

Armando's Revenge

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2139 words

Armando Philippe Alviero Torreira was the brother who stayed home, much to his regret, while his younger brother Marco left to pursue a career at sea. The two brothers decided who was to leave during an all-night conference shortly after burying their father next to their mother. Armando wanted to leave, but how could he ask Marco to care for his wife and two children while he was away for months, even years? The farm barely supported them. For the past two years it had done nothing but rain. Potatoes rotted under the perpetual drizzle and the grapes tasted foul. No, if they were to save the farm and keep the family from starving, one of the brothers would have to go. Armando volunteered to make the sacrifice. Marco was free to leave.

“Do you really mean it, brother?” Marco stood and clasped his brother’s shoulders, searching for anger or deception in his eyes. As boys they had daydreamed together of being explorers, sailing out to sea on a large ship. And returning home rich, heroes. “You would do this for me?”

Armando nodded, unable to speak. The brothers kissed on both cheeks to seal the deal.

Marco’s jubilation turned quickly to despair. “Oh, no,” he said, tapping his forehead. “Last night I became betrothed to Claudia. Papa gave permission last week, before he grew so sick. I asked her to marry me last night and she agreed.” He beamed for an instant, before the

excitement drained from his face. “I believe her family will hold me to my promise. She is already 23 and may not find another suitor soon.”

The brothers sat heavily onto wooden chairs solidly built by their grandfather. They rested their strong arms on the hickory table that had stood in this kitchen for generations. They stared into the fire and thought.

At last Armando said, “You will have to marry, then, before you leave. Claudia can stay here, in your room, until you return with your fortune. We can feed another woman, especially one who works.”

“Thank you, ‘Mando. I will be forever in your debt.” They embraced again.

And so it was. Marco and Claudia married, and she moved to the farm. Claudia loved playing with the children and cooking the family’s meals while Maria Helena, Armando’s wife, made cheese to barter in the mercado. Marco left after the meager harvest was completed, promising to write when he found a ship that would hire him as crew.

Claudia cried for a week, then settled into her new life. She began to sing as she worked. And every day, in the late afternoon while the children napped, she went for a walk that invariably took her to the high cliffs and a view of the sea.

Armando watched her from the corner of his eyes. He noticed her comely figure and long neck, so different from his dumpy, ill-tempered wife. He began to follow her on her walks, remaining far enough back that she didn’t see him. He wasn’t sure why he did this, but every day he found himself following as she made her way among the trees and up to the cliffs. There she sang a sad song. She spread her shawl on the ground and sat, staring out to sea, tears streaming down her face.

Armando watched. Weeks later he dared to approach her while she stood near the cliff's edge.

"You," she cried as she whirled to face him. "I am not surprised to see you here. You watch me as if I'm a mouse and you are a cat. What do you want of me? Why don't you leave me alone?" Her eyes flashed fire.

"Claudia," he stammered, tentative as he slowly approached her. "Do you not need a man while Marco is away? I could be so good to you." He reached for her hands, staring into her eyes with what he hoped was loving entreaty.

"Certainly not," she snapped, taking a step backward. She was very near the edge. "I am waiting for Marco. If you bother me again I will leave here and return to my parents. You will be humiliated, because I will tell them the truth." She glared at him. "Now go, and do not follow me again."

Armando's shoulders sagged. "All right, we will act like this never happened." He reached to take her hand but she stepped backward and stumbled over a rock. Off-balance, she groped for his arm but her hand slipped off his shirt. She disappeared over the edge. He heard her body falling, a single sharp scream, and then silence.

Armando stood, frozen, listening for her cries from the edge of the river that ran beneath the cliff. Edging closer, he peered over the rocks. She was not visible, and he heard only the wind. He could not safely climb down the cliff to rescue her. He would have to go around the long way, down the hill and through the fields. He began to run, but stopped when he spotted her shawl on the ground, some distance from the edge. His mind worked feverishly.

If she lived, would she tell about their confrontation? Would she blame him for her fall? And if she died, how would he explain the fact that he had witnessed her fall? How would he explain his presence on her solitary walk?

No, he would avoid all questions by returning to his work in the fields. The longer she was undiscovered the greater the likelihood that she would either die or fail to remember how she came to tumble over the cliff's edge.

He returned to his work, burning off the farthest field, preparing it for spring planting. He returned home at dusk for the evening meal. And found no food prepared. His wife had just returned from the market. The children were unsupervised but appeared to be suffering only from hunger. Claudia was nowhere to be found.

He met his wife's anxious eyes. Together they searched for Claudia, taking a torch to light their way. Eventually they found her body draped in an unnatural position over a rock beside the swollen river. When they knew she was dead, Maria Helena stared up at the tall cliff.

"How could she have fallen? Everyone knows to stay away from the edge. Even the children don't go near."

"I don't know. But obviously she did fall, and I need to carry her inside. Here, take the torch." He gathered his sister-in-law's body into his arms and carried her gently to the house, where he laid her on the kitchen table. Maria Helena prepared her for burial.

Afterward, the village constable questioned each family member concerning their whereabouts on the day of the death. Maria Helena was in the village, the children were at their naps, and Armando was in the far field. He stoutly denied seeing Claudia after the midday meal. He hoped he sounded like an innocent man.

His wife pulled away from him when he touched her, though she never accused him directly of any wrong. The constable eventually stopped questioning him and accepted that the death was a regrettable accident. A letter was sent to Marco, but who knew when he would receive it?

Life went on, eventually returning to near normal. Jerking awake from nightmares that came nearly every night, Armando tossed and turned until dawn, seeing again the fear in Claudia's eyes as she stumbled backward to her death. Was he responsible, or had it truly been an accident? If he had found her earlier would she still be alive? Was he no longer the good man he had always considered himself to be?

He was tempted to unburden himself to the village priest, but fear stopped him. Even if the priest absolved him of guilt, how would he ever hold his head up in the village again? Better to say nothing.

His house became a silent tomb. No one sang now. Maria Helena worked even harder to manage the children, the house, the cheese. She spoke to Armando only of trivialities, and silently refused his advances. Increasingly, the children took their chatter elsewhere. The floods of years past gave way to drought. The household grew ever poorer as the years passed and the rain refused to fall on the little farm.

Twenty years passed before Marco returned home. He seemed years younger than his haunted brother, and in good humor. He brought gifts, money, and conversation to the house. On his second night home he asked about Claudia's accident. Maria Helena shrugged, glanced at her husband, and retired to bed.

"I don't know what happened, brother. I was working in the fields and Claudia apparently went for her usual afternoon walk. We found her shawl spread on the ground some

distance from the ledge. I will show you where it was, tomorrow, if you want. I believe she may have thrown herself off the cliff in her grief from missing you, but I do not know for sure.”

Marco was silent, his hands tented under his chin, staring into the fire that had turned to glowing embers. “She was a comely little thing, wasn’t she? I wanted her from the first time I saw her. I would not be surprised that any man would want her.” His voice was soft and light. “I have thought upon this for years, while I was away at sea. I wonder if she was meeting some man up there. What do you think, brother?” He turned glittering eyes to his brother.

“Uh, well...” Armando could not hold the gaze. “I do not know, for I was away at the time, but I can tell you that no man came around here sniffing after her that I saw. She sang for you, sad, lonely longs. No, I do not think that someone from the village was involved. Perhaps she meant to throw a flower into the river for you and stumbled and fell.” He looked at Marco and shrugged, a faint smile on his face.

“As you know, I have not married again, and will not. Many nights I have lain awake, wishing you and I had changed places. Wishing I had my own wife and children, my own cozy little home. You seem to not value your riches, my brother.”

Armando snorted. “Riches I have not. Only a silent wife, children who rarely visit, and backbreaking labor for a subsistence living. You traveled the world, saw amazing things. How could my poor life compare with that?”

“Ah, ‘Mando. I wish I had never gone away. She might still be alive, my lovely Claudia.” Sighing, he reached to add a log to the fire.

The next afternoon the brothers carried materials to the cliff’s edge to build a bench in Claudia’s memory. They sawed and hammered, and when it was completed Marco sat on the

bench and stared over the hills to the sea. “If I had built this before I left, perhaps she wouldn’t have needed to stand so near the edge.”

Reaching inside his shirt he pulled out a small piece of cloth and showed it to Armando. “Maria Helena gave me this yesterday. She found it in Claudia’s fist when she was preparing her body for burial. Didn’t you have a shirt like this, brother?”

Armando jerked, startled. His other hand felt for the spot on his arm that her fingers had grasped as she fell. He was sure, almost, that she had not torn his shirt. But could it have happened? No, he thought not. His brother was testing him. Quickly he moved his hand away and rearranged his expression to one of disbelief.

“You accuse me? But I was not there. That is not my shirt, I assure you.” He hoped his laugh sounded sincere.

Marco was slow to respond. “In a way, I don’t blame you for being tempted. She was a lovely thing. I almost didn’t believe it of you. But you gave yourself away when you grabbed your arm.” His voice was grim.

Flicking the piece of cloth onto the ground, he picked up the hammer and started resolutely toward Armando.

The two men grappled, fell, and rolled on the ground as they tried to kill each other. Unbeknownst to either, they were very near the edge. The hammer dropped to one side. Marco crawled toward it, and Armando stood and kicked him in the stomach. Marco fell, gasping for breath, and rolled over the cliff.

Armando could hear Marco’s body crashing off the rocks as it made its way to the river and thence to the sea, the screams echoing in the distance. He gathered his tools and whistled, walking slowly around the long way to his brother.