

When Tomás's father had gone to the Cathedral of Toledo to claim his son for the trip to Granada, ten-year-old Tomás had resisted, "The padres won't let me go," but no one could dissuade his father. The padres said good-bye to Tomás at the school gates and turned away, shaking their heads. What a good pupil! What a good priest he would have made!

A week later Tomás (as Padre José was known as a boy), his father and brothers had traveled well into La Mancha, the hot, dry plain that lay between Toledo and Granada. It was a summer day much like this one at the mission; the sun warmed the ground soon after sunrise. With Tomo and Teo's help, his father had overpowered a horse and rider the night before, stolen the man's horse, money, and a flask of whiskey before letting the rider go. The family was sleeping soundly. His brother Jaime—traveling with him was the only happiness in Tomás's journey—lay next to him, his face turned toward him, breathing sweetly through his mouth.

Tomás got up from the dirt and walked toward one of the trees he had noticed on the opposite side of the road. The tree he chose to pee against, a fig tree, resembled a large bush. Its narrow trunk supported unwieldy branches of large-lobed leaves. As his urine soaked the earth, he noticed the tree's fruit, a little pouch, like a man's testicle. Curious, he picked the fruit from the branch and used his thumbnail to slice it open. Under its purple skin lay the flower. A pale, purple meat surrounded a mass of delicate tentacles.

Tomás slowly brought the flesh to his lips. He bit into the tentacles gingerly. The sweetness overwhelmed his mouth, brought tears to his eyes, made his ears buzz. He devoured the fruit and threw the empty skin to the ground. Quickly he grabbed another fruit, brought it to his lips and bit into it. He ate the whole fig, skin and all, threw the stem to the ground and reached for another. Another. And another. Pleasure existed. Sweetness held in the mouth. Delicious on the tongue. Teased out of an ordinary fruit. He was incredulous.

As he ate, he began to question the padres' lessons. Perhaps there was more to life than following—with no deviations—Christ's teachings. More than living by St Francis's example: hard bread and cold rooms. Woolen robes that irritated the skin. The word of God.

Where else might pleasure lie?

He was giddy. He was joyful. He continued to devour the fruit, one fig at a time, faster and faster.

“What have we here?” A rough voice roused Tomás from his ecstasy. He looked up to see two soldiers on horseback across the road. They were looking down at his father and brothers. Tomás shrank into the dense leaves of the fig tree. He saw his father sit up slowly, too hung over to make sense of anything. Tomo and Teo were awake, too. The three rose to their feet. Only Jaime slept on, a child’s sleep, deep and unburdened.

“Good morning,” his father said with a nervous laugh. His brothers were silent. Knowing the authorities’ brutality, all avoided the local police and ducked around corners when they spied a soldier. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere,” the soldier, fat and unshaven, answered. He held out a flask to Tomás’s father. When the old man reached for it, the soldier yanked it away. “Ha, did you see that?” he asked his partner.

“Yes, yes, now let’s be on our way, before our regiment catches up with us and strings us up from the tallest branches of a tree.” The smaller man looked around. “They wouldn’t have much luck with these fig trees though, would they?”

Tomás, hidden by the thick leaves, didn’t move.

“This stinking war; what does that bastard Napoleon want of us?” the fat soldier rattled on. “I’ll tell you one thing, I’m not going back to get killed. They’ll have to kill me first. Hey, you,” he turned his attention to Tomás’s father. “Got any whiskey?”

“No, sir, no. We finished it last night.” This time he giggled.

“What about money?”

“Oh, sir, nothing really. Only a few coins to get me and my sons to Granada.”

“Let’s have it,” the fat soldier ordered. Tomás peeked through the branches. He saw the man take his sword from his scabbard and brandish it above his father’s head.

“You can’t do that,” yelled Teo. At seventeen, he had the broad shoulders of a man, but the sense of a boy. He rushed forward to stand between the soldier and his father.

“Who says I can’t?” Without another word, he plunged the sword into Teo’s heart.

Tomás’s cries were drowned in the screaming that followed.

“That’s my son. You killed my son,” the old man yelled. Kneeling, he cradled Teo’s head in his arms. “My son, my boy,” he cried.

Tomo, the fifteen-year-old, threw his empty whiskey flask at the soldier, catching him on the side of the head. He rushed the horse and grabbed at the soldier's legs, trying to pull him to the ground. While the horse wheeled, the soldier resisted, swinging his sword. The blade caught Tomo on his neck, carving a long gash. Only then did Tomo fall back; blood spurted from his neck in a heavy stream.

For a moment, Tomás took in the scene: His father wringing his hands and crying; Teo lying dead in a pool of blood; Tomo clutching his neck, trying desperately to staunch the flow. Tomo fell to his knees, then to the ground, where he lay motionless, blood flowing freely from his wound.