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My Mother's Dress

Novel

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Sunday

I awoke at sunrise, drenched in sweat, my teeth clenched. I couldn't get back to sleep again. I sat down by the kitchen window in my knickers and bra and lit myself a cigarette, blew smoke down into the courtyard. All the windows were dark, a smell of fried fish from the evening before and fabric softener hung in the air from the neighbours' washing lines that were spanned from corner to corner on each floor. My smoke drifted through dangling bras and towels. The inner courtyard is a deep well only overlooked by the milky panes of the kitchens and stairwells. Its bottom, black, stared back at me. Although I had spent endless hours as a girl playing French skipping and rayuela down there, it made me shudder, so powerful was its pull, so intense the compulsion to lean further and further forward. In the end I had to force myself to turn away.

Our kitchen is an inviting place on a Sunday morning – the smell of coffee, music playing on the radio, conversations. My parents always wake before me, talk, sometimes argue. I only manage to get out of bed around midday, grab the last chocolate roll, my mother handing me a wooden board, a knife, sets down beside me a few tomatoes or onions, as a woman I have to help prepare lunch whilst Dad reads in the living room.

On this morning it was dreadfully quiet. Of course the fridge was humming, the usual flock of swallows chased across the rooftops squawking loudly, the traffic, that never came to rest in this city, roared. Somewhere a male voice was singing 'La Romana'. I felt incredibly alone, could sense my mouth distorting itself into a childish square in readiness to cry and wondered whether I ought to call Paloma, or La Plaga, who had probably left me dozens of messages, or maybe even Ángel, who immediately would have caught the next plane to Spain. But something inside me held me back: a mixture of defiance, fear and the hope that the previous day just hadn't

happened. Perhaps everything wasn't true. Then I would just make a fool of myself. Anita Nanita. Food for having my leg pulled for the next few decades. I don't dream very often, but when I do, it is fairly deeply. What I wanted on this morning was to be entangled in a very bizarre, much too long dream, out of which I would at some point be startled.

I no longer remember when the last time was that I had sat in the grey half-light of the kitchen. Perhaps it was the morning when Ángel left for Germany. He was offended because my father continued to reproach him right up until the last moment. He said not a word whilst he hastily drank his milky coffee, chased away my mother who was holding a plate of tostadas beneath his nose, with an angry flick of the hand.

My brother Ángel went to Germany a few months ago. He got a distinction in his PhD that he studied at the Complutense. After that he wanted to cap it off with a degree in literary translation from the University of Aranjuez because he couldn't find a job. He quickly broke it off though. "The beautiful days of Aranjuez are now over," he said afterwards. Ángel claimed that he could read German better than speak or understand it, and that he was far from perfect at it. I wouldn't know. I have never been interested in the language. I don't think it sounds particularly attractive. But ever since our holiday in Dénia, Ángel was into anything German: music, books, food, especially bread, pan aleman, that he sometimes bought from a baker in Salamanca. And, of course, the girls. He keeps a list of all the German women he has slept with. An alphabet of names starting with Andrea, Barbara, Christa, Dora ... grumbles when there are doubles because so many German women around the age of forty are called Sabine or Tanja. For this reason he intended to change the way he organised them and instead of using first names he would order them by place of origin: Andernach, Baiersbronn, Celle, Duisburg. I once asked him what he saw in these tourists, business women, au-pairs and students. For the most part we are talking about big, frequently overweight, white-skinned women with rucksacks, dressed in hiking gear or for a day at the sports ground. They can down copious amounts of alcohol, always get sunburn, and think nothing of throwing up on the Lope de Vega quotes set into the paving stones of the Calle de las Huertas.

Ángel hummed and hawed "They are so ...inexperienced. It's like you are wallowing on a rain-soaked lawn. And when they start to talk, I wallow in a volume of Hölderlin, Goethe or Tieck."

Although he had a PhD, after he had been unemployed for a long time, with only the occasional casual job as a city guide, ice cream seller, packer in a furniture company, he bought himself a ticket to Berlin. Dad was still ranting and raving at the airport: "Poor, but sexy – we've got that in Madrid as well! Go to Stuttgart, that's where the money is! Mercedes, Porsche, the car industry, suppliers, services, rich retirees that want to learn Spanish so they can die on the Costa Blanca, that's where there are a lot of prospects for you!"

Ángel didn't just have a plane ticket to Berlin-Tegel in his jacket pocket, he also had a printout of an email from the Humboldt University informing him that it was not the custom for the Institute of German Literature to pay unemployed academics for giving seminars, but that the teaching experience he would gain from doing so would certainly be an apt reward for his efforts and that they were pleased to be able to allocate him room 407 in SS 2012 for his

lectures on Gertrud Kolmar. Ángel translated this letter for me whilst my parents were buying him his last bocadillo with calamari and asked me to keep my mouth shut.

The fridge looked like it had been raided. There were two tomatoes in the fruit bowl. There was hardly anything in the kitchen dresser cupboards: some tins, squid in its own ink, olives, coffee. There were ten euros in our biscuit tin. On this morning a well-stocked cupboard would at least have provided me with some sense of reassurance. Instead I went into a panic. Ran into the hallway. Searched through my dad's summer jacket. My mum's summer coat. I found about 60 euros in Dad's worn out wallet. I opened my mum's handbag in the kitchen which released a strong scent of Jasmin. There were 20 euros in her purse and a plastic token for the shopping trolley at Carrefour. How much did they have in their account? I realised I didn't have a clue.

Suddenly it was the sole thought that filled my head. What was I going to survive on? How was I going to pay for the instalments on the apartment? To pay for V.V. that, as my mother had the habit of saying, hung round our necks like a millstone? We had hardly managed to get by as it had stood. Without Ángel's money from Germany we would have faced eviction long ago.

I had to think of all the stories that I had heard from friends and via the media. Juan Carlos's story. The news every night. My parents put the relentless letters, with their bright logo from our house bank, on the table in the living room, silent and threatening. It had only been a few days since the last one had arrived. Sticky coins slipped through my fingers, rolled across the kitchen floor. Achilles raised his head and looked at me. This time I spoke to him without paying attention to my state of mind: "You will starve too. We will both get thrown out. And they will make soup of you."

Just as I was in the process of making myself some coffee – a very weak one for the sake of prudence – the bell to our apartment rang, loud and persistent. I screamed and jumped. Achilles, who was on his maiden voyage through the kitchen and had left a few piles beneath the table, froze, whilst I hastened towards the apartment door, stopped midway, because I was only wearing underwear, desperately racking my brains as to who it could possibly be. What should I say so that nobody would notice? But why actually? I hadn't done anything bad. I just didn't want to think about the thing in the bedroom that might just have been a delusion, a hallucination. I needed time to come to terms with it, gain some clarity on whether I was asleep and stumbling around in a nightmare or I was awake and somehow had to find my way in a world gone crazy.

In the meantime the ringing had gone over to a hammering. A loud female voice penetrated the door: "Blanca! Blanca, are you already awake? Blanca!" No sooner heard, than the words my mother would use when someone disturbed her, slipped off my tongue: "What in God's name!"

I took my mum's housedress from the hook on the bathroom door, wrapped myself in the yellow-lilac flowered imitation silk and went to the door. Gilipollas was standing on the doormat and stared at me. Then she started to prattle.

“Blanca, I know, it is Sunday, it is a day of rest, for us as well, who no longer need to get out early. But, regardless, a good housewife like you still gets up with the first rays of sunlight. So I thought I could quickly stop by. You are usually dressed up to the nines, but I have caught you by surprise this time! As I haven’t got a grain of sugar left in the house. Blanca, this has never happened to me before! It’s always top of my list: sugar. Considering how much I bake. I can’t drink my coffee without two heaped spoonfuls, you understand? Like two snowy peaks, like the Peñalara. But then suddenly the day arrives! Even during the war, behind the walls of the Alcazár, my Paco always managed to get hold of sugar for me. The Reds, they never let us be. We were completely at their mercy. I brewed my morning coffee from chicory – but made it sweet, very sweet. Like the Virgin Mary’s smile, thanks to Pacito. You won’t ever find another man like him ...” I just nodded and intimated a smile with the corners of my mouth.

We all despised Señora Pipota because she wasn’t just a staunch Francoist, whose greatest fortune it had been apparently as a young girl to not only have survived in the Alcazár of Toledo, but also to have been as curious as a cat and a terrible gossip. When we were still little, Ángel and I had been frightened of her, even though she was always nice to us. But she had the thickest moustache since Frieda Kahlo and used purple eyeshadow which made her eyes look like she had just come from a beating. She loved to blacken our names behind our backs in front of our parents. She didn’t trust them because of their political convictions, which in spite of their elegant attire, were obvious. Not a single day passed by without her ringing the doorbell, knocking, or shouting out of the open kitchen window from below. “She doesn’t consider it beneath herself to blow a fuse for the pure pleasure of seeing your father crawling around on his knees in front of her and fiddling around with her old television.” After dad had had to clean out her kitchen drain on a public holiday once, and had ruined his best suit in the process, he had started to refer to Señora Pipota as Gilipollas within the family circle. Even our mother who was a sensitive person jumped on the bandwagon.

Gilipollas was a danger. She would ask after my parents. She would want to come in and realise that I was under the influence of a drug, which I still didn’t know how had entered my body, perhaps I was still sleeping. So I did what was expected of me. I nodded like an idiot, signalled that I was listening, retreated into the entrance hall, into the kitchen, took the sugar bowl from the buffet and filled half a cup full. I took it back to Gilipollas, who in the meantime had seized the opportunity to enter. She was already standing in front of the hall cupboard mirror and shoving my Chucks to one side with her foot.

“Blanca, your Anita has a right temper hasn’t she? Even as a small girl she would throw her shoes at the wall. And yesterday she was banging the doors when she got home ...” I pressed the cup into her hand and pushed her out the door. “Is that enough,” I screeched. “Blanca, darling, that’s much too much! Two little spoonful’s would have been enough. I don’t need a lot any more at my age. You will realise that soon enough yourself, although I think you look very young, even without all the make-up. Oscar can consider himself lucky.” She giggled, fortunately. It meant she didn’t hear my sigh.

It couldn’t be true, she took me for my mother! Maybe she didn’t have her glasses on? But Gilipollas had the eyes of a hawk, would usually spot every single crumb on the carpet. Perhaps

she was going senile. No problem. I closed the door forcefully and peered into the hall mirror. Me, Ana Maria Martínez Madrugada. Anita Nanita. Anita. Wearing my mother Blanca's housedress. Unevenly buttoned. Straggly hair, that was all over the place. My mother plaited her hair before she went to bed. Her hair is much longer than mine. It almost reaches down to her waist. I am taller than she is, slimmer, paler. I am not wearing make-up, am worn out from lack of sleep. And nowhere near as beautiful. Everybody says that I am the spitting image of my father. Even if my father is a good-looking man, for a girl, it's the kiss of death. That's probably why my mother forever kept pointing it out. My mother is a little fleshier than I am. Not in the sense of being fat. Someone who can wear a plunging neckline. "She is a woman, you are a girl." My father's words. I don't find this very flattering. I could feel myself growing angry with my parents. It didn't feel good, especially as I still wasn't sure what had happened to them.

What Gilipollas had seen couldn't be true. She was after all an old bag, not quite all there anymore. She was such a gossip that she no longer knew who she was talking to. What a load of nonsense!

I drew back my hand and gave myself a slap across the face. My reflection looked at me reproachfully. The imprint of my hand left a soft pink mark on my left cheek. The brown sleepy eyes were brimming with tears. I was awake, there was no doubt about it.

In the bedroom beneath the window stood the chest in which my mother hid her jewellery case and a few gold coins from baptisms and communions along with photo albums. Perhaps also money. Something valuable. Something that could set my mind at ease, at least for the time being. The thought helped me to turn away from the mirror, to place my hand on the door-handle to the bedroom – to stand there as if rooted to the spot.

If I entered now, what would await me? My parents, still sleeping, completely normal on a Sunday morning at six o'clock? My parents getting dressed? My parents having sex beneath the sheets? I had never seen them in the act. The two dead people from yesterday afternoon? Had I really changed their attire, put them in their best clothes?

I entered, with eyes shut, with a burning cheek and holding my breath, because I was frightened of smelling the stench of corpses and going mad like all the scream queens in the horror movies that I had watched by the dozen in Juan Carlos's narrow bed, with a bottle of Mahou on my naked belly and his short stubby fingers carefully stroking my hair.

Of course there was no smell of decay in the bedroom. There was only the smell, of the damp tarmac that the nightly road cleaners had left behind, of the coolness of the morning, from which you could surmise how hot it was likely to get later. They were both still seated in the armchairs by the window. Suit and dress flapping around their limbs. My father's hands had disappeared into his shirt cuffs, only the tips of my mother's shoes peeped out beneath the flowered skirt, that was all, not her naked knees like yesterday. No foot touched the ground. Everything about them had grown smaller, had shrunk overnight. I studied them from the door, I addressed them, but they were still as dead as they had been yesterday. And just like yesterday they had a smooth, clean appearance, as if they were artificial, like replicas from a waxwork cabinet. On both faces, in which the eyes had remained closed in a sleep from which they could

never awaken, there was not a single wrinkle, blemish, to be seen, just the contented indestructible smile that had already been there yesterday. The two of them no longer looked like Oscar and Blanca. I could still sense my parents, but these were two very young people sitting here. For a brief moment I thought of Ángel and myself. We must have looked similar when we used to dress up in our parents' cast-offs and would, according to my wishes play families, only then five minutes later, whilst I was in the process of furnishing the apartment, switch to playing robber and policeman, like Ángel had planned to do from the start.

If it hadn't been for the ring, I would have shut the door again, because I didn't dare get any closer. But then something fell to the floor with a bright sunny clink, rolled across the parquet floor towards me, sparkling deeply, confident, as if it knew exactly what it was worth. My mother's wedding ring, yellow gold, heavy and solid, two intertwined bands, very lavish for such a late marriage. My father liked his mother's scratched ring purely out of devotion. He had had a pretentious chunk of a ring made for Blanca. At that moment, given her shrunken state, it must have slipped from her finger. Dropped onto the floor and rolled over to me. So far so good. I bent down to pick it up. "Should I pawn it? Sell it at 'Compro Oro'? What should I do?" I yelled at the two over by the window, only to look down at the floor, ashamed. After a while I put the ring on my right hand, on my index finger, on the assumption that this was the only finger that it would fit on, my fattest finger. I was wrong. Too tight. It wasn't until I put it on my ring finger that the cool gold encircled it with a soft glow as if it belonged there.

I interpreted the ring as a sign that I was at least permitted to enter. I made the bed first, plumped up the pillows like I always had done in my own room ever since I had known that I wouldn't find any work – like a sacrifice, an offering born out of a bad conscience. Anita Nanita, the attentive housemate. I now brought the offering so that I could get to the chest without being punished. Perhaps my behaviour was questionable on this Sunday morning. I did no more than straighten a few covers and take mum's little jewellery case and an important looking black file from the chest. I hastened out of the bedroom again without turning round. With the ring on my finger, as if it made me invisible like Bilbo in the Hobbit fleeing from the cave of the Orcs.

What did other people do when this happened to them? I had no experience of death. My parents had buried aunts and my grandparents on my father's side long before I had been born. What was happening to me?

I went back into the only room that still felt lived in – into the kitchen. At least the neighbours' voices wafted through the window, Achilles was hanging around somewhere. I sliced the second last tomato for him that he ate slowly and noisily. His studded carapace sparkled. I raised my hand boastfully: "Look, I too have something really expensive now."

Suddenly the whole room filled with noise. Sounds pervaded the silence in which only the sound of my voice and a little clattering of tortoise feet had been audible. Two strokes of a gong, one rapidly succeeding the other. It may sound pretty unbelievable, but perhaps it is understandable that I didn't immediately register what the ringtone of a mobile sounded like. The sound that signals the arrival of an SMS. Mum's phone was lying on the kitchen table where she had left it the morning before. Beside her handbag and bunch of keys. The silver dog was vibrating. The display lit up green, showed a number and a little letter. Paloma perhaps? I

automatically grabbed it. It felt warm and much heavier than my own. The button that calls up the menu pressed itself as if of its own accord.

My beautiful star, I miss you. Can you meet me on Wednesday? I want to rest my face in your hands and hear your voice. 17 hundred, beneath the clock? Ich liebe Dich sehr. R.

I sat down at the table and placed the mobile in front of me on the wooden table top. The SMS was in Spanish apart from the last words: 'Ich liebe Dich sehr.' One of the few German phrases that I understood. Along with 'Arschloch', 'Scheiße', 'Hau ab!' and 'Prost!' that Ángel had taught me when delving deeper into the mire of this wayward language. What did this mean? Who was writing this? The little coffee pot hissed on the stove, I had turned the gas up too high, a blue-yellow wreath of flame darted around the silver belly, steam poured out of the spout. The coffee tasted of nothing, I scalded my tongue. I picked up my mother's mobile again, the display had gone dark again.

No name, just a number. It was one of my mother's quirks. She used a little address book made of paper instead of storing her contacts on the phone. She also knew a lot of numbers off by heart. I rummaged through her handbag, which – unlike mine – was perfectly organised. There were three cigarettes in a silver case, lighter positioned directly next to them, lipstick, compact, a packet of mints, everything lined up like soldiers in the side pockets. The address book was right at the bottom. My fingers clumsily attempted to turn the tiny pages. So few names: Paloma, Ángel, Anita, Oscar, various doctors, all of whom I knew, a few old school friends, former colleagues from the Teatro Español. Not a single man. The number from the SMS really was under R, without any further addition. R. and nothing else. In contrast to the other entries, it was noted down in pencil, as if it had been important to my mother to be able to eradicate it at any given time. Ramon, Rodrigo, Ruben? Who was this person?

To be honest, I was angry. So angry that, for a while, I forgot that mum was dead. Anger and disappointment suppressed everything else. I turned the handbag upside down without taking note of the five euro note that fluttered out. Who gave her the right? Who did she think she was? Almost sixty years old! Spider veins on her thighs, wrinkles around her mouth and eyes, she had dyed her hair herself, which was a blue-black instead of brown like mine, for as long as I could remember. My mother who blushed when a couple kissed each other on the television. My mother, who unwaveringly gazed straight ahead, when she was on the street and men turned around to look at her. Even when I was walking beside her. The admiration was for her, not for me, I already realised this when I was a teenager, and she knew it. Even my lovers were fascinated by her. Juan Carlos's goggle-eyes! And she? She acted all innocent, almost offended. No other name ever fell apart from Oscar. Oscarcito. She called him 'arborito', little tree, after some silly book, and he called her 'brujita', little witch. Embarrassing. Ángel and I looked away whenever we had to listen to this. And now this! R., who wanted to meet her beneath the clock.

Beneath the clock! It could only be the clock tower at the Puerta del Sol. How charming. How unoriginal. It was the most common meeting point in the whole of Madrid. I tried imagining this man waiting for my mother in the throng of the square, perhaps hopping from one foot to the

other, burying his hands in his trouser pockets, impatiently pacing back and forth, as she would always as a rule arrive a little late. I didn't succeed. The pictures that filled my mind were terrifying and revolting. Ashamed of myself, I stuffed everything back in her handbag, zipped it up and put it back on the table. The bunch of keys was still lying there. The little silver dog that hung from it was a little scratched, but it shone bright and precious. I carefully picked it up. It felt cold. How long had she already had it? When I touched it, and seconds later the smell of metal and sweat rose up towards me, I saw myself as a little girl again, my long socks pinching in the hollows of my knees, wearing a checked skirt, the white blouse of my school uniform, my hair all mussed and my hairclips come loose, a girl of eight or nine, out of breath, opening the door, crashing into the flat, slipping my school bag from my shoulder, already calling for my mother from the hallway. On this day I got no response, which made me holler all the more loudly, walk through all the rooms, gradually slowing my pace, and becoming more quiet.

My mother was sitting in the bedroom on the made up bed. I would never have expected to find her there during the day. But she was sitting there, wearing one of her Sunday dresses, the dark green one with the cream polka dots, matching pumps and a patent leather handbag. Her mouth had a red lustre, and she was playing with a shiny object, no, she was incessantly stroking it with two fingers, gently and deep in thought. It was something silver that looked like a toy. "Mummy, mummy, it's a dog! Oh it's so cute! It's for me isn't it mummy? You bought it for me didn't you!" I was allowed to touch the silver dog, I was allowed to stroke it, look at it, carry it around, but after a while she took it out of my hands, shaking her head. "Anita, you have made it all sticky. Please wash your fingers!" The dog disappeared, and I know, that I was hurt. When my mother locked the door a few days later to go shopping with me, I saw it again. It was dancing on her bunch of keys, but it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. She put it in her handbag before I could ask and tugged me along.

Now I was standing in the kitchen clutching the bunch of keys in my fist, tense, angry and disappointed, with tears in my eyes. What I then did, happened without any further thought. I took the mobile, retrieved R.'s message, selected the option 'reply'. It was unfamiliar, typing on the clattering keys.

I will be there. Blanca

After I had pressed 'send', I put the phone back on the table as if it were something poisonous. Before leaving the kitchen, I took the last bottle of wine from the fridge. In the hallway I bumped into Achilles. We stared into each other's eyes for a long time, then I went into my room and slammed the door in his face.

By the time I dared to emerge again, I was pretty drunk. Drunk enough to dare to go into the bedroom again, but not to acknowledge the pair seated by the window, to open the clothes cupboard and flick through the skirts, dresses, shirts and suits as if through a huge picture book. To cry in the process. My eyes brimming with tears, to grasp something. To go out again, a dress over my arm. To stumble into the bathroom.

I felt sick. I greedily drank water straight from the tap, warm, chlorinated, stale. My own phone emitted a soft, forlorn tone. It twitched and moved across the surface of the washstand

on which I had placed it, towards me, like an animal seeking shelter. The display lit up gold, a wide open familiar eye, and I saw Laura's new message. The others I ignored, there were over a hundred, all from La Plaga.

Anita, we haven't heard from you for ages. Are you still alive? Please, get in touch, I am worried! Everything is pretty dull here, the house is finished, everyone has a hangover, and David threw up in the pool. You can consider yourself lucky that you didn't come along, it's been pure slavery.

I picked up the device. The back of it was hot, I gently wiped its face in order to send a reply. It had bleeped and sung a lot since I had made the discovery in the bedroom, but I had ignored it like never before. What should I write back? I couldn't tell them the truth, although my stomach ached with yearning for the whole gang. So I just wrote a few words:

Something happened. A man, a dream, going away with him.
More later. Kiss everyone for me!

This sounded incredibly melodramatic, and I had barely sent it when I knew that Laura would read out loud what I had said, whilst the others would gather around her, lean over her smartphone and indulge in all sorts of speculations.

I undressed in front of the bathroom mirror, hung the housedress back on its hook and suddenly, very calm, inspected what I had taken from the bedroom. It was just a dress: mum's blue Sunday dress with the swinging skirt, in which she looked, in the words of my father, 'like an upside down bellflower.' The delicate material glided effortlessly down over my sweaty body. The thin patent red belt slipped through the loops like a clever snake, buttons and hooks closed as if of their own accord. Then I combed back my hair. It was as damp and sticky as the rest of Anita. I twisted my thin ponytail up into a powerful knot, like the one my mother daily wore in the nape of her neck, in which I had often drilled a finger as a child, because I couldn't quite believe that this platted basket was entirely made out of hair. I thought it was filled with something, but all I could feel was the interwoven smooth warm strands, smell the alcohol from the hairspray. The knot sat well. I used a few metal hairpins to give it hold, took the pearl earrings and the long necklace from the porcelain dish and adorned myself, rubbed the wedding ring, sprayed Jasmin perfume on my neck and wrists until I was completely dazed. I used her make up things with the same assurance that I used my own, which were just as cheap, but neither neat nor clean looking. Black kohl, mascara, a thick eyeliner which I wobbled four times before I got right. Red lipstick, melon flavour. The imprint of my mouth on the Kleenex, like a butterfly. To finish, I used the eyebrow pencil to draw the small freckle on my right cheek, that my mother called her beauty spot. For the first time in my life I was happy about a spot that had appeared in exactly the same place. Slightly striking and a rich brown, it was the perfect size.

I only looked at myself in the mirror once I had finished. Prior to that I had only worked on individual parts, without inspecting the overall effect. I couldn't tear myself away from the picture that looked back at me in the dull yellow light of our windowless bathroom – it was convincing

and almost more beautiful than the face that I wanted to reproduce, younger, smoother, in an alarmingly enduring way.

I only saw the full length of me in the hallway mirror, in the red pumps that had stood next to my father's black brogues beneath the cupboard. Specks of dust hung on the seam of the cream silk coat like small grey clouds. I shook it out. There was a little buttonhole on the lapel, probably from the Jardín Botánico. I removed it carefully, it was already completely dried up. I found a two euro piece in the coat pocket. This made me happy as I wanted to buy Achilles salad.

When I, still unsteady in the high heels which I was unaccustomed to wearing, tottered back into the kitchen to fetch the handbag and keys, there was a new message waiting for Blanca.

Why don't you tell me that you love me? R.

I have never written a man that I love him, not Juan Carlos, not David, or Alejandro from V.V. with whom I exchanged my first French kiss at the age of 13. Nobody but my father. It would have just felt untrue, kitschy, as if I was meant to simulate something that I knew from TV. That's why I didn't do it. On the old mobile, I wrote and sent the words without a bat of the eyelid:

I love you. Blanca.

There was nothing much that I could set my hopes on in the little jewellery case. There were only four thin gold coins and dad's father's pocket watch didn't look particularly valuable. I put the items, along with two red stone rings, a few bracelets and cufflinks in an envelope. Then I drank some milk, inspected the rim of the glass on which my lips had left a fatty red trace, nodded at Achilles and left the apartment.

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Pilar at the Carrefour round the corner had greeted me as Blanca, kissing me on both cheeks, when I appeared in front of her with a salad, toast and a bottle of Mahou. Beaming, she told me that the first early oranges from Seville had arrived, didn't I want to take some with me? I hadn't stopped asking after them.

My mother was crazy for oranges, even if they only really start tasting good in winter. Pilar knew this because my mother had been going into the supermarket on an almost daily basis since the little grocery on the Calle de San Pedro had had to close. So I left the Carrefour with three oranges and the rest of my shopping.

Miguel from the café on the corner waved at me and called out that I should send his regards to Oscar and little Anita. The sun set, the sky above Madrid turned a dirty pink, that rapidly turned darker and darker, and I carried on walking, growing more confident, with my mother's proud upturned chin. Everywhere I saw people, ready for a night out, nothing had changed during the recession. They at least wanted to step outside their doors in the evening, lose themselves in the noise of the city, on the terraces, feel the balminess of the night wind on their

faces, surrounded by lights and voices that no longer reminded them of everything that had gone wrong during the day.

It felt good being my mother. I was beautiful, in an unfamiliar way. Everyone whistles at young, pretty women, that's nothing special. Tight shorts, a colourful mini, open hair – whistles not really meant for you. That kind do it automatically, they don't do it with real enthusiasm.

What I experienced, on taking my very first steps along this most familiar of roads in Madrid, felt like magic. Blanca did not elicit any whistling or shouting. Instead men would stop dead in their tracks and gazing after her, amazement written on their faces. She would see the faces of women, particularly those of the very young, or the very old, light up. The retired couple from over the road, Rosa and Joaquin, who had just stepped out of the house, also addressed me as Blanca. They asked after my husband, after the children, and why we hadn't driven to the Sierra given the heat. Blanca replied that Anita hadn't been feeling well. You couldn't leave your own daughter behind. The three of us grumbled a little about the bad times, how difficult they were, especially for the young, then I returned to the fourth floor.

Achilles was sleeping behind the sofa in the living room, a dark dome in the shadows. I scooped up his little piles, making as much noise as possible, as the silence was unbearable. He didn't let it bother him, even though he was sleeping, he must have known that I didn't pose a threat to him. I listened to several songs on my smartphone whilst washing the salad and making myself a sandwich, but soon grew tired of my playlist. I wiped the oranges with a damp cloth before placing them in the fruit bowl, like my mother always did.

Blanca would never have sat at the kitchen table in her Sunday dress in order to peel oranges. As I suddenly felt like eating fruit, I tied her apron around me. When I found a crumpled up piece of paper towel in the apron pocket that smelled of my mother, I started to cry.

In the hallway the telephone rang so suddenly that I dropped the paper towel, stumbled over my own feet, fell and hit my head on the doorframe, eventually staggering out. I stood there in front of the device with my eyes closed, waited for the ringing to stop. In the end I couldn't bear it anymore and picked up the receiver. It was Ángel. "Damn, where have you all been? Why is no-one answering the phone?" "I was on the loo!" I hissed, endeavouring to hit the crabby tone that he was accustomed to from his sister. "Can I speak to mum?" "They are still in V.V." Ángel was silent, took a deep breath. I could sense how down he was, that he was annoyed with me, and that he would have liked to have spoken with our mother. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Why didn't you go with them? It must be unbearable in town." I didn't feel like it. It's always the same. Dad needs to write a review. Paloma pays mum a visit, they want to dye their hair." Ángel sighed in sympathy. I prattled on. "In any case, the neighbours needed a babysitter. I looked after Daniel yesterday afternoon and this morning. He's really cute. Isabel is going to give me a dress in return, which she has grown too fat for. And later we are going out." "Who is we?" "La Plaga and I, of course." I heard my brother stifling a yawn in Germany. "Where to?" "Oh, just out, nowhere special. There's a bar now in Huerta that has recession dishes, everything is three euros. Have you got three euros?" I now said in a high squeaky voice. Ángel gave a muted laugh, a mixture of vague amusement and irritation at the same time. "Oh it's you, Anita Nanita,"

he said. "I've got more than three euros, let me tell you. I'll send you something tomorrow again, buy yourself a kilo of chewing gum." Giving it my all, I piped: "Thank you, Ángelito, my life, my heaven, my little tree!" He choked, I noticed, that he was finally laughing. "Stop it, Anita Nanita. The Germans stay in the same pub all night long. It is a strange country. Kiss mum and dad for me." My brother didn't tell me what was on his mind that evening, it was only later that I found out. He mumbled something and then hung up.

I had not managed to tell him anything of what had happened here. He was, after all, Ángel, my brother, we knew each other inside out, although we hardly had any mutual interests, given his craze for books and everything. He was always telling me to learn German and emigrate too. He was being serious. He believed there was no future for us in Spain. I felt bad after the phone call: because I had lied to Ángel, because I realised that he wasn't telling me something and simply because I felt terrible being alone in the dark apartment with just a tortoise. I could at least have talked to my brother about Achilles.

I took mum's telephone out of her bag to check whether the messages from R. really did exist, whether I really had replied to this phantom. But the display only showed 'battery low'. I plugged the device in to charge it and tried to open the SMS function. But, either I was too stupid, or the old thing wasn't capable of performing two actions at once.

I suddenly felt stupid. My mother's dress dangled round my knees. It threw folds around the hips, the neckline was too wide. A badly made up person with smudged eye makeup, who hadn't tied her apron strings properly, looked back at me in the hall mirror. I fetched my cosy jogging suit from the cupboard, put it on and went into the kitchen.

Let them rot in their armchairs! I wasn't going to go and check whether they were still there. Perhaps the wind had carried them off. There was nobody else apart from me in number 26 Calle de San Pedro. Besides, it was Sunday evening, almost ten o'clock, the precise time when Oscar and Blanca would be returning from V.V. They usually set out very late.

I would watch a little television and wait, until my parents arrived. That seemed like the best solution to me. They might be stuck in traffic. My sandwich and the orange were still lying on the kitchen table. Achilles had joined them in the meantime. "Don't look at me so reproachfully, I bought salad for you, although I need to be careful." The animal rustled under the table, where a few old newspapers were still lying around. I coaxed the tortoise with a few particularly green leaves, but it didn't emerge from beneath the pile of paper.

Normally I don't watch much TV. There is hardly ever anything on that interests me. We watch YouTube most of the time. My parents always claim they are not bothered about watching TV, but as soon as I switch it on, they are there. They would of course deny this. But our TV is in an old cupboard, the doors of which creak incredibly loudly.

If I want to watch films or soaps, this noise inevitably summons my father or my mother, who then sit down beside me on the sofa and provide an annoying commentary.

I had already been sitting in front of the set for a while, but I couldn't concentrate, although an old horror film that I liked was on. But when the giant spiders worked their way out of the crater,

I distinctly heard my mother's voice in my head saying "How fake are they!" I felt my stomach twisting and quickly changed channels. I landed on a cartoon series that Ángel and I had loved as children, but I didn't want to think of Ángel either, or the Sunday evenings of our childhood, when we arrived back from V.V. sweaty and dirt-encrusted, hastily dragged our bags upstairs, switched on the TV and threw ourselves on the sofa, half dazed by the fresh air and sun of the weekend, watched another two episodes of 'Marzinger Z' scratched open our mosquito bites and heard our mother letting the bath water into the bath and our father heaving the rest of the luggage upstairs. So I continued to channel-hop until I reached the last channel that usually aired animes.

The screen displayed a studio filled with a bluish light in which stood a gold winged chair. The floor was covered in a deep thick piled azure carpet. There was nobody in the picture, instead a telephone number and an email address appeared at the lower edge. Followed by the name 'Lady Semira, medium. A sure contact to the dead.' At the same time, off stage, a calm male voice said: "Have you lost a loved one too? Do you want to get in touch with them, ask your deceased questions, or convey messages to them? Use the power of an internationally famous medium. Lady Semira can help you. Lady Semira can offer you support. Call now or send us an email."

After this announcement a woman stepped into the picture, slowly letting herself sink into the glittery heap of cushions. She was wearing a kind of dressing gown made of velvet, as blue as the carpet. Her hair was dyed blonde and piled up like a mane on her head. A couple of tired brown eyes peered out of the heavily made up face into the camera. "Good evening my dears. I am Semira and would like to welcome everyone who has tuned in today. Let us start right away. We already have a caller online. Concepción from Malaga. She would like to speak with her son, with Roberto. Welcome Concepción!" A photograph of Roberto appeared. He was about the same age as I was, wearing a light blue T-shirt depicting a grinning chimp smiling with its lips sealed. I grabbed the remote to change channels because I was afraid of what would come next, but the callers voice was already filling the studio, slightly distorted by the noise of the telephone line. You could clearly hear the suppressed tears. "Semira, I need to speak to my Robertino. I need to ask him why he did this to us, to his father and me." The voice broke, the woman swallowed loudly. Semira who had been listening with an expressionless face, added, after having taken a deep breath: "Concepción, your son committed suicide a few weeks ago." The sobbing grew into a fit of coughing, out of which slowly rose a whining: "My Robertino, my baby!" 'The life and soul of Malaga' they called him in the news! He had us, his father and me. He had no right. We did everything for him, gave him all our love, every day. What should we have done? He was in such a desperate state, so hopeless! Nobody wanted him, in this cursed land! When he had such good marks, only As, and still ..." Semira interrupted: "Concepción, we all feel for you. It is terrible to lose your child, and in the way you did. Please tell me now: What would you like to say to your son?" The woman on the line blew her nose, mumbled an apology and then in a firm voice said: "It took me a long time to find the courage to call you. But I can't sleep through a single night, my husband is in hospital, it's taken it out of him. Please just ask Roberto whether he is fine now where he is. Tell him that I love him above all else." She paused for a moment, sniffed and then continued: "And ask him whether it was worth it. Throwing his beautiful young life away. Tell him that he has murdered his mother and father, his grandparents

and his little brother as well! Tell him that there are so many people worse off than he is! All the misery everywhere in the world! The refugees! It was a lot tougher for my parents after the war! They often didn't know where to get the food to feed us. They didn't run away from life! He could have gone to Buenos Aires like his cousin Susana, she also ..."

I couldn't take any more and switched off the TV. It was only now that I realised how heavily I was breathing. My hands were shaking, and when I got up to go to the loo, I had to hold onto the arm rest of the sofa. I felt sick and dizzy. I was sick in the bathroom, but all that I choked up was a stream of water mixed with bile. Perhaps I should switch on the television again? And call Lady Semira? Email her? I could remain anonymous, mum and dad would also recognise my voice on the other side. I knew exactly how I would have started the conversation with them:

"Oscar and Blanca, what is your line of defence? Simply stealing away like that one morning, in broad daylight, in the middle of the holidays, and both at the same time? Right from the start you were already too old to have kids, yet you still did. And, who is left with the mess? What should I do now, without you? It's not fair. Give me some advice, like you always do. Speak to me when I am talking to you!"

Perhaps a gurgling voice would have emerged from Semira's stomach. After some coughing and burping, would assume the cultivated tone of my father's voice.

"Anita, my darling, believe me, we didn't plan it. All I wanted to do on that morning was to drive to V.V. with you and your mother. To sing in the car together. To slaughter a watermelon and watch the sun go down above the Sierra."

Mum most probably would have interrupted him.

"Oscar my dear, that's not appropriate now, Anita is right, she needs some practical advice. Call your brother sweetheart, and Paloma. You are not alone. You don't need to be ashamed to accept help. Everything will turn out fine, Ángel and you will manage things together. And you have so many friends. What about La Plaga?"

At this point it would have been high time to lay into my mother and snottily ask her in return:

"And what about R.? How am I meant to handle that? Did you tell dad about him? Actually, you could do that now. What could happen to you now, you are already dead."

Knowing my mother, she would just have shaken her head, throwing into disarray the medium's fake blonde hair.

"Ana Maria, it's none of your business, but your father's and mine. Don't concern yourself about us, focus on yourself. You will do everything right. Daddy and I love you so, my little one."

I sat on the loo to pee, my mother's voice sounded in my ears like a sweet tinnitus. My legs gave way when I was washing my hands, and I collapsed on the fluffy yoke yellow bathmat. I pressed my hands against my stomach and breathed hastily to control the gurgling beneath my stomach wall, turned my head to one side as I couldn't handle the light from the neon tube above the mirror. But I didn't close my eyes, because I was suddenly terrified of the darkness

that would descend behind my closed eyelids. Perhaps I would also have to die if I went to sleep now. Curled up on the mat I sensed, more acutely than in the preceding hours, my overwhelming loneliness. I was completely alone in this room with its yellow tiled walls, in this apartment, in this city, and for the first time, everything seemed scary and practically unbearable to me.

Whilst I lay there on the floor like that, throwing my head from side to side, I discovered one of my mother's hairs on the tiles. Long and strong, it snaked its way towards me, I couldn't do anything other than grab it. It was obvious that it was from my mother's head and not mine, because my hair is limp and straight, it would never have crept so full of energy in my direction. I wound it tightly round my index finger that immediately began to throb and turn blue at the point where the flesh bulged between the dark coils. It didn't particularly hurt, but I seized this pathetic pain as an excuse to bury my face in the pile of the mat and softly moan. Because my mother wasn't there to come and console me, although I was feeling so bad. Because she was not standing behind me and stroking my neck, like she used to, when I felt unwell and would hang over the washbasin. Because she didn't ask me if I wanted tea and because her cool hands weren't placed on my shoulders, to guide me, humming softly, through the apartment to my bed. Mum would always hum the tune of an old pop song when she did things for Ángel or me which were deadly boring for her: board games, dressing and undressing dolls, baking cake, brushing hair.

When I managed to get up after a while, I dragged myself back to the TV and searched for Lady Semira. My yearning was too great, better to watch this nonsense than to do nothing. But I couldn't find the programme again; there were now two older guys praising some bed linen on the channel, kitchen gadgets and pans. One of them was tall and skinny, the other small and fat. To top it off, they called each other Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.