

MARTIRICOS

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MARTIRICOS is a publication of Málaga's E.O.I. English Department. Its sole purpose is to make public the short stories which each year are shortlisted in the Concurso de Narrativa E.O.I. de Málaga, which can be entered for by all the students of all the Escuelas de Idiomas in Andalucía. In this edition, 2005, the first prize has been awarded to Pablo Blas García for the story "Monopoly" (41 points), the finalists being María Dolores Egea Varela and Isabel María Begines Fernández, with the stories "The Great Fire" and "Samuel" respectively (38 points each).

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MARTIRICOS

Panel of judges of the IV Concurso de Narrativa en Inglés E.O.I. de Málaga

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MONOPOLY

Pablo Blas García

Winner of the IV Concurso de Narrativa E.O.I.

Born in Málaga, Pablo Blas García is an economist and works for the European Resource Unit at the County Council (Diputación). He loves reading, sports and languages. He studies English (5th course) at Malaga's E.O.I.

Once upon a time, when I was a teenage English student in Tacoma, Washington State, something very funny happened to me. All the members of the family I stayed with, were women. First, we have Susy Stuart, the girl of the house, who was my age. Then we have her two sisters: Mary Stuart, a sweet, peaceful nun; and Nancy Stuart, a soldier in the U.S. Navy, whose neck was as thick as one of her legs. To finish with the family, we have their mother (I will call her just 'Big Mother'), who was very big. Sorry, I forgot to say my name: I am Linda.

The Stuarts were very religious and also very patriotic. They belonged to one of those Christian sects that gather together every Sunday, and they pray, and they sing, and they even dance waving their hands the whole day long until they lose control of their minds. God's eye was on them all the time and the U.S. flag hung permanently from one of the windows of the Stuart house.

Well, life was horribly dull and boring with the Stuart family, until that day when they decided to go on a trip to the mountains to spend some days in their "house in the woods", as they called it. Washington state is called the rain state, obviously because of the incredible green forests. The idea sounded good to me: 'wow,' I thought, 'mountains, house in the woods...'

So we all set off early in the morning in a small car. After miles and miles of a lonely, long, straight motorway, we got to a deep, dark wood with a winding road. At night, we arrived at a horrible tiny hut in the middle of nowhere which was supposed to be 'the house in the woods'. The place reminded me dangerously of 'Twin Peaks' (in fact, it was shot in those places)

However, the inside of the house was even worse. Once we had cleaned the place and arranged everything, there wasn't too much to do, it was freezing cold outside and I was bored to death inside, so I was delighted when Peaceful Mary Stuart suggested that we could play Monopoly, which is, well which was till that moment, one of my favourite table-games.

The three Stuart girls and I started to play and everything was going pretty well, especially for Nancy Stuart. Yes, with her aggressive financial strategies, the huge girl from the Navy had just won the only million dollar note you have in this game. And me, well, I was doing just fine but I had always thought that the amusing part of the game was to cheat and so I waited for the right moment to steal the one million dollar note and hide it very well under my legs on the chair. I found it the most natural thing to do in order to have some fun, and when I did it nobody noticed it.

The game went on for a while, but then Nancy decided to buy a new hotel and she needed the note. You would never imagine her face when she could not find it. First, she looked at me narrowing her eyes, then she looked at Peaceful Mary and finally, deciding that her sister was *peaceful* Mary, the nun, and Linda was after all, the new girl in the house, neither her nor me were able to do that kind of thing, she glared at Susy in anger and with a wild look in her eyes said: 'I've been robbed... and you did it!!' All of us were shivering with terror but Susy, in a panic, started to shout as well: 'I did not, I didn't steal anything!!!' 'Yes, you did it, don't lie!!!' 'No, no, I am not lying, you are the liar!!!' They got really violent. You can imagine my state of mind as the shouting went on: I was trying to work out the possibilities of getting out of there alive, get to the road, find somewhere to hide in the woods... I don't know. Peaceful Mary looked at me with tender eyes that meant 'Calm down... and please, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.'

Suddenly, Big Mother came into the room to see what was happening. She just approached Susy and took her upstairs. So the rest of us stayed there in silence watching each other. We

could hear poor Susy crying: 'I did not steal anything, I swear I didn't!!!!', and then Big Mother: 'On your knees!!! And now listen, lying is a dirty sin; remember god's watching you and he knows you are a liar!!!', and then the sound of Big Mother's hand slapping poor Susy's cheeks over and over again. In that very moment, Susy screamed: 'Yes, I did it!!! I confess, God forgive me for being a sinner and a liar!!'

In that situation, I came to the conclusion that I had to destroy the proof of my crime, so I made a desperate decision: I waited again for the right moment when nobody was looking at me and then put the note in my mouth, I softly chewed it and after a few disgusting seconds, I swallowed it.

Ten minutes later, Susy came downstairs with pink swollen cheeks and glanced at me with bloodshot eyes. Our relationship was not the same the following days.

Unfortunately, we never had the time to mend our friendship, because five days later, the Organization that had sent me to the Stuart family decided, I still don't know why, that it would be a good idea to send me to another family in the other side of the city.

* * *

SAMUEL

María Dolores Egea Valera

Finalist of the IV Concurso de Narrativa E.O.I.

*María Dolores Egea Valera is a “veteran” both in this contest and in **MARTIRICOS**: last year’s issue her story “The Fisher of Men” was among the best five taking part in the III Concurso de narrativa E.O.I. She studies English at Córdoba E.O.I. and works as a teacher of both English and German. Reading, swimming and travelling are the activities she enjoys the most.*

The sensation of coming back home and knowing that someone is waiting for you is something gorgeous. I have never been frightened of loneliness. My solitude is something I’ve always enjoyed and I’m proud of it, but to know that someone is waiting for you is something very comforting. I feel butterflies in my stomach when I go up the stairs and come into the sitting room. The light is very weak. He is staring at me fixedly, motionless, with a sweat and static look as if he wanted to tell me something and he didn’t dare. I smile to him and I sit by his side.

Today I have had a ghastly day in the laboratory. The tissue culture has been infected and the bacteria have flowered like spores all over the test tubes, polluting the neighbouring cells and spoiling the experiment.

Samuel smiles and I switch on the T.V. I’m very tired and scarcely can fix the view in the set. There is nothing interesting. I put my head on Samuel’s shoulder and an intense smell of latex fills my senses. I look at his hands of latex, his eyes of silicon, his artificial hair....It’s a candied smell that relaxes me like children when they hug their plastic dolls and fall asleep grasping their mother’s hair. We go to bed. Samuel is tired too and has nothing to tell me.

At dawn, the day knocked at the door and a bunch of sparkling rays scattered over the room inviting you to go out. The smells that came through the window made you feel alive. Everything palpitated around me.

I felt like those throbbing hearts that operate on television and beat furiously without stopping Unfortunately, I had to go to the dentist. Samuel wanted to come with me. I placed him in the car and we took the highway. The dentist lived in the outskirts of Madrid.

When we passed the Armani shop the traffic lights were red and I had to stop. Samuel was looking at the window impatiently. She was in the shop window, splendid as always, wearing a black party dress with a tremendous neckline that covered her firm bust insinuating the voluptuous and winding forms of the perfect woman.

Many times, I have been jealous of her when I have stopped at the traffic lights and I've seen this mannequin. I can't compete with a woman like this, but I know that Samuel is not very demanding and I realise he likes me. I have never had a complaint on his part, at least he has never said a word. Sometimes I could wish he were more talkative. I don't know what crosses his mind, what is inside his scatterbrain. But this is groping in the dark. He is the sort of person that agrees to everything and always approves with a pleasant frozen smile

Samuel remained seated in the waiting room and I entered to get a filling in my teeth. When I came out, he was still waiting for me. He hadn't ever read a single magazine that lay on the table in the surgery.

We rode in the car while a gang of children threw little paper balls against his window trying to hit him. Samuel smiled, I started the car and drove away.

At half past two we had an appointment at Paul's house. Paul and Beatrice had invited us to lunch. On the way back to Madrid, I went straight to the point. I didn't want to beat about the bush anymore cause I was fully aware that something was happening. I asked him but a deep silence was the only answer.

To have a latex lover is not an easy task. The dialogues turn normally into monologues, although rarely is there a subject to discuss. His attitude is so submissive that it can become boring. A man like this at your side makes you feel you are the centre of attention, you always conduct the orchestra, he never gets in your way and the ultimate advantage: he never snores.

At lunch, Samuel was very quiet. Paul ruled the roost and Samuel took a middle distance without contradicting anybody but also without bringing up any subject for discussion. The lamb was

delicious. It had been marinated in a sweet-and-sour sauce, baked in the oven and served with bamboo shoots and caramelised sultanas.

Beatrice adores Samuel, his obliging smile, his perfect manners, his education and his neutral vision of the facts. He is the perfect man, she will often say. You don't know how lucky you are.

The next day I had to go to Segovia to pick up some tests from the laboratory and bring them back to Madrid. We have been working on these tissue cultures for ages and although the findings of the research were inconclusive, I had to bring them back to Madrid. Samuel didn't fancy coming with me and preferred to stay at home listening to his old records. It was fairly hot for the time of the year and the poppies covered the green fields like in a Renoir picture. I picked up the test in the laboratory and went to a restaurant at lunch time. Although it was hot, I ate piglet with red wine. I telephoned home but there was no answer. This was strange. I rang him up again but nobody answered the phone.

At nightfall I reached Madrid. When I was going up the stairs I felt butterflies in my stomach again. I opened the door and all was dark. There was nobody in the sitting room. I went through the corridor and I saw a tender light in the bedroom. I opened the door and there she was, naked on my bed, next to Samuel. On the floor there was embroidery underwear and a black Armany party dress. The two looked at me astonished. In Samuel's eyes there was a static look as if he wanted to say something but he didn't dare.

Trembling, I went out of the house, my legs shaking, I burst into tears.

I walked along the avenue slowly, under a cloak of twinkling stars while a warm wind stroked my hair.

* * *

THE GREAT FIRE

Isabel María Begines Fernández

Finalist of the IV Concurso de Narrativa E.O.I.

Born in Málaga in 1973, Isabel María Begines Fernández qualified as a biologist and is at present an employee at the airport. She makes tapestries and looks after her own garden. As to other hobbies, she loves reading, especially biographies and novels. She studies English (4th course) at Málaga's E.O.I. She points out that she has never published any sort of sotry.

The city had been everything but soft or calm since Governor Miro passed the ordinance called 'The Tignon Law' in the Spanish Province of Louisiana. The ordinance made it an offence for unmarried women of colour to walk abroad in silk, jewels, or plumes. The only head covering they might wear was a madras kerchief known as a tignon, twisted around the head and knotted on top.

It all started when Madeleine Dupont was walking by the French Market with a beautiful hat and a diamond ring on her finger. She was a well-known Quadroon supported by Monsieur Claudet, but she was also unlucky enough to meet Madame Claudet while they were buying sweets in the *patisserie*.

Madame Claudet evoked her right as a white woman and ordered to have Madeleine whipped like a slave. She knew she would have to pay the consequences when her husband heard about the whipping administered in the *calabozo*. But it was worth if she could avoid her husband's lover demonstration around New Orleans.

After the big scandal, the Creole society felt that Governor's ordinance would help to increase circumspection in Quadroon's behaviour. But Monsieur Claudet was mad enough to make his wife stay in her bedroom for a month.

The air on early spring days in New Orleans is usually calm, but that day the wind blew continually from the South. Violet was watching through her bedroom's window to those people down in Royal Street, fighting to walk against the strong wind. Her bedroom was the noisiest in the house, so that she preferred studying in Eliza's room, whose window looked on Dumaine Street, always less crowded. But that day Eliza had invited some girls from school to study with her and that room was busy.

Violet knew those girls from the Ursulines Convent where they all studied. Eliza seemed to like them but Violet could not stand their conversations, always about how they spent last summer in their Manor houses by the river and how important their ancestors were to the city. Even the nuns treated them differently for being Creole!

Studying was not Violet's main interest at that moment. She could hear her mother in the courtyard, bringing the chairs into the house. Her father had brought all the furniture from Spain when he was transferred to the colonies and bought the house. As a military officer, he had to travel a lot, but the girls could always count on their mother, who dealt with the slaves and put some order in the house.

Every time she had the chance, Violet used to go to the French Market where she spent time just watching: Quadroons wearing cotton gowns buying roses, Sirènes peddling gris-gris or amulets, street vendors selling all kinds of potions, Creoles of colour working leather and people singing.

Violet would have liked to go there again, but it was Good Friday and there was no market that day. Instead of that she walked around the Place d'Armes, admiring the wooden Cathedral and palisades, and thinking of the last wedding she had attended at St. Louis Cathedral. The bride had been her sister Eliza's best friend, Françoise Claudet, a French Creole young lady who had got married to Alexander Castro, another military officer transferred from Spain to the colonies and a good friend of their father's. At the Cathedral, Violet got to see the famous Madame Claudet after the whipping incident. She did not seem cowed by her period of isolation. That old maid behaved

as if she owned her husband, her daughter, the Cathedral, the *Cabildo*, the priest and the city of New Orleans. Violet would have loved to see Madame Claudet's face if Madeleine Dupont had been invited to the wedding. But it did not happen!

She walked back home and entered through the *porte cochère* towards the courtyard. She wanted to go to the slave's quarters and the kitchen, where she would ask what they had to do that night. Every Catholic family in New Orleans showed their respect to the mourning of Good Friday.

.....

Violet had been sleeping for a long time when her mother came into the room to wake her and her sisters up. Her mother sounded really scared and Violet could hear people screaming 'Fire!' in the street.

When they were downstairs Violet saw her mother dragging out the slaves in an effort to save them from the danger. People were screaming in desperation while they saw hopeless their houses burning. The orange flames were engulfing and destroying buildings.

It seemed as if there was not a safe place to go while they saw children running in all directions, black smoke invading the air and frightening flames all around the city. Men banded together to save what little they could. The fire was greedy and cruel, leaving virtually nothing standing. The wind blew continually from the south and the flames, fanned by the relentless southern night wind, spread wildly through the city.

The smartest thing to do was to look for shelter in the Ursulines Convent and the nearby Military Hospital. They all ran there with dozens of women in their night clothes carrying children. At the entrance of the complex Violet saw Père Antoine commanding a group of black men who had made a "bucket brigade" to stop the fire close to the building.

Violet and her group entered the hospital room and she noticed two old black women sitting on a bench gossiping.

'See Marcia,' the older one was saying, 'had it not been for Monsieur Claudet's cry when he saw the flames burning through the French doors of Madeleine Claudet bedroom we would all be dead!.'

'Was he in the house?' the young woman asked.

'No Marcia! He was getting back home from his lover's place. Thank God he had a mistress to visit,' exclaimed the old woman.

* * *

A MENTAL EXERCISE

María Garcés Martín

María Garcés Martín was born in Málaga in 1986. She studies Translation and Interpretation (1st course) at Malaga's University. She likes reading any sort of books, although she prefers adventure novels. She studies English (5th course) at Malaga's E.O.I. This story, "A Mental Exercise", has been voted among the best eight taking part in this edition of the Concurso de Narrativa.

'Have you got any questions? Any doubt?'

He always finished his explanations like that, with these two sentences.

It was a piece of advice that a retired teacher told him, so, that way, nobody could say that he didn't allow the children to express their ideas.

'Ok...For tomorrow you'll have to solve the following mathematics problem,' he said, conscious that most of them weren't paying attention to him. 'So take out a sheet of paper and a pencil, and write down what is written on the blackboard.'

He knew that it was a very difficult problem, in fact, it was a terrible problem, but he liked to find out if among his pupils, there was that young child who any teacher wanted to discover.

'You can ask your parents or your elder brothers and sisters, but first try to solve it on your own, ok?' he said while everybody was leaving the classroom because the bell had just rung.

The following day, he was surprised to learn that all his pupils (and they were thirty-six) had done the exercise.

'How strange!' he thought, so he asked:

'Who can solve the problem on the blackboard?'

Everyone looked down and none of them answered. So he asked again:

'How many of you have solved the problem on your own? I mean, without asking anybody?'

Once again, no one did any movement. Everyone was in silence.

'All right, before I do it, can you choose a candidate to solve it?'

One of them pointed her out, another simply said her name, but in any case it was clear: Susana. Susana was the answer.

Arturo's classes were at eight o' clock. He was the new teacher; he had just arrived at the school so everybody wanted to impress him, that's why everyone had finished the exercise. There were people who had completely forgotten about the problem; others didn't even try to find the solution; most of them had asked their parents or elder brothers and sisters and few had really tried it... but it was Susana Pedrosa Castillo the only one who had achieved to solve it, so before eight o' clock, everybody had copied the answer but no one was able to explain it.

'Well...Susana, come here, please.'

She stood up. Her face went pale and then red as she came closer to the blackboard. Susana was very shy and insecure. She hated attracting attention.

'Can you read it first?'

'Yes... A man meets a friend in the street. They haven't seen each other for a long time. One of them is married and he has three daughters.'

'How old are your daughters?'

'The multiplication of their ages is equal to thirty-six.'

'And how many make their ages?'

'The number of the house opposite us.'

'But, there is a piece of information missing.'

'Yes, I almost forgot, my elder daughter plays the piano.'

'All right, now I'm ready to tell you how old your daughters are.'

'Ok Susana, so what you have to do is to find out their ages.'

'I think that they aren't real friends because it's much easier to say their ages; if it happened to me I'd stop talking to him,' said Jaime.

His fellow students agreed with him.

'My father,' said another, 'told me that this problem hasn't got a solution. Jonathan Cortés worshipped his father and he believed all he said. But, when his father said ironically that there were a lot of pieces of information missing, like the make of his car, Jonathan didn't understand it,

so he asked his mother, who told him that his father knew so much about cars that if he found out the make, he could tell you everything about the driver and his family.

Little by little, everyone started to say what they thought.

'Silence please... How did you do to solve the problem, Susana?' asked the teacher.

'Well... er.. I...'

She was extremely nervous.

'There are eight different combinations whose result is thirty-six,' said Susana in a quiet voice. 'But only two of them were possible: 1-6-6 and 2-2-9.'

'And why?' asked Arturo very surprised.

'Because of the piano.'

'Go on,' said he.

'If the only one who plays the piano is the elder daughter, the combination 1-6-6 can't be, because, that way, the two elder sisters would play the piano, so... the ages of the daughters are two, two and nine. And the number of the house opposite them is thirteen.'

'Well done Susana, congratulations!' said the teacher very excited.

The rest of the class started to applaud but she only wanted to disappear. Susana preferred not to stand out; because of that, her marks were those of an average student; what is more, she wasn't considered the cleverest of the class, because it was Claudia Sigüenza (and not her) who got the best marks. Claudia was intelligent and quite hard-working, but above all, bright: she had a great ability to convince, express her ideas and cheat in the exams. All her fellow students knew it, but they didn't say anything. Claudia had all the popularity, she was the leader of the class and Susana didn't feel envy, on the contrary, Susana was happy going unnoticed.

**NOTE: This exercise was brought by my brother some years ago. He asked my father and me. We really tried to find it out, but it was impossible for us and that day, like a lot of parents and elder brothers, we remembered the teacher's mother.*

* * *

LEFTALONE CITY

A true story for fictitious people
Gema M. Cascales Romero

Born in Málaga en 1970, Gema M. Cascales Romero, a graduate in Filología Inglesa, is an employee. She loves music, reading and photography. She has never published any sort of work. She is doing 5th course of English at Málaga E.O.I.

I

That was a warm and quiet summer night. Too quiet, even for Leftalone City. The heat prevented anybody from going out of their homes, for there was not even a cool breeze to relieve these poor souls of the sweaty feeling. And there was the Woman, sitting on the footsteps of her front door, watching the sky intently, with a cool beer in her hand, wondering... for the first time. She felt different. The concepts in her mind were changing, moving from one place to another. Time and space were becoming something significant, giving a kind of roundness, a 3D perception to her senses. There appeared a "before". She realised, but in a slow-motion way, something was avoiding her, memories like images that elude you the moment you want to focus on them. How long had she been living in Leftalone? Why was she there? Maybe it was the moment. How could one know? Something stirred within her heart.

She sipped from her can, grateful for the cooling sensation down her throat. As she looked upon the road there he was, approaching. There could be no mistake; the black bandana on his forehead, hiding the opening that connects with the Other Side. It was difficult to tell his age. Depending on the light and the shadows he seemed to be in constant change, from old to young and young to old.

'I heard you called.'

'But, I didn't...' 'Shhhh. Each awakening produces a particular sound, unrepeatable and unique, as well as every Leftalonero has assigned a unique Pathfinder that will be attracted to that sound, no matter wherever he is or whatever he is doing.'

'I need to know. I want you to tell me what I left behind.'

'As you wish. But once we have started, the fan of futures closes and only two ways are revealed, nothing more.'

'I think I can handle it.'

'Give me one day. I'll find you.'

'I'll find you.' Still the echo of the sentence was fading in her head when he was nowhere to be seen. She didn't even try to go to bed that night. It was true. The awakening had begun.

II

To leave your home, your family and friends, quit your job, your previous life as you know it, and become a Leftaloner is not something you exactly decide. It just happens. The key is not caring anymore. You stop perceiving the world, you speak less, you see less. You hear nothing, and nothing becomes a matter of importance. Then, one day, you just turn around a corner and cross the border. There you are. Welcome to Leftalone City, where nobody will bother you, not even yourself.

The next morning of her interview with the Pathfinder, something unusual, even bizarre, took place. She received a letter; amazing for a place with no post service; just two sentences and no signature: 'We need you. Where are you?' It was like the cut of a knife down along her spine. Her mouth dried instantly, the place darkened. Suddenly it was so cold she couldn't help but shivering out of control. The cotton-warm reality around her tore a little bit and she had a blurred glance of something else, the mortal touch of the Other Side. Her room changed into another place, unfamiliar and disturbing; a corridor, a window, a face. A pair of lips moved in front of her, but no sound reached her mind. She felt dizzy, she was about to be sick and faint when a hand seized her from behind.

'Calm down,' he said. 'I'm here now.' The Pathfinder looked her in the eye. And the vision disappeared.

'I really do not know how to explain this. It is the first time the two worlds mix in such a way. I am your only key to the Other Side. It seems there must be some urge to have the physical laws of this place altered like this.'

The Woman couldn't utter a word. She felt ice in her mouth.

'Ok. I'll tell you what. I can't delay this anymore, I'll give you your vision, but you will have to receive it somewhere else. We cannot share the same space when I'm finding.'

He wrote the address on a piece of paper and handed it to her. She wasn't sure if she was going to be able to walk, but the fear of repeating the experience proved to be a good incentive. So she left for the Hill of Shalaf.

III

It is said there is a hill in Leftalone City where you can see the Milky Way so close, that you could count all the stars one by one without mistaking them, that is, if you had the time. And Shalaf did. He had already counted fifteen thousand, three hundred and twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty...

'Shalaf,' she said.

'Just a moment. Twenty-three,' he wrote the number down so he wouldn't forget.

'Oh, my dear. How terrible for you. But don't you fear, my love. You are safe now with me,' he addressed her with eternal kindness.

Back in her apartment, the Pathfinder removed the black cloth from his head. He had been summoned either to find the way back, or to quit existence forever. He was kneeling in the dark. It began. First, the smell, some ancient scent excited his nostrils. Then, the wind, hot and full of colours, travelling faster and faster, making him breath with difficulty. His pulse raced. A splash,

and under the water he went. It was the connection, the womb that opens to the Other Side. And the vision began. The Woman had a name there, and a house, and a son, and a husband. But the house was burning, the son was dead, the Woman was badly hurt and the husband was... laughing. The vision changed. The burial of the son; she was already leaving the world, though nobody seemed to have noticed yet, but he recognised the sign. She was vanishing, almost transparent. The absence of the Husband so meaningful; it meant the abyss. The vision changed again. A corridor, a window, a face. A Mother talking to the Woman. 'We need you, where are you?' You are the witness. He can't get away with it. Come back, please, come back'. The tears of the Mother falling on the hands of the Woman, burning invisible marks of desperation. The water made the connection.

'Shalaf,' she called. Her voice was heart-breaking, so sad it could make you cry a whole sea of sorrow.

'I'm here,' he said.

'It hurts. It hurts so much.'

'I know. I've seen it before. That's why I'm here.'

So he reached out his hand and took a ribbon of light from the closest star, and rubbed her forehead. And she fell asleep. He didn't know if she was moving to the Other Side, or quitting her existence forever.

IV

'My baby,' she mumbled.

The Mother looked up, not quite sure if the sound of the words was real, or just a trick of the mind.

'Oh, my God, I knew you would come, my love.'

'Mum, my baby,' she wept.

'I know, my love. I know,' she kissed her daughter's tears.

'Don't worry, Mum. I'm going to be fine. I know. I'm here. I'm ready now. I'll fight back.'

* * *

THE ENVELOPES

Francisco Sánchez Domene

Born in Castellón in 1973, Francisco Sánchez Domene lives at present in Macael, in whose E.O.I., having finished English, he studies French (2nd course). He works as a clerk for a firm dealing in marble. Loves Hitchcock and other classics. In literature he is for Wilde, Chesterton and Javier Marías among others. He published a story in the University Journal while a student.

'This is the point when you work at Personnel Department, you know what everybody earns, but cannot do anything in order to prevent it'. This is what Luisa was thinking while she picked up from the boss' hands the money for the payment of the first two weeks of November.

It would be the last time that she did it, after spending ten years introducing millions of the old 'pesetas', thousands of euros nowadays, which they gave her to prepare the wages of all the staff. She liked imagining that, each fortnight, the boss suffered a philanthropic fit and ordered her to pay out round the employees the small bag full of money which he got in the bank regularly. With two or three bags like those, she was thinking, one could buy a good house. After so much time delivering salary envelopes, now she would move to marketing department. She would not be promoted, she was, simply, being transferred. For her she thought it was right, considering she found everything right, maybe due to her faint-hearted condition.

Just two things broke the extreme austerity at Luisa's desk. The first one was a twenty-five peseta coin which she preserved in honour of her faithful mate for all these years, the "peseta". The second one was a post-it note put on the left corner of the screen, where the word "honesty" was written in capital letters. She had put this note in front of her in order to try to keep away from her mind the wicked thoughts that, inevitably, came to her head sometimes.

Luisa sat and started to count the money that she had just received from her boss some minutes before. There were almost fifty thousand euros. She counted the bank notes very fast, dampening her finger tips with her tongue and spreading on the table all the multicoloured wads. Then, she thought she was coming back to her childhood, when she played with her friends endless Monopoly games. She thought that, when she was in the new department, she would miss

these gratifying moments: the smell of new notes, the sound of the scattered coins on the table, the joy of finding out a false note and going quickly to the boss to show it to him...

When she had all prepared, she would go to the factory and would give the envelopes to the workers. She knew she was delivering ordinary illusions: new cars, high-fidelity radios, flat payments... But, especially, she knew she was giving them vices. She considered it a normal thing that, after fifteen days working inside the factory, on Friday, many of the employees went quickly to night clubs when the bell that announced the end of the turn finished ringing.

Luisa had prepared as well the envelopes for the managers. They were the compensation for the time they had been stealing from their families and that they spent in interminable meetings or doing strange movements attached to a mobile phone.

Luisa liked her job except when she had to hand the last envelope out to someone, the envelope with the settlement of extra hours. She considered it a disgusting thing. However in the course of the years, she had learnt to hide her annoyance and to keep quiet in such situations. But, above all, she regretted the departure of the students in practice, so young and pretty, many of them, and so innocent, them all.

She remembered with embarrassment how she flirted with a young engineer in training period, although she was firmly determined not to mix labour affairs with sentimental ones. But she liked this boy very much. They went out twice and during the second walk, Luisa noticed that he just wanted to know the salary of another colleague. She did not want to tell him and was really disappointed because of this and did not want to know anything more about this boy.

After this, she only dared on very few occasions to send farewell notes to the boys she had liked. She imagined their face expression when they cut the envelope to take a note and inside it found a small sheet in which she confessed her admiration and wished good luck in the search of a new job. None of them cared at all about her until the following year, when they phoned her to ask for an income certificate which would be useful for the tax return.

That would be the last time that Luisa prepared the envelopes because the next would be made by a new girl, the girl Luisa had been teaching for the latest weeks. Luisa was not very pretty. Small, with a strange shape of nose and straight black hair, she was not worried about being trendy at all. However, she had a sweet and clear voice; maybe for this, the personnel manager wanted to give her a chance by putting her on the telephone of the Customer Service, instead of firing her directly. 'Good morning, Luisa speaking, can I help you?' she would say at the time she hung the earphone.

Luisa got ready to go to the bank looking for change for the last time. She took a small amount of notes which she would change for a bag full of coins. Before leaving the office she unstuck the note saying 'honesty', made a little ball with it and threw it into the wastepaper basket. She put on her coat and went to the street. It was a cold November morning. She waited patiently in the queue, they gave her the change as usual and, after putting the coins in her bag, she started to come back to the office. When she was at the main door she passed through gently. Under her arm she picked an old paper folder in which there were almost fifty thousand euros. She thought no one would miss them and that, at her age, the time to pay for the deposit for a flat had come.

* * *

CELSIUS

Luis Francisco Zavargo Peche

Born in Málaga in 1980. Luis Francisco Zavargo Peche is an engineer. His hobbies are computing, music, which he studies formally, languages and reading. He published some stories in the magazine Victoria while still a student. At present, besides piano, he studies English (5th) at Málaga E.O.I.

'The airport is closed. All flights have been cancelled. You have to wait until the airport is reopened.'

'And when will it be reopened?'

'We don't know. We just know that no aircraft will take off from JFK today.'

Isam looked at his flight tickets and repeated to himself "cancelled".

'How on Earth will I go back home?' he wondered.

There were not so many flights from New York to Riyadh because it was not the Americans' favourite holiday destination. Not many people in the United States located his country correctly. Where is that city? Is it in Africa? No! Saudi Arabia is not a city, it is a country! And it isn't in Africa, it's in Asia!

He had arrived in the USA the week before because the company where he worked awarded a present to him due to his good work. He worked in a software designing enterprise and after many sleepless nights he had managed to work out the problem that was blocking the development of a tool, that his company was about to launch. Plenty of his workmates envied him, but the only person who he thought about was Mariam. "Please, come back". There was no sadness and no happiness in her eyes when she said that to him at his farewell party. He wondered why she had said that common sentence in such an unusual way.

They had met each other two years before, when he signed the contract with SAAD (the name of the company where they were working). She was employed in the international department and he started in the development department and, as usual in big enterprises, in one year they had hardly exchanged any greetings or smiles. However one lonely night, changes came

as she appeared in his home with a pair of tickets for the theatre. She looked like an angel and prayed that he went with her because it was her birthday and wanted to go out, but nobody had remembered. Isam's face went pale and "Happy birthday!" were the only words that managed to exit his mouth. Half a minute later Mariam had to ask him if he was coming because the answer was too long in coming. Of course he agreed, and they spent a wonderful evening... and night together.

'Would you please come with us, sir?' a policeman said as Isam came down to Earth.

Customs officers asked him about nationality, destination, arrival date, etc. And after 15 minutes, they let him leave that cold small room. He was close to collapsing when he recognised Mariam standing just in front of the door, and she said that she was waiting for him.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he managed to cry without paying attention to Mariam's words. 'You are supposed to be on the other side of the world!'

'Hello Isam! I'm also glad to see you! Let's go to the theatre.'

Her American English was perfect! At that moment he knew that something was going wrong. There was nothing normal in that situation. The flights cancelled, the customs official, Mariam... They took the taxi.

'You are not Arabian. You are American. You seem like a person that has always lived here.'

'There are plenty of things that you don't know about me. Yes, I was born in this city and I grew up here. And yes, I'm American. My father is Arabian, but my mother was born in Chicago. My father was on holiday and while visiting the Niagara Falls, they met. What a coincidence, isn't it? You couldn't imagine that I was a foreigner because I learnt Arabic with my father when I was a child.'

'Amazing! But can you tell me why you are here and how you knew that I was in the airport and in that small room?'

'Well... I'm not allowed to answer all those questions in the way that you want. But I can give you a couple of reasons that are true anyway. The first one is that I know you.'

'And the second one?' inquired Isam anxiously.

'Because I love you.'

Those last words were followed by a short kiss on Isam's lips. As usual he froze. But this time, he also felt tired.

When he woke up he was only able to look through the taxi window, because looking into Mariam's eyes was a nightmare. He couldn't find love in her eyes. At least he couldn't find the love that he was used to discovering in women's eyes when they said that they loved him. Her eyes were a step between the look in a mother's eyes and that of a father's. There was the intention to take care of him and intention to teach and instruct him. Suddenly the cab stopped and they got out.

The theatre was vast and there were guards at the front gate. Then he realized that the style of the guards' clothes was Arabian and that the Saudi Arabia flag was on the top of the theatre's roof. A 'Saudi Arabia Embassy' sign clarified all his doubts.

As the guards recognised Mariam, they let them enter. Once they were inside the building Mariam led Isam to the ambassador's quarters. There, Isam was instructed to go back to Riyadh. In two days, September 13th, a plane would take him to his country but meanwhile he should stay at the embassy for his own safety.

Two days later, while he was looking through the window of the Boeing 737, the world was becoming smaller and smaller. He did not think about terrorism, towers, politics, spies or bombs. Only one question echoed continuously on his mind.

'Will I see Mariam again?'

* * *

GOD HAS THE KEY OF DESTINY

Ianire Salcedo Pérez

Born in Málaga in 1986, Ianire Salcedo Pérez is studying to become a nurse. She likes listening to music, going to the cinema and reading. She is doing English (4th course) at Málaga E.O.I.

I still remember our meeting as if I lived it for the first time. Their eyes showed panic, he could hardly walk. But I am going to start from the beginning, I will tell you the way that I lived that horrible day.

My name is Erika Williams and I have lived in Los Angeles since I was a child. Some friends of my family offered me a job as a photographer in a magazine in New York. I loved the job, so I accepted. When I moved to New York; I met Tom Hutman who would be my couple two months later. I could tell you how we met each other but it is a very long story.

After that, I passed four happy years of my life next to Tom, without any kind of problems between us or sadness, until...

It was 6:30 in the morning; neither my boyfriend nor I had the strength to get up because the night before, we had been drinking and dancing because of a friend's birthday. But, in spite of that, the alarm clock sounded and sounded.

'Oh, my God! A little more, please. It's too early and I can't open my eyes.'

'I know that it's too early, honey, but I won't be able to prepare breakfast, if you don't let me. And you have a meeting at 8:30 and I have to go to work.'

'Ok, only just a thing. Kiss me, please. I need energy to begin the day.' I knew he was going to say that because, every morning, he said the same. So, I kissed him.

I took a shower to clear my mind, I got dressed and I prepared breakfast. We finished having breakfast at 7:45 a.m. We caught our suitcases and when we were in the street, we said goodbye to each other:

'I will see you later. Shall we meet in the park after work?'

'Yes, of course. What's the matter?'

'Nothing, it's a surprise. I love you, Erika,' he kissed me in the cheek and he went to the World Trade Center to work.

I stayed in that place, watching how he went away from me. I wanted the hours to pass quickly, I wanted to see him again. But I couldn't imagine what was going to happen a little time later.

I arrived at the magazine at about 8:10. I entered my office, I got some documents that I needed and I met with my boss to show him some ideas on a new project. I left my boss' office

twenty minutes later. My head hurt and I took a pill. I haven't said it before but from my office, I could see the enormous towers. That day I stayed in front of the window, observing them while I took a cup of coffee, I don't know why. Suddenly, an enormous explosion illuminated the sky of New York and one of the towers began to burn. I could hardly move. I was paralyzed. What was happening? It had to be a dream! It wasn't real! I only needed some minutes to react before that horrible situation. I didn't think of anything, only of Tom. So, I simply left the offices and I ran to the World Trade Center.

I arrived about 15 minutes later. Immediately, people began to scream: 'Oh, my God! Another plane is going to collide! It's going to collide!' I looked at the towers and a second plane crashed into the other tower. I will never forget those images: people ran for all places, nobody knew where to go. I asked policemen, firemen... but nobody had seen Tom. I didn't know if he was dead or alive.

The towers couldn't resist the heat of such a blaze and they collapsed. I was still, I wanted the debris of the towers, the powder... to get to me quickly, but a man caught me and he took me to a store or bar (I don't remember it), where I would be safe together with other fortunate people.

I will never be able to forget those horrible scenes. There was blood everywhere, people on the floor: some without legs, others without arms, dead, ... Children that looked for their parents and parents that looked for their children. And I was there; I was in the middle of that catastrophe, looking at nothing and wondering where Tom would be, what could have happened to him... But I didn't lose hope and I returned to those places where I had already asked. 'Have you seen a man who is tall, with dark hair, blue eyes and glasses?' Unfortunately, the answer was always the same one: 'I'm sorry, I haven't seen him.'

I realized that I had left my handbag with the keys of the apartment in that bar, so I returned again. When I entered, somebody had my handbag. It was a man sitting down on a chair. He stood up and he told me: 'Erika, I'm still here.' My God! My God! I ran toward him and I hugged him, I hugged him badly.

I don't know how he arrived or he stayed there, we have never talked about that. But I know that, now, he is with me, he is alive and I thank God every day of my life; I thank Him for letting us live again.

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