

Lullaby

MIREN GORROTXATEGI

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translation:
Izaro Artetxe
Amaia Erdozain

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Original title: Lo-kanta

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Just before I enter the vestibule, the door suddenly opens and someone comes out. Even though I say “goodnight”, she doesn’t look at me, and leaves grumbling, suitcase in hand. I look at my watch and go upstairs to the first floor, two steps at a time. I open the door as quietly as I can, and I take off my shoes. Even though they'd told me to visit them, they'll probably be asleep.

There was a time I recognized this smell as home, but not anymore. Now my house is filled with black vanilla scent whereas this one smells of being locked up. It isn't only the smell that is unfamiliar to me: the painting that used to decorate the hall wall has been changed too. There’s no coat of arms representing Mum and Dad’s family names; in its place there is a painting of a black woman exposing one of her breasts. The box Dad carved when he was young is still there, and, above that, a thin layer of dust covers my sister’s and my first Communion pictures. I’m wearing a dress specifically bought for the occasion, and I’m forcing a smile. My sister’s wearing the same dress, tightened up by the dressmaker; she has a broad smile, not forced.

I tiptoe into the living room. I find Dad on the sofa. There are adverts on TV; his eyes are closed, his mouth, open.

“Dad”, I whisper.

He opens his eyes and straightens his glasses on his nose. He mutes the TV.

“I couldn’t leave work sooner”, I excuse myself.

“The doctor just left.”

“And what did she say?”

“She hasn’t prescribed any new medicine. She thinks those sticky poultices for her back are enough for the pain.” He shakes his head to say he doesn't agree with the doctor’s decision.

“Dad, she’ll know best, she’s the doctor.”

“The one who came yesterday gave her another medicine to relieve the pain.”

“Is Mum in pain today too?”

"She says her throat's dry."

"But isn't she feeling pain?"

He shrugs his shoulders and switches on the sound of the TV on again, concluding the conversation. I walk along the corridor to my parents' room. The African art exhibition that begins in the hall continues throughout: colourful marketplaces, ochre-coloured sunsets, naked children, more women exposing their breasts. I hear my mum's voice groaning from her room, like an injured animal. It's dark. I switch on the small bedside light: Mum is curled up, shivering. She seems so small: her illness has worn her out. I calculate where her bony forearm might be under the duvet, and put my hand there.

"Anything wrong, Mum? Any pain?"

"Cold. I'm freezing."

I take a blanket from the wardrobe and I lay it over her. Then I sit next to her. Her groans go silent; I'm not sure if it's due to the blanket's warmth or mine.

"Better, Mum?"

"My throat gets dry."

"Do you drink enough water?"

"Of course I do. Are you staying the night here?"

"Jokin is waiting for dinner at home. Besides, you look better than yesterday, Mum. In any case, if you want to, I can lay here next to you for a bit."

I lay on my dad's side. I used to do that when I was a kid. I used to sleep until I recovered, next to Mum. Now, however, Mum's hands are the ones that look for refuge in mine. She holds them and traces circles with her thumb. I'm not comfortable, but I repress the impulse to withdraw my hand. When was the last time I held her hand? When I was a kid. When holding hands was usual; my parents', my sister's, my grandparents', my friends', some teachers'. Now only Jokin does that, and only from time to time. And now Mum has done it without asking for permission.

"Amaia called earlier", she tells me. Her face shines when she mentions Amaia's name, whereas mine darkens. "Do you meet up with her?"

"I haven't." Since you got sick, I should have specified. "Not for a while."

"She often calls, nearly everyday. It must be expensive calling from Africa, right? I ask her about my illness, but she tells me she's not a specialist and that I should listen to the local doctors."

My illness. Mum doesn't want to call it by its name, although it does have one.

"Amaia's right, Mum. She is a paediatrician. You should listen to your doctors. Anyway, is she planning to come back soon?"

"Why do you say that? I don't have much time? Are you hiding something from me?"

"No, Mum, it's not that, but..."

"With you here there's no need for her. Have you seen the painting in the hall? The one she sent for my birthday, do you remember it? It's really beautiful."

"Lovely", I lie. "What did the doctor say?"

"She got angry when I told her my throat was dry."

"Of course she would, Mum. You called A&E because your throat was dry, which was normal. I'm bringing you a glass of water."

When I signal that I'm going to get up, Mum squeezes my hand; she's seen my wish to get away.

"Stay here for a bit."

"Mum, it's late. And by now Dad must want to go to bed."

“He never goes to bed earlier than midnight.”

“Jokin is waiting for me, Mum.”

“He’s your husband, not a babe-in-arms. He’ll have dinner without you.”

Without freeing myself from Mum’s grip, I search for my phone in my bag with my other hand. “Coming for dinner?” “When are you coming?” “Lost your phone? I called you five times!” “At Mum’s,” I reply. “Yesterday’s pasta’s in the fridge. I’ll be there soon.”

“What are you doing?”, asks Mum.

“Telling Jokin I’ll be late.”

“So are you staying the night?”

“I won’t move until you fall asleep, ok?”

She tightens her grip for quite a time. That means thank you in her morse code.

“Can I go for a glass of water for you now?”

My hand is finally freed. I take the glass from her bedside table and go to the bathroom, accompanied by some Congolese views. When I open the bathroom’s door the smell of pee hits me. I fill the glass and go back to my mum’s side. She barely drinks. I lay next to her again. Now she holds both my hands. We’re facing each other, and I see how she’s looking at me, her hands too. Not only her body, the sparkle in her eyes also shows exhaustion. She closes her eyes. It seems I’m not invited to investigate her gaze’s intimate nooks.

“Perhaps I’ll fall asleep faster if you sing me a song”, she whispers without opening her eyes.

“Sing?” I can’t hold my laugh. Suddenly I push away all the tenderness that had grown up between us. Mum opens her eyes.

"I used to sing for you before going to sleep, don't you remember?"

"I used to ask for Txirri, Mirri and Txiribiton the clowns' songs; you would sing me 'Loa loa', 'Haurtxo polita', 'Amaren bularra'."

"As if I wouldn't remember. But that's usually for kids, Mum, not for grown ups."

"Sure, it's much more pleasant to love children than elders."

"Oh great, now you're into emotional blackmail."

"It's not blackmail. I only mean it's much easier to be tender with children rather than with an old grandma like me."

"Gosh! Aren't I tender enough with you?"

I glance at our hands held together on the pillow. Goodness, I've never been in such an intimate position with Jokin. Mum has closed her eyes again, it looks like she doesn't even need to answer me. Thank Goodness her throat's dry, she really needs to talk! Easier to be tender with children... Children are chosen deliberately, they are usually wanted. Perhaps not in the Congolese village where Amaia lives, but here they are. And prior to their birth, you already know that you'll sing them lullabies and that a thousand diapers will need to be changed. And you'll do both happily. But parents getting old? That's not a deliberate choice. They just get old, and you don't change their diapers that happily. All the times I got ill as a child, would you ever wonder if we were on the same side of the coin, Mum? Did you even think that at one point the tables would turn, and that it was me who would take care of you then? Did you ever think of that before getting pregnant? Even so, you got pregnant anyway? Because you had thought of that, you got pregnant?

Without any lullaby, it seems like Mum has fallen asleep, finally. Carefully, I untangle our interlaced fingers, and I get up.

Dad is asleep in front of the TV.

"Go to bed", I whisper into his ear. He turns off the television and walks along the corridor to the toilet. I put my shoes on and quietly leave.

"Where have you been?", my husband welcomes me as I come in.

"I told you, at Mum's."

"Is she in pain today again?"

"She just wanted company."

"I almost fell asleep waiting for you."

"Have you had dinner?" I ask, looking for the pasta leftovers that have already disappeared from the fridge shelves.

"I've actually digested them"

"I'm going to bed, I'm exhausted", I close the fridge rudely.

"Wait, girl", says Jokin while he holds me by the waist from behind, and after pushing my hair to one side, he bites my ear softly.

"Didn't you tell me this morning you were ovulating? It's now or never."

I look back at the smiling baby from the magazine I purposely left between the fridge and the coffee maker while Jokin caresses my nipples from outside my T-shirt. "Everything you need to know before getting pregnant" say the thick black letters near the baby. "How to bathe a newborn step by step." "Top 5 diaper brands on the market". Is there any magazine that advertises rankings for adult diapers in capital letters? Any article that explains how to shower your mum? I realise I forgot to take my pre-pregnancy pill again this morning, even though Jokin places it deliberately between the fridge and the coffee maker, next to the smiling babies' magazine.

"I don't feel like it."

I escape from Jokin's arms and go to the bathroom.

"Your sister called, she said you don't pick up. She wanted to know how your Mum is" I hear while I brush my teeth. I leave the bathroom and start taking my clothes off to put my pyjamas on. "Idoia, you can't be angry with Amaia forever."

"She chose not to take care of Mum, I chose to be angry with her. Or do I have to ask anybody for permission for that as well?"

"Don't shoot the messenger. I just wanted to let you know she called." He gets into bed with his phone in his hand.

"Jokin, if we had a baby, would you clean his bottom?"

"What a question! Of course I would, happily!"

"And would you be ready to clean mine as well?", I ask as I lay down. I don't hold his hand; we don't cross glances. He's staring at his phone screen.

"What's that for? Did you have to clean your Mum's backside?"

"I didn't. Mum is capable of cleaning her behind by herself."

"So what was that for? Not everyone ages the same way, some people can clean their bums until the day they die."

"I know, but I want a response. If I got ill, if I couldn't, would you do that for me?"

"Yeah, I'd have to."

"'Would have to?' There's a huge gap between 'happily' and 'I would have to', you know."

"Yeah, I would have to. Even you take care of your mum because you have to, right?" I don't know what to say but he isn't waiting for a response either: he doesn't take his eyes off his phone. "Anyway, I would rather die before anyone has to clean my behind."

"Are you serious? Wouldn't you let me take care of you?"

"If I had to lose my dignity, I wouldn't." He finally leaves his phone on his bedside table, and he puts an arm around my waist.

"And if you do it in the name of love, Jokin? Isn't that dignified?"

"You pay other people to do those kinds of things. There's no place for love there." He pushes my hair to one side and starts licking my neck.

"And isn't there dignity in those people's work?" I stick to my point.

"In their work, yes. It's the ill who lose their dignity, I believe", he says, and keeps on combining kisses and licks.

"Lose their dignity? Are you serious?"

"I don't know, Idoia, and I don't even care." To end the conversation, he lies on me and starts stroking my breasts.

"But you are ready to be a dad anyway."

"What does it have to do with this?". Beaten, he takes his hands off my breasts and lays near me, staring at the ceiling.

"One day, if everything goes well, you'll get old too. You don't want me to clean your behind. Would you leave that for our child? You want to condemn your descendants to clean your dirty diapers just because you would happily clean your child's smooth butt?"

"No one has been condemned here, Idoia." He looks at me just before dropping the bomb. "You've chosen to take care of your Mum; Amaia's chosen to get on with her life."

"And just because I've chosen to take care of mum, my life's over. Is that what you mean?"

"You know that's not what I mean. I mean that you felt the moral duty to take care of your mum, your sister didn't. She felt a duty to treat children in need."

"And that makes her a better person."

"No, but it doesn't make you one either. That's why I think you should call her and sort things out."

"I don't want to talk about Amaia, Jokin, not now."

"Neither do I. I just wanted sex, darling". He grabs his phone, looks at the time and leaves it on the night table again, saying, with a sigh, that it's late. However, had he lost all hope of sex, he would have finished the conversation already.

I keep talking. "On the other hand, having children is life insurance for some people. How many people have children because of the fear of being alone when they get old?"

"Idoia, are you serious? Do you think that couples talk about this when they are about to have sex? They just get on with it. Come here."

Jokin pulls at my knickers' elastic band and puts his tongue in my mouth at the same time.

"Would you sing for the baby to fall asleep? Would you sing lullabies?"

"Yeah", he sighs again.

"And would you sing for me?"

"Yeah" He's ready to say yes to anything just for me to shut up.

"And would you sing for me now?"

"Not now, Idoia."

"And when? I've never heard you sing."

"I'm not a good singer."

"I don't care, sing for me."

"But what do you want me to sing?"

"A lullaby, softly, just before sex." I have to give him some hope.

"Are you serious?"

"Completely."

"I can't." He starts laughing.

"C'mon, you're prepared to clean my behind but you can't sing a lullaby for me?"

"It's not the same thing. I'd do the diaper thing just if I had no other choice."

"That's it: I don't want you to do it because you have to, but because you love me."

"You mean the diaper thing or the lullaby?"