A THOUSAND TIMES AWAY

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MIL VECES LEJOS

I've lost Peressi's damn file. If only I could remember where the heck I left it. By eleven on the dot, I'll have to hand everything over to Gómez. It's quarter to eleven. I've rummaged through every possible nook in the cubicle, and nothing. Vanished folder. Perhaps it's in my tote. Let's see... Anything could turn up here. Frayed receipts, tampons, keys, mints, wallet, lipstick, foundation. Oops...! Mati's rosary (she'll kill me if she finds out I have it), brush, old pics, perfume samples, and unpaid gas bills. Bingo! On top of the filing cabinet at the end of the corridor. I left it there before going to the toilet. God*dammit!* Gómez, the brown-noser. He's fanning himself with the file.

"Done, luv. Stop fretting. I'll sort everything out and send it, as usual..."

Without a word, I sullenly go back to my den. I will never ever learn. Just wanted another job because I hated the frigging bakery, but this is not my thing. My desk is a pigsty like my head. I need a fag. Now. For the umpteenth time today, I promise myself to change. How did this photo get here? I'd forgotten I had it. The Flea and me. How old were we? About fifteen. I'm sticking out my tongue like a twit; with that old piercing on my nose. He's hugging me with his skinny arm and sleepy eyes. Maybe I dropped it in the address book within the ID photo pack. It's funny how I got hooked on the Flea. Although I'm not sure if hooked is the right word. Just a story.

Downtown is like the breath of a thousand devils. People are squeezing, stymied, bustling. I haven't forgotten anything, I guess. I always make the stupid supermarket list and leave it at home: blue cheese for Enrique, Brazilian roasted coffee, skimmed milk... From the window of a bar, an old man watches life go by and kind of pities me. This place used to be called *El Barracón* if my memory doesn't play tricks on me...

...we roamed downtown cafes, especially those gathering men with silky neck scarves poring over newspapers at arm's length, couples with five shopping bags, or prim ladies having Earl Grey tea with lemon pie.

"Just you watch and learn, mate," the Flea would tell me. And I followed, at a distance, feeling as if someone was just about to rat on me. Depending on the situation, he used either relentless insistence or sheer drama. After school, he always

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.93.12
Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 93; octubre 2026, pp. 243-248; ISSN: e-2530-8335
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managed to get some Chinese-made pen bunches from a "friendly supplier" and got down to business because he had to help his mam make ends meet.

"You'll see, in a bit, we'll rake in a few pesos," he bragged.

I tagged him along secretly, of course. If Mati found out, I'd be proper screwed, for sure. He would mess up his matted curls, leave his trainers in my custody, put on a Saint Bernard dog's face, and wait until the waiter was distracted. Attack.

"Sir, fancy buying something? I've got nowt to eat. It's only eight pesos."

And the others saying "No-thanks-dear-I-have-no-money-Eight-pesos?-you're-crazy-Pass-the-sugar-love-Oh!-Not-again"; or else, a distant look towards the horizon.

"Alright, I'll give it to you for seven... For four? I'll give you two for seven fifty; I'll even go down to two pesos. Look," and he'd wiggle his toes.

"Back again, are ya? I told ya to do one last time, you, useless sod. Go on, get lost!" the waiter would push him towards the door.

"No, this kind missus is about to buy me goods."

"Tell ya what, missus, I'll give it for two, deal?" clinging onto the waiter's arm and sweeping the floor.

Two pesos in his pocket. *El Barracón* didn't pay off; on to something else...

...my face was pressed against the window of the blue *Fiat* that morning when I arrived at the school of Los Telares, looking at the universe and all its silly creatures with disdain. What a beautiful redhead with a grumpy face, he said he had thought when he first saw me. I didn't want to get out of the car, so I stayed put to see if my dad would dare to slap me in front of everyone, the teacher included. The Flea chuckled in awe as my dad yanked me out of the seat. I was tired of change: Mum's illness, the new house, and now a new school. An eyesore, with those sunken, barred windows and that smell of dampness mixed with kerosene heating. The worst was having to endure the gaze of those kids in dirty smocks and stiff hair. That was the most distressing morning of my ten years.

"Did it hurt?" he prodded once we were in the back benches of the classroom.

I didn't even look at him, my gaze fixed on a distant point on the ceiling where some veins of dampness or a cobweb nested.

"Oh, that's nothing... You should see how me mum drags me outta bed when I don't want to get up!"

Cobweb, with bug and all.

"Do you know how to play *payanas*?" He showed me a few stones, although I only saw his long nails outlined with dirt...

I have only visited him once since he got caught. I didn't have much to say last time when I wanted to tell him about my stuff, my life with Enrique, the office job or Mati's latest surgery. He smiled to break the silence. He always smiles. As if those solid teeth were his only inheritance to face that crappy life of his. One of these days, I'll go see him.

...Mati never liked him. My grandma is a tough woman. Not even when widowed did she cry, in her thirties, when Dad and Aunt Berta were in primary school. Mati started a kind of café-bar, so she and my aunt cooked and served the railway temps mostly. Gran would never tie the knot again. Well, she would never have been able to find someone who could put up with her anyway. Later on, she broke her hip and came to live with my father, my brother and me. Mumsy was already gone. Even as handicapped as my gran was, she could never sit still. So, when my dad got laid off, she started cooking empanadas and pizzas on weekends that my brother Fito and I delivered on our retching *Zanella*.

I remember her face when I brought the Flea home for the first time. She watched him from head to toe, clenching her jaw, kneading the whitish dough with her chubby arms full of flour. Without turning her back, she blurted out:

"Kiddo, ain't it about time you headed home? Your mum'll be worried sick!"

He was the only friend I had in the new school. When I suggested that he help us with the delivery, he was delighted.

"Don't you dare," Mati snapped. "If anyone sees him turn up in that state, we won't sell so much as half a slice of pizza. Bet this darkie already given you nits!"

He came over a couple more times, and one day, everything was fine, he said, but every time Mati looked at him, he felt like he had to wash his hands or take a bath, and the dirt wouldn't come off. It was stuck, he said. So, he waited for my brother and me to get on the motorcycle and guided us on that rickety bike of his. We chatted and laughed about anything, the Flea giving us directions, of course. We planned to do a bunch of things when we grew up. To start with, we wanted to be American TV series actors: *Baywatch*-style, then lifeguards or Formula One drivers. After much deliberation, we opted for a dulce de leche ice cream shop.

"I wish I could have one with three scoops covered in chocolate every day. Ahhh...!" he squinted his eyes. And out of the blue, looking in the distance, he mumbled:

"I don't wanna end up like me old man. He don't even know me name..."

I'm smoking too much. Enrique tells me to quit; it'll be harder if I get pregnant. A baby. I can't imagine myself with one. Swallowed by the couch, I doze while he's chain-zapping half-nude butts, gutter news, soccer goals, and the latest gem from direct shopping. There's a stack of dirty dishes I'm too lazy to wash. Enrique insists it's time for a baby to brighten our lives. Who knows? Then we'd have to leave it with a nanny most of the time. A loop of smoke surfs towards the window and dissolves into the hot February night. I only see a green curtain from the floor opposite, always open. A desk with a large lamp lit and several books piled on the side. No one has ever sat down to read them or tidy them up. A thick one with a red spine is always underneath.

"I'm going to bed," Enrique says, handing me the remote control.

"There in a minute. I'll finish the fag."

He's balding like his father. I don't want to wash the dishes. I don't want a baby. I don't want to smoke. The lamp in the opposite window has gone out, but the green curtain remains almost visible. I light another cigarette.

...Marina, Marisa, or Mariela was the name of that girlfriend of his I met. My bestie Sonia and I were bored to death and went out for some booze at that music joint. The tide of people sweated, rubbed against each other, and surrendered to the heat and the beer ("Te esperé bajo la lluvia dos horas, ¿Cuántas?...). The rhythm of a distant popular song wrestled amidst the out-of-tune mass... ("Mil horas, como un perro. Cuando llegaste, me miraste y me dijiste..."). The Flea had repeated his third year in high school and said he wouldn't continue... ("...estás mojado, ya no te quiero ... Ah, ah, ah!"[1])

"You have to keep up with school, Flea."

"Teachers don't want me in, mate. Haven't you seen how they always look for trouble to throw me out? Or they're just waiting for me to slip up so they can shove me in with the 'special needs' lot. Poor buggers. It's a bloody circus, Colo. 'Ladies and gentlemen! I'm going to ask for a few minutes of your kind attention.'"

We were friends, but something had changed...

"This is my girl," he said, looking at me.

On impulse, he took me to the dance floor, leaving her with a half-burst bubblegum balloon.

"Do you like her?" His breath reeked of beer, and his eyes fiercely fixed on mine.

"Who?"

"My girlfriend."

"As long as *you* like her..."

The music embraced us; arms, necks, and waists entwined with some urgency. I felt a tickle, a twitch of his body against mine. His voice caressed my ear.

"If you wanted, Colo..." his hand sought under my shirt. I looked at him with accelerated breathing.

"No... I don't want to."

My face was burning...

This day won't be like all the others. It started off with a foolish argument with Enrique because yesterday I forgot who-knows-what about his stupid Moon diet; the boss preaching on and on about something I must have done wrong, not to mention Gómez's usual small talk at ten o'clock break.

"Bad night, babe?"

...autumn afternoon. I was leaving work at the bakery.

"Have... you heard?" Sonia was stuttering. "The Flea is on the run. He and two guys robbed a house."

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[1] "I waited for you in the rain for two hours (How many?) / (A thousand hours) Like a dog / When you arrived, you looked at me and said /...you're soaked, I don't love you anymore." My translation. Andrés Calamaro, *Mil Horas*, Los Abuelos de la Nada, 1983, track 5 on *Vasos y Besos* (PolyGram).

"Robbed a house?"

"Robbed, like... robbed, yeah... They were kinda high, and they say the owner tried to call the police or escape or something, and one of them... had a gun and... shot him. Bang! S...screwed."

"A gun, the Flea?"

"Thing is... the man's wife saw them because... the twits had their faces uncovered. So now they're hiding somewhere, and the cops are on their toes. He says he wants to see you."

"What? Who?"

"And who do you think, you jerk? The Flea."

"Isn't he on the run?"

"Yes, but we know where he is..."

I barely survived the morning in the office, fighting tooth and nail with memories. I'm fed up. Why did this bloody photo show up? I don't want to go home. I don't want to wait for the two or three muted days with Enrique. I want somewhere to go, but not to that place I now call home.

..."What the hell did you do, Flea?"

"Nothing. They said it'd be easy, that there was cash lying about. Anyway... why bother explaining it to you, Colo? You've always been a bloody coward... Come with me, Colo. They'll sort me out some bus tickets to San Juan. If you here, it's for a reason, ain't it?"

"I came... I came... what the hell? I don't know why I came. Cos' I'm just plain stupid, but you can't go on like this, Flea. You're going down the drain, mate! Do you remember the dulce de leche ice cream?"

He smiled bitterly...

I just climb the first bus I find to the end of the line. Number 78. I'm about twenty blocks from the massive greyish building. I challenge the late February heat in these office-like plain high heels. I sit on a step at the entrance and watch the result of the walk: two pearly blisters. There, in one of those identical windows with humidity smudges, there. I know it's visiting day, but I doubt whether the lie I've decided to tell at control will be convincing.

"Come in," the official says without looking up from my ID.

I walk down the long, empty hallway that bounces a whitish glow as if eager to run away. There's not much hustle; the prisoners must be sleeping. My heart wants to take off. I wonder if it's the place or the low ceiling, but my hands are sweating. Finally, someone appears around the corner. The Flea is escorted by a tall, burly guard who stands to the side, looking without seeing. He's thinner. He stops in his tracks, trying to guess who I am. I pretend to smile. The blisters burn. He walks purposely slowly, not taking his eyes off me once. We matter-of-factly head for the vis-à-vis meeting room. We sit at an awkward distance, looking at each other from time to time without speaking.

"So, you're my new gal, Colo?" This time, there's no smile. His eyes are foggy, his hair tightly cropped, a two-day stubble. I clumsily fumble for a cigarette. I offer him one.

"How are you, Flea?"

"Does it really bother you, Colo? We ain't seen each other in a fair while," he says with obvious reproach. He soon offers a truce:

"How's it going?"

"Fine... well... What do I know, Flea. No. I don't know." He looks at me sadly.

I take the photo out of my purse. My throat releases the choke, and the tears break free from time. He sits crestfallen, watching our frozen faces on the still glossy paper. I cry in silence for a long time until we look at each other. There's only unease. He smells my cheek, following the path of the mascara, and kisses me, savouring my face. I taste the salt on his lips. His hands subtly trace my neck. Blood opens my floodgates and drowns my body. Gómez's sneer. Mati stares at me. The bar in the corner. "Ain't I good enough for ya?" Payanas at ten-thirty-recess. "Come with me." I wonder if I am here or a thousand lives away. "We should be on the family way by now. What are we waiting for? You aren't getting any younger." I don't want that life for myself. Dulce de leche and to the hell with everything. "I handed myself in to the coppers." A thousand hours, like a dog. It's useless; I can't stop the outburst. "I'm going to be someone." Green curtain. The red book. The light has gone out. I'm here. I want. I want. I want. I. Want.

The second line has emerged clearly. It never fails, they say. I carry the test in my purse, and every now and then, I glance at it to convince myself that it is real. I told Enrique I was pregnant yesterday, and the Flea was the child's father. The poor guy still can't understand a thing. Neither can I. A couple of weeks ago, I asked for a transfer vacancy in the office, a position in the west, almost on the border with Chile. I'm trying like crazy to forget that I have only one cigarette left. I am on a bus heading for San Juan. The Flea has ten years with a chance of parole. Maybe someday I'll tell him. The mountains in the distance are hooded in snow; the air must be getting cool. I'd better doze a bit. It's still a long way to go.