

Giving Shelter to the Homeless

By Mercedes Cebrián

Translated by Ben Van Wyke

I don't do it now as much as I used to, but I still like sliding a wedding band on my ring finger, going down to the market with my grocery bag and asking the fruit vendor for julienned vegetables "for the kids' puree." But no celery, the little one doesn't like celery and always tells me Mommy, I'm not gonna eat it if there's celery in it. How are your kids? I'd love to meet them (the vendor asks about them as a friend would, about Adrián and Paloma, and I tell him they're at school right now, they're as feisty as ever.) Bye, Carmen, have a good day. See you later.

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I pay, say goodbye and I just can't help myself so, without him seeing, I slip on a silk foulard with an equestrian motif and some fake pearl earrings mounted in gold that I carry around in my purse, and walk over to another more expensive fruit and vegetable stand to buy ingredients for a small salad. Here my name is Asun, Asun, I better not forget. Only fresh ones, please. Yes ma'am, of course, Asun, for clients such as yourself, only the very best. That's how friendly fruit Vendor #2 is, and he stands there chatting for a bit about the shine on the tomatoes, the thickness of the asparagus, and the escarole, Take a look at this escarole that I just got in; but why limit myself simply to vegetables when I could tell him that today my husband Alfonso's bosses are coming to dinner, He travels a lot because of his job with a French telecommunications company; me on the other hand, I don't get out much—all day bustling around the house, you know—. Vendor #2, who likes me as much if not more than Vendor #1, encourages me to look for a little job or get out and enjoy myself some, and that I'm still young. Yes, yes, I will do that, but what I would really like to do is have a baby but, unfortunately, I can't (the vendor is visibly uncomfortable on account of the confession). We want to adopt a little Chinese girl, it looks like we will be able to get her next year (his expression changes). But I don't want to hold you up. You have people waiting.

I walk home. At the door, still sporting the scarf and earrings, I say hello to the neighbor, a friendly man—how's it going, Juanjo—and then, why hide it, once inside my apartment a certain sadness related to the handful of cherries from those fruit vendors that my intangible kids are never going to get brings me face to face with the marrow of the game, face to face with the doubt of whether it's even worth growing so fond of Alfonso, Paloma and Adrián and, by extension, of myself as Carmen or the frustrated Asun, when the only real thing in all this is the vegetable soup, with or without celery, that I'm going to eat at noon all by myself.



I'll try to explain it by way of an image: the image of the handwriting that corresponds to me because of my height and weight, handwriting that as a little girl was something that direly needed changing by means of writing exercises like *hyena hurt hector* and *kilogram kiosk kimono*. The infamous *writing* that explains, according to the graphologist, my character and personal moods, that points right at me via the inclination of the "t" or the upper opening of the lowercase "a." So, thank God for business cards. For the chance to see myself printed in offset, to be able to choose between more than twenty different fonts, and, why not, to opt precisely for the one that reproduces the writing of some unidentified someone.

When everything is ready, I pick up the cards from the printer's and sign up for some random course (*tour guide, window dressing, business German...yeah, business German*). I take advantage of the occasion to distribute my uninhibited typography to my peers. And when it's time to pair off for the conversation exercise, I pick this guy with a dark complexion who's wearing a Disney tie. I ask him *Wie heisst du?* Oh, Ignacio, *hallo, Ignacio*, you know, you look a lot like a neighbor of mine. And I tell him *Ich heisse Leonor*, and that *Ich bin 34 jahre alt*. He wants to know what I do, *Was ist dein Beruf?* In an olive oil exporting company (*Ich arbeite für ein Olivenölexportfirma*. Is that how you say it?), and, after wavering between head of the sales department and even general manager, I introduce myself as manager. I even had business cards printed with the word "manager" written below my name. I counterfeit letterhead and anagrams, go to a print shop to get fake logos made up in photogravure for my fictitious business (Olimarket, with a capital "o" to represent the globe), all in order to be recognized in the end by Ignacio, and everybody else who crosses my path, as manager.

And if I'm asked about the dates, if I'm asked when I fired off the starting shots to this not-exactly-a-game, my memory takes me back to high school, to the deciliters of dry mouth when confronted with the thought of making the entire trip back home in the subway with this guy from my class who kept staring at me. It also brings me back to hearing myself pronounce an Oh, I have to take the bus, the bus passes closer to my house, and after that day, for the entire school year, every afternoon a bus with three red transversally striped numbers would drive me out to a district I didn't belong to but whose street names (Ezequiel Solana, Río Nervion, Virgen del Sagrario), and names of businesses and subway stops I retained, because, from that moment on, every piece of falsified data about myself would have to be backed up by a framework that could sustain it, sufficient mental footage so I could speak with ease in front of the kids at school about the neighborhood that nobody lived in but me. So I spent a month bragging about the notebooks that you could only get at the Fuenllana Stationary Shop, about drink machines recently installed in my subway stop and gas leaks documented in the press.

Then all of a sudden, adulthood arrived, the members of my family with so much to talk about: my translator cousin, the cellist sister-in-law; and my need to come up with something more interesting than the meager reality of working out of my own home processing health insurance forms for businesses; the attempts at producing some quality material to offer them at brunches and baptisms. And since I know I've got what it takes, it didn't take long for me to get my blue belt, brown belt, and even black belt in the art of lying, and so when one day confronted with a How's it going? Anything new?, it wasn't enough to answer with a Well, yes, I was at a conference, in Granada, held at the Parador. My presentation? It went very well, word got around, and as a result of that I've gotten several offers to collaborate on two or three publications. It just wasn't enough, and soon I found it necessary to reserve rooms in small town hotels with the excuse of going to the IV Iberoamerican Congress on Urban Development (Santander, March 3-6), for example, or the III Conference on Cultural Heritage Management (Granada, October 26-29).

I register as an attendee, I go to all the sessions and in some I even manage not to nod off. Afterwards, at the luncheon, I seek out a place at the table with the speakers and I sit there listening quietly to how, among the cutting and slicing, the vice-rector of the University of Salamanca debates the distinguished speakers on the balance between conservation and tourism, and for the most part I don't pay a whole lot of attention. Since I'm well aware that membership to a group is obtained through a certain ability to handle the jargon and some common themes of conversation, and since I know that I won't achieve much if I just limit myself to the paraphernalia in the folder, the pen, the paper with the sponsor's company logo, I've flipped through a number of articles in a few *Journal of* or *Revue de*. That way I can pick up a bit of idea-varnish to use on those rare occasions when they actually take notice of me. Although in theory I'm doing a doctorate in the humanities, in the department of Cultural Heritage Management, yes, with Sanchez Vuela, sure I'll tell him you asked about him, no problem.

That's how this works. Always alert, never letting down my guard because, even if it doesn't happen often, after lunch, some Guillermo Aparicio, one of the collaborators on the restoration project of a famous monument, sits chatting with me in the comfortable lobby chairs of the hotel with a snifter full of brandy between his fingers, and who, since we're having such a good time, tosses out an Inés, why don't we skip the presentations this afternoon, take a stroll around town and have dinner later by ourselves, without all the conference people. He was really getting interested in my ideas about how to bring sacred art closer to the secular public, he said.

A piece of advice: when this happens you absolutely have to break it off immediately, you've got to move on, discreetly, and go sing your song of simulation somewhere else, like in those movies about professional con artists. Although, in the end, I decided to stay a little while longer that afternoon, because really, this wasn't exactly what one would call a con job, and in this while longer, I dared to attempt the never-before-attempted triple jump, and explained to Mr. Aparicio that I hardly have any time to dedicate to my doctoral work on account of all the time I spend with my job (I show apartments for a real estate agency). Getting together would be impossible, that's really a shame. My schedule is horrible, and you know the way Madrid is, you lose all your time travelling from one place to another. All my time's spent riding around on busses and the subway, but nevertheless, for the first time, I agreed to show him, with all the fear that I own, one of the flats that the branch office where I work has for sale. I ended up accepting to abandon the nomadic life for a moment, and yes, we set a date for next week. He writes down my cell phone number: Inés Corbacho, 647-843-995. I don't have any business cards with me today, I just ran out, but I've ordered more.

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And the usual thing in these cases: I talk with someone I know who works for an agency and lay it on thick, tell him it's for a bet, that it needs to be me who shows the 2br. apt., bright, hdwd., a/c and he But you must be crazy, no, no don't worry, you'll see, it'll be fine.

It's such a surprise to encounter, for the first time, somebody who plays at the same thing as you, who's not interested in buying a 2br. apt., bright, hdwd., a/c, but who nevertheless still wants to see it at all costs for reasons that are no less important. It didn't take me long to recognize Guillermo, now there's a true expert for you. We met in my building: Juan José Vega Torres his mailbox said, Juanjo. We said hello to each other in the entranceway without much ado. In German class his name was Ignacio López Parra, the one that worked *für eine Versicherung* and wore brightly colored ties, not like in Granada when on account of his being Guillermo Aparicio, was dressed differently: clothes of a much sleeker cut, Catalan design, nice shiny shoes. There he talked to me with complete expertise about monument restoration, very polite, very much in his element. He was so far away from that Juanjo from 4B that's had problems with humidity, and Ignacio who's trying to perfect his German that I, who was a manager at Olimarket before, and had somehow dedicated my managerial position to him, or to his facet as Ignacio López Parra—I was sure that my I manager was going to get along with his I insurance salesman—so far from them that I decided once again to be another in his honor. Maybe for the *savoir faire* he showed in Granada, so discrete, even while knowing full well that I too was breaking a record: from Leonor to Inés in a matter of minutes, from olive oil to apartments with hardly any effort.

An impeccable move, Guillermo: you even asked me everything a future property owner would want to know: how often the maintenance fee goes up, if there are plans to install an elevator, if this wall could be torn down or if it's one of the support walls. Good thing you didn't give me an obvious I know you're Asun, I know you're Leonor. I know it too, we've always known it, stupid, and I bet the question comes up (I'm sure for both of us) of how we could possibly establish any kind of connection at all with a professional imposter, of how to stop being a hamster compulsively spinning around on the wheels of simulacra and come to rest once and for all in the presence of somebody. At least in the presence of someone who feels, like you do, that the best representation of terror would be having to use the last name García all the time and forming part of a couple that falls asleep on the couch flipping back and forth from the evening movie they show on Channel 1 to the interview program they have on 2. A couple who, on Saturday, went over to eat with the in-laws—whose, I don't know—and took advantage of the trip to drop off the curtains at the dry cleaners on the way, because the mall next to my/your parents' is open in the afternoon, now just don't start, if we take the car all we have to do is swing by and drop them off and it'll just take a second.

There, it's precisely on this point where we most urgently need to apply the acupuncture of the game so we can shake off a life that might incurably take us over, asphyxiating us under the coverless cushions from the couch of everyday life.

And of course, seeing yourself safe keeps you reserving hotel rooms, ordering new cards, imitating accents from other regions—if you could see how much it took me to lose this Madrilenian accent the month I was from the Canary Islands—or even waiting for a hypothetical buyer at the entrance of the building that has an apartment for sale. But, just as I'd feared, there wasn't a drop of pleasure in this last meeting, in my Good afternoon Guillermo, did you have a problem finding a place to park? Let's go on upstairs, the owners aren't home. Too bad you're seeing it when there's so little light, you really have to see it some time in the morning to truly get the idea of how bright it is, especially the living room.

It's unavoidable that my lack of enthusiasm shows through when I tell him about the pipes that have recently been changed and the bathroom that has been redone. My lack of enthusiasm and at the same time the panic I have of arming myself with the courage to tell him Hey, you know this whole thing is a farce too, It's just not fun anymore, and it's no longer saving me. Let's just leave this anonymous flat, go back to mine and stay there for good. We'll sit and watch TV, and there's a new series starting today, and on another channel they're interviewing the Minister of Economy and Public Works. Although with all this running around I'll probably start nodding off and fall as... zzz... asleep leaning on your shoulder. Remind me that, on the way home, we have to pick up the curtains. And don't call me Inés, my name's not Inés. How about calling me Carmen? Or Asun? Or whatever you want.

