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Community Property

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Juan José Saer

COMMUNITY PROPERTY

They were a young couple. Recently married, they worked for a Catalan publisher, selling art books, dictionaries, encyclopedias and the like, door to door. Sometimes they went on sales trips together; other times, one of them stayed in Madrid while the other went off, or else they would work different areas teamed-up with different colleagues. They were doing well but the work was pretty hard, and they found it hard to settle down, have children, organize themselves like a regular family.

Although it may seem strange, the work left them dissatisfied, not only from a financial point of view or in terms of their professional dignity, but in an ethical sense: they weren't sure, in certain cases, whether encouraging people to go into debt to buy endless and costly encyclopedias wasn't a sort of blackmail. Many of their clients bought from them believing that a brilliant future and a change in social status would take place once they owned those huge illustrated volumes, the greater part of whose content was of no interest to them and might be out of date even before they finished making their payments. Selling something completely superfluous to someone without resources, making them believe that it was indispensable, looks a lot, to be frank, like a swindle.

For reasons that will be understandable soon enough, it is better not to say their names; suffice it to say that they were between twenty-five and thirty, that is, they were living the last stages of their youth and entering, as if through a dizzying yet slow tunnel, still fresh, into maturity. Certain aspects of what we truly are remain unknown throughout childhood, and sometimes are revealed suddenly in adolescence; in many cases, though, they appear little by little, in different stages of life, in such a way that finally, due to sudden or gradual changes, we discover that a stranger, admirable, obnoxious or odd—it doesn't matter which—has usurped the place of someone we believed we knew.

One night—they had been married for about a year and a half—she returned from a trip with a sad and anxious face. Although her husband noticed it right away he only decided to ask her what the matter was when, in the early morning, in bed, her muffled sobbing, coming from his side in the

darkness, woke him up. Then, begging him please not to turn on the light, the woman, more disconsolate than ashamed, made the terrible confession to him: from some singularity in her way of being, for reasons that escaped her, she had always felt attracted, even long before knowing him, by the idea of making love to complete strangers, and if the sincere fondness she felt for her husband had for a time hidden this singularity, that week, when she was staying by herself in a hotel in Ciudad Real, her irresistible inclination had overcome her once more, bothering her night and day until she finally gave in. The sudden desire that took hold of her, the young woman argued, had been something like an attack of madness, or as if she had suddenly departed a familiar world for some strange other one where only her desire existed, where all ties to her real life had been cut off. Before and after that attack, in the real world, her love for her husband and their life in common was all that mattered to her, and for that reason she did not feel guilty so much as disconsolate and perplexed.

The man listened to her in terror, and that night of disgust and affliction turned into a nightmarish month: recriminations and violence, cries and weeping, silences and threats, flowed from one of them to the other, day after day, as if they were slowly dismembering each other. They decided to separate forever, and then a few minutes later made love angrily and desperately in the sleepless, endless night. Instead of calming them down, alcohol made things worse, and they felt that their pain and fury would keep growing forever, until after a few weeks their rancor, their sadness and impotence, gradually diminished, giving way to a muffled gray calm. They no longer spoke of separating but she, to pay for her singularity in some fashion, resigned herself to his endless, minute interrogations about the sudden attack. Over and over again, she felt obligated to answer the strangest questions about the length of the act, the positions they had been in, what the man's body was like, the force of the pleasure, the words they exchanged, what the room looked like, the lighting, the order in which the events took place, what time it was. A thousand times the questions emerged from the man's lips, and he stared at her as he asked them, looking for new and odd details or maybe just a steady confirmation of the old ones, and a thousand times she would answer with precise and scrupulous sincerity, never even thinking about how hurtful that sincerity must have been for her husband. And the demand for truth reached the point that, when the storm seemed to be passing, and they were living in an apparent calm as if nothing had happened, she felt it necessary to tell him

that she was not certain that the attack would not return sometime in the future.

He listened to her in silence, but it was easy to guess from his look that since they couldn't separate he would ask for something in return, which he in fact did a few days later: he said to her that he accepted her as she was, but that he didn't want those things to happen behind his back or in his absence. Those attacks of hers, if he accepted them, were part of their community property and they should administer them together. Perplexed and curious, and also with a certain feeling of relief—for that proposal freed her of her feelings of guilt—the woman accepted.

For about a year and a half, when they went on a sales trip together, the same situation would be repeated every so often: in the small-town hotels where they stayed they would not register as husband and wife but as simple colleagues, and would sleep in separate but contiguous rooms. After work, they would go to the night spots, and if the woman felt attracted by a stranger—for her singularity required that it be a stranger and for one night only—the husband, in his role as working colleague, would watch them from a distance, slowly sipping his drink and absentmindedly tapping the ice cubes against the side of his glass. His heart would beat a bit faster when things got started. And if it looked like they were headed for the foreseeable ending, he would go off in the direction of the hotel, arriving there first, lying in the darkness of his room, alert and throbbing, awaiting their arrival. Each sound that announced them—the elevator or, when there wasn't one, the steps on the staircase, in the hallway, the sound of a door opening and closing—accelerated the heartbeats, increased the anxiety, redoubled his attentiveness. Lying still in the darkness, his whole being would turn toward the noises that issued from the room next door—muffled laughter, whispers, sighs, cries, the clanking of metal and the creaking of wood, the soft sound of sheets or the whisper of silk—seeming to penetrate him not only through his ears but through every pore of his body. When the stranger left, she would come to his room and in silence, without turning on the light or exchanging a single phrase (she would quietly scratch on the door and he would open it in darkness) they would make love and then sleep till morning.

While the husband's preference for these scripted adventures was increasing, the wife's was diminishing, both the frequency of the attacks and her desire for them. What had been her only freedom was slowly turning into a

sort of prison. She felt as if she had contracted an infinite debt that she would never be able to pay off. At the same time, her husband's will seemed to have taken her pleasure, transforming it into an appendix of his own desire. She no longer came during this repeated ritual, instead concentrating on each of her acts so as to make them conform in a rigorous way to her husband's fantasy. A sort of indifference took hold of her. For a time, she could not understand what was happening to her and let herself be carried along by events, but the day when she heard her husband, in the pitch of excitement, make plans for the construction of a thin wall in their own house so that she could bring home strangers and he could hear everything from the next room, she realized that the time had come when she should try to survive, so without saying anything to him, taking advantage of the fact that he was away on a trip, she wrote him a goodbye note, packed her bags, and changed not just cities but countries, continents, names.

Translated by Daniel Balderston