

# Delusions

*A Bilingual Collection of Short Stories*

JOSÉ PRATS SARIOL

TRANSLATED BY ANJA BERNARDY



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## PROLOGUE

This collection of short stories, written by José Prats Sariol and translated by Anja Bernardy, is representative of nearly 20 years of the author's works in short fiction. The stories could be grouped by various themes, such as masks and appearances; the inadequacy and even superfluity of words; and the nostalgia of exile and the bittersweet attainment of "freedom." However, while all of those, and more, lie beneath the surface of stories whose characters are often navigating the difficulties and scarcities of Cuba under Castro—or the mental labyrinths and philosophical conundrums created by the aforementioned—the collection's title alludes to the tie that binds them: delusions.

Prats Sariol's prose style—a somewhat baroque sensibility mixed with subtle humor and often poetic descriptions—goes well with the theme of delusions, appearances, and the questioning of an imposed reality, a reality which in its nature and implementation is often contradictory to the very discourses used to impose it. This can lead to a questioning of words and language itself, and therefore, of how we create an image of our selves and ourselves. In that sense of a hermeneutic spiral, Prats Sariol dialogues with other

notable literary figures, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Juan José Arreola, and Antonio Benítez Rojo, among others; these dialogues, which do not require the reader to be familiar with the texts alluded to, offer another layer, more texture. Bernardy's translations perfectly reproduce Prats Sariol's engaging stories and lively dialogue, full of the double-entendres that so often mark Caribbean speech. She has captured the essence of the Cuban experience in the English language by keeping the stories in their original settings and utilizing mostly Spanish names for proper nouns.

I first met José Prats Sariol as a student in his monographic course on Lezama Lima—our own *curso délfico*—in which we bonded over our love for difficult and stimulating literature, and he helped foster the importance of translation as a critical method of analysis, affirming it at a time when others were discouraging it. Through him, and really, through the written word—that method that so often brings linguaphiles together—I met the translator, Anja Bernardy. When I read her translation of Prats Sariol's novel, *Lila's Sorrows* (Verbum 2015), it not only showcased her talent to me, but impressed me in the magnitude of its undertaking, including the poetry translations at the end. In this collection, her talents shine again. Aside from authentically transmitting the complexities of form, speech patterns and cultural context, her titles in English are particularly well chosen. They are also examples of Bernardy's critical eye and ability to keep the “mood” of the originals, including their implicit ironies. “In the Shadow Zone” (for “Zona de Sombra”) and “Croquette Mini Sandwiches without Bread” (for “Bocadito de croqueta

sin pan”) caused some anguished discussion for their ambivalences (the former) and cultural referents (the latter). A story that seems to have been written in a Borgesian universe—and which, in fact is “in memory of ‘Nightmares’” from his *Seven Nights* lecture series—, “In the Shadow Zone” is as cryptic and labyrinthine as any Borges story, and the title acts as portal into that universe.

The collection opens with “The Charade,” a superb example not only of the masks and appearances we choose to project, but also of those that society forces us to create. This story helps an outsider see the inner workings of Cuban society from the seemingly mundane life of neighbors, suddenly curious about the bizarre behavior of one amongst them. On another level, it is a commentary on Foucault’s panopticon played out through a neighborhood watch, and on yet another level, is simply the story of a sadly humorous and absurd masquerade.

Several stories showcase a contemplative narrative voice. “In the Sand” has a narrator that moves inward, while watching the sea carry his projected thoughts outward. It is a pensive moment, spent contemplating fraudulence and the audacity of faith and optimism when words and ideas can be so quickly erased by time. “The Room,” whose dedication reads “Playing chess with Juan José Arreola,” finds another narrator-protagonist going inward, surrounded by memories and nostalgia of the room he shared with his wife. He is a man living with the delusion that change will come, that the odds are not stacked against him in a society where privacy is hard to come by. A contemplative voice continues in the “The Medal,” “The Scribe,” and

“A Brushstroke of Sweat,” whose main characters are on the cusp of a big event and struggle with their own delusions of themselves, or those that others have about them. In “The Medal” Dr. Ciro Pérez reflects upon his life’s work and daily routines, and questions the impending celebration of his career: Is it a ceremony in honor of his life, or of his death? Similarly, in “A Brushstroke of Sweat,” a character contemplates his life’s work on the eve of a poetry reading, questions the nature of artistic expression, of poetry itself, and of the insufficiency of words. “The Scribe” will resonate with any writer, for it unfolds as a metanarrative in which words become vacuous in the same ways as the empty gestures they are memorializing, and this parallels the hypocrisy and lip service of a government opening a new factory to create trophies, diplomas, and other manner of awards.

Empty gestures, hypocrisy, and the very meaning of words become a dialogue in “Croquette Mini Sandwiches without Bread,” constructed around the seemingly simplistic transaction of buying a snack. But in dictatorial Cuba, everything takes on myriad meanings, and a philosophical and humorous dialogue full of double-entendres is a sharp look at the scarcity of necessities and abundance of platitudes, which complicate and frustrate daily communication. By questioning the limits of what can be called a mini sandwich, the protagonist enters the dangerous zone of criticizing authority and outing himself as a traitor to the Revolution. The danger of putting those thoughts into action is displayed in “Into the Sea,” the story that most directly addresses the topic of exile, its subsequent bittersweet and equivocal

freedoms, unquenchable loneliness, and perpetual nostalgia.

And finally, the collection closes with “Delusions,” another story that, on its surface, is about the difficulties of navigating daily life in Cuba, particularly the mundane act of finding parts to repair a pocket watch—a complicated quest. It is also about an aged man who worked on the railroad, and how the watch ties him to his past by representing his life’s work. The story explores nostalgia, memories, and the inner workings of a man’s watch and his mind as he nears the end of his life. Ultimately, like the other stories in the collection, it is a meditation on the delusions surrounding creativity, authority, systems, love and friendship—the delusions that bind us all.

*Katie Brown*  
*Pueblo, Colorado, January 2018*

## THE CHARADE

*To Iván Vivas*

My curiosity about Alicia López began between spoonfuls of soup as my wife was telling me about what happened at the dairy shop earlier in the day. The occurrences peaked my interest. Apparently, people were waiting in line for their turn when the following events took place, more or less in this order: Alicia López, who lived almost directly across the street from my building, on the second floor, in number 133C, left her apartment at 8:00 a.m., as she did every day. Gliding gracefully like a cat, she walked slowly to the yellow dairy shop on the corner, where, after asking who was last in line, she talked about the heat or the rain, about the dangers of riding your bike at night, or perhaps even about the latest Brazilian soap opera—who knows...

The best part, and what stood out the most, was her clothing. Her dress was made of red Chinese brocade, with ruffles that looked like small butterflies. She wore it with black, patent leather high-heeled shoes, a matching purse, a pair of earrings and a bracelet made of tiny black corral. The carefully applied eye shadow, the blush on her cheeks and the pink lip color

completed the look—at least that’s what they told my wife. And that was all, because no one had dared to inquire about the reasons for that outfit. Besides, she wore it so matter-of-fact, as if it were—I don’t know—a faded blouse and skirt, and she completely ignored the stares, the complicit elbow jab in the side, and the frozen frown on the milkman’s face. She then paid for her liter of milk and slowly made her way back to the apartment. On the way, I suppose she petted the Siamese cat that kept watch on top of the wall alongside the entranceway to the building.

Her neighbors had been able to gather just bits of information, supposedly factual, about the woman whose most distinguishing feature were her almost black, dark-green eyes. They seemed to mock the intricate web spun by those with the greatest propensity for other people’s lives. It was as if the scattered flecks that lightened her eye color turned any hypothesis upside down. Equally scattered were the few details we knew of her. They reflected the almost non-existent interest she had generated until that day. Perhaps it was her rhythmic walk with her arms and shoulders slowly swaying back and forth—definitely feline. That could very well have been another of the features capable of altering the indifference that until then had besieged the now carnival-like act at the dairy shop.

It seems that Alicia López had brilliantly managed the rare art of silence, of inconsequential conversations, of diplomatically avoiding being the topic of conversation. I should know shortly if she did it on purpose. When the enigma was born on that night four Thursdays ago, my wife could only add what

Nereida, who is in charge of the Neighborhood Watch Committee, had pieced together after telling her about the morning scandal. At that time, I didn't even know her last name or where exactly she lived in the building across the street. Neither did I know her age, which I roughly estimated at around forty, maybe a little bit older. The only thing I knew about her was a superficial impression I remember from having run into her a time or two by coincidence, and that memory was pretty vague. Of those times, I only recall the lemonade, her eyes, the cat-like walk of a slender woman with long legs and sculpted thighs, and the gray hair that draped her slim shoulders. The most memorable thing at the time was the lemonade she made. She would make it at home and it was by far her most delicious contribution. The trick was crushing the ice in a blender. A bit of bee honey added just the right amount of sweetness and a slight but definite hint of white rum gave the final touch. The pitcher of lemonade would miraculously appear every time I had to show up for volunteer work on Sundays. I'm not sure if I went out of political obligation, the need for some exercise, or because I was afraid of being singled out if I didn't go. More likely it was a combination of all three factors that influenced my decision to participate. In any case, just as the rhythm of the machetes slowed down and the hoes eased up on the weeds in the gardens, she would show up with her lemonade, which was accompanied by a hostess' smile. Her pleasure lay in waiting for my thank you, in the anticipation of hearing me praise her ingenious idea to alleviate our work with that ice-cold nectar. As the frozen, alcoholic drink, acidic yet slightly sweet, ran down my throat, it refreshed the

harshness of our thirty degrees Celsius in the shade, one glass at a time.

The days following her first appearance in red Chinese brocade turned monotonous, killing the neighborhood's circus-like curiosity. Alicia López, as if nothing had happened, erased any sign that could alter her gracious catwalks on the city block. Apparently nobody dared to drop even the slightest hint about the incident, not even a veiled one, not even from Juan the mechanic. When his neighbor Domingo, who works at the body shop, comes home late zigzagging to apartment #108, the next morning Juan shows him a raised fist, with the index finger sticking out. With that ironic reference to the bottle, he alludes to his neighbor's excessive drinking the previous evening.

But at the same time on the following Thursday, at eight in the morning, those standing in line for milk were stunned by another outfit. According to what my wife told me at dinner, it was shiny jade-green and was combined perfectly with matching make-up, white high heels, jewelry... I didn't notice it at the time, but a week later it dawned on me that the day she had chosen was in the middle of the week, the day devoted to Jupiter; in other words, cheerfulness. But I did take it upon myself to find out what little was known about her. I even managed to get my wife to fetch Nereida. I don't recall exactly what pretext we came up with: she was making either a milk pudding or some custard.

Everyone knew that she lived alone and that she barely had visitors. When she did, they were almost never from around here, except for occasional, brief visits from two of her neighbors, and neither of them had been able to get past the living-dining room, not

even to take a glimpse at the kitchen or the bathroom. She had a television and a radio cassette player, but out in the hallway you couldn't hear what programs she listened to. She paid her dues to the Committee and to the Women's Federation religiously and she usually attended their meetings, although she never opened her mouth, nor did she miss her night watch or fail to show up for volunteer work with her pitcher of lemonade. The only piece of information that seemed to shed light on her past was her being a widow: she had moved five years ago because, according to her, she couldn't stand all the memories associated with her former home, where she had lived with Hermes for over twenty years without having had a family. Being two only children, they had been unable to break down the loneliness that surrounded them—they were unable to procreate, unable to continue the family line. There was nothing else known about her, and there was nothing about her usual clothing to suggest the lavishness of the red Chinese brocade or the jade-green velvet. She didn't dress like that when she collected her beloved Hermes' pension check or when she treated herself—as she would say—to a meal at a restaurant in El Vedado. Not even when she'd go see a movie at the Astral or at La Rampa—of course she didn't care what movie they were playing... “Decent, friendly, quiet,” is how Nereida summed it up. “I never imagined she would have that type of clothing,” she added before leaving. The curiosity was killing her pride, after all, she was in charge of the Neighborhood Watch Committee and it was her duty to know every detail about everyone who lived on our block.

On that second Thursday, these questions and a handful of possible answers hounded my pillow. On the evening of the fourth Thursday that same hounding, but now much worse, unbearable, in fact, would lead me to her apartment to seek an end to my curiosity. It had become obsessive, immeasurable, and bloated like a jellyfish in the sand. And then, from that day on, I began to reconstruct the image of Alicia López with the help of a few chance encounters on the street and at the butcher's. That task became a challenge; I wanted to find the similarities, the references along the grooves of a smile surrounded by fragile lines—a smile still reminiscent of an age when her body would have given in to reckless abandon, a smile that still showed the certain pleasures of the flesh. Her mouth seemed to suggest delectable possibilities that her lips were unable to utter with the usual, listless words that pointed to the quiet, boring existence in the convent that is our neighborhood, full of gossip, like any other place in this city of sun and salty air.

Last Thursday, once again without any signs during the week of the impending scandal, she showed up at the dairy shop dressed for a party or a wedding, ready to attend an exclusive reception at Bucán Hall, next to the Congressional Palace. My wife's and Nereida's description was even more unbelievable than the two previous ones. She wore a floral dress made of silk, with a plunging neckline in the back, almost down to her waist. The accessories, again, set the tone, making the outfit almost outlandish. Even Juan, as he passed by the people standing in line on his way to the auto shop, couldn't help but almost shout the question "Hey, where's the party?"

That night, as if we were setting up a fireworks display, we reconstructed the three apparitions. The fact, now clearly evident, that she always appeared on a Thursday created a set of expectations for the following Thursday, meaning this morning's events. In the meantime, I was able to find her former residence at the Address Registry. What I found out from the Committee members over there shrouded her in even more mystery: she had never been married, no one knew of any place she had ever worked, she never had her neighbors over, and it was a mystery where she went on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday nights... The information—obtained thanks to the clever ingenuity of my police work—only boosted my interest in her. Her character was turning into something intimate; she was becoming part of my everyday life. I couldn't live without her. It was as if the delicious flavor of her lemonade had captured every minute of my free time. Her magic potion was working.

The news that the circus spectacle would be repeated today at 8 a.m., on this fourth Thursday of the rare wardrobe exhibition, stirred the neighborhood. Even the most carefree folks made sure they participated in the scene. With half an hour to go, my wife, Nereida, and I installed ourselves on the block wall bordering the entrance to the dairy shop, exactly where she would walk by showing off a new outfit of tulle and lace. Others, pretending to have a conversation, were spread out in various groups on the two sidewalks leading up to the corner where the line formed. Domingo, from his balcony, took care of the four-story height with a set of enormous binoculars. Juan, standing on the same corner, seemed to be ready to hurl another

provocative question. Xiomara and Maruchi, the only two neighbors with whom she was somewhat friendly, had joined another spectator in front of the glass doors so they could casually hang out.

At the precise time, like a cat defying gravity on a narrow parapet and without any obvious effort to balance herself, Alicia López emerged from the grayish interior of the hallway. She said hello to her neighbors and headed towards the dairy shop. When she arrived, she asked where the end of the line was, like she did every time. She was wearing a black satin dress with dark, green inlays. Tiny leaves sparkling on her chest bordered the bodice and framed the curves of her still-firm breasts. The mid-length dress was paired with coordinating accessories. Her shoes, stockings, make-up, and jewelry harmonized with the black satin and her skin, which still possessed rosy hues.

The people milling about outside the dairy shop gasped unanimously. You would think they were a Viennese choir singing a Wagner opera. Immediately Juan, without the least bit of shame, launched the question: “What’s going on with you?” But that didn’t provoke a reaction. Slowly, with her rhythmic walk, she came up to the wall where I was sitting and ran her greenish eyes over each of us. She rested her eyes on me for a few seconds, cocking her head slightly, and said good morning, acting as if nothing was wrong. We didn’t know whether to be confused or feel sorry for her. After that, as if compelled by some previous agreement, we all went back to figuring out the probable causes for her behavior.

Now that I have decided I must pay her a visit to put an end to these pestering possibilities once and for all,

I think the least likely scenario would be that it was all just a colossal joke. And also, that the best thing to do is not to come up with some excuse, but to get straight to the point and explain the reason for my unexpected visit. That's what I'm going to do as soon as I finish getting dressed, as soon as I realize what I'm doing. I'm acting as if I were going to one of my students' graduation or to celebrate the anniversary of a patient who is still grateful for regaining her mental health. So I finish spraying a bit of cologne behind my ears and I go into the living room, where I say goodbye to my wife and to Nereida, who will be nervous wrecks until I return. In a bit of a hurry, I then walk to the front door, cross the street and enter her building. After going up to the second floor, I look for the white door of apartment C and ring the bell. I can hear the sound of the soprano bells on the other side. I don't hear any footsteps, but then her voice asks who it is. My answer follows. She asks me to wait a moment. Soon I will be able to put my mind at ease by proving or disproving the hypothesis with the most likely possibilities, the one that postulates a personality disorder.

The minutes go by. My wait seems longer than expected before Alicia López opens the door. A complacent smile makes her blackish-green eyes squint. She invites me in, delicately closes the door and points to the sofa. I sit down and only then I realize that she is wearing nothing but a sheer, black negligee. I am surprised by its transparency and the lines and spaces, tangents and contours it reveals. I try to stay calm and put on my clinical practitioner face while she playfully points to the coffee table in front of the sofa, where a sweaty pitcher of lemonade is waiting,

as if it had always been there. She serves two glasses without losing her smile, without taking her eyes off me. And she talks to me. And she tells me she already knows. And like a mischievous child, a conspirator whose ploy was successful, she tells me that she was expecting me, either today or tomorrow, at the latest. I keep fighting to maintain my composure as a psychiatrist, the silence characteristic of my job. The drink helps—it has more rum in it than the ones I was used to from the volunteer work. And she tells me that she came up with the idea so that I would finally notice her, so that my curiosity as a doctor would lead to this encounter, so that she could have fun at the expense of the neighborhood and remember her good times as a showgirl. And then she gets up to go to the radio cassette player and puts on Sinatra. She stops in front of the entrance to the kitchen, where the light reveals even more through the black transparency of her negligee. I shake my head. The stupidity of those hypotheses, Nereida, my wife, the dairy shop, are forgotten. Suddenly, through a half-open door—I suppose it's to the bedroom—a Siamese cat appears. Alicia hurries to pick it up and pets it, showing me that it's a female, like her, that it belongs to her, not to a neighbor. And then she puts it down on the armchair but without losing her smile, without hiding the shine of victory in her eyes. And the naughtiness in her invitation to dance says it all, declaring the audacity of her ruse that has just claimed its victory. Any minute now, she will take me to her bed and later I will go home with the alibi of her personality disorder, of her transference neurosis. It might require prolonged treatment, who knows? In the meantime, the fluorescent eyes of her

Siamese cat will be our only accomplices, like cheerful symbols of the coming Thursdays.

*1991*

## FUNÁMBULA

*A Iván Vivas*

La curiosidad por Alicia López comenzó entre cucharadas de sopa, cuando el cuento de mi mujer sobre lo sucedido en la lechería desató las preguntas. Lo ocurrido en la cola para la leche más o menos fue lo siguiente: Alicia López, como todos los días a las 8 a.m., salió de su apartamento, el C del segundo piso del número 113, casi frente por frente a mi edificio, y caminó sin prisa, con su andar de gata, hasta la esquina amarilla, a pedir el último, a conversar sobre el calor o la lluvia, sobre los peligros de montar bicicleta de noche, quién sabe si también sobre la telenovela brasileña...

El detalle, el granito de arena, era la ropa. Un vestido de lamé rojo chino, de vuelos imitando pequeñas mariposas, venía acompañado de unos altos tacones de charol negro, en juego con la carterita, con el collar, los aretes, la pulsa de diminutos corales negros. Todo se complementaba, según le dijeron a mi mujer, con un cuidadoso maquillaje de sombras leves sobre los párpados, en combinación con el polvo de las mejillas, con el rosa del creyón de labios. Y nada más, porque nadie se atrevió a

preguntarle las causas, porque ella sencillamente actuó como si llevase, no sé, una blusa y una saya desvaídas; sin acusar recibo de las miradas, de un codo hundido en el costado de alguien para encontrar complicidad, del fruncimiento cristalizado en la cara del lechero. Hasta que pagó su litro de leche y paso a paso regresó al apartamento, supongo que sin dejar de acariciar al gato siamés, de guardia sobre el muro que bordea el pasillo de entrada a su edificio.

En la cuadra apenas se han acumulado datos, presumiblemente ciertos, sobre esta mujer cuya seña menos común son los ojos de un verde casi negro, que parecen una burla al trabajoso tejido que le han hilado los vecinos más propensos a la vida ajena, como si las escamas vegetales que le aclaran los ojos equivalieran a las escasas informaciones, les pusieran traspies a las hipótesis; por lo demás también escasas, propias del casi nulo interés que ella había logrado enardecer. Quizás su modo de caminar, melódico, acompasado entre un breve movimiento de hombros y de brazos, decididamente felino, podría tomarse como otro rasgo capaz de alterar la indiferencia que la había cercado hasta el acto carnavalesco de la lechería.

Alicia López, dentro de un rato sabré si a propósito, parece haber manejado con brillantez la rara habilidad del silencio, de las conversaciones insustanciales, de evitar diplomáticamente un giro del tema hacia sí misma. Aquella noche de hace cuatro jueves, cuando nacía el enigma, mi mujer sólo supo agregar lo que Nereida, la Responsable de Vigilancia del Comité de la cuadra, le había dicho a retazos, después que le contara del escándalo

matinal. Yo ni siquiera sabía entonces sus apellidos, el domicilio exacto en el edificio de enfrente, la edad, que calculaba borrosamente alrededor de los cuarenta, quizás un poquito por encima.

Lo único que sabía de ella era el producto, bastante disperso, bastante pobre, de las veces que la casualidad nos había hecho coincidir. De los encuentros sólo retenía las limonadas, los ojos, el andar gatuno de esta mujer delgada y de piernas y muslos largos, de pelo gris, lacio sobre los hombros aún esbeltos. Las limonadas, entonces, eran lo más interesante. Y sin duda lo más sabroso. Las preparaba con el detalle de que el escaso dulzor era a base de miel de abejas, con el hielo pasado por la licuadora, con un leve pero definido toque de ron blanco. Cada vez que la insistencia, los temores a señalarme, el deporte, o más bien una mezcla de los tres factores me hacían presente en un trabajo voluntario dominical, cuando el agotamiento y el sudor aflojaban el ritmo del machete o de la guataca contra la hierba de los parterres, se aparecía el milagro de la jarra de limonada, con una sonrisa de anfitriona cuyo placer se centraba en aguardar mis gracias, en esperar el elogio a su genial idea de mitigar la faena con aquel néctar helado, con aquella nieve donde el ácido ligeramente dulce se alcoholizaba al transcurrir garganta abajo, al refrescar vasito a vasito las inclemencias de nuestros 30 grados centígrados a la sombra.

Los días posteriores al jueves del lamé rojo chino apagaron con su monotonía la curiosidad circense del vecindario. Alicia López, como si nada hubiese sucedido, borró cualquier detalle capaz de alterar

su anónimo fluir por la cuadra. Parece que nadie se atrevió a dejarle caer la más mínima alusión al incidente, ni siquiera como a Domingo, el chapista del 108, que cuando llega de zigzag en zigzag a su casa sólo recibe al día siguiente el puño cerrado con el pulgar en alto, la forma de botella con que Juan el mecánico le hace referencia irónica a la copiosidad de tragos ingeridos la noche anterior.

Pero el jueves siguiente, a las mismas 8 de la mañana, otro atuendo enmudeció la cola para la leche. Según me contó mi mujer a la mesa, era de un verde jade brillante, con acompañamiento exacto de maquillaje, tacones blancos, bisutería... Ni yo reparé entonces, hasta el otro jueves, de que el día escogido por ella era el centro de la semana, el consagrado a Júpiter, es decir, a la jovialidad. Pero sí me puse enseguida a averiguar lo poco que se conocía sobre Alicia López. Y logré que mi mujer fuese a buscar a Nereida, con el pretexto de brindarle un arroz con leche o una natilla, no recuerdo bien.

Se sabía que estaba sola, que apenas recibía visitas, casi nunca del barrio, salvo breves y esporádicos recibimientos a dos vecinas, ninguna de las cuales había podido pasar de la salita-comedor, ni siquiera a la cocina o al baño. Tenía televisor y radiograbadora, pero nunca pudo oírse en el pasillo cuáles programas sintonizaba. Religiosamente pagaba la mensualidad del Comité y de la Federación de Mujeres, por lo general asistía a las reuniones, aunque jamás abría la boca ni faltaba a las guardias, a los trabajos voluntarios con su jarra de limonada. El único dato que parecía alumbrar su pasado era la viudez, la mudanza hace unos cinco años porque

había dicho que no pudo aguantar la acumulación de recuerdos, prendidos en cada detalle de su antigua vivienda, de más de veinte años junto a Hermes, sin haber podido tener familia, sin haber podido desbaratar el cerco de dos hijos únicos incapaces de procrear, de continuarse. Ni una sola noticia extra, salvo que su ropa habitual nunca insinuó los desmanes del lamé rojo chino, del verde jade, ni cuando salía a cobrar la pensión del difunto Hermes, a darse el gusto —según les decía— de comer en algún restaurante de El Vedado, de irse al cine Astral o a La Rampa, sin importarle qué película echaban... “Decente, servicial, callada” —nos resumió Nereida. “Nunca me imaginé que tuviera una ropa así” —agregó antes de irse, con la intriga picándole el orgullo de su cargo de Responsable de Vigilancia, de conocedora diligente de cada uno de los habitantes de nuestra cuadra.

Ese segundo jueves las preguntas y el manejo de respuestas posibles asediaron mi almohada, como esta noche del cuarto jueves cuando el mismo asedio, pero acrecentado hasta lo insoportable, me llevara hasta su apartamento, a terminar con una curiosidad que se ha vuelto obsesiva, inabarcable, que se ha ido hinchando como una medusa en la arena. Y también la reconstrucción de la figura de Alicia López, a partir de ese día, propiciada por algunos encuentros fugaces en la acera y en la carnicería, adquirió el carácter de un desafío que busca similitudes, asociaciones por los vericuetos de su sonrisa estriada por frágiles líneas, que aún luce un homenaje a los años en que su cuerpo pudo haberse desbandado sin previsiones, que todavía exhibe

la seguridad de probables escarceos de la carne y parece sugerir transacciones nada despreciables de su boca con algo más que las palabras habituales, desganas, de una existencia apacible, flácida, en el convento de nuestra cuadra tan llena de chismes como cualquier otra de esta ciudad de sol y salitre.

El pasado jueves, de nuevo sin que otros signos durante la semana presagiaran el escándalo, ella volvió a irrumpir en la lechería con las señales de baile o boda, de recepción exclusiva en el Salón Bucán, aledaño al Palacio de los Congresos. La descripción de mi mujer y de Nereida fue más exaltada que las dos anteriores. Era un vestido de seda floreada, de amplio escote en la espalda, casi hasta la cintura. Y eran de nuevo los aditamentos quienes exacerbaban el conjunto, los que daban la tónica, hasta la pregunta casi gritada por Juan el mecánico, al pasar por el costado de la cola rumbo a su taller: “¿Dónde es la fiesta, eh?”

Esa noche, como si estuviéramos en una fábrica de pirotecnia, reconstruimos las tres apariciones. El hecho, ahora evidente, de que siempre se producían los jueves, trajo las expectativas para el próximo, es decir, para los sucesos de esta mañana. Durante los días de espera pude averiguar en el Registro de Direcciones su antigua residencia. Las verificaciones que realicé allá con los del Comité arrojaron nuevas incógnitas sobre ella: nunca había estado casada, nunca se le conoció vinculación laboral, nunca recibía a los vecinos, nunca se supo adónde salía las noches de viernes, sábado y domingo... La información, suministrada gracias a misteriosas astucias donde yo aparecía como un probable policía,

potenció el interés. El personaje se convertía definitivamente en algo íntimo, en parte de mis objetos cotidianos. No podía prescindir de ella, como si el delicioso sabor de las limonadas hubiese obrado de elíxir, de cazador de cada parte de mi tiempo libre.

La noticia de que el espectáculo circense se volvería a producir hoy, a las 8 a.m. de este cuarto jueves de inusitada exhibición de modas, revolvió al vecindario. Hasta los más despreocupados procuraron participar de la escena. Mi mujer, Nereida y yo ocupamos desde media hora antes el murito que limita la puerta de la lechería, exactamente por donde debía pasar ella con un nuevo despliegue de tules y encajes. Otros hacían como que conversaban, distribuidos en varios grupos por las dos aceras que convergían en la esquina de la cola. Domingo el chapista, desde su balcón, resolvía los cuatro pisos de altura con unos prismáticos enormes. Juan el mecánico, parado en la misma esquina, parecía dispuesto a lanzar otra pregunta provocadora. Las únicas dos vecinas con las que ella había intimado algo, Xiomara y Maruchi, se juntaron a otra espectadora, para hacerse las distraídas ante la puerta de cristales velados del edificio.

A la hora señalada, como una gata que desafiara el vértigo de un delgado pretil y sin aparente esfuerzo de equilibrio anduviera sobre él, Alicia López emergió de la grisácea atmósfera del pasillo, saludó a las vecinas, dobló hacia la lechería, llegó a la cola y como cada amanecer pidió el último. El vestido era de raso negro con breves incrustaciones de un verde oscuro, de diminutas hojas brillando sobre el pecho, ajustando la tela hacia la curvatura

aún erecta de los senos. El acompañamiento iba en concordancia con el vestido a media pierna. Zapatos, medias, maquillaje, adornos, combinaban armónicamente con el negro del raso, con la piel aún dueña de matices rosa pálido.

Una exclamación unánime, como si se tratara de un coro vienés representando una ópera de Wagner, se produjo en los grupos que bordeaban la lechería. Juan inmediatamente, sin el más mínimo pudor, soltó la pregunta: “¿Qué le pasará a la compañera?” Ella ni se inmutó. Avanzó lentamente, con su caminar melódico, hacia el murito donde me hallaba, y paseó la vista verdosa sobre cada uno de nosotros, hasta que la detuvo unos segundos sobre mí, y junto a una ligera inclinación de cabeza nos dio los buenos días, como si nada. Entre la vergüenza ajena y el desconcierto, como si un acuerdo previo nos compulsara, regresamos a desgranar de nuevo las causas probables de aquel acto.

Ahora que he resuelto visitarla, acabar de una vez con las mordidas de cada posibilidad, pienso que lo más remoto sería la versión de una broma colosal. Y también que lo más sensato es no inventarle ningún pretexto. Llegar sin dilaciones a la razón de la cita inesperada. Así lo haré, en cuanto termine de vestirme, en cuanto me dé cuenta de que lo estoy haciendo como si fuera a una graduación de mis alumnos, al aniversario de algún paciente que aún me agradece la recuperación psíquica. Así termino oprimiendo el spray del perfume debajo de las orejas, salgo a la sala, me despido de mi mujer y de Nereida, que aguardaran a buchitos de nerviosismo mi regreso, y con algo de prisa camino hacia

la salida, cruzo la calle, entro a su edificio, subo hasta el segundo piso, hasta la puerta blanca del apartamento C, y oprimo el botón que suena dentro con unas campanitas asopranadas. No siento pasos, pero oigo enseguida su voz preguntando quién es, mi respuesta, la solicitud de que espere unos momentos. Pronto podré descansar, verificar o desechar la hipótesis de mayor índice de probabilidades, la que aventura un trastorno de personalidad.

Pasan más minutos de lo normal antes de que Alicia López abra la puerta. Una sonrisa de complacencia achina sus ojos verdinegros. Me invita a pasar, cierra delicadamente la puerta y señala hacia el sofá donde me siento, sin reparar hasta ese instante en que ella sólo está vestida con un deshacillé de un negro vaporoso, traslúcido, sorprendente por las sugerencias de líneas y espacios, de tangencias y vados. Trato de asumir el tiempo y la máscara de mis consultas en el hospital mientras ella felinamente señala hacia la mesita del centro, frente al sofá, donde una sudorosa jarra de limonada parecía estar allí desde siempre, esperando. Sirve dos vasos sin dejar la sonrisa, sin dejar que sus ojos cesen de mirarme. Y me habla. Y dice que ya sabe. Y con aire de niña traviesa, de conspiradora que acaba de satisfacer sus ardides, dice que sabía de mi visita, hoy o a más tardar mañana. Sigo luchando por conservar la tonalidad del psiquiatra, los silencios de mi oficio, ayudado por el sabor del trago, más cargado de ron que los del trabajo voluntario. Y me cuenta que lo había ideado todo para que al fin yo reparara en ella, para que la curiosidad del médico impusiera este encuentro, para también divertirse a

costa del vecindario, recordar sus buenos tiempos de vedette. Y se levanta hacia la radiograbadora, pone un casete de Sinatra y se detiene frente a la entrada de la cocina, donde la luz me hace ver más entre la vaporosidad negra del deshabillé. Muevo la cabeza y ni pienso en la estupidez de las hipótesis, en Nereida y en mi mujer, en la lechería. De pronto, por una puerta entreabierta, supongo que del dormitorio, sale el gato siamés que ella se apresura a cargar, a acariciar mostrándome que también es hembra, que no era de ninguna vecina sino de ella. Y lo suelta sobre un butacón sin perder la sonrisa, sin dejar que sus ojos oculten el brillo de la victoria. Y la picardía de su invitación a bailar resume el cuento, declara el equilibrio de un ardid que acaba de triunfar, que dentro de un rato me llevará a su cama, a irme después con la coartada del trastorno de personalidad, de la transferencia que puede exigir, quién sabe, un aplicado tratamiento; mientras los ojos fosforescentes de la gata siamesa quedarán como únicos cómplices, como joviales símbolos de los juegos venideros.

1991

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