

EVERYTHING
YOU AND I
COULD HAVE BEEN
IF WE WEREN'T
YOU AND I

BY
ALBERT
ESPINOSA



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Grijalbo

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PROLOGUE

«THE FASCINATING BOY»

our tigers drink milk
our falcons go on foot
our sharks drown in water
our wolves yawn in front of open cages

No, I didn't write it, but every time I think of him this poem comes into my head and I feel happy and brave, I feel safe, comfortable and in peace. It makes me smile widely, the number 3 smile, one of my favorites that he knows so well. He has the gift of knowing how many faces you have, how many looks, breaths, gestures and smiles and the meaning of each one. Another of his gifts is being able to distribute humility, happiness, sincerity, love and life to the people who surround him and whom he loves. He always finds the right words for each moment and the faces to go with them. He is fascinating and surprising.

When I saw him for the first time, I didn't know who he was, just that he moved at an advanced pace for a human being, that he was a teenager fascinated by life in the body of an older boy, who always expressed himself with 5 points, taking more time to explain and make himself understood to the other person in the 1st and 2nd points, then go directly to the 3rd, 4th and finally the 5th; accompanying that explanation with drawings and scribbles on the corners of pages, newspapers and napkins.

The first time you meet he will greet you with a handshake or a kiss on

the cheek, although when that first meeting is over it will surely end with a huge bear hug.

I haven't known him for long, but during this intense time we've shared—filled with work, laughter, magical moments and words, hugs, gifts and the occasional sob—I have gotten to know him better. To the point where just by hearing each other's voice on the telephone we know what is going on with the other; it is the beginning of a long and immortal friendship. One day, swimming underwater through this vast sea that is life, I opened an oyster and found this fascinating, brilliant and multicolored pearl called Albert Espinosa.

Albert has managed to write a novel filled with magic and love where people's lives have no limits for being with the person they want to be with. A world of fascinating people able to stop dreaming but never to stop loving: *Everything You and I Could Have Been If We Weren't You and I*.

According to him, life is turning doorknobs; I only hope, throughout my life, to find myself in front of many doors that transport me to new places, paths and experiences. I know that every time I'm in front of each of those doors, I will have a trusted friend to take my hand and go through it with me, and if at some point he can't come with me I will ask him for advice. Don't ever let go of my hand, Albert.

ROGER BERRUEZO, your first stranger
Actor

1

DEER WITH EAGLE HEADS

I like sleeping, it's probably what I like best in this life. And maybe I like it so much because it's so hard for me to fall asleep.

I'm not one of those people that conks out as soon as they get into bed. I can't sleep in a car, or in an airport chair, not even lying out on the beach half-drunk.

But after the news I'd received a few days earlier, I really needed some sleep. Ever since I was a kid I've thought sleeping distanced you from the world, made you immune to its attacks. People can only harm the awake, the ones with their eyes open. When we disappear into dreams, we are safe.

But I have a hard time falling asleep. I have to confess that I've always needed to sleep in a bed, and it has to be my bed. That's why I've always admired those people who are deeply asleep two seconds after putting their head down on any surface. I admire them and I envy them... Is it even possible to admire something you don't envy? Or envy something you don't admire?

I always need my bed, I think that's a good definition of me, well, maybe of my sleeping habits. I'd even go so far as to say that your bed, wait, I mean your pillow, is the most important element in a person's life.

Sometimes I've asked myself that ridiculous question: What would you take with you to a desert island? And I always think: my pillow. Even though, I don't know why, I always end up saying: a good book and an excellent wine, using those two adjectives that have lost almost all meaning.

And the truth is that you take years in making a pillow yours; hundreds of nights to give it its special shape that is so enticing to you and lulls you off to sleep.

In the end, you know how to fold the pillow to get the perfect night's sleep, how to turn it so that it doesn't get hotter than your perfect

temperature. You even know how it smells after a good night. If only we could know the people we love so well, the ones who sleep beside us.

I have to tell you, I don't believe in love, I'm going to lay it out there, so that there's no doubt whatsoever. I don't believe in falling in love, I don't believe in dying for love, I don't believe in sighing over someone, or in not eating for some special person.

But what I have always believed is that pillows hold a part of your nightmares inside them, part of your problems and your dreams. And that's why we put those cases on them: so we won't have to look at those traces of our lives. Nobody likes seeing themselves reflected in an object. Our cars, our cell phones, our clothes, they all say so much about us.

I think I'd been sleeping for four hours that night when they knocked on the door. I almost never leave on any "open sound" while I'm sleeping.

There are many sounds open in our lives when we disappear into dreams: the telephone, the cell phone, the intercom, the alarm clock, the dripping faucets, computers... They are sounds that never rest, that are always alert. And either you turn them off or they invade your sleep.

I don't know why I left the intercom on that Sunday. Well, I do know why, because I knew a package would arrive that would change my life. And I've never been a patient person.

Ever since I was a kid, if I knew that something good was going to happen the next day, I couldn't get a wink of sleep. I'd leave the blinds all the way up so that the dawn would smack me in the face and the new day would arrive so quickly that my dream would be as short as a commercial. I've always thought that dreams are advertisements; some long, like paid programming, others short, like movie trailers and other teasers. And they all speak of our desires. But we don't understand them because they seem shot by David Lynch.

But getting back to the subject, I'm impatient, I know it and I like that about myself. Even though at some point impatience became some horrible defect, I think we all know that really it's a virtue. Someday, the impatient will inherit the earth. Or at least I hope so.

The intercom rang again, entering my deep sleep. I remember that I was dreaming that day about deer with eagle heads. Yes, I love mixing concepts, feeling a bit like God in my dreams.

Creating new creatures by mixing parts from other ones or having the feeling that friends who don't even know each other get very chummy, and I even love dreaming that people who I barely know are a very intimate part of my life. And sometimes I think people use dreams to violate: to violate privacy, to violate the language they use to express themselves, to violate images at whim.

How many times have I had sex with people in dreams and the next day not even dared to say hi to them, thinking that in my "good morning" they would hear a "what a good night we spent together."

Maybe the world would be a better place if we told our erotic dreams to the people who had starred in them.

Although in the period I was living in that was impossible. Not even I could have imagined that on that day my world would change, along with everyone else's. Maybe those kinds of days should be marked on the calendar in hot pink. We should have some indication of those moments after which nothing will ever be the same again, moments that punch a hole through the entire world in a similar way, creating collective memories. That way we can decide if getting up on a hot pink day is worth the trouble.

My uncle lived through September 11, 2001; he was twenty-two years old when it happened. He says that the really shocking part was watching the second plane crash on live TV. He always wondered: "Did the second

plane wait to crash just long enough for the television to have time to broadcast the collision of the first plane? Or was it supposed to hit at the same time, but arrived late?” That bothered him enormously. He wanted to know if the people behind those attacks had wanted the whole world to turn on their televisions and see the second impact, or if it was a ghastly coincidence. Sometimes, he answered himself: “If it is the former, human evil has no limits.” And I swear that then I saw his eyes flood with deep sadness.

But going back to that night, the night the package arrived, I was dreaming about deer with eagle heads. I woke up because one of them was looking at me with its eagle head and its deer antlers, as if it were studying me and was about to attack me and rip out my eyes with its deer/eagle hooves...

Then, all of a sudden, a red light interrupted my dream, blinking in the animal’s eyes and sounding a lot like my intercom. It took me fifteen seconds to realize my mistake and wake up. Although maybe it was less, I can’t say for sure. Time in dreams is a mystery, it’s so relative...

But I think we should be grateful that dreams have those jumps in continuity. Although sometimes you discover one and you keep on dreaming anyway, because you don’t want to wake up. Which shows that a lot of people prefer sleeping to real life, even though they know that what they’re enjoying isn’t real.

I’m not one of those; I don’t like to realize that what I’m feeling isn’t a dream. If I sense a glitch like that, I wake up immediately.

The intercom rang again, but this time it didn’t interrupt my dream; I was already waking up. I looked at the clock: three in the morning, exactly when they said they would arrive.

I got up without slippers; there are times in life when you should answer

the door barefoot, to make the moment more epic.

And this was one of them, they were bringing me the medication that would put an end to my sleeping, that would allow me to live twenty-four hours a day without having to rest...

And as it should be, its arrival had interrupted my rest. It had ripped straight through my imagined world.

After all, from that moment on, it would interrupt it forever.

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2

MY MOTHER LEFT ME AND I DECIDED TO LEAVE THE
WORLD

I went over to the intercom, and through the viewfinder I saw a Thai man, about twenty-five years old, dressed casually, with an older man that looked Dutch, around seventy and wearing a gray suit. Although it could be that they were twenty and sixty, I've never been good at judging ages, but I am good with feelings, and at telling where people are from.

I am totally gullible when it comes to age. If you tell me you're 30 and it's reasonable, I'll believe it, even if you're pushing forty. I think that age means little in this life. My mother used to say that your real age was in your stomach and in your head. Wrinkles are only a result of worrying and eating badly. I've always thought that she was right, so I've tried not to worry much, and eat a lot.

I've noticed that people usually feel good when they tell me their age, because I answer: "I took you for less." And people flip over that. That and commenting on their tan is what people love best. If you tell someone: "I thought you were younger and you're very tan," they're over the moon.

My cousin's son, who's six now, is a strange kid. Every time you ask him to guess the age of someone over twenty, he looks at them, observes them carefully and answers: "You're ten." Whether you're seventy, fifty or twenty, to this kid everybody's ten years old. That you are in double digits means he sees you as really big. It makes sense; when you only have one digit, two is the end of everything.

When I see someone really old, I think: "he must be 100 years old," the three digits being the be-all and end-all for someone with only two. We don't change that much as we grow from kids to adults; the only difference is an extra digit.

I felt my feet getting cold. But I didn't go back to my bedroom to look for slippers; when you decide that you're going to be epic you have to hold your ground. Otherwise, really, what kind of an epic hero are you?

I waited impatiently for the elevator to arrive at my floor. The elevator's red light blinked, and I was reminded of the deer with eagle heads. Their eyes sparkled too. I felt nervous. I touched my left eye lightly. I always did that when I was nervous or lying; which is why, since I realized it, I almost never do it in public.

I felt very alone as I waited. The truth is I didn't expect to be spending that epic moment alone.

I think that when you are changing some essential part of yourself, in this case giving up sleeping, you shouldn't live the moment alone. There should be someone by your side, somebody telling you, "It's gonna be great, this is your big day."

Isn't that what usually happens when you make an important decision in life? At weddings there are always people around you saying things like that. Even when you sign a mortgage at the age of thirty-five, there is somebody there to cheer you on. And, above all, right before the nurse wheels you away for an operation, there is always somebody wishing you luck.

But I didn't have anyone at that moment. I've always been a loner.

Well, I think I should tell you about something that happened to me a few hours before. I don't know why I didn't mention it sooner...

Actually I do know why: sometimes you beat around the bush in order to avoid going straight to the root. Especially if the root is painful and could bring the whole bush down.

My mother died yesterday.

They called me from Boston, where she was on her last tour. She was a famous choreographer who had always spent more time away than here. Always creating, always imagining worlds, always living for her art... Sometimes when I couldn't understand why she worked so much she

reminded me of a James Dean quote about life in the theater: “I don't even want to be just the best. I want to grow so tall that nobody can reach me. Not to prove anything, but just to go where you ought to go when you devote your whole life and all you are to one thing.”

And that was what she did. The truth is that when I found out yesterday that my mother had left me, I realized that I would leave the world.

I decided that the world had lost its best asset and I stopped believing in it, because nobody had held on to her; the world didn't stop or even seem shocked by its loss.

I don't mean I want to commit suicide, or disappear from the face of the earth. Just that I needed something to change, I needed something to be different, because I could no longer live in the world as I knew it.

My mother was gone and the pain was unbearable. I swear I had never felt anything like it.

But don't think that this was the first time I'd experienced death. Sometimes, the first time a loved one dies it is so intense that it seems insurmountable. I have been through several in my life. My grandmother, who always loved me deeply, died three years ago and that was also a heavy blow. She barely remembered anything in her final years, but she would get so excited when I came to visit her. She was so happy to see me that she shouted with excitement. I felt so loved... I cried a lot over her death.

I remember how one night, on Capri (I love islands; I only vacation on islands, the smaller the better; they make me feel alive), my girlfriend at the time woke up in the middle of the night and saw me crying inconsolably, remembering my grandmother. It had only been two months since her death. My girlfriend looked at me with a tenderness that I wouldn't see again in another human being for quite a long time after. She hugged me tightly (it wasn't a sex hug, or a friend hug, more like a pain hug). I let

myself go limp. I was so devastated that I let her squeeze me tightly. Even though I usually never let that happen; I like to be the hugger, not the huggee.

But she hugged me tightly and whispered, “It’s okay, Marcos, she knew you loved her.” That made me cry even harder.

I burst into tears. I love that expression. You don’t say someone has burst into a meal or burst into a walk. You burst into tears or into laughter. I think it’s worth bursting into pieces for those feelings.

I couldn’t get back to sleep that night on Capri. She did, she slept in my arms, as I held her. My tears dried and a few months later it was our relationship that ended.

I thought that on the day we broke up she would mention that moment, when she held me and calmed me down. If she had I would have stayed with her for six more months. I know that sounds cold and calculating. An embrace for disconsolate sobbing on Capri equals six extra months of a loveless relationship? The truth is that that’s what it is worth to me; I calculated it. Not mathematically, but emotionally. But she didn’t bring it up and I was grateful.

I’ve always thought that I lost her because I was stupid, although I never told her that. I know that later she got married on Capri and I felt that somehow she was giving a nod to me, but maybe it was just a coincidence.

But I never told her that she was the person I had loved the most, and that was why I lost her. There are so many things that if said out loud would reveal secrets so intense, we might not be able to own up to them.

I still haven’t been able to tell anyone that once in a while I cry inconsolably over the loss of my grandmother. I don’t know if people would understand it; I don’t know if people would try to understand it.

And as for my mother, I still hadn’t called anyone. I hadn’t mentioned

my loss to any of my family or friends. People understand what they want to, what interests them.

I know it might seem that I've got a grudge against society, and the truth is at that moment I did.

The elevator opened just when the pain became unbearable. The young, casually-dressed Thai and the older Dutch man in a suit came out.

The young man was holding a gunmetal gray suitcase, the kind you only carry if you know that what's inside is valuable. They looked me up and down. I think they were surprised that I was barefoot. Or maybe not... The truth is that every time I feel different I think that the rest of the world will realize, but most people don't notice anything.

I remember a song that said, "The good-looking people are the weird ones, everyone knows that but no one dares to say it. Even they don't like themselves, and they've got hang-ups about being different." I've always liked those lyrics, I know that what they say about good-looking people is a lie, but I loved thinking that being handsome isn't the panacea. I'm not handsome, obviously, if I were I wouldn't like the song.

My mother used to tell me that I looked a lot like James Dean. That's how mothers are. Although over the years more than a dozen people have agreed with her. I met Dean on Minorca. Not literally, his car had crashed years earlier. I remember that my mother had a performance on the island that was cancelled because of rain.

So there we were, in a hotel in Fornells, she and I watching how the rain had turned a possible Sunday on the beach into a lackluster day of waiting; into one of those days that seem like they don't count.

My mother asked me if I wanted to meet a star, one of those that shoot through the sky quickly but are so spellbinding that people never forget

them. At twelve years old, I was anxious to see dazzling stars, or anything that would entertain me on that rainy day.

We saw *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Giant*, one after the other. Every movie he ever made in one night; it was easy. When *Giant* ended, I felt what my mother had predicted I would: that a dazzling star had shot through my life.

I never knew if I actually look like James Dean or if my desire to look like him has made me slowly, bit by bit, resemble him. Maybe it's like how dogs that are fascinated by their owners feel, and then they end up looking like them.

I've always maintained that Dean wasn't handsome, he was magical. And that his magic was mistaken for beauty.

The young man with the silver suitcase was handsome; he had very black hair. I'd always liked hair that had a very definite color to it. Another thing I don't have: my hair is dull chestnut brown. The woman that hugged me on Capri always said that my hair was lovely, but I never knew if she really meant it. I'm very distrusting when it comes to compliments given in bed, in the middle of an embrace.

"Can we come in?" asked the young man with the black hair, without even introducing himself.

"Sure, sure," I answered twice. I always repeat words when I'm nervous; that's happened to me since I was a kid.

The older Dutch man didn't say anything. They came in.

They stopped as soon as they crossed the threshold. Which is a courtesy I've always found strange, especially when there's only one possible route from the entryway to the living room.

There were dishes from last night's dinner on the coffee table. Then I still

only had three meals. Irrationally I thought of raising the blinds, but it was nighttime and that wouldn't solve anything.

They were about to sit right in the middle of the sofa when I decided that I didn't feel like having them make themselves at home in my living room; I didn't know them that well. Something told me I shouldn't allow it.

"Why don't we go out on the terrace?" I asked, using a tone that implied it was an obligatory suggestion.

The older man looked at the younger one and he seemed to think it was fine. That was when I realized that the young man was the older one's bodyguard.

Aside from security reasons, I'm sure they agreed because they didn't much want to sit in front of some stranger's leftover lasagna either.

Again they politely waited for me to lead the way; I kindly showed them the two steps to the terrace. They were very tame little mice.

I have lived in nine apartments in my life. I never minded moving, I only wanted each one to have a larger terrace than the one before. For me that's progress: a better terrace and better views. From my terrace you could see the bustling Plaza Santa Ana, one of the most beautiful plazas I've ever lived in. I don't know what it is about it, but having the Teatro Español on one side makes the magic of the stage extend to every corner of the plaza.

Even then, as I looked at that plaza at three in the morning, I was surprised at how full of life it was. All the stores were open, kids playing on the swings, mothers having a coffee with other mothers and a ton of people enjoying their rem. Rem was a new mealtime that had recently been created. A lot of people were saying that rem was the most important meal of the day. I don't know, maybe it was true; maybe if you look at everything from the perspective of spending 24 hours a day awake, rem could be the perfect moment to fuel up.

The clock marked three. I've always been a minute ahead. I told you, I'm impatient. At that time of the day you could always spot people in suits rushing because they were late for work. One of the shifts started at three thirty in the morning.

That plaza was chaotic, but what better way to receive the medication than in the midst of that craziness. Exactly what was in store for me when I took it.

I think the older man didn't even look at the plaza for a second; he placed the suitcase on top of the white garden table that was in the middle of my terrace.

Just then I thought of my mother, of what she would say if she knew that, as soon as she had died, I had decided to get the injection to quit sleeping.

But I needed the world to be different, I needed to not dream of losing her again and I needed the days to not be the same as the ones when she was by my side.

A tear slid down my cheek. The two men thought that it was out of excitement at getting the medication. If they had known the truth I don't think they would have understood.

I guess that they had mothers too, but you couldn't tell by looking at them.

The older man stuck his hand into the suitcase. In a few seconds I would finally get my first look at Cetamine, the medication that nine months earlier had turned our world on its head.

3

THINKING LIKE THE THIEF WHO'S LOOKING FOR IT
AND LIKE THE PERSON WHO'S HIDING IT

When the old man's hand reappeared from inside the metal suitcase, his fingers were holding two small injections, the kind without a needle, the kind that perforate your skin and you don't even know how. They were the size of the old USB card that my uncle used to have on the desk in his office. He called them electronic pencils.

I was glad they weren't injections. I've never liked injections; I'm scared of them. My mother always used to say that they were opportunities that life gave us to blow and make a wish, but it's never going to feel good to have a needle go through your skin, no matter how positive a spin some people try to put on it.

The older man held out the two strange capsules to me, but when I went to grab them, suddenly he wouldn't give them to me. It was like in the hallway, but reversed. Now he was the one who knew the path, who knew the steps and he wouldn't give me that medication without the corresponding instructions.

He gave the impression of being conscientious. The type that are the archenemies of the impatient. I wanted to inject it into my veins and he looked to want to explain every last detail to me. He looked into my eyes, so intently that I had to look away.

"Do you know how it works...?" he asked, dragging out each of the syllables in the sentence.

I liked that older man's delicacy and tone. He was a bit sweeter than the younger one. You could tell he wanted to empathize with me. He didn't know that I hadn't wanted more friends, for some time now. Years ago my quota of getting to know people had been filled, by far.

"I guess you inject it and that's it, right?" I responded.

"Yes... That's it in theory. You inject it and that's all. But in practice it's a little more complicated."

“What do you mean?”

“Should we sit down?” the old man requested very kindly.

I knew right away that I shouldn't sit down, that I shouldn't listen to him, that all I had to do was grab that injection and let it do its job. But I liked the man's tone, it reminded me of an old priest who used to talk to me about Jesus, when I was a boy. And I would listen fascinated. I blindly believed everything he explained to me: dogmas, miracles and faith. Until my grandmother was at death's door and I prayed so hard that I wore out Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Creeds. My grandmother died and I discovered that that priest had taught me some charms that did nothing, absolutely nothing.

I sat beside the old man. He moved the injections out of my sight, as if he wanted me to concentrate on his voice, on his moment. He was like a magician at a funfair.

There are so many people that know they have their moment and they take advantage of it...

The fishmongers know it when you ask them for advice about a fish fillet. Even the dermatologists when you worriedly show them a dark spot know it's their moment. Even the cleaning woman, who comes on Thursdays and scolds me because the dust builds up in inaccessible areas, is aware that I should listen to her.

“What's your name, boy?”

While the old man tried to get to know me better, the young man lit a cigarette and turned to look at the plaza, taking no interest in a conversation he must have heard thousands of times.

“Marcos,” I answered politely.

“Marcos, I know that the product's advertising says that if you want to quit sleeping all you have to do is inject the contents, and gradually you'll

notice small changes that will result in being able to live 24 hours a day without sleeping.”

“Yes, that’s what it says.”

“Well, I should warn you that it’s true, but it’s also... a lie,” he declared with an interesting dramatic pause.

At that point I decided that I wanted to smoke. I asked the young man for a cigarette. They weren’t what they used to be, and hadn’t been for some time. My uncle, who was a big smoker, quit when my grandmother died of cancer. Later cigarettes gave up people, they took out all the nicotine and now they’re like candies with smoke.

An entire generation abhorred them, but ours, the one that still discovered Bogart classics on television, sometimes wants to smoke, to emulate our heroes in black and white.

He kindly gave me a cigarette and I lit it very slowly. It was a unique moment, it was an instant classic in black and white.

“What do you mean by that?” I exhaled all the smoke I could at the end of the question.

“That you will stop sleeping if you take it, and that your body will make up for it with movement. But it is more important that you know what that will mean. Like everything in life, first your head has to accept the change, you understand?”

I had never liked the demagoguery in the condescending you understand?”. I can’t stand it when people condescend to me. And least of all him, with his line of work.

He didn’t know it, but it bothered me enormously that he doubted my reasons for what I was about to do, the changes it entailed and what it would mean. I was really angry that his whole speech was so simplistic.

“Are you asking me if I know what I’m about to do?”

“Yes, more or less.” He stared into my eyes again.

“I know, I’m going to stop sleeping. And that’s what I want. Is that all?” I responded without the slightest hint of friendliness.

Now he was the one who looked at me scornfully; it seemed clear he didn’t like his big moment being rushed.

He couldn’t stand the true simplicity and I couldn’t stand the false complexity.

“That’s all,” he confirmed. “We have to make sure that the user understands what he is going to do. Do you have the money ready?”

His tone changed when he talked about the financial aspect. It was no longer sweet, it became rough. His gaze stopped observing me attentively; now, I was of no interest to him.

I went to find the envelope with the money. In cash. They always charged that way, since at first people would take the injections and then go cancel the check or the wire transfer and disappear. And later, even when you find them, how can you take away something that is forever? Stopping sleeping is like immortality: if they give it to you, how can they later take it away?

So they only accepted cash.

I had the money at home since the day before; I took it out of the bank as soon as I found out I had lost my mother. I went to the bank that was in the entryway of my building; I didn’t go out onto the street.

It was nearly eleven at night when I took out almost all my savings. When I got home I didn’t know where to put it; there were only a few hours left before they brought me the injections, but I was afraid someone would rob me as I slept.

I spent time thinking where to hide it. I don’t know if you’ve ever found yourself with the problem of hiding money at home. It’s complicated,

because you think like the person who hides it, but at the same time like the thief who's looking for it.

You think you've found a good spot, but then you think like a thief and you realize that it would be the first place you'd look.

Socks, shoes, backs of closets, nooks, tiles, the bathroom cabinet... They all seem like brilliant ideas, but immediately they turn into terribly obvious hiding spots.

It took me almost two hours to find the right place. It had to be unthinkable both for the person with the money and for the thief. And, it had to be someplace easy to remember. How many times have we hidden things of value so, so well that later we couldn't find them.

I went over to my pillow, took off the case and sewn inside there was the narrow white envelope that held all my money. How ironic, the pillow held the key to quitting sleeping.

I went back to the terrace. The two men weren't talking. That made me think that they couldn't stand each other. I imagined a fight between them, over money, over character differences and even over some shady girl trouble. I handed the money to the older man. He passed it immediately to the younger one, who began to count it.

When he finished he counted it again. And then a third time.

No one spoke during those three counts, no one looked at anyone, only the sound from the plaza flooded everything. The sound of those who had already achieved it. Money in showy motion.

"It's all good," said the young man as if the triple check hadn't happened.

The older man handed me the two injections. I took them and noticed that his hand was cold. I didn't like it, I've never liked people without body heat.

"Enjoy," he said without any sort of positive intonation, so I wouldn't

think he believed what he was telling me.

“Thank you. I hope you can find your way out,” I answered.

I know, it was very rude not to walk them to the door, but I didn't want to have to retrace the path to the door, wait for the elevator to arrive and say goodbye again.

They appreciated it; they left. I'm sure they had to wake up many more people so they could quit sleeping.

I sat in the chair that the old man had left cold and I kept smoking, expelling the fake nicotine forcefully from my clean lungs.

In my left fist were the two injections; I squeezed them tightly.

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4

FEAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

We're all afraid. We all have fears, but the good thing about this life is that hardly anyone asks us what ours are.

They sense them, they smell them, they encounter them one day at the airport, in the middle of a dark street, getting onto a bus in a strange city... And suddenly they realize that we are afraid of flying, or of the dark, of being mugged or of loving and giving part of ourselves when we have sex.

That night, as he gave me the injections, I had a horrible fear of losing... Of losing my dreams, of becoming just one more of those who had given up sleeping. One of those people in the plaza... My mother once told me, "Being different only depends on how many people are on your side."

I don't know if the old man's words had affected me or if simply, as so often happens, that as a long-awaited moment approaches you realize that maybe you don't want it to.

Weddings, investments, kisses, sex... In all those moments you can decide to turn back out of all kinds of fear.

I'll admit it, I didn't want it, it wasn't something I thought I should do.

When Cetamine was introduced, a lot of people said that they would never take it. That you'd have to be a fool to give up sleeping, give up your naps and your dreams.

After a few months, so many had succumbed that you realized you either had to convert or lose a part of your life.

There were some that decided to take it out of jealousy. Yes, jealousy. What was your lover doing while you slept? Who were they with, what was going on, what were they seeing, what were they feeling...? That got to a lot of people, people who didn't want to be left out of what was happening at night, those nocturnal moments that seemed to have been created for the loveliest things on the planet. When your lover came home, woke you up and told you about something incredible that happened at five in the

morning while you were still accruing hours of sleep, there with your crusty eyes, well, that feeling won out over many people's refusal to give up the nocturnal life they'd always known.

But I still wanted to sleep even after I heard those reasons. After all, I've always thought that sleeping is like time travel. A lot of people think that we'll never travel to the future, but I think we do it every night. You sleep and when you wake up incredible things have happened: treaties have been signed, the stock market's values have changed, people have broken up and fallen in love on other parts of the planet, where life continues...

And all these big events have happened while you were sleeping. In those two seconds that are really eight hours, or nine or ten, depending on what you need and what you can get. And sleeping is never the same.

I've always found it amazing how sleep, when done right, passes in the blink of an eye.

I've always believed in sleeping and in traveling to the future, maybe that's why losing what was so much a part of me, those nocturnal trips, frightened me.

I'll tell you a secret: sometimes, if I fall asleep quickly without thinking about it, I wake up suddenly, afraid, deathly afraid; it's as if my body slept but my brain didn't. Suddenly they both wake up at once and my most primal fears make me feel like a helpless little boy. And that is when I hug whomever I have by my side, and I would give all my love and all my sex in exchange for being taken care of.

Over the years, I've realized that it's a fear I can control if I am aware that I've only fallen asleep and woken up quickly. It's a primal fear, instantaneous, but easy to get under control if you diagnose it promptly. But the weird part is that I don't really want to control it, I like seeing myself so incredibly weak.

And there I was, about to do something that I had sworn I wouldn't. Many, many people had already stopped sleeping, but I still felt it was important.

My whole philosophy had gone up in smoke when I found out that my mother had left me.

And I knew that once I did it I'd get a raise immediately, and a new mortgage. Because they say that life changes when you don't sleep. That your work schedule is different, that you experience time in a whole new way. I don't know, I guess it's true. Although people are such liars... Hardly anyone complains about an expensive trip or a concert ticket that cost an arm and a leg. We have to like expensive things or, if we don't, we refuse to admit it. Nobody is stupid enough to take a load of crap and on top of that to pay good money for it.

I decided that I'd had enough of my fears; it was time to inject the medication. I looked out at the plaza and brought the needle to my arm.

But just as I was about to feel the liquid in my veins, the unexpected happened...

5

VOCAL CORDS IN THE SHAPE OF A GRAMOPHONE
NEEDLE

It happened. I saw her. She was in the middle of the crowded Plaza Santa Ana. Right smack in the middle. She couldn't have found the exact center better if she'd tried.

She was waiting for someone; her gaze searched and searched in hundreds of directions. Her eyes traveled over bodies, over skin, followed footsteps... She was anxious, waiting for her date to arrive. From up on the seventh floor, I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

There was something in her waiting, the way she was waiting, that drew my attention powerfully. I'm not the falling in love type, I told you that already, I'd never done it.

I don't believe in love, I believe in sex. But there was something about that young woman, something so strange in the way she was waiting, how she positioned her legs, how she moved, how she searched, that awoke a new feeling in me. Maybe I was being too epic.

There, barefoot, in the middle of the night, I felt like a junkie with that strange injection a millimeter away from piercing my skin. It was like the side effect of that medication before ecstasy.

Suddenly, an accordion player and a guitarist started playing a jazz melody. A very young boy, who couldn't have been more than fourteen, with his hair slicked back, started singing songs in a style so passé that it seemed like his vocal cords were prolonged gramophone needles.

The song wouldn't have meant much to me if it weren't for the fact that those jazzy melodies were my mother's favorites; she played them all day long when I was a kid.

I had breakfast, lunch and dinner with the jazz greats. Parker, Rollins and Ellington were the soundtrack of my childhood. My mother always sang them in a low voice, whispering the lyrics. She never sang at full voice... She believed in the whisper, in whispering.

“There isn’t enough whispering in life,” she used to say to me. “I’ve probably gotten a total of three to six minutes of whispers. Very short sentences from men at very specific moments: “I love you... I’ll never forget you... don’t stop... don’t stop...” Whispers are so powerful that they should be outlawed in bed. Everyone tells lies in bed, absolutely everyone. You should never whisper in bed, and especially not when you’re having sex,” she repeated in a whisper in a taxi on the way to the Beijing airport.

Yes, I think it’s about time I told you: my mother talked about sex. I’ve been lucky in life, from the age of thirteen she talked to me about the subject that most every parent wishes would never come up in a conversation.

At first I was overwhelmed. At thirteen you don’t want to talk to your mother about anything, and least of all about sex. But my mother was always very liberal. Well, I don’t like the word liberal, and neither did she. She considered herself “free.”

She referred to herself and to many of the people she admired as “free people.” I don’t know if I’ve managed to be free.

I remember that when I was fourteen we went to a hotel that was a skyscraper. We were staying on the 112th floor; it was the first skyscraper I had ever set foot in. It was amazing, it was really like being up in the sky. It was a strange and intense sensation, although later I set foot and spent nights in so many skyscraper hotels that that moment got diluted and I forgot all about it.

That’s why, sometimes, when I’m in an airplane and I sense that someone is flying for the first time I don’t take my eyes off of them. You can tell that they’re enjoying it so much: feeling the takeoff, how routine flying at 11,000 meters becomes and then the panic at landing. I try to fill myself

with their passion, their fears, their first time. Yes, I can admit it, I'm a bit of a vampire of primal emotions.

Well, that day, in that hotel in New York, the only room left was one with just a double bed. I was almost fifteen years old, so there was no way I wanted to share a bed with my mother, it was very embarrassing. And that was what I told her. She looked at me as only she knew how to do. She only put her eyes on me for ten seconds, twisted her mouth and already I was feeling intimidated.

"You don't want to sleep next to me?" She twisted her mouth and I swallowed hard.

"I'm almost fifteen, Mom."

"I was fifteen too when I had to sleep next to you for the first time. And I did it for nine months even though you made me want to vomit and you wouldn't stop kicking me. But if you'd rather, you can sleep in the chair. We are free, free people and we can decide."

That left me almost breathless. She put on one of her old jazz records and she smoked a cigarette.

She didn't look for a reaction in me; she didn't believe in coercing or convincing people.

I got into the bed, beside her. I listened to the music and I smelled her cigarettes.

She always made me feel like a special teenager.

The song that was playing the first night I slept with my mother in that skyscraper was the same one I heard on that terrace overlooking the Plaza Santa Ana, the night that I was about to quit sleeping.

The boy with the slicked back hair was singing it a rhythm so syncopated that it was as if I could feel my mother's presence nearby. Maybe it was a sign, I don't know, it must have been something.

She was still waiting. Her passively active face had me spellbound.

She hadn't noticed my presence, she hadn't felt how my eyes were glued on her, not shifting for even a second.

My gaze, my presence, my intermittent heartbeat were foreign to her.

And just as she had arrived to the middle of the plaza, she left, with slow steps.

She headed toward the Teatro Español. She kept staring at the poster for *Death of a Salesman*, the wonderful Arthur Miller play that was showing there then.

Suddenly, all hesitation left her steps and she went right up to the theater entrance.

And I was imagining a whole story in my head. She had been waiting for someone, they didn't show up, the play was about to start and she had made a decision.

If you get stood up at three in the morning and you want to see a play, you have to make a decision. I think that in that moment, her pride won out over her sadness.

She went quickly into the theater. I had the feeling I could even hear how the ticket taker tore her ticket and the usher whispered to her, "Row 6, seat 15, follow me."

I felt that she was disappearing from my world and I didn't know what to do.

I would have loved to just go into the theater. My mother used to say that no one should discourage you. Nobody. Ever.

But her absence from the plaza hurt. It was as if I'd lost something. It is horrible and creepy to miss something you've never had.

The sound of the telephone brought me back to reality. I knew that it was serious because of the long rings and the cadence between them. I've

always believed that phones have an intelligence and they know when they're bearing bad news, so they try to warn us with an appropriate tone so that we know what's imminent.

I picked it up on the sixth ring.

Leaving the terrace was like leaving behind my destiny. The wooden smell of the linoleum floor brought me back to my daily life. Seeing my living room made me forget for a second what I'd experienced outside.

"Hello?" I like to get right to the point when I answer the phone.

"You should come immediately, something unbelievable just happened," said my boss, in an irritated tone that signaled something extremely serious was going on.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You didn't hear?"

"No, I was... sleeping."

"Well, turn on the news, you're going to freak out. The media just found out ten minutes ago. Come quickly, we need you here."

My boss didn't sleep anymore. You could tell by the tone he was using at three in the morning. People who didn't sleep always had a ten o'clock-in-the-morning tone, no matter what time it was. I felt stupid having to tell him that I'd been asleep.

I turned on the television. I was prepared for anything, except what I saw. It was as freaky as my boss had warned me it would be.

So I decided to change from one channel to the next to make sure what I was seeing was true.

The headline of the news on the first channel was extraordinary and spoke for itself: "Confirmed arrival of the first extraterrestrial to planet Earth."

The headlines on the other channels only varied in style, but they all

contained the word extraterrestrial.

There were no pictures of it. There was only a newscaster reporting from a studio and archive images taken from famous films.

I sat down, well, I collapsed onto the sofa. I stared at the headline for many minutes, spellbound, and watched the circus that had sprung up around so little information.

There were no other facts, no image, not even an eyewitness or expert to confirm what they were saying. An absolute void that sucked you in.

They had just gotten the news barely ten minutes earlier and you could already sense that they would spend the whole day twisting and distorting that disturbing headline, without having anything more to report than they had at that moment.

And it would probably get record audience ratings.

My grandmother told me that she'd watched man landing on the moon on television. She always remembered that my mother wouldn't stop crying because she was teething and that it was an incredibly hot day, as if the sun was resisting the event with all its strength.

Who would have thought that another hot summer would be the setting for the arrival of the first extraterrestrial to Earth. I pricked up my ears toward the street in search of children crying over mouth pain but all I heard were a couple of soft barks.

I decided to get dressed; I knew what was waiting for me at work. I knew it right away, because they'd called me and that made me feel nervous, but at the same time tremendously special.

I chose dark tones. I drank a liter and a half of milk in a couple of gulps, straight from the bottle.

I took the stairs because I needed to think. I don't know why, but brief, intense physical exercise always helped. All sorts of daily activities, like

dishwashing, riding my stationery bike or walking down stairs strengthened my ideas and my imagination.

In the Plaza Santa Ana I noticed that people were starting to hear the news.

From mouth to mouth, whisper to whisper, as if the air itself were conveying the news and carrying it to everyone sitting at the outdoor tables.

The barmen passed it to the waiters, the waiters to the customers, and the customers to the passersby. Gradually, they left their beers on the tables and they gathered around the television, hypnotized. Their daily routine or their big meeting were put on hold by this disturbing fact that was changing everyone's lives.

I went to catch a taxi, but just as my hand was lifting to hail a free one... I stopped it.

The Teatro Español, there in front of me, impassive at the big news, was calling to me.

Suddenly I thought, did she know what had happened? When she went in did the usher mention it while he showed her to her row and seat? Or was she completely oblivious as she watched *Death of a Salesman*? I thought how at that very moment, Willy Loman would be explaining his car trouble to his wife or maybe he'd be criticizing Biff. Poor Biff...

I approached that mass of stone. The theater looked like a bunker. All the doors were closed. I went over to a poster that showed in small type the cast and the length of the performance. A play's exact length is never clear, but it said, "Approximately 120 minutes." I thought that for two whole hours she would be caught up in the death of that salesman without knowing about the arrival of the visitor from another planet, who might be bringing about the end of life as we know it.

"Do you want a taxi or not?"

The taxi driver that I had hidden my hand from had noticed, slowed down and was looking at me anxiously. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that he already had the meter running. I've never liked taxi drivers; I don't trust them. My mother took so many cabs that she used to tell me that there was no choice: "Taxis are like members of your family. They're the mother-in-law or the uncle you know will turn against you, but that you have to love."

"If you don't want a cab, don't hail one."

I hated taking that taxi, but that plaza was either overflowing with cabs or completely devoid of them. I couldn't risk it.

I slowly got in as I listened to the theater's buzzing energy, that sound that's almost imperceptible but filled with intense power. You can hear it by almost every theater; it is the sum total of all the very slight sounds during performances, the sighs of audience members and the soft movements of the stagehands.

That is the sound of my childhood, since I grew up in the theaters of hundreds of countries around the world. My mother was a theater woman. If she heard me say that, she'd kill me, because she was a dancer.

"Where to?"

"Torrejón. Block E."

"Really?" I could feel the cabdriver's heart beating in time to his meter. His whole being was excited, maybe he even had an erection thinking about how much money he was going to make, since Torrejón was quite a ways away.

"Really. And if you don't mind, turn off the air conditioning, I'll roll down the windows."

He did it without complaining. The taxi took off, leaving behind my plaza and that young woman that had had such an impact on me.

I closed my eyes, pretending to be tired, so the taxi driver would get that I didn't want to chat. The way you act in the first five minutes is what marks the whole ride in a taxi. I felt him watching me in the rear view mirror; then he turned on the radio and forgot about me.

I kept my eyes closed for a while, knowing that in a few minutes I would find myself "face to face" with the extraterrestrial who had captivated the entire world.

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6

THE DANCE OF THE ESOPHAGUS

Gradually, kilometer by kilometer, I opened my eyes. It was the first time I had left the house since I found out about my mother's death. Going to the bank, since it was in my entryway, didn't count.

Everything was the same out on the street. People meandered, cars circulated nervously and the night continued as dormant as ever.

Who had to die to make the world stop completely and for us to cease our daily activities? Who is important enough to shift everything so viscerally?

As we made our way through the intense traffic of that Sunday at four in the morning, inside that taxi I was thinking about the life I had spent with my mother.

She had always wanted me to be creative. She had never said it in those words, but I knew.

First she taught me dance. I had always enjoyed watching how the dancers fulfilled her choreographies. She was very hard on them, she didn't think of them as her children, or even as friends. I believe they were simply the instrument she used to achieve what she wanted. Knives and forks that brought the food to her mouth.

How can I describe her dances? They were a different kind of choreography, filled with life and light. She hated all things classic. In dance and in life.

"What is dance?" I asked her one cold winter in Poznań where the temperature never went above -5 degrees Celsius.

"Do you have time to listen to the answer, Marcos?" was her icy response.

How I hated that she never thought my fourteen years were enough and having to hear that darn response every time I asked her anything the slightest bit grown-up. It really, really bugged me. It made me feel like a

boy who couldn't concentrate; it made me feel that she was questioning my interest.

"Of course," I replied, offended.

"Dance is the way to show how our esophagus is feeling," she declared.

And as you can imagine, I didn't understand at all.

Let me give you some context. She believed that the heart was the most overrated organ. Love, passion and pain were the exclusive domain of that little throbbing red thing. And that really annoyed her.

So, I don't know when, I think it was before I was born, she decided that the esophagus would be the organ that possessed artistic vitality. And according to her, dance captured her vitality; painting showed her colors; film revealed her movement and theater, her language.

"Should I take the M-30 or the M-40?" asked the taxi driver, bringing me back to reality with a question whose feet were firmly planted on the ground.

"Whatever you like," I replied, and he went back to his world and I went back to mine.

I decided to paint at the age of sixteen.

I gave up dancing because it was her world, my mother's world. I knew that I would never get anywhere, that I didn't even have a fraction of her talent. Did the son of Humphrey Bogart or Elizabeth Taylor think they would be able to emulate their parents?

I wanted to paint life, I wanted to make a series of paintings, a trilogy of concepts. Capture them in paint. Life in three canvases.

This was no idea chosen at random, it came to me when I saw Picasso's painting "La Vie." It's my favorite by him. I saw it in Cleveland; my mother was there for the premiere of her latest innovative performance and I spent three hours looking at that marvelous painting in the museum. I didn't look

at any others. At the age of sixteen I became captivated by that blue masterpiece.

What is “life” all about? Well, it’s about love.

My mother always said that everything that was good artistically talked about love. The great films that are shown again and again, the timeless masterworks of the theater that are staged over and over and even the epic books reread every five years or so. They all have something in common: love or the loss of that love.

Particularly, in the painting “La Vie” there are four groups: a couple in love, another in lust, someone alone who has lost his love and another happy to be free of it. I think that each group symbolizes a stage in our lives, the precise moments we have, we feel.

In that moment of my life, I felt like the person alone, the one who had lost his beloved and was sad over it. Solitary love is still love, but it is completely different from the couple who loves each other, the couple who desires each other and the person glad for their loss.

I wondered if that taxi driver was in love just then. If he desired someone in silence, if he had had sex that night, if he had enjoyed it.

I wish we could ask ourselves these questions without blushing. Just as that painting forces you to respond to them, after merely looking at it for a good long while.

My mother never made me feel guilty about missing her Cleveland premiere. I told her about Picasso’s canvas and my idea of painting a trilogy about life.

She listened attentively, took her ten minutes (she never answered important questions hastily; what’s more, she believed the world would be a better place if we all took that time) and she said to me:

“If you want to paint a trilogy about life, speak of childhood, sex and

death. That is life in three concepts.”

Then she went off to take her post-premiere bath.

She loved water. She said that ideas, creation, depend on what surrounds them.

She believed that people think that the air we breathe is the perfect conductor for creating, but they are completely wrong. It could be water, and she explained that many inventors had had their best ideas when their bodies were completely submerged. Or it could also be the oxygen mixed with the music of a concert or listening to the same song over and over again while you hunt for the perfect idea. Or sometimes, just smelling the burned wood in a fireplace could be how you find inspiration. She spent her life searching for her ideal creative atmosphere. I always thought they were her post-premiere baths, until one day, on an airplane, she told me:

“I think that my creative scent is the mix of your breath with mine.” Then she took a deep breath and indicated that I should do the same. We exhaled and inhaled two or three times. “The ideas are already coming to me...” she said, smiling at me.

I felt flattered and very embarrassed at the same time.

I didn't speak again on that flight. I tried to barely breathe and it was a long eight-hour journey between Montreal and Barcelona.

Sometimes it is difficult to accept someone saying something so lovely to you.

The taxi driver changed radio stations; the music disappeared and the news about the alien returned. The cabbie, who seemed not to have heard it yet, turned the volume up to the maximum as if that would give him more information.

“Do you hear what they're saying?” he asked, startled.

“Yes.”

“Do you think it’s true?” He changed stations several times. “Fuck, that’s intense, right? An alien here, they don’t even know what to make up anymore.”

“No, they don’t even know what to make up anymore,” I repeated, not knowing what else to say.

The conversation stopped again. He sped up; I had the feeling my indifference bothered him. If he knew that in sixteen minutes I would be with that alien, I guess he would have been much more interested in his uncommunicative passenger.

I took my mother’s advice about the trilogy. I painted death at the age of twenty-three and childhood at seventeen, but I never painted sex.

I believe that sometimes you don’t dare to paint something that you know is so profound within you.

My mother spoke to me so often about sex when I was little that I ended up hating everything that had anything to do with it. I’ve never stopping having it, but I don’t think I knew how to face up to it with a palette in my hand.

Death was easy to paint.

Although it was very hard to gain access to it. I went through hundreds of prisons in the United States where they still had the death penalty. I managed, thanks to a head warden who was in love with my mother, to make friends with inmates who would soon die and I asked them about their imminent end.

They spent hours and hours talking to me about death and I listened. Months searching for something that they would show me that I could paint. Aren’t they and the terminally ill the only ones who are lucid about death? They wait for it, they know it, they see it coming for years,

sometimes right in front of their faces. And I believe they even come to accept their expiration date.

I preferred the inmates to the terminally ill because somehow their pain wasn't so intense and their deaths were more clearly defined, not mixed with another difficult feeling that is almost impossible to depict.

Every inmate I met seemed innocent, I would have given them pardons. I don't know what it is about death that makes all human beings seem so fragile, innocent and naïve...

And those condemned men told me so many things, some of them so dark, others terribly filled with light...

Until I met one... David was his name. David was going to be executed for raping and killing his two sisters. He asked for his last meal, a strange ritual that was still practiced in all of those prisons. An absurd courtesy to those about to die.

He didn't ask for much, a vanilla ice cream with nuts. But it was when they brought it to him, on that inexpressive blue tray, that he saw what death was. I only had to paint his final wish.

I picked up my brushes and I painted that, as realistically as I could. The white ice cream, the ochre nuts and the blue of the tray.

David died, I didn't watch, I couldn't bear it, I had grown fond of him.

The painting, according to my mother, reeked of death.

I could barely look at it, so I gave it to an old friend. I haven't been able to eat vanilla ice cream with nuts either. When I try to it's as if death itself made me retch.

Childhood is easier to draw. I remember my mother always said that it was a lie that it was the happiest times of our lives. She thought it was when we cried most. She said that we cry so inconsolably those first few years,

that childhood is like tons of sadness mixed with kilos of happiness. The great bipolar stage of our lives.

That was my inspiration. I painted little kids who had been given toys and then two minutes later had them snatched away.

I sought out the most believable tears, the most dramatic sobs mixed with smiles and the incredible happiness that still could be seen on their faces. The possession and loss of the toy produced those opposing reactions.

I ended up creating a truly disturbing painting. Extreme happiness and sadness, pure childhood. My mother was so proud of me... She hugged me so hard that I felt like our two esophagi were merging. Then she whispered:

“Sex. Now do sex, Marcos. Paint it.”

Sex. I never even picked up my brush. I don't think my mother forgave me for that. I started to neglect my painting. I promised her that I would finish the trilogy, but thirteen years have passed and I had almost completely forgotten about it all.

In just a few short hours her corpse would arrive, fulfilling a premonition that she told me about years ago on a boat on the way to Finland: “One day you will look into my lifeless eyes without having finished the trilogy about your life.” I hated that she was right, just like when, at fourteen, she thought I wouldn't pay attention to her answer to my adult question.

I hated that she said it in such a dramatic way. And most of all I hated that there existed lifeless eyes.

The cabbie arrived at my destination.

I paid him; I didn't leave a tip. My assistant was waiting for me at the door of the building complex. Dani had glowing skin. I don't know how he did it, but he always gave off an air of freshness.

I know that he held me in high regard and he always tried to greet me with a big smile. He had a gallery of twelve or thirteen smiles, although that

day his skin was drawn and his smile was a worried grimace. His entire face was shrunken.

He looked at me with his green eyes filled with concern.

I got out of the taxi; the driver took off almost as soon as I closed the door. A minute sooner and he would have taken me with him. I think he was upset that I hadn't tipped him.

"It's inside," said my assistant when the taxi had fled. "I don't know what it's like, but they want you to see it immediately. Everybody is nervous."

"Is it green and tiny with antennae and giant black eyes?" I joked.

"No," he answered without laughing.

We got into a second car and headed to the offices. I wasn't nervous at all; I just thought that I should finish the sex painting before my mother's body arrived, before I looked into her lifeless eyes.

I hadn't really seen them yet, so I could still finish my trilogy.

I know it seems stupid. I was on my way to meet the first alien that had reached planet Earth and all I could think about was making some strange painting about sex.

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7

I DON'T KNOW IF MY GIFT FOUND ME OR IF I FOUND
IT

I enjoyed the short trip from the entry to the head office. The driver, a sixty-year-old Peruvian with a young soul, always put on a Cranberries CD as soon as he saw me get into the car. Then he would smile at me with his gold teeth.

One day he told me they had been his father's. That when he died, he had them taken out and he kept them, then he had two healthy teeth pulled out and he put in his father's gold ones.

"My father is inside me," he said one day as he smiled at me through the rearview mirror, showing his paternal gold teeth.

"I'm sure he would be proud of you," I answered.

"I don't think so," he added. "This was the only shiny part of my father; the rest wasn't pretty to look at, and it didn't light up anything or anyone."

We didn't speak about his teeth ever again, but every time he smiled I felt close to him.

I like people that make you feel warmth so easily. They achieve it so simply that you can't tell how they do it. It's like one of those hidden Microsoft codes. The source is known only to its creator.

There is a Chinese proverb that I love: "Don't open a store if you don't know how to smile." My Peruvian driver could open up a hundred department stores.

Dani was still very nervous; his skin had lost what little texture it had had when I arrived. He gestured to the Peruvian, whose smile disappeared behind a black glass that cut us off from him and the Cranberries' music.

"Tell me, is it true what they're saying in the news?" I decided to get a jump on his preoccupation.

"Yes. We've got him inside. They want you to talk to him, to use your gift and confirm that he really is who he says he is," responded Dani trying, as always, for "gift" not to sound too strange coming from his lips.

I remained pensive. I wasn't sure if my gift would work. I hoped so, since it had never failed me yet, but I still had my doubts.

Dani respected my silence for almost half a minute, but he soon was interrupting my thoughts.

“Have you quit sleeping already?”

I wasn't expecting that, a radical shift in the conversation. I guess he was trying to put me at ease. I pulled the two injections out of my pocket and showed them to him. He looked at them with as much desire as if they were bread in the Great Depression. I don't think he had ever seen them so up close.

“Are they real?” he asked as he stroked them softly like a cat.

“They better be, for what they cost me.”

“And why haven't you taken them?” he asked as he brought them closer to his skin.

“I don't know, it wasn't the right moment.”

“And who is the other one for?” he said giving them back before he injected them in a sudden fit.

It's true, I didn't tell you that every time you buy one injection for quitting sleeping they give you another. It's not a two-for-one deal but, because of the fabrication method, the medicine needed to make one injection is the same as for two. So that was why they gave you both.

I tried to dissuade them, I wasn't interested in having two and I could have used a discount, but I didn't get anywhere. The truth is I hadn't thought about the question Dani was asking me; I didn't know who I would give the other one to.

“Do you want it?” I asked.

I know that he wanted to stop sleeping. He had mentioned it hundreds of times, but he couldn't afford it.

“I can’t pay you for it,” he answered, blushing as if he had been given an excessive compliment.

“I’m not selling it to you, Dani, I’m giving it to you.”

“I can’t pay you for it, I’m sorry.” The black glass lowered. “The chief is waiting for you at the entrance, he wants to talk to you before you see the stranger.”

He said the word stranger just as the glass completely disappeared. I know that I shouldn’t ask anything more, because we no longer had privacy, but I couldn’t help it.

“You guys call him the stranger?” Finally Dani hesitated before answering, he looked at the Peruvian and then at me and he must have decided that the danger of filtration was minimal and that the information had no value.

“Yes, that’s what they decided. Until his origin is determined he’ll be called “the stranger”.

The car braked. We had arrived at the main building. I saw the chief’s shoes beside the vehicle.

He was waiting for Dani to open the door but he couldn’t do it, he was stock-still, as if he wanted to tell me something more. I looked at him, inviting him to do so. But he hesitated and the chief’s shoes were getting more and more nervous with the wait. It was as if they were tap dancing.

“I appreciate your offer,” he said finally, blushing again. “You know that there is nothing I want more in this life than to quit sleeping. Give me two hours to get together some money; if you think it’s enough I will buy the other injection from you.”

He opened the door so quickly that I didn’t have time to answer him. I loved Dani’s fragility. I smiled at the Peruvian driver before abandoning his domain.

“I think that the stranger is an extraterrestrial,” he told me, smiling. “Good luck with your gift, I wonder what you’ll discover.”

I had always suspected that the dark glass was useless. After it had gone up I could hear the Peruvian breathing, absorbing everything we were saying. Assimilating it, processing it and finally looking at us when we thought he hadn’t heard a thing.

Although, surely, whether the Peruvian was listening in or not didn’t matter much. I suppose now you’ll be wondering what my “gift” is. What it is I do for a living.

Painting, as you’ll have already figured out, never got past a hobby. I thinking there is nothing harder than admitting that your artistic vein won’t give you a professional future.

There is something devastatingly sad about feeling you are one of those for whom their work and their creativity don’t go hand in hand.

But that doesn’t mean that I’ve given up painting. I still paint in my free time. Although not really, not on canvas, but in my imagination. And the truth is that I have a lot of down time; my work doesn’t keep me very busy, since I am only called in occasionally.

I don’t know if my gift found me or if I found it.

“We are expecting a lot of you, Marcos,” the chief told me when I set foot outside the car.

Then he squeezed my hand so hard that I felt as if two of my fingers were about to break.

My boss was a sixty-something Belgian who had been an Olympic champion in archery. I had only seen him shoot an arrow once; his face was pure pleasure when he picked up the bow. I love the faces that appear alongside our life passions.

My mother believed that the world would be a better place if our sexual

self invaded our homebody selves. She told me when I was fifteen that I had to understand that there were two people inside of me: my sexual self and my homebody self.

“Maybe you aren’t yet familiar with your sexual self, Marcos,” she told me while we waited in the seats of a theater before a dress rehearsal in Essen. “But you will soon feel it. It will appear at certain moments of your life: when you desire someone, when you have sex or simply in the most unexpected situations.

“Your sexual self is the most important thing in your life because when you go somewhere you’ve never been it will activate you. You will feel how it scours, searching for what it wants, how it falls in love, lights up, fills with passion.

“Maybe you have yet to feel it, but soon, every time you meet people you will end up asking yourself what those people will mean in your life.

“Just getting onto a plane, you’ll know in an instant which people you desire, which people would be able to feel love for you or you to feel love for them and which ones you would want to have sex with.

“It’s innate in people and you must understand that feeling desire is not a bad thing. It forms part of your sexual self. Your homebody self, your formal self, will turn off your sexual self, making it more compliant in society’s eyes, more presentable.

“But Marcos, how are we going to get to know the people around us if we don’t know what they are really like, if we don’t know how they pant, their sexual desires, how they show their most extreme passion...? How can we not know all that? How much happier we’d be if our sexual self controlled our lives and our face showed the happiness of passion.”

The dress rehearsal began in Essen and she forgot all about me from that moment on.

I remember each and every one of her words. I have never dared to apply any of what she told me, but I know she wasn't talking about orgies or about doing what we desire in every moment.

She was talking about transferring the happiness that we feel in the bedroom to the office, to a sad winter day as we walk the streets or wait for the bus.

When my boss picked up the bow I believe that his sexual self appeared. The sounds he made were like pants of passion in miniature. And he glowed in a way I had never seen him do before. That day I thought that my mother had been right and I understood her a little bit more.

"I'll do what I can," I answered my boss as we went into the offices.

Maybe that would have also been a good response to my mother's speech in Essen.

But I didn't say anything to her. Many conversations with my mother remained unfinished. She didn't believe in ending arguments, chats or dance performances.

She said that periods make people's lives easier. Commas and ellipses increase intelligence.

How I was missing her; her loss hurt me to an extent I never could have imagined. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I had only shed one single tear on the terrace. And that doesn't count as crying. Crying is at least two or three tears; one is just sorrow.

We headed to the basement. It made sense that they were holding the stranger there. The faces of everyone we came across looked at me expectantly. They all knew about my gift and what I could do.

My gift... it's hard to explain. How I learned to use it is even weirder. How I ended up working for them, well, I don't think any of it is easy to explain.

But I want to tell you about it. There are things, little details, that form part of us and make us who we are. And my gift was something that defined me.

Even though I used it very little. I didn't like to use it in normal life, so I kept it almost always disconnected. That made me feel more alive. If I had had the gift connected when I saw the girl in front of the Teatro Español maybe I wouldn't have felt the same way about her.

What I felt was primal, it was authentic. Falling in love with her waiting. I thought about her again, she must still be in the theater, enjoying, smiling and savoring that play about the traveling salesman.

How could I miss her without ever having met her? Human beings are magical and indescribable. I felt something special when I thought about her again.

The first time I realized my gift was also in a theater. I was seventeen-years-old. They say that is the age when people's gifts appear. That day I met a new dancer in the dressing rooms. My mother had a lot of faith that she would give her choreography a new style.

I came across the dancer in those long dressing rooms in Cologne and, suddenly, without knowing why, in barely a couple of seconds, just by looking at her, I knew her entire life.

Her dreams, her desires, her lies came to me. All her emotions and passions were clearly transmitted to me, as if I received them through infrareds.

I perceived her pain over her little brother's death. Such grief that I realized it came from the guilt of having left him home alone. I also felt the sadness that filled her every time she had sex with strangers. She didn't like it, she had been raped at fifteen and sex had never been pleasant for her, it

was just something that she felt she should do even though it wasn't pleasurable.

And more than a dozen other feelings, as profound as those first two, came to me. It was like prying into her life without even wanting to. My face filled with her emotions, so much so that I had to leave, get away from her. I didn't know what had happened, but I had seen her life, her weak points and what made her feel comfortable and proud, too.

Her hatred of my mother came to me as well. It was so strong and so terrible that I even thought she was capable of killing her.

But I didn't say anything to my mother, because I didn't think any of that was true.

Two months later, that dancer stabbed my mother in the heart with a pair of scissors. She wasn't badly hurt, but if it had been just two centimeters to the left and my mother would have died.

In the ICU I told her what I had felt when I met her attacker. She looked at me and took her time and finally said:

“You have a gift, Marcos. Learn to use it and never let it use you.”

We never spoke about my gift again. Her heart recovered. She didn't mind the whole thing, because of her utmost disdain toward that organ she considered overrated. I think it was her esophagus that controlled her most important emotions.

“Do you want to go in alone to see the stranger?” asked my boss.

I nodded.

“How long have you been holding him?” I asked before entering.

“Three months,” he answered.

“You've had him locked up for three months?” I asked, indignant.

“We've tried every method, but we haven't been able to figure out if he is a stranger or not. Let's see what your gift tells you.”

If they had resorted to me it was because I was their last option. Before me, military men, psychologists, doctors and even elite torturers must have entered that room. And they must have all failed because in the upper echelons my gift was not very popular.

“How did the press find out?” I inquired.

The chief was getting increasingly nervous. I think he didn’t want to be asked questions but to be given answers.

“Filtrations, I guess,” he mused indifferently.

“Well, from what I’ve seen on television, in a few hours the media wants to meet him.”

“That’s why you are here,” he declared, anxious for me to enter.

“You have to turn off all cameras, otherwise there will be interference.”

“His face changed dramatically; he wasn’t willing to lose communication with that room.

“Why can’t you try to use your gift with the cameras on, this time?”

“It won’t work,” I reminded him. “Electromagnetic interference won’t allow me to distinguish between what is real and what is false. What has been imagined as opposed to what has actually happened.”

My boss rubbed his face; he didn’t like it one bit. I imagined what it would take for him to transfer my request to his superiors. They were not going to be amused in the slightest to miss that curious moment with the stranger.

“Okay, we’ll turn everything off,” he accepted. “You do what you have to get the information.”

He went off, leaving me alone in front of that door.

8

THE PORTUGUESE GIRL AND THE BAKER WHO LOVED
HORSES

Before turning the knob and entering I began to let my gift penetrate me. It wasn't painful, it was a mix of strangeness and pleasure.

I haven't told you much about my gift, but when I let it invade me I feel very powerful.

The gift gives me premonitions... Well, I don't like that word... Let's just say that it "gives" me the beginning of the most terrible and also the most pleasurable memory of the person whose eyes I am looking into.

I have seen horrible crimes, consummated desires, unbearable pain, psychological terror followed by limitless love, unbridled passion and extreme joy.

In that first moment when I am observing the person I have that duality of feelings. It's like watching a trailer of both feelings. They come to me, I see the sequence of their two important moments and then I receive twelve extra moments. They are like a succession that goes from the horrible to the pleasurable. As if they were secondary numbers in the lottery.

I don't see those as two-minute trailers but as fourteen-second teasers.

And, sometimes, in those twelve moments is the key to the person I am examining. Often, the extremes are so far from each other that they don't allow me to understand the person. We aren't defined by our extremes.

I remember the first day I worked with the police. The baker in Santa Ana sold me a baguette. I had my gift turned on that day and all of a sudden I saw, in full detail, how he murdered his wife followed immediately by his love for horses.

Horseback riding was his passion. That respect for animals overlapped with the painful death of a human being by his hand.

I went to the police. I still don't understand why that detective believed me. He was the same one I now call boss. Years have passed and we have both changed physically, but not much in what matters.

I remember when I told him all I had felt about the baker. He hung up the telephone and without hesitating sent a patrol, who found the wife's body about to be baked and turned into horse feed.

I felt so useless when he told me that, when he showed me the images of the chopped-up corpse... I hadn't been able to save that woman's life. She was dead, because that gift only gave me images of things that had already happened.

It never showed me the future, or murders that were planned but not carried out, or dark, horrible dreams that had not been fulfilled.

They were always realities, never just desires. In the case of my mother's dancer I saw hate, but I never thought that hate would become a murder attempt.

I went to the burial of my baker's wife.

I felt awful, I thought that I was an accomplice to that murder because, somehow, I had been a witness to that moment.

Although it was after the fact, I had seen her death like a guest statue. It was hard to bear. It was like a video, I had the scene taped but it wasn't live. A macabre observer of what had been recorded.

My boss was also at the burial. He watched me without saying a thing. At the end he treated me to an iced coffee. And in that horrible cemetery café, he went straight to the point.

"Would you like to work with me?"

"With the police?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Although I'd like you to just be in contact with me in order to avoid..."

"Being made fun of?" I asked.

He chose the word well; I liked it, it was what my mother would have done in that situation.

“Misunderstandings,” he clarified.

I told him that I needed to think about it.

I’d had the gift for more than six years and I had never thought that it could be used for anything more than discovering how strange people are, since I simultaneously saw their evil and their extreme goodness.

“Can I ask you something?” he said when I got up without having taken even a sip of my iced coffee.

I knew what he was going to ask me. When I tell people about my gift they all want me to use it on them. To reveal to them those two extreme states that live together within them and their twelve adjacent feelings.

“You want to know your extremes?” I asked directly, making it easier for him.

He nodded, finishing his iced coffee eagerly. I installed the gift inside myself and looked at him.

“You killed a man under arrest, but it wasn’t premeditated or on purpose,” I said as I saw that scene clearly in my mind. “You weren’t the one who caused the tragedy, it was a policeman with a beard, about fifty years old, but you feel guilty over that murder. You’ve never forgotten it.”

His face grew pale, I guess it must not be pleasant to find yourself in a cemetery cafe with someone you’ve just met and have him reveal your biggest secret.

“You have a lover,” I continued. “A Portuguese woman. She is your greatest joy, the other extreme. You meet up on Fridays in a house she has beside a river. You feel very young when you are with her. Those hours you spend together are your extreme happiness.”

He didn’t say a word. I realized that it was Friday and that the elegant clothes and cologne he wore probably weren’t out of respect toward the baker’s wife but toward the Portuguese woman who was about forty.”

He said nothing, and I left the café.

Once I was out on the street I wondered if I should accept his offer. As I looked out at hundreds of graves I decided that it wasn't for me.

It took two more years before I accepted his offer. Although we became friends during that time. I met the Portuguese woman and I visited the grave of the man who killed that man in custody. That policeman with the beard was his father. He never had the courage to denounce what he did but talking to me about it made him feel better.

Why did I agree to work with him? Well I think it was to give some meaning to my gift. I needed that. We all need our actions to have meaning.

In front of that door, about to turn the knob and meet the most famous stranger in the world, I felt that my gift was taking on real meaning.

If the stranger was who the television claimed, the image I got from him would allow us to know his history, where he comes from and even his intentions on this planet.

Good and evil are like one's cardinal points. Like that game where you have to join fourteen points to get an image.

The fourteen points were in my hands.

I took a deep breath, dialed my gift up to the max, and opened the door.

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9

RED RAIN IN CHILDHOOD

When I opened the door, I was expecting to find a viscous being. Maybe because that was the idea I had of strangers from other worlds.

Viscosity, yes, that was the characteristic that I was imagining. I don't know why, but I couldn't get that image out of my head.

I opened the door, afraid. And there he was, sitting in the middle of the interrogation room. He was looking at the floor and not at me, but he wasn't viscous at all.

Physically he looked a lot like Alain Delon in the film *Purple Noon*. He exuded vitality and was surprisingly handsome. Even though he kept his gaze on the floor, I sensed that he had large eyes and his hair seemed like it would feel very soft.

He didn't say anything, he didn't even look up at any point.

I sat in front of him. We were separated by a small, square white desk covered with scribbles written by prisoners when they were left alone. I read a few phrases like: "I'm innocent... I shouldn't be here... they violated my rights..."

He kept his gaze focused on the floor. He seemed like a shy teenager.

The clothing he wore had been lent to him by the institution that was holding him and it was reminiscent of blue hospital pajamas. The neck was very stretched out and showed part of his skin, normal skin. Not viscous at all.

I greeted him: "Hello." He didn't answer; I think he hadn't even noticed my presence or he wasn't the least bit interested.

He really didn't seem strange at all, he was just a kid.

I searched for his gaze to find out what I had come to discover, but right away I noticed that my gift wasn't working. They hadn't listened to me and the electronic and listening devices were connected.

I gestured with my hands at the mirror that presided over the room and

pointed to all the cameras that were interfering with my gift.

I waited a few seconds, the stranger crossed his legs. His indifference began to make me nervous.

I sensed as each of the electronic devices were shut off and I could feel my gift growing in strength and intensity. A strange pleasure overtook me. It was like feeling a pleasant, warm color.

When they turned off the last electronic surveillance device I felt that I was alone. Although they were watching us through the mirror they couldn't know what we were talking about or even zoom into a part of our faces.

The stranger and I were alone. I felt powerful.

"Yesterday your mother died, right?" asked the stranger without even looking up.

My heart and my esophagus both leapt. I didn't know how to react.

It was as if you had missiles pointing in one direction and when you were about to launch them you were hit with an atomic bomb. How could he know...?

I took some time, I didn't want to seem nervous. I searched for his gaze again, but he continued with his head down, as if he had asked me the time of day or what the weather would be tomorrow.

I decided to stay calm and not show fear.

"You are afraid," he continued. "You feel that your life has no meaning now that your mother is gone. You miss her, you spent a lot of time together in many different countries. You and her, always you and her. And that must hurt a lot... It's the worst moment of your life, right?"

And just then he lifted his gaze. Suddenly I understood; that stranger had my gift. For the first time I knew what people felt when I fearlessly x-rayed them.

My face must have been one of total fear, because my boss' voice echoed in the room.

“Are you okay, Marcos? Do you need help?” he asked in a threatening voice.

“I'm fine.” I calmed myself down again. “Turn off the wiretaps again, please.”

They turned off all the electronic gadgets again. The stranger paused for a few seconds before speaking again.

“Was she as good a mother as I am sensing?” he asked. “Eight of your twelve memories have to do with her.”

I didn't answer. I tried to penetrate his mind, even things out. But something stopped me, and it wasn't electronic interference.

He smiled at me.

“You met a girl today? You felt a lot of pleasure, didn't you? You should go to her before she leaves the theater. You can't imagine how important she will be in your life. Seriously, go there now to see the “salesman.” Even though that isn't the moment of maximum pleasure in your life, that is when...”

“Stop!” I shouted.

Not even I know where that shout came from, why I didn't want him to continue. But there was something in that illegal rifling through my feelings that infuriated me and I absolutely did not want him to tell me what had been the greatest pleasure of my life.

I wanted my moment of extreme happiness to be a mystery, since I had always hesitated when choosing between two or three moments as being the best and happiest of my life. And I planned on hesitating over that choice for the rest of my life.

It was horrible to have someone make a list of your feelings and your

passions. I had never imagined that.

I wavered. Finally I spoke.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He looked at me, picked up the glass of water that was beside him on the table and drank slowly.

“Shouldn’t you be the one to answer that?”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re blocked, right?” He smiled for the second time.

I didn’t like that second smile. I decided to turn my gift up to full. I concentrated more than I had ever needed to before to do it. But I got nothing; it was as if he was keeping me from being able to.

“Are you from another planet?” I asked innocently.

He laughed. His laughter was amused and healthy, something unimaginable in an alien.

“Haven’t your superiors told you anything?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to tell you?” he asked.

“If you don’t mind...”

He came closer to me, as much as he could. I saw that he wore handcuffs that linked his hands beneath the table. He approached a bit more and whispered:

“I know your mother liked this kind of communication.” He continued whispering, but his tone changed and veered toward pain. “Help me, I have to get out of here immediately.”

My skin bristled at those words. Who was that stranger who knew so much about me and seemed to need me so much? I started to sweat.

“I can’t, I’m sorry,” I answered without thinking.

“You don’t want to or you shouldn’t?” he replied.

I swallowed hard, something about him scared me.

“Weren’t you going to tell me who you are?” I insisted.

“First get me out of here.” For the first time he sounded distressed.

“They won’t do anything to you,” I said. “Tell me, who are you?”

“They’ve already done everything they can to me.”

Suddenly he was silent. Slowly, I felt an image come to me, as he allowed it to reach me. He had decided to show himself in images instead of with words.

I didn’t know what memory it was, since it didn’t come to me in the usual way. It could be an extreme or one of the twelve.

And it arrived...

It was a happy image.

A smiling boy playing soccer with his father. The boy looked very much like the stranger. It was him as a child. He was tremendously happy until suddenly it started to rain and father and son ran laughing to take shelter beneath a tree.

It was an image like many I had seen in people I’d examined. Happiness between a father and son; something that I had never experienced, but which always formed part of the twelve fundamental feelings that people held on to.

Although, suddenly, I felt something strange in the images I perceived. The rain that fell was different. It was red.

It was raining red. But neither the father nor the son batted an eyelash. They looked up at that night sky and suddenly I saw that there was no moon. Instead a pentagonal planet presided over that sky.

The rain continued; the red color became more and more intense. Yes, it was a happy memory, but that wasn’t what the stranger wanted to show me

but rather where it had taken place. And I can assure you that it was not Earth.

I don't know where it was, but it was the strangest place I had ever seen.

The image stopped, and the stranger looked at me.

“Will you help me now?” he whispered.

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10

I COULDN'T ENTER HIS MIND WITHOUT KNOWING HIM

I left the room. I needed to get away from him, from what he had shown me. Outside, behind the door, I felt better. Even though I was still very shaken.

My boss was there a few seconds later, with Dani. I saw in his face how anxious he was to know what had happened. Watching me without being able to listen in had increased his concern.

I spoke before they had a chance to.

“I don’t know anything about him,” I said. “My gift doesn’t work in his presence, what I need is for you to tell me everything you know about him right now. I can’t enter his mind without knowing him.”

I never thought I would say those words. I had always known what people were like without exchanging even a few sentences with them.

Suddenly, his words came back to me: you have to meet the girl at the theater. Why was it so important that I speak with her? How could he know about her existence? Had he read it in me? Had the memory of her penetrated me so deeply that he could smell it and it had already become one of the twelve basic memories of my life?

“Come with me to the office,” said the boss, visibly annoyed.

As we walked down the long hallway, the boss spoke with two of his superiors on his cell phone. He told them that I hadn’t achieved my objective.

I took advantage of his phone call to get closer to Dani; I wanted to tell him something without the boss hearing me.

“Find out what time the play being shown at the Teatro Español ends; it’s *Death of a Salesman*.”

“How long the play lasts?” he asked, surprised, trying to link that information somehow with the stranger.

“Yes, I have to be there right when the audience gets out. Make sure the

information is correct. They will tell you approximately two hours, but make them be precise. Go.”

Dani didn't hesitate and left quickly. I caught up to my boss, who was still dealing with the fallout. He was clearly in a bad mood; I guess he didn't understand why his secret weapon had failed him for the first time.

We entered the office and he locked it behind me.

Then he opened up the safe and pulled out a pile of reports.

“We found him in the mountains.” He showed me a photo where there was a large crater produced by extreme heat. “There was no ship or any type of vehicle nearby, if that's what you're wondering. According to the satellites,” he showed me more photos, “the entire area burned up in less than a minute. As you can see, in the satellite photo taken at 19:04 hours the vegetation is abundant in the mountains, but a minute later it is all destroyed and the only presence in the scorched area is that guy.”

I picked up all the images he had shown me and I took a closer look at them. It was incredible. That rapid destruction could only be connected with an energy generated by an unknown technology.

“And what explanation did he give when you showed it to him?” I inquired.

“He doesn't talk. He doesn't confirm or deny anything. He only asks us to let him go, because he has things to do.”

“And what is it he has to do?”

“We don't know. He doesn't want to tell us.”

He pulled out more reports and passed them to me.

“These are the medical tests they've done on him,” said the boss. “All the results, as you can see, are completely normal. The psychological test results are similar; totally average, not even superior to other humans of his age.”

“So, why are you holding him? All you have is the crater in the mountains?” I asked.

“Because of the bone test.” He passed it to me.

I looked it over and then went to the conclusions. I read them to myself and then out loud to make sure that what I was reading was true.

“The stranger has a bone constitution different than ours, as if he had spent years in an atmosphere unlike Earth’s. The only time something similar has been observed is in astronauts who spent a lot of time in space stations.” I read.

The boss didn’t say anything, as if he had already read it hundreds of times. I saw that there were some photos, face-down, that he hadn’t showed me. I went to turn them over.

“Don’t look at them,” he said.

“Because...?”

“They are from other interrogations, different than yours.”

I hesitated but then picked them up.

I turned them over. What those snapshots showed was horrible. The things they had down to that teenage boy were absolutely abominable. There were all sorts of humiliations and abuses.

“This is...” The adjectives didn’t even come out. “And he didn’t talk after all that?”

“Not a word.”

I put them back on the desk; it was hard to keep looking at them. They were left face-up, so the boss turned them over again.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

“It’s complicated,” answered the boss as he put all the documents back in the safe hastily, not worrying about what order they were in.

“But the press will want to see him.”

“I know.”

He sat down in the chair and served himself a whisky. I sensed there was something he hadn't told me.

“What's going on?” I probed.

“They want to cut him up. Do an autopsy.”

“Seriously? But if they aren't sure if he's...”

“That's why they want to do it. Many believe that he is; they rely on the bone tests as proof. Others, including me, think it's a bone malformation.”

“And that's why you called me in?” I asked. “If I had seen that he isn't from here, then...?”

“Then they would chop him up mercilessly.”

I got mad.

“You called me here to...”

The boss interrupted me, angrily.

“I didn't call you. My superiors asked me to do it. They know of your achievements and they needed one more piece of evidence to...”

I interrupted him.

“Kill him,” I said.

He nodded. I know he didn't like what he was telling me, he had always been an honest, upright man.

“They say that he won't tell us anything more alive, but dead he can still tell us a lot,” he added. “They are only afraid of the press, which is why the stranger is still alive and in one piece.”

Suddenly an image came to me, a flash of someone's new memory. I still had the gift turned on. That was when I saw that it was another of my boss' memories.

I saw him in a phone booth, calling someone and telling them about the stranger. It was a brave act, filled with happiness, it must have replaced one

of the twelve I had already seen in him. The order shifted as people did valiant or dramatic things. This was an important act in his life.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, surprised.

“It was you who called the press,” I declared.

He looked at me, ashamed. He nodded again.

“But it won’t do any good,” he added. “They’ll do it anyway, they are going to kill him. They’ve made up their minds. Then they’ll make up some story about that boy and they will deny and discredit any news about him.”

He took another sip.

“Do you think he is?” I asked.

“Is what?” he replied.

“A stranger.”

“He’s a kid,” he answered. “I don’t know if he’s a kid who was born here or somewhere else, but nobody deserves what they did to him, wherever they come from.”

There was a knock on the door. The boss got up, hid the whisky and opened the door.

It was Dani. He sat down beside me and slipped me a piece of paper that read: *The play ends in forty minutes, give or take five minutes depending on the length of the applause.*

He was very diligent in his work. I folded the paper up again and looked at the boss.

“When are they going to do it?”

Dani looked at me in surprise; first me and then the boss. It was as if he were following a long tennis play without even knowing what value each point he was watching had.

“Very soon,” answered the boss.

“And if I tell them that what I saw is normal, that he’s not a stranger?” I

asked.

“I don’t think they care, Marcos. They only want to hear the other answer. Don’t let it get to you.”

I felt rage; that image of the boy with his father taking shelter from the red rain came back to me. I know that the stranger could have altered or fabricated that memory but, whoever he was, I wanted to know him better.

“Let’s get him out of here,” I declared.

The boss didn’t shake his head or try to refute my idea.

He smiled, as if he was hoping I would say that.

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11

ACCEPTING UNWANTED LOVE BEFORE LOSING IT AND
WANTING IT

I knew what I had just proposed wasn't going to be easy, since it was a very secure complex, but there was something about that stranger... I don't know if it was the look of that kid taking shelter beneath the red rain or those pentagonal planets or the way he told me that it was important for me to meet the girl at the Teatro Español.

The boss started to pull maps out of the safe and explain various possibilities. Dani listened attentively while I thought about the girl at the theater.

I already knew that my opinion wasn't important to the escape plan: I've always known my limitations. I think that is my greatest achievement: knowing what is beyond me, either from a lack of intelligence or a lack of interest.

Why did the stranger say that the girl at the Teatro Español was so important in my life? I thought about it while they decided on strategies. Why had I felt such an intense feeling for her? If only fear hadn't overtaken me and I had dared to ask the stranger more questions.

That stranger had something fascinating about him. Curiously, he reminded me of the fascination my mother awoke in those who watched her choreographies or who simply found themselves in her presence.

Dani had remained totally silent until he understood the entire plan and our intentions.

"But, where will we take him?" he pointed out. "I mean, if we manage to get him out of here, where will we take him to? They won't stop until they find him."

"We aren't going to hide him," declared the boss. "We are only going to free him."

"But what if..." Dani had trouble getting the words out. "What if he is a stranger, shouldn't we keep an eye on him?"

I hesitated, wondering if I should tell them what I had seen. Tell them about the red rain, the pentagonal planet. Dissipate their doubts about his origins. But I feared that that would make them change their minds.

“Help us, Dani,” I said. “Trust me.”

Dani had never failed me; as soon as I met him I knew that he would help me.

Dani was in love with me; I knew it from the first time we saw each other. My mother taught me from a very young age to accept that the feelings others have for us, even if they are not mutual, are important.

“You should understand that that unwanted love, that unreciprocated desire, is a great gift,” she told me on a long train trip from Barcelona to Paris. “Don’t disdain it simply because it isn’t useful to you.”

I was very young and I didn’t understand her. I never understood her. She, on the other hand, had experienced those loves she spoke of. Many people had been in love with her. Her dance, her way of moving, her choreographies awakened all types of passions, among which were love and sex.

Since I was a young boy, I saw how she dealt affectionately with those who were in love with her, even though she felt nothing for them. But it seemed that the mere fact that that feeling for her was real nourished her and made her feel more complete.

There were men and women in love with her. And that never bothered her in the slightest.

“Don’t think about sexual tendencies,” she pointed out one day. “The tendencies only reflect fear of difference and of what you don’t understand. You only have to accept that they are projecting a feeling onto you.”

I don’t think she ever slept with a woman, although I can’t be sure, since

she understood those feelings that were lavished on her, and they filled her deeply; she didn't care much where they came from.

She also taught me to notice, to recognize and understand which people were in love or desiring me secretly. Love is bound to sex and sex to love, she would tell me. You had to find the point where they came together.

“Marcos, you have to find traces of both feelings in the people around you. Discover that desire, that passion, before they confess their feelings to you. Hidden desires are the engine that drives life,” my mother would say.

The gift never helped me find hidden desires. It always showed me real situations, feelings that had been embodied, not platonic ones.

So my mother taught me to recognize those feelings. The day I saw Dani I noticed that the love and sexual desire he felt for me were very intense.

I have never known how those intense, hard to control feelings arise.

“When love and sex get stuck festering in unreality,” my mother would say, “the pleasure the person feels could turn into pain. Having that love that means nothing to you is different than losing it. Because, although you are losing something that you don't understand, you will never have it again, and that is terrible.”

I'm sure that my mother never lost a single one of the people who loved her platonically. Because, in her own way, she loved them too. I think that was what made her so powerful.

“Okay, I'll help you,” said Dani in response to my request.

The boss sighed in relief; I think that without Dani's help everything seemed more difficult for him. And I knew that he wasn't helping me just because of his feelings for me, but most of all because he trusted me, trusted my instincts.

“I have to go to the Teatro Español. Call me and tell me where to meet up when you get him out,” I said.

Both the boss and Dani were confused.

“You are going to see a play, now?” asked my boss, surprised.

“I have to pick someone up,” I explained.

“But...” The boss was really incredulous.

“I have to do it, it’s important. Besides, I don’t know anything about escapes or how to get him out of here. You two are better at that and I know you’ll pull it off.”

That is also something my mother taught me: trust in those who have what you lack. That is the foundation of true talent. Although she, who was so good at everything having to do with dance, must never have had to put it into practice.

I got up. They weren’t convinced, but I knew that the boss would get him out of there, even though he knew it would mean the end of his career. Dani, on the other hand, had little at risk and he still wasn’t entirely convinced. I knew that his conscience could play dirty tricks on him. Consciences are too dangerous.

“Go see the head of security on the third floor,” the boss ordered me.

“Why?” I asked.

“I need to have something against him, to convince him if things go awry. Study him with your gift and call me if you find something.”

I didn’t like that; the boss had never asked me for anything so unethical. Using my gift for blackmail was something that didn’t sit well with my conscience, or his.

I knew that I shouldn’t do it, but he shouldn’t have called the press and Dani shouldn’t have agreed to help us either. We were all breaking our moral rules, because we knew that desperate situations require desperate acts.

“I’ll do it,” I said as I left the room.

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12

HE IS A STRANGER BECAUSE HE TOLERATES
UNIMAGINABLE PAIN

I had never been on the third floor, since my pass didn't allow me access to that area. Besides, I had never wanted to know what went on up there.

Somehow, I wanted the head of security on that floor to not have any shady things in his life or, if I did find something, I hoped that the boss would find a way to free the boy without using the information I obtained.

I had the utmost respect for my gift.

The elevator arrived at the third floor. The head of security was smoking at the end of the hallway. I almost didn't recognize him; he was a young man, about thirty and his parents were Brazilian, although for some reason he considered himself French. I think I had heard him mention once that his paternal grandparents were.

I approached him, checking the time, as I walked toward him. I couldn't waste much time if I wanted to reach the Plaza Santa Ana before the traveling salesman died in that car accident.

The head of security looked at me. I was still thirty paces away from him. He didn't say anything, he didn't start a conversation or greet me. He just waited as if he hadn't seen me. That showed the kind of person he was. He lowered his eyes three times, looked out the window and smoked.

I reached him.

"Hello, I don't know if you remember me, I'm..."

"I know who you are. The one with the gift," he added, smiling cynically. I didn't like that smile one bit. I returned it with a terse reply.

"Exactly. That's me."

"Well it didn't do you much good today, with the stranger," he said. "I'd even go so far as to say you were scared out of your mind."

His gaze was defiant. And I didn't like it one bit. He didn't trust me, that was abundantly clear.

"Your mother is that famous dancer, right?" he added as the smile

appeared on his face again.

I knew that he had checked me out and that question was just to let me know that he had power. His cockiness made it easier for me to get what I had come for, although it didn't make it more ethical.

"Yes, she was my mother," I replied. "She died yesterday."

He swallowed hard; his investigations of me weren't up to date. I think I heard "I'm sorry," although he said it almost imperceptibly. I don't think he had ever said those two words out loud.

My mother had always taught me that you can't trust people who don't say "I'm sorry" and "forgive me." She believed those expressions should be used on many occasions in life and said without the slightest fear or embarrassment.

The head of security's phone rang. He looked to see who was calling.

"These fucking journalists are going to fuck everything up," he said.

"Fuck up what...?" I asked.

He looked at me, enraged.

"Just because that stranger is a teenager and seems friendly, don't trust him," he said. "I interrogated him and, while I don't have your gift, I can tell you that he's not who he says he is."

"And how do you know?" I probed.

"Because of the pain. Nobody can tolerate that much pain."

He pulled out another cigarette and lit it off the other one, which barely existed at that point. Suddenly, I remembered having seen cigarette burns in the interrogation photos that were face-down on the desk. I knew that all those abuses I had seen were the work of the man in front of me, his way of getting information.

I hadn't yet started using my gift, but what I could see disgusted me.

"And what does it matter if he comes from another planet," I said, furious

and fed up. “Doesn’t he have a right to not want to say where he’s from?”

He looked at me strangely. I don’t think he liked what I said. I saw that he wanted to interrogate me, he was anxious to find out what I really knew and what I had talked to the stranger about when the cameras and microphones were turned off. But he just took a couple of drags on his cigarette and said:

“No, he doesn’t.”

I never thought that real life could be so similar to a movie. A stranger arrives and we just want him to confess who he is and what his intentions are.

Although it wasn’t so strange; if we treat with cruelty those people who enter our country illegally, what wouldn’t we do to an illegal from another planet?

“Did you want something?” he asked, obviously wanting to end the conversation.

“No. I was looking for the boss, but I can see he’s not here,” I lied.

“No, he’s not. What a crappy gift you have.”

Before leaving I activated the gift. I looked into his eyes for the first time and I felt how he involuntarily transferred all his feelings to me.

The bad was horrible. His life was filled with evil. His most terrible memory was the murder in cold blood of a prisoner in a cell located in a damp basement. But I couldn’t make out the victim’s face or know when or where it had happened. There was humiliation, and a lot of screams and pain. But I wasn’t sure if that was a crime that the boss could use against him. Maybe it was even legal.

On the other extreme, I could see that his great passion was shooting. But it was different than the happiness archery gave my boss. This security guy

loved to shoot animals, especially from behind. It gave him great joy. A curious concept of happiness.

On the positive scale I saw two relationships with women that made him vibrate, many years ago. He loved them like crazy until they each left him at different moments of his life.

Suddenly, in the fifth spot, I found the memory that my boss needed. Something that he wouldn't want people to know about him. And that memory, as always, wasn't the worst or the best. The extremes don't work, the fundamental one is always somewhere in the pile, in the fifth or sixth spot.

I left. For him, only a few seconds had passed before I turned and left him with his cigarettes. Although, really, in those seconds his entire life had flashed before me.

I went into the elevator and down to the garage, checking the time. It was too late to call a taxi, so I asked my Peruvian friend to take me to the Teatro Español. He accepted willingly.

The Cranberries played as soon as I got into the car. His teeth shined brightly and I could tell that many things had happened inside that building and that the person who was leaving was different than the one who had arrived.

It's incredible how life takes so many turns when you're least expecting it. My mother used to say that just watching a performance can change your life radically.

"Is he an alien?" the Peruvian asked when we left the complex.

"Yes," I answered.

It was the first time that I admitted that fact, and the truth was I was convinced of it. Besides, I realized at that moment, for the first time, I was

following the advice of someone from another planet. I didn't know if he was right about the girl, but I knew I had to check it out.

My mother always told me that in love and sex any advice could be valid, although she said it in other words.

“Love and sex are so strange that, surely, strangers have the key to what we should do.”

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13

DREAMING WITHOUT CANVASES, PAINTING WITHOUT
COLORS

During the drive back to the Plaza Santa Ana I was more restless than on the way there. I kept looking at my watch; I knew I couldn't be late.

I explained in broad strokes to the Peruvian what I had to do in Santa Ana, what time I had to arrive and I urged him to step on the accelerator. But he didn't want to; he argued that respecting the speed limits is basic to avoiding serious accidents. I had only ever gone with him inside the complex and at thirty kilometers an hour.

I was surprised by his sense of civic responsibility, but I respected it.

I asked him to put on the radio; I wanted to know how the news had evolved.

I lowered the window. It was a very hot night and I remembered that great film *Body Heat* by Lawrence Kasdan. It takes place during a summer that is so stifling that there is even a cop who says that it's so hot that people think the laws don't exist, that they've melted and they can break them.

He took off the Cranberries and the news filled the car. Soon I saw that the panorama had changed radically. Official denials, exaggeration, falsehoods. Everything was deflating. The Peruvian's expression speaks volumes. Those guys were doing their job well.

The news was dying out for lack of oxygen. Over her life my mother lived through a lot of scandals over lovers, her tyrannical professional character (although that one wasn't a lie) and over her death.

I think they killed her off four times throughout her life. She always told me that it rejuvenated her, that it allowed her to take stock of her life.

She used to say that it was like being autopsied while you're still alive. She had a lot of faith in that kind of autopsy.

At sixteen she spoke to me about sexual autopsies.

She told me that it would be good if we practiced one of those autopsies

every five years.

That we stayed very still and someone told us what part of our body hadn't been caressed; how many kisses we'd received; if a cheek or an eyebrow or an ear or our lips had been loved more.

A full autopsy of our sex, but with us alive, although motionless.

She imagined it and she liked to think that someone, just by looking at our fingers, could know if they had been touched passionately or just routinely. If our eyes had been looked at with desire or our tongue had known many others.

Also, we could know which were our best sexual acts, just like how we can see in a cut-down tree trunk when it lived through floods or droughts. Maybe at seventeen, thirty and forty-seven. Maybe always in springtime or almost always by the sea.

How many nibbles, how many whispers, how many love bites had we felt? A calculation of statistics about our sex, our lust, our solitary pleasures.

And according to her, the best part was that when that autopsy ended we would know that we were alive, that we could improve and achieve caresses, desire, to love and be loved in return.

You have to be very brave to listen to that from someone else's lips, even though I don't know if such a person, with those abilities, even exists.

But that's how my mother was. I thought again about the sex painting; I still owed it to her, to her and my incomplete trilogy.

When I painted diligently I always went to a little store on Valverde and Gran Vía. It was run by an old Canadian man who was about ninety and always gave me a good price.

I hadn't painted in two years. I thought about passing by the store. I was

short on time, but maybe I wouldn't be able to later. If my boss and Dani managed to get the stranger out, everything would get more complicated.

"Can you stop by Valverde and Gran Vía first?" I asked the Peruvian. "It'll just be a sec."

The Peruvian accepted willingly; I barely noticed the shift in his route.

I thought about the girl at the Teatro Español, what would I say to her, how to focus that strange encounter without her thinking that I was crazy or out for sex.

The telephone brought me back to reality. It was the boss.

"What do you have on him?" he asked me directly.

I was hoping it wouldn't be necessary; I didn't like even saying it out loud. I asked the driver to raise the opaque separating window even though I knew he could still hear what I was saying.

"Do you really need to know it?" I asked once the window had gone up.

"The original plan failed and they are going to move him to another complex. I need something to make the head of security help us. Do you have anything?"

I did, but I didn't like it; I was slow to respond.

"Marcos, we are going to lose him," insisted the boss. "If you don't tell me what you have they'll kill him. The press isn't going to stop until they find him, so they will destroy him before they let that happen."

I didn't want to do it but there was no other solution.

"He has photos of naked little girls, between two and five years old," I said. "He looks at them pretty often and he hides them in a folder called "attached2," which is inside another folder on the desktop called "attached.""

I didn't feel good about it at all. The boss didn't say anything, just absorbed it in silence.

He hung up just as the car stopped on Valverde at Gran Vía.

I got out and saw that the sign for the store as I remembered it was no longer there. In place of the charming little frame shop there was now a dream store. I had heard that it was a growing business.

People who had quit sleeping missed them. A friend from the plaza who I played poker with every Thursday told me he had tried them several times. He said you could ask for whatever subject you wanted; then, they told you a dream using a hypnotic technique, so it was similar to actual dreaming.

How strange that people end up missing dreaming. We always end up appreciating the things we lose.

I went in, maybe because I wanted to see how the space had been transformed on the inside.

As soon as I went through the door I heard the faint tinkle of a bell. It was the same as before; I was happy that that hadn't changed. A familiar sound welcomed me.

A few seconds later the old Canadian appeared. I was surprised that he recognized me.

"It's been a long time," he said. "Did you lose your inspiration or lose yourself?"

Then he gave me a hug. I loved that he didn't shake my hand and he broke code with a stranger, although we had once been close.

"We don't sell canvases anymore," he said after the hug. "Now..."

"Dreams without canvases," I replied.

He laughed thunderously; his laugh was still the same. There are things that the passing years can't take from us.

"Do you want to paint again?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted, surprised by my response. "An old idea came back into my head and I need some materials."

“It’s important to have the elements you need for when the ideas come to you. Are you sleeping?”

I smiled. I showed him the injections. It took me a little while to find them.

“I’m about to quit,” I pointed out.

He offered me a seat.

I didn’t look at the time, since I knew I didn’t have time, but I could never refuse his kind offer. He served me a little wine in a glass that was on the table, as if it was waiting for me. I noticed that the chair reclined and I imagined that the customers sat there for a quick rest.

I remember that many people thought that everybody who quit sleeping would sell their beds. It didn’t happen; beds still have many functions in those people’s lives: loving, having sex, resting with their eyes open, lying down, living... They were selling more beds than ever.

“Don’t do it,” he said. “I’ve seen the harm it can do to people. They miss dreaming so much... They miss having something to break up their day... You don’t know how frustrating it is after a horrible day, filled with the worst you could imagine, to know that that day is never going to end, like the one after it and the one after that. There is no difference between day and night. Their characters grow bitter, they end up changing and needing to disconnect, even just for a few hours. The ones that come here aren’t looking for dreams, they are just looking to disappear for a few moments from those never-ending days and months. Don’t do it...”

The car horn sounded. The Peruvian knew that I had to be to Santa Ana on time. But I was perplexed about what I had heard.

“And the dreaming...” I thought carefully about how to phrase the question. “Do you get them to dream? Do you get them to disconnect?”

He took my hands in his left hand. I noticed the texture of his palm; I had

known him for years, but I had never touched him in such a personal way. With his right hand he closed my eyes.

“Today you dreamt of... deer and eagles... am I right?”

My heart skipped a beat and my esophagus turned. He was so spot on that I couldn't believe it.

“How...?” I asked in surprise.

He didn't answer, just as I wouldn't respond if someone asked me that same question about my gift. He got up, went to a shelf and pulled down some wrapped canvases. He gave them to me.

“I thought you didn't have any,” I said.

“There is always something left from the old business in the new one.” He smiled. “Besides the owner.”

“And my paintings, do you still have them?” I asked.

He shook his head. It pained me to know that. He kept the first two paintings of the trilogy: the childhood one and the one about death. When I showed them to him he fell in love with them, so I gave them to him, because I thought he would never get rid of them and I really liked how he looked at them. You need perfect adoptive parents who love your paintings, in order to let go of them.

“I gave them to your mother,” he said. “She wanted them so much that I couldn't say no.”

I couldn't believe it. She had never told me; I knew she liked my paintings but I thought she didn't want to own them. She gave me advice, and affection when she liked what I'd done, she looked at them with interest, but I didn't think she wanted to see them day after day. Besides, she never had a fixed residence where she could hang them.

I pulled out my wallet, but he put his hand over mine and kept me from opening it; again I felt his skin.

“It’s a gift, Marcos,” he whispered. “Listen to me, don’t quit sleeping.”

This time I was the one who gave him a hug. He accepted it gratefully. I left.

When I was in the car I felt more complete. I knew that I needed to have those canvases with me, I didn’t know if I would be able to paint the final painting but as the old Canadian said, ideas need materials.

We headed toward the Plaza Santa Ana. In three minutes, the audience would return to their reality. The Peruvian sped up.

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14

LIFE IS TURNING DOORKNOBS

We reached the Teatro Español two minutes before the hour.

All the doors of the theater were wide open, yearning to welcome their public. I thought that if I touched the wood I will feel its impatience.

I got out of the car and the Peruvian parked on a corner beside the outdoor tables of a restaurant. I stationed myself beside the main door.

A bit further on there was a guy with sunglasses who was about thirty; I don't know why I had the feeling he was spying on me. I guess that's the result of meeting a stranger and a pederast security guard on the same day.

The guy in the sunglasses was also watching the door. I would say he was even more impatient than I was.

We could hear the faint whisper of the words the actors delivered to the audience. My mother always told me that the end of a theater performance was built from the first moment.

It's like building a pyramid. You will never place the last stone expertly if the base isn't stable.

She always told me about the thicknesses of silence, which were obvious in theaters.

She showed them to me many times, live and direct, from the last row of numerous theaters.

There were silences two centimeters thick that were equivalent to attention without passion.

Others were thicker; silences that neared forty centimeters, which are the ones broken by performers, making the magic of theater be felt in all its glory.

And finally those ninety-nine centimeters thick, as splendid as a triple laugh in unison with the entire audience. It echoes, it is heard, felt and experienced. It is the spectator's complete loss of consciousness, just when as they forget any personal problems and their brain stops emitting the noise

of worry; that is what makes silence supreme. Stopping thinking silences everything.

That night, I felt a silence thirty-four centimeters thick. My mother's old habits that I still practiced.

The wait was seeming long, so I decided to enter the theater, to find out if inside the silence was thicker. And also to see her...

There was no one guarding the door. Some places are prepared to keep you from getting in at the beginning but just fifteen minutes before the end they are doing the opposite, taking great care to make it as easy as possible for you to leave quickly but doing nothing to keep you from coming in.

I went through the main door and into the theater's vestibule. There wasn't a single soul. I headed toward the door that connected the vestibule with the seats.

Curiously, the knob on that door was identical to the one on the room where the stranger was being held. Even though I knew that when I turned it I would find something radically different, I felt the same nervousness.

You never know what you'll find behind a door. Maybe that's what life is: turning doorknobs.

I turned it. The silence, which was forty-two centimeters thick, penetrated me instantly.

The salesman's best friend was reciting his final monologue at the funeral.

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there's no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine.

It was still as good as I remembered it. I knew that play well; my mother had done a version in dance. In her visual creation, Charley recited the

monologue while he took small steps on the coffin. Slight movements to the rhythm of his contained rage.

The play continued its monologues and I searched for the girl with my gaze.

I ran my eyes over all the napes of necks in the theater conscientiously. I don't know why, but I imagined that I would recognize hers; it was just a feeling I had.

I didn't find her, I thought that maybe she had left, disappointed at having been stood up by her date.

The impulse to enter a theater is one thing and deciding to stay is quite another. Or maybe the play didn't fulfill her; there are people who don't relate to *Death of a Salesman*, they find it outdated. I don't understand them, it speaks about the great subject: parents and children.

But soon my doubt vanished. I was sure that she wasn't one of those girls who leaves a theater before the play has ended.

My mother said that leaving a theater is one of the unforgivable deadly sins. The sadness it produces in the actor or dancer is dramatic. They usually take five minutes to recover their concentration. And the audience needs twice that time.

Suddenly, the sounds of my cell phone, which are quiet barks (I don't have a dog but I've always wanted to have one, so my telephone barks affectionately like a friendly mutt), mixed with the monologue by the salesman's wife.

The entire audience turned simultaneously. I had committed the second deadly sin that my mother hated, only forgivable in the case of a sick relative or the birth of a first child. The latter no longer counts as mitigating circumstances.

The audience's napes turned into faces in shadow. I could barely see their

eyes.

And that was when I saw her, in the sixth row, on the extreme left. She didn't recognize me. Of course, she didn't know me. But I wished she had recognized me.

When I managed to turn off the call from my boss all the eyes without gleam were focused back on the stage. Except hers, hers lagged two seconds before returning to the widow's monologue.

When she looked at me I noticed that I still had my gift connected. I switched it off, but an image slipped through.

Her with a dog. Her with a lot of dogs. She loved them; they were her favorite animals. She trusted them more than any person. I saw her at six years old petting a dog; I think he was named Walter. She was happy, completely happy in that memory. I don't know where that emotion was located on the scale, but I loved it.

Although I didn't like stealing that emotion from her.

I went slowly toward her row, and saw that the seat next to her was empty. The idea that she had been stood up seemed more likely.

I sat beside her, she was so focused on the play that I think she didn't notice my presence.

I observed her out of the corner of my eye. I realized that her face did not only thrill me as she waited in the plaza, but also when she listened carefully.

I was falling in love with each of her features, with each one of her gazes in pause.

I focused on the play; I remembered those last three minutes perfectly. I had seen the version my mother did of *Death of a Salesman* more than fifty times, although I almost always enjoyed the ending. I always went into the

theater just as it was about to finish. The final phrase is genius: “We’re free... we’re free...”

I noticed that as we reached the end the girl’s breathing began to match the rhythm of mine.

The emotion as we breathe, the sound of her inhalations and exhalations, the air that she decided to take in and let out was identical to mine.

We were two people who vibrate in such a way with the play that we were breathing in sync. We were keeping in step with each other without looking at each other, with just the words of an epic ending.

I felt as if a relationship was beginning. As if by being the only two people in the theater who were breathing in sync we were having our first kiss, our first caress, the first sensual moment and as if we were even having sex. And I’m not just saying that, since as I felt it, my breathing increased and hers superimposed itself on mine.

Before we were able to consummate anything the play ended and the applause filled everything.

There were up to five minutes of uninterrupted applause. Again our clapping was in unison. My heart and my esophagus were in sync with hers. Although maybe it was all in my head.

The last clapping ended suddenly. The audience got up at once. She remained seated; I did too.

Everyone in our row left on the far side, since they saw we weren’t inclined to moving.

There were less and less people in the theater; she continued mesmerized by what she had seen on stage and I pretended to feel the same way.

I knew that in a few seconds she would get up or the ushers would shoo us out. I wanted to find the perfect phrase to start a conversation but nothing came to me.

I didn't want to resort to something about dogs; it didn't seem ethical.

Suddenly, I discovered that her head was bowed because she was looking at a text message and not because of the play she had just experienced. That message had her paralyzed; she read it over and over.

My mother believed that cell phone text messages contained much truth in few characters. People took great pains to tell their feelings without spending too much money. The conciseness of emotions.

She kept many of the ones she received. She never transcribed them, she never transferred them to other formats. She believed they lost their magic that way.

She saved messages that were over ten years old. She told me that in them there was extreme pain, sincere passion and pure sex.

According to her, SMS stood for "sex more sex." She told me that everyone had a sexual message saved on his or her cell phone.

And sometimes only the person who received it knows that it was; anyone else reading it wouldn't realize. Since they would have to know what time it was received, what had happened beforehand and its intensity.

She said that fantastic messages were the perfect epilogue to a great meeting. How many times after a good date, when you leave, a few minutes after separating from the other person, have you received an SMS confirming your perception of those shared moments?

Sometimes the message is more important than the date itself.

I have a message saved on my phone from a long time ago, a very sexual one, one of those that, as my mother used to say, no one would imagine was. It merely said: "Are you coming?"

A girl I was in a relationship with sent it to me. When I received it, I read it and got aroused. For weeks I would reread it and it kept arousing me.

I never went where she wanted me to, maybe that's why I still keep that

SMS and it still excites me.

I also kept one from my mother; she sent it to me the first time I traveled abroad without her. It said: “Don’t get lost, Marcos, the world’s limits are where you decide they are.”

But the truth is that my limits were increasingly smaller: the Teatro Español, the Plaza Santa Ana and its few bordering streets.

Suddenly, the girl beside me looked at me and spoke.

“Can you do me a favor?”

That was incredible. Sometimes life solves your problems without asking for anything in return.

“Yes. Yes.” I replied with two yeses, out of extreme nervousness.

“My boyfriend, who was supposed to see this play with me but didn’t show, is waiting outside for me and I don’t want him to think I watched it alone, so I wanted to ask you if you could pretend that...” she asked, embarrassed, letting her words trail off.

“It would be my pleasure to have taken you to the play,” I said.

I got up and we left the theater together. I know that our relationship wasn’t real, it was just a fiction for a stranger, but I lived each second that it took us to leave the building as if it were.

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15

THREE SIPS OF COFFEE AND A SUITCASE FULL OF
MEMORIES

We went out on the street. It turned out that the guy who I thought was watching me, the one with the dark glasses, was her boyfriend. Power to the imagination. She was very close to me, there was barely enough distance between our bodies to perspire. She didn't hold my hand or anything like that; I just felt her very near. I sensed her presence and her scent.

The boy in the dark glasses didn't come over, he stormed off angrily, almost offended. She pretended she wasn't looking at him, although I think she didn't take her eyes off of him.

I noticed that he was no longer watching us and that he had left the plaza, because she decided to move a bit further away from me. Very little, just a bit.

Then she stopped, I would say we were again in the middle of the plaza, right where I had seen her for the first time. I stopped too.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I answered.

I didn't know what else to add; I knew that she would leave if I didn't come up with something quickly. She turned to go.

"Will you let me buy you a drink?"

She looked at me in surprise.

"I mean in case he comes back. I wouldn't go far if my girlfriend was out with someone. I would come back to see if it was someone she had happened to meet in the theater or someone more special," I added.

She hesitated.

"Okay," she said.

I headed toward the outside tables of my usual spot. I don't know why it seemed less touristy to me. The waiter had known me for more than ten years, although I don't know his name and he doesn't know mine. I liked

him because he remembered what I usually ordered. He even guessed the days when I didn't feel like having my usual and wanted a change.

That waiter, on a day when we got talking, told me that he had been born and fallen in love in the Plaza Santa Ana, and that he still lived here. Everything important had happened here. That plaza was his life and he wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. It was strange, I had been raised in a thousand different places and I felt the same way.

We sat down. The waiter came over quickly.

"Finally some customers, today with this whole E.T. thing nobody's coming by." He looked at me. "What'll you have today?"

He knew that it was a special day and I didn't want my usual. I liked that. "E.T.?" she asked.

The waiter laughed and asked, "Haven't you heard about the alien?"

"We were in the theater," she replied.

The waiter seemed surprised; he must have seen me entering the theater at the end of the performance. But he didn't say anything.

"They say they've captured an alien. Although now they are denying it. Whatever it is, people haven't been going out for a drink. What can I get you?"

She didn't seem to put much stock in the news. I feigned interest. We ordered the same thing: both espressos with milk. I find it amusing when someone invites someone to have a drink and they end up ordering coffee or vice versa.

The waiter headed off.

"Do you think it's true?" she asked.

Her question struck me as funny. If only she knew... Suddenly, a woman passed by with a German shepherd and she moved aside a bit. It seemed she was afraid of the dog.

But that didn't make sense. According to the gift, she loved dogs.

The dog sniffed her and started barking. She turned very pale.

Soon the dog ran off and she regained her natural color.

"Are you afraid of dogs?" I asked.

"Ever since I can remember."

It couldn't be. The gift had never failed me. It didn't make sense. Maybe there was some magnetic interference in the theater. But it was strange because I had seen her as a girl, it was her face and she had a dog in her lap and I felt her love toward those animals.

The waiter brought us our coffees. But he didn't leave the bill; that was his way of not rushing regular customers. He left right away, because I think he could tell I needed privacy.

"You've never had a dog?" I insisted.

"Never."

She drank a sip of coffee and then another. I did the same. I realized that she was the first person I had shared a coffee with since my mother died.

Sometimes we don't catch those details, but for me, whatever happens, she will be the first girl I had a coffee with at five in the morning after my mother's death.

The night was still pitch black. I felt tired. I had only slept four hours and it wasn't enough. I yawned.

"Do you sleep?" she asked me.

"I do." I didn't add the word still.

"You?"

"I sleep too."

We both drank another two sips of coffee.

One more sip and she would go. She took the sip and I remained silent.

She didn't say anything either. I knew she would get up. Then she cleared her throat; she was about to stand up.

But just then I heard my name in the plaza. The concierge of my building was calling my name as she dragged a suitcase.

The sound of the wheels on that suitcase transported me to airports, train stations and thousands of hallways on hotel floors.

I knew the sound of that suitcase, I had spent hundreds of hours with it, beside it, and I had placed it in hundreds of high, inaccessible places so it could rest between trips.

"They brought this suitcase for you, from the airport," she said, staring at the girl who was with me.

She left the suitcase beside me and it seemed to be giving off cold. That was my mother's suitcase and even though the authorities in Boston had informed me that they would repatriate her body and belongings, I never thought the luggage would arrive before she did.

I didn't dare to look at that brown suitcase with three wheels. My mother, over the years, had had an extra wheel added, because she thought that would make it easy for her to transport it. I didn't even touch the handle because I had the feeling that, somehow, her essence, her perfume, part of her last moments would be there.

"It's yours, right, Marcos?" asked the concierge, seeing how little interest I showed in it.

"Yes, it is," I said. I didn't want to give more details.

Then I smiled and thanked her. She left devastated because she was hoping I would introduce her to my coffee companion.

"Did you lose your luggage in the airport?" asked the girl from the theater.

Maybe it was the conversation I needed, talking to her about what that

suitcase meant to me. What it would mean to open it, find part of her world and be able to share it with someone now that she was gone. But I didn't want her to feel sorry for me, to discover that it was a tragic day in my life and that she had met me at a time when I was no longer myself.

"Not exactly," I said. "It was my mother's."

She didn't stand up

"Does your mother live with you?"

I didn't want to lie to her but I didn't want to tell her the truth either. How many times had I found myself at that crossroads... Maybe there should be a concept halfway between a lie and the truth.

Before I could answer, my phone started barking again. I saw fear in her face, even though the barks weren't real. It was the boss. I had forgotten that he'd called me when I was in the theater. I answered it.

I could tell that she was getting ready to leave; the call was the perfect ending. But she waited for me to finish so she could say goodbye.

I decided to take full advantage of the call, I would drag it out as long as I needed to.

"We managed to set him free without implicating ourselves," the boss said curtly.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes. He said he would go to the main plaza in Salamanca. He has something to do there," he added. "He wants you to go there; the stranger wants to see you. I'll call you later and you can tell me about it, we can't leave here now. It's at a fever pitch."

I didn't know what to say, the stranger was free and wanted to see me. I know that I should have asked my boss a lot of questions about the escape, about why the stranger needed to go to that Castilian city and why he

wanted to talk to me. But I couldn't ask any of them, because the boss hung up before I had a chance.

I acted like the call hadn't ended; I didn't want her to leave. I kept saying "yes" and "no" randomly. A couple of times I added "aha" and finally, when I saw that she was going to stand up even if I stayed on the call, I let out a "perfect, I'll see you there."

I hung up. She stood up. Suddenly, I felt I was losing her and I took a risk.

"Do you want to come somewhere with me?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She just waited to see what else I said.

"When you told me you didn't want to leave *Death of a Salesman* alone because there was someone you didn't want to see, I believed you. Now I am asking you something stranger: for you to come with me to Salamanca to see someone I don't want to face alone either."

She continued in silence. I didn't know what else to say to convince her.

"I promise it isn't a trap or anything shady. Trust me."

She smiled.

"Do we know each other?" she asked in a tone so soft it was almost imperceptible.

I was very surprised by her question.

"No," I said. "I don't think so."

"I have the feeling I've seen you before. You seem..."

She took a few seconds to find the word. I didn't try to help her.

"...trustworthy. I trust you."

Now I was the one who smiled. I stood up, so did she. I made the gesture of "put it on my tab" to the waiter, who had been observing our conversation from a distance.

We headed toward where the Peruvian was parked. His gold teeth were

my north star.

I had to grab the suitcase; I felt something strange when my fingers touched the handle.

My mother never let me carry it for her; she said that the day she couldn't transport her own suitcase would be the day she would stop traveling.

Now her suitcase was mine. It was unfair that fate allowed me to carry it. I felt a terrible pain, unimaginable, but I didn't mention it to the girl from the Teatro Español.

On the way to the car I saw that the televisions were showing the stranger's photos, but as if he wasn't related to the alien. Beneath his photo there was a sign that read "WANTED FOR PEDERASTY." Then I saw the photos I had seen in the security guard's folder entitled "attached" but with his face replaced by the stranger's.

I felt disgust at the set-up. They had to find him and they were trying to make people feel repulsed by someone who hadn't done those monstrous things, since they were the work of his possible captor.

Poor stranger, his first moments on Earth and they were already blaming him for something he hadn't done.

Again, I said nothing. We got into the car; the Peruvian treated the girl as if he had known her his entire life.

"We're going to Salamanca," I said to the Peruvian.

"I know," he answered as he put on my music.

The car started, the suitcase was between her and me.

My mother's presence made itself clear.

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16

THE ART OF DRAWING A GOOD BATH AND THE
BRAVERY OF ENJOYING IT

It had been years since I'd visited Salamanca. The last time I was twelve years old. They had hired my mother to do an outdoor summer gig.

She really liked that kind of event; she used to say that the audience was relaxed, the dancers felt comfortable and that the influx of the stars, moon and the fresh air revitalized those mediocre shows.

Sometimes she told me that the performance was all of that and that she liked to mingle with the audience and see how the person to her left listened to the music as they looked up at the starry sky and how the one on the right followed the dancers' movements closely, but their sense of smell was totally focused on enjoying the aromas of the summer night mixed with hundreds of tanning lotion scents.

She acted in Salamanca's main plaza with her company, one very hot summer. The place, the audience and the climate were so marvelous that I remember my mother said that they competed with the performance in a way that was almost illegal.

"Tell me," the girl asked as soon as we took the first avenue with more than four lanes.

I knew that that "tell me" referred to everything. Tell me everything, she was saying to me. The Peruvian raised the dark window, and I thanked him with a look.

I also felt something strange toward her. That trust that shouldn't arise between people who've just met, but sometimes exists and is more intense than what you feel for someone you've known for more than twenty years.

"It's not that familiarity breeds contempt..." said my mother whenever someone let her down. "Familiarity shouldn't exist. It is the laxity that provokes the big disappointments in every type of relationship."

She believed that you had to earn the trust of the other person each day.

Demand that they earn yours, that they surprise you and you must show them the same.

I never saw her living a day-to-day relationship with anyone. I never saw her live with a man in the traditional sense. I think that had to do with trust.

I've always believed that the person she spent the most time with, she shared more rooms with and had more conversations with... was me. And I can assure you that I always felt her demands on me and she taught me to make those demands of her.

The simplest time of our lives was in Boston, which was also where she had passed away. It is a city with its own spirit, indomitable, that seems like it was transplanted from the European continent to the American.

In the summertime, when I was fifteen, I loved to sit on one of the benches in its immense parks filled with lakes and observe, like Will Hunting, the tranquility of a city that demands nothing of you and doesn't expect you to aspire to anything. In that city I felt that I was myself, my most intense self.

It was in that city where I felt closest to my mother.

She always took baths after her premieres, which I think I already told you. She said it was her way of liberating herself from the smell of the first performance, the accumulated nerves and passion.

Ever since I was ten years old, I was the one in charge of drawing her bath.

She had taught me that filling a bathtub is no different than preparing a meal in a kitchen. You have to be attentive to both things, so that they come out right and are perfect.

She would say that there were people who started cooking and then went off to finish other things. And that mix of activities showed in the results.

She told me that stoves and bathtubs need our affection, our full

attention. As if that 36.5 degrees Celsius water we fill a tub with or cook pasta in was the key to the good taste we feel when eating it or the great pleasure we feel when slipping into it.

So, from the age of ten, I remained seated, in silence, watching the bathtub fill.

First, always six minutes of very cold water; then three minutes of very hot water. The soap always went in at the last minute and that was the most pleasant moment, because if it was done well I could feel how the foam took on its own texture. It was no different than the art of painting.

I liked being in charge of her baths. Then she spent exactly sixty minutes enjoying them. Always alone. And she emerged renewed.

In Boston I had helped in the direction of the work that was being premiered. It was my first time. So when the bath was ready she asked if I wanted to get in with her. One on each side, facing each other.

I hesitated, but since I believe that there really was something in the Boston air that made you forget your prejudices and preoccupations, I undressed and got into the bath. I took the side opposite her.

At first I was very tense, but gradually I relaxed and enjoyed the experience.

I felt how the nerves of the performance, the stress of the last rehearsals, were diluted and mixed with that water prepared with such affection.

Little by little, I noticed how my mother's body, which at first I didn't even want to brush, was touching mine involuntarily.

It was a pleasant experience, actually the most pleasant I've ever felt.

Years later I decided that when I finished a painting I would take a post-painting bath, to get rid of the colors dwelling inside my body. And I swear that just hearing the sound of the water made my esophagus vibrate.

That has always been and will be my happy sound.

I have never shared a bathtub since. I almost suggested it to the girl in Capri, the one I embraced after my grandmother's death, but in the end I didn't dare.

I don't know what it is about sharing a bathtub with someone for sixty minutes, but it's as if you got to know that person better.

As if the water transported part of your secrets, your fears, and brushing involuntarily against their skin allowed you to enter their most private essence.

"Tell me everything, really. Don't be afraid of what I'll think," said the girl from the theater again.

I knew that she would really believe me. The trust between us since we saw the end of the salesman was intense.

I did it.

In that hour and a half, I told her everything. The speed of my words reminded me of the tone that David Bowie used when singing "Modern Love."

I swallowed sentences and glossed over some things but I conveyed the essence.

On the way between Madrid and Ávila I told her about the stranger, my gift, his escape, the red rain, the pentagonal planet and how I had seen her in the Plaza Santa Ana.

From Ávila to Salamanca I focused on my mother, her less, my decision to quit sleeping, my fears, my loneliness, the painting, the unfinished sex canvas and the suitcase.

It was an intense ninety-minute monologue without her saying a word. Not a single word.

It was an immense pleasure to tell her everything; well, that's a lie, maybe I didn't exactly explain my fascination for her. I was cautious in

love, and since I had never had anything to tell, now that I did I wasn't sure how to present it. It was like handling an explosive.

About the rest, I didn't leave out a single detail.

She was the sixth person I had told about the gift. First I told my mother, then Dani, the boss, the girl in Capri and the guy who I thought was my father. Maybe I'll tell you about him someday.

She didn't say anything when I told her about my gift either. Not even when I mentioned the stranger.

I had never been so honest and open with anyone. I was afraid of her reaction.

The car went down one of the streets that led to Salamanca's main plaza just as I was telling her about the escape plan.

In the middle of the plaza I saw the stranger. He was wearing a hood, probably so no one would recognize him as the supposed pederast.

We got out and headed over to him.

"Do you believe me?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe you," she said.

And I knew that she believed me. I felt good.

Sincerity that is rewarded is one of the most satisfying pleasures in this life.

I was glad there hadn't been a "but." "I believe you, but..." "I'm sorry, although..." Terrible conjunctions that end up deactivating the feelings that precede them.

When we were still fifty paces from the stranger, he looked up and smiled.

I loved that he did that before we reached him. And, I realized that he was right in the middle of the plaza waiting for us. Another plaza, and another fascinating person in the middle waiting.

17

BE BRAVE, IN LIFE, LOVE AND SEX

As soon as I reached him, the stranger hugged me. He smelled like a baby, a faint fragrance. I wasn't sure if it was cologne or the scent of his skin.

There are so many bodies that generate natural perfumes...

The first girl I was with, a lifeguard at a pool in Montreal, always smelled of chlorine. We talked every afternoon that I spent at the pool of the hotel where she worked.

For me, that pool was a small Eden, far from the cold, from the vast network of trains that connected that city underground, and that kept you from seeing and feeling the 24 degrees below zero Celsius.

The few times that I went out on the street, if I closed my eyes more than ten seconds, the cold froze my eyelashes.

So, while my mother created in a nearby underground theater, I lived in the swimming pool.

The lifeguard talked and talked, and I listened spellbound.

The day we got together for the first time away from the pool, she didn't smell of chlorine but of a fragrance somewhere between grapefruit and saffron.

We made love. It was my first time and that scent has always stayed with me.

I, on the other hand, don't smell of anything.

Which is why, every time I think that someone I know has a virtue I don't possess, I think they smell good. I find out what cologne they wear and I use it for a few months.

I've worn a lot of different ones; every six months I change my scent. As if my shortcomings would be absorbed by their cologne.

I would have liked to ask the stranger what he smelled of, so I could wear his scent for a while, but it wasn't the time or the place.

"Did you tell her?" the stranger asked as he extended his hand to the girl

from the Teatro Español.

I nodded.

“Did you like the play?” he asked.

She smiled and nodded.

The bells in the main plaza rang out seven in the morning. He turned 360 degrees, as if looking for someone. It seemed he was there waiting for somebody.

That was when I looked around the plaza, which I hadn't visited in years. It was lovely. I think it is the most beautiful plaza in the world, hands down. My mother adored it.

“It is a brave plaza,” she told me hours after premiering a work and having a new success under her belt.

“Brave?” I asked. “There are brave plazas?”

“There are, this one is because it invites bravery.”

She took my hand in that moment, placed it on her belly button and kissed me on the back of my neck. It surprised me.

“Be brave,” she said. “In life, in love and in sex. People forget that they should ask for caresses and kisses. Never think that it is up to your partner. If only you could understand that the actions related to sex have to be decriminalized.

“A caress, a kiss, asking for the warmth of a hand on your belly button shouldn't be linked to the feeling that they will provoke or result in sex.

“A hug shouldn't last ten seconds, or thirty, it can last eight minutes if need be. Stroking a body doesn't have to always mean sex. You have to appreciate the caress as part of your life. Decriminalize it within your life.

“Just like you laugh at somebody's joke and you accept that their words make you happy, you shouldn't fear telling someone that their skin, their eyes, their mouth make you feel something else. We have to decriminalize

sexual acts, bring them into real life, everyday life, and tie them to life instead of sex. Do you understand, Marcos?”

After that long monologue I continued with my hand on her belly button for a good while. I felt the plaza’s bravery in me and I kissed her neck with my lips.

I didn’t feel sex, I felt life.

Then I asked her: “Who is my father?”

She had never spoken to me about him, it was her Achilles’ heel. I think it made her sad.

The stranger headed over to the bench in the center of the plaza. The only one there. He sat down and invited us to do the same.

“Do you want to know who I am?” he asked.

We both nodded. The sun still hadn’t come up yet. It was very, very close, though. The plaza was losing people, since at that time there was another work shift change.

I felt nervous. In that plaza my mother made me feel special yet again, and I knew that after the conversation with the stranger something would change in my life.

And, she –the girl from the Teatro Español who knew all my secrets— was there. I don’t really know what she felt about me, or what I felt for her, but the fact that she was there made me feel lucky.

And, beside me were my mother’s suitcase and the blank canvas. I felt as if my life was slowly completing. Pieces of my life were coming together.

The stranger started to speak. I knew that that was the moment I had been waiting for since I met him.

“I know that what I am going to tell you might sound strange and I can’t really give you any reliable evidence that it is true, but it is the reality,” he

began saying. “I am a stranger, I like the name they gave me, but I won’t be stranger than you in a short while.”

He was silent during a long pause.

“Life... where I come from, the concept of time, our time, our life, is very different than yours. But this life here isn’t strange to me, because I’ve already experienced it.”

We both absorbed every sentence he said. The girl from the Teatro Español, suddenly, drew her hand near to me. I took it in mine and instinctively brought it to my belly button, like my mother had done with mine years earlier.

I think that the girl from the Teatro Español was afraid. I, honestly, felt the bravery of the plaza in my veins.

“I was born here, in Salamanca, quite a few years ago. I ran through this plaza as a boy, I played here with my brothers. I was a happy child, very happy; I remember that, even though it was many years ago. As an adult, I went to work in a nearby town, Peñaranda de Bracamonte, and I settled there. One July 9th, when the Spanish Civil War had already ended, a train came into the station loaded with gunpowder and because of a wheel that was red hot, the entire town almost blew up. They called this tragedy The Powder Keg and I lost a leg and an arm.”

He paused. I think we all needed it. Even though something didn’t fit, because that man wasn’t missing any of his legs or arms.

Suddenly, he sent an image to my gift. I felt it arrive; I hesitate before accepting it, because I didn’t have the gift connected, but he introduced it.

I saw, in images, everything he had told us. I saw the sequence of The Powder Keg that he had mentioned. I saw him, that hot July Sunday, going to mass, the train arriving in the station and the large explosion that took so many lives. I squeezed the girl from the theater’s hand against my chest.

The images I was seeing were painful: thousands of legs hanging from trees and arms scattered over kilometers. So much pain... And I saw him, missing one leg and one arm, just as he had said...

But the person who was speaking to us in that plaza had both arms and legs; I didn't understand anything. Was he manipulating my images?

"You saw it, right?" he asked. "Well, living it was more horrible than remembering it. My life changed; I thought life as I knew it was over, until the army sent prisoners of war to rebuild the town. And I met her. Look at her, look closely," he said.

I saw his first encounter with a lovely girl with chestnut brown hair. She was much younger than him; I think by ten or fifteen years. It was incredible how she looked at him, how she saw his stumps without feeling pity, as if between them something intense was building. It was such an intense, beautiful memory that I had no doubt that that was the most thrilling moment in the stranger's life.

"We were married for fifty years. My death..." He paused. "My death was very peaceful, I barely remember it, I can't send it to you," he said to me.

His death. He talked about his death as if it were real. But he wasn't dead. I think the girl from the Teatro Español wanted to ask as badly as I did. But we didn't dare, we knew that it was beyond our intelligence and that our questions would only reflect our ignorance.

"I suppose that you are wondering what there is after death, right?" he said without changing his tone even slightly.

We nodded, even though we knew it was a rhetorical question.

"There is... more life."

My heart, my breathing and my esophagus throbbed. That stranger was

telling us the secret that everyone wanted to know. Knowing what there is after life, knowing what death holds for us.

“When you die on this planet, you go to another one... Earth is known, where I come from, as Planet 2.” He smiled when he saw the fascination in our faces. “Yes, as you’re imagining there is a Planet 1, so that this is your second life.”

I took a deep breath and she did as well. He continued relentlessly.

“On Planet 3 life is more pleasurable than on number 2, and on 2 more than on 1. Each death provides you with a planet where everything is more enjoyable, it doesn’t matter what life you have here, it doesn’t have anything to do with your previous life, only with a circle you must complete. You could be a thief on 2 and a prince on 3. But the life on the next planet is always more filled with happiness, love and fulfillment.”

Just at that moment I thought he was lying, he had to be lying. Planets you go to when you die; that made no sense, that was crazy.

“There are six planets,” he added. “Six lives. After the fourth planet they give you “gifts.” On the fourth they give you a strange gift that allows you to know how someone is emotionally just by looking at them. It’s like seeing their most pleasurable and most horrible memories instantly. You also see twelve intermediary feelings.

“On the fifth planet they give you the “gift” of knowing that you have lived four other lives and you know what your life was like on each one of those planets. So you can choose if you want to continue living on the fifth one or go straight to the sixth. It’s important to be able to choose. There are people who know that the sixth will be better so they commit suicide right away; others want to live their fifth life fully.”

He stopped again. He moved his neck several times. I couldn’t even move. From what I understood, I had the gift they gave you on the fourth

planet, but according to what he was saying I lived on the second. I didn't understand anything. I think that he knew what I was feeling; he smiled at me.

“Sometimes, nature fails and someone on the second, or the first or the third, is given the wrong gift. Someone on Earth can get the gift of knowing people. Or like what happened to me: when I got to the third planet I knew that I had already lived two lives and that I had three more.” He inhaled and exhaled. “Sometimes it's complicated to have a gift in the wrong life.”

He looked at me and I observed him as well.

“I have missed my wife since the time I died many years ago, for the second time. When I woke up on that third strange planet, where there were pentagonal planets and red rain, I knew that she existed, because they had mistakenly given me the gift of remembering my previous lives. I went through lives quickly because I wanted to come back here. I wanted to go back to my second life, although I don't know how I knew that that possibility existed if I reached the sixth planet... But it did. On the sixth you can choose between the unknown or return to any of the previous planets. No one ever goes back, they all leap into the unknown, except me, who knew that she lived here, that she would be almost 109 years old and that she still came every day to the plaza she loved most in this world.”

I realized that while he was speaking he kept glancing around the plaza and searching for his beloved. He hadn't stopped looking for her the whole time. I realized that he was scrutinizing every older person, every little old lady who moved slowly, walking with difficulty. He was searching for her, yearning to find her.

The girl from the Teatro Español and I looked at each other. We didn't know what to tell him.

I swear that I believed him. I don't know what she was thinking.

“What is there after the sixth planet?” she finally asked.

He smiled.

“Nobody knows, just like you now wonder what there is after this life.” He smiled. “The lives pass and we go from planet to planet, but in the end there is the same uncertainty.”

I didn’t believe him. That was the only part I didn’t believe. I had the feeling that he had lied to us and that he did know what there was after the sixth planet.

I thought that if the rest was true, he and I had both received the wrong gifts. That linked us. He was searching for a girl; I had just found one. That also linked us. I had lost my mother and the pain of thinking that I would never see her again was unbearable. He lost someone special and spent many lives trying to find her. Suddenly I was struck by a doubt.

“Why didn’t you wait for her die to meet up with her again? If she died, she would go to your life, right?”

He didn’t even look at me.

“Wish for her death to be with her again in life? Never.” He looked at me. “Would you commit suicide today to be with your mother?” I took a deep breath. “Do you know that it’s possible? And we have the same face on each planet, the same features, but we spend a couple of lives without knowing that that person was fundamental to our previous life.”

Suddenly he offered me many memories at once. Memories of life on the six planets he had been on. It was incredible; his face, his appearance, his features didn’t change, he looked young, they were always memories up to the age of twelve, thirteen at the most. Memories of happiness and sadness in incomparable settings. Planets filled with beauty. I received hundreds of images, randomly, in no particular order. It was amazing, I didn’t know

what memory belonged to which planet, what emotion trumped another. It was ecstasy.

“Impressive, huh? Well, living it is better.”

All of a sudden the image came back to me that I had of the girl from the Teatro Español, the one in which she was playing with a dog as a child, which hadn't matched with anything in her current life. Was it possible that I had seen her life on another planet where she had previously lived? Was that her first planet?

I asked the stranger that question without beating around the bush. He was slow to respond, it was the first time that he didn't answer right away. That made me afraid.

“I prefer not to answer,” he said. “Unless you both ask me.” I looked at the girl. “But I don't think you should know about the relationship you had in the other life on that first planet.”

We didn't know what to say. I already knew the girl from the Teatro Español? Was that why I had a memory of her other life? What was her relationship to me? Maybe that was why I had such an intense feeling when I saw her. And maybe the stranger knew it when he saw me.

“In the interrogation room you said that she was important in my life,” I said. “You saw my memories of that life and the one before it and you knew that she was in both of my lives, right?”

He nodded.

“Who am I to him?” she asked.

The stranger smiled.

“In this life or in the previous one? Which one are you living now? Why do you want to interfere in it? The life you are living is this one.”

She wasn't intimidated.

“You lived for your second life in all the others, right?”

“Because I had that information. You are lucky to not have it, enjoy this life with him, not with who he was on the first planet.”

She didn't say anything more. Neither did I. We remained in silence almost twenty minutes without knowing what to ask or what to believe.

A gentle rain began to fall. It wasn't red. I was debating between fear and passion.

Thinking that simply killing myself would allow me to be with my mother again... That was very tempting for a grieving soul. Knowing that that girl had maybe been close to me in another life was something that overwhelmed me and made me very, very curious.

But I had to be brave, as my mother always said, in life, in love and in sex.

In minute number twenty-one, both of us, the girl from the theater and I, couldn't hold it back any longer.

“Who are we to each other?” we asked in unison.

The stranger looked at us as if he knew that question was a big mistake and that we would regret having asked it forever.

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UNEXHALING AND UNINHALING

The stranger knew what answering that question meant. That was why it was so hard for him to reply.

When he was just about to, he suddenly felt a terrible stabbing pain in his chest. And I felt it too.

“She’s gone,” he said.

“Who?” I asked.

“My wife, she just died.”

His face was pure sadness, absolute desperation. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone’s features disappear in that way. He had lost his direction, his life, his “everything.”

“Are you sure?” asked the girl from the theater.

He nodded. Suddenly he was paralyzed; I sensed that he had no energy. It wasn’t surprising, if he had really lived or taken five lives to get here and now, he had lost the reason behind his entire existence because of being held captive for three months.

“And can’t you go to the third planet with her?” the girl from the theater asked again.

“Yes, but...” He was having trouble speaking. “I won’t remember anything, I won’t have these gifts and I won’t know who she is. I will have to start from zero, I will begin the cycle again.”

I didn’t know what to tell him to make him feel better. He was completely destroyed. I understood him; I felt the same way over my mother.

I thought that maybe on that third planet my mother and his wife would be close friends. They had been born two days apart and maybe, without knowing it, they would share something from being related to people who had been given the wrong gifts in different lives.

“I want to see her,” said the stranger. “They are going to bury her in

Peñaranda, I'm sure of it.”

He got up and went toward one of the plaza's exits. The rain was soaking us, but the incredible heat made it dry instantly.

I overtook him. I directed him toward the car. The Peruvian was already waiting for us.

We headed to Peñaranda. We were only forty kilometers from that town.

We didn't speak on the way there. I didn't dare ask him about my relationship to the girl from the Teatro Español; it wasn't the moment and now it seemed unimportant.

I thought about the big question of my life. Who was my father? My mother never wanted to tell me, and I never coerced her into revealing it. Although I knew that she carried a diary where she wrote down everything, and I was sure that the diary was in the suitcase. Although maybe there were two questions in my life: who was my father in the first life and who was my father in the second life?

I also reflected on what would happen if this whole story were exposed to the general public. I was sure that many people wouldn't believe it, but also many others would blindly follow the idea that this life is just one of the lives we have.

What would happen to the people who aren't happy in this life? People who feel unlucky, who haven't met their goals or who are living the torment of poor health or depression. Would they commit suicide for the possibility of a better life on a third planet?

I also didn't know if the human beings on the second planet were prepared to know all that information. I appreciated the fact that the stranger hadn't said anything in the interrogations and that day became a hot pink day.

I don't know what the girl from the Teatro Español was thinking, since

her eyes were almost closed. She was ruminating, no doubt.

When we reached Peñaranda, the stranger directed the Peruvian through the narrow streets as if he had lived there all his life.

We ended up in the Nueva Plaza, the third plaza we had visited. Of course his beloved lived—or died—in a plaza. An enormous sign over it indicated that prisoners from the civil war had reconstructed it.

We stopped at number 65 in that plaza. There were people in the doorway, neighbors with sad faces. She must have been ill for some time.

He got out and we followed behind him.

He went into the house and headed to the second apartment on the mezzanine floor, which was open. Inside there were more neighbors. The news of her death was recent.

He headed to the master bedroom; there was a very old woman in the bed. She seemed to be asleep. Around her there were quite a few people.

They looked at us in surprise, but no one said anything. The situation of such recent death was so strange that nobody dared to comment anything.

The stranger saw her and became emotional. I could feel his reaction.

“Can you leave me alone with her, please?” asked the stranger.

The people in the room weren’t expecting that. They had never seen that stranger, or the people who had come in with him.

“Please... I am a close family member.”

Then he pointed to the large photo that crowned the room. It was of a man without a hand but who looked very much like him. He really did look just like the photo, even though now in a teenage version. The people could see the incredible resemblance and must have been convinced that the man who was asking for space alone with her was a relative: a cousin, a grandson, a son... Despite the obvious resemblance, no one thought that he was the man in the photograph, much younger.

We were left alone. He sat on the bed. He looked into the face of that old woman and cried.

He burst into tears, as my mother used to say.

I did nothing to console him; the girl from the Teatro Español didn't either.

After ten minutes of crying, he gradually calmed down and finally placed his hands on the woman's face. And suddenly a hologram appeared above the woman. You could clearly see some images of planets. They were strange planets, like some interplanetary GPS.

I only recognized Earth and the planet with the red rain. The planets moved and on one of them, the Earth, there was a blinking light... Like a soul.

With shock and emotion, we watched as the soul went from planet 2 to planet 3. It was amazing, I didn't know that a gift existed that allowed you to watch a soul—or whatever that blinking light was—travel.

“I am going to go with her,” said the stranger, stroking the old woman's face. “Even if she doesn't recognize me, I'm sure that I will end up finding her again. And if not, on the next planet, and if not in the next life.” He kissed the woman, a kiss so filled with passion that it seemed the woman would revive. “Please, leave.”

I think he was doing the right thing, without a doubt, but it was difficult for me to accept.

“Don't you want to wait a few days?” I asked.

“There is nothing here that matters to me,” he responded. “And being born on the same day as her might be the key to our finding each other.”

Then he took a piece of paper and a pencil that was in the second drawer of the dresser on the left side. It was as if he knew it was there. He wrote something down and gave it to me.

“Here you have your relationship on the first planet. You two decide if you want to read it,” he said, handing me the paper. “I give it to you in exchange for this: when you die and find me on the third planet, if you still have your gift and you have any memory of me, of who I was, of who she is, I want you to tell it to me immediately.”

I nodded. I would definitely do that. If I ran into him in another life, if I had the gift, I would give him that information without a second thought.

I embraced him, his scent went through me again. The girl from the Teatro Español kissed him.

We left that room. He lay beside the woman in the bed.

I remembered the image of my mother and me in that skyscraper hotel, although the age difference was greater. Maybe my mother had raised me to be able to accept that image.

Suddenly I felt the stranger stop breathing, the sound of his inhaling and exhaling disappeared. Maybe he had already practiced in other lives how to be able to leave planets quickly.

The image of the two of them together had something lovely about it, like a dream being finally completed.

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EVERYTHING YOU AND I COULD HAVE BEEN IF WE
WEREN'T YOU AND I

I was exhausted. It looked like she was, too. We saw a hostel a few meters from the house and we booked a room.

We knew that we shouldn't distance ourselves too much from the stranger. From everything that had been his life.

The room they gave us was small, with two old paintings hung very close together that showed landscapes of the region.

The bed that presided over the room was lovely, or that was how it seemed to me.

I glanced out the window, which overlooked the plaza. I liked it. What's more, dawn was breaking. That night was something really special.

I didn't know what to say, how to begin. I didn't know if I should unfold the paper and read it, or just go for it and give her a passionate kiss or paint a picture of her.

I decided on the last option.

"Can I paint you?" She nodded. I took out the paints. I begin that lovely ritual I had been missing for so long, mixing colors. Getting dirty to achieve beauty.

She sat down in a chair and looked at me.

"My mother told me one day that in order to paintsex I should feel that I would never have it. You can only paint things that you don't feel." I looked at her. "I feel that we will never have sex, I don't know why but that's my sense, maybe the paper will tell us the reason."

She continued looking at me.

"What do you want me to tell you?" she asked me.

"Do you know how to dance?" I asked her.

She nodded.

"Well then dance for me."

She began to dance. As she danced I felt a shiver run through my body. It

was incredibly beautiful, filled with sensuality and sexuality.

As she danced she moved toward the suitcase, opened it with slight movements and began taking out everything that was inside it.

I couldn't stop painting. I painted as if imbued with an uncontrollable force. Reds, greens and yellows mixed with black and created powerful images I never thought I was capable of.

She pulled out the two jazz records my mother always carried with her, she pulled out her albums of photographs of jumps... For years she photographed people jumping; she believed that dance and jumping made the mask fall off and offered people's true images. I never imagined there were that many photos. I had jumped for her so many times!

Her dresses. Her small vanity case where she kept some of her secrets and her fragrance.

The paintings, my two paintings about childhood and death. She carried them rolled up; she brought them with her to every hotel, to every place where she created. That particularly moved me.

And her diary. I knew that it would be there and I also knew that in it I would find the name of my father. Written on some page.

Two secrets would be revealed that night. I had one of them in my pocket, on a wrinkled piece of paper that came out of the second drawer of a dresser. And the other was in the diary that the girl who was dancing spectacularly for me held in her hands.

I continued painting. My mother's music flooded everything. There was no record playing but I heard it.

It was incredible, the most exhausting and real experience of my life.

The painting was almost finished. The painting of sex desired but not achieved. And my mother still hadn't arrived, or maybe she had, to another world but not by my side.

She stopped dancing and lay down on the bed. I placed myself beside her.

We didn't say anything. We were breathing as we had in the theater. The words at the end of *Death of a Salesman* echoed inside me: "we're free, we're free." That was how I felt by her side. It was an epic moment.

I remembered the injections. I felt that that was the epic moment I had been waiting for to take them. I pulled them both out of my pocket. I showed them to her.

"I don't want to take them. I don't want this second life to be any different than it was created to be. And, above all, I don't want to stop sleeping, because, when I wake up, I want to find you by my side for a long time. I don't want to miss that image of seeing you come back to life every day."

I couldn't image not seeing her wake up. I watched my mother wake up so many times over the years... I loved sleeping next to her; after that day in the skyscraper I made a habit of it. I liked how she awoke, how she came back to life; it was very sweet. She would look at me, smile and say; "I'm waking up, Marcos." And she would kiss me on the cheek.

I think I was in love with my mother.

I had never thought that, but I loved her. And I think she loved me too. That love that she always spoke of and that had nothing to do with sex.

She taught me about sex and I ended up feeling love for her. She believed that we have to educate our children about love, sex and life. I will never be able to thank her for it. She was brave. She never cared what people thought. It was just what she thought was right.

"Sounds good to me," said the girl from the Teatro Español. "I don't want to quit sleeping either. Can I see the painting?"

I nodded. She picked it up, carried it to the bed and looked at it. I think

there was part of the sex for my mother, sex for her and sex for Dani. The three most important sexes in my life.

I realized that I would give Dani the injections. One day I used my gift on him and saw his most heartbreaking memory. His father beat him, although that wasn't the horrible part. The worst was that Dani had nightmares, every night, about his father beating him. His father was dead but he lived on in his dreams and there he could still hit him.

That was why he wanted the medicine, to kill him. And I would be an accomplice in that dream murder. Maybe that would help Dani to find someone and forget me. And I would lose him and, as my mother used to say, the pain of losing something, even though you don't need it, would become something terrible.

"It's lovely," she said, still looking at the painting.

I smiled. I don't know how to describe that painting to you. It was abstract but if you looked at it and you were in sync it was very realistic. Wasn't sex just like that?

My mother said that sex was: "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." I always thought it was a lovely definition. I told her that I liked it. She laughed, it wasn't a definition of sex; it already existed. Churchill had used it to define Russia. We laughed a lot that night wherever it was that I was with her.

We burned the diary; it didn't matter who my father was. The fire, on the other hand, was necessary; that heat was what we needed, as if it were the perfect atmosphere for what we were going to do.

I gave her the folded piece of paper. She was going to open it, we were going to know who we were in another life, on that first planet.

She read it and then passed it to me. I read it.

There was a long silence.

Then, I remember that I said: “Everything you and I could have been if we weren’t you and I.” She nodded.

We hugged each other and slowly we fell asleep. I think it was the first time I slept well in a strange bed.

Knowing that you are only living a tiny part of one of your first lives is very calming and gives you great pleasure.

I thought of my mother. Now I know why I felt that way: she hadn’t been the person I’d most loved, she had been the person who most loved me.

It is hard to lose the person who most loved you.

I hugged my daughter close.

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Albert Espinosa (Barcelona, 1973) is an actor, director, scriptwriter for film, theater and television, and an industrial engineer.

He is the creator and writer of the hit TV show *Red Band Society*, which has been broadcast in many countries around the world and adapted in the US, Italy and Russia to enormous success, winning numerous prestigious awards including Best Series in the 2015 Emmy Kids Awards. *Red Band Society* is based on *The Yellow World* and Espinosa's personal battle against cancer. Published in 2008, this book has become both a best and long seller internationally, available in the United States, Great Britain, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Norway, Japan, Taiwan, Slovakia, Korea, Greece, Portugal, Poland, Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, Brazil, Israel and Russia, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile and Peru. All of his titles are available as e-books, and are among the top sellers in this format.

Among his films are *Planta 4.^a* [*4th Floor*], *Va a ser que nadie es perfecto* [*Turns Out Nobody's Perfect*], *Tu vida en 65'* [*Your Life in 65 Minutes*], *No me pidas que te bese porque te besaré* [*Don't Ask Me to Kiss You, Because I Will*] and *Héroes* [*Heroes*].

He has written the novels *El mundo azul. Ama tu caos* [*The Blue World. Embrace Your Chaos*] (2015), *Brújulas que buscan sonrisas perdidas* [*Compasses in Search of Lost Smiles*] (2013), *Si tú me dices ven lo dejo todo... pero dime ven* [*If You Ask Me to Come, I'll Drop Everything... But Ask Me*] (2011), all of them published by Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial.

His novels have been published in more than 40 countries, with over 1,500,000 copies sold around the world.

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Everything you and I could have been if we weren't you and I

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Biography

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