

Audrey Thomas /

THE MORE LITTLE MUMMY IN THE WORLD

"Oscar A. Lempe
Denver, Colo. U.S. 14-V-1876
23-XI-1958

Guanauato, Gto.
Recuerdo de Su Esposa
Chijas
Perpetuidad"

"Louis Montgomery Allen Sr.
New York City Dec. 6 1887
Feb. 12 1957

Guanauato, Gto.
Perpetuidad"

Handprints on this one — of whom? Su esposa? Su hermosa? A passing, naughty, unrelated child?

"Elisabeth Carnes Allen, D.A.R."

She wandered through the cemetery looking at every stone, imagining the people, what had brought them there, what the town had been like nearly a hundred years before. The lure of what riches? The silver mines perhaps.

Everywhere there were flowers stuck in tins — Mobil Oil tins, paint tins, tomatoes, green chillies:

"Chiles Jalapenos, En Escapbeche"

She took out her pocket dictionary.

The wind blowing through the cypress trees rattled the tins like bones.

“To My Beloved Wife
Maria Concepcion Buchman”

Although there had been a long line-up to see the mummies there were very few people in the Pantheon itself. A young couple with their arms around one another, laughing, exchanging kisses, some old women in black, a gardener. And the dead of course, the multitude of dead stacked six or seven high. The soft brown hills beyond and El Pipla, the boy hero, alone on a hill above the Jardin de la Union, his arm upraised.

Ayer (yesterday). Hoy (today)
Mañana.

“Mother
Lily Mast McBride
Born Sept. 19 – 1882
Died July 22 – 1926”

A pretty blue-grey stone, this one, beautifully incised.

It was very peaceful here with the wreaths, the plastic flowers and the real — gladioli, lilies — the white ones she saw everywhere here, Easter lilies back home — geraniums, carnations. The flowers dead too of course, or dying, sucking up the last dregs of rusty water from the tins. Still, she liked this place better than the churches with their bleeding christs, their oppressive smell of hot wax, their plaster damned pleading to her for one last chance at salvation.

Some stones were casually propped against still-occupied cabinets. (They couldn't be called tombs and she couldn't think of a better word than “cabinet” — cabin, verb, to confine in a small space, cramp.) She turned one over.

"Naci Inocente! . . .
Muero Ignorante

Freyre Jose E.
V-7-1925
Perpetuidad."

So much for perpetuidad.

She had been thinking of failures and of suicides and had gone to mass on Palm Sunday in the hopes of finding something positive if only for a second, if only for an instant, if only, even, an aura or a whiff of hope for her salvation.

Buenos dias. Adios.
She straightened a tin of gladioli which had fallen over in the wind.

Outside the Parroquia women and men were braiding palms into elaborate patterns. She bought a small crucifix and went in, covering her head, but the Mass was a disappointment. She stood up. She sat down. She prayed. The priest was way way up in the chancel. Little bells rang. There was no pageantry, no music, nothing to draw her spirit up and away from the deep well of despair into which it seemed to have fallen. Over the words of the priest a poem of Yeats' kept running through her mind:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms . . .

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

They had been going to come down here together. Had maps, dreams, destinations. Even a tape:

Siento molestarle
No es ninguna molestia
Salud

How much too much please thank you don't mention it.

Instead he took her out (at her request) the night before she left. To a Greek restaurant (again at her request). She drank a lot of wine, and crumbling a bit of bread between her fingers, told him it was she all along whom he really loved.

"Do you think so," he said and smiled at her over his wine glass. Then in an offhand manner he asked her if she'd ever been in any of the other Greek restaurants along the street, places where you just walked in and took whatever was going, places where the Greeks themselves went, cheaper places than this. (And he, who never went into a restaurant alone, whom had he lingered with in a small cafe full of the smell of lamb and garlic and the whine of recorded music. Who? Don't ask, or, as he would have put it, "why humiliate yourself?") He had always been Machiavellian; had always known how to put her in her place.

They had been at the house of his best friend and contemporary, Peter:

"I was coming in on the bus from the island," her lover said, "towards sunset — a beautiful evening. Suddenly I looked up and there was this incredible cloud formation — incredible! I said to the fellow next to me, without really thinking about it, you know, 'my god, that looks just like the Mushroom Cloud!' I saw the guy look at me and give a little frown and then I realized with a start that he was younger, younger than the Bomb — that he didn't even know what I was talking about. The only mushroom cloud he knew was psilocybin!"

Peter had laughed appreciatively. He was thirty-five.

"It's true. People talk about the 'generation gap' — as a metaphor I mean — but it seems to me there's a real gap — I almost see it as a physical space — between those born before or during the War and those born after it."

"Yes. There's a point at which Rachel and I just can't communicate; we were born into two different worlds." He had turned to her. "When I talk about Marlene Dietrich I don't know if you even know who I mean."

She was immediately defensive. He had wanted her to be, had set her up.

"Of course I know who Marlene Dietrich is."

"Ah yes — you know her name. But is your Marlene Dietrich the same as mine — I doubt it." Peter nodded and began singing "Lili Marlene." Her lover sat back and lit his pipe.

That night at the Greek restaurant he had given her a handsome present — a shoulderbag with three sections, or pouches, like a saddlebag.

"Now you will have three places to put all your clutter," he said, "instead of just one." ("It's not that she doesn't have a place for everything," he said once, at a party, "it's that she has several places." He was very tidy and they fought about the missing cap to the toothpaste.)

Buenos dias. Adios. No comprendo.

In one place there were fresh-dry graves, four in a row, an accident perhaps. This in a courtyard which led to a view of the city. Bougainvillea had been splashed against the walls, the original purple and the scarlet, blood-coloured. In the distance she could hear the sound of children's voices.

Estoy esperando un paquete.

Lo tiene usted aqui?

When he came to get her at the hospital he was very brusque and efficient, annoyed that she was still in bed and crying. His sons were in the car — they were going camping. Yet still she wanted to buy him gifts — an onyx chess set, a heavy silver ring, a blanket for his bed. Things of beauty and whimsy, things that would make him think of her, remember her and want her.

Donde este. Where is?

He had told her there was nothing wrong, that maybe she should see a shrink. The gifts would only embarrass him. When she began to cry at the bus station, he kissed her quickly on the forehead and walked away. She hated him; no, she loved him.

She had read in the guidebook that if the rent was not kept up on the crypts (yes, that was the word she had been searching for), the bodies were removed after five years and the bones thrown into a common bone-house to make room for new arrivals. But the region was very dry and some of the bodies would be mummified. When they were, they were put into the museum. Directly outside the cemetery were souvenir stands — skeletons, on horseback or playing fiddles or dancing, with springy arms and legs. Postcards of the mummies, earthenware, bone letter-openers and crochet hooks (human bone?). There were mummies of pale beige toffee with raisin eyes. These were wrapped in red or yellow cellophane. As she approached a man had offered her two large ones on one packet, “*Momias Matrimonias*,” and laughed at her discomfort. Now she was trying to get up enough courage to go into the mummy museum itself.

Death and disease were accepted here. Death was even made fun of, made into toffee or chocolate or tiny plaster figures to decorate, along with gilded pictures of miraculous virgins, the windows and mirrors of buses and cars. She now knew that almost certainly, whenever she saw a street musician, either he was blind or lame or leprous or there was a terribly deformed creature, just out of sight, for whom he was playing his music.

Her operation had been therapeutic and therefore covered by her insurance. No back streets or borrowed money — things were easier now.

Ayer (yesterday). Hoy (today)
Mañana

This was a very strange town to walk around in and easy to get lost. The main road ran underneath the town in places, re-appearing above ground several hundred yards beyond. It was really a stone-arched tunnel and rather frightening. And there were six or seven main squares, not just one. She had already in spite of her map, been lost several times. The night before, wandering steep alleys full of wrought-iron balconies she had stumbled upon a strange religious ceremony in one of the smaller lamplit squares. There were bleachers set out and many of the people were already seated, men, women and children, facing an old church. The church bell began to ring and then a priest appeared high up on the church steps, intoning Hail Marys and Our Fathers, (she understood a bit of it) the history of the week leading up to the arrest of Jesus. Below the steps were men in purple sackcloth and black hoods, very medieval and frightening. A lifesized statue of Christ (looking not unlike the 'Jesuchristo Superstare' she had seen in Mexico City) was brought out of the church by more hooded men, carried down the steep steps and put on a flower-decked platform. There was a rope around his neck and it hung down his back, binding his hands behind him. A child-angel and one of the masked men climbed up and sat on either side of him. Torches were lit and as the rest of the masked men shouldered their burden the crowd gave a deep moan of pity and anticipation. The statue had real hair and jointed, moveable arms. He terrified her for he hovered somewhere in a strange space between icon and the living god. The wind blew his hair across his gentle, accepting face. His gown was purple like the garments of the men but his was of velvet, not hemp. A workman beat a drum and the entire affair — Christ, angel, masked men, flowers, scaffolding, torches, priest — began to move. A young boy followed behind, playing a simple pipe and the procession slowly moved out from the small square into the larger one beyond. Behind came small children, some on tricycles, the women in black, the men, balloon sellers, a thin brown pariah dog. The bowed, bound figure of Christ rode above them all. It was amateurish in a way but very powerful — she hid herself in the crowd.

Por que. Why? No se. I don't know.
Perdone.

It was as though once she had decided she didn't want it he had washed his hands of the whole affair.

"Ruth Barnes"

Just a small stone marker with a dried-up geranium obscuring the date. Presumably to be buried in this small courtyard was more expensive than to be deposited on the shelves. The wind blowing rattled the tins like bones.

If he were here he would have struck up a friendship with the gardener, would try out the little Spanish he knew and supplement it with laughter and broad gestures. His energy was one of the first things that had excited her. And his keen intelligence, his learning, the whole sum of his life experience. He had been married (twice), had children (one as old as her youngest sister), had suffered and taken chances.

"I find it impossible to live alone," he had said to her the first night, "and yet somehow I always seem to fuck it up — my relationships with women." He showed her pictures of his sons and took her home to bed.

Dispenseme. Excuse me.

Muchas gracias.

Everywhere down here men followed her and tried to feel her up — a woman alone deserved to be treated that way. Then they gave their paycheques to their mothers and went to mass on Sunday.

Hail Mary Full of Grace Blessed is

The Fruit of Thy Womb Jesus

On the train from Nuevo Laredo she had met a middle-aged man who lived in San Miguel. He said the happiest day of his life was the day when they nailed his wife's coffin shut. Federales came on the train looking for contraband. They wore their revolvers tucked in the back of their pants, Pancho Villa style.

"Watch for the Mordida," the American said.

She shook her head.

"'The Bite.' To force someone to give you a bribe. It's a game between the Federales and the people coming back."

Was that what she had done by getting pregnant? Put the bite on him?

The boy-hero stood unconcerned on the distant hill, his arm up-raised forever. Her first day in the town she had followed the crude signs and climbed steep stairs and back alleys until she reached the top of that hill. She had taken some bread and fruit with her and sat in a little summer house just below the enormous figure, eating slices of pineapple and writing in her journal. He had set fire to the granary in which the Royalists had barricaded themselves. At his feet it said, in Spanish,

"There are still other castles to burn."

She felt quite happy there, after her climb, the whole town at her feet. But in the evening, at a band concert in the Jardin de la Union, she sat on a wrought-iron bench and longed to have him with her, next to her, observing, commenting, loving. Canaries mocked her from the laurel trees around the square.

Where is? No comprendo.

She retraced her steps, back through the main courtyard with all its stacked and silent dead, back through the black iron gate with its simple cross on top. There were very few people in line now so there was no reason to wait.

He had been quite calm when she told him. Just said, "Well, what do you want to do about it?" He left it entirely up to her. Had she wanted him to be otherwise? Had she wanted to bear his child? She wanted to be a writer, a poet — had he not encouraged her, sung her praises? In Chapultepec Park in Mexico City she sat on the grass one Sunday and watched the fathers spoil their children. They were immaculate — it was the mothers, of course, who saw to that. There were funny animal heads on the trash cans in the children's playground. The children laughed and squealed when they stuck their little hands in.

She paid her five pesos and went into the Mummy Museum.

In Chapultepec Park she had sat on the grass and wept. She wanted to be six years old in a white dress and riding on her father's shoulders, her small hands tugging at his curly hair. She wanted to be held and to be forgiven. She wanted a red balloon.

Her mother was home making a delicious Sunday dinner.

Ayer (yesterday). Hoy (today)
Mañana.

The mummy museum was really a long artificially-lit corridor with the mummies displayed in glass cases along one side. The corridor was hot and very crowded, so that for a moment she experienced a wave of claustrophobia and almost turned around and ran.

Some of the names and dates on the stones had simply been scrawled in the wet plaster.

Aristo Perez
Manuel Torres M.
Maria de los Angeles Rodriguez

So there were the mummies, in glass cases like curios — which of course they were. Most were without clothes, jaundice-coloured and hideously wrinkled. A few had on mouldy shoes and there was one man who had on a complete suit of tattered black clothes. Very few had hair and this surprised her. Was it just an old wives' tale that the hair would keep on growing?

He read her, one night, from John Donne's "Funerall"

"Who ever comes to shroud me, do not harme
Nor question much
That subtile wreath of hair, which crowns my arme;"

and from "A Feaver"

"Oh doe not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one."

She got up and cut off a lock of her hair and gave it to him; he kissed her neck and put the lock in the back of his grandfather's gold watch.

Donde este. Where is?

The mummies' faces were full of anger and terror. Shrinkage had pulled their mouths open and their hands were clutched across their empty bellies. Her Spanish was not quick enough to understand everything the guides were saying, but there were abnormalities and tumours and other curious things being pointed out as they moved along. The mummies were tall or short, male and female, the men's papery genitals still visible, the women's wrinkled breasts.

She wrote him letter after letter and tore them all up.

Quiero comprar una postal. I wish to buy a postcard.

As she crossed the street to his car and his waiting sons, she stumbled, still drugged and swollen-eyed, against the curb, and turned her ankle. Suddenly she had to sit down on the grass and put her head between her knees. She knew the boys, his sons, were watching her. What had he said to them? Why had he brought them to the hospital? What was he trying to say?

People with limps, people with no legs, blind people, lepers, pariah dogs. The country swarmed with outcasts and cripples. The tourists bought silver rings and onyx chess sets and turned their heads away. After all, it was not their problem. Charity begins . . .

"They hate us," the American man had said. "They want our money but they hate us. They would prefer if we just mailed it down."

Almost at the end of the corridor was a display case full of child mummies — some in Christening gowns and bonnets, some naked or wrapped in tiny shrouds. In front of the smallest of these a cardboard sign was propped. She pushed closer, in order to read it, then tugged at the guide's elbow.

"Please. Por favor. What does the sign say? Que quiere decir?"

"La Momia Más Pequeña del mundo."

He smiled at her, showing perfect teeth.

"Si. Si. In English. Habla Usted Inglis?"

"Ah. Inglis."

He smiled again.

"The more little mummy in the world."

It sat there, no bigger than the rubber babies she had played with as a child.

Where were the parents? Why had these children been removed to this terrible glass limbo? She looked at la momia mas Pequena but it refused to answer.

The American man had asked her to come and spend a few days with him in San Miguel.

She pushed her way through the tourists and out the exit door. The sun struck her like a slap. She half-ran, half-walked towards the souvenir stands, rummaged quickly through the cards until she found the one she was looking for, the one she knew was certain to be there.

Back at the apartment he had said, "D'you think you could rustle us up some dinner — we'd like to get away before dark." The boys were looking at her curiously. She went into the bedroom and began to pack, tears running down her face, the little plastic hospital bracelet still locked around her wrist.

Go. Come. Are you ready?
Don't forget.

She fumbled in her bag for the change purse then headed back down the hill. Tonight, drinking her cho-ko-la-tay in that little restaurant near the Plazuela where she had seen the Christ, she would get out the card and address it.

"Having a wonderful time" she would write.

"Wish you were here."