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FESTA GONBIDATUAK
PARTY GUESTS
KATIXA AGIRRE



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KATIXA AGIRRE

festa gonbidatuak
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Hitzaurrea / Foreword: Miren Agur Meabe

Edizio hau elebiduna da. Katixa Agirreren ipuinak euskaraz irakurri nahi badituzu, esteka honetan sakatu, mesedez:
[FESTA GONBIDATUAK](#)

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FESTA GONBIDATUAK

AURKIBIDEA

Hitzaurrea – Eguneroko bizimoduaren taupada ezkutuak

Hesperia, California

Jaun eta jabe

Igeri egin

Festa gonbidatuak

Hitzaurrea – Eguneroko bizimoduaren taupada ezkutua

Katixa Agirreraren edozein narrazio irakurtzean, jakin-mina eta artegatasuna sentitzen ditut hasieratik. Zer gertatuko ote da? Gertaera handia edo muntabakoa izan, lorratza utziko du protagonistengan, ezen itxurazko normaltasunaren azpian ur-laster isila dabil, bukaera orduko zerbait arrastaka eramango duena errukirik gabe. Ez al zara ohartu gauzak ez direla diruditenak?

Bizimodu baketsu eta ganoraz antolatutakoekin txirikordatuta, zenbat frustrazio, manipulazio, mendekotasun, gezur, irrika, suntsiketa-nahi, nartsizismo, koldarrera, asperdura, zaurgarritasun, gutxitasun-sentimendu, segurtasun falta, lotsa, traizio, autoflagelazio, erresumin, erruduntasun, jelsia, egoismo, obsesio...?

Agirrek gaitasun nabarmena ageri du gizatasuna naturaltasunez eta sakontasun psikologiko eraginkorrez islatzeko. Trebezia sartzen da pertsonaien baitan eta, fikzioa ez dirudien fikzioa eginez, beren ohikotasunean liluragarriak diren pasarte zeharo sinesgarriak eskaintzen dizkigu. Pertsonaien erretratuak eta haien portamoldeen logika deskribatzean, ezkutuko kameraren askatasunarekin jokatzeko du, alde makurrak estali eta baita epaitu gabe ere.

Pertsonaiak etengabe hitz egiten ari dira beren buruarekin; burmuinean kateatzen dituzte elkarrizketak; edo galderen mailukatze itogarria pairatzen dute, une oro bizitzak jartzen dizkien ebaluazio-kontrolak egitera derrigortuak. Giza emozioen tipologia zabalaren laginak ditugu, erlategi urdurietako aleak.

Hala ere, ipuinotan ez dauka tokirik sentimentalismoak. Dramak (osagai dramatiko mamitsuak biltzen baitituzte testuok), 1. pertsonan nahiz 3. pertsonan eman, distantzia galdu gabe azaltzen zaizkigu, kronista neurritsu batek egingo lukeen moduan. Horrenbestez, amaiera sendoek irakurlearen esku uzten dute leitu ahala sorturiko galderei erantzutea. Izan ere, irekitasuna eta anbiguotasuna dira idazlearen berezitasunetako bat, hainbestearainokoa non gogoeta egiteko tartea hartu behar izaten baita hurrengo narrazioari ekin baino lehen. Nola jakin noiz egingo digun iruzur bizitzak?

Idazkerari dagokionez, esan behar erritmo biziko testuak taxutzen dituela Agirrek, esaldi labur eta zehatzen bidez. Narrazioek ia berez egiten dute aurrera, estiloaren inertzia lagun.

Espazio fisikoak eta eszenatokiak —metro koadro gutxi batzuk nahiz milaka kilometro— pertsonaien nortasunaren luzapen legez ikusten ditugu, norberaren inguruabarren salda egosten den lapiko baten antzera. Bestetara esanda, harremanek eta elkarreraginek jarduten duten esparru fisikoa marraztean detaile urri aipatu arren, eraturako atmosferak erakargarriak eta erabat osatuak dira.

Eta han-hemen, ironiaren ukitua, eguneroko bizimoduaren taupada ezkutuei barreka.

Miren Agur Meabe
Bilbon, 2020ko urtarrilean

Hesperia, California

Elkarrekin bidaiatzea dirua aurrezteko modurik onena zen. Horregatik sartu ginen auto batean ia ezezaguna zitzaigun bikote horrekin.

Pentsatzen dut ordurako H. eta nire artekoa makal zebilela, gu konturatu ez arren. Horregatik bilatzen genuen besteen konpainia, kanpoko zaratak barrukoa estaliko zuelakoan. Horregatik sartu ginen auto batean ia ezezaguna zitzaigun bikote horrekin. Konturatu izan bagina, agian nik bakarrik igaro izango nukeen uda hura. Etenalditxo batek zer bait konpontzeko balioko zuen momentua izan zitekeen hura. Summer break. Azken finean hiru hilabeteko kontua baino ez zen, eta lan egiteko nengoen Renoko unibertsitatean. Baina ez, H. ere apuntatu egin zen, bere enpresa izan baitzen krisiaren lehenengo biktimetako bat —krisia hasi eta pare bat urte lehenago, badu meritua.

Marketing mobileko negozio txiki baten jabe zen H., beste bazkide birekin batera: hiru urtez baino ez zuen iraun. Beren lorpenik handiena: Guggenheim museoak enkargatutako sakelako telefonoetarako gida birtual bat, bisitariak bluetooth bidez deskargatuko zutena. Baikortasunez hartu zuen H.-k deskalabru hura, ez zuen ematen bere bizitzako ilusioa komuneko zulotik behera joanda zenik ia egun batetik bestera. Aukera berriak etorriko dira, esaten zuen, eta uda horretan Nevadako unibertsitatean egonaldia egiteko beka lortu nuela esan nionean, Silicon Valley-tik 400 kilometrora zegoen hirian hain zuzen, bere igurikapen baikorrenak betetzen ari zirela sentitu zuen: nirekin etor zitekeen, ingeles ikastaro bat egin unibertsitatean —bere karrerako puntu ahula, beti atsekabetzen zuena—, eta akaso, bailarako enpresei bisitaren bat egin, bere burua aurkeztu, kontaktuak lortu, auskalo.

Zapuztuta gelditu ote nintzen nirekin etorriko zela jakin izan nuenean? Ez dakit, ez nion behintzat neure buruari halakorik aitortu. Gestio guztiak elkarrekin egin genituen, modu azkar eta efizientean. Apartamentu bat, campusetik ez oso urrun. Ingeles ikastaro bat H.-rentzat, garesti demonio suertatu zitzaiguna. Aurkezpen e-mailak elkarrizketatu nahi nituen professor guztiei.

Behin hara ailegatuta, serio hartu nuen neure lana, jet-lagari men egin gabe. Renoko neoiek eta dekadentziak ez ninduten despistatu. Bizikletaz abiatzen ginen unibertsitatara. H. gaztetxo asiarrez betetako ikasgela batean sartzen zen, eta nik liburutegiko aire girotua gozatzen nuen. Rotunda izeneko areto borobila zen nire gogokoena. Bertan, liburuz inguratuta, inoiz amaitzen ez zen caffè latte handi bat eskuetan, eguneko ordurik onenak igarotzen nituen. Askotan, Nevadako zeru beti garbira begira baino ez nintzen geratzen, hamabost minutuz, ordu erdiz. Hamabietarako H. itzultzen zen, eta neure aurrean paratuta, etxerako lanak egiten zituen bazkalordua heldu bitartean. Burua sutan jartzen zidan phrasal verb horiekin guztiekin. Ahalegindu arren ez zuen harrapatzen call off eta put off aditzen arteko diferentzia.

Sandra liburutegiko kafetegian ezagutu nuen, uztailaren 4ko zubiaren ostean. Caffè lattea saltzen zidan nikaraguarrarekin hizketan entzun nion, gaztelaniaz, eta uste dut nik aurkeztu nuela neure burua aurrea. Nazioarteko harremanetarako dekanordea zen Valentziako unibertsitateko Psikologia fakultatean. Ez zegoen bertan ikerketa egiteko, ni bezala, baizik eta Nevada eta Valentziako unibertsitateen artean ikasle trukaketa programa bat aurrera ateratzeko. Sinpatikoezia izan zen lehenengo momentutik eta ni beti mesfidatia naiz horrelako jendearekin. Hala ere, inguru hartan lagun askorik topatzen ez nuen —Euskal Herritik IVEFeko lau morroi txandaldun baino ez zebiltzan campusean bueltaka, auskalo zertan, eta euskal artzainen emazteei buruzko dokumental edo liburu bat egin nahi zuen neska pinpirin bat—, egunero hasi ginen kafea hartzen Sandra eta biok. Elkar ezagutu eta hiru egunetara, H. ere sartu behar izan nuen gure zirkuluan, eta noizean behin —Sandrak gestiorik ez bazuen, edo nik elkarrizketaren bat—, elkarrekin bazkaltzen genuen. Estatuatuarrak eta Espainiako unibertsitate sistema kritikatu betetzen genituen geure solasaldiak, baina lehenengo gaiari beti ematen genion garrantzi handiagoa, H.-rekiko begirunez.

Gure bueltarako dozena bat egun geratzen zirenean, Jorge ailegatu zen, Sandraren senarra, oporralditxo amerikarrak igarotze aldera. Ordurako lotuta eta ondo antolatuta genuen laurok egingo genuen bidaia hura. Autoa alokatuta, San Frantzisko eta Las Vegaseko hotelak erreserbatuta, eta mapa batean marra imajinario bat, imajinazio askorik gabe marraztuta. San Frantziskoraino joango ginen lehenik eta behin, eta handik, 1 errepideari jarraituz, Los Angeleseraino. Los Angelesetik San Diegora joan gintezkeen, baina egun nahikorik ez genuela eta zuzenean Las Vegasera joatera deliberatu ginen —poker jokalaria amorratua omen zen Jorge, Sandrak esan zigunez—, eta handik, barrualdetik, Renora bueltan. Abiatu aurretik, H.-k Silicon Valley-ri aipamen bat edo beste egin zion, baina ez enfasi nahikoarekin, eta azkenean, bisita korporatibo horiek hutsalduz joan ziren, networking hitza sekula berriz ez entzuteraino. Apur bat kezkatuta nengoen Jorgerekin, izan ere, ezertaz ezagutu gabe, berarekin sartu behar genuen auto batean ez dakit zenbat orduz, eta okerragoa zena, lehenengo gauetan hoteleko logela ere konpartitu beharko genuen laurok. Sandraren ideia izan zen hura, San Frantziskoko hoteletako prezioek inspiratuta. Pertsona zuhurra zen, laster ohartuko nintzenez.

Baina ez zen inongo arazorik egon. Ohituta nago presente ez dauden senarrei buruz ezin hobeto hitz egiten duten emakumeetara —altuena, guapoena, azkarrena nirea—. Sandraren deskribapena nahiko zehatza izan zela aitortu behar dut, ordea. Altua zen Jorge, eta nahiko guapoa, eta sinpatikoa ere bai, baina bazekien distantziak mantentzen eta isilik geratzen zenean, bolantearen gainetik zerumugari begira, guztiok errespetatzen genuen. Topiko bikainak erabiltzen bazekien, egoerak hala eskatzen bazuen, baina benetako elkarrizketa interesgarriak izaten ere bai. Abokatua zen farmazia-enpresa handi batean eta etengabe bidaiatzen zuen Suitzara, zentralera. Dagoeneko zekizkien makina bat hizkuntzari txinera ere gehituko zion laster. Bazekien nola tratatu jendea berak nahi zuena lortzeko, supermerkatuko kutxazaina, bere emaztea, baita ni ere, jakina. Hasieratik nabaritu nuen H.-k ez zuela berarengan inpresio handirik eragin. Hala ere, edukazio handiz tratatu zuen bidaia osoan zehar,

eta noizean behin bluetoothari buruzko galderak ere egiten zizkion.

Oroitzapen lausoa daukat egun horietaz. Argazkiak atera genituen, baina ez ditut inoiz begiratzen. Esperantzaren telefono bat gogoratzen dut, Golden Gate zubiko suizidentzat bertan jarria, grazia handia egin zidana. “Jausi egin aurretik, deitu ezazu!”. Inoiz jan ditudan arrautza nahasirik bikainenak ere ondo gogoan ditut: itsaslabarreko jatetxe bat, Pazifiko hotza han behean, arrautzak, ogi txigortua eta kafea. Inoiz dastatu dudan mojitore penagarriena ere ezin ahaztu. San Luis Obispo izeneko hiri unibertsitario batean izan zen, konpromiso hartutako edabea, izugarri nekatuta bainengoen gau hartan. Los Angelesi buruz ez dut ezer gogoratzen: zalantza daukat inoiz autotik jaitsi ote ginen ere.

Bidaiaren azken zatian, Las Vegasetik hiru ordura geunden egun batean, iluntzeak sorpresaz hartu gintuen eta gelditzea erabaki genuen. Mapa eskuetan, Hesperia izeneko hiri bat aukeratu genuen, izenak grazia egin zigulako. Bazegoen handik hurbil Adelanto izeneko beste hiri are tentagarriago bat, baina apur bat desbideratu beharra zegoen, eta Hesperiak gure beharrianak aseko zituela deliberatu genuen. Mojave desertuaren erdian bat-batean loratutako —hitz egiteko modu bat da— hiri bat baino ez zen, gure gida turistikoan bost lerro baino merezi ez zituen. Bitxia zela esango nuke, ordurako hamaika hiri bitxi ikusi izan ez bagenu. Ez zeukan hirigunerik —edo guk ez genuen topatu—, errepidearen alboetan hazitako eraikinak baizik. Hanburgeseriak, likoreriak eta motel ugari: Las Vegasera zihoazen ezkongai, ludopata eta familia obesoentzako propio eraikita.

Ordurako moteletan adituak ginen, eta estandar altuen bila genbiltzan. Behin hiria aukeratuta, zortzi edo bederatzi motel ikuskatu genitzakeen egokienarekin topo egin aurretik. Jacuzzi behar zuten izan, aire girotua eta Interneterako konexioa logeletan, Jorgek beti zuelako lan konturen bat zain bere mezuen artean. Oheak ere probatzen genituen, eta izotz-makinarik ote zuten konprobatu. Hesperian, probatu genuen lehenengo motelak konbentzitu gintuen, ordea. Berritsua zen harrerako neska, gure giltzei buruz baino gehiago bere sorterriaz hitz egiten interesatua. Yucatango Meridakoa zela gogoratzen dut, Sandrak bazituelako doktoregoko ikasle bi hiri horretako unibertsitatean, eta horretaz jardun zutelako minutu pare batez. Azkenean lortu genuen gure logeletarako sarbidea, eta Jorgek jacuzziagatik galdetu zion.

—Atzeko aldean dago, jauna, baina orain ezin da erabili, hamarretatik aurrera, iluntasunagatik, kamerarekin ezin baita bigilantziarik egin —erantzun zuen bere azentu gozoaz—. Seguritate kontuak, jauna.

Gure ateen bila errezepiotik atera ginenean, Jorgeri etsipenez esan nion:

—Ezer ez galdetzea hobe, beti da hobe barkamena eskatzea baimena eskatzea baino.

—Zer diozu? —erantzun zidan berak—. Behar genuen informazioa eman digu: orain badakigu

ez gaituela inork molestaturko jacuzzian gauden bitartean.

Arrazoa zuela onartu behar izan nuen. Ohitzen hasia nintzen. Autoan gizonak aurrean esertzen baziren ere, eta emakumeok atzeko partean, nabaritzen hasita nengoen Jorge eta bion artean afinitate berezi bat sortzen ari zela. Jorge eta H.-ren artekoa baino askoz handiagoa, eta Sandra eta bion artekoa baino askoz handiagoa. Gauza asko nituen komunean Sandrarekin —lanbidea, familia istorio antzekoa, are Damien Rice-kiko zaletasun ia patologikoa ere—, eta hala ere, klik egin gabe jarraitzen genuen, arrazoi irakurtezina tarteko. San Frantziskoko lehenengo gauean, logela konpartitu genuen lehenengo gau hartan, bere adinari buruz gezurra esaten zebilela deskubritu nuen gainera. Berezi grabea iruditu zitzaidan hori, bi aste lehenago bere urtebetetze ospatu baikenuen Renoko pizzeriarik onenean, eta piper zatiak erabiliz, bere adin faltsua konposatu nuen nik tomate saltsaren gainean, kandelarik ez genuelako.

Gauza da San Frantziskoko hotelean geundelarik pasaporte bat ikusi nuela mahai gainean. Nirea izango zelakoan zabaldu nuen, baina, horren orde, Sandraren aurpegiarekin egin nuen topo. Ez zen ni baino bost urte zaharragoa, beti gogorazten zidan moduan, zazpi urte baizik. Gezurretan arituz gero fundamentuz egin beharra dagoela iruditzen zait niri, bi urterengatik ez duela merezi. Baina plan bat izango zuela pentsatu nuen gero: beste askok egiten duten moduan, berak ere, adin batetik aurrera, urtebetetze bakoitzeko urte bat kentzea erabaki zuela, gehitu beharrean. Hurrengo udan, lau urteko diferentzia izango zuen nirekin, seguru.

Ez nion inori esan —H.-ri, esan nahi baita—, baina plazer txikiz gogoratzen nuen nire deskubrimendutxoak Sandrak adinarekin zerikusia zuen edozer esaten zuen bakoitzean (eta arraioa, etengabe zerabilen gai hura ahotan), noizbait umeak izan nahi zituela gogorazten zigun bakoitzean adibidez (noizbait?, baina noiz, demontre?, galdetzen nion nik neure buruari, bost urte gutxiago betetzen dituzunean?).

Erlaxatuta afaldu genuen Hesperia-ko jatetxerik onenetako batean —Big Boy, zeinen espezialitatea bi pisuko hanburgesa baitzen—, baina afalondoa ez genuen gehiegi luzatu nahi izan, denok baikenuen jacuzia buruan. Bidaiako momenturik goxoenak —H.-ren lekuz kanpoko iruzkinak iruzkin— bertan pasatuak genituen ordura arte. Izarren pean, burbuila beroen arrimuan.

—Bost minutu barru jacuzzian!

Korrika abiatu ginen logeletara, bainujantziak autoaren atzeko bandejatik jaso eta gero. Han uzten genituen goizeko bainuaren ostean —erritual hori ere bagenuen—, errepedeko eguzkiak lehor zitzan. Lau minuturen buruan, berriz batu ginen SPA-GUESTS ONLY zioen kartelaren pean toalla zuria gerrian. Gaua zenez, ez genuen hesirik harago zabaltzen zen orube tristea ikusi eta glamour ilusioa mantendu ahal izan genuen uretan sartu bitartean. Krisketa ireki zuen Jorgek arazorik gabe, eta jacuzia eta igerilekua inguratzen zuen hesia zeharkatu genuen,

klandestinitatea agerian utziz gure pauso arin eta nerbiosoekin.

—Gaur askatasun osoz jokatu dezakegu, lagunok! —esan zuen H.-k, ipurdian atximur egiten zidan bitartean—. Badakigu ez dugula youtuben amaituko, kamara ez dabil!

Sandrak eta Jorgek komentarioa entzun ez izanaren plantak egin zituzten dotorezia handiz eta minutu batez, burbuilak baino ez ziren entzun, eta gure gorputzen baretzea. Kaliforniako gaueko aire freskoak aurpegietan egiten zigun kilima, gorputzak berotzen zitzaizkigun bitartean.

—Badakizue zer dugun faltan hemen, ezta? —esan zuen Jorgek orduan.

—Whiskia, noski! —erantzun zuen Sandrak, ondo konpenetratutako bikotekidearen papera jokatuz.

—Bai, eta nor aterako da paradisu honetatik, whiskiaren bila joateko? —esan nuen nik konfiantzarik gabe.

—Ni joango naiz —eta zutik jarri zen H., bere bainujantzi loredua audientzia osoari erakutsiz—. Errepidea gurutzatu eta hantxe bertan dago likore-denda bat.

—Zurekin joango naiz —esan zuen Jorgek, azken finean ideia originalaren egilea.

Kamisetak jantzi zituzten eta bainujantziak blai eginda atera ziren hesiaren bestaldera. Bakarrik geratu ginen Sandra eta biok, isilpean.

—Ondo konpontzen direla ematen du, ezta? —saiatu nintzen ni orduan, galtzen ziren bi silueta bustiei begira.

—Bai. Aizu, ni izotzen bila noa, dena prest izateko.

Eta berak ere utzi zuen bake eta bapore tenplu hura. Zimeltzen hasiak ziren nire hatz-mamiei begira gelditu nintzen bost minutuz, burua husten saiatuz. Sandra itzuli zen aurrena, logeletan beti aurkitzen genituen plastikozko kubo horietako bat izotzez beteta. Izotz puxka horietako bat hartu nuen eta ahoan sartu. Berehala itzuli ziren gizonak, zalapartaka.

—Ladies, zuen eskaria hemen da —esan zuen H.-k.

—Kostatu egin zaigu, baina azkenean lortu egin dugu! —erantsi zuen Jorgek.

—Yankee vietnamdar zoroa... —esan zuen H.-k jacuzzian hanka bat sartzen zuen bitartean.

Jorge bitartean edaria banatzen hasi zen. H. eta bion edalontziak, on the rocks. Besteak, izotzik gabe. Ordurako ez zegoen galdetu beharrik.

—Fijatu zara nola gordetzen zituen eskuak mostradorearen azpian, eskopeta ateratzeko prest?

—Niri beldur handiagoa eman didate txori horiek guztiek, karioletan. Seguru entrenatuta dituela bezeroei begiak ateratzeko.

—Zenbat izango zituen han? Eta usain hura!

Renoko kasinoetatik bi hilabetez paseatu ostean, edozein motatako pertsonaiekin ohituta nongoen. Oxigeno botilei lotuta makinetan jokoan zebiltzan jubilatua, bibote daliarra listuarekin apaintzen zuten homeless ilegorriak, autoekin lehian lasterketak egiten zituzten paralitikoak, mila dolarreko billete faltsuak banatzen salbazioa iragartzen zuten iluminatuak. Nekagarria egiten zitzaidan antropologia ariketa iraunkor hura. Gaueko ordu horietan trago bat baino ez nuen nahi, mundutik atera, nire burua baino ez aintzat hartu. Nire edalontzia atrapatu nuen eta topa egin gabe bota nuen lehenengo zangada.

—God save America! —esan zuen Jorgek.

—God save America! —esan genuen guztiok.

—Eureka! —gehitu zuen H.-k, gidan irakurrita baitzuen hori zela Kaliforniako eslogana.

Bakoitza bere basoan kontzentratu zen, eta gogoratzen dudanaren arabera ez zen hitz handirik egon hurrengo minutuetan. Bigarren erronda etorri zen, eta agian hirugarrena ere bai. Logura sentitzen hasi nintzen, eta zorientasunaren antza izan zezakeen zerbait. Izarrak ikuskatzen saiatu nintzen, lepoa atzerantz bihurrituz, eta justu orduan norbaitek ezkerreko oinean fereka egiten zidala sentitu nuen. Luze. Astiro. Eserita geunden tokitik edozein izan zitekeen, baina H.-rentzat postura bortxatu samar bat izango litzateke eta ez zeukan lizunkerietan ibiltzen zeneko babo aurpegi hura. Oina kendu beharrean, egoera luzatzea pentsatu nuen, ferekaren egilea deskubritu nahian.

Silueta beltz bat gerturatzen zela sentitu genuen orduan, baina beranduegi, egoeraz ohartu ginenerako, zabalik utzitako atea zeharkatzen ari baitzen gorputz handi bat. Seguritate guarda bat, pentsatu genuen guztiok ziurrenik, ez baitzen lehen aldia gure bainuen erdian morroi uniformedunen bat agertzen zela. Baina honek ez zeukan uniformerik: bermudak, txankletak eta tirantedun kamiseta bat baizik, tatuajez beteriko besoak ikusgai uzten zituena. H. eta Jorge tente jarri ziren aldi berean. Nire oina ferekatzen zuen oina bat-batean erretiratu zen.

—Likore-dendako tipoa... —esan zuen H.-k.

—Hi, guys! —esan zuen likore-dendako tipoak, eta kamiseta kentzeari ekin zion.

Bere bular txuri eta tatuatuarekin topo ez egiteko jaitsi nuen begirada eta mozoloaren oinetara jo nuen: apur bat gorago, ezkerreko orkatilan, lokalizadore bat deskubritu nion. Seinale bat bidaltzen ari zen momentu hartan Hesperiaiko polizia-etxera? Sheriff bat agertuko zitzaigun koadro kostunbrista hura behin-betiko osatzeko?

Bermudetan, txitxiak dardaran, likore-dendako tipoak kaska soildua harramazkatzen zuen, bere hurrengo mugimenduen nondik norakoa erabaki ezinik. Jacuzziak lau lagunok lasai samar geunden hala ere, gure gorputzekin bainuontzi horren edukiera betetzen baikenuen. Agerikoa behar zuen hor ez zegoela bosgarren gorputz baterako tokirik, sistemaren azpiproduktu horrek ere ikusi beharko zuen. Gainera, ateko kartelak ongi baino hobeto azaltzen zuen “spa”ren erabilera moteleko bezeroentzat erreserbatuta zegoela.

Baina azpiproduktua gugana ari zen gerturatzen.

—Having fun?

Ez genion erantzun. Geure artean elkarrizketa telepatiko bat izaten saiatu ginen. Zerbait esan beharko genion? Handik ziztu bizian atera? Lekutxo bat egin ipurdi vietnamdar horri?

—Sartu nahi du —esan zuen orduan Sandrak, agerikoa zena guztiekin konpartitu nahian.

—Zer egingo dugu? —nik.

—Txoriekin ez datorren bitartean, nigatik ondo —esan zuen H.-k erdi irribarre batez, baina inori ez zion graziarik egin.

Ez genuen ezer egin, hanka bigilatu horri begira gelditu besterik ez: behatz puntak, orkatila, ilerik gabeko hanka, bermuda zaharrak. Paralizaturik geunden, eta jacuzziak gurekin bat egitea erabaki zuen, bere burbuila-jarduna momentu hartan eten baitzen. Bost minutuz behin gertatzen zen, eta botoiari sakatu beharra zegoen orduan. Tatuaiadunak berak egin zuen, bere ezkerreko oinarekin. Botoia nire sorbaldaren atzean zegoen, eta burua biratu nuenean, bere azazkal beltzak ikusi nituen. Segundo bat geroago, oin hura uretan zen, Sandra eta nire sorbalden artean. Portuetako ur koipetsuetan janari bila ibili ohi diren arrain ilun horietako bat ematen zuen.

—Aizu! —esan zion orduan Jorgek, bularra ateraz, baina tipoak jarraitu zuen uraren tenperatura probatzen, ez-axolati.

Senak esaten zidan, eta Sandrari ere antzeko zerbait esango zion, alboratu beharra genuela, jacuzzitik atera, korrika egin. Eta hala ere han jarraitzen genuen, oin zikin batek gure arteko ura irauli eta belzten zuen bitartean, ezer egin gabe. Instintuari kasu egin beharrean, gizonezkoen erreakzioaren zain gelditu ginen. Baina haiek ere instintuari gor nonbait. Morroskoak ondo aprobetxatu zuen egoera: oin bat sartu —baina zer gertatzen zen lokalizadore hori bustitzen bazen?—, eta ezer gertatzen ez zenez, bestea ere sartu zuen. Begirada erretiratu nuen, okerrena imajinatu bainuen bere bermuden pean. Mugimendu bakar batez bere ipurdiari tokia egin zion Sandra eta bion ipurdien artean. Azalak azala ukitzen zuen, lodiagoa ematen zuen gizonak uretan, bermuden azpian jaurtitzeko prestatzen ari zen torpedo bat imajinatu nuen.

Kontakizun baten bitartez ezin da azaldu zeinen azkar pasatu zen dena, hitzek nahitaez moteltzen dute gertatutakoa, baina bat-batekotasun horrek bakarrik argitu dezake nolatan ez ginen mugitu, ez genuen ezer egin. Likore-dendako tipoaren ipurdiari lekua egiteko, ni H.-rengana gerturatua nintzen, eta Sandra Jorgerengana, naturala den moduan. Eta hala ere, morroskoak gauzarik nazkagarriena egiteko adorea bildu zuen: bere mingain zuria atera —zin dagit zuria zela—, eta nire azalaren gainean lepotik belarrirako bidea egin zuen, miazkatzen zidan azal zati hori izoztuta utziz.

—Aizu! —esan zuen orduan H.-k, bularra Jorgek bezala ateraz, eta bere besoa jarri zuen nire sorbalden gainean.

Nik ez dakit “joder” edo “putakumea” zer esan nuen, baina azpiproduktuak ez zuen gaizki hartu, beste alderantz egin baitzuen orduan, Sandrarekin prozesu bera errepikatzeko. Ez dakit bere mingain lodiak Sandraren azala ukitzera ailegatu ote zen. Oso gertu egon zela bai, baina justu orduan Jorge jausi zitzaion gainean, itsaso-munstro baten trinkotasunarekin. Estrategiarik gabe bere pisu guztia morroskoaren kontra bota zuen, baina berehala erabaki bat hartu, eta beso batez gizonkotearen lepoa inguratzen zuen bitartean, beste eskuarekin haren burua urperatzen saiatu zen. Bitartean, Sandra, H. eta hirurok jacuzziaren izkina urrunenean geratu ginen, edo behintzat irudi hori daukat buruan, jakin badakidan arren ontzi txiki hartan ez zegoela izkina urrutirik, izkinarik ere ez zuelako, besteak beste. Denok geunden gertu-gertu, gorputzen zopa nahasi bat zen hura, baina Jorge ari zen indarra egiten, eta likore-dendako tipoa ura edaten.

Itotzen ari zen, berehala konturatu ginen. Jorgek, modu kontzientean, morroskoa ito nahi zuen. Indar guztia helburu horretan jarrita zuen. Kopetako zainak puztuta zituen eta sekulako ahaleginak egiten zituen buru vietnamdar horrek berriz airerik hartu ez zezan. Noizean behin, burua ateratzea lortzen zuen gizonkoteak, ukabilkadak ematen zituen, ostikoren bat edo beste ere jaso nuen nik, uraren azpian. Jorgek ez zuen amore ematen ordea. Beherantz indarra egiten jarraitzen zuen, indarrak auskalo nondik ateraz. Halako batean burbuilak amaitu ziren berriz ere, eta lasaitasun berri horrek makurragoa, zitalagoa bihurtu zuen eszena osoa. Burura,

Mojaveko desertua zetorkidan, pala bi, egunsentiraino luzatzen den enterramendu bat. Zinemari esker, erabat sinesgarria eta egingarria iruditzen zitzaidan pasadizoa. Ez ninduen izutu.

—Nahikoa da, Jorge! —egin zuen txilio Sandrak, inoiz entzundako ahotsik zorrotzenarekin.

Atzera egin zuen gizonak orduan, otzan, esku artean zuena zaku baten moduan jaurtiz, mespretxuz. Gizonkotearen burua uretatik bere kabuz aterako ote zen gelditu ginen guztiak. Atera egin zuen. Eztula egin zuen. Zutik jarri zen jacuzziaren erdian, eta orduan denok atera ginen uretatik. Jorgek tipoaren kamiseta eta txanklak hartu zituen eta hesiaz bestaldera jaurti zituen. Eztula gehiago. Zorabio imintzioak.

—Go away! —esan zuen Jorgek oraindik berea ez zen ahots batez.

Pauso baldarrez atera zen bera azkenean. Tu egin zuen hiru edo lau aldiz irteerarantz jotzen zuen bitartean. Botaka egingo zuela pentsatu nuen nik, aztarna hori utziko zigula.

—Pasatu egin zara —esan zion Sandrak Jorgeri, zeinek gazteagoa eta biziberritua ematen baitzuen.

Sandrak negarrari ekin zion orduan, ez dakit zergatik. Besarkatu egin ziren begiratzea ia lotsa ematen zuen modu batez. Nik azpiproduktuaren lerdea garbitzen saiatzen nintzen nire toallarekin, baina banekien bertan sentituko nuela bolada batez. H.-k burua harramazkatzen zuen, eta txistuka egiten zuen, ez dakit arinduaz edo adrenalinarekin poderioz.

—Goazen hemendik —esan zuen Jorgek—. Lo egiteko ordua da.

Berehalakoan egin genuen men guztiok.

Gaua oso txarto pasa nuen. Ziur nengoen edozein momentutan tipoa itzuliko zela. Eta ez zen noski bakarrik itzuliko. Eskopeta, mostradore azpian gordetzen zuen eskopeta hori, berarekin ekarriko zuen. Gu guztiak hil ondoren bere txoriak askatuko zituen, geure hondakinekin elika zitezten. Edo akaso gu akabatu aurretik. Ate aurrean jarri nuen sofa, eta baita telebistaren altzaria ere. H. ados egon zen, ez zidan barrerik egin. Sekulako amorrua sentitu nuen, goizeko hirurak aldera, H. lokartu zela sentitzerakoan. Nik ez nuen lorik hartu goizaldera arte. Halako batean, likore-dendako morroskoarengan pentsatzeari utzi nion, baina edozein motatako pentsamendu ilunak etorri zitzaizkidan ametsetan: errepide-istripuak, katastrofe naturalak, bakardadea.

Ohi baino lehenago gosaldu genuen egun hartan, eta ez genuen goizeko bainurik hartu. Hiru orduren buruan Las Vegasen ginen, eta pare bat egunetan ez genion elkarri hitzik egin behar

izan: argiak, pantailak, kasino mahaien artean biluzten ziren neskak eta bekatarien kontra aritzen ziren salbatzaileen artean, haluzinatuta eman genituen ordu guztiak. Egun horietan banatu ginen lehenengo aldiz. Jorgek pokerrean kontzentratu nahi zuen; eta guk hirurok, turismo hutsa egin.

Egun bakar batean itzuli ginen Renora, Jorge eta Sandraren hegaldirako zortzi ordu eskas gelditzen zirenean. Espektatiba eta promesa faltsurik gabe esan genien agur, baina izugarri ondo pasatu genuela elkarri esanez.

Bost hilabete geroago, Gabonen ostean, H. eta biok banandu egin ginen. Bera joan zen anaia baten etxera, eta etxea salgai jarri genuen arren, ni gelditu nintzen bertan eroslea agertu bitartean, fakultatetik gertu geratzen zelako. H. kalitate ikastaro batean eman zuen izena. Pasiarik gabeko banaketa bat izan zen, kontatzen ere aspergarri suertatzen den horietako bat. Handik hilabete batzuetara, udako egun likitsu batez, apartamentu berrian telefonoa jarri zidaten egun berean, ez dakit nola gogoratu nuen Sandraren urtebetetzea zela. Pizza hura etorri zitzaidan gogora, eta piperrekin osatutako adin faltsua. Kuriositatea nuen. Gehiegi pentsatu gabe deitu nion etxera. Sandrak beharrean, Jorgek erantzun zion telefonoari, abegitsu erantzun ere. Hiru-lau hitz elkar trukatu ostean, Sandrarekin hitz egin nahi nuela esan nion, zoriondu nahi nuela. Sandra ez zela jada bertan bizi esan zidan, tonua erabat ilunduz. Auskalo zergatik, entzundakoak ez ninduen batere harritu.

—O —esan nuen, hala ere.

Ez nuenez sarkin bat izan nahi, ezer galdetu beharrean (baina zer gertatu da?, hain bikote ederra egiten zenuten!), nire istorioa kontatu nion, kointzidentzia azpimarratuz, detaile interesgarrienak bildu nahian, eta Jorgek sentitzen zuela esan zidan dena entzun ostean. Baina berak ez zidan ezer kontatu.

—Tira, gauza hauek gertatzen dira.

—Bai, gertatzen dira.

—Aizu, beste egunen batean deituko dizut eta lasaiago hitz egingo dugu, ados?

Ados, esan zidan, modu neutroan. Eta eskegi aurretik zenbat egunez itxaron beharko nukeen kalkulatzeko hasi nintzen, nire hurrengo deia oso arraroa suerta ez zedin.

Jaun eta jabe

Ezuste eta deserosotasunak gorabehera, ez zitzairen etxe berrira ohitzea larregi kostatu. Arrotza zitzairen, bai, kanpoko isiltasuna, gauez tinpanoak urratzen zituen huts hura; arrotza, halaber, etxearen beraren noizean behingo soinu erreperitorioa: habeen kraska, zoruen kirrinka, tximinian behera zetozen haize-uluak.

Arazo teknikoak ere ez ziren makalak izan: kalefakzio sistema berria ez zebilen behar bezala (lagun batek aholkaturiko erradiadoreen purgazioek ezer gutxirako balio izan zuten), eta, azaroaren hasieratik, estufa elektriko txiki bat sartu behar izan zuten logelan. Arratoi inbasio nazkagarri bati egin behar izan zioten aurre, tranpa itsaskor (eta krudel) batzuen bitartez. Bainugelan, kainerien konexioa gaizki eginda zegoen nonbait, eta mando gorria erabili behar zen ur hotza lortzeko, eta urdina beroa izateko. Goiz askotan bitxikeria hura ahaztu eta denbora puska bat pasatzen zuten zorrotada hotzaren azpian, madarikazioka.

Eta hala ere, pozik zeuden, aldaketaz kontent. Hala esaten zioten elkarri. Benetako etxe baten jabe ziren, Goiok lanerako toki aparta zeukan, Garazik ordu erdi eskaseko auto bidaia lantokiraino. Mauka eder hura topatu izanaren zortea txalotzen zuten. Garazik sei urte inguru zeramatzan pisu babestuen zozketetan parte hartzen. Bere izena, beste milaka izenen zerrenda batean. Hogeita zazpi urte baino gutxiagoko kupoan hasieran, hogeita zazpi baino gehiagokoetan gero (halabeharrez). Azkenean, egunkarian iragarki txiki bat ikusi eta urte luzez izozturiko afera martxan jarri zen supituki, abiadura bizian jarri ere.

Etxearen jabeak, estutasun ekonomikoak tarteko –gaizki ateratako negozio bat, nonbait–, presa zeukan heredatutako etxe zahar hura saltzeko. Hamar urtez abandonatuta izan zuen, baina ezinbestekoa zitzaion orain etxea saltzea. Horregatik zen prezioa hain baxua, azaldu zien Goio eta Garaziri, urgentziagatik.

Inoiz ez zitzairen, ordura arte, hiritik kanpo bizitzea burutik pasa. Garaziri, babes ofizialeko pisu baten zain zegoenean ere, kezka eragiten zion auzo berri horien periferikotasunak, ezerezaren erdigunean egote bakandu horrek. Eta orain, auskalo nondik nora, herri ezin apartatuago batera joan ala ez erabakitzen ari ziren.

Ordura arte sekula entzun gabeko herria zen, mapetan kostata topatzen zena, ezdeusa, beste garai batekoa. Internet bidez bilatu behar izan zituzten hara ailegatzeko argibideak. Muino baten gainean zegoen eta, bere punta altuenetik ere, gari soroak eta eskualde-errepide bat baino ez ziren ikusten. Errepidearen bestaldean, txalet adosatuen urbanizazio berri bat ere ikus zitekeen. Hori zen gizateriaren aztarna bakarra, eta horrek lasaitu zituen herrira gerturatu ziren lehenengo aldian.

Alde onei erreparatu zieten. Etxe hura benetako etxe bat zen, sobera espazioduna, naturaz

inguratua, benetako historia baten jabe. Lasaia (oso). Bakartia ere bai, baina festak antola zitezkeen, nahi adina, udaltzaingoari deituko zioten bizilagunen arriskurik gabe. Aire purua izango zuten eskura etengabe. Prezioarena ez zen nolana hiko abantaila. Eta, noski, umeak izatekotan ere, leku bikaina huraxe, ezta?

Lagun arkitekto batekin bisitatu zuten etxea bigarren aldian. Hark etxearen egoera onesgarria ziurtatu zien. Azkar eta erraz egin zitezkeen konponketa eta berrikuntza simple batzuk azaldu zizkien. Teilatuan atonketak. Leihoen isolamendua. Kalefakziorako instalazio berria. Eta ez, beheko pisuko bi gelatxoak banatzen zituena ez zen karga horma bat, eta hura botaz saloi handi samarra geratuko zitzaien (festetarako-eta).

Hurbileko urbanizaziora jaitsi ziren gero, tabernan zeuden bezeroen artean informazio pilaketa egiten saiatzera: herria, bizilagunak, komunikazioak. Herrixka 70eko hamarkadan hasi zen husten, ia-ia desagertzeraino, inguruko herri gehienek pairatutako patu bera. Familia bakarra gelditzen zen orain modu iraunkorrean bertan bizitzen. Baina (eta hor zegoen herrirako esperantza bakarra) hiriko jendea hasia zen etxeak erosten, berritzen, asteburuetan umez betetzen. Udan ere, mugimendu dezente zegoen, eta ez bakarrik asteburuetan. Gainera, urtebete zen telekomunikazioak hobetzeko administrazioaren plan bati esker posible zela herrian ADSL konexioa izatea. Herrira zeraman pista estua berriki asfaltatua zen, urtebete ere ez zen izango. Tabernarik ez zegoen, baina urbanizazioko tabernan bazegoen girotxoa, eta ongi etorriak izango ziren bertan.

Handik pare bat egunetara, etxeko jabeak presa sartu zien. Garazik beren zalantzak azaldu zizkion, denbora eskatu zion. Prezio merkeago bat proposatu zion orduan jabeak. Beherapen adierazgarria. Pasatzen utziko zuten horrelako aukera bat?

Hilabete batzuk pasa ziren hirian alokairuan zeukaten pisua utzi eta herrira mugitu zirenerako. Lan mordoa egin behar zen etxea bizigarri bilakatu arte (hasieran, baikortasunez, aurreikusia baino askoz gehiago). Asteburuak baliatu zituzten, baita oporrak ere. Engainatu ahal izan zituzten lagun guztiak bertan izan ziren, teilatu gainean, edo etxe barruan, leiho eta ate markoetan burleta ipintzen, hormak margotzen. Gaez, beren pisu alokatura bueltatzen zirenean, txikia eta itogarria egiten zitzairen, eta handik alde egiteko gogoak gainezka egiten zien.

Azkenean, irailaren bukaera aldera, mudantza definitiboa egin zuten. Garazik bi egun libre hartu zituen. Lagun batek utzitako furgonetan pisu alokatuan zeuzkaten altzari apurrak sartu eta agur esan zioten hiriari. Dena garbitu behar izan zuten. Zoruak, eskailerak, eskailera-azpia, bainugelak, ataria, oharkabean pasatako hamaika izkina eta txoko ilun. Altzariak kokatu zituzten. Gela bakar batean sartzen ziren guztiak. Altzari berriak erosi beharko zituzten, hutsuneak betetzeko. Estilo tradizionalago bat proposatu zuen Garazik, nekazal inguru berrira

hobeto egokitzeko. Burdina forjatuko ohe bat logelarako, esaterako. Eta, zergatik ez, Garaziren amaren etxean gordetzen zuten komoda zahar hura, umeen gelarako.

Ez zen umeen gela delakoa aipatzen zuen lehenengo aldia. Bromatan bazen ere, beren logelaren ondoan zegoen gela txikiagoa aipatzen zuen bakoitzean, horrela deitzen zuen.

Eta ze kolorez pintatuko ditugu umeen gelako paretak?

Kutxa horiek, momentuz, umeen gelan gera daitezke.

Goiok ez zekien kezkatzen hasteko ordua ote zen.

Bere ustez, kontua nahiko argi zegoen.

Arkitekto baten bulegoko bere lana (maketa birtualen diseinuaz arduratzen zen) utzi berri zuen, printzipioz urtebeteko eszedentziaz, baina tarte hura bukatutakoan lanera bueltatuko zela imajinatze hutsa ezinezkoa egiten zitzaion. Saiatu ere, ez zen asko saiatzen. Orain, gainera, etxearen eta hipotekaren esklabotza zeukaten (Garaziren nominagatik lortua, noski) eta ume batek gehiegi konplikatu luke guztia. Garaziren hitzei muzin egitea erabaki zuen Goiok. Oraindik luzamendutan ibiltzeko aukerak bazituela iruditu zitzaion. Buruhauste nagusia etxea guztiz txukuntzea zen. Horrekin entretenimendua izan zezakeen Garazik bolara baterako.

Zoriontsu zegoen etxeko jauna egoitza berrian. Goizetan, batez ere. Batera gosaltzen zuten Garazik eta biek, baina gero, emakumeak autoa hartu eta alde egiten zuenerako, isiltasuna baino ez zen geratzen inguru osoan. Ganbarara igotzen zen orduan eta, ordenagailua pizten zen bitartean, lehenengo zigarroa erre ohi zuen leihoan.

Momentu hoberena zen hura: eguna probetxugarria izango zitzaion esperantza mantendu zezakeen oraindik. Urtebeteko beka lortua zuen, baina hain luze begitandu zitzaion urtebete hura zortzi hilabetetan geratua zen azkar batean, eta denborak gupidagabe aurrera egiten jarraituko zuen sentipena zeukan Goiok. Emaitzak behar zituen, aspalditik. Eta dena erritmo egokiz martxan jarriko zen momentuaren zain bizi zen.

Kea botatzearekin batera etxe aurreko aranondoari erreparatzen zion: aranak, helduegiak, berez erortzen ziren, eta txoriek, pare bat mokoka dedikatu ostean, bertan abandonatzen zituzten. Herriko kale bakarra erdialderantz zabaltzen zen, eliza zegoen tokian, baina bidezidor bihurtzera ailegatzen zen gorantz egin ahala, kanposantuan bukatzeraino. Noizbait kanposantua bisitatzera joan behar zuela gogoratu zion bere buruari Goiok. Gero, herriko biztanle bakarrak izandakoen etxera begiratu zuen.

Bizilagunen arteko harremanaren kalitatea beren etxeak banatzen duen distantziarekiko proportzionala bada, Goiok harreman baketsu eta atsegin samarra aurreikusten zuen, etxe bakoitza herriko mutur batean baitzegoen. Eskualdeerrepidetik pista asfaltatu berria hartuz eta bi kilometro gorantz eginez, herria agertzen zen, eta topatzen zenuen lehenengo etxea bizilagunena zen. Etxe izugarria zen, armarri eta guzti, baina leihoen erdia-edo egurrez estalita zituen. Baratze txukun bat ere bazuen: tomateak, letxugak, tipulak. Gero goranzko bidea jarraitu beharra zegoen, ezkerrera zein eskumara etxe zahar eta zaharberrituak utziz, eliza igaroz, Goio eta Garaziren etxera ailegatu arte. Herriko azken etxea. Garaiena. Guztira, berrehun metro egongo ziren bata eta bestearen artean. Aski zen.

Egun horietako batean auzoak bisitatzera joan beharko lukete. Pelikuletan bezala. Beren buruak aurkeztera eta. Baina pelikuletan, beteranoak joan ohi dira bizilagun berriak bisitatzera eta detailetxoren bat eramatera. Beheko bizilagun horiek, ordea, ez ziruditen norberaren etxera deituko zutenetakoak, goxoki kaxa edo ardo botila bat eskuan. Buruarekin eta urrundik baino ez zituzten ordura arte auzoek agurtu, inongo jakin-minik agertu gabe.

Gizon konkortu samar bat zen bata. Goizean goiz, aitzurra edo sega eskuan, mendian galtzen zena. Batzuetan Land Rover zaharra hartu eta abiadura harrigarri bidea jaisten ere ikusten zuen Goiok. Itzultzen zenean, are azkarrago zetorren, autoa kontrolatzeko arazoak balitu bezala. Urbanizazioko tabernan ere topatua zuen noiz edo noiz gizona (adin adieraztezina, lanerako faxa oraindik soinean), baina bere aurpegiak ezer ez esateko aholkatzen zion.

Neskatxa bat zen bestea, goizero taxi bat hartzen zuena, motxila bizkarrean, eta gauera arte itzultzen ez zena. Asteburu batzuetan mutil baten motorrean igo eta gero galtzen ikusten zuten.

Hori zen guztia. Ez zirudien familia ugaria eta, zaratatsuak baldin baziren, Goio eta Garaziren etxetik ezin zen igarri.

Sukaldean afaltzen zuten, goiz samar. Sukaldeko hormara iltzatutako barra batean, eserleku altuetan. Sukalde osoa berria zen, etxe-tresna modernoz hornitua. Beren inbertsiorik handiena etxe barruan. Garazik bere lanaz lehen baino gehiago hitz egiten zuela iruditzen zitzaion Goiori. Afari osoa monopolizatu zezakeen lasai asko, Ekoikuskaritza araudiaren eta ISO 14.001en inguruan berbetan, edota XYZ lankidearen azken lardaskeria deskribatuz. Inguru-giro teknikaria zen enpresa aeronautiko batean. Hegoak eta turbinak eraikitzen zituzten abioiak egiten zuen enpresa brasildar batentzako. Ia hamar urte zeramatzan jardun horretan, eta jadanik ez zeukan inongo misteriorik Goioarentzat.

Berak, ordea, ez zeukan gauza handirik kontatzeko. Etxean pasatzen zuen egun osoa. Goizaren erdian buelta bat egiten zuen. Urbanizazioko tabernara ere jaitsi ohi zen, kafea edo patxarana

hartzera, bazkalostean. Urbanizazioa ez zen oso alaia: etxe gehienak oraindik saldu gabe zeuden, eta tabernako bezero gehienak inguruetakoko nekazariak ziren, Goioentzat ulergaitzak ziren gauzei buruz mintzatzen ziren, edo musean egiten zuten hitzik bota gabe. Bueltako bidean, masustak hartzen entretenitzen zen. Prozesuan zeukan piezari buruz ez zuen inoiz hitz egiten. Arkitekturaz ez da abesten, ezta? esan ohi zuen, ahaztua zuen norbait parafraseatuz, ba arteaz ez dut nik hitz egingo. Gainera mantso zebilen, edo mantso baino okerrago, pauso bat aurrera eta beste bi atzera ematen zituela iruditzen zitzaion. Egoera, baina, ez zen oraindik Garazirekin komentatzeko bezain grabea, bere ustez.

Bat-batean norbaitek atea jo zuen, postrea etenez. Atearen aldaba originala utzia zuten (fosil pintores-koa), baina tinbre elektriko bat ere bazuten. Din-don egiten zuena.

Din-don.

Garazi altxatu zen, eta Goio atzetik joan zitzaion. Ez zeuden bisitetara ohituta (hirian bizi zirenean ez bezala) eta gertakizun harrigarria zen hura, biok ikusi beharrekoa.

Neskak ilea horiz tindatua zuen. Hurbildik ikusten zuten lehenengo aldia zen, eta argi eta garbi ikusten zitzaizkion orain bere sustrai beltzak. Tirantedun elastikoa zeraman eta anorak bat gaineratik, irekita. Hamasei bat urte izango zituen, baina makillajeak begirada zahartzen zion.

Epa, gabon. Han beheko bizilaguna naiz, Joana.

Ez zien bostekoa luzatu ez beste antzeko keinurik egin. Goio eta Garazi zer esan edo zer egin jakin gabe geratu ziren. Neska teledendako saltzaile baten moduan mintzatzen hasi zitzaion. Makillajea gorabehera, begi apartak zituen. Eta bazekien.

Ongi etorri herrira, e? –esan zuen irribarre zabal batez.

Mila esker –erreakzionatu zuen azkenean Garazik. – Ni Garazi naiz. Eta bera Goio.

Oso ondo. Beno, ba, besterik gabe, jakin dezazuela, inoiz laguntza behar baduzue, umeekin-edo, nik zaindu ditzakedala. Kanguru ona naiz. Esperientzia badaukat.

Neskak etxe barrua behatzeko ahaleginak egiten zituen, Goio eta Garaziren artean utzitako espazioa baliatuz.

Eskerrik asko, baina ez dugu umerik.

A. Ez duzue. Esku ona daukat umeekin, beti esaten didate. Baina, klaro, ez duzue umerik. Beno, ba, ez dakit, beste ezer behar baduzue, garbitzea, edo baratzean laguntza, hemen nagoela.

Besterik gabe.

Oso ondo... Joana, ezta?

Bai, Joana, hori da. Beheko etxe horretakoa. Bizilaguna. Nahi duzue? –Anorakeko poltsikotik tabako pakete bat atera eta zigarro bat eskaintzen ari zitzaien.

Ez, mila esker.

Eta zuk? –Goiori zuzenean.

Ez, orain ez.

Tira, ba, agur, gero arte, gabon.

Zigarroa piztuta gorantz jarraitu zuen, kanposanturantz, baina ez zuten begiradarekin jarraitu, berriro sukaldera bueltatu baitziren. Goio beldur zen, zirkunstantziak baliatuta, ez ote zuen Garazik umeen gaia aterako.

Ze bakarrik behar duen egon adin horretako neska batek herri honetan.

Ni ere bakarrik nago egun osoan hemen. Ez dizut penarik ematen?

Zu handia zara, eta jostailu asko dituzu denbora pasatzeko. Bide batez, zelan doa azken pieza, eskuarena?

Ondo.

Ondo... besterik gabe?

Bai, ondo besterik gabe.

Beno, ba, ea harrikoa ere ondo egiten duzun.

Ezer esan gabe jaso zituen Goiok postreko koilaratxoak eta harraskara hurbildu. Lasaituta sentitzen zen. Garazi telebista aurrean zegoen, bere mantaren barruan, eta ez zirudien ugalketari buruzko ezer esateko indarrik geratzen zitzaionik. Harrikoarekin kontzentratu zen.

Azaroko larunbat batez Goio bere estudioan sartu eta hondamendiarekin egin zuen topo. Garazi lotan zegoen oraindik baina gizonaren oihu eta madarikazioek berehala esnatu zuten.

Estudioan, dena blai. Aurreko bi egunetan etengabe bota zuen euria, eta zaparradak Goioren estudioan jarraitzen zuen orain. Putzuak zeuden nonahi. Sabaiak ere arrakalak zituen eta sabelduta zegoen leku zenbaitetan. Etxe-aldaketaz geroztik lurrean eta dorretxo txukunetan zituen liburu mordoa guztiz bustita zeuden. Bustita eta puztuta. Ekipoa konprobatzera jo zuen berehala. Kable korapiloak eta elektrizitate lapurrak lehor ziruditen. Tentsio orekatzailea, teklatua eta ordenagailua ondo zeuden. Gaitz erdi. Kaltetuena, antza, liburuak.

Arazoa, gero jakin zutenez, teila azpiko egurra zen. Lizunduta zegoen erabat. Teilak aldatzearekin ez zuten ezer lortuko. Beheko materiala aldatzea zen zentzudunena. Onduline izeneko asmakizun bati buruz hitz egin zien beren lagun arkitektoak. Isolatzailea zen guztiz, eta teilaren bat edo beste apurtuta ere, uretatik libre egongo ziren betiko.

Aldaketa garestia zen, baina hori oraindik ez zekiten larunbat goiz hartan, Goioren liburu guztiak kanpora atera zituztenean, behinola baratze izandakora, orain lorategi bihurtzeko asmoz Garazik zaintzen zuen belardira. Eguzkiak goiza laguntzen zuen, aurreko egunetako joera aldaturik, eta liburuak hortik zehar sakabanatzeko aprobetxatu zuten, aulki, mahai eta noizbait eserleku moduan erabiltzeko asmoa zuten egurren gainean, lehor zitezten. Arte liburuak ziren gehienak, liburu garestiak, handiak eta pisutsuak, are pisutsuagoak orain urez beterik zeudela. Atzerriko museoetan erosiak ziren batzuk, ahalegin handiz maletetan garraiatuak. Askotan, liburu horien erruz, gehiegizko pisuari dagokion gehigarria ordaindu behar izan zuen Goiak. Ez zuten patu miserable eta umel hori merezi. Agerikoa zen horietako batzuk ez zirela salbatuko, eta gehienek arrastoak pairatuko zituztela betiko. Goiak negar egiteko gogoa zuen.

Garazik ezin zuen tragediaren neurria harrapatu, baina gizona besarkatu zuen.

Besarkadaren erdian bizilaguna pasa zen baratze-lorategiaren aurretik. Joanaren (ustezko) aita. Oraindik ez zekiten haren izena. Lanerako buzo batez jantzita zetorren, aitzurra sorbaldan. Betiko moduan, distantzia egoki batetik egin zien agur buruarekin, baina, liburu saldoa ikusita, gerturatu egin zitzaion.

Arazoak?

Bai, itogin madarikatuak, ganbaran –azaldu zion Garazik.

Txarra da hori.

Bai, jauna.

Teilak aldatu beharko dituzue.

Zerbait egin beharko dugu, bai.

Laguntza behar baduzue... badakizue non nagoen.

Beste inork baino prezio hobea egingo dizuet.

Eta bideari berrekin zion, beste ezer erantsi gabe.

Familia hori guretzat lan egiteko irrikan dagoela dirudi –esan zion Garazik Goiori bizilaguna hor nonbaiten galdu zenean. – Zer, gosaltzera sartuko gara, ala hemen gelditu nahi duzu, liburu-zaintzan?

Sartuko gara, bai. Baina ni ez naiz gose.

Etxean sartu baino lehen, ordea, Joana agertu zitzaien.

Ai, ama, zer gertatu zaizue?

Liburuei begira geratu zen bera ere. Bere kolore eta tamaina desberdinekin ezohiko flora osatzen zuten sasi-baratze horretan. Itoginarena azaldu zioten.

Ba, laguntza behar baduzue teilatua konpontzen, badakizue... Joder, zenbat liburu. Zertarako nahi dituzue hainbeste? Guztiak irakurri dituzue? Ufff... Nik urtero erretzen ditut, kurtsoa bukatuta. Gustuagatik, besterik gabe. Hor, etxe ondoan. Beno, aurten ezin izan dut, laugarren maila errepikatzen ari naizelako. Putada bat. Baina uda honetan, sekulako sutea ikusiko duzue, bai horixe.

Eta gero, keinua guztiz aldatuz, galdetu zien: Aita ikusi duzue?

Bai, oraintxe pasa da.

Eta norantz zihoan? Ohartu zarete? Gorantz, kanposanturantz.

Bale.

Eta, berriro ere zigarro bat piztuta (agur erritual bat berarentzat, nonbait), kontrako zentzua hartu eta beherantz egin zuen alde, azkar batean.

Gabonak gertu zeuden, baina ezin plan handirik egin. Garai batean, bidaiatu egiten zuten Gabonetako oporrak aprobeztatuta. Europako hiri batean (Berlin edo Praga edo Erroma, eta hango museoetan) pasatzen zituzten lau, bost egun. Edota kanariar uharte batean atsedena

hartzen zuten.

Baina beren ekonomia ez zegoen bidaia edo uharteetarako orain.

Teilatuaren ezusteko aferak kolpe mortala eman zien kontu korronteei. Aurtengoan, turroi merkea erosi beharko zuten. Gabon gaua Garaziren familiarekin pasako zuten, umez betetako etxe zaratatsu batean. Urtezaharra Goioren aitarekin eta haren emaztearekin igaroko zuten, isiltasun handiagoz.

Gioiri sei hilabete baino ez zitzaizkion geratzen lana bukatzeko. Gero, beste pare bat hilabete zituen erakusketa prestatzeko. Bere bakarkako lehenengo erakusketa izango zen, eta pozik legoke lana behar bezala aurreratua balu. Baina ez zen horrela. Denboraren erdia xahutua zuten, baina lanaren erdia ez zegoen osatuta. Ezta laurden bat ere.

Lasai, maitea –esaten zion Garazik. – Gabonetan inora joango ez garenez, egun guztiak aprobetxatu ditzakezu lan egiteko. Dena den, nik oraindik egunak ditudanez hartzeko, ziurrenik lauzpabost egun hartuko ditut, eta hemendik ibiliko natzaizu, molestatzin-eta.

Oso ondo –erantzun zion Goiok, begiak pantailatik bereizi gabe.

Garazi lepoa musukatzen hasi zitzaion.

Zer moduz hogeita batgarren mendeko maisulan hori?

Ondo.

Alkandoraren lehenengo bi botoiak askatu eta haren bularreko ile beltzekin jolasten hasi zen. Famatua eta aberatsa egingo zara eta neska gazteago batengatik utziko nauzu? Ahaztu egingo nauzu eta hemen utziko, herri galdu honetan?

Hankartera ailegatuta, belarria miazkatzeari utzi gabe, bakeroen botoia askatzeko ahaleginak egiten ari zen, baina ez zeukan erraz.

Ba, hori gertatu baino lehen zutaz aprobetxatu beharko dut pixka batean...

Mesedez, Garazi, lanean ari naizela, joder.

Ez zuen ulertzen, etxean eginagatik, hura lana zela. Lana. Errespetatu beharreko momentua. Bera ez zitzaion sekula bere bulegora joango, bere sujetadorea askatzera. Zergatik ezin zuen ulertu? Hain zaila al zen? Hainbeste ari zen eskatzen?

Garaziren danbatekoa auzokoez entzuteko modukoa izan zen.

Gabonen ostean, Goiok uste bezala, Garaziren obsesioa areagotu egin zen. Bi arrazoi nagusi zeuden. Garaziren urtebetetzea (urtarrilean) eta Lorea (Garaziren ahizpa). Bera baino bi urte gazteagoa izanagatik bi ume zituen dagoeneko. Neska eta mutila, bikotetxo xarmagarria. Gainera, Eguberri eguneko bazkarian iragarri bezala, hirugarrenaren peskizan zeuden. Lorearen senarrak triste aurpegia zuen, eta Goiok ezin zuen gizon hura imajinatu ume bat egiteko behar den gutxienerako gar horrekin. Baina frogak hor zeuden, begien aurrean, negarrez, mukiak sofan utziz, argazki albumak apurtzen eta izeba Garaziren lerdea jarioarazten. Bizitza hutsal samarra izango zutela imajinatzen zuen Goiok, bestela ezin zuen ulertu oraindik gazteak izanik beren existentzia umez betetzeko grina zoro hori, beste guztia alde batera utziz.

Hogeita hamahiru urte, ezin dut sinetsi –pare bat egun gelditzen ziren Garaziren urtebetetzera, eta hasiak ziren aieneak.

Urtero errepikatzen zenez, ezaguna zuen Goiok hizketaldiaren nondik norakoa. Aurten operari on bat egin beharko zion. Txarrena zen kotxe bakarra zutela. Hortaz, Garazirekin joan beharko zuen hirira, eta egun osoa bertan galdu, dendetan aspertu eta gero neskaren zain egon, are aspertuago. Nagikeriak harrapatzen zuen hirira joan behar zuela ikusten zuen bakoitzean; bi astez egon zitekeen herritik mugitu gabe, pozik.

Nire kontsolamendu bakarra da agian datorren urtebetetzera hiru izan gaitezkeela etxe honetan.

Zer nahi duzu, txakur bat? Ez dugu datorren urtebetetzera itxaron behar horretarako.

Goio, txakurraren txistea pasa den urtean ere egin zenidan.

Bai, baina orain herri galdu batean bizi gara, askoz zoriontsuago izango litzateke txakur bat hemen. Eta konpainia egingo lidake, zu lanean zauden bitartean.

Goio. Benetan ari naiz. Ez dut uste askoz gehiago itxaron behar dugunik. Denbora gure kontra dago.

Garazi, momentu honetan ezin dut halakorik pentsatu ere egin. Proiektua bukatu behar dut, eta erakusketa prestatu, eta...

Baina ekainean lanera itzuli beharko duzu, eta dena askoz antolatuago egongo da orduan.

Tira, ez dakit..., agian goizegi da lanera itzultzeko. Erakusketa nola doan ikusi beharko da. Agian

zerbait indartsua saltzea lortuko dut, eta beste erakusketa baterako...

Zer? Goio, hori ez zen hitzartutakoa.

Nik dakidala ez zegoen hitzarmenik. Gauzak datozen moduan hartu beharko ditugu, ezta?

Eta nola datoz gauzak, Goio? Baina, zein mundutan bizi zara? Dagoeneko ezin duzu artista bohemiotara jolastu. Ez dituzu hogeitau urte.

Jolastu? Nor ari da jolasten? Ez dut uste ezer arrarorik esan dudanik. Bekarena ez da fantasia bat, benetan egin dute nigatik apustua, eta etorkizunean ere...

Bai, ditxosozko beka hori, ikusi zenuen zer-nolako aurpegia jarri ziguten bankuan beka aipatu zenuenean. Eta gogoratu artista gazteentzako beka bat izan zela hura, eta ozta-ozta sartu zinela hautagaien artean.

Ez nuela merezi uste duzu, ez dudala ezer balio.

Melodramarik ez, mesedez. Ez dut ezer esan nahi zure lan, talentu edo dena delakoaren inguruan. Ez dauka zerikusirik horrekin. Besterik gabe errealismoz pentsatzeko eskatzen dizut. Errealismoz? Zuk ume bat nahi duzulako usteldu behar dut nik bulego batean astelehenetik ostiralera, errealismo osoz?

Barkatu, baina hori da nik egunero-egunero egiten dudana, eta horri esker daukagu etxe hau, besteak beste.

Zure bizkarrera bizi naizela egotzi nahi didazu, hori da? Nik dakidala, orain arte erdibana egin dugu dena.

Bai, baina noiz arte? Beka laster bukatuko zaizu, eta orain esan didazu ez duzula lanera itzultzeko asmorik...

Nik ez dut esan...

Eta gainera, nik uste nuen zuk ere umeak nahi zenituela. Orain ni naiz interesatu bakarra, ala?

Tinbreak jo zuenean konturatu ziren oihuka bizian ari zirela biak. Arnasa hartu zuten, eta bolumena jaitsi. Baina nor ote da? Ia gauerdia zen. Neguko gauerdia. Kanpoan ez zen giro. Barruan ere ez.

Neska ohiko anorakarekin zetorren. Malkoek, ordea, errimela desegitearekin batera, begi zulo

sakonak eragin zizkioten. Dardarka zetorren.

Pasa naiteke?

Haize hotza zebilen, eta azkar sarrarazi zuten neska etxean. Behin alfonbra zapalduta, negarrari ekin zion. Garazik eta Goiok elkarri begiratu zioten, estututa. Garazik belarrian hatz egin zuen, zer egin ez zekienean egin ohi zuen moduan. Sukaldea seinalatu zuen gizonak buruarekin azkenean, eta hara eraman zuen Garazik neska, besoa sorbalden gainean jarrita.

Lasai, Joana, ez negarrik egin, esaguzu zer duzun...

Baina neskak ez zuen ezer esaten, negarra baino ez zuen egiten, zotinka gero. Bere begi berdeak inoiz baino distiratsuago zeuden.

Cola-cao bat prestatuko dizut, nahi?

Mahaiaren inguruan eseri ziren hirurok. Neskak negar-jarioa eten eta zurrupada txiki bat eman zion cola-caoari. Baina ez zen hitz egitera animatzen.

Zerbait gertatu al da etxean?

Garazik ondo neurtu nahi zituen bere hitzak. Neskaren begiak geroz eta sakonagoak egiten zirela zirudien.

Zerbait gertatu zaio zeure aitari?

Aitaren aipamena entzun eta negarrari ekin zion berriro Joanak. Gero, anoraka jaitsi eta ezkerreko sorbalda utzi zuen agerian. Zigarro markak bost ziren, gorriak: zirkulu bat osatzen zuten bosten artean. Berehala gorde zuen sorbalda, eta trago luzeago bat eman zion cola-caoari.

Aitak egin al dizu hori?

Neskak ez zuen ezer erantzun. Burua gehiago sartu zuen sorbalden artean.

Esaguzu, Joana, berak egin al dizu?

Ezer erantsiko ez zuela zirudienean, biak harrituta utzi zituen modu argi eta lasaian mintzatu zen:

Hemen geratu naiteke gaua pasatzera?

Zur eta lur geratu ziren Goio eta Garazi. Kontua konplikatua zen. Alde batetik, nork ukatuko lioke neska babesgabe bati aterpea, batez ere inguruan senide psikopata baten mehatxua zebilela jakinda? Beste alde batetik, neska adin txikikoa zen eta aitak erraz asko erreklamatu zezakeen bere alaba, modu txar samarrean, edo bikoteari bahiketa leporatu, zergatik ez.

Ez izan esajeratua, gizona.

Garazi neska hartzeaz konbentzituta zegoen, eta Goio konbentzitzen saiatzen ari zen, saloian, neska momentu batez sukaldean bakarrik utzita.

Gau bakar batez ez da ezer gertatuko. Bihar gauzak argitzen saiatuko gara.

Tira, ongi da, baino gero ez esan nire ideia izan zela.

Sukaldera bueltatu ziren. Katiluan ez zen esnerik geratzen.

Zatoz, Joana, saloiko sofa irekiko dizugu –esan zion Garazik goxoki– eta nire pijama bat ere utziko dizut.

Umeen gelan ere gera zitekeen, baina hurbilegi zegoen beren logelatik. Sofa-ohearena erdibideko soluzioa iruditu zitzaien.

Ordu bata zen azkenik ohera sartu zirenean. Sei ordu barru iratzargailuak joko zuen. Hala ere, ezin zuten lorik hartu. Biak ere belarriak zorrozten saiatu ziren, beheko pisutik, saloitik, etor zitekeen edozein soinuri antzemateko. Baina ez zen ezer aditzen. Biharamunean dena argituko zela esanez lasaitu nahi izan zuten elkar. Azkenean Garazi lokartu zen, eta Goiok, haren arnasaldiari jarraituz, bide bera hartu zuen handik gutxira.

Hurrengo goizean Garazik, dutxatuta eta jantzita gosaltzera jaitsi zenean, ez zuen inor topatu beheko pisuan. Sofa-ohea gordeta zegoen; maindireak, bola bat eginda, gainean utzita. Bere pijama arrosa aulki baten gainean zegoen, tolestuta. Te bat edan eta autoa hartu zuen, berandu samar baitzihoan. Joanaren etxe aurretik pasa zenean ez zuen ezer berezirik sumatu.

Afera bere horretan uztea hoberena izango zela pentsatu zuten. Gau hartan gertatutakoa ahazten saiatu ziren, garrantzia kendu zioten. Nerabe-guraso ohiko istilu bat izan zitekeen, besterik ez. Eta nork esaten zien benetan aitak eginak zirela zigarro markak? Joanak ez zuen esplizituki hori adierazi. Beheko etxean lasai zirudien denak. Joana ikusten zuten, ohi bezala, eskolara joan-etorrian. Aitak ere bere errutinekin jarraitzen zuen, soroetara lanera, edo Land Rover-arekin auskalo nora.

Garaziren urtebetetze-festa zen gainera beren kezka eta okupazio nagusia. Sekulakoa izango zen. Lagun askorentzat lehenengo aldia zen etxea bukatuta eta txukunduta ikusten zutela. Garaziren lankideak ere etorriko ziren. Guztira, hogeita hamar pertsona bilduko ziren larunbatean. Ia guztiak umerik gabeko gazte alai eta osasuntsuak.

Garazik distira berezi bat zeukan bere egunean. Aspaldi ez zuen Goiok hain zoriontsu ikusten. Ederra ere bazegoen (pelukerian egona zen goizean, eta alkandora polit bat estreinatzen zuen). Pintxoak prestatzen igaro zuten arratsalde osoa, eta autoan ia sartu ez zitzaizkien botilak saloian, sukaldean eta portxean kokatzen.

Gehiegi edan ostean kotxea hartu nahi ez zuten lagunak etxean gera zitezkeen lotan. Batzuek koltxoi puzgarriak ekarri zituzten, propio. Opariak ere bai. Brindisak etorri ziren gero. Jan eta edanera dedikatu ziren buru-belarri. Gonbidatuek gustuko izango zutelakoan, su eder bat piztu zuten inoiz erabiltzen ez zen tximinian. Norbaitek dj lanak egin zituen eta musika mundu guztiaren gustukoa suertatu zen. Dantzan hasi ziren animatuenak. Zenbaitek marihuana erre zuten portxean, eta sukaldean gero, hotzegi zegoelako kanpoan. Garazik tartako kandela guztiei putz egin ostean (ez ziren hogeita hamahiru, hogeita hamar urte betetzearekin batera utzi baitzion kandela berriak erosteari) cava botila bat ireki eta gonbidatu guztiei pittin bat zerbitzatzeko hasi zen.

Zorionak, Garazi.

Kopa bat betetzear zegoen koparen jabea identifikatu gabe, baina ahots horrek gorantz begirarazi zion.

A, Joana, hemen zara.

Bai, eskerrak ematera etorri naiz, aurreko egunekoagatik, besterik gabe..., eta zuen lagun batek ireki dit ateak. Ez nekien festa bat ematen zenutenik. Oso jatorra zuen lagun hori, Ander deitzen zela uste dut...

Ondo zaude? Esan nahi dut... arazorik etxean?

Ez, ez, ondo nago, dena ondo etxean, baina hemen pixka bat geratzea bururatu zait, besterik gabe..., kristoren giroa daukazue, aizue!

Eta zure aitak badaki hemen zaudela?

Ez dago etxean, edatera irtengo zen. Zer, ez didazu xanpain pixka bat emango, ala?

Garazik duda egin zuen. Adin txikiko baten aurrean zegoen. Azkenean pittin bat ematea erabaki

zuen, eta Goioen bila joan zen gero, cava gehiago erreklamatzeko ziotenei muzin eginez.

Goio, ikusi duzu nor etorri zaigun, ustekabean?

Auzoagatik diozu? Bai, lehen ikusi dut, patata tortilla jaten. Uste nuen zuk gonbidatu zenuela, aurreko egunean hain abegitsu portatu zinen berarekin...

Nola gonbidatuko nuen nik? Saltsa ikusi eta hemen sartu da, bere kopeta guztiarekin.

Eta zer egin behar duzu ba, bota?

Zuk egingo zenuela uste nuen.

Txoratu al zara? Nik ez dut rolo txarrik nahi gaur. Nigatik, gera dadila. Ez du molestatzen.

Neskari begiratu zioten, saloiko beste aldean. Cava apurra bukatuta, bere edalontzia berriro ari zen betetzen, ronarena zirudien botila bati lotuta.

Hau mozkortzera etorri da, ikusten? Goio, zerbait egin beharko genuke.

Baina Goio betiko lagun batekin hasia zen abesten, eta Garazi konturatu zen ez zegoela ezer egiterik. Joana erraztasunez hasia zen bere lankide birekin berbetan, lankideak barrezka ari ziren gainera Joana komentatzen ari zen zerbaitengatik, eta berak ere dibertsio apur bat bilatzea erabaki zuen. Azken finean, bere urtebetetzea zen. Beste cava botila bat ireki eta bere buruari zerbitzatu zion lehenengo kopa, merezi zuen eta.

Hurrengo egunean Goio eta Garazik Historiako Buruko Minik Lazgarriaren titulua eskuratzeko lehian sartzeko prest esnatu ziren. Garazik ezin zuela altxatu aldarrikatu zuen, baina handik hamar segundotara korrika bizian joan behar izan zuen komunera. Goio faltan bota zituen hamazortzi urte zituen garaiak, denetariko nahasketa koloretsuak edan ostean, fresko eta alai altxatzen zen garai urrun hura.

Ez zekiten azkenean ze lagun gelditu ziren etxean lotan. Ezin zuten festaren bukaera gogoratu. "Umeen gelara" sartu zen Goio eta morrosko bi ikusi zituen, bere betiko lagunak, sehaskaren orde kokatutako ohean. Zurrungaka zeuden biak eta Goio bere sabel puztuei erreparatu zien: berriak ziren. Eskailerak jaitsi zituen gero, eta saloian lau pertsona kontatu zituen, botila eta eda- lontzi mordoxka baten erdian. Bikote bat lurrian zegoen, gaizki puztutako koltxoi baten gainean, lozakuetan. Beste bat sofa-ohean, maindirerik gabe, berokiak manta gisa erabilia, edozein modutan. Baina ez zituen lehenengoan ezagutu. Gizona Garaziren lankide bat zen, haren nagusia zehazkiago esanda, baina Garazirekin ondo (ondoegi, Goioen iritziz)

konpontzen zena. Neska... neska Joana zen. Ilea aurpegitik kendu behar izan zion guztiz ziur egon arte. Festan eramandako arropa berarekin zegoen lotan.

Baina ze ostia...? –murmurikatu zuen Goiok.

Lau lotiak ez ziren esnatzen eta Goio Garaziri txosten osoa ematera igo zen.

Zer? Hemen gelditu dela lotan? Eta non? Sofa-ohean, Eduardorekin. Eduardorekin ohe berean?

Begiak ireki gabe hitz egiten zuen emakumeak, eskua kopetan, ohean berriro. Zer egingo dugu?

Ez dakit... Goio, oso gaizki nago, bi aldiz egin dut oka..., momentuz, zergatik ez didazu te bat prestatzen?

Ohera bueltatuko litzateke gustura asko, baina zarata apur bat egitea komeni zela iritzi zion, loti guztiak esnarazteko eta bakoitza bere etxera itzul zedin. Loti horietako bat bereziki.

Sukaldean aritu zen, inongo kontenplaziorik gabe kizarak maneiatur, eta gero, saloiko atean oihu egin zuen.

Gosaria prest dagooooo!

Ez zen guztiz egia: kafea eta tea besterik ez zegoen, ez baitzen jatekorik geratzen. Kafea prestatzen zuen bitartean gogoratzen hasi zen goizeko bostak inguruan, festa beherantz zihoanean, Jokinekin sartua zela sukaldean eta magdalenak eta gailetak jaten hasi zirela, dena bukatu arte. Ogia ere, pintxoak egiteko xahutua zuten. Kafe eta te soila, beraz, izorra zitezela. Koltxonetakoak berehala esnatu ziren, Garaziren ingeniari-tza eskolako ikaskide bi, bizkarreko minaz kexaka biak ere. Eduardori gehiago kostatu zitzaion, marmar egin zuen, ingurura begiratu zuen, desorientatua, eta Joana esnatu zuen gero. Goikoak baino ez ziren falta, Garazi barne. Baina pausoka egitea erabaki zuen Goiok. Joan zitezela lau hauek lehenik eta behin, eta gero gerokoak.

Joanak ez zion begiratu edo hitzik zuzendu. Jada ezaguna zitzaion sukaldeko mahaian eseri eta kafea zurrupa- tzen hasi zen, paperezko ahozapi batekin begietako makillajea kentzen zuen bitartean. Eduardo alboan eseri zitzaion baina ez zirudien ezertaz ezagutzen zuenik. Begiak irekita zituen arren, oraindik ez zegoen esna.

A zelako festa... –bota zuen azkenean neskak. – Noiz errepikatuko dugu?

Joana, zure aitak ba al daki hemen zaudela?

Lasai, ohituta dago.

Zurripada luzeago batez adierazi zuen ez zuela beste ezer eransteko gogorik. Beste gonbidatuak ere beren edabeei lotu zitzaizkien, ezer esan gabe, jatekorik ez zegoelako kexatu gabe. Goiko pisukoak ere jaitsi ziren eta, poliki-poliki, denek alde egin zuten.

Garazik, ordea, ohean jarraitzen zuen.

Alde egin dute guztiek.

Gure neskatoak ere bai?

Bai, berak ere bai. Bazkaria prestatuko dut eta gero siesta egingo dugu, ados?

Egin nahi duzuna, nik ezin dut ezer jan.

Garazi, zure adinarekin, gehiago kontrolatu beharko zenuke.

Izorrai.

Ajeak asteazkenera arte iraun zion Garaziri. Astelehenean, Eduardorekin hitz egin zuen festaz, azaletik, anekdota tontoren bat edo beste elkarri gogoraraziz, baina nagusiak ez zuen ezer aipatu Joanaz. Azkenean, Garazik kasualitate hutsez egin zutela batera lo erabaki zuen, biak mozkor eta nekatuta egonda, sofa hura topatu eta biontzako lekua zegoela ikusita. Gonazale porrokatua zen Eduardo, hori gauza jakina zen, baina hamasei urteko batekin ez litzateke atrebituko. Are gutxiago Garaziren etxean.

Ostiralean, goizean goizetik, elurra botatzeari ekin zion eta ez zuen egun osoan atertu. Arratsalderako moztuak zeuden errepide ugari, horien artean Garaziren etxera zeramana. Mariaren etxean geldituko zela abisatzeko deitu zion Goiori. Maria beren lagun arkitektoa zen, etxearen berrikuntzekin lagundu ziena. Bakarrik bizi zen eta oso gustuko zituen bisitak.

Lehenengo gaua zen Goiok etxean bakarrik pasatzen zuena. Ahal bezain ondo profitatzea erabaki zuen. Ezkongabearen bizimodua disfrutatzea, hori zuen egiteko bakarra. Inoiz ez zen bakarrik bizi izan. Pisu konpartitu batean sartu zen ikasle garaian, gero gurasoen etxera bueltatu zen (ama gaixorik zegoen ordurako, eta nolabaiteko obligazioa sentitu zuen), eta handik, zuzenean, Garazirekin bizitzen jarri zen. Damutzen ez zitzaion arren, batzuetan pentsatzen zuen goizegi joan zela neskekin bizitzera (hogeita sei urte zituen), eta bestelako

bitza-estilorik probatu ez izanak kuriositatea eragiten zion.

Zer egiten du, bada, bakarrik bizi den gizonetako batek, lana bukatu duenean, afaria jan eta harrikoa egin duenean, kanpoan elurra bota ahala ari duenean? Kopa bat prestatzea otu zitzaion. Patxarana, bourbona eta ardoa gelditzen ziren oraindik festa egunetik (harrigarria, edan zuten guztia kontuan hartuz). Bigarrenaren alde egin zuen. Ostirala izanda, eta hirian egonda, Garazik hortik zehar ateratzeko aprobetxatuko zuela pentsatu zuen, indarrak berreskuratu bazituen, behintzat. Mariarekin irtengo zen, hark utziko zion arropa egokiren bat, gauerako. Parrandazale porrokatua zen Maria. Ez zuen gizonen bat ezagutzeko aukerari inoiz uko egiten.

Basoa eskuzabalki bete ostean, izotzik gabe, bere buruagatik egin zuen topa. Begiak malkoz bete zitzaizkion baina bere buruaren aurrean disimulatu nahi izan zuen. Gero, pare bat izotz erantsi zituen. On the rocks. Aste produktibo samarra izan zuen. Aspaldian ez bezala. Telebista piztu ordez, leihotik begira jarri zen. Elurtea apaltzen zihoan. Biharamunerako, agian, ez zen geruza fin eta belztu bat baino geratuko. Garazik ez zuen itzultzeko arazorik izango. Plastikoa hartu eta irristaketara dedikatu zezaketen eguna.

Azkenean, ezin izan zion telebistaren deiarri gehiago eutsi. Zapping azkar bat egin zuen, inertziak. Inoiz ikusi gabeko eta doi-doi harrapatzen zen kate lokal batean geratu zen iltzatuta. Porno zatar samar bat zegoen pantailaren zatirik handienera, eta azpiko partean, errotuluen bidez, jendeak bidaltzen zituen SMSak plazaratzen ziren. Zakil lodiak eta neska beroak eskatzen zituzten mezuak, telefono bidezko edo kotxe barruko sexua eskaintzen zutenak. Ezkongabe bitza eramatekotan, horrela bukatuko zuen berak ere, ordu txikietan infra-kate horietako batera mezu penagarriak bidaltzen? Barre egin zuen imajinatzerekin batera, eta gauean lehenengo aldiz faltan bota zuen Garazi.

Orduan, aldabaren soinua entzun zuen. Haizea izango zela pentsatu eta sofatik altxatzea baztertu zuen, baina berriro entzun zuen. Eta azkenean, txirrinak ere jo zuen. Poliki abiatu zen aterantz eta ireki zuenean, auskalo zergatik, topatu zuenak ez zuen batere harritu.

Kaixo, Goio, sar naiteke?

Ikusi zuen azken aldian baino itxura hobea zeukan neskak. Ondo orraztuta, ondo makillatuta, bufanda gorri bat zeraman lepo inguruan, eta kolore bereko eskularruak.

Zer duzu, Joana? Arazoren bat?

Neskak ez zuen erantzun. Sartu eta bufanda kentzen hasi zen. Eskularruak ere bai. Gero betileei eragin zien. Benetan ikusgarriak ziren bere begiak.

Ederra elurtea, ezta? Non utz dezaket anoraka? Bustita dago.

Emaidazu, baina... ezer behar duzu?

Eta Garazi? Ez dago etxean? Edo lotan dago jada?

Ez, ez dago etxean.

Autoa ez zegoen ohiko tokian, eta kanpoko edozein behatzaile finentzat agerikoa behar zuen Garaziren absentziak.

Zer, telebista ikusten ari zinen?

Goio neskari jarraitu zion saloirantz eta ahal bezain azkar mandoa harrapatu eta telebista itzali zuen.

Lasai, gizona, nik ere ikusten ditut horrelakoak aldian behin, mezuak irakurtzeko batez ere, barrez lehertzeko modukoak dira batzuk, ezta?

Joana, ezer behar baduzu, esaidazu, oheratzekotan nengoen, nekatuta nago eta.

Whisky hori bukatu gabe oheratu behar zenuen?

Goio zer esan ez zekiela geratu zen, sofa aurreko mahaitxoaren gainean zegoen edalontziari begira. Ia osorik zegoen oraindik.

Barkatu ez badizut eskaintzen, baina nahikotxo edan zenuen larunbatean, ezta?

Nahikotxo? Hori ez zen ezer izan, gizona!

Eta aita? Enteratu al zen hemen pasatu zenuela gaua?

Aita, aita, aita... eta nori axola zaio hori?

Sumindura nabaritzen hasia zitzaion aurpegian. Arazorik berarekin?

Mozkor horrekin nola ez dut ba arazorik izango? Benetan, ezin dut gehiago agoantatu – negarrari eman behar ziola ematen zuen, baina Goio ez zuen malkorik ikusi. – Baina utz dezagun hori, ez dut aitari buruz hitz egin nahi. Gaurkoz libratu naiz.

Joanaren itxura ez zen ogro baten eskuetatik ozta-ozta ihes egindako neska batena. Ondo

prestatua zetorren bere etxera, ile bakoitza bere lekuan, arropa ondo aukeratua. Leihotik begiratu zuen, Joanaren etxerantz. Garajea zutenez ezin Land Rover-a bertan zen ala ez jakin. Argirik behintzat ez zen ikusten.

Lasai, ez da etorriko, lo seko geratuko zen zurrutari gogoz eman ostean, betiko moduan.

Begira, Joana, ni ez naiz agian pertsona egokiena honi buruz hitz egiteko. Akaso kanpoko laguntza bilatu beharko zenuke, gizarte-laguntzaile batekin hitz egin, edo psikologo batekin...

Popatik hartzera psikologo guztiak! Zer uste duzu? Ez naizela beraiekin aritu? Ama hil zenetik irakasle alu guztiek bidaltzen naute ikastetxeko psikologoarengana. Eta zertarako? Ezertarako ez!

Sofan eseri zen neska, Goio zutik geratzen zen bitartean. Basoa hartu eta izotzei soinua ateratzen hasi zen Joana.

Orain trago bat emango didazu?

Ez. – Eskuetatik basoa kendu zion, tentazioa uxatzeko—. Adin txikikoa zara.

Hamazazpi urte beteko ditut datorren hilean.

Horixe ba, adin txikikoa zara. Datorren urteko otsailean zatoz hona eta nahi dituzun whisky edo patxaran guztiak aterako dizkizut.

Benetan?

Bai.

Ez dut uste hemen egongo naizenik datorren urtean, baina mila esker eskaintzagatik. Urtebete agoantatzea gehiegi agoantatzea da.

Hitz ilunok neskaren alboan esertzera bultzatu zuten Goio. Isilik egon ziren tarte luzeegi batez. Zuk ez duzu lanik egiten, ezta?

Nik?

Bai.

Nire aitak ere ez. Istripu bat izan zuen orain dela urte pila bat eta elbarritasun pentsioa ematen diote. Orain baratzea eta hor kanposantu inguruan dituen lur batzuk lantzen entretenitzen da.

Horrekin eta botilarekin, noski.

Baina nik lan egiten dut. Etxean egiten dut lan. – Puntu hori argitzeko beharra zeukan Goiok.

Etxean? Etxekoandrea zara, orduan?

Neskaren barreek inoiz aitortuko ez lukeen modu batez mindu zuten.

Artista naiz.

Ez zuen sekula izendapen hori erabiltzen bere burua deskribatzerakoan. Handiegi gelditzen zitzaiola iruditu ohi zitzaion. Aurrezki kutxak beka eman zionean albistea prentsan agertu zen, eta kazetariak hitz hori zerabilten bolo-bolo, “artistaren proposamena”, “artista gaztearen iritzi”... Lotsagorritu egiten zen hitz horiek bere izenaren ondoan inprimatuta ikuste hutsarekin. Orain, ordea, neskari aldarrikapena botatzean, harrotasun handiz egin zuen, inolako kontzientzia txarrik gabe. Neskak ere hitzen garrantziari antzeman zion.

Artista! La ostia! Horregatik dituzu hainbeste liburu, noski.

Bai –erantzun zuen Goiok, esplikazio horrekin nahastuta, baina era berean neskaren entusiasmoarekin horditurik.

Eta zer egiten duzu, pintatu?

Eskultura. Eskultura digitala.

Digitala?

Bai. Fisikoki modelatu beharrean, ordenagailuan egiten dut lan hori. 3D teknologia erabiliz. Modelatua eremu birtualean. Gero, modelo fisikoa ere lor dezaket, prototipatu-makina baten bidez...

Neskak ezer ulertzen ez zuen aurpegia zeukan. Une batetik bestera interesa galduko zuela zirudien. Eta Goiok ezin zuen horrelakorik onartu.

Etorri nirekin, erakutsiko dizut.

Oina lehenengo eskailera-mailan jartzearekin batera marra ikusezin bat zeharkatzen ari zen sentipena izan zuen Goiok. Hala ere, horrek indar handiagoz igoarazi zizkion eskailerak. Neskak, eskailera bidean, zigarro bat pizteko aprobetxatu zuen. “Eskerrak ez dagoela Garazi hemen” pentsatu zuen Goiok.

Begira, hauxe da nire estudioa.

Atea zabaltzearekin batera neska seko liluratuta geratuko zela pentsatu zuen gizonak. Agian horregatik dezepzionatu zuen apur bat haren erreakzioak.

A. Ze ondo.

Inguruari begira geratu zen Goio, bere erresumari begira. 3D artisten estudioak ez dira agian errenazimenduko artisten estudioak bezain ikusgarriak, baina txokoak bazuen bere xarma, eta agerikoa behar zuen edozeinentzat. Liburuak (triskatuta horietako asko, bai) apalategietan kokatuta zeuden orain. Paretetan bere obra batzuen erreproduzioak zeuden, aluminio plantxetan. Mahaia handia zen, eta ordenagailuak, bere kable mataza eta eranskin guztiekin, zientzia-fikziozko pelikula batetik atera berria zirudien. Reflex bat ere ikusgai zegoen. Eta buru-hezurra.

Hauxe da eredu moduan erabiltzen dudan buru-hezurra.

A ze nazka. Zer egiten duzu horrekin?

Modelatu egiten dut, ordenagailuan. Eta behin irudia hiru dimentsiotan dudala, berarekin nahi dudana egin dezaket. Adibidez, buru-hezur honekin egingo dudana izango da okzipitala puztu. Begira –buru-hezurra eskuetan zuela egiten zuen berba–, hezur okzipitalaren atzean lobulu okzipitala dago, eta bertan bihurtzen da irudi gure begiek antzematen dutena.

Giza adaptazioaren inguruko hausnarketa sakon bat zegoen proiektu horren muinean. Gizakia mundura egokituz. Gizakia, munduaren eta gizartearen garapen zoroaren aurrean, bere gorputz atal batzuk atrofiatuz eta beste batzuk gehiegizko modu batez garatuz. Amesgaizto lamarckianoa. Eskua IV izeneko lana adibidez: atzamar indizearen giharrak guztiz garatuta, handituta, saguarekin pasatako ordu guztien ondorioz. Internet eta inkomunikazioa. Gizarte kontsumistari kritika. Irudiaren gizartearen inguruko hausnarketa garrantza. Bekarako aurkeztu zuen txostenean modu argigarrian azalduta zegoen hura guztia. Baina orain, neskaren aurrean, hitzik gabe bezala zegoen. Akaso hortik zehar zituen anatomia liburuak erakutsiko balizkio, hobeto ulertuko zuen dena.

A zer kamera polita! –Azkenean zerk edo zerk piztu zuen neskaren arreta. – Egidazu argazki bat, artista!

Bere altxorra. Nikon D70, reflex digital zoragarri bat. Neskak Goioen eskuetan jarri zuen altxorra, eta berak, pentsatu gabe, klik egin zuen, neskaren plano txiki bat hartuta.

Aizu, momentu bat! Ezustean harrapatu nauzu-eta...

Neskak eskuak bere lan-aulkian paratu zituen eta burua apur bat okertu zuen. Gero, bere begirada sarkorra objektiborantz zuzendu zuen, errukirik gabe.

Beno, listo..., pozik? Eta orain, zergatik ez...? –esan zuen Goiok asko pentsatu gabe bigarren aldiz klik egin zuenean.

Eta orain beste bat! Biok batera!

Eta Goioren sorbaldan jarri zuen besoa. Goiok hotzikara bat sentitu zuen, kamera ahal bezain beste urrundu eta bion argazki bat egin zuen, irribarre tentel bat saiatuz.

Bale, badago.

Bidaliko didazu kopia bana, ezta? Nire e-maila emango dizut, non apuntatuko dut?

Orain neska axotaren bila zebilen Goioren paper eta liburuen artean, eta gizonak, lehenengo aldiz, egoera eskuetatik joana zitzaiola onartu behar izan zuen. Baina neskak aurkitua zuen papera, nonbait, eta baita boligrafoa ere, eta letra handi batez apuntatu zion bere helbide elektronikoa.

Informatika klasean bakarrik begiratu dezaket korreoa, baina tira.

Goiok atzeko patrikan gorde zuen papera, automatikoki. Puntu eta aparte. Amaitzeko ordua zen. Ohera joateko ordua. Bakoitza bere ohera.

Tira, Joana, berandu da eta...

Bai, badakit berandu dela, eta barkatu.

Estrategia aldaketarako garaia. Serio zegoen orain Joana. Ile mototsetik ihes egindako ile batzuk belarri atzean kokatu zituen, bi hatz dardaratiz. Gero, Goiok paretaren kontra zeukan dibanean eseri zen, begiekin baimena eskatuz.

Badakit berandu dela, baina ezin dut etxera itzuli. Alde egin nahi dut. Betiko.

Betiko, e?

Benetan ari naiz.

Ummm, baina nora joango zara, Joana?

Hirira. Badaukat lan egiteko adina. Eta lagun batek lana lortu diezadake arropa-denda batean. Baina non biziko zara? Adin txikikoa zara, ez dizute utziko...

Hori berdin zait orain, alde egin behar dut, alde! – Ukondoak belaunetan eta aurpegia eskuetan, negarrez zegoen neska, eta oraingoak benetako negarra zirudien. – Ezin dut gehiago agoantatu, ezin dut, nire ama bezala bukatuko dut bestela...

Goio distantzia bat mantentzen saiatzen zen. Distantzia fisikoa, baina baita bestelakoa ere. Kanpotik eszena jarraitzea. Kanpotik.

Ezin zuen, eszena horren barruan zegoen bera ere, nahitaez. Bere buruak agintzen zionaren kontra, azkenean neskaren ondoan eseri zen, ahal moduan, dibanean.

Besoa pasa zion sorbaldeetatik, sotilki, bere besoaren pisua neskaren gorputzean deskargatu nahi gabe, neskak argazkirako egin zuen bezala. Kotsolatu egin beharko zuen edo. Neskak, orduan, burua altxatu zuen, eta sakonetik begiratu zion:

Sos batzuk behar nituzke, lehenengo egunak pasatzeko. Itzuliko dizkizut, benetan, lanean hasten naizen momentuan bertan.

Goio besoa kendu zion sorbaldeetatik, haren bizkarrak, bat-batean, erreko balu bezala.

Baina zertaz ari zara? Ez daukazu kotxerik ere! Nola joango zara?

Lagun bat daukat... motorra duena. Nire bila etorriko da, ordubietan gelditua naiz berarekin. Berak eramango nau. Baina berak ere ez dauka diru askorik.

Joana, hau erokeria bat da. Zergatik ez duzu bihar arte itxaroten? Bihar, egun-argiarekin, dena beste modu batera ikusiko duzu, eta erabaki zentzudunak hartu ahal izango dituzu...

Ez, Goio, asteak daramatzat hau planeatzen. Erabakia hartuta dago. Alde egin behar dut, besterik gabe. Ez dago atzera bueltarik. Mesedez, uler ezazu...

Elkar ukitzen ez zuten arren, gertu-gertu zeuden, bata besteari begira, begirada lehor bat begirada busti baten kontra. Talka. Eta momentu batez, bat-bateko foku urdin baten pean bezala, Goio neska ulertzen zuela imajinatu zuen, eta nahi zuen guztia ematen ziola ere etorri zitzaion burura, eta gero haren besoetan galtzen zela haren bihotz taupadekin bat egin arte, eta malko guztiak hurrupatzen zizkiola, eta sorbalda mindua musukatzen ziola, eta gero beste sorbalda ere bai. Azkenean diban hura zulo bihurtzen zen, eta zuloak biok zurrupatzen zituen,

grabitatearena baino indartsuagoa zen indar berri batek erakarrita.

Goiz altxatzea pentsatua zuen arren, hamaikak ziren begiak lehenengoz ireki zituenean. Aurreko gauean pentsatu bezala, elur apurrak baino ez ziren geratzen han-hemenka. Garazi ailegatzekotan egongo zen, eta berak, frogak borratu beharra sentitu zuen, modu urgente baino zehaztugabe batean. Baina ze froga? Pijamarekin oraindik, etxetik buelta bat eman zuen, aurreko gaueko detaile oro gogoratu nahirik. Patxaran basoa harraskara eraman zuen. Gero bere praketako atzeko patrikan gordetako papera gogoratu eta komunean behera bota zuen. Lasaiago gelditu zen papera desagertzen ikusi zuenean.

Zergatik jokutzen zuen delinkuente batean moduan? Ez zuen galdera hori erantzuteko betarik izan, Garaziren autoa aditu baitzuen, etxera hurbilduz.

Oraindik pijaman, loti hori?

Croissant egin berriak zekartzan eta Goiok gutizia eskertu zuen. Aurreko gaua lasai pasatua zuen Garazik Mariaren etxean, atera gabe, biak ere nekatuta baitzeuden eta elkarri gauza ugari kontatzeko gogoz.

Aizu, goazen plastiko batekin, hortik zehar irristatzera! –proposatu zuen Garazik, gosaria bukatu zutenean.

Goiok ez zuen jadanik irristaketan ibiltzeko gogorik, baina neska poztearren baietz esan zuen. Jantziko zela eta gero plastikoren bat bilatuko zuela mudantzako kutxen artean.

Ateratzeko prest zeudenean, Garazik ideia berri bat izan zuen:

Eta hartu kamera! Ederra dago ingurua!

Goio bere estudiora igo zen Garaziren kapritxoa betetzera, baina kamera ez zegoen ohiko tokian, mahai gainean. Dibanean begiratu zuen. Paretako iltzeetan. Paperen artean. Tiraderetan. Mahai azpian. Ezer ez. Logelako mesanotxean, armairuan, komodan. Ezer ez. Umeen gelan, ezer ez. Saloian, sukaldean, eskailerapean, ezer ez, ezer ez, ezer ez.

Eta kamera? –galdetu zion Garazik, Goio esku-hutsik atera zenean.

Ez du bateriarik, kargatzen utzi dut.

Beti berdin, behar dugun bakoitzean egiten digu kale. Tira ba, goazen jolastera!

Baina Goioentzat jolasak ez zuen inongo graziaz izan, disimulatu zuen arren. Kamera berreskuratu beharra zuen. Noiz hartu ote zuen Joanak? Momentu bakarra zegoen, Goioen aburuz: dirurik emango ez ziola argitu eta estudiantik hitzik erantsi gabe atera zirenean. Goioek hartu zuen aurrea, Joana bere gibelean zihoan, harro, eta orduan kamera hartu eta poltsan sartzeko abagunea izango zuen. Neska madarikatua. Bere burua ere madarikatu zuen. Hogei euro eman izan balizkio agian konformatuko zen. Baina kamera. Kamera lanerako behar zuen. Modelo fisikoaren argazkiak egiten zituen etengabe, gero erreferentziak hartzeko. Eta berri bat erosteko dirurik ez zuen, beraz, berreskuratzea baino ez zitzaion geratzen.

Beharrezkoa izanez gero, guardia zibilari deituko zion. Bai horixe.

Baina, pauso hori eman aurretik, tarte bat eskainiko zion neskari, hausnar zezan, bere errorea konpon zezan, hau da, lapurtutakoa itzul zezan. Agian damutu eta berehala itzuliko zuen kamera. Agian bai. Edo agian ez. Agian bahi-denda batean zegoen dagoeneko bere kamera. Baina, tira, larunbata zen eta bahi-dendak itxita egongo ziren. Funtsik gabeko ideia hori buruan (zer zekien berak denda mota horien ordutegiaz?) egunean aurrera egitea lortu zuen.

Zer duzu, Goio? –galdetu zion Garazik pare bat aldiz.

Ezer ez, zer izango dut ba?

Etxera itzultzean, ogitarteko batzuk baino ez zituzten prestatu bazkaltzeko, eta postrea bukatu baino lehen, bigundu, elkarrengana oldartu eta maitasuna egin zuten. Logelako estufa piztuta, manten pean kuzkurtuta geratu ziren arratsalde pasa, bizkarra bularraren kontra. Goioek ahaztua zuen kameraren afera, edo behintzat bere pentsamenduen zerrendan oso atzean utzia zuen. Garaziren belarrira mintzatzen zen, xamurki:

Agian arrazoia duzu, eta pilula hartzeari utzi beharko zenioke.

Zer?

Horixe ba, agian momentu egokia dela hau.

Benetan?

Goioek ez zekien oso ondo zergatik esan zuen hori, asko pentsatutako aldarrikapena ez zen, hori ziur, baina bota bezain laster gauzak ondo egiten ari zen sententzioak horditu egin zuen eta ez zuen sentipen hura etenarazteko inongo asmorik.

Bai, Garazi, arrazoia zenuen. Ez egiteko aitzakiak beti izango ditugu, eta azkenean sasoia pasako zaigu. Beraz, zergatik ez orain?

Benetan?

Garazik ez zuen halakorik espero eta horregatik ez zuen hitzik aurkitzen. Buelta eman zuen, Goio besarkatzeko, eta, bidez batez, Goioen bularra malkoz betetzeko.

Baina ez negarrik egin, txotxola!

Ilun zegoen kanpoan. Garazi bainu bat hartzen ari zen, eta luzarorako omen zuen. Goiok buelta bat egin nahi zuela esan zion, beheko pisutik, garrasika. Airea behar zuen. Ondo jantzi eta kanpora jo zuen. Izugarri hotza zen gaua. Aranondoak izoztuta zirudien. Zigarro bat piztu zuen, horrek berotuko zuen esperantzan. Bizilagunen etxean ez zen argirik ikusten. Kameraren inguruko pentsamendu ilunak barbarka bueltatu zitzaizkion. Aitarekin hitz egin beharko zuen, akaso? Baina ba ote zuen aita horrek bere alabarenganako inongo kontrolik? Gaua kanpoan pasa zezakeen inongo arazorik gabe, etxetik alde egin zezakeen ageriko ondoriorik gabe... zer espero zitekeen horrelako aita batengandik? Joana belarritik hartu eta kamera itzularaziko ziola? Hobe zuen esperantza hori baztertu. Berak egin beharko luke zerbeit. Eta azkar.

Momentu horretan bertan motor baten soinua entzun zuen. Bukatuta ez zegoen arren, zigarroa bota eta zanpatu egin zuen. Elizaren hormara itsatsita, ondo ikus zezakeen eszenatokia Goiok, iluntasuna babeslekutzat hartuta. Berak suposatu bezala, Joanaren lagunaren motorra zen bidea igotzen ari zena, eta ez zetorren bakarrik. Joana zekarren gibelean. Motorra etxe aurrean gelditu zen. Atariko argien pean. Mutilak kaskoa kendu zuen. Hark ere, Joanak bezala, ilea horiz tindatuta zuen, hori argia, ia zuria. Joanak ez zuen kaskorik, eta grazia handiz jaitsi zen motorretik. Haien hitzei ezin zien igarri Goiok, baxu samar hitz egiten baitzuten, zurrumurruka. Berehala berriketa utzi eta elkarri muxuka hasi ziren. Pare bat astinduren ostean, mutilak motorra piztu eta alde egin zuen, kaskoa besoan zintzilik.

Joanak aterantz jo zuen. Aurreko eguneko arropa bera jantzita, poltsa ere berarekin zeraman. Bertan ote zegoen kamera oraindik ere? Joana etxean sartu zenean erlaxatu egin zen Goio. Hura ihesaldia hura! Hogeita lau ordutara ere ez zen iristen! Fundamentuzko eskapada, bai horixe. Goiok bere golkorako egin zuen barre. Berri onak ziren horiek berarentzat, bikainak egia esanda: tarte labur horretan ez zegoen kamera saltzeko denbora askorik, are gutxiago diru hori gastatzeko. Eta gainera, Joana eskura zuen orain, berrogei metro eskasetara. Umekeria hori laster konponduko zen. Konponduko zuen.

Ez zituen oinak eta eskuak sentitzen, eta lurrari pare bat ostiko eman zizkion. Bizilagunen etxera deitzera ausartuko zen? Ez zen hura momenturik egokiena, apika. Joana ailegatu berria, aita ernegatua. Hoberena urbanizazioko tabernara jaistea izango zen. Ez zegoen presarik. Harainoko paseoak on egingo zion, zer esanik ez bertan hartuko zuen zerbezak. Eta handik bueltan, ikusiko zuen.

Taberna leporaino beteta zegoen; telebista handian futbola. Zalea ez zen arren, gustura jarraitu zituen norgehiagokaren hamar minutu, zerbeza bat edaten zuen bitartean. Tarteka, beren seme-alabekin zeuden aitei erreparatu zien, batek futbolinera jokatzen zuen bi alabatxorekin. Bere burua horrelako egoera batean irudikatu nahian. Ez zuen lortu. Garazirengan pentsatzen, etxerako bidea hartu zuen berriro. Azkar egin zuen, hotzak kitzikatua. Ez zen apenas elurrik geratzen. Bizilagunen etxe paretik pasatzerakoan, bertara sartzeko ideia baztertu zuen. Ez zen momentua. Berandu zen. Bihar, eguzki argitan... Bazekien aitzakia merkeak baino ez zirela horiek, baina benetan gatazketarako indarrrik gabe sentitzen zen. Ahalik etar gehien atzeratu ohi zituen mota horietako talkak. Azkenean, jakina, egoerari aurre egin beharko zion (beste erremediorik ez zeukan ere) baina bihar izan zitekeen momentu hori.

Lanpasean lehortu zituen oinak etxean sartu baino lehen, eta Garazi topatu zuen saloiko mahaian eserita, espantu aurpegiarekin. Bainuko txabusina zeraman oraindik. Eta mahai gainean, kamera zegoen. Nikon D70 dotorea.

Goio!

Garazi mahaitik altxatu eta gizonaren besoetan jausi zen.

Goio, non zeunden? Tipo nazkagarri hori etorri da, beheko bizilaguna. Atean jo duenean zu zinela pentsatu dut, giltzak ahaztuta zenituela, eta horrela jantzita ireki diot, baina ez zinen zu, gizon zahar hori zen... eta nik gonbidatu gabe sartu da etxera.

Etxera? –Goiok ingurua behatu zuen instintiboki eta emakumea lasaitzen saiatu zen. Mahaian eserarazi zuen. Bata bestearen alboan eseri zirenean kamera eskuetan hartzeko bulkadari eutsi behar izan zion.

Hau ekarri du, Goio, zure kamera. Oso gauza arraroak esaten zituen, ez nion apenas ulertzen. Garrasi egiten zuen, mehatxu egin nahi zuela zirudien. Eta zerion usaina..., ene, ardoa eta egur ustelaren usaina... nazkagarria.

Baina zer esan dizu? Eta zer egiten du kamerak hemen?

Hori da arraroena. Ulertu diodanez zuk eman omen diozu Joanari, ordain moduan edo ez dakit zer. Guardia Zibilari deituko ziola horrela jarraituz gero, hori esan dit, sinetsi dezakezu? Eta bazekiela Joanak gurean pasa dituela gau batzuk, eta alkohola eman diozula eta hori delitua dela..., horrelako barrabaskeriak bota dizkit, oiheri batean.

Sentitzen dut, Garazi, ni hemen izan banintz...

Baina arraroena kamerarena da. Ze zuk kargatzen utzi duzu gaur goizean, ezta?

Ez dakit ba... –Goio azkar pentsatzen saiatzen ari zen, entzuten ari zen dena prozesatzen–, baina berak zeukan?

Bai, bere alabari ikusi diola, eta alabak esan diola zuk eman diozula.

Nik eman? Baina nola!

Ni ere aho zabalik utzi nau, baina bestela nola lortu du kamera?

Ene, ba ez dakit, bururatzen zaidan gauza bakarra da akaso irekita utziko genuela atea gaur plastikoekin atera garenean. Hori da azalpen bakarra. Hortik olgetan geundela aprobetxatuta, Joana etxean sartu da eta zerbait lapurtzea otu zaio.

Zuk uste? Bai, zu atera zara azkena. Ba ez nau batere lasai uzten..., beldurra ematen du, ezta? Agian ez da etxean sartu den lehenengo aldia. Baina zergatik esango zion aitari zuk eman diozula?

Ba, ziurrenik aitak kamerarekin harrapatu duelako, eta zerbait asmatu behar izan duelako. Ez zuen lapurtu egin duela aitortuko, ezta?

Lasaitzen ari zen Garazi, pieza guztiek bat egiten zutela ikusita.

Eta zer egingo dugu orain? Arazoak izango ditugu gurean pare bat gau pasa dituelako?

Ez dut uste –Goio ez zegoen hain ziur baina–. Dena den, argi dago zer ez dugun berriro egin behar: neska horri etxe barrura pasatzen utzi eta atea irekita utzi alde egiten dugun bakoitzean. Bai, bai, bai... dudarik gabe. Baina hain izan da desatsegina. Ni txabusinarekin, erdi biluzik, eta gizon hori bere hats nazkagarriarekin, zuri buruzko gauza horiek esanaz... eta zu auskalo non! Non zeunden, Goio?

Urbanizazioko tabernara jaitsi naiz, zerbeza bat hartzera. Baina lasai, maitia, dena pasa da. Bueltan etortzen bada, ni izango naiz hemen. Ez da ezer gertatuko, zin degizut.

Emakumea besarkatu zuen, haren arnasketa erlaxatzen sentitu zuen arte, eta jarraian, tonurik alaiena erabiltzen saiatu zen:

Eta orain, afaria prestatuko dizut. Berdura-pure bero-bero bat, zer iruditzen?

Ongi da, pijama janztera igoko naiz ni.

Baina ez zen mugitu. Goiok sukaldera jo zuen eta handik Garaziren mugimenduak jarraitzen saiatu zen. Han segitzen zuen emakumeak, mahaian bere txabusinarekin, gertatutakoari hamaikagarren buelta emanaz. Kalabazina, porruak, patatak eta azenarioak, dena lerrokatu eta zuritzeari ekin zion Goiok. Ozen hitz egiten saiatu zen Garazi:

Neska madarikatua, imajinatu aitak ez duela harrapatzen, kamera saltzeko kapaza da Joana hori. Eta orduan bai egingo lizukeela putada galanta, lanerako behar duzu eta. Eta kostatu zitzaizunarekin...

Bai, eskerrak! Hobe buelta gehiagorik ez ematea, Garazi.

Bigarren patata zuritzen ari zen emakumeak kamera piztu zuela ikusi zuenean. Labana eskutik irristatu zitzaion. Ezer egiteko denborarik ez zegoen. Berdurei begira geratu zen, Garaziren mugimenduak, keinuak eta erreakzioa irudikatuz. Hor egongo zen, Garaziren begien aurrean, kameraren pantaila txikian, Joana alaia, Joana gazte eta begirada sarkorrekoa, non eta Goioren estudioan, norekin eta Goiorekin berarekin, besoa bere sorbalden gainean, biak irribarrez aspaldiko lagunen modura.

Tira. Azalpenak eman beharko zituen. Bai. Ez. Garazik entzungo zituen. Ulertuko zuen. Kontua ulergarria zen, azken finean. Ez hain konplikatu. Pitokeria bat. Ondo azalduz gero. Azkar pentsatu. Nondik hasi, nondik bukatu. Berriz hartu zuen labana, eta erdizka baino zurituta ez zegoen patatari heldu zion. Saloitik, hitzik ez. Etxeko jaunak erabaki bat hartu beharko zuen. Eta azkar egin. Bai. Ez.

Zer nahiago duzu, laztana? Kalabaza ala kalabazina?

Isiltasuna berriro ere. Soinurik ez. Gaez tinpanoak urratzen zituen huts bera.

Kalabazina aukeratu zuen.

Igeri egin

Abuztuaren hasieran heldu ziren irlara. Dena gogoratzen zuten bezalaxe agertu zitzairen: terrazak mukuru, portuko belaontzi dotoreak, turista britainiarren alkandorak. Eta hala ere, haiek ez ziren ordukoak: orain farmazia, guardiako medikua, kolunpioak eta itzalpea ondo lokalizatu behar zituzten oporraldiari lasaitasunez ekin aurretik.

Orain haur txiki bat zuten.

Hamabost hilabete, bere bigarren uda, oraindik ez zebilen oinez.

Alokatutako duplexaren eskailerak zerbaitekin blokeatu behar izan zituzten hara sartu orduko, oinez ibili ez arren lau hanketara abiadura harrigarritz mugitzen baitzen haurra. Maleta handi bat kokatu zuten behin-behinean. Gizonak zerrenda bat egin zuen –entxufeak estaltzeko tapak, eltxoentzako tranpak, zerealak, ur minerala, barazkiak, okela, arrain eta fruta freskoa–, eta supermerkatu baten bila abiatzen zen bitartean, emakumea etxetik zekartzaten purea berotu eta umeari ematen saiatu zen. Gero, umea bainatu zuten –hegazkinean botaka egin zuen eta oraindik arrastoak geratzen zitzaizkion paparrean–, pijama jantzi eta amaren titiari lotuta lokartu arte itxaron zuten.

Orduan afaldu zuten, hamarrak pasatxo, pizza lehor bat, eta oporraldia zabaldutzat eman zuten.

* * *

–Igeri egitera joango naiz. Txikitxoarekin geratuko zara? –galdetu zuen emakumeak. Hondartzan izanagatik, txanoa zeraman, eta betaurrekoak.

–Jakina, zoaz lasai.

Harean zulo bat egiten ari ziren. Umeak izpi ultramoreetatik babesteko kamiseta zeraman, gogoratzen zuen bakoitzean atzaparkada batez kentzen zuen txanoa, eta masailak eta sudurra kremaz estalirik.

–Segi ba! –esan zion gizonak berriro, emakumea, eskuak gerrian paratuta, eguzkitakoaren peko eszenari begira geratzen zela ikusita.

Azkenean, atzera begiratu gabe, itsasoan sartu zen, poliki baina zalantzati ibili gabe. Abuztua, epel zegoen ura ordurako. Gizonak bi segundoz bereizi zuen begirada umearengandik bere emaztearen ipurmasail gogorre so geratzeko.

Haurdunaldi osoan zehar igeri egiten jarraitu zuen, baina bestelako entrenamendua baztertuta zuen ordutik. Erditu eta gero okerrago izan zen. Ariketa fisiko oro debekatu zioten. Umetokiaren prolapsa. Ez zen broma. Ebakuntza-gela. Errehabilitazioa. Urtebete baino gehiago igarota, ariketa suabera bueltatzen ari zen pixkanaka. Pilates. Hipopresiboak. Orain, igeriketa ere bai.

Elitezko kirola faltan hartzen bazuen, ez zion inoiz halakorik adierazi. Umea zuen orain ardua bakarra. Atzean geratuak ziren bidaiak, txapelketak, entrenamenduak, sufrimenduak, lesioak, dietak. Eta, perspektiba apur batekin, argi geratzen ari zen hura momentu egokia zela umea izateko, birritan joko olinpikoetatik kanpo ozta-ozta geratu ostean, zaila baitzen oso, bere adinarekin, hirugarren aukera batekin amets egitea.

Orain haur txiki bat zuten.

Eta haur txiki hori harek jaten ari zen.

–Baina zer...? Utzi hori!

Hamaiketako eskuetatik kentzen ziola ikusita, negarrez jarri zen haurra. Gizonak besoetan hartu zuen, sudurra bere sudur puntarekin igurtzi zion askotan egin bezala, baina horrek are gehiago haserretu zuen umea.

–Tira, goazen buelta bat ematera.

Besoetan hartuta itsasorantz abiatu zen. Birritan egin behar izan zuen atzera txanoa berreskuratzeko. Olatuen marmarrak beldurra eragin zion umeari eta berriz jarri zen negarrez.

–Jexux, petral samar gaude gaur.

Umeak, sorbaldetan jarrita, barre egiten zuen orain, inguruko bainulariekin dibertituta.

–Abisatu ama ikusten baduzu, ados? Uretan dago, hor.

Baina ez zuten ikusi.

Paseatzeaz laster nekatu zen, eta gainera ez zegoen lasai poltsa zaindu gabe zegoela jakinda. Toallara itzuli ziren, eguzkitakoaren pera. Nola desbideratu umearen arreta, harek gehiago jan ez zezan? Jostailutxo bat atera zuen, plastikozko olagarro bat. Erlojuari begiratu zion, bazkaltzeko ordua izan zitekeen txikitxoarentzat. Baina hobe zen emakumeari itxarotea horretarako. Ura eskaini zion haurrari. Berritara begiratu zuen ordua. Kalkulatu zuen hogeitazko hogeita bost minutu zeramala emakumeak uretan. Ez al zen gehiegitxo? Bere txano gorria

antzematen saiatu zen beste behin, uretan olgatzten ziren guzti horien artean. Ez zuen ezer ikusi. Bazekien denboraren nozioa galtzen zuela uretan, baina nekadurak jota egon behar zuen ordurako, entrenatu gabe hainbeste denbora igaro ostean. Bazitekeen arroken artean atsedena hartzen egotea ere, baina kasu horretan jakin beharko luke umearentzat bazkalordua zela.

Gaileta bat eman zion. Harearekin ondo estali eta ahora eraman zuen umeak. Ez zuen irenstea gelditzerik izan eta umeari egiten uztea deliberatu zuen. Zutik jarri zen, eskua bisera gisa erabilita. Txano gorriaren arrastorik ez. Umea negarrez orain.

–Gose zara, ezta? Tira, tira, bazkaria emango dizut.

Adurzapia jarri, hareaz eta lerdez betetako gaileta kendu eta termoa zabaldu zuen. Umeak ahoa itxita mantendu zuen: ez zuen purea nahi, gaileta nahi zuen.

Geroz eta urduriago zegoen gizona eta ez zekien umeagatik edo emakumeagatik ote zen. Berriz altxatu zen, umea hareaz betetako gailetarekin utzita, emakumea hautematen saiatzeko. Berriz eseri zenean, purea toallan barreiatuta zegoen.

* * *

Lau urte ziren elkar ezagutzen zutela. Emakumeak triatloi proba batengatik zegoen gizonaren hirian. Olinpiaden aukera bizirik zegoen artean eta emakumeak ez zuen maitasun istorioetarako astirik. Baina gizonak ez zuen etsi. Bera hasi zen emakumea bisitatzen, txapelketetara laguntzen, beharrezko sostengu emozionala eskaintzen.

Bigarren olinpiadetatik kanpo geratu zenean, depresiotik gertu egon zen emakumea. Orduan proposatu zion gizonak berarekin bizitzera etortzea. Gizonak ezin zuen hiria utzi, justu orduan hartua zuen aitaren enpresaren ardura. Emakumeak, ordea, kirol babesletzaren negozioa martxan jar zezakeen, bere erretirorako beti buruan izan zuen irtenbidea. Baina emakumeak ez zuen argi ikusten, benetan hura al zen erretiratzeko unea?

Orduan haurdun geratu zen. Eta etortzekoa zen ume horrek bizitzak ordenatu zizkien. Emakumea gizonaren etxera mugitu zen. Ezkondu egin ziren, ospakizun handirik gabe. Irlara etorri ziren aurreneko aldiz, ezkonbidaia. Orduan ere, uretan igaro zuen emakumeak oporraldiaren zatirik handiena.

Haurdunaldian suabe entrenatzen jarraitu bazuen ere, negozio berria planifikatzeari ekin zion hiri berrian emakumeak, goragaleekin. Gizonak geroz eta ordu gehiago ematen zituen enpresan, ozta heltzen zen etxera afaltzeko garaiz. Bigarren hiruhilekoko ekografiara huts egin zuen. Bitartean, sabel puztuarekin, korrika egitera ateratzen zen emakumea, bizikletarekin

hogei kilometro baino gehiago egiten zituen, igerilekura egunero joaten zen. 31. astean uzkurdurak hasi ziren arte. Hor amaitu zen kirola. Erditzea bi hilabeteko aurrerapenarekin gertatzea posible zen, eta batere desiragarria ez. Atsedena. Etxean bakarrik igarotako makina bat ordu. 38. astean umea heldu zen arte. 48 orduko erditze-lanaren ostean. Forzepsak. 3. mailako urraketa. 16 puntu hankartean. 4 kiloko mutiko bat.

* * *

Umea aulkitxoan jarri, toalla bola bat eginda poltsan sartu, dena batu eta harean barrena aurrera egiten saiatu zen gizona, eguzkitakoa besapean. Apenas entzuten zituen umearen negarrak orain, burrunba zuen belarrietan. Ezin seguru egon, baina hiru ordu laurden ziren emakumea igeri egitera atera zenetik. Ordubete akaso. Hala azaldu zion sudurra zurituta eta ilea hori zuen sorosleari. Emakumearen itxura eta janzkera ere deskribatu zizkion bere ahotsa ez zen beste ahots batez. Walkie-arekin hitz egin zuen ilehoriak, eta gizonari lehen sorospenetarako erabiltzen zuten etxetxoan itxoiteko eskatu zion. Gizonak ez zion kontra egin. Aulkitxotik tiraka, eguzkitakoa oraindik besapean, izerdi patsetan heldu zen hara. Kanpoan, sorosleen arteko elkarrizketa urduria. Mugimendua. Beste gizon bat sartu zen, ura eskaini zion. Lasaitasun hitz batzuk saiatu. Txalupa laranja bat seinalatu zion, emakumearen bila zihoazen. Berriz geratu ziren bakarrik, abandonatuta. Beste gaileta bat eman zion umeari, ez zeukan besterik. Ezin titia eskaini. Pozik zegoen hala ere mutikoa, buila mordo batekin jolasean.

Beste sorosle bat sartu zen, zaharragoa, hondartzako gainbegiralea, esan zion. Kostatu zitzaion gizonari elkarrizketa jarraitzea. Protokoloak aipatu zituen, helikoptero bidezko laguntza.

—Etxera joan nahiko duzu, ezta? Edozer gauza dakigunean deituko dizugu, egon lasai. Etxera eramango zaituztegu? Ez? Seguru zaude?

Bai, seguru zegoen. Berriz jarri zuen umea aulkitxoan eta, eguzkitakoa besapean, auto alokatura jo zuen, itsasorantz begiratu gabe.

* * *

Zirt edo zarteko pertsonatzat zeukan bere burua, presiopean lan egitera ohituta. Baina arratsalde hartan, duplexera ailegatu eta umeak, gosetuta, negarrari ekin zionean enegarrenez, geldirik geratu zen sukaldearen erdian, hurrengo pausoa zein izango. Mutikoak sandaliatik egiten zion tira, altxatu nahi zuen, baina gizona ez zen mugitzen, ez zion semeari begiratu ere egiten.

Emakumeari deitu zion, goiko pisuan egongo balitz bezala, eta berehala konturatu zen erraz gal zezakeela burua. Martxan jarri beharra zegoen. Umeagatik. Besoetan hartu eta ur apur bat

eman zion. Ohituragatik, iturriko ura eman zion, irlan zeuden bitartean botilakoa bakarrik emango ziotela adostuta bazuten ere.

Ez zuten adostuta. Emakumeak hala erabaki eta gizonak men egin zuen. Beti egiten zuten horrela. Emakumeak erabaki eta gizonak ulertu zuela konfirmatu. Arraina, astean bi aldiz. Ados. Dermatitis atopikorako krema, egunean bi aldiz. Ados. Txupetea, astean behin esterilizatu. Ados. Ez umea besoetatik heldu, prest dagoenean hasiko da oinez. Ados. Auto-estimurako, hobe motxilan eramatea eta ez aulkitxoan. Ados. Ekidin ditzagun ipuin sexistak. Ados. Utz diezaigun eskuekin esperimentatu dezala janariarekin. Ados.

Azkenean, emakumea zen hamaika mandamendu horiek betetzen zituen bakarra, triatletaren diziplinaz, gizonak geroz eta ordu gehiago pasatzen zituelako enpresan. Asteburuetan, amateur hutsa sentitzen zen, emakumeari egiten uzten zion, hari begira noizbait ikasiko zuen esperantzan.

Umeak trago luze bat hartu zuen. Ondo. Orain jateko zer edo zer eman behar zion. Baina purea prestatu beharra zegoen, emakumeak ez zituen farmazietako potito horiek onartzen. Madari bat zatitu eta erretiluan utzi zion. 28 gradu egongo ziren ordurako etxe barruan. Umeak bi zati murtxikatu zituen gogo handiz eta segituan dena bota zuen: hartutako ura zein madaria. Iturriko uragatik izango zen? Edo gaixorik zegoen aurretik, abioian botaka egin zuenez?

Umea aulki altutik jaitsi, gonbitoa garbitu, umeari ura eman (botilakoa), pardela aldatu, arropa aldatu, termometroaren bila joan, termometroa besapean jarri, termometroa lurretik jaso, berriz besapean jarri, telebistan marrazki bizidunak bilatu, zazpi minutu itxaron umearen besoak immobilizatuz eta bere garrasiak jasanetz, eta azkenean ikusi zuen: 37,6º. Ez zen asko. Edo bai?

Orduan, ate ondoko altzarian utzitako telefonoak gauzarik ikaragarriena egin zuen: jo egin zuen. Bazetorren, beraz, albistea. Ume beroa besoetan, hara abiatu zen korrika bizian.

Prest ote zegoen? Bai. Ez. Moteldu zuen pausoa. Erantzutera ausartuko zen? Bai. Ez. Esku dardaratia telefonotik oso gertu zuenean, oharra ikusi zuen: post-it hori bat, maitasun adierazpena, emakumearen idazkera karratua, tinta urdina, bihotz bat.

Askotan egiten zuen emakumeak hori, maitasun oharrak utzi, komuneko ispiluan, atean. Gustuko zuen hori gizonak. Baina haurra jaio orduko, egiteari utzi zion: astirik ez. Eta gaur, hain justu, berriz egitea bururatu zitzaion, atea itxi aurretik diskrezioz ohar hori utzi, plurala erabiliz oraingoan, maite zaituztet. Aurreneko aldiz.

Kasualitatea zen. Ez. Bai.

Premonizioa. Bai. Ez.

Premeditazioa. Ez. Bai.

Denbora geldi orain. Telefonoa jo eta jo. Txirrina nazkagarri hura. Premiarik ez gizonak ordea. Zertarako. Esango ziotena ondo aurreikusten zuen: ez zegoela emakumearen arrastorik, bila jarraituko zutela, helikopteroa bidean, polizia laster etxean.

Umeari begiratu zion, begiak gorri zituen, goibel zirudien, deshidratatuta egongo zen seguru, gosetuta eta gaixorik.

Lan handia zuen aurretik.

Festa gonbidatuak

Patricia eta MJ sukaldean daude, afaria prestatzen. Etxe berean bizi arren ez dute egun osoan elkar ikusi. Miraria! esango du Patriciak. Bakoitzak bere ordutegia du, hori da arrazoi miraritsua, bere biorritmo propio eta finkoak, eta hauxe da biorritmo propio eta finko horiek bat egiten duten eguneko lehenengo momentua: afari ordua, hura prestatu eta jateko abagunea.

Patriciak nahiago du goizean lan egitea, lehen argi laruarekin. Zazpitan jaiki, laranja pareari zukua atera, edalontzian vodka apur bat gehitu, eta horrela hasten da bere eguna. Trago on batekin. Fundamentuarekin. Egun produktiboa baldin badu ez du vodka iluntzera arte berriz probatuko: lanaren zurrunbiloan emango ditu orduak, mundua eta infernua eta vodka botila ahaztuta. Egun kaxkarretan, ordea, sarri joko du botilara, inspirazio bila-edo. Egun horietan disimuluz egin ohi ditu edari-altzarirainoko bidaiak, MJ ohar ez dadin. Baina MJ konturatu ohi da. Nola ez. Laster ezagutzen ditu Patriciaren pausotxo errudunak eta vodka-karen tanta-jariatze kikildua. Ez zaio gustatzen baina ohitzen hasia da nonbait. Beste aukerarik ba al du?

Berak nahiago du arratsaldea: bazkalostea da bere momentu doia. Beraz, goiza erlaxatzeko erabiltzen du, bere burua kokatzeko, berak esaten duenez. Goizero-goizero New Hopera gidatzen du bere auto zaharra, 1948ko Ford beltz traketsa, eta esnatu berria den herrian The New York Times erosten du. Egunkaria eskuetan, kafea hartuko du kale nagusiko kafetegi txukunean, albiste guztiak xeheki irakurri. Eguneko albiste bitxiak azpimarratu egiten ditu, gero Patriciari erakusteko, biek batera komenta ditzaten. Honengatik ez balitz, Patriciari mundua oharkabean pasatuko litzaioke, Pennsylvaniako isolamendura ongi egi ohitzen hasia da eta.

Bazkaltzeko orduan itzultzen da etxera. Sandwich bat jan ohi du, ez besterik, eta orduan bai, lanean sartzen da buru-belarri, bost orduz-edo, Patricia, bere laneguna bukatutzat emanda, altzariak diseinatzen dedikatzen den bitartean. Altzariak diseinatu dirua irabazteko kapaza balitz ez luke beste liburu alurik idatziko, esaten du, aurpegi serioz, bere zirriborro-kaieran sartuta dagoenean. Baina hori ez du inork sinisten, are gutxiago Patriciak berak.

Biak dira idazleak, eta maitaleak, eta emakumeak. MJK haur eta gazteentzako literatura idazten du batik bat. Diru ona egiten du, baina ez da Pat bezain famatua. Pat famatua dela esan baitaiteke. Zelebridade bat. Bere nobela bat zinemara eraman du nork eta Alfred Hitchcockek. Bigarren bat zinemarako bidean dago. Frantses batek zuzendu behar du oraingo honetan, René-ez-dakit-zer batek. European, dio Patek gehiegi edan duenean, kaletik gelditu eta autografoak eskatzen dizkirate. Idazle estimatua naiz European, bai horixe. Europako unibertsitateetan niri buruzko mintegiak antolatzen dituzte. Baina herrialde puta honetan beti izango naiz Hitchcocken film hura inspiratu zuen andere bitxia.

Tomate entsalada ari dira prestatzen afarirako, plater azkar eta praktikoa. Modenako ozpinarekin. Luxu bat garai honetarako. 1961eko udaren hasieran gaude. John F. Kennedy da Estatu Batuetako presidente berria. Patriciari ez zaio irlandar hori gustatzen, ez da haren begiez fidatzen.

–Faltan botatzen al dun New York? –galdetu dio MJk Patriciari, tiraderako labana egokiena aukeratzen duen bitartean.

–Ezta pentsatu ere –erantzuten du berak, hausnartzeko unerik hartu gabe.

–Neuk ere ez –dio MJk, baina ez du oso konbentziturik esan; xafla distiratsuari begira dago.

Baratxuria mozten ari dira orain. Patriciak atzamarrak sudurrera gerturatu dizkio bere neskari. MJk, asko pentsatu gabe, ahoan sartu ditu Patriciaren atzamarrak. Gustura milikatu ditu. Baratxuria gustuko du. Eta baita bere neskaren atzamarrak ere. Gero musu eman diote elkarri. Xamurki hasieran, bortizkiago gero. Bietako inork ez du musua urrunegi eraman nahi –azken finean, goseak dira biak– baina gustura daude horrela. Patriciak aldaka laztantzen dio. Zirkuluak marrazten dizkio praken gainetik, ipurdi aldean. MJk, ezin eutsiz, koxka egin dio besteari beheko ezpainean. Patricia ez da kexatu. Emakume gogorra da.

Horrela egon dira ezin zehaztu daitekeen tarte batez, bata bestea milikatzen, baratxuri usaina sudurretik kendu ezinean. Zarata batek beren bakartze goxotik atera dituen arte. Kanpotik datorren zarata. Zerbait apurtu dela adierazi nahi duen zarata. Banandu eta, ezer esan gabe, harrabotsa etorri den lekura zuzendu dituzte euren begiradak. Sukaldeko leihotik bestaldera Jimmyren aurpegi gorritua ikusi dute, begiak ezin zabalago. Jimmy gaixoa. Loreontzi bat bota eta puskatu du, eta hala ere ezin da mugitu. Han dago, bi emakumeei begira, sinesgogortasunaren eta beldurraren arteko keinua aurpegian, oinak lurrez zikindurik. Patriciak eskua luzatu eta mutikoa agurtu du, adeitsuki –distantzia egokiarekin, umeak onargarriak zaizkio–, eskumako eskua oraindik MJren gerrian paratuta. Orduan bai, umeak erreakzionatu eta, Patriciaren agurra itzuli gabe, leihotik alde egin du, erreperidera doan bidexka hartuz, korrika bizian.

–Ama, ama, bi emakume elkarri musuka! Zergatik, ama, zergatik? –ari da esaten Patricia, umearen ahots zorrotza imitatuz; eta harraska gaineko armairutxotik platerak eta edalontziak hartzen hasi da, lasai asko.

MJ txuri dago. Ez da mugitzen. Berak ere hartu du sustoa mutila ikustean. Ez zuen halakorik espero. Ez leku bakarti honetan, bizilagun urrunen parajea, non eta Pennsylvaniako azkeneko konderrian. Bere sukaldean, bere leiho pribatuan. Baina hala jazo da. Beste behin ere gertatu zitzaion. Agian behin baino gehiagotan, baina gogoratzeko modukoa izan zen hura. Gazteago zenean. New Yorkeko bere apartamentu ohian: musu eman zion garaiko bere

neskari –Manhattango ospitale bateko erizain argala– etxeke atean –errutinazko agur bat, ez besterik–, eta bigarren solairuko bizilagun zalapartatsuak, atso zahar higuingarriak, harrapatu egin zituen. Hura momentu itsusia, hura. Handik aurrera atsoak begiz jotzen zituen bakoitzean bastoia goratu eta halako hitz purrustada bat botatzen zien grezieraz. Ezin zuten ezer ulertu baina haserre zirudien atsoak. Orduan ez zitzairen inporta, horrela esaten zioten elkarri behintzat, barre egiten zieten atso greziarraren madarikazioei eta lagunaren aurrean ere kontatzen zuten, guztiek barre egin zezaten.

Baina gaurkoa desberdina da, Jimmy desberdina delako. Umetxo bat besterik ez. Umetxo alegera, zintzoa. Pekaz beterik du sudurra eta beisbolean jolasten ematen du eguna, bere oporrak disfrutatzen. Inozentea da. Hori batez ere. Agian bere liburuak irakurtzen ditu –edo irakurtzen dizkiote– lokartu baino lehen, igeri egiten ikasten duen pandaren istorioa, esaterako, edota mantangorri kuxkuxeroarena. Beldurtuta egongo da. Koitadua.

–Traumatizatu egin dinagu, ezta? –Pat dibertitu egiten da horrelako gauzekin, ezin eutsi.

–Ez dun barregarria, batere ez –MJ adoretu egin da–, beldurtu egin dinagu mutikoa. Agian berarekin hitz egin beharko niken.

–Berarekin hitz egin? Niregana sentitzen dudan erakarpen eutsiezinaren berri eman behar dion, ala?

–Ez, baina...

–Traum und Trauma –esaten du Patriciak histrionikoki, alemanez botatzen dituen eta itzultzeko lanik ere hartzen ez duen esaldi horietako batean, afera itxiztat ematen duen seinale.

MJk ez daki zer esan, ez Patriciari, ezta Jimmyri ere. Baina aztoratuta dago. Ez du ia hitzik egin afari osoan. Patriciak, antza, guztia ahaztu du lehenengo ardo txuri koparekin. Asteburuan bisitan izango dituzten lagun batzuei buruz hitz egiten du, animoso. Psikiatra bat eta bere senarra. Hirian bizi den jende jatorra. Europarrak, jakina. Martxotik ez ditinagu ikusi. Batera afaldu geninan jatetxe espainiar horretan, gogoratzen? Ziur baietz, gogoratu paella hura. Eta ardoa, jakina! Ardoa gogoratuko dun! Ez? MJk nekez jarrai ditzake Paten hitzak. Jimmy txikiarengana joaten zaio burua nahi gabe. Zortzi bat urte izango ditu. Zazpi agian. Bidegurutzea baino lehen bizi den baserritar bikotearen iloba da, Stackhouse jaun-andreena, berarekin uda pasatzen ari dena. Non dago Jimmy orain? Bere aitona-amonen besoetan? Bere logelako izkina ilun batean? Zer ari da pentsatzen? Zer ari da kontatzen?

MJk egunero topatzen du mutikoa, herrirako bidean edota herritik bueltan. Adierazi gabeko hitzordua dute goizero, eta bietako inork ez du hutsik egiten. Lagun arteko hitzordu bat da.

Etxe aurreko lorategian egon ohi da Jimmy, aitonarekin beisbolean jolasten edo bere salgai propioekin. Dendari fina da Jimmy. Kartoi kutxa bat bide ertzean jarri eta denetarik saltzen du hor. Bidetik jaso dituen harritxoak, txotxekin eraikitzen dituen figura zakar samarrak edota etxean –amonaren laguntzaz, akaso– egiten duen limoi zukua, paper baso txikietan banatuta. MJ bere autoarekin umearen aurretik pasatzen denean klaxona jo ohi du eta mutilak eskua luzatzen du bera agurtzeko. Gehienetan MJ errukitu, autoa gelditu eta umetxoaren denda inprobisatura gerturatzen da, egun horretan saltzen duen edozer gauza eskuratzeko. Izan ere, bide bakartia da New Hopera daraman hori eta bezero potentzialen eskasia arazo larria da Jimmyren negozioarentzat. Horrexegatik MJk, bezero preferente horrek, paper-txoriz, marrazkitxoak eta kolorezko harriz beterik du Ford zaharraren atzeko eserlekua. Zer duzu gaur, Jimmy? Gaur harriak margotu ditut! Hogei zentabo txiki hauek, andereño, hogeita hamar handiak.

–Ohera? –esaten du Patriciak, afarian erdizka gelditu den ardo botila bukatu dutenean.

–Goazeman –esan du MJk, eta sofatik altxatu dira biak aldi berean.

Hurrengo egunean MJk egiten duen lehenengo gauza Jimmyk apurtutako loreontzia jasotzea da. Bart erabat ahaztu zitzaion. Dena bota du zakarrontzira: zeramika zatiak, lur beltza, eta bertan aspertuta bizi zen geranio zaharkitua. Hireak egin dik, geranio. Erratza pasa du, gorabeheraren zantzu guztiak desagerraraziz. Ford beltza arrankatu eta Jimmyren aitona-amonen etxerantz abiatu da gero. Ziur jo du ate gorrian, bere autoa etxe aurrean trakeski aparkatu ostean.

–Egun on, Stackhouse anderea, Jimmy etxean al da? –galdetu dio atea ireki dion emakume ileurdinari, Jimmyren amonari.

–Oraindik ohean da, atzo oso nekatuta zegoen eta ez dut oraindik esnatu nahi izan. –MJ emakumearen begirada aztertzen ari da, beldur edo mespretxuaren bila, baina emakumea beti bezain irribarretsu agertu zaio–. Zer behar duzu, andereño? Ez zen ba Jimmy bihurrikerietan ibiliko zure etxe inguruetan?

–Ez, ez, ez da hori. Zintzoa da zure Jimmy, oso zintzoa. Opari bat eman nahi nion, besterik ez... –MJ bere poltsan hasi da bila–. Nire ipuintxo bat, gustuko izango duela pentsatzen dut.

–Manda Pandak igeri egin nahi du –irakurri du amonak motelki, urgentziaz eta oso aspaldi irakurtzen ikasi zutenen antzera, MJk ematen dion liburua harrapatuz–. Mila esker, andereño, baina ez zenuen zertan...

–Gustuko badu, beste bat ekarriko diot... beste egunen batean –moztu dio MJk.

–Tira, ez dakit zer esan...

–Ez esan ezer, anderea, egun on eta goraintziak Jimmyri!

–Egun on zeuri ere, bai.

Amonak bere etxeko atea itxi duenerako autoan bueltan da MJ. Arnasa hartu du. Irratia piztu. Amonak ez daki ezer. Argi dago ez dakiela ezer. Ez du sukaldean jazotakoaren berri. Jimmyk ez dio hitz erdirik ere esan. Mutu ailegatu zen etxera bart, eta mutu sartu ohean. Ikusitakoa ametsa zela bere buruari errepikatuz. Dagoeneko konbentziturik. Ala ez? Dena ote daki amona zaharrak eta horregatik ari ote da umea ezkututzen, oraindik ohean dela esanez? Bere Jimmy gaixoa degeneratu horiengandik urrun mantendu nahian, noski. Hori ere posible da oso. MJren Ford beltza ikusi eta logelan sartu du umea. Gera zaitetz hemen, autoa igaro arte. Ez mugitzeko esan dut, Jimmy.

Baina adeitsu egon da emakumea MJrekin izan duen solasaldi laburrean, irribarrea aurpegian zintzilik uneoro. Aktore ona ote da Jimmyren amona? Edozer gauzaren gainetik itxurak mantendu nahi dituen horietako bat? Baina zertarako disimulatu behar du emakumeak? Zertarako adeitasunez tratatu, gorrotoa eta aiherra besterik sentitzen ez badu?

Halako galderak buruan bueltaka pasatu zaio goiza, apenas dastatu du bere kafea eta apenas jabetu da eguneko albiste eta iritzi artikuluez. The New York Timesek ez du bere kuriositatea pizten. Urrun, oso urrun sentitu du New York hona ailegatu zenetik lehenengoz. Gero hiru kilo banana erosi ditu eta behar zituen beste jakiez ahaztu da.

Arratsalde partean, Patricia sukaldean sartu denean MJ topatu du, mantala jantzita eta oso lanpetuta.

–Utzidan asmatzen, banana pastela egin behar dun? Ez dun izango!

MJK baietz diotso buruarekin eta irribarre zabal batekin, aspaldian egiten ez duen eta Patriciai hainbeste maite duen pastel hori gaur egin behar duela. Irinez zikindurik du sudurra eta Patriciai ez dio ezer esaten, horrela gustatzen zaio, ume kutsu horrekin.

–Banana pastela... –esaten du bere baitarako– hau ospatu beharra zegon.

Patricia, mimo handiz, bi martini prestatzen hasi da MJK labea pizten duen bitartean. Patek kasik egunero topatzen du zer ospatu, eta zerbait ospatzeko ez dago martini ederra bezalakorik. Gaur tomate entsalada jango dute berriro, besterik ez baitute etxean, baina hori bai, postrea kolosala izango da: banana pastela, MJren espezialitatea eta Paten gozokirik begikoena.

Ohean gelditu da MJ hurrengo goizean. Ez dago lotan, ezta nekatuta ere, baina izugarri alfer sentitzen da, hodeien atzetik irtetera animatzen ez den eguzkia bezain alfer edo areago. Patriciaren estudiotik datorren Underwood zaharraren tak-tak-tak lasaigarria entzun dezake. Egun ona du Patek, tak-tak-tak etengabeko egun horietako bat. MJk ez, hori argi dago. Lehoia izan nahi zuen katutxoaren historia erdizka dauka, eta hor dago katua, ez aurrera ez atzera. Ahal izanez gero putzu batean itoko luke katutxo pinpirina. Hori bai amaiera zirraragarri... eta ustekabekoa. Ausarta balitz Patriciari eskatuko lioke laguntza. Zer egin dezaket katutxo honekin, Pat. Orain arte idatzitakoa erakutsi eta haren iritziaren zain geldituko litzateke. Baina ez da hain ausarta. Patriciak berak ez du inoiz lanean dabilen liburuaz hitz egiten, are gutxiago aholkua eskatzen. Baina, noski, Patricia zelebridade bat da, Hitchcocken filma inspiratu duen andere txit agurgarria, eta ez katutxo koldarrez idazten duen luma traketsa. Hala ere, Patriciak ez badu egiten, berak ere ez. Kontu pribatua da lehoi izan nahi zuen katu horren istorioa. Beraren eta katutxoaren arteko afera.

Azkenik altxatu da, eta ezer esan gabe etxetik atera. Irten baino lehen, ordea, sukaldetik pasa da. Pastel erdia gelditu zitzaien bart soberan, eta ez gutxi jan zutelako, baizik eta pastel handi handia prestatu zuelako, nahita. Trapu garbi batekin estali du goxokia eta gidariaren ondoko eserlekuan utzi du paketetxo desiragarria. New Hoperako bidea hartu du gero.

–Hemen zara berriro! –amonak ez du oraingoan bere harridura disimulatu.

–Egun on, andere. Jimmy esnaturik dago? –Bi ordu beranduago iritsi da gaurkoan, beraz ohean dagoela esaten badio ez du sinistuko eta bere susmo ilun guztiak egiaztatuta geldituko dira.

–Barruan dago, bere kaligrafia ariketekin. Ezer behar duzu?

Kaligrafia ariketak, bai zera. Jimmy egunero dabil kanpoan, gora eta behera, bere beisbol batearekin, bere patinekin. Eta gaur, kasualitatez, etxeko lanetan dihardu umetxo aplikatuak.

–Pastela ekarri diot. Eta zuri ere bai. Eta zure senarrari, jakina. Banana pastela. –MJk trapuz estalitako platera luzatzen dio.

–Banana pastela! Jimmy txoratu egiten du. Asko poztuko da, esango diot zuk ekarri duzula. Eskerrik asko, andereño.

Ez dio ezer eranstekeo betarik eman, atea itxi baitu MJren sudurretan. Arraroa da andrearen jarrera. Hotza eta beroa. Irribarretsua baina mikaztasun punttu batekin. Eta kaligrafiarena sinistu behar al du? Jimmy pekaduna bere eskua idazlumarekin trebatzen? Zaila egiten zaio imajinatzea, geldirik egon ezin daitekeen mutil horrengan.

Triste eta goibel egin du herrirako bidea. Jimmyrekin zuen harremana zapuztuta dago, argi ikusten du orain. (Gustuko zuen, arraioa, haren limoi-zukua, haren pekatxoak eta aurreko-hortzik gabeko irribarrea). Hori, kontua okerrera ez badao. Berria konderri osoan zabaltzen ez bada. Jendea mesfidati begiratzen hasten ez bada. Zeharka eta fidagaitz. Ezagutzen ditu horrelako begiradak. Egunkaria saltzen dion gizona, esnea etxeko ateraino ekartzen dien baserritarra, kafea eta saltxitxak prestatzen dizkion kafetegiko emakume lodia, Jimmy bera, haren aitona-amonak. Ez dira honetarako hiritik aldendu, ez horixe. Lasai bizi nahi zutelako egin zuten alde New Yorketik. Bizilagun greziarrik gabe bizitzeko, esaterako. Jatetxeetan mahai bat lortzearren gona jantzi beharrik ez izateko. Villageko taberna zuloetan gehiago ez ezkutatzeko.

Baina gauzak beti konplikatzen dira. Beti. Bere bizitzaren historia da eta ez dago ezer egiterik. Begirada maltzurak, fidagaitzak, beti. New Yorken, Pennsylvanian, edonon. Jaki-dendaren aurrean aparkatu du eta, Patricia eman dion zerrenda luzea eskuan, Fordetik atera da.

Arratsaldeko hiruretatik dabil Patricia sukaldean, jo eta ke afaria prestatzen. Afari berezia izatea nahi du. Askotan dituzte bisitak konderri honetako bihotzean bizi direnetik, hiritik autoz datorren jendea normalean, eta beti ahalegintzen da afari bikaina, ahaztezina prestatzen. Ermitaua bilakatzen ari ez dela frogatzeko-edo. Bere abildade sozialek bere horretan jarraitzen dutela, bai horixe. Gaur bisitan dituztenak britainiar senar-emazteak dira, psikiatra emakumea, abokatu gizona. Jende liberala. Patriciaren lagunak eta MJren ezagunak. Bazter guztietan ditu lagunak Patricia, eta guztiak gonbidatu behar ditu afaltzera gainera. Beste idazle batzuk, aktoreak, medikuak, kazetariak, sukaldariak. Gainera, bere maitale ohiak lagun bilakatzeko gaitasun sinesgaitza du emakumeak, eta askotan dituzte bisitan, asteburu oso baterako, “berrogeita hamahiruko udako affaire zoroa” edo “nigatik txora-txora eginda zegoen errubia titi-txiki hura”, besteren artean.

MJ ez da kasu hauetan jeloskor jartzen, ez, baina Patricia bezala egin nahiko luke. Kontaktua mantendu bere maitale ohiekin, afaltzera gonbidatu eta abar. Erizain argal hura, adibidez. Badira bi urte haren berririk ez duela.

Zazpitan ailegatu dira Laura eta bere senarra, hiritarrek mendira joateko jantzen dituzten jantziekin, leku eta giroarekin bat etorri nahian bere jatorri urbanoa nabarmendu besterik egiten ez dutenak. Etxea ikuskatu dute, bertan dauden lehenengo aldia baita, lorategia goretzi dute gero, eta lau martini edateko atzeko portxean eseri dira azkenean.

–Hau paradisua da, zoratuta gaude New Yorken bizi garenok –esan du Laurak lehenengo zurrupadarekin.

–Askotan esan dizut ba Ingalaterrara bueltatu beharko genukeela, Surreyko etxetxo

konpondu eta... –senarrak ahopeka eta mantso hitz egiten du, beldurrez bezala, eta bere azentu britainiarra ia komikoa da, gehiegizkoa MJren iritziz.

–Surrey! Falta zitzaiguna. Eta eguna behiak psikoanalizatzen igaro?

Bikote bitxia, dudarik gabe. Laurak gizon sorbaldak ditu, zabalak eta gihartsuak. Bere kontralto ahotsa edozein gela betetzeko gauza da. Bere senarra, Peter, txikitxo da, estua, eta ahots suabekoa, alboan esnatu nahi ez duen ume bat balu bezala. Laura beti kexaka dabilela dirudi, eta Peter bera kontsolatzen. Laura ez da ezerekin konformatzen. Peterrek mundua eskerronez ikusten du. Laurak jaka kendu eta bere gizonari eskuratzen dio. Zapatak bi mugimendu azkarrez kendu eta bere Peterren belauen gainean jartzen ditu oin izerdituak. Eraman handiko gizona, inondik inora.

–Euliak, euliak, euliak edonon. New Yorkek gauza onik badu, hori da: eulirik ez dagoela, bat ere ez.

Jangelara pasatu dira eta Patricia zerbitzari lanetan trebatzen hasi da. Arrain zopa hasteko. Freskoa benetan, nondik ekartzen dizute amuarraina, Pat? Fussilliak boloniar erara gero. A, Italia, oraindik lur horrekin txoratuta, ezta? Marrubi budina bukatzeko. Zoragarria, zer esan dezaket. Eta ardoa, ardo pilo. Laurak, Patricia berak baino gehiago edateko gai den emakume bakarria dirudi. Hala iruditzen zaio behinik behin MJri. Portxera bueltatu direnean, afaldu eta gero, bosgarren ardo botila irekitzera doaz. Peterrek edaten ez duela kontuan hartuta, bada marka gero.

–Badakizu azkena? –Postre garaitik badirudi Laurak Patriciaarentzat bakarrik hitz egiten duela. Peter eta MJ haien hitzak jarraitzera mugatzen dira.

MJk badaki zer datorren orain. Badakizu azkena? Bosgarren ardo botilarekin atera ohi diren kontuak: festa gonbidatu berriak nortzuk diren, nortzuk atera berri diren armairutik, nortzuk izan diren in fraganti harrapatuak. Hala izan zen haien azkeneko topaketa horretan, Sevilla jatetxean. Festa gonbidatuak gora eta behera. Eta niri zer axola, esaten dio MJk bere buruari. Hau agoantatu beharra ere. Suminduta sentitzen hasi da bosgarren botila hori ireki dutenetik. Konturatu da gainera bera ere gehiegi edaten ari dela, baina bere umorea, hobetu gabe, okerrera ari dela egiten bere borondatearen kontra.

Festa gonbidatuak. Horrela deitzen zaie, New Yorkeko argotean, Patricia eta bera bezalako emakume eta gizoni. Beraien homosexualitatea sekretuan daramaten “festa gonbidatuak” argitara ekartzea ohiko dibertimendua da nonbait Laura honentzat. Ez dakit zer argitaletxetako editorea berriki ezkondu eta bere apartamentuaren albokoa erosi du maitalearentzat, berarentzako lan egiten duen gazte gihartsu horrentzat, zer iruditzen zaizue.

–Gehiegizko lana, nire aburuz! –komentatzen du Patricia, irribarre batekin–. Bi giltza, bi ohe... gehiegi.

Badirudi berak ere gustuko dituela hau bezalako txu- txu-mutxuak, MJri sinestea zaila egiten bazaio ere. Begien distira batekin jarraitzen du behintzat psikiatraren hitz jario maliziatsua. Orain ezkontza atondu horietako baten berri ematen ari da plazer handiz. Ez dakit zer egunkaritako bi kazetari gazte. Kiroletakoa gizona. Kulturakoa emakumea. Normalak dira festa gonbidatu emakumezko eta gizonezko biren arteko ezkontzak. Estalki perfektua bientzat. Bakoitzak bere bizitza sekretuarekin jarraituko du lasai asko, eta familiakoek ez diete berriz galdetuko: eta? noiz ezkondu behar duk, tunante horrek?

–Erredakzioan festa bat egin diete, ezer susmatu gabe, kar-kar-kar. –Laurari aurreko hortzak beltz gelditzen ari zaizkio ardoaren erruz.

Baina nola enteratzen da emakume hau gauza hauetaz? Hobe ez pentsatzea. Bere pazienteek jakin beharko lukete ez dela fidatzeko modukoa. Besteen intimitateak ez bakarrik entzun baizik eta barreiatzea gustuko duela. Bereziki liluratzen dute bizitza bikoitza daramaten gaixoei, ez diren zerbaiten itxura eman behar dutenek. Agian berak ere bizitza bikoitza daramalako, edo eraman nahiko lukeelako. Interesgarria litzateke horretaz hitz egitea, esaguzu, Laura, zer dela eta “festa gonbidatuekin” hainbesteko interesa?

Goizeko ordu biak dira MJk ohera doala aldarrikatu duenerako. Bere sorpresarako, guztiek bat egin eta haiek ere ohera doazela diote. Mahaia jaso gabe, harrikoa egin gabe jo dute ohera. Laurak eta Peterrek beheko gelara, gonbidatuen gelara; Patricia eta MJk eskaileretan gora zain duten ohera. Zaila da esatea nor dagoen mozkorrako. Patricia gehiago edan du, dudarik gabe, baina bere erresistentzia paregabea da. Poliki igotzen dituzte biek eskailerak. Biluztu eta ohe gainean gelditzen dira, maindireak zabaldu gabe. Gaua beroa da. Aire itogarria. Ezin nuen gehiago agoantatu Laura alu hori, esan nahiko luke MJk, baina alferrik esango luke, Patricia jadanik lo seko dagoelako, zurrunga eta guzti. Hobe horrela. Gorroto ditu Patriciaren lagunak inguruko eztabaidak. Bere lagunak sakratuak dira. Patriciaekin dituen eztabaida guztiak gorroto ditu, egia esanda. Sutan jartzen dira biak, baina Patricia berehala pasatzen zaio, dry-martini bat prestatu eta lasai gelditzen da portxean eserita, zurrupaka. Bera, ordea, lur jota egongo da egun osoan, Patriciaren begietara begiratu ezinik. Hori ez da bidezkoa. Ez horixe. Horregatik, koldarra dirudien arren, hobe gatazka saihestea.

Ordu erdi darama ohean eta ez da lokartzen. Egarri da eta, aldi berean, sukaldera jaisteko nekatuegi dago. Beste bost minutu igaro dira, eta orain egarria eta beroa jasanezinak egiten zaizkio. Nola-hala bere gorputza arrastaka mugitzeko indarrak pilatu eta eskaileretan behera jarri da. Ur freskoak on egin dio eztairitik behera. Atzamarrak basoan sartu eta tanta hotzez zipriztindu du bularra, lepoa, aurpegia. Sukaldeko leihoa ireki du, kanpoan freskoago egongo delakoan, baina ez da hala. Haize izpirik gabeko gaua da. Berriz oherako bidea hartu behar

duenean zerbait entzun du gonbidatuen logelan. Gelditu egin da, hobeto entzuteko. Kexu bat dirudi, urrumaka dabilen emakumezko baten ahots etena. Saloitik gonbidatuen gelako atea irekita dagoela ikus dezake, baina barruan ilunegi dago ezer ikusteko.

MJ egongela zeharkatu eta aterantz gerturatu da, zaratarik egin gabe. Kostata, bere begiak barruko iluntasunera ohitu dira. Emakumearen kexua ez ezik, ohearen kexu metalikoa ere ailegatzten da bere belarrietara orain. Berehala ikusten duen bultoa interpretatzea lortu du. Peter bere emaztearen gainean dago, aldakari indarrez eragiten. Biak biluzik, maindirerik ez beren gorputzak estaltzeko. Harritzeko moduko postura da. Peter isilak, Peter koitaduak, lema darama orain. Eta nola gainera: bere emaztea ez da panpina indargea baino gizonaren eskuetan. Ulergaitza da emakumearen kexua, baina ez da isiltzen. Gizona, berriz, esfortzu handiegia ari da egiten ezer esateko. Maratoi-korrikalari baten moduan hartzen du arnasa. Izerdi errekatxo batek bizkarrean behera egiten dio, ipurdiraino. Ohearen kexua geroz eta frenetikoagoa da. Orain ulergarriagoa da Lauraren marmarra: gora, gora, gora... ari da esaten, geroz eta ozenago. Gora, gora... Gora? harritu da MJ.

Zehaztu gabeko denbora batez egon da zelatan MJ, egiten ari denaz ohartu den arte. Eskailerak igotzen dituen bitartean gorroto adierazkaitz bat sentitu du Peter eta Laura horiengatik. Zerri halakoak. Zergatik arraio ez dute atea itxi? Ikusle bila ari dira, ala? Alprojak! Haienganako nazka bere buruarengana ere bideratzen hasi da ohean, berriz ere Patriciaren ondoan kokatu denean, hipnotizaturik bezala ate horren aurrean gelditzeagatik. Zeren bila zebilen? Zergatik gelditu da ate horren aurrean Peterren ipurdiko izerdiari begira? Gustatu al zaio ikusi duena? Ez, arraioa. Eta hala ere han gelditu da, tentelduta bezala. Kontzentratuegia, ikusten zuena hain nazkantea egiten bazitzaion.

Ondorengo goiza lainotua esnatuagatik ere beroak bere horretan dirau. Hamarrak aldera Patriciak gosaria prestatzen hasi beharko lukeela dio, baina MJk, bere neska gerritik harrapatuz, ohean ordu bat gehiago atxikitzeko ahaleginak egin ditu. Hamaikak pasatxo dira eskailerak batera jaitsi dituztenerako. MJ beldur da. Bere begirada gonbidatuen gelara joango zaion beldur. Gaueko ikuskari beraren testigu izango den beldur. Badaezpada trakeski eta zalapartatsu jaitsi ditu eskailerak, Patriciak harrituta begiratzen dion bitartean.

Laura eta Peter esnaturik daude. Dutzatuta eta arropa garbi eta txuriekin jantzita. Patricia sukaldean gogoz saiatu den arren besteek ez dute gehiegi gosaldurik: ajearen errua. Patriciak txango bat proposatu du. Entusiasmoz proposatu ere. Picnica prestatu eta berak ezagutzen duen mendixka eder baten magalean jan dezakete. Erreka bat omen dago inguruetan, sargoria freskatzeko. Lauretarako bueltan izango dira, eta senar-emazteak ilundu baino lehen ailegatu daitezke hirira. Zer iruditzen?

Guztiek gustura onartu dute plana, MJk izan ezik. Buruko mina, dio, buruko min izugarria. Ardo larregi, badakizue. Bakarrik utzi dute, hortaz, sandwichak prestatu eta mendi botak

jantzi ostean. Ez dira ziurrenik oso urrunera joango baina MJk tarte baliotsua izango du berarentzako. Agur, agur, kontuz ibili gero. Ura edan, burua estalita ibili, sargori hau oso arriskutsua da eta.

Eta orain, bakarrik dagoela, zer egin dezake? Lorategia ureztatu? Liburuak ordenatu? Eta Jimmyren etxera joango balitz? Ezta pentsatu ere. Berriz ate joka hasten bada poliziar deituko dioten inpresioa du. Inpresioa baino gehiago, ziurtasuna. Izan ere, amonaren balizko gorrotoa benetako gorroto zurruna bilakatu da gauaren ostean. Ardoak zenbait gauza argiki ikusarazi baitizkio. Ardoak eta gaueko ikuskizun lizunak, agian.

Bere estudioan sartu da. Sukalde ondoan dagoen gelatxo ttattarrean. Erratz-gela bat da izatez, baina Patriciak espresuki diseinaturiko altzariei esker –mahaitxoa, apalak, aulkia, dena txikia, neurrira egin– estudio antza hartzen hasia da gela. Automatismoz, bere idazmakinarean aurrean eseri da, diziplinaren poderioz erraza egiten zaion mugimendu batez. Ez du igandeetan lan egiteko ohiturarik, baina atzeratu samar dabil lehoia izan nahi zuen katutxoarekin eta ez legoke batere gaizki kontu horri aurrerakada bat ematea. Orri zuria bere zirrikituan kokatu du, konbentzimendu handiz. Arnasa hartu du. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA idatzi du atzamarraren mugimendu azkarraz. Gero:BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB. Azkenik: CCCCCCCC- CCCCCCCCCC. Eta etsipenez jaitsi ditu besoak, burua teklatuaren gainean deskantsatuz. Igandea eta ajea, zer espero daiteke holakoetan?, esan dio bere buruari.

Kolpetxo batzuk entzun ditu orduan sukaldeko atean. Bueltan dira Patricia eta bere lagunak? Ezinezkoa. Agian Laurari orkatila bihurritu eta eguna bere sofán eserita igarotzeko planak egin ditu. Ez dirudi oso kirolari fina Laura horrek, ziur azakirten hutsa dela psikiatra kuxkuxeroa. Dena dela, pozik dago idazmakina utzi behar izanaz. Ondo da, Laura baldin bada sofán utziko du, eta gero, lanaren aitzakian, bere estudioan sartuko da berriro. Ez du haren ahots gozoa berriro entzuteko inongo asmorik. Sukaldera ailegatzerakoan, ordea, figura txiki bat ikusi du atearen bestaldean. Ez da Laura, ez. Jimmy da. Jimmy txikia. Atea ireki dio eta sartzeko keinua egin, eta hala ere mutila atarian gelditu da, ez atzera ez aurrera.

–Egun on, Jimmy –tonu neutroa aukeratu du MJk, mutilaren erreakzioaren zain-edo.

–Egun on, andereño. –Sar zaitetz, mesedez. Jimmy, manaeraz, sukaldean sartu da. Peto urdina darama, eta zapatak, ohi bezala, lokatzez beteta. Pakete bat darama esku artean, eta zerbait esateko mingain puntan, baina ez da ausartzen nonbait.

–Amonak bidali nau, liburuagatik eskerrik asko esan diezazudan –azkenean animatu da mutila.

–A, hori. Ba, ez horregatik. Baina gustatu al zaizu? Ipuina, esan nahi dut.

Baietz egin du mutikoak buruarekin, eta gero bere oin lokaztuei begira gelditu da. Masailak gorrituak ditu, erraz ikusten da ez dela eroso sentitzen.

–Eta hau ekarri dizut –paketetxoa luzatu dio azkenean–. Marrubi tarta. Nire amonak egina. Zuk emandako banana pastelagatik.

–Primeran! –dio MJk alegantzia zintzoaz, paketea hartuz. Zerbait gehiago erantsi beharko luke, baina ez zaio ezer otutzen–. Eta? Gustatu zitzaizun Manda Pandak igeri egin nahi du? –ahoa ireki orduko konturatu da jadanik egina diola ditzosozko itauna.

–Amonak esan dit zuk idatzi duzula. –Bai, hala da. Orduan, gustatu zaizu? –Bai. Gustatu zait azkenean Mandak igeri egiten ikasten duenean –esan du Jimmyk–. Nik ere egiten dut igeri. Pasa den udan irakatsi zidan aitonak.

Hau elkarrizketa itxura hartzen hasi da. Orain haritik tiratu beharra dago, baina sotilki, apur ez dadin.

–Ba, ipuin gehiago ditut. Ipuin ugari idatzi ditut. –Ez daki horrek mutikoa inpresionatuko duen, baina saiatu beharko–. Etor zaitez nirekin.

Dudatsu, Jimmyk emakumeari jarraitu dio erratz-gela edo estudiorantz. MJ apaletan arakutzen ari da. Liburu ugari kartoi kaxetan daude oraindik, New Yorketik ailegatu ziren egunean bezalaxe, beren txandaren zain. Berak idatzitako liburu guztiak ere kaxa batean daude, baina orain ezin du asmatu zeinetan. Bere liburutxoan ale ugari ditu beti etxean, gonbidatuei opari gisa eskaintzeko, edota, besterik gabe, noizean behin begiratu bat emateko. Bere obra ikuskatzeko. Patriciak ez bezala. Patriciak ez ditu inoiz berak idatzitako liburuak berrirakurtzen argitaratu ostean, hortaz, zaila da Patriciaren etxean Patriciaren liburu bat topatzea. MJk gordetzen du baten bat. Elkar ezagutu zuten egunean sinatu zion ale hura, esaterako. Baina ezkutuan gordetzen du. Detaile sentimentalegia Patriciarentzat. Azkenean topatu du kaxa, liburu bat eskuratu eta hautsa kendu dio.

–Hauxe, adibidez: Ezkutatuko gara?

Liburua gainetik begiratzen du, marrazki ugari dituela konprobatzeko-edo. Eta bai, baditu marrazki ugari.

–Beno, banoa. Amona zain dut.

–Ondo da. Nahi duzunean itzuli, beste liburu baten bila edo...

Sukalderantz doaz berriro. MJk atea ireki dio. –Zer moduz dago arrosa? Momentu batez MJk

ez daki Jimmy zertaz ari den.

Gero ohartu da. Jimmyren begietan erruduntasun punttu hori ikusterakoan. Geranio zaharkituaz hitz egiten du. Berak bota zuen geranioaz, alegia.

–Ondo dago, loreontzi berri batean landatu dut –gezurra esaten du MJK–. Ez zaitetz kezkatu. Ez da ezer gertatzen.

Jimmyk, lehenengoz, irribarre zabala eskaini dio. Gero, liburua eskuan, korrika atera da etxetik. Begiradarekin jarraitu dio mutikoaren ibilera azkarrari, bidean txiki egin den arte. Gero sukaldean geratu da zutik, zer egin ez dakiela. Marrubi tartari begira gelditu da. Itxura onekoa, baina ez da gose. Afarirako utziko du, Patricia eta biontzako, Laurak eta Peterrek alde egiten dutenerako.

Eta hala ere, zerbait ospatzeko beharra sentitzen du bere baitan. Ospakizun pribatua, barnekoa. Patriciaren eraginez-edo, martini bat prestatu dezakeela otu zaio, baina berehala ajeaz gogoratu da. Ajearekin martinirik ez, aspaldian egindako promesa hori gogorarazi dio bere buruari. Egongelara doa orduan eta sofán etzan da. Honetarako etorri dira Pennsylvaniara, ezta? Lasai bizitzeko. Igandea sofán botata igarotzeko. Afarian marrubi tarta jateko. Minutuak luze egin zaizkio eta azkenean bere estudiora bueltatu da.

Patricia eta bere lagunak hiru ordu beranduago ailegatu dira. Nekatuta dirudite, batez ere Laurak. Ilea bekokira itsatsita, masailak gorrituta. Orkatila behintzat bere lekuan dago. Azkar agurtu dituzte Peterrek eta emazteak, ez omen dute hirira berandu ailegatu nahi. Itzuliko gara, hau paradisua da, izan dira Lauraren azken hitzak, baina bero madarikatu hau, nola agoantatzen duzue?

–Jatorrak ditun, ezta? –esan dio Patriciak bakarrik gelditu direnean.

Baietz erantzun dio MJK buruarekin. Orain urrun daudela, autopistarako bidean-edo, jatorragoak iruditzen zaizkiolako.

–Eta hik zer egin dun egun osoan?

–Ezer gutxi, Lehoia izan nahi zuen katutxoaren historiari azken ukituak eman.

–Benetan? Bukatu dun? Hau ospatu beharra zegon!

Eta hala egin dute. Ospatu. Patriciak martini batekin –berak ez du inoiz ajerik– eta MJK marrubi tartarekin. Jimmyk ekarri dion marrubi tartarekin.

PARTY GUESTS

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Foreword – The Hidden Heartbeats of Daily Life

When I read stories by Katixa Agirre my curiosity awakens, and I feel nervous. What's happening to me? Whether it's a great event or something trivial, the main character will be affected as if there were a fast-moving stream silently flowing beneath the skin of apparent normality, movement which will leave its unavoidable mark by the end. Haven't you realised that things aren't as they seem?

Tucked into a peaceful, carefully organized way of life there are so many frustrations, lies, desires, feelings of insignificance, obsessions; so much manipulation, desire to destroy, narcissism, cowardice, boredom, vulnerability, sensation of insignificance, lack of security, shame, treason, self-flagellation, hurt, guilt, jealousy, egoism...

Agirre shows remarkable ability to reflect humanity in a natural way and with deep psychological insight. She skilfully takes us under her characters' skin, writing fiction which doesn't feel like fiction, offering us brilliant passages which are wholly believable within those daily routines. When painting her characters' portraits and describing the logic behind their actions it's as if she has a hidden camera, a camera which neither hides the characters' weaknesses nor judges them.

The characters speak to themselves all the time; the conversations are linked in their minds; or they are hammered by insistent questions, forced to take the continual assessment evaluations which life puts them through. We see many types of emotion, specimens from a never-ceasing beehive.

However, there is no space for sentimentalism in these stories. The dramas (these texts are made up of substantial dramatic components), whether in the first person or the third, are put to us from close by, in the way an impartial chronicler might. To such an extent that the strong endings leave it up to the reader to answer the questions which have sprung up while reading each story. In fact, openness and ambiguity are two of the writer's main characteristics, and the reader has to take some time for reflection before moving on to the following story. How do we know when life is going to deceive us?

Agirre constructs together fast-moving texts, using short, precise sentences. The narratives seem to go forward by their own, moved along by the inertia of their own style.

We see physical spaces and sceneries – whether a few square metres or thousands of kilometres – as extensions of the characters' personalities, like a pot in which each of their circumstance's stocks are cooked. To put it another way, although few details of the physical areas in which relationships and interactions take place are painted for us, the atmospheres created are both complete and attractive.

And, just once in a while, with a touch of irony, there's laughter at the hidden heartbeats of daily life.

Miren Agur Meabe
Bilbao, January, 2020

Hesperia, California

Travelling together was the best way to save money. That was why we got into a car with a couple we hardly knew.

I think that by then things weren't going well between H. and me, although we hadn't realised it. That was why we sought out other people's company, thinking noise from outside would cover up the noise between us. That was why we got into a car with a couple we hardly knew. If we had realised, perhaps I would have spent the summer alone. It might have been a moment when a short break could have sorted something out. A summer break. At the end of the day, it was only three months, and I was going to work at the university in Reno. But H. signed up too, his company having been one of the first victims of the crisis – in fact, a victim of it two years before the crisis had started, which is quite something.

He had been the owner of a small mobile marketing business along with a further three partners; it had only lasted three years. Their greatest achievements: a virtual telephone guide commissioned by the Guggenheim museum which visitors could download via Bluetooth. He faced up to the disaster with optimism; it didn't seem as if the dreams of his whole life had been flushed down the toilet from one day to the next. There will be new opportunities, he used to say, and when I told him that I had been given a grant to spend time at Nevada University that summer, in a city which was just 400 kilometres from Silicon Valley, he felt that his most optimistic hopes were being fulfilled: he could come with me, take an English course at the university – the weak point in his curriculum, something which always gave him grief – and, perhaps, visit some company in the Valley, introduce himself, get some contacts, who knew.

Was I disappointed when I found out he was going to come with me? I don't know, but if I was I didn't admit it to myself. We made all the preparations together, quickly and efficiently. An apartment not far from the campus. An English course for H., which turned out to be horribly expensive. In my introduction e-mail I said that I wanted to interview all of the lecturers.

Once we got there, I took my work seriously and ignored my jet-lag. Reno's neon lights and decadence did not distract me. We used to bike to the university. H. went to a classroom full of young Asians, and I enjoyed the air conditioning in the library. The place I liked best was a room called Rotunda. There, surrounded by books, with a never-ending caffè latte in my hand, I would spend the best hours of the day. Often I would just stare into the clean Nevadan sky for a quarter of an hour, for half an hour. H. used to turn up by twelve o'clock, sit down opposite me and do his homework until it was time for lunch. He used to drive me up the wall with all those phrasal verbs. Try as he might, he couldn't see the difference between call off and put off.

I met Sandra in the library cafeteria after the 4th of July long weekend. I heard her speaking in Spanish with the Nicaraguan who used to sell me caffè lattes, and I think I introduced myself first. She was the vice chancellor for international students at the Valencia University psychology faculty. She wasn't there for research like me: she was laying the ground for a student exchange scheme between Nevada and Valencia universities. Sandra was too friendly right from the start, and I always distrust people like that. Even so, as I didn't come across many friends out there – from the Basque Country there were only four track suit-clad Basque University PE kids, and a pristinely dressed girl who wanted to write a book or make a documentary about Basque shepherds' wives – and we started having coffee together every day. Three days after we met I had to bring H. into our circle and sometimes, if Sandra had nothing to sort out and I had no interviews, we had lunch together. Our conversations were highly critical of the US and Spanish university systems, but we always made sure we included H. in the conversation.

When there were a dozen or so days left before our return, Sandra's husband Jorge arrived after taking a trip around America. By that time we had already agreed and thoroughly organized the journey that we were going to go on. A rented car, bookings in hotels in San Francisco and Las Vegas, and an imaginary line on a map, a line drawn without much imagination. We were going to go to San Francisco first of all and, from there, along Route 101, to Los Angeles. From Los Angeles we could have carried on to San Diego, but we didn't have enough days and decided to go straight to Las Vegas – Sandra had told us that Jorge was a dedicated poker player – and, from there, back to Reno. H. mentioned Silicon Valley a few times before we set off, but not forcefully enough, and in the end those corporate visits were left out; to such an extent that we never heard the word 'networking' again.

Jorge worried me a bit; although we didn't know him at all, we were going to be in a car with him for who knew how many hours, and the worst of it was that on the first night we were going to have to share a room at the hotel too. That had been Sandra's idea, coming to her as a result of hotel prices in San Francisco. She was tight with money, I was soon to realise.

But we didn't have any problems. I'm used to wives saying all the best things about their absent husbands: my one's the tallest, the handsomest, the sharpest... But I have to admit that Sandra's description had been pretty precise. Jorge was tall and he was quite good-looking, and friendly too, but he knew how to keep his distance and when he kept quiet, staring over the steering wheel at the horizon, we all respected him. He knew how to use excellent clichés when the circumstances called for that, but he could also hold genuinely interesting conversations. He was a lawyer at a large pharmaceutical company and travelled to the head office in Switzerland all the time. He was soon to add Chinese to the bus-load of languages he already knew. He knew how to treat people to get what he wanted: the people at supermarket check-outs, his wife, and me too, obviously. I realised from the start that H. hadn't impressed him much. Even so, he was very polite to him throughout the journey, and from time to time

he would ask him questions about Bluetooth.

I have vague memories of those days. We took photos, but I never look at them. I remember a Hope Telephone for suicides on the Golden Gate bridge; I thought it was very funny. "Call me before you jump off!" I also remember the best scrambled eggs I've ever had very well: a restaurant on top of a cliff by the sea, the cold Pacific beneath us, toast and coffee. I can't forget the worst mojito I've ever had either. That was in a university town called San Luis Obispo; it was a drink I felt obliged to have even though I was incredibly tired that evening. I don't remember anything about Los Angeles: I'm not even sure we actually got out of the car.

During the last part of the trip, one day when we were three hours from Las Vegas, it got dark sooner than we had expected and we decided to stop. Looking at the map we chose a city called Hesperia because we liked the name. Nearby there was another city with an even more tempting name, Adelanto, but it would have taken us out of our way a bit, and we decided that Hesperia would satisfy our needs. It was no more than a city which had suddenly flowered – to put it one way – in the middle of the Mojave desert, and our guidebook only gave it five lines. I would have said it was weird if we hadn't already seen loads of weird cities. There was no city centre, or none that we ever found, only buildings which had grown up along the road. Hamburger restaurants, liquor stores and lots of motels: built specifically for people going to Las Vegas to get married, compulsive gamblers and obese families.

By that time we were experts on motels, and we were looking for high standards. After choosing a city, we were up to inspecting eight or nine motels before coming across the most appropriate one. It had to have a jacuzzi and air conditioning, and wifi in the bedrooms because Jorge was always expecting to get some work things among his messages. We also used to try the beds out and check that there were ice machines. In Hesperia, however, the first motel we saw passed the test. The girl at reception was chatty, more interested in telling us about her home town than about our keys. I remember that she was from Merida, in Yucatan, because Sandra had two PhD students from the university there, and because they talked about that for a couple of minutes. Finally we got to our bedroom doors and Jorge asked about the jacuzzi.

"It's at the back, sir, but it's out of use right now because we can't monitor it after ten due to the darkness", she told us in her gentle accent. "It's a safety issue, sir."

As we left reception to look for our rooms, I said to Jorge in disappointment:

"It's better to ask nothing; it's always easier to say sorry than it is to ask for permission."

"What's that?", he answered. "She's given us the information we needed: now we know that nobody's going to bother us while we're in the jacuzzi."

I had to admit that he was right. I'd started to get used to that. Although the men used to sit in the front of the car, and we women in the back, I'd started to realise that there was a special type of affinity growing up between Jorge and myself. Much more so than between Jorge and H., and much more than between Sandra and myself. I had a lot of things in common with Sandra – work, similar family stories, and being almost pathological fans of Damien Rice – but, even so, for some unfathomable reason we still hadn't clicked. On the first night in San Francisco, that first night when we all shared a bedroom, I also discovered that she was lying about her age. That seemed especially serious to me as two weeks earlier we had celebrated her birthday in the best pizza restaurant in Reno and, using strips of pepper, I had written her false age on top of the tomato sauce because there weren't any candles.

What happened was that when we were in the hotel in San Francisco I saw a passport on a table. I opened it up thinking it was mine, but it was Sandra's face I saw in there. She wasn't five years older than me, as she always used to remind me: she was seven years older than me. I reckon that if you're going to tell lies you should do it properly, and it wasn't worth doing that for a difference of just two years. But later on I thought she had to have a plan: like many people, she, too, had decided to take a year off after a certain age rather than adding one at each birthday. They'd probably be a four-year difference between us by the following summer.

I didn't tell anybody, by which I mean I didn't tell H., but I got a little pleasure each time Sandra said anything connected with age and I remembered my small discovery, and goodness, she used to talk about age all the time. Each time she reminded us that she wanted to have children, for instance. "When? When on earth?" I used to wonder. "When you're five years younger?"

We had a relaxed supper in one of the best restaurants in Hesperia — Big Boy, specialised in double-decker hamburgers — but we didn't want to stay there too long after eating: the jacuzzi was preying on our minds. The best moments on the trip, in spite of H.'s inappropriate comments, had been the ones we'd spent in the jacuzzis, under the stars and leaning into the warm bubbles.

"See you in five minutes' in the jacuzzi!"

We ran to our rooms after taking our swimming costumes from the back tray in the car. We used to leave them there after our morning dip – that was another ritual of ours – for them to dry out in the sun. Four minutes later we met up again under the sign saying SPA-GUESTS ONLY with white towels wrapped around our waists. As it was night time we couldn't see the empty land beyond the fence, and that meant we were able to keep up the illusion of glamour as we got into the water. Jorge opened the taps without any difficulty and we went through the fence around the jacuzzi and the swimming pool our swift, nervous steps underlining the clandestine nature of the moment.

"Hey, guys, today we can do whatever we want!", said H. as he pinched my bum. "We know it's not going to end up on Youtube as the camera's not working!"

Sandra and Jorge pretended they hadn't heard that comment with great elegance and, for a minute, the only sound came from the bubbles, and our bodies relaxed. The cool Californian air tickled our faces while our bodies warmed up.

"You all know what's missing here, don't you?", Jorge said then.

"Whisky, of course!", Sandra answered, playing the role of the couple who knew each other inside-out.

"Yeah, and who's going to leave this paradise to go and get some?", I said, without much hope.

"I'll go", said H. as he stood up, showing his flowery swimming trunks to all. "There's a liquor store just across the road."

"I'll go with you", said Jorge, whose idea it had been in the first place, after all.

They put on their T-shirts and walked to the other side of the fence in their soaking swimming trunks. Sandra and I were left there alone, in silence.

"They seem to get on, don't they?" I tried saying as we watched the two silhouettes disappear.

"Yes. Hey, I'm going to go and get some ice so we've got everything ready."

And then she, too, left that temple of peace and steam. I spent five minutes looking at my fingertips, which had started to wrinkle, and tried to empty my mind. Sandra was back first carrying one of those plastic buckets, which we always found in the bedrooms, full of ice. I took one of the ice cubes and put it in my mouth. The men came back right away, noisily.

"Ladies, here is your order", said H.

"It's been tough, but in the end we managed to get it!", added Jorge.

"Mad Vietnamese Yankee...", said H. as he put one leg into the jacuzzi.

Meanwhile, Jorge starting handing the drinks around. H. and mine were on the rocks, the other two were straight. By that time there was no need to ask.

"Did you notice how he kept his hands under the counter ready to get his shotgun out?"

"I was more scared by all those birds in their cages. I bet he'd trained them to take customers' eyes out."

"How many did he have there? What a smell!"

After walking by the casinos in Reno for two months, we were used to seeing all sorts of characters. Retired people playing the machines while hooked up to their oxygen canisters; red-haired homeless men who groomed their Daliesque moustaches with spit; people with paralysis trying to race against cars; people who'd seen the light giving out fake thousand-dollar bills. I used to find that endless exercise in anthropology tiring. At that time of night all I wanted was a drink, leave the world behind and think only of myself. I picked up my glass and took the first swig without making a toast.

"God save America!", said Jorge

"God save America!", we all said.

"Eureka!", added H. as if he had read in the guidebook that Eureka was the Californian motto.

We all concentrated on our own glasses, and, as I remember it, not much was said over the following minutes. The second round of drinks came along, and maybe the third too. I started to feel tired, and also something similar to happiness. Bending my head backwards I tried to make out the stars, and just then I felt that somebody was stroking my left foot. For a long time. Slowly. From the way we were sitting it could have been anybody, but for H. it would have been quite an uncomfortable position, and he didn't have the expression he usually had on his face whenever he was up to something saucy. I decided to let the moment go on rather than take my foot away, wanting to find out who it was stroking me.

We saw a black silhouette approaching us, but too late by the time we realised the situation we were in; a large body was coming through the gate we had left open. A security guard, we probably all thought; it wouldn't be the first time a guy in uniform had turned up while we were half way through our dip. But he wasn't wearing a uniform; he had Bermuda shorts on, flip-flops and a sleeveless T-shirt which left his tattoo-covered arms open for all to see. H. and Jorge sat up straight at the same time. Whoever was stroking my foot stopped doing so.

"The guy from the liquor store", said H.

"Hi, guys!", said the guy from the liquor store, and started to take his T-shirt off.

I lowered my eyes to avoid looking at his white chest and tattoos, and came across his feet; a little higher, on this left ankle, I saw an electronic tag. Was he sending a message to the Hesperia police station at that very moment? Was a sheriff going to turn up and complete that typical scenario once and for all?

In his Bermuda shorts, his flab shivering, the guy from the liquor store scratched his bald patch, unable to decide on his next movement. Even so, the four of us in the jacuzzi were quite relaxed as our four bodies were filling the whole tub. It must have been obvious that there was no space for a fifth; even that sub-product of the system must have seen that. What's more, the sign on the gate made it clear that the spa was reserved for motel guests.

But the sub-product was coming towards us.

"Having fun?"

We didn't answer him. We tried to have a telepathic conversation between the four of us. Should we say something to him? Jump out of there? Make room for that Vietnamese arse?

"He wants to get in", Sandra said then, wanting to share what was obvious to us all.

"What are we going to do?", I said.

"As long as he doesn't bring his birds along, it's fine by me", said H. with a half smile. But nobody was amused.

We didn't do anything, just looked at that monitored leg: toenails, ankle, hairless legs, old Bermuda shorts. We were paralysed, and the jacuzzi decided to join us in that, the bubbles stopping at just that moment. That happened every five minutes, and then you had to press the button. The tattooed guy did that with his left foot. The button was behind my back and, when I turned around, I saw his black toenails. A second later that foot was in the water between Sandra's back and mine. It looked like one of those dark fish that come looking for food in the oily waters in ports.

"Hey!", said Jorge, sticking his chest out, but the guy went on trying the water out for temperature with apparent indifference.

Instinct told me, and it must have told Sandra something similar too, that we had to leave, get out of the jacuzzi, run away. But we just stayed there – while a dirty foot stirred up and blackened the water between us – without saying a word. Instead of listening to our instincts, we waited to see how the men would react. But they, too, seemed to be deaf to their instinct. The guy took full advantage of the situation: he put one foot in (but what would happen if his

electronic tagger got wet?) and, as nothing happened, then put the other one in too. I looked away as I had imagined the worst under his Bermuda shorts. With a single movement he made room for his bum between Sandra's and mine. It was skin against skin, he seemed fatter now he was in the water, and I imagined the torpedo he was getting ready to launch underneath his shorts.

It's impossible to explain how quickly things happened, words seem to inevitably slow down what happened, but only the suddenness of it all can explain how we didn't move, how we didn't do anything. To make space for the liquor store guy's butt I moved towards H., and Sandra went towards Jorge, as was only natural. And, even so, the guy went ahead and did the most revolting thing: he stuck his white tongue out – I swear it was white – and slid it up from my neck to my ear, leaving all the skin he had licked frozen.

"Hey!", H. said then, sticking his chest out like Jorge, and putting his arm over my shoulder.

I don't know if I said "Fuck!" or "Bastard!", but the sub-product wasn't offended, turned the other way to do the same thing to Sandra. I don't know if his thick tongue actually reached Sandra's skin. It did get very close, but just then Jorge jumped on top of him with the concentrated determination of sea-monster. Without any strategy he threw all of his weight down on the guy, but took a decision right away and, as he put one arm around the guy's neck, he tried to put his head under the water with his other hand. At the same time Sandra, H. and I stayed at the far corner of the jacuzzi, or at least that's the picture I have in my mind, although I'm aware that there was no far corner in that tiny pool because there weren't even any corners, amongst other things. All of us were very close together, it was a mixed-up soup of bodies, but Jorge was going for it, and the liquor store guy was drinking in water.

We suddenly realised that he was drowning. Jorge consciously wanted to drown him. He was using all his strength to do that. He veins on his forehead were pulsating and he was making an incredible effort for that Vietnamese head not to be able to ever breathe again. Sometimes the fat man managed to take his head out of the water, he lashed out with his elbows and gave me some kicks under the water too. But Jorge didn't give up. He kept on forcing the guy down, who knows where he got all his strength from. And then the jacuzzi bubbles stopped again, and the whole scene became more wicked and more evil in that tranquillity. I suddenly thought of the Mojave desert, two shovels, a burial which goes on until dawn. Thanks to movies that scene seemed wholly credible and viable to me. It didn't scare me.

"That's enough, Jorge!", Sandra screamed in the most penetrating voice I've ever heard.

He moved back then, obediently, scornfully letting what he had in his hand drop as if it were a bag. We all kept still, waiting to see whether the fat man's head would come out of the water. It did come out. Jorge coughed. He stood up in the middle of the jacuzzi, and then we all got

out of the water. Jorge picked the guy's T-shirt and flip-flops up and threw them over the fence. More coughing. He looked as if he was going to faint.

"Go away!", said Jorge in a voice which was not his own.

Finally the guy got out clumsily. He spat three or four times as he got out. I thought he was going throw up, he was going to leave us a reminder of himself like that.

"You've gone too far", said Sandra to Jorge, who looked younger and reinvigorated.

Then she started crying, I don't know why. They embraced each other in a way it was almost embarrassing to watch. I tried to clean the sub-product's slime off me using my towel, but I knew I was going to feel it on me for some time. H. was scratching his head and whistling, I don't know whether from relief or because of the adrenaline.

"Let's leave", day Jorge. "It's time to get some sleep."

We all obeyed right away.

I had a really bad night. I was sure the guy would come back any time. And, of course, he wouldn't be alone. He would bring his shotgun, the one he kept under the counter, with him. After killing us all he would let his birds loose so that they could feed off our remains. Or maybe he'd do that before he killed us. I put the sofa in front of the bed, and the TV stand as well. H. was in agreement; he didn't laugh at me. I was really pissed off when I felt he got off to sleep at around three in the morning. I didn't sleep at all until the morning. All of a sudden I stopped thinking about the guy from the off-licence, but I had all sorts of dark thoughts in my dreams: road accidents, natural catastrophes, solitude.

We had breakfast earlier than usual that day, and we didn't take a dip. Three hours later we were in Las Vegas, and then for a couple of days we had no need to say anything to each other: amongst the lights, screens, girls who stripped naked between the casino tables and the saviours who were fighting against sin, we spent every hour hallucinating. During those days we split up for the first time. Jorge wanted to concentrate on his poker, and the other three of us just went sight-seeing.

We travelled back to Reno in a single day when it was just eight hours before Jorge and Sandra's flight. We said goodbye without any false expectations or promises, but we did say that we'd really enjoyed our time together.

Five months later, after Christmas, H. and I split up. He moved to one of his brother's houses and, although we put our place up for sale, I stayed there until a buyer turned up as it was

close to the faculty. H. signed up for a course on quality. It was a passionless separation, the type it's tedious to even tell people about.

A few months later, on a sticky summer day, the same day they installed the phone in my new apartment, for no apparent reason I remembered it was Sandra's birthday. I remembered that pizza and writing her fake age on it with strips of pepper. I was curious. I called her home without thinking about it too much. Instead of Sandra, Jorge picked up, and he was actually friendly. After telling him three or four things, I told him I wanted to speak to Sandra, I wanted to wish her a happy birthday. He told me Sandra no longer lived there, his voice turning dark. I don't know why, but hearing that didn't surprise me at all.

"Oh!", I said, even so.

As I didn't want to stick my nose in, instead of asking him anything ("But what happened? You were such a good couple!"), I told him my story, underlining the coincidence there, hoping to tell him the most interesting details, and, after hearing everything, Jorge said he was sorry. But he didn't tell me anything himself.

"Well, these things happen."

"Yes, they happen."

"Hey, I'll call you another day and can catch up properly."

Ok, he said in a neutral voice. And before I hung up I started to calculate how many days I would have to wait so my next call wouldn't sound too weird.

Lord and Master

In spite of the surprise and the discomfort, they didn't find it too hard to get used to the new house. They were unfamiliar with the silence outside, that sound which pierced their eardrums at night; nor were they familiar with the house's own occasional sound-repertoire: the creaking beams, the squeaking floor, the wind howling down the chimney.

There were major technical problems: the new heating system didn't work as it should (a friend's advice to drain the radiators hadn't served for much) and, at the beginning of November, they had to plug in a small electric stove in the bedroom. They had to deal with a revolting invasion of rats using some sticky, cruel traps. The drains in the bathroom seemed to be poorly connected, and they had to use the red tap to get cold water and the blue one for hot water. Many mornings they forgot about that peculiarity and spent some time swearing under a cold shower.

But even so they were happy, pleased about the change. That's what they told each other. They were the owners of a real house, there was a great place for Goio to work, and it was no more than half an hour's drive to work for Garazi. They congratulated themselves on having had the luck to find something as good. Garazi had been on the list for council housing for around six years. Her name was on it along with thousands of others. She'd been under twenty-seven when she signed up and, inevitably, was over twenty-seven now. Finally, when they saw a classified ad in the newspaper they quickly revived a plan which had been on ice for years. The owner of the house was in financial straights – apparently a business project hadn't worked out – and he was in a hurry to sell that old house. It had been empty for ten years, but he had to sell it now. That was why the price was so low, he explained to Goio and Garazi when they asked about the hurry he was in.

Until then they had never thought of moving to live away from the city. Although Garazi was on that list for council housing, she didn't like those districts on the outskirts, out there in the middle of nowhere. And now, out of the blue, they had decided to go and live in the remotest of villages.

It was a village they had never heard of until then, hard to find on the map, tiny, from another age. They had to look on the Internet to get instructions for how to get there. It was on a hill, and from the highest point all you could see were wheat fields and a local road. On the other side of the road there was a new estate of semi-detached houses. That was the only sign of human life, and it had reassured them when they went to the village for the first time.

They looked at the bright side of things. It was a real house, it had more than enough space, it was surrounded by nature, it had a real history to it. It was very, very peaceful. It was also isolated, but they would be able to hold parties, as many as they wanted, without any risk of

neighbours calling the police. They would have as much fresh air as they wanted. The price was no small consideration. And, of course, if they were to have children, wouldn't it be a great place?

The second time they visited it they took along an architect friend. She assured them that the house was in good nick, saying they could easily sort it out with a few simple improvements. Repairing the roof. Isolating the windows. Installing new heating. And no, the wall between the two small rooms on the ground floor wasn't structural and, if they knocked it down, they could have quite a large sitting room there for parties and so on.

Then they went down to the housing estate to try to get some information from the people they found in the bar: the village, the people, communications. The village had started to empty in the 1970's and had almost disappeared, which is what had happened to most of the villages in the area. There was only a single family still living there throughout the year. However (and this was the village's only hope), people from the village had started to buy houses and do them up, and there were loads of children around at weekends. There were quite a lot of people during the summer too, and not just at weekends. What's more, thanks to a public telecommunications plan there has been ADSL in the village since a year ago. The narrow path up to the village had been asphalted less than a year before. There wasn't a bar, but quite a lot of people went to the bar in the housing estate, and they would be welcome there.

A couple of days later the owner of the house asked them to get a move on. Garazi told him about her doubts and asked for some time. And then he offered them a cheaper price. A considerable reduction. Were they going to let an opportunity like that get away?

A few months went by before they left the flat they were renting in the city and moved to the village. They had to do a load of things to make the house habitable, many more things than they had optimistically foreseen at the start. They had used the weekends to do that, and their holidays too. All the friends they had managed to recruit had been there on the roof, or inside the house, putting draught excluders on the windows and doors, painting the walls. At night, when they went back to their rented flat, it seemed small and suffocating to them, and the need to move out became unbearable.

Finally, at the end of September, they moved once and for all. Garazi took a couple of days off. They put the few pieces of furniture they had in the flat into a van a friend had lent them, and said goodbye to the city. They had to clean everything. The floor, the stairs, under the stairs, the bathrooms, the hall, all the dark nooks and crannies they'd overlooked. They put the furniture in place. There was space for all of it in a single room. They were going to have to buy new furniture to fill the gaps. Garazi suggested a more traditional style to fit in better with their

new rural surroundings. A forged iron bed, for instance. And why not? That old chest of drawers they had kept from Garazi's mum's house for the children's room.

It wasn't the first time they'd mentioned what they called the children's room. Even if they were joking, whenever they mentioned the small room next to theirs they called it that.

And what colour are we going to paint the children's room?

We can leave those boxes in the children's room for the moment.

Goio didn't know whether he should start worrying or not.

He thought things were pretty clear.

He had just given up his job in an architect's studio where he had been in charge of designing the virtual models. In principle he was taking a year off, but he found it impossible to even imagine that he would go back to work when the time was up. He didn't even really try to. And now, on top of all that, they were slaves to their mortgage, which they'd got thanks to Garazi's salary, of course, and having a child would make things too complicated. Goio decided to ignore what Garazi said. He thought they still had plenty of time to put things off. Their main concern was getting the house into really good shape. That would keep Garazi entertained for a while.

The master of the house was happy in his new headquarters. Particularly in the morning. He and Garazi had breakfast together and then, when she got into the car and drove away, there was nothing but silence all around. He went up to the attic then and, while the computer was firing up, smoked a cigarette at the window.

That was the best moment: he was still able to hope that it would turn out to be a productive day. He had got a grant for a year, but what had seemed like a long period to him was just eight months all of a sudden, and Goio had the sensation that time was going to carry on moving ahead mercilessly. He had needed some results for a long time now. And he spent his time waiting for the moment to start working at the right rhythm.

As he blew out smoke he looked at the plum tree by the house opposite: the plums, over-ripe, were falling off and the birds, after pecking at them a couple of times, left them where they were. The only street in the village widened towards the centre, where the church was, but it became no more than a track as it went up and ended at the cemetery. Goio made a mental note that they should go and visit the cemetery some time. Then he looked at the village's only inhabitants' house.

If the quality of relationships is proportional to the distance between houses, then Goio foresaw a peaceful, fairly agreeable relationship as the two houses were at opposite ends of the village. Taking the asphalted track and going up it two kilometres you reached the village, and their neighbours' house was the first one. It was an amazing house, with a coat-of-arms and everything, but around half the windows were boarded over. There was also a neat kitchen garden: tomatoes, lettuces, onions. Then you had to carry on up the track, going past old, restored houses to the left and the right, going past the church, and then you got to Goio and Garazi's house. The last house in the village. The highest one. There must have been two hundred metres between the two houses. That was enough.

One of those days they would have to go and visit their neighbours. Like in the movies. Introduce themselves and so on. But in the movies the veterans used to go and visit the new people and take them a little something. But their neighbours down there didn't look like the type who would call on somebody and take a box of chocolates or a bottle of wine with them. For the moment their neighbours had only nodded to them from a distance and without showing any curiosity about them.

One of them was a fairly bent-over man. Early each morning he would go into the hills carrying a hoe or a scythe. Goio had also seen him driving an old Land Rover down the track at an incredible speed. He came back even faster, as if he had difficulty keeping the vehicle under control. He'd come across him from time to time in the housing estate bar too. It was impossible to tell his age, and he was still wearing his work clothes, but his face warned Goio against saying anything to him.

The other person in the house was a young girl who got a taxi every morning, carried a backpack, and didn't come back until the evening. Some weekends they'd see a lad on a bike go up there and then disappear.

That was all. It didn't seem like a large family and, if they were noisy, Goio and Garazi didn't hear anything from their house.

They used to have supper quite early in the kitchen. They ate from a piece of wood nailed to the wall, sitting on stools. The whole kitchen was new and fitted with modern devices. It had been their biggest investment inside the house. Goio thought Garazi was talking more about her work than she had done before. She was capable of monopolising the whole supper talking about environmental norms for ISO 14.001, or describing workmate X's latest muddle. She was an environmental technician at an aeronautical company. A Brazilian company which made plane wings and turbines. She had been there for nearly ten years, and there was no longer anything Goio didn't know about it.

He, on the other hand, had little to tell. He spent all day at home. He used to go for a short walk mid-morning. He also used to go to the bar in the housing estate for a coffee or a patxarana after lunch. The housing estate wasn't very cheerful: there were houses which had not yet been sold, and most of the customers were local farmers who talked about things Goio found difficult to understand, or who played cards without uttering a sound. He used to entertain himself by picking blackberries on the way back home. He never used to talk about the piece he was working on. You don't sing about architecture, do you?, he used to say, paraphrasing whom he remembered not; So I'm not going to talk about art. What's more, it was going slowly, or worse than slowly: he thought he was taking one step forward and two steps backwards. But he thought things weren't serious enough to tell Garazi about them yet. All of sudden somebody knocked on the door as they were eating pudding. They had left the original knocker on it, but there was also an electric bell. Which rang ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Garazi got up, and Goio walked behind her. They weren't used to receiving visits, unlike when they had lived in the city, and it was something astonishing, something they both had to see. The girl had dyed blonde hair. It was the first time they'd seen her up close, and her black roots were as clear as day. She was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and an open anorak. She must have been around sixteen, but her make-up made her look older.

Hi, hello. I'm young neighbour from down there, Joana.

She didn't hold her hand out to them or anything like that. Goio and Garazi didn't know what to say or do. The girl started talking like somebody at a call centre. In spite of the make-up, her eyes were something else. And she knew it.

"So welcome to the village", she said with a wide smile.

"Thank you very much", Garazi finally reacted. "I'm Garazi. And he's Goio."

"Great. I just wanted to tell you that if you ever need anything, looking after your children or whatever, I can help you. I'm a good baby-sitter. I've got experience."

She tried to look into the house through the space between Goio and Garazi.

"Thanks, but we don't have children."

"Ah. You don't have any. I'm good with children, they've always told me that. But, obviously, if you don't have children... Well, I don't know, if you need anything else, cleaning, or help in the garden, here I am. That's all."

"Great. Joana, right?"

"Yes, Joana, that's it. From the house down there. Your neighbour. Do you want one?" She took a packet of cigarettes from her anorak pocket and offered them.

"No thanks."

"And you?" she asked Goio.

"No, not now."

"Ok then, see you later, bye."

She walked off towards the cemetery with her lit cigarette, but they didn't watch her, they went back to the kitchen. Goio was afraid that Garazi would take advantage of the situation to bring up the issue of children.

"How lonely a girl of that age must be in this village."

"I'm here alone all day too. Don't you feel sorry for me?"

"You're grown-up, and you've got a lot of toys to make time go by. By the way, how's your latest piece getting on, the hand?"

"Fine."

"Fine... No more than that?"

"Yeah, fine, no more than that."

"Ok, let's see if you do the washing-up well too."

Goio picked the pudding bowls up without a word and went to the sink. He felt relieved. Garazi was in front of the tv, wrapped in her blanket, and she didn't seem to have any energy left to talk about reproduction. He concentrated on washing up.

One Saturday in November Goio went into his studio and found the disaster. Garazi was still asleep, but his screams and swearing woke her up right away. Everything in the studio was soaked. It had rained non-stop the previous two days and it was still pouring in Goio's studio.

There were puddles everywhere. There were cracks in the ceiling and it sagging in several places. The books which had been elegantly stacked on the floor ever since they had moved in were now completely soaked. Soaked and ruined. He tried his equipment out right away. The coiled cables and extension leads seemed to be dry. The keyboard and computer were fine. Just as well. The books seemed to have been the main victims.

The problem, they were later to find out, was the wood under the tiles. It was rotten through and through. They hadn't achieved anything by changing the tiles. Changing the material beneath made the most sense. Their architect friend told them about a product called Onduline. It was a complete isolator, and even if a tile or two were to break, they'd never have to worry about water again.

It was an expensive piece of work, but they didn't know that on that Saturday morning as Goio took at the books outside to what had once been the kitchen garden, to the lawn which Garazi wanted to turn into a garden. It was a sunny morning, unlike the days before, and they made the most of it to spread all the book out there, on top of the pieces of wood they intended to use soon as chairs and tables, to dry them out. Most of them were books about art, expensive books, large and heavy, even heavier now they were full of water. They'd bought some of them at foreign museums, lugging them back in their suitcases. Often those books had led to Goio having to pay surcharges on their luggage. The books didn't deserve that miserable, rotten end. It was obvious that some of them couldn't be saved, and most of them would be marked for ever. He felt like crying.

Garazi couldn't see the scale of the tragedy, but she hugged him.

In the middle of that hug their neighbour walked past the garden. The man they thought was Joana's father. They still didn't know his name. He was wearing work overalls and was carrying a hoe on his shoulder. As usual, he nodded to them from an appropriate distance but, on seeing the pile of books, he came closer.

"Problems?"

"Yeah, a bloody flood in the attic", Garazi explained.

"That's a problem."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have to change the tiles."

"We'll have to do something, sure."

"If you need any help, you know where I am. I'll give you a better price than anyone else."
And he set off again without another word.

"It seems like that whole family's dying to work for us", Garazi said to Goio when they lost him from sight. "So, shall we go in from breakfast, or do you want to stay out here and look after the books?"

"Let's go in, yeah. But I'm not hungry."

But Joana turned up before they went in.

"Oh no, what's happened?"

She, too, stared at the books. Their varied colours and shapes were unusual flora in that semi-kitchen garden. She told them about the plumber.

"So, if you need any help sorting the roof out, you know... Damn, that's a lot of books! What do you want so many for? Have you read them all? Wow... I burn mine at the end of each year. Mostly because I enjoy it. There, next to the house. Well, this year I haven't been able to as I'm doing fourth year again. It's a bugger. But this year you'll see a hell of a bonfire, no doubts there."

And then she asked them in a different way: "Have you seen my dad?"

"Yes, he's just come by."

"And where was he going? Did you see?"

"Up towards the cemetery."

"Ok."

And then, with a lit cigarette again, as if that were some type of farewell-ritual for her, she set off in the opposite direction in a hurry.

Christmas was soon, but they couldn't do much. At one time they had used to make the most of the Christmas holidays and travel then. They used to spend four or five days in some European city: Berlin, Prague or Rome, and the museums there. Or to one of the Canary isles to take a break.

But their finances were no longer up to that.

The problem with the roof was a mortal blow to their current accounts. This year they were going to have to buy the cheap turrón. They would spend Christmas Eve with Garazi's family, in a noisy house full of children. And New Year's Eve with Goio's father and his wife in a more silent setting.

Goio only had six months left to finish his work. Then he would have a couple of months to get the exhibition ready. It was going to be his first solo exhibition, and he would be pleased if his work were as advanced as it should be. But it wasn't. He'd used up half of the time, but he hadn't done half the work. Not even a quarter of it.

"Don't worry, dear", Garazi used to say to him. "As we're not going anywhere at Christmas you'll be able to work every day. Even so, I've still got some days' holiday left, so I'll probably take four or five days and you'll have me here getting in your way."

"Fine", answered Goio without lifting his eyes from the screen.

Garazi started kissing him on the neck.

"How's that twenty-first century masterpiece coming along?"

"Fine."

She undid the first two buttons on his shirt and started playing with the black hair on his chest. "Are you going to become famous and rich and leave me for a younger girl? Are you going to forget about me and leave me in this god-forsaken village?"

She got down to between his legs without stopping licking his ear, and she tried to open his jeans' buttons, but it wasn't easy.

"Well, I'll have to make the most of you before that happens..."

"Damn, Garazi, I'm working, please."

She didn't understand that even though he was at home, it was still work. Work. A moment which had to be respected. He was never going to turn up at her office and take her bra off. Why couldn't she understand that? Was it all that hard? Was he asking for all that much?

The neighbours could have heard the way Garazi slammed the door behind her.

After Christmas, and as Goio had imagined, Garazi's obsession increased. There were two main reasons for that. Garazi's birthday in January and Lorea's, Garazi's sister's. Although she was two years younger than Garazi, she already had two children. A girl and a boy, a charming pair. What's more, and as she had announced at New Year's Day lunch, she was hoping for a third. Lorea's husband didn't look happy about it, and Goio couldn't imagine him with the minimum enthusiasm you needed to have a child. But the evidence was there for all to see, crying all over the sofa, making aunt Garazi look through the whole photo album. They must have had a pretty empty life, Goio imagined. Otherwise, he couldn't imagine the need to fill their lives up with children at such a young age and leave everything else to one side.

"Thirty-four years old, I can't believe it"... There were a couple of days left before Garazi's birthday and her moaning began.

As it happened every year, Goio knew full well how things were going to go. He would have to give her a good present this year. The problem was that they only had the one car. That meant he'd have to go to the city with Garazi and waste the whole day there, get bored in the shops and then wait for her and get even more bored. He felt overcome by tedium each time he saw the need to go to the city; he could very happily spend a fortnight without moving from the village.

"My only consolation is that maybe on my next birthday there'll be three of us in this house."
"What are you after, a dog? There's no need for us to wait 'till your next birthday for that."

"Goio, you told me the joke about the dog last year too."

"Yeah, but now we live in a remote village, and a dog would be much happier here. And it would keep me company while you're at work."

"Goio. I'm serious. I don't think we should wait much longer. Time's against us."

"Garazi, right now I can't even think about things like that. I have to finish my project, get the exhibition ready, and..."

"But you have to go back to work in June, and everything will be much better organised then."

"Well, I don't know... Maybe it's too soon for me to go back to work. We'll have to see how the exhibition goes. Maybe I'll manage to sell something big, and then another exhibition..."

"What? Goio, that isn't what we agreed."

"As far as I know we didn't agree anything. We'll have to take things as they come, won't we?"

"And how are things coming, Goio? I mean, what planet are you on? You can't play around at being a Bohemian artist any more. You're not twenty any more."

"Playing around? Who's playing around? I don't think I've said anything weird. The grant isn't a fantasy, they're actually making a commitment to me, and to the future too..."

"Yeah, that bloody grant; you saw the way they looked at you in the bank when you brought that up. And remember it was a grant for young artists, and you only just got to be a candidate."

"You think I don't deserve it, I'm not worth anything."

"No melodramas, please. I didn't say anything about your work, your talent or anything like that. It's nothing to do with that. I'm just asking you to think about things in a realistic way."

"Realism? Because you want a child I have to rot in an office from Monday to Friday in complete realism?"

"I'm sorry, but that's what I do every day, and it's thanks to that we've got this house, amongst other things."

"You want to blame me for living off you, is that it? As far as I know, until now we've always paid for things half and half."

"Yeah, but for how long? Your grant's going to dry up soon, and you've just told me you've no intention of going back to work..."

"I didn't say..."

"And, in fact, I thought you wanted children too. Am I the only one who wants that now, then?"

When the bell rang they realised that they were shouting their heads off. They took a breath and lowered the volume. Who on earth was that? It was nearly midnight. Midnight in winter. There was nothing moving outside. Nor inside either.

The girl was there in her usual anorak. But her tears had made her eye-liner run and given her bags under her eyes. She was shivering.

"Can I come in?"

There was a cold wind, and they hurried her into the house. Once she got onto the carpet she started crying. Garazi and Goio looked at each other, embarrassed. Garazi scratched her ear as she did when she didn't know what to do. Eventually Goio nodded towards the kitchen and Garazi led the girl there, her arm over her shoulder.

"Easy, Joana, don't cry, tell us what's happened..."

But the girl said nothing, just cried, then sobbed. Her green eyes were more brilliant than ever.

"I'll make you hot chocolate, ok?"

The three of them sat around the table. The girl stopped sobbing and took a sip of the hot chocolate. But she said nothing.

"Has something happened at home?"

Garazi measured her words out carefully. It seemed to her that the bag under Joana's eyes were getting deeper.

"Has something happened to your dad?"

The girl started crying again as soon as she heard her father mentioned. Then she took her anorak off and her left shoulder was bare. There were five red cigarette burns on it; they formed a circle. She hid her shoulder right away and took a long drink of hot chocolate.

"Did your dad do that to you?"

The girl didn't answer. She drew her head further down between her shoulders.

"Tell us, Joana, did he do that to you?"

Just when it seemed she wasn't going to say anything, she astonished them by saying clearly and calmly:

"Can I stay and spend the night here?"

Goio and Garazi were astonished. It was difficult. On the one hand, who could refuse to take an unprotected girl in, even more so knowing that she was being threatened by a psychopathic relative in the area? On the other hand, she was under-age and it would be easy enough for her father to claim her back in no uncertain terms, or accuse them of kidnapping her, why not. Garazi was sure they should take the girl in, and she tried to convince Goio in the sitting room,

leaving Joana alone in the kitchen for a moment.

"Nothing can happen because of a single night. We'll try to clear things up tomorrow."

"Ok, fine, but don't go and say it was my idea."

They went back to the kitchen. There was no hot chocolate left in the mug.

"Come along, Joana, we'll open up the sofa in the sitting room for you", Garazi said to her softly, "And I lend you some pyjamas."

She could have stayed in the children's room too, but that was too close to their bedroom. The sofa-bed seemed like a compromise to them.

It was one o'clock by the time they went to bed. The alarm clock was going to go off six hours later. Even so, they couldn't get to sleep. They were both listening carefully, try to hear any sounds that might come up from downstairs, from the sitting room. But there wasn't a sound. They tried to reassure each other by saying that everything would be cleared up the following day. Finally Garazi dropped off and Goio, in synch with her breathing, followed her shortly afterwards.

The next morning after her shower and getting dressed, Garazi went down for breakfast but found nobody there. The sofa-bed had been closed; the sheets, rolled up into a ball, were on top of it. Her pink pyjamas had been folded and left on a chair. She had a cup of tea and drove away; she was a bit late. She didn't see anything special when she drove past Joana's house.

They thought it was best to leave things as they were. They tried to forget what had happened that night, to not see it as something important. It could have been a typical row between parents and adolescents, nothing more than that. And who was to say that the father really had made those cigarette burns? Joana hadn't said that specifically. Everything seemed peaceful in the house down there. They saw Joana on her way to and from school, as usual. The father carried on with his routine, going to the field to work and who knows where in his Land Rover.

What's more, their main concern was Garazi's birthday party. It was going to be quite something. For many of their friends it was going to be the first time they'd seen the house finished and tidy. Garazi's workmates were going to come too. Altogether there would be thirty of them on Saturday. Almost all of them were healthy, happy, childless young people.

Garazi shined in a special way on her day. Goio hadn't seen her look so happy for a long time.

She looked beautiful too; she'd gone to the hairdressers in the morning, and she was giving a pretty shirt its first outing. They spent the whole afternoon getting the nibbles ready and putting all the bottles, which had hardly fit in the car, around the sitting room, the kitchen and the porch.

Friends who didn't want to drive after having too much to drink would be able to sleep over. Some of them had brought inflatable mattresses with them to that end. And presents too. Then there were toasts. They concentrated hard on eating and drinking. Thinking their guests would like it, they lit a fine fire in the chimney they never used. Somebody acted as DJ, and there was music to everyone's taste. The liveliest people started dancing. Some people smoked joints in the porch, and, later on, in the kitchen; it was too cold to be outside. After Garazi had blown out all the candles on the cake – there weren't thirty-four of them; she'd stopped buying new candles when she hit thirty – she opened a bottle of cava and gave all the guests a tiny drop.

“Happy Birthday, Garazi.”

There was a glass waiting to be filled, Garazi didn't know whose it was, but that voice made her look up.

"Ah, Joana, you're here."

"Yes, I've come to say thank you for the other day, that's all... And one of your friends opened the door to me. I didn't know you were having a party. He's really nice that friend of yours, I think he's called Ander..."

"Are you ok? I mean... Any problems at home?"

"No, no, I'm fine, but I thought I'd stay here a bit longer, that's all. Hey, you've got a great atmosphere here!"

"And does your dad know you're here?"

"He's not at home, he's gone drinking. Aren't you going to give me a little champagne?"

Garazi wasn't sure. She was talking to an under-age girl. Finally she decided to give Joana a little, and then she went to find Goio and tell him to say no to people asking for more cava.

"Goio, have you seen who's turned up?"

"Our neighbour, you mean? Yes, I saw her eating some omelette. I thought you'd invited her,

you were so welcoming to her the other day..."

"Why would I invite her? She saw something was going on and just barged in. And what are you going to do, throw her out?"

"I thought you were going to."

"Have you gone mad? I don't want any bad vibes. As far as I'm concerned she can stay. She isn't a nuisance."

They looked over at Joana on the other side of the room. Having finished her drop of cava, she was filling her glass from a bottle which looked like rum.

"She's come to get drunk, can't you see? Goio, we've got to do something."

But Goio had started singing with one of his old friends, and Garazi realised there was nothing she could do. Joana was talking at ease with two of her workmates, who were laughing at something she was saying, and Garazi decided that she, too, was going to have a bit of fun. After all, it was her birthday. She opened another bottle of cava and poured herself the first glass; she deserved it.

The next day she and Goio woke up ready to compete for the title Worst Hangover in History award. Garazi warned that she couldn't get up, but ten seconds after that she had to run to the bathroom. Goio missed being eighteen, the far-off times when after drinking the most colourful of mixtures he used to get up fresh and content.

They didn't know who had slept over in the end. They couldn't remember the end of the party. Goio went into the children's room and saw two big lads there, his old friends, on the bed that was there instead of a cradle. They were both snoring and Goio looked down at his swollen belly; that was new. Then he went downstairs and found four people in the sitting room surrounded by loads of bottles and glasses. There was a couple in sleeping bags on a badly inflated mattress on the floor. Another on the sofa-bed, without any sheets, coats instead of blankets, spread out any old way. But he didn't recognise them at first. The man was one of Garazi's workmates – her boss, in fact – but Garazi got on well with him; too well, Goio thought. The girl... the girl was Joana. He had to move the hair from her face to be completely sure. She was wearing the same clothes she had on during the party.

"But what the hell...?" murmured Goio.

None of the four sleepers woke up, and Goio went upstairs to give Garazi his report.

"What? She slept here? Where?"

"On the sofa-bed with Eduardo."

"In the same bed as Eduardo?"

She spoke without opening her eyes, a hand on her forehead, on the bed once more. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Goio, I feel really bad, I've thrown up twice... For the moment, why don't you make me a cup of tea?"

He would have loved to go back to bed, but he thought it was a good idea to make a bit of noise, wake all the sleepers up so they could all go back to their homes. One of the sleepers in particular.

He got things ready in the kitchen, moving the cups around without any consideration, and shouted from the sitting-room door:

"Breakfast's ready!"

That wasn't wholly true: there was only tea and coffee, there being nothing left to eat. While he made the coffee he started to remember that about five in the morning, when the party was winding down, he and Jokin had gone into the kitchen and started eating sponge cake and biscuits until there were none left. Bread too, which had been sliced for the nibbles. Just coffee and bread, so they can like it or lump it.

The couple on the inflatable mattress woke up right away – two classmates from Garazi's engineering school – both of them complaining about back-aches. Eduardo took longer; he mumbled something, looked around him, disorientated, and then Joana woke up. Only the people from upstairs were missing, including Garazi. But Goio decided to take things step by step. The four people there should leave as soon as possible, and then they'd see.

Joana didn't look at him or say anything. She sat down at the kitchen table she already knew and began sipping coffee while she removed her eye make-up with a paper handkerchief. Eduardo sat down next to her, but didn't seem to know her at all. Although his eyes were open, he hadn't woken up yet.

"Oh, what a party..." she said finally. "When are we going to do it again?"

"Joana, does your father know you're here?"

"Don't worry, he's used to it."

She took a long sip to say that she didn't fancy adding anything to that. The other guests too started drinking their potions in silence, unworried by there being nothing to eat. The people from upstairs came down too and, little by little, they all left.

Garazi, though, was still in bed.

"They've all left."

"Our little girl too?"

"Yes, she's gone too."

"I'll make lunch and then we'll have a siesta, ok?"

"Do what you want, I can't eat anything"

"Garazi, at your age you should be in control a bit more."

"Piss off."

Garazi's hangover lasted until the Wednesday. On the Monday she spoke with Eduardo about the party superficially, reminding each other of some silly anecdotes, but he didn't say anything to her about Joana. Finally Garazi reached the conclusion that they had slept together by chance; both of them drunk and tired, they come across the sofa and seen there was space for both of them. Eduardo was a confirmed womaniser, that was well known, but he wouldn't dare with a sixteen year old girl. Even less so in Garazi's house.

Early on Friday morning it started snowing and it didn't stop all day. By the afternoon a lot of roads were blocked, including the one to Garazi's house. She called Goio and told him she would stay at Maria's. Maria was her architect friend, the one who'd helped them with the work on the house. She lived alone and liked getting visits.

It was the first night Goio had spend alone in the house. He decided to make the most he could of it. Enjoying a bachelor's lifestyle, that was all he was going to do. He had very seldom lived

alone. He had lived in a shared flat when he was a student, then gone back to his parents' house – his mother was ill by then, and he had felt obliged to an extent – and from there he went straight to living with Garazi. Although he didn't regret that, he did sometimes think that he had gone to live with her too soon – he had been twenty-six – and not having tried any other lifestyles made him curious.

So what does a man who lives alone do after work, after having supper and washing the dishes, when it's snowing outside? He thought about making a drink. There was still patxarana, bourbon and wine left over from the party, which was astonishing bearing in mind everything they had drunk then. He chose the second. Being a Friday, and being in the city, he thought Garazi would make the most of it and go out; as long as she had made a full recovery by now. She would go out with Maria, wearing the right type of clothes she'd lent her for the night. Maria loved going out. She never passed up the opportunity to meet men.

After pouring a lot into the glass, without any ice, he proposed a toast to himself. His eyes watered up, but he wanted to hide that fact from himself. Then he put in a couple of ice cubes. On the rocks. He'd had quite a productive week. The first one for a long time. Instead of turning the tv on, he started looking out of the window. It was beginning to snow less. Perhaps by the next day there would be no more than a thin, dirty layer left. Garazi wouldn't have any trouble getting back. They'd be able to get a piece of plastic sheeting and spend the day sliding down slopes.

Finally he couldn't resist the call of the television any further. He zapped from channel to channel at random. He ended up on a local station which he'd never seen and which only just had a signal. There was some pretty rubbish porn on the screen and, beneath that, on a strip of colour, the text messages people were sending in. Messages asking for thick dicks and hot girls, messages offering sex on the phone or in cars. If he were unmarried, would he end up that way too, sending ridiculous messages to a sub-channel like that in the early hours? Just imagining that made him laugh, and he missed Garazi for the first time that night.

That was when he heard the sound of the knocker. He thought it must be the wind and decided not to get up off the sofa, but he heard the knocking again. And, finally, the electric bell rang. He walked slowly to the door and, when he opened it, who knows why, he wasn't at all surprised by what he saw.

"Hi, Goio, can I come in?"

She looked a lot better than she had the last time he had seen her. Her hair combed, well made-up, a red scarf around her neck, and gloves the same colour.

"What's up, Joana? Any problems?"

She didn't answer. She went in and started taking her scarf off. Her gloves too. Then she moved her eyelashes. Her eyes really were worth seeing.

"Great snowfall, isn't it? Where can I leave my anorak? It's wet."

"Give it to me... But what do you need?"

"Where's Garazi? Isn't she home? Or is she asleep already?"

"No, she isn't at home."

The car wasn't in its usual place, and Garazi's absence would be obvious to any decent observer.

"So you're watching tv?"

Goio followed her into the sitting room, took hold of the remote control and turned the tv off as quickly as he could.

"Don't worry, mate, I watch stuff like that from time to time too, mostly to see the messages, some of them really make you laugh, don't they?"

"Joana, if you need anything, say so, I was just about to go to bed, I'm tired."

"You were going to go to bed without finishing that whiskey?"

Goio didn't know what to say, and stared at the glass on the coffee table in front of the sofa. It was still almost full.

"Sorry if I don't offer you one, but you had quite enough to drink on Saturday, didn't you?"

"Quite enough? That wasn't anything, mate!"

"And your dad? Did he find out you spent the night here?"

"Dad, Dad, Dad... Just who cares about him?"

You could see the irritation on her face.

"Have you got problems with him?"

"How could I not have problems with that drunk? Honestly, I can't stand him any more", she said and looked as if she were going to start crying. But Goio didn't see any tears. "But let's forget about that, I don't want to talk about my father. I'm free of him for today."

Joana didn't look like a girl who'd only just managed to escape from a ogre. She had looked good when she had arrived from her house, not a hair out of place, her clothes well chosen. He looked out of the window towards her house. As they had a garage you couldn't tell if the Land Rover was there or not. There weren't any lights on, anyway.

"Don't worry, he's not going to turn up; he fell fast asleep after drinking hard, just like always."

"Look, Joana, I'm not the best person to talk about this. Perhaps you should look for some outside help, speak with a social worker, or a psychologist..."

"All the psychologists can piss off! What do you think? I haven't seen them? Since my mum died all the bloody teachers send me to see the school psychologist. And what's the good? None whatsoever."

She sat down on the sofa while Goio remained standing up. She picked the glass up and started clinking the ice cubes around.

"Are you going to give me a drink now?"

"No." He took the glass out of her hand to remove the temptation. "You're under-age."

"I'll be seventeen next month."

"Exactly, you're under-age. Come here February next year and I'll give you all the whiskey or patxarana you want."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I'll be here next year, but I really appreciate the offer. Putting up with it for a year is too much putting up with it."

Those dark words made Goio sit down next to her. They remained in silence for too long.

"You don't work, do you?"

"Me?"

"Yes. My dad doesn't either. He had an accident years ago and they give him a disability pension. He keeps himself busy in the kitchen garden and some bits of land he has around the cemetery. That and his bottles, of course."

"But I do work. I work at home." Goio felt the need to make that clear.

"At home? Are you the housewife, then?"

Her laughter hurt him in a way he would never admit.

"I'm an artist."

He had never used that term to describe himself before. He used to think it was too much for him. When the savings bank gave him a grant the news was published in the press, and the journalists used the word non-stop: "the artist's project", "the young artist believes that"... Just seeing those words printed next to his name made him blush. But now, as he made the claim to Joana, he did so with pride, with no regrets. She saw the importance of his words too.

"An artist! Fuck! That's why you've got so many books, of course!"

"Yes", Goio answered, confused by that explanation, but at the same time intoxicated by her enthusiasm.

"And what do you do, paint?"

"Sculpture. Digital sculpture."

"Digital?"

"Yes. Instead of modelling things physically, I do it with a computer. Using 3D technology. Modelled in a virtual setting. You can make physical models too using prototype machines..."
Joana looked as if she didn't understand. She seemed to have lost interest all of a sudden. And Goio couldn't let that happen.

"Come with me, I'll show you."

As he put his foot on the first stair Goio had the feeling he was going over an invisible red line. But he went up the stairs with even greater determination. On her way to the stairs Joana lit a

cigarette. "Good thing Garazi isn't here", Goio thought.

"Look, this is my studio."

He thought that she would be completely mesmerised when he opened the door. Perhaps that was why her reaction disappointed him a little.

"Ah. Great."

Goio looked around him, surveying his kingdom. Maybe 3D artists' studios aren't as spectacular as Renaissance artists' studios, but the place did have its own charm, and that had to be obvious to anyone. The books – many of them spoilt, true – were now on shelves. There were aluminium sheet reproductions of some of his pieces of work on the walls. The desk was large and the computer, with its mass of cables and auxiliary devices, looked as if it had come out of a science fiction film. The reflex camera was worth looking at too. And the skull.

"This is the skull I use as a model."

"God, that's revolting. What do you do with that?"

"I model it in the computer. And once I've got the image in three dimensions I can do what I want with it. For instance, what I'm going to do with this skull is an occipital swelling. Look", and he picked up the skull with both hands: "The occipital bones are behind the occipital lobule, and that's where our eyes see images."

There was an in-depth reflection on human adaptation behind that project. Humans adapting to the world. Humanity confronted with the crazy development of society, some of its body parts atrophied and others over-developed. The Lamarckian nightmare. The piece called Hand IV, for instance: the muscles on the index finger are fully developed, enlarged, after spending hours clicking on the computer mouse. Internet and incommunication. A critique of consumer society. A bitter reflection on society in images. All of that was clearly explained in the report he had presented for the grant. But now, with the girl in front of him, he was almost speechless. Perhaps if he showed her all the books on anatomy he had there she would understand everything better.

"What a beautiful camera!" At last something caught her eye. "Take a photo of me, artist!"

His treasure. A Nikon D70, an amazing digital reflex. She put the treasure in his hand and he took a shot without thinking about it twice, a close range shot of her.

"Hey, just a moment! You've taken me by surprise..."

She rested her hands on his work chair and moved her head to one side a little. Then she turned her penetrating eyes towards the camera with no mercy.

"Ok, ready... good to go? And now why not?" Goio said without thinking about it much when he clicked for the second time.

"And once more! Now both of us together!"

And she put her arm over Goio's shoulder. He felt a shiver, he pushed the camera as far away from them as possible and took their photo trying to keep a firm smile.

"Ok, that's done."

"You'll send me a copy of them both, won't you? I'll give you my e-mail; where shall I write it down?"

She started looking for a piece of paper in between his papers and books and he, for the first time, had to admit things had gone too far. But somehow she found something to write on, and a biro too, and she wrote her e-mail address on it in large writing.

"IT class is the only place I can look at my mail, but that'll do."

Goio automatically put the piece of paper in his back pocket. Full stop. Time to finish. Time to go to bed. Each of them to their own bed.

"Hey, Joana, it's late..."

"Yeah, it is, sorry."

Time to change tactics. He was serious now.

"Joana." She tucked a couple of strands of hair which had slipped out of her ponytail behind her ear with two trembling fingers. Then she sat down on the sofa Goio had against the wall, asking for permission with her eyes.

"I know it's late, but I can't go home. I want to leave. Forever. Forever. I'm serious."

"Um... But where are you going to do, Joana?"

"Go to the city. I'm old enough to work. And a friend of mine can get work for me in a clothes

shop."

"But where will you live? You're under-age, they won't let you..."

"I don't care about that now, I have to leave, leave here!"

Her shoulders on her knees and her face between her hands, she was crying, and this time they looked like real tears. "I can't stand it any more, I can't, otherwise I'll end up like my mum..."

Goio tried to keep his distance. His physical distance, but the other one too. Following what was happening from outside it. Outside.

He couldn't; he was inside whether he liked it or not. In spite what he was telling himself to do, finally he sat down next to her, squeezing onto the sofa.

He put his arm lightly around her shoulder, not wanting to put all the weight of his arm on her, just as she had done for the photos. He was going to comfort her, or something like that. Then she lifted her head up and looked deep into his eyes:

"I'll need a little money for the first few days. I'll give it back to you, I promise, once I start working."

He lifted his arm from her shoulders as if her back were suddenly on fire.

"But what are you talking about? You haven't even got a car! How are you going to get there?"

"I've got a friend who's got a bike. He'll come and get me, we're meeting up at two o'clock. He'll take me. But he doesn't have enough money."

"Joana, this is madness. Why don't you wait until tomorrow? Tomorrow, in the light of day, you'll see things a different way, and you'll be able to take sensible decisions."

"No, Goio, I've been planning this for weeks. I've taken the decision. I have to get away, that's all there is to it. There's no going back. Please understand me..."

Although they weren't touching, they were very close and looking at each other, a dry look against a moist one. Colliding. And for a moment, as if under a blue spotlight which had suddenly been turned on, Goio imagined he understood her, and he also imagined giving her everything she wanted, and then he went into her arms until he felt her heartbeat, and he kissed dry all her tears, and kissed her hurt shoulder, and then her other shoulder too. Finally the sofa became a hole, and the hole sucked them both in, drawn in by a force stronger than gravity.

Although he had planned to get up early, it was eleven when he first opened his eyes. As he'd thought the night before, there were only little scraps of snow here and there. Garazi must be about to arrive and he felt he had to get rid of the evidence in an urgent, though unspecified way. But what evidence? Still in his pyjamas, he was going to have to go around the house to remember every detail from last night. He took the bourbon glass to the sink. Later he remembered the piece of paper he'd put into his back pocket and flushed it down the toilet. He felt relieved when it disappeared.

Why was he behaving like a criminal? He didn't have time to answer the question as he heard Garazi driving up to the house.

"Still in your pyjamas, sleepy head?"

She had brought some recently made croissants and Goio thanked her for the whim. She'd spent a quiet night in with Maria at her house; they'd both been very tired and felt like telling each other a lot of things.

"Hey, let's get a sheet of plastic and go and slide down some slopes!" Garazi suggested when they finished breakfast.

Goio didn't feel like that any more, but he said yes to keep her happy. He'd get dressed and then go and find a sheet of plastic from the removal things.

When they were ready to go, Garazi had another idea:

"And bring your camera! It's beautiful out there!"

He went up to the studio to do as Garazi wanted, but his camera wasn't in its usual place on the table. He looked on the sofa. On the nails in the wall. In his papers. In the drawers. Under the table. Not there. On their bedside table, in the wardrobe, in the chest of drawers. Not there. In the children's' room. Not there. In the sitting room, in the kitchen, under the stairs. Not there, there or there.

"What about your camera?" Garazi asked him when he came back empty-handed.

"No battery; I've left it charging up."

"It's always the same; whenever we need it, it lets us down. Ok then, let's go and play."

But Goio wasn't going to enjoy playing at all, however much he pretended otherwise. He had to get his camera back. When on earth had Joana taken it? There was only one moment, he thought: when he told her that he wasn't going to give her any money and they left the studio without saying a word. Goio went first, Joana behind him, walking stiffly, and it was then she'd taken in and had the chance to put it into her bag. Bloody girl. He cursed himself too. If he'd given her twenty Euros perhaps she'd have had enough. But his camera... He needed it for work. He took photos of physical models all the time to have references later on. And he didn't have money to buy a new one, so his only choice was to get it back.

If he had to, he'd call the Civil Guard. That's right.

But before he did that he'd give the girl a chance to reflect, to rectify her mistake, to give back what she'd stolen. Perhaps she'd regret it and give him the camera back right away. Maybe she would. Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe it was already in a pawn shop. But no, it was Saturday and the pawn shops wouldn't be open. With that unfounded idea in mind – what on earth did he know about that type of shop? – he managed to get through the day.

"What's up with you, Goio?" Garazi asked him a couple of times.

"Nothing, why should there be?"

When they got back home they made a few sandwiches for lunch and, before finishing pudding, they got tender, went for each other and made love. The bedroom stove on, they spent the afternoon under the blankets, one of them holding onto the other from behind. Goio forgot about the camera problem, or, at least, it was way back on the list of things in his mind. He whispered tenderly into Garazi's ear:

"Maybe you're right and you should stop taking the pill."

"What?"

"Well, you know, maybe it's the right moment."

"Really?"

Goio didn't know very well why he'd said that, he hadn't thought about it very much, but as soon as he'd said it he was filled with the feeling that they were doing things right, and he didn't have any intention of cutting that feeling off.

"Yes, Garazi, you were right. We'll always have excuses not to do it, and finally we'll run out of

time. So why not now?"

"Really?"

Garazi hadn't been expecting anything like that, which was why she couldn't think of anything to say. She turned around the hug Goio and, at the same time, cry onto his chest.

"Don't cry, you silly thing!"

It was dark outside. Garazi was in the bath, and it looked like she was going to take her time. Goio shouted to her from downstairs that he was going to go out for a walk. He needed a breather. He wrapped up warm and went out. It was a terribly cold night. The plum trees looked frozen. He lit a cigarette hoping it would warm him up. There were no lights on in their neighbours' house. Dark thoughts about the camera rushed back to him. Should he perhaps talk with her father? But was he in any way in control of what his daughter got up to? She could spend the night away from home without any difficulty, she could leave home without any obvious consequences... What could he hope for from a father like that? Would he take Joana by the ear and make her give him the camera back? He'd better not expect that to happen. He'd have to do something himself. And quickly.

At that very moment he heard the sound of an engine. Although he hadn't finished it, he threw the cigarette on the ground and stood on it. From up against the church wall, Goio could see the scene well, using the darkness to protect himself. As he had imagined, it was Joana's friend's motorbike coming up the track and he wasn't alone. He had Joana behind him. The bike stopped in front of the house. Under the porch light. The boy took his helmet off. Like Joana, he had dyed blonde hair, it was very light, almost white. Joana wasn't wearing a helmet, and she got off the bike with elegance. Goio couldn't hear what they were saying because they were speaking quite low, whispering. Suddenly they stopped talking and started kissing. After a couple of moments the boy turned the engine on and left, the helmet hanging from his arm. Joana walked back. She was wearing the same clothes as the day before, carrying the same bag too. Was the camera still in there too? Goio relaxed when she went into the house. What an escape from home that'd been! It hadn't even lasted twenty-four hours. A real escape, that one. He laughed to himself. It was good news for him, excellent, in fact: she hadn't had much time to sell the camera, and still less time to spend the money. What's more, Joana was right there, just forty metres away. They'd soon sort that childish prank out. They'd work it out.

He couldn't feel his feet or his hands, and he kicked the ground a couple of times. Was he going to dare to call at their neighbours' house? Maybe that wasn't the best time. Joana had just arrived, her father was awake. The best thing would be to go to the bar in the housing estate. There wasn't any hurry. The walk there would be good for him, not to mention the glass of

beer he'd have there. And on the way back he'd see what to do.

The bar was packed out, with football on the giant screen. Although he wasn't a fan, he enjoyed watching the match for ten minutes as he drank a beer. From time to time he looked at the fathers with their children; one of them was playing table football with his two young daughters. He wanted to imagine himself doing that. He couldn't. He thought about Garazi as he started off home again. He walked fast, spurred on by the cold. There was hardly any snow left. As he walked past their neighbours' house he decided not to call. It wasn't the right moment. It was late. Tomorrow, in the sunlight... He knew those were no more than cheap excuses, but he really didn't feel up to a fight. He used to put that type of conflict off as long as possible. Finally, of course, he'd have to deal with the situation, there was no alternative to that, but the next day could be the right moment for that.

He dried his feet on the doormat before going into the house and he found Garazi at the sitting room table with a look of horror on her face. She still had her dressing gown on. And the camera was on the table. The beautiful Nikon D70.

"Goio!"

Garazi jumped up from the table and flew into his arms.

"Goio, where've you been? That revolting man came along, our neighbour from down there. When he knocked on the door I thought it was you, I thought you'd forgotten your keys, and I opened up dressed like this, but it wasn't you, it was that old man... And he came in without me asking him to."

"Into the house?" He looked around himself instinctively and tried to calm her down. He sat her down at the table. When they were sitting next to each other he had to resist the temptation to pick the camera up.

"He brought this, Goio, your camera. He said some weird things, I hardly understood him. He was shouting, it was as if he wanted to threaten me. And he stank of rotten wood... It was revolting."

"But what did he tell you? And what's the camera doing here?"

"That's the weirdest thing. From what I understood you'd given it to Joana as a payment or something. He'd told me he'd call the Civil Guard if it went on, can you believe that? And he knew she'd spent some nights here, and you gave her some drinks and that's a crime... He shouted idiotic things like that at me."

"I'm sorry, Garazi, if I'd been here..."

"But the weirdest thing's the camera. You started charging it up yourself this morning, didn't you?"

"Well, I don't know..." He was trying to think on his feet, taking in everything he was hearing.

"But did he have it?"

"Yes, he saw his daughter with it, and she said you'd given it to her."

"I gave it to her? But why would I do that?"

"Yeah, I was astonished too, but how else could she have got hold of it?"

"Well, I don't know. The only thing I can think of is that we left the door open when we went out to slide down the snow this morning. That's the only explanation. Taking advantage that we were fooling around, Joana came into the house and decided to steal something."

"You reckon?"

"Yeah, you were last out."

"But that doesn't make me feel better about it, it's frightening, isn't it? Maybe it's not the first time she's come in. But why would she tell her father you gave it to her?"

"Well, probably because her father caught her with it, and she had to come up with something. She wasn't going to admit she'd stolen it, was she?"

Garazi started to calm down seeing that all the pieces were beginning to come together.

"And what are we going to do now? Are we going to get into trouble because she spent a couple of nights here?"

"I don't think so", Goio said although he wasn't that sure. "What is clear is that we mustn't do it again: we mustn't let that girl in the house again or leave the door open again."

"Yeah, yeah... No doubts there. But it's been really nasty. Me in my dressing down, half naked, and that man with his foul smell saying those things about you... And who knows where you were! Where were you, Goio?"

"I went to the bar in the housing estate to have a beer. But don't worry, darling, it's all over. If he comes back again, I'll be here. And nothing's going to happen, I promise you."

He hugged her until he felt her breathing relax and, then, he tried to talk in a happier way:

"And now I'll make supper. What about some hot vegetable purée, what do you think?"

"Ok, I'm going upstairs to put my pyjamas on."

But she didn't move. Goio went into the kitchen and tried to follow Garazi's movements from there. She was still there, sitting at the table in her dressing gown, thinking about what had happened for the thousandth time. Courgettes, leeks, potatoes and carrots; he lined them all up and started peeling them. Garazi tried to talk in a loud voice:

"Bloody girl. Just imagine her father hadn't caught her: that Joana'd be capable of selling the camera. And that would really have buggered us up: you need it for work. And what it cost you..."

"Yeah, thank goodness! Best not to think about it any more, Garazi."

He was peeling the second potato when he saw her turning the camera on. The knife slipped out of his hand. There wasn't time to do anything. He stared at the vegetables and just imagined Garazi's movements, gestures and reaction. There it would be, in front of her eyes, on the camera's small screen: happy Joana, young Joana with her penetrating gaze, in Goio's studio, with Goio himself, his arm over her shoulder, both of them smiling like old friends.

Well. He should have explained things to her. Yes. No. Garazi would have listened to him. She would have understood. It was understandable, at the end of the day. It wasn't that complicated. A silly little thing. If well explained. Think quickly. Where to start, where to finish. He picked the knife up again and the half-peeled potato. Not a word from the sitting room. The lord of the house was going to have to take a decision. And act quickly. Yes. No.

"What do you prefer, darling? Courgettes or pumpkin?"

Silence once more. Not a sound. The same sound that scratched their eardrums at night.

She chose courgettes.

Swimming

They reached the island at the beginning of August. Everything was as they had remembered it: the huge terrace, the elegant yachts in the harbour, the British tourists' shirts. But that wasn't what concerned them now. Now they needed a chemist's, a doctor on call and swings, and they needed to find the well shaded places before they could start their holidays in peace. They had a small child now.

Fifteen months old, his second summer; he couldn't walk yet.

They had to block off the stairs in the two-storey flat they'd rented as soon as they got there: although he couldn't walk, he could crawl, and at an incredible speed. Temporarily they put a large suitcase there. He made a list – plug covers, mosquito traps, cereals, mineral water, vegetables, meat, fish and fresh fruit – and, while he went out to look for a supermarket, she stayed at home to heat the puré up and try to get the baby to eat it. Then they bathed him – he'd thrown up in the plane and there were still traces of that on his/her chest – put his pyjamas on and waited 'till he fell asleep on his mother's breast.

Then they had supper, shortly after ten, a dried-up pizza, and declared their holidays open.

* * *

"I'm going to go swimming. Can you stay with the little one?" she asked him. Although they were on the beach, she took her swimming cap and goggles.

"Sure, go ahead."

They were making a hole in the sand. The toddler was wearing T-shirt to protect him from ultraviolet rays, he pushed his bonnet off each time he remembered to, and had his cheeks and nose covered in cream.

"Go on!" he said to her when he saw her with her hands on her waist watching the scene under the sun.

Finally, without looking backwards, she got into the sea, slowly but surely. It was August, and the water was still warm. He took his eyes off the child for two seconds to look at his wife's firm buttocks.

She'd kept on going swimming right through her pregnancy, but she hadn't taken any other form of exercise since then. It was worse after she gave birth. They'd forbidden her to take exercise. It was no joke. The operating theatre. Rehab. After more than a year she was starting

to take some gentle exercise once more. Pilates. And swimming now too.

If she was missing top level sports, she never said anything about it. The child was her only concern now. The trips, championships, training, suffering, injuries, diets... That was all behind her now. And, with a little perspective, that has obviously been the moment to have a child: after just missing the Olympics twice, it was going to be very hard at her age to dream about having a third opportunity.

They had a small child now.

And that small child was eating sand.

"Hey, what...? Stop doing that!"

Seeing his eleveses being taken away from him, the child started to cry. He picked him up, rubbed his nose as he often did, but that only seemed to make him angrier.

"Ok, let's go for a walk."

He carried the child towards the sea. He had to turn around twice to pick the bonnet up. The child was afraid of the sound of the waves, and he started crying again.

"Damn, we're a bit tiresome today."

The child, now on his back, started to laugh, amused by the bathers around them.

"Tell me if you see Mum, ok? She's in the water, over there."

But they didn't see her.

He soon grew tired of walking around, and, what's more, he couldn't relax knowing that nobody was looking after their bag. They went back to their towel under the sun. How could he distract his son's attention so he wouldn't eat any more sand? He took a toy out, a plastic octopus. He looked at his watch; it might be time for the little one's lunch. But he'd better wait for his wife for that. He offered the child water. And looked at the time again. He reckoned she'd been in the sea for twenty to twenty-five minutes now. Or maybe a bit more? He tried to pick out her red swimming cap once again amongst all the people playing around in the water. He didn't see her. He was aware that you lost the notion of time when you were in the sea, but she had to be exhausted by now after such a long period without any training. Maybe she was taking a break between the rocks, but if she were, she would know it was time for the child's lunch.

He gave him a biscuit. He covered it in sand and put it in his mouth. There was no way to stop him doing that, and he decided to let him. He stood up and used a hand to shield his eyes. No trace of the red swimming cap. The child was crying now.

"You're hungry, aren't you? Ok, ok, I'll give you lunch."

He put his bib on, took the biscuit covered in sand and saliva away from him and opened the thermo. The child kept his mouth closed: he didn't want any puré, he wanted the biscuit.

He was getting increasingly nervous and he didn't know if that was because of his son or because of his wife. He stood up once more, leaving the child holding the biscuit covered in sand, and tried to see where his wife was. By the time he sat down again, the towel was covered in puré.

* * *

It had been four years since they had met. She had been in his city for a triathlon trial. There was still a chance she might take part in the Olympics, and she didn't have any time for love stories. But he didn't give up. He started visiting her, taking her to her championships, offering her the emotional support she needed.

When she missed her second chance at the Olympics she almost fell into a depression. That was when he asked her to go and live with him. He couldn't leave his city: he'd just taken on responsibility for his father's firm. She, for her part, would be able to set up a sports sponsorship business, which is what she had always had in mind for when she retired. But she wasn't sure. Was that really the right time to retire?

And then she got pregnant. And the child on the way put their lives in order. She moved in with him. They got married without any great ceremony. They came to the island for the first time on their honeymoon. Then, too, she had spent most of her time in the sea.

Although she carried on training gently during her pregnancy, she started to plan her new business. He spent more and more time at the company, only just getting home in time for supper. She went out running, cycled for more than twenty kilometres, and went swimming every day.

The contractions started in the 31st week. That was an end to sport. It was possible she might give birth two months early, and that wasn't at all desirable.

Rest.

Spending loads of time at home alone.

Until the child arrived during the 38th week. After 48 hours of labour. Forsceps. 16 stiches between her legs. A 4-kilo boy.

* * *

He put the boy into his pram, rolled the towel up into the bag, collected everything and tried to walk over the sand, the parasol under his arm. He could hardly hear the boy crying now, there was humming in his ears. He couldn't be sure, but he thought three quarters of an hour had gone by since she'd gone for her swim. Maybe an hour. That's what he explained to the lifeguard with a pierced nose and blond hair. A voice which wasn't his own described her appearance and clothes. The blond guy spoke into his walkie-talkie and asked him to wait in the lifeguards' shack. He didn't say no. Pulling the pram, the parasol under his arm, he was covered in sweat when he got there. The lifeguards were talking nervously outside. Movement. Another man came in and offered him water. Tried to calm him down. He pointed to an orange dingy, said they were looking for his wife.

Then they were left alone again, abandoned. He gave his son another biscuit; he didn't have anything else. He couldn't offer him a breast. But the boy was happy all the same, playing in the midst of all the commotion.

Another lifeguard came in, an older one, the beach supervisor, he said. He found it hard to follow what he was saying. He mentioned protocols and helicopter assistance.

"You want to go home, don't you? We'll call you when we know something, don't worry about that. Do you want us to take you home? No? Sure about that?"

Yes, he was sure. He put the boy into his pram again and, with the parasol under his arm, went to their hire car without looking at the sea.

* * *

He thought of himself as a decisive person, somebody used to working under pressure. But that afternoon when he got back to the apartment, and the hungry child started crying for the thousandth time, he stood still in the middle of the kitchen unable to know what to do next. The boy was pulling at his sandal wanting to come up, but he didn't move, he didn't even look at his son.

He called out to his wife as if she were on the floor above, and suddenly he realised he could

easily lose his mind. He had to get moving. For the child. He took him in his arms and gave him a little water. Out of habit he gave him tap water even though they'd agreed to only give him bottled water on the island.

They hadn't agreed that. She'd decided and he'd accepted. They always did it like that. She decided and he confirmed that he'd understood. Fish, twice a week. Okay. Sterilize the dummy once a week. Okay. Don't hold our son by his arms, he'll start walking when he's ready to. Okay. For self-esteem, it's better to carry him on our backs than push him in the pram. Okay. Let's avoid sexist tales. Okay. We'll let him play around with food using his hands. Okay.

Finally, she was the only one who fulfilled those multiple commandments with her triathlete's discipline because he was spending more and more time at the company. At weekends he felt like a complete amateur, letting her do everything, looking at him in the hope that he'd learn sometime.

The boy took a long drink. Good. Now he'd have to give him something to eat. But he'd have to make the puré: his wife didn't approve of the stuff for sale at the chemists. He peeled a pear and left it on the tray. It must have been 28 degrees inside the flat. The child sucked on two pieces with a lot of enthusiasm, and then threw it all up, the water and the pear. Would that be because of it had been tap water? Or had he been unwell before that, since throwing up on the plane?

He took the child down from the high chair, cleaned the sick up, gave him some water from a bottle, changed his nappy, changed his clothes, looked for the thermometer, put it under his arm, picked it up from the floor, put it under this arm again, hunted up some cartoons on the tv, kept the child's arms still for seven minutes and put up with his screams, and finally saw: 37.6°. That wasn't a lot. Or was it?

And then the phone he'd left on the piece of furniture by the door did the most amazing thing: it rang. So there was going to be some news. With the hot child in his arms he ran to it.

Was he ready? Yes. No. He slowed down. Was he going to dare to answer? Yes. No. When his trembling hand was close to the phone, he saw a note, a yellow post-it, a message of love, her squarish writing, a heart in blue ink.

She often did that, leaving love notes on the mirror in the bathroom, on the door. He liked that. But she stopped doing it when the child was born: no time. And precisely today she'd thought of doing it again, deceptively leaving that note before closing the door, writing in plural this time: I love you both. The first time.

Coincidence. No. Yes.

Premonition. Yes. No.

Premeditation. No. Yes.

Time stood still. The phone kept on ringing. That horrible ring-tone. But he wasn't in a hurry. What for? He could well foresee what they were going to say to him: there was no trace of his wife, they'd carry on searching, the helicopter was on its way, the police would be with him soon.

He looked at his son, saw his red eyes, he looked down, he must be dehydrated, hungry and unwell.

He had a lot of work ahead of him.

Party Guests

Patricia and MJ are getting supper ready in the kitchen. Although they live in the same house, they haven't seen each other all day. A miracle! Patricia would say. They each have their own timetables, their own fixed biorhythms, that's why it's a miracle, and this is the one moment of the day those fixed biorhythms of theirs coincide, the time when they get supper ready and eat it together.

Patricia prefers to work mornings. She gets up at seven, squeezes the juice from a couple of oranges, pours a little vodka into the glass, and that's how her day starts. A good drink. A proper drink. If it's a productive day she won't have any more vodka until the evening, she'll spend the hours in the whirlwind of work, the world, hell and the bottle of vodka forgotten. But on days which aren't so good she'll hit the bottle a lot in her search for inspiration. On those days she sneaks to the drinks cabinet hoping MJ won't realise. But MJ usually does realise. Obviously. She quickly identifies Patricia's guilty steps and the cowardly way she pours out a few drops. She doesn't like it, but she's more or less got used to it.

MJ prefers the afternoon: after lunch is her best moment. So she uses the morning for relaxing, situating herself, as she puts it. She drives to New Hope every morning in that clumsy black 1948 Ford and buys The New York Times in the recently awoken town. She'll have a coffee at the smart café on Main Street and read all the news in detail. She underlines the strangest pieces of news to show to Patricia later, for them both to talk about them. If it weren't for that Patricia wouldn't hear about anything; she's started to get too used to the isolation of Pennsylvania. MJ goes back home at lunchtime. She normally has a sandwich, no more than that, and then gets stuck into her work for five hours or so, designing furniture while Patricia finishes off her working day. If she were able to make money by designing furniture she wouldn't write another book, she usually says, with a serious expression on her face while she looks through her notebook. But nobody believes her, least of all Patricia herself.

They're both writers, and lovers, and women. MJ writes books for children and younger readers mostly. She makes good money, but she isn't as famous as Pat. Because you can say Pat's famous. A celebrity. The great Alfred Hitchcock's adapted one of her novels for the cinema. A second one's being made into a film. A Frenchman's going to direct this one, René Something-or-Another. In Europe, Pat says when she's had too much to drink, they stop me on the street and ask for my autograph. I'm a prestigious writer in Europe, I really am. They organize conferences about me in European universities. But in this damn country she'll always be that strange woman who inspired that Hitchcock movie.

They're making cabbage salad for supper; it's easy and practical. With Modena vinegar. A luxury at the time. It's early summer in 1961. John F. Kennedy's the new president of the United States. Patricia doesn't like that Irishman, she doesn't trust his eyes.

"Do you miss New York?" MJ asks Patricia while she choose the right knife from the drawer. "No way", she replies, taking no time to think about it.

"I don't either", says MJ, but she doesn't sound very convinced as she looks at the shiny blade.

They're slicing the garlic now. Patricia puts her fingers up to her girl's nose. MJ, without thinking about it, puts Patricia's fingers in her mouth. She licks them with pleasure. She likes garlic. And her girl's fingers too. Then they kiss. Softly at first, then with more strength. Neither of them wants the kissing to go too far, they're both hungry, after all, but they enjoy it like that. Patricia strokes her hip. She draws circles on her trousers, near her behind. MJ can't resist it and bites Patricia's lower lip. She doesn't complain. They're both breathing heavily now.

They don't know how long they spend like that, licking each other, unable to get the smell of garlic out of their noses. Until a noise takes them from their sweet solitude. A noise from outside. A noise which means that something has broken. They move apart and, without saying anything, look towards where the noise has come from. They see Jimmy's reddened face on the other side of the kitchen window, his eyes as wide open as they can be. Poor Jimmy. He's knocked a flowerpot over and broken it, and even so he can't move. There he is looking at the two women, with a look between incredulity and fear on his face, his feet dirtied by the soil. Patricia holds out her hand to greet him, friendly, her right hand still on MJ's waist. Now the child does react and, without returning Patricia's greeting, he moves away from the window, running fast along the path to the road.

"Mum, Mum, there are two women kissing! Why, Mum, why?" Patricia is saying, imitating the boy's shrill voice, and she starts to take plates and glasses from the small wardrobe over the sink calmly.

MJ has turned white. She doesn't move. Seeing the boy had startled her too. She hadn't expected it. Not in that solitary place, far from any neighbours, in the last county in Pennsylvania. In her own kitchen, in fact, through her own private window. But that's what's happened. It had happened to her before. When she was younger. In her old apartment in New York: she gave her then girlfriend, a thin nurse from a Manhattan hospital, a kiss at the door to the flat and a foul, noisy old woman who lived on the second floor caught them. From then on whenever the old woman saw them she'd lift her stick up into the air and swear at them in Greek. They couldn't understand her, but she seemed to be angry. They didn't care then; they laughed at the old Greek woman's curses. But today's been different. Completely different. Jimmy's different. A little child, no more than that. A happy little child, well-behaved. His nose is covered in freckles and he spends all day playing baseball. He's innocent. Maybe he reads her books, or they read them to him, before he goes to sleep, the story about the panda who learns how to swim, maybe, or the nosey butterfly. He'll be scared. Poor kid.

"We've given him a trauma, haven't we?" Pat finds things like that fun.

"It's not funny, not at all", MJ says with emphasis. "We've frightened the boy. Maybe I should speak with him."

"Speak with him? So you're going to tell him about the irresistible attraction you feel for me?"

"No, but..."

"Traum und Trauma", Patricia says histrionically, one of those German expressions she comes out with, a signal that the subject's over.

MJ doesn't know what to say, not to Patricia, not to Jimmy either. But she's jumbled up. She hardly speaks during supper. Patricia, on the other hand, seems to have forgotten all about it by the time they have their first glass of white wine. She talks with enthusiasm about some friends who are going to visit them that weekend. A psychiatrist and her husband. Nice people who live in the city. Europeans, of course. We haven't seen them since March. "We all had supper at that Spanish restaurant, do you remember? You've got to remember that paella." MJ finds it hard to follow Pat's words. She can't help thinking about little Jimmy. He must be around eight. Maybe seven. He's the grandson of the farming couple who live this side of the crossroads, Mr and Mrs Stackhouse; he spends the summers with them. Where is Jimmy now? In his grandparents' arms? In a dark corner in his bedroom? What is he thinking about? What is he saying?

MJ comes across him every day either on the way to the town or on the way back. They have an unspoken appointment every morning, and neither of them misses it. Jimmy's usually in the garden in front of the house playing baseball with his grandad or tending his shop. Jimmy's a fine shopkeeper. He puts a cardboard box by the side of the road and sells all sorts of stuff there. Pebbles he's picked up from the path, rather clumsy figures he makes using toothpicks, maybe with grandma's help, lemon juice poured into small paper cups. As MJ drives past him she usually hoots her horn at him, and he holds his hand up to greet her. Usually MJ takes pity on him, stops the cars and goes up to the little boy's improvised shop to acquire whatever it is he's selling that day. In fact, it's a solitary route into New Hope and the lack of potential customers is a serious problem for Jimmy's business. Which is why MJ, his favourite customer, has the back seat of her old Ford covered in paper birds, little sharks and coloured stones.

"What have you got today, Jimmy?"

"I've painted some stones today! Twenty cents, miss."

"Bed?" says Patricia when they finish the bottle of wine they'd got half way through at supper. "Let's go", says MJ, and they get up from the sofa at the same time.

The next day the first thing MJ does is to clear up the flowerpot which Jimmy had broken. She'd completely forgotten about it the night before. She puts it all into the bin: pieces of pottery, black soil and the aged geranium which had lived there. She sweeps up and clears almost everything up. She starts her old Ford up and heads for Jimmy's grandparents'. She knocks firmly on the red door after parking clumsily.

"Good morning, Mrs Stackhouse, is Jimmy at home?" she asks the grey-haired woman, Jimmy's grandmother, who opens the door.

"He's still in bed; he was very tired yesterday and I haven't woken him up yet." MJ is examining the woman's eyes, looking for fear or disgust, but the woman smiles like always. "Can I help you, miss? Jimmy hasn't been naughty around your house, has he?"

"No, no, it's not that. Your Jimmy's very well-behaved indeed. I wanted to give him a present, that's all..." MJ starts looking in her bag: "One of my little stories, I think he'll like it."

"Manda Panda wants to go swimming" the grandmother read slowly, quickly and like somebody who learned to read a long time ago, holding onto the book MJ's giving her. "Thank you, miss, there's no need, really..."

"If he likes it I'll bring him another one some other day", MJ interrupted her.

"Well, I don't know what to say..."

"Don't say anything, ma'am, and say hi to Jimmy from me!"

"And a good morning to you too."

By the time Jimmy's grandmother's closed the door MJ's back in her car. She takes a deep breath. Turns the radio on. The grandmother doesn't know anything. It's obvious she doesn't know a thing. She hasn't heard about what had taken place in the kitchen. Jimmy hasn't said a word. He'd kept quiet when he got home last night, and gone to bed without saying a word. Telling himself again and again it had been a dream. Already convinced of it. Or not? Does his old grandma know everything, and that's why she's keeping him hidden, saying he's still in bed? Wanting to keep her Jimmy far away from those degenerates, naturally. That's quite possible. She saw MJ's Ford and tucked the boy into his bedroom. Still here 'till the car's gone. I said keep still, Jimmy.

But the woman had been polite during the short conversation she'd had with MJ, a smile on her face all the time. Was Jimmy's grandmother a good actress? One of those people who always want to keep up appearances whatever happens? But why would she need to cover things up? Why be polite when all she felt was hate and contempt?

MJ spends the morning asking herself that and similar questions, she hardly touches her coffee, and she hardly takes in the news of the day and the opinion pieces. The New York Times doesn't awaken her curiosity. New York has seemed a long way off to her ever since she got here. Then she buys three kilos of bananas and doesn't remember the rest of the food she has to buy.

When Patricia goes into the kitchen in the afternoon she finds MJ there, busy at work and with her apron on.

"Let me guess; you're making banana pie. No way!"

MJ nods and gives her a wide smile; she is making that pie she hasn't made for so long and which Patricia loves so much. She's got flour on her nose and Patricia doesn't say anything, she likes her like that, that childlike touch.

"Banana pie...", she says to herself. "We've got to celebrate this."

Patricia takes a lot of care mixing two Martinis while MJ turns the oven on. Pat finds something to celebrate almost every day, and there's nothing like drinking a great Martini to celebrate things. They going to have cabbage salad again today as there's nothing else in, but pudding's going to be colossal: banana pie, MJ's speciality, and Pat's favourite dessert.

MJ stays in bed the following morning. She isn't asleep, or tired either, but she feels very lazy, as lazy as the sun so reluctant to come out from behind the clouds. She can hear the calming tack-tack-tack of Patricia's old Underwood coming from the studio. Pat's having a good day, one of those days when the tack-tack-tack never stops. MJ isn't, that much is clear. She's half-way through the story about the kitten who wants to be a lion, and the kitten's not going anywhere. If she could she'd drown that prissy kitten in a puddle. That would be an exciting end... and a surprise. If she dared she'd ask Patricia for help. What can I do with this kitten, Pat? Show her what she's written so far and wait for her opinion. But she isn't as daring as that. Patricia never talks to her about the book she's working on; still less does she ask for her advice. But, of course, Patricia's a celebrity, the highly respected woman who inspired a Hitchcock film, and not a clumsy scribe who writes about cowardly kittens.

Finally she gets up and leaves the house without saying anything. But she goes to the kitchen before she goes out. Half of the pie is left over from the night before, and not because they'd

not eaten much: she'd deliberately made a huge pie. She covers it up with a clean cloth and puts the tasty package on the driver's seat. Then she heads towards New Hope.

"Here again!" This time the grandmother doesn't hide her surprise.

"Good morning, ma'am. Is Jimmy awake?" She's arrived two hours later today, so she won't believe her if she says he's still in bed, and her worst suspicions will be confirmed.

"He's inside doing his writing exercises. How can I help you?"

Writing exercises, right. Jimmy spends all day outside wandering around with his baseball bat and his roller skates. And just today, by coincidence, the hard-working boy's doing his homework.

"I've brought a pie. It's for you too. And for your husband, natural banana pie." MJ holds the plate with the cloth over it out to her.

"Banana pie! Jimmy's going to love that. He'll be really happy; I'll tell him you've brought it. Thank you very much, miss."

She doesn't give MJ time to say anything, closing the door in her face. What a strange attitude. Hot and cold. Smiling but somewhat bitter too. And should she believe that thing about the writing exercises? Freckled Jimmy getting better with his pen? She finds it hard to imagine, hard to imagine that boy staying still.

She's sad and gloomy as she drives to the town. The relationship he had with Jimmy has been spoilt, she sees that clearly now. And hey, she did used to like his lemon juice, his freckles and toothless smile. And that's if things don't get even worse. If the news doesn't spread all over the county. If people don't start looking at them with distrust. Out of the corner of their eyes and untrusting. She's familiar with looks like that. The man who sells her the newspaper, the farmer who brings them milk to the house, the fat woman who makes her coffee and sausages at the café, Jimmy himself, his grandparents. They won't leave town because of that, no way. They'd left New York because they wanted a peaceful life. A life without Greek neighbours, for example. Not having to wear a skirt to be let into restaurants. Not having to hide in small bars in the Village anymore.

But things always get complicated. Always. It's the story of her life, and there's nothing she can do about it. There are always evil, mistrusting looks. In New York, Pennsylvania... everywhere. She parks in front of the clothes shop and gets out of the Ford with the long list Patricia had given her in her hand.

Patricia's been in the kitchen since three o'clock, working hard to get supper ready. She wants it to be a special supper. They've had a lot of visits since they moved to the country, normally people who drive from the city, and they always try to make a great supper, an unforgettable one. As if to prove that they aren't becoming hermits. Their social skills are just the same as ever, just look. The visit today is from a British married couple, the woman's a psychiatrist, the man, a lawyer. Liberal folk. Friends of Patricia's and acquaintances of MJ's. Patricia has friends everywhere, and she invites them all to supper. Other writers, actors, doctors, journalists, chefs. What's more, she's incredibly skilled at turning her former lovers into friends, and they often visit for a whole weekend, amongst others "a crazy affair in the summer of fifty-three" and "that blonde with small breasts who was mad about me".

MJ doesn't get jealous then, but she'd like to do what Patricia does. Keep in touch with her former lovers, invite them for supper and so on. That dumb nurse, for instance. It's been two years since she last heard from her.

Laura and her husband arrive at seven wearing the clothes they wear to go to the hills, which only puts on show their urban origins and desire to fit in with the place and the atmosphere. They inspect the house as it's the first time they've been there, then they praise the garden and, finally, sit on the porch and drink four Martinis.

"This is paradise, we're going crazy living in New York", says Laura with her first sip.

"I've often said we should go back to England, fix up our house in Surrey and...", her husband says softly and slowly, as if afraid, and his British accent is almost comical.

"Surrey! The last straw. And spend my time psychoanalysing cows?"

They're an unusual couple. Laura has a man's shoulders, wide and muscular. Her baritone voice can fill any room. Her husband, Peter, is smallish, slim, and his voice is suave, as if he didn't wish to awake the child they don't have. Laura always seems to be worried, and Peter consoles her. Laura isn't satisfied by anything. Peter looks at the world with gratitude.

"Flies, flies, flies everywhere. If there's one good thing about New York, that's it: there aren't any flies, none at all."

They go through to the sitting room and Patricia serves them skilfully. Fish soup for starters.

"It's really fresh; where do you get the salmon from, Pat?"

"Ah, Italy; still made about that country, are you?" Strawberry pudding to finish.

"Wonderful. What can I say."

And wine; lots of wine. Laura seems to be the only woman who can drink more than Patricia can. Or at least that's what MJ thinks. They're about to open their sixth bottle when they go back to the porch after supper. Bearing in mind that Peter doesn't drink, that's quite something.

"Have you heard the latest?" By pudding it seemed as if Laura was only speaking for Patricia. Peter and MJ were limited to following their words.

MJ knows what's coming next. "Have you heard the latest?" Things that normally come out along with the sixth bottle of wine: who's been invited to the latest party, who's just come out, who's been caught in fraganti. That was what it had been like the last time they met up, at a restaurant called Sevilla. All about the party guests. And what do I care, MJ said to herself. Why should I have to put up with this? She's started to feel hurt since they opened the sixth bottle of wine. What's more, she's realised that she, too, is drinking too much, but her mood, instead of improving, which is what she wants, is getting worse.

Party guests. That's what men and women like her and Peter are called in New York slang. It seems bringing these people who keep their homosexuality a secret into the light is a usual pass-time for this Laura.

"I don't know why that editor at the publishers has got married and bought the apartment next door for his lover, that muscular young man who works for him, what do you all think?"

"How shameless, and what a lot of stress!" says Patricia, smiling.

It seems she too enjoys this gossip, hard though MJ finds it to believe that. She follows the psychiatrist's malicious stream of words with a shine in her eyes. It's a great pleasure for her to hear about this latest marriage for appearances' sake. Two young journalists at some newspaper. Sportsmen. A woman in the arts. Weddings between men and women party guests are standard. The perfect cover-up. Each of them will be able to carry on with their secret lives in tranquillity, and their families will stop saying "So when are you getting married, you silly thing?"

"They held a party for them in the writers' room without suspecting a thing, ha, ha, ha!" Laura's front teeth are going black from the wine.

But how does this woman find out about all this stuff? Better not to think about it. Her patients should know that she's not to be trusted. She doesn't just like hearing about other people's intimate lives, she likes making fun of them too. She's especially fascinated by the poor people

who lead double lives, who have to pretend to be something they aren't. Perhaps she too leads a double life, or would like to. It would be interesting to talk about that: Hey, Laura, tell us: why are you so very interested in "party guests"?

It's two in the morning when MJ says she's going to bed. To her surprise, everyone agrees and says they're off too. They go to bed without clearing the table or doing the washing-up. Laura and Peter go to the downstairs room, the guest room; Patricia and MJ go upstairs to their room. It's hard to say who's drunker. Patricia has definitely drunk more, no doubt about that, but her stamina is second to nobody's. They go slowly up the stairs. They get undressed and lie on the bed without opening the sheets. It's a hot night. It's suffocating. I can't stand that Laura anymore, MJ would like to say, but it wouldn't be any use, Patricia's sound asleep already, snoring and everything. Better that way. She hates arguments about Patricia's friends. Her friends are sacred. She hates all the arguments she has with Patricia, to tell the truth. They both get furious, but Patricia gets over it right away, makes a dry Martini and sips it quietly on the porch. She, on the other hand, is affected by it all day, unable to look Patricia in the eye. It isn't fair. It really isn't. That's why it's best to avoid arguments.

They been on the bed for half an hour and she can't get to sleep. She's thirsty and, at the same time, too tired to go down to the kitchen. Another five minutes go by, and now she can't stand her thirst and the heat any longer. Somehow she summons up the strength to drag her body down the stairs. It'll be good to get some cool water down her throat. She puts her fingers into the glass and sprinkles cold drops on her chest, her neck, her face. She opens the kitchen window thinking it'll be cooler outside, but it isn't. It's a night without a whisper of wind. When she's about to head off for bed again she hears something in the guests' room. She stands still to listen better. She can see from the sitting room that the guests' room door is open, but it's too dark inside to see anything. MJ walks across the sitting room and up to the door without making a sound. It's hard, but her eyes get used to the darkness in there. In addition to the woman's groaning, now she can hear the metal bed squeaking as well. She manages to interpret the mound she can see right away. Peter is on top of his wife moving his hips vigorously. They're both naked with no sheets over their bodies. It's an astonishing posture. Silent Peter, poor Peter, he's the one in control now. And in no uncertain way: his wife is no more than a doll in her husband's hands. What she groans is incomprehensible, but she doesn't stop. The man, if anything, seems to be making even more of an effort. He's breathing like a marathon runner. The bed's sounds are more and more frenzied. Laura's moaning has become comprehensible: "Up, up, up" is what she's saying louder and louder. "Up, up..." Up? MJ is amazed.

She doesn't know how long she watches for, and then realises what she's doing. As she goes up the stairs she feels an inexpressible hatred for those two, Peter and Laura. Bloody pigs. Why the hell didn't they close the door? Looking for spectators or something? In bed she starts to direct the revulsion she feels for them towards herself too. As she lies beside Patricia once

more, revolted by having stood there hypnotised by the door. What had she been looking for? Why had she stood by that door? Had she liked what she'd seen? No, damn it. And even so she'd stayed there, stupefied. Concentrating too hard because she found what she saw so revolting.

Although it's clouded over next morning, the heat still there. Around ten Patricia says that they should start getting breakfast ready, but MJ makes an effort to spend another hour in bed. It's shortly after eleven by the time they go downstairs. MJ is frightened. She's afraid she won't be able to stop looking towards the guests' room. Scared she's going to see what she'd seen the night before again. She makes a noise as she goes down the stairs, just in case.

Laura and Peter are awake. Showered and wearing clean white clothes.

Although Patricia makes an effort, the others don't have much for breakfast: the hangover. Patricia suggests they go for a walk. She'll make a picnic and they can eat it on a pretty hill she knows. She says there's a stream nearby for cooling down. They'll be back before four o'clock, and man and wife will be able to get back to the city before dark. What do you think?

All of them like the plan except for MJ. She says she's got a headache, a terrible headache. Too much wine; you know. So they leave her alone after making their sandwiches and putting on their walking boots. They aren't sure they'll go very far, but MJ will have a good time to be by herself. "Goodbye, take care. Drink lots of water; this heat's very dangerous."

And what can she do now she's alone? Water the garden? Tidy the books up? What about going to Jimmy's house? No way. She reckons if she starts knocking on their door again they'll call the police. In fact, the grandmother's potential hatred has become a sure thing after last night. The wine's made her see several things clearly. The wine and the dirty things she saw during the night, perhaps. She goes into her study. The little room opposite the kitchen. It's supposed to be a broom cupboard, but thanks to the furniture which Patricia had specifically designed (a little table, shelves, everything tiny, and made-to-measure) the room has begun to look like a studio. She sits at her desk automatically, a movement which force of habit has made easy for her. She doesn't usually work on Sundays but she's way behind with the kitten who wants to be a lion, and making some progress on that wouldn't be at all bad. She puts a blank sheet into the typewriter with great conviction. She breathes.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA she writes with a quick finger movement. And then:BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB. Finally: CCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCC. And she folds her arms in resignation, resting her head on the keyboard. It's Sunday and you've got a hangover; what did you expect? she says to herself.

And then she hears some tapping on the kitchen door. Have Patricia and her friends come

back? Impossible. Perhaps Laura's twisted her ankle and has decided to spend the day sitting on the sofa. That Laura doesn't look like much of a sportswoman. That gossiping psychiatrist's probably clumsy as hell. Whatever it is, she's glad she has to get up from her typewriter. It's ok, she'll leave Laura on the sofa and then, using her work as an excuse, come back to her studio. She doesn't want to hear her falsely sweet voice again, not at all. But when she gets to the kitchen she sees a small figure on the other side of the door. It isn't Laura, no. It's Jimmy. Little Jimmy. She opens the door and gestures for him to come in, but he stays in the doorstep, immobile.

"Good Morning, Jimmy", MJ says in a deliberately neutral tone, waiting to see the boy's reaction.

"Good morning, miss."

"Please come in."

Jimmy, nervous, comes into the kitchen. He's wearing blue dungarees and his shoes, as always, are covered in mud. He is carrying a package, and has something to say on the tip of his tongue, but doesn't seem to dare to.

"Grandma's sent me to say thank you for the book", he dares to say at last.

"Oh, that... Well, you're welcome. But did you like it? The story, I mean."

He nods his head, and then stares down at his muddy feet. He's blushing, and it's obvious he isn't at ease.

"And I've brought you this", he finally holds the package out to her. "Strawberry pie. My grandma's made it. For the banana pie you gave us."

"Great!" says MJ with polite delight as she takes the package. She should say something more, but nothing springs to mind.

"So then? Did you like Manda Panda wants to go swimming?" she blurts out, realising at the same time that she's already asked him that damn question.

"Yes. I like it when Manda finally learns how to swim", says Jimmy. "I can swim too. Grandad taught me last summer."

It's beginning to be something like a conversation. She still has to lead him a bit, but subtly so it doesn't break off.

"Well, I've got some more stories. I've written a lot of stories." She doesn't know if that impresses the boy, but she has to try. "Come with me."

Doubtful, Jimmy follows her to the broom cupboard or studio. MJ looks along the shelves. A lot of her books are still in boxes, just as they were the day they arrived from New York, waiting for their turn. All the books she has written are in a box too, but now she can't work out which one it is. She always has a lot of copies of her book at home to give to guests. To make her work visible. Unlike Patricia. Patricia never re-reads the books she's written after they're published, so it's hard to come across a book of Patricia's in Patricia's house. MJ keeps a few. The copy she signed for her the day they met, for instance. But she hides them away. It's something too sentimental for Patricia. Finally she identifies the box, takes a book out and wipes the dust off it.

This book: "Shall we hide?"

Jimmy timidly takes the book and says thank you in a low voice. He looks the book over as if to see whether there are a lot of drawings. And yes, there are indeed.

"

Well, I'm off. Grandma's waiting for me."

"Ok. Come back whenever you want, if you want another book or anything."

They go to the kitchen once more. MJ opens the door.

"How is the rose?"

For a moment MJ doesn't know what Jimmy's talking about. Then she realises. She thinks a look of guilt in his eyes. He's talking about the aged geranium. The geranium he knocked over, in other words.

"It's ok, I've planted it in a new pot", MJ lies. "Don't worry. It's not a problem."

At first, Jimmy smiles at her broadly. Then, with the book in his hand, he runs out of the house. She follows the fast-moving boy with her eyes until he's tiny in the distance. She stands there in the kitchen, not knowing what to do. She stares at the strawberry pie. It looks good, but she's not hungry. She'll leave it for supper, for Patricia and herself, for when Laura and Peter have left.

But even so she feels the need to celebrate something. A private ceremony, an intimate one. Perhaps influenced by Patricia she thinks she could make a Martini, but suddenly she

remembers her hangover. No Martinis with a hangover; she reminds herself of the promise she had made long ago. Then she goes to the sitting room and lies down on the sofa. That's why they came to Pennsylvania, wasn't it? To lead a quiet life. To spend Sundays lying on the sofa. To eat strawberry pie for supper. Time goes slowly, and finally she goes back to her studio.

Patricia and her friends arrive three hours later. They look tired, Laura particularly. Her hair is stuck to her forehead, her cheeks are red. At least her ankle is where it should be. She and Peter say hello quickly, say they don't want to arrive late. They'll come back, this is paradise, those were Laura's last words, but this damned heat, how do you put up with it?

"They're nice, aren't they?" says Patricia to MJ when they're alone again.

MJ nods. Now they're far away, on their way to the motorway or something, she thinks they're nicer.

"And what have you been up to all day?"

"Not much. I've given The kitten who wanted to be a lion a final touch."

"Really? Have you finished? We'll have to celebrate that!"

And that's what they do. Celebrate. Patricia has a Martini, she never has hangovers, and MJ has some strawberry pie. The strawberry pie Jimmy had brought.