



Illustration by Bernat Gómez

THE WATCHER

Few are the souls who spend the winter months at Gorg Espadat, and none does so by choice. In summer, the coolness and stillness of this deep Pyrenean valley draw a handful of city folk who fill the village's only inn—a business I run—but when the days shorten and nature falls silent, that pleasant coolness sharpens into a glassy cold that turns the forest brittle and opens cracks in the skin, and the restful stillness becomes a leaden, sickening oppression that can make anyone believe they have reached the last redoubt of life in the world.

On the particular evening I set down here, we were four old friends—Quim, the village baker; Artur, the cobbler; Eugeni, the mayor and a botanist; and myself—who had gathered at the inn. During the week we rarely spoke to one another, for in those days the village had but a single telephone, and our trades kept us apart. But the arrangement was tacit, and without ever having spoken of it, each Friday we would fall in around a jug of wine and natter away. Those meetings were essential to us, being among the few chances we had to escape the solitude and darkness of winter, when the sun never climbs above the peaks that ring the valley.

That Friday nature was in a frenzy. A gale enveloped the inn as though it meant to tear it up from its foundations, and snow as hard as hail lashed the windowpanes. It was mid-January of a particularly harsh winter; we no longer remembered the last time we had seen the blue of the sky, and the snow was piling up even in the valleys, burying the roads and choking off all communication. So much calamity had worn down our spirits, and that evening all four of us drooped languidly over our glasses, letting the fire lend us a little warmth and carry our thoughts off to some more pleasant place. The silence was

so obstinate that Quim's remark—he has always had a somewhat macabre side—rang out as if inside a cathedral. "Good heavens! I've never seen a gale like it. It's just as if the dead were wailing in chorus from beyond the grave!". "Leave the dead be. They're well enough where they are!" a hoarse voice suddenly spat out, one that belonged to none of us. "If that infernal howling were them, we'd already be done for!" Along with the voice, in the darkest corner of the inn there had materialized the figure of a man who, leaning his every movement on his battered walking stick, was drawing near to us with the limping gait of one whose knees have been ground down by long and wearying marches. It was old Estanislau, another of the village's stubborn regulars. A retired ice carrier, more accustomed to dealing with beasts than with people, he would sink into his wine and the smoke of black tobacco at the table in the most out-of-the-way corner. He would spend hour upon hour melted into the gloom, so still that we forgot he was there until the creaking of his joints announced that he was leaving. He never opened his mouth, but that day he sat down at our table, and paying no heed to our astonishment, he loaded his pipe with solemnity while the firelight danced among the wrinkles of his face, blackened by the mountain sun. He took his time scrutinizing us one by one, as though appraising us in some way.

"Come now, Estanislau, don't tell me you believe in ghosts. You, who've seen it all!" Quim fired at him, breaking the awkward silence. Old Estanislau shot him a fierce look. "It's precisely because of what I've seen that I do believe!" He lit his pipe, and the scent of the smoke softened his expression. "There are things it's better not to trifle with." We waited for him to add something, but the old man merely went on savoring his tobacco in silence. "And what is it you saw, if I may ask?" I said to him, as gruffly as he had.

The old man resumed his peculiar appraisal with a stern face, studying our features while the wisps of smoke rising from his pipe marked the passing of time with the precision of a pendulum. Such reticence could only be hiding a good story, and when at last he gestured with a nod for me to fill his glass, I understood that he had agreed to put an end to our gloom.

“It happened a good half-century ago now, when I was a lad of little more than twenty. My companion Roc and I were making our way through the Congost del Perdigot, coming back from hauling a load of ice to the pit, when, as we came out of the pass, winter turned on us savagely. A ferocious wind broke loose from the depths of the gorges, and the drizzle that had kept us company all day thickened, in the blink of an eye, into flakes as big as cobbles. We could not see a thing; the roar of the wind kept us from speaking; our feet froze, and the tips of my fingers took on a purple so deep they barely looked alive. Everything was covered in a smooth but treacherous white, a white that might hide a shelter as easily as a chasm. Desperate, we decided to unharness the donkey and rid ourselves of most of the gear to lighten our load. We kept only our shotguns, our blankets, and a few provisions, and, commending ourselves to Heaven, we followed the flank of the mountain, hoping to find some cover soon.

“Luckily, with the day’s last gasp we glimpsed the blurred silhouettes of some ruins. A hamlet we did not know, which meant we were utterly lost. Despite their decrepit state, the houses looked so humble that their inhabitants seemed always to have been miserably poor. The small church, looking more like a chapel, dominated the square where the main streets met. Its bell tower was half-collapsed, but the rest was far better preserved than the forgotten remains all around; at least its door, of thick wood, still clung to its hinges. It seemed the perfect place to shelter, but the donkey resisted like the Devil, refusing to enter. No doubt its animal instinct sensed something unpleasant that escaped us, but at that moment both Roc and I would have sold our souls for a roof, and we shoved the poor creature inside.

“Inside the church not a single religious object remained, and the rear wall had caved in; the hole was covered by a rough wooden board that did not stop the icy wind from seeping between the slats. On opposite walls, a plain cot and a table made of the same wood, which could only have come from the parishioners’ pews, completed the furnishings; between them, over the charred remains of a fire,

hung a burnt cooking pot. And yes—the pot was full! Full of the finest welcome imaginable: a mutton stew, cold but still delicious, which we devoured ravenously, telling ourselves that we would settle up later with our unknown host.

“Night closed in, and to warm ourselves and keep ill omens at bay, we lit the fire once more and spent a long while feeding it, waiting for the mysterious inhabitant of the church to appear. But when the firewood had burned down and we huddled under our blankets to surrender to sleep, not a single soul had yet emerged from the darkness that besieged us on the other side of the walls.

“In the middle of the night I was woken by the frightened moans of the donkey. When I opened my eyes I found myself bathed in a flickering glow. It took me a few moments to grasp that it came from a small lantern; the hand that held it, bony and pale, belonged to an old woman whose face was hidden among her disheveled hair. She gave me quite a fright, but she was only the church’s occupant; when she leaned toward me to reassure me, she did so with a kindly expression marked by the scars of a life of hardship. As became clear in the days that followed, she was an agreeable woman and seemed grateful for the unexpected company. Not only did she not blame us for having wolfed down her supper, she even offered us lodging until the storm should ease. But there was something not quite right about her. She was devilishly reticent when it came to personal matters. She introduced herself only as Amèlia, the last inhabitant of the hamlet, and sketched out a vague story about why the place had been abandoned—something about young folk migrating to the big city, years of meager harvests, and who knows how many other falsehoods. And when we asked her why she went on scraping a living there like a hermit, and what the devil she was doing wandering about in the dead of night in the middle of the blizzard, her only answers were that she loved those old walls too much to leave them, and that now and then she liked to take the air in the cold of the winter nights. Nonsense! Even then I caught the smell of lies in her words, but I made no mention of it, for the truth did not matter to me anyway. I intended to be on

my way as soon as the snowfall let up, and to forget that wretched day and that miserable den.

“It was obvious the donkey wanted to clear off from there as soon as possible too. The animal had always had a gentle temperament, but from the moment we entered the church it never fully settled. When Amèlia tried to lead it to her little stable, it reared up like a thing possessed and came within a hair of kicking out in all directions. There was no way on earth to calm it. It could not bear the old woman’s presence within ten feet. In the end I had to lead it to the stable myself. Believe me when I tell you we would have done far better to heed the poor beast and go on our way! But the snow kept falling as if it meant to do so for all eternity, and the danger of losing ourselves again in the storm held us back.

“On the third midnight of our confinement, Roc woke me with a rough shake. Poor Roc! The tedium had stuffed strange ideas into his head. ‘Estanislau, that old crone is rotten with money!’ he whispered to me, his eyes wide with greed; ‘but she won’t fool me. I’ve a hunch she’s hiding something!’ ‘Hiding, hiding what?’ I stammered, half asleep. ‘A fortune!’ he answered, his voice thick with craving; ‘she’s surely butchered her husband and is hiding his cash somewhere close by! If we follow her, we’ll find out where, and all our troubles will be over, forever!’ Such was the madness that had lodged itself in his skull. In vain I tried to make him see it was folly; everywhere he looked, he found telling proof of it: that this was why she went out into the snowfall—to check the money was still in place; that if she lived in those unwholesome ruins, it was to keep clear of the law. His reason had been turned completely upside down; it was as if a pair of blinkers kept him from seeing anything but a heap of gold at the end of the road, a road that ran through robbing an old woman. I hesitated a moment and he got ahead of me: ‘The next time she goes out I’ll follow her, with you or without!’ Resigned, I agreed to go with him, so as to protect him from himself.

“The next day Amèlia set off early in the morning, and we went after her. The storm had died down; the sky gleamed like a mountain lake and the fallen snow

threw back a sharp brightness. We followed our hostess's footprints for over an hour along a bare hillside, and then higher up the mountain through a fir wood. In the midst of the trees rose a rocky wall, invisible until one was almost upon it; there we found Amèlia, absently scanning her surroundings, paying little real heed. I say this because, had she put a little heart into it, she would have seen us diving behind a heap of snow to hide.

"When we poked our heads out, the old woman had vanished. In that instant the impulse to give the whole thing up and go home crossed my mind. It was a flawless day, and finding the way back would have been child's play, but by that point my curiosity had flared up until it was as strong as Roc's greed. So we drew near the wall, and discovered the narrow mouth of a cave concealed behind a tangle of dead vines. Rising from the darkness one could still hear the echo of footsteps making their way into the bowels of the mountain; when they had almost faded away, we went in.

"The cave was far deeper than its narrow opening suggested. After a cramped first stretch, it widened into a corridor broad enough to walk along with some comfort. Soon everything was pitch black, but feeling our way along the damp walls we managed to keep going until a faint orange glow appeared around a bend. One could hear a kind of tender murmuring, as if someone were humming a lullaby. We stopped, and shortly the little song ceased, giving way to a busy clatter: light footsteps, the clink of ceramic vessels, the sloshing of liquids. I felt Roc's hand on my shoulder, urging me on toward the horrifying truth that awaited us ahead. When I found it, I could barely stifle a cry of terror.

"We had reached a chamber arranged like a bedroom, with a cot, a stool, shelves full of bowls, flasks, and jars, and a workbench, all very crude, and brightly lit by countless candles. Amèlia was busy at the bench, her back to us, measuring out, carefully but without dawdling, various quantities of liquids and powders and working them all together in a mortar. She was not alone. On the cot lay what at first glance seemed a girl of about ten, gaunt and scrawny, covered in a frayed

tunic; one did not need to be very observant, however, to notice the horror that fouled her child's body. The skin was not exactly pale, but rather gray as ash, and so thin and taut it seemed about to tear. Beneath it a robust musculature, unbecoming of a child, stood out, and from the tips of her twenty bony, spidery fingers sprang black nails, curved like a vulture's talons. That creature lay perfectly still, silent and gray as a flagstone. I looked at Roc, but he did not look back; he was petrified, unable to tear his eyes from that disturbing being. In a trembling voice he asked me whether I thought she was dead. I did not answer; there was no need. Of course that monstrosity was dead! It could be no other way; though the dead may be arranged to make them look as if they are asleep, one can never completely hide what they truly are. It was plain that the spark of life had gone out in that ashen body; of this I was as certain as I was that it still burned in us.

"A whistle, faint as a draft of night wind, startled us at once. It was a breath, an impossible breath. It was life returning to that withered body! It would have been enough to watch the girl's chest swell and fall to freeze the blood of the bravest man; but more disturbing still was the way Amèlia flew into a panic when she heard that sibilant breathing. She gave such a start that she nearly dropped the mixture she was preparing; but she took no time at all to compose herself and go on working—no longer merely hurrying now, but frantic, throwing nervous glances now and then at the thing that was coming back to life. She ground, measured, and stirred at a mad pace; she knew her life depended on finishing that brew in time. But she was too slow. At the moment those loathsome, taloned fingers clenched with the spasm of dawning consciousness, Amèlia set down the mortar and lunged for her bag to draw out a little sack tied with a string. The knot, though, resisted her, and while she struggled the creature was rising with the heaviness of one waking from a deep sleep. Beneath the grayish film it had for skin, the outline of the skull was perfectly visible; at the bottom of its eye sockets, as deep as wells, tiny crystalline glints suddenly sparkled.

“Then Amélia managed to untie the knot. Only just in time! The creature sprang at her the moment its feet touched the ground, launching itself on all fours like a monstrous ape; but in mid-flight the old woman flung at it a white powder she had taken from the sack, making it miss its leap and smash against the ground with a bloodcurdling shriek. The monster then bounded to the farthest side of the chamber and there spent a while frantically brushing the powder from its face and body. When it finished, it raised its empty gaze and fixed it on us.

Old Estanislau broke off his account to take a few nervous draws on his pipe, no doubt trying to keep down the painful memories. It took him several gulps of wine to steady himself fully. “I’ve said too much,” he pronounced with drunken firmness, scraping back his chair in a clumsy attempt to rise. “I don’t know what got into me, telling you all this! It’s a disrespect to Roc.” “Estanislau,” Artur put in, “this thing you speak of may still be prowling about out there. To know of it—” “You need to know nothing of it!” the old man flared, slamming a hand down on the table. “I know for certain that monster does not roam free through the woods, because I split its guts open myself with a shotgun blast!” All at once he calmed down and slumped back into his chair, as if the effort of losing his temper had drained him. “Between it spotting us and hurling itself upon us only an instant passed, and Roc had the misfortune to be the one it chose. The creature fell upon him with deadly speed, sank its rotten teeth into his throat and with a single bite tore the Adam’s apple from his neck. Then it turned its corpse-like face toward me and bared its bloodied gums in a kind of inhuman, mocking smile. It was about to attack me; luckily I was quicker. I trained my shotgun on it and squeezed the trigger, catching it full in the belly. It was a very near thing; had my finger wavered for the blink of an eye, you can be sure it would be some other man’s tall tales you’d be listening to right now. But don’t think I’m glad I saved my own skin. I’d sooner the thing had leapt on me and Roc had squeezed the trigger, so that I wouldn’t have to live with the image of his torn-open throat burned into my eyes!” Estanislau fell silent again and let the silence speak for him. Then he emptied his glass and cleared his throat as a prelude to his leave-

taking. I hastened to pour him more wine, and with a question I coaxed him to stay. “What was it, that creature?”

“Amèlia explained it to me,” the old man replied, watching the stream of wine fill his glass; “she explained it as if by doing so she would make sense of things. At first the monster’s death seemed to affect her, but hers was the resigned grief of one who had prepared for that ending long before. For me, on the other hand, the grief still lasts to this day, and the memory of that repulsive monster from beyond the grave is bound up with it.” With a long draft of wine he seemed to smother the grief enough to take up the tale again. “Amèlia swallowed her tears just as I have swallowed this wine, and told me her story. Her true story. A story so shattering that, despite the shock of that moment, it was stamped upon my memory.

“That girl should have died many years earlier, when a strange epidemic of rabies fell upon the hamlet. The sickness spread like spilled water from street to street, from door to door, with no remedy able to stand against it. No one knew where it came from, nor had they ever known another with such devastating symptoms. The luckless souls who caught it fell prostrate in bed, consumed by fever, delirium, and dreadful convulsions. Like a herald of imminent death, the outline of the skull grew steadily plainer beneath the thinning skin; the eyes sank into their sockets until their gleam nearly went out, and, owing to the violent convulsions, the sufferers’ muscles grew hard as iron—some even ended up snapping the ropes that bound them to their cots.

“Most died, withered by the fever, within two weeks; those who survived, though, suffered a worse fate. The disease drove them mad, turned them into demons stripped of the least trace of humanity. Remembering nothing of their past, an insatiable craving for flesh drove them to attack, with canine ferocity, anyone who crossed their path. The relatives who had kept vigil over their own, cooling their brows when the fever devoured them, and feeding them gruel when the delirium

allowed, met a ghastly death that carried them off while they still wondered why that sibilant-breathing being did not recognize them.

“Terror was not long in taking hold of the hamlet and setting its people against one another, divided between those in favor of finishing off the afflicted while there was still time and those who refused. Fearing that the neighbors would murder her sick daughter, Amèlia resolved to hide her in that remote cave, where her husband, the village apothecary and one of the first to succumb to the disease, had long been investigating an enigmatic substance: a poison capable of postponing death. Thanks to that brew she was able to hold back the monster dwelling within her daughter long enough for it to sink its teeth into poor Roc’s neck.”

Old Estanislau drew deeply on his pipe and wrapped his years-battered face in a wisp of smoke. “It was not until much later that Amèlia dared return to the village, clinging to the naive hope that someone had found a cure and everything had gone back to how it was. But what she found was a desolate place over which hung the unsettling calm that follows a slaughter. The streets that had watched her grow up now belonged to the wind and the wild beasts. The houses had been ransacked. Everywhere, smearing the walls and the broken-in doors, spatters of dried blood bore witness to the reason for all that havoc. Amèlia understood that in this world she had but a single tie left, and, bearing that grim realization, she went back to the cave, where she grew old with no purpose but to watch over her daughter’s body and, from time to time, apply to it the substance that put off the inevitable end. At last, the burdens of age forced her to flee the unwholesome damp of the cave, and she settled in the best-preserved building of the only habitable place she knew...”

“Morteine!” Eugeni suddenly muttered.

We all turned toward him, startled by the unexpected interruption, but the botanist, as if sunk in some deep recollection, did not seem aware of having

uttered that name, unknown to us. A few moments passed before he felt the weight of our stares and explained himself in a rush, his eyes glittering with excitement. “Morteine; a poison extracted from a very rare fungus, *Anaphaena spelunquensis*, or rock lily. It’s an extraordinary compound! It induces what is called the morteic sleep, which halts all the body’s vital functions and, by extension, any ongoing pathological process. The morteic sleep is in no way distinguishable from ordinary death, save for its reversibility and the absence of decomposition, and it can be prolonged indefinitely as long as morteine is applied regularly. Yes, it all fits! The girl’s aversion to salt, which was, beyond any doubt, the powder Amèlia threw at her, is due to the severe dehydration suffered by subjects plunged into the morteic sleep; and the fact that she prepared the ointment just before applying it is because, once extracted from the fungus, morteine is highly unstable.” Eugeni turned to the old man with an almost pleading look. “Estanislau, if Amèlia used morteine, we are looking at an exceptional find. The last reference to the rock lily is so old that the plant was thought extinct, and it is precisely because of this lack of specimens that morteine remains, in large part, a mystery to science. It would be an extraordinary contribution if I could take up the research again! Please, pin down for me the location of the cave; any detail you remember, however small, would be of great use to me.” By way of answer, Estanislau tucked his pipe into a leather case and rose, leaning on his walking stick. From his full height, he fixed each of us in turn with his soot-black gaze. “It was not that brew that killed my companion Roc, but it was indeed what kept alive the monster that did. What you ask of me is a secret that I know full well I shall carry to my grave!”

With weary steps the old man made for the door, but just before crossing the threshold he stopped. “There are borders that knowledge should never cross,” he murmured without turning, and was lost in the gale.

Old Estanislau went on being a regular at the inn, but as if he had used up what voice remained to him in the long telling of that—now distant—dark and stormy evening, he never opened his mouth again. Eugeni tried, again and again, to

breach the old man's secrecy, to persuade him to reveal some hint of the cave's whereabouts, but it was to no avail. Neither by appealing to his authority as mayor, nor under the promise of more drink, did he manage to wring a single word from him. Cradled by alcohol, the old man merely drew absently on his pipe, shunning reality as he always had, and, true to his word, he carried the secret to his grave soon after. Eugeni, however, did not give up. At his request we tried to find the cave ourselves, setting out from the Congost del Perdigot and searching slopes and crags in every direction. But perhaps the cave had been buried by a landslide; perhaps it was more remote than we imagined; perhaps it had never existed at all. The fact is that none of our expeditions proved fruitful, and over time the story settled into our memories like the fantasy of a drunkard. Only Eugeni still goes out, now only very rarely, driven by a dying hope. But I am sure that deep down he too knows that both the cave and morteine, that substance brimming with possibilities, are destined to fade into the oblivion of the generations to come.

END