

elipsis

2021

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Editors

Margarita Rosa Lozano Aguirre
Estefanía Rodríguez Rozo
Tatiana Chiquito Gómez
Gabriel Gamba Amaya

Chronicle Daniela García Patiño



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Chronicle

Daniela García Patiño

Preface

Sylvia Ospina

Arts Director, British Council Colombia

Since 2015, the Ellipsis program has become the backbone of our work in literature. Since its inception, we have tied this program, an encounter between ten young emerging writers and editors, to events as important as the Hay Festival and FILBO. We did this for five uninterrupted years, until the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to rethink the way we did absolutely everything.

This volume is the result of the courageous work of ten young people who worked together without ever meeting each other face to face, who did not enjoy the adventure of starting their work in Cartagena at the Hay Festival and meeting again at FILBO, who worked while locked down, sometimes sick, sometimes saying goodbye to important people in their lives. After what has happened since March 2020, we are beginning to understand that the *Ellipsis* program is, at times, more than a training program or a

professional platform. It is a lifeline that allows its participants to go through and understand the vicissitudes of their days.

We are always very proud to present each volume of Ellipsis, but this edition fills us with even more feeling. It is the feeling that comes from knowing that this year we had to do everything differently, that the experience of these ten young people is very different from the experience of the 60 young people who came before them, and that they had to overcome a series of additional obstacles that had nothing to do with the nature of the program but that were nevertheless determining factors in their experience of it.

Until we are able to resume the program as we have always run it, as we intend to, these pages will serve to confirm that even when life turns against us, art always finds a way.

From Bocaccio to Ellipsis

Marta Orrantia
Alejandra Jaramillo Morales

This was the year of the plague. The world came to a standstill, time ground to a halt, and life, for everyone, changed in the most diverse ways. The only form of solace many of us found was in books. Not only because literature is a refuge, words give us security, and characters become our accomplices, but because literature taught us that this year was similar to so many others, and that, as before, we will return to life.

In 1348, for example, there was an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Florence. The population was decimated, and those who were able to flee the city to seek refuge in the mountains and nearby villages did just that. A year later, a Florentine writer named Giovanni Bocaccio began what would become one of the most important works of world literature: *The Decameron*.

Also called *The Human Comedy* (it was Bocaccio who baptized Dante's comedy as divine), *The Decameron* means ten days, the period during which a group of friends—seven women and three men—gather in a house on the outskirts of Florence to escape the plague and spend their days telling stories—one hundred in total, which make up the book.

This group of stories, written in the vernacular language and not in the obligatory Latin, became an important work, not only because of the language and the modern construction of the stories, but also because they portray the customs of the time and shed light on daily life in the fourteenth century. Therefore, *The Decameron* is not only a great book, but also a historical document.

Just as it is possible to imagine the voices of those people that were trying to survive the Florentine plague, we, as survivors of this new confinement, peer out at stories of other times—of multiple confinements—that have been told in literature. And although we had already read many of those books, although we already knew the stories of Boccaccio and many others, we had read them in innocence: we did not know that the plague could also touch our world. Thus, literature has been plagued by plagues, pestilence, and disease. Literature inhabits these crises, the transformations, the abysses, the moments of astonishment, the impotence in the face of nature's relentless onslaught. Edgar Allan Poe too, like Boccaccio, tells the story of a king who, in order to save his court from the red death, locks them in a castle, not realizing that power is not immune to the plague. Mary Shelley, in her book *The Last Man*, tells of the fall of British culture in the midst of a plague through a narrator who, as indicated in the title, will be the last man on the planet, and thus she shows us the unstoppable force of nature.

Also, having now lived through this pandemic, reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus is a whole different story. This work relates, step by step, what we experienced in the year 2020: the astonishment, the doubt, the truth; the planet in pause; everything that surrounded us taking on that new veneer of a bizarre reality along with the permanent reproduction of the fear of death.

This edition of *Ellipsis* was produced during that year when we were changing from innocent readers to survivor readers. And that is why we think not only of the literary but also the historical

importance of this edition. These are the stories of the end of the world, written under exceptional circumstances and edited in difficult times, that are finally seeing the light when the world begins, slowly, to understand this nightmare.

There are not ten characters, but nine, because one deserted the project. There are three men, as in the Italian book, and the rest are women. During the process, there were family tragedies, contagions, personal crises, and political marches. We never met in person; we worked at a distance. We saw each other on screens, and yet we had deep conversations in which we heard how, in the face of the pandemic and the protests, the participants of *Ellipsis* questioned their role in society, the contribution they could make through literature, and, more generally, the validity of a profession that seems a luxury in the midst of hunger and death.

The result of the process is in your hands. Four stories, plus illustrations and reporting, all permeated by the ghosts, doubts, fears, and questions that arise in confinement. Through them you can see humour, fear, inequality, violence, and poverty: all those layers that made up the pandemic, the social condition, and the reality of writers and editors during this last year.

Readers of this book should know that here they will find here the product of a titanic effort, marshalled under adverse circumstances by a group of women and men who gave everything they had to move forward with a creative process, even when the world around them was faltering. These stories will whisper to readers about life and its weft amidst the overwhelming uncertainty of being alive during a pandemic. To the creators, who at some point doubted the validity of their craft, we must say that they made a literary work of enormous value, but also a wonderful historical document, a reflection of who we all were in the year of the plague.



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Margarita Rosa Lozano Aguirre
Editor

Daniel F Martínez
Author

All

dressed
up



Margarita Rosa Lozano Aguirre

Editor

There was only one artist who did not have—could not have—the sacred right to an external, sincere, and kind opinion on his creative process. When God made his work, there was only him, and although his creative capacity and his technique built wonderful things, he did end up with a couple loose ends, a couple of things that do not quite come across, a couple of pieces that do not seem to fit with anything else, a couple of loose bolts. After that little bit of chaos (which so far has only brought as a consequence that constant, eternal, and inconclusive question about the nature of being and the world), editors were necessary.

In an effort to meet expectations, we sharpen our eyes until we can't see anything else; we open our ears until we recognize silences; we walk through places that

could collapse on us for lack of foundations; we psycho-analyze characters that we insist on taking as people and, on top of that, we end up dreaming about them. None of these experiences is as risky as coming into contact with a foreign world—that of the artist—without touching anything unnecessarily, without damaging it, given the catastrophic consequences and, moreover, with the intention of contributing something of value, be it little or much. Something like this can only be achieved with deep love, respect, and trust in the other and in his or her capacities. A perfect exchange, given that the other party invests the same virtues in us. Thanks to Ellipsis and Daniel for allowing me that experience and giving me that confidence.



Daniel F. Martínez
Author

He never remembered what he was dreaming about that early morning, but he could not forget the feeling of uneasiness, perhaps a premonition, that oppressed him and would not let his wife sleep either. His attempt to cling to sleep was cut short by a faint murmur that little by little took away the night's silence, and with it the possibility of sleeping. When that vibration seemed to be all that existed around him, he discovered with annoyance that it was none other than his cell phone, lost among the blankets. Despite his exhaustion, he woke without a start and with his eyes closed, as if refusing to surrender to the dawn, and began to grope for the phone hidden in the sheets.

The cloth pupa wrapped around his cell phone seemed to be playing with him. Although he located the device, he could not untangle it without opening his eyes to find the right opening from which to reach it and take the call. On the other hand, she, who had needed only the first whimpers of the ringtone to wake up, had been watching for quite some time the pitiful spectacle of her husband moving his hands in a ridiculous flutter, as if he were trying to crush non-existent insects against the bed. She saw him half-naked, eyes shut tight, frowning, and searching on all fours for the same cell phone that, cutting through the darkness of the room with its brightness, revealed its location without him taking notice.

The cell phone mockingly lit up his face in the middle of the bed. He also stumbled on her tired face, which was looking at him with condescending tenderness, since the sight of her partner's failed effort, both tender and clumsy, had reminded her a little of viral videos of angry babies that have not yet arrived at the right technique for unwrapping presents, or of chimpanzees shocked at the existence of some novel object.

Without a word, they both glanced at the still vibrating device, following the trail of fabrics that imprisoned it and disappeared beneath her body. He looked at her, this time as if to apologize for making her uncomfortable again. She grimaced, but then gave reluctant smile and, propping herself up on her elbow, raised her hips so that her husband could pull the sheets aside and finally grab his cell phone.

Despite his lack of visual focus, typical of an unexpected awakening, he could see that it was not an unknown number calling him, but his father's. Somewhat chagrined and not wanting to disturb, he decided to answer it outside the room. He got up as softly as he could and gently prepared to leave the room while he answered, without managing to hide the snore still lodged in his sleepy voice:

“Hey, pa. How are you?”

Although he didn't hear any response, he didn't hear silence either, but rather something like a laboured gasp that shook him. He repeated the greeting several times. Receiving no answer, he was about to hang up and dial back, when a hoarse and unfamiliar voice spoke to him with the buzz of the street in the background, stopping him in his tracks. A feeling somewhere between alarm and confusion prevented him from understanding most of the message. They went on speaking to him, but understanding nothing, he had to interrupt:

"No, no, I don't understand. Excuse me, who are you again? Why are you calling me from my father's cell phone?"

From her cocoon of blankets, she watched him out of the corner of her eye for, despite the odd hour, it was not unusual for the "very important sir" as she teasingly called him to have to provide legal advice to his clients at the most indecent hours. However, the fact that her husband had slowly gotten up from the bed left her with a twinge of uneasiness that prevented her from falling asleep again. She kept her gaze fixed on the sports sweatpants and the tight neighbourhood team jersey that he insisted on calling pyjamas and that now hung pitifully on his hunched figure.

With his back turned, her husband seemed to be catching the cell phone with his shoulder and ear in a sort of pincer that prevented him from moving freely, while with his left hand he was scratching an indeterminate space between his buttocks and his back. Despite the comic value of the image, she noticed how he was shaken by the call. Then, speculating that some bad news could explain the impolite hour of the call, she gradually sat up and hopped along to the corner of the bed so that she could eavesdrop on the conversation.

"And what did you say the lady's name was?" she heard her husband ask".

Seemingly startled by the answer, her husband hung up the phone suddenly. Without even needing to turn to look at her, for he knew she was watching his back, he rubbed his head and exclaimed:

"Shit".

"What happened?"

"No idea. I don't know if my dad was mugged or if he lost his phone. I got a call from his number, some guy".

"And what did he say? He found his phone?"

"No, no, that's what's weird, he told me a lady passed it to him".

"A lady?" she asked, exaggerating, perhaps overexaggerating, her incredulity".

"Well, that's what the guy said. That he was with a lady who got into a fight with some policemen and that before the policemen took her away, she passed him the cell phone so that he could tell me".

"Tell you? Why?"

"No idea. But the weirdest thing is the lady's name," he said with annoyance, avoiding her gaze, while an uncomfortable silence settled in the room".

The guy said that the lady who gave him the cell phone so he could tell me that she was being taken away was called Luz.

Pretending to be unaffected by the mention of his mother's name, distant for so long, he turned his head away, expressionless, thinking how, as he spoke, he felt the words leave his mouth infected with the confusion that overpowered him. So he paused for a long moment, sat down beside

his wife at the foot of the bed, and released a deep sigh, as if wanting to say something that he couldn't manage to utter.

Suddenly, the cell phone rang again. He held it up to his face, eyeing with the same distrust with which the hero of the movie deliberates between the red or the blue wire. He pressed his finger to the glass to answer, but this time he only brought the speaker to his ear, without speaking, hoping to recognize something, some truth or trace through the distant sound, while his wife, in that sign language typical of long relationships, demanded that he activate the speakerphone.

This time she was close enough to hear clearly and first-hand whatever the person on the other end of the line had to say. Silence. They both noted with disappointment that there was no voice to amplify. The person calling them seemed to have his cell phone stuffed in a pocket, for there was just the muffled sound of a hurried gait, intelligible voices, and noises that punctuated the sonorous silence here and there.

A few seconds passed that felt eternal until perhaps, on the other end of the line, they finally noticed the ongoing call and a gasping, coarse "Hello?" flooded the anguished couple's apartment. As an automatic response to the voice, her husband put the cell phone to his ear and in doing so inadvertently deactivated the speakerphone, which further frayed her already strained nerves, although she stopped herself from distracting him from the conversation, punctuating the silences of the call with her husband's anxious responses.

"Hello? Hello? Can you hear me? Yes, yes, I'm here...
Wait, slow down, I can't make out what you're saying...
What did she tell you again?... No, sir, I don't really know
her, but the phone you're using belongs to a relative.
Let me find out and I'll call you back".

Upon hanging up, they looked at each other, each wearing the most confused face they had ever seen on each other. In view of the evident intrigue he saw on his wife's face, he finally prepared to tell her, with the air of someone who is going to embark on a tale, about the unlikely call that had just taken place. But she, who was not in the mood for tales, got ahead of him before he could say a word.

"Who was it?"

"I... I don't know. It sounded like a hobo".

The expression "street dweller" that he had always obliged himself to use in public rang unnecessarily false before the intimate audience of his wife.

"How so?"

"Exactly that. From how he spoke, I'm sure the guy who called me is a homeless guy"

"And did he say who he was? What his name is?"

"No, not really, and I didn't ask him either, because... I don't know how to explain it, but I know he wouldn't have told me anyway, and he wasn't in the mood to introduce himself, he was in a hurry"

"Well, then, what did he tell you?"

Restraining himself to avoid getting into an argument, he explained as best he could that a hobo, as he had understood from the voice, had called him to say that a lady with his mother's name, who had been taken away by the police from a downtown brawl in the middle of the pandemic, was the one who had given the phone to him, asking him to dial this exact number to ask for help. The only thing that seemed to make sense was that the call had indeed come from his dad's cell phone number. The guy said that he was with her on a downtown street that he couldn't or wouldn't say, that she, who was supposedly mediating in the disagreement, was among the first to be taken away for allegedly failing to comply with the quarantine.

When he was done speaking, he nervously began to fiddle with the cell phone between his fingers. He hoped that his wife could give him an answer

that would sort out the senselessness that invaded him. As he listened to his partner's response, he felt that she formulated it with such an emphasis on its obviousness that he was grateful that she hadn't accompanied it with a snort.

"Could it be a scam?"

This was the same question that was fluttering about in his head. He only gave her a forced smile, which for her was nothing more than a reflection of concern.

"That's what I thought"—he replied—, "but I got a call from my old man's cell phone after all".

"Let's dial his house number and see what's going on. He might be there".

"I don't think he'd answer. I don't think he even uses the landline"—he replied.

"Let me try"—she said, now looking through the sheets for her own cell phone.

The calls to the landline went unanswered, and several unsuccessful attempts later they decided to go to his father's house themselves. She went ahead and went down the stairs, cell phone in hand, hoping that, by dint of repetition, her call would eventually be answered. As soon as she opened the door to the basement, the cold of the city embraced her. As she reached the vehicle, gasping from the chill, she couldn't help but stop and think about the two or nearly three months she hadn't been inside the car. The pandemic had made the dashboard look to her now like the command centre of some unknown alien ship, the one that only her husband had been delegated to use from time to time to go shopping.

She sat down and instinctively tried to put her arms on the steering wheel and realized that, with the seat where it was, she felt dwarfed. She had to adjust it until she could see the curvature of the hood if she stretched a little. The coldness of the vehicle's icy faux-leather cushions, which she detested, was even more detestable to her at that hour of the morning.

The sun still had not lit up the city, although the glow of the night was no longer black but a dying dark blue that he took in with some disappointment from the living room windows. He, who acknowledged that he was somewhat allergic to early mornings, was grumbling about his luck because that was precisely the day of the week when he wouldn't have video calls scheduled in the morning, and he had gone to bed with the deluded certainty of being able to sleep a little longer. As he grumbled, he emptied the last of his desk drawers; he had already done the same with the night table and with a piece of furniture he didn't know the name of, but which, depending on the occasion, sometimes decorated and sometimes simply got in the way in the living room.

He couldn't explain how none of the documents that turned up in his search were copies of his father's identity cards and the other necessary papers, despite the fact that, for about three months, he had treasured them and kept them carefully in case he ever needed them. He looked again at the careful mosaic of papers, envelopes, and folders he had left on the floor, almost expecting that suddenly one of the photocopies he was looking for would reveal itself with a particular gleam or movement, only to end his scan with disappointment, recognizing that the package with the documents had indeed been very well kept. He resolved to leave the mess as it was, to put his things away when he returned. He picked up only a few of his mother's documents, which he had not seen for some time and which he found treasurable, and put them in the top drawer of the cabinet in the living room (the one with no clear function).

From time to time, he would glance towards his cell phone. He felt like one of those deer attentively watching the horizon: every glow and vibration of his phone made his nerves twitch because he thought it would be his wife calling with the good news. But no, a notification, an alert from some app whose review he had been putting off for several days, even a prayer chain too early in the morning got between him and news of his father, between him and his sanity, sustained only by the faith that the next notification might be the one he was waiting for.

On his way down, he kept repeating to himself the need to take it easy as he tried to take a deep breath and count to ten so as not to panic. He was aware of the deterioration of his father's health and was quick to recall the old family myth that some senile dementia flirted with the men in his family when they reached old age. He did the math. He wanted to remember his father's age. Was he born in '53 or '57? Was he still too young to suffer from delusions? He wondered in vain, while also feeling guilty about the fact that, as usual, he couldn't remember anyone's birthday, not even his parents'.

He thought it wasn't relevant. Surely the information was in the copies of his father's identity card, and he couldn't help but let out a huff as he angrily remembered that he couldn't find those copies. Overwhelmed, he decided that at least leaving his apartment would offer him reprieve from the vicious circle of worry; he thought of how angry his wife would be when she saw the mess he had left, but decided to leave that other mess for later.

Not finding the documents he was looking for, he decided to grab the only bundle of papers he could find that related to his father, more on faith than based on any real use they might offer. They were mainly pension fund affiliations, health schemes, and bank and utility receipts, all useless documents. He put them in an old folder that he pulled out of a messy pile of papers, folding the corner of the documents carefully so they wouldn't get mixed up with the papers already there, and tucked them under his arm.

He grabbed the keys with his other hand, hung his mask over one of his ears, threw half an arm into the right sleeve of a waterproof jacket, and closed the door behind him.

She, already outside in the car, was irritated thinking that in the time it took her to shower, get dressed, call his father's landline about thirty times, and prepare the car for the journey, he was still not ready. She also thought, not without some envy, that he would surely end up coming down without having showered, without clear directions, and perhaps even more confused than he had been just a few minutes before. But she decided not to pressure him; she felt she had to have the proper attitude for whatever might unfold. She had never been the prototype of the self-sacrificing wife, and although she was sure that some punk had simply found the lost cell phone in the street and decided to dial to try his luck, the subject of the old man was a serious matter over which it was no good to argue.

Then she wondered: Is he really old already? She remembered that her father-in-law was about to turn 68, undoubtedly an age when he should start taking care of himself and cut down on his drinking, among his many other vices. She remembered that she herself had told him so the last time they went to dinner at his apartment, but she had never seen him as an old man. Undoubtedly a bit out of his mind and, altogether, a father worthy of his son. The thought made her shiver uncomfortably as she recalled those everyday flashes of madness that she jokingly pointed out to her husband from time to time.

When her husband finally came out of the building, that feeling didn't get any better, for there he was, in a muddle, in a tangled mess with his jacket, suitcase, and a folder, balancing them awkwardly, while trying not to drop his mask. Before he got in the car, she again cursed the early morning. Teleworking—to which the pandemic had dragged her with considerable uncertainty—had taught her the sweetness of laziness, which meant that anything before ten in the morning now sounded like early morning to her. She felt like shit when she saw the clock on the vehicle's dashboard reading barely five o'clock.

He, as always, couldn't get in the car without first looking it over to inspect who knows what. When he finished, he stood in front of the

driver's door, as if claiming the right to drive. Upon looking down at his wife though, who seemed to accept the duel, he moved across to the passenger side. Before they departed, he thought he saw a couple of neighbours crouching in windows of the second floors, stimulating in him a certain sense of danger.

The fact of going out into the street, and not to stand in line for three hours at the supermarket, puffed up his chest a bit. It seemed to him that he was embarking on some kind of adventure. The sensation was short-lived: no sooner had he placed his buttocks on the fine, soft imitation leather he so loved to caress than his wife, almost reproachfully, exclaimed:

"Shit! We didn't think about the police".

"What about the police?"

"What if they stop us?"

"Well, we'll say we have an emergency. Not just say it! We're in the middle of a fucking emergency. That has to be among the exceptions allowed".

"Is looking for an old drunk who dumped his stuff in the street among the exceptions?" she asked, immediately feeling like the biggest scumbag in the world.

"No" —he said, as he filled himself with as much false calm as he could fit into the vehicle. "Any possibly missing person is an emergency and that's excepted and if not, I don't care, so let's just get going".

"Fine, but if we get pulled over, you do the talking".

She started off in silence. She could not believe the joy of driving in those conditions: the street was not completely empty, there were public transport buses and cabs here and there, but, save for them, the roads were for them alone. So, without consulting, she took the usual route to her father-in-law's house.

It seemed the most obvious thing to do, and he didn't correct her or make any further comments either, probably still annoyed at her hurtful question.

For some reason, she had a feeling that they wouldn't find him there, but to even suggest that possibility would be an attack on her partner's hopes. She didn't have to say it, or rather her worried attitude gave away her thoughts for, out of nowhere, her husband said to her:

"We have to think about where we're going".

"What do you mean? We're going to your dad's place".

"Yes, but where to look for him next".

She didn't know what to answer. She released a confused uhh as she tried not to let the emotion of her partner's moment of lucid resignation cloud her eyes with sadness and answered:

"Well, your dad's house is on the way downtown. We probably won't find him in the apartment, but maybe we'll find something that will show us where to go next".

"Such as?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm thinking receipts from a bar or someplace he might have gone to. Maybe he's there".

"In the middle of lockdown?"

"Well, if we know he went out last night, it wouldn't be the first time he's done it, would it?"

"Maybe, but I can't imagine how. Between the cleaner and the nurse who visits him to give him his shots, I can't imagine how he would have had time or a way to get out without anyone noticing or telling us".

"Maybe someone noticed, but they didn't think it unusual" —she finished.

Doubts about his father's behaviour during lockdown gripped his gut. He knew that the old man, given his age, had to watch out for the virus that was going around, but he suddenly thought that the isolation, despite the visits they tried to make on a regular basis, could have been too much for him. Although he had always been a bit of a hermit and a bit distant, that was out of conviction and not out of obligation. He worried that this subtle difference might have been a determining factor in his father's mental health and might have led him to slip away.

So absorbed was he in his father's mind that if his wife had not gently touched his thigh to signal him to get out because they had arrived, he could have stayed in the car for another hour. Only when he stepped onto the sidewalk did he realize that she had parked the car on the berm, something he always criticized her for, but this time overlooked.

He entered the run-down, concierge-less building with a copy of the key he almost didn't find in the glove compartment. Although he had kept his composure until now, as soon as the gate closed behind his partner, he rushed up the stairs, climbing them three at a time, and arrived headlong at the fourth floor, feeling choked by his own breath. He dropped the keys in his eagerness, so when he tried to open it again, he grabbed the knob with his left hand, upon which he almost tumbled to the ground, since the door, which had been unlocked the whole time, gave way under his weight.

He didn't need to see his wife to feel from behind the scream she was holding back with her hands. The tiredness had disappeared and instead a shower of cold sweat ran down his shirt, while his throbbing temples felt like they wanted to pop out of his head. He finished opening the door and, peeking in only with his torso, carefully ran his hands along the rough wall, feeling for the light switch as he called out his father's name, hoping that if his father didn't answer, at least no one else would. There was no answer, only silence.

He cautiously entered the apartment, which he discovered was completely upside down. He had to take giant steps to avoid stepping on the sea of papers, envelopes, clothes, shoes and other items that covered the floorboards. He walked to the centre of the living room, looked around, panning over each and every detail. He took a deep breath to calm down and turned around a couple of times, checking that he hadn't miss anything that could give him new information about his father's whereabouts. At this point, even the receipt for a brothel where he might ask a few questions could help.

He could see the look on his wife's face, who, from the doorway, watched both with pity and concern at his deranged gesture. He tried to reassure her by nodding senselessly. After a few more turns, he needed no further confirmation that the mess was his father's work. There was no trace of violence, and to his mind there was in fact no mess. It was rather a peculiar order, an order very similar to his own and of which he had left an example at home before leaving.

Seeing the fake smile with which her partner was futilely trying to calm her down, she struggled to conceal the expression of pity that was coming over her face. She already had her cell phone in her hand ready to contact the police over what to her appeared to clearly be a robbery, but guessing her intention, he said:

"Don't call. With the police we will only take longer".

"But, what about all this?" —she gestured at the space around him.

"This was my dad looking for something. What I don't know is whether he found it".

She considered her options, and despite wanting to yell at him for his sudden, impertinent sense of calm, she decided, in her exasperation, to surrender to her husband's obvious mental breakdown. Not so much because of her confidence in the ridiculous instinct that just awakened in him as because of the scepticism they shared regarding the utility of contacting the authorities.

As she watched him fishing and digging through the papers on the floor here and there, she decided to hurry him, but as she did not want to fight with him and still felt quite tired, she decided to go to the kitchen to make a coffee for them both. When she had it ready, she brought the cup to him, saying:

"It's instant coffee, there's nothing else. Have you thought about where we're going to go next?" —she asked, as if not really wanting to know the answer.

"No" —he answered. He grimaced in disgust as he sipped his coffee.— "But I think we'll have to call back and see if the guy tells us anything else".

"Yes"—she exclaimed with determination—. "Call him".

She blew on her drink to cool it, and watched as her husband downed his coffee in one gulp. She felt some tenderness as she watched him search with his free hand for his cell phone among the various pockets of his clothes. She approached him, holding out the phone almost square in his face so that he would realize that he hadn't even taken it out of the car when he got out.

He grabbed it gratefully and searched for the record of the call he had received hours before while she placed her chin on her intertwined hands and perched her head on her partner's shoulder, leaning gently on him, trying to convey some calm or courage.

She was so close that this time she didn't need to ask him to use the speakerphone, although when she heard the guy's gruff voice reluctantly answer she couldn't help but dig her nails into him just a little.

"What's up" —answered the husky voice, this time with a carelessness that indicated he was tired.

"We didn't find the owner of that phone at house, but I suppose he must have been with the lady you saw. Do you know where they might have taken her?"

"So stupid. Where do you suppose they're going to take her at midnight? Well, to the UPJ".

"Do you know where that is?"

"Papi" —he said, dramatically and dragging his vowels.—. "There behind San Andresito on Calle 38. As I told you, I was just passing by, I don't know anymore. It's a good thing I haven't sold this phone because this is no time to work".

"Gracias" —le respondió.

"Dude, don't thank me. I haven't sold it yet because they haven't opened the store where they buy them from me" — he said with a mocking tone as he hung up.

The UPJ had always seemed to him to be a macabre character in his adolescence that stood in for the bogeyman when the cops started to scare him more than the darkness. He hadn't imagined it as a place for old people, but he reflected that, not having been dragged there as a young man, he didn't actually have a clear picture of what kind of people made up the fauna of that institution.

With a new route already determined and coffee warming his belly, he felt enthusiastic. He only had to wait for his wife to drink the dirty, cold water she always let the coffee become before starting off. In the meantime, he added some documents to his folder: an old photocopy that, despite its scars from the folds, showed his father's ID number (yes, it was '53, he said to himself as he checked it), some other documents he didn't quite understand but that belonged to the old man's health insurance, and a couple of portrait photos that seemed quite recent and that, as he placed among the other documents, he hoped he wouldn't have to use, because he couldn't help but feel a lump in his throat when he imagined going from corner to corner printing flyers with that naïve face of his father. He carefully folded the opposite corner of these papers as well.

Before leaving her father-in-law's apartment, she switched off the power, turned off the water and gas, and took advantage of her location in the kitchen to throw away half of the coffee without her husband noticing, since she was not going to drink it cold. When she got into the car, she couldn't help but feel how her nerves, already quite frayed, became more upset with her husband's routine round about the car. She never understood very well what it was that he expected to find hidden behind a tire. He, at the end of his routine, felt grateful to find the car in one piece in that neighbourhood that he distrusted.

He got in and silently fantasized about the possible outcomes of his situation, not looking out the window but with his eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror, concentrating on the reflection of the city behind them, which left its record in the lights that passed eagerly through the small glass, seeming to want to get out beyond the limits of the mirror.

To her, the idea of going to the UPJ sounded awful. She might as well have been told that they should go to Cuadra Picha, to El Bronx, or Cazucá—all of which sounded to her like that dark set of mythical urban underworlds that she could not locate on a map, since she knew well

that her notion of these parts of the city derived exclusively from the news channels and perhaps a little from the slum scenes of some movie. Foreseeing this discomfiting fate, she didn't want to go too long before interrupting her partner's calm to ask:

"So, where are we going" —She looked at him, holding back a nervous giggle that his laughter only released. They didn't know how to get there.

"Let's use Waze" —he said as he pulled himself together, pulling out his cell phone.

"Oh no, let's use mine. Yours could run out of battery and we won't be able to call anymore".

The mechanical voice from Waze hardly served to liven up the journey that finished in just a few minutes. The morning city, already fully lit, seemed abandoned, and although along the main street they saw a few vehicles and a few delivery drivers, she felt she was driving completely alone amid millions of inhabitants.

She was not disoriented at any point along the route except for the last three turns of the wheel, which took them away from the main artery of the commercial sector of San Andresito and led to what looked like an area sector of old and gloomy warehouses, crowned in the centre by a huge police station. She knew that she would never have made it to that part of the city on her own and that she wanted to get out of there.

Those last three turns also seemed to have left their lockdown behind them. Men and women dressed in lime-green apparel were taking groups of drunks, old people, young people, street dwellers, and some prostitutes who resisted confinement, taking them from small cars to bigger cars.

**Some of them
were taken into
the station, while
a few others came
out of it looking
disoriented.**

The commotion was considerable, and the picture was completed with several street vendors offering all order of drinks to help face the morning cold, which still refused to give way to the heat of the day.

She didn't ignore the market carts full of white thermoses and, not feeling serene enough to enter a police station at that moment, she told her husband that she would be at the coffee stand and asked him if he wanted anything. She crossed the street to the cleanest vendor she could find, from whom she asked not for coffee, but for a cup of hot corn-starch. Years of working downtown had led her to discover that coffee was not the only elixir that could emanate from those colourful thermoses.

He didn't want to approach what appeared to be the front desk until he saw her cross the entire street and get close enough to the vendor where he thought she would be safe. He made his way to the building and was about to walk through the sturdy metal doors when the pressing sensation of being watched made him turn.

From a small store on the opposite corner of the street, a figure caught his eye. He saw him sitting on a plastic chair, wearing a blue dress that didn't quite fit and grandmotherly high heels. It was his father, who somehow looked even more ridiculous because of the facemask covering his jaw than because of the excessively tight dress. Gazing calmly at him, he was sipping his tea..

He looked him up and down, more curious than surprised. He spied his wife, who was still distracted with her drink and raced over to where his father was sitting without her noticing. He sat down at the table in front of his father, in the only chair in the little shop that fortunately was still empty. He wanted to scold him, yes, but he looked so calm that he couldn't help but be infected by his calmness.

"Let me guess... Luz?" —he asked his father in a tone more curious than adamant.

"How did you know?"

"A guy called me saying that Mrs. Luz had been taken away by the police, and now that I see you, well, I put two and two together".

Luz laughed, and her son could not help but join in the laughter.

"I thought they'd sold the phone. Did Marta come with you?" —she asked her son without giving him time to continue the interrogation.

"Yes"—he said and looked around—, "but she thinks I am inside"

"Shit".

"Why didn't they take you in?"

"I think a cop liked me. When we arrived, he pulled me out first and pushed me away from the group. I've been here waiting for the buses to start boarding because they stole my wallet in the patrol car and I didn't have my phone, but I was able to save my papers".

"I understand. So then what money were you going to use to take the bus?"

"Here, I've got some in the other pocket" —he said, reaching into his dress and taking out a small handful from the bra that served as a wallet.

"Well" —said his son, averting his gaze, and blushed at the thought that he was not uncomfortable with his

father's chest, but rather with finding it covered by his mother's dress —."What happened at home?"— he asked to change the subject.

"I was looking for it" —he said, grabbing and shaking a corner of his wife's dress.—. "It should have been hanging in the closet, but Gladys must have washed it because I found it hanging on the clothesline".

"Well, shall I give you a ride?"

"With Marta? Don't be an idiot" —Carlos looked at him, surprised, since his father was not one for insults—. "I don't want to get in and have her start asking questions. Just give me some money for the cab".

He called his partner. She asked him where he was and he told her to wait for him in the car, as he was still inside looking for news of his father, but he was sure he wouldn't be long. When some minutes had passed, he approached the car carefully and, pretending to be leaving the police station, told his wife that the important thing was that they already knew where his father was and that he was fine. He made up that he was involved in squabble over a woman, laughing at the sub-text of the statement. He told her that the best thing was for them to go back home and rest and that he would take care of getting him out early when he'd served his time.

She flatly refused, wanting to lend her help, so they decided to go back to her father's house to organize the mess a bit. All the way back to her father-in-law's house she didn't want to talk, or she did want to, but she preferred not to as she was waiting for him to initiate the conversation. She felt very sorry for her husband, because she imagined that it couldn't have been easy to see his father, surely drunk, or worse, in the cells of that horrible place. Her feeling of pity only increased when she saw him

get into the car without giving it the usual walk around and, even more, when he drank the cold coffee she had kept for him, more out of manners than anything else, in one gulp and without complaining.

She then accompanied him, stoically, to clean and organize the curious mosaic that the old man had left in the apartment, timidly formulated a couple of suppositions about the possible instability of her father-in-law's mental health and, although she saw that her husband answered her questions without discomfort, she felt that that the impact of his discoveries had affected him. They didn't take long to finish the cleaning job and were about to leave, when she noticed her husband staring meditatively at the closet in his parents' room, so she decided, as she had done in the morning, to go down to the car first and drive back home without asking any more questions than necessary.

He never understood exactly why the impact hadn't been greater. Surely because of the shock, the memories of drive home were veiled from his memory; only a couple of moments would remain in his mind that would come back to him in the most unexpected circumstances. The first, the moment when he hung his mother's dresses in the closet, dresses that he hadn't seen in months or years, noticing in particular the space left by the absence of the blue dress. The second, the long time he spent analysing, once back at home, the curious and now disturbing resemblance between the arrangement of clutter on the floor with that the one they had just picked up at his father's house.

When she finally saw him come to the bedroom to go to bed, she could only mumble in a relieved and somewhat derisive manner, "In retrospect it was a sorry spectacle," and she wiggled between the sheets, turning her back to him and sending a loud kiss towards the wall. He could not return the kiss. Instead he was left thinking that her summation, although she'd had something else in mind, could not have been more accurate, since Luz's dress did not even fit him.



2

Estefanía Rodríguez Rozo
Editor

Candi Mayerly Lasso Eraso
Author

A

Labyrinth of Guilt

**Estefanía Rodríguez Roza**

Editor

Reflecting on the editorial process of Ellipsis 2021 entails reimagining ourselves in confinement. Go out? Stay inside? Connect virtually? As editors we felt a constant desire to meet face to face, but I have lost a certain amount of hope. However, not all has been lost. Editing in lockdown led me to a near-epistolary practice with Candy, perhaps as an antidote to the distance between us, and the impossibility of sharing a conversation in the same space about the paths that Lucia and Antonio could take. I didn't want it to be an exercise of mere 'marginalia' and cold comments next to the text, but rather an opportunity to reweave connections between us in this virtual environment.

Despite the context in which everything took place, I can say that maybe I got to know my fellow team members better than other Ellipsis cohorts were able to. The reason for this is because I had the chance to glimpse their bookcases behind them, their family members

walking past unaware, their cats parading gracefully over keyboards and immaculately made beds. But beyond that, we were able to see ourselves reflected in the uncertainty of our own individual confinement and, even more symbolically, in the dismay, anger and sadness (and even some pixelated tears) stirred by the recent social unrest.

I believe, with complete conviction, in the power of spoken or written words, and in my view the hard edges of our confinements were softened briefly during our on-line meetups. And I feel that reading each other's ideas about breaking free from being locked down brought us face to face with all the places, cities, and rooms that we have ever inhabited.

**Candi Mayerly Lasso Eraso**

Author

I try to make the wait go faster with some wine. It calms my anxiety, but also brings me gradually into a state of comfort that takes my mind off the confinement of lockdown and its routine, off the despondency I'm left with when my days end as soon as I open my eyes, when I go to bed at night after having lived the same day over and over. From high up on a cloud I look down at myself, small and empowered. I take charge of the moment, try to break away from the automatism and tear down the wall of indifference that is consuming my marriage. I steel myself to surf the wave of my worries and their consequences. Why is he taking so long to come out? God... what will he think when he sees everything I've prepared? Will Antonio stay with me tonight, or shut himself away in his office again?

Lockdown brought questions to the surface that I must face with fear. Conversation had been an intimate companion from the moment we met and had led us to take a decisive step in our relationship, but it's faded away over time to practically nothing today. He is more and more withdrawn; I feel like I've lost him. Lockdown made it clear that we had grown apart, and were like a couple of strangers sharing the same four walls. I'm don't know if his work and my dedication to teaching have eaten away at us to the point that we no longer have intimacy as a couple. The mutual understanding of days gone by has buckled under the strain of a life of responsibilities and priorities. Antonio is absorbed by his university activities: classes and some kind of talk or presentation in the mornings, and in the afternoons, he shuts himself away in his office until it's time for dinner. At the weekend he spends time on video calls with his old friends, where they discuss politics or some topic involving history.

In my case, by contrast, this time at home has increased my workload. I have exams, seminars and assignments to mark, and when Nury died of Covid I was left in charge of the classes she used to teach. If that weren't enough, I have to cook and keep an apartment clean as the situation had driven me to such paranoia that I asked my domestic helper, Yolanda, to stop coming until they had found a cure. Too much work! I feel that I've drawn strength from where I have none. I know tonight will be useful in some way.

Between the various responsibilities demanded by both of our jobs, and later my master's degree, we saw each other less and less and ended up settling for old versions of ourselves. His presence is a necessity to me in these times, but in the moments when I most needed to talk, when I most needed his company, his affection and the love we vowed to each other all that time ago, I found only silence. This exhausting, endless confinement brought us face to face with who we were, a new chapter of our life with a shadow hanging over us and a situation with no end in sight.

The wait is never-ending. I'm on my fourth glass of wine. I ask myself whether this idea to break with routine and do something different will help in any way. Glancing at the table, I'm surprised at how quickly I laid all the preparations: the dining table, the new crockery, the half-burned candles, the already-served food, the glasses next to the bottle of wine. And then there's me. Once everything was in place, I put on some makeup and tied half of my mane in a plait, letting the rest of my hair hang loose, then slipped into the red dress that I'd bought months before for an event that was later cancelled when the world began to collapse. Although it emphasizes the extra kilos I've gained in these last few months, I feel that it accentuates my curves.

I do my best not to finish the bottle of wine. After quite a while, Antonio comes out into the kitchen in search of dinner. He looks pensive. Putting his handkerchief in his trouser pocket, he lifts his gaze and it lands on me in the chiaroscuro of the amber light, my legs crossed and

a glass in my right hand. His expression changes to one of astonishment. A faint light glints in his brown eyes as he walks over to the table, where the candles subtly embellish the plates and glasses.

"And all this?"

"I wanted to surprise you, I ordered Chinese food and pizza. I don't know what you fancy eating".

"Chinese".

I serve him a hearty portion of Chinese rice and do the same for myself. The way he delicately holds his glass of wine takes me back to the day I met him, amid the hubbub of students' voices and the clinking of plates. I long for those days. I used to see Antonio in the corridors of the university; I didn't know him yet, but he struck me as a man with an air of unparalleled superiority. That impression changed when I was introduced to him. Emilia asked me to go with her to the cafeteria and there he was, looking just as he does at this very moment, holding his cup of coffee with the same delicacy. He said hello to Emilia and she introduced us. We sat down to enjoy our coffee, and the conversation flowed along easily. We talked about everything from the most trivial matters to the most consequential, and of course about ourselves. He told me that he was from the city of Popayán, and that he would be finishing his master's degree in Bogotá. At that time I was close to finishing my undergraduate degree: like him, I had come to the capital to study. Over time, I found out that his family owned a law firm but that he had decided to be the black sheep of the family, rejecting the world of law in favour of that of literature, history and political science. We stayed in the cafeteria for hours that day, and our conversation was so absorbing that I forgot to go to my lecture. How can I forget what happened when we got up from our seats? Antonio got tangled up with the table leg and jiggled it so roughly that everyone in the room turned around to look at us. I was beside myself with laughter. That event was the start of what would be a life shared together. The sound of fork on plate jerks me into the present again.

No conversation ensues. I try asking about his presentation and his afternoon lecture but his answers are dry and curt, as if deep down all this displeased him. I think nothing of it and continue with my endeavour.

I get up from the table and turn up the volume of the music. Antonio's annoyance puzzles me, but I can see that he too is perplexed by my attitude. He watches me as he raises his glass of wine, and I sense his boredom. He intends to get up from the table and hide away again. Fine, I don't want to force him to do anything he doesn't want to. I wander over to the balcony, taking my glass of wine with me, and open the window. His attitude of irritation leads me to indifference, to waiting. What will his decision be? Is he planning to continue with this awkwardness, or will he make an effort to enjoy this night in? Our only company is the sound of the music echoing around the walls of the room. After a while he stands up and comes closer; it seems his bewilderment impels him to seek me out.

"A cold night, and a warm sky" –he says, while moving closer to the window.

I ignore him, and marvel at the vast canvas where an infinite number of stars are sparkling. Nico appears in my mind. He so loves nights like these. When will I see him again? Will he be eating well? His absence tightens my throat and floods me with nostalgia. No words are needed for the present moment to immerse us in the fascination of the cosmos. We stand there enjoying the scene until I say:

"If Marx once said that religion was the opium of the people, I reckon we are the opium of the world"

"The only thing is that, to Marx, religion was a highly effective tool for the ruling classes, primarily because it alleviates the suffering of the people by making them experience religious emotions. We are simply the intrinsic destruction of pleasure".

"I'd forgotten what contradicting one of your arguments feels like".

His eyes narrow as if reacting to a bright, blinding light. He purses his lips without saying a word, then takes and puts aside my glass before clutching my waist forcefully and leading me to the centre of the room. We begin to dance a little out of step; we're out of practice, and Antonio treads on my toes. I try to make light of it by reminiscing about the years of our youth, and bring our trip to Machu Picchu, the best we took, into the conversation.

"Do you remember the walk we did along the stone walls in Machu Picchu? It was our first year together, the first time I'd been in another country. And who can forget the shock we had when that eagle flew past us. A fright at first, and then after that we were falling about laughing".

"Machu Picchu, you could never forget that Incan paradise. I remember when you went out to buy sun cream and called me half an hour later all worried. You'd wandered so far away that you didn't know how to get back. I dashed out so quickly that I didn't even realise I was wearing flip-flops".

We laugh while telling the anecdote until the song ends. I sense that the best way to avoid what is about to happen causing displeasure is to compliment him first, so that his egomania can soften him up a bit. I start telling him how I find the arguments in his presentations more well-crafted, how he manages to capture the spectators' attention and stir their emotions. I mention the importance of considering making it less demanding, and even more so with first-year students. Antonio thinks differently; to him, the important thing is for the students to read, make reading a regular habit and understand the terminology used in the first two semesters of the degree.

By now, the potency of the wine has gradually become more intense. Our bodies, and the moment, call for something stronger. We don't waste much time thinking and order two half-bottles of aguardiente. This decision has livened up the night. Antonio is becoming more relaxed and it looks like everything might turn out well. He even leads the conversation in another direction, which pleases me: I can feel his motivation.

**"Tell me,
why couldn't
you sleep
this mornin-
g?"-I hand
him a shot of
aguardien-
te before
answering.**

"I was disturbed by a dream, but it wasn't much different from the ones I've always had. I was in the ocean. The water was a deep shade of blue, but I couldn't feel the waves. It was as if the world had stopped, and even then, I still felt at ease. The situation suddenly took a stormy turn, and the peace of mind that the sea was giving me was turning into chaos. I watched as the palm trees, plants and sand were losing their form, melting away. From nowhere, an enormous wave rose up in front of me, and I woke up when it was starting to suck me into the vortex. Feeling suffocated, I awoke with a start and thought it hadn't been that violent because you went on sleeping. To be honest I was scared, and then I tried to relax and get back to sleep".

"Ah, it definitely sounds like the type of dream you always have. I could feel that you were taking a few deep breaths, but tiredness got the better of me. I was up late marking exams; I can't have been asleep for more than three hours when I began to sense your restlessness".

"It must be because the monotony has put me on edge a little".

The aguardiente arrives and we start drinking and dancing more and more. After a while the effect of the liquor clouds my mind. Now I feel more open to talking about things I would never discuss sober. The next words that come out of my mouth set the course of the conversation.

"You don't know how much I miss the countryside, seeing my mother, having Nicolás come to visit us. All of this is starting to affect me and I get the feeling that the dreams are announcing something to me. That's always been the way my body and mind work together when things aren't going well".

"Dreams don't always say things or speak in the way you think they do. Sometimes they're just expressions and repetitions of what we see or hear over the course of the day. You shouldn't attach so much importance to them. You miss the countryside, Nico and your mother. I know that, so much so that I spoke to Nico this morning; he told me he could travel to Cali with a friend who lives in Medellín, and we can pick him up from there. I wanted it to be a surprise for you, but I think the moment merits it".

The anger fades away. After five months of confinement and distance, I would finally be able to see Nicolás. It's one thing for him to say he's fine on the phone, that studying is keeping him entertained, but what a mother can perceive when they're standing in front of you, without a screen as a filter, is something else entirely. I fill the glasses with aguardiente, turn up the music and invite Antonio to dance.

"Wow, that's amazing! Thanks for that news. When did you talk to him?"

"Yesterday morning. We didn't speak for long because he was stressed out over an exam, but he did say he'd made plans with a friend to travel as far as Cali".

His phone starts to vibrate on the table and Antonio walks out onto the balcony to pick up. I put the bottle to my mouth, take a long swig and keep dancing. I already feel tipsy enough to not want to stop. Part of me is filled with joy at seeing Nico soon, but negative thoughts creep in and fill me with worry. Who's calling him at this time of night? I drink as I dance and in a matter of moments, in the midst of my spins and my muddled head, Antonio walks up to me purposefully, grabs my hands and we dance together.

"Who was calling at this time of night?"

"Fernando. He wanted to discuss something I mentioned in the presentation today that he disagreed with, but I told him to wait until Saturday. He couldn't believe what I'm getting up to with you".

"Fernando, the philosophy professor?"

"That's him. We spend all the time scrapping like cats and dogs. The day we finally agree on something, that moment will be the onset of chaos".

"By the way, did I surprise you?"

"Oh you surprised me, of course. I like seeing you so radiant and cheerful. Although I did find it a bit strange that you would do something like this out of the blue".

"I wanted to shake up the routine, I'm tired of going to bed exhausted every Friday night, carrying the weight of a week that takes away the best of me".

I feel myself brimming with life and a desire for the night never to end. By now we've already danced a couple of songs and our coordination has improved; we're more in step with each other, and this makes us press our bodies tightly together. The feeling causes my negative thoughts to dissipate. We gaze at each other while the flames of passion begin to burn bright. The song ends, and Antonio cups my alcohol-warmed cheeks in his hands and kisses me. This action freezes me in my tracks. He looks older to me, with more grey hair. There are crow's feet in the corners of his eyes and his expression lines are more pronounced. I go back to the past, to the first glimmer of that passion that time had dampened between

us. I smile. I'm happy because I have him, until my joy is cut short by his phone again. This time he walks into the study, as he had forgotten to email some documents before 8pm.

Antonio comes straight back to the living room. He's less on edge, and his desire for me seems to intensify with each passing shot. Something different and wild happens during each song; in the slow ones, like a bachata, we press our faces close together. When salsa comes on, he opens his hands and grips my waist vigorously, before dropping down to my thighs and then sliding up to my back again in fluctuating waves of pleasure, and I can feel the brush of his fingers as they explore my entire body. We stop to catch our breath during a vallenato and sing along at the top of our lungs. In the part of that merengue song that goes "Quiero que me recuerdes con la canción que nos hacía callar, esa que nos decía de que algún día la despedida tendría que llegar...", I return to the past, to when we were young and full of dreams, anxious to take the world by storm. During other songs, when I do a turn and stand with my back to him, he squeezes his body against mine. For fleeting instants, I feel his sex, while his hands are on an exhilarating journey that starts from my neck, passes over my breasts and plunges without a pause down the valley of my abdomen until coming to an end on my inner thigh. The state of euphoria that we reach when we dance drives us to drink more. We've already got through two bottles of wine and the first half-bottle of aguardiente.

"I don't know how long it's been since we busted a move like that! – Le digo, tirándome al sofá. I exclaim, flopping down onto the sofa. Antonio's forehead is glistening with sweat, and although the armchair next to the sofa is free, he sits down next to me, lifting my legs into his lap. At that second, my plan takes form and a momentary impulse pushes me to ask him"

"How about we play a game?"

"Come on, Lucia. Now you're going to spoil the night."

"It'll be more fun. Humour me".

"The liquor's got your creativity going. So how does this game work?"

"You're allowed three questions that you've always wanted to ask me. I'll answer them with complete sincerity, and then you'll do the same".

"Hmm, I'm not sure. What's the aim of all this?"

"Well, to be honest that's what the game's about. We'll be totally honest with each other".

"Oh, Lucia! Is there something you want to say? Don't dance around the issue and be direct".

He's right. I want to ask him a few questions centred on past events, without him thinking that I care enough to go to the lengths of putting all of this together to find out the truth. There are a lot of things I'd like to ask him, and narrowing them down will be a real challenge to my ingenuity. I know that if my aim is to delve deeper into what he thinks and how he feels, I have to start with his everyday behaviour or random thoughts.

"If I had a question burning inside me, I'd already have asked you. I want tonight to be special. You go first, if you like".

"Well, OK, what does it hurt. Let's start making tonight special." –He falls silent for a few seconds, before adding: –"I didn't think you were a fan of techno cumbia music. Why is it your favourite thing to dance to all of a sudden?"

**Hearing the
question
puts a smile
on my face,
but his eyes
and his
straight face
tell me that
he's asking
in complete
seriousness.**

"I've been in Popayán for quite a while now. I know that music is culture to you guys and yes, you're right, I admit it, when I first got here, I found it strange because I had no idea how to dance to it. No-one listens to that where I'm from, among the coffee plantations. Now what do you think?"

I stand up from the sofa, turn around and take a few steps away from him so he can watch as I move sensually to the music. He smiles in satisfaction.

"My turn. Have you ever lusted after a woman to the point of being unfaithful to me?"

"Do you really want to know that?"

"Of course. –His answer puts me on my guard".

"OK. I've got to be honest with you, there have been a lot of women that I've desired during my life. I'm a man and in my eyes a woman's beauty is extraordinary. But I'm a long way from going from that to cheating on you. Lucia, I've made plenty of mistakes in my life, but being unfaithful to you isn't going to be one of them. You're the mother of my son, the woman I married and chose as my wife. Have you ever been unfaithful to me?"

"Do you remember the guy that was going out with Ana? The tall, muscular one that went everywhere with her".

"I don't think so –His hostile tone gives away his displeasure".

"Well, I don't know how he got my number. He started calling me persistently to invite me out with him. I never agreed to, and obviously I told Ana..."

"Did you cheat on me with him? –Antonio cuts me short".

"No. I didn't tell you because I knew you would have put him in his place, and what I said to him was sufficient".

"Really? What did you tell him?"

"I lectured him about how disrespectful it was to make me that kind of proposal. He knew I was married and that Ana's my friend, therefore, that guy is her ex-boyfriend. My principles won't allow me to do something like that. Would you have said yes?"

"Like I already said, Lucía, I can go as far as admiring someone's beauty and standing there staring like an idiot, but to take the leap to what you're asking about: I agree with you, it's not for me either".

"OK. And what about the Ramirez's, why did we stop speaking to them?"

I'm aiming to lower the level of the conversation, and this is a question that won't take up much of my time. He might say 'we argued,' or 'we stopped talking'. Anyway, now I know that he hasn't been unfaithful to me and that there isn't anyone else. What interests me next is getting to the third question, and for him to tell me why he drifted away from me.

"Hold on, is that another question?"

"Yes, question number two".

The Ramirez's were a married couple that we used to see regularly, until all of a sudden Antonio distanced himself from Carlos. He was never seen again at our gatherings or in our family circle. They were colleagues, and I was under the impression that Antonio had been of great help to Carlos in winning several cases related to land. And then I saw no more of his wife

Margot, who was a complete enigma to my friends due to her reserved appearance and hostile way of answering when asked something in the company of others. I, on the other hand, saw a woman subjugated to the authority of a man who, at some time in her life, had deprived her of being herself. Even so, from time to time we had good conversations. She struck me as a good person in spite of her solitude and self-absorption. Then she abruptly stopped going to the hair salon where we often met.

Lost in thought, Antonio inspects the glass he holds in his hands, before raising it, downing the aguardiente without hesitation and then leaping up energetically towards the stereo.

"I've never liked that song...damn it, is there anything that's actually any good?"

He seems agitated. Does he want to convince me that his annoyance is due to the music, or does what I've just said play any part? He skips impatiently through the songs.

"I really have no idea. I haven't heard from him for how long...three years?"

His obfuscation leaves me slightly uneasy; his reaction reveals to me that he's hiding something. I press further in search of an answer:

"But you used to work together. What happened? Did he get fired? Did he quit?"

I can tell that my pushing to find out something about the Ramirez family is trying Antonio's patience. He circumvents my questions in a nervous manner that betrays him: in a flash his face is clouded by shadows and his eyes appear dulled.

"I love this song! Come on, let's dance".

He spins around, sending a vase tumbling. I attempt to free myself from his embrace to catch it, but he keeps me in his grasp. We continue dancing and my disconcertment grows. Why did he act in that way because of such a trivial question? I thought he'd say 'the guy left, he got sacked and hasn't spoken to me since'...What do I know! But why the fluster? The song comes to an end and I walk over to turn down the volume, pausing for a few seconds with my hands resting on the shelf that holds the stereo, while I wonder what the hell is going on. I turn to face him.

"I want you to tell me why you and Carlos Ramírez broke off contact. What really happened with that family?"

Antonio jumps up from the sofa and punches the wall until the pain is etched across his face. It's as if he had flicked a switch and was being flooded by the full force of his emotions. He's not shut off and withdrawn any more, but rather explosive, volcanic. Before I can utter a word, he stands in the middle of the room with his fists clenched and jaw tight and yells:

"I can't take it anymore! There's a tight feeling in my chest that's unbearable".

"Antonio, what's going on?"

His rage and highly agitated state show me that we're going too far. He shuts his eyes and seems to be in a trance.

I walk to the kitchen for a glass of water. The chill all over my body warns me that something terrible is about to happen. I'm overrun with nerves. Antonio is still on his feet, and he aims a forceful kick at the vase lying on the floor, scattering the fragments across the apartment. The outburst appears to pacify him slightly. He scratches his head and sits down, and I hear words coming out of his mouth. I put the glass of water down on the table and take a seat in front of him.

"That happened a little over three years ago. You know that around that time he was helping my family to win a few land-related cases here in the Cauca department. Carlos was in charge of that particular case; he'd been with the family for years and gained expertise in those kinds of matters. I was responsible for the historical aspect, and also travelled to the community to speak with them, in an attempt to earn their trust and convince them to sell up. It's fair to say that Carlos and I had our differences. He had an unbending and authoritarian way of acting and could never stand being challenged. You know what I'm like: I couldn't just keep my mouth shut and let the guy walk all over everybody to get what he wanted. Those superman ethics have never been my thing, I despise them just as I despise everything to do with that kind of capitalist ideology. In the end I was forced to accept those decisions, which later helped to win the case. Of course, my friendship with Carlos fell apart. I had the chance to get to know him and his way of working better, and I learned what he did under the table".

When Antonio stops talking, I begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together. On one hand, I'm aware that while some of my behaviour over the last few years may have upset him, it wasn't reason enough for him to shut himself away so much. And on the other, there's his enmity with Carlos and the land case, which upon reflection —what a coincidence— is related to the feud between Antonio and his family in the same period of time.

Does the indifference of Antonio's family towards him have anything to do with Carlos? Despite having chosen a different path in life Antonio was always their most cherished offspring, but out of the blue —and as abruptly as his friendship with Carlos ended— he stopped seeing his siblings as frequently as before. I hadn't realized, perhaps because I always distanced myself from the symbiotic relationship that they used to have, but in the lights of Carlos' revelations that indifference makes sense.

It's as if everything was leading me to this point. I decide to stop probing, safe in the knowledge that my third question will reveal everything I need to know.

"Tell me the exact reason why you stopped working at your family's law firm."

Antonio drifts over to the window while drinking the shot I've just poured him. He glances at his watch, then starts talking as he moves from one side of the apartment to the other.

"The problems cropped up when I was working with Carlos and the indigenous group that owned the land. One of them was that the community living there considered it ancestral land, and that proved to be the case. It turns out that those lands had belonged to the earliest Paez people, who were the group that put up the fiercest resistance following the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the Cauca region around 1533. They had a very different fate to the Pubenense people and their neighbors the Coconucos, Totoros and Guambianos, who were subjugated when the conquest was barely underway. Faced with the impossibility of subduing the Paezs, the Spanish were compelled to come to an agreement with them in the 18th century, which was enshrined in the deeds granted to Juan Tama, the leader of the Paezs. Through this accord the marquess gave up his encomienda rights, making the delimitation of the reserves a simpler task. The reason I'm giving you this mini history lecture is to explain that the creation of the reserves gave the indigenous people control over part of their traditional territory, as well as the exercise of political power, represented by the captains and the indigenous council. These institutions, despite not being of their own creation, were rapidly appropriated by the indigenous culture. And since then, it's the land that their ancestors inherited, and which they still inhabit today, or used to inhabit".

My hands start to prickle, and my blood feels like it's at boiling point. I'm incapable of processing all the information Antonio is throwing at me.

"I don't mean to bore you, but this is important so you can understand the indigenous people's refusal to sell that land. Carlos gave me a certain amount of time to win them over and avoid him having to resort to radical solutions. I exhausted all the possibilities: bumping up the money, creating a company, moving them somewhere else, laying out an agreement by which both parties would end up benefitting, but negotiating with the leaders was futile. When that time was up, Carlos made the call to end those lives. At first, he tried sending a warning, flyers with threats to get them to leave, but it was no use. They were full of resistance, just like their ancestors. Blessed resistance! They refused to let themselves be intimidated, and are a people who have suffered abuse of every nature. That's what has built up their strength throughout history, what has instilled them with a spirit of struggle and defiance. They outlasted the conquistadors, the colonizers, the same old groups from the left and the right. And at that moment they were resisting against us and our abuse. My family were on my back, hungry for a quick solution. I'd screwed up big time and had no way back." He takes a long swig, straight from the bottle. "In Carlos's words, 'We've gotta step up the number of patients, *mijo*, so that they catch a fright and get out of there without their feet touching the ground'."

"What did you do, Antonio?"

His half-closed, evasive eyes give away his fear; he's ashamed, confused. He begins to speak but the emotion makes a knot form in his throat, and he shakes his head.

His words strangle him, and he stammers:

"I never wanted to go to such an extreme, and I tried to stop it at all costs. My life, my conception of the world, my morals and my ethics all went down the drain".

"Oh my God! God, my God! – I was struck cold and stood up from where I was sitting and lit a cigarette. Then I turned to look at him and took him to task. "Is that why you changed so much? You lost your charisma, your ambition, and you retreated into yourself. You even forgot about me".

"For God's sake Lucia, don't be a fool! Can't you see that people were killed because of me? And yes, I forgot about you because you forgot about me first, you're a selfish asshole who only cares about her job and her friends. You were never at home, we lost intimacy and the attention we gave each other, and let's not forget about Nicolas: you never take an interest in your son's decisions, you have no idea who his friends are or what he likes and dislikes. And now that you're feeling cooped up you wanted to do something to break you out of your routine. Here you are, trying to fix something that you flushed down the toilet a long time ago".

His level of exasperation rises, and he fixes me with a contemptuous gaze. I, by contrast, am confused by the situation. We were doing great, singing and laughing, then in a flash everything changed. There's so much I have to process that my chest tightens and my mind goes blank, and I struggle to come up with a response. I feel bewildered and my head is on the verge of exploding. We are both struck dumb. I hear him breathe hard and take in air, before he exhales and breaks the silence in a placid tone.

"Lucia, I'm harbouring horrors inside me. The past hasn't gone away, I haven't got over it or been able to wipe it away. It's still alive within me".

"Are you trying to make excuses? Bottling up your feelings only makes it harder to free yourself from them. You accuse me of selfishness, but after I married you, all you did was put me in a secondary position, your family matters always came first. Should I feel guilty for wanting to advance my career? to give my son freedom? Of course not. All I'm guilty of is wanting to stay with a man who always lived life as a mummy's boy, and to top it off it turned you into a killer".

"I wanted nothing to do anymore with the people who drove me to this point. I thought that, by staying away from my family and everything that reminded me of that despicable act, I could rediscover the old me somewhere, even if it was in the most extreme darkness".

"Jesus! And now what will your son think when he finds out his dad is a murderer? How could you do that to him? Why are you making a fool of me?"

His son has believed in him and viewed him with respect and admiration. What a humiliation, my God! I would have preferred to have never found out, to have got divorced due to a lack of interest or a simple absence of love. 'The professor who married a murderer'. I can already imagine that headline ending my professional and working life without a trace. It's not fair.

Antonio rushes towards me, grabs my shoulders forcefully and shakes me violently as he talks.

"Get it in your head, crazy bitch. You can't say anything to anyone, least of all Nicolás!"

"Antonio, you've betrayed everything you are, everything you'd become. You're a hypocrite!"

"¡No! Eres un puto asesino. No mereces nada".

I wriggle free from his grasp, and he drops to his knees and bows his head to the floor. He's fearful and trembling, and clenches his fists tightly. I can almost see the different feelings washing over him in waves: pain, shame, wounded pride, impotence. He appears shattered, a million miles away from being the renowned history professor with all the achievements and qualifications. The image of the man he could not, and would never be. I walk away from Antonio and get another cigarette.

Far away, the first signs of dawn start to emerge, and the sky is tinged with pink hues with orange and yellow streaks. We stay there in silence for a while, and I lean on the windowsill and smoke my cigarette as I appreciate the sight. Despite the unease that tonight has stirred in me, I feel lighter, as if I had been awaiting confirmation of something for a long time. A ray of light illuminates my face and dazzles my eyes with such strength that it pushes me back inside. I look at Antonio, who is squatting down with his hands on his head. I don't know how long he'll stay there like that. I see him in an aura of unfamiliarity; he is now a stranger. I go to clean up the mess we have made. Who would have thought this would be our last party? Suddenly, I hear his voice once more.

"I know that it's not possible to relive the past, to be who I used to be, to go back to that place and do things differently, or quit. There's nothing that can alter the past or turn me into a different person. There's no way back, I know. But I can't ignore the feeling that something is waiting for me in this old prison of mine, where I've been" since the day I decided to act, to do things that way. There's something I have to get back, or discover. A part of me that's long been missing. And neither you, nor anyone else will intervene in that process, even if I have to shoulder a new form of guilt".

Antonio walks back to his office, and closes the door behind him.



3

You are

Tatiana Chiquito

Editor

Jorge Mario Rojas Gutiérrez

Author

worse
than him



Tatiana Chiquito
Editor

An editor's work is silent and oftentimes little known." More or less, these were the words of welcome to the editors' workshop that Marta Orrantia gave us at the beginning of Ellipsis in January 2021. Before being given the opportunity to be an editor in this beautiful project, I had not stopped to think much about what it means to be an editor and to accompany a writer's creative process. The truth is, as Marta's words say, it is a little-known subject that those who are not in the literary field or do not work in editorial processes confuse with proofreading.

So, to tell you about how my process went, I find it necessary to provide a metaphor: an editor is like an actor or a singer. You may be wondering why and how the two things can be connected, but I invite you to think for a moment about all the times you have had the opportunity to see an actor on stage, or a singer on a stage or, even in these pandemic times, when you saw a play online. What is presented before your eyes is a person, or a group of people, presenting a performance by any name. Call it At God the Father's Side, The Great Salsa Concert, The Launch of.... The name, for this metaphor, is hardly the important thing. What you see and hear is already the final product of a creative process, of the artist's desire to write the play(s) or

compose the song(s). And what came before? What was the spark that led the artist to scratch on paper? Who did she talk to? What inspired him? How did she do it?

I started this journey as an editor in the middle of the pandemic, in the company of a group of people I did not know and that, to date, I still do not know but hope to meet in literary nooks and crannies someday. I was in my last semester of a master's degree in literature at the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana. I had already gone through editorial processes as a researcher and co-author of creative works, but I had not realized the contribution that editors make. I began to understand when Marta, in the editors' workshops, told us that the best thing we could do was to ask the writer questions, to enter a little into their creative logic, to show them what their successes were and what parts of the piece could be improved.

Just as the artist temporarily lends his body to the character or the song in order to achieve an excellent performance, that is what we editors are: we lend our reading and literary engineering skills so that the texts we are going to accompany have strong structural bases and can have an impact on third party readers. We are the devil's advocates who sometimes shake the writer to get the best out of him.

In short, this journey in *Elipsis* led me to change my perspective on writing and reading, making me a better companion for any text that comes before my eyes in order to bring out the best that the author can do for his or her own works.



Jorge Mario Rojas Gutiérrez
Author

My lungs struggle, reaching for any of the suspended molecules in this chilling room. A room that works to imprison me and steal all my oxygen. A room that pretends to be bigger than it is, where the echo of coughing, monitoring machines, ventilators, the sound of doctors and nurses' footsteps bounce between corner and corner, flooding the whole room. And as if that were not enough, that voice comes back to my mind saying, "*You are worse than him.*"

My limbs no longer respond due to lack of oxygen. My sweat abounds and my nerves are on edge. I feel like a hare in front of a flock of buzzards. Every time I try to get up, I get pecked. The needles lacerate my left hand: peck. The beeping of the oximeter: peck. My heart rate going out of control: peck. They finish me off with the same fucking phrase in my head: "*You are worse than him.*" And then the final blow prevents me from getting up.

I don't know what to do. My anxiety conspires with my fear, increasing at the sight of the oxygen mask I have to wear to regulate my breathing. My strength weakens. I can't make out the shapes of what's around me. Is that a curtain? That other thing, a nurse? My arms fall asleep, my legs tingle, my vision becomes blurred, and my body loses the battle with consciousness and I finally fall asleep...

I remember when I was working and not sick as I am now. I comforted those crying in the waiting room. I looked warmly at those who were drinking coffee and sometimes I mediated in the arguments between security and the patients' relatives. I experienced hard moments, but also happy ones, like the time I went out to break the news to an anxious man, telling him that the name that would concern him could be Maria and not Carlos.

Here I am, terrified of this disease I have. The IV is doing its job of keeping me going with the nutrients I can't digest. There is a dichotomy in me. While my mind is brimming with fatalistic thoughts about what might happen next, about the lack of company, my body lies static on a stretcher.

I must have been cooped up in here for three days now. Every day I feel worse, and although I'm sedated, I can still feel the daily deterioration of my condition. I am aware that the worst is yet to come, and it's sad to know that I may be dying and she is not by my side, taking care of me as she did at other times. There is no one pressuring the guard at the door to be let in, no one exhausting the coffees from the lady in the cafeteria on my behalf...and what if I die? Who will cry for me? Will I be unplugged without prior consent because there is no one to grant it? I don't think so. My mother hasn't found out about my condition yet and I have no other family. I didn't take the time to make my own family.

I think I can remember happiness from moments in my life. What did I do right? Where did I go wrong? If I get out of this alive, will I change? I feel like I'm in a maze of questions I can't get out of. The confusion in my head drives me to look for culprits, but I only find myself. I'm the only one to blame for building my life on the judgments of others. I've heard so many women talk of their failed relationships, among them my mother, who used to tell me, "All men are cut from the same cloth." These words affected me so much that they changed my way of looking at life. I heard so many women talk about their failed relationships. For instance, hearing my mother say, "All men are cut from the same cloth" changed me. This is how my way of thinking was influenced.

Death is like heartbreak: you stumble and fall, but you get back up, you are left with lessons learned, and you simply get over hard times. Some lessons learned are amazing, and everyone experiences different emotions: rejection, fear, anger, remorse, and ultimate acceptance. Now I understand! As my cheeks grow moist and my eyes struggle to see the joints in the ceiling, I feel lonely again, and that loneliness wipes out my will to go on. It destroys all hope, increases that desire to see her again, hug her again. It clips the wings of a *"together forever."*

I am alone. Could there be a worse death? They say it is terrible to die by drowning or burning. They say the vertigo you feel before you die in an airplane crash is indescribable. But has anyone ever thought about what it feels like to die slowly and alone? I have heard that my wardmates have husbands outside of the ER and their children at home praying to an omnipotent being. And me, who do I have? Only my mother's voice uttering a single phrase that echoes in my head: *"You are worse than him."* I have my memories and I feel a chill, a sharp emptiness in my chest, as if I were about to fall from the tip of Mount Everest itself.



Amidst the back and forth of strong palpitations, the rise and fall of the thermometer between 40 and 41 degrees, the beeping of the monitoring machine, and the wailing of other patients in other rooms, I can glimpse a black silhouette approaching and grabbing my feet, coming up my legs.

I can't see his face. I scream! I cry for help! I am four years old and my mother doesn't believe me. Or well... she didn't believe me then. Once again, that monster that takes cover in the darkness under my bed so that his silhouette can slip away and not be detected. I scream again.

"Mommy!"

"What's wrong?!" my mother responds as she finishes putting on her robe and kicks open the door to my room.

"The monster came back. The monster was touching my leg. Mommy, I'm scared, help me," I beg her, sobbing with fear".

"Again with this?! You know there's no such thing as monsters," she replies, scolding me for waking her up with my "nonsense".

Many nights I asked her for help with my fears. I begged her to defend me, but she never did. She always came into my room but never looked under my bed where I told her he was hiding, because, I guess, she was sleepy.

After Christmas dinner in '94, my parents, eyes red and tiny, smelling funny and struggling to keep their balance, sent me to bed before midnight. They finished feasting in the wee hours of the morning and went to bed. Until I screamed again.

"Mommy"

My mother, angry and drunk, came into the room scolding me for waking her up again. As I cried desperately in my bed, she grabbed me by the arm to show me that nothing was hiding underneath. She was speechless when she lifted the comforter and saw my father. She immediately

grabbed me and we ran to the home of a friend of hers. My mother couldn't stop crying. I felt guilty for making her cry.

"Forgive me, dear".

I open my eyes, look around, and I'm still in the white room, a torrent of sweat mixing with my tears, my heart in my hand, the tube in my windpipe, the intravenous drips and machines attached to me.

I take a deep breath, let the stretcher feel all my weight. My fever is higher and higher and my sweat grows more abundant. It becomes even more difficult for me to breathe and I contract my muscles, breaking with the serenity that was approaching. I hear my mother crying. I am in her womb. I feel a menthol gust from the back and it makes me shiver. Is that my father screaming? Why is he insulting my mother? Is everything okay? Aaaa! What was that? Why did I feel everything move? Why is my mother hugging me over her belly and telling him to stop it? It seems like my brain is losing the fight to remain sane. But my memories return along with the same fucking phrase: "*You are worse than him.*"

Now I find myself walking down a red carpet with a gown covering my beautiful blue dress and silver shoes. I move forward at the beat of the voice announcing my arrival. I am concentrating on making sure my high heels don't trip over the carpet or get tangled in my gown. I am wearing my heart on my sleeve, with a giant smile, with my steps faltering and my sweat glands exuding small salty drops. I also see my mother crying in the front row, right behind the graduates, as they hand me the diploma that, after so much hard work, I earned so I could get a job and make a better life for us both. I begin to swear an oath: "I solemnly swear before God and in the presence of this assembly, I will do everything in my power to raise the good name of my profession. With loyalty, I will aim to assist the physician..." Immediately after my words, the program director says to me, "If you do so, may society reward you, and if not, may it sue you."

It was one of my happiest days. I had finally graduated as a nurse with honours. Finally, my dream of being a professional had come true. Finally, I would accomplish my goals and I would be able to give my mother the best. She, with a big smile on her face, hugs me and says, "I am so proud of you. Too bad you are worse than him." Like dominos falling, the entire auditorium begins to tell me that I am worse than him, and I think of nothing but running, of fleeing, but those voices follow me. They surround me and leave me in a foetal position in the middle of the bleachers.

I open my eyes in a startle and feel that the sedative has begun to lose the battle against my extremities. I feel nauseous for the first time since all this started. Even though I am wearing this mask, it is still hard to breathe. My heart rate is rising again. I want to scream. I want to call for help, but this probe is hurting me. Help! Somebody! Pleaaaaaase. Turn and look at me. Why don't you hear my oximeter rising? I need help! This probe is scratching me, the shortness of breath is back, my limbs are starting to wake up, the tingling is inevitable. I want to die! *"You are worse than him."*

Damn it, shut up. I can't reign in my desperation because I keep remembering that unfinished part of my mother's sentence. Jazmín, don't forget what you learned in your studies. You must calm down. It is impossible for me to listen to my conscience, and now I understand why it is so difficult for my patients when I tell them to calm down.

Seeing Veronica come in calms me down. I know that she knows as much as I do, that she is a committed nurse. She will finally help me with my suffering. She'll give me sedative.

Before she reaches my stretcher, another colleague approaches her and I overhear their conversation:

**"Hey man, I'm
sorry. You know
how it gets in
the emergency
room, especially
with this disease
and the careless
people who aren't
considerate. Man!
How I'd love to
glue their masks
to them..."**

Poor Veronica. I don't even want to remember how complicated it is out there. It's always difficult to deal with sick and injured people and the relatives of pregnant women about to give birth, and now it's even worse with these patients complaining all day long.

My concern increased. I had been seeing stretchers come out with white sheets covering a bundle and, after that, hearing this conversation scared me even more.

Thank heavens, Veronica finished her chat with the other nurse and gave me the sedative. My body couldn't take any more. Not being able to talk, not being able to move much to avoid fatigue, being prostrate on a stretcher—it is killing me, it's worse than the disease. I only ask that it all passes quickly. If I have to die, let it be now, and if not, let this torture end. Many of us dream of a fleeting and painless death, but in fact it is totally different. Maybe resigning myself to it is a great option. I am tired of fighting against Covid. I no longer want to remain prostrate on a stretcher, depending on an anaesthetic given to me through an IV.

My eyes are heavy, but my thoughts and this damn bug inside of me won't let me sleep. As time passes, I see how the lights in the room dim and Veronica asks me to rest and gives me an encouraging goodnight wish. My urge to yawn is enormous, but I can't. This ventilator prevents me from doing so. I haven't slept very well these days. I'm going to count sheep to see if that helps: one sheep... two sheep... three sheep... four sheep... five sheep... six sheep... seven... *"You are worse than him."*

I remember my fifteenth birthday. I wanted a party themed around my favourite saga, Harry Potter, but my mother said no because she couldn't find the right decorations. Anyway, she arranged a beautiful party for me in a large room with a starry sky, a throne that reflected the lights in the room, and a pillow on the side where my silver heels rested. I remember everything was pink, my favourite colour. Behind the table of food and refreshments, a garland of balloons was set out for me. And not to

mention my pompous princess dress. The corset choked me a little, but I felt beautiful. I must admit that, at first, I was not very convinced about my mother's decision for such a party, but she was so excited to see me dressed as a princess, and I wanted to please her.

As was customary at this type of party, I was locked in a room in the back to come out right at twelve o'clock. The heat in that room began to be too much for me. I didn't want my makeup to run from the beads of sweat. I looked at the guests through a crack in the door. There were people I knew and people I had never seen, people who had been invited and people who had not. Wanting to look perfect and ensure that my makeup wouldn't run with the sweat, that my curls wouldn't fall and my crown wouldn't fall off—all this awakened my anxiety.

Personally, I didn't care so much about the people who had arrived, because my eyes were looking for someone else, they were looking for my childhood sweetheart. They were looking for a head of blonde, curly hair. They were looking for someone familiar.

Finally twelve o'clock came around, and I was able to go out to receive everyone's applause. I went straight to sit on the throne so my best friend could put my so-called glass slippers on me.

Then, I remember that the DJ couldn't find the song for the waltz. We were all ready to get dancing. My main concern was not remembering the steps, which I had learned well, but keeping the heel of my slippers from bending and throwing me off balance. And before the DJ played the song, I saw him. I saw his curls, his smile, and his flirtatious eyes looking at me. Finally the *quince primaveras* song played, and the men holding the fifteen roses began, one by one, to dance a part of the song with me.

I remember very well the count in my head of one, two, three—one, two, three—until that concentration disappeared when I saw who boy number fifteen was. For an instant, I forgot how to waltz. How was that possible?

I also remember clearly that when the song ended and he spun me for the last time, I looked at my mother and remembered our past. In a millisecond, many things went through my head. I felt sad. I wanted to cry because I didn't have a dad, like all my friends did, to put my slippers on or to open the dance floor with me or take me by the arm to show me off to all the guests. It had to be my best friend, my accomplice, the only one who knew about my crush. And yes, I loved him very much, but every girl's dream is that, at fifteen, she would have a father who would take care of her, who would protect her, and not a monster who would assault her.

The party continued. The food was delicious, although I don't really remember what we ate. The cake was just as good, and the liquor began to arrive. My friends, like all teenagers, began to drink uncontrollably along with my crush, Erick.

Erick approached me. He reeked of alcohol. His hands no longer obeyed his brain, and everything got worse. He was slowly letting his hand fall to my buttocks, trying to steal kisses from me, telling me how much he liked me and how much he wanted a kiss from me. The discomfort did not last long, because even if he was my platonic love, I had not given him permission to touch me.

This made my *quinceañera* party worse, because my best friend, Andrés, had already realized what was going on and was protecting me as if he were my older brother. My suspicions were soon realized, and the drunk kissed me, even though Andrés had his murderous gaze on him. He removed the barrier I had put up and he kissed me. And it was then that the promise that I made to myself when my mother told me about my father's beatings and humiliations took on more force and evoked the promise of *together forever, without men*.



I also remember a year ago, when I walked through the doors of this clinic for the first time. Because of the bustle, my boss met me and gave me a quick tour of the clinic while telling me what to do and what not to do. He explained the rules, the schedules, the patients on each floor. I had too much information, and I couldn't retain any of what he was telling me. I could only see everyone doing their job: running to save lives and trying to calm patients' families and the patients themselves was an absolute odyssey.

At the end of my rounds, I had to attend to my first patient with gastric erosions, who stained parts of my uniform with vomit and blood. That day, when I returned home, my mom, concerned about the blood stains on my uniform, started shooting her questions at me. "Did you dissect some dirty old man? Is that blood from some restless brat? Did you amputate an arm?! Did you meet an interesting boy?" They were somewhat macabre thoughts. I told her what had happened and she laughed. In revenge, I started chasing her all over the house, threatening to throw my soiled uniform on her. Those were the days.

But here I am, alone, joyless, dying slowly from a virus that has caught the world with its pants down. Here I am, separated from my mother, unable to practice my profession, without a husband, without children. And all of this, for what? It seems incredible, but even I don't have the answer. *"You are worse than him."*

Another day with this bug inside of me. It gets worse and worse; each lapse awakens a different symptom in me. Not only do I find it difficult to breathe, but also to discover the taste of my saliva and the smells that can be picked up in an emergency room. One more day alone, with no one to ask about me, no one to be concerned about me. One more time when my mind is flooded with questions: Why didn't I accept any of my high school suitors? Why didn't I accept my college suitors? One more day to reflect on my life. I mean, yes, I have my mother, but I haven't known what it feels like to be one myself. I haven't known what it feels like to sit up late at night making a model because my son or daughter forgot to let me know ahead of time.

"Hi, Jaz. I'm Mile-na. I'm going to check on you. Everyone misses you out there. Everyone is worried about your slow improvement, but we all know that you are a strong woman and you can handle this and more".

I hear my colleagues every time they enter the room. I feel them, I see them, and that makes me feel calm because I know they are looking out for us. I listen to the oral report that Milena gave to Dr Gonzalez, who is handling my case, and it is not very encouraging to say the least:

"Hello, doctor. I really don't see any improvement in Jazmín. Her heart rate is still very fast. Her fever has started to rise, and her breathing shows no progress".

"What a shame. Keep giving her the sedative every two hours".

I know it is very likely that I will die, that I will close my eyes and never open them again, but who wants that? I know some people consider death an escape route, but I don't. My fear is in a constant battle with my resignation. *"I wish I had never brought you with me. You are worse than him."*

I think death is upon me. The pressure in my chest starts to feel like it is crushing me, as if someone was trying to grab my lungs from the outside. Oh no! One more symptom of this bug. I never thought it would be so ugly. My oximeter rises again and my hyperventilation returns. Why doesn't this mask regulate my breathing? The weight on my chest doesn't exactly help my lungs to suck in air. If only I could reach the blue button to call the nurses. Aaaaaaaah! I don't know what to do. Heeeeeeeelp, pleaaaaaaase. I can't breathe anymore. I'm losing the battle. Why are my eyes closing? Why are my fingers twisting? He... he... he... help.

"Code blue on stretcher 33! Code blue on stretcher 33!"

What are those voices? I hear them, but I can't see them. Where are they? Help me! Oh no, I'm not in the mood for stomach cramps right now. I need a ventilator. I can't breathe. I feel dizzy. Please, somebody help me.

"Bring the resuscitation equipment, charge it to thirty. Three, two, one, clear".

Please help me. The currents from the defibrillator are very strong, but I still can't see anything.

My life is in your hands. I feel helpless, not able to do anything, putting all the responsibility on them. My fears come to life. Spiders, heights, loneliness, and my mother's phrase runs through my mind:

"I wish I had never brought you with me. You are worse than him".

"Charge it to forty. Three, two, one, clear".

"Doctor, her heart rate is dropping. We're losing her".

I'm dying, and my mother doesn't know anything about what's happening to me. The fear of dying alone is becoming a reality. I wish my mother was with me. I would like to say goodbye to her. I don't want to leave without saying goodbye first

"Raise it to sixty. Three, two, one, clear!"

"Doctor, vitals are eighty over sixty. Heart rate one hundred and ten. She's stabilized".

"Let her rest, inject morphine sulphate, and do chest percussion to rule out any mucus in the lungs".

I almost died, and I can't stop listening to my mother tell me that I am worse than my father. I may be anesthetized, but I can feel the nurses' gloved hands tapping my left lobe in an attempt to drain the mucus from my lungs.

I open my eyes and my vision starts to focus. I don't know how long it's been, how long I was unconscious. After all the medical procedures to revive me, I don't see Veronica. I guess she is resting. I got used to her dropping by my room every half hour to cheer me up. This feeling of loneliness is multiplied a thousand-fold when I am this sensitive.

With the sound of thunder, my memories awaken and lead me to travel away from my reality, to ignore this bug and be able to forget a little about my ailments.

I wake up in high school right at the moment when I meet a cute, smart guy who was very attracted to a career in nursing. Everything was rosy. I think he was the only one I let get close to me. I accepted the flowers, the chocolates, the peach palms with honey and Coca-Cola. I accepted the trips to Kilometre 18 to drink *aguapanela* and cheese and look out over the city from a high and cold lookout point. When I spent time with him, I wondered where the prototype of the man I had built for myself all my life was. I remembered it when I found that ideal guy having sex with my best friend in college bathrooms. I let someone in, and all it did was remind me of the disgust I had for men. *"I wish I had never brought you with me. You are worse than him."*

Whenever I stop remembering, I realize that all my existential problems are coming at me because of the shock of emotions, because of the sedative and the illness, but I still have the phrase that my mother told me engrained in my head, and it is like a song that sticks in my mind and does not leave me.

An argument with her was the precursor of this phrase that has not left me alone. I have tried to sneak through all my memories to avoid this specific one, but it is impossible not to think about it and all the pain it brings me. I know, as a nurse, that this historical moment has changed us, has revealed the worst side of us, and I don't know if that's what happened to me.

I always did my best to keep my mother from having a boyfriend, just like I avoided having one. Whenever I found out she had a date, I pretended to be sick. I blackmailed her, saying that I wouldn't be home when she returned if she accepted that date and even acted rude to any man she introduced me to.

When I was a teenager, I scared off a suitor and we had our first fight about it. She didn't want to leave him, and I didn't want her to have him. The point is that I never allowed her, nor did I allow myself, the presence of a man between us. She is always in my best and most beautiful memories. But three months ago, things changed.

When the lockdown began, I bought everything we needed and forbade her to go out. I was on her case and became possessive. My perfect excuse was that my mother was an elderly woman and prone to contagion.

At first, she accepted and didn't protest, but after several days, she began to argue with me and the disagreements became constant. A month later, my mother stopped fighting me for not letting her go out even to the store.

One day I left for work. I had an afternoon shift. Before I took the bus, I realized that I had forgotten my nurse's card, and without it, they wouldn't let me into the clinic, so I went back. What a surprise I had when I found that no one was home. My mother was gone, and I didn't know why she had left. I stayed to wait for her and called my boss to tell her that I couldn't come in because I had a family emergency. At that moment, I didn't care about being out of work, I didn't care about the scolding from my boss or the possible dismissal for an unjustified absence, because I really didn't have any justification.

The passing of time made me uncomfortable. My mother did not arrive. I called her friends to ask about her, but the answer was always the same, "We haven't seen her." Obviously, my concern increased. Where is she? Why isn't she answering her phone? Is she all right? Is she with her friends?

The afternoon seemed endless. Every second seemed like an hour. Every hour seemed like days. I mopped the house four times, flipped through all the TV channels about five times to see what I could find that caught my attention, checked my cell phone about five times every ten

minutes, brushed my cat several times, the poor thing was almost hairless. All this to calm myself down and not think of the worst.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon and I had heard absolutely nothing from my mother. It had already been six hours since I had returned from the bus stop. The clock was ticking, but I felt that my life had gotten stuck in a single afternoon, and all my mind did was return to the same fucking question. "Where is my mom?" Going to the police would be a waste of money because they wouldn't do anything before seventy-two hours had passed, and I was afraid to ask in morgues, fearing they might tell me they had her there.

Four hours later, just five minutes before I usually got home, I heard the garden gate open. I really must admit that it was an ingenious way to escape from home: the front door was kept locked, and I had the only keys that could open it, so it was impossible to get out that way.

The surprise on my mother's face when she saw me inside the house made her look guilty. She greeted me, and I didn't even flinch. She tried to hug me but was cruelly rebuffed with a question.

"Where were you?"

"I... I... I was at Amparo's – she answered without looking at me".

"Are you sure? Because I was talking to her and she didn't mention you at all" –I said, raising an eyebrow to seem imposing and furious. I'll ask you again, where were you? You know you can ask me for anything you need and I'll bring it to you".

"Why did you call Amparo? How far are you going to go with this?"

"As far as I have to".

"I'm getting tired of this, Jazmín. Do you want to know where I was? Well, I was with a man. For many years I've shied away from having someone by my side to be with you, to put up with your tantrums".

"But you know what we thought and what we agreed about men".

"You were a child and you were just becoming aware of your father. I only wanted to support you. I know it wasn't easy what we went through with your father, but I've realized that not everyone is the same".

"But I put men aside for you".

"No, Jazmín, you pushed them away because you were protecting yourself from what your father did to you. I never asked you to do this for me".

When my mother told me that, it was as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over me, but I showed no weakness and remained firm in my convictions. I was determined to go ahead with the interrogation and try to talk some sense into my mother, although it was more complicated than I thought, and even more so with what she told me afterwards.

"I am dating a man and I am in love. He treats me well, he listens to me, He considers my feelings, and he doesn't treat me like a captive teenager. I will not walk away from him. I have indulged you with everything since you were a little girl, and I think it's time to think about me. I want to give myself a chance with Marcos, even if you don't want to support me".

"But I gave up everything for you. Why can't you do it for me?"

Remembering with any exactness while I am in this emergency room is difficult, and the memories may not be precise, but the idea stands. I've heard psychologists say that remembering helps you reflect so you can start to overcome.

Before my mother left with Marcos, she told me that Marcos made her happy and that I was becoming overprotective and unintentionally turning into my father.

"You are worse than him".

It was impossible not to shed a tear when I had thought about all this and know that I might forget my mother and never reconcile with her. I could be left with that question, whether I really am worse than my father, and I could die alone. My spirits were down, and my will to live is lost in the dullness of my thoughts and the scars that this damn bug could leave within me. In comes Veronica, with tears in her eyes.

"Jaz, you keep getting worse. We've already been ordered to intubate you and move you to an ICU. You're going to be unconscious. You know it's risky. Do you have anyone we can call? Your mom?"



**I kept looking at
the door, just in
case I saw her
come in.**

**Then I saw
Veronica's tears. I
don't know, I really
don't know.**

4

**Ghost
at El**

Gabriel Gamba Amaya
Editor

Angie Lijhem Dimas De La Cruz
Author

Hallazgo

**Gabriel Gamba Amaya**

Editor

I believe that the work of an editor embodies the idea of ‘doing something out of love’ from a human —and one could say altruistic— dimension, while writing does so from an individual dimension that is egotistical to the extent that all forms of expression and poetic exercise demand it, although in any branch of art (creating, editing, or reading) love, passion or desire are always present. By this, I mean that editing is the first step in receiving and experiencing a literary text, the gateway to humanity’s library of Babel, and writing literature consists of translating emotions into words.

My experience as an Ellipsis 2021 editor —supporting the creative work of Angie amid a virtual environment that has highlighted, in a unique way, the innate invisibility of the act of editing— is one that has convinced me that there can be no art without artisanship, that writers and editors alike take part, to varying degrees, in both universes. The former go from the artisanship of their language to the art of their works, while the latter go from the works of writers to the

artisanship from which they arise, in order to polish the surface of that sphere of aesthetic creation.

From its first few drafts, Angie's story overflowed with intense passion, emotional involvement, and empathy, which through her magnificent work of refinement shifted gradually from merely local protestations to a well-crafted tragic irony that was universal. Unafraid of shaping her narrative as if it were a work of sculpture, through the questions and suggestions I made as an editor, Angie laid down the emotion and direction that she wanted to inject it with from the outset. In this way, the result achieved was a rounded, well-written and, above all, absorbing story of the ilk that demands emotional engagement from the reader.

Ellipsis has been a truly valuable experience for me, as it has undoubtedly been for all those who have passed through the project, and will be for those lovers of working with words who are yet to reach its door.



Angie Lijhem Dimas De La Cruz
Author

She now felt nothing, the weight of her body a mere memory, as if during a deep, painless slumber each of her muscles, ligaments, and bones had been pulled out piece by piece, as if every last drop of her blood had been drained and all her organs removed. Upon awakening, it was as if everything had vanished into thin air, skin and all, as if all the particles in her body had never really been part of her. Everything was, therefore, a cluster of nothingness suspended in the air. She wasn't sure whether she weighed little or was simply empty, whether she was deaf or had at last discovered the secret behind the silence. A sombre shade of indigo filled the room. Nena Florentina—or what was left of her, with her sanity on the loose—saw her phantasmagorical reflection in the mirror. At that moment she understood everything: she was dead, liberated.

All the memories of her life faded away. She had seduced death and would soon make love to the Devil. Glancing away from the mirror, she saw her naked body lying on the bed, splattered with the signs of her violent death; the sheets were stained red and the framed Saint Michael above the bedhead was bathed in her blood as if it were part of the painting, with the fresh drops on the archangel's sword mingling with those of the defeated Lucifer himself.

On seeing herself there, stretched out and disfigured, she couldn't help thinking about the everlasting seconds that went by before her death, when she didn't know if she'd have the courage to squeeze the trigger of the gun held to her temple. She felt the way death was flirting with

her, impelling her, calling her, offering her companionship, latent in every memory. She grasped the gun in her trembling hands, pressed it against her skull to be sure not to miss, fired, and then there came silence. She didn't even hear the bang.

Every element in that room told the story of a perfect crime scene that was capable of ruining anybody's life. Her last breath gave her a victorious send-off from the earthly world, leaving her exhilarated and ready to spark an epic finale that would free a woman and condemn a man.

The voices in the background can now be heard clearly and close by, like when you break through the surface of the water from the depths and sound rushes back in. The distraught voice of a woman rang through the corridor leading to the bedroom. Looking out, she was able to ascertain that the voice belonged to the woman from the photo in the living room, who was sprawled across the floor in tears, trying to hold back the retching. Behind her, and clutching her in a hug, was William.

"Everything's going to be OK, my love," he kept saying, calmly and with conviction, while hugging her tighter and tighter".

"No it won't! Everything's going to go wrong for you, you bastard!" Nena shouted in his ear".

Nena yelled and cursed, euphoric to be handing down a sentence and convinced that at that precise moment her revenge was taking shape. Nobody heard her: the scene remained unchanged, but that didn't stop her from showering him with all the insults she had dreamed up when she was still alive. Being able to go unseen and enjoy the power of omnipresence enabled her to enjoy the drama. She burst out laughing upon seeing that William's wife was the first to shed tears over her death, almost choking on her own vomit, but it brought her even more pleasure to watch him hypocritically

play the part of the ideal husband, on his knees in front of a tormented woman and all but begging her for forgiveness. The doorbell rang suddenly, so William gently released her from his embrace while she was trying to compose herself, then walked down to the ground floor to answer the door.

"Have mercy on me, Oh God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions".

"That's right, pray! That must be the police at the door, or the people who have come looking for me. Nothing, not even God, can forgive your husband for this," Nena mocked, while trying to interrupt her".

"Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin, for I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you are right in your verdict, and justified when you judge".

"Evil? Evil that fucking husband of yours, get him to come here and pray!"

"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me," she recited the psalm as the tears slid down her face.

Nena walked over to the door, anxious and ready for the show to start. Let the curtain rise! It was actually two of her minders, who had arrived in search of her. Their first question to William was, 'Where is she?' and those words sent songs of victory singing inside her head. Their way of doing things was anything but subtle. She knew that first they would relieve him of large amounts of money before killing him, and maybe his wife too.

The ironic thing would be for both of them to be killed in that same house, on the same day. Perhaps once dead they would be able to see and hear her, so that she could finally have the chance to confront them without reprisals.

"Upstairs at the back. Do whatever you've got to do, but get a move on"—said William.

"Yes, boss, don't sweat it"—one of them said back.

Boss? They weren't the type to go around saying that to just anyone. Nena was bemused, and wondered why they were acting in such a civilized way. She thought that he might have paid a lot of money in exchange for them sparing his life. On their way upstairs, they ran into William's wife, now calm.

"Afternoon, Doña Marcela"—said one.

"Don't talk to me. I need this house spotless in an hour"—she shot back.

"Doña Marcela?"—Nena echoed, confused by their formal tone.

None of what was happening made any sense. Powerless, she watched as her plan to ruin William's life seemed to be slipping through her fingers. The options were becoming fewer and fewer. He must be someone high up, then; someone with friends in the right places, one of the untouchables. They wouldn't show respect or be deferential to someone who wasn't at the top of the ladder.

Although nothing was certain yet, Nena already knew that they wouldn't hurt William or his wife, and despondently came to terms with the idea that she wasn't going to get to watch them suffer. Maybe he really had paid something, but him losing money didn't come close to the thrill of seeing him die on that very day, not without hearing his sobbing and pleas for mercy first, of course.

**She wanted
to watch him
suck in his last
breath in the
same room
she had died
in, and longed
even more for
him to know
that she would
be responsible
for his death.**

Hope was draining away from her, and thinking about the chance of the police showing up and delivering justice struck her as just like expecting God himself to come down from above and drag William away to the circles of Hell. She just hoped that maybe someone, a friend or her family, would someday notice her absence, realize she was missing, and work out that the last time she was seen alive was with William, who would pay for her death.

Her perfect crime scene now contained two gangsters, who were wrapping her body in a sheet with the skill and speed of seasoned experts, shaking her with indifference as one would any throwaway object. They folded her body up between the linens, tied it up securely with rope and tossed it on the floor, before using a handkerchief to carefully remove the bits of Nena that had been sprayed across the painting, taking their time to not damage the artwork. As the only witness to all this, she longed to burst right through the canvas and destroy everything in her path, to take the gun and shoot the pair of them and then wrap things up by squeezing the trigger against the head of that unpunished criminal and torching the house—anything apart from just motionlessly watching the effortless way in which they were disposing of her. In one desperate effort, she attempted to undo the knots that held the sheets tight, but succeeded only in passing right through them as if there was nothing there. Shouting and swearing, she stalked from one end of the room to the other in search of anything tangible that could be used to give notice of her ghostly presence. After a few minutes, she accepted defeat and thought back to the day that everything had started, as if by replaying the events she could escape her deathly fate.

It was a hot April Friday in Medellín. Where the start of the weekend had once been the cue for nights out, now it only signalled a strict lockdown. A virus had forced the world to stand still, and the death toll was climbing every day, but she wasn't bothered, sitting there on the first-floor balcony of one of the many houses along the 70th Street boulevard and smoking the last Green-branded cigarette of the 10-pack she'd bought that morning. The mentholated smoke freshened her throat and took her mind off the heat, although her buttocks were clinging like glue to the plastic chair, her

skirt too short to cover them. She hated that sensation of stickiness but was aware that she couldn't hide her legs. Moisturized every day with self-tanning lotion, they were her best feature and a sure-fire way of enchanting any man on the hunt for a prostitute blessed with beauty.

Her cigarette was half finished and Nena thought that—thanks to the pandemic leaving her without work—for the first time she had been able to slow down the pace, both in terms of her stream of clients and of her heart. She had read that the frenzy reached during sex demanded a rate of one hundred beats per minute, and one hundred was the approximate number of clients that Nena shared a bed with in a month. But there she was, with the time to savour a cigarette on that balcony and watch the street below. Everything had changed: solitude and silence now reigned on the streets of Medellín because of that virus, which inspired only apathy in Nena. She cared more about the money problems caused by lockdown than the disease itself, or even death. How could she fear them, when they were the hazards of her trade?

The word "Covid" echoed in her head.

"All that fuss over the fucking flu. What they are is a bunch of pampered kids who don't have to go hungry, so they don't give a shit about people getting left without work" —she murmured, before lifting the cigarette to her mouth.

Nena knew that she could fall victim to disease at any time. In fact, she already knew the painful side of sex. Plenty of times, vaginal infections had left her with remorseless itching and a diabolical burning sensation when peeing, but she still had to go on working. Once she had to attend to a client after cystitis had left her urethra at its limit; the condom was so smeared in blood and fluids that he thought she was a virgin, and even left a tip in his delight. She knew that, to a man, popping a hooker's cherry was a tribute to virility.

Nena felt the disease close by and usually said she wasn't afraid of death. Suffering was part of the routine: in the past she had been punched, tortured, humiliated, and raped. She was conscious of the fact that she had bartered with her freedom, and slow to discover that deals with the devil have no expiry date. Intimacy, like her boobs, no longer belonged to her. She was left in no doubt that every part of her was owned by the ones who charged for her services, the ones who profited from all five feet five inches of her exotic body, leaving her with enough money to get by and a bit more to send to her family. She also had no doubts that her entire body, from her blonde locks to her toenails painted red, was the property of people whose faces she had never seen. But it was clear, to her and to everyone, that powerful people were behind that organization, and that the ones putting their necks and reputations on the line were the idiots who lived in that brothel masquerading as a house, guarding it and getting clients for her. Nena was under no illusions that her life could be snatched away from her at any second, either at the hands of the faceless ones when she was no longer of any use to them, or by a drunk, drugged-up man, or simply someone with illusions of superiority who was willing to accept the price of ruining the star product.

Sitting there on that balcony, she glanced at the street and was overcome by an unfamiliar feeling. Now there were no pedestrians, no students from the university on the corner hurrying to get to class on time. No sound of the cyclists shouting at drivers to stay out of the bike lane, and no sound of the roaring engines of thousands of motorbikes. All the bars had closed, sending all the drunks back to their homes to drink, and the cacophonous din of two dozen songs from different genres blasting out in unison was just a memory. Now silence was what rang through Nena's head, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

A chill spread over her skin when the naked bodies of a menagerie of men burst into her mind in flashes, men who had once been frequent visitors to that house and who tended only to want her: maybe for her beauty, maybe for her prowess. A repulsed expression washed over her face, and she decided to soften the bitterness of those mental pictures by thinking about money. The only thing she needed from those bad lays was their money.

What had happened to her clients? What were the reasons they had stopped coming? That little flu? She thought that the most likely reason they hadn't come back was either the fear of getting hit with a fine for breaking lockdown restrictions, or not having an excuse to leave the house.

Cynicism has no limits, and some of the ones who managed to flout the law went as far as insisting on certain health precautions: using facemasks, washing hands, applying sanitizer, even showering in front of them under the pretext of not infecting their families. Nena let out a loud chuckle and muttered to herself:

"They're a fucking joke, those idiots. They don't want to infect their wives, supposedly to 'protect them'... If they were that bothered, they wouldn't come here and jump into bed with us. Hypocritical *hijueputas* is what they are".

But her laughter, like the cigarette, was short-lived. She looked at the time, realizing that it was nearly noon and she still hadn't had a single client. Only one had shown up that morning, and he'd gone off with one of the girls Nena worked with. Money, money, money: it was all she thought about, the thing she was in love with and sleepless over, the only thing she danced for and screwed with pleasure. In her mind money was the answer to everything. Those two months of strict lockdown had affected her. No clients, no cash—simple as that. Despite them being scared out of their wits, she thought of the girls that clients picked up and took home as lucky, as she did of the ones the pimps themselves took somewhere. At least they were working, even if they did have to put up with an imbecile for such a long time.

The restless movement of her legs was spreading the fallen ash from her cigarette across the floor, without her noticing the mess that she would have to tidy up. The melody from 'Todo Tiene su Final' was audible in the distance, and an image of her mother cleaning the house while passionately dancing and singing across her mind. Nearly three months had gone by since the last time she laid eyes on her mum. It was on December 31, 2019, where in her neighbourhood the sounds of gunfire and

gunpowder melted together and the Christmas lights flashed in time with the music of Pastor López. December was her favourite month, not just because she made good money, but rather because during those few days she felt the closest thing to happiness. This happy memory, however, was cut short when she remembered that she had argued with her mum over money that day. If things had been like that in her best month, how would her mum be doing now that there was no money to send her?

Nena was the breadwinner in her house. She had five brothers, who, in her words, were a bunch of dickheads who spent everything they earned on their vices and going out partying every weekend. To her, they were all just flashy guns for hire, even if they denied it. Nena knew that she was no saint, but unlike them, she didn't have any bodies on her, so her conscience was clear. Nelly, her mother, stopped her sons from getting involved in the dealings of the neighbourhood tough guys since the day she buried her oldest son. In the contract killing world, it catches up with all of them sooner or later, and a bullet to the heart of Nena's favourite brother had snatched his life away. After that, her family split apart, and she was concerned only with filling the financial void her brother had left.

Nena sang the words of the song to herself while her mind was on her family. "*Nada dura para siempre, tenemos que recordar que no existe eternidad....*" She leapt up suddenly from her chair and let out a howl of rage upon seeing the floor, coated in grey ash.

"Fuck, man!"

"What's all that shouting of yours about, eh?" —said the threatening voice of one of the brothel's minders, who was lying down on the bed in the room that led to the balcony.

"Alright, take it easy, I made a mess that's all. I'll clean it up now"—Nena answered exasperatedly.

While hurling insults into the air, she stomped up to the roof terrace in a desperate attempt to channel her rage. After retrieving the mop, she walked back downstairs and cleaned the floor until the tiles were left sparkling

She had regained some calmness now, but the knot in her throat prevented her from quelling the emotion entirely.

She couldn't keep her mind from wandering to her mother, so she put the mop back and walked down the stairs, telling the minder that she was just going out front to use the payphone and would come straight back. He asked her why she didn't use her own phone, to which Nena replied that she didn't want her family to have her number.

"Put your facemask on then, and wash your hands properly" —the minder warned her.

Nena did as he said while rolling her eyes at him, then covered her face with a surgical mask and doused her hands with an alcohol spray so strong that inhaling it made her almost suffocate from coughing.

"I'm sick to death of this fucking sanitizer already, I smell like a hospital now".

She walked out of the house and dashed across the street, although now there were no cars, buses, motorbikes, or trucks to make her wait ages to reach the other side. She picked up the receiver in the booth, inserted a coin, and dialled her home number, hoping that her mother would pick up. She wasn't in the mood to talk to any of her brothers.

"How's it going, Mum?" —said Nena.

"Ah, and to what do I owe this miracle, dear? You seem to forget you have a mother".

She already knew that her mother would play the part of the victim, which would lead them to clash again. To avoid this, she got directly to the point; more than finding out how she was, Nena needed to make sure she had received that month's money.

"You did get the money, didn't you?" —she asked.

"Hmm, yes dear, I already spent those few pesos on paying off debts and buying food for the table".

Nena took a deep breath and slid her hand down her face to her neck, massaging it briefly before sighing again and glowering angrily, but she managed to contain herself. She had no intention of arguing over the same old stuff again. Nothing was ever enough for her mum. Then she replied:

"Oh, OK then, I'll send more as soon as I can. That was all anyway Ma, bye" —she hung up without as much as waiting to hear her goodbye.

She was tired of persevering. Her relationship with her mother was evidently always going to have a banknote-shaped wedge driving them apart. Sending money to her family meant a lot to her. All in all, she did what she did to provide a decent life for her people. She was, perhaps, shouldering the burden of a dead body, that of her brother. His absence not only shrunk her heart but also hit her in the pocket, as she was the one who inherited his debts and duties, the one charged with keeping her family above water.

Gratitude, more than love, was what Nena felt towards her mother. She would never have been able to erase from her memory all the times that her mother had had nothing for lunch but a mug of *aguapanela* so that she and her brothers could eat a proper meal, or the countless occasions when she made hardly any sales at her *empanada* stall and arrived home in tears, fearing they would be evicted if she didn't keep up with the rent.

She walked back to the house, feeling weighed down, and rang the doorbell. The minder came down the stairs to let her in, and after wiping the soles of her shoes brusquely on the disinfectant mat she walked through the door, immediately tearing off her disposable facemask and tossing it into the bin. The look he shot her was enough to tell her she had to wash

her hands, and she went straight into the restroom before the words could leave his mouth. The day was barely beginning, but her body and mind were already worn out as if it were the end of her shift. The signs all pointed to nothing but another day with just herself for company, and with no money.

With nothing else to do, Nena went upstairs to lie down for a while until she drifted off to sleep, before the clumsy movements of one of the minders made her snap awake in a state of confusion. A client had arrived to pick her up: on the ground floor a man was talking to the other minder, and everything seemed to indicate that they were closing a deal.

The man's face—or at least the vague facial features that could be made out through his mask—was familiar to her. If Nena was good at anything, it was remembering. He inspected her from head to toe and threw her a flirtatious look with every sweep his eyes made over her body. Without a bag, at his request, they walked out of the house but were soon stopped in their tracks by a minder, who was clutching a facemask that he handed to her insistently. She accepted it resentfully, removed the wrapping and put the mask on, then scrunched the plastic up into a ball and threw it at the minder with a comic and spiteful expression that he was probably unable to discern due to most of her face being covered up.

Every time that somebody came for one of them, they were notified ahead of time to enable them to pack their bags in keeping with the eccentricities of each client. The contents of each bag were varied and largely unpredictable: beyond the belongings and personal hygiene items that were commonplace in any overnight case, some were stuffed with BDSM paraphernalia, while others contained a smorgasbord of drugs from viagra to MDMA. But that didn't matter; if he wanted her stark naked and without any kind of protection or extra fun then that's what he'd get, because everything seemed to indicate that the man—whose face she was still trying to place—was going to make her day, and that she would finally be able to forget her financial worries.

An enormous pickup truck was parked right in front of the house.

Nena knew next to nothing about cars, but just enough to be sure that one was expensive. At that second, she realized that the person she was going off with wasn't just anyone, and maybe that was the reason they had been so relaxed about her leaving.

For an instant, she allowed herself to be fooled by his slightly scruffy appearance, with his straight cut jeans, moccasin shoes, and blue and red check shirt. In her mind, she was unable to associate his shirt with anything other than the many boxer shorts with the same pattern that she had removed over the years.

After he had opened the door and climbed in, Nena remained standing awkwardly on the pavement unsure what side of the car to get in. She thought about gesturing to him to find out, but the car's tinted windows left her staring back at nothing but her own reflection. She raised her hand to her hair in an attempt to bring it under control. She had not long woken up from her nap, and even though she was already with the client, she still felt a pressing need to always look her best. In a hurry to leave, he told her to stop being stupid and to sit in the front, then pulled away until they came to a stop at the traffic light on the next corner. Nena wondered why he hadn't just kept going straight on, as the city was literally deserted and she hadn't seen a single car go past. "He's the stupid one," she told herself, without vocalizing her thoughts on the subject.

She often felt curious about her clients' lives, and examined her surroundings in search of anything that could provide clues about the man she was with. But everything was spotless and she came up with nothing. Her efforts to recall where she knew him from had also been in vain, to the point that she now thought he simply looked like someone she knew. His voice wasn't familiar, his car even less so, and she hadn't yet seen his whole face. Maybe she was just mixed up.

"We still haven't introduced ourselves" —he said.

"That's true. Nena, pleasure to meet you".

"I already knew that, and the pleasure's all mine" —he replied in a suggestive tone.

"So you're not planning to tell me your name then, or where we're going?" —Nena asked him.

"Of course. William. And to satiate your burning desire for answers, let's just say that we're going to my house. I'll be enjoying your company for the next week".

After that highly specific explanation, and delighted at having secured not one but seven days' work, Nena began to make a mental note of every place they drove past. They were going down Las Palmas Avenue and approaching the San Diego shopping centre. This part of town was the favourite haunt of the cream of Medellín society, and she formulated a mental image of what the place she was being taken to might be like.

Although she showed no visible signs, Nena was also hatching theories about who the man could be. The vocabulary he'd just used suggested he was well-educated. His car gave an impression of wealth, and maybe the fact that she was riding along in it meant that he needed more spice in his life.

Looking at the clock, she saw that fifteen minutes had gone by and they were still moving along Las Palmas. The journey had certainly lasted longer than she expected, and this told her that he couldn't live in Alto de Las Palmas, because if that were the case, they would already have arrived. She had been shivering with cold for a while. As well as her miniskirt, she was wearing a cropped, low-cut blouse and she alternated between rubbing her thighs and her upper arms to warm herself up a little with the friction. A low-hanging cloud of fog was hugging

the road and the cold gave her goosebumps. The road was barely distinguishable, but some mountains were visible to the left, while to the right lay the urban landscape of Medellín, shrinking ever smaller into the distance. They were driving along the road between Rionegro and Llanogrande. It wouldn't have surprised Nena to find out that he lived on a farm out in Llanogrande, or in a big mansion in Rionegro.

Eventually, he rolled up the windows and turned on the heater. Nena let out a nervous giggle and thanked him. She couldn't let her guard down. She had grown unaccustomed to the feeling of uncertainty that overcame her before any appointment with a client. A lot of time had passed since she'd faced up to fear in that way, to feeling highly exposed and in danger. Not a fear of dying, as that would be preferable to the unimaginable horrors that a deranged man can unleash.

They travelled as far as a farm in El Retiro called El Hallazgo. Straight after turning off the engine and pressing Nena's seatbelt button, he undid his seatbelt and got out. That was permission enough for her to do the same.

"You've got a really nice house" —she said.

He nodded, but said nothing in response. On their way to the entrance they were intercepted by an elderly man.

"Don William, *jovencita*, how are you both? Is there anything I can help you with" —he said cheerfully.

"Not for the time being, Darío. Very kind of you"—William replied.

"Thanks"—was all Nena dared to say.

Musing over the possibility that all of this could be hers was unavoidable: the car, the farm, the butler that treated her as if she were his boss. She had never considered the idea of getting married and even less of having children, but right then she pictured herself enjoying that life in that exact place, and even though it wasn't a conscious desire, William was playing the part of her husband in the scene inside her head. She began instantly to work out ways of conquering his heart to find an escape from the brothel, to stop suffering for money and finally live life as a free and, most of all, happy woman.

Anyone would think that it was impossible for years to go by without a person feeling an inkling of genuine happiness, but Nena had already forgotten what that felt like. Her most vivid memories of authentic joy and laughter came from her childhood, when living in poverty was no obstacle to her playing, giggling, and revelling in the joy of being alive. Now she opened her eyes every morning feeling weighed down and charged with an intimate desire to stop breathing or be able to leave absolutely everything behind and travel far away to a place where nobody knew a thing about her past or called the shots for her. They walked into the house, and without being there for even five minutes or having seen the man's face behind his mask, Nena had already concocted a way out of her broken life, a way of starting over. This image in her mind's eye, however, grew hazy as she noticed details about the place. In the living room there was a large painting of him with a woman who was presumably his wife. Even so, Nena held out hope that perhaps he was divorced and didn't want to take it down. It was clear that the butler found nothing unusual about her being there, and he had greeted her with such warmth that he was either well used to the man bringing women there behind his wife's back, or he actually wasn't married.

When they reached the front door, William abruptly showered her with sanitizer and asked her to accompany him to the bedroom. Her satirical mind was already making questioning comments about how

he could bring himself to roll around with a hooker in what was almost certainly the same bed where he had declared his eternal love for his wife, or ex-wife. Upon seeing the room, she realized she was mistaken. There was no way it was the master bedroom of the house, let alone the place where he slept with his wife; it was a guest room, something that the man confirmed by telling her that it was where she would be staying.

As soon as they stepped through the door, he hurled her onto the bed violently and tore at her clothes until he had left her completely naked, then tied her hands to the bedhead with coarse rope and sat down to observe her unblinkingly in a chair to one side. While her body was infused with fear, her mind was primed for any kind of weirdness, and this led her to stay silent and still in anticipation of what was coming next.

The fear of what he would do to her after his brutal attack meant she could imagine nothing but scenes of obscene abuse and insults, sparking memories of other events that she believed had been put behind her.



"What are you going to do to me? —was a thought that inadvertently became spoken words".

"Nothing — he replied".

Before walking out of the bedroom and locking the door behind him.

No sooner had she heard William's footsteps fading away, Nena starting shouting. She called out his name, imploring him to come back to the bedroom, and even shouted Darío's name in the hope that her cries would be heard through the room's only window. By nightfall, Nena was hoarse from so much shouting, and her wrists were sore and bleeding after numerous attempts to wrest herself free. She was cold, and all that was covering her skin were the tears flowing incessantly from her tired eyes.

With the passing of the hours, when the silence had become so deafening that it was broken only by the sound of insects colliding against the window and the chirping of the cicadas, William entered the room.

"Untie me, please" —Nena said, with as much strength as she could muster so that he would hear her. She coughed and tried to clear her throat before repeating her plea over and over.

He smiled, taking the blanket he was carrying in his arms and placing it over her from the waist down, then said 'good night' and walked back out. Her nipples were erect and a deeper shade of brown than normal, and goosebumps were still spread across her flesh. Despite the scant relief of her legs warming up, she was shivering as if going into a hypothermic stupor.

She wasn't aware when she had fallen asleep, but there was already daylight outside. The sound of the key being inserted into the keyhole stirred her: it was William, holding a glass in his hand this time. He made her drink some water, almost causing her to choke due to the position she was in, but she drank what she could. She remained silent, while he took the blanket off her legs and sat down in the same chair. She could only squeeze her eyes together as the tears started to slide towards her ears again. He stayed sitting there for several minutes, watching her, and then left the room again. When the door closed behind him, Nena opened her eyes.

She couldn't understand what they guy wanted. Overwhelmed with anger, she muttered "*malparido, pirobo, carechimba...*," all the insults for him that came into her head.

Three days went by and he repeated the same routine: only watching her, forcing her to stay hydrated, and covering her lower half with a blanket for the cold nights. For the first time in her life she missed having sex, missed being insulted and slapped about, being urinated on and taken anally without lube, everything that was normally done to her during her working day that she was already accustomed to. Anything was better than feeling that pain in her wrists and arms, which felt heavy after being raised for so long. Everything was an improvement on lying in pools of her own piss, and having to hear her empty stomach rumbling even though she had no appetite. She longed to not wake up the next day.

She was tormented by the thought that he couldn't kill her or he would find himself in a world of trouble. But it was worse to think that she was the one who would end up suffering more if she laid a finger on him, because her only desire was to kill him. She had never come across such a cruel and psychopathic man, a man whose eyes gleamed and pupils expanded in ecstasy with each yelp of pain. The more sobbing there was, the more pleasure he felt.

With no energy to do much else, Nena spent most of the time in and out of dreams, reaching the point of being unable to distinguish the line where reality begins. Hunger consumed her, as did the withdrawal caused by the lack of nicotine in her system. In some dreams, she was out on the balcony again, feeling the heat of the day and imagining the cigarette smoke travelling through her throat. In others she was turning the tables on him, and had him tied down to the bed while she stared at his minuscule penis. Waking up and feeling the pain of being alive was the worst thing that could happen to her. Despite her extremely weak state, she thought about trying to escape, but the likelihood of being caught and receiving an even more severe punishment was so high that now all she wanted was to die and be free at last.

The fourth day was different. The routine was unchanged, but instead of sitting there watching her, naked and spitting venom, William played some home recorded videos of women in that same bedroom, tied and bound as she was, wailing and wounding their hands in a desperate attempt to free themselves. He stayed there for the whole day, watching them with her. He only left the room on three occasions, pausing the tape each time, before returning to press play again. Nena kept her eyes shut from the first video on. She didn't want to see those women's faces; they could have been old friends of hers who never made it back to the brothel.

But above and beyond the faces of others, she had no desire to see her own. She was drained, and willing to die so that it would be over once and for all. "Kill me, please," she said in a faint voice, with puddles of tears flooding her eyes and blinding her. She sang songs to herself inside her head to block out the sound coming from the television, but no matter how hard she tried, the screams penetrated deep into her ears and echoed around her head one by one. She sensed him move closer, and said 'kill me' again. He untied her, and she no longer had the strength or desire to struggle.

While he was holding her naked body in his arms, Nena's heartbeat quickened and the sound of the palpitations reverberated inside her frail body. But she wasn't on her way to the slaughterhouse yet. He carried her to a bathtub, full of water and ready for her to plunge into, and bathed her with the same gentleness and affection as a mother would her daughter. After washing the blood off her wrists with the hot water, he told her that everything was going to be OK.

The anger gripped her body. His every touch repulsed her, but her weak condition prevented her from doing anything. He wrapped her in a towel and carried her back to the bedroom again, laying her gently down on the bed without tying her up. Then he covered her up before leaving and closing the door delicately behind him.

She looked around the room, searching for an object that she could drive into his neck to do away with him for good. She was drunk with rage, sick of him and all the other men who had brutalized her at some point in her life, of all the ones who paid to be with her. Looking hopelessly at the window, she longed to kill him but also wanted to die herself. Her world had been reduced to that room. Feeling exhausted, she had no wish to go back.

"Disgusting fucking motherfuckers, all of 'em"—she screamed into the pillow with potent fury.

With her strength flagging but enough spirit to walk with shuffling steps, she headed towards the door and checked that it was unlocked. After crossing the hall and looking to her left, she caught sight of William sitting in the living room, gun in hand. At that second, she felt dread and a void in her stomach, and a sensation of feebleness took over her body. Certain that death was close at hand, she inhaled deeply and closed her eyes.

"Kill me" —she said.

He told her to open her eyes again and aimed the gun in her direction, saying:

"You are free to inhabit this floor as you please, but if you make any attempt to go through that door —he pointed the gun towards the front door, then directed it at the staircase—or walk up there...bang!"

"Understood" —she replied, taking a banana from a bowl on the kitchen island.

When she was sure he was going to kill her, she felt fear, but the thought of having to stay there and see him again terrified her more. All she knew was that she couldn't spend a second longer in that place. She then

contemplated running towards the front door so he would shoot her and get it over with, but she restrained herself after a quick scan of the kitchen revealed a set of high-quality knives. Someone was going to die: him, her, or both of them. She could succeed in ending his life, or if she missed the mark, he would do the same to her, and that wasn't far removed from her wishes. Nothing mattered to her any more. She was an intelligent woman, and he was clearly a rich and powerful man. If she killed him and stole some of his money in order to make her escape, the Colombian authorities wouldn't rest until the perpetrator had been found. There was no chance in hell she was going to spend the rest of her days in prison without a peso, where she would have to endure confinement and scorn even more punishing than what she had been subjected to by William—or in the brothel. She abandoned the idea and shuffled back to the bedroom, dragging her feet.



Killing him was too easy at that point. She was hungry to see him suffer, to rejoice in his pain and hear his pleas for her to stop. Her mind was filled with fantasies of filming while she tortured him and did to him all the things he had done to her.

But nothing was enough, not even the thought of all the agony she could inflict on him or all the hate she felt. But none of it was sufficient and nothing could shed those memories, which brought a feeling of sickness and emptiness to her stomach and a certain sense of disassociation every time they popped into her mind, together with William's name and those of all the men she had been forced to face in the past.

Regardless of how alive she was when she left that room, she had nothing left to give. Nena couldn't bear another day in the noisy, violent city, or another shift in the brothel; she already dwelled in the seventh circle of urban hell that was carrying her to the labyrinthine inferno of her sad and sordid memories. She felt herself racked with guilt and scourged herself with perverse evocations, banishing herself from the places to which she once belonged. She injected her memories of the people she had loved with amnesia, and angrily imagined herself seeking revenge upon recalling William's words; his voice wouldn't leave her mind, and all she remembered of herself was her crying. Nena was experiencing one of those days when she was unable to come out of herself, when she thought only of the hell that she was being dragged into and that was condemning her to relive—a thousand times over and in all their grim details—the moments when she had been hurt.

It had already come to her in her dreams, and now she was going to make it a reality: taking her own life was the perfect revenge. Doing so would unburden herself from the oppressive weight of going through another day feeling the misery of existence and hating her body, her work, and her family. It would also ruin his life at the same time. The weapon was already there. A neighbour from one of the nearby farms might hear the boom of a gunshot, become alarmed, and call the police. If not, her minders would hunt him down as soon as they smelt something suspicious, then make him pay in money and blood without mercy.

William came into the bedroom and started whipping her with a leather belt so savagely that it was as if he had heard every last bit of her mental

monologue about him and her plan of vengeance. Apart from her face, he thrashed every other part of her body until he had drawn blood, then left the door unlocked after he was done. Curled up in a ball, she tried to remain still so that her skin wouldn't brush against the sheets, as the slightest amount of friction caused her searing pain. She was anxiously awaiting the perfect opportunity to snatch his gun and blow her brains out right in front of him, to make him experience the feeling of control slipping from his grasp and to stop him, for the first time, from relishing her pain.

The next day he didn't touch her. She managed to wash her wounds with difficulty and tried to make something quick to eat despite having no appetite, to make him think everything was OK. While she was in the kitchen, she overheard him talking on the phone.

"What time are you landing?"

She edged closer to the stairs, trying to stay out of his line of sight, and stood still so she could catch any useful information.

"Absolutely, my love, I haven't forgotten, I'll be there at half four on Sunday".

It was Thursday. Her stay in the house was sure to be cut short, but now she had another reason to destroy his life: for his wife, who he missed so much, to find her naked body sprawled across their marital bed with her head caved in by a bullet. And echoing out from their TV, the screams of all the women in the videos, probably prostitutes, as the soundtrack to the scene.

On Saturday morning he told Nena that he would be taking her back to the brothel, and handed her a change of clothes that seemingly belonged to his wife. Her wounds were still fresh, making it a struggle for her to get dressed. She weighed up the idea of grabbing his gun and giving him no option but to kill her. Despite not wanting to go back to the brothel, she

knew that his wife would never witness the truth behind the killing if he finished her off then, as she was returning the following day and he would obviously dispose of Nena's body beforehand. She had become obsessed with following her plan exactly as she had imagined it, so decided to clamber into the car and work out how to make her way back there later. She memorized the route, already sure of how she was going to come up with a way to return to El Hallazgo the next day and execute her perfect plan.

When she reached the brothel, she acted like everything was normal and her wounds were hidden under the clothes. The first thing she did was chat to the other girls, telling them that the man she went away with had an amazing house, and that she had spent an incredible few days drinking, dancing, and screwing in style. Later on, as if nothing had happened, she went up to her minders to ask them how much she was going to be paid for the work, before calmly searching among her things for her phone and her brother's gun, which she had kept to protect herself with just as he used to protect her. She had everything covered: if there was no sign of William's gun, she would use that one, a wanted hitman's deadly weapon with numerous bodies on it and the closest link she still had to her brother. So on Sunday, under the same pretext of calling her mum to tell her she would be sending money, she walked out of the brothel never to return again.

She came back to the present. Now there was nothing. The room was so impeccably clean that attempting to reconstruct the exact scene of her suicide without missing any details was impossible. She watched as the men dragged her body towards the front door and made an attempt to follow them to at least see where they were taking it, but an external force prevented her from passing through the doorway. No matter what she tried, going through the window, the walls or even the smallest escape routes, she couldn't leave the house. She was now the ghost of El Hallazgo.

Her hopes of doing even a little harm to William rested on one thing: wrecking his marriage. The woman was distraught at the sight of the

aftermath of the brutal scene, and that fitted in with Nena's plan. But she didn't appear shocked or furious at seeing a woman's dead naked body in her bed, beaten and bruised, nor did she show any compassion when she heard the cries and pleas of the women in the videos.

Once the men had closed the door behind them and no sign remained of what had occurred, William's wife looked at him fixedly and launched into a short lecture, "I already know about your adventures, I know about your brothel, and I know that woman was a hooker. Nobody's going to say a word. Our marriage is still intact and perfect, but from this moment on neither you, nor I, nor much less our son will ever return to this house, and may God forgive us." Then she made the sign of the cross. William's only response, again, was to say, "Everything's going to be OK," before he opened the door for her and gestured the way out. She went out first, with him following behind.

Nena remembered where she knew him from. Years ago, in her first week on the job, she had been introduced to him—he was the owner of the brothel.



**Crushed,
she watched
through the
window as
William walked
away into
the distance
to continue
his life as if
nothing had
happened.**



Chronicle

**Daniela García Patiño.**

The 2021 *Ellipsis* project was marked by two unique events: a global pandemic and a national strike. For better and for worse, this reality made the experience of participating in this process unforgettable. Artists, including writers, must learn to capture the realities before our eyes, and *Ellipsis* participants were no exception.

The selection was made in 2020. I myself was studying literature at ICESI and received an email from the director of my program announcing my nomination, along with the date of the exam that would determine my participation in the program. I had never edited anything when I sat the exam, but I had been studying literature for many years. It might have been luck, as it was also luck that we were chosen just this year—the most difficult of all—to be part of *Ellipsis*.

It seemed that it would be the most impersonal edition of them all, because everyone was locked in their own home. However, the surprises were just beginning. One of the first messages we received after entering the program was from the British Council, announcing that they would send us a book by one of the authors who would speak to us in a private session during the Hay Festival. Neither Paula Silva nor María Juliana Tamarayo could have known that one of my favourite topics is the Holocaust, so it was a surprise (a very nice one) to receive the book by Philippe Sands just in time for Christmas, as if they already knew me and my tastes.

We were supposed to begin work in Cartagena in January, according to the *Ellipsis* program, but this year's Hay Festival, like so many other events, was held online. While it is true that we did not meet in person, we got to know the bedrooms of each of the members of the programme, their families, and even their dogs. Sure, in past editions, participants went out together, walked around Cartagena's old town, and chatted a lot, but they never reached this level of intimacy.

For the *Ellipsis* students, the Hay Festival went by like this: hours and hours of Zoom, listening to talks, sharing knowledge, learning and meeting new people, even if only on camera. They explained the dynamics to us: the *Ellipsis* project consists of having five writers and five editors (chosen through exams like the one I sat) who would work throughout the year on the texts written by the former and edited by the latter. For early career writers, the experience of participating in a project like *Ellipsis* is a privilege, and the organizers and tutors work hard to make it perfect. Not only writing, but also publishing books is a difficult task in Colombia, especially for people who are not part of the industry. Given this, just to learn about the process of producing a book is very valuable for the careers of all the students participating in *Ellipsis*.

During the week of Hay Festival, the writers worked on possible themes for their stories. Of course, the pandemic was a theme, but not the only one; they reflected on the isolation, loneliness, death, fear, and inequity it

brought with it. Once the theme was decided, we formed pairs of writers and editors who would work throughout the year together to complete the book. At the end of the encounter, Paula Silva emphasized how strict the story submissions would be. They were so strict that participants failing to meet the requirements could be expelled from the programme.

The writers started working with the tutor, and the next meeting was scheduled for May. Before the meeting, however, I received an email summoning me alone. My partner, a writer, had left the program. Because of that, my role changed, and I ended up being an illustrator and providing this reportage: two new elements in this edition then, in addition to the stories.

Moreover, the May meeting coincided with the national strike in Colombia. In a moment of upheaval, the participants met to continue with the project. Undoubtedly, the country's situation affected the course of the online meeting, which went from being a workshop to clear up questions and work on the stories to becoming a space for reflection on the current situation and a place to air the concerns that this new world brought to everyone. Some wondered about the validity of their profession, others about the future, and still others were victims of family tragedies or relatives suffering from Covid. We had a lot to think about, and the only way to channel it was to come together. We founded a collective that shared written and visual content on social networks. This united us even more, because sharing the emotions around the strike brought together all the people who, until then, were just Zoom rectangles to each other. The *Ellipsis* group were pretty much the only new people I met during the year of quarantine.

After months of hard work, of meetings between writers and editors, of texts coming and going, the work was completed.

Philippe Sands, one of the authors who spoke with us during the Hay Festival, said at the end of his conference that young people should not worry because after the pandemic everything would be better. The

students, mostly early-career writers, share the fact of writing their texts in the midst of a global pandemic with many distinguished writers. Creativity is a tool that will always be at hand no matter the circumstances.

These words stuck in my head, and I have often thought about what they mean. Undoubtedly, these times have brought about great challenges at all levels of life, but facing the problem and doing the best with what you have is always the most appropriate thing to do. In my case, as soon as the pandemic began, I started painting, and today this is the tool that has given me a livelihood for a couple of months and tremendous peace of mind, because I have more ways of channelling my emotions. For the writers and editors of *Ellipsis*, working on this project must have had a similar effect. In closing, this process was strange, because we are in strange times, but even though it was difficult, we didn't quit. We all did our best with what we had, and this is the result.

