

A N Y O N E L O V E S T O R Y

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They met at a party neither of them would have attended under normal circumstances. Now that so many had left, the social circles in their small town were readjusting to make way for new and strange encounters. The party wasn't about affirming close bonds or friendships. Real friendships had been lost some time ago. It was about survival, about not losing human contact and one day suddenly realizing you'd grown old. It was also about having someone to talk to, to whom you could complain a little—but only a little—because complaining too much could make partygoers uncomfortable. You had to be subtle and not break the fragile bubble. Outside, the real world was hostile. Brutality reigned, and no one wanted to think too much about it. No one wanted to think at all. To think was to die while still living, and they had decided to stay, at least in part because the others hadn't had a choice.

There was always someone, an acquaintance of an acquaintance, the boyfriend of a friend's friend, a co-worker's girlfriend's cousin. Some alcohol to quench your thirst, a little marijuana to calm your nerves. Does anyone know how to reach whoever's bringing the E? Someone always brings something that does the trick so you continue to have faith in love, or experience the miracle of a stranger's touch, or form a connection with the most elemental, or so you can be one with your senses. Images of the terror can stay outside. They belong to the past, or rather, to the present of past things.

Both of them arrived without really knowing anyone, but somehow knowing everyone; perhaps they'd seen them before, or knew their names, or had gone to the same venue years earlier. These were people with whom they'd never spoken before, whom they disliked for whatever reason, people they simply found uninteresting. But they were all there, so they had to be cordial. They needed a fresh start. The umbrella and the sewing machine meet by chance on the dissection table, called by the impulse of the flesh, which pulls them together. Under different circumstances, neither would have seriously considered the other. In times of famine, who can say no to a piece of meat? Or a slice of bread when food is scarce? Anyone looking for nourishment for their spirit is elsewhere because all the spirits here have been dead for a while. There is nothing left but bodies seeking sustenance. Everyone at this party has lost something already—although it's been so long they no longer remember what. Their memory fails because their wounded bodies have to be protected from hurting too much.

Their eyes meet, but they don't recognize each other. They have never seen each other before. She is a desk jockey who hates her job but is unqualified to do anything better. They say he's an artist, a painter whose moment has passed. Their eyes meet, and there's no spark. But you have to fool yourself a little. You have to try new things. Chances like this don't come around very often anymore. She smiles at him and closes the distance between them. I have to work tomorrow, but I don't want to, she thinks. He smiles back and waits for her to reach him. There is nothing on his mind. He doesn't think about having to work the next day because he doesn't have a job. They say hello. Who invited you? I'd never seen you before. They go over the degrees of separation that have led them to this moment. They don't know the same people; they don't frequent the same circles. They agree that truly chance—also known as misfortune—has brought them here, to this old house, among these strange people with unfocused eyes who dance as if possessed, these people who need no one but themselves as foreign substances run through their veins.

They talk about nothing in particular, about the scorching, hellish weather that never lets up and admits no change of season. It's August, and it sometimes rains at night, but hell allows them no respite from its heat. After a while, an uncomfortable silence settles between them. They have run out of things to talk about. They don't have the same interests; they don't have similar interests; they aren't even diametrically different. They are just strangers. So, they get some more beer. He lights up a marijuana joint. He brought it from his house so he wouldn't have to ask some stranger,

or worse, some unpleasant acquaintance. They both think that, maybe, after drinking and smoking a little, everything will flow better. They continue to make small talk, how their paths had never crossed, how they don't like many of the people in this old and grimy Managua house.

People come and go. Some of them step out to the backyard, many of them barefoot. They later leave their dark footprints on the floor. Who is going to clean all this? she wonders. The only sources of light in the entire place are a couple of lightbulbs. In the dim light, a couple can be glimpsed in the back of the room. The woman's dress has a floral pattern, and she is sitting on the man's lap. They're making strange movements. They seem to be fucking, but everyone pretends not to see it. Nobody really notices what goes on outside themselves. He recognizes the woman. They'd gone out not long ago, but it hadn't worked out. Seeing her again isn't strange. Sometimes that's how it goes. She tells him she has to leave. She doesn't want to go to bed late. Tomorrow, she has to deal with some gringo who filed a complaint because his insurance company doesn't cover whatever terminal illness he has. She has a car, so she tells him she can give him a ride home, but he suggests they go to her apartment to talk a little longer, even though they have nothing left to talk about. She says yes. She has nothing to lose. He'll either be another disappointment or he won't; her life will be the same. At least she'll be able to tell people at the office she had sex last night, even though no one will ask or care.

She rents an apartment in a nice part of town. He sleeps in a tiny room and shares a house with four other guys that's close to the university. It doesn't hurt to be close to university life, or rather, to be close to university life so that young, impressionable young women make him feel interesting. Even so, he's starting to realize he can't keep up with them anymore. He's beginning to feel... not old—that word's too ugly—but *older*, grown up. And this was not what he thought growing up would be like. What am I doing with my life? His mind begins to whirl. I don't even have a studio where I can work, just this room where there's barely enough space for a bed, a chair, an easel in the corner, and a portable closet. They're together in the car now. He continues to contemplate the absurdity of his adult life in silence. She looks at him out of the corner of her eye and realizes she's never gone out with a man like him. He looks disheveled, but he's not ugly. He'd clean up good if he tried. That faded plaid shirt, how long has he had it?

Her life revolves around a job that engages neither the mind nor heart, but she doesn't believe there is such a thing as the "right" job, especially since nothing in her life seems to match that adjective. She studied some type of engineering, but she didn't finish. At some point, submitting a thesis became a nonsensical requirement. Her parents had the foresight to invest their money, which wasn't much, in making their infant daughter bilingual. They thought this skill would influence her income bracket more than a university degree, and their bet paid off. Thanks to their investment their daughter got a job as a customer service rep at a call center, a position that requires no university degree, and where only the strongest, or worse, the most damaged, can survive for more than a year or two. She stayed, unlike those that had fled, desperate because they'd felt that place had been robbing them of their lives and sinking them into a pit of frustration. She stoically carried on, not because she'd found her calling but because she knew she'd never find a better job—not that she was interested in looking for one. Her blood ran cold, and that's what you need for a position like this. That's what her superiors had told her when she'd started. You have what it takes to stick it out. It was a compliment, but it was a life sentence too. Her last boyfriend, whom she'd planned to marry, had left her because of that unsentimental spirit of hers. He would tell her, you have no ambition; you have no dreams, no interests, no plans; you're just there. He would tell her that often, until one day he looted her savings and left to be with someone else. My ambition is to survive this shit without losing my mind, she would tell herself. I wonder what they did with the money he stole from me? She often pictured her ex-boyfriend buying a reclining sofa. He'd always wanted one so he could watch some soccer league or other. She'd been planning on getting him one the following month, but she didn't get to do it—at least not willingly. Such is life, she tells herself. Things don't always turn out the way you'd hoped.

They're both lost in thought until they reach her apartment and have to get out of the car. She invites him in. They go to her room, and she offers him a beer. This is so much better than my tiny room, he thinks, but I can't afford it. I need to get a real job. He starts kissing her. He tries to concentrate, but he can't stop thinking about the direction his life is taking. She lets him kiss her. She thinks about how she hasn't kissed anyone in a long time, not since her ex-boyfriend left. How long ago was that? Eight months, maybe nine? That's a lot for someone her age. She'll soon be thirty-two. She's not really old; she's still young. But she's surprised at how old and tired she feels. I don't think I'll make it to fifty. No. I don't *want* to make it to fifty. They try to lose themselves in the kiss. They try to stop thinking or to think about someone else, another body, another pair of tits, a curvier ass, a nicer smelling dick, a date, a gesture, a look. They dig for a memory that will elicit more emotion than the present. They dismember different bodies in their heads and put together a kind of erotic Frankenstein. They get naked and fuck for a few minutes, but neither of them manages to come. It wasn't bad. It could have been worse—maybe another day, under different circumstances.

He tells her he should go, but it's a lie. He doesn't have to go anywhere. Nobody's expecting him. He says it in the hope that she won't let him go back to his filthy reality, to his miserable little room and his dirty sheets. Her sheets smell so good. I should wash mine more often, he thinks. And they're still white. Are they new? I don't remember ever buying sheets. I don't know how I got the ones I have. She stares at his thoughtful face. He said he had to go, but he hasn't moved. He doesn't seem to want to leave. She tells him he can stay if he wants. It's already late. She doesn't need to tell him twice; he accepts immediately. They fall asleep next to each other, not touching, not comfortable, but not uncomfortable either. Not feeling anything at all.

The following morning, she finds herself looking at him. He's sound asleep, so she decides not to wake him up. She leaves him a note: You can take whatever you want from the fridge. Lock the door when you leave. While driving she berates herself for leaving the apartment at the mercy of a man she met the night before. What if he steals from you? But then she remembers there aren't many valuable things in her apartment, or rather, she doesn't own many things she cares about. If someone steals from me, it won't be a huge loss. It's not as if I haven't been robbed before. She has his phone number; they'd exchanged numbers at the party. She could call him later to find out if he'd left at last.

She arrives at the office, clocks in, puts her things away, pours herself a cup of coffee, and goes into her cubicle. Everything is the same, always the same. Only her colleagues don't stay the same. She is one of the oldest employees at the department. Not everyone can stand having a gringo, hundreds of kilometers away, calling you hysterically and complaining about their hospital bill or about their health insurance refusing to cover this or that condition. Some were furious. Some cried on the phone and told you stories about their leukemia-afflicted children or their cancer-battling parents. But there was nothing anyone could do. Your policy doesn't cover it, sir or ma'am. You had to remain calm. You couldn't allow yourself to be moved by their stories because if you did, the guilt would find you later—the nightmares, the discomfort, the thoughts about how unfair the world was, and finally the realization that life was meaningless. It was around that time her colleagues quit. What you had to do to survive in this job was to remember that they were gringos while the people on the other end of the line were university dropouts like her, who had learned English because there simply weren't any other job opportunities out there. I can't feel sorry for them while I'm living in hell, she told herself. Perhaps that's what they meant when they praised her sangfroid. For a time, there was a man who'd sat on her right on that long row of cubicles. He'd been in his forties then. He'd owned a restaurant that had gone bust a few months before. He'd gotten married recently, and he had a newborn daughter. Every time she'd looked at him, he'd had dark circles under his eyes and had been in a bad mood. She'd given him five months tops. Sometimes she made bets with herself about how long her coworkers would last.

Turnover was always high, but she remained, like an old armchair, like another piece of furniture in that cold office, where the air conditioning was always set to ten degrees to counteract the thirty-eight raging outside. Then you could at least imagine your shitty job was in another country up north. She had unflinchingly endured the time when her coworkers had resigned in droves. The line of people scurrying away had been huge. The first to leave had been the ones who'd hoped their lives would have some meaning if they got away from the country. Then the massive layoffs had come, the fleeing clients, the economic crisis. Labor here is cheap, but this is no longer a safe space for businesses—that's what the investors had said. So the managers had frozen their wages. They had begun paying less and setting absurd goals. Then the ones who had lost their jobs, jobs that had been significantly better paid than hers, arrived. They'd finished college. They'd even gone to grad school. But they hadn't found work anywhere else. These people didn't stay long. They would save some money and leave with their families. And while all of that was happening, she'd remained in the same cubicle, in the same position, reading the same complaints from people pleading for a payment plan, partial debt relief, some special consideration. The answer was invariably no. There is nothing for you here. Do you think I'm allowed any relief or special consideration as I watch the world around me wither away?

She gets up to pour herself another coffee. At least her department is better than where the drudges work. They have a foreman who counts how many times they go to the bathroom and uses a stopwatch to keep track of how many calls they can take per minute. I feel I've been handed a terminal prognosis, she thinks, but there is no customer service number I can call to complain that the life I've been given is not what I expected—though I never did know what to expect. She checks her phone. There's a text from him asking if he can wait for her so they can have dinner. Have dinner? With him? She doesn't like the idea very much but soon changes her mind. It wouldn't hurt to have some company for dinner. Anybody would do. Maybe she should adopt a dog, she tells herself before replying to the next email.

He wakes up late that morning and is a little bemused at finding himself in someone else's room. He stays in bed for a while, checking his phone. The idea of going back home isn't appealing enough to get him out of bed. For the past few months, he's been feeling particularly anxious about his life, his future. He isn't sure if it has something to do with his age, but he can't bring himself to do anything about it either. He's just out of ideas, and he doesn't have the energy to try anything different. A restaurant had commissioned some paintings from him, but they hadn't pay him the advance they'd promised. He had run out of money to buy supplies, and he wasn't excited about painting still lifes or commissioned portraits for people who thought seeing themselves in a painting was more chic than doing so in a photograph. He mostly tried to stay away from this type of work, but that was exactly what his clients insisted he do. He had no choice but to say yes. He was out of options, especially in those moments when everything seemed to get worse and worse. Paintings weren't a priority for anyone. Paying for one was a kind of luxury, and he had to take advantage of his skills. I didn't study art to make tacky pictures, he mused to himself. He really hated them. Nothing seemed more abhorrent to him than hyperrealism. That's what photography was for, for god's sake. Is there any merit in leaving someone with their mouth agape because you can produce an invisible brush stroke, a representation of an object that is faithful to the last detail, a robotic technique that erases any trace of the world of the symbolic?

As much as he disliked painting them, however, it was not the watermelons or the papayas he hated most, but the nudes. They would send him a terrible photo taken with a cellphone of a young woman who'd been posed in a quasi-erotic position. He'd lost count of how many times he'd seen a young woman lying on a sofa, imitating that scene from *Titanic*. I'd like to give it to her for her birthday so she knows how much I love her, his customers would say to him enthusiastically. Sometimes they asked him to paint the girls with butterfly wings or flowers around them, but he would tell them he didn't know how to do that, even though he did know. His pride could only endure so much humiliation. It was bad enough his colleagues knew he now made his living as a

painter for hire. His teachers had once said, this boy is the most talented student in his class, but his talent was worthless because he was missing something. Many had said he lacked personality and audacity. His less talented classmates had eventually won scholarships to go to Europe and exhibit at international biennales. What had happened to him? What had happened to his talent? The problem had always been that he had nothing to say, nothing to communicate or transmit through his work. He was empty. He felt a kind of hole in his brain and body, a hole that consume him little by little every day and grew larger week by week, a hole that would eventually swallow him whole, like a terminal illness, and he didn't know how to stop it.

The last time he'd exhibited his work, he'd barely been able to sell one painting. He'd created a series around the city's sunsets, but he'd done nothing else since. The woman that ran the gallery had told him to keep trying. She'd said his technique was very good, if a little... how to put it? flat? hollow? But he certainly had talent. Talent, talent, goddamned talent, fucking miserable talent, he would often mutter under his breath. What good was talent if he couldn't do anything with it? It would've been better if he didn't have any, better if everyone had told him he was garbage, that he had no future. Then he would've maybe done something different with his life. Having talent was withering him from the inside. How much longer will I have to endure this life in that dingy room? I had to pawn my camera, the only valuable thing I owned, and I've missed too many payments to ever dream of possibly getting it back. He mulls over all of his anxieties while having breakfast alone in the dining room of the girl he met last night. He helps himself to everything he doesn't usually eat. He's tired of eggs and coffee or a glass of pinolillo with water. Now he can have ham, bacon, bread, butter. How long has it been since I bought a stick of butter? Olive oil, fruit. This is the life I deserve. What happened that made me settle for so little? Why am I living such a pitiful life?

After breakfast he goes back to bed. The sheets are clean. The sun comes through the curtains and illuminates the white walls with a warm glow. He could stare at that glimmer all day. It's hot, but not too hot. He turns on the fan and drifts off to sleep, the kind of peaceful sleep he hasn't gotten in months. He rests for about three hours, and after a deep, restorative nap, he feels better, a little calmer, glad to be surrounded by silence. He begins to snoop around her room. In front of the bed there's a closet the size of his room downtown. It's kind of empty. Inside he also finds some boxes and decides to rummage through them. They're filled with men's clothes and a some running shoes. He checks out her clothes and finds out she likes dresses a lot. They all have flowers, tiny flowers. They're so small, he has to look at the fabric up close to be able to see them clearly. There isn't a single dress in a solid color. They're all essentially the same with slight variations—some are longer; some have sleeves; some are sleeveless—but she's basically bought the same dress ten or fifteen times. He finds many blankets, pillowcases, floor mats, and she also has many towels. He looks through the small bookcase in the back of the room. There's nothing there to catch his eye. She has a book series he's never heard of, a couple of García Márquez novels, an anthology of Nicaraguan poetry, and several Harry Potter books in English. If he had to judge her by her bookcase, he wouldn't think her a particularly interesting person, but he prefers not to think about that too much. Maybe she has other qualities. She is very neat. That's a great quality. Her room is methodically organized. Everything here has a place, and that place has been carefully chosen. She has many plants and small paintings—details that reveal someone who has been using this space for many years.

He goes out and sees a hammock in the middle of the garden, suspended between two medium-sized trees. The backyard is not too big, but it is cozy. The plants look healthy, and lush green dominates his surroundings. This is a good place to paint, he thinks. As he approaches the flowers, which grow exuberantly this time of year, he sees a large bougainvillea vine hanging over the garden wall. He lies down for a while under the shade of the trees. He doesn't want to leave, not now. He decides to text her. He'll ask if he can stay a little longer, but how can he justify it? He can tell her he'll cook dinner for her. He doesn't really know what to make. He's far from a skilled cook, but surely he can find some recipe online that's easy to follow so she won't think he's completely

useless. If she says no, then he'll have to return home soon. He's not even sure how to get back. Public transport doesn't cover this part of the city. He'll have to ask a mototaxi to take him to a place he knows better, and he doesn't have enough money for a cab to take him home, so she better respond soon because in a few hours the sun will set, and getting out of there will be even harder. Luckily for him, she says yes. All he has to do now is take a bath and spruce up a bit, even if he's still wearing the same clothes he had on yesterday. What if I water the plants? Maybe I could clean the house too. I have to do something so she doesn't think I slept all day.

And so his day goes by until they meet for dinner. He opens the door for her; she notices something different about him. He shaved his beard a little. He probably did it with the shaving machine she uses for her legs. This strikes her as a little overfamiliar, but she decides not to say anything. He welcomes her with mediocre pasta. The spaghetti are overcooked and the sauce is a bit thick, but she doesn't want to make him feel bad, so she thanks him for the gesture. Tomorrow I'll be leaving early in the morning, he tells her. I don't want to overstay my welcome. She stares at him for a few seconds. His shirt is missing a button, and it's even more threadbare than she remembers. She still finds him attractive, strange and unkempt, but attractive nevertheless. You can stay until tomorrow or even another day if you want. With a solemn gesture, he tells her he'll think about it. He must return home soon to finish the job the restaurant asked him to do. He has to paint some still lifes, but he hasn't settled on a style for some of them yet, and he has to deliver them soon. In the end, he doesn't stay one day but five. Five days in which she goes to work while he cleans the house and cooks dinner. They watch TV together in the evening. He even does her laundry because it doesn't take more than one hour for the clothes to dry under the mid-day sun. She tells him he can take her ex-boyfriend's clothes, which are in some boxes in the closet, if he needs them. Apparently, they're the same size. This is how their days go by. He dresses up as her ex-boyfriend, and she pretends what they're doing is normal. She doesn't quite understand why she doesn't just tell him to leave, but there is something in his presence that is gratifying to her somehow, even if she can't figure out exactly what it is. She likes to come home to someone, even if that someone was a complete stranger five days ago. Well, now he's just a stranger. The sex is still not great, but it's not as bad as the first time.

After five days of playing dress-up in those clothes, he goes home and locks himself in his room to think. What's gonna happen to me if I can't sell these paintings? No one has commissioned anything from me in over a month. So he spends his days and nights pondering his future, filled with anxiety, not knowing what to do. Where are his friends? The ones that would've lent him a hand some time ago, the ones that would've opened their homes to him? They aren't there anymore. They left a long time ago. He hasn't heard from them. They don't keep in touch anymore.

She goes back to work, back to answering emails and forwarding insurance policies, aware that most of her colleagues are there, saving up and waiting for the first chance to flee. She hears an anxious leg shaking uncontrollably in the cubicle next to her; she can almost hear their teeth grinding, telltale signs that someone won't be here for long. After a couple of days he pops into her mind, and she decides to text him. She asks how his paintings are coming along. She then invites him to dinner and tells him he can stay a few more days if he wants. He packs his suitcase and knocks on her door. They stare at each other in the doorway. They know what this means. So he starts to move his things into her place little by little. She makes room for him and tells him to keep the clothes in the boxes and also the shoes. It turns out he and her ex wear the same shoe size. Before long he brings with him his paints and brushes, his frames. The dingy room downtown is nearly empty. He's never had much anyway. She doesn't stop him; she just lets things run their course. He finally moves out of his room in that house near the university. He gives his bed to a friend because he doesn't know what to do with it and moves in permanently with the girl he met at that party, and who doesn't love him. He knows it. He can feel it. And she knows he doesn't feel anything close to love for her either, but that doesn't matter at the moment, as long as the sewing machine and the umbrella can keep each other company. She gets up in the morning; he makes her breakfast. He

goes back to bed and sleeps into the afternoon. Then he finds a spot in the small backyard and begins to paint. When she returns, dinner is ready. She looks at his paintings. He's decided to stop painting still lifes. Now he's experimenting with things she doesn't understand, but she encourages him anyway. It's a series on ants, large, small, misshapen, multicolored ants. She doesn't understand why he's so passionate about them. Soon things will get better, you'll see, and you'll be able to sell them—she says this to motivate him. He seems lost in thought for a moment, and then asks, this can't last forever, right? One would hope not, she says. But sometimes I just don't know.

*Translated from the Spanish by Camila Torres Carrillo*