

Extract from

Vista desde una acera [View from a Sidewalk]

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SCENES FOR A DIARY

FIRST DAY

Without speaking, Adrián closes the envelope with the lab results.

In this waiting room, from these seats we're sitting in, everything stops for an instant; everything goes quiet; and then it all starts sluggishly moving again. Even though the two men in front, with their backs to us, continue their conversation, and the child even further away still pulls at his mama's skirt, the loudspeakers keep sounding and the people in this hospital keep passing by, suddenly everything moves strangely, and the whole world turns into something else: how isn't anyone realising? I look at the floor in front of me and it's like being somewhere else, as if we were stuck at a different point to other people, a point like there must be in some line in the pages of a beautiful novel, when you know that what you hold in your hands is ending, and then you get that nostalgia, that little urge to read slower so it won't end as quickly, the desire to close the book for a while and smoke the end of a cigarette... That's what we're like here, completely suspended, forced by instinct into a useless hope; he holds the envelope between his fingers and I take it, I take out the paper and that word is there again: positive... We haven't read it wrong. This is without a doubt the point we're at.

Adrián is beside me. His head hangs to the side, his hands have abandoned the arms of the chair to lay on top of his legs (it looks like he's studying something very important in the air): I watch him. I feel horribly stupid thinking about saying: "Come on, don't be sad." How could he not be sad?! I say to myself. But he, because he's braver, looks me in the eyes, faintly smiling at the corners of his mouth, and says: "But we were happy, weren't we?" I just draw my lips in and open my eyes more like a sincere yes; and I want to tell him what he already knows, that I love him... But it would be such a stupid thing, I know it would be useless, and in the end I don't say anything. So he goes back to looking straight ahead, slightly downwards; or inwards. And then it seems he's smiling again, and then it doesn't...

—Why don't we get away Fernando? We'll go to the sea. Because you've never seen it, right?

He tells me this as if I didn't already know. I hide between my shoulders thinking what does it matter anymore, and I tell him he's right with a gesture that he doesn't see.

—And we'll get in the water—he says. He says it to himself.

Through the windows I see sunlight on the brick walls and for the first time today I appreciate how beautiful this evening is; how the light coming through, that light you get in Bogotá at five o'clock when there are no clouds, looks like sunlight on the sea in a movie. A thousand kilometres from here to the sea, on foot, would truly be nothing at this instant; it would be so normal to leave now, to walk that distance in a moment, to be already at the beach, to look at all that water and not be afraid. With just the two of us facing the edge of the sea fear wouldn't exist, I suppose. I can almost imagine it: I put my arm around his shoulders just how he likes, I hold him tight against me and we go forwards; we slowly immerse ourselves and the water licks our waists (as if we were in the drawing of an indigenous legend I saw once at school); as we go further the sun comes with us, it too sinking behind the horizon, and now the water would be at our chins. And in our hearts some little desire to turn back, of course: to give the scene a sweet emotive touch. And then I'd kiss him before the water floods our mouths, and fills his breath, and mine, with salt, as now it finally covers us and everything disappears in a brightness that fades to black before the credits roll.

Just like that this stupid dream of dying in the sea disappears in this sigh I let out: we're in the waiting room of a hospital; that word on the piece of paper in the envelope is not the last word of the ending. It's just this book can't be closed, and I suspect we'll have to live out the entire epilogue, what can we do.

But the sunlight beams down like something unreal. And then the sea... It really would be gorgeous to be there; just to watch it for a bit. Two of us on a beach like we're going for a walk, still seeing the sun at night in the boys' brown skin, and the people who love each other under the water, like us when we close a door: to live all that beautiful corniness. Now that the future we were waiting for won't come, at least we could say goodbye to it without being humiliated by sadness... Of course: if it weren't for the fact that we have no more than five hundred pesos in our pockets, I suddenly think, which leaves us over a million kilometres from the sea. And from any kind of happiness. Saying "let's go to the sea" isn't like saying "let's go for a coffee": not for us, at least. So our simplest desires will also be a dream. And the end of today will be just as trivial and without the sea as any other day.

The best thing to do would be to go home, I think.

—You're going to be left alone—he says to me.

—I don't want to be left behind without you —I say; and I want to punch him. I really do.

—...

—And anyway we don't know anything. Let's see what the doctor says tomorrow.

—No, Fernando. No more going to the doctor.

And he sits there looking me in the eyes.

What can I say?! How can I reproach him now for feeling like this, defeated, when he's spent eight months getting sicker every day without knowing why... until now. I almost feel like a wretch: it's not fair that he's sick and I'm not, I tell myself. What I mean is: Why is he alone in this? And why did he get sick first? What will I do? Where the hell are the instructions on how to be good when life gets tangled up like this? In the end, it is what it is, I can at least take care of him, can't I? Yes. I'll have to drop out of college, I tell myself, and I'll fully dedicate myself to working to get some more money. We're going to need it: because we're alone. God...

—Look, Adrián, the doctor can cure whatever's wrong with you now —I tell him as if I know lots about it—. I've read that you get different illnesses and the doctors keep it under control until they're not able to any more. But in the meantime you can be healthy; and I'll find the money so you don't have to worry about that, and we'll move in together and we'll have a good time for this bit we have left —he doesn't say anything, but he smiles at me, and now I can't stop staying all this stupid stuff to cheer us up (what else can I do?)—. Tomorrow we'll go to the doctor, for our appointment, and he'll give you something for you diarrhoea, then we'll go and see The Last Emperor which is supposed to be amazing, and we'll borrow some money to go to Cartagena... We'll hit up one of our friends. Maybe David will lend it to us. Or Beatriz.

—No, poor David. Beatriz does have money though.

—You're right, poor David —I say, and in our faces there's the beginning of a plan to tap Beatriz—. Hm, maybe we should just save. But you have to get better so we can properly enjoy it, and wait until I get sick as well and we'll both get sick and then we'll go, ok?

And he says: "Ok."

Suddenly I feel the fear of dying hurts less than that of losing each other, now he's feeling sorry for me as well, he's smiling like he's about to cry, he knows I'm going to die as well, he says: "Don't worry, they'll find a cure soon..." and he makes me fall in love with him even more.

It's so stupid, but we smile, knowing we've started to lie to each other. Because there's nothing more certain, and we know it, than the fact that it'll be impossible for us to live

together, that the money I can earn will be just about enough to survive: enough, like up until now, for us to live a life of getting on a bus, seeing each other somewhere in the centre, sometimes going to the cinema or getting a beer. So all that about living together, Cartagena, enjoying ourselves, and the loan we won't ask David for, or Beatriz, or anybody, it's just lies we tell so we can tell each other something else: that we're together, or something like that.

That's all.

It must be just before half past five. We'd like to go to my house; but Adrián is afraid of my father's cold face, and he asks me to take him to his—that's more than two hours south of here, I think—. My house is closer; I have my room there; I'll get around him somehow so we can be there together tonight. Especially tonight.

And we leave.

On the sidewalk, in front of the Santafé Foundation, there aren't many people around at this time. Walking towards the bus stop, I take his backpack and throw my arm around his shoulders; it'll all be fine, I tell myself.

Just our luck. The buses pass us by, full.

It's Tuesday April 12th 1988; I can't believe how beautiful this evening is.