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Author:
Andrés Barba
Reader:
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Andrés Barba (Madrid, 1975) was last year chosen as one of Granta's 'Best of Young Spanish Language Novelists'. He has distinguished himself across the literary field, with six novels (*Katia's Sister*, 2001, has been filmed; *Versions of Teresa* won the Torrente Ballester prize 2006), short stories, and essays (*The Ceremony of Porn* won the Anagrama Essay Prize in 2007). His works have been translated into nine languages and so far, a couple of stories have made it into English.

Fourteen-year-old Tomás goes with his well-off family on their usual seaside summer holiday, but he is at a stage in his life when nothing is the same. Sullenly detached from his family, full of confused intimations of sexuality, he is also faced with death when his widowed aunt, who lives in the resort, is taken seriously ill. The double thread of sex and death cross in his obscure search for meaning, as he frequents the forbidden in the form of some lower-class village kids: casually transgressive boys and even more alien, sexually knowing girls; meanwhile he becomes close to his delirious aunt on her deathbed.

The climax comes when on the last day, he finds himself participating in a gang rape of a retarded girl who is like a mascot for the town kids. When it is his turn, he only pretends to do it, enough to save face with the boys.

In the second, shorter section, Tomás, back in Madrid, wrestles with guilt and confusion until he takes some money and his aunt's keys, and goes back secretly, alone, to find the girl. Their day at her school fete is on the face of it a moving scene of atonement and forgiveness. However, ambiguity lurks even in this redemption: Tomás plays a loving older brother, and yet it is not quite like that for the young girl.

Andrés Barba's crafted, sensual prose gives us this dark story from within Tomás's groping feelings and thoughts, though it is not a first-person account. A powerful mixture of delicacy and violence, realism and interiority, characterizes the writer's style, with echoes of *bildungsroman* classics from André Gide and Thomas Mann to Edmund White. The psychological complexities avoid triteness because they are always concrete, conveyed through perception and sensation. Barba is an artist who rehabilitates the personal, and whose themes of youth and age, vulnerability and stoicism, cruelty and candour, cause this very adult novel about adolescence to resonate hauntingly in the mind.