

BONFILIO, a story by Héctor Domingo (Mexico)

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Translated into English by

Dr Christopher Rollason (Metz, France) – rollason@9online.fr

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7 September

“Why are you taking it if it’s not for you?”, the sweeper asked me that evening in the little square. The sun was already hiding itself and the wind had blown towards me a leaf of paper, old-fashioned in appearance and delicately handwritten.

“Is it yours?”, I asked him in surprise. He came up to me to take it away from me suavely, then raised his arm to the sky and let it float away after the first gust that rose up with sufficient strength.

“That letter’s not for you – or me either”, he said as if apologetically. Then he withdrew to carry on with his labours, while the piece of paper flew on, down the street and towards the ocean.

I went after the man with my uncertainties and he responded by pointing towards an old house situated uphill. There at the balustrade was a woman in a gala dress.

“Every day she throws her letters out into the wind”, murmured the sweeper without interrupting his work. “She always writes exactly the same appeal, nothing changes but the date and –.” Then he stopped unexpectedly, as if reflecting – to turn his face round to regard me and, finally, ask me: “I take it you’re not Bonfilio?”

I didn’t know what to reply. Instinctively I ran off in the hope of catching the letter, but it had flown out of my grasp.

8 September

I’m only passing through, here to take representative photos of the place. They tell me this town is becoming something of a tourist spot and I’ve been asked to produce postcard images as soon as possible.

Bonfilio – what a name! It must have been the first that came into my mother’s head. They say she left me right after I was baptised. If she’s still alive, maybe she asks after me, maybe she too launches her letters into the wind like the woman at the balustrade. That bizarre old lady, wrapped in her gala dress, throwing out appeals in writing. I’d like to see her from close up ... maybe tomorrow before I leave. Even so, let me make it clear: I didn’t come here to fight with false illusions; there are a lot of us Bonfilios, and a lot of mothers who abandon their offspring too.

9 September

I tried my best not to think of her. I finished taking the remaining photos, packed up my luggage and, finally, ended up staying another night in the town. Is the old lady ill? This evening she didn't appear to send out her letter. Balustrades are dangerous, people can fall. I should have captured her image that evening when the sweeper pointed her out. Ayy, you sluggard of a photographer! Neither light nor distance would have been at their best, but I would have appeased this annoying sensation I'm feeling now.

When I was small I used to observe people in groups. I would memorise each detail of their features, their clothes, their movements – especially ladies. I never said goodbye to the hope that in the middle of some crowd I might some day come to 'recognise' my mother. Afterwards, I became a photographer. The task of observation was simpler on an amplified, static image: it was like holding up a large shard of time with just two fingers. Besides, everyone saw my attachment to the camera as a straightforward case of genetics – my mother too, they say, at some time in her life was one of those who spend their time behind the lens – and so I never felt obliged to tell them the true reason for my choice of occupation.

Tomorrow I'll go to the old lady's place, and after I've taken a few photos of her I'll leave for the city. There's work to be done fast.

12 September

I've been stuck in this joint for several days now, trying to investigate the old lady. In the hotel they've started giving me suspicious looks; if there's anything more they know, they're not going to tell me now.

First thing was to go to the woman's place: I knocked long and loud, but no answer. I got desperate and insisted even more: I kicked up a fuss that frightened the neighbours, but all I could get out of them was that she'd gone away and told no-one when she would be back. Then I looked for the sweeper, but he had nothing to add to what he'd already told me. "I don't even know her name", he declared with emphasis, "though round here we know her as Doña Soledad". *Soledad. Solitude.* "Could there be a better name for a woman who's always lived alone?" No-one knew a thing, and, to cap it all, I've had a message from the municipal council telling me to speed up and get my work finished: if not, my contract will be cancelled.

They're pressing me to leave: but how can I leave like that, without photographing her, without so much as seeing her again? They don't realise that all I need is one instant, one click.

15 September

I prepared the tripod and a couple of telephotos. For the last three days I've been camping out on the flat rooftop of the cheap hotel, and since then I've been targeting my camera on the surroundings all the time. If the old lady is still living at her place, I'll know at whatever moment, and if she's gone for good all I have to do is be patient; the people we most desire to see don't stay away for long, they say, unless they can't come back again.

It doesn't surprise me that the municipal council has decided to cancel my postcard contract, and nor do I care any more. Nor do I care about the lack of money (a rooftop isn't a room that has to be paid for, whatever the hotel folk may maintain). *If you throw me out I'll have the photos ready, I'll make waves and create a scandal!* – so I've warned them more than once, but they won't be intimidated so easily.

16 September

It looks as if I'm finally going to be left in peace, for two or three days anyway. The tourists are beginning to arrive and everyone in the hotel looks pretty busy. This afternoon there was a big procession: crowds, bunches of faces and silhouettes which I broke into fragments with every one of my clicks. During the day I make the takes and at night I review them one by one with the electronic viewer. I should delete some – too dark or out of focus – but I don't dare, just in case one of the faces might be that of the old lady I seek. Has she returned already without me knowing? I have to look at the images more carefully. I need to get something to eat, too. The hotel folk have locked the doors to make sure I can't get into their larder, but never mind that. I can go on drinking water from the tanks and I can even take a bath.

Soledad, solitude - could there be a better name for a woman who's always lived alone? – that was what the sweeper said. Coincidences happen, for better or worse: my mother was called Soledad too.

19 September

I didn't want to raise false hopes this morning over the piece of paper that arrived floating over the branches of the trees. It could have been any waste paper, any fragment of a newspaper; but the wind insisted on blowing in the opposite direction, as if just for today it had decided to steal back from the ocean all it had been giving it before. "Damn it!", I muttered. I called for them to open the doors for me so I could get down. The hotel folk looked at me as if jestingly, and said: "at last the gentleman is leaving us"!

I rushed to the park. The wind had died down, there was nothing on the tree-branches – no trace of any piece of paper, nothing on the ground either. I collapsed on to a bench, exhausted, while some way off the sweeper greeted me with a smile. Another sunset: still the house was deserted. And then I heard a whistling sound.

In a few seconds the man had reached my bench, and in accents shot through with agitation said: "I don't know how it happened, but this one never got to the sea ... it looks like it was for you after all". His hand held out the letter, stained here and there but still in one piece. I took it. I recognised the date at the top: *7 September*.

"I was wrong, too, when I told you I was sure this letter would be just like all the rest", said the sweeper shamefacedly as soon as he'd passed it me to read. "The old lady signed this one with her real name".

I looked up in surprise: "Her real name?" The sweeper nodded emotively, and yet I started feeling that all the exhaustion that had built up in me over the last few days was suddenly falling with all of its weight on to my shoulders. If the woman wasn't called Soledad, well ...

“Look, I’m not that Bonfilio”, I said as I returned the letter to his hands. The man saw my disappointment and for an instant seemed to doubt his ears, but finally went his way. I watched as in the distance he held out his arm as if appealing for a gust of wind to blow that delusive scrap of paper out of his fingers. And then came doubt, a pressing doubt - “Wait! Wait!”: I shouted, trying to stop him with my voice as I rushed back to catch him. “Wait”, I said one more time, but now without enthusiasm. “Tell me, what *is* her name then, that woman who’s always lived alone?”

“Esperanza”, he replied at once. *Esperanza. Hope.* “That’s the signature on the letter”.

28 September

Things have gradually returned to their usual course since I came back to the city, though my camera is still buried in a drawer of my desk. There are no oceans here, only steel and concrete, but there are evenings when I am visited by memories of Esperanza. They come blown on the wind with the swallows, murmuring that maybe the old lady is still there at her balustrade, or perhaps at someone else’s, but still alone. Alone in her gala dress. And then I get out the notebook to send her a few phrases of consolation. I tear out the leaf and stretch out my arm from up there, among the breezes with the words that hang from them:

*Esperanza: the people we most desire to see don’t stay away for long,
unless they can’t come back again*