

SERA

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Translated into English by Trevor Scarse



otherwords
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Cover photo: Bart Kingma

1.

She likes the atmosphere as she enters the hall. The evening's entertainment is at its midpoint, noticeably. Some of the youths are already walking around wearily, the more experienced part of the public is still talking leisurely in groups in the knowledge that the real deal is still to come. They aren't interested that much in the band that is playing. The acoustics are dreadful in the large shipyard, but fortunately this disguises the quality of the trio. Sera looks around the hall. Festivalgoers are the same everywhere. Beards, tattoos, a lot of denim and leather, earrings in all shapes and sizes: maybe just a few more nose rings and black plastic earrings than back home.

The bar is on the long side of the hall. Here beers are drawn into formless round glasses. But she has seen this all around the Basque Country, so it doesn't deter her.

"On holiday?" asks a guy waiting next to her in the line for the bar.

She always feels a bit awkward, a bit caught out, when she gets recognized immediately as an outsider. The light brown eyes of the guy are friendly however, and he has a soft voice.

"Sort of. A working holiday, more or less."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a singer."

His face lights up. He likes the musician type, he says. He can't play anything himself, much to his regret. Still, he often meets a lot of musicians through his work.

Sera sees he is proud of that fact. She's left with no other option than to ask him what his occupation is.

He's volunteering here today because this festival is held in his own village, he answers, but he usually works as a roadie for all sorts of bands from the region. That way he is scouring nearly all concerts and festivals, in the neighbourhood and far beyond. He once met a singer in France who looked a bit like her.

Sera usually loathes people who want to cram their whole life story in a talk of only a few minutes, but in a way this boy has a certain charm since he's quite oblivious to the fact that this kind of talk doesn't make any impression at all on a forty-year-old woman. But maybe he's too self-involved to notice that he has no chance with her. That has something touching about it. She should be careful not to smile too much at him. She estimates that he's about eighteen years old, no older. She decides not to ask follow-up questions, so he's forced to try another approach. She still can't establish eye contact with the personnel behind the bar. The boy does succeed to order two beers though.

"Will you perform tonight?" he asks.

"Tonight? No, I won't."

"Some other time during your stay here?"

Two glasses of beer appear in front of the lad. He puts two tokens down next to them, which almost slide off the wet board.

Sera shakes her head. No, not planning to. No audience for the moment, that is what she has been looking forward to. Not to be gawked at, be her own person again. See what that does for her. At the moment she hasn't yet much to say about the last part, by the way.

"Do you like it here?" He offers her a beer. "My name is Ibon, by the way."

"Sera. Thanks. Yes, I find it beautiful here." She looks at him unabashedly, as candid as possible but not provocative, to let him know she stands no nonsense. He doesn't give in, looks back cheerfully, no change in intent visible in his brown eyes.

"So do I. The Basque Country is like paradise. When I'm somewhere else, I always wish I'm back here again."

"Yes, that is the problem with paradise," she smiles knowingly. "It exists only in your imagination. Paradise is only paradise when you've left it behind or when it still lies ahead." She hopes he doesn't inquire how she came upon such wisdom.

Ibon nods understandingly. He then tugs on her sleeve. A bit too forceful, she is tempted to resist. He notices it, lets go and soothes her discomfort with a glance, then walks to the side of the hall. She shuffles after him obediently.

"Look", he says, when they reach an open door overlooking the end of the bay. The day is slowly fading away.

She takes a look. Hobby fishermen on the rocks, a pilot ship leaving harbour, the radio antenna high on the cliff, the light beacon at the end of the pier. It must have been lit up just beforehand.

"Look at the text on the pier", Ibon clarifies.

She searches. Big white letters chalked on the concrete. 'Presoak etxera, amnistia'. Only the last word she understands.

"It says that all Basque prisoners must be returned home", Ibon says. "It's the policy of the Spanish government to put all the Basques who've ever been arrested for terrorism, in prisons as far away from the Basque Country as possible. They're locked up in Andalusia, Extremadura, Murcia. Sheer lunacy, of course. The farther away they are, the more they see this country as a paradise, the fiercer their Basque identity becomes. It would be much better to bring them back here. That way we can tend to them and take away those tensions."

"But they're terrorists, aren't they?"

The lad shakes his head. Sera cannot gauge his reaction: does he disagree with her, or does he disapprove of the degree of ignorance of her question. He keeps quiet. She gazes at the pier. An older couple strolls on the pier towards the beacon. The light flashes red. Two polyester boats with fishermen dock.

She turns around. Ibon has gone. The old shipping warehouse has quite filled up with people now. The main act has already begun. The first song of Txiki & Arrakasta has just finished. Oh well, those usually are nothing more than glorified sound checks anyway. Txiki is standing awkwardly in front of his trio. A big man with square glasses and a full, black beard in which he has hung yellow and blue beads. Nevertheless she likes his voice, which matches his full beard and guitar play. It makes her think of the early nineties, when all local bands did their utmost to become the next Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Bush, Soundgarden or Green Day. She has always loved that deep sound. It is quite possible that Txiki and his band started in that time too; they all seem to be in their forties, except for the bass player. The guitarist still fits into his leather trousers, the drummer probably gave that up a long time ago. She can't understand the lyrics, but they sound serious. The audience sings along with most of them. Sera only recognises a rough cover of The Partisan by Leonard Cohen. She claps her hands and looks around to see that the audience is very moved by the song.

About ten metres to her left she recognises Ibon. She smiles carefully at him. He smiles back, steps towards her. She lets him come.

"Do you know the difference between a partisan and a terrorist?" he asks.

She shrugs her shoulders.

"The messenger. If he dislikes you, he calls you a terrorist. If you're his friend, you are a partisan."

He gives her a cryptic look. She doesn't really know how to answer it.

"So what are you?" she asks.

He glances about. "Everyone is everything around here," he says. "Terrorist, partisan, victim, culprit. Or else you're the child of one."

"Are you the son of a terrorist then? Or of a partisan? Or ..."

"I'm the child of all of them."

"What do you mean?"

He doesn't respond.

"Are you free tomorrow evening?" he asks.

Yes, she is.

Ibon fishes a ticket out of his pocket and gives it to her. "Here. Baiona, or Bayonne, just across the border. A bertsolari-festival is held there tomorrow. Do you know what that is?"

Yes, she knows. She saw videos on Youtube of the art form that is so popular around here. The bertsolaris have to improvise lyrics based on an assignment they get on the spot. A song has to be thought up spontaneously and be performed.

“Will you be there?”, she asks.

“Yes, but I have to work”, he grins at her. “That’s why you get my ticket.”

2.

From the outside the building seemed somewhat rundown, but inside the big sports centre of Bayonne is intimate and warm. Sera guesses there are at least five thousand people sitting in the stands and seats. A sense of happy expectation hangs in the air. The stage has six empty seats, a lectern and a television spot. A few cameras are set up for the live broadcast. Not much else was done for decoration, but people are excitedly waiting as if Beyoncé will perform. Technicians in denim trousers and black polo shirts are walking left and right. She can’t see Ibon anywhere yet.

She looks for the seat indicated on her ticket: fourth row, seat 23. After she stumbled past a few people, she finds her seat, next to a girl. Or is it a young woman? She could be twenty, but thirty five is just as likely. Her face is very smooth, no wrinkle or beauty mark to be seen. She has got small, but beautiful light brown eyes. But the most striking is her short black hair, which she has cut in a Mondrian style model: angular sections interspersed with circular patterns and a few long thin strands hanging from her head. Sera can’t immediately decide whether she likes it or not, but combined with her slender figure and delicate features the hair style gives the girl a singular presence which makes Sera nearly jealous. The girl nods friendly to Sera, as if she was waiting for her arrival. She isn’t used to this kind of reception in this neighbourhood. She answers with a friendly nod and flops down into the bucket seat made of red plastic.

There is a buzz all around her. Elderly people, but also a lot of youths. They’re talking, humming and looking out for familiar faces to greet.

Then the music starts and everyone starts to clap and sing along. From a side entrance the six contestants of this bertsolari-festival march in single file into the hall. The last one ... that’s Ibon! Sera laughs. Couldn’t he just have told her, instead of calling it ‘working’? Together with the other contestants Ibon climbs onto the stage and timidly receives the applause. All six of them look as if they did not have time to change. The two women did not think to try on a nice dress and the men seemingly have also left their smart shirts and jackets at home. Ibon wears brown corduroy slacks and a blue seaman’s pullover.

When the presenter introduces Ibon to the crowd, the girl next to her claps much harder than she did for the others. Sera looks at her questioningly. She smiles.

“He’s my little brother.”

She should have known, of course. The empty chair, the warm welcome, the same light brown eyes. Sera nods jovially and puts out her hand.

“Sera.”

“Que sera, sera! My name is Aran.” Her whole face lights up as she smiles. Aran knew Sera would come, she says. Ibon had told her. And she will do her best to help her guest understand what is about to happen. Sera nods gratefully to her. She looks from Aran to Ibon. There he is, both hands in his pockets. On the stage he is by far the youngest. Brother and sister have the same eyes, the same skin colour.

“Ibon didn’t tell me he was a bertsolari.”

“Ibon keeps quiet about a lot of things”, Aran answers. “He hasn’t been a serious competitor for long. But he has got talent, because he’s already in the finals.”

The presenter asks for everyone’s attention for the first round. The contestants have to role play in pairs. It makes Sera think of ‘What is my line?’ and other improvisational television programs, but she is astounded when the bertsolaris begin. Not only do they get a subject, but also a metre. They only have a few seconds to come up with a story, concoct a melody to go with it, make up lyrics that fit the metre and rhyme, and sing it. Without any musicians, without any preparation.

Aran occasionally scribbles down in a few keywords an English translation in a notebook she brought along, and shows it to Sera. Through this method Sera understands that the bertsolaris sing humorously and earnestly about every subject they’re given. One of the contestants brings the house down with a telephone call in which Donald Trump tries to talk courteously about Clinton, but can’t help himself and keeps mockingly calling her Hillahahahary. One of the others sings about the beautiful sadness of going on holiday on your own. The contestants get score marks on the quality of the content, language usage and singing ability.

Aran’s fingers turn blue from all the scribbling which Sera greatly appreciates. This way she can follow what is being said. In a one-two Ibon sketches a beautiful scene about two bartenders who find out there is no booze left. The whole room is rolling on the floor when Ibon sings to his guests that he definitely had asked the supplier to come around on November 31st.

During the break the judges decide who the two finalists will be. Sera asks what Ibon’s chances are. Aran shrugs. Her face has gone red, she wipes her forehead. She hopes he will, she hopes, she says.

Sera does so too.

The judges’ decision is handed over to the presenter. The presenter reads the paper, looks surprised and walks to the microphone. The first finalist is Odei. No surprise there, says Aran, he was the favourite beforehand. The second finalist IS a surprise. Aran shrieks, Sera cheers.

He got into the final round, that young boy whose eyes are just as pretty as his sister's. A boy she would like to give a bear hug, even though she is still not quite certain why.

The final assignment is no joke. Both have to sing a story about a married couple walking along a ravine during a hike. Both bertsolaris need to come up with the feelings of the couple being there and how the story continues. They have to tell it in three verses of ten lines, alternating between seven and six syllables, and every second line has to rhyme.

Odei is led out of the room, so he can't hear what Ibon sings. The boy is now completely alone on stage. Hands in his pockets, his head held high in concentration. The hall quietens down. Sera holds her breath, as does Aran. She doesn't dare to look up at her brother and is staring at the program booklet under her chair. The thin strands of hair hang down to her knees.

Ibon starts. His voice is a bit uncertain. Sera hears her neighbour gasp. From the rest of the audience she senses that Ibon is doing something special, she can hear some murmuring. Already after the first verse he gets a big applause. Ibon gives himself a few seconds to think. Sera looks to her left. Aran turns to her and whispers: "This is about our parents. They're divorced. Because of what my father did."

Sera nods. What else can she do? Ibon continues. A few people sitting around them apparently know that Aran is his sister, because they keep looking at her. She keeps her eyes fixed on the booklet. You can clearly hear from Ibon's voice that the story affects him, but he keeps in control. There is absolute silence for a few seconds, before the second verse gets an even bigger applause than the first, while Ibon is getting ready for the final verse. Aran doesn't really want to talk, but Sera keeps looking at her, full of questions. "Mum isn't alive anymore. She committed ...". Aran makes a gesture, but she seems to want to take it back immediately.

Then Ibon walks up to the microphone again. He swallows. He starts the first line. Sera counts along. Exactly seven syllables. Then a line of six. Then again one of ... Ibon stumbles. He then looks at the audience for the first time. The fear is clearly visible in his eyes. He can't go on. Hangs his head. The audience softly lets an 'aww' out. Ibon takes a deep breath, grabs the microphone in his hand, ready to continue. His mouth opens. But no sound emerges from it. He looks in Sera's direction – no, his sister's. Then he squeezes his eyes shut. He takes a step backwards, away from the microphone. With an apologetic nod to the presenter he sits back down in his chair, and covers his eyes with his hands. No sound is heard for a second or two, then a huge applause fills up the hall. Just as everybody else Sera stands up from her chair and starts clapping, harder and harder. Ibon won't win the final, but it can't get any more emotional than this.

Only then does she look at her neighbour. The girl is still sitting in her chair, doesn't dare to stand up and looks helplessly to her right. Sera helps her up. People are looking at her. Sera puts her arm around the girl.

3.

They get into the car. Ibon points out that they can just drive straight out of the street. Then left at the T-junction onto a road out of the village. A sign indicates a dead end after 15 kilometres.

“There’s a nature reserve at the end. We’ll drive a little that way”, he says.

First the road follows a stream through a valley, but at a hamlet the road bends up into the mountains. The road gets narrower and steeper here. It’s wet and the asphalt is covered in leaves, so she doesn’t want to go too fast through the twists and turns, although she needs to keep the accelerator down to maintain speed. The sun glistens through the trees, so she needs to concentrate to maintain good visibility. Ibon doesn’t say anything either. He rummages through his backpack.

For several minutes they zigzag up the hill. Now and again they get a beautiful view of the countryside. A few mountain bikers pedal upwards in low gear, swaying over the road. Sera slows down, takes her foot off the accelerator to change into first gear. Only on a broader piece of road is she brave enough to overtake the cyclists.

“Did you stay long, yesterday?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “No. I had to wish Odei luck, of course, and I talked with a few from the organisation and others, but we left quickly after that. Oh well, it was nice to be in the final, of course. But I didn’t want it to end this way.”

Only two kilometres of road to go according to the road signs. There is a small open field within an inside bend. Ibon points to it, letting her know she can park there. They are the only ones here, although the weather is magnificent. Sera parks the car in the moss and turns off the engine. Only then does she see that Ibon had hardly any beard growth. Just a few patches of stubbles on his jawline, no more than that. But it looks better than it is because of its black colour. They get out of the car. There are concrete picnic tables and two dustbins. Ibon throws some plastic packing he got from his bag into one of the bins.

On the other side of the road the ascending slope is easily scalable. But since she is still stiff from sitting down, it’s a bit of a struggle for Sera. Ibon walks a few steps ahead of her. After a few minutes they reach the top. Sera pants, but as she catches her breath, she notices the utter silence up here. You can’t even hear any birds or cowbells. Ibon finds a large slab sticking out of the greenery and sits down on it. From here they have a dazzling view of the mountains. Sera sits down next to him. In front of them they can see several hilltops. Grey rocks, like lids on green brown cones. Quietly they let the view sink in. Something hangs in the air. A buzzard, or maybe a hawk? It makes large circles without flapping its wings.

“No one lives here anymore”, Ibon says. “The road ends behind this mountain ridge.”

“So for you it’s not the sea that is the end of the world, but the land”, smiles Sera.

Ibon doesn't respond to this. "People from the village often come here to pick mushrooms, or berries. Foreigners don't come here much because it ends in the middle of nowhere. So it's like our own little world here."

"Were you born here?"

"Yes. So were my father and mother. This country is in our blood."

"I can see why you love this country. It's so beautiful." She means it.

"That's our punishment", says Ibon. "It's so stunning here that we don't even consider living anywhere else. So we're stuck here. Trapped in paradise. Which no longer makes it paradise."

She nods in understanding. Ibon gets a bottle of cider from his bag and drinks straight from the bottle, afterwards he offers it to Sera. She's unsure whether to accept, thinking of all the bends she needs to get through on the way back.

He catches her hesitation. "A little won't hurt. It has almost no alcohol."

She takes a few sips. It's very nice.

"They used to hold races here. First they drank a whole bottle of cider up here, then see who could race the fastest down to the bottom of the valley. In their rundown cars: Kadetts, Taunusses and the like. My father competed often."

"Didn't anybody get hurt?"

He shrugs. "No one does it anymore. Shall we walk a bit further?" He points to the right. It doesn't look like a steep climb, and they would stay above the tree line. Sera acquiesces. They get up and start walking.

"Do you live alone with your father?"

"Yes, I do." She gives him a questioning look, expecting more. He hesitates a bit. "Aran lives in Donostia, on her own. I go there quite often. But I can't leave my father alone for more than one night, so I always come back."

"What's wrong with him?" The path is narrow here, with a stone staircase going up. Ibon leads the way. They need every breath for this climb. Sera knows that this gives him the opportunity to avoid talking. She doesn't begrudge him that way out.

Ibon waits until they reach the top. "It started slowly. He went outside less and less, especially after our mother was gone. Everything shut down. In our house, but also in himself. He didn't socialise anymore, hid in his shell."

"Any reason for that; how did it begin?" Sera asks.

Ibon looks around. The asphalt road is fifty metres below them, it goes straight down from there. The fields are open here, the slopes steep. Ibon points in that direction. "Yes, it started over there."

They needed half an hour to get to 'there'. They took the long way round, because it was much too dangerous to go straight down. The paths were already slippery and steep. They had to go through a patch of woods, but now it is bare again. They have to talk louder than Sera would like because of the noise of a flowing creek. The path ends at a small concrete bridge across the water. Ibon walks towards it and stops. Sera looks about her. The valley is encircled by mountains, as if it were a huge bowl. The asphalt road loops around them a hundred metres above.

They had been friends since childhood, Ibon told her on the way down. His father and Xabier. They played in the streets together, went to school together, and walked home together in the afternoon because they lived next to each other. They had the same toys, bought the same moped, exchanged music and girls, and got in the car together to win the downhill races.

"And then they both started a family?" asks Sera as she sits down on one of the steps of the bridge.

"They both married a girl from their village. There weren't many women there, so it was a kind of tangle of messy affairs. But it worked itself out. My father had a garage where he fixed cars, bicycles and mopeds. And he had a job on the side as a courier, carrying packages to the city etcetera. Mum worked at the bakery, where the whole village came to drink coffee or txakoli and eat pintxos. When we were small, Aran and I often went there and got a treat. Xabier's wife worked there too, but she didn't get along with my mother as well as their husbands did."

"And did that end the friendship?"

Ibon shook his head. "Xabier went into politics. Which didn't go down well with the people in their village. He joined the Partido Popular. Straight from the Franco stable, according to the people here. Our village was very proud of their Basque heritage, of course, so any Francoist would have problems here. However, Xabier grew up in a family sincere in their belief that a unitary state would be better for the country. And Xabier quickly established himself as an important politician in the region." Ibon gets a *tortilla* sandwich from his backpack and offers it to her. Sera declines.

"My father and Xabier managed to stay friends though", Ibon continues. "It was hard, but my father maintained that they could keep their friendship separate from their politics. They just didn't talk about it, he said. They kept on going into the mountains, on foot or by car. After my father had fixed a car, he usually drove it to the top and back, as a test." Ibon takes a bite from the tortilla and falls silent for a moment.

Sera looks around her to give him some time. A car drives down the road and they can hear it slow down as it changes gear. Ibon gets up and walks to the other end of the bridge. He points at the steps on that side. The ends are crumbling, the reinforcement rods can be seen in the cracks of the concrete. A chunk of concrete is missing from the base.

“Xabier met his end here. Sometime in the late nineties he and my father drove downhill behind each other. Xabier drove off the road, fell down into the ravine. His car came to a halt at the base of this bridge. After the car had rolled over umpteen times, of course.”

Sera looks at it. She notices that the crash had not only smashed away part of the steps, but also put the whole structure out of joint.

“And what about your father?”

“He said there was nothing he could have done. To his surprise Xabier had suddenly slipped on a straight stretch of road and went down the cliff, he said.”

“And he could not help him?”

Ibon shakes his head. “He said he couldn’t. But then ETA made a statement that they had successfully assassinated Xabier. That sowed seeds of doubt.”

“That must have been terrible for your father. Did he then become a suspect?”

“I don’t know what everybody believed. But my father vowed that it had been an accident. Nonetheless everything changed after that. Some acquaintances started to avoid him, he lost customers; my mother couldn’t work alongside Xabier’s wife anymore and had to quit. Times got tough at home. Less money, more tensions. Tensions also rose between my parents. We heard them argue more and more. At night Aran and I held each other tight, but that didn’t help. She prayed for love, but it didn’t come. My father was at home more and more, because he got less work at the garage. He stopped working as a courier, but we didn’t know why. And he never left the house anymore. Slowly it became unbearable at home. In the beginning they waited with quarrelling until we were in bed, but in the end they couldn’t even manage to wait until then. The volcano was about to burst.”

“And at last it erupted?”

“Eventually mum put the knife to his throat. Almost literally. One evening she was standing in front of him waving something around. I can’t remember anymore whether it was a knife, but it was some kind of kitchen utensil she had in her hand. We were standing in the door opening, but they didn’t even notice. Mum was willing to hurt him if he didn’t say out loud what had happened the day that had changed her life completely. Finally, my father admitted it.”

“That it wasn’t an accident?”

Ibon nods. He swings the backpack over his shoulders. They follow the same path back. After a while they leave the creek behind them and walk through the woods again. It is nice and quiet here. The trees are interspersed widely, one large brown tapestry in between them. Sera kicks up the leaves. Presently they have to climb again, so Sera tries to slow them down, so they can keep talking. She starts walking in front of him, backwards, facing Ibon. He gets the message. They halt.

“His courier work wasn’t that innocent, he admitted. Dad was in contact with ETA, kept them informed about the happenings in the village and ran goods for them. He probably hid weapons somewhere up here in the mountains. Enough possibilities for that here. Anyway, one day he got the order to execute Xabier. He didn’t dare to refuse, but agonised over it for weeks, he told us that evening. He just couldn’t shoot his best friend. Still, he supported the idea that anti-Basque politicians like Xabier should be eliminated, and he couldn’t refuse an order coming from ETA. In the end he made a decision. He asked Xabier to meet him on the mountain, and coaxed him into one last race to the foot of the mountain. There on that straight stretch of road it is wide enough for two cars. My father was able to drive his car next to Xabier’s and run him off the road.”

Sera finds a tree to lean against. Ibon stands in front of her, drawing circles in the leaves with his toes.

“My father went down to the car, to cover his tracks and make his story credible. Then he went to search for help. He thought he could get away with it that way. He stuck to his story, even when people started to question his explanations. He steadily lost his equilibrium, however. He kept silent for a couple of years, but then my mother got him talking. Just that one time.”

“And she couldn’t live with that revelation? The ravine you sang about last night ...”

Ibon nods slowly. “Someone who wants to cover up violence, creates an invisible enemy he can’t defeat. Since then my father lives without really existing. He can’t be among other people, but he can’t be alone either. He has lost all control over himself.”

Ibon throws his backpack onto the backseat. Sera starts the car. She slowly backs up onto the road. Then she changes the car into second gear immediately, after which the car virtually freewheels down the hill. On the stretch of road where Xavier drove off the road, stands an aluminium crash barrier, painted red and white.