

Elsewhere

Martha Reyes

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Love is in page 52, Franziska Surber
Elsewhere, Martha Reyes

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ELSEWHERE

Martha Reyes

Presentation.....

Love European style

They prefer them.....

Where do I obtain for myself one like that?.....

Spoiled black woman.....

It is requested.....

I have known the worst, I come for the best...

We got the wrong country.....

They dance alone.....

The Place

Center, axis, reason, why living

Where is it?

It is an infinite chimera

Figment of the imagination

Longing for the non-existent

Endless search

Pale light faded to the sun

Loss of what was never owned

Earth, blood, song drowned in tears

And despair. It hurts...

It is not visible but it feels

Unassailable black hole

Outdoor asphyxiation

Breath of luxury, peace and security

Burden of not desiring but still wanting,

Come to wrap up warm my heart...

PRESENTATION

My story of migration is one more among the millions that we can tell, us, who are part of the third nation most populated in the world. The one that has all the colors of skin, , religions, languages, cultures, roots and uprooting. The one that is in all the territories of the planet: The Nation of the Migrants. That third nation is rich at least in stories to tell and mine, inextricably intertwines with others.

Leaving Mexico was not one of my priorities. Moreover, it was not even remotely contemplated. Being attentive, curious and open to other cultures was in fact vital in my big city. It was the same seeing them come home to the many cultural events that make living in the city of the gray cloud be so enjoyable, as having the opportunity to visit them in their place of origin, but all the time with the certainty of returning home earlier than late.

It always caused to me great admiration that a third of our country that fled from despair to seek for a better life in the United States. A thought invaded me: how desperate should their situation be in order of not minding risking everything, including their life, just to try a change. Invariably, their courage placed me on the opposite side of the scale: the emigrants, courageous and brave, on the one hand, and the coward who never contemplated the possibility of having such a risky adventure.

How did I get here? I came guided by the love to my closest loved ones, in search of a stable, sure and unattainable life in my metropolis of more than twenty million inhabitants and with a triplicated number of problems of all kinds. Following the impulses of my heart and stifling the fears of my mind.

I was educated by the environment to be alert to the danger and to the changes of a country whose mystique of life sometimes reaches up to having to kill or die to survive. If life is in itself a constant struggle with more disappointments than enjoyments, adding up the adrenaline of the “Place of the Navel of the Moon”, where it runs through your arteries and at the same time causes addiction and it hurts those of us who fall subjugated by its charm.

It is said that there is an inherent temperament to each culture. I think that us Mexicans can be awarded the badge of “passion” without restrictions. We cry without consolation and laugh without stopping with the same intensity

and sometimes on the same occasions. We are beings of great emotional liveliness and with a pride that gets to border on exacerbated nationalism.

That is how a Swiss translator made me see signs of it, in the first contact we had, a few weeks after having arrived. She was translating an official document German to Spanish and she asked me to check it before finishing it, because with other Mexican clients she had to correct the tone in which it should talk about “us”. We are very proud of our culture, our identity and our values are deeply rooted, according to her and other Europeans that I have recently met.

THE EMIGRATION

The shock of emigrating becomes tangible as soon as we face to the differences of language, or rather, of the languages and dialects of this country. We automatically become illiterate or at least disabled. We must relearn social skills, because those that we had brought enter in a state of latency and have little or no use in the face of the new challenge of adapting to a very different society.

The chronometric of the public transport system, insurance even for your favorite dress, knowing that it is known where you live, what you do for a living, where you come from, if you have committed a crime, etc., are issues that at first gave me the chills, because in our previous city we lived protected – and unprotected – by anonymity. Here, it did not matter who you were, what you did or what history of achievements and failures would have enriched you. Migrating is like being reborn, starting from scratch, starting once again and confronting our naked and helpless being. It requires a camouflage to engage in a new life in conditions that dissimulates the weaknesses.

Emigrate also means having the courage to face our acute self-criticism. How? When we review: what have I done...what have I been...Anyway, now I am not anymore and it does not matter what I have been. We, animals of the asphalt jungle, with inherent or acquired social skills with which we were always able to handle, jump, negotiate or manipulate situations, now we do not know how to do anything in the new circumstances.

Zurich is also called “the stomach of the capital”. It is home of enormous fortunes, both good and bad earned. It is a cosmopolitan center where there are immigrants from 130 countries, mainly the former Yugoslavia and Turkey. The largest population from Latin America is Brazilian.

We Mexicans are about a thousand families; a lot, binational couples and to some lesser extent compatriots who are in transit due to work or studies.

LIVING IN ZURICH

In our first apartment we used to sit on the balcony of the third floor. There, with a globe in hand, my children and I bet from where would the people who passed through the streets of that strangely alive and populous neighborhood come, considering the standard of the city. One thing was clear: we had the most practical geography classes and we learned more that way than with the Atlas.

In our building we had a neighbor who never believed that there was living a Swiss, my husband, because it was a place for immigrants, legal immigrants, illegals, workers, Hindu and Turkish shops, and restaurants of any origin we could imagine. It was a befitting place for drug dealers and prostitutes, but not for him, according to Herr Kharaman, a resident of this neighborhood for fifteen years.

In my country, where unfortunately only the same and unique language is spoken, we also face social coexistence by skipping the rules. It is not that we are confessed criminals, but we do find the way to avoid payments, taxes, procedures, or whatever is necessary. We always seek “to reach an agreement”. It is a terrible confrontation, because Switzerland is diametrically opposed: if you owe, you pay; if you use, you pay; if you forgot something, you face it; if you acted negligently, you are exposed; if you want to be funny, you become undesirable. There are no jokes facing any minor fault, even due to ignorance. The law has no sense of humor and those who apply it, much less. There is no place where you can hide to avoid the consequences.

It is not that there is no corruption, but it is corrected by an absolutely structured system that can not be evaded, unless you choose to be a *freak*, an *outsider*, those of whom there are very few real ones in this society.

The fact of paying for throwing away the garbage, where has it been seen! A king of the garbage my ass, here everything works with the precision of a clock (Swiss, and assembled here of course). The services do not have any delay, they are operated by workers trained for this purpose, there are specialists for everything. It would never happen what we see there where it is common to repair something damaged with a clip or stocking, unimaginable for a common

Swiss! It is curious that who less have, always find how to cope, if not, remember the fleet of Chevrolet 56 circulating in Havana.

Employment sources are created in as many areas as one can imagine. A plumber specializes in the bathroom or kitchen, but does not know or does not want to know about the other speciality. That way, a repair has a real price: the salary of the clerk, the operator, the extras and of course the taxes. It is always better to buy something new that includes installation, instead of repairing. It is more expensive the remedy than the illness. Geez, how we have changed!

THE WEATHER

Theme aside is the weather. In our city of the gray cloud, we enjoy a weather regulated by height, sun and pollution: all irremovable. In Switzerland, climate is the determining factor of the character of its inhabitants in each region.

The mountainous geography, abundant in rivers and lakes, captivates at first sight. A curious anecdote says that once, on a business visit, an Arab oilman magnate, amazed by the beauty of the alpine landscape, commented that he would gladly exchange some of his oil wells for a river and a lake from Switzerland.

We arrived in Zurich in a summer a few years ago. Those who know about it, say that it was one of the most intense summers in a long time. My children could hardly believe that 35 degrees centigrade were welcoming us. Getting to the open spas at the side of the river or lake was a real discovery. How much life! Beyond the topless and the nudists, we were impressed by the weather, better than Cancun!

Everyone smiled at everyone. Among drinks and barbecues I found some that were uninhibited laughing loudly. Of course I felt at home. The surprise comes when the sun hides and the beautiful autumn of multicolored leaves slowly arrives. The laughter disappears and the smiles begin to be scarce. For winter, needless to say. It takes one to find someone's face on the street. If by bad luck he is a stranger, he avoids in an unsociable way your gaze. The gestures become hard and the coexistence more.

That is why I have the impression that people changes according to the weather. In Mexico, this effect is not perceived. For me every season is enjoyable, except when the sun takes days to show up. In my land I always seemed more smiling. In Zurich, the short and sometimes non-existent spring and the fleeting summer get confused, and the autumn is perceived briefly tied with an overwhelming and extended winter. Like that, people react to the lack

of natural light by continuously changing moods; not even the phototherapy saves you.

VALUES AND WORK

The German Switzerland is very different from the other regions. It is a sign of economic strength and discipline of iron, there the word pledged is honored as in other times.

My husband has always told me that the midpoint between the liveliness of the Mexican and the constancy of the Swiss would be a perfect mix: we Mexicans are creative, happy and hardworking, while the Swiss are punctual, constant and honest. The mix of those values would be interesting.

A mayor from Zurich once described his countrymen like this: "They are friendly, cooperative, they like to speak many languages, they are good for business and the best of their virtues is punctuality". Nothing to do with the *Mexican time* characteristic of our country. Being late here is the first and last impression you give to a strict Swiss. It is simply unforgivable. In the beginning, I thought that extreme punctuality was an inconceivable act of intolerance, but when I had to wait for a Latina friend for about fifteen minutes on the street, at 10 degrees below zero, I understood. I became more punctual and less tolerant.

The wit of the Mexican does not go unnoticed in this society, but the outpouring of sympathy falls short if it is not played with the same cards of this society: seriousness, trust, responsibility and formality. For example, events such as the return of a lost monthly salary in the train, do not appear even in the most feverish of Mexican utopias. It is normal here, to return what does not belong to us without even thinking about it.

The entry keys to each house have a control number and when someone loses them, he or she has to inform the police to obtain a duplicate. More than once we lost the keys and, always with satisfaction, we proved and thanked the honesty of those who gave them back to us.

To honor the word pledged is something that in Mexico stayed in the past and in Switzerland is a living letter of small and large agreements. For example, a verbal contract between dealmakers is considered a valid legal act. It is not necessary to write it down, because when someone makes a commitment of doing something, he is a trusted subject until is demonstrated otherwise. I have

not seen anyone amending and regaining confidence for having betrayed its word.

It is said that the French Switzerland have the largest number of Latino immigrants, understandable if we think that the weather, food and language are more similar. In the Italian part, there are less immigrants. Why are there so many immigrants in the German zone? The north is industrious and protestant. Although the weather and the language, test out even the bravest, there is no lack of jobs if you search. The cities to the north of the country tend to conservatism, while the French and Italian zones seem more progressive and, therefore, their economy is less solid. The work is to the north and the weather and enjoyable life, to the south.

The characteristic of the German Swiss is of strict discipline in all spheres of life: dress what is necessary according to the weather, eat just what is required without falling into excesses, living an austere life with stability and security as priorities over everything else. That conservative trait of Swiss society has been and will be guarantee of permanence of the entire confederation, supported by the balance generated by an efficient tax collection and a rotating annual cabinet of seven ministers, who more than to win, they invest in their political career, at least at the beginning. They all are distinguished members of the society that they have managed to excel in their prosperous business.

SPARE TIME

One of the great and remarkable pleasures of the average Swiss is vacation, which they take religiously to fulfill the sacrosanct ritual of traveling to poor countries and return convinced that there is nothing better than their country, despite of the weather, the routine and stress generated by the demands of living in such a structured society.

Zurich is a cosmopolitan city where the artistic and cultural activities are constant and very good, but they are only available to those who can afford them. There are rooms for all uses, from community centers to the “Opernhaus” (Opera house). The society is distinguished and chosen not by tastes, but by socioeconomic sectors. Young people enjoy a wide freedom and every weekend it is common to see them around eleven o’clock at night drinking a lot on public transport, which we must say is not very cultural. Immigrants, on the other hand, have freedom of assembly and association, so that in perfectly defined ghettos they carry out their meetings and cultural activities, without mixing up with other nationalities.

POLITICS

In the first mentions of Switzerland, during the time of Charlemagne, he calls them: “A group of wild mountain people, brave in battle, distrustful and very hardworking”. The model survives partially.

The political regime of direct democracy, with the seven ministers which are rotated each year, facilitates the alternation in power and the balance between the partisan fractions. The political system allows citizen consultations to vote in favor or against initiatives of law and regulations of social coexistence. The consultations can be national or local, by cantons (what we would call *states* in Mexico).

Each canton (they are 26) has its social political, fiscal, educational, ecological, health...characteristics. The mechanism is efficient, effective and reliable. IFE, my foot! Here you can vote by mail from home or go to the polling station on the appointed day, open for two hours.

Recently, several initiatives that concern us, to immigrants, were voted on at national level. One stands out, because it suggests a shift towards extreme conservatism and proves a radical change in the Swiss tradition of reaching out to those who need it. Criticism of this initiative resonated beyond the confines of the Helvetic Confederation. It is a law that categorically separates the immigration that is welcome from the one that is not. The time for the Italian labourers was over and farther away was that poor Switzerland that expelled whole families to other lands in order to earn their bread.

The province of Misiones in Argentina and one closer to Sao Paulo in Brazil, know about that history, since, benevolent, they welcomed Swiss immigrants into their territory. The circumstances have so many turns that now the grandchildren of those generations who found a home and shelter and took that land as their own until death, come back.

Today, that immigration, product of the economic exclusion of the third world, has no place here. But anyone who has guaranteed economic subsistence and purchasing power from 1 to 10 compared to Mexico, is welcomed. Whoever comes to work here must fill a vacancy in a company or must be qualified to perform tasks that nobody in the Confederation is capable of doing. As for the students, are only accepted the ones with scholarships, exchange, higher education or that through agreements they come to schools paid from abroad.

Bi-national couples are also welcome, especially those who have strictly met all the requirements. In the case of the Swiss married to Europeans, things are even easier.

The key point of this initiative was to restrict the possibilities of granting asylum to applicants whose proven conditions are not life or death, with the intention of reducing the expenditure of resources that already impact the state. This makes clear that the Swiss tradition of supporting humanely works as long as it is not in its territory.

Justifiable or not, this initiative was approved with the scandalous addition that has a xenophobic tinge never seen before: immigrant juvenile offenders were legislated, so that the crimes they had committed will be evaluated and may lead, in extreme cases, to the deportation of them and their families.

There is also a form of migration that highlights the operation of a double moral in the system: the “F” permit granted to “dancers”, which in fact opens the door widely to sexual exploitation and trafficking in people.

With this initiative, the population intrinsically identified as undesirable is that of the former Yugoslavia. Albanian Kosovars are an unwelcome immigrant group to which is blamed for assaults or conflicts, when there is one. In fact, the new rules of social coexistence take this group as the object of xenophobic measures. In general, the initiative is aimed at all those who come from poor countries. There are no major changes in legislation with the member countries of the European Union, Japan and the United States. It is to investors of any kind who are truly welcomed, without objections of origin nor people, nor the type of financial resources.

EDUCATION

An inalienable right with its consequent obligations is education really free. Here, facilities, instruction, books and materials are provided in the classrooms up to concluding the third year of secondary school.

Rarely there is a fee to be paid, for a school trip or an extramural activity. There are no cooperatives nor parents' associations. There is a council of education by neighborhoods that is in charge of the citizens themselves. The members hold honorary positions that often mean the first step for those who have political ambitions. In effect, nobody looks more for their community than those who suffer their problems or enjoy their benefits; the one who knows it well and who has to think about his or her family when pondering what steps he or she has to take. These personal initiatives form political cadres of citizens in action.

As the law indicates (if the parents do not send their children to school they can be fined and in extreme cases the guardianship is withdrawn), my

children went to the closest school to our home once we registered in the neighborhood migration police office, which is mandatory. How much paranoid thought came to my head. When would we notify the police where we live in Mexico! Never! That goes against good sense.

The standard of educational services in Zurich can be the equivalent of a private school in Mexico, with the additional benefit that children coexist with other students of many origins.

The visit of a musician friend from New York made me realize how valuable it was for my children to have a multicultural and multilingual education in such an open environment and, at the same time, always under the control of professors, directors and even from the state itself. In his city, my friend never saw social inclusion as healthy as here, despite the fact that New York is considered the most cosmopolitan metropolis in the world.

The first disadvantage of my children was the language, or rather said, the languages. Then, not having studied pre-primary here, which is essential for coexistence and to assimilate the rules that students follow in classrooms throughout their academic history.

Seeing the four-year-old kids crossing the busy avenues by cars as well as by public transport, protected only by that phosphorescent insignia hung around their neck that seems to say: "Here I am, do not knock me down", made me stop more than once the impulse to protect any of them. But no; here they are in the hands of road staff and they take lessons on how to move alone, at least from home to school and vice versa. That would never happen in my city, where this training is permanent, because you have to get out well freed of any car attack, because the speed bump is the best friend of the minibus and there is no way to repeat the lesson: once the mistake is made, you do not live to tell about it.

This welfare society so well-structured, provides as much as you can imagine. In fact, I think that makes it decadent. For example, the increase in requests for assisted death in the country. Yes! You can pay for dying when you decide to, as long as you abide by the regulations and cover the corresponding amount, which, by the way, is very high.

This high suicide rate, this existential vacuum that provides the economic slack and the extreme luxury of some, is difficult to explain. How so much prevention, security and comfort lead to self-destructive and antisocial attitudes and behaviors.

HEALTH

The health system was another surprise. No IMSS, ISSSTE or SSA; no acronyms nor any welfare or electoral system. The medical services are all private and it is obligatory to pay them for anyone residing in the country, whether you use them or not.

You have the freedom to choose the company and the conditions of each service, according to individual and family circumstances. You can opt for a special coverage, paying only for an illness or service that is required. For example, those who need constant attention, such as a friend who underwent a kidney transplant that waited years in Mexico and here he was given one very soon. He had no problems with the operation nor with the specialized care, which he had at all times. The payment was covered with his franchise, paid monthly and which he had hired shortly before.

Nevertheless, the impression prevails that the diagnoses are not the strength of the doctors here. I have known about more than one that worsened by going to consultation or after surgery.

The good news is that, despite being the birthplace of the strongest transnational pharmaceutical companies in the market, possibilities to alternative medicine are beginning to open up. The holistic is very recognized and accepted by Swiss patients and companies that offer medical services.

INTEGRATION

Switzerland is the land of the banks, stock exchanges houses, watches, chocolates, pocket-knives and pharmaceuticals, with snowy landscapes and an imperturbable stability that guarantees the capital of all who can and want to entrust their funds of, at least, millions of dollars or, much better, euros.

When I arrived, I still managed to receive a glossary under my name to learn how the city works: transportation system, condominium rules, taxes, registers, schools, recycling, and a long list of etcetera; all written in Spanish and in friendly and proud tone that rather concealed a warning, because it seemed to me that it said: “Now you can not fall into omissions, because all the information is in your language and under your name”.

As a matter of principle, I liked the recycling thing, because in my city I fought a solo fight separating the garbage, but when it was picked up, they would rummage it again and at the end of the chain the bosses of the guilds of scavengers would take advantage of it to increase their income.

Paying for throwing away garbage, impressed me. Collaterally, what an effective way to force people not to eat packaged foods! For plastics, cans, paper and cardboard there are containers and in many areas compost is made with organics; thus, the only waste comes from the packaging of processed food.

The grocery bags bought at 30 cents are also paper. Little plastic is used and the contamination is almost null, because what is paid for the garbage bags is used to burn them in special plants. Of course, when less garbage is produced, less money is spent. Throwing trash on public roads is punishable, and that is reflected in the cleanliness of rivers, lakes, parks and others. Zurich is an almost aseptic city.

Emigrating is for young people or for those fleeing calamities such as war or extreme poverty. But I think that as long as life or survival is not at stake, changing countries is not a recommendable exercise, much less for those who are of mature age. A factor that helps the adaptability is the courage of youth and the unconsciousness that comes with it. This is the only way to have a good chance of getting out of the circumstances that confront them.

When migration has not been forced by circumstances beyond our control, it is easier to be opened to the changes that migration brings. Talking to friends from Sri Lanka or Kurdistan, I have learned that they agree that coming to Switzerland saved their lives, to them as well as to their families. Communities agglutinated by their customs and traditions become examples of assimilation, like the vast community from Tibet, which does not cause any discomfort with its discreet presence.

Among all the almost voluntary projects in which I participate, I have had the opportunity of meeting many people, mainly women. I have jumped from group to group without distinction of nationality or language, but undoubtedly the sweetest group of women with an air of my land are those from Sri Lanka. Their parties, clothing, attitude towards life and even certain physical traits, remind me of groups from Oaxaca, Guerrero or Chiapas. I love their food with spicy taste, talk smilingly and looking for any excuse to celebrate.

The beautiful Africans in such dazzling attire have a fairly compact group of Somali refugees in Zurich. Their dignity and discretion touch me. Turks are so dissimilar that they can not be generalized even by a trait of character or by social skills. They are energetic, willful and determined, but I have the impression that they draw strength from weakness. They seem to be rocks that withstand storms and tides, but they only hide their vulnerability. Albanians are distinguished by their beauty and intelligence, but they suffer the social stigma unfortunately well earned by the men of their community.

I have known lovely Arab women, who in addition to their exotic beauty, at least for me, are the most affected by social prejudice. The use of the burka out of conviction makes them the object of rejection of the female sector of the Swiss population. They judge them weak, fanatical or, at least, self-sacrificing. Due to their dress, they attract attention, but most of those who observe them do not think that, for them, the attire is also a trait of identity and belonging.

Obviously, this country grants freedom of worship, as long as you do not want to build new mosques. There is an unfounded fear or rejection of Arab immigrants since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the main victims are women.

Surprisingly, there is a fairly large Chinese community, from mainland China as well as from Taiwan. The intelligence and tenacity to complete their tasks is very much theirs. They are at least trilingual and accumulate languages and knowledge in an almost mechanical way. They struggle to preserve their mother tongue, Mandarin, and families with young children have their own cultural centers.

After the Brazilians, the Thais are the women most chosen as wives by some Swiss. In fact, according to statistics, 30% of marriages are binational. Unfortunately, there is a trafficking network of people from Thailand that has just been discovered and has not stopped operating its trafficking in children, adolescents and very young women who live as sex slaves or who are at least said to be involved in prostitution activities, an important regulator in a space where great social restraint is perceived.

The work as an intercultural mediator took me once to chat with a good Spanish friend who wanted to trace the profile of Latin American female migration. Her hypothesis was that most of these women were legally married and came from low social strata and without education. I gave myself the task of doing a small survey among the Latin Americans that I knew, to whom I asked the three questions. The first two of them were true, but not the last, what a pleasant surprise! More than 80% of our women had completed higher education and before they had emigrated they already spoke or at least understood another language besides Spanish.

As a good representative of the mother country, my friend could not believe that female immigration from the third world had a high profile, compared to the average that had been seen until the end of the year 2000. It changes, everything changes, Meche *la Osa* would say.

The meeting point for immigrant women, where I collaborate, had given me the opportunity to compare my impression of Swiss society with that of women from other latitudes. They all agree that this image of friendship with

the Swiss is correct, like the coconut peel: it is very difficult to penetrate, to break the shell; but once it opens, friendship is like coconut water: sweet and fluid.

I am infinitely grateful to whom it corresponds to have a network of well-known people of all colors and flavors, in which the Swiss are solidary friends, committed and understanding foolproof. With their friendship they have helped me to form almost a family here.

The following stories have as starting point, these beings that live in a multicultural, multilingual and multicolored city. Here are mentioned with deep love and respect women who have given me with their trust and life experience, a diverse perspective in this land so different and sometimes cruel, that gives us shelter. They are stories of deep humanity, with a positive sense that tries to fight bravely and take life as it comes; what is more, smiling, even when it gives a one-two punch.

LOVE EUROPEAN STYLE

As walking thru the bullring, Carmina enters to the Bar-bazul, with the fire of mature woman of four decades. Her red dress is one of generous neckline and smooth shoulders appear between the flirtatious sleeve barely linked by thin threads. Her elegant skirt flutters in her safe passing, despite the high shoes, and shows her long, firm, dark and well-shaped legs thanks to everyday exercise marked with Caribbean rhythms that alternates with different companions while she sweeps, cleans floors, windows, kitchen or make beds.

She searches with her eyes, from side to side. Almost at the back of the bar – with twenty tables and half of the parishioners – she finds her target: Bernard, fiftyish and somewhat bald, who adjusts his glasses and raises his hand to make himself visible in the semidarkness of the place. Carmina approaches smiling from ear to ear with a brightness of joy in her olive-colored eyes.

They greet each other according to the customs of the region with three kisses on the cheeks. Carmina sits down and places in a nearby chair her handbag plus another plastic one containing a gift. The bright and dark paper makes noticeable the ribbon of fine silk that binds it.

As in all their celebrations, they gather to have a drink in that popular place of the so called red zone of the city, there abound the bars of all the forms, decorations and intentions.

Retail drug dealers rub shoulders with young students, housewives on the way to preparing dinner, prostitutes for all tastes and drug addicts whose physical condition forces pedestrians to change sidewalk.

Carmina asks for a beer imported from her country. It is always more expensive than the normal one, but, what the hell, today they are celebrating! The two of them dined in their respective house before the date. It is very expensive to eat outside and here it is not customary the chivalry of the third world according to which the woman is invited, shown and strolled by the one who woos her.

Bernard slowly takes whichever glass of red wine, almost always with a glass is enough for the talk they hold for about forty minutes. When finished, they leave the place to enjoy themselves in the privacy of his apartment.

In the three years of the relationship, they have kept the routine of the encounters every weekend, always in his house, and barely disturbed by special occasions.

Carmina is Latin American, widow, undocumented. She works looking after the children of her sister with great love and tenderness. They are repositories of all their maternal anxieties. They receive the caresses and affection that she would like to give to her children, whom her mother attends in her homeland.

Bernard never married, mainly because the commitment required at least half of his salary to support a couple. He is worker in a factory that assembles parts for cargo ships. He is waiting for his retirement and longs for a future with a life without having to work. He wants to live out of his pension and nothing else. Finding Carmina was a wonderful gift of luck. A woman who is alone, has somewhere to live, covers her expenses and gives him unconditional love and without any exigency, it was like getting the lottery!

She, on the other hand, does not lose hope that Bernard will ask her to marry and thus end the uncertain situation in which she finds herself. She dreams of a life together in which she can achieve a modest, stable and mutually supportive happiness until her old age. Her currency of change is love and understanding.

For him, the relationship is perfect as it is. He does not have the slightest intention of changing it, despite the fact that sometimes he feels pity for Carmina's hard life and sympathizes with her ... morally, of course. In his life plan there is no marriage and much less has thought about having children. That costs a lot!

Carmina extends her hand, takes the plastic bag and looks excitedly into his eyes:

- Happy Birthday!

He takes the gift and, with some indifference, he is grateful for it while he suffocates the desire that this sensual woman provokes to him. He tears the paper, pulls the ribbon of fine silk and discovers a fluffy dark green sweater, delicately woven by hand by her. Immediately replies:

- We agreed to exchange birthday gifts of at least fifty francs, right?

Carmina, disconcerted, replies:

- Yes, but do not you like it? I wove it for you in just three weeks.

- Yes, but I do not know if it is what we agreed.

Immediately afterwards, he puts the sweater in the plastic bag, kicks the paper and the undone ribbon. He asks for the bill of his wine glass and beckons Carmina to leave the bar in order to go to his house.

She holds the crying and obeys meekly. She pays for her beer and with less graceful steps, disconcerted she goes out of the Bar-bazul, following Bernard a little behind.

THEY PREFER THEM ...

A study published last year in a well-known national weekly magazine addresses the topic of binational couples. Very curious things are highlighted: due to a standard of living with high satisfactions in a predominantly individualistic society, to the high cost of life and to the fact that marital failure and subsequent divorce leave debts especially to men, marriage is almost in disuse.

The Swiss women pose great demands for a mate. Their Prince Charming has a profile that does not correspond to the average Swiss. They are more interested in their professional development than in marriage. They are attracted to living as a couple in an equal relationship in which the companion is modern enough to share domestic duties and empathize with the imperatives of his companion's professional life. No subjection, self-sacrifice or social roles of the nineteenth century at all.

In the study, it is cited that thirty percent of men look for their other half with the qualities they value and that in their national market they have become anachronistic. Where are those jewels in extinction? Well, in the wrongly called third world!

WHERE DO I OBTAIN FOR MYSELF ONE LIKE THAT?

On Fridays, after work, groups of office workers, especially from the area of finance, meet in a lounge located on a central street with a very chic atmosphere. It is a loft with designer furniture and *ad hoc* environmental music to allow attendees to chat and enjoy excellent drinks. There, two young men chatted animatedly, awaiting the arrival of a third.

Peter and Joseph see Luca enter the place accompanied by a sculptural mulatto girl with extraordinary blue eyes, long, reddish and wavy hair that falls at the middle of the back. She must be 25 years old at the most and smiles in all directions with a gesture of innocence of a girl who knows she is being observed and admired by those around her.

The three of them work in a transnational insurance company which abound in the city. They enjoy an enviable professional and financial success, none of them over 35 years old and they know each other since the time when they studied Economic Sciences in St. Gallen. They are mutual confidants of stories and failed relationships, intense or inconsequential.

After a brief talk in a mix of *Spanglish*, Connie (Concepcion actually) excuses herself and looks for the *toilette* with her eyes. Lucca leads her to the entrance of the toilet and the others follow with their eyes the spectacular way of filling those jeans with firm thighs and buttocks that threaten to get out of place.

- Was ist los mit dir! (*What is wrong with you!*) What is wrong? Where did you get that girl? – both inquire. Lucca gets comfortable on the sofa and without being able to hide his satisfaction, he starts talking.

On his last trip to South America, the company entrusted him with the mission of putting the activities of its new branch back on track, which should function as a headquarters in that region of the continent. In those days he was, when among the staff that he had to train, all promising insurance professionals, he found Connie. They went out a few times while he was in the city and now she was testing if their relationship could work in Switzerland and also took the opportunity to learn more about the company at its headquarters.

He commented very well that she was not only beautiful, as they had proven, but that she was also an intelligent professional and a loving and homely woman. She enjoyed doing the double day of the modern woman. She felt proud to be “so independent”, of paying half of her expenses and taking care of household chores: clean, wash, iron and cook without complaint, rather satisfied to be able to do it.

Aware of the envy that his conquest provoked to his friends, Lucca gave detail and more of how happy he was to have found a woman up to his measure, with the attributes of a companion of this era, plus the virtues of women from before.

There was no point of comparison with other relations with European women that always ended in arguments over everything. They were relations for power in all areas: from home up to bed, and they began to show their differences with details such as, the inability to agree on who would make the groceries shopping to dine together.

They detested that style of dressing and of behaving as men do. Competitive, direct, almost without makeup; comfortable shoes and limited personal care. What we, some of the women in Mexico know as “slovenly” (*“fodonga”*).

Connie was very careful with her appearance. Her beauty, femininity and coquetry turned her into a case of cute things with unbeatable presentation.

The talk on the subject was about to end due to the imminent return of Connie after a touch-up of twenty minutes in the bathroom. Almost in unison they asked:

- And, how did you convince her to come?

Lucca replied that there was the possibility of a transfer of place to train for a few months and meanwhile they would take the opportunity to experiment if their relationship worked or not. Joseph said:

- Tell me, how do I obtain for myself one like that?

SPOILED BLACK WOMAN

Estela came to Switzerland as many of us, in love with a young man who dazzled her with his cheerful, open, tolerant nature, and with an unbeatable clarity and attitude towards life. They met on the island when he went to study music ethnology to the place where she worked as a dancer.

After hundreds of adventures, she arrived in Europe confident of her love, full of illusions and in search of happiness. She wanted to change her reality, which predicted a gray future on the island.

The first shock was to verify the change of character experienced by her companion, to the extent that he seemed a person on the island and another on the mountain. She avoided her bad thoughts and with all her soul she insisted on learning the language and supporting the nascent business of her husband's dance academy.

Black skin with a smiling half-moon mouth, similar to a slice of watermelon. Curly hair, indomitable and voluminous. Her face could very well inspire Bola de Nieve (Ball of Snow) in his classic "Duerme Negrito" (Sleep little Negro). Children's features with wide-opened eyes which cheered with the flutter of her bushy lashes and her arched and populated eyebrows. The delicate chin and an upturned nose lost between her happy mouth and her huge dark eyes.

Dancer by profession, she told how she failed in her attempt to be part of the "Tropicana" due to her physique; that is, the stereotype nothing islander of white, tall and slender women who had little to do with their sculptural body of 1.55 meters tall.

Leaving the sea for the mountain, the sun for the snow, changing the music for productivity and the being for the having, tempers any person, and to one like her – a being of sublime and delicate spirit – it disrupted her from the root.

Calls the attention, the effort put by Europeans in acquiring dance skills in a field that has been denied to them: the rhythm. Months, even years of stubborn training to learn how to dance, always betrays the track that governs the technique and suffer from the natural rhythm.

Estela spent the first three years of her stay in Zurich teaching the rhythms of the island, in the business that her husband skillfully managed. Not a few were benefited by her knowledge, but anyone gets tired of sowing passion where only technique can be harvested.

She came to count days of twelve hours of salsa classes, both in the dance club as well as in private homes, dance halls or wherever necessary, including during the holidays. She ended exhausted and with an inner emptiness that dyed in white her black hair in the third decade of life.

Her tenacity was clear when she decided to make a career in German as an aerobics teacher. There is no one who I know, that has not been forced to change their profession, passion or occupation when migrating, all in order to adapt. But painful examples such as Estela, are touching when observing how joy and the vital force wither in the struggle to survive in a world that requires as a quota of admission: be what society wants us to be so that it works.

Estela no longer dances, she does not teach dancing anymore. She only trains people in a gym, people who admire her appearance of Olympic athlete, her gift of people and that smile, now darkened, that is no more than a grimace of the laughter that once echoed in the streets of Old Havana.

IT IS REQUESTED ...

Silvia tore off from the bulletin board a small piece of paper that flew with the air conditioning in the cashiers' area of the shopping mall. Finally, someone was looking for domestic help twice a week for four hours in a row. Her head made calculations: 25 francs per hour plus transportation, that would help her alleviate the financial crisis in which she was left by her first deportation.

With luck, she could even send some money to build up the walls of the land she bought in her mother's town near Cochabamba. The roof could wait a few months. The most important thing was to put a fence so that it would not be invaded.

Suddenly, she came back to reality: "Well, how am I going to communicate with these people if I do not speak German?" She mentally shuffled her linguistic baggage and wrote, rather described, how some phrases she heard from known people sounded articulated. Those known on the take that were experts subleasing their work places during their forced visits to their homeland. What unpleasant surprise to learn that among the Bolivian community it was common practice to charge sometimes up to half the salary earned for cleaning houses. Those known women, that in order to not lose customers, offered a trusted substitute. Thus they obtained double profit: half of their salary without working and the guarantee of not losing the job when returning from the family trip. Good for them; but that abuse from the substitutes seemed to me a new form of slavery in the era of globalization.

Silvia accommodated her solid and straight black hair, she sharpened the look so as not to mistake the telephone dialing, she remembered very well some of the details in her telephone sales course: “Speak with confidence, project confidence in your voice and act as if you were facing your interlocutor”. When the recommendations were completed, she dialed the number, took air and articulated the sounds that were in her notebook.

A very attentive male voice answered her and made for her an appointment in a downtown cafeteria, he spoke slowly explaining how he would dress and where he would wait sitting down. “There is no loss”, she told to herself enthusiastically.

She did not realize that what was usually done was to meet at the client’s house to explain what he had to do and how. She felt too optimistic as to notice small details.

While she was on her way to her appointment, when passing through the University, she remembered her days being a student. Her degree in Chemist Pharmaceutical-biologist was ancient history; not so, the time and effort devoted for many years to achieve it.

She smiled to herself with bitterness, recalling her student motivations: getting out of the neighborhood, financially helping her mother, having her own pharmacy. How crazy! Although at the time these illusions gave her the strength to move forward. In her city she barely managed to get a job as a pharmacy assistant with a salary that was never enough even for the whole family to eat.

After a few years, and she married her boyfriend from when she was a student, who always put apart the effort to study and put all his tenacity in encouraging her so that she would be a professional. Then, their only son was born and a terrible streak came, not the “was born under a lucky star” which is so much talked about when a child is born. Her husband lost his job and she, who was engaged in parenting, was not able to stay as a pharmacy assistant.

When the boy was four years old, she left him in charge with her mother and a sister in order to emigrate to Spain, where a family member worked cleaning houses. As she could, she collected the money for the trip. Her husband went to friends and family to borrow from them with the promise that he would return it to them at the first opportunity, and he left with her.

Thanks to her docile, reliable and modest appearance, Silvia easily placed herself as a house-employee from Monday to Friday, “bed inside”, that means, staying overnight in the workplace. Saturday and Sunday she sold food in public parks.

Her husband slept wherever he could and earned some coins singing in the streets, barely enough for his food and daily transportation, nor even dream of paying the loan.

Once again the inevitable happened. He was arrested and forced to leave the country. Silvia had managed to stay stable in her job and had obtained an annual residency permit. The dilemma was to stay and that he returns to Bolivia or that both leave to a third country. They had heard that in Geneva there would be possibilities of employment, he, in construction and she, in houses; so they arrived to Switzerland to start over again.

The first months were surprisingly good. They paid their travel expenses and brought their son who was eight years old already. She worked twelve-hour days between transportation and house cleaning. He kept singing in the streets and he set schedules to take care of his son between school entrance and exit, where, by the way, nobody asked about his migratory quality, but he was only installed in the integration programs that the institution had arranged.

One of those Sundays, when the child was at home with Silvia, a friend of her husband came to urge them to leave their house, because the husband had been found singing in a place where it was forbidden and was taken immediately to the place of transit in the airport. In a matter of hours, he would be returned to his land.

Silvia took her little boy and fled to Zurich. As soon as she arrived, she found those famous “acquaintances” who, seeing her need, they subleased her work places. She, grateful, did not judge it as abuse; rather, she felt relatively protected among her countrymen.

Although the child enjoyed more freedom and free education, the worry of being illegals was Silvia’s daily concern. It frightened her, especially that her son was left alone if something happened to her. She was also tormented by her husband’s constant demands for money, arguing that she worked and he, there, had not achieved anything in two years. Without her money, neither he nor her mother had to eat.

One day, around six in the morning, the bell rang in our house. He was the son of Silvia with the anguish reflected in his face.

-My mommy did not get home to sleep – he said, while it was difficult for him to hold back the crying. We offered him breakfast, a change of clothes and we proposed him to go to school which he shared with my son, taking for granted the solidarity and discretion of the teachers who in such situations would not stop supporting him. Meanwhile, we could look for Silvia and by the afternoon, when he returned to our house, we would know perhaps more about what was happening.

We looked in hospitals, prisons and other possible places, which more predicted the worst. Two days passed. The little one stayed with us and followed the instructions that his mother gave him: not to go back home to sleep, but only

get some effects that were very well hidden and that he only knew where they were hidden.

Through a priest of the Catholic Mission, we learned that she was detained and that she had completed 72 hours of research on her immigration status. She would be deported to that term.

At about twelve o'clock on the third day, Silvia showed up at school to pick up her son, accompanied by a woman from the immigration police. She managed to validate her old work permit and she would be deported with her son to Spain. Of the bad things, the minor.

The personal effects were her savings of hundreds of hours of domestic work. With that, it helped to restart for the umpteenth time in Madrid. There, the boy was very depressed and never got adapted to the Spanish school which was much more racist than the Swiss school.

Silvia chose to send him back to Bolivia and stayed working alone in the most difficult time of her long experience as a migrant. Risking herself, she went back to Zurich, where she already knew how things worked, or at least knew how and where she could offer her services.

She arrived at the coffee place to her work appointment. She immediately located her possible employer and greeted with her half tongue.

He looked at her like someone who looks in a store window a commodity susceptible of purchasing.

Silvia told him that she was *Latinoamerikanerin*. He smiled, pleased. Silvia asked as she could, where was his house, and he asked her at the same time how much she charged. She answered that 25 francs per hour. He, puzzled, replied: -Sicher? Normale weise sind 80, aber, wie so in mein Haus?

As if struck by lightning, she understood that he was looking for a woman, but not for cleaning. She forgot the key word: *Putzen!* Frightened, she got up, took her old coat and left the place without saying goodbye.

I HAVE KNOWN THE WORST, I COME FOR THE BEST...

During some fabulous vacations in the beautiful beaches of Dominican Republic, Eloisa met who her husband would be. Pascal was a thirty-something blond, somewhat insipid, who was captivated by her spectacular hips, which, to the rhythm of merengue, subjugated him to the point of forgetting that she was a woman, more than humble, illiterate.

At that time, the life of Eloisa passed between two seasons: the work in the field and the dance. She was literally torn from her medium. She left everything she knew and, engrossed with youthful curiosity, she changed her life radically. Of not having even what to wear nor what to eat, from one moment to the next she got to know all the luxuries that no one in his town could reach.

A great advantage was on her side when emigrating: her open and positive attitude to the new. She learned with I do not know what Swiss-German and High German technique from the literacy level, while raising his two little ones.

Over the years, cultural differences opened a gap impossible to save and they divorced with an agreement that was almost advantageous for her. Thanks to her intelligence and common sense developed in those years of marriage, she managed to win in the divorce at least one alimony and some monthly money to survive.

Their children know almost nothing about their motherland. The brief vacation periods were not enough to captivate them and now, in adolescence,

they prefer to go to other places to walk. They feel more Swiss than anyone else and, in fact, they avoid speaking Spanish although their dark skin reveals their origin.

When I asked Eloisa if she would return to the Dominican Republic when her children became independent, she told me:

-Going back, what for, if nothing is the same. My mother died, my friends forgot me, the heat makes me sick and what would I do there without my children. That is not an option.

Her youth passed like a gust while she insisted on being what her husband and Switzerland wanted. Now, already mature, she is aware that getting here at the age she was then, allowed her to concentrate exclusively on the daily struggle, the family, and nothing or almost nothing, she dedicated for herself. What will she have left when her children leave?

WE GOT THE WRONG COUNTRY!

If there is something that invariably is sorely missed, besides the good weather, is the social life to which we Latin-American women are used to. Even Spanish and Italian say they also suffer. All my life I rejected that common waste in our celebrations: sparing no expense, although the next day there is not even enough to eat.

A saying goes: “You have to live as you should, even though you owe what you have”. Always contrary and in disagreement, I avoided as much as possible participating in close friendships, invitations and all those practices aimed at strengthening ties among friends through exaggerated celebrations and with a minimum duration of two days. When there was no way to avoid it, I went, always being cautious with my big mouth on any acid and unpleasant comments.

Being spontaneous and demonstrating as often as I could, my affection to my friends, family and colleagues was my philosophy, without the date having more than the meaning that I wanted to give it. I never adulated sellers of second-hand products.

Nevertheless, now I miss those cheesy and wasteful parties that I missed. I need the chaos and anarchy of these intense celebrations. Such is the degree of nostalgia that the last September 15, I organized with a good group of friends, the ceremony of the “Grito de Independencia” (*Cry of independence*). The advantage is that now we can do it as we want, without any protocol. It was a delicious *sui generis* ceremony.

THEY DANCE ALONE

I knocked at the door of a building whose only sign with a last name in Spanish assured me that I had arrived to the right place. How good, because the cold was too bad!

My dear friend opened the door to me and she received me accompanied by an aroma of stew and beer with a background music of Cuban Son.

We agreed to meet between February 14, Valentine's Day, and March 8, Women's Day, in order to kill two birds with one stone. We also organized an exchange of gifts with the tactic of the secret friend; that is, we would not know to whom our gift would be destined. By Swiss influence, we put certain rules: the price and that could be any object for personal use, new and preferably with some utility.

It was a very curious reunion with a mixture of relaxed and spontaneous customs, combined with the features of Swiss formality: at what time it started, at what time it ended; with the expenses of the food divided equally between the attendees, etcetera.

Guatemalans, Colombians, Dominicans, Argentines, Peruvians, Bolivians and Mexicans, we gathered in the apartment of Damiana, risking being admonished by the neighbors because of the noise, which for us it was not such, but good music, laughter and jokes in an environment of euphoria.

While we began to eat the delicacies prepared by our hostess from the Dominican Republic, drinking a Prosecco, we talked about how we got here.

All the stories were similar: all married with Swiss, with children here and the rest of the family there. The hardships of some were the same as of the others.

I remember the comments regarding the weather. One said that it was very hard for her to stop going out well-groomed and with high-heels shoes during winter and that she just stopped doing it after a resounding fall caused by sliding on the ice.

Another said that she came to the country with her low-cut, striking and coquettish clothes and it took her years to realize that she was mistaken for a prostitute in the street. Another one described very tenderly how difficult it is to find suitable clothes in bright colors in winter. Everything is half dead...! Even the people seem like that in that season.

Listening to Jose Jose, the nostalgia became acute. A sculptural black woman said that what she most missed was finding a good partner to dance; that she had given up going to nightclubs, since it was clear that men were engaged in charging for dancing.

Another added, that the only thing she had not achieved was to make her husband to learn how to dance, despite having spent so much time together. Perhaps, she said, it also had to do with the passing of time: she did not feel attractive enough for someone to invite her to dance.

We all reacted in unison:

-No, is not that! -. Here people do not know how to enjoy the rhythm or take advantage of the closeness that the dance allows. The enjoyment of life that costs nothing, comes with joy and smiles, with sharing bread and salt if there is. We are used to that and the rest is social reprogramming due to immigration.

I do not remember when it was the last time I danced with only women, but in that occasion, the dance was unleashed from one moment to the next. How many rhythms filled the improvised dance floor, in fact, the living room of the house. We all danced improvising movements, teaching steps and making of the moment something to remember.

We exorcise nostalgia, bad thoughts and cold. That present was perhaps a party on the seashore for some, a dance for fifteen-year celebration for others or a party in the family home. In short, a bacchanal of singing and devoted rite to joy.

We all danced, not alone, but accompanied by all the others, until the body could resist no more, when we realized that the last train was about to pass.

We returned home with swollen feet, sore throats from so much laughing and the spirit overflowing with joy. Winter did not get to freeze the soul, at least not for that night.

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