

PANTHER EYES

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Translated from Catalan

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"Maths are boring! I hate maths! What *I* like is muuusic!"

"And so do I, kid! What do you think? And skiing and strawberry milkshakes... but there is something called a "test" and until you become a wizard and are able to know what the test is going to be like, we'll have to study it all, O.K?"

She needed not be told how hard mathematics were. When she was in her first year at the Biology Faculty, it was a tough nut to crack. It was the kind of subject that made you go nuts when you didn't understand it, but gave you a sense of satisfaction once you could master it. Obviously, no matter how many times she would explain it to this scatterbrain called Marc, he would never understand it.

"Listen, let's call it a day. It's very late. You should do the exercises on your own again, without looking at the key. Do you think you'll be able to do so?"

"Without looking at the answers? I don't know if I'll be able to resist the temptation..."

"Well, it's up to you. It'll be of no use if you do."

At that precise moment, the door opened and Marc's mother came in. When she saw the woman stepping towards the table, Mireia stood up to approach her, and Marc used the opportunity to go to the dining room and switch the TV on. He put it loud enough so as not to hear them talking. He had no intention to listen to what they would say about him. He knew it was the same old story.

"Well, how's he doing? How did you find him?"

"He's not too good. Besides, he finds it hard to concentrate on the problems. He's bright, but..."

"You're telling me! I always tell him: *"Marc, you're fifteen and you've already lost a year due to the hepatitis and if you don't pull yourself together, you'll end up losing another one!"*. But he's only keen on music... It's not that I dislike it, but he doesn't do anything else! It has reached a point where I don't know what to do. His father says we shouldn't allow him to keep on playing music as long as he doesn't study..."

"I don't know, but I think this would have the opposite effect, and he would dislike studying even more..."

"You may be right. And besides, he plays so beautifully... Have you ever heard him? Are you in a hurry? Wait a minute, then. Maaarc, play "For Elise" for your teacher!"

In spite of his intention to concentrate on TV, Marc couldn't help listening to the conversation with one ear. As soon as he heard his mother praise his talent for music, he ran to the bathroom.

"I can't. I'm in the loo."

Mrs Blader looked at Mireia while balancing lightly her head from side to side and laughing at the same time.

"He's so shy deep down..."

Shy, she said? This lady didn't know what a cheeky lad she had at home. This boy had a nerve! He didn't even bother to bring his books home so that she could help him with his studies. Mireia was fed up with improvising exercises and problems; she had ended up buying another mathematics book with her own money. This had never happened to her before!

Mrs Blader may be a good woman, but waiting until the end of April to correct that situation showed a certain carelessness on her behalf. Mireia didn't deny that Marc had lost a year because of his illness, but nobody could believe that being held back a year had made him lazy. This kid had never worked in his whole life! And nothing indicated he wanted to change his ways. If he didn't change his attitude, she would tell his mother that she gave it up. She didn't want to waste her time and her breath on a spoiled brat.

2

The phone rang several times and Mrs. Blader, who was the only one up that Saturday, ran to pick it up.

"Marc, it's for you. I think it's Quim."

Marc got up from his bed with sleepy eyes. He had stayed up late playing the piano, and the rings under his eyes went to his feet.

"Eeh? Yes, it's me. O.K., at eight. See you later..."

That weekend they would practise in the warehouse that Quim's father left at their disposal. Maybe Andreu would come too, although in reality the group was composed of Marc and Quim. But Quim thought that taking in Andreu could do them much good, especially now that they wanted to record a song and present it to a competition, because Andreu came from another group and had a lot of experience. Since they didn't know anyone in that field, he was their only chance if they wanted to make progress.

"Hello, Marc!"

"Hey, Andreu! Quim hasn't arrived yet?"

"No, he said he would come later. And that we should wait for him in the snack bar across the street..."

They went in and sat at the counter. It was the first time they were alone and Marc was very anxious to know what an expert like him thought of the group.

"You, Andreu, what is your opinion? Do you think we have potential?"

"Well, I think so; otherwise, I wouldn't have joined you. Quim must have told you. I've been in another rock band. And they were really terrible! Furthermore, they spent the weekends boozing and afterwards there was no way we could do anything. And since I can't drink anything because of my illness..."

"I didn't know you had an illness..."

"Yes, it's a hereditary thing... My father has it too. It's not serious, but sometimes it's annoying not to be allowed to have a drink, especially when you're over eighteen..."

"Heredity is... You may as well get something terrific or something terrible, eh? Of course, it all depends on how you take it..."

"Yes, because you, Marc, that hair of yours... I mean, you don't put anything on it, do you? Because for marketing it's very good, you know?"

"It must be now, because when I was little people always called me "carrot". Believe me, when I was ten I would have dyed it very dark, if I could!"

"Are you kidding, it's fab! But you should wear it longer, so that it would be more visible... Hey, look, there's Quim. Do we go and join him?"

"Let's go!"

The two boys left the counter and went to help Quim lift the warehouse's iron door. Once inside, they plugged all the instruments and started playing frenetically. They were lucky that Quim's father owned a warehouse next to a wasteland. They could use it until something was built, and the man thought it wouldn't be for a couple of years: "Just the time for you to become famous and afford renting one for yourselves!"

How he envied Quim for having such a father! Not only did the man help them do all the wiring, but he always took the trouble to leave them soft drinks in the refrigerator so that they would have something cool to drink after the rehearsals. His father, on the other hand, had only one thing on his mind: study, study, study. Now his last bright idea had been to give him a private teacher. He was losing his time. He didn't dislike the girl, but if his father thought that that would make him change his mind about studying... he could forget about it.

3

"Excuse me, Mireia... can I ask you something, just one little question?"

There we were again. Questions and more questions to waste time instead of working. He was trying to make her lose her temper. O.K., she would let him say just one more of his silly remarks, and it would be all.

"One question. Just one!"

"Listen, I can't understand it... What do you see in mathematics that you don't have enough with yours and you must also bother other people with them?"

The girl took her breath before she started her sermon.

"You want to know what I see in them? Well, you should know, since you think you understand so much in music. Many famous composers consider music to be mathematics. Mathematics are a language and, before they were invented, what we now express with a simple equation like those we will see if you let me go through your book became a very large sentence. And all the problems we can resolve with the equations had to be written on pages and pages, and you were likely to get lost before you found the answer. To me they are only a means. You know that what I like is biology..."

"And to make other people bored..."

"Enough. Do you know what? I'll speak with your mother. You make me lose my time and your parents their money."

"But... Mireia, it was just a joke... Don't tell my mother anything, because then she tells my father and I've been ticked off enough lately... Now, I'm asking you seriously, what do you study in biology that you need maths for?"

The girl wondered for a moment if it was worth answering. Finally, she decided to give him one last chance, just in case that, for once in his life, the kid were serious and she didn't notice it.

"Well, for your information, in the last biology practical class, we used mathematics to study the heredity of blood groups, or blood types. You know that there are four main blood groups, don't you? I mean groups A, B, O and AB. I discovered something amazing. I discovered that my blood type is O and both my parents are A. At first I thought: 'I'm adopted and they didn't tell me!'"

"Geel! You must have been quite shaken... Did you ask your mother why they hadn't told you?"

"No. And do you know why?"

"You were afraid they'd get mad?"

"Not exactly..."

"Why, then?"

"Because I listened in class, something you haven't done in your whole life, and I learned the whole story!"

"Eeh? Now I don't get it at all..."

With a satisfied expression and the feeling that for the first time she had won a round against that kid, Mireia took her breath and thought about the easiest way to explain it to him. She didn't want to lose the opportunity, now that he was disposed to listen.

"Look, living beings like us have all the information about how we will be: eye and hair colour, blood type, 'written' in our genes. The genes are in the chromosomes that are inside our body's cells. You must have learned that cells have nuclei, haven't you? Inside are the chromosomes. Have you ever seen any picture of it? Do you have an encyclopaedia?"

Marc stayed silent. He didn't feel like going to the dining room to get one of those heavy volumes his father liked so much. Fortunately, the girl didn't insist and scrawled on a piece of paper an irregular circle, with inside a smaller circle full of nervous ribbons that represented the chromosomes.

"Look, people have 23 pairs of chromosomes, 23 of which come from the mother and 23 from the father. Inside the chromosomes are aligned the genes, containing all the information, somewhat like the bar codes on the goods we buy. We just see lines, but

when the cashier puts it in front of the magnetic reader, on the screen of the cash register appear a series of data."

"Yes... But don't children look like their parents? I still don't understand how the hell you can be group O if you say your father is A and so is your mother!"

In her mind, Mireia thought: "And now how do I explain him that!", but some guardian angel must have been helping her because a parallel that didn't seem too far from the scientific truth occurred to her.

"Observe that some colours are stronger than others, they "dominate" the others. If you put red and black paint in a pot, the resulting paint will be black, because the black dominates, isn't it so? So with genes it's the same: each of my parents has an A gene and an O gene, but since the A is dominant, it doesn't let the O gene be seen, so to speak..."

"So your parents both were group A but they had the O gene hidden. What a pair of jokers..."

"Yes. Now inside the chromosomes are both the dominant genes as well as those that you don't "see", the recessive ones."

"How do you say that, Mireia? Re-ces..."

"Re-ces-sive. It means that it stays "behind", it's the contrary of dominant. Everything that is written in the chromosomes is called genotype, whereas what is "visible", what shows, is called phenotype. So my parents have phenotype A, but their genotype is $L^A L^0$, which means that they have an A gene and an O gene."

So that he would understand better, Mireia took a sheet of paper and started to write. Marc was looking at her as she was writing, with his eyes riveted on the sheet. For a few moments the girl noticed that for the first time, she had been able to get the kid's attention and make it a success. That made her relax.

"Do you see, Marc? And now we pair those two people—we do a crossing—and let's see what happens with their children..."

"Oh, wow! An X!... Nothing pornographic, Mireia, please. I'm too young!"

While saying that, Marc covered his face with his hands in a very dramatic gesture. Then he opened his fingers slightly and looked at the girl, who was trying to refrain from laughing by taking an offended air.

"You're... Listen, if you're not interested I leave it at that, O.K.?"

"Hey, hey, who says I'm not interested? It was just a joke! I am very much interested!"

At this moment Mrs Blader came in to tell them she had to leave and asked them to leave the door open so that they would hear the phone. That interruption had Mireia look at her watch and notice that there was only half an hour of class left.

"Listen, Marc, I have an idea. Let's do the two problems that are left on this page and then I'll explain you the rest of it. O.K.?"

"No way! Explain it to me now! Didn't you tell me that it also involves mathematics? It's that now, I swear, I couldn't concentrate even though I wanted."

"O.K., but ten minutes and that's all. And then maths!"

Marc got up right away and ran to the kitchen. Mireia was at a loss to understand what was the matter with him. A few seconds later the kid came back with a superb timer in the form of a tomato and wound it up so that it would ring after exactly ten minutes.

"Let's go! 'Tomatic never fails!"

This time Mireia couldn't refrain from laughing and for the first time, she looked at the kid kindly.

"Well, let's go on. We said that children take one gene from each parent, no?"

"Even the genes that can't be seen like that from group O0, ha, ha, let's not forget it, Mireia!"

"Exactly. Let's consider the various possibilities one by one, so that we don't forget any."

Before Mireia was finished writing the result of the various combinations, Marc was reciting them easily to the last one.

"And the fourth possibility... Hey! It's yours! L^0 from the mother and L^0 from the father. You're not a martian, Mireia! You're really your parents' daughter! You're 0 even though both your parents are A! Genetics is really funny!"

"Who could have told, eh? But wait: that's not all. What is the probability for each of these combinations to occur? Eh? Aha! Math-e-mat-ics... what are mathematics used for? Listen, we said that there were four combinations, didn't we? So it means that one in every four times the first combination will occur. That is: its probability is one out of four: one fourth. And the probability that the second combination occurs?"

"Well... it's easy, it is also one fourth. And the same goes for the third and the fourth combinations. They're all equal."

"Perfect! Now, something harder... What was the probability that I were type A, eh, Marc?"

To this question Marc didn't know what to answer. All the combinations were starting to dance before his eyes. He made a broad smile and scratched his head, just like a monkey. When she saw him, Mireia had to take upon herself not to be doubled up with laughter.

"That's what would have happened if I had had any of the other combinations! So..."

"It's that I don't know what to do with all those fourths! Do I add them up?"

The girl nodded and Marc cried out bluntly.

"Then it's three fourths!"

"Perfect! That's exactly the probability I had to be group A. So you see that people who are group A can be homozygous $L^A L^A$ —if both genes are alike— or heterozygous if they have one 0 gene and one A gene. But all those in group 0 are monozygous."

"Hey, I'm the king of mathematics! So mathematics are used to know how your children can be... It's one-zero for you, Mireia!"

"Genetics use mathematics a lot... In fact, the tests that can be done with blood groups are so precise that you can be virtually sure if you are some person's son or not. You know, all those movie stars and singers to whom children sometimes seem to appear out of nowhere? Well now they can know for sure if they are or not their children."

Right at that moment a deafening sound gave Mireia a start. Marc burst out laughing when he saw her frightened face.

"It's Tomatic! Ha, ha, ha! But listen... And me, what could my blood group be?"

"Do you know what group are your father and your mother? On the old identity cards, the blue ones, it was mentioned. If they haven't renewed it maybe they still have it or maybe they kept a photocopy..."

Marc was pensive and Mireia, who wanted to get on with the work, answered in a way that would make the boy go back to mathematics.

"Look, you ask them, eh? And now we start im-me-di-ate-ly with the systems of equations..."

The rest of the lesson went off like a dream. Only a slight hum indicated that they were not finished yet. Marc's mother came back and when she heard them working, she hurried out to buy a few things she needed for dinner.

Both kids didn't even hear the door close, absorbed as they were isolating unknowns. After they had done one problem together, Mireia wanted Marc to do one alone in front of her to make sure he had understood. While the boy was doing it, she looked at her watch. She would end a little late, but she didn't mind the extra time if that meant that starting from then all the lessons would be like this one.

"Correct. Now you know how it goes, don't you? You just need to practise. Look, for the next time you do numbers 6, 7 and 8 on this page. If you have it all done, I promise that the next time we'll take care of your blood group. Also, now that I think of it, I have something you may like. Of course, it depends on you that I have enough time to show it to you..."

"You're exaggerating, Mireia... That's total blackmail."

"Exactly... I'm glad to see that you understand me! O.K., you can breathe, now, that's all for today."

"Hey, it's half past nine! It's the day we finish latest and it went by very fast!"

"That's because for a change, Marc, today you made an effort... I hope you haven't used up all your energy in one day, eh? And don't forget about our deal!"

"Yes, master, your slave will do the problems."

"Bye, clown!"

As she was going down, Mireia smiled at herself in the lift's mirror. That kid was... But look at how she could finally touch the right chord. Something good could come out of him after all. She was just thinking about that when she reached the ground level. When the door opened, she saw Mrs Blader who was waiting for the lift.

"Hello, Mireia. How did it go today?"

"Better, much better, he seems to be taking a little interest."

"I'm so happy to hear that! Oh, excuse me, I have to go and prepare the suitcases because tomorrow we are going to the swimming championships with Oriol for a few days. I don't know if Marc told you... They asked for mothers to accompany them, and since I could work it out..."

"Have a pleasant trip, Mrs Blader, and goodbye!"

"Thank you, bye!"

The heredity of blood types
Descendants of two $I^A I^O$ heterozigous individuals

(mother)	$I^A I^O$	x	$I^A I^O$	(father)
genotype	$I^A I^A$	$I^A I^O$	$I^O I^A$	$I^O I^O$
phenotype	A	A	A	O
probability	<u>1/4</u>	<u>1/4</u>	<u>1/4</u>	<u>1/4</u>
		3/4		1/4

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7

From that day on, Marc's interest in science did nothing but increase. He even opened the heavy encyclopaedia on the dining room bookshelf. His mother's absence made it easy to find out her blood group; he didn't dare touch his father's belongings, though.

Mireia was so pleased at that change that she preferred not to worry too much about the reason for Marc's sudden interest. All she did was bring him as much information as she could in order to "keep the fire alive" at least until the end of the school year. She even asked a friend who worked at the university if he could get her the reactives so that she could tell Marc his blood type the day after his last final exam.

Together with the fact that his blood type was O-, D-day brought Marc the certainty of something he had always suspected: being group AB, his father couldn't be his biological father. A casual comment at dinner gave him the clue of who his true father might be. His mother's ex-boyfriend was a musician like himself and came from the Basque Country, where the O group was most common. Marc waited until everybody was asleep to look at his mother's most treasured photos only to find out that his guess was true. That man had the same red hair, the same blue eyes, the same freckled nose as himself. He was mad at his mother.

Mireia's room was full of piled books, some of them open, some closed. The lightbulb in the adjustable lamp that was inclined over the table was very hot. She had been studying for a good while. It was time to take some rest. She would go to the kitchen and prepare herself a delicious salami sandwich, that she would accompany with a very large glass of strawberry milkshake...

When she entered the kitchen and saw the dishes of the last two days, she felt sick. After each meal she had thought: for one plate and one glass, it's not worth the trouble, so a huge mountain of kitchen utensils had piled up in the sink. Since her parents wouldn't be back for a couple of days, she didn't mind too much. She closed her eyes to calm down. As soon as she would finish eating, she would clean it all up. Fina had said she would come between ten and eleven and she didn't want her friend to find such a mess.

Not one second after she had taken the heroic decision to clean up, she heard someone ring at the door. It wasn't yet ten o'clock. She found it very strange and peeped through the judas hole before she opened. If so many hours studying hadn't distorted her vision, this wasn't Fina. It was Marc in person! He had come all the way to the village! But hadn't they agreed that he would call her when he knew the mark he had got on the exam? She turned the key somewhat impatiently.

"Hello, Mireia. Don't make that face. I have to explain you something incredible. I'm desperate!"

The boy's voice didn't show the carefree tone or the joke with which he ended every sentence, which were so customary in him. For a moment the girl was frightened, but at once she realized that the results of the exams were probably not as wonderful as he expected.

"Don't take it so hard, Marc, you certainly didn't fail by much. You will have another chance in September!"

"In September? That can't be arranged in September!"

"What do you mean, Marc?"

"Do you remember that you said as a joke that maybe there was a Basque ancestor in my family? Well it's not an ancestor, it's my father."

"And that's what's bothering you? So what? Mr. Blader is Basque! What's his mother's last name?"

"Mata."

"Ah, that doesn't sound Basque..."

"That's because he's not. Mr. Josep Blader i Mata is Catalan, but my father is Basque and he's called Mikel Lertxundi."

"Mikel Lertxundi, the musician? Hey, hey, what are you coming out with?"

"I looked at their blood types. My mother is type A and Mr. Blader is AB so he can't be my father."

Mireia managed to hide her surprise in order not to trouble the boy even more and she tried to gain time with a question:

"But what makes you think Mikel Lertxundi is your father?"

"Because he is doing a concert with his group at the Summer Festival and soft Mr Blader had a nerve to joke at dinner saying he was an old boyfriend of my mother's. And my mother, as red as a beetroot, evading his insinuations! I could have broken both their faces. I went away. I don't want to see them any more!"

"Look, Marc, I think you're jumping to conclusions when you say that your father is not your biological father. Listen, in order to establish paternity they do an exhaustive series of tests and, furthermore, there's always a small margin of error because of possible mutations..."

"That's a good one! Now it turns out I'm a mutant! Look at me well. You know Mr. Blader. Do you think I look like him? Be honest! Now, look at this picture. The one on the right!"

Mireia took the picture Marc was giving her and couldn't help laughing.

"Excuse me, Marc, but with that hair and that beard of his he looks like a bear!"

"Go on, laugh as much as you wish! But he has red hair like me. And Mr. Blader's hair is pitch black, like my little brother's. I had always suspected it: my father worships my brother Oriol because he looks so much like him whereas with me... I don't do anything right! I knew it had to be something like that, I knew it!"

"Would you calm down? Look, what you're saying about hair colour is unfounded because the gene for red hair is recessive. And if you remember what I told you, both your father and your mother must have one red-hair gene and one dark-hair gene. Since dark hair is dominant, they have dark hair, but each of them gave you one red-hair gene. Do you follow me?"

"O.K. But can you tell me how Mr. Blader could have given me the O gene if he himself is AB?"

Mireia stayed silent for a few moments; she didn't know what else to tell him. She wanted him to quiet down, but she had no intention whatsoever to deceive him.

"Look, I don't know, but you don't even know what blood group Mikel Lertxundi is!"

"He's Basque, and you told me most of them were group 0."

"Wait a minute... I told you the frequency of group 0 was high."

"Be as it is, it's more frequent in the Basque Country than it is here, in Catalonia, no? Don't say it isn't, I read it in a book!"

"Yes, you're right, but..."

"So what I said isn't so stupid!"

"Let's say that if you were sure about it your cranky theory might have a certain basis."

"That's what I want to find out!"

"Listen, Marc, calm down. You've probably not had dinner. Do you want to eat something? I was about to make myself a salami sandwich and a big glass of strawberry milkshake. How does it sound?"

"I have a lump in my throat, I don't think I could swallow anything... Maybe some milk..."

While Marc was sitting down and trying to calm down, Mireia went to the kitchen to prepare the salami sandwich. Then, after a few seconds in the blender she had a magnificent strawberry milkshake ready. She put it all on a tray, with a glass of fresh milk for Marc.

"Here is your milk. If you're hungry you can take a piece of sandwich, eh?"

"Thank you, but..."

"Hey, Marc, by the way... How do you plan to go back home? At this hour there are no more trains and a taxi can cost you a fortune..."

"I can stay here... I'm sure you're not afraid that I stay here to sleep, are you, Mireia?"

The girl turned a deaf ear. She didn't know what to answer him and she preferred to get out of the situation with a suggestion.

"You should call home so that your parents don't worry."

"You want me to tell them that we're alone at your place, at my private teacher's place?"

"I'm sorry to disillusion you, Marc, but a friend of mine will arrive soon. Do you know what? You don't look as bad as when you came in because you're already starting with those jokes of yours! You'll have to sleep on the living room couch. Here's the phone. Call them, please!"

"There's no need. They went away for the weekend and I told them I would sleep at a friend's house."

"That's really bright. And what if they call him?"

"Quim already knows where I am."

Someone rang at the door once again. This time there would be no surprises. It was Fina. After the customary introductions, Mireia said that she was tired and that she went to sleep. Since Fina wasn't following her, she pinched her in the back and pulled her on the sly into the bedroom. As soon as they had closed the door, Fina commented:

"You didn't tell me... He's the cutest thing..."

— You, Fina, are crazy! Do you know how old he is? He's a child! Furthermore, now he's confused because of something that has to do with his father...

While Mireia was telling her the whole story, Fina, with her eyes wide open, kept balancing her head from side to side and making faces.

"Well I find him very attractive and I'm not as fussy as you are. And to think I didn't care about red-haired boys! But thiiiis one! Do you know what I'll do? I'll go see how he's sleeping... Wow!"

"Fina, if you get out of the bed and do anything to him..."

"Don't worry. I won't do anything to your "protégé". That is, if he doesn't make me change my mind..."

Mireia uttered one last muffled cry to make her friend change her mind about getting out of the room with her short nightgown, but to no avail. Fina went through the livingroom where the boy was sleeping and entered the kitchen with a determined pace. The noise of the sliding door running heavily on its tracks woke Marc up. The girl opened the refrigerator decidedly and took out the bottle of fresh lemonade to pour herself a glass. She wasn't thirsty at all, but it was a good excuse.

"Ah, it's you, Fina."

"Yes. I'm sorry I woke you up. I was thirsty, it's so hot... If you want some, I can bring you a glass..."

"No, no thank you. Good night."

And he turned on his side. Fina let out a sigh and went on to the bedroom. From the bed, Mireia was wondering whether she should get up and go see what her friend was doing, but finally she preferred to wait for her to return. Just as Fina had closed the door, when she was still in the doorway, Mireia couldn't wait to ask her.

"What the hell were you talking about?"

"Many things, life, love... Ha, ha, ha! And do you know what I discovered about your dear protégé?"

Repressing her interest in knowing what secrets Fina would tell her, the girl made an uninterested face.

"Ah, so I don't tell you, dear Mireia!"

"What have you discovered that's so interesting, go on, tell me, Fina!"

"Well I discovered, ha, ha, ha! I'm sorry, it's just that, ha, ha, ha!"

Every time she tried to begin the sentence, she started laughing and couldn't reach the end. Mireia, although she was beginning to feel like laughing too, was so nervous that she would gladly have shaken her like a rag doll.

"Would you stop it, you'll wake up the whole neighbourhood!"

"Look, Mireia, I don't know whether his father is Basque or not, but I swear his feet are authentic Idiazabal cheese. His wornout running shoes smell like hell!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Fina, you're so vulgar!"

The two girls looked at each other and then Mireia couldn't refrain from laughing. To make matters worse, Fina didn't stop pinching her nose and then opening her fingers. In order to try and calm down, they had to put the pillows in their faces so that they wouldn't wake the neighbours up. After they had laughed their hearts out, they were so tired that they finally went to sleep.

The next morning, Fina got up first. She had to meet some friends at the pool. Since Mireia was sleeping like a log, she left her a note in case she wished to join her. As she read the note, the girl couldn't refrain from laughing when she read the postscript. "Tell Cheesy that there are inner soles on the market that do wonders! I'm just saying that because if he comes to the pool I wouldn't want him to make the whole staff sick". Signed: "Good-smelling Fina (with no intention to be rude)".

Mireia folded the paper, put it in her dressing gown pocket and ran toward the shower. Marc was already finished and was sitting on the couch with his wet hair combed backwards. Without the fringe that was always covering his forehead, he looked older.

"Your friend is already gone."

"Yes, I know, and you should do the same, Marc."

"Yes, but before I go you should do me a big favour. Say you'll do it."

"Hey, hey. Not so fast, Marc. First you must tell me what it's about."

"You can't refuse: after all, you're involved too..."

That insinuation hurt her a lot. More for the coercing tone than for the sentence in itself. She had invested a lot of efforts in that kid and now in a sense he was blaming her for it. In a profoundly hurt tone of voice she expressed her disappointment.

"Don't you think you've gone too far, Marc?"

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean that, but what would you do if suddenly you learned that the man you called dad all your life isn't really your father?"

"I don't know, Marc, I really don't know."

"I thought about it all night long and I have a plan. If you help me I can make it work, but alone I don't feel up to it. The plan is about writing Mikel Lertxundi a note and signing it as if my mother had written it and giving it to him at the end of the concert."

"And what would you want me to do?"

"With your woman's writing, you could..."

"What do you mean, 'with your woman's writing'? You're a male chauvinist, aren't you? Oh, boy... And what do I write him?"

"Tell him any story. I have it: that your son would be thrilled if he could interview him for the local paper. What do you think?"

"For old times' sake, in a way of speaking? And me... I'll end up in jail by your fault! You're a minor, but I'm nineteen, eh?"

Mireia took a few cards and started writing the contents of the note. It should be neither too intimate nor too distant, but it had to have enough bite for the man to answer.

After many deletions, they decided it was right and they put the note inside an envelope. The sender's name had to be clear: Carme Espinosa.

With the letter in their hand they went to the concert. It was in the open and it wasn't long before harmonious sounds filled the hazy air of that summer night. The vault of the starry sky was like the lighted dome of a circus tent.

After a couple of curtain calls, they had to wait until the numerous spectators had gone before going toward the stage. A guy with long hair asked them what they wanted. Not daring to say anything or almost, they handed him the letter addressed to Mikel Lertxundi. The guy turned the envelope over and read the sender's name.

"One moment, please."

The long-haired guy disappeared behind the stage and Mireia and Marc found themselves looking at how a group of men were disassembling the stage and carting along the equipment. In other circumstances, Marc would have enjoyed taking a closer look at the instruments, but he was too nervous. With his hands in his pockets, he was pivoting on his heels in an attempt to calm down.

Neither did Mireia know what to do with herself. She went back to take a programme for the summer concerts in order to try and concentrate her attention on something. Neither Marc nor she dared say anything; they just exchanged looks of surprise and emotion when a noise seemed to indicate that someone was coming.

Finally, after a while, the long-haired guy came toward them, beckoned them to follow him and led them behind the stage. There, beside immense cases, Mikel Lertxundi was having a cool drink. After a friendly greeting, he lifted his bottle to accompany his offer.

"Excuse me... Do you want something to drink?"

Marc let out a timid no, but Mireia, who didn't know what to do with her hands, thought it would do her good to hold a glass, so she asked for a soft drink. As if she had given him a brilliant idea, Marc, after thinking it over for a moment, added:

"Well, me too..."

"You can speak Catalan. I understand it. I even used to speak it when I lived here in Catalonia, but now... you'll have to pardon me because I am running short of words. It's been a long time..."

Marc looked at the man with an inextricable mix of surprise and fear. He didn't look much like the hairy bear his mother was hugging on the picture. His red hair was streaked with gray and was much shorter.

Mikel made a broad smile and a fine network of wrinkles made his deep-blue eyes look smaller. It was as if remembering that episode of his past lightened sparks in them.

He looked kindly at the horizon, looked to the ground and then at the two kids, and in the end he asked casually:

"And your mother?"

Mireia, who was already prepared for that question, rushed to answer that she was out of town and that she was very sad she couldn't come to the concert. Marc joined her by repeating exactly the end of every sentence.

The man smiled at that rehearsed answer and told them that after the concert he was very tired, but that he would be delighted to grant them an interview if they could come to his hotel the next day. He gave them the address and they agreed to meet at twelve. Mireia and Marc exchanged looks of complicity before they said goodbye. When they had walked a certain distance, Marc discharged in a deep sigh all the tension accumulated during the short conversation with Mikel.

"Mireia, I told you so! He is my father, I'm sure. You saw his blue eyes, didn't you? And the face he made when he asked for my mother?"

"Because he certainly loved her! What do you think? Furthermore, what you're saying about eye colour isn't that simple. I don't want to go through all the details because it's not the moment, but eye colour depends on the presence of various pigments. To make them, some particular enzymes have to be present. What the genes contain is the information for the making of the enzymes that will allow the making of the pigments that will give the eyes their colour, and not directly that of the pigments. So you can imagine that it's fairly complicated."

"I'm glad you didn't want to go through all the details! O.K., you know more about it. What we have to discover anyway is his blood type. Then will you be convinced?"

"Yes. It's very simple, isn't it? And how do you think you'll ask him? Just like that? Listen, let me think about it and I'll figure out a way. You, see about finding a tape recorder and cassettes to record the conversation. And prepare a few questions about music. You're the expert! I'll try and manage to find a way to introduce the issue of blood groups, although I don't know how I will do it!"

"O.K. I'll take care of the questions about music and..."

"We'll meet tomorrow morning at eight to polish it up."

"So early, Mireia? Give me a break, it's Sunday!"

"But what do you want? Listen, either we do it that way, or I'm washing my hands of it. You go alone and you manage to find it out by yourself!"

"Calm down, Mireia, when you get nervous... Eight o'clock will be fine."

10

The next day, Marc, more punctual than he had ever been, arrived at the flat Mireia shared with Fina in the city. After much debate about the relevance of every question, they reached an agreement. Each of them would be responsible for part of the questions. Mireia would start and then Marc would continue, and when they would see that the moment had come to ask him "the question", Mireia would do it.

They arrived in the hall of the hotel and, when they said who they wanted to see, a very-well-dressed receptionist led them to a lounge where Mikel was waiting for them.

"Do you want something to drink? A soft drink, maybe?"

The two kids answered with one voice and after a very short while they were brought two large glasses with, in the bottom, a slice of lemon over which the waiter poured the contents of the two bottles. Both kids stared at the process as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. They didn't know how to start and, unconsciously, they wanted to make that moment last as long as possible.

"Hum... When you wish. Do I say it well?"

"Yes, yes, very well."

The three of them smiled, which relaxed both kids. After a few questions about the background of the group since the seventies, Mireia tried to divert the conversation and, using the fact that he had lived in Catalonia for a long time, she asked him what differences he saw with the Basque people. Suddenly, as though he had drunk a fast-acting poison, Mark felt an irrepressible urge to go to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry... I have to go..."

Mireia told Mikel that they didn't have to wait for him to return and the man answered by taking the conversation back to the field of music. The girl, then, taking advantage of Marc's absence, thought it was a unique opportunity to ask him "the question" without interference, although it didn't fit at all in the conversation.

"But you, the Basque people, are a very definite race. For example, there is a very high frequency of the O blood group and that of the negative Rh is one of the highest in the world..."

The man felt right away that the girl was meddling too much in themes that were very far from his field. He decided to interrupt her as gently as he could and accompanied his interruption with a broad smile.

"I see that you are much more informed than I am... Ha, ha, ha! We can't deny the racial component of the Basque people, but also, as happened in Catalonia, one cannot overlook the contribution of immigrants. In my band, for example, there are three musicians who are sons of immigrants: Andoni, Txomin and Arramun. You see from their first names that they are as Basque as I am. It wouldn't occur to me to ask them about their blood group... and I wouldn't let anyone investigate mine either. Except if I were to have a transfusion, of course..."

Mikel had politely shut the door in their faces. There would be no way to have him say what his blood group was. Although she was aware that she had lost the opportunity to know it, Mireia decided she should at least try to make him forget her inquisitive ways.

"You speak Catalan very well. It's incredible, isn't it?"

"Thank you, but not that much. Remember that I lived in Catalonia for almost two years! What is true is that the more I speak the more I remember..."

"And pardon me for the question. I've been a little inquisitive, but it was because I am a student in biology and at times I collaborated with the Red Cross and since I know that the O blood group with negative Rh is not very common here in Catalonia..."

"You mean that you want to drain my blood, now that I am here..."

Mireia had the feeling that instead of arranging things, she had spoiled them completely. She didn't notice that Mikel's annoyed gesture was a subtle form of laughing at the situation, so she hurried to apologize.

"It's not that..."

— I know, of course. And I'm a donor! Look, here's my card. Wait, I gave blood on March 26, it hasn't been the prescribed six months yet... I'm sorry, but..."

The man had taken a card out of his wallet and Mireia could catch a glimpse of his blood type: O-, written in a box. Fortunately, Marc was still in the washroom. Otherwise, from the place where he was sitting, at a greater distance from Mikel than she

was, he would have suffered like hell to think that he had within reach the confirmation to his suspicions and that he couldn't see it.

After a short while, the boy came back more relaxed and started his series of questions without knowing that what had brought them there was already done.

"I'm sorry I took so long. Well, I'll go ahead with my questions. How do you start creating? I mean, how does inspiration come to you?"

"We practise in a country house we converted into a studio in Elantxobe. I don't know if you know where that is... It's a small town on the coast of *Bizkaia*... The place is incredible. The inspiration is everywhere. Speaking with the people, eating, looking at the stones, the sea... If you've never been there you don't know what you're missing!"

After this introductory question, Marc went into more concrete instrumental aspects. Mikel was surprised of the kid's musical background and acknowledged it, giving him all kinds of details. After he had asked all his questions, Marc made a sign to Mireia so that she would ask "what" had brought them there. The girl, instead, nodded in a way he didn't know how to interpret. Mikel then looked at the time and excused himself.

"I'm sorry, but now I should go..."

When the girl got up to say goodbye, Marc, annoyed, pinched her arm, to which Mireia answered with a nudge. Mikel, who saw it all, made a condescending face and smiled before he said goodbye.

"I've been delighted to meet you! *Agur!**"

"*Agur*, Mikel."

The two youths were going toward the hotel's front door with large strides. Once they were out, Marc couldn't refrain from asking her the question openly.

"Why didn't you ask him, eh, Mireia? Didn't we agree that you were the one who would ask him?"

"Who told you I didn't ask him? I did, you know. And he refused to answer."

"So we did it all for nothing! Shit!"

Mireia kept silent without taking her eyes off him. She wasn't lying. Mikel had refused to answer the question. That thanks to her good sight she could glimpse at his blood group on his donor card, that was pure luck. If she explained it to him now, it would cause a family upheaval, but if she didn't, she was hiding him something he had all the right to know. Her head was a jumble: she needed time to sort it out.

* "Goodbye" in Basque.

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14

Suspecting that Mireia was hiding the truth from him, Marc decided to talk openly to Mikel and went to the small village on the Basque coast where he lived. When Marc told him he was his son, Mikel hesitated for a while, then exhaled. Mathematics made it impossible: Marc's mother had left him for another man much before. He could even remember the man was called Josep Blader... Upon hearing his father's name, Marc felt so embarrassed that he couldn't enjoy Mikel's offer to show him his recording studio. All he wanted was to disappear.

When Marc finally came home, he didn't even want to listen to Mireia. It was too late for apologies. Who cared if the reactives had been mistakenly interchanged? She was the only one to blame.

Mireia returned home feeling miserable. Not even Fina's funny jokes seemed to cheer her up. But was it only guilt that she felt? She had no time to find it out; the only thing she could do was to take her courage in both hands and study if she wanted to pass her own exams.

15

In early July it wasn't strange that the train be crammed. Mireia was happy she could find a seat, because she was so tired that she felt unable to stand during the whole trip. The suffering was over. No matter what her marks would be, she had handed in the last exam and from then on she was completely free. It would be some time before she would get the results, but at least she could put her books away for a few days. When she arrived home, her mother was waiting for her.

"Hello, how did your exam go?"

"I don't know. I think I have chances, but for the moment what makes me most happy is that it's over!"

"I'm sure you will do good... Ah, look, there's a letter for you."

It had to be publicity because the envelope wasn't sealed. Mireia opened it and realized that it was an invitation to the county's rock music contest. It was to take place on that same evening. She hurried to call Fina and ask her if she wanted to go. The girl didn't need much persuasion. She was one of those people who accept all invitations, even at the last minute.

"I will take you at nine thirty. Be ready, eh, Fina? Bye..."

Mireia stretched out on the couch for a short while and ended up sleeping like a log. She hadn't slept enough lately. Fortunately, her mother remembered that she wanted to go out and woke her up so that she would have enough time to get prepared. In two ticks she got up from the couch, took a shower and put on a blouse with straps and a pair of very-tight-fitting jeans she had bought two days earlier. She felt like wearing something new on her first day of freedom in almost three weeks. Then she went directly to take Fina.

"Hello Mireia, what a pair of trousers!"

"You like them? I bought them for half a pound!"

"He, he, he!"

"Hurry, Fina, I know I'm very funny, but if you don't hurry we'll be late as always."

The two girls ran to the place where the contest was held. They were hoping to see friends, although they didn't see anyone on their way. Small villages are like that: wherever you go, you always find someone you know, even when you don't feel like it.

When they arrived there was a lot of people in the queue at the door, but they managed to find seats at the counter. They took a cool drink and ate with delight the crisps they were brought. Almost immediately, the host started announcing the names of the finalists in each category. They liked very much the first two groups and accompanied the music moving their heads and their feet. Suddenly, Fina pinched Mireia so that she would notice that Jeroni was there.

"No, please, I don't feel like talking to him...Now that I've got it all out of my mind!"

"Listen, he didn't do it on purpose, you know? Maybe he didn't see you. Oh, oh, oh! I think you don't have to worry about him any more... Look who's with him!"

"What? Who's that ugly thing, where did he find her? Do you know her, Fina?"

Mireia, annoyed to see that Jeroni was having a good time without her, waived her hand slowly to him.

"That's it, now say hello to him, Mireia!"

— Ah, you're so... Now... he won't even come close to us, you'll see!

Mireia turned her eye toward the entrance and kept seeing things. Almost unconsciously, she lowered her head to protect herself.

"Finaaa! Now I'm dying. Do you know who's at the door? Don't turn your head! It's Marc's parents! What are they doing here? Don't tell me that now they spend the summer in the village! I'm going to the restroom and I'm not getting out of there!"

"Don't be silly. Stay here, there's a lot of people now and nobody'll see you! You're chicken, hasn't anyone ever told you so?"

"And you're a know-all, hasn't anyone ever told you that? I'd like to see you in my place!"

"Do you know what I'll do, Mireia? So that you see that I'm such a good friend I'll go near them and listen carefully to try and learn something. You look, sit and be quiet."

"Now I do realize that you're completely crazy, Fina!"

Without paying any attention to the remark, Fina made her way between the people until she reached the door. As she was getting closer she noticed that Marc's parents were starting a conversation with a tall man with reddish hair. When she was close enough, she leaned against a column and started pricking up her ears.

"Congratulations! I don't know if I say it right... For the moment he made it to finalist!"

"Hey, but you're... Mikel. We heard that the concert had much success. But what are you doing here? How do you know that Marc is among the finalists?"

"That..., ask your son to tell you... It's a long story..."

"Excuse me, I wish to introduce to you my husband, Josep. I can't believe it. It's a small world! But, so you know Marc?"

"He sent me a demo-tape and I gave him some advice."

With an expression that seemed both surprised and satisfied, Marc's father put his oar in.

"So he listened to me! Do you hear, Carme? Your son listened to me for the first time in his life! I'm sure you gave him more than a few pieces of advice, hey, Mikel?"

"Nothing of the kind, Josep. The kid is good, you know? He deserves to be supported."

"You're the expert... As for me, as long as it doesn't interfere with his studies..."

"Well this year he sure proved it to you, Josep. He passed every subject in June, and he even had a very good mark in mathematics!"

"It's true, I have to admit it; of course we gave him someone to help him..."

"You, Josep, always belittle him! It's as though he were not your son!"

"It's not that, I'm just explaining the things as they are. I feel very proud of him, but I like my sons to be thankful with those who help them... Listen, Mikel, my wife and I would be very pleased to have you for dinner..."

"Thanks, but we're going back to Elantxobe this very night. Hey, Shht! It's starting!"

Fina noticed that the three of them were staying silent and were looking toward the stage. She hurried back to her seat beside Mireia.

"So, do you know what they're doing here, Fina?"

"Shht!, it's starting! I'll explain it to you in a moment..."

The host went back to the middle of the stage to announce the following group.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, a group of very young people from this county. They are called: Quimandmarc."

"Talk about the names they give to their groups... eh, Fina? How would you write that?"

"Hey, Mireia, do you see the same thing I do, or should I wear glasses?"

Mireia, who was distracted looking for the group's name on the invitation, looked up and put her hand to her mouth to muffle a cry.

"Isn't that red-haired boy... Ah!"

"I think so! He's cute, isn't he, with his hair longer! Although... the one on the left isn't bad either, eh, Mireia?"

After he had said the name of the group, the host left the stage and the whole room resounded with the first notes. When she heard the first words of the song, Mireia stayed glued to her seat, closed her eyes and smiled while clenching her fists tightly to make a wish...

Paaaaanther e-yes...