

Prologue

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"Miss Pony"

The moment I wrote this name on the white letter paper, something warm filled my inside.

I take a deep breath. A breath on behalf of relief and gratitude. Unintentionally, I join my hands together tightly. The last few weeks, I could do nothing but pray. Nothing but write a letter to Miss Pony each day I've prayed...

"Pony's Home" is far away. I have never felt this reproachful for being parted so far away by the sea.

I wanted to be next to Miss Pony, to look after her, to encourage her.

Just when I write Miss Pony's name in the letter I'm addressing to her, I start reading once again the letter I received from Miss Lane. The letter which tells that Miss Pony has gotten over an attack, that she is now recovering... Even Miss Lane's thin handwriting which seems to be smiling, dances like it is happy.

"Really? Miss Lane, you don't say that to relieve me, do you?"

As if she heard you saying that, I've enclosed a letter from Miss Pony to mine. If she gets better a little more, she would send a longer letter...

The enclosed letter from Miss Pony. No matter how many times I read it, I shed tears every time.

*Candy, I have worried you, haven't I?
I'm alright now.
After all, there are still things to do for children too.
Besides, I have decided not to die before we meet again.
God would hear my wish too.*

Paulina Giddings

I slowly follow that signature with my finger.

Indeed, that big round writing is as warm as Miss Pony. Although not as strong as usual, I almost can

hear Miss Pony's voice, Miss Pony who smells like a newly baked hot cake.

"Miss Paulina ..."

I smile unintentionally when I whisper that name.

My learning of Miss Pony's real name was when I completely grew up.

- Since my childhood, I was always called Pony. Just like the round and fat ponies growing in the neighboring farm, right? Since then, I don't seem to have changed much physically.

This is what Miss Pony said, laughing.

Speaking of names, there was an inevitably repetitive pleasant confession of Miss Lane.

- When I was a child, they always made fun of Lane Roche. Roche... For some reason, it sounded to me like a roach, or a loach... That was the worst mispronunciations that disappointed me. Although it is a precious name inherited from my ancestors, the fact that it is cursed is...

I can even imagine Miss Lane staring at the sky, thinking with a serious expression.

The warm fireplace of "Pony's Home". The cracking sound of woods. Miss Pony, who is either rocking, or sitting in her old chair. Miss Lane giving a hot cocoa to me as I was sitting in front of the fireplace.

- It's hot, so be careful, Candy.

Me, bringing the cup to my mouth before Miss Lane could make her warning, and spitting as I shout: "it's hot!"

I miss these old winter days.

- No matter how many times it happens, you still... Candy, really!

Miss Pony who bursts out laughing. The taste of fried marshmallows in the fireplace. The snow outside.

The premises where children sleep become silent. However, I know. That children aren't sleeping. Everyone is waiting for the snow to amass.

Most probably, as we all fall asleep, we will gently be getting out of bed, to go make a big snowman. As we want to surprise Miss Pony and Miss Lane in the morning...

I was like that too. With Annie and Tom, even if we had to pinch each other in order to not fall asleep, we used to wait until late at night for the snow to amass.

I am grateful to my mother and my father who left me at Pony's Home. It is my homeland. The place where I can go back to...

I get up from my desk, and go comfortably in front of the console.

The decorated oil painting number 10 in the handmade frame. That person decorated everywhere he saw.

He is the person who found years ago this oil painting in London's flea market.

That was such a great present.

That person was the one who, seeing the first oil painting between the very old looking ones, understood quickly that this painting exhibited "Pony's Home". At least, the panoramic view of Pony's home, that can be seen from Pony's Hill.

I'm standing in front of this painting and staring carefully at it. There was a signature in a corner of the picture, in a place not very visible. By *Slim*. Just noticing that signature made me feel like my chest was going to crush.

(*Slim!*)

He was half-breed. His gray eyes seemed to be sad. At twilight time, he always seemed to be about to cry.

- Was Slim crying in the sunset? Could it be that he remembers the day he was abandoned, although he was a newborn baby?

I remember Miss Lane, who gave Slim his name, saying that with bitterness.

He was terribly shy, but he had an emotional attachment towards me. When mornings came, he used to poke me slowly and purse his lips as if apologizing. His specialty was wetting his bed. We tried to clean it up, but it seemed like Miss Pony and Miss Lane had the ability to see everything. Slim who was thin and doddering. Slim who used to do nothing but draw.

- That boy... Despite his wish to take drawing lessons...

Miss Pony's saying so to herself, as if whispering, popped into my head.

When I returned to Pony's Home, Slim had already gone. They said that he took over a blacksmith's job in a faraway city. Miss Pony and Miss Lane were sad that Slim had to live in a world that had nothing to do with drawing (*Slim, we haven't forgotten you drawing, you know that, don't you?*). Slim's delicate and careful touches. No one but Slim could draw Pony's Home from before, as if it was quickly spreading out in front of my eyes.

Pony's Home, nowadays, becomes even more splendid than before.

I wonder how that oil painting drawn by Slim, who was adopted by a blacksmith, was found in London, so far from America... Furthermore, in a flea market.

I just feel that the time Slim has spent wasn't monotonous, just like mine.

Candy, I think such a miraculous coincidence doesn't have any other aim than to encourage you. Take good care of this painting. We are living in this painting. Candy, we're always watching over you. Slim and the others are certainly in this picture. Whatever happens, please keep it always with you, okay?

So wrote Miss Pony, as if to encourage me, in her answer to my letter in which I told her I found Slim's painting. I thought about giving that painting to Miss Pony and Miss Lane, who were always worried about Slim. I guess they have felt it. That I needed that painting. That I needed that place where I can go back to...

Even if I'm far away, "Pony's Home" is always in my living room.

- At any rate, I can't help thinking that Slim drew that painting for me.

Sweet month of May. Buttercups and white clovers covering Pony's Hill. Beyond it, Pony's Home can be seen surrounded by every fruitful green tree, as if making one's eyes smart. The gently growing grass. And, multicolored Black-eyed Susans decorating all around the house.

Even now, it's still like Miss Lane's opening the creaking old wooden front door, to run after Tom who made a prank.

We're there... Annie and I. At the moment when my life completely changed. On that day when Annie was accepted in Brightons' house... Time is coming back quickly.

- I've closed my eyes.