

ENGLISH TITLE:

Centaur Again

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ORIGINAL TITLE:

Berriz zentauro

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*For Lea and Joanes,
and all the children of today,
thinking about their future.*

VR: virtual reality, full simulation that takes the user out of their reality through the use of glasses and other devices.

AR: augmented reality, a method of digitally adding virtual elements to physical reality, enriching perception.

XR: extended reality, a full mix of virtual reality and physical reality, in which physical objects can interact in the virtual environment and vice versa.

1

This is how things begin. With no transition. The act of putting on the glasses changes everything. You're here and suddenly you're there. Or the other way around.

For example.

Your body, standing in a green meadow.

No, not your body.

Your consciousness.

Forget you even have a body.

It's better that way.

Feel how it dissolves.

Only the meadow, the meadow here. Green. It's still wet, do you feel it? It's morning. The dew, a gentle shiver. Don't judge your feelings. Name them. Name them and let them go.

You can look around, left and right. Without fear. The rays of the sun make everything greener, so many different greens, it's intoxicating, isn't it? There's a fine breeze. The sky is blue, infinite blue. Breathe in, the forest begins farther on, breathe out, over there. Over there is your destination now.

Almost before you realize it, you've moved. With your gaze, yes: you focus on a point in the distance and you're there. Not you, you haven't moved (you have no body, remember): your consciousness. The birds are singing. Chirp. Just for you. You but not you. One of them flies past and you turn your head to follow its flight. It moves its wings slowly, like a small dragon.

You look straight in front of you again. You're in the middle of the forest now. Rigid trunks, wavy trunks, trunks. Trunks embraced by giant pink centipedes. Admire their coordination as they walk. Now a dragonfly, changing colors as it flies by. Breathe in, enjoy the new oxygen that this forest offers, breathe out, clean oxygen, all of it for you. Breathe in, fill yourself with this wild green peace, farther, even farther, breathe out, you'll see the sea, the air will fill with salt and iodine, the waves will rumble, breathe in, breathe out, all of it for you.

But Paula doesn't have the patience to walk through this forest as well so the warm sand will caress her feet, to wait for her breath to become one with the motion of the sea. She has no patience. That's it. She takes off the OFtals quickly, brusquely, and the meadow, the forest, the sea, all vanish; the impossible birds disappear, as do the giant pink centipedes. The bubble pops. Pop. The four walls of a room. *C'est tout*. That's how things end. With no transition. You're there and suddenly you're here, in this hotel room.

Or the other way around.

And here, or there, it's two o'clock in the morning and Paula has to accept the fact that she's run the NIX module from top to bottom, from top to bottom and nothing, from top to bottom and failure, fiasco and frustration. The NIX module has been successful, many people say they've gotten over their insomnia with it.

It promises a lot, that much is true: Tibetan music, rain sounds, forest sounds, other natural sounds, ASMR sessions, 432 Hz music, an entire concert of Gregorian chant in a stone monastery, a tireless voice that will count sheep for you, guided meditation (kundalini, vipassana or transcendental), and this, the last great hope, the last war dance: the Forest Wellness experience. Let no one say their insomnia has no solution. You have only to look at the drop-down menu of the NIX module.

But not today. Today something is not working right. Paula is still awake. But what? She's starting to regret not having brought her neoprene suit. No neoprene, not even the gloves. What was she thinking? This moment had to come. She was proud of her decision, a radical, epic decision that had come naturally and that demonstrated, beyond all doubt, her lack of dependency on all that gear. Now she's not so sure. It's difficult to feel proud of yourself at two in the morning, drowning in a pool of insomnia.

She looks at her body. There it is, in its entirety. The neoprene, however, is at home. And her body is here. A bare body, denuded. She'll just have to make do with it. But what exactly is this body, what mercy of the night is this? A palm tree, a baobab, a banana tree in mid-autumn. Any tree full of insomnia, really. A tree that spent the day taking in an invisible vapor – in the station, on the train, in the driverless taxi – and, photosynthesis complete, now explodes, releasing through all its pores everything that it took in, transformed into organic material.

This wretched inability to fall asleep is the organic material, the new invisible vapor, the poison that fills the room. An organic material that can

find no way out of the hotel room. The windows can't be opened; this is an intelligent building and it knows better than anyone that insomniacs should not open windows, much less put their heads out, come to believe there might be a way out.

Ten past two already. Everything's gone to hell. Paula imagines herself putting on the neoprene and entering Delphi's red rooms. She doesn't skip a single motion, she imagines them all. It's so natural and simple. The imagination is a placebo. The doors open. And there she goes.

Time disappears in that space without time zones. Even saying space is saying too much. It's whatever time you want there, in that non-space, in that bubble, on that cloud. It's whatever time you want if you're alone; or the time that you agree upon with others, if you seek interaction. A democratic schedule chosen by the assembly. And not only that. Time moves forward at the speed of your choice there. Quickly. Slowly. And who says it always has to move forward? It can even stop, if you want. All that stolen time will have to be returned at some point, of course, it's best to remember that. But that will come later, a lot later: inside the neoprene there is only the present, a light present, a clean present.

If she had the gloves on, she would choose her avatar now with the usual flick of the fingers. An avatar is license to leave the body behind.

It's important to choose your avatar well, design it to your own liking and desire, bring it into being without thinking too much about the cost. At first Paula had many, at least a dozen, cheap versions for silly games, blond hair, green eyes, black mustache, brown skin, hats and sunglasses. It was a game of who's who, a pleasing enough hodgepodge. She even designed avatars of her old-woman self and her child self, which in the end were of no use to her. She refined her choices over time, ending up with only two. The first avatar is a faithful portrayal, created by scanning her face and programmed to age as she

ages, slowly and subtly, treacherously. If she meets people she knows, they can recognize her easily, without needing to look at her username. Paula does all of her work events with this avatar and uses it when she meets with friends. With the other avatar, no one can recognize her. The face was generated by artificial intelligence, which turned out to be quite expensive, but guarantees that there's no one else in the world like it. This one is not programmed to age. Always thirty-five, the age Paula likes the best. He is tall and muscular, has a chestnut beard, and wears tight pants that show off his crotch. Scandinavian build, Italian-style clothes and Mediterranean curls. Occasionally she buys him different accessories: new shirts, finer mustaches. She's happy with the latest voice she got for him, carefully selected after trying out two or three others: dark but sweet, a slow, thick stream of honey. They know him as Viktor there, in that non-place, in that bubble, on that cloud.

And this is her secret. Well-kept in the bubble. There, Viktor. Pop.

If she had the neoprene with her, she would surely choose this second avatar to deal with her insomnia. The solidity of masculinity is what she needs right now, that precise and indisputable way of moving through the world. But the damned NIX module can't give that to her. Time to take the next step.

Viktor, come here, please.

But Viktor doesn't come. She touches her face and feels the soft skin, the fine cheekbones, the slender neck. And between her legs, an emptiness.

That's all she has then.

She'll just have to make do with it.

She caresses the emptiness between her legs for a few seconds through her pajamas with her eyes closed, reluctantly but concentrating. She can't think of anything and nothing happens. A dead end. A short circuit. A spent fuse. A sign that something is going wrong. But if she had the neoprene on...

Enough. She should stop thinking about the neoprene, it's not doing her any good. The minutes tick by, minute after damned minute, and here she is, still awake. As a compensatory exercise, she takes off her pajamas. She asks the room assistant to raise the temperature by two degrees. She undresses slowly, as if it weren't required. And now, naked in front of the mirror, she looks at her palm tree/body in despair.

Desperate? No! One last try, come on! If she stands up straight, cranes her neck and gives a challenging glare that she has used on only three or four people in her life, she can still find a pleasant halo around the palm tree. Yes, there it is. A spark. A small spark anyway. If she relaxes her shoulders, draws in her neck and allows her spine to sink, her belly looks like an accordion without breath, folds lying one on top of another. The rings under her eyes are visible now, the wrinkles on her forehead, stretch marks from bringing babies into the world, bags of tired air. The image in the mirror reminds her of a many-layered cake, magnificent for a moment before its collapse. Plop.

She is no longer a palm tree, nor a baobab. A banana tree in mid-autumn? Hardly. More like a cauliflower fresh out of the pressure cooker. At best.

Name your feelings: dry skin, withered flesh, flabbiness, decline. Name them and let them go.

Far away, let them go far away.

Don't judge yourself: okay, but how do you do that? No idea? Turn off the light then, intelligent, hateful, damnable assistant, and let's go to sleep already, this time for real or my head will explode.

Still naked, she gets back into the bed, which has gone cold, and longs for another body, a warm body that would quickly warm hers.

And then, with the simplicity and astonishment with which wishes come true, with the lack of fear with which wishes come true, she feels a presence at her side. How can this be? Who knows? But there it is. It starts at her ear: a faint breath of air. Then a languid warmth that strokes her skin all over, from her head to her toes and back again. A seismic tremor in the mattress: 0.01 on the Richter scale. Without knowing for sure that her eyes are open, she sees her: Mary Wollstonecraft. Lady of the Enlightenment, women’s rights activist, spokesperson for free love. She has come through centuries to be here. Nice detail. They’re face to face, she’s so close to her, Paula has no doubt: it’s Mary. She’s wearing a gray robe à l’anglaise and a soft hat, black and discreet. White face, rosy cheeks, full lips, steady gaze. Paula has looked at her portrait so many times recently that the vision is completely familiar to her. It is Mary’s final portrait that has stuck most firmly in Paula’s memory, done by John Opie, when Wollstonecraft was pregnant for the second time: so full of life and so near to death. Oh, Mary...

The woman is close enough to touch now, lying on her side, one elbow planted in the pillow, one hand supporting her head. But no, Paula remembers that she’s not wearing the neoprene; this is something else. But what? It doesn’t matter: she looks so close, so contemporary, so substantial and so real that Paula can even see the tiny veins below her eyes, the black spots on her nose. Mary Wollstonecraft’s body is an orchid.

“Well, Paula, here I am. At last.”

She smiles before speaking again.

“But, of course, if you’d rather speak in English...”

Name your thoughts: hallucination, delirium, insanity, unhinged imagination, side effects of relentless insomnia. Name them and let them go.

But not very far.

“Je parle plutôt bien français, vous savez...”

Remember, don't judge yourself. So greet your guest. Don't be rude. But Paula's throat has stopped working and no sound comes out of her mouth. What would she say? Hello, hi, how's it going? She prefers to simply gaze at the creature. Drink in all the details. Remember everything. This can't last very much longer. Or can it?

“Are you enjoying Paris, Paula? In my day, Paris was the capital of the world. Everything was happening here, everything happened here, and I saw it all. The Seine frozen, bloodshed in the town squares. How old are you, Paula? You don't have to tell me, I'm sure you're older than I ever was, though you don't look it, not at all, I know what things are like in your times, I know the word Pilates, and I've heard about the state-of-the-art technique you call anti-age editing, and the washing machine... that's the best invention, don't you think? Surely you must have made it past my final age. That's why you're looking at me with such pity, isn't it? Don't be sad for me, Paula, enjoy your luck, enjoy your times.”

So she knows, thinks Paula. That's good, I won't put my foot in it then.

“Thirty-eight years old, yes, I know. Young? No. In my times, no one would have said I was young, but people grieved for me because I left a newborn behind and in the care of a widower, and my three-year-old, my little girl, my beloved Fanny, poor illegitimate child. Thirty-eight years old. And I know the details too. Eleven days of agony. The trap of the hemochorial placenta. And doctors didn't wash their hands in my day. Don't distress yourself, Paula, I held onto hope until the very end, even in the shadows. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Even though today's shadows are different. Hydroalcoholic gel is in all your hospitals today. Don't worry, darling, we don't have to talk about this if you don't want to. Very few people like to talk about death. Fewer and fewer.”

She called her darling, how sweet. Perhaps she should respond with some similar courtesy. But she doesn't dare. Instead, it occurs to her that only in Paris do people visit the graves of the famous. Who knows why? No one goes to Bournemouth to see a grave, so the woman had to come all the way here from Bournemouth. Mary must be resting in peace there, by the sea. And this

thought is comforting to Paula, very comforting. The Wollstonecraft-Shelley tombstone, dark marble under the Bournemouth rain, near the murmur of the sea. So damp and so peaceful.

[Paula dictates a note to the assistant, a small detail, but one that could be put to good use: she had forgotten that Wollstonecraft also spoke French, and why not add that piece of content to the module? Niko is right, she can't stop working for even one second.]

Then she turns over halfway, strokes the perimeters of her palm tree/body, just to make sure they're still there, closes her eyes and feels Mary Wollstonecraft return to her grave on the English coast. The world dissolves like a sugar cube and she falls into sweet sleep. She no longer knows what time it is in the Paris hotel room.

2

There were three hotels on that street, on Rue Meslay, at the height of physical tourism. That time is not so long ago that Paula can't remember it. Airports, time zones, sudden contrasts between climes. When she married Kai, for example – it's only been thirteen years, though it seems longer – they could still take an airplane and spend ten days on a Greek island. It was an expensive trip, a luxury, but not unattainable.

There were three hotels then, on that discreet street near the Place de la République, on Rue Meslay. And only one hotel now: Hôtel du Plat d'Étain. It's the same across the whole city, the number of hotels has decreased at the same rate all over. But the prices certainly haven't decreased at all. The reduction in offerings and the demand for luxury have driven prices up to absurd levels – the only guests now are the richest Asian tourists, who can afford to pay for extra kilometers, and people coming for trade shows or meetings, who have enough to pay the environmental tax. This same hotel, at one time a small and unassuming three-star hotel, is now within reach of very few, and to make

that pathetic exclusivity obvious while avoiding any significant investment in radical renovations with no guaranteed return, they've filled it with pretentious details, like the hologram that greets you at the door, calls a driverless taxi for you, gives you directions; a hologram that looks like a bellboy in one of those mythic 20th-century hotels on the Costa Azul, and thus makes the absurdity of its presence, and even of its position, all too obvious. In Paula's opinion – and she knows a bit about these things – the result couldn't be more depressing, and last night, when this creature made of light gave her a broad smile, this twenty-something boy dressed in red from head to toe, designed down to the last tiny hair of his thin, rudimentary, inadequate mustache, she scowled at him and marched through the hotel doors without a word, embarrassed for him.

Fortunately, she found a real person at the reception desk and with great dignity, Paula explained that she would prefer to be on one of the lower floors, on the first floor if possible. She did not explain that she would prefer not to use the elevator, nor why, though she often felt the temptation to humiliate herself in front of strangers. The woman behind the counter handed her the key to room 105 without comment. *Merci beaucoup.*

A feeling of contentment filled Paula's chest as she went up to the first floor, tugging her small suitcase behind her. It was important to stay on this street, Rue Meslay, and now here she is. She has reached her destination. Her first destination, at least. It was important to stay on Rue Meslay, and how happy she was, what a joyful leap her heart gave when she discovered that there was still a hotel on this street. Here, it had to be here, she had told the assistant. No sooner said than done, and now here she is.

Meslay, or Meslée, as it was spelled then: Mary Wollstonecraft's residence when she came to Paris in the middle of the Revolution: her winter quarters, her watchtower, her room of her own, her cave, her refuge. And what would it have been like to travel from London to Paris alone in those days: dangerous roads, the sea passage, the three-day journey by cart from Calais to the capital, delays for no apparent reason, advances by swindlers, rumors, howls, potholes, nights, dark nights with no electric lights. And all of that, all of it, suffered

inside a woman's body. But she arrived, and she did it on her own. She entered the walls of Paris and took her first residence here, on Rue Meslée. Here. Close to the Temple tower, where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were held prisoner, so close, almost close enough to hear their sighs. The Temple tower is no longer there, no more walls, no Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette. No more Rue Meslée either, for that matter, since it's now called Meslay, but anyway: close enough.

It was important to be here, even though there's nothing left from before. But there must be, of course there must, that's the whole point of this trip: there must be noise, there must be towers, stone walls and prisons, posters and soapbox speechmakers declaiming to the crowds; there must be carts, horses, horse manure, elegant cafes and the chaos of markets, prostitutes and fishmongers, vegetables trodden underfoot, lascivious glances, mud. And there must be clamor. The smell of blood. Fear. There must be Revolution. And she must be there, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lady of the Enlightenment and brave traveler, who appeared to her last night to free her of insomnia, warm, sweet and contemporary.

This is Paula's job: to reconstruct what is missing, to create something tangible in the void. The new fabric of dreams is not in Hollywood, but in the companies that produce virtual reality.

But before producing it, before creating it, Paula must give shape to the dream in her mind. Her work requires the collaboration of programmers, architects, designers, artists and who knows how many experts, but before all the budgets, rough drafts, funding, codes upon codes, prototypes, optimization, calibration tests, marketing plans and coordination, before setting this unstoppable army in motion, everything is inside her. She gives the signal: now. She says: like this.

It's not only that. Paula is not that arrogant. She knows that not everything is in her hands, that even if she gives precise instructions, things can still go to hell. Because once the choreography is in place – budget, draft, prototype – the most difficult thing remains to be done. The final leap. The little step that can send all that work straight into the garbage or give it wings. Because it requires

the souls of the users. The user, the customer, the consumer. Impossible without them. Somewhere that martial music must be sounding. In truth, much is asked of those users, customers and consumers. This: the voluntary submission of all their senses. Leave your perception in our hands. Forget what you're seeing, we'll tell you what you're seeing. This is how the magic works. With no transition. You're here and suddenly there. The glasses, the gloves, the neoprene.

We're going.

Do you want to come with us?

The new fabric of dreams is not in Hollywood, but inside whoever dares to enter Delphi. The white screens of dreams are there, inside. Paula imagines it and all those users, customers and consumers join the dance. It's beautiful, it's difficult, magnificent and terrifying. Paula has a certain power, but she also feels the weight of responsibility. She must do things well. No more halfway measures, no shoddy work. She is the creator of a new world now.

This is how Paula found her vocation, the thing that she's really good at, the thing that has brought her happiness and, might as well admit it, money. After losing her way on too many shortcuts.

It had been two years since they signed the agreement to reduce travel in the company. And they had followed it strictly ever since: they had gotten used to holding meetings, negotiations, presentations and seminars in Delphi's professional rooms. There were some disadvantages, but it was also convenient and they saved a lot of time. Everyone got used to it faster than they thought they would. But now it was time to make an exception, and Paula calmly explained why to her partner, Nikola.

Because her gut cried out for it.

Because she needed to get away from home.

Because her greatest erotic fantasy was to be in a hotel room alone.

No, she didn't explain it like that. She had other justifications: rigor, atmosphere, detail, truth. They were looking at a project that had to be done properly, one that was well funded and for which there were high expectations. To bolster her arguments, she brought up the Mirande affair, even though she knew it would be painful, precisely because she knew it would be painful. It was another module set in Paris that had debuted three years earlier and had been hacked immediately, which had caused them any number of headaches.

That module, which followed the life and literary career of Jon Mirande, had been designed by Paula, without traveling to Paris, without even leaving her home, truth be told. It had appeared to be nothing more than another order for the Department of Education. But Paula had had her doubts from the beginning. The era of abolishment was over and the literary and educational systems were now in agreement: Jon Mirande's work should be restored because it included hidden masterworks and because the poor and meager history of Basque literature could not afford to lose such an illustrious pen as his. But his dark side as well as his light side must be laid bare. Within their context, of course, but without trying to play down the man's hatefulness. Alcoholic, nazi, whoremonger. Pedophile, perhaps? Yes, yes, all of that. Beyond all shadow of a doubt, besides. But now, let us read his works. Applaud his prose. Call him a pioneer for the lyricism with which he speaks of lesbian sexual relations.

That was the new consensus. The directive from the Department of Education.

Paula was not so sure. In her day, Mirande was not studied at school, and she hadn't felt any need for him to be. She felt a sort of shiver looking at that ordinary face, reading his words so full of resentment. He was a horrible man.

This is why she did the work quickly and without enthusiasm, no use to deny it. She simply browsed the bibliography, dealt with authors' rights, interviewed three or four elderly academics. A routine job, a cinch. That may have had

nothing to do with the hack or with what came after – they could just as easily have hacked a different, more meticulously documented module – but to Paula’s mind there was a clear connection: the Mirande module was a job done without properly laying the foundations, and one that had unforeseen consequences. Paula wanted to avoid that if they were going to set another module in Paris. Nikola had to understand that.

And so it was.

Nikola didn’t suspect a thing.

So, two nights in Paris, with an entire day between them. And then another night in London, between two days. Getting the visa for the United Kingdom turned out to be especially difficult. They didn’t get it until the last minute and even then, only by paying an express fee. The level of paranoia and bureaucracy of the last monarchy of the West was outrageous. Paula couldn’t muster much enthusiasm for going to Mary Wollstonecraft’s country of birth, to be honest. When her mothers were young, everyone went there to study English. That was where her mothers had met, in fact: two young ladies from the same foreign country, in a pub in Shoreditch. Now, since travel has become practically impossible and the need to study languages is also declining as simultaneous automatic translators become better and better, anyone who studies a language does it for the love of it, just as a hobby and without leaving home. In Delphi, you can learn to speak any language beautifully with the help of a virtual teacher with the accent of your choice, or even a whole gang of them who will go out for a walk with you if necessary.

Besides, the situation depicted by the media was frankly not very tempting. Isolation, disturbances, a desire to always blame foreigners. The same tendencies existed all over Europe, but Paula had the impression that, since it was an island, and given the difficulty involved in traveling by sea, everything was amplified there. Also, there were no hotels on the streets where Wollstonecraft had lived, most of the streets from that time no longer even existed after the

great renovation that had been carried out after the last flood. And that was important in Paula's opinion, even though it was a totally irrational thought.

But if she wanted to come to Paris, how could she justify her rejection of London to Nikola? She would go, of course. It wouldn't do her any harm to have a walk around Newton Green – that's where Wollstonecraft had opened a school for young ladies when she was twenty-five, and the park that bore her name was still there at least. Besides, Paula perked up a bit when she found out that she would also have the chance to visit Shoreditch, since the neighborhood where her mothers had first met was near Primrose Street, where Mary Wollstonecraft was born. She was hoping to tell them about it and ignite a spark of excitement. Unfortunately, they didn't remember the name of the pub. The Crown and Anchor? The Malt and Mardle? Who knows!

In any case, yes, she would go to London, of course.

But she was much more excited to be here, no use to deny it. In the City of Light. In the marvelous city the Romans called Lutetia Parisiorum.

Also, even though Mary Wollstonecraft had lived in Paris for three years, much less time than she had spent in London, her years in Paris were the most important, the most meaningful, of her life. The years of the Revolution and of free love. Or in other words, the years of the guillotine and laudanum. Hence Paris. Hence here.

The agreement they had signed had been to *reduce* travel, not *give it up completely*. On the other hand, what the hell, everyone knew that the document signed by the tech companies was nothing but a marketing strategy, a way to win over public opinion after the Green AI label fraud scandal. In practice, the world was still the playground of those who could afford it. And the Haptik company was a member of that secret club, even though they led people to believe the opposite with their neutral offices and discreet Christmas parties where they served only organic beers and cashews. She booked it without thinking twice. The hotel, the train trip – it had been ten years since they had banned flights of

under 1,500 kilometers – she had only to reorganize her schedule at home and *à tout à l'heure!* She'd be back before she knew it – eighty hours for humanity, a complete and total escape for her – ready to begin the Wollstonecraft module, full of inspiration, photosynthesis complete.

Pioneers of feminism I. One of the keys of the success of the Haptik company was said to be the versatility of its modules. They were experts in modules that worked equally well in Delphi's classrooms and leisure rooms. Therefore, even though the first phase of the *Pioneers of feminism* project was funded by the European Confederation's Laboratory for Educational Innovation, it would have other applications later, especially in virtual tourism. The module could be used from the early levels of primary education through the final year of high school, and it would have cross-curricular content: feminism, history, literature, languages. By cutting back or adapting its content, the module could be offered to the general public, so that serene tourists could freely wander the streets of Revolutionary Paris, so they could discover London in the early days of Romanticism. All of that without leaving home and with Mary Wollstonecraft as guide, instructor and friend. They were in the golden age of virtual tourism, and it was time to seize the day.

[Paula loved her work, though she would never say so out loud.]

3

She woke early and left the hotel early. Without having breakfast. She can find better croissants and cheaper ones on any corner than in that grubby buffet. Besides, she always feels wider awake on an empty stomach, like a hunter on the prowl. So she immerses herself in the pleasure of walking aimlessly around the city. The platforms of her shoes go clack, clack, clack on the sidewalk. This could be the beginning of a movie, and she clings to the thrill of being both screenwriter and director in these first moments of the morning.

Why did she wake up so early, without having set an alarm? Why is she not tired after tossing and turning all night? Why does the cold of January feel so stimulating? It's the euphoria. Where does this euphoria come from? From traveling, after so long. From being alone, after so long. From having received Mary Wollstonecraft's blessing last night, after so many doubts. There are many reasons for her euphoria, this euphoria is a gift, this new day that stretches out before her eyes. Onward, then. Clack, clack, clack. A gift: it can be opened carelessly, ripping the paper it's wrapped in to bits. Will she then hit a low, as unexpected as this euphoria? Undoubtedly, but in the meantime, clack, clack, clack.

She has no appointments until twelve. She has nothing to do but seek the things she mentioned to Niko: rigor, atmosphere, detail, truth. It's eight o'clock in the morning, the sun is not yet all the way up, a gray light dirties the beautiful city. The silence is incredible. Buses, driverless taxis and streetcars whistle by constantly, almost without a sound. Not many people are out walking. A bicycle from time to time. The streets are clean: it hasn't snowed this winter either. The seventh winter without a single snowflake.

Next to the Temple metro stop, she sees a man. From afar, she can't interpret his gestures, but they are extravagant, they attract attention. Young, twenty, twenty-two at the most, brown hair, speaking Arabic. She's closer to him now. It's not strictly true to say that he's speaking, since he's weeping openly, sobbing, and only rarely tries to string together words or sentences. He has his OFtals on, model 7.3 or 7.4 at least, and the XR glasses are so small that they leave the wreckage uncovered, for anyone to see: tears escape from under the glasses, strings of snot dirty half his face. When she passes him, Paula sees how his throat constricts, fighting for air. Even though he's not wearing haptic gloves, he moves his hands and arms as if he were trying to catch something. The feeling of dissolving in tears has never seemed more literal. Who could he be talking to? Who is before his eyes right now? What could they have told him or what must he tell them?