

THE QUARRY

Judith Mendoza-White

Winter Jam

One

By the time I had climbed up the first flight of stairs I already knew that Julián had hit rock-bottom. The odour of rancid food and urine worked its way into my nostrils as it had carved its way into the walls decades before. While I kept climbing up the steps one at a time I amused myself looking down at the hollowed surface in the centre of the timber, where hundreds of other feet had preceded mine, and tried to guess some vestige of brown or green lost along the years or the decades. The remains of old and new graffiti screamed against the government, the country or life itself from the dirty walls, hostile as those of a prison.

I was out of breath when I reached the sixth floor. Julián shouted, ‘Come in!’ from inside when I rang the doorbell; the door was not locked, sure, anybody would have known that whoever lived on the top floor of that pigsty had nothing to give or to lose.

‘Ah, it’s you. Come in, viejo.’

It was cold, dead cold, inside. It somehow felt colder inside the room than out in the street on that freezing mid-July early afternoon. Julián was wrapped in a threadbare blanket with a design of large brown and white squares; I recalled similar checked blankets from my childhood or my teenage years. There is no closet in Buenos Aires which does not sport one of those old-fashioned blankets folded up on

the top shelf. On the sofa next to Julián another figure was curled up under a wooden shawl: Roxana. She smiled an absent-minded grin towards me but her eyes did not move away from the screen of the black and white television set. The incessant chatter of one of those gossip shows that entertain or increase the emptiness of the siestas blared from the screen, the street noises muffled by the sound and the closed curtain-less window.

‘Do you want mate? Give him a mate, che.’

Roxana handed me a lukewarm mate without looking back. I sat in the only empty armchair. There was a hole on the dry leather seat and its oblique legs tilted outwards, in the fashion of the fifties. As I sat down I saw the guitar leaning against the cupboard and I turned away to avoid seeing it, to look at Julián.

‘It’s crazy to bump into each other in the street after all these years, isn’t it,’ said Julián as he reached and took a cigarette out of the packet that I had just deposited on the table.

‘Buenos Aires is a big city, but not that big after all... One ends up coming across people sooner or later, I guess,’ I said, aware of the banality of the comment. If it were so, we would have bumped into each other some other time at some point of those twenty years, more than twenty perhaps, though what difference does it make after all, who’s counting?

Julián had spotted me in one street or other near Once train station, an area I had not set foot in for years, and to which only the possibility of a good business deal could take me. The deal had been excellent indeed, and the cheque was already in my pocket when Julián bumped into me while I scanned the noisy avenue trying to find a taxi. The evening was dull and windy, there was a fine silent drizzle that threatened to turn into heavy rain, and most taxis were busy. My hand clasped the wallet in my pocket when I felt the fingers on my arm, and I almost turned away and ran before I saw his face. Julián. Twenty years. Or was it longer than that?

The blanket slid off Julián’s shoulders and I saw the outline of his bony arms covered by a thick turtleneck that had seen many winters, his stomach flat under the purple wool. I thought of my round stomach, the stomach of a man who orders lunch in upmarket restaurants without looking at the price list, who needs but to send the maid down to the cellar if he wants to enjoy a good bottle of wine with his dinner. Julián had always been skinny, with that skin-and-bone- rocker air that only added to

his Mick Jagger looks, which he had consciously or unconsciously learned to emphasize with the ironic grin of his large mouth, which seemed to take over the whole of his face when he laughed. Twenty years of gigs in seedy basement bars, cheap joints and the odd meal does not help anyone keep the weight on.

If I had stayed on with the band I'd also have a flat stomach, and maybe a room in some pigsty or other like this one here. Instead, I have a beer belly but also a BMW sitting in the parking lot round the corner, a penthouse on Libertador and money to do or buy whatever takes my fancy. I feel sorry for Julián, yes, I'm sorry for him but it all makes me a bit sick as well; when we were twenty we didn't even smell the piss in the clubs where we played, it did not bother us to spend the odd night on that creaky sofa that we found in the street and pushed up the stairs for two hours, all that puffing and sweating over the goddam sofa, but with the cover knitted by one of the many girlfriends or one-night-stands that used to flutter around the house we covered the stains, and if somebody had asked what colour was the sofa or the dozen chairs that came from God knows where, nobody would have known or cared.

But it's a different story now, for God's sake, anyone in his forties starts to notice a few more things, the wires poking through the seat start to hurt, at this age we snort as I did when I walked in and smelled the grease and the dampness on the walls; it's no longer easy to live on mate, cheap beer and last night's pizza boxes, and the dreams of fame have turned into memories, yeah, good moments while they lasted, there's no denying that, but to drag them along the decades is absurd and doesn't do anyone any good, just a look at Julián is enough to prove me right.

... it's great of you to drop in, we could barely talk the other day, in the street, what with the rain and all...

... it was a different world, viejo. Those were the nineties... If it was now with Facebook and WhatsApp and all that crap I'd know every bit you've been doing in each and every day of all these years... I'd recognize your kids if I came across them in the street. How many kids do you have? Even your dog I'd be able to tell.

... He must be happy, your old man... CEO, are you? ... He almost had a stroke, remember? When you dropped out of university to tour the provinces...

... c'mon loco, take a toke for old times' sake... no? Ok, it's your loss, viejo...

... are you coming on Friday? We are playing at Parnaso, here, take a flyer... Yes, El Parnaso, in Floresta, the same but not the same actually... they haven't invested a cent on it for years and the basement is pretty run down... but they don't charge to play, and we can always make a few pesos from the door cover if we bring enough people...

... Clarita is trying to get us a spot on the radio. Yes, she drops in from time to time, but she's been having some issues with the kids... She's got two, and her husband went to Brazil last summer to do a couple of gigs and looks like he's lost the way back...

... Che, how about a jam? Come over on Saturday, if you can't make Friday... Do you still have your bass guitar?

Two

...The door was always open, after all he was asking for it. That seedy rundown apartment block, that creepy back alley. Anyone could come in day or night, even the front door of the building would not lock unless you gave it a good push. Nobody saw me when I walked in that Saturday evening, much earlier than Julián had suggested. I knew the others would not be there yet, and Roxana is always out at the handcraft market on weekends. Julián was alone, his fingers caressing the guitar strings, his eyes closed in the solitary winter jam. The extremes of his large Mick Jagger mouth curved in a private, placid smile. I listened to the languid bittersweet string of notes for some time before I took the gun out.

I still have the bass guitar, yes, but I think the time has come to burn it with the other junk or put it in the bin. It annoys me but not as much as it annoyed me to see Julián's guitar, so clean, so shiny, the strings taut and new, the only thing that was in good condition in that pigsty he lived in. All Julián cared about was his guitar, his music. He condemned himself to stale pizza and cask wine because he wanted to live for his music, to be what he had been born to be. And he did not care for shit. That was the worst thing: he honestly did not care.

Me, that's another story. I just couldn't keep freezing my ass in those damp basements, could not put up with the lack of money, the lack of everything; the rock-hard beds started to bother me and then came María Paz. She also put up with a few months of late night gigs and drank cheap wine with us in bars with cement floors and no ventilation and she even enjoyed it, sure, a bohemian interlude in her rich daddy's girl world, but it had to end. I knew it would end, and if I wanted her to stay it had to end for me too.

On Sunday I'll stay home while María Paz takes the kids to her parents and I'll de-clutter all those boxes that have been piled up in my office forever. I've been meaning to do it for ages, all those drawers full of demos and CDs and the guitar, the blessed bass guitar that I used to play every now and then until there was no more time. No more time to waste on anything but keeping it all up, the money, our beautiful life, my perfect world.

... Because Julián was happy. I saw it in his eyes that day, sitting on that stupid armchair wrapped up in the old blanket, in that cold dirty pigsty. I don't know how anyone can be happy among all that crap, and then Roxana and the mate like twenty years ago, luckily they had no kids, sure, Julián did not want children, he needed nothing but his music, he didn't even need Roxana, she stayed because she chose to, because she never left. Or perhaps she did love him. Who knows? Who cares?

Now I can go on with my life, and there will come a time when I'll forget about it all, like I had managed to do before that damned evening in which the rain and the city put me in Julián's path and it all started to hurt once again.

...Forgive me, viejo. I had to do it. If you stayed around I could not keep ignoring that other world that is still out there even if I chose not to see it. Without you I can live without music, without dreams. With you gone, there may come a time when I talk myself once again into believing that I am happy.

Notes:

Viejo: Lit. old man. Colloquial form used to address male friends.

Mate: typical Argentinean drink, a kind of green tea sipped from a pot by means of a straw and usually shared with others.

Once: suburb in Buenos Aires inhabited for the most part by working and lower classes, especially the areas around the train station.