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PEDRO MAIRAL

Personal Hypnotizer

Translated from the Spanish by Jennifer Croft

Years ago, in a fiction workshop, I met a girl with a lot of money. Or actually, her parents had a lot of money. Her name was not Verónica, but I'm going to call her Verónica just in case, even though she doesn't even live in Argentina anymore. Verónica wrote short stories that took place in Paris, New York, Amsterdam, with characters that always got invited to big parties. The workshop was at Callao and Córdoba, and when it was over I'd take her up to Las Heras on my bicycle. We didn't realize how dangerous it was, or maybe we did and just got a kick out of that part. Only once did a bus try to run us over; it was pretty close. I stopped us by slamming my foot down on the wheel. Sometimes we would go to bookstores, and she'd buy herself a book, but then when I'd ask her if she liked it, she'd tell me she hadn't read it. She didn't really like to read. She was always running into old high-school classmates and then inveighing against them to me after. They live in a bubble, she'd tell me, they're always talking about going skiing or to Punta del Este; they don't realize there's a lot more to life than that. As is often the case, Verónica despised the people she most resembled. I don't have any pictures of her, but I remember that she was languid, more than anything else. She was more languid than pretty. I can also remember her shampoo smell while she was seated on the bike frame. Without me ever even having kissed her, she spurred me on and scorned me, subtly alternating between the two, keeping me at arm's length and yet, at the same time, within reach. If she had asked me to, I would have pedaled her all the way to Brazil.

At some point, she invited me to her place on Galileo Street; her film friends were coming later on (she studied film at some institute). Come on, I can't handle just waiting by myself. We arrived, and a security guard in a gray uniform opened the door for us. It must have been one of the few buildings in Buenos Aires that already had private, round-the-clock security back then. The apartment was enormous, decorated like in the magazines. And she was living there on her own because her parents were always off in some exotic place abroad. There was an old servant going around the kitchen with whom she

kept having terrible arguments that embarrassed her. In half an hour she had shown me her new camera; had shown me pictures from a trip to India; had shown me something on her computer that I didn't really get until some time later, when the Internet became common; had put a CD on in her super hi-fi stereo system; had gone around the whole apartment; had shown me her father's gun; and we had had ice cream, and then her friends started to get there.

I don't remember all the names. There was a girl called Fabiana and a long-haired boy named Pablo, and I thought they were going out because they were giving each other massages on the couch. They all seemed used to the place, instantly and perfectly at home in the living room, opening up the fridge and asking the servant for smoothies. I saw them again and again after that and tried to copy that confidence.

They made that their "base," and then they went off to parties at other houses. I went just once to one of those parties, where they were doing exactly the same thing but with different people and a different brand of beer: sitting down and talking about the next party they were going to go to. The best thing, the perfect party, was always at the next place.

An often-asked question came up in one or another of these sofa chats: what would you choose to have if you could have anything in the world? Most people wanted to have a different body or a lot of money. Verónica's answer caught my attention. I want to have a personal hypnotizer, she said, a "hypno"—they exist, I swear they do exist. A guy who would hypnotize me at the boring times and then wake me up for the exciting times, who would get rid of dead time for me. That's what Verónica wanted, somebody who would edit her life for her. Asked exactly what it would be like, she explained that the hypnotizer would have to put her to sleep, for example, before she went on a trip to Paris. He'd load her up in the car asleep, take her to the airport, do her paperwork and so forth, load her onto the plane, and wake her up for a little bit during the flight so she could have dinner; then he'd put her back to sleep and wake her up in the taxi, on the streets of Paris, on the way to the hotel. It needed to be a strong guy who could carry her.

The phrase "dead time" surprised me. I had heard it said by her filmmaker friends, but I hadn't completely understood it until she said it. And it made me recall some people in a neighboring tent on the beach in Pinamar: two married couples playing bridge in the afternoon, playing for hours in the shade until one of the men would look at his watch and say, "Whoof, six o'clock already, we killed the whole

afternoon!” and applause would follow that sounded like a single clap, and they would rub their hands together because the afternoon had died; they were the ones who had killed it.

Verónica wanted to kill time, too, to kill dead time. She was allergic to real time. She couldn't stand the time in between the moments in her life that she deemed really relevant. She couldn't stand the dead time she spent at stoplights or waiting in line. The moments when nothing was happening.

When it was my turn to say what I wanted, I thought how what I wanted was Verónica, but I didn't say it. I don't remember what I said in an effort to get out of saying the truth. Nor do I know now if that was the very night I managed to kiss her. I remember that we went quite a ways walking down Galileo until we sat down on the steps of the Plaza Mitre, and, because I had had quite a bit of beer, I went for it. But it was tough. She kept getting away from me. Like I wasn't even there. She lived a life that was out of sync with the present, a little ahead of time, always thinking about something cool that was going to happen later, telling me about that, a party, a film, something they were going to film, some article of clothing that her parents were going to bring her from New York, always on that anxious slope, falling forward.

I came over often. Sometimes Pablo and Fabiana were there watching videos. One Saturday night I had asked Verónica out for a drink in San Telmo, but she had said she was tired. Pretty soon, Pablo, Fabiana, and some friends from Puerto Rico who wanted to go dance salsa stopped by. They brought La Negrita rum and mixed it with Coca-Cola. I could tell Verónica was getting ready to go out, was having a great time, and I started to drink rum. One glass after another. She wanted me to go with them, but I—infected by literature—preferred the loser's sadness. I ended up buzzing her place at four in the morning, totally drunk, telling her I wanted to be her personal hypnotizer. The security guard, who recognized me by now, caught me a taxi and sent me home.

I wrote Verónica things. Poetry. One time we went to a late-night movie, and then for a drink, and then for a walk, and at a kiosk at dawn I bought the newspaper that had just come out to show her that the cultural supplement had published a poem of mine dedicated to her. I had no other aces up my sleeve, and I hadn't gotten any further than those first kisses. I had told her that I liked her, and she had said that I was “a very intense guy.” Since then, that adjective—applied to anything at all—has always caused me some embarrassment.

One afternoon I went riding up the incline of Galileo Street. The security guard greeted me: How's it going, Pedrito? Verónica's not here... Hey, so the other kid, the kid with the long hair... Who, Pablo? I asked. Yeah, he beat you out, he said. He stays over and everything. The other day I pried it out of her, you know, I said, who are you going to go with, the kid with the long hair or Pedrito?, and she says, you know, the other kid, the kid with the long hair.

I bade him farewell with a smile that was pretty dignified, given how my heart had just been broken. I went back the way I'd come on foot, next to my bicycle, without getting on it. I felt like taking off all my clothes as I went and lying down naked in the middle of the street. I don't know if it was that day exactly, but the bicycle went into storage. I didn't go back to the fiction workshop, nor did I see Verónica again. I found out from a friend of a friend that she got married and that she lives in the U.S. now.

A few years ago, I wrote a short story with her as a character in it. It must have ended up in some pile of papers. The narrator was the hypnotizer, the person in charge of casting a spell on her when she got bored. He was telling the story of what he had done that afternoon. It was set in Mexico because I thought it sounded better. And he talked about "the girl." "At two, the girl asks me to put her to sleep and take her to a party in Cuernavaca." Then he talked about putting her to sleep in her chair, loading her into the car, and sitting down in front of the steering wheel, to drive slowly. Her sleeping in the backseat, him smoking, with the window open. He described the trip and how on the way he saw a summer storm coming, and then it was raining, and there was hail. It was told in the present, because he was trapped in the present, living the dead time that she didn't want to live. Then they arrived in Cuernavaca at night, and a few blocks before they got there, the hypnotizer woke "the girl" up. He told her that it had hailed, and she got mad because she said how could he not have woken her up to see that; she would have liked to see it hail. The girl gave him a severe "telling off" and got out of the car and went off to the party, slamming the door. He was in love with her.