

JOSE

Pulling lightly on his black moustache, Jose gazed at the girl sitting with him and two men in the Kiosk Cafe. Since an English writer told him that his moody dark eyes and long thin body reminded him of Robert Louis Stevenson's photograph in the frontispiece of his books, Jose affected a romantic air, as if he had been ravaged by love. In his late thirties, with one of his legs a rubber-capped cane of hard wood, he encouraged sympathy.

The girl's deeply-tanned shoulders showed over the top of a close fitting green dress that accentuated her figure. Her blonde hair fell to the curve of her neck. As she talked, her hands moved with the flow of her feelings, and the rings on her fingers twinkled brightly in the afternoon sun.

The two men, like those at tables near them, had risen from their three o'clock meal to spend the rest of the afternoon drinking and contemplating. They affected indifference to Jose's sexual attraction for the girl and regarded the other pretty girls in straw hats, their lips, pursed in soft red lip-stick, with disguised desire.

Jose, transfixed by her beauty, watched the girl write a postcard. Aware of his attention, she smiled and occasionally glanced at him. Ready to mail her card, she told Jose that she wanted to leave. Immediately he clapped his hands to summon the waiter, paid the bill and followed her swaying back among the tables to the road. The men in the cafe watched her svelte figure move away. Jose, walking with a cane, had difficulty keeping up with her. But she did not slacken her pace.

The girl told him that she was not going home; she was visiting friends.

"But I thought," he began, and stopped abruptly, hearing the disappointment in his voice.

"I'll see you tonight," she said. "Watch for me at the bar, and we can go home together."

Smiling, he turned to limp to his Bar, where he had to prepare for the evening's business.

Jose's Bar attracted many tourists and the young artists of the town. The Bar itself was nothing to look at. The room was narrow and drab. Two colourful paper posters of nation-wide design, showing a toreador with a bright red cape passing a maddened bull, hung on one wall. Duplicates could be seen in every cheap bar across Spain. But Jose's bar, unlike the score of other small bars in the town, provided music, often the only entertainment in the evenings.

Jose sat down with men drinking at a table and called for his wife, Maria. A door opened from one wall, disclosing ascending stairs and a sick-looking woman, her eyes a dark mixture of misery and fortitude. In the black dress that women over the age of thirty wear in this culture, still under the influence of a centuries-old Moorish tradition, which relegated women to a lower level than Spanish law had been able to do, Maria, wrinkled and slightly

bent, looked far older than she was. A dark beauty had been lost by the markings of time, for her, a time that moved at double speed. Her waist, once slim, bulged. Taking orders for drinks, she moved slowly from one table to the next as people began to arrive.

When most of the tables in the Bar were occupied and the voices of his customers rose in intensity, Jose picked up his guitar behind the bar and sat on a straight back wooden chair. Customers at a few tables stopped talking to look at him expectantly.

Jose's long fingers plucked the strings strongly. His thin arms hanging loosely from hunched shoulders cradled the instrument. At first, the sound was hard, jarring the sensitivities, but then a jerky rhythm caught the attention. As the talking died away, the throbbing of his guitar seemed to lead the mind into a sinuous passage through a velvet night, broken intermittently by high notes that spoke of gayety to relieve the sadness. Jose's audience, overtaken by sentiment, sat in respectful silence.

A 17 year-old boy, whom Jose engaged to dance the flamenco, stepped into the room, followed by his friends, who pounced on the last vacant table while the boy began to dance. The boy clicked his heels, stomped and wriggled to the music. Soon the little bar was jammed with newcomers, leaving little space for the boy to perform, though he continued to dance and Jose played as if lost in his music. Together they cast a spell over the Bar. Only Maria moved, serving drinks and silently collecting the monies left on the tables.

As the boy began to flag, his dance becoming less energetic, Jose's guitar settled into a soft, nostalgic flamenco and the boy joined his friends to listen. Some customers resumed talking but in subdued voice. After a time, the boy resumed his dance and his friends shouted encouragement as Jose intensified his playing. The hour was late when Jose put his guitar away and helped Maria serve the tables. He spoke with some of the young women whom he had met earlier in the Kiosk; they took

guitar lessons from him, adding to his income, which he needed to survive, and giving him the youthful female attention that he craved.

At one o'clock, Maria collected from the last customers and emptied the money with the rest of the night's receipts in a dirty white cardboard box. Without looking at Jose, she climbed the stairs to bed and rest.

Jose watched her slow ascent, his high brow furrowed under the locks of his curly black hair. A few of his foreign customers, who were constant in their attendance, had thought she needed medical care, but he refused, saying that he could not afford it. Yet he worried what they were saying about him in their concern for Maria. Behind the counter, he scooped up the paper bills in the cardboard box and pensively watched them slip through his fingers. Suddenly, excitedly, his hand grabbed a fistful of bills and he pocketed them. He noticed the light striking her blonde hair and her young breasts as the girl stood in the doorway, waiting.

A week later, Jose entered Maria's room. She was in bed. It was nine o'clock when usually she was house cleaning. He called her but, when she did not move, he seized her shoulder. Maria groaned and half-opened her eyes. She tried to speak. Jose looked at her with distaste. She had always obeyed him without question but now perhaps she no longer could. He bent over her to hear what she was whispering and caught the word "doctor." He felt the impulsive pleasure of his power over her and was about to shake his head, when he paused in doubt. He saw the worried face of a young Englishman, who had urged him to take care of her. "I'll get him," he said reluctantly. Maria lapsed into semi-consciousness as he left her room.

An August sun licked over the white-walled houses into the narrow street as Jose walked slowly up the hill. His cane leg struck the rock with a sharp sound as if announcing his coming to the vendors opening their boutiques. A senorita flashed eyes and teeth at him from the threshold of the dry cleaning shop in which she worked. Jose smiled in recognition and caught his reflection in the window of the tailor's shop as he passed. His smile could still charm, he thought. Abruptly he stepped aside to barely miss a boy hurtling down, spinning a bicycle wheel ahead of him. He almost lost his balance and swore that he would crack the miscreant with his walking stick. He watched until the boy stopped far down the street and turned into Antonio's Draperies. "If that boy were mine," he swore, then smiled as he remembered he had cuckolded Antonio for years, and the boy probably was his. But that was before he had a wooden leg.

Crossing the market square stirring with ladies setting up their booths and with pushcarts bringing vegetables, meats, trinkets and clothing and avoiding the beggars, some legless, some carrying small signs for help, Jose came to the doctor's building and climbed the stairs to his office.

The doctor was making his morning calls, but his nurse was there. She had worked for the doctor as nursing assistant, secretary and housekeeper for years, knew all his patients well and assisted when Maria had her stillborn baby.

"You want the doctor for your wife." Her tone implied injustice.

Jose glared at her. "Yes."

"I'll tell him when he returns," she said grimly but thought that she should reach him sooner.

The sun was very close and strong. Although Jose disliked sitting in a cafe in the mornings because of the glare, he remembered he had not had his coffee. At the Kiosk he was surprised to meet his two fat companions, who usually came in the late afternoon. He lowered his long slim body into a chair at their table and smiled good-humouredly as he pulled lightly on his moustache.

"We saw a friend off on the train," one of them explained.

The waiter brought Jose his cafe con leche and his long fingers searched for the sugar spoon. He smiled contently as he stirred his coffee. "Since you've been around early in the morning," he asked, "have you seen my beautiful blonde friend? I didn't see her all day yesterday."

"She's gone," they said together.

"Gone! Where?" Jose's long face fell in surprise. A sense of inevitability gripped him.

"To where she came from." That was far out in the nowhere, about which Jose never enquired. "She was the one we saw off this morning," one of them added, enjoying Jose's reaction.

He stormed, "She didn't tell me! Why didn't you?"

"We didn't know that you didn't know," the other man said, looking sympathetic.

Jose swallowed his coffee and left the Kiosk. His hands trembled. Of course, this had happened to him before with other girls. But each time it shocked him. He walked to a part of the Roman wall overlooking the sea where he could be alone with his thoughts. Now he would have the trouble of finding another girl, which would be difficult because the tourist season was coming to an end. He placed his hands on the stone and strained his body upon them to release the tension in his mind. He cursed his handicap as he recalled the other women who had left him in the same secret manner, afraid of his anger, of his disappointment. He perched on the wall and stared down at the sea lapping at the rocks below.

The sun was well past its zenith when he levered himself to his feet and began the descent into the lower town. When he walked into his bar, intending to go to Maria's room, he saw the doctor sitting alone at a table.

The doctor looked sharply at him. "I've been waiting over half an hour for you." His voice edged with anger. "Maria is dead."

Jose felt a hurt stir in him, a reptilian slithering hurt, a baseness, a guilt that he had known was there but had refused to recognize. His cruel subconscious killing of his wife, his unacknowledged wish to be rid of her, terrified him as he saw the sadism and delight at his core. Suddenly alone, facing a vacuousness ahead of him, he slapped his thin arms on the bar counter and buried his head, sobbing in self-pity.

Startled, the doctor misread Jose's pain as sorrow. "I'm sorry," he muttered.