

Martín Rejtman

ALPLAX

Ana takes half a pill and lies down on top of her bedspread without intending to sleep. It's seven in the evening and it's autumn outside. Inside the house the heat is turned on, although it's not very cold out yet. Lying down, Ana's eyes are open and she stares blankly at the ceiling. There's a water stain in one corner, and stuck to the ceiling are three or four silver stars, which came with the apartment and nobody bothered to take down. Every now and then she hears some noises from the place upstairs: some bass notes, barely recognizable, and someone seems to be moving furniture. When her door opens and her father comes in, Ana hears him but it's as if she doesn't register his presence. Since she lay down, the evening light has begun to sink, and now her room is in shadows.

A little later Ana wakes up in a sweat. Her face is red. The apartment building has central heating, so there's no way for her to control it. She strips the bed a little violently, takes the sheets to the laundry room, and drops them in the dirty clothes hamper. In the kitchen she finds a commercial on the television, and she turns it off. She takes the box of Alplax out of the cupboard and slips two pills into the pocket of her jeans.

It's night outside. On her same block she runs into Gabriela, who's sitting in the entrance of a closed business, its metal curtain rolled down. Gabriela is smoking a cigarette, and with a gesture she offers one to Ana.

"Are they filtered or unfiltered?" Ana asks, sitting down next to Gabriela.

"Unfiltered."

Ana nods. Gabriela lights a new cigarette and passes it to her. A few meters away, at the edge of the sidewalk next to a tree, a grey cat sleeps too quietly. It seems to be asleep, but every now and then it blinks and leaves its eyes half open.

Ana and Gabriela smoke unfiltered. At first it seems like they're taking turns: when one takes a drag the other exhales. Until they both take a drag at the same time, and from that moment forward Ana and Gabriela smoke their cigarettes in sync.

Two hours later, at ten, Ana, Gabriela, and Laura drink beer while leaning on a car. Laura brought her dog, Lila, who's pregnant. It's Wednesday, half-price day at the movies, so the three of them decide to go. First they take Lila to Laura's house. Then they take a bus to Lavalle and unwittingly walk into a French film. Ana leaves half-way through the movie to make a call from a public phone. When she comes back into the theater, she asks Gabriela what happened while she was gone.

As they're leaving, Federico, Ana's boyfriend, passes by on his motorcycle to look for them. Ana says hi and tells him she'll be right back. She heads into the theater again and goes into the bathroom. She takes out one of the Alplax from her pocket and sets in on the counter. She tries to break it in two with a key, but the pill gets crushed almost completely into powder. She takes what she can salvage, which is less than half, then immediately gets out the other pill and takes it whole.

Laura had gotten invites to a disco from her brother, who passes them out on the street. There are four people, the only vehicle they have is Federico's motorcycle, and the disco is in Quilmes. But then Gabriela decides to go home, so Federico takes her on his bike. Ana and Laura wait for him on the corner of Lavalle and Esmeralda.

Federico, Ana, and Laura go on the motorcycle. Federico sits on the front, Laura in the middle, and Ana on the back. Federico and Ana wear matching helmets. Laura goes without.

The disco is about seven hundred square meters, with black walls, and it's brimming with people. According to Laura, Wednesday is a good night. They set their jackets and the two helmets on the floor and go to dance. Ana is feeling a little out of place out on the floor. She stops dancing, heads toward the bathroom, and washes her face. Moments later she's asleep in a big black vinyl chair, in a dark corner, snuggling the three jackets and the two helmets. Federico dances alone on one side of the floor. Laura is nowhere to be seen.

The three of them go back to the bike together. Ana, in between Federico and Laura, is sleeping, despite the wind that's hitting her face.

When they drop Laura off, it's nearly dawn. Laura goes into her house and quickly lowers her living room blinds, as if she's trying to convince herself that it's still night. She looks for her dog Lila in the kitchen but doesn't find her, and when she goes to her bedroom, she finds Lila on her bed with six

newborn puppies. Lila is almost totally white except for three or four brown spots. Laura watches the puppies for a while: they're all completely black and not one of the six looks a thing like Lila. For a second, Laura wonders if the six puppies are really another dog's babies.

Ana sleeps at Federico's place, a one-bedroom apartment in Almagro. As she sits down on the bed, her eyes are already closing, but as soon as she lays her head on the pillow they fly open and don't shut again. She blinks methodically a few times as she listens to the smooth sound of Federico's rhythmic breathing, as he enters a very deep sleep.

On Friday of the next week, Ana, Laura, and Gabriela go in Laura's mother's Honda Civic to visit Daniel, Gabriela's boyfriend, who lives in Azul. Daniel is an agricultural engineer and works the family ranch of some people from Buenos Aires who don't make it to Azul very often. He lives in a little house built for servants, and there's only enough space for Gabriela. The main house is just for the owners' use; Daniel doesn't even have a key. Ana and Laura sleep outside in a tent that they brought from Buenos Aires.

At night, lying in their sleeping bags, the two of them smoke unfiltered cigarettes. A thick smoke soon envelops them in the closed tent, and they fall asleep. Ana wakes up alone a while later. She has no idea what time it is. The cigarette smoke still lingers in the air. She opens the zipper on the tent and pulls her sleeping bag halfway outside. For a long time she watches the darkness of the sky and the stars until, without realizing it, she falls asleep again.

The next day, after twelve, Federico arrives. He came on his motorcycle and the visor on his helmet is covered with dead bugs. In his backpack he brought some clothes and Ana's helmet.

That same day, during a card game, an absurd argument breaks out between Daniel and Federico. The two of them have known each other for a long time, they played on the same rugby team, but they really were never good friends. Now they see each other fairly often because of Ana and Gabriela. At first it doesn't seem like the argument will have any serious consequences, but nightfall, the beginning of darkness, and animal noises make Federico decide to spend the night in a hotel in Azul. Ana, however, prefers to stay at the ranch and sleep in the tent with Laura. That night Federico sleeps badly in the hotel room; the mattress is too soft, the cold, cement floor makes the room too damp, and the pillow is much higher than the one on his own bed.

He gets up early, while it's still dark, and he decides to go back to Buenos Aires. Before starting the trip, Federico passes by the ranch where Daniel works again. He leaves his bike along the side of the road, jumps the wire fence, and walks some two hundred meters toward the servants' quarters and the tent. It's seven in the morning; everyone's sleeping. The tent zipper is down, and through the fabric he can barely distinguish some shapeless shapes. In the middle of the dew-dampened grass there's a bird, all red. When it sees Federico, the bird lets out a few cries that sound mechanical, as if they came out of some machine and not from an animal. Federico stays motionless, watching it. After a while the light begins to change; it's nearly daylight, and the bird hops a few times, lets out another mechanical squawk, and flies away. Federico follows it with his eyes as he starts to walk back toward the road.

Three weeks later it's Gabriela's birthday. Gabriela is with Ana and Laura in the kitchen at her house. They have tea and cake from a box and watch a soccer game on television, Independiente-Colón de Santa Fé. At quarter to ten at night, in the middle of the second half, the telephone rings. It's Daniel. He wishes Gabriela a happy birthday, doesn't mention where he's calling from, and ten minutes later he shows up to surprise her at her house with a gift hamster.

At first Gabriela looks curiously at the hamster, but soon she realizes that she doesn't know what to do with it. For a while they keep it in the kitchen, in a little aquarium they found at the bottom of the hall closet; Daniel brought it in a cardboard box, but that got soaked right away and they had to throw it out. Gabriela moves the aquarium to a different place every day, until she finally leaves it on top of the refrigerator. But every day that goes by, the hamster disgusts her more. One night she fantasizes about making a visit to Laura's and leaving the forgotten little animal there, lost among Lila's puppies. The next morning, when she wakes up, she calls Laura on the phone. But as soon as Laura answers, Gabriela hangs up.

One Saturday in October, Daniel goes back to Buenos Aires in the four-by-four. But Gabriela's answering machine is on, and she doesn't come to the door when he rings the bell. It's ten in the morning, Daniel still doesn't have a house or any family in Buenos Aires, and the only telephone number he has memorized, besides Gabriela's, is Federico's.

Federico meets him in a café downtown at eleven-thirty. Daniel gets there twenty minutes early. Federico arrives on time, with a girl he met the night before at a disco; he can't get rid of her. When Daniel asks about Gabriela, Federico tells him that it's been a while since he's seen her, but he heard from Ana that she has a hamster now.

Around a quarter past twelve, barely having touched his double espresso, Federico gets up from the table and says goodbye, leaving Daniel and the girl alone together. Daniel asks her if she wants anything else. She says no and goes to the restroom. When she comes back, Daniel offers to take her home in the four-by-four. On the way they take a turn off and check into an adult motel. The girl leaves around three in the afternoon; Daniel is worn out from the trip and besides, he has nowhere else to go, so he stays and sleeps. He sleeps all night.

In the morning, when he wakes up, Daniel opens his eyes and sees himself reflected in the mirror on the ceiling. He's completely dressed, in a grey suit and white shirt, no tie, lying on top of the turquoise quilt on the hotel bed, which he never even bothered to unmake.

Now more than a month has passed, and the hamster that Daniel gave to Gabriela still doesn't have a name. It's been days since Gabriela made the firm decision to get rid of it, but at the same time the little creature on top of the fridge has become an invisible presence, and feeding it has become a mechanical and spontaneous act. It still disgusts her as much as it did that first day, but there's something in the habit of feeding it that holds her back from getting rid of the animal.

Until finally, one afternoon, Gabriela leaves her house with the little aquarium and the hamster in a gym bag. She goes into the first pet shop she sees, takes the animal out of the bag, and assures the employee that her boyfriend bought it there a few days ago and she can no longer keep it. Gabriela is kind of surprised when the employee accepts the return without question and without requiring anything else of her. He can't give her any money, he says, but he offers her in exchange a nine-kilo sack of dog food. The employee won't take the aquarium and puts the hamster in a metal cage and places it in the pet shop window. The next day, Gabriela gives the sack of dog food to Laura so she can use it to feed Lila and her puppies.

Ana has spread yellow paint over her bedroom ceiling three times now, but the water stain keeps reappearing. In the last few months it's kept growing, and now it occupies almost twice the area it did when they moved into the apartment. All Ana was able to cover up were the star decals which are no longer silver, but yellow. Now they blend in with the paint on the ceiling; they show up only in relief.

Ana carries the paint roller to the sink and leaves it to soak in a bowl. In the kitchen, Gabriela and Laura are watching a documentary about animals on television. During a commercial the three of them go down to the fruit stand and buy a dozen bananas.

When they return to the apartment, Gabriela and Laura go back to concentrating on the documentary and Ana sets about making milkshakes. She smashes up six Alplax with a mallet and puts the powder in the blender with the milk and bananas.

There's a sports show on the TV now. The three girls have already finished their milkshakes. Laura is splayed across the chair in the living room; her legs extend over the top of the armrests. Gabriela is passed out with her head on the kitchen table.

Ana flips Laura's purse over on the coffee table and takes a look at what's inside, but doesn't touch anything. She does the same thing with Gabriela's purse and takes out a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. She grabs her canvas bag, sticks the pack of unfiltered inside, and leaves the house.

Two blocks outside her building, Ana goes into a bar and asks to use the restroom. She washes her face, and in the process splashes her clothes. She takes off her blouse and dries it with the hand drier; she leaves her jeans wet. There's a soccer game on the bar TV but Ana can't tell who's playing. She goes out to the street and gets on a bus. She doesn't know where she's going. She wants to smoke a cigarette, but the pack she took out of Gabriela's purse is empty. She crumples it up and tosses it out the window. During the ride, she watches the cars and the buildings. They begin to blur together. When she wakes up she's at the bus terminal. She's never been on that street, not even in that neighborhood. Ana goes into another bar and asks for a non-carbonated mineral water. Before they bring it to her she leaves the bar and looks around for a newsstand. She buys a pack of unfiltered cigarettes, takes off the clear plastic, pulls out a cigarette, and leans against a car to smoke. Now it's nearly night.

Translated by Aprille Clark