

The Mistrustful Man of Málaga / el desconfiado hombre de Málaga

In a city named Málaga, on the southern coast of Spain, at the lip of the Mediterranean, lived a man known by the residents of the city as *'the Polack'*. He was referred to as the Polack because he had come from Poland. In fact, he was an immigrant to the city. He had come from a small village in his homeland, from a family of farmers, and was raised to be one himself. He had never been to school and had never studied. He had moved to Málaga in search of opportunity.

The Polack had difficulty making friends in the city. Perhaps it was because he was reserved, and did not go out of his way to talk to the people he would come across in his daily dealings. It might also have been because he was considerably frugal, and preferred to cook his meals at home, and did not visit the local bars, or drink beer and take tapas with the locals, which was part of the culture in Málaga. Or it may have been because the Polack simply did not trust people. He had always heard from his father that city-people were dishonest, and cheats, and swindlers, and were the type to take advantage of others any chance they got. In truth, this mistrust didn't extend only to city-people, but to the Polack's neighbours who lived on the next farm over, the priests in the church, the police, the mailman...even family relatives were looked at with a suspicious eye by the Polack's father. This may have stuck with the Polack throughout his life, weaving itself unconsciously through his mind, like a creeping vine, so that even he was unaware of what motivated his sense of distrust.

The Polack however did make one friend. This man was named Arturo. Arturo was born into an old and well-respected family that had lived in Málaga from time immemorial. In fact, they owned quite a bit of property, both within the city centre and the surrounding countryside. From the ranks of this family many a poet, artist and composer had been produced. Every generation had at least one doctor, one lawyer and one accountant, and they were always recognized and praised for practicing their services with unflinching honesty and open-handed generosity. Within the city one could find monuments and busts, street names and theatres, museums and plazas dedicated to the members of Arturo's family who had done so much for the city they had always called home.

Somehow, through an incidental meeting, the Polack and Arturo had become friends, and had even become close. Indeed, they made an odd friendship, however they got along well enough.

Recently, the Polack, who was still young enough to be considered a bachelor, had met a young and pretty woman. This woman told the Polack that she was from France, from a family of jewellers, and that back home, in her town, whose name the Polack could neither pronounce nor remember, her family ran a small yet profitable jewellery shop, and that one day she would take over as the owner. The prospect looked promising. But the Polack had his misgivings.

"What if she is lying about this jewelry shop business? What if in fact she is poor, or a thief, or a disgraced whore who has left her city in shame, and now pretends to take advantage of me, and win over my heart with pretty pictures of a future in France together?" – This is what the Polack said to Arturo one day, soon after meeting the woman.

"It is possible. Quite possible. However, you must remember, everyone can be lying, at any time. But what does it serve to mistrust them? You might as well take her for her word until she gives you cause to believe otherwise." – Was Arturo's advice to the Polack.

And indeed, it was sound advice. Reasonable, really. But the Polack had trouble putting the premise into practice. Not much later, the French girl told the Polack that she must go back to France for a week, to take care of some family business. She had never before demonstrated any signs of being a flirt, or a coquette, or dishonest, but the Polack couldn't help but worry that perhaps she was off with

another man in another town, doing unspeakable sexual acts, making a fool of the Polack behind his back, giving him the horns.

“It will rest easier on your soul if you simply trust her, and take her for her word.” – Suggested Arturo when the Polack expressed his fears to him.

“How can I trust her? I have no reason to!” – Cried the Polack.

“What reason would you need? And at any rate, you have no reason not to trust her for that matter, do you?” – Was Arturo’s response.

And indeed, it was a wise response, but the Polack had trouble wrapping his mind around this way of reasoning. Not much later, the French girl returned to the city. She demonstrated no changes in her behaviour towards the Polack. In fact, she seemed even more attached to him, as though the time apart had strengthened her feelings. Despite this, the Polack had a gnawing doubt like an acidic ulcer eating away at the inside of his belly. What he thought he wanted was that she had been faithful, and had done nothing untowards during her trip. This is what he thought he wanted, superficially. Perhaps, deep down, he wanted his doubts confirmed. So that he could point his finger at her, and say confidently – “A-ha! I knew it! You whore!”. Indeed, his psychology was disturbed, to say the least. At any rate, he remained skeptical, and could find no way to settle his doubts. He didn’t dare ask her, for fear of looking like a jealous fool, yet he could not bear to be cuckolded.

Sure enough, a month later, the French girl had to make another trip back to her country.

“She is having an affair with some bohemian, I am sure of it! Some French artist or poet or other, with long hair tied up in a ponytail, and a hairy chest, and they sleep together and have their fun, and then she comes back here to me as though nothing has happened!” – The Polack’s voice was positively brimming with distress.

“And from where did you retrieve this notion? Did you find any hidden love-letters, or marks on her skin, hickeys on her neck, to suggest that some other mouth had been devouring her sweetness?” – Replied Arturo, sincerely confused by the Polack’s distress.

Of course, the Polack had found nothing of the like, yet he was insistent, stubborn even, and would not let go of the idea that she was being unfaithful.

“I have a proposition that I hope will put your mind at ease. I have been thinking to extend my business ventures out to France, and the city your French girl calls home is as good a starting place as any. I can accompany her on this pretense, or at the very least meet her there, and see for myself how the land lays. And if by chance I discover she is being untrue to you, I will send you word, and you can terminate the relationship confidently. On the other hand, if I can confirm that she remains loyal to you, then you may rest easy. How does that sound?” – Was Arturo’s generous solution.

“Yes, yes, perfect. Thank you, Arturo, you are a true friend, to me!” - Exclaimed the Polack, happy to hear this news.

And so Arturo left Málaga as well, accompanying the girl back to France, on the pretense of wanting to extend his business there. And for the first few solitary days of silence the Polack drove himself near crazy, one moment hoping to hear news that she was faithful, and the next imagining with twisted delight that his doubts be confirmed. In fact, he wasn’t sure *which* he would consider good news. Finally, after a few days of anxious waiting, the Polack received a letter at his door. It was from Arturo.

Dear friend,
You have nothing to worry about. Her conduct is honest. She remains faithful. You may rest easy.

Yours Truly,
Arturo.

The Polack read the short letter. And before a thought even had the chance to cross his mind, like an immediate, unexpected, first response, a wave of relief flooded his chest, a light and bubbly smile sprung upon his lips, and it was as if all his doubts had vanished, dispersed like a mist, and he felt fresh. But this feeling only lasted but a fraction of a fraction of a blissful second. It was interrupted by a horrible thought that began to creep up from a dark well buried deep inside the Polack's being. And like a black and twisted wispy hook, this thought latched onto his heart, and would not let go. In fact, it was more like a tsunami wave, for it crashed over his heart and smashed it down, and he felt heavy, and burdened, and broken. And this thought said to the Polack – "He is lying to you. They have begun something together. They are in France, laughing at you behind your back, doing unspeakable sexual acts, the swine!"

This thought made its way up to the Polack's throat, and began to choke him, and he began to overheat with rage. He read the letter again, looking for clues of their infidelity deviously hidden between the lines. But everything and nothing fueled the flames of his raging mistrust, and he thrust the paper down to the ground, gasping for air, the room spinning around him. He needed a moment to escape this intoxicating thought. He needed fresh air, something cool to drink.

In a daze the Polack left his little apartment and went out and into the city of Málaga. But even outdoors he felt suffocated. The sun was too strong, the wind too invasive, and the streets too crowded. Much too crowded. Everywhere the eyes bore into him like lasers, at every corner was a new face with a disapproving look. They were willing him to fall and break his leg, leave in disgrace, he felt he was being ostracized by their eyes. He stumbled into a restaurant, and made his way to the bar, and ordered a cold drink.

The bartender gave him a broad smile.

"Aren't you a friend of Arturo's? I believe you two came in here a few days ago." – the Polack's face froze – "Yes, yes, I'm sure of it. Well, I want you to know you are always welcome here." – said the bartender as he placed a drink in front of the Polack.

The Polack looked down at the drink like it was a nuclear bomb. With his bloodshot eyes protruding out of his skull he glared up at the bartender. The man just stood there, the same pleasant smile plastered across his face, but to the Polack it looked sinister, like the mask of a ghoul. What is this? He looked around at the smiling faces and sensed that behind the smiles they were laughing at him, that they were waiting for him to take a sip of the vile substance and clutch at his chest as the venom began to run its course through his veins, and then laugh as his body collapsed to the floor. He dared not take a sip. It was poison. He was sure of it. Even here, they were trying to persecute him? They're trying to kill me! – he thought. It's Arturo! – he thought. He's sent them after me – he wants the French girl all to himself!

The Polack knocked over the poisoned drink as he jumped away from the bar.

"You – stay away from me! Don't try anything, damn it! You won't get me, I don't care if he sent you, you won't get me!" – He shouted at the patrons and the bartender, who looked on with serious concern as he rushed out the bar and went back into the city.

As the Polack made his way dizzily through the streets, his vision becoming more blurred at every step, his head hotter, he thought to himself – Did Arturo pay them? What did he offer for my head? No...he probably didn't pay them anything. He didn't need to. They've hated me from the start. They just needed a reason to get rid of me!

The Polack kept darting glances back over his shoulder. He feared that someone would stab him. In fact, he could already feel the cold steel cutting into his side, slicing open his kidney, spilling his blood all over the dusty ground.

He saw a man put his hand into his pocket and with a screech jumped into an alley.

The people are trying to kill me. They hate me, I am a nuisance to them, because I never made any effort to conform to their ways, and now they are getting their revenge on me. They've hated me since I arrived. Because I won't do what they want. Because I won't go for tapas with them. The bastards! And Arturo, that swine, he has set them on me, he wants me out of the way, he wants my French girl all for himself! He has never liked me, he has wanted to kill me since the beginning.

He looked down at his hand. It was bleeding. He had cut it on the glass he broke in the bar.

Oh! I should have never come to this city, with all these strangers, I have made a grave mistake! What have I done? Why have I done this to myself? What was I thinking? How could I have done this?

The Polack stopped in front of a window pane that belonged to an empty store. The glass was dirty, for months of neglect. A man stood in this window. The Polack jumped back. He pointed his finger at the man.

"You! Who are you? Did you bring me here? It's you, isn't it? You've been the one, leading me on, misleading me, pretending, lying, whispering falsities in my ear! Who are you? Who are you!"

And as the Polack continued this tirade, coming ever closer to the root of his mistrust, a vagrant of the city of Málaga, an alcoholic, a bum on the side of the street, saw the Polack looking in the window and screaming at himself.

It occurred to the Polack that he should focus his gaze on the man standing in the window, to get a good look at him, to see the face of his accuser. And as he did something came to him, and it was not a thought, for he spoke suddenly and without thinking.

"Oh God" – he said – "I hope they are not lying. I really do. I hope they have been honest, and done nothing untowards, and kept their faith" – he said – "I really do. Oh God I do."

And as the Polack said these things, and the reflection of the man in the window became clearer, a new silhouette stepped onto the tragic scene. The vagrant plunged the broken glass into the Polacks side, puncturing his kidney. Then the man on the street of the city of Málaga dug the glass in deeper, and twisted it, and the Polack collapsed to the floor in a pool of his own blood.