

"The Eyes of the Owl"

By Jordi Llavina

I shouldn't have ever come to Barcelona. But chance very often enjoys correcting what seemed the written and signed destiny of a human being. And then, more often than not, it does something else, unexpected and confusing.

For the past twelve years I had been living, with my wife and my daughter, in a simple and modern little house, mildly conditioned by geothermics in a new district of Alkmaar. It's Antje's city, the woman I married; I'm Scottish but until I was twenty years old I had practically lived half of my life in London.

We had settled there because Antje had her job and her parents in Alkmaar and because I can work in any corner of the world (and also call from any part of the world my mother, who by the way, I'd say, is not very communicative). To carry on my normal life I only need a network connection and a telephone. We both had agreed Alkmaar seemed a nice place to raise children. How many times had I tried to explain to my worldwide partners that this Dutch city, apart from cheeses and beer, had a lot more to offer !

Our little daughter, Neske, is seven years old and until the last school year, she didn't start attending school. She used to say that she was the queen of the garden, and both of us enjoyed the idea of her feeling the sovereign of a space which, in the long Dutch spring , always used to be full of colours nourished by the surrounding lawn. A space which at the same time greeted the twitting of the birds and the threatening buzz of the bees. " But queens - Antje and I used to argue with a smile on our lips - do not have their hands soiled with dirt and scratches on their skin". I was

convinced that Neske will always remember that garden as her private paradise. To remove the soil was her own way of tasting happiness, ignoring worms dragging around and other little animals which were busy excavating their own corridors in the dark.

But paradise, unfortunately, was for me a lost paradise. In January 2011 my friend John, the only childhood friend I had, died in a tragic motorcycle accident (is there any accident which is not a tragic one ?) A van coming from the opposite direction made an unexpected move in order to avoid an animal which had invaded the main road. The animal was a dog or a fox, who cares. The quadruped saved its life but not my friend with whom I had always been closely in touch.

On the other hand, at the end of 2010, Antje suggested we separate for a month. It had been a long time since *things* were not going smoothly at home. Upon completion of the thirty-day period, I returned home but *things* didn't go back to normal until, one early day in April, my wife asked me to file for divorce. We went through the pain of filling out the necessary papers and sold our house. The worst of all was that she and Neske left and were headed towards North America. It turns out that it had been more than two years since she was having an affair with a professor at Cornell University whom she had met, by coincidence, in a market in Amsterdam. All of a sudden, I understood many things. I immediately came to terms with her absence of desire so many past nights and the lack of hope for so many mornings when we woke up together.

I shouldn't have ever come to Barcelona but hazard, or whatever it was, had already decided. In December 2011 I had the possibility of ending what had turned out to be the worse year of my life by travelling for a week to Milan. The occasion was a congress related to simultaneous translation. Unexpectedly, one of the organizers, Mr. Vitaliano Amero, had just suffered a severe heart attack and all the participants were eagerly awaiting news about his health condition. Finally, the congress was postponed *sine-die* and I received an e-mail informing me about the decision. The day after I received another e-mail from Mateu Samà, the

well-known Barcelonian journalist, who was also invited to the ill-fated Milanese congress.

It had been a long time since we were in excellent terms with Samà and he knew I was not going through a good time in my life. "I want to invite you for a few days to Barcelona. Think about it. You don't have to give me an answer right away. In about twenty minutes, write back and let me know what day are you coming over. I suggest you choose the same days of the postponed congress. May I remind you that a change of air might be good for you. Trust me. All the best".

I went to Barcelona one day before I had agreed with my friend Samà. He didn't know it. I like to get to places alone and initially also discover them alone, little by little without a guide or other intermediaries. I had about twenty hours to stroll around, to discover a city I associated with Gaudí, the Barça F.C and a few other things. The day after I would call Mateu. Now that I lived alone I could indulge myself in a few extravagances. My salary allowed me, from time to time, some extra fancies. A whole and cold ocean separated me from my daughter who I wouldn't see before February. I booked a room at the Majestic Hotel, from which I could contemplate the Passeig de Gràcia's promenade. At the hotel bar I connected my mobile phone and went through the places I felt I'd like to visit. I wrote down ten or twelve on a note pad and put it in my pocket.

The first stop was at the Egyptian museum, because of one of my youth's weaknesses. I spent there two hours and a half, I even did some drawings of specific objects in the collection regarding cosmetics and eroticism. Suddenly, the cell phone rang which I took out from my pocket knowing quite well who was calling me. I hung up because the tune - a techno song, very well-known in the Eighties - was quite out of place among those millenary pieces. " Everything's o.k.: We'll see each other at 11am. "I suggest a centric place", I wrote back to my friend who, in a matter of a few minutes, sent me a message: "Okey-dokey. We can meet in front of Vinçon, in Passeig de Gràcia". It was a funny coincidence choosing the same street in which I had stayed the previous night and the day after

I went to Vinçon, willing to drink a beer there (I didn't know why I'd associated that name with a fashionable bar).

I always go to places at least thirty minutes in advance to the established hour. I didn't drink the beer but I bought two objects for my desk and puzzles for Neske with typical images of the city: Holy Family Church, a taxi, the Canaletes fountain, a "Swan" (Barcelona Touristic Boat), the grotesque albino gorilla.

—I like to travel alone, but from time to time I have the feeling to have been forced away from a trip and my daughter having stayed at her mother's side. Perhaps I should have acted with more... how can I put it? resoluteness?

I had Mateu in front of me and now we finally ordered a beer in a terrace bar on Passeig de Gràcia which, in spite of being a cold day, was full of customers. A lot of them spoke English and also a good number spoke Russian.

A touristic bus passed close to us full of tourists, with women madly trying to catch an image with their cameras. The bus stopped very close to "La Pedrera" the building I had visited earlier in the morning. Mateu noticed my interest in the vehicle and in the noisy bunch of tourists whose boisterous presence in all the spots of the city painted the urban landscape... His English was acceptable, even though, to communicate and in his public speeches he preferred the use of French or Spanish.

Samà gave me some tips to soften my sadness and offered some consolatory advice ("it's still too early") which didn't affect me a bit. On one occasion, he had met Antje in Berlin, quite a long time ago, Neske wasn't even born yet. Every time we met in the past, my Catalan friend reminded me how strong an impression that girl had bestowed upon him! Not anymore. It was now the first time in which he was pointing out some of her imperfections: too proud of herself, a bit arrogant, a cold beauty.

—Let's go, let's take a walk. Here we are, Barcelona welcomes you!

When we passed in front of the Majestic, I almost told him that I had stayed there the previous night. Mateu thought I had just arrived that precise morning.

—It seems a very luxurious establishment. And the location... magnificent. Don't you agree?

—Location? It's nothing, really nothing. Now you are going to see which is the best location for a hotel in Barcelona.

He stopped a cab and gave the driver an address. After twenty minutes we were having an aperitive at the Hotel Florida, with the city at our feet. Somebody who had never met us before, could have thought we were a gay couple, mature and happy. *Tibi Dabo*. Why did the road up to the hotel have a Latin name?

—And now let's have dinner...

Mateu asked for a taxi again. Barcelona didn't have the same dimensions as Paris, nevertheless it was bigger than Alkmaar.

The restaurant's name was Alkimia. I wouldn't remember the name without the card I put in my pocket. My friend knew the chef, called Vilà. I wouldn't remember his name either without the same card. One of the delicacies we tasted was a very little thing which was called "Moll de l'Os" A rape , in the middle of the dish, kind of a greyish white colour, full of little black eggs powdered with caviar.

—I suppose that you, Barcelonese people, don't always have a dinner like this in your everyday life, am I wrong ?

In the evening Mateu had to go to Barcelona's International Conventions Centre. He asked me to come along, always by taxi (I was not used to that kind of transportation).

—Here is where the Universal Forum of Cultures took place in the year 2004. Do you remember ?

I vaguely remembered. The new Barcelona, the sea, right there in front of us. "Do whatever you like, suggested my friend. Leisure time. But at eight p.m. we'll meet at the Our Lady of the Sea's Basilica". And we agreed on that.

I took advantage of the four free hours granted by my friend in order to visit a museum. I asked a passer-by if it was far away or if I could get there on foot. I showed him a piece of paper where I had written MNAC and the boy, who seemed to be a local, looked at me as if he didn't have the slightest clue about what the abbreviation stood for. I asked again two more people and I got the same identical response. At the end, I finally found a man carrying a suitcase who knew what I was looking for.

—You have to take some sort of vehicle or public transportation - he answered back in a poorly articulated English. *It's so far away*, he told me while his facial expression underpinned his statement. And he was right, it was far away but I managed very well by riding the underground.

I shouldn't have ever come to Barcelona. But things, occasionally, don't turn out the way you want them to.

It was a remarkable museum. Inside a gorgeous palace with many rooms lined up in a row. Some of the rooms congregated groups of curious people; a *connoisseur* taking notes, official guides pointing out the importance of a new style or a new period in the trajectory of a painter. I was going through the rooms like travelling in a time machine, crossing different periods, going forward in time. With Antje we used to visit at least one museum a month. We had visited the most important museums in Europe. Loneliness is a tough apprenticeship, I thought, while admiring the sculpture of a girl, resting in an indolent position. And I was alone, without her.

Suddenly I discovered that small painting. Nobody seemed to pay attention to it. Nobody would stop in front of it and, at the most, they glided their glance which would then stop in other works. The impact was very strong. I can't say that the girl represented in the painting looked like

Antje. My wife is blonde and the one in the painting had brown hair. The hair style between the two had nothing to share. The mouth of the portrait was smaller than Antje's and, on top of that, didn't have the habit of putting lipstick (like the artist had done with her creature). My wife's eyes and her dreamer's glance and the one in the painting were identical ! The glance of being unconcerned (*Printània*, the name of the portrait, was also the name of the figure? Was it the name of a woman what seemed the name of a region? No, I really can't assert that the girl portrayed looked like the woman I loved. She didn't look at all like her. She was her. I had to sit down to cope with the overwhelming surprise. I realised that my pulse had accelerated, that a cold sweat had dampened my skin. When I recovered from all that, I had been sitting there still for forty-five minutes in front of the oil-painting. Was that a strange move of destiny, what had brought me to Barcelona?

I stepped out of the museum as if I was returning from a baffling experience. I was not totally aware, not yet anyway, of the extent of astonishment to which I had been subjected to from the painting lesson. In the evening, while I was having dinner with my friend and was trying to explain everything to him, the only thing which could help to understand was that I had associated the vision of "Printània" with Antje's farewell.

Those clear eyes of the painting exactly like those of my wife. Eyes which seemed to look far behind the spectator, those eyes were the ones which had allowed me to close those of my wife. Eyes which for so long, didn't dare to blink. Wide-opened eyes like the ones of the owl, lightning my mind".

Suddenly, and at the same time, our cell-phones rang. We looked at each other rather surprised. He had received a message. So had I. Vitaliano Amero had passed away early that morning.