

Burbujas

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In this collection of thirteen stories Irati Elorrieta sets forth a vision of young love in modern Europe. The stories are interlinked, following a small cast of eccentric characters, narrated for the most part by Sira, a young Spanish woman whose heart has been broken and who is attempting to recover from an unspecified loss by escaping to Berlin. For the summer she rents a room from two men, one of whom is Hermann, a tall cellist who wears black and loves women as much as he loves his cello--he accidentally has a daughter by one of them. When Criss, one of the artists who live in the apartment building that is the base for this community, sends Sira photos of that summer after she returns to Spain, Sira is captivated by a picture of her and Hermann engrossed in conversation with each other while everyone else is smiling for the camera. She realizes that she might love him. They begin texting across borders, sharing in some small way the experiences of attending friends' funerals and watching art films like "Swimming Pool" and "Lost in Translation" alone late at night in their own apartments, and over the course of two years Sira works up the nerve to return to Berlin to visit Hermann.

The book's cover copy states that the first and final stories in the collection have won prizes, but it is perhaps the second story, "Gazes, Messages from Afar," that is the most powerful. Sira returns to Berlin and over the course of the summer she and Hermann become telepathic lovers, moving cautiously, long before their relationship becomes physical. Sagan, the bald, tattooed drummer who is their third room mate, says to Sira, "Let's see if you're not too frightened this time."

Sagan spends most of his time smoking joints and composing music on his computer. In "Sagan's Dream" he asks his girlfriend, Yinye, in the middle of the night if she will have a child with him. She says yes and he drifts back off to sleep in a delirium of joy. When they awaken in the morning he reminds her of their conversation but she does not remember a thing and retracts her promise; she says things would have to change a lot before they could consider having a baby. Sagan is heartbroken and goes out into the dawn to smoke a joint.

"Criss and Carl" is about a couple who has two daughters. As the story opens, Criss and Sira go to the airport to pick up Hermann, who is returning from holidays in London with his daughter and one of Criss' girls. Elorrieta has a great eye for detail and describes Criss thus: "Criss checks she has everything in her bag. She always has everything in her bag. Like olives and cheese sandwiches, in order to be able to have a picnic at a moment's notice." As they drive, Sira comments on the obvious tension between Carl and Criss, and Criss explains that Carl wants to have another child, a son, in order to recreate the family he comes from--he has two older sisters. Criss likes the idea of having a boy but, living hand-to-mouth as they do, she cannot imagine the work of having another baby. Carl is a collector who drives around the city dumps in his pickup truck, looking for things to add to his collection, which is displayed in museum-like order in his room, or perhaps to sell. His dream of another child is impossible.

In "The Test" Lou, a musician who has fallen in love with Ara, a Danish girl with whom he spent one night, is trying desperately to get back to Berlin in time to see Ara before she leaves. He is stymied at every turn, and begs Sagan to attend his noon rendezvous with Ara on his behalf when it becomes clear he will not make it home from Brussels in time. Fortunately Sagan does not oversleep, and Ara recognizes him when she has almost given up on finding Lou at the Gorki Cafe. The story is a poignant illustration of the desperation lovers feel when circumstances prevent them from achieving the object of their desire.

The story "In a Face" is about Katrin, another tenant in the building who is an American girl from LA with a horrible childhood and a broken heart. Elorrieta opens the story, "In one face, excessive maturity and astonishing childishness." She's a drifter who has left boxes of her things in Seattle, LA, New York, and Berlin as she drifts through life. Katrin, with her long, golden hair and her sad eyes, is a rival for Hermann's attention. Nonetheless, Sira and Hermann attend the children's theater for which Katrin has designed the set, in order to support her.

"Sequence: After Lunch, First Floor" is about Frank, a film student influenced by the French Nouvelle Vague and Italian Neorealism movements, who disappears for weeks at a time to work on his screenplay, which he never tires of promoting. Frank is an American studying in San Sebastian, and his long-distance relationship with a girl in Barcelona has failed. He has returned to Berlin after a year's absence and is startled by all the rapid changes in the city. He wants Cesar, his former film teacher, to be first camera on his movie if it goes into production, but he is afraid he has offended Cesar unknowingly. He is a stereotypically self-involved young American, who thinks that the world revolves around himself. When Sira is thrilled to get a phone call from an old friend, Frank asks her who has put such a smile on her face. Sira answers, "Why do you want to know? You think I smile less when it's you calling me?" Sira and Frank spend an afternoon together and Sira asks him what his current girlfriend, an Italian, will think--if she will be jealous. "Nah," he says, but is surprised when Sira turns out to be right.

"Two Rooms" is the story of Mifu, a comic artist whose mother is Japanese but comes from Asturias; she has an

on-again-off-again relationship with Kike, moving in with him and moving out again. She leads a peripatetic life and works at the Modern Art Museum, where she lets Sira in for free when she's on duty. Sira reciprocates by letting Mifu into the movie theater where she works as a projectionist. The story sketches their friendship, and the difficulties of living with a lover.

"Vacations in November" should perhaps be the final story in the book. It pulls together all of the characters from previous stories and puts them in a van en route a picnic in the country on a Sunday afternoon. The summer is over, the apricots on the tree in the building's courtyard have been harvested in a big party on Saturday evening, and Sira has come out of her shell, relinquishing her grief and daring to love Hermann, even to conceive of having a child with him. The story ends, "Why feel guilty for feeling happy?"

I found the final story in the book, "Pop.H.Pop" somewhat confusing. It is the story of a concert, and of the dynamic between the three musicians: Hermann on cello, Sigran on drums, and Jeff on guitar and vocals. The "H" in the story title stands for "holocaust" and refers to Jeff's style of performing. The story is fragmented and might be cut if the book is picked up for translation, although it is clearly meaningful to the author, since the epigraph is from "P.H.P."

Each story in BUBBLES is accompanied by a delicate line drawing, often featuring the apricot tree in the courtyard of their building which serves as a device to mark the passage of time for the reader, as the blossoms fall and become hard green fruit that gradually matures throughout the summer, yielding a huge bowl full of velvety orange apricots in the fall. While each character has their "own" story, they come and go throughout the book, giving it the feel of a novel. In BUBBLES Irati Elorrieta has beautifully captured the life of a generation of young Europeans--its multicultural nature, its wired-ness, and its impermanence. The inhabitants of this apartment block in Berlin form a modern kind of family, supporting each others' artistic endeavors and helping each other out. Still, it is difficult to conceive of intentionally bringing children into this world, and this is perhaps the leitmotif of this moving collection. But by the end of the book Sira and Hermann feel hopeful enough to try.

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