

# SHE KNOWS IT

*Lorena Franco*

*For Celso*

*I know you would have liked  
to read this story*

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## **EPILOGUE**

# SAVE YOURSELF, I AM ALREADY DEAD

The Monster is near, I know it.

Inside my brain there is hammering and absurd laughter; they want to play with me and drive me mad.

There is a bandage over my eyes and I cannot untie it with such numb fingers.

It is a small, claustrophobic place and I can barely breathe.

The floor and walls are cold and humid, I am shivering. I want to get up but my legs tremble uncontrollably.

I have tried to shout but to no avail. There is no strength in my voice.

It is not the first time that my body does not seem to belong to me but the first that frightens me so much.

I should have freed myself of my obsession with the dark side of the human soul and escaped long before I found the letter.

Now I have no way out.

I want to forget.

I turn slowly around, trying to protect myself with my own body.

Am I dead? Is this death?

«You would like to be dead already», the voice tells me; the same voice which disappeared some time ago. Always harmful, always matter-of-fact and sarcastic.

If I move my hand even a millimeter I can touch that hand, cold and slimy, as if it already were in the state of decomposition. I do not know who is there by my side, accompanying me in this nightmare; but if it is a person, it is dead. Because here the smell of death lingers in each and every corner that I cannot see.

The Monster killed that person, who knows when. Now I am sure that in a few minutes, he is going to kill me.

With all my strength, I want to alleviate the pure terror I feel.

I want to make the hammering and the laughter disappear, that noise induced, I am sure, by something he injected in my body.

In desperation, I go on touching the humid walls, looking for a door, getting as far away as I can from that hand. I must get out of here before the Monster returns.

I want to find a way to interact with my heavy legs, make them stop trembling, tell them that I need them, here and now, and to escape somewhere, towards my salvation.

But nothing ever turns out the way I plan. Nothing.

A key turns in the lock of the door. He has come, he is already here. I feel his eyes on me, observing me, and his laughter is like an echo from the beyond.

—Why, Andrea? Why? — he asks with feigned empathy.

That voice. That voice.

A sharp object hits me in the head with great force and I fall to the floor.

The hammering and the laughter are gone.

I am sure that in a while I will stop breathing.

—It hurts... — I say to him with the little strength I have left, in barely a whisper, pointlessly asking for mercy.

He does not answer. Silently, he bends over me. His breath gives off all the evilness that dwells in his soul; the evilness I was unable to see. He takes off the bandage from my eyes so that I can look at him for the last time.

In the few seconds left of my life I ask myself if we really know the people around us.

# PART 1

«Closing your eyes isn't going to change anything.

Nothing's going to disappear

Just because you can't see what's going on.

In fact, things will even be worse  
the next time you open your eyes.

Only a coward closes his eyes.

Closing your eyes and plugging up your ears

Won't make time stand still.»

Haruki Murakami

## ANDREA

*Monday, 8th of June, 2015*

*The Anniversary*

**T**oday is my anniversary. It is not my birthday, nor does it coincide with the day of my wedding or anything of that kind. Two years ago today, I left the prison which our apartment in the narrow Santa Anna Street in Barcelona had become; only to enter another cage I thought would be my salvation. But it was not; I only managed to distance myself even more from everything.

I know that Nico, my husband, still blames me for taking a liking to that oppressive apartment which, even after we renovated it according to our taste, turned out to be the worst decision we could have made. He may even hate me for having to live for years in a place where all our neighbours turned against us. Besides, the sun never entered the flat; and it really got us down to have to keep the lights on in the living room in daytime. Filth all around, drunks shouting in the street at three in the morning, tourists ...

I insisted on moving there because for me it presented the most emblematic scenerio, that of one of the best novels of all times: *The Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón. In that same street which converges with another characteristic avenue, Portal de l'Àngel, there lived its protagonist, Daniel Sempere. I imagined that it would be possible to abandon the printed paper and travel back to the forties in search of that moment when he devours the ficticious novel of Julián Carax with such passion as I did whenever I immersed myself in the pages of the book.

I was wondering if Daniel Sempere also had to meet with such dilemmas in his time and then I laughed at myself realizing that I was certainly going mad: Sempere did not exist; nor did his apartment, though sometimes I liked to imagine that Zafón found inspiration in mine. What is certain though is that Sempere did not have to bear the complaints of my husband, who never knew of the importance that book had for me; especially the copy which disappeared among masses of boxes when we were leaving the flat. I still hope to find it, because I need it, even though every chapter of it is recorded in my mind.

«[...] and we walked along the streets of a Barcelona trapped beneath ashen skies and the misty sun.»

How many times I dreamt about that moment when, hand in hand with Nico, I would take him to see the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, making him promise that he would keep the secret. How stupid I often feel because I am unable to distinguish a lie from the truth; fiction from reality.

I do not know when I began to mix alcohol with sleeping pills, in which moment I began my decline into hell. Or rather, I do know but I have chosen not to remember because it hurts too much. Sometimes I remember, only sometimes... and I say to myself «Life is too precious to waste it». Then I return to reality and forget the canon which before, many years before, was like a command I strictly obeyed.

Nico was earning enough to support both of us in reasonable comfort so I devoted myself to writing crime novels, which kept me shut up night and day without composing even one line worth the effort. What is more, we were slowly distancing ourselves from our friends, though I still do not know why, and the only person with whom I got on well was our neighbour Clara, who thanks to her frequent visits made me see myself not as a failure but a person with dreams and aims, who one day, even if it takes some time in coming, would shine through in her own light and would not have to depend on her husband or anybody else.

Clara was special. She was three years older than me and lived in the company of two cats. She was incredibly attractive, tall and slender and had beautiful blond hair; of the type I always envied, one of those who by just entering a space illuminate it with their radiant smile.

Many times I miss her. Sometimes I forget her.

The last persons who saw Clara alive were Nico and I. Usually, the three of us liked to go out for dinner to the Lluna restaurant, close to where we lived. Its bright dining area transported us back to the twenties and we were great fans of their cream of pumpkin soup and delicious steamed salmon with ravioli in broccoli cream sauce. But that night, Clara invited us to her flat and we ate pizza. Later, Nico and I went home to sleep and left her with her cats.

The next morning we were woken by the sirens of the police cars, parked in front of our building; no unusual as the presence of the police in the neighbourhood was quite frequent, due to thefts and fights.

I had grave misgivings from the start and I called to mind the the last moment I saw Clara, when I said goodbye to her the night before. She looked at me fixedly, gave me a half smile, the saddest I had ever seen in my life, and though meaning to say something different from a simple “Good night”, she only caressed my shoulder with a loving touch of farewell.

When I came out onto the landing, my misgivings were confirmed: my friend’s flat was cordoned off and a policeman was holding the two cats, which, seeing me, miaowed for help.

—It’s them, they were the last who saw her — shouted, pointing at us, señor Gregorio, who lived just opposite to Clara and knew about every coming and going of his young and attractive neighbour.

—¿W-what’s happened? — asked Nico, as confused as I was. — We still cannot confirm it but it seems that your neighbour took an overdose of heroin, which provoked cardiac arrest —said another policeman.

—What? — I asked, alarmed but still half asleep. — It's impossible, Clara is... No, for heavens sake. Clara was the soundest person in the world —I managed to say under the disapproving gaze of Gregorio, as if I had anything to do with what happened.

And it happened in the early morning of Monday, the fifteenth of April, a bit more than two years ago. The tragedy that marked me for life.

The police interrogated all the neighbours, more thoroughly Nico and me, who were indeed the last to see Clara alive, though we were at no time suspected of anything. At the time when Clara died we were sleeping peacefully and although we could not prove it, the way we acted and our grief over her death demonstrated our innocence.

Nico, being a lawyer and a member of a prestigious law firm was able to make inquiries among his contacts so some time later we learned that after the post mortem and practically non-existent investigation, the police reached the verdict of accidental death. According to them nobody was involved in her death and this was something I refused to believe to be true.

No, no way. They might mislead themselves, they might mislead the others. I always thought that someone had entered Clara's flat in the middle of the night and ended her life in such a cruel way and so well prepared, not a single error committed. However, for the police it was convenient to think that Clara was a drug addict.

I also remember that on the day of her funeral I cried like never before and Nico had to take me home, so I did not go to the cemetery. In those two years, in solitude, I have cried whenever I think of her.

Still, that was not the end of the story because some time later our neighbours began to make life impossible for us. More than one of them thought, like me, that someone had killed Clara but they blamed us and using red paint wrote on our door such insulting words like «Motherfuckers» or «Monsters».

It was then that I began to turn into what I am now. I imagine that Nico also felt the impact of Clara's death and its aftermath, though in a different form; when observing everything from a distance, it would not touch him as deeply and directly as it touched me.

We left behind our small and murky flat where I even began to fear for the safety of my husband and of my own and moved to the remodelled housing development, built in 1965 on the outskirts of Mataró, of identical and dull little red-brick two storey houses with abundant greenery surrounding them, expecting to find a safe refuge where we could have a family and stay away from what I still consider the hell of Barcelona.

But things were not any better and the baby did not come. For the first few months I was taking folic acid and adapting my diet to suit the new circumstances. What Nico does not know is that I have become hopelessly addicted to tranquillizers, which are ruining my body and prevent me from forming a new life in my belly.

And today is the anniversary of our arrival to this residential locality where my dreams were broken when I realized that sometimes happiness has nothing to do with the place where you live or the people who surround you. Almost always it depends on you. If you do not feel well with yourself, you will not feel well in any place and even less so with anybody. You cannot change either your inner nature or your memories. How sorry I feel for Nico... how sorry I feel for myself.

Zafón already said: «There are worse prisons than words».

Like every morning for the last two years I observe the daily routine in the neighbourhood from a small window in my kitchen. Drinking coffee I have made for myself, I want to know if the eighty-year-old sister of señora Dolores, who is about to go shopping has died or not. Antonio, my unpredictable and sad-faced neighbour who lives two houses down the street, has with great effort thrown one of his big garbage bags into the container, something he usually does once or twice a month. He does it discreetly, looking one way and the other, not knowing that I am the

only one who watches him closely. I ask myself what there might be inside those bags to weigh so much.

María and her husband, Carlos, are kissing goodbye at the door of their house; they are so much in love... He, well-mannered and rather reserved, spruce and close-shaved; she, naturally elegant, perfectly dressed up from early morning. He is touching María's silky black hair then goes towards the car and from there he turns round to wave her goodbye; she smiles showing perfect teeth and secretly rubbing her belly.

Alicia, always engrossed in her own world, goes jogging with the earphones on. Behind her, *Matías*, her dog — who she loves more than Ismael, her new boyfriend who has just moved in with her —, is running fast with his long tongue out moving from one side to the other. Federico, a sharp man in his eighties is feeding some stray cats on the corner round which Carlos in his car has just disappeared, and Alicia as well. I give free rein to my imagination and fantasize that young Alicia and Carlos are together, deceiving their partners and having a torrid clandestine affair.

María, who has just taken some letters from the letter box, is greeting me now with an exaggerated wave of her left hand and I respond, tilting my head and smiling. She is the only person who knows about my taste for spying from the privacy of my kitchen. Nobody, apart from her, knows my secret. And she does not mind.

This is a quiet street, with pine trees and shrubs which separate the houses, in a residential area like many others.

---Nothing ever happens here — María told me one day. — But if it did, you would know and nobody would escape prison if they felt like killing someone.

It has been long since I had such a hearty laugh! I could easily imagine old Federico with one of his shotguns he keeps in his garage killing señora Dolores, because he has had enough of her turning the volume up on her television set at daybreak. Or that old weirdo Antonio poisoning young Alicia because her dog discovered what was in one of those garbage bags which worry and obsess me so. On many evenings he also carries two bulging suitcases, puts

them in the boot of his car and drives quietly away to who knows where. Is Antonio a murderer who quarters his victims? One day, when it gets dark, the lights go off and people go to sleep, I will walk there and open one of those bags. Perhaps I will not discover anything of importance or even interesting. Perhaps I will find inside some pieces of decomposing human flesh. I suppose it would be better if I no longer were so preoccupied with poor Antonio and thought rather that his seriousness is the fruit of loneliness and claustrophobia one can often feel when living here.

Outwardly, it is a nice place, a dream place but slowly and imperceptibly it encircles you and traps you as if it were a cage. More and more often I cannot be bothered to get into the car and go to the centre of Barcelona, only a half-an-hour distance from here but so far in my thoughts. Always the same people, always the same anxiety, always the same lunacy of seeing every day the faces that show stories different from those they hide.

Our street lacks something the one behind has in excess: children. Their laughter can be heard from afar, as well as their tantrums and the hysterical yelling of their parents, who often do not know how to handle typical children's problems they come across. I suppose they must know how lucky they are but then maybe they do not often give it a thought. I wish I could have a little nipper here running about, breaking vases, waking me up at seven in the morning at the weekends, hiding kitchen utensils and risking his life by hanging from the curtains in the living room. What would I not give for knowing if he would have my blue eyes and brown hair or would he rather inherit Nico's wild appeal. I would pay no attention to my dear window, which now with the infernal summer heat and my difficulty to sleep keeps me there for hours. Having a child at home would let me forget Antonio's bags and suitcases or the happy marriage of Carlos and María.

I have swollen like a balloon because of folic acid, tranquillizantes and alcohol and have slept badly for I do not even remember how long. «To sleep badly» would not exactly be the right expression because I can hardly sleep at all in spite of the pills.

I close my eyes for a while and, as if it already were a habit, I wake and then stare at the black and dishevelled hair of Nico, sleeping with his back to me. Sometimes I get bored and go to my study with the intention to write but on most occasions I go down to the kitchen, where the air is more refreshing and where, sitting by the window I can look at the cool dark summer night. I think about how guilty I feel because I know that Nico longs for a child even more than I do, the child I cannot give him. Some time ago we talked about the in vitro fertilization although there is still a spark of hope for me and I think that I might become pregnant in the natural way. The only problem is that it has been two months now and since then Nico does not want to make love with me. He rejects me as if I were a stranger; he is excluding me from his life and the worst of all this is that I cannot imagine my life without him.

We met ten years ago, when I was a naive twenty-three-year old and he an attractive man of twenty-five. We were each in the company of our friends, standing at the entrance to the cinema and neither he nor I could agree about what film we wanted to see. Nico noticed that I was in a similar situation so he came up and, with his mischevious and a bit brazen smile and a wicked look in his almond-shaped eyes suggested seeing a film together: «I think our taste is a bit more select». And so we found ourselves, two complete strangers in the empty cinema, enjoying *Elsa and Fred*, while the rest of the company wolfed down popcorn admiring the toned muscles of Brad Pitt and big eyes of Angelina Jolie in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.

It has been such a long time since he gazed at me lovingly, much too long, since I heard his hoarse voice —«You are so beautiful...»— after a long orgasm while I, ecstatic, caressed his dark skin and dishevelled hair. Too long a time since Nico does not live for me. He is not my beautiful hero I knew.

I can hear him coming down the stairs.

—Hi — he greets me in a harsh voice.

—Hi — I repeat without much enthusiasm.

—What are you doing today? —he asks. He pours himself a cup of coffee and takes a toast.

—I have an appointment with the gynaecologist... You could come — I say tentatively, looking at him fixedly, trying to see if I can make him do the same.

«I am here! Look at me! Why don't you look at me like before? Why don't you want to make me feel the most exceptional woman in the world?»

—Why?

—To decide what we want to do, Nico, do we go ahead with in vitro or not.

—You decide. Do what you want —he answers casually.

And he goes to take a shower.

Only a short time ago, he would kiss me before saying “Hi”. Now, only a cold greeting from a distance; and he gives me a kiss only when I ask him, when he is about to go out. Frankly, I do not want to be merely an ornament, a wife, who has to walk behind her husband to get a kiss like some kind of bonus. This is what you have turned me into? Really? Well, that's a damn mean joke.

«I hate you. I hate you. I hate you», says a tiny voice in my head and suddenly I feel like mixing alcohol with tranquillizers when he is around. His attitude towards me makes me think that, yes, he does know of my addiction and hates me for it. When he is at home, I control the dose. When he goes away, everything changes, gets out of control.

One evening, when Nico was in Zaragoza on a business trip, María came to dinner and after she left I went the whole way even forgetting who I was. I do not know, how the hell, I ended up naked on the garage floor. I also do not know who made a deep cut in my lip and why there was a dark blue mark on my forehead. Yet the sensation of having gaps in my mind captivated me. Since then I want Nico to travel more often and leave me alone so that I would not have to adjust the amount of medication I take. Madness is a dangerous addiction but now it is the only means to save me.

He has his regular routine. He leaves home, drives to his lawyer's office in the centre of Barcelona and returns engrossed in his own affairs. My days are different: I spend practically the whole day at home and create stories in my mind, not knowing where they may lead, hoping to see them written on paper. My only diversion is to contemplate the life of others, so that I would not be thinking of mine, going down the drain.

I hold back tears prompted by Nico's indifference and look through the windowpane. It is eight in the morning and most of my neighbors have already gone to work. In five minutes, Alicia will appear with *Matías* about to finish her daily run, or an amorous adventure with Carlos, which exists only in my mind. María will perhaps drive to the shops at nine; señora Dolores, who has the nicest and best-tended garden in the street, will water her roses at half past ten and Federico will go out to tell her: «Dolores! How lucky we are to have you here, these days the young do not want to know anything about flowers». That is true. The gardens in front of other houses are boring, we hardly ever mow the grass at the weekends and we only try to salvage the few fruit trees, which had been planted before we came to live here.

I will not get even a glimpse of my neighbour Antonio until seven in the evening when, with his two suitcases, he will get into the car and go to his destination still unknown to me. I promise myself that tonight will be «the night»: tonight I will expose the mysterious neighbour who in reality is a serious killer. Still, this is what I plan to do every morning and never dare to accomplish in the evening.

I will stay at home, trying to put meaningful words together and finish my novel, while my husband shuts himself up in his office, with a secretary, who, I am sure, is younger than me and also much prettier.

Nico comes to the kitchen with his jacket already on.

—What time will you be back today? — I ask and swallow the last gulp of coffee.

—I will try to come early. Victor is arriving today.

—Victor?

—My brother.

—Your brother? How come?

—I told you last week, Andrea. He will stay a couple of days.

He did not tell me. Or perhaps he did and I do not remember.

—But he lives in San Francisco, doesn't he? It's his holidays?

—No, I think he has put everything there behind him and is coming to Barcelona for good, but I'm not sure — says Nico—. It's only a couple of days, won't be a problem. He's my brother, okay? If he needs help, I am here for him.

—He needs help? Has something happened? —I ask, pretending to be preoccupied, though in reality I could not care less.

—I don't know! He only asked if he could stay here, nothing else. Sounded a bit highly-strung, but he has always been rather odd so I didn't give it much importance. He doesn't get along with our parents and prefers to stay here.

—Lovely —I say with irony.

—I'll come early, okay? Victor should be here around six.

I am tired of begging for a goodbye kiss so I let him go and while I am washing the coffee cups I look absently through window and see Nico driving away at sixty kilometres per hour; an excessive speed, he should be doing thirty.

I have seen Victor only two times and that was many years ago. He has little contact with Nico or his parents, they call each other once in three months and I think he lives off what he studied, architecture. I have never liked him much, this indifference he shows for his family is what I particularly do not like. When I met him, he seemed rather haughty to me and has never shown the slightest interest in the wife of his only brother. He never asked how I was or what I did, and never wanted to know whether I was from Barcelona or any other place in the world. This is what one usually asks when meeting a person for the first time. I even very much doubt he remembers my face. On neither of those two occasions, he let me approach him to start a conversation; as if he did not permit anybody to break through the barrier which he himself, for the

reasons I do not know, has erected. He is an odd and silent type whom I do not want to have at home now.

In spite of that, I think Nico should have a closer bond with Victor. He has not even once suggested we should go to San Francisco to see his brother. I have always thought that if I had brothers I would have been in close contact with them, even if it were only on account of sharing the same genes. That is not their case, though. In fact, Nico seldom talks about Victor.

I walk listlessly up, go to the bedroom, do the bed and collect dirty clothes. Then I take a five-minute shower and put on the first thing I find in the closet, jeans and a grey T-shirt. Before, not a long time ago, I would stand in front of the closet for half an hour, deciding what I should wear. I was a coquette, not swollen like a balloon, and I liked to dress well.

-The wife of a lawyer and a would-be writer of crime stories must dress elegantly-, I used to think.

Now I do not care. My blue eyes, so desirable among the common brown eyes, have lost the sparkle, are puffy and baggy. I can make out tiny wrinkles there while in the corners of the mouth they are deep and sore. I should look better after myself, should not smoke so much, I should have bought more moisturizing creams, advertised on television by celebrities. I tie my unkempt hair, dry and with a loathsome silver thread or two showing through, into a bun, which does not suit me as well as I would like to and try to stretch the T-shirt to cover rolls of fat protruding from the jeans.

A couple of minutes later, it is me who is driving idly towards the centre of Barcelona to attend the appointment with my gynaecologist, wondering if anybody was watching me from a rear window in the privacy of their home.

I want to run away from the sad waiting room in the hospital, not to look at the dreadful green of its walls and never again tread on the grey marble tiles. Several women have been with the doctor before me and I have seen in their eyes that special sparkle I once had too. Perhaps they already are a couple of weeks pregnant or

perhaps the gynaecologist, who each time I see and tells me: -Be patient, it will come-, has given them real hope of a longed-for pregnancy. Naturally, it is possible that they look after themselves better than I do and are able to give up any addiction in order to fulfill their dream of being mothers. I have not been able, I am not able and that is why I feel like a piece of crap.

I cannot bear to look at pregnant women these days. When I come across one, I glance at her and think: «Why not me? Why she and not me?». I agonize over it, I get depressed and only want to lock myself in a dark room and cry until I can shed no more tears. On top of that I feel abandoned and rejected by the man with whom I have shared my life for ten years.

It is hard when people ask you: -And when will the baby come?-. If we could understand the word «to think» a little better, we would never ask a married couple a question like that, not knowing the circumstances they find themselves in.

—Andrea Fernández —says a dark girl at the door of the surgery, dressed in white and with a look in her eyes as warm as her smile.

It is my turn. I walk in with a sure step but inside I am shaking like jelly.

—¿How are you? — asks Marta, my gynaecologist. She is in her fifties, with grey hair and clear eyes, which inspire confidence. She does not smile much but when she does, she shows perfectly even white teeth.

—Fine — I lie.

After examining me carefully, we sit opposite each other at the desk in the surgery.

—What do we do, Marta? —I ask uncertainly.

—In your case there is no problem of age, you are young, you are only thirty-three. Only, it's unusual that nothing happened in all this time, Andrea. But you must't give up hope, there are women who need much more time. —She looks at me with compassion. I cannot bear it when people look at me with compassion. Then she

glances at my medical records. She knows that I have been taking tranquillizers for the last two years, though not the exact quantity. I have concealed this information from her and she thinks it is not something that could impair my becoming pregnant—. The tests did not indicate any fertility problems in you or your husband and I still do not see anything irregular. You... —she hesitates— what do you want to do?

Silence. I am so accustomed to holding back tears so what gives me away is only a slight quiver of my chin. Apart from that, I put on a brave face, shrug my shoulders and arch my brows, waiting for her to tell me what I should do.

—We have several options —she begins—. Well, I will tell about three fertility treatments. Not everything is lost, Andrea. there are solutions, okay? Then we always have the option of waiting. As I have already told you, in comparison with other cases, one year is nothing. —She takes a deep breath and interlaces her fingers, ready to tell me of the options, which I intend to listen to with attention—.-----On the one hand, we have assisted stimulation of ovaries, for example. It consists in taking certain drugs to help liberate an ovum. It is not folic acid, proteins and balanced diet, which is what you have been doing. I would prescribe you clomiphene, a commonly used drug, which helps women to ovulate or gonadotropin, which is administered by injection. All right?

—Are there any side effects? Folic acid and proteins have only caused swelling. —And whisky and tranquillizers.... But, obviously, I am not going to tell her that.

—Yes, there are. Clomiphene can cause stomach pain, hot flashes and mood swings and you may suffer some breast discomfort. Injections of gonadotropins may cause bloating and pain in the lower part of the abdomen. But this option is much more feasible, Andrea. In your case, I would not suggest a surgical intervention in your reproductive system, like removing blockage in the Falopian tubes.

—No. It will be easier to put me on medication. - I sigh and rub my eyes. And the *in vitro* fertilisation? Medication will be simpler.

Injections make me feel funny. The very thought of having something injected in my veins sends a shiver down my spine. —. I want pills.

—Clomiphene- says Marta

—It's a pill, isn't it?

Marta nods and begins writing out the prescription in silence. I am afraid that clomiphene, a new drug I have just been informed about, will become another of my addictions. As if swallowing one pill after another could save my marriage with Nico.

—It comes in tablets. Take one a day, always at the same time, for five days starting on the fifth day of the cycle. And Andrea, please... Do not mix it with tranquillizers, okay? —I do not say anything, because I cannot promise it, it is beyond me—. Come to see me in two weeks and we'll see.

I say goodbye to Marta, with the prescription already in hand.

Even though for her, one year might be nothing, I ask myself why we did not think of the other solutions before my marriage began to fall apart, before Nico began to ignore as if I were a stray dog. I do not believe that I will go to a pharmacy to get this new medication. What sense would it make now? I would not want to bring an unwanted child to this world. It would never forgive me.

I put the prescription in my bag and leave the hospital, reminding myself that today my husband's brother is coming and what I least want now is to have my brother-in-law at home.

### *The visit of a stranger*

**A**licia returns home strictly obeying the speed sign of thirty kilometres per hour. I know that her boyfriend Ismael does not work because I saw him walking with *Matías* a short time ago. I have not exchanged even one word with him, but then he is not the type I would want to strike up a conversation. I think he smokes joints and drinks too much in the bushes here, judging by the number of beer cans I have seen on the grass. He does not seem to wash his

dreadlocks with shampoo, either. Alicia does not choose her boyfriends well but I will not be the one to give her advice. I do not want to and I cannot.

Señora Dolores has been sitting on the porch of her house for the last two hours with a glass of lemonade. She pretends to be reading but has not turned a page in more than half an hour.

Antonio will drive away in half an hour, but I already saw him at three in the afternoon putting his bulging suitcases in his car.

Federico, as always, has been talking with señora Dolores for more than three hours. They would be talking about the weather and global warming, about how handsome they were in the forties and how little attention they get from their children. Now he will watch a documentary on Channel 2, sitting in a wing chair of brown leather with a cup of green tea on the small table in front of him.

I have not seen María all day. Normally I see her leaving home quite often, always busy, always on the move. These days she has not been out a lot. She usually comes before noon to have coffee with me and to talk and maybe today she pressed the bell when I was in the surgery of my gynaecologist. But the truth is that though we talk a lot, we do not say anything interesting, we do not know each other too well.

María and Carlos moved to the house across the street some ten months ago. When we met, I saw the light. That was after I have realised that I do not want to have to speak louder when I talk to Federico and señora Dolores, so they can understand me. I have also known by then that I do not have anything in common with Alicia, a rich girl, whose parents retired to a small town in Galicia and left the house only to her and her numerous «stable» partners or with Antonio, of whom I can only say that I find his life mysterious. I thought then that we would get on well with María and Carlos because we were about the same age and we would often go out to dinner or make plans together... but nothing like that happened during all those months. They only invited us once to dinner, shortly after moving here. I think that Nico does not like them, and asking him why would be useless because he cannot stand eighty

percent of the human race. But I like them, especially María, who reminds me of Clara, even though she has nothing to do with her. Above all, I like her for her sense of humour. María, same as Clara, does not attach importance to things for which I would jump off a bridge.

Besides, I identify with her in some respects, for example, in the fact that Carlos spends the whole day away from home, like Nico. Although, contrary to Nico, he shows how much he is in love with his wife. I feel jealous when I see him getting out of his car with a bouquet of flowers.

María is different from me. She knows how to look after herself and to dress well. She is perfect. She looks as if she has stepped out of the films of the fifties in which the ladies of the house had perfect hairdos and not a single crease in their blouses and skirts. She always wears high heels and never gives the impression that her feet ache, something I always thought exclusive to models and creatures from outer space. She never has dark rings round her eyes, her make-up is perfect, almost like her smile. Sometimes she wears glasses and looks well in them. If I were wearing glasses, I would lose the little appeal I have left. She studied education, she told me, but after having worked in different schools decided, like me, not to work. She seems to be quite satisfied about this decision, because, as far as I can see, Carlos earns good money in a German scientific laboratory.

-What would you do if you thought that Carlos had a lover?-, I asked her once.

She burst out laughing and looked at me mockingly with those deep pistachio green eyes.

-I would let him enjoy himself. Then when he comes home, he doesn't bother me.-

I did not laugh. It has been some months, when we had that conversation, when I began to suspect that Nico was having a love affair with his secretary. More than once, I thought about going to his office, taking him by surprise, imagining that I find them making love on the desk in his office. But then I thought: «Out of

sight, out of mind», and went on being the wife who does not notice anything and still hopes to have a baby with the man who has not touched even her hand for the last two months..

It gives me a start to see a taxi pulling up at the door of our house. I swallow the last of my coffee and leave the cup on the worktop to go over to the window to confirm that it is indeed my brother-in-law, paying the taxi. I did not remember that he was so tall and so athletic. Nor did I remember that he resembled Nico so much, so that he might easily be mistaken for his twin brother. The same black hair, the same almond-shaped eyes, the same dark complexion. He has a few days' stubble and even though he looks tired, I find him very attractive.

With the help of the taxi-driver, Victor gets his enormous black suitcase and stands still looking at my house, while the taxi drives away. I am hesitating whether I should go and open the door for him or wait until he rings the bell and then Victor looks in the direction of the kitchen window and sees me there. He does not smile, or make any sign of greeting me. I desperately want Nico to come back home. It is seven in the evening, for goodness sake, and he should already be here. He told me he would be back soon, why do I believe him? Victor points at the door, I nod my head and go to open it.

—Hi, Victor —I greet him with a forced smile.

—How's it going?

—Well, here I am... waiting for your brother.

—Uh-huh.

Victor goes through the hallway, leaves the suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and leans against the frame of the arch, which leads to the living room. He looks around curiously as if he wanted to uncover something in some nook of my house. I get nervous when, without asking permission, he takes a step and enters the living room. He picks up a framed photograph with Nico and me, smiling and happy on the day of the wedding. He squints at it and

makes a grimace of annoyance, which I do not know how to interpret.

—What a pity you couldn't come to the wedding —I say, pointing to the photo, with the intention of breaking the ice.

—Uh-huh...

He is not interested in striking up a conversation, like on the other two occasions years ago. He does not even look at me, what I consider unnerving; he is after all in my home and should show his more agreeable side.

—Will you have something? —I offer, a bit tense, on edge. —. Are you jetlagged?

—What do you think? —he asks sarcastically.

I do not know anything about jetlag. I have not travelled much, Italy has been the farthest I have ever been to, during our honeymoon. Yes, I keep thinking, this man is a total stranger, who I have to put up with at home for a couple of days.

«Only a couple of days. It will be only a couple of days», I reassure myself. I hate his deadly silence and his eyes fixed on me, conveying absolutely nothing.

Like an idiot, I look away because I am worried sick and I hate it. His presence disturbs me, I really do not want him in my home.

—I am going to prepare dinner. If you want to take a shower, go on, it's upstairs. Make yourself at home —I say, wishing only to get him out of my sight.

—Uh-huh...

I want to tell him that if he says «Uh-huh» again, I will kick him out and throw his suitcase after him; but I only smile and go to the kitchen to prepare something for dinner. A potato tortilla would do, mine is always delicious and it was the first thing I cooked when Nico and I moved to this house, where, I remind myself again, we have lived for two years. A house we wanted to fill up with kids, their crying at night, laughter and happiness. In the end... it has become an empty house, which has to deal with the absence of a distant man and the depression of a woman, fatter, uglier and sicker.

—When is Nico coming?

I turn round and see Victor leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, closely observing my laborious task of peeling an onion. Shit. Why doesn't he go upstairs to have a shower? Why is he still here trying to give the impression that we feel at ease?

—He should have come already —I answer, looking at the clock. The hands do not seem to move at all, as if time has stopped.  
— You want anything? Coffee, tea?

—Have you got beer?

—Help yourself —I tell him, pointing at the fridge.

Victor smiles for the first time and I can make out a natural grin, like Nico's in the past. When Nico smiles now, it seems to be forced, it is never natural. Nonetheless, Victor is probably one of those people, whose smiles materialize on their own, without being obliged to do so. In some way, it surprises me to think so. He takes out a beer from the back of the fridge, covered with condensation droplets and instead of returning to the living room, he again leans against the doorframe of the kitchen, where I am.

—You don't want a shower or something?

It is not a question, it is a suggestion.

—Am I bothering you?

—What? No, no... do what you want.

I begin to move restlessly from one side to the other, not knowing exactly what I am doing. I finish peeling the onion, cut potatoes into fine slices and put the frying pan full of oil on the ring.

—What has brought you here? —I ask him, turning round, conscious of being observed all this time.

I dry sweat from my forehead and move to get a glass of water. What awful heat!

—I miss my family, you know.

It would have sounded quite normal to me, if he had not said it so hastily, with his head down and his face turned away so that he would not have to look at me. Perhaps the mind of a crime-story writer, ready to see the dark side of every person is telling me to make up what does not exist; but I think that this is not the reason why Victor is here.

If I remember correctly, Nico once told me that his brother was about my age and that he went to live in San Francisco when only eighteen to study architecture. That is fifteen years ago. I would never have dared to cross the Pond all alone and at such an early age. Certainly, we know very little about his life, at least I do. Why has he come now? Would it not be better to stay with «papa» and «mama», as he did the other two times? Nico hardly ever talks about Victor and when I sometimes asked about his brother he either got annoyed or answered with a grunt. I have enough of my own obsessions and manias but Victor is, without any doubt, a mystery, which I would like to unravel even more eagerly than the contents of Antonio's bags and suitcases.

—You will be asking why I have come here instead of staying in my parents' house —he says, reading my mind. All about him is disturbing, from the very first word he utters until the last, he intimidates me with a single look. —As you know —he goes on— the relationship with my brother is zero. I suppose both of us are too independent and not very affectionate. But as time goes by you realize that you need a family, you need to create bonds... I don't know, call it what you like. —He swallows a sip of beer and again looks me fixedly in the eye. I feel uneasy again, feel this lump in my throat, which almost chokes me. — I don't want to bother you in any way, as soon as I resolve some matters, I will go —he concludes mysteriously.

—Some matters?

—Uh-huh...

Victor turns back and with his beer in hand goes upstairs. Still disturbed by those mysterious «matters» he has to resolve I prick up my ears and know that he has been opening the doors of every room, looking for the bathroom, I suppose. Five minutes later, I can hear the water running in the shower, blending with the sound of potatoes and onions sizzling in the frying pan.

Nothing of what he has said makes any sense.

Why now, after so many years, he wants to create bonds? Has he done something that makes him feel so guilty he needs the

brother he has ignored for years? What kind of problems they have had? What he said about being independent and not very affectionate sounds like an excuse or a lie he needs to conceal something.

*Like two strangers*

The potato tortilla is getting cold on the table in the kitchen. Victor is still in the bathroom, having spent there one hour and perhaps I should make a show of being a better hostess and find out if he is all right.

Nico has not come back yet. I have already called him three times and left three messages in his voicemail, telling him that his brother has now arrived.

I open the drawer where I have put the prescription for clomiphene and look at it, it seems to be lying in wait for me. Do I take the pills or not? Do I want to have a baby with Nico? Is it what I really want? I do not know any more. While thinking about it I light a cigarette. A vice I have been giving up a hundred times since I put upon myself the task of having a baby. In view of the positive result, why should I deny myself the pleasure? After all, it is less harmful than the one I have now.

The clock shows eight thirty and just as it moves a millimetre towards thirty-one, Victor opens the door of the bathroom.

—Are you all right? —I ask, not moving from the kitchen and raising my voice so that he can hear me.

—Uh-huh —I hear him mutter.

He comes down, I know he has used my lavender gel by the smell it gives off. He has changed, now instead of jeans he is wearing grey tracksuit pants and a comfortable green T-shirt instead of a dark blue shirt that made him look so good.

I know that uncomfortable silence will follow so I get up to observe the life outside from my window. I want to stick to my habit even when there are visitors at home. Antonio has already gone, with Victor's arrival I have forgotten to watch how again, at

seven, he puts his suitcases in his red Fiat and disappears down the street to who knows where. Señora Dolores has left the book and the empty lemonade glass on a small wicker table on the porch and has turned on the light in the kitchen. Very likely she is preparing dinner and in a while the whole street will smell of sardines, her favourite summer dish. Ismael, with a joint between his fingers is walking *Matías* and again I think about how little I like this young man. María comes out to welcome Carlos, who has just parked his car in the garage. However, I can see from the window, that she is keeping an eye on my house rather than on her husband.

—And you are you all right? —Victor asks, sitting on a chair.

—I write, you know? Crime stories. I like to observe and find out what is happening around me — I tell him, not really knowing why.

—How interesting. This tortilla looks good. It's been years since I had a good tortilla... In San Francisco all allegedly Spanish restaurants have no idea how to make it properly.

His voice is unhurried and deep. Perhaps he is not as disagreeable as I thought in the beginning, perhaps his stay in this house will do Nico and me good, will break the routine. Just as I want to assure Victor that this will be the best tortilla he has ever had —jokingly, of course—, we can hear the key in the lock and the front door opens.

Victor gets up and goes into the hall, but what I have expected to be an emotional welcome with affectionate hugs of two brothers, who have not seen each other for years, turns out to be something cold, distant and very odd. Victor and Nico greet by just lifting their heads and looking fixedly at each other. Challenging each other, rather. The atmosphere becomes tense and the smell of lavender disappears as if by magic to give way to the nasty damp smell. I always feel it when I am in an uncomfortable situation, like this one when I do not know what to do with my hands.

—How's it going? —Nico asks.

—How's it going with you?

Nico pays no attention to his brother's question and goes to the kitchen. Now when I have them both together, I can see that extraordinary likeness between them. Nico is a little shorter and slimmer, his complexion is not so dark and his lips are fuller but, apart from that, they look almost identical to me.

—Sorry for being late —says Nico, sticking to his bad habit of not looking me in the face.

He cuts a piece of the tortilla, puts it on a plate and sits at the table. .

—You are not eating? —he asks rudely.

I know that he is not going to ask me about the morning visit to the gynaecologist, not even how my day was. Still, taking this attitude in front of his brother, who he has not seen in years, really annoys me.

— I am going for a walk —I decide. —. I hope you like the the tortilla.

Nico does not even look at me. Victor, yes, he does. With compassion. Again that damned compassion in a stranger's eyes, taking pity on me. «I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.»

I go out into the street, which I normally contemplate from the kitchen window rather than from the outside and glance towards the house of María and Carlos. They are in the living room and, through the white curtains, I can make out rather too exaggerated gestures of Carlos. I stop. María is standing with crossed arms and Carlos seems to be shouting at her. I cannot very well see María's face but it looks as if she squinted at her husband, frowned at him and took a step or two away from him. The egoist in me is happy to see that I am not the only one with marital problems. María and Carlos, so much in love to all appearances, also have them. Judging by what I can see from a discreet distance, very serious problems.

I keep on walking. Ismael goes back home with *Matías* and another joint between his fingers. We acknowledge each other with a curt and neutral nod and he goes his way; I turn back to look at his dreadlocks and stay put for a while because of the smoke of the joint. During the next half hour, when it begins to get dark I

walk around our residential area and even dare to get a bit deeper into the wood.

I try to imagine what it was like in the sixties, who walked where I am walking now and if the sun seemed to be as much of a captive among little brick houses, as it seems to me now. The light of the moon, still weak but clear and white gives everything a two-dimensional appearance; my shadow grows longer before me and I seem to be taller than I really am. It is all very quiet and hushed. I breathe the pure air the leafy trees give us and snoop around a bit towards the lights in the windows of the people living in the other streets, which I do not know as well as my street. Those houses, not like the houses of my own neighbours, do not mean anything to me because I cannot see them from my window. I ask myself if my obsession with the people who live close to me, whether I know them or not, is also a kind of illness. I turn back to go home, do not want to think about all this any longer because the simple fact of thinking is like a torture.

Sometimes I miss the hustle and bustle of the city. The bad mood of the people crowding the streets, hundreds of shops, bars and restaurants I could go to. I miss what I was like before the death of Clara, or even before I met her.

Nico and I loved taking long walks in the old town of Barcelona; losing our way among its narrow, dark and quaint streets and ending our walks with a glass of vermouth in the legendary wine bar, Bodega Cala del Vermut: dark, very small and always packed with people, tourists, inquisitive onlookers and regulars. In the summer, we would be getting a tan on the crowded beach of Barceloneta; then eat a delicious big paella in one of few restaurants, which do not cheat the tourists, like Can Majó. Its walls painted in sky blue and the photos and paintings with maritime motifs made us feel as if we were on board a ship. Then we would walk along the promenade watching the setting sun, always cuddled up like any other happy couple we came across at every turn. Later in the evening, we would sit in some beach bar, drinking mojitos and finally have a pleasant walk home.

I loved to go shopping in the avenue Portal de l'Àngel, I knew each and every shop there just like the shops in the emblematic Paseo de Gràcia. There, however, I could only enjoy window-shopping, as my earning power was not adequate to their prices.

Every twenty third of April, the Saint George's Day, Nico and I would walk up and down the Rambla among hundreds of people who, like us, did not want to miss such a special day in Barcelona. How proud I was walking hand in hand with Nico, holding a rose he gave me that day in the other hand. What has happened to all those friends with whom we used to dine every Friday in any of the fashionable restaurants in Gràcia? Endless appetizers in the Bardot bar; red tuna tartar in Café Emma, with its elegant décor and cristal lamps I wanted to have in my living room and small tables in cosy nooks, promising intimate atmosphere; or Asiatic tapas in Doble Zero, close to the Santa Caterina market in the old town.

-What has happened to that life and to the people who surrounded us? What have I become?-, I ask myself incessantly.

It seems one whole life has passed since then.

Then I think about Clara and do not anymore miss the heart of Barcelona and all those things I used to do with Nico and those friends who seem to have disappeared from the face of the Earth. When Clara died, I was seeing her face in all women and alleged murderers in any man who looked at me in a peculiar way. I, who had always slept like a log, became obsessed with the idea that somebody would enter my home in the depth of night and kill me by goading me into taking an overdose of heroin. That is why I cannot sleep. It looks as if I have ordered my brain to keep me in the state of wakefulness. The suffocating heat of these days does not help, either. Nor does the memory of Clara.

Sometimes I have the impression that the lights in my bedroom go on and off all by themselves and on other occasions the radio volume goes crazy. More than once I have thought that it is Clara, who is sending me signals from the great beyond. Then I persuade myself that it is nothing but hallucinations, provoked by the tranquillizers and whiskey; but even so, I still take them. Why

should I stop doing something that helps me withdraw from this shitty life? Besides, deep down, I think I quite like the radio going crazy, almost as if were also addicted to the terror I feel when I imagine a ghost by my side, sending me messages.

When I return home, the night has already fallen. Nico is watching a documentary on television from the sofa and although I can smell the aroma of my lavender shower gel there is not a sign of Victor.

—And your brother? —I ask, drying sweat from my forehead. Air-conditioning has broken and I have not yet called the repairman. Damned old houses.

—In the guest room —he answers— I gave him those flowery sheets you kept in the wardrobe drawer.

—What are you watching? —I ask, sitting next to him. Again, he ignores me, only points at the television set and that makes me feel like a perfect idiot. —. Okay. Since you do not want to talk with me, I am going to bed.

—Very well.

He need not have said anything and I would have felt better without this goddamn «Very well». It feels as if he has hit me with a stone.

From the window of my bedroom I can only see the house next door, Federico's, who has already turned all the lights off. I open the drawer of my night table and take out a small box of pills, which I keep hidden among some books. Today I need one, only one... or two... I swallow them without water because now taking them is for me like breathing.

I turn off the light and close my eyes. I am peaceful and calm... perhaps I will wake up in a couple of hours still with the effects of the tranquillizers and even then I will still not be able to fall asleep. Perhaps in this infernal heat I will decide to go to my studio and write all night. Or perhaps, I will take a peek from the kitchen window at the sleeping souls who coexist so close to me and at the same time so far away.

I torment myself for a few seconds but then I think: «Tomorrow will be another day». I again feel the peace and calm I need so much.

*Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> of June, 2015*

*The tension*

**I**t is so strange. For the first time in ages, I am more interested in what is going on in my kitchen than in the exterior I contemplate from the window every morning. Nico and Victor are having coffee and toast with raspberry jam. I look at them in amazement, as if I were seeing one person making the same gestures in front of a mirror. Both absorbed in their own world, they do not have the need to talk. Perhaps yesterday, when I went out to get some air and walk for a while I missed an interesting conversation between them. Perhaps they have told each other everything and now have nothing to talk about, though fifteen years might offer some opportunity.

—Well, I'm going — Nico says, looking sideways at his brother.

—Good luck —Victor wishes him, as casually as Nico.

—What are you doing today? —Nico asks me, with a smile that surprises me.

—Writing, I suppose —I answer, looking at Victor.

Nico stands before me and for the first time in those two months encircles my waist, holds me tight and kisses me on the lips.

—I love you —he whispers in my ear and leaves me with a silly smile I will surely keep on my face all day.

I look sideways at the drawer with the prescription for a drug, which might help me to create a new life and decide that today I will go to a pharmacy and buy clomiphene. I want a child. And I want Nico to be the father. I need to convince myself that things will go well if only I follow the instructions of my gynaecologist.

-Do not mix clomiphene with excessive use of harmful tranquilizers and whiskey- I make a mental note.

When Nico leaves and I am again alone with Victor the tension becomes palpable. It is because I do not know what to say, because with the distant look in his eyes I feel uncomfortable. Again, there appears, I do not know where from, this putrid damp smell. And again I feel dizzy and see double but even though I know that in a few seconds all this will disappear, it makes my stomach heave.

—What are you going to do today? —I ask, after I recovered a bit of common sense.

—Now, I will go to collect the car I have rented.

—And... with Nico, everything's okay?

I watch closely the expression on his face. Before answering, he raises his eyebrows and twists his lips. He opens his eyes very wide and finally laughs cynically.

—In the same vein —he says. He gets up and goes upstairs, preventing me from saying anything else.

Five minutes later, I go to my bedroom upstairs and press my ear to the wall, trying to hear something. Victor opens the wardrobe then closes it. He drags a metal object, probably from under the bed —I imagine—. The door opens, then closes and I can hear him going downstairs.

—Andrea?

—Yes? —I say, opening the bedroom door.

—I am going.

—Okay, have a good time.

Another door opens, the front door. I wait a bit in case he comes back and then go to the guest room. I know it is not done to snoop, of course, it isn't! But I have every right to know who is staying in my house.

Everything seems correct. I open the wardrobe: jeans, shirts, T-shirts, five pairs of shoes in perfect order, as if my brother-in-law were the kind of a maniac who needs to have everything sorted out according to size and colour.

As if he was going to stay for ever!

On the other hand, if Victor's presence makes Nico to be so affectionate every morning, I will sign a contract giving him the right to stay indefinitely.

I look under the bed. I thought I had heard a disturbing sound of something being dragged out from under it, but there is nothing there. Only a bit of dust which I should get rid of with a vacuum-cleaner. The bed is done, the window open and the aroma of my lavender shower gel fills the air.

I leave the guest room and go back to bedroom, ready to change and go to the pharmacy to buy my «little help» to have a baby. I am excited, I seem to act like an idiot, a simple kiss and an «I love you», which I should consider absolutely normal, even though unusual, has made me very happy.

An hour later I am back home. There is a black Seat, parked in front of the house; I suppose it is the one Victor has rented.

—Andrea!

It is María. She is loaded with shopping bags and greets me from the door of her house. I look at my windows, I think Victor is probably there.

—Hi, María! —I say, hiding the little packet from the pharmacy in my bag.

- Want a coffee?

I nod and enter her house, as perfect as its owner. The arrangement of the rooms is practically identical to ours, but the design is minimalist and the furniture is immaculately white, which would be impossible to maintain if children lived there. I have never asked her why they do not have kids and do not intend. I do not like when people ask me, so why should I do so? And if they cannot? And if yesterday they quarreled about it?

María, in a black pencil skirt and a white shirt puts the shopping bags on the marble worktop in the kitchen and begins to make coffee.

—How's life? —she asks—. I see you have guests at home.

—It's Nico's brother.

—Ah, yes?

—He lives in San Francisco. He plans to stay with us for a couple of days.

—How interesting —she says, busy with the coffee maker but with her eyes on me.

—And how are you? —I ask.

I did not want to tell her that yesterday Carlos seemed to me rather agitated, as if he were shouting. María knows that I observe and keep the street under control from my window but I do not want her to think that I meddle in other people's affairs, especially hers.

—As usual —she answers with a forced smile.

I look at her stomach. Which she caressed yesterday when she was saying good bye to Carlos. It is not the stomach of a pregnant woman; perhaps not quite flat but maybe she has just put on couple of kilos, like me, and it would be rather embarrassing to ask her and be told that she is not pregnant. I prefer not to take chances.

She pours coffee into a cup and sits at my side. She transmits calm, she is one of those with whom, unlike with Nico or Victor, you will not feel uncomfortable even if you do not say anything.

It was the same with Clara. I would always go down to her flat to have coffee, though quite often we would go up to Vallcarca to our favourite coffee bar on the corner of República Argentina and Gomis Street, a bit above the Vallcarca bridge from where we could see the Güell Park, the Montaña Pelada, houses and the sky, open sky. It was called El Rincón, I suppose it is still there. I wonder if the owner, a very pleasant guy, will miss us or think about us and our noisy fits of laughter, provoked by any silly remark. We would spend hours there, sitting at a table facing the south and trying to see the sea; but the owner only laughed and said it was an «urban legend».

When I quarrelled with Nico about any trifle, it was Clara who, with a pat on the shoulder and a few right words, typical of any carefree single girl, surprised at nothing, calmed my nerves and made me see it was not so important. Of course, it was not. Later,

after we returned to my flat, Nico and I would hug, apologize and then we would make love for hours. Such times... those times.

María returns me to reality:

—We quarreled yesterday, Carlos and I. You didn't see from your window? —She gives me a wink and smiles—. I don't know, it's so silly, but ... I am sorry, I am so sorry.

—What are you sorry about?

María looks at me, takes my hand and clasps it tenderly. She looks as if she is going to say something important but I know she will not. We will talk about many things, all of them superficial, trivial but not about anything that would make us really open our hearts.

-I am sorry, I am so sorry-: Is it about me? I softly take my hand away from her grasp, I do not want to appear cold or indifferent.

—Sorry... I don't know, sorry to be like that, you know? Only that.

—I don't want to press you...

—You don't quarrel with Nico?

—It's normal —I tell her.

—Sure, —she whispers, takes a sip of coffee and laughs out loud. She seems nervous, less cordial than usually. —. How is your brother-in-law? —she asks, changing the subject.

—I haven't talked much with him.

—No? You don't get on?

—I hardly know him.

—Nico will be happy to see his brother after so many years, don't you think?

Her comment makes me think. Perhaps I have this bad habit of not trusting anybody and anything that happens around me. The tranquilizers make me see and hear things, which never really occur; but I do not remember ever having told María that Nico and Victor did not see each other for a long time. That he lives in San Francisco does not mean he did not visit before. I look at her with

suspicion. Those twinkling eyes and the hands, much more restless than usually hide nervousness I do not understand.

—You know that Nico is not much given to expressing what he feels —I answer at last.

—I don't know, I don't know him so well —she says quickly— I think he doesn't much like Carlos and me.

—He doesn't like practically anybody. Having to defend bad guys in court can make anybody gruff.

—Does he always defend the bad guys?

—Almost always. His latest case was of an abused wife.

The face of María changes completely. She turns round and pretends to be looking for something in the drawer. She looks frightened and I am frightened when I think that perhaps Carlos is not such a perfect husband he makes out and abuses his wife in some way. I remember his wild gesticulation of yesterday and am already a bit worried though I try to hide it. I also think about the flowers Carlos often gives her, perhaps in order to take a load off his conscience for abusing her. Then I remember that once I saw a documentary where they said that in their majority the abusers were charming men; nothing to show what monsters they are in reality.

—María, is something wrong?

—Eh? No, no... nothing.

She smiles again. I glance at her, trying to see some scratch or bruise that would confirm my suspicions. There is nothing. Surely, it is me imagining things again.

—As I was saying, Nico was defending an abuser, he was well aware of what the man had done and finally he won. An abuser, damn it! Can you believe that they gave him the custody of his three children because his wife was certified after she had been beaten up a hundred times and psychologically mistreated?

— And Nico can sleep at night?

I have never given it a thought. Yes, he sleeps like a log, not bothered by anything like that. If, because of me, some innocent children were left in the hands of an abusive father, I doubt I would be able to live when anything happened to them.

—Well, I must go – I say, a bit confused.

- Yes, sure. I don't want to keep you.

I finish my coffee and leave María's house with a very different feeling from other times.

«To be perfect would be a weakness» I heard someone say once. Perfection does not exist, not even in somebody so seemingly wonderful as María. Perhaps she is at odds with herself, perhaps with the outer world. Perhaps I should have to watch her more carefully from my window and find out if my doubts about the possible mistreatment by Carlos are real or only a fruit of my mind, somewhat sick and depressive, a mind, which has to invent stories so that I do not think so much about what happens to me.

#### *A visit from Carlos*

Soon after I have returned home, Victor has told me he is going out again. I suppose he wants to see his parents and hope they will be have more to talk about than his brother has.

I have been writing for hours without any break. I have not eaten, have not even had time to calculate days to start the medication, prescribed by Marta.

It is six in the afternoon. Alicia comes back from work, I imagine that Ismael, her kept boyfriend, waits for her at home with *Matías* and in half an hour they will go for a walk together, or maybe, separately.

Antonio seems to have changed his routine of not leaving home until seven. Today he does it one hour earlier, as always loaded with his suitcases.

I am surprised to see that señora Dolores has changed her old book for a cell phone, which she curiously examines and which certainly her children have brought her as entertainment.

Not a sign of Federico or Carlos, just as of Nico, who has not yet returned home.

— Spying again? —a mocking voice of my brother-in-law behind me.

I turn round startled.

— I didn't know you were back.

— Just arrived. You haven't heard the door?

— I haven't noticed.

— Living in your world, eh? —he says .

I do not answer, I consider it a lack of respect, even insolence to make such a comment to a person you do not know well or trust.

— Coffee?

— Better a beer. Relax, I'll get it.

— Feel yourself at home —I say with irony.

— I've been to see my parents. How they have aged...

— We all notice the passage of time.

I pick up my mobile and, watched attentively by Victor, I count the five days during which I will have to take clomiphene.

—You are all hooked up on social networks — he suddenly blurts out — I am not in even one. They are a waste of time.

—Nico says the same —I say, not taking my eyes off the mobile screen.

Next week, according to my calculations, I must start taking the pills. As I still have some days left, I can decide whether I want to or not.

—They take away your freedom — Victor adds. He evidently is in the mood for talking. —. It is as if nobody wanted to keep their privacy and had this necessity to inform the world what they eat, how they sleep or how often they fart.

I look at him in amazement, cannot believe what he has just said but his comment about farting makes me laugh. Victor has a sense of humour, I like the way he talks about things, directly, without screening.

—I totally agree with you. Though my virtual friends fortunately do not share the news about farting —I add, laughing again—, only photos of their kids, family celebrations... I don't know, this kind of thing.

—Why do they do it? Isn't it better to keep such memories in a private album? Like it's always been done. Well, that's what I

think. Why announce the news that you are happy to all and sundry? I read the other day that couples with most problems send such photos to social networks in which their life looks like an idyll. Always happy and smiling. In the Caribbean, for example... maybe they are there but each with a mobile in hand, not paying attention to themselves. What kind of life is that? —he says, more to himself than to me.

This reminds me of the photos María hangs on Facebook. She does it for herself rather than for other people, bearing in mind the she has only two virtual friends: Carlos and me. In the photos, she always shows off her husband. There are many from Paris, near the Eiffel Tower. But I am beginning to suspect that the reality is different from what she wants to show in her social profile.

—Why you and Nico haven't had children? —he asks cautiously.

The bell rings.

«Saved by the bell», I think. Saved from providing explanations and telling my problems.

Having opened the door, I am surprised to see Carlos. His face is anything but friendly.

—Hi, Carlos, can I help you with anything?

—What have you said to my wife? —he asks, his hoarse voice threatening and fury in his eyes. He is swaying a little, as if he were drunk.

I do not know what to say. He runs his hand through his thick brown hair and I am sure he does it only to refrain from hitting me, as I feel he has done before, to María.

—What's going on? —Victor appears behind me.

—Who is that?

—Victor, Andrea's brother-in-law —Victor butts in, on the defensive. — And you...?

—Carlos, the husband of the neighbour there, in whose head your sister-in-law is putting stupid ideas – he splutters through his clenched jaws.

—Carlos, I haven't said anything to her. We were having coffee and talking only about Nico's work —I defend myself, trying to stay calm.

I have never seen Carlos in such a state, at least from close up. My suspicions that he might be an abuser are growing with every second. Feeling his cold eyes on me, I try to remember when I could have said something inopportune to María.

—Look, I don't care —Carlos screams, making the same wild gestures with his hands like the day before when I saw him quarrelling with María— I only know that when I came home I found my wife crying on the sofa. I asked what she did today, she said she only had coffee with you. So, the only person who could hurt her is you. Stop nosing around in the lives of other people and do something with yours, you are ruining it.

Carlos looks at me with the scorn as Nico has done during all these months, with the exception of several wonderful seconds this morning. I need to keep them in memory so that I do not burst out crying.

—Get out of here, you idiot. —Victor moves a step and pushes Carlos outside.

They begin to grapple and I just stand in the door in shock. I think, I feel, I see but I am unable to speak. Then Nico appears and observes the scene from the car; finally, Carlos crosses the street, turning round several times and throwing me threatening looks while María, watches us through the living room window as if she were a soul in Purgatory, almost a ghost.

—Is something happening? —señora Dolores asks from her porch full of flowers, getting up from her rocking chair.

— Nothing, señora Dolores. Nothing —I answer, raising my voice a bit. I can see that Carlos closes the door behind him.

— What's happened? —Nico asks and loosens his tie.

—What a moron. You okay? —Victor puts his hand on my shoulder, ignoring his brother.

I nod and thank him for what has just done for me.

Nico, in an outburst of jealousy, gives Victor a light push and kisses me on the lips.

—But what has happened? —he asks again, this time talking directly to me.

—He says I put stupid idea into María's head... —I am still trembling.

—Well, don't worry, he's probably had a bad day —Nico adds and comes inside. —. What have you made for dinner?

—Nothing yet —I say.

—Why don't you do dinner, Nico? —Victor proposes.

Nico looks at him with the same indifference I am so accustomed to and goes upstairs.

—Nico never prepares dinner —I tell him—. He works all day, comes home very tired and ...

—I also work every day and when I come home, I cook dinner.

—That's because you live alone, don't you? You have no choice.

Victor only shrugs his shoulders and leaves me wondering whether he lives alone or has a partner or what.

Nico, already in his pyjamas sits on the sofa and turns the television on while Victor comes to the kitchen with me.

—What is it between your brother and you? —I dare to ask.

—Nothing.

—There is something...

—What are we cooking?

Victor gives me a wink and helps prepare a delicious salad and some hamburgers; I know that Nico is watching us from the living room. I like this feeling. I also know that Nico is jealous of his brother's approach towards me. After such long periods of silence and hurling insults, I could even say that it arouses me to see him jealous. Very much. I have always thought that the most important thing is to feel well with yourself and that it does not matter what men think about you but I cannot ignore the necessity to feel that he desires me.

«Will you take me out to dinner?», I asked him once.

«You want to go in this? This dress doesn't look good on you», he said.

That was the most appropriate he could have told me but I know that what he really wanted to say was that I was becoming as fat as a pig and that dress made me look even fatter. It took me a lifetime to fasten the zip. The great effort was a total waste of time and the beginning of the decline. I buried all my lovely dresses at the bottom of the wardrobe and put on jeans and sloppy T-shirts, which regardless of my attempts to stretch them, do not hide those blasted rolls of fat.

*Madness in the night of the summer*

Right after dinner both Victor and I have gone up to sleep and have left Nico in the living room watching television. Like every night, I cannot fall asleep but I do not want to go downstairs to the living room. What for? So that Nico again looks at me with scorn and tells me to shut up because it distracts him?

I turn round in bed and when I open the drawer, I notice that the box with tranquilizers is empty.

«Now you will have to go down to the kitchen», tells me a mocking voice, that voice which I know to be only a figment of my imagination, but which since Clara's death has helped me to feel less lonely.

With the burning need to gobble down tiny pills I slowly go downstairs in silence so that Nico does not hear me. Now it is me who does not want to talk with him.

There must be two full boxes in the kitchen, this is the only thing I can think about.

—You are joking! —exclaims Nico in the living room.

I lean over the banister and see him talking on the phone with his back to me. He paces nervously up and down the room, stroking the back of his neck, a typical gesture when he is tense.

—So are you sure it was him? My brother killed that man?

«What do mean, your brother killed a man?»

I raise my hand to my heart then I slip and almost fall down the stairs; this would have surely prompted Nico to hang up immediately and I would not have learned anything else.

—Well, he was asking for it. I am grateful for the information, Richard.

—...

—One must have friends even in hell.

—...

—Sure, now I understand; I will have it under control.

—...

—Yes, he was careful, nobody can suspect him.

—...

—I understand.

I am so shocked by what I hear that I have not noticed Nico has turned round and can probably see my hand on the barrister. I pull it back quickly but it is too late: he is coming towards me.

—Richard, I've got to hang up —I hear his urgent voice from a distance.

It gives me time to climb the stairs, rush to my bedroom and drop on the bed with my face down, pretending I have not heard anything. My heart is thudding as if it might burst right through my chest.

My brother-in-law is a murderer. What's more, my husband is ready to keep it a secret and he has not sounded surprised to hear the information from this Richard. And who is Richard?

My God, I am giving shelter to a murderer! I think about the prison sentence I might get if they find it out in the United States.

—Everything okay? —Nico asks from the door. I have not even heard him come up. — I know that you have heard the conversation and I want to tell you that nothing is what it seems.

I turn round and look at him. I do not know what to say.

—Yes, Victor has got himself into trouble. Can happen to anybody, don't you know? You must understand that he is my brother and I will help him, however I can.

—Even cover him up for murder? — I ask, horrified.

Nico is not upset, he half smiles at me.

—Nobody accuses him of murder, he was careful. He only helped a rich businessman in San Francisco, addicted to heroin and coke, to take the final step. That's all —he explains in a cold voice. I am stunned.

—Overdose of heroin?

Nico nods. I can only think of Clara, of how she died in the same way, and no suspicion falling on anybody.

—Not a word, Andrea. I trust you.

Nico goes out of my bedroom, and I am a bundle of nerves.

«How are you going to keep such a secret, Andrea?», asks the malicious voice.

This is what I ask myself. How can I look into eyes of a murderer who is staying in my home? How can I trust him and not suspect that he may kill me in any moment?

I do not feel like turning the conversation I have heard over and over in my mind so I have not asked Nico who Richard is and how they have met. I did not know he had contacts in San Francisco, perhaps my protective husband has been «looking after» or rather watching over his brother from the other side of the Pond.

A few minutes later, when Nico is in the bathroom I manage to slip in the kitchen and swallow four pills. Much calmer I return to my bedroom though I know that the night will be very long. The heat is suffocating and I will not be able to fall asleep.

«As if the heat was to blame», the voice laughs.

### *Fear*

It must be two in the morning. Or three, I do not know.

I look with fascination at the naked torso of my husband, lying in bed with his back to me.

Now, more than ever, I want him to make love to me, to make me feel loved, to be again sure of myself and of our relationship. I think of María and Carlos and perhaps I am the lucky one to have somebody like Nico, who has never raised his hand to strike me or

raised his voice to such a dangerous point that would make me feel and understand what fear is. Real fear. Fear of having endangered your own life. One part in me understands that he wants to protect his brother, but on the other hand, it gives me a bit of a fright to see how much level-headedness he has shown.

I do not know how sick or mad one must be to be aroused by her husband wishing to keep under lock and key the information about a murder, committed by his own brother.

With the tips of my fingers, I brush against his naked skin. I slowly move closer and stroke his neck. He does not move, nor does he show any intention of doing so. I am now very close to him. I touch his shoulder, I want him to turn round but I get no reaction.

—Nico... — I whisper into his ear.

—What?

—Turn round...

—What for?

I love it when his voice sounds tired and sleepy.

—I want to make love... —I whisper.

—Not now, Andrea.

I do not move and in a few seconds he turns round. I smile. The light of the moon in the window gives him a magical look.

I am bewitched.

—I do not want my brother to hear us.

—Your brother is not at home, he has gone out.

—Gone out? How do you know?

—I heard him open the door of his room a while ago. He went down and then closed the front door.

—At this hour? Where could he have gone? —he asks. He is worried.

—I don't know, Nico, I don't care. He's probably seeing somebody. Come on...

—I said no, Andrea.

He brusquely turns his back on me again. This smidgen of happiness I have felt all day, the two occasions when it was he, who has come up to me and kissed me, vanishes.

I cannot stop thinking about Victor and the murder.

And if he is a psychopath and has gone out to kill?

It will be best to forget, to pretend to know nothing. It has always worked well for me.