

A TASTE OF OLD COIN

—
A Novel



Teodoro Adrián Cardós

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Contents

Prologue · The Salt	9
Part I · THE INHERITANCE	12
Chapter 1 · The Queue	13
Chapter 2 · The Car	18
Chapter 3 · From Thirteen to Eighteen	23
Chapter 4 · The Visiting Room	27
Chapter 5 · The Exemption	31
Chapter 6 · The Waste Ground	34
Chapter 7 · The Body	39
Chapter 8 · Laura	44
Part II · THE GLOW	48
Chapter 9 · The First Glow	49
Chapter 10 · The Sofa	53
Chapter 11 · Leaving and Coming Back	58
Chapter 12 · Rocío's House	61
Chapter 13 · The Flat	66
Chapter 14 · The Craft of Reading	71

Chapter 15 · The Older Woman	75
Chapter 16 · The Pattern	79
Part III · MARTA	84
Chapter 17 · Marta	85
Chapter 18 · The Art School	90
Chapter 19 · The Motorbike	95
Chapter 20 · Two Trips to A&E	100
Chapter 21 · The Throuple	105
Chapter 22 · The Channel	110
Chapter 23 · My Father's Place	115
Chapter 24 · The Consulting Room	119
Chapter 25 · A Sunday in Winter	124
Chapter 26 · The Ship	128
Part IV · THE NAME	133
Chapter 27 · The First Ward	134
Chapter 28 · The Name	138
Chapter 29 · The Inheritance	143
Chapter 30 · Well and Strong	147
Chapter 31 · Turning It All Round	152
Chapter 32 · The Doctor	157
Chapter 33 · The Messiah	163

Chapter 34 · The Twenty-Sixth Floor	171
Chapter 35 · The Recordings	176
Chapter 36 · Lidia's Forgiveness	182
Part V · THE FALL	187
Chapter 37 · The Truce	188
Chapter 38 · The Line	193
Chapter 39 · The Podcast	197
Chapter 40 · The Day It Started	201
Chapter 41 · The Rented Flat	206
Chapter 42 · Seven Words	210
Chapter 43 · The Living Room	215
Chapter 44 · Claudia	220
Chapter 45 · The Camera at Two in the Morning	224
Chapter 46 · The Screen	230
Part VI · THE WRONG LINE	235
Chapter 47 · The Doctor Who Talked	236
Chapter 48 · One Hundred and Fifty-Five Kilos	240
Chapter 49 · The Kitten	245
Chapter 50 · No Straight Line	249
Chapter 51 · Lidia, Again	253
Chapter 52 · The Third Date	257

Chapter 53 • The Letter 262

Chapter 54 • The Admission I Asked For 267

Chapter 55 • The Nightmares 272

Chapter 56 • The Ones Who Stayed 276

Chapter 57 • For Claudia 280

Epilogue • The Night Dose 284

Prologue · The Salt

Some tastes arrive before the leaflet does. Lithium's is metallic, but not the way a fork is metallic: it's the rust on a coin that has lain forgotten in a drawer for years and that somebody decides to lay on your tongue. When I put the first tablet in my mouth (thirty-three years old, barely, a locked ward, a window onto an inner courtyard where absolutely nothing grew), I didn't discover that taste. I recognised it. It came from much further back. It came from the orange bottle that stood on the edge of the sink all through my childhood, in the kitchen of that house, wedged between the scouring pad and the cooking salt.

My father killed himself with lithium. I was twenty.

I put it like that, with nothing underneath to break the fall, because any other way of saying it would be make-up. On the official paper they called it autolysis by lithium. Two words out of a medical dictionary for a house whose floor had just caved in; somebody wrote them, closed the file and went for lunch. My sister Sonia put it all away in a blue folder, that entire summer shut in there, and I opened that folder once. I've never opened it again. I know what that sounds like: cowardice. It isn't, and I'm not saying so to come out well. It's that I don't need a piece of paper to remind me. I've got it on me. My father had this brain of mine and this illness of mine from the day he was born, with its technical name and its diagnosis on the table; what he didn't have was anybody beside him to hold his treatment in place, or his head, during the stretches when his head went off on its own for a wander. And he ended up using the pill that was there to keep him alive for that other thing the same pill also knows how to do when the man holding it is alone and wrecked.

Thirteen years after that summer, the one in the bed was me. Borrowed gown, a plastic band round my wrist with my name printed on it (which is the polite way of telling you that in there you're a parcel with a label), and in front of me a small psychiatrist with short hair, explaining without any solemnity that this wasn't for a few months but for good. I told her about my father, that he'd gone with an overdose of this same thing. I didn't surprise her: she had it in

front of her, written in my notes. She prescribed it anyway, because the only alternative available was not prescribing it. And there the conversation ended. I've been playing chess since I was a kid and I know straight away those positions where it makes no difference what you move. I asked how long, mainly to have something to ask. That was how long: for good. Type one isn't something you get rid of. It's something you carry.

I took it that same afternoon. And with the old coin dissolving in my mouth came everything else in one block, the way it comes every time and the way it will go on coming as long as I have a tongue left: my father, the sink, the orange bottle, that kitchen, the blue folder I don't open.

That was more than seven years ago now. Do the sum if you like: it comes to over two thousand seven hundred days, and there hasn't been a single one of them when I haven't swallowed the salt twice, when I got up and before I went to bed. That's more than five thousand times my father in my mouth. But there's a part of this I take a good deal worse than the taste, and I'm telling it here because it explains this house better than anything else I could tell. In the morning my dose is a pill and a half. Which means that every few days I have to break a tablet in two. And I can't do it on my own. Every time it comes round I ring my mother so she'll come over and stand next to me, and the two of us do it on our feet in the kitchen, hardly talking. I call it the ritual. Because breaking in half the exact pill my father used to take himself out of the picture isn't taking a medication: it's repeating with your hands the gesture he made. And that gesture, with nobody in front of me, won't come out.

And that same salt is, at the same time, the only thing keeping me upright. Which is why any blood test of mine has a line on it that says serum lithium, one point one zero, and that number means two things at once: that I'm being treated, and exactly how much distance there is between my father and me.

This doesn't get cured. Lithium doesn't take the illness off me, it holds it back, which is not the same thing. It's a dam. And behind a dam the water doesn't disappear: it's still there, rising with the same patience as ever, waiting for the day somebody gets careless with the sluice gates. Which is why the thing that has taken down most of us who are in this is not the illness head-on: it's a reasonable idea, a sensible one, almost common sense, that turns up on a good morning, the idea that you don't need this any more. You're well, yes. And you're well for exactly that reason. My father opened the gates all at once: the same brain I have, the same box in the same drawer, and one night he decided

that was far enough, and drank in one sitting all the sips he had left in front of him.

And now what there is today, so that it's clear from this first page what's being played for in the ones that follow. Today is a good day. I took the pill and a half with a coffee, standing at the window, looking at the mountain you can see from here, and mid-morning I'll go down for another coffee with Laia, the woman I've been with for a year and who sleeps in this house half the nights. I have a job I'm signed off from, my mother ten minutes away on foot, a sister who puts two glasses of water on the table when I come to eat, and a cat. I've given up everything that was taking me apart, in this order and never in a straight line: first the weed, then tobacco, then alcohol. I'm forty-one, and since I was thirty-three I've also had a name for what I have. That's the whole inventory. It isn't much, and it's the most I've ever had.

Hanging over all of that there's one thing I don't intend to dress up: the application for a long committal, the year-long kind, signed by people who decided two years ago that I'm something other than what I am. If that committal comes, it separates me from the coffee, from the window, from Laia and from the cat. So I'm not writing this out of nostalgia, which is the first thing anybody thinks and the falsest thing anybody can think. There is nothing in these pages that I miss. I'm writing it because it's the only way I have of explaining what happened to me, and because what I have today is the one thing I'm not prepared to lose.

What comes after this has taken me seven years to be able to put in writing. And it isn't drawn from memory: it's drawn against memory, with the archive open beside me, because of the years about to turn up here my head keeps a shambles I don't trust. It starts a fair way before the pill. It starts in a queue, at the gate of a prison, with my mother pregnant with my sister.

Part I • THE INHERITANCE

Chapter 1 • The Queue

My mother stood in the same queue twice, twenty-five years apart, and both times to see the same man. I'll start with the first because it's the one that explains the second, and because of the two it's the only one I didn't see: I hadn't been born. What I know about it I know from my mother, who has written it down her way and told it to me her way, and the two versions agree on what matters.

The road from the village to the prison was a dirt track, unsurfaced, and my mother walked it once a week with a bag in each hand (clean clothes, food) and a five-month belly that kept on growing. One day she fell and couldn't get up, and she stayed there on the ground, crying out of sheer terror that something had happened to the baby, until a lad going past on a bicycle got off and helped her. Then the queue at the gate, with the others. All around her there was nothing but women with kids hanging off their skirts, and she asked herself what she was doing there, at what point she had come down so far, her, who had crossed a sea with a degree already in her hand. And in that queue, with the girl inside her, she made herself a vow: that her daughter would never set foot in a prison to see her father behind bars. Then the visiting room, the dirty glass, the telephone, the torture of having your husband in front of you and not being able to so much as brush his hands. And the walk back along the dirt track, crying. Every week. That's how she swore it.

To understand how anyone ends up in that queue you have to go back, and the first thing of all is a taxi. My mother is Italian. She was born in Cagliari, a city with a port, in Sardinia, and her house was Sicilian by origin: her parents had left Sicily driven out by hunger and by debt and had landed on the island with nothing at all, to sleep in a rented room inside another family's flat. That's where they had her. And when they were left without a father, my grandmother put on her husband's boots and took his place at the wholesale market: she walked across the city at three in the morning, alone, in the dark, rain or frost, to get there in time to unload the crates of fruit. That was the woman my mother

grew up in front of, and with that woman in front of her she did what nobody of her blood had done: she got into a university. And she got in against the grain, fighting her own mother, who held that studying was throwing your time away when a woman was going to end up married anyway. She took her degree in Spanish Language and Literature in the four regulation years without resitting a single exam. The thesis was still to come, and her supervisor put in front of her a subject that struck her as a gift: Federico García Lorca directing *La Barraca*, the travelling theatre that climbed onto a lorry to take the classics round the villages of Spain. In Italy there was no material on it. The newspapers she needed, the ones from before the war, were here. So she crossed a sea after a murdered poet and a few newspaper archives, twenty-three years old and everything passed except that, and that was what she was coming for the day she got into that taxi. Spanish had got into her blood along the way, and Italian has never left her: forty years on she still drags the accent about with her, and when she's angry or when she prays out comes her mother's language, which is the language I learned to count in. There was a line of taxis outside the terminal and the one she was due wasn't my father's, which was behind it: the one in front, for whatever reason (nobody has ever been able to explain it), turned round to the car behind and gave up its turn. She got into that one. So that's literally where I come from: a taxi driver deciding not to take a fare. If that man doesn't turn his head, I'm not here.

At the wheel there was a dark-haired man with a big nose and a scar beside one eye, past thirty already, dressed in black from head to foot, same as the car. He looked like an undertaker, she says, and she says too that the signs couldn't have been plainer and that she should have read them. But the man opened his mouth and didn't shut it again until they got to the guesthouse. He took her case out of the boot, carried it up to her room (something which, as he admitted to her a long time afterwards, he had never done for anybody in his life) and, while he was at it, suggested going out that same evening, dinner and a look round the city. She still can't explain why she said yes to a stranger eleven years older than her. She said yes. Two hours later she had him at the front door in a suit and tie. The only punctual date of the whole life they spent together. He took her to dinner and dancing and dropped her at the guesthouse as it was getting light. And so it went for a fortnight, up to a kiss on a high spot where you could see the whole city with the lights trembling underneath. And that's where

the tool of the house comes to me from: the gift of the gab. My father only had to talk. So did I, all my life.

The signs were there, and not in the small print. The thing is she couldn't read that language, and today her skin crawls when she goes back over it. That man barely slept and ran at a different speed from the rest of the world: a job by day, another by night, his mouth never stopping, his head throwing out enormous plans that seven days later were different plans, and on top of that an intensity that made you dizzy and that, now she knows what it was, was also a bit frightening. From Cagliari, her mother and her sister smelled it without being able to name it, and that put more venom into a rejection that had come out of the factory ready-made: if the taxi driver took it into his head to turn up there, they'd throw him down the stairs. She translated every detail backwards. The symptom sounded to her like passion. A racing head looked to her like a man with an appetite for living. And she ended up doing what a girl in her early twenties does when she's head over heels and her family are against it: she got her degree, bought a one-way ticket, left a goodbye letter on the table and walked out of the house one morning when there was nobody in, with the case that had been waiting under the bed for weeks. In Barcelona my father was waiting for her with an orchid in his hands.

And here comes the scene that, for me, is the whole key to this story, even if at the time it struck her as a formality. A few days before the wedding, he and his sister took her to a psychiatrist's consulting room without giving her much explanation on the way. They wanted to tell her before the I do. My father got depressions. There was a medication, and on the medication his life was an ordinary life; the trouble started when he came off it, and he came off it every five minutes, which she was going to find out in no time at all. She came out of there on his arm and calm, certain that this wasn't going to beat the two of them, because she was the age she was and believed from top to bottom that love sorts everything out. They married at five in the afternoon, like a bullfight, and on the honeymoon he wrapped the side of the borrowed car round a lorry at a set of lights on the way out of the city. The first of a great many.

They had told her half. And it wasn't a lie, mind: it was the bottom half. Depressions was the name given back then to the part of this illness that hurts the one who has it, the part you can see, the part that takes a man to a doctor. The other half, the top one, nobody named for her in that consulting room, because the top half didn't look like an illness: it looked like him. A man who doesn't

sleep, who talks non-stop, who makes plans, who works two shifts, who makes an Italian woman fall in love with him over one taxi ride, that, from outside, is not a symptom. It's a character, and a terrific character at that. That's the trap in the illness my father had and I have: there are two poles, and of the two only one hurts the patient. The other hurts everybody else, and later, once the bill has come in for the sleepless nights, the plans, the money, the crashes, the disappearances. A doctor names what he sees in the consulting room, and in the consulting room my father was down. The top half was seen by my mother, alone, at home, with no doctor and no word for it.

And what a family does with an illness that has no name is give it a moral one. Liar. Selfish. Irresponsible. Mad, in the worst case, and mad explains nothing: it's the way language has of giving up. My mother spent thirty years trying to separate the man from what the man had, and she tried it empty-handed, because the only tool that works for that is the exact word, and that one nobody gave her. I was given it at thirty-three, on a locked ward, and it wasn't a present either. But at least they gave me all of it.

Until one night he didn't come home. She spent the whole of it at the window, listening for the engine of every car that came up the street, with the fear stuck in her throat that anything at all might have happened to him. As soon as it got light she rang her sister-in-law for advice, and what she heard down the line was a perfectly calm voice telling her not to get into a state, that he'd disappeared before, that it was the illness. On the second day my father turned up at the house with a gash on his forehead and a crash in his mouth, and that was why he hadn't been able to let her know. She swallowed it. It took her years to find out what had really happened, because he told her himself: he hadn't had the nerve to come back and stand in front of her, and the gash he'd made himself. That wasn't a performance. It was a sick head that, the moment the crisis pressed, preferred to hurt itself rather than sit down and look the life it had straight in the face. And that repeated itself many times, with excuses of the most varied kind: the afternoon he left his mother and mine sitting outside a café with a back in a minute and they had to get home by taxi, or the day there was a bomb warning at the school where she taught, they cleared the building, and my mother found him out in the street, waiting for her. He took her off for breakfast and told her, with all the pride in the world, that the call had been his: for her, to steal a bit of that morning off her.

"You're mad," she told him.

He thought it was funny and let it go, as if it were of no importance whatsoever. And there's the whole story: her coming out with the word without noticing that she meant it, and him laughing because he didn't notice either.

He hung up the taxi and set up a jeweller's workshop, which was what he'd done before, and he told my mother that a friend was going to let him have the gold to get started. Workshop by day, wheel by night. Until one night, with the two of them already in bed and my mother five months gone with my sister Sonia, somebody started hammering on the door. Open up, police. My father got up, opened it and they took him away without explaining anything to anybody. A few hours later they came back with him, went straight to the bedroom, opened the wardrobe and pulled out a bag loaded with jewellery. There had never been any friend with gold: my father bought the material from whoever was stealing it, melted it down and made the commissions out of that, and the thieves had given him up at the first ask. Receiving stolen goods, and not from one place only. My mother found an honest, cheap solicitor, who applied for bail and was refused, and who then got the judge to see her, in case she could soften him. He wasn't moved by the tears or by the belly.

"Madam, forget about your husband, because they're going to give him more than ten years."

She came out of that office with her soul dragging on the floor, and behind it came the dirt track, a bag in each hand and the queue with the other women. Months of that. To raise the bail she sold the car with the taxi licence on it, and they rang her with the good answer a week before she was due. She planted herself at the gate to wait for him and watched my father come out in the middle of a group of prisoners who were being let go around then over some other business, something to do with politics. They parked the nightmare, and my sister was born. Afterwards would come more disappearances, more excuses, another prison and a conviction in absentia that had him going in and out of the country for years on false papers, and I'll talk about all that when it's due. What matters here is the vow. Twenty-five years later, at the gate of another prison, to see the same man, my mother stood in that queue again. With her daughter beside her. And with a sixteen-year-old son behind her, who was me.

Chapter 2 • The Car

My father put the night scope into my hands on a beach, at night, with the same gesture another father uses to hand his son the binoculars for plane-spotting on a Sunday. I must have been eleven, twelve at the most. I looked. Inside the scope everything was green and grainy, and in that green there was a boat, and men standing in the water up to their knees, and bundles going from one pair of hands to the next until they reached the sand. Not a word of explanation. None was needed, either. That night the mask came off completely, and I finished tying up what I'd had half tied for a while.

Because I got into that car at eight years old. At the start the whole family went, and to any neighbour who saw us leave with the boot shut it was a holiday and that was that: the coast, the islands, half of Europe, a kid in the back with a comic and a father at the wheel who drove like an angel. What was travelling underneath the kid nobody in that car knew, and my mother least of all. Then my parents separated and the trips carried on, but now just him and me, and there was nothing of a holiday about them. The official cover was that he represented a jeweller's. To me, a boy who read a lot, who swallowed television at all hours and who was a good deal sharper than was good for anybody, the sums didn't add up: whole nights sleeping in the houses of people we didn't know, Moroccan families, extremely odd blokes, places no jeweller's rep in the world has any business being. He'd leave me for hours inside the car without telling me why or until when, exactly the way he'd left my mother sitting outside that café. And I waited. A child doesn't know his house is a strange house until he sets foot in another one, and I had no other one to set foot in.

By twelve or thirteen I knew perfectly well what we were mixed up in. I say that without taking shelter behind the alibi of the child who doesn't understand: I understood. Nobody told me, there was no father-to-son talk, nobody sat down with me to explain it. I got there myself, putting pieces together. The faces that turned up, the villages, the ungodly hours, money that materialised and vanished like a trick done by a bad magician. And then I did what a sharp kid on

his own does: watch a lot, ask nothing and draw conclusions. That's where my first idea of authority came from, and he gave it to me without meaning to: that people in uniform can come to your house looking for you, that being afraid of the police wasn't some paranoia of mine but a fear with grounds under it, and that the people who are there to protect you can make an accomplice of you in things a child shouldn't even know exist.

And even with all that, and I write it because it's the truth and because if I keep it quiet it looks like I crawled out of a sewer, my childhood was happy. Happy and fairly ordinary. A house with timetables, with its family trips, and a mother who looked after me and who spent years acting as a retaining wall: if it took me so long to find out my father's real trade it was because she gave herself body and soul to my not finding out. There were rows, the kind you can hear from beginning to end from your room with the door shut, and I didn't understand what was going on for a reason that seems obvious to me today: I had nothing to compare it with. Until I was ten I was a normal, loved child. I came out of a home. What came afterwards happened to somebody who came from somewhere.

Out of that whole absurdity, the best of it was the houses. Those Moroccan families, in neighbourhoods on the edge of cities whose names I couldn't even pronounce, sat us at their table as if we shared the surname, every single time, without one exception that has stuck in me. They fed us, they brought out the tea, they made room for two Spaniards turning up at night over a matter that wasn't very presentable. I was a kid, but I saw perfectly well what I had in front of me: people who owed us absolutely nothing sharing out the little they had. And that inoculated me, and I use the word on purpose. When you've had dinner in the kitchen of one of those families who only ever appear on the news in the problems section, the headline doesn't go in any more.

With all of that on him, I didn't see my father as ill. I didn't see him as a man breaking one rule after another either, or as the one with a boot full of drugs and his son in the seat beside him. I saw a hero. The one who came to get me out of the school where they made my life impossible, the one who could stand a whole night at the wheel, the one who knocked on doors that opened for him in strangers' houses. He had the illness that would wreck my life years later, diagnosis and all, and he took his medication as the mood took him, which is an elegant way of saying in patches: he'd stop, come back, stop again, like a man who waters a plant on the days he remembers it. And with hashish he'd built his

own system to pay for what the upper phases spent and to get through the lead weight of the lower ones. At the wheel he was a marvel and on the road he was a disaster, both at once and without it striking him as a contradiction: he didn't give a toss about traffic signs any more than about the rules of living alongside other people or the entire criminal code, and he didn't give a toss about them precisely because of what he had. Which is why, in the years he spent away, that job of driver for a gang that robbed banks, the one who waits with the engine running while inside whatever happens happens, fitted him like a glove cut to measure. Everything he did in this life he did with a car underneath him.

And where it came from, while we're at it, because there was always mental illness in my family. Papers to prove it, none. For something to get written down you first need the words, and the Herreras, when it comes to words for what really matters, have been overdrawn all our lives. My grandfather on my father's side was born in one of those southern villages where the only thing there is is the village, and there they said of him that he was a man of contrasts, which was the polite country way of saying what I dispose of today with an acronym and a manual under my arm. Stretches of an energy and a good humour that carried the whole family off with them; and then, with no warning and with nothing having happened, weeks shut in his room without coming out, without talking and without wanting to see anybody. In the villages back then that wasn't a diagnosis. It was a character. That's just how he is, they said. And on with the harvest.

History went over that man twice, and still nobody had thought to ask him how he was coping with his own business. As a young man they took him off to a war in Africa, to the rear, to load crates and keep the accounts of what other men were spending on killing each other, and about that he never said a word in his life. Then came the one here. He had a brother on the left, and the summer it all blew up they took the brother out of the village and he didn't come back. That brother existed, he was my blood, and I know his name. My grandfather was marked out for the same thing, so he walked over the mountains into the other zone, and my grandmother stayed in this one with her hands three years deep in the wounds of the lads coming down from the front, on the side that ended up winning. And that was exactly what saved his skin when the time came to settle accounts: my grandmother's decency worked as his safe conduct. Other families have a title deed and some land behind them. Mine has that. Afterwards they gave him his post back, he ended up working on the railways, he

moved his family from one town to the next until he came to rest in Barcelona, and in old age he was a lovely grandfather who'd stand over the stove making his grandchildren's dinner. And he was also, depending on the day, a man of sharp edges, the kind whose mood we could read at home from the noise the keys made going into the lock. Both things were true and neither of them was bad faith: they were the contrasts of a lifetime, plus two wars and a brother who didn't come back and who nobody helped him carry. With a rucksack like that, let somebody come and tell me who walks away unhurt.

My father was born once the guns had gone quiet, a literal child of the peace, and he arrived wearing my grandfather's contrasts with the volume turned up. And I arrived with my father's turned up again. An echo that, instead of dying away, comes back louder off every wall.

Here I have to pull the handbrake, because for years I told this leaning on one word, epigenetics, and it suited me beautifully: my grandfather's trauma had touched the genes he handed to my father, and my father's trauma the ones he handed to me. I went and checked before putting it in writing, and it turns out it doesn't hold up like that. I'd rather be left without a gorgeous metaphor than put in a false fact, however gorgeous the metaphor was. What is more than settled is that this illness is one of the most heritable in the whole of psychiatry: twin studies, which are the clean way of separating what comes in the blood from what comes from the house, put most of the risk on the genes, and that is classic genetics, the old-fashioned kind. The son of a father with this has a good many more tickets in the draw than the neighbour across the landing, and even so the likeliest thing is still that it won't come up, because there isn't one gene, there are hundreds, each putting in its grain of sand, and a lot of them have to come together. In my case a lot of them came together. The other settled thing is that trauma does travel from one generation to the next, which is what this whole chapter is about, but by the routes you can point at: what the atmosphere of a house is like, how you're brought up, what you learn from watching, the stress of a pregnant mother and, above all, the story, what a family says out loud and what it decides not to say.

What hasn't been shown in people is the other part: that an experience leaves a chemical mark on the cells your children are made from and that the mark drifts all the way down to the grandchildren like a message in a bottle. The idea is out there, it's being researched, in an interview it goes down a treat, but in humans the evidence is thin and hotly argued over, and there's a biological prob-

lem underneath it as well: those marks are wiped almost entirely in two sweeps, one when those cells are formed and another right after fertilisation. So I'll put it the way it can be put without lying: from my father I inherited genes that already came loaded from the factory, and I inherited as well his house, his fear, the way he planted himself in the world and a family history that was never told out loud. That's more than enough to explain the chain. I don't need a molecule.

And if the chain sounds louder at every jump, it's for a very concrete reason: my grandfather never got a name for his, and my father did have one, but he lacked the thing that actually does the work, which is the net. Consistency, check-ups, people around you who know what happens when a man comes off lithium, because lithium on its own holds nobody up. That's what there wasn't in this family, and it has taken me forty years and five admissions to learn it. My sister Sonia wrote not long ago, while she was hunting for a photograph of him to remember him by, that he was a man who called himself mad and who fought that madness without knowing it was probably what gave him most of his charm; that not all of it was lovely, that there was pain and a lot of fear, but that the charisma and the tenderness ended up tipping the scales the other way. That's the man I come from. And a family that has spent twenty years remembering him without once writing down the word monster.

Chapter 3 · From Thirteen to Eighteen

My parents separated the year I turned thirteen, or a few months before it, and that school year everything came down at once, as if somebody had pulled the tablecloth. The house was mortgaged and had to go for whatever it would fetch; my mother moved us to a flat in another town; I left the private school and landed in the state secondary. One single year for the three things. She had separated because she'd seen the lining of the thing: she found the hashish and understood what my father actually did for a living. And here is what, after turning it over a thousand times, still resists me: knowing that, she let me carry on getting into that car. What went on inside those trips she never knew, and I put that in writing and I'll sign it wherever it's needed, but the business she was clear about. And she let me go. And I went happily, which is the half of the truth I least fancy telling. Those trips were the way out of the school, which I hated and where I was bullied, and the way out too of the shit life I was living. Between hashish in the boot and an eight o'clock class, I took the boot without thinking twice.

The rest of the hours I spent in my room in front of a computer. The internet back then had no law in it whatsoever, and anybody who was there knows I'm not exaggerating: text channels, forums, cables joining rooms enormous distances apart without anybody knowing who was at the other end, and without anybody caring to find out. The computer was in my bedroom. Parental controls, none. And on top of that the very particular loneliness of the fat kid with a father wrapped up in his own affairs and a mother working herself into the ground.

It didn't come down all at once. At the start it was talk: somebody asking, somebody with time, the novelty of adults listening to you the way nobody near you listened. Then came trust, which goes up slowly and with presents. Then the requests, said as if they were the most normal thing in the world. And then the rest of it.

It wasn't one man. It was a great many, from thirteen to eighteen. Grown men who came across a fat boy with nobody at the bad corners of the network and did with him exactly what those men do. They beat me. They humiliated me. They tied me up. They urinated on me and in my mouth. They degraded me in every way a child who is in no position to say no gets degraded, and they put me into child pornography that I carry branded on me for life. I write it like this once and I don't repeat it, because the full inventory is no use to anybody but me. And it didn't stop of its own accord: it carried on until I was eighteen and it stayed inside me turned into habit, the cruising, the meetings with disgusting men and repellent fantasies; at eighteen I started going into saunas, and years later would come sex with drugs. Two decades on, with a psychiatrist in front of me, I still couldn't give any of it its name.

I'm going to take one out of the pile, because his mark gets a chapter to itself further on and I'd rather leave it laid down here, the way you lay out a rope before you pull on it. That man used to tie me to the bed. He left me unable to move, he raped me like that, with me unable to shift an arm, and he took photographs. I was thirteen. The panic of not being able to move is a trauma in its own right, and it arrives ahead of any thought: the animal inside giving the order to run and the body not obeying. With that alone there's more than enough. But the photographs put the other half of the damage on top, because they meant it didn't end when it ended: on some hard drive somewhere in the world there is a tied-up boy who is still available to whoever pays. Keep this paragraph. Further on, in these same pages, there is another bed and there is a tied-up boy again.

With paperwork, this time.

And in case anything was missing, in those same years it was my father who got me into prostitution. The first time I had sex it was with a prostitute and the idea was his. I went on using prostitutes until I was twenty, and not because I'd picked it off a list of options: it's that I didn't know any other sexuality. A transactional thing, disconnected, the body working as a service you hire, with its price, its duration and its finishing time. So that, with the men on the computer pulling from one side and my father from the other, what I had learned about sex by that age came to two things, and neither of them was sex: that my body belonged to whoever had the strength to take hold of it, and that other people's were rented by the hour.

What I could name was the result: an early, broken sexual awakening, and a hypersexuality that psychiatry would later give the surname reactive (that is, the desperate swipe of somebody trying to get back a body that was desecrated) and that I spent twenty years taking for the way I was made, without it occurring to me that it was the exact blueprint of what had been done to me at thirteen.

This is where the business crosses with the illness, and it's worth braking here, because that crossing is the whole thesis of this book. I'll start with what is well measured: among the people who end up developing this, the ones who suffered maltreatment or abuse as children have their onset younger, pile up more episodes, more attempts to take themselves out of the picture, more substances and a worse course than the ones who didn't go through it. Nobody should read that backwards: trauma doesn't manufacture the disorder, the disorder came written into the genes and I've told that part already. What early trauma does, on a brain that's already carrying the predisposition, is bring the clock forward and turn up the volume on everything else. With my surname and my grandfather, a boy already had tickets in the draw. With my surname, my grandfather and five years of that, the tickets were a great many more, and they were tickets for the prize to come up early and come up badly.

And there's a second thing, subtler, that nobody around me knew how to read. Hypersexuality is not a sin with a modern name stuck on it: in this illness it's catalogued as a symptom, and it appears among the criteria the manuals require for mania and hypomania, next to insomnia and grandiosity. Three motors get started at once. Desire goes up, because the reward system is running at a rate of revolutions that isn't its own and suddenly everything gleams. Inhibition falls away, and what's forbidden stops being frightening and starts calling. And the calculation of risk goes to sleep, so the consequences simply don't come into the sum. It also has a signature that gives it away, which is that it follows mood the way a shadow follows a body: up there it fires off, and in depression it goes out into the most absolute indifference. While the episode lasts there is no shame at all, there is euphoria; the shame turns up afterwards, when your head comes back clear and you have to recognise as your own acts you don't recognise. Mania doesn't uncover hidden desires in you: it manufactures them and it deforms them, the same way it manufactures impossible purchases and plans for saving the world that it occurs to nobody to take for anybody's deep truth.

Right, then, and now put the two together: when mania started that motor of mine, the motor had been running since I was thirteen down a lane built to

measure for it. There's the mixture, and there's the reason nobody saw it. If for everybody around you what a man does in bed comes out of what that man is, then, on the day that man breaks, what has broken doesn't look like an illness. It looks like his character. I'd spent fifteen years covering with my body what happened at thirteen and what my father did, and they ended up calling that the way I was made. A symptom is not an identity. The person who outside the episode chooses, takes care and recognises himself in what he does is not disproved by whatever mania may have done with his body: he answers for what's his, but he isn't defined by that. It has taken me twenty years to be able to write that sentence without it sticking in my throat.

And one other thing stayed with me out of all of it, and it's not a trifle. I bite the inside of my cheek. Always on the same side, always in the same spot, until it's raw. I've done it since I was thirteen. Since that. And it has never gone away. The women I've lived with must have caught me at it a thousand times and thought nothing of it, among other reasons because I thought nothing of it either: one more oddity of mine. Today I do know when it turns up. It turns up with the intrusive thoughts. And it turns up in calm as well, on the sofa, watching a series with Laia, out of nowhere and without my deciding anything. I find out when I've already been at it a while. What exactly it is, I still don't know. I have it written down to ask my psychiatrist: whether it's a tic, whether it's a way of absenting myself from where I am, or whether it's something else. The only thing I'm clear about is that a thirteen-year-old boy started doing it for some reason, and that the boy has spent twenty-eight years doing it inside a man of forty-one who no longer remembers what the reason was.

Chapter 4 • The Visiting Room

The first time I watched live one of those horrors that stop the whole world, I was on a ferry, with my father, with my brother Gabriel and with the hold looking after our car loaded with hashish. Gabriel came along on those trips the same as I did, but he knew nothing about any of it: he's nearly four years older than me, and for him it was a holiday, and thank God it was. On the ship's television, which ran off an aerial and looked terrible, all snow and breaks because we were in the middle of the Mediterranean, you could see the thing burning and see it repeated over and over. And I understood what it meant. I don't know where that came from, but I understood, with that odd sensitivity I've always had to collective disasters and that has stayed with me through every one that has come since, one by one, without skipping any: they have all gone all the way in.

And what I did that day, while it was happening, was shut myself in the ship's toilet, take hold of the lavatory brush and suck it while I masturbated.

That was what those men had left inside me. That was my state as a kid, on a boat, with my father and my brother on the other side of the door, ten metres away and the world burning on a screen. I tell it because it needs telling, and because today I have the name for what it was and then I didn't: it's a documented consequence of sexual abuse in childhood. A child who has sexuality put into him before his time and by force is left with that sexuality welded to degradation, and in adolescence the business comes back as compulsive, self-degrading behaviour with no relation to desire, which goes off when there's stress and which the lad doesn't understand even while he's doing it. A threat on the scale of the whole world, seen live, switches on the body's alarm; and in somebody with that history behind him, the alarm comes out through the only channel that was forced open in him at thirteen. There's no perversion and there's no choice. There's a symptom doing the only thing it was taught to do. And if I've decided to tell this, it's because there are worse things I've decided not to tell. Whoever needs to know already knows.

A few months later they came for my father. They'd been on the trail of the money and the phones for a while, and in the end the whole weight of the hashish came down on him. Drug trafficking. Remand. I'd been crossing borders inside that car since I was eight, and suddenly, in a single day, the car, the trips and the man disappeared from the house.

And then the visits started, which is the part nobody ever tells. Waiting outside, the queue, the search, and then inside a visiting room, a dirty pane of glass and a telephone. My father a hand's width away and no touching him. And that isn't one bad afternoon: that's months, and it repeats at the same hour, with the same queue and with the same bag. My mother, Sonia and I went. Back then I knew nothing about the vow my mother had made twenty-five years earlier in an identical queue, with Sonia inside her belly; I found that out much later, reading her. And they'd put my father in the wing where they kept the ones who were like him, medicated by force, with the look of a man who can no longer tell which side of the real he's on, and every week a little further away from himself. Seeing your father in an official cage, turned into a file with a number, drugged because somebody else decided it, left me with the kind of terror of psychiatry and institutions that doesn't answer to reasoning, and it took me twenty years to be able to look at it head-on.

Of those men in the last chapter there's one I have to give separate room to, because he doesn't fit the mould of the others and because, precisely by not fitting it, he did a different kind of damage, subtler and much longer-lasting. I'm going to call him Sergio. A man twice my age who worked in an office. I was fifteen. He'd come and fetch me from the house in his car, we'd clear off to the waste ground on the edge of town and the hours would go there. And here is what makes him different from the rest: it wasn't only sex that was in those hours. There was conversation. He asked me about my life, he listened to me, he gave the impression that what was happening to me mattered to him. We kissed at length (and mind you, I have never liked kissing a man, but I pushed that to one side because he liked it and because, for the first time, I had the feeling somebody was there). It was the nearest thing I had to a partner in the whole of my adolescence, and there's the black joke in all of it. I leave it written exactly as I lived it then, even if today I can read it with the manual open beside me: what I felt as affection, and what was the closest to love a lonely lad could imagine, was the mechanism of abuse working with clockwork precision. A grown man doesn't turn tender with a boy of fifteen out of love. He turns tender

so the boy won't go. And that homosexuality of mine back then, which had me in a muddle for so many years, wasn't an orientation: it was a broken, lonely adolescent, raped by older men, holding on to the only affection within reach of his hand, even if it came poisoned.

And one day he vanished. Overnight, without a word or a warning. He stopped answering the phone, blocked me and got me out of the way the way you delete a file that's in your road. A good few years later I joined up the ends, which is the only thing I know how to do: he had a partner while he was with me, and the likeliest thing is that she or he saw a message and cut it off at the root to save an orderly adult life with a secret in it. But at fifteen I was nowhere near that analysis. I had the hole and nothing else. It was one of my first abandonments, and out of it came all the ones that followed.

So that year the whole lot came down on the same person, and in this order. The man disappeared all at once. My father went into prison. And I stopped setting foot in school and stayed shut up at home, with a mother flattened by what had happened to her husband who had no strength left to drag me out of bed every morning. That's where my first depression came from, the one they treated with drips and that appears in my notes almost as an administrative entry, with its date beside it. The cause appears in no report.

They took me to a psychologist. The same one, as it happens, who had seen me at eight or nine and had given me an intelligence test on which I came out at a hundred and forty, and that can go in the file, just in case anybody says otherwise later on. Now I was sixteen and sunk, and he saw me with my mother sitting beside me, in the same room, which made opening up impossible. About the abuse I didn't say half a word, and it wasn't for lack of opportunity: it's that for me it wasn't abuse. I had it filed in my head as a sexual initiation, closed, sealed and stamped, and I was so ashamed I'd have died before talking about it with anybody. And there's a poison here that nobody on earth talks about and that I have to say in full, because otherwise none of this makes sense: the poison is having enjoyed something you repudiate today. Because there was attention. There were presents. There were, for the first time in my life, adults who listened to me. And a kid's body responds to what a kid's body responds to, and then that kid spends half his life convinced that he did something, or that he took part, or that he liked it. Well, no. I was thirteen and I had neither the legal capacity nor the maturity to consent to any of it. Full stop. They were grown men and they knew perfectly well what they were up to.

What I did tell the psychologist was that I was in a bad way because I didn't have a girlfriend. That what I wanted was a girlfriend, like anybody else. And the psychologist came out with a sentence it took me half a lifetime to decipher: that it wasn't about being fat. That what girls my age were after was a lad who'd be there for them, who'd take notice of them, who'd love them. That what they wanted was to be loved. At the time I didn't get it, obviously, I was sixteen and my head was anywhere else. I got it a good few years and a good few bills later. Good advice, the man's. The trouble is it was two sessions and that was that. Because what was concluded there was that the depression was logical: with the father in prison and the lad out of school, what did anybody expect. And that was as far as the analysis went. Two sessions and out on the street.

In that office there were two things nobody saw, and both of them were on the table. One: in the chair there was a sixteen-year-old lad, depressed, whose father was diagnosed with this illness and was being medicated by force in the wing of a prison. And a depression in the adolescent son of a man with this is, no more and no less, the most classic way this illness has of presenting itself. In more than half of cases the first episode isn't a mania: it's a depression, in adolescence or shortly after, identical to any other depression, until years later the first rise turns up and the whole thing has to be reread backwards. The imprisoned father did come into the analysis; what the father had did not. With that one question, the name of my thing would have been on that table seventeen years before they gave it to me. And two: having a father in prison is one of the ten adverse childhood experiences that get measured today in half the world, off the back of a study done almost thirty years ago with thousands of people. It's the least frequent of the ten, which is also why it's the one least asked about. The children of prisoners have nearly twice the mental health problems of other children, and around one in seven meets the criteria for post-traumatic stress. One in seven. I didn't know that. And nobody asked what a sixteen-year-old was doing in the queue at a prison visiting room, or what stays inside him when he sees his father dopey on the other side of the glass. A lad who is told his depression is logical doesn't get the cause treated: he gets his mood certified.

That was the first professional who had me in front of him and didn't see it. He wasn't the last.

Chapter 5 • The Exemption

They let my father out on an exemption. I use the lawyers' word because it's the one that stuck to me at sixteen and the one I've had to hear again, with a different face in front of me, twenty years later. An exemption is this: a court accepts that the man in front of it did what he did with an illness inside him, that the illness was deciding for him, and that therefore he can't be punished the way a whole man is punished. They explained it to him. They accepted it. They opened the door. And that was the end of that.

I was sixteen when I saw him go in and when I saw him come out, and on both journeys I was inside the car. Of the first I've already told what there is. Of the second I remember less than I should, and I have an explanation that works for me today and didn't then: what came home that day wasn't the man who had left. It was the shadow. The same clothes, the same way of sitting in the car as if the seat belonged to him, and inside nothing. Prison finished the job of breaking him. And what he was given on the way out was exactly what he'd had on the way in: nothing in his hand. No treatment that would hold, no psychiatrist to follow him up, nobody to sit down with him, or with us, and explain what he had. They recognised the illness in order to let him out and they handed him back to the street with it inside him.

And there's the seam this whole book is stitched along. The law has it provided for, what you do with a person who is recognised as not having been master of his acts because of an illness: instead of the sentence, treatment, follow-up, sometimes a committal; something that holds up the reason the sentence was waived. My father got neither the one nor the other. The system looked at his illness through a magnifying glass for exactly as long as it took to decide what to do with the file, and as soon as the file was closed the illness stopped being of interest to anybody. That's what I want understood, because it will be back: that institutions recognise that somebody is ill when it suits them for letting him go, for filing him away, for getting him off their hands, and are perfectly incapable of recognising it when recognising it would oblige them to

do something. The illness, for them, is a formality. My father came out of there with an exemption and with an untreated bipolar disorder, and of the two things only one was going to go on working, and it wasn't the one with the court's stamp on it.

And there's a symmetry I find hard to write. They recognised his illness in order to let him out and afterwards left him alone with it. Me, almost twenty years later, they put that same illness on headed paper, and even then it had to be fought instance by instance for somebody to sit down and read the paper. The two of us with the same thing inside and the same surname. And of the two, the one who ended up worst was the one who went a long way from home to die in the countryside.

And that left the fear of institutions on me for good. Not an idea a man holds or an opinion you can argue over at dinner: a response the body lets go of without waiting for you to think. When at thirty-three they put me on a locked ward, my head wasn't on that ward: it was in front of that pane of glass. You didn't have to be Freud to know where the panic came from. All you had to do was read my notes, which were on the table.

And then there are the envelopes, the doorbells and the uniforms. An envelope in the letterbox with a little window and a letterhead. A doorbell at an hour when I'm not expecting anybody. A uniform on the pavement opposite, not coming for me or for anyone, just standing there looking at a phone. Any of those three stops my body for a second, puts my pulse up and puts a sixteen-year-old queueing with a bag into the pit of my stomach. A second later I already know the envelope is from the bank and the uniform is waiting for a colleague. But that second isn't mine to control. Another part of the brain controls it, one that learned very early something very simple: that authority could come looking for you, and that when it came, it took somebody away.

And with that fear underneath I did, a few years later, something that makes me laugh today and that at the time looked like a way out: I started studying for the police entrance exams, with the woman I was with then, Patricia, backing me. I gave it up almost at once, as soon as it hit me that with what I drag around where authority is concerned I was never going to be happy in that uniform, and that there was a rather fine black comedy in the idea of putting on the uniform that terrified me so that it would stop terrifying me. To understand where that fear came from I still had fifteen years and a few admissions to go.

And it left me, in the opposite direction to what anybody would expect of a lad who grew up sitting on top of the hashish, a terror of the law that has made me the most law-abiding citizen I know, the sort who pays every last charge. My father spent his life on the other side of that line, first as the gang's driver and then in the hashish. I was brought up knowing what that costs, and my body took minutes without consulting me. A couple of times somebody has come to me with the offer of dealing, of making real, easy money, and both times I said no on the spot, for that exact reason and no other.

And it doesn't stop at the paperwork. Other people's things I have never touched. Not once. In a souvenir shop I'm incapable of slipping a fridge magnet into my pocket, that nothing of a theft half the world has committed at some point and nobody remembers the next day. It beats me. And I say that with the authority of a man who has been through mania, through hypomania, through being off his head and through having his judgement reduced to rubble, which is the situation in which you literally do whatever you feel like: not even then. Everything I did while I was ill is going to come up in this book, and taking what isn't mine doesn't come up, because it didn't happen. Which is why it stings so much, the way this ended up turning: I spent my entire life running from my father's shadow by being the straightest man in the queue, and what finally sat me down in a courtroom wasn't greed, and it wasn't bad faith. It was health.

Chapter 6 • The Waste Ground

I was twenty when my father died.

He'd gone months without taking his lithium. And mind, he wasn't throwing it away: he was putting it aside. That's what has to be understood about that summer, and it took me years to be able to look at it straight. A man with the diagnosis already on him, who nobody had followed up since he came out, stopped taking the pill that held him up and set it aside, dose by dose, in some corner of the house, until he had the quantity he was after. Then he disappeared. And on the last night, before he went, he put a hand on my shoulder and came out with a sentence that sounded to me then like another of his oddities and that today I read for what it was:

"Look after your sister."

It took them nearly two months to find him. I spent that summer the way you spend a summer at twenty with a vanished father who had vanished other times before: waiting and not waiting at the same time. I was living in a shared flat in the town I'd moved to in order to be nearer Marta, a girl from my crowd who in a few years is going to eat half this novel, and the night my mother's phone rang I was getting dressed to go out with the lads from the flat to the going-out quarter. They'd found him a long way from home, on waste ground up on the mountain, behind some rocks. I hung up, got into my boy-racer car and pulled out of there burning rubber, with nearly a packet of cigarettes gone in a forty-five-minute drive I did in under thirty. I had to get to my mother and to my brother Gabriel, and the road went on forever.

At the mortuary the pathologist was straight with me, and to this day I'm grateful to her.

"Don't go in. The wallet is enough."

The wallet came soaked in a grease that by then wasn't grease any more, and the identity card was inside it, and that settled the identification. She told me she didn't want (she, as if it were her own business, and in a way it was) me to be left with that image of my father. I did as she said. And I did as she said be-

cause I knew perfectly well what was on the other side of that door: at twenty I had already seen, on those gore pages that went round back then and that posted uncut everything the television wouldn't show, bodies photographed decomposing at the scene, and I knew what state my father was going to be in after two months in the sun with a precision no lad of twenty ought to have. He was dried out like salt cod. That word I've spent twenty years trying to get off me, and I write it here to see if it leaves. A body out in the open, in a dry summer with the sun coming straight down, goes through phases that forensic medicine has described and that a study decades ago measured over hundreds of cases: first it swells, then it decomposes, the insects eat away at it and in the end, if the air is dry and the sun is hard, what's left mummifies and the skin stays tanned over the bone. Eight weeks my father was out there. When the identification gets done with a card instead of with a face, it's because there's no face left to recognise. At some point I can't place, my sister showed me that wallet; what did stay with me was what I felt on seeing it. I didn't go in. Of all the decisions of that month it's one of the very few I've been grateful for since, because thanks to it I don't remember him like that.

In this family funerals come with police included. They arrested my father the day we buried my grandmother, who was his mother, because they know full well that a son doesn't miss that and they use grief to get their hands on the ones who are on the run. There were plain-clothes officers mixed in with the mourners, and they took him away in handcuffs in front of everyone. First they let him hug my mother goodbye, and he used the hug to slip his false papers into her coat pocket, which were exactly what they couldn't be allowed to find on him. I was very small and I don't remember any of it. I know it because she tells it, left standing there with those papers squeezed in her pocket, burning her hand, while they took her husband away. At my father's funeral, on the other hand, nobody came for him. It was us and nobody else.

It was devastating for everybody except me, and that needs explaining. Sonia had written him a text. Only she can write a thing like that, hyper-emotional and exact at the same time, because my sister has a sensitivity and a head that don't come along often. The thing is she couldn't read it out. I read it, dressed up in a false solemnity that held almost to the end; in the last lines I came within an inch of breaking. I didn't break. I held my whole face. At twenty that looked like strength, and later I understood it was something else, and that the something else gets paid for in instalments and with interest.

From that day I'm left with a door and a pair of arms. Marta didn't come. We'd met in the youth group of a church, which my brother was also mixed up in, and the one who introduced us was Vanessa, who at the time was my girlfriend. We were all from the same crowd and that afternoon they all came, even Marta's brother with his girlfriend. Not her. And the reason for it the two of us had manufactured between us: ours started with me leaving Vanessa for her, and afterwards, already with her, Vanessa came looking for me and I slept with Vanessa. Marta found out through the group and left me, so planting herself in that funeral, with Vanessa standing there and the whole church watching, was simply impossible. I have never held it against her, not at the time and not later: the cheating was mine and the circumstances we'd both set up. I leave it written down because a lad watching the door of a funeral parlour to see if somebody comes in is an image I haven't been able to let go of for twenty years, and because that door stayed unopened a good many more times. And in that same funeral parlour there was Vanessa, the only partner of mine who ever met my father alive. She put her arms round me and stayed with me the whole afternoon. I'm not writing it to give anybody marks. I'm writing it because what I took away from that day was that: a door I looked over from top to bottom, and a pair of arms that were there.

I didn't take the bereavement leave, when I could have. The next day I was back in the office working, as if the dried-out body and the text read out loud had happened to somebody in a film I once saw. What I did do was go out at night, buy a bottle anywhere with its shutters still up and spend hours walking, or sitting on a bench, drinking just enough for the thoughts to go soft without quite leaving. That was the first time I used alcohol to handle something I had no other way of handling. Real alcoholism would come years later and has chapters of its own; but it was on those benches that I found out what it was good for: for wrapping in cotton wool a thing that, touched bare, couldn't be touched.

And I asked nothing. That's the part that still gets me. I didn't ask since when he'd been off the pills, or where he had them hidden, or whether anybody noticed, or why he went so far away, or what he did in his last hours. Not my mother, not my sister, not anybody. A lad of twenty who knew the entire decomposition process of a body by heart and who wasn't capable of formulating a single question about the decomposition of a man. I ask myself those ques-

tions now, with the answers already written in my notes, and I answer them on my own.

Because it's time to name the hardest thing in this whole story, and here there's no room for half a joke: bipolar disorder kills. And I don't say that as a figure of speech. It has one of the highest suicide rates in the whole of psychiatry, far above that of people who don't have it, and I don't put it in to frighten anybody but so it's understood once and for all that treatment is not a whim or a fashionable label. The idea of finishing doesn't turn up as the reasoned conclusion of somebody who has weighed his life in the balance and decided it doesn't pay. It turns up as a symptom. The bottom pole of this illness doesn't sadden you: it deceives you. It puts into your head, in the tone of somebody stating a mathematical truth, that none of this can be mended, that there's no way out, that your people would do better without you on top of them. And it does it with the same mechanism mania uses to convince you that you're a god: by operating on precisely the organ that decides whether a life is worth living. My father didn't give up out of weakness or out of selfishness. His judgement went out in the worst possible minute, on his own and with nobody near. That voice, when it comes (and it comes), goes out in two ways and no more, and both have to be in place beforehand, the way you hang a fire extinguisher on the wall: knowing that it's the illness talking and that it lies, and not staying alone with it, telling somebody, which is exactly what the voice doesn't want you to do and exactly what has to be done. And there's another thing nobody knew then, and me least of all: losing a father to suicide is not a bereavement like the others. People don't know what to say to you, so they say nothing, and in that gap the children score higher on shame and on guilt and have, and this is measured, more risk of ending up admitted and of repeating the gesture. I joined that group at twenty, with his illness in my genes and with no idea about anything.

And anybody who reads all this without having known him is going to be left with the worst half of a man who was a great deal more. My father was the most affectionate of fathers. He loved us with an intensity I understand better now than I did then: he went without for us, he gave us everything to the point of overdoing it, and that way he had of giving had a reason behind it that turns sad the moment you understand it, which is that he was giving us what he'd gone without in a post-war where there was nothing. That's where the other thing came from too, the hoarding, because he ended up keeping everything, and today that's in the manuals with a name of its own and back then it was

simply that your father doesn't throw anything out. And now the conclusion underneath all of it, which has taken me forty years to be able to say out loud: his was worse than mine. This hasn't been climbing from one generation to the next the way the fable of cursed inheritances tells it, which is lovely and is a lie. It has been coming down. My picture is less deep than his, and on top of that I have what he never came to have: the name, the explanation and people around me who know what happens when somebody comes off lithium.

He had this brain and this same box of pills, and one day he decided that was far enough. I swallow the salt twice a day, and every time it has to be broken in half I ring my mother. That's the whole distance between dying in a field at sixty-six and sitting here writing this. There is no third act.

Chapter 7 • The Body

Up to twelve or thirteen I went to a private school, one of the expensive ones, which my father paid for with drug money, and that detail explains half the country. There they'd nicknamed me the walking encyclopedia, for the number of books I got through, and I was an obese child, and that weighed on me, never more literally, though it weighed a good deal less than making the whole class laugh. I had friends. They were fond of me. Then came the separation, the move and the jump to a state secondary, and a change like that shows in the first break of the first day. The erudition that had been admired at the private school was read at the secondary as showing off; the extra weight, tolerated there, turned here into the joke of every morning; and the encyclopedia became that know-it-all who needed taking down a peg, with his empty breaks and a set of nicknames I'd still rather not put in writing.

And then she appeared. She was one of those girls who at fourteen already took something seriously: she got up to train while the rest of us were still asleep, with the discipline of somebody who knows that in that particular thing you can't improvise. Her name I don't remember, and it isn't a narrator's delicacy: memory has kept the wound and rubbed out the signature. She was the only person in the entire school who sat beside me, who talked to me in the breaks, who stuck up for me. And, as happens with any affection that arrives while you're drowning, I fell in love with her with the total fixation of the adolescent nobody wants and who suddenly somebody does. At home her father didn't treat her well, and on one of those walks in which two adolescents sort out the world before tea she told me her dream plan: clearing off to an aunt's house, in a province far away. Away from her father and away from everything. And between the two of us we ended up building the plan.

One ordinary morning we pretended to be going to class, took a city bus to the station, bought two tickets to the aunt's province and sat down together. I had a present for her: a pendant I'd picked out from my sister's, which is the sort of romantic and mildly criminal gesture you only commit at fourteen. When the

bus left the city behind, I felt for the first time in a long while something that resembled freedom. What I didn't know was that she'd told a few people in our class; not to betray me, I suppose, but out of that adolescent need for somebody to know you're about to do something big. The class told the teachers when they took the register, the teachers rang the houses and the chain of command worked with admirable precision, the only admirable precision of my entire schooling. Her father, the father she was running away from, took the car, caught the bus up on the road and waved the driver down. The bus pulled onto the hard shoulder. The man got on, made the two of us get off without raising his voice and put us in his car. Five or six hours back. Me in the rear, silent, my face against the window seeing nothing; her in front, answering in monosyllables; and him driving without once putting an eye to the mirror, as if nobody were travelling in the back seat. That indifference humiliated me more than any shouting. He dropped me at my front door and said nothing to me. She didn't say goodbye either. And she never spoke to me again in her life: not a hello in the corridor, not a look, not an explanation. It was the first time I was blocked, twenty years before that word meant what it means today.

What broke in that back seat didn't get mended with punishments. I started skipping classes, whole mornings lying about in parks and in the libraries of neighbourhoods that weren't mine, and when my father went into prison I stopped going at all and shut myself up at home with the computers. It was in that bedroom that I reached the worst number of my life on a set of scales.

Out of that, by way of an operating theatre, came the body I have to talk about now. As an adolescent I was operated on to lose weight (it was my mother's decision and I signed it with my eyes shut, because anything that got me out of that confinement looked good to me), and in under a year I lost more than half of what I weighed. And here comes the detail that never appears in any before and after: when you lose that much at that speed, the skin doesn't go back. It stays hanging. And that gets taken off in an operating theatre. They call it cosmetic surgery and the name deceives, because it's major surgery: general anaesthetic, drains hanging off your body for weeks and a pain that won't even let you sit up on your own. There were several operations, and I was eighteen. I still go about covered in scars they gave me before I was old enough to vote.

That new body needed somewhere to put down the energy it suddenly had going spare. I found the weights room. Then powerlifting. Then Olympic weightlifting. An impeccable gym CV, and what was underneath it: bigorexia,

the same compulsion that had run my adolescence, now devoted to manufacturing muscle, one more attempt to write over the top of a body other people had taken without asking. Along the way I got my school certificate at an adult education centre, went into a computing firm as an intern, was taken on permanently and, with the first real wages, bought the car I'd been dreaming of for half my life, a boy-racer car that, added to that body, opened another world for me: all at once I was somebody women looked at and men respected. Half a life waiting for that film and they put the whole of it on in one sitting.

And now what really matters about those years, which is what I'd have liked somebody to explain to me at the time. Through that entire stretch, with Patricia (the steady relationship of my twenties, a woman from my town with whom I led a genuinely orderly life), I was taking absolutely nothing. No medication, no diagnosis, no treatment. The illness was already inside me, the abuse had already happened, my father was already buried, every risk counter was already on the board. And even so I was stable for years. And faithful, on top of it, which in my biography is a clinical fact before it's a virtue. Why? Because without having the faintest idea I was doing precisely what gets prescribed today: rhythm. Getting up always at the same hour, training every day, eating what a body that trains has to eat, sleeping (and a body wrecked by weights sleeps), a job with fixed hours and a woman waiting for me at home. There's a whole therapy built on top of this, and a study twenty years ago measured that patients who had their social rhythms put in order, meaning sleep, meals, exercise and the hour you see people, took far longer for the phases to come back. I hadn't read a line about any of it. I simply trained, and sport held my head in place with the same efficiency the salt holds it today, and with a better taste. The first time I broke the habit of sport everything else broke behind it, but that has a chapter of its own. With its qualifications, because I don't want to sell anybody a paradise: I drank at weekends the way half the country drinks, and one snowy night, back in the town, somebody put something in my glass that I don't even know what it was, I went down like a stone in the middle of a club and spent three days between intensive care and internal medicine at the northern hospital, which was my first visit to the place that years later was going to call me by my first name. That one I hadn't gone looking for. The years of the body were the clean years.

And in the middle of those years, three after the waste ground, Britney reappeared. Britney is what came before everything: my first love, at thirteen, be-

fore the men on the internet. We never got as far as kissing; we held hands and that was it, and that was more than enough. We lost track of each other, each of us fell on his own side into the hands of adults who should never have touched us, and at twenty-three I ran into her on a night out with my brother, just back myself from a holiday that had left me fairly deregulated. We recognised each other in a second. We ended up at her flat, and it was a bare couple of weeks and two or three meetings at most. Inside it was enormous, because what was happening was the thirteen-year-old thing happening again. There was no sex. There was recognition. And one night she told me she had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

And out of that comes the irony I'm going to be eating for the rest of my life and that not even lithium takes off me: I left her for that. With my father three years dead of the same thing. With no diagnosis of my own yet. With Patricia as the official excuse, very convenient and very presentable for the gallery. The real reason, which I only dared admit to myself years later, was that I didn't see myself as capable of shouldering a person with bipolar disorder. I applied to her, at her worst moment, exactly the stigma I was going to beg people not to apply to me the moment it was my turn.

There was a third time, and a last, a good many years later, with a mania on me, one of the big ones, and I behaved erratically and destructively: that time there was sex, it turned out far less memorable than what I'd been projecting since I was a kid, and the squalor of the ending I supplied entirely myself. And then came the fact I still don't know which end to pick up by: Britney had had her label swapped for a gentler one, the sort that appears in no manual and that can be said at a dinner table without anybody glancing sideways at the knives. I don't have a settled opinion about it: there are people who celebrate having got a heavy word off them, and there are people who years later come back to the public clinic with a worse picture than the one they had. What I do know is why one word sinks you and the other decorates you, when the two describe a similar person. That's called stigma, and it isn't some sociologists' notion: it weighs in kilos and you notice it the moment you lift it. Ours ended over a song I'd composed in mania and that I shouldn't have posted anywhere. She heard it, told me so to my face and warned me that it was dangerous, the state I was in. I answered appallingly, told her to mind her own business, and she cut it off. I never looked for her again. But that first love at thirteen I'm keeping.

Of that lad who had been made to believe he was invincible by a car and a new body there was nothing left, a few years later, but a bloke in his twenties with four jobs to keep the ship from going down at home. The car I sold the moment I smelled the crash coming. The body lasted me longer.

Chapter 8 • Laura

That first summer in Barcelona, with Laura, was the easiest of all the versions I could have been. She was good-looking in a quiet way, the sort who don't stop a street but make you turn round three paces later, and inside better still: loyal, well read, her head in its place, conversation enough for a whole night, left-wing of the genuine kind. She had a practical intelligence that worked as the exact counterweight to mine: while I went about thinking possibilities, connections and three projects at once, she went about thinking consequences, deadlines and concrete details. Her degree was already done (she graduated while she was with me, not long after ours started, and we celebrated it together); the one in the first year of a History degree, at twenty-five, was me. We moved in together. And it worked, for a couple of years, with nothing up anybody's sleeve.

What I'm left with of her is above all one image, and I put it here because it's worth all the others: I'd come home and she'd be waiting for me at the window, reading. No phone in her hand, no anxious watching of the street, no question prepared. Reading. It took me years to understand what that window gave me and why it gave me so much. Laura had a life of her own, plans of her own and a head of her own, and she didn't need me in order to know who she was. She was predictable in the best sense of the word, a sense a man of twenty-five doesn't know how to value and that at forty-one strikes me as the biggest compliment you can pay a person. And it wasn't only her: I spent whole days at her mother's and her sister's, eating and sleeping there, taken into a family that made room for me without asking anything back.

And in that house Laura did a job on me that nobody had commissioned and that today I'm more grateful for than for anything else. I turned up with a pose on, and I'll name it without make-up: the alpha, the shagger, the one riding very high, with the new body just out of its box and the boy-racer car just sold and all that testosterone looking for somewhere to put itself. I don't tell it with nostalgia, I tell it with shame. And it's worth splitting hairs here, because I already

know who is going to read this paragraph through a magnifying glass: the profile in social terms I have never given, neither for what I think nor for how I've treated the women in my life. Macho stunts I did pull, a fair few, the kind that come out of the body before you get as far as thinking them. One day we ran into an ex of hers in the street who used to harass her and give her a lot of grief, and I planted myself in front of him with my fists closed, holding his eye, wearing the face of a man one word away from splitting your mouth open. Nothing happened. But that wasn't me: that was the weekend's alcohol, and it was the textbook macho move on top of it, the one where you protect the woman by turning yourself into the danger. Laura, who was precisely the opposite of that kind of boy, didn't find it funny at all, and she told me so each and every time the streak came out, without shouting and without sermons, with a patience that still strikes me today as a miracle of pedagogy. In two years she took the pose off me. And mind you, I don't believe in the word deconstruction, or at least not the way it's sold: nobody gets rid of what he brought from home, because what he brought is still down there in the basement, putting out roots. What you do is lay down layers on top, layers that end up weighing more than the ones underneath and doing the governing. The first of those layers, the one that decided all the rest, was laid on me by her.

Because Laura is a feminist of the real sort. Of the street and of the march, one of those who are there on the day that's marked and on the other three hundred and sixty-four. And there's the difference that impresses me: anybody goes to a huge demonstration when one is called. Being planted where you need to be planted, in the things that don't show up anywhere and don't earn anybody a like, that's another business altogether. That's groundwork, ant's work. And she has given years of her life to causes that have given her nothing back. I've never wanted to get involved in any of that, and for most of my adult life I didn't even believe in it. But I'm clear that Laura is one of the people who genuinely change the world, who are always the ones still standing there when the cameras have gone.

And that woman I left twice. Both times with the illness on me, and both times she went on being exactly the same person. The first was the winter I stopped sleeping and stopped keeping still, the winter of the first mania, which has a chapter of its own; the second, the following spring, over Rocío. How it happened and who decided what goes in its place.

I saw her again one summer, a year later, with her new boyfriend by then, shortly before they married and went off to Paris on honeymoon. And that was when she said it to me, because Laura is one of those people who know how to forgive. No bitterness, no bill presented, with that way she has of saying things like somebody pointing out that your flies are undone.

"When you're well you're the best person in the world. But you aren't always well."

I didn't understand it. I heard it the way you hear the affectionate reproach of an ex, half compliment and half receipt, and I carried on with my life, which back then was going at full speed in the wrong direction. I understood it five years later, sitting on a psychiatric ward with the diagnosis just laid on the table. Laura was right. And her rightness was the diagnosis nobody had given me yet: it was missing the letterhead and it was missing the stamp, but the text was complete. She had it four and a half years before any psychiatrist did.

And this needs explaining, because it's one of the things about this illness that get understood worst and that would save most people if they were understood. The first person to diagnose a bipolar disorder has almost never been given a medical degree. It's the people around you. It's the woman waiting for you at the window who sees, day after day, that the man coming up the stairs isn't the same one who came up them three weeks ago: that he now sleeps four hours and comes in euphoric, that he talks faster, that he has three projects open and a brilliant idea every night, and that in two months he won't be able to get off the sofa. A psychiatrist sees you for twenty minutes every three months, and in those twenty minutes you present yourself exactly as you are that day. She, on the other hand, sees the whole curve. She sees the peaks and she sees the troughs, and above all she sees that there are peaks and troughs, which is precisely what the man inside can't see. Because that's the other half of the mechanism, and it has a name, anosognosia, and it has its chapter further on: the patient is the last to find out, because the organ he'd need in order to notice is precisely the organ that's failing. From inside it's never the illness. That's why the only one who can see it is the person beside you, and that's why what the person beside you says, when it's said with the calm Laura said it to me with, is not an opinion: it's a clinical fact, the first one in existence and sometimes the only one there is for years. The trouble is that nobody is taught to read it. Not the one saying it, who doesn't know she's describing a disorder and believes she's describing a character; and not the one hearing it, who hears a reproach and starts

defending himself. Psychoeducation, when it finally comes, ought to be for the two of them. Mine came at thirty-three. Laura's never came, and she got it right anyway.

These days we meet once a year. Her with her life set up and me with mine. We sit down, we talk, and neither of us brings up the window. There's no need, either: what she saw from there I now carry written on a piece of paper with a stamp, and it took psychiatry five years, two trips to A&E and one admission to arrive at the same sentence Laura gave me for free, before she left for Paris.

Part II • THE GLOW

Chapter 9 • The First Glow

I was fourteen. It was one of those weeks at the start of spring, one of the first when you come out of school without doing up your coat, and all of a sudden the world came with a different texture. I can't explain it any better, and I've been trying for twenty-seven years. Ideas presented themselves without my calling them, hooked one to the next, each pulling the following one along like the handkerchiefs a magician pulls out of his sleeve. On four hours' sleep I got up as if I'd slept ten. Talking came to me with an ease that the week before I hadn't had anywhere about me, and the girls in my class, who until then had looked at me the way you look at a chair, started looking at me. That was what threw me most, because I hadn't changed my face, or my clothes, or anything you could point a finger at. What had changed was the speed. And it turns out speed shows from outside.

It lasted seven days. On the eighth the world went back to its usual tone, with no warning and no refund: the same school, the same desk, the same kid and the light switched off. Nobody had warned me it was going to end, among other reasons because nobody had told me it was anything. And that contrast, the light full on and behind it the usual grey, opened a series that was going to take nineteen years to be given a name. I give the exact figure because I've done the sum: fourteen when the thing started, thirty-three when somebody put it in writing.

Nobody saw it. And it wasn't for want of eyes: it's that in that house and in that school there wasn't a single word to look at it with. My mother saw an adolescent with a lot of energy who a few days later was flat again, which is, if you think about it, the exact definition of an adolescent. My father was busy enough with his own storms and with his orange bottle beside the sink to miss his son's, and this is one of the things in this story that sits worst with me when I think it all the way through: the only man in the house who knew at first hand what that was, because he had it inside him and with a diagnosis on top, was also the one least able to look. And the teachers saw an irregular pupil. Irregu-

lar: that was the word, not one more and not one less, and they stuck it on me so many times that I ended up believing it was a feature of mine, like the colour of my eyes. Brilliant in the good spells, absent in the bad. What nobody said, because nobody had the vocabulary to say it, is that the brilliant one and the absent one were the same kid at two different points of the same cycle. That the irregularity had a name. And that the name had a treatment.

Let's give it one now, twenty-seven years late, because whoever is reading is going to need it in all the chapters that follow and because at school nobody gave it to me. That week was a hypomania. Hypomania is the same picture as mania with the volume turned down, and they share the complete list of symptoms: mood through the roof or irritable, energy to spare, sleeping less and not missing it, talking without stopping, ideas escaping one after another, being distracted by the first thing that goes past, starting ten things at once with ten different aims and getting into business that can end up costing a fortune. The difference lies in three things, three and no more. That it lasts less: four days will do, instead of a week. That it doesn't wreck your life in any visible way. And that there's no psychosis and no hospital in it. The criterion is so strict that it works backwards: the moment any of those three appears, we're no longer talking about hypomania, we're talking about mania. Same illness, same phase, and the only thing separating them is how much they break. Which as a classification criterion is pretty ugly, frankly, but it's the one there is.

And out of that comes the definition of what I have, and it's worth setting it down as soon as possible. To diagnose a bipolar disorder type one, one manic episode in an entire life is enough. One. The rest of the time, which is practically all the time, the illness isn't in mania: it's in hypomania, in depression, in mixed states or in calm, and it rotates. I've had four or five of the big manias in twenty years, the sort that end in an admission. And I've had hypomania in nearly every other year, untreated, since that week in spring. Since I was fourteen.

And now what makes hypomania the most treacherous symptom in the catalogue, the one nobody fancies having treated, and I'm going to say it with an honesty almost no book about this allows itself, because out loud it's extremely uncomfortable: hypomania feels good. It isn't the euphemism of a man hunting for the good side of a disaster, or that silly business about every cloud having a silver lining. It's a fact: in that phase the brain manufactures dopamine in quantities that produce a sincerely pleasurable experience. It resembles health. It re-

semples more than health. You have the sensation of having turned at last into the best version of yourself, the one you're supposed to be carrying about inside waiting for its turn. You sleep little and don't feel it, ideas hook themselves together, you're funny, you're charming, you produce as never before, a confidence comes out of you that the rest of the year you couldn't buy. You work double, you pull, you write, you start projects. And nobody around you sees an illness in that: they see a man on a run. Nobody has ever called an ambulance because their friend was being charming. A man in hypomania doesn't get treated: he gets invited out. And he pays, on top of it.

It's the only psychiatric symptom the people around you reward. Stop and think about it: sadness frightens, insomnia worries, rage scares people off. Hypomania, on the other hand, fills the table. You're the one people want in the room, the one who makes everybody else feel seen, the one who turns an ordinary dinner into a night that gets remembered. I've been that man many times, and everybody liked it, starting with me. That's why it's a trap that builds itself: no patient wants what he lives as the best thing that has ever happened to him taken away from him, and no friend suggests to a man on splendid form that he drop in on a psychiatrist. So nobody consults anybody. You consult when you sink, if you consult at all, and by then the top half has already left and the doctor finds nothing but the pit. That's how it takes nineteen years to make a diagnosis that was written on the face of a fourteen-year-old. And that delay is the cost nobody adds up when mental health gets talked about: the dearest of the lot, and deferred as well.

And that's why hypomania is the phase relationships start in. Mine all started with that suit on, without one exception: the generous one, the one who organised everything, the one who kept the conversation going until four in the morning, the one who was up for anything and got involved in everything. And depression and mixed states are the phases they get lost in. Many years later, when I was starting to come down off a very high summer, a woman who appears further on in this book wrote to me, half joking: mister reason is back, you're a bore sometimes, I like you better when you're a bit hippyish. A bit hippyish. The hippyish was the symptom. What she liked, the ideas, the energy, the conversation till all hours, the getting on board with any plan going, was the illness in its likeable version, and what she was missing was exactly what the medication was taking off me. I don't blame her for anything. She liked the same thing I liked.

The catch is that hypomania isn't a plateau where you can settle down and live in peace. It's a slope. And the slope, if nobody brakes it, goes on climbing to a point where there's no charm left at all: full mania, psychosis, the wreckage. What it gives you at the top it charges you for at the bottom, with interest and with no chance to negotiate, because after every climb the grey always comes, and the higher you've climbed, the blacker the grey comes. At fourteen the slope was short and the grey was that of a flat adolescent over his desk; the adults filed it as one of those things at that age and got on with their own business. And I spent nineteen years paying in that currency without even knowing I was paying anything.

The day they finally gave me the name, on a psychiatric ward with my discharge already under way, something inside my head recognised that I had just been handed the piece that had been missing all my life. An edge piece, what's more, one of the ones without which there's no way of putting anything together. And the first thing that fitted into it, before anything else that comes up in this book, was that week of blinding light at fourteen that everybody had dismissed as one of those things at that age.

And here is what I want whoever is reading this with a freshly made diagnosis and fear in their body to take away: the hardest thing in my whole recovery wasn't swallowing the pill with its taste of old coin. It was learning to give up that version of me I liked so much. It was accepting that the kid of that spring, with the girls in his class looking at him for the first time, was nobody's best version. That the one I missed wasn't me at my best. It was the fire starting.

Chapter 10 • The Sofa

It started on one of the apps there were back then. It was the winter of my twenty-sixth year, with my brain running at two hundred and the hypersexuality pushing in every direction at once, like a hose that comes loose and starts whipping about on its own. A profile with a face that stayed with you and a smile of the sort that gives you to understand there's something in there the rest of us don't know. And a message sent at two in the morning, because a brain in that state has to unload the energy somewhere or it bursts, and at two in the morning the only thing still open is the phone.

We arranged to meet in the park opposite her house. She lived on the pavement across the road and had set it there for safety, so she could cross back if the thing turned out to be a disaster. The bench was missing a screw in one of its slats, and I noticed because I'd spent a good while making an effort not to think about what I was going to say to her, and that slat rocking under my thigh was the only solid thing nearby. Nuria turned up seven minutes late (that is, the time it takes to come downstairs and cross a street, so you tell me where the achievement is) and sat down with the calm of somebody who in her own head had been there before her body arrived. She had on a very worn leather jacket, one of those that have lasted more seasons than they let on, and a book in her hand that she didn't open all afternoon. The book as a prop, which is a classic and I don't say it with any malice: I've done exactly the same with a guitar.

"So what do you do?"

I came out with the degree: that I'd gone into History at twenty-five and was in the first year. She thought that was fascinating. I smiled. She smiled. And the bench slat stayed loose.

She was a few years older than me. She lived in a shared flat that came cheap, and in that flat there also lived a friend of hers, who was the one holding the house up and paying the bills. A man with a goodness in him of the kind you don't believe in until you see it working close up. And I tell how it was in there because I saw it from in there: Nuria brought blokes home and slept with

them in the room next to his, with him sleeping wall to wall. And among those blokes was me. I was the special one, she told me so herself, and I think that was true. But I wasn't the only one, and I knew that from the first week. That man loved her and he stayed, and explaining why he stayed isn't my business.

The first afternoon stretched to three in the morning. In love I was not. I was in hypomania, which is a state that manufactures absolute certainties about things that aren't so certain: certainties about people, about the intensity of what's happening, about the meaning of an afternoon that runs on till three. I thought she was extraordinary because in that state everything is, a cashpoint included. For Nuria it was a different thing, and what I set down here is what she told me, then and later, not what I might deduce: that that night she felt desired as she had never felt before, and that this, coming out of years of complexes about her own body, mattered to her enormously. She got hooked there. And I was twenty-six and carrying the soft version of the illness, the one that breaks nothing, the one that gets nobody admitted, the one that from outside looks like a charming bloke with a lot of energy. That's what I turned up at her bench with. I crossed the street behind her and went up to a flat that smelled of incense and cats, and what I thought was: this is extraordinary. And it was. It was also the start of something that wasn't going to end well.

The next morning she wanted me to stay. I had a class. Before that week was out she'd rung me four times. Before the month was out we'd met three more times and she'd invited me to her birthday, and not only me: my brother and a friend of mine as well. Meanwhile, at home, I was telling Laura I'd made a new friend. And Laura was nobody's fool. The thing is that hypomania gives the man carrying it a conviction when he talks that makes it extremely hard not to believe him.

On her sofa people smoked. I started smoking there, in her flat, because it was what was done in that house and it struck me as the most normal thing in the world. And to understand what happened on that sofa you have to know where I was coming from, because otherwise the first joint looks like a drawing-room anecdote, and it wasn't. That autumn, the first of the degree, I'd joined the first hard-training gym that opened near the faculty and I trained every day; I was a competitive athlete, with my body made daily, with no fat worth counting and no tolerance to anything: I didn't smoke, I drank at most the odd weekend and cannabis had never once crossed my mind. That was my anchor and it worked. And I stopped during the break for the winter exams, to concentrate

and rest a bit, and it was precisely in that break that I met Nuria. Some coincidence. Without my knowing it, and without anybody knowing it, sport was the only thing holding my head in place: I'd been carrying the hypomania for years, but the training kept it in check, and I didn't even know there was anything to keep in check. The joints came in through that gap.

And there was no way either of us could have known this, not in that living room or in any other: a brain like mine doesn't get stoned by THC. It gets fired up. And a body like the one I had then, which from outside looks like a guarantee, turns out to be precisely the opposite. THC is among the most fat-soluble substances there are: it doesn't stay circulating in the blood, it goes off into the tissues, and with continued use it ends up stored in fat, which in the habitual smoker works as a reservoir and lets it out over weeks. A body with hardly any fat has nowhere to keep it: the whole dose goes to the tissues that get the most blood, and the one that gets most is the brain. And a brain that has never seen THC in its life answers with all its receptors in place. In people who smoke daily, the brain defends itself by withdrawing around a fifth of its cannabinoid receptors (it's been measured with scans, and it's also known that a month without smoking puts them back), which is why the same joint does less for them; in the beginner, on the other hand, it fires off the dopamine and the glutamate of the striatum all at once, which is exactly the circuit that lights up in a mania. With alcohol the thing works the other way round, incidentally, because it spreads through the body's water and muscle is nearly three-quarters water: the athlete I was got less drunk on the same glass than the man I turned into later. Alcohol came to do its damage afterwards, on a body already wrecked. What came in that winter on a clean body was cannabis.

So the sum comes out the opposite way round from how it looks. Every joint on that sofa landed in a clean brain, with no adaptive brake at all, without a gram of fat to cushion it, and it landed whole. Those joints took hold of the hypomania I'd arrived at her bench with and turned it into a mania. The kind that does break things. I didn't sleep, I didn't keep still, I was everywhere and with everybody, and it lasted me the first half of that year. It was me with the illness at full power, and at full power because of what we were smoking in her flat. Nuria must have believed that unleashed, sociable, tireless, hypersexual bloke was me in the pure state, and I don't hold it against her in the slightest: I believed it too, and the one inside was me. She fell in love with a symptom. And from that year there's one detail left that isn't among the big ones and that for

exactly that reason portrays it better than the big ones: she had those manias in front of her and knew perfectly well what she was looking at, so much so that she went as far as talking to my family because she was worried. And that was as far as she went. Not another call, not an attempt to do anything with what she was seeing, not one time in twelve years when she sat down with me and told me what she saw. She saw the illness before anybody and did nothing with it. What she did do with it eleven years later I tell in its place.

With the joints the sport ended, obviously, because a man who smokes doesn't feel like training. And once that habit was lost, I never got it back. Not with the next one, not with the one after, not with anybody. That was the price I didn't see coming. And behind the joints alcohol came back, which until then I'd had suspended, spaced out and kept in line by the training: the moment I stopped training the brake collapsed and drink took its place again, in precisely the year the mania lit up. A perfect plan, if what you're after is ending up the way I ended up.

And from that year there's also an argument left that portrays the lot of us. At the start of the summer we stopped speaking for a while over the most ridiculous of reasons, which is how the real reasons usually are: an acquaintance of hers got me into a horrible job, pulling a string. The place was appalling, with bosses who treated the staff dreadfully, on a diet of insults and bad manners. And I left there making a considerable scene, which was the way I had then, with the mania on me, of getting out of a place like that. The acquaintance was left looking terrible in front of his people and was furious, with every right in the world, Nuria and I argued about it and the silence came down.

And now the part that stops all of this from being a bill against her, and it has to be read with the same care as what's above it. Nuria knew nothing about any of this. Neither did I. In that house nobody knew that underneath it all there was a bipolar disorder type one, and there were seven years to go before anybody put a name to it. She offered what gets offered in any living room in your thirties, and I took it. With my own hand. I don't hold her responsible for it and I'm not charging her for it. And even so there's something it has taken me fourteen years to be able to think all the way through, and it closes the circle exactly where it opened: I should never have met Nuria at all. It's pure arithmetic. When I wrote to her at two in the morning I was in hypomania; without that hypomania I wouldn't have written, or gone to her bench, or smoked on her sofa, or given up the sport, and most likely the chain that ended where it ended

wouldn't even have started. Without my disorder, Nuria doesn't exist in my life. She was a statistical error of my illness: the person a deregulated brain ran into at the worst possible moment. Healthy, I wouldn't have got past that first afternoon on the bench. She wasn't the cause. I'm not putting that on her.

Chapter 11 · Leaving and Coming Back

I left Laura after two years with her. I've already said who Laura was and about the whole family that had made room for me. No man in his right mind leaves a woman like that.

I left her. And I left her to go to another woman's sofa, to smoke and to spend the nights not sleeping in her bed. And from there on, the loss of control: I went back to cruising (right as things started with Nuria, a detail with something in it that I don't intend to hide), I was meeting men over the internet as well, and I got involved with more than a dozen girls from those apps. It's worth explaining what it was like, because otherwise it sounds like another film altogether. Nearly all of it was one-afternoon meetings: you meet, you fuck and you don't see each other again. They were after the same thing I was. And it came easy to me, because I was very strong, I was looking terrific and in that state I had initiative to spare. Two or three were something else: longer stories, with their expiry date marked from the first day and known to both of us, enjoyed while they lasted and never complicated. And there was one I set up from minute one so that it would last, and it's the only one that has lasted: Mireia, from the faculty. It started while I was still with Laura, a little before the Nuria business (I note that without make-up, which is what I'm writing this for), and today she's still a friend of mine, of the real sort. Mireia was in the middle of all of it, she saw me from inside through those months and she can certify what the Marcos of that time was like. And out of that comes something that completely changes how what follows has to be read: when I started seeing Nuria I wasn't inaugurating any relationship of years. I was doing exactly what I was doing with the others. It could have stayed in the same place all the rest of them stayed in.

In the summer the tide went out. And the moment it went out, I went back to Laura. We moved in together in a town in the metropolitan area, right next to her family, and I held myself in check (and I held myself in check, among other reasons, because the mania ran out, since will on its own doesn't work miracles

of that size; anybody who claims otherwise has never had one on them). I stopped sleeping with Mireia, and we went on being friends. And that year there was a threesome, which I tell because it happened and because nothing gets hidden in this book.

That summer I was a lifeguard at the pool of a housing estate nearby, and I lived right beside it. And it wasn't a run-of-the-mill summer job: it was a great many hours a day, and most of them went on the people of the place, the residents, with whom I got on so well that I ended up eating in their houses, and above all on the kids, several of whom I taught to play chess. Laura came to see me. She met the children, she was at the gymkhana I put on for them so that the last afternoon would be a party and she ate the pizzas we ordered at the end with us. Then there was a party and there was drinking. I never drank while working, that I'm absolutely clear about and I've never done it in my life; what I did do was order myself a beer at the lunch break, or two, and that made the day easier to get through. Since sport wasn't putting me in order any more, I put myself in order with that. And in the afternoon, another. Not every day, but many. In front of Laura and with nothing hidden, because it strikes nobody as odd that a man has a beer at the end of work, and she had no reason at all to suspect. And there's the problem with alcohol in this country: no alarm sounds until there's nothing left to be done, because the alarm comes disconnected as standard and the rest of us pay for it between us.

And that's how I went on down the slope, with the odd party at home of the kind you no longer remember whole. At one of them I pissed on the wall, blind drunk and in my own house, because I couldn't manage to find the bathroom. I write it because it's true and because it's ugly, and because it marks the exact point from which, with the anchor of sport already lost, anything went. And when the next academic year started without my joining anything, not a job and not a training session, living off what was left of an old redundancy payment and what I'd saved at the pool, I started drinking every day while my girlfriend was at work. And smoking, at the window or going down to the street, because she couldn't stand tobacco in the house; she found out, of course, because she was no fool, and it cost us a couple of serious arguments. By the end of that year I was drinking seriously, often on my own and behind Laura's back. And that boiler, lit, was only waiting for a spark.

Because without what I'm about to say, this chapter reads like the story of a bloke who didn't know what he wanted, and that isn't what it's about. Or not

only what it's about. Leaving Laura wasn't done by a man choosing; it was done by a mania, which neither compares nor calculates, which goes after intensity and novelty and manufactures reasons to move where there aren't any. What's new lights up dopamine in a way stability can't match, and it can't match it because it isn't even in that league: a brain in a high phase doesn't calculate costs, it calculates intensities, and a woman who waits for you reading at the window doesn't score on that scale however good she is. That's what I call an episode decision, and it's worth learning to recognise them, because a fair few are going to come up in this book: decisions that look as though a person took them and that in fact were taken by a phase. They're told apart by a very simple detail, which is that the person wouldn't have taken them either before or after. The damage is mine, and I've been paying Laura for it as best I knew how. What I can't say is that the decision was mine, because nobody took it: a phase took it, and the moment the phase left, the decision left behind it.

And coming back wasn't entirely my decision either, much as I'd love to be able to sign for it. There's something I came with from the factory that took me years to learn had a name: adult separation anxiety. It isn't a manner of speaking: it's a diagnosis with a name of its own, and in patient series with bipolar disorder it comes up with a brutal frequency, around four in ten according to the studies that have set out to measure it. Mine has a starting date: twenty years old and the way my father left. An attachment system that doesn't admit separation and that, when somebody I love goes away or I lose them, doesn't get sad: it starts searching (and that has its explanation, which I give where it belongs, on the night of the dog). Coming back is what I do. I wrote it down a while ago and I stand by it word for word: living alone I hate, I detest it with all my soul, and holding myself up on my own I didn't know how to do. So mania took me out of Laura's house from above and attachment handed me back to her from below, and on neither of the two journeys was I entirely at the wheel. Which doesn't stop coming back from being the best thing I did in that whole year. And both times, as I've said, she went on being the same person. That's a clinical fact too, even if the fact is hers and not mine.

That second spell of living together lasted eleven months, in the town, with her family round the corner and a beer with every meal. Laura wanted to marry, to have children, to build a life, and she'd spent years wanting to build it with me. I drank alone while she was at work and turned nothing over in my head. From there to Rocío the road was a very short one.

Chapter 12 · Rocío's House

I found Rocío looking for couple swapping in the murky part of the internet, one night of that winter when I was drinking alone while Laura was at work. Convincing Laura didn't cost me much (getting out of the routine is always a sweet within easy reach) and we had them round to the flat, her and her boyfriend. We all fucked, some more than others. If we stick to the official minutes, the evening went badly: the next day came the reproaches, that I'd been fucking her without so much as looking at her, that this wasn't happening again. But there were secret minutes with one line in them I didn't read out loud, and the line said that I'd liked that girl. Her body as well, why lie. Above all the attitude: that of somebody entirely clear about what she is, who goes into the mud up to her neck and doesn't waste a second thinking about what anybody will say.

A few days later she started writing to me. That she'd left the boyfriend, that she didn't mind coming on her own, that why was I torturing myself over having a partner when the whole thing was going to be a pleasant while and nothing more. She was very young, from a good family, and she spent all day around animals. She had a serene stubbornness for which no antidote has yet been invented, a deep voice that clashed with that child's face of hers and a pair of eyes that read the world at a speed I recognised immediately: she'd been looking for the edge of things since well before I turned up. Me, meanwhile: twenty-seven, not a penny, the exams just vomited up, and a partner waiting for me at home. And cheating on a woman I had loved genuinely turned my stomach, with an uncomfortable, irritating tremor in it. It didn't stop me either. Note both those things down, and note down the difference in age.

A month later the two of us met alone, and we met at my flat, the one that was Laura's and mine, with Laura on her shift. It was an infidelity twice over, because Rocío was still with her boyfriend, and the two of us crossed that door knowing what we were doing.

"On your knees," I said, without having thought it.

And she did it with a calm that took me apart. Not like somebody obeying. Like somebody recognising something. At the time I wrote that I didn't know where that order had come from. I did know. I have always known and it has taken me years to put it in writing. It came from two places, and both of them were put on me when I was a kid. One: those men, the ones from when I was thirteen, who were the ones who put me on my knees, who made me submit and who set in front of me material no child should ever see. And two: a screen that a few years later came along to explain to me that it hadn't been damage, that it was a genre with a name of its own, an aesthetic of its own and a loyal audience. I didn't arrive in this world wanting to humiliate anybody. My first relationships with women were the most ordinary thing going, vanilla to the point of tedium. The other installed itself afterwards, and nobody forced me, which is worse and is more exact: they taught me what to desire, and by dint of repeating it, it turned into my way of being aroused. So when I told Rocío to kneel, I was repeating what had been done to me and, at the same time, trying to get back command of a body other people had taken without asking. Both things at once. And neither she nor I knew it. I tell it because explaining is not excusing, and because on top of that relationship a story of wickedness was later built, and you only get to wickedness when the rest of the information is missing.

I found her another name, one that was ours alone, and I gave it to her: Fiera. Submissive she wore in her pores; what she'd always lacked was a master who really was one. And now the confession: I wasn't. I set out to fake it with everything I had, and there came a point on the road where the costume stuck to my skin. But that character never stepped outside the dynamic. Outside the role, which was where we spent nearly all the hours, we were any two people: series, cooking, lecture notes, classical music, a night at the ballet. And yes: there was water drunk from a dish on the floor, there were the hard kind of spankings, and she was available to me at any hour. The thing is that the same master sat down every night to brush her hair and read her a book until she fell asleep. That master was me. The deal was closed from the first day: she did everything we agreed and I never went over a single limit of hers. She chose the safe word herself, and in all the time we lasted she never came to say it; why she didn't say it, she'll have to tell that herself if she ever wants to. And she taught me to ride. From then on we went riding every week, her like somebody who'd been doing it since she was a child and me not quite able to believe it. With her I did

everything, and of everything we did the loveliest was that, far above any session.

At the end of that winter I came out with the truth at home: I told Laura I hadn't stopped seeing Rocío and that it was turning into being in love. In between there'd been a whole week at the festival in Mireia's town, where I drank like a Cossack and the hypomania I was already carrying made the jump to mania, and it was in that state that I took the decision. And Laura reacted the way anybody reacts when their house is burning: grabbing whatever's nearest to see if she can save something. She came up, in desperation, with taking her in. That Rocío should become the submissive of the two of us. So one afternoon Rocío sat down in our living room and it was Laura who put it to her face to face. Rocío said no. That she wasn't going to be a couple's toy and that she was there for me. She shut herself in the bathroom for a while, came out, crossed the flat and threw herself down the stairs and off along the street. I ran out after her. That's where I chose: not in any office, not in any sensible conversation between adults, but at a run along a pavement after a girl, and with the woman I'd spent years with left standing alone in the middle of that living room. I don't know how many days went by between that scene and the day Laura packed her cases. I know she packed them and I know she was right to. What I was doing there's nobody who could stand. Laura wanted a life. And I was in another reality: what I wanted was to be spanking a girl in a dungeon.

And ours didn't stay shut inside the four walls of a bedroom. She took me into her family with a naturalness I wasn't expecting: nearly a year and a half sharing a roof with her, with her mother and with her sister. Not visiting: living there. And her mother was entirely clear about what kind of relationship it was and judged absolutely nothing; she sat me at the table with a plate in front of me and treated me as one of the household. And from that house there's a scene that has to be told exactly as it happened. Rocío's father found her accounts open on a computer and started reading our conversations, which were anything but innocent. He didn't understand a single thing, and I don't hold it against him in the slightest. He turned up looking for me, beside himself. And then Rocío put herself in the middle. She stood up in front of her father and defended me with a ferocity I'd never seen in her: that the decision was hers, that this was exactly what she wanted, that she was in love and that he had no business there. And her mother, who was there listening to all of it, defended me as well. He calmed

down and left. We went off to a park and there she cried for a good while, in pieces. But she didn't take back a single word.

Four months later came the collar. I had it made to measure: a leather strap with a tag hanging off it and, on the tag, the name only the two of us used. She wore it every day and everywhere, and if anybody asked her what it was she'd answer, with a face like butter wouldn't melt, that her boyfriend had given it to her. The solemnity with which she received it surprised me: there wasn't the slightest excitement of the forbidden anywhere in it, there was the seriousness of somebody signing a commitment. She said yes, and she said she'd say it only once, because it was going to be a yes for good. I wrote the ritual myself, and what I set down then I'll sign today in the same words: it was more moving than a good many wedding ceremonies. The last thing I wrote from that time ended by saying that yes, I loved her, who'd have thought it, and that we'd see how long the thing held.

And now what all of that really was, said with the name it deserves. That relationship wasn't a choice: it was a symptom on two legs. What hypersexuality is in this illness I've already explained in its place, with its three motors; what goes here is what those motors did with one concrete scene. When the reward system is running at high revs, desire doesn't only go up: it widens. Bodies, ages and situations suddenly come onto the radar that outside the episode would never have come onto it, and it isn't that your identity has changed: it's that mania drops all your thresholds at once and turns up the volume on anything that is new. And we're not talking about what gets called sex addiction, which exists independently of mood: in this illness the business is episodic, it fires off in the high phase, it goes out into absolute indifference in depression and it remits when mood settles. In my case, on top of that, it came with a road that had been surfaced since I was thirteen. I didn't choose a girl and I didn't choose that world: they were chosen by an undiagnosed illness that nobody knew how to read, and the proof is in what happened once it was finally named and treated, because since then I haven't been unfaithful to a partner again. Not once. In this book, the stable stretches coincide exactly with the stretches in which I was faithful, and that is not to be put down to any merit of character: it's the map of the illness traced over my biography. For the damage I answer. For the symptom, no.

There's a question nobody puts out loud and that hangs in the air all the same when a man tells what I have just told, with the thirteen-year-old on one side

and a girl barely out of adolescence on the other. I'll answer it myself, and in full: no. Never. Not an impulse, not a drive, not once in forty years. Not with the kids at that swimming pool and not with any other child, and it makes no difference what state I was in: not in mania, not in the middle of an episode, not at the worst moment I have ever found myself in. What was done to me by men taking advantage of the fact that a boy trusts, I have not done to anybody.

How that ended, and what I had in my blood when it ended, has a chapter of its own. Here goes the other part, the part we didn't have then and did have later. Five years later Rocío came looking for me, and not to pick anything up again, but to see somebody she had loved. She had an eighteen-month-old son by a partner things had ended badly with. She came through the door and I noticed at once that there was something different about her: being a mother had left a gravity on her she hadn't had before. That winter, one afternoon, we made love with tenderness and with delicacy, and with her pleasure ahead of mine; it was the only time in the whole year, because neither she nor I was after that. And it didn't resemble anything we'd had before: there wasn't a trace left of that architecture, not a role, nothing.

And there's another scene, at her flat, one afternoon when I was visiting, the two of us sitting talking. The boy demanded his due, she picked him up and started feeding him right there, with that naturalness of a mother who has no intention of cutting a conversation short over such a triviality. I sat looking at her and felt something I couldn't name at the time and that today I call tenderness. She told me she found me different: that the man sitting across from her wasn't that master any more, that I understood intimacy in another way and that I'd learned things about care I hadn't had the first idea about years before. She told me, in those exact words, that she saw me as feminist and modern. I told her that her body was beautiful. I told her because it was true and because I had a feeling it was a long time since she'd heard it from anybody. And she cried a little. Not from pain, it seemed to me. From relief.

And what I was is in that year and a half in her house: in the master who brushed her hair and read her books, in the horses, in the plate her mother put in front of me. That was on show too, and for a great deal longer than the other thing.

Chapter 13 • The Flat

That spring I started taking drugs seriously, and I say it like that, without the little diminutive a man puts on so he can sleep at night. I was dragging more than enough failed subjects behind me (in the previous months I'd been far too distracted by Rocío, and at twenty-eight, with a girl sleeping in your bed, coursework doesn't compete) and I scraped the year through on mephedrone, whole days studying without sleeping, hyperfunctional and thoroughly delighted with myself, which is exactly the state in which a bipolar man signs his worst CVs. That same spring I'd travelled to Bulgaria to meet my daughter at last, Claudia, who still has a while to go before she comes into this story, but she comes into it; and that journey, which should have been the loveliest thing that had happened to me in years, what it did was fire me off. I came back with my brain running at two hundred, and on my return GHB and mephedrone came into the house, first behind Rocío's back and then in front of her. Once, that spring, the two of us had sex on drugs. And in those weeks I asked her for things that went past the mark. Nothing she said no to (she never used the safe word, I've told that already, and she never refused anything, to please me), but I know they were wrong, and I knew it then, with that part of me that was still watching the scene from a corner. That was how the two of us arrived at that weekend in another city.

We'd gone to a holiday flat, a couple of days, on our own. I took too much GHB. What came afterwards I keep in pieces, like a badly edited film: the flat, an aggression that rose in me all at once and with no warning, me demanding that she take it with me, a hand of mine on her neck (one hand, or that's what I seem to remember, because I don't remember that part well) and then the floor. And I want to be exact about what I have and what I don't have, because in this chapter it's the only thing I can offer. I don't have a clean scene. Of what happened inside that flat before I went down on the floor I have flashes and nothing more. I know I turned aggressive. I know I was demanding she take it with me. And I know, because I've looked at it from every possible angle for

twelve years, that I never hit her. The rest, what exactly I said to her, what I did with my hands, how long it lasted, I don't have, and I'd rather say I don't have it than fill the gap with whichever version suits me best, which is what everybody does with gaps and what in this book is forbidden.

I lost consciousness. No coma and no hospital: GHB, when there's no alcohol behind it, puts you out, but it puts you out for a while and that's that. Rocío, frightened to death and not knowing who to turn to, rang a friend we had in common, and the friend told her to call the paramedics, which was precisely the thing to do. The paramedics came, woke me, examined me, saw I was all right and that there was no need to take me anywhere, and left.

And there's a detail of that night it has taken me years to dare to look at: she didn't get angry. Frightened I think she was, and that fear I put down to myself as well. But when we got back to her house she behaved with complete normality, as if it hadn't been that much of a thing. The two of us came out of a dynamic where violence was agreed and normalised between us, with its rules and with its marks worn with pride, and that's why what happened that night wasn't lived at the time as the violent thing it was. That doesn't make it less serious. It makes it harder to see, which is worse, because what isn't seen doesn't get stopped either.

And then came my part, which is the part that portrays me. I went into a fury. With her. For having phoned. I cancelled the weekend, we drove back to Barcelona and I spent the entire journey sulking and being insufferable, punishing her with silence for having done the one sensible thing there was to do that night. Today I know where all of it came from, and knowing doesn't rub it out: it was irritability in the pure state, the kind that comes along behind the episode, mixed with the panic I'd had since the days of the visiting room towards anybody wearing a uniform, years before anybody admitted me anywhere. Medics had come into a room to get me, and a very ancient part of my head read into that what it had learned at sixteen: that when somebody in uniform turns up it's because somebody is going to be taken away. And that fear turned in me into aggression pointed outwards, which is what fear usually does when it can't find a way of saying itself. And there's something worse than the silence in the car: the looking after, afterwards, was mine to do, and I didn't do it. Not a hug, not a word, not a thank you for calling. Rocío ate all of that on her own, and she never threw it in my face. Not then and not later. And about the friend who picked up the phone exactly the same has to be said, and with the same clarity: she did

everything she could to help me, that night and the nights after. A desperate girl asked her for help in the small hours, and she answered, and she answered well. I didn't thank her. On top of it I got angry with her too.

Without the name of what happened in that flat, all of this reads like the story of a bloke who overdid the drugs and turned violent, which is half the truth and precisely the half that explains nothing. GHB has a very particular problem for a brain like mine: it isn't a recreational drug, it's paraffin thrown on a fire. It's a depressant and not a stimulant, however much the first hour deceives you: it works on the same braking system of the brain that alcohol works on, and it has a dose curve so narrow that between euphoria and the floor there can be one millilitre. With a little, disinhibition and an appetite for everything; with a tiny bit more, the brain goes out the way a house goes out when the trip switch goes; and mixed with alcohol, your breathing can go with it, and there are dead people from that who nobody has ever called suicides. Mine was the middle term: a dose sufficient to switch me off for a while and insufficient to kill me, with the illness underneath pushing upwards. And before it switches you off, on the way up, GHB does to a bipolar brain the same thing cannabis had done to me on Nuria's sofa: it cancels impulse control completely. You act before your head has time to intervene, the limbic system raw and with no prefrontal cortex holding it in. A car with no brakes and the engine freshly tuned.

And what came out the other side carried a different signature, and that signature has a name too. The mania of the films is the euphoric one: the bloke who laughs, who buys everybody a round, who buys what he doesn't need. But there is a mania that doesn't laugh, and in the manuals it appears as a mixed episode, or mania with mixed features: the energy and the acceleration of the high pole with the mood of the low one, irritability instead of joy, agitation instead of enthusiasm, a body at two hundred an hour driven by a head that hates everything. Of all the states of this illness it's the most dangerous, and that isn't an opinion of mine: it's the phase that concentrates the most aggression, the most impulsivity and the most suicide attempts, precisely because it adds the energy to do something to the wish not to go on. And the substances that depress the nervous system, with alcohol and GHB at the head of the queue, manufacture it with a frightening ease: they put your irritability up, they take your brake away and they give you nothing back. The man making demands inside that flat and the man punishing with silence inside that car were the same state a few hours apart. An undiagnosed hypomania, an overdose on top of it and, a

few weeks away, a mania with psychosis still to come: the illness calling for the substance and the substance firing off the illness. And in the middle of all that, a very young woman I loved and who I hurt.

I tell it for two reasons. The first, because it's the only time in forty-one years that I've turned aggressive with a partner. One. With an overdose inside me, with the illness still without a name, and without hitting her, and even so the thing happened and I tell it before somebody else comes along to tell it. And the second, because when years later one of those words that nobody can stop any more started going round about me, in a certain group, this was the only fact underneath the whole film. And it wasn't even the one being told. That word didn't come out of a file or out of a professional's mouth: it came out of a real scene told to somebody who wasn't there, at a time when none of the three of us had either the vocabulary or the fact. And once a word like that is set rolling nobody stops it: it gets passed on, it gets inherited and it comes back many years later, through different mouths, sounding exactly the same. I'll say this once, with the coldness you use for stating a fact, and I won't come back to it: nobody has ever reported me for abuse. No court has ever had a complaint like that with my name on it, because that complaint doesn't exist.

And now the part that falls to me out of all of it, which is the part that shows me in the worst light. I was twenty-eight and she was nearly ten years younger than me. And that, looked at from where I stand today, I no longer explain with the word freedom. The adult in that room was me, even if my brain was broken and I didn't know it. I have never asked Rocío for forgiveness. Not once. Others I have asked, and this book tells when and in what way. Not her, and I owe it to her for a fair number of things: for those weeks, for what happened in the flat, for the journey back inside that car, for the care I didn't give her. And I don't intend to send it to her, because it isn't the moment. I leave it written here, which is the only place I can leave it, and let it be worth whatever it's worth, or nothing. That came out of an undiagnosed illness and it hurt her all the same. Which is why an explanation is never an apology, and I've given her neither of the two.

And one last thing, because it's one of the very few occasions in this story when I learned something first time round. That was the end of designer drugs. They'd come into my life on the way back from Bulgaria and in that flat they came to an end, barely a month later. And it wasn't out of good sense or out of discipline: I gave them up because that night put a terrible fear into my body. Seeing what my head was capable of with that inside it, and in four weeks, was

enough for me. It held for nearly a year. What my head did in the days that followed, with no substance at all and without making an appointment, was a great deal worse.

Chapter 14 · The Craft of Reading

I went into History out of love for History. It wasn't a career plan, I hadn't done any sums about where it led, and certainly nobody sat down with me to explain the state of the job market. I started at twenty-five and I started in love, with that very particular intensity of a man who has finally found the language his head thinks in without effort. Because History is about patterns: about how forces build up, about how systems blow, about how the thing that looks like an accident came with roots decades or centuries deep. And for a brain that went about processing reality on the hunt for connections, and at a speed the rest couldn't keep up with, that degree was the only place where the processing manufactured something usable instead of manufacturing a delusion. It's the same machine in both cases: put it in front of an archive and out comes a method; put it in front of a car's number plate and out comes a sign from God.

The essays I handed in at the faculty had one feature my lecturers pointed out to me with approval mixed with discomfort, which is exactly the mixture I have been provoking all my life: they always went beyond what was asked for. A five-page paper, twelve pages handed in. And it wasn't exhibitionism, or it wasn't only that: it's that the subject wouldn't let itself be closed in five pages without something being lost on the way. That was hypomania too, though back then it was called being conscientious. The incapacity to set a limit, to know at what point you stop, to admit that a shorter version can do the job even if it comes out lame.

I dropped the last eight subjects for Marta. I was twenty-nine, and the gap left by those eight subjects that stood between me and the degree was filled by technical support for software companies, which is, and here's the joke, the exact opposite of History: in one you read what happened in order to understand why it happened; in the other you reboot and see whether that does the trick. I don't blame Marta. I chose. The thing is I chose in hypomania, with that overflowing conviction that love justifies any sacrifice and with the absolute certainty that there was going to be time for everything. There wasn't. There never

is, and with this, less than ever. History was left lying in a folder on my desktop, and inside it the notes for what I had left, and now and then I open them and read them with that very particular pleasure of reading something I would have written myself if I'd been given the chance. There are days when I ask myself who I'd be if the diagnosis had reached me ten years earlier. Answer, I have none. And I know perfectly well that the question is no use at all, which doesn't stop me asking it one day and the next as well, because that's who I am. What I am sure of is what the illness took from me there, and it wasn't a degree: it was an identity. A man who reads archives and finds the pattern, instead of a man who reboots machines and stands there waiting.

What there is is what there is. And in what there is there's my daughter Claudia, who on the last trip came out with it that she wants to study Philosophy. That irony I handle carefully, the way you handle things that don't fit whole inside a single emotion. And there's a detail that changes the meaning of this chapter, and I said it myself a few months ago without giving it the slightest importance. One morning this winter I was talking to Iván, who was off to class, to his university, and I said that if they give me the incapacity award I think I'm going to finish the degree. And straight afterwards, that I might go into Philosophy as well. That I'd love to. So that folder isn't closed. It's still waiting. Eight subjects.

The only thing I did learn properly at that faculty was a trade, and the trade is this: reading archives. Putting a date on a document, counting it, cross-checking it against another, distrusting the witness and, above all, distrusting the witness when the witness is you. That trade, which got me no degree, is the one that has given me this book, because I didn't write it knowing what had happened: I wrote it to find out. And what I found out on the way was that my memory of these twenty years wasn't bad in the way anybody's memory goes bad as the years pass. It was bad in a different way. With complete holes in it. With years I keep practically nothing of. With scenes that really did happen but filed in the wrong place, in another tone and with the blame shared out differently. I've recovered conversations of mine that went on for hours and that I didn't even know had existed, messages I didn't remember writing, sentences said to me that I'd have sworn in front of a judge nobody had said. Of the year of my first two admissions I have almost nothing left.

And this has its mechanism, and it's worth explaining, because from here on there are going to be whole chapters I don't remember. For a memory to exist, it

first has to be recorded, and recording takes attention: in a mania attention is nowhere, it jumps from one thing to another without landing, and what isn't attended to isn't kept. Then that memory has to be consolidated, and that gets done by sleeping; a brain that has spent weeks sleeping three hours consolidates absolutely nothing, and if there's psychosis on top of it, what gets filed is the delusion's version and not the room's. Then it has to be retrieved, and that's where depression puts its hand in: low mood goes looking by preference for what hurt, and hands you back a past blacker and guiltier than it was. Add the admissions with the medication still being adjusted. And add the trauma, which has a filing system all its own: it keeps things in pieces, with no order and no date, or it simply leaves things out of reach, which is what gets called dissociation. And it's been measured, in studies that bring together thousands of patients, that verbal memory is one of the functions that comes off worst in this illness, and that it stays affected even in the calm stretches, and more so the more episodes a person is carrying. So it isn't that a bipolar man lies more than the rest. It's that the apparatus anybody uses to reconstruct his past (because memory doesn't keep: it reconstructs, and it does it from the present) is working for him with broken pieces and with a bent present.

Years after almost everything that appears in this book, I told Nuria and Raquel (who hasn't turned up here yet, but she turns up) things exactly as I had lived them. And they concluded that I'd lied to them. I didn't lie to them. I told what my head was capable of remembering, which was all there was. The accounts they took for lies were true memories of mine, and they were besides the only ones I had in my head at the time, passed through the filter of trauma and of a dissociation I couldn't even name then. I wasn't lying. I was dissociated and telling what reached me. That, which has taken me three years to understand, is the difference between a liar and a sick man. And since neither they nor I knew that difference, things got broken on the way that perhaps didn't need breaking. I was judged with enormous severity for not remembering properly what the trauma wouldn't let me remember.

And if I hadn't been able to correct myself until now, it was for a very concrete reason: I had never sat down to read my own conversations. Archives I had, and they'd spent years inside a hard drive without my opening them. Partly out of fear and partly because materially it can't be done: there are more than half a million messages in there, and one person, by dint of reading, neither gets to the end nor understands what he has in front of him. If this book exists it's

because I've finally had a tool capable of processing a thing that size: dating it, counting it, cross-checking it, drawing out proportions and telling me, with no mercy at all and without flattering me, what happened, when and with whom. It's an artificial intelligence, and I say so without the slightest embarrassment: the historian who never finished his degree has finally got an archive assistant who never gets tired. With that in front of me I've had to correct myself a great many times. And nearly always against myself.

There's one thing I want to leave just as clear, because otherwise all of this would end up being read as a retraction, and it isn't one. The traumas are real. What happened to me happened. The abuse at thirteen is a fact, my father's suicide is a fact, the admissions and the straps are facts, and so is everything that comes afterwards, and none of those facts is under review by anybody. And the underlying facts of what I remembered were real too. What has changed, with the archive on the table, are the dates, the proportions, who each thing belonged to and the odd conclusion. Not the substance. I didn't invent myself a life: I remembered the life I'd lived badly. And if at some point this doesn't square with what I was saying myself at the time, the explanation isn't that I was lying then or that I'm lying now. It's that then I didn't have the archive in front of me, and now I do.

Chapter 15 · The Older Woman

That whole year starts with a prescription. I was thirty, I was living in a flat in Barcelona with Marta (how we found each other again and what ours was takes up the whole of the next part, because a woman like that doesn't fit into a paragraph) and living with us were Jordi, a friend of mine from always, and my brother Gabriel. A depression came down on me, one of the ones that won't let you get up, I asked for an appointment with the GP and came out of the surgery with antidepressants in my pocket and nothing underneath to hold them. That man didn't know he was medicating a bipolar brain, and he had no way of knowing: I didn't know, my family didn't know, nobody knew. What came afterwards was a mania I couldn't give that name to, or any other. I had no diagnosis. And besides, a mania from the inside gives you no sensation of illness at all: it gives you the sensation of being right.

At the time all I noticed was that I was burning, and this is the piece that would have explained the entire year and that nobody explained to Marta. A bipolar depression and an ordinary depression look alike from outside the way two tides look alike: the one going out because the sea is low and the one going out because it's about to come in all at once. Mine was the second. An antidepressant does what its name advertises, pushing mood upwards by moving serotonin, noradrenaline and dopamine, and in a brain that only knows how to sink, that push brings it back up to the level of the rest of the world and there it stops. In a brain like mine the push doesn't stop where it ought to, because there's nothing to say this far and no further: the water rises and goes on rising and comes over the top. That's called a switch, and it isn't a strange finding or anybody's theory, it's in the manuals, in the chapter on the most studied risks of this illness. So much so that when somebody is fired into a mania by an antidepressant the psychiatrist notes the suspicion that underneath there's an undiagnosed bipolar, and for some years now the manual has added that if that mania lasts longer than the drug lasts in the body, then it isn't an adverse effect: it's a fully paid-up mania and it serves to make the diagnosis. Hence the rule in type

one, which is never to prescribe it bare, but always with a stabiliser underneath, lithium or whatever fits, acting as the stop. I had no stabiliser because I had no diagnosis, and on top of that I was piling up everything that raises the risk most: type one, a father with the illness written into his history, alcohol and cannabis in the middle of it. Let it be on record that the GP acted in good faith and with what he had in front of him. The malpractice wasn't his, it was the system's, which let a man whose mood had been out of true since he was fourteen and with a diagnosed father in the family tree get as far as a ten-minute appointment, and let him out again with antidepressants without it occurring to anybody, at any rung, to wonder what was underneath.

With my brain alight I threw Marta out of the flat. And Jordi, and my brother. In a few days I remade my life from top to bottom with that maniac's conviction that you're doing it right and the rest are running late. Out of that whole year there's one sentence that still shames me: I called Marta fat. Once. It wasn't my way of speaking to her or my vocabulary, it was what came out of the mouth of a bloke with his brain accelerated by antidepressants while he threw the woman he lived with out onto the street, in a hurry. And there's a scene from that spring that portrays the lot. It was her birthday. We met with her already out of the flat and with me putting up a new life at top speed with a woman I barely knew, and we talked the way two people talk when they're trying to be friends after a thing like that: politely, carefully, and with what mattered under the table. I told her I was getting married. She listened. Weeks later, when we next talked seriously, it was she who brought up the fat. Without shouting, with that habit of hers of putting a thing on the table and not touching it, so that you'll look at it yourself. She was within her rights, and it's what people do: you keep it and hand it back on the day the other one has ears again. I said it, with my own mouth, and it goes with my name under it even if my brain was in flames. What isn't true is that I spoke to her like that. In ten years I called her fat once, and the affectionate name we had, several thousand times.

The woman I was going to marry was a good deal older than me, she came with a rucksack of her own (which isn't mine to tell) and she worked in one of those trades that need careful hands. I proposed a few days after meeting her, with no anaesthetic and no cooling-off period, and she moved into the flat I'd just thrown everybody out of. From that mania there's one detail that portrays it on its own. My brother's room was left empty when he went, and I didn't leave it empty for even a week: I built a temple in there. Alchemical and astrological

symbols on the walls, candles, the full ceremonial, which at the time struck me as the most reasonable thing you could do with a spare room. I did rituals and meditations, and scrying in a black mirror, which for anybody who doesn't know consists of fixing your eyes on a dark surface by candlelight until your head starts handing you things back, and a head like mine at that moment handed back everything. I got into esoteric practices with people who were in that world, and it wasn't prurience or after-dinner curiosity: it was aimed at obtaining something, it had a purpose. With Rocío there had already been something of ritual in my business, but this was another matter. I spent a while in chaos magic, reading the authors you read there, and I came out of that journey returning completely to the Kabbalah and to the one God of the Hebrews, which is who I've matured with and who I've become the man I am today with. I tell it without drama and without nostalgia, because from here it's one more clinical fact: a brain in mania looking for a structure that would explain the state it was in and grabbing the first thing it found with symbols enough in it. The nonsense of that time and what puts my head in order today are the same thread.

And there's one more piece left that shows better than any explanation how far the thing had gone. She wore white gloves at work, which was the most normal thing in the world. In my head I built it up that those gloves were a Freemason's. That she went to lodge meetings. That she belonged to a lodge and was hiding it from me. I never quite believed it, and there's the interesting part: a part of me knew perfectly well it was absurd, and the idea installed itself anyway and came back every few days. That's the exact point at which a man is somewhere between a notion and a delusion, with a foot on either side, and from outside nothing shows, because the one who has it keeps quiet precisely because the healthy part is still ashamed. A man who builds a temple with candles and a black mirror in his brother's room and who on top of it suspects his partner of being in a secret society isn't going through an odd patch: he's inside an episode, in full. Nobody around me called it by its name. And that mechanism didn't stay there. It came back years later, with material that time put inside me from outside, and then it wasn't a silly suspicion you live alongside now and then: it was what decided how I reacted. That comes further on. My brain did the same thing both times. The difference is that that year the paranoia fed itself on a pair of work gloves.

It didn't last, and not because I repented in the ordinary sense of the word, but because the mania gave way and the world got its real colours back, which

are a good deal duller. Nothing built in that state survived the return to calm. Years later, with the diagnosis on the table, I was able to put a name to that whole year: drug-induced manic episode. And I have to tell how it ended, because this book can't put that woman into my life without saying which way she went out. It finished one night at the start of that summer. I went out with a friend, we drank far more than was reasonable and we ended up at an after-hours place with people I didn't know at all, where everything was going round, and where the cocaine came in. Within hours a psychotic episode lit up in me. Three of us came back in the taxi, and the one who was with us I frightened so badly with what I was saying to him that he got out of the car before we arrived. I came into the flat proclaiming that I was the messiah, in a terrible state, and I fell asleep on the sofa with the engine still at full power. She called the emergency services. They came for me, and it was the first time I was taken out of my own home in restraints, in a psychiatric ambulance. The first of a fair few. And the moment I set foot in the hospital and saw a white coat in front of me, I slid out of the story I'd built in the living room: the psychiatrist on duty found a calm man with his speech in order, and sent me home with an anti-psychotic. No admission, no observation, no call to anybody. A few hours later I was back in my living room, and the first thing I did on getting there was throw her out. No discussion and no going back. I sent her to her parents. Her father came to fetch her and, before leaving, told me to my face that I had a problem. He was the first to say it to me like that, unwrapped, and I heard it the way you hear rain: it struck me as nonsense, and nonsense from a man who'd come to defend his daughter at that. The next day I told Marta about it with the delusion still warm, painting that woman as a danger, and Marta didn't follow me: she told me that talking about her like that wasn't healthy, that I should put myself in her place, that the hospital business I'd gone looking for on my own. In her twenties and with her heart in shreds, she was the only person connected to that flat with her head where a head is supposed to be.

I didn't look for help. I didn't follow the treatment. I didn't understand it as a warning, not that time and not the next, which came at the end of that same summer and has its own chapter. In a single night I was warned twice: an ambulance with straps and the father of a woman telling me to my face what nobody else dared tell me. I took notice of neither of them. The diagnosis would still take two and a half years to arrive.

Chapter 16 • The Pattern

That first stage with Marta ended at twenty, and until Patricia turned up there were a few months of the likeable sort of chaos: the shared flat, the faculty parties, the long nights with the crowd from the night school. In the middle of it I was with a woman a good deal older than me, who I knew from work, and who has nothing to do with the one of the temple and the candles, because that one arrived ten years later. She wrote, and she let me read it, and we went over it together. That struck me as magical and it still does: somebody free opening the door of the adult world to me. Let nobody take this as meaning that a difference in age condemns anything. I'm saying something else: that mine, the ones with a big difference in them, came condemned from the factory, and that the ones that lasted were the ones between similar ages. When we met Patricia was eighteen and I had just turned twenty-one. There the distance was manageable. With her came the most normal and the happiest years I've had.

And here I have to show one of those days, because writing the happiest years and leaving it there, like a footnote, is cheating with the one thing this book has to prove. Everything else is read against those years.

A day went like this. I got up before anybody and by seven I was training, in winter with the gym's strip lights and the street still black. First the weights room, then the lifting. I taught myself, with a manual open on the floor and my phone in my bag to film myself and correct my own technique, frame by frame, like a man studying for an exam. I got up to two hundred and twenty kilos and I got as far as competing, and in all those years I didn't have a single injury, which is the fact I show off about. At weekends I ran the mountain trails. Then the office, eight hours of computing, the same place for six years, with its hours and its payslip and its colleagues. And on the way out, her. Patricia was half Italian, she had green eyes and a laugh you could hear from the street door, and she was from my town, which is the reason I went back to living there. We had dinner at her house many nights, with her parents. Her father was a policeman and a thoroughly good bloke, one of those who ask you about work and wait for

the whole answer; her mother ended up giving my mother a job, so you tell me how far into a family a man has to be for that to happen. She liked eating badly with an enthusiasm that made me laugh (so much so that she ended up an economist in that very sector), so half our plans were a cinema and a burger. And by eleven or twelve I was asleep, because a body wrecked by weights sleeps, it doesn't negotiate.

Not a cigarette. Not a drug. Not one blowout in three years. We went to Italy together and she's the only woman of mine who has met my family over there. When it was my sister Sonia's turn to marry, with our father already dead, it was me who walked her in on my arm, and Patricia watched from the pew, dazzling in a green dress, and that day we were two normal people at a celebration. That's everything that happened in three years. There's no ambulance, there's no locked ward, there's no sleepless night worth telling, there's no infidelity until the last week, there isn't one call from anybody asking what was happening to me. Nothing. And she told me, years later and without my asking, that in those days she felt like a princess; and when I asked how she remembered me, she answered with a single word, affectionate, and added that I was always kissing her and hugging her. That was me with the rhythm on. The same man, the same brain, the same surname and the same grandfather.

It remains to say how they came down, because it wasn't for the reason anybody would think. Days started piling up when there was no way of getting out of bed. It wasn't laziness and it wasn't a hangover: it was not being able to, and from the GP I came back with sick notes that explained absolutely nothing. Then I learned my daughter was going to be born, and behind that news my performance and my appetite for anything collapsed all at once, and that was the crisis that ended the Patricia business and that took with it, a few months later, the job of six years. Habits hold, and they held for a long time. Holding isn't armour-plating. What those years gave me wasn't immunity: it was time.

And now the summer. The impossible relationship with the older woman came apart the way everything built in the middle of a mania comes apart, and I was left alone in that flat, in the thick of the heat. The phone rang and it was Raquel, with whom there had already been something behind Marta's back and who I talk about at length further on. She wanted to know if I had room going spare. She asked me calling me by a nickname she'd invented for me, because she gave one to everybody, and it worked: you felt chosen, because the nickname came loaded with something that looked like an intuition about what you

were, and probably was. She had no fixed address, rolling between friends' flats and collectives on the margin, and she was the centre of gravity of that ecosystem. I said yes without thinking for a second. She stayed more than a month.

That month was what it was. Excesses with our eyes open, both of us knowing what we were doing while we did it, and that intensity you only reach when nobody has to clock in the next day. We gave that summer an invented name that I don't intend to write here. I took ketamine as I have never taken it, with mystical music playing at all hours and with the impression that the world had shrunk to four rooms and that this was a gain. No other substance gave me that state: it wasn't euphoria, it was dissolution. The outline of the self went soft, and the question of where you ended and the rest began stopped having any urgency. I read it as a fusion of souls. From here, with seven years of treatment, I see what didn't cross my mind then: that the dissolution wasn't enlightenment. It was, traced exactly, what my brain did on its own in the manic episodes, with the volume up and decorated by chemistry. It wasn't opening a road inwards: it was that the road inwards was already wide open, with the door torn off its hinges, looking for a nice word to call itself spiritual by. And even so. Even so it was the experience of somebody recognising the whole of you for a time that was short and was true. The affection you feel with certain substances in you isn't false: it went through that nervous system and it left a mark. Nothing that came later rubs it out. It only lays layers on top.

And now what was underneath the bubble, which is what never gets told. Underneath there were other people's kitchens: her family were fond of me from the first day and every time I turned up there they fed me. No bubble holds up unless somebody outside is cooking. And underneath there was the flat, because Raquel that summer wasn't visiting: she was installed in the home I'd built with Marta, which was as much hers as mine, decorated by her, with a headboard we'd painted together. In that same bed I later slept with Raquel. And Marta came back to that flat before Raquel left. I introduced them, I wrote to her that she'd like her, that she had a marvellous soul in front of her, and they spent a while under the same roof with a tension Marta put in writing from the start: that thinking of me with her turned her stomach completely, that it was part of a bad memory. Two weeks later, knowing perfectly well what there had been between us, she wrote telling me to tell Raquel to let her know if she needed anything at all, and that she meant it. Disgust and generosity in the same month, on the same phone and in the same woman: that's how people work, not

characters. When the tide went out I went back to the village with my decision made, Marta and no more. I didn't leave Raquel for anybody. I left her because there was no way of living at that pace. She was serious that summer, and that stayed put away for years without being spoken, which is how you keep the things that come out later with interest. For a long time I dragged around the idea that I'd played her. She took it apart herself, in writing and without my asking her anything, four years later: that I never promised her a thing or committed to anything, that she crashed all on her own, like the good kamikaze she was, and that that year was her big smash. Neither of them did anything wrong that summer. The one with two conversations open at once was me.

And now the concept. In this illness you don't fall in love: the phase falls in love, and what people fall in love with in you is the phase. What the people on that list met at the start was a man in hypomania: generous, awake till four, with plans, with certainties. None of them chose a sick man. They chose the best-publicised symptom in the whole of psychiatry, and I put it in front of them convinced it was me. And underneath there are two mechanisms, and both have been measured. The first is sleep. A month of ketamine, of music and of being shut into four rooms isn't an intense month: it's a regime, and in a regime like that the first thing that breaks is sleep, which is, since a study almost forty years ago that still gets cited, the final common pathway of mania: it makes no difference why you lose it, a party, a flight or a bereavement, because it always ends in the same place. A brain like mine doesn't register that a free person has left a house; it registers that the whole structure, the house, the music, the chemistry and the person, disappears all at once and on the same day, and it does what it does. The second is older, and two psychologists described it seventy years ago with pigeons: the behaviour that holds out longest isn't the one that's always rewarded, but the one that's rewarded at intervals nobody can predict. In those relationships affection beat conflict hands down, and nobody ever knew which was due. Nobody designed that distribution: the phase made it. And it's the distribution that hooks hardest, on both sides: me into apologising again, them into getting back on the train. It isn't a judgement about any of them. It's a judgement about the calendar. When the calendar is run by an illness with no name, both people are answering to something they can't see. Marta wrote it that summer without knowing she was writing it: without even remembering, she said to me, when I told her lightly where I'd been the night before. She read it as contempt. It was memory: a brain in a high phase doesn't fix what it does. The

symptom had the name of a character defect, and without the other name the only reading to hand was the moral one.

Nobody ever explained to us that sleep wasn't a luxury of that summer. And we didn't ask.

Part III • MARTA

Chapter 17 • Marta

The first time I saw Marta was inside a church, and the funny part is that neither of us had any business being there. I'd come in holding Vanessa's hand, who was my girlfriend at the time and did belong to the house, a believer of the real sort, a good person without any fuss about it, with that decency she has since put at other people's service. I was nineteen, nearly twenty, I was good-looking and slim and I was carrying all my innocence unopened. Vanessa walked me round the youth group to introduce me, and it turned out there was another person there on loan: she was the sister of the boyfriend of a cousin of hers, and she'd come for the social life, keeping her brother company. Exactly my case. That was the first ground we stood on together, the two of us gatecrashing the house of God for sentimental reasons. We stood there looking at each other like a pair of idiots from minute one. It reached me as a physical certainty, in the pit of my stomach, and she hadn't said a word yet.

We started out as friends, which is where serious things start. The first cigarettes I smoked in my life I smoked with her, hidden away on the stairwell landings while the rest of them sang inside. Through the same door and with the same gesture in came the love of my life and my first vice. She already smoked. She was the interesting one of the group: more sceptical, more of our own time, less of the churchgoing sort, with that way of looking sideways at what the others held sacred. And at the hospital, working, she was an angel: she'd come down to the patient's level as though it were the most natural thing in the world, and the patients adored her, and they were right. I write it today, with a complaint and a trial in between, because it was true then and it still is. I fell in love with her before anything between us had started.

"I don't know what you're doing with Vanessa," she told me many times afterwards. "She isn't even that pretty."

And here I have to be fair. Vanessa was an ordinary girl and I liked her. Marta considered herself prettier and she wasn't. The thing is I liked the other one more for the way she was. With Vanessa, incidentally, I slept for the first

time without paying, and it took me too many years to say that out loud. I stayed a few months longer than I wanted because her family were going through something very hard and I couldn't bring myself to do that to her. As soon as I could, I ended it. I kissed Marta for the first time in the metro, coming down the steps at the exit, one afternoon that spring. Then a friend caught us kissing on a bench, and that's how it got out, and that bench was two steps from the street where twelve years later we were going to live together, in the Raval.

And now what came afterwards, which I tell with the shame it deserves and not a gram more. With my thing with Marta barely started, Vanessa turned up at my house, which was nothing out of the ordinary, because there she was known and she was liked, by my mother and by my brother Gabriel, who was also in the youth group. She threw herself at me. And I didn't know how to say no, because I still liked Vanessa and because I was hypersexual even without any raging hypomania, though it also has to be said that this happens to any lad of twenty with his ex in front of him: not everything of mine has a diagnosis underneath, there are things that only have age and hormones. My part ends there. Hers came afterwards. Vanessa's mouth ran away with her, she couldn't keep it to herself, the whole group found out, and then the older ones, and then the parents, and somebody ended up telling Marta. And Marta left me. So that's how it was shared out among the three of us: I supplied the bed, she supplied the mouth and Marta was left outside without having done a single thing. That I never forgave Vanessa for, because I was in love with Marta up to my eyebrows, and the entire story this book tells proves it more than well enough and with the bills paid. And so that the portrait of who I was at twenty is complete: after all that I went on sleeping with Vanessa for a while. Without wanting to go back to her and without being able to forgive her, but fucking. That was me.

And now the facts, which portray themselves. That same autumn we buried my father, and who turned up and who didn't is already told. Marta, so many years later, didn't turn up at any admission either. Vanessa would have turned up. And she never spoke badly of Marta to me, not at the time and not ever. Marta, on the other hand, when the subject came up years later, was still at the same thing: ugh, Vanessa, what a silly little thing. I leave it written because in this story the account of who failed who wasn't opened by me, and if anybody opens it, it opens all the way.

In between there were other years, with another woman, with sport at full throttle and no smoke, the most normal of my whole adult life. And in the

middle of that time Marta and I met one afternoon as friends, with no intention on either side, in the park next to her house, in her town, and we were fine. Very fine. Each with our own life, talking the way two people talk who once loved each other and no longer owe each other anything. Out of fourteen years, that is the only afternoon we saw each other with no illness in the middle: not the one at twenty, which was pure age, and not the one afterwards, which was chemistry. The man in that park, the one with the sport and his sleep in its place, is the one who was underneath everything she saw later on.

The other time was at twenty-nine, and first I have to tell what I left pending when I talked about that other city: what my head did in the days that followed, without one single substance in it. We came back to Barcelona with nothing definitive said. The one who changed was me, and by then up in the mountains, where I was doing my third summer as a lifeguard. My brain gave that click bipolar brains give when the cycle shifts without warning and without making an appointment: suddenly everything fitted, fitted absolutely, and I was the only one who could see it. I set off walking with no direction round the edges of the town, following signs the others couldn't see, a pigeon that turns back, a number that repeats, the shadow of a tree falling at exactly the right angle. The signs took me to an olive tree, and then to a cross, and I believed I'd found God. But it wasn't only that. It was seeing myself from outside, the way you see a stranger, and seeing what I'd been doing to Rocío from the beginning, and seeing a monster, which is the word that installed itself in my head that day and that I haven't got rid of. A repentance came over me all at once and with real pain in it, physical pain, and I broke it off with her loving her enormously and from inside the mania at the same time, utterly convinced that my earlier life had been a mistaken life and that it was time to wipe the lot and start again from zero. Rocío didn't understand a thing, and there was nothing to understand from outside: the bloke who rang to end it no longer recognised even himself. The weeks left of that summer I spent at the pool, clean, alone, burnt by the sun and with my head hunting for messages in anything at all. That was the state of the man who one day read a post by Marta. In my head that wasn't a post: it was a call addressed to me. That's how I read it and that's how I acted. She was living with her partner then, in a flat that belonged to neither of them, working and earning little. And we fell in love again with an intensity that wasn't normal. From that summer there's a trip left: we got away for a few days, we were caught up in one of those big festivals where a whole city comes out into the street, and we went up

to Montserrat, to the monastery hanging at the top of the mountain. I lived that as if the reconciliation came blessed by a force I had no intention of contradicting. In the afternoon, up there, with the sun going down behind the stone, we made love. And in the middle of so much solemnity the least solemn thing imaginable happened, back down below: in a park in the city full of ceramics and tourists I put my hand inside a cactus. The whole hand. It was left full of spines, like a complete fool, with all the dignity of the chosen one of the universe still on me. Marta laughed until the tears came, and then, still unable to stop laughing, she sat down beside me and took them out one by one, carefully, with the skill of a woman who earns her living healing people and with the tenderness only she had. That picture, her taking out the spines I'd stuck in myself all on my own, stayed engraved on me for good, and at the time I didn't know how many times we were going to repeat the scene with no cactus involved.

Of the first night in the new flat I remember everything. We arrived with no cases, with the laptop as our only luggage, and it consisted of watching the usual series and eating some burgers we ordered by phone. That first flat, which we moved into with Jordi and later with my brother, was a depressing hole with a kitchen so small the two of us didn't fit in it at once, and we turned it into the home with the most love inside it in Barcelona that autumn. I was looking for work and we didn't have a euro in the wallet, so I made stuffed bread rolls to keep us going, one day after another, and in the small hours we'd go down to the local supermarket for something to eat, the two of us, with just enough on us, laughing our heads off in the street. Poor as rats and happier than in our whole lives. I had eight subjects left and I dropped them, as I've told. She was earning a pittance at a clinic that squeezed her dry, and in order to pay the rent I sold the car Rocío's mother had given me and went back into computing, on rotating shifts, to keep the two of us. She asked me for none of that; I decided it, because I loved her. Four years later, when the one who needed holding up was me, there was no car to sell and no degree to drop. There was a suitcase. I put it here alongside, without commenting on it, and I move on.

The first year was the easiest I remember, until it stopped being so. She smoked her joints daily and had smoked them for as long as she could remember, and in that small flat the one who got hooked again was me, which made three times. I started working, with the shifts wrecking my sleep, and one spring afternoon we had another plan in our heads: joining the gym across the road, the one thirty metres from our front door. We didn't go. We swapped what could

have been the habit that puts my life in most order for a glass of liquid ecstasy the two of us drank in the living room, and that set off something in my brain that it didn't set off in hers. That's where the worst period of my life until then started: the hypersexuality with no brake, the infidelities, the saunas and the syphilis, which I caught, in a sauna, with no protection, with the symptom running at full power while I took it for a feature of my character. The shame was immense. Her anger was just as big. And afterwards she forgave, the way she always forgave. She never said to me this is madness, we've come far enough. And that made me angry then and it makes me angry now, because if she'd ever said enough we would never have got so far or done each other so much damage.

A forgiveness with no diagnosis behind it does one very particular thing: it takes a symptom and treats it as a fault. It absolves the fault, and the symptom stays where it was, intact. And it comes back, because that's what a symptom is for. Every time she forgave, the thing learned absolutely nothing, because the one asking for forgiveness was me and I didn't know what I had inside me either. We got from the monastery on the mountain to the first psychiatric ward calling it character. And it wasn't through anybody's negligence: neither she nor I had the right name. After every going back, what was needed wasn't another forgiveness. It was an appointment. I needed limits the way I needed air and she didn't know how to set them for me, just as I didn't know how to love her the way she needed, and neither of those things had anything to do with a lack of love. We were two people with an unbaptised illness in the middle, and the two people spent years handing each other bills for what the third one was doing. It was never that Marta didn't understand me. It was that nobody on this earth explained the illness to her. And she, meanwhile, went on taking spines out of me one by one.

Chapter 18 • The Art School

On Marta's papers it said something else: one of the jobs at the bottom of a hospital, impossible shifts, a laughable wage. Artist wasn't written anywhere, and an artist is what she was. She'd get home destroyed from putting up with patients and bosses, sit down at the kitchen table of that tiny flat, take out a notebook and some pencils she bought in secret the way other people buy themselves a vice, and start drawing. Small watercolours. Pencil portraits. Hands, a great many hands, which apparently are the hardest thing there is, and she repeated them over and over with a patience she never applied to herself in any other matter of her life. She was starting out, and you could tell she was starting out. I could see none of that: I saw Michelangelo in pyjamas. And it wasn't only that I was in love. It was my hypomanic brain doing with that what it did with everything it loved, which was raising it to the epic. A hypomania couldn't care less that what it has in front of it is a watercolour of a park: if it was painted by the woman of your life, it's the Sistine Chapel, and there's nothing more to say. The strange thing about it is that the exaggeration did good there, because somebody needed to believe in Marta more than she believed in herself, which was a great deal less than she was worth.

And that was exactly the problem, which wasn't in the talent but in the wanting. She'd spent years saying that one day she'd do something with the drawing, and the day never came. It wasn't laziness. It was the tiredness of somebody who has heard all her life that it's a hobby, that you have to be realistic, that watercolours don't pay bills. She found the school herself, let that be clear: she looked for an art school in the city, studied the deadlines, the entrance tests and which timetables she could square with her shifts, and then put the folder in a drawer to gather dust, because knowing about a thing is one matter and believing it's for you is another, and in that sport she wasn't registered. That's where I came in. I told her the first time I saw her painting in the living room, that it wasn't a pastime, that it was her thing, and I went on saying it for two years, without nagging and without letting go of it. And one afternoon I planted the

papers on the kitchen table, on top of her drawn hands, and set about knocking down her objections one at a time.

"It's terribly expensive."

"You'll pay for it yourself. You're earning more now."

And it was true: by then she'd got out of the clinic and was stringing together cover posts in hospitals, so she paid for it herself from top to bottom, the fees, the materials and those enormous folders you had to get onto the metro. The other objections came. That she was too old now. That she wasn't up to the level. That who was going to swap her shifts. To all of them I answered the same thing in different words. The only thing I put in was faith, nothing but faith. And Marta enrolled and studied.

From the school she came back a different woman: straighter in the back, smelling of turpentine, talking about blocking in and tonal values. She brought the work home. She'd arrive with the piece wrapped in rags and newspaper, leave it on the table or straight onto the living room floor, and spend hours with the gouge and the sandpaper getting the shape out of the plaster, with the white dust floating in the air and settling on the sofa, on the furniture, on the dog and on my keyboard. She learned to work with her hands, and she got a taste for it. I swept that up twice a week and I didn't complain once, because the sound of that sandpaper was the closest thing to happiness that has ever sounded inside that house. She sent me photos from the workshop, stuffed into her overalls, and I have never seen her more beautiful than in those photos, truly I haven't. One winter day a piece of work came back marked down and she wrote to me that she'd doomed herself by going off to study that, that the day had come down on her like a bucket of cold water. I answered that same afternoon: that a stumble was deceiving her; that she was the most sacred thing there was; that the world doesn't fall down because one piece turns out so-so; that I was proud. Every sheet got its congratulations. That was Marta's vocation. Not healthcare, which was what she'd been dealt. I have no idea whether she's still painting, and I hope she is, because it would be the only thing from those years to have come out whole.

Of the several pictures she gave me in that time I have two hanging on the wall of the house I'm writing from, and I describe them because I want it on record what's still alive. One is a hand-drawn tree, with the black trunk sown with white dots and the branches coiling upwards, with coloured circles floating round it as if they were planets, and with some lines of verse written by hand by

her among the branches. That handwriting is hers. It has come with me to every house I've passed through, including a room of twelve square metres. The other is the odd one, the one that catches the eye of everybody who comes in: an eye in the sky, a set of antlers and coloured tentacles tangling away underneath. That's her at her best, the version she hardly showed anybody. And they still strike me as tremendous now, with lithium and with my head still: I like them, and that's all. They're there because I hold no grudge against anybody and least of all against her, because I genuinely like them and because she left them to me. I look at them every day without thinking about any of this.

Then there's the music, which is the worst, because there's no way of filing it: it plays, and it catches you wherever you are. There was a singer who was ours, the soundtrack of the house and of the good years, and his history with us we wrote ourselves. One summer day she puts the radio on and writes to me that he's playing, that maybe it's our song, with six ha-has after it. The following month, that he's part of our story now. At the worst of it, a year later: that he kills her if it isn't with me. And with everything already broken: fuck the bloody singer, the radio, us and all this shit, it hurts me even to breathe. And four days after my second discharge from psychiatry, the last one she wrote: that he always hits the nail on the head, and that she couldn't listen to much music. She wrote that. But the ones that really portray us are the songs of a singer-songwriter she discovered, who played in a small venue, and who is what was playing on the good days of our last spell living together. Placidity and nothing else. No conflict and nothing underneath. An open window and a song in the kitchen. Anybody who wants to know what loving each other was like when nothing was happening should go there. Not to the court files. For years, after everything, I listened to our singer crying, sometimes with my sister Sonia beside me, and the two of us would end up crying, her at seeing me like that and me for everything else. I don't cry with him any more.

And now what Marta used to write, which I have in front of me and which is what neither of us knew how to read. At your pace. Six times she wrote it to me, in those words. You know I fit in with the plan. I need you, and I need you strong, and I need you strong as a bull, and I need you well, strong and focused on everything: a dozen times in two years. That it depended on me, that it was a business. The pain of being on my own. And afterwards, once she'd already gone, that not once had she spent three nights in a row alone in the house. Read that alongside what comes now, because it's what nobody explained to us.

After medication, what most governs the course of a bipolar disorder isn't the patient: it's the people around him. There are studies from forty years ago with an ugly name, expressed emotion, that measure three things in the person who lives with the patient: criticism, hostility and emotional over-involvement. A patient who lives with somebody who scores high on any of the three relapses a good deal more within the following year, and there's a nuance that weighs here: criticism from those around you predicts above all the depressive relapse, not the manic one. The other leg is rhythms. Whoever is beside a bipolar protects sleep, defends timetables, knows the moment to call the emergency services and pushes towards treatment without starting a fight. The literature sums it up like an instruction manual: neither over-involved nor withdrawn. Now go back and read her sentences. She had no rhythm of her own, she coupled herself to mine, and mine was that of a continuous hypomania, so that at your pace meant at the illness's pace. She didn't know how to be alone and she left it said in so many words. And she wanted me strong as a bull and focused on everything because the one holding that house up was the sick man, and the day the sick man went down nobody was left standing. Over-involvement first, criticism afterwards for things that were symptoms, total withdrawal at the end: the three boxes on the scale, one after another, in exactly the order the clinical literature says sinks a patient. I don't write it to diagnose her, because I'm nobody to do that. I write it because nobody on this earth ever gave her the manual, and without the manual a woman who loves a sick man ends up doing precisely that: she leans on him until she snaps, criticises him for snapping and leaves. The woman I live with today, who hasn't read a single manual, asked me one night when I'd last slept properly. That is protecting a rhythm. Marta used to ask me whether I was strong.

Faithful to her I didn't know how to be, and I'll go on paying for that as long as I live. I gave her what I did have to give: the house, the calm of the stretches when I had calm, and a faith in her that she didn't have, held up every day and out loud. A disastrous good sort, which is probably the most accurate description of what I was inside that flat. Years later, at a trial, from behind a screen, I heard the complete inventory of the damage I caused. It had been made in detail. The art school didn't come up in it. Who put the papers in front of her didn't come up, or who swept the plaster off the living room floor. And I understand that without anybody having to lie: an abuser who pushes you towards your vocation and applauds every sheet you bring home is a character that doesn't hold

up, and what doesn't hold up absolves. So a coherent story got told there. A complete one, no.

Chapter 19 • The Motorbike

I ran that motorbike in on a spin round Barcelona with Marta on the back, and we liked it so much that the next day I bought her the complete kit: the helmet, and the boots, the jacket and the gloves as well. I bought it for safety, because the only thing that genuinely kept me awake was imagining the two of us on the ground one ordinary day. I come out of this book in a lot of ways and nearly all of them bad, so I'll note this one down too: that bloke spent his nights thinking about what would happen if they came off. On the bike we went to fetch the living-room sofa, which is how we did things. And on that same bike, one midday at the start of the summer I turned thirty-one, I rode up the mountain alone.

Before going on, a warning about method, because of that day there isn't a line in any archive: what follows I tell from memory, with a recollection that is still sharp ten years on, and I've explained already why I don't trust my own memory in the high phases. It wasn't a planned outing. It was the impulse of a hypomanic brain, already accelerated by that spring's antidepressants, asking for movement, with that village in the Montseny associated with the summer two years before, the one of the epiphany and my third as a lifeguard, and wanting to mark the anniversary with some gesture that weighed. I went to the usual tree, the one on the edge of the village. There was nothing special about it: I'd found it by chance that other summer and had sat there a while, and that while had turned in my head into a place loaded with meaning, which is what that head does with any place where a man sits down for five minutes.

I arrived and stopped the bike. Clean sky, not a cloud, with that early summer sun that hits hard up in the mountains. And I said out loud, knowing perfectly well it was a ridiculous gesture, that if he existed he should give me a sign. What came in the next two minutes I've told a great many times and always with the same warning in front of it: I don't know what that was. I know what happened. The sky went black all at once, and not slowly, but as if somebody had pulled a curtain across in one movement. Behind it came the thunder and the hail, thick and violent, one of those storms that had no business at that

time of year. I ran for the nearest roof there was. It hailed for fifteen minutes. And in those fifteen minutes, with my earphones in and five hundred songs playing on shuffle, in the exact second when I sat down on a bench and my body started coming down off the revs, the algorithm put on a song by our singer, the one of the house and the journeys, and the first line was precisely about a signal you send that the other one never receives. I couldn't move. The song went on: a meditation that won't come, a flight lower than what's expected of you, some dead hours in front of a wall. It seemed written for the exact point on the map where I was sitting. When the hail stopped I walked back to the bike, and as I put the key in the ignition the last thing happened: the cloud split down the middle as it discharged, and the angle of the sunbeams and that hole combined to drop a shaft of light directly above me. A perfect piece of stagecraft. It took me days to know what to do with that. Years to find the words.

The words are these, and I know all of them. Meteorology explains the hail: orographic masking, a cumulonimbus loaded with ice formed on the far slope, with the mountains acting as a wall for the eye and the wind pushing it up to the summit; and then a wet downburst, which is the core of the cloud collapsing all at once and dropping tonnes of ice vertically over a few hectares. Physically explicable, meteorologically odd, wildly improbable at that time of year. The algorithm explains the song: pseudo-random numbers, one in five hundred. Neurology explains the moment: fright switches off the prefrontal cortex so that you can run, and when you're safe and your pulse comes down the cortex switches on again all at once and demands that the chaos be put in order, and the first thing that comes through that window gets branded on you. And psychology explains the sum of the lot: apophenia, which is seeing meaningful patterns where there are only loose pieces of data, and which in a brain in a high phase runs with the volume all the way up. I know every one of those explanations and I use them. They settle nothing for me. What happened, happened.

Years later, with the lithium already inside me, I sat down and did the sum. In probability there's an idea they call the black swan: the highly improbable event, impossible to predict and with enormous consequences. If you take the storm, the exact roof, the exact song in the exact second and the shaft of light as independent, the number that comes out is the equivalent in particle physics of more than seven sigma, and to announce a discovery the bar is at five. The catch is that it doesn't repeat, and an experiment that doesn't repeat isn't an experiment: it's an anecdote with good numbers behind it. And what I wrote down

the night I finished the sum, and that I don't intend to take out of here, is that it was extremely interesting and proved nothing, except that I had saved myself thanks to a narrative of pure confirmation bias. The sum is correctly done. And the narrative I built on top of it saved my life.

What matters clinically about that afternoon, though, isn't in the sky. It's in what I wrote afterwards, with the thing just happened. Three months later, in the small hours, in the middle of an argument with Marta and sending her songs so she'd understand what was happening to me, I wrote to her that on the day of the tree it had been revealed to me, that it had been brutal to watch it hail for me, that it was like Moses parting the waters. A year later, in another conversation that was about something else entirely, I wrote to her that while I was making it hail our singer was playing, that I'd worked a miracle, that I'd gone off to where I'd found true love and that the moment I asked, all hell came down. I made it hail. I worked a miracle. First person, active voice. Hypomania isn't satisfied with interpreting the sign: it claims the authorship. That's where my faith comes from, the real one, the one I've kept. And out of that, with cocaine on top ten days later, came the Messiah of that night that's already been told. I never told Marta the whole of it: she saw the result and didn't see where it came from.

A month later the two of us went up, and that trip is in the archive, and I tell it because it's among the most luminous things there are in four and a half years. It starts the afternoon before: she wrote that coming into the city was no problem, and that if I'd rather not spend money and the house was free, I should make her something nice to eat. I answered a minute later suggesting we ride up the mountain and eat up there, and we agreed I'd pick her up at the end of her shift. I went for her on the bike that night, and she wrote that she definitely needed me further in, and I told her I needed to be further in too. The next day we rode up with her helmet, her boots and her jacket, and we went back to what had been our house, with the sofa we'd bought together. And that night, with each of us back in our own place, is the best thing I keep from that summer. She wrote that it had been a wonderful day and that she was sorry the ending had come out a bit colder. I answered in the same minute that she shouldn't worry about me, that the day had been marvellous, as always, and that that weekend I wanted to sleep with her. And then came the sentence I've been remembering for ten years: that that day her chest hurt from loving me, even if sometimes she held herself in and didn't say everything she felt. I told her mine did too. And after midnight, already in her own bed, the last message: that she smelled of me,

that she was going to sleep with that love, and that she loved me. Now I have to say where I was while all of that was being written, and it isn't a minor detail: Raquel was living in my house then, there was another woman installed temporarily, people came and went at any hour, and I was in up to my neck in the mania the following chapters tell. And even with all of that, that day happened. If only the other part of this story gets told, what's left is a man incapable of loving anybody. And that wasn't it. This was true as well, in the same month and on some days the same day: a bloke in a high phase wrecking everything, and the two of them writing to each other that their chests hurt from loving each other.

And now the concept, which is hypomania at the wheel of the big decisions, and it's explained with what's already been told and with two more things. A brain in a high phase doesn't decide the way people decide: it doesn't wait until tomorrow. It takes a motorbike, rides up a mountain and calls God to account out loud. It remakes an entire life in forty-eight hours. And one winter when I was out of work I sent Marta, in five consecutive messages, a complete financial plan, with its spread across several baskets, its waiting for the right moment in the market, its entry into large companies and its reinvestment of dividends, and the conclusion that in thirteen or fourteen well-run years we'd be able to stop working. I repeat: I was out of work while I was writing that. That's the motor, the certainty that costs nothing, the speed with no brake and an energy that from outside passes for initiative and from inside is lived as destiny. And here's the trap: the same brain that signs without reading what it shouldn't sign is incapable of signing what it should when the chance finally comes. Two autumns after the hailstorm, with no job and no flat, Marta and I went to see a house to rent in that same village. I had marrying her in my head and I was looking at rings. And at the last moment I pulled out. The excuse was that we were both out of work and that signing like that didn't seem honest to me; the real reason was fear, the panic of having to produce a payslip that no longer existed. That was the most expensive mistake of those months: renting that house would have got me out of my mother's town, which was where I bought the marijuana, and would have taken me up the mountain to rebuild a life with her. That no, said out of fear and with a brain already on its way to psychosis, has tortured me for years. And one more detail: the only time in four and a half years that Marta wrote the word psychiatrist was to send me the link to a news story about an old closed-down hospital. In the same village as the tree. In the

same village as the house I didn't sign for. Of all the places in the world, that one.

And I went back to that tree, many years later, to bury something.

Chapter 20 • Two Trips to A&E

One midday at the height of that summer I wrote to Marta that I was in a terrible way and couldn't stop coughing. A quarter of an hour later, that I was dying. Two minutes after that, that I was about to go to the doctor. And her, straight away: go to the doctor. A minute later I answered that I wasn't going anywhere and that I'd sleep as soon as I got home. Four minutes later, that I hadn't slept. And a while after having sent me off to the doctor, her again: you're not ill. And then: now the one creating the problem is you. The doctor that midday was for the cough. We were coming off a night with a third person in my flat and two days of rowing in writing, and what she had in front of her was a man who hadn't slept after that night, and that, with no diagnosis, looks like a stop and not like an illness. The only time in that whole summer the word ill turned up, I was the one who wrote it, and it was denied that same afternoon.

I have to say what state I was in that summer I turned thirty-one, because without that the above looks like a couple having a row and it was something else. The mania had started up in the spring, set off by the antidepressants I've already told about, and it didn't go out until the end of the summer. In those months I put away alcohol and I put away liquid ecstasy in quantities that turn my stomach today just remembering them, and I had several psychotic episodes; two of them ended in A&E. The first came right at the start of the summer, when the thing with the older woman blew up: a crisis, the hospital, and me blaming her for the lot of it. The next morning I announced to Marta that it was over, and Marta refused, with every right in the world, to join in the demonising of that woman. We weren't a couple at that point, and she'd made that clear from the first day, laughing about it in writing: that she knew perfectly well she was doing brilliantly and that it was thanks to me, because in her version the one who'd wrecked everything was me. Weeks later she wrote telling me to go off with the woman who'd nearly had me put away in a nuthouse. There it is, in her own writing, what she knew about that start of summer: that

somebody had come close to having me admitted. And there too is what she didn't have: the name of the thing.

And then there's a night in the middle of that summer, which has to be told with the clock in front of you, because the clock is the only thing about that night that doesn't lie. It started with a reproach of mine, that she hadn't known how to stand up for me in some business with my mother. An hour later I informed her that I was going to live with the older woman, as flatmates. And in the next eight minutes I wrote, word for word, that I intended to govern this country and that I'd told her so a thousand times, that I was married to the cause and not to a person; that I'd dumped her because she was idle; that the cause was the truth, that it needed resources, that she was either helping or getting in the way, that we were heading straight for a horrible, infernal tyranny, that I'd been born to prevent it and that if she wasn't helping she was serving my enemy; and that there was something above everything else, and that something was me and the truth. Read that again. A man insulting his partner and in the same minute announcing to her that he's going to save the country from a tyranny. And her, in the middle of the burst, the only sane voice on the whole screen:

"What on earth are you talking about."

And a little after:

"What cause."

That question had no answer, because there was no cause. There was a delusion of grandeur, which is in the manual, on the list of criteria for the manic episode, on the same line as irritability, and the two things were running at once and off the same motor. An abuser humiliates in order to keep the other person small and within reach. A man in mania humiliates because the other person is getting in the way of his mission to save the nation, and he says so, in writing, with the time stamped on it. The second is what's in that archive, and the difference isn't a nuance: it's the difference between a method and a symptom. She couldn't have known. She asked what cause, which was exactly what needed asking, and there was nobody around who could have told her that the thing was called grandiosity and that it can be treated. And it's worth saying what could have been done that night, because it wasn't much: in this country, putting somebody on a ward against their will takes a judge, or a doctor who will certify an emergency, and a man writing delusions from a phone in the middle of the night isn't an emergency any doctor can certify. Her question was the ceiling of

what could be done from a screen. And it wasn't one night. Days before, I'd written to her that trillions would die in the hour of the good. Days later, that I had to get myself rich in order to govern this country. And three weeks before the psychosis, that I was the Messiah.

The psychosis came as the summer was ending, and it was the second emergency. Toxic psychosis on top of an affective picture, that's what it's called, when the substance lights up what the illness already had prepared: visual hallucinations, and a man who this time asked of his own accord to be taken to hospital. They gave me an antipsychotic and sent me home. And here's the fact nobody has ever put on the table and that Marta saw with her own eyes: the following month, with the antipsychotic inside me, the nights awake stopped dead and back came the man she'd known in the best nine months. From one day to the next. That's what one pill did. And I came off it after a month. With nobody taking it away from me and nobody holding me to it, because I came out of those two emergencies the same way both times: with no diagnosis, no follow-up and not one person to explain to me what had just happened. A system that lets a man out of A&E with psychotic symptoms and a prescription, and then goes off to sleep soundly. In the whole archive of those four and a half years, in more than a hundred thousand messages of hers and mine, the word bipolar doesn't appear once. The word illness she never wrote at all. And psychiatrist she wrote a single time, and not in order to send me to one. Nobody said the word. Not her, not me, not the doctor who gave me the antipsychotic, and not the one who watched me come off it, who didn't exist.

And now the question she must have asked herself a thousand times and that it took me years to be able to answer: how was it possible that I didn't notice. It has a name and it has figures. It's called anosognosia, and it isn't denial: it's not being able to see. A study that measured insight into the illness phase by phase found that at least moderate denial of what is happening shows up in around eighty-five per cent of patients in pure mania; in fifty-nine in mixed episodes; in thirty-six in depression; and in twenty-two in euthymia, when you're well. And the nuance is what decides the whole thing. What doesn't get recognised isn't having the disorder: that's admitted without any trouble in cold blood, with the report in front of you. What doesn't get recognised is that what you are doing right now is the disorder. A diabetic in a hypo notices the shaking because his illness doesn't switch off the instrument he assesses himself with. Mania does switch it off. It's the only illness that attacks precisely the organ that ought

to be doing the noticing. That's why I kept telling Marta I was perfectly fine while the house was coming down on top of me, and that's why I wasn't lying to her when I said it. And that's why I came off the antipsychotic after a month: because with the antipsychotic inside me I was well, and when you're well what you can see is that you don't need it, without cottoning on to the detail that you're well precisely because you're taking it. I've said it already about lithium and I say it here about that pill, which was the first. And the insight of the person watching from outside switches off too when nobody has given them the name: Marta wasn't denying an illness; she was answering a man. That sentence from that midday, you're not ill, was still the right one for what she could see. What was missing was the illness underneath it.

There was something else underneath, and it has to be said because it explains why that autumn I didn't go down to the health centre a single time. For me, being admitted wasn't a bed and a pill. It was my father. It was a kid watching his father in a cage, and a man of twenty reading a report with two Latin words in it. When years later a psychiatrist told me I had the same thing he had, and that the medicine was the same one he'd killed himself with, what I felt wasn't relief at having a name: it was that the inheritance was being handed over to me. And inheritances like that don't get signed for until somebody makes you. At thirty nobody was making me. So the anosognosia did its part, the fear did its own, and between the two of them they left the box in a drawer.

There's a detail from those years that makes me laugh and gives me the shivers in equal measure, and that sums up what it is to get to thirty-three without anybody having explained to you what you've got inside. I had a stock line. I'd come out with it over the table after any meal, joking, and somebody always laughed: that the cheapest way to get high was not sleeping. That if you were skint, you skipped the night and you'd see. The worst of it is that I wasn't lying. Lack of sleep did get me high. Two nights running with my eyes open and I was euphoric, fast, quick with a line, unstoppable, with the world turning at my revs, and I'd tell it the way you pass on a home-made tip for saving money. What I was describing was a manic prodrome. With its clinical precision and its mechanism inside it, because sleep is, as I've said already, the best documented trigger of this illness and one of the first signs that it's on its way. Which is to say I had my own early warning pinned down, pinned down so well that I'd built a joke out of it, and I repeated it out loud in front of doctors, part-

ners and friends. Nobody understood it. Nor did I. The information wasn't missing: it was coming out of my mouth, and not a soul picked it up.

The doctor business, that summer midday, was the only practical thing that came up in two entire days of messages, and today, ten years on, it's still the right answer. They took me to a doctor two and a half years later. In an ambulance. And she was no longer there.

Chapter 21 • The Throuple

The year I turned thirty-three I spent from end to end in mania. It's the word that was missing from that year while it was happening and from every version of it that has gone around since, mine included. The name took more than a year to arrive; the night it started was in a studio flat in the old quarter, on a giant sofa bed that took up half the living room, with a mug in my hand.

I'd moved there on my own, from my mother's house, after that summer. I was dragging along a dull depression of the kind that has no name and therefore has no cure, flattened by an IT job I detested, and I spent my evenings sunk into that sofa with no idea what to fight against. And then Raquel turned up again, and with her the substances came back into my life. I started using again, and the first thing I took was an opiate. And in my brain that was a resurrection: the depression evaporated in one go, the colours came back, the music was booming inside my head again. Today I know what it was: a substance-induced mood switch in a brain that was already ill, and with opiates what they give you on the way up they charge for on the way down. We picked ours up again and opened a spiral of sex and substances, weekend after weekend. That Christmas I didn't even spend with my family: I made out I was ill, and I was in the studio, off my head, receiving people who should never have come through that door. And New Year's Eve I spent with Marta, just the two of us, having dinner on that sofa bed; it was lovely and it was strange, and she noticed without being able to put a name to it, because I was raising a glass with her at midnight with a secret the size of a flat. It was the last New Year's Eve we spent together.

Once the holidays were over, at work, they moved me from support to sales: more hours, more pressure and a great deal less structure, exactly what a bipolar going into mania does not need. And at the end of that month I left Marta. With Raquel I was never unfaithful to her: I left her. I couldn't stand the contradiction of loving them both, I didn't want to lie to her again and, above all, I didn't want to drag her into the drugs. She wrote to me in those days that she'd sabotaged what we had, that she hadn't listened to me, and she apologised for her cold-

ness. Her. And, laughing, that I shouldn't go finishing off me and our heart by not sleeping.

The weeks that followed were a man keeping up two incompatible conversations at once. One morning Marta was writing to me that she'd been to A&E with anxiety, that it was hitting her very hard and that she gathered it wasn't hitting me. And in the small hours of that same day Raquel was writing to me about something else entirely. One afternoon that month I put it in writing: a proposal with the three people inside it, and with the only line from that day that respected them both, which was that it would be when she wanted and the other one wanted. Raquel answered four minutes later that ever since I'd told her she'd been fantasising about the two of them together. Which is to say I'd told her beforehand. The desire belonged to all three of us, that's true. But the one who turned it into a plan, the one who said when and how, was me.

And there's one night that winter that explains the three years that followed. I'd barely slept since the Friday, Raquel wasn't there, and after midnight I wrote her a good twenty messages in a row. That I loved her totally but not exclusively. That I wasn't going to abandon her again. And that I was terribly sorry for having let her go over a little girl who couldn't understand me and who I'd lied to because I couldn't admit to her what I was like without fear of being judged. The little girl was Marta. She was thirty and we'd been together four years. The next morning Raquel asked me the only question that needed asking: whether all of that was part of a delusion and not a reality. And I, that same morning, wrote that I'd gone five days with hardly a wink of sleep and drew the conclusion entirely on my own: that I supposed I was deluded as well. Eleven months before the first admission, a man acknowledging in writing that he was deluded, and nobody around with the map on which that sentence is an alarm.

And while we're here, the map. Mania isn't being cheerful or having a lot of energy: it's an episode, with at least a week of mood shot up or irritable, and on top of that the manual sets out seven pieces, of which you need three for the picture to have a name. I'll say them plainly and with that year as the example. Inflated self-esteem: the manifesto of that night, a man convinced his love was a superior way of loving. Sleeping less and not missing it: five days. Talking non-stop: twenty messages in a row at an hour when people are asleep. Thought at full speed, ideas jumping with no bridge between them. Getting distracted by anything at all. The increase in goal-directed activity: a three-way plan drafted in detail in the middle of the afternoon. And the seventh, the one that's worth all

the others put together: excessive involvement in pleasurable activities carrying a high risk, and the manual puts, word for word, unrestrained spending sprees, sexual indiscretions and foolish investments. It's the only one of the seven that works out well for the people around you: an insult gets noticed, a delusion gets noticed, and a round bought at the bar looks like generosity.

At the end of the winter Marta came back. During the break-up she'd met a couple, and she wrote to me that she felt free as the wind; and I, when I found out, thought that if she was taking drugs with other people she'd be better off doing it with me. Marta and Raquel, against every forecast and against every manual, got on: Raquel wrote to me that she was falling in love with her, that she'd talked more with Marta in a week than with me in a month. And that's how the throuple started. Marta I loved with the part of me that was after stability; Raquel, with the part that recognises the abyss in somebody else. And me in the middle, my brain in mania, convinced I'd hit on the invention of the century. Nobody asked the one thing that needed asking: and when the storm comes, who stays.

And now the part that puts that year in order for me and that I'd never written down. I didn't set that up just for sex. For two years I'd been writing to Marta that she was the love of my life and to Raquel that I was dying for her, on the same phone and sometimes in the same hour, without telling either of them the whole truth about the other. That I slept with people has a clinical explanation. That does not: it was cowardice, then and now. So I set up the throuple in order to stop lying. If the two of them knew each other and everything was on the table, I stopped being the man cheating on one with the other and became somebody who loves two people and says so. In my head at the time it was a moral repair job. And it didn't work, of course, because a man in mania doesn't repair anything: he amplifies. What I set up in order to stop lying left all three of us worse off than we'd been, with Marta, who'd asked for the least, paying the highest bill.

There's one day after she came back that's the only proof of what was underneath. Marta and I had had a habit for years: we'd look each other in the eye and say the other's name. I'd say Marta, look at her and kiss her. She'd say Marcos, look at me and kiss me. That day we did it for hours, high on ecstasy. But what was being said was the same thing we said to each other sober. And here goes the bit I know sounds like a junkie's excuse and that I stand by anyway: the love you feel when you're high is love too. For most people it wears off with the

comedown. Mine never has. I'm not saying it was good. I'm saying it wasn't false.

From there until the autumn we put our foot down and blew through every limit of sanity and of biology, in that order. The studio turned into a cave with no clocks and no mirrors. I took everything going, and I say it about myself, who is the only person I can say it about: crystal meth, ketamine, mephedrone, GHB, MDMA, poppers, Viagra; I got to the point of applying the substances straight onto the mucous membranes so the hit would be immediate. Orgies that went on for days. Practices that escalated to dangerous anatomical limits, with the body cut off from pain by the chemical anaesthesia. And the body nearly all of that was performed on was mine: I was the one on the receiving end and the one using the most, by a very long way, and on the Monday, eight hours of functioning professional on top of a wrecked body. And all of it I paid for. With my wages first, with the cards afterwards, with loans I took out online at four in the morning. Marta put in what I let her put in, which was little because I didn't let her, and her share of the rent she always paid. In those circles everybody was using, one thing or another; the only one who was judged for it was me. The bulk of it I put in, because I was the only one with a payslip and because I had it fixed in my head that loving properly meant giving. What I was left with from that was a debt it took me four years to pay off, month by month and on overtime.

It broke in the spring, over a small piece of mistrust that was covering up the real thing. A silly suspicion came up, the kind you settle by talking for ten minutes, and it didn't get settled: we dumped it on Raquel, who was the only one with a life outside the triangle, and what got switched on was a fear that came from a long way back. She took it the way you take an accusation that hits you like a bullet, and she answered the next morning just as badly. That was the spark. And underneath, the real thing had been there for months: the money, the absence (I told her I'd got angry because she wasn't around, and she gave it straight back to me: that I hadn't been around either), and a sentence of hers from that last night: that she knew I was lying, and that it was that which got to her, that I wasn't loyal. The lies again. And Marta wrote the next day the thing that sums it up: that we'd failed because it was too big for us, and not only for her. That same week she handed in the keys to her flat and came to live in the studio, writing to me that she supposed I wouldn't care either way. That's where the summer started.

And about that summer, what it was, said without filters, because if I leave it out this book turns into the version that suits me. For three months I didn't have normal sex with Marta. Not one act of intercourse, not once. And not because there was no sex: because I got stuck on one single thing, always the same and always with drugs in front of it, which she gave me on her own, with her hand and her arm inside me, for hours, without my touching her at all. And on top of that I was demanding: I asked her for things, I corrected her, I hurried her along. In the same bed and at the same time of night, the other thing: hours on end before dawn, high, with a screen, beside the woman I have wanted most in my life while she tried to sleep a hand's breadth away. And one afternoon at the end of that summer, in our own home, while she was at work, I slept with a rent boy. She asked twice whether I'd gone off to get my rocks off and I lied to her twice. That has the name of hypersexuality, which has been explained already, and here it adds the thing neither of us saw at the time: the escalation. That brain latches onto a stimulus and hands it everything, and it raises the dose because yesterday's dose no longer reaches. And I never once asked her whether she was all right with it. I put it down because it happened.

The day she couldn't take any more she didn't make a scene. She wrote it to me on a Friday afternoon, while we were talking about something else. That she was eaten up with craving and had decided to pack in scoring. That the whole thing made her feel like a plastic dildo, with a laugh behind it so it wouldn't hurt me. That I hadn't listened to her or felt her. And ten minutes later, just in case, that she wasn't putting on pressure and wasn't angry, but that she needed a bit of tenderness too. She gave it up with one sentence. I didn't give it up even with an ambulance. Hers was a use that answered to her tiredness, and it went out when she got tired; mine answered to an episode, and it couldn't be put out from inside, because it was fed by the same thing that was keeping me awake.

Chapter 22 · The Channel

That autumn we lost everything in order, and the order matters. First the job: they sacked me on the spot, because you could see the using on me and because of repeated absences with poor excuses. Then the studio. And with no wages and no flat, instead of giving up, we put together an entire house. I'll tell this slowly because out of that whole autumn it's the only thing that wasn't a ruin: an empty house that we wired up and plumbed in ourselves, that we furnished and that we left working. I bought the furniture and the two of us assembled it; she put together as many pieces as I did or more, and she was better at it. I put up the lamps and the bed; she painted the bedside tables and they came out beautiful. There's one morning that stands for that whole month: me running the pipes through with the drill broken, with a chisel and a hammer, one finger bleeding, and in the middle of the afternoon writing to her in capitals that everything worked. She answered: god, hallelujah. That was the last euphoric moment the two of us had. Because we were squatting that house, and we were caught, and instead of taking shelter behind what the law allowed us we were honest and we left. She was the one who fronted it. On her own, for the two of us. I lost my nerve and let her do it, and I note it down here because that's what I'm writing this for. And in that house, on a mattress on the floor we'd put down as a temporary thing, we made love. Normal, with her pleasure ahead of mine, no substances and nobody else. After three months, that. It was the last time, and today I know it was a goodbye, made without either of us knowing it.

From there, to my mother's house, in the village, up in the Vallès. A room of twelve square metres, the two of us and the dog. And here I'd better say the thing about the substances, because I believed I'd stopped and what I'd actually done was change substance. The hard drugs finished at the end of the summer, genuinely, and it looked to me like stopping. What I did was keep the marijuana, which I bought where you buy it in every village, and the beer, which in those months was never not there. And around my birthday, an episode with psilocybin of which not much is left, apart from one thing: in that vis-

ion I saw the pornography addiction whole, what it was and what it had done to her, and I gave it up. For good and with no relapses. Back then I believed the joints were the soft stuff. Today I know what cannabis does to a brain like mine, and into that room it came every night, and that brain was on its way to an ambulance.

She could see it, and she wrote it down, and it has to go in because for years the story has been that she saw nothing. One afternoon that autumn, mid-afternoon, she asked me not to score, that we should do it calmly because we deserved that much; that it terrified her that I'd score and get myself into the state I got into in there. Twenty minutes later, what living with me that autumn was: that she would like to be able to go out and come back into the house without feeling that when she came back she'd find me the way she'd found me the last few times. And two minutes after that, that she was starting to need some connection with me. And that same afternoon, a couple of hours later, she sent me the list of the shopping she'd just done: coffee for everybody, yoghurts, apples, biscuits for breakfast and my mother's hair dye. And that she'd paid, and that she felt bad saying so. That's what there was: a terrified woman doing the household shop, apologising for mentioning it and asking me please not to score. Weeks later, a single line of hers that is an entire diagnosis: asking whether I hadn't gone and bought more beer. And for my birthday the two of us went off for two days to another city. It was our last trip, exactly a month before the suitcase, and we were fine, no arguments and nobody else in the conversation, which by then was already a rarity. If anybody had seen us in the street they'd have seen an ordinary couple.

And then there was the channel. I'd opened a video channel on the internet, and that autumn it ate the lot. I spent my nights in front of the computer, in that room of twelve square metres, with her asleep or trying to be a metre away, cutting videos until six in the morning: a weather forecast, some short films, a trailer, experiments with the editing tools, hours and hours of it. And all of them, every one I made in those days and still have, went over our songs. I'd show them to her and she'd answer that they were cool, that they were funny, that you could follow them. One midday, after laughing at the weather forecast, she wrote to me: get something ready and we'll film it later. Another day, that she was watching all the videos again. Another, that she was still waiting for me to sit down with her and explain a few things in them. And one night, without making a drama of it, what was actually happening: that I'd spent weeks ignor-

ing everybody to be on the videos, and that I couldn't now expect everybody to answer. Weeks, plural. She saw a man who shut himself inside a computer until six in the morning and didn't look at her. That's what there was.

And one night well into that autumn, the only thing I did outside the house in the whole of it. That summer, with her visiting on a break from work, we'd come across an adult philosophy course, one of those held over a drink after dinner, and she'd pointed the poster out to me with her finger. I wrote a letter to get myself accepted, and I still have that letter in full: it jumped from the dog days of summer to Gramsci, from Gramsci to a scorpion on a poster read as a sign, from the scorpion to astrology and from there to an actor's illness, without one logical bridge and with absolute confidence at every crossing, and the second beer halfway through the working day written down by my own hand without my attaching the slightest importance to it. Flight of ideas, grandiosity, magical thinking, irritability dressed up as literature. They accepted me on that letter. And in that text, where I left nobody standing, the only person who came out intact and loved from first line to last was her: my beloved Marta, the one who bore the heat with more dignity than I did, the one who pointed at the doorway with her finger. I wrote that, in my worst summer, four months before everything ended. Well, I turned up to the class and put on a show. The discussion was conducted over wine, and I drank all the wine they had. All of it. And it went up from there. I'm not going to reconstruct what I said, because I don't remember it properly: knowing that I turned up at a philosophy class, drank the place dry and made a spectacle of myself says all there is to say about where I was. I didn't go back. And out of that performance, weeks later, somebody who wasn't there and who was told about it asked for my phone number. That goes in its own place.

Now we have to talk about sleep, because it's what was underneath all of that and what she named before anybody else did. Almost a year earlier, in the middle of the winter, she'd written to me, laughing, that I shouldn't go finishing off me and our heart by not sleeping. She laughed because nobody had given her the map on which that sentence is an alarm. A review from twenty years ago, which pulled together seventeen studies on how a mania starts, said two things that describe that autumn with an accuracy that frightens: that the prodrome, the antechamber of the episode, lasts more than twenty days; and that the commonest symptom by a distance, in three out of every four patients, is broken sleep. And here's what took me years: in this illness sleep isn't only the

first symptom. It's also the trigger. The bipolar brain has a fragile internal clock, and a single night without sleep can set a mania alight the way a match sets a dry field alight; and the mania, in its turn, takes the sleep away, and there you have a circuit that closes and feeds itself. A screen at six in the morning with the ideas going at full speed isn't a man staying up late: it's the illness winding itself up. On top of that goes the piece of the manual that has already come up, goal-directed activity: the brain latches onto one single thing and hands it every hour of the day and of the night. My goal was the channel. And the reverse of it, on the same list, is the withdrawal: you shut yourself in with your goal and leave out the person right beside you, not because she's surplus to requirements, but because the system that decides what gets attended to is ill. And underneath that the other thing was already starting, the antechamber of the psychosis, which gets told in its own place: the sense that something enormous is going on all around and that everything, a video, a news item, a number, has been put there for you. Ever since then I have been hearing that it was lack of interest. It wasn't lack of interest. It was a brain going into a psychosis with a loudspeaker in front of it.

And here goes the part of that autumn that reads worst, because the two things happened at the same time and both were the same mania. In those days I wanted to marry Marta. I was looking at rings on the internet. We'd looked at a house to rent higher up, already in the Montseny, the one I didn't sign for and that has been told already, and I wanted to leave everything behind and be up there with her. From those days there's one photo left: the two of us sitting out in the country with Toby between us, her stroking him and my hand on his back. It's the last one we had taken together. In it we look like an ordinary couple, and we were one, and I was looking at rings. And in those same weeks, on the same computer, the same mania had me writing about sex with Nuria, a woman I didn't fancy and have never fancied, who I never wanted to be with. Marta saw it on the computer, and she knew. That wasn't a decision: it was a psychotic episode with the prefrontal cortex out of service, throwing me back to the meetings of other years behind my partners' backs. I never once intended to make it real. I couldn't even leave the house. Looking at rings and talking about sex with a woman I didn't fancy were the same mania, and neither of them was a decision. She got the second one. She left believing that the man in that room was a liar, and the man in that room was a sick man, with one of the gravest illnesses in psychiatry and no diagnosis, looking at rings.

And the channel ended where these things end: in a declaration of war. One Sunday afternoon I wrote to Marta that she had to help me make the whole channel go viral, because the next day they were voting on something or other in Brussels and the world was ending. And sixteen minutes later I sent Raquel the same link with a few words that say all of it: maximum circulation, the truth has to be heard, now, tomorrow is too late. A man in a room of twelve square metres, in his mother's village, with no job, no home and no sleep, declaring war on the entire world with some videos set to his girlfriend's songs. She was at the bus stop, with the dog, waiting for me to come down.

Chapter 23 • My Father's Place

It was Sonia who took me to the place where my father turned up, and she took me the same year he turned up there. It's high up, on the hill above the village, with the whole of the Vallès open at your feet and, if the day is clear, Barcelona in the distance. I'd run through that stretch hundreds of times when I was training, in the good years, and I'd never once stopped.

That Sunday she'd gone down to the stop with the dog and wrote telling me to come up: that whatever I was doing could bloody well wait, that I should come out and clear my head with the two of them, get some air, that it was a nice afternoon. I answered that I was busy. I was busy with the channel, with the law being voted on the next day and the end of the world, which has been told already. Minutes later, that she was nearly there and that they were waiting for me. Then, whether I was coming down. And later in the afternoon, in two messages, my name with a please after it and a come home. Marcos, please. Come home. They're the last two lines of hers for five days, because after that hour I disappear off every phone at once, which is exactly what's left of a night that ends the way this one ended.

When I got back the two of us went into the room and one of those absurd, delirious conversations started up, the kind there was no longer any way of having with me. No idea what it was about. I know how it ended: me going out of the door at a run with Toby. I came back for the car, left her alone in there, put the dog in the back and drove straight up the hill. To the exact spot where they'd found my father. Whether I was going to walk the dog or what, that I no longer know. My sister phoned me and turned up there in the dark, with me and with the dog loose among the rocks, and there I gave her the full feature film, championship conspiracy stuff: that there was a kind of parallel reality underneath this one; that Dad had been taken out by a dark and superior force, an invading thing that installed itself in your mind; and that the same thing was happening to me. Sonia let me talk. Then we said we'd go down to the house, and I put the dog back in the car and took off along the road in the opposite direction. I came

back a good deal later. When I arrived I had the medics waiting for me at the door. They took me to hospital, and Marta came with me. What happened in that consulting room has a chapter of its own. Here goes the other thing: why I went up there.

Because I've spent years asking myself that question and until recently I couldn't answer it. Why, in the middle of a delusion, I took the car and took my dog to the precise place where they found my father. And it wasn't a one-off, which is what turns it into a fact and not an anecdote: I've done it three times and in three different ways, and the other two come later in this book, one of them hammering on my mother's shutters and the other in a cemetery. That cemetery is his as well, because the family grave is there, and on top of the grave there's a marble book with some lines engraved in Italian: the words of the song he adored, the one about that island that doesn't exist and that a man spends his whole life looking for. My mother chose it, and she's where the language comes from. And that marble book I took home with me during a decompensation and had for years on my shelf, and I didn't put it back where it belonged until after the first admission, which is the fact that best sums up what I was doing with my dead in those days. Three times the brain broke, and all three times it ran towards the same man.

And this has an explanation, and it has been written down for half a century. The two psychiatrists who described the phases of grief called the second one, in those exact words, yearning and searching. The attachment system, when it loses the person it was hooked to, doesn't switch off: it starts looking for her. And it looks where it makes sense to look, which is the places associated with her. In a healthy head that comes out as wanting to go back to a place and a lump in the throat. In a head in psychosis that same search comes out with no brake and no judgement: you take the car and plant yourself where they found him, or you hammer on a shutter shouting that he's alive. A recent review on the times when the ones left behind see or hear the one who went says it almost in these words: they appear within the desperate search that follows the loss of an attachment figure. I hadn't grieved my father. I'd read aloud at his funeral holding my face together, gone back to the office the next day and hadn't asked a single question. Thirteen years later, with my brain off the brakes, the grief came out where it could: up the road that climbs the mountain, with a dog on the back seat.

And on top of the grief there's the other thing, the one I told already with Laura and that Marta watched at work for four years without either of us knowing what it was called: separation anxiety, the kind that started at twenty with the way my father went. And that piece doesn't only explain the business of the place. Above all it explains what I did with Marta in the years that followed, which is what I had never been able to put a name to: going back. Going back over and over, going down to look for her at every station in the city for years, writing to her after a whole year of being blocked in case the thing could be reopened. That wasn't stubbornness, or a lack of dignity, or harassment: it was an attachment system that doesn't accept separation and that pushes you back to the same place, exactly the way it pushes me up the hill above the village to talk to my father. When somebody I love goes, my head doesn't turn sad: it starts searching. And it searches badly, and it searches shouting.

Now the part of that night Marta did see and that may well have frightened her: the state I got into. Because I got into the state I got into, and you have to know where it came from. It wasn't rage at her. Or at anybody in that hospital. It was panic. Panic at being admitted, which in my head wasn't a bed and a pill: it was my father. Being admitted, for me, was the queue, the checkpoint, the visiting room, the dirty glass and the telephone, and on the other side of the glass a man shut into the unit where they kept the ones who were like him, medicated by force, with that look of somebody who can no longer tell which side of reality he's on. And it was the salt in the drawer as well, the salt that same man took in one sitting when I was twenty. So that night, with the medics at the door of my mother's house, in that car and in that waiting room, I was two people at once: a lad of sixteen watching his father in a cage, and a man of thirty-three who had seen what the same salt did to the same man. Neither of them wanted to go onto a ward. Neither of them could ask for the one thing that would have saved him. And I say it plainly, with no decoration, because everything that came afterwards depends on it: I was deluded, and I did something that frightened her enormously, and even so I was not aggressive with Marta at any moment of that night. Not that night and not any other. I was no danger to anybody, and I was no danger to the dog either, who came home in one piece and slept between the two of us, like every other night. What I had that night was a delusion, and a delusion isn't an intention. Mine was about a dark force that had taken my father and that was coming for me. In none of its versions was there a plan against anybody. Seen from outside it was a madman with a dog. Seen

from inside it was a son who, without knowing it, had gone to the only place in the whole district where there was still somebody of his own blood to ask what was happening to him.

That place was, that night, the set for a delusion, and today it's something else entirely: it's a place I go to on pilgrimage. I've gone up many times, on the nights of doubt, the same way I go up to my tree on the mountain. I've stayed up there at night talking to the full moon as if it were my father, telling him what I'm doing with my life; at the tree I talk to God and up there I talk to him, because I feel him present and because for me a dead man never quite finishes dying, and the resident atheist can say whatever he likes. And a hundred metres from that place there's another that belongs to Marta and me alone: some rocks you can see the city from, where she and I made love one night in one of the good summers. That night was beautiful. So it turns out that I go up to give an account of myself to my father a hundred metres from where I was happy with her, and the two things live together up there without getting in each other's way. I gave Marta some of the loveliest nights she has had, and I imagine she has wanted to forget them, because that's what you do when the same person also gave you the worst. I haven't forgotten them. And I don't keep them with hatred, or with nostalgia any more either: I remember them with the love that belongs to them, which isn't the same thing. Today I have something truer, less impulsive and a great deal more grown up, and precisely because of that I can write this without my hand shaking. I go up, I talk to the moon, which is the only one that answers, and I come down. My father is still there. Marta isn't.

Chapter 24 • The Consulting Room

Marta came into the duty psychiatrist's room with me. That has to be said first, because it's what made everything else possible: in twenty years of an illness with no name, that was the only time the system opened the door by itself. Nobody had to call anybody. A man in the middle of a delusion had disappeared with a dog and a car, the medics had gone to the house to fetch him, they'd sat him down in front of the person who could have him admitted, and the admission was on the table. I couldn't ask for it, and not out of stubbornness: because of the lack of insight into the illness I've been explaining since the first page, and because of the inherited panic I've just told about. My mother could call, and she did call, and it wasn't enough. Nobody from outside gets anybody onto a ward without a doctor there. That night there was one. And there was one other person in that room the doctor was going to ask, because she was the one who lived with him. And she asked her.

And Marta said the sentence that changed the course of things: that she would take charge of me, that there was no need to admit me. I don't know whether she said it because she was afraid of me, which is possible, or out of fear of an admission; what is certain is that she didn't know what one was. And inside, I was grateful to her the way you're grateful to somebody for getting you out of a prison. Without knowing she was getting me out of the one place that could have saved me. And neither of us could have known it. What was written down about that night I found years later, in the list of previous history in another report: an attendance at A&E for behavioural disturbance at home, with no diagnoses reached, and discharge with no diagnosis, no treatment and no recommendation of follow-up. A man in a psychotic prodrome went into a hospital and came out of it without a single line written on him. The system did its part as far as the door of that room, and in the room she spoke, with the best will in the world, and the system went off to sleep soundly.

Now I have to tell what an admission is, because that night she decided about a thing she didn't know. You come out of an admission softer than a baby's bot-

tom, that's the truth of it: you come out fully medicated and, normally, in post-psychotic depression; you don't come out aggressive with anybody. The first one I had, seven weeks after that night, was the gentle sort: no restraints, and even so with a door that locks from the outside. The others weren't that: the seclusion, the rooms locked with a key and the restraints, which I wore twice. And now it has to be put together with the other thing, because both are true at once. An admission is horrible. And an admission is what saved my life that winter. The horror of it isn't an argument for not doing it: it's the reason for doing it as early as possible, while the small one is still enough. That night there was a small one on the table. And it wasn't done. A review from twenty years ago, which brought together thousands of first-episode patients, measured what time does in these matters: the longer a psychosis goes untreated, the worse the symptoms and the functioning are half a year and a year later, and the less likely the remission is. With that sentence the psychosis walked out of the hospital and went back to the room of twelve square metres, and there it carried on for seven more weeks, untreated.

And I repeat it here because this is where it's needed most: I was never a danger, not to her and not to the dog. Not that night and not any other. Across five admissions there isn't one single act of physical harm to anybody: not to her, not to Toby, not to the police officers who years later carried me out of two houses and a hotel in restraints. That night the only person in danger was me.

And now, with the diagnosis in place, with five admissions behind me and the papers in front of me, I have to look at that decision of hers whole and in cold blood. Not to charge her for it. To know what it was, because for years I've been hearing two versions, hers and mine, and both of them are lies: hers, that she tried everything and nothing could be done; mine, that she abandoned me because I'd been made ill and that's that. Let's look at it the way you look at a case.

First, what she knew. And here there's no room for the kindness of saying she knew nothing. Two years earlier she'd written telling me to go off with the woman who'd nearly had me put away in a nuthouse. She wrote that sentence. That same autumn two years earlier she talked to me about the medication they'd put me on, because I was coming off two emergencies for psychotic symptoms and an antipsychotic I dropped after a month. And a few months after that consulting room, talking about that winter, she would say it herself with a precision some medical reports could learn from: I know you weren't

there. That isn't the sentence of a woman who didn't know. It's the sentence of a woman who was watching it and had nowhere to put it. She worked in one of the jobs at the bottom of a hospital, with impossible shifts. She knew perfectly well what a white coat was.

Second, what she didn't know, with the same exactness. She didn't have the name. And she didn't have it because nobody gave it to her, and that isn't a moral failing of hers: it's the failure of an entire system that lets a man out of A&E with no diagnosis and no follow-up. I've said already that in more than four years of messages the word bipolar doesn't appear once. In her messages from that autumn, from the move up to the village to the day she left, the words doctor, hospital, admission and help don't appear referring to me a single time. What there is is don't score, had I gone and bought more beer, come home. The only visit to a doctor in those three months that shows up in the chat is hers, for her stomach. It's what two people with no diagnosis do with a problem they can't name: they manage it with the calendar. And the calendar cures nothing.

Third, what she did with what she knew, which is what all of this is about. Five days after telling a doctor she was taking charge of me, she wrote to me at night that she had her things ready, but that she couldn't leave like that, and that she was sorry. I answered with a question mark. Her, nothing more. I don't remember any of this. Not the sentence, not the moment, not her face: my head, in the middle of an episode, didn't fix it, and I've had to reconstruct it by reading her messages, years afterwards. In those days my brother Gabriel came to see me, and that isn't in any chat, because it was talked about in the kitchen. My sister had come out to the place where my father died to look for me; my mother was in and out; my brother turned up there afterwards. My whole family saw what there was. Not one of them could sign for an admission. The only person who could be in that consulting room had already been in it, and had already said no.

And here's the thing I've spent years unable to put in order and that today I put in order. For a long time I wrote that nobody has a duty to stay, and in general that's true: nobody can be required to keep an illness like this one company. But with her that sentence falls apart on its own, and it falls apart at one very specific point. The duty isn't one I'm imposing from a moral height: she took it on herself, out loud and in front of a doctor who was about to admit me. That is no longer standing by somebody because you love them, which nobody owes anybody. That is taking charge of a treatment. And a treatment accepted in front

of a doctor obliges you to one very small thing, which isn't staying for life: it obliges you to hand it back if you can't manage it. To ring the clinic. To say so to my mother, who was the one left with the man she had taken charge of. She didn't hand it back. She left it on the table of that kitchen, with the cases packed five days after the sentence and, fourteen days after it, at a station, which is how long the charge lasted. And a treatment that gets accepted in front of a doctor and abandoned without warning isn't the same as never accepting it: it's worse, because it shuts the door and turns the light off above it as well. That she went is hers, and it was legitimate, and it needs no decoration: she was skin and bone, not sleeping, with a man in the middle of a delusion a metre away. I grant her that in full. What she was asking me for in those weeks was that I change, that if things went on like that she'd leave. Seen from her side it's the most reasonable thing in the world. Seen from inside my head it's this: she was asking a man in a psychotic prodrome, with no diagnosis and no treatment, to do by will-power what is only done with an admission, five days after having prevented that admission. A brain at that point doesn't change because it's asked to. What she was waiting for wasn't a change: it was a miracle. And what came was the only thing that could come, which was more psychosis.

And since a year later she would write that she'd tried everything, it's worth saying what everything is, because it has been in print for twenty years and not one of its lines says ask the patient to do his bit: teach the illness to the patient and to the family, which cuts the relapses down, and in acute mania an anti-psychotic and, if there's a risk, an admission. Which is exactly what some strangers in uniform did seven weeks later. And it worked first time. So there was in fact an everything to be tried. It was written down, and she worked in the place where it gets done. What was tried was the thing that couldn't work, and when it didn't work the conclusion was that the sick man didn't want to get better. We tried everything is what families say in a hospital corridor when somebody of theirs has died, and they say it after having stayed to the end.

And there's a fact nobody has put on the table: when she left, I was improving in everything that could be seen. The hard drugs finished, the pornography finished, a rental looked at and some rings looked at. The only thing getting worse was precisely the thing you can't see.

Out of all of that, the only thing that genuinely still hurts isn't the suitcase, or the station, or the dog, or the silence afterwards. It's the sentence in that consulting room. Because out of everything that was said in those months, that's the

only one that changed the course of an illness. The rest was two people hurting each other without knowing what they had in front of them. That was something else: it was a well woman, with a healthcare training, speaking for a sick man in front of the only doctor who had him within range in twenty years, and saying it wasn't needed. And then leaving. Both things, inside fourteen days. She did exactly the opposite of what needed doing, and she did it loving me. Both things are true. The whole road, from the car loaded with hashish to the pill and a half of every morning, goes through that consulting room. She was standing right at the middle of it: on the night that road could have been shortened by five years and wasn't.

Chapter 25 • A Sunday in Winter

She stayed on nine more days with the case packed, and those nine days are on the phone, and they're not what you'd imagine of a woman who is leaving. They're dog logistics (whether he's been out, whether he's eaten, whether there are apples in the fridge, whether his little bed is wet underneath) and they are, above all, a patience I find hard to read today. One of those afternoons she asked me to make the bed and sent me off to check whether the dog's bed was wet, and I answered by showing her the videos I was cutting, and she told me they were cool. And as the afternoon closed in I wrote asking her whether we were back, or what.

"Back where? I don't follow you."

"You and me. All right again."

"Yes. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. I think so."

That is a man in a psychotic prodrome asking a woman who has had her luggage ready for days whether they're all right again, and the woman answering yes, and the man believing her. And she wasn't lying to me, or not entirely: she was staying, and while she stayed it was true. And I wasn't deceiving her: I was deceiving myself, which is what a brain with no insight into its own illness does with the only measuring instrument it has left, which is the face of the person in front of it. The face read normal. The case didn't, but the case was in the wardrobe.

And on the last night, already brushing midnight, I asked her from the computer how my loves were doing. She answered by asking which loves I meant; that the dog was asleep, that she'd just eaten and was fine, and how was I. After midnight, a thoughtful emoji. And in the small hours, three messages in a row, which are the last of that year and the last of that life: that she was going to try to sleep. That whatever I was doing should go well. And a kiss. Whatever I was doing was cutting videos to her songs a metre from her bed. With that sentence, and with that kiss, an archive of four and a half years closed, and it took me

years to understand that it didn't close for lack of affection. It closed because a few weeks later my phone was stolen.

And Lidia has to be introduced, because for years a version has been going round in which she arrives earlier. After the night in A&E I went five days with no phone and no trace of me anywhere, and in those five days somebody from a philosophy group on the internet, who'd been told about the performance at the class, wrote me two messages. She introduced herself by saying that I didn't know her but that she knew me, by report; that her name was Lidia, that she was from the group, and that she wanted to ask me whether I'd be coming back, if that wasn't an indiscretion, and that if it was, the question was asked already. And then, that she'd been left intrigued to meet me. It took me four days to answer her. I sent her a link, three lines of a poem and one condition: that we could meet whenever she liked, but outside the group, because I refuse to belong to any club that would have me as a member. Which is to say that on the day Marta had her cases packed, Lidia was a name that had written me two messages and that I hadn't answered one of. What there was in the weeks that followed was two people arguing in writing, in the small hours, about whether culture is the friend or the enemy of the individual, whether origin always points back to something noble and what dark ideologies hide underneath your own. One night she suggested that we go on talking about the subjects that interested us and see what could be done with that, and seventeen minutes later I answered that all right, I wanted to. That was Lidia. With Marta I could no longer talk about anything without it turning into a delusion, and that woman was talking to me about Nietzsche.

That Sunday the city was taken over by people who'd come in from outside for a match, the streets full of shirts in two colours that belonged to nobody there, and even the bars had changed language for a day. I was walking through the middle of all that with a song going round in my head, the one she'd sent me soon after we moved up to the village, the latest by her favourite singer, the singer I'd taken her to see at a concert on the bike. It was about a woman pulling the mask off a man who lies. She was obsessed with that song and with what it meant. I listened to it as well, and I had no idea it was about me.

Lidia came out to the village that Sunday. We had a coffee. We walked Toby together, and then I took her on the bike to Barcelona, in the cold. And it has to be said what that woman was to me that day, because Marta left believing one thing and it was another: she was a new friend I talked philosophy with, and

that coffee had no intention behind it. Not a kiss, not a plan, nothing. It turned into what it turned into weeks later, when Marta was already gone and I moved straight on without a single day of mourning, because I couldn't be alone with what was happening to me, and I'll talk about that when it comes. On the day of the suitcase, Lidia was exactly that: a conversation about culture and a ride on a motorbike in the cold.

When I got back to the village, Marta had gone. She hadn't said anything. She'd taken what fitted in the cases and left with Toby. My mother had driven her to the station, to catch the Barcelona train. There was no goodbye: only the half-emptied room and the absence of the dog. What my mother told her that afternoon, about the coffee and the motorbike, didn't change a decision, because the decision had been in the wardrobe for nine days. It put a date on it. And for a long time I hated my mother for choosing the wrong side at the worst moment of my life, and today I know she didn't choose any side: she drove a woman who was skin and bone to a station, and then she stayed with what was left in that room, which was me.

And now the song, because I understand what she did with it, and this is a reading and not a reproach. It was a protest song in which a woman frees herself from a man who lies, and she saw in it the man she had at home. Except that the man she had at home wasn't a liar: he was an undiagnosed sick man looking at rings, and I've said already what the other thing was. She mistook freeing herself from a liar for leaving a sick man. And I think that deep down she has never forgiven herself for it, and that that's why somebody was needed afterwards who could turn the whole thing round with new words, and I'll talk about that too when it comes.

And that dog has to be given the size he really had, because up to here I've written him as though he were a line on a removals list and he wasn't. Toby was my first dog. I adored him. And he wasn't only a dog: he was the project Marta and I had started together, the only thing in that whole year that we were building to last. Having him torn out of my hands at the worst moment of my life, on top of losing her, which was the worst of all of it, wasn't an upset. It was what took me straight into madness. And this has an explanation, so it doesn't come across as sentimentality over a dog. Attachment to an animal runs on the same system as attachment to people: it has been measured, with the same attachment theory in hand that explains the business of my father's place, and what comes out is that a dog is an attachment figure in the full sense, with its secure base, its

safe haven and its protest when it goes. And a dog is, on top of that, a clock. He has to go out at his hours, rain or no rain, whatever state your head is in. She herself had written to me two days earlier to take him out if we hadn't been out. That, in a brain that no longer slept, was the last hand still moving.

Because I've told already about the fragile clock of this illness, and what keeps it on time isn't inside: it's outside. It's in the routines, in the hour of getting up, of eating, of seeing somebody, of walking the dog, and those routines are called, with a German word, time-givers. The episodes fire off when those hands come loose all at once, and the quickest way to let them all go at the same time is to lose a person, because a person takes away with her the dinner hour, the bedtime hour and the conversation of the evening. My brain lost, in the same afternoon, two attachment figures and the last timetable it had left. The microchip was in her name, and that's on record. The effect of the dog going doesn't depend on that. A brain in prodrome that is left with no partner, no dog and no timetable on the same day has nothing left to hold on to.

Chapter 26 • The Ship

In those weeks I was living inside a spaceship. Literally: my house was a ship that had crashed on an inhospitable planet, the motorbike was the light vehicle I could cover the surface of that planet with, and the surface was swarming with hostile beings. In the vehicle I went out to see Lidia, and not much else. And my girlfriend, inside that story, had been carried off by entities hostile to the unknown world we'd fallen into. This isn't a figure of speech or a metaphor picked out for the writing of this book. It's what my head built, taken absolutely literally and in complete seriousness, so that her having left would be bearable. And I didn't remember any of it: I know because it's said to camera in what I filmed in those days.

From outside that's a textbook delusion, complete with its B-movie set. From inside it was something else: it was my head putting up a reality less dystopian than the one in plain sight. Because let's take the inventory of what was in plain sight. My partner, gone. The job, lost. My dignity, lost. Debt up to my neck. And the dog wasn't there either, because she'd taken him. And all of it was happening to me on my own, in my mother's house, drinking myself stupid and in the middle of an episode. Faced with a picture like that a broken brain does the only thing it knows how to do: it hands you a crashed ship and a vehicle to get about in. It turns out you live better on an enemy planet than inside a failure. The enemy planet comes with a mission, a pilot and a plot; the failure only brings you, sitting in a borrowed room.

And the clinic knows perfectly well why psychosis always manufactures a story. A psychiatrist set it down twenty years ago: in the prodrome, the chemistry of the brain starts flagging as important things that aren't, a light, a number, a news item, a coincidence, and the man living through it doesn't have a delusion yet, he has a world that all at once means too much without his knowing what. Nobody can stand that. The delusion is the explanation the mind manufactures to put order into that excess, and that's why, when it finally sets, it doesn't arrive as a terror: it arrives as a relief, because at last everything fits. It

doesn't invent that material from scratch, it takes it out of your own larder, and in mine there was science fiction, a history degree, kabbalah and my father's song. Biography doesn't get wiped in a psychosis: it gets used as props. And there's a part left that makes my hair stand up every time I think about it, which is that in essence I wasn't wrong. The years that came afterwards proved that the planet was as hostile as I believed. The only thing I had wrong was the species: the hostile beings weren't aliens. They were people I knew, and they didn't come with laser beams, they came with complaints and screenshots.

What came after the suitcase, she has never known. I drank a great deal more. I smoked until I passed out. And I had seizures on the floor of that house, alone, on the nights my mother wasn't there because she'd gone off, frightened, to sleep at my sister's. I could have died in those weeks, and I say it with the exact word: on the motorbike, on the floor of my own house and in a street in the old quarter. And there's a measurement behind that, and it isn't mine: in the year that follows a first psychotic episode suicide is multiplied by more than ten, and the quality of the support you have in that stretch predicts fewer symptoms and fewer admissions years afterwards. I'm not talking about duty. I'm talking about the effect an empty chair has in that precise stretch, and about the fact that I took the whole of it. Only one thing managed to steady me, and only just enough to reach the admission alive: Lidia. That on its own is why I'm writing this.

Marta came back a fortnight later to take away what she still had there. Before leaving for good she gave me a hug, and I took it without quite understanding what was happening. Of what we said there isn't one sentence left in me. I don't keep that conversation anywhere in my head: the episode was taking charge of everything that couldn't be held up any other way. The only thing I know for certain is that I had the webcam recording, because back then I recorded anything at any hour, and that the goodbye stayed inside a hard drive that no longer exists. There's one thing about those two weeks I do know and that it hurts me to know: that I said monstrous things to her, drunk and psychotic, at some moment I'm incapable of placing. She remembers words I don't even know I said, and that's more unfair on her than on me, because what I'm left with is the fog and what she was left with are the words. I asked her forgiveness for it many years later, and she gave it. I leave it written here and nothing else.

Of Christmas Eve there is a record, and I wish there weren't. That year neither my sister nor my brother-in-law wanted me anywhere near my nephews,

so dinner was my mother and me, the two of us alone at the table, and nothing better occurred to me than to start telling her about a famous murder case from when I was a boy, in every last detail. On Christmas Eve. To my mother, who'd spent weeks watching her son go, and who is going to find out by reading this that back then I wasn't even capable of working out the damage a conversation does. When dinner was over I went off with my lot, drank like a Cossack and drove back in the small hours along the road that climbs up to the village, blind drunk. That night I could have killed myself or killed somebody else, and that's the kind of luck nobody remembers when they draw up the list of what was done to them. New Year's Eve Marta and I had talked about spending together, and it couldn't happen because she'd been ill for weeks, one cold after another. I spent it shut in the house, drinking alone and wanting to die, and that same night I installed for the first time a messaging app with open groups and set about pouring delusions into them. That was the opening night of the worst social network of my life, the one that has done me the most harm, and where on those same nights I met one of my best friends.

And at that point my mother took a decision that I suppose looked protective to her: shutting me into the flat, sealed up tight, for three days. No heating, no electricity, no internet, with the Montseny winter outside. I remember getting under the shower and the water coming out freezing, and not even trying to heat it, because I had the feeling that that punishment was exactly what I had coming for having destroyed everything. Eating badly. Not sleeping. And with a thing inside me that was no longer a hum but the total certainty that everything had a meaning nobody else was able to see: my father's death, the lithium, the collapse of that year, Marta, Raquel, all of it forming a cosmic drawing that at last allowed itself to be read and that on top of everything struck me as enormously elegant. There was a laptop left in the flat with some battery in it and I set about filming myself. Those videos I can't watch: I open them and within a few seconds I close them, because seeing myself like that destabilises me. I put them through a transcription tool and read them instead. And there's the ship. In them I say the ship is still in collision, that there's no way of getting power, that they've cut off all my supplies but left me a gas heater and a blanket, and that it's bloody freezing, brothers. In them I say I'm going to have a lie-down and that afterwards, if it comes to it, I might take the vehicle and pop over to the unexplored planet. In them I proclaim myself, all in one run and without drawing breath, an idiot, a Christian, a Jew, autistic, a prophet and the Messiah of all of

you, friends of my soul. And in them, in the middle of the derailment, my father comes in through the door of one of his songs, one of the ones he liked. What I see when I read that is this. That that man is alone: he's talking to a camera because he has nobody left to talk to. That that man isn't having a bad time: he feels terrific, lucid, generous, chosen and even funny, while he freezes in the dark in an empty flat scraping out what was left in the cupboard. And that the man in there is me. Not a stranger. Me, with my degree, with my jokes, with my father's song, with my way of talking, with everything of mine at full power and nobody at the wheel.

One of those nights I took it into my head to get lost in the city. I drank my way from bar to bar until I was championship drunk and ended up in the old quarter, and there somebody I never knew anything about got me in a chokehold from behind and left me on the ground with no phone. Inside that phone, with no backup anywhere, was everything Marta and I had written to each other since that last kiss in the small hours: everything we said between the suitcase and that night went off with the handset. Our archive wasn't cut short because the affection ran out. It was cut short because a man had his phone stolen in a street. Scared to death, I went to ask for shelter at the house of the man who brought me the drugs, who I took for a friend. Those people are nobody's friend: I learned it ringing the bell like a desperate man and getting absolute silence on the other side. I sat a while in his doorway and then set off walking to the station to look for a taxi to take me up to the village, a good hour of road away. I didn't have a penny on me. And instead of asking my mother for the money, the way I did over the degree, I had the taxi stop a few streets before the house and made a run for it. The driver caught me in two strides, and I, frozen, gave him the only thing I had on me: my motorbike jacket, the one my family had given me. While all of that was going on, and I only learned this years later reading her archive, Lidia was awake: asking whether I was in the taxi yet, whether my battery had died, saying she was in a bad way over me and didn't know what else to do, and in the small hours, that she couldn't get to sleep for thinking about how I was, that she hoped nothing had been stolen, and that she was going to come and find me. A woman who had known me six weeks.

I climbed the stairs at my mother's house and found a mother who that night had no comfort left to give me. Overwhelmed, I threatened to kill her to her face and went off to bed to sleep. I write it in those words because they're the ones on record. For what a brain does in that state a man doesn't answer the way

he answers for a decision; for the harm, which was real, he does. Ten minutes later there were two officers inside the room. That's how the part of this book that carries Marta's name ends: with the police in the room of twelve square metres where she had slept, and with the man I was then, who wasn't me, on his way to his first ward.

Part IV • THE NAME

Chapter 27 • The First Ward

That same night I went in through A&E to a small contracted clinic, and there I stayed eleven days. Before going on it's worth dismantling an expectation, because I went in wearing it: there were no restraints. Nobody tied me down. A small ward, a short corridor, medication, sleep and questions. The horror came from another direction, quieter and finer: the door that locks from the outside, and realising at thirty-three that you can end up in a place like that without understanding how you got there. What there was in there was first times. The first patient's pyjamas. The first sleeping pill handed out off a trolley. The first night listening to a stranger cry on the other side of the partition. And I didn't resist. In my whole life I have never physically resisted an admission, and that's written down somewhere too: they have taken me out of houses and they have taken me out of a hotel, and I have always gone, with a docility that stands out if you know what states I was really in.

And I have to explain what that locked door meant to me. An admission, in my head, was my father on the other side of a pane of glass. Well, that first night, with the pyjamas on and the sleeping pill taking effect, I understood something nobody had warned me about and that there's no way of telling from outside: that for once in my life the one on the other side of the glass was me. That the one with the gone-away eyes was me. And that in the queue, once again, my mother had been left standing. What I felt wasn't fear. It was recognising the place.

They put me in a room and the psychiatrist on duty appeared with her questionnaire and her notebook. She did what had to be done and noted what had to be noted, and as for a firm diagnosis, nothing, because eleven emergency days aren't enough for a job that takes weeks. What was left in writing was a psychotic disorder put down to the substances, and behind it, noted the way you leave a door ajar, the possibility that there was something else underneath, to be assessed over time. I left there on a provisional medication, with a piece of paper saying I should carry on at the health centre, with the fear lodged in my

body, with no map and, above all, with no word that put a name to what was happening to me.

In that ward there also happened the thing out of that whole winter I've had the hardest time digesting, and I tell it exactly as it looked from the bed. Lidia came. A woman I'd known for six weeks, who I'd had a coffee with and argued about Nietzsche with in the small hours, and who on the night of the mugging had stayed awake asking whether I was in the taxi yet. She didn't stay at the door: she came in, she hugged me, she kissed me, she was there with everything she had, and she installed herself in the chair beside the bed with clean clothes, a wash bag and a charger. Marta's chair. And I watched her from the bed, locked in and medicated, unable to understand why the one sitting there wasn't her. In front of me I had an absolute stranger worrying about me, bringing me underwear and chargers up to a psychiatric ward, while the girlfriend of my whole life didn't call. In the month of my first admission, the woman I'd lived with for four and a half years doesn't appear on my phone except because I appear on hers: a few days after discharge I sent her the link to a video from the channel. She didn't answer. I sent Raquel two more and nothing there either. That was the month, entire: a bloke just out of a locked ward sending the two women he'd wrecked the world with the year before the videos from a channel he thought was his life's work. And I'm not going to write here that Marta was getting herself out of anything, because it wasn't true: I was no danger to her, I was ill, and for the first time in the whole relationship I genuinely needed her. That was absurd, horrible and desperately painful, one of those things that won't go into your head and that the head keeps whole because it doesn't know where to put them. They're still there.

The night I came out, Lidia didn't ask me where I'd been. What she wrote to me was that she had my video on, the one about what philosophy is, and later, in the small hours, that she'd taken the mentions very much to heart and was grateful for them. Which is to say that with barely a day out of a locked ward the two of us were back inside the channel. And a few days later, still decompensated, I told her one afternoon about the gold: that my mother had gone to verify whether it was still where I'd told her it was, because she didn't trust me any more, and that luckily I had my assets well spread out and always kept an ace up my sleeve. While I was at it I talked about cards I was holding back and about giving somebody a Kevlar hoodie for their birthday. A man just out, with the whole mania still running underneath the medication, talking about his gold.

And what she did with that wasn't to argue with me or to take fright. She answered that they had to be given time to learn to trust again, and immediately afterwards, with all the naturalness in the world, she told me which days she had class that week and asked whether I fancied meeting on the Wednesday for a walk. That was her method, and she hadn't got it out of any book: don't contradict the delusion, and put a Wednesday next to it.

And in the other archive, my mother's, which keeps exactly four messages from that month, is the other way of caring. The oldest message that survives is from three days after the discharge and comes with three questions inside it: how I am, whether everything's going all right, when I'm thinking of coming back. A quarter of an hour later the fourth arrives, which is whether the motor-bike has been picked up yet. The next day she wants to know whether I'm going to drop round the house. And the day after that, the formula that was going to be repeated to me every night for seven years appears: that's very good, don't forget your pill, get some rest, until tomorrow. Two voices, two ways of caring, and a difference between them that took me seven years to tell apart. One came looking for me in the small hours. The other made a note of the pill and sat down to wait for the doctor to come out of the door. Both of them were looking after me; what changed was the motor, because one ran on the intensity of a woman in love and terrified at the same time, and the other on that counter-clerk patience of somebody who has already seen the film in her own house and knows full well that this lasts years. And from those days I'm also left with a piece of advice I didn't take and that, given what came afterwards, was the best I was given in that entire year. With the whole family on top of me taking decisions on my behalf, Lidia suggested I get ahead of them and find myself a therapist: not a psychiatrist, somebody neutral, and chosen by me. Neutral, and chosen by me. Precisely what I lacked for the next five years. A girl in her early twenties put it to me in two lines and I let it go by.

The restraints, which were what I expected to find when I went in, came later: twice in five admissions, and the first of them still took more than a year to arrive. When they come they get told in full, with the hour and with what it feels like, because that's the only thing this book has promised out loud.

There is, on the other hand, one small after-effect that ward with no restraints left me with, and I tell it because I know of no better example of how a body learns. There's a sequence I know off by heart and that always goes in the same order: first the vehicle with the lights, then the little side room, then the clothes

they take off you, then the door that locks from outside and, on two occasions, the restraints. Repeated five times, that chain got burned into my nervous system, which today doesn't need the whole chain: seeing the first link is enough for it to set off the complete alarm, and it doesn't consult me. That's why, when I see an ambulance go past, I jump. And it isn't a figure of speech: an ambulance crosses the street, or a siren goes three blocks away, and before I have time to think anything at all the pull in my chest has already come. Before that winter those vehicles did nothing to me; they were cars with lights and a hurry on. Afterwards they stopped being that, because for me an ambulance no longer means somebody is being helped. All of this has its name, and the name isn't having turned hysterical: it's called a trauma reminder, and the jump isn't the body exaggerating, it's exactly the job that mechanism exists to do. The drawback is that mine was calibrated with an object that in a big city parades under your window every twenty minutes. And out of the whole chain there's one thing that strikes me as deeply unfair: the only link that was never hostile is precisely that one. The people inside were doing their job, nearly always doing it well, and one or two of them spoke to me with a decency I still remember. The thing is that the body doesn't separate whoever takes you from the place they take you to. Seven years on I'm still jumping. Next to the rest of it, it's nothing, I know that. It's also the daily, free and punctual reminder that it happened and that it's still filed somewhere I can't get to.

At the time I had nothing to compare it with, but that was confinement in its gentle version: a small centre, no shouting in the background, the key turned and not much else. In less than a month I was going to meet the other version, the serious one. And that's why, when people ask me where my panic at being admitted comes from, I never tell them about this ward. I tell them about the ones that came after.

Chapter 28 • The Name

I came out of the clinic and went back to my mother's house, and my head carried on with its own business: sleeping little and badly, ideas that started up and never closed, the world shifted slightly out of place. That discharge hadn't cured anything, it had contained. And of the weeks that came after, what's left is my mother's archive, where four messages are enough to show the whole of what was on its way. First, her usual question: whether I had the pills on me. I sent her a photo and she sent back a very good, love, and some kisses. The next day it occurred to her to suggest I go and get myself on the register at the town hall and, while I was at it, leave a copy at the health centre. She had to ask me twice, because the first time I answered with an uh-huh and an uh-huh wasn't good enough for her: what was that supposed to mean, was it a yes or a no. And my answer portrays the whole month from end to end: that it meant tomorrow, that I had a colossal amount of work on that day, that you don't launch a video channel by doing paperwork. Three minutes later, with the poise of a marketing director, I added the technical detail: that Mondays, heaven knows why, are when people watch the most videos, and that I put it down to the slump at work and the comedown from the weekend. My mother was asking me to call in at the health centre. I was answering her with viewing figures.

And then there's the other run of messages, which is the one that really dates the episode, because they're the ones a mother writes to a son who is sleeping in her house, two walls away. At first, politely: could I turn the volume down, please, thank you. A few days later, the same. One night in the small hours, the same again. That night she rang me as well, I didn't pick up, and after midnight the politeness ran out all at once: turn the volume down and go to fucking sleep. I answered okii. She rang again. And a while later, in writing again, would I do her the favour of stopping dragging that chair about and stop disturbing everybody. There you have an elderly woman begging her son, in the small hours, not to drag a chair. That isn't a bad-tempered domestic scene. It's a manic prodrome minuted in writing, and by the only person who was inside the house. A

day and a half after the message about the chair, I was sending her and sending Lidia exactly the same sentence: that they were making me go in.

There was another row with my mother, and it escalated again to where there's no escalating any further. The police at the door again, the medics again and again the either-or: you're coming with us or you're coming with us. That time I didn't resist either. Of that morning the archive keeps both ends of the thread. On my side: they're making me go in; a minute later, that I don't know whether that's legal; seven minutes later, that by the time you read this I'll have no battery left, and behind it an I love you. On my mother's side, in the same minute: that she still hasn't managed to speak to the doctor. And on Lidia's, mid-morning: that she can see my battery has gone, that she's going to call my sister so somebody brings me a charger up; and at midday, that she loves me, to keep my chin up, and that the following afternoon she'll bring the emergency wash bag to wherever they transfer me. Wherever they transfer me. A woman who had known me nine weeks was packing a wash bag for a psychiatric ward whose name neither of us knew yet, and then she came in there, the same way she'd come into the first one, to hug me and to sit down in the chair. Marta got the news through my sister. And for years I told people I'd been admitted for shouting, until my sister took it apart in one line, a long time afterwards: that it hadn't come from any shouting, it came behind a great many other symptoms that had been dragging on for months. She's right. Telling it as an admission for shouting suited me beautifully, because that way it came out disproportionate and I came out innocent. And it was a lie. I was admitted for what had been happening for months and that nobody, starting with me, knew how to call by its name in time.

This time it was in the public system, in the hospital to the north, the same one where years earlier I'd spent three days between intensive care and the medical ward without anybody tying one end to another. And this time it wasn't the friendly version. Linoleum corridors, and windows giving onto the inner courtyard: gravel below and the wall of the opposite wing in front of you. Not a plant, not a garden, not a place to go out and get some air. A space that looks designed to do harm to whoever has the bad luck to spend several weeks of his life in it without a single civil right. The good part is that in there there was time: time to look, to assess and to ask the sort of question whose answer takes weeks to appear. One day the doctor came in with a tablet in her hand and an expression it took me years to be able to name: the expression of somebody tak-

ing a responsibility onto her own back. She asked me whether I knew why I'd been admitted. I answered that I'd threatened my mother; that I didn't hold the exact memory of having done it, and that the only thing left to me of it was the look on her face. She nodded and wrote something. Then she asked me about family history, and there my father appeared: a suicide thirteen years earlier, with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and with a lithium he took his own way and not the way he'd been told to. Another note. And then she told me that what had been going on in those weeks was a manic phase with psychotic elements, and that the thing that had brought me there had a name.

"And now what?"

"Now, we stabilise. Medication and follow-up."

"For how long?"

"The medication, for life."

It took me longer than it normally takes to digest that sentence, because anti-psychotics leave your thinking on a delay, as if the words had to travel an extra stretch before landing inside you. I asked her whether that meant I was never going to be completely well. She answered that with the right treatment you can lead a functional life, and that without treatment the episodes come more often and come worse as the years go by. I asked her what the medication was. Lithium, among other things. I said all right, without really understanding what I was saying yes to. I didn't sign any informed consent: that paper was signed by my family for me. And I took the first pill that afternoon, right at the end of it, with the winter night already on us, and what happened then in my mouth is told on the first page of this book, and what happened afterwards goes in the chapter that comes next. Here it's the other thing's turn: the name, and why it took so long.

Because the name reached me twice, and it's worth being exact, since the file is. In that room it reached me out loud, with the word lithium, the word bipolar and the phrase for life. In writing it came a great deal later, and it came in stages. On the discharge from the first ward they wrote substance-induced psychotic disorder, with progression to a primary bipolar disorder to be assessed. On the discharge from this one, a psychotic episode. At the community mental health centre, weeks later, a toxic psychosis in remission, with bipolar disorder set down beside it as a possibility to be evaluated with more time and with no substance use in the middle. Half a year later the working diagnosis was still open between three options. And the firm diagnosis, bipolar disorder type

one with psychotic symptoms, wasn't fixed until the discharge from the third admission, fourteen months after that first ward. Look at the order, because it's the order of this entire story: first they gave me for ever the same salt my father took, and fourteen months later they wrote it down on a piece of paper. And I have to explain why it takes so long, because healthy people imagine that a psychiatric diagnosis is made the way an X-ray is made, and it's made the way a biography is. First, because of the rule in the manual: if there are substances in the blood, the psychosis gets put down to the substances until the contrary is proved, and to prove it you have to see the brain clean for months, and I'd gone a year without being clean for one straight month. Second, because of the illness itself: bipolar disorder usually comes in through the door of depression, and a depression gets called a depression and gets treated as one for years; and the other half, the hypomania, never reaches a consulting room at all, because it feels marvellous and nobody books an appointment for feeling marvellous. And third, because the diagnosis is made backwards, by reading a history, and mine was there entire and unread: two emergencies for psychotic symptoms two and a half years earlier, and a father with the same name written into the record. Nobody had put that together until a woman with a tablet put it together. There are series that measure ten years on average between the first symptoms and the diagnosis; the kindest of them says six. They gave me the lithium and the name at thirty-three, they wrote it down for me at thirty-four, and the first episode I can read today as an episode I had more than ten years before that. What somebody beside me lived through as an interminable year was, on the real scale of this illness, the last stretch of a wait of more than a decade. And then there's the grammatical fight every diagnosed person knows: whether you are bipolar or you have a bipolar disorder. The clinic goes with have, so that the diagnosis doesn't make a meal of your own name. I've ended up on a third road: inside the episode you are the illness, because what decides in there is the episode; and when the calm comes back you go over to having it, the way you have a scar.

There's one thing about psychiatric wards that nobody on the outside imagines, and it's that real friendships get made in there. People think an acute ward is a gallery of catatonics and lost manics. There are some, and I've been one. But there are also people sunk in a depression, people who arrive from a suicide attempt, people broken in places that don't stop them talking or listening. And among the ones who can talk, a way of living together builds up that only resembles what gets told about prisons: the brotherhood of those locked up to-

gether, with no phone, no laces in their shoes and no character to play, with nothing to give one another except the truth. In there posturing doesn't fit, because there's nowhere to put it.

In that admission I met a woman who kept me company more than anybody in those weeks. We became close friends in four days, which in there is how long things take. She was a wonderful person, warm, one of those who ask and then stay to hear the answer. She was in there for the same thing I was. Depressed. With the same salt on her bedside table.

Some time after the two of us were discharged, she took herself out of the way. I found out when I was already outside, and I sat a long while with it in my hand not knowing where to put it. I write it down for what it taught me, which is the only thing this book knows how to do with its dead. The woman who laughed with me in the day room was exactly the same one who later decided not to come back. And she was neither of the two. She was both. A person is ill at one particular moment and perfectly well at a great many others, and the salt on the bedside table serves both of those things, depending on who has it in their hand and on when they have it. That was what I had in mine that winter afternoon, with the name just out of the box.

Chapter 29 • The Inheritance

I came out of the second admission with a box of lithium, an appointment for a monthly antipsychotic injection, a leaflet of side effects that ran to two sides of a sheet of paper and a room of twelve square metres in the old house in the village, the same room Marta had walked out of with the suitcase. Nothing in the bank, and the debt from that year waiting for me with the patience debts have. And my sister. Organising what had to be organised was Sonia's job: the appointments at the health centre, keeping track of the pills and, above all, the conversations with my mother so that the guilt wouldn't roll over me. She was also the one who came out with, in that first week, the only sentence of that winter that was any use to me: that I had no obligation whatsoever to be well, that my obligation was to follow the treatment and nothing else. She and I have looked after each other since we were small, and we've been at it for forty years with nobody ever explaining to us why it comes so naturally; that spring it was her turn.

And here comes the first piece, the one that's hardest to explain. I came into that spring believing myself healthy. I wasn't a man who knew he was ill and refused to be treated, because that man exists and has his own chapter in the manuals: I was a man who believed himself healthy and who was living, at the very least, in a perpetual hypomania that looked to Marta like my character and looked to me like my character. What was a state, the two of us had called, for years, personality. And it was with that head that they put me on lithium. That isn't receiving a diagnosis. That is receiving an inheritance all at once, with no will and no solicitor: that of a father who was completely dysfunctional, who abandoned me by killing himself, and who it turns out had also left me this inside. In one afternoon I turned into three things at once, with nobody to explain any of them to me: the son of the sick man who killed himself, a sick man myself, and a patient on the same drug that had been the weapon.

And I didn't believe it. I say it as plainly as that because I've checked it since, message by message, with the archive in front of me. In the almost two years of

conversation I had left with Marta I didn't write the word bipolar once. Not fresh out of the ward where they gave it to me, and not afterwards. I talked about the admission, about the pills, about the doctor, about the using, about how little I was able to remember; about the name, never. With Raquel, the same: in years of chat the word appears a single time, a long while afterwards, written by her and in order to tell me I was hiding behind it. I wasn't hiding it from anybody. It's that I didn't believe it. And there are two further pieces of evidence, which leave me looking worse still. To Lidia, with the discharge still fresh, I spelled out in writing my reluctance to put that stuff into my body, and a minute later, without leaving the same conversation, I was swearing to her that I'd take it exactly as prescribed provided there was no using involved: the same man, both things, the same minute. And a year and a half later I set down in writing that I was taking lithium for a bipolarity that, in the opinion of the man writing it, I didn't have. A year and a half of salt in the mouth morning and night, and the man swallowing it still wouldn't admit what for.

The lack of insight into the illness I've explained already, and it doesn't switch off with a discharge: it eases, and it climbs again the moment the next episode shows its face. But here there was something more, and it's what gives this chapter its title. Believing the diagnosis meant accepting that I was my father. That those years of his with the blind pulled down and those months on the sofa without going near a shower hadn't been coldness or lack of love, but the lower part of an arc nobody ever put a name to. And that the spells when he looked capable of taking on anything, the law included, were neither his character nor his strength: they were exactly the days on which I, decades later, was dragging Marta and Raquel along at a pace that would wreck anybody. Accepting the pill meant accepting the whole chain, from grandfather to father and from father to me, and thinking for the first time about Claudia, my daughter, with that chain in my hand. Nobody wants to sign that at thirty-three. So you do what I did: swallow the salt and not believe a word of it.

And now what lithium is in practice, because nobody told me any of this and anybody reading this from a ward is going to need it more than anything else in this book. It's a salt. An element from the periodic table, the third one, one of the simplest there is, and nobody entirely knows why it works; what is known is that it works, that it is different, and that for seventy years it has been holding up people like me and bringing suicide down in this illness as no other drug has. What it does is put in a ceiling and a floor: it doesn't take away the sadness of a

bad day and it doesn't hand you happiness, it holds the pendulum so that it doesn't overshoot at the top or at the bottom. And what it demands is precisely what makes it dangerous: the margin between the dose that works and the dose that poisons is narrow, a mouthful of difference, and that's why it has to be measured in the blood. That's what the lithium level is: a blood test done twelve hours after the last dose, at first every few weeks and afterwards every few months, that says whether you're inside the range or outside it. With the same sample they look at the kidney and the thyroid, because the salt leaves by one of them and touches the other. You have to drink water. A summer of sweating hard, a stomach bug, any old diuretic, can move your level without your having changed the dose. And it has to be taken at its hours, morning and night, always, with no days off, because the dose you skip is never made up. My father kept the doses he skipped. I've already said what I do with mine.

And what it takes away, which nobody warned me about. It took away the white nights, and I don't mean the insomnia of worry, I mean the other ones: the not needing to sleep, with the body manufacturing projects and ideas at three in the morning and that certainty that there wasn't a closed door anywhere in the world. It took away the speed, and with it the connections that arrived in cascades before you could write them down, and that capacity to hold four conversations without dropping the thread of any of them. And during the first year, with the antipsychotic keeping it company, it took away the pleasure of feeling things strongly: the world had several points knocked off the saturation of its colours, and that hypersexuality that had governed me for twenty years went out so completely it seemed not to exist. The centre is called euthymia, and the centre, for months, feels like a hollow. As if somebody had turned the volume down on the world and gone off with the remote in his pocket. Nobody tells you that, not the doctor and not the family, who had enough on their hands, and you find it out on your own: that you've spent years living at the extremes and that the centre sounds like silence to you because you've never been in it. And worse still: that without noticing you'd made hypomania your yardstick for health, that brilliant, tireless version of yourself, and that next to a fire, not burning looks a great deal like being put out.

That's the reason it gets abandoned, and it isn't the one healthy people think. It doesn't get dropped through carelessness. It gets dropped because you're flat and you remember what you were like up there; it gets dropped because the moment a prodrome shows, the brain decides all on its own that the medicine is the

enemy and that the other thing, the bottle or whatever it is, is the friend of a lifetime; and it gets dropped for the reason I gave on the first page, when you're well. The people who have measured it reckon that four out of every ten patients drop it at some point, and in that I was no exception: that year I went on taking it, complaining, and I dropped it twice afterwards, and both times are told where they belong.

And what it gives, which took me a year to see. What it gives is continuity. It gives you back the possibility of starting a thing and finishing it, because the cycle no longer changes on you halfway. The possibility of holding a whole conversation without your head clearing off somewhere else. The possibility of deciding something today and of the man who decided it still existing in a fortnight. Over the years it has also given me my daughter, who I can watch grow up instead of disappearing into an episode; it has given me Laia, because for somebody to stay you first have to be still enough for staying to be an option; and it has given me this book, which at either of the two extremes would have been impossible to write.

And there's one photo left from that spring. Five weeks after the discharge, in the kitchen of my mother's house, with Sonia and a cake with candles on it. It's worth looking at properly, because everything that was needed is in it and there's nothing else: a diagnosis in writing, a treatment started, a house, a family sitting at the table and a man prepared to learn to live with what he'd just been told he had. This story could have ended there. There was no reason for anything that came after that cake to come at all; none of it was written down anywhere and none of it was the inevitable consequence of being ill.

The last thing is about my daughter. I've said already what the twin studies say, and Claudia carries in her blood a possibility I can't wipe out for her. What is in my hands is that, on the day she needs it, she shouldn't spend thirty years waiting for somebody to put a name to what is happening to her. That is exactly what I didn't have, and it's the only thing I can give her. And today, when I go away from the house for a few days, the notice I send my own people never changes: that out of everything I own, the only thing I'm taking is the lithium.

Chapter 30 • Well and Strong

Between the first admission and the second, on the new phone I'd had to buy myself after the mugging, I wrote Marta two lines: a hey, and the question of whether she had me blocked. She had me blocked. There was no answer, and there was none in the two months that followed, which were the months of the two wards, the diagnosis and the discharge. And there was no need for me to tell her anything, because she knew all of it: in those months she was still talking to my mother and to Sonia, and down that line both admissions reached her, with their dates and their hospital. She knew and she didn't come. The one who came was a woman I'd known for a matter of weeks.

Three days after the discharge the conversation existed again, and the one who broke the silence was her. The first thing there is is me thanking her for having spoken to me, because I needed to hear from her, and her saying not to thank her, that she hadn't known how to do it any other way. Me, that I knew, that I hadn't known how either, and that the miraculous part was that I was still alive. And from there, in less than half an hour, everything that was going to hold that year up and tear it apart, said in one run: that now I was going to live with even more appetite; that I should give myself time and a bit of tenderness; that I had a blank sheet of paper in front of me; that I wasn't alone and that there was a great deal of love waiting for me; that she didn't want me out of her life, but that she wanted me well and strong and to know I could be; and that she didn't want to do herself harm. I answered that life was very long, and how strange it was for me to be saying that. And I believed every word of it.

Today I read it with a different head, and not in order to charge her for it. A blank sheet of paper three days after a discharge is a man with no memory of four months. The love that was there was my mother's and my sister's; hers she was giving me in writing from where she wasn't. And well and strong is exactly what the illness has just taken away from a newly diagnosed patient. She was telling me, without knowing it, that she wanted me in the high phase. The next day, when I gave her my first explanation of what had happened (that the bad

part had gone with the admission, that the drugs had done me a great deal of harm and that they weren't going to admit me again), she answered two things one after another. That she knew it was better this way, because there are things that only heal this way. And that three months ago she'd been there, only three months. And when I said I'd been taking a lot of drugs, she corrected my chronology without raising her voice: that I'd been taking a lot of drugs long before that. This way meant apart. Distance healed her, and in that she was lying to nobody. For me, according to everything that has ever been measured about this illness, distance from the person I slept beside was the factor that weighed most heavily against me. What healed her was, for me, a prognosis. And into the three months she was counting, two psychiatric wards fitted.

A week later I told her I'd gone back over the days she left with my mother and my sister, and that I remembered almost nothing, as if my mind had protected itself or hadn't been there at all. She took three hours to answer and answered that she'd been left in shock, that she'd thought I remembered. That she was ready to talk about it, that she'd spent months turning it over. Months turning over days I didn't have. Of that winter there is only one complete version, and it isn't mine.

And what there was beside me while we were talking was this. My mother had moved in the middle of the winter to another village in the Vallès, where Sonia was already living, and she left me the whole of the old house, and I couldn't stand it: it brought me too many memories, Marta's and the psychosis's, and I didn't know how to keep a house going or how to keep myself going. I found a temporary job for two months, cold calling on the telephone, which is ringing people who don't want to be rung with a brain fresh out of a ward and fresh onto lithium. If somebody had to design the least suitable job for a man in my situation, they'd struggle to improve on it. I moved near the job, to a town on the edge of the city, into a room in somebody else's flat with two flatmates who never exchanged a word with me, and I wasn't capable of spending a weekend there: every Friday I went off to my mother's or met up with Lidia. And Lidia was, at that point, a stranger who gave me an enormous amount of affection, and I held on to her the way you hold on to whatever there is. It was in that flat where nobody spoke that for the first time in my life I asked a search engine the question you don't ask a search engine, how to end it all, and with the same substance that took my father. It didn't answer me, obviously. I leave it written down because it's part of the file and because anybody sitting in that

square today deserves to know two things: that it was the illness talking, and that there is a way out of there.

Seven weeks after the discharge I wrote to her that I felt alone, that that was the worst of it, that I was a bit down. And she answered that I shouldn't be so negative, that those thoughts always circled back to me; that I had to be aware I wasn't a victim, and even change the way I spoke; and that a person is how he shows himself to others. Me, a few minutes later: that she was absolutely right, but that in those days I felt like that, even if at work I put on the friendly face. There's the whole year: a man with seven weeks of lithium in him agreeing with the sentence that denies his illness. I wasn't playing the victim: I was describing a symptom to her, and she answered the symptom as though it were a pose. And a person is how he shows himself works for healthy people; for what I have it's exactly the other way round. The criteria for mania are a list of ways of showing yourself (more talkative, less sleep, self-esteem shot up), and those for depression are the opposite list (the slowed speech, the body made of lead, the thought that always comes back round to yourself). This illness is, literally, an illness of how you show yourself. A cardiologist doesn't tell you that you are how your electrocardiogram shows itself on the day of the heart attack. Here, with the organ that manages precisely the showing, that is exactly what was done.

A study from more than twenty-five years ago followed type one patients month by month and measured one very specific thing: low social support doesn't change much in mania, but it lengthens the recovery from depressive episodes and makes them more symptomatic. It's specific to the phase I was in, the depression that comes after the psychosis. And on top of that, expressed emotion, which has been told already: the criticism from those around you doesn't have to be cruel, it's enough for it to tell the symptom it's a pose. That spring I had both at once, from the same person and with affection: the withdrawal (that she wasn't ready; that since she was well, seeing me made her anxious; that she wasn't afraid of me but of herself; that if it stung then there was life in it) and the correction. And on top of it all I was apologising to her for asking. Sorry for bothering you, sorry for going round in circles, sorry for unsettling you. A man just out of two wards apologising for asking whether he could see his dog, and a woman apologising for taking a while to answer because she'd been in the shower. I tell it because until recently I hadn't been able to read it.

The summer was a loop, and it describes itself. I said hello. She talked about work. I asked about Toby. She talked about work. I said I missed her; she, that she was in another place. I asked for less than I wanted; she granted less than I asked for. We both said we loved each other, I apologised for being a nuisance, and the next day we started again. One day she said the most exact thing of that whole year: that she missed a Marcos who didn't exist, and I missed a Marta who didn't exist any more either. Another, that I was smothering her; that she was happier knowing I was well and getting a little stronger every day; that she was asking me to be the one who turned the whole thing round. One night I wrote to her that I was terribly sorry for having been so selfish, that I'd been very ill, that the guilt was enormous, and she said twice in a row that it wasn't my fault; that I had to forgive myself and let it hurt, because I hadn't decided to be like that; and that she hadn't been able to do any more for me either. Forgive myself for what, I ask today. You forgive yourself a wrong, and what I had was a diagnosis. And she could have done more for me: she was the one variable the literature points to for what I had.

And on the night of the three hours, by then well into the summer, she finally said out loud what she'd spent months not saying: that behind it there was a fear of a reaction on my part and of going back to the hell of that winter. I asked fear of what, sorry. Of a negative reaction, or depressive in the extreme, or how was she to know. And when I talked to her about trying from a stable footing, with the lithium in place and the injection in place and four months of treatment, she answered that it was a wonderful story, but that real life was something else. And five words: nobody dies of love. I answer them with the only part of all this that doesn't depend on me. A meta-analysis of a hundred studies measured that in the first three months after a psychiatric discharge the suicide rate is about a hundred times the world rate, and that for the rest of that first year it is still nearly sixty times. I was four months out. Nobody dies of love. People die of what I had, in exactly the months in which she was writing that to me. And that spring I had already put the question to a search engine.

Around then I was turned down for a room because the landlords had read on the internet what I'd written during the winter, and neither the signed job nor the medical report was any use to them. And a few days later I told her I'd found a flat with Lidia, that it had been a very quick decision because the two of us were being turned out of our own places. She said that was very good, that her life was changing onto a course she liked a great deal; that we weren't in any

state to be together and that realising a thing doesn't work is love too; that she'd closed that chapter and that she needed to in order to be happy. And the next day, the whole of it: that the best thing would be to speak only now and then and let each other be; that she didn't think I understood who she was, and that she didn't have the strength to make any more effort to understand me. I asked to be allowed to ask about Toby from time to time, and I acknowledged it with one sentence: that she was telling me to stop talking, for good. Her last words of that summer were that she wished me the best, which is inseparable from love.

I kept the hope of getting back with her right up to that day, and a little beyond, until I accepted that it wasn't a parenthesis. It was my life. And today I say a thing I don't like saying and that is true: it would have been better if she'd never spoken to me again. Not because of what she said, which was affectionate; because of what it did. An I love you at night and the next morning the sentence that it couldn't have been any other way, from the same phone and the same person, month after month. An English psychiatrist described sixty years ago what an animal does when its attachment figure disappears: first it protests, it searches, it calls and it doesn't stop calling, and that phase only goes out when it stops receiving a signal. I received a signal every night. With that the protest doesn't go out: it turns chronic, and a newly diagnosed brain spends an entire year waiting, every night at the same hour, for the sentence that no longer meant what he needed it to mean.

Chapter 31 · Turning It All Round

At the end of that summer I moved in with Lidia to a tiny, squalid top-floor flat in the village up above, where my mother and my sister were already living, and the block had a woman saint's name on the sign by the entrance. I mention it because it's exactly what was going on inside me: I couldn't look at that sign without remembering the magnificent house Marta and I had seen in a street in Barcelona with that same name, the one we used to look at the way you look into a shop window. Every time I came into my new home, with another woman, the doorway sent me back to the one we never got to have. And even so, with Lidia there was affection and there was peace: that was worth something. But nothing good comes of two people getting together without having grieved, and neither of us had. I was carrying Marta's suitcase on my back, and she was carrying her ex, who she went on seeing that autumn. In that flat there were three griefs living in forty square metres, and I spent months looking for a more presentable name for mine than jealousy, and it was jealousy, and it wore me down just enough to start me drinking again. One beer on getting in from work. And that beer was the foundation of everything that came afterwards.

Apart from that it was ordinary life, which is what gets told least in this book and what there was most of: a new job in technical support, a modest wage and fixed hours; a master's in the evenings; a psychologist once a week, privately, with whom I was working for the first time on the business of being thirteen and, along with it, the trauma of separation. And on the phone, after two months of silence kept by both of us, Marta again.

It was an afternoon at the start of the autumn and we talked for almost four hours straight. It started well. She was very glad about how well I was, she said she was very stable and that she hardly thought about horrible things any more: that she had got as far as forgiving me and, more importantly, forgiving herself, and that she was going through life fairly light. I answered with one of the harshest sentences I have ever aimed at myself: how very little good of me she'd seen over far too long a time, considering how much I'd loved her; that there

was a bad boy inside who had taken me years to get out. There was no bad boy. There was a twelve-month manic episode with psychotic symptoms, which is what my clinical record calls it today, and I called it a bad boy because the vocabulary I had to hand was hers, the vocabulary of forgiveness. She explained to me why she did have to forgive herself: that she'd seen me ill in so many different ways that she needed to get those images out of her head, and that seeing me was no help; that she hadn't spent three nights in a row alone in a house in her whole life. She learned to be alone in the same weeks in which I was learning to be on a ward.

And after three hours she asked the question: whether I wasn't with the girl who turned up when she left. I answered her with the truth: that I was with Lidia because she had gone, and that when they admitted me Lidia was there; that afterwards the thing had worked, but that back then I was only frightened and lost. And then she wrote the sentence that sums up the disagreement of the years that followed: did I realise that my point of view was still extremely selfish. That I talked as if nothing had happened before that abandonment, when she had tried everything and everybody around me had tried everything; that she left for her own sake, and that in that she had been selfish, and that it was the only thing she'd done for herself in years; that my way of talking made her furious. And that she was glad Lidia at least was keeping me company.

The only thing she'd done for herself in years, she said: leaving. The only things I'd done for myself in those same months were two admissions, a lithium and nine job interviews, and I called that surviving. Selfish is the man who prefers his own good when he has a choice; she had a choice, she chose, and that same afternoon she gave it its name. I couldn't choose anything. And the business of having tried everything I've already answered: things were tried against the drugs and against my character, which was what could be seen; against the illness, nothing was tried at all.

This is where a sentence fits that she'd let drop in passing that summer, talking about what was working for her then: that she'd learned to turn everything round. To turn everything round. That's the precise opposite of repairing it. Where that way of looking came from I don't know and it isn't mine to say, and I'm not going to invent a room I wasn't in. What I do know is the other part: that a story built alone, without the other person in front of you, chooses its words for the relief they give. You get out of guilt through two doors, repairing what was done or convincing yourself there was nothing to repair, and the sentence

with which she went out through the second she repeated all year: that it couldn't have been any other way. Nobody feels guilty about what couldn't have been any other way; nobody feels guilty about the rain. Her body knew it could have been another way, and that's why, as she said herself, it hurt her for a great many days.

And the story that came out of there has a structure I've seen again since in every story told about me. For leaving, empowerment: the only thing she'd done for herself, being selfish gave her peace, leaving was love; she called leaving love four times in four months. For what was illness, playing the victim: that I wasn't a victim, that it had to come from me, that I should turn it round, that I was smothering her. She demanded full responsibility from the only one of the two of us who had an illness that cancels it, and granted herself the fragility she was denying him. And the gap she left open is this. Three days after my discharge, she herself had written that the whole thing had been a black cloud that grabbed hold of me and that it wasn't me. She had the distinction between the illness and the person made before any doctor of mine did, and she used it to leave both of them: the cloud was treated by a hospital, and the one she left behind in that house was me. Then she set about cleaning up the memory of the cloud, which was the only thing she'd taken away with her. And two years later, in another place and with other people, the same cloud would have another name. That gets told where it belongs.

The clinic calls this revictimisation: first biology punishes you and then people punish you for the symptoms of that same punishment, because those around you don't read an episode the way they read a heart attack, they read it as a revelation. And when the other person's story needs you to be the villain, the story closes and no longer admits anything that comes from you, not an I love you and not a question about the dog. All that year I apologised to her for being ill, and I did it because I believed what she was telling me. A sick man apologising for his symptoms to the person who left him for having them has a name, self-stigma, and it has been measured: it predicts worse adherence, more depression and more isolation. Before the channel, before the complaints and the reams of paper, the first source of my self-stigma was her. And I learned it so thoroughly that years later I was still apologising for existing.

On my birthday she sent me her good wishes at midday, and at night there was an hour and a half of conversation that went down one step at a time. I told her about the day: a toaster we were short of at home, a mug, a meal out with

Lidia. And then the loop: that it would have been worth trying again. She cut it off in the next minute, that it wasn't real, that I was with somebody and she was with herself. And then she wrote the barest thing she said in that entire year: that she now had a life she liked, even if it wasn't the one she wanted. That she didn't want to be alone every night, and that she had never slept with anybody again the way she slept with me. And then but there it is, sorry. I put it in because it's hers and because it explains the other thing: I love you but I can't see you, said for months to a brain with a broken attachment system, is a door that opens and shuts at irregular intervals, which is precisely the way to keep an animal hooked.

A few days later she offered to talk on the phone, and the call came, and I took it out walking with Lidia. And in that call, with the voice that doesn't fit inside a chat, she blamed me for the syphilis of four years earlier, about which she knew nothing: not that it was mounted on top of the business of being thirteen, and not that that autumn I was in precisely that, in therapy, watching it go into remission for the first time in my life with the mood stabiliser inside me. That call taught me that the I love you and it will always be that way was what could be written, and that what could be said out loud was the syphilis. And that the reproach arrived at the exact moment when I was, at last, being cured of the thing she was reproaching me for.

Nine days later came the work dinner. For my birthday I'd been to a concert and drunk a good deal more than usual, and at the dinner I drank a great deal more than was reasonable again. A little before midnight I wrote to her, and she answered that it was curious that exactly a year earlier we'd been in a terrible state. Me, that yes: terrible terrible, the most terrible of all. Her, that everything ends and other things start. Me, that it killed me to say yes to that. After midnight she asked me about the song from the Christmas dinner, I gave her the title, and she answered with an eye-roll emoji, and in the small hours she asked what was wrong with me. And the three messages of that night arrived. That nothing was wrong, why was she surprised. That it was because she wasn't the enemy. That she was my enemy. She asked where that had come from. Me, that it came from the whole shit process I'd had to work through in order to leave her behind, to forget the thing that mattered most to me in this fucking shit of a life. She answered with a single word, a fine, and went off to sleep.

The next morning I was in class. She wrote that she hadn't liked the night before at all; that she wasn't having a return to the same thing as a year earlier, nor

my believing I could vomit whatever I felt like in there; that it wasn't healthy. I answered in the next minute: that I'd just come out of a session with my psychologist that had stirred everything up, in which we were digging out precisely the separation trauma; that the rage and the sadness at having lost each other came out, and that I shouldn't have written to her. She told me to concentrate on what I had and to leave her alone; that she did the same and wasn't going about disturbing my routines or my feelings; that she thought she would cut off contact right there; that it was always the way I wanted it. And me: come on, Marta, that I didn't want to mess her about, that she should block me and be done with it, that I apologised and wouldn't do it again. Her: well, you do it. Which is to say I asked for that block myself. And I respected it for an entire year without writing to her once. What I vomited up was one sentence, in a year of I love yous and apologies; for one sentence, a year of being blocked, and I sign off on it, because a brain like mine can manage a no when it has three things in front of it: a reason, a sentence and its own request. Without them, it can't. It's worth keeping hold of, because it's the piece of evidence that's needed for the next one.

And one thing from that morning that she believed and that is false: that her silence was neutral. The person who sets another person's clock doesn't disappear without changing his rhythm, and I've told already what changes of rhythm do in this illness. Her silence disturbed my routines exactly as my messages disturbed hers. With one difference: she said so and I got admitted. In the weeks that followed I started writing in the small hours again, more and more, the first sign I would learn to read years later. Three months after that I was on a ward.

Chapter 32 · The Doctor

The doctor who had charge of me for the next five years had never once seen me on a ward. In the first admission I was seen by the psychiatrist on duty, who recited her protocol and put me back out on the street without putting a name to anything; in the second it was a different one who gave me the name and disappeared out of my life the moment she signed the discharge. The one I got afterwards, the one at the health centre, the one with the appointments every few weeks and the one with the reports and the prescriptions for all the years that were coming, was a third woman, and in this book she is going to have no name beyond that: the doctor at the health centre. I came out of the first appointment knowing it was going to go badly, and not because of what she did, which was properly done. Because of the way she looked at me. I wasn't, to her, a man with an illness. I was an addict. Out of that came the only question I was asked appointment after appointment for five years: not what has happened to you, but what have you taken. And when two years later the complaint came, which has a chapter of its own, it went into that room ahead of me and changed the colour of everything: from then on I was an abuser with a disorder that explained his conduct without excusing it. What was going on inside her is something I would be inventing; what she signed is in the papers. Stable, a manipulator in remission. Relapsed, the confirmation of what was already known. Silent, a dishonest man.

I'm going to set down one whole appointment, because without it this is a patient's word against a professional the reader has never seen.

A room with a window giving onto a yard between blocks, a desk, the computer turned side on and three chairs: hers, mine and a third that in five years was never left empty for a single day. I talked and she typed, and every few sentences her eyes came up over the top of the screen for just long enough to check a fact, the way you pull out the dipstick, look at it and put it back in. And she always started from the same place.

"What have you been using?"

That, and nothing but that. Not how are you sleeping, not how is the court business going, not how are you coping with your father. Five years of appointments opened with that question, sustained with that question and closed with that question, and whatever I answered landed in one line of text.

There was one day when I tried to explain to her the arrangement I'd worked out on my own, which was an outrage, yes, but an outrage with its own logic inside it.

"I'm not taking it because of the tobacco. I'm taking it so I don't drink. What I'm trying to do is replace the alcohol with it."

Months later, in a report of hers I needed for something else, I found it written that the patient reported using that substance with the intention of giving up smoking. Not even my worst idea made it onto the page in one piece.

Then she'd swing her chair round a little to the side, where my mother was, or my sister, depending on the day.

"And what have you noticed?"

And my mother would say what can be seen from outside and on the bad days, which is the only thing you can see from there: that I was in a terrible state, that I was drinking, that I was going about posting videos. Not one false word in it. She was scared to death, she'd been given no tool of any kind and she answered with what she had. Then came the thing this chapter rests on: the two of them would start talking about me in the third person with the party concerned half a metre away. The patient minimises. The patient does not acknowledge his consumption. In consultation he appears calm, approachable, cooperative. Me, sitting there with my coat across my knees, listening to the typing of the document a judge was going to read a few weeks later.

The aversive treatment, the one that makes your body impossible if you drink, she offered me once.

"No."

Like that, bare, with no explanation of why, because explaining meant handing over material. In the file it went down as declined by the patient, and for years that line worked as the documentary proof of my bad faith.

And she'd close with her own business: the prescription, the date of the next one and a formality.

"I'm going to refer you to the nurses, so they can explain a few things to you about the disorder."

A few things it literally was: a handful of sessions, the basics, goodbye. Real psychoeducation, with a method and with hours in it, I wasn't given any of until seven years after having the diagnosis, and it certainly didn't come from there. I always left that room the same way, with the paper in my hand and with the exact sensation of a man who has just been through a police checkpoint on a road.

And one day, on the subject of the alcohol, she said a sentence to me. That if I ever drank and lost control, I could rape somebody. It doesn't appear on any piece of paper and that's why I write it here, because it is the centre of all of this. I left that room knowing what I was to my doctor, and it wasn't a patient with an affective disorder: it was a potential rapist being kept under watch with drugs. I didn't swallow it, because it wasn't true and never had been; but it was said by the person with total authority over my clinical record, and her reports travelled to the court, and that sentence stayed inside my nervous system with the weight of a solid object. And there's still the layer underneath, which is the one I find hardest to put down. In one of my admission histories there appears, as a biographical fact and nothing more, precocious sexuality and multiple high-risk sexual relationships from the age of thirteen. In the passive. With no subject. With not one question behind it. No child of thirteen has precocious sexuality: he has adults around him doing what they should not be doing, and that phrase is one of the central markers of child sexual abuse. It was written down, and nobody ever asked. Telling that patient he could rape somebody isn't only a reckless judgement: it's taking the victim and putting him, without wanting to know any better, on the abuser's side. What that produces has been described and is called sealing the silence. With that sentence on top of you, let's see who tells that woman what was done to him at thirteen. The true fact, the boy's, stayed exactly where it was, buried, with a new shame standing guard over it.

Then there was the set-up, which is the word that fits it. I was ordered to come accompanied, with my mother or with my sister, one year after another; she didn't want me on my own, and a spell alone was never once offered to me. Let's see where I was supposed to talk about my father's suicide, with his widow in the chair beside me. Let's see where I was supposed to talk about my sexuality, my shame or my fear, with my family of origin taking notes on my right. Absolute transparency was demanded of me and I was denied the only format in which transparency is possible. And the reports were cooked up out of what they told her on the phone, which was what can be seen from outside and

on the worst days, because whatever I said didn't count. From all that there's one morning that portrays the whole thing, and it's from the worst month of my life: I found out an appointment had been moved, I assumed my mother had moved it by ringing up on her own account, and I wrote to her as best I could that she wasn't a psychiatrist, that I was the patient, Mum. And her, minutes later, terrified and without a single tool in her hand: that it was because I was poorly and my head went and then I came looking for the two of them. I was going into an episode. And my psychiatrist was writing her reports out of what the people who rang her told her.

So I lied. I minimised. I kept quiet about entire relapses. Anything I let out in there could end up written down, and what was written down ended up in front of a judge: telling her my symptoms and my using was, with no metaphor involved, testifying against myself every three weeks. I wasn't hiding out of dishonesty; I was hiding out of survival, and that concealment which my file noted down as a trait of my character was, in that office, the only rational behaviour still available. I took the lithium the way a prisoner keeps to the timetable of his wing: not because he believes in it, but because the alternative is worse. And in the prodrome of every relapse of those five years I let it go and went off looking for the usual. It took me five years to be able to say it in the exact words: the therapeutic alliance isn't the decoration on a consultation, it's a clinical variable of the sort that moves the outcome; and adherence isn't a trait of the patient and isn't measured in his character, it's a property of the relationship between two people. And trauma, which was what lay underneath my diagnosis, is only touched under conditions of safety: with no safety there is no disclosure, and with no disclosure there is nothing to work through. In my life there was no less safe place than that consulting room.

And now the other half, in the same handwriting, because otherwise this is worth nothing. I was a case to make anybody shudder: a type one with polysubstance dependence, with open cases in the courts and with a supernatural talent for hiding whatever suited me. The drugs she put me on were the ones that had to be put on, and I will always acknowledge that. With the doctor who adjusted the regime I have no problem at all. I have one with the person holding the pen. Five years without one single question about my grief for my father, about the years of bullying at school, about the business at thirteen; without sending me to psychology, without one piece of psychoeducation from her own hand. And the reports, sown with typing errors, including one I had to submit to a court.

What it cost me to get out of there explains the whole system. One night I wrote to Sonia that I was going to change psychiatrists, and the why came in three messages in a row: that she wasn't the right one; that she didn't look after me, that she confined herself to dispensing psychiatric drugs; that she had never shown either empathy or respect for my condition. There's no bitterness in there. There's a diagnosis of a relationship. And it took seven months. Seven months between the day a patient sets down in writing that his psychiatrist is no use to him and the day he wrenches the transfer out of the system, and into that gap fits, entire, the worst decompensation I have ever had. When my mother finally got the appointment I was working and with the court case under way, so I asked her to go up and request it on my behalf and I dictated to her how she had to put it: that if the doctor didn't object to her patient being able to lead a normal life, one in the afternoon and near home would suit me. In those terms. Asking permission to be allowed to change doctor. That night my mother finished off the day by telling me she'd spoken to the solicitor and that they were going to try to make sure I never set foot in that room again, and that perhaps I never would. Five years on, that was the best news anybody could give me about my own psychiatrist.

And the proof that the problem wasn't me arrives with the doctor who came afterwards, who has a chapter of his own. I sat down in front of him with the same brain, the same illness, the same biography and equivalent drugs. The only variable that changed was who was on the other side of the desk and how he looked at me. The result is on record in the file: more than two years of appointments without missing one, the lithium levels up to date, total abstinence. And one detail that's worth the whole report: that aversive treatment which in the previous period appears as declined by the patient, I asked for myself, out of my own mouth, the moment I had somebody in front of me with whom telling the truth cost nothing. My poor adherence in those five years was never a trait of mine. It was a property of the relationship.

And meanwhile the body was keeping the count, and the nurses noted it down with exemplary diligence: the kilos, the high blood pressure, the racing heart while sitting still. What isn't on record is anybody reading that curve for what it was, an organism swelling up with fear. From the month of the recordings to the pulmonary embolism that nearly killed me, nine months after I got out of that consulting room, the scales went from ninety kilos to a hundred and fifty-five. Nobody can prove a causal link, and I'm not going to do to her story

what she did to mine, which was to assert without evidence. I say only this: she watched me put on weight in plain sight, year after year, and she didn't open her mouth once.

A few months ago I asked my sister for the reports from those five years, sat down one morning and read them straight through, and put in a written complaint where it had to be put in. Not to settle any score: so that it's on record, and because it may well be happening to another patient in that room right now. She didn't hold me up: she watched me. She didn't examine me: she classified me. She didn't cushion my stressors: she was one of them.

Chapter 33 • The Messiah

That winter I spent with Lidia. Lidia was the girl who had sat in the chair at my first admission, and since then we'd built an entire life: the patch that went over a hole shaped exactly like Marta held for nearly a year and a half and was, whatever the papers said about it afterwards, a real relationship, and a lovely one nearly all the time. We set up house in my mother's village, a flat first and a top-floor place afterwards, and anybody looking at us from outside would have said that man had put his life back together. Inside, things were going another way. She was dragging her own business along half closed: she'd separated from her ex in order to come and live with me and she went on getting on a train almost every month to go and see him in the city where he lived, whole days of it, and I swallowed it and said nothing. The man I'd been two years earlier wouldn't have batted an eyelid, he'd have counted it as part of the scenery; that man no longer existed, and this one was hurt by every trip and kept his mouth shut. And then the holidays came and she went back to her own country for a few weeks, and left me alone in that flat. Because of that loneliness, and nothing else, the drugs came back. I didn't relapse out partying, I didn't relapse out of vice: I relapsed on my own, in that flat, with her thousands of kilometres away and with Marta two years unburied. And even that ugly part belonged to both of us: the drugs were an experiment in company, and afterwards the regret came in duplicate too.

With her back, one afternoon at the start of that year we took ketamine. There were a few days left before a virus got into everybody's life and set up a genuine planetary quarantine, and that isn't a small detail, because I had asked for that confinement the year before in my delusions: I'd asked God to put people into their houses with their children and their pets, another of the paradoxes apophenia kept serving me up on a plate. In a brain in the state mine was in then, with the medication I was on and with the fragility I always carry, that dose opened a door that should never have been opened.

And what happened on the other side has to be told, because it wasn't a high and because out of it came my way of being in the world for the rest of my life. My soul came away from my body. With no metaphor: the body ended, the senses ended, the name and the edges ended. What was left of me floated in an emptiness that was neither dark nor cold, but full. The kabbalists have a word for that, Ein Sof, that which has no limit, what comes before any creation; at the time I didn't know the thing had a name or a tradition. I knew that I was inside it, with no outline, and that in that nothing which was all things there was a Presence. Eyes I didn't have, so I didn't see it. Ears neither, so I didn't hear it. It reached me by the one thing I still had on, bare consciousness, and what reached me was God. It was the drug, you'll tell me, and of course it was, and I'm not the one who's going to argue: the door was opened by a substance, the doors substances open are paid for at the price of gold, and I paid for this one with the worst episode I have ever had. That said, the key being chemical tells you nothing at all about what was behind the door. I'd believed myself the Messiah before, in another city, as one more delusion in the collection. That time was different: it was the year my God and my illness touched, and I've never been able to separate them completely since.

The clinical name goes alongside it, and takes nothing away from it. In mania with psychosis the delusion usually matches the mood (the manuals say mood-congruent), and that means a euphoric man doesn't have delusions about being persecuted: he has delusions about having been chosen. The greatness, the mission, the secret only he understands, God speaking into his ear. The plot is chosen by the mood; the psychosis supplies only the conviction. And the mystical delusion is the oldest and the cheapest to assemble, because the brain manufactures nothing new: it grabs the most valuable thing it has in storage and inflates it until it fills the room. If you give a boy who has had the mystical wire hanging loose all his life an afternoon of ketamine in which he has touched God, the material is served up ready. The experience was mine and I don't dispute it. What the mania did with it was promote it to an office: from I have felt God I moved to I am the one God has sent. The border between an experience and a delusion isn't in what you feel. It's in the doubt running out.

The prodrome came with a film set. My brother and sister and I were coming back from Rome, from a trip to my mother's country on which they had already noticed that I was completely decompensated and which turned out to be a battle from beginning to end. We saw that city empty in a way nobody has seen

it since tourism has existed: we landed there on exactly the day Italy shut. On the plane back I wrote to Lidia that I'd got up in a temper about the way the peanuts were shared out, and she answered poor me, that I'd get some sleep at home. Three or four days after we got back she left for her ex's city, and the president's speech declaring the state of alarm I watched alone, in our flat. And I didn't only watch it: I filmed it. There's a video of me somewhere commentating live on that decree, in the middle of an episode, with a voice that frightens you and saying things that are simply brutal. Of all my episodes I keep recordings like that, made from inside by the man going through them, and I've never found anything like them on the internet. For now I keep them and that's that.

Two days before the state of alarm, first thing in the morning, I wrote my mother what follows, and it goes in the same order in which it came out of my fingers: that if her son kills her, she'll die with a smile on her lips. That they had to stay shut in until it was over. That the virus was an invention and I didn't have it. That she was going to weep with happiness at my sacrifice. That I was terribly sorry for having made such a mess of it, but that there was no other road. And ten minutes later, the most honest thing I said in that entire month: that perhaps I was making it all up and it had nothing to do with what I really thought. She answered what a mother can answer to that: what a load I was carrying, why was I paranoid and aggressive again, whether that meant I'd stopped the medication and was putting on an act in front of everybody. And seeing that there was no way in down that road, she stood back: that if that was how I saw it, go ahead; that they'd be at a distance in case they were needed; and that they loved me. The next day, with the country going into a state of alarm and with her son explaining to her that the virus was a set-up, she sent me a message to say she'd forgotten one thing: would I rather she made me an omelette or a pizza. And that she hoped I hadn't got angry with her. In those two lines you have the whole of my mother and the whole of this illness: a woman with not one technical word in her mouth, with no tools and no blame, offering hot food and apologising in case she was in the way.

And after that came the business of the shutters. I turned up at my mother's house and started hammering on them with my fists, shouting that Dad was there, alive, with me. In the middle of the street, at the top of my voice, in a village sealed up tight. Inside were my mother, my sister and Lidia, who'd come back on the third day because my family asked her to. She didn't come down. I found that out a year later and I tell it where it belongs, because what it did to

my head was no small thing. They took me away under arrest, and out of the ambulance came three messages in a row that she kept: that I was in the ambulance again; that anything but the hospital again, that they shouldn't do that to me, that it wasn't fair; that I wanted something better than being shut up like a poor little animal. The last line of that day I didn't write. She wrote it, a while later: that she was with me. In an episode, I didn't last a fortnight of quarantine. At the admission she didn't turn up for a single day.

Of the inside I keep little, and the little I have I have complete, and I set it down in the order in which it happened, because the order is half of what has to be understood.

The moment I went in they left me in a little side room to change and put on the pyjamas and the rubber sandals. And there I stayed, waiting for somebody to appear. Nobody did. In those days nobody appeared anywhere, with the staff overwhelmed and the planet locked from the inside. So I left. I opened the door, the corridor was deserted, at the end of it you could see the way out of the hospital, and nobody stopped me because there was nobody there in a state to stop me. I set off walking through the industrial estate to see if somebody would give me a cigarette. I found nobody. Literally nobody: in the whole walk I didn't pass a single human being. Shutters down, dead streets, the silence of a country shut into its houses, and me in the middle of it in the hospital pyjamas and the rubber sandals, strolling through the set of the end of the world. I went past the sports hall they'd turned into a morgue, with the coffins inside, and I saw it without seeing it, because in that state I didn't register what was in front of me. I was going to the cemetery where my father and my grandparents are, which is nearby, to pay my respects: to the same father I'd just been shouting for in front of a set of shutters and who I was now going to visit under the ground, and the contradiction didn't brush against me for one second, because psychosis has a logic of its own and inside it everything fits like a well-drawn plan. It was the third of the three times I announced earlier: the place where they found him, the shutters and this one, and all three with the same drawing, a broken brain running towards the same man. I didn't get there. They found me, of course. They always find you.

And that's why they tied me down. I set it down with the reason first, because the reason is half the matter: they didn't tie me down for being agitated; they didn't tie me down because I resisted (I didn't resist, I have never in my life resisted an admission); they didn't tie me down to stop anything that was going

on in that room, because nothing was going on in there. They tied me down for having gone for a walk.

It was done by a porter and a nurse, and I hold nothing against them; they were overwhelmed, with no resources, doing what the paperwork says has to be done. What does have to be explained is what a mechanical restraint is, because you hear he was restrained and you imagine something almost sensible, along the lines of doing somebody's seatbelt up. It isn't that. It's about having all four limbs strapped to a bed, face up, unable to turn over, unable to scratch yourself, unable to drink water unless somebody comes and holds the glass, for hours and sometimes for days. And one clarification in the hospital's favour, because the picture people have comes from the cinema and it has to be said too: the straps aren't leather any more, they're wide and made of cotton, and they don't leave your wrists raw. That is true. And it changes nothing about the rest.

The rest is that nobody spoke a word to me. Not before, not during, not afterwards: not one sentence explaining what was being done to me, how long it was going to last or what was expected of me for it to end, and I have turned that silence over more in six years than I have the straps. Inside me there was no agitation: there was panic mixed up with disbelief, and I wouldn't wish that mixture on anybody. On one side the body strapped to a bed; on the other the head repeating that it was impossible, that not to me, that you don't do this to a person. And on top of that the thing that never comes up when the subject gets discussed on a talk show: asking a stranger to clean you. To bring you the bedpan. To feed you by the spoonful, like a baby, with your eyes fixed on the ceiling. I've had a fair few delusions, and the delusions, next to that, look like a reasonable proposition. What was delusional was the room. What was delusional was the procedure.

And I struggled. It's true the straps don't hurt if you keep still, and I moved anyway, because in my head the one tied down wasn't me: it was somebody else who was having something done to him and who had to be got out of there. I got the wrist cuffs to my mouth and gnawed at them. With my teeth and with my neck, like an animal in a trap, until I tore them off. And the moment I tore one set off they came and put another on. I ate my way through four sets of straps in three days. Three days. That's what lies underneath the subordinate clause this book has been writing since the first page.

And remember now, reader, the paragraph I asked you to keep, the one with the nail in the wall. At thirteen, one of those men from the internet used to tie

me to a bed. He immobilised me, he raped me like that and he took photographs. When the porter pulled the strap tight he was applying a mechanical restraint protocol; my nervous system, meanwhile, was twenty years away and in a different room. Immobilisation on its own is already an enormous trauma for anybody. In me it inaugurated nothing: it reopened with the precision of a tracing. And on that ward nobody could have known it, because nobody had ever asked me: not in that admission, not in the earlier ones, not in a single appointment in twenty years. So I wasn't fighting the straps of that night. I was fighting the other ones.

Then came the virus protocol: nineteen days isolated in a closed room, with no stimulus, no voice, without touching another human being, a trauma that isn't applied even to prisoners. The whole world shut into its houses, and me shut inside the shutting. And there, emptied out to the bottom, I was left alone again with bare consciousness, and the Presence was still there. It turns out you arrive at the same place by two opposite roads, filling yourself until you burst or emptying yourself until you disappear: the ketamine or the cell. And I prayed, and not for them to open the door: I prayed for it to mean something, because a suffering with a meaning can be borne and there is no body that can hold up one without.

In three weeks my only human contact was a nurse who appeared every night, always at the same hour, with the medication. Bald, in uniform, efficient. He'd stay in the doorway with the little cup and would invariably come out with the same question.

"How are you?"

And the question was meant seriously, I knew that then and I stand by it. That man was entirely clear that putting a virus isolation on top of a psychiatric admission was one cruelty added to another that was already considerable, and he asked because he cared. And even so it sounded like a bad joke, and every time I heard it I wanted to tear the room apart. How are you. How are you. Not even ordinary prisoners are isolated like that. The ones who have done real harm aren't left three weeks without seeing a face, and I was in there because my brain was a storm I hadn't asked for and didn't know how to stop. And even so I waited for that hour the way you wait for a visit. The rest was a room, a window and my head. Until the discharge I didn't see anybody else.

And now what got installed, which is the part that doesn't appear in any report. That chain I told about, the ambulance, the little side room and the door

that locks from outside, had from then on one more link at the end, and that link had stopped being imaginary. Doctors call it treatment-induced trauma, which is the damage produced by the act of curing itself when it doesn't look at the history of the person in front of it; and what it leaves behind they call institutional phobia, which in plain language means preferring to go through a prodrome on your own, shut in a room, rather than set foot again in the place where they strapped you down. That's where the cruellest circle of this illness closes, and in my case it closed a good few times: out of fear the admission gets delayed, the delay makes it worse, and the worse it is, the more fear it leaves for the next one. That's the hidden bill for the straps, and it isn't on the wrists, because wrists heal in four days.

With uniforms the body does exactly the opposite, and it's the hardest thing in all of this to explain. They don't set me off: they switch me off. In front of a badge or a white coat I shrink, my voice goes, I say yes to everything, I cooperate and on top of that I say thank you. That's why I went quiet all at once when the local police arrived over the shutters, and that's why I walked to every one of those places on my own two feet, calm, with a docility that to anybody watching would have looked almost comic in a man who had just been shouting at a dead man in the small hours. It doesn't occur to a man who grew up taking blows from authority to rebel against it: he obeys faster than anybody and saves it up for later. It took me years to be able to say this out loud, and the day I finally told it to the doctor who came afterwards I told it crying, with the absurd shame of a man apologising for something that was done to him.

They discharged me with the state of alarm still running and I settled ten metres from my mother, and her messages from those weeks are the closest thing to a treatment I received in that entire spring: how are you getting on, have you eaten, put a jacket on because it's turned cold. And in the middle of it, always, the same question: had the psychiatrist rung me yet. When she finally rang and dealt with me in four questions, my mother told me to get the appointment for the injection booked and cancelled herself the one at another hospital that was no use any more. An elderly woman, on the telephone, in the middle of a lockdown and while she was making his dinner, managing the psychiatric follow-up of a son fresh out of a ward. And one of those mornings I sent her a long text about anxious attachment, the thing about the carer only being there part of the time and the child spending his childhood measuring, never knowing whether she'll be there. She answered that it was extremely interesting, that she

wished she'd read it a long time ago, that now she understood me a great deal better and would I forgive her for not having realised. And in the message after that, whether I'd sent it to my sister as well, because she thought she ought to read it. She didn't defend herself, she didn't argue, she didn't accuse me of re-writing anything. Three weeks out of a psychiatric ward, with the world sealed up tight, my mother and I were finally doing what we hadn't done in thirty-four years: explaining ourselves to each other.

And there's something from that year I wasn't able to see: my aunt, my father's sister, died of the virus, and we didn't bury her, because at the time the dead from that weren't buried. I had the fact inside my own family, with a surname on it and everything, and the brain it reached wasn't in a state to process it. And Lidia, from outside, set down in writing what I wasn't able to see either: that the admission had been a good thing if I was in an episode, and that she felt I was dragging her into my episode, and that that was part of why she had gone. Years later, when there was nothing left to fix and nobody left to convince, I wrote her the only thing there was: that I genuinely fell in love with her, that that was why giving her up cost me so much, and that out of that came that vindictive streak of mine in a manic state. It's the only time, in all my archives, when I name my own ugly part without anybody throwing it in my face.

Chapter 34 • The Twenty-Sixth Floor

Of the first year with a name and with the salt what's left me is a blur, and there are reasons: it was the first year of serious medication, and also the first in which I came anywhere near euthymia. That truce doesn't consist of turning into an ordinary person; it consists of being yourself but with the sea still, with its stretches of grey and its background noise. And the truce had its price at first: sedation, slowness and a memory that worked in jumps. I came out of the lockdown admission, I worked, I did a master's, I went to therapy and I did nobody any harm. And in that state, at the start of that autumn, a private psychiatrist offered to review the diagnosis. Which is exactly what a patient with anosognosia has been longing to hear since the day he was given it. Holding on to that sentence, I stopped the injection that same autumn, without telling anybody. And when the winter came I stopped the lithium. Both of them. On my own account. Nobody took them off me and nobody found out, because a man who has been well for a few months gives no sign at all of having let go of anything. He gives the opposite sign: he's well.

That's what doctors call losing adherence, and in this illness half of patients lose it at some point, and not because they're stupid: because of the sedation, because of the weight, because of the grief for the highs, which get missed even though they blew your life apart, and above all because of the mechanism that already has its name in this book, the one of feeling well and using that as proof there was nothing to treat. I got, on top of everything, the extra turn of the screw that comes with the salt: every pill was my father's. And what happens when the mood stabiliser is withdrawn has been measured for more than thirty years: of those who stop lithium abruptly, roughly half relapse in the months that follow, the relapse is usually upwards, into mania, and it arrives the faster the more abrupt the cut has been. The man who stops it in winter finds himself in spring with no brakes, and if on top of that he isn't sleeping, is drinking, is alone and has the floor pulled out from under him, he has the four conditions that in a type

one come before an episode. That winter I gathered all four, and the last one was brought to me by the phone.

Because in those same weeks the block arrived. I'd gone a year without speaking to Marta, and in that year I'd done what a man can do to behave himself: not write to her. And one day that winter I wrote to her, to ask how she was. She answered in the same minute: hello, that the dog was doing brilliantly, that she was extremely glad I was well and about my therapy, and that I should take good care of myself. We talked about her going to the cinema, about the cold, about the sleet that had been coming down all day. Three conversations like that, friendly, of no consequence whatever. I didn't want to get back with her. I wanted one thing only, and I didn't get time to say it: to see the dog. And in the third one, with no warning, she blocked me. I asked how her weekend had been. Sixteen minutes later, whether she'd blocked me again and what for. And a minute after that I wrote the last message of a conversation of four and a half years: that things get said, that there was no need at all to do it that way. Nobody answered. I sent her a text message to ask for a closing with a minimum of dignity, not to do that to me. Nothing. And it has to be said with the same exactness what there was on her bank of the river, because it's there to be read in her own sentences and I didn't know how to read it: that I should take good care of myself, that she wasn't after anything. That isn't a door opening. It's the formula with which a conversation gets closed. She had been saying goodbye from the first day, and I read a door where there was a farewell.

And what that did to my head wasn't a sadness. It was a short circuit. In a brain like mine rejection isn't processed as a piece of news: it's processed as a threat, on the same circuit somebody else would use to process being followed, and it comes with the diagnosis under its own name: rejection sensitivity. And a block with no closure is the purest form of rejection there is, because it has no why to hold on to and no goodbye to answer: it's a door that disappears out of the wall. My head didn't read a block. It read, all at once, every abrupt cut in my life, starting with hers: the suitcase in the winter of the first admission and my father's funeral that she didn't come to. That, in a man who had been off lithium for weeks and wasn't sleeping, isn't an upset. It's a match in a room full of gas.

Where I was, because that part nobody has ever told. In the living room of my mother's house, in the village, sleeping on a folding bed, with the television beside me and the life of the house going on over the top of me. A man of thirty-five folding himself away every morning along with his bed. I worked

from there, shut in, with the agoraphobia starting to close off the street to me. I drank every day. I didn't sleep. And in those weeks I was the one who broke it off with Judit, a woman I'd been with a few months and who was among the most grown-up things that has passed through this story, in the middle of a prodrome, on the phone and badly. She offered to end it in person, like adults. I didn't go. Asking Marta by text message for the very thing I was denying Judit on the phone, and not seeing it. Like a man hunting for his glasses with his glasses on.

And in the middle of all that a three-way call with Lidia was arranged, with the best intention in the world and the opposite effect. There I learned, from her own mouth, what had happened on the day of the shutters: that she was inside the house, with my family, and didn't come down, and that at the admission she didn't turn up for a single day. Finding out how close she'd been, and that she decided not to come any closer, lit a rage in me I hadn't met before. I don't write this to justify what I did afterwards. I write it so it can be understood. And there were people who lent a hand, too. Two strangers who presented themselves as internet investigators decided to devote their afternoons to Lidia: they set about tracing her life on the net and brought me a story ready-assembled. What that story said doesn't matter; what matters is that my head bought the whole of it. A paranoia manufactured on your own collapses under its own weight. A paranoia with two witnesses showing you screenshots stands up. And I went for Lidia on social media, and not with the disorder of what I'd done years earlier with Marta, but with structure, with an internal logic assembled by a brain in an episode. I was a great deal more systematic. And precisely because of that I did more damage.

A few weeks later she put in writing what she'd been holding back for months: did I understand once and for all why she'd gone, which was that I didn't care about the consequences of what I did or about the people around me. And a few days after that, with the points numbered, the best-ordered summary of that year anybody has ever given me: I was ill; it had to be stopped and there was no way of stopping it, because of the drugs and because of the Messiah delusion; she had no tools; I was a wall against any feedback, shut inside a cognitive tunnel. Three days before getting that list I had announced to her that my therapy was practically finished. A man proclaiming he's cured while the inside of his tunnel is being described to him. And in between I wrote two sentences I read today for what they are: that I'm not bipolar and that I'm Marcos. She said

goodbye properly: that her body wasn't right, that she had to block me, that we should give each other some time for the sake of our health. She wished me luck with the move and asked me to take care of myself. Twelve days later I was inside the group of the next chapter.

Before the hotel two more things happened. Raquel rang me and I went to where she was living then, and that night I used again. The person in front of me knew my history down to the last detail: the admissions, what that same substance had done to my brain a year earlier, the nineteen days in isolation, the straps and the exact fragility of the moment I was in. And I knew it while I was doing it. It was the bad road, yes, and the other road, the one of holding out with nothing at all, frightened me even more. And the week before that, with the prodrome already assembled and the grievance story eating me every night, I took my mother's car and drove up alone to the mountain with the monastery on it without telling anybody where I was going. I went to look for the exact spot where Marta and I, years before, had made love at the close of a great day, with the monastery going quiet all around. That time there was only wind, rock and a man of thirty-five planted in the same place, looking at the same horizon, entirely alone. And there a certainty without a crack in it came down on me: I'd lost her. That wasn't what bit. It was the manner of it. That the woman who had probably loved me more than anybody in her whole life had deleted me without saying goodbye and without even reproaching me with anything. It wasn't that she'd left me. It was that I had stopped existing for her, and that's a different thing and it bites somewhere else. I came the whole way down that mountain with a question that has no answer: if somebody like that could delete me like that, what was I.

So put it all together, which is what nobody has ever done, not a court and not me either until recently. A man of thirty-five on the folding bed in his mother's living room. Off lithium since the winter and off the injection since the autumn. Drinking every day. Not sleeping. With agoraphobia closing off the street to him. With a relapse into ketamine on top of it, in front of somebody who knew perfectly well what that had done to him a year earlier. With two strangers feeding him a paranoia on false evidence. With one relationship he'd ended himself and another he'd blown up on social media. And underneath all of it, the hole Marta had left without a word, which was the only one he couldn't name. Seven things plaited together, six of them mine or belonging to people who weren't her, and on top of all seven an untreated illness. It wasn't a man

who one day decided to do somebody harm. It was an entire building coming down at once.

A few days after coming down from there I took a room in a tall hotel in the city. Twenty-sixth floor, with Barcelona below and me looking at it as though I were king of the world. And it has to be said which hotel it was, because I didn't put it together until years afterwards and with that fact the episode reads differently: it was the same hotel and the same floor where Marta and I had slept on the night of the reconciliation, newly back in love, the first time in my life I had set foot in a place like that. First I went up alone to the exact spot on the mountain where we'd been together; a few days later I took the room we'd slept in. A man convinced he's going mad on his own account and who is in fact visiting, one after another and without knowing it, the altars of his own story. I put it down because it's the cleanest proof I have that it wasn't hatred. It was a brain with no brakes looking blindly for what it had loved most.

I bought two bottles and went up. And now the window. A twenty-sixth floor has a sheet of glass from top to bottom and the whole city underneath, at night, with its lights, and to a man with no rein, no sleep and no floor that doesn't look like a view. It looks like a way out. The man who went up to that floor hadn't gone there to do anybody any harm. He'd gone there not to come back. And he had the luck, or the grace, that the police got there before he did. What happened in that room over the next two nights I don't remember.

Chapter 35 • The Recordings

The group was mine. I'd opened it some time before, under the name I was using then, on one of those messaging apps, and I gave it the use a place like that gets given: unloading. That winter I reopened it with two sentences, that I was going to put up a collection of my recordings in there and that whoever listened to them should argue them down bare-knuckle. And I put up forty-odd of them one after another, some of them a quarter of an hour long. The thing ended up being a sort of forum with meetings by video call; I'd convene debates and ask for photos of graffiti and of banknotes with a tag on them. That was the room. And my account had already been restricted after reports.

The strangers came in one night, fifteen at once, and one of them told me where they'd come from: from a gossip group where they'd spent three days with my name in their mouths. From then on the curve of that room was exactly the curve of my episode, in messages and in people: it got up to almost two hundred of them watching the same thing, and nearly all of it was written by about ten. And what they said to that man is written down and I put it in exactly as it was, because whoever reads this has to see what was being read inside that screen: you're misunderstood, the best thing is to take your own life and move up a level. Kill yourself and stop suffering. I came here to watch a live suicide and all there is is some bloke begging for cash. You haven't got the balls to jump. Over and over, on different days. On the first night, while I was drinking beer, they corrected my drink upwards, to gin. I'd spent years using alcohol to bring my sleepless nights down, and they knew it because I was telling them live, and what they did was raise the proof. And they pushed in both directions at once: one would write that somebody should ring Marta and another, the same afternoon, that I hadn't got the balls to ring her; when I talked about her, that Marta hated me, that I didn't exist for her. If anybody wants to know how you keep a manic man alight for twelve days straight, let him read those two weeks. It's a manual.

And there's one thing that can no longer be read without the heart going out of you. I had posted in there, of my own accord, where I was going to be three days later: a retreat up in the hills, with people, with the name of the property and of the village, asking them not to ring the place. A plant retreat that, with my diagnosis, I should never have gone to, but that was at least people, and hills, and hours without a screen. For three days that was the group's running joke. And the day before, one of them pronounced it dead in four words, and four hours later another wrote: call a taxi and go to the hotel. Two minutes later, another pasted a link to a hotel booking site. That if I got to the hotel I should film everything. That I should barricade myself in the room. The day of the retreat was the day the police came to the door.

And now the part that costs me most, which is hers. Of those two weeks, nine days are a man in an episode talking about the woman he loved, in front of strangers, in floods. That she was sound. That she was never the next one, that she was HER, like that, in capitals. That she wasn't the harbour: that she was the ocean. That she was my soulmate. And when one of them started making jokes about her name and about her body, I leapt to defend her, and it's there in writing. And also there, from the same man and the same days, is a sentence I read with a knot in my throat: that I was not going to harass Marta. And there's the other thing, which is also from the same man: whether anybody fancied ringing her and explaining it all to her; who was going to be the first to ring her; and her number, written out by me, three times. All three times came off my keyboard. And a sentence from the same day that portrays where I was better than any other: that I'd be one phone call away from being locked up for life. I knew it. I wrote it. And I carried on.

And then that night came, and I tell it as it was. I drank a whole bottle, and there are people from that group who put it in writing of their own accord, asking me how the bottle was coming along, so it isn't even my memory. With that inside me and with the episode at full power, I rang her. And I rang her again. And again. And at some point in those small hours my head went completely and I started recording non-stop. Hours of recordings, with a broken voice, taken over by hard drink and by madness. Brutal death threats, monstrosities my head manufactured as it went with the poise of a man who believes he's telling the truth to the whole world. I said I'd cut her spine with a pair of pruning shears. I published her details. And mine. And at one point, after hours of recordings, one of them wrote: well, you've threatened her now. And I

answered in that same minute, in four messages in a row: bah. It was a joke. A wind-up. And two minutes later I was uploading another recording. I tell it because it's exactly what was inside my head: I believed I was putting on a show for a room, performing for a gallery that was applauding me. And that same night, in the same room, I shared photos of the two of us from the good years, with the pride of a man showing off what's his, and somebody answered that she was very ugly. I leapt up as though they'd insulted me, and I answered with a recording, with all the swagger that comes out of me in an episode: that Marta was the most beautiful woman I'd ever met, the most beautiful his eyes would ever see and the most beautiful in the whole universe and the whole multidimension. On the same night I was saying the other thing.

Somebody from that group got the recordings to Marta. That is what reached her, and I'm not going to soften it by a single comma, because what reached her is true and the fear she felt is true. What has to be understood about those recordings doesn't excuse them, it only explains them: what came out of my mouth was not a plan and not a wish. It was the material my head had to hand. And my head had spent twenty-five years inside the internet, seeing and reading all the horror that can be seen and read in there. When you take the brake off a brain like that with alcohol and psychosis, it grabs the most terrible thing it has in storage and spits it out. That's why, when I listened to them afterwards, I recognised nothing. Not one sentence. It wasn't my vocabulary. It was the sewer I'd been swimming in for twenty-five years, coming out of a mouth with no brake on it. None of it was going anywhere, and it went nowhere. But it reached her. And that is the thing I can't fix.

The next day the hotel called security, security couldn't get me out of the room, and they called the police; the group were broadcasting it in the room, like men commentating on a match: that the hotel staff had rung, that there was an officer outside the door, that the police were already inside the room, and one of them proposing, by which point it was entirely redundant, that somebody should ring the hotel to warn them the man inside was in an episode.

In the middle of the afternoon they came in. And this part I don't tell from memory, because from memory I have nothing: the phone was left recording on the table and the recording is there, thirty-two minutes I've played a fair few times with the sensation of listening to a stranger who is using my voice. It goes exactly as it is, with what can be heard on it.

The first thing you hear is Bach, at full volume on the laptop, and over the top of Bach the door and two new voices. I was in the bed, completely naked, covered up to the top with the sheet and the bedspread and my head out, and I didn't move.

"How are you, sir?" says one of the voices.

"I am the Messiah."

I said it like that, without raising my voice and without any hurry, like a man giving out an administrative detail. And they carried on with their business, which is what astonishes me most about the whole recording: two people doing their job with a decency I hadn't been expecting.

"Do you have any psychiatric history?"

"I'm a trillionaire."

And behind that, in the same burst, that somebody or other's mother was the queen, that they had to understand what was happening in the world in those days, and one sentence that haunts me because it's the only one in the thirty-two minutes with the shape of a legal argument.

"I'm drunk on love. Not on drugs."

At some point they ask me about the rules. The house rules, the hotel's rules, the ones I'd spent two days breaking without realising they existed. And here is the thing that genuinely interests me about all of this.

"What rules? He hasn't touched Marta."

That's what I said. In front of the police. In the third person, as if I were talking about somebody else. And I was talking about somebody else: in that minute there was in my head a man whose conduct I was accounting for to the officers, a third party I was defending against a charge nobody had brought against him yet, while on the phone that was recording there were forty voice messages saying what they said. Both things in the same body, on the same day and in the same voice. And one small thing I keep as well, because it portrays the state better than anything else: the officer who came in first had one of those old-fashioned double names, and within a few minutes I was already calling her by the short form, with the familiarity of a man who thinks everybody has come to his party.

They took me out delirious, certain as we went down that all of it was part of a greater plan that only I was in a position to understand. Of the journey nothing is left. What is left is the waking up: a bed I couldn't move in, the taste of old coin waiting for me in my mouth, and a certainty that was already coming from

inside the comedown, that this time I'd done something that couldn't be put right by paying instalments every month. And I was right.

They took me to the hospital in the south, because there were no beds in the one in the north, and there the judge interviewed me. Not in a courtroom and not in a gown: in a borrowed office, with a laptop propped on a table and a face inside a rectangle on the screen, and a doctor beside me until he stopped being there. That is an involuntary committal seen from inside, and it has to be called by its name: a formality that ends up taking the health service's account as sound and almost never the patient's, and that finishes with a person having his civil rights suspended for a length of time nobody tells him. They left me in there on my own. When I saw that nobody was coming back, I minimised the video call, went into my email and copied onto a sticky note the numbers I wanted to ring during the admission and didn't know by heart. I hid the paper in my underpants. Then I poured myself a shot of hand sanitiser into one of those little paper cups they keep on the wards, with the desperation of an alcoholic in withdrawal, and knocked it back in one. I asked to make a phone call, said it was to my girlfriend, and rang Marta. I said: hello, Marta, I'm calling you from the hospital. She hung up the moment she heard my voice. And I do not reproach her for it, knowing what there was on her side, which has also been measured: a voice that has become associated with a threat doesn't reach the brain as a voice, it reaches it as the threat, by a short route that fires off the fear before the cortex has understood the words. Hanging up, at that point, isn't a decision. It's a reflex. The word hospital was travelling the long road and arrived when the phone was already down. Then I rang Jordi, a friend from the village and from all my life, and he told me he'd just lost somebody from his own house, suddenly. I went down completely, with my father on top of me and the woman from the second admission on top of me, I turned aggressive with a nurse who tried to do something to me physically, I don't remember what, and they restrained me. That time with reasons to spare. Seven days later they transferred me to the hospital in the north, the one with my clinical record in it. The discharge report says manic decompensation with psychotic symptoms, and under substance history it puts that my mother reported an increase in alcohol consumption over the last weeks, and that the patient denied it despite being confronted. That's the man who recorded those messages: one who eight days later had to be strapped to a bed, and who denied having drunk with the bottles still in the room.

And in this chapter, which is the chapter of the worst thing I have ever done, it falls to me to explain what an episode is from inside, because everything that comes afterwards rests entirely on the idea that it was a choice of mine. First the sleep goes, which has been told already; then the thinking accelerates, and the sensation isn't one of illness, it's one of lucidity; then the brake disconnects, the one that assesses consequences, which is what I explained earlier. And there's something people don't know about mania, because they imagine it as euphoria: roughly one in three is irritable and hostile, and verbal hostility is as textbook a symptom as not sleeping. Physical aggression, on the other hand, is rare, and when it does appear it is nearly always turned on yourself. What came out of that room was the first of those, in its purest form. While it lasts, the man going through it has no access to the tool for assessing what he does; he isn't using it badly: he doesn't have it in front of him. Hence criminal law recognising, as grounds for exemption, the mental abnormality that prevents a man from understanding what he is doing. And hence the fact that the usual sentence, but you did it, can't be answered with a yes or a no. It gets answered with this: my body did it, with my voice and with my phone, under orders from a brain that in those days wasn't the one I am. And then there's the part that does belong to me and that I take on: I'd been months without treatment, I was drinking, I was sleeping badly and I rode straight over every warning. None of those things causes an episode on its own, and all of them together make one more likely. I didn't choose the episode. What I did choose, many times and over years, was not to put up all the barriers against it I could have put up. That's where the line is and I don't move off it: for what I did in psychosis I don't answer, because there was nobody in there in a state to answer. For what I do today I answer in full.

The group carried on without me for another seventeen days, commenting on my admission, arguing openly about whether I was on a ward or making it up, how many admissions I'd had. And two days after they took me out of the hotel, one of them wrote the only sensible sentence of those three weeks: that the whole group was tainted, that they'd spent days egging the messiah on to do mad things. I exported it and deleted it. The evidence of what the others did was kept by the only one who came out of it badly.

Chapter 36 · Lidia's Forgiveness

I came out of that ward and there were two complaints waiting in the letterbox. One was from Lidia, for what I'd done on social media that winter. The other was from Marta, for the recordings. And behind them came the worst post-psychotic depression I'd had up to that point, which anybody who hasn't been through one can't imagine: it isn't about being sad, it's about the mains going off. My mother's living room again, again unable to get out through the front door, and with a single window onto the outside, which was the screen of my phone. Through that window they came in. The ones from that room: private messages from accounts with no photo, bits of my recordings turned into memes with laughter dubbed over them, fucking bipolar, fucking nutter, do the world a favour. There was one, better informed than the rest, who wrote telling me to kill myself the same way my father did. And the calls in the small hours, from a withheld number, ringing in my mother's living room to deliver the same instruction and hang up amid howls of laughter. They always fired with the same thing: my illness. They weren't going for me over something I'd done; they were going for me over what I was. And I didn't leave, because the man who lives down the well needs to know how much they hate him today, the way you press a broken tooth to check whether it still hurts. Every night I went in to read my own stoning.

And at the same time, on that same phone and in that same week, there were four women doing four different things with me. My sister was building the defence from inside: that I should look for the recordings with threats in them that they claimed to have submitted, and in the small hours the two limits I needed and didn't want to hear, that ignoring the doctors nothing at all was going to work and that this wasn't a prison but a rehabilitation process. You are not in prison. My sister had to put that in writing for me, because from inside I wasn't capable of telling one from the other. Raquel sent me songs, one day after another, without asking me anything, and one serious sentence that was worth more than the whole repertoire: that this was what she'd meant when she asked

me to learn to recognise myself before the mania. Prodrome detection, in the mouth of a woman who had never studied medicine, three years before any professional explained it to me. Judit was forgiving me, that it hadn't been me and you could see it perfectly clearly, and two hours later came the part that wasn't forgiveness but a bill: that she knew perfectly well what had been going on, and that I could have leaned on her instead of pushing her away. And my mother was writing to me from A&E, with a drip in her arm, to ask how I was. And that man, in those same weeks, was convinced nobody was holding him up.

The solicitor's view was that it wouldn't do to tell Lidia where all of it had come from: that there was no evidence, that it wasn't the moment. My sister rang her anyway. Lidia didn't pick up, so she left her a voice message telling her what had happened. Lidia listened to it. And what came back three days later, through my sister's mouth, is the best thing anybody said to me in that entire year: that she didn't understand why I didn't take myself away from there for a while and set about getting my self-command back, and that if I went on throwing wood on the fire I'd end up burning myself again. That was said by the woman who had brought a complaint against me, with every right in the world never to say my name again. It took me two and a half years to take myself away. And I burned myself again, exactly as she had announced.

And then Lidia had a dream. You have to be told who she was to understand the size of that: a nihilist, a philosophy student, convinced that none of this means anything. Something moved inside her after a journey, in a process that came out of the suffering she'd been through with me, and the nihilist ended up a believer. And in that dream the Virgin told her that I wasn't a bad man, that I was an ill one. That I was good. That she had to forgive me. She was still in a group I was in too; I asked her forgiveness and explained that it hadn't been me, that I hadn't done it on purpose. She forgave me and withdrew the complaint. More than a year later I wrote to thank her for having been understanding about my disorder and to tell her that the treatment was going well, and she answered with no reproach and without setting me one single condition: that forgiving me had cost her a world of effort, but that God had helped her, and that without Him she doesn't think she could have. I've spent years wanting people to understand me. She did something a good deal harder: she forgave me without having fully understood me. That forgiveness wasn't to everybody's liking. Somebody who was around her rang me on a video call while I was in the middle of a psychosis, knowing perfectly well that I published everything that came into my

phone, and the moment I published it he sued me in the civil courts over his image. In the civil courts, where the exemption doesn't exist: in there I wasn't a sick man in an episode, I was a lucid citizen circulating images out of pure malice. It cost me what I didn't have in lawyers and a signed apology in a language that wasn't mine, in which the man who had fallen into the trap apologised in writing to the man who had set it.

This didn't happen with Marta. Marta went all the way to the end, until there was a verdict. And I don't hold it against her, because I know what had come down on her along the way and the one who brought it down on her was me: the people from that group rang her as well, using the details I'd published myself in an episode, and with that on top of you, keeping the proceedings going to the end is what anybody who only wants the thing over would have done. What stayed lodged in me was a question. At the first hearing her lawyer asked me whether I had abused my partner, and the judge put it in writing that the question was inadmissible. I chewed that over for two years. Two years recording voice messages at night in a private group where there was nobody but me, talking for hours on end to a Marta who wasn't there, answering her with what in that courtroom I wasn't allowed to answer. That's what the man on the folding bed did when the light went out. Answered her.

And those recordings ended up in a court so that somebody could answer one single question: whether that man could govern himself or not. A forensic doctor answered it on one sheet of paper, and the sheet of paper stayed inside the court. The recordings didn't. And a recording of a man in psychosis, listened to without the diagnosis beside it, tells you nothing about any illness: what it does is manufacture a character. The rest is supplied by repetition, which has been studied for close to a century: in each mouth the story gets shorter, the details that don't fit what the listener already believes drop away, and the first thing to drop is always the context. For that, nobody needs to lie at any link in the chain. It's enough to tell it three times, and once a few people have decided, it comes cheaper to the next one to trust what has been decided than to go and look for himself. One single fact against it breaks all of that, and that fact never arrived, because the only man who could give it was strapped to a bed, or on a folding one, or talking at night to a woman who wasn't there. And some of them got in ahead: those people published a notice explaining that the person responsible for everything that came out of there was me. An alibi, a month after my fourth admission.

And in the last months of that year somebody appeared I haven't told about yet. Her name was Nerea. We'd met years earlier and I'd stood her up, a no-show I don't remember, and that autumn she wrote me a drawn-out hello and seven minutes later handed me the bill with a dry edge on it: whether I'd stopped being a prick and whether I'd stopped leaving people in the lurch. I answered with what at the time I wouldn't have known how to say: that in those days my bipolar disorder wasn't medicated. Nerea had her life tied together with wire and held it up with a dignity I'd never seen before: a badly paid job and children to look after. And even so she made room for me. After five weeks she did what nobody else in this book knew how to do with me: tell me she loved me very much, but that if I went back to the drugs she wouldn't be there; and twenty-three minutes later, so it wouldn't sound like a threat, that she wanted me in her life and that I knew what her life was like. And in the winter: that being annoyed with me didn't mean loving me less; that she loved me, but that she loved herself more. That autumn Kira arrived, the tortoiseshell cat, and that winter my mother had her knee operated on, and the one who reared the kitten in her own house all those months was Nerea. Even the habit of getting in under the bedspread she learned there. And I looked after my mother, took her to the bathroom, gave her the heparin injections. I did my part.

And I lost her for not getting in the car for a quarter of an hour. The lawsuit dragged on all that year; I sold the motorbike to pay lawyers and the alcohol came back in through the back door, one beer in order to be able to read each document. I didn't start drinking with anybody. I started drinking with the court. We lived in two villages in the Vallès a good quarter of an hour of road apart; the one with every reason to stay put was her, and she moved; the one with everything in his favour was me, and getting me out of the house cost more every time. That wasn't falling out of love: it was the agoraphobia and the depression of that year turning fifteen minutes of road into an impossible distance. From outside you see no illness. From outside you see a bloke who doesn't turn up. She said it to me in so many words: that she wasn't accounted for in my timetable; that it was always what I could manage, and a great deal of the time what I felt like; that the crumbs were over. And a woman from before had turned up again, who I talk about where she belongs, and the time I wasn't giving Nerea I was giving, right under her nose, somewhere else. One morning at the end of that summer I wrote to her that I was so-so, that I'd had a lot of nightmares, and five times in a row that I didn't want to lose her, and in the middle of

it, out of nowhere, did she know that the day before I'd been in a video meeting with people who had the same thing I had. She answered that and not the other. In seventeen minutes the two things that were going to decide the years ahead got into that conversation: the woman I was about to lose and the association that would end up holding me up. With Nerea the same thing happened as with Judit, and the same as before that with Lidia: I didn't lose them because I stopped loving them. I lost them because my heart was inside a courtroom and inside a darkened living room, talking to Marta. Crumbs.

Part V • THE FALL

Chapter 37 • The Truce

The year after the hotel was the quietest of the last ten, and it's exactly the part people find hard to believe: that between two catastrophes in this book a whole year fits with no episode, no ambulance and no cross word with anybody. A year in which my mother asked me not to take the car because I had too much medication in me and I answered her in writing that she was right. Rightly so, I wrote. That same sentence, three years earlier, would have ended in a slammed door. That adverb measures what had changed better than any report, and what had changed is called euthymia.

Euthymia is the normal mood of a bipolar, the middle stretch, with no mania above and no depression below. It doesn't mean happiness and it doesn't mean health either: it means the illness isn't at the wheel. It's a truce, and truces are held up by thoroughly unepic things: the pill and a half in the morning and the two at night, always sleeping the same hours, always eating at the same hours, not drinking, having somewhere to go in the morning and somebody to tell your day to. The business of social rhythms has been explained already, and when they break (a long flight, a break-up, a trial) the episode comes along behind. All of that I had that year. What I didn't have was almost everything else, and there's the trap nobody tells you about: the moment the illness lets go of the wheel, the man who sits down to drive is a man who hasn't driven for ten years, with the street closed off by agoraphobia, with a hundred and thirty kilos on him and with a list of people lost that's longer than the list of the ones he has left. Being well, with this illness, consists of having the entire reconstruction ahead of you. And no pill does the reconstruction for you.

I did it myself, in my mother's living room, with two sets of proceedings still open above my head and with the debt left over from the year of the throuple, which I paid off alone, because the loans had been signed by me even if the consumption had belonged to more than one person. Four years of paying. The first month I opened the statement every day, with the vigilance you give a wound. Then I discovered that work helped: while I was solving somebody's

problem, my head had no spare cycles left for counting instalments. It was technical support; the man who answers when something has broken. It wasn't the job I'd have chosen, but it brought something I hadn't counted on: a concrete problem, belonging to a concrete person, who rang with the voice of somebody who needs help and hung up with the voice of somebody who doesn't need it any more. Either it worked or it didn't, and for a bloke whose entire life was ambiguous that was almost a treatment. Paying month by month for four years is no great feat. It's an exercise in surrender: admitting that there are consequences that don't go away by themselves and that the only thing in your hands is not to stop paying.

And in that quiet year I did what anybody does on discovering he's been left with nobody: I started knocking on old doors. One of them was Nuria's. And this had better be said plainly, because it has been told the other way round many times: Nuria didn't come back. I went looking for her.

To understand what Nuria was when she opened that door you have to look at the people around her. Her lifelong friends didn't leave her in the lurch: they grew up, which isn't the same thing even if from inside it looks fairly similar. I'd tangled her world up with mine myself in the year of the sofa, when at her birthday I introduced her to the best thing I had. And one by one, the people in that group found their way out: a partner, a job, some children, a life that moves on. Nuria stayed where she was while the others moved. She had her own reasons and her own wound, and they aren't mine to tell. Nor do I put it down as a reproach: I've spent years doing similar things in order not to look straight at what was in front of me. I put it down because she dismissed everybody who moved with the same word. They had abandoned her. She talked about the others' departures with a sneer, like somebody commenting on a surrender, and what she was describing without realising was what had been getting away from her. I listened to those remarks one by one and looked the other way, because I needed company. And the rule is an old one and I knew it: the person who speaks badly of others behind their backs in front of you will one day speak badly of you behind yours. Abandonment. The same word she was going to pin on me years later.

Around then something had shifted for her, and that's where she was when I wrote, not remotely expecting what came. The thing started up again with a force I hadn't reckoned on, and it has to be said what was inside that force, because the ending has stained the beginning and the beginning was something

else: Nuria gave me understanding with no limit on it. She gave me affection, she gave me care and she gave me the keys to her flat. She'd go down for bread, eggs, tomatoes and milk to make me my breakfast. She kept an eye on me in a stretch when I wasn't keeping an eye on anybody. She put everything she had into it, and I, at that moment, needed it.

And now the part where I come out badly. All of that took me away from Nerea, and not by accident: I went away because I chose to. With Nerea I wasn't right: I was still in full mourning for Marta, recording voice messages in the small hours about a story that had ended years before, and I wasn't putting half of what needed putting into that relationship. One day that autumn she wrote me the three things I ought to be concentrating on, the gym, university and work, and half an hour later what she needed from me, with no ambiguity about it: that I should pay attention without obsessing, that I should know she existed, that I shouldn't disappear, that I should be capable of listening to a voice message when she sent me one. And that same morning she wrote me the loveliest thing anybody has ever written to me: that I'd turned up in her life again in a way so unexpected that it seemed impossible, and that in a very short time I was already part of her small family. The praise, the plan and the ultimatum, all on the same day. And that's where Nuria did her part, which consisted of reproaching me with nothing: understanding with no conditions at exactly the minute the other door was asking me to account for myself. I stayed with the one who asked for no account and stopped looking in at the one who did. A brain that comes from where mine came from always pulls towards wherever no account is asked of it. And with Nerea that wasn't fair.

Nuria wanted a relationship, and I couldn't give her one, and not for the reason it looks like. I never saw her as a partner: it wasn't a decision, it was an absence, and absences don't get explained, they get described. I have always fallen in love with women you can talk to until four in the morning about anything at all, the ones with a world inside them that you lean in and look at. With Nuria I laughed the way I do with very few people; what there never was was a place to lean in and look at, and without that, in a man built the way I'm built, nothing starts. She said it to me many times, and not as a joke: that we'd make the perfect couple, how could I not see it. That desire was real and it was hers. And here euthymia stops being a word and turns into the cleanest proof I have: in euthymia I have never desired her. Not one single time in twelve years. I desired her in the year of the sofa, and I genuinely desired her, but that desire was

mounted on top of a hypomania and went out with it; with no episode there was nothing of the other. She came back, I had her in front of me for whole months, with every facility imaginable, and I didn't want to. Neither a relationship nor a bed. I told her in a thousand different ways and every one of them sounded to her like a personal rejection, when what I was describing to her was how I'm made.

And there was another reason, which explains this stretch better than any other. Before Nuria, Raquel had come back, and the order matters because it has been told the other way round for years: the one who got me out of the house again that year, towards the places belonging to that community I'd walked away from, was Raquel. By the time Nuria reappeared I was already back inside it, and I no longer wanted any of the things I'd spent a decade preaching. And even so I did what I've been doing since I was a boy, putting everybody together with everybody else, as though a full house were the same thing as a home: I put Nuria and Raquel in front of one another and said look, this is this one and this is the other one. And to Nuria I said what I sincerely thought, that in there nobody was going to judge her, that she'd make friends, that she might meet somebody. And in she went, of course. Except that who she wanted was me. So she was going with enthusiasm into a world I was coming out of with relief, and that world was precisely the one she wanted to share with me. We were walking in opposite directions down the same corridor, and that was nobody's fault.

The last day of that year I tell in full because it has both things in it. In the morning I was talking to Nerea. We'd arranged to see each other and I started shifting the time, because my mother had been leaning on me about the plan for lunch, and I suggested putting it back. What came afterwards lasted nine minutes and I set it down the way it sounded, which is the way it has to be set down.

"I'm sorry. It isn't going to happen: that wasn't the plan. Thanks for showing me where I stand."

"We can do it another way. I'll fit round it."

"I haven't seen anything I hadn't seen already. Your mother wins again. This shit year is over."

"Next year will be better."

"For me it will. For you I don't know."

Nine minutes, and she'd seen it coming a long time before I had. And that night Nuria took me to have dinner with her people. They introduced me as Nuria's friend and made room for me at the table without asking who I was, and it made perfect sense: we'd spent months being an odd, platonic couple, with no sex life and a couple in everything else, the weekends, the series, the meals, the plans. From her logic that was the natural thing; from mine, a place where I didn't know what I was doing. We were both right from where we were standing. Back at her flat, something tightened inside me. I needed to get out of that dynamic and I had no energy left to put another one up, and those two women were the only thread holding me to anything resembling a social life. So I stayed. And Nuria went on waiting.

Chapter 38 • The Line

With my story with Nerea already broken, Nuria seemed to have accepted that this sunken, medicated man didn't want to go to bed with her. And now it falls to me to be honest about what I went to her flat looking for, which wasn't sex. It was affection. I was broken, with the agoraphobia eating up the street and the court hanging from the ceiling, and the only thing I needed in the world was for somebody to look after me for a while. So I held on to the one source still open: a woman who loved me and desired me, and who was longing to give me precisely the thing I wasn't asking her for.

The line I'd drawn myself, out loud and without leaving a word of it unsaid. No relationship with her, not a serious one, not a label-free one, nothing halfway. No sex. And no going back to the other thing, to the practices of my earlier life, the ones with the collar, which I'd let go of with relief and had no intention of taking up again with her or with anybody, for reasons this book has already explained. I put it to her straight: that since the year of the sofa things had changed, that I was in a bad way, medicated and just out of a relationship, and that the thing, quite simply, was not going to happen any more. You couldn't put it more plainly. And the line got crossed anyway, and it wasn't me crossing it.

Behind closed doors it came as pecks. Chaste kisses, the kind that commit you to nothing and that committed me to everything, because they were the crack the rest came in through. And the rest was her hands. She handled me, she groped at me, because she felt like it and because she wanted to. I found it uncomfortable, and I say uncomfortable and not anything else. And here I want to be exact, because I've told this badly a fair few times and in both directions. There were no hands at night or anything like it. There were touches and caresses in the daytime, around the house, in greater quantity than I wanted. And now the part that suits me least: I never told her no. Never. There wasn't one single time when I came out with a hey, don't touch me, I don't like it. I didn't feel violated, and I'm not going to write the opposite because it would be

a lie. I felt pressured, uncomfortable, pushed towards a place I didn't want to be in. With any strength in me I'd have stood flat on my ground. I didn't have it. Saying no uses up energy, even if it doesn't look that way, and I went into that flat with no energy for anything.

And she'd been repeating something I didn't know how to take apart in all that time: that the one who touched her was me, asleep, that I touched her breasts without knowing it, and that what she did was therefore nothing more than giving it back to me. I never touched her voluntarily, asleep or awake. What I do know is the effect: any conversation started with me in the red, and from there I couldn't find the way in. No no ever comes out of an invented debt. It has taken me years to see that sentence for what it was, which isn't an explanation but a manoeuvre: the man who was about to protest starts off owing, and finds himself forced to deny something (having touched her in his sleep) instead of being able to state something (that he doesn't want to be touched). And I don't think she set it up in bad faith: I think she didn't see it, just as she didn't see any number of other things that were right in front of her eyes.

The name I've used in my worst moments isn't the right one, and the one a court would use isn't either. Harassment it wasn't: that word has a precise content, and spending it here would be to spoil it for people who need it intact. And it wasn't a poor defenceless man faced with a predator either, which is the opposite caricature and is just as false. What there was has a less showy name and a good deal more useful one: an erosion. Eroding isn't striking; it's repeating the same small pressure on the same point for as long as it takes, and none of those touches, on its own, would have left a mark on a whole man. The damage is in the sum and in the state of the ground. And the ground is mine to explain, because holding a boundary isn't a trait of character but a function, and in this illness that function wears away at both ends. At the bottom end it's worn away by exhaustion and isolation, and when the person you ought to be saying no to turns out to be the only bond you have left, the price of the no stops being social and turns existential. A man with no partner, no street and no network, with one single house to go to at the weekend, doesn't gamble that house over a hand on his thigh. That isn't weakness of character: it's a calculation. And at the top end it's worn away by hypomania, and then a man doesn't decide to cross the line he painted: he stops seeing that he painted it. I have been both those figures, and in the year I'm telling I got the bottom one first and the top one a few months later. And there's a half of it that no explanation gets me out of: she couldn't read

minds. A no said out loud with my own mouth would have changed that situation, and I didn't say it. That omission is mine. Small and true.

That weekend away, with spring already brushing at us, I tell in full, because it had a great deal more good in it than bad. It went well: we ate marvellously, we walked round the village and we were the way we'd been for months, an odd, platonic couple. We got into a fairly twee whirlpool bath with nothing on and I thought it was splendid: nobody forced me and I have nothing to reproach her with. And there's something else that has to be said out loud: Nuria was picking a self-esteem up off the floor for me. She saw me as good-looking, with a body I was ashamed of; Nerea had thrown it in my face that I was putting on weight, without knowing what cortisol and medication do to a body, and Nuria accepted me exactly as I was and, what's more, liked me exactly as I was. It would be unfair not to write it. The other thing was different. She dug her heels in about our doing one of those things from my earlier life, one of the ones I'd given up, and she wanted me to do it to her, and she went on asking after hearing me say no, and I said it several times, until I said yes. There was a no there. Said, explicit and repeated. And there was an insistence that didn't stop at that no but carried on until I gave in, and I didn't give in on some triviality: I gave in at exactly the point I had marked out as mine. I did it unwillingly, out of pure attrition, and I came away with the feeling of having betrayed myself. I don't put a legal label on it and I don't attribute intention to her, because I don't believe she meant to force me into anything. The thing is that insistence disarms me: I end up giving in so that it will stop, and the one who afterwards carries what was given is me. That yes she got out of tiredness and not out of desire, and that's why it served the opposite of what she was after: that was where Nuria understood that I was never going to want her in that way.

And there was another thing she asked me for with the same insistence, and it goes in a paragraph of its own because it has nothing to do with the above or with anything she did to earn a living. She asked me to take part in something that would have amounted to being incited to commit a crime. I don't say what, because there's no need. She asked me straight out, the way you ask a neighbour a favour, and there I did refuse flat, and I explained why: because it would have put me head first into a mess I wouldn't know how to get out of afterwards, and messes with the law I already had in abundance. What threw me was something else: realising that the door I had opened so she could make friends had turned into something different, and that I, without having had any hand in it, could

end up giving explanations for a business I hadn't set in motion. That's where my trust eroded. The pattern repeats in all three cases: I set the limit, she pushes, and pushes, and pushes. And when the story of who had done what got built, the version that survived was hers. I became the predator and she the victim. Out of every version my refusal that weekend disappeared, and so did my giving in, and I was left without the boundary respected and with the label on me into the bargain.

Having said which, I have to speak up for her. That winter I saw my daughter again after eight and a half years, and Nuria encouraged me enormously. She threw herself into it. In the middle of my enthusiasm I even suggested she come and meet her, and she was the one who pulled me up, with good sense: that it was neither the moment nor the place. She took my side in that, and for months in the business with Marta as well, which was no small thing. What no longer adds up came afterwards: one day she turned the whole story round and started looking at me as though I'd been a monster in that house, twisting things that until then had seemed obvious to her, and on top of that she went so far as to tell me I'd sold her a story. What I told her was the faulty version I had at the time, and this book treats Marta with a great deal more understanding than I had on that sofa.

In short, and with no tricks: neither a saving angel nor a monster. Nuria did me a great deal of good first and a great deal of harm afterwards. To put that in order I use the rule I owe to Jordi and that runs right through this book: there are no good people and bad people; there are good actions and bad actions. And in my own column this one has to be written: years later, by then in the middle of the wreckage, I recorded videos in which I said false things about her that put her in a place that isn't hers. On her side there was never any intention of doing me harm of that kind. She wanted me and that was all. And I was so broken that I ended up doing things with her I didn't want to do, and not for lack of affection, because affection I had for her by the bucketload, but because I didn't look at her that way and never had. That's the whole of it. That she became hard going for me is true and I don't take it back. The other thing, what I came out with when I was at my worst, doesn't stand up: there are words too heavy to drop on anybody, and I know perfectly well what they weigh, because a fair few have landed on me with no will behind them at all.

Chapter 39 • The Podcast

There's one episode of the podcast I listened to once and have never played again. It's the third one, the last I edited, and I edited it the same way as the two before it: in the small hours, in my mother's living room, with headphones on so as not to wake anybody, cleaning up the awkward silences, levelling the voices, cutting the laughs that trod on one another and putting the theme tune I'd composed myself on a free bit of software at the front. I uploaded it, and fourteen days later I was out.

But before telling how they threw me out I have to tell what it was, because from outside a show with three friends talking about films looks like an after-dinner triviality and for me it wasn't. The project was born in the quiet year, on a sofa, between box sets and franchises: film criticism for the general public, the kind where three people sit down in front of a microphone and explain why a film is what it is. The idea wasn't mine and I owe it to the ones who had it. The other two put in the voices and the ideas; I put in what I know how to do, which is the sound, the editing, the music and the technical business of uploading things to wherever they have to be uploaded. Unpaid, of course: nobody was paid there. It was months of graft, of meetings, of nights in front of an audio track and enormously long conversations, and that gave a bloke who hadn't set foot in the street for two years exactly what he was short of: a routine and a place. A place where what I knew how to do was good for something. And it wasn't set up out of anybody's self-interest: it was set up because we felt like being near each other and because we had a good time, which is the reason people do normal things. When the recordings came round, that summer, I was already heading straight for the fall I tell in the next chapter, and we sat down in front of the microphones a month after the worst row of my life, on a show that on paper was going to reconcile us. On paper. During those weeks editing was, without exaggeration, the only thing keeping me on my feet: the one thing in my life that gave back results if I put hours into it. That was taken away from me as well.

How they threw me out is quickly told, because there was nothing to tell. Not a conversation, not a call, not a message saying this is as far as we go. The other two decided it, and how they got to that decision is their business and I don't know. In the archive of that month not one line is left: not the conversation where it was decided, not the moment I found out, not what I said that day. The trail is left, and the trail lasts months. A few weeks on I write to my sister that I'm low because the show has gone on without me, and I was watching it from the pavement the way you look at a house you used to live in. A little after that, in the middle of an argument, the only sentence that says how I was living it from inside slips out of me: that I don't know what she saw or what I set up in that month. And the answer starts off taking as read something I didn't know was being taken as read: that it wasn't only about that month. By the autumn, with everything else on top of me, I sum it up to my sister in a question I still can't answer: whether, really, seriously, all of it has been over a fucking podcast. And in the winter the erasure stops being an interpretation of mine and turns into a sentence with a subject and a verb: that I'm blocked on the show's account.

Because they didn't stop at throwing me out. The episodes I appeared in were deleted, and they were recorded again on exactly the same subjects, without me, and published again as if the earlier version had never existed. And this, as the frustrated historian I am, I recognise straight away: in imperial Rome it was the custom to erase the disgraced emperor from the records, to chisel his name out of the inscriptions, melt down his statues and throw his body into the Tiber so that no memory would remain that he had existed. *Damnatio memoriae*, the books call it. They erased my work as if I had never done it. With one detail that takes even the grandeur out of the business: the show went on being published with my theme tune in it and without my name.

And that has to be given its exact name, which isn't hypocrisy, because hypocrisy explains almost nothing. It's called courtesy stigma, and Goffman described it sixty years ago in the book where almost everything that appears in this chapter is described: stigma is contagious. Whoever stands beside the marked man gets a share of the mark, and he gets it for the mere fact of still being there, without having done a thing. That has a consequence that doesn't belong to bad people but to ordinary ones: defending the marked man is expensive. It costs reputation, it costs friends, it costs you being looked at with the same face as before. And in a small community like that one, where everybody

knows everybody with two intermediaries in between and where there are networks of women whose function is to give warning about dangerous men, networks that are needed and that genuinely save women, standing next to a man about whom a warning has circulated means putting yourself on the list. That's why nobody came down to pick me up when I fell. Not because they were cruel, but because staying with me on the show, with my name in the credits and my music on the title sequence, meant carrying my mark on them. And that gets done without anybody deciding it, in little pieces that move on their own: it isn't an expulsion, it's that the project took a different direction; the responsibility gets divided between two people until it belongs to nobody; and above all the other man gets moved into a category where care no longer applies. In the story of that summer I had stopped being a person: I was a matter. You don't ask matters how they are; you settle them. And what makes the mechanism run so smoothly is that from inside nothing shows, not then and not now. There were people in that community who saw it from inside and told me so, but they told me later, when saying it cost nothing, which is exactly what courtesy predicts.

And the second part is still to come. In mental health it's called double victimisation, and it describes something very precise: for the man with a disorder the illness isn't enough, on top of it there comes a second blow, the one the others give him for having had it. The first is yours and you didn't choose it: the episode, what your head does, what you say without being able to stop yourself. The second is given to you: pushing you aside, deleting you, not greeting you any more, treating you as a problem instead of as a sick man. And the difference between the two holds up this whole book: for the first I wasn't responsible; for the second they were. Nobody chooses to go into an episode. Erasing me was chosen by every one of the people who erased me. And I don't write it to settle a score. I write it because a reader with my diagnosis might close this book believing that what is done to him when they push him out is something he has earned. He hasn't earned it.

And I know what can be thought, because it's what Marta would think, always looking for the other person's reasons first: that they didn't know either. It's true, and I sign off on it for them exactly as I sign off on it for her. But there's a nuance that in their case weighs differently, and it's the one reproach I'm going to allow myself. Marta knew nothing because nobody told her: in fourteen years I wasn't capable of telling her the name of what I have, and the

little I did tell her I told her under the old name. Then I told. They knew about my admissions, they knew about the straps, they knew my whole history because I'd told it to them myself on that sofa. And when that autumn I was in pieces, the answer that reached me in writing was that I claimed to be bipolar in order to get out of taking responsibility. That isn't not knowing. That's knowing it and turning it round. Ignorance doesn't cancel the effect, but it does cancel the reproach, and they didn't have ignorance on their side.

And so that it can be seen where the second blow landed, I have to explain what the street was like by then. Agoraphobia doesn't appear all at once; it installs itself the way things that come to stay install themselves: first it's a preference, then a habit, then a necessity and in the end an impossibility. The preference for staying at home formed in me in the years of the sessions with Marta, when the whole world fitted into a flat and the house was the only place with no variables in it. The habit installed itself with the pandemic, which arrived exactly when the preference was ripe, and I thought with a relief I didn't dare say out loud: it isn't me, it's that the world has come to where I already was. The admissions made it worse, because every return home from a ward pushed the street a little further away, and going out came to mean the possibility of running into somebody who would recognise me. The necessity arrived hand in hand with the complaints, and by the year of the show it was giving all the orders: going down to the front door was an expedition, and the body was carrying all those years on it. From that man, who left the house for little more than going to record with them, they took the recording away.

And the fact that that erasure lasted me three years and not three weeks has a technical name I explain where it belongs: a loss with no body, no paperwork, no ceremony and no date has nowhere to be set down, so it goes on circling until it finds a similar scene to land in. The show went on being published. With my music and without my name. That is a loss with no corpse, and that's why it didn't close. In a brain that by then had gone almost a year without anybody touching its medication, that doesn't pass: it stays switched on. And that nobody had a duty to keep me on a project that wasn't mine and that was called whatever they chose to call it, I have never disputed, and I don't intend to dispute it here. The effect didn't depend on the duty.

Chapter 40 • The Day It Started

That spring morning I sent the last transfer. By the middle of the morning the screen was giving me back a zero: four years of my life to pay off the smoke from one year of mania. I was expecting to feel something, and nothing came. No relief, no satisfaction, none of the closure I'd been picturing since the day I started paying. A bare zero and that was that.

Two hours later the postman brought me, by recorded delivery, the written submission of the private prosecution, Marta's, in the proceedings over the recordings. They were asking for years of prison for me. I read what they were asking. I got up from the computer, went to the kitchen, drank a glass of water, came back and read it again. It said the same thing. I took a tranquilliser and another one behind it, to be on the safe side. I thought about my daughter, and about the woman she'd be by the time I came out. And then the zero turned into something else: the day I finished paying what a life with Marta had cost me in money was the day Marta was asking for me to be locked up. Of that Thursday the archive keeps a handful of messages with my mother, and at the end of the night four of mine of which all that's left is the mark of having written them and deleted them.

That evening I went out for a drink with Chapa round the village. Chapa has his own chapter; with him drinking stopped being a clandestine business and turned into a routine. We drank. And then more. The shape of that whole month is set down in my mother's archive: that I'm already on my fourth can and how does my stomach put up with that. There she is in those weeks, managing pennies, counting my cans and asking whether I wanted an omelette.

In the small hours, with a drunk brain and frightened out of my wits, I opened Nuria's chat and let out everything I'd spent months swallowing. It wasn't one thing: it was a landslide. The resentment those months of attrition had been laying down, being sick of feeling like somebody's ward, the rejection I'd never known how to put into civilised words. It was brutal. Part of it was unfair. Part of it was true. And what was underneath has already been told: a year

of saying no and finding out that saying it was no use to anybody, and further down still the thing I never told her, that I didn't desire her, because that man had nothing left to say it to her face with.

And now the sentence this chapter exists for: that was not a drunk. With the envelope on the table, that same day, I went into mania. Not days later and not a week later: that day. That's how this comes on, with no run-up and no warning, and that's why anybody looking at it from outside doesn't believe it. The alcohol was there and the terror was there, and neither of them explains what came out that night: what explains it is the phase that had started up that morning, with the papers in my hand. Those messages were the first act of an episode, not the last act of a friendship. And there's the trap: seen from outside, the first act of a mania looks exactly like a bloke who's had too much to drink and comes out with what he thinks. They're so alike that not even I could tell them apart.

Nuria read them when she woke up. And the world moved. And I deleted them. I deleted the lot and deleted the whole chat. I suppose it was shame, and also that I knew what was going to happen to them, because Nuria keeps everything, screenshots everything and forwards everything, and with no screenshots there'd be nothing left to show anybody. That, she told me so herself, made her even angrier than the messages did. And here's the key to everything that came afterwards: what got recorded was the explosion. Not the months before it, not the attrition, not the times I said no, not the envelope with the years of prison inside. The explosion and nothing else. And the explosion on its own, with nothing round it, looks exactly and precisely like what Nuria says it was. With the surroundings put back in it's something else: a worn-out sick man setting a limit in the worst way imaginable, because he didn't know how to end something he didn't know how to end. Both descriptions are half true. One of them went round.

She took three days to answer, and when she did she didn't answer me: she wrote in the chat the three of us had, with Raquel there. Whole paragraphs in capitals, and not one line in any of them about what she had done: not that weekend, not the insisting, not what she'd asked me for. It was all me. And I said sorry, and said it again, and said it a third time, because those messages had to be apologised for, since they were mine and they were brutal. The thing is that every time I also tried to explain something (this happened too, this was you) the atmosphere got worse on the spot. The only thing that worked was putting my head down. Two months of that. Raquel came in as a mediator and drif-

ted the way almost everybody drifts in somebody else's conflict: towards whichever side she found more credible. She concluded that I was lying, and from where she stood that was a reasonable conclusion, because my memories of those years were bad, they were full of holes and they didn't match what other people were telling her. She didn't see a sick man with a broken memory: she saw a bloke whose versions didn't add up. And a liar's word isn't weighed any more. And with all that on top of me, three weeks after that night, I was telling my sister I was flat-hunting. With Nuria. The word wasn't in place yet. It went into place that autumn, and from that autumn everything before it was reread backwards. And a month after the shouting we were sitting in front of the microphones again, recording the show.

And while all that was going off, my daughter's mother was writing to me from far away that they were there, for me too, and it didn't reach the place where it was needed, because the place was taken up by a chat and two people deciding what kind of man I was. That's the first thing a lynching does: it doesn't take people away from you. It takes away your ability to see them.

Once the summer was over I stopped existing in that world, and to tell how it blew up completely I have to start with what I did, because I did mine first. That autumn, with a new home and a stability that lasted as long as it lasted, I posted in the community the two of them belonged to a piece about chosen family: the new house, the people who come in, the people who go, and what I wasn't planning to allow inside my door again. With no name in it, no insult in it, and with addressees, put up exactly where their whole world was going to read it. In the third person and in a tone of gratitude, which is the cleanest way there is of accusing somebody in front of their own people without a single word being able to be held against you.

The answer came straight back, and of that conversation three minutes survive, because she deleted the chat and I, in the middle of the row, had told her I had it exported, and it turned out to be true. Of twelve years with Nuria I keep eighteen messages. They go like this, one after another and with not a word of mine in between, because it's all that's left of twelve years and because read in one go they last as long as that thing lasted.

"I've got the chat exported."

"This is the last thing you will ever read from me."

And then I sent her the link to one of those websites that manufacture fake conversations, which is a refined sort of cruelty and one no episode covers com-

pletely: I wasn't announcing that I had evidence, I was announcing that I could manufacture it.

"No wonder Marta wants you in prison."

"You're a control freak."

"You deserve every single thing that's coming."

And then, on its own in a message, she repeated the last word. Coming. And I closed off twelve years with a sentence I still don't know today whether it was sincere or whether it was the last blow wrapped in a blessing.

"I hope that one day you find the forgiveness you need so badly."

What came before that, the capitals, the I hate you, the I hope you die, is in the deleted part, and I stand it up with what I wrote to my sister the next day. And she said it to a man who had at home a document asking for years of prison, weeks without sleep and an application for committal sitting in a court, knowing he was ill, because he'd told her so himself. She reduced me to a convict who deserves his sentence; I reduced her to a controller. Neither of us was describing anybody: we were both defending ourselves. And when all that survives of twelve years is the worst moment, that moment becomes the whole relationship. It wasn't. What happens is that nobody exported the good part.

And then came the word. I was being thrown out of groups without being told why. Women I didn't know from Adam were answering me in my own threads that I'd brought it on myself, that I was a stalker and a junkie, and I read that without understanding where so much rage at a stranger was coming from. I saw the whole campaign much later, and it was told to me by people from in there who had watched it from inside: that the warning about me went from group to group, above all through the women's spaces that exist to give notice about dangerous men; that my diagnosis travelled inside the warning like one more piece of evidence; and that in that world it had been said out loud that I was dangerous, with a detail that has its place further on. And they'd known me for years, from bed, from kitchen and from sofa.

What was packed inside the warning was my diagnosis: bipolar, a medical fact, the most private thing a person owns, slipped into the case against me as though it were evidence for the prosecution. The stereotype didn't even have to be manufactured, because in one of those recordings, with me sitting right there, it had been said in the tone of somebody listing the obvious that you have to be careful because there are a lot of disturbed men and a lot of predators about, the two words used as synonyms, at a table where the only diagnosed

person was me. And this is what the numbers say: a study with more than thirty thousand people found that severe mental illness, on its own, does not predict violence; and another found that more than a quarter of adults with disorders like mine had been the victim of a violent crime in the previous year, eleven times the rate in the general population. The sick man isn't the one to be frightened of. He's the one who's frightened. The warning networks are needed; what they haven't got is a way of telling a dangerous man from a man in an episode, and I fell on the wrong side of that net. That's what a digital lynching is: a frame there's no way out of from inside, because any defence reads as the reaction of the man who confirms the pattern.

The order of things is the only thing I ask the reader to remember. Everything I've just told happened before I recorded the first video. When that winter I shut myself in a hotel room with the laptop camera in front of me, I already had on me two months of reproaches in which saying sorry wasn't enough, an expulsion, an erasure, a whole community warned about me, an I hate you and an I hope you die, and my illness turned into the proof that I was dangerous. Of that winter, the last thing I did has been seen. The first thing they did to me, never.

Chapter 41 • The Rented Flat

That summer I learned what loneliness really is. Not the weekend with nothing on: the other kind, the structural kind, the one that turns up when the world a man has been assembling round himself falls down all at once and entire. They'd thrown me off the show a few weeks before, with the document asking for years of prison on the table, and that has been told. Inés, who I talk about in the next chapter, was travelling at the other end of the world and answering less and less. Raquel simply wasn't answering. And Nuria had stopped existing for me, though hers was one of the active absences: I knew that somewhere out there I was being talked about. Nobody was left within reach but Chapa, and what Chapa and I had was meeting up to drink in the village park.

And even so, that month wasn't all desert. That summer I met Iván, a good deal younger than me, and we clicked over the first beer because we're both sick with history. A few days later I wrote to him that I'd try to come out as soon as I was feeling better, and twenty-three minutes after that, apologising for what was in fact my illness talking, I told him I was sorry, mate, that I overthought everything, that I was in the shit. Weeks later, after another night of telling him about my business, I sent him the usual message the next morning, that I was sorry for banging on at him about my crap, and he answered five minutes later in a single line: that I hadn't banged on at all, that I'd simply said how I felt. I'd spent half my life apologising for talking, and that same summer I'd been thrown out of a place for talking too much. And that line wasn't written by any therapist.

Going the other way, Rocío turned up. I saw she was online on one of those apps and I wrote to her in desperation, to see if I could get a bit of warmth out of somebody who had loved me, and three lines came back: that I had been disastrous for her life and that I shouldn't write to her again. The facts I don't dispute, they're in her chapter; what I dispute is the format, because it turned symptoms into conscious decisions to do harm. And the thing is that needing somebody to have chosen to hurt you is easier to live with than accepting that

the harm came out of a brain incapable of choosing anything else. I didn't ask my psychiatrist at the time for help that summer, not that summer and not any other: with her there was no emergency mode, and I knew it perfectly well.

To understand why I rented that flat you have to be told where I was sleeping, which was on the folding bed in my mother's living room, and what I was up to, which was trying to regulate myself by the worst method available: I went back to drugs. One night at the start of the autumn I went down with GHB on the floor of that living room. It's in my medical notes because I told the clinic about it two weeks later: my mother saw me convulsing, rang my sister, who lived a walk away, and rang the emergency number, and when I opened my eyes I had two paramedics in front of me and behind them my mother and Sonia with a face I've never seen on anybody else. They told me I had to go to A&E and I said no. I said it with an animal's fear, because I'd opened my eyes surrounded by white coats too many times and too many times that scene had ended with me shut in a ward for weeks, strapped down in a few of them. My body could no longer tell the difference between being saved and being taken away. Against all the odds they left me at home, and I was lucky. Two weeks later I moved out. There was no door slammed: there was an exhausted mother who was no longer prepared to have her son taking drugs in her house, and the right of it was entirely hers. Sonia looked at flats with me, with the sums done, and put it to me in writing that what had to go well was in me and not in the place. I rented the flat anyway. Two bedrooms. And it didn't go well.

I'd met Chapa the winter before in a park in the village, when he came over to ask me for a cigarette. We were both solitaires of the same species. And at the end of that summer some debts rolled over him and he came off badly. Somebody from his world rang me, because she didn't know who else to ring, and I went straight to the hospital. When he woke up and saw me beside the bed he said he'd known I'd come. I said of course. You didn't have to, he said. And I said I knew that.

So the two needs, his and mine, came together in that flat. I took Chapa in with the marks still open, and with Chapa came his girlfriend, who had nowhere to go either, and with her a friend of hers. And before telling what that house turned into I have to tell what it also was. Chapa plays the guitar, and he plays it well. On a lot of nights that winter the three of us would stay up till all hours, him with the guitar and the two of us writing lyrics in notebooks and singing them under our breath so as not to wake the neighbours. She's very clever,

grown up before her time, and she draws in a way that used to shut me up. Those small hours are among the few things from that year I'd save whole. We came to love each other a great deal. They still love me, and I love them, even if I love them from a distance.

The problem is that together we brought out the worst in each other. In that house people used, and not as an episode but as a presence: the smell in the walls and the emergency economy of somebody who needs the next dose more than anything else in the world. People coming up to my flat at three in the morning, dealers sitting in my living room with nobody having invited them, rows that ended in blows between Chapa and blokes they'd brought in themselves. And me on the other side of the partition wall, headphones on and the work system open on the screen. A man with agoraphobia who couldn't get downstairs for bread was sending Chapa or his girlfriend, and paying with his wages for what was being used in that house while he went under. Months later my sister would say it to me with no anaesthetic: that I was in no condition to tell anything from anything, that my supposed best friend was taking advantage of exactly that, and that the people who loved me were bailing out water with no chance at all. I answered what you answer in the middle of an episode, which is to defend the man who's sinking you: that he'd stay in my house as long as he needed.

Iván came through that flat too, the way everybody did, and he never touched a thing. And Rubén came, a friend of half a lifetime, who today, however much I love him, is kryptonite. It wasn't a question of how much they loved me. It was a question of how they lived.

And of that account it's time to make the list, which is short on both sides. Jordi goes back twenty years. In the winter of the suitcase he pulled away too, a whole year, and came back without asking for explanations and without giving any: he didn't understand what was happening to me because the thing had no name, and since he learned to separate the illness from the person he hasn't moved from where he stands. He's been in therapy since he was a teenager, he doesn't touch a substance, and the Tuesday afternoon calls are a ritual neither of us ever got round to declaring. And there's Mireia, who comes from university and from a faculty entanglement that went out by itself and left a better friendship behind it. When I told her about the proceedings she took notes and asked me whether I had psychiatric reports from the episodes, whether they were dated and whether they matched up with the facts. One afternoon in the big park

I asked her why she'd always been there, and she answered that she'd known me from before all of this, that the reports and the trials were what had happened to me and not what I was, and that the ones who left had confused those two things.

The ones who left have names too. Elvira, a friend of ten years, blocked me in the winter of the suitcase over one falling-out, one, and has never answered again, knowing the diagnosis down to the last detail. Ten years and a diagnosed illness are more than enough for a twenty-minute conversation. And Quim, a friend from all my life, from the village, who I've spent thousands of hours philosophising with into the small hours, came away little by little, which is normal, and explained it to me by blaming me, which is the cruel part: my attitudes, my way of being. I tried to explain it to him and he dispatched me with three words: take your lithium. I'd been taking the lithium, morning and night, since the thing got a name. What he was telling me wasn't take your pill. It was your existence makes me uncomfortable and it's your fault that it does. And then there are the ones who don't even have a sentence: all the friends I shared with Nuria, in a block and in the same stretch, people who weren't in that world and who saw nothing whatsoever. I send them an ordinary message, long time no see. And the message sits there read, and behind it the silence.

That has a name, and finding it was a relief: ostracism, exclusion with no aggression and no explanations. In the long phases it doesn't produce rage, it produces a switching off, and the damage multiplies when you don't know why, because with no reason there's nothing to put right, and you spend years preparing a defence for a trial that's never going to be held.

And that's how that flat got assembled. I had friends going back two decades and I rang none of them when Nuria and Raquel went, and not because I ruled them out, but because they didn't appear on the screen. And in that gap the only people who knock at the door are the ones who haven't got a door either, because a man on his own with a flat and a wage is, to somebody who has neither, a door. Opening it to everybody who turns up broken, without stopping to look at whether you're in any condition to hold anybody up, isn't goodness, or isn't only goodness: it's plugging a hole of your own with people. I've been described these last years as a bloke who uses people, and a bloke who uses people doesn't open his door to another one who's just been let out in pieces, three months before he breaks completely himself.

Chapter 42 • Seven Words

Raquel left in writing, over four days, at the end of that summer, and it started on a weekday morning, halfway through a work meeting. She wrote that she wasn't coming to argue, but out of the affection we'd had for each other. I answered from the meeting that of course, give me a while, I didn't want to argue either. That morning she sent me several voice messages, and several times I asked to talk out loud. There was no call. She was asking me to delete any intimate material of ours, and I had nothing: I'd deleted it months before because looking at it wrecked me. I told her so, and out of that came the only part of that morning that can be set down in a row.

"I haven't got anything. I deleted it months ago."

"For fuck's sake, babe, I don't believe you."

Half an hour of being treated as a blackmailer, and at the end the dry line of a hurt bloke came out of me.

"Live in fear if you like. I am never going to use anything against you."

And I haven't used it: three years of doing appalling things with a camera in front of me, and not one of them has been that.

And in the middle of that morning I wrote the most complete explanation of myself there is in the whole archive, with no audience and no lawyer. That I was in bits. That I'd come very close to decompensating that summer, that those stressors took me to my limit, and that with alcohol it was the combination for another terrible situation. That stressors equals Marcos gets poorly. And that I'd spent two years getting to know myself outside the manifold states and still had a long way to go. There it is, written by a man in prodrome, what this book would take another two years to put in order. And she answered this, which is the only time in years of archive that she writes the word.

"Look, Marcos: you're bipolar purely so you can dodge responsibility. When you fill yourself up with alcohol, bipolar disorder doesn't feature in your reasoning."

"If I'm a prick, then I'm a prick and that's that. What I need is tenderness, understanding, loyalty, and people who FUCKING STAY."

"Sincerely, I hope you can heal and stop breaking everything you touch."

In years of archive with her the word bipolar appears that once and never again, and she wrote it to tell me I was hiding behind the diagnosis. Note the verb: not that I should stop drinking, but that I should stop breaking what I touched, which is the way of saying that what breaks things isn't what you do but what you are. And afterwards, that I should stop lying, that I lived in a fantasy.

On the Sunday night she gave me her reasons, and she gave them well: forty minutes, in order, with not one insult. That she and Nuria had become friends and that she'd spent months reading my conversations with Nuria while I told each of them a different version of the same thing. That for months I'd got on at her about the way Nuria handled her own business, which was none of mine; there I answered badly, and wrote three times that I knew it was an ugly thing to do and that I'd been taken over by demons. That my way of being unwell took her to a place from her childhood she didn't want, and that my traumas collided with hers. And that I should take away with me that she had loved me honestly. My love, she called me, in the same sentence in which she told me she couldn't trust me. On the Monday she came back to close it: that I always caused her trouble, that perhaps the problem was me with my murky dynamics, and two minutes later, that if I was incapable of empathy perhaps narcissism was getting the better of me. That I shouldn't come near her, please. And a kiss, with the usual nickname. On the Wednesday I wrote the last three messages of eight years and a song. After that, nothing. And seven weeks later she would come to my living room for my recorded voice, which is the next chapter.

Read the list and look for a single clinical word: lying, fantasy, spite, incapable of asking how are you, murky dynamics, narcissism. Six ways of saying the same thing, and the seventh, the first by the clock, says it with no detours: that the diagnosis was an alibi, meaning that the thing was my way of being. And underneath each one there's a name in a manual. What she called lying was the gaps in a brain in prodrome with alcohol in it, telling what reached it and not what had happened, and I've said that already. What she called spite was irritability, which is listed as a symptom. What she called not asking how you are was the self-absorption of a high phase. What she called murky dynamics and moral superiority was grandiosity, added to pressure of speech, which is the ur-

gency to say without being able to stop. And what she called venom was verbal aggression turned outwards, a symptom of the mixed state, with the filter switched off: you don't say what you think, you say what does the most damage. That the mechanism has a name doesn't make it any less horrible to read. But venom is chosen and a symptom isn't. And the proof is that they went out. With lithium, with sleep, with no alcohol and no courts on top of me, not one of the seven appears. Not a bit less: not one.

Her reasons were good, and with them on the table, leaving was the thing to do. What the words change fits in a line: if that was my character, I was the problem; if it was my illness, she did right just the same, but the conclusion about who I am is a different one. And from that night there's a sentence of hers, the mildest one and the one that has given me the most work: that I'd hurt her with my moment in life. A moment in life happens to a person's biography, not to their brain, and the name you put on a thing decides what gets done with it: if it was a moment in life, the thing to do is stand aside and wait for it to pass, which is what she did; if it was a prodrome, the thing to do is ring somebody who knows, and nobody made that call. The name was chosen by the people who didn't have it. And the one who did have it was sitting at the same table.

Because I'd met Inés at the beginning of that summer, on a dating app. On the first date she told me she worked in mental health. And I said to her: bloody hell, well, I've got bipolar disorder. That afternoon I talked to her about my father and about how he died, first thing, because from somebody who knows you expect a particular thing. And in five dates she gave me the first psychoeducation classes of my life, five years after the name and on a café terrace: dopamine, what substances do to a brain like mine, and the warning, in those words, that I shouldn't drink. Pleased as a kid, I introduced her to Nuria and Raquel online, with screenshots of her profile. That's where it all started. On the fourth date she explained that her romantic life was non-exclusive, and I, who loathe that arrangement for what it did to us in the throuple, didn't say no: I asked one single thing, whether she'd sleep with the others. And she said of course. I asked for the night, because in my illness sleep is the variable that regulates it: the cheapest protection there is for a brain like mine, asked for without knowing the name from the only person at the table who knew it.

Two days after the first date I wrote her two lines one after the other: how beautiful you are, and then, word for word, that I was running away with myself, that she should stop me, that I didn't want to love bomb her. A man with a

diagnosed type one warning a specialist, with the exact term, that he was going up: a piece of clinical observation, which struck her as a compliment. And at the end of that summer, from the other side of the world, she saw it herself and wrote it down: that I gave her a brutal feeling of instability, that it was yes now no now yes now no, that I'd spent the whole trip saying one thing and its opposite. Impulsivity, pressure of speech, lability: three criteria of the episode, written out by her. At the end of that summer I put her in a group to leave her some recorded reflections, in the small hours, unable to stop when she asked me to, and her last message was a goodbye with some laughing emojis in front of it. She blocked me. I tried to reach her by another route, and then she called me a stalker. That a private individual should use that word in the heat of the moment I understand. But a study from twenty-five years ago on stalkers put it in writing that that behaviour is sometimes seen in manic states and that treating the disorder usually brings it to an end. What looks like stalking in a manic man is cured with lithium, and what is stalking isn't. She had that literature at her fingertips before she wrote the word.

Weeks later I found out that it was being said around the place that the character no longer stood up, and that the truth always ends up coming out under its own weight. And on a call that winter, the last one, I learned that Inés had ended up close to Raquel. Years later the same thing happened again, and worse, and it goes in its own place: I sent Inés two videos to her email about the harm she'd done me, asking her for nothing except one thing, expressly and in writing, that she shouldn't tell Nuria. She told her. I was never her patient, so there was no professional confidence to break; but handing a third party health data that somebody has sent you in private, against their express request, is one of those things that anybody who works with sick people shouldn't let herself do. And my part, so the account is complete: in our last exchange I wrote to her that I hoped none of her patients ever depended on her at their worst moment. Today I'd rather not have said it.

Nothing Inés did is a crime. What happens is that a training isn't hung on a peg on the way out of work, and whoever has it doesn't stop having it on a café terrace, at a dinner or in a group of friends: the authority that knowing gives you doesn't switch off when the shift ends, and there are certain things you don't do with what you know. And to see it without fog, put it in another trade. An off-duty lifeguard: really drowning has no shouting and no thrashing about in it, and that's why drownings happen in front of twenty people who see nothing;

she's the only one on the beach trained to tell the difference, she tells the difference, and she says to the others that he's messing about, and goes back to her towel. She knew how to read the scene and she read it backwards and out loud. Of the three people who decided about me that autumn, two owed me nothing: they did what they knew how to do with what they had. Inés did owe me something, and it wasn't affection and it wasn't loyalty: it was competence. Something very small was needed: for the only person in that world with clinical training to say once, in the right place, that what you're describing isn't a predator, it's a clinical picture and it has a treatment. I don't think she did it out of malice. I think she was frightened and that she was a party to it. But being frightened is not knowing. She knew.

Chapter 43 • The Living Room

There are things that have stayed recorded in me with a sharpness I never asked for. The noise of the lift, first. Then the doorbell. And then Sonia's voice from the hall announcing that it was Raquel and one of her people. It was a night that autumn, weeks after the goodbye in writing and a bit over a week before she got on a plane; my sister drove them there, because Raquel didn't know the way. She came in with somebody from her family, who had the face of a person who didn't want to be in that living room, and the four of us sat down. Sonia took the chair in the corner. The two of them, the sofa. I stayed on the floor, back against the wall, which was the only free spot left in my own house. Behind the partition was Chapa's room, and in the walls, the smell of what was being used in there.

Raquel talked for nearly two hours. Without raising her voice, at a calm, orderly pace, cataloguing each grievance as evidence of a pattern. Some parts of it I recognised and others I didn't. And every time I tried to explain something (that in the spring I'd been dysregulated, that Marta's document had arrived that very day, that this wasn't an excuse but a context), she came back with the sentence that stayed in my body for a long time afterwards: that context made no difference to her, that the damage had been real. About the damage she was right. About the equals sign she put between the damage and the intention, not at all. And those two hours have had an academic description for seventy years: a sociologist called them a degradation ceremony, and the thing works like this. The accuser speaks in the name of values she presents as everybody's. The accused isn't charged with an act, he's redefined entire, so that he stops being somebody who did things and becomes somebody who is a thing. And the past gets reread backwards, so that what you were for years comes out as the front and the last few weeks as what you always really were. That's why some parts I recognised and others I didn't. The ones I recognised were mine. The others were eight years of my life reread by the torchlight of that end of summer, and by that torchlight any human life is frightening.

At the end she took her phone out and asked me to record her a message undertaking never to look for her again. There was no threat of the police and she had no need of one. What she had in front of her was enough: a man who'd gone weeks without sleeping, with Marta's proceedings hanging off his ceiling and that smell in the walls of his house. And what the two of us were was enough as well: in all the years I'd known her I hadn't contradicted her a single time. I adored that woman like a goddess, and you don't argue with goddesses: you obey them. I looked at Sonia. Sonia looked at me. And I took the phone she was holding out and recorded the message, on her phone and not on mine, with my sister as a powerless witness, saying what she wanted to hear so she could leave. When they'd gone, Sonia and I sat there in silence for a long while. And that same night I wrote my sister four lines that are a portrait of the state I came out of that in: that it had been an enormous help, that thank you for everything; that I didn't want to stop seeing Raquel without a hug; that that was enough for me. That was the man who had just recorded that message: one who was saying thank you for having been allowed to say goodbye. I asked for the recording the next day, through my sister, and two days after that again. I haven't got it.

And the smallest thing about that night is what I keep most of: the hug. She gave it to me before she left. Two seconds, after two hours of sentencing and a message extracted, and a few days later I wrote to my sister that few hugs had been given to me like that one. That hug proves that whatever that night was, it wasn't hate. And there's something else I wrote to Sonia the next day: that I'd have liked Raquel to know that if I hadn't been on lithium I'd have cried my eyes out. That when I drank I almost always ended up crying once I was on my own, and that lithium, among other things, flattens my crying. That night she didn't see me cry, and it wasn't because it didn't hurt. I don't know whether they ever told her.

And here comes the hard part that belongs to Raquel, measured and with no insult in it, because insults I already threw at her that I shouldn't have. That night she asked me for something she shouldn't have asked me for, given the state I was in and given what she knew about the state I was in. Raquel had seen my episode in the pandemic and she'd seen the one at the hotel. After the hotel she was the one who asked me to learn to recognise myself before the mania. And she had in front of her a man who'd gone weeks without sleeping and eleven months with nobody touching his medication, and instead of doing what she'd done in the pandemic, which was to tell me call me mad but I'm staying

with you, she held out her phone so I could record myself renouncing her. That needed no malice: it needed not wanting to look at the fact. An undertaking extracted from a man in that state isn't anybody's will, and on this clinical psychology stopped using no-suicide contracts twenty years ago, precisely because a piece of paper signed in the middle of a crisis doesn't hold any crisis down; and I was made to sign a no-contact contract with a contact compulsion running. My sister, from the chair in the corner, allowed it because she didn't have the fact either: nobody had ever explained to her that what you do with a sick man in prodrome is listen to him, bring his temperature down and stay with him, and not open a trial in the living room of his house. I reproach them both with the same thing: that in all the years I'd been diagnosed nobody sat the people who loved me down to explain what it was that I had. And that the one who did know it was so close by and never opened her mouth. And even so I've kept to it, with two exceptions in three years.

What was on that floor has a name and nobody pronounced it: prodrome, the phase that runs ahead of the episode. It isn't the episode: it's the ramp up to it, and in each patient it has a shape of its own and a fairly stable one. Mine is visible to the naked eye. Sleep goes down, and not in the form of insomnia but in the form of not needing it. The small hours come forward, which is the time when I write what I shouldn't write. Speech speeds up and judgement narrows, with that irritability that from outside looks like a bad mood. And the projects appear, which that autumn had the shape of a camera. I was sleeping three hours and writing in the small hours a great deal more than at the end of the summer. And I'd gone back to recording videos for a channel that had been switched off since the hotel. On the very day I was leaving for the airport my sister reminded me that my lawyer had advised me not to record, and the next day she pressed it: that she'd seen two of those videos, that I should set them to private and that in one of them I looked like I was on something. A few weeks later my mother aimed at another spot with the same accuracy: that I should try not to record anything while I was high, because it showed, and that I was heading for ruin. And I went on recording.

And why nobody sees it, if the ramp is so visible. For two reasons that add up. The first is that a prodrome doesn't look like an illness: it looks like a character. A bloke who sleeps little, talks too much, gets angry and is right about everything doesn't look like a sick man, he looks like an unbearable one, and with unbearable men the people who love them do what you do with unbearable

men, which is sit them on the floor and read them the list. Everything I wrote at the end of that year came out of a decompensated man, and they treated it as though behind every message there were somebody calm deciding with his cards face up. Nobody in there was calculating. The second reason is mine: the man going up the ramp doesn't see it either, and that already has its name in this book. Weeks earlier I'd written to Raquel that stressors equals Marcos gets poorly; I knew it and didn't know it at the same time, which is the only way anything is known inside a prodrome. And what was underneath wasn't a clean mania either: it was a mixed state, the energy of mania with the content of depression, the phase that manufactures exactly what could be seen in those videos, hostility and an overpowering need to be right. And a prodrome asks for precisely the opposite of what it produces: it asks for somebody to defend its sleep and bring its temperature down, and what it produces is everybody around it putting the temperature up.

Of that temperature one winter morning is left, the worst conversation I've had with my mother in forty years, and I put it in because everything I did wrong with the only person who has never gone is in there. She started, after watching the videos: that I should stop blaming her for everything that happened to me, that with the venom I'd spat at her those last few days she didn't want to see me or hear me for a good long while; and in that same message, the sentence that holds up everything that came after: that she loved me the same as my brothers. I defended myself, which is what a mixed state does: that I hadn't told a single lie, and that if she was suffering now it was the consequence of the suffering she'd inflicted on me. She called it by its name: half-truths, memories altered and confused. And she was right: in a high phase memory reconsolidates itself skewed, and my head was serving me a version that had already been edited. Then I said the sentence I have no way of justifying: that the worst thing about those years, by a long way, had been her, Mum. And in the same minute I recommended to her for the first time that she inform herself about my condition. She closed the conversation, and two minutes later she wrote that the health centre was ten minutes from the house, so perhaps I could shift myself a bit. And an hour later I did the only constructive thing of the whole day: sent her eight links in a row from a psychoeducation channel about bipolar disorder. A mother and a son tearing each other apart at nine in the morning, and the son sending her material at midday so that she can learn to understand it.

And a few weeks later, on a morning with a long shift ahead and not a euro in my pocket, I asked her to buy me cigarettes. She answered with what she'd been holding in for weeks: that I should leave her in peace, that she wasn't my errand girl. And thirty-six minutes later: that she was at the tobacconist's and would wait for me there. Nine days after that I wrote her two words that are in the archive and that I'm not going to take out of this book: I hate you. They were written by a man who slept three hours a night, a few weeks away from sitting in a courtroom and with his brake out of service: the disinhibition of an episode, which at the time nobody knew how to recognise, and I least of all. I have never hated my mother. And in the whole of that month, with everything that got written, my sister spoke to me almost every day, and my mother did too. Nobody left.

Chapter 44 • Claudia

My flat was on its way to becoming what it became, and I, in the meantime, bought a ticket to Bulgaria. Claudia lived there with her mother, almost a teenager by then, and that was where I went when the flights came within reach and my head let me. It's worth saying where that trip came out of: I'd spent the previous month on a relapse with alcohol and on one of those small depressions that leave you running at half power. To get on the plane I cleaned up, because I was one thing and she was another. Those days were the cleanest I had in the whole year. Not a drink. Nothing at all.

And here I have to tell at last, and in order, the whole story of my daughter. She was born when I was very young, out of a short relationship that was beaten by the distance and by my disorder, and in her first years she was, for me, a small voice on the phone and a face growing inside photographs. When she was a little girl I finally put together the money and the nerve and turned up at her house to meet her: a creature who examined me with the seriousness of a notary and who on the second day ruled that this big man was to be trusted. That autumn they came over. Claudia was still very small, and one afternoon she fell asleep on top of me, and what's left to me of that while is the warm weight of my daughter breathing against my chest, which is one of the two brightest memories I own. What I didn't know then was that I was going to have to live off that memory for nearly a decade. That autumn Marta was already with me, so she knew about my little girl from the first day. And in four years living together my daughter was the subject of one single conversation. That silence was built by the two of us: I didn't name her either, so as not to have a drawer open that hurt. The one who should have broken it was me.

Between that creature asleep on top of me and the next day I had her in front of me, eight and a half years fit, and inside them fits everything this book tells: the throuple, the suitcase, the admissions, the complaints, the pit. Fatherhood at that distance is a twinge that makes no noise and doesn't go away either: every morning you know that thousands of kilometres off your daughter is losing her

milk teeth, and working out her first letters, and blowing out candles, and slowly turning into a person, and that in that room there's nobody who looks like you. I missed pretty much the whole lot, and that bill doesn't appear in any court file and I'm still paying it every morning. The winter before that trip they'd come to Barcelona for a weekend. Claudia was ceasing to be a child, and it was nothing like a reunion in a film: she treated me with the courtesy you reserve for a visitor, polite, with reservations, looking at me sideways the way you look at a stranger you've been told versions about that don't fit together. And I don't reproach her: no teenage girl owes affection to a father who has been, basically, an absence. I didn't even dare try a hug. It was enough for me to sit near her, listen to her, look at that clever person, entirely alive and entirely real, and think without quite believing it: she exists.

What's left of that autumn trip is the logistics, and the logistics portray the relationship better than anything else. Two days before the flight her mother sent me the instructions: that it was cold there and I should bring clothes, the taxi, the bus and what each thing cost. And a sentence of a delicacy I didn't know how to read at the time: that she'd try to come to the airport herself, so that I wouldn't go unloading my emotions in an unfamiliar place. And there was one condition, one only, spelled out in full: that I shouldn't smoke in front of them. I answered with the usual clumsiness, that I'd try to meet all the conditions, and she corrected me on the spot: that in fact there was only one, and that it shouldn't be that hard for me either. One condition in all those years. That's the exact measure of how little that woman has ever demanded of me. And one more detail: the first day she was coming on her own; I'd see the girl the next day, probably at lunch; and maybe the three of us would have dinner, depending on what Claudia said. At that age, it was my daughter who decided when she saw her father. And that's how it had to be.

And on the day of the flight I didn't get there. I got stuck on the motorway, missed the plane and wrote to her mother that I was looking for alternatives and that I wanted to die, with a photo whose caption sums the whole thing up: lost in the airport. In the afternoon I found the way out, another airport at midnight and a plane at dawn, and I landed there the next morning a day late. That place is the exact opposite of Barcelona: a dry cold that cuts, snow already grey at the edge of the pavement, a low white light we never get here. From home there were court notifications coming in that I ignored on purpose and messages from Sonia that I dispatched with an I'm fine, because I was. I saw her at lunchtime,

with her mother there, and what there was was that tense courtesy: a short smile, a hello under her breath, hands buried in her coat pockets. No hug. And even so she still had, intact, the obsessions of the brilliant kid she's always been. She came out with a theory about octopuses, with the seriousness of somebody presenting results at a conference: that their intelligence comes from having nine brains spread about, one per tentacle plus the one in the head, and that this is where their ability to deal with nine matters at once comes from. I listened to her with that complete attention that only lovers and parents give. And while I was listening I thought that whatever the judgment said, that existed. That that girl and her octopus theory exist, and they exist partly because I exist. And that day, that was reason enough to go on existing. To take the lithium.

There's one thing almost nobody talks about, and it's what the illness decides for you when you're a father. For years I genuinely believed that the best thing for everybody was for an ill person to stay out of the way. That wasn't a decision: that was depression talking with the vocabulary of consideration. A brain in a low phase doesn't say I can't; it says I shouldn't, and it says it with a logic so clean that you sign it as if it were your own. And in a high phase the opposite happens, you promise what you aren't going to deliver: one summer I promised her mother some money for a summer camp and ten days later I cut it back with the worst excuse imaginable, that my mother kept my accounts and she should wait till the end of the month. A grown man, with a daughter whose birthday was the next day, explaining to the girl's mother that his own mother controlled his money. What she answered I had coming: that Claudia was my business. That's how this illness decides fatherhood: it doesn't take your daughter away, it takes away the years in which you could have been there, some of them from below and some from above, and in exchange it hands you back a teenage girl who looks at you sideways with every right in the world. And the other half of the distance isn't governed by me either: there are no phone calls and no video calls, and there never have been on any sustained basis. There are messages I write, long silences I don't control, and the odd trip when the flights and my head allow it. Her mother doesn't authorise more, and there's no cruelty in it: she does it because she still has the stigma stuck in her and because she's afraid that, with her not there, something might slip out of me that would hurt the girl. Caution and fear, the two things manufactured by an illness nobody has ever had explained to them. All I do is try to show, with small repeated facts, that that intermittent father is being left behind. And since I've known she can

read me, I write and publish on the basis that everything I put up could fall into the hands of a girl her age.

Her mother once sent me a photo of a drawing Claudia had done for school when she was small: a map with a star put right on top of where her father lives. I saved it in the folder on my phone where I put what I don't want to lose, which hasn't got a great deal in it: a photo of a tree in the Montseny taken before the storm, the recording of Claudia asking me whether I was all right when I was in hospital, three songs and now the map. They're the things that make the what-if of the bad nights have an answer made of flesh and not only of smoke. Claudia is nearly a woman now and she knows where her father lives. And there's something it took me fifteen years to be able to say without rage, and I said it to her mother in writing one morning last year: that my mother had lived embittered by never having had the chance to see her granddaughter grow up, and that she has a heart of gold. One of the longest-running resentments in my family, settled in two lines. It hadn't been rejection. It had been grief.

I came back at the start of that winter with one thing in my hand that I haven't let go of since: this person exists, and she's the most perfect thing that has come out of my whole story. And when I opened the door of the flat the smell told me everything, because in that house it didn't resemble any other. The fridge, empty. The floor, sown with cigarette ends. And Chapa watching me come in with the eyes of a man who is no longer entirely inside his own body. A man in prodrome was arriving from four days of sleeping and from a girl talking about octopuses, and what was waiting for him at home was the exact opposite of all of that.

Chapter 45 • The Camera at Two in the Morning

What I remember about that winter isn't the feeling of losing my mind. It's the opposite one, and that's why it's so frightening to tell: the feeling of finally doing the only sensible thing left to do, which was to put it on record, to set down in front of a camera in the small hours what everybody else was determined not to look at. A psychosis isn't lived as madness. It's lived as an exact sanity inside a different reality, and one single element is missing, the one that changes everything: the voice inside that in euthymia asks what for, and waits, and doubts, and leaves the message asleep until tomorrow. That brake has already been described in this book. In an episode it doesn't break, it goes out, and what takes its place manufactures certainties faster than you can write them down. With that machinery running inside me I came back from the trip to see my daughter: three hours of sleep noted down on a clinic sheet from those days, eleven months with nobody having touched my medication, and a video channel waiting for me.

About the channel it's worth clearing up a misunderstanding before going on, because nearly everybody tells it the wrong way round. It wasn't born that night. It was the same one as always, the one from the twelve-square-metre room, the same one where I posted videos explaining our songs and Marta watched them and afterwards would ask me to tell her what I'd meant at such and such a minute. Two videos stayed in there that we wrote and voiced between us, one night, laughing ourselves sick the way we hardly ever laughed by then; if anybody asks me where Marta and I laughed out loud for the last time, that's the answer. I recorded in every episode I've ever had, and after each admission I deleted the lot, and it never once caused me a problem until that winter, which was when I came back to it with my head completely gone. My sister kept asking me to drop it and I kept answering that recording was my therapy. The therapy part was true. The timing was the worst possible.

The first videos were about Nuria, and I didn't say her name: I built an archetype, the woman who manufactures a public image of goodness while inside

she wishes death on the man who has rejected her, and onto that archetype I unloaded every insult I could think of, which were many, with the disinhibition of a man whose brake is out of service. I don't tell it to justify it. I tell it to name it: that was a brain in an episode manufacturing poisoned truths. And within days the brain forgot about her and dived straight onto what was really tearing me apart, which was Marta. The proceedings. Toby, who had gone off with her without letting me say goodbye. The love I'd believed was real turned into the gravest criminal charge of my life. In the fifteenth video I said her name, and afterwards I talked for two hours and forty minutes without stopping. The transcript of that stretch exists, it's hours devoted to her and to nobody but her, and what's inside it bears no resemblance to what ended up reaching a courtroom. There are minutes and minutes of photographs, a man opening a drawer to show a camera a piece of furniture she'd left like new, things of hers hanging on my wall, the helmet that matched mine, a trip to the mountains, her people, wishing them one by one the happy birthdays I hadn't wished them. There are sentences aimed at her telling her I wasn't asking her for anything, that I wasn't ringing her, that I wasn't threatening her, that I didn't want to forget her even if we were never together again in our lives. And there are stretches, and I'm not going to hide them, where I said I hated her. All of it is in the same recording and sometimes in the same minute, because an unregulated head isn't two men with two different intentions. It's one. What I didn't know while I was putting that up was that somebody from her world had found it in the first few hours and had passed it on to her.

If this book let it be thought that nobody warned me, it would be lying. They all warned me, at once and in writing. My sister spent a whole day with me, link by link: that I should cut the ending where I was insulting people, that I should stop playing with fire, and seven hours later the sentence I should have read twice and read not once, that she was trying to protect me but that this wasn't going to take her mental health with it as well. My mother threatened to report me, the only time in her life, so that I would take a family photograph out of my last video. The next morning came the message that reads worst of all: that I hadn't taken it out, that I was still lying, that I'd just dug my own grave by giving my name and my details. With the word congratulations after it. And my sister again, the next morning, a warning to all concerned, that with what I was saying in that video I was heading straight for a trial worse than Thursday's; two hours later she threw in the towel in writing, that her energy had run out, and

ten minutes after that she was sending me a kiss for the person I was going to spend the day with. That's what she's like. With six warnings right under my nose, what I did was record for another eighteen days. That is anosognosia in its extreme version, the one I've already explained: not denying the diagnosis, which in cold blood I'd admit without blinking, but being incapable of seeing that what you're doing at this precise minute is the diagnosis. And it is, at the same time, a man who was warned and couldn't stop. Both things are true and they don't get in each other's way.

In one of those videos a document with Marta's details slipped through. I didn't put it there: it slipped through, at the speed a man edits videos when he doesn't sleep and is putting out with a camera the fires he himself keeps lighting. I saw it shortly after uploading it. I took the video down. I put it back up without the document. Between one thing and the other, minutes went by, and in those minutes somebody who was sitting in front of the screen took a screenshot, and that screenshot ended up inside a complaint. A brain in psychosis isn't entirely switched off: it goes in bursts, on and off, and in one of those bursts I saw what was in there, understood what it was and took it out. Out of three whole weeks, that's the only moment when I did exactly what needed doing, on my own, with nobody asking me to, and it's precisely the moment they took to court. What was punished was the minute in which I was realising. And to fish out a document that was in the air for a few minutes, on a channel almost nobody watched, you have to have spent days on end watching a man who wasn't sleeping. Read whole, those screenshots are my exemption. Cropped, they became my criminal record. I closed the channel myself, and in the last video, which four people saw, you can see me apologising and crying.

While I was recording, in that world I was being talked about. It was said out loud, and out of a fear that was theirs and was real, that I was a dangerous man. I've already said who the man they were talking about was. And so it doesn't come cheap for me: I didn't find out at the time, I found out months later, when I was already in the post-psychotic depression, so it wasn't the trigger for anything. What did set me off was learning that Nuria was ringing my sister almost every day to get me to stop recording, and on learning it I recorded more. That fear has ingredients I know one by one, and not one of them is anybody's malice: the word bipolar with nothing behind it; a real behaviour, that of an irritable, sleepless, unfiltered man, which reads as escalation because nobody had explained to them that the escalation of a prodrome goes inwards, towards the

camera and towards your own liver, and not towards anybody's body; the echo of frightened people talking to each other every day; and the only person in that group with clinical training, who could have defused it in thirty seconds and didn't. A stranger calling you a dangerous lunatic is background noise. Being turned into a monster by the people who have loved you is an amputation.

The night before the first fast-track trial I didn't sleep. There were drugs to hand and I didn't think about it long, because the alternative was going on counting cracks in the ceiling until eight. Jordi drove me. Marta was at the door of the court, with her people around her, and I didn't go over, because I was forbidden to and because the shame had eaten me hollow, that very strange shame of the defendant who goes round silently apologising for offences that were symptoms. We ended up smoking thirty metres from each other, like three strangers, them not lifting their eyes and me looking at my shoes. One of her family, who I'd almost thought of as a friend, looked at me as though he wanted to kill me, and that look wasn't produced by what I was, but by the part of me that fitted inside a legal document. Inside the courtroom Marta didn't meet my eyes once, as though that bench and that evening on the mountain had happened to two other people. I went in fully in an episode, with no capacity whatsoever to know I was ill, which is as much as to say with no capacity to ask for help. My testimony was lamentable. The duty lawyer, who neither prepared me nor listened to me, was paid the same. The judge was as sympathetic as anybody can be in fifteen minutes, and at the end she lifted her eyes from the papers and asked me the only question I was asked that morning.

"Do you understand that what you did was wrong?"

"Yes."

And it was true. That it was wrong was understood by anybody and it was understood by me. What I didn't understand, because the illness wouldn't let me understand it, was that I was ill. Nobody asked that. The question you have to ask a man who has spent three weeks filming himself at two in the morning isn't whether he knows it was wrong; and in fifteen minutes per case there's no time for any other. I came out sentenced to twenty days of home confinement and to a course I still haven't done. Me, who for months hadn't been able to cross the landing, sentenced to not leaving the house.

The second trial, the one over the more serious videos, the ones I deleted myself and of which no record remains anywhere, was a week later and was settled by agreed plea. That day my mother came with me. In the corridor she

came face to face with Marta and told her to her face how dare she, wasn't she ashamed; Marta didn't answer, and the woman who had driven her to the station with the suitcase placed herself for the first time, in front of me, on the only side she had ever been on. I had in the car, without knowing why I'd taken it that morning, one of the pictures she'd given me. When I came out from signing I was no longer able to go home with it inside. I left it leaning against the wall, on top of a bench in the street, so that the first person to pass could take it, and of that morning a photograph remains in which you can see that somebody had painted on the back of the bench, in red spray and in enormous letters, I love you. I don't know what to do with that beyond telling it.

The agreed plea is what gets signed in psychosis. The fast-track trial is designed for the driver who blows into the tube at the roadside and the pub fight with three witnesses: that day the duty court had another seventeen cases, fifteen minutes each, and my lawyer had had thirty seconds with me in a corridor. At the centre of the invention there's an incentive, and it's a good incentive for almost everybody: you accept the facts, the sentence comes down by a third and you walk home. For a man three weeks out of a psychosis, terrified, with a lawyer who met him that same morning, that isn't choosing between two options. It's an emergency exit with the green light on above it. What nobody explained to me was that signing meant putting a fiction on the record, the fiction that I had acted in full possession of my faculties, and that in accepting the facts you also give up any argument about criminal responsibility, because an exemption needs expert witnesses and time, which are precisely the two things that procedure is designed not to have. And the fiction isn't held up by the court alone. The morning after signing I wrote to my sister that I had wanted to be tried like somebody normal, with no disorders, and that if I was functional for everything else it was only fair that I should be functional for this too. That was written by self-stigma, which by then was already speaking out of my mouth. The same episode produced the videos and produced the signature. In the proceedings where somebody stopped to look properly, which is the next chapter, that episode was a full exemption. In the ones where nobody had fifteen minutes, that episode didn't exist. My criminal record comes out of these two trials and no others.

On the night of the first trial I wrote that Marta had done me an enormous favour, that seeing her, seeing her contempt and having her not meet my eyes had set me free. And it didn't stop at the phone: I sat down in front of the camera

and said it out loud, utterly convinced, with that firmness that comes from being in an episode and needing to believe it. The moment I stopped recording I threw myself on the bed, crushed my face into the pillow and screamed until I had no voice left. What has always been judged about those videos is what could be seen on the screen. What was happening thirty seconds after it was switched off, nobody has seen.

Chapter 46 • The Screen

I served the twenty days at the start of that summer. I was living with my mother again: folding bed in the living room and an old monitor, bought back in the day with Marta, from which I went on working remotely so as not to lose the job as well. Three times a day the local police came up for me to sign a piece of paper certifying that I was still in the place I couldn't move from. On the first day I summed it up for my sister in writing: it's one thing not to want to go out and quite another not to be able to. That sentence didn't alter my routine by a single day, because my head had had me locked in from long before a judge signed it. Two days after serving it I walked into the courtroom for the big trial.

They held it in the village where I'd first moved out on my own, when I moved for Marta. I'm never going to set foot in any of its squares again, and that's something almost nobody tells you about this illness: on top of the years and the people, it takes the maps. At the door the scene from the winter repeated itself, Marta smoking thirty metres off with somebody from her family, the three of us treating each other as strangers. Her side amended its case before we started: if the court found a full exemption they would ask for security measures, and if it didn't they were reducing the years of prison they'd been asking for, plus a restraining order and a ban on contacting her by any route. Which is to say that the prosecution itself was taking it as read that this was about a sick man. The fight wasn't guilty or innocent. The fight was what you do with a man who isn't criminally responsible, whether you shut him away or watch him. The forensic doctor's report, which recorded that my intellectual and volitional faculties had been entirely impaired, had been in the file for three years, and until that morning there had been a document with my name on it asking for years in prison. The body can't tell the difference between the sentence that's asked for and the sentence that's handed down.

I chose to give evidence. I acknowledged the relationship and I acknowledged the recordings, with the one qualification that was true: that I'd sent them to a group I didn't know she was in.

"And what were you saying in those recordings?" the prosecutor asked.

"Well, they were recordings with some hyperbolic threats in them, the product of a psychotic episode I was going through."

"And you weren't aware you were sending them?"

"I wasn't aware of what I was doing."

I explained that I had no memory of recording them and that listening to them afterwards had been like a stranger using my voice. And when her lawyer brought up the subject of treatment the teacher in me came out: the four pillars of mental health, what a decompensation means, why putting a dose up isn't the same as relapsing. I said the word *euthymia* in front of a court. I also told them something almost nobody knows, which is that months after the hotel business I contacted her once, a recording to ask her forgiveness, and I did it because my lawyer had told me the case was closed and that Marta hadn't appealed. She had appealed, the measures were still live, I broke them without knowing it, and the moment I found out I never wrote to her again: that's five years. A forgiveness thrown into the void. From what came back to me, she said I hadn't understood a thing, and she may have been right, because to a person nobody has ever explained what a psychotic episode does from the inside, my explanation could only sound like an excuse. That was everything that came out of my mouth that day: not a threat, not a word against her; a diagnosis, four pillars and an apology. She was three metres away, behind a screen, and heard none of it.

Then she gave evidence. She described the calls of that day and the whole catalogue of the delusion, recited out loud in a courtroom. They asked her whether she'd been frightened and she said yes, obviously. From behind the screen, I couldn't find a single reason to doubt it: those recordings existed and they were made by my voice. She also said that she had never asked me to stop, and that after that there had been no further contact, not directly, that what there had been was a video channel. Not directly. She said it herself. And she said that of that channel she'd watched the first two or three videos and no more, and I believe her, because that means she didn't see the worst ones, but also that she didn't see the hours of photographs or the belated birthdays. What went into me, in any case, wasn't the content. It was the manner. There was the woman I've connected with most in my life talking about me without a tremor in her voice, without a qualification, without a doubt, and however hard I looked I couldn't recognise her anywhere in that tone. There's an explanation, and it isn't malice: she didn't walk into that courtroom as a witness, she walked in as a party, with

her lawyer, her pleading and her request for a sentence. A witness remembers. A party maintains a case. That version had had three years and an office to be rounded off in, and in a document like that there's no room for the woman who used to get a train to come and see me. I don't write it as a reproach against any decision of hers. I write it as what a legal procedure does to the memory of whoever has to carry it.

Now the screen, which appears in no legal code. At the fast-track trial in the winter there wasn't one: the two of us were in the same room, a few metres apart. For the same facts, six months later, the screen appeared. Nobody asked for it. It comes as standard with the domestic violence template, which separates the aggressor from his victim without stopping to look at which two people it has in front of it. And that screen did three things in one minute: it put me in the place where dangerous men are put, a man who six months before had stayed thirty metres away from her, in the open street, looking at his shoes; it placed her, by protocol, in the role of my victim; and it covered her ears on precisely the day I was talking.

Then came the expert evidence, and for that trial nobody examined me in person. The forensic doctor gave evidence by video call and the video call kept dropping. My life came close to being adjourned because of a router. When she was finally audible, she confirmed her report, and the entire basis of an exemption was disposed of in a few minutes and in broad strokes. My lawyer pulled at the thread: if they had in front of them a treated patient, compliant, with three years of follow-up, was a committal necessary? The forensic doctor conceded that her assessment was the one from back then, not the one from now. And in the middle of that discussion I found out that Toby had died. My dog. The only one who loved me without setting me conditions. I don't even know the day; I know how the news reached me. Five and a half years with her, not one with me, and he died while I was being tried. Me in there, crying over a dog, with a screen in front of me announcing to the world that I was the dangerous one. I'm grateful to her for looking after him the years I couldn't, even if she's grateful to me for nothing.

In the closing submissions, the prosecutor asked for committal. Her lawyer reminded the court that not being criminally responsible doesn't mean going free, and asked for a restraining order, a ban on contact and costs. Mine said that this had been a delusion, that there had never been any physical approach and that the proportionate thing was to supervise me, not to shut me away.

Nobody disputed the exemption. What was disputed was my future, and it was disputed in terms of logistics. And at the end came the last word, which is the only minute in a whole procedure when the law lets you speak for yourself, and there I rode straight over every instruction I'd been taught. I said that not only did I wish Marta no harm: I'd always loved her. That this had turned into a judicial madness, that it needn't have ended like this, that at some point we could have sat down and talked. I explained to the judge that the procedure itself is a permanent stressor and that three years of cortisol had put fifty kilos on me. I wished her happiness. And I asked for one thing only, that this nightmare should end. My lawyer was signalling at me to cut it short, and on the way out I got a telling-off, because tell me not to do something and I go straight off and do it. About the form of it he was entirely right. About the substance, that disorderly last word was the truest thing said in there.

The judgment reached me at the end of the summer and it said this: one year of psychiatric committal in a suitable establishment, a ban on approaching her and a ban on contacting her by any means. I rang my sister and told her that if the appeal didn't succeed, I was going in. She went quiet. Then she said the appeal was going to succeed, and when I asked her how she knew she answered that she didn't know, but that we were going to make it succeed. The next day she knocked the metaphysics out of my hands with one swipe: no karma about it, from here on it's just lawyers. Mireia read the judgment that same afternoon and told me the appeal had a basis; I asked her what I was supposed to do in the meantime, and she said in the meantime, live. And now comes the thing it took me nearly two years to understand. That judgment wasn't a conviction. It found a full exemption, in so many words, and where there's a full exemption there's no conviction: there's an acquittal and security measures. They don't punish you. They treat you. The problem is that the paper had the word sentence written on it, and that's how it stayed inside me. A month later the prosecution service asked for exactly that to be clarified, and the clarification took far longer to arrive than anybody's patience holds out. All that time I lived with a conviction on my back, with the shame on me and the I'm a convicted man repeating itself on its own. I'd been acquitted since that summer and nobody told me. It isn't bad faith either: it's a court with more paper than hands, and the delay was paid for by me. The appeal, to this day, is still waiting.

The first thing I did when I finished reading the judgment wasn't to ring a lawyer. It was to go looking for the people who'd left. I asked my sister to get a

video and the songs I'd written to Nuria, and what came back was silence, and behind the silence the opposite of silence: the demand that I delete the channel and delete the songs. To Raquel I wrote a few messages to a number that might not even have been hers any more and told her I wanted to die. And weeks later I asked my sister about her, and she answered what she answered: that she hadn't replied, but that she knew it through Nuria. Nobody was obliged to answer me. But not answering is also an act, and on the other side there was a man who began to think about taking himself out of the way with that strange coldness extreme exhaustion gives you. That's where the body of a hundred and fifty-five kilos comes from, which has a chapter of its own.

What happened to me in that village has had a name for fifty years and it's called the criminalisation of mentally disordered behaviour. It consists of this: when the only door left open is the police station's, everything the sick man does goes in through that door. The same episode is an admission if a doctor looks at it and a criminal complaint if an investigating judge looks at it. Mine was looked at three times by an investigating judge. There you have the double condition no courtroom knows how to hold, sick and guilty at once: the same State that wrote on a sheet of paper that I couldn't govern my own acts afterwards sent me the bill for the crockery broken in the fire. Because the other bill, the money one, arrived as well: five lawyers, counting the legal aid ones, who aren't free either, and the costs of the proceedings, which came to almost the exact same figure as the debt from the year of the suitcase. And the real balance of forces is precisely the opposite of the one the file describes. She, today, with one phone call, can set in motion again a machine capable of putting me on a ward for a year. I can do nothing to her, and I don't want to: I don't know where she lives, I don't want to know, and in all these years of complaints and trials there isn't one injury and not one medical report. The one with the power is her. The one who lives in fear is me. Her fear at the hotel was real and I don't hold it against her. I write this so she knows that the man she was told she had to be protected from has spent five years unable to read her name without ending up taking a pill.

Part VI • THE WRONG LINE

Chapter 47 • The Doctor Who Talked

My mother kept that month's medical appointments written on a bit of paper and crossed them off as they were kept. That spring, between the fast-track trials and the summer one, a single one was left uncrossed, the new psychiatrist at the hospital, and she reminded me of it in that way of hers, as if the balance of the account depended on it. Changing psychiatrist cost me what has already been told, because getting a transfer out of the system isn't a matter of asking and that's that, and on top of it I asked with an excuse about appointment times, because telling the truth (that the previous one had broken something inside me) didn't fit on any form. The appointment fell early that spring, in the afternoon. A few days before I'd come out with one of those sentences with which a man defends himself without noticing that he's giving himself away: that the psychiatrist must know what I got up to. He didn't. He had no reason to. I had to tell him myself. And that minimal thing, absurd for being so small, was exactly what was new.

That doctor was like none of the ones who'd treated me, and the first difference showed within ten seconds: he talked. He talked more than any other doctor I'd ever met, and he knew it, and he said so smiling. I'd come from five years with a psychiatrist who rationed sentences as though each one cost her money out of her own pocket, so I spent the first appointment doing something I hadn't done since the diagnosis: really talking. Without calculating as I went. Without producing the presentable version of myself, the one you learn to build so that everything comes out correct in the consulting room. He listened the way somebody listens when he wants to understand something, not the way somebody listens while filling in boxes. He separated the patient from the disorder, and inside the patient he separated the symptoms of an episode from the decisions of a person, which is a distinction nobody had made for me in five years. He believed me. And he wrote reports that put down what had actually happened. In those first appointments he also said a sentence to me that I've repeated since to a great many people, because it sums up the whole difference: that I should

come to A&E whenever I needed to. A psychiatric patient whose doctor says that to him has a door. In the previous five years I had no door. I had an appointment every three months and a form.

One day the session went off in a direction that hadn't been planned and I asked him why he did this for a living.

"Because it strikes me as the most honest work there is."

I asked him to explain the honest part.

"Because in here you can't pretend. A patient in an episode isn't acting. One in a depression isn't exaggerating. What's there is what's there."

I asked him whether it didn't wear him out.

"Everything wears you out. The question is whether what it gives you makes up for what it costs you."

I asked about his own case. He said yes, that in his it made up for it; that there are days when his heart sinks to his boots, but that when somebody who hasn't been able to get up for years gets up again, and you know you've had something to do with it, no other trade pays that. I didn't tell him I was one of those. There was no need to tell him. And there was something else, less showy and more important: he was the same man in the good appointment and in the bad one, the same tone, the same courtesy, whatever state I came through the door in. That has a name, consistency, and it's a good deal rarer to find than clinical competence.

So that this doesn't end up as an edifying story, I'll put in from my own side the material that spoils it. The following winter there was a morning when I woke up and couldn't get out of bed. By the afternoon I was telling my sister about it: how awful, that I couldn't move, and a minute later, that my soul didn't want to come back into my body and I could feel it. She put a name on it in one line, that this was the depression, and proposed what common sense proposed, going that same afternoon to see the psychiatrist, that she'd drive me, that this was exactly what he'd said he was there for. I said no within the minute. She pressed it. Half an hour later I told her I didn't think that man could help me and that anyway I wasn't in any state to talk to anybody. And a quarter of an hour after that, when I'd already refused twice and the conversation had gone off in search of a psychologist's phone number, she wrote that even so, talking to him that day was going to comfort me, that he's a good man and he thinks well of me. I underline the detail of who says it: I'm not the one saying it, it's said by somebody who isn't me. I skipped another appointment she'd asked me to keep,

and I skipped it with the vocabulary of the patient who knows better than his doctor, that you go to the psychiatrist every three months. Which is to say that continuity didn't turn me into a model patient. It turned me into a patient with a doctor, which isn't the same thing and which is already quite a lot.

There is, all the same, one thing neither of them did, neither the doctor at the health centre nor him. Nobody ever explained to me what was happening to me. On the technical side it all arrived: the diagnosis arrived, the medication arrived, the clinical names arrived. What never arrived was the practical side. What it means, in a life, to have a type one. What the face of a prodrome looks like. What you do when sleep starts to fail. How you tell this to your people so that, instead of running away, they know how to give you a hand. That has a name, it's called psychoeducation, it has solid evidence behind it (it reduces admissions and improves prognosis) and in the public health service there's no protocol whatsoever for giving it to you: the psychiatrist handles the medication and signs papers, and the psychologist, when you're assigned one, has half an hour every three months. Mine I gave myself. Reading, cross-checking my own reports, joining up the dots at three in the morning, and afterwards at the association. Thirty-three years waiting for somebody to put a name to this, and seven more until I worked out on my own what that name meant. There's also the joke about the cheapest way to get high in the world, which is not sleeping: my own predictor of an episode, said out loud in front of doctors for years without anybody, myself included, picking it up off the floor.

And I don't reproach only the ones who left, who had the answer five seconds away in a search engine. I reproach my whole circle, which runs on goodwill it has to spare and on knowledge nobody has bothered to give it; and I reproach myself, who had that word written in a report for years without understanding it. Bipolar is one of those words everybody takes as known because they've heard it a thousand times and because it sounds like two things, up and down. Nobody looks up in a dictionary what he believes he already knows.

So I'll leave here together, in order and with no heroics, what did work, in case it's any use to somebody with this diagnosis or to somebody who loves a person who has it. First, a psychiatrist who looked at me, and I don't say that from my own impression: the therapeutic alliance is one of the most solid predictors of outcome there is in mental health. Second, a long therapy that went down into the cellar, into the thirteen-year-old, into the abandonment, into the shame, and that instead of generic understanding gave me tools you can use and

throw away out of your pocket: seeing a prodrome coming, telling an idea from an impulse, stopping your hand before sending the message. Third, a woman who instead of measuring my guilt measured my sleep, and I talk about her in her own place. Fourth, getting it outside in writing, sung and recorded. And fifth, knowing what I've got: that irritability is a symptom and not my character, that if I sleep four hours three nights running somebody has to pick up the phone, that the euphoria of brilliant ideas at three in the morning isn't inspiration but a warning. Not one of those five things is willpower. It wasn't willpower I was short of. It was those five things, and the moment I had them on me, the behaviour everybody was hanging on my character went by itself, without anybody having to make an effort to correct it. No diabetic is told that with a bit more character his glucose would come down. We're told it daily. For the first time since they gave me the name, the medication meant something that wasn't fear of the consequences. The lithium still tasted of old coin, but swallowing it had stopped being obedience and become something else: care.

Chapter 48 · One Hundred and Fifty-Five Kilos

Hundreds of hours of overtime in under three years. On-call weeks, availability at any hour of the day or night and a client with no timetable, because systems haven't got one either and it occurs to nobody that a machine might wait until tomorrow. I answered emails from the room next door in that house of mine where people used and I paid, from the sofa where I didn't sleep, from the fixed fear of the judgment that was still to fall. Everybody rushes to the man who breaks; nobody takes care of the one who holds out, and nobody takes care of him precisely because he holds out. The money from those hours came to nothing good either: it went on plugging the debts that house kept generating.

Before that winter there was an autumn, the one straight after the judgment, and in that autumn I met a woman. A mutual friend introduced us, we talked for a month and I went to see her, four days in her city, a long way from mine. To get there I had to break the agoraphobia, which for three years hadn't let me cross the door of my house. She had an abyss of her own, and that's the only thing it's my business to tell about her; I didn't know how to read it in her, because a man that lonely and that close to the edge doesn't check the label on the lifebelt. She said goodbye with a kiss, as though we'd be seeing each other soon, and the moment I got back she stopped speaking to me without a word. In exactly those weeks, while I was digesting the judgment. Disappearances go straight into the abandonment wound in me: I don't experience them as a discourtesy, I experience them as a trigger. I've taken a tranquilliser because a friend had gone days without answering me, and it turned out he was just busy. Abandonment didn't leave me a scar. It left me an alarm that goes off on its own.

One hundred and fifty-five kilos. That was what went down on the scales at the hospital in the north that winter. And from those days of the holidays there's a sentence of mine that places better than any other where I was before my lung forced me to stop. My sister was telling me off for having had a drink and I was defending myself with the full case: that it had been one little bottle of rum, that

alcohol releases emotions, that this wasn't the loss of control she was painting. In the same minute I was already making plans, that in three days the treadmill was arriving and I was going on a strict diet, and that maybe next year's holidays I'd spend with Claudia, because that year was crucial. And three minutes later, with no transition at all, this slipped out of me: that until the embolism I hadn't cared if I died. I wrote it the way you contribute a piece of background information. And note the nuance, because it isn't that I wanted to die: it's that I didn't care, which is another thing and a worse one, because that has no urgency, alarms nobody and asks for no help. A man who doesn't care whether he dies doesn't throw himself out of a window. He puts on fifty kilos, does overtime without stopping, doesn't leave the house, lets in through the door whatever comes in and goes on answering emails. And takes six hours to get to A&E with a clot in both lungs. A man who didn't care whether he died, making plans for next year's holidays with his daughter. I can't put it any better.

It was a Tuesday at the start of that winter and it began like a pulled muscle, a strange pain in the chest. In the morning I was at A&E with my mother, and what we wrote to each other while I was waiting inside measures with laboratory precision what I understood of my own condition. She asks whether I'm hungry. I tell her I'm ravenous. She offers to make me a turkey and cheese sandwich and corrects herself unprompted, that for the moment I can't eat anything. And then I'm the one who proposes the afternoon's plan: that on the way back from the dentist we could stop for a burger. A thromboembolism under way and me thinking about the burger on the way home. At four Sonia collected me and drove me to the hospital in the north, and the A&E doctor came out with the full phrase, massive bilateral pulmonary thromboembolism, with that seriousness of a man telling you you've come within millimetres of not being here. He asked me how long I'd had the pain and I said since the morning. He asked me why I hadn't come sooner, and while I was hunting for an answer the real ones went through me: the fear of hospitals manufactured over years of admissions with straps, the impossibility of separating a real emergency from the background noise a head like mine produces, the agoraphobia. I answered that I hadn't known how to recognise it. They put me on anticoagulants, kept me in for eight days and told me I'd been lucky. From there I brought away a detail that won't leave me: the deodorant in the bag was the same one they'd brought me during the psychiatric admissions, and I had to ask my mother to buy me another. Four years of straps and corridors packed inside a smell, and set off on a respiratory

ward by a can somebody had put in a bag with the best intentions in the world. On the day I was discharged my mother, who's an old woman now, sent me two links one after the other: one about the risk of dying of an embolism as a smoker and one about how to stop smoking after an embolism.

And what did the company do with a bloke fresh out of hospital after coming within millimetres? Nothing. Six days after discharge I was on an on-call week and they woke me at half past six to sort out an incident. Two weeks in, with the heparin still in my body, I was doing interventions at seven in the morning and at midnight, and I missed the big family dinner of those holidays because an alert went off and the one on call was me. When the system sees that you hold out it doesn't take weight off you: it puts more on, to see where you burst. And nobody forced me, which is the part that belongs to me, because the first one who didn't know how to stop was me. Nobody from that world rang, and even that has an explanation: the people around you don't disappear because they've stopped loving the sick man, they disappear because they can't stand what they feel when they're in front of him, and in my case there's the courtesy stigma I've already talked about on top. With a clot in your pulmonary artery people bring you food round. With what was behind the clot, they don't. And the best thing about that month didn't happen in any hospital: ten days after going into A&E I found out what my daughter had answered when they asked her what she wanted for her birthday. Nothing, that she already had everything she wanted. I had lungs full of clots and a year of committal under appeal, and a long way from here a kid I barely know was saying she didn't need anything because she already had it all. It's the only thing anybody did right in this whole story, and I wasn't the one who did it.

The agoraphobia, which I've been naming for chapters and chapters, was exactly this. Opening the door of my house required a preparation that could take me hours: my heart going up before I'd even touched the handle, my body manufacturing cortisol for a situation my head knew perfectly well wasn't dangerous. And the fear wasn't running into somebody. The fear was being seen. The fear was my body. Some kids shouted fatty at me from the opposite pavement and had me weeks without going down into the street; and when my sister asked me to come to Barcelona to see her, I put it to her in writing that I couldn't go and put up with the looks, that I was pitiful and disgusting, that I didn't want to be seen like that. That's me at thirty-eight, saying word for word what I'd have said at fourteen in a school playground. And this same body once

lifted more than two hundred kilos off the floor and did handstand press-ups. From the handstand to wheezing on the sofa: that's the distance, and the sensation of being trapped inside your own flesh I wouldn't wish on anybody. On top of it the mechanism keeps itself going, unassisted: avoidance takes the anxiety away immediately, and that's why it gets reinforced; every day you don't go out, your brain notes that not going out worked, and the bar for going out tomorrow is set a little higher. Nobody decides to shut himself in the house. You wake up one day shut in, without having taken any decision at all.

All of this has a name, and it's the name that closes the circuit between the courtroom and the scales: allostatic load, the wear a body is left with after having its stress response systems switched on for years on end. Cortisol doesn't go up because you live sadly. It goes up with sustained, unresolved threat, which is the literal definition of the years before that A&E corridor: years of prison demanded in writing, four complaints at once, two fast-track trials, a blocking with no explanation, a group where my name was being handed round, and underneath it all the agoraphobia and the antipsychotics doing their work on my metabolism. An American researcher spent years sitting in a court dealing with small cases and summed it up in five words: the process is the punishment. No judgment changed my life. The envelope did. And I've looked at it with a calculator in front of me, because I too swallowed for years the idea that a fat man is a lazy one with his mouth open. Sixty-five kilos in three years and nine months is a kilo and a half a month, and a kilo and a half a month is produced by an imbalance of three hundred calories a day. Three hundred calories: a glass of milk. There were no binges in there and no moral collapse whatsoever. There was a body with chronic cortisol, which gives the order to store fat in case another crisis comes; antipsychotics that disconnect satiety; a depression, which isn't sadness but the collapse of the thousand small movements of a day; an agoraphobia; broken sleep; and the alcohol. Five things pushing in the same direction for forty-five consecutive months. With that you don't even have to eat badly. It's enough to stay alive. A wounded animal doesn't swell up out of greed: it stays still, and swells up. And the embolism wasn't bad luck, it was arithmetic: blood that doesn't circulate because the body doesn't move, severe obesity and the antipsychotic itself were all three pushing towards the same clot. That didn't interrupt the story. It finished it off, and left me anticoagulated for the rest of my life. Let it be clear what I'm saying and what I'm not. I don't send this bill to Marta, who signed her complaint with the only information in front of her, the

voice of a man threatening her. I send it to the apparatus: to the one that doesn't distinguish, that takes years to decide what a forensic doctor had written on a single sheet, and that meanwhile goes on collecting in lungs and in kilos.

Chapter 49 • The Kitten

When the episode of that winter went out completely and I was left looking at what was around me (a house that had had drug use worked into its walls, a channel full of videos, the police coming up to ring the bell), a conclusion landed on me that wasn't a surrender but a calculation: I couldn't go on living alone. The flat had stopped being a flat months before. The debts from that autumn weighed more than my wages could carry with a rent on top. And a brain that had just manufactured those videos can't be asked to live with no net underneath it. So I threw Chapa out, I threw out the girl who was living with him by then, and the friend who'd come with her didn't need throwing out, because she'd already gone of her own accord. And while I was taking the house apart, boxing up the little that fitted and throwing the rest away, I had to make the hardest decision of that year, which appears on no piece of paper in any court.

There was a kitten. Tiny. They'd found her at the end of that autumn under a car, on a rainy day, soaked through, mewing in that very high voice a cat has when it has gone too many hours with nobody answering it, and we took her up to the flat. The three of us adopted her, she was the one who named her, and we bought her a little litter tray we put next to Kira's. She existed in that house the way small things exist in the middle of a disaster: in spite of the disaster, never thanks to it. Between the racket in that living room and the guitar nights, an animal of half a kilo lived in there, capable of falling asleep on top of anything that was warm. And when the thing dissolved, I couldn't take her with me. I was going back to my mother's living room, back to the folding bed, and I was going back with Kira, who was mine already and was old already. Two cats in that space, one of them a kitten, with the head I had at the time, wasn't a real option however much it destroyed me. I looked for a good home for her. I found one: people who loved her. I did what had to be done and it hurt exactly as much as if I'd done the opposite.

I landed in my mother's living room at the start of that spring, exhausted, ruined by what that house had left behind and sunk in a post-psychotic depres-

sion that was nothing like the previous ones. It took me a long year to get back on my feet, and I managed it with my psychiatrist's hand on me, which has already been told, and on the back of something with no heroics in it at all: routine. Work. Sleep. The morning one and the night one. Paying off the flat's debts one by one with the overtime I've already described. If anybody takes that year and measures it with the phone messages in front of him, what comes out is an extremely boring archive: the volume at half, the small hours switched off, two or three people talking every day about things of no importance. And after everything this book has written down, a boring archive is precisely the proof that something was going right.

It's worth telling as well how that was lived from the other side, which is her side. Convalescent and composing non-stop, I talked. I talked at all hours, whether there was somebody in front of me or not, and the messages my mother wrote me in those months, read today one after another, are one single thing said in a thousand different ways: shut up. Could I turn the music down, please, how was she supposed to hold a meeting with that din. That now I'd had my sleep, was I going to go on at her all night. And a minute later, one word on its own: quiet. That I should stop the non-stop gabbling, that I should lower my voice or shut up for fuck's sake. And the most hers of all, one night, finished off with her exhausted-face emoji: could I calm down, she wasn't meditating. That's an old woman living with the logorrhoea of a son in a mixed state, and telling him so the way a mother tells him: badly, late and with every right in the world. I've spent the whole book explaining that irritability is a symptom, so it's time to say the other thing: the non-stop talking is one too, it's one of the symptoms that wear down the person living with you most, and the person who put up with it most didn't choose it and had nobody to explain it to her.

And in the middle of all that there was a cat. Kira arrived years earlier, in the autumn of the complaints: my sister heard her mewling near her house and thought of me before she bent down to pick her up, because in this family every cat has come off the street. The house reorganised itself around her in four days. By the third my mother was on the sofa with the cat asleep on top of her; by the fifth she was asking me how often it's advisable to change the litter. She's a tortoiseshell, with the orange, the black and the white distributed by somebody with no clear rules about symmetry, a little Picasso face that took me days to really look at. When I finally noticed her she struck me as the most charming

thing I'd seen in a long time. And from those first weeks there's a conversation I have recorded whole.

"Is it a good thing, having a cat?" she asked me.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't ask me to explain anything. She only demands warmth and food."

"I ask for that too."

"You ask for explanations."

"Yes."

"Yours are welcome."

My mother smiled. A cat cures nothing. It hasn't the faintest idea what bipolar disorder is. It climbs onto your thigh, kneads it with its front paws and there its science ends. What it does is something else: it fastens you to a minimal routine, feeding it, cleaning the litter tray, opening the door when it scratches, and that minimal routine, on the days when there's no other reason at all to get out of bed, is sometimes the only reason to get out of bed. A cat doesn't know it's saving your morning. It saves it anyway.

I come back to the kitten who had to be given away, because I don't tell it as a sweet anecdote. Bipolar disorder is, before anything else, a disorder of loss. Friends go, partners, money, health, jobs, houses and years that don't come back, and with every episode you lose it all again and start from zero. But there are two kinds of loss that bear no resemblance at all to a burial, and this illness produces them by the shovelful. The first is ambiguous loss, the one I announced when I told the podcast business, the one with no body and no certificate and which precisely for that reason never closes: a daughter growing up far away and in photographs; Marta far away and on the telephone; Toby, my dog, alive for five and a half years in another house; a half-kilo kitten who's perfectly all right, with people who love her, in a flat that isn't mine. The second has an even worse name, disenfranchised grief, and it takes the prize: grief for something nobody recognises as a loss. It occurs to nobody to offer you condolences for a cat you had to give away. Or for a dog who died in the house of the woman who brought a complaint against you. Or for the life you had before the illness ran it over, or for the person you were before they gave you the name. And a grief you can't cry in front of anybody doesn't get done: it stays in there. That's why the dead pile up without funerals for sick men like me. And that's

why a kitten, which seen from outside is a triviality next to a courtroom, in the archive of my head weighs the same as a courtroom.

A year and a bit after that living room I moved into a house of my own, the first in many years that wasn't anybody's living room and wasn't a flat full of broken people, with Kira riding shotgun on the car seat. From my window you can see the mountain. I go out with the coffee in my hand and every morning I think the same thing, and I don't think about the mountain: I think about what's behind me when I turn round. What frightens me I wrote on the first page, that they'll shut me away and I'll be left without Laia and without my cat. Laia, if they shut me away, somebody will explain it to. She'll get a train, or the car, she'll sit in a chair on a ward and start counting days, which is what she does. Kira, nobody is going to explain it to. A cat doesn't know what a courtroom is or a year of committal. The only thing she knows is that one day you go out of the door the way you've gone out a thousand times and this time you don't come back. And she sits down to wait. And goes on waiting. That's what turns my stomach at eight in the morning, with the mountain in front of me and the mug in my hand: that a cat should be left waiting at the door for a man who was taken away for being ill.

And then I tell myself not today. That today the two of them are here. And I drink the coffee, and that's that.

Chapter 50 • No Straight Line

First the joints, then the tobacco, then the alcohol. That's the order in which they went, and it's the order in which they crossed the line, not the order in which they ran, because none of the three races was in a straight line. I'm going to tell them with all their bends in for two reasons: because the story that you stop drinking by force of character has done a lot of people harm, and because my character was good for holding out for stretches, never for holding out for years.

The drugs all stayed inside that flat the day I shut the door, and since then not a line and not a pill has gone into my body that doesn't come in a box with my name printed on it. The joints lasted longer, because next to the rest a joint doesn't look like anything, and that's precisely where it hides. It also hides behind the oldest alibi in the world, which I had assembled and well assembled one afternoon, fresh out of the hospital after the embolism, when my sister saw what I was posting and wrote to me that I was losing the plot and that I should cut out the using, please. I answered with the artist's case: that half the songs had been written with wine and with weed, that I was a Bukowski, that under the influence I wrote better and felt more intensely. She answered that the problem was precisely that excuse, because with that excuse you use more and never stop; that I was strung out; and that the loop wasn't going to be taken away from me by drugs. The joints were the first on the list and the last of the drugs, by then in the new house, and I can't remember the day. What I remember is the alibi, which sounds convincing right up to the exact second when you stop needing it.

The tobacco went next, one autumn, and about that I want to tell something that took me by surprise. Since then I've had the morning coffee without a cigarette and I don't miss it. Not at all. That cigarette was the good one, the only one I really liked, and it was good for a reason that had nothing to do with tobacco: I used to smoke it with Marta. Her with her mug and me with mine, the smoke between the two, and the eight in the morning conversation, which was

the best of the day. Without her there, the cigarette was worth nothing. I don't miss the one with her, because I already know that one isn't coming back. And the one on its own turns out to have been nothing.

Alcohol is the long bend. The first day without drinking I announced to my sister that same night, in the spring before the trial with the screen, and the report I sent her is the exact measure of where the bar was set: that I'd had a shower, that I hadn't touched alcohol and that I'd been splendid in all my dealings with people. A few minutes later I let out the real reason: that I couldn't turn up at that trial half cut. Which is to say that it wasn't health that pulled me off the bottle. It was looking at myself in the mirror and working out that you don't walk into a courtroom with a face like that. And even the origin of that has its explanation, because the day before I'd been drinking for Marta's birthday. After that the sawtooth begins. Three days after that first day achieved, my sister was still having to ask me please to stop. Over the holidays it broke again, and when she answered in the tone sisters answer in, I told her not to talk to me in that disappointed tone, that the first one disappointed was always me. Months later I wrote the sentence that sums up those two years better than anything I could add now: bloody hell, alcohol's vile, how hard this is. That was will-power, raw. Days achieved, scattered relapses, day one all over again, and a man begging his sister not to use that tone on him.

There was still one more slip, and it was one. I'd just moved into the new house, and a house move, for a head like mine, disorders every timetable at once: sleep, meals and pills. On top of that Marta's birthday fell in the middle. What I did those days wasn't go out drinking: it was try to get an apology to her, because I needed to close that, and what came back to me goes in its own chapter. What matters here is that in my illness a slip isn't a drink. It's the first domino in a row I've watched fall the whole way four times. The alcohol went for good behind the tobacco, that same autumn, and it went the way things go when they finally go: in a conversation with my sister about a food hamper, wedged into the same sentence as the pork, with a laughing emoji at the end, no pork and no alcohol.

And if alcohol is the substance of this book it's for a specific reason. People think it relaxes you. It doesn't relax you: it disinhibits. It switches off exactly the same brake that in a high phase comes switched off as standard, so it doesn't add, it multiplies. And it isn't true either that with a drink the real man comes out. What happens is that nobody's left on watch. I'm not saying the drugs did

this to me. Mine came from birth; they were the match. And let it be perfectly clear, because I'm not going to wriggle out of it: the first drink was raised by my hand, every time. From the twentieth on there was nobody left to ask anything of.

The Antabuse came last, and it didn't come after a relapse: it came before. That winter my project ended and I went on sick leave, and with the project went the last structure holding my hours in place. What has to be told here is that I knew two things at the same time. One, that I was going to decompensate. Two, that as soon as I decompensated I'd drink again. I read it in my own file the way you read a manual: a blow at work, insomnia, thoughts firing off, and at exactly the point where the head starts to run, the bottle to try to slow it down. My sister was seeing it the same way I was, and she said it in her own words, don't you go taking to the drink, eh. So I did something that a few years earlier I wouldn't even have known how to imagine: I rang my psychiatrist and asked him for the Antabuse before anything had happened. One Monday I read him out loud a report I'd drafted myself, and which that same morning I also sent to my mother, my sister, my brother and Laia. It said that I needed to stop now as a precaution, with the word written in capitals; that I hadn't hit bottom, but that precisely because I was lucid I could detect risk signals, waking abruptly at half past five with my thoughts racing and my head chewing the job and the judgment in a loop; and that I wasn't depressed, I was on alert, again in capitals. That's a man asking permission to brake. And it's the first time in my life that the part of me that keeps watch got there before the part of me that burns.

A few days later I decompensated, and what came after ended in the admission I asked for myself, which also has its chapter. But I didn't drink. At the worst of that stretch I wrote to a friend the only sentence in this whole story that is a result: that I'd been on the pill for over a month and hadn't touched a drop. The pill didn't save me from the episode, because nothing saves you from the episode. It saved me from an episode with alcohol in it, which is the version of the episode that put me in the courts. The mechanics are no mystery: if you drink, your body turns against you within minutes. It doesn't ask you for will-power. It asks you to have swallowed it that morning. It's taking the decision out of three in the morning, which is the hour at which I don't win a single argument, and putting it at eight, in front of my sister, who since that winter handles all my medication. In my kitchen there are two shot glasses that will never have

spirits in them again as long as I live: one holds the morning pills and the other the night ones.

The other thing people hang on my character without its being character is the irritability. From outside all you see is a bloke who suddenly answers with a harshness nobody asked for. But it's a symptom, as much a symptom as insomnia. In mania and in mixed states the alarm comes hypersensitive and the brake arrives late and weak: the spark gets bigger and the extinguisher smaller, and then a remark that in cold blood wouldn't so much as graze me lands as an assault. The main trigger is sleep. The hard way I learned that irritability is my number one warning: the moment I catch myself answering badly for no reason, it's time to look at how much I've slept and time to ring the doctor.

And irritability discriminates against nobody. It doesn't choose by sex, or by affection, or by rank. I spoke badly to Marta, yes, and out of that came a criminal case. And I spoke just as badly to my brother, and to my mother, and to my friends. One night, when Gabriel and I were living together, I came home drunk as a lord and set about insulting him. He came over and gave me a slap. One. No speeches. My jaw hit the floor, because I wasn't expecting it and because I knew perfectly well I'd thoroughly earned it. It's one of the only two slaps I've had in my life. The other was given to me by my father, I'd have been about nine, the day I called my brother a son of a bitch: the only slap of his whole life, accompanied by a sentence that has never rubbed out, that my mother was no bitch. Apart from that once, he never laid a finger on us, and I refuse to let the illness and the ending take that away from him in the memory as well.

If I tell it in the past tense it's for a reason: today there's hardly any irritability left in me, and the credit doesn't belong to my good intentions, it belongs to the chemistry being properly set. With the lithium where it should be, without a drop of anything and with my sleep looked after, the threshold has come back up to the height it belongs at and things slide off me the way they slide off anybody. That's the best thermometer I have for knowing I'm well: that I hardly snap any more. I say hardly because sometimes what I take to sleep leaves me the next day with a touch of the shirty about me, and the difference from before is that now I identify it on the wing, name it inwardly (this isn't me, this is the pill) and cut it off before it comes out of my mouth as a bad answer. And on the days I don't catch it first, Laia catches it. She tells me I'm getting irritable. No drama.

Chapter 51 • Lidia, Again

When the case was closed, Lidia and I stopped talking normally. There was the odd message now and then, and longer and longer silences between one and the next. The closing of the case healed no wound: all it did was stop it bleeding on paper. At some point she changed her number and the channel went out altogether. More than two years with nothing. Of what happened to her during that time I'm going to tell only what's essential for understanding what came afterwards, because her story is hers and not mine: Lidia went through an episode. It didn't reach her the way mine reached me, and not through any substance, and she corrected me with every justification the day I hinted otherwise. Hers came out of fervour, out of a spiritual experience so intense that it left her with no floodgate, up to the point where everyday reality stops serving as a reference. This time the one who lost the ground under her was her. The one who knew what it is to lose it and to have no idea how you come back.

One afternoon at the beginning of that summer, newly moved in, a message came in from a number I didn't have saved: hello, Marcos, how are you. I answered within the minute, and the first thing that came out of me was to hand the question back, how was she, dear friend, that I felt terrible about the last time we'd spoken and that I hadn't dared come looking for her. And behind it, in a burst, the five-year report packed into seven lines: that I was well, that I'd given up drugs for good, that I lived alone with my cat, that I was happy. She explained why she'd written: that she'd had one of those dreams of hers and with it the feeling that it was all right now to unblock me. Two minutes later I confessed I'd just cried a bit, and I told her why, because I'd loved her a great deal back then and losing her had hurt, the way so many people who went in those years hurt. And she, the following minute: oh, but I hadn't lost her. That she'd only needed time.

Ten days later she asked whether I thought it would do us good to see each other, and in that conversation the same thing came out of both of us, each on our own and almost at the same moment. I said it would be like making peace

with my murky, mad past. She, a minute later, said she also needed to make peace with that past. We met on a Thursday that summer at a café terrace, and there wasn't one second of awkwardness: there was a hug. A hug that didn't end, and the two of us crying inside it with no need to explain anything to the other. Afterwards she told me what she'd been holding on to for some time. That now she did know what an episode is. That she could never really have known without having lived it. That she believed she'd understood it at the time, because she'd read and she'd listened, but that understanding an episode from outside and understanding it from inside are two different things, and that everything lies between the two. I cried as well. When somebody finally acknowledges the thing you've spent years explaining to people with no desire whatsoever to hear it, a weight falls off your chest that you didn't even know was still there. Lidia had to lose the ground under her to believe me. That afternoon neither of us had to apologise. The apology was in going.

Since then we talk nearly every day. She doesn't live here any more, she went back to her country, and we're still friends with thousands of kilometres in between, which is a fairly honest way of loving somebody, because there's nothing to gain. What we talk about most now is God. Her from her Christianity and me from my own thing, both of us with the same seriousness with which in our twenties we argued about Freud in the small hours. When she closes a subject by putting it in God's hands, I answer yes, but He works through us. We used to argue about whether the origin points back to the noble. Now we argue about where the locus of control is. We're the same two people. What happened to her has, in her mouth, a name that comes from her faith and not from a manual, and I don't argue with her about it, among other reasons because I've learned in my own flesh what it feels like when somebody tears out of your mouth the explanation you were giving yourself of yourself. And from those conversations I've come away wearing a sentence of hers: that we can talk without fully agreeing. With everything this book has recorded about people who stopped speaking to me precisely for not agreeing, that sentence is worth its weight in gold. She's the only person in these pages who has read what I write about her before it was published, and I corrected everything she corrected.

Then two more things arrived, both in writing, and they're the ones that really close this. The first, one night that winter: the list, numbered and with not a single reproach in it, of the reasons she left six years before. That she didn't want to watch me go back to the drugs, that one of the reasons for leaving me

was realising I wasn't going to stop on my own, and that on top of it I was hiding it from her. She's the only woman in this book who has explained to me why she left. The second arrived one morning the following spring. I'd just told her where all my own business came from, the thirteen-year-old and what came after, and I'd told her that I was well now and she shouldn't worry, that I'd loved her as much as I was capable of loving then and that losing her split me down the middle. In the afternoon she wrote this: that she was very sorry; that she hadn't been ready to have a relationship, that she hadn't finished the grieving or the letting go that would have taken; that she was sincerely sorry for having hurt me. Six years later. Without my asking. And with the precision of somebody who has done the work inside, because there's no I'm sorry about what happened in there: there's what was going on with her and why the thing had no way of turning out well. I'd spent six years waiting for that sentence without even knowing I was waiting for it, and when it came I didn't feel relief. I felt shame, because the big apology was the one I owed her, and I'd been handing it over in pieces and out of time. I answered three minutes later that I didn't blame her for anything and that I was sorry too for having hurt her. That word, blame, I've gone and looked for by hand through everything we've written to each other, because for years my head did the most comfortable and most unjust thing there is: every time I lost Marta, the blame landed on whichever woman was in front of me. Well then, the word appears aimed at her twice and both times it's to take it off her. The mechanism was inside me and I could feel it working. What was left in writing is the opposite.

A court file is repaired by closing it. An apology doesn't repair the past: it repairs the future, what from that day on will be able to happen between two people. Nothing mends the past, and the only thing that shifts it is somebody ending up standing exactly where you stood, and that can neither be asked for nor signed. Lidia didn't repair me by forgiving me, because she'd done that years before. She repaired me on a summer afternoon on which the two people sitting at the table both knew from inside what an episode is. And that the repair went in both directions has a proof, and it comes from that winter when my project ended. She wrote first, in the small hours, still knowing nothing at all: was I all right, she could tell I was a bit down and I shouldn't let that take my peace away. She was reading my mood in writing, from the other side of the world, exactly as she had in our twenties. I answered, wide awake, that my project was ending and I was thinking of applying for the incapacity pension and giving up

rowing. Her reply came in one go: that I shouldn't despair; that I could apply, though it might be a bad idea, because work is what orders my life; that I should talk it over with my psychiatrist and with my family; and that the underlying problem was the uncertainty. There's the whole of her lucidity in four lines: the comfort, the way out, the warning about the way out and the exact name of what was happening to me. And immediately afterwards, with no transition at all, she started telling me about her own business. That's the difference between somebody who attends to you and somebody who's with you.

Not long ago she wrote to me that she's glad I'm her friend, that she values it a great deal and that she knows the advice I give her is for her own good. From the woman who stood on the other side when I came out of that ward to the woman who thanks me for a piece of advice there are six years, two episodes (mine and hers), a conversion and a lot of work on both sides. And that chair on the first ward, the one that belonged to somebody else and that she ended up sitting in, is still hers. Of all the people who stood on the other side back then, the one with the most reasons to condemn me was the first to step away from it and the only one who came to put her arms round me.

Chapter 52 • The Third Date

Laia turned up in the same month I moved into the new house, which was also the month I finally closed the Marta business, and that goes in its own place. She didn't turn up with film music. She turned up without warning. The first message was written by her and it already had her character inside it: she introduced herself laughing at herself, and three hours later she apologised for having crashed out on the sofa, that one isn't up to nights out any more. Dry humour, no pose. On the third day of knowing each other, with my verses reaching her at unreasonable hours, she came out with a sentence no woman had ever said to me at the beginning: that I should tell the muses to let me sleep, because otherwise it's harder to function afterwards. Third day, and that woman was already looking after my sleep. That same afternoon came the other one: that I shouldn't worry, that when she can't, she doesn't answer, and that she's a bit radical about it. Nobody had ever said such a thing to me. And with those two sentences eleven years of panic at silence came to an end, because when somebody warns you on day three that there'll be days with no answer, the silence turns into information and stops being a threat.

About her I'm going to tell only what's necessary, because it's no good exposing anybody in a book that's about me. She's got where she's got on her own merits, with an independence she earned by herself, and even so she chooses to be in a couple, which is the opposite of what people do when they pair up because they can't be alone. She'd looked after her own family for years, with a long illness in the house, and out of that she got something nobody teaches: that being beside somebody at his worst isn't an emotion, it's a technique. That's why she isn't frightened of me and doesn't pity me. Three weeks after we met she watched the whole trilogy of videos in which I explained my life, and wrote to me that it had been quite a ride. And she stayed. On the first date I told her everything, with no preamble: the diagnosis, the proceedings, the judgment pending, the admissions, the straps, the Marta business. Whole. And I sat there watching to see whether she'd get up.

"That's what happened to your brain in those moments," she said. "Not what you are."

"Not everybody sees it that way."

"Not everybody has bothered to look."

And she went on with her dinner, as though she'd just said the most ordinary thing in the world. To her it was. That first date was in my place, the village on the mountain: the one with the tree and the hailstorm, the one with the house I didn't dare sign for with Marta. I took the new woman to the very place where years before I'd asked the sky for a sign, and this time nothing miraculous happened. Only two people having dinner and walking back slowly. Walking back towards the car we held hands. That was the end of the date, the whole of it. And it was exactly like being thirteen again, when with Britney holding hands was already the event of the day. It wasn't until the third date that I kissed her, and we hadn't discussed it: we both waited. When it finally happened we spent the afternoon kissing like two kids, without moving from there or going anywhere. In the first song I wrote for her afterwards I put that kissing her had been arriving home. It's the exact word and it's taken me forty years to find it. Laia is my home.

And to explain that word I have to describe a figure I use to understand myself. It comes from science fiction novels, the ones where the hero finds out that somebody has touched the past and that the life he's living isn't the one he was meant to have: there's a timeline that was his and another one he's ended up in. My head, when it broke, used to build realities with that aesthetic, and that has already been told; now I know it's a metaphor, the most exact one I have. There was a line that belonged to me. It was Marta's: the flat in the old quarter and the beers with friends, the nine months of training, the deposit on a mortgage that was in my wages and that went on drugs for three. In that line Marta and I ended the way ordinary couples end, and none of the rest of it happened. None: not the hotel, not the courts, not the straps, not the hundred and fifty-five kilos. That line was cut in the winter of the suitcase, and it was cut by two things at once: an undiagnosed illness and a suitcase. The day she packed that suitcase I didn't lose a partner. I changed dimension. From one day to the next I was dropped into a line where I had a chronic illness with a name, a pill for the rest of my life, a stranger sitting in the chair that had been hers, and her far away but talking to me every day, which is the worst of all the distances. And in that line I lived six years the way the character in those novels lives: knowing that this

wasn't my life, hunting for the point where it had gone wrong so as to undo it, writing to the people from the previous line as though from there they could send me back. That's what the messages to Marta of those two years were, and the hotel, and a good part of what was afterwards called stalking: a man trying to get back to a line that no longer existed.

And now the turning point, which in those novels always happens in a small scene. On the third date with Laia, the afternoon of the kissing, I felt I was at home. Not in a new house: at home, the one I'd lost that winter, at the same temperature. And that's where I understood what the hero of those novels understands at the end: that you mustn't go back to the previous line, because the previous line doesn't exist and because in this one there's already what you were looking for in the other. What the illness and the suitcase decided was which of the two lines I was going to stay in. What that kiss decided was that the line I'd stayed in should stop being an exile and become my home. Since then I don't write to anybody from the other line to be sent back. I write to them, when I write, to close, which is the opposite. And I'll say the missing half too: if Marta hadn't left, the woman of my life would still be her. In the line that belonged to me it was her; in the one I ended up living it's Laia, and it isn't a consolation prize: it's that everything that happened, even the worst of it, kept turning me into the man she needed. Marta was the first home. Laia is the home I've reached having finally learned to read the plans.

And the first difficult moment came early, and I tell it because it might be of use to somebody. I'd been sleeping badly for days. It wasn't the insomnia of the episodes, which has its own texture and is recognisable, it was the insomnia of fear, the kind that gets you up at four with the what-if already sitting on your chest. What if she goes the way they all went. What if this is the high phase in disguise as love again. What if I'm the one who breaks it. I didn't say anything to her. She noticed on the third day.

"When did you last sleep properly?"

"I don't know."

"Have you spoken to your doctor?"

"I've got an appointment on Thursday."

"Can you bring it forward?"

"I don't want to be the nuisance who rings his psychiatrist between appointments every time something goes round in his head."

"It isn't about the rumination. It's about what the rumination is doing to your sleep."

I said her name, nothing else, to stop her. And she asked me how long I'd been telling her I was all right when I wasn't all right. I said I hadn't told her I was all right. That I'd told her I was here, she answered, which is my version of I'm all right. So tell her how I really was. I told her I was frightened. That this will never end. That there'll always be another letter, another threat, another set of proceedings. She asked what happened if that fear was real. I said it was real. She asked what I could control. How I respond, I said. The treatment. Not drinking. Writing to Claudia even if she doesn't answer. And the Nuria business: letting go of it, stopping looking back.

"Then start by sleeping. The Nuria business isn't going to be sorted out tonight, and you've gone three nights without shutting your eyes. Tomorrow you ring the doctor. Tonight you sleep. And I'll stay here, because that's what I came for."

And she stayed. Not to mend me, because I'm not a broken thing: I'm an ill man. She stayed because, when the other person is frightened, staying is the only thing that does any good. I learned that that night, at forty years of age and with a woman beside me breathing slowly on purpose, so that my body would copy the rhythm of hers. And what she did that night is in the manuals, and she hadn't opened one: it's what I already described when I talked about Marta, the person beside you who protects the sleep and defends the timetable. She didn't ask me what was going on inside me and she didn't let the three days go by. She asked me when I'd slept and when I had a doctor's appointment. Laia says I love you to me less often than she says go to bed, or get some rest. And that's the loveliest way anybody has ever had of saying it to me, because anybody can say I love you, and go to bed is only said by somebody who knows that if I don't sleep I get ill. And about the pills, one morning: that she knew I knew, but that she had to say it, that I should take the morning ones. She doesn't police me: she keeps me company. And in the middle of the following winter's decompensation, when I was doing a thousand revolutions with paperwork and it was snowing, she wrote to me to stop for two minutes and have a nice warm coffee looking at the snow. That's what somebody who knows what's happening says to a man in prodrome.

And when out of that winter came the admission I asked for myself, which goes in its own chapter, she wrote good morning and good night to a switched-

off phone. Every day. And she came three days running to collect me. I had to let her watch me walk into an acute ward with a bag holding three changes of clothes and no laces, and come back the next day, and not run away from the shame. And that, letting myself be loved without shining, is the hardest thing I've done in my life. All I knew was being loved in a high phase. Laia doesn't love me in spite of that, and not because of it. She loves me whole, with no need whatsoever for the man I used to be. And accepting that somebody loves me precisely in the phase everybody else used as a reason to leave has been the real reconstruction, far more than the lithium. She has her character. Sometimes she's brusque, and when she gets angry and goes quiet, that silence does me a damage that isn't hers to do, because it lands exactly where I was broken as a kid; and even so I tell her, we talk about it and it passes, which is exactly what had never happened to me with anybody. She doesn't believe in God and I do. She calls me a flatterer, because I hand out I love yous the way you hand out bread, and she says it with half a smile. And when something belongs to both of us, she says it's very us.

This summer we went back to the tall hotel, to the same floor I'd slept on with Marta years before and where I later broke completely. After what I caused the last time, there was a rule in there with my name on it: I wasn't allowed back up. And at reception somebody decided I was. He told me he trusted me. There wasn't a single problem. For the first time that hotel was only a hotel: a high room with a view of Barcelona, with a woman asleep beside me and a man awake thanking nobody in particular. And I'm happy. I use that dull word because it's the exact one and because for twenty years I couldn't use it without lying: happy, in love and, above all, calm. Getting up and knowing how the day is going to go, and who's going to be there, and that nothing is going to happen.

Chapter 53 • The Letter

That spring I couldn't get up a flight of stairs. The anticoagulant was newly in me, the clot a few months back down the road and my life reduced to a small window, which is what the depression after an episode leaves you when on top of it your body has come within millimetres of stopping. And in that state I did something that, told quickly, looks like something else. Months earlier word had reached me that Raquel was pulling out of that project, and with the news came a curiosity that isn't noble and doesn't have to be: I was the one who'd introduced them, and I wanted to know whether the table I'd set was still standing. I opened an account with no name on a social network and asked to follow Nuria, who accepted me without asking who I was. I went in twice, looked at very little, got bored, and the account sat there dead. The only real use I put it to was writing to Raquel to ask her for an apology I'd owed her for years. She accepted it. Two days later the letter arrived.

My sister knew about it the same day, because my sister knows everything the same day: she asked me who else I'd written to with that account, warned me that Nuria might go off, and got on with her own thing. That I had to give up all the addictions, that the moment I get agitated it comes out of me. That all means ALL, with her capitals. That yes, I told her, even poetry. That night she stayed over at my house. Raquel, meanwhile, told Nuria to check whether that account was following her.

The letter didn't come to me. It went to Sonia, and it said so inside, that she wanted my sister to know what she was sending me. I wasn't reachable, or I was reachable in a way that frightened her, and that was the only door she had left open. Sonia passed it to me one night; I read the whole thing and deleted the chat, which is what I do with everything I can't hold, and the next morning I asked her for her copy, and this chapter comes out of that copy. I'm not going to paste her text in here, because it's hers. I say what it says and that's that.

It opened by warning me what it wasn't: not a hand held out, not an open door. It was her turn to speak, and what she was sending me was the itemised

bill for what my acts had cost her. That I wasn't aware of the damage those videos of that winter had done her. That I'd helped bring the episode about myself, by surrendering to the addictions and taking the easy road, letting narcissism, egocentrism and delusions of grandeur win the game. Then came what it had cost her in sleep, in body and in money, and I don't copy it because it's hers; I say that I believe all of it, and that part of it was produced by me with what I recorded. That the nameless account was getting back into her life from behind anonymity, and that she lived under an obligation to ask every person she met online to prove he wasn't me. That I hid behind my mental health without lifting a finger to get it back. That every time I came near her I did something unbearable to her. That she knew about the recordings I'd been reported for and that my version, the one I'd told her in tears on her sofa, was a lie. That I wouldn't stop needing to be listened to until they locked me up, so that the few strays who still put up with me would validate my role as a victim. And there, among everything else, written down, the word: abuser.

Then came the warning. That the next communication between us would be through lawyers. That she had everything saved and that if she hadn't reported me it was because of the affection she has for my family. That now she did have what it takes, that this meant sending me straight to prison and that her hand wouldn't shake. That if that letter wasn't warning enough for me, she'd expose me in public with my full name. That none of it was threats, that they were realities. And she finished off by talking to me about my own people: that I should give my mother a peaceful evening of her life, and my daughter the legacy of a man who fought for his life, and not what I was leaving her. That I was mean-spirited and vengeful. And goodbye for ever, no drama.

That night my sister wanted to know whether I was all right, and what came out of me I put ahead of everything else: that it hurt me enormously not to have seen it coming, but that I hadn't read anything I wasn't expecting, only that I was worse than I'd expected. Sonia answered what she has always thought, that the mistake was not accepting that I had to detox. Using equals getting worse and cock-ups. Note the formula down, because it's exactly the same one that holds up the letter, and it's signed by two women who are nothing like each other. In the morning I did the only thing I did in the whole business: left my sister a letter for Nuria in writing. It told her that she had been there when there was almost nobody left and that even so I'd dragged her down with me; that I hadn't even done it meaning to, but out of not knowing how to brake; and that I wasn't

writing so she'd forgive me, but to tell her that I was trying to repair things. I don't know whether she ever read it. Hers I didn't answer, then or ever. The account disappeared.

And now what I answer from today, which has cost me two years, and I answer it by mechanism and not by grievance, because you defend yourself against a grievance and you find out about a mechanism. I start with the beam that holds up the whole letter: that I helped bring the episode about. A manic episode with psychotic symptoms is chosen by nobody. And in somebody like me using isn't the easy road either: it's what clinically is called self-medication, and the comorbidity between this disorder and substances is the highest in the whole of psychiatry. Saying I collaborated in bringing it on makes the same sense as reproaching an epileptic for having collaborated in his seizure by sleeping badly. Sleep has an influence, of course it has, and even so it occurs to nobody to look for intention in the arm that fires off on its own. It's also told backwards, because that was a chain and chains have an order. First the net fell away: the two people who were my entire world, and a circle that had already been warned that I was a danger. Afterwards, and only afterwards, the drugs came back to look for in chemistry what was no longer there in people. Then sleep broke. And at the end came what always comes when a head like mine spends weeks sleeping three hours, using, with nobody round it and a demand for years of prison on the table. Of those links, the letter names not one. It takes the second, the using, promotes it to first cause and adds three words to it that, applied to this, don't appear in any manual.

The second thing is what those three words take as read: that that winter my true version finally came out, the one that had been covered up for twelve years. Well, the manual that diagnoses me says exactly the opposite. What I have is a mood disorder: episodic, with phases, with remissions. A personality disorder is another chapter of the manual and is defined by the opposite, a stable pattern from early adulthood, present in every context, medicated and unmedicated. And the manual itself warns that mania imitates narcissistic grandiosity, that alcohol imitates traits that aren't there, and that this is why you don't diagnose a personality during an episode. To be able to call an episode an episode it also requires that the change should be uncharacteristic of the person when he isn't symptomatic. That that man didn't resemble me isn't the excuse I'm producing now: it's the requirement that had to be met for me to be given the diagnosis. If that bloke had been me, I wouldn't have this diagnosis.

And she had the proof in her hands, with no need to believe me: twelve years of knowing me, her sofa, her table. If that had been what I am, it would have come out before, and not only in the exact weeks when I wasn't sleeping, was drinking and had gone eleven months with nobody adjusting my medication. A trait doesn't appear only when sleep and chemistry fail, and doesn't disappear when they're put right. Symptoms do. And the experiment has been done: at thirty-three they put me on lithium, and from then on the insults disappeared, the small hours collapsed and the apologies multiplied; and in the episode that came afterwards, with the illness treated and without a single substance in me, the thing came to a few videos nobody watched and went out by itself in a matter of days. A character isn't switched off by a salt. A state is. And what was left underneath when the state went was a man who apologised fifty times and blamed himself even for what he hadn't done: the exact opposite of what a narcissist lacks, which is guilt. For two years I thought that was me, and that idea has done me more damage than the courts. It was me with no brake, which isn't the same as me with no mask. The mask, if anything, is the one I wear when I'm well, and it's called the prefrontal cortex.

And the other word, the one on the placard. An abuser is a specific thing, and I'm not the one who defines it: somebody who isolates, who controls the money, the phone and the timetable, who degrades daily and in cold blood and makes humiliation a sustained strategy, without a drop of guilt. It needs years. Between Nuria and me there was never a single one of those pieces: we weren't a couple, there was no shared economy and no dependency of any kind. Marta, who did live with me, never called me that, and none of the cases was ever about abuse. The only person in my life who maintains that word is the one who knew me least and the one who asked least. And there's an experiment from fifty years ago that explains how that's done without lying: a group of people were shown a car accident, and some were asked how fast the cars were going when they hit each other and others when they smashed into each other; the smashed group remembered more speed, and a week later twice as many of them remembered having seen broken glass that wasn't there. A word placed on top of a memory produces broken glass. She took the word and went with it looking through twelve years, and she found them, because they're always found. And the same thing happened to me with hers: for two years I looked in myself for the narcissist in her letter and I found him too. Neither of us was lying. That's what the archive is for, that's what the dates are for.

And it hasn't stopped. To this day she goes on telling everybody who'll listen that I'm an abuser with five complaints against him, and two friends of mine, who were part of none of this and who I'd told nothing to, have stopped speaking to me because of it. I note it down with no identifying details and without sending it back, because sending it back would be the same method, and the method is exactly what I'm arguing with. I give the addends and I don't give the sum. And of the strays, one is a real one, Kira, the one my sister found for a man sunk by the complaints; the others go in their own chapter. What really decides how that letter has to be read fits in one line. In all its pages the word bipolar doesn't appear once. Not prodrome, not episode, not psychosis, not mixed state. She's describing, one by one, the symptoms of an illness whose name she knows because I told it to her, and she describes them as though they were my way of being. I wrote my part inside an episode that a court recognised in writing. She wrote hers a year and a half later, with no fever and no urgency, knowing from my sister that I was convalescing from a clot in both lungs. One of them was dictated by an illness. The other wasn't.

Chapter 54 • The Admission I Asked For

Ten months after that letter I signed for the fifth admission of my life. It was the only one I asked for myself, and the only one of the five in which the woman who loved me sat in the chair beside me. And it starts, the way nearly everything of mine starts, on a channel. For almost two years I'd had another channel on the side where I posted nothing but songs, hundreds of songs with the words written by hand and the music put there by a machine: my sound diary from the period when my head couldn't hold a long piece of writing. My sister uploaded them, being the filter I hadn't had in the winter of the videos, and she listened to them crying at the office. That winter, signed off sick and with no project, I'd been in a mixed state for weeks, with broken sleep and narrowed judgement, and the channel changed its nature. I recorded videos under pseudonyms, with my voice distorted by a machine, taking Nuria's letter apart point by point. Almost nobody watched them. They weren't after humiliation. They were after a voice.

And there I made the mistake I still regret: I sent two of those videos to Inés, to her email, with one single thing asked for in writing, that she shouldn't tell Nuria. Inés rang Nuria. Nuria went into the channel and saw the video in which I'd dared to answer her back. With the trauma I carry with her, the moment I decompensate the ruminations come out by themselves: the brain grabs the biggest wound it has, grinds it at four in the morning and throws it out wherever it can. That time it threw it out through a channel nobody was watching. I didn't name her, I didn't look for her, I didn't write to her.

On the Thursday, mid-morning, my sister wrote from work: that I should delete from the channel everything to do with them, and delete it NOW, in capitals, because one of them wanted to talk to her and that meant something had reached her. That she felt like strangling me. That she couldn't take any more, that she genuinely couldn't take any more. And within a few minutes the idea appeared, and it appeared in her mouth and not in anybody else's from outside: a voluntary admission, to detox me from all that and get me out of the loop. Six

hours later I wrote that the channel was deleted. Not part of it: all of it. Hundreds of songs with the words written by hand, two years of a man shut in his house doing the only thing he knew how to do with what was going on inside him. I deleted them myself, with my own finger, on a Thursday afternoon, so they'd leave my sister alone. Nobody forced me, and that's exactly what makes it worse. By nightfall all I was capable of writing was that they'd terrified me and that I was frightened of going out into the street. Of that week I keep one image above all the others, and it isn't of anybody threatening me. It's of my sister hiding the tranquillisers round the house and giving them to me one at a time, one behind the monitor, another behind a photo frame. One for the whole day, and I should work out the timing carefully, because Laia was coming in the afternoon and she wanted me to receive her awake.

On the Friday I asked my sister whether she could get hold of some kind of proof that I was being forced into an admission under threat of a complaint, to cover our backs. The answer, within the minute, makes it clear who was in charge in there: that I couldn't lie about my symptoms, that they show on me, and that somebody who isn't acute doesn't get admitted. That same Friday I wrote to her that the worst of it had passed all at once, and in the same minute I wrote the other half, that I was still terrified. This whole chapter fits in there, in two lines: the episode had gone out, the fear was still on.

On the Monday Nuria sent my sister a message to pass on to me. That she'd spent days listening to everything I'd said about her on the internet over two years, that she'd gone nights without sleeping, and would she tell me, woman to woman, whether that can be forgiven in anybody. And underneath came the list of what I'd said. I don't copy it here and I never will: I said things to her that I'm not going to repeat, the kind that sink a person. It closed with the only line that wasn't an insult but a reproach, that I'd told her I'd never report her and that this made me a liar. Underneath came the conditions: delete all the material that had anything to do with her and sign a silence that would last the rest of my life. And through my sister's hand came the order of the steps: the admission first, a lawyers' document afterwards, and a heavy payout waiting if I broke it. The other thing came too, which leaves me looking worse and which I put in anyway: that she didn't want to report me, and that she was having an awful time. On the other side of that there wasn't a woman scheming anything. There was a woman who couldn't sleep because of what I was publishing.

I answered in under ten minutes that I'd sign it and that I retracted everything. And I spent the whole day dictating messages to my sister, all of them beginning the same way, with two words: tell her. Tell her I'll sign with no problem. Tell her tomorrow I'll do whatever it takes to get myself admitted. Tell her I'll never refer to her again in my life. And one I'm not going to take out of here because it's the worst of the lot: that she should tell them I was much worse than I was. A man of forty negotiating his surrender through his sister, and offering to exaggerate his illness in exchange for being left in peace. That same afternoon a sentence reached me that went across my face like a hand, and it went across it because it came from inside my own house. Sonia said it after spending the day acting as a bridge: that she's a good person, honestly, but that I've done her too much harm. I'd spent two years manufacturing a character, and the person who'd been at all five of my admissions was warning me that that character wasn't her. I retract all of it. The complete list. And I stand by that today, calm and with my head where it should be.

On the Tuesday I went to my psychiatrist's clinic, and this has to be told very carefully. I didn't lie to him. I didn't fake a single symptom I didn't have. I put on the table what there was: the videos, the list, the lawyers, the document, my sister turned into a switchboard, and the fact that I needed it on record in writing that I was going into treatment of my own accord. And it was he, seeing me as he saw me, who authorised the voluntary admission to save me from worse. I walked out into the street with the paper in one hand and a long hour of panic inside me, because the report had manic episode written on it, and with those two words printed the normal thing is for you to be sectioned, and a sectioning isn't lifted by the patient when he feels like it. I sent my sister the rucksack report, which is the detail only somebody who's been inside writes: no trousers with drawstrings, three changes of clothes. She answered that I should take more clothes, that you can't do laundry in there, and that I shouldn't forget socks. And Laia, working that day and answering me between one thing and another, did the little that can be done from outside: reminded me that this admission wasn't like the previous ones and asked me to find one good thing in it and hold on to that. Then came the most honest sentence said all day: that I should do what I could, that she hadn't the faintest idea how, that she was going in blind and with no steering wheel.

I went in on the Wednesday afternoon, on foot, with my rucksack, at the hospital in the north. From the waiting room I wrote to Laia: they're admitting me, I

love you. She answered within the minute: I love you. And behind it: you've got balls like I've never seen. Head up. Be smart. To me a ward isn't a hospital: it's the place where my body goes back to being thirteen. And even so I went in. Laia came up with me. The room had a bed, a chair and a window facing the wall of the building opposite; we sat there and were quiet for a long while. Then she started to cry, the way somebody cries who had decided not to cry and finds out that her body takes its own decisions.

"It isn't fair."

"No."

"You shouldn't be here."

"No."

"I'll come back tomorrow."

I started to tell her there was no need and she said it again: I'll come back tomorrow. It wasn't an offer. It was a fact, just as with Sonia everything is facts and never offers. And on that ward, for the first time in five admissions, somebody who had chosen to stay sat down and cried with me instead of waiting outside for it to pass. That was where I learned all at once the difference between being held down and being kept company.

It was the worst ward I've been on, and I've got plenty of material to compare. The rooms locked by day and by night, which translated means that for three days you can't lie down or shut a door behind you; the entire life of the place taking place in a common room with the strip lights on and the shouting of the ones who were worst off bouncing off the tiles; one bathroom for the whole ward. I spent nearly three days sitting in a plastic chair, lucid, looking at a wall with an out-of-date magazine in my hand. I saw my fellow patients exactly as Laia saw them from outside, people who were in a terrible state; and Laia saw me, who was well, in there with them. That destroyed her. After forty-eight hours I asked to discharge myself and they gave it to me without argument, because the staff could see perfectly well that there was nothing in there to be treated on a locked ward. And the one who ended up getting me out was the same one who on the Tuesday had told me not to run: my sister, horrified at the conditions.

The word voluntary, here, is misleading. When all this started I was unwell, and I don't dispute it. But six days went by between that Thursday and the admission, and in six days a short decompensation goes out, all the more so if along the way you get the fright of your life. When I asked for the bed I no

longer met the clinical criteria for admission: I was lucid, without a single psychotic symptom, and what I needed was a medication adjustment and some sleep, not a ward locked with a key. I signed because of the ultimatum, not because of the illness, and that's exactly what makes an admission iatrogenic: a punishment in a white coat. Thirty years ago somebody measured that the paper you sign and the coercion you feel are two different axes: there are patients admitted by force who don't feel forced, and patients who sign in their own hand and score extremely high on coercion. What separates the one from the other isn't decided by the law. It's decided by whether the person had a voice while decisions were being made about him. And here a phone call would have been enough: the day Sonia asked me to take that stuff down, it was down before dark. What Nuria wanted has to be said in full: she wanted me to be well, and that's why she asked for an admission and not a prosecution, having one within reach and not bringing it; and she wanted, I imagine, nobody rewriting her story behind her back, which is exactly what I've been doing with mine throughout this book. What there was was a decompensated man recording things and a frightened woman trying to stop him with the only thing she had to hand, which was fear. What always gets chosen is the instrument. And it was paid for by two people who weren't even in that argument: Laia and my sister.

And yet. From the hotel I was taken out by police officers, delirious. This time I walked in on my own two feet, with my rucksack packed and the woman who loves me beside me, and the day I was asked to take down what I'd published it took me a few hours to delete the lot. The same man, the same illness. The only thing that changed was who was deciding. Asking for help isn't a character trait: it's a skill, you learn it late and the hard way, and I learned it in the worst possible place and for the worst possible reason. I came out of there with three things clear. That I wasn't going to give way any further. That I was going to let go of the Nuria business, because the past had stopped being a place I wanted to go on living in. And that I was going to write this story. The psychologist at the association asked me whether it was a good idea to stir all that up. I told her it wasn't a question of stirring it: it was a question of putting it in order. Stirred it had been for years.

Chapter 55 • The Nightmares

That spring, the one with the clot, I went up the mountain with my sister with a USB stick in my pocket, and told in cold blood it sounds ridiculous and yet it cured me: two years of recordings made almost daily in a group I'd opened for that and nothing else, with Marta's name on it, and in which there was nobody. Two years of apologies addressed to a woman who was never going to hear them. I buried it up there, under my tree, the one from the hailstorm. I said her name out loud, thanked her for what she'd given me and for what her pain had taught me, and let her go, with Sonia watching, she being the only person in front of whom you can make a sacred fool of yourself without feeling like a fool. No lightning struck. The two of us came down the mountain a little lighter. And it's still up there, under a tree that people walk past every weekend without the faintest idea what's underneath. I genuinely believe that gave it its force.

And the other thing from that month I didn't do. Her forgiveness reached me, through my sister, six and a half years after I started asking for it from a twelve-square-metre room, and it's the biggest thing anybody has given me in these years, doctors included. Why, I'm not going to say. What it did to me, I will: it let me go. I stopped writing songs for her, and not because I stopped loving her, but because for the first time in five years I no longer had anything to ask her for, and a man with nothing to ask for can finally look somewhere else. Three weeks later Laia came in through the door that forgiveness had left open. I don't give thanks for it in words, which have done quite enough damage where I'm concerned: I give thanks for it by staying where I am.

Forgiveness and reconciliation aren't the same thing, and the distinction was given to me by a prayer that isn't mine. In Judaism there's a prayer said every night before sleep: Master of the Universe, I forgive and pardon anyone who has angered or offended me, or who has sinned against me, against my body, my property or my honour, whether by accident or by ill will, in word or in deed; and let no human being be punished on my account. It doesn't say that tomorrow the other person can come back in, or that he gets the key back. It says

that you let go of what's yours so that you can sleep. Forgiving is what you do with your own resentment; letting yourself be hurt again is a different decision, and that one isn't in the prayer. I've done it in that order. The first thing, every night it was needed. The second, no. And it's all forgiven, on my side and genuinely, with no small print: Marta, Nuria, Raquel, Inés. Nuria is the only one who hasn't been able to forgive me, and I asked her many times; but the only half that depends on me is mine, and that one is done.

And now what forgiveness doesn't take away, because forgiving cleans the inside and doesn't touch the body. I'm afraid. It isn't a manner of speaking: it's a reaction measurable in heartbeats. I have Marta's two pictures hanging on the wall and I can't read her name without a shiver going through me, the same one an ambulance gives me. I don't miss her: I'm afraid of her, and not of her, who I've let go, but of her name on a file, of her complaints, which are still alive in an appeal nobody resolves. Fear that the appeal will shut me away for a year on a ward like the one in the previous chapter stops me adopting a dog and thinking of a future with Laia beyond next month. And with Nuria it's the same, and I don't think she knows it. I have a phobia of her, and I don't use the word decoratively. It's enough for me to read her name written anywhere and my body has gone before my head can explain that nothing's happening. The distance she asked me for I'd have needed just as much without her asking. What there is here is a man who crosses the street.

That has a name and it isn't a defect of character, not hers and not mine: it's called generalisation of conditioned fear, and it's what an alarm system does when the original stimulus was big enough, which is to stop responding to the thing that happened and start responding to everything that resembles it. To Nuria a song she recognises herself in arrives with the calibre of that winter, and to me a letter with a letterhead arrives with the calibre of a court. A trauma isn't a bad memory. It's a memory that hasn't learned that it's over.

And at night the other thing comes. The sleepless nights were taken away from me by lithium, but what happens inside the nights I do sleep hasn't been taken away by anything. I still have nightmares today, in euthymia, medicated and with my life in order, and that's written into whole years of good-morning messages: that the night had come in loaded, that the nightmares had done me in. The oldest are the ones about the admissions, and those have never stopped: one morning I told my sister I'd dreamed I was in there again, with that way they treat you in there, as if you were a minor. And then there are the three. I

dream about Marta, about Raquel and about Nuria, who slip inside without my inviting them, and never, not once, have I had a lovely dream about any of them: they come in to reproach me with something or to shut me out, frozen in the role they were given the day the thing broke. I dream about Marta over and over: in one of the last ones I was telling her I still loved her and asking her to forgive me, and she was answering that she loved me but couldn't forgive me. And what proves that this is trauma and not that I miss her is that in real life she did forgive me; what stayed inside me isn't what happened, it's something from further down and further back.

And the worst one was a night this last summer. I dreamed that what we'd had was far worse than it was, a savage campaign of abuse, that it was on the television and in the papers and that I was a pariah all over the country; and that behind it there was a secret society that had recruited me as a boy, at fourteen, that had corrupted me, and that when I'd tried to get out they'd kidnapped me, wiped my memory and changed my timeline to turn me into an abuser. That isn't a delusion that comes from nowhere. It's the story three people built for me, turned into a nightmare. Abuser was put on me by Nuria, and from her mouth it passed to the others; you break everything you touch was written to me by Raquel; and stalker was hung on me by Inés. All three took the hole Marta left when she went and then wrote on it, handed it round and turned me into the monster of a film I'd never shot. Marta is the hole; they are the lettering. And both things come back at night, together, with the same face. I work on it in therapy, and even so I can't get it out of me; the only thing I know how to do for the moment is put a name on it, which is what I'm doing here.

As for why they keep coming, years later, I give myself two answers, as a patient and not as a doctor. The first: what closed well and what closed badly don't get filed in the same drawer. What was left open is still on the workbench, and dreaming is the night shift working at that bench. There was no closing in any of those matters: the admissions ended in straps, the Marta business ended in a court, the Raquel business in a recording made on her phone, the Nuria business in a lynching. Nobody said goodbye to anybody in there, and what isn't said goodbye to ends up coming back. The second answer is more uncomfortable and strikes me as the right one: I don't dream about them. I dream about what they made me feel, and in all three cases it was a variant of the same thing: that I was surplus, that I'd failed, that I'd been thrown out of somewhere I believed I had a place.

This has no clean ending. There's this: two and a half years without a drug and, since the autumn I gave up tobacco, without a drink, with an Antabuse tablet I take every morning in front of my sister; the full regime, morning and night; psychiatrist, psychologist and the association; a house of my own; a woman beside me who doesn't leave when I get ill; my sister handling my medication and my mother sleeping soundly. And alongside it, what still isn't standing, because that's the truth too: I'm signed off sick and I'm not going back to work; I don't go out much; and the appeal is still pending, and if it succeeds all this goes back into a courtroom. And even doing everything right I can go into an episode all the same: the day my mother goes I'll probably go into one; if Laia left me, I'd probably go into one. What all those things achieve, which is no small thing, is to delay the episode, shorten it and reduce the wreckage. They don't make me invulnerable. They make me manageable, which is an ugly word and exactly the right one.

And the final reckoning. I go back over the whole list and I no longer see a row of executioners. Almost nobody in there was lying. Marta was telling her truth, that of a wrecked, frightened woman who nobody ever explained to what it was that was wrecking her. Nuria was telling hers, with the only word she had to hand for naming somebody pulling away. Raquel's was the truth of somebody trained to run at the first smell of smoke. Inés was frightened and a party to it. At none of those tables was there a shortage of goodness. What was missing was a fact, which was my illness explained, and none of the people sitting there had it, starting with the man writing this. I've said it already: ignorance doesn't cancel the effect, but it does cancel the reproach, and this book has decided to collect the effect in understanding and to leave the reproach uncollected. If anybody asks me what I'd want at this stage, the answer isn't a retraction and it isn't a judgment in my favour. It's a hug. One, of the kind you give looking at the floor and saying nothing, like Lidia's, and afterwards each of us home. And the pictures are still on the wall.

Chapter 56 • The Ones Who Stayed

What I did to deserve my mother I don't know, and I put it ahead of everything else because everything that follows hangs off it. A woman who spent years with a diagnosed husband who dropped the lithium every five minutes, who ended up burying him, and who when she saw the same cycle starting again in the second of her sons didn't run: she opened the door of her house. I have arrived at that house in states in which dignity was a word out of a dictionary, and she has changed my sheets without a single comment and put me in the shower when the days without washing were already being counted in weeks. And in the winter of the suitcase she did what a mother does with two people she loves in a house that's burning: she got out the one she could get out. She drove Marta, left her on the platform and came back to wait for me to arrive. She didn't choose a side. I owe her my life in the literal sense.

And Sonia, eight years older than me, grown up enough when our father died to carry what had to be carried, and still young enough for that load to steal pieces of her life she has never come to claim back. On the night of the first admission she did a forty-minute drive in twenty, and when she came through the door I was already down on the floor with the police coming up the stairs. She has done that five times. What she has is a background vigilance that installed itself in her between my second admission and the court, and that hasn't gone away. And a skill nobody else has: she can tell my silences apart. The good one is when I'm working, and days can go by with no news. The bad one has a different texture: shorter replies, and a hyper-precision in what I write, without the usual typos, which she has learned to read as the sign that something is being held in.

It was that silence she recognised in the autumn of the flat, and she turned up one Saturday without warning. I opened the door to her with the face of a man who hasn't shut his eyes for days. The first thing she wanted to know was when I'd last eaten, and I told her the day before, a sandwich. She opened the fridge, saw it empty and told me to sit down; I started to say there was no need and she

repeated it word for word. I sat down. She went down to the supermarket, bought three days' worth, cooked, laid the table and asked absolutely nothing. When both plates were empty, with the coffee made and some colour coming back into me, then yes: what was going on. I told her about Chapa, about the flat and about the previous months. She listened without moving a muscle in her face, and when I'd finished she wanted to know why I hadn't told her before.

"Because you're tired of being the person I tell."

"Listen to me. I'm not tired of being the person you tell. I'm tired of there being so many things that have to be told to me. And they're not the same thing."

"What's the difference?"

"That one of the two I can change and the other I can't. I can go on being your sister. I can't make your brain work differently."

I didn't answer. She asked me whether I was taking my medication, whether I had an appointment with the doctor, whether I needed her to drive me. Then she said she loved me, and since I answered that I already knew that, she demanded that I say it to her. I said it. She nodded, let out a right then, and moved on to asking me what my plans were for the weekend. That I should come over for lunch. And when I started to thank her she cut me off short, that the thank-yous had already been said and we shouldn't overdo it. Forty years serving as a wall without anybody ever asking her whether she wanted to be one. My father asked me to look after her. It has been the other way round from the first day.

And Gabriel, who is the other side of that same coin. My little brother left young for another city, our father's business caught him too small, and with me he built a way of looking at me that in twenty years hasn't shifted a millimetre: the way you look at a brother who is, before anything else, a liability. To him, symptom and character were the same thing. The real wound came with the hotel admission: I was on a ward and he had an important celebration those days, and he didn't move it. Nobody turned up there but my sister, holding everything together from outside, while he put on his suit. When I asked him about it years later he didn't defend himself with speeches: that I was very unpredictable, that life doesn't go on pause because I've been admitted again, and that comparisons with people who have cancer didn't work for him. And we were having that conversation with an episode of mine under way, and I said to him what he'd spent twenty years wanting to hear: that I wasn't even bipolar, that my problem was my personality. When it was Sonia's turn to get married, on the other hand, it was me who walked her in on my arm, in the place that

would have been our father's. When we ill people talk about our suffering it's always about judges and ex-partners; almost never about the empty chair. And even so the rest has to be told: he came back. Slowly, without the whole conversation. He told me that he had admired me in some stages, that he no longer saw me so much as a big brother, that he loved me a great deal, and that he could talk to me as long as I was on good form. He stops admiring you, he goes on loving you and he learns to attach a condition to you: that's what this illness does to a younger brother. And on the morning of my last admission, the one I asked for, he wrote that he hoped it went well, that Mum had already told him, and well done if I needed it. It doesn't wipe everything out. But it counts.

And then there's the family that came in on my sister's side. Paco came into the house when I was a kid and since then I can't remember the family without him. From him I learned what has kept me twenty years inside the labour market with the head I've got: that you go to work, and that there are obligations you don't dodge however wrecked you are. When my father died, he filled the gap without either of us ever saying so out loud. In an episode I said something unforgivable to his face, and he raised his hand and didn't bring it down on me: he held himself in and left. That goes in his column. That relationship ended up breaking, and how it broke isn't mine to tell. What is mine is this: for thirty years everybody called him by the short form of his name, and to me it's his full name now, because the short form was from when he was my family.

And with him came his mother. Amparo occupied for nearly thirty years the place of the grandmother I never had. Hundreds of afternoons in her living room, a few glasses of wine, her dark tobacco and everything under the sun and beyond it, because with her you could talk about God with the freedom a very old woman has when she's no longer afraid of any question. She met Marta, she loved her, and in two of our crises she was the bridge between us. When that broke, Amparo disappeared from my life: one day she stopped answering, with no conversation and no goodbye. With in-laws that happens to everybody; what happens is that with me a disappearance lands where it lands. And here's the part I couldn't have written two years ago: it hurts, but it doesn't put me on the floor. That's the cleanest proof I have that the treatment works.

In the prognosis of this illness there's a variable that isn't a drug and weighs almost as much: who's around you and what they know. I've already given the numbers; what they do in practice is this, that the anosognosia takes away my capacity to see my own state exactly when it's most needed and the network

sees it for me: a sister reading a silence, somebody who turns up on a Saturday with the shopping. And it has a reverse side: an empty chair at a wedding is a form of hostility even if nobody shouts, and what hostility does I've already described. What nobody measures is what it costs the one doing the holding. An elderly mother fighting the health centre switchboard to get her son a call back, on the very morning she writes that she's a bit foggy because she hadn't been able to sleep. Her sleeping badly and carrying my pill box for me.

And where they are today. My mother is still in the village, ten minutes away, she rings us every day and sends every morning one of those videos with flowers that mothers of her generation send their children. My sister, a few months ago, for the first time, wrote that she needed my help with a couple of things, and that it was important. After five years in which the one who needed was me, my sister asked me for help and I was able to give it to her. That, for me, is a better ending to this story than any judgment. Gabriel turns up and holds his part. Jordi keeps up the Tuesday calls, Mireia finds gaps to have lunch with me, and Iván sits in my kitchen with one of the beers I keep cold in the fridge, which aren't mine, while I drink an iced tea. And then there are the ones I've had to keep at a distance myself, with no resentment at all and with the same clean condition as a farewell for both of us: the day your own situation is sorted out, we'll talk. A man holding on by his fingernails can't have beside him, at four in the morning, the person offering him precisely what sets him off. For half a lifetime I have felt absolutely alone, and in some stretches of this book I was. Today I'm not.

Chapter 57 • For Claudia

The best day of these forty years was the day I turned forty. For the first time I can remember my whole family was in one place: my mother, Sonia, Laia, and Claudia with her mother, who came a long way to be there. It would look good to write here that my daughter threw herself into my arms. She didn't, and this book isn't going to lie about this either. The visit was like the ones before it: reserved, polite, slightly lost, looking at me the way you look at a jigsaw with pieces missing that nobody ever handed over. I tried to hand them over myself. One afternoon, with all the clumsiness in the world, I tried to explain to her what's wrong with me and why I was far away for so many years, and it came out badly: words, which I've spent my whole life using as scaffolding, wouldn't hold me up in front of the only person they really mattered to. I stopped halfway, and she nodded with that very polite pity they have at that age. And yet, at the airport, as we said goodbye, what hadn't happened since she was small happened: she hugged me. A shy, short hug, the kind that gets decided in the last second. The first since that little girl asleep on my chest. Three badly measured seconds that did more for me than all the medication in this book.

Out of that failure and that hug came the only thing I know how to do when my voice doesn't carry to the end: write. The letter got away from me, because so many years of silence don't fit on one sheet. Here goes the part that belongs to this book, exactly as I sent it to her, when it seemed to me that she could understand it now.

Claudia,

By the time you read this you'll be nearly a woman, and I'll be doing the same thing I do every night, and at the end I'll tell you what. I'll start with what I tried to say to you in person and couldn't, because a letter has one advantage over a father: it doesn't stammer.

I have an illness. It's called bipolar disorder, and it's the type that sometimes brings psychosis with it. It isn't a monster and I'm not going to give you euphemisms: it's an illness of the brain, of the organ you think with, and that's

why it's so hard to see from inside. It has two sides. On one, which is called mania, you don't need to sleep, everything seems possible, ideas go faster than your mouth, and you do things you afterwards don't recognise as yours. From outside that side doesn't look like an illness: it looks like a charming man full of plans, and that's why nobody spots it until it has already broken something. On the other side is the pit, and in the pit you aren't sad: you're convinced, with a certainty that admits no argument, that everything is irreversible and that the others would be better off without you. That side lies. I'll say it again because it's the most important thing in this letter: when that voice speaks, it lies.

Nobody told me until I was thirty-three. Your grandfather, who you never met, had it too, and he didn't find out in time either, and when he did find out he had nobody to hold his treatment in place. He died when I was twenty. With the same medicine that keeps me alive today. I tell you without decoration because you have a right to know where you come from, and because there's one thing I want you to know about me before any other: I am not going to do that. Ever. When you've been through somebody you love dying that way you know the damage it does to the ones left behind, and it doesn't even cross your mind. I have too many things to do, and one of them is waiting for you.

Now the part a father would rather not write. This illness is partly inherited. Not entirely, not always, and I say it so that you're frightened neither too much nor too little: most children of somebody who has it never develop it, and the ones who do develop it aren't condemned to what I've lived, because what I've lived isn't the illness: it's the illness plus twenty years with no name. And there's another thing that concerns you closely and that I tell you without the blind pride parents go in for: you're very clever, and you're good at almost everything you touch. That's yours and it's magnificent. But people who have spent years studying this illness have found that intelligence, above all the verbal kind, and this condition share part of the same ground. It isn't a threat. It's a map. And the map says this: what sets this illness off isn't mainly drugs, though they push; it's sustained stress and lack of sleep. You live with the pressure of somebody who always wins. So I'm giving you the four rules nobody gave me. Sleep; if for three nights running you don't need to sleep, that isn't energy, it's a warning. If one day you feel the storm coming, tell somebody early, even if it seems to you that you're overreacting. Not a single street drug, and I don't say it out of morality: what's being touched is the chemistry you think with. And ask for help before you need it, because asking early is the clever thing and not the weak one.

If it's ever needed, you'll have from the first day what your grandfather never had and I had late: a name, a treatment and people who know what to do.

The years I didn't reach you I'll tell you about without bitterness. I was ill without knowing it, and then ill knowing it and unable to manage it, and there were spells when I sincerely believed it was better for you that a man like that shouldn't be near. Today I know that was the pit talking. What I want you to keep is one thing only: the gaps weren't forgetting. I keep the five times I've had you near me in your whole life the way you keep stones that shine, and I hand them back to you one by one in case you were too small to keep them yourself: the kid who examined me with the seriousness of a notary and decided on the second day that this man was to be trusted; the afternoon you fell asleep in my arms; the weekend you treated me with the courtesy due to a visitor, and rightly; the octopus theory; the hug at the airport.

Now the advice, which is the part of being a father that can be done by post. For choosing people, look at two things: what they do when they get nothing out of it, and how they talk about people who aren't there, because that's how they'll talk about you one day; and keep the ones who turn up at the most inconvenient moment. On forgiveness: forgiving is putting the stone down, not absolving the person who threw it. On love: choose somebody who is genuinely made happy by what makes you happy. And be decent to the people closest to you, which is the only place that gets proved. Inside this letter I'm leaving you another, smaller one, for the bad days. And I'm leaving it written that you have a house of your own here, and that you're never going to have to choose between the places you come from.

While you're reading this I'll be doing what I promised you at the beginning: taking my pills, writing, loving the ones who stayed and leaving the door open. I'm not asking you to come. I'm telling you where I am.

Your father.

And what came after, what there is today, is silence: my daughter and I haven't spoken since that visit. I find out about her life from social media, like a stranger with a good memory. To my messages, her mother replies with silences that sometimes stretch out until they look like disappearances, and I've already said why: caution and fear. With my head I understand it perfectly. With the rest of me, no. And even so what that woman did right has to be said, and this book has not one score to settle with her: she has raised on her own a brilliant, well brought up, decent girl, and when I told her my diagnosis she

went and read about it, without my asking. One day I said to her the only thing I really needed to say: that if she ever saw an early symptom in Claudia, she should get her into treatment as soon as possible, so that she wouldn't suffer what I suffered before the name. She answered that she'd already read about it. What I put in that letter is a grain of sand on top of work that had already been done.

And this is what has to be told to a child about this illness: not the fear, the map. Inheritance can't be changed; what gets broken isn't the chain of the gene, it's the chain of silence. My aim is to stay still where I am: to write without demanding an answer, to look in without intruding, and to remain reachable and stable for the day she takes it into her head to come and find her father. Her whole childhood I missed and that can't be mended now. What's still ahead I intend to wait for on the platform, with the punctuality of a man who works on the railways. It's in my blood: my grandfather ended up working on the railways.

Epilogue • The Night Dose

I close the laptop.

Half past eleven on a summer night in the house in the village. On the sofa Kira is asleep. In the bedroom Laia is asleep. Outside, at this hour, the village is making its usual noise, which is almost none.

I go into the kitchen. On the worktop are the two shot glasses that will never have spirits in them again, and I've told that already: one holds the morning ones and the other the night ones. The night one has two lithium in it and what my doctor put me on to sleep after the last admission. Two whole ones, at night. The pill and a half is the morning one, and that half gets broken with my mother beside me. Here there's nothing to break. I tip them into the palm of my hand and swallow them with a glass of water, the same as every night for more than seven years.

And the lithium tastes of old coin. I wrote it on the first page and I repeat it on the last because it hasn't changed and it never will: it tastes of metal, of that rust the back of a peseta gives off when you run it over your tongue. Behind the taste comes the usual, in the same order and without asking my permission: my father, the orange tub beside the sink, between the scouring pad and the salt, that kitchen, the blue folder I still haven't opened. My father is behind every dose. He has been in the five thousand and more I've taken and he'll be in all the ones I have left, and I've stopped fighting with that, first because you can't and afterwards because, if I'm honest, I don't want to. He saved his up. Dose by dose, whole months of them, hidden in some corner of the house, until he had enough. I swallow mine. There's the whole difference, and it fits inside a shot glass.

Not this time.

I think it in those three exact words, every night, and it isn't a line I manufactured to round off a book: it's what lights up in my head by itself as the salt goes down. Not this time. And not because I'm stronger than he was, because I'm not, or better, or cleverer. Because I have what he wasn't given: the name of this

thing, a doctor who's the same one every month, a sister who can tell my silences apart, a mother ten minutes from here, a woman in the next room who in the mornings looks at my face before she looks at her phone, and a cat who demands warmth and food and never asks me to explain myself. With all that around it, the same pill does exactly the opposite of what it did with him. And if there's anything about this illness worth repeating, it's that: that with the same salt and the same brain you can end up dead on a piece of waste ground at sixty-six or standing up in a kitchen at forty-one, and that what decides which of the two happens isn't inside the pill. It's around it.

The book exists.

The story of my fucking life with these people is written down. With the names changed to protect whoever has to be protected and with what happened told exactly as it happened. With the first admission and with this taste. With Claudia and her map with a star on top of the place where her father lives. With Kira and her face distributed with no symmetry whatsoever. With Laia, who stayed.

It's all in here, and at last I've been the one to tell it. Written down it weighs less, and I wasn't asking this book for anything else: not to give me back what I lost, only to let me carry it a different way. What I used to do was ruminate, which also has a name and a chapter in the manuals: going round and round the same scenes and the same sentences, every morning, always in the present tense, as though the whole thing were happening to me again from the beginning. Writing something down with its order and its context sends it into the past, which is where it belongs. It stops being a wound that opens on its own and becomes a written paragraph that doesn't have to be written again. Every chapter I've closed has also closed, a little, the thing it was talking about. And it isn't that it hurts less: it's that it's been said now, and I don't have to repeat it to myself at three in the morning.

And there's an account still open with a song, because I understood half of it ten years ago, sitting on the bench of a shelter while the hail came down, and the other half I haven't understood until writing this. The song says that in the end the thing turns out like it does in the films, and that it hurts just the same. That afternoon, with the mania alight and everything still to lose, that sounded to me like a loser's consolation. Today I sign it, because it has happened to me. I compare how I handle myself now with how I handled myself then and the result is like the films. A mania I used to manage by setting fire to my life and re-

cordova in the small hours; now I manage it with lithium, with a doctor, with a woman who reads my face and with these pages. I used to lose houses, jobs, partners and friends in batches. Now there's a house, somebody who doesn't leave, a daughter who knows where her father lives, and a book in the place where before there was only rubble nobody had cleared. I used to be told by other people. Now I tell myself. So yes: like the films.

And it hurts just the same.

Marta hurts. Rocío hurts. Inés hurts. The years that stayed behind in courtrooms, on psychiatric wards and in overtime hurt, paying off what was broken by an illness nobody asked me whether I wanted. Eight and a half years without seeing my daughter hurt, and nobody is giving those back to me. The people who crossed the street when they saw me coming hurt. And it hurts in another way, a cleaner one, to know that part of that wreckage was done by me. That's what the song knew and I still didn't: that doing things right cancels no bill. You can end up well and go on hurting, because pain isn't what you pay for having done it badly. It's the mark that something was there.

I put the glass in the sink. I turn off the kitchen light. Kira doesn't so much as stir.

And tomorrow there's one to be halved. I'll ring my mother.