

THAT QUESTION OF ORIFICES

When I moved to Buenos Aires to pursue my studies in mathematics with the famous algebraist Blastone, I used my scholarship money to rent a basic apartment on the sixth floor of one of those buildings whose windows lean towards each other, whose walls are like painted scenery and where, without wanting to, you hear of the most trivial of circumstances and sometimes of the most terrible things in other people's lives. Since I lived alone, the fights, the laughter, the shrieking of television sets, though a frequent distraction from my studies, gave me company of sorts, and I eventually got used to it.

Leaning out of the window for the first time, I got the impression that I could almost touch the other wing of the building if I stretched out or crossed from side to side with a leap, without much risk. The apartment across from mine was vacant. The whole time I lived there, its blinds stayed stubbornly down. In "5 B", one floor below, there was a couple -husband and wife I assumed at first- who didn't bother closing their windows to make love.

Practically every night, very late, when the building was completely silent, the woman's cries would awake me. Cries that I still seem to hear sometimes in my dreams even today and which at that time came to obsess me. However, I couldn't describe them: I feel that any attempt would be futile, as futile as describing a perfume for instance. All I can say is that I had never heard anything quite like it. Her cries weren't at all like the faltering panting of the girls I had known. They were not like the desiring, sweet moan of my former girlfriend. Hers were plain and simple cries. Cries that seem to dig away in her throat without actually reaching bottom and rose to the surface from ever-greater depths. Wild cries, if you will, because there was no trace in them of so-called restraint or modesty, but for that very reason, for their very primal sound, I believe, were they so profoundly disturbing. Everything else is false, they seemed to say, this and only this is love.

The first night I heard the woman's cries was also the first time I saw her. It was a scorching night in February, two or three days after I had moved in. I still hadn't bought myself a bed, and I was sleeping on a cot underneath the window. At two in the morning I was suddenly jerked awake with the feeling that something awful had happened. As I sat up I heard one last cry which sounded like a death knell to me. I leaned fearfully out the window: the only light on was in 5B, a strange bluish glow, perhaps coming from the TV screen. It took me barely an instant to realize what was going on. From my vantage point, I could see almost the whole room. It looked even closer in the dark. I could even see the door and sink of a bathroom en suite. Only the bed remained hidden: I could just make out the end of the bed littered with clothes. But I could see the sheet still moving and a foot and a heel, intertwined, and I was a little embarrassed not to have discovered the truth earlier. No further sound was heard, only an exhausted silence, a silence that seemed definitive. I was just about to draw away from the window when the woman got up and appeared, naked, next to the bed.

The beauty of her body was withdrawing into a fight which had become unequal. It was the kind of body that can't be looked upon without a vague feeling of sadness. Her breasts -whose nipples were strangely pointed- were heavy and full but starting to sag. Her thighs had

the painful frailty of something on the verge of falling. She started talking unworriedly, one knee up against the edge of the bed, and I thought how vulnerable a woman's body is when she is unaware she is being observed, when her guard is down. She had a strong, slightly husky voice, but she gabbled and I couldn't catch what she was saying. I think she was talking about a party or a dance. I found her beautiful or I wanted her to be beautiful, or maybe it was her childlike enthusiasm as she spoke, or the way she occasionally brushed her hair off her face with her hand. At one point she disappeared only to return immediately with two glasses and then I realized that if for any reason she raised her eyes, she would find me there, in my briefs, opposite the window, contemplating her. I pulled back brusquely and lay down again. For a while I could still hear the murmur of that carefree voice. Only when I heard the sound of blinds tumbling shut did I go back to sleep.

At first I thought I would get used to her cries in the night, that eventually I wouldn't hear them anymore, just as I had become accustomed to the flushing of my neighbor's toilet or to the noise of the tv sets at suppertime. It wasn't like that. During the day I studied religiously. Professor Blastone, probably moved by the gaps in my education and my provincial earnestness, would put discouraging piles of books and magazines in my hands with untiring helpfulness, drawn from his own library. Soon my table was covered with dusty volumes of books and scribbled papers with which I struggled but reaped more grief than rewards.

Every night at nine I traded the books for a plate of food, usually rice or sausages. It was then, as I finished my meal, that an indefinable and yet distinct unease would come over me. I knew the woman from the fifth floor would be home by now; she was always the first one back. I knew she would be having a shower and if I leaned out the window, I could see the steam on her apartment windows. I knew the man would be back soon, and she would be wearing a red negligee or a green one with dragons. She would bring his supper to bed on a folding tray. I knew, above all, that at 2 a.m. after watching TV they would make love, and I would be awakened by her cries.

Although I was aware of all this, or maybe precisely because I knew exactly how the events would unfold, I went to bed feeling restless. I had always slept deeply but I was becoming a light sleeper, expectant and tense. I can still see myself sitting up in bed as the cries grew in intensity, hovering next to the window, beyond control, struggling not to look. When they finally succumbed, when the cries were overcome by one triumphant last gasp -my awaited deliverance- I would stay around for a long time, gazing stupidly at the naked walls of my room, incapable of thought, sharply aware of the absence of a woman.

An air vent and a malicious comment made me take the step of iniquity. The air vent was in my kitchen and it had obviously always been there. The comment was made by the doorman early one morning as I came back from buying the paper. We had started talking vaguely about which neighbors were early birds or night owls. I don't know why, but at one point I mentioned the married couple on the fifth floor. "5B?" he said with a sharp laugh. "Her, married!" he said, "every month she's onto a new man." He lowered his voice and added, "She's had at least twenty husbands so far, has that one."

I want to tell things exactly as they happened: that same night I stayed awake to watch them through the window. The doorman's comment was just the permission my worst intentions needed. *Every month she's onto a new man*, I repeated over and over, and felt my impunity growing. I was free to think what I wanted about her. I could even think (and I guess I did) that maybe it was not a coincidence that she always left the blinds partially open.

So in the end I waited. Around midnight, I remember reading a whole chapter from Serge Lang's book on number theory in atonement. When I turned out the light I had a strong feeling of strangeness, as if it wasn't exactly me there, in the dark, waiting.

From time to time I peered briefly out the window. I caught a glimpse of the tray with food being carried in, then back out again, empty. Then they began listening to a dubbed TV movie interrupted only by the refrains of commercials. The movie seemed to last forever; at times I was afraid I might fall asleep in my chair. Finally, I didn't hear the TV anymore. I crept up to the window. Something there made me catch my breath—the rising arc of a shadow, a different silence. It was happening, at that very moment. I leaned out as far as possible, despite my terror at the thought of being discovered, but I soon realized I had no reason to worry: from my vantage point the most I could see was the innocent pile of clothes at the foot of the bed and a corner of the fallen bedspread. That was when I remembered the air vent in the kitchen. I had shut it when I first moved in to keep the dirt out, but its location would provide a better angle. I fumbled my way to the kitchen, trying not to make any noise, and cautiously undid the lock. It was as though the final curtain had been raised; from here, through the tiny opening, I could see absolutely everything. I leaned closer, trembling.

The man was lying face down, one arm hanging over the bedside. She was straddling him from behind. She wore a bra, nothing more. At first I thought she was motionless, but she was actually rubbing herself, slowly back and forth along his back. Each time she swayed I could see a bit more of her pubis. At one point she bent over to undo her bra; her breasts were loosened softly, then she stretched out along his body and began stroking him with her nipples, running those erect, pointed nipples up and down his side. Although the light was dim I could make out her expression. I thought I could see a kind of secret, almost perverse smile, as though she knew she was capable of giving rise to more pleasure than was tolerable.

Suddenly, she flipped the man over onto his back and thrust herself onto him with greedy, barely-contained eagerness. I could hear her now. Nothing but a moan at first. She still rocked slowly to and fro; her eyes half-closed, the man's hands at her waist pulling down, down, in a rolling movement ever deeper, while her moan grew thicker, harsher. Her body was shaken by sudden fury. I could see the way she writhed, the wild flinging of her hair back from her face. I could see the way she grasped her breasts, pinched her nipples. And I could hear her cries mounting higher and higher. Cries I had heard many times before, but this time they seemed unbearable. Those lustful cries, that woman's greed were somehow frightening.

Finally she rocked back with one last jerk, like a weapon being cocked, cried out one last time and dropped onto the man, hugging him convulsively while small shivers continued to shake her body.

I turned on the light and, half-blinded by the sudden brightness, looked around my room. It was as if I were seeing it for the first time. I saw the table covered with books and papers, I turned the page of a book, dropped onto a chair. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep that night.

What happened next, what happened from then on, was really only a repeat of that first night. To put it simply, I began to spy on her. I remember spending hours at a time straining to see through the air vent, lurking, waiting for the sheet to wrinkle; for the movement of a hand; for the television to fall silent and for her body to be ready for the brutal coupling that so distressed me. There was also a kind of monstrous ease or convenience to it all: it was enough to turn out the light, unlock the vent and wait; there was no way they could see me through the tiny opening.

At first, guilt pushed me to study with unaccustomed fervor. I went to bed very late, of course, but I kept waking up early to study all day long, sometimes without even stopping for lunch. Blastone encouraged me, doubtlessly surprised by my progress. Now we spoke almost as equals. A tenuous, intellectual affection had built up between us, that which normally arises between master and disciple. I was one of the few people Blastone could talk to, about his specialty -valuations in number fields- and for a mathematician, having someone who could listen was both infrequent and precious. I remember him filling blackboards with scribbled passion, formulating problems to which he himself gave the answers while I tried shakily to follow him, constantly ashamed at having to ask him to go over his reasoning or stop at an example. But Blastone had unfailing patience and more confidence in me than I likely deserved. One day, unexpectedly, he proposed a problem for my doctoral thesis. That was the first inkling of what would happen to me later on. I would watch Blastone as he wrote in sweeping characters across the blackboard and realized that I should be feeling happy or enthusiastic somehow, maybe proud. But I didn't, not in the least. I listened to him carefully. I noted that the problem was difficult, interesting. That was all.

Nevertheless, I threw myself into my work; I had discovered that what I was going through was worse than even I was ready to admit; I was beginning to realize I was incapable of shaking off that yearning that drew me to the air vent night after night. I thought --wanted to assume-- that as I advanced with the problem I would manage to leave all of that behind.

One or two months passed. Although I continued to spy on the woman from the time the light went on in her room, I didn't come to know much more about her. This never ceased to astonish me: I knew almost everything about her, having seen her at her most naked, and at the same time I hardly knew a thing about her, just the few unconnected fragments and pieces that can be gleaned about someone else's life through a window.

I saw her name on the first joint building utility statement I received: E. Cartan. E for Eugenia as I learned one day when she answered the phone. She spent a good deal of time on the phone, but there was no way of knowing whether she was speaking to the same friend every time or whether she had several friends. What I did realize, and soon saw borne out, was that the doorman wasn't entirely mistaken. One morning as I lay half-asleep, I heard a violent argument through the blinds. The furious sound of a door slamming woke me up completely, and in the ensuing silence I thought I could hear, very faintly, the sound of her weeping.

That night she ate alone. After dinner, she put on a very low-cut white dress, spent a long time on her make-up and went out again. She came home extremely late: the lights went on in the apartment just before daybreak. When she walked into the bedroom, I could see she was with a tall, gray-haired man. They undressed feverishly and the man, with little consideration, threw her face down onto the bed and mounted her from behind, mercilessly. She cried out louder than ever, long sustained wails. Afterwards, the man put his clothes on and left, but he came back the next day, earlier this time. He stayed the night with her, and soon I began to hear the TV again and see the tray being carried back and forth.

I ran into this second man one day in front of the building. I looked at him with some curiosity, without really knowing what I expected to see; I don't think I could recall a single feature of his now. I bumped into her, too, one day on my way into the building. She was waiting for the elevator and the two of us stood in silence watching the numbers light up. I opened the doors with excessive force; I felt nervous, awkward. I let her in first, she thanked me with a confident smile and while I was closing the doors, she asked me for my floor. Only then did I realize she didn't even know me, that this was quite possibly the first time she had

seen me in her life. I looked at her out of the corner of my eye while she tidied her hair in front of the mirror: that face, seen close up, suited the body I had seen naked so many times. It was the face of a woman who wouldn't be beautiful much longer. I suppose she must have felt my gaze and she in turn stared at me defiantly. I had an irrational fear that my expression would somehow give me away, provide her with a clue and I looked away. She smiled to herself and said good-bye when she got off on the fifth floor with exaggerated, mocking courtesy.

Time seemed to stand still. Despite the multitude of possible positions in lovemaking—all of which the woman seemed to know—the same ones started repeating themselves. However, for some inexplicable reason, instead of boring me the repetition just aggravated my state of mind, sometimes to shameful extents. At times I felt I might be able to free myself of the obsession if I could just see the coupling as a purely mechanical act, nothing more, nothing less than a rhythmic joining of two bodies. Sometimes I repeated to myself, like a weak spell, an idiotic phrase I had heard once in a movie I think: Sex: that question of orifices. But invariably her cries got to me.

Nothing seemed to change and yet, time was doing its job in a subtle way. I was making absolutely no headway with my thesis. It was increasingly difficult for me to concentrate on my studies: I felt strangely indifferent, increasingly numb. At the time, I blamed the feeling on exhaustion and lack of sleep, but deep down I knew already what I now know with such clarity. What was happening to me was as simple as it was horrible: I couldn't cope with the furious intensity of the repeated couplings. The cries seemed to say *This and only this is life*. What could I oppose to them? Serge Lang's book? My hours of study? It wasn't just that I had lost interest, but that everything had been diminished, made pointless by what I saw. There behind the window, life was being taken to its limit—a devastating display of combustion that made me feel like an insect under too bright a light.

It didn't take long for Dr. Blastone to notice I was making no progress. One day he insinuated he could come up with another equally interesting but more accessible problem if I found the one he had assigned too difficult. I asked him for some more time and he, laughing, protested that I had misunderstood him, that of course I could take as long as necessary.

I remember the night that followed that day. I had decided to go to sleep and ignore the woman once and for all. I set the alarm and went to bed early. I re-read the first chapter of a novel I had set aside and turned the light out before midnight All in vain. Sleep wouldn't come, and at 2 o'clock sharp I started hearing the cries, like one single jarring, increasingly imperious note. I contained myself for a moment with my head under the pillow, but finally I decided there wasn't much point: after all, I was awake. I walked barefoot into the kitchen and peered through the air vent. All I could see was the man's back in the frenzy of the final throes, her body buried under his. For the space of a second though, I saw her hands gripping the man's hips as though trying to drive him deeper, drag him inside her forever. This is all there was, her hands, and yet, like never before, I felt a deep sexual urge, as if the appearance of those hands were mocking me, or were a warning confirmation that nothing would ever change.

I threw my clothes on and stepped outside. I walked for blocks and blocks, in the direction of downtown. I kept thinking how I would never be free of my obsession, that Blastone would finally lose patience with me and give up on me. I saw myself expelled forever from the mathematicians' kingdom. My scholarship would not be renewed. I would have to return home without a doctorate to end my days teaching high school classes to students who

hated me, just like I had hated my own math teachers. I told myself all this, but I couldn't shake the picture of those hands from my mind.

On a street corner a sleepy boy held out a card: RELAX COMPANY, I read, LOW RATES. The whorehouse was half a block away; I formulated a confused, ultimately mistaken plan. I walked inside. The girl I was put with called me honey and seemed nice enough. When she undressed I saw she had miserable little breasts, all ruined. I asked her to cry out as loud as she could. I'll never forget her smile. That'll be extra, she said. I paid. She did what she could and so did I. It was atrocious.

From then on, all I remember is feeling dazed, adrift. With what I still had of scientific curiosity, I observed the successive stages of indifference. During the day I sat down in front of my books and leafed through them mechanically, unable to focus on a single page. I didn't have enough energy for my thesis either, which now seemed increasingly remote, one of those proposals that start to reveal themselves as impossible. I don't know or have never wanted to imagine how much longer I could have gone on like that, only living for those minutes of exile in front of the air vent. One night changed all that, however, a night that was to become, in a certain sense, the last.

I saw the light go on in the apartment at the usual time. When I peered through the air vent, she was getting undressed to shower. Then I saw her sitting on the bed, her bathrobe open and her hair still wet, painstakingly polishing her nails. Afterwards she began to brush her hair. She combed incessantly, with a repeated, useless gesture. I suddenly knew the man wouldn't be coming back. At one point she turned the TV on only to turn it off again almost immediately. Then she dialed a phone number. I think she was speaking to her mother; her voice sounded strangely subdued, I could only catch an occasional word or two. I saw her nod several times silently. "You got it right," I heard her say angrily, "I'm forty years old and still being screwed around by men."

She hung up and dropped onto the bed where she lay for a while, one arm thrown across her face. Her robe was partially open and I could see the whole length of one thigh and the dark promise of her pubis. She turned on her side suddenly, agitated, a breast showing through her gaping robe. I watched her caress her breast absent-mindedly, almost unconsciously. She lay suspended for a moment and then her hand, still undecided, slowly began the journey down, stroking her pubis first then disappearing between her legs. Her body bowed in slow silent combustion until, with a shudder, her legs opened, and I could see for the space of a second the blind stroking of her fingers.

I stood back from the window in shame. I had known what would happen from the start and yet I stood watching. Remorse works in strange ways: deep down I don't think I regretted anything I had done up until then, but I would have given anything to obliterate that moment, that minute, from my life and my mind. I turned on the bedroom light, still rattled. No cries rang out this time, only a discordant, almost inaudible plaint. A sudden resolve took hold of me. I wrote a short note on a piece of paper. I waited until the lights in her apartment went out for good then went downstairs and slid the note under her door. In it, I asked her to come up to see me some time, that I had something to say to her. Nothing else.

The next morning I woke terror-stricken. In the light of day, my actions the preceding night seemed sheer craziness, a stupid, irreversible impulse. Yes, she would come. I had taken care that the note was impersonal enough, a message from a neighbor. She would come, but our encounter wouldn't go the way I had imagined it. She would undoubtedly insult me and run from my apartment screaming for all the neighbors to hear that I was a degenerate; or even worse, she could get herself some muscle-bound he-man to come and smash my face in.

However, as I began tidying the apartment, my courage started seeping back. I had managed, finally, to make a move. She would come, I would tell her everything, and something would happen. I felt a sort of vertigo. With my note I had set the wheels in motion, something unpredictable but imminent was heading my way.

The doorbell rang while I was ridding the table of all my papers. For a second, I thought I still had time, I could decide not to answer it, pretend no one was home. I opened the door. She was wearing dark glasses. She asked if I was the person who had left her a note. I nodded and asked her in. She sat on the chair I always sit in, which threw me off slightly; I stood there, hesitating. She smiled, intrigued. "I'm listening," she said. I felt like I was sitting a tough exam during which suddenly everything becomes clear because you have found the right answer. I asked her not to interrupt me, then began to talk. I told her everything, or almost everything, which given the situation was as good as. I only omitted the previous night and the doorman's comment which would have offended her unnecessarily. I spoke with a passion that surprised even myself; every word I uttered, however horrible, came of its own accord, and I told her everything without stopping to think, trusting in the strange, imperious exhilaration. I tried not to look at her as I spoke, but I did notice her smiling slightly in spite of herself. I thought then that maybe I would, after all, be given a chance. When I finished, I saw she had taken her glasses off and was twirling them in her hands. I think she realized immediately that mine was more than a confession; she knew what I was asking from the start. Out of the blue, she asked me how old I was.

"Twenty-four," I said, hoping I had added enough years.

"Twenty-four," she said with a soft sigh. "I'm thirty-nine."

She stood up and began walking around the room looking at my books with curiosity. Everything was happening with the fatal inevitability of longed-for events, with that betraying ease, with that unconsciousness with which reality twists things in the end. At long last she was in my apartment, but she sat in the wrong chair. Whatever I said did little more than elicit a smile, and now she was simply reading the titles of my books, amused. She also peered into the kitchen for a minute and must have seen the unwashed dishes because she looked at me with a gentle, slightly maternal smile, an insufferable smile. Finally she put her glasses back on with a slight theatrical flourish. Before leaving, she held out her hand smelling of lotion.

"I'm sorry if my carelessness led you to see something you shouldn't have," she said in a tone that might have been mocking, "I promise it won't happen again."

Almost as soon as she walked into her apartment that night, she closed the windows and lowered the blinds completely. I never saw the blinds up again at night. On the third or fourth day I heard her cries, but through a closed window they sounded strangely inoffensive. I was able to sleep again and devoted myself to my problem without a thought for anything else. I did solve it finally, with what wasn't a brilliant method but one effective enough for me to obtain a doctorate, and on my return a teaching position in the local university.

There are people, I suppose, who wanted to have had more money or more power in their lives. I wanted to have, for one night, that woman in my bed.

*Translated by Susan Ouriou
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