

Part one

The electric coffee maker

In a short while somebody is going to commit a crime. An ordinary crime. Theft. Nothing too serious. Three thousand pesos. That is all. It won't be reported. Not even the police will be notified. A great deal of crime is committed every day in this city, each with its own peculiarity. Few reach the public domain. The particularity of this case, which worries me, is that the robber is a novice; Ernestina Valdés is not aware of what she is going to do. Nor that the victim will be Emma Valdés, her only sister.

Ernestina, she could have sworn it with a hand crossed over her heart, had never wished anything wrong to happen to Emma. Well...perhaps, but who hadn't hated his own brother or sister sometime in their lives? From a young age she suffered just thinking that someone or something could deform her sister's face, a face that she thought perfect. She tormented herself imagining Emma with a burned or scarred face. One afternoon the vision was of such power that it turned into a terrifying apparition for the girl. But none of this is important; time moves on and there won't be much left before Ernestina sees her own boyfriend, Cosme Segundo, delivering a bath of boiling coffee over Emma's holly face.

Emma will try to resist the assault, kicking and biting with all her strength at the hands of Pablo Leonard, the third accomplice. Then Cosme will look at the jug of coffee on the hotplate and it won't take him long to recognise a weapon there. He will pick it up and walk towards Emma.

1

But all of this had started before, when Pablo Leonard, a friend of Cosme, returned to Buenos Aires. Ernestina and Cosme went to wait for him at Retiro station. They walked from his house on Ecuador Street, down along Santa Fe Avenue. With them on a leash was their dog. It was a golden retriever, which they had received as a gift. One afternoon a few days after getting the dog, when Ernestina and Cosme took it to the park for a walk, the animal started running frantically in circles until it tumbled exhausted on to the ground. This was followed by convulsions and epileptic-like spasms. Ernestina felt responsible. Nothing good could come of a relationship in its terminal phase, like hers and Cosme's.

Santa Fe Avenue. All three of them walking along. Cosme and Ernestina lost in the tune of the latest pop-song "you-are-like-e-a-city-seen-from-a-plane". It was a hypnotic hit that had taken the city by storm. It was the background music of a cable news program that, like the concentric circles formed by a stone breaking the surface of a lake, started to circulate between a few people in the network until becoming the city's soundtrack for that season. Ernestina sung it over and over again like a mantra. She had been listening to it for only a few days, but it already embodied memories of a recent past, which flooded back as soon as she heard the first few notes of the song. The little dog followed them.

In the crowd of the bus terminus Cosme recognised Pablo's narrow body, a straight line in a space filled with volumes. Attired like a 50's dandy, he stood out from the casually dressed majority. Cosme became excited, his friend's presence triggered great expectations in him. "The world is our oyster," he told himself.

A little girl started to play with the dog. Ernestina asked her if she wanted to take it. The girl nodded. But at that moment Cosme snapped his fingers and the dog ran towards him and just like that, Ernestina lost her chance to get rid of the sad little puppy.

Ernestina, Cosme and Pablo made a strange trio. As if painted

Natural Selection

with the same brush, they inhabited the same comic book and followed its page layout. The trio was totally squalid, except for her curves, which, in reality, bothered her. She didn't like taking space. But she was tall, with an elongated structure, a fidgety nature and a loud voice; she always called attention to herself. It was difficult for her to pass by unnoticed.

During her infancy, she put up with grown-ups pinching her chubby, rosy cheeks. Compliments embarrassed her. But after she lost her fat cheeks, she missed the flattery, and told herself she could endure the percentage of lies and insincerity they carried. In the mirror she always looked for those vanished cheeks. She solved the problem by wearing a fringe down to her chin so that only the tip of her nose and her uncolored lips could be seen. The girl, who was adored by everybody while in kindergarten, had been showing signs that used to worry her teacher. The afternoon it was announced that the classroom would be visited by the head mistress, a well-heeled woman who sponsored high IQ children, Ernestina changed her brightly coloured drawings for a collection of black squares. And that was the first missed opportunity of her life. Emma, on the other hand, always enjoyed being looked at. Her mother spent a night consoling her, in grade three, when a fever kept her away from the school play on Sarmiento's day. Another girl spoke in the microphone to present the programme. Little Emma stayed awake shedding tears until sunrise.

In the bus station, Cosme and Pablo looked almost alike. Cosme had bleached his hair. Pablo had added golden highlights to his straight, black hair. Both their skins had a matt, olive shade. Instead, Ernestina's skin was white. Because she was wearing a short dress with a low, square cleavage held by thin straps, and had forgotten to wear tights or anything warm, her skin, so transparent that her purplish veins could be seen through, was almost completely exposed.

That same night, a few hours later, Cosme would dream that Ernestina's veins were a road map which he had to study in order to reach his destination. In the dream, Cosme saw himself cross-

Cecilia Szperling

ing a red motorway traversed by blue lanes. In a screen showing her body's route, Cosme saw his vehicle moving up Ernestina's arm. The journey ended in her heart, a bomb about to explode. He had to save her, stop the explosion. But we don't know how it ended, because the video of the season's pop song interrupted the dream, like a paid advertisement.

In the flat on Ecuador Street, third floor "D", the three friends shared an acid tablet brought by Pablo, with the face of Mickey Mouse on it. Later they smoked some grass and baked sweet potatoes that nobody ate. Ernestina played with the potatoes sinking her fingers in their flesh until destroying them with great pleasure, while telling herself "does anybody see any other possibility"? She was referring to people's limitations with food.

Cosme dragged his friend to the huge bathroom, in total lack of proportion with the rest of the flat. Pablo undressed. Cosme turned on the hot-water tap and filled the bathtub. With Pablo in the water he sprinkled the sides with petrol and lit it. It was a game. The type of games they played since the first day they met.

Pablo and Cosme hadn't seen each other since one night in a police station, two years before. They had shared a silo in the docks, which had been precariously converted by the city hall into accommodation for fine art students. Obviously, none of its inhabitants, neither Pablo or Cosme, nor Mr. Dead or Mrs. Dead, attended classes. The Carcova had been a meeting place, but the teaching there was mediocre and backward. They got fed up the day they were taken to the racecourse to draw horses. The whole thing was embarrassing. They bought a bottle of gin and decided to bet instead. They thought gambling a sharper art, more interesting and sophisticated than copying from real life. They never went back to school again.

In any case, they continued to live in the silo. Nobody evicted them, until Mr. and Mrs. Dead performed a ritual with fire, no one knows why, which alerted the fire brigade and the police. They were thrown out unceremoniously. From that day they split up. The night of the ritual, Mr. Dead had been drinking beer on his

Natural Selection

mattress. He was very thin and always dressed in the same gothic, new-romantic outfit. He rarely took it off. He didn't have any occupation. His father and mother had abandoned him leaving a flat in his name. From the rent they all ate for a whole month. Wearing warm clothes in high summer, he dressed in plastic trousers and black boots. He had removed the collar from his white shirt, and used it as a necklace. His long hair made the back of his head sweat. That same night Mrs. Dead, sitting on the edge of the mattress, had a desired to be penetrated by him, but because his lack of hygiene made her sick, she just settled for hoping he would take her quickly and by surprise. It was said that one day, tired of waiting, Mrs. Dead burned his clothes.

There, in the silo at the dock, Cosme and Pablo had planned things that would make them successful; wrap the Aconcagua in yellow paper, place a ten-kilometer long mirror in the middle of the Riachuelo, paint crosses on the roof of shantytown dwellings so they could be seen from the sky by planes and helicopters.

From the house nextdoor a Paraguayan tune filtered through, mixing with the amorphous sound of an electric bass played by Mr. Dead. Pablo played on a toy piano with wooden keys, that he had found in the street. They tried to play the hit song of that season, but that season's pop song had not been perfect.

2

While the three friends, high on the acid particles travelling through their blood, were inventing new languages in their Barrio Norte's apartment; Emma was watching a program about the life of a celebrity on TV in her San Isidro home. Celebrity biographies were a hobby and pastime that were becoming an addiction for her. She loved the vertigo of the triumph and fall of a real life drama in forty-five minutes. On this occasion the star had been abused by her father, exploited by her agent and subjected to demanding studio contracts. Later she had fallen in love with a doctor, a talented and good-hearted man. Sadly, a failed pregnancy was followed by the death of the good man in a plane accident. The plane had fallen in the snowy peaks of a mountain. Now, the star was seen in the morgue trying to identify his mangled and frozen body.

For no reason, she thought about her sister, and wondered what her address and telephone number were. She remembered Ernestina getting off the bus that took her from Gualeguay that cloudy, slightly nippy afternoon. Ernestina had a sad stare, hunched shoulders and a bowed head as if it were pushed inside a wooly red coat that shone amid the grey fog. Her eyes were sparkling grey and her skin was totally smooth, with no lines, marks or wrinkles. It was like a white paper with a tinge of colour on the lips and eyes. When Ernestina got off the bus and lifted up her head to greet her, a ray of light filtered through the clouds illuminating her like a Madonna. The vision touched Emma, who for a moment felt her sister was somebody special, more spiritual and ethereal than people in general. "A martyr," Emma had thought, and realised that that was the plan that Cordelia, their mother, had designed for Ernestina. "My poor sister," she thought. She was dismayed to think that, while she was winning beauty contests, she had left her sister alone in their gloomy mother's

Natural Selection

clutches. She was suddenly burdened by her professional achievements, added to the fact she had found a man she liked and was living in a beautiful house. As if she had achieved them at Ernestina's detriment. She hadn't. But that was what she thought, and she told herself she would now have the opportunity to repay her sister.

Ernestina didn't get along with Greg. Emma's husband was an Englishman born in Manchester, with fine features and a self-absorbed expression. He had grey eyes, a small nose, high cheekbones and a wide mouth. When he got into the car, Greg picked up the telephone and talked in English in such a loud voice that it interrupted the sisters' conversation for the whole trip. Emma felt embarrassed by Greg's lack of manners. Ernestina's apathy and suspicion added to poor Emma's worries. She only wanted the best for her loved ones.

The drawing of a frozen body took over the TV screen. Emma reached for a jar with her hands and put an oyster mask on her face. "Poor woman," she said in a loud voice. The star was coming out of the morgue followed by a group of photographers.