

The Story of the Lizard Who Made a Habit of Having His Wives for Dinner

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(translated by Alastair Reid)

At the edge of the river, hidden by the tall grass, a woman is reading.

Once upon a time, the book tells, there lived a man of very great substance. Everything belonged to him: the town of Lucanamarca, everything around it, the dry and the wet, the tamed and the wild, all that had memory, all that had oblivion.

But that lord of all things had no heir. Every day his wife offered a thousand prayers, begging for the blessing of a son, and every night she lit a thousand candles.

God was fed up with the demands of that persistent woman, who asked for what He had not wished to grant. Finally, either to avoid having to hear her voice any longer or from divine mercy, He performed the miracle. And joy descended on that house-hold.

The child had a human face and the body of a lizard.

With time, he spoke, but he slithered along on his belly. The finest teachers from Ayacucho taught him to read, but his claws prevented him from writing.

At the age of eighteen, he asked for a wife.

His well-heeled father found him one, and the wedding was celebrated with great pomp in the priest's house.

The first night, the lizard threw himself on his wife and devoured her. When the sun rose, in the marriage bed there was only the widower asleep, surrounded by small bones.

The lizard then demanded another wife, and there was an-other wedding and another devouring, and the glutton asked for yet another, and so on.

Fiancées were never lacking. In the households of the poor, there was always some spare girl.

His scaly belly lapped by river water, Dulcidio is taking his siesta.

Opening one eye, he sees her. She is reading. Never before in his life has he seen a woman wearing glasses. Dulcidio pokes forward his long snout:

—What are you reading?

She lowers her book, looks at him calmly, and replies:

—Legends.

—Legends?

—Ancient voices.

—What for?

She shrugs her shoulders:

—Company.

This woman does not seem to be from the mountains, nor the jungle, nor the coast.

—I know how to read too, says Dulcidio.

She closes her book and turns her face away.

Before the woman disappears, Dulcidio manages to ask:

—Where are you from?

The following Sunday, when Dulcidio wakes from his siesta, she is there. Bookless, but wearing glasses.

Sitting on the sand, her feet hidden under many bright-colored skirts, she is very much there, rooted there. She casts her eye on the intruder.

Dulcidio plays all his cards. He raises a horny claw and waves it toward the blue mountains on the horizon.

—Everything you see and don't see, it's all mine.

She does not even glance at the vast expanse, and remains silent. A very silent silence.

The heir presses on. Many lambs, many Indians, all his to command. He is lord of all that expanse of earth and water and air, and also of the small strip of sand she sits on.

—But you have my permission, he assures her.

Tossing her long black tresses, she bows:

—Thank you.

Then the lizard adds that he is rich but humble, studious, a worker and above all a gentleman who wishes to make a home but has been doomed to widowerhood by the cruelties of fate.

She looks away. Lowering her head, she reflects on the situation.

Dulcidio hovers.

He whispers:

—May I ask a favor of you?

And he turns his side to her, offering his back.

—Would you scratch my shoulder? I can't reach.

She puts out her hand to touch the metallic scales, and exclaims:

—It's like silk.

Dulcidio stretches, closes his eyes, opens his mouth, stiffens his tail, and feels as he has never felt.

But when he turns his head, she is no longer there.

He looks for her, rushing full tilt across the field of tall grass, back and forth, on all sides. No trace of her. The woman has evaporated, as before.

The following Sunday, she does not come to the riverbank. Nor the next Sunday. Nor the following one.

Since he first saw her, he sees only her and nothing but her.

The famous sleeper no longer sleeps, the glutton no longer eats.

Dulcidio's bedroom is no longer the pleasant sanctuary he took his rest in, watched over by his dead wives. Their photographs are all there, covering the walls from top to bottom, in heart-shaped frames garlanded with orange blossom; but Dulcidio, now condemned to solitude, lies slumped into his cushions and into despair. Doctors and medicine men come from all over, but can do nothing for the course of his fever and the collapse of everything else.

With his small battery radio, bought from a passing Turk, Dulcidio spends his nights and days sighing and listening to melodies long out of fashion. His parents, despairing, watch him pine away. He no longer asks for a wife, declaring I'm hungry. Now he pleads, I am made a poor beggar for love, and in a broken voice, and showing an alarming tendency to rhyme, he pays painful homage to that certain She who stole his soul and his serenity.

The whole populace sets out to find her. Searchers scour heaven and earth, but they do not even know the name of the vanished one, and no one has seen a woman wearing glasses in the neighborhood or beyond.

One Sunday afternoon, Dulcidio has a premonition. He gets up, in pain, and sets out painfully for the riverbank.

She is there.

In floods of tears, Dulcidio announces his love for the elusive and indifferent dream-girl. He confesses that he has died of thirst for the honeys of your mouth, allows that I don't deserve your disregard, my beautiful dove, and showers her with compliments and caresses.

The wedding day arrives. Everyone is delighted, for the people have gone a long time without a fiesta, and Dulcidio is the only one there of the marrying kind. The priest gives him a good price, as a special client.

Guitar music engulfs the sweethearts, the harp and the violins sound in all their glory. A toast of everlasting love is raised to the happy pair, and rivers of punch flow under the great bouquets of flowers.

Dulcidio is sporting a new skin, pink on his shoulders and greenish blue on his prodigious tail.

When at last the two are alone and the hour of truth arrives, he declares to her:

—I give you my heart, for you to tread on.

She blows out the candle in a single breath, lets fall her wedding dress, spongy with lace, slowly removes her glasses, and tells him, Don't be an asshole, knock off the bullshit. With one tug, she unsheathes him like a sword, flings his skin on the floor, embraces his naked body, and sets him on fire.

Afterward Dulcidio sleeps deeply, curled up against this woman, and dreams for the first time in his life.

She eats him while he is still sleeping. She goes on consuming him in small bites, from head to tail, making little sound and chewing as gently as possible, taking care not to wake him, so that he will not carry away a bad impression.