

Elsie Méndez Baillet

LETTERS TO MY ABSENT
HUSBAND

To Fabricio and Valdy,
hard-skinned children.

*Buried alive
in an infinite
labyrinth of mirrors
I hear myself, I follow myself
in the smooth
wall of silence.*

But I cannot find myself.

*I feel, I listen, I look,
By all the echoes
of this labyrinth,
an accent of mine
is pretending
to reach my ear.*

But I do not notice it.

*Someone is imprisoned
here, in this cold
lucid ground,
labyrinth of mirrors.
Someone, whom I imitate.
If he leaves, I walk away.
If he comes back, I come back
If he falls asleep, I dream.
- "Is it you? I say to myself...*

But I do not answer.

*Persecuted, wounded
by the same accent
- which I do not know if it is mine -
against the echo itself
of the same memory,
in this infinite
labyrinth of mirrors
buried alive."*

Jaime Torres Bodet

INT. FILM-CLUB IFAL. NIGHT

On the black screen appears a sign slowly:

I: The mirror

Jean-Pierre Léaud repeated before his own image: Antoine Doinel – Antoine Doinel – Antoine Doinel – Antoine Doinel – without pauses nor breaks.

At the center of the cinema, leaning over the back of the front seat, I was completely subjugated by that clumsy, casual, naïve young man, and of perplexed countenance. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and, repeating his name several times. The resemblance he had with Truffaut, the director of the film, was surprising; you could swear they were brothers. They had the same dark brown hair and curly, so light, that in all the pictures he looks disheveled; his nose, which he shows off in the story, sharp and protruding; his eyes with an intelligent gaze; the expression of the face recalled the misfortunes that he suffered in “Los 400 golpes”

(*The 400 blows*) where he acts as a child, sun spots adorning his very white complexion, his long hands always accentuating the conversation.

Besos robados (*Stolen kisses*), belonged to the third of an autobiographical series and all three were delightful. My admiration for Truffaut was growing nostalgic scene after smiling scene. At night, when leaving the film-club, I was uneasy by the image from the mirror. On my way home I was traveling in a bus “Zona Rosa” (*Pink Zone*), I was standing and reading the critique of the film amid juddering: “Antoine Doinel or the robber of kisses, Antoine Doinel or the robber of life. Antoine Doinel or the stolen one in his kisses. Antoine Doinel or the stolen one in his life. Francois Truffaut or the desire of a man to define himself and to define his environment”. The simple play that the author made in the note convinced me, especially when it refers to “defining himself with anxiety” which impressed me. I discarded my impressions because, for sure, they were erroneous and frivolous. - It is not a divertissement... -I meditated while I grabbed myself hard with both hands on the slippery tube of the bus. The bus driver ignored the people on the street who asked him to stop. It was not so crowded but, apparently, he was in a crazy hurry to arrive to the bus terminal to deliver, and be able to see, at midnight, the movie that was going to be played on channel 2: *The mailman calls twice*. – It is not a light comedy, do not stay with the first reasoning, it must have a deep meaning so much repetition of a name. –I felt inspired when I had to put the book between my teeth to

avoid flying through a window when passing through a curve of a roundabout. -... That image has to be the essence of the story – I said to myself convinced when I noticed that I was unaware of the course. I pulled the ringer’s cord and kept the ringing angry at my distraction. I was dazzled by the orange light from the new lamps of sodium gas that were being used for the first time in the city.

I arrived home walking because it was so late that there were no more buses passing by. I went up the stairs noisily hitting the floor on each step; I felt my feet sore. I took the key out of the denim pants and walked into the empty apartment. We only had a couple of improvised book shelves, with boards and bricks. I threw the sweater on the mattress on the floor and went to the bathroom. I lowered the plastic lid of the toilet and climbed onto it. The mirror reflected most of me, in the same way that Jean- Pierre Léaud had done in the scene. The purpose was to discover if I had the same resemblance to my husband. Instead of saying my name, I began to say: -Miguel-Miguel-Miguel-Miguel-Miguel-Miguel.

The echo of the room was added to my voice. The rumbling sound reminded me of the one that is produced in the chapels of La Piedad. I started to low down and raise my voice as the priests do in the litanies. Then it resembled a prayer. After, it occurred to me to apply the singsong that the loudmouths shout to the numbers of the lottery.

“That is easy”-I thought. My grandmother analyzed the lottery lists every afternoon, writing down her calculations.

The numbers what were most likely to come out, if she could, she would buy them, if not, she would simply write them on a piece of paper. On Wednesdays and Sundays, we watched the TV broadcast and she asked me to write down the winners. It was difficult for me to know what the children said and my grandmother, in order to teach me, she imitated the scream and interpreted it at once, without distracting from her notes. It was simple to shout it:

-Mimiguelmiguelmiguelmigueeeeeel!...

Mimiguelmiguelmiguelmigueeeeeel!... –I was having fun but it was not exactly what I was looking for. It occurred to me to put background music. I sang “Las Mañanitas”:

-Miguelmiiiiguel, Miguelmiiiiguel, Miguelmiiiiguel,
Miguelmiii...

-We are here to please you, tell me, what melody do you want to hear? – I said with my hand closed with the fist before my mouth to simulate the voice of an announcer with a microphone:

-For you all, with a lot of love, “The Sad One” ...
Miguelmiiiiguel, Miguelmimigueeel...
Miguelmiguelmiguelmimiguelll...

I stayed for a while with the second place winning song. I tried hard to imprint to the melody the same feeling that the singer gave to it.

The image from the mirror was me but it was also Miguel, my husband. I was dressed in his plaid shirt and his denim pants. I was also wearing underwear, including socks

and shoes. Miguel was not Antoine Doinel and I was not Miguel. It took me fifteen years to realize it.

Flash back:

Fifteen years before

Voice-over:

October 1984.

Dear Miguel:

Then you were 14 years old, I weighed 68 kilos and I was also 14 years old. Every night I put the alarm clock that my dad gave me so it would ring at two in the afternoon. The alarm worked by turning on the radio. I tuned it into AM's XEQK, where the time was announced every minute. The announcer's voice was monotonous: "El Borceguí shoes for the whole family ... La Princesa, French corsetry ... Breel Cream gives your hair a nice and natural look ... La hora Haste, the time of Mexico ... thirteen hours and fifty-nine minutes..."

With that rumor of voices to which I added mine, repeating each and every one of the commercials, I used to go out to the balcony on the fourth floor of my parents' house and sat on a bench as if I was in the first row, in the first performance. I grabbed the binoculars by placing them on the handrail to hold them firmly and adjusted diopters, distance

and focus. I looked for you in the distance, in the garden, by the sidewalks or among the wide palms of dates. I vertiginously swept the space hoping to find you among the people who was walking or was getting bored at the bus stop. You always used to arrive through the same place, you appeared by Caleta, crossed Vertiz and took the sidewalk of the park. I could see then, in a long full shot, your khaki figure with the little cap of a soldier on the epaulette. You floated in slow motion. You walked as if you were going for a walk, swinging your right arm which carried a notebook. You looked around, you were not in a hurry but your step was determined. You were coming towards me and did not know it. The image undulated like a ghost, it was the midday steam that sprang from the pavement. When you passed under a row of tepozanes, the blackness of the shadow lost you and I hurried to get you back in my eyes. Since then, I looked at you on a screen, alien, distant, untouchable, ethereal. You could not look at me nor listen to me, just like the characters in a movie. When you arrived at the corner of Quemada and got into your house, I put the binoculars aside and picked up the popcorn dish that I had prepared for me.

EXTERIOR. BALCONY. MIDDAY

Fade in to the young woman who leaves the binoculars on the floor. She is dressed in another school uniform, the gala uniform. (The presence of the voice of the radio announcer slowly rises): “Sombreros Tardán, donde más barato dan

(Hats Tardan, where the cheapest is offered) ... the time, fourteen hours and twenty minutes ..."

She, meanwhile, puts a handful of popcorn in her mouth, repeats the phrase from the commercial at the same time as the radio*

- "Hicock", the article for gentleman ...

Cut to:

INT. CANDY STORE CINEMA MANACAR. AFTERNOON

Sign appears on the black screen:

II: The agreements

I made a promise to him, not to eat popcorn in the room because I made a lot of noise:

-The sound of digging with the hand inside the paper bag distracts, it takes you out of the movie – he told me seriously – and I took all the suggestions as commands which I appreciated. I leaned onto the bright neon light showcase and searched in the chocolates section, I chose some in the shape of little balls with taffy filling. Miguel asked for the same. I had the craving, as was my habit, of eating a cream horn and an ice cream cup, but I was stopped by the fleeting thought that it might be embarrassing when he could spit out a piece of meringue that I had had left in the commissure of

the lips. No, it would be kind of rude to eat those childish treats, I thought sure of what I was doing.

It was the first time that a boy invited me to the movies. Nerves did not allow me to say a word. I could only bring out short and stupid giggles. The movie theater was the safe place where teenagers and everyone who loved each other could kiss. To accept an invitation to the movies was to suppose the kisses and the caresses from the companion. That meant a commitment for me.

Miguel did not kiss me at the movies. Neither when it was dark, nor when we were alone in the cinema room, because he read each and every one of the final credits, and by no means when they turned on the lights. My desires remained stuck, waiting to experience them in the door of my house. Maybe that was the most propitious place. There was silence on the road. When we arrived he asked me worried if I had liked the movie. I did not remember not even a little bit, but even so, I said: – Yes – low and little.

Then, he smiled pleased and touched my arm slightly. He gestured enthusiastically and invited me again to the movies for the next day, to see one of his favorites: Río Bravo.

-Tomorrow starts the second run of a film of Hawks, would you like to see it? – he asked, giving himself importance.

Cut to:

EXTERIOR. BALCONY. NOON

On the screen appears a young man who has a film slate in his hands. He shouts the scene number, raises his voice to indicate shot two. He closes the tab producing a loud and dry sound. From where he came in, he goes out of picture and leaves uncovered the same image where she spies on Miguel with the binoculars. It is almost the end. She is dressed up in the sports uniform. She places the binoculars on the floor in the same way and on the side picks up the popcorn pot. It is a repetition but instead of echoing the voice of the radio announcer, he imitates the gesture that Miguel made the previous day, when he invites her again to the cinema. He puts a fistful of popcorn in his mouth and reproduces what was said by him: "Tomorrow begins the second run of a movie of Hawks, would you like to see it?".

Cut to:

INTERIOR. PROJECTION CINEMA TERESA. AFTERNOON.

When in Rio Bravo, John Wayne visits Angie Dickinson in the hotel room to ask her to leave because she is being looked for, and shows her a reward advertisement, I knew he had fallen in love with her. I saw how he took her in his arms and I decided to experience the sensation of the kiss: I closed

my eyes, ran my fingers over my wet lips, swallowed saliva and felt the taste of chocolate.

We left the cinema and walked slowly back home. I looked at the floor except when Miguel walked faster and showed me how Walter Brennan walked and how he made fun of Dean Martin: “Someone smells like roses” – he mimicked the toothless laughter that later transformed into the thunderous and honest of him.

EXTERIOR. BALCONY. DAY

In the same balcony, enter into the picture in *close-up*, the slate with the same previous inscription. The difference is the shot that now marks number three. The slate holder sings the scene and at the stroke of the tab, in a direct cut, Miguel appears walking in the distance, as we have already seen through the binoculars.

She holds them firmly and without taking them off she says imitating Miguel: “Someone smells like roses”.

Cut to:

SEQUENCE OF SHORT SCENES

On-screen sign: “Third day”.

EXTERIOR.CINEMA LIDO. NIGHT. RAIN

They walk through the streets without hurry. Light rain falls. It is getting dark and violet tonalities of oil and gasoline are perceived on the wet pavement. Their steps discover the reflections in the water of the illuminated marquee of the Cinema Lido. The camera moves until seeing in *full shot* opened the entrance of the Cinema Lido. Can be read clearly: *Live at Night*.

Dissolvency to:

On-screen sign: "Fourth day".

EXT. TICKET OFFICE CINEMA MEXICO. NIGHT

Miguel approaches the window and asks for two tickets. Over the small counter he slides money bills that add up to 8 pesos. He receives two tickets that jump out of the slot of a metal plate. On the crystal, a poster of *La Hija de Ryan* (*The daughter of Ryan*) and on top of this one, a sign, "Today" in red letters.

Dissolvency to:

On-screen sign: "Fifth day".

INT. CANDY STORE CINEMA LAS AMERICAS. NIGHT

They, leaning over the candy display case. Their faces illuminated by the blue neon light. They receive two boxes of chocolates. They walk to the cinema room and cross a screen that shows photographs of the movie *El Coleccionista* (*The Collector*). An usher opens the heavy curtain of red velvet.

Dissolvency to:

On-screen sign: "Sixth day".

INT. CINEMA ROOM ARCADIA. NIGHT

Sat in the armchairs of the first rows, there is a silent public watching *Esplendor en la hierba* (*Splendor in the grass*). The light which is reflected in the spectators, flashes by the changes in the images of the projection on screen. The camera slowly approaches our couple. We can hear a sound of voices altered by the speakers. Very close we watch the attentive faces of them that are absorbed. She reads avidly the subtitles:

- "...Stay with me this day and tonight and you will be the owner of the origin of all the poems ... You will be the owner of the goods of the earth and the sun (there are still millions of suns left) ... You will no longer receive second or third-hand things, nor will you look through the eyes of the dead, nor will you feed from the ghosts of the books ...

Neither will you look through my eyes, nor accept what I say to you ... You will hear what comes to you from all sides and you will screen it ...”

On the screen, Natalie Wood, standing in the classroom, tries to explain the meaning of the poem. Immersed in the armchair, a lonely tear slips on her face.

Voice-over:

December 1984

I did not have to think about it Miguel, you never asked me. I had no choice. There was no sleepless night. I walked the dark hallway of the ground floor of that cold building behind you, allowing me to be pulled slightly, without resistance, with my head down. My cheeks were burning, my breast was becoming red, a tremor went up through my body and reflected almost an imperceptible impact on the jaw. In the nape, the neck hardened under loose hair, the skin bristled and it unstuck the magnetized clothes. You simply took me by the hand and we entered the house of your parents.

We went into the bedroom full of bunk beds. I unbuttoned my school uniform blouse with the tips of my numbed fingers, while I guessed on which one you would sleep. I pulled down my skirt, kicked off my shoes without leaning, with the help of the other foot. I pulled a sock looking for your gaze. You were pulling your belt with serene movements. The white shirt covered your face and came out

floating through the air, the afternoon sunshine entering the room made it sparkle. You leaned to untie the knots of the shoelaces, you still had your pants on. You were postponing the moment to take them off. I loosened my bra and lay down on one of the seven beds of the seven brothers, covering my breasts with both hands. I closed my eyes, I waited. I heard the missing piece sliding. It took you a moment before placing yourself on top of me. Were you watching me?

I imagined a restless breathing, as in the movies, but you were silent hiding your face in my neck. I timidly scanned your back and watched curious evaporate the sweat between my fingers. I saw transforming the muscles of the neck and shoulders, wanting to get out of the skin wrapping until you remained still. The smell of the bodies flooded the room like a slap in the face. I did not hear sounds, which filled me with bewilderment. You loved me so quietly that the weak noises from the box-spring seemed like a scandal. I did not feel reactions in my body. Some sensations that appeared on the surface of my skin were dissipated, fleeting, fearful, like ghosts from childhood that are not recognized in the dark room. The experience was quick and quiet, my perceptions, like the images in the window of a train, crossed quickly before my eyes. I wanted to grasp something, a part, but it escaped from the memory...

We rushed to get dressed finally without disturbances. We wanted to get out of there in a hurry. We heard a noise coming from the front door and because of the fright, we jumped to the other end of the room, I put on the blouse inside out, knowing that I would not be able to turn it. Your

brother came in and looked at us suspiciously. He turned on a ruinous radio and searched for a station with Mexican music. I took the opportunity to put on my shoes with stealth. He lay down in "our" bed and I felt ashamed to think that he could notice the combined odors of our bodies. But he did not notice anything and stopped looking at us the moment I pulled out a folded ten-peso bill from my shoe and I said to you firmly:

-Yes, I am interested in your book. I buy it, I expressed it too loudly.

-What book? –you asked surprised.

In response I deflected a glance towards my bra that was on the floor half hidden by a bed. The discovery paralyzed you. It did not help at all the distraction that I tried with the book. You stared at the bra lying along, with the cups rigid and upright like perfect mountains of a drawing of a child. Your brother took out a pack of cigarettes (crushed and empty) from the back pocket of his pants and asked you for one. You did not react. It seemed you had not heard him. I repeated the question to you raising my voice:

-A cigarette! Give him a cigarette!

-Ah! –you exhaled, because you also had stopped breathing. –One cigarette... -you felt the pockets of your pants. –No, I do not have. I do not smoke –you revealed raising your shoulders as an apology.

But I had, and I took it out with care from the hem of my skirt. He smiled at me happily and, accomplice, he winked at me. Then he pulled matches out of a drawer of a bedside table and we took the opportunity to leave the room. I

remembered my underwear and went back to hide it. Without stopping, I slightly kicked one of the hard mountains that slid under the bed. I came to him and approached him to ask for fire with a cigarette in my lips:

-Would you lit it for me? – I said sensually and waited tilted.

Without looking at me, he put an arm under the nape, took out a battered comic book under the pillow, and expressed his view with snub:

-You are too young to smoke.

He placed the comic book before his eyes and whistled the melody of the advertisement of the tomatoes “El Fuerte” that came out loud from the speaker. I left the bedroom trying to guess again, which one would be your bed. That one, was not it.

When we came out to the light you did not kiss me. You half turned to Obrero Mundial, uttering a sound report. Without turning turning your head when you left, you raised your arm with a sign that seemed a farewell. I watched your departure and decided to follow you; Did not I belong to you? Did not you belong to me? You could not leave as if nothing had happened. But in our relationship there were no words, so I thought that being by your side was a way of telling each other things.

I walked behind you through the streets of Colonia Roma, narrow streets and little traffic. I was afraid that you might discover me when you were letting the cars pass by in a side street. If you looked around, I would hide behind poles and trees not as thick as my body. The beeping of a car of

sweet potatoes sounded hurting the afternoon after us and made me hide in the cube of a grey building. I nervously rang all the door bells. I feared that you would turn around and discover me.

-A coin for God's sake – I asked pleadingly to those who answered the ring call. The interphone speaker was filled with metallic claims. The insults covered me. I peeped out furtively to locate you. You had not noticed anything, you were following your path. I continued a little further and a while later you entered the Cinema Gloria. I bought my ticket and sat two rows behind you.

Steve McQueen dazzled me. I looked at him with great delight and I liked everything in him: his short golden hair, the hairstyle divided at right angles to his face, he seemed very manly to me; his wide and uncovered forehead, I found it as a sign of intelligence, the short lips, forming a thin line with the deep corners, it was what resembled you the most; in addition to his wide smile uncovering his white and uniform teeth. I found him identical to you, only his blue eyes had nothing to do with yours, of brown color, and I simply overlooked it.

Lying in the armchair, protected in the darkness, I was able to observe quietly his way of solving a crime, the smoothness of his movements, the unheard-of past that as a detective he had lived, his new future, the commitments with his love, who secretly was me and not the star of the film; the organization of the theft, the development of the plans, and in the end what was expected, was fulfilled, they escaped with the money towards a more than happy destination. I

knew that everything was part of a fiction but it filled my gaps. I made mine the conflict in which he struggled, the passion with which he loved, his fears and his desires. I transformed, during the screening, the roughness of my daily life in that fervent adventure, the silence that surrounded us had become tender and sweet words; our lack of experience in love, in the fiery caresses. I ended up pleased with the actor who represented you and it helped me to stay in love.

The humidity and heat returned to my body with the scene in which the actress caresses the chess lady and he is disturbed when looking at her lips. I saw the eyes of Steve McQueen and saw your desire.

EXTERIOR. GARDEN. DAY

On the black screen appears the sign:

III: Bon jour tristesse (*Good morning sadness*)

Sunday, boring afternoon. My parents were not there and it was not surprising, they never did. And we did not go to the club because we got tired of doing the same things every Saturday and Sunday of every week of the year. My father used to drop us there at eight in the morning and would pick us up at eight at night. We ended up hating the pool, the smell of chlorine, having wrinkled hands and irritated eyes. The steam baths full of blurry women had lost their initial interest. We no longer had fun grabbing their towels and hiding them. The fun, of being chased by fat

women running dangerously naked behind us screaming profanity to get their belongings back, was over. We preferred to stay in the neighborhood to play at the park.

That boring Sunday a small philharmonic orchestra played. The sellers of cotton candy, meringues, pork rinds, icee, fruit with chile, and balloons, filled the red dirt roads. My sisters had fun on the bike with other children. I had abandoned the bicycle, the skates with all included, the synchronized clapping, yoyos, balls, jumping springs, kicked cans, enchantments, ropes, airplanes and, of course, all my dolls. I left my sisters playing and I went up to the house. It did not occur to me what to do: I went out to the balcony, I entered the living room and again, back to the same: I went out-entered. I lit a cigarette Raleigh 100 mentholated. I opened the canteen and found an orange liqueur that tasted very sweet. To the second sip, it was already too sweet for me to be drinking by little sips, and I drank the whole bottle at once.

My sister Marcela found me crying on the handrail of the balcony, leaning over my body and with the face sunk in my arms. My cry was scandalous – the only thing that I still have as a child is the way I cry – and I was explaining her, between sobs and snots, that the park had been stolen from me:

-Are you crazy? –nobody can steal a park! – Blow your nose please! – she yelled at me angry. – Do not you see it there? – she pointed at it getting impatient.

And I, the fibber, the fat one, the dumb, the messy one, insisted: - I know that it is there, but they have stolen it from me – and I continued with my sobbing.

I was very fat and motionless, my sisters, skinny and small, were not able to carry me. They were trying to put me on the bed to cover up my unusual drunkenness. When they heard the keys turning the lock of the door, they were the ones who ran to get under the blankets and pretended to be asleep. My mother found me on the floor, she perceived very soon the odor that I was giving off, she broke loose her shoe and began to hit me furiously. My body was numb and I let her know:

-It does not hurt me – I said indifferently.

-I know, stupid kid – she answered ireful.

She kept hitting me until she had no more strength. Then she dragged me to the bathroom and opened the shower. There she left me under the cold water, with my feeling of rejoicing because the Grand Marnier had freed me from the pain of the beating.

Cut to:

Voice-over

January 1985.

Dear Miguel:

Do you remember my early drunkenness? They thought that the crying of the park was because of the alcohol. I was actually saying goodbye to childhood.

On the dark screen, a vertical curtain uncovers the sign:

IV: Months later...

EXT. SHORT-STAY HOTEL. EVENING

There were many furtive entries to the hotel on Caleta Street. We waited for no known people to be there and we went running through the parking lot. The run and the nerves agitated us a little. At the counter, without holding hands, we wanted to look like an old married couple or a couple of close friends. The manager attended to his work seriously. It was like in a silent movie scene, something implied. Miguel hid the fifteen-pesos-bill and slid it into the hand of the pockmarked man, how payments were made to the “tamarindos” (*policemen*), and he received the key to the room in the same way. All in a learned scene. Nobody improvised:

- Towels?
- No.
- Shampoo?
- No.
- Body oil?
- No.

- Chinese ink?
- No.
- Anything else?
- No.

We entered to the small room, with the attitude that habit makes, it was very familiar and all of them were very similar. We closed the green curtains that darkened it almost to black and we undressed without hurry. We went to bed each one on its own. Miguel took the bed sheet by the fold with both hands and lifted it making it swallow air. It was inflated like a downhill parachute and slowly covered our bodies. I never asked him the reason for the gesture because I liked the ritual. One Sunday morning, when I was setting my bed, it occurred to me that he was also doing it. His gesture in the room with the bed sheet, was something like stretching the bed.

-Are you staying? – the only verbal that was heard in our encounters.

I did not expect an answer, he got up from the bed and got dressed. I remained grabbed to the “parachute”, sticking my head out, watching how he picked up the clothes one by one from the floor and covered himself until he picked up a sweater that he usually did not wear. When leaving, he abandoned us, the room and me. I pricked up my ears and when hearing the “click” of the knob closing the door completely, I did a double summersault and dressed in a hurry. I always put on my blouse inside out in a kind of tribute to the first time we made love. It was a challenge to do it fast,

I needed to catch up with him to follow him and watch the movie he had chosen.

I watched many movies, sitting two rows behind, without Miguel knowing. While he enjoyed them alone, I did it mainly to be in his companionship in a clandestine situation. Since I could not talk about them, I got used to buying books, and I started reading literature about movies. Once I followed him to the Cinema International. It was a re-release: *The indomitable*, and I was sad for several days when a critic exposed the character as a decadent hero:

“... is in fact the opposite of a hero: the cynical, derogatory, selfish, feeble and venal guy, who has no notion of greatness, no love for the earth and who pursues easy pleasures like any petit bourgeois on a Saturday night”. It seemed to me to be reading Miguel’s description and yet, instead of hating him, I spilled a copious cry for him and for myself.

Voice-over

February 1985

Dear Miguel:

I made your wishes mine. I can tell you now, I adopted your habits without arguing, I imitated your language, I learned your movements and your voice echoed in mine. I loved everything that you loved with equal passion. I detested

everything you hated, including Betty Davis. And I hoped, inside me, for you to arrive.

On the black screen a curtain is opened horizontally and uncovers the following sign:

V: ... and the days passed

I locked myself home for several months. It had been many moons since menstruation was missing. I stopped counting the days, I lost count. I did not know what to do. When I asked the classmates about school, I found out that there was a clandestine group of ex-virgins in high school. It was not big, but girls of all grades pertained there. I felt proud to enter. I heard there several tips:

-Are nerves... show us the belly... tuck it in... inflate it...

Someone put the cardboard cylinder of the toilet paper to my belly and she stuck the ear to the other end:

-Do you hear something from the inside?

They measured daily, with a measuring tape, my breasts and my waist. They had a record that they wrote down in a shorthand notebook, they asked me short questions as doctors do:

-Did you eat a sandwich right now?... Do you feel kicks?... or is it gas? They played with a magnetic sphere caught by the end of a cord and hung it over my belly, if it moved in circles then I was pregnant, if it drew lines then I was not. No one was very sure of what kind of movements had taken place. The discussions were long, scandalous and

they all spoke at the same time except me. No agreement was reached because nobody knew the symptoms of pregnancy and since we were forbidden to ask an adult, we remained the same way. We did not even know how the gestation process took place. There were those who still kept their virginity but belonged to the “club”. The mistakes were frequent due to the lack of knowledge. Some swore that caressing their partners or allowing themselves to be caressed was a cause of loss. Some others claimed that if there was no blood, would be the constancy of virginity, as if it was determined by the existence of the little membrane, which, moreover, it was difficult to know if it was there or not.

During the recesses between class and class, while we raised the skirts of the uniform by rolling them up around the waist to transform them into miniskirts, the secret meetings were held in the bathrooms and we exchanged new experiences. We distrusted the books because some were very “crappy” and we thought they were “porn”. What we did allow ourselves was to watch movies. Although it was difficult to enter to the adult show because some of us looked too childish and were on the risk of being sent back out.

One afternoon of persecutions I saw, at the Cinema Eden, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and excitedly I took my friends the next day. When the show had finished, we cried without embarrassment. We shared the handkerchiefs and laughed comically at our crying. We left disgusted by the death of them. We did not want to return to our homes with that

unpleasantness and we agreed to have a coffee and smoke a cigarette to be able to comment on the film. One of my companions, Tihui, asked:

-Why was Faye Dunaway so angry with him?

-When did she get angry? – asked the popcorn devourer, another fat one like me.

Patricia, annoyed by the question that seemed foolish, as the oldest of the group and who probably had more experience in love, gave her a withering look and pointed:

-When they are lying in bed, that Clyde is asleep and Bonnie is awake ... before the shooting, you can see without a doubt that she is angry at him.

-And why does she get angry? –Tihui insisted, the girl that still was very girlish.

-But how stupid you are! ...because Clyde does not make love to her! – Cecilia Perez answered, with the words bitten by the jaw tight and half body on the Vips table. She was the one with the best grades but she felt very ugly.

The girlish-girl, who was squashed between the others and that they did not allow her to be near the table, indicated as a way of apology and enduring the glances of all:

-And that is why she gets angry? ... She should be happy... Are not we always saying that sex is an horror? – and she plunged herself offended among the others until disappearing.

The eldest, the expert, the leader of 2nd grade “F”, Patricia, lifted her right arm and drew with her hand a gesture of “you are not worth it”. She toured her gaze

through all, preparing her speech and dropped us “the lesson” once more. After a deep sigh she added annoyingly:

-But which film did this fool see? – indicating the place where Tihui had disappeared. – It is about a love story, it is not one of bullets... or what, do you think that the important thing here is the money they steal? ...the bullets they get, the cars pursuits? ...Well, no. it is their love the only interesting thing ... She even writes a poem after Clyde can make love to her and...

Upset, Tihui interrupts her:

-Can? ...Can not all?

Busi, who was at her right side, responded to her, imitating the voice of a mentally retarded:

-Of course not everyone can, ignorant!

Tihui was going to continue protesting when Olguita Caceres contained her gently, placing her hand on the mouth. She spoke to her quietly:

-Shut up already, manita. Let speak.

Patricia took time recovering her speech:

-Where was I?... – she lowered her pensive gaze.

-that the movie was not of bullets but of kisses. –with enthusiasm Olguita helped to remember.

-Ah! ...that is why they are killed, because of their forbidden love. –It ended without the passion with which it had begun, perhaps with melancholy.

Maybe she remembered her boyfriend who had been killed on the road to Cuernavaca. She turned her gaze to the street in a theatrical act, as if she were in a moment of mourning. She was exhausted, she lit a menthol cigarette and

drank her cold coffee. We kept silence respecting her grief. Without giving importance to her pain, another girl, Maribel, the most dressed up, the makeup expert, frivolously practicing her signature with the cigarette smoke that danced between her nacreous fingernails, broke the silence and with her high-pitched voice, she mentioned:

-A little angel passed by.

And Olga, the dedicated, took advantage of the moment and dared to say:

-Well, they are also killed for being bank robbers, are not they? There were no more comments. We sheltered in another batch of American coffees, and we changed the subject.

Anyway, that afternoon that ended with noises of dishes and filled the ambience of orange and yellow, despite not agreeing between us, we all fell in love with Warren Beaty and I, besides, with Arthur Penn.

A circle begins to reduce the image of the restaurant until completely disappearing and leaving the screen in total black.

Voice-over

March 1985

Dear Miguel:

Let me tell you something that happened to me when I was a little girl. My mother sought admiration and respect from us by performing magic tricks. She made money appear in our ears, she disappeared, one by one, sponge balls that she threw into the air as the best equilibrist, she found chocolate ice cream cones in the most unsuspected corners, and among other things, she could read thoughts, desires and pranks, in our forehead. Tense letters appeared little by little that only she could see because of her motherhood. It was like a grace given by our guardian angels. I was sure that she could know everything. Thereby, when we broke something or did something wrong, what was, on the other hand, difficult to judge, my mother called us and formed us in a row. She asked who was the one who did it. If we kept silent, in solidarity, then she ordered us to uncover our forehead while she went through the faces of each one until she stopped at the culprit. The one that had been discovered was punished but, above all, for not having confessed, and together with her, me. I was the oldest and, therefore, responsible for the others, whatever they did, whatever happened.

When we grew up, the story stopped working; we had learned to hide our activities better. The bonds between us were reinforced and insurmountable. It was not easy anymore for my mother to know what was happening at home, especially after she began to be absent frequently. The faces of each one were indecipherable. It was when the welts appeared. It was enough when someone escaped to a party so that the next day we were all covered in welts. Fortunately,

my mother did not find any relationship at all and blamed the mosquitoes on every occasion. She healed us with “Caladril”, a pink and sticky liquid that refreshed the burning of the skin.

One day, taking the bottle of milk out of the refrigerator in order to boil it, I told my mother that I felt, halfway down my right hip, some pricks as if they were cramps. She was chopping onion for the eggs for breakfast and mentioned laughing: “That is how you feel when you are pregnant”. The bottle of milk slipped from my hands.

Cut to:

VI: The marriage

INT. DINNING ROOM. AFTERNOON

Everything was happening quickly: The announcement of my pregnancy when my mother covered the welts in pink color. The threat that my father slipped: “He better comply, because I would look for him and...I would find him”, pulling out the drawer of the gun and looking at me determined. Fill out the marriage application: Have you ever had any of these diseases? Mark with an X. “Mom, have I ever had syphilis?” – and my mother’s expression answered everything. “...or gonorrhoea?” Better respond “yes” to everything and not seem naïve. The confection of the dress, wide at the waist to conceal but to make it as a “modern” detail. The studies of

the hairdresser of different high crests with “crepe” to harmonize with the “headdress”, a gift from my aunt “the godmother of the bouquet”, with which also matched. The list of relatives who were not going to be invited because of historical reasons in the family. The large arrangements of white chrysanthemums adorned with nacreous ribbons and bouquets of orange blossoms that the artist built at home. The placement on the center table of the room of a great pyramid of champagne glasses. The choice of rings. And the best: the rehearsing of the “wedding march”. Without even looking at me, my mother told me as a sentence:

-Since you did not want a party for your fifteenth birthday, now you have to rehearse the waltz anyway.

Miguel looked very elegant with a new brown jacket and a tie that was not the khaki. I felt the dress of pale blue terlenka style “princess” tight because I had insisted that it be short. It raised too much by the front and allowed my thick thighs to be seen when Miguel and I entered with hands linked above our heads, taking little steps to the beat of the music. My headdress with the white hairnet helped cover the pink spots that I had by tens on my face. The judge was reading boringly the epistle of Melchor Ocampo, while our tearful parents and the witnesses were signing the open book. We did not have to sign because of our age. Not even then had we the need to tell us anything. Three waiters delivered biscuits with caviar and champagne on flying trays. “Carlos spared no expense”, my mother repeated without fatigue. At the end of the meal, the people started to leave

and they gave us permission to sleep outside that night. The next day each one of us returned home.

Voice-over

April 1985

Miguel:

One day you told me to go to the matinee of the Cinema Del Prado. They were playing "Duel to the Sun" for the last time and I should not miss it. Then I weighed eighty kilos, I had a big belly and a lot of difficulty moving. The pregnancy did not stop me from continuing wearing short dresses or miniskirts. That cinema was frequented by lonely men. I changed seats many times when I felt the heat of a dark hand on my legs. I tried not to lose the thread of the plot, later I was going to be tested by you and I had to be attentive. It was 1971, I was about to turn seventeen. Gregory Peck shot Jennifer Jones to death, his great love. Outside the cinema, not far away and a little later, in the streets of Mexico City, the "halcones" (paramilitary group the hawks) were shooting young Mexicans. I was hit by the first bullets, those of Gregory Peck.

Cut to:

INT. BANK SERVICE DESK. DAY

VII: The first job

Before my thirty-day-old baby could realize that I was his mother, I dressed up appropriately and went to look for a job at the National Bank of Mexico. I was so skinny that the miniskirts did not look like miniskirts anymore. I hated pantyhose because you could see the division line and they were itchy on the skin, but I wore them that day to ask for a job and look like an adult.

I was cashier number four of the office of Diagonal de San Antonio. I signed a contract with minimum wage. I was always missing money, and everyone had to wait for me because the cash closing took me a long time. When I cried, they gave me the last chance and I had to practice with speed exercises. I pressed the keys of the adding machine by dialing numbers of six and more digits. After each number, the key of plus sign and at the end, the equals sign. I could not operate it fast enough. I did not pass the manual test of counting money either. Even now, when I go to the bank and the cashiers run their fingers over the surface of the bills, I think that they perform magic acts. They do it so fast that I still can not count at the same pace as them. They transferred me to the personnel department at the headquarters because I was not up to the job.

To get to work on time, at seven in the morning I had to take the bus "*Bellas Artes*" of thirty-five cents, in *Obrero Mundial* and *Niño Perdido*. I asked for the stop by pulling the rope when we were in *Salto del Agua*. I walked through *Jose Maria Izazaga*, then a little stretch of Bolivar and continued

through *San Jeronimo*. The convent of the Hieronymites always intrigued me and I peeked through their windows. I was hoping to find nuns working and I wanted to find out what they were doing and if they were happy. I imagined that my grandmother had been studying there during her childhood until they had to take her out because of lack of money. At the age of fifteen they made her marry to a much older man. Her parents chose him. I wanted to know if my grandmother, of being able to choose, would have preferred to remain in the convent instead of having been abandoned with four little girls after five years of marriage. After the attempts to spy on the supposed nuns, I continued on my way to *Isabel La Catolica* until I reached the bank. I did not have to do those twists but I did not like to walk through *San Juan de Letran* because I was exposed to a lot of “touching” and the hope of finding a happy novice in the cloister or in the convent, made that route special. When it was getting late, I would stop a taxi of the so-called “cocodrilo” (*crocodile*) who would take me to the door. The cost was four pesos and I would only do it in case of extreme necessity.

The work that I had to do in the personnel department got complicated: everyday I collected the entry cards and counted the delays. I pointed out the corresponding discounts in their salaries for the next fortnight. Three delays amounted to a warning issued by means of a memorandum; three memos amounted to a day of punishment without going to work; three absences because of punishments was dismissal without compensation, which seemed unfair to me. Among these cards were several that lacked only a delay to

be dismissed. I wanted to know who were those employees who could not be late because they would lose their jobs and not just part of the fortnight. I spied them one morning in front of the checking clock to get to know them. All were young and the vast majority were men. It occurred to me that if I marked their cards before the time of entry, they would no longer have the risk of losing their jobs. That is how a full month went by.

My boss checked over my reports one day and was surprised that there were no delays. She did not believe that everyone was arriving on time and thought that I did not know how to correctly elaborate the rough drafts. She asked me indifferently for the card package and found that there were no delays. Another month passed and she asked me again for the cards. She took a heap to her house to check them over. The next day she showed me an average of delays of each employee of the bank and she explained to me, in a very bad mood, that the administrative management had carried out a calculation of employees who had to leave each month, since an equal number entered to the “institution”. She had to work all night to do it, her eyes seemed that way. She threatened me with shouts, thinking that I knew how to delay the clock. She brought someone to put an aluminium band with a metal stamp, one of those that were put on the light gauge, and she thought she was a winner. That is how one more month went by. It amused me to think that the bank was becoming saturated with employees, that it could explode like a balloon.

My boss received a subpoena from the management. When she came down, she pointed the index at me and said slowly: "I will uncover you". Although she did not check card, she arrived at eight twenty but started to enter earlier, a little before eight o'clock. At that time, I had to check the cards of my protégés before, at seven forty, so that I had time to mark more than twenty. After a few days she decided to arrive at seven thirty, and I, earlier. When the cards had the time of entry six forty-five, I had to resign because two of those who arrived late asked me to. And because they asked me to, I could not refuse. I have never been able to say no to a man.

Cut to:

Voice-over

Dear Miguel:

*I never knew when you decided to abandon me. It is true that there were no words between us, but was it because you did not find a job? Because I got pregnant again? Because I lost my job? Do not blame me. Neither of us knew what to do with our lives. I only remember that under the pretext of **Bajo el Volcan** you went to search towards the south **El Farolito**. My pain was so great that I surrendered completely to the cinema. But it was not enough for me to see one or two movies a day. I was living through hollow days. It occurred to me to change the piano that the family had kept for generations – although nobody played it – for a VCR, and I*

*bought many video-tapes, hundreds. One Sunday afternoon I prepared myself to see **El día en que paralizaron la Tierra**, in my living room. Looking at the scene in which Michael Rennie asks Patricia Neal to activate the robot, I had a fleeting thought and repeated with a fervent wish: “Klatu baranda viktu!”*

At the beginning I noticed that the colors had gone from my environment. I thought that it was because of the many hours of watching at the luminosity of the TV screen, but, fractions of a second later, I looked at it thoroughly and...I found, instead of the pictures of the movie, the living room of my house. I understood that I had gotten into the film.

I do not know how long I have been like this. This place is exasperating, everything is in place, things are immovable. Nothing changes here in this calm world, the wind does not blow, no sun rises. I spend whole weeks trying to get back through paths a thousand times taken. I am lost.

*I am turning to you because of the days in which we were dancing **Under the rain (Bajo la lluvia)** with Gene Kelly, for the times that we loved each other like Gerard Depardieu and Fanny Ardant or we quarrel like Catherine Deneuve and Jean-Paul Belmondo, for all the dialogues of films that we made ours and we said: “If perhaps one day you see this old movie you will know that to do”.*

*Little by little the image goes away in a *fade out* to black. Appearing, in cut, a sign that says:*

The End