

ENGLISH TITLE:

The Last House

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ORIGINAL TITLE:

Azken etxea

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The spy knows that the same person who rented the house across the street bought the house in the pines, that the house being renovated, and that the buyer is the redhead. It doesn't occur to him that the person in the hoodie could have bought the house in the pines. The price wouldn't have been far off half a million.

He knows that the two women were away for a few days. Everything is normal, apparently. Two women living together in a rented house and one of them has bought a new house, right in the neighborhood. All normal, but the spy has a feeling they're hiding something and it makes him furious to think that they'll leave soon and he has little time to clear up his suspicions.

The last few days, the redhead has been going up and down, mostly in the contractor's car, and the woman in the hoodie goes out twice a day with the dog, sometimes up the hill, and sometimes she uses the car to do the shopping. Also, they get a package almost every day, perhaps following the new trend and buying things online.

He also received a call from his friend at the police station, and he knows who the woman was who was found dead at the house in the pines. A woman who had been involved with ETA a long time ago, who had Spanish citizenship, who spent some time in prison, and who has been off the radar of the gendarmes for a long time. Just an old homeless woman who died of a heart attack. He finds it odd. He thought that such militants had the protection of the organization forever.

He thinks that if the women across the street have a secret, it must be something to do with the one in the hoodie because, among other things, right now, in the middle of a warm spring, she always has her hood on when she leaves

the house, morning or evening. The former gendarme has no psychological explanation for this oddity; he's not used to details of that type. Nor does he know that the woman wears the hoodie solely to exit and enter the house, because it doesn't occur to him that the women are aware of his espionage. He has seen how the trend of wearing a hood, probably from America, has spread among young people, but always among young people, not among women who must be his age.

If the body found in the house in the pines was someone who was involved in terrorism, perhaps they had met in the past, on opposite sides of the trenches, the former gendarme and the deceased. If he were to stick strictly to the truth, he would have to say that this has happened to him only rarely, but those few exceptions have long been part of his mythology. In the past, however, terrorism seemed to be a problem imported from the south, one that barely affected the local Basques. He remembers the folklore he learned from his parents as a child, which in no way undermined the integrity of France. Songs, dances, festivals, even the flag. Too simple to run deep.

The people who came here fleeing from the south changed the situation. But today the gendarme, who is stuck with surveillance work, barely has enough work to deal with this problem. He was busier with thieves, smugglers, drug traffickers, first in Bayonne and then around Hendaye, on the banks of the Bidasoa, close to his childhood home. He had dreamed of going to Paris for a long time, until he had to give it up. In the end, most of the credit went to those who worked against terrorism, not to those who fought drug traffickers. But the people who screwed up his knee, and with it his whole life, were not terrorists. If the body found in the house in the pines was one of those, she died too late, thinks the gendarme, it would have been better if she had died young.

The spy is not interested in the woman in the hoodie, he can recognize her at a glance when she's going in or out of the house. He's interested in the redhead, with a longing that is unfamiliar to him. She's not a young woman, no. She's a beautiful and elegant older woman, the perfect age for the spy. It could also be that the spy was looking for a caretaker, someone to look after him. But

if that's the case, it's far in the background, almost out of focus. The man feels well enough taken care of and the pension he receives every month guarantees this until his death. He likes the way he's treated: he lives comfortably with care that is free from emotion. When he was working, he hardly knew the woman who took care of the house. He could see that the house was tidier thanks to the woman's work. He would leave his wages on the kitchen table and that was it, until the next time.

The renovation of the house in the pines is moving along. The roof is finished, the heating system is installed in the walls, waiting for the radiators. The contractor says they have to wait a couple of days while the cracks in the walls dry, and not to worry: there's a slight delay, but the radiators will arrive on time. The contractor has painted what are meant to be sand-color swatches, and the homeowner is surprised at how yellow or pink they seem. What beach does the man have in mind? Where could he have seen sand that color? So many swatches and no suitable colors. The owner says that she'll bring him a handful of sand from the beach in Hendaye and he should try to match it. The man agrees with a sigh. He knew that it would not be as easy as it seemed at first. Experience has taught him that when a woman is at the rudder, everything is more difficult, more complicated, women are great at sailing in circles.

The porch is missing, and there was an argument about that too, or at least different opinions. In the man's opinion, it would be best to paint the railing since they'll paint the front of the house, the façade. The homeowner, however, likes the look of the color of wood mixed with traces of white, apparently it gives the porch a particular touch that she likes. So, since the structure is sound, they won't touch the porch.

In the meantime, however, no response from Paris yet. It's early May, the pines have put out new shoots, the grass is growing, and the passion-flowers, wherever they came from, are taking over the fence to the left of the house. They weren't there last year, no one planted them, but they don't seem to care. The gardener, who came from the south, wants to get rid of them because they're

invasive, but the owner has a different opinion, she loves plants that arrive on their own, the ones that claim space without anyone's help.

What little patience she has is about to run out when the letter from Paris finally arrives. It comes by express mail and on the envelope, in neat writing, is the full name of the redhead. The woman doesn't even take the time to sit down before she opens the letter. She rips open the envelope, tears it apart. And yes, the letter says that she got into the nursing home, a private room. That's what she wanted, but now, just as she's about to take that step, she is overcome by all her fears and disgust. She sits down, closes her eyes, thinks she might faint. She tries to calm her breathing. It wonders again whether Paris isn't too dangerous; after all, the house in the pines is hers by law, but it's not enough. She wants the house to be in her real name, as real as possible.

With difficulty, she steadies the rudder and gets the ship back on course. She takes a piece of paper and starts making a list of things she needs to do before she goes back to Paris. The renovation first, of course, including the garden; the dog, buy clothes, withdraw money, the appointment with the notary. Now she just has to prioritize the tasks and buy a ticket to Paris. Come on, she encourages herself, you're not going to give up now before taking the last step.

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There are only a few days left in May when the redhead again steps onto the platform at the train station in Hendaye one afternoon. There are twenty minutes before the train leaves and here's the woman, wearing her travel clothes, suitcase in hand, properly turned out. There are few people around and she finds that reassuring. Only five hours, and she'll be at the Montparnasse station.

It seems like a short trip, perhaps because what she has to do after it seems so difficult. When she gets off the train at Montparnasse, it feels like the journey

from Hendaye went by in the blink of an eye. She's shocked when she sees her image reflected in a shop window in the station. There she is, dressed again in electric blue, long hair dancing down her back, fine heels on her feet, grounded by the handle of her suitcase. She stares at her image for a few seconds, as if she can't believe what she's seeing or, more precisely, as if that image will soon be just a memory.

It's not yet dark when she arrives at the hotel where she has a reservation. She leaves her suitcase in the room and changes nothing but her shoes before she goes out again. That is, after hiding her passport in the bathroom. She sits on a terrace near the hotel and watches the people, as she often does, with the intentness of an entomologist. The person now called Eugenia used to call her a butterfly, but she feels more like a bee, or maybe an ant. Like ants, she collected and saved the money she earned from Modigliani to Modigliani, the money that would give her freedom now and in the future.

She thirstily observes people's coming and goings and notes that there are hardly any old people among the pedestrians in the dusk, and she finds this ironic, if she compares it to the human landscape she'll be looking at starting tomorrow. She'll have to disguise herself beyond just her clothes, but that doesn't worry her. After all, she's been in disguise half her life, she's in disguise right now, giving a solid performance.

She had planned to order red wine, but changed her order on the spur of the moment when the waiter approached. She asks for a glass of champagne, knowing she'll have to pay a king's ransom. What is there to celebrate? The desire to celebrate something, the desire to think that her goal is near and within reach. Desire. What she has to do tomorrow seems like an uphill struggle. Though no more difficult than the various troubles she's had to overcome so far.

She returns to the hotel without eating dinner. As soon as she enters the room, she takes off the clothes she's wearing and puts on the gray jersey she brought in her suitcase, a loose garment that hangs to mid-thigh. Then she goes into the bathroom and washes off the makeup she put on so carefully in the

morning. Taking off the red lipstick makes her feel the worst because that's the only makeup she likes. Eugenia, on the other hand, never paints her lips, and starting tomorrow, she will be Eugenia. You'll color them red again after you fix everything, she tells herself.

With a clean face, she takes the clothes she'll wear the next day out of the suitcase. She dresses in black from top to toe, takes off her red wig and suddenly, Eugenia appears in the mirror, face furrowed by time, hair white and short. She smiles at her reflection in the mirror. She feels like putting on her hood then, but the jersey she's wearing has no hood. She lies on the bed without changing her clothes; she thinks that her disguise will be more convincing if she sleeps in the new clothes.

Gone are the days when she was able to sleep through the night from beginning to end. That night, however, will be one of the worst she's ever had. She tries to remember her last home, she has a home waiting for her with no leaks, no woodworm, with a garden and everything. She tries to imagine a passport with her full name written on it. She can't.

Time keeps marching on and the next morning comes, the next noon, the next afternoon. At that moment they meet, at the metro stop near the nursing home, the former redhead and the ally who will help her get what she needs. It's hard for the man to recognize the woman before him because she looks so much like his late mother, the same isolation, the same bitterness, similar wrinkles. I'm Eugenia says the woman. She's dressed in black and holds her suitcase with her right hand. And the remark makes the man laugh, for the first time in a long time. Moved by this warmth, he takes the woman by her left arm and thus they arrive at the entrance to the nursing home. They stand there, looking at each other blankly without speaking.

"Sure?" the man asks. The woman steps forward in response, hunching her shoulders and leaving the suitcase with the man. When she bends her spine, she doesn't feel like Eugenia, but like her late mother. Oh, mothers, always hovering over our heads. Her mother died in a nursing home as well, as the woman found

out later, when she was in Santiago. She hadn't seen her mother for seven or eight years, and wasn't familiar with the nursing home where she died, but it was probably in worse condition than the one before her now. She knew her grandmother's nursing home from her childhood and she remembers its wide halls full of lost old people. Mixericordia, her grandmother's was called; her mother's they called the nursing home. It could be fate, but the former redhead knows she's not going to die there; she's come for the treasure map, not to live there. She pictures her mother as she had always known her, with a white bun at the nape of her neck.

The maelstrom lasts only a few seconds, but the attack is fierce. So fierce that she stops in her tracks, unable to move forward. The man thinks that perhaps the woman will back out at the last minute, she won't go ahead with this absurd initiative. But nothing like that happens. The woman moves forward immediately, hunched over, and the man follows with the suitcase.

In the office to the right of the entrance, the woman presents her papers, and the employee offers her a prefabricated smile in return, as a welcome. The reservation is under the name of Françoise Segurette, and she is warmly welcomed. The man and the bent woman say goodbye there, agreeing that they'll see each other again on Saturday. A young girl takes the suitcase from the man and they go to the elevator. The woman recognizes the entrance and the penetrating and indefinable smell of it seems familiar to her as well.

On the elevator she decides that she'll take the mimosa-scented cologne out of her suitcase as soon as she gets to her room, at least if her room smells like everything else. The room looks tidy enough because she expected worse. It has a bed, a closet, a small armchair next to a desk, and a bathroom. The girl says she'll help her unpack her suitcase before she shows her around the home, but the woman turns down the offer.

Leaving the suitcase on the bed, they both leave the room, the girl giving endless explanations. Madame Segurette this, Madame Segurette that. Dinner is at seven, she retains that much information. She sees the dining room, the

living room, the nurse's office, the tv room, but even though she's keeping an eye out, she doesn't see the old man she's looking for. She goes back to her room and waits for dinner after putting the clothes she brought with her in the closet.

Lying on the bed, she contemplates the bareness of the room. She's always lived in rental properties, both as a child and later. Maybe that's why her last home is so exciting. Her thoughts turn to it, to the nest waiting for her, until a sing-song bell announces that it's time for dinner. It is Eugenia who heads for the dining room, curious about a certain matter of concern.