

ENGLISH TITLE

Half-light

AUTHOR:

Pello Lizarralde

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Argiantza

TRANSLATED BY:

Kristin Addis

As soon as he went out to the front, the usher's face was covered with salty spray. Immediately and instinctively, he raised his hand to dry his forehead and eyelids. Then he fixed his gaze on the reddish strip of horizon above the parapet of the sea promenade. He didn't stir until the waves began to wet the parapet. Then he blinked and turned to the left, arms akimbo.

About a hundred yards away, he could make out the shadow of the projectionist walking along the sidewalk opposite the villas. The neon light above the door tinted one side of the usher's body blue. The sign said *Atlantic Cinema* and the letter *c* was flashing. The dull light barely colored the tiles of the entrance and was reflected in the display case on one side of the ticket office. Inside the display case were two posters. On the left was a cartoon of an airplane tied in a knot coming in for a landing, with the title of the movie above the runway: *Airplane*. The one on the right was almost completely taken up by a woman's face and her angelic blond hair. *Xanadu* was written above her head.

As he entered the lobby of the movie theater, the usher went to the right, into a room that was both changing room and storeroom, opened the electrical panel and flipped three black switches. He exited and went up the nearby staircase to the projection booth. The light from the narrow upstairs hallway was enough for him to see that the projectionist had left everything in order. All the lights were off and the reels were in two bags. He went down to the ticket office and opened the wide middle drawer. The bills had been put in an envelope with the tickets and the coins were in a plastic pouch.

Back in the storeroom, the usher began to empty the pockets of his gray jacket. On a small table he placed what he had found among the seats of the theater: half a dozen peseta and five-peseta coins, two half-full bags of candy,

a pocket comb and a set of keys. After leaving the comb and the keys in a metal locker, he hung up his work jacket and crossed the hall to the bathroom. He opened the door and stood listening for a moment without going in. As he heard nothing but a drip and the hiss of a tank, he returned to the entrance.

The front door was wide open and the wet sea breeze rustled the curtains at the entrance to the building. The usher looked into the dark theater. A slight creaking sound came from between the wooden seats. Once the curtains were drawn and the door closed, the yellow light of the streetlights that had just been lit on the promenade was reflected in the round windows with double wooden shutters.

Keys in hand, the usher walked over to the wall by the ticket office to turn off the entrance lights. He walked to the door in complete darkness, separated two keys and locked the front door. Outside, he took his first steps looking up at the sky. The stars were few and shone only a short time before his eyes. The song of a cricket rose from a sandy lot between villas.

September 19, 1982

I know all too well what I came for. Though it would have been pointless, I was going to make up things that didn't happen. It wouldn't be too difficult to make excuses. I could say that I wasn't the one who came up with it, it was Alfonso's son, who didn't ask me directly but pushed me and pressured me to do it... That, and other things like that.

It's not true though. Iñaki has neither the age nor the authority to force me. He's only just taken over from his father and has no idea what he's doing. He may have studied economics, but he doesn't have what it takes to run a company like this. He has no respect for anything and I saw immediately that he has no scruples at all. He keeps the accounts well enough; that's what he studied.

I'm not bad at that task either, and when he came to me after finishing the summer accounts, I confronted him briefly. I soon had to step down, however. Everything was beautifully prepared and it was hard to refute him. And top it all off, he pulled out a large folder to show me the accounts for the last three years. He explained them to me in detail and were as clear as could be. I didn't let him finish. Apart from the fact that he had done things properly, I sensed that while he was at it, he meant to suggest, if only obliquely, that I had not done my job properly.

It wasn't true, of course, but I quickly realized there was nothing I could do to convince him otherwise. He was comparing results, and would see nothing else. It was useless to explain that earning less did not mean a loss. The curves sloped downward, and that's all there was to it.

I looked him in the eye and decided to keep quiet. He waved his arms about nervously. I wanted to force him to say something, and finally he blurted it out: "Something must be done, Ramon, things can't go on like this."

I didn't help him go on. I didn't want to make it any easier for him. He told me we had to take a close look at what we had, how the theaters in the villages were doing, what their workers were doing.

Coming from anyone else, that would have been like saying nothing, but since I had seen what he had shown me, it was easy to figure out what he wasn't saying. Then, without thinking twice, I told him I'd take care of it myself, to leave it to me and I'd have news for him in about ten days.

He agreed and seemed to be at least a little relieved. I told him that I would start on Monday and that it would take me a week to complete the inspections. And here I am, ready to make good on my promise.

I still have a hard time believing it. I don't know what led me to take this step. With this sudden decision, I believed I could do something for the people in the company, that I could act more justly than the young man. Now I realize that I have my own share of arrogance. If you think about it, what can I do better than Iñaki?

I've started to think that I'm doing it for myself. I need to move, though I don't know where. I've been through a lot since Maritxu's death. In the meantime, continuing to work has given me strength. It hasn't been easy to stick to the decision I made three years ago. Even my friends have lost respect for me and tease me. And when it comes to pestering, my daughter is the worst. "Dad, you should be enjoying yourself right now," she tells me almost every time she visits. She seems to think I'm feeling a bit down, but even though she speaks with the best of intentions, she should look at the big picture and think about what I might get out of doing my usual job.

I have no chores at home since my daughter brought a woman in to help around the house. I often eat out. I relax at the office. I don't watch the clock here, nobody rushes me and I spend most of my working hours alone. From time to time the workers we have in this city show up, leave what they're supposed to leave, and go away again.

I've always liked routine. It's helpful, it makes everything easier. That's why I feel something like fear when I come here. It's not only the task I set for myself; I would say that just leaving the house affects me.

Although I don't know for sure what good it will do me, I've decided to write down everything that happens these days. Just moving my hand helps me calm this unfamiliar tremor. I haven't put together a sentence since I was in school. There's no need for any such thing in accounting and at our house, it was Maritxu who wrote our Christmas cards.

Anyone else would die laughing to see how short my itinerary is. Believe it or not, in my thirty years with the company, I've visited only four theaters, the ones in this city, that is. I'll have five to visit starting tomorrow, and I'll start with the one on the coast.

It's been years since I was so close to the sea. The last time I went was with Maritxu. She was sick by then, and I remember we spent a Sunday there. Today's hotel is near the beach. I had dinner and went straight to my room. The place is simple and clean. From here you can only see the small bit of the sea that's lit by the

spotlights at the entrance, but the smell and the sound are everywhere. Maritxu used to say that you sleep like a baby by the sea. In that case, it should do me some good.

Thank goodness I came early. We had an appointment at eleven in the morning, but I was here about twenty minutes early. The cleaning lady hadn't shown up and everything was as I had left it the day before. So I decided to leave the front door and the door to the theater wide open. It was warm outside and there was a gentle breeze. But that's never enough to air out the inside, so I went to the storeroom for some green air freshener to spray around the theater. I can't smell its perfume any more, but the people who come in appreciate it, they tell me it smells sweet.

Then I went out to the sidewalk. I didn't have to wait more than a couple of minutes. Though I'd never seen him, I thought he must be the manager the minute I set eyes on him. He was coming over from the villas, on foot and walking quickly. I was surprised because I'd been expecting a car. Later I found out he was staying near the beach.

When he was about ten yards from me, he noticed the name of the movie theater, and when he turned his head slightly, the sun caught his glasses and blinded him for a moment. Then he came over to me, shook my hand as he said my name as a question, and gave me his full name as he released my hand.

It wasn't a very strong handshake. I could smell him then. He had just shaved and I would say he was wearing a light cologne. I asked about his trip and he said it was short and pleasant, without going into detail. We looked at the sea and exchanged a few words about the nice weather. Then I had the chance to take a good look at him.

I hadn't expected a young man, but I was surprised to see that he was about seventy and surely should have retired by now. He looked good though. What his stooped back and tired eyes behind his glasses detracted from his appearance was offset by the elegance of his dress, which was discreet: a blue summer suit, maroon tie, mesh shoes.

He immediately made an impatient gesture. When he put his hand to his temple and touched his thick gray hair, I invited him into the theater. He stood in the lobby for a moment, not knowing which way to turn. Before he went anywhere, I warned him that the cleaning lady hadn't come and the theater hadn't been tidied.

I showed him the ticket office and the storeroom. He inspected them from the doorway without saying a word. He nodded at my explanations. It was the same when we went up to the projection booth. I also pointed out the rest room, but he made no move to go over to it. It was clear that he wanted to go straight to the theater.

He stopped in the center aisle to look at the seats, the walls and the ceiling. He had one hand in his suit pocket and a faint sound was coming out of it. I realized that he was clicking the point of his pen in and out, over and over. Then he took a few steps down the aisle, slowly, looking both ways, ignoring me. When he reached the front row, he raised his head toward the screen. When he saw the stairs to the stage on the right, he looked back to me, as if asking permission. I moved quickly and when we started to climb the stairs, I was in front of him and asked him to be careful. We went to the back through the narrow passage left by the screen. Then I was a little embarrassed because I hadn't been there in a long time; I knew there was nothing to see.

Under the dim light of the screen, the manager took a quick look, first at the broken seats stashed there, then at the dusty cloths on the floor, and finally at the brooms and other things left by the cleaning lady. All the while he said not a word. When we retraced our steps and went back up the aisle of the theater, I noticed the manager was walking faster, head down.

When we got to the lobby, he told me he had to use the toilet. I turned off the lights in the rooms and waited. He spent two or three minutes in the rest room. When he came out, he gestured toward the street. We walked to the promenade side by side. I thought it would be unseemly to speak my mind bluntly, so I asked if he would be returning to the city and he told me he had a

few other theaters to visit. It was obvious that he didn't want to talk about it and he turned his attention to me to change the subject: now that the season was over, would I be taking a break... I told him no, I'm a traveler and once the fall comes, I sell hardware, that's my job, my real job. The manager nodded his head as he listened.

He wanted to know how many years I've been here. When I told him it had been twenty-four years, he turned his head a little and pursed his lips. That's quite a while, he said then. I told him the job is not what it used to be, it's not tiring in and of itself, but you have to put up with more and more. "Nothing's what it used to be," he replied, ducking his head and clicking his tongue.

We shook hands as we said goodbye and he said my name again. He returned the way he had come, almost as quickly as before.

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Before starting up the stairs to the pergola of the hotel, the manager stopped to brush the sand off his shoes. When he got to the top, he took a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the droplets of sweat from his forehead. He tugged at the neck of his blue knit shirt, trying to ease the heat.

He looked out to sea, leaning on one of the pillars of the pergola. In the water, he glimpsed three tiny heads among glittering specks of gold. There was no longer a flag on the pole next to the lifeguard's empty chair. Folding beach chairs for rent were stacked a few yards away, and two boys were drawing lines in the sand with their heels, marking out a soccer field. Once the playing field was finished, they marked the goals with jerseys.

The manager turned when he heard the whistle of a train behind him. The narrow-gauge train had just arrived. It was behind the hotel, about a hundred yards away. It was clear that they had modeled the old station on an idealized

Basque farmhouse. Whatever the time was, the shade of the chestnut trees on the two platforms was scant.

Soon after, the manager saw the train leave. The dark cars moved along without straying too far from the shore and crossed the bridge to the other side of the estuary.

As soon as the train disappeared, the manager turned his gaze to the villas along the promenade. Two had swimming pools in their back yards. Floating on the water were large leaves, not yet completely yellow.

To get from the pergola to the hotel cafeteria, the manager had to cross the terrace. Most of the tables were taken by customers. There were no young people. Some were playing cards and the rest were chatting with their backs to the sea. It looked like the cups and glasses on the tables had been emptied long before. The only waiter was in the cafeteria, with his back to the door and half bent over, focused on something under the television. The manager went straight to a small sitting area next to a large window. There were small tears here and there on the long sofa and the two Chester armchairs, and their armrests were worn. The manager took off his glasses, set them down on a small table between the two chairs, and rubbed his eyes.

When the waiter straightened up, he realized the manager was waiting for him. He apologized - "Have you been waiting long?" - and went over after washing his hands. The manager hesitated before ordering, but finally asked the waiter to bring him a draught beer.

As soon as he had the beer in front of him, he took a long drink. He didn't take his eyes off the beach until intermittent sounds and fluctuating volume from the bar caught his attention. From the sound of buttons being pushed, he deduced that the waiter was trying to connect the device under the television set. Images and sounds appeared briefly, then disappeared. Snippets of an old black and white film, in any case. Once the film was on, the waiter watched for a

little while, arms akimbo, then he hunched in front of the set again, forwarded the movie, then stopped it.

The manager went over to the bar with a few coins in his hand. He asked the waiter to charge him, paid, and then, like the waiter, looked up at the images on the screen: “so this is the new thing they’re all talking about...”

The waiter said it was, and told him the name of the device: VCR player.

“It’s not a new movie,” the manager said as if talking to himself. The waiter shrugged and said that he’d been given it to try out, neither the film nor the device was his. He took out two boxes to show the manager. *Laura*, the manager read on the first one. A brief smile crossed his lips. With his thumb on his temple and the rest of his fingers on his forehead, he stood for moment, looking at the front of the box.

“This one’s better for Easter,” said the waiter, touching the second box with a finger. The manager roused himself and blinked. He picked up the second box. *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* was written above a still that showed Judas kissing Jesus Christ. The manager looked down. The waiter stopped the movie and the trembling image of a man in black wearing a hat filled the screen. It was night, and the man was looking up at the sky with snowflakes all around him.

When the movie started again, the manager tapped the counter lightly with his fingers to say he was leaving. On his way to his room, he heard a man’s voice on the television. “What have you decided?” it said. Then a woman’s voice answered: “I’ve decided not to.” At the foot of the stairs, the manager felt a light breeze. The only window in the reception area was half open. The sand, water and sea reflected in the glass were more intense and they danced on the rattling pane.

September 20, 1982

The fact that the season ended yesterday forced me to start with the Atlantic. I don't know what I'll find in the future, but I don't want to have the same feeling I had today after doing the inspection. To say the Atlantic is outdated would be an understatement. It was an unpleasant surprise, which shows I wasn't as vigilant as I should have been. I should have known I'd find something like this.

It's not hard to guess why we are where we are. It did the Atlantic no favors to be on the coast, but it's not only that. It's closed for many months a year and as far as I know, no maintenance has been done in years. Certainly, the fact that it's a summer theater has caused it to gradually lose status, has made us think that the people who come here don't need much, just a seat and a movie. We think that happy, carefree people on vacation don't notice their surroundings and don't care what the place is like. And I don't think we're far off the mark.

The worst part of is that the previous owner left things as they are now and, in this case, the problem is irreversible. It would be crazy to try to bring it back to its former glory. If the profits were what they used to be, well, something could be done, but as it is, there's nothing we can do.

So I can't soften the blow, because the Atlantic is in a terrible state and you'd have to be totally blind not to see it. I'm using to making things clear and it doesn't take a genius to figure out what's coming next. In any case, I'll have to tell Alfonso's son, who will do the math. He won't be sorry to have me confirm his suspicions. What would the owner of a plot of land lose? A plot of land right by the sea...

Before I came, I thought that the work I'd taken on wouldn't be too much for me, but this morning was not pleasant. An employee named Antonio welcomed me. He seems to be working as an usher. A polite man, one who knows his place. He must be nearly sixty and when we took our leave of each other he told me the movie theater is his second job. Almost a quarter of a century with us and I'd never met him. Though there was no reason for it, I was seized by a sense of unease.