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Stories to read *slowly*

Twelve short stories about trees,
seasons and unhurried people



Camomila Studio

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Short stories to read without hurry, five to ten minutes each: about as long as a cup of tea. They appear in the order in which they happen: read them straight through, like a book, or start anywhere.



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STORY · 6 MIN READ

The bench *under the linden*

On waiting without waiting for anything, and a tree that knew how.

Every afternoon at six, Elvira came down to the square in her cardigan, even when it was warm. She was seventy-something, with white hair pinned up in a bun and small, strong hands, the hands of someone who had worked hard. She always sat on the same bench, the one beneath the big linden tree. She brought no book and no bag. She rested her hands on her knees and looked up into the branches, like someone listening to a conversation that isn't theirs.

The neighbours had grown used to her the same way they had grown used to the linden: she was there, and that was that. The baker waved to her as he pulled down his shutter. The mothers coming back from school steered their pushchairs around her. Nobody asked her anything, because the square had a rule that nobody had ever written down: you don't bother people who are at peace.

Candela didn't know that rule. She was nine, with a school bag that weighed more than she did and a question for everything she

saw. One June afternoon, while her mother queued at the chemist's, she planted herself in front of the bench.

"What are you doing?"

Elvira lowered her eyes from the branches slowly, as if coming back from far away.

"Waiting."

"For who?"

"For nobody," she said. "I'm waiting for the tree to move."

Candela looked at the linden suspiciously. It was an enormous tree, with a grey trunk and heart-shaped leaves, and at that moment it was perfectly still. Not a leaf. Not a bird.

"Well, it isn't moving," she said.

"Not yet."

The girl took off her school bag, dropped it on the ground and sat at the other end of the bench, arms folded, determined to prove that the whole thing was silly.

At first, she counted. He counted the cars that went round the square, which came to three. He counted the pigeons pecking by the fountain, which were nine, or ten if you counted a lame one that wouldn't keep still. He counted how many times her mother moved forward in the queue at the chemist's, which was twice. Then she got tired of counting.

That was when she began to hear things. The jet of the fountain, which sounded different when a pigeon stepped under it. The shutter of her father's bakery, rattling down in fits and starts. A television on some balcony, turned up the way grandmothers turn it

up. And, above it all, a low, steady hum that seemed to come from the sky.

"What's that?"

Elvira pointed upwards without looking.

"Bees. The linden is in flower. They come from all over the neighbourhood."

Candela lifted her head. Among the leaves hung clusters of tiny yellow flowers, small as buttons, and hundreds of little dots came and went around them. There was a sweet smell she couldn't put a name to.

"Those flowers make linden tea," said Elvira. "My mother used to pick them in June and dry them in the attic, on a sheet of newspaper. The whole house smelled like that until Christmas."

"And what's linden tea for?"

"For when you're going too fast."

Candela thought that wasn't an illness, but she didn't say so. Her mother came out of the chemist's and called her from the pavement. She picked up her bag, disappointed.

"It didn't move," she complained.

"Not today," said Elvira. "Trees don't have clocks."

The next day she came back. She hadn't planned it. At five to six she simply persuaded her mother that she needed an exercise book from the stationer's on the square, and while her mother was choosing one, she crossed over to the bench.

Elvira was already there. She made room for her without a word, as if she had been expecting her. Though later Candela thought

perhaps not, perhaps she made room for everyone.

That afternoon the tree didn't move either. Nor the next. But Candela discovered that things happened on the bench. That the ants had a path that ran from a crack in the ground to a breadcrumb, and that they never got it wrong. That the swifts screamed louder when the sun touched the bell tower. That Mr Anselmo, from the newspaper kiosk, fell asleep at a quarter past six with the paper on his belly and woke with a start at half past, as if someone had called his name. That the light, coming through the leaves, drew trembling coins on the ground.

"Why do you come here?" Candela asked her one afternoon.

Elvira took a while to answer.

"I worked forty years in a biscuit factory," she said at last. "Everything there was a rush: the conveyor belt, the boxes, the bus, dinner. When I retired, I had time to spare and didn't know what to do with it. Sitting still made me restless. One day I sat down here for a rest, and this tree, which is more than a hundred years old, was so calm. It wasn't in a hurry for anything. And I thought: if it can, I can learn too."

"And have you learned?"

"A little. Mondays are still hard."

Candela laughed, and so did Elvira.

July arrived, and with it the real heat, the kind that empties the square until the sun goes down behind the church. One afternoon the air was so still it seemed made of glass. The bees hummed more slowly. Even the pigeons had taken shelter under the arcade.

Candela wasn't counting anything anymore. She was sitting cross-legged on the bench, her back against the backrest, looking at the leaves without searching for anything in particular. She was thinking about the swimming pool, about a comic her cousin had lent her, about nothing. A minute went by. Then another.

Then the wind came.

She heard it before she felt it: a murmur rising from the river up the street below, as if someone were dragging an enormous sheet across the rooftops. And all at once the whole linden woke up. Every leaf turned at the same moment and showed its underside, white and silver. The tree went from green to silver in an instant, then back to green, and silver again, like a shoal of fish changing direction in the water. Flowers rained down on the bench, on Elvira's hair, on Candela's knees. It smelled of linden, of wet dust, of summer.

It didn't last long. Half a minute, perhaps. Then the air settled and the tree went still again, as if nothing had happened.

Candela opened her mouth, but said nothing. There was no need.

Elvira picked a flower from her hair and handed it to her.

"For you to dry," she said.

From then on, at six o'clock, there were always two people on the bench.

Candela learned to arrive without hurrying, to sit down without asking and to wait without waiting for anything. Sometimes the tree moved and sometimes it didn't, and she found that both were fine.

At the end of August, Mateo, her little brother, stopped in front of the bench with a ball under his arm and looked at them with a frown.

“What are you doing?”

Candela looked at Elvira. Elvira looked at the linden. And Candela, very seriously, answered:

“We’re waiting.”

“For who?”

“For nobody. We’re waiting for the tree to move.”

Mateo was quiet for a moment. Then he put the ball down on the ground and sat at the end of the bench, arms folded, determined to prove that the whole thing was silly.

Elvira smiled and looked up again.





STORY · 5 MIN READ

January *moon*

On a baker, a hard winter and a light that never went away.

Andrés left home at a quarter to four in the morning, when the neighbourhood still belonged to the cats and the rubbish lorries. He had walked the same way for thirty years: three streets downhill, the linden square, the green shutter of the bakery. Thirty years raising that shutter in the dark, lighting the oven and sinking his hands into the dough while the rest of the world slept.

That December he walked looking at the ground. In the autumn a big supermarket had opened on the edge of the neighbourhood, with a car park and bread that never ran out, and since then he had loaves left over every evening. Andrés did sums on the way: the flour, the electricity, the rent on the shop. The sums didn't add up, and he went over them again and again as if, by going over them enough, they might change.

There was no moon on those early mornings. Or so he believed, though he didn't look for it either.

One afternoon, on his way home after closing, he stopped at a zebra crossing and, while he waited, raised his head for no reason at all. There it was: a pale moon in the middle of the blue sky, in broad daylight, half rubbed out, like a drawing done in chalk and then wiped with a sleeve. It was shaped like a D.

He remembered his mother, who hung the washing on the flat roof and used to tell him, pointing upwards with a clothes peg: "The moon is a liar, Andrés. When it makes a D, it's growing; when it makes a C, it's shrinking. It says the opposite of what it is." He hadn't thought of that in forty years. It surprised him to remember it, and it surprised him even more that the moon was there, in the daytime, with nobody looking at it.

The light turned green. He took a while to cross.

The second week of January was the worst. The supplier put up the price of flour, the oven began to make a noise he didn't like and one evening, doing sums in the back room, Andrés wrote on a piece of paper the date when, if nothing changed, he would have to close. Then he tore up the paper. Then he wrote the date again on another.

That morning he left home with a heavy body. And as he went down the hill, he found the street lit up.

It wasn't the street lamps. The full moon was huge and very high, higher than he could ever remember it, and it bathed the roofs, the cars and the pavements in a cold white light that cast sharp shadows, as if it were daytime. In the square, the bare linden drew all its branches on the ground. Andrés stopped in the middle of the square, his hands in his pockets, and stood looking up.

He had read somewhere, or heard someone say in the queue for bread, that in winter the full moon climbs higher than at any other time of year and stays longer in the sky. The longest nights are also the ones with the most moon. It seemed fair to him.

The moon didn't fix anything. The sums still didn't add up. But he spent a whole minute without thinking about them, and then another, and when at last he raised the shutter his hands were cold and his head a little clearer.

In February things got somewhat better. It wasn't a miracle. Some neighbours who had gone over to the supermarket came back, because nobody could bite into that bread the next day. Elvira, the woman with the white bun who sat on the bench under the linden with Candela and Mateo, his children, began buying half a loaf every afternoon before going to the bench. And one Saturday Mateo, his youngest, came in with a ball under his arm and asked him for "the round bread from before, the one with a cross on it". Andrés started making it again, just for him, and every one of them sold.

Now, when he left home, he looked for the moon before setting off. It was almost always there: sometimes high above the square, sometimes low behind the church, a little thinner each morning, a C that grew finer and finer. It was shrinking, even though it said the opposite. Andrés found it funny that it was a liar.

One of those mornings, when the C was no more than a thread above the church, Andrés saw something he had never seen before: the rest of the circle was there too, grey and very faint, like an old coin at the bottom of a pond. The whole moon, even though only

one edge was lit. He thought of those December mornings, when he believed there was no moon. It had been there all along; he had simply stopped looking.

One morning in March, when he already had the dough on the table, the light changed.

The moon, full again that night and already going down towards the rooftops, came in through the high window of the bakehouse. It fell on the wooden table, on the spread flour, and drew a white circle on it, a little whiter than the white.

Andrés took his hands out of the dough. He stood still, his fingers covered in flour, watching calmly, waiting for the light to move on its own.



STORY · 5 MIN READ

The garden of *Tuesdays*

On two friends, an empty lot and
the flowers that were already there.

We came to the neighbourhood in February, when nobody arrives anywhere. My father had been given a job at the flour mill, and we moved into a fourth-floor flat that smelled of paint, with a window that looked out on an empty lot.

The lot was the only thing I could see from my room. A gap between two buildings where a house used to be, with a half-collapsed brick wall, a fence with a hole in it and a heap of rubble covered in grass. The other children didn't look at it. I had nothing else to look at.

At school they sat me next to Candela, who talked for both of us. In the first hour she had told me that she lived in my building, on the second floor, that her father was the baker on the square, that she had an unbearable brother, that her dog was called Pistón and that on Tuesdays her mother worked until eight. I told her mine did too.

"Then Tuesdays are ours, Nora," she said, like someone signing something.

The first Tuesday we sat in the doorway doing nothing. The second, Candela peered through the hole in the fence.

"You could make a garden in there."

It seemed the strangest thing I had ever heard, and also the best.

We knew nothing about gardens. We knew you needed earth, and there was plenty of that, though full of stones. We knew you needed water, and Mrs Paca, the caretaker, let us fill a big jug at the tap in the courtyard as long as we didn't tread on her freshly washed floor. What we didn't have was seeds.

"There are lentils at my house," said Candela.

We planted half a packet of lentils in a crooked row and, in another row, chickpeas. I made a sign out of a stick and the lid of a shoebox: GARDEN OF TUESDAYS. NO ENTRY. We stuck it in among the rubble.

The lentils came up. It still seems a miracle to me. The following week there was a row of tiny green threads, fine as hairs, bending in the breeze. The chickpeas never came up. Candela says it's because Pistón trampled them; I think we watered them too much.

One Tuesday we brought flowers from the park, pulled up roots and all, wrapped in newspaper. They were yellow and very pretty, and in the lot they lasted two days. By the next Tuesday they were lying flat and brown, as if they were embarrassed.

"They don't like it here," said Candela.

We were sitting on the wall, sad, when I noticed the ground beside my shoes. There were small white flowers with yellow centres, the size of a button. Lots of them. They grew between the rubble, at the foot of the fence, in the cracks of the wall. They had been there all along, and we hadn't seen them because we were busy planting others.

"Daisies," I said.

"Those don't count," said Candela. "We didn't put them there."

We argued. It was our first quarrel. She said a garden is what you plant, and I said a garden is what grows. In the end Candela went home without saying goodbye and I stayed alone in the lot, pulling weeds around the daisies so they would show better, very angry.

That week we hardly spoke at school. But on Tuesday, at five, Candela came down to the doorway with two soup spoons and a toy watering can that belonged to her brother.

"For yours, Nora," she said. And nothing more needed saying.

That spring we learned things without anyone teaching us. That daisies close at night and when it's cloudy, and open with the sun, as if someone were switching the garden on and off. That ants do no harm. That a warm stone is the best place for a lizard, and the lizard is always quicker than you. That if you lift the rubble slowly, there are earthworms underneath, and that Candela screams at earthworms even though she says she doesn't.

One Tuesday we went to the hardware shop in the centre to buy real seeds with what we had in our piggy banks. To get there you had to cross the old square, the one with the big linden tree. Under

the tree, on a bench, sat an elderly woman with white hair pinned up in a bun and, beside her, Mateo, Candela's brother. They were sitting doing nothing, looking up.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"Waiting for the tree to move," said Candela, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "They do it every afternoon. On the other days I go too."

We stood for a moment watching them. The tree didn't move. We walked on.

We bought a packet of nasturtiums because in the picture they were orange and looked easy. Three came up. We put them next to the daisies, so they would keep each other company.

In June, the last Tuesday before the holidays, we stayed in the lot until late. We had cleared so much around the daisies that you could see them from my window, like a white stain among the bricks. The lentils had dried up long ago. The nasturtiums climbed the fence.

We sat on the wall and Candela began to sing *Martinillo*, which they had taught us in music. When she got to the second verse, I started from the beginning, as in class, and for a while our voices chased each other across the lot without catching up, one behind the other, until we got the giggles and both lost our place.

Mrs Paca leaned out into the courtyard and called us by our first name and both surnames, which was what she did when eight o'clock came.

We picked up the spoons and the watering can. Before crossing the fence I turned to look back. The sun had gone behind the

building opposite, and the daisies, one by one, were closing.





STORY · 6 MIN READ

What *Ramona* kept

On acorns, a forgetful bird and planting for whoever comes next.

Nobody knew how many acorns she carried in her apron pocket, or why. Ramona was eighty-one, with a whitewashed house at the end of Calle Real and the habit of going out for a walk every autumn afternoon, with an ash walking stick she didn't need at all. She came back at dusk with her shoes full of earth and a lighter pocket.

In the village there were theories. That she gave them to her nephew's pigs. That she made flour from them, as in the lean years. That she had gone a little soft in the head. Ramona heard the theories in the shop and corrected none of them.

Inés arrived in September to take over the school, which had eleven pupils and a wood stove. She came from the city, from a flat with a view of another flat, and for the first few weeks the silence of the village weighed on her like a wet coat. In the afternoons, after marking, she went out walking with no destination, just to hear her own footsteps.

That was how she met Ramona on the path up the hill.

The hill lay behind the village, bare and brown, with a few rockroses and a great many stones. From below it looked like the back of a sleeping animal. Ramona was climbing a goat track, slowly, stopping every few steps. Inés watched her poke a hole with the tip of her stick, take something from her pocket, drop it in and cover it with her foot. Then she took three steps and did it all again.

"Good afternoon," said Inés.

"So they say," answered Ramona, without looking up.

Inés stood watching. Ramona made another hole.

"What are you sowing?"

"Oaks."

Inés looked around: stone, dust, a dried-out rockrose.

"But nothing grows here."

"Not now," said Ramona. "When I was a girl, this was an oak wood. It burned the summer I turned twenty. It burned for three days. From the village you could see the glow at night, as if the dawn were coming up on the wrong side."

She leaned on her stick and looked at the hillside as if seeing it differently.

"My father kept his beehives here. And there was an oak so big that a whole wedding fitted underneath. Almost every girl of my age got married in its shade."

"And nobody ever planted it again?"

"An oak takes a long time," said Ramona. "And people are in a hurry for things they can see."

The next afternoon, Inés climbed again. And the one after. She didn't decide to: her feet took her. Ramona said nothing the first time she found her waiting on the track, but when they reached the dried-out rockrose she put a handful of acorns in her palm.

They were brown and shiny, each with its rough little cap. Some had a tiny hole in them.

"Not those," said Ramona, taking them back. "Those already have a tenant."

She showed her how to pick the sound ones, how to make the hole not too deep, two fingers' worth, how to lay them on their sides and then tread on them, gently, the way you tuck someone in. She showed her how to find the side of the stones where the earth keeps its damp.

"How many come up?" asked Inés.

"Few. The ones the mice don't eat, that don't dry out, that the goats don't trample."

"And then?"

"Then you plant a lot."

While they worked, a bird crossed the hillside in a clumsy, undulating flight and landed on a stone. It was pinkish brown, with a blue patch on its wing. It was carrying something in its beak.

"Look," said Ramona in a low voice. "The jay."

The bird hopped to the ground, scratched about a little, let fall what it was carrying and covered it with leaves. Then it flew off.

"It's hidden an acorn," said Inés.

"It hides hundreds in autumn, for the winter. And it forgets many of them." Ramona smiled for the first time since Inés had known her. "Half the sierra was planted by a forgetful bird. I just lend it a hand."

The winter was long and the rain was just enough. In spring, Inés took her eleven pupils on a trip to the hill, on the pretext of studying plants. They searched among the stones for almost an hour without finding anything, and just as the children were starting to grumble, Tomás, from the house with the walnut tree, shouted from behind a rock.

It was a reddish stalk, no taller than a finger, with two hard leaves and a rim of tiny prickles. It seemed very little to be called an oak.

"Is this going to be a tree?" asked Tomás, disappointed.

"One day," said Inés, and realised she had spoken just like Ramona.

That afternoon she went to tell her. Ramona listened sitting on the bench by her door, shelling broad beans, and nodded as if she were being told news of a grandchild.

"Will you see it grown?" asked Inés, and immediately regretted the question.

Ramona wasn't offended. She went on shelling beans.

"Dear, oaks aren't planted for oneself," she said. "They're planted for whoever comes next."

That autumn, as they gathered, Inés finally dared to ask her where she got so many acorns. There were few oaks in the village, and almost all of them in fenced-off estates.

Ramona took a while to answer. Then she set off up the hill, beyond where they usually planted, to a hollow that couldn't be seen

from the village.

There, among the stones, was an enormous stump, still black on one side, so wide that Inés couldn't have put her arms around it. And from the foot of the stump, a little crooked, grew an oak. Taller than a house, but not by much. It had a grey trunk and a round crown, and the ground all around was covered with acorns.

"It's the wedding oak," said Ramona.

Inés looked at the burnt stump, then at the tree.

"But it burned."

"It burned on top. Not underneath." Ramona rested her hand on the bark. "The next year it sent up a shoot from the root. My father said it was a scrub and would never come to anything. My father was wrong about that, and about other things."

Every acorn they had buried on the hill came from here. Ramona had been climbing up for sixty autumns to gather them, one by one, under the same tree.

"Oaks know how to wait," she said. "That's why I like them."

They sat for a while on the stump, without speaking. From there you could see the whole village: the rooftops, the smoke from the chimneys, the school with its empty yard. The jay passed again, with something in its beak, and vanished down the slope.

Many autumns went by. When the hill began to have shade, Tomás married Candela, grandfather Julián's granddaughter, beneath one of those oaks. It wasn't nearly as big as the old one, but there was room for the bride and groom, a bit of the party and, in

the front row, Nora, the bride's friend, who had come all the way from the old neighbourhood.

Before the dancing, Tomás asked for silence. He told them that one spring afternoon, when he was just a boy, he had found a reddish stalk on that hillside that didn't look like anything.

"Ramona used to say that oaks aren't planted for oneself," said Tomás. "They're planted for whoever comes next. We are the ones who came."

Then, instead of rice, they handed out acorns. One for each guest, to bury wherever they liked: two fingers deep, lying on its side, and treading gently.





STORY · 6 MIN READ

Tinder

On fire, patience and a fungus that grows one layer a year.

Candela arrived at her grandfather's village on the last Friday of October, with a wheeled suitcase that was no use at all on those stone streets. She was ten and had a very clear idea of what boredom was: it was exactly this. A house that smelled of firewood, a wall clock that ticked too loudly and a grandfather who said little and took a long time to say it.

Grandpa Julián had lived alone for years, at the end of a street that ran out into the hills. His eyebrows were like two white shrubs and his boots looked older than he was. When he saw her get out of the car, he put a hand on her head, the way you check that something is still where you left it, and said:

"You've grown."

And he said nothing more until dinner.

In the kitchen, by the stove, there was a dented quince-paste tin that nobody used for quince paste. Candela opened it while her grandfather peeled potatoes. Inside were a grey stone, a piece of

iron curved like a small horseshoe and some scraps of something brown and soft, a bit like felt.

"What's this?"

"Flint, steel and tinder," said her grandfather, without looking up. "For lighting the fire."

"That's what matches are for."

"That's what matches are for," he repeated, and went on peeling, so that Candela couldn't tell whether he was agreeing with her or quite the opposite.

The next morning he took her to the beech wood. They climbed a path of leaves that crackled like newspaper, and after a while the trees closed over them and the light turned golden, as if it were shining through a glass of tea.

Her grandfather walked slowly. He would stop for no apparent reason, look at something Candela couldn't see, and carry on. At first she waited for him, huffing. Then, without noticing, she began to stop too.

"Look," he said suddenly.

On the trunk of a fallen beech, at knee height, there were some hard grey things shaped like hooves, stuck to the bark as if someone had nailed them there.

"They look like horses' hooves," said Candela.

"That's why some people call them that. Here we call them tinder fungus." Her grandfather ran his finger along the edge, where you could see stripes, one on top of the other. "Every year it grows a layer. Just one. This one must be fifteen or twenty years old."

“Can’t it grow any faster?”

“What for?”

Candela didn’t know what to say. She touched the fungus. It was cold and hard as wood, but there was something alive about it, something patient.

“We only take them from trees that have already fallen,” said her grandfather, as he worked one loose with his penknife. “The others are still busy.”

On the way back, he explained that the tinder came from the soft part inside, and that it had to be boiled, beaten and dried for days. Candela worked out that lighting a fire this way took about a month. It seemed to her the most ridiculous thing in the world.

That night the storm came. It began with fat drops against the window and ended with a thunderclap so close that the wall clock fell silent all at once. And with the clock, the lights.

“Well, well,” said her grandfather in the dark, in no hurry at all.

The stove had gone out a while before. Candela felt along the shelf for the box of matches. It was almost empty, and the three left had soaked up the damp: they crumbled when she struck them.

“What now?”

She heard her grandfather open the quince-paste tin.

They sat on the floor in front of the open stove. Her grandfather placed a scrap of tinder on the stone, held it with his thumb and struck the edge with the curved iron. A spark leapt out, tiny and orange, and died in the air. Another. And another.

“It won’t catch,” said Candela.

“Not yet.”

Strike. Spark. Nothing. Strike. Spark. Nothing. Candela started counting the strikes and gave up at thirty. Outside it was still raining. Inside, the only sound was the click of iron against stone, steady as a heartbeat.

“Grandpa, it won’t light like that.”

“Of course not,” he said. “Fire isn’t lit. It’s persuaded.”

And at that moment a spark fell on the tinder and didn’t go out. It stayed there, a little red dot in the middle of the brown, like an eye opening.

Her grandfather set the stone down very slowly. He wrapped the tinder in a handful of dry straw, the way you tuck in a bird, and blew. Not hard: soft and long, the way you blow on soup that is too hot. The red dot grew. He blew again. The straw began to smoke, to crackle, to glow from the inside, and suddenly a small yellow flame appeared that lit up her grandfather’s white eyebrows and Candela’s wide-open eyes.

He put it in the stove, among the kindling, and waited. He didn’t add any wood until the kindling had taken hold. Then a thin log. Then another.

“There,” he said. “It’s been persuaded.”

When the lights came back, after midnight, neither of them got up to switch on the bulb. They stayed there on the floor, hands held out to the stove, listening to the wood settle.

“Will you teach me?” asked Candela.

“Tomorrow,” said her grandfather. “And the day after. And the one after that.”

He taught her all through the long weekend. On the first day, Candela hit her fingers and didn’t get a single spark. On the second she got plenty, but none of them stayed. On the third, the last morning, while her parents’ car waited at the door, a spark fell on the tinder and stayed, red and still. Candela blew the way he had taught her, without hurrying, and the straw caught between her hands.

Her grandfather said nothing. He put his hand on her head, as on the first day. Then he gave her the quince-paste tin.

Back home in the neighbourhood, Candela kept the tin in her desk drawer. There was no fireplace at home, and she never used it to light anything.

But sometimes, when something wouldn’t give way—a maths problem that wouldn’t come out, Mateo, her little brother, who wouldn’t go to sleep, an afternoon that felt like an uphill climb—she remembered the click of iron against stone, steady as a heartbeat, and that little red dot that came when nobody was expecting it any more.

Then she would sit down, breathe slowly and wait a little longer.

Some things aren’t lit, she thought. They’re persuaded.



STORY · 4 MIN READ

Tracks

On a small school, the first snowfall and everything that happens while we sleep.

That year the first snow fell late, in February, on a Wednesday night, without warning, and when we got to school the playground was a white sheet without a single crease.

There were eleven of us. The García twins, who always arrived running. Iván, who knew everything or pretended he did. The three girls from the bakery. And Martina, the youngest of the Herreros, who was six and wore boots two sizes too big, handed down from her sister. The rest of us, no more and no less than that. I was one of the rest: Tomás, from the house with the walnut tree.

We all stayed by the gate, not daring to go in, as if the playground were a new sheet of paper too good to spoil.

Then Martina pointed at the ground.

“Someone’s been here.”

By the gate, crossing the playground from one side to the other, there was a line of tracks. Small, oval, one in front of the other, so straight they looked as if they had been drawn with a ruler.

"A dog," said Iván.

"Dogs don't walk like that," said the teacher, who had come up behind us with her coat covered in snowflakes. "Dogs wander from side to side, sniffing. This one knew exactly where it was going."

Inés, the teacher, crouched down and let us look closely. Four little toes and, in front, some fine marks, like claws.

"A fox," she said. "It puts each paw exactly where the one before it went. That's why it looks as if someone with only one leg has walked past."

We laughed. One of the twins tried to walk like that, one foot right in front of the other, and fell on his bottom in the snow. We laughed even more.

The teacher looked at the school, with the stove still cold, and then looked at us.

"Today the lesson is outside," she said.

We followed the fox as far as the threshing floors, and there we found other tracks that looked like nothing at all: little groups of four marks, two small ones at the back, one behind the other, and two big ones in front, side by side, as if the animal had walked with its legs the wrong way round.

"It's backwards," said Iván, very sure of himself.

"It's a rabbit," said the teacher. "It hops, and its back legs, which are the long ones, land in front of its front ones."

We didn't understand until we tried it. For a good while the threshing floors were full of eleven rabbits hopping with their hands on the ground, falling, getting up, shouting. The three girls from the bakery ended up with snow down the backs of their necks. Martina, who was the best hopper, left an almost perfect rabbit trail.

Further on, by the path up the hill, we found some big, deep tracks, with two fat toes and two little dots behind.

"A wild boar," said the teacher, and this time nobody wanted to try walking like it.



The ones we liked best were the birds'.

Some went in pairs, little hops with both feet together. Others, beside a wall, belonged to a bigger bird that had walked for a while, step by little step, and then, suddenly, nothing. The tracks stopped in the middle of the snow. On either side there were fine lines, as if someone had drawn their fingers across it very gently.

"Where did it go?" asked Martina.

"Up," said the teacher. "Those marks at the sides are its wings."

We all stood looking at the sky, as if the bird were still there.

Near the wall, beside the tracks, there was a small hollow in the snow, as if someone had been digging. Martina put her fingers in and pulled out an acorn.

"This is Granny Ramona's," she said, because everyone in the village knew who went about with pockets full of acorns.

The teacher smiled and told her to bury it again, because someone would come looking for it.

That morning we learned that the night is not empty. While we were asleep, the village had been full of people: the fox going about its business, the rabbits hopping, the boar coming down from the hills, the birds looking for something to eat. And no one had seen them. Only the snow, which remembered everything.

At midday it began to snow again, slowly.

When we got back to school we stopped at the gate. The playground was no longer a sheet without creases: it was full of paths. Ours, eleven of them, crossing and tangling and going round in circles for no reason. And, through the middle, straight as a ruler, the fox's, already fading under the new flakes.

Martina tugged at the teacher's sleeve.

"Tonight," she said, "someone will walk over here and won't know who we were."

And the eleven of us stayed a while at the gate, in silence, watching the snow cover our tracks and the fox's, all at once, without making any difference between them.



STORY · 4 MIN READ

Frost

On a frozen morning, a little brother and the shadows the cold keeps.

Monday dawned white. Candela knew it before she raised the blind, from the silence: on Mondays the street sounded of motorbikes and shutters, and that morning it sounded of nothing at all, as if someone had wrapped it in cotton wool.

"You're taking Mateo today," her mother said from the door, her coat already on. "I start early. And don't be late."

Candela was twelve and had a very clear opinion about taking Mateo to school: it was like pushing a pram with a crooked wheel. Mateo was nine, had a pair of yellow wellies that he wore even when it wasn't raining and a habit of stopping in front of anything he found interesting, which was almost everything. On other days they walked with Nora, from the fourth floor, but on Mondays Nora had choir first thing.

Out in the street, the parked cars had white windows. Not misted: white, covered in the finest drawings that opened out like fans, like ferns, like feathers, like the map of a river seen from very high up.

"Look," said Mateo, and he stopped at the first one.

"Come on."

"Look at this one."

"Mateo, come on."

Mateo brought his face up to a van's windscreen until it almost touched and breathed on it. A clear circle opened in the ice, with a wet edge.

"It's frost," he said, very seriously. "Miss told us. It's the water in the air, that sticks to things at night and freezes without turning into drops."

Candela took him by the sleeve and pulled. Mateo left the mark of a finger on the glass, and then another, and then a smiling face, while she dragged him towards the corner.

So as not to be late, they cut through the linden square.

The square was unrecognisable. The grass in the flower beds had turned silver grey, and every blade had a white edge. The bench under the big linden tree was shining, frosted all over, and nobody had sat on it. The linden was bare; its branches stood out against a very clean sky, the blue of very cold mornings.

Mateo stepped off the path onto the grass. It crunched.

"Mateo!"

"Listen." He stepped again. Crunch. Behind him his boots left footprints, dark, green, one after another.

Then the sun appeared above the rooftops.

It was as if someone had switched the square on. The light came in sideways, yellow, and wherever it touched, the frost began to leave: the white turned grey, the grey turned green and wet, and a thin vapour rose from the grass, like the steam from a cup.

Mateo stood still.

“Candela. Look at the tree.”

Candela looked at the linden and saw nothing. Then she looked at the ground, which was where Mateo was pointing.

On the grass, at the foot of the tree, the frost remained in only one place: exactly where the linden’s shadow fell. And since the sun had already melted everything else, the tree was drawn on the ground, whole, with its trunk, its branches and even the finest twigs, in white on green. A white shadow. A shadow made of cold.

“It’s because the sun doesn’t reach there,” said Mateo.

“I know,” said Candela, who hadn’t known.

They stood looking at it. As the sun rose, the shadow moved a little and the drawing came undone along one side, like a word being rubbed out.

“Let’s make ours,” said Mateo.

“Our what?”

“Our shadow. We stand still in the sun, on top of the frost, and we wait.”

Candela looked at the pharmacy clock. Eight minutes to nine. They were going to be late, definitely, and she would have to explain. She opened her mouth to say no.

And then, without knowing why, she remembered her grandfather's kitchen, the click of iron against stone, that spark that wouldn't come and came when nobody was expecting it any more. And she remembered Elvira on that very bench, on summer afternoons, her hands on her knees, waiting for the tree to move. Some things can't be hurried.

"All right," she said. "But really still."

They found a patch of grass that was still white, at the edge of the linden's shadow, where the sun had only just arrived, and stood side by side, their backs to the light. Mateo took her hand in his glove. They didn't talk. Their breath came out in clouds, and the clouds rose slowly, shining. Candela felt the sun on the back of her neck, lukewarm, and the cold climbing up through her boots. She heard a shutter, a car, a pigeon. Mateo, for once in his life, didn't move.

She didn't know how long they stood there. A little while. A long while.

"Now," said Mateo.

They took a step to one side, together, careful not to tread on it.

In front of them, on the wet green grass, there were two white silhouettes, stretched long by the still-low sun of late March: one tall and one small, side by side, joined at the hand. They were already starting to melt at the edges.





STORY · 6 MIN READ

Fog *in the harbour*

On two voices that never stopped, a white afternoon and what you hear when you fall quiet.

They arrived in the seaside village on a Friday in early April, when the beach bar had not yet opened and half the houses still had their shutters down. Candela and Tomás had been married for ten years and had spent three months saying they needed to stop. In the end they had booked two nights in a guesthouse by the harbour, with a small window that looked out on the sea and a crocheted bedspread.

They talked the whole way there. They talked while they unpacked and while they looked for somewhere to have dinner. They talked fast, both at once, each finishing the other's sentences, like two people passing a ball back and forth without ever letting it drop: the plumber who was coming on Tuesday, Thursday's meeting, Sunday lunch at Tomás's mother's, whether they would go somewhere over the May Day long weekend, where, by when they had to book. They didn't argue. They understood each other so well that they no longer needed to listen.

On Saturday afternoon they set off walking towards the lighthouse. The path ran along the top of the cliff, between ferns and gorse, and from the guesthouse you could see the lighthouse at the far end, white and small as a thimble.

"Tomorrow we could..." Tomás began.

"...go to the beach with the dunes," Candela went on, "and have lunch there, and that way on Monday..."

"...we leave early, because at ten..."

"...you've got the insurance thing, I know."

They walked looking at the ground, or straight ahead, or at nothing at all. They didn't see that the sea, down below, had changed colour, or that a white band was coming in from the horizon, low and thick, like cotton wool that someone was unrolling over the water. By the time they noticed, it was already wetting their faces.

In a few minutes they could no longer see the lighthouse. Then the sea. Then the ferns on either side. They kept walking and talking, because it was what they always did, and at some point the ground stopped being trodden earth and became tall, soft grass that soaked the bottoms of their trousers.

They stopped. Around them there was nothing: no path, no lighthouse, no village. Only white.

Candela was about to say something, and so was Tomás. They both fell silent at once, mid-sentence, and the fog kept the rest.

They weren't frightened. The path couldn't be more than a few steps away. But they didn't know in which direction, and that small doubt crept into their bodies like a cold that didn't come from outside.

The first thing they did, without thinking, was reach for each other's hand.

Tomás's hand was icy on the outside and a little damp on the inside, from the fright. Candela's, the same. They took hold clumsily, rearranging their fingers, as if it were the first time, and for a while they did nothing else: just held on in the middle of the white, feeling the other's pulse in their palm, slowly settling. It had been years since they had walked hand in hand. They couldn't remember when they had stopped.

The unease didn't go away entirely, but it grew small. It fitted between their two hands.

"Right," said Tomás, quietly.

"Right," said Candela.

And neither of them added anything more.

Then they began to hear.

First, the sea. They couldn't see it, but it was there, to the right and below, striking the rocks with a slow, muffled sound, like someone breathing in their sleep. If the sea was on the right, the way back had to be on the left.

Then, behind them, a long, deep sound that vibrated in their chests: the lighthouse foghorn. They counted without saying it out loud. It sounded again after twenty seconds, and again twenty

seconds after that. It was like having someone behind them saying: I'm here, I'm here.

They moved forward very slowly, feeling their way with their feet. Candela crouched to touch the ground, to know whether they were on grass or earth. Her fingers found tiny flowers, closed up like buttons. Daisies. They close when there is no sun; she had known that since she was a girl, she had learned it with her friend Nora in the garden they used to go to on Tuesdays. They were at the edge, where the grass ends. She followed the row with her hand and, a few steps further on, found trodden earth. The path.

Sometimes they had to let go to squeeze between two gorse bushes, and then one of them would ask:

"Are you still there?"

And the other would answer:

"Here."

They took turns saying it, without ever having agreed to. Candela thought it had been a long time since she had heard Tomás's voice like that, on its own, without another voice on top of it; it had a hoarse depth she didn't remember. Tomás thought something very similar about hers.

Little by little more sounds appeared, one after another, as if someone were switching on lights in a dark house. A bell on the water, to the left, ringing whenever it liked, with the sway of a buoy. A dog that barked twice and went quiet. A door. And at last, ahead of them, a small, constant jingling, like cutlery in a drawer.

"The boats," they both said at once. And this time they didn't mind.

The harbour appeared all of a sudden, all together: the coloured hulls, the wet quay, the ropes knocking against the masts, the yellow light of the only bar still open. It smelled of diesel and fried fish. They stood for a moment at the edge of the light, still hand in hand, breathing as if they had run up a hill.

Tomás's hair was covered in tiny droplets, white with fog, as if he had suddenly grown old. Tangled in a lock above his ear was a gull's feather, grey on top and white underneath, small and perfect. Candela took it out carefully and put it in her coat pocket.

They had dinner in the bar. They talked little, and slowly. When one of them began a sentence, the other waited for it to end.



That night the fog stayed pressed against the window, so thick that they couldn't even see the lamp post on the quay. They went to bed with the light off. Neither of them mentioned the plumber, or Monday, or the May Day long weekend.

Out of the darkness, every twenty seconds, came the lighthouse foghorn, far away now, long and deep. They listened to it together, holding hands on top of the bedspread, until they stopped counting.

On the windowsill, against the white glass, lay the feather.





STORY · 8 MIN READ

August *in the city*

On a summer chosen, a freshly sown balcony and the swifts that leave.

At the end of July, the people from work rented a house on the coast near Cádiz, with a whitewashed courtyard and a fig tree, and kept a room for Nora. They told her at the last lunch before the holidays, while photos of the house were passed from hand to hand over the plates.

"There's plenty of room," said one of them. "And the sea is five minutes away."

"Not this year," said Nora. "I'm staying here."

She didn't look for an excuse, because she didn't have one. She felt like August in the city: the city half empty, no timetables, the whole month ahead of her and nobody waiting for her anywhere. She had done it other summers, and she always came back from those Augusts as if from a journey.

They laughed at her, fondly.

"You and your Augusts."

"Me and my Augusts," said Nora, and raised her glass.

They agreed to meet when they got back, so they could tell her about their trip and she could tell them about hers, although she didn't yet know what she would have to tell.

On the first day of August, the neighbourhood woke up at half speed. Half the shutters were down, there were parking spaces in every street and, at nine in the morning, the noise was just right: a delivery van, a radio, someone sluicing down a doorway.

Nora went out early, before the sun got too strong. Three stalls were still open at the market, and at one of them the greengrocer, who never closed in August, chose her tomatoes one by one, pressing them with his thumb.

"These for today. These for Thursday."

On the way back she crossed the linden square. The bakery had belonged to someone else since Candela's father retired, but the bread still smelled the same from the corner. The linden had finished flowering and cast a thick shade over the bench, where two women fanned themselves without speaking. Nora remembered the woman with the white bun and Mateo, arms folded, waiting for the tree to move, and walked on with her bag of tomatoes, in no hurry at all.

At two o'clock the heat came down on the city like a lid. Nora lowered the shutters halfway, set the fan turning slowly and lay down on the sofa with a book. She slept for a while. She read for a while. The house, in half-light, smelled of freshly cut tomato and washing on the line. Until seven nothing moved, not in the street and not inside, and that seemed exactly right to her.

That same week she decided to fill the balcony.

It had been empty for years, with a folding chair and a dried-up pot she didn't remember buying. One morning she went to the hardware shop in the centre, which was still open, with the same wooden counter and the same little drawers of seeds, and bought three window boxes, a sack of soil and a packet of chamomile. In the picture on the packet the flowers were white, with yellow centres, the size of a button. They looked a lot like some others she knew.

The packet said it could be sown at the end of summer, in the shade, with the soil kept moist.

On the way back she passed the building on the empty lot. Six floors, a garage, green awnings. At the foot of the front wall, in the crack in the pavement, daisies still came up, closed against the midday heat. Nora stopped for a moment with the sack of soil in her arms. She had seen them every summer since the building went up, and every summer they made her smile in the same way.

She sowed in the afternoon, when the sun had left the balcony. The seeds were so small they looked like dust, and she had to mix them with a little sand to see them. She scattered them without burying them, pressed the soil down with the palm of her hand and watered with a glass jug, very slowly, so as not to wash them away. Then she sat in the folding chair, barefoot on the wet tiles, and stayed a while listening to the neighbourhood wake up from its siesta.

From the balcony you could see a piece of the square and a piece of sky, and in that piece of sky lived the swifts.

They appeared every evening, when the heat eased: dozens of dark arrows skimming the rooftops, calling to one another with a thin whistle, all turning at once, as if someone were leading them on a thread. Nora watched them while she watered. They never landed. As a girl she had been told that swifts did everything in the air, eating, drinking, even sleeping, and only came down to earth to nest. She had never checked, and she didn't need to.

At that same hour, with the windows wide open, Nora sat down at the piano. It was an old upright, pushed against the living-room wall, which had been with her for so many years that she couldn't remember the flat without it. She played slowly and from memory, things she had always known, and the whistling of the swifts came in through the window and mixed with the notes, as if they knew the piece too. When she finished, she would sit for a moment with her hands in her lap, listening to them.

One morning, halfway through the month, she went out to water and the sky was quiet.

She waited a while, jug in hand. A pigeon went by. A plane went by, very high up. The swifts didn't come back. They had left during the night, heading south, as they did every August, and nobody in the neighbourhood had noticed, except her.

It didn't make her sad. It gave her a small, odd satisfaction, that of having been there to notice. The summer had turned a little, the way a key turns in a lock, and she had heard it. That evening she played with the window open, as always, and the piano sounded clearer, like a room that has just been swept.

The people from the neighbourhood never went away in August. They were the usual ones: two friends from school who still lived three streets away, the neighbour from the building opposite and his wife, and a couple who had arrived in the neighbourhood not long ago and already seemed to have been there forever. One evening they messaged her to have dinner at the terrace on the square.

She arrived at ten, when the heat was beginning to let go of the city. They ordered tortilla, fried peppers and a jug of tinto de verano, and then another. They talked about everything and nothing: about some roadworks that never ended, about the heat, about a dog that had run away and come home on its own the next day, very dignified. They laughed a lot at something silly that at any other hour wouldn't have been funny at all. By midnight the square was fuller than at midday, with children on bicycles and grandparents on chairs brought out from home.

Nora walked back, slowly, through streets that were still warm. She had enjoyed going, and she enjoyed coming back. She opened the door of the flat, left her keys in the bowl by the entrance, and the silence of the house greeted her like a calm dog that is glad to see you without barking.

On the night of the Perseids she went up to the roof terrace.

She wasn't expecting much. In the city, with so much light, you saw few of them. But it was a good night for looking up: the floor of the roof still held the afternoon's heat and gave it back through her

shoulders, and at that hour a breeze was finally blowing that smelled of washing on the line and watered earth.

She wasn't alone. A couple of neighbours had sat down on the low wall by the washing lines, and they greeted her quietly, the way people greet each other in church. Nobody said much more. Nora lay down on a towel, her hands behind her head.

The first one took a while to come: a short white streak towards the east, so fast she wasn't sure she had seen it. About the second she had no doubt. One of the neighbours said "There!", and everyone looked to where there was no longer anything, and laughed. Nora didn't make any wishes. She couldn't think of anything she was missing. She saw four in all, and they seemed like a lot.

Towards the end of the month, one morning, when she went out to water, she saw a green fuzz in the window boxes. She crouched down. They were threads as fine as hairs, hundreds of them, with two tiny leaves at the tip, bending under the water from the jug. She remembered the lentils on the empty lot, which had also come up when nobody believed they would, and laughed to herself on the balcony.

The people from work came back on the last weekend, tanned and tired from the journey, and called her to meet for a drink. They showed her photos of the courtyard, of the fig tree, of a long beach with green water.

"And you?" they asked. "What have you done all month?"

Nora thought about it.

"Nothing," she said.

She hadn't done anything all month. And it was true. And it had been a great deal.

The next day she went out to water at dawn, which was the coolest hour and the one most her own. The neighbourhood was still asleep. In the window boxes the chamomile went on growing at its own pace, with nobody hurrying it, and the flat, behind her, seemed perfect to her: neither too big nor too small, just her size.





STORY · 6 MIN READ

Cracking walnuts *in November*

On two friends, six hours by train and a bag of walnuts.

The postcard had been stuck to the fridge with a magnet for three weeks. The photo showed a square with arcades; on the back, in the same round handwriting as ever, Candela had written: "On Saturday the 14th I have to come down to the old neighbourhood to sort something out. I'll stay the night, if you'll have me. I'm bringing walnuts. C."

Candela had gone to live in Tomás's village, and her parents, when they retired, had gone to the village too, to grandfather Julián's house. Between the village and the old neighbourhood lay six hours by train and two changes. At first that hadn't mattered. Then it began to matter a little, and then it was simply how things were: a postcard at Christmas, another on her birthday, and a "we must see each other" that both of them wrote and meant and neither of them kept. The last time they had seen each other was at a lunch, shortly before the move. Seven years ago. Nora had to count them on her fingers.

In November it got dark at six. Nora came home from work in the last of the light and switched on the lamps one by one, and the flat, which in summer seemed perfect to her, felt too big. She wasn't sad. It was just that in November the silence in her home sounded a little louder.

On Saturday she cleaned the flat twice. She bought flowers, then decided that was too much and hid them in the kitchen. Without meaning to, she found herself thinking up things to talk about.

Candela arrived at five, with her coat open and a cloth bag as heavy as a stone.

"You haven't changed," she said.

"Neither have you," said Nora.

They were both lying a little, and they both knew it. Candela had grey at her temples and didn't dye it. Nora had worn glasses for three years.

They sat on the sofa and talked the way people talk in waiting rooms. Work, fine. Tomás, fine, he sends his love. And your parents? Fine, getting on. And the flat? Very nice, lots of light. And the piano? Still there; in November I hardly open it. Each sentence came out whole and stayed on its own, never catching on to the next. Nora noticed that she was sitting on the edge of the sofa, as if in someone else's house.

It was Candela who got up.

"Have you got a small knife? And a bowl."

They emptied the bag onto the kitchen table, over the oilcloth. The walnuts came from the tree belonging to Tomás's mother, in the village; that year it had given so many they didn't know what to do with them. Candela had husked them the weekend before, pulling off the green outer skin with her hands, and her fingers were stained a dark brown that nothing would wash off.

"It lasts a week," she said. "At work they think I smoke."

Nora looked at her hands and laughed for the first time since she had arrived.

"Like when we used to come back from the empty lot."

"Worse. That came off with water."

Candela showed her the trick: the tip of the knife in the seam, where the two halves meet, a twist of the wrist, and the walnut opens cleanly, with the kernel whole inside, wrinkled like a small brain. Nora's broke. They came out in pieces, with splinters of shell stuck to them. Candela didn't correct her; she just passed her another.

After a while they found the rhythm. Click, the shell into the bowl, the nut onto the plate. Click. Sometimes one came out empty, and whoever had opened it held it up high, offended, and the other laughed. Sometimes one came out perfect, with both halves the same, and they set it aside without saying why.

And the conversation, which on the sofa had refused to get going, began to come of its own accord, between one walnut and the next, without hurry. When there was nothing to say, they said nothing, and nothing was wrong.

“They’ve built on the empty lot,” said Nora.

Candela put down the knife. Something tightened in her, a small place under her ribs she hadn’t known was still there.

“The whole thing?”

“Six floors. With a garage.” Nora opened another walnut. “But at the foot of the front wall, in the crack in the pavement, daisies still come up. I see them when I walk past.”

Candela picked up the knife again.

They talked about Tomás and a weekend on the coast when they got lost in the fog. “It was the best thing that happened all year,” said Candela, and she didn’t explain why, and Nora didn’t ask: it showed on her face. They talked about Mrs Paca, who lived with one of her daughters now, and about Pistón, who had been the silliest and kindest dog in the world.

And at some point, without having decided to, Nora told her about the flat in November. That things were going well for her, that she regretted nothing, but that at six, when she switched on the lamps, the silence sometimes grew too big. She hadn’t told anyone, because said out loud it sounded like more than it was.

Candela gave her no advice. She nodded slowly, searched the plate for one of the perfect walnuts and put it in her hand.

Nora thought that with Candela she had never had to be fine to feel at ease.

Then Candela got up, wiped her hands on her trousers without much success and went into the living room. She lifted the lid of the piano and, with one finger, clumsily, began *Martinillo*, the one they used to sing on the empty lot.

Nora heard her from the kitchen. When Candela got to the second verse, she sat down beside her on the stool and started from the beginning, as in class. For a while the two tunes chased each other through the flat without catching up, one behind the other, until they got the giggles and both lost their place.



It was already full night when they finished. The plate was full, the bowl was overflowing and there were shells everywhere: under the chairs, in the sink, in Nora's hair. Candela would sleep on the sofa; her train left at nine. Tomorrow would mean saying goodbye and going back to postcards. Not now.

Nora looked at her fingers. The tips were stained brown. Not as much as Candela's, but almost.

On the oilcloth, in the light of the kitchen lamp, among the shells, lay four still hands, all the same colour.





STORY · 4 MIN READ

What the snow *takes away*

On a train that never left, branches that know how to bend, and the friends who wait.

The present had been wrapped since the twentieth. It was a small brass watering can, for Candela's balcony, and Nora had wrapped it in brown paper tied with string, because Candela liked things that looked as if they came from another time. The suitcase was waiting by the door. The ticket, printed out, was stuck to the fridge with the same magnet as November's postcard: the ten past nine train, two changes, arriving at a quarter past three.

New Year's Eve at Candela and Tomás's. They had promised it in the kitchen, among the walnut shells, and this time it was going to happen.

On the thirtieth, in the afternoon, it began to snow. At first it was lovely: big, slow flakes that melted as they touched the pavement. Nora watched them from the window with a cup between her hands. By night they had stopped melting. And by morning the city was white and hushed, the cars turned into mounds, not a sound in the street.

She got to the station an hour early, dragging the suitcase through the snow. On the departures board, beside her train, there was a word in red: CANCELLED. Beside the next one, too.

She queued at the ticket window for forty minutes. The man behind it had the face of someone who had given the same news two hundred times.

"The line's blocked at the pass. We don't know for how long. Nothing's leaving today."

"And tomorrow?"

"Let's hope."

Nora didn't give up. She crossed half the city to the bus station, slipping at every corner. There was a handwritten sign on the door: "No service to the north. Roads closed." She asked anyway, just in case. They told her what the sign said, only out loud.

There was one possibility left. At the car hire office next to the station, the young man at the counter listened to her patiently and showed her a map covered in marked stretches of road.

"I can give you a car," he said. "But the pass is closed and the Guardia Civil won't let anyone through, not even with chains. I wouldn't go."

Nora stood looking at the map for a while, as if by looking hard enough another way might appear. None did.

She walked home. The suitcase wheels were no use in the snow, so she carried it in her arms for the last few metres, like a sleeping

child.

She sat down on the sofa without taking off her coat. The present was still on the table, with its string. She had done everything there was to do: the station, the buses, the car. She had really tried, and that gave her a kind of tired calm, the calm of having reached the end of the road even though the road led nowhere.

But that didn't take away the rest. She cried a little, not much. For the train, for the dinner that wasn't going to be, for the face Candela would have made opening the watering can.



In the afternoon she couldn't bear to stay in any longer and went out to the park.

There was nobody there. The snow had swallowed the paths, the benches and the noise of the city, and all she could hear were her own steps, a soft crunch. The pines at the far end were laden right to the top.

Nora stopped under one. A long branch was bending under the weight, slowly, more and more, until it almost touched the ground. It looked as if it would break. But at the last moment the snow slid off, all at once, in a puff of white dust, and the branch sprang back up to its place, trembling a little.

A few steps further on, on the ground, lay another branch. Thick, straight, snapped in two. It hadn't bent. It had held the whole weight of the snow, until it couldn't any more.

Nora stayed for a while between the two. The branches that bend let the snow fall. The ones that don't, break.

That night she wrote a postcard. She chose one of a snowy pine that she had kept in a drawer for years, without knowing what for.

“I can’t make it this year. It’s snowed. I tried everything, honestly. Save me a walnut. As soon as the snow goes, I’ll come. N.”

As she wrote it she realised it wasn’t a goodbye, just a postponement. Candela and Tomás were still there, six hours away by train. The snow would go, as it always does. The train would run again. What there was between them didn’t depend on a date: it had lasted seven years of postcards, so it could last a few days of snow.

She left the present by the door, next to the suitcase, ready for when they reopened the line.

At midnight she opened the window. The chimes of the bells reached her muffled, as if from very far away. Across the street, in the tree outside, a laden branch bent slowly under the street lamp, let its snow fall without a sound and rose again.



STORY · 9 MIN READ

What is left *for the bees*

On a promise that arrived late, a field of lavender and the last row.

The country bus left her at the side of the road, next to a shelter with no glass and a sign with the village's name half eaten by the sun. It was six in the evening on a Tuesday in July and the air smelled of something Nora couldn't name: sweet, dry, a little like a grandmother's soap.

She had her rucksack on her back and inside it, still wrapped in brown paper and tied with the same string, the brass watering can. It had travelled with her for half a year. From the hallway to the snowbound station, from the station back to the hallway, and from the hallway to a cupboard, where it waited for the snow to go, and then for the spring, and then for a job that left no days free. "As soon as the snow is gone, I'll come," she had written on the postcard. The snow had gone in March.

Candela was waiting for her, sitting on the low wall of the shelter, in a straw hat that wasn't hers.

"You're late," she said, getting up.

"Six months," said Nora.

"I know. I counted them."

And she hugged her so hard that the brass of the watering can rang inside the rucksack.

Candela and Tomás lived two streets away, but in summer they spent their days at the house of Tomás's mother, a stone house with a cobbled courtyard and, in the middle, the walnut tree. Nora recognised it without ever having seen it: she had been to the village only once, on the day of the wedding, and all she remembered of that day was the hill and the oak. That was where the November walnuts had come from, the ones that stained her fingers for a week. Now the walnuts were green, round and smooth, hidden among the leaves, and it seemed to Nora that she was looking at the year from the other side, the way you look at a piece of cloth from the back.

Tomás's mother was called Herminia. She was small, with very short white hair and arms tanned to the elbow, and she spoke little, as if words cost money. She shook Nora's hand instead of kissing her, looked her up and down, as if trying to remember her from the wedding, and said:

"You're the one with the postcards."

Nora wasn't sure whether it was a question.

At first she felt like a visitor. Candela and Tomás had their habits in that house: who laid the table, which chair each of them sat in, the usual joke about the dripping tap. Nora watched them move around the kitchen the way you watch a couple dance to a tune you don't know. She offered to help three times, and three times she was told to sit down. Only at Candela’s parents’ house, grandfather Julián’s

old house at the end of the street that ran out into the hills, did she feel as she used to: Andrés set a round loaf with a cross on it in front of her, like the ones from the square, and wouldn't let her leave without taking another.

As evening fell, Herminia took a hat from a nail and said to Nora: "Come on."

She didn't say where. They went out the back of the house, along a dirt track between two walls, and as they turned the last corner the field appeared. Higher up, on the hill, the oaks could be seen, round and dark, and without meaning to Nora looked for the one from the wedding.

It was purple as far as the eye could see. The rows of lavender climbed the slope, round as cushions set out in a line, separated by furrows of pale earth, and the evening light drew from them a colour that wasn't in any box of pencils. The scent came in waves, on the air. And underneath it all there was a sound, a low, steady hum, as if the whole field were breathing.

"The bees," said Herminia. "They don't go until the sun is down."

They walked slowly between two rows. The bees paid them no attention; they went from spike to spike, laden, in no hurry. Nora passed her hand over the plants without touching them, and even so the scent stayed on her palm.

"What you see here is lavandin," said Herminia. "It's the child of lavender and spike lavender, bigger, stronger. It gives more oil. The real one is something else."

"Which is the real one?"

Herminia didn't answer. But when they got back to the house, on the stone bench by the door, she pointed to a small grey plant in an old tin, with short spikes of a darker purple.

"I brought this one down from the hills when I was your age. It smells different. Smell it."

Nora bent down. It smelled finer, sweeter, like something you remember rather than something you smell.

"My husband planted the field," said Herminia, and went inside.

At dinner, Tomás mentioned in passing, as he broke the bread, that his mother was thinking of renting out the field. That the harvest weighed on her more each year, that he had never known anything about lavender and had never wanted to, that a man from the next village was interested.

"We'll talk about it," said Herminia, and asked if anyone wanted more salad.

That night, when the house was dark, Nora and Candela went out for a walk. They went to the field without saying so. The earth of the furrows still held the heat of the day and gave it back upwards, and the scent of the lavender, without the sun, had grown deeper. There were no bees any more. There were crickets.

They sat at the edge of a row, their legs stretched out in the furrow.

"It makes her sad," said Candela. "Even if she doesn't say so. It's the last thing she has left of him that still grows."

They talked for a long time. About that and about other things. As in the kitchen with the walnuts, the sentences came out on their

own, and when there was nothing to say they said nothing. At the edge of the track, in the moonlight, Nora saw some daisies closed like buttons, just like the ones on the waste ground when they were girls. She thought there were flowers that followed her everywhere, or that she was the one who always noticed the same ones.

The festival was on the Saturday, the last before the harvest. The village put bowls of lavender flowers in the windows, hung paper garlands from one side of the street to the other and, as evening fell, a band of five musicians played folk songs in the square, under the acacia. There was lemonade in jugs and a long table of cakes that half the village had baked.

At eight, the mayor climbed onto a chair and asked for volunteers. It was the custom: before the machines came, the first row of the year was cut by hand, with a sickle, as it used to be, and the first sheaf was hung on the church door until the following year. Whoever wanted to did it.

There was a silence. Some children pushed each other. Someone said that this year it was the young people's turn, and the young people looked at the ground.

Nora looked at Herminia. Herminia's eyes were fixed on the field, at the end of the street, and her hands were still in her lap. Nora thought about who would have cut that first row in other years.

Then she took her hand. Herminia turned, surprised, and the two of them looked at each other for a moment without saying anything, with that complicity that sometimes appears between two people

who have known each other for three days. Then Herminia squeezed her fingers a little.

And they stepped forward, together.

The sickle was heavier than it looked. Herminia showed her how to hold it, how to grasp a handful of stems with the other hand and pull towards her, in a single movement, without fear. The first time Nora cut almost nothing. The second, half. The third time, the bunch stayed whole in her hand, purple and warm, and the scent rose to her face as if she had opened a wardrobe.

Behind them, the village clapped. Candela shouted something Nora didn't hear. Herminia said nothing, but she kept cutting beside her, slowly, at the same pace, and when they finished the row she tied the sheaf with a string and gave it to Nora to carry to the church.

"My husband used to say lavender should be cut in the morning," said Herminia as they walked back. "That by the afternoon it's tired."

Nora laughed. Herminia did too, for the first time.

The machines came on the Monday, at dawn. Nora got up to watch them. The field was left in short green rows, like a child with a fresh haircut, and the scent was so strong you could notice it from the courtyard.

When only the last row was left, Herminia went out onto the track and raised her hand. She spoke to the man on the machine, who

shrugged and drove off.

"That one stays," she said to Nora. "For the bees, until they go. My husband always left one."

They stood for a while looking at it. A single purple row in the middle of the shorn slope, and above it the hum, as if the whole field had moved in there.

"I'll harvest next year too," said Herminia, without looking at her. "If somebody comes to help me."

Nora didn't answer at once. Then she said:

"This time, don't wait for a postcard."

Before she left, Nora finally took the watering can out of her rucksack and gave it to Candela. Candela undid the string, took off the brown paper and stood for a while with it in her hands, looking at the brass.

She didn't take it home for her balcony. She filled it at the fountain in the courtyard, crossed to the stone bench by the door and watered, slowly, the small grey plant in the old tin. The real one.

On the bus home, Nora rested her head against the glass. Other fields went past the window, already harvested, short and green, and every so often a purple row that someone had left uncut. She smelled her hands. They still smelled of lavender, just as in November they had smelled of walnut. She thought that arriving late was not the same as not arriving.

Thank you for reading slowly

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“When there was nothing to say, they said nothing, and nothing was wrong.”

— CRACKING WALNUTS IN NOVEMBER

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