



The Heart Has Its Reasons

By Maria Duenas



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A talented college professor in Madrid, Blanca Perea seems to have it all. But her world is suddenly shattered when her husband of twenty years leaves her for another woman. Questioning the life she once had and whether she truly knows herself, Blanca resolves to change her surroundings. She accepts what looks like a boring research grant in California involving an exiled Spanish writer who died decades ago. Anxious to leave her own troubled life behind, she is gradually drawn into his haunted world, with its poignant loves and unfulfilled ambitions.

But in delving into the past, Blanca finds herself simultaneously awakened to the present by Daniel Carter, a charismatic professor with crucial knowledge about the dead writer that he has never before revealed. Amid this web of passion, conflict, and hidden feelings, including her own, Blanca advances like an avid detective, refusing to quit, and ultimately discovers startling answers that resonate deeply in her own life.

Evocative, lyrical, and humorous, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* is a journey of the soul from the pangs of the past to the vibrant present. It is a story about the thrill of creating one’s life anew.



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Editorial Review

Review

“Dueñas more than lives up to her title as one of the best contemporary authors today.” (*?El Mundo (Spain)*)

“In vivid moving prose, María Dueñas tells a story that is highly entertaining.” (*?La Vanguardia (Spain)*)

“A story you will not want to put down.” (*?Donna Moderna (Italy)*)

“Dueñas’s second novel is able maintain the same pitch of urgency as *The Time in Between*.” (*?La Repubblica (Italy)*)

“An ingeniously architectural work structured around fascinating lives.” (*? Baarnsche Courant (Holland)*)

About the Author

María Dueñas holds a PhD in English philology. After two decades dedicated to academics, she broke onto the literary scene in 2009 with the publication of the *New York Times* bestselling novel *The Time in Between*, followed by *The Heart Has Its Reasons* in 2012. Both novels became international bestsellers and have been translated into thirty-five languages. The television adaptation of *The Time in Between* earned critical and international acclaim. *The Vineyard* is her third novel.

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Chapter 1

Sometimes life comes crashing down, heavy and cold as a deadweight.

This is how I felt on opening the office door. It had all felt so cozy, so intimate, so mine. Before.

And yet to the naked eye there was no reason for apprehension; everything remained just as I had left it.

Shelves crammed with books, bulletin board full of schedules and reminders. Folders, filing cabinets, old playbills, envelopes addressed to me. The calendar frozen two months back, July 1999. Everything stood intact in that space which for fourteen years had been my haven, where semester after semester I’d welcomed countless students lost in doubt or searching for something. The only thing that had changed were the props that supported me. Shattered.

Several minutes went by, perhaps even ten. Sufficient time, in any event, for me to come to a decision. My first order of business was to dial a telephone number. In reply I only got the icy courtesy of a voice mail. Hesitating whether or not to hang up, I decided to leave a message.

“Rosalia, it’s Blanca Perea. I have to get out of here, I need your help. I don’t know where I could go; it’s all the same to me. Somewhere I don’t know a soul and no one knows me. I realize it’s the worst timing, with the semester about to begin, but call me as soon as you can, please.”

I felt better after leaving the message. I knew I could trust Rosalia Martin, both her understanding and her goodwill. We had known each other since our early days at the university, when I was a young professor with a meager temporary contract and she was responsible for running a recently established department of international relations. Although our friendship had diluted somewhat with the passing of time, I knew Rosalia’s mettle and was sure that my cry for help would be answered.

Only after the phone call could I muster enough energy to face my duties. My e-mail in-box opened like an overflowing dam of messages, and I dove into its current for a good while, answering some and discarding others that were outdated or of no import. Until the telephone interrupted me, and I answered with a curt

“Yes . . . ?”

“What’s the matter with you, madwoman? Where do you want to go at this point? And what’s with all the rush?”

Rosalia’s impassioned voice brought back the memories of so many shared experiences. Hours on end sitting in front of the black-and-white screen of a prehistoric computer. Shared visits to foreign universities in search of exchange programs and partnerships, double rooms in nondescript hotels, dawns spent waiting in empty airports. With the passage of time we’d gone our separate ways, but the traces of an old complicity remained alive, and that is why I told her everything. Without reservation, with brutal honesty.

In a couple of minutes she knew all she needed to know. That Alberto had left me. That the assumed solidity of my marriage had vanished during the first days of summer; that my kids had already flown the nest; that I’d spent the last couple of months awkwardly trying to adjust to my new reality. And that now, facing the new semester, I lacked the stamina to stay afloat in the setting I’d lived comfortably in for years, simply latching onto my responsibilities and routines as if my life hadn’t undergone a swift sure gash like a knife through flesh.

With a dose of pragmatism equal to her body’s considerable size,

Rosalia immediately absorbed the situation and realized that the last thing I needed was well-meaning sugarcoated advice. So she did not delve into details or offer me her soft shoulder as solace. She only made a comment that, as I might have expected, bordered on bluntness.

“Well, I’m afraid it won’t be that easy for us, honey.” She spoke in the plural, immediately taking on the matter as something we were in together. “The deadlines for interesting things passed months ago,” she added, “and the next fellowship application deadlines are still some months away. But the semester is just beginning, and I don’t know if we’ve received anything new in the last couple of weeks. Give me until the end of the day to see if I can come up with something.”

I spent the rest of the morning wandering around the university. I took care of pending paperwork, returned books to the library, and had coffee afterwards. Nothing sufficient to distract me while waiting for Rosalia’s call. I was overanxious and lacked confidence. At a quarter to two I rapped on her office door, which was ajar. Inside, serene as always, and with violet-tinted hair, Rosalia was busy at work.

“I was just about to call you,” she announced, without even giving me time to greet her. Pointing to the computer screen, she proceeded to reel off what she’d found. “Three things came in during the holidays. They’re not that bad—more than I expected, to tell you the truth. Three universities and three different activities. Lithuania, Portugal, and the United States. California, specifically. None are cushy jobs, mind you, and they all promise to work your ass off without contributing much to your curriculum vitae, but it’s better than nothing, right? Where would you like me to start?”

I shrugged, pursing my lips slightly to stifle a smile: this was my first glimpse of optimism in a long time. In the meantime, Rosalia adjusted her chewing-gum-green glasses and redirected her gaze to the computer, scrutinizing its contents.

“Lithuania, for instance. They’re looking for specialists in linguistic pedagogy for a new teacher training program. Two months. They have a European Union subsidy, which requires an international group. And this is in your line of work, right?”

Indeed it was. Applied linguistics, language pedagogy, curriculum design. I’d been treading that path for the last two decades of my life. But before succumbing to the first siren’s song, I chose to inquire a bit further.

“And Portugal?”

“University of Espirito Santo, in Sintra. Private, modern, loaded. They’ve put together a master’s program in teaching Spanish as a foreign language, and are looking for experts in methodology. The deadline is this Friday—in other words now. A twelve-week intensive course, with enough teaching hours to choke a horse. The salary isn’t too bad, so I imagine they must have loads of applications. But in your favor you have all those years of slogging away, and we’ve got a wonderful relationship with Espirito Santo, so it might not be

too hard for us to get it.”

That offer seemed infinitely more tempting than the Lithuanian one. Sintra, with its forests and palaces, so close to Lisbon, and yet near to home. Rosalia’s voice brought me out of my reverie.

“And lastly, California,” she resumed, without ungluing her eyes from the screen. “I see this possibility as more iffy, but we can take a look at it, just in case. University of Santa Cecilia, north of San Francisco. The information we have is rather scant right now: the proposal has just come in and I haven’t had time to ask for more. At first glance, it seems like a grant financed by a private foundation, although the work will be carried out on campus. The endowment offered is nothing to write home about, but you’d be able to survive.”

“What does the work consist of, basically?”

“It has something to do with the compilation and classification of documents, and they’re looking for someone of Spanish nationality with a PhD in any area of the humanities.” Removing her glasses, she added: “Normally this type of grant goes to people with a lower professional standing than you, so you’d certainly stand out from the rest when it comes to evaluating the candidates. And California, dear, is a real temptation, so, if you wish, I can try to get further information.”

“Sintra,” I insisted, refusing the third offer. Twelve weeks. Perhaps enough time for my wounds to stop stinging. Far enough away to distance me from my immediate reality, close enough for me to return frequently in the event that my situation resolved itself suddenly and everything returned to normal. “Sintra sounds perfect,” I stated categorically.

Half an hour later I left Rosalia’s office, the electronic application sent. I had a thousand details in my head, a handful of papers in my hand, and the feeling that perhaps luck, in a haphazard fashion, had finally decided to take my side.

The rest of the day went by in a sort of limbo. I ate a grilled vegetable sandwich, without much appetite, in the faculty cafeteria and went on working distractedly all afternoon. At seven I attended the presentation of a new book by a colleague in the Ancient History Department. I tried to get away as soon as it was over, but afterwards a few colleagues dragged me with them in search of a cold beer and I didn’t have the strength to decline. It was close to ten when I finally reached home. In the semidarkness before I turned on the light I could see the answering machine blinking insistently in the far corner of the living room. Then I remembered that I’d turned my cell phone off when the presentation began and had forgotten to switch it back on. The first message was from Pablo, my younger son. Charming, incoherent, and vague, with loud music and laughter in the background. I had difficulty understanding his rushed words.

“Mother, it’s me, where the hell are you? . . . I’ve called your cell phone a bunch of times to tell you . . . I’m not coming back this week either, I’m staying at the beach, and . . . and . . . well, I’ll keep on trying you, okay?”

“Pablo,” I whispered, pausing the machine to search for his face amid the bookshelves. There it was, photographed a dozen times. Sometimes alone but almost always with his older brother, so alike the two of them. The eternal smiles, the black bangs covering the eyes. Rowdy sequences from their twenty-two and twenty-three years of life. Indians, pirates, and Flintstones in school plays, blowing out an ever-increasing number of candles on cakes. Summer camps, Christmas scenes. Fragments printed on Kodak paper, memory cutouts of a close-knit family that, as such, no longer existed.

With my son Pablo still lingering in my mind, I pressed the play button to listen to the next message.

“Uh . . . Blanca, it’s Alberto. You don’t answer your cell phone, I don’t know if you’re home. Uh . . . I’m calling you because . . . um . . . to tell you that . . . uh . . . Well, it’s better if I tell you afterwards, when I reach you. I’ll call you later. Goodbye, talk to you later. Bye.”

My husband’s blundering voice left me restless. Or rather, my ex-husband’s. I was clueless as to what he wanted to tell me, but from his tone I hardly expected good news. My first reaction was, as usual, to think that something must have happened to one of my kids. From the previous message I knew that Pablo was

fine; I then quickly rescued the cell phone from my bag, switched it on, and called David.

“Are you okay?” I inquired impatiently as soon as I heard his voice. “Yes, of course I’m okay. How about you?”

He sounded tense. Perhaps it was only a false perception due to the phone connection. Perhaps not.

“Me, well, more or less . . . The thing is that Dad called and—”

“I know,” he interrupted me. “He just called me too. How did you take it?”

“How did I take what?”

“About the kid.”

“What kid?”

“The one he’s going to have with Eva.”

Without the power of thought or sight, impenetrable as a marble mausoleum or a sidewalk curb, I remained suspended in a void for an indeterminate time. When I was again conscious of reality, I heard David’s voice screaming from the telephone, which had fallen on my lap. “I’m still here,” I finally answered. And without giving him more time to inquire any further, I ended the conversation. “Everything’s fine; I’ll call you later.” I sat still on the sofa, gazing into nowhere while trying to digest the news that my husband was going to have a kid with the woman he’d left me for barely two months ago. Alberto’s third kid: that third child he never wanted to have with me despite my long insistence. The one who would be born from a belly that wasn’t mine and in a house that was not our own. I felt anguish rising unchecked from my stomach, announcing waves of nausea and distress. With hurried staggering steps, bumping against the doorway to the hall, I managed to reach the bathroom. I flung myself over the toilet and, down on my knees, began vomiting.

I remained kneeling there for a long while, my forehead glued to the wall’s cold tiles as I tried to find a shred of coherence in the midst of the confusion. When I was finally able to stand up, I washed my hands slowly, deliberately, allowing the lathery water to run between my fingers. Then I brushed my teeth methodically, giving my brain time to work in a parallel manner, unhurriedly. Finally I returned to the living room with a clean mouth and hands, an empty stomach, a clear mind, and a numb heart. I found my cell phone on the carpet and dialed a number, but no one answered. Once more, I left my message on the answering machine. “It’s Blanca again, Rosalia. Change of plans. I have to go farther away, longer, immediately. Please find out whatever you can about that California fellowship.”

Nine days later I landed at the San Francisco airport.

Chapter 2

The abrupt cessation of hammering brought me back to reality. I looked to see what time it was. Noon. Only then was I conscious of the number of hours I had spent rummaging through papers without the slightest idea what to do with them. I rose from the floor with difficulty, noticing that my joints were numb. While dusting off my hands, I stood on tiptoe and peered out the small window close to the ceiling. The only thing I saw was a building under construction and the sturdy boots of a handful of workers bustling about with their lunch pails amid stacks of wooden planks. I felt a sharp pain in my stomach: a mixture of weakness, bewilderment, and hunger.

I had reached California the previous evening after three planes and countless hours of flight. After picking up my luggage and feeling momentarily disoriented, I spotted my name written in thick blue letters on a small piece of cardboard. It was held up by a robust woman with a lost look and of indeterminate age, thirty-seven, forty, forty-something, perhaps, with a vanilla-colored dress and a blunt haircut that ended at the jawline. I went up to her, but not even when I was standing in front of her did she seem to notice my presence.

“I’m Blanca Perea, I think you’re looking for me.”

I thought I was mistaken: she was not looking for me. Not for me nor for anyone else. She simply remained static and absent, apart from the moving mass, immune to the terminal's hectic bustle.

"Blanca Perea," I repeated. "Professor Blanca Perea, from Spain." She finally reacted, opening and closing her eyes quickly, as if she had just returned hastily from an astral voyage. Extending her hand, she shook mine with an abrupt jolt; then, without a word, she took off without waiting for me while I made an effort to follow, juggling two suitcases, a handbag, and a laptop bag dangling from my shoulder.

The white 4x4 vehicle awaiting us in the parking lot had been parked diagonally, brashly invading two adjacent parking spots. JESUS LOVES YOU could be read on a sticker in the rear window. With a sudden powerful acceleration that belied the stolid appearance of its driver, we headed into the humid night along San Francisco Bay. Destination: Santa Cecilia.

She drove glued to the wheel and focused. We hardly spoke during the entire journey; she simply answered my questions with monosyllables and brief scraps of information. All the same, I learned a few things. Her name was Fanny Stern, she worked for the university, and her immediate objective was to drop me off at the apartment that, along with a modest stipend, was part of the fellowship granted to me. I still had only a vague idea of what my new assignment entailed, since the suddenness of my departure had prevented me from obtaining more detailed information. That didn't worry me, however, for there would be plenty of time to find out. In any case, I expected my job to be neither stimulating nor rewarding. For the time being, I was just happy to be able to flee my reality like a bat out of hell.

In spite of my lack of sleep, when the alarm clock surprised me at seven a.m. the next day, I was reasonably awake and clear-minded. I got up and immediately jumped into the shower, preventing the fresh consciousness of morning from revisiting the dark road I'd traveled in recent days. With the sunlight I was able to confirm what I had intuited the previous night: that this nondescript apartment intended for visiting professors would turn out to be a suitable refuge for me. A small living room and basic kitchen were integrated at one end.

A bedroom, a plain bathroom. Bare walls, sparse and neutral furniture. An anonymous shelter, but decent. Livable. Acceptable.

I roamed the streets in search of a place to have breakfast while absorbing what Santa Cecilia had on display. In the apartment I'd found a folder bearing my name with all the necessary information to help orient me: a map, a pamphlet, a writing pad with the university's logo. Nothing else was needed.

I found no trace of the Californian scenery familiar from television series and the collective imagination. No coast, no swaying palm trees or mansions with ten bathrooms. That superwealthy California, a paradise of technology, nonconformity, and showbiz, was clearly elsewhere.

Ravenous, I finally sat down at a nearby coffee shop. While devouring a blueberry muffin and drinking a watery cup of coffee, I slowly took in the scenery. There was a large square clotted with trees and surrounded by renovated buildings with an adobe appearance that gave the whiff of a past halfway between America and Mexico, with a residue of something vaguely Spanish. Lined up on the opposite side of the square were a First National Bank branch, a souvenir shop, the all-important post office, and a CVS pharmacy.

My next goal was to reach Guevara Hall, where I would find the Modern Languages Department. This was to serve as my work environment for a still undetermined number of months. Whether this interval would turn out to be an effective balm or a simple Band-Aid for my wounds remained to be seen, but in any case I would at least stop feeling trapped. Entering the campus, I remained vigilant so as not to get lost in that maze of paths where throngs of students were making their way by bike or on foot to their classrooms.

The noise of the department's photocopying machine masked the sound of my steps and prevented Fanny, who was working there, from noticing my arrival until I was right beside her. She raised her eyes and stared at me again for several seconds with her inexpressive face. Extending her right arm with an automaton's precision and pointing to the open door of an office, she announced: "Someone is waiting for you." Having nothing further to say, she turned and went off with that same dull gait as on the previous evening at the

airport.

I took a quick glance at the sign on the door as I entered. Rebecca Cullen, the name on almost all e-mails I'd received prior to departure, finally had a tangible place and presence. In addition to all the files and transcripts in her office were paintings saturated with color, family pictures, and a bouquet of white lilies. Her greeting was an affectionate, warm handshake. Her clear eyes lit up a pretty face from which the wrinkles did not detract. A large lock of silvery hair fell over her forehead. I figured she was in her sixties, and I had a feeling that she must be one of those indispensable secretaries who, with a third of their superiors' salaries, are usually three times as competent.

"Well, Blanca, finally . . . It's been a total surprise to learn that we have a visiting researcher this semester. We're delighted . . ."

To my relief, we were able to communicate without a problem. I had laid the groundwork for my English during stays in the U.K. and had strengthened it through years of study and frequent contact with British universities. However, my experience regarding North America had only been sporadic: a few conferences, a family celebration in New York after my son Pablo passed his university entrance exam, and a brief research stint in Maryland. So I was reassured to confirm that I'd be able to cope on the West Coast without any great language barrier.

"I think I told you in one of my last messages that the head of our department, Dr. Luis Zarate, would be at a conference in Philadelphia, so in the meantime I'll be the one in charge of orienting you in your work."

Rebecca Cullen explained in general terms what I more or less knew I was expected to accomplish: to order and assess the legacy of an old faculty member who had died decades earlier. It was financed by SAPAM, the newly created foundation for Scientific Assessment of Philological Academic Manuscripts.

"His name was Andres Fontana and, as you know, he was a Spaniard. He lived in Santa Cecilia until his death in 1969, and was much

beloved, but the usual thing happened afterwards. Since he didn't have any family in this country, no one came forward to claim his things and, awaiting someone to decide what to do, they've sat here all these years, stacked in a basement."

"Nothing has been moved since then?"

"Nothing, until SAPAM finally endowed a grant to carry out this project. To be perfectly honest," she added in a knowing tone, "I think it's rather shameful that three decades have already gone by, but that's how things are: everyone's always busy, the faculty comes and goes. And of all the people who were familiar with and esteemed Andres Fontana in his day, hardly anyone is left here except a few veterans like myself." I made an effort to disguise the fact that, if his own colleagues weren't interested in that expatriate who had fallen into oblivion, I was even less so.

"And now, if it's okay with you," she continued, getting back to practical matters, "first I'm going to show you your office and then the storeroom where all the material is kept. You'll have to forgive us: the news of your arrival has been rather sudden and we haven't had a chance to find you a better spot."

I pretended to look in my bag for a tissue to blow my nose, waiting for Rebecca Cullen to change subjects, hoping she'd move on to another matter quickly and not delve into the reasons why a Spanish professor with a secure professional career, an impressive CV, a good salary, family, and contacts had decided so swiftly to pack a couple of suitcases and move to the other end of the world like someone fleeing the plague.

My new office turned out to be a remote cubbyhole, with no comforts and a single window—narrow, off to one side, and not too clean—overlooking the campus. There was a desk with an old computer and a heavy telephone supported by two sturdy outdated telephone books. Relics from other times and other hands; decrepit surplus that no one wanted any longer. We'd get along well, I thought. After all, we were both in a state of depreciation.

"It's important that you know how to find Fanny Stern: she'll be in charge of supplying you with any materials you may need," Rebecca announced, making way for me to navigate the turn that led into Fanny's working space.

On sticking my head in Fanny's cubicle, I was overcome by a feeling of confusion but one that existed somewhere between tenderness and hilarity. There was not an inch of empty space on the walls, which were covered with playbills, calendars, posters of sunsets among snowy mountaintops, and sugary, optimistic messages like *Don't lose heart, you can make it*; *The sun always shines after a storm*; and *There's always a helping hand nearby*. In the middle of all this, beatific and absent, sat Fanny, gobbling up a white chocolate bar as greedily as a five-year-old.

Before Fanny managed to finish swallowing and greet us, Rebecca went over to her and stood behind her. Holding Fanny by the shoulders, she gave her an affectionate squeeze.

"Fanny, you already know Professor Perea, our visiting researcher, and you know what office we've assigned her, right? Remember that you must help her with everything she asks for, okay?"

"Sure, Mrs. Cullen," she answered with a full mouth. To emphasize her willingness, she nodded several times vigorously.

"Fanny is very eager and a hard worker. Her mother was also part of this department for decades." Rebecca spoke slowly, as if carefully choosing her words. "Darla Stern worked here many years, and for a while she held the position that I later took over. How is your mother, Fanny?" she asked.

"Mother is very well, Mrs. Cullen, thank you," Fanny replied, nodding once more as she swallowed.

"Give her my regards. And now we're off. I must show Professor Perea the storeroom," she concluded.

When we left, Fanny was again sinking her teeth into the chocolate bar, surrounded by her blissful posters and perhaps even some devil lurking somewhere in a drawer.

"Before retiring from the dean's office about four years ago, her mother saw to it that Fanny remained in the department as a kind of inheritance," Rebecca explained with no trace of irony. "She doesn't have a great many tasks, because, as you may have noticed, her abilities are somewhat limited. But her responsibilities are well-defined and she manages reasonably well: she hands out the mail, is in charge of making photocopies, organizes supplies, and carries out small errands. She's an essential part of this house. And she can be counted on whenever you need her."

A labyrinth of hallways and stairs took us to a remote section of the basement. Rebecca, in front, moved about with the familiarity of someone who had trod these floors for ages. I, behind, tried in vain to commit to memory all the twists and turns, anticipating how often I'd get lost before finding my way around.

Meanwhile, Rebecca reeled off some facts about the university. More than fourteen thousand students, she said, almost all from out of town. Initially it was a college and eventually evolved into its present-day status of small, somewhat prestigious university. She mentioned that it currently created the most jobs and the greatest revenue of any institution in the community.

We reached a narrow hallway flanked by metallic doors.

"And this, Blanca, is your storeroom," she announced, turning the key in one of the locks. When she finally opened it, with some difficulty, she flipped several switches on and the fluorescent lights sputtered to life, blinding us.

I saw before me a long, narrow room like the corridor of a train. The cement walls, which had not been painted, were lined with industrial shelving whose contents spoke of dislocation and oblivion. Through two horizontal windows located at a considerable height, some natural light filtered in and the sound of hammering from a nearby construction site could be heard. At first it seemed like a rectangular space; however, after we had taken a few steps forward, I realized that the apparent shape and size were somewhat deceiving. At the back end, to the left, the storehouse had an L-shaped space that unfolded into another room.

"*Et voilà*," she announced, flipping on another switch. "Professor Fontana's legacy."

I was filled with such a terrible feeling of discouragement that I was about to tell her not to leave me there, to take me with her, to shelter me in any corner of her hospitable human office, where her calm presence would mitigate my anxiety.

Perhaps aware of my thoughts, she tried to rally my spirits. “Daunting, right? But I’m sure you’ll be making your way through it in no time, you’ll see . . .” she said as she took her leave.

My eagerness to flee my domestic demons had led me to imagine that a radical change of work and geography would anchor me. But on seeing that chaos—piles of papers, folders strewn on the floor, and boxes stacked one upon the other without a trace of coherence, I felt I’d made a huge mistake.

Even so, there was no turning back. Too late, too many bridges burned. And there I was, marooned in the basement of a campus at the farthest reaches of a foreign country, while thousands of miles away my sons ventured forth alone in the first stretch of their adult lives, and the man who until then had been my husband was about to relive the passionate adventure of paternity with a blond lawyer fifteen years younger than me. I leaned against the wall and covered my face with my hands. Everything seemed to be getting worse and I was running out of strength to endure it. Nothing seemed to be sorting itself out; nothing moved forward. Not even the immense distance had brought me a glimmer of hope. Even though I had promised myself to be strong, to endure courageously and not surrender, I began to notice that salty, murky taste of saliva that precedes weeping.

Somehow I was able to hold back, to calm down and thereby halt the threat of succumbing. One step before descending into the void, some mechanism beyond my will kicked in and transported me via memory to a time far in the past.

There I was, with the same chestnut-colored hair, the same slender body, and two dozen fewer years, facing adverse circumstances that were nonetheless unable to knock me down. My promising college studies were truncated in their fourth year by an unexpected pregnancy, intolerant parents who were unable to accept the blow, and a sad emergency wedding. An immature counterpart as a husband. A freezing subterranean apartment as a home. A scrawny baby that cried inconsolably and all the uncertainty of the world before me. Times of mackerel sandwiches for dinner, cigarettes of dark tobacco, and lousy tap water. Poorly paying private classes and translations on the kitchen table seasoned with more imagination than exactitude; days short on sleep with lots of rushing, shortages, anxiety, and confusion. I didn’t have a bank account; all I had was the unconscious strength provided by my twenty-one years, a recently born baby boy, and the closeness of the person I thought was going to be my life mate.

Suddenly, everything had turned upside down and now I was alone, no longer struggling to bring up that skinny crying little kid, nor his brother, who came into the world barely a year and a half later. I no longer had to fight for that young rash marriage to work out, to help my husband in his professional aspirations, to achieve my own career by studying at dawn with borrowed notes and a stove at my feet. To pay for babysitters, day care, baby food, and a thirdhand Renault 5, to finally move to a rented apartment with central heating and two terraces. To prove to the world that my existence was not a failure. All this had been left behind and in this new chapter only I was left.

Impelled by the sudden lucidity that the memories had brought, I removed my hands from my face, and as my eyes grew accustomed to the cold ugly light, I rolled my shirtsleeves up past my elbows.

“Greater heights than this have been scaled,” I whispered.

I had no idea about where to start organizing the disastrous legacy of Professor Andres Fontana, but I rushed headlong to work as if my entire life depended on the task.

Chapter 3

The first few days were the worst: submerged in the storeroom, trying to find a thread of congruity amid the chaos. Dozens of notepads were scattered among folios, reams of yellowing papers, and countless letters and cards. Everything stacked on shelves that risked collapsing or in ramshackle piles on the verge of toppling over.

After the first week I gained a certain confidence, and despite the snail’s pace I began to negotiate that shapeless mess more efficiently, giving each document a quick glance to ascertain its contents and assign it

a corresponding category according to my rudimentary organizational scheme: literary criticism, prose and poetry, history of Spain, history of California, and personal correspondence.

I'd begin work before nine a.m. and wouldn't stop until past five o'clock in the afternoon, with a short lunch break in some corner of the campus cafeteria when I would absentmindedly leaf through the university's newspaper. Usually it was rather late, toward two o'clock, when the cleaning crew would begin their perfunctory mopping of the floor and when only a few students were left scattered among the tables, some busy reading, others dozing off, still others wearily underlining in their books before finishing off their lunch.

I finally met Luis Zarate, the department chairman, one day when I needed scissors to cut the tape from some bundles and mine were nowhere to be found, lost no doubt beneath some pile or other. Unable to locate Fanny to borrow a pair, I went to Rebecca's office, where I bumped into her and Zarate going over a course syllabus together. She, seated, speaking deliberately. He, standing beside her with hands leaning on the table as he bent over the syllabus, seemed to be listening to her attentively. My first glance registered a slender, well-groomed man of roughly my own age with brown hair and rimless eyeglasses, wearing dark gray pants, a black shirt, and a light-gray tie.

Once we had exchanged pleasantries, he invited me to accompany him back to his office. I inwardly regretted the deplorable state of my attire. My overly casual clothes, resistant to grime and cobwebs, would hardly make a professional impression on the person who was in effect my new boss. I looked dusty and disheveled, with a ponytail that could barely restrain my hair and dust-covered hands that I was forced to rub against the seat of my trousers before extending one to greet him.

"Well, I'm delighted to welcome you to our department, Professor Perea," he said, pointing to an armchair in front of his desk. "Or Blanca, if you'll allow me," he added while taking his seat.

His cordiality sounded authentic and his Spanish excellent: polite, modulated, with a slight accent that I was not quite able to pinpoint.

"Blanca, please," I agreed. "I'm equally delighted, and thankful to have been accepted."

"It's always a pleasure to receive visiting professors, although we're not used to having many from Spain. So your visit pleases us all the more."

I took advantage of that initial exchange of pleasantries to take a quick look around his office. Adjustable steel table lamp, modern prints, books and papers enviably in order. Without being altogether minimalist, it came quite close to it.

"For us," he went on, "it has been very gratifying to strike this deal with SAPAM to subsidize your work. Any initiative that involves attracting research from other institutions is always welcome. Although we weren't expecting someone with your background . . ."

His words put me on guard. I did not want to discuss the reasons that had pushed me to apply for this position so far from my area of expertise. I had no intention of being sincere, nor did I feel like inventing an awkward lie. So I chose to change the course of the conversation instead.

"SAPAM and the department have been incredibly efficient in making all of the arrangements, and here I am, already immersed in my work. Santa Cecilia is turning out to be a very pleasant change of scenery to finish out the momentous year of 1999. Perhaps the world will come to an end as well while I'm here," I said, trying to be clever.

To my relief, he smiled at my clumsy joke.

"What paranoia, this business of the end of the millennium! And in Spain all this madness must be affecting you all the more so now that the euro is about to become the new currency. How is it progressing, by the way? When will the old pesetas cease to function?"

The reasons behind my applying for this fellowship turned out to be of less interest to the department chairman than a superficial conversation about recent events in my country on the threshold of the new century. We talked of Spain in general, of the situation in Spanish universities, of everything and nothing. In

the interim, I moved out of harm's way and, while I was at it, took advantage of the chance to have a thorough look at him.

I figured he must be three or four years younger than myself; recently turned forty, no doubt, but no older than that. There were the unmistakable signs of gray streaks at his temples and small creases at the corners of his eyes, which did not in any way diminish his appeal. He was the son of a Chilean psychologist, he explained, and a trauma surgeon from Santander who had been living in the U.S. for a long while but with whom he didn't seem to have much contact.

Luis Zarate clearly enjoyed talking, and I selfishly took advantage of the situation, giving him free rein. The less I had to explain about my own matters, the better. I was already familiar with his academic career, but discovered that he had been in Santa Cecilia only a couple of years and that his intention was to leave as soon as possible in pursuit of a position at some prestigious East Coast university. To my relief, after having spent more than half an hour chatting with him, I was convinced that this specialist in postmodern cultural studies couldn't have cared less about the yellowing bits of paper belonging to an old professor who'd been dead for three decades. Thus I would be able to continue working at ease without having to give explanations to anyone.

I was already in the hallway, about to make my way back to the storeroom, when, as if not quite willing to let me go, he called me back from his office door.

"I think it would be a good idea to organize a little get-together to introduce you to the rest of our department colleagues." He did not wait for my answer. "At noon on Thursday, for instance," he added. "Next door in the conference room."

Why not? It would do me good to climb out of my hole and socialize a little, I thought. It would also be a convenient way to put names to some of the faces I had been coming across in hallways and on campus. The proposed lunch date finally rolled around. The conference room was quite large, with several windows, a bookcase full of old leather-bound books, and a collection of photos displayed on the wall. The university's catering service had prepared a cold buffet of meats, cheeses, fruit, and salads. Hardly anyone sat down: we all served ourselves standing, chatting away in small groups that varied according to the flow of conversation.

The department chairman kept pulling me from one group of professors to the next. There were Americanized Hispanics, Hispanicized Americans. Chicano literature professors; experts on Vargas Llosa, Galdos, and Elena Poniatowska; specialists in comparative linguistics and Andalusian poetry as well as enthusiasts of all things mestizo or alternative. The great majority I knew by sight. Rebecca was also at the luncheon, participating in conversations while overseeing the event with a keen eye. Fanny, meanwhile, alone in a corner, feasted on roast beef and Diet Pepsi, absorbed in her own world as she chewed away industriously.

The lunch lasted exactly sixty minutes. At one o'clock sharp the diaspora took place, whereupon a couple of students dressed in blue and yellow—the university's colors—began to clear out the leftovers. When almost everyone had gone, I was finally able to center my attention on a wall that was covered with photos.

Some were older, others more recent, individual and group photos, in color and black-and-white. The great majority commemorated institutional events; the conferring of diplomas, graduation speeches, conferences. I was in search of some familiar face among them when I noticed Rebecca approaching me.

"The history of your new home, Blanca," she said with a trace of nostalgia.

She fell silent for a couple of seconds, then pointed to four different photos.

"And here you have him: Andres Fontana."

A strong, energetic bearing. Dark eyes, intelligent beneath bushy eyebrows. An abundant head of curly hair combed back. A thick beard and a serious expression when he was apparently listening to someone. A man of flesh and blood despite the motionless images.

I was overwhelmed. With a pang in my stomach, I backed away from the wall.

I needed space, distance, air. For the first time since my arrival I decided to give myself a break. Without even going back to the storeroom to turn off the lights, I wandered around Santa Cecilia, discovering places I'd never encountered before. Streets through which an isolated car or a solitary student on a bicycle appeared once in a while; deserted residential neighborhoods; remote areas I'd never set foot in, until my erratic steps took me to a unique spot: a large expanse of woodland, a mass of pine trees ascending a slope and disappearing into the horizon. By that time of the day, close to dusk, the effect was overwhelming. Though it lacked the drama of many picture-perfect sites that could be captured within the confines of a postcard, it possessed a rare atmosphere of solace and serenity. I soon realized, however, that this piece of paradise was in imminent danger. An immense billboard full of photos of apparently happy faces and lettering a foot and a half high announced the area's new fate: LUXURY SHOPPING CENTER. EXCITING SHOPPING, DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT, FAMILY FUN.

Nailed on sticks at the foot of the billboard like so many tiny Davids before a looming Goliath were several homemade placards repeating the word "NO." No to the exciting shopping, no to the specialty stores, no to that type of family fun. I recalled seeing several editorials and letters in the university newspaper objecting to the construction of a new mall.

I moved away from the billboard and decided it was time to return home.

On my way back I stopped to buy something for dinner at Meli's Market, which was on a side street off the main square. Despite the place's apparent lack of pretense—rustic wooden floors, bare-brick walls, and the air of an old establishment out of a Western—its numerous delicacies and organic products labeled with elegant simplicity were evidence that it catered to sophisticated palates and deep pockets, not students and middle-income families with tight budgets that had to stretch to the end of the month.

With my arrival at Santa Cecilia, I'd left behind most of my old routines, including the large bimonthly shopping spree in a superstore with a deafening public-address system, discounts in the frozen sections, and three-for-two special offers. Like so many other things in my life, the shopping carts overflowing with part-skim milk and dozens of rolls of toilet paper had become a thing of the past.

Closing time was nearing and the last clients were hurriedly making their purchases. The employees, dressed in long black aprons, seemed anxious to put an end to the day's work. In the cheese section I decided, without much thought, to go for a chunk of Parmesan. Then I added a can of dried tomatoes in olive oil to my basket along with a bag of arugula before heading to the bakery section, figuring there wouldn't be much choice left. Suddenly I felt a tap on my left shoulder, little more than a grazing of two fingers and a slight pressure. In the middle of my absurd dilemma—a small round loaf of bread with bits of olive or a baguette topped with sesame seeds—I looked up, and to my surprise there stood Rebecca Cullen.

As we greeted each other, someone appeared behind her back. A tall, distinctive man with slightly long, grayish-blond hair and a beard that contrasted with his tan skin. He was holding a bottle of wine, and the reading glasses perched on his nose suggested that he'd been scrutinizing its label just a couple of seconds earlier.

"My friend Daniel Carter, an old professor from our department" was all Rebecca volunteered.

He offered me a large hand and I noticed he was wearing a sizable black digital watch on his right wrist, something I associated more with athletes than university types. I held my hand out and readied a greeting in English that I never uttered, a standard greeting I'd been repeating since my arrival: "How do you do, a pleasure meeting you." But he took the lead. Surprisingly, disconcertingly, that athletic-looking American, almost juvenile despite his obvious maturity, took my hand in his while regarding me with blue eyes, and burst into flawless Spanish, throwing me completely off guard.

"Rebecca has spoken to me about your presence in Santa Cecilia, dear Blanca, of your mission to rescue the legacy of our old professor. I was looking forward to meeting you, as lovely ladies of regal Spanish lineage do not abound in these remote places."

I couldn't help laughing at the stilted flair in his parody of an old-fashioned gallant scene, as well as the hidden warmth behind his spontaneity—not to mention the soothing sensation, after weeks of obscure seclusion, of hearing an accent so familiar and impeccable in someone so alien to my universe.

"I've spent much of my life in your country," he added, without letting go of my hand. "Great affections, wonderful Spanish friends, Andres Fontana among them. More than half a lifetime coming and going from here to there—great moments. What a place. I always go back—always."

We hardly had the chance to continue talking: the shutters were being pulled down and the lights turned off; they were expected for dinner someplace, while an empty apartment awaited me. As we headed toward the cashiers and then outside, I was able to learn only that he was a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara who was enjoying a year's sabbatical and that his friendship with Rebecca had temporarily brought him back to Santa Cecilia.

"I'm still not sure how long I'll be here," he concluded while holding the door to let us through. "I'm finishing a book and it's good for me to keep away from daily distractions. Turn-of-the-century Spanish prose; I'm sure you're familiar with the whole crew. We'll see how it comes along."

We said good-bye on the street with a vague promise of meeting up on some other occasion and took off in opposite directions as the first stars became visible.

On reaching my apartment I was again overwhelmed by that uncomfortable and hard-to-define feeling that I'd been dragging along like a deadweight ever since the department luncheon. I slept poorly that night, restless and preoccupied with Andres Fontana. Seeing a photo of the actual man, his face and his forceful presence, had somehow destroyed all my preconceived ideas, creating a new anxiety. Toward dawn my dreams were filled with vintage photographs among which I tried to identify a face as the images began dissolving and then disappeared.

I woke up thirsty and hot, my head throbbing. Daylight was advancing timidly. I threw open the window, seeking fresh air. Hardly any cars could be heard and only the silhouettes of a few joggers broke the stillness with their rhythmic pace. I grabbed a glass mechanically, turned on the faucet, and filled it. As the water ran down my throat, the previous day's images came back to my mind. Then and only then did I understand. I had approached my task from the wrong angle. After my self-imposed discipline of long hours locked up in the storeroom, struggling before a ton of old documents, something was still lacking. I had been dealing with Andres Fontana's papers as if they were so many boxes of nuts and bolts, turning my task into a disrespectful invasion of a human being's privacy.

Between the archival material and the conference room's old snapshots I began to see something more than a tenuous common thread. The connection linking the legacy's contents and the four images of the dead professor, whose name was all I knew at that point, grew sharp and powerful.

I could no longer confine myself to simply classifying the work Professor Fontana had left behind upon his death. My task had to be approached from a human stance, up close. I had to make an effort to grasp the person hidden behind the words—someone whose soul I had until then failed to seek out. Seeing those photos the day before made me realize that I had handled my new assignment with a coldness verging on hostility, as if I were dealing with a mere commercial product. Absorbed by my own miseries, forcing myself to work compulsively to evade my problems, I hardly bothered to take into account the human being hidden among the pages of his legacy: crouching between the lines, concealed within sentences, suspended amid the strokes of each word.

My job had suddenly become clear to me: to rescue and bring to life the buried legacy of a man who had been long ago forgotten.

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