Daylight. Morning in the Tropic.

I've spent years sitting on this chair. Stuck. And I’m incapable of moving. At first... At first, I thought it would be some…

Did you hear that?

That noise?

No?

Another mango has fallen off.

They usually fall off every day.

Ripe. Delicious.

Plop.

That noise. Plop. As it lands on the ground. It calls me. But I can’t reach for it. I’ve told you already. I can’t lift my arse off this chair. The mangoes keep falling off, and I’m not able to eat them.

At first, when I got stuck, sitting here, on hearing that plop, I’d try to get up with my full strength.

Every effort was in vain.

One day, more or less a decade ago, on a scorching day, I heard the impact.

Sweet.

Plop.

And I was impassive.

I was really sweating and I couldn’t bother wasting my energies on something I couldn’t manage anyway.

I guess I accepted my condition: having to sit here, forever.

I closed my eyes.

And I took a breath.

Would you close your eyes too?

Yes?

No?

Well, I… this *self* sitting here, she suggests you close your eyes with me.

I’m getting up from the chair. Painlessly. I’m walking towards the front of the yard, where the trees are. The lemons look firm, voluptuous. They glisten. As if they had been coated with wax. The guavas are starting to bloom.

I spend the time taking walks. Looking at leaves, fruits and flowers.

The wind caresses me.

*Silence.*

Here it is. The mango.

It didn’t break off with the impact on the ground. It must have come from the lower branches. I touch it. That thick skin. Almost impenetrable. So many days, so many years, so many *plop*… And now I have it in my hands.

I smell it.

I think about biting it. I do it. But I find it slightly disgusting.

I stop.

What now?

How should I eat it?

Should I tear its skin and bite away?

Desist?

All of a sudden, a knife appears on the floor.

(That’s the beautiful thing about imagination, it gifts you everything you need)

I start peeling it.

My hands, full of juice. The sickly sweet smell soaking me up, down to my toenails. Tearing the skin unhurriedly at first. Then, in haste. The fibres between my teeth. The juice in my mouth, on my neck, on my cleavage. Hands sticky. The ecstasy.

*Silence.*

I opened my eyes after a while. And I was still here, like this, just like you see me now. Sitting. Fuck… the way words help us. What would I do without words? Sometimes I think I’m just words. One day these, the next those. Some day, all of them at once.

The words…

I’m digressing. Sorry. That’s not the story I want to tell you. I spend so many hours here, on my own, years sometimes, so when there’s somebody I can talk to, I feel the urge to tell everything…

Okay, I’m going to focus.

You’d like to know while I’m sitting here, wouldn’t you?

Well… I actually don’t know why I’m asking that.

I’ll get to the point.

This situation. Mine. Being here and not being able to leave, is just a consequence. This, my arse stuck to the chair, is the outcome of something which began on July 24th 1998, in this tiny tropical country I won't be able to name.

Yes, this story is based on real events, and due to security reasons, I will have to leave some people’s names out, as well as some of the locations where what happened, happened.

Anyway…

July 24th 1998

I got up from bed effortlessly. I find it difficult to get up early. So much. But on that day, I left the bed early and quite happy. Maybe it’s a bit of an overstatement to call that slim, small mattress dumped on the concrete floor a bed. But that was my bed, and for a long time. Shorter than expected, but a longer time than I could have thought sometime.

My bed, my bedroom, were right next to the eucalyptus distiller. It smelt super good. Uncomfortable as it was, the room smelt super good. We'd get imbued with that scent on days we used the still. So nice.

I had been working for an NGO in a project to… That's right. I'm such a bore. I'm digressing again... Let's try to focus a little bit. I'm so delighted to have you here and then I get started... started with my verboseness, this urge to tell you everything. In detail.

Excuse me.

You should visit me more often…

I’m going to focus.

Where was I?

Oh yeah, the reason I set off so quickly, that's it!

I was thrilled. A month had passed since I had last been to the sea and… Án…. hmmm… let’s call him… He… I smile every time I think about Him. Because when we were introduced to each other, we instantly understood that some day… Excuse me, back to the point: he asked me to go with him to work.

He had told me we’d go buy some coconuts. Yes. coconuts. He was devising a flood prevention plan and I believe one of the actions revolved around replanting the coconut tree area in order to… What for, I don’t really know, in fact. But the thought of hauling those round, brown, furry balls from one place to the other with our pick-up truck seemed fantastic to me, especially since the morning would conclude with a visit to the beach.

I asked Him if Oriol, my friend, could come along. Oriol and I were sharing a flat in Barcelona as well as that stay, project and adventures in this country. He agreed, even if just to have me by his side, so the both of us went, Oriol and I.

Oriol and I had already got over salmonella poisoning. And that damn diarrhoea. And vomiting. And the dizziness. The nightmare of shitting ourselves down in the middle of the street was gone too. Who was shitting himself was Oriol, poor him. What a story. An ice-cream wasn't easy to find in that rural region. But we managed to. A Twister. Two. So delicious. And in such a bad condition, damn.

The morning that followed we were barely human. We were out in the sticks, there was no public transport or a phone. The only option was to make our way out the nearest road, intercepting the first four-wheeled thing that came up and ask to be taken to the capital to be seen by a doctor.

We saw that a big red truck, empty, was drawing near, raising dust. We paid the driver. He told us he was going into town and that he was in a hurry. We got on the back of the truck, the roofless dump compartment. Burnt to a cinder while swallowing tons of dust, we travelled down those roads for a couple of hours. Unpaved roads with no traffic signs or lane markings. So in the end, the fever and the stomach cramps were just afterthoughts.

We reached the office of the NGO. It was closed. It was lunchtime. There was no other way: we had to wait outside. Outdoors. Oriol, or rather what remained of him, those two metres of sinewy body lying on the pavement with his head resting on my legs, gushing shit endlessly, unable to get up. I was able to stay on my feet and I went to the tree to take a shit. In broad daylight. We had no paper. But we would be shitting anyway. We smelled of shit. We looked like junkies.

Fortunately, that nightmare was over. And I’m digressing again. *Ais.* In part I’m telling you so you can understand... I don't know. I don't know what you are supposed to grasp from that pooing story. It just happened. And we got over it. We were back in the country, distilling essential oils and classifying plants. And one day by the seaside was a good way to celebrate that everything was still going well.

He had told me that after we were done with work we’d go to the Bay of Ji… oops, I almost let it out, a place name. So, anyway, we were going to the sea. And to eat. He also mentioned there was an island in the bay…

So can we go there? Are there boats which take you there?

He laughed and looked at me. Like almost every time I said something to him.

No, we can't go there. There are pirates down there.

Wow, that's cool! Pirates!

No, it's not cool. Those are actual pirates. They rob and kill.

Fuck!

The actual existence of pirates in real action shocked me more than the possibility of... never mind... I had been here for more than one month. I got used to hearing gunshots. To the sight of coffins. Being warned about certain places I shouldn’t go to. Used to even understanding death and violence from a different perspective. That "fuck", then, didn't mean the same as my other "fucks". It was a different "fuck". An ethical and moral variation on earlier "fucks". A new "fuck" which was shaping up, no idea, the meaning of which I didn’t really know.

We'll go to a safe place, rest assured. But no, we won’t go sailing.

He… *Ay…* With his words, his smile... And that look which made my guts churn. I couldn't bring myself to accept it, but he made me feel good.

Pirates! I kept thinking as I got in the car.

Will I see them, from a distance?

I would like so much to be a pirate!

Putting out to sea. On sail. Storming ships packed with cargo. Robbing them. Not killing anyone. (Just bruising them a little bit). And sailing away towards that island of our dreams. Finding the treasure chest. We’d celebrate it. And after some rest, my crew and I, loaded with gold, we'd continue sailing the seas. Discovering uninhabited, remote… virginal paradises. Wonderful.

That's what I thought.

The morning looked promising.

And my imagination was taking flight.

We were seven, and we had a mission: transporting coconuts from one place to the next and outwitting the pirates off the shore.

What a plan!

Perfect. The perfect plan. Everything was perfect.

I was allowed to go on the back of the pick-up, standing. With Oriol and with... with... with Álvaro. Álvaro wasn’t his name but it suits him. Álvaro was, is, His brother. He had arrived the day before and he was just freaking out. The backdrop was really different from his hometown of Madrid. He was right in the midst of a sensory jungle. Mud tracks. Potholes. Brakes slammed. People jaywalking. Countless peasant hats waggling among the bushes. Surrounded by cars. Surrounded by more peasant hats. Dark faces. Eyes filled with life, gifted life. Souls who had dodged death.

I remember the dampness of that morning.

We succeeded in our goal: coconuts loaded, unloaded, and delivered.

Off to the Bay!

Once again on the back of the pick-up. Clutching the railing so we wouldn't fall. We couldn't stop crying out:

Heeeey!

Ahhh!

Look at that!

That rocks!

Leaps. Squealing brakes. Wheels slipping on the mud, which made us jerk from side to side. We were happy, all three at the back: Álvaro, Oriol, and myself. I guess those who were inside the car must have been talking about work. And I guess, too, considering what was the best way to get there.

We were getting away from the settlements. From groups of houses, their adobe walls, their old timber, their ceilings, sometimes built from coffin scraps. The details…

We hadn't seen a soul for a while.

The mud seemed fresher, with no trace of other cars.

A proper adventure!

Sheer bliss!

What a sense of freedom!

Shouting. Happy. Discovering the world.

Then, all of a sudden, shouting.

Stop!!!!!!!!!

Get out of the car!!!!!!!

Those voices sounded far away. although the five hooded men, bandanas covering their faces, jumping and running towards us like savages, wielding their guns, were inching closer.

I wasn't thinking.

It's now I'm thinking.

There, I just did what I was told to do.

Get out of the car. Hands behind your neck. Take your shoes off.

They left mine on. I was the only woman.

Get moving!

We were at gunpoint and they were yelling at us. We kept following orders.

One of them took Pedro, the driver, whose name was not Pedro, with him. With the car.

The rest walked in line. The guys, barefoot, not me. With our hands behind our necks. And with four hooded men guiding us, in shouts, away from the road.

I was still not thinking.

I don't think anyone was thinking.

Well, those who had been born in this small country were surely thinking.

I can't remember what I was feeling, either. Nothing, I believe.

I have asked myself sometimes if I cried and, to be honest, I don't think I did, at that point.

We stepped deep into the forest.

Another question I often ask myself is: was I afraid?

I don't think so, not at that stage.

I wasn't thinking.

I wasn't feeling.

I was just following orders.

It's been more than twenty years, and I remember everything. It's like having a photograph tattooed into my brain.

I remember the light perfectly.

The colour of the mud.

The tree trunks.

Their clothes. And our clothes.

I remember the place where we stood still.

There was a small esplanade. A very small one.

And they kept us there, motionless. With our hands behind our

necks.

We were searched one after another.

I was searched three times. And each time they touched my butt.

The third time they required my shoes.

I had been taken away from the group. Slightly. And there was a gun pointing to my head.

When I crouched down to take my shoes off, the gun replicated the movement of my body, downwards. Down to my feet.

That’s when I cried. I can remember that suppressed crying. Also the tremor of that hand which held the cold pistol.

Its barrel was touching my skin.

And I also remember my hands moving erratically. I was trembling. But I was trying to make the firmest, the most precise movements of my life.

The assailant had... I think he had... a moment of mercy when she saw the tears flooding my cheeks. And my neck. My cleavage. And I wasn't, I wasn't even sobbing.

Don't worry, nothing will happen to you, he said to me.

What's going on is a whole lot already, man, I thought, while his shaky hand pressed his gun against my temple.

The crying stopped.

I guess it did me good to think that...

Did you hear that?

That noise?

No?

Another mango has fallen off.

I'm going to close my eyes. I do it every time one falls off

I invite you to do the same.

This time I'll go a bit quicker.

*Silence*

Here it is.

I touch it.

That strong skin. Almost impenetrable.

I smell it.

A knife.

Juice. A sickly sweet smell. Ecstasy.

*Silence*

Where were we?

Ah… that “nothing will happen to you”.

The crying receded.

We had just made a pact: unless something went awry, unless some bird passed

and startled him, probably no bullet would come out of that gun for me that time. And that was a consolation. The only consolation I could cling to.

They took me back to my group.

What they did to me was also done to some others in our group. I can't remember which ones. I don't keep images from that. I was recovering from the cold I had felt by my temple. The left one. That tremor. That finger in the trigger that held my life captive.

I stopped belonging to myself.

My life between a finger and a trigger.

Such little leeway.

I considered for a long while that young assailant's shaky finger, he who had felt some mercy in me, and had paid me a few words of consolation.

I saw myself from above. As though I had been watching a recording of what had happened some minutes before. With the camel-coloured shorts I borrowed from Oriol and that black ribbed sleeveless t-shirt that I kept for years. Full of dust. And my hair, all messy. Small. Kneeling down. Taking my shoes off. With the gun rubbing my left temporal lobe.

I see those hooded guys. Taking us aside, one by one, fumbling in our pockets. I see Him, and Álvaro, Oriol and the other two, whose names I can't remember today, but whose faces, bodies and eyes I do remember. Even their t-shirts.

*Silence.*

The searching was over.

We were in a row, all six of us, once again.

One standing next to the other.

With our hands on the back of our necks.

The attackers were pointing at us from a distance. Two guns. Two assault rifles: an Ak47 and an M16. Spoils from a war that had never been settled. Rival weapons and a single purpose: robbing and maybe killing us.

We heard the sound of a car.

Maybe that was the end of the attack. Or of our lives.

Any change. Any movement. Any noise. Could be an end.

And, yes, I was starting to think. I think we were all thinking. At that time, we did.

The noise felt increasingly close. And the mystery was unbearable.

I hope it's the police.

And what if I'm caught in the crossfire, what would I do then?

It better be not the police.

Pedro maybe?

I hope it's Pedro.

So what who's in the car is the other assailant, without Pedro.

I hope that's not our car.

I don't want to see a dead person.

The car eventually arrived, with Pedro behind the wheel.

They made him get out of the car and pushed him towards us. Another one, one of us. Standing, next to us, with his hands behind his neck.

Maybe that would be the end of the assault.

Maybe it would be the end of our lives.

Why were we being retained if they already had all of our belongings?

Turn around!, shouted one of them.

And turning back, my whole life burst out in my head.

Just like that.

It happens.

I expected the gunshot. Gunshots.

But all was still.

Then they talked between them. I was shaking, really trembling inside. And I shed many tears. Silently. I was the only female. I had been told too many stories about rape and murder. That's why when I heard them talk from a distance, I went frightened... I didn't know if they were talking about letting us go or who would be the first one to rape me. I only wished that if I was raped, they'd let me go. That they wouldn't kill me. That I wouldn't be taken hostage. That I wouldn't be tortured for days. That it would be quick. That it wouldn't be too painful. I prayed. To God. Yes, I know he doesn't exist. But I did pray. I asked him this: a quick rape, not too painful, no blood, no torture, no kidnapping.

They all began to fear for me. It was horrible.

One after another, they were whispering to me. Barely moving their lips.

Don't worry, nothing will happen to you.

We're here.

We will protect you.

That made me even more afraid. So afraid I began to focus on the mosquitos feasting on my legs. I relished each single sting. That countered my reflex of warding off them. I had been doing that without noticing. At that point, I realised. A swift movement to repel those mosquitoes could have

been the end. My end.

Three guns and two assault rifles pointing at me. From behind.

My life lay between those fingers and those triggers.

I couldn't afford myself the slightest slip. I had to stay still. With my hands at the back of my neck. With my feet drowning in the mud. And those mosquitoes devouring me.

It took two years before the mosquito sting marks went away.

Two years, or longer. With those hours engraved on my skin. Every time I took a look at my legs, every time I applied sunscreen on my skin, every time I put clothes on or off: there they were.

They stopped talking between them.

We feared for the worst.

I thought of my parents.

Like never before.

I apologised for embarking on that blasted adventure with no way back.

I sent them my full forces so they could overcome their daughter's death.

And I prayed to my grandfather.

He had only died some months earlier. I dreamed about him. It was a recurring dream. He'd come by my bed, wake me up tenderly and say: "I've come to hug you". I asked him to help me. To hug me at that end. To come with me, please. And I felt at peace.

*Silence*

Something happened. They were louder. Movement. Much, too much.

Somebody said goodbye.

We heard footsteps and voices every time further away.

Once again, the situation was taking a turn. Once again the uncertainty on our minds. Any change entailed an additional dose of fear. One further step towards the unwanted.

One of us whispered. There are only three of them. I'm going to attack. Don't worry. This is almost over.

Don't move, motherfucker. My first words since we had descended the car.

I was convincing enough to stop him from moving a single inch from our position. Also, at the same time, when I gave him a sidelong glance, I realised that he didn't have his hands on the back of his neck.

Later on, when that was already over, I knew he had belonged to the elite forces of this tiny country's guerilla.

Later on, I was also to learn that he could have beat them all.

But a different fear got hold of me at the time.

Don't let this guy charge.

Please.

What should I do if he moves?

Run and hide behind a tree?

Run to the right? Or to the left instead?

Drop to the floor and crawl away?

Climb that tree, no matter how?

I had no answers. And since I saw that, for the time being, he wouldn't make a move, I tried to pay attention elsewhere. I went evasive. On the intentions of who wanted to save us. And the rifles and guns aimed at us.

I started making calculations to keep my mind off.

We had picked up around 8 o'clock in the morning. If we count the loading and the unloading of the coconuts, one or two hours must have passed. We must have been there for another couple of hours, although I wasn't sure of that. So I reckoned it must have been somewhere between 10 and 12 am. I added 7 hours to that. And I calculated that, at the moment, it must have been between 5 and 7 in the afternoon in Menorca.

I thought about what day it was, what day number. Since I had arrived I had kept a diary, that's why I didn't doubt: July 24. Fiestas of Es Castell. I thought. My friends must be partying until they drop, surrounded by horses and people drenched in sweat. They must be drinking pomada. At this time I bet they're bursting into tipsy laughter. They must be talking shit all over the place. And here I am instead.

They had paella today. Like every year. That delicious paella we order every year, somewhere. I'd like to eat paella now, I thought. Two dishes. With lots of beer and lots of pomada as the dessert. That pomada Nati used to make with natural lemon and fresh mint, and a lot of Gin Xoriguer. I craved litres of that.

I, who had just left on a trip on my own for the first time. Who had flown across the ocean for the first time. Who, as my diary reads, wanted to feel full freedom. Broaden my points of view. Seeing the world. Meeting new people. Live differently. I, who had given up on my true love so I could fulfil my reckless explorer's dreams. I, who had decided, for the first time, not to spend summer on my island. I, who was becoming bored of doing always the same thing. At that moment, at 21 years old, I wished for a monotonous life, around the usual folks, keeping myself busy with my customary routines. With the same old flavours, No more changes whatsoever, please. And I cursed myself for my ambition. I cursed myself for not conforming.

And that's how I kept myself busy. With some frights in the meantime. As when something stirred. When some bird flew past. When one of us moved a few millimetres. When, unable to see them, I felt one of the others changed their position.

Mosquitoes were keeping me busy too. They were feasting on my legs.

My feet were increasingly stuck in the mud.

It started to rain, a little bit.

We were in the rain season. Heavy, abundant rain. But it merely drizzled. And we were lucky for that.

Later on, we were told that the place where we had been taken was some sort of mass grave, full of corpses. Dead people. Worthless. Murdered people. People who didn't even deserve a resting place.

When I was told that, I couldn't stop thanking whoever it was for the rain, the gentle rain. I don't dare to imagine what would happen if, suddenly, propelled by one of those tropical downpours, from between the mud, that mud that was gobbling my feet, remains started to emerge. Human remains. Rotting corpses.

Can you imagine that?

I can. And I'm sure I would have screamed, I would have moved and caused an ugly mess.

Well, that's for sure.

We had been standing there for long, with the situation not changing.

I got used to fear.

To fear that everlasting moment.

Everything was like a single moment.

Until we heard voices coming in our direction.

Once again. The panicking.

Once again, the same doubts.

I hope it's the police.

I hope it’s not the police.

I hope they move on and they leave us here.

I hope they don’t kill me.

I hope they don’t retain me.

I hope they don’t rape me.

I hope that, when they rape, they do it fast.

I hope they don’t kill me.

I hope they don’t kill Oriol.

I hope they don’t kill Him.

I hope they don’t kill Álvaro.

I hope they don’t kill Pedro.

I hope they don’t kill Mau… the… former guerilla fighter.

I hope they don't kill... the guy in the blue t-shirt.

I hope they follow this reversed order when they kill us.

I hope I'm capable of returning on my own, somewhere, if I'm the only one not getting killed.

I-hopes that crossed my mind in less than one second.

Turn away!

Again.

And in turning back, once again... everything I had lived, diluting, in an instant, before me.

This time, besides seeing my life go past, I also thought.

What a bunch of sadists!

They want to see our faces when they shoot us.

I hated them. For the first time, I think.

The world had come to a halt.

Some in front of others.

A void.

Huge.

Two assault rifles. An AK47, Russian. An M16, North American. And three handguns I couldn't identify.

Five men... who were not men. They were kids. Their bodies were immature, it was noticeable. Five children, dressed in worn black clothes. Flea-black, as my mum would say. With bandanas covering their faces. With hoods and hats to conceal their hair. One of them wore a wig. Like a clown's. Canary yellow. Possibly he didn't own a hat…

They, the others. Five kids pointing at us, challenging us. In silence. Face to face. With our lives between their fingers and their triggers. I keep repeating that over and over, but the feeling was terrible. My life didn't belong to me, it wasn't mine. My life was in the space between those fingers and those triggers.

On the other side, we. Seven. Six with our hands behind our neck. One with arms resting by his upper body. Expectant, the seven of us. Fearless now. It was the end. We could only wish that they didn't hurt us too much, but I don't think that even crossed our minds.

In my brain, silence.

Breathing emptiness.

*Silence.*

Get out. All of you, back on the car.

One by one! they said.

To the car, somebody said, one of us.

I can't remember who that was.

I can't remember his voice. To the cry “get out” nobody had moved out. And one of us said my name.

I reacted and started to walk.

I walked next to the others.

With my head bent down.

Trying to be invisible.

You and you.

Wait.

I stopped for a second, unsure if they were talking to me.

I looked on.

I saw they had been captured, Oriol and He.

They were still being kept at gunpoint.

I feared for the worst.

La *chemi*.

What? I don't understand?

La *chemi*, one more time. He sounded more violent.

I felt Pedro, the driver, behind me. He made me walk forward. It was his turn to save me. I understood the deal. If anything happened, he and I would run away with the car.

I walked on.

In a knee-jerk reaction, I went to the back of the pick-up, the roofless part. My place since we had left in the morning.

Inside. Inside. Quick. Pedro shouted, breathless.

I understood immediately, so I did what he said.

I got into the car.

I closed the door.

Pedro also came in and closed the door. He started the engine.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

One after the other, we were getting in the car.

Another saved life.

Oriol and He still had guns pointed at them.

Don’t worry, Pedro said.

He had become my guardian. My Saviour. But I… I was suffering for my friend and for Him. Maybe they were getting killed and there would be nothing I could do. Just flee.

*Silence*

The time came, at last.

They had been allowed to go.

I felt relieved.

Are we all in the car?

Yes

We started the engine.

When the nightmare seemed like it was over, the front wheels of the car got blocked by a mudhill that Pedro couldn’t circumvent. Without a word, without saying anything, they all leaped off the car. I was going to do the same. I opened the door. And I heard them again. I'm not sure if all of them, or just one.

Get inside, don’t move.

Close the door, Pedro said from the wheel.

With kicks, they tore down trees, thin-trunked trees, but trees after all. I watched them from the car, they looked like superheroes.

There they are! Shouted Mau… the ex guerrilla fighter.

Duck down, Pedro ordered me.

I embedded myself into the seat.

Don’t worry.

I look up, outside. They were all still. Looking behind. Towards the others.

I began to turn my head, slowly, until I saw them. Pointing at us, more spiteful than ever. Their stance was, for the first time, that of someone who’s going to shoot no matter what.

Duck down, Pedro ordered me again.

I embedded myself into the seat.

Our group started piling trunks, at extraordinary speed.

Fast and precise movements.

I turned my head again.

The others were still there. I could feel their violence, more powerful than ever.

Duck down, begged me Pedro.

They built a ramp in a matter of seconds.

Come on, Pedro, speed up.

They lifted the car.

It was a big, heavy car, one that five men wouldn’t be able to lift in normal conditions. But nobody had any doubt they could do it. They put the tree trunks under the front wheels. And an abrupt jostle left us in the starting position, once again.

They got back in the car. This time Oriol sat on the seat next to mine. And he hugged me.

We left.

I looked behind me for a long while.

Oriol's arms were embracing me, strongly.

They were still pointing at us. Ruthless.

Until, at a distance, I saw how they gave up their body stance and left.

They looked tiny.

*Silence*

Do you realise how people will want to hit on us when we tell that story?

Fucking idiot.

What a guy! I got upset. I unwrapped myself off his arms and told him to leave me alone.

I looked outside the window. I shed all my tears by that window.

I couldn't hear anything or anybody.

It took me a long time to cry again. Years. It took me much longer to cry again about this. I did cry about other things. Sometimes I felt the fear coming back, abstract, and I did cry. But as if crying about something else.

We soon reached the first houses.

Somebody had found a banknote in their pocket. It became clear then that they hadn't been searched as thoroughly as I had been. But I couldn't care less. We laughed. We just had a few bucks and we were definitely spending them.

Between the first houses, a small shop appeared. Made of exposed concrete and old timber. We stopped the car. We told them what happened to us and we were given much more than what that old, mangled banknote was worth. It wasn't much. Just enough. Cans of Coca-cola, beer, crisps, and cigarettes.

I sat on the veranda, lit a cigarette and took a gulp of Coca-cola.

Can't beat the feeling! I thought. And smiled listlessly.

The best Coca-cola I ever had.

The most delicious cigarette ever.

I recall being in silence, detached from their conversation. Drinking Coca-cola and chain-smoking.

*Silence*

I can't remember how we got to the local police station.

A hut among the trees.

Two cops. A good one and another one, maybe worse.

We came to report an armed assault.

Name of the assailants.

Excuse me officer, but we didn't introduce each other.

No name, no report.

We gave some nicknames we managed to overhear while they were talking to each other. I will leave those out. As I mentioned early on, I'm leaving them out for security reasons.

OK, that should suffice. Said the cop about the nicknames. I was speechless. Just imagine you walk into a police station and when you're being asked to name the people you want to report, you answer Micky Mouse and the Blondie. And cops then nod in approval. It sounds hard to believe, but that's what happened.

OK, that should suffice. Said the cop. Let's file the report.

He came back with a sheet of paper. It was a square sheet from a DIN-4 torn out of the wire binding. Old. Worn. Stained with oil and stuff written on it.

He wrote the names down. And we recounted the events.

The cop scribbled whatever he pleased.

I can see that desk, his chairs, their silhouettes, their postures. That paper. That handwriting.

We finished our statement.

Come with me, the good cop commanded.

We followed him.

He walked towards an oil barrel and opened the lid.

You have a car, we've got this.

He began to show us machine guns. Assault rifles.

Shall we go and get them?

We could kill them, said the other cop, the, maybe, worst of the two.

*Silence.*

Stares.

No.

That *no* broke the silence.

I went on...

If you hand them over to me, yes. Yes... I will kill them. I'll kill them myself.

I didn't say anything.

Why did I just say that?

I want to go away.

Into town.

Right now.

We all looked at each other.

Silence, filled with doubts.

I want to go.

More silence.

More doubts.

*Silence.*

I want to go.

And we left.

*Silence.*

Night light in the Tropic.

It wasn’t difficult to get a bed from someone, in a big house. With a barbed wire fence, a gatekeeper and his machine gun to match. Oh… and, of course, a party was included.

I needed alcohol. A shower. I asked for it. I also borrowed a dress. Black. And knickers.

I drank up half a bottle of rum, on the shower floor, under the stream of water.

The best shower of my life. I love to reminisce about it. I can sometimes even smell the soap I used. And, sometimes, when I remember it, when I’m reaching the end of that memory, it feels like my hair is wet, like my skin is fresh. And, some days, when I look at myself after that recollection, it feels to me I’m wearing the dress I borrowed from them.

*Silence*

The guests didn’t take long. There were many people and everybody knew what happened to us. People were talking to me, but I couldn’t hear them.

Some women came, volunteering to listen to me about my trauma. I thanked them all. I told them I was alright. And poured myself another drink. Everybody, the local women in particular, took for granted that I had been raped.

They didn't do anything to me, I repeated, more than once.

While still drinking.

Seriously. I'd repeat. Nothing.

They just touched my butt. Three times.

They just held a gun against my temple. Left one.

They didn't believe me.

I resolved to isolate myself. More. In the kitchen.

There He was, bottle of tequila in hand.

Would you like to have some?

Ok.

Do you know how people drink it here?

May I?

Sure.

He gave me a wet kiss on the hand and poured some salt on it. I quivered. He took a slice of lemon and he put it in my lips, gently. He licked the salt, took a gulp of tequila straight off the bottle and, without touching me, he snatched the lemon from my lips.

Your turn.

We drank the bottle between us.

But I didn’t get drunk.

*Silence.*

This night will belong to us. Forever.

We had just won a battle and we were celebrating together.

Did you hear that? That noise? No? That was a gunshot.

Someone must have been killed. Ais, sorry, I’ll stop. But… nothing. Let’s move on. But where were we?

Oh yeah…

He…

I woke in his arms, floating. I can still feel his smell. Baby-like. Yes, that big-handed man, fifteen years my senior, he smelled like a baby. The light was pouring from the window. We looked at each other, in silence. For a long while.

*Silence.*

We’re alive, I whispered in a broken voice.

*Silence.*

At breakfast, I asked Him and his brother Álvaro if they were feeling sore. We were sore in every corner of our bodies, our souls, our brains. Our eyelids too.

*Silence*

Life, as it couldn’t be otherwise, went on.

Oriol and I went back to the countryside.

We resumed our routine.

Collecting plants. Classifying them. Making our herbarium project come true. Distilling eucalyptus. And lemongrass. Working in the country. Picking pipians. Going out to the small shop in the afternoon for a beer. Having dinner with our host family.

Showering in the well. With our clothes on. Taking shit. In that outhouse. Liquid poo. While the flies ravaged our butts.

I was having nightmares. A nightmare, a recurring one. I'd wake up drenched in sweat. And I'd run towards the window to check they weren't there. I dreamed that the eyes of those five guys, the others, were staring from outside the window. With their faces covered. Their hoods. That canary yellow clown wig. They were staring at me, pointing at me with their machine guns and pistols. It was awful.

I tried to sleep again. But I wouldn't sleep. And despite the fear, I'd go out of the room. I'd go to the well. And I'd walk a little bit into the bushes. I'd grab a stone and throw it. Not too far.

And then, a galaxy of fireflies would appear before me. Every single time.

It wouldn't last long. But it was beautiful. And that moment, looking at them, I felt alive. It was the only thing that made me feel anything. Just once, every night, waking up after a nightmare, I'd go and wake them. And when they'd faded out, I'd look up to the sky and watch the stars. Longingly. As if I was meant to be there. In the firmament. Dead. But I wasn't. I felt a very strong connection. With the soil and the sky. Something very profound to a 21-year-old child.

When I went back to bed, I would shut my eyes. Sometimes I would get closer to Oriol and cuddled him in order to sleep better. Sometimes, sound asleep, he welcomed me in his arms. Some other times I didn't hug him. I just touched him with a foot or a hand, some patch of his skin.

More or less clutching onto him, I'd close my eyes and recall over and over that moment in which, after throwing that stone, the galaxy of fireflies ignited for me. And so I was able to sleep. Among fireflies, among galaxies.

One morning they came looking for us. I can't remember who that was. Somebody came for us from the town. The robbers had heard about our police report and they spread the voice that if they found us, they would kill us. We had to go. We packed the few things we had. A few clothes. The passport. And

little else.

We were taken back to town. And we were told that we would have a meeting, the seven of us.

Us seven, we got in. Here.

There was a table with its chairs..

The seven of us exchanged greetings euphorically. A silent euphoria. We didn't need words.

We were there. Alive. Why talk about nothing.

We waited.

Until a man came in. I still don't know who he is. Well I do know perfectly who he is. It's all written in my diary. But now, I need to leave out the details. I've told you a few times, Yes, still two decades after that, I must leave that out. Leave out names, leave out job positions. Leave out… I’m afraid. yes, of...

Anyways! That man. Who had some power. He told us this:

We made you all come here because, after the assault, the robbers, with everything they stole from you, bought off the police in the region. Before, their turf was this size. The strip of territory he showed us between his fingers was the length of a lighter. Now their police impunity zone is this big. And he stretched out his arms to show us its size. Since there are Europeans among the victims, some...

some dipl... some mechanisms... have been activated. (Ais… I don't want to get into a mess here.) Some "organs", in lack of a better word. So, yes, certain “organs” have been activated, and we’re working in conjunction with them.

We looked at each other. It seemed like they were taking action. Maybe those “organs”, working in conjunction with them, could… anyway.

If you give us your consent for it, as soon as we catch them red-handed, we will kill them.

I understood everything. I had been long enough in this tiny country to be able to understand that wasn’t as insane as it sounded.

And I just talked.

I can't decide this. I can't agree to something like this. But I understand the situation. So I'm donating my “vote” to this country's citizens.

We were four Europeans and three locals.

With my ruling, the Sal… those born here were going to decide.

The other Europeans adhered to my proposal.

The remaining three, the ones from here, gave us looks of gratitude.

They knew it wasn’t an easy choice. Killing somebody, or giving somebody your consent to do it wasn’t part of our plans. In our European aid workers’ plans. To them, born here, killing sometimes was a necessary thing. And if somebody else could handle it, all the better.

And, as we knew, all three of them agreed to have those guys killed if caught in action.

The meeting finished.

And I, this self, stayed here. Nailed to this chair.

Oriol and another of my selves couldn’t go back to the country. They were after us. To kill them.

So they went to an island, a paradise. On that island, Oriol and another of my selves, found some solace.

I’m not sure, maybe it’d be better if… what if I keep telling this story, without changing selves? Without… without explaining which self is the one speaking and this way we can progress with no *sotracs*?

Shit!

What do you call *sotracs*?

Wow, me, this self stuck to the chair. I'm not sure why it hasn't spoken Catalan again. Because most of my selves happen to speak Catalan. And like some of the things one self and another self do permeate and affect all those selves, sometimes, inexplicably, some words come out in Catalan. I don't know... sotracs... sotracs... sotracs. I can’t think of the right word.

Anyway…

Let’s make a pact, ok? I speak in the first person, singular, even speaking about other selves. And you won’t forget I am many selves and, from now on, when I say *I* i’m referring to a different self. Because I, this self, already told you her story. The story that ended after that meeting. Absurdly, here, in that chair.

Let’s go back to the island.

Anyway, there isn’t that much to tell. An island, a hammock, cold beer, some rest… It was much needed, actually. And then, the journey continued. We visited other countries. We met many people. We slept among the fleas. With mice. Our poo was still liquid. And not much else.

One day we took a flight back home.

At Menorca Airport I showed up in front of my parents and they didn’t recognise me.

I had lost weight, I was very suntanned, more than usual. But I believe they didn't recognise me because my look, my face, my soul, had been changed forever. I wore the imprint of a gifted life, carved into every pore of my skin.

The mark of someone who is there, but who might have not been.

Dad.

Mum.

They said my name at the same time. And they took me in their arms. They kissed me.

Once in the car, I told them something happened. My mum turned around and said: July 24?

How do you know?

My dad jolted the steering wheel and stopped the car at the kerb.

Mum, how do you know?

I can't believe it. I can't believe it. I can't believe it. Repeated my dad, ever the sceptic.

I didn't know what was going on. I hadn't told anyone what happened. Nobody that was close to me. No one who might have been in touch with my parents.

My mum was crying. Heartbroken.

Mum?

Mum? What’s going on?

She wouldn’t reply, she just cried. And stared at me

My dad dropped it: that day we were sat at the table and your mum cried. She said: she's not alright. Our daughter is not alright. Something's happening to her. She cried for two hours in bed. I tried to reassure her, but I couldn't. She kept saying: she's not alright. Our daughter is not alright, she repeated.

Fuck, mum.

Stop cursing, my mum stammered, as she stopped crying.

Fuck, mum, no way!

I asked grandpa, wherever he was, to protect you.

Fuck.

That mouth…

I could feel him, mum. Fuck…

I suddenly stopped crying, she said.

Fuck… fuck… mum…

I knew that everything was over. I didn’t know what, but I knew that you were alright. That everything was over.

I told them what that “everything” was and how it had ended. They were frightened about what could have happened.

We will never be able to understand everything.

I spent a few days in Menorca, at the house we have by the sea.

I didn’t feel.

I couldn’t sleep well.

My home, my place in the world, I found it remote.

I once spat on the dining room floor. My dad told me off. It was the last time I’d spit on the floor. I was suddenly eating rice with my hands. I was suddenly saying words my parents didn’t understand.

Sometimes I had the feeling I had just returned from war.

Everything felt like nothing.

And I started gambling with fate.

Betting hard.

On my first night out, I did drugs. I stole some pills with my friends. Yes, we borrowed them, but that’s a different story. I drove my car while very high. I had never done that before (that. or stealing ecstasy). But I did it. I knew nothing could happen.

Nothing else can ever happen to me. That was my mantra. Nothing could ever happen to me.

I knew it would take a while for death to knock on my door again.

I went back to Barcelona. To university.

I resumed my routine and tried to forget what happened.

So naive.

Such things are not forgotten.

*Silence.*

My phone rang on an autumn evening.

It was Him.

Hi?

Hi.

He called my name, sweetly.

I called his name, sweetly. And I asked him how he was.

They’ve been killed. That was his answer.

Shit. Fuck.

Yes.

We were quiet for a while. Breathing together.

Are you alright?

So so. You?

So so.

Let 's chat soon.

Ok.

Take care.

You too.

I hung up the phone. We hung up.

Silence. More silence.

Even more.

That silence still remains.

Twenty years later, I haven’t managed to fill that dan silence.

Five dead.

Five victims.

Five dead, on my shoulders.

Five.

Five dead, five murderers, dead.

Five dead, who will die with me.

Five mothers of my dead.

Only five. Only five mothers of five dead.

Only five.

Only five dead. On my shoulders.

And that silence.

That silence which lingers, which won’t go away. It won’t dissolve. Twenty years later. That “they’ve been killed” remains inside me. It won’t go away. I know that much. It’s the price of that “yes”, indirect. but still “yes”. That consent. Absurd. That “yes” which has left me nailed to this chair.

This chair.

This silence.

Silence.

This silence is an apology. To them, to the others.

To the five mothers.

That silence is my blame.

And it 's heavy.

Nothing will happen to you, that kid said to me, as he hammered his gun against my temple.

Nothing happened to me. Not to me. He was right. Nothing was going to happen to me.

Silence.

Did you hear that?

A mango has fallen off.

Silence.

Another one.

Silence.

And another one.

Oooh… Mangoes are falling off.

Many.

So wonderful.

Maybe each one of us will be able to pick their own.

*The stage becomes filled with fireflies.*

*Silence*

*.*

*All but five fireflies fade out*

*Silence.*