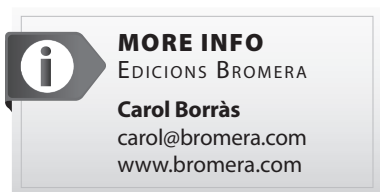


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Translated by Andrew McDougall

MÉSLLLLIBRES



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The Pond

MÉSLLLIBRES

Meritxell
Benedí Altés

Translated by Andrew McDougall

*For Martina and Jana, my daughters,
because the future is theirs.*

*For Marta, my mother,
for her legacy.*

For all the Mireias.

The road towards Port de la Selva is a snake and Sergi's car, a bubble. I've added my CDs to his and since leaving Barcelona, we have delighted in playing each other our favourite songs. First him, then me. I put on *Good fortune* by PJ Harvey.,

'I saw her in Benicàssim, she stood in the middle of the stage, playing the guitar with an unbelievable power.'

I turn up the volume and stop paying attention to the road, the vineyards and the sea. I look at him, I caress his hair with my fingers and return to the same sensations as every time I hear these lyrics: tensed muscles, euphoria and the urge to sing my heart out. Maybe my bad fortune was also slipping away.

It's his turn.

'Look for the Silvio Rodríguez CD and play *Mujeres*. I listened to it a lot when I was in Cuba, every time we went out to do field work. The *mujeres* Silvio talks about exist. Like you and your eyes, bug.

The song begins and he taps the steering wheel to the rhythm of the guitar. He looks at me and smiles.

My cheeks burn with shyness, as if I were thirteen years old. Your eyes, bug. Almost thirty and I still blush. If I had a shell, Sergi's desire undid it with a single phrase: your eyes, bug. He pierced my skin with his gaze. He entered me with four words and a look.

That easy.

That quick.

And then, bug.

And yet, bug.

Although my name is Mireia.

Either side of the road, fields full of rows of vines, and Sergi explains to me, as if it were one of his classes, the typology of the constructions of the area, the rock that produces that wine and why they are so special, wine and landscape, resisting while adapting to the Tramontane wind. He points to the Canigó mountain and, with that small gesture, he casts a thread that ties what we will do in these couple of days to the coming months.

'This weekend we won't have time head up there, but we have to do it before the snow comes.'

'...'

'The Pyrenees end at Cap de Creus. Tomorrow we'll walk over rocks that are millions of years old. You'll love it, bug.'

My head thinks about what we'll do when winter comes and my feet anticipate the ground they'll tread. I breathe deeply and let go the unease I had been holding in since I realised I liked him. These days will be that start of everything. The road leads to the beach, but we continue a little further, towards La Selva de Mar and an inn, where we are almost alone, presided over by a friendly

hippy woman who gives us *the loveliest room for the happy couple*.

Bright and early, we take the coastal route that leads from Tamariua cove to Fornells cove. We've come to Cap de Creus because, just like with the Silvio songs yesterday, he wants to show me a corner of the world that is his. And, with this fragment of a map, let me see who he is. These are the first days of autumn and on the beach a group of women enter the sea, naked, celebrating what seems to be a sacred ritual. They walk slowly, feeling the sand and pebbles with the soles of their feet, regaining their balance when they trip on a larger stone, dancing to the rhythm of the waves. They enter the water slowly, allowing their skin to adapt to the cold. Some hold hands. They take heart, they laugh, they celebrate. One of them looks at me and for a moment I long to form part of that festival of bodies, sand and sea but the scent of Sergi's skin intervenes, three steps ahead of me. I decide to follow him and the coastal path

The scenery unfolds imposingly as we proceed. Port de la Selva before us, Llançà and Colera on the other side of the bay and the Canigó in the distance. The sea like a pond, the blue sky cloudless and with our movement it is warm enough for me to want to take off my jacket and desire to bathe in the coves we'll find along the way. Then, suddenly, as if they were painted there, prickly pear cacti brimming with an intensely-crimson-coloured fruit atop the green of the pads and the blue tones of the surroundings, some so ripe they have fallen to the floor. The image is of such beauty it seems set up. They must be delicious, I think, and I choose one to eat, although I quickly remember the infinity of spikes they have. It took my sister Núria two days to get one

out when she was younger, one time when, with my other sister, Anna, they decided to pick all the prickly pears from a cactus. I recall her sat in the kitchen at home, her hands full of tiny needles and our mum and a neighbour removing them with tweezers. They told her prickly pears were as devious as they are delicious, that you don't even realise how they prick you. And, half joking and half scolding her, they gave her instructions for when she next picked any:

'This'll happen to you once in a lifetime and that's it,' they told her. And I, as a young girl, tried to memorise the rules: one, don't take them from the cactus but from the ground, as that is when you know they're ripe; two, roll them on the ground so all the spikes stay in the sand, using your foot or a stick; three, open them with a knife; four, scoop out the pulp with a spoon.

I'm carrying a knife and wearing walking boots. Disciplined, I follow the instructions: I choose one, I make the ground remove its spikes and, carefully, I blow the dust off it and open it. The pulp is as sweet and fleshy as I imagined, and it feels like quite the feat to have my hands intact.

Sergi realises I'm not following him. He stops, turns and says:

'I've never met anyone who dared to take on a prickly pear.'

And just as I am about to explain to him how to eat them, I feel a spike on my lip. I disguise the discomfort. I smile and blow him a kiss, gently, so as not to hurt myself.

All the way to Fornells cove, behind him, I try to remove the spike, poking myself in silence. I recount all the steps that must be followed, checking to see what I'd done wrong. I curse myself. I try not to let him see my mistake.

'So, mister professor, as you know all the names in the world, what's that islet there?'

‘La Meda de Terra. We’ve just come around Cap Mitjà. Look over there: we’re leaving behind the Port and Llançà and all that white-smudge-of-second-homes-and-seasonal-apartments-trying-to-imitate-the-native-architecture. When we get there, we’ll only see the sea. We came here with the scouts and it was like being on a desert island.

I like the care he takes in gathering words, dissecting and grouping them, to place them upon the exact geographic phenomenon.

He knows the names of all the mountains, rivers and valleys, the headlands and islets, as if the world were his possession. He builds, stone by stone, all the elements that make up the universe.

On the way to the paradise he has promised me, the mar expands before me. I run my tongue over the spike and the stinging returns to my lip. I try and fail to take it out with my fingers, but once we reach the cove I give up, distracted by the beauty of this part of the world. Maybe if I stop obsessing, it will come out on its own.

In October there’s no one else apart from us. We take a quick dip and dry off in the sun, side by side, naked, with our eyes closed and stroking each other’s arms, backs, sexes. I run my fingers over the snake he has tattooed on his wrist. I want to memorise the drawing and always remember this place. Sergi is a man of his word. We have a desert island on which to swim, talk and examine each other’s scars. His: one on his arm, from when he was ten and fell off his bike, another on his forehead, from acting the big man to impress a girl in scouts and jumping off a rock, in this very cave. Mine: one on my eyebrow, from when I ran into the door when skating down the corridor, and a chipped tooth from a drunken night with my colleagues from the radio.

And a spike in my lip that I don't want to spoil your kisses, I think.

We avoid scars of the heart, although they are there. Wounds that, in the long run, we won't be able to hide. I sense his, built from words or silences I catch in the wind. As he does with me, I suppose. We'll discover them little by little. Without rushing.

On Sunday we go back home, avoiding the motorway, looking for country roads and a bar to have dinner in, not out of hunger, but simply to prolong the weekend as much as we can. We arrange to go to Carrer de Verdi. He drops me off outside my building after midnight and, when I reach my flat, I receive a message on my phone:

You've left your PJs in the car. That must be a good sign.

I'm wearing the same clothes as yesterday and I should go home, put a wash on and shower. But want to keep Sergi's scent, hugging me tightly, on my skin. That feeling prolongs the time we are together, even when we're doing our own thing, especially when I get into bed and I smell him between the sheets, as if he were next to me despite being far apart.

His smell and I decide not to stop by the flat and instead walk to Gràcia, where my friends are waiting for me to have dinner. They spot me from the other side of the square. They wave and Raül comes over to me and says:

'A month without showing up. Not for Sol Soler, not for Cangrejo. A month! Look, darling, we get it, this guy is handsome, intelligent and a bit rugged, just the way you like them, but do us a favour and come back down to earth, because we thought something had happened to you...'

'Good thing your articles in the paper have your name, so we at least have a sign of life!'

I laugh.

'You lot love to exaggerate!'

'For now she's here in the Plaça del Sol and over dinner she'll tell us how the trip to Cap de Creus went,' says Laura. 'But her face already tells the story.'

'Your skin hasn't been this radiant since you were eighteen. And that giddy face, come on.'

'Wake up Mireia, it's like you're daydreaming. If not for the fact everyone has news to share, I'd put your wedding as the only order of business, as we want the full story from top to bottom,' says Marc, stressing the last word and winking.

'Especially the date, to know when we need to start dieting to look cute in the photos.'

'Well, just the other day he asked for my hand. We'll be married in Montserrat, I'll have a train like Lady Di's and you will all be my bridesmaids, you'll be on the cover of *Hola*, all lined up and wearing the same colour...'

We laugh and chat about where we'd buy the dresses for the bride and bridesmaids, then we argue over what we'll have for dinner and what we'll say, as usual: each of us suggests a headline and, between exclamations, we establish an order of priorities, and when we've finished, we have to go down to Cangrejo. Laura is going off to work in Ecuador for six months, Marc has decided to do a postgraduate in Tolosa and Raúl is sleeping with his ex again. Work, moves, sex and love superimposed over food and drink. I miss them pre-emptively. It's not just me distancing myself, it's them leaving too. We have a short time left together in the same city, but we act like everything will remain the same, forever.

Just as the wine arrives, I receive a message that reads *Good evening, bug, talk me up to your friends*, and, as my face lights up and I can't stop smiling, they have the perfect excuse.

Marc looks into my eyes.

‘Okay, let’s hear your story, come on. We’ll get it out the way now because otherwise you’ll have that giddy face the whole dinner.’

‘What do you want to know? I’m on a cloud all day, as if I were thirteen and the boy I liked asked to walk me home. We see each other almost every day. We like each other a lot.’

They give me the standard interrogation, punctuated by ordering dinner: where does he live, who with, what does he do exactly? Are you sure he doesn’t have a crazy ex like that idiot you were seeing when you worked at the radio? He’s not married like that other bastard, is he? And when will we meet him, Mireia?’

‘I have to be able to tell my mum what your boyfriend does for a living, because she cares a lot about you and wants you to have a good match,’ laughs Raül. ‘She always asks me why are you aren’t presenting the news when you’re so attractive...’

I answer all their questions freely, dreaming out loud, growing our bubble. He’s an architect. A proper gentleman, who waits for me after work. He’s not married, but he separated at the beginning of the year. It seems his ex was controlling and didn’t let him breathe. Now she has gone to live in England. He’s free. He makes the best potato and onion omelette in the world and really brilliant biscuits and other things I won’t tell you because I know you. Don’t worry, he’s not another idiot. He’s already told his siblings about me, he isn’t hiding me.

I could talk about Sergi all day. I’d have his name in my mouth constantly, listening to the sound the air makes as it leaves my lips, feeling it once and again. Gradually, as I wear out his name and sum up the weeks that have

passed since the last time we all met up, I touch ground and remember that, as nice as it is, I have to leave the bubble. If I breathe the same air all the time, I'll poison myself. I make up an excuse to move on to the next item on the agenda.

When I get home, I send him a message: *You passed the test. They want to meet you. Goodnight.* To which he responds with a *Good morning, bug. See how I'm irresistible?*

The next day we meet up to go to the cinema and we do the small things together. We build a routine out of delicate gestures. We go together to buy a set of sheets. He waits for me with dinner made when I finish late at the newspaper. He tells me how his classes have gone at the university and how at work they manage to reconcile creativity and urban planning rules in the same project. I scold him if he gets distracted when it's my turn and I tell him about the articles I've written, the interviews I've done or the power struggles at the paper. Little by little, we colonise time and spaces. Now it's not just his smell on the sheets that makes him present, it's the pair of boxers in my underwear drawer and the second toothbrush in the bathroom.

Although not by design, we are sleeping together every day, at his place or mine. We always find a plan for the next day. In the morning he makes me coffee the way I like it: long and without sugar. I don't even think about making plans with anyone else. It doesn't cross my mind. Everything is him. I'll see my friends and family further down the line. I'll catch up on my yoga classes. I'll tell Marionna I'll skip a few days at the swimming pool. I spend all day checking my phone for messages from him. *The sky is so beautiful, bug, I wish you were looking at it with me; Can't wait for it to be this evening already; In case you forget: you're*

beautiful. I think about his hair, his skin, his fingers. I know his tattoo. I feel his sex, as if it were still inside me. I don't answer the messages from Francesc or Oscar. And when I bump into them and they ask if I've been hiding in a cave, I tell them I'm seeing someone and that we probably won't go out again. I don't need to explain why. They have nothing to offer me now.

For the early-December long weekend we set off for the Canigó mountain laden with old newspapers, my books and his notebooks. Sergi will have time to draw and I to read, once we accomplish the mission that brings us to the Conflent region. With the summit scaled, we'll get up late and have long, lazy brunches the rest of the days.

'Look, I've brought you the interview we did with Silvo Rodrríguez when he played in Barcelona.'

'How did it go?'

'He'd spent the whole day doing promotional work but he was very polite and pleasant, very professional. Let me know what you think.'

I gave him a wink and then turn my attention to the coffee he's made me and the reading awaiting me. He doesn't say anything so I tease him.

'You're very concentrated. If you like, I'll dedicate the piece to you!'

For a second, his face changes and a mist descends.

'Looking at a two-page spread of your girlfriend trying to chat up a singer isn't exactly pleasant.'

But he quickly regains his expression and reaches out his hand, smiling.

'No wonder, when you've got the most beautiful woman in the world in front of you!'

'I was doing my job. Don't you go and get jealous on me now!'

He had said it laughing, but I reread the interview to see if I could find any traces of my flirting, looking for clues I may have passed over. I don't want anyone to doubt my professionalism.

'Come on, don't play innocent, you know how to play the game. Look at me: you've got me right where you want me.'

I feel his desire and his urge to have me all to himself, and I like it. He gives me a long, intense kiss.

'Don't run away from me,' he whispers in my ear.

Sunday night, in bed, alone for the first time in a few days, I run my tongue over my lip. I think I can feel the spike.

‘I live on a cloud.’

That’s what I tell my friends, sisters or work colleagues when they ask me how it’s going on Sant Llogari, our new street in the village. They are happy for me. All of them, except my mother.

Sergi comes to a Sunday lunch at my parents’ house and, as soon as he arrives, my brothers-in-law greet him and ask him how he managed to capture me and carry me out of the city, since I’ve always been so Barcelonan.

‘She was the one who trapped me with her charm. She’s got me hooked and she takes me wherever she wants!’

‘Don’t believe a word of it!’

‘That you aren’t the most wonderful woman in the world?’

‘That I do with you as I wish.’

He leans in to give me a kiss and says, into my ear:

‘You know I love it, that you want to tame me.’

My mum comes out of the kitchen and, witnessing the scene, calls us to order:

‘Come on, set the table, it’s like you’re a bunch of teenagers!’

Once we’re sat down to lunch, my dad observes him first and then gives him a subtle interrogation, examining him with every question. With every answer, I see how he is making a place for him in the family, until he announces:

‘Well, now we have someone to come get the churros with us on the morning of St Stephen’s Day!’

Not so my mother. Raised to make sure we don’t choke, get hurt or stung, my mother watches him from the moment he crosses the threshold until he leaves. She puts on that face that mothers do when their daughter climbs on a chair: Mireia, be careful, you’ll fall. Mireia, look out, you’ll get a scratch. Mireia, put the knife down, you’ll cut yourself. My mum makes that face that says: you’re making a mistake. That face that says: I don’t know why you followed that man fifty kilometres away from where you have a life and a job. That face that says: that isn’t they way I brought you up. Even though he has all the ingredients to be the perfect son-in-law: handsome, polite and an architect.

In the following months, every time I go to see her, she will take the chance to remind me that my dream, as a little girl, wasn’t living in a village.

‘I was cleaning the laundry room and look what I found,’ and she shows me the certificate I was awarded at fourteen-years-old when I won a school prize organised by *Avui*. ‘You went to collect it and came back saying you wanted to work at *The New York Times*.’

My mother will hurry me towards buying a car.

'Don't be like me, I passed my test and then became scared of driving. My whole life unable to go where I wanted when I wanted.

My mother, from now on, every time she looks at me, will think that by taking flight I am disobeying her only commandment: never depend on a man. She doesn't understand. She who had to start working at twelve-years-old. She who, when she got married, had to move neighbourhoods and go years without seeing her friends. She who left her job as a secretary because *she had to be there for those at home*. She who raised us to enjoy the freedom she never had, looks at me. And she doesn't understand me. Because she's already made her peace with my sisters, but I was her last hope. I had to be free. But what she doesn't know is that I already am, and when I have a car I will regain all of my independence. Castellterçol isn't so far from Barcelona, there are people who commute from there every day, mum. You don't need to worry about me, I left home years ago. With my work I can adapt. You're overplaying this. 2007 isn't 1969. I've lived alone for years, mum. I'm very in love.

Even to me it is a little strange to hear it like that, that I don't need friends or work or a car. My group of friends will always be there, they rate me highly at the newspaper. Besides, we still spend two nights a week at my flat in El Raval. I don't miss my old life. I enjoy driving back and forth, following the windy roads from Barcelona to Moianès, seeing how the seasons take hold of out on the fields and the trees we see on either side, and finding balance as we move, in a choreography that goes from the city to the village, between a flat behind the MACBA and a house on a postcard-worthy street.

We are a well-oiled machine that tidies the house, a fine-tuned mechanism operated by Sergi where I obey his orders and trust he knows exactly what is needed in every corner. Meticulous as he is, he has prepared sketches of what we will do in every room, with colour codes, furniture and fabrics. He has the ability to convert an until-recently unknown space into our home, with small things taken from here and there and, although the Vichy pattern towels are too much for me, I don't say anything so as not to dampen this happiness. One day he arrives from a worksite visit with ten swallow's nests. He has decided to offer our house once more to a group of tiny birds that cross continents every, so that they eat the flies and act as our soundtrack from spring to autumn.

I no longer go swimming with Mariona or to yoga with Laura. I cast off deadweight in order to fly ever higher. Sergi fills all my hours, thoughts and desires and, if I ever think I'm giving too much, I quickly move on. I don't have

time for anything else until we've finished painting. I'll go back when we've adapted to the new routine.

I live on a cloud and I am exalted, full of energy, when we find a cupboard for my grandmother's crockery in an antique store in Montpellier on one of our weekend drives.

'Our house won't be like everyone else's, bug. Our house will be you and me.'

We don't need anything else. His whole being is in Carrer Sant Llogari, but mine isn't yet, because my books, which are my wings, are still in El Raval. While we wait for the right time to bring them to the house, Sergi designs and builds some shelves and, while cutting the wood, he gets a splinter.

'Damn your bloody bookshelves, bug!'

'Come here, I'll make it better and your finger will be as good as new,' I smile and take his hand softly.

'Get out! Don't touch me. I'll never finish if you start playing nurses and doctors.' I don't recognise him. Anger has deformed his face. Brusquely, he lets go of my hand and I feel a twinge that freezes me. Heart, body and wings.

'What's wrong?'

'You should know what's wrong.'

He stiffens.

'You hurt yourself and you're annoyed at yourself. Come on...'

I approach him confidently.

'You don't understand anything,' he says with a hard glare that stops me in my tracks.

'But...'

'You always do things your way. Leave me be!'

A shadow has fallen over him.

He doesn't even look at me.

He takes out the splinter, wraps up his finger and continues his work while I remain rooted to the same spot, gobsmacked.

Suddenly, I am smaller.

Frozen and with a knot in my stomach, I wait, incredulous, for him to apologise and explain what came over him. But he doesn't say anything. Then anger takes hold of me and I storm out the house so as not to turn a splinter into a nuclear disaster. I try to breathe deeply. Once, twice, three times. Standing looking through the window, I watch Sergi go into the kitchen and disappear from sight. On the street, the houses annoy me, all neatly aligned, white, happy. I walk quicker to leave behind all that perfection, almost running, until the asphalt ends and the track leading to the Creueta begins. I reach the top breathless and, not knowing where I'm going, I head into the forest. I need to breathe, to loosen the knot in my stomach.

The wind moves the leaves on the poplars and ash trees and, gradually, my thoughts and breathing slow down. I feel bewildered and mad at myself for having made such a scene. It's beginning to get dark. He's made no attempt to clear up the matter. No gesture. No word. Nor has he apologised. He didn't say anything when I left.

I should go back.

And what if you don't go home? You quickly shut the world this question opens. That is a path you have already decided not to walk. Trust in us. You want it to work. For real this time. What are you doing here, in the middle of the forest? It's a daft argument, Mireia, he'll get over it. You sometimes have bad days, too.

I begin to retrace my footsteps. The bubble cannot contain us indefinitely. You knew that sooner or later the frictions of living together would deflate it. When I'm back

at the Creueta, I look towards Montseny in the distance and, beyond it, the certainty of Cap de Creus. Since that weekend a year ago now, you have been flying higher and higher, holding his hand, as if it were the first time. And today, when he let go, you were scared.

Of what? Of living with your parents again at thirty? Of being alone? Of not living the life you want? Of the shame of failure? Of Sergi's reaction? Don't be a drama queen. Sergi would never hurt you. Stop and breathe, Mireia. You think too much. Maybe I should have shut up. Maybe I do need to be patient and learn to think first.

Get a move on, the streetlights are already lit.

I come across Carme's son, who is running behind his daughter's bike. I close my eyes and see my father.

'Today I'll teach you how to ride a bike.'

He said it while we were having breakfast together, like every Sunday. He said it was our ritual: taking a croissant, filling it with cream mum brought from the patisserie and, while we ate, we decided what we would do that morning. I copied his movements as if I were his reflection in the mirror. When I grew up I wanted to be him.

'Maybe she doesn't fancy it,' I hear my mother say from the kitchen.

But not following him doesn't even cross my mind.

'She's old enough. It's time.'

My world was tailored to his measurements. There only existed places that he had visited. Things were just as he liked them, as tall as him, as young or as old as him. When we hiked around the mountain and he looked at me, I knew I couldn't fall. When he congratulated me on my school marks, I knew I'd worked hard. When I put on new shoes and he told me I was beautiful, I existed, for a moment, above my sisters.

I follow him to the garage with a cloth in my hand. We have to dust it down, it's been a while since Núria took it out. She and Anna are older now and are embarrassed to be seen on a BH with a little basket. They ask for a moped every day, but they have to content themselves with riding pillion. They are fourteen-years-old. I'm seven.

'You'll get it right away, Mireia. Then you can come with me to get the newspaper.'

We adjust the seat and the handlebar to my height. We lift the kickstand.

'Dad, Cristina's bike has stabilisers.'

'My daughter doesn't need those.'

Cristina had stabilisers because she could fall. But I couldn't, as I was my father's daughter. At seven I could handle anything.

We go out into the street. There's a downhill slope. I climb on. My feet don't touch the ground. If he doesn't hold me, I'll fall.

'This is the front brake. This is the back brake. Try them, press them hard.'

My hands are too small and I can't squeeze tightly. I don't tell him. I don't want him to think I'm not his daughter.

He walks alongside me, with one hand on the seat and the other on the handlebar.

'Ok, pedal.'

The bike gathers speed.

'Dad, I'm scared.'

He doesn't hear me. I keep staring down the hill.

'Dad, I can't.'

I feel him let me go, loosening his grip with every step, and the bicycle wobbles.

I lose control and fall. I've grazed my hands and legs on the asphalt and I see the blood starting to emerge from

the scratches, drop by drop. He comes over, lifts up the bike and pushes it up the road.

‘Let’s go again.’

I follow him.

‘Dad, I’m scared. I want stabilisers like Cristina.’

‘No daughter of mine needs stabilisers. Up you get! You can do it!’

We try it once, twice, three times. Fear paralyses me. As soon as I begin to pedal, I lose control and let myself fall.

He loses drops of patience with every attempt. Each time he gets angrier.

‘Your sisters learnt first time. I learnt by myself.’

What if I can’t? Will I not be his daughter? I cry tears of rage at not being enough. My legs and hands hurt. I’m so stiff I can’t steer the handlebars.

For the first time in my life, I rebel. I begin to walk home-wards. I’m not my sisters. I’m me. Why doesn’t he listen to me?

‘Where are you going?’

‘I don’t want to ride without stabilisers.’

‘So what will you do? Will you be like mum, who can’t come cycling with me?’

I didn’t want to be like mum. I wanted to be like dad. But the fear of falling was stronger. I say nothing and keep walking.

‘Mireia! Come here!’

‘No! Not without stabilisers!’

He looks at me like he never has before. I’ve never seen him so angry. He thinks I’m not his daughter.

‘Pick up the bike, then! You’ll figure it out yourself.’

‘I’ll ask Cristina to teach me.’

And then, the decree:

‘No one will ever love you if you always do things your way.’

My feet hurt. I look at them and realise I left the house in my slippers and that I’ve destroyed them. I knock on the door, hoping that Sergi will say he was worried and ask where I’ve been.

‘I thought I’d be having dinner alone.’

I don’t understand a word.

No doubt we’ll talk at the table. I go into the dining room and watch him cook while Silvio croons, and I am even more disconcerted because soon he turns, blows me a kiss and, as if a shadow hadn’t fallen over him, he shows me his work.

‘I just need to varnish them. Stylish shelves for a stylish journalist. Here you can have your beloved library. And my zoetrope in the middle.’

We eat as if nothing had happened and I think it’s best if we leave it be for today. I’m very tired. The next day he doesn’t want to talk about it, he’s sorry we got mad and, as the days go by, the Sergi I know returns. His reaction resonates ever further away, like an echo. It fades so much that I doubt if it really happened or whether I invented it.

‘Sergi, the day of the shelves...’

‘Bug, don’t think any more of it. I barely remember it.’

The books are now in boxes, ready to leave the last refuge of my solitary existence and for my whole being to be in Carrer Sant Llogari. Do I want to put that at risk by insisting and confusing us?

‘I’d like if the next time something like that happens you could tell me what’s wrong. You reacted in a way that...’

‘I didn’t understand either why you left without saying anything. Don’t you see that without you this house doesn’t make sense?’

I convince myself that I tend to overreact. I shouldn't have responded that way.

I agree with the newspaper that I'll leave a number of articles ready to cover the first few weeks after giving birth and that, as soon as I'm able to get back to work, they'll save a spot for me in the Sunday supplement. I spread my wings. The pregnancy won't hold me back. I fly. I send a message to my friends and another to my family. I don't want to tell Sergi by phone because I want to give him a surprise. I wait until I get home.

'Whose dick did you have to suck to get a promotion like that?' His face turns bitter and dark once more.

'What?' Something gets stuck in my wings. I stop dead. What?

'It's a joke, bug, I'm really pleased for you.'

I try to ignore the sinking feeling. I try to plan.

'Only you find that joke funny.'

He pinches my bum as he goes to get the plates to lay the table. My wings aren't responding.

'It's a joke.'

He laughs. I sink. Then he adds:

‘By the way, I’ve been talking to Xavi and my brother and as the works are just about finished and the little tyke is still a while away, we’ll go hiking for a few days. Once she’s born, I won’t be able to tear myself away from her for a minute, because this girl is going to be as gorgeous as her mother and we won’t be able to leave her alone.’

‘I’m glad you’re spending time with your friends. They must miss your sense of humour.’

I touch the ground taking care not to break anything. I look at my arms and I don’t have any scratches, but I feel the pain in my chest.

When he sleeps, I stroke his tattoo and I run my fingers over his body, seeking out the nest where he buries all this resentment. I look at him thinking he must have an identical twin brother who hates me and swaps places with him sometimes, like Anna and Núria did when they were fifteen. A nasty joke sometimes, like the ones his father makes. But he doesn’t want to be his father. I see how he hates him, how he fights to differentiate himself from him, how he loves Consol, his mother.

Clara moves inside me, asking for attention. *Relax, mum*, I sense she tells me, *dad isn’t grandad*.

I close my eyes and fall asleep. Every day I wake up heavier and I go to work and come back home and he loves me and I go to sleep again and he’s going away for a few days and I think it will do us good to miss each other a bit.

I miss you both a lot, bug.

How’s it going at the paper? I read your latest articles and they’re really good. As if nothing had happened.

Since I went to Valencia we haven't been apart and it feels strange to have breakfast alone and have the bed to myself again. I spread out. I leave my things all over the house, I go to places I've been missing for months. It's only a week but I miss Sergi so much that, when I go to bed, I put his pyjamas under my pillow. But I also make the most of these days to be with the rest of myself that I left to one side a long time ago. I breathe. I make up for lost time with my friends and store it up for the weeks we'll spend inside the nest, with a chick under my wing.

'We could have dinner with Berta and Laura seeing as you're here. Because you'll burst and then disappear completely!'

'Don't exaggerate, it's not like we never see each other!'

'Mariona sometimes, as we see her around the neighbourhood, but you, Mireia, we don't catch a glimpse of you. Ever since Mr Perfect kidnapped you it's impossible to get you to a dinner or the cinema.'

I hope this man is worth it, is what Raül means. Indeed, when I miss my friends dearly, I hope so too. I don't tell him that most of the time he is, but that sometimes I miss my life before, as I'm embarrassed. Maybe I shouldn't have gone so far away. I think that sometimes and I know they always think it. My mum, my sisters, my friends, my colleagues at the paper. They see me and they must wonder: why has she given up so much for him? But I haven't given up anything. We live near the forest in a house with a garden, a fireplace, a pond to keep us cool, and soon Clara will be born. It is only occasionally, when Sergi clouds over or the road to the village feels eternal, that I really hope I didn't make a mistake.

I need to make the most of these days and fill up on Barcelona. On exhibitions, on lunches with someone different

every day, on walking everywhere, on wandering the streets of El Raval and the Gothic Quarter, on the reek of piss, on going up Verdi from Revolution Square. I have to fill up on all that in case two years go by again without being able to enjoy it like this. And I work hard, preparing for the weeks when I won't enter the office. I move around the whole day feeling free, but I don't notice the tiredness. I allow the city to wash over me and saturate me with myself and the life I had, in order to face the months when I will lead an existence that will colonise me and no longer only be mine.

The telephone rings and it's Consol. I reply surprised. My hello hides a *why are you calling me?*

'How are you feeling Mireia?'

'A bit tired but fine. Do you need anything? Have you spoken to your son?'

'Yes, he called me yesterday and he told me he's having a good time. I just wanted to know how you were getting on. When I was pregnant with Pep, by this point, I was fed up.'

'I am working long hours, to be honest, but I'm fine for now. If I need anything, I'll let you know. Thanks, really.'

'Don't tell Sergi I called you, he'll say I'm a nuisance.'

'Don't worry about that.' Soon we'll be part of the same community, I almost tell her. 'Thanks for looking out for me.'

When Sergi gets home, we spend all of Sunday in bed, telling each other what we've done in the last few days, kissing, touching each other and my stomach, singing Silvio songs to Clara, allowing our scents to mingle again.

‘Since I got back, every time I look at you, you’re lost in your phone. It seems like you care more about your friends than me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you tired of living with me already?’

‘Woah! It’s a way of being with the group, even though I don’t live in Barcelona. I miss them, and Marc is so funny! Look...’

‘So keen to put yourself on display. Honestly, I thought you were above that, bug.’

‘What’s wrong? What do you want?’

‘You should know what I want by now.’

We repeat the same conversation almost every day with small variations: if it’s not that I care more about my friends than him, it’s that I’ve become a postmodern capitalist sellout who needs the approval of others, or that I’m bored in this simple, humble village and I miss stupid, arrogant Barcelona.

Over and over again.

‘From time to time I need to see my family and friends. And now Clara is almost born and I’ll be spending more time here, it’s a way of keeping them close.’

‘I see I’m not enough for you, bug.’

‘It’s not about that. Don’t you see that, to build a life with you, I’ve cast my friends and family aside? I’ve changed my daily life to live here with you, Sergi. Don’t you need to be with your people?’

‘You are my people. And Clara. I don’t need anyone else.’

I try to explain it to you, to rid the matter of importance until, to not hear you, I end up looking at Facebook every time I go to the toilet. I start to betray you sat on the toilet seat, chatting. It’s absurd, but I betray you. Why

should I have to hide a triviality like that from you? Because as long as you don't see me with my phone in my hand, we don't have that repetitive and absurd conversation. It's a small, inoffensive rebellion, done so as not to argue any more, like when dad was away and my mum let us have school dinners instead of coming home for lunch, *if you don't tell dad*. Why would dad be angry? Why did school dinners have to be a secret? So as not to start stupid arguments about unimportant things, now I get it. To not feel a stranger to herself. To be able to go back to her neighbourhood. To be able to vent about life with her husband and daughters. Because just like my mother needed that time without us, now I also need to maintain the thread that ties me to my previous life.

'Imagine I couldn't even have lunch with my friends now and again,' my mother used to say. Staying in the school canteen was an inoffensive lie. What else could she do? When since moving neighbourhoods after she got married she only saw them twice a year. When she'd lost her parents a few weeks apart just after coming back from her honeymoon and the only people who knew who she was before meeting my dad lived six metro stops away. And we loved having lunch at school. Just imagine, said my mum.

'But don't tell your dad.'

That's how we learnt that, if it's not important, there's no need to fight over silly things. So there you have it. Looking at Facebook in the bathroom doesn't hurt anyone.

‘Look, bug, there are tadpoles in the pond! When our little bug is born, she’ll have frogs to play with.’

I would die of disgust if it wasn’t for the anxiety rooted in my chest. I can’t imagine how Clara’s birth will go, even though I’ve asked and listened to every woman I know who’s had a child. I look for videos and try to predict what kind of pain I’ll feel. My mother was anaesthetised and doesn’t remember anything. My sisters have varying stories. Mariona tells me it was surprisingly easy, but I’m convinced I won’t be so lucky. That voice, that whispers to me. The birth becomes an inevitable fate from which I cannot escape, a nebula in an exterior galaxy that is expanding and will soon swallow me up like a black hole, where everything will disappear. I’m obsessed by the pain and the opening movement my body has to make. My body. That moved so lightly, so freely, and which now feels so stiff. I’m scared. I doubt myself. I don’t know if I’ll be able to. I read everything, I watch everything and I ask everything, but I cannot

translate it all to my flesh, to my bones, to my skin. Sometimes the anxiety burrows deep down and I have to get up and walk to feel that this body is mine, to know I'm really still alive, that I'm not nothing and that the baby hasn't been born yet. Then I desire with every fibre of my being for her to be out of me and to stay inside me at the same time. Every day that passes is a day less.

We have dinner in the on the patio and talk about what we've done during the day. Suddenly we fall silent and look at each other, happy. A frog ribbits and my uterus goes plop! I feel the water running through my soaked knickers and it surprises me. There are animals in the pond and Clara is on her way. We act as a team with movements we've imagined many times. The knot in my stomach takes hold of me. Sergi is calm and helps me to shower, to take the bag and get comfortable in the car. We make our way down the road towards the hospital. He holds my hand gently. The birth has begun. That's what the books say, but I don't feel any pain and I'm disconcerted.

'You did the right thing coming in. It's time.'

This certainty paralyses me. My body refuses to do anything. Are you sure everything is okay? The midwives ask me if I have contractions, how strong they are, how frequent. No, I don't. Neither strong nor gentle. Are you sure this is normal?

'It's your first, dear. You'll be here for a while.'

'Can't we go back home then, where I'll be calmer?'

It's not safe and it's not worth it, they tell us. We're staying here.

I walk around the room. I try to breathe how they showed me at the prenatal classes. I put music on and turn up the volume because not a single note comes out my headphones.

'Turn the sound down, bug, it's very loud.'

I don't hear anything. I don't feel anything. Nothing is any use to me. My body has to open, but it resists.

We have frogs in the pond.

This isn't how you imagined it. Open up, Mireia. Relax. Calm down. Walk. Concentrate. Let yourself go. Breathe.

Sergi rubs my back lovingly, but I can't stop repeating to myself, as it were a mantra: we have frogs in the pond. We have frogs in the pond.

We.

Have.

Frogs.

In.

The.

Pond.

I try to make my head pull my body, like I have done so many times in the mountains, when my legs give in. But it doesn't work. And as time goes by, I'm blinder and deafer to what's happening to me. My-body-does-not-move. I cannot trust it. I can only leave myself in the hands of the midwives. Motionless. Paralysed. Frightened. Ever more iron-stiff. A recluse in this room and this body. With another body inside me, which is also frightened. Sergi hugs me silently. I don't want him to touch me, I need to move freely. I don't want him to look at me either, I can't stand it. He makes me nauseous. Don't give me orders, only I can do that. Despite the fear, I manage to speak:

'Is this normal?'

'Relax, she's dropped, but you can't feel that.'

You don't say anything, but I'm certain that, as the hours go by and my body doesn't open, I disappoint you. A far cry from the women you saw in Cuba with free bodies and easy homebirths, surrounded by mothers, sisters

and jubilation. I'm not the deity you imagined, with wide hips and burgeoning breasts. You hug me and don't let me move, and I need to move, Sergi. You must be scared too. In the moment of truth, I'm a fraud. Hours go by and this isn't progressing, there are no contractions, dilation or pain. Only fear. Open up. Relax. Calm down. Walk. Concentrate. Let yourself go. Breathe. Until someone decides we've been there too long, they give me oxytocin and the pain is so unbearable it paralyses me and I can't breathe. Open up. Relax. Breathe.

You don't say anything to me, Sergi. You just look at me. I ask them to give me the epidural and I disappoint you, resorting to anaesthesia to numb the pain. My body isn't free and this isn't an easy birth. Here I don't know anyone except you. But you don't do anything, you don't say anything to me, you don't move. My mum isn't here to tell me everything will be okay, nor Berta to tell me when it's over we'll celebrate with a bottle of wine. I'm alone. The needle in my spine ends the pain and I disappoint you again when, hours later, I ask them to please take Clara out of me, to perform a caesarean if necessary. I disappoint you when the midwives say *push* and I try with all my strength, but Clara doesn't come out and the hours go by and I'm not the only one who's stiff, all the staff are too because it's been too long since I broke water. Until a midwife stands behind me and whispers in my ear:

'You're doing great, lovely. This girl will come out. Don't worry. Trust yourself. Breathe. Come on, let's do it.'

And I still don't know how, because I don't know if it's been two hours or two minutes, I have Clara on my chest, silent, soft, warm and purplish. And while I count her fingers to make sure they're all there and the experienced midwife rubs her vigorously with a green cloth, she breaks

out into a cry and, as the wails hit all four walls of this delivery room, the air fills every inch of her body, her skin becomes pinker, and I sob, relieved that this torture is over.

I leave the delivery room happy and exhausted but at the same time convinced that my body isn't fit for the only thing it was made to do, disconcerted because I almost killed that tiny, soft, beautiful girl who is suckling at my nipple. Convinced that nothing I've done before has prepared me for Clara's birth. Convinced that you'll no longer sing Silvio for me.

A new landscape unfolds before Mireia. The summer in Cap de Creus is coming to an end and, with Sergi by her side, she thinks her bad luck is too. It seems the future is all there is. The promise of a happy and stable relationship drives her decisions, while also spinning a web that is hard to see but ensnares everything.

MÉSLLLIBRES

The Pond tenderly narrates a woman’s journey as she seeks to rediscover herself in the midst of love, routine and the blurry lines of what we call happiness. With intimate, incisive prose, this novel gets to the heart of a romance that turns murky, and the fight to understand what remains of that initial dream. A novel that wraps us up in its atmosphere and implores us with its truth.