

REUNION

She was different, even though there was nothing in her physical appearance that initially suggested it. She knew what she wanted and was relentless in her pursuit of it. Her gaze was always clear, positive, and open to life.

We met in an unusual—even strange—and certainly unexpected way. I was a loner. I had no need for the company of others beyond what was strictly necessary. I rarely used social media; I had no interest in forming superficial, empty connections, nor did I want to waste time on them or desperately seek to rack up "likes" on my posts.

I was aware that a large number of people from various countries were arriving in my town, as two major companies had set up operations there and required a substantial workforce. Every day, the news showed images of small boats packed with people risking their lives to escape the hellish conditions they lived in. Sometimes, young children arrived—sent off by desperate parents hoping they would escape hunger and death. Many perished during the crossing. Those who did reach the coast had no idea of the bureaucratic maze that awaited them. Some politicians used harsh, inflammatory language against them, claiming they had come to take our jobs or exploit public services. In an even more malicious vein, rumors circulated that they received monthly benefits higher than those of unemployed locals, that they squatted in homes, stole, and raped women—in short, all manner of outrageous lies designed to turn the public against them. The reality, however, was quite different. The government eventually shortened the waiting period for work permits because there was a shortage of qualified workers for many manual jobs—the kind once known as "blue-collar" work.

One day, I received an email from a woman letting me know that, although she had been living in our country for a few months, she would be in Torre del Río in two days. She would arrive at approximately six in the evening. She asked if I would pick her up at the train stop. She would be carrying a red suitcase and wearing a green scarf around her neck. It was undoubtedly a mistake.

When the time came, I decided to go to the meeting point—either to let her know there had been a mix-up or simply to confirm that she had realized her error and wouldn't show up. I headed toward the railway station, hoping not to find her. As I walked, the thought began to take hold that I might be caught up in a scam or something worse. From time to time, the media warned us not to let our guard down—to stay alert, because at any

moment we could find ourselves entangled in some unwanted situation. Our society was built on individualism, fear, and a lack of trust in one another. All that mattered was making money and spending it on leisure and entertainment, while projecting an image of a comfortable, affluent life. Consistently helping those in greatest need, understanding the situations others were going through, trusting our neighbors, and being kind to others—these were behaviors rarely seen. Contrary to my premonitions, she was waiting for me; she seemed a bit impatient—she had likely been there for a few minutes already, leaning against the wall next to the clock. She approached me with a faint smile on her face, while I remained impassive.

"Hey! Don't you remember me?"

"I can't quite place you, to be honest."

"Doesn't my face ring a bell?"

"Well... no, actually."

"And now?" she asked, showing me a medium shot of a young woman on her mobile phone screen. "You're the girl who put me up at the shelter during the disaster. It's been a long time. I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you."

"Of course; twenty years have passed, and I wear my hair differently—and dyed, too."

A long silence fell between us.

"Accommodation and something more. I'm Valentina—that outgoing, cheerful girl who was by your side during those trying times."

"Yes, much more, Valentina," I said softly.

A powerful hurricane devastated the Pacific coast of the country where I was finalizing a promising deal for my company. The wind blew with unprecedented intensity,

and torrential rains flooded the area. It all began on my second day there. The hotel where I was staying was completely destroyed; all my belongings vanished amidst the storm and chaos. According to newspaper reports, twenty-three thousand people were evacuated; nine thousand of them were housed in various local shelters, bungalows, private homes, and other tourist facilities. When I arrived at the shelter assigned to me, a woman was in labor and unable to reach a hospital. That was where I ran into Valentina again. She was assisting a doctor who happened to be on the scene. The newborn girl was given the name of the devastating cyclone that had battered us. I remember thinking it was in poor taste, though it seems the locals are accustomed to such weather events. Once the young woman finished helping the mother, she took me to a nearby shelter. She explained that the previous one was overcrowded and that I would find the service better at this new location. I had first met the young woman at the hotel, where she worked as a waitress. We had a long, relaxed conversation at the bar while I drank a beer. She gave me advice on how to navigate the country—what was considered acceptable behavior and what wasn't. Finally, she listed the various jobs she held to make a living: waitress, masseuse, cook, and ticket clerk. I left her a generous tip.

One afternoon, feeling disheartened because I couldn't get through to the airline to reschedule my return flight, I reached out to her. She told me she was working at the time but promised to come visit me as soon as she finished. As soon as she arrived, seeing how nervous I was, she offered to give me a massage to help relieve my emotional tension and stress. To my surprise, she refused to accept any payment when she finished, but I insisted. Before leaving, she warned me not to mention her services to anyone, as she wasn't qualified to provide them and could get into serious trouble.

"I've been hired by a local factory that needs workers. They told me to come by the office first thing tomorrow morning. Could I stay at your place until I find an apartment?" Valentina went on to explain.

Silence.

"Are you still a loner? Do you live alone?"

"No problem; you can count on me for a few days. I have an older daughter, but she's been living in the capital for quite some time."

Despite the time limit we had agreed upon, we never parted ways. Valentina worked at IberKárnica del Río until it closed its doors and relocated to an Eastern European country. I managed to sell my high-tech parts manufacturing business to a well-known multinational. With our affairs settled, we took the opportunity to travel the wide world. We journeyed through a great many countries and visited some of the planet's most remarkable monuments and regions. Little by little, we became inveterate nomads, always attentive to the diversity of landscapes, traditions, foods, and languages we encountered. Our devotion to the unknown and our curiosity about what we saw were so profound that—as if driven by some hidden force—we transformed into people with an immense zest for life, filled with excitement for the situations that came our way.

Valentina is no longer with me. She crossed over to the other side one cold morning. She asked me not to cry, telling me that our journey together through space and time had been wonderful. Three years earlier—when my partner was in perfect health and the illness had not yet manifested—my daughter had threatened to take me to court if I didn't draw up a will that fully respected her rights.

I've just called reception to say I'm not feeling well and would like a cup of broth and some scrambled eggs brought up to my room. I am alone again; solitude and the passing years weigh on me like a mountain of reinforced concrete.

“Stories without a Mufflers” (2006 -)