

***Frontier Days* (fragments)**

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How difficult it was to be young in the nineties.

For centuries one of the main aims of children and young people in Europe – we're talking of times when teenagers had yet to be invented – was to make it to adulthood. Youth was merely a stage on the way to a maturity that was reckoned to be the only phase that could bring freedom and independence. However, all that started to change in 1954 with Elvis Presley. Earlier, in 1951, *A Tramcar Named Desire*, had consecrated the T-shirt as a transgressive item of clothing. In 1954, another film, *The Wild One*, added the leather jacket to the teenage wardrobe, that would be rounded off the following year by the threadbare jeans in *Rebel Without a Cause*. In the space of three years youth as we know it today was born: beautiful, sensitive and off-key, and linked to a style of dress.

In the sixties, the future looked hazy but much better, that's for sure. The Beatles sang 'All you need is love'. But the hippy dream was wearing thin and ended abruptly in 1969 when the Manson family stabbed Sharon Tate sixteen times.

The only way to be a proper youngster in the following decade was to embrace the mannerisms of Heavy Metal, Punk or Hard Rock, where each trend came with its respective clothing, hairdo, colours and attitudes. By the eighties, however, no one could deny that being young meant consuming specific products. They were the years of video clips, soft rock and rebels with a brand.

In the early nineties, being young had lost its epic touch. Teresa and Pau had a limited range of drugs and musical offerings from which to choose: grunge or alternative rock or whatever was in revival. Thatcher had gone, the USSR had melted away and they'd released Mandela. It was as if they'd missed the boat.

Vero made up and dressed like Madonna in *Bedtime Stories*, and was the first to be eyed up when they walked into a club. Teresa sparked the interest of those who took

ages to make up their minds. They were years of tentative approaches, of long Sunday evenings strolling through empty squares or watching dreadful series on television. Teenagers had to run to the dining room telephone to talk to their friends while their parents pretended to watch *Falcon Crest*.

Movistar Spaces, Spring Sound, Sónar and Summercase simply didn't exist in the early nineties and no Britpop group played at the old Damm brewery. That perhaps explains why Pau essentially spent his student years studying. He took on supplementary bibliographies as a personal challenge. Granted, he did go out at the weekends in Figueres with his much older brother's gang of friends. Influenced by Marx's early works, he wrote them off as perfect examples of alienation, reduced to the role of producers of goods and services, in the thrall of the needs of the market. They didn't tell him, but they reckoned he was a boring wet fish, and continued to dub him The Swot. They only put up with him because he was Marc's brother.

Both Pau and Teresa were in a hurry to grow up. When the right person appeared, they would live together and though the first years would be tough, they wouldn't give up. Meanwhile they took their first steps in the apprenticeship of feeling, practiced sex on the sofa, and went through motions that they'd later call experience.

Parenthesis

We're always surprised to see photos of when our parents were young, slim, full of hope, and the rest. Women wore Sophia Loren hair styles and Audrey Hepburn jackets; men dressed smartly like Spencer Tracy. They did everything when they were much younger: started work, married and had us.

Teresa's father was born at the end of the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera; Pau's father during the Spanish civil war. Their mothers, in the course of the Second World War. They had no problems finding work, though they took a long time to find out what a labour agreement was. Both fathers started work before age, Teresa's helping an accountant; Pau's serving in a tailor's. The profession of housekeeping was the women's lot, and most of their lives that meant washing clothes without a washing machine, cleaning floors without a vacuum cleaner, bringing kids up without a kindergarten, cooking with very little in the way of ingredients, and shopping with next-to-nothing in their purses. Babies came when God – or Dr Ogino's safe days – decided, and cheered up the house, despite the sacrifices they imposed. Depending on your point of view, they could also be seen as an investment, since proud parents thought that in future years – how naïve can you be – they'd help keep the household afloat.

Pau and Teresa's parents lived most of their lives under a military Catholic dictatorship that was both ignorant and spiteful. They were never taught their history, their language or their rights. They suffered hunger and cold, complied with every Lenten duty, studied the Formation of the National Spirit, did military service, sang the fascist anthem "Cara al sol" and watched Franco parade by under a canopy. After becoming silently inured to the wretchedness of daily life over decades, they saw how their children kicked over the traces of the political, social and sexual order and surprised them doing by the light of day what they hadn't dared mention even behind closed doors. The long years under Franco instilled fear in their bodies they didn't lose until after the Transition. For that alone, we should forgive them for the times they needlessly scolded us: all those exemplary punishments, all that blindness.

If they'd had secondary roles

Teresa would be intriguing, a woman who has hardly wilted but has given up trying to find her place in the world, when one fine day, while serving coffee in a roadside bar, she is discovered by a wealthy man who has made a large number of mistakes throughout the film, but is now sensible enough to realize he could spend the rest of his life with her and, in cinematic terms, the end of the film.

Lola would be the woman who has aged so well that anyone who'd not known her in her teens would imagine her as being much prettier than she actually was, a melancholy grandma to conjure up teenager dramas that in her case began in childhood.

Pau would be a member of a people's jury that had to pronounce on the guilt of a black man in the Deep South. In one of their discussions he would formulate the question that leads to the final outcome. After this moment of glory Pau would disappear because the spotlight switched to the defence lawyer and the attractive prosecutor, who seemed to be quite merciless but was in fact an honest, insecure village girl.

Pau's father would be the likable old man who spent his Sunday afternoons in the garage tuning his old Triumph. He'd wear a Lakers cap and gulp on a can of Budweiser, at the frontier of product placement. At the end of the film, he'd have his scene saving the hero at the last with sprint on his Triumph, in a sudden surge from a corner of the camera.

Pau's mother would sit out her life on a swing in the entrance to an Alabama village. An outsider would think she was an embittered old woman, but the village children knew she liked to give out for free huge amounts of cherry jam she stored in her pantry. When all the men in the village crumbled before the local tyrant, she stood up to him with the best lines in the film. The next night she would die as the result of an arsonist's bomb, but lived on for ever in the memories of the villagers, finally liberated from the tyrant thanks to the revolt led by the outsider, inspired by her deeds.

The doubts of a Malthusian

Let's take a look at 2007. Teresa and Pau are thirty-somethings and live together. As they're not in an emotional or economic crisis, the issue of children will inevitably come up sooner or later.

Andrea, Pau's niece, is at the "dangerous walking" stage. A kerb, a step, any sudden drop is a threat to her physical wellbeing. She's covered in scratches, has scabby knees and the odd bruise. Marc and Eva have to keep a close eye on her all the time – even when asleep – because a tenth of a second can make all the difference.

It's Sunday afternoon and we're at Pau's parents'. His mother, pointing to Andrea – sitting on the couch watching *Just for Laughs* – sticks her oar in.

"Well then, you two, what about it?"

Silence is the only reply she gets.

A couple of weeks later, when they're on their desserts, Lola unleashes a more direct attack: "Come on now, when will you make me a granny?"

"I'm a Malthusian," Pau replies, knowing she won't understand.

Children are a mystery, as far as Teresa is concerned. An only child with no experience as an aunt or a cousin, she has only the faintest idea. She sees Andrea for a few moments at the weekend. Vero's no help; she's planning to adopt when she reaches the menopause.

In Pau's fantasies, children are always pre- or post-adolescent, childish or mature, affectionate or self-contained – and never stressful. He has more than enough of teenagers at school. At least in his fantasies, he can spare himself the grind, the slammed doors and flare-ups. However, when he is feeling low, especially when he has just left the classroom, he tends to ask himself questions to which there are no replies. What's the point in wasting years teaching them to talk? Couldn't they come complete with language, like computers that have already been programmed? And, for heaven's

sake, when they start to reason, why do they put so much energy into arguing with their teachers and particularly – as a tutor he has privileged access to information – with their parents, constantly rowing, reproaching them for bringing them up, for bringing them up badly, and, indeed, for bringing them into the world in the first place?

He has nothing against kids, provided they're somebody else's. Indeed, he thinks he's a good uncle. He buys Andrea dolls and when she's a bit older he cherishes the idea of inviting her to a pizza once a month and developing a relationship that's both supportive and distant.

One Sunday in 2011, on the beach in Garbet, Teresa and he did talk about having children. Stretched out on the sand, her body slightly touching his – after a few of those salty kisses that spice up the summer, they decided on a moratorium: they'd not mention the subject again until she reached forty.

"Perhaps we ought to make the most of it now when the grandparents can still lend a hand," she wonders.

"It isn't a good idea to get bogged down with children if you don't have a steady job," he ponders.

Is there any need to add that they felt mean after invoking such arguments?

Holidays at Sea

For Vero, love and travel are synonymous with what she saw in the series *The Love Boat*.

She not only adores this series but more than once had been dying to take part: sailing aboard the Pacific Princess, staying in its cabins, having supper in the dining-room, swimming in the pools, drinking a daiquiri on one of the decks. The height of her ambition had been to appear as a guest star in an episode, smiling in the opening credits between two concentric blue circles beneath her name and surname while, in the background, the camera zooms in on the vessel so viewers can marvel at its grandeur, luxury and promises of bliss.

Because bliss is what it was all about. Vero thought she had a right, if not to the bliss radiated by the characters in *The Love Boat*, at least to the happiness that had flooded over her when she saw the repeats on Tele5 in the early nineties, sitting on her living room rug next to her mother who'd watched the first part of the series when she was a young girl. Revisiting it with her daughter was her way of going back in time, of sharing with her an innocence that she had lost and idealised now her husband had ditched her for a poultry seller.

The reader shouldn't imagine for one moment that Vero is the kind who knows the lives of the actors in their favourite series by heart, who run associations in their honour and tirelessly return to episodes from each year searching for memorable scenes. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it. The series had made a vague, if striking impact. And we're not referring to issues like length of socks or size of side-whiskers of the heroes. She simply watched it at a key moment when she was developing her ideas about the adult world. The boundaries of *The Love Boat* would be forever hers.

Vero found the series comforting on several fronts. The absence of deep dramatic tensions made each episode uniformly mellow, and we could say the same of their measured sense of humour and moral tone. The structure never changed. The heroes were crew members, and a handful of guest actors who joined each episode in the roles of tourists. Both groups shared a tendency to over-act, especially in their huge range of facial expressions and liking for witty remarks. Their inter-relations provoked minor problems that were solved in fifty minutes (not counting the advertisements), when the cruiser reached port and the different strands converged in a happy ending. The excursion had been a success, and no viewer expected to be told what happened next.

In retrospect, each vital phase in Vero's life perfectly matched the characters of the series' heroes, as if at each stage she had chosen one of the behavioural models it supplied:

1) The Julie phase: for three years Vero aspired to emulate Julie McCoy. Lively and appealing, the cruise director always had an answer ready, was determined yet respectful, and endowed with a childlike intelligence and beauty. Except for a brief anorexic interlude, it wasn't a bad time for Vero.

2) The Gopher phase: throughout the next three years, Julie's easy professional style gave way to an extended period when Vero couldn't find her right place. Like the cruiser's purser, she systematically put her foot in it and allowed herself to be dominated by her inferiority complex that led her to put her foot in it yet again, and again and again.

3) The Isaac phase: for the twenty years this phase lasted, Vero behaved with the open, anti-snobish bonhomie of the black barman in the series. Conscious of her attractions, she fell in love with the fake nonchalance of someone who can see the end is nigh.

4) The Bricker phase: as she neared the forty-mark, Vero felt too sensible and responsible, like the ship's doctor. She was tired of the mistakes she made during her Isaac phase, but had yet to find the man of her dreams she identified as being like Captain Stubbs. In other words, she was looking for a mature, self-assured man gifted with empathy and a surprising, comprehensive sense of humour. She was prepared to accept he might be bald provided he was tanned and had an athletic build.

The last trip

It's the year 2011. In the bus station in Litomerice – Prague –there's no sign indicating how to get to Terezin. There's an information kiosk by the platform that Teresa thinks is straight out of a travelling circus and that reminds Pau of the interrogation unit they saw the previous day in the Museum of Communism on the boulevard Na Příkopě. The man behind the counter only understands Czech.

Back on the platform, a girl with a smattering of English informs them that the bus to Terezin is about to leave. In effect, a metal crate is juddering painfully off. The driver sees them running and stops so they can get on. There's only one seat free, so Pau stands the whole way.

As they are leaving Prague they see the statue on the place where two members of the resistance shot at Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's man in Bohemia. Meadows and woods parade seamlessly past the windows. Now and then there's a row of low houses painted in blending colours, the original for the faded watercolours tourists buy on the Charles Bridge.

An hour later they alight opposite the car park. A poster on their left points to the Muzeum Ghetto and on their right to Malá Pevnost. They buy a bottle of water from the burger-joint in the car park and head immediately to the fortress's cemetery: a meadow covered in gravestones with red flowers, where the remains of a hundred thousand people are at rest. Gardeners are tidying the flowerbeds next to French tourists who are taking photos.

To the left of the guards' quarters, an exhibition records the history of the so called 'little fortress' of Terezin, built at the end of the 18th century that the Gestapo used as a prison from 1940 to 1945.

They read the same words in black letters on a white background that they have seen in photos of Auschwitz: *Arbeit macht frei*. They walk for a couple of hours through the various yards and enter prisoner's bedrooms, the clothes-store, showers, punishment cells, and the room set aside for the admission of prisoners – that is smaller than the commandant's office. They are the only ones who walk through the underground tunnel that leads to the execution wall. Very close to the common graves, they come across a swimming-pool and a cinema used by the prison staff. The pool is empty, but they are showing documentaries on life in Terezin during the German occupation in the cinema which has chairs that remind them of the Fossos School in Figueres.

They are shocked by how familiar the materials are. The wooden bunks recall those you find in a mountain refuge, the bricks are no different to ones you can still see in the Raval in Figueres, the vegetation on top of the casemates reminds them of the vegetation in the Sant Ferran castle, the earthen yard is like the one that existed years ago in the school of Sant Pau, the stones and trees show no signs of the tragedies they have witnessed.

The old SS barracks has been turned into a public space. The cases display clothes and objects that belonged to guards and prisoners, who were nearly all members of the Czech resistance: very many communists, but also the occasional cardinal and the poet Robert Desnos who died of typhoid there. The photographs give an idea of daily life in Malá Pevnost and also of what happened after the liberation. There are three photos of the commandant: in uniform, in civilian dress and strung up.

When they leave they head to the Muzeum Ghetta. Over the river, they see a building on the corner that's closed, where, according to the sign, they sell Spanish furniture. The path leads to another, bigger fortified building, surrounded by a large ditch. They can hear laughter and smell meat – there's a gymkhana in progress. Families with small children stroll between stands, drinking beer and eating crisps and sausages fried by traders on the spot. Loudspeakers blare out country music sung in Czech. By the moat, a dozen horses and ponies and their adolescent riders wait for the off. The first test is about galloping, stopping dead, riding over planks and then riding back at full tilt.

They cross the bridge and are inside. The small fortress they have just left looked like a prison, but what they have now entered is a real city. Poorly paved streets separate blocks of flats and shops. Walls are caked with dirt, traffic signs are rusty, doorways and windows haven't been painted in years, many windows are boarded up and doors shut, but children play in the street, clothes are drying and curtains hang at more than

one window. Further on they come across a church, and close-by a rag-and-bone merchant's, a restaurant and a second-hand clothes shop.

As they've not brought anything to eat, they decide to eat lunch in the restaurant on the square, that is slightly more appetising than the burger joint on the parking lot attached to the former Gestapo prison. However, they are wrong, since the flies and bees on the terrace are not frightened off by their waving hands. The waitress leaves them plastic fly-killers that Pau activates with one hand while eating with the other. The square is thronged by women in housecoats, men in shorts and bare-chested youths slurping beer.

At dessert time, when the bees have withdrawn and the flies offer a truce, Pau reads passages from the guide out loud. Terezin was built in the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a frontier fortress city that could accommodate some five thousand people including soldiers, officers and their families. In 1940 Hitler drove out the residents, re-baptised it the Theresienstadt Ghetto and used it to round up local Jews. It wasn't a concentration camp, but a city that served as staging post before the final move to Auschwitz or Treblinka. Sixty thousand people, including Kafka's sister and one of Freud's, were herded into that one kilometre square space. The conditions were horrific, but better than those in the concentration camps, since the Jews were allowed a minimum of self-organisation, a school and even a theatre.

In 1943, when there was an impending visit by representatives of the International Red Cross, the German authorities carried out a *Verschönerungaktion* or enhancement campaign: they removed the worst-looking prisoners, planted lawns and rose-trees, organised a nursery, re-fitted a concert hall, and opened shops and a café. The following year, after a six-hour visit that the Germans prepared minutely, the Red Cross declared Theresienstadt to be a model establishment. Making the most of their campaign, the Germans filmed a propaganda documentary entitled "The Führer gifts a city to the Jews". When he's back home, Pau will find images on YouTube: prisoners playing football, listening to music, working and going for a stroll. When the propaganda effort was over, most filmed there were sent to extermination camps.

The Ghetto Museum, in the old school building, exhibits the documents and statistics of death. Pau lingered so long over the maps and graphs of deportations that they're late reaching the bus-stop that is situated outside, in front of the small fortress. As the next bus leaves in two hours time, they return to the ghetto.

In the entrance, they walk past two boys in combat trousers carrying a litre of beer a-piece, and Pau shows that he has learned over time the exact moment she feels like a hug.

From 1946 the former inhabitants of Terezin begin to drift back (those living there today must be their descendents). The pamphlet they bought in the museum allows them to identify what the different buildings were used for during the occupation. They see lights switched on in the block opposite the former disinfection unit, and an open window in the old girls' school. A man is repairing a door to Block CIV, facing the old ghetto kitchens.

Following a suggestion in the museum pamphlet they visit the Block BV building. There is an exhibition of drawings, paintings and poems by people in the ghetto. A solemn old lady watches over each room. The largest room incorporates a small stage. Prisoners rehearsed roles in Terezin theatre companies knowing that there would never be time to perform.

Pau and Teresa resisted a possible visit to the crematorium, but what else can they do in the time remaining? They walk across Kleiner Park, where a couple of youngsters sit on a bench listening to a car radio. A house with a garden and a poster proclaiming it is a pension-pizzeria stands opposite the old morgue on the path to the crematorium a few metres from the railway tracks that transported thousands of deportees.

As nobody told them it was such a long way to the crematorium, they once again miss the bus back to Prague. And on this occasion it was the last one. From the bus-stop they watch a group of youngsters dressed in black walk past on their way to the burger joint in the parking lot. A few minutes later, the girl who clipped their tickets in the museum crosses the bridge opposite the Spanish furniture shop.

Dusk is falling when they make their way to Terezin for a third time. The last country festival-goers are loading up their ice-boxes and taking their horses away. By the side of the abandoned marquees Teresa points out to Pau the number "1941" painted in black on the old factory. They're still hoping to find some means of transport to Prague, but only old men in baggy clothes walk the streets.

As they don't find any bus or taxi, they spend the night in a room at the pension-pizzeria.

Pau retains images from the experience that help him to sum up the recent history of Europe. He will tell his pupils how the ghetto worked, and explain the differences

between the Spanish civil war and the Second World War, how they ended and the memories they left in their wake.

Teresa will remember in particular the Magdeburg barracks, where they exhibited the legacy of the prisoners that survived the censors and the destruction: poems, diaries, drawings, puppets, a school magazine.... Theresienstadt was a hell, but not the worst of hells. Although escape was impossible, more diversion was allowed than in other ghettos. Concerts were held, *Carmen* and *The Marriage of Figaro* were performed; there was theatre and even cabaret. For Teresa, the art of the ghetto wasn't self-deception – prisoners were aware of their fate – but was a way of not yielding to despair and fear, of not feeling completely defeated, of feeling they were human to the end. That's what Teresa would tell her pupils if she had any.

At a good moment

When Teresa was born she weighed 3.250 grams and was 45 centimetres long. She was a lovely new born babe according to western canons of beauty.

She gradually put on weight. By fifteen months she had the cheeks of a trumpeter and her head joined her body with no trace of a neck. When Lola was giving her a bath, it was obvious enough she wasn't a pretty girl.

That was sorted with her first growth spurt. By the age of two she'd slimmed, had fine hair and a cheerful manner. It was a good period.

However at the age of twelve her forehead became spotty. Every part of her body that stood out grew mercilessly: nose and mouth, breasts and bum. Men turned their heads but her classmates thought she'd overdone it.

When she reached her majority a sense of proportion was re-established. She became a svelte silent young woman who moved around quite unostentatiously.

On the cusp of thirty, such youthful harmony vanished. Her neck thickened; her hips and thighs had grown. Her body aged more quickly than she did.

Now she was approaching forty, Teresa brought together all the attractions of maturity. Her hairdresser had found the right cut to enhance her face and she had learned to choose her clothes – the style Vero called "hippy chic". She knew when to speak and when to keep quiet, managed her body well and was her own woman. She'd left her youth behind, but she was attractive.

Types of silence

Neither Pau nor Teresa was bothered by silence. They weren't the kind of people to switch on the radio or play a record as soon as they arrived home. They could be next to each other not saying a thing and not feel that something was missing. Both worked better without somebody talking close-by, although Pau did find certain silences in his class room very disturbing, especially when he asked a question he was sure more than one pupil could answer. The worst silences were those that descended on family meals, not so much with the married couple on carrer de l'Oliva as with the widow on carrer Pi i Margall, especially when she invited them to a coffee in the Green Room and they realised they'd exhausted every possible topic of conversation.

According to Teresa, Lola was losing it. Not simply because she was getting deafer and took ages to dye her hair, but because she was experiencing a regression: recently she had started to use many of the proverbs she'd heard in her childhood in the Campo de Daroca. She was as ill-informed as ever, rarely listened and then poorly, but compensated with lapidary phrases that weren't always appropriate.

On the other hand after lunch, when Teresa and Pau were alone in their flat on carrer Migdia, silence trickled like honey. They didn't row very often, but when they did, they enjoyed the silence preceding reconciliation, that was also a wordless event. After years of living together, Pau had learned when to keep quiet, when to speak, and when he should simply touch her hair. Then there were the silences that fell in restaurants on the

grand occasions when they celebrated their birthdays. They were the splendid silences of people who have nothing to hide and still have something to say.

Words could prove even more fascinating than silences. As a result of living with Teresa Pau had discovered subtle hints, crannies and complexities he'd never dreamed existed. His relationships with his parents and brother, with his colleagues at school or his pupils were ruled by a binary mechanism: they went well or badly. He could pretend, lie, adapt, compromise, but the relationship was basically good or bad and, once it was established which, other possibilities fell into place in a coherent sequence. Of course, he was able to shift from one state to the other, but he could never be like Teresa, who was able to feel good or bad at the same time with the same person. She could express her weariness at Lola's selfishness and simultaneously feel pity because she hadn't found someone else to share her life with after Sr. Robert died.

She could happily go out on the town with Vero and not feel used. Up to then, Pau didn't realise it was possible to harbour two contradictory feelings simultaneously. In the case of Teresa, some neighbours and certain films had a similar effect: she both liked and detested them, and never resolved the tension. When he pointed that out, she was amazed he found it inconsistent. Pau had reached the provisional conclusion that Teresa's way of feeling was organised in arabesques, developed in fractal spirals that were influenced by subtle changes in the atmospheric pressure, the temperature, her hormonal cycles or the pollen count.

When he was into his forties, Pau began to feel it wasn't necessary to transform love into a pattern of constant exploration. He had learned to enjoy consolidation. After all, even routine had its attractions, as Ferran would say. Pau liked to arrive home and find his supper on the table, a plate of salad with a dozen fruit and vegetables, chopped and arranged in small clusters, as in a Japanese meal. (He specialised in steak and chips. Though, *nota bene*, not cooked any old how. He quietly queued at a specific butchers in the centre of the city and always bought his new potatoes from a farmer's wife in plaça del Gra. He sliced them with a special knife he'd bought at Vinçons, in pieces 0.8 centimetres long and gave them individual attention, turning them over and changing their position in the pan one by one. He'd not achieved a number of things in his life, but in the matter of chips Pau had attained perfection.)

Each knew and liked to cook the other's favourite dishes. If they were too tired, they'd decide to have supper at the Fiore or Shangai. A woman came a couple of days a week to clean and she also saved them problems.

They weren't very fond of the beach (even though she accompanied Vero now and then) or of skiing. The previous year, as she wasn't sure she'd have work in September, they'd opted not to go on holiday. It didn't turn out badly. He worked on his thesis; she visited the Museum of the Ampurdan and was delighted by a different item each day.

They reckoned only idiots were ever bored, though they suspected their time might come. It was still too early to think of children, even though they both thought they were a kind of guarantee. In effect, they represented a practical measure against the inevitable boredom that set in even before they arrived. First, they had to devote time to studying the pros and cons of having any, and weigh up the consequences from multiple points of view. Then came the conception, by natural or artificial means, and that, frankly, wasn't what worried them most. And, all of a sudden, visits to the gynaecologist, pre-labour gymnastic exercises (with the future father at hand, literally, in a tracksuit dug out of the back of the wardrobe), the purchase of clothing and gadgets, and reading specialised books. And all that before the baby was born. Children were the single resource that supplied topics for conversation and distraction for decades. You only need look at Ferran and Marc.

Silences weren't the problem, but tedium. If they wanted to avoid that, there were only two solutions: to have children or to "shake life up", the expression cousin Pol used when referring to adultery.

A day in the life of Pau

At the very least an hour went by from the moment he woke up to the moment he got up – from his bed, or increasingly from his sofa. He needed that time to remember who he was, where he lived, how it was he'd ended up there and, above all, to convince himself that it *was* necessary to get up. He always spent a few minutes remembering the good times he'd enjoyed with Teresa, interspersed by memories of the torrid seconds he'd experienced in the book shop with the English supply teacher – in a way that recalled the sudden flashbacks that characterise thrillers from the nineties. The two kinds of memories tended to reinforce each other. Everyday he'd return to the same ones and end up celebrating the alternating as a punishment he deserved.

Then he switched on the light – and the television – and dragged himself into the kitchen. While the leftover coffee from the previous day was heating in the microwave, he opened the cupboard and selected an item of mass-produced pastry from a packet. He drank his first coffee standing up. He took his second to the sofa and, while watching a news bulletin or channel he dunked chocolate coated madeleines, filled *ensaimades*, cream wafers, *pains au chocolat*, various brioches and angel's hair pastry. After consuming calories galore, he dozed off until lunchtime.

He generally summoned up the energy to shower, and often to shave and so on before going out to buy food. Over the first few days he stocked up on Bolivian and Uruguayan patties in La Tertulia, but as he'd suffer unpleasant consequences, the following day he

decided on pre-cooked dishes from Can Monserrat. After a few days of trying different tasters, he plumped for a limited range of dishes he combined over the week: a round slice of veal with mushrooms, fillet of Iberian pork, deboned shoulder of lamb, hake in a green sauce and vegetable lasagna. He bought a dish a day and added for good measure bread from Cal Flequer. For dessert he ate yoghurt to enrich his gastric juices, and now and then titbits from Deliciae and Danish from Can Palau.

The days he didn't fancy going out, he would resort to the tins he bought in the dried fruit shop on carrer Sant Pau - chickpeas and tuna was the usual combination. He also stocked peanuts, sunflower seeds and fried corn to pick at while watching television. He didn't like eating out, since he wasn't at all amused by the idea he might meet an old pupil or acquaintance who'd ask how life was treating him – out of ignorance or spite, it made no odds.

After lunch he'd zap until he found an entertaining film. In the afternoon he'd have visitors: Ferran, cousin Pol or his parents. If he felt up to it, he'd make his bed before getting into it. Before falling asleep there'd be the inevitable period of stress: he was too old to seek a new life in Canada, too young to own a flat.

He ruminated on the order that once ruled his life and the chaos into which it had plunged. Did you have to renounce all hope of finding a balance between risk and routine? He found it hard to understand the shifting parameters where people like Vero lived. At least she got on with her life. At forty-three, John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been elected President of the United States; at the same age, he'd done nothing and owned nothing. One of his usual diversions in the fight against sleeplessness was to review the list of people who'd made their mark before reaching forty: García Lorca, Mozart, Rudolf Valentino, Bob Marley, Che Guevara, Lord Byron, Martin Luther King... Jesus and Alexander the Great had changed the world before hitting thirty-four.

To avoid tossing and turning in bed he got into the habit of following a protocol.

The protocol

When evening comes and we're alone through no fault of our own, is it instinct or a reflex action prompted by the films we've seen that drives us to go to seek refuge in bars? What made Pau, who could go months without entering a single one, begin to repeat the same protocol every evening, that we might define as his contribution to the Kübler-Ross model?

No doubt, the flat didn't help. Ferran and he had ensured it was cheap and small, but they'd not anticipated that it would be dark, noisy and smelly.

"The architect must have been high," cousin Pol had commented on his first visit.

Only the lounge-diner saw the light of day. The kitchen, bedroom and bathroom looked over the inner patio that was the domain of people Pau dubbed "the immigrants" in a generalisation unworthy of a teacher of social sciences who voted for parties of the left. This group, comprising an indefinite number of families with different ethnic origins, shared the generic trait of sound and smell pollution. They cooked: boiled mutton, fried plantain, crackling, frozen squid, toxic nuggets and croquettes apparently without ever changing the oil in the pan that gave off a stench similar to the reek from fields recently spread with manure. They played: big drums, the *darbukka*, bongos, maracas, tambourines and flamenco *cajón*. When you weren't hearing the Juanes or Los

Chichos playing, it was reggae, hip hop, rai or rumba, alternating with the songs sung by women ironing or cooking, over Radio Tropical, Al Jazeera and Tele5, mobiles continually ringing with melodies from Sahel and gossip "the immigrants" bawled from one window to another. There were also lots of ill-defined noises Pau attributed to *syrtaki*, *capoeira*, voodoo curses, gang rivalries, tantric sexual practices and the ritual sacrifice of feathered creatures. Into the bargain kids screamed as if they were undergoing live circumcision and the women seemed multi-orgasmic. The kids fell into two groups: those who didn't jump into the flat underneath went out into the street and engaged in shouting competitions and threw stones at the metal shutters of the shops.

All in all, it's hardly surprising that Pau visited plaça del Sol every night, the liveliest area of Figueres when the moon was up. After a number of closures, auctions and re-openings, the offer boiled down to half a dozen bars on the same side of the road, mixed up with day-time establishments such as a business consultancy, a Wok and a dance academy.

(Pau had practically not been back there from the days when he went out with his brother's gang, and the oldest bar of the lot, the Selva de Mar, still existed, where every customer wore a safety-pin in their lip or else was over seventy.)

The first bar – a tapas bar – had already closed when he started on his protocol. The second wasn't for him because it was a flamenco dive. Four remained, which Pau tried in succession, following their order down the street.

First was the Music Hall, an intimate spot which often had live jazz, and where he'd heard the group that Ferran's son belonged to. Pau kicked off his crawl drinking the bar's speciality, a gin tonic (he alternated them spiced or with fruit) On one occasion when he wore his jersey inside out, a lady who must have been slightly older than him – with frizzy hair and a lace blouse – whispered: "Do you live alone or are you afraid of witches?" Pau gave her a polite cold shoulder.

Second came the Federal Café that drew customers of different ages, origins and acquisitive power. Although its salmon pink façade was hardly enticing, the terrace was welcoming, even though Pau felt out of place there. He would drink a beer at the bar and meditate on his last phase with Teresa. What was love? Getting along as best you could, or a brief, intense, disastrous experience?

Third was Jem Casey's. Behind its modernist façade rock and roll classics bellowed out at a volume of decibels Pau couldn't have tolerated for a minute without the previous two drinks. He knocked back a margarita in four glugs and left. At this point,

he found smiling easier than walking. Do please bear in mind that in recent years he'd not taken the art of drinking seriously.

The last bar was the Royal (there are two Royals in Figueres: we refer to the night-time joint). It looked like a store from the outside, but inside it broadened out as if you were entering another dimension. It wouldn't be right to say that Pau walked in sober. In fact, he had no clear idea of the layout of the space, the music being played or the people who went there. Sitting opposite a screen showing the Catalan 24 hour news channel, he gulped down a beer while his eyes focused on the piercing in the waitress's navel. We can't imagine what would have happened if months before they hadn't shut down the Cafè de Nit and Pau had reached the Royal with an extra drink in his bladder. In plaça del Sol bars loneliness was transformed into liquid adventures that brought on peaceful recollection. While he sat on a stool or leaned on the bar, Pau's mind travelled in different directions, riffed on some fixed idea, or zigzagged fleetingly between images of joy and desolation.

"Couldn't you turn down the music a bit?" he'd ask the waitresses in the early days.

They looked at him as if he were a psychopath.

He'd think about the partners he'd had, calculate the length of each relationship, and conclude that his staying power had gradually increased until Teresa had beaten all the records. If he shackled up again it might be the last time. Was *that* what he wanted? To have children so that, after a time, Teresa - or whoever – would address him as "daddy"? To get used to having someone else around and never having time for each other? To suffer the pain whenever the improbable citizen of whichever sex they conceived came home later than warranted?

By his fourth bar, the doubts sparked off by their break up were being expressed in floods of unanswerable questions. Who was he really? Could he go back to being the person he was before he met Teresa? If it hadn't been for her, would he have developed in a similar way or would he be someone else? Did the *real* Pau exist somewhere, intact under all the layers left by seven years of cohabitation? Could he go back to thinking in the singular ever again? Was going into reverse feasible or was he condemned to remaining the person he'd turned into? He had read that it took people who gave up smoking the length of time they'd smoked to recover their proper lung capacity. To what extent could he make himself anew? Was it possible to re-boot as if he were a computer? And above all: did he need to?

One day at the beginning of July, when he was about to enter the Music Hall, he spotted Vero and friends inside. After he'd checked that Teresa wasn't with them, he decided to reverse his protocol, since the last thing he felt like was talking to Vero. That night he started drinking in the Royal. Till then, he'd missed out on many features of that bar. He'd never noticed those black and white photographs of places all its customers must have visited except for him: the Coliseum, London Bridge, the Brandenburg Gate...

A couple of hours later, when he reached the Music Hall, Vero had gone. And he was only half there.

The next morning, when he woke up in his bed, a strange woman was lying next to him and looking at him affectionately.

"Don't worry. I'm off now."

She seemed used to discreet departures. She must have been good-looking twenty years ago. You could glimpse that behind the wrinkles round her mouth and eyes. When she smiled, she could still break the odd heart, but not Pau's.

"Do you mind if I take a shower? Don't you ever use a mop? My God, a real bachelor's pad!"

It was nice to idle while he listened to the water splash, sniffed the scent that woman's hair had left on the pillow, watched her getting dressed from his bed after she'd raised the shutters and the sun shone in after so many days in the half dark. Watching her come over and give him a kiss was the best thing that had happened to him in the last two months.

The day after he stayed three hours in the Music Hall, but the woman didn't come back. All in all, perhaps it was for the best.

The loners of Figueres

Ever since he's been living in the flat on carrer Sant Josep, Pau shops on Saturday afternoons and buys every thing he thinks he'll need the day after. He takes it for granted that he'll spend the morning loafing between bed and sofa and back again. On the other hand, come the afternoon, there's a risk he might be tempted: a donut, a film, a beer. He must foresee any temptation the day before, given the idea is not to leave the house throughout Sunday.

Pau knows that every Sunday afternoon Figueres is occupied by a silent army that wears no uniform but is all the same an invading force. It is made up long-standing bachelors, recalcitrant widowers, the divorced, the separated and the rejected. They emerge after lunch and move around the centre like souls in limbo. Summer or winter, whether the north wind blows or the sun blisters down, the loners of Figueres drag their feet in search of open spaces: from the Town Hall to the Dalí Museum, from plaça Catalunya to Escorxador, from the Rambla to plaça Triangular.

Like zombies, the loners of Figueres recognize each other, know they are different to everyone else, but can't be bothered to get organised. They merely move aimlessly around, at most exchanging the occasional deadpan greeting. A passer-by who stays in one spot for a time will see the same loners going in the same direction, as if they're on a circuit. If God exists, perhaps he amuses himself checking on their routes that from on high must recall the figures we doodle when we're on the phone.

The loners of Figueres are middle-aged and above. We should identify them with the plight of an uncle rather than the freedom of a single. After the relationships they'd

decided to establish have been broken forever, they have been plunged into relentless isolation and been unable to re-organise their circle of friends, change their habits or invent new routines. Years have passed and they have lost all joy and motivation. They're convinced they have nothing to offer. They don't go out looking for someone, but because their flat is driving them mad. When they're at work they feel part of a group, but when Sunday comes round they find no relief in football or motorcycle races. Quite the contrary, it makes them realise they have no one to banter with. They walk at a leisurely pace. Why run if they're going nowhere? Sooner or later they end up leaning on the stone balustrade at the end of the Rambla, next to the monument to Narcís Monturiol, and smoke while they watch couples stroll by and women who they fancy who never glance their way.

They follow a diet based on oils and fats that leads to overweight and relationship problems that feed on each other. In some cases, the stroll through the centre takes place after a visit to mother in the old people's home. The luckiest get a visit from their daughter who ventilates the house, and the son-in-law, who talks about the prospects for independence, though it's clear they're in a hurry to leave. The smartest have bought a small, yappy dog that can't stand children.

One of the distinguishing features of the loners who invade Figueres every Sunday afternoon is their shabbiness: their hair is messy and they miss tufts of hair when they shave. But the worst is their clothes. They never wear t-shirts, tracksuits, flip-flops or shorts, as if they were stubbornly abiding by some complex, out-of-date rules of decorum. On the other hand they do wear clashing colours, filthy trousers, faded shirts, jerseys with rips out of their field of vision. Generally, they're over-sized; their shirts hang over the back of their invariably baggy trousers. They excessively extend the lives of clothes they buy from cheap outlets where nobody asks what they want and they can try things on without having to listen to the comments of the shop assistants. As they've not changed their spectacle frames in decades, though they're ancient, they seem far too modern.

Pau doesn't even have the dubious consolation of going to work. In his den he has started to feel he is emotionally exiled. Even though he knows she's not perfect, he intuitively feels that he won't find anyone to understand him as Teresa did, to look at him the way she did. Out of a lack of ambition, perhaps out of love, or gratitude, or convenience, he curls up in the half dark and waits for Monday to come.

Three scenes from 1977

Teresa was three when her father died. It's difficult to work out how genuine her memories of him are since they take the form of blurred visions that are a mixture of dreams, desires, experiences and images from films. On the other hand, three very distinct scenes from the day of the funeral are etched on her mind.

First scene

The obese priest – a strong parting in his greasy hair – walks down the altar steps and ceremoniously over to the coffin, that's been placed on the front bench in the church. He waves a laurel branch he has previously soaked in holy water, sprinkling drops on the coffin lid – between the wreaths of flowers, from Lola and the estate agents.

Second scene

Women past their best approach Teresa, bend down, stroke her hair, touch her clothes, kiss her lightly on the cheeks and whisper – affectionately, respectfully, sweetly, pitifully, despondently, with all manner of sympathy – the most repeated words of the day being: "Poor little dear".

Third scene

Two workers dressed in grey slide the coffin into its niche. A man wearing dusty jeans, trainers and a check-shirt is calmly organising his materials: a few bricks, a bucket of water, a bag of sand, a brush and a sack of cement. For a period that Teresa thinks is inordinately long, the man mixes the ingredients, cuts bricks to size and fills the

opening to the niche. He uses the trowel to mix and measure the density of the cement, to cut and cement the bricks and eliminate any excess. Teresa clearly remembers the gradual, non-transcendent, craftsman-like way the man made the coffin disappear, amid the silence of relatives and neighbours that only the shrill voice of his uncle from Salt dared to break.

"Now I know now more inside than outside."

translated from the Catalan by Peter Bush

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