. As I was saying, Cuca arrived and we left her to look after the girls so Doña Olga and I could go to Olga María's house to make sure they fixed her up as best as possible. We took my car. Doña Olga had taken some strong sedatives – the poor woman is pretty old and unwell, and the doctor told her not to go to the scene of the crime, just the sight of it could do her great harm, she should wait till they took her to the funeral home. Sergio agreed and managed to convince her to wait. But when we got to Olga María's house, her body was still there. That's what I'm telling you: the magistrate is a stupid old drunk, he must have been out partying with his secretaries, I'm sure of it, that's why he took so long and why we couldn't prevent Doña Olga from seeing her daughter with her head blown to bits. But Marito and I took her by her arm and we led her into the master bedroom so she could help me choose the clothes to dress Olga María in, and the jewellery, and the right makeup, that's what I said, but Doña Olga, who's always so composed and pulled together, was falling apart, she was sobbing, which is understandable, her eldest daughter, her most beloved daughter, was lying there dead in the living room, and for no reason whatsoever. I opened the closet door so we could look through her clothes, I was trying to distract Doña Olga; that's when I picked out that black satin dress Olga María is wearing. I called Mercedes at the beauty salon to tell her what had happened and ask her to come

to the funeral home to do Olga María's hair as best she could, and I suggested Doña Olga take away her daughter's jewellery, just in case the policemen started rummaging through her things and decided to steal whatever they could get their hands on. The magistrate finally arrived just as we were leaving the bedroom. Marito asked me to take Doña Olga to the funeral home so she could be there when the body arrived and help get it ready. So that's what I did. Then I went home to change and make myself presentable once and for all because I'm going to stay here all night – Diana is arriving tomorrow morning, supposedly, that's Olga María's younger sister, the one who's been living in Miami for years, that's what she said, that she'd get on the first flight tomorrow, they're three hours ahead, so there's no way she could get here today. That one standing next to the coffin must be Memo, Marito's second in command, he just started working with him; Olga María didn't take to him very well, probably because he took Julio Iglesias's job – that's what we called the Spaniard who helped Marito start the agency. Now, he was a hunk, tall and gorgeous, though with a bit of a belly for my taste, but he drove Olga María crazy for a few months, that Julio Iglesias, she used to tell me she didn't know what to do, he was her husband's partner, her husband's friend, but she had the hots for him. It's not that she was unfaithful, on the contrary, that's why it was so hard for her, because that was the first time she'd been attracted in that way to another man since she'd gotten married to Marito, it was the first time she went further

than being her naturally flirtatious self, all Marito's fault, I can tell you, because this was when he'd all but abandoned Olga María. We never found out who was behind it – just look at him over there, all meek and mild-mannered, but Marito's a sneaky devil, I always suspected he had a few things on the side, and Olga María found out about at least two of his sluts. That was right around the time Marito decided to start his own agency, and he asked Julio Iglesias, from Madrid, also an expert in advertising, to be his partner; he'd just come to San Salvador as a consultant for the company Marito was working for. But I knew right off the bat: I'd seen that same gleam in Olga María's eyes when we were at the American School, when she started drooling over one of our classmates. Julio Iglesias began going over to their house for dinner, more and more frequently, and Olga María was getting hooked, little by little, because he liked her, too, who wouldn't, and what with talking about the business and sitting around the table after dinner, they started finding opportunities to say things to each other, seducing each other right under Marito's nose, because he was putting all his energy into starting his agency. There was no applying the brakes once Julio Iglesias showed up one afternoon at the boutique, casually, as if he just happened to be at the Villas Españolas Mall to do a little shopping and just happened to run into a friend – his partner's wife – at her boutique. Olga María was totally nonchalant so Cheli and Conchita wouldn't notice that she was melting for that man who invited her out for a cup of coffee, right there, in the mall, and once

they were sitting in the café he told her he couldn't stop thinking about her, he could no longer control his passion. And Olga María had to admit that she'd been thinking about him a lot, too, though she couldn't say she loved him, nor that she was in love with him, just that it was something weird, something new. Julio Iglesias had an apartment across the street from the Sheraton Hotel, near Villas Españolas; he suggested they meet there, that would be best, he didn't want to complicate things with Marito, his partner and friend. Olga María told him she'd give it some thought, it wasn't so simple, even though her relationship with Marito was on the rocks, she loved him, and there were the two girls, she didn't want to risk everything, throw away eleven years of her life. But Julio Iglesias kept at it: he called her at the boutique, came by every once in a while to invite her out for coffee (always making it seem proper, needless to say, even though Cheli and Conchita must have suspected something), and when he ate at the house he'd whisper sweet nothings in her ear. Until she couldn't resist any longer and she said she would, she'd come to his apartment, but they had to plan it very carefully, there were lots of obstacles, because he couldn't pick her up at the boutique and she couldn't drive to his apartment – what if Marito or one of his friends saw her car parked in front of Julio Iglesias's apartment, how would they explain that, huh? That's where I came in, Auntie Laura, who else: best friend, confidante, the only one who could make this whole thing happen. You can't imagine, my dear, how nervous Olga María was at noon

that day; the story was that I'd invited her out for lunch at a new vegetarian restaurant, so Marito should pick up the girls and then she'd go straight back to the boutique after lunch without going home. That was the story. The idea was that I'd pick her up at the boutique around twelve fifteen, then I'd drop her off at Julio Iglesias's apartment, I'd go eat lunch at my cousin's, and at two fifteen I'd pick her up. The poor thing was terrified when I got to the boutique – she was still hesitant; it was her first time. But as soon as we got in my car, she relaxed a little. She was dressed casually – a green miniskirt, I remember it perfectly – but very elegant, classy as usual. She stepped confidently out of the car, and I was the one left biting my fingernails, wondering how things were going, if finally they'd make love or if she'd only let him kiss her, she wasn't even sure herself. I'm telling you, that's the guy who took Julio Iglesias's place as vice president of Marito's advertising agency; look how the other employees greet him, with such respect, not at all like they treated that guy from Madrid I've been telling you about. Anyway, at two fifteen on the dot I was parked in front of Julio Iglesias's apartment; I honked the horn and saw her come out – happy, glowing, on cloud nine. I wanted her to tell me everything, all the juicy details, immediately. She told me she had the best time, better than she'd ever expected: he'd made a delicious salad and opened a fine bottle of white wine, ice cold – the way she loved it. He started kissing her the minute she stepped into the apartment, and he never stopped kissing and touching her, so tender, that's