

The Third of Death

by

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Left horn in mottled grey-white pushing its way into right thigh covered in gold ribbons and silk. Arms protracted in pain, face grotesque. Screaming for help serves no purpose, for the entourage of three remain frozen in time, eyes looking towards the heavens for mercy and mouths open as far as they will go. A catastrophe prompted not by the animal itself but by the man tripping, so the press will report in the morning. How could he trip, someone shouts, and others cry out similar complaints, the purists, oh especially the purists, those who defend this spectacle as an art form of the highest calibre and have no time for an animal's misery or a man's doom. Yes, how can a man of such impeccable technique, and matching grace, trip just like that. He was walking with his back to the bull, his cape dangling a little lower than it should, barely a couple of centimetres more than it normally does, and he simply tripped on it. It can happen to anyone, you can trip on the steps when climbing to get to your seat in the stands, as in the case of a few spectators that very day, or in the middle of a bullring and with a colossal creature standing alongside you.

Tossed into the air is the man now. And as he comes down, he is gored halfway. And when he hits the ground with a deafening bump, he breaks a couple of bones but he cannot tell which. Get up and run, one in his entourage shouts from behind

the barrier. The man wants to reply something like *how easy it is to say that sort of thing from where you are* but does not have the strength. The flow of blood from several wounds is now staining his gleaming outfit, his ideas are not all that great anymore, his reflexes unresponsive. He now screams some incomprehensible jargon, but the heartbreak is all there. On hearing him, the bull stands back. It looks around and sees a man lying on the ground, the same man it attacked before. What can it do but strike again, this time with even more brutal force, as if unhinged. Or perhaps it instinctively knows that there is no way it is going to come out alive of this whole bloody episode. Perhaps living so close to its instincts makes it know about the future more than we ever can, with our higher ideals and abundant collections of facts. With our superior qualities, proven by philosophers, and our comprehension of the universe, as stated by Science. But despite all these plusses, shouting for help sometimes produces no results. It is all one big minus. The screams first intimidate the bull, and then bring out its wrath in all its might. And as the man dressed in gold hits the ground once again, the bull comes closer, smells the blood, sees red.

Right horn opens up the man's aorta, hind legs smash into his lower back. The bull is all of six hundred and seventy-five kilogrammes, the largest that sunny afternoon. It thrusts forward its horns both to attack and to show them off to anyone who cares to look. They are shorn, the horns are –unlike in the old days when horns were horns, left to grow as far as they would go and as sharp as they deserved to be. Technically horn-shearing is punished by law, yet –as some claim– it is more than widespread. Such an illegal procedure is nothing short of agonising, with the bull in persistent pain, any shearing displaying nerves endings and blood supply. It also deprives the animal of its most prized appendices, its symbols of power, its own swords to compete with the swords of men. But there is business to be had in all of

this: some make considerable sums, bulls turn out to be less fierce, bullfighting leans more towards the man than the bull. Thus circumcised, the bull ceases to be a worthy representative of its species, and more a forlorn creature that can only wish for its final hours to quickly end. Yet even shorn, the horns can cause untold damage, for the man's blood now flows like a brook into the sand of the arena. It is only then that the three-strong entourage recover speech and movement. They later claimed that, when the bull charged, they felt time had stopped and they could not immediately react, as if witnessing the whole incident on fast forward. The bull, on its part, was swift to respond to any provocation, as if the event was played in slow motion, speed on its side.

But the main difference between man and beast is not one bit about size or the speed of likely reactions. A man is set to attack before being attacked, fully armed and assisted by his entourage. The bull will react rather than act, accustomed as it is to the brutalities of Nature, with no further resources than its own drive to move forward and charge, and no more purpose than to stay alive. Most of all, the man must be greatly skilled in the art of slaughter. In the bull's case, it may not be an art but surely there must be some kind of inspiration to each of its actions. Ultimately, the bull does not kill but defend itself, does not maim but shield itself from danger.

The man is now motionless, as if waiting, unflinching, still thinking about how famous he will become by the end of the spectacle. For the whole show is nothing more than a fight to the death, going back centuries, millennia. But whose death is it going to be this time, he asks himself, as his whole life is speeding through his now declining mind: his childhood dream of becoming a bullfighter, his first steps with young and tame bulls, his initiation, his *alternativa* when he was publicly

endorsed as a bull-fighter, his fame, his fortune, his end. One more minute and I am gone forever. Save me, for I am at death's throes, he manages to shout.

His three assistants then engage the bull, distract it by shaking their capes of red and yellow, with their twirling movements and acrobatic skills. But what the hell, the bull has a man at its entire disposal, and now both horns are pushed hard into the belly, soft as lard, intestines flowing onto the arena, liver hooked on one of the horns, the man's lunch still undigested there on the ground for everyone to see. For fear makes you do that sort of thing: you do not digest, you stop breathing, you cannot think, you get killed. Why did you trip on your cape, the man whispers feebly to himself at that last instant, his innards all around him. Was it because of fear, and fear alone? Did you want to trip and end it all, for I never really aspired to kill and get killed? Did I now, did I? And so close to death, he thinks there is no more to come.

And yet there is more, worse is to come: the right horn penetrates his left eye, slowly and gently, like a lover would penetrate the beloved, thus horn and eye are fused and become one. Perhaps the man has become one with the bull, the oppressor and the oppressed, even though it is he who started the fight while the bull was content in its pen, wanting nothing to do with the world of men. And now man and beast both share the unspeakable pain, for the bull is being butchered itself by the members of the entourage, who having finally reacted are thrusting their blades into its buttocks, its legs, its neck, unable yet to touch its heart. Who suffers more, the man or the beast, is the question no one asks because, most claim, suffering can only be a human experience.

And so, the remains of a man, who once decided that bullfighting was a profession as good as any other despite his many misgivings, lie on the ground and, as he is dragged by his men –to shouts of both “You’re the bravest!” and “Why did you trip on your cape, for fuck’s sake?”– his heart caves in and he is gone. At almost that same moment the bull falls to the ground, unable to get up anymore, and it receives the *coup de grâce*, a dagger piercing the back of its neck. Shaking its legs, it is also gone, dragged into the butchers across the arena, its best cuts sold expensively; its testicles bought by mothers of young boys believing the child will become equally robust and virile when consuming such delicacies carefully sliced and fried in oil; its lesser cuts going to the poor who queue outside for hours; the horns that inflicted such terrible damage sent to be carved at the local souvenir factory: ashtrays, vases, shoehorns, spoons, household objects that can never convey the grandeur of a confrontation to the death. And what will become of the bullfighter, now disembowelled and stone dead, his purple and gold suit of lights, as they like to call it, in tatters, his guts –that had sustained him until now, keeping all his doubts and fears at bay– spread over a vast area of the arena? No, you would not believe that all that could be contained within a single man. And yes, his name will live on as a hero for aspiring bullfighters, ten-, twelve-, fifteen-year-olds; his memory engraved on a plaque commemorating his death on that very bullring, for a few seasons at least.

On that fateful afternoon, the young man managed to turn the spectacle on its head. The third of death took place at the beginning and not at the end. There was no time for the other two-thirds of the show: the so-called third of lances and the third of the deadly yet colourful sticks with spikes, the *banderillas*. With death happening at the beginning and not at the end, the bullfighter missed out on what he

had carefully planned. But more so the spectators, who discreetly but relentlessly complained that what they had witnessed was hardly a full show in honour of that very full house, but barely a salvage operation. As to the bull, it died the death it was meant for since birth, its end much sooner than expected, its suffering much kinder than other animals experience in bullfights where the man comes out unscathed, or almost. In this case, the bull had an easy ride, some will later say, as only one of the thirds did it endure, and barely that. Not the other two, the more serious thirds that provide the real thrill of the spectacle and, beyond measure, excite the most fervent spectators who, when watching such a fight to the death, burn with a rare and primeval passion. It takes you back centuries, some state to justify what they feel, and it connects us with our past as if centuries and customs had flown by. Whatever they say, in the end it was all about death, most things are. As it turned out, man and beast shared the same destiny: a bloodbath. Tripping on your cape can only happen if you are not sure you are doing the right thing anymore, unforgiving purists claim when it is all finished. The spectacle, they shout, must always come first, over and above the grief and torment of others.

The show goes on with the next bull in line, a little less heavy but with equal ferocity. As to the next bullfighter lined up, he shudders briefly, remembering the fate of the previous one. And about to step into the bullring, he looks back at the public in attendance and thinks about alternatives to his life. But only for a moment or two, because when he turns his head again, now facing the arena, he clearly sees the darkest bull charging into him as the most natural thing it can do.

(from 'Paradise & Hell', © Isabel del Rio, 2018)