



AMANDA

NARA VIDAL

TRANSLATED BY EMYR HUMPHREYS

It was in the lift. We were going up, as if ascending to heaven. It was meant to be. There, we saw each other for the first time. My grandmother was with me. She had the bitter, wry expression of someone who had been abandoned by love for quite some time. Her narrowed eyes scrutinised the metal doors in front. Her mouth, surrounded by wrinkles, betrayed the rigours of a life devoid of joy. Her right foot tapped the floor impatiently. We hadn't even passed the third floor. We were on our way to the twenty-fifth. There were thirty-six floors, I hoped he was getting off after us. My grandmother huffed impatiently. She couldn't bear that little display she was witnessing. Perhaps it was the dazzling colours inside the lift. Sparks and stars leapt from my eyes, so expectantly gazing upwards, unblinking. My eyebrows were arched above those coy eyes of mine. I began to fidget, my heart was pounding inside me, unreachable and unruly. I nervously fiddled with my nail varnish. Our eyes met. Moonlight beamed from his eyes. He was gorgeous! My gaze turned upwards again, confirming my desire. I watched as the numbers rose, one by one, my grandmother clicked her tongue, voicing her dissatisfaction. I saw him smile. I avoided his gaze in complete surrender. It was impossible to look him in the eyes. I avoided the beaming moonlight again. I avoided catching sight of it. I avoided it. My evasion, he could see, showed that I was interested. I thought of Fatima who would always make eyes with the man she wanted. She would smile and make conversation. Fatima got straight to the point and never played cat and mouse. She would complain that it was old-fashioned. I was, pathetically, stuck in an inexplicable cycle, unable to smile, to make eye contact, to speak. Even if my Grandmother hadn't been with me, I would still have been gazing upwards, showing my attraction. But to make eye contact, never! We arrived on the twelfth floor. Marcos and I were holding hands. Still. Last time. Joaquim in his arms, in agony. He wasn't crying. He was rasping, wailing. The little boy had a disease which made him cough like a dog, really heavy stuff. At the paediatricians, Marcos was visibly impatient at my expression, still coy, though no longer impassioned. The problem was that I still wanted that man who answered me with silence every night after work. I dedicated as much of myself to Joaquim as I possibly could. It was me and him and no one else. All day. Marcos would provide some services in Taquara and leave before sunset, hurrying home as if no train existed after five-forty. My grandmother kept telling me how it wasn't easy to leave the countryside. She put a curse on me by telling me how I would never be able to get used to the loneliness of other people in the big city. Everyone together, pressed up against each other, living in each other's pockets, towering walls, ugly faces. She said I would miss the knock on my door for a cup of coffee and a slice of cake at exactly three o'clock every afternoon. But with Joaquim's disease it was hard to find the time for that. I never had the time for baking cakes. Marcos' dinner was always ready at half past eight, after a twenty-minute shower. I would bring it to him on a tray with a cherry blossom design on it. Aunt Anunciata had bought it on credit, bless



her. He would watch the news and I would go and see Joaquim. I watched Joaquim all day. I went to monitor the boy's sleep. I already knew what I was about to see. Stripped walls, cot, stuffed dolphin, fish pattern curtains. Fish pattern curtains, stuffed dolphin, cot, stripped walls. I would come back from his bedroom and Marcos would complain that my sandals were slapping on the floor tiles and that he couldn't hear the news. I would ask him if taking them off would help, but he never answered. Marcos would get impatient with me. He would say how he worked too hard to chatter pointlessly with me when the only thing he wanted was a bit of peace and quiet. The man did work hard. He put food on the table. We'd have steak on Sundays. Sometimes he'd go for a barbecue with his friends. Joaquim and I would always stay at home. I never complain. Joaquim takes a lot of work and Marcos deserves his rest, even when he's impatient with us. But he's a good dad: he's never raised a hand to his poorly son. When out for lunch at his friends' on Sundays, he comes home early, at least compared to Zé Marcio, a shameless man, a drunk, always looking for a bit of skirt despite being married to a saint. His wife, Ondina, lives in mourning. She'd lost her three-year-old son in the garage when her twelve-year-old son reversed their car. Shut up in the house, her husband would go out looking for some action, seeing as Ondina had died herself, along with her son.

One day, Marcos decided to hit me. When my mouth had stopped bleeding, I went to the bedroom thinking how pathetic I was that I couldn't keep my mouth shut and wait until he had the energy to talk. Why did I have to ease my loneliness with my husband when I had nothing to say? Did Marcos really want to know if I'd spent less on sugar to buy apples? That Luísa had had an allergic reaction to her new nail varnish and had to go to hospital? Why didn't I wait for the break, the news headlines, to try and start a conversation? But no. I had to disturb Marcos. On the night of the argument, of the blood, he made me give him a blowjob. He said it turned him on when he saw me like that, with nowhere to go. And seeing as I wasn't going anywhere because I had no one and I needed money to eat and to stay somewhere, I made him come. It was the least I could do. Not that I could change his mind. And I really was thankful.

I'm only in this lift because Marcos broke my finger. I can't feed Joaquim with a broken finger. If Marcos breaks any more of me the boy will have no one. Mariana made me go. She said I had rights and that Marcos was an animal. I don't know if she's exaggerating, but I can't make it even more difficult for Joaquim. My finger hurts and until the bandage comes off, the boy will suffer. I press the button for the ground floor. This police business is just so embarrassing. I think of my grandmother hovering about, weighing down the atmosphere. Surely, if I talk with Marcos he'll change his ways. Mariana swears he won't. If he hit me once he'll always hit me. I don't know. I prefer to doubt her. The lift arrives on the eighth floor. The door opens and I see the placard for the police. I feel that kind of embarrassment that seems to swallow you up into the ground. I press the button for the ground floor again, quickly. I'll go find Joaquim at Mariana's mum's house.



I mustn't forget to stop at the bakery and get the *empanado* that Marcos likes. We'll get through this. It's just about doing it a certain way, waiting for the headlines of the evening news. Joaquim doesn't just need me. He needs a father figure at home. May God bless us and save us from a broken home, irreparable, without a mum and dad together to raise the children!

I feel so bad for my friend from the country who divorced her husband after being married for ten years. She knew he had someone else. When she tried bringing up the subject, he hit her with a belt so hard she had to go to hospital. The police never arrested the man. They wanted to interrogate my friend because men don't react like that for no reason. She really poked the bear! She asked him if it was true, the rumour going around town. The man had turned into a monster. Instead of letting him calm down, she pressed him for the truth. She got the belt! I don't excuse his behaviour at all, but she didn't know when was best to talk. I don't want to be like my friend and destroy our marriage. I had to learn when to bring up the subject. Marriage is an exchange. Both parties always need to be improving themselves. Even though he'd hit me, Marcos didn't want it to get to that point. I'm sure of it. I know it because he told me himself. It wasn't possible that my husband had forgotten that day in the lift and the first coy, impassioned gaze of my life, glistening with dreams as the floors passed us by, until the end. It wasn't possible that Marcos had forgotten about the moonlight that beamed from those smiling eyes of his, of the lift, dazzling and full of stars. It wasn't possible. It wasn't. If I'd been more patient, who knows if he'd still see in me what he sees in Lilian? It's just that being alone... Being alone is awful. One day we'll work it out. He didn't want to hurt me. I remember Marcos' face as he said that. He held my hand, calmly, and looked into my eyes. But my eyes were already turned upwards, my brow furrowed. While I could not look Marcos in the eyes with that coy expression of mine, I still hoped to see the moonlight beam from them again. And you know, when it isn't raining, it's clear skies.