

# Spanish Fall

*Katelyn M. Stewart*

Alejandro sat motionless in his chair, staring at the empty screen. All day, he had delivered magnetic gestures to his co-workers in their virtual work setting, but as soon as the last face logged out, loneliness crashed over him.

Across the room, on the kitchen bar top, sat a phone. Alejandro tried not to look at the device, knowing that if there was a message, he would not want to read it.

Stella lay purring rhythmically. She had tried to comfort Alejandro, but his emotions made her uncomfortable, so she retreated for an extended repose on the back of the sofa. Alejandro looked over at his small feline companion and felt a pang of jealousy, realizing that the troubles of man would never bother a cat. Stella's apathy gave Alejandro the motivation to stand and view the room from a different vantage point.

Alejandro's apartment was pristine. Red brick served as a base for the room's main features, accentuated by bursts of color from Gustave Klimt paintings and the black-and-white's of old movie posters. His most beloved poster hung above the leather sofa. It featured Clark Gable biting into a carrot with fresh veneers as a young Claudette Colbert stared at him with wide silver-screen eyes.

Alejandro was thirteen when he and Miguel started going to the theater after Mass to watch the old films. Every Sunday, the owner, a widower in his mid-30s, would put on the pro-code films in memory of his late wife's obsession. On those days, the only four people who would step foot in the theater were Alejandro, Miguel, the owner, and the ghost of his wife.

During these screenings, the two couples—one separated by life and death, the other by the risk of discovery—would pine for one another under the silver screen.

Of all the movies that played during the black-and-white

Sunday showings, *It Happened One Night* was the boys' favorite. There was something spectacular about the way the old Americans spoke; biting into every word like a source of unyielding pleasure.

Alejandro shook the memory away as he moved out from behind his desk and made his way to the kitchen. Eating had become difficult over the last week. Still, he took comfort in gripping the refrigerator handle, pulling it firmly until the seal released, then, as it gasped widely, pushing it shut. His eyes drifted across the countertop, past the knives, breadbox, and coffee maker, until he landed on the miniature bottle of port wine. For six months, it had sat on the counter untouched.

Theirs had been a spring wedding: Miguel and Adelina's. Alejandro had stood, straightening his suit in a back room of the church before the ceremony began. Adelina had begged for the groomsmen's suits to be cream-colored. Alejandro had agreed. The woman had exceptional taste. The heavy wooden door opened, and Miguel quietly entered.

Years ago, Miguel had grown his mustache to match Clarke Gable's, and even now, against his bride's wishes, he wore it proudly. Alejandro was never bothered by it.

"Are you ready?" Alejandro asked.

Miguel flashed a grin, "Her father already said yes."

The wedding happened.

Before the eyes of the Lord, a man and woman were married. Their families were thrilled. Wine poured down the throats of all who attended, and while the bride danced the night away, her husband escaped to a coat closet with his lover. Only God knew.

That night, Alejandro went home with a miniature bottle of port wine, and Miguel went home with Adelina. Neither slept well. Alejandro felt a chill of despair run through his ribs. He looked away from the bottle of port wine and out the kitchen window. Outside his apartment, city life continued unbothered.

The Madrid fall was something like magic—warm mornings followed by cool evenings. Laughter could be heard on every corner in transit to the festivals happening around the city. For those who wandered the solitary path, the light rains would brush their cheeks, ensuring they weren't left un-kissed that day.

Due to the state of the body, Adelina had declined an open casket. During the funeral, there was no rain, just exhausting sunshine. Alejandro had stood outside the church but was unable to make himself go inside. Instead, he walked to the back to sniff out a rogue cigarette. Behind the church, dressed in black silk, was Adelina. Her gaunt face stared out across the courtyard, taking long, numbed drags off an unfiltered cigarette. *Perfect class.*

Alejandro stopped dead and attempted to retreat without being noticed, but Adelina turned, dark eyes smeared in residual mascara and stared directly at him. Purgatory would not have lasted as long. Adelina broke the stillness by pulling the half smoked cigarette from her lips and placing it carefully on the church step. She then rose and stepped back inside. Alejandro walked over to finish what she had left.

There was no smoking in Alejandro's building. Even if the activity was allowed, he had only smoked a handful of times in his life. But now, sitting by the window, he craved a drag. Suddenly, he heard a rap at the door.

Alejandro remembered the last time someone knocked on his door. After crawling from his slumber, he had answered the door and found Miguel standing there, rain beading across his rain jacket, eyes distant. At that moment, Alejandro knew this would be the last time he ever saw Miguel.

A passionate entanglement began and ended. Alejandro awoke alone in the morning, and later that day, he received a call from his mother, who between sobs, told him what had happened. Now, the rap came again. Alejandro rose to his feet and approached the door as if a ghost were behind it, ready to announce the intention to begin a haunt. He turned the handle, opened the door, and before him stood Adelina.

A wool peacoat and smart dress almost distracted from the dark circles under her eyes. Almost.

Alejandro, surprised, began to stutter. “Adelina...what are you doing here?”

She raised her chin, staring intensely at Alejandro. “Come. We’re going out.”

“To where?”

She pursed her lips. “Anywhere. Come on. Grab your coat. It’s brisk.”

Hair stood on the back of Alejandro’s neck, but Adelina’s presence, although terrifying, was also comforting. He reached behind the door for his coat and followed her out into the city. Stella did not stir.

Adelina and Alejandro walked side-by-side. Two people of impeccable dress, grieving over the same personal loss. As they were about to pass a cafe, Adelina sat down at an outdoor table. Alejandro looked around to see who amongst the strangers might care about their conversation and took his seat across from the widow.

The waiter appeared. “Welcome. Shall we start with drinks?”

Adelina gave him a wide plastic smile. “Yes. Two Vermut, *por favor*.”

The waiter stepped away, leaving his patrons to steep in their atmosphere once again.

Alejandro shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “So, how are you?”

Adelina waved the question away and replied in a passionate indifference. “No pleasantries. We’re both miserable. There’s no reason to hide it.”

The urge to defend himself and continue the facade crossed Alejandro's mind, but Adelina's forceful composure left him disarmed. *How much did she know?*

Adelina continued, "What I don't understand is *why*? What was so horrible in his life that he had to end it like that?"

The waiter appeared again and dropped the two glasses of vermouth on the table. Whether he spoke, neither knew.

Adelina's eyes moved to the street and watched as a group of young people made their way towards some wondrous destination.

"Was I that bad of a choice?"

Alejandro leaned forward. "Adelina, He loved you."

Adelina's statuesque form remained still. "No, Ale, he loved you."

Alejandro could feel the buried misery rising to the surface. The dryness of his mouth left him unable to say anything. Soon the tears would come. Not in public. He looked to Adelina, whose eyes now held him. She sat there, the gatekeeper secrets, and he knew she wanted him to tell her everything.

"You think I didn't know? You think that I thought it was normal for my husband to not want to touch me?" She gestured wildly at her feminine frame. Exasperated, she leaned back in her chair and tilted her head up toward the heavens, breathing in the open air. After a moment, she sat back up to meet Alejandro's eyes and shifted in discomfort, seeing that his face had fallen.

"He loved me in the way he could, but his deep reservoir of love...that was saved for you, Ale."

Alejandro knew this. That deep and sacred love that they shared had gone unspoken for almost 15 years, and he couldn't help thinking that if they had told the truth, Miguel might be alive today. Before Alejandro sat Miguel's beautiful and sharp-witted widow.

Her dark hair was pulled back with a French hair pen, and her eyes were wide, dark, and all-knowing. Even now, Alejandro could see the entirety of the Universe flash through Adelina's irises, and he wondered what Miguel had last seen in those eyes before he decided he could no longer go on.

Then, they began to weep.

At that point, no other words were necessary. All they could do was let the tears pour as people passed by, living their lives.

After the tears had flowed for a while, Alejandro looked back at Adelina, whose features were hidden under the swelling that only grieving brings, and at that moment, he understood. They were just two people surviving the loss of a man they had both loved very much. He then grabbed his glass of Vermouth and raised it high.

Adelina wiped her eyes and slid her hand to her glass.

“To those who survive the greatest losses.”

They toasted to each other.