



Alberto Palacios\*

## Reawakenings

I

I remember it clearly; I was watching the prodigious hands of Alice Sara Ott perform Beethoven’s third and my own Alicia intertwined her legs with mine—with no intentions of seducing me, she insisted. The year was just starting out and—why not?—it was snowing hard. No heater seemed to be enough. Our modest apartment smelled of humidity and gardenias, a left-over

\* Doctor and psychoanalyst; dr.apboix@icloud.com.

from the long confinement that we never got used to. I offered her a drink of Ardbeg Uigeadial, alluding to the “mysterious, dark place” that had once congregated us in a dive of a jazz club. But obviously, she had other things in mind.

Cynical and skilled in psychology, she showed me her treatise on COVID characteropathies, alien to the music filtering through the room. I interrupted the recording as the *allegro* ended, with the pianist’s features frozen on the screen. With a half-drunk cup of coffee and a bit upset—I admit it—I turned to look at my lover, trying to contain my irritation.

“We’re part of that silent majority that has sunk into lethargy, putting life on pause. Accepting our recently discovered condition of pariahs; renouncing social life, the pleasure of work, seeing the light, or breathing air unencumbered.”

“Enough, Iván. If you’re not interested, don’t make faces.”

“Sorry, sorry,” I responded, shamefaced. “I’m listening.”

She moved away from me, herself annoyed at my arrogance, and, after hesitating a few moments, she began to read her notes. I confess that they sparked my interest and I let Alicia go on, trying to imagine each one of her characters. The snow knocked against the cornices and the night became more penetrating with the counterpoint of her voice.

“There’s the most common one,” she began, “the circumstantial paranoiac, who lives an anonymous existence until this pandemic made his stumbling and expectations relevant. He suddenly realized he was vulnerable, exposed to a closer threat than a nuclear holocaust or economic instability. He awoke one morning drenched in alarming news that put him in an extreme position: ‘I’m hypertensive, my parents were diabetic, and I smoke,’ he recognized, swathed in panic. So, he didn’t stick his head out the door until they assured him a vaccine was coming soon. Perhaps he was partially right: several of his contemporaries died in that first wave when they intubated everybody without any great physio-pathological considerations, and people were dying of strokes or the reviled cytokine storm. But there were those who fell into delirium, refusing to speak to their relatives and friends except behind a screen or kilometers away. As you might suppose, Iván, this archetype was the most impacted by isolation and helplessness.

“Later came those with anxiety and depression; they’re always around when there’s a catastrophe. This is often a more predictable psychopathology, which has its ups and downs and its degrees. As we know, this is often the field for psychiatrists with their ruinous avalanche of drugs, especially since a good course of psychotherapeutic treatment requires more introspection and less urgency. It’s true that they abound, but they’ve stayed on the sidelines, mustering through lockdown with more contrition than rhetoric.

“Lastly are the deniers. Optimists to the hilt despite their ignorance, they decided to set off on a crusade that could be called ‘turning their backs on reality,’ like those who see themselves as invulnerable do. Naturally, many of these died, proclaiming their stupidity from daises or from oblivion. That was the most regrettable epitaph of this tragedy that has brought us all up to the present.”

“Alicia,” I interrupted, “I think you’re being too sarcastic. And you and me, where do you put us?”

“I must say that we’re part of that silent majority that has sunk into lethargy, putting life on pause. Accepting our recently discovered condition of pariahs; renouncing social life, the pleasure of work, seeing the light, or breathing air unencumbered. Perhaps I should call us melancholic by necessity, willing to accept, like the first Christians or the vanquished in any war, the humble renunciation of a destiny that no longer belongs to us . . .”

Only then did I notice her tears, which ran in slow lines down her cheeks and gave her crooked smile a singular shine. I hugged her tightly and buried my face in her hair, a balm for those hours of loneliness that relentlessly contemplated us.

Her father, a man she loved more than anyone, had died in the first weeks of the pandemic, simply because his age could not sustain him. Later, well into the summer, a dear friend abandoned her struggle and chemotherapy in an intensive care unit, her lungs rent by a rapidly progressing pneumonia that no one understood yet. Alicia and I could not say goodbye to her or pay her minimal homage in a funeral parlor. Innumerable acquaintances suffered from different degrees of symptoms, from those who lost their sense of smell and didn’t take it seriously, to those who spent miserable days on the edge of death and ended up with hidden aftereffects in their internal organs.

It was in those days, when the case count surpassed 60 million, that I felt she was on the verge of a breakdown. She told me, a prisoner of that critical moment, that in the United States alone, one person was dying every minute. “It’s annihilation,” she said, biting her lip. For a moment, I thought she was losing it, that her pain and anger had saturated her consciousness, that all the tenderness that I was capable of was not enough to contain her.

And so, with our little dizzy spells, we subsisted. But what made us most indignant, day after day, was the myopia of our government, calculating figures that didn’t match anything but their whimsical statistics, stating that

the contagion was slowing when we all knew someone who had died or several people who were hospitalized in serious condition. False promises, systematic trickery.

Amidst that much anxiety, we decided to celebrate Christmas reservedly; that is, on Zoom, that platform that became the display window for all our frustrations. We gathered a few friends, the remaining family, certain work-mates from other eras who were wandering around in their loneliness, and we organized a small, simulated get-together on our empty screens. We promised each other gifts in the spring, placed under a non-existent tree, and we almost all refused to decorate an apartment that nobody would visit. The evening was enough to get drunk, which at least allowed us to sleep in peace for a night.

Recently, we've been able to recover laughter, Alicia with her bullet-proof cynicism and myself, more temperate, because I'm beginning once again to get a glimpse of a certain rhythm in my work.

"Do you remember how we used to like to go to VIP lounges and unabashedly eat junk food?" I ask her, as I heat up dinner.

She turns, gets up from her chair, and puts the computer on pause. With a gesture I hadn't seen before in her, she takes me firmly by both arms and gives me a long kiss, letting our saliva mix, and pastes her body against mine; for the first time in many months she's aroused and suddenly demands that future that we still haven't deciphered.

## II

I hear the rumor of birds for the first time in several weeks. It's like a breeze that clouds the sun and filters sweetly into my dreams. I approach Sofía silently and whisper in her ear that the plague has passed. I think she doesn't hear me; she's exhausted. She turns over and sighs, returning to her slumber.

In the floor above, a dog whines and scratches the balcony door looking for petting or left-overs, a distinctive example of these weeks of scarcity and isolation. I went so far as to think that he was dead, and I'm happy for him, for all those living beings who, like me, awaken today to get back on track.

My wife's back seems exquisite against the light, and, after tracing it with a light touch, I get up to make coffee;

They were fateful days of constant uncertainty. They started with a wave of contradictory information and continued with the screech of ambulances and the clamor of catastrophe or collective suicide.

a few Nespresso capsules that I've been saving up to celebrate this lucky day.

Now, from the living room, barricaded under books and board games, I can see some birds leaning in from the eucalyptus trees toward my window. In the distance, a couple is washing their car as though it were a party, throwing soapy water on each other, laughing joyously like children. I resist turning on the television or catching sight of my cell phone. I don't want the news or the voices of alarm to take me back again to that dark period we're emerging from. They were fateful days of constant uncertainty. They started with a wave of contradictory information and continued with the screech of ambulances and the clamor of catastrophe or collective suicide. The social media became the garbage heap of our catharsis, and you couldn't believe anyone, couldn't trust anyone with the sacred, couldn't follow anyone candidly to go down some path toward the future. Our existence occurred among the cries of death, sipping discouragement, and seeing how old people dropped like flies, until emergency services were saturated in each and every corner of the known world. We didn't know what was really happening in intensive care wards. Were they really fighting against all this dying? It seemed like an interminable nightmare in which we were the impotent spectators, prisoners of our own anxiety and intemperance.

Today, I prefer to remember our dead with the pain of battle, as innocent heroes in a war that faded away without our being able to win it despite our discipline and so much valor.

I won't complain, but I'm spent; I had to work in the mines, providing inputs, digging and waiting for instructions. I did my job as a foot soldier, without pay; and I congratulate myself that I contributed to beating this ineffable enemy that seems to distance itself moving toward a blurry horizon.

From my balcony, in shadow for so long, I can see my neighbor playing the guitar. He makes me weep with his

Sofía is my lighthouse, my destiny. As though she could hear my thoughts, she approaches, takes my hand, and, still naked, she urges me to open the main window to breathe in the morning breeze once again.

ballad. Silent healing tears, peculiarly calm tears; a feeling I hadn't felt in years. His wife is singing, but I can't distinguish her voice at a distance. I can only make out their passionate dedication, and it moves me even more because it seems to demand that the world awaken, that it restore itself and open its wings; a remote sign that the storm has passed.

The aroma of coffee exerts its spell and I drink my first cup as a kind of ritual, as I flip through the first pages of Colum McCann's latest novel that had been lying on my bureau like an elusive emblem of so many sleepless nights.

We are left with the memory, of course. What we learned and what we must forget so it doesn't martyr us. The mistakes we made at the beginning that cost so many lives cannot be repeated.

But there are also the stories of those who sacrificed themselves until they fell, vanquished. A male nurse who worked in the triage tent for three days, sleeping in snatches, always efficient; a rank-and-file worker who extended his hours, unmoved and available. I myself carried him to intensive care. He died from exhaustion, his lungs flooded and his gaze empty. Our efforts to save him were useless; he had poured his energy into others and his body was left with nothing to protect him. I embraced his fellow nurses, defying protocol, to ask them not to forget him, to carry his name and his bravery as intimate testimony, reaffirmed in the care for each patient, in the solidarity and the sleeplessness.

I also remembered my parents, both dead from preventable diseases, sightless to the input of life, to the pleasure of awakening every morning.

Without my noticing she's there, Sofía kisses me on the neck and refills my coffee cup before sitting down beside me to look at the slight swaying of the trees.

"Did you call the girls, Fermín?" she asks with that maternal tone that doesn't betray our daughters' ages.

"Sara's in Paris, on her anniversary trip, dear. Did you forget?"

"That's right," she says, coming out of her haze, as though returning suddenly to reality.

"But Manuela should be at home or in Málaga with her in-laws. Why don't we try to reach her?"

The conversation turns out to be a balm of joy and affection. The grandchildren squeal in the background and promise that they'll visit us as soon as regular flights resume. We offer to meet up on the Costa Brava, in Palafrugell, to remember old times.

As soon as I hang up the phone, Sofía puts her arms around me and I can divine her humid sex under her linen pajama. We make love slowly, rubbing our skin and caressing each other's nipples, kissing our sweat and letting ourselves sink into a long embrace of eroticism; recognizing each other, discovering our longing to be one and be reborn in complicity and desire.

I'm left alone in bed, submerged in daydreams. When I met her, Sofía was practically a little girl, but behind her naiveté hid a decided character and an iron will that has sped us forward like a locomotive. I distinctly remember her in her blue jeans, her wavy hair half way down her back, a blouse that covered her round, tense breasts, and that mischievous look that age and wrinkles have not erased. With the same eagerness that she took me this morning, we made love in her parents' house, taking advantage of their absence and the somnolence of the dogs. We laughed out loud after a simultaneous orgasm; we had conquered a prohibited world that would be ours forever. She lit a cigarette, imitating her movie heroines, and it made me cough like a consumptive, unaccustomed to tobacco and being confined. That made her make fun of me and she said—if memory serves—, "Oh, darling, if you're as weak as your lungs, I'll have to take care of you your whole life."

I watch her as she moves through the house like a lioness. It's true, she has protected me even from my own upsets. Fortunately, my weakness has been manageable and I'm a faithful man, by conviction and because of that love that I have known how to cultivate every day. Sofía is my lighthouse, my destiny. As though she could hear my thoughts, she approaches, takes my hand, and, still naked, she urges me to open the main window to breathe in the morning breeze once again. ■■■