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Pierre J. Mejlak – Malta

Dak li l-Lejl Iħallik Tgħid (2011)

What the Night Lets You Say

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Biography

Born in Malta in 1982, Pierre J. Mejlak has been writing since he was young. Mejlak has written books for children, adaptations, a novel for adolescents and two collections of short stories, winning numerous awards, including five National Book Awards, the Commonwealth Essay Writing Award and the Sea of Words European Short Story Award.

Mejlak worked as a journalist from 1999 to 2005 and was twice the winner of the Malta Journalism Award. He was a BBC correspondent, a regular columnist for Maltese daily newspaper *In-Nazzjon* and produced radio shows – including 60 one-hour documentaries on rock legends – for various national radio stations.

Synopsis

The 10 stories in this collection, just like any self-respecting collection of medieval tales, are framed by a prologue and an epilogue. And some of the characters in the stories, like the bishop in 'Il-Barranija' ('The Foreign Woman') or the dying father in 'Mort Naraha, Pa' ('I Went to See Her, Pa'), could easily have inhabited Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The tension in many of the stories arises from the coming together of the past (or, at least, a previous way of life) and the present. Many of the narrators are travellers, moving from one point of their existence to another, trying to understand a life that they have lived but never fully comprehended, or trying to undo a part of the past that did not go according to plan. Very often their travels take them from metropolitan Europe to the periphery or the other way round, and these seemingly opposite worlds that have become so close in contemporary Europe serve as background to the lives of the different characters, who realize, or at least help us readers realize, that life is still lived at different rhythms in different parts of the world.

In fact, this could be read as a book about storytelling, not only as a form of pleasure that is shared between writer and reader, or narrator and listener, but more importantly as a gift that's given with love and needs love to be appreciated.

Dak li l-Lejl l'ħallik Tgħid

Pierre J. Mejlak

Mort naraha, Pa

Tbaxxejt u b'għajnejja moħbija fil-pali ta' jdejja – qisni tifel qed iħares minn tieqa mżellġa bix-xemx kontriħ – pespistielu.

“Mort naraha, pa. Mort naraha.”

*

L-aħħar darba li żortu ma tantx kien jidher tajjeb. Oħti ż-żgħira kienet għadha kemm ħarġet u kienet ħaditlu rasu tgħidlu li qed tarah sejjer lura. Is-soltu tagħha. U ħassejt li almenu jien għandi nibdel id-diska. U allura staqsejtu f'liema mara qed jaħseb l-iżjed u l-kliem waqa' fuq l-Ispanjola.

Kien jieħu pjaċir meta nkellmu dwar in-nisa ta' ħajtu. Donnu dak il-ħin l-uġiġħ kien jinsieh u għajnejh bħal jikbru u jiffukaw. Għax kemm kien ilu li marad u daħal l-isptar, in-nisa li ħabb f'ħajtu kienu saru għalih album ta' ritratti li ma seta' jieqaf iqalleb qatt. U taħt kull ritratt kien hemm mija oħra moħbija. Ma kienx hemm dettall wieħed li ma kienx għadu jiftakar b'ċarezza. Kultant kont naħseb li qed jaqla' minn żniedu iżda meta xahar jew tnejn wara jerġa' lura bl-istess dettall, bl-istess konvinzjoni, bl-istess ħarsa u tbissima, kull dubju li kien ikolli kien jisfuma fix-xejn. “Allahares m'għandix lilhom,” kien jgħidli meta konna nkunu weħidna. “Għidli int – kieku kif se nqatta' dawk l-iljieli li ma jkunu jridu jgħaddu qatt?” U mbaġħad kien ikompli dejjem bl-istess mistoqsija. “Għax, ngħid jien, fuq xiex joqogħdu jaħsbu dawk ix-xjuħ bħali – weħidhom – li f'ħajjithom qatt ma ġgennu wara mara?” U meta kien ikun

jidher b'saħħtu biżżejjed għal argument kont ngħidlu li forsi jkun qed jaħsbu dwar il-pajjiżi li żaru, il-ħbieb li kellhom, l-avventuri li għexu, l-istejjer li semgħu, ix-xogħol li ħadmu, u dwar dak kollu li għaddew minnu. U kien isikkitni b'tixjira tal-idejn tipika tan-nies ta' żmienu. "Le, le, ibni. Mhux l-istess. Daqskemm għamilt xogħlijiet f'ħajti. X'niftakar minnhom? Xejn. U daqskemm żort pajjiżi u għaddejt minn affarijiet..."

"Kem m tiegħu gost jekk tarak!" reġa' qalli meta rgajna lura għall-Ispanjola. "Isma', twegħedni li tmur iżżurha qabel immut?" U bla ma ħallieni nwiegħbu, kompli. "Mur. Ghidilha b'kollox u ġibli aħbarha."

Riedni bilfors immur inżurha. U meta rani qisni qed naħsibha, iżjed talabni b'herqa. "Qabel immut, ibni, mur kellimha!" Fakkarni fija meta kont żgħir u kont nibgħat lil ommi tgħaddi messaġġ lil xi hadd li jien ma kellix il-kuraġġ ngħaddihulu. U spjegali t-triq bl-istess ton u bl-istess ismagħni sew tal-bidu li bihom fi tfuliti kien qalli kif għandi nagħmel biex immur għand in-nanniet. Jew għand tal-grocer biex nixtri l-ħalib.

"Ismagħni sew. Kif tasal l-ajruport ta' Alicante, ikri karozza," qed jgħidli, b'xufftejh jingħafsu flimkien, bir-roġħda ta' idu moħbija fil-komma u bi tbissima nofsha mqarba u nofsha ma nafx xiex. "Oħroġ mill-parking tal-ajruport u segwi t-tabelli li b'ittri kbar, fuq nett, jgħidulek Murcia."

Imbagħad iħares lejja u jinduna li ma jien qed inniżzel xejn. "Ikteb!"

U noħroġ biro mill-but tal-glekk u nikteb fuq l-ewwel karta li nsib – l-irċevuta tal-gallettini u tal-ilma li xtrajtlu jien u diehel l-isptar.

"Suq f'dik id-direzzjoni sakemm it-triq wiesgħa tinqasam fi tnejn u fin-nofs l-ieħor jibdew jidhru tabelli oħra kbar bil-kliem Grenada Almeria. Ixgħel l-indicator. Attent għal ta' warajk u aqleb fuq in-naħa l-oħra. U suq bil-mod!"

Nitbissem imma t-tbissima tiegħi ma jarahiex għax fil-frattemp għalaq għajnejh u ntilef isuq lejn dar l-Ispanjola.

“Issa suq bid-dritt sakemm tara t-tabella Mazarron.”

Ninnota idu. Qisha l-vlegga fuq GPS.

“Mur fejn tibagħtek dik. Suppost, issa, bdew jidhru d-djar, l-appartamenti għall-kiri u għall-bejgħ u l-baħar qieghed fil-qrib. Imma mhux qed tarah. Fhimt?”

“Fhimt.”

“Ma’ kull ffit kilometri qed jizdiedu t-tabelli u fuq kull waħda issa tista’ tinnota Puerto de Mazarron. Suq fid-direzzjoni tal-port sakemm tara l-ewwel vlegge li jimmarkawlek id-dahla għal Aguilas.”

Jiftaħ għajnejh u narahom jixegħlu hafna iżjed milli kienu qabel għalaqhom.

“Inti qed tikteb?”

“Iva, iva, qed nikteb. Kompli.”

“Jekk tasal s’hemm u m’intix tilmaħ kilometri shaħ ta’ serer bojod mimlija tadam fellaqt xi mkien. Jekk qed tara s-serer, mela issa m’hemmx fejn tinfixel. Triq waħda sakemm tasal f’salib it-toroq u tara tabella ċkejkna fuq il-lemin li tghidlek Puntas de Calnegre. Idhol f’dik it-triq dejqa, itfagħha free u halli r-roti jduru wehidhom. U niżżel it-twieqi halli thoss iż-ziffa tal-baħar tiffriskak. Xi ġmiel...”

“Pa, evita l-poezija. Iffoka fuq it-tabelli!”

Jagħfas għajnejh. Jitbissem u jerga’ lura għad-direzzjonijiet.

“Suq bil-mod li ma jmurx jaqsamlek tifel minn xi mkien. U minn hemm għandek taraha – fit-tarf tat-triq – villa maqtugħa mill-bqija. Kompli sejjer sa hdejha. Ipparkja bil-kwiet. Ohroġ.

Mur fuq il-bankina, fejn probabbli se ssib qattus jilgħaq skeletru ta' xi ħuta, u doqq il-qanpiena.”

Missieri kien qed jibgħatni nara lill-mara li dam jara – bil-moħbi t'ommi – għaxar snin. U m'iniex sejjer biex nikkuntentah. Sejjer għax nixtieq insir nafha lil din il-mara li għamlitu tant ferħan. Sejjer biex bla kliem niringrazzjaha. Ridt naraha lil din il-mara li kull darba kienet tinjettalu doża ferħ li kienet tmantnih xhur shaħ. Imbagħad, meta jgħib kull hjiel tagħha, jerga' lura Spanja bl-iskuża tax-xogħol. U aħna nistennewh ġej lura b'xi tanbur, żugraga, ċimblu, borża žibeg b'elf kulur u bi tbissima ta' xi ħadd mimli bil-ferħ.

U bl-irċevuta tal-ħanut tal-isptar magħfusa mal-istering tal-Ford Ka li krejt, qed insuq u nitbissem u nammira l-memorja ta' missieri. Għax anke li kieku ħallejt il-karozza f'idejn xadina probabbli kienet tasal ħdejn il-villa tal-Ispanjola bla ebda xkiel. U issa għaddej mit-triq tal-villa u niżżilt it-tieqa tal-karozza u qed nidħak qisni iblah għax iż-żiffa tal-baħar

qieghda tabilhaqq tiffriskali wiċċi. U qed nisma' wkoll l-eċċitament tat-tfal ħafjin jiġru wara l-ballun fuq il-bajja u t-tgergir t'ommmhom quddiem tal-grocer u t-tisbit ta' missierhom ħiereg mill-bar fuq in-naħa l-oħra tat-triq. U qed naħseb li, li kieku ma qtajtlux kliemu meta kien wasal f'dan il-punt tal-vjaġġ, dawn id-dettalji kien isemmihomli wkoll.

Imbagħad daqqajt il-qanpiena u tfaċċat quddiemi lista ta' possibbiltajiet li lanqas biss kienu għaddewli minn moħhi tul il-vjaġġ. Forsi l-mara mietet. Jew marret tgħix band'oħra. Forsi qieghda ma' raġel ieħor u l-istorja ma' missieri nsietha. Jew trid tinsieha. Forsi fid-dar m'għadu joqgħod ħadd. Jew xtraha ħaddieħor li, dwar l-istorja ta' missieri mal-Ispanjola, ma jaf xejn. Jew forsi l-Ispanjola se tiftaħli u ma tkunx trid tilqagħni. Jew forsi se jiftaħli binha u mbagħad x'se ngħidlu?

Jinfetaħ il-bieb u titfaċċa quddiem i l-Ispanjola ta' missieri. Ma kellix dubji li ma kenitx hi. Għajnejha kien pittirhomli. U pittirhom tajjeb. Kbar. Hodor. Fl-isfar. Sbieħ. U wiċċha ta' anzjana li qed tixjieħ bil-grazzja kollha tad-dinja.

“Xhin tiftaħlek għidilha li inti t-tifel tiegħi u li smajt ħafna dwarha. Għidilha li qed immut bil-mod il-mod imma li għadha f'qalbi u bla ma taf qed iżzommli ħafna kumpanija. U mbagħad se tgħidlek tidħol ġewwa u tistaqsik elf mistoqsija. Għax dik hekk – għal kull kelma tiegħek, mistoqsija. U mbagħad ara tferragħlekk ftit tal-45.”

“Għaraftek,” qaltli fil-bieb. “Għandek għaj-nejn missierek. Ma tantx inbdilt mir-ritratti li kien urieni. Imma toqgħodx fil-bieb. Idħol. Għaddi ġewwa.” Imbagħad daret fuq qattusa li kien hemm iċċassata lejja bejn saqajha. “¡Tira de aqui! Tenemos una visita.”

U wara li kilna fi kċina mimlija borom u taġnijiet imdendla dawramejt, semmejtilha l-45 u għajnejha f'daqqa nksew b'kisja oħra dmugh. Qaltli nimxi warajha. Nizzlitni l-garigor u fil-frisk tal-kantina writhomli stivati hdejn xulxin – flixxkun hdejn l-ieħor – ilkoll bin-numru 45 miktub fuqhom bl-idejn.

Kienet ilha tistiva flixxkun hdejn l-ieħor minn dakinhar li telaq u ma reġax mar lura.

“Kont ċerta li għad jiġi. Mhux l-ewwel darba li qalli li kellha tkun l-aħħar darba li qed narah. Kien ilu jgħidli li xi darba ż-żjarat tiegħu se jieqfu u ma jerġgħux jibdew. Imma qatt ma emmintu għax – orrajt – ġieli kienu jgħaddu ftit tax-xhur... imma dejjem ġie lura. U bqajt minn dakinhar li rajtu l-aħħar – noħroġ fil-ġnien naqta' l-berquq, bl-istess ingwanti li kien jilbes meta kien joħroġ jaqtagħhom hu.”

U tant dratha r-rutina li għadha tagħmilha sal-lum. Għadha tidħol bil-kaxxa tal-berquq u tbattalha fuq il-bank il-kbir

tal-kċina u bl-istess mus taqta' berquqa berquqa fi tnejn u twaddab kollox f'borma tagħli. U hemm thalli l-berquq joqmos fl-ilma jbaqbaq għal minuta. Biex xi dudu żgħir u iswed li seta' kien hemm moħbi ġo fihom jinkewa bla jinduna u jisparixxi qisu qatt ma kien.

“Kif sparixxa hu,” qed tgħidli b'nofs tbissima gherja minn kull hjiel ta' rabja. “La ittra. La telefonata. Xejn. Hekk kien missierek. Jew faċċata ta' dar kollha dwal qawwija li jgħammxulek għajnejk jew ix-xejn.”

U mbagħad ittella' b'kuċċarun il-berquq sħun u mxarrab u twaddbu f'ħames litri cognac u hemm thallih xahar u nofs. Ħamsa u erbghin jum. La wiehed żejjed u 'qas wiehed nieqes.

“Kif kien jgħidli nagħmel hu.”

Ħamsa u erbghin jum, li matulhom tittama li hekk kif tbattal il-kontenitur fil-passatur biex il-cognac jibqa' għaddej u l-berquq jinqabad ġewwa, ikun hemm hdejha fil-kċina, sorpriż li x-xarba tiegħu baqgħet tagħmilha. Imbagħad bil-cognac li jgħaddi mill-passatur timla flixkun tal-ħġieg. U twaħħal fuq il-flixkun stiker safra u fuqha, b'felt pen iswed, thażżeż 45 – kif kien jagħmel hu – għal kull jum li għamel lix-xarba dak li saret. “Għax ix-xarba qisna aħna,” kien jgħidilha, probabbli bl-istess ton li bih kien spjegali minn fejn għandi ngħaddi biex immur l-iskola waħdi. U mbagħad – l-istess bħalu – tikteb fir-rokna t'isfel tal-istiker is-safra d-data ta' dakinhar.

“Joghġbok?”

“Ħafna.”

“Hadd ma johroġ minn hawn qabel iduq ftit minnu. U kull darba li ngħollu t-tazzi naħseb fih. Kemm xhur għamilt hekk, ara,” qed tgħidli thares lejn il-ġnien b'tazza 45 f'idha.

“Inħares fil-ġnien u naħseb fih u dwar jekk hux qed jaħseb fija. Dwar x'qed jagħmel dak il-ħin. Dwar jekk nesinix bħallikieku qatt ma kont. Dwar x'tifkira ħa miegħu tiegħi. Dwar jekk iddiżappuntajtux l-aħħar darba li ġie hawn. Dwar jekk għidtlux xi kelma li ma kellix ngħid jew jekk għidtlux xi ħaġa li fehem ħażin. Dwar jekk hux qed jaħsibha li xi darba jerga' lura. Jekk hux qed jittama li b'xi mod, xi mkien, nerġgħu niltaqgħu. U dwar jekk qattx għad iddoqq dik il-qanpiena li daqqajt int u xħin niftaħ insib lilu.”

Tieqaf. Tħares lejja. Tinduna li m'għandi xejn xi ngħid. U tkompli. “Domt ħafna biex irrassenjajt ruħi li lil missierek ma kellix nerġa' narah. Ħafna, ħafna domt. Bqajt noħroġ fil-ġnien u naqta' kaxxa berquq wara l-oħra bit-tama li meta xahar u nofs wara nimla flixxkun iehor ikun ħdejjja.”

Qed inħoss li għandi ngħid xi ħaġa. Izda ma nista' nsib xejn aħjar mis-silenzju.

“Għall-bidu, meta ntbaħt li forsi lura mhu ġej qatt, ippruvajt nirrabja għalih. Ħsibt li forsi b'hekk il-vojt tiegħu ma nħossux tant. Izda ma stajtx nirrabja għal xi ħadd bħalu. Ma kienx hemm x'taħfirlu. Missierek ma gideb qatt. L-affarijiet kienu ċari mill-ewwel lejla li fiha ltqajna fil-port. Kont jien li aċċettajt li narah kumdità tiegħu. Kont jien li ħsibt li forsi nista' narah u ngawdih bla ma niftaħlu qalbi. Imma meta ntbaħt li qalbi kienet hu u hu kien qalbi kien ftit tard.”

Issa daħlet il-qattusa u qabżet fuq kuxxtejha.

“Missierek għallimni ħafna. U daħħakni ħafna wkoll. U ħabbni. Żgur.”

It-tazza tiegħi żvojtat. Terġa' timliħieli. Imbagħad tħares lejja.

“Se ddum hawn?”

*

Missieri miet ma' sbieħ it-tielet jum li għamilt għandha. Ċemplitli oħti filgħodu kmieni u qaltli li miet matul il-lejl. Hadd ma stennieh se jitlaq hekk malajr.

U fi triqti lejn Alicante bkejt. U hi bkiet miegħi.

“Mort naraha, pa. Mort naraha,” pespistlu b'għajnejja moħbija fil-pali ta' jdejja qed jagħfsu mal-kawba tleqq tat-tebut.

“Għadha thobbni?” qed jistaqsini.

“Iffissata, pa. Iffissata fuqek baqgħet, pa! U ma taqtax kemm għandha fliexken tal-45? Kantina shiħa mimlija bihom, pa! Kantina shiħa!”

U qed jitbissem it-tbissima tiegħu.

“U ġibtlek xi ħaġa miegħi, pa. Ġibtlek xi ħaġa miegħi.”

“Flixxun 45 żgur!”

“Le. Mhux flixxun 45. Xi ħaġa oħra. Stenna ffit. Issa taraha daqt... qalb dawn il-ħafna nies.”

What the Night Lets You Say

Pierre J. Mejlak

Translated from the Maltese by Antoine Cassar

I Went to See Her, Pa

I bent down, cupping my hand over my eyes, as if shielding them from the sun, and I whispered to him, “I went to see her, Pa. I went to see her.”

*

The last time I visited him, he didn't look so good. My younger sister had just left and, as usual, she had kept harping on about how he seemed to be getting worse. I felt I should keep things light and so I asked him about the women who had marked his life. That's how we ended up talking about the Spanish woman.

He used to enjoy talking about the women he had known. In those moments he would seem to forget his pain, his eyes would sparkle and suddenly focus. Because, since he had gotten ill and been taken to the hospital, the women he had loved during his life had become for him a photo album, which he never tired of thumbing through. And beneath every photo there were another 50 hidden. There wasn't one single detail that had escaped his memory. Sometimes I used to think he was making it all up, but when a month or two later, he would repeat it all with the exact same details, the same conviction, the same look and smile, my doubts would disappear. “Thank God I have them,” he would tell me when we were alone. “Tell me how else would I get through these interminable nights?” and then he would usually go on reflectively, “Sometimes

I wonder, what do they think about, those other old men like me – alone – if they’ve never known the thrill of loving another woman?” And when he’d be strong enough to argue, I would tell him that maybe they would think about the countries they had visited, old friends they had had, adventures they had lived through, stories they had heard, the work they had done, dogs they had raised, days they had spent swimming in the sun, beautiful moments they had shared. And he would stop me with a wave of his hand, typical of people his age, “No, no, my son. It’s not the same. Oh, the number of jobs I had in my life! What do I remember about them all? Nothing. And the number of countries I visited and the walks I took...”

“How she’d love to see you,” he told me when we got back to the Spanish woman. “Listen, will you promise me to go and visit her before I die?” And he went on without giving me time to reply, “Go tell her everything and bring me news of her.” He was adamant about my going, and when he saw I was seriously toying with the idea, he pleaded earnestly with me to go.

“Go talk to her, my son, before I die.”

He reminded me of myself when I was young. How I used to ask my mother to deliver messages that I lacked the courage to deliver myself. And he directed me to her house in the same urgent tone of “listen carefully” that he had used before, when in my younger days he would explain the way to my grandparents, or to the grocer to buy milk.

“Listen carefully. When you arrive at Alicante airport, rent a car,” he’s saying through pursed lips, his shaking hand hidden in his sleeve and with a smile halfway between mischievous and slightly mysterious.

“Leave the airport and follow the signs, written in big letters, saying Murcia.”

Then he looks at me and realizes I’m not taking any notes. “Write it down, dammit!”

And I take out a pen from my blazer pocket and start writing on the first piece of paper that comes to hand – the receipt for the biscuits and water I bought for him on arriving at the hospital. “Drive in that direction until the highway splits in two and, on the other side, you’ll be able to see new big signs saying Grenada Almeria. Put on the indicator lights, watch out for the cars behind you, and cross over to the other side. And drive carefully.”

I smile, but he doesn’t see it because in the meantime he has closed his eyes and lost himself driving towards his Spanish lady.

“Now keep going straight ahead till you see the sign saying Mazarron.”

I notice his hand. It looks like the arrow on my GPS.

“Go where it directs you. By now you should start seeing the buildings, apartments for rent and for sale, and the sea is close by, but you still can’t see it. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“With every few kilometres, you’ll see more signs, and on each one you’ll notice Puerto de Mazarron. Drive in the direction of the port until you see the first arrows that point the way to Aguilas.”

He opens his eyes and I can see them shining and much clearer than they had been before.

“Are you writing it all down?”

“Yes, yes, I am writing. Go on.”

“If you get to that point and you can’t see whole kilometres of white greenhouses full of tomatoes, then somewhere you must have taken a wrong turn. If you can see them, then you have no problem. Straight down the road till you come to a crossroad and on the right you see a small sign which says Puntas de Calnegre. Drive down that narrow road, take your foot off the break and let the wheels roll. Open the windows so you can feel the breeze from the sea fresh on your face... what beauty.”

“Pa, cut the poetry. Focus on the signs.”

He squints his eyes, smiles, and goes back to giving directions.

“Slow down. Be careful of children crossing the road. And from there you should see it – at the end of the road – a villa set apart from the others. Drive up to it. Park. Go out. Move to the sidewalk, where you’ll probably find a cat licking clean the skeleton of some fish, and ring the bell.”

My father was sending me to meet the woman he had secretly seen for 10 years. And I’m not doing it to please him. I am doing it because I wish to get to know this woman who had made him so happy. I’m going so that I can wordlessly thank her. I wanted to meet this woman who, every time, had filled him up with enough joy to keep him going for months. Then, when every hint of that joy disappeared, he’d go back to Spain on the pretence of business. And we would wait for him to come back carrying a drum, a top, a pair of cymbals, a bag of beads of a thousand colours, and the joyful smile of someone deeply sated.

And with the receipt from the hospital canteen stuck to the steering wheel of the Ford Ka that I rented, I am driving and

smiling. Marvelling at my father's memory. Because even if I had left the driving in the hands of a monkey, it would probably have arrived at the villa without mishap.

And now I'm driving down the road to the villa, and I've wound down the car window and I am laughing like an idiot, because the breeze from the sea is so fresh on my face... and I'm listening to the excitement of the barefoot children running after a ball on the beach, and their mothers muttering at the grocers and the slam-bang noises of their fathers coming from the bar at the other end of the road. And I'm thinking that if I hadn't cut him short when he came to this part of the trip he would have added these details as well.

Then I rang the bell and suddenly I was struck by a hundred doubts. Maybe the woman had died, or moved somewhere else, maybe she's living with another man and has completely forgotten my father, or wishes to, maybe the house was not lived in now, or had been bought by someone who knows nothing about my father's affair with the Spanish lady, or maybe she would open but wouldn't welcome me, or maybe her son would open, and then what would I tell him?

The door opens and there in front of me was my father's Spanish lady. I had no doubt it was her. He had painted her eyes for me. And he had done a good job. Green. With a hint of yellow. Beautiful.

And her face! A woman ageing gracefully.

"When she opens, tell her you're my son, and that you've heard a lot about her. Tell her I'm dying but that she is still in my heart, and keeping me company. And then she'll invite you in and ask you a thousand different questions. Because she's like that – for your every word she has a question. And then she'll pour you a little 45."

“I know you,” she said at the door. “You’ve got your father’s eyes. You haven’t changed much from the pictures he showed me. But don’t stay on the doorstep. Come in. Come inside.” Then she turned to a cat who was staring at me from between her legs. “Get away with you! We’ve got guests.”

And after we ate in a kitchen full of pots and pans hanging all around, I mentioned the 45, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She asked me to follow her. We went down a spiral staircase and, in the cool interior of the basement, she showed them to me, stored one next to another – bottle after bottle – all of them sporting the number 45 written on them by hand. She had been storing bottle after bottle since the day he left never to return.

“I was certain he’d come back one day. It wasn’t the first time he had told me that this would be the last time I saw him. He told me many times that one day he’d stop coming. But I never believed him because – well, yes – sometimes months would pass, but he always came back. And since the last time I saw him, I kept going to the garden, gathering the apricots, wearing the same gloves he used to wear when he would gather them himself.”

It had become a ritual which she followed to that day. She would come in laden with a box full of apricots, and empty them onto the huge kitchen bench. And with the same knife he had used, she would cut them in half, one by one, and throw the lot into a large boiling pot. And she would leave the apricots bubbling in the boiling water for a minute, so that if there happened to be a small black worm hidden inside any of them, it would be scorched and disappear as if it had never been. “Just like that he disappeared,” she’s telling me with a half-smile which excludes any hint of anger. “Not a letter. Not

a phone call. Nothing. That was your father. Either a brightly lit façade that dazzles your eyes or nada.” And then with a large ladle she would scoop the hot wet apricots and throw them in five litres of cognac, and there she’d leave them for a month and a half. Forty-five days. Not one more, not one less.

“As he used to do.”

Forty-five days, during which she hopes that by the time she’s passing the cognac through the sieve while leaving the apricots out, he would be there, by her side, in her kitchen, surprised that she had continued to make his drink. Then she’d filter the sieved cognac into a glass bottle. On it she’d stick a yellow note, and in a black felt pen she’d write 45 – as he used to do – for each day that made the drink what it was. “Because the drink is like us,” he used to tell her, probably in the same tone he used to give me directions on how to get to school on my own. And then – just as he used to do – in the lower corner of the yellow sticker, she’d write the day’s date.

“Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

“No one goes out of here before tasting some of it. And every time we raise a glass, I think of him.”

“You see... I’ve spent whole months like this,” she is now telling me with a glass of 45 in her right hand, and with her eyes fixed on the apricot trees outside. “I look at the garden and wonder about him, wonder what he’s doing right now, whether he’s forgotten all about me or what memories he’s got of me. If maybe I had disappointed him the last time he was here. Whether I had said something I shouldn’t have, or if maybe I had said something which he misunderstood. Whether he was thinking of coming back one day. Whether

he was hoping that somehow, somewhere, we'd meet again. And whether one day, the bell you rang would ring and I'd open the door and find him there."

She stops. Looks at me. Understanding that I have nothing to say, she continues. "It took me a long time to accept the fact that I'd never see your father again. A long, long time. I continued gathering the apricots, box after box from the garden, in the hope that by the time I filled another bottle, he'd be here with me."

I feel I should say something but I can't find anything worth breaking the silence for.

"At first, when I understood he wasn't coming back, I tried to feel angry at him. I thought maybe the anger could fill up the emptiness in my heart. But I couldn't be angry at someone like him.

"There was nothing to forgive. Your father never lied. Things were clear from the first time we met down at the harbour. I accepted the arrangement to see him at his convenience. I had thought that maybe I could see and enjoy him without giving him my heart. But by the time I realized that he was my heart and my heart was him it was too late." Now the cat came in and jumped onto her lap.

"Your father taught me a lot. And made me laugh a lot. And loved me. I'm sure of that."

My glass is now empty. She fills it up again. Then she looks at me.

"Are you staying long?"

*

My father died on the dawn of the third day I spent with her. My sister called me early and gave me the news. No one had expected him to go so fast. And on my way to Alicante I cried. And she cried with me.

“I went to see her, Pa. I went to see her,” I whispered, my eyes hidden behind my hands pressing the cold shiny mahogany of the coffin.

“Does she still love me?” he’s asking me.

“She’s crazy about you, Pa. She’s still crazy about you. And guess how many bottles of 45 she has? A cellar full, Pa! A whole cellar full!”

And he’s smiling his special smile.

“And I brought you something with me, Pa. I got you something.”

“A bottle of 45?”

“No, not a bottle of 45. Something else. Wait a minute. You’ll soon see what I brought you... she’s here among the crowd.”



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