

Federico FALCO

Extract from the novel *Cuqui*

In Utah There Are Mountains Too

I

All that year Cuqui kept thinking about it, but schoolwork, figure-skating classes, drawing lessons and her friends's sweet-sixteen parties kept her too busy. When vacation rolled around, she again turned the matter over in her mind and came to a conclusion: God doesn't exist. So Cuqui decided she'd become an atheist. The first person she told was her grandmother. She just shrugged: it made no difference to her whether Cuqui was an atheist, a Protestant, a Jew or a Catholic. Later she told her mother over the telephone.

Mom, I don't believe in God any more. I've become an atheist.

Cuqui's mother, at the other end of the line, remained silent.

Mom, did you hear me?

I did, she said.

I realized that the people who don't believe in God are superior to those who do because they don't depend on anything. I don't want to depend on anyone, Mom.

Cuqui, what's wrong? Why are you telling me these things?

Because that's what I think. She could hear her mother sobbing.

Mom, please don't cry.

Mom, are you still there?

Yes, she said, and then hung up.

*

Every summer, Cuqui's mother rented out the house they lived in. She left it in the hands of one of the downtown real estate firms and went off to work as a cook in a hotel on top of the mountain. She would give Cuqui a little box with a roll of banknotes and send her to live with her grandmother. The money in the box was supposed to cover her expenses for all three summer months. The real estate people would rent the house to tourists who came to Villa Carlos Paz looking for fun and tranquillity, people who spent their time rock climbing, taking pictures of one another riding burros and chatting with other tourists standing in the lake, the water up to their waists, and the sun frying their backs. To pick up some overtime, Cuqui's mother never took a day off, so she never came down to Villa Carlos Paz. But every two or three days she would telephone the grandmother's house and ask what was going on. Cuqui always told her everything was just fine.

Cuqui's grandmother lived in the high part of Carlos Paz, on the slope of the mountain, near

the cable car. From her garden it was possible to see the entire lake below, the grey and white houses, the downtown hotels, the main street that meandered until it came to an end opposite the church, at the Cuckoo Clock Rotunda. The summer Cuqui became an atheist was long, dry, and suffocating. Cuqui hated vacation. She didn't like the heat, got along badly with her grandmother, was horrified at the thought of swimming in the muddy lake, and the tourists drove her mad. From lunchtime until sunset it was impossible to go anywhere. The sun shone down on the lake and scorched roofs, pavements, and asphalt. Cuqui would fall into bed and stare at her grandfather's library, overflowing with old books, encyclopaedias and art magazines. For hours she would think about what to do with her life. Cuqui wanted to become famous. The problem was she as yet had no idea how.

Sometimes Cuqui dreamed about being a model. She saw Kate Moss in the Calvin Klein ads and dreamed about becoming a model: Not on the catwalk, because Cuqui is short, but a magazine model. She fantasized about someone, some day, discovering her strolling down the avenue and getting her out of Villa Carlos Paz, out of her mother's house, out of summers with Grandma. Cuqui would travel the world, would be photographed by the best photographers, and would be one the cover of Italian *Vogue*, the best-designed *Vogue*. Then one day Cuqui just had to face facts. She took off her gym shorts, her T-shirt, the sports bra her mother had bought her, pulled off her panties, and just stood still opposite the mirror.

The shades were down, barely any light came in. Cuqui looked herself over for a good while.

She was useless, even for magazine photos, she later said.

She forgot all about it until she read a headline in the newspaper: 'Björk was the grand finale in Jean Paul Gaultier's catwalk display.' Yes, Bjork, who is also short, did it, so why can't I? The secret is to stand out. I have to become someone important so the best designers will invite me to be the grand finale in their fashion shows and the greatest photographers will ask me to pose for them. That's the only way I'll ever be on the cover of Italian *Vogue*.

Cuqui had already reached a conclusion about the other problem bothering her: God didn't exist, so she became an atheist. Now she had to get out of Carlos Paz and become famous. But how was she going to stand out? She decided to solve that problem over the course of the summer and spent her time thinking about it. When she got tired of thinking, she silently wandered around the house. Grandma was taking a siesta stretched out in bed with her feet raised and the fan on. Cuqui marched around the kitchen, observed the dust and the cobwebs clinging to the windows, the cat hairs on the dining-room chair, the wooden table for four, which could be opened to seat six or eight but which was never used.

The cat yawned in the only patch of shade in the weed-choked, sun-beaten garden. The tall grass curled over, dried out and brown. The blue armchair fading in the hall. Cuqui would sit in it and remain still not wanting to do anything. She looked at the cars on the street, the tourists walking toward the lake with their beach umbrellas under their arms, a dog scratching its fleas. Cuqui felt the perspiration on her body, her hair sticking to the nape of her neck, the leather on the armchair to which she'd begun to stick, the sweat between her skin and the padding. When she heard her grandmother getting out of bed, she ran to her room again. She lowered the shades, locked the door, and thought some more.

*

That's how she spent the first month of summer. Then, with no warning, Cuqui fell in love with a

Mormon. He was a young, good-looking Mormon with blue eyes and blondish hair. Cuqui met him in the house of the woman who lived just across the street. One afternoon, sitting in the blue chair, Cuqui saw two boys walking under the blistering sun. The boys were wearing white short-sleeved shirts, ties and black trousers. Each one had a pack on his back. They rang the bell at the Aguirre house, but no one answered. They knocked at the door of Lamónica, the widower's little apartment, but no one answered there either. One of the boys wiped his dripping forehead and took refuge under the big ash tree. The other one knocked at the door of Mrs Pérez's house. Mrs Pérez looked them over for a second through a window, asked what they wanted, hesitated an instant, and invited them in.

Mormons in Mrs Pérez's house! Finally something interesting! said Cuqui as she ran to the bathroom to wash her face and comb her hair a bit. She took off her pyjamas, put on her black dress, made sure her grandmother was snoring opposite the fan, picked up an empty cup and walked out.

She entered Mrs Pérez's house through the laundry room, pretending to be oblivious.

Mrs Pérez, Mrs Pérez, she called out.

People were talking in the living room. Mrs Pérez came into the kitchen.

I have guests, she said. What do you need?

Cuqui showed her the cup. Could you lend me some sugar?

While Mrs Pérez got the sugar can out of the closet, Cuqui peeked into the dining room. The Mormons were sitting in the armchairs facing the window. One was an ordinary boy, his cheeks pocked with old acne scars, his ears a bit big. The other Mormon was handsome. He reminded Cuqui of Joey McIntyre, from *New Kids on the Block*.

Would you like some coffee? Mrs Pérez shouted to them.

The Mormons looked up and saw Cuqui leaning in the doorway. Cuqui smelled them with her eyes closed. They gave off a sharp aroma of pine forest, soap and cologne.

We don't drink coffee, our religion forbids it, said the Mormons.

Some tea then? Coca Cola, Sprite? asked Mrs Pérez as she woke Cuqui up and pointed to the laundry room door.

Off with you, she whispered.

I want to listen to them too.

None of that, said Mrs Pérez. Your grandma needs the sugar. Bring it to her.

A glass of Sprite would be great, answered one of the Mormons from the living room.

Mrs Pérez opened the refrigerator, closed it, opened it again, and clasped her hands around her head. There was no more Sprite. Out of the sideboard she took out the little can where she kept her spare change and found a five peso note.

Take this, she held the money out to Cuqui, go over to Vicente's and buy me a litre and a half bottle of Sprite. Tell him it's for me so he doesn't charge you the deposit. I'll bring the bottle back tonight. Make sure it's good and cold.

Cuqui ran to the store. When she got back, Mrs Pérez was showing the Mormons some photos of her husband, who'd died the previous winter.

He liked to read, he adored it, said Mrs Pérez pointing to the bookcase behind the armchairs. The Mormons swivelled around and for just an instant looked at the hundreds of *Reader's Digest* selections perfectly lined up. Years and years of the monthly selections arranged in order of publication.

From the kitchen, Cuqui called Mrs Pérez. She lifted up the bottle and showed it to her. Ah! The Sprite's finally arrived! said Mrs Pérez. I'll pour some out for you right now.

This is Cuqui, the granddaughter of my neighbour; she introduced her while she arranged the glasses on a tray.

Cuqui! It sounds just like cookie! said the Mormon who looked like Joey McIntyre.

The other Mormon, the one with the scarred cheeks, explained to Cuqui what a cookie was. Your name sounds just like the English word cookie.

Cuqui wasn't even listening. No one had ever spoken her name in a foreign language.

II

Each Mormon, over his heart, wore a golden pin bearing his name. The ugly Mormon was named Robert and was called Bob. The cute Mormon was named Steve and had no nickname. Bob was older than Steve, had just turned twenty-two and looked very serious. Both spoke perfect Spanish, but the hard pronunciation of English appeared at the end of words. Steve and Bob told them they believed in God and that Jesus was God's son and that they believed in the Bible. But beside all that, since they were Mormons, they also believed in another book, a sacred book written in America.

Bob's voice was soft and slow. He explained things as if Cuqui and Mrs Pérez were five-year-olds. Steve would nod in agreement and add something from time to time. When Bob finished, Steve opened his backpack, took out two books with blue bindings, and stood them on the table, next to the glasses and tray.

This is the Book of Mormon. These copies are for you.

Before Steve could close the backpack, Cuqui saw that inside, along with another pair of books there was an empty plastic container and a green Axe deodorant missing its cap.

You can read in these books what Bob's told us, Steve went on.

What we would like is that during the week you two think about what you've heard and that you ask God, in true faith, with a sincere heart, if you should believe us or not, said Bob. He will answer you. If you ask in true faith, He will answer you. Okay?

Okay, okay, said Mrs Pérez. She had her hands clasped on her lap and was nodding slowly, her eyes half shut and the expression of someone deeply moved.

Bob smiled, turned his head, and looked at Cuqui:

Okay?

Yes, of course, said Cuqui.

Before they left, Bob and Steve set a day and hour for their next meeting. Even though Cuqui wrote it down on a scrap of paper, she didn't have to look at it again. Wednesday at three. She would never have forgotten it. She said it **over** and over. That week, she thought about nothing except Steve smiling at her with his glistening white teeth and his blue eyes flashing light. Steve caressing her hair. Steve holding her close and seeking her mouth. Steve saying to her Cookie, Cookie, Cookie. Each time she thought about Steve, Cuqui ran to her room, locked the door and touched herself.

What are you doing in there? asked her grandmother.

Nothing. Leave me in peace, shouted Cuqui. And then she continued.

She went to the supermarket, bought herself a green Axe, and that night, before going to sleep, rubbed some on her pillow and slept hugging it. She dreamed about Steve's white chest.

She imagined the beauty marks he might have on his back, the freckles on his shoulders, the golden, thin hair on his chest.

Steve, she murmured in her dreams, lulled by the scent.

*

Did you read? asked Mrs Pérez the instant Cuqui knocked at her door the next Wednesday. Her *Book of Mormon* was waiting next to the waiting tray, the glasses upside down on a lacy napkin, and the bottle of Sprite chilling in a wine cooler. Sticking out from between the pages were improvised place markers – scraps of paper, pamphlets, strand of wool.

Cuqui had no time to answer. Mrs Pérez was already peeking through the window.

Here they come, here they come, and she checked to see that everything was in place. She let them ring and, even though she was standing next to it, waited half a minute before opening the door.

Bob was just as repulsive as before. Steve, on the other hand, was much better looking than Cuqui remembered. He'd shaved carefully and his cheeks were glistening, smooth and clean. He was not wearing the dark blue tie with light blue polka dots he'd worn the previous week. Now he was wearing one with small checks, a mix of blue-black and gold that looked even better on him. And then there was his shirt, white and short-sleeved like the one he wore the first time, but it seemed smaller, more tightly fitted to his body. It hugged the muscles on his arms. His wide shoulders and straight spine revealed the body of an athlete. Cuqui recalled the men in underwear in the Avon catalogues a neighbour dropped off for her mother every month and felt a wave of heat that devoured her face. She lowered her eyes, pulled her hair forward and looked through her bangs. Bob held out his hand to her. Steve was smiling a step behind him.

Come in, come in, said Mrs Pérez gesturing towards the armchairs and pouring soda.

Bob and Steve sat down and Mrs Pérez handed them their glasses. They drank silently, all in one swallow, as if they were dying of thirst. Mrs Pérez's living room had filled with the sharp, savage aroma of green Axe. Cuqui realized that Bob and Steve shared the deodorant and that after walking through Villa Carlos Paz at siesta time, they would stop and put some on before entering anyone's house. That's why Steve carried it in his backpack.

When he finished his soda, Bob dried his lips with a handkerchief and asked if they'd read the *Book of Mormon* and if they'd thought about what he and Steve had said.

Mrs. Pérez instantly nodded.

Of course, answered Cuqui.

Very well. Today we'll introduce you to Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, said Bob, and he began to speak. Cuqui was not allowed to hear even half of the story. During the week, Mrs Pérez had mentioned to Cuqui's grandmother that Cuqui was in her house along with the Mormons. That Wednesday, half an hour after 3 p.m., Cuqui's grandmother had told Cuqui's mother by telephone. She let out a howl and ordered her to get her daughter out of there immediately. Cuqui's grandmother crossed the street, rang the bell and said: 'You're coming with me. Don't say a word.'

Cuqui had to go. She couldn't say goodbye to Steve or even find out when he'd be coming back to Mrs Pérez's house.

That night Cuqui's mother telephoned her.

I don't ever want to see you near those people again.

I do what I like, answered Cuqui. I'm an atheist, so what they say doesn't interest me, so just relax. I'm not going to make them atheists, and they're not going to make me a Mormon.

So why go? Your grandmother told me they gave you a book, that you've got it in your room, that you lock yourself away to read.

I like one of the Mormons, Mom, that's what's going on. I'm in love, and I'm going to fight to get him.

You've been brainwashed by them, said Cuqui's mother bursting into tears.

I've had it with you, said Cuqui hanging up.

I don't ever want you see you going to the Pérez place again, Cuqui heard her grandmother shout just before she slammed her bedroom door and threw herself onto the bed to cry.

III

From that day on, the heat no longer mattered to Cuqui, the tourists no longer bothered her, and she stopped thinking about what she was going to do with her life. Cuqui was in love. There was only room in her head for Steve. She went to the Carlos Paz library and read everything they had about Mormons. She made a list of questions that sounded profound and required long answers and kept it in her pocket. She didn't want to find herself bereft of conversation topics when she ran into Steve and Bob again. She began taking bicycle rides that lasted the whole day. She knew that Steve and Bob were doing their missionary work in her neighbourhood, that they went from house to house, knocking on doors. It shouldn't be hard to find them, but even so it took her a week to pick up their trail. Seven long days of investigation, pursuit and fruitless pedalling.

And then, one day she saw them sitting in the square, right under the monument to the Volunteer Fireman. Cuqui crouched behind a bush and spied on them. Bob took a plastic container out of his backpack and began stirring up some cold beans. He ate for a good while, while Steve read the *Book of Mormon*. Then they switched. Bob passed the container to Steve, and Steve handed him the book. Cuqui's foot fell asleep. She got up, stretched her legs, pretended to be strolling, and ran to hide behind an evergreen. When Bob and Steve finished eating, they put away the container and went back to their missionary work. For the entire afternoon, Cuqui followed while they preached. She hid in gardens, behind lamp poles, between two parked cars, up in a tree. She never lost them. Late in the afternoon, Bob and Steve went home, and Cuqui discovered where they lived: a tiny apartment in the patio of a hardware store, on the other side of Carlos Paz, near the Cuckoo Clock. The next day she asked the owner of the store if they'd been living there for long.

They keep changing. Every three months, two new ones come, and the old ones disappear. They're nice people.

Cuqui discovered their schedule.

They set out at nine thirty and spend the day on the move. They don't come back here until seven or eight. They turn the light out right away. Cuqui carefully noted their habits, the houses they visited, how much time they spent in each, how often they returned. When she'd learned everything, she began to set up ambushes. She would wait for them on a corner in the shadow of a tree, and would intercept them wearing her best smile: Boys, what a coincidence!, she'd greet them before asking the first question.

*

Bob had more experience. He was older and had done missionary work for a longer time. In the conversations with Mrs Pérez, he'd always been the main speaker. Even so, when it came to Cuqui, he stepped aside and let Steve take over the conversation. Cuqui knew that Bob didn't trust her. Perhaps Mrs Pérez had warned him, perhaps he was jealous. She would take out the list she'd

written out in the library and ask the questions with true conviction, but the answers didn't interest her. And she couldn't conceal that. Bob would cross his arms and find someplace to sit. He didn't even try to answer her, letting Steve take charge. Steve did make an effort to convince Cuqui. He was full of ardour and enthusiasm, as if he needed to make a conversion to get his missionary diploma or as if he wanted to impress Bob, show him how much he knew.

Can you explain to me how the ancient prophets came to the United States from Jerusalem? And what do you think about Darwin's theories with regard to the survivors of the Tower of Babel?

She didn't give him time even to take a breath, and no sooner had Steve finished his answer than Cuqui was wondering if in Utah the Mormons still married several wives, then she'd express her doubts about the possibility of writing out an entire book on sheets of gold, or assert that it was impossible for a man to learn to speak ancient languages in a single day.

Steve would listen carefully. Then, his face full of peace, he would smile.

You need faith, he would say. God is much greater than we are; without faith you'll never understand Him. And then he'd apologize because they had to be on their way, a family was expecting them. But before saying goodbye, Steve promised Cuqui he'd pray for her that night.

Tonight I'll pray for you, Steve would say. I will ask that the Holy Spirit illuminate you and give you the gift of faith and understanding.

Thank you, thank you, Cuqui would answer. She'd get on her bike and leave, happy because that night Steve was going to think about her. Cuqui would then run to her room, hug the pillow redolent of green Axe and imagine Steve sitting next to her on the edge of the bed. He would raise his arm and show her his armpit. Cuqui would press the button. Steve's blond hairs, soft and translucent, would receive the shower of deodorant and be moistened. Thank you, Steve would say, and lean over, and before making love to her would run his tongue over her eyelids, moistening her closed eyes.

IV

One day, Cuqui had an idea. To talk about something other than religion, she would invite Bob and Steve to dinner. She had the money her mother had left her and could bring them to a good restaurant.

We never eat outside the house. At ten we have to go to bed, Bob informed her.

In that case, I'll invite you to lunch.

We always eat with other missionaries or with families that are members of the congregation, said Bob.

No problem. I'll invite you to breakfast, Cuqui insisted.

Bob hesitated for an instant. He looked over at Steve. Steve said nothing.

Okay then, breakfast, Bob finally answered.

Cuqui jumped for joy. She got on her bicycle and rode full speed down Carlos Paz's main street. She was so happy she waved to the newspaper vendors and turned down the pamphlets about rental cottages, excursions on the lake, and all-you-can-eat barbecues. She looked over several hotels, visited restaurants that served breakfast, asked about prices, investigated menus, and asked what each thing was, how much it cost, if you could have a second helping. She chose the Hotel del Lago. Expensive, but its window over the coast was worth it.

The night before the breakfast Cuqui couldn't sleep. Again and again she reviewed the subjects she'd bring up for conversation, the seating arrangement, the clothes she'd wear. The

Hotel del Lago offered an American, buffet-style breakfast. When Cuqui made enquiries, the hostess showed her the breakfast room. It was late and there were only some tourist families at a few tables. Cuqui's feet sank into the soft, bordeaux-coloured rug. The window faced the lake and, beyond it, the dry, brown mountains. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The centre of each table was occupied by a floral arrangement – roses, daisies and ivy.

Are they real flowers or plastic? asked Cuqui.

The hostess frowned: Real of course.

Cuqui ran her finger over some petals and saw she wasn't lying.

You can eat as much as you want?

As much as you like.

And it's just the way it is in the United States?

Yes, miss; it's an *American* breakfast.

The piped-in music was soft, as fluffy as the rug. A tourist wearing bermudas and a white T-shirt got up to get the newspaper on the counter and went back to his table. A waiter emerged from the kitchen with huge, round, stainless steel tray topped with a glass dome. Cuqui imagined Steve and Bob sitting at the window, slowly eating their scrambled eggs and toast. She imagined them laughing their heads off and thanking her profoundly for having invited them to have a breakfast just like the ones they had in their own country. Cuqui had them recover the tastes of home. She imagined Bob discretely getting up, saying he wanted to stroll a bit out on the terrace to get a breath of air and Steve alone with her, at the light-bathed table. Steve would toss his napkin to one side and rest his hand on Cuqui's. She would feel all its heat.

Thank you, Steve would say, staring into her eyes. Thank you, Cuqui, thanks a lot, she imagined Steve saying before he kissed her. And then, towards dawn, she fell asleep.

*

She set two alarm clocks, but needed none. She got up before the sun actually rose. She took a quick bath, brushed her teeth and drank a glass of Coca-Cola, so she wouldn't leave the house with an empty stomach. Her long, white dress, strappy sandals and a touch of perfume behind her ears. That was all. Simple, fresh, the ideal outfit for a breakfast overlooking the lake. Cuqui had arranged it all on the chair, so it took her less than a second to get dressed. No necklaces, no earrings. She looked at herself in the mirror. She was perfect. Now it was time to leave.

From her bedroom, her grandmother asked what she was doing, where she was going.

I've got something important said Cuqui. I'll be back before lunch, she shouted as she shut the door.

Her bicycle awaited her, leaning against the wall. The previous afternoon she'd checked to make sure both tires were hard and that the chain needed no oil. She wanted no mishaps. Cuqui flew along downhill through the empty, still shadow-covered streets, her hem pulled up so it wouldn't get tangled in the spokes or stained by the pedals. Her legs: smooth, shining, freshly shaved. The wind made her hair float and showed her face and Cuqui felt like singing something, a funny song, or, even better, she felt like whistling a melody that would be like background music. She felt she was in a movie. Young and sensual.

She flew along the main street, crossed Carlos Paz in a trice, went onto the new bridge over the narrowest part of the lake, and went the wrong way down a one-way street that went down to the Cuckoo Clock. Why not? There was no one coming. The owner of the hardware store was getting out portable barbecues, ladders, and armloads of brooms to display on the sidewalk for potential customers. Cuqui left her bicycle leaning against the light post.

Will you keep an eye on it for me? she asked the hardware store owner. He nodded yes: It's safe there.

Cuqui walked along the asphalt ally next to the store. She passed the Goodyear poster, the roles of chicken wire, the piles of stakes, the posts. Behind, in the small patio, the plants in the vases had died years ago. The window of the Mormons' little apartment was shut. Cuqui knocked at the door. Once, twice. Silence. She checked her watch: it was the time they'd agreed on. She knocked again, and from the other side she seemed to here a growl, the slight creak of springs.

Who is it? asked a voice that seemed like Bob's.

Cuqui.

Just a minute, said Bob.

Cuqui heard whispering and stumbling steps. The muffled sound of tossed sheets. More whispering, and finally, the key that turned in the lock.

Bob was wearing basketball shorts, a T-shirt two or three sizes too big and his hair was like tangled straw.

Ready for breakfast? asked Cuqui as she looked through the half-open door. She saw a plastic table covered with dirty dishes, piles of the *Book of Mormon*, open bags of crackers and a sugar bowl with no lid. She saw two plastic chairs with the Cervecería Córdoba logo on their backs. She saw a poster of Jesus's face tacked to the wall, and under the poster a bed whose sheets were on the floor with one pillow against the headrest.

What time is it? asked Bob as he scratched his head.

Seven thirty, the time we agreed on, answered Cuqui.

Behind Bob, sitting on the bed in his underpants and wearing another huge T-shirt, Cuqui could see Steve yawning and rubbing his eyes. Steve put on a baseball cap – backwards – smiled and waved to Cuqui.

We'll need fifteen minutes, said Bob.

Fine, no problem, I'll wait for you here, said Cuqui taking two steps back.

Yes, okay, wait for us, said Bob.

It was only when he closed the door and she turned a bit and looked toward the blue sky and the lot behind the hardware shop that Cuqui noticed the wave of foul air loaded with moisture and stinks that wafted from the Mormons' apartment and enveloped her. A smell similar to the sweat she'd noticed from time to time on the boys in her school, but mixed with remnants of sleep, dirty sheets, dry saliva on lips and with something sweeter, like apples, or flavoured cereal, or a slice of cake forgotten in the refrigerator.

Cuqui shut her eyes and took a deep breath to inhale it completely. The smell by then had diminished, and she could barely find a few confused traces that she engraved on her memory. She understood that it was the smell of Steve when he slept and that the deodorant was only a disguise to fool others. Only she knew his intimate life.

Nevertheless, it annoyed her that in this intimacy there was also a bit of Bob's smell.

V

Even though Cuqui insisted they eat all they wanted, Bob and Steve barely finished a cup of milk and a slice of bread each.

There were few people in the dining room. A family at the other end and a couple of retired folks at the tables closest to the buffet. And Bob and Steve there, opposite Cuqui, with their ties and white shirts and the blond hair plastered down with gel, the part on the side, perfect, the

knapsacks filled with the *Book of Mormon*, their trays in their hands. Outside, the sail of a windsurfer cut the surface of the lake moving along so slowly it seemed stationary.

You can have more, said Cuqui. As much as you like.

This will be fine, said Bob sitting down.

No, not in that chair, said Cuqui. Yours is the other chair, that's Steve's.

Bob and Steve exchanged glances but said nothing. Steve sat where Cuqui wanted him to sit. She tried to initiate a conversation. She talked about the heat, the drought, the danger of forest fires, exchange rates, an accident on the funicular. Bob and Steve listened in silence.

Steve is leaving today, said Bob, when Cuqui finally stopped talking. We've decided it's better he go to another mission, far from here.

Cuqui didn't understand, and for an instant went on talking about something else. Bob had to repeat what he'd said:

Steve is leaving today. He leaves this evening.

Cuqui thought they were joking with her. It couldn't be true.

Is that true? she asked Steve. Tell me, look me in the eye. Is it true?

Steve lowered his eyes and took a long drink of milk.

Why would he lie? said Bob.

I'm not asking you, I'm asking him, Cuqui blurted out. Steve, is it true?

Yes, said, Steve, his eyes fixed on the tablecloth.

Steve had indeed said yes. Cuqui felt that the lake was disappearing, that the sun was shining so brightly it turned everything white, that a black hand was pulling her guts down. Her eyes trembled. That was the void.

Could you leave us for a moment? she asked Bob, making an effort to pull herself together. I'd like to speak to Steve alone.

That's impossible, answered Bob. We missionaries have to do everything together. It's one of our ways to resist the attacks of the demon.

Enough, Bob, said Steve.

But . . .

It's okay, Bob, I know what I'm doing.

Bob got up and walked away without saying another word.

The previous night Cuqui had fallen asleep reviewing the list of subjects for conversation. Now none was of any use, and nevertheless each item was still there, curled up in her head, piled one on top of the other, keeping her from thinking. Cuqui closed her eyes.

I love you, she said.

Steve blushed.

Cuqui went over to him. Tried to kiss him. The smell of green Axe, so near, and nevertheless as if on the other side of a wall.

No, said Steve pushing her away. No, he said again.

Cuqui's eyes filled with tears.

Is it because I'm an atheist? Is that it?

Steve didn't answer.

It's because I'm ugly.

Steve signalled to Bob to come back.

Cuqui got up and without saying goodbye walked to the cashier. She didn't want Bob to see her cry. In her bodice she had a banknote, one her mother had given her in the little box. She

flattened it out on the counter, paid the bill, and left.

She saw them again that afternoon at siesta time. Cuqui knocked at their door and Steve appeared. He was just finishing up his packing. Cuqui invited him to take a walk.

Bob has to come too. Cuqui accepted. They walked toward the lake. In front of the Cuckoo Clock a crowd was gathering. It was five minutes before the hour and the tourists were waiting with their cameras raised, focused on the door from which the little wooden bird would appear.

I brought you this, so you'll remember me forever, Cuqui said to Steve.

It was a tin heart, the kind they sell at the kiosks. The heart cut through the middle so there were two identical halves. Each half had a hole in it so it could be put on a chain and worn as a necklace. Cuqui had separated the two halves and then cut the half she was giving to Steve in half. She gave the half with the hole to Steve and the other to Bob.

So the two of you will remember me, she said. Take it wherever you go. Keep it with you on your missions and when you go back to the United States. Keep it with you forever.

The clock's bell began to ring, the double door opened, and the wooden cuckoo with the open beak appeared.

Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! screeched the bird.

I'll pray for you every night, said Steve.

Great, said Cuqui.

The bird went back in, and the doors shut for a second. Then they opened again just as quickly.

Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! screeched the bird once more, and the mass of tourists again took pictures.

I have to ask you one last question, Cuqui said.

Yes, of course, said Steve,

Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! screeched the wooden bird for the third time.

What is Utah like? asked Cuqui.

I don't know. I've never been there. My family is from Arkansas, said Steve.

In Utah there are mountains too, just like here, said Bob.

Cuqui smiled. She shaded her eyes with the palm of her hand so the sun wouldn't dazzle her and she looked out at the lake, the hotels along the shore, the main street and its shops, the dry peaks around Villa Carlos Paz.

Thanks, that's what I wanted to know, she said, turning aside. Then she left.

Bob and Steve stood there, silent, among the tourists taking flash photos. Each one held in his hand a piece of the tin heart.

Then the wooden bird again disappeared behind the door and did not come out again. The tourists put away their cameras and little by little began to disperse. Cuqui pedaled at top speed, climbed the hill toward the cable car. She wanted to get to her grandmother's house quickly, throw the green Axe into the garbage and lock herself in her room to think. She had to recoup the lost time. Only one month of summer was left.

Translated from the Spanish by Alfred Mac Adam