

Finally the Sage turned off down the narrowing road. Ta-nien watched him out of sight.

The wind that once had blown through the bright willows now rose in the coco palms, chilling and cold. Between them Ta-nien saw the first lamps of evening coming on.

And turning into his own house, Ta-nien pretended to feel afraid of nothing in the whole wide windy world.

CARLOS MORAND / CHILE

The Only Son

I

Ten years passed before the Moscosos were visited by an heir. When they were married, Luciana was nineteen years old and Gaspar twenty-four. Like all couples who yield to the basic instinct of the preservation of the species, they wanted their first child without delay. But he did not come immediately; he did not come in that first year of marriage, nor in the following one, nor in the six which followed those two. Although they tried not to lose hope, at the end of the fifth year, they realized that the days were becoming rather long and empty. They looked yearningly at other people's children; and they acquired the habit of drinking together, and a little more than is prudent, considering all the time they had left to live without the presence of children. In the afternoon, as soon as Gaspar returned home from work, they took out glasses and bottles, sat in the living room, watched television and began to drink dispassionately while prolonged silences stretched between sips. The visits to his in-laws on Saturday afternoons and to her in-laws on Sunday mornings always languished soon after they began; everyone was thinking about the same thing: that it was now time for the arrival of the only one who at this height of boredom could revive by his very presence feelings dulled by habit and who could generate new topics of conversation.

After ten years of marriage, on the 15th of October, when Luciana should have been suffering the first of the four days of her menstrual period, there were no signs of its appearance. Somewhat surprised because it was the first time that this had happened, she thought that some internal disorder was temporarily altering the calendar, and she decided to wait

out the next few days. One week passed, nevertheless, then ten days, and with the exception of a slight throat inflammation that disappeared as quickly as it appeared, everything seemed normal. After fifteen days she decided not to wait any more and without telling her husband, she had herself examined by a gynecologist. She listened to the routine questions asked by the doctor and discovered that her blood pressure was 120/80. In a little room with white walls smelling of disinfectant, she was subjected to a "rabbit test." A nurse while passing smiled at her and Luciana, a little disturbed, returned the smile. With the results of the exam in her purse, she returned home. On the way she passed by several stores selling articles for infants. She abstained from entering the first ones, merely contemplating for a long time the reflection in the shop window of her own image whose transparency was interrupted by cradles, booties and clothing.

Gaspar Moscoso saw his child—a boy—for the first time at 2:30 on the morning of an icy July 30, in the waiting room of a private clinic. Later, and for many years, he would remember the scene as if it had been part of a dream. He saw the swinging door suddenly open and a nurse wearing an antiseptic mask come forward. In her arms, she held a little monkey enveloped in diapers and blankets. The nurse held out the bundle and the little monkey directed a glassy look at him through watery eyes, yawned widely, as if this first contact with people and with the world irremediably bored him, and he went back to sleep. Gaspar Moscoso didn't know why, but this last gesture of the baby's reminded him of his own father.

Luciana's parents-in-law saw their first grandson two days later. Although it would be unjust to deny that they felt authentic emotion at that moment, the philosophical background of each was not long in coming forward by way of that same emotion which had already decreased in intensity after the first fifteen minutes of the visit. Because having completed the rite of walking around the crib, leaning over it repeatedly and looking for physical, moral and intellectual similarities between the little monkey, who was hidden beneath three layers of blankets, and the characteristics of the Moscoso Salvatierra ancestors (Gaspar's parents behaved towards their daughter-in-law as if the creature was entirely her husband's achievement), Don Gaspar cleared his throat and began to solemnize the occasion with the best collection of his philosophy. But as far as this act was concerned, his wife was faster than he and had her say first. Looking again at the baby, Doña Clemencia whispered as though she were talking to herself: "Life is suffering." Because of his retirement from all public activity and because of his third heart attack, Don Gaspar had acquired a certain pessimistic attitude. He looked once more at his grandson and with a sad inflection in his voice, repeated the old phrase which refined Romans used to inscribe on their time pieces: "Each minute wounds, the last kills." Gaspar witnessed the whole scene pretending not to understand very much. Luciana,

lying on her back, feigned preoccupation with her face, while clenching her teeth behind her hand mirror.

II

The fetal aspect that characterized the baby when newborn began to change after the first weeks of his stay in the world. From this moment, his father thought he observed almost human traits and reactions in the baby which indicated to him that the child was well on his way down the path of evolution and development. The confused and empty expression in his eyes disappeared during the first days, after suffering from temporary estrabismus, his eyes acquired a steadiness and brilliance which indicated that something lived behind them. This quality intensified shortly after the nipple, or the baby bottle, made contact with his lips. Someone else, one of the many aunts who showed up at the house to make sure for the thousandth time of the miracle that had just happened to the Moscosos, contemplated the baby for awhile and exclaimed to the great satisfaction of his father: "But he is already very much his own person!" Gaspar quickly committed the phrase to memory and from that moment preoccupied himself in following every millimeter of those developments which revealed the "person."

After two months, the baby weighed eleven pounds; and the pediatrician prescribed a feeding of powdered milk and sugar in water. After four months, the infant smiled when the baby bottle was jiggled in front of his eye. The black tangle of hair, sticky from the amniotic fluid, was replaced by a blond fuzz similar to that of a chick. After five months the baby weighed fourteen pounds; twice a day he ate a mush made of semolina, meat juice and mashed potatoes; he slept less, and sucked his fingers. His face looked astonishingly like the late Winston Churchill at the time of his finest hour.

Gaspar Moscoso spent all this time between observation of his son and consultation of child care manuals. He read them every night, before going to sleep, looking in the pages for an explanation of those characteristics discovered in the baby during the day. A certain chapter of one of those texts impressed him exceedingly since it informed him that the baby's growth synthesized the history of living beings. From that moment, Gaspar began to see in his son the sum of eighty thousand years of humanity in marvelous evolution. Also, this and other books permitted him to formulate in his mind an outline of the steps to come in the boy's development: after six months, he would measure twenty inches, after eight months, he would begin to crawl, and after one year and half, he would be walking on his feet and babbling a few articulate sounds. He told his parents of these predictions, and they received the information with signs of assent and smiles of forced cheerfulness. "Then the baby definitely will begin to

live," Doña Clemencia commented with a sigh, while Don Gaspar consulted his watch for the time.

One day, Gaspar sat down near the cradle and, gazing down at the baby, began to fabricate the following monologue:

—You will be better than I; you will go far. You will enter grade school when you're six and you will graduate at eighteen with the highest grade-point. You will have been the most distinguished student in the history of the school. You will choose the career of architect. You will perform brilliant work in your studies. You will earn your degree at twenty-three, and at twenty-four, you will own a car. You will have your finely furnished house, a refrigerator, a radio, and a large television set. You will choose a girl from a good family and when you reach twenty-five, you will marry her. You will travel around the world and you will love the Lord your God . . .

Luciana appeared at the door.

—Are you talking alone, Gaspar?

—I was conversing with the boy—he answered, a little disturbed, and he decided to leave the rest of the monologue for another opportunity. Before leaving the room, he looked at the baby and seemed to discover in his eyes a slight expression of assent. "He understood"—murmured his father to himself, satisfied—"he will follow my advice."

Luciana's happiness was expressed almost silently. She cared for the baby with such a method, and an idea of order so perfect, that one would have said she had always raised children. She paid attention to the boy as if she was the first mother who had given birth after centuries of universal sterility, or as if they had announced that her son was the last specimen of the human race. One day she confessed to her husband that she felt capable of spending her entire life feeding the baby and changing his diapers, without becoming bored.

Meanwhile, Gaspar did not abandon his reading. He consulted whatever book fell into his hands; he possessed an astonishing instinct for finding references about the life of children. For example, he was much impressed by a paragraph he read casually in a book through which he had browsed at the home of his wife's parents. One Sunday afternoon, due to the January heat, everybody took a nap on easy chairs looking as angelic as the baby, who was just six months old. Gaspar opened the book by chance and read:

Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man—a grown man, suffering and enjoying, loving and hating, thinking, remembering, imagining. And what had been a blob of jelly within her body would invent a god and worship; what had been a

kind of fish would create and, having created, would become the battle-ground of disputing good and evil; what had blindly lived in her as a parasite worm would look at the stars, would listen to music, would read poetry.

The reading of these lines greatly affected Gaspar and at the same time strangely disturbed him. The truth is that in the last month any reference to the development of children left him submerged in that state located between emotion and fear. The atmosphere of the family helped to stimulate such disturbances. The fifth heart attack had made his father even more pessimistic. One day, seeing the baby smile at his eight ounces of milk, Don Gaspar commented: "The poor little one is cheerful." And at another opportunity, citing a Spanish author whom Gaspar remembered having read in his studies at school, he passed judgment: "To be born is to begin to die."

III

But Gaspar's predictions referring to his son's growth did not seem to come with the exactness that nature and the child care books had guaranteed.

At eight months, the baby weighed the same fifteen pounds as at six months, measured the same twenty-four inches, and his hair at the temples continued to be the yellowish fuzz of a new-born chick. He was very far from learning to crawl; he emitted identical babbles, as before; and his stomach refused to support the diet that corresponded to his age. He was almost one year old, and the baby had not gained one ounce nor grown one inch more than at six months of age. He was incapable of turning over on his back if he was lying on his stomach, and he couldn't roll over on his stomach if they had laid him down on his back. His hair had not been touched by scissors. He wore the same size clothes.

When his parents were certain that the baby was not developing in any sense and that, in general, he looked the same as at six months of age, they felt really alarmed and decided to go to a pediatrician.

The new doctor submitted the baby to a complete exam which lasted five days. At the end of this time, he issued a diagnosis which in simple terms indicated that the boy was as healthy as anyone; his organs were normal and there was nothing that should disturb his developing like all babies. The Moscosos, who had expected something more precise than this superficial explanation, demanded that he explain the causes and the consequences of the phenomenon, asking if there was a cure. The doctor stated conclusively: the baby was healthy and did not show any organic defect which would justify such a curious abnormality. Since he was fond of mechanical things, the pediatrician compared the baby to an automobile with

all its parts in place, the motor started and ready to leave; but the gears refused to shift from neutral to first.

After revealing this analogy with a satisfied air, he proclaimed himself unable to do any more.

After this doctor's exam, others followed; they all came to similar conclusions. The results of each were sent to a pediatricians' congress and to an institute dedicated to the investigation of the origin of life and to the development of cells. But all turned out to be useless. They all came up with different theories, which, for the most part, were announced with a cautious "maybe." Of all of them, one, nevertheless, was repeated rather frequently: that Strontium 90 had affected the ribonucleic acid of the embryo. After many months of scientific noise, the doctors forgot the case.

Another year elapsed, and the baby weighed exactly fifteen pounds; measured twenty-four inches; and the down on his head was the same pale blond color. Fat and rosy, crying at six in the morning and kicking his feet when he spotted the baby bottle with the eight ounces of milk, he had become his father's anguish and the secret happiness of his mother. So as not to irritate Gaspar, Luciana feigned torment over the baby's abnormality. But, patient and kind, and with a perpetual smile on her lips, Luciana Moscoso changed his diapers, bathed him every Monday and Thursday in his little plastic bathtub and took him for a walk every morning in the large carriage with an awning of flowered material.

IV

When the baby was, theoretically, five years old, Gaspar Moscoso was unable to take it any more, and he began to introduce him to people as a nephew six months old, left in his care by his brother whose wife had just died. Luciana reproached his lack of tenderness toward the boy, which she saw as an unpleasant absence of genuine paternal affection. She addressed her reproaches in the baby's presence, a situation that obliged Gaspar to leave the room immediately since he was certain that the child understood everything. Other times, convinced of the opposite, he shook the cradle while crying desperately:

—I am your father! Don't you recognize me? I am your father! Speak to me!

But the baby continued to smile or pouted and began to cry with gurgling sounds if the jerks became too rough. Kicking the furniture, Gaspar Moscoso cursed atomic explosions and Strontium 90. Sometimes at night, he thought before going to sleep: "Today he would have entered grade school," or: "Today I would have bought him a bicycle," or: "according to the book, he should be eating vegetable soup, ground beef and creamed corn." "On Sunday I would have taken him to see the giraffe at the zoo." "Today he would have told me that he wanted to be an architect." "In the

summer, he would go camping with the boy scouts.” He lost sleep over these conjectures; he opened his texts on child rearing and consulted the physical and intellectual characteristics of the model child at six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve years of age, and imagined his son with these characteristics. Meanwhile, at the same time, the baby slept in his cradle and made sucking sounds with the pacifier which he held between his toothless gums.

The years passed and Gaspar Moscoso was fifty years old. From this moment, he introduced the boy as his nephew. But almost nobody believed him because Luciana managed to undo the lie behind his back. She did it partly because of anger, for her husband had flatly refused to beget more children. Every morning, while humming a little tune, she hung the diapers in the rear patio of the house and took them down every afternoon, at sunset, so they would not absorb the humidity.

Gaspar Moscoso was now fifty-five years old. One September morning, the baby, in his cradle, recently changed and ready to take his 10 a.m. milk, babbled a scarcely audible “goo,” closed his eyes and slept in the peace of God, with the fingers of his left hand in his mouth. Theoretically, he was twenty-one years old. He was of age.

Luciana cried all that day and part of the night; Gaspar had to admit that he did not feel the same sorrow as his wife; his was the sadness of one who laments what could have been and was not. “It is the fault of Strontium 90,” he thought, as if the scientific explanations acted as a consolation. They buried the baby in a little white coffin. On the tombstone was inscribed the date of birth and an epitaph that said: “His life passed him by.” The ceremony, a very brief one, was attended only by Gaspar, Luciana and Gaspar’s mother (Don Gaspar had died ten years before, after surviving his sixth heart attack but not the wheels of a truck which was going the wrong way on a one-way street).

At the exit to the cemetery, old Doña Clemencia put on what she thought was a smile, and referring to her grandson whom they had just buried, she said in a low voice:

—At least the little one lived happily.

On the return trip, Gaspar carefully observed his family. Luciana was describing to her mother-in-law the little suit that she had knitted and that the baby would have worn for the first time that same week: Doña Clemencia followed her daughter-in-law’s words with real fervor. Then Gaspar became certain that the explanation of what had happened to his only son was not to be found in the effects of Strontium 90.

Translated by Carla Wood and Sue Otto