

*Novela das Nove*

The house was small despite the number of rooms that grew or shrank according to what was needed. It was perfect, and didn't represent the norm in poor housing; it was sturdy and neat and the street didn't smell like shit. Julio lived alone, but he had never washed a dish or dusted his house. Those things seemed to take care of themselves. He did sweep his floors once though. He felt a strong desire tug him one morning as he awoke. He swept from the back to the front of his small home—it was particularly small that morning. There was no dirt, no discarded wrappers, no difficult stains, just sterile, fine dust, like sand. When he got to the front door he stood there sweeping into the street, where a rich man's car crept by. Inside the out-of-place car an older gentleman stared Julio down with a cruel smile. Julio thought this was poetic, a poor man sweeping and toiling while a rich man passed in luxury. That was months ago, and Julio never swept, or thought of sweeping, again. The house stayed clean.

The rich man in the car stayed in Julio's mind. He appeared in Julio's dreams. He saw the man's face, now laughing, now angry, now wearing a snarl, now blank, always in black-and-white or sepia. Julio woke in the mornings sweating on his low hammock.

Julio liked to go down to the ocean and watch the water move back and forth in hypnotic, repetitive motions. Sometimes the rhythms would bring images, like shards of his past, up to the surface of his mind. He was poor, but felt lucky to live by the ocean, he could see it from his poor-man house. It moved constantly from his window. He felt the sea breeze at nights. He liked to watch people move along the beach, and in the water. He liked to imagine their lives, because he could not imagine his own. Julio did not know who he was. He suffered from amnesia in an anonymous part of the city, surrounded by

anonymous people who bought him drinks when he went to bars. He imagined himself as each person he saw, hoping to find himself in them, find a face he would recognize as his own. He could never remember their names, but kept a list of their faces in his head.

But every life he saw seemed less important than his, though he felt bad he felt that way. There was the old man who fished all day, bringing back half a barrel of fish on a good day. He smelled of sea and sweat. There was the little boy with the scar along side his head who everyone knew lived on the street. He floated out to fishing boats and helped various older fishermen during the day, but at night was forgotten until the sun came back up. There was the girl with the long, black hair and glasses who would put her hands on either side of Julio's face every time she saw him, look into his eyes and say, "*Oh menino! Como está?* I hope all is well. I hope you are well." Each time she would turn away crying, then go off to work as a maidservant in some mansion somewhere in town. Julio didn't think too much about this, though he liked the girl, and wished she would stop crying.

His neighbors told him he must have been a good guy in his previous life, because soon after he lost his memory he saved a little girl from drowning, and sharks. He punched a shark that day. There had never been any sharks in the water before. There was never any since.

Julio felt he was inherently good, though he never liked to think about it. Good people should never think about how good they are. Still, there were times he felt like anything he did didn't matter. Sometimes he felt like he didn't exist, and during those times he felt like fading away.

Julio was in love with a woman he never met, but he saw her on the beach every day. She walked barefoot on the sand, where she played with her two children in her long, swaying skirt. Her dark hair hung in soft curls on her tanned skin. Each time Julio turned to look at her she snapped her head away and pretended to look at the water, or after her children. Still, he would catch her staring at him from time to time. He never talked to her. She never talked to him. Every day as the beach started to gather a crowd she would disappear with her children into some expensive, chauffeured car.

The woman stayed in Julio's mind, awake or asleep. Her face floated before him, either in a passionate embrace with Julio, or a sad, longing silence. This went on for what seemed like years that passed like montage in which the woman's clothes changed, but she did not.

One night, the images in Julio's mind raged. They alternated between the older, rich man, the angel, beach woman and his anonymous neighbors. His mind would not stop, and he twisted himself in his hammock in the dark, listening to his heartbeat and the rain slapping the red-tile roof. He felt the rain come on during the night and dampen the air around him. Drops flicked on him from the six-inch gap between the wall and ceiling. He lay, images rolling, until he felt the sun was about to rise and he knew he could no longer stay in his hammock. With almost no preparation he got up, opened his door, and jogged onto the beach without bothering to put on a shirt. He didn't have a hint of a gut. His muscles were toned, and his long hair showed no signs of balding. He ran to the water and stepped into it. He stood, rain dripping off his body and into the ocean, for a long time watching the water, grey against a grey sky.

When he turned back toward the shore there she was, alone, standing inside a wall of rain. He couldn't see her face, but knew it was her, the way she swayed.

She walked to him and smiled, "I knew I'd find you here."

"I see you every day," he said. "Who are—"

She reached out and touched his neck, his cheek and swept her thumb over his bottom lip. "I can't believe this is happening," she said before pushing her open mouth into his.

He grabbed a handful of her hair, giving in, taking control.

She swooned.

This went on for a while. Julio felt he could be seen from various angles. He felt as if someone were peering at the pore-less skin around their lips.

After, she led him by the hand to a parked car. A large, bald man opened the door and smiled as they got in.

"What's your name?" Julio asked.

"Call me *Morena*," she said, breathing into his ear. "Please."

Her house stretched upwards toward the sky, and back to far Julio couldn't see where it ended. She floated from the car to the house, past servants from Julio's neighborhood who wore secret smiles. It was no longer raining. The sun was up and bright.

The maid, who Julio recognized as the woman who lived down the street from him said, "Welcome home, *Dona*." She looked Julio, worried, about to say something.

“Please,” Morena interrupted, “I have things to do.” Morena winked at the maid, took Julio by the hand, and led him up the stairs into a large bedroom with golden bedposts on the bed, and long mirrors against the walls.

“Come to me,” she said, and pushed her tongue into Julio’s mouth. They rolled into one another on the bed, until they seemed to be one throbbing, smooth-skinned person.

If anyone had been watching, they would have noticed how explicit they were without so much as a nipple being shown. Julio flexed his hairless, bronze chest. Morena slithered under the sheets until they exposed her outer thigh.

When it was over, they sat in calm, sweat-less splendor. Morena’s hair hung well-maintained over her shoulder, eyelids half lowered in a look of bliss. Julio sighed, rolled over Morena, and sat on the side of the bed next to the dresser. On the dresser was a photo album. He picked it up and began to flip through the photos.

“This feels like a dream,” she said, moving over to him and laying her ear against his back.

Julio’s eyes widened. There was a picture of himself as a groom, well-kempt, on a beach, arm around Morena dressed as a bride. This was placed next to a picture of himself holding a little boy on the same beach. The room started to swim, and he had trouble breathing. “What? What the hell is this?” he said.

“It’s you,” she said, studying his expression. “And your son.” She bit her lip.

“What?” he said. He was feeling a little sick, and confused. “Who are you?”

Morena smiled and looked at the picture of Julio and her as bride and groom.

“My wife,” he said. His sickness disappeared. It was replaced with gratitude and excitement. “My son.” He scanned the boy’s features, trying to find his own traits. He studied the nose, the mouth, the eyes, running his finger over each. It was his son. One of the photos had fallen to the floor. He picked it up. It was the little girl he always saw on the beach together with his son and Morena. He turned to Morena, whose smile was covering most of her face.

“My kids?” he choked, holding up the pictures.

Morena kept smiling, but the smile hardened and started to look more like a grimace. “Well,” she said. “*Sim*...I mean...of course!” She reached out to hug him.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Julio said, leaning back from her a little.

“I couldn’t. I was being watched. He...he would beat me...my kids. Oh, you don’t understand. I’m so sorry!”

There was a furious slam against the bedroom door. It flew open, splinters from the frame falling to the floor. Julio and Morena whipped their heads toward the door, both with the same expression of shock: open mouth, eyes wide.

In the doorway loomed an enormous, ape-shaped, older man with white hair, and a small, white beard. He was dressed in nice, white pants, a white shirt and a white suit-jacket. It was the same man Julio had seen the morning he swept his house.

“*Quenga!*” the older man said. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Julio fell backwards onto the bed. He didn’t know what to say. “I...I’ve seen you before.”

“Of course you have, son,” the older man said.

“You’re supposed to be in Paris!” Morena interrupted. She pulled the sheets higher up her already covered breasts.

The older man gave a cruel laugh. “I know. I know you thought that. Do you think I don’t know why you started going to the beach everyday? Do you think I didn’t know who lived there? You’re so predictable, woman. All I needed was to give you a chance to get caught.”

Julio stood up. As he stood, the bed sheets fell off his body revealing white shorts wrapped tight around a well-formed rear, and muscular legs. His bulge was intimidating. “Who are you?” Julio asked the man.

“You don’t remember anything, do you?” The older man grinned. “I thought you were back to face me! It couldn’t have been for that!” He pointed to Morena, covering herself on the bed, and started laughing harder. “I thought...” He was laughing so hard he was having trouble breathing. He bent over, clutching his knees. After a few seconds his laughter slowed down, then stopped. “Get out of my house.” His voice was serious. The older man walked past Julio, who didn’t know what to do, over to Morena’s bed, and pulled her up by her arm. She wore small, white panties. Her breasts were contained, but spilling from a white bra. The man threw Morena out of her bed. She tripped over her long, tan legs, like a baby calf, as she spilled to the floor.

Julio threw himself between Morena and the man. He moved quick, but something seemed off. It was strange, but he felt like hanging his head and trying again, like he had been too slow, not heroic enough. “Who are you?” Julio said again. “What kind of a man treats a woman this way?”

“You really want to know?” The old man shouted, pushing his hair back with his left palm.

“Please. Don’t,” Morena said. “Leave him alone. Haven’t you caused enough harm?” She sobbed. Julio thought she sounded strained, like she was forcing her words. Trying too hard.

“I’m your father. This,” the old man said, lifting his arms and ignoring Morena, “was your house. That,” he pointed at Morena, “was your wife. Now they’re mine. I was your business partner, until you had that car crash. Then you got amnesia, and it was all so perfect. How I hated watching you with your fancy house, your fancy woman, your fancy son. Now they’re mine.”

“Please...” Morena said.

Julio was starting to feel dizzy again. Of course this life was too good to be true. Still, he would fight for his wife, so that he could get to know her. He moved toward the older man and took a swing at him. The older man dodged Julio’s punch without much effort.

“And since I had you pronounced dead,” the older man continued. “I married your wife, who was already madly in love with me. And now I have one thing you never had, a little girl. That’s right. The girl is my daughter!”

Morena gasped, and Julio looked at her, crushed. This was not going at all the way he imagined his life would be. He was starting to wish he could trade it for another: for the old fisherman, or the boy who lived on the streets. This life was starting to become too much.



Morena shrieked. As Julio looked at her he saw she had mascara streaming down her smooth cheeks. “It’s true,” she choked. “Once you disappeared your father came and consoled me. I was distraught with grief! And the day you died was the worst day of my life. I never thought I would ever be happy again. If I could change what happened I would!”

Julio looked at Morena, then at the older man who was starting to move toward him. “How dare you!” Julio said to the older man, and ran toward him, landing a punch to the older man’s face.

The man staggered back, wiped blood from his nose with the palm of his hand, looked at the blood and chuckled. “Not so bad. I don’t think you’ve ever hit me like that before.” He lunged toward Julio, caught him in a headlock, then started to pound his face with his right fist. Julio fell to his knees, bloodied.

Julio, the older man, and Morena heard footfalls running and stopping at the open door. They whipped their heads toward the open door and stared with the same expression of shock: mouth open, eyes wide.

A young, thin girl with large, round glasses and black, curly hair stepped through the door. She wore a black-and-white maid dress. It was Julio’s neighbor. Morena and the older man kept their look of shock. Julio started to look confused.

The girl pushed forward, almost running, toward Julio, and stood between him and the older man.

“Stop!” She said, stretching her hand out toward the older man. In one liquid movement she tore off her glasses and pulled off her wig, one in each hand, throwing both to the floor, her legs spaced apart in a hero stance. “It is I,” she said.” “Ariana!”

The older man and Morena gasped.

Julio furrowed his eyebrows and looks up at the people surrounding him, expecting an answer.

Julio could not explain why it hurt his heart to see Ariana take off her wig. Her hair changed from black and curly to blonde and strait. It made it seem like the world he left behind by the water didn't exist, and he was starting to prefer his old house to this knew one, his anonymity to this world where everyone knew him.

“*Minha filha!*” The older man brought his hand up to his mouth as he let go of Julio.

“Ariana!” Morena said, also covering her mouth with her hand.

“*Quem?*” Julio said. He was having a difficult time speaking and was starting to feel his face swell up, but when he looked at himself in the mirror on the wall he saw he looked no different, other than a trickle of blood from his nose.

“My daughter, my daughter,” the old man said starting to tear up with joy. “I’ve been looking for you for so long, and you’ve been right here! How could you do this to me?”

“How could I do this to you?” Ariana said. “I hate you. I hate you, and I’ve been looking for a chance to destroy everything you have. Of course I knew my brother was still alive!” She ran to him, knelt, and cradled his head, pushing his face between her two overwhelming breasts.

Julio didn't know how to act anymore. He twisted as slow as he could to try and inch away from his supposed sister's bosom, without offending. He wanted to go back home. He was starting to appreciate his amnesia.

Ariana, still clutching her brother, with a fierce look, turned toward her father and Morena. “When I found him, I knew I had to disappear. I had to teach you a lesson. And you, Morena, marrying this old, withered man? I knew I had to keep an eye on you. But I couldn’t take it anymore. Yes, it is I, Ariana! I have all the basis I need to prove my brother is alive, sue you for the hurt you’ve caused him, and watch you collapse!”

The older man backed away and looked at Morena, who still covered the lover part of her face with her hand.

Julio didn’t want this anymore. It was painful, but more than that it was starting to feel ridiculous, and despite the pain in his face, Julio was starting to get bored. Julio didn’t want to shake any more memories loose. They were too dangerous.

There were more footsteps that stopped at the open door. Everyone turned their heads toward the door with the same expression of shock: open mouth, wide eyed. Except Julio. He looked out the window. I will jump, he thought, make my escape. In the background Julio could hear another speech, muted. He stepped over to the window, opened it, looked down, and saw a ledge he could jump to that would allow him to slide down an adjacent pole. From there he could run. He thought about how lucky he was to have amnesia, and the more he sank down inside himself the more he began to think about the ocean he loved so much. I’ll escape out the window, he thought. I’ll shimmy down the pole and out into the street, go back to my ocean and walk along the beach until I find a spot where I can sit and forget in peace. He started to exit through the window. The people in the room didn’t notice. I’ll find somebody, he thought. We’ll walk together on the beach until we forget the names we have and all the people we know. We’ll settle down and have amnesiac children in a house no one will ever find. We’ll love one

another, fight, then forget why we were fighting, and hate one another in silence until everything around us disappears and the children grow and forget us. We'll eventually forget every hour of every day and slip until our house on the beach is consumed by the waves that care for no man.