

Translation: "The Feather Pillow" by Horacio Quiroga

The Feather Pillow

By Horacio Quiroga

Translated, from the Spanish, by A.Z. Foreman

Their honeymoon was one long shudder. A blonde, angelic and shy young thing, her childhood fantasies of being a bride had been chilled by her husband's stern nature. She loved him very much even so, though sometimes with a slight twinge when, as they returned home through the streets at night together, she would glance up furtively at the impressive stature of her Jordan who had been silent for the past hour. He likewise was in love with her, but never made it known.

For three months -they had been married in April- they lived in a singular kind of bliss. Doubtless she would have wished less severity in those strict heavens of love, a more expansive and spontaneous tenderness; but her husband's immovable manner would always hold her back.

The house in which they lived affected her twinges and shuddering in no small fashion. The silent patio's whiteness -friezes, columns, and marble statues- gave the autumnal impression of an enchanted palace. Inside, the glacial brilliance of stucco and the totally bare walls reenforced the feeling of unpleasant cold. On crossing from one room to the next, the echo of footsteps reverberated all through the house, as if long years of neglect had sensitized their resonance.

Alicia spent her entire autumn in this strange love-nest. But she had determined to cast a veil over her dreams of old, and still lived in the hostile house, trying not to think of anything until her husband came home.

It is no surprise that she grew thin. She had a slight bout of the flu which dragged on insidiously for days on end. Alicia would never be healthy again. Eventually she was able to go out one late afternoon into the garden, resting on his arm. Listlessly, she looked around from side to side. Suddenly Jordan ran his hand slowly, with deep tenderness, over her head, and Alicia promptly burst into sobs, throwing her arms round his neck. For a long while she cried all her stifled fears out, wailing louder at Jordan's slightest caress. Then her sobs began to subside, and she stood a long while with her face hidden against his neck, wordless and motionless.

That was Alicia's final day out of bed. The next morning she felt faint as soon as she awoke. Jordan's doctor examined her with the utmost thoroughness, prescribing complete bed-rest and calm. "I don't know" he said to Jordan in a lowered voice on his way out to the street, "she has this great weakness that I can't explain. And there's no vomiting or anything... if she wakes up tomorrow and nothing's changed, call me right away."

The next day Alicia woke up feeling worse. Doctors were called. They diagnosed it as acute idiopathic anaemia, completely inexplicable. Alicia had no more fainting spells, but was visibly moving toward death. All day long in complete silence the bedroom lights stayed on. Hours went by without the slightest noise. Alicia dozed. Jordan all but lived in the drawing room, its lamps also on. He paced ceaselessly, with tireless persistence, from one end of the room to the other. The carpet swallowed the sound of his steps. At times he would enter the bedroom and continue his wordless paces up and down alongside the bed, pausing for an instant to look at his wife at each end. Soon Alicia began to hallucinate: vague, indistinct visions, at first floating in the air and then descending to the floor. Her eyes stretched wide open, the girl stared constantly at the carpet on either side of the head of her bed. One night she was suddenly transfixed, staring at one spot. After a while she opened her mouth to scream, her nostrils and lips beaded with sweat.

"Jordan! Jordan!" She shrieked, rigid with fear, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

Jordan ran into the bedroom. When she saw him appear, Alicia screamed in horror

"It's me, Alicia! It's me."

Alicia stared blankly at him, at the carpet, and back at him; and after a long pause of stupefied confrontation, she came back to her senses. She smiled, taking her husband's hand in her own, caressing it, trembling, for half an hour.

Amongst her most recurrent hallucinations, there was a hominoid creature, poised on its fingers on the carpet, eyeing her.

The doctors returned to no avail. They had before them a waning life, bleeding away day by day, hour by hour, and they knew not why. During the last consultation, Alicia lay in a stupor while they took her pulse, passing her inert wrist from one to the other. For a long while they observed her in silence, and then went on to the dining room.

"Huh..." the chief physician shrugged in discouragement "This case is serious...there's not much to be done...."

"That's all I needed!" snapped Jordan, staggering suddenly.

Alicia was ebbing away in an anaemic subfever which grew worse in the afternoon but always let up somewhat after dawn. During the day, her illness did not progress, but every morning she awoke pallid, barely conscious. It seemed only at night that her life drained out of her in ever-new billows of blood. Always when she woke up she had the sensation of lying collapsed in bed with a million-kilo weight on her body. Following the third day of this episode, she never left her bed again. She could hardly move her head; she didn't want her bed to be touched, not even to have the pillow plumped. Her crepuscular terrors made their advance in the form of monsters that dragged themselves to the bed and scrambled up onto the bedspread.

Then she lost consciousness. The last two days she raved ceaselessly in a feeble voice. The lights stayed on, their vigil illuminating the bedroom and drawing room. In the deathly silence of the house, the only sound was the monotonous delirium from the bedroom and the stifled thud of Jordan's eternal pacing.

Finally, Alicia died. The servant, when she came in afterward to strip the now empty bed, stared for a while in puzzlement at the pillow.

"Sir" she called to Jordan in a low voice. "There are stains in the pillow that look like blood." Jordan approached the bed quickly and bent over the pillow. There indeed on the pillowcase, on either side of the hollow left by Alicia's head, were two small dark stains.

"They look like bite-marks" the servant murmured after a moment of unmoving observation.

"Hold it up to the light" Jordan said.

The servant lifted it, but instantly dropped it and stood staring, pallid and trembling. Without knowing why, Jordan felt his hairs stand on end.

"What is it?" he murmured hoarsely.

"It's really heavy" the servant stammered, still trembling.

Jordan picked it up. It was extraordinarily heavy. They carried it out of the room and on the dining room table he slashed open the case and ticking. The outer feathers floated away and the servant shrieked with terror, her mouth agape, covering her face with balled fists: At the bottom of the pillowcase, among the feathers, slowly moving its hairy legs, was a monstrous animal, a living, viscous ball. It was so bloated

one could barely make out its mouth.

Night after night, ever since Alicia had taken to bed, it had applied its mouth - one might better say its snout- to her temples, sucking her blood. The bitemark was scarcely perceptible. The daily plumping of the pillow had doubtlessly at first hindered its advance, but once the girl could no longer move, the suction became vertiginous. In five days, five nights, it had drunk Alicia dry.

These bird-born parasites, usually quite tiny in their natural environment, can grow to enormous proportions under certain conditions. Human blood seems particularly favorable to them, and they are not uncommonly found in feather pillows.