

The Club

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‘I want everyone to tear out the first page.’

Professor Shaper turned with an overly dramatic gesture. Tilting his head, his toupee shifted slightly, and he tried to adjust it while repeating the instruction. Hands in pockets, and body slanted, he positioned himself at the center of the class and adjusted his glasses. This was his favorite scene, the moment when Professor Keating asked his astonished students to rip out the introduction of the literature textbook.

‘But this book is from the library. Do I tear out the page anyway?’

‘No, leave the library books intact.’

‘I didn’t bring a book. I have photocopies. Can I just un-staple them...?’

Shaper had arrived at the Girona Campus three months earlier, from his previous post at Loughborough University. No one understood why he climbed onto the table that afternoon and took off his shoes before awkwardly reciting verses from Whitman. Some students had also complained about the professor’s odd behavior, whispering unintelligible messages in their ears, and insisting on gathering a group of them in a nocturnal forest. Facing a flood of complaints, the Council considered expelling the professor but ultimately managed to enroll Shaper in an exchange program with a remote university in southern Europe.

‘For heaven’s sake, Miriam, don’t tear out the back cover. What I want you to do is remove the introduction to the literature compendium. It’s a symbolic gesture to...’

‘You said to tear out the first page.’

Shaper had arrived in Girona on the day the city broke its historical temperature record. Accustomed to the cold of the Midlands, the Saharan heat caused him a severe fainting spell. It took three days to recover, the time it took for bus drivers to find the cage of Heathcliff, Shaper’s snowshoe cat, and the feline’s corpse. In addition to losing his cat, Shaper lost his suitcase and all the notes he had accumulated after years of teaching. Some sheets appeared in the Onyar months later, alongside his barefoot socks.

When the classroom had nearly emptied, and Shaper was erasing Bukowski quotes from the blackboard, Robert rose from his seat and ceremoniously approached his teacher. The tight T-shirt allowed a radiograph of his generous muscles; on his left arm, a tattoo with Gothic letters proclaimed ‘*Put a Espanya*’. From the faux pocket on his chest, a yellow ribbon dangled.

‘Your classes are always very inspiring, professor.’

His comment hung in the air for an instant, like an open parenthesis. Shaper savored the moment, and so he applied himself with the eraser as if he were eliminating the evidence of a crime.

The following week, Professor Shaper had written ‘Inspiration’ on the blackboard. The truth was he had started too far to the right and with such large letters that he had to reduce the size as he approached the board’s edge, forcing him to place the N on top of the O. Although left-handed, he had to write with his right hand because the stray cat he had tried to adopt the day before had bruised his palm and wrist. As blood causes him extreme aversion, he fainted and hit his forehead on a lamppost, explaining the huge bump on his head.

‘Laia, where has your inspiration taken you?’

Laia stood up with a cocky gesture, took the sheet of paper, and pretended to read:

‘Visca el pa, visca el vi, visca la mare que em va parir’.

Shaper, who spoke academic Catalan, misunderstood the most basic elements of colloquial language. He interpreted Laia’s verses as *‘I dwell in bread, I dwell in wine, I dwell in the mother who bore me’* and found a certain lyricism in the composition. His effusive congratulations provoked a loud laugh from the classroom that the professor was unable to interpret. Most students seized the opportunity and exchanged their clumsy verses for phrases from ads, popular songs, or internet memes. The laughter could be heard even in the cold cloister, especially when someone proclaimed, *‘Y volé, y me hizo volar, y yo volé de él’.*

When class ended, the professor approached Robert’s desk, leaped clumsily onto the adjacent table, and leaned in as if about to make a confession.

‘I sense a volcano within you, a mound of lava needing to erupt. Believe me, I have a good eye for this. How would you like to join a club where you could unleash that instinct? I have other candidates, but I have no doubt you should join before anyone else.’

Robert’s face lit up, barely able to contain his excitement.

‘Count me in. I’ve always wanted to be a soldier for the cause.’

‘I’ll wait for you tonight in Plaça de Sant Domènec.’

David arrived first at the rendezvous. Born on the Tibetan plateau, he was adopted by a family from Garrotxa when he was one year old. His father ran a funeral home in Olot, and he barely remembered his mother because she ran away with a Cuban worker when he was still a child. Someone told him they had opened a dance academy in Barcelona, but he never made the effort to investigate further, and her trail was lost in the fog, the same fog now whitening

the square. He was dazzled by the reflection of a trembling lantern, located on the other side of the quadrilateral.

‘*Xino*, are you also involved in this?’

‘Professor Shaper asked me to come at this time. It’s freaking cold.’

‘And where the hell is he?’

After the unsuccessful rendezvous, David and Robert went to meet the professor as he entered the classroom loaded with worn books, a tiny Tupperware, and an apple swaying like the *anxaneta* of a *castell*.

‘Did you find what I left you?’ he asked, winking.

‘We didn’t find shit. There was a damn fog. We didn’t find you either,’ David replied.

‘This is a path you must follow alone. I can guide you, I can advise you, but you must take responsibility for the club.’

‘You can’t abandon ship now,’ interjected Robert.

‘Alright. I’ll look for a more suitable place for the next meeting. I have two new candidates.’

Usually, the bookstore café located in the heart of the Jewish quarter was a quiet, almost deserted space, not only because of its secluded location but also due to the taciturn character of the owner. However, that day a group of American cyclists had gathered, still wearing their multicolored tights and cleated shoes. Euphoric, they shared the sensations of their journey through Cap de Creus and the vast plain of Empordà. In a corner of the café, trapped like sardines in a trawl net, the club members tried to communicate among the ocean of words and laughter.

‘You can’t bring outside food. This business relies on you eating and drinking products from the establishment.’

Aurora stored the Tupperware in which she had brought some stew croquettes. Today marked a year since cancer had taken Josep Maria, with whom she had been married for almost 50 years. To overcome depression, her daughter convinced her to enroll in university, as she had always dreamed. In reality, Aurora suffered from persistent deafness, and classes were almost unintelligible to her, but these sessions were the only effective antidote against her loneliness. Shaper had recruited her for the club, mistaking her silence for complicity, so that afternoon Aurora showed up at the meeting with croquettes she had cooked from the remnants of a solitary stew. Despite the owner’s prohibition, David grabbed one and tasted it amid the tumult.

In addition to Aurora, David, and Robert, Èrica was also at the table. Tired of the taunts in high school, she decided to create a character that would serve as armor in university. She shed her uniform and straight hairstyle and disguised herself as a bad girl: blue hair, black shirt, tight pants, and sinister makeup. The problem was that Èrica detested alcohol and now didn't know what to do with the beer David had brought without asking. She decided to slowly pour the contents into the flowerpot just behind her. To reinforce her character, she used exaggeratedly coarse language, though her inexperience often resulted in sentences that made little sense.

‘So where the hell is Shaper’s dick?’

‘Are you Robert?’

A Glovo rider entered the establishment, headed to the end of the café, and pulled an envelope from his voluminous backpack.

‘You’re Robert, right?’

The rider carried a DIN-A4 with the image of the robust student.

‘Uh, yes, I’m Robert.’

The Indian rider handed him the envelope, asked for his identification number, and left into the outdoors while the Americans in the venue sang tavern songs, despite the owner’s warnings.

‘What the hell is going on?’, Èrica inquired after pouring the last bit of beer into the artificial plant.

Robert opened the envelope, which contained a folded sheet of paper. He read aloud its contents:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹*

As he read, David noticed the monk who entered the venue and strode firmly toward him.

‘I can’t believe it.’

The monk, dressed in a red and saffron *chuba* and a prayer *zen* atop, stood next to David and bowed after a brief pause.

¹ Lines from a poem by American poet Robert Frost.

‘Would you please leave me alone? How did you find me? Are you following me?’

The monk persisted in his bows, which irritated David, who, furious, stood up from the table and grabbed the monk by the arm to escort him to the exit. Seeing the scene, various cyclists rebuked the student, and one of them, perhaps due to alcoholic excess, punched him in the eye. This acted as a spring for Robert, who came to his companion’s defense, and a brawl ensued amid the desperate screams of the owner. A little later, the four members of the makeshift club crossed the Pont de Pedra with the aftermath of the skirmish marked on their faces.

‘He’s no monk. He’s a nutjob convinced I’m the reincarnation of a lama and insists on making offerings and bows, and taking me to Tibet to teach. Ever since he saw me one day in Salt, I find him everywhere. I’m sick of it.’

‘I don’t know who’s worse, your monk or our professor,’ Èrica chimed in.

‘Want a joint?’ offered David when the group had taken shelter in a small square.

Robert declined with a polite gesture, and Aurora didn’t take the hint, but Èrica, unable to improvise an excuse and in order to maintain the pretense of her personality, agreed with a decisive gesture.

‘What this verse means is that we need to take action now, that we have to stop saying what we’re going to do and actually do it. Take the hard path, the one less traveled. Let’s dare, damn it.’

Èrica felt euphoric and dared to rally her companions: for the first time, she felt that those words were not the script of her role but flowed freely from within her. That morning, the university walls woke up to graffiti, emancipatory verses extracted from a book Aurora had borrowed from the library. Each small urban artwork was signed by *The Club*, and in the small university community, the first comments about the identity of this unprecedented collective emerged.

‘Is this some kind of joke? I’ve been in this damn hole for three months. I’ve had to endure more classes in these months than all the training at the Police School. I have to see ‘Put a España’ on my arm every day that Peláez drew with persistent ink. And now that I’ve finally managed to infiltrate a cell, you’re shutting down the program? Now that I’ve earned their trust?’

‘This time it’s true, *comisario*. I’ve joined a group, they call themselves *The Club*. The leader is testing us, and I’m sure if we pass the test, we’ll enter the heart of the organization. I’ll be able to know their plans, their tactics, their protocols. And I’ll gather all the

information possible to nail them all, from the leaders to the pawns. I just need a little more time, chief. And someone to do a phonetics homework for me by Tuesday.'

When the group of students entered the classroom, they found a message written on the blackboard, again with descending typography due to lack of space: 'We meet in the Cloister.' With a strident murmur, Professor Shaper's students descended the faculty stairs and arrived at the side courtyard where the teacher awaited them, his toupee moved by the strong wind. In the gallery on the first floor, other students watched between curious and indifferent the extravagant instructions of the professor.

'I want each of you to start walking around the cloister at your own pace. Come on, go ahead. Don't worry, it won't affect your evaluation.'

At first, each student adopted their own style, but as they progressed, they synchronized their steps, as Shaper had hoped. This had happened when Professor Keating asked Pitt, Cameron, and Overstreet to walk around the courtyard. On the second lap, all students had adopted a martial rhythm and, to accentuate the effect, Professor Shaper took the lead, and upon reaching the cloister's corner, entered the building. All students followed the professor's path and descended with the cadence marked by the stairs to the lower floor, while Shaper's steps sounded increasingly louder. He would later explain the drawbacks of conformism and the need to find one's own path, to stop imitating what others do. To reinforce the idea of following, he entered the narrow recording room without ever breaking rhythm, and the students followed the route with an increasingly weary gesture; the newcomers progressively occupied the narrow space, and those entering barred the way for the head of the line. When the last one entered, the door closed, and the pressure of the group made it impossible to open again. The door was locked, and emergency services took almost an hour to rescue them, in a passage that occupied social networks for days.

'We have to get rid of this idiot before he causes a disaster,' the Vice chancellor of Personnel proposed.

'You're not wrong, but I have to remind you that this Shaper is at our university as part of an exchange with Loughborough,' interrupted the Vice chancellor of International Relations.

'And what are you afraid of, a diplomatic conflict?'

'Don't you know who we've sent to England in this program? Àngels, the professor from the Faculty of Medicine who sent us three complaint emails a day. Whether it's too hot, whether she can't park, whether Moodle is too complicated, whether she needs money to go to a conference and see her daughter in Argentina, whether the schedule doesn't allow her to

attend her mindfulness classes... Do you remember what you told me? ‘One more email and I’ll take Àngels to the dissection room.’

‘That video of the room as if it were the Marx Brothers’ crowded cabin scene became the third most viewed of the day. We were the laughingstock of the Catalan universities, but yesterday a professor from the University of Barcelona forgot to turn off the camera in a teleconference when her lover arrived, and today no one remembers us,’ explained the Vice chancellor of Communication.

This time, Shaper placed his students in the crater of the Santa Margarida Volcano. He trusted that the telluric forces of the volcano would finally activate the hidden side of the club’s students, that they would shed academic conventions and learn to get excited, to live fully. Graziella, an Erasmus student from Naples known for her defiant and critical attitude, became the latest addition to the club’s usual four members, having been recruited by Shaper for her potential to invigorate the rest of the team. Graziella’s ambition to become a soccer player led her to Girona, captivated by the local team’s dynamic performance in the Spanish League. Her attire often included sports jerseys, predominantly those of Maradona, the legendary Napoli icon. This choice subtly honored her father, a die-hard Napoli fan, who, despite having four daughters, never realized his dream of raising a son to join the youth soccer ranks. Without a doubt, she was the fittest person in the expedition and thus far outpaced the rest of the hikers.

‘We have to stop fucking doing what that nutjob Shaper asks,’ Èrica initiated.

‘My older brother, who finished Geography, only gave me one piece of advice: Do what the professors say, no matter how strange it seems. If you just follow their instructions, you’ll finish your degree,’ replied David.

‘You have a brother?’ asked Robert. ‘And is he also... like you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know. If your brother is also... Chinese.’

‘My brother is Catalan like me, idiot. And stop calling me *Xino*.’

‘Sorry. Since everyone knows you by that, I thought you liked it.’

‘I’ve brought croquettes,’ interrupted Aurora.

When they reached the summit of the volcano, a downpour surprised them, and they had to run and try to shelter in the hermitage located in the center of the crater. Since the naves of the ship and the rear apse are very narrow, the only possible refuge was the small exterior roof that, like a circumflex accent, was located on the facade of the temple. Since the door was closed, Graziella looked for a way to enter the hermitage but realized there was only a tiny

side window, besides the openings located on the facade. The storm began to rage, and the first thunder was heard, which made the group of people huddle even closer in the tiny main shelter. Robert lifted Graziella up to the rosette window, and there they fortunately found the key that opened the door to the hermitage. They entered the dark enclosure and illuminated it with a few candles and with the light from their mobiles, which allowed them to distinguish the book placed on the altar, a collection of poems by Emily Dickinson. A post-it had marked one of the poems in the book that Aurora recited with a vehemence that surprised her companions while they tasted the croquettes:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune—without the words,
And never stops at all ...²*

‘I’m starting to get tired of playing escape room with this madman. I have two assignments to submit for Monday, and I’m here wasting time following a fanatic,’ opened David.

‘I’m also done playing the fucking goose. Let’s hope the rain lets up, and we get the hell out of this fucking volcano, and away from this fucking nutjob. And this fucking world, damn it,’ Èrica added, visibly moved, so much so that Graziella came to console her.

‘He’s testing us, don’t you see? He’s just asking for a little patience, a little hope. If we stay firm, we’ll achieve our purpose, we’ll do something great, something memorable. It’s not much longer, we just need to have hope.’

The last thing Robert could imagine was the independence group dissolving before it even started its activity, so he encouraged his companions to remain in the organization. The commissioner demanded concrete evidence, and time was running against him. His plea had an effect, and the group maintained its cohesion: trapped under the persistent rain, they reviewed the energetic verses of Dickinson and walked along the Moebius strip the poet drew. They gave meaning to the stopped clocks, to the clovers and bees, to the months that speak, to the man with the red tie, to the kneeling Emperor. Going back was impossible in that enclosure, and perhaps for a moment, everything made a certain sense.

Faced with the commissioner’s ultimatum, and given the club’s exasperatingly slow pace, Robert decided to accelerate his plan and began to create false emails from a computer located

² Lines from a poem by American poet Emily Dickinson.

in the Montilivi library, in which conspiracies were woven, objectives were set, and actions in Palamós, in Roses, in Sarrià, or in Camprodon were foreseen. After intercepting the emails, a beefy Civil Guard with temporary tattoos and a shirt with a huge estelada began to earn Robert's trust, in order to enter the terrorist organization detected at the University.

The first snows of the year crowned the mountain front of the Pyrenees, and the cold filled the exterior gardens of the Campus with frost. Despite the chilly atmosphere, a group of students had lunch at the picnic tables under the watchful eye of the city walls. Graziella and Èrica not only shared a blanket that protected them from the cold but also shared kisses and caresses. Inspired by Frost's verses, Èrica had decided to take the less traveled path and face that wall she had built, that mask that hid more than her shyness. Although it was at the winter party when she kissed Graziella for the first time, it all started with an innocent hug in the hermitage, in the middle of the century's downpour.

'Look at him. He's there, behind the apse,' pointed out Graziella.

'Come sit with us,' David interceded.

The guy dressed as a Tibetan monk followed the scene from a clumsy gray hiding place, which could not camouflage the vivid color of the tunic. Discovered, he approached the wooden tables and, after a long bow and crowning David with a bead necklace, sat on the ground right next to the diners.

'How did it go in Barcelona?' asked Èrica.

'To sum it up, I'm learning to dance salsa. No, don't ask me for a demonstration.'

'I've brought croquettes,' interjected Aurora. 'They're vegan.'

'I almost prefer the stew ones,' concluded David, receiving the reprimand from the rest of the club members.

In the last class before the New Year, Professor Shaper announced that it was his last session because the exchange program had concluded. In reality, the anatomy professor from Girona had plunged the management team into such a state of distress that they opted to revert the exchange and return the professor, even if the price they had to pay was the unfortunate return of Shaper to Loughborough. Most of the class received the news with jests and laughter. If the professor hadn't left the classroom so hastily, he would have seen those four students standing on the table to the astonishment of the rest of their classmates.