

# **CRIACUERVO**

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**Translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe**

## PROLOGUE: THE CHILDREN OF THE FOREST

On the unbroken rear windscreen of the mangled vehicle found among the ash trees, the police saw a sticker that read: *Haply God's riddle it, so vague and yet so certain*. Inside the car, they discovered the dead bodies of a pair of biologists. According to the media they were a married couple who had been employed for years by the Max Planck Society, where they were working on a way to interrupt the pathogenic mechanism of a rare disease called Lafora. They had been invited to present a paper - on their research using the enzyme found in a common fungus - at the largest German symposium on mycology, organised by the University of Hohenheim in Stuttgart. Although the university had offered to pay for their flights from Berlin, the couple decided to do the trip in their own car. It was summer and the route boasted spectacular scenery. Days later, the car was found overturned on the verge somewhere off the A71, which cuts through the Thuringian Forest. The first person to find it was a lorry driver transporting swine from a pig farm in Gotha. He had noticed the trail of destruction the car had left before it slammed into a dense coppice of trees. In his statement, he said he pulled over his lorry to go into the forest and search for survivors. In the news reports, he stated that the biologists' car looked like it had been torn apart. It was strewn with fallen leaves, the windows spattered with dried blood. The lorry driver called the police from a nearby petrol station. When the authorities arrived on the scene, along with an ambulance, they could see there was nothing to be done.

The couple had two sons in Berlin: Klaus and Adler Zweig.

The family had lived on the third floor of a five-storey building in Lichtenberg, a working-class neighbourhood in the east of the capital. Among the biologists' tiny handful of friends was a neighbour who lived on the floor above. Her name was Anna Baumann. She had a daughter called Cora, and ran a shop selling rugs imported from Azerbaijan. Cora and the Zweig brothers were very

close friends.

From an early age, Klaus and Cora had an intense attraction to one another. Adler, the youngest of the three, frequently caught them kissing furtively on the stairs, clutched in an embrace like something out of a soap opera. The situation made his blood boil and he was deeply hurt by it, although he never dared to confront them. He realised he had no legitimate reason to reproach them. At the age of ten, Adler learned to suffer and to pray, and came to understand that a prayer is like a scream underwater. It did not seem to matter that he and Cora had more in common. They both used to love reading the collection of fables that Anna had in her apartment. In fact, this was the only activity from which Klaus was excluded. They devoured Abstemious, Aesop, Lessing, Lutman, Florian, La Fontaine... What animal do you reckon you would be in a fable? Cora asked him one day. He said he would be a rat. Not because he liked rats, but because that would be just his luck. She said that with his blond hair, he would actually make a better canary. In such moments they seemed to verge on perfect intimacy, although Adler knew that his brother was always lying in wait, ready to effortlessly win Cora's smile.

Sometimes the biologists would be away for two or three days at a time. Anna Baumann looked after the boys and more often than not, they stayed over in her apartment. They would go out for meals or walks in the park. Every summer, without exception, they would all get a swimming pass so they could use Berlin's public pools. There, the Zweig brothers challenged each other to fierce competitions which Anna timed out loud, and not very accurately. It was in those pools, teeming with children and plump women, that Adler decided he would become a swimmer. He nearly always won against Klaus, but he never managed to beat Cora at the game of holding their breath underwater. He never beat her at anything.

The morning Anna Baumann opened the door to a police officer who informed her of the biologists' accident, she decided she would not go to work. She did the same the following day and kept the boys at home. The Zweig brothers had been staying at her apartment for almost a week, something they had already sensed was strange because their parents never usually stayed away that long. Anna woke them up at around midday. She did not explain why they weren't going to

school. In silence she poured grapefruit juice, scrambled a few eggs and warmed up some croissants. She sat across from them, watching them as they ate. Her eyes were watery, glistening. It was Klaus who asked her why she had let them sleep in so late. Then she told them that mummy and daddy were dead. Adler started crying with his hands in his lap. Klaus, on the other hand, stared down at his plate and played with the remains of his breakfast. Later on, Anna took them with her to the shop and the two of them sat in silence on a rug adorned with Persian filigrees and camels outlined with silvery thread.

After a few days, a car pulled up outside the building, a battered old Trabant (one of those awful little cars found in Eastern Germany before the fall of the wall, and which, once requested from the government, had a ten-year waiting list). The car belonged to the Zweigs' paternal grandfather, who had come to claim custody of the boys. After going through the rigorous procedures with Social Services and a few tantrums on the part of the brothers, they went to live with him in Hamburg.

The grandfather's name was Abelard. He lived in a building mainly occupied by single people. He was an inscrutable man, coarse and ill-tempered, whose outfit of choice was a pair of baggy polyester trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His forearms were tattooed with flowers: an orchid, a rose, a tulip and a jasmine. He was a widower. His sole companion was a Doberman which he later had to put to sleep, when having lost its sight and sense of smell, it bit him in the face while he was taking his afternoon nap. Given that his only son - the biologist - never introduced him to his grandchildren, in the beginning he was a complete stranger to them. Abelard decided to hold the funeral in the Ohlsdorf Cemetery in Hamburg. He explained to the boys that from then on, he would be daddy and mummy, and of course, grandpa. They understood little to nothing. They thought that it was all just some absurd situation that was going to be rectified sooner or later. Over time, however, they realised that things were going to become even more troubled and turbulent.

Besides the three of them, nobody else came to the funeral. For the Zweig brothers, the funeral was a farce. It left Adler with the profound impression that their parents did not have a single friend in the entire world.

One night, around three months after they had moved to Hamburg, Klaus asked Abelard why nobody had come to the funeral to say goodbye to his mother. Abelard, who by that point was on his seventh glass of *glühwein*, retorted sharply that people worked on Wednesdays and the funeral had been on a Wednesday. That was why. Then Klaus wanted to know how his parents had met. Abelard, exasperated by his questions, ran his tongue over his lips and slurred drunkenly that it was a very unfortunate encounter. Klaus didn't understand. Unfortunate how? And, as if disturbed by some terrible image, Abelard shook his head and said that mummy was a gypsy. Or rather, a slut. What's a slut? A slut is a whore, and a gypsy is a slut! Abelard shouted, pounding his fists on the table. Then he collapsed into sobs.

Klaus would never forgive him for that comment, he would never stop to consider that his grandfather uttered those words when he was intoxicated and distraught. Later that night, Adler saw his brother get out of bed in the darkness, make his way to the living room and pick up an extension cable. He trailed after him through the apartment, asking him in a whisper what the hell he thought he was doing. Klaus didn't answer, but grabbed Abelard's Doberman, tied the cable round its neck and dragged it out along the corridors and down the stairs until they were outside the building. Adler then watched as Klaus flung the other end of the cable over a high tree branch and started tugging forcefully on it to strangle the animal. The dog, who at first must have thought that they were taking it out for walk, started to let out strained howls, its paws flailing around desperately in the air. Adler observed the episode with his feet rooted to the spot, not daring to intervene. The animal's howls woke the neighbours, and when Abelard appeared in the doorway he sprinted over to save it. Adler remembered the look of terror on the old man's face as he stared at his brother. Klaus, cable still in hand, stared back impassively.

At their new school in Hamburg they barely spoke to anyone. Neither of the Zweig brothers ever found out how the other students learned of their parents' demise in the Thuringian Forest. It didn't take long for the cruel jokes to start. *Where are your parents?* They would ask. The brothers tried to ignore the jibes, but they felt every word keenly, full of resentment. *Your parents are in the forest*, finally came the inevitable response. And then the other students would sing ditties about woodland

animals, always ending with *Because the Zweigs are the children of the forest*. As was to be expected, Klaus was the first to lose it. One lunchtime, he rammed a fork into the back of one of the jokers, right above his shoulder blade. The boy squealed through the halls, crying out for help, the piece of cutlery jutting out near his neck like an antenna. Abelard was forced to explain both to the headmaster and to the victim's parents the circumstances that the boys had been through, so that they did not get expelled. In any case, nobody ever called them those things again. Adler was ostracised by the other children, while Klaus came to understand the usefulness of violence.

It was not hard to predict that Klaus would turn into an aggressive and troubled teenager. He had a couple of Bulgarian friends who he used to go shoplifting with. He lifted weights at the gym. He was infamous for fighting at school. All of this seemed to indicate that he might end up a delinquent, or a psychopath. Abelard could find no way of controlling him. Nothing worked. No threat frightened him. No punch was forceful enough to wipe that proud, surly look off his face. All the old man could do was go in to the school and apologise when the boy smashed another student's face in; pay double for the things he nicked from shops in the neighbourhood; pick him up from the police station if he got caught. Adler knew that, despite his brother's violent and unpredictable behaviour, he was still in love with Cora. They wrote each other letters with unfailing regularity. Klaus fervently guarded those letters in a drawer with a lock on it, and when he turned fifteen he started visiting her every Christmas in Berlin. Cora never invited him.

Adler sought refuge in the school pool. He went there after classes to train with the small swimming team, but he would stay in the gymnasium until nightfall, when the underwater lights came on, and the din of the boys running around the corridors was replaced by the hum of the fluorescent strip lights hanging from the ceiling rafters. He swam alone through the diamantine glimmer of the lights or spent long periods of time floating on his back with his eyes closed. Apart from the janitor, who only appeared at the last minute to tell him it was time to go home, there was nobody else there. The janitor had one of those scars on his mouth from corrective surgery for a harelip, and the boys at school used to tell tales about him. None of them true, of course. He was actually a rather kindly sort, who let Adler stay in the gymnasium until it was time to leave. He never

intruded in his space before closing time. Adler normally brought a turkey sandwich and a soft drink with him from home; he would eat, get back in the water, and sometimes he would do his homework or read books that he checked out of the school library and returned with the pages all dog-eared. That narrow pool with its over-chlorinated water was his perfect kingdom, and the decision to become a professional swimmer probably an attempt to preserve it.

The relationship between the Zweig brothers went from minimal to non-existent when they finished secondary school. Neither of them got involved in the other's business. They lived side by side like two different species of animal confined in the same cage. Shortly before Klaus was preparing to sit his Abitur exams, Abelard suggested that he enrol in the Deutsche Marine. To everyone's surprise, Klaus applied and was accepted. The last thing Adler knew of his brother in the years that followed was that he became a diver specialising in underwater ship repair. The day he left home, with a canvas duffel bag Abelard had given him slung over his shoulder, Klaus shook Adler's hand without a word and was never seen again. Adler was also carving out his own path during that time: he was an athlete in the peak of fitness and was a member of the German Swimming Federation. He travelled to compete in championships all over Europe. His room was cluttered with trophies and medals. He had a close friendship with his trainer, Lars Rauff, who at a certain point came to believe that he had a truly brilliant athlete on his hands. A rising star. The German promise. At that time, he amassed his most significant achievements, yet he never moved out of the apartment he shared with Abelard in Hamburg. He was there, with him, when the old man started to become less lucid. He took charge of his finances after finding out, in a letter from the bank, that he had re-mortgaged the apartment to invest in an ultra-right newspaper that folded after only a few months due to lack of advertisers. As Adler was spending most of his time away from the apartment due to his commitments to the Federation, he took on a nurse to care for the old man. The woman's name was Olga. She had two albino sons. When the old man's health deteriorated, Adler decided to put him in a retirement home and dispense with the nurse. Olga, however, carried on visiting the house with her two boys in tow.

## PART TWO: KLAUS' DESERT

*'Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.'*

Tony Morrison, *Beloved*

### 1.

Klaus Zweig married a German translator in the Criacuervo desert. The Guajiro notary charged them for the permit, a couple of bottles of cheap champagne, and even provided the pre-ceremony hairdressing services for them himself.

Klaus had ended up in Criacuervo after he left the Deutsche Marine and became a diver for the Wintershall oil company. The company had sent him to that miniscule town in northern Colombia because they were just finishing the installation of an oil rig off the coast that would be in operation for several years. They calculated that the new oilfield would yield a total of around two billion barrels. It was the first time that he had left Germany, and given that he spoke no Spanish, he took some classes in Cartagena before starting his job.

The woman hired to teach the lessons was from Munich. Her name was Helen Koch and she was a professional translator who had travelled all over South America, staying in hostels with never-ending parties. Just as her travelling was coming to an end and she needed to make some money so as not to go home empty-handed, she landed a job at the Goethe-Institut through one of her friends. In her five months as Klaus' teacher, she managed to have the diver from Berlin confidently mangling a few unintelligible phrases. In their spare time, they drove around in the Renault 9 the company had given Klaus so he could get around the city. They stayed out until all hours in dive bars, where other men often whisked Helen away to dance to *guaguancó* music, while all Klaus could do was try to swallow his jealousy.

When Klaus went back to Criacuervo to start work, he could not get Helen off his mind. After three weeks, he decided to go back for her. He showed up at the Goethe-Institut one afternoon wearing filthy overalls, with a sunburned face, greasy, dishevelled hair and sparkling eyes. He also reeked of rum. Helen was seduced by his ravaged appearance. She liked her men world-worn. He looked - she told him - as if he had fought with wild dogs or tunnelled a hole through the earth to find his way back to her. She didn't need much persuading to go with him. Helen insisted on driving the whole way back to the desert, and, Klaus had to bribe the soldiers at four different checkpoints because his bride-to-be lacked the necessary documents.

Since the oil rig was located roughly five thousand nautical miles off the coast, the company had built a complex of identical houses for the workers. The majority of its residents were men, most of them unmarried or having lost their wives due to the distance. Many of them received divorce petitions through the post. For a time, in fact, the postman was so scared they would kill him, that he stopped delivering post there. He had already been beaten up twice by men who'd lost their minds through living there all cooped up, with broken hearts. The work was tough. Madness festered in the periods of isolation. Klaus had to spend weeks on end on the rig, diving constantly. Helen, who was pregnant by then, used the time to write long letters to her family in Munich. Those months were incredibly hard and monotonous for her. The only person she had for company was Elvira, the black woman who did the housework and predicted that the baby would be a boy by placing a needle hanging from a thread on Helen's belly.

Her premonitions came true. After a long, difficult birth, a baby boy arrived in the desert. They named him Dieter. There was a strange story about the doctor who delivered the baby. He was the head doctor on the rig, and he read tarot for fun in his spare time, an activity that was met with disapproval by the other riggers, who were always teasing him about it. The doctor had been one of the first men on the rig to receive a divorce petition. His wife had sent it to him from Bogotá. He was so upset that he attempted to kill himself by taking sleeping pills and slitting his wrists, but when he tried to carry out the second part of his plan, the drugs took effect and he only managed to make shallow slashes. The assistant doctor found him overdosed, lying on his bed. He administered

flumazenil - an antidote to benzodiazepines - and when the doctor woke up hours later, a few of the riggers had stripped off his clothes and wrapped his bathrobe around his bottom like a nappy. Klaus always considered him a respectable, stand-up guy, though slightly melodramatic, which was what made him a perfect victim for the other men who, within the confines of the rig, behaved with a grotesque indifference towards one another.

As there were few children in Criacuervo, Helen became the only lens through which her son could explore the world beyond that arid plain. Klaus' prolonged absences meant that, every time he returned, he was a complete stranger to the boy; an intruder sleeping with the one person who constituted his whole world. Once, while Klaus was sleeping, Dieter slipped furtively out of his room and attacked him with an ashtray that weighed nearly a kilo. Klaus still bore the evidence on his left cheekbone: a scar that would never fade, an undeniable testimony of the son rising up against his father before he had reached the age of reason.

When the boy turned six and it was time to enrol him in a school, they decided that Helen would take him with her to live in Cartagena. Keeping him in the desert would only exacerbate his feral nature. Although Klaus earned a decent salary and Helen did not need to work in Cartagena, she went back to teaching classes at the Goethe-Institut while she and the boy lived in the city. She rented an apartment in the centre. Over in the desert, Klaus started to worry that it would soon be his turn to receive a divorce petition. He was an impatient, practical, reserved man, yet not devoid of sensitivity or his own particular interests. But he also loved his family wholeheartedly; that could not be disputed. Even so, the most common fights between Klaus and Helen revolved around his lack of aspirations beyond Criacuervo. It was as if, Helen told him reproachfully, he had come to the end of his road in that desert. 'Don't you want to live anywhere else?' she would say to him. Klaus avoided those arguments, saying nothing, or else making promises he never kept. He had resigned himself to receiving just two visits from his wife and son every month, when they came down in the Renault 9. Helen always made an effort to look pretty for him and usually brought him some whisky and chocolate almonds, which she bought at the contraband stores on the way. The sight of Helen drove

the rig workers wild. She was sure that she flitted through their minds every time they jerked off. This knowledge gave her a secret satisfaction.

The relationship between Klaus and his son had turned a corner since the boy had gone to Cartagena. This change was demonstrated by something that happened the day Dieter turned nine. Helen took him to the desert, after presenting the boy with a pack of plastic soldiers that he barely glanced at. Klaus, on the other hand, had decided on a memorable gift: he had filled an empty gherkin jar with crude oil. When Helen and Dieter arrived at the house in Criacuervo, Elvira brought out a chocolate cake as a surprise. Out of the boy's earshot, Helen anxiously asked Klaus if he had bought him anything. Klaus said no, but he had got him something interesting. With that, he went over to a cabinet in the living room, took the jar of oil out of one of the drawers and set it down in front of the boy. After blowing out his candles, Dieter examined the jar full of black liquid, taken aback. It was as if he could not work out whether it fascinated or repulsed him. When he took off the lid, the stench filled the house. It was like the smell of rotting seaweed washed up on the beach. Helen looked like she was about to protest, but then Klaus asked the boy if he knew what it was. He shook his head. His father told him that what he had in his hands was something that was once alive: something that had then died and remained trapped for thousands of years until it turned into that stinking juice; a juice that moved cars and cleaned toilets and led to the extermination of whole towns. 'Light and darkness,' he mused poetically, as if discussing the existence of God with a theologian. The way he spoke produced in the boy an unfathomable admiration for his father. From then on, Dieter carefully guarded the jar like a piece of precious treasure.

When Helen and the boy moved to Cartagena, Klaus stopped travelling to the city. He preferred to let his family have that space, although as time went by, he realised that he did not actually want to leave the desert. Although Helen was an intuitive woman, she could never work out why Klaus was so obsessed with the place.

The only fun to be had by the diver and the riggers on their days off involved swimming in the sea or getting drunk on *chirrinchi*, made by the Wayuu on a ranch crammed full of industrial tanks. When the oil company left the desert, the Wayuu ranch moved west to harvest shrimp, so Klaus decided to

build a still and make his own alcohol. After everyone left, only one of his friends had remained: Thomas Stein, a geologist from Bonn, a fifty-something of a generous nature who used to stay at Klaus' house for long periods of time. He had a daughter who everyone called Nani, although her real name was Kim. Thomas sent her to Germany with her mother, because he thought that the desert had become too dangerous a place for a girl.

In fact, it was Thomas who had predicted the incident in which Klaus lost an eye, in early August. Months earlier, he had told him there were rumours going around town of a sabotage by a band of mercenaries called The Hares. This bloodthirsty and volatile gang was made up of former members of the paramilitary who, after it was disbanded by the government, had regrouped in areas neglected by the State. According to Thomas, The Hares were demanding millions in return for not disrupting the peace in Criacuervo. They operated with complete impunity. They controlled the flow of smuggled vehicles, fuel and liquor coming from Venezuela: they also extorted various multinational companies operating within the sector. The oil company had regularly handed over money, but with its operations imminently coming to an end, it decided to cut all ties with the gang. Klaus never paid much attention to the rumours, and just as they were beginning to dissipate, Helen received a phone call in Cartagena telling her to come to a hospital in Riohacha right away. They informed her that Klaus had lost an eye in an explosion caused by a leak on the oil rig. They added that, in order to assess how much damage had been caused, they had done a series of MRIs on his head and had detected a tumour. It might have been a meningioma: a kind of tumour that was usually benign, but there were exceptions, so he would need to undergo comprehensive tests.

As for the Wintershall oil company, it decided to withdraw its operations from the country.

## 2.

After the oil company left the desert, Klaus spent his afternoons sitting in a wrought iron rocking chair on the porch of his house. He frequently found himself wondering about Adler: was he still swimming? Was he living in Hamburg? Was he married?

Since he'd got back into the habit of writing to Cora, every time he went to Riohacha on a shopping run that would last him two weeks, he would shut himself in a phone booth and ask her for news of him. Her reply was always the same: she didn't know anything. What she did tell him was that her mother had Alzheimer's and was in a home. She also told him about the unpleasant situation with her husband, named Jürgen or something like that, who was some kind of lawyer. A secretary had caught him having sex with a girl of fifteen or sixteen, and Cora did everything in her power to send him to prison for it. Klaus had slept with some teenagers, but not that young. What did the pussy of a girl that age taste like? Piss, maybe?

In the letters he sent Cora, Klaus would write long, detailed descriptions of the desert. He told her about his daily walks down the winding paths, like flumes that lead nowhere; the goatherds he saw bringing herds of scrawny, crusty-eyed animals to graze; the games of dominoes he played with Thomas Stein and Elvira; the stars that flickered as if transmitting an encoded message; the dawns, drunk on his homemade liquor. After a while, Klaus invited her to come and visit him. Cora said she could come in January and they agreed to meet then. He explained that she needed to buy a ticket to Cartagena, and from there, they would travel to Ciriacuervo together.

He had chosen to omit his own marital problems from those letters. What would be the point of telling Cora about it? Helen hardly ever wanted to visit him in the desert by then anyway. She hated the place. And she was also hanging around with two guys in Cartagena that he hated: a poet and a painter. He'd realised the relationship was doomed when, at the start of November, he had to travel to Cartagena for the medical tests that would establish whether the meningioma was benign or malignant. He had postponed the trip for almost two months and had completely neglected to take any care of himself by that point. In fact, he wasn't even sure what kind of precautions he should be taking. Thomas, on the other hand, had done a lot of research into the best neurosurgeons. It was good to know that someone cared about him.

He set off on a Friday at five in the morning and got a lift in town with a tanker that took him as far as the highway. From there, he took a motorbike to the bus station, where he boarded a bus to Cartagena.

Helen's apartment was close to the Catholic school where Dieter studied, so the boy could walk to school and back. Once Klaus arrived in the city, he checked his watch to make sure he had enough time to go and pick him up. The boy was surprised to see him in the reception and ran over to give him a hug. Helen was giving German classes and would be back at eight that evening, so that father and son had a few hours alone together.

On the way back to the apartment, the boy told him that he wanted to be a diver, just like him. Then he complained about not having a pet. Mummy wouldn't let him. Mummy didn't like animals. Had he ever had a dog? What was it called? Klaus told him about the dog that had belonged to Abelard, his grandfather. A Doberman. Called Glück. Of course, he didn't tell Dieter that he had almost garrotted it with a cable, but he did tell him that the animal went blind in old age and they had to have it put down. 'Why would anyone kill their own dog?' asked the boy in horror. Klaus explained that the dog no longer recognised them and had become a danger. It was a shame that they had to kill it, of course, but there was no other solution. The boy ferociously replied that he would never do anything like that to his dog. He would look after it. Even if it went blind and attacked him by accident. 'Killing a dog you've lived with all your life is like killing a friend,' he said, 'isn't it?' Klaus listened to him in astonished bewilderment. The boy's large, blue, almond-shaped eyes were just like his own, along with that same sullen gesture: the corner of his lip curling up when he finished a sentence.

That night, when Helen got back the apartment, Klaus realised that she didn't seem particularly thrilled about his visit. To tell the truth, she gave the impression of having resigned herself to seeing him. They went out for pizza at a street stall near the walls of the old city. Helen liked mushrooms on hers. The boy liked ham and cheese. Klaus ate for the sake of eating; he couldn't care less about the taste. They sat on plastic chairs dotted around the pavement while the pizza chef, a fat man with an insincere smile, smoked filter-less cigarettes beneath the single lightbulb of his mobile oven. Then

they strolled around the town hall and Helen asked Dieter to read out the street names; they sounded like ancient spells or dark litanies. The city was strange to Klaus, decadent and beautiful in equal measure.

When it was time for bed, Klaus had a rock-hard erection and stroked his wife's hips. But Helen brushed him off, saying she was tired. Klaus asked her what was going on. Helen, half-naked, turned her overwhelmingly beautiful face to look at him for a moment.

'I'm going to leave you, Klaus.'

'Can't you leave me in twenty minutes?' he said.

She gave a sarcastic smile.

'The perfect time to become a comedian,' she said, and as she lay her head back down on the pillow she added, 'Anyway, you never last more than ten minutes.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure you don't want to see what I've got for you over here?'

'I'm sure, Klaus.'

'But why do you want to leave me?'

'I left you a long time ago, you just didn't notice. Now turn off the light and let me go to sleep.'

Klaus didn't bother her further. On Saturday night, Helen told him she was going to meet up with her friends in the square near the School of Fine Arts. Klaus insisted on going too. He would bring Dieter along.

'Do whatever you want,' she said, with a shrug.

He saw Helen's friends in the square. One of them was that black poet. He was young, tall and gaunt, with a shaven head. The other was that painter: pale, effeminate, always wearing tight jeans with holes in the knees. They both looked like pathetic gangsters, or gangsters with romantic aspirations, the kind who dreamed of being harder than they actually were. Klaus reckoned that he could jump the poet and smash his face in, then hurl the painter through the air. Instead, he did nothing. As he sat beside his son and swallowed jealous bile, he watched his wife laughing raucously

at the poet and painter's jokes. The two men ignored him, although they knew perfectly well who he was. It was as if they were trying to provoke him.

That night he witnessed something that broke his heart.

While the painter was off buying a bottle of rum from a liquor store, the poet, already drunk, tried to kiss Helen. She laughed and pushed him gently away, as if assuming that it was a joke, but also giving into the game somehow. At that moment, the blood rushed to Klaus' head and the atrophied muscles in the hollow of his missing eye started to throb. But he kept his cool. He had forgotten that Dieter was seeing the same things he was. Rooted to the spot by the scene unfolding before him, he only remembered that his son was next to him when he saw Dieter jump up suddenly, looking angry. He was so taken aback that he didn't know how to react; he saw the boy walk towards the poet, who put his hand on the boy's shoulder. Dieter shook it off and yelled in Spanish that his father had two rifles in the desert, and that he was going to go and get one and blow a hole in his chest. The poet chuckled and told him that he had the makings of a good writer. Helen pulled the boy in for a hug, trying to get him to calm down. But Dieter broke free of his mother's grasp and hawked a gob of spit straight in the poet's face.

In that instant, Klaus felt that the boy had forged the path ahead; overcome by a raging fury, he jumped up and rushed towards them. He grabbed the poet by the shirt and punched him so hard that it broke his nose. The painter leapt on top of him, while Helen stood there screaming. People gathered around the brawl and began cheering them on. A policeman pulled them apart like dogs, using his baton, and bundled Klaus into a police car and took him away.

### 3.

They put him in a cell that was also a courtyard. In the centre, there was a loquat tree, and near the metal mesh fence, a tank full of boas confiscated by the environmental police. He spent the whole night sitting cross-legged on the dry, dead soil, talking to a homeless beggar who stole pets in Bocagrande. The man told him that it was an immoral way to make a living, of course, but that didn't make it easy. After he stole the pets, he waited for the reward notices to be put up at the police

station and then returned the animals to claim the reward money. It all seemed pretty ridiculous to Klaus. When they let him out, he felt sorry for the man and gave him what little money he had in his pocket.

They had released him at three in the morning, because the poet decided not to press charges. That's what the assistant of the deputy police officer told him. He imagined his wife begging that moron to let the incident slide. The very idea of it brought all the hatred he had released in the fight rushing back.

The only people Klaus saw in the deserted streets were the bin-men, just beginning their melancholic rounds on Avenida Pedro de Heredia, rolling their rubbish bins along, brooms at the ready. As he walked along, skirting the dark mangroves, Klaus started to feel like an intruder in Helen's life. Nearing the Circo Teatro, he resigned himself to accepting her decision to leave him, knowing that with that merciless shove she was establishing her freedom, but messing up his own in the process.

When he reached the apartment, everyone was asleep. To avoid waking Helen, he unfolded a sofa bed in the living room and slept there. The following morning, when he opened his eye, the first thing he saw was Helen sitting out on the balcony with the boy on her lap. She was running a tortoiseshell comb through his damp hair. They looked peaceful, as if they had slept well and forgotten the awkward events of the previous night. The sun shone intensely in the cloudless sky, and the smell of burnt oil emanating from the street-food stalls in front of the building wafted on the breeze.

The minute Dieter realised that Klaus was awake, he leapt off his mother's lap and ran over to him on the sofa bed.

'What a punch!' he cried, throwing himself on top of Klaus and flinging his arms around him. Klaus had a few scratches on his neck, and had tied a knot in the broken string holding the patch over his empty socket. Helen asked Dieter to go to his room and watch TV for a while because she needed to talk to his father. Dieter did as he was told. Klaus went into the kitchen, switched on the coffee machine, and then joined Helen on the balcony.

'Listen,' Klaus said. 'You need to respect Dieter. You can't behave like that in front of him.'

'I'm really sorry about what happened.'

'And I'm sorry that you didn't come and get me from the police station.'

'I had to stay with Dieter.'

'You could have brought him with you. I'm his father.'

'Well, you're here now,' she said. 'By the way, where did he get that thing about you having two rifles?'

'I have no idea.'

Helen smiled, no doubt remembering what the boy had said. Then she looked at Klaus.

'Let me make you some breakfast.'

She made him some pancakes with maple syrup and poured the coffee, which was ready by then. The two of them sat down at the dining room table. She said she wasn't hungry. He could tell she wanted to say something else, but couldn't bring herself to. Finally, she spoke again, in a conciliatory tone:

'Look,' she said. 'What do you want me to do about this situation?'

'I don't want you to see those two guys again,' he said, his eyes fixed on the dining table.

'You're not going to tell me who I can or can't see.'

'Well, in that case, I'd like some sugar in my coffee.'

Helen started laughing, her elbows on the table, her chin resting in her hands. She got up and went to the kitchen. She came back with the sugar and put it down next to his dish.

'We can change this, Helen,' he said through a large mouthful of pancake.

'Please...'

'I just want us to at least try. I don't want to lose you like this.'

'You don't want to lose me because it will hurt your pride, which is a separate issue. I know you.'

'I don't want to lose you because I love you,' he said, sipping his coffee.

'Klaus, I think it's best if you just leave me alone.'

He pushed his dish away and lifted the eyepatch. He scratched the corner of the eye he didn't have. Helen took out a pack of cigarettes and went out onto the balcony. Klaus went out too and

asked her for one. Two jet-black birds were perched on an electric line. He remembered teaching his son how to pronounce the word for them, *mariamulatas*. The birds were so close that he could have touched them if he stretched out his hand.

'Why did you come?' she asked, exhaling a swirl of purplish smoke.

'I have my medical tests tomorrow.'

'I swear, sometimes I forget you've got that thing inside your head.'

'I know,' he said. Feeling queasy from the cigarette, he crushed it out in the ashtray.

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, I don't know what I was trying to say,' he said, grumpy about the cigarette butt, which was still giving off smoke. 'Actually, I was thinking about inviting my brother to Criacuervo.'

'And how are you going to find him?' said Helen. 'You told me you haven't heard from him in ages.'

'I think Cora can find out where he is.'

'Are you going to invite her too?'

'I already have,' he said. 'She's thinking about coming next month. Is that okay with you?'

'You don't have to ask my permission for anything, Klaus,' she snapped, suddenly irritated.

**Extracts from *Criacuervo* by Orlando Echeverri Benedetti (pp. 9-21 & 117-138)**