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DEATH AND ITS PERCEPTIONS

Every time I write something I search within my life hoping to find events related to the topic I am trying to develop. In the following paragraphs I will try to explain how the way we understand life is closely related to the way we understand death by looking at Gabriel García Marquez's short story entitled, "The handsomest drowned man in the world". I can imagine some people think this is crazy. Life and death are exactly the opposite you might say. But, as I see things, your idea of death can, or can not, enforce your life.

These words have a tyle as background: "The handsomest owned man in the world" by Gabriel 'Garcia Marquez. In it he shows how people change their point of view on life as they

change their thoughts on death. It also shows how communities develop collective feelings, dreams, hopes and fears and what death has to do in this process. It shows how people can transform their life if they change their environmental perception. In this tale Garcia Marquez has drawn a picture of Colombia or any community that has the power to mix reality and dreams. I can not be outside this picture, specially when I feel I am of the blood and food of my country.

Who other than kids has the power of truly denying death? In the earliest years of life, unless you have been shocked by death, you just do not even think about it. First, because it does not really exist for you. Older people protect you from the scary idea of death for as long as they can. Second because when you are young, death is the elderly's concern. Even today sometimes I think death will never come for me; as if I were somehow protected by a power stronger than me, but that comes from me. When you really learn that death means the end of life as you know it (no matter what happens afterwards), you place a limit on your dreams. Then you begin to think about your role in life, your transcendence; all those things some of us tasted, enjoyed and discussed when we were teenagers. Kids can not see death, because it does not exist; instead of death they see, as in the story, an army ship or a whale. They can even play with it without fear:

"The first children who saw the dark and slinky bulge approaching through the sea let themselves think it was an enemy ship. Then they saw it had no flags or masts and they thought it was a whale. But when it washed up on the beach, they removed the clumps of seaweed, the jellyfish tentacles, and the remains of fish and flotsam, and only then did they see that it was a drowned man."(1)

How differently does a kid or a community that has not developed the idea of death grow. Some communities live in a sort of endless time. Others, like ours, fight every day against the idea of death and try at all times to forget they have the power of self-destruction.

But, suddenly; nobody remembers why or when death appears in our life. Some times it is shocking, at others it simply arrives quietly, without your permission. And nothing will ever be the same. For the first time you realize life can and does end. So you begin to create your own ideas on death, based on your current knowledge, your hopes, your imagination and, of course, your environment. What people tell you is very important. What you hear in the news, what you hear from your religion, the moments when you feel specially loved or when you love somebody from the depths of your heart. Even the jokes people make, or the games they play, are basic in the construction of a particular idea of death. If all this is true there must have been existed as many ideas of death as people in the earth. And not only that, but you can even change that idea---- which certainly rules many of your decisions---- as time goes by. I know ten years ago I was sure, my life would be like a file in a computer that has not been saved and which can vanish in a moment. You can do whatever you want, but that file never existed for the memory of the computer. A little crazy, depressing? I was fifteen then. This is the way a sailor can find a dead body and actually think it can keep on growing under special circumstances (specially if it is a drowned man):

"The men who carried him to the nearest house noticed that he weighed more than any dead man they had ever known, almost as much as a horse, and they said to each other that maybe he'd been floating too long and the water had got into his bones. When they laid him on the floor they

said he'd been taller than all other men because there was barely enough room for him in the house, but they thought that maybe the ability to keep on growing after death was part of the nature of certain drowned men."(2).

The women of this village would even make a profile of the drowned man based on their own circumstances; giving him the job of maing their dreams come true, and even blaming him because of their bad luck:

"They thought that he would have had so much authority that he could have drawn fish out of the sea simply by calling their names and that he would have put so much work into his land that springs would have burst forth from among the rocks so that he would have been able to plan flowers on the cliffs. They secretly compared him to their own men, thinking that for all their lives theirs were incapable of doing what he could do in one night, and they ended up dismissing them deep in their hearts as the weakest, meanest, and most useless creatures on earth."(3).

The way people face death is related to their funerals, their houses, their dreams and their mood. This is why a society as this one we live in, tries to develop new rules and parameters that allow to forget about death in the near future. I am not talking simply about physical death, but about the extinction itself of the community we know. Probably Colombia is, as we once were, also a teenager denying its own death.

When I was seventeen I had my first serious position on death. I thought life would be finished by the time I died, but I had no panic because I recognized my self-as-part of the universe. That as the time when I met Esteban, the rape given to the drowned man by the villagers, for the first time. You have to develop your ideas about life and death

in order to find Esteban. The recognition of Esteban opens a whole new sight in life; it means you can create your own life parameters. If a community develops an idea of death and recognizes what is death for itself, its people will create their rules based on a this criteria. I hope a country like Colombia will see that its Esteban means that it has the power of self-destruction, but also the power of creation. This country can construct or destroy and it will enforce it. The recognition of Esteban means things will not be the same again. That happened to me, that can happen to an old teenage community and that hap pened to the men that saw the face of the drowned man and finally recognize him as such:

"He was Esteban. It was not necessary to repeat it for them to recognize him. If they had been told Sir Walter Raleigh, even they might have been impressed with his gringo accent, the macaw on his shoulder, his cannibal-killing blunderbuss, but there could be only one Esteban in the world and there he was, stretched out like a sperm whale, shoeless, wearing the pants of an undersized child, and with those stony nails that had to be cut with a knife."(4).

There are many differences between the way people, who have lived different circumstances, recognize Esteban. But, of course, there are also a lot of coincidences. Some people believe whatever happens in this land, they will reach eternal life. Others believe about that eternal life that is divided into heaven and hell. Others think this life we know is

just part of a series of appearances. Others think life will end with death. People run their lives based on what they expect from death. Some try to enjoy this little time that we are in this world. Some suffer with the idea of sin and the eternal punishment. Some dedicate their life to establishing communication with god and creating a close relation with him. Everybody lives by looking as far as their beliefs allow them. Communities do the same. A village can be dark just because there is no reason for it to be bright. If no one comes to visit them, even dead people, then, why should it be different?:

"While they fought for the privilege of carrying him on the steep escarpment by the cliffs, men and women became aware for the first time of the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards, the narrowness of their dreams as they faced the splendor and beauty of their drowned man." (5).

However, if there is a beloved ghost walking down the streets and if there is a hope to see him again, the village has to be prepared for that moment:

"But they also knew that everything would be different from then on, that their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors so that Esteban's memory could go everywhere (...) because they were going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban's memory eternal and they were going to break their backs digging for springs among the stones and planting flowers on the cliffs..."(6).

This is the time for Esteban to begin to use another dress. It is the time when our circumstances and thoughts change, and life and death are seen through a new filter. He will always be Esteban but the one from the new "reality." I myself dressed up Esteban different. This can

^{(3).} World Writers Today. The handsomest drowned man in the world. Gabriel Garcia Marquez. p. 128. ScottForesman. Glenview, Illinois, US. 1995.

^{(4).} World Writers Today. The handsomest drowned man in the world. Gabriel Garcia Marquez. p. 130. ScottForesman. Glenview, Illinois, US. 1995.

happen to any person any time. I hope this happens to us as Colombians. We have to change our permanent sense of self-destruction for a sense of selfconstruction. We have to change our idea of death to enforce our idea of life. This must be the principal goal we have to achieve at the end of this hazardous peace process we are supposed to be in.

This is, in fact, how the drowned man in the story changed the life of the villagers. Everything came from the new perspectives they had. The village became the place of gardens after they met Esteban and, Esteban himself was dressed with their most beautiful dreams

and feelings:

"in future years at dawn the passengers on great liners would awaken, suffocated by the smell of gardens on the high seas, and the captain would have to come down from the bridge in his dress uniform, with his astrolabe, his pole star, and his row of war medals and, pointing to the promontory of roses on the horizon, he would say in fourteen languages, look there, where the wind is so peaceful now that it's gone to sleep beneath the bed's, over there, where the sun's so bright that the sunflowers don't know which way to turn, yes, over there, that's Esteban's village."(7).

(Germán Hernández)

....IN THIS WAR, SILENCE IS MY WEAPON....

She put her finger on my pointed chin and said: -"I don't like the weak little toots you make on your flute. I don't like the way you can make a fist for tetherball, why don't you make a fist? Come on get tough, come on throw fists..."- while she was yelling me ! could see in her eyes the bitterness of

-"Why don't you scream "help?", she kept saying.- Help? This girl is so miserable; her family has to as different as our hearts. My mother always says: "Asking for help is a sort of pain, a weakness and a shame". When I decided to fight in silence against those personalities", mv "make-up supported me, and my sister. In the name of the Shiu family, we would never hurt we'd always protect other, each ourselves from "apparent-help". Poor girl she will never know what it is to be protected.

-"You'd better say something" she said. She shook my shoulder and pulled my hair again, I could see her hands even though my tears were blinding my eyes. I could see them, they were awful!

"Through a woman's eyes you can see her soul and, through her hands she shows her heart, her fingers, her nails, her palm and its lines. The way you handle your hands demonstrates who you are" My mother always told us that. Every sunday at 10:00 a.m. It was then that she, my sister and I, sat down around the table to embellish our hearts. My mother is the best embellisher of hearts. That's why our house is always full of American ladies waiting for her. I cannot imagine how some of their hearts are. They must be terrible, because sometimes, some of them arrive at our house in a hurry for her aid. They even pay her a lot of money. But she doesn't do it for the money, she receives it out of courtesy. My mother huna annoucement in front of the house with a magical word written on it. According to

her life. Through my tears I could wet the darkness of her unhappiness which was almost darker than her skin. What a shame! Poor girl. I couldn't imagine how a real Chinese girl could feel with those enormous and calloused hands. I would never talk. I've been fighting all my life against those false "american-feminine speaking personalities". I would never be another. I wanna be me.

^{(7).} World Writers Today. The handsomest drowned man in the world. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, p. 132. ScottForesman, Glenview, Illinois, US. 1995.

her they could beautify their hearts. That word is: MANICURIST.

-"I'm going to pull you harder"she continued saying to me. But while
her strong and bossy voice was rumbling
inside my ears, I only could see her heart
moaning out of pain; gusshing out from
her prisoner-hands full of black nails and
stubby fingers. Poor girl!

Ever since I was in my belly's mother I realized what kind of woman I was to be. My world was then so sweet clear and warm; every sound, every movement was amazing, everything was perfect. There my voice found its rhythm. In those days, I liked to talk, my charm were my long speeches. All this until the day I had to move into this world. couldn't get used to it cause it's so shocking. It's too fast, too full of light but not bright. This is why my voice was in disorder. It never found the connection. Even if I tried, I couldn't do it. If I spoke. it wouldn't be me. If I talked as I am. nobody would understand because my voice's speed is incompatible, its tone imperceptible. Besides, I would have to make up a different personality like this girl in fornt of me. I would never accept this, I am not a part of a series. So I would never talk.

-"Now look what you've done You are going to pay for this", that girl scolded me with her voice, interrupted by her weepings. She was so pathetic that i would've liked to tell her that in spite of her violence, or of my physical pain, I couldn't and wouldn't speak. -"Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader or pompom girl? What are you going to do for a living? She kept on screaming, almost in convultions. I really felt pity, I wouldn't like to be her.

Late, really late in the afternoon, the torture ceased. But neither my pity nor my war finished. I only saw her again 18 months later. Days, I thought, in which her family was in the labor of embellishing her heart. It was the very same day when the audience aclaimed my story written down by my sister. My

sister, my mother, and even my father, all were there. However, something strange happened.

Among this jubilee, backstage I saw a lady getting closer and closer. She was crying, and if you ask me, ever since I saw her I began to feel a deep shame. I her soul, tired and downhearted. When she came close to me I noticed those memorable hands hustled by life. scratched by the years. She took my hair, and walked around me. She looked me up and down, caressed my face slowly, scraping my skin with her rough palms. Her tears were going down her wrinkles which seemed like abysses. She kept wiping her nose on her dark sweater which smelled of attic. Suddenly, she opened her mouth and with a sour penetrating gasp coming from a gang of yellow and black teeth which reached my she screamed soul.TALKKKKKKK!!!!!......". Her dark skin became purple, her scream seemeed to be strangling her. Abruptly her breasts fall down, and never got up again.

Then I knew thatin this war silence is my weapon.....

(Patricia Lafont)

THE HANDSOMEST DROWNED MAN IN THE WORLD

Gabriel García Márquez locates this short story, honoring his own history, in a village near the coast. During the story, he tells of the arrival of a drowned man to this village. This is a habitual fact, but this time it would change the villagers' life.

The first contact is not extraordinary. The dead body arrives from the seas, and far away it cannot be distinguished from an enemy ship, or even a whale. When it arrives, it is not different, at all, from any other drowned

man who might have arrived in the same way.

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The extraordinary starts to appear slowly. Men that are carrying him note that he weighs much more than any normal man. He is also taller than a normal man. However, they explain away these facts in a very rational way. For them this drowned man is not different from any other man of bigger dimensions. But something very different occurs with women.

The women are the ones who are in charge of the drowned man. Maybe is because of the deserved fame that women have developed in history and literature. That fame which signals them as being more sensitive, more concerned with details. This is why it is precisely the women the ones who are first shocked by the drowned man's charms. Women start to recognize the meaning of the drowned man's body size beyond the body itself. And it is precisely the oldest woman who "discovers" that the drowned man's name is Esteban.

Esteban; just a name, but not any name. But the magic of Esteban's body is not only its beauty. Maybe Esteban had the beauty and the strength of someone who lives fullness. Maybe his face was as peaceful as the face of someone who faces death, even accidentally, having the certainty of having truly lived. How could this man's face have been? Without seeing him, only by hearing his name, you can imagine tracks of his personality. Gabriel García Márques gives this name that effect. Moreover, he affirms the meaning of this name, when he says that the more stubborn among them ----the youngest---- created another name for the drowned man. Lautaro. But that name could not be the drowned man's name. He could not ne any other than Esteban

This name is now for the women not drily a body, but also a complete story. They start to guess at all the difficulties that he could have had during his life because of this huge body. They start to imagine him facing those difficulties with such simplicity, with such humility. They could not avoid being touched by Esteban's sweet story. Even the men when they uncover Esteban's face they also find this name; that of a man and a story beyond the drowned body. Esteban's sincerity touches everybody; men, women, even the most mistrustful man.

That is why they start preparing the last and unique homage they could have for Esteban; his funeral. When people in neighboring villages meet Esteban, he also leaves them breathless. They join the funeral which becomes every time bigger and more majestic. It is precisely during the funeral, when they came to see themselves. Esteban's greatness, a greatness which was actually given by themselves, made them realize the desolation of their streets and the narrowness of their dreams. They become aware of the real meaning Esteban had in their lives.

Esteban made the villagers conscious of themselves. They changed their life style through him. Now, imagine at least only for a moment, that you are in the same situation as the villagers. There is a dead body in front of you. It is up to you to create his story, his name, his moments, his qualities, and his defects. What would you create? Would that story not express your hopes and mistrusts about yourself? We regain our innate capacity to dream, to imagine and to believe. A Esteban, or whatever your name, could really change your life.

(Juliana Garay)

ON REVENGE

Since the most ancient times we have seen that human beings have in their depths this "feeling" that we have called REVENGE. It is just waiting for a trigger to come out. It makes us take

some decisions that, in one way or another, go against us our own peacefulness. Jesus said two thousand years ago "if some one hit you in your cheek you turn the other cheek" But contrary to this we see in this story that Juvencio Nava killed Guadalupe Terreros because this Guadalupe had killed one of Juvencio's yearlings. Thirty-five years later Guadalupe's son kills Juvencio to avenge his father.

This story show us two positions we can take when we have been hurt physically or psychologically. It all depends on the control we have on an inner felling that everybody carries (a kind of gland). Can we control this feeling? What could be the process to control it? First of all we have to try to understand its origin, analyze the results when we have taken revenge, and finally, we have to analyze what religion says about it.

THE ORIGIN OF REVENGE

The exact meaning of this word, looked up in a dictionary, is:

"To inflict pain or injury in return for pain or injured received. Desire of vengeance."

We have seen that Juvencio killed Lupe Terreros because Lupe killed one of his yearlings after not haing let his animals have access to some pastures in his farm. He was in psychological pain about his animal and about his family because of Guadalupe's attitude. Not only would the animals suffer of hunger but also Juvencio's own family.

But before Guadalupe killed the yearling they were together playing a senseless game: one of them breaking through the fence and driving his animals to the pasture, and the other one mending the same fence in order not to let the animals use it. The trigger, the killing of the yearling, was the moment when Juvencio's gland blew out. The

explosion contained his mind, his heart and his soul. He decided to rub out Guadalupe from this life.

Guadalupe was found lying in a stream hacked with a machete and with an ox goad in his belly. Juvencio, we can deduce, had time to make a plan: the place, the weapons, and the time to commit it. What does it mean? Well it means that the poison of the liquid in this "gland" can plan, seeks to destroy and can last a life. This is why Guadalupe's son, Colonel Terreros, waits all his life to avenge his father, and even his mother, who died because of the pain the murder of her husband caused her.

But the question is if this revenge is really an inner gland invisible to science and unchangeable so that when it is shattered its contents fills up our body, contaminating our blood and even our children. Children whose glands will be waiting for an opportunity to burst.

In the history of human beings there have always been killings because of wars, envy, jealousy; for instance, we saw what Cain did. But not only killings are triggers that shatter this 'gland'. You can see the same process when someone is betrayed by someone else. She feels like taking revenge. We seek to cause pain or injury to that person who hurt us, physically or psychologically. So through the times people have received this poison generation after generation.

This idea is difficult to believe because you feel real love after you have been together for a long time and you have shared things. You both respect each other. In fact you can not break a long love with only a bad action, you do not feel like taking revenge. So love also began at the beginnings of the life when Adan and Eva had to share every thing, then they felt in love and this feeling was deposited in their children and so forth. In fact all feelings are developed through time, and not only the evil ones.

the other possibility is that God put many feelings inside us, good ones and bad ones, so through your life when you face some situations they come out and invade you in a instant, making you take decisions that will mark your path in life and even probably after it. These feelings will always be there in your mind as information, in your soul as part of it and no matter what you do to control them you will be invaded, in any moment, by them.

I think is the first theory is more logical because the second one does not let you take responsibility for good or bad decisions. I mean in a hurtful situation you would always take revenge. There would be no way to control it. It would be a trap you could not get out of, if you fell in it. We would be just like animals, or even worse.

Justino would not have taken revenge, he would have done something to save him. He could have controlled himself, this inner feeling, the gland would not have blown up.

RESULTS OF REVENGE

What happened after Juvencio killed don Lupe? It was not just his death at the hands of the Colonel, 65 years later, but the fact that he had to run away during all his life. He lost his things, his wife; everything. He did not have one day of peace. He had to hide in mountains during long periods of time, just having herbs to eat. It was so painful for his soul that before he was captured he actually saw those men coming for him, but he did not do anything to avoid them. He could have gone to mountains, but he did not. All his life was ruined because of what he did that day, Moreover, he caused pain to his family, his children and grandchildren. The pain did not end with his death; after it other people began to suffer. Taking revenge does not leave a good taste, your pain persists. You do not feel anything after that, you do not feel at ease. You do not rest.

AVOIDING REVENGE

Up to now we have discussed the origin of this feeling and have looked at the results when we take revenge. But Jesus says "if someone hits your cheek you must turn the other". For him taking revenge is not the way. We have realized that taking revenge does not relieve the pain or the grief. Conversely, it opens a door to a place we do not want to enter. But, then we ask, how can we control this inner feeling if we cannot even see it coming? How can we turn the other cheek?

Well I have some ideas and you will have to propose some others.

First of all, the actions to control this 'feeling' will depend on the kind of injury you have suffered. First, there are laws in societies which place on limit on your You must calm wishes for revenge. down, or else, you go to prison, loose your job, are thrown out of your school. These rules help this process of avoiding revenge. You have always to think about the immediate consequences if you take revenge. Likewise, you have to think about how your family and the people you love will be affected because you have broken society's basic laws. The second point is that you have to think you really do not want to cross that door. You do not want to be involved in that dangerous game. Your life will be your prison as it was for Juvencio.

You will still be feeling angry and you still want to take revenge. But, if you listen to Christ, you have to make the most difficult decision; the decision to forgive, as the best possibility, or at least to forget. What are the differences between forgiving and forgetting? If you forgive, you can begin again: nothing has Once again you have happened. confidence in that person again. At the same instant you decide to forgive, you forget what happened. It won't come back to bother you. If you only forget, but not completely forgive, you have get away from the person that caused your ill-feelings. Otherwise, you will always be

bothered by them.

I have told you what to do but I have not told you how can you do it. For strong situations I don't have the answer, but I know now that one clue is to look at Justino Nava. He showed courage by not avenging his father as Colonel Terreros did his. Was it becasue he thought about all the consequences he would have had if he had killed Colonel Terreros? Becaus he would have gone to prison? Or because he knew he would have gotten involved in the "game". Did he decide to forget and go away? I do not know for sure why, but I now that you probably find him and his family living somewhere in Mexico. They do not need to run all their lives from themselves.

(William Charry)

TWO WORDS

"Two words", which is a story written by Isabel Allende, presents love in a very strange way. Belisa Crepusculario is a word seller. One day she is asked by a Colonel to write him a speech because he wants to become president. She does so, and in the end tells him two secret words that the author leaves up to the reader's imagination. He repeats the words everyday thorughout the day; then, he delivers his speech in every single town of the country. Due to the fact that the speech is very good, he wins popularity all over. Later on, he gets sick, so sick that the people who work for him think he will not become their president. They bring Belisa and when she comes, she holds his hands. With that we come to the end of the story. In short, they only saw each other twice before he got sick.

When Belisa first saw him, she felt a strong physical attraction towards him. On the other side of the coin stood the Colonel who felt the same attraction the moment she told him the words. For the first time, she was close to him that he could smell her and hear her well. His illness was not physical, though his men knew he would die before he could sit on

the president's chair. What really made him sick, was to discover that he could feel, that he also could love and not merely fight. Before meeting her, the only thing he knew was war. He thought he was strong because of his being able to fight. He wanted to become a president, but he wanted to have the people's approval. He wanted people to see him as a person. But a person like him, of whom everyone is afraid, has become harsh and perhaps even rotten, due to the fact that he has been in war.

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It is at this point that Belisa arrives to his life. He now faces his own feelings. He was able to feel sensations but not feelings. His love was simply "a word written in the beaches of forgetfulness, (not a love) carved in the immensity of the core." (J. Alba). In every human being there is a part that is hidden from eve himself. We do not discover this mistery until someone or something makes it arise. Belisa's words were that something that made his feelings come forth from the depths. That's why he didn't tell anyone. He knew that if he had told somebody his feelings, he would have been lost. If he had spoken, his men wouldn't have trusted him anymore. The Colonel could govern a lot of soldiers but not himself, or at least his feelings. This leader projects his power, as if nothing can make him fall, not even love. This is why in the story they never call the Colonel by his first name, not even by his last name. He is simply the Colonel.

But Belisa's speech to the Colonel was so penetrating that in each word he says he remembers her. He must repeat her two words during the day. She's so important to him, that to be in him she need not be there; "..... and his senses were inflamed with the memory of her feral scent, her fiery heat, the whisper of the hair and the sweetmint breath in his ear..."

For the Colonel it was very difficult to accept he could possibly be

¹ "Two words", Isabel Allende, Page 391, "World writers today"

affected by two simple words from this newcomer.

We usually think that words are too simple and, therefore, we can just ignore them. Words have an unbelievable power that lies in the person's own conscience. When people repeat words several times to us, our subconscious takes those words as true. It is very difficult to convince oneself otherwise. The Colonel repeated the words so many times, that he was totally obsessed with them. We have to be careful about what we say; otherwise, we can cause harm not only to other people but also to ourselves. For instance, in "Romeo and Juliet", Juliet's mother tells her she wished she would spouse her grave. The words becomes true.

At the very beginning Belisa sees the Colonel for the first time. The first thing she thinks is that he is the loneliest man in the world. Why is this so? Because she knew that everyone was afraid of him, anyone was an obstacle for love. His solitude must have that of the exceptional for "solitude is a weight that only can be stood for a long time by exceptional people" (A. Miotto). Colonel could take refuge from his loneliness in war. But, when he didn't have recourse to war, he had to face himself, that is, the only person in the world that he had. Forever unknown to him, Belisa was in love with him. His only love, a love that made him sick with two simple, utterly secret words. The cause of his illness remains, in the story, unknown. But it reamins true that the weakness of his spirit could not stand those two real words of love. Belisa's unforgettable words.

(María Claudia Sandoval)

(Edited by Andrés Melo Cousineau)

