

Fragments of

A STORY NEVER FILMED¹

Jorge Volpi*

1

“It shouldn’t be like this, should it?” the young woman asks him, happy, but with reservations. He has her lying against his chest. The sheets cover them both to the waist, revealing the girl’s small, perfectly formed breasts. Renata’s hair spills over his skin and he limits himself to holding her up by putting his hand over her forearm. She’s a little frightened, only slightly less so because of the trust she has been able to place in the director. Gruber does not speak, but his silence is comforting, perhaps even better than words, as though for the first time the actress feels that she actually knows him, as though it were the first time he has

been completely sincere. Underneath the cloth, she presses Gruber’s thighs with her knees. The only thing that can be heard is Renata’s timid breathing and the director’s panting.

She still feels strange. It’s true, she has always liked older men; Carlos is several years older. But Gruber could not only have been her father; he could have been her grandfather. The age difference—she does the subtraction in her head, embarrassed, so he cannot guess what she’s thinking—is almost 40 years. Could something like that really work? She notices the silver hairs on his chest and realizes just how big a mistake she’s making. But she can’t resist either. She can no longer look at him like an old man or the famous cinematographer he is. Nor as the myth everyone bows down to, nor the dark, bitter, terribly intelligent personage he has always been made out to be. Now he’s just another person, just a naked man—defenseless—next to her, but who holds her affectionately to protect her. She has finally gotten to know him and he turned out to be



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¹ Scenes from Chapter 6 of the novel *El temperamento melancólico*, published by Joaquín Mortiz, Mexico City, 1996.

Drawings by Lydia Peña González.

quite different from what she imagined, the extreme opposite, totally unrelated to months of accumulated preconceptions.

"Why don't you answer?" she prompts, anxious to hear his voice even though, deep down, she knows the answer. She'll risk hearing it, divesting herself of her illusions about him once and for all. She asks because she must, though she would prefer the silence to continue forever; cautiously she caresses his yellowish skin, the wrinkles that, despite his exercising and the still-firm muscles, undoubtedly betray the decadence of his body.

"You know why," he murmurs, dragging out the vowels and kissing her hair. Gruber breathes in the young woman's aroma, her young sweat, her dreams. "It's the only scene I shouldn't have allowed myself," he explains affectionately, as though he weren't saying anything important, but only a comforting word after love-making.

Renata demands the answer even though she doesn't want it. A misgiving sought out deliberately comes back to her: in a few weeks, she has gone from Carlos to Gamaliel and now to Gruber. What ails her? What infirmity stalks her? Is she really the guilty one, the one responsible for the acts of others? She feels she has a power that she doesn't know how to manage. Is it really that easy? She has always been able to satisfy her vanity, but now she becomes aware of how much damage she can do to herself. She carefully goes over the examples and convinces herself that she's cursed, that without exception, pride has ended by consuming her. She resists thinking about it

any more and torturing herself with presentiments of disaster. She climbs up on top of the director's body and kisses him on the mouth, an unending kiss; she doesn't want it to end; she refuses to let time erase the image in front of her.

Gruber receives her tongue frenetically and begins caressing her again; he picks her up, changing position on the bed. He is now on top and she is underneath. Their bodies unite; he begins kissing her body slowly, her neck, her breasts, her belly, her pubis, her legs and her feet, without tiring, like an unspeakable show of affection. Renata, trusting, lets herself go in his hands.

2

"I remember something I read not long ago," he tells the hurt young woman with the devastated face. "The more people love each other, the more they violate each other. That's terrible, don't you think? Love makes us want to know everything about the other; it destroys intimacy and secrets. But if lovers do not violate each other, as McCormack says, love dies."

She understands why he is speaking to her in this way. Throughout their relationship she has always asked him questions, interrogated him, when they went out, at rehearsals, about each and

every part of his life. Gruber, on the other hand, outside of the preparations for the film, has hardly questioned her at all. But perhaps, Renata thinks in order to not feel guilty, that is only because he already knows her completely. Yes, one way or another she has tried to dig into his memories, possess him as though she had always known him, as though the distance of forty years that separated her from him were unreal. Why did you leave your homeland? What was Sophie like? Why did you marry Magda? What do you think about art? Gruber, a little abashed at reproaching her, thinks that his whole life he has been subjected to an interminable interrogation, as though he has had to explain to the world each of the decisions he has made and every one of his actions. As though he needed to justify himself before a non-existent audience and he were subject to the opinions of others. Both in his public life and in private he has behaved this way. Is it perhaps that he displays himself voluntarily, that what he wants is to be seen and judged at every moment, unsure of himself when faced with the statements of anyone else? For a moment, he believes that he operates that way. "If you were my age," he says to Renata, "you would understand that sometimes it's better not to know, not to ask more than you should. If you got to know me as I do, you would have no choice but to detest me. You would be disgusted and you'd

*Love makes us want to know everything
about the other; it destroys intimacy and secrets.*

leave me right away. If you keep on asking, you risk the answers being too hard to take. Investigation is not a simple thing. You have to be hard enough to accept responsibility for what you come up with. Even if you don't like it. Even if it kills you."

Renata just wishes she could weep at his side.

3

They bathe together. The house has an enormous bathtub with a shower. Renata undresses and plays with the water; she undresses the old man with a mixture of tenderness and mischievousness. She splashes his face, puts her cold hand on his back and, amused, watches him shiver. Finally, she takes him with her into the water; she laughs and makes jokes, taking any solemnity out of the situation. Gruber also smiles and for the first time Renata sees him smile without reservation, without being sarcastic or coming up with an ironic remark. He smiles like a little boy. She suds her hands and begins sliding them over the director's wet skin. She slaps him lightly, but her wet palms magnify the sound. She washes and rubs him on his cheeks and his shoulders, his legs and his ass with a green sponge. For once, he is not ashamed as she looks at him in the clear light of day. He squirms like a little boy. Like a

little boy, Renata thinks to herself, moved. But, she cannot stop thinking that it is her father's body slithering between her hands.

4

"Do you still think love is a lie?" she asks.

"And how do you know what I think?" Gruber's words come out with



difficulty; he's trying to break down Renata's solemnity.

"I read it somewhere, in an interview or something."

"Never trust interviews. That's partly why I stopped speaking in public. They always misrepresent what you say, and, what's worse, they put words and opinions in your mouth.

It's the worst way of discrediting you. They make you do it yourself."

"Well, just tell me what you want from me."

"Everything," answers Gruber, courteously, dodging any commitment.

"Right," Renata says, playing his game. "But what's *everything*?"

"Everything is everything," growls the director, "your body, your soul, your company, even the stupid questions you ask me."

She pretends to become furious, and finally, she does. He has treated her like a little girl so often. Perhaps she has provoked it; other times, she likes it, but not when she's *being serious*. "Don't make fun of me," she demands willfully.

"My God!" laughs Gruber. "Do you want to talk about love *seriously*?"

"Yes."

"Renata," his tone becomes paternal again, "you and I have no prospects. You know that perfectly well. This should not be happening. What use is it for us to torture ourselves?"

"You're the one who doesn't understand." Renata is becoming aggressive. "Because, I'm not another one of your adventures."

"Of course not, Renata. Please!" On the one hand, Gruber thinks it is funny that he is going through the emotional problems he has always managed to avoid, but on the other hand, he is uneasy. He is not sure just how long he is going to be able to control her.

"I just want to know what I'm doing here."

"You are doing just what you feel like," he answers. "You always impose your will on everyone else, so don't act the victim either. From the beginning you were completely aware of what was going to happen."

"All that's missing now is for you to say I seduced you."

"You did." He wants to make her angry; he likes to see her angry. "Or do you really think I always plan everything?"

9

"Didn't you ever think about having children?" It's Renata again.

"No. Who knows why, but since I was a little boy I had a horror of fatherhood." The director's features betray certain embarrassment. "All that business about having a child meaning endorsing the world we live in or committing the worst of sins. At bottom, it's very easy to see that it's just another aspect of my fear of taking responsibility for another person. When you're not able to be responsible for yourself, you shouldn't try to do it with an innocent."

"I don't agree, but what surprises me is that you are taking a very moral

position. At the end of the day, you're a lot more moral than you say."

"You may be right, Renata," he says, resigned. "Perhaps my whole life, I've done nothing more than contradict myself."

10

When he begins to caress her breasts, she begins to cry. Suddenly, and without being able to stop herself, she breaks down in cold, uncontrollable tears.

"I just want you to hold me," she says. "Hold me for a long time."

He does the opposite. Gruber moves away and leaves her alone. He cannot avoid disgust at any show of sentimentalism, at his own weakness.

11

She never thought she would like an old man's sex. She takes it in her hand and looks at it carefully. She observes each one of its details without any erotic intentions, as though she were doing an anatomical analysis. It is no different from others she has seen. The only difference is that he is not circumcised. It has not been long since they made love and the minute contact she is making does not give him an erection. The tes-

ticles, perhaps, seem a little larger. She plays with them a while, feeling their consistency as though she were pursuing them inside his skin. It seems curious: she had never imagined she would find grey among his pubic hair. She is delighted with her discoveries, like a little girl having fun undressing her younger brother.

14

"My love for film is stronger than any morality," he tells her, furious, as the conclusion of their endless bickering.

15

"Tomorrow is the day." Renata is massaging his neck while speaking into his ear.

Gruber nods yes, apparently satisfied, although really a little disheartened. It is not that he does not want to start shooting. It is just that sometimes the wait for something you fervently desire is more gratifying than its fulfillment. Besides, he still has his doubts about the consequences of what he is planning to do with his actors. He will finally push the passions that he has been sowing among them over the last two months to their logical conclusion; he will release them, indomitable, to operate alone, emotions and feelings out of control, ready to be filmed as though they were real. No. Gruber corrects himself mentally. The truth is that *they are already real.*

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THE CRACK GENERATION AND ITS EXPONENTS

In August 1996, a group of writers born in the 1960s published a manifesto calling themselves "The Crack Generation." Ricardo Chávez Castañeda (1961), Eloy Urroz (1967), Pedro Angel Palou (1966), Ignacio Padilla (1968) and Jorge Volpi (1968) are the signers. What does their manifesto propose? The will to embody a literary break to renovate contemporary Mexican narrative.

"Crack novels" they say, are not born of certainty, mother of the annihilation of all creativity, but of the most profound doubt about knowing. Therefore, we cannot say that there is one type of "crack novel," but many. They do not seek a better world; they do not believe in a utopia and, without trying to be, they are subversive. Their novels are not romantic, optimistic or "nice." Their novels' dilemma consists of seeking heroically to carry out the feat of finding what the famous Argentine novelist, Julio Cortázar, called their readers' active participation, just when what is being sold and consumed is an abominable reluctance to participate.

The manifesto says, "The narrative has been dying little by little of anemia and complacency. Risk-taking and the desire for renewal are languishing. A vacuum of several years mucks up the ground surrounding letters with absenteeism, absenteeism of novelists who do not write, or, worse, writers who cannot be called novelists."

This generation has no single prophet, but many. Their art is less the art of what has been completed than that of the incomplete.

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Now Renata has gone on to kiss his neck; she takes his shirt off little by little and puts her closed lips on the director's tanned skin. He picks her up and puts her on the floor. After a few moments they make love languidly, aware that after the next day things cannot be the same. They caress each other with enjoyment, but slowly, prolonging as much as possible the movements, textures and smells. It is a kind of last chance to enjoy a game of their own their making, far from the world, the old man and the young woman who do not see each other as such, but as two bodies, two minds united and carried away until exhausted. Later, it will no longer be like this. They are not sure what will happen, but they at least know it will be different, that the rhythm of filming will fill their lives, too, that they will concentrate the whole time on that, and as long as it lasts their energy will wane. For once, they do not think about whether they love each other or not, or whether their love is real. They do not stop to measure their actions or judge the acts of the other. They just let themselves go, lost in their sensations, while their wills are annihilated and they approach a vacuum. At last they recognize that this part of the story — the story of their encounters — will have to disappear as though it had never existed, as though no one knew of it, not even they themselves. Once the film begins, they will become strangers again, director and actress, boss and subordinate, subject to the unpredictable forces of fiction. Their common destiny will have vanished, leaving only a few traces, small glimpses, the fragments of a random and impossible story never filmed. *W*