

A Woman's Voice
Carles Cortés

(Kathleen McNerney)

I

I was young once, too...and not as long ago as you might think. I promise! It was a different era, I know...but we were happy then too! We also had problems, joys, conflicts, hopes. It was a very different time, and yet, it might seem a lot like yours, too, in some ways. With differences, of course, plenty has changed since then, it seems so distant and yet really, basically similar, too. I don't like to go out much any more, as you can see, I always have my legs under the table with the little brazier, next to the fire, because my legs don't have the strength they used to. It's so cold out there, haven't you noticed? I bet it's going to snow tonight, a lot of white flakes, like flowers of ice. It's been such a long time since it's snowed in this town! Things aren't like they were before, when it really did get cold, and we went to bed hoping there wouldn't be any school the next day. And we didn't have to go to school that next day; we couldn't even open the door, because the snow kept falling, by the basketful, everything was so white and so dark at the same time, there wasn't much light. I opened the window without mother knowing it, and I could see how it kept on snowing and snowing, the sky was so white and thick. I called out to my sister...Sara, can't you see how it's coming down? And back to bed again, to feel those blankets warming up my body once more. Because in those days the blankets were really heavy, not like the ones nowadays, they aren't blankets or anything like it! They seem like paper, with a couple of little hairs...before, they were wool, we called them **heavy wool blanket**, I don't even hear that word any more, and they really warmed us up, it was something else! Some bad winter days, mother put so many of them on us that we felt we'd been beaten when we got up. A pain on the inside, like in the bones, for having had that weight on us all night. But we were warm, that's for sure. Wait, I was talking about the snow that fell and fell, all that night, now I remember. One time, my older brother, old Uncle Andreu, I know I've talked about him before, he couldn't get home from the theater where he'd gone that evening to see one of those funny little plays they sometimes brought to town on Sunday evenings. While the show was going on, it didn't stop snowing, and it snowed so much that there were several feet of it on the ground when they tried to go out, and they couldn't even open the doors. It was already snowing when the play started, but no one could imagine that so much of it would fall in the hour or so the show went on. They finally managed to climb out the windows and get to nearby houses, because to come home they would have had to cross that road that led from the house to the highway, and the little path was always impassible as soon as it rained a bit or did anything like that. You have to remember that we didn't have asphalt then, like we do now, but it was all so lovely, so white and pretty when it snowed, what memories it brings! Childhood dreams, too. Jaume, sweetie, would you check to see that the stove is plugged in...it's as cold as death and I can feel it getting inside my bones. And pay attention to those dreams, to those memories of the past, you'll see I'm right, you can believe, at my seventy-four years, I've seen a lot of water under the bridge.

I was a girl like all the others, good-looking and vain, too. Everyone said I looked nice when I got dressed to go out. Even though I was only fourteen or fifteen, I made myself up, of

course I did, but discretely, so they wouldn't be talking about me, saying weird things, ugly things like I heard them saying about other girls in the neighborhood...doesn't Pepita look **floozy** with her lips so red? or, Paquita's **resemble** just like her godmother, look how tight all her clothes are, and all that kind of stuff. My dress was nice and long so my ankles wouldn't show; my belt pretty tight but the folds of the dress full enough not to show off my body too much. Because I was--still am--a bit full-figured. You know, women are still the same, thinking everybody's looking at you as if you were a sack of apples or oranges. My mother, grandma Antonia, always put a girdle on me, one of those that squeezes in your flesh, even when I was young. She said that way I wouldn't get a big belly like my father. He really did have a big one, he couldn't even tie his own shoes. Belt tight and well covered, that's how I liked to cross the bridge to go to the middle of town. I knew they were looking me over, but I pretended I didn't. I never liked the feeling of being watched, and even less by men! None of them dared to say anything out of line to me, because I would disappear...'Look, there goes Eva, she sure looks good! Just like her mother when she was young!...'What do you mean? Mrs. Antonia never had half the good taste the girl has...she's a real lady.'

We didn't have running water...it was post-war time; that war, that damn war that nowadays you study in school like something long ago and unreal, but for me and everyone in my generation it was something we lived through...My dad was killed during the Germans' last airplane bombing, from shrapnel, because the fascists here didn't have airplanes, or any kind of shame for anything they did. None. Dad died while he was trying to get to a refuge, after work. Poor daddy John, he wasn't with us very long! I was the little one, '*la menueta*' as he said, because I don't know if you know that he was from Alacant and he talked a little different; I liked it when he called '*la menueta*', and said other funny words, but mother didn't: 'such a long time you've lived in this town and you still don't talk right' she would say, and 'my mother told me not to marry you, no trade, no money, a real good-for-nothing you are, loafer, sloppy worker, like everyone from your town, all you're good for is shuffling around, like they say, Alacantí is the same as Drunkard.' Mother always bawled him out because he didn't bring home all the money he earned at the factory, he'd say he already paid for that week's food, stuff like that, but poor Antonia knew it wasn't so, they'd seen him at the casino, gambling was his weakness. All four of us kids watched them, and listened to them, but we didn't understand much. All we knew was that we lived in a house without running water, and we had to go to the fountain twice a day to fill up the jugs and wash the clothes, and that's the part I liked...because my two sisters, Sara and Teresa, didn't want to go. I did, I'd stuff all the **laundry** into the **bucket**, grab the soap and the brush, and off I'd go to the river, where the mayor had just inaugurated a new washer for the town, with all the ceremonies such an event called for: '*don José Llorens*, in honor of all the ladies of this town who bravely resisted the power of the Reds' all pronounced proudly in that other, official language...I was there that day, and I didn't know what all that stuff about the Reds was, Reds all over the place. I liked the color red, for sure I loved wearing that red dress that my godmother, Paca, the baker's wife, gave me. She was Paquita's godmother too, my friend, the one they gossiped about for wearing tight clothes. Paca, the baker's wife, knew how to sew, her hands seemed to push and pull on that thread and as if by magic a blouse or a dress would appear; everyone in the neighborhood wanted Paca to be the godmother of their little girls because she made such pretty things. And so, there I was the day of the inauguration, all dressed up in that red dress. The 'washer' really wasn't more than a ditch, a pond, all set up so the women would bend over all day to wash clothes for the men. There was *don José* yakking about how we were the future of the fatherland, and on and on about the Reds; in

the end it was all a bunch of foolishness to get us, the women of the town, to do the washing for guys like him--I'm sure his wife spent all day starching his shirts; *don* José was one of those who always had a buttoned-up collar. That's the type he was, my mother always said so, and she said *donya* Rosario, the mayor's wife--mother called her Xarito, the fisher woman, because she came from a family that had always sold fish at the market, even though later she would say her father was in the Merchant Marine, some people put on such airs--anyway, mother said she was just a poor soul, always looking anxious and worried. While the mayor was saying those nice words, I could imagine his wife, brush in hand, bent over the washer, and *don* José with the belt, yelling 'come on, more, more, do it better!' All that, as you can imagine, I kept inside me while I watched the spectacle of the mayor and the rich ladies of the town with their fancy lipstick who showed off at the inauguration even though they didn't care about the washer, since they would never have to bend over it. Their maids would, of course, but not them. I also noticed how some of those fine ladies looked at me, they stared at my red dress, and I could hear what they said: 'Look at Antonia's daughter, what do you think about that, all dressed up in red, her dad hasn't even been dead for a year.' 'Well, she's wearing her dad's colour, and she's an atheist, and naughty, too, like that whole family!' 'A red dress for mourning, yes sir, that's the upbringing Antonia gives them.' It was a time of hatred, revenge, envy about one thing or another, because even though the war ended, people's quarrels went on as before, and as usual, the most jeopardized were those who didn't have much, whether they called us Reds or atheists or peasants, anything at all provoked the aggression of those swindlers among the richest people in town. The women gossiped constantly: 'Poor Antonia, what a cross she had to bear with that husband of hers, and now her youngest girl turns out just like him, that ne'er-do-well.' I didn't pay much attention: to my face it was all praise: 'how nice you look, sweetie,' and behind my back, they criticized me. What I had in my head was just to gather the clothes, the brush and soap, and come down and do the washing when the ceremonies were over. Because the washer was nice, and that spot along the river was so pretty. It was a lovely meadow with grass growing up between the rocks, clear water, and flowers, a place you could sit for hours waiting for the clothes to dry. I would come home looking great, with cheeks red from the sun and the sweet-smelling clothes over my arm. My sister Sara preferred to stay at home with mother and help with the cooking and other household chores; I loved to be outdoors, with the fresh air, the sky, the clouds, the river, the streets. I like to watch people coming and going and I saw myself as one more among them, on my way to the river, under the bridge, with my stuff and my songs, because I loved to sing, especially love songs: today's songs aren't like they used to be! The old melodies had rhythm and rhyme and love, lots of love and passion, and some of them--I don't know what *donya* Rosario and her friends would have said if they heard them--they were all about your heart, and your body, and your lovely chest, and I'll die for you, my love. I bet the fine ladies listened to them by themselves, hiding, and crying too, just like they made me cry, I'm sure they did! So that was it, down the hill, and I can swear to you I never had to come back alone--there was always some guy trying to get my attention, they'd offer to help me, tell me how pretty I looked, they'd say they'd seen me at the festival, ask me my name, saying, 'you can't take that heavy thing up the hill all by yourself, let me help you.' I'd pretend to be unsure, 'I can't possibly accept, I don't know you, my mother wouldn't like it, what would the other women think if they saw me with you,' etc., but in the end I accepted, of course! It saved me having to lug that basket full of clothing up the hill; damp clothes are heavy...now with washers and all, you don't know what it's like, but it was tough. The fellows that went with me were disappointed anyway, I could tell by the faces they made when I said I was in a hurry, that I had to get home early so mother wouldn't suspect anything or realize that I

hadn't come back alone. They always had their heads up and tongues wagging, 'Okay, when will I see you again, what time, what day.' And I'd say my mother didn't want me to go out, I was too young, we're still in mourning for my father, and the truth was I didn't really like any of them. They left a lot to be desired, at least for me, and I know I can tell you that since you're both young and you understand what I mean. I couldn't have said anything like that to anyone at the time, not even my best friends Paquita and Pepita, I don't know what they'd have thought of me, even though they told me things about others. To me, guys were disgusting, dirty and smelly, even if they put on a lot of cologne, they didn't do a thing for me, I didn't want any of them. But it suited me to accept, don't you think? After all, they were the ones who wanted to help me...and I let them. What would you have done, Mireia, sweetie?

II

Pere was the only one who impressed me. He was stubborn; he was the only one who kept coming back I don't know how many times, to help me with the laundry. At first, like with all the others, I told him I couldn't accept, that he should go away, but he insisted. And he knew what he was doing, he knew how to slowly get inside of my way of being, he quickly learned my rules of the game. I fell madly in love with him, like a wounded animal, truly, anxiously, with intense passion and desire. I wanted to keep seeing him, I sought out any odd moment, unexpected times, to be with him. I washed more and more clothes, just to be with Pere. Mother said there was no need, that we could wait until Monday to go to the washer. But I said I wanted to go, dirty clothes bothered me, and my sister Sara, who shared the bedroom with me, understood. She helped me, she got mud on the sheets, she said she'd come in through the mud in front of the door, she made up a story about how she had a pebble in her shoe and she stumbled, and when she took it off she got it all dirty and she didn't realize it, so when she got into bed it bothered her. She couldn't sleep on muddy sheets, dirty clothes annoyed her too. How thankful I was to Sara, because she succeeded in getting mother to let me go to the river early the next morning because we didn't have any spare sheets so they had to dry all day. Pere came with me, and I was tremendously happy. The night after the muddy sheets, Sara and I slept in the same bed, my bed, and she asked me about him: 'Listen, Eva, you're really in love with Pere, aren't you? Be careful, men just want to end up with our secret, and you're too young; I am too, it's true, but the two years I have on you are enough to teach me that not all men are what they seem. Pere is young too, and he seems like a nice guy, I know, but I've heard that he's had a lot of experience...' I covered her mouth, I didn't want to hear any more, no lies or surprises! Not even his name, Pere, my Pere, the most immaculate being on earth, angel among angels, the most faithful of all, there was no way he could have bad intentions...and I was convinced that he hadn't had other girlfriends! Sara, I know he's already been in the military, and they do all kinds of things there, but not him, he told me, he hasn't been with any other girl. My fifteen years didn't leave room for much experience, and I didn't know yet what love and suffering were all about, that they came together in one package. Love and pain, so often in the same package or the same envelope, like those letters that arrive at their destination without wanting to, but the sender wanted them to: always together, love and pain, happiness and suffering. Because I suffered a lot, after that night!

The first kiss came not long after that, short, intense, like a cloud that inflates before a storm, big, and expansive like cotton candy. He told me it was his first kiss too, and I didn't believe it but I didn't care, I had to believe it, what else could I do? It was my first anyway; I tasted that new flavour with an echo of music, those songs and melodies I knew that made me feel like living. It all filled me with happiness, dreams of the future, still far off, dreams that told me I would do so many things in life...with Pere! My whole existence with him, with his support and help, with him, just him. The first kiss, the first experience, a timid contact between our lips that filled each with the flavour of the other. Different lips, sweet and juicy with affection, like egg whites, all soft and tender. Paquita told me that the guy stuck his tongue in her mouth her first time...what are you saying? What a feeling that must be! Impossible...what do you do with that tongue on your teeth? Bite it? 'Shut up, silly, what do you know, that's your imagination.' You mean he put it between your lips? Words, to me they were just words that I couldn't believe at fifteen, those years that seem so far away and yet so close now that I'm telling you about them. Yes, kids, telling you brings it all back. So why did I start to tell you all my old secrets? You want me to go on? No, I don't mind, and you know how I like to chatter, especially if someone's listening to me, and I can see that you are paying attention. Okay, let me think back for new things, you haven't heard the best ones yet!

I asked Pere not to kiss me ever again. 'But it's your fault too, Eva!' his face was all surprised. No, that can't be, you forced me, women never take the first step, you men cause all our problems, you're our temptation, our vices are your fault, that's what my mother always said to my father. That's what I always heard! 'I'm sure your parents kissed too, just like we did.' No, that's impossible, and if they did, my father forced her. No, it was impossible, what we did was ugly, like we were animals. I'm sure my parents never did that. Just at the wedding, when the priest told them to, but never around us, no! That kiss made me shiver inside, intensely, and I didn't understand what was going on. I'd gotten the prize I wanted ever since I met my Pere, but at the same time I felt such a repulsion for my body, and his too. I felt dirty, damaged, and guilty for doing something I shouldn't have done at least until I was married, in the church, wearing white, with my heart singing love songs and the priest saying our names, saying 'I do,' putting rings on each other's fingers, with bouquets of lilies around the altar, or roses, I like roses better, white roses by the statue of Mary and on the benches, and...couldn't I wear red? I've always like it best, it's my colour, white bothers me. I didn't see myself married, and certainly not in white, a colour that doesn't suit me even now. Red is life, action, soul, desire, will, illusion; white is calm, laziness, lack of things, emptiness. And I don't like all that. You have to live life intensely, and that's what I did, even though at the time all I could see was my marriage to Pere. It would be around Easter time, I told Sara, my confidant, and I'll wear a long train and all the kids will throw carnations as I walk by, the factories will close, they'll open late because of me, the peasants won't go to the fields, and my honeymoon will be different too: we'll get on the train and won't stop until we get all the way to Valencia, and we'll stay the whole weekend, like real lovers, and my Pere will carry me in his arms from the station and everyone will applaud and I'll gaze into the eyes of my beloved.

All those memories brought on by that first kiss! The desire, the guilt, all together! The unknown, that strange moisture in my mouth, the attraction toward something they'd always told me was a sin but that we've always desired...we always wonder, when will it come, that first kiss? And when it does come, you get such an intense feeling, a sweetness that makes you dizzy and stimulates you and makes you want to live...and the effect lasts

for days and days. The image of the first kiss: so many memories it invokes, and so many experiences since then! Life is short and intense lived again through the memory of that kiss. Come on now, don't be shy, have you had your first one yet, you two?