

El último día de la vida anterior

Author:

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Reader:

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Are the characters of this entrancing and intriguing short novel trapped in a dreamscape, or a nightmare? Are they dead? Are they under glass in a strange diorama? Andrés Barba writes such rich and realistic prose, full of telling details that it's hard not to take every scene at face value, no matter how mysterious.

The first character we meet is a seemingly level-headed, thirty-six-year-old real estate agent who turns around in the kitchen of a house she's about to show and sees an unblinking boy in a school uniform. He seems to belong there and she is sure he's real, even though he never blinks. She feels no fear, just the revulsion she always feels for the rich. When she goes back the following day, half-expecting to see him again, she sees her own self, in yesterday's dress, rinsing a cloth at the kitchen sink. This previous version of herself, is also "real", and says exactly what she had said to the boy the day before. And then turns back around and says it again. And again.

In this instance, as when she first saw the boy, the narrator tells us: "It's not a figment of her imagination, but a body as real and solid as the counter or the refrigerator", which seems to imply we're not reading a ghost story; but the boy seems to wordlessly require her presence in the house. She thinks later that only the living have the possibility of being inconsistent, death condemns a person to consistency, so she can choose whether to return to the house or not, but the boy can do nothing but wait, which seems to imply that he is a ghost. She spends several days trying to study her reflection (or whatever it is) up close, to interact with it, without success, and finally to touch it, after which she concludes that it is nothing but a puppet, a lure the boy has used to trap her there.

Between visits to the house that she's no longer trying to sell, she goes to see her father, a retired hairdresser, accompanies her boss to bury his dog in the countryside, has a beer in the park with a childhood friend whose young son has been refusing to take off his spiderman costume for days, and with whom she used to play a game of being each other's slave. "It was marvellous to have a slave, but much more so to be one, ... fear was better than power, better to be an object than to have an object, better to receive an order than give one, completely lose her will rather than feel its weight," she thinks. She will eventually play this game with the unblinking boy, ordering him to draw a picture and give her a massage. When it's his turn to make demands, he tells her to cut her hair. She takes his drawing to her father and asks him to cut her hair in that short style.

When she gets home, the man with whom she lives tells her he's going back to his wife, and she packs a few things and lets herself into the empty house. The boy does not seem to be there, but when she wakes up the next day the room is furnished and someone's clothes are lying on the unmade bed and a light is on in the bathroom.

Outside, she watches the clouds and breeze and notices a strange repetition. She counts the seconds before everything starts over again. She breaks a branch of jasmine to test her hypothesis and, sure enough, it is intact again 29 seconds later. When the boy appears at her side, she asks him if it's always exactly the same and he nods. He takes her over to the swimming pool where they watch his mother swimming back and forth under water. The seam in the torn fabric of time (or whatever it is) is invisible, a perfect loop. The boy's father and brother are inside, endlessly repeating 29 seconds of their previous lives as well. To "protect himself from madness" the boy has a routine of visiting all three of his family members and then running upstairs and throwing himself on his bed and crying, or pretending to cry, into his pillow. She doesn't know if he shows her these things or if she discovers them, doesn't even know if she's actually walking around the house with him, or if they are still in the kitchen having left those bodies of a woman and a boy walking through the house.

The woman seems to come up with a way to free the boy involving a grasshopper he has in a box under the wardrobe that he'd shown her on one of her earlier visits when it had been dead and desiccated but is now alive. The boy blinks, and the insect flies out the window.

The last two dozen pages are from the boy's perspective from before the inexplicable and unexplained thing has befallen him and his family, and Barba is incredibly good at portraying a child's thought processes. When the boy gets home from school, he likes to pretend to be a horse. He has a very specific routine as he gallops around the house speeding up at certain corners, slowing at others, and wants to tell his mother how he does it on this last of three days his brother and father are both away. But he overhears his mother arguing with the housekeeper, who needs to leave. When he hears his mother say she can't be left alone with "the boy" he feels a shiver of indignation. Mother and son laze around for a while, he gives her a massage and then she cooks him a steak, which he does not want. While she is on the phone with someone who upsets her, he hides the chewed-up spat-out meat under the table. When she sees it, she flies into a rage and says he will eat it, all of it, if not now then for breakfast, or lunch, etc. The boy shouts helplessly that he told her he wasn't hungry. He locks himself in his room and wishes all sorts of horrible things will happen to his mother. The next morning, she doesn't come out of her bedroom, and when the doctor comes and says they can't go on holiday he knows it's all his fault. At school he provokes a fight with the class bully.

Barba is a master of far-from-innocent childhood innocence and incomprehension, even when conveyed by a third-person narrator. In the end the boy is trapped inside his fear, sure that he has caused all this strange horror. Trapped in his unmoving body, all he can do is try to move in his imagination. He imagines he goes inside the house as a horse, imagines he throws himself on his bed and pretends to cry. Then we see the final interaction with the real estate agent from the other side. She shakes him and says words he doesn't understand, places her hand on his cheek and turns around to leave. Then he's back in the garden, playing at being a horse but he feels the sun on his skin and is able to move, and in his head is the thought "it's not my fault."

A slim ghost story that reads like a realistic tale of contemporary solitude with a depth of prose and characterization that make it feel like a much longer novel. One of those rare books that you want to start reading again as soon as you finish. Highly recommended.