

# IXO –shush- (1987)

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*Those who experienced imprisonment (and, more generally, all who have gone through harsh experiences) are divided into two distinct categories, with rare intermediate shadings: those who remain silent and those who speak. Both obey valid reasons: those remain silent who feel more deeply that sense of malaise which I for simplicity's sake call 'shame', those who do not feel at peace with themselves, or whose wounds still burn. The others speak, and often speak a lot, obeying different impulses. They speak because, at varied levels of consciousness, they perceive in their (even though by now distant) imprisonment the centre of their life, the event that for good or evil has marked their entire existence.*

Primo Levi

*All this happened, more or less.*

Kurt Vonnegut

olatz

# 1

♦ ETA was founded in 1958 and suffered a number of splits over the years ♦ In 1974 it split into two factions: the 'polimili' or political-military faction (ETA<sub>pm</sub>, which prioritised political strategy) and the 'mili' or military faction (ETA<sub>m</sub>, which opted for the military route) ♦ From 1975 onwards, the Spanish government declared a number of states of exception in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa: checkpoints, increased censorship, mass detentions and torture and the restriction of movement for both individuals and vehicles, etc. ♦ When the polimilis Garmendia and Otaegi were arrested, Garmendia was badly wounded ♦ They were given the death penalty ♦ After agent Mikel Lejarza (alias the Wolf) infiltrated the organisation, Franco's police force arrested and detained around 50 polimilis, including Juan Paredes Manot (alias Txiki) ♦

'He finally took me to the parish hall! Ever since we started going out he'd always said he'd take me when I turned seventeen. Well, my birthday was last April and it took him four long months to keep his word. Four loong months! Anyhow, there we were, Mertxe and I (sorry, but what does she see in Karmelo? I know he's tall but he's such a clown. And whenever Mertxe's around he never shuts up, just jabbers on and on, talking rubbish... It really gets on Xabi's nerves).

Anyhow, so, there we were, me, Mertxe, Xabi and everyone. We sat down and Xabi pulled out this pamphlet with a flourish and said: I have news of an *estado de excepción*. And, just to show off that he's studying Basque philology, Karmelo chirps up with: hey, anyone know how you say *estado de excepción* in Basque?

Xabi just sat there, getting more and more annoyed, while everyone else started shouting out crazy translations, like *state of beating, police state, torture me please!*

I wanted to suggest *salbuespen-egoera* (state of exception), like Aunty Esti once told me, but I didn't dare - I tend to gabble when I'm nervous. I need to learn to control my tongue.

As always, Karmelo had to have the last word: grey days! Xabi soon put an end to the guffaws: grey? What are you on about? When have you ever seen a grey one of those b\_ \_ \_ \_ ds in this town? What exactly do you think Pigface is? And Karmelo, all innocent like: A b \_ \_ \_ \_ d? And Xabi, almost at the end of his tether: he's a civil guard, you halfwit.<sup>1</sup>

He shook the pamphlet: due to the censorship, this is the only fountain of potable news left.

He has an elegant turn of phrase does Xabi. I felt really proud, both because he'd brought me to the meeting and because he was so good at explaining everything.

He carried on, still holding up the pamphlet. Do you remember what happened in Ondarroa? It was clear that the boy the civil guards killed never attacked them. It says here that he and his friends were singing as they walked home from their graduation dinner, and as they walked past the barracks, the civil guards in there arrested one of them. Luis Arriola. Next morning they told his parents he'd died in an accident.

Xabi has a finger in every pie, he goes to clandestine meetings, hides things for

<sup>1</sup> At that time, the Spanish police wore grey uniforms and the Civil Guard green ones.

people... Even though he never says anything to me about it, I know what he does and it frightens me. Our friends keep asking why we don't hang out with them anymore. But why would we want to spend time with them? They're nothing but children! Last Saturday they were in Bordatxo when the four of us went in to have dinner. And when they saw us they starting giggling. I mean, how old are they?'<sup>2</sup>

She never wrote the whole truth down, just in case. Whenever she went out, she'd put her diary in a bag and hide it in the brambles until she came home.

Where the hell was Xabi? Pigface was likely to pop out from behind a lamppost at any moment, and then ... sometimes you could hear the screams of the detainees coming out of the barracks. And Capitan Thunder was no joke either. I don't know who thought up the nickname 'Pigface', but Captain Thunder was Karmelo's creation. And it was a fitting one too, because the captain of the civil guard was an arrogant git, as stiff as a pole, and often went about on horseback. Nevertheless, he didn't frighten Olatz as much as Pigface did. With his cold eyes...

The comforting sound of the motorbike engine didn't come from the road, but rather from the cemetery. Xabi rode over, the beautiful satchel that Olatz had given him slung over one shoulder.

'You didn't see where I just came from,' said Xabi with a conspiratorial smile.

Olatz gave him a kiss. Her nerves quashed the butterflies that this action usually produced. She climbed on behind him and off they went, the bag bumping against her right leg. She hoped everything would be over quickly.

The square was heaving. The protest was about to start. Someone had apparently seen

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<sup>2</sup> I selected these excerpts from my mum's diary. Her Aunt Esti had been determined she should learn standard Basque, and Mum practised by writing a journal. She carried on as a kind of therapy, even after Aunt Esti died, right up until the moment she fled to the French Basque Country. Later on, life left her little time for keeping a diary.

Captain Thunder outside the barracks, holding a machine gun and getting ready to mount his horse. They couldn't let that stop them though. They had to carry on, for Garmendia and Otaegi.

The arrests that happened at the end of July had been a serious blow for ETA<sub>pm</sub>; the people are with you! Olatz imagined Garmendia lying on the ground in a pool of blood, a bullet hole in his mouth.

Cries and shouts: *Gora ETA!* (long live ETA!). The atmosphere grew tenser, the civil guards were sure to arrive at any moment, lashing out in all directions. But instead, the only ones who showed up were Mertxe and Karmelo (what a pair!), laughing and joking as if on their way to the circus.

Olatz thought back to the rumours she had heard about Otaegi, that more than a member of ETA he was just a collaborator, but since Garmendia had been seriously wounded and one of them at least had to pay, he'd been sentenced to death by firing squad. But she couldn't ask anyone, particularly not Xabi, lest he think her a defeatist.

She wanted to get started right away. But Xabi insisted they wait. He was like John Wayne. Calmness personified in the face of attack. Finally, leaving Olatz with just a few leaflets in the bag, he moved off into the crowd with a huge bundle of them. Before long, handfuls of leaflets started shooting up into the air like geysers. Taking advantage of the hustle and bustle around her, Olatz took her leaflets out of the bag and threw them up into the air. Aren't doves also white?

For the next three or four seconds she was paralysed with fear, certain that Pigface would appear any minute out of thin air and fix his mean, beady eyes on her.

Shots! Shots! Everyone started running. Just as the square was about to explode, the civil guards blocked all the exits so they could hunt down the protesters as they fled,

like moles.

Then they entered in force from one side, batons flying. Chaos, shouts, more shots. The doorway next to Mondragones Bar opened; Mertxe grabbed Olatz's hand and quickly pulled her up the wooden stairs. Eleven people were hiding inside one of the flats. Silent. Trembling. Although she looked straight at them, their faces wouldn't register on her brain. Outside, the square was quickly turning into a bloodbath. God knew where poor Xabi had got to.

It was a war. It was like being back in '36. Olatz imagined herself kneeling on the floor, caressing Xabi's head in her lap as he lay bleeding, dying.

She started to weep.



## 2

• A court martial sentenced Txiki to death also • Even international pressure, including an appeal from the Pope himself, general strikes and widespread protests, did not sway Franco in his decision • Txiki was executed by firing squad in Barcelona, Otaegi in Burgos and José Luis Sánchez Bravo, Ramón García Sanz and José Humberto Baena Alonso, all members of the Revolutionary Antifascist Patriotic Front (FRAP), in Madrid • The following Sunday, a large crowd gathered in Madrid to show their support for Franco, who was at death's door. He appeared on the balcony beside Juan Carlos de Borbón • Otaegi's body was sent to his home town separately from his family, so it would arrive three hours later • Txiki was buried in Barcelona. Four thousand people attended the funeral held in Zarautz • His mother spoke during the service and was detained for a few hours by the police, along with the chaplain • Txiki's body was delivered to his family one year later •

Xabi Mendoza and his friends; it was pure coincidence that they sat down right in front of them at the cinema, or so she and Mertxe tried to convince their friends. At first, the boys were on their best behaviour, pretending to ignore the girls' whisperings. But as soon as the lights went out they started pulling their hair and pinching their shoulders. Loving it, the girls turned round in feigned annoyance and told them off.

Xabi looked as if he could be their dad, gazing attentively up at the screen, far removed from their childish antics. Grown up.

A few months beforehand, when Olatz had confessed to her mum and Grandma Ixabel

in the kitchen of Xantio farmhouse that she had a boyfriend, both had been delighted. Hugs and kisses all round. After she timidly told them the boy's name, however, there was glacial silence. Her mother grabbed her by the hand and dragged her outside and over to the allotment, her expression thunderous.

The only thing her mother had heard were Xabi's surnames, Mendoza Gantxegi. The nasty business that had occurred between her aunt and Xabi's dad was obviously not forgotten. Their families could not have been more different. Just like two oxen pulling a plough, one big and strong, the other small and weak, there was no comparison between Xantio and Villa Marcia, and a gaping chasm divided Xantio's debts from the Mendoza family's wealth and the Gantxegi family's influence.

Her father and Grandpa Teofilo stopped working, astonished. After listening to his wife's tirade with his head bowed, as if at mass, her father frowned and picked up his hoe once more. What was there to say? That Olatz had been too big for her boots ever since she went off to the Usandizaga Institute in San Sebastián to study for the baccalaureate? That going to evening classes to learn to read and write standard Basque was putting fancy ideas into her head? That she was obsessed with books and newfangled notions, just like her aunt? Times were hard. The more ill Franco grew, the worse things got. Thank goodness Mikel was the younger of the two siblings. Too young yet a while to get into trouble.

'I only ever saw Xabi cry once. It was when they arrested Txiki. Apparently he was a keen walker before he got into all that trouble, and he and Xabi had climbed half the mountains in Gipuzkoa together. Both were members of the Inda Mendi club too. Even before they announced it on the tele, Xabi knew what the sentence was going to be. It

was always the same. I racked my brains to remember all the prayers I'd learned as a child, to ask God for Franco to just die and get it over with.

And since we're being honest here, I guess I should confess that, at first, I didn't really like Txiki. I once reminded Xabi that Txiki had been born in Extremadura, and although his family had moved to the Basque Country when he was a child, and he was now fighting for us, he had never bothered to learn Basque. Xabi didn't answer, offended by my words. After he'd calmed down a bit, he told me I was lucky to have been born among native Basque speakers. And he was right; if life was a game of poker, then I had been born with a good hand.

I want to help the Basque Country become a Basque-speaking region. Whenever he says things like that my love for him rushes over me like a tidal wave. He sees things so clearly, always: the Spanish shot Txiki because they saw him as a traitor, and couldn't stand the fact that one of them was fighting on our side, had become one of us.'

She jumped when she heard the knocking on her bedroom door. Slipping the notebook under her pillow she called out with movie-star elegance: 'Yes? What do you want?'

Grandpa Teofilo opened the door, red-faced and grinning from ear to ear. He hobbled in (time had played havoc with one of his hips) and opened a calloused hand to reveal a one hundred peseta note.

'Thanks Grandpa,' she said and gave him a kiss. It had become a weekly ceremony since she had taken over Grandma Ixabel's place on the stall in the market square. By then, being a farmer's daughter was no longer a source of embarrassment to her, but selling vegetables in front of the whole town still made her uncomfortable. She felt just like the old women around her, unable to ever get the dirt out from under her

fingernails. Well, perhaps she was still a little embarrassed, but it was great to be able to afford to buy her own sandwiches, without having to be a burden to Xabi.

Alone again. She looked at her watch for the umpteenth time: two hours to go. Still too early. Just imagining the moment caused a lifting sensation in her stomach, followed immediately by a stab of fear.

She didn't feel like reading. With real life calling out to her, she could find no comfort in the stories of others. On the other hand, she had a yearning to record everything that happened in her life, to immortalise it. And she had always been an avid reader, ever since she was very small.

Aunt Esti had brought an elegant wooden chest with her when she had moved into Xantio Farmhouse. She always left her room and the chest open, with all the mysterious volumes chaotically piled up inside. She loved nothing better than to see Olatz reading, and showered her with advice and recommendations. Once, however, she had caught her with a copy of Luca de Tena's *The Forbidden Age*. She had grabbed it and thrown it out of the window into the mud, claiming it was nothing but pro-Franco propaganda, designed to breed faithful, submissive wives.

After her death, Olatz would often find refuge on the floor of her old room, drawing some small comfort from the fact that everything had been kept just as it had been when she was alive. On the bedside table were the two volumes of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, coving up the cross her mother had put there. Aunt Esti was always quoting it when she was alive.

Once, she had picked up the book in front of her and opened it. As she had read the words in Spanish she had grown more and more alarmed. What was a woman? In order to define herself, a woman first needs to acknowledge her female nature. But men don't.

Was she a woman? She'd had her period now for three years. Was menstruation the key to it all? Was it that which made you a woman? Or was it Xabi's kisses and caresses? Or the fact that it was getting harder and harder not to let herself go and give in to him completely? Or was it the clandestine meetings?

When she tried to turn over the fourth page, however, she found she couldn't: the pages were still uncut at the top.

She slammed the never-read book shut. Let it keep its secret.

She was happy just taking her aunt's clothes, one by one. Grandma Brigida adjusted them to fit her. And her mum never said a word, until one day, as she was coming back from the washhouse, she ordered her, with uncommon abruptness, to bring down all Esti's things.

Olatz ran as fast as she could to her aunt's room to hide Beauvoir's books and her aunt's secret. But in vain. Her mother swept in like a whirlwind, emptied out the entire contents of the wardrobe and book chest and threw them all down the stairs and into the fire. And her aunt's bedroom became, once again, just another cold room in an old farmhouse.

'We started with the protests, believing that we could change things, believing that if the people stood up to them, the Francoists would just back off. We had them. We were making more noise even than those protesting against the Burgos process: burning cars, throwing stones, distributing anti-regime propaganda, etc. And they responded by bringing more force to bear than ever before: waves of green and grey, rubber bullets and, every now and then, real ones too. Many were injured. Some died. But we were close. We could feel it.

When Txiki and Otaegi were sent to the firing squad, I felt empty. No tears, no hate, nothing at all. Txiki was shot by six volunteers. I couldn't get that piece of information out of my head: six heroes stepped forward, voluntarily, to take another man's life.

It was a Saturday. 7.30pm. Real Sociedad had just beaten RCD Espanyol one-nil.

According to the Sunday papers, given the importance of the match, fewer people than expected had turned out to watch it. Thinking of those thousands of heartless spectators made my blood boil; what a pity a nuclear bomb hadn't blasted the match to hell!

She was running late. Frowning, she took some old jeans out of the wardrobe. Her mother was bound to start on at her, saying that that was no way for a young lady to go out. Christ, what a nag she could be!

The queue outside the Modelo cinema was huge. Xabi hugged her and Olatz lost herself gratefully in his embrace: by this time she no longer thought twice about it; they were a couple. Inseparable. They belonged together. Forever.

When Xabi showed her the two tickets, she got angry: it wasn't right for him to take advantage of his privileged situation, and thanks to his father and grandfather, Xabi's situation was pretty privileged indeed. He was never arrogant about it, but he wasn't ashamed either.

The lights went out and the NO-DO trumpets sounded. Propaganda by the regime: apparently they had just opened a fair in Madrid and (bla, bla, bla). Xabi usually made the most of those ten minutes to caress her hands and whisper sweet nothings in her ear. But this time he just sat staring mutely at the screen, fidgeting and unable to sit still in his comfy theatre seat. And he wasn't the only one. Half way through the murmuring grew louder. Shots outside Santa Ana. A civil guard. Injured. *Polimilis*. Someone dead.

Xabi started laughing, nervous, almost hysterical. Someone clapped. Karmelo crawled up the aisle.

'They killed Pigface,' he whispered. He put his hand over his heart and lay down on the floor, writhing and grunting . His antics were met with gales of laughter.

'Get out of here!' hissed Xabi. 'You're drawing attention to yourself you idiot!'

'Keep your hair on, Romeo, I'm going! By the way, they say his son saw the body.'

Pigface's son. She'd seen him around. What must it be like to have a father like that? The previous year, in an attempt to seem grown up, when Grandpa Teofilo had been talking once about how the civil guard would go around beating people, Olatz had murmured:

'Bastards'.

Her mother had grabbed her and given her a right scolding:

'A man isn't a bastard because he's a civil guard! He's a bastard because he's evil.'

That was the first time her mother had ever said the word *bastard*. The first and the last too.

*Evil* really didn't cover the half of it with Pigface, though. He deserved to be shot. *Bastard*.

Even so, she couldn't begin to imagine what it must be like to find your father's body like that, shot to pieces. She put her arm through Xabi's to distract herself from the horrible thought.

Twenty minutes to go. Xabi squeezed her knee. Let's get out of here. When they pushed open the heavy doors to the street, however, they came face to face with six civil guards.

'*Prisa?*' said a voice in Spanish from the left, mocking their obvious haste to get away.

Before they even had time to look round, the blows started raining down on their heads. It was Captain Thunder. They were dragged off to the barracks. One of her dad's friends saw them on the way. Would he tell him? Would he help them? An old couple saw them too. They weren't from the town. They seemed scared, but they weren't looking in shock at the civil guards, but rather at the couple of young thieves they were dragging off.

A couple of thieves.

They separated them and threw Olatz into a cell, alone. She spent hours, terrified. Did they know about the leaflets at the protest? What would they do to her? Maybe it was all just a silly mix up. They'd come for her soon, surely, to apologise. And come for her they did. In the small hours of the morning she heard the sound of heavy boots walking towards her. The metal door opened and a young civil guard left a sandwich on the floor just inside.

Mortadella. With olives. She couldn't eat it.

She tried (in vain) to find refuge in pleasant memories. Why wasn't she like the rest of the girls in the town? Living in a happy world, with no desire to get caught up in politics.

The boots came back. 'Get up.' She was grabbed by the arm and led up the stairs. The howls of a girl, crying out in pain. The civil guard whispered in a conspiratorial tone that a couple from Ibarra also had lodgings in that 'hotel'. Ibarra was next to Tolosa. Why had they brought them all the way to Zarautz?

A room. Four civil guards and Captain Thunder. 'Start talking.' Olatz in tears. The first slap sent her reeling backwards, and it was just by sheer luck that she didn't fall. Surprise numbed the pain for the first few seconds. Then she felt a throbbing sensation in her cheek. Could someone really whack a person like that without being angry?



The pain hit immediately next time.

'Confess!'

What, though?

They threw her to the floor and dragged her across the room by her hair. One kick. Another. They sat her in a chair. 'Answer.' She started hiccuping. Her throat closed. She felt a warmth spreading out from between her legs. Laughter. Jeers. More slaps.

'Strip.'

They had to repeat themselves twice. Her brain simply refused to translate the Spanish words *fuera la ropa*. She could sense the men's eagerness. She took off her jumper. Her shoes. Her socks. Stalling for a miracle, but no miracle came. The top button of her shirt. And the next. One of the men came over and ripped open the rest, tearing her shirt right off her back. Wolf-whistles. Someone pinching her nipples. Clapping.

'Now you do the rest.'

She'd never even been naked in front of her mother; oh god, if her mother could see her now! She undid the zip on her trousers, eyes squeezed tightly shut. The wet fabric clung to her skin. She had to struggle to push it down. Careful to keep her knickers in place, she took one foot out, then the other. Once off, she didn't know whether to fold her trousers up, throw them on the floor or just let them drop. She felt the warm urine on her inner thighs, now grown cold.

No pity. 'Go on.' With her one free hand she pulled her knickers down to her ankles. She trembled, hidden behind her thin arms, tears making the room swim.

They told her to put her arms out to the side, like she used to have to stand as a girl when the nuns punished her. All eyes on her. Dressed only in her tears. The situation was imbued with a perverse kind of subjugation; more than clothes, their uniforms were

like a kind of armour. And there she was, naked: laughable, defenceless, clumsy, humiliated.

Captain Thunder stepped forward. He lifted her tits up with his baton. Then he let them flop down again. He lowered the baton to her groin, and pushed inwards with the tip. Amidst snorts and guffaws they debated whether or not she was a virgin, and which one of them would get to rape her first. They would do what they wanted with her. In the end they dragged her back to her cell. She was trembling so hard she couldn't walk. Even though they threw in a blanket, she was shaking so violently it was as if her body were being racked by an earthquake. And just when sleep came to deliver her from the nightmare, they dragged her back up. Captain Thunder was still there. She didn't recognise any of the others.

Grandpa Manuel had apparently been there last night, red beret on his head and war medals displayed proudly on his chest, standing straight as a rod in a futile attempt to hide his pot belly. He had loudly demanded to talk to the Captain. 'Let my granddaughter go!' And the guards pretending to doubt whether to just rough him up a bit, shoot him in the head or make him have an 'accident'.

'Which would you prefer?'

So hard to choose.

More tears. She told them again about the propaganda, and about the things Xabi had been given, always trying to downplay his role in everything. Roars of laughter: Xabi was already free, thanks to his father. He'd left her here alone, so she could get to know some real men. Captain Thunder lifted back his hand to deal another blow.

'The ones from Ibarra!' cried Olatz. She saw him hesitate for a second, and her mind raced. *They* gave it all to Xabi. It was them! The leaflets, the weapons. The cache.'

Captain Thunder smiled, like a hunter standing over his fallen, bloodstained, prey.

There was a bathtub filled with grey water from the toilets. A punch to the face sent her reeling to the floor. They rolled her up in a rug. Tight. Only her head free. Her lungs tried to expand to take in air. They couldn't. The guards kicked her again and again. Her mouth filled with blood. They stepped on her head. They lifted her into the air. Held her over the bathtub. Stench. Piss. Shit. The stink of rot. They dunked her under. She tried to struggle. She couldn't. She tried to breathe. She couldn't. She was drowning. No air. Her nostrils filled with piss. Though she clamped her lips shut, her mouth filled with shit. Throat blocked. No air. Murdered at the barracks, just like Luis Arriola.

She couldn't do that to her mother. Oh god, Mum. Mum.

# 3

• Franco was on his deathbed for two months • Two days after his death, Juan Carlos de Borbón was crowned King of Spain • Para-police groups started carrying out attacks; in 1975 they killed one person, ETA<sub>m</sub> 12 people and ETA<sub>pm</sub> 3 people • ETA<sub>pm</sub> was greatly weakened; its ideologist, Eduardo Moreno Bergaretxe (alias Pertur) proposed creating a political party offshoot from ETA<sub>pm</sub> to control the armed organisation • Juan Carlos de Borbón appointed Adolfo Suárez (Secretary General of the National Movement) President of the Government • The polimilis launched a campaign of kidnappings, and killed one of their hostages, Angel Berazadi • 29 prisoners escaped from Segovia prison (12 polimilis, 5 milis and 4 members of the VI Assembly, among others) • Thanks to an infiltrator, the police killed Oriol Solé Sugranyes and captured the rest of his group, except 4 who managed to cross the border into France • Pertur disappeared in the summer of 1976, most likely killed by a paramilitary group • In 1976, ETA<sub>m</sub> killed 16 people •

At home they looked after her, and kept an eye on her. When she was able to communicate once again, they took her out to visit Great-grandma Brigida. Her great-grandmother was gentle with her, asking about school and exams. Olatz's mind refused to register. Usandizaga, and everyone and everything there, was a distant memory, like

something out of an old film, but her great-grandma Brigida was determined to steer clear of talking about what happened at the barracks. Only at the end, when she was giving her a kiss goodbye, did she make a throwaway comment: 'don't be in a rush to find a boyfriend, child'. The remark caught Olatz off guard and she barely managed to hold back her tears.

She went back to school; her mother took her to the station in the morning and was waiting for her when she got back in the afternoon. And eventually, they let her go out walking with Mertxe. When the rain finally stopped, they went down to the promenade. And in the distance there he was: Captain Thunder on his horse.

The sound of the waves, the seagulls, her friends' chatter, all fell away. The only thing in the universe was the imperious clip-clop, clip-clop of Captain Thunder's horse. He was steering the horse with a steely hand, coming closer and closer, his beady eyes fixed steadily on her.

Olatz felt as if she had been turned to salt like Lot's wife. The paralysis slowly crept up her body, from her knees to her thighs to her hips. Salt instead of skin. Three weeks had passed since she had been released from the barracks, yet she still felt naked.

She flushed all the way to the bone, a violent tremble shaking her body. All she could think of were the lies she had told about the couple from Ibarra. Lies invented as a coin with which to buy air. Captain Thunder must surely have found her out by now.

He pulled his horse up right beside her and looked her up and down, his gaze dripping with disdain. And Olatz just stood there, imprisoned in salt. The popular song claims that Itziar's son would never betray his friend; it doesn't say anything about Itziar's daughter though. Captain Thunder had stripped her inside too.

One day, when her mother's guard was down, she slipped off to the parish hall. Xabi

was preaching to his disciples about his 'baptism' at the barracks. Olatz stood frozen in the doorway, lost for words. The boys were all seated; Xabi standing. He blinked in surprise and stopped, right in the middle of his sermon. The others scrambled to their feet and stood staring at the apparition. Then they filed out, one by one, heads bowed low in embarrassment.

For the first time Olatz realised how shabby the room was, with its cheap tables and chairs and bare walls. She didn't know whether or not to kiss Xabi hello. She needed a hug, one of those hugs that enveloped you in peace, but the few feet between them was like a gaping chasm.

'How are you?' asked Xabi, his embarrassment written all over his face. Olatz shrugged her shoulders in reply, and dropped her gaze. Xabi took her hand and squeezed it. Olatz felt nothing. 'Shall we sit?' His voice was shaking.

They sat down facing one another. Xabi took her hand again, a serious expression on his face. At least he wasn't happy or pretending everything was normal.

'The ...erm ... the day after they got us Karmelo took off. He's gone north of the border, to France.'

Olatz's eyes remained fixed on the stucco walls, examining the cottage cheese-like texture. She nodded meekly. A minute went by. Then two. Then three.

Xabi's breath grew ragged. Tears started rolling down his cheeks. He bent his head to hide his eyes. He started sobbing. He knelt on the floor and laid his head in Olatz's lap, hugging her knees to his chest.

'My dad ...I don't know what my dad's gonna do to me...' More sobs. 'I ... I... Karmelo and I...' Olatz caressed his head. He was just a child after all. '...we passed on the information for Pigface's shooting... I'm so sorry they...'

*Tortured you.* Just two little words. But he didn't say them.

They. The men. When she was young, how many sleepless nights had she had as a result of her aunt telling her about they had chopped Victor Jara's fingers off so he would know that, even if by some miracle he survived the torture, he would never be able to play the guitar again.

'Sooner or later they'll arrest me again,' said Xabi. 'Captain Thunder won't let me go twice. I'll have to cross the border.'

'I'll go with you,' whispered Olatz. Her heart felt like a raisin, dry and wrinkled. Not a trace of the blind, undying love she had felt just one month earlier. 'When will we go?'

'Tonight. We'll meet on the road to Orio, by the first curve. At eight.'

Olatz left a note hidden in the sugar jar<sup>3</sup> and, stuffing some clothes into her bag, slipped out of Xantio just before dusk. Who knew when she would be back, when she would see her parents again, her brother Mikel, her grandparents.

She was still crying when she reached the road out of town. Xabi hadn't arrived yet. It started to get dark. Olatz felt scared, waiting there all alone, wondering if at any moment she would hear the clip-clop of a horse's hooves, or see the police torches searching for her. She hid among the bushes, and it was just as well she did, for soon a patrol passed by, heading slowly towards Orio. Half an hour later, another one appeared, this time heading back to Zarautz. Did they suspect?

She was suddenly overcome by memories of the torture, by the shame of it. Had they caught Xabi? Poor Xabi...

Two hours later it was clear that something had happened to him. She couldn't go back

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<sup>3</sup> I've often wondered what sort of note I would leave my family in such a situation, assuming I had the chance to write one before I left, that is. My grandmother still remembers what my mum hastily scribbled on a torn out page of her journal: *I have to cross the border sorry.* No goodbye, no I love yous. And yet, what meaning is contained in that last 'sorry'! My grandmother threw the note straight into the fire, just in case.

to Xantio, they'd be watching her. She didn't know what to do. She went back down the path to the old hut above their farmhouse. She sat down in the only place where the ground wasn't damp and fell asleep. She woke up to find two eyes staring down at her.

'You'll be off, then?' asked Grandpa Teofilo.

The old man was too upset to ask any more questions. He took her to San Sebastián on the back of his old Vespa and managed to get in contact with someone who could smuggle her over the border. He accompanied her to the bus station. As she hugged him goodbye, his familiar smell filled her nostrils. He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a wad of carefully folded notes tied together with a piece of string. Tears ran down his wrinkled reddened cheeks. He gave her the money and gently pushed her towards the bus.

'Once you get to Hendaye, find someone from home.'

Karmelo! A ray of hope. Something good for once.

But it was a thin ray, hardly more than a glimmer. Finding Karmelo was no easy feat, and when at last she was led to his door, the welcome she received was a far cry from what she had expected. He abruptly informed her she'd have to sleep on the floor, because there were already twelve people crammed into that tiny, seedy, flat.

She felt lonelier among all those people than she had the day before whilst waiting in vain for Xabi by the side of the road. The money her grandfather had given her wouldn't last long. Then what?

On the third day, a guy named Alfontso arrived to pick up two people from the flat. The moment he laid eyes on Olatz he invited her to go with him. She quickly agreed. Anything was better than that horrid place.

He took her to Bidaxune in Lower Navarre; to a farmhouse located on a rise just at the



entrance to the village. It was a beautiful place, connected to the flat valleys around it by a sea of lush green grass.

The grain tower was a lighthouse, the rolling hills the white froth of the waves. Xantio had been built in a dip, this farmhouse high up on a rise. Could it be a metaphor for her new life?

The farmhouse was a training centre for activists. Mostly they focused on politics, but there were also some French and Basque classes too. And when they were not training, they just passed the time, striving always to be discrete and not draw attention to themselves.

Olatz made no friends. She retreated into a melancholy shell, existing in a permanent state of semi-darkness. How many times had they played that song by Benito Lertxundi at the parish hall? Countless times. So where was this idyllic, Basque-speaking Soule he sung about? Wasn't the whole French Basque Country like that? She didn't like that strange, foreign atmosphere, with everyone chattering away in Spanish or French. It was too much, too optimistic. Put a couple of guns in their hands and they'd soon tear the Basque Country out of Spain and France's clutches.

Yeah, right. Once, a paramilitary group known as *Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey* opened fire with machine guns on a van carrying nine refugees. They all threw themselves onto the floor and, miraculously, no one was hurt. But the threat came down to settle over them every morning, along with the thick morning mist.

Franco was hanging on by a thread. The rumours grew stronger, and little by little, Radio Nacional de España started broadcasting some good news. As the wellspring of his life ran dry, so the French radios and BBC London dared to mention the word 'death' with increasing frequency.

The celebration started at six in the morning: people laughing, jumping, shouting, hugging and kissing each other and letting off yodels of joy. The most common cry was 'bastard'. They piled into cars, six or seven at a time, and drove down to Hendaye, singing and honking their horns. At eight o'clock a line of young men stood on the French side of the Bidasoa river pointing champagne bottles at Spain across the water. One, two, three..... pop!

The instruction not to draw attention to themselves was broken time and time again that day in Petit Bayonne, morning, afternoon and evening, as they paraded in a human chain through the streets, singing as they went. The residents cringing in embarrassment and smiling nervously.

Olatz, who hadn't thought to bring any money with her but had, for the first time ever, drunk as much as she wanted, floated along in a dream. The feeling stayed while she met a million people and drifted through a deluge of names and an ocean of faces.

'You're the only Basque not celebrating,' said Alfontso, appearing out of nowhere at her side.

She recognised him by his clumsy attempt to speak the Basque language. He was the only one of the bosses who was clean-shaven, and he was always elegantly dressed, with blue eyes and white teeth.

'Really?' Nerves made her respond more abruptly than she intended.

Alfontso looked at the revellers in wry amusement: some were drinking, others singing, and all were laughing and smoking. Even though she'd never been to Sestao, she imagined this must be what it looked like, with smoke curling out of all the factory chimneys to hover over them like a grey mist.

A couple headed for the door, holding hands. The girls here were much freer with

things like that than in Zarautz. Olatz wasn't naive: Alfontso was being far too nice.

'In nine months' time there'll be lots of babies called Patxi!' he remarked.<sup>4</sup> Olatz couldn't hold his ardent gaze and lowered her eyes to her glass of cheap wine. 'The prettiest ones are always taken,' he remarked, with the tone and gesture of an angry child. 'You got a boyfriend?' Olatz nodded, butterflies in her stomach.

She could barely keep from crying. She'd had no news from home. Someone had told them she was ok, but nothing more. Alfontso picked up the bottle to refill Olatz's glass. He put his arm round her shoulder and drew her to him.

'It's hard at first, I know,' he said softly, his mouth close to her ear. 'But fighting for freedom means sacrifices. You'll get used to it, you'll see.'

Olatz froze. She repeated Xabi's name to herself in an attempt to quell the sudden upsurge of desire. She could not allow her body to be aroused like this. Xabi, where are you? In what prison?

'Do you want to go home?' whispered Alfontso.

Language can play cruel tricks: a split second before she realised he was talking about Bidaxune, the image of Xantio exploded in her mind.

Once every fortnight, on a Sunday, her mother and family would come and visit in Grandpa Manuel's car. They'd meet her in the square at eleven, and stay until five. It was like a crumb of bread to a starving man.

Home. Who cared? She just need to get out of there. It was as if that bar had become the whole universe.

As they went out, Alfontso put his arm around her again, but when Olatz instinctively pulled away, she felt it slip a little, and the arm became a bridge framing the space between them. After walking along awkwardly for a while, Alfontso dropped his arm.

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<sup>4</sup> Patxi is short for Francisco in Basque (a reference to Francisco Franco)

In the car. One chattering away, the other silent as the grave. When they finally pulled up, Olatz jumped out and ran up the drive to the farmhouse door, the pebbles crunching underfoot. But she had no keys. How pathetic.

Alfontso opened the door for her, took her hand and led her to his bedroom on the ground floor. When she saw the bed, the fright shook her out of her reverie. She pulled free and stumbled up the stairs, taking them two or three at a time, spurred on by Alfontso's laughter.

While she undressed she heard the crunch-crunch-crunch of pebbles on the driveway, the rev of an engine starting and the sound of a car driving away. Lying on her bunk bed she didn't know what made her feel more ashamed: having forgotten all about Xabi from the very first sip of wine, or Alfontso's not really so unexpected pass.

At the meetings of the feminist group she was a member of at Usandizaga they had often talked about sexual liberation. Such debates and discussions! So why was she so scared now? Why the regret?

She felt restless, and something else too prevented her from sinking into reassuring self-pity: a kind of warmth deep inside, a sense of attraction, gratitude that for once, someone had shown some concern about her. As she fell asleep, though, shame rush in like the turning tide and covered everything else up.

How many tears had she shed and how much anger had she felt growing up as the result of that horrid nickname: *dung-girl*, given to her because, according to the posh girls from Santa Ana, she stunk of the farmyard. And her fingernails were always dirty, no matter how long she spent scrubbing them so they'd look like the nails of the elegant girls who lived in the town. And no matter how hard she tried, she could never soften her rough hands, calloused from so much grubbing in the dirt.

When Aunt Esti had gone to live at Xantio, Olatz had tried to hide her farmyard smell with a few drops of her perfume. But it was no use. Her appearance was always greeted by a chorus of *dung-girl!* Mertxe too suffered the same taunts, until her family's move to a flat in town seemed to wash away the stench and halt the insults.

Olatz, on the other hand, had to wait until she blossomed. For boys, apparently, a pretty face can mask even the foulest smell and is the best antidote for jeers. Insults miraculously turned to compliments, almost overnight. It was ironic, then, that it was her knowledge of farming that provided Olatz with a way out of Bidaxune.

Even though she tried to pay attention, the classes in politics were as dry as sawdust. A deluge of empty glass words: proletariat, social justice, capital, surplus... No matter how hard she looked, she couldn't see the meaning hidden inside.

Since she got bored during Basque language lessons, she started working in the allotment and her expertise was soon noticed, especially since most of the others there were urbanites through and through. She was offered the chance of going to live and work at the Etxepare farmhouse in Muger. 30 kilometres away. By herself.

In Bidaxune, people came and went all the time, and no one batted an eyelid at her departure. Only Alfontso, who drove her to Muger, made any effort to stay in touch, dropping by every once in a while.

Things were better at Etxepare. Xalbat, the father, spoke Basque, but his wife and their three sons did not. But there wasn't much need to talk anyway. Olatz curled in on herself, living only for her work and her family's visits.

One day, a letter arrived from Mertxe. After a jokey greeting in Spanish, *Querida Olach*, the rest of the letter, written in her friend's round, carefree handwriting, spoke of what was going on back in Zarautz, who had asked after her and how much she was

missed. The letter was adorned with a shower of little hearts and a P.S. that was scribbled hastily in a corner as an afterthought made Olatz smile: 'You lucky duck: I bet you can get your hands on all sorts of clothes up there. Could you get me a pair of Levis, please? You know, the ones with the buttons.'

Nothing about Karmelo though. Not a word. It was a letter written by a child. How Olatz would have loved to be a child again.

She rarely walked down from Muger to Bayonne. There was plenty to keep her busy on the farm. Mertxe was right about one thing: she had the whole world within her grasp. She just lacked the desire to reach out and take it. Surrounded by people who didn't speak her language, she felt tired and hollow. It became more and more of an effort not to give in to her tears in front of the family, more and more difficult to pretend that everything was hunky dory, particularly when the political-military faction of ETA (ETA<sub>pm</sub>) kidnapped Angel Berazadi.

That Sunday she met her family for the first time on Hendaye beach. Mum, dad, little Mikel and Grandma Ixabel all silent; Grandpa Teofilo with a face like a thunder cloud. He didn't even kiss her hello, but just launched right in:

'Tell them to let him go, right now! He's a true Basque, our Angel, a true nationalist.'

Her mother didn't have the courage to intervene; she gestured with her eyes to her husband, but he either didn't see or chose not to.

Olatz was dumbstruck. How could she explain? She felt like a pendulum, oscillating between powerlessness and sadness, between disappointment and desperation.

'As far as we know, they have nothing on you, dear,' said her mother. The same speech every fortnight. 'That's what we've been told. And moreover, now Franco's dead...everything will get better. Come home.'

Home.

'Aren't you ever going to tell her?' Grandpa Teofilo was still fuming. He pointed at his granddaughter. 'That fancy boyfriend of yours is just fine and dandy, young lady. His father sent him off the very night you were supposed to run away together. He's studying at some cushy boarding school now in La Coruña. Hasn't he written to you?'

The most painful part of the visit was the goodbye. She watched them rowing away back to their lives, while she remained anchored like one of the little old boats in the port. That day, for the first time, she felt relieved to be alone. And sad. Now she didn't even have the consolation of family visits to look forward to.

The next two Sunday visits were even worse: Grandpa Teofilo went on and on about his friend, Angel Berazadi, whom he referred to by his Basque name, Aingeru. He talked endlessly about him, the club they were both members of and the town Olatz had left behind, directing his comments at her as if she were a spokesperson for the *polimilis*. Ironic really, since she had never been further removed from ETA.

That Monday, a whole load of prisoners escaped from Segovia prison. The newsreaders on the Spanish radio stations didn't specify how many, but assured the public they would soon be apprehended. Hours with no news. Shameful euphoria. Would they make it? For the poor, however, happiness is a fleeting friend, and the following Thursday they found Berazadi, dead from a shot to the head.

She felt something inside her break, as if someone had just cut the last rope mooring her to the shore and she was now adrift, left to survive as best she could with no sail and no oars, completely at the mercy of the sea.

The following Sunday brought no peace, even though her grandfather did not show

up. He came the next time though. His face thunderous, his eyes on fire, his cheeks bright red and his anger etched eloquently in the thin lines of his lips. He threw a newspaper at her. Dying of shame, Olatz picked it up: 'Angel Berazadi, murdered'.

There was a photo. There was no doubt about it, as a girl she had seen him a million times at the *Gure Kabiya* club. Grandpa Teofilo punched the word 'France' so hard with his forefinger that it went right through the paper.

'You'd reached an agreement!' he stuttered through his rage. And then he seemed to deflate. 'Why?'

His eyes filling with tears, he turned away. Olatz could bear it no more and burst into tears as well. Her mother didn't come over to hug her immediately. First she made her pay a bit.

Finally, enveloped in her mother's arms and finding strength in her familiar smell, she whispered: 'Next week, take me home'.