

Quellón. Chiloé. A night years ago. Sometime after ten. No sky, no vegetation, no ocean. Only the wind, the hand that grabs at everything. There must be a dozen of us. A dozen souls. In a place like this, at a time like now, you can call a person a soul. The wharf is small and sloped. The island surrenders to the water in concrete blocks with a number of cleats bolted to them in a row. They look like the deformed heads of the colossal nails that pin the dock to the seabed. That's all. I'm amazed at the islanders' stillness. They sit scattered under the rain beside large objects the size of trunks. Swaddled in windproof plastic, they eat in silence with thermoses locked between their thighs. They wait. The rain pounds down as though cursing at them, runs along their hunched backs and forms rivulets that flow into the sea, the enormous mouth that never tires of swallowing, receiving. The cold feels peculiar. It's possible I've drunk some of it myself, since I can feel it thrashing and bucking under my skin, and also deeper inside, in the arches between each organ. Impenetrable islanders. I've been here for three months, working as a cook at a couple of summer camps for teenagers. In the evenings I would cycle to town and drink aguardiente at the hostel bar. There were barely any women.



It was a workers' ritual. Stained teeth bared in greeting. The jet-black eyes of every family tree that's managed to grow on this salty rock speak to me from their tables. They speak to me for all of the dead.



I'm not a chef, I'm just a mess-hall cook, capable and self-taught. The thing I most enjoy about my job is handling food while it's still whole, when some part of it still speaks of its place in the world, its point of origin, the zone of exclusion that all creatures need in order to thrive. Water, earth, lungs. The perfect conditions for silence. Food comes to us wrapped in skin, and to prepare it you need a knife. If I've got one skill in the kitchen, it's carving things up. The rest is hardly an art. Seasoning, tossing things together, applying heat . . . Your hands end up doing it all on their own. I've worked at schools, nursing homes, in a prison. Each job only lasts a few weeks, they slip away from me, spots of grease that I gradually scrub off. The last boss I had before coming to Chiloé tried to give me an explanation: the problem isn't the food, it's you. Kitchens require team effort. I'd have to find a really small one if I wanted to work on my own and still make a living.



The ship arrives at midnight. It barrels toward us at an alarming speed. Or at least that's how it looks, because of the light glaring in the downpour, making us blink. There's movement



behind us too; someone's pulled up in a jeep and left the engine running. He calls us. The islanders rise. They look like enormous turtles hatched from a large egg. They plod through the rain, and as they pass me I feel like an insignificant foreigner, disease-white and sopping wet under my dark blue rain jacket. You'd need two of me to make one body as tough as theirs. But I was like them once, despite everything. I'd dug into the island with my nails and learned that the pulp of your fingers can harden, that the heart governs the body and shapes it according to its highest mandate: the will. We huddle around the driver's door. I use my hood as a visor, rub my eyes, and try to make sense of what's happening. Hands exchange coins, bills. From the car radio comes the sound of string music, as though in honor of the storm. I buy a ticket with pesos from my belt bag. The rest of my three months' salary is wrapped in plastic, tucked between my undershirt and my skin.



It's as if the sea itself has held out the gangway, as if the ocean has come to collect us. My backpack has me walking at an angle. I've got ropes in each fist and I let them lead the way. The yelling keeps us moving. As I board the ship I think it's not actually that big, and then—silence. Human sounds are virtually imperceptible, here, beyond the reach of the elements. We walk sideways, with cautious steps, down a metal staircase. Behind a door is an empty hold. This is a freighter, not a cruise ship. We let ourselves fall inside as though we'd been adrift for years, and some of

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Quellón. Chiloé. Una nit de fa molts anys. Les deu passades. Ni cel, ni vegetació, ni oceà. Només el vent, la mà que tot ho pren. Devem ser una dotzena de persones. Ànimes. En un lloc com aquest, en aquesta hora, de les persones se'n pot dir ànimes. L'embarcador és petit i fa pendent. L'illa s'entrega a l'aigua en blocs de formigó on se subjecten, un al costat de l'altre, alguns amarradors. Semblen els caps deformes dels claus descomunals que fermen aquest moll al fons del mar. Res més. La quietud dels illencs

m'esbalaeix. Seuen sota la pluja, escampats, amb embalums grossos com baguls a tocar. Es cobreixen amb plàstics resistents al vent, mengen en silenci, un termo entre les cames. Esperen. La pluja els percudeix com si els maleís, se'ls escola gep avall i forma rierols que baixen fins al mar, boca immensa mai cansada de rebre i empassar. Fa un fred curiós, en dec haver begut perquè me'l noto, fanàtic, combatiu, sota la pell i més endins, als arcs que construeixen els òrgans entre ells. Illencs incomprensibles. M'hi he estat tres mesos, cuinant en uns campaments d'estiu per a adolescents. Al vespre pedalava fins al poble i prenia un aiguardent al bar de la pensió. Gairebé cap dona. Ritual de treballadors. Les dents tacades que saluden. Els ulls negríssims dels arbres genealògics crescuts a poc a poc sobre la pedra salabrosa parlant amb mi des de les taules. Parlant per tots els morts.

No sóc una bona cuinera, sóc una cuinera de ranxo, capaç, sense formació. El que més m'agrada de la feina és fer-me càrrec dels aliments quan encara estan sencers, quan alguna cosa en

ells proclama un lloc, una procedència, i aquell radi immediat de solitud que a tot ésser viu li cal per créixer. Aigua, terra, pulmons. Les condicions del silenci. Els aliments tenen pell i preparar-los demana ganivets. Si a la cuina sóc bona en alguna cosa és en esquarterar-ho tot. La resta no és un art. Assaonar, reunir, donar escalfor... les mans s'hi acaben fent, es manen soles. He treballat en col·legis, en geriàtrics i en una presó. Les feines em duren setmanes, se m'escolen, són un greix que vaig desfent. El meu darrer cap, abans que vingués a Chiloé, em va voler donar una explicació: el problema no era el menjar, sinó jo. En una cuina es treballa en equip, m'havia de buscar una cuina molt petita si volia treballar sola i seguir vivint d'això.

A mitjanit arriba el vaixell. Es llança sobre nosaltres a una velocitat alarmant. M'ho deu semblar pels llums, que esclaten en l'aiguada i ens fan parpellejar. Darrere nostre hi ha moviment, algú que arriba en un jeep negre i deixa el motor engegat. Ens crida. Els illencs es posen drets, semblen tortugues enormes nascudes d'un gran

ou. Travessen la pluja a poc a poc, passen pel meu costat i em sento una estrangera de no res, blanca com la malaltia i xopa sota l'impermeable blau fosc. Caldrien dos cossos dels meus per fer-ne un de resistent com els seus. Però malgrat tot he estat com ells, he cavat l'illa amb les ungles fins a adonar-me que el tou dels dits pot endurir-se, que el cor governa el cos i el modifica amb el seu mandat primer, la voluntat. Ens agomblem a la porta del conductor. Em faig visera amb la caputxa, em frego els ulls i miro d'entendre què passa. Mans intercanviant monedes, bitllets. De dins del cotxe surt una melodia de corda que sembla que celebri el temporal. Compro el passatge amb els *pesos* que em trec de la ronyonera. La resta, el salari de tres mesos, la duc embolicada amb paper film entre la primera samarreta i la pell.

És com si la passarel·la ens l'hagués posada el mar, com si ens vingués a collir. La motxilla em fa caminar inclinada. Tinc una corda a dins de cada puny i les segueixo sense deixar-me anar. Uns crits fan que no parem d'avançar. M'en-