

he subsists on his pension and the weekly column he writes for a newspaper.

The record he bequeaths us, covering the stormy ninety-first year of his life, belongs to a specific subspecies of memoir: the confession. As typified in the Confessions of Saint Augustine, the confession tells the story of a squandered life culminating in an inner crisis and a conversion experience, followed by spiritual rebirth into a new and richer existence. In the Christian tradition the confession has a strongly didactic purpose. Behold my example, it says: behold how through the mysterious agency of the Holy Spirit even so worthless a being as I can be saved.

The first ninety years of our hero's life have certainly been squandered. Not only has he wasted his inheritance and his talents, but his emotional life has been remarkably arid too. He has never married (he was engaged long ago, but walked out on his bride at the last minute). He has never been to bed with a woman whom he has not paid: even when the woman has not wanted money he has forced it on her, turning her into another of his whores. The only enduring relationship he has had has been with his house servant, whom he mounts ritually once a month while she does the laundry, always *en sentido contrario*, a euphemism which Grossman translates as "from the back," thus making it possible for her to claim, as an old woman, that she is still *virgo intacta*.

For his ninetieth birthday, he promises himself a treat: sex with a young virgin. A procuress named Rosa, with whom he has long had dealings, ushers him into a room in her brothel where a fourteen-year-old girl lies ready for him, naked and drugged.

She was dark and warm. Her hair had been curled, and she wore natural polish on the nails of her fingers and toes, but her molasses-coloured skin looked rough and mistreated. Her newborn breasts still seemed like a boy's, but they appeared full to bursting with a secret energy that was ready to explode. The best part of her body were her large, silent-stepping feet with toes as long and sensitive as fingers. She was drenched in phosphorescent perspiration despite the fan.... It was impossible to imagine what her face was like under the paint ...but the adornments and cosmetics could not hide her character: the haughty nose, heavy eyebrows, intense lips. I thought: A tender young fighting bull.

The first response of the experienced roué to the sight of the girl is unexpected: terror and confusion, an urge to

run away. She moves away in her sleep. Drained of lust, he begins to sing to her: "Angels surround the bed of Delgadina." Soon he finds himself praying for her too. Then he falls asleep. When he awakes at five in the morning, the girl is lying with her arms opened in the form of a cross, "absolute mistress of her virginity." God bless you, he thinks, and takes his leave.

The procuress telephones to jeer at him for his pusillanimity and offer him a second chance to prove his manhood. He declines. "I can't anymore," he says, and at once feels relieved, "free at last of a servitude" -servitude to sex, narrowly understood- "that had kept me enslaved since the age of thirteen."

But Rosa persists until he gives in and revisits the brothel. Again the girl is sleeping, again he does no more than wipe the perspiration off her body and sing: "Delgadina, Delgadina, you will be my darling love." (His song is not without dark undertones: in the fairy story Delgadina is a princess who has to flee the amorous advances of her father.)

He makes his way home in the midst of a mighty storm. A newly acquired cat seems to have turned into a satanic presence in his house. Rain pours through holes in the roof, a steam pipe bursts, the wind smashes the windowpanes. As he struggles to save his beloved books, he becomes aware of the ghostly figure of Delgadina beside him, helping him. He is certain now that he has found true love, "the first love of my life at the age of ninety."

A moral revolution takes place within him. He confronts the shabbiness, meanness, and obsessiveness of his past life and repudiates it. He becomes, he says, "another man." It is

love that moves the world, he begins to realise--not love consummated so much as love in its multiple unrequited forms. His column in the newspaper becomes a paean to the powers of love, and the reading public responds with adulation.

By day--though we never witness it-Delgadina, like a true fairy-tale heroine, goes off to the factory to sew buttonholes. Nightly she returns to her room in the brothel, now adorned by her lover with paintings and books (he has vague ambitions to improve her mind), to sleep chastely beside him. He reads stories to her aloud; now and again she utters words in her sleep. But on the whole he does not like her voice, which sounds like the voice of a stranger speaking from within her. He prefers her unconscious.

To be concluded in the next issue. This article was first published in nybooks.com.

