

# the fruits of obsession

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**H**IS VOICE WAS STRONG and bold and rang with life. He strummed his guitar and sang in the crisp accents and soft vowels of Mexico and the sound was like a tropical sunset in copper and gold. Then—suddenly—he was gone. The spell was broken. The movie was over. I knew I'd never see him again.

But he came back! Two weeks later! The year, 1945. He was younger than I remembered, lusty and forceful, cute even in shades of black and white and arrogant in the way of handsome young men. He was the eternal loner, the unconquerable, dominant cowboy with a dare in his manner that challenged a woman to tame him and promised she'd fail, no matter how desperately she tried.

I wasn't fooled, not a bit. I knew /was the one he was waiting for. I knew it instantly, the first time I looked into his eyes, so compelling and defiant, so longing just for me. But when would he sing? *When?* I waited...and waited...and just before my patience went *snap* he swung the guitar against him (ah, lucky guitar) and strummed a chord. I slid along the carpet, silent so I wouldn't interrupt him, closer and closer, my eyes never leaving his. I stopped three inches from the TV. He was a little blurry but he was mine. An earthquake wouldn't have budged me from that spot. A volcano directly *under* me wouldn't have budged me.

Songs floated across the decades, caressing like fine, translucent silk against my cheek, warm like ermine, as spirited as a young colt, soft as a scented breeze. Okay...you know how it goes. I was in love. Head over heels. Joy and energy burst from his voice like the summer sun through threatening clouds, like cascades of brilliant, golden June light. I grabbed my recorder just in time—and then he was gone.

I played that recording for days, two little songs, over and over, snippets that gripped me until it became important, urgent, to know this man. Who was he? *Where* was he? I had to find him. I had to tell him of the enchantment in his voice. I had to tell him a voice so beautiful in the entire annals of voicedom. Never had there been eyes so compelling so longing just for me...

I guessed he'd be in his seventies by now, retired in Mexico. *Un abuelo*, mobbed by adoring grandchildren and living graciously in a sprawling, colorful hacienda hung with piñatas and surrounded by horse corrals. Maybe he still sang. I would write to him, one whole page in the remnants of labored high school Spanish and he would understand. He would understand that I loved him.

The city library was open. I sprinted to the desk and gave the clerk his name and nationality. Anything, I said, *anything* you can find. She worked. I paced. She tapped her keyboard. I tapped on a tabletop. She finished—finally—and handed me a single piece of paper. I grabbed it. Photo? Review? Address? **NO!** The clerk saw my face. "Sorry, honey, that's all I found." I scoured it for a loophole. It wasn't him. It couldn't be. *I just found him! It couldn't be true!* But it was. He died in the fifties. I never had a chance.

I should have stopped, gone shopping, gone anywhere...but I didn't. Persistence screeched into high gear. I had to know. I had to bring him back to life. I raided shelves for more information – magazines, books, anything that would talk to me. Six more reviews from the thirties told me he was no Olivier. Another obit: cirrhosis of the liver. Damn! The idiot drowned himself in alcohol. Shot his voice to hell with a shot glass. I was furious. How dare he throw himself away like an empty pint flask before I ever knew he existed? I swore at him, big, hard words. Then I took a deep breath. Okay. He's gone. No hacienda, no piñatas, no letters in labored Spanish. You can't bring him back. Chill out.

But I couldn't chill. I couldn't! The less info I had, the more had to have. Movies, songs, wives, girlfriends (probably dozens), favorite *cerveza*, mother's maiden name—I didn't care. I had to know anything, *everything*.

Aha! An obit with chops: he married a spitfire movie queen the last year of his life. He died in L.A. and the president of Mexico sent a plane to bring him home (my guy had clout), but the movie queen wasn't impressed. Emotionally, grandly, she dismissed the president's plane (*extreme* clout), chartered an airliner and flew her husband back to Mexico to a huge outpouring of public sorrow. And the spitfire? Devastated-propped up at the funeral by two men-limp, a rag doll, grief-stricken. Of course she was. Who could doubt it? Clout or not, she was a woman. I understood perfectly.

Smugness cheered me up a little. I knew he was magic; now I knew he'd been a star. He was coming alive—I was personally resurrecting him—but I needed more than death notices. I searched the U of A archives for old Mexican newspapers. Nothing. I devoured the New York Times newspaper index. Two entries, more obits. The man lived and died in obits. It wasn't enough. I needed more. I was high, on a roll, trackin' him down! I searched encyclopedias. Nothing. European encyclopedias. Nothing. Magazine indexes. *NOTHING!* Obits-obits-obits. I was going *nuts*.

I left the university, ran back to the city library. Something-anything-something-anything. I muttered. People stared. I prowled the shelves where Spanish-language biographies lived, one end to the other, ink-blackened fingers smearing index pages, searching for any reference. Then I started over. People made room for me. I looked dangerous, wild-eyed, over-the-top. I showed my teeth. *OUTTA MY WAY! THIS SHELF BELONGS TO ME!* Grrrr.

I ran back to the card index. Must have missed something. Must have missed something. Cards buckled under my fingers. Then I saw...could it be? *Yes!* His name. *His name! His name!* Right in front of me! On a card! In a title! In a book! Was the book there? I galloped back to the shelves. Ripped out a volume. Threw it aside. Ripped out another one. Where *is* it?? Suddenly...quietly...there it was. Light brown, slender, ordinary. Right number, right title, right name. I stood like a stone. I couldn't believe it. But there he was. *I FOUND HIM! I FOUND HIM!* I pulled him off the shelf and hugged him. He was in Spanish, but he was a little book and I had a big dictionary. I could do this. I carried him to the desk and checked him out. The clerk smiled at me. She knew *amor* when she *saw* it. He rested on my lap all the way home. Carefully, so I wouldn't drop him, I carried him inside to where I lived. This is where I live, I said. *Bienvenido*.

I placed him gently on a soft pillow. I'll be right back, I cooed. I'll just get my dictionary and slip into something comfortable. I had him. He was mine! *Al fin, TU ERES MIO.*

This was fun. I learned he had illustrious forebears, military generals, and his father was a professor. (I hoped he wasn't too upper class for me.) He studied opera when he was young (too snooty, but I forgave him). He ditched opera (yippee) for a career as a pop singer. He was *chica* magnet (no surprise there). He made a bunch of movies where he wore tight *charro* (cowboy) suits and always got the girl even though he never really wanted her. He was cute *and* smart. He headed the labor union he belonged to and began another one right from scratch. He even had a social conscience—he founded a home for the aged! (I felt humble.)

I also felt impressed with *me*. I took a dim figure from the past, gave him life, made him real, made him mine *siempre...*

A year after he married a pretty little actress who had his daughter, he fell hard for a sexy, wicked woman. He left his wife and moved in with the GREAT INGRATE. He stayed with this *maldita mujer* for ten years. People didn't like her. People didn't trust her. They whispered about her. He wouldn't listen. He loved her. He believed in her. He lavished everything on her. She starred in his movies, shared his fame, shared his money. One day he came home early from a business trip. On purpose. She wasn't expecting him. He wanted to surprise her and stop the rumors-but he found her in the arms of another man, his friend. The evil, conniving [bleep] cheated on him! *In his own house!* I decided to go to Mexico, find the nursing home she was in and shut off her oxygen.

It was a hard blow. He sank into a depression, dove into his work (it's a guy thing), didn't sleep, didn't eat, smoked too much (any smoking is too much). **But he'd didn't drink.** He got sick but not from a shot glass. *La Ingrata* couldn't turn him into a drunk.

After he lost his cheating lover he recorded torch songs so personal and sad I understood instantly what he was saying. The poor dope wanted her back.

Eventually, his life improved. He found the tempestuous movie queen who'd adored him for years, married her, made a couple of movies with her (they had great chemistry), made his last movie with her. The *charro* and the spitfire were happy for almost a year.

**Warning:** If you translate, drink coffee. Stay awake. Stay alert. When things go bad, **shut the book.** It's the slo-o-owness of wading through sentences that'll get you, the need to pull out each word, to plod back and forth in the dictionary, find the translation, write down the meaning. It's repetitive, hypnotic. Each word leads relentlessly to the next. Suddenly an innocent-looking word *SLAPS* you awake with a meaning that shocks you. The entire meaning of a sentence hangs on that one word—and you're trapped.

He was dying. I stood by his hospital bed and watched him die, inches away from him, helpless. The slow-motion, sinking-through-quicksand inevitability, the heavy certainty of where it would lead—and *I couldn't shut the damned book. I couldn't stop.* I knew what was coming and I couldn't hurry. I...could...not...hurry. I sat in a comfortable chair with pillows around me and sucked up his real-life pain and his sickness and the last minutes of his life like a vampire. Every second with every word, I watched him die—*trapped.*

I remembered hearing a strong voice create bold images of golden sunsets. Now, overlaid, was the image of that voice stopped forever as blood gushed from his ruptured esophagus. Once, I sighed over dark, arrogant, defiant eyes. Now, superimposed, was the vision of his eyes at the end, leaking the fluids that overflowed his ruined body. A handsome, compelling man once filled my imagination and now, with the turn of a single page, a photograph of the bloated, confined reality. I chose to forget the first movie I saw him in. It was his last. He died four months after he finished it.

It was over. I sat back, numb. *What happened? Was I possessed? Was I haunted?* How did I get involved with this dead guy in the first place and why didn't I stop when I had the chance? This is what I know: A stranger from the past moved into my imagination and the perseverance that brought him back to life and made him real became demanding and compulsive and assaulted me with an ugliness I wouldn't forget. That's all I know, except for one other thing. The fruits of my obsessions had always been free—and this time I paid.

