

Rodrigo BLANCO CALDERON

### Flamingo.

Between three and four in the morning, judging by the colour of the sky, David stops the car at the edge of the highway. In the distance, the junction that leads to the districts of El Rosal and Chacaito begins to take shape.

David gets out of the car and retraces his steps back to where the herons and flamingos stand. He watches them from the bushes that grow to one side of the tarmac. Always still, at least to his fleeting glances from the car each time he travels up the highway, they now seem to flutter their wings among the shadows. Perhaps it's the memory of the herons on the banks of the Guaire, alighting and ascending over the rotting riverbed, which gives him the sense of this wooden resurrection. Or perhaps it's the beers he had during the concert.

It was a mistake to go to the concert. To embrace pain with such premeditation. But that was precisely the plan, though he knew it impossible: to suffer as Flavia suffered.

They had met a few weeks earlier at a Vida Bohème gig. It was enough for their eyes to meet in the right chord for everything else to flow: the approach, the conversation, the brush of hand on arm. It happens like that, sometimes. You just need to be in the right place at the right time, with an open mind and an open soul. It's a flash of harmony that life can capture and convert into rhythm.

After that there were no dates, no emails, no calls. He only ever managed to see her house from a distance, when he took her home on the day they went to the beach. The succession of gigs enabled their meeting. 'You have to understand Flavia. She reads too much literature, watches too much television, listens to too much music. She's a romantic', said Verónica.

On the first night they spent together – the same night they first met – Flavia offered him a mixed insight into her personality. They were lying on the bed, in their underwear, juggling with interpretations of the lyrics. Flavia saw it as a love song.

*If the open sea knocks you down and hatred turns you blind/ I'll be there for you with a raft where a million candles shine/ Because your face is full of fear, the mountain cannot calm your rage/ And though sometimes I upset you, I'll have your dinner on the table/ yet again.*

Flavia's iPod was resting between her breasts and her voice was lost in the phosphorescent darkness of the room. She had one earphone in her left ear, and the other was in David's right. 'It's a love song', said Flavia. 'A bit sexist if it's sung by a woman, isn't it? But it's still good'. David tried to imagine himself as an old man, thirty years old, arriving home tired after a long day at work. Flavia would be waiting for him with the table set. He tried to imagine the scene, but he couldn't.

'What about the title?' David asked. These were his first words since they had entered the room. Perhaps since they had left the bar. David didn't talk much. She had been the one to speak to him in the first place, some harmless comment in the middle of all the noise. He had simply agreed, uttered the occasional monosyllabic response and followed her in whatever she suggested or attested.

At the end of the gig they went to Misia Jacinta. They ordered snacks and more beers. Flavia didn't stop talking in all the time they were there and David did not stop listening. Flavia noticed his unwavering attention in the middle of her chatter, and felt the

light padding that her words caused in his mind and chest. And just like that she knew that David was nice. And she told him so.

‘You’re nice’, she told him.

David blushed, tried to laugh. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I know. Don’t be embarrassed. Being nice is sexy, especially in Caracas.’

Flavia asked for the bill. She watched the waiter walk away and looked at her watch. ‘It’s almost four’, she said. ‘What shall we do?’

‘Do you want to go somewhere else? Greenwich should be open.’

‘No. I’m tired.’

‘Shall I take you home?’

‘I can’t go there either. I told my mum I was staying at Verónica’s. You know? The chubby girl who was with me.’ David didn’t know how to interpret that. ‘Where do you live?’ said Flavia.

‘In San Román. But I can’t take you back there. My mum would have a fit. Once my brother’s girlfriend spent the night at ours and she went mental. Now, every time I go out, she reminds me that the house isn’t a motel.’

‘Alright. Let’s go to the Riazor, then.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A motel.’

The Riazor is in El Rosal, on the street that runs next to the highway, to the north of where the herons and flamingos stand.

‘I should warn you that we’re not going to do anything’, said Flavia, when David parked the car.

*Nothing will happen if you don’t want it to.* David had heard this phrase used in similar situations at the cinema or on television. It had always seemed absurd to him, since the man never has any control over what might or might not happen with a woman unless he is a thug, a rapist or a murderer. So he kept quiet.

‘It’s my time of the month’, Flavia explained.

‘Okay’, said David.

‘The title? Calling it *Flamingo* is the proof that it’s a love song. Haven’t you ever seen two flamingos kissing? Their necks, their heads and their beaks make a heart. It’s amazing’, said Flavia.

‘How do you know they’re kissing?’

‘The other day there was a programme about flamingos on Animal Planet. In the programme they said that when two flamingos get together, they stay together forever. Parrots are the same.’

‘They said that about parrots?’

‘No, but think about it, they fly in pairs. At the university they always fly in twos.’

‘The ones at the university are macaws.’

‘And parrots.’

‘But I’ve seen that the macaws are always in pairs.’

‘Because they’re faithful, like parrots. And flamingos.’

At some point in the conversation they fell asleep.

David weighed up the railing that protected the terrain. The light from a pylon allowed him to make out a gap between a bent bar and the scuffles of the railing, probably pulled apart by the impact of a drunken car. Half of the bar hung down like a broken arm, a loose thread of metal barely keeping it attached. David flexed it up and down for a long while until the piece of metal came away.

Brandishing his improvised spear, he went in.

Once inside, he was hypnotised by the sight. The herons and flamingos stood impassively, staring at him, looking as though they might suddenly fly off. All with that

rigidity, and at the same time that haste, that the night impresses upon anything that holds out against it.

Finally, he edged closer. He held his breath and placed a hand on the head of one of the birds. The cold of the wood caressed his fingertips. With more confidence, as though no longer fearing attack, he gripped the neck tightly and tugged. The animal hardly moved. David bent down to its legs, two pieces of reinforcement steel driven into the ground. He did the same thing there, with identical results.

A low shadow, accompanied by a shriek, shook in the bushes.

Rats, he thought, once again taking up the bar that he had leant against one of the legs. And just imagining their filthy gunpowder discharges, he started to sweat. The car, he thought. A few steps later he had reached the railing. He squeezed through the gap and made sure that everything was in order.

A new shaking that shrieked from the leaves made him concentrate. Again he went in, raised the bar like a cybernetic pylon and drove it into the ground, several times, around the metal legs. A line of blood warmed his arm. In one of his thrusts he had cut himself on the hard edge of its beak. In less than an hour, Flavia would be making her way down to the airport. If he wanted to surprise her he'd have to hurry. David wiped away the blood with his t-shirt, adding it to the remains of the powder paint in one single stain, and continued digging.

They met again two days later. It was a Friday, La Bohème had still not set up and the venue was already packed. In the bustle of the bar he saw Verónica. She greeted him like an old friend. They chatted, they laughed, and David bought the first round of beers.

'Where's Flavia?' David asked at last.

'She should be here soon.'

'What's that face for?'

'Nothing.'

'What's Flavia told you?'

'That you're a pervert.'

'What?'

'You've gone all red. Flavia was right, you're lovely.'

That annoyed him. He was scared that, as always, everything would be ruined by that fucking tenderness that he inspired in women. If he wanted to sleep with Flavia – if he wanted, at last, to sleep with any woman – he'd have to start to toughen up a bit, to be less kind and more forceful. To accept that love, or sex at least, requires at least a minimal disposition to hurt. The gig finished late and they left the bar at five in the morning. David, Miki, Verónica and Flavia. Flavia was the one that suggested going down to La Guaira.

Driving in that state can be deadly. You blink and you're dead. On the other hand, if it doesn't kill you, you blink and you're there. Like this, buffeted by pockets of lethargy, they saw the last act of the sunrise and the sharp assertion of the morning's colours. The sound of aeroplane turbines, just taking off from the airport, could be heard from the other side of the coast.

David was still pondering distances and blinks, sounds and absences right on the seashore, when Miki lit up a joint. It made its way from hand to hand as the waves kept rolling and crashing to a capoeira beat.

'This is how things should be', said Flavia, out of the blue. She had the joint between her fingers and observed it carefully as she spoke. She seemed to be reading the future.

'What is?' asked Miki.

'This. Being able to smoke in peace. In Amsterdam they even give you weed with your coffee. No exaggeration.'

‘Get over it’, said Verónica.

‘Idiot’, said Flavia.

‘I doubt they’ve got these beaches in Amsterdam. Or that the rum’s so cheap’, continued Verónica, grasping the bottle that Miki had pulled out of thin air when they were in the car and leaving Caracas. ‘What do you think, David? Am I right?’

David didn’t answer. He wore a cheerful, detached expression. He let himself fall down into the sand. But deep down, at least in part, he agreed with Flavia. And also with Verónica. This was how things should be. But not because of the weed or the rum, or not just because of them, but because of the sea. Everyone should be born by the sea and spend the first years of their life there. Then, later on, they might have enough and leave for the city, with its wooden birds and its dawns and dusks like the on-off of a light bulb. Or for the mountaintops. But only after having the good fortune of being born by the sea.

If the open sea knocks you down. The mountain cannot calm your rage. Then what?

David wallowed in his doubt and felt that the oceanic liquid of the morning had broken. He gazed at Flavia and the others as though from an island. ‘Give me your number’, he said to her.

Flavia smiled, caressed his cheek, stood up and headed back to the car. It was then that Verónica told him that he had to understand Flavia. Literature, cinema, music, too romantic.

The night of that day they made love. La Vida was playing again. This time they didn’t wait for them to play Nicaragua but went straight to the Riazor.

In the room their bodies rediscovered the inertia of their first encounter: kisses, molten promises, firm caresses, unconcealed glances at every inch of the other’s body followed one after the other. For some minutes now, David had been going over the movements that he’d practiced so many times in his bathroom at home: open the wrapper at one side with his teeth, take out the prophylactic, press down on its tip to expel the air, then squeeze in his penis as quickly as possible to avoid a flimsiness that would leave him feeling silly.

But Flavia gave him no time to manoeuvre. She was sucking him off and when she saw that he was ready, without saying a word, she got on top of him.

A minute later, Flavia was telling him not to worry.

‘Don’t worry. You’ll last longer next time.’

‘That’s not what I’m worried about.’

‘The condom, you mean? I’m not sure you would have got it on.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I know.’

‘You mean I’m supposed to be grateful?’

‘Pretty much, yeah.’

Flavia smiled. Then she lay on his chest and caressed his body. The caresses distracted David. Deep down, he knew she was right.

‘This is how things work in Holland. There’s a brothel in Amsterdam just for the disabled and deformed. They get things there that they can’t get anywhere else. That brothel’s just as important as a hospital for the poor.’

‘If I’m deformed then you’re a whore.’

‘Not any more.’

‘Since when?’

‘Right now I’m a saint and you’re a beggar.’ Flavia toyed with him like a cat with a mouse, indifferent and a little cruel. Like a cat.

‘Why are you always going on about Holland?’ David asked her.

'It's the best country in the world. I want to live there.'

'So you can smoke?'

'Not just that. When you go to the Van Gogh Museum, when you visit Anne Frank's House, when you see those fields full of tulips, then you'll understand. And you'll also understand that this country is a shithole.'

David remained silent.

'Don't you think this country is a shithole?'

'Not really a shithole, no.'

'You can tell you haven't travelled.'

'I have.'

'Where to?'

'Miami.'

'Travelling to Miami is the exact opposite of travelling. Going to Miami is like going back to the heart of Venezuela. It's all because of the fucking oil. But when I live in Amsterdam I won't care about any of that.'

David started to laugh.

'What are you laughing at?'

'It's ironic, that's all.'

'What's ironic?'

'That you're going to Holland to get away from Dutch disease.'

'I don't get it.'

'It's something we studied last semester. Dutch disease is the damage that the sudden influx of huge amounts of money can do to a country. Like when gas or oil fields are discovered. The new wealth drives up inflation, devalues the currency, stimulates dependency. Everything grows until it fucks itself up. It's like people's brains swelling and filling up with fat.'

'Why Dutch?'

'Because it happened in Holland, on the North Sea. Near France and Flanders.'

'That's where flamingos are from.'

'There are flamingos everywhere, Flavia.'

'No, not the birds. The people that are born in Flanders.'

'Oh. You mean Flemings.'

'Yeah. Like flamenco.'

Flavia got out of bed and went to the bathroom. David also got up and moved towards the window. He opened the curtain slightly and stood there, looking out.

'Don't you have any plans to leave?' Flavia had come back from the bathroom and was now talking to him stretched out on the bed.

'At the end of the year we're going to meet up with my dad.'

'In Miami?'

'Un-huh. Or Costa Rica.'

'Knowing the Venezuelans I get Miami. But Costa Rica? I don't get why everyone wants to go there.'

'There aren't any soldiers in Costa Rica.'

'But there are Venezuelans. More and more of them.'

David was watching the cars pass through the stretch of the highway that he could see from the window. Then he saw, like a shoal of question marks, the necks of the herons and flamingos.

'Why are you leaving?'

'My dad was in business with the government. I don't know what the problem was, but now the government's turned its back on him. And he got scared that they'd arrest him.'

‘Do you feel bad about it?’

‘No.’

‘What’s up then?’

David went back to bed.

‘Nothing. I just think it’s strange that three such different things have such similar names.’

On saying this, a shiver ran down his spine. He tried to trace the source of his fear but he couldn’t. And he felt that uncertainty wrench his chest, the rip of unanswered questions, the broken necks of the flamingos.

That week *La Vida Bohème* was only playing on Wednesday and Thursday. Both times at the same place. Over the weekend they would be on tour around the provinces. In a blend of doubt and conviction, his anxiety to see her mixed with the confidence that they would meet again. The combination electrified his nerves.

The bar was filling up as the time of the gig drew nearer. Flavia had still not appeared. Neither had Verónica. He began to worry when he heard the first chords of *Radio Capital*. He watched the concert from a corner, without moving, allowing himself to be splattered by the coloured sprays of powder paint that were launched from the stage. Always on the lookout for Flavia’s appearance, imagining the strange adventure she would tell him to explain her delay.

Flavia did not turn up. Neither did Verónica. At the exit, sat against a concrete wall, was Miki. David was pleased to find him there, though he had only seen him on the morning they went down to the beach.

‘Where have you been?’ David asked, by way of a greeting.

Miki started and took a few seconds to recognise him.

‘I got here late and couldn’t get in.’

Miki had a bruise on one of his cheekbones and one arm in plaster. David was about to ask him what had happened, but decided not to. Words about pain are also painful, he thought. That’s why he liked the song so much. *And the what’s up? gets you down and bowls you over like an avalanche/ And though sometimes you get upset I’ll never let you go/ yet again*. He liked it because it talked to him about himself and not someone else. Not like Flavia thought, romantic as she was.

‘What’s up with the girls? Why didn’t they come?’

Miki stared at him for a while.

‘What?’ David asked.

‘You don’t know what happened?’

‘No.’

So Miki told him of the week’s events:

The drive that they had taken on Sunday night; the roadblock where they were stopped by the police that then seemed not to be police but in the end turned out actually to be police; the drugs they found on them; the shady moment when they separated him from Verónica and Flavia; his protests and the blows he received that made him lose consciousness; the dazed dawn and the vain attempt by Flavia and Verónica to lodge a complaint; the telephone threats that the police made the following day to remind them they were the police; the decision by Flavia’s parents to get her out of the country.

After listening to him, David had only one absurd thought: why is he telling me this?

Miki seemed to read his mind, adding:

‘I’m telling you this because I know you’re alright, and you won’t tell anyone. And because I know that there was something going on between you and Flavia.’

Was, thought David.

‘And what are you doing here?’

‘I don’t know. I couldn’t sleep. They beat the crap out of me outside and now it turns out I’m scared of being at home’, said Miki.

Like sparring, thought David. The city was the sparring match and the ring and the crowd and the opponent. And you were always yourself.

‘When does Flavia leave?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

The following night he returned to the bar. He knew that he wouldn’t see Flavia, or Verónica, or even Miki. He knew that the vortex that had appeared in his chest since hearing what had happened was going to swirl up as soon as he set foot inside. He hadn’t gone out to meet Flavia, but the shadow of his pain.

He had had too many beers for one night. This time he placed himself in the middle of the mosh pit and bound up and down endlessly as he sang along to each one of the songs. His white t-shirt picked up a good amount of the paint powder with which the band liked to baptise the faithful. To cap it all, to twist the knife, the group chose to end the recital with Flamingo. He remembered the flamingos and herons that he always saw on the highway on the way to university and everything fell into place. He left the bar before they had even finished the song. He waited for the parking attendant to hand over his car and set off towards the highway.

The wound was small but would not stop bleeding. Time and time again David had to interrupt his work to stem the flow with his t-shirt. His blood, at this hour of the morning, was indiscernible from the bursts of paint.

At last he uprooted the animal. The reinforcement steel of its legs rested on a metal base. On the base and legs fell the tolerable weight of the figure. He held it from below and around the neck, bearing it like a flag, or a spear. Flavia would know it had been him, and would understand exactly what it meant to find such a flamingo in her garden on the very morning of her departure.

He carefully placed the flamingo onto the hard shoulder and climbed through the rusty spider’s web of railing. Again he picked up the flamingo by the base and neck and got ready to return. It was then that he saw a shadow rummaging through his car.

He gripped the flamingo as tightly as he could. He was shaking from cold and fear. The shadow had managed to undo the lock and was now manoeuvring beneath the driver’s seat. David gripped the flamingo again until its neck snapped. In his hands he felt the pain that, through the animal, he was inflicting upon himself.

He saw the flamingo differently now, as a totem which had converted his fear into a venerable object.

Once at the wheel, David accelerated. In the back seat, behind the passenger seat, lay the head and neck of the flamingo. Its beak was stained with blood. It had the face of a prostitute smudged by the dawn. The image made him laugh. A flamingo-prostitute, a flamingo-saint, a flamingo-murderess. Then he saw once again the image of the shaking man, the dark spring that welled from his head and spread over the tarmac. Soon the corpse would be removed and the blood would dry, as his own blood, and the paint, had dried on his t-shirt.

At Bello Monte, before crossing the bridge over the river Guaire that leads towards Plaza Venezuela, he stopped. It was a few minutes to five in the morning. He got out of the car unhurriedly, opened one of the back doors and took out the flamingo. He climbed the small slope by the gully and hurled the remains of the bird into the rotting riverbed.

Back in the car, he turned towards Plaza Venezuela. Then he took to the highway, westbound. As he went through the first of the tunnels that lead to the airport, plunging ardently and humidly towards the beaches of La Guaira, he put on the CD. He skipped to

song number four and sang it with the full breath in his body, bursting open the chords of his vocals, feeling the promise of the sea in the tears that ran down his face.

He sang the song as he had never sung it before. For the first time, without doubts or regrets, he sang it for himself.

*Translated from the Spanish by Alex Thomas*