

Eider Rodriguez
urtebetetze festa · birthday party



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[urtebetetze festa](#)

Urtebetetze festa ipuinaren audioa [hemen](#) entzun daiteke.

Eta Eider Rodriguezekin izan dugun bideo-elkarrizketa [hemen](#) dago.

This is a bilingual edition. If you wish to read Eider Rodriguez' stories in **English**, please click on this link:

[birthday party](#)

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EIDER RODRIGUEZ

urtebetetze festa

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Ipuin hauek bilduma hauetan argitaratu ziren lehenengo aldian: *Haragia* (2007), *Katu jendea* (2010) and *Bihotz handiegia* (2017), hurrenez hurren. Booktegik **Elkar** eta **Susa** argitaletxeei berplazaratzeko eta itzultzeko baimena eskertu nahi die biziki.

Azala: Ramon Zabalegi

Itzulpenak: Sarah Turtle, Aritz Branton

Hitzaurrea

Munduarekin dialogoan

Fabrikatik ezegonkor, moldagarri, eszeptiko naizen honek zalantza handirik gabe esan dezake: Eider Rodriguez da bere belaunaldiko idazlerik kitzikagarrienetako bat, kitzikagarriena ez bada. Gezurra dirudi, baina hamalau urte joan dira lehen ipuin bilduma, *Eta handik gutxira gaur*, argitaratu zuenetik. Hazi baino ez da egin Rodriguezen ipuingintza orduz geroztik.

Horren froga izan daiteke ingelesera itzultzeko aukeratu diren hiru ipuinak *Haragia* (2007), *Katu jendea* (2010) eta *Bihotz handiegia* (2017) liburuetatik hartuak izana. Liburu bakoitzetik ipuin bana. Baina betiere ipuina, narrazio laburraren terrenoan aritu izan delako fikzioan beti, kasik kontrakarrean, nobela exijitzen den garaiotan.

"Hirugarren oparia", "Kapitalismoa" eta "Urtebetetze festa". Ez da hau ipuinok aletzeko lekua, ez galdu irakurtzearen plazera, baina ezin utzi esan gabe Rodriguezen egiteko moduaren erakusgarri direla. Interpretatu behar diren hitzak, keinuak, isiluneak; pertsonak -eskuarki gizonezkoak- zaintzen dituzten pertsonak -kurioki emakumezkoak-; nonbaiteko, erresuma baten parte sentitzen direnak; 45 urte elkar ukitu gabe egon izan diren aita-emeak; isiltasunaren halaber erresuman babes hartzen duten alabak; normala denetik aparte, arauz kanpo, bizi diren familiak.

Osagarri-edo, gero *Amama* filmean entzun ahal izan diren oihartzunak, gure iruditerian hamaika aldiz errepikatu diren kirolariak, dirua irabazi eta pilotzeko zaletasuna dutenak, Rafael Chirbesen hura gogoratzen duen padura usaina eta lupetzaren misterioa. Eta ezagun egiten zaizkigun paisaiak, mugakoak, Hendaiatik idatziak izan direnak; jakin gabe ordea Hendaian egonik Iruna begira, zehazki non gauden: Hendaian, edo Irunen bertan.

Hain zuzen Rodriguezen editore izan den Gorka Arresek esan du: "Orain, editatu osteko urratsak egiten hasi behar da, gure kultura gizartearen erdigunera ekartzeko, ardazteko eta munduarekin dialogoan hasteko". Zer hoberik, beren txikian, ingeleserako itzulpenok kanpoarekiko jardun horretan harri kozkor bat gehiago jartzeko.

Irun, 2018ko ekaina
Aritz Galarraga

Hirugarren oparia

Arrotza egin zaio aireportuaren zoko batean, metalaren erdian, eguzkiak argitu eta haizeak harrotzen duen ikurrina, eta birrikak txiki gelditu zaizkio ikuskizunarekin. Berriro da lau urte lehenago gurasoen etxea utzi zuen neskatoa, baina mendi eta lur usainak galduta.

Etxera deitu du, hiru bider, amak erantzun duen arte, hilabeteak hitzik ahoskatu gabe dirudienaren ahotsaz.

– Iritsi zara orduan?

– Bai. Galdeiozu aitari nire bila etor daitekeen Zarautzera.

– Galdetuko diot. Bost minutu barru berriro deitu, katxarro horietara deitzea garesti irteten da-eta.

Zarautzera iritsi bezain pronto aita agertu da Expressaren barruan, atzealdea zakuz beterik.

– Igo –esan dio ingude gaineko mailukada hotsez.

Irratian Ganbara taldearen balada bat.

– Plakatu haiz.

– Aspaldian ikusi gabe –erantzun dio alabak hiru kolpetan, eta gero ez da kasik ezer entzun errementerian, sugar saiatuak soilik labetik ihes egin nahian.

Saioak hanken artean helduta darama maleta, eta maldan gora zambuluka doan paisaje berdeari begiratzen dio, mendixketan jasotako etxe trinkoei, gaztainaz kargaturiko adar batek autoaren aurkako talkaz menia apurtu duenean.

– Osaba antzarak akabatzen utzi dinat. Azkenaldian langile zabilen eta aprobeixatu egin behar!

Herrira iristeko azken maldan gaztaina gudarosteak oldartu zaizkie, arantzak Saioa eta aitari itzulita.

– Bihar gaztainak biltzera etorri behar dinat.

Saioak ulertu du gonbidapen bat dela.

– Londonen ez dago gaztainarik, ba al zenekien?

Aitak balazta zanpatu du, eta furgoneta herriko plazako aieka batean geldiarazi.

– Ikusi al dun? –kultur etxe bihurturiko Jauregi Zaharraren atarian eraikitako aluminio eta beirazko igogailua erakutsi dio—. Modernoa.

Saioak ulertu du, aitak gustatuko zaiolakoan erakutsi diola igogailua, eta plazer eman nahi izan diola, nahiz eta badakien aitari higuigarria iruditzen zaiola, Jauregi Zaharrean halako espanturik.

- London ematen du.
 - Urte hasieran jarri zitenan. Etxe asko egin nahi ditizten. Modan jarriko dun herria.
 - Moda-modan.
- Saioa ohartu da ezer ez dela aldatu aitaren iseka airea, bere iseka airea, ezer ez.
- Aurrerantzean gazteek ez dituen Ingalaterrara alde egin beharko.

Expressaren balaztek garrasi egin dute: etxea du parez pare, zuri eta ilun, berde eta heze. Ama eta osaba atarian dira, ama gomazko goanteak erantzi gabe, osaba ganibeta eskuan.

- Ikusi Rogelio –esan dio aitak Saioari antzara lohitua erakutsiz, eta bat-batean izen horrek gordetako unibertsoak eztanda egin dio. Soroan korrika zoroan, antzara erraldoi bat lepoturik, biziaren azken bulkadak lumatza odolduan, antzara txikiago bat segika duela.

- Emaio! –oihu egin du osabak aitari.

- Plakatu zara –esan dio amak, Saioaren oinetan etzan denean antzara dekapitatua, sabelean oraindik bizia. Berea izan da lehen muxua, estua eta hezea–. Eta uztai hori?

Saioak sudurra zimurtu du eta behiak bezala egin du orro.

- Neska hau!

- Zer moduz dago señorita? –esan dio osabak, mahoizko galtzetan xukatuz eskuetako gorria, eta gero atximurka egin dio masailean; hainbesteko energiaz Saioari sudurreko uztaia dilindan gelditu zaio.

- Afari-merienda prestatu dugu.

Aitak hortzen arteko karraskila adarra ahoaren bestaldera eramanez segizioari buruzagitza jarri dio, iluna garaitzen ari den belarraren gainetik. Atzean utzi dituzte motzondo etsituak. Sukaldean gazta eta lukainka mutur bat jaten ari diren bitartean, amak ur irakinetan hondoratu du Rogelio, uzki horitua bistan, eta lumatzen joan da, kendutako luma sorta bakoitzaren ostean maleta askatu ezin duen alabari txeraz begiratuz. Aita-osabak mahaiaren bueltan dira, dena zain eta izerdi.

- Ohera noa, leher eginda nago.

- Osabaren logela patatarako erabili dugu, humedadeagatik, aitonarena txukundu dizut –erantzun dio amak.

– Ni zurean geldituko naiz –esan du osabak eta atximurka egin dio onik utzitako masailean.

Hil zenetik gutxitan aipatzen dute aitona. Aitaren aita zen baina amak zaindu zuen hil aurreko hemeretzi urteetan. Gangrenak hankak janak zizkion arren, batailak irabaztera ohitutako jeneral baten antzera gobernatzen zuen etxea zaharrak. Gero, gehiago zahartu zenean, burua erabat galdua, hitz egiteari utzi zion. Tuberkulu bat. Eta hala ere, etxe hartan izandako itzalak mehatxatuko balitu bezala zaindu zuten hil artean. Saioa txikitatik harritzen zuen amaren sakrifizio ahalmenak.

Aitak maleta logelara eramaten lagundu dio. Ama atzetik joan zaio, sukaldeko zapia amantaletik zintzilik, eta Saioa ohartu da Londonetik lehen aldiz etorri zenean ekarritako belarritakoak daramatzala jantzirik.

– Zer moduz reflexologia ikastaroa? –galdetu dio aitoren eske, aitak bakarrik utzi dituenean.

Amari, asaldatzen den guztietan bezala, ezpainak mokortu zaizkio:

– Ixo, ume, hauek ez dakite ezer eta.

– Oraindik ez? Eta nork eramaten zaitu Zarautzera?

– Aitak. Masajea hartzera eramaten nauela pentsatzen du.

– Esaiozu nire opari bat izan zela, nik ordaindu nuela ikastaroa.

– Belarriko minekin jarraitzen al duzu?

– Urtaro aldaketa bakoitzeko.

– Hori sendatzen ere ikasi dugu.

Gero atea itxi du eta Saioa bakarrik gelditu da. Animaliak bezala mugitzen da ama: zehaztasunez, baina zaratarik atera gabe; geisha baten antza du: zurbila, irribera, adeitsua. Logelatik aberearen pulunpak entzuten dira oraindik.

Saioak beharrezkoak dituen puskak baizik ez ditu atera maletatik. Aitona bertan aurkitu zuten bakailaoa bezala gogorturik. Amak eta berak aurkitu zuten. Ogi kozkor bat zuen esku artean eta ahoa zabalik.

Ez da bere arrastorik gelditzen logelan.

Amak aitonaren ondoan egiten zuen lo, oxigenorik gabe gelditzen zenean ito ez zedin. Itota hil ez dadin esaten zuen beti amak, etxe hartan heriotzaz hitz egiteko zeukaten soltura paregabearekin. Orain plastikoan bilduta dago ohe hori. Saioak ez du inoiz jakin zenbat denboraz egon zen begira, baina greba zela-eta ikastolara joan gabe gelditu zen egun batean, ama katuak bezala hurbildu zen gela hartara,

orain bezala, eta zaharrari sudurra estaltzen aurkitu zuen Saioa. Utziozu esan zion, larritasunik azaldu gabe. Utziozu, ahotsa jaso gabe. Ez zuten afera sekula berriro aipatu. Handik urtebetera edo hil zen zaharra, eta ama-alabek maindire bat tolestean den zeremonia faltaz preparatu zuten hobirako.

Elkarri eskua emanda egon ziren tanatorioan, eskuak lotuta, elkarri kemena eman bezala bizitza berri bati ekin behar dioten ezkonberrien antzera.

– Erdiarekin ere nahikoa genuen –xuxurlatu zion amak alabari irriz.

Hankak falta ez zituen gizon baten tamainakoa zen kutxa.

Saioak ezin du lorik egin. Mesanotxean jaunartzeko argazkia jarri du norbaitek: txirikorda bik zedarritzen diote aurpegia eta lore zuriak ditu buru gainean. Kabitzen ez zitzaion eraztun baten erruz hanpaturik ikusten zaio hatza. Egun hartan amak organo bat oparitu zion, eta Saioak agindu zion beretzako abesti bat jotzen ikasiko zuela. Bésame mucho izan zen, apaizak erakutsi zion, katixima eta gero. Gizonak aurrean ez zeudenean jotzen zuen Saioak, ama dantzatzen ikusteko. Gizonen aurrean zoriontsu agertzeko eskubidea izango ez balute bezala. Ondoko gelatik osabaren txiza txorrota plastikozko pixontziaren kontra entzuten da, jarraian karkaxa bat eta goizaldeko oilarraren kantuekin elkartu den zurrunga.

Bazkalorduan jaiki da Saioa, amak kaska egin duenean.

– Joan al dira gaztainetara?

– Bai, goizean goiz. Iristear egongo dira –poliziaren zain egongo balitz bezain erne belarria–. Hor dira, aditzen?

Saioak esne botila hartu du hozkailutik. Sojarenera ohitua, harridura eragin dio benetako behi esnea zintzurretik behera sentitzeak.

– Azkenean jantzi dituzu oparitu nizkizun belarritakoak.

– Kosta zait, baina orain ez ditut kentzen.

– Aitak zeozer esan al zizun?

Amak belarritakoak laztandu ditu.

– Kaldererotara ote nindoan.

– Ez al zizuten alergia ematen?

Indian egindako belarritakoak dira, zilarrezkoak. Ordura arte belarritako pare bakarra zuen amak, urrezkoa. Oparia egin zion garaian, Saioak amaren mundu murriz eta kamutsari leihoak zabaldu nahi zizkion.

– Zer moduz zaude?

– A ze galdera, neska. Nola nahi duzu ba egotea?

Senarra eta anaia inguruan zebiltzanean, amari galderak erantzun gabe erantzuteko trebetasuna azaleratzen zitzaion.

Osabak errafiazko zaku bat gaztaina ekarri du.

– Bost bat kilo.

Amak eskukada bat hartu du itxura begiratzeko, triku momifikatuak dirudite. Saioari goroldio usaina etorri zaio, orain bai, etxean da.

Gizonek lepoaren inguruan lotuta dute aho-zapia. Bazkaltzen duten bitartean ez dute apenas hitzik egiten, elikagaietan eta horiek sabeleratzeko egin beharreko mugimenduetan soilik jarria balituzte bezala gogoa eta indarra.

– Elurra datorrela esan dute irratian –esan du Saioak.

– Bazkalostean egur egin behar dinagu –esan du aitak. Leihotik begira dago. Ez ditu inoiz bereizi aginduak eta laguntza eskeak.

– Elur erauntsia –gaineratu du osabak.

– Ikusi al duzu Jauregi Zaharrarekin egin dutena? Zuri gustatuko zaizu –ama iseka airez ari zaio Saioari. Aita-osabak agertu bezain pronto haien arauetara makurtzen dira ama-alabak oharkabeen.

– Atzo erakutsi zidan aitak. Nahiago nuen lehen bezala, egia esateko.

– Babes ofizialeko etxeak egin behar ditizten. Zarauztarrak etorriko ditun bizitzera eta herria modernizatu beharra zagon.

Osabak ogiaren koxkorraz fideo eta oilar soberakinak ahoratu eta amari eman dio platera. Honek labekoa zerbitzatu du, senarrari, anaiari, alabari, eta azkenik bere buruari. Akuri erre bana.

– Ez al duzu izena eman behar? –galdetu dio amak.

Saioak bakarka hitz egiteko gaia iritzi dio, baina hala ere erantzun du:

– Denda biologiko baten arduraduna naiz Londonen, ama, oraingoz han gelditzeko asmoa daukat. Gainera, etxea musutruk daukat eta diru dexente ari naiz aurrezten –saihets ttipietan hondoratu ditu sardexka eta labana.

– Hori ongi dago.

– Dirua ez zagon inoiz soberan.

– Ingelesa hobeto ikasi nahi dut. Erdara baino hobeto hitz egiten dut kasik!

– Erdaraz primeran egiten dun ba hik! –esan du aitak amari begira, eta platerean pilatutako akuria hezurtxoak mahaiaren erdian utzi ditu, pila handiago batean.

Osabaren begiek mahaiaren bestaldetik traba egin diotenean, hozkailutik flan pakete bat atera eta mahaiaren ipini du Saioak. Aitak, osabak eta amak platerari

buelta eman diote eta gainean isuri dute flana. Zoparako erabilitako koilararekin jan dute.

– Zure aita datorren urtean da erretiratzekoa. Londonera joango garela agindu dit.

Aitak ez du imintziorik txikiena ere egin, baina Saioak badaki lotsaturik dagoela.

– Bai ala? –zirikatu du.

– Joan beharko –eta gerrikoa koska bat nasaituta, ogi papurrak galtzetatik astindu eta siesta egitera igo da. Saioari zahartu egin dela iruditu zaio.

– Eta zu, osaba?

– Ni ez naun katxarro horietako batean sekula santan igoko –eta sagar bat zuritu du, sagar asko zuritu dituenaren iaiotasunez, eta labanarekin lagunduta isiltasun erabatekoan jan eta gero, bera ere siesta egitera joan da.

Saioa eta ama harrikoa egiten gelditu dira. Edozein etxetan bizi izan dela ere, Saioa beti egon izan da prest harrikoa egiteko, aitzakia eta xextra guztietatik urrun. Ez du inoiz konpartitu jendearen nagikeria ontziak garbitzeko, beretzat harrikoa beti izan da une intimo eta gozoa, etxean amak eta berak egin dutelako beti agian.

– Nahi baduzu goazen zure gelara eta reflexologia pixka bat egingo dizut. Ea belarri horiek sendatzen ditugun.

Ohean etzanda Saioa, amak galtzerdiak erantzi dizkio eta oinak bere izter gainean ipini ditu. Saioak amantalaren hezea nabari dezake orkatiletan. Amaren eskuak mamitsuak dira eta okinak oreka nola maneiatzen ditu Saioaren oinak.

– Zer moduz bizi zara?

Behatz txikerrak indarrez estutu dizkio:

– Hemen daude belarriko min horiek, horregatik egiten dizu min estutzen zarenean.

– Eta zer moduz zaude ordua

– Zenbatetan galdetu behar duzu! Ondo, esan dizut.

– Badakit zer esan duzun.

Isilik gelditu dira eta Saioak tristura gozo bat nabaritu dio aurpegian.

– Opari bat ekarri dizut.

Maletatik koloretako paperetan bildutako kutxa atera du. Amak belarri parean jarri eta astindu egin du.

– Zintzarri hotsa dauka!

Saioak barre egin du, ama ume bilakatuta ikusteak zirrara eragiten dio.

Papera kontu handiz kendu eta ohe gainean utzi du, tolestuta. Kutxa zabaldu eta edukia esku ahurrean erortzen utzi du: soka batez lotutako golf tamainako bola bi.

– Txinatar bolak deitzen dira –erantzun dio Saioak amaren galderak egin gabe galderak egiteko moduari.

Saioak bakarrik utzi du ama. Korridoretik aita-osaben zurrungak heltzen dira. Sukaldetik Juan Carlos Irizarren kantu bat, jendeak nahi duen abestia eskatzen duen saio horietako bat. Gaztaina eskukada bat jarri du egosten, anisarekin.

Bitartean, aizkora txiki bat hartuta, egurra egin du gauerako. Izerdia botatzeak on egiten dio.

Kapitalismoa

Telmoren ama hil zenean, Telmo, urtebete lehenago arrebaren ezkontzara eramandako trajearekin azaldu zen. Eta anaia eliz atariko harmailetan gora ikusi ahala haserretuz joan zen Alazne:

- Gorbata ere ez duzu aldatu...
- Dibortziatu egin zarete, zer axola dio.
- Gorbata aldatu izan bazenu sikiera...
- Zapatak ez dira ezkontzakoak, ikusi...

Alaznek lurrera begiratu zuen: egur itxurako zapata marroiak, lokarri finekoak. Arrazoi zuen, ez zion axolarik. Eta senar-emazte zaharren antzera, besotik heldu zion elizpea zeharkatzeko.

Alaznek, kaxmirrezko gaban beltza zeraman soinean, zapata baxu distiratsuak, egun hartan bertan amaren logelatik hartutako urre zurizko lepoko bat. Josetxo, anaia gazteena, eta aita traje urdin ilun berri banarekin heldu ziren, ardo usainarekin biak.

Eliza barruan, aitaren eta Telmoren eskuei heldu zien Alaznek, baina Telmori intsentsuak azkura eman zion sudurrean eta elizatik irten behar izan zuen doministikuka. Zaharrak, Alaznek eta Josetxok kanpotik zetozen Telmoren usinak entzuten zituzten apaizaren barealdietan, negarrik egin gabe.

Gero, zaharra hil zen, Roman. Eliza jendez bete zen, aberatsekiko atxikimendua eta mira erakustea maite baitu herriak.

Elizkizuna hasi aurretik, Telmok hilkutxa biltzen zuen oihala ukitu zuen, amaren hilkutxa aukeratu zutenean aita egindako gauza bera eginez. Leuna zen, biguna zen, baina bazuen harro puntu bat. Aita eroso pasako zuen gaua bertan. Zaharra maniatikoa zen oihal kontuekin: ez zuen inoiz paperezko eskuzapiak jartzen zituzten jatetxeetan jaten, kleenexik erabili gabe joan zitzaion bizia, eta batista ingelesezko mukizapiak Donostiako denda batean erosi behar zizkioten (ama hil ostean, Alazne arduratu zen zeregin horretaz). Haute couture jostun baten antzera mintzatu ohi zen ehunen jauskera edo duintasunaz, eta alabak, haren laguntzaz aukeratu zuen ezkon soinekoa.

Alaznek mukizapi bat luzatu zion Telmori aulkian eseri aurretik:

- Atxiska hasiz gero...

Senar ohiaren inzialak zituen brodaturik, hari grisez.

- Zuk brodatu zenizkion? –galdetu zion Telmok belarrira.

Telmok sudur parean jarri zuen mukizapia, badaezpada.

- Edan egin duzu –esan zion Alaznek Josetxori ezpainak mugitu gabe.
- Ardo bat, etorri aurretik.
- Bat?

Josetxok joateko imintzioa egin zuen, eta arreba isildu egin zen.

Bataiatu zutenez geroztik, Telmo txikia eliza batera sartzen zen bigarren aldia zen. Aitaren eta izebaren artean zegoen, eta tarteka atzerantz begiratzen zuen,

amaren bila. Erdialdeko ilara batean zegoen Maite, apaizaren berbei adi, herri guztietan dago hildakoentzat nahikoa lur, kobazulo hartarako freskoegi jantzita. Behin baino ez ziren gurutzatu ama eta semearen begiradak, eta mutikoari, nekeagatik eta asperduragatik nork daki, aitonaren sudurra hilkutxatik irteten ikusi izana iruditu zitzaion marrazo baten hegala nola.

Amaren hiletatik gizenduta zeuden hiru anai-arrebak.

Lasai zeuden, autobusaren zain baleude bezala egon ziren ofizioak iraun zuen bitartean.

Kasik amaieran, Telmo elizatik irten zen. Izebaren eskua askatu eta atzetik joan zitzaion mutikoa. Aita atarian zegoen eserita, txakur bati laztan egiten.

Zaharra Telmoren aurrean hil zen, ospitalean eta egun argiz. Arnas ziztuka hasi zenean ere Telmo ez zen zaharra ukitzera ausartu, 45 urte elkar ukitu gabe bizi ondoren bihotz hauskor hura fereka batekin suntsituko zuen beldurrez. Azken hasperenarekin batera txirrina jo zion erizainari.

– Amaitu da –esan zion erizainak, eta andre aldakazabal haren esku epela senti dezake oraindik lepoaren ondoan–. Sufritu gabe joan da.

Erizain hark ez zekien zein neurritaraino ari zen egia esaten. Ondoren, begiak itxi zizkion, hatz mamiak betazaletan maitasunez pausatuz, eta ohea desegiten lagunduko ote zion, Telmok ez zuen besterik esaten asmatu.

– Ez da beharrezkoa.

Aita ohe eta guzti eramán zuten. Eguzkiak bete-betean jotzen zuen eta hauts malutak ikus zitezkeen airean. Telmo korridorean gelditu zen, anai-arrebak etorri zain. Esku batean, arropaz eta gailleta zorroz beteriko maletatxoa zeukan; bestean, aitaren hortzeria zuen edalontzia. Telmok ez zuen jakin non pausatu, arrebak eskutik erauzi eta zapitxo batean bildu arte:

– Batzuetan nahita egiten duzula dirudi, gizona... Herentzian, enpresaren akzioen herena eta diru mordoxka bat jaso zuen seme-alabetako bakoitzak. Notarioak plastikozko boligrafo batekin sinarazi zien paper sorta ugari, aita labetik irten berria zela:

– Zaharrenetik gazteenera egingo dugu: Telmo, Alazne, Jose Antonio... Badakit une latzak direla hauek, eta horregatik, lehenbailehen amaitzea hobe.

Telmok zuen sinadurarik barrokoena. Alazne eta Josetxorenak kasualagoak ziren, lurrunkorragoak.

Espero zitezkeen bezala, ez zen haserrerik egon. Guztiek berdin jaso zuten, nahiz eta Josetxok ez zuen enpresarekin inoiz ezer jakin nahi izan. Alaznek eta Telmok nahiago zuten Joxetxo kanpoan, nolanahi ere.

Notarioak bostekoa eman zien:

– Gizon zintzoa izan da zuen aita. Gaur egun Enpresaritzak ikasten dutenen artean ez da halakorik aurkitzen. Marketing gutxiago eta Etika gehiago irakatsi beharko liekete gazteei unibertsitateetan. Eta Roman irakasle. Gaur egun, azkar aberastea, besterik ez dute buruan...

Telmok, Alaznek eta Josetxok, buruaz baietz egin zuten, notarioa zehazki zeri buruz ari zen oso ongi jakin gabe. Tarteka elkarrekin arrantza eginak zirela

notarioa eta aita, hori bazekiten. Bata bestearengandik bost metrora egoten ziren, kirol jantziekin, elkarri begiratu eta hitzik egin gabe, soilik txirrikaren karranka, eta, tarteka, arrain baten azken buztankadak baldearen kontra.

Inoiz ez zuten aitari buruzko gauza askorik jakin. Zekiten apurra, amak esana zen. Amak, gudaroste baten balentriei buruz ariko balitz bezala kontaktzen zituen aitaren sendiari buruzkoak, aberatsei zor zaien urruntasunaz. Kontakizunari larritasuna emateko, aulki batean eseri eta ahotsa apaltzen zuen. Telmok eta Alaznek batez ere ama entzutea maite zuten. Nonbaiteko, erresuma baten parte sentitzen ziren. Entzutean, haien berraitona, eraikitzailea zela, adibidez, etxeek eraikitzailearen izena zeramaten garaian. Roman hamahiru urterekin hasi zen aitarekin lanean, hondar eta igeltsu zakuak batetik bestera eramaten; hamasei urterekin, kamioian joaten zen, gidariaren laguntzaile, harrobian hondar tonak erostera. Hemezortzirekin, berak bakarrik, bere lehen tratua itxi zuen, baserria handitu nahi zuen bezero zahar batekin. Aitak behetik gora erakutsi nahi izan zion ofizioa, bestela jendeak ez omen zion barkatuko eta.

Urteak behar izan zituen Romanek ulertzeko. Herrikoek maita zezaten deus egin ez zuen arren, maite zutela ohartu zenean. Huraxe izan zen aitaren ikasbidea: apaltasuna eta irmotasuna.

Ordurako, aitak utzitako negozioa enpresa bilakatua zuen Romanek.

Herentziaren zati bat beltzean jaso zuten Romanen seme-alabek, eta diru horrekin, Telmok auto berria erosi zuen: Volvo familiar beltz bat. Auto saltzailearekin batera itxuratu zituen Volvo berriaren kanpoa eta barrua, eta han, gizon harekin bakarrik, haren desodorante usainak bulegoa betetzen zuela, larruaren kolorea eta airbag kopurua zehazten ari zenean, Maiteren falta sumatu zuen.

Kanbioen eskutokia metalezkoa nahi zuen, horretan ez zegoen dudarik:

– Hori ez dizute fabrikari egingo, hori aparte eskatu beharra dago –esan zion saltzaileak.

– Dei bat egingo dut.

Maitek larru argiaren ezegokitasunaz ohartarazi zuen Telmo:

– Umea txikiegia da oraindik; edo ez diozu zure autoan txokolatea jaten utzi behar?

Arrazoi zuen, Maitek beti zuen arrazoia. Gainera, Telmo txikiak asteburuak probesten zituen nahi zuena eta nahi zuen orduan jateko, amaren arauetatik libre.

– Eskerrik asko. Ongi zaude? Ez dizut galdetu ere egin.

– Bai, hilekoa erretiratu zait, eta lehen beroaldiak pairatzen nabil.

– Ez nekien. Mingarria da?

– Ez, Telmo. Zahartzen ari garela, besterik ez. Amari ere goiz xamar erretiratu zitzaion. Tipula baten modura hasi naiz janzen, kalera irtetez zer erantzizateko.

– Umeak badaki?

– Jakin beharko luke?

Hilabete pare baten buruan, auto saltzaileak autoa iritsi zela esateko deitu zionean, Telmok ez zuen jakin norekin joan kontzesionariora. Aita bizirik balego, berak eramango zuen, elkarrekin sartuko liriateke autora, elkarrekin hordituko larruaren berri usainarekin. Baina aita bizirik balego, berak ez leukake auto berririk. Beraz, aukera horrek ez zuen balio. Telmo eskolan zen eta Maiteri deitzea ez zitzaion txukuna begitandu. Bitan pentsatu zuen, bigarrengoan txukunago irudituko zitzaiolakoan, baina ez. Gainera, ostiral arratsaldea zen, eta beste edonori deitzea lekuz kanpo zegokeen. Bazituen arazoak konpontzeko lagunak, korrika egitera joateko bizilagunak eta tartean behin mozkortzeko nekalogunak. Baina, kontzesionariora auto berria jasotzera lagunduko zion inor ez zuen ezagutzen.

Bakarrik joan zen, taxian. Auto saltzaileak harrera egin zion, bostekoa luzatuz.

– Goizean ailegatu da. Eguraldi bikaina duzu barru-barruraino sakatzeko.

Zeruan, eguzki zuri eta hotza. Lainoak zirpilduz zihoazen aurrera egin ahala.

Telmok autoaren bila jaitsi zituen begiak, saltzailea ebitatuz, baina ez zen ageri.

Saltzaileak, dramarako joera nabarmenarekin, sorbaldatik heldu eta dendaren atzealdera eraman zuen. Han, belar izpi bakan batzuk baino ez zituen orube baten erdian, bere auto bakarti, distirant, beldurgarria zegoen, uzkurtuta, zain.

Gizonak hatza gaintetik pasa eta marra distiratsu bat utzi zuen kapotaren gainean:

– Polenak estali aurretik eramatea komeni –esan zion saltzaileak.

Telmok doministiku bat ito zuen.

– Depositoa bete dizut, etxearen kontura.

Telmok giltza ukabildu zuenean, billetez betetako gutunazala luzatu zion saltzaileari. Saltzaileak, hatzen eta ezpainen abiadura biziak modu harrigarrian koordinatuz zenbatu zituen. Telmok ez zuen zirkinik egin. Eta bezeroa urdangarekin bakarka uzten duen proxenetaren antzera begiratu zion saltzaileak: – Zaindu ezazu. Eta ongi pasa.

Bakarrik gelditu zenean, Telmok aurrez aurre begiratu zion autoari: muturra, txapala; ahoa, luzea eta zabala, serioa eta arranditsua; argiak, zabalik munduari begira. Pilotuek itxura oldarkorra ematen zioten, apeta hutsagatik eraso egin dezakeen animalia batena. Gerria findu izanak silueta edertzen zion, baina handitasunari kalterik eragin gabe. Ipurtalde gihartsua lerdentasun agian gehiegizkoaren kontrapuntua zen, ez zekien, arreta handiagoaz aztertu beharko zuen.

Piztu aurretik, beste itzuli bat eman zuen autoaren inguruan. Perfektua zen.

Urte batzuk lehenago, autoa bereganatzeko unean bakarrik egoteak zapuztu egingo zukeen. Baina, Maite eta biak bereiztu zirenetik, gauzei bere begiekin soilik begiratzen trebatu zen. Bereiztu zenetik intimitatea berreskuratu zuen, Maite eta Telmo txikiari hilabeteko kuota ordaintzearen truke. Gainera, aitaren heriotzarekin, xamurragoa zitzaion intimitatearen erosketa hura. Merkeagoa, bederen. Eta merkeago erosteak biderkatu egiten du erositakoaren balioa, edo hori sinetsita bizi zen Telmo.

Hatz mamiaz giltzaren botoia inguratu zuen, sakatuz eta burdina tentetuz, burdina hotz eta gogorra. Telmok ez zuen inoiz ezer inon sartzeko premia larriagorik sentitu. Hunkiturik zegoen.

Atea zabaldu aurretik, zapatetako hautsa kendu zuen. Han barruan, erabatekoa zen isiltasuna. Eserlekuetako larrua epela zen, kasik gizakume batena bezain. Zimurrek eta poroek gizatasuna areagotzen zioten. Martxen eskutokia leuna eta sendoa zen. Aginte-mahaiaren gainean jarri zuen masaila. Lehen ikara hura sentitu nahi zuen aurpegian, arnasa, autoaren desloratzea motorra piztean. Giltza barneratu eta motor hotsarekin batera, animalia inarrosi egin zen. Telmok laztan egin zion.

Lehen autoa izan zuenetik ez zuen larridura hura bizi. Bigarrena sartu eta orube hartatik irten zen: mantso eta astun, pozik baina zuhur. Errepidera abiatu aurretik, bluetooth-a erabiltzen ahalegindu zen, baina ez zuen lortu. Maiteri deitu nahi zion auto berriarekin semea nora eraman zezakeen galdetzeko. Ordu pare bat gelditzen zitzaion oraindik, Jaizkibel mendia abiadura ezberdinetan igo eta jaisteko urrezko bi ordu.

Telmok eta bere familiak bedeinkapen gisa hartzen zuten lantokia eta etxea elkarren ondoan izatea. Batez ere Alaznek. Telmoren arrebak atsekabea adierazten zuen hurbileko norbaitek lanera joateko autoa hartu behar zuela jakiten zuenean.

– Zenbat kilometro egiten dituzu joateko? –galdetzen zien beti.

– Berrogei bat.

– Berrogei bider bi, laurogei. Egunero bizitza arriskuan jarri lanera joateko? Eta gasolinak duen prezioarekin!

Autoak asteburuetarako ziren, oporretarako. Jaizkibel igotzen hasterako lainoak saretu ziren. Telmok azeleragailua sakatu zuen, bihurguneetan apenas mugituz bolantea; jaitsieretan, lurrari fermuki heltzen zitzaion autoa, igoeretan berriro aireratzeko. Ez zirudien autoa bere menpe zegoen makina zela, baizik eta jabearen instintuari jarraitzen zion animalia. Beldurra eta miresmena sortzen zizkion izaki libre bat.

Itsas-labar baten gainaldean gelditu zen, ehiztariantzako etxola huts baten ondoan. Errepidean ez zebilen inor, hegaztien karrankak entzuten ziren, olatuak hausten. Azken batean, autoa aitari erakutsi nahi zion, han zabaldu zituzten-eta haren errautsak hilabete batzuk lehenago. Zerura begiratu zuen, baina zurtasuna mingarria zitzaion. Makurtu, eta belar bustia laztandu zuen:

– Ederra da. Eta fina.

Horrelakoa zen aitarekiko harremana. Inoiz ez galderarik, inoiz ez bostekorik, burura eramandako ekintzak soilik. Azken bospasei urteetan, Urte Berriarekin batera, enpresak beltzean irabazitako dirua banatzen zuen Romanek hiru seme-alaben artean: bizpahiru milioi bakoitzarentzat. Josetxo ez zen ezkondu, eta Alazne eta Telmoren senar-emazte eta kumeek haien gurasoen etxeetan bazkaltzen zuten urtarrilaren lehenean, Romanek hala iradokita:

– Gero zuek ikusi zer egin sobreekin; nahi izanez gero zuen amaginarrebei edo Medicus Mundiri eman, baina nik behintzat ez dut lekukorik nahi.

Turroiarekin batera ekarri ohi zituen gutunazalak amak, aita siestara joandakoan. Orduan ere ezin eskerrak eman. Une hartara arte, gurasoen logelan egoten ziren sobreak, komoda gaineko pitxar baten inguruan jarrita: hiru gutunazal maiztu, paperez beteak, hamaika bider birziklatutako goma batez estutuak. Turroiaren azpilean ekartzen zituen amak, eta han egoten ziren, azukre-almendra, mahaspasa, turroi papur, kikara zikin eta mazapanekin berdinduta, mahaiaren erdigunean, desafio eginez bezala, “gai al zarete bazkalondoari eusteko milioi hauek mahai gainean egonda?”, ama aharrausika hasi eta bera ere lotara joan arte.

Bereiztu ziren urtean, Telmo txikiak aitarekin pasa nahi izan zuen Urte Berria. Bost urte zituen eta aitona-amonen etxe misterioz beteriko hura berriro ez zapaltzeko beldur aitorrezina. Telmok telefonoz esan zion zaharrari semearekin joango zela. Baimena eskatzeko modu bat zen, lekuko txiki bat eramateko baimena. Zaharrari egoki iruditu zitzaion, biloba zaharrena zen, premuaren kimu guria, eta konplexurik gabe adierazten zuen zaharrak Telmo txikiarekiko zaletasuna haren lehengusuak alboan izanda ere. Egun hartan, bazkal aurretik, Romanek despentsara eraman zuen Telmo txikia:

– Ba al dakizu ehun arte zenbatzen?

– Bai –erantzun zion umeak.

Irrati zahar baten ipurditik, klip batekin lotutako billete sorta atera zuen. Umearen pareraino jaitsi zen, hatz mamiak listuz busti eta errezo baten kadentziarekin, ehun paper bereiztu zituen.

– Orain zuk.

Mutikoak aldartea aldatu gabe zenbatu zituen.

– Behar dituzunerako. Ez inori erakutsi.

Hiru anai-arrebak eta gurasoak elkartzen ziren urteko egun bakarra izaten zen hura. Zaharrak, lehen platera zerbitzatu arte, El Diario Vasco mahai gainean irakurtzen zuen. Baina egun horretan, Telmo txikiari hontzaren ulua egiten erakutsi zion, umearen aitak eta osaba-izebek eski jauziak telebistan ikusi bitartean. Gero, aitonak ez zion bilobari hitzik zuzendu, eta Telmo txikiak, tarteka, patrikan sartu behar zuen eskua hangoa egiazkoa zela ziurtatzeko.

Gabonetan, Alazne arduratzen zen bazkaria prestatu, mahaia jarri eta zerbitzatzeaz. Enkajezko zamau zuria, alpakazko argimutila eta mahai-tresnak, hautsontzi bat aitaren aldean bazkalosteko purutxoarentzat, izotzontzia Josetxo eta Telmoren erdian txakolin botila batekin. Beti lehorregi irteten zen txerrikumea izaten zuten bigarren platererako, senide bati erosia. Ardoa, nahi beste, hogeit hamar urte baino gehiago ziren hornitzaileek Gabonen bueltan ardo eta xanpain kutxak bidaltzen zituztela Roman Lazcano e hijos enpresara. Eta itsaskiak gutxi, azido urikoa igotzen zielako zaharrei. Baina ez zen zikoizkeria. Bizitzeko modu bat zen. Dirua irabazi eta pilatzeko zaletasuna. Kirol bat bezala, karta joko bat bezala; eta irabazteko inertzia belaunaldiz belaunaldi igaro zen, futbol talde

edo alderdi batekiko atxikimendua kutsatzen den xalotasunaz, apenas gaiztakeriarik gabe.

Ama telebista aurrean lo utzita, hiru seme-alabek elkarrekin hartzen zuten igogailua. Behera iritsi aurretik izaten zuten gutunazalak zekarrenaren berri. Alazne izaten zen zenbatzen azkarrena.

Zaharraren errautsak haizatu zituzten egunean, antzerako koloreak zituen Jaizkibekek: eguzkia zuri, itsasoa beltz, belarra urdin. Ordutik ez zen itzuli. Hotza sentitu zuen oin zoletan Telmok eta autora bueltatu zen. Labarraren ertzean aparkatuta, zerua ebakiz, beldurgarria ikusten zen.

Aurreko autoa, Opel Vectra, Maiteri eskaini zion, zalapartarik gabe. Volvoa hartu bezain pronto emango ziola, nahi izatera. Ongi konpontzen ziren. Maite, ongi egindako ohea bezain erakargarria zen: garbikari usainekoa, zehaztasunez lisatuta, freskoa. Zortzi urtetan, behin bakarrik urratu zuen Telmok seigarren manamendua, semea jaio eta aste gutxira, gainera. Bere lanbidean putanerrak ugariak ziren, baina Telmok ez zituen putak gogoko, higieagatik, esaten zien kolegei. Bilboko lehengusu txiki baten ezkontza izan zen. Maitek nahiago izan zuen ez joan, umeari bularra ematen segitzeko. Komunean izan zen, trajez jantzitako bere adin beretsuko gizon batekin. Gizonak lepotik heldu zion, lapur batek bezala, eta bere lurrin bera erabiltzen zuela ohartu zen Telmo. Gizonak, belarria horzkatu eta gerrikoa askatu zion. Telmok une oro eman zion bizkarra. Bost minutuko kontua izan zen, burtsako agente biren arteko borroka zirudien. Bereiztu zirenean, sastakaia ateratzen ziotela sentitu zuen, min gozo bat, zauria agerian. Festara bueltan, hitz pare bat trukatu zituzten, euren biografiei buruzkoak. Gizonak bisita txartela eman zion, finka administratzailea zen. Azken gin tonica edan eta autora abiatu zen. Eseri zenean, postrean jandako txokolate beroz beteriko souflearen antzera sentitu zen.

Telmok, inorekin larrua jotzea baino, maiteago zuen masturbatzea. Beti jakin zuen, eta patua onartzen den naturaltasunez zeukan barneratua. Hotel batera iritsi bezain laster, komuneko papera mesanotxe gainean ipini eta eragin egiten zion. Bere onera bueltatzen zenean, Maiteri deitzen zion ongi zegoela esateko eta bideko gorabeheren eta gelako dekorazioaren berri emateko.

Beragatik izan balitz, ez zen bereiztuko. Baina Maite tematu egin zen, gauzak ez zirela horrela egiten.

– Hanka politik zituen –esan zion aitak dibortzioa sinatzear zirela—. Eta hankak dira, andre batengan, gutxien zahartzen den gorputz atala. Bazenekien?

Hanka politik zituen, belaun hezurtsuak eta izter joriak. Sinatu eta gero jatetxe batean bazkaldu zuten, bazirudien ez zela ezer gertatu. Agurtzean, eguneroko musua eman zioten elkarri, Telmoren eskola atarian.

Behin eta berriz ukabildu eta askatu zuen martxen eskutokia Telmok, eta inoiz ukitutako formarik bikainena iruditu zitzaion. Duina, boteretsua, serioa, leiala zuen autoa. Zaratarik atera gabe utzi zuen labarra atzean. Belarrak iluntzen hasiak ziren, zerua lurrera biltzen.

– Auto honetan nekez aurkituko duzu plastiko zati bat –esan zion saltzaileak salmenta egunean–. Eta hori beti da interesgarria, auto arruntek, lasto-fardelek bezala hartzen dute-eta su.

Babesturik sentitzen zen Telmo han barruan, bonbardatzen ari diren hiriko eliza barruan bezala. Eraginkorrak izan ziren ingeniarien ahaleginak autoa munduko zaratatik isolatzeko. Noizbait sentitu izandako mistikotasun hura berreskuratzen laguntzen zion auto barru hark.

Itzuli zitekeen Maiterekin, baina ez zuen berarekin bueltatzeko motibo argirik aurkitzen. Emaztea, semearen ikastolako zuzendariarekin endredatu zen, umeak lau urte zituenean. Telmok bazekien ez zuela luze iraungo, baina Maiteren presak, itxaropenak, zuzentasunak, dibortzioa eskatzera bultzatu zuten. Telmok, trabarik jarri gabe onartu zuen. Azken batean, alde on asko zituen. Bost urte pasata, bueltatu zitezkeen, baina Maitek ere ez zuen horretarako motibo sendorik aurkitzen. Nork bere etxea, autoa, soldata zuen, eta gainera, bederatziz urteko seme bat konpartitzen zuten. Egitasmo gutxi gelditzen zitzaizkien elkarrekin burutzeko.

Itzuleran, 190 kilometro orduko abiadura hartu zuen. Telmori ez zitzaion abiadura bereziki gustatzen, baina autoa trantze hartan ipintzeko gogoia zuen. Dardar sotil bat eta autoa bizirik zegoela sentitu, besterik ez.

Inoiz Telmorena ere izandako Maiteren etxe parera iritsi zenean, eta leku hoberik ezean, espaloi gainean utzi zuen autoa. Klaxona jotzea nabarmenkeria iruditu zitzaion (distiratsuegi, berriegi zegoen oraindik autoa), eta txirrina sakatu zuen. Minutu baten bueltan ama-semeak atarian zeuden. Ama, orraztu berritan, usain oneko, ezpainak ikasle batenak bezain osasungarri.

– Afaltzeko gelditu zara, ala?

– Bai. Nabaritzen al da? –galdetu zion Maitek, portaleko kristalean bere isla epaituz.

– Ez dakit. Agian. Pixka bat.

Semeak motxila handi eta hanpatua zeraman bizkarrean. Telmo, umea iragan igandetik ikusi gabe, asaldatu egin zen. Munduan gehien maitatu behar ditugun pertsonak, maitatzen zailen direnen antza dute, pentsatu zuen. Telmo txikiak aitonaren aurpegiera baitzuen: kokots eta sudur kakotzen hasiak, kopeta estua eta ilaje ilun oparoa, Maiteren begi borobil eta ezpain mardulak. Baina Maite ez zegoen maitatzen zailenen artean, bera ez.

Emakumeak musu eman zion mutikoari buruan. Aitarengana joateko seinalea zen.

– Parkean biltzen garen amak gelditu gara afaltzeko. Ez dugu zerikusi handirik gure artean, baina...

– Batzuetan ez da gehiagorik behar.

– Normalean ez da gehiagorik behar, egia da. Maitek irribarre egin zuen, Telmok beretzako nahiko lukeen buruaskitasuna iradokiz:

– Eta zuek nora joango zarete? –galdetu zuen emakumeak arinago.

– Begiratu hor parean.

Telmo txikiak korrika igaro zuen zebrabidea. Maite iritsi zen ondoren, eta Telmo apur bat atzerago gelditu zen, emazte ohiaren eta semearen ospakizunekin xamurtuta.

– Honetan bilakatu da aita, Volvo V70 batean, zer iruditzen?

– Ez ezazula horrelakorik esan.

– Hala da, gauzak diren bezala esan behar dira.

– Azkenean larru iluna aukeratu duzu...

– Kasu egin nizun.

– Baina ez duzu haurarentzako eserlekua ezarri.

– Behingoagatik ez zaio ezer gertatuko, ez da hala Telmo?

Mutikoak, atzeko eserlekuko DVDa piztu eta marrazo zuriei buruzko dokumentala atera zuen motxilatik.

– Oso aita ederra duzu –esan zion Maitek, asebetterik. Telmo autoaren muturrari begira zegoen, sorgortuta.

– Bere irribarrea dauka, konturatu zara? Emakumeak lepoa okertu zuen 90 gradu, baiezkoa eginez, amakor.

– Aspalditik nuen begiz jota.

Maitek burua auto barruan sartu zuen:

– Berri usaina dauka. Maite dut.

– Tori, esandakoa –Telmok Opel Vectraren giltza ipini zion eskuan emazte ohiari, helize urrekara bat zuen zintzilik–. Aparkalekuko giltza izango duzu oraindik, ezta?

– Bai, hor nonbait izango dut.

– Nahi duzunean hartu. Azaroan iraungitzen da aseguru.

– Mila esker, Telmo. Benetan. Golf a ilobari salduko diot, 3.000 eurogatik. Sinbolikoa da, ulertu dezan zerbait edukitzeko borrokatu beharra dagoela. Eta dirua umearen kontuan sartuko dut, ongi iruditzen bazaizu.

– Zer? –galdetu zuen auto barrutik Telmo txikiak.

– Ezer ez, segi zure pelikularekin.

– Orduan, igande gauera arte?

Telmok musu bat eman zion belarri ondoan. Bere usaina oroitu nahi zuen.

– Ongi pasa afaritan.

Ateak itxi eta motorra piztu bezain pronto, Telmok adorea berreskuratu zuen. Babesturik sentitzen zen, bakean, arriskutik kanpo. Bolanteari helduta, autoaren dardaren oihartzuna sentitu zuen eskuetan. DVDtik ateratzen zen offeko ahotsak baizik ez zuen isiltasuna zapuzten.

– Ez al zara aspertzen beti pelikula bera ikusteaz? Umeak ez zion jaramonik egin.

– Udaletxeko lagun batek esan dit, datorren urtean agian marrazo zuri bat ekarriko dutela akuariumera.

Mutikoak aurreko bi eserlekuen artean ipini zuen burua:

– Arrain guztiak jango lituzke!

Ostiralero bezala, hiriburuko saltoki-gune batera joan ziren, astebururako janaria erostera. Telmok ernegua sentitu zuen aparkalekuan autoa bakarrik utzi behar izanateagatik, eta azkar egingo zutela gaztigatu zion mutikoari:

– Azkar egingo dugu, ezta, txiki?

Aita-semeak eskutik helduta, txikleak jaten eta poltsa banarekin irten ziren supermerkatutik, nekatu ixturarekin. Saltoki-gunearen kanpoaldean, Toys 'r' us-en parean, animalien plastikozko erreplikak saltzen zituen postu bat ipini berri zuten. Telmok histrionismoa erabili ohi zuen mutikoaren zirrara pizten ahalegintzeko:

– Begira hor!, begira!, hara!, begira, uau!, zenbat!, ufa!

Mutikoaren sudur parean, koloretako azpiletan sailkatuta, narrastiak, ugaztunak, hegaztiak eta arrainak. Aitak hogeituro eurokoa eman zion. Hura zen asteburuko gutuziak asetzeko kuota, kudeatzen ikasi behar zuen diru kopurua.

Telmo txikiak marrazo zuri bat hartu zuen esku batean. Hegatsaren azpian, salneurria: 9,95 euro. Izerditan zituen eskuak. Azpilean nahasten jarraitu ondoren, marrazo tigre bat hartu zuen beste eskuan, zuria baino txikiagoa: 6,95 euro. Bertigoa sentitu zuen, mutu utzi zuen zarrada bat.

Aita autoaren giltzarekin ari zen jolasean, aparkalekura begira, botoiaren sentiberatasuna aproban jartzen.

Mutikoak plastikozko begiei begiratu zien, zuriaren erreplika leialagoa zen tigrea baina, eta handiagoa ere bai; tigrea erositako ordea, hiru euro aurreztuko zituen.

– Zein hartuko dut, aita?

– Mugi zaitez, maitea, berandu da-eta –egin zion errieta aitak, sinesgarritasun eskasarekin.

Eskuak ez ezik, Telmo txikiak izerditan zuen lepoa, bizkarrezurra. Izerdi hotza, lehorra.

– Ez dakit zein aukeratu...

Begiak itxi zituen poliki, marrazo biak ukabilduta. Zabaldutik zituenerako, erabakia hartu zuen: marrazo zuria bere lekuan utzi eta hogeituro billetea luzatu zion saltzaileari. Kanbioak eta aparatudun irribarrea itzuli zizkion hark.

Autora bueltan, atek ixtearekin bat, isiltasun hermetikoak bildu zituen aita-semeak. Munduak pelikula mutu eta graziaz gabeko baten itxura zuen han barrutik.

– Pozik zaude? –galdetu zion aitak.

– Bai –erantzun zuen Telmo txikiak, urduri oraindik. Bera ere pozik zegoen. Eserlekuan hondoratu zenean, berri usainaren amaieran, kirats ustelkara bat sartu zitzaion biriketara ordea.

Bera ere noizbait ondasun bilakatuko zen, luxuzko orga edo malko itxurako igerilekua, nork jakin.

Erretrobisoretik begiratu zuen: marrazoa hegazkin bilakatuta, airea zeharkatuz ari zen umea.

Urtebetetze festa

Izadik kirolen bat egin behar lukeela esan zidan irakasleak kurtso amaierako bileran, “barruan duen indarra ezagutu”, “beste jende mota batekin egon”, “harreman berriak egin”, “autonomia”. Horrelakoak eta gehiago esan zituen irakasleak, urtero legez. Harritu plantak egin nituen, baina banekien. Bere gainean egoteko ohitura neukan, onena hori zela uste nuen, edo beharbada ez nekien, ez nengoen seguru. Hainbeste desio izan nuen umeaz ahalik eta gehien gozatzea. Aurretik ez nuen ez ezer ez inor luzaz zaindu, eta ematen zuena baino konplikatuagoa zen, maitatzea baino askoz zailagoa. Asteburuak, oporrak, gure egunak... unitate didaktikoen segida bat balitz bezala antolatzeraz ohituta nengoen, azken urtean ordea nekatuegi nengoen, eta, agian horregatik, gure arteko harremana okertzen hasi zen.

Uda hartan, piragua ikastaro batean apuntatu nuen bere borondatearen kontra. Klub atariraino laguntzen nuen eta bukatzean itzultzen nintzen bila. Bi ordu haietan egin nahi behar nituzkeen gauza guztietan pentsatzeak itolarria sor tzen zidan. Askatasuna beharrean, tristura eta ezinegona sentitzen nituen. Izadi han utzi, aparkatu eta Santiago auzoko kafetegi batera joaten hasi nintzen. Han, egunkaria irakurriko nuen aspaldiko partez, edo besterik gabe te bat hartuko nuen eguzkipean. Baina ezin izaten nion eutsi, eta ibaira itzultzen nintzen. Banku batean eserita egoten nintzen uretara begira, piraguetan zeuden hamarnaka haurren artean nirearen bila: beti zegoen taldetik aparte, salbuespenik gabe, nahiz eta ez nekien benetan hala zen edo nire irudipena zen.

Besteetan bidegorrira joan eta, gehiegi urrutiratzeko beldurrez, atzera-aurrera ibiltzen nintzen. Ordura arte ez nuen bazter hura ezagutzen. Ezkerrean etxe txurigorri txikiak, parean fabrikak eta eskuinean Irungo etxe orratzak. Baina ingurua bakean utzi eta errekarik bakarrik erreparatuz gero, leku basati bat da aurrean daukazuna, behin eta berriz joan eta behin eta berriz gauzak sentitzeko moduko leku bat. Nonbait entzuna nuen, antzina, mugimenduan zegoen urari begira jartzeko gomendatzen zirela triste zeuden emakumeei, mugimendu hark barruko sentipen txarrak askatuko zizkielakoan. Nolanahi den ere, espero gabeko ñabardurak aurkitu nizkion errekarik: padura usaina eta lupetzaren misterioa deskubritu nituen.

Azken egunean Izadik gutun-azal bat erakutsi zidan, bila joan nintzaionean.

– Claudiak bere urtebetetze festara gonbidatu nau. Bihar.

Izurde bat ageri zen gonbidapen txartelean; atzealdean eskuz egindako mapa bat, puntu gorri batekin, kalearen izena eta eguna, “ekarri bainujantzia”, espainolez idatzita.

– Nor da Claudia?

– Lagun bat.

Leioha jaitsi eta deiadar egin zuen:

– Claudia!

Bisera zeraman neskatila batek besoa altxatu zuen urrunean. Izadi baino altuagoa eta gizenagoa zen.

– Utzi dit! –oihu egin zuen Izadik.

Urtebetetzeari esker agian beste bizpahiru ordu marruska nitzakeen.

– Orban bat dauka aurpegian –esan zidan–, horregatik eraman behar du bisera belarridun hori.

– Ez nengoen ohartuta –eta neskatoari begiratu nion ongi erreparatzeko, baina ordurako joana zen. – Ez zarelako inoiz ni ikustera etorri.

Tirabira txiki bat izan genuen. Kontu handiz azaldu nion niretzako astia behar nuela eta berak ere ni gabe egoten ikasi behar zuela. Ez nion kontatu urrutitik beha egoten nintzela. Izadi isilik gelditu zen. Zegoen tokitik alde egiteko erabiltzen zuen. Isiltasunaren erresuma, esaten nion, noiz itzuli behar duzu isiltasunaren erresumatik?

– Nolakoa da, granatea? –galdetu nion gehiago jakiteko gogoz–. Granatea al da? Hitz egiten ari naiz. Nolakoa da, morexka?

Kasik gure etxe parean egon arte ez zidan erantzun.

– Marroia. Bizkarretik azal puska bat kendu zioten eta aurpegian jarri. Uste dut besteei nazka ematen diela, baina niri ez.

– Ongi –esan nion–. Hori oso ongi dago.

Atzerako ispilutik begiratu nion poza erakusteko, baina aurrera begira zegoen serio. Begi politak ditu. Jende askok esan izan dit. Hazia eman zuen tipoa ere polita ote zen galdetzen diot tarteka nire buruari. Jende ederrak horrelako gauzak egiten ote dituen, jende ederra baino gehiago jende berezia ez ote den horrelako gauzak egiten dituen. Berezia, onerako zein txarrerako. Izan al zaitezke berezia onerako zein txarrerako izan gabe?

Pentsakizun horietan hasten nintzenez urrunegi joaten nintzen, eta gero kostea egiten zitzaidan bueltatzea.

Izadik ez zion etxean egindako zerbait bakarrik oparitu nahi. Nire irizpideen kontra, Soy Luna-ren egunerokoa erosiko genion, elkarrekin bizkotxo bat prestatzearen truke.

– Ongi iruditzen al zaizu?

– Berdin zait –esan zidan Izadik.

Baina nik egin egin nahi nuen. Biok batera sortutako zerbait. Politak iruditzen zitzaidan horrelako aukerak aprobetxatzea. Izadik tratua onartu zuen. Aztoratuta zegoen. Besteen etxeak ikustea maite zuen gehien, eta Claudiarena nolakoa ote zen espekulatzen aritu zen:

– Aberatsak direla uste dut. Pizina dutela esan dit. Eta jolasteko gela bat dauka, jostailuz betea.

– Gela asko izateak esan nahi du, lan asko egin behar dela horiek ordaintzeko. Eta lan asko egin behar izateak esan nahi du, elkarrekin egoteko denbora gutxi dutela.

– Ezin al diogu irin normala bota?

– Integrala da normala.

– Zaharrentzako da.

– Zuri gustatzen zaizu ba.

– Besteei ez.

– Goxoa aterako da, zaude lasai.

– Gu izan al gaitzke aberatsak?

– Bagara –behin eta berriro hitz egiten genuen gai honen inguruan, baina Izadi ez zegoen amore emateko prest–. Bi logelako etxea dugu biontzat. Hozkailua beteta. Gutariko bakoitzak armairu propio bat dauka. Balkoi handi bat daukagu, marrubiz betea. Lau aitonaamona dituzu. Lagunak. Furgoneta bat. Zapata pare pilo. Ez dugu inoiz goserik pasatu. Ez gaude gaixorik. Udan oporretan joaten gara.

– Bai, ja!

Arrautzak irabiatzeari utz ziezaion keinua egin nion.

– Nik amaituko dut. Zoaz. Mesedez.

Ez nion begiratu. Nik ere banekien isiltasuna behar bezala kudeatzen. Izadik, egongelan zegoen ficusaren hostoak garbitu zituen banan-banan, kotoi eta urarekin, ume-umetatik egiten erakutsi nion bezala, lasaitu beharra zeukanean. Bukatu zuenean besarkatzera hurbildu nintzen, baina alde egin zidan. Gauza eder bat egin nahi eta haserre bukatu. Urrea zabor bilakatzen genuen alkimistak ginen.

– Etorri sukaldera, hau gustatuko zaizu!

Lasaiago zegoen eta egiten utzi nion. Bihotz formako moldean sartu genuen labera. Ateratakoan algarrobo krema ipini genion barnean eta, sari gisa, glas azukrearekin hautsezta zezan utzi nion. Gero apainapain jarri zen. Pekatxoak zituen sudurrean, eguzkiarengatik.

Berehala iritsi ginen planoari jarraituta. Bi globo gorri zeuden kanpoko hesian.

– Erre egin zen –esan zidan kotxetik irten aurretik–. Horregatik du mantxa hori –ispiluan begira jarri zen eta masaila atximurkatu zuen, keinu itsusi bat eginez–. Bizkarretik azal puska bat kendu zioten eta aurpegian jarri, baina hala ere nabaritu egiten zaio.

Euskal estiloko etxe zahar baina txukun bat zen, huntzak eta bugainbilea batek estaltzen zuten fatxada erdia, landaredia sarrerako hesiaren kontra hazten eta metatzen zen. Izadi aurretik joan zen opariarekin. Kolorezko globoek etxearen atzealdera eramán gintuzten, lorategira. Claudia berehala etorri zen Izadiren bila. Uste baino handiagoa zen, azal eta haragizko arabeskoek masailaren erdia baino gehiago hartzen zioten, eta buruko larruzal pixkatxo bat ere bai. Horregatik ez

balitz ume ederra zatekeen, begi beltzak eta ezpain mardulak. Begira gelditu nintzaion irribarrez. Mahai baten bueltan bi emakume zeuden, zigarro bana erretzen. Haietako batek, gu ikusitakoan, loreontzi baten kontra zanpatu zuen eta nigana etorri zen.

– Nieves naiz, Claudiaren ama, eta zu bere laguntxo berriaren ama izango zara, ezta?

– Izadirena, bai.

Rita Hayworthen orrazkera zeraman, ongi pentsatutakoa. Berak ere desitxuratuta zuen aurpegi erdia, eta adats ilun izurkara ur-jauzian erortzen zitzaion sarraskitutako zatiaren gainean, estali asmoz.

Mahaira eserita zegoen beste andrea bankutik altxatu zen, poltsa hartuta.

– Pare bat ordu barru etorriko naiz –pizina puzgarrian zeuden haurrengana joan zen–. Neskak! Jator ibili, gero azalduko naiz zuen bila –eta guregana jiratu zen–. Nieves, ekarri musu bat.

Lotsa eman zidan nik ere alde egin behar nuela esateak.

– Bizkotxo hau egin dugu Izadik eta biok –esan nion beste andrea desagertu zenean.

– Eskerrik asko! Hor ipiniko dut.

Walt Disneyren pertsonaiekin apainduriko zamaua eta platerak zeuden terrazako mahaian, plastikozko ontziak arto-krispetaz gainezka, sandwichak, ozpinkiak, litro eta erdiko freskagarriak.

– Bihotz formakoa, bai polita! –haurrengana zuzendu zuen begirada, profilez ez zitzaion deus nabaritzen–. Claudia, ikusi zer ekarri dizun zure laguntxoak!

Izadiz eta Cludiaz gain beste bi neskatila zeuden han, hamar-hamaika urtekoak denak.

– Kafetxo bat nahi? –eskaini zidan.

Irri egiten zuenean ahoa desitxuratzen zitzaion, goma batek ezpain batetik tiratuko balio bezala.

– Ez dut kaferik hartzen, mila esker.

– Agian mandaturen bat egiteko aprobeixatu nahi duzu, lasai hartu, konponduko naiz. Urteak udan betetzeak hori dauka, kurtsoan zehar baino jende gutxiago etortzen da festara, zer egingo diogu. Claudia ohitu da, nonbait. Baina hasieran, ez dakizu zer izan zen hura! Orain alaba arduratzen da hemen nor egongo den jakiteaz eta gonbidapenak egiteaz. Lautik hiru etorri dira –ahotsa apaldu zuen–. Eta ni pozik, jakina.

– Gelditu egingo naiz, inporta ez bazaizu. Ongi egoten da hemen.

Egurrezko bankuan eseri nintzen, bere aldamenean. Mahatsondo baten azpian zegoen, gerizpean.

– Etorri ginenean landatu genuen hori, duela zortzi urte, eta begira nola dagoen.

Gora begira gelditu ginen biak. Nievesek begiak itxi zituen. Narrasti bat zirudien horrela jarrita. Erredura bat zen. Lepotik behera jarraitzen zuen. Begiak itxi nituen nik ere. Eta hala egon ginen Nievesek hasperen egin zuen arte:

– Senarra tematu zen. Berak egin zuen egitura hori lau hesolarekin. Logroñoeko herri txiki batekoa da, umetan Bilbora joandakoa, eta etxeko patioan horrelako bat omen zeukaten. Bilbotik hona etorri ginenean jarri zuen, eta begira urte gutxitan nolakoa egin den—esan zuen, dilinda egiten zuten mahats mulkoei begira—. Arrazoi duzu, ongi egoten da hemen.

– Nik ez daukat eskurik. Landare-dendan gogorrenak erosten ditut beti, itxurari apenas begiratu gabe. – Nik ere ez pentsa... Arreta eskatzen dute, fedea eta konfiantza. Batzuk bakean utzi behar dira, zenbat eta kasu gutxiago orduan eta ederrago —azkabal luzeen artean tipulin bat hartu eta ahoratu egin zuen.

Gora begira gelditu ginen berriro ere. Mahatsondoaren adarrak gorriak ziren eta odola garraiatzen zutela zirudien. Enbor eskas eta ezpaldu hartatik hainbeste bizitza atera zitekeenik...

– Ederki pasatzen ari dira —esan nion piszinarantz jiraturik.

– Haurrak hurrekin ondoen. Zurea ere alaba bakarra al da?

– Bai.

– Orduan jakingo duzu zertaz ari naizen. Eta begiak itxi genituen.

Haurrak toaletan bilduta eseri ziren mahaira. Izadi, hezur eta azal, dardarka ari zen, ezpainak ubelduta. Arto-krispetak erakutsi zizkidan eta jateko baimena eman nion, okasio berezi bat zen. Ahalegin handia egin behar izan nuen eskutada bakoitzak gordetzen zuen pozoia ez neurtzeko. Bi ahizpek paperezko poltsa bat atera zuten aulki baten azpitik eta Claudiari eman zioten: tutu arrosazko gona zuen pijama bat. Claudiak berehala jantzi zuen.

– Ooo... Bai polita! —esan zuen Nievesek. Claudiak gonatxoa atondu zuen, eta besoak altxatu zituen balleteko figura bat itxuratuz eta bere ardatzaren inguruan jiraturik. Groteskua iruditu zitzaidan. Erantzi zuenean, masail bilakatutako bizkar txatala ikusi uste izan nion.

Izadik ere bere oparia eman zion. Zabaldutu zuenean besarkada batean estutu zuen Claudiak:

– Soy Luna!

Izadi gorritu egin zen. Bere besoak Claudiaren bizkarretik gora igotzen ikusi nituen, guztiz pausatu gabe. Claudiak Izadiren ama zirudien, nahiz eta hilabete batzuk zaharragoa soilik izan.

– Crema eman. Ez dirudi, baina eguzki honek erre egiten du —esan zien Nievesek hurrei crema pote bat jaurtiz.

Eta lasterka alde egin aurretik, Claudiari heldu zion. Nievesek txorrotada bat jarri zion eskuetan, eta honek gorputz osoan zabaldutu zuen. Amaitu zuenean, Nievesek aurpegian zabaldutu zion hatz txikerraz, leunki, erreduraren gainean bi geruza

jarriz. Claudiak begiratu egin zidan ni ere begira nengoen jakiteko. Irribarre egin nion... dena ongi dago, mundua perfektua da, zu perfektua zara adierazi nahian. Arnasa bota zuen.

Gortina moduan erabiltzen zuen ile xerloa belarri atzean ipini eta krema ipini zuen Nievesek, geruza lodiago bat jarritz erreta zuen aurpegiaren erdian. Orduan ere ez nuen egiten ari zenetik begirada apartatu, ez nuen nahi gaizki senti zedin. Bukatutakoan, ilea belarri atzetik askatu eta estilo handiarekin bota zuen aurpegi gainera. Irribarre egin zidan. Beheko hortzoia ikusten zitzaion irribarre egitean. Sobera gelditu zitzaion krema belaunburuetan zabaldu eta zigarro bat piztu zuen.

– Kontuz ibili behar dugu ditxosozko azal honekin, demonio –esan zuen.

– Nongoak zarete? –galdetu nion.

– Dagoeneko ez dakit!

– Hendaia ez da toki txarra berriro hasteko –esan nion.

– Hala esaten dute –esan zuen berak, neu halakorik behin ere entzun gabe nengoen arren– Gu ongi gaude, askoz hobeto.

– Jende asko dago berriro hastera etortzen dena –esan nuen, bion arteko espazioa hitzek bete zezaten–. Beste bizimodu bat, beste klima bat, beste ohitura batzuk, beste hizkuntza bat... Batzuetan ongi dago besteek esaten dutena ez ulertzea, ez duzu uste? Eta hori dena salto batera.

– Salto batera, bai. Eta zuek zer egiten duzue hemen? Zuek ere ez zarete eta hemengoak...

– Gu higiezinaren erbesterratuak gara, edo hori esaten dut galdetzen didatenean. Baina parte batean, zero kilometroaren bila etorri nintzen, badakizu haur bat izatea zer den...

– Bum! –egin zuen ozen–. Bonba bat zure egunerokotasunaren erdian, baina zuk bakarrik entzun duzu leherketa, ezta?

– Beste inork ez.

– Istripua eta gero aldaketa bat behar genuen.

– Istripu bat izan zenuten?

Erretzen ari zen zigarroa seinalatu zuen.

– Gaizki itzalitako zigarrokin bat... Eta etxeak su hartu zuen lo geundela.

– Aspaldi?

– Uda honetan bederatzi urte. Bilbon bizi ginen orduan. Auzoan ezagunegiak ginen eta ez zen erraza jendearekin... egotea. Lanetik etxera itzultzen ginen ahalik eta jende gutxienarekin gurutzatzeko, eta asteburuetan Logroñora joaten hasi ginen, inork ezagutuko ez gintuen inguru baten bila. Azkenean, aseguru etxea portatu egin zen, udaletxeak ere dirutxo bat eman behar izan zigun. Eta begira. Clementeri bururatu zitzaion hona etortzea. Decathlonen lan egiten du, bulegoetan, eta trasladoa eskatu zuen Irunera, eskatu eta eman. Ez gara gauzei hamaika buelta ematen dizkioten horietakoak. Oso apasionatuak gara. Eta

hemen gaude. Dibortziatuta? –galdetu zidan, asmakizunaren erantzuna etorri izan balitzaio bezala.

– Ez, ez... Izadi eta biok bakarrik gara.

– Hori ere ongi dago.

– Bai, dena bezala.

– Zerbait hartu nahi al duzu? Ni egarriak nago, garagardo bat hartuko dut, beste bat nahi? Moscatoa ere badugu. Ardotan hori bakarrik gustatzen zait niri.

– Garagardo bat hartuko dut nik ere, mila esker. Joan zenean haurrei begira gelditu nintzen. Ez nion esan ez nuela tantarik edaten, gustu txarrekoa iruditu zitzaidan, ez dakit ongi zergatik. Belarretan eserita zeuden. Claudiak hitz egiten zuen, ahizpak adi-adi zituen, baina Izadi bizkarka zegoen, lurrean zegoen zerbaiti begira. Hara joan eta aurrera begira eser zedin eskatzeko gogoari eutsi nion. – Eta okerrena ba al dakizu zer den? –esan zuen Nievesek etxe barrutik itzuli zenean–. Aurten berriz hasi naizela erretzen! Ez daukat erremediorik. Azkenean nire enpresa propioa martxan jartzen hasi naiz eta estresa, badakizu. Behintzat inork ez dit errietarik egiten, zailagoa izan behar du hogeit ureterekin hasten direnentzat, ezta? Zuk zertan lan egiten duzu, gehiegi galdetzea ez bada?

– Anbulatorioan, administrazioan. Ez da niri gustatzen zaidana, baina gauza onak baditu, buruan ez dit toki gehiegi hartzen. Udan oporrak batzeko aukera ematen dit, Izadirekin lasai egoteko, geure kasara.

– Denbora! Hori ongi dago. Neska horiei deituko diet, tarta jatera etor daitezen ama bila etorri aurretik.

Tragoa eman ondoren, aho ertzetik ihes egiten zion garagardoa lehortu behar zuela ohartu nintzen.

Nievesek kandelak piztu zituenean *Zorionak zuri* kantatu genion denon artean Claudiari. Izadik ezpainak mugitzen zituen baina hotsik atera gabe, sabeliztuna falta balitzaio bezala. Claudiak arnasa hartu zuen eta, masailak puztuta, su txiki haien parean jarrita itxaron zuen abestia amaitu arte. Sugarrek egiten zituzten figuren antzekoak zituen azalean estanpaturik, eta zegoen bezala, suaren atzean makurtuta, orbanak mugimendua zuela zirudien.

Txalo jo genuen itzali zituenean. Claudia kabitu ezinda zegoen. Hunkiberegia zela ikusten zen eta hori ere ez zen ona. Eskuak aurpegiaren alde banatan jarrita zituen, begiak beteta.

Donutsekin egindako tarta banatu zuenean zati bat eskaini zidan Nievesek:

– Urtean behin ez du kalterik egiten.

Ezetz esan nion. Gure bizkotxoak ukitu gabe zegoen. Trukean luzokertxo bat hartu nuen esker ona erakutsi nahian, nahiz eta baziren gutxienez hamar urte ez nuela halakorik jaten.

– Hara! –esan zuen Nievesek bozina hotsa entzun zuenean–. Zuen ama heldu da, jantzi egin beharko duzue!

Gominolak eskuetan alde egin zuten neskek, Nieves eta Claudia etxe atariraino joan ziren agurtzera. Izadirengana hurbildu nintzen. Aulki tolesgarri batean eserita zegoen, Claudiak erdizka utzi zion trentza heltzen.

– Ongi pasatzen ari al zara?

– Bai.

– Bai? Ez dirudi. Laster joan egingo gara.

– Oraindik ez –eskatu zidan.

– Oraindik ez, laster.

Claudia eta Nieves gerritik helduta etorri ziren, irribarrez, sekretu bat gordetzen ari balira bezala. Alde berean zuten erredura, baina urrunetik ez zitzairen deus igartzen.

– Claudiak ideia bat izan du –bota zidan, alabari hitza eman ez.

– Gelditu zaitezke afaltzen? Ilusio handia egiten dit. Gelditu, mesedez –esan zuen Claudiak, lurrian belauniko eskuak otoitz egiteko maneran emanda.

– Clemente berehala etorriko da janari txinatarrarekin, beti erosten du gehiegi eta bi egunez jan behar izaten dugu –lagundu zion Nievesek–. Denetarik jaten duzue? Entsalada bat ere egin dezaket bestela, edo tortillatxo bat, edo biak.

Izadiri begiratu nion. Zaila egin zitzaidan desio zuena antzematea.

– Mesedez! –esan zuen Claudiak–. Nire urteak dira! Masail tarratatuari begiratu nion.

– Zergatik ez –erantzun nuen bion izenean.

Izadi gure bizkotxoaren parean jarri zen, begirabegira. – Nahi al duzu pusketak bat? –galdetu zion Nievesek–. Ez izan lotsarik, neska –gure bizkotxotik hiruki bat moztu zuen eta eman egin zion.

Izadik gogotik jan zuen. Hunkitu egin nintzen. Nievesek ere zati bat hartu zuen eta koska txikiak egin zizkion, eskua aho parean jarrita papurrei irteten ez uzteko.

– Mundiala dago. Errezeta eman behar didazu –esan zidan–. Txaketa bat nahi? Edo barrura joango gara? Freskatu egin du.

Jasotzen lagundu nion eta etxera sartu ginen. Haurrak goiko pisura joan ziren lasterka. Nievesek sukaldera egin zuen ontziekin, ni egongelan bakarrik utzita. Gauzez beteta zegoen. Altzari klasiko ilunak zumitzezkoekin nahastuta, koloretako kuxinak, landareak. Behin-behinekoa zirudien ordena arraro bat zen, baina txukun eta garbi zegoen. Mahaitxoaren gainean lau mando zeuden tapete baten gainean. Traste elektronikoen ugarien argitxo gorriak ikus zitezkeen nonahi. Ele itxurako sofa batek hartzen zuen espazio gehien, hormari itsatsitako telebista erraldoi baten parean jarrita. Beheko suaren zuloan panpinak. Gainean, marmolezko hegian, nonbaiteko souvenirra zen maskorrekin egindako sagu bat eta ondoan oinak kiskalita zituen metalezko kristo gurutziltzatu bat. Egongelara itzuli zenean baztertu egin nuen begirada.

– Nork daki jotzen? –galdetu nion, sofa atzean zegoen Yamaha teklatua seinalatuz.

– Claudiak eta biok pixka bat –esan zuen Nievesek—. Baina benetako artista Clemente da. Lehen –eskuarekin iragan urrun bat irudikatu zuen, sutearen aurretikoa, ulertu uste izan nuenez— talde batean jotzen zuen. Oso ongi kantatzen du, baina orain etxekoentzat bakarrik egiten du, pena da.

Sofan eseri ginen. Sandaliak kendu zituen eta eroso eseri zen. Nik ere gauza bera egin nuen. Goiko pisuan batetik bestera zebiltzan haurren urratsak entzuten ziren. Lasaigarria zen. Dena aldatuko duen unea, pentsatu nuen, zu ez zauden eta zure alaba zuk nahi zenukeen hura bilakatzen den unea. Orduan, kristalezko mahaitxoaren gainean beraien argazki bat zegoela ikusi nuen, hirurena. Zaila zen ez begiratzea. Ezeroso sentitu nintzen, nahiz eta Nievesek ohituta egon behar zuen. Areago, agian plan baten baitakoa zen guztia.

Eskuetan hartu, eta niri erakutsi aurretik, kristal gainean putz egin eta soineko muturrarekin garbitu zuen.

– Hau da gelditzen zaigun argazki bakarrenetakoa. Estudioko argazkia zen. Lurrean eserita zeuden, oinutsik eta zuriz jantzita. Nievesek soineko udatiarra zeraman, begizta bat eskotean, garaiezina zirudien irribarrea. Mediterraneotar edertasuna zuen, haragitsua, erraza. Gizona ez nuen horrelakoa irudikatzen: eguzkiak beltzarandutako azala zuen, kopeta zabala, gainetik soiltzen hasitako ilea konpentsatzeko bezala melenatxo duin bat, alkandoraren hiruzpalau botoi zabalik, galtza barrenak tolesetan jasoak. Handia zirudien, besoaren gainaldean eskorpioi baten tatuaiak zuen, larruzko eskumuturreko batzuk. Claudia zen serio zegoen bakarra, urte eta erdi inguru izango zuen.

Azal eta oihal haiek guztiak sutan irudikatu nituen tabernetako aho-zapien moduan.

– Bai familia ederra –esan nuen.

– Bai, ezta? –beregana jiratu zuen argazkia eta begira gelditu zitzaion—. Horrelakoak ginen. Pelikula bat ikusten ari ginen senarra eta biok, eta loak hartu gintuen sofan. Mirari bat izan zen bizirik irtetea. Eta Claudia... Bera bai miraria, fondoko gelan egiten zuen lo! Nire senarrak atera zuen... –ilezko errezelari eragin zion koket—. Nik ikusi nuen sugarren artean pasatzen eta bueltan etortzen, manta batean bilduta zuela umea, sutan biak... Ñabardurak niretzat gordeko ditut, sinetsiezadazu, hobeto horrela.

– Claudia behintzat ez da ezertaz gogoratuko...

– Zorionez ez... Dena galdu genuen. Etxea, arropak, argazkiak, oroitzapenak, Clementek eta biok elkarri idatzitako gutunak... Asko idatzi izan diogu elkarri, soldaduska garaitik hasita, pentsa, soldaduskatik etorri zenean Ingalaterrara joan zen ingelesa ikastera... Orain edozein ume-mokok egiten du hori, baina garai

hartan ez. Hamazazpi urtetatik elkarrekin, pentsa. Dena galdua. Ez dakizu zer den hori... Dena galtzea... Dena!

– Eta begira orain –esan nion, zer zen oso ongi ez nekien zerbait adierazi nahian.

– Begira orain –baieztatu zuen berak, konforme–. Oraindik amesgaiztoak izaten ditut egongelan geneuzkan gazazko gortinekin... Haizeak harrotzen ditu eta etxe barrurantz sartzen dira, han daude flotatzen, fantasmak dirudite nire buru gainean ni sofán nagoen bitartean, batzuetan telebistari begira, besteetan haurra aldamenean lo daukadala, eta kolpetik sutan daude... Orduan esnatu egiten naiz... –begiak zabaldu zituen eta tente jarri zen sofán–. Isiltzera noa, niri ez zait eta besteen ametsak entzutea gustatzen, seko aspertzen nau. Zuri?

– Ez dakit, ez dut inoiz horretan pentsatu.

– Gorroto ditut besteen ametsak.

– Niri besteen oporraldiekin gertatzen zait hori. Barre egin zuen.

– Berriro jaio zineten. Meritu handia daukazue.

– Bai, baina gauza bat esango dizut: ez digu ezertarako balio. Normala denetik aparte bizi gara, arauz kanpo, eta jendeak ezin du disimulatu. Karitatea ez denean biguina da, eta badira beraien ontasuna gurekiko adeitasunarekin frogatzen dutenak ere, miserable asko dago munduan, ezin duzu imajinatu; jende ona ere bai, justuak izateko hori ere esan beharra dago, jende ona egon badago.

Ni talde horietako bakar batean sartuko ez banintz bezala hitz egin zidan, arraroa izan zen.

– Baina niri Claudiak ematen dit beldur gehien, nola moldatuko den aurrerantzean, eta hori zirujauak sorgin hatzak dituztela, ikusi behar zenuen... Begira zein polita zen... Eta da... niretzat behintzat.

Irribarre barkaberari eusten ahalegindu nintzen.

– Oso polita da. Baliabide asko dituen neskatxa dirudi gainera. Izadi txora-txora eginda dago berarekin. Gustatu egin zitzaion hori entzutea.

– Bai, baditu.

– Eta alaia...

– Bestea ez dakit, baina hor bete-betean asmatu duzu.

Clementek txistu jo zuen etxeko atea ireki bezain pronto, eta Nievesi keinua aldatu zitzaion, sotilki, baina nik nabaritu egin nuen, irri ezdeus batek irten zion, lasaituzkoa edota pozezkoa iruditu zitzaidana. Pentsatu nuen agian ordura arte ez zela ongi egon nirekin, eta bat-batean traban sentitu nintzen.

Poltsaz kargaturik iritsi zen. Aurpegi osoa zuen erreta, eta kurioski, zati bat izateak baino inpresio gutxiago eragin zidan. Begi ertzak urtzeko prozesuan bezala zituen, baina gainontzean, erredura uniforme zen, testuraz eta kolore aldaketa leunez beterikoa. Bostekoa luzatu zidan. Eskua ere erreta zuen. Nievesi muxu luzea eman eta ilea atondu zion.

– Gonbidatuak gainera, hau poza –esan zuen askatu zenean–. Non dago gure aingerutxo?

– Goian, piraguako lagun berriarekin –erantzun zion Nievesek.

Senarra argazkian baino soilduagoa zegoen, motots batean zeraman bilduta urdindutako ilea. Beste ezer esan gabe, jaka kendu zuen, pertxeroan ipini eta pianora eseri zen. Alkandoraren mahukak jaso, bi botoi askatu eta hatzak mugitu zituen airean. Eskorpioia sutatik libratu zela ikusi nuen.

Zorionak zuri-ren lehenengo notak jo bezain pronto jaitsi zen lasterka Claudia. Atzetik besarkatu zuen fuerte aita. Nieves zutik gelditu zen egongelaren erdian, harrotasunez begira. Izadi ere jaitsi eta nire ondoan eseri zen sofan; besoa pasatu nion sorbalda gaintetik eta nigana erakarri nuen. Kantua jotzen amaitu zuenean, Clementek galtzaren patrikatik oihalezko mukizapi bat atera eta aurpegia lehortu zuen. Nievesek garagardo fresko bat ipini zion teklatu gainean, deus galdetu gabe, eta trago luze bat eman ondoren teklatura itzuli zen.

– Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide. No escape from reality... –kantatu zuen a capella eta falsetoa eginez–. Open your eyes. Look up to the skies and see... I’m just a poor boy. I need no sympathy, because I’m easy come, easy go...

Nievesek eta Claudiak elkarri begiratu zioten familia barruko koderen bati segika akaso.

Izadi eta biok ere hurbildu egin ginen. Clementek Bohemian Rhapsody-ren lehen akordeak jo zituen, burua batera eta bestera astinduz.

– Mamaaa... just killed a man... Put a gun against his head. Pulled my trigger, now he’s dead.

Aurreikuspen guztien kontra ahots miresgarria zuen.

– Mamaaa... life had just begun... But now I’ve gone and thrown it all away...

Lehenengo ahapaldiaren ondoren gugana jiratu zuen burua, irribarre nekatu batekin. Ordurako bere inguruan geunden denok, sofaren kontra bermatuta, ama bakoitza bere alabarekin dantza txikian, isilik, hain izaten ari zen hauskorra eta ederra une hura.

Bukatu zuenean bertan egon zen eserita momentu batez, guri bizkarra emanda, geldirik. Gu ere halaxe gelditu ginen, mugitu ezinda.

Jiratu zenean gaztetuta ikusi nuen, denok geunden gaztetuta eta arinduta.

Garagardoa bukatu zuen.

Nieves zigarro bat erretzera irten zen terrazara.

– Etorri, nahi baduzu –esan zidan lehenago.

– Ez, ongi nago hemen –erantzun nion. Gero Clementerengana jiratu nintzen–: Zuk ez al duzu erretzen?

– Vade retro –esan zidan, oinetakoa erortzen utzi eta txankletak jarri bitartean–. Garagardoa nahi beste, whiskiren bat ere tarteka bai, baina tabakoa! Zoaz hiri

europarretara, benetako Europara, Parisera, Bruselara edo Bartzelonara, ea zenbat erretzaile ikusten duzun han; herrialde azpigaratuetan ordea bai, saldoka –diskurtso hura behin baino gehiagotan errepikatu izanaren traza hartu nion, berak ere aspertuta zirudien bere hitzekin–. Tripa-zorriak ditut –esan zuen, tonua aldatuz eta sabela ukituz–. Eta zuek, neskak?

Gero zimiko egin zion Izadiri gerrian.

– Ume honek bizikleta batek baino haragi gutxiago dauka-eta! Ez dizute jaten ematen ala?

Izadik eskapo egin zion, edukazioa galdu gabe, eta Claudiaren atzetik igo zen goiko pisura.

– Ahots ederra duzu –esan nion Clementeri–. Harrituta geratu naiz, egia esateko.

– Ez zenuen espero, e! –esan zidan pozik, eta begira-begira geratu zitzaidan nik nahi baino luzeago.

– Ederra eta berezia.

Irri-karkaila egin zuen, *ederra* eta *berezia* errepikatuz.

Begiradari eutsi nion, serio, benetan ari nintzela jakin behar zuen, garrantzitsua zen niretzat. – Lastima ezkondata zaudela, bestela zure ezkontzan kantatuko nukeen...

– Ez nago ezkondata.

– Ez zaitetz haserretu –esan zidan eskua luzatuz–. Ez dago haserretzeko motiborik. Ez dut nire burua serio hartzen, hobeto doakit horrela.

Esku leuna zuen, hatz lodiarekin esku-gaina laztandu nion ahal izan genuen luzeen. Nieves entzun genuenean askatu egin ginen.

Ordurako txinatar janari usainak egongela gairatua zuen. Nieves loredun hule batekin sartu zen eta egongelako mahaitxoaren gainean zabaldu zuen. Gero, han jarri zituen poltsetatik ateratako ontziak eta sofako kuxinekin inguratu zuen mahaia.

Konturatu nintzen Clementeren etorrerarekin txikitu egin zela, hauspoa galdu izan balu bezala. Hala ere ez zirudien ez triste ez haserre, lasai baizik.

Claudia eta Izadi arduratu ziren estalkiak kentzeaz eta era guztietako jaki likatsuak agerian uzteaz. Clementek Moscatoa ekarri zuen. Lurrean eseri ginen denok, gu sardexkekin, haiek txinatar makilatxoekin. Nievesek begi bat kliskatu zidan topa egin aurretik. Gantxo batekin jaso zuen ilea, erredura agerian utzita. Berpiztuta zirudien berriro ere. – Urte askoan, polit hori! –esan zion Clementek Claudiari. Begiak beteta zituen, baita Nievesek ere.

Cludiak hatz puntak musukatu zituen eta putz eginez bidali zizkien musuak gurasoei.

– Oso harro gaude zutaz –esan zion Nievesek, eta musu bat bidali zion airez.

Izadi platerera begira zegoen. Kokotsetik heldu nion burua altxa zezan. Masaila laztandu nion.

Jatekoa ez zen espero bezain dramatikoa izan. Postrerako gure bizkotxo atera zuten eta denek ospatu zuten. Familiako bat gehiago sentitu nintzen. Ongi pasatu genuen. Uste dut beraiek ere ongi pasatu zutela.

Agurtzerakoan besarkatu egin nituen.

– Mila esker, benetan –bihotza ukitu nuen.

– Eskerrak zuei –esan zuen Nievesek.

– Eta segi jotzen, zoragarria izan da –esan nion Clementeri.

Ile adats bat belarri atzean jarri zidan, naturaltasunez. Nievesek begiak itxi zituen, onarpena adieraziz bezala.

Hesiraino etorri ziren. Clementek gerritik heltzen zion Nievesi, eta honek bere sorbalda gainean jarri zuen burua. Ez zen promesik egon, inoren partetik. Kopilotuaren aulkian esertzeko eskatu nion Izadiri. Eskutik emanda egin genuen bidea. Arratsalde luze hartan oso berezia zen zerbait aurkitu uste izan nuen, hondartzan maskorrak biltzen sentitu izan dudana liluraren pareko zerbait, eta eutsi egin nahi izan nion, eskapo egin ez zezan, betiko nire barruan bizi zedin, aurkikuntza gunetik apartatu ahala, poliki-poliki, lilura desegingo zela jakin arren.

Hitzatzea

Literaturak intriga eta istorioak eskaintzen dizkigu; idazleen tekniken emaitzak eta efektu bereziak; idazle batzuen trebezia mirestea; begi eta belarrien gozagarri diren asonantzia, aliterazio eta abarren edertasuna; pentsamendurako eta hausnarketarako akuilua; lagunekin eta familiarekin eztabaidatzeko gauzak ("Pertsonak ondokoarengatik behar duena: ulertzeko aski antzekoa den zerbait, arreta erakartzeko aski diferentea den zerbait, eta miresmena sorrarazteko aski ederra den zerbait" – T.S. Eliot, *Kulturaren definizioarentzako oharra*). Eta, idazle batzuen eskutik jendea ezagutzen dugu, idazle horien pertsonaiak, alegia. Bestela ezagutuko ez genukeen jendea.

Guztiok abiapuntu ezberdinak ditugu, eta bide ezberdinetan ibiltzen gara. Beraz, irakurle batzuek Eider Rodriguezen hiru ipuinotan dauden pertsonaia batzuk erraz identifikatuko dituzte: Saioaren sentazioak eta oroitzapenak familiako baserrira itzultzen denean, Londresen urte batzuk eman ondoren, eta hiri horretara itzuli baino lehen; Telmok egoera formaletan duen ondoeza, emaztearengatik sentitu ezin duen pasioa, eta, senar-emazteak banatu ondoren, oraindik emaztearekin duen menpekotasuna; alaba gehiegi babesten duela jabetzen den Izadiren ama, hori gutxiago egiteko egin nahi duen ahalegina, eta beste heldu batzuekin konektatzeko duen beharra.

Beste irakurle batzuk ez dira hain erraz harremanetan jarriko Eider Rodriguezek sortzen edo asmatzen dituen –bizitzara ekartzen dituen– pertsonaiekin. Edo baliteke irakurle batzuei pertsonaia horiek ezertxo ere ez esatea. Baina fikzioan horrelako pertsonak ezagutzeko aukera dugu, eta mundua haien ikuspuntutik ikustekoa. Eta abagune horrek mundua bestela eskuragai izango ez genukeen era batean –eta, ausaz, bururatu ere egingo ez litzaigukeena– ikustea ahalbidetzen digu.

Eider Rodriguezen fikzioak idazleak bere sorterriaren gainean duen ikuspuntua ere eskaintzen digu: Nafarroa, edo Euskal Herria, zazpi probintziako nazio bat, hiru lurralde ofizialetan banatua. Kultura baten erdigunea –kultura zentzu zabalenean– kultura horren hizkuntza da, eta, gero, kultura osatzen duten kultur arlo guztien nahasketa. Nafarroan, esaterako, kirolak kulturaren %40a izan dezake; bertsolaritza %15a; literaturak %5a... Eta kultur arloen nahasketa eta horien garrantzia erlatiboa aldatu egiten dira kultura batetik bestera. Baina leku guztietan oso gauza antzekoak sentitzen ditugu –gosea, alaitasuna, asperdura– eta, horregatik, euskaratik itzuli diren ipuinak erabat ulergarriak eta hurbilak izan daitezke ingelesez irakurtzen dituztenentzat.

Eider Rodriguezek ez ditu bere ipuinak modu txukunegian ixten. Gure egunak modu perfektuan bukatzen ez diren bezala, idazleak ez du amaiera tradizionalik eta perfektuegirik behar. Idazle honen pertsonaiek benetakoak dirudite, nahiz eta, benetako bizitzan bezala, inortxok ez lukeen nahi haiekin denbora asko igarotzerik.

“Munduak Nafarroa miretsiko du”, dio Fernando erregeak Shakespearen *Galdutako amodioen penak* antzerki lanean. Dena dela, Nafarroan, beste edozein tokitan bezala, era askotako jendea dago. Eider Rodriguezen lanak pertsonaia horien egoerak, esperientziak eta sentimenduak ikusteko leiho batzuk irekitzen dizkigu, literatura handiak bakarrik egin dezakeen moduan, eta literatura mota batzuek bakarrik egiten duten bezala.

Aritz Branton
Donostia, 2018ko ekaina

EIDER RODRIGUEZ

birthday party

[Foreword](#)

[The Third Present](#)

[Capitalism](#)

[Birthday Party](#)

[Afterword](#)

These short stories were first published in these collections: *Haragia* ('Flesh' – 2007), *Katu jendea* ('Cat People' – 2010) and *Bihotz handiegia* ('Too Big a Heart' – 2017), respectively.

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Translators:
Idoia Etxeberria, Sarah Turtle, Aritz Branton

Foreword

A Dialogue with the World

I am changeable, adaptive and sceptical by nature, but I can say this without many doubts at all: Eider Rodriguez is one of the most stimulating writers of her generation, if not the most stimulating. The fourteen years since *Eta handik gutxira gaur* ('Today comes shortly after then'), her first collection of short stories, have gone by quickly. And in that time Rodriguez' ability to tell stories has grown and grown.

The three short stories which we have chosen from the collections *Haragia* ('Flesh' – 2007), *Katu jendea* ('Cat People' – 2010) and *Bihotz handiegia* ('Too Big a Heart' – 2017) bear witness to that. A short story from each book. But they are all short stories, the genre which Eider Rodriguez has always focused on, almost going against the stream in this time when writing novels seems to be a requirement.

"The Third Present", "Capitalism" and "Birthday Party". I am not going to talk about these stories in detail, which might spoil readers' pleasure, but just let me say that they are representative of Rodriguez' work. Words, gestures and silences which have to be interpreted; people – generally men – who are looked after by other people – women, strangely enough; people who feel part of some realm somewhere; a father and son who have not touched each other over 45 years; the reign of silence in which a daughter takes refuge; families which live outside the norms, outside the normal.

As a sort of supplement, there are echoes from Eider Rodriguez' work in the film *Amama*; sports players who have entered our imagery a hundred times; people who like earning or winning money and piling it up; the smell of meadows and buried mystery which Rafael Chirbes recalls in his work. And landscapes we are familiar with, boundaries described from Hendaia, but without knowing exactly where we are when we look at Irun from Hendaia, whether in Hendaia, or in Irun itself.

As Rodriguez's editor, Gorka Arrese, put it: "This is when the steps after editing have to be taken, the time to take our culture to the centre of our society, to structure society around our culture and start a dialogue with the world." What could be better than these translations' modest contribution to that reaching out to the world.

Aritz Galarraga
Irun, June 2018

The Third Present

Seeing the Basque flag in a corner at the airport – surrounded by metal posts, lit up by the sun and blown around by the wind – gives her a strange sensation, and her lungs seem to grow smaller. She left her parents' home just four years ago, back when she was a young girl, but by then she'd already lost her home's scent of snow and smell of wood.

She phones home three times, and when her mother answers it sounds as if Mum hasn't uttered a word for months.

"You there, then?"

"Yes. Ask Dad if he can come and pick me up from Zarautz."

"I'll ask him. Call again in five minutes; these gadgets are expensive."

Her father reaches Zarautz at the same time she does; there he is in his van, the back of it full of sacks.

"Get in", he says, in his voice like a hammer on an anvil.

There's a ballad by Ganbara on the radio.

"You've lost weight."

"Long time no see", his daughter answers, dwelling on each word. And after that there's almost complete silence in the forge, only the sound of the liveliest flames trying to get out of the kiln.

Saioa has her suitcase between her legs, and she looks out at the green countryside as they rumble up the track, out at the compact houses on the hills, and then a well-loaded chestnut tree breaks the silence with its branches hitting the van.

"Your uncle's killing some geese. Been working hard recently; got to make the most of that."

On the last slope up to the village the army of chestnuts really goes for them, their prickly spikes turning against Saioa and her father.

"Got to come for chestnuts tomorrow."

Saioa takes that as an invitation.

"There aren't any chestnuts in London, you know?"

Her father steps on the brake, and the van screeches to a halt in the village square.

"You seen that?" The Old Mansion, now turned into an arts centre, has had an aluminium and glass lift stuck onto it. "Modern."

Saioa thinks her father's shown her the lift thinking she'll like it, and because he wants to please her, although she knows he'll think putting a horror like that onto the Old Mansion is vile.

"Looks like London."

"They put it up installed it early this year. They want to build a lot of houses. Town's got fashionable."

"Top fashion."

Saioa realises her father's air of mockery has not changed; not at all.

"Now young people won't have to go to London any more."

The van's brakes screech. They're in front of their house; it's white and dark, green and damp. Mum and Uncle are at the front door, Mum with her rubber gloves still on, Uncle with a knife in his hand.

"Look at Rogelio" her father tells her, pointing at the fattened goose, and that name suddenly bursts open the universe she's kept stored away so long... There she was, running wildly around a field, grabbing a giant goose by its neck, its last spasms of life on its blooded feathers, a smaller goose following on behind her...

"Give me that goose!" her uncle shouts at her father.

"You've lost weight", Mum says to her as the decapitated goose falls at Saioa's feet, its belly throbbing. She gives Saioa her first kiss; it's forceful and damp.

"What's with that ring?"

Saioa wrinkles her nose and moos like a cow.

"What a girl!"

"How's the young miss?" Uncle says, wiping his red hands on his blue overall trousers, and then he strokes her cheek so energetically that Saioa's nose-ring dances from side to side.

"Let's have dinner."

Dad pushes the twig in his mouth to one side, establishing his leadership on the funeral procession which is heading over the dark-growing grass. They've left the stumps now bereft of hope behind them. While they eat a few bits of cheese and sausage in the kitchen, Mum pushes Rogelio into the boiling water, his red arse sticking out. Then she starts to pluck the goose, looking with love at her daughter – who hasn't been able to put her suitcase down anywhere yet – between picking off each bunch of feathers. Dad and Uncle are around the table, waiting impatiently.

"I'm off to bed, I'm exhausted."

"Uncle's room is so damp we've used it for the potatoes, it's so damp; I'll tidy Granddad's up for you", her mother replies.

"I'll use yours", Uncle says to Saioa, and strokes her untouched cheek.

They don't mention Granddad much since he died. He was Dad's father, but Mum looked after him for the nineteen years before he died. Although his legs were eaten away by gangrene, he used to rule the house as if he were a general heading out to conquer. Later on, when he got really old, he lost his mind completely and stopped talking. A vegetable. Even so, they looked after him until his death as if his influence on the house posed a threat to them. From a very young age Saioa had been amazed by her mother's self-sacrifice.

Dad helps her take her suitcase up to the bedroom. Mum follows them up, a kitchen cloth hanging from her apron, and Saioa notices she's wearing the earrings she'd brought for her the first time she came back from London.

"How's the reflexology course going?" Saioa asks once Dad's gone, wanting to hear something real.

Mum, pursing her lips together as she does whenever she's uncomfortable:

"Hush, girl, they don't know anything about that."

"Not even now? So who takes you to Zarautz?"

"Dad. He thinks I go to get a massage."

"Tell him it was a present from me, I paid for the course."

"Do you still get earache?"

"At every change of season."

"We've learned how to treat that too."

Then she closes the door and leaves Saioa alone. Mum moves around like an animal, with precision but without making a noise. She's like a geisha: pale, smiling, respectful. Saioa can still hear geese being plunged into water from up there too.

Saioa only takes what she absolutely needs from her suitcase. Granddad had been as hard as dried cod when they found him there. She and Mum had found him. He had a piece of bread in his hand; his mouth was open.

No trace of him remained in the bedroom.

Mum had used to sleep next to Granddad, making sure he didn't suffocate when he ran out of oxygen. "So he doesn't suffocate to death", Mum always said, with

the extraordinary ease they talked about death in that house. Now the bed's wrapped in a sheet of plastic. One day, when she hadn't gone to school because there was a strike, Saioa had seen Mum creeping into that room like a cat, just like now, and she saw her covering up the old man's nose. "Leave him", she'd said to her, without sounding alarmed. "Leave him", she said, without raising her voice. They'd never mentioned it again. The old man died around a year after that, and Mum prepared him for his coffin by wrapping him in a blanket; no ceremonial deference there.

They held hands on the way to the funeral parlour, like newlyweds giving each other strength to deal with the new life they've just started.

"Half of it would have been enough", Mum whispered with a smile.

The coffin was the right size for a man who wasn't missing a leg.

Saioa can't sleep. Somebody's put a photo from her First Communion on the bedside table; two plaits of her hair frame her face, and there are white flowers on top of her head. She sees her finger, swollen up because of a ring which was too small for her. That day Mum had given her a portable organ, and Saioa promised she'd learn to play a song for her. It was "Bésame mucho"; the priest taught her how to play it after catechism. Saioa used to play it when the men weren't there so she could see Mum dance. As if Mum didn't have a right to seem happy when the men were there.

Saioa can hear her uncle in the room next door pissing into a plastic potty; then he spits. There's the sound of snoring along with the cock's crow.

Saioa goes downstairs at lunchtime when Mum calls her.

"Have they gone to get chestnuts?"

"Yes, early this morning. They must be about to get back", and she listens out as if the police were about to arrive. "There they are. Can you hear them?"

Saioa takes a bottle of milk from the fridge. Used to soya milk, feeling cow's milk going down her throat gives her a strange sensation.

"So you've put those earrings on at last."

"It took me a while, but now I never take them off."

"Did Dad say anything?"

Saioa's mum strokes her earrings.

"He asked if I was dressing up as a gypsy."

"They don't give you a rash?"

The earrings are silver, made in India. Until then Mum'd only had one pair of earrings, gold ones. When Saioa gave her the new ones, she'd wanted to open windows on Mum's limited, stunted world.

"How are you?"

"What a question, girl. How do you think I am?"

When her husband and brother were around, her mother was an expert at not answering questions.

Uncle brings in a raffia sack full of chestnuts.

"About five kilos."

Mum picks up a handful to see what they're like; they look like mummified hedgehogs. Saioa smells moss in the house now.

The men have handkerchiefs wrapped around their necks. They hardly talk as they eat lunch, as if they were using all their concentration on the food, and all their strength to digest it.

"On the radio they've said it's going to snow", Saioa says.

"We've got to get some wood ready after lunch", her father says. He's looking out of the window. He's never differentiated between giving orders and making requests.

"Rain and snow mixed", Uncle says.

"Have you seen what they've done to the Old Mansion? I bet you like it", Mum says mockingly to Saioa. As soon as Dad and Uncle are on the scene, mother and daughter unwittingly submit to their norms.

"Dad showed it to me yesterday. To tell the truth, I preferred it as it was before."

"They're going to build some council houses. Some people from Zarautz have moved here, and the town has to be modernised."

Uncle mops up what's left of the noodles and chicken on his plate, which he then hands to Mum. She serves each of them straight from the oven: her husband, brother, daughter and, finally, herself. A roast guinea pig each.

"Aren't you going to tell us anything?" Mum asks.

Saioa thinks it's something for them to talk about when they're alone, but even so she answers:

"I'm in charge of an organic food shop in London, Mum, and I'm planning to stay there. I get my house free of charge, so I'm saving up quite a lot", and she sinks her fork and knife between the tiny ribs.

"That's good."

"Having money's never a problem."

"I want to learn English better. I speak it almost better than Spanish!"¹

"But you speak great Spanish!" Dad says looking at Mum, and he pushes the guinea pig bones piled up on his plates onto a larger plate in the middle of the table.

When Uncle's eyes meet hers from the other side of the table, Saioa takes a pack of crème caramels from the fridge and puts it on the table. Dad, Uncle and Mum turn their plates over and put their crème caramels onto them. They eat them using their soup spoons.

"Your dad's retiring next year. He's promised me we'll go to London."

Dad makes no sign whatsoever, but Saioa knows he's embarrassed.

"Really?" she says to egg him on.

"We'll have to," and he loosens his belt a notch, shakes the bread crumbs from his trousers and goes upstairs to take a nap. Saioa thinks he's grown old.

"And what about you, Uncle?"

"I'm never going to get into one of those flying boxes", and he peels an apple with the skill of somebody who's peeled many apples, eating it using his knife and in complete silence. Then he, too, goes upstairs to have nap.

Saioa and Mum stay in the kitchen to do the washing up. Saioa's always been happy to do the washing up wherever she's lived: no excuses or disputes there. She's never felt the reluctance so many people have about cleaning dishes. For her doing the washing up is something intimate and agreeable, maybe because she and Mum have always done it at home.

"If you like we can go to your room and I'll give you a bit of reflexology. Let's see if we can cure those ears of yours."

Saioa lies down on the bed, Mum pulls her socks off and puts her feet onto her thighs. Saioa can feel Mum's damp apron on her heels. Mum has strong hands, and she massages Saioa's feet as if they were made of dough.

"How are you, then?"

Mum squeezes her little toes:

"This is where your earache comes from, that's why you feel pain there when you get nervous."

¹ The family's language is Basque, which is not connected with Spanish linguistically. However, all Basque speakers are able to use either Spanish or French, and most younger people can do so to a bilingual standard.

"And how are you, Mum?"

"How many times are you going to ask me that! I'm fine; I told you."

"I know what you said."

They keep quiet, and Saioa notices a sort of affectionate sadness on Mum's face.

"I've brought you a present."

She takes a box covered in coloured paper from her suitcase. Mum holds it up to one of her ears and shakes it.

"It sounds like a cowbell!"

Saioa laughs; seeing Mum excited moves her.

Mum unwraps the box carefully, folds the paper and lays it on the bed. She opens the box and lets its contents fall into the palm of her hand: two balls the size of golf balls tied together with string.

"They're called Chinese medicine balls", Saioa answers Mum's unasked question.

Saioa leaves her mother by herself. From the corridor she can hear Dad and Uncle snoring. There's a song by Juan Carlos Irizar coming from the kitchen; it's a request programme on the radio. She puts a handful of chestnuts in boiling water and adds a little aniseed.

While that's happening, she picks up a small axe to cut some wood for the evening. Sweating a bit's going to feel good.

Capitalism

When his mother died Telmo turned up wearing the suit he had worn a year earlier to his sister Alazne's wedding. And his sister scolded him as he walked up the steps into the church:

"You haven't even put on a different tie."

"You've got divorced since then, so what does it matter?"

"You could have worn a different tie at least."

"I'm not wearing the wedding shoes, look!"

Alazne looked down at them; they were brown, they looked like wood and had thin laces.

He was right: she did not really mind. Like an old married couple, he held her arm as they walked into the church.

Alazne was wearing a cashmere overcoat, shiny flat shoes and a white gold necklace, which she had taken from her mother's room that very day. Josetxo, the youngest of the three siblings, and Father appeared wearing dark blue suits, and they both smelt of wine.

Inside the church Alazne took hold of Telmo's and Father's hands, but the incense made Telmo sneeze, and he had to go outside. The old man, Alazne and Josetxo heard Telmo sneezing outside when the priest was silent; they were not crying. Then Roman, the old man, died. The church filled up: people love to show their admiration and fondness for the rich.

Before the service Telmo touched the cloth on top of the coffin, just as Father had done when they had chosen Mother's coffin. It was soft and smooth, but a little stiff at the same time. Father would spend the night at ease. The old man had been obsessive about cloth: he never ate in restaurants where they used paper napkins; he had never used a paper handkerchief in his life; they had to buy English linen handkerchiefs for him from a shop in Donostia (Alazne had taken charge of doing that after Mother died). The old man used to talk about the way particular pieces of cloth hung and about their quality as if he were a haute couture tailor, and he had helped his daughter to choose her wedding dress.

Alazne offered Telmo a handkerchief before he sat down:

"Just in case you start sneezing."

It had her ex-husband's initials embroidered on it in grey.

"Did you embroider it for him?" Telmo whispered to her.

He held the handkerchief by his nose, just in case.

"You've been drinking", Alazne said to Josetxo, hardly moving her lips.

"A glass of wine before I got here."

"One glass?"

Josetxo made as if to walk away, and his sister said no more.

It was the second time that little Telmo had come into a church since he had been baptised. He was between his father and his aunt, and from time to time he turned to look back to see his mother. Maite was sitting in an aisle in the middle of the church, listening to the priest – *There is enough ground in every town for the dead* – and she was dressed too lightly to be at ease in that cave. Mother and son's gazes only met once, and the boy, perhaps tired or bored, thought that his grandfather's nose sticking out of the coffin looked like a shark's fin.

The three siblings had put on weight since their mother's funeral.

They were relaxed, as if waiting for a bus, while the service went on.

Telmo left the church when it was almost over. The boy let go of his aunt's hand and went out behind him. His father was sitting in the porch stroking a dog.

Telmo had been there when the old man died in the hospital in broad daylight. Not even when his breath started to rattle did Telmo dare touch him, afraid that after spending 45 years without touching each other a single caress might destroy that fragile heart. He rang the bell for the nurse when his father breathed his last breath.

"It's over," the nurse said to him. And he could still feel that wide-hipped woman's warm hand on his shoulder. "He didn't suffer."

The nurse had not known just how right she was about that. Then she closed the old man's eyes, resting the tips of her fingers lovingly on his eyelids. Telmo asked her if she wanted him to help her strip the bed; he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"There's no need."

They his father was wheeled away on the bed. The sun was shining brightly and you could see particles of dust in the air. Telmo waited in the corridor for his brother and sister to come. In one hand he had a small suitcase full of clothes and packets of biscuits; in the other, a glass with his father's false teeth in it. He did not know where to put it; his sister snatched it from his hand and wrapped the teeth up in a cloth.

"Sometimes it really feels like you do it on purpose." Each of the old man's children had inherited a third of the company's shares and a lot of money. The notary public made them all sign a sheaf of paperwork just as their father came out of the cremator.

"We'll go from the eldest to the youngest: Telmo, Alazne, Jose Antonio... I know this is an awful moment, but that's why it's best to get it over with."

Telmo had the fanciest signature. Alazne and Josetxo's were more casual and more changeable.

As was to be expected, there were no disagreements. They all got the same, even though Josetxo had never wanted to have anything to do with the company. Alazne and Telmo had always preferred to keep him out of it, in any case.

The notary shook their hands:

"Your father always behaved appropriately. There's nobody like that among the people who do Business Studies nowadays. Young people should study more Ethics and less Marketing at university. And have Roman as their teacher. Nowadays all they want to do is get rich quick."

Telmo, Alazne and Josetxo nodded in agreement, although they were not sure exactly what he was talking about. From time to time the notary and their father had gone fishing together; that they did know. They would sit about five metres from each other, both wearing sports clothes, neither looking at each other nor speaking, the only sounds being the the rattle of the line and, from time to time, a fish's last throws inside the bucket.

The children had never known much about their father. Their mother had told them the little they knew. She used to tell them about what their father's relatives had done as if they were the brave deeds of an army, and spoke of them with the respect which the rich deserve. To give what she said emphasis, she would sit in an armchair and lower her voice. Telmo and Alazne, in particular, loved listening to her. Somehow it made them feel part of a kingdom. They heard, for instance, that their great-grandfather had been a builder back when buildings bore the names of those who had built them. Roman had started working with his father when he was thirteen, carrying sacks of sand and plaster from one place to another; at sixteen, he used go with the lorry drivers when they went to the quarry to buy tons of sand. At eighteen he had made his first deal by himself; it was with a loyal customer of theirs who wanted to enlarge his farmstead. His

father had wanted to teach him the job from top to bottom, saying that otherwise nobody would let him off if he made any mistakes.

It had taken Roman years to understand. When he realised that people in the town loved him, he also saw that they would have loved him even if he had never done anything. That was how their father had learned: with humility and determination.

By then Roman had turned the business his father had left him into a company. His children received part of their inheritance in dirty money, and Telmo decided to buy himself a car with that money: a black Volvo estate car. With the help of the salesman he chose the outside and inside fittings for a new Volvo and, there and then, as he chose the colour of the leather and the size of the air bag with that man, whose deodorant filled the office, he realised that he was missing Maite.

He wanted a metal gear stick, no doubts there.

"They won't make that for you in the factory, we'll have to get that made somewhere else", the salesman told him.

"I'll make a call."

Maite told Telmo it was a bad idea to get light-coloured leather:

"Our son's still too young. Or aren't you going to let him eat chocolate in your car?"

She was right; Maite was always right. What was more, little Telmo used to take advantage of the weekends to eat whatever he wanted when he wanted, free from his mother's rules.

"Thank you very much. Are you alright? I haven't even asked you."

"Yes, my periods have stopped and I've started getting my first hot flushes."

"I didn't know that. Is it painful?"

"No, Telmo. We're getting older, that's all. My mother got them quite young too. I've started putting on clothes like an onion so I can take things off when I go out."

"Does our son know?"

"Should he know?"

A couple of months later the car salesman called to say that his car was ready, and Telmo did not know who to go with to pick it up. If his father had been alive, he would have gone with him, they would have got into the car together, taken in that smell of new leather together. But if his father had been alive, he would not have had a new car. So that option was no good for him. Little Telmo was at

school, and calling Maite did not seem appropriate; he thought about that option twice, and the second time it seemed more suitable, but still not quite appropriate enough. In any case, it was Friday afternoon, and that was not the time to call anybody else. He had friends who would solve problems for him; neighbours he could go jogging with; and friends he could have drinks with from time to time. But he knew nobody he could go to pick up a new car with.

He went by himself in a taxi. The car salesman held his hand out to greet him.

"It got here this morning. This is great weather for you to really try it out."

The sun was white and cold in the sky. The mist was unravelling as the day went by.

Telmo lowered his eyes to look for his car, avoiding the salesman, but he was unable to make it out. The salesman, with an obvious taste for drama, held Telmo's shoulder and led him behind the saleroom. There, in the middle of a piece of land with just a few blades of grass on it, was his car; all by itself, shiny, imposing, compact, waiting for him there.

The salesman ran a finger over it and left a shiny line on the bonnet:

"You'd better take it before it gets covered in pollen", he said.

Telmo managed to hold in a sneeze.

"I've filled the tank for you; that's on the house."

As Telmo took the keys in his fist, he handed over an envelope full of bank notes to the salesman, who counted them using his fingers and lips at an incredible speed. Telmo did not move. And then the salesman looked at him like a pimp leaving a customer alone with a whore.

"You take care now. And have a good time."

When he was alone, Telmo looked straight at the car: its rear and its bodywork; its front, long, wide and grand; its lights, wide open to look out onto the world. The sidelights made it look aggressive, like an animal that might attack out of pure whim. The narrowed middle part gave it a beautiful silhouette, but without that in any way spoiling its grandeur. Its muscular rear end balanced what might, otherwise, have been excessive slimness; he was not sure about that, he would have to examine it further.

He walked around the car once more before starting it up. It was perfect.

A few years earlier picking up the car would have spoiled it for him. But since he and Maite had split up, he had got good at looking at things through his eyes only. Since they had split up he had regained his own intimacy in exchange for sending

Maite and little Telmo a monthly payment. And since his father had died, buying that intimacy seemed even sweeter to him. Cheaper, at least. And buying it more cheaply multiplied the value of what he bought, or that, at least, is how Telmo felt about it.

He moved his finger tip towards the key button, pressed it and felt the cold, hard iron. Telmo had never felt such an urgent desire to put anything anywhere. He was moved.

He shook the dust off his shoes before opening the door. There was complete silence inside. The leather on the seat was warm, almost like somebody's skin. The wrinkles and pores made it seem even more human. The gear stick was smooth and strong. He rested his cheek against the dashboard. He wanted to feel that first shiver on his face, the car's breath and deflowering as he started it up. He put the key in and, with the sound of the engine, the car shook itself into life. Telmo stoked it.

He had not felt that excitement since he got his first car. He put it into second gear and drove off the plot of land; slow and heavy, happy but prudent. Before heading for the main road he tried to get the Bluetooth working, but did not manage to. He wanted to call Maite to ask her where he could take their son in his new car. There were still a couple of hours to go, two golden hours in which he could drive up and down Jaizkibel Hill at different speeds.

Telmo and his family had always seen living next to the factory as a blessing. Above all, Alazne. Telmo's sister always sounded sad whenever she found out that anybody they knew had to drive to work.

"How many kilometres do you have to drive?" she always asked them.

"Around forty."

"Forty times two, eighty. Putting your life at risk every day to go to work? And petrol at the price it is?"

Cars were for the weekend, for holidays. By the time Telmo started driving up Jaizkibel the mist had started to thicken. He stepped on the accelerator, hardly moving the steering wheel going around bends; on the way down, the car stuck close to the surface, took off into the air again on the way back up. The car did not seem to be a machine under his control: it was more like an animal which followed its master's instinct. A free being which he feared and admired at the same time.

He stopped on top of a cliff, next to an empty hunters' shelter. There was nobody on the road; you could hear the cry of birds of prey and the breaking of the waves below. In fact, what he wanted was to show his father the car, and that was where they had scattered his ashes some months earlier. He looked up at the sky, but its white brightness hurt his eyes. He lent down and stroked the damp grass. "It's beautiful. And well-finished."

That was what his relationship with his father had been like. There had never been any questions, or high fives; only mental activities. During the last five or six years, at New Year, Roman had shared the dirty money from the company between his three children; there was between three and five thousand euros for each of them. Josetxo had not married, and Alazne and Telmo's children and spouses used to have lunch at the spouses' parents' houses on New Year's Day. It was then that Ramon would say:

"It's up to you what you do with the envelopes: if you want you can give them to your mothers-in-law or to Medicus Mundi, but I don't want to know anything about it."

Their mother used to bring out the envelopes along with the turrón, after their father had gone for his nap. So that then, too, they could not thank him. Until that moment, the envelopes would be kept in their parents' room, propped up against a jar on a chest of drawers: three guest envelopes, full of paper, bunched up by elastic bands which had been reused a thousand times. Mother would bring them to the table on the tray for the turrón, and there they would remain, surrounded by sugared almonds, raisins, small pieces of turrón, amongst dirty spoons and marzipan; there in the middle of the table, as if challenging the three children, saying "Are you going to be able to leave these thousands of euros on the table until the very end of the meal?", until, finally, Mother would start yawning and she, too, would go for her nap.

The year Telmo and Maite split up, little Telmo started to spend New Year there with his father. He was five, and he had an unspeakable fear of stepping into his grandparents' house, which was so full of mysteries for him. Telmo told his father over the phone that his son would be coming. It was a way of asking for permission, permission to take a small witness along with him. The old man was alright with that; little Telmo was his eldest grandson, his eldest child's ripe shoot, and the old man had no scruples about saying that he was his favourite

grandchild, not even when the other ones were around. That day, before lunch, Roman took little Telmo into the larder.

"Do you know how to count to one hundred?"

"Yes", the child replied.

His grandfather took a wad of bank notes in a clip from under an old radio. He crouched down to the boy's height, licked the tips of his fingers and, to the cadence of a prayer, counted one hundred notes.

"Now it's your turn."

The boy, without showing any surprise, counted them out.

"For whatever you need. And don't show them to anybody."

That used to be the only day of the year the three siblings and their parents got together. The old man used to read *El Diario Vasco*² at the table until the first course was served. But that day he taught little Telmo how to ululate like an owl while the boy's father, aunt and uncle watched ski jumping on the television. He did not talk to his grandson again after that and, from time to time, little Telmo had to put his hands into his pockets to check that the bank notes were still there. At Christmas Alazne used to make lunch, lay the table and serve the food. A white embroidered tablecloth, a nickel candlestick and the cutlery, an ashtray for Father's after-lunch cigar, an ice bucket between Josetxo and Telmo with a bottle of Txakoli in it. They used to have a suckling pig they had bought from a relative for the main course, and it was always too dry. As much wine as they wanted; for more than twenty years suppliers had been sending boxes of wine and champagne to Roman Lazcano and Sons. And just a little seafood, because that aggravated the old man's gout. But there was nothing miserly about it. It was a way of life. An ability to earn money and pile it up. Like a sport, like a game of cards; and the inertia of winning increased from generation to generation, with the same candour as supporting a football team or a political party; there was hardly anything scheming about it.

Leaving their mother asleep in front of the television, the three siblings took the lift down to street level. They used to see what was in the envelopes before they got all the way down. Alazne usually counted it quickest.

On the day they scattered Father's ashes, Jaizkibel Hill was the same sort of colour: the sun white, the sea black, the grass blue. Telmo had not been back

² In spite of the name ('The Basque Daily'), a Spanish newspaper published in Gipuzkoa.

there since then. The soles of his feet felt cold, and he got back into the car. Parked by the edge of the cliff, cut off by the sky, it looked frightening.

He had offered Maite his previous car, an Opel Vectra, without making a big thing of it. He would give her his old car as soon as he got the Volvo, if she wanted it. They got on well. Maite was attractive like a well-made bed: the smell of cleaning products, precisely folded, fresh. During the eight years they were married Telmo had broken the sixth commandment only once; just a few weeks after their son had been born, in fact. At work there were lots of men who liked to go to brothels, but Telmo did not like whores; it was a matter of hygiene, he used to tell his colleagues. It happened at a young cousin's wedding in Bilbao. Maite preferred not to go, she wanted to carry on breast-feeding their child. It happened in the toilets, with a man of his age who was wearing a suit. The man held him by the neck, like a thief, and Telmo realised that they were wearing the same cologne. The man nibbled his ear and undid his belt. Telmo had his back to him all the time. It was all over in five minutes; something like a struggle between two brokers at the stock exchange. When they moved apart he felt as if he was coming out of some brambles; a sweet pain, his wounds uncovered. Back in the dining hall they said a few words to each other, things about their lives. The man gave him a visiting card; he was an estate manager. Telmo drank his last gin and tonic and went out to his car. When he sat down he felt something like the warmth of the chocolate-filled soufflé he had eaten for dessert.

Telmo preferred masturbating to having sex with anybody. He had always known that, and accepted it as naturally as you resign yourself to your fate. As soon as he reached any hotel he would put some toilet paper on the bedside table and get down to it. When he got over it he would call Maite to say that he was okay, tell her about his trip and how the room was decorated.

If it had been up to Telmo, they would never have split up. But Maite had insisted: you didn't do things that way.

"She had pretty legs", his father had said to him when they went to sign the divorce papers. "And legs are the part of a lady's body which least age. Did you know that?"

She had pretty legs, bony knees and abundant thighs. They went to have lunch in a restaurant after they had signed; it was as if nothing had happened. As they said goodbye they gave each other their daily kiss at the gates of little Telmo's school.

Telmo took the gear stick in his hand and released it time and again; he thought it was the finest shape he had ever touched. His car was dignified, powerful, serious and loyal. He drove it away from the cliff without making a noise. The grass had started to darken, and the sky was joining up with the earth.

"You won't find much plastic at all in this car", the salesman had said to him on the day he bought it. "And that's a major point: ordinary cars catch fire like haystacks."

Telmo felt protected inside it, as if he were inside the church of a town which was being bombarded. The engineers' work had been successful in isolating it from the noises of the world. The inside of the car helped him to recover that sense of mysticism he had sometimes felt.

He could get back together with Maite again, but he could find no clear reason to do so. His wife had got together with their son's head teacher when their little Telmo was four. He had known that it was not going to last long, but Maite's hurry, hope and rectitude had pushed them into divorce. Telmo had accepted it without making any objection: at the end of the day, there were many good sides to it. After five years he could have gone back to her, but Maite, too, had found no strong reason for them to do so. They each had their houses, their salaries and, in addition to that, they shared a seven-year-old son. They were few things left for them to do together.

On the way back he got up to 190 kilometres per hour. Telmo did not particularly like speed, but he felt like putting the car through that. A slight tremor and feeling that the car was alive; that was all.

Sometimes when Telmo had gone to Maite's house, which had once been his too, he had parked on the pavement if there was no better place. Blowing the horn seemed too obvious to him – too showy: the car was still too new – and he rang the inter phone. A minute later mother and son were at the door. She was recently combed, smelt good, and her lips looked as healthy as a schoolgirl's.

"Are you going out for supper or something?"

"Yes. Is it that obvious?" Maite asked, looking at her reflection in the glass in the front door.

"I don't know. Maybe. A bit."

Their son was carrying a large, bulging backpack. Telmo, who had not seen him since the Sunday before, was excited. The people we have to love most in the world look like the hardest ones to love, he thought. Little Telmo had his

grandfather's face: his chin and nose had started to curve, his forehead was narrow, his hair dark and thick, and he had Maite's round, fleshy lips. But Maite was not amongst those hardest to love.

She kissed her son's head. That was the sign for him to go off with his father.

"I'm having supper with the other mums who get together in the park. We don't have much in common, but still..."

"Sometimes you don't need too much in common."

"Not normally; you're right." Maite smiled, giving a notion of personal independence which Telmo would have liked to have had:

"And where are you two going to go?" she asked him with a lighter touch.

"Look at that thing over there", he answered.

Little Telmo ran across the level crossing. Then Maite went over, and Telmo followed a moment later, moved by his ex-wife and his son's enthusiasm about the car.

"This is what my father's turned into, a Volvo V70."

"Don't say things like that."

"That's the way it is: you have to call a spade a spade."

"So you've gone for dark-coloured leather, then."

"I took your advice."

"But you haven't put a child's seat in."

"Just this once nothing's going to happen to him, right, Telmo?"

The boy, sitting on the back seat, turned on the DVD player in front of him and took a documentary about white sharks out of his backpack.

"You've got a beautiful father", said Maite, unable to stop herself. Telmo looked at the front of the car, bewitched.

"It's got his smile, can't you see?" Maite turned her head 90 degrees and nodded in a motherly way.

"I'd wanted it for a long time."

Maite stuck her head inside the car:

"It smells new. I love it."

"Here, as we said", and Telmo put the keys to the Opel Vectra, hanging from a golden propeller key ring, into his ex-wife's hand. "You've still got the garage keys, haven't you?"

"Yes, I must have them somewhere."

"Take it whenever you want. It's insured until November."

"Thank you very much, Telmo. Really. I'm going to sell my Golf to my niece for 3,000 euros. It's symbolic, just so she knows you have to make an effort to get things. And I'll put the money into our son's account, if that's ok with you."

"What?" asked little Telmo from inside the car.

"Nothing; keep on watching your film."

"So see you on Sunday night?"

Telmo gave her a kiss next to her ear. He wanted to remember her smell.

"Have a good time at the supper."

As soon as he closed the door and turned the engine on, Telmo got his energy back. He felt protected, at peace, at no risk. Holding onto the steering wheel he felt an echo of the engine's vibration in his hands. The only thing breaking the silence was the narrator's voice on the DVD.

"Don't you get bored always watching the same film?" The boy paid no attention.

"A friend at City Hall's told me that maybe next year they're going to bring a white shark to the aquarium."

The boy stuck his head between the two front seats:

"It would eat all the fish!"

As every Friday, they went to a shopping centre in the city to buy food for the weekend. Telmo felt annoyed about having to leave the car by itself in the car park, and he told his son they would be quick:

"We'll do it fast, ok, son?"

Father and son were holding hands and chewing gum as they left the supermarket, each of them with a bag in one hand, and they looked tired. Outside the shopping centre, opposite Toys 'r' Us, there was a newspaper stand which also sold, amongst other things, plastic animal models. Telmo spoke in the exaggeratedly dramatic tone he used to get his son excited:

"Look over there! Look! Wow! There are loads of them!"

At the height of the boy's nose, spread out on coloured trays, there were reptiles, mammals, birds of prey and spiders. His father gave him twenty euros. That was his pocket money for the whole weekend, an amount he had to get used to managing with.

Little Telmo picked up a white shark in one hand. The price was under the fin: 9.95 euros. His palms were sweaty. After moving the animals on the tray around a little more, he picked up a tiger shark in his other hand. It was smaller than the other one: 6.95 euros. He felt dizzy, a feeling which made him go quiet.

His father was playing with the car keys, looking towards the car park, trying out the key button's sensitivity.

The boy looked at the plastic eyes, the white shark looked more loyal than the tiger shark, and it was bigger, too; but if he bought the tiger shark, he would save three euros.

"Which one shall I take, Dad?"

"Come on, mate, it's getting late", his father reprimanded him, though not very convincingly.

It was not just little Telmo's hands: his neck and back were sweaty too. Cold, dry sweat.

"I don't know which one to choose..."

He closed his eyes slowly and held the two sharks in his fists. By the time he opened them, he had made up his mind: he put the white shark back in its place and gave the shop assistant his twenty euro note. The assistant gave him the model and his change with a smile.

Back at the car, and as soon as the doors opened, father and son were wrapped in hermetic silence. From in there, the world looked like a silent film with no charm to it.

"Are you happy?" father asked son.

"Yes", the son answered, still nervous. The father, too, was happy. But when he sank into his seat, and when the new-car scent subsided, the smell of something putrid reached his lungs.

He, too, would become an inheritance one day, a luxury car or a tear-shaped swimming pool; who knew.

He looked in the rear-view mirror: the shark had become a bird of prey, and the boy was waving it through the air.

Birthday Party

At the end-of-term meeting Izadi's teacher told me that she should take up a sport to find her inner strength, to spend time with other types of people, to make new friends, to become more self-reliant... That's what she told me, and more besides. Like every year. I pretended to be astonished, but I knew. I was used to keeping her close, I thought it was best, or perhaps I didn't know, I wasn't sure. I wanted to enjoy having a child as much as possible. I had never looked after anything or anyone for long before, and it was more complicated than it seemed, much harder than loving somebody. Weekends, holidays, 'our days'... I was used to organising things like a series of teaching units. Over the last year I had been too tired and maybe that was why our relationship had started to deteriorate.

That summer I signed her up for a canoeing course against her will. I used to go with her to the clubhouse door and went back for her when they had finished. I found it suffocating to think about all the things I wanted to do during those two hours. Instead of enjoying the freedom, it made me sad and uneasy. I used to leave Izadi there, park the car and go to a café in the Santiago part of town. I was going to read a newspaper there for the first time for ages, or just sit in the sun and have a cup of tea. But I couldn't deal with that and ended up going back to the river. I used to sit on a bench and look at the water, looking for my child among the dozens of them in the canoes. She was always apart from the groups, absolutely always, although I didn't know if that was really the case or whether it was just my imagination.

Other times I went to the bike-lane and, worried about going too far, walked up and down it; I hadn't been there before. There were little red and white houses to the left, factories opposite, and Irun's skyscrapers to the right. But ignoring the surroundings and just looking at the river, it's a wild place there in front of me, the sort of place that always makes me feel things. A long time ago I heard that it was good for women who were sad to look at moving water, the movement helped them to let out the bad feelings they had inside. Whether that's true or not, I found things I wasn't expecting in the water, I discovered the smell of the marsh and the mystery of the mud.

On the last day Izadi showed me an envelope when I went to pick her up.

"Claudia's invited me to her birthday party. It's tomorrow."

There was a dolphin on the card; on the back of it there was a hand-drawn map with a red dot on it, the name of the street and the day. "Bring your swimsuit" was written on it in Spanish.

"Who's Claudia?"

"A friend."

She wound down the window and called out:

"Claudia!"

A girl in the distance wearing a baseball cap lifted up her arm. She was taller and fatter than Izadi.

"She says I can go", Izadi shouted across.

Perhaps the birthday party would let me squeeze out another two or three hours.

"She's got a mark on her face", she told me. "That's why she has to wear that baseball cap with flaps."

"I hadn't realised", and I looked at my little girl to take her in, but by that time she'd already withdrawn into herself.

"Because you've never come to see me."

We had a little quarrel. Very carefully I explained to her that I needed time for myself, and she too had to learn to spend time without me. I didn't tell her I used to watch her from a distance.

Izadi kept quiet. She used to do that to get out of wherever she was. The kingdom of silence, I used to say to her: When are you going to come back from the kingdom of silence?

"What's it like, maroon?" I asked her to find out more. "Is it maroon? I'm talking. What is it like, purple?"

She didn't answer me until we were almost back home.

"Brown. They took a bit of skin from her back and put it on her face. I think the others find it revolting, but I don't."

"Good", I said. "That's very good."

I looked at her in the rear-view mirror to show I was pleased, but she was looking straight forward with a serious expression on her face. She has pretty eyes. Lots of people have told me that. I sometimes wondered if her grown-up-looking figure was pretty too, whether beautiful people do things like that, whether it's more strange people than beautiful people who do things like that. Special, in a good way or a bad way. Can you be strange without it being in a good way or a bad way?

When I start thinking things like that I usually go too far, and then I have a job coming back down to earth.

Izadi didn't want to give her something we'd just made at home. Contrary to my criteria, we bought her a Soy Luna diary in exchange for us both making her a sponge cake.

"Is that ok with you?"

"I don't mind", Izadi told me.

But I did want to make it. Something we made together. I really like making the most of that type of opportunity. Izadi accepted the deal. She was very excited. She loved seeing other people's houses and she was speculating about what Claudia's house might be like:

"I think they're rich, She's told me they've got a swimming pool. And she's got a playroom full of toys."

"Having a lot of rooms means that you have to do a lot of work to pay for them. And having to do a lot of work means that you don't have a lot of time to be together."

"Can't we use normal flour?"

"Wholemeal is normal."

"It's for old people."

"Well you like it."

"The others don't."

"It'll be tasty, don't worry."

"Can we be rich?"

"We are rich." We used to talk about that time and again, but Izadi wasn't prepared to give up on it. "We live in a two-bedroom house. The fridge's full. We each have our own wardrobe. We have a large balcony, which is full of strawberries. You've got four grandparents. Friends. A van. Loads of shoes. We're never hungry. We aren't ill. We go on holiday in the summer."

"Yeah, right."

I made a sign for her to stop beating the eggs.

"I'll finish it. Off you go. Please."

I didn't look at her. I knew how to make use of silence as well as she did.

Izadi cleaned the leaves of the rubber plant in the living room, one by one, using cotton wool and water, as I'd taught her to when she was very small when she needed to calm down. When she had finished I went up to her to give her a hug, but she walked away. You want to do something great and you end up getting angry. We were alchemists at turning gold into trash.

"Come to the kitchen, you're going to like this!"

She was calm and I let her do it. We put a heart-shaped mould into the oven. When we took it out we put carob cream onto it and then, as a treat, I let her sprinkle it with frosted sugar. Then she dressed up really smartly. She had little freckles on her nose from the sun.

We followed the map and got there right away. There were two red balloons on the fence outside.

"She got burned", she said to me before we got out of the car. "That's why she has that mark." She looked at herself in the mirror, pinched her cheek and pulled

an ugly face. "They took a bit of skin from her back and put it on her face, but you can still see it."

It was an old, tidy-looking Basque-style house with ivy and bougainvillea covering half of its façade and plants were growing over the fence by the front door. Izadi went in first with the present. The coloured balloons led us round to the back of the house to the garden. Claudia came to meet Izadi right away. She was larger than I had thought, the skin and flesh arabesque took up more than half of her cheek and part of the skin on her head too. If it hadn't been for that she would have been a beautiful child with dark eyes and thick lips. I stood there smiling at her. There were two women sitting at a table, each of them smoking a cigarette. One of them put hers out against a flowerpot when she saw us and came towards me.

"I'm Nieves, Claudia's mother, and you must be her new friend's mother."

"Izadi's mother, yes."

Nieves wore her hair like Rita Hayworth; it was well thought-out. Half of her face was disfigured, too, just like Claudia's, and, to cover that up, the waterfall of dark curly hair fell over the part which had been destroyed.

The other woman sitting at the table got up from the bench and picked up her bag.

"I'll come back in a couple of hours." She walked up to the girls in the blow-up pool. "Girls! Behave yourselves, I'll come and pick you up later", and she turned towards us. "Nieves, give me a kiss."

I was too embarrassed to say that I had to go too.

"Izadi and I have made a sponge cake", I told her as the other woman left.

"Thanks! I'll put it there."

On the terrace table there was a table-cloth and plates with Walt Disney characters on them, plastic containers full of popcorn, sandwiches, pickles, litre-and-a-half bottles of soft drinks.

"Heart-shaped, that's pretty!" She looked towards the girls; sideways you didn't notice it on her. "Claudia, look at what your mate's brought!"

There were two other little girls there as well as Izadi and Claudia; they were all around ten or eleven.

"Do you want a coffee?" she asked me.

When she smiled her mouth went out of shape as if an elastic band were pulling at one of her lips.

"I don't drink coffee, thanks."

"Maybe you want to go and get things done, don't worry, I'll manage. That's the thing about having a birthday in the summer, fewer people go to your party than during the school year; nothing you can do about it. Claudia's used to it, apparently. You can't imagine what it was like at first. But now she finds out who's

going to come and then gives out the invitations. Three out of four of them come", her voice trailed off. "And I'm happy with that, naturally."

"I'll stay, if that's ok with you. It's nice here."

I sat down next to her on the wooden bench. She was under a vine, in its shade.

"We planted this when we came here, seven years ago, and look at it now."

Both of us looked up at it. Nieves closed her eyes. Like that she looked like a reptile. It was a burn. It went down below her neck. I closed my eyes too. And that's how we remained until Nieves whispered:

"My husband insisted. He built this framework with four posts. He's from a small town near Logroño, he moved to Bilbao as a child, and it seems they had one like this on their patio. He put it up when we moved here from Bilbao, and look now, after just a few years", she said, looking at the swaying bunches of grapes. "You're right; it's nice here."

"I don't have green fingers. I always buy the toughest plants in the shop, I hardly even pay attention to their appearance."

"I'm no good with them either... They need attention, trust and confidence. Some of them have to be left alone; the less attention you pay them, the prettier they look". She picked up a pickled onion with her long nails and put it in her mouth. We looked upwards again. The vine's branches were red, it looked as if they had blood in them. So much life could come out of those frail, splintered trunks...

"They're having a great time", I said to her looking towards the swimming pool.

"Kids are best with other kids. Is yours an only child?"

"Yes."

"So you'll know what I'm talking about."

And we closed our eyes.

The girls sat at the table, wrapped in their towels. Izadi, all skin and bones, was shivering, her lips darkened. She pointed at the popcorn and I gave her permission to eat it, being a special occasion. I had to make a great effort not to measure the poison in each handful she took. The two sisters got out a paper bag from under a chair and gave it to Claudia: it was pyjamas with a pink tutu-skirt. Claudia put it on right away.

"Oh! That's really pretty!" said Nieves.

Claudia arranged the skirt, held her arms up like a ballet dancer and spun around. I thought it was grotesque. When she took it off, I thought I saw the bit of her back which had become her cheek.

Izadi gave her present too. Claudia opened it and gave her a big hug:

"Soy Luna!"

Izadi blushed. I saw her run her arms up Claudia's back without pausing. Claudia looked a lot older than Izadi, almost like her mother, even though she was just a few months older than her.

"Put some cream on. This sunlight's hotter than it seems", Nieves said and threw the girls the jar of cream. And she grabbed hold of Claudia before she could run away, put some cream on her hands and spread it all over her body. When she finished, Nieves put some on her face using her little finger softly, putting two layers on the burn. Claudia looked at me to see if I was looking too. I smiled at her... Everything's ok, the world's perfect, you're perfect, I wanted to say to her. She sighed.

She tucked the hair she used as a curtain behind her ear and Nieves put some cream on her, a thicker layer on the burnt side of her face. I didn't look away from what she was doing then either, I didn't want her to feel bad. At the end she freed the hair from behind her ear and put it in front of her face with a lot of style. I smiled at her. You could see her lower gums when she smiled. She spread the left-over cream on her kneecap and lit a cigarette.

"We have to be careful with this bloody skin", she said.

"Where are you from?" I asked her.

"I don't know any more!"

"Hendaia isn't a bad place to start again", I told her.

"That's what they say", she said, although I'd never heard it before myself. "We're OK here, much better."

"Lots of people come here to start again", I said, hoping the words would fill the space between us. "Another lifestyle, another climate, other habits, another language... Sometimes it's better not to understand what other people are saying, don't you think? And all of a sudden."

"Yes, all of a sudden. And what are you two doing here? You aren't local either..."

"We're real-estate exiles, that's what I say when they ask me. But to an extent I came here to find kilometre zero, you know what it's like having a child..."

"Bang!", she said in a loud voice. "A bomb goes off in the middle of your daily life, but you're the only one who hears the explosion, right?"

"Nobody else does."

"We had to make a change after the accident."

"You had an accident?"

She pointed at the cigarette she was smoking.

"A butt-end that wasn't put out properly... And the house caught fire when we were asleep."

"A long time ago?"

"Nine years ago this summer. We lived in Bilbao then. We were too well-known in our district and it wasn't easy being around people. On our way home from

work we used to try to bump into as few people as possible, and we went to Logroño at the weekends, looking for a place-where they wouldn't know us. In the end the insurance paid up, and the city council gave us a little money too. And here we are. Clemente had the idea of coming here. He works at Decathlon, in the offices, and he asked for a transfer to Irun, which they gave him right away. We aren't the sort of people who think things over too much. We follow our hearts. And here we are. You divorced?" she asked me as if she had found the answer to a riddle.

"No, no... We're alone, Izadi and me."

"That's good, too."

"Yeah, like everything."

"Do you want a drink? I'm thirsty, I'm going to have a beer. Do you want one too? We've got Muscatel as well. It's the only type of wine I like."

"I'll have a beer too, thanks a lot."

When she went to get them I watched the girls. I hadn't told her I never drank, I thought it was in bad taste, I don't really know why. They were sitting on the grass. Claudia was talking, the sisters were listening to her, but Izadi had her back to them, looking at something on the ground. I resisted wanting to go up to her and ask her to turn around.

"And do you know what the worst thing is?" said Nieves when she got back from the house. "This year I've started smoking again. I'm hopeless. I've ended up setting up my own company and, what with all the stress, well, you know. At least no-one tells me off about it. It must be harder for people who are starting up, don't you think? What do you do, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm at the health centre, in admin. It isn't what I like, but it has good bits, it doesn't take up much of my mind. It gives me the chance to take all my holidays in one go during the summer, so I can spend them with Izadi doing our things."

"Time! That's good. I'm going to call the girls, get them to come and have some cake before their mother comes."

She took a sip, and I saw she had to dry off some beer which had dribbled out of her mouth.

When Nieves lit the candles we all sang "Happy Birthday" to Claudia. Izadi moved her lips, but without making a sound, as if her ventriloquist were missing. Claudia took a deep breath, blew her cheeks out and waited by the little flames until the song was over. The prints on her skin were like the shapes of the flames and, leaning over them, it looked as if the marks were moving.

We clapped when she blew them out. Claudia was really moved. She was obviously too emotional, and that wasn't good. She had lifted her hands to either side of her face and her eyes were welling over.

After cutting the cake, which was made of doughnuts, Nieves offered me a slice.

"There's no harm once a year."

I turned it down. Our sponge cake was untouched. Instead I picked up a gherkin to show I was grateful, even though it was at least ten years since I'd eaten anything like that.

"Hey!" said Nieves when she heard a car horn. "You two, your mother's here, you've got to get dressed!"

The girls walked away with winegums in their hands, and Nieves and Claudia walked with them to the door to say goodbye. I went up to Izadi. She was sitting on a deck chair, holding on to a plait which Claudia had half finished for her.

"Are you having a good time?"

"Yes."

"Really? It doesn't look like it. We'll be going soon."

"Not yet", she said.

"Not yet; soon."

Claudia and Nieves came back holding each other by the waist, smiling as if they were sharing a secret. They had their burns on the same side, but you didn't see them at all from a distance.

"Claudia's had an idea", Nieves said to me, and let her daughter continue.

"Will you two stay for supper? I'd really like that. Please stay", said Claudia, kneeling down and with her hands raised up as if she were praying.

"Clemente will be here any minute with Chinese food; we always buy too much and have to eat it over two days", Nieves backed her up. "Do you eat everything? Otherwise I can make a salad, or an omelette, or both."

Izadi looked at me. I found it hard to see what she wanted.

"Please!" Claudia said. "It's my birthday!"

I looked at her torn-up cheek.

"Why not", I answered her in both our names.

Izadi went up to our sponge cake and stared at it.

"Do you want a piece?" Nieves asked her. "Don't be shy, dear". She cut a triangle from our sponge cake and gave it to her.

Izadi ate it with pleasure. I was touched. Nieves took a piece too and nibbled at it, holding her hand up to her mouth to stop crumbs from coming out.

"It's fantastic. You must give me the recipe", she said to me. "Do you want a cardigan? Or shall we go inside? It's got cooler."

I helped her clear up and we went into the house. The girls ran upstairs. Nieves went to the kitchen with the plates and things, and I was alone in the living-room. It was full of stuff. There were old-fashioned pieces of furniture mixed with wicker pieces, different coloured cushions, plants. It was a strange combination of things and it looked provisional, but it was clean and tidy. There were four remote controls on a piece of cloth. You could see red lights from electronic

devices all over the place. An L-shaped sofa was what took up most of the space, and it faced a giant television attached to a wall. There were dolls in the fireplace. Above that, on the marble mantelpiece, there was a souvenir from somewhere, a mouse made of shells and, next to that, a metal crucifix with charred feet. I looked away when Nieves came back into the living-room.

"Who knows how to play?" I asked her, pointing at the Yamaha keyboard behind the sofa.

"Claudia and I do a bit", Nieves said. "But Clemente's the real artist. Back then", her hand seemed to express some distant past, a time before the fire I understood, "he used to play in a group. He sings really well, but now he only does that for us at home; it's a pity."

We sat down on the sofa. She took her sandals off, sat down and made herself comfortable. I did the same. You could hear the children walking around upstairs. It was relaxing. The moment when everything changes, I thought; the moment when you aren't there and your daughter becomes what you would have wanted. Then I noticed their photo on the glass table, a photo of the three of them. It was hard not to look at it. I felt uncomfortable, although Nieves must have been used to that. In fact, perhaps it had all been planned out.

She picked it up, blew on it and cleaned it with the sleeve of her dress before showing it to me.

"This is one of the few photos of us left."

It had been taken in a studio. They were sitting on the floor, bare-foot and dressed in white. Nieves was wearing a summer dress, a bow on the neckline, and her smile looked invincible. It was a Mediterranean type of beauty, tangible, easy. I hadn't imagined her husband like that: he was suntanned, he had a wide forehead, wore his hair long in a smart way to make up for his receding hairline, had three or four buttons open on his shirt, the bottoms of his trousers turned up. He looked large, he had a scorpion tattooed on his arm, and was wearing some leather wrist-bands. Claudia was the only one looking serious; she must have been about eighteen months.

I imagined all that flesh and cloth in flames like paper napkins in a bar.

"What a good-looking family", I said.

"Yeah, isn't it?" Nieves turned the photo towards her and looked at it closely. "That's what we were like. My husband and I were watching a film and we fell asleep on the sofa. Getting out of there alive was a miracle. And Claudia... That really was a miracle, her room was the one at the back! My husband brought her out..." She rearranged her curtain of hair. I saw him going through the flames and coming back, he had Claudia wrapped in a blanket, both of them on fire... I'll keep the details to myself; believe me, it's best."

"At least Claudia won't remember anything..."

"Fortunately not... We lost everything. Our home, clothes, photos, memories, the letters Clemente and I had written to each other... We used to write to each other a lot, starting when he did National Service, just imagine... When he came back from that he went to England to learn the language... Nowadays any kid does that, but not back then. Together since we were seventeen, just think. Everything lost. You can't imagine what that means... Losing everything... Everything!"

"And look now", I told her without being too sure what I wanted say.

"Look now", she agreed with me and backed me up. "I still have nightmares about the net curtains we had in the living-room... The wind blows them inwards, they float there, they're like ghosts floating over me, I'm on the sofa, sometimes watching TV, other times my daughter's asleep next to me, and all of a sudden they're on fire... That's when I wake up..." She opened her eyes and sat up on the sofa. "I'm going to shut up; I don't like hearing about other people's dreams, I get really bored. What about you?"

"I don't know, I've never thought about it."

"I hate other people's dreams."

"I get like that about other people's holidays."

She laughed.

"You were born again. That's a great credit to you."

"Yeah, but I'll tell you something: it hasn't done us any good. We live outside the normal, outside the rules, and people can't hide what they think. When it's not charity it's disgust; and there are people who prove their kindness by putting their respect for us on display. You've no idea, there are a lot of vile people in the world. Good people too, I have to say that to be fair; there are good people out there too."

She was speaking to me as if I were part of none of those groups; it was strange.

"But it's Claudia I'm most worried about, how she'll get on from now on, even bearing in mind the surgeons' magic fingers, you should have seen her... And look how pretty she is... At least she is for me."

I tried to keep smiling in agreement.

"She's very pretty. And she seems like a girl with a lot of things going for her. Izadi's mad about her."

Nieves liked hearing that.

"Yes, she does have a lot of things going for her."

"And she's cheerful..."

"I'm not sure about the rest, but you're absolutely right about that."

Clemente whistled as soon as he opened the door, and the look on Nieves' face changed; it was subtle, but I noticed it, it was just a tiny smile; she looked more relaxed. I thought perhaps she hadn't been at ease with me until then, and all of a sudden I felt I was in the way.

He was loaded with bags. His entire face had been burned, which affected me less than seeing just a part of it like that. It looked as though the sides of his eyes were melting, but the burnt part was uniform elsewhere with just slight variations in texture and colour. He shook my hand. His hand was also burnt. He gave Nieves a long kiss and smoothed her hair.

"And guests too, this is great", he said when he let go of her. "Where's our little angel?"

"Upstairs, with her new canoeing friend", Nieves answered.

Her husband was balder than in the photo, his grey hair in a ponytail. He took his jacket off without saying a word, put it on a coat hanger and sat down at the piano. He rolled his sleeves up, undid a couple of buttons and moved his fingers about in the air. I saw that the scorpion had survived the fire.

Claudia ran downstairs as soon as the first notes of 'Happy Birthday' rang out. She gave her father a strong hug from behind. Nieves stood still in the middle of the living-room, looking at them with pride. Izadi came down too and sat next to me on the sofa; I put an arm over her shoulder and drew her towards me. When he finished playing the song, Clemente took a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and dried his face. Nieves put a cool beer on the keyboard without asking him and, after taking a long sip, he sat in front of it again.

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide. No escape from reality..." he sang *a capella*. "Open your eyes. Look up to the skies and see... I'm just a poor boy. I need no sympathy, because I'm easy come, easy go..."

Nieves and Claudia looked at each other; perhaps they were following some family code.

Izadi and I went up to them.

Clemente played the first chords of 'Bohemian Rhapsody' moving his head from one side to another.

"Mamaaa... just killed a man... Put a gun against his head. Pulled my trigger, now he's dead."

Against all expectations, he had a wonderful voice.

"Mamaaa... life had just begun... But now I've gone and thrown it all away..."

He turned towards us after the first stanza with a tired-looking smile on his face. By then we were all standing around him, sheltered by the sofa, each mother doing a little dance with her daughter in silence during that fragile, beautiful moment.

When he finished he sat there for a second, his back to us, quite still. We stayed still too, unable to move.

He looked younger when he turned around; we were all younger and lighter.

He finished his beer.

Nieves went out onto the terrace to smoke a cigarette.

"Come with me, if you want", she said before going out.

"No, I'm fine here", I answered. Then I turned towards Clemente. "Don't you smoke?"

"No way", he said as he slipped his shoes off and put on some flip-flops. "As much beer as I want, a whisky from time to time, but no smoking! If you go to European cities, real European cities, like Paris, Brussels or Barcelona, just look at how many smokers you see there; in underdeveloped countries, on the other hand, there are loads of them." I got the impression he'd given that speech many times before; he seemed bored himself with what he was saying. "My belly's rumbling", he said in a different tone and rubbing his stomach. "What about you, girls?"

And then he tickled Izadi on her waist.

"This girl's got less meat on her than a bicycle! Don't you feed her?"

Izadi broke away from him, but politely, and went upstairs after Claudia.

"You've got a beautiful voice", I said to Clemente. "I'm astonished, to tell the truth."

"You didn't expect that, eh?" he said happily, and he looked straight at me for longer than I would have liked.

"Beautiful and special."

He laughed out loud and repeated 'beautiful and special'.

I kept looking straight at him, serious, letting him know I really meant it; that was important to me.

"It's a pity you're married, otherwise I'd sing at your wedding."

"I'm not married."

"Don't be annoyed", he said held his hand out. "No need to get angry. I don't take myself seriously, it's better for me that way."

His hand was soft; I stroked the tip of his thumb for as long as I dared to. We let go of each other when we heard Nieves.

By that time the living-room was full of the smell of Chinese food. Nieves came in carrying an oilcloth with a flower-pattern on it; she spread it out on the low table in the living-room. Then she took the containers out of the bags there and put the cushions from the sofa around the table.

I realised she seemed smaller since Clemente had come, as if the air had gone out of her. But she didn't seem angry or sad, just peaceful.

Claudia and Izadi took charge of taking the lids off and uncovered all kinds of sticky food. Clemente brought in the Muscatel. We all sat on the floor; we used forks, and they used the chopsticks. Nieves winked before touching her glass to mine. She had pinned her hair back, and the burn was plain to see. She seemed to have woken up again.

"Many Happy Returns, you lovely thing!" Clemente said to Claudia. Her eyes were welling up, as were Nieves's.

Claudia kissed her fingertips and blew her parents the kisses.

"We're very proud of you", Nieves said, and blew her a kiss.

Izadi was looking at her plate. I took hold of her chin, wanting her to lift her head.

I stroked her chin.

The food wasn't as exotic as I'd expected. They brought our sponge cake out for dessert and everyone praised it. I felt like one of the family. We had a good time.

I think they had a good time too.

I hugged them when it came to saying goodbye.

"Thank you, really", and I touched my heart.

"Thanks to you two", Nieves answered.

"And keep on playing, that was wonderful", I said to Clemente.

He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear as if that were the normal thing to do. Nieves closed her eyes as if to give her approval.

They came out to the gate. Clemente held Nieves around the waist, and she put her head on his shoulder. Nobody made any promises.

I asked Izadi to sit next to me in the front. We held hands on the way back. I thought I'd come across something very special on that long afternoon, something like what I felt when I found shells on the beach, and I wanted to hang onto it, I didn't want it to get away, I wanted to keep it inside me forever, keep the discovery separate even though I knew the wonder would disappear, little by little.

Afterword

Literature offers us stories and intrigue; effects from writers' techniques and special effects; admiration for a writer's skills; sonic and visual beauty in assonance, alliteration and alike; stimulation for thought and reflection; things to discuss with friends and family ("Men require of their neighbors something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration" – T.S. Eliot in "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture"); and, when introduced to by some writers, the chance to meet people, those writers' characters. People you would not otherwise meet.

We all start from different places, and go along different routes, and some readers will identify readily with some of the characters in these three stories by Eider Rodriguez: Saioa's sensations and memories as she returns to visit her family farmstead after a few years in London, to where she will return; Telmo's unease in formal situations, his inability to feel passion for his wife and, once they have separated, his continued dependence on her; Izadi's mother's awareness that she overprotects her daughter, efforts to do so less, and need to connect with other adults.

Other readers will find it harder to connect with the characters Eider Rodriguez creates or invents, and certainly brings to life; or readers may not connect with the characters at all. But we do have the chance to get to know such people in fiction, see things from their point of view. And it is an opportunity which lets you see things in a way you might otherwise never have access to, or which might not even occur to you.

Eider Rodriguez' fiction also offers a chance to see the writer's take on her native Navarre, which is also known as the Basque Country, a seven-province nation divided into three different official territories. Each culture, in the widest sense, is defined firstly by its language and then by the mix of cultural manifestations of different relative weight within it. In Navarre, for instance, sport might stand for 40% of culture; improvisational poetry for 15%; literature for 5%... And the mix of cultural manifestations and their relative preponderance varies from culture to culture. But people do experience and feel similar things everywhere –hunger, joy, tedium–, which is why stories translated from Basque can be perfectly comprehensible and immediate for readers in English.

Eider Rodriguez does not end her stories in a (falsely) neat manner, or need the support of a 'traditional', pat ending, just as our own days do not end with perfect closure. This writer's characters feel real, and are interesting, although, as in real life, no single person would want to spend a whole lot of time with all of them in real life.

"Navarre shall be the wonder of the world" said King Ferdinand in "Love's Labours Lost". Be that as it may, in Navarre, as everywhere else, there are a whole lot of different people. Eider Rodriguez' work opens windows for us onto those characters' situations, experiences and feelings in the way only great literature can, and only certain types of great literature do.

Aritz Branton
Donostia, May 2018



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