

Two extracts from the novel *Por qué te vas*, published with Penguin Random House, 2023.

Zapiola 483, Studio apt. 1 BTH, ideal f. couples

A man opens the door and lets me in. He must be Ricardo. Everyone who rents apartments is called Ricardo and dresses just like this Ricardo. There's no need to describe my Ricardo, he's just like the others: chest hair peeking out above a salmon polo shirt. And the cellphone, too: it rings and the tone is a song by Arjona. Famous Ricardo wonders through *my* Ricardo's speakerphone why love is so cruel. My Ricardo makes a *Sorry-but-I-have-to-take-this-call* kind of face. I start to close the door behind me, but on second thoughts, I decide to leave it open. A woman comes out of the bathroom. Ricardo pinches her ass with one hand while holding the phone to his ear with the other. I look away, and take the opportunity to survey the apartment. The kitchen is part of the same single open space. I make sauce and my sheets end up smelling like onion. I invite someone to sleep over and they say, "What's wrong with your sheets? They make me cry." And I end up alone for the rest of my life.

Ricardo is still on the call, now ranting about the country's political situation. The woman comes closer with a glass of wine hanging from her flabby hand. I look out the window at the street packed with cars, two floors below. I hear the horns, brakes screeching, the engines roaring that won't let me sleep. "So, what do you think of the apartment?" the woman asks. "It's nice," I mutter. "Yeah, I just love the place," she says. "From the apartment I rent on the sixth, the view is di-vine, and Ricky is a total sweetheart. He really takes care of us tenants, always asks how are you doing, is everything okay with the gas... he's always there for you." "I'll check out the bathroom," I say. I head towards it, but the woman drifts into the kitchen and gets distracted turning the burner on and off, so I change direction and head to the front door. I think I could probably put up with Ricardo grabbing my ass every time he comes to check the gas, but not with the noise from the street or the smell of onion on my clothes.

I'm about to reach freedom when Ricardo looks at me and I stop dead. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he's shouting. I stammer, not knowing what to say. He cuts me off: "Can't you see you're a total asshole?" On the floor there are a few beer caps, I keep staring at them. He's right, I'm an asshole. "Asshole, asshole!" Ricardo repeats. Then I realize he's talking to his phone and I dash out. From the hallway, I hear Ricardo yell, "You can trust no-one anymore!" I run down the stairs, jump on my bike and pedal away at full speed, pondering: "No, you can't, especially not Ricardos."

The scent

Eucalyptus leaves are long and thick. Their fruits have a starfish-shaped hole. Lavender flowers are my favorites because of their smell and because they're easy to pull out. It was Nico's mother who suggested we made perfume, and showed us how: we had to pour ethyl alcohol into a small cup and fill it with flowers and aromatic plants; after letting it sit for a few hours, we could transfer it into empty shampoo bottles and sell the perfume to the guests.

I had already collected enough, but Nico was walking absentmindedly, twisting a leaf every now and then. He was twelve, two years older than me. We had met during the summer vacation and had decided to make some money to spend on the hotel's arcade machines. Following the path lined with plants, we reached the entrance to the reception, where the game room was, past the dining hall where we drank hot chocolate and next to the computers with internet access. Nico opened the door to get in. I told him we still needed to collect quite a bit more, but he went in anyway, so I followed him. "Let's see what they're showing," he said. There was a movie room where they usually screened children's films, but we felt grown-up and hardly ever went to the activities.

Inside it's completely dark except for the pale light coming from the screen. I instantly feel something is wrong, that we shouldn't be there; something about the silence as we walk in suddenly makes me nervous. Nico ushers me in and then closes the door. I hear the click of the lock like a sentence, something irreversible. On the screen there's a huge white space that looks like a hospital, with stretchers, and lab coats hanging from walls. In the center of the big empty space, a naked woman on all fours. A man, also naked, penetrates her from behind, holding her tightly. I turn round and motion to leave, but Nico is leaning against the door and won't let me open it. "Wait, let's watch for a bit," he whispers in my ear. I hear the woman's moans and impulsively look at the screen with a mix of horror, excitement, and shame. A whitish fluid is coming out of the guy's dick or the woman's mouth or I don't really know where from. In the dark room there are other viewers. What are they doing there? "Come on, please, let me out," I beg Nico.

We ran back to our room. Before going in, I stopped and asked him not to say anything about what we'd done. He said no, obviously, but the first thing he did when my mom opened the door was tell her everything. I don't remember the look on my mother's face, or the details of what Nico said. I was too busy putting a eucalyptus fruit into each little cup of alcohol.

Two extracts from the play *Decir te amo es un atentado*, Teatro Nacional Cervantes, 2021.

Scene I

A ten-year-old girl's bathroom. Iggy Pop posters on the walls. TAMARA (10) is standing on the closed toilet lid. MICHELLE (9) is doing her makeup in the mirror. BORIS (16) is smoking a joint.

BORIS: The Clash.

TAMARA: Joe Strummer.

BORIS: Talking Heads.

TAMARA: David Byrne.

BORIS: The Offspring.

TAMARA: Dexter Holland.

BORIS: Sex Pistols.

TAMARA: Johnny Rotten.

BORIS: The Ramones.

TAMARA: Joey Ramone.

BORIS: The Stooges.

TAMARA: The best in the world. The king of punk. The creator of jumping on people at concerts.

BORIS: The mosh.

TAMARA: The creator of mosh. Look at him! Here he is! Ladies and gentlemen: Iggy Pop!

TAMARA and BORIS sing "The Passenger".

MICHELLE: It's impossible to do your makeup like this. *(She turns on the faucet, but no water comes out. She wipes her face with a towel, smearing the makeup. Starts over)*

BORIS: What did they get you?

TAMARA: Nothing.

BORIS: Dad wanted to get here early to talk to your dad.

TAMARA: Why do you call her dad? She's a woman.

BORIS: I was born and he was my dad. He's a woman, if he wants, that's fine, but he's my dad.

TAMARA: I'm sure she wants you to call her mom.

BORIS: No.

TAMARA: Did you ask her?

BORIS: No. It's fine.

TAMARA: Fine how.

BORIS: With dad. It's fine. We don't really talk about that stuff.

MICHELLE: When I grow up, I want to be a transvestite.

BORIS: What are you talking about?

TAMARA: Do you want to be a boy?

MICHELLE: No. I want to be a transvestite.

BORIS: Do you want to change your sex?

MICHELLE: Ew! Hahaha! He said “sex”!

TAMARA: Do you know what a transvestite is?

MICHELLE: Obviously.

TAMARA: What is it?

MICHELLE: A tr... a transvestite.

BORIS: Why do you want to be a transvestite?

MICHELLE: To dress like your mom... your dad... your mad... whatever. Transvestites dress really cool and they know how to do their makeup. And they’re special because there aren’t many of them. There are lots of doctors and cops and actors and boys and girls, but there are very few transvestites. I want to be special. My mom says I’m “a very special being”. My mom is always smiling, so I never know if she’s happy all the time or sometimes she’s actually really sad.

BORIS: Did you get any presents?

TAMARA: You’ve already asked me.

BORIS: Who else is coming?

TAMARA: Auntie Rocío.

BORIS: Ugh.

TAMARA: What.

BORIS: She smokes weed.

TAMARA: *You* smoke weed.

BORIS: Yeah, but she’s a grownup. I’m a teenager. Smoking weed is my duty. It’s in my essence.

MICHELLE: What’s “essence”?

BORIS: The soul of things. Essence is what makes each thing what it is and not something else.

MICHELLE: Like vanilla essence. The soul of banana bread. Banana bread is the most beautiful word in the world. Banana bread. Mom always watches the cooking channel. She watches everything she can, all day, so she learns a lot about cooking. That’s why I know how desserts and meals are made. Mommy doesn’t cook-- we have a woman who does. She also takes me to school and picks me up, bathes me, and cooks. What’s “weed”?

BORIS: Pot.

MICHELLE: Oh. Pot. And what’s “pot”?

BORIS: Marihuana.

MICHELLE: Oh. And that... What is that?

BORIS: Come on, don't play dumb.

MICHELLE: No, really. What is it?

BORIS: THC is a psychotropic substance obtained from the cannabis plant...

MICHELLE (*interrupting*): Boring!

BORIS (*to Tamara*): Smoking weed is a revolutionary act. It's anarchist. It's punk. Have you ever tried it?

TAMARA: Nope.

BORIS: Do you want to? (*He offers her the joint*)

TAMARA: Can I?

BORIS: I don't know. Can you?

TAMARA: Yeah, I think I can.

BORIS (*pulling the joint away*): No. You can't. You're nine. You're too little.

TAMARA: I turned ten today. Please. As a birthday present. Concede it.

BORIS (*mocking*): Oh, "concede it".

MICHELLE: What's that?

TAMARA: What?

MICHELLE: Concede it. How do you know grown-up words like that?

TAMARA: Dad and I have a deal. We call it "exceptions and concessions". There are lots of things I'm not allowed to do. But if there's something I really want, I can ask for an exception. We have a meeting on Friday nights, and he decides if it's conceded or not.

MICHELLE: I want one.

TAMARA: One what?

MICHELLE (*very serious*): One weed. Concede it.

BORIS: You're nine too.

MICHELLE: Can't you see I'm all made up?

BORIS: Yeah, you look like a transvestite.

MICHELLE: No. I'm a teenager. Smoking weed is my duty. It's in my essence.

BORIS: That's my phrase.

MICHELLE: That's my phrase.

BORIS: Don't copy me.

MICHELLE: Don't copy me.

BORIS: Ugh, you're such an idiot.

MICHELLE: You're an idiot!!!

BORIS: Ha! You lost.

MICHELLE: Games are for having fun. It doesn't matter who wins or loses.

BORIS: Typical loser thing to say.

Scene VI

The living room. CAMILA (17), Tamara's sister, dressed as a classical ballerina, wearing a pink tutu stained with ketchup, ballet slippers, and a sports bag hanging from her arm. She is furious, her makeup smeared. MARCOS, the father, soaked and stained, looks at her.

CAMILA: Sometimes I think that I have no talent, that I have nothing to give, that I have no future, that I'm plain, that I don't stand out, that I won't shine. I imagine myself all grown up, still trying with all my strength to overcome humiliation and defeat. Poor, shabby, going to auditions where they'll treat me badly and laugh at me. *(She adjusts the tutu, annoyed by it).* And I keep thinking about health insurance and rent and taxes and dental work, and how I'll never be able to afford any of that, nor have a big modern house, or let my kids play PlayStation. When I was little, we didn't have a PlayStation because Dad decided against it. Maybe it was because we were two girls, and of course, girls don't play PlayStation. Maybe if Mom had been here, she would've said, "Relax, a PlayStation isn't going to ruin your daughters." But she wasn't here, and Dad was left to make these decisions on his own, no matter how badly I wanted to play that car-stealing game, the one with the gun, and TA-TA-TA-TA, tear everything down *(she grabs a plate of small sandwiches and swallows three in a row. The others look at her worried and start to move toward her, but Camila speaks again and they freeze).* Other times I feel like I do have talent, and I fancy myself living as a dancer, being part of a renowned dance troupe, or at least working in films and playing a dancer, or maybe even teaching dancing lessons to little girls. But then-- why does it have to be so hard? Why does it take so much struggle? *(she grabs another sandwich).* And I wonder if it's me, if I don't let myself grow. "You're fine like this, Camila, no need to push it, don't try too hard." Because not everything works out for me, that's true. But today, Dad, I thought, or I realized, or I don't know, that maybe it's you, Dad, who won't let me grow. I'm talking to you, Dad, look at me when I talk to you. I do things right: I dance with joy, I train, I go running, I have friends, I use Instagram and Facebook but not too much, and I don't post food pictures, and I already closed Twitter. I behave, I don't talk back, I'm affectionate, "happy birthday, Tamara," I make my bed, and at parties I drink a little but not too much, I don't do drugs, and I dance reggaeton even though I want to be a classical dancer because you have to have an open mind! And I don't have a boyfriend, but he'll come, he'll come, everything in its own time, and I'd like to be like the girls in the movies, but I know one has to be true to oneself and not go through life copying what others do... I'm dying of thirst *(she grabs a bottle of water and drinks it all in one gulp).* I understand that everything happens for a reason, and sometimes I take a deep breath, I take some time to think, and I smile, even if everything is a fucking mess. That's why today, when you took me

to the dance audition and you asked if I was hungry and I said yes but that I was nervous, and you ran off without listening to me and came back with a hot dog, no, not a hot dog, a super hot dog, covered in potato chips and dripping with ketchup, one of those extra long hot dogs you have to tilt your mouth sideways to eat... I lost my train of thought... What was I saying? *(she picks up a sandwich, brings it to her mouth, but stops midway)*. A hot dog?! How could you buy me a hot dog before an audition? Ballet and hot dogs don't go together, Dad. They don't match. Sausage and potato chips with *battements* and *jetés*? It's like you don't know me at all, like you don't know anything about me. Hot dogs and ballet don't go together. A hot dog goes well with soccer fields, with drunk teenagers after clubbing, with gas stations. It does not go with tutus and slippers. How am I supposed to get *demi-pliés* and *pas de bourrée* right if I've just eaten a hot dog? *(She takes off the tutu)*. So I held back, I didn't eat it, and then I was hungry, and while I was dancing, I thought about the hot dog twice as much: from hunger and from anger. "My dad doesn't know anything about me." That's what I kept thinking, and I couldn't concentrate and I did everything wrong, and now they're definitely not going to pick me and I'm going to be left out of everything.

MARCOS *(fearful)*: Left out? Out of what?

CAMILA *(with her mouth full, almost crying)*: Left out of the dance school, out of the path I chose, out of the future I thought I could have-- left out of the life I've always wanted. And I'll stay a failure forever, watching everyone else succeed while I sit here getting fat and having kids.

She screams and runs out of the room in despair. MARCOS goes after her.

Extract from the sociological chronicle *Letters of Forgiveness: Reparation or Fear of Public Shaming?* published by VICE Magazine, 2020.

In 2017, I wrote a letter to ask for forgiveness.

Andressa and I had met at a theater festival in Brazil. For three months, we had been going back and forth between Buenos Aires and São Paulo. And then suddenly, without explanation, with only a bunch of tangled up words, I stopped seeing her. Some time later, I felt the need to write to Andressa and try to give an explanation: to justify my cruelty, to fill in my silences, to seek forgiveness.

The letter I wrote said things like “In many ways, I was cruel, and that fills me with shame and pain. I hope you can forgive me (even though there’s no need for you to say it) so I can feel that everything we experienced was worth it; that the memories of us will hopefully once again illuminate our journeys.

Andressa replied with a poem by Roberto Juarroz. It went like this: *To create a frame for each thing, so each thing knows where to enter. And then, to break that frame with it, so each thing knows how to depart, without breaking itself.*

Two years later, I’m at a party with a bunch of drunk artists. It’s 2019, before the pandemic is not even in the farthest reaches of imagination. From the futon, I look at a mass of thirty arms and legs dancing to the rhythm of Wos’s latest trap song. Sitting next to me is Valentina, and she’s telling Mailén something that happened to her two days ago: her ex-boyfriend Marcos wrote to her to invite her out for coffee; they met, they had coffee, and Marcos apologized. “Apologized for what?” Mailén asks.

“For everything he did wrong,” Valentina replies. Her feather earrings sway, almost fluttering away. They had broken up four years earlier. After all that time, she says, the pain no longer weighed on her, but hearing Marcos question himself and reflect on his behavior made her feel acknowledged.

“Feminism has done us quite a lot of good,” Mailén says now, playing with her navel peeking out from beneath a cropped tank top.

I take out my phone and search in my Sent folder for emails dated April 2017. I want to reread them, because I think it matters: my exchange with Andressa, my letter asking for forgiveness, and her reply with the Juarroz poem.

“Anything’s wrong? Are you okay?” Mailén wants to know.

I had forgotten, but I just found them, and suddenly I remember everything. In less than a month, in addition to the letter I sent to Andressa, I had written two more letters, addressed to Ana and Rocío. In both cases, using different words and reasoning, I repeated

the same process: I shared that I'd been thinking things over, that I had come to the realization that I had to change some attitudes, that I felt sorry and wanted to apologize.

I log into Facebook and write one of those colorful posts where people ask for something. I barely think about it; I write the first thing that comes to mind. And I post it.

Testimonies, letters, emails, WhatsApp messages, and voice notes start trickling in; first with the shyness of foam, then pouring in with the force of a sea. About 95% of the people who write to me are women. They send messages they have received from their exes, and also texts they themselves have written. Sometimes I sense sadness in the way they introduce the material they are forwarding. But above all, there is relief in sharing it, enthusiasm for revisiting breakups, and a great deal of humor.

For example, this screenshot Laura sent:

Ex-boyfriend: "Hey, I wanted to tell you why I felt like writing to you. I feel I haven't behaved very well. I've started questioning certain norms; and this has helped me become more aware of how I relate to others. I did what I thought was best, and I wish I'd begun this deconstruction earlier. Today I just wanted to offer you my apologies".

Laura: "I have two questions for you: what specific things are you apologizing for? And what do you mean when you say 'I did what I thought was best'?"

Ex-boyfriend: "I want to apologize for certain fights, and see I was in very sexist positions, which created confusion. Or for not respecting your space. I became a bit paranoid, but without bad intentions, you know... Deep down, that's how I was raised... I was taught to persist rather than to listen. When I say I did my best, I mean that at the time I truly believed I was right, it was a way of showing love."

Or Vera, who received this message from a guy she was dating until he vanished: "From the beginning, I suggested a relaxed relationship, to have time and space to be alone. I've been learning a lot about relationships lately; I'm improving so much, and what you told me about emotional responsibility was great! Thank you!! You didn't do anything wrong, Vera! I went on my trip and completely disconnected. I feel like we vibed, but your desire to go deeper into my things and really get to know me scared me. I've been thinking a lot, trying to understand why. It's like I needed to change the music, change my clothes, choose a different ice cream flavor. I don't know, haha. It happens to me once in a while. I totally detached and disappeared in a bad way. A thousand apologies for that."

I ask Vera how she felt when she got the message. She writes back: "At first, I felt happy that he had finally decided to reply, because I didn't know if he ever would. But when I read it, it felt constructed, or rehearsed, I don't know the word. It didn't sit right. You know that feeling when someone talks a lot and says very little? I feel like behind all that wordiness there's something concrete I'll never get to know."

And I can't help but think that, for him, it seemed acceptable to leave her the same way one changes clothes, music, or ice cream flavors. And I realize there's nothing more to add.

Extract from the novel *Años luz que no brillamos*, to be published with Penguin Random House, 2026.

Chapter Four

I had learned *forgetting* a long time ago. But back then I didn't call it that way.

"Wake up, Sochi."

Kalli's voice, alive. Her hand on my shoulder shook me out of a bad dream: a gap in the window invited aerolites into the Ship and everything exploded. I tried to hold chaos in suspense by telling stories, but they wouldn't listen, they were bare matter. The aerolites tore through the Ship and we all floated.

In the half-light, Kalli stroked my shoulders, lifting me from my heavy nightmares. "You want to tell me what you saw?" she asked.

"I would like to, but there's no image, it's dark again," I complained. There had been images, though, but I turned my dreams into secrets so as not to frighten her with delirium.

Kalli dried my forehead with velvet fingers. "I can't sleep either," she sighed.

We stayed silent for a while, letting ourselves be held by the interweaving breaths of the three of us. Nearby slept Jadi, wrapped into herself, her little finger between her teeth.

Even knowing they could hear us, I let rise, out of the deepness of my shame, the concern that had besieged me since Kalli, not long before, had begun to make the music sound while I, not being allowed to do that, was assigned a different task: to take over operations in the *Docta*:

"How does music feel?" I asked. And waited.

Just "okay then," Kalli said in the dark and began to move. In seconds she turned into a muted complaint. She moaned griefs I didn't know, as if she were trying to keep an echo inside herself. The trembling grew, as drool was spilling from her mouth. She tried to hold it back with small sucking sounds, and suddenly she went still.

There was silence, for an instant, from both of us. I let in a lilac glimmer, just enough to get to see her. Kalli had paused all movement. She hid the end of one hand between her legs. She looked at me with the smile of a child at play. She announced:

"This is more or less what it's like."

But there was no sound. I had asked about the music, and Kalli, in response, was showing me a silence. I insisted that she tell me about the action that turned on Sinatra.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "That belongs to others. This is yours. This is secret."

I kept waiting in dissatisfaction. Kalli said:

"You won't get it til you try it. If I touch you, they'll know, and we'll get scolded. You do it."

I closed my eyes, ashamed for having her so close. I got my hand nearer, expectant and trembling. I don't know why I hadn't known this before, but there are things we don't learn unless someone teaches us.

Suddenly Jadi stirred beside us, talking to herself in her sleep. Kalli and I went stiff. We looked at each other, holding our breath until we couldn't anymore, and we burst into laughter. We stopped before we woke her.

"Do it," Kalli insisted once we calmed down.

And I began to touch myself. At that very moment, Yaco called my name. I withdrew my hand without opening my eyes. "I can't," I told Kalli, but she said:

"Keep going."

It was an order. So I kept going.

"Sochi."

Yaco's voice stopped me again, from nowhere, from everywhere.

I searched for Kalli's eyes; she looked back in defiance. I obeyed her, as I always did, and would always have done. I felt the music in my fingers, though it sounded for no one else but for me. Jadi's breathing, Kalli's command, Yaco's voice, the Ship moving forward, there was surely sound in all of that. But the music in my fingers wouldn't let me hear my name, wouldn't let me hear a thing. Jadi's breathing, Kalli's command, Yaco's voice, the Ship moving forward, everything was turning into heartbeats, a pulse that took over my body and ear. And that was how I turned the music into silence.