



El Don is Home

By L.C. Rodríguez

You may think he is just like all the others in the pueblo. After all, it's just after sunset and there he goes, taking the two-minute route from *El Cafecito* to *La Viuda*, the widow's bar. Yes, he is similarly attired, but on closer inspection, you may notice that his coat (rather too large for his narrow frame) is of a finer, more costly wool and ah! – look at those soft, shiny leather shoes. Look closely because hereabouts, in the winter, they are the only clean pair of shoes you'll see. Don Manolo has always been a delicate man. Delicate and distinguished.

Politely, he orders a *vino tinto de la casa*, some olives and a *pincho* of *jamón serrano*. He sits back, unbuttons the top two buttons of his shirt, stretches his legs and sips his wine contentedly. Don Manolo is happy to be home. You might think that is strange, as Don Manolo has not lived in the *pueblo* for over thirty years. Like many a small town boy, he left for the big city, in this case Madrid, at the age of eighteen. Don Manolo, a dreamer and a man of high ambitions, eventually became an aircraft engineer, quite a fine one, at that. Nowadays, he travels around the world and lectures. In Tokyo and Seoul they call him “El Don”; in Paris, they say, “Le Don”; in the U.S. they refer to him simply as “Don M.” Why do you think? Besides his intelligence (and luck), Don Manolo is also impossibly charming, that rare breed of charm that is also quite sincere.

He is talking to the bartender, Luís, small talk about the mountain weather and the recent processions for *La Virgen Dolorosa*. Yes, his regional accent is a bit too forced; he tries too hard to sound like the rest of them. But also note the rich, cultivated timbre; many a woman has fallen in love with *El Don's* voice. Roberto, the bank trainee, and the cousin of a cousin of a cousin of Don Manolo, approaches with the fires of admiration in his eyes. Don Manolo is a legend to him, and the good señor gives him advice and anecdotes aplenty for an hour or so. Roberto has to go. His wife wants him home by eleven *en punto*.

It is getting later. Notice that the men in the bar are getting louder. Indeed, raucous laughter fills the smoky little room, which may start to shiver at any moment. The distinguished *Don* sits in the same corner, his face reddened by wine but strangely downcast. Perhaps because after thirty years, he no longer understands his compatriots' jokes. No, he is not so happy in that corner. And we all know how certain tongues begin to wag when loosened by a good Rioja or two. Now if you really listen, you might hear some of the jokes they are making about the good old *Don*, who gives

himself airs, removing olive pits with his knife like a surgeon. Why, he even removes the whitish fatty edges of the *jamón serrano* – the best part! Which part of the world did he learn *that* from? They call him Manolito, his childhood nickname, but not with tenderness. Don Manolito, who left his mother, the most pious woman in the pueblo. Doña Pura. Dressed in black from neck to ankle, at least for the last twenty years.

Certain men from the pueblo, not all of them, they don't look or listen closely enough. If they did, they would see how Don Manolo's eyes light up with genuine interest when you speak to him, whether it be about Doña Mari's broken hip that finally healed, about the new bar in the next pueblo, or about Real Madrid versus Barça. Don Manolo sees the whole world with a childish wonder, and that's part of his famous charm. They would notice that he visits Doña Pura as often as he can. In fact, he has been known to fly twenty hours to be in the pueblo for a couple of days. They would notice with what passion Don Manolo speaks of his beloved pueblo, how even after thirty years, he misses all of those things and people that remind him of "home."

If they are not attentive, they might miss seeing the tremor in Don Manolo's wine-stained lips beneath the carefully groomed moustache. They might miss the sad dignity in his bent shoulders as he slowly slips on his slightly large coat and his gloves. And they might just miss the smallest catch in his usually deep, sure voice when he finally bids his countrymen goodbye.

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