MARTUTENE

MARTUTENE

RAMON SAIZARBITORIA

Translated from the Basque by
Aritz Branton

Edited by Cecilia Ross

HB Hispabooks
Publishing

Hispabooks Publishing, S. L.
Madrid, Spain
www.hispabooks.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing by the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Copyright © 2012 by Ramon Saizarbitoria

Originally published in Spain as *Martutene* by Erein, 2012
First published in English by Hispabooks, 2016
English translation copyright © by Aritz Branton
Revision and copy-editing by Cecilia Ross
Design © simonpates - www.patesy.com

ISBN 978-84-944262-7-8 (trade paperback)
ISBN 978-84-944262-8-5 (ebook)
Legal Deposit: M-28335-2016

The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Instituto Vasco Etxepare.

MARTUTENE

A NEIGHBORHOOD IN DONOSTIA, between Loiola and Astigarraga, on the southern banks of the Urumea, whose name comes from a half-timbered *baserri* farmstead where the El Estanco bar is now. A group of businessmen originally set it up as a luxury residential area and leisure park. The first small mansions were built in 1906, and little by little, important families from the city and exiled French royalists went to live there. Armenouille is one of the few houses remaining from that period. The bullring was opened in 1908—the first covered one in Spain—and the Berlin Philharmonic played the opening concert. Basically it was a multipurpose area, a glass-roofed “plaza for public festivities,” not very successful, and it was destroyed in 1923. The amusement park—American Park, also called Kursaal—was opened in 1910 and had excellent facilities, for instance its roller coaster, although its most famous attraction was the 985-foot-long cave. However, even though the developer, Celestino de Batioil, organized a fake “appearance” by the Virgin Mary, which increased the number of visits in the short term, the park was not as successful as it needed to be and was closed down in 1912 for financial reasons. Because it was easy to get to by tram, it continued to be a place for regular people to spend the day or celebrate special occasions, and in 1929 the gardens, named Campos Elíseos after the Champs-Élysées, were opened, though the name

does not reflect the transformation the neighborhood was to undergo; this is undoubtedly much better represented by Martutene Prison, which opened in 1948. Nowadays, the neighborhood is highly industrial—the well-known Industrial Park 27 is there, home to numerous small- and medium-sized companies—and it is also a residential area, with apartment blocks and villas that have survived from that period, and several *baserris* and cider houses. Large-scale infrastructure projects will soon reach the neighborhood to start off the twenty-first century: the Urumea highway, high-speed train lines, and the third Donostia beltway, among others.

PREAMBLE

JULIA REMEMBERS THE DAY SHE MET MARTIN. She remembers the first day she spoke with him, rather; they'd known each other by sight since forever. They met during that first conference on literary translation; Martin was one of the translated writers who'd been invited to participate. Although she hadn't signed up for the conference, Harri also turned up and managed to get into Martin's session. Martin started by saying that he found it difficult talking in public but that he'd had no choice but to accept the invitation—the director, whom he'd long been friends with, had really insisted. And he apologized—bearing in mind how little talent he had for public speaking, he was going to read a text, even though he knew that would be boring for everybody.

His text, as well as not having much to do with the subject, was also too tightly packed to be easily listened to; but it was by no means boring. Often—too often, he would say—you start with the description of a scene that comes to mind: a young woman without a face, wearing nothing but a pale-salmon-colored petticoat—it was shiny, perhaps made of silk—was sitting on the edge of a high, old-fashioned bed, and next to her, standing up, there was a man—his face, too, was not clearly visible—wearing a stiff, dark suit, with one hand on the young woman's shoulder. He knows, because of the

woman's youth, soft neck, and healthy body, that her face, which is invisible in the half-light for some unknown reason, is beautiful.

However, the man's face is invisible because he's hiding it behind a mask of a black bowler hat and a green apple, like in Magritte's famous painting; but his constitution and formal clothing give the impression that he's old.

Without knowing why, what you see there—and in fact that's all there is to see—is a strange picture, it creates enormous anxiety, and then a bell starts ringing louder and louder and closer and closer, it's deafening, and he breaks into a sweat, seemingly terrified.

So the picture is deliberate delirium. It comes back to him so often that when he wakes up in the morning looking a wreck, nobody ever asks if he's slept well but, without beating around the bush, whether he's had his nightmare again.

On the day Julia met him, he gave a basic description of that nightmare, without going into details, to demonstrate that any starting point can be used to get to the bottom of something, and then he talked about the habit they'd had of following people around for fun when he was a child. Apparently, they would choose someone walking along the street, just like that, by chance, or because they looked mysterious, mean, wicked, or evil to them, and then walk behind them in the hope that they might lead them to some secret meeting, perhaps a secret date, or maybe somewhere where something dramatic would happen. Sometimes they would lose the trail, when their subject took a taxi, for instance, or they'd get bored and give up, like you give up reading a boring book, but normally they had fun doing it, at least it was more fun than wandering aimlessly around wondering how to spend the long hours of those wearisome childhood afternoons.

Then he started a long, complicated explanation that was quite difficult to listen to, it had to do with the psychological factors behind some people's tendency to write and tell stories about themselves or about others. He appeared to be more bored by his reading than his listeners were by listening to it. His voice was monotonous, flattened, his mouth sounded dry (it made Julia feel anxious), but even so, he didn't touch his water (as she found out later, it was because he didn't want anyone to see that his hands were shaking), and all of a sudden, he started to read really fast, as if he wanted to get to the end, but because the text was very long, it still took him a while.

She felt sorry for him. After reading his sheets of paper, he quickly folded them and put them in his jacket pocket and thanked the listeners for their patience, in a broken voice, although they hadn't been all that patient, moving around in their seats and coughing a lot. He looked really depressed (Julia heard him say "*nevermore*"[1] as Harri dragged him away from the table), and she felt more like hugging him than congratulating him (the latter being what the circumstances demanded), like consoling a child who's forgotten his poem at his school's end-of-the-year performance. Alberdi, on the other hand, spoke as if he were with a group of children eager to hear some stories. He talked in a deliberate, measured way and looked around at people with a smile of pride, in control of his own ability to seduce others, and there was something perverse in that smile. She found him revolting, as revolting as Martin was attractive to her, standing there by her side as if he weren't there at all, calm now that his trial was over. And she was even more indignant during the debate, when Alberdi, in a pedagogical, amused tone, added nuances—that was the word he had used—to many of Martin's explanations and also denied that some of them were right.

His friendly, soft, and humble manners did not hide what he thought of himself. When he said he had a new parable to explain the idea better, people moved around in their seats to get more comfortable, and in the silence that followed, in which you could have heard a pin drop, he started to talk about the railway cattle cars that had transported Jews to Auschwitz, Dachau, and Büchenwald, trucks in which, because there was no extra space on the floors to leave bodies, the living had traveled side by side with the dead as they crossed Europe.

Martin was to say later, when the two of them were alone, that it wasn't a new use of the example, he knew that Azúa had used it in his Dictionary of the Arts, but for Julia, as for the rest of the listeners, it was a previously unknown resource and an appropriate contribution.

It is true that Azúa talks about it is his Dictionary—the captives in each car chose a person and lifted him or her eight feet up off

---

1 Translator's note: In English in the original. The considerable number of expressions and sentences written in English in the original are marked in italics from here onward.

the floor to the ventilation holes in the roof, in order for them to relay what they could see from there. Those chosen, having spent days and even weeks locked up, had to get used to the blinding light and boiling heat, and the others had to give those they raised up with such effort some time to get used to their new conditions. However, they didn't all manage to acclimate, and not all of those who did were able to complete their task well—some of them were too precise and got lost in small details; others, on the contrary, talked about what they were seeing in a disjointed way, without establishing connections, making neither head nor tail of anything; others looked at things too personally, linking everything to their own experiences—and so they only lifted up those who were capable of making them feel what was essential for them, those who could make them feel like part of the world of the living and like they belonged to that world, at least for a few seconds.

Martin mentioned Azúa's parable about cattle cars full of Jews on their way to Auschwitz and Dachau again when they went to a bar to have a beer after the round table debate finished.

She remembers him with a serious face (she still has her doubts about how serious he was), describing himself as if he were the watchman the other travelers are lifting up to the ventilation slit, knowing they can't hold him up there for long. He tells them what he sees, sights that stop him from sleeping, there's cool wind on his face and hot, blinding sun in the clear sky, he looks at fields of wheat he'll probably never see again. He was that frustrated observer who, even after being brought down from the ventilation slit and exchanged for someone who did the job better, carried on telling his inevitably detail-filled story, surrounded by the few unfortunate listeners around him.

Narrating the cause of the trauma. Freud and the narcissistic injury. It led to a long conversation. Alberdi having left—saying that he had to get up early the next morning and that, contrary to what many people think, writers are condemned to lead an ascetic lifestyle—there was no longer a single conversational focus to pay particular attention to, and everybody felt free to talk.

Martin talked about people's tendency to tell stories that are of no interest to anyone else, stories told by the person involved, often helped by drink loosening up any emotional control: experiences at boarding school; things that happened during military service and,

of course, during the war; what took place in the birthing room—especially before epidural techniques were used. He talked about how people can reach a state of disinhibition in which even the most withdrawn will fling open their shirt or blouse, which they would never do, under any circumstances, if it weren't to show off some irremovable scar there.

Julia herself got up the courage to say that every year, she used to walk from Errenteria to Lezo with her mother to see the Holy Christ Chapel full of ex-votos, walking sticks, and, more than anything else, crutches, and there were always beggars seated all along the way, moaning and making mocking gestures, with deformed torsos, paralyzed, ulcer-ridden, displaying their revolting stumps. Her mother, apparently, had been devoted to the Holy Christ, but Julia hated him, because of the terrible moments he put her through.

At gatherings like that, sometimes the conversations multiply, and although you would rather listen to someone else or even say something yourself, you feel forced to remain engaged with a particular person, as if he or she were in the water and about to drown, holding a flailing hand upward to demand your attention.

There's always someone next to Julia to bore her to death, someone she doesn't want to listen to, who looks at her to ask her to turn her attention to them, and she normally does listen to those tedious kidnappers—not because she feels sorry for them, but because she lacks courage. That's what she thought of when she realized she was only talking to Martin, and when she apologized—"I'm boring you to tears"—he reassured her politely. Her memories were very interesting, he said, and they were just right for illustrating the attitude of certain writers, such as himself, being able to offer shy people who sometimes come up to you, like dogs smelling the garbage and then indifferently going on their way once more, stories that may be made up or are perhaps taken from here and there, somewhat seasoned to meet the demands of convention, but which always come from within oneself, from deep within, a treatment of our own pain which we then serve up.

"All bad writers are pathetic, but even more pathetic are those belonging to the group I myself form part of," he said. Even so, he'd rather have this role than that of some Scheherazade trying to keep an old Persian man content. She's heard him say that quite often since then. On that first occasion, she would have liked to have

told him that she really enjoyed reading his stories, but she didn't dare, partly because she didn't want him to think she was being obsequious, but above all because she didn't know what she would answer if he asked why she liked them, and because she was afraid of not being up to talking about his work.

They spoke alone for a long time, protected by the imaginary circle that people leave around a couple getting to know each other. The others looked happy speaking ill of Alberdi; it seemed as if all those who hadn't left with him hated him. They talked about his false modesty, that cloying sweetness of his, his bland, easy literature that delighted undemanding readers. Martin didn't want to get involved in the character assassination. All of a sudden, he said, "What do you like?" And she answered that she liked novels about writers and films about the cinema. She tried to explain what she meant, the famous Ricardou quote came to mind, and although it was the only thing she knew about Ricardou, she couldn't resist using it. "*Le récit n'est plus l'écriture d'une aventure, mais l'aventure d'une écriture.*" And she even gave into the temptation of saying it in French, or was daring enough to do so, depending on how you look at it, and it was obvious that the writer was affected, in some way, by the quote spoken in his beloved Flaubert's language.

"How true that is," he agreed, and he regretted not being able to remember the quote by Miguel de Unamuno, which Julia herself now knows, about how the truly novel thing is how a novel is written—"*Lo verdaderamente novelesco es cómo se hace una novela.*" She's since learned how frustrating it is for Martin to have a quote that would help to define an idea on the tip of his tongue and not be able to recall it.

In any case, although he didn't say that memory is the fool's intelligence, he did say a couple of things in praise of poor memory, or taking the shine off good memory, and it was then that Julia first heard about Beckett's essay on Proust, which she now likes so much that she always has a bilingual edition near at hand. "Only those without memory can recall."

She loved that sentence. Then she felt obliged to ask him what he was writing, without knowing how much he hated being asked that. Harri did know, and said to her, "Hey, you can't ask him that," without caring that saying so made it obvious that she'd been sitting right next to them and listening in the whole time. She remembers

that he said "a novel" after a long silence that made her think he wasn't going to answer at all, making her regret having asked the question. "In any case, a novel," he confirmed. It was going to be his first one. She could tell how frustrated he was by not having been able to write a real novel until then, to be no more than a writer of short stories. To his annoyance, Professor Lourdes Arregi had defined him as a "writer of short stories and novellas" in her book titled *Euskal idazleak plazara*, or *Published Basque Writers*.

"A novel in which nothing happens."

At the time, Julia didn't know the real meaning of Flaubert's statement and took it to be a witticism used to avoid talking about the plot of the novel he was writing. "You don't have to tell me anything," she said, regretting her indiscretion. But Martin did tell her some things about his hypothetical novel, even though she couldn't pay much attention to them, due to her nervousness. And now Julia doesn't know if what Harri says, happily and laughing aloud, is true—she says he mentioned the story of a couple whose lives come together when they meet at an airport terminal.

It's true, Harri says, he mentioned his intention to start the novel with a chance meeting at an airport. Although that chance encounter was, inevitably, of no great depth, it was to prove decisive for the couple. Julia doesn't believe it. But what she does remember is that he said "any excuse to show off the scars" while opening his jacket and holding his arms out theatrically, and that, after laughing (she thought he wanted to show that he was joking), he took care of the bill for all the unpaid food and drink—including Alberdi's and that of the people who had left with him—and that she wanted to know what that sarcastic and very attractive man's secret was.

PART ONE

1

Harri Gabilondo took great pleasure in describing where it happened and believed that what she was telling them was astonishing. She always believes that when she tells them about something—it's something amazing and incredible. "You won't believe what happened to me," she'll say, for instance, but everything that comes after that passionate announcement seems dispensable to Julia and, usually, far too long. For Julia—unable to avoid Harri's gray eyes—the pauses she makes when telling her stories are too long, and the gestures she uses to show how amazed and surprised she is are too much, especially compared with the listener's lack of excitement about the stories.

Julia knows that when she finishes the first version of her story, she'll go back to some part she thinks particularly significant in order to underline it and, with her eyes wide open, say "what do you make of that?" Then, without stopping, she'll ask the same thing in Spanish—"*¿Qué te parece?*"—and even though this "what do you think of that?" is no more than conversational filler in her story, Julia thinks that when Harri says it, she's asking Martin, leaving her out of it.

"*¿Qué te parece?*"

Harri's greatest desire is to inspire Martin to write a story in which she features as a character. But she's unable to keep his

attention for long. His eyes suddenly dart toward the pages of a book, or he turns the television on very obviously, and when that happens, Julia listens even harder, so that Harri won't get angry. But her efforts are in vain, because what matters to Harri is having Martin listen, and she always gets angry enough to stop being polite. "You two aren't paying attention to what I'm saying," she says, in the plural.

In fact, when that happens, Julia feels for her.

This time, she tells them that she's in love, that it was "*un flechazo*," love at first sight, and she makes even more exaggerated gestures than usual, a hand on her chest, her eyes closed. "You aren't going to believe it."

She doesn't bother to take off her new camel-hair coat—an "incredibly expensive" coat, and no, she won't tell them how much it cost, it's a disgrace how much she paid for it in London—but Julia knows that she'll end up telling them the price even if they don't ask her. It's a beautiful soft coat—though it does make her look very much like a *señora*—and she wants it to break it in as soon as possible so that it'll start looking the way only good cloth can after it's been well used. She was interested in the man as soon as she saw him at the airport; she'd dropped her daughter off at a boarding school in Surrey, where she'd taken her to distance her from "the conflict." She says she doesn't know why, because he looked like your typical Basque man: bearded, checked shirt and corduroy pants, about her age, maybe forty-five, intellectual looking, probably a university lecturer, from the Humanities and Social Sciences Department perhaps, which his two plastic bags full of books, as well as his backpack, seemed to confirm. A man who looked like any other, but with something special, too, something she could see, a spark in his eyes, a warmth. They were sitting across from each other. The man was reading a book whose title she couldn't see, because glasses don't look good on her, but she glanced up from time to time, and then, unlike at first, she looked straight at him, with no embarrassment. Unluckily, the seats to either side of her were taken; she's sure he would have come and sat next to her otherwise. She's sure of that, she repeats. There was a free seat next to the man, and now she regrets not having dared to sit there. She also regrets not wearing the black silk blouse and pantsuit that look so good on her, but which she was afraid of creasing on the journey, instead of jeans.

Harri's habit of drawing stories out, her insistence on giving details that are almost always irrelevant, finally drives Julia crazy. Probably because she herself tends to do the opposite. Martin accuses her of being too direct, but what he really means is too hurried, and he's not wrong there—when she starts talking about something in front of two or three people, she gets frightened she's going to bore them and begins speaking very fast, avoiding all details, maybe skipping over things that would really add to what she wants to say. But, then, we all have our limits, and she'd much rather have her own sort. So she asks Harri to get on with it, to come to the point once and for all, without mentioning that she has work to get back to. She even tells Harri that she's dying to hear about it, and just this once, although he's always complained that Harri is tedious and dull, Martin stands up for her, just for the pleasure of attacking Julia.

"God is in the details," he says, using someone else's words, although Julia almost says that it's the devil who's in them. She knows a lot of quotes in praise of details: "Reality is just a detail"—Márai; "The holiness of minute particulars"—Blake; that famous quote from Nabokov she's forgotten. She holds her tongue so as not to cause a fuss and so that Harri can start her story again as soon as possible. As if Harri didn't have enough of her own to say, Martin's words have given her an excuse to carry on talking slowly, savoring the moment, her gray eyes looking from one of them to the other, as though she herself were amazed by the sharpness of the question she's now asking them: Why are left-leaning and culturally-minded people more cold-natured than executive types? It seems like a fair question. The first wear thick sweaters, warm tops, and big boots, while the latter seem just fine in a shirt, jacket, tie, and thin goatskin shoes. The secret's in the tie, which is the most differentiating garment. And all of that was just to lead into the fact that the man had been wearing not only a checked shirt, a wool sweater, and green corduroy pants but also a blue duffel coat, and finally Martin, who regrets having just spoken out in favor of details, says that she's rambling and tells her to come to the point. Harri goes on to say that she got very nervous when she was thinking about whether or not it was up to her to go and sit in the free seat to the left of the man and that when she, growing increasingly nervous, was just about to decide, the executive in the light flannel suit to her own right got up, and so then she decided to

wait, being sure that the man was going to come and sit down in the free seat next to her.

Just in case, she closed the book she had open in front of her and was careful to put it into her bag, because it might have seemed like inappropriate reading to the man—it was Jon Juaristi's *El bucle melancólico*, a history of Basque nationalism. She had been planning to boycott the writer, among other things because he said that he wasn't going to use the murderers' language any more, but apparently Julia had made her read it—the book was very well written and the writer was a great polemicist, and she argued that great polemicists' attacks on attitudes help us to understand those attitudes.

"It's your fault," she blurts out, as if Julia's recommendation of *El bucle* had put her introduction to the man at the airport at risk. She read somewhere about someone who chose books to travel with as if they were clothes: chic books; ones that gives you a serious touch; books for going out for a stroll; ones that make you look young; ones that give you an air of spirituality. You have to decide where to open them. Julia remembers something and giggles. Harri points a finger at her angrily—"You made me, do you remember?" Julia remembers that she'd explained at the time that it was a sentence based on Gorz's famous "I'll never speak German." A wholly inappropriate sentence, obviously, but one that shouldn't be taken literally; it was pure rhetoric, designed to provoke. What's more, it wasn't Jauristi who said it, though that's got nothing to do with what they're talking about. So in the end, did the man sit next to you or not? "He couldn't." She shakes her head in regret. What happened was that as soon as he stood up, the boarding call went out, and he didn't have time to go up to her, everybody started rushing toward the gate, and she, too, had to get up.

"*¿Qué te parece?*"

The telephone rings, and Martin rushes over to the shelves between the living room and the work area to pick it up. *"The penthouse girl*," he says, looking lively. The two women keep quiet and listen to him speaking in English. Martin speaks fluently but with a terrible accent, he doesn't make the slightest attempt to follow phonetic rules. Apparently, given that it's impossible for him to pronounce really well, he thinks it's useless to try, and that in fact, and most especially, making any effort reflects a complete lack of style. He is very good at sublimating his inability.

"*I was waiting for your call.*" They have no trouble deducing that he's talking with the woman he's offered to rent out the top floor rooms to, because he's explaining where the small Belle Époque mansion is, next to the river (he doesn't say that it's actually closer to the railroad than it is to the river), that it has a large garden with many beautiful trees in it, among them a particularly fine Magnolia grandiflora that gives the place some privacy from the rest of the neighborhood, which is a little rundown but has good transport connections for getting downtown.

He says that they have excellent land, sea, and air connections and laughs at his own joke. Julia is angered by his excessive enthusiasm as he speaks, and when Harri asks who Martin is speaking with, she says she doesn't have a clue, not wanting to hide the fact that she's angry; until that very morning, he hadn't told her that he wanted to rent the apartment out. It's his house, and he has the right to do whatever he wants to with it, but he's always full of doubts, asks her opinion about any trifle, and she's hurt by him being so independent and unforthcoming about such important things.

What's more, she suspects he intends to let the woman have the apartment at no charge, or almost free, and that he only said otherwise because he didn't want her to accuse him of going around playing at being generous (some friends have given him the honorary title *marquis of Martutene* to tease him) only to later complain that people take advantage of him and are ungrateful. They don't take advantage of his generosity; it's his idiotic vanity they take advantage of.

And so Julia doesn't listen to the conversation Martin is having with the woman he wants to rent the apartment to (the train's the easiest way to get there, it's quick and runs on time, she can come by whenever she wants, he's always holed up at home) and instead asks after Harri's daughter. "How's Harritxu?" She's sent her—exiled her, she says—to an elite school for her final year, in order to get her away from the radical environment. A difficult decision, inspired by Martin, to a large extent, and opposed by her husband and by her daughter herself; however, although she's thought of little else over the last few months, she isn't interested in the subject today. Harri looks toward the bookcases, as if to judge whether Martin will be able to hear her, and speaks in a low voice as if to hide what she's going to say, although Julia knows only too well that what she is now going to tell her in secret she will later repeat in greater detail

when she has Martin there to listen to her as well; she tells her, so that she can see just how worked up she was at the airport, that right then, right when she heard the boarding call, she absolutely hated Martxelo, knowing that he would be waiting for her at Loiu Airport with that dumb look on his face and that she'd have to go back home with him, tell him stupid things about London, listen to the bad things that happened to him at work at the hospital, and then make dinner. She wanted something to happen to stop him from going to pick her up, an accident, anything, and then perhaps the unknown man would go up to her and, if nobody was waiting for her in Bilbao, suggest that she could go with him.

After hanging up, Martin tells them about the possible tenant, whom he's just spoken with: she's a young American woman, she's very interesting, and he thinks she's a sociologist. He says she won't get in their way, because there's a separate spiral staircase to go up to the top floor. Then, to stop Harri from worrying when she asks if he has to rent the apartment out because of money problems, he says he just felt like having a *penthouse* girl, and after coming out with the pleasantry, and afraid she might not get it, he explains that *penthouse* means a luxurious top-floor dwelling in English. As far as Julia knows, that dwelling has to be crowning an apartment complex as well as being luxurious if it's to be called a penthouse. She nearly says that a *chambre de bonne* would be a better term for the apartment and that she'd like to know what title would better fit the tenant, but she keeps quiet, among other things because he'd react horribly, and also because Harri, who seems to be genuinely worried, stops saying silly things and asks Martin to tell the truth about his money situation. He says once more, trying to be convincing, that there aren't any problems, not making any use of that part of the house just makes him feel guilty, that's why he's renting it out. After saying that, and obviously wanting to change the subject, he asks Harri to tell him what he hadn't been able to hear while he was on the phone, but although she's dying to tell him, she makes a sign as if to say "that's our business" or "it's women's stuff."

It's ridiculous, among other things because she has a closer relationship with Martin than with Julia—the two of them have known each other since they were teenagers, since they went to the French lyceum together. Julia's only recently arrived on the scene, she's a *parvenue*, as Harri usually reminds her when Julia complains about

the cloying complicity between her and Martin. There aren't many secrets between them, in some sense they're incredibly similar (twin souls, as Harri would say), they have that awful, revolting habit of whispering things to each other, and Julia's sure Harri knows about intimate things in her relationship with Martin.

So it would be out of character for her to resist telling him about the hate and disdain she felt for her husband, "as awful as that might sound," and sure enough, after complaining, in that affected tone she normally uses to cover up the fact that she's being serious, about Martin being insensitive (she, an honest wife, who is faithful to her husband, is confessing that she's crazy about some unknown man and is prepared to do anything for him; meanwhile, Martin's sitting there talking about *playboy* girls and renting out apartments over the phone), she starts her story again where she left off, in other words, in the boarding lounge, at the moment when the seat to her right became free and the man got up holding his backpack and plastic bags full of books. He took two steps toward her, and her heart started beating like a frightened mare in her chest, but just then, the boarding call went out, and she had no choice but to stand up, as well, although she would have happily stayed sitting there and let the plane take off if the man had made some sign that he intended to stay.

She thinks that he would have stayed, too, if she had dared to remain sitting there and held his look. She has no doubt about it. Now she regrets not having taken that risk, even knowing just how cowardly men are. And, she says, she wouldn't have minded having to remain alone in the boarding lounge and watch the plane take off with the man in it. She would have had the consolation of having tried. Now she dreams about having been brave enough—the man sitting down next to her, the two of them keeping silent while the last call for travelers to Bilbao comes out over the speakers, repeating their names, and watching the plane as it goes up into the air without them.

"Can you imagine it?" she says to Martin, as if to say "doesn't that inspire you?" A gesture of sorrow. She wasn't brave enough, and now, she thinks, she would be, more than enough. Unfortunately, good sense got the better of her and she got into line, although she did pray—something she hadn't done for a long time—that they'd be sitting together. But luck isn't on their side. She sits down first, the man stops at the door, or he's been stopped by the flight

attendants, she's not sure why, probably because of something to do with his bags, and when she sees him coming down the aisle, walking sideways, carrying one bag in front of him and the other behind because it wouldn't all fit otherwise, their eyes meet, the man gives her a long, agreeable smile, he even lifts his chin a little to greet her, and she also smiles, in what she hopes is an unaffected way, though she's a little ashamed of her daring, and when he's almost up to where she is, two or three rows in front of her, one of the bags, the one he's carrying on his front hip, bursts, as was to be expected, and ten or twelve books or more fall to the floor.

He crouches down and tries to pick them up, holding them between his thighs and his chest, but they fall down again. "*Joder,*" he swears in Spanish, which proves he's from here, and he lets the stress fall on the *o*, a form of enunciation that makes it seem like he's not really all that put out about it, or over-worried or nervous at blocking the way, even though there are people waiting behind him who are getting visibly impatient, though not enough to prompt any of them to help him.

Harri, however, resolutely gets up without thinking twice, takes her two Harrods bags out of the hand luggage compartment, puts the contents of one of them into the other, and offers him the empty one. The man smiles again, grateful now, and she helps him to pick the books up from all over the floor. They're both crouching down, face to face, he doesn't care about holding up the people behind him, and she's waiting for something to happen, wishing for something to happen, her heart beating fast, when the man and she both reach out to grab the last book, and their hands touch.

There's a beach on the cover of the book, a beach with two empty hammocks on it and a lighthouse in the distance. The man opens the book and reads, "*This book was written in good faith,*" very slowly, with complete calm, as if it were just the two of them on the plane and they weren't holding up any other travelers, as they are, and he offers her the book in English, as well. "*It's a present for you.*" But she, fool that she is, doesn't take it, she's incapable of doing anything but looking at the picture on the cover, or rather, she's incapable of doing anything but wondering if it's a beach in the north, with those clumps of grass, the long shadows of the two empty deckchairs, a headland in the distance where there's a lighthouse with a red stripe halfway up it.

She says she remembers it all very well, and even though the man offered her the book again—"*It's for you*"—she paid no attention and stood back up again when a flight attendant—who seemed more like an English nanny—curtly asked them to take their seats. She tells the man she can't accept the book (a dumb thing to say), and when he holds the book out to offer it to her again, she says that she doesn't read English (another dumb thing to say—he could take her confession as a sign of ignorance, and really, who doesn't read English nowadays if they're reasonably well educated, and in fact she does read English, even if not novels, because almost all the papers she reads at work are written in it). But that's what she tells him, before going back to her seat, pushed on by the line of impatient passengers.

They didn't speak any more after that. She heard his voice from a few rows behind her before they took off, and she thought she heard him changing places to let a couple that was split up sit together. He asked for a whisky during the flight, and the flight attendant laughed when he said something, and he often laughed, too, the happy, relaxed laughter of a healthy, sensual man, in no way over the top or vulgar, instead open and frank, and it made her want to be by his side and share his cheerfulness even more. "*¿Qué te parece?*"

Apparently, there by herself, flying over the clouds, she realized that she didn't laugh very much. She didn't want to arrive, she was dying to smell the man again—she closes her eyes to remember: pipe tobacco and perhaps a touch of mint, wool, and the scent of his own skin—and she decided that when they landed, she would stand next to him at the baggage carousel, if only for that purpose, to be able to smell him again, and to give him the chance to ask if anyone was waiting for her, just in case he wanted to suggest sharing a taxi to Bilbao, or to anywhere else in the world. She fantasized about that possibility, and while she did so, she really hated Martxelo, because he was going to be there. She wished again for something to happen to him, even an accident, as long as it gave her the remote chance of getting next to the unknown man. "Nothing like that's ever happened to me before, not even with you"—she pointed at Martin with her chin—"such a violent attraction, so physical. Don't you believe me?" She lifted her chin up again. "I swear to you, I hated my boring husband, I hated my stuck-up daughter, I'd have freed myself of all previous affection, I'd have freed myself from all ties and gone off with the man if he just made me a sign."

This time she doesn't finish off with her usual *¿qué te parece?* She gets up as if she's going to leave but then remains standing in the middle of the room, with her back to the windows that look out onto the garden, and Julia can't see her face, which is turned toward Martin, who's also standing up, at one corner of the bookshelves. With her arms hanging down and slightly outward from her body, she holds her hands open for a moment in a way that reminds Julia of the some miraculous virgin, and after a silence she doesn't dare to interrupt, while Martin for once keeps quiet, Harri says again, "If he made just a single gesture, I'd have gone off with him." There's another long silence after that, long enough to hear a freight train going by, and then she speaks again. "I can't think about anything else," she says defeatedly, with one of her characteristic gestures to emphasize her despair, as if she were shaking her hair dry after coming out of the water, and she reproaches them for not believing her. "It's not true, we do believe you," Julia says, encouraging her to go on, and after having them beg her awhile, she starts again, without having lost an ounce of her enthusiasm for the story, saying that at the passport control desk at the airport, there wasn't any way for her to go up to the man, because he was accosted by an elderly couple who'd ridden next to him on the plane and wanted to ask him their tourists' questions. Apparently she did manage to get parallel to him, because there were two lines, but, unluckily, he was stopped at the control desk, and she had no choice but to continue on to the baggage carousel and hope to see him there, but she waited for him in vain, even as her single large suitcase, the only one left, went around several times, and then she saw her husband, with that dumb face of his, drawing a circle in the air with one finger, trying to tell her that she was missing it as it went by again. She saw the man again in the arrivals hall. There was a peroxide blonde waiting for him. She wasn't very attractive, in fact she was pretty ugly, and despite having dyed hair, she was as pale as milk, almost an albino; she doesn't remember what she was wearing. They greeted each other without much enthusiasm, and almost the first thing the woman asked him was why he was carrying so many books. She and Martxelo weren't particularly affectionate toward each other, either. She cares a great deal for him, she says as an aside, as if she were trying to excuse herself, "he's a good person," but her blood was already boiling, because he started straight in on her,

saying how she was so absent-minded that she'd let the suitcase go around three times right under her nose and hadn't even recognized it and that he wanted to get out of there as soon as possible because he'd parked the car illegally so as not to have to pay in the lot, the stingy bastard. (Doctors tend to be stingy, because they get used to having their labs pay for everything.) Even at that moment, she felt sorry for the man who'd traveled with her, because his wife seemed so ugly, so disagreeable, and so un-feminine. She saw them as they were leaving, and she and Martxelo were, too, a few steps behind them, surrounded by people greeting and hugging each other, many young people returning home from English courses abroad and their whole families coming to welcome them, and then suddenly the man and his partner turned around, came face-to-face with them, and Harri couldn't stop herself from saying hello to him. She would have liked to have told him that she wanted to see him again, that you never run out of chances in life—too many things to say in a single look, she admits to Julia, who is moved by her wide smile—but apparently the man pretended not to realize, perhaps afraid of how the peroxide blonde might react if he paid any attention to her. Harri, on the other hand, felt that she was being penetrated by the woman's frightening, curiosity-powered glance. Who was she to say goodbye to her man, she was obviously thinking, and Harri didn't try again, decided to walk on without looking back, sure that the blonde would be asking the poor, unfortunate man where he knew her from, but in the end, she couldn't help herself, and her eyes met his—he, too, had looked back over his shoulder. She can't explain exactly what he wanted to say, but he lifted one hand up, holding the tips of his fingers together. It seemed to be a sign of his shame, suffering, and decline. This wasn't the happy, contented, pleasant man she'd seen at Heathrow, and she was sorry about that, just as sorry as she was angry about her husband, who started pulling her leg as he massaged her shoulders as he usually did to be affectionate or sweet—"Well, well, well, I see you've made a friend on the trip," and other such stupid comments—and then impressed upon her that they really should go and find the car, until finally she said she'd wait for him there with her suitcase and her bags. And so she was standing there waiting when the couple turned up again, the woman first and the man two or three paces behind her, pushing a heavily loaded trolley. The man stops next to the first

taxi and lets the woman continue walking toward the parking lot, but then she realizes that she's walking alone, and she stops. She turns around and says—or, to be more precise, shouts—at the man, "What are you doing?" He's standing at the open door of a taxi and has already put his things inside it. "I'm sick of you," he replies in a quiet, calm voice, and while the woman shouts awful words at him, he gets into the taxi, and as he reaches his arm out to close the door, their eyes, "his and mine," meet again. She would have had time, she says, to get in and sit next to him, but she didn't do it, of course. She slaps her thigh as a sign of regret. Now, she'd do it. "I'm going with you," she'd say to him, without batting an eye, but at the time, once more, her courage failed her, or perhaps the thought of doing so never even seriously crossed her mind because she was no longer in London, she was in Loiu. And then Martxelo pulled up in his newly cleaned car. He told her that he'd cleaned it in her honor, and as he turned on the ignition, he asked if she'd met that man in London or if they'd known each other from before, with a jokey tone that didn't hide his jealous nature, to such an extent that she had to tell him that he was annoying her. And yet in London she had really missed him, so much so that she had decided to come clean with him when she returned and, in general, try to be more open and affectionate with him.

Leaning down over the coffee table, playing with the packet of cigarettes, Harri takes one out and holds it between two fingers, as if she were going to light it, even though she doesn't smoke. She holds it beneath her nose and smells it. She'll never forget the voice, and the smell, of the man she's fallen in love with. She says she's sure she changed his fate completely, which is why she now feels connected to him. This is what she says to Martin and Julia, looking from one to the other with a disconcerting smile on her lips that is halfway between happiness and regret.

Finally the sun breaks through the clouds and shines brightly. And with that, the neglected garden regains some of the remains of its fertile beauty after the pleasant rain, although the only things invading it are the tenacious calla lilies. A couple of hydrangeas have appeared; once bright-blue, they are now a dubious pink and could stand a little fertilizer and pruning. The pansies that Martin planted along the path leading down to the river haven't flowered—the fault, he says, of the birds, which he hates. Paying no mind to the

couple of alley cats that have taken over the lawn, the sparrows and a few thrushes—which are as big as pigeons—peck at the grass.

There are no curtains on the wide windows. Julia took them down long ago—they were very dirty and she wanted to clean them, which she did, but she hasn't yet found time to iron them. Because of that, light now pours into the room, cheering it up, even though it already has a lot of light thanks to the functional, Scandinavian-style furniture, in contrast to all the other rooms, where there is still furniture from Martin's grandfather's time—heavy, dark, rustic stuff Julia finds oppressive despite the fact that, apparently, it's all very valuable, especially the formal library space itself—an enormous old-fashioned book room housing a sort of alcove, with a divan, that Martin locks himself in, saying he's got writer's block. In general Julia likes the house, because it's comfortable, because the garden—which she wishes were better looked after than it is—provides her with a nice view while she works, and especially because there's a Petrof grand piano there; she likes it so much that she's even thought at times that it's the last thing attaching her to Martin, apart from the remains of their past love, and that it's precisely because their relationship has no future that she's trying to break her connections with the house. That's why she's stopped taking care of the garden, which she used to tend to with such enthusiasm, which she had fixed up so beautifully back when she used to make use of little breaks from work to water plants and pull up weeds. Harri brought it to her attention some time ago, before she realized it for herself, telling her that she was sorry to see the garden so neglected and adding, "it doesn't look like the woman of the house is very in love," which she said as if it were a joke, though she was actually speaking seriously. And Julia had remained silent. She was a little embarrassed, and certainly astonished, to learn that her sentimental situation was so clear for all to see.

And now, as is so often the case, Julia once again doesn't know what to say. Harri turns toward her and complains again. "You two don't take me seriously," she says, in a normal, unexaggerated voice this time, and she doesn't know what to say in reply. What could she possibly say to her? That she finds her sudden rush of love believable, that what she reveals about her relationship with Martxelo is sad, that her idea of suggesting a story to a writer with writer's block is pathetic? "Of course we believe you," Martin says, using the plural.

And then, getting up from his armchair, "a very promising start of a story," meaning that she has already inspired him plenty. He, too, has fair hair, but not much of it, and what little there is stands on end. He's wearing a yellow and black striped robe, he still buys them at the same *college* he was sent to as an adolescent like Harri's daughter, and he's got on his old Church's shoes, without socks. He looks unkempt, as he tends to recently. The tenant could appear at any moment, and it wouldn't be a good idea for her to find him like that, he says, straightening his robe before going up the stairs. Harri, too, is going to have to leave soon, because they've brought forward the round table talk on biostatistics she's attending. Harri has brought some of the traditional *pantxineta* cakes Martin likes so much and which she tends to bring for her afternoon visits, and they're sitting on the coffee table. Julia decides to make tea, which is what they usually drink with them.

THE KITCHEN, TOO, IS QUITE OLD, although it is not the house's original one. It's large, like an old-fashioned kitchen, has a long wooden table in the middle, a storage stove and cooker with a large oven, and a modern glass-ceramic hob, which they use every day, on what used to be a sideboard. She boils the water in the kettle; the teapot, which is stained brown in many places, especially the spout, she finds revolting. She would very much like to get a new one, but Martin, who particularly likes old things—and who also has a puritan, bourgeois guardian's tendency to make things last—would not approve of her doing so. She follows the established norms for making tea. She pours boiling water into the teapot and swirls it around to warm it, she scoops in the tea—a spoonful for each of them and one for the pot—and waits five minutes exactly, making use of the time to wash the dishes Martin's got piled up in the sink. With the faucet off, she can hear voices from the living room, just a murmur, as if they were whispering in the covered-up way they do whenever her back's turned. It used to drive her crazy, but it doesn't anymore.

When she goes back to the living room, the writer's looking extremely elegant. A beige polo shirt and flannel pants of the same color, buckled dress shoes that are as shiny as a mirror, and a raw silk Loewe jacket with leather details on the lapels, cuffs, and pockets. Almost all being worn for the first time. The jacket is beautiful,

although it's at least a size too big for him. Julia told him that the day he bought it, but apparently he couldn't exchange it, because he was already wearing it. Harri thinks the same thing, it's beautiful, she says, but she can't understand how he could buy such a loose-fitting jacket, to which he, unbuttoning it to hide the bagginess, replies that it's a habit he got from his mother, buying things large in order not to grow out of them.

When they served the tea, a controversy that was not new came up: Do you add the milk to the tea, or put it in the cups before the tea? Harri brought it up, not knowing that the week before, Martin had emptied the teapot into the sink in anger over that very same question. Julia was sure that she had read that the milk is added to the tea, although she didn't remember why, while Martin thought it was the other way around. The outcome was an argument about the matter, and in order to find out who was right, first Martin and then Julia looked for *Five O'Clock Tea*, but neither could find it, and Martin accused Julia of not putting books back on the shelves and hiding them, an accusation she couldn't accept, not after spending so many hours cataloguing the books, and she really got angry. Because they are still taking stock of the damage caused by that quarrel, Julia curtly says that she doesn't know. Harri's theory—Harri's always all science—is that, by simple logic, the tea has to be put in first, being the indispensable, main ingredient, to which the additional ingredient —milk—is added, she says, and what's more, it's also the easiest way to control the mix and make sure you don't put in too much milk. She also mentions an aesthetic reason: the wonderful braid of clouds that the cold milk forms in the hot tea. Martin, always the aesthete, had used the same dumb argument for arguing that the tea should go in first. But this time, in a completely shameless way, he says that it's the other way around, although he doesn't remember why. In other words, first the milk and then the tea. "That's right, isn't it?" He looks at Julia, as if wondering whether there isn't much difference after all between the two options and one could live with putting either the tea or the milk in first. Martin the peacemaker. They talk about doing it both ways to choose which one they like best, and Julia's furious, because Martin, who finds it so difficult to give way on anything, is now so flexible and ready to reach an agreement, and all because the *penthouse* girl is about to turn up and he doesn't want her to walk into a bad, sulky atmosphere. It made her want to tell

Harri all the details of their quarrel—even more than Martin's angry, childish character, what she really hates about him is his ability to pretend that he can control himself when there are other people around.

Martin, who's so mean when it comes to expressing affection, rests a hand on Julia as he says, with a smile, that they can live with the doubt about what comes first, the milk or the tea, and Harri joins him by saying that it would be a different matter if it were the chicken and the egg, at which they both laugh. Probably a way of them saying that she's being hysterical about the whole thing. Julia decides to leave, even though she usually sleeps there on Thursdays and has done so for some time now. She says her mother's gone to Otzeta and she doesn't want to leave Zigor alone. She doesn't know why she thought of saying something that's not just a lie but also an implausible excuse, because not having her mother at home's never been a reason for not staying—her sister lives next door and her son spends almost all day there with his cousins. She thinks that Martin's glad she's decided to go, that he'd rather be alone to be able to receive his tenant properly. Harri reads his mind—"We'll leave you alone with your *playboy* girl"—and she stands up and grabs her green leather briefcase. It's getting late, and apparently the students in her grad course tend to be demanding.

Julia catches Harri lifting her hand up to her left armpit. It isn't the first time she's seen her doing that, and Martin points it out to her now. Why does she touch it so much? It seems she has a ganglion cyst the size of an apple, and nobody pays her any attention about it. She grabs Martin's hand for him to feel it, but he doesn't want to, because it gives him the creeps, he says, and it's she, Julia, who stretches her finger out to touch a lump the size of a chickpea. She's already shown Martxelo, she supposes. She has shown him, yes, but it was pointless, he says it's nothing, he thinks she's a hypochondriac. "So if your husband doesn't think it's anything," Martin argues, "and he's a doctor, after all, you should quit worrying and stop touching it all the time." But he's a pediatrician, she points out, and not one of the best. She puts her green case down on the floor and tries again to get Martin to touch her lump by taking one of his hands, which he's hidden behind his back, hugging him as she does so.

Julia, who's gone to the kitchen on the excuse of having to clean the tea service, hears the commotion—Martin's laughing and asking

Harri not to tickle him, she's complaining that he's too rough and he's hurting her. Julia doesn't like their excessive familiarity and waits awhile in the kitchen, and when she goes back to the living room, she sees them sitting there docilely like two young children at the sudden appearance of their evil stepmother. "He doesn't want to touch my cancer," Harri complains, pretending she's about to start crying. At times like that—although admittedly much less frequently now—Julia wonders if they've ever gone to bed together. She's asked them, too, always in such a way that they could take it as a joke, but never one-to-one. "I'm sure you two have done it," she says as a joke, seeing them playing around. They've always denied it, saying it would be like incest, that they are the living proof that good-looking, healthy, and clever men and women can have a good relationship without there being any carnal side to it; but Julia thinks they've done it at some point. To be more precise, she's sure they did it once.

In the garden, Harri asks Julia, "How's our boy doing, is he writing?" The question itself is a tautology, because he's only ever doing well when he's writing. The main feature of the affliction of writers is that creative work is the only way they can find to be happy. Sándor Márai said something like that very recently. That's why she prefers him to be writing, it makes it easier to be with him, at least he feels alive, it's the only time he thinks he's on the right track. That's the only reason she wants him to write. She thinks that Harri, on the other hand, would like to share some of his fame as a writer. She's often said that it's a pity to let talent go to waste, and she's always on the lookout to see what he's writing, to see if his famous novel is getting anywhere, asking when he's going to finish it. Martin, however, usually gives her evasive answers, if not outright lies, like a bad writer who wants to make her believe that he's made more progress than he has.

Julia knows for sure that he can't stand having to satisfy the expectations of the people around him, whom he fears disappointing if he's unable to write a successful novel. He's even said as much to her, and even if he hadn't, she's convinced that he believes people admire him for his ability to write and, at the same time, that he isn't sure whether he has enough talent to write anything that deserves to

be called a novel. Julia thinks he does have that talent, and more than enough of it to write a decent novel, but she'd be happy if he took up watercolors if that made him happy.

She says she's bored of "our boy" but doesn't give any details. In fact, she never really gives her any explanations, although she's more than once been tempted to reveal some secret side of him in order to put Harri's devotion to him to the test. Later on she's glad not to have tried that, it wouldn't have made her feel any better, and if she spoke ill of him, all she would achieve is that Harri would hate her. In any case, Harri puts any negative sides that Martin may have down to the dark part of his genius. And at the end of the day, although Harri's idealized version of Martin drives her up the wall, she wouldn't want to tarnish it. She decides to say that she thinks he's making progress with his novel and that she sees him working on it every day, not mentioning that he spends the days in his ugly robe, sitting down and standing up in front of his computer, up and down, like a punished student incapable of working hard and, after studying, incapable of doing anything else; he hardly goes out, reads very little, wastes the hours away watching trash on television, and drinks a good deal.

She doesn't say that from what she's read of, she's not sure you could say if what he's writing is a novel or not. She has to keep that quiet, among other things because she looked at his computer in secret.

"I think he's making some progress."

Harri looks at her in an inquisitive way, Julia thinks she's trying to see to what extent she's given her an evasive answer, and deciding to be more truthful, she says that she thinks he may have been a little stuck recently. Because of his perfectionism, she adds, so that she doesn't think she's doubting his talent, rather just the opposite.

"If one could only help."

"He's alone in his work."

"I'd do anything."

Turning toward the writer's home, moving her head from one side to the other in order to confirm how much she means it when she says "anything," so much so that it's almost comical, as if saying to Julia that she has no idea just how serious she is.

Julia knows she's truthful and, perhaps because of that, cannot help being sarcastic. "You'd do anything, apart from putting up with him every day." She says that in spite of herself, not much liking

letting everyone know that she's the unhappy companion of a genius, but it's too late now to take it back. That's what Harri thinks: Martin is a real genius whose talent should not be wasted, and the duty of all of those around him is to help him bring his work to the world. Julia's the one whose good or bad fortune it is to be the writer's main support. Everyone—Harri, Martin's mother, sisters, and friends—tells her that he seems to be better with her, more balanced, more at peace, and that she must need a lot of patience because, as they all know, it's no bargain living with an artist.

There's an enormous, tank-like machine moving around in front of Harri's car, blocking the way out. So she has to wait. Every single day, they can see the lengthening of the channel that's being cut into one side of the bottom of the valley to open the way for the high-speed train. Another hara-kiri, says Harri, looking gloomy. They've talked about that before, about how the house is going to end up right in the middle of a huge transport tangle, about the contradiction between wanting to protect your surroundings and wanting to have Paris at your doorstep. The two women are brought together by their nostalgia for the landscape. They never knew the surroundings at their finest, but they had known them when there were still *baserris*, large apple orchards, rich kitchen gardens that were fertilized using waste material brought from the tobacco factory—which had a smell they still haven't forgotten—and elegant Belle Époque mansions with beautiful gardens.

Now you hardly see a real piece of green land until you get to Antondegi hill. "Sagastizabal does not exist," Harri says. The Sagastizabal *baserri* had been on the other side of the road, where the Elektra factory is now, and Julia had lived there until she was seven, until most of their land, which went all the way down to the river, got expropriated; her father had no choice but to sell the rest of it. He didn't get much money for it, on the one hand because the land was only reclassified later on and the fixed price was nothing like the market value and, on the other, and most of all, because he had decided that whatever he got through this rejection of his primogeniture would be shared among all members of the family, because the obligation that came with being the firstborn was to keep the house going, which he had been unable to do.

Julia has always been proud of his decision, which then led him to become a coastal fisherman—he had always loved the sea, and

the sea was his destiny—but regretfully, when he finally made his dream of owning a boat come true, at the age when other people usually retire, he had to start working in a foundry, because her mother could no longer bear the recurring nightmare in which her husband was found drowned. With inevitable irony, while working at the foundry, he bought a small boat for fishing baby squid after work and on the weekends, and then one Sunday morning, with fine weather and a calm sea, he went out, and the boat was found off Ziburu, empty. Julia remembers her father to have been an honest man. He was proud of having divided up the money from the sale of Sagastizabal among the family, and she had thought her mother was proud of that as well, although she had recently heard a few bitter comments about what he'd done, for instance about how they'd had to pay the price for his fine behavior and things along those lines, and seeing her mother's frustration made Julia extremely sad.

"Sagastizabal doesn't exist." Harri sounds moved when she says that, as if she's guessed Julia's feelings, and she puts her hand on her shoulder, which moves her in turn, because they aren't usually very affectionate toward one another. The expression has become almost an aphorism for them, an aphorism about how to accept one's inability to do anything. Something between the French *c'est la vie*—that's life—and the Spanish *se acabó lo que se daba*—all things come to an end. "*Gureak egin du*, this is it for us. Sagastizabal doesn't exist."

The small stone buildings that were once the stable, barn, and storeroom, as well as the apple orchard that gave the *baserri* its name, are still there; they don't know who they belong to now. "There's still something left," she says, for the sake of saying something, and Harri slowly shakes her head. "Not much." Once, Julia had even been jealous of her straw-colored hair. Now she wears it very short, in layers, which makes the disproportion between her head and body even more pronounced, because she does have a small head, and she moves it all the time to underline her words, in short movements, like a bird Martin often says. But she sees herself as a typical Basque woman, like the ones Arteta used to paint, thin from the waist up and strong from the waist down. Julia thinks she's beautiful. After a certain age, and also because it's more comfortable, she thinks it's better to have short hair, because having long hair shows a pathetic desire to seduce, but she always puts off cutting her own hair, which

is curly, black, and has a few gray hairs, mostly at the front, that she doesn't want to dye.

Julia doesn't know whether to mention it or not when she sees Harri making a hidden movement to touch the lump on her armpit, under her coat. She thinks it would be better for her to find a specialist to remove it, but she doesn't want to add to her worries, and at the end of the day, Harri isn't a child. She takes ahold of her hand to pull it out of her coat. She says it's probably best if she stops touching it so often and suggests she should get an appointment with Abaitua, "although if your husband thinks it's nothing, there's no reason for you to think otherwise." She doesn't answer immediately. "My poor husband"—she sounds tired and resigned—"he's a master at not seeing what he doesn't want to. He wouldn't even notice if a tomato grew on my nose." After another pause, she admits that lately, the more affectionate he is with her, the less she desires him.

If Harri's sincerity is not only obscene but also a little uncomfortable for Julia, it's because, above all, she's asking for something in return. Julia doesn't want her to talk about her relationship with her husband, because she, Julia, would then have to tell her about her relationship with Martin, and she doesn't want to. "But I'm not sad," Harri says, with a smile that shows quite the opposite. "Now I've got something to be excited about." Julia doesn't know what she's talking about. "That's great. What is it, may I ask?" Another smile comes with the answer, and Julia really doesn't know if she's joking or not. "The man I met at the airport, of course!"

"You don't believe me, either, just like that idiot," and she points toward the house. "Because he doesn't believe me, does he?" In spite of what the question might suggest, Julia's incredulity doesn't hurt her as much as Martin's; she doesn't care about hers. "I don't know," she says to avoid the issue. The enormous caterpillar tractor has turned around and is throwing up a thick burst of black smoke from its vertical exhaust pipes, and now Harri can move her car. "It really is late now," she says as she opens the door, but she doesn't get in, as if she were looking for the right words to say goodbye with. They're at the top of the stairs that lead down to the road. Julia hasn't used them for some time, even though it's the shortest way to get to the house. For some time, there'd been a chalk outline of a human body a couple of steps away from where she is now. She doesn't remember if more than one person died in that attack, which wounded several. At

least the one worker from Elektra, of course, on his way to work at the factory. It had been an enormous explosion. The roar that shook the house had been terrible, but the silence that followed it had seemed even crueler to her, and then screams, and later on police sirens, and ambulances and fire engines. She imagines she must have followed the daily reports at the time on how the wounded were doing, but now she only has a vague memory of it, like the residues of a nightmare.

A scruffy looking woman kicks up a fuss, because they're in the way. She shouts loudly in Spanish about the damn cars—"¡*Coches de mierda*!"—and that's the most polite thing she shouts, but they pay no attention to her. Harri, before getting into the car, whispers in her confidential way, "People get bitter and demanding because life's not going well for them." Julia thinks that maybe she's got Martin in mind when she says that, as well. In any case, she mentions him before setting off. "Take care of him." "And you take care, too."

Her mother is alone at home. They've just come back from Otzeta, and Zigor's at her sister's house. "I wasn't expecting you." Julia doesn't think she sounds annoyed, but it is obvious that she isn't glad to see her. She doesn't like her mother making it so obvious that she would rather she start living with Martin once and for all. She understands her but thinks her opinion is offensive, because it has nothing to do with having evaluated any of Martin's actual qualities—which, by the way, she doesn't think she has a high opinion of; at best she seems to find him strange—and everything to do with the fact that Martin comes from a good family. The best family of all those she knows. Respectable people, moneyed, your classic nationalists. It makes her angry, or rather it disappoints her that her mother thinks that Martin's mother—a conceited, embittered old woman—has "a lot of class" and that whenever she comes up in conversation, she calls her "Doña Sagrario," like most people from the neighborhood do.

She's annoyed to find the refrigerator almost empty, and she realizes it's a very masculine reaction. She decides to make an onion omelet, and while she beats the egg, it occurs to her that not so long ago, it would have been unthinkable not to find enough there to be able to get a decent dinner together. As unthinkable as living with a

man without marrying him. As a child, the refrigerator had always been full of leftovers. Some stew, cod with tomato, or a bit of potato omelet. She's hungry. As she watches the egg congeal around the onion, she remembers that Martin bought some Russula field mushrooms, and she feels a little sad. Now she regrets, or, more precisely, she's frustrated that she wasn't able to stop getting angry about seeing Martin so happy as he waited for his American tenant to arrive. Because that's what she felt angriest about. She wonders what he's doing, whether he dared to invite her out for dinner. She supposes not, his seduction techniques are more slow-moving than that.

She can see the house from her kitchen window, there on the low hill, standing out against the cobalt, almost black, sky. There are still no lights on in any of the windows, but the one over the door that looks out onto the garden has already been turned on. She notices that she misses the house when she leaves it. She particularly misses the piano when she's in her own ugly house; even if she had one, she wouldn't be able to play it without irritating the neighbors, not with those paper-thin walls. The same question pops into her mind for the second time recently: To what extent has Martin's status stopped her from breaking up with him once and for all? At her age, she's no longer a passionate defender of romantic love, but she is worried that she may have ulterior motives. She's sure that she read in Beauvoir's *La vieillesse* that a person's money is as intrinsic to them as their nose or the color of their eyes, it's consubstantial, in fact, and there's no reason why being attracted by a man's status and the security, material well-being, and other things that come with it should be less dignified that falling in love with his physical attractiveness; however, after spending more than half an hour looking, she isn't able to find the exact text. But she has come across a curious word—*gribouillisme*: *fait d'aller au devant des ennuis qu'on cherche à éviter.* It means preempting troubles one would seek to avoid, which is one of Martin's tricks when he deliberately puts himself across as an old man.

She puts the plate with the omelet on the ugly piece of oilcloth that's laid out over the table.

The original white, red, and green squares—there's always been a weakness in the house for those colors, the Basque national colors, especially in the kitchen—are worn away from having been scrubbed so often. She's always told her mother that she hates that

tablecloth, and oilcloth in general; she's fed up of buying tablecloths of all colors and types and her mother always using that one. Although she keeps things clean and tidy, she isn't interested in decoration, she doesn't think it's necessary, and of course that's what she takes changing tablecloths to be. It's fine in other people homes, at Martin's, for instance. But not at her house.

The pale-yellow tablecloth reminds her of the kitchen at Sagastizabal—the lower half of the walls painted green, white cupboards and storerooms with handles covered in a thick coat of red paint (and a circle in the same color around them, traced with a glass). A design scheme very similar, in fact, to that found on coastal fishing boats. After dinner, while her mother washed the dishes, her father used to sit with his back against the wall, his feet resting on the firewood basket, and sing improvised rhyming *bertsos* with great enthusiasm and little harmony; he enjoyed singing as much as he liked being out of tune. His endless strings of *bertsos* were usually sad. "*Markesaren alaba*"—meaning "The Marquis's Daughter"—and "*Limosnatxo bat*"—"A Handout"—were his favorites, always the same monotonous tunes. He was happy, because he wasn't hungry and because he was giving his daughters the education that he himself hadn't received. It was a type of well-being based on the modesty of his aspirations, taking the form of the quiet desperation of the age. As a child she had hated those songs and now thinks they're beautiful. She regrets not having sat by his side to sing them, she would give a lot to be able to do that now.

Etxezar. The name of her mother's *baserri*. Her mother never lived there, but her family rented it out from the Marquis of Villafuerte for generations, the latter selling it to her grandfather, Julia's great-grandfather. Julia's grandfather put up what was, at the time, a lot of money toward the purchase—seven thousand pesetas; his boss at the *baserri* where he had been a servant since he was a boy had kept it aside for him. A good man, apparently. But the *baserri* was inherited by the grandfather's brother, and now his grandson is the owner, the son of one of Julia's mother's cousins, an alcoholic bachelor who makes a living without working by selling bits of land from time to time at a bad price to an unscrupulous neighbor. Her mother periodically follows the progress of her ancestors' home's destruction with despair and sorrow, and her heart breaks each time she hears about more land being lost. Today, when she

arrived back from Otzeta, her sister told her that he had sold the pine grove behind the hermitage the previous Friday, and on Saturday an employee from town had found him lying on the ground, covered in vomit and surrounded by scattered bills that the dogs were already chewing at.

That's why she looked unhappy and upset. Her dream is to recover the family seat where her ancestors were born and died, and which cost her father who knows how many years of hard work, and she has sometimes said—although never in so many words—that she might ask one of the rich friends her husband had, colleagues of his from the Amaika social club, for a loan to help her buy Etxezar. "If I asked any of them, they'd give it to me," she says, and Julia doesn't know to what extent she's serious, because her relationship with her father's friends doesn't go beyond a short greeting whenever they happen to pass on the street, and she's sure that her father would be terribly embarrassed there in his eternal rest at the bottom of the sea if he found out that his wife wanted to do something that he himself would never have considered even in the most difficult of situations: asking friends for money. Julia suspects that she's hinting for her to ask Martin for the money, and just in case, she once told her mother that if she ever did have enough money to "save" that gloomy pine grove beside Etxezar, she'd rather use it to buy a little house with a garden in Les Landes.

Zigor's walked in. He looks at her first, then at his grandmother, who is still washing the dishes, and then back at Julia. There's a question in his eyes. Julia knows that he's examining everyone's moods and wants to know if she's said something to their grandmother that's saddened her. He's in a serious mood. It seems to her that he's suddenly become a man, and that he's aware of that. He says he hasn't finished his vacation homework yet, and he goes back to his room. Running away from the gloomy atmosphere.

Mother and son do not hug each other as much as they used to, and when they do, it's not the same as before. She feels rigid now, and the thought that he might feel revolted by coming into contact with her terrifies her. The same thing happened to her with her mother; they long ago stopped giving each other kisses, she doesn't know when, though she often dreams that her father's calling her, and she runs toward him, and they embrace. Her mother, who is so affectionate with little children—all those "I could just eat you

ups" as she kisses tummies and tiny hands—becomes very physically distant with them when they reach a certain age she can't quite calculate. That's how she behaved with her and her sister, and with her grandchildren, as well. She can remember her sitting with naked babies on her lap, literally kneading them all over with her hands (according to her, it was a grandmother's duty to knead babies in front of a warm fire, and she even has a saying for it: basking the baby), but after a certain point, all physical contact with her disappears. Nowadays, when cultural shifts have made giving a kiss on the cheek such a common form of greeting—even men and women of a certain age in Otzeta have taken on the habit—it's not strange to see her receiving kisses from others, or even leaning forward and offering a cheek herself, and she finds it strange to see her mother hugging or kissing people of her daughter's age, and when they're together in a group, she often feels embarrassed, because it's so obvious that she and her are the only two who don't kiss.

She feels obliged to watch the television with her mother for a while. She withdraws into herself and thinks about things that have nothing to do with what's on the screen: Harri's fantasies, her harsh words about her husband. She doesn't think her mother is paying much attention to what's on the screen, either. In Martin's words—in fact, they're a copy of Faustino Iturberena's—old people watch television as they once used to watch a fire in a chimney: without leaving their own thoughts.

"What's 'solipsism?'" Zigor asks from his room.

Although she knows the answer, she masters her desire to answer the question and, like always, shouts that he should look it up in the dictionary. Martin long ago told him—and Zigor greatly respects him, because he's a writer—that the best way to acquire knowledge is by looking up unknown words in the dictionary. As well as sharing his opinion, the difficulty she was often met with when answering seemingly simple questions of his also influenced her in her decision to instill that beneficial habit; she would be embarrassed whenever her excessive lack of knowledge became too apparent, putting off her answer by using any excuse she could, saying she had something on the stove, or that the washing machine was leaking—as it often does—in order to be able to secretly look at the dictionary herself. Sometimes the problem was not so much the gaps in her knowledge as the enthusiasm to teach she often feels, a mother's need to explain

things in all their complexity, to give all the details, to go into related ideas, to look at the causes of things, forgetting that what the boy wanted was to find the easiest, quickest answer; her reasoning usually confused him and made him nervous rather than helping him. "Forget it, I'll figure it out myself," he would finally say, sorry he had asked the question. So now the boy usually sorts things out by himself, often with the help of IT tools, and that's why Julia is amazed when he asks what "solipsism" is. Could it be a way of trying to get her to follow him into the other room, she wonders.

She sits on the edge of his bed after he's gotten in and they talk for a while. It's always been one of Julia's happiest moments. They tell each other what's happened during the day, speak together as if he were a grown man; she wouldn't like to lose the habit, she wants it to always be the same, for them to carry on getting together when he's twenty, whether at his place or hers, or somewhere else—"*chez toi, ou bien chez moi ou sur à une terrasse*," as Reggiani puts it in the song—but she's started to think that won't be easy. Now she's the one who finds it hard to open her heart, she's bitter, and she thinks the boy realizes that. To a different degree, of course, but whatever dark thing it was that separated her from her mother is also moving her son away from her. She thinks that all generations of parents believe that they will have an open, trusting relationship with their children, better than the one they had with their own parents. Julia is sure that it will be like that in her case, but she also knows that it will only be a partial improvement, less than what she hoped for when the boy was a small child.

She wouldn't want him to be too devoted to her, either, to have that excessive love that some men have for their mothers—the love Albert Cohen portrays in his book, for instance—and which comes with a hatred for other women, in her opinion. Unexpectedly, it comes to her that she once carried this well-behaved being, who already has a trace of a blond moustache, in her belly, and the thought makes her stand up all of a sudden. She sits in front of her son's desk. It's too small for him. She says they'll have to buy a new one, and he says it's not worth it. He's very careful about what he asks for, and she's grateful to him for that.

"Hey, *ama*," he says, sitting up in bed. Julia pays attention, instinctively sure that he's going to ask her one of those questions

that will put her to the test, rather than a dictionary question. "Why do they stop us from deciding if we want to be independent?" Suddenly she feels very tired, despondent, and doesn't know what to answer. Whenever he comes back from Otzeta, his hands are swollen from playing *pilota*—Basque pelota—and his heart is full of that patriotic *abertzale* spirit. "What do you want me to say?" She realizes they all must have talked about that after lunch at Torrekua and now he wants to have a heart-to-heart with her about it. The boy's obviously nervous. "I don't mean the right to be independent, I mean the right to decide if we want to be independent." Julia gets furious with her sister, her brother-in-law, everybody at Torrekua, because they fill him with ideology; she's angry with herself, too, because she leaves him with them for too long, because it's easier for her that way. The boy's waiting for her answer, his lips pressed tight together, arms folded, and Julia's sure he can read what's going on in her mind. The people at Torrekua really are Basques through and through, and no doubt about it. What is she going to say?

"Things are more complicated than they seem," she comes out with, and she regrets it as soon as she says it. Why does she always need so many words, nuances, and details to explain different points of view? "Everything's very complicated for you, but in fact, things are very simple." Zigor said that, Zigor senior, in 1977, when amnesty had just been declared and he told her he'd decided to go back to leading a clandestine life and she tried to convince him not to: "Things are more complicated that they seem." They got to talking about politics. He said that when Franco died, the apparatus of the state was never purged and everything remained just the same. As simple as that. For her, too, things were simple; she loved him more than anything and anyone else, and she dreamed about having dinner with him and sleeping in the same bed with him, and she couldn't stand living in fear that she would one day hear on the news that he'd been shot dead somewhere. As simple as that. But those were not words that a person who was prepared to give his life for his ideals could hear without contempt.

Now, too, she doesn't know whether to express her feelings or not, she's afraid her son may think she isn't loyal to her own people, and perhaps thinking that will prevent him from ever coming to her. She isn't even absolutely sure that independence is the best strategy for preserving their language and culture, and even if it

is, it wouldn't be legal, and according to the elections, most people don't want it to be, either. So why make such a fuss about it? The way forward would be to make good use of the autonomy they've already won in order to convince those who are still on the fence, and whatever any case, violence isn't the way. "Do you understand that?" He's identical to his father when he looks her in the eyes. He nods at her in silence and, with a gesture of boredom, lies down on the bed and faces the wall. Julia is about to ask him for a kiss when her mother calls up from the kitchen to let him go to sleep, it's late and he must be tired out.

When she walks past the bathroom, she sees her mother brushing her hair, which goes all the way down her back. She has gray hair, with an almost even number of white and black strands, like Julia's, and it's curly, as well, but only from the neck down, because she wears it in a tight bun during the day. Julia finds it disturbing when she sees such long hair. Perhaps it reminds her of the iconography of witchcraft—such a clearly feminine feature in such an old mother. She swears that even though she gets so many compliments about it, she's going to get her own hair cut before long.