

Claudia Piñeiro

Elena Knows

Translated by Frances Riddle

CHARCO
PRESS



'A gloriously taut and haunting tale... Astonishingly assured.'

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For her literary career

Winner of
**LIBERATURPREIS PRIZE
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For *Elena sabe* [*Elena Knows*]

Winner of
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For *Las grietas de Jara* [*A Crack in the Wall*]

Winner of
**CLARÍN PRIZE FOR NOVELS
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For *Las viudas de los jueves* [*Thursday Night Widows*]

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To my mother

Now he understood her, who had lived beside him so many years and been loved but never understood. You were never truly together with one you loved until the person in question was dead and actually inside you.

Thomas Bernhard, *Gargoyles*
(trans. Richard and Clara Winston)

*Even a concrete building is nothing but a house of cards.
It's just waiting for the right gust of wind.*

Thomas Bernhard,
The Forest is Large, and So is the Darkness
(trans. Douglas Robertson)

I: MORNING (SECOND PILL)

The trick is to lift up the right foot, just a few centimetres off the floor, move it forward through the air, just enough to get past the left foot, and when it gets as far as it can go, lower it. That's all it is, Elena thinks. But she thinks this, and even though her brain orders the movement, her right foot doesn't move. It does not lift up. It does not move forward through the air. It does not lower back down. It's so simple. But it doesn't do it. So Elena sits and waits. In her kitchen. She has to take the train into the city at ten o'clock; the one after that, the eleven o'clock, won't do because she took the pill at nine, so she thinks, and she knows, that she has to take the ten o'clock train, right after the medication has managed to persuade her body to follow her brain's orders. Soon. The eleven o'clock train won't do because by then the medicine's effect will have diminished and almost disappeared and she'll be back to where she is now, but without any hope that the levodopa will take effect. Levodopa is the name for the chemical that will begin circulating in her body once the pill has dissolved; she has known that name for a while now. Levodopa. The doctor said it and she wrote it down for herself on a piece of paper because she knew she wasn't going to understand the doctor's handwriting. She knows that the levodopa is moving through her body. All she can do now is wait. She counts the streets. She recites the names from memory. From first to last and last to first. Lupo, Moreno, 25 de Mayo, Mitre, Roca. Roca, Mitre, 25 de Mayo, Moreno, Lupo. Levodopa. It's only five blocks to the train station, it's not that many, she thinks, and she continues reciting the street names, and continues waiting. Five. She can't yet shuffle down those five blocks but she can silently repeat the street names. She hopes she doesn't run into anyone she knows today. No one who will ask after her health or give her their belated condolences over the death of her daughter. Every day there's some new person who couldn't make it to the vigil or the burial. Or who didn't dare to. Or didn't want to. When someone like Rita dies, everyone feels invited to the funeral. That's why ten o'clock is the worst time, she thinks, because to get to the station she has to pass by the bank and today's the day the pensions are paid, so it's very likely that she'll run into some neighbour or other. Or several. Even though the bank doesn't open until

ten, just as her train should be arriving at the station and she'll be there ready to board, ticket in hand, before that, Elena knows, she's going to have to pass the pensioners lined up outside as if they're afraid the money will run out so they have to get there early. She can avoid going past the bank if she walks round the block, but that's something the Parkinson's won't allow. That's its name. Elena knows she hasn't been the one in charge of some parts of her body for a while now, her feet, for example. He's in charge. Or she. And she wonders if Parkinson's is masculine or feminine, because even though the name sounds masculine it's still an illness, and an illness is something feminine. Just like a misfortune. Or a curse. And so she thinks she should address it as Herself, because when she thinks about it, she thinks 'fucking whore illness.' And a whore is a she, not a he. If Herself will excuse my language. Dr Benegas explained it to her several times but she still doesn't understand; she understands what she has because it's inside her body, but not some of the words that the doctor uses. Rita was there when he first explained the disease. Rita, who's now dead. He told them that Parkinson's was a degradation of the cells of the nervous system. And both she and her daughter disliked that word. Degradation. And Dr Benegas must've noticed, because he quickly tried to explain. And he said, an illness of the central nervous system that degrades, or mutates, or changes, or modifies the nerve cells in such a way that they stop producing dopamine. And then Elena learned that when her brain orders her feet to move, for example, the order only reaches her feet if the dopamine takes it there. Like a messenger, she thought that day. So Parkinson's is Herself and dopamine is the messenger. And her brain is nothing, she thinks, because her feet don't listen to it. Like a dethroned king who doesn't realise he's not in charge anymore. Like the emperor with no clothes from the story she used to tell Rita when she was little. The dethroned king, the emperor with no clothes. And now there's Herself, not Elena but her illness, the messenger, and the dethroned king. Elena repeats the names like she repeated the streets she has to pass to get to the station; the names keep her company while she waits. From first to last and last to first. She doesn't like the emperor with no clothes because it means he's naked. She prefers the dethroned king. She waits, she repeats, she breaks them into pairs: Herself and the messenger; the messenger and the king, the king and Herself. She tries again but her feet are still foreign to her, not merely disobedient, but deaf. Deaf feet. Elena would love to shout at them, *Move, feet, hurry up! Dammit*, she'd even shout, *Move and*

hurry up, dammit, but she knows it would be useless, because her feet won't listen to her voice either. So she doesn't shout, she waits. She silently recites the streets, kings, streets again. She adds new words to her prayer: dopamine, levodopa. She makes the connection between the dopa of dopamine and of levodopa, they must be related, but she's just guessing, she doesn't know for sure, she recites the words, plays with them, she lets her tongue get twisted, she waits, and she doesn't care, she only cares that the time passes, that the pill dissolves, that it moves through her body to her feet so that they will finally get the message that they have to start moving.

She's nervous, which isn't good, because when she gets nervous the medication takes longer to work. But she can't help it. Today's the day she's going to play her last card, to try to find out who killed her daughter, to talk to the only person in the world who she thinks she can convince to help her. Because of a long-ago debt, something almost forgotten. She's going to call in that debt, though if Rita were here she wouldn't approve, *life's not a swap meet, Mum, some things are done because God wills it*. It's not going to be easy, but she's going to try. Isabel is the name of the woman she's looking for. She's not sure if Isabel will remember her. Probably not. She'll remember Rita, though, she sends her a Christmas card every year. She might not know about Rita's death. If no one told her, if she didn't read the obituary that the Catholic school where Rita worked finally ran two days after the burial, saying that the administration, staff and student body are united in grief at her sudden loss. If she doesn't find Isabel today, she will almost certainly send another card this December, addressed to a dead woman, wishing her a merry Christmas and a happy New Year. She definitely remembers Rita, but her, Elena, probably not. And even if she remembers her she won't recognise her, trapped, hunched, inside a deteriorating body that doesn't match her age. It will be Elena's job to explain who she is and why she's there, when she confronts Isabel. She's going to tell her about Rita. And about her death. Or rather she'll tell her the little she understands from everything they've told her. Elena knows where to find Isabel, but not how to get there, even though she went there herself, twenty years ago, alongside Rita. If luck is on her side, if Isabel hasn't moved, or if she hasn't died like her daughter died, she'll find her there, in that old house in Belgrano that has a heavy wooden door with bronze fittings, right beside some doctors' offices. She doesn't remember the name of the street, if she could just recall the question that her daughter asked her that day, *Have you ever heard of a street called Soldado de la*

Independencia, Mum? then she would know. She'll know soon, because she remembers that it's one or two blocks from the avenue that runs along the edge of Buenos Aires from Retiro Station to the General Paz Highway, near a little plaza beside the train tracks. They didn't see the train, but they heard it pass by and Rita asked which line it was. But Isabel didn't answer, because she was crying too hard. To find out how to get there, this second time, almost twenty years later, Elena went to the private car service which had opened a few years back on the corner of her street, replacing the bakery where Elena had bought bread every day since moving to the neighbourhood as a new bride, until one day the bread disappeared and the cars showed up. The driver didn't know, *I'm new*, he apologised and he asked the owner. He repeated Elena's words, *The avenue that runs along the edge of Buenos Aires, from Retiro to the General Paz, near the train tracks*. And the owner answered, *Libertador*. And Elena said *Yes, that's it, Libertador*, as soon as they said it she remembered, and she told them that she had to go to Belgrano, to a little plaza. *Olleros*, said another driver who had just returned from a trip. *I don't know the name*, said Elena. *Olleros*, repeated the man, confidently, but she didn't remember the name of the street, just the wooden door, and the bronze fittings, and Isabel, and her husband, very little about her husband. *Shall we take you?* the owner asked her and Elena said no, that it was a long trip, a big expense, that she was going to go by train and if necessary, if she couldn't make it on her own and her body didn't feel up for the subway, she'd take a taxi near Constitución. *We can give you a good deal*, the owner offered. *No, thank you*, she answered. *You can pay later*, he insisted. *I'll take the train*, said Elena, *I don't like debts*. They weren't going to change her mind. *There's no subway near there, ma'am. The closest station is Carranza, but from there you'd have to walk like ten blocks*, one of the drivers said. *If you go by taxi be careful not to let them take you for a ride, tell the driver to go straight down 9 de Julio to Libertador and from there straight on to Olleros. Well, no*, the driver who knew the way corrected him, *because Libertador turns into Figueroa Alcorta, before the Planetarium they'll have to be careful to turn to the left, towards the Spanish Monument, and then retake Libertador there. Or at the Palermo Hippodrome*, the owner added, *but don't let them take you for a ride, are you sure you don't want us to drive you?* Elena left without answering, because she'd already answered that question and it was enough of an effort for her already without having to answer everything twice.

Constitución, 9 de Julio, Libertador, Figueroa Alcorta, Planetarium,

Spanish Monument, Libertador, Olleros, a wooden door, bronze fittings, a door, Olleros, Libertador, 9 de Julio, Constitución. Last to first and first to last. She doesn't know at what point in the prayer she should add the Hippodrome. She waits, she thinks, she counts the streets again. Five blocks to the station, and then so many more she doesn't know, or she doesn't remember, to call in a debt because she has no other choice. King without a crown. Herself. From her position, seated, she tries to lift her right foot in the air, the foot now responds to the message and rises. So she's ready, she knows. She places her palms on her seated thighs, she puts her two feet together so that her knees are at ninety-degree angles, then she crosses her right hand to her left shoulder and her left hand on her right shoulder, she begins to rock back and forth on the chair and then, with the momentum, she stands up. That's how Dr Benegas has taught her to stand up, and she knows it's harder that way but she tries it as often as she can, she practises, because she wants to be able to do it at her next check-up. She wants to impress Dr Benegas, show him that she can do it, despite the things he told her during their last appointment, two weeks before Rita was found dead. Standing in front of the chair she raises her right foot, she holds it up in the air, just a few centimetres, she moves it forward until it gets far enough past the left foot so that the movement can be called a step, then she lowers it, and now it's the left foot's turn to do the same thing, exactly the same thing. Move up and through the air. Lower down. Up, over, down.

That's all it is. Nothing more than that. Just walking, to get to the ten o'clock train.

Rita died on a rainy afternoon. On a shelf in her room there was a glass sea lion that turned purplish pink when the humidity in the air neared one hundred percent and precipitation was imminent. That was the colour it had the day she died. She'd bought it one summer in Mar del Plata. Elena and Rita had gone on holiday as they'd always done, every two years, up until Elena's illness began to make a mockery of her shameful attempts at motion. The years they didn't travel they stayed home and used their savings to paint the house or do repairs that couldn't be put off any longer, like fixing a broken pipe, changing a worn-out mattress, having a new sewage pit dug. The last year they'd stayed home they'd had to replace almost all the back patio tiles because the roots of a paraíso tree, which wasn't even theirs, had surreptitiously crept under their yard from the other side of the fence. The years that they went on holiday it was always to the coast, to Mar del Plata. They rented a two-room house off Colón Avenue, one block before it begins to climb the hill that later slopes down to the sea. Rita slept in the bedroom and Elena in the living-dining area. *You get up so early, Mum, it's better for you to be near the kitchen so you don't bother me.* Just like they did every two years, Rita had circled the classified ads for apartments within their budget, to later choose based on the one whose owner lived closest to their house, so they wouldn't have to go too far to pay and pick up the key, and in the end all the places were pretty much the same, a few extra plates or a nicer upholstery weren't going to affect their holiday. They would go together to close the deal. Even though they would take the apartment regardless, they'd ask to see pictures and the owners would show them photos that were never a faithful representation of reality, that never showed any grime. But that wasn't a problem either, because Elena liked to clean, back when she still had a body that could do so. Scrubbing relaxed her and even miraculously eased her back pain. In just one afternoon the apartment was what it was, but it was clean. They didn't go to the beach. Too many people, too hot. Rita didn't like to carry the umbrella, and Elena refused to set foot on the sand if she didn't have guaranteed shade. But it was a change of scenery, and that was good. They slept a bit more, they ate fresh-baked croissants for breakfast, they cooked

lots of fresh fish, and every afternoon, when the sun began to tuck itself behind the apartment buildings, they went out to walk the Rambla. They walked from south to north along the seafront and returned north to south along the avenue. They argued. Always, every afternoon. About anything. The topic was unimportant, what mattered was their chosen mode of communicating. Arguments layered on top of each other, one hidden beneath another, lying in wait and ready to leap forth, no matter how unrelated to the topic at hand. They fought as if each word thrown out were the crack of a whip, leather in motion, one of them lashed out, then the other. Blistering the rival's body with words. Neither let on that she was hurt. They stopped just short of an actual physical altercation but went on until one of the two, usually Rita, sped up to walk several steps ahead, muttering angrily under her breath, abandoning the fight more out of fear of her own words than any pain felt or provoked.

She spotted the glass sea lion on the first day of their holiday one year, in a store that sold conch necklaces, ashtrays shaped like the Torreón del Monje, jewellery boxes decorated with tiny shells, corkscrews in the form of the anatomy of a little boy, a priest, or a gaucho, which neither of them dared to look at, and other souvenirs of that nature. Rita stopped in front of the window and tapped the glass with the recently-filed nail of her index finger and said, *Before we leave I'm going to buy that.* Weather-Predicting Seal: Blue=Sunny, Pink=Rain, said the sign stuck to the glass, written in bright blue capital letters. Elena didn't approve, *Don't waste your money on stupid trinkets; it's hard enough for you to make it in the first place. I'm going to spend it on what I please. Your sense of pleasure is impaired. Let's not talk about impairments. You're right, we have your friend at the bank for that. At least I have a man that loves me. If that makes you happy, dear. It's hard to be happy anywhere near you, Mum,* Rita dealt her final blow and took several long strides to move ahead. From the rear, Elena followed in her daughter's wake while maintaining the established distance, then just a few paces later she cracked her own whip, *With that rotten personality you'll never be happy. What's inherited can't be stolen, Mum, Is that so,* Elena responded, and they fell silent. When they got to the Hotel Provincial they turned around and headed back south. They repeated the same routine every day. The walk, the whip cracks, the distance, and finally the silence. The words changed, the reasons behind the fights were different, but the cadence, the tone, the routine, never varied, They didn't mention the sea lion again, although one afternoon when they passed the souvenir and seashell store Elena laughed

and said, *Why don't you take the priest corkscrew to Father Juan?* but her daughter didn't think it was funny, *You're so filthy-minded, Mum.*

Before the two weeks were up, just as Rita had declared, she bought the weather-predicting seal. She paid for it in cash. She had a debit card she'd received when the school officially hired her and set up direct deposit payments into her account, but she never carried the card with her out of fear it might get stolen. She asked them to wrap the seal in a lot of paper so it wouldn't break but they used bubble wrap instead and Rita enjoyed popping it later, after she'd ridden with the sea lion on her lap the whole bus ride home.

Elena still keeps it, like she keeps all of Rita's things. She put everything in a big cardboard box that her neighbour's twenty-nine-inch TV had come in. The neighbour had taken it out with the trash and Elena asked him if she could have it. To put away Rita's things, she told him, and he gave it to her without saying a word, but like he was silently giving his condolences. He even helped her take it into her house. Elena put everything inside it. Everything except the clothes; she couldn't stand to put the clothes in, they still had her smell, the smell of her daughter. Clothes always retain a person's smell, Elena knows, even if they're washed a thousand times with different detergents. It's not the smell of the perfume or deodorant the person wore or the laundry soap it was washed with when there was still someone to stain it. It's not the smell of the house or the family because Elena's clothes don't have the same smell. It's the smell of the dead person when they were alive. The smell of Rita. She couldn't bear to smell that smell and not see her daughter. The same thing happened with her husband's clothes but at the time she had no idea how much more that smell could hurt when it was your child's. So not the clothes. She also didn't want to give them to the church and then have to see Rita's green sweater someday turning the corner keeping somebody else warm. So she burned her daughter's clothes in a pile in the back yard. It took four matches to light it. The first things to catch fire were the nylon stockings, melted by the heat into synthetic lava, then little by little everything began to blaze. There were underwires, snaps, zips left in the ashes afterwards which Elena put in a rubbish bag and took out for the garbage man. So the clothes didn't go into the neighbour's box. But she did put in the shoes, a brand new pair of wool gloves that didn't smell like anything, old photos, Rita's address book, all her important papers except her ID, which she'd had to give to the funeral company so they could take care of the burial,

Rita's calendar, her bank cards, her half-finished knitting, the newspaper photo taken of all the teachers the day they inaugurated the new high school, the bible Father Juan had given her, with the inscription *May the word of God accompany you as it did your father*, Rita's reading glasses, her thyroid medication, a little Saint Expeditus prayer card that the school secretary had given her when Elena's retirement pension had taken a long time to go through, the clipping from the newspaper the day Isabel's daughter was born. *Isabel and Marcos Mansilla joyfully announce the birth of their daughter, María Julieta, in the City of Buenos Aires, March 20, 1982.* The announcement was carefully clipped, the edges perfectly straight. The folder with the cards that the Mansillas sent every Christmas. The empty heart-shaped box of chocolates that her friend from the bank had given her which she'd used to keep pieces of paper and a bundle of badly folded letters tied with a pink ribbon. Elena hadn't dared to read the notes, not out of respect for her daughter's privacy, but for her own sake, to avoid learning the details of a story she'd never wanted to know anything about. For some mothers reading their daughter's love letters could be interesting, illicitly thrilling, Elena thinks, affirming that the daughter had become a woman, that she was desired, that she was on her way to fulfilling her duty to the species, following the cycle of birth, maturity, reproduction, and death, knowing her torch would continue on in the world. Elena looks at the bundle of cards and she thinks about that word, torch. Torch. This wasn't the case with Rita, she wasn't a young woman meeting her intended and Roberto Almada was incapable of rising to the circumstances. They were two hopeless creatures, two losers in love, or not even, two lonely people who had never even entered the game, who had contented themselves with watching from the stands. As far as Elena was concerned, it would've been more dignified at that point for her daughter to abstain from playing altogether. But Rita did enter the game, however late, at the age Elena had already been widowed. She suspects little happened between them, just a few kisses and some clumsy groping in the plaza as the sun disappeared behind the monument to the nation's flag, or at Roberto's house before his mother got home from the beauty salon. Whatever happened, she prefers not to know, much less to read about it in those letters, more terrified of the words Roberto wrote in response to her daughter than of what they might've done. So she did not untie the ribbon, she did not let the bow come undone to expose those papers full of words, she hardly touched them as she put them back in the box of chocolates and

dropped it into the big box that the neighbour gave her, along with all of the other belongings left over after the fire took everything that smelled like her daughter.

Everything except the little sea lion. She placed the weather-predicting seal on a shelf in the dining room, between the radio and the telephone, but pushed a few centimetres forward. A distance proportional to the one Rita and Elena maintained after each fight. A prime location. So she could see it every day, so she'd never forget that, on the afternoon Rita died, it was raining.

Elena advances towards the station. Five blocks lie ahead of her. First things first. She'll walk five blocks, she'll look out of the corner of her eye at the open window of the ticket booth, she'll say round trip to Plaza Constitución, open her coin purse, remove the coins that she counted out last night for the exact cost of the ticket, stretch out her hand, let the ticket seller take the coins and give her the ticket, grip the little piece of paper that allows her to travel, not letting it fall, put it in the pocket of her cardigan, and once she's sure she won't lose it, descend the stairs holding on to the rail, if possible on the right side because that's the arm that responds best to what the brain orders, at the bottom of the stairs turn left, walk through the tunnel, trying not to breathe in the smell of urine that saturates the walls, the ceiling, and the floor which Elena drags her feet across, the same acrid smell since the day she crossed the tunnel for the first time long before she ever needed any pill to help her walk, when she still knew nothing about dethroned kings or messengers, holding Rita's hand when she was a little girl or several steps behind her when she stopped being little, always the same smell of urine that burns her nostrils just thinking about it, always with her mouth closed and lips pressed tight to avoid inhaling it, and never opening her mouth a crack, dodging the woman selling garlic and spices, the boy who sells pirated CDs that she wouldn't be able to play, the girl who sells key rings with coloured lights and alarm clocks that sound as she walks by, or the man with no legs who holds out his hand for coins like she held hers out a few minutes ago for the train ticket, turn again to the left, go up the same number of steps that she just went down and then, finally, step onto the platform. But all that, Elena knows, will be after she's managed to walk those five blocks she still hasn't walked. She's just finished the first one. Someone says hello. Her stiff neck forces her to walk looking down at the ground so she doesn't see who it is. Sternocleidomastoid is the name of the muscle that restricts her movement. The one that pulls her head down. Sternocleidomastoid, Dr Benegas had said, and Elena asked him to write it down, *In capital letters, Doctor, or I won't understand your handwriting*, so that she wouldn't forget, so that even if her executioner wore a hood, she would know his name and be able to

include him in the prayer she recites while she waits. The person who greeted her continues on their way and although she glances out of the corner of her eye she doesn't recognise the back moving away in the opposite direction, but she says good morning anyway, because the person who greeted her said *Good morning, Elena*, and if they know her name they warrant a greeting. At the first corner she waits for a car to pass and then she crosses the street. With her head down, all she can see are the worn tyres as they approach, pass her, and then move away. She steps off the pavement, walks quickly taking short steps, scraping along the hot asphalt, steps onto the pavement of the next block, pauses for a second, just a second, and continues on. A few steps ahead the black and white checkerboard paving tiles let her know she's walking past the midwife's house. Rita refused to set foot on those tiles ever since the day she learned that abortions were performed inside that house. *She's an abortionist, not a midwife, Mum. Who told you that? Father Juan. And how does he know? Because he gives confession to everyone in the neighbourhood, Mum, of course he knows. And doesn't he have to keep what he hears in confession confidential? He didn't tell me who had the abortion, Mum, just where. And that isn't covered by the confidentiality of confession? No. Who told you it isn't? Father Juan.* Elena, to humour Rita, didn't walk past the house either, they always crossed the street and walked on the other pavement and then crossed back over once they'd passed it, as if they were afraid stepping on those tiles would somehow contaminate them, or make them complicit, as if just walking past the house were some sin. But Rita isn't here, someone killed her, Elena knows, even though everyone else says something different, and while she'd like to respect her dead daughter's memory she can't allow herself the luxury of observing all her rituals. On that very checkerboard pavement is where Rita met Isabel, the woman she's going to try to find, she makes the connection for the first time, and then she steps more confidently, calmly, as if the checkerboard her daughter had cursed so many times suddenly made sense. She hesitates when she reaches the end of the second block. If she goes straight it's only three blocks to the ticket booth where she'll say round trip to Plaza Constitución, but that route will take her past the bank where the pensioners are waiting in line, and it's quite likely she'll run into someone she knows, that that someone will want to give her their condolences, that they will hold her up longer than she wants them to, and then she'll miss the ten o'clock train. If she goes round the block she'll have to add three more blocks to her route, and that would be

asking too much of her illness. Elena doesn't like owing Herself any favours. No debts and no favours. Herself would make her regret it, Elena knows, because she knows Herself almost as well as she knew her daughter. Fucking whore illness. Before, when she had just a little difficulty getting her left arm into the sleeve of her coat, when she'd still never heard of Madopar or levodopa and her shuffling gait didn't yet have a name, before her neck began to force her to always stare at her shoes, she would avoid going past the bank. Even though back then there was no risk of condolences, she did it anyway, to avoid running into Roberto Almada, Rita's friend, the son of the hairdresser. *My boyfriend, Mum. A person of your age can't have a boyfriend. What do you want me to call him then? Roberto, that's more than enough.* But she isn't up to taking the longer route now. When the pavement switches to grey tiles, larger and glossier than any others on her route, Elena knows she's walking past the bank. *They're special tiles designed for heavy foot traffic, Elena, made locally but just as good as the Italian ones,* Roberto had explained proudly when talking about the place he'd worked since age eighteen. Now she can see, out of the corner of her eye, a row of shoes lined up in front of the door. She can see the wearers of the shoes up to the knee. She doesn't see any trainers or jeans. Just worn loafers, espadrilles, a sandal covering a bandaged foot and ankle. Purple feet, crisscrossed by veins, freckly, spotted, swollen. All old feet, she thinks, the feet of the old people who are worried the money will run out. She doesn't look at them, she's afraid she'll recognise a leg and she prefers not to stop. Then, once the line has ended and she feels safe, once there's no longer a row of shoes to her left, someone says *Good morning, Elena,* but she keeps going as if she hasn't heard. But then the person speeds up, touches her shoulder. Roberto Almada, the man Rita insisted on calling her boyfriend. The cripple, as Elena called him in front of her daughter to provoke her. Or the hunchback, as the neighbourhood kids called him when he was a boy. Elena can't see his hump, she can just barely raise her eyes to the height of his chest with great effort, but she knows Roberto's back begins to curve around at the shoulder blades. *Hello, Doña Elena,* he says again, and his formal tone hits Elena between the eyes. *Oh, Roberto, I didn't recognise you, you got new shoes, didn't you?* He looks at his shoes and says *Yes, they're new.* They both go silent, Elena's worn out shoes beside Roberto's shiny new ones. Roberto shifts his feet uncomfortably, *Mum wanted to send her love and says you should stop by the hair salon sometime, if you liked your last haircut she'll give you another one, on the house.* Elena thanks him, even though