

FOUR SEASONS

Spring was there. There had been an explosion of light and colour. They wish that life would be kinder to them than it had been to their parents. They would do everything in their power to make that wish come true. They were hopeful that they would. They had the right to dream.

Zacarías and Paco abandoned their vocational training studies to join the cable company that had opened two production lines in the local industrial estate. They worked eight hours a day from Monday to Friday and the salary was not bad. They could hand over part of it at home and keep the rest to pay the car instalments or start saving to buy a flat in the future and they could even have some drinks with friends at the weekend.

Clara's parents forced her to stay in the family business as soon as she finished high school. It was the most profitable bakery in the area and there her future was more than assured. Her teachers could not understand this decision, she was a brilliant, hard-working student, if she had continued studying, she could have gone very far. At that time, she was starting to date José, a construction worker some years older than her. Months later she let him know she was pregnant. The bricklayer ignored the matter and, when her parents knew about it, they considered the fact an affront to the whole family. The pregnant girl's brothers decided to intervene in the matter and gave a few blows to the bricklayer, who, at the sight of the adverse events, considered it necessary and advisable to take on other, more benign airs for him, not before assuring his exgirlfriend that he would recognise the child and collaborate on the expenses of its development and maintenance. So, he said goodbye to the company he worked for and moved to the coast of Valencia. There was much to do there and, as he had been told, the salaries were well above the wage agreement, although, of course, he would have to work hard.

Manuel, close friend of José's, volunteered to join the army after finishing high school, as he had the intention of gradually working his way up the non-commissioned officer ladder. Isabel, his twin sister, passed the University Orientation Course and the University Entrance Examination. She finished her degree in Technical Architecture with flying colours and began working for a large national company.

Summer came. It was hot during the day, sometimes unbearably so, if it cooled down at night, you could dream, but it wasn't always this way. Before them was the reality that each of them had been working on through the years. They were all from the same neighbourhood, but their footprints followed very different paths.

Isabel, after five years working and living in Valencia, returned to her hometown to take charge of the Town Planning Department. In the next elections she would run as head of the list and would manage to win the mayor's office. After a long engagement which did not end well, she decided to adopt a girl. Her friendships made it possible for this usually long and difficult process to be over in a few months for her.

Manuel lived in Madrid, he was a sergeant in the armoured brigade. He liked playing mus, a card game, and was a member of Atlético. His friends said that he could not have been a member of any other team, as he had had this passion since he was a little boy. He maintained that he was not interested in politics, that it was an acronymic nuisance, but he complained that in the army they were not paid according to the responsibility they took on and the way of life they led.

Zacarías, Paco, Ivo, Mohamed and Clara's brothers, Pascual and Ramón became unemployed when the cable company left for Morocco. For a long time, they were unable to find work because their professional profile was not adequate. The first four had only worked in the cable production line, the same as the other two, but these had also helped their father in the bakery for a short time. The father had started up a sliced bread company. According to him, the bad arts of the competing multinational companies and the continuous loans from the banks had put an end to the business that his grandfather had started. Those were years in which the energy companies agreed to offer the megawatt per hour at the highest production cost rate and not at the weighted cost of the different rates involved, which would have been the most reasonable thing to do.

Clara had a son. She worked at the bakery until the last moment. Then, she applied to several supermarkets and shops. After a year, a grocery shop hired her part-time for six months, and extended her contract for another four months. Her mother lent her a hand with her child. She died, according to gossip, as a result of her displeasure at the family

ruin. The father took to drink and later took a coach to the capital. Nothing was heard of him for a long time.

Despite his promises, José disappeared as soon as the baby was born. When the construction bubble burst, he remained on the coastal area selling and renting tourist flats on commission. He married Celeste, a Dominican sports instructor who worked in a gym. He had two children with her and divorced. He continued to fail to meet his legal obligations. His ex-wife made a comfortable living and never cared much for him. According to her, he was a toxic man and it was better for the children if he was away from them so that they could grow up in peace.

Autumn was making its way into the nostalgic souls of the pilgrims. Some days the sky was overcast, grey and rainy; on other days there was a warm, serene sun, but little by little the light faded and a cold wind began to blow. There were barely any dreams left. Life gave off a warm smile for some, it was hard for most and they had to struggle to get by, for others, however, defeats, shortage, loneliness, and invisibility were their daily bread.

The workers who had attended the plenary session at the City Hall to expose the mayoress their precarious situation in the cleaning company, a well-known multinational contracted for two decades by the city council, were disappointed. Most of them were upset, others were angry and a few ones felt that they were insignificant, social scum whose problems and feelings mattered to no one. Among the latter were Zacarías, Paco, Clara, Manuela and Ramón. All of them shared two stigmas: middle-aged and having gone through periods of long-term unemployment. As for the women, they also had in common the fact that they were part of a single-parent family. The trade unions in the sector claimed that, after getting very lucrative contracts from public institutions, the large companies kept their workers in highly precarious working and wage conditions.

After years in the lurch, when they only received the meagre social assistance, they were hired by the mentioned company to work part-time for just a quarter of the monthly salary. "Things are bad – they had been told at the office- when this crisis is over, we'll improve your contract".

Four months had passed and they had not been able to put their point of view at the question and request section yet. When the time came, the mayoress simply kept saying there was no time for such matters. They, who had attended four boring plenary sessions lasting more than four hours, had not even had a few minutes to be listened and paid attention.

Manuela was unable to pay the mortgage on the flat. She ended up living with her children in the park increasingly dependent on alcohol. Social workers had to intervene: she was sent to a detox centre and her children were placed in a children's home, she was told, on a temporary basis.

Celeste stood in the municipal elections. She represented one of the opposition groups as a councillor for one term. Then, she returned to work at the gym which she had owned for five years

Winter. Decadence peeps through the window, it creeps slowly through the long nights where the wind howls. The light goes out and memories fall silent. Some looks are quiet, others ache and some wound.

Manuel took advantage of the early retirement plan for army commanders. He retired with the fourteen pay cheques that corresponded to his rank of brigade. He continued with his activities and hobbies and his Atlético de Madrid.

Paco and Mohamed are very old now, their bodies are very worn out. A bridge is not the best place to grow old. Ivo went back to Bulgaria, things were not well at all for him here. He used to say that he missed his country very much.

Zacarías, the good and quiet Zacarías, died in prison with the permanent reviewable prison that was never reviewed and with mental derangement. He had killed with a knife two youngsters who had set fire to his mattress one freezing night, when he was covered from head to toe in the doorway of a department store.

Isabel, the former municipal councillor, used to claim proudly that she didn't receive any remuneration for being the highest authority in the town hall. Everybody knew that for

a long time she also had held a high position in the Provincial Department. She continued in national politics as a senator until she was seventy-five. Her daughter, Vanesa, lives in New York.

José, driven by greed and ill-informed or perhaps misguided advisors, invested heavily in a fund that yielded excellent dividends, but eventually turned out to be a pyramid fiasco. The funds' tycoons were tried and convicted, but by then he, like so many others, was totally ruined. After having too many drinks, he got into his SUV one foggy night and drove the wrong way down the motorway for six kilometres. Police reported two people dead, in addition to the kamikaze, and four seriously injured.

Clara lives with his son's family, who refuse to take her to a nursing home. For her part, she gives them her small pension every month.

Celeste moved to a community for the elderly. Her children often visit her and her visits to their families are also frequent.

It is Christmas Eve today and the Council, as it does every year, has organised a reception in the various shelters for the "transients without habitual address", a euphemism used nowadays to avoid saying the words: beggars, homeless and the extremely poor.

"Stories without a Mufflers" (2006 -)