

# **The Martyr**

Katherine Anne Porter



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RUBEN, the most illustrious painter in Mexico, was deeply in love with his model Isabel, who was in turn romantically attached to a rival artist whose name is of no importance.

Isabel used to call Ruben her little "Churro," which is a sort of sweet cake, and is, besides, a popular pet name among the Mexicans for small dogs. Ruben thought it a very delightful name, and would say before visitors to the studio, "And now she calls me 'Churro!' Ha! ha!" When he laughed, he shook in the waistcoat, for he was getting fat.

Then Isabel, who was tall and thin, with long, keen fingers, would rip her hands through a bouquet of flowers Ruben had brought her and scatter the petals, or she would cry, "Yah! yah!" derisively, and flick the tip of his nose with paint. She had been observed also to pull his hair and ears without mercy.

When earnest-minded people made pilgrimages down the narrow, cobbled street, picked their way carefully over puddles in the patio, and clattered up the uncertain stairs for a glimpse of the great and yet so simple personage, she would cry, "Here come the pretty sheep!" She enjoyed their gaze of wonder at her daring.

Often she was bored, for sometimes she would stand all day long, braiding and unbraiding her hair while Ruben made sketches of her, and they would forget to eat until late; but there was no place for her to go until her lover, Ruben's rival, should sell a painting, for every one declared Ruben would kill on sight the man who even attempted to rob him of Isabel. So Isabel stayed, and Ruben made eighteen different drawings of her for his mural, and she cooked for him occasionally, quarreled with him, and put out her long, red tongue at visitors she did not like. Ruben adored her.

He was just beginning the nineteenth drawing of Isabel when his rival sold a very large painting to a rich man whose decorator told him he must have a panel of green and orange on a certain wall of his new house. By a felicitous chance, this painting was prodigiously green and orange. The rich man paid him a huge price, but was happy to do it, he explained, because it would cost six times as much to cover the space with tapestry. The rival was happy, too, though he neglected to explain why. The next day he and Isabel went to Costa Rica, and that is the end of them so far as we are concerned.

Ruben read her farewell note:

"Poor old Churro: It is a pity your life is so very dull, and I cannot live it any longer. I am going away with some one who will never allow me to cook for him, but will make a mural with fifty figures of me in it, instead of only twenty. I am also to have red slippers, and a gay life to my heart's content.

"Your old friend,

"ISABEL."

When Ruben read this, he felt like a man drowning. His breath would not come, and he thrashed his arms about a great deal. Then he drank a large bottle of tequila, without lemon or salt to take the edge off, and lay down on the floor with his head in a palette of freshly mixed paint and wept vehemently.

After this, he was altogether a changed man. He could not talk unless he was telling about Isabel, her angelic ways, her pretty little tricks and ways: "She used to kick my shins black and blue," he would say, fondly, and the tears would flow into his eyes. He was always eating crisp sweet cakes from a bag near his easel. "See," he would say, holding one up before taking a mouthful, "she used to call me 'Churro,' like this!"

His friends were all pleased to see Isabel go, and said among themselves he was lucky to lose the lean she-devil. They set themselves to help him forget. But Ruben could not be distracted. "There is no other woman like that woman," he would say, shaking his head stubbornly. "When she went, she took my life with her. I have no spirit even for revenge." Then he would add, "I tell you, my poor little angel Isabel is a murderess, for she has broken my heart."

At times he would roam anxiously about the studio, kicking his felt slippers into the shuffles of drawings piled

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about, gathering dust; or he would grind colors for a few minutes, saying in a dolorous voice: "She once did all this for me. Imagine her goodness!" But always he came back to the window, and ate sweets and fruits and almond cakes from the bag. When his friends took him out for dinner, he would sit quietly and eat huge platefuls of every sort of food, and wash it down with sweet wine. Then he would begin to weep, and talk about Isabel.

His friends agreed it was getting rather stupid. Isabel had been gone for nearly six months, and Ruben refused even to touch the nineteenth figure of her, much less to begin the twentieth, and the mural was getting nowhere.

"Look, my dear friend," said Ramon, who did caricatures, and heads of pretty girls for the magazines, "even I, who am not a great artist, know how women can spoil a man's work for him. Let me tell you, when Trinidad left me, I was good for nothing for a week. Nothing tasted properly, I could not tell one color from another, I positively was tone deaf. That *nina sin verguenza* almost ruined me. But you, *amigo*, rouse yourself, and finish your great mural for the world, for the future, and remember Isabel only when you give thanks to God that she is gone."

Ruben would shake his head as he sat collapsed upon his couch munching sugared almonds, and would cry:

"I have a pain in my heart that will kill me. There is no woman like that one."

His collars suddenly refused to meet under his chin. He loosened his belt three notches, and explained: "I sit still; I cannot move any more. My energy has gone to grief." The layers of fat piled insidiously upon him, he bulged until he became strange even to himself. Ramon, showing his new caricature of Ruben to his friends, declared: "I could as well have drawn it with a compass, I swear. The buttons are bursting from his waist-coat. It is positively unsafe."

But still Ruben sat, eating moodily in solitude, and weeping over Isabel after his third bottle of sweet wine at night.

His friends talked it over, concluded that the affair was growing desperate; it was high time some one should tell him the true cause of his pain. But every one wished the other would be the one chosen. And it came out there was not a person in the group, possibly not one in all Mexico, indelicate enough to do such a thing. They decided to shift the responsibility upon a physician from the faculty of the university. In the mind of such a one would be combined a sufficiently refined sentiment with the highest degree of technical knowledge. This was the diplomatic, the discreet, the fastidious thing to do. It was done.

The doctor found Ruben seated before his easel, facing the half-finished nineteenth figure of Isabel. He was weeping, and between sobs he ate spoonfuls of soft Toluca cheese, with spiced mangos. He hung in all directions over his painting—stool, like a mound of kneaded dough. He told the doctor first about Isabel. "I do assure you faithfully, my friend, not even I could capture in paint the line of beauty in her thigh and instep. And, besides, she was an angel for kindness." Later he said the pain in his heart would be the death of him. The doctor was profoundly touched. For a great while he sat offering consolation without courage to prescribe material cures for a man of such delicately adjusted susceptibilities.

"I have only crass and vulgar remedies," — with a graceful gesture he seemed to offer them between thumb and forefinger, — "but they are all the world of flesh may contribute toward the healing of the wounded spirit." He named them one at a time. They made a neat, but not impressive, row: a diet, fresh air, long walks, frequent violent exercise, preferably on the cross-bar, ice showers, almost no wine.

Ruben seemed not to hear him. His sustained, oblivious murmur flowed warmly through the doctor's solemnly rounded periods:

"The pains are most unendurable at night, when I lie in my lonely bed and gaze at the empty heavens through my narrow window, and I think to myself, 'Soon my grave shall be narrower than that window, and darker than that firmament,' and my heart gives a writhe. Ah, Isabelita, my executioner!"

The doctor tiptoed out respectfully, and left him sitting there eating cheese and gazing with wet eyes at the nineteenth figure of Isabel.

The friends grew hopelessly bored and left him more and more alone. No one saw him for some weeks except the proprietor of a small cafe called "The Little Monkeys" where Ruben was accustomed to dine with Isabel and where he now went alone for food.

Here one night quite suddenly Ruben clasped his heart with violence, rose from his chair, and upset the dish of tamales and pepper gravy he had been eating. The proprietor ran to him. Ruben said something in a hurried whisper, made rather an impressive gesture over his head with one arm, and, to say it as gently as possible, died.

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His friends hastened the next day to see the proprietor, who gave them a solidly dramatic version of the lamentable episode. Ramon was even then gathering material for an intimate biography of his country's most eminent painter, to be illustrated with large numbers of his own character portraits. Already the dedication was composed to his "Friend and Master, Inspired and Incomparable Genius of Art on the American Continent."

"But what did he say to you," insisted Ramon, "at the final stupendous moment? It is most important. The last words of a great artist, they should be very eloquent. Repeat them precisely, my dear fellow! It will add splendor to the biography, nay, to the very history of art itself, if they are eloquent."

The proprietor nodded his head with the air of a man who understands everything.

"I know, I know. Well, maybe you will not believe me when I tell you that his very last words were a truly sublime message to you, his good and faithful friends, and to the world. He said, gentlemen: 'Tell them I am a martyr to love. I perish in a cause worthy the sacrifice. I die of a broken heart!' and then he said, 'Isabelita, my executioner!' That was all, gentlemen," ended the proprietor, simply and reverently. He bowed his head. They all bowed their heads.

"That was truly magnificent," said Ramon, after the correct interval of silent mourning. "I thank you. It is a superb epitaph. I am most gratified."

"He was also supremely fond of my tamales and pepper gravy," added the proprietor in a modest tone. "They were his final indulgence."

"That shall be mentioned in its place, never fear, my good friend," cried Ramon, his voice crumbling with generous emotion, "with the name of your cafe, even. It shall be a shrine for artists when this story is known. Trust me faithfully to preserve for the future every smallest detail in the life and character of this great genius. Each episode has its own sacred, its precious and peculiar interest. Yes, truly, I shall mention the tamales."