

## **LONDON LIFE**

a short story by Silvia Nanclares

### *Translator's Note*

*This story is set in a very important period in Spanish: the end of the Franco dictatorship and the beginning of the transition to democracy. The years the sisters were born marked the death of Francisco Franco (1975) and one of the dying gasps of the regime, the Atocha Massacre (1977), which was a neo-fascist attack that resulted in the death of five people. The story was set in one of the suburbs of Madrid which, though urbanized, lacks the vibrant cultural life of the capital. Though clearly set in the recent history and cultural landscape of Spain, it offers a universal message that even when the conformism of one's social milieu seems to offer few options, there still exists the possibility of embarking on a new life. In particular, it is the story of the emergence of a vocation to become a writer in a world where that was not one of the available options.*

*The term "Ahistory", which appears in this story, also requires explanation. In his book, *The End of History* (1992, *The National Interest*), Francis Fukuyama argued that the period known as History (the world of ideological struggle) came to an end with the collapse of communism in the 1980s. "Ahistory" thus refers to the period that follows the end of History.*

*For César*

My sister Emma and I were born right at the beginning of the end of History. 1975 and 1977.

We grew up in the ghetto of the end of History, in apartment buildings with low ceilings, with the highway serving as a protective wall, separating us from the city, and with row after row of cheaply made buildings with insignificant variations stretching out one after another.

Each residential tower had an assigned acronym, paper-thin walls covered originally with wall paper, and later replaced by stucco, terrazzo floors, bathrooms covered with green, blue or sepia tiles, functional kitchens, and every one of the combined living/dining rooms had an eye to entertain us; it was both a pet and an idol, and it was most definitely, the chief of the tribe: the TV set. Flickering and faithful, intimate as if it had a fireplace crackling within, diligently and efficiently distracting us, it transformed all of us into a single person, a single child, who looked through it to the other side while the mechanism worked perfectly. 625 lines of imagination ready to be consumed.

We were all trained to serve and be served by capital. We had to conveniently perpetrate the end of History and to follow to the letter the program whereby we would be first ahistorical children then, ahistorical teenagers, and later, ahistorical young adults and, finally, free and capitalist men and women.

We had to move money, make it, then spend it and then make some more. That was our simple mission. The project was written down and the project was carried out.

And it was against this backdrop, that Emma, my younger sister and I, like so many others, emerged as individuals. I am speaking of Ahistory, that is to say, the period right before the irresistible destruction.

I am talking about a huge, relentless wasteland which had been urbanized without mercy for decades. I am talking about brick schools built in the middle of nowhere. I am talking about artificial parks,

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soulless squares without any shade, markets without tradition, bars occupying almost every other store front.

I am talking about elevators that resembled caskets, tacky railings, common rooms for storing bicycles, skylines marked by high tension towers.

I am talking about visits to the zoo, Sunday afternoons on the highway that leads to the countryside, tennis courts rented by the hour, indoor swimming pools with loudspeakers and echoes, pounds of spaghetti served in metal trays, phone books distributed door to door, where, the name of each family appeared, as if by magic. I am talking about identical mail boxes with the names Gómez-García, González-Crespo, Jiménez-Blanco, entire afternoons sitting on a curb, stolen motorcycles, shacks on rutted roads, prefabricated houses donated to Gypsies, dead ends and gigantic puddles, which like particles of carbon 14, gave the lie to the placebo of Ahistory, by whispering in our ear, "No children, what you see wasn't always like this. "

I am talking about tools stuck in the mud, bottles purchased when we were sixteen, trips to cookie factories, crowded buses and subways which, like a mail train, deposited us on the Other Side, the unquestionable Center of the City which wasn't our zone and where other things happened or at least –as the dilapidated houses and the bending, irregular-shaped city squares bear witness– had happened. Before.

That is to say, History.

But History was well protected thanks to the highway, sports facilities and the cemetery. History was quiet and the angels, who had already stopped looking back into the past –our grandparents– also lived in neighborhoods on the outskirts of town. Once a week they used to come to pick Emma and myself up at school. They brought us tons of peanuts and would ask us –a rather strange request– to say "something" in English.

English is the language of Ahistory.

And they, the angels from another Time, observing our expertise with monosyllabic onomatopoeias as if it were a natural quality, rather than what was, a sign of the training that we were subject to.

The angels –Tomás and Teresa, our maternal grandparents– had already given up on any sort of kingdom in this world. And the fact that this new zone of Non history spoke another language justified in some fashion the fact that no one would want to listen to them, to the angels, who, as everyone knows, can be treacherous.

And this, despite the fact that they, without a doubt, had good stories to tell. Stories about entire days without television, for example. Without radio. Without freeways. Also, without food.

But the fiction of our immortality and all the rest had always been so powerful, so gradual and so effective that any attempt at an epic moment was reduced to an anecdote about a strange place, History, and about a time that had been transcended, where everything had been –it is impossible to imagine it any other way– in black and white.

My sister Emma was born the very same day that the Barcelona writer known for his satanic practices finished his first novel in Paris: *The Enlightened Assassin*

I don't think that these two events were the product of chance, although they can only be explained in terms of chance.

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They were years of propping up the amusement park of normality, which was, on second thought both unusual and bizarre, and which consisted in splitting time between meals, rest, work or school, and above all going shopping or watching television. There were other places which existed simultaneously to our own where, for example, people were writing books. As a proper normality invented and validated by the vast majority of people, it consisted of fanning the machine of habit in order to obtain a sensation of time standing still. The abolition of uncertainty and the urge to complete a mission: the identical repetition of the same sequence of yearly events punctuated by the school year and holidays.

This story, Emma's story, my story, can be organized around the fold that every presumably ordered system presents.

It is a story about holes and cracks through which one can escape.

If, simultaneously to our own Non time, Satan wrote books, this meant that Ahistory had faults and channels that connected the paralyzed world of endless sidewalks to History.

The project had fringes and, I don't know if it was random or by virtue of a probability also calculated by the machine, we were two of those fringes, and, moreover, I don't know if it was by chance or not, we were members of the same family.

Emma says that I gave her signs to land here. But I don't want to waste time arguing about improbable things, even though that everything that my sister believes is very important to me.

It is an indisputable fact that I am my sister's sister and that we are daughters of our parents and I have no idea if it is part of a plan devised by someone. But what is clear is that it obeys some type of logic.

We had to be born here and help each other to find the temporal fold that would take us out of Ahistory. That would return us the process of becoming, to the amorphous future, to the possibilities of chance and whim.

Thus, we would be born when we found a way to cross the highway once and for all. We had to leave Ahistory. Like Huckleberry Finn, we would fake an assassination, if necessary. We had to leave Ahistory.

"It's easy. Take the bus. It will take you Downtown."

And no, it wasn't so easy. Because when you have grown up in a shell outside of History, you are extremely ignorant and you have absolutely nothing to offer the world. And the project was written and the project was carried out. The project existed and the project was completed.

We were totally prepared people who, for the rest, were trained in comfort, and in stopping our watches. Just as discomfort breeds an immediate need to move in order to end the discomfort, we lived for certainty, measuring the years in periods that went from September to July. This pattern led us to ask few questions about our lives.

Our field of action was limited to buses and the urban landscape.

But there had to be cracks.

It was through music and books that Emma and I discovered the crack that sooner or later we would have to slip through.

Since I was the eldest, and, according to Emma, the one who attracted her into the world, I always had to assume the proverbial role of the leader, of the adventurous mountain climber who would open new paths to cross bridges so that, at irregular intervals, Emma could lose herself worry-free in order to watch the scenery.

But I hoped that Emma would also know when we had to slip through and reach the other side. I was already becoming tired of sitting with my sister alongside the highway with nothing to do, so when the next bus passed, I didn't have to think twice. I stared at the photo of the ad on the side of the bus, several white rabbits in a row seemed to be a sign of something. I got on. Emma didn't notice at all, she had been immersed forever in that book without illustrations, which will never understand how it hooked her. But I did it.

Despite all odds, Emma jumped on at the last moment.

We arrived Downtown while Emma was finishing her book: "I remember that it began to rain which caused that group of people to separate and at that moment, separated from them, separated from their impertinent murmur, and from the stupor that was reflected in all their remarks, I recovered my lucidity, I continued walking, now quite far from them, motivated by a morbid curiosity and laughing to myself under the rain, promising myself that, if only to satisfy my curiosity, and my vanity as well, no matter what happened, *The Enlightened Assassin* would continue, moving about for a while."

On the other side of the hole, the other History began at last.

*We are able to read the past because it is dead.*  
Enrique Vila-Matas, *Brief History of Portable Literature*



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