

THE LIGHT OF SVALBARD

Mònica Richart

l'eclèctica

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THE LIGHT OF SVALBARD

Mònica Richart

//l'eclèctica//

1

In Longyearbyen, in July, the sun never sets. It is a town of less than 3000 inhabitants; think Benimodo, give or take. Unlike Benimodo, however, Longyearbyen has an airport, a hospital, several hotels, bars, cafes, restaurants, shops with an array of souvenirs, and a constant flow of tourists and scientific personnel that justify it all. It is the largest settlement on Svalbard, an archipelago halfway between Oslo and the North Pole. The people who live in Longyearbyen tend to do so on a temporary basis, for a couple of years at most. Many go there attracted by the low taxes; others, by the polar exoticism of the northernmost town in the world.

In my case, Longyearbyen hooked me in with a research contract. As a doctoral student in physics at the University of Valencia, my employment prospects could be summed up as a choice of: going to Catalonia as a substitute secondary school teacher, or embarking on a series of precarious contracts in the world of scientific research. As teenagers scared me far more than destitution, I opted for the latter, and had been doing so for seven years, since finishing my master's, roaming the world. I had been offered this research visit thanks to a previous one I had done in Oslo. I liked Scandinavia in general: the locals' character was closer to mine than that of those at home. Besides, wandering here and there suited me, it wasn't as if there was anything that tied me to Montortal, my village, beyond my parents and my siblings, who all had their own lives. A part of me had always thought that baptising me Júlia had been a

prophecy that I would spend my life wandering. It is a name that works well wherever you go, as long as you are prepared to sacrifice the accent and accept the English pronunciation. My sister had to explain the story of the Virgin of Núria every time she travelled, while my brother had to choose between fighting for the double 'r' in Ferran or becoming Fernando. None of that for me: Julia, Yulia, Llúlia; I wasn't too pedantic and I received few questions.

I arrived in Longyearbyen in July, in the midst of polar summer. From the window of the plane I could see treeless mountains, decorated only with a few resistant patches of snow that hadn't been melted by the warmest Arctic summer on record. The thaw had ended a month ago and the glaciers were dry ruts looking upwards as if they wanted to threaten the tourists who arrived by air, as if they wanted to reproach humanity for what they had done to them. *I'm not a tourist*, I wanted to say to those snow-depleted summits, *I'm here to help*. In truth, I wasn't entirely sure whether my contribution in the field of remote monitoring in environmental physics would have any real repercussion in the matter of global warming. Beyond building another tool for predicting the end of the world, my work had rather innexistant practical effects. *You should have known that when you became a physicist*, one of my thesis supervisors had said. *If you wanted to solve problems, you should have become an engineer. We physicists come to the world to ask questions, not to find answers*.

On a research visit in Finland I had witnessed the white nights, those with a clear sky that never quite completely darkens. They had fascinated me. I had always been obsessed with matters relating to weather and climate. As a girl, I loved watching the rain and pondering the process of condensation. Those white nights had enchanted me, but nothing had prepared

me for the wonder that was the midnight sun in Longyearbyen. I had seen photos and videos and, naturally, I had an extensive knowledge of the Earth's elliptical orbit and all that. And yet, I couldn't help being amazed as I watched the sun form a subtle circle on the horizon, without ever disappearing. Two, three, four in the morning: it remained up there, challenging the ancestral tradition of nighttime in which I and most of the planet had been raised.

Appreciating the aesthetic pleasure of my surroundings was a more or less effective distraction from the anxiety that starting my new job gave me. It wasn't that the project I was going to be working on was particularly daunting: I knew the tasks I'd have to do, I'd done them before. It was a problem I had with change, with anything that was new. New faces, new names, a new office, new ways of working. I would have to adapt to all that, create a new routine. And, when I had done so, move on again. It was pretty screwed up that after so much scientific nomadism I still hadn't gotten used to these changes, but my psychologist told me it was normal, it was part of my neurology, and she gave me tools to manage it, which I used with varying consistency. And with that I got by.

At the door of the University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), a master's student who had offered to be my guide was waiting for me. He showed me some of the classrooms and led me around the various departments before taking me to Physics. The university gave me the opposite impression to the student residence: it seemed like an extraordinarily warm place for an educational centre. It was as if they had gotten mixed up and put each thing in the wrong building, because the facility where people had to live was cold and aseptic, like a hospital, while the UNIS, on the other hand, had corridors with wooden walls and ceilings, like the mountain cabins Norwegians like so much. Even the university cafeteria (whose prices made me abandon any notion of having lunch there) was decorated in this style, with an octagonal fire in the middle of the room. Below, in the security department, a wall full of rifles reminded me that Svalbard wasn't the cosmopolitan Norway I had known in Oslo.

'This week they'll give you training and show you inside the security warehouse. They have special clothes, more weapons and even snowmobiles! And this is where you check if your beacon works.'

'Beacon?'

'Yes, this device that flashes...in case the emergency services have to fetch you on an expedition. It doesn't usually happen, but better to be safe than sorry.'

I had to hold back the urge to laugh. As a physicist, my research work would be carried out indoors, in an office, with a computer, far away from polar bears and the need for beacons. It would be quite the surprise if they asked me to go on expeditions.

'Do I look like a biologist?' I replied. As a fellow physicist, he laughed.

We went up to the wings of the building that housed the

offices. I was surprised again by how welcoming and inviting they were. Real curtains, I mean, with patterns and colours, not those industrial grey linen things. And stuffed animals. There were soft toys in many of the offices, and a unicorn poster that I never found an explanation for. The last area he showed me was environmental physics and there he left me in the office of my head of department, a woman of around sixty who, judging by the way she explained the workings of the programmes, didn't know anything I didn't know already. What differentiated her (permanent position with a good wage, stability, recognition and prestige) from me (eternal precarious intern) was mostly our dates of birth. That is what I had found in all the universities I had spent time at. People of my age couldn't compete against that generation, no matter the qualifications we had, no matter the achievements we accumulated, seniority was always the determining factor. But millennial angst wasn't limited to me or the academic world. My sister, a thirty-five-year-old surgeon, worked the hours the old-timers in the service passed up, the ones who held the good positions even though they hadn't seen patients in years. My university classmates who had opted for teaching couldn't choose their school or hours, despite passing the qualifying exams with merit, because the dinosaurs in place were ahead of them on seniority. I sometimes wondered if my brother Ferran wasn't the smartest one, even if we all considered him a bit daft, when he looked at the situation and told my parents, *A doctorate? I'd have to be sick*, and then devoted himself to living life.

My first impression of Longyearbyen as somewhere not very easy on the eye was fading away. It was one of the first things I told Týra during our date, when she asked me if I liked the town. She laughed. She had an attractive, charismatic laugh; her teeth were perfect and very white. She wore a baggy black t-shirt of some metal band that gave me a glimpse of her muscular arms: the right, covered in a huge tattoo with sinuous inky shapes; the left, marked by scars I didn't yet dare ask about.

'I'm overdressed, aren't I?' I asked when I looked at the other customers in Kroa. I wore a fairly unpretentious semi-transparent black blouse (belly button showing, of course) and a little makeup. Around about me, everyone was wearing sportswear.

'You'll see that the dress code in Longyearbyen is...I was going to say informal, but it's non-existent. In winter lots of folk go into restaurants in thermal underwear, and it's socially acceptable. It's a paradise if you have a complicated sensorial profile.'

'Sensorial profile?' her use of the term took me by surprise. 'I don't often meet people who use words like that. Have you studied psychology or are you...?'

'No, I didn't go to university,' she cuts me off. 'I couldn't.'

I noticed her face tense up when she said that and I didn't want to insist. I fell silent, perhaps a little uncomfortable, weighing up the risk of asking the question I wanted to.'

'So, you're also...?'

'I'm not sure,' Týra smiled with a hint of bitterness, or so it seemed. 'When I was five I was given a sort of pre-diagnosis, but they told my mum she'd have to bring me back for evaluation later to confirm whether I was autistic or not, but she never did. I found all that out last year, and now lots of things are making sense.'

'Last year? Your mum didn't tell you until then?'

'We have a difficult relationship, my mum and I,' but before I could ask her anything else, she added, 'and what about you? You were quick to recognise the concept, eh?'

'Yeah, I've had my diagnosis since I was eighteen. After having to put up with all the bullying at school. Lots of things make sense for me too now.'

'Like what?'

'Uff, where to start? Besides the sensorial stuff... Inflexibility, socialisation problems...'

Týra listened to me talk and nodded. She didn't question my experience; she didn't compare me to other autistics. That surprised me a lot, it was unusual. Then she told me about her routines and the dichotomous thinking we shared, and that led to the topic of personality, and from there to another, and the waitress had to come over three times top ask what we wanted to eat because we couldn't find a moment to stop talking and look at the menu. Eventually we reluctantly focused on the task of choosing. She ordered the steak without thinking too much about it. I would have liked to have made a list of the pros and cons of each option. I wanted to try something local: from the prohibitive prices, I knew I wouldn't have many meals outside the residence. At the same time, I didn't want anything that left me too full, but neither could I stand being left hungry. I panicked at the thought of ordering an unknown meat or fish and

it having a gelatinous texture. Finally, I went for the *klippfisk*, which according to Týra was a dried salted fish, although she didn't know which. I wasn't sure if she didn't know what kind of fish it was or if she didn't know the word in English for the fish in question.

'Your English is amazing,' I marvelled out loud, 'much better than mine.'

'Really? No, I don't think so. Maybe I have a good accent, that can fool you, but the grammar I have isn't...Anyway, it's nothing. All Norwegians have good English.'

'But you are much more fluent than most...you've lived somewhere English-speaking, no?'

'No, I've never lived outside Norway.'

'You've travelled a lot, then?'

She fell silent for a moment.

'I have to confess,' she bit her lip and lowered her voice. 'I have to confess I don't really like travelling.'

She had drawn herself nearer, leaning over the table that separated us, to talk in a quieter voice. I followed suit: I brought my face close to hers and whispered in the same tone.

'And why do you say it as if it were a taboo?'

'Because it is!' she laughed and returned to her previous posture and volume. 'Because these days, at our age, you can't say you don't like travelling. It's like...it goes without saying that everyone likes it. Anyone who doesn't travel more, it's because they can't, because of money or work.'

'You're right,' and I sat back, pensively. I didn't know anyone of my generation who didn't like travelling. Even my old primary school classmates, the ones who wouldn't live more than 15 miles away from Benimodo even if you gifted them a house, posted photos every summer in Mallorca, or the Canaries for the more daring. Relatively close destinations, culturally

homogenised, that allowed them to fulfil their social quota of exoticism without having to step outside the parameters of their comfort zone.

'I've been to Italy because an ex-partner dragged me there when we were still together...and not much more. You must have travelled a lot, huh?'

'Eh...' Now I was the one to bite my lip and smile shyly when I realised that my story and the way I often told it perfectly fitted into the cliché of the rootless millennial. *I've lived in ten countries in the last ten years*, I used to say, as if it were an achievement and not merely the result of an immense lack of job security, and there was always a voice inside my head reproaching me, but this time it was louder than usual. 'For work, yes. Mainly within Europe. I jump from one short contract or grant to another and I go wherever they'll take me. And what do you do in the holidays?' I shifted the focus.

'Usually, I go back to the mainland to visit my family.'

'Ah, so you do have a relationship with them,' I replied, still surprised by what she'd told me earlier about her mother and the diagnosis.

'It's complicated, but yes, generally speaking,' like a reflex, she briefly rubbed the arm with the scars. 'How do you get on with your family?'

Týra's question was followed by a long soliloquy about the Ribelles Semper family, which she listened to with an admirable stoicism. She appeared genuinely interested in my life and I gave her a very thorough overview. I told her about my parents, both secondary school teachers, my mum of history, my dad of physics and chemistry, and about my siblings. I confessed, because her presence put me at ease, that I was aware that in the eyes of my parents I had never lived up to my sister, Núria, who had it all: she had studied medicine, she had married a

good man, she lived half an hour from them and had given them a granddaughter. But neither had I received the negative attention of my younger brother, who had always been a bit of a loose cannon, who had dropped out of his Physical Education degree when he only needed a few more credits and only after years of family nagging did he deign to finish it and enrol in the master's course to become a teacher.

'I suppose I'm the cliché middle child,' I admitted. 'And there are lots of people in my situation. But even so, it hurts. My family hasn't felt like *home* for a long time, and nor has any other place. Núria has her house with her husband and daughter, and Ferran still lives with my parents. I'm neither here nor there, and if one day I run out of grants or contracts and have to go back, I don't even want to think about it... They're not bad people, but I can't bear the idea of living with them.'

'I get it,' she said at the end, when I was starting to think I was talking too much. 'I'm a middle child too. Sort of. It's... tough.'

5

The Autumn in Longyearbyen had been fleeting. No sooner had the nights begun than the tundra was covered in all the shades of brown imaginable: an intense and ferocious brownness surrounded us, as if it were aware of its own brevity, as if it wanted to compensate for the fact there were no trees on the island whose leaves could change colour and then fall. The summits of a few of the nearby mountains had received a dusting of snow and some had even reached the town, particularly at nighttime.

At home they had taken the news of my job at the restaurant better than I had predicted. At first, I had been pleasantly surprised. Then Ferren had told me that, in fact, my parents hoped that discovering the reality of life in hospitality would lead me away from the kitchen and the push me towards finishing my doctorate once and for all. Núria had lamented that I wouldn't be at her daughter's first birthday, but had then encouraged me to follow my dreams with the condescension of those who have already achieved theirs.

In all honesty, I didn't know what dream I was chasing, or even if I was chasing one. My priority was to remain in Longyearbyen, more so than any professional aspiration. If being able to do so meant entering numbers on a computer or peeling potatoes, I wasn't fussed either way. The striking calmness of those wild terrains and the warm company of Týra and her friends gave me an addictive sensation of wellbeing, a state of simple contentedness that I didn't want to give up. Ultimately, what sense would there be in jumping back on the

hamster's wheel of a life I had been leading until then? Exploiting myself, suffering the vexations of my thesis supervisors, living miserably in shared flats while finishing a doctorate that wouldn't even guarantee me a better future? I was fine just the way I was.

Living with Týra had turned out to be easier than I had imagined from the initial state of her kitchen. Once it was clean and disinfected, she had made an effort to keep it presentable. Aside from the odd culture clash, such as having to explain to her than duvet covers were like sheets and needed to be washed, we didn't have any conflicts relating to cohabiting. If anything, the conflicts were inside my head when I wondered if I was taking advantage of her by staying in her flat for so little money, a merely symbolic rent, and if I wasn't giving her expectations I couldn't fulfil. There was no alternative. Housing in Longyearbyen was scarce and expensive, it would have been hard to find a flat just for myself. And I didn't have all the money in the world. I may have earned more than with the grants, because the minimum wage in Longyearbyen was high and essentially tax-free, but between the astronomical rent and the price of vegetables, I would have been left with nothing.

At the beginning, I rose very early, because they had put me on the breakfast and lunch shifts. I headed down to the town along the path that ran between Platåberget and the centre. I passed by Elvesletta and smiled, glad to no longer live there. I hadn't found sharing living space with students traumatic, but I was nevertheless happy to have left. I much preferred Týra's Viking altar and her Pikachu bath towel to the cold feeling of living in a hospital and never knowing what new faces I would come across on my way to the kitchen. At work, for the first month, they only let me do simple things: peeling, chopping, crushing, boiling, mixing, plating at a push. And washing up,

of course. They supervised me most of the time, correcting me occasionally.

The sky on those October mornings was a soft blue, dotted with the odd candy-floss cloud. When I began to do afternoon and night shifts, I enjoyed nothing more than getting up in time to have a coffee on the balcony, gazing at that spectacle. Sometimes it was impossible due to the icy wind, but when the cold allowed it, I delighted in spending time out there. *The snow is beautiful, it strokes the mountains*, went the song. I couldn't remember how all the Júlias of the past filled the time I now spent observing my surroundings. If the permanent summer sun had given me a constant peace, the fleetingness of autumn, when each day was twenty minutes shorter than the previous one, forced me to intensely savour the details of every day, to be present in the world I inhabited and be conscious of it.

My first day off coincided with a trip Týra was running to Pyramiden. She didn't usually do guided tours that weren't mountain expeditions, but the guide who was supposed to take a group of tourists to the abandoned Soviet settlement that day had taken ill and asked her to cover for her as a favour. Týra felt bad that we couldn't spend the day together and asked the company if she could bring a companion. At least that's what she told me. I never discovered if she had actually just paid my fare, which was a sum I couldn't have afforded.

The boat left the port of Longyearbyen at nine in the morning. After the safety instructions, Týra went to meet the rest of the staff, while the passengers, the few of us there were, spread out around the various corners of the ship. I wore a blue overall on top of my clothes, as we had been advised to do if we wanted to go out on deck, and as soon as I went outside I understood why: the wind up there blew much harder than in Longyearbyen. The snot running from my nose began to

freeze, just as Týra had warned me would happen, and I had to pull my scarf up over my nose.

Only a handful of reckless people had come up to the deck in the hope of seeing a polar bear. A man offered me some binoculars and from his accent I could tell English wasn't his first language. He turned out to be Basque and had lived in Barcelona and spoke Catalan rather well. Without realising it, I stuck to him like glue: it was the first time in months I had someone with whom to speak in Valencian. We exchanged impressions on Svalbard, Longyearbyen and the people who lived there. He was a tourist and I summed up my story with Týra.

'Now that's love, washing dishes in the north pole for her!'

I gave the customary smile, hidden by the scarf, and chose not to tell him I wasn't sure if I had fallen in love with Týra or simply with the same place she had fallen in love with years previously.

The Pyramiden settlement bore the name of the pyramid-shaped mountain it stood before. The Soviet Union had bought the town from Sweden in 1927 and mined its coal until 1998, which is when Pyramiden lost all its residents and had been abandoned, frozen in time. Týra, now in her role as guide, explained that to us. From time to time she had taken me on trips to the mountains, but outside of her working hours. Besides, on the mountaineering trips, there was more walking and less talking. Now, however, she was sharing facts and stories with her unique charisma: it was a side of Týra I hadn't seen yet, her tourist guide facet. And she was great at it. It was remarkable how her slightly intimidating demeanour and usual sullenness gave way to this other, apparently extroverted, sociable, witty person, and although I wanted to pay attention to what she was saying I couldn't stop wondering how many other masks this woman I had just started living with had at her disposal.

'In its golden age, Pyramiden had over a thousand inhabitants,' she told us, while we walked from the port to the town. 'The canteen was the only building in the town with a kitchen, and everyone gathered there for meals, which were free, and for parties.'

'Where did they get the food from?'

'They were largely self-sufficient. In their greenhouses they even managed to grow watermelons. They also had animals. Both the soil for planting and the animals were imported from the Soviet Union. They never had a commercial relationship with Longyearbyen.

What we saw around us was the picture of isolation. I had imagined Pyramiden as a sort of Soviet version of Gavarda la Vella, a partially abandoned village close to my hometown, but I had been unaware of the important detail that it had no roads or paths that linked it to any other settlement. Now, when the sailing season ended until the following summer, Pyramiden would be completely isolated until it had snowed enough to reach it by snowmobile: a journey of more than 100km, more than three hours, through the Arctic desert, between ten and thirty degrees below zero and with no stops. No signposts, no reference points except the mountains and frozen rivers. With good reason the voices of our group were the only sound that could be heard alongside the wind. The dry grass took over any space not covered in snow, and wild animals took advantage of the empty buildings to make their dens.

'It's hard to believe people lived here,' I thought out loud.

'And well,' added Týra. 'The Soviet Union strived to make Pyramiden a symbol of the success of its social and economic model. Life may not have been easy, because it couldn't have been in these conditions, but the people in Pyramiden in the twentieth century lived better than the community in

Longyearbyen. Here they fostered a lively cultural life, with a cinema, theatre, museum and library; they also had a covered swimming pool, a gym, a school, a nursery, a hospital...'

'The turf isn't autochthonous, is it?' asked someone in the group, scraping a little at the snow. 'It's too long...'

'No, they imported it from Ukraine.'

We left behind the brutalist apartment blocks to enter the building that housed the canteen. The large windows and decorations on the façade, with white pilasters and bare, grey bricks surrounding the entrance, exemplified the austere brutalism that characterised the architecture in that corner of the world. Either side of the main door there were two structures which must have been ticket booths: as evidenced by the musical and cinematographic motifs adorning them and the row of round white lightbulbs, like the dressing room of a variety show, above them which remained intact, symmetrical, expectant.

'Incredible,' I breathed as soon as I went in. Týra turned and smiled at me. She had been to Pyramiden before and knew I would be impressed. It was impossible for anyone to escape untouched by those images, those impressions. The opulence of the marble and the nineteenth-century-style double staircase that dominated the hallway contrasted with the damp marks and peeling paintwork that came afterwards and the piles of earth in every corner. The kitchen, tiled in white and sky blue with broken-tile mosaics was where the facilities' abandonment could most keenly be felt, between the ceiling's paintwork which was falling aggressively by sections and the mould colonising everything. For some reason, I felt a great sadness upon seeing those huge cauldrons, which I would have fit comfortably inside, that had fed the entire community of Pyramiden but were now condemned to oblivion. The main hall, meanwhile, was better conserved. A mosaic mural

decorated the stairwell. It depicted a summery scene, with a bright sun above snowy mountains and polar bears watching pieces of ice float on the sea. The wooden tables and leather chairs were still there, as if at any moment someone might come in and sit down. Who would steal furniture left in the middle of the desert?

When we left the canteen, the clouds had cleared a little and the bright light fell harshly upon the brown and scarlet façade. We walked along the partially snow-covered stone path towards the main square. The customary bust of Lenin welcomed us to the pearl of Pyramiden: the building that housed the sports complex and library, amongst other amenities. Inside it was excellently maintained, as if just yesterday a basketball game had been held on the main court. Only occasional details, such as the nineties aesthetic of the posters or the faded photos, evidenced the passing of time. Týra told us that this building was one of the few still in use: on the upper floor, the library had been converted into a café and souvenir shop. While she showed us the swimming pool, drained now, she told us there were rumours that the guides who stayed in Pyramiden held parties there until not too long ago. That made me put myself in the shoes of the half a dozen or so souls that would remain there when our boat set sail again. As far as I had gathered, they were mostly young people who worked in the hotel or café. There was no need to go to 78 degrees latitude to find a settlement with less than ten inhabitants; Galicia was full of villages with two or three inhabited houses. Of course, the people there could jump in the car and be in the centre of Santiago de Compostela in a couple of hours, or in any number of large towns in less than that. The few residents of Pyramiden, during the winter, must only see the same faces for weeks on end. Even in the months when the snow didn't

isolate them, visits like ours were mainly fleeting and practical: there was almost no interaction required. I wondered if they found that more perturbing, or having to live with the omnipresent ghost of a society that no longer existed.

'Are you alright? Týra approached me as we returned to the boat. She caught me thinking, still immersed in existential doubts that, considered coldly, didn't really affect me. I told her I was fine and that I'd tell her about it properly at home, and she went back to leading the group. I watched her move for a while, with her blonde hair billowing over her reflective jacket, her perfect arse, rifle slung over her shoulder. I remember having thought that if there was a more magnetic creature on the planet, I had no need to meet them.

On the way back, the boat passed by the Nordenskiöld glacier. We had seen some glaciers on our way to Pyramiden, but we hadn't gotten as close. Now, just a few metres of grey tranquil water separated us from that icy mountain where white and blueish tones danced and shimmered around dark crevices.

'The blue marks,' explained Týra, are pieces of ice under high pressure that were previously covered by another layer of ice that has now fallen. That hole over there, for example, do you see it? Just five years ago it didn't exist.'

These were details I already knew thanks to the research work I had done, but all the same, the imminence of the climate emergency appeared much more evident in person. Numbers in databases and quotes in APA didn't do justice to the hole I had before my eyes. Someone cried out in surprise and we all looked towards where they were pointing. A seal was swimming towards us with the face of a happy puppy. I wondered how many generations of descendants of that seal would be able to enjoy this sea before the rising temperatures left them without food.

'You seemed sad today,' Týra took my gloved hand as we headed up the hill towards home after sharing a few pizzas in the pub with the guy who lived in Barcelona. 'Do you miss home?'

'No!' I replied emphatically. 'What makes you say so?'

'I don't know, I'd never heard you speaking your language and I thought maybe that was why you seemed distant.'

I stopped for a moment to process it. Maybe I did miss speaking Valencian a little bit.

That man was leaving the next day, and it might be months before I bumped into anyone else who spoke my first language. I imagined being one of those few inhabitants of Pyramiden, isolated in the icy desert, and the comparison made me laugh inside. Or rather it made me feel like a happy seal, ignorant of the adversities that might come. In any case, that was what worried me: that something might disturb my peace.

'I'm just very happy here,' I confessed in the end. 'I like my work, I like being with you, I like the days. I don't know if I want to go back to the life I had before.'

'And your doctorate?'

I sighed.

'I suppose that's what worries me, deep down; that at some point I'll have to finish it.'

'Is there any way of finishing it in Longyearbyen? Are there any grants or agreements with the UNIS?'

'I should look into it...'

'But you don't want to,' she guessed.

'I'm fine as I am. I don't feel like I need anything more.'

'And isn't that beautiful?'

It was nighttime and the streetlights on the main road gleamed defiantly against the black sky. I moved ahead of Týra and turned to take both her hands and look at her against the backdrop of that wintery autumn scene. A wisp of golden hair

had escaped from between her hat, scarf and jacket, and the green of her eyes looked at me expectantly. When I stepped towards her, not letting go of her hands, the snow crunched gently. I kissed her.

'So beautiful.'

I didn't need anything more.

6

The mornings between the end of October and the middle of November were twilights that lasted hours. I had always been fascinated by the colours and light of dusk, but had seldom been able to enjoy them as you had to be able to look at the sky just as the sun made to hide itself, and in a matter of minutes it had passed. In Longyearbyen, due to its latitude, the sun stayed less than six degrees below the horizon for hours and the light was an intense blue that I had never seen before in such a sustained way. That phenomenon, the civil twilight, had settled in and the snowy cloak draped over the mountains and roads had now turned most of the ground white.

The thermometer no longer recorded positive values and that meant changes to my wardrobe. Woolly hats became a necessary complement from then on, even though they made it impossible to keep my fringe in a decent state, and I had to squeeze a thermal t-shirt between my skinny tops and borrow a woolly jumper from Týra if I wanted to spend more than half an hour outside. Generally speaking, I could get by with her clothes, but I was aware that sooner or later I would have to invest in my own clothes because we had different styles and needs: she didn't feel the cold the same way I did, accustomed as she was to it. I also wasn't sure how much to spend on such items without knowing how long I'd be using them for. I'd been given a contract until Christmas and everything suggested they would renew it after the holidays.

'If they offer you a renewal, will you take it?' Sofia asked me one Saturday over a steak dinner. 'Are you happy there?'

'Yeah.'

'You don't sound too convinced?' said Kjersti.

She had a point. Working in a kitchen wasn't easy. The shifts in particular were killing me, having to change my body's routines every week. And now that I was carrying out slightly more complex tasks, and had come to take on some responsibility, I was often required to make quick decisions, which I struggled with. I also couldn't quite believe that this was my job. It was so different to what I had always done that I often felt like I was on some kind of camp, like when I was younger and my parents sent me to develop every kind of hobby imaginable during the holidays, and when this was over I would go back to the click-clack of the keyboard and quotations in APA format. That said, it wasn't all bad. I was learning a lot about cookery: at times would be surprised to discover the theory that backed up something I had always done intuitively; at others, I discovered new techniques that allowed me to work more efficiently, or combinations of flavours and textures that I had never considered. I was happy not to have to feign interest in work that was outside my field just because it had been done by an acquaintance of my thesis supervisor; not to have to cite articles to publish things that had been said thousands of times before. In the kitchen, what I did always had a purpose. Things started and ended the same day and I went home with the feeling of having met my objectives, and not of floating in the uncertain limbo of productivity in the research world.

With the crisis of the escaped dog dealt with, Kjersti began to talk to another volunteer at the shelter and left me to wander around, looking at the lights of the town in the distance. Something else I had learned about the Norwegians was that the social convention of introducing two people who didn't know each other, if they coincided in space and time, didn't exist for them, nor did it in Longyearbyen. Núria called me but I didn't pick up because she would ask me what I was doing and I didn't know how to explain to my perfect sister that what was on my mind right now was making piles of snow with my food and trying to discern a particular smell other than wet dog. I suspected, because I knew her, that she wouldn't believe I was really happy like this. Nevertheless, I was.

When she was done chatting, Kjersti rejoined me and we set off towards the town. It was two in the afternoon and the night was black. There, away from the urban hub, the stars stood out clearly and the moon shone a bright white. As we got further away from the dog shelter, the barks became softer and the silence more evident.

'I was telling you before that you've been really good for Týra,' resumed Kjersti. 'I've never seen her as alive as since you two... well, I don't know if you're together, I don't want to stick my nose in. But you know what I mean, she seems better than ever.'

'Really? Sometimes I think that, no matter what I do, it will never be enough. And since Daniel and Hedda got together, she seems quite distant...'

'She has very deep scars, yeah,' she conceded.

'Do you mean literally or metaphorically?'

'Both. Have you ever asked her about the scars on her arm?'

'No,' I confessed. 'I never find the right time. Or I'm scared of waking monsters I won't know how to calm. I suppose I have to, though, right?'

'Ah, I'm not here to give advice. I only understand animals, not people. If Týra was a husky, I could help you. But I suppose in that case you wouldn't want to sleep with her. Hey, look!'

Kjersti pointed to a vague point in the distance, and I soon understood why: amidst the blackness of the night, a green glow lit up the sky. This, too, was Svalbard: an aurora borealis just after midday. We stopped to look at, entranced. I didn't know if anyone could ever get used to the magic and the lights of this place, or take them for granted, or coexist with them without feeling the utmost fascination. I couldn't imagine that my wonder was down to the novelty, because Kjersti had lived on the island for years and didn't tire of them. I was beginning to realise that Longyearbyen was a place of extremes in every possible sense: you either wanted to escape as soon as your contract there was up, or it sucked you in and you and you were incapable of imagining a fulfilling life anywhere else. *A bit like Týra*, I thought.

'In my experience, the monsters don't go away, no matter how much you ignore them,' I said, with my eyes still fixed on the northern lights.

Kjersti shrugged. Despite her obvious inability to discuss sentimental matters, and although I hadn't had time to ask her about Týra's relationship with Daniel, she had given me more

than enough material for a sleepless night. With a little luck, I'd also be able to glimpse one those green rays from Týra's bedroom window, over the silhouette of her firm, naked body. I couldn't think of a better kind of insomnia.

The only redeeming moment was when I saw the aurora borealis from the toilet seat, while shitting, and it wasn't even socially acceptable to mention it.

When we finally left, I had exhausted all the energy I had. Between the loud music from the night before, all the small talk and the fact I'd been away from my safe space and routines, I felt as if I'd gone several nights without sleeping. As if that wasn't enough, I was carrying the built-up stress from the

move and the awkwardness with Týra over the conversations we hadn't had yet. It was an explosive cocktail and I should have known it would leave me devoid of energy. I had overestimated my tolerance levels.

'Today we'll have to go a bit quicker than when we came yesterday, ok?' Hedda warned me, and I wasn't quite sure whether to read some kind of reproach into that comment.

'Sure, we don't want night to fall,' I replied sarcastically, but I don't think anyone heard me.

Unlike on the outward journey, Hedda and Daniel's snowmobile didn't fall behind mine. At first, they rode next to me, in parallel. When we'd been driving for ten minutes, give or take, the light snow that had accompanied us since the beginning of the trip grew heavier. The snowflakes became thicker and less intermittent, and I had to slow down a couple of times to maintain control of the vehicle with one hand while wiping the white off my goggles with the other. The Norwegians, on the other hand, sped up. Daniel and Hedda overtook me and I tried hard to keep up with them, but I was scared to go as fast as them because I wasn't used to handling that thing.

Riding through an icy desert was an experience unlike anything I had done before. In the immensity of the night, in the emptiness of the hectares of snow and more snow that surrounded me, I had only the ever-more distant light of the Norwegians' snowmobiles to guide me. There were no roads, rivers or trees, only ice. Everything was the track and nothing was, and proceeding was a matter of choosing the straightest line possible. Without another vehicle behind me, like on the way there, the landscape seemed more desolate than ever, and I even found a certain romanticism in that striking nothingness. That magical sensation soon disappeared, however, when

we passed through want must have been a glacier and I found myself before a fork with no way of knowing which path the group had taken.

At first I thought I could make it alone. I told myself that I could follow the tracks of their snowmobiles, but between the darkness, the heavy snow and the wind, finding them was impossible. I turned to my instincts and headed down one of the paths without stopping. After a few minutes of driving without finding the Norwegians, I began to suspect that my instincts had let me down. Angrily bowing before the evidence, I took out my phone to call Daniel or Hedda and ask them to come and find me. Neither picked up: they mustn't have heard their phones over the noise of the engines and the wind.

I weighed up the situation: trying to reach the town on my own was dangerous, because I could get lost and end up even further away. I wasn't carrying any weapon except the flare gun. I wanted to think the snowmobile was faster than a polar bear, but I wasn't totally sure. The other option was following the tracks of my own snowmobile back to the cabin and calling them from there. Impossible: with all the turns I'd made trying to find them, I didn't know which way I'd come from anymore. Orientating oneself without the sun was much trickier than I'd imagined. If I stayed put where I was and waited for them to come back for me, would they? They would realise at some point that they were a snowmobile down, sure, or they would see the missed calls, but what if I had strayed too far from the route they'd taken and they couldn't find me? I tried to call Týra but there was no connection, then I remembered she was leading an excursion to a cave that day.

The lack of viable options began to overwhelm me. The icy wind penetrated my lungs painfully and I couldn't think clearly. I wasn't any good at improvising in unexpected situations,

I usually left the urgent decisions to someone else, but now I didn't have anyone to help me. My survival depended on choosing a path that didn't exist, the alternatives were fading away before my eyes, the snow blinded me and I felt as if I were on the edge of an abyss. I was immensely embarrassed at the thought the police might have to rescue me a few kilometres from the town: I couldn't be too far away if I had signal. I felt a deep anger, towards Daniel and Hedda for leaving me there, perhaps, but mainly towards myself for agreeing to that journey, for getting lost, for not being able to find a solution to the problem I had gotten myself into. I had to repress my fury momentarily to call the emergency services. I had just enough time to tell them where I'd left from and that I was headed towards Longyearbyen before my phone suddenly died. That had happened to me a few times before, the cold drained the battery. In a fit of rage, I threw it to the floor.

I don't remember very well what happened next because my memory always retains meltdowns in a confused and partial fashion. I remember shouting, and I must have because the next day I had to have several teas with honey. I don't know if I pronounced anything coherent, or just random words, or simply disconnected sounds that scratched my throat. I do remember the tears that gushed out uncontrollably and blurred my vision. I also remember rocking back and forth, hugging my chest in an attempt to calm myself. I remember that after those shouts, I couldn't speak anymore. I still thought verbally, but moving my lips to form sounds was impossible. Not because of the cold, or so I believe: it was rather a paralysis brought on by a kind of fatigue that flooded over me and only allowed me to do the strictly necessary for survival. It had happened to me before, but many years ago.

I was a teenager then and I didn't yet have my diagnosis.

When the Sysselmesteren official arrived, I stuck to nodding and shaking my head to the questions he asked. The man switched to English upon realising I didn't understand Norwegian. He had a clear accent and I understood him, but I couldn't reply with words. He asked me if I was able to drive my own snowmobile. I nodded. He asked me to follow him. I drove after him like a robot, crying ceaselessly, but it was now a silent, resigned sobbing. The snot that ran onto my skin and scarf froze as we advanced. I drove and cried and I didn't want or hope for anything.

The official parked in front of the hospital door. He recommended I go in so that someone in the emergency department could decide whether I had symptoms of hypothermia, but he told me that he couldn't force me to. I nodded. I stood looking at the Sykehus door for a while. I didn't feel cold or warm, so I figured I didn't have hypothermia and it wasn't worth bothering anyone else. I drove homewards and parked the snowmobile outside the flat. As I took off my outer layers, I supposed I should let Týra know I'd made it home safely. I didn't even want to think about Daniel and Hedda. When I had charged up my phone, which was miraculously still working, I opened my conversation with her. I didn't feel able to compose a written message and the keys on the touchscreen seemed alien and threatening. In the end, I sent her an emoji of a house. Under the hot water of the shower, I thought it was curious I had been unable to express myself with verbal language, an ability that had faithfully accompanied me for more than twenty years, and yet I had been able to drive the snowmobile home.

//l'eclèctica//

Júlia, a young environmental physicist arrives in the Arctic town of Longyearbyen on a research visit. In this wild and unfamiliar environment, she finds an unexpectedly welcoming routine, a singular community and an intense relationship with Týra, a woman with a troubled past and looking for stability. Through love, coexistence and conflicts, Júlia confronts her fears, emotional fragility and the need to take decisions. The polar landscape, with its extreme light and darkness, is the setting for a profound life change.

The Light of Svalbard is the story about opting to stay, to care and to love despite the uncertainty. A novel that challenges both rootedness and rootlessness.

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