

Weekends

by Mario Benedetti, 'Buzón de tiempo' (*Suma de Letras: 2000*). p.17-21. Translated by Rohan James Rice.

He waited for his father in the doorway of the school. Just like every Friday. After the divorce, Fernando lived with his mother, but he spent weekends with his father. Before any court ruling was imposed, they had amicably resolved things as not to further damage their son with useless conflicts. His father never arrived on time, but on this occasion he was later than usual. Fernando wasn't worried whilst the other boys were waiting with him, but one by one they were collected by their parents until finally it was just him and the doorman - and he was the type who, despite working in a school, hated schoolchildren.

Marcelo finally appeared, almost running. Fernando reluctantly kissed his sweaty, paternal cheek. He didn't like doing this because it left his mouth wet and he was taught that it was improper to clean it with a handkerchief afterwards.

—Were you anxious that I wouldn't come?

—No.

—Please, don't tell your mother about this. It'll only worry her. The truth is I had a client droning on and on and I just couldn't get rid of him.

Don't tell your mother. Fernando didn't understand why he didn't say: don't tell Luisa.

They took a taxi to the restaurant they went to every Friday. Fernando didn't bother to read the menu. He had always been loyal to the barbecued steak with side-salad.

—Don't you want to order something else?

—No.

—I'd be bored always having the same thing.

—I like it. So it doesn't bore me.

Marcelo went through the obligatory parental questions about his classes, his teachers, his school friends. They were always the same questions and Fernando always gave the same responses.

—Out of everything you're learning, what do you like the most?

—The stories and accounts.

As an accompaniment to such basic humour, Fernando gave a hint of his first smile that Friday and his father couldn't help but laugh.

Dessert was also without change: vanilla ice cream.

—And your mother, how is she?

—Alone. She's alone.

—Well, not really alone. She's got you, right?

—Yeah, I guess.

They arrived at his father's spectacular flat on the Rambla and Fernando went to his room. Marcelo had reserved a space for him where, alongside a bed and other furniture, he had some games (a Meccano, an electronic train) to use and enjoy to himself. Not forgetting a small television too. In his mother's house he also had his own area, but of course with other types of toys. Fernando liked that he always had different things to entertain him. It was like jumping from one distinct region to another and vice-versa.

He played for a while with the Meccano (he constructed something that, if looked at kindly, could be a windmill) whilst watching a documentary on TV about squirrels. He fell asleep for a bit, until Marcelo called him from the terrace.

There he was faced with someone he'd never encountered before: a woman, tall, with loose blonde hair, dressed all in denim. Fernando thought she looked both beautiful and kind.

“Fernando”, said his father. “This is Inés, a good friend of mine, that's also going to be a good friend of yours”.

The good friend only said, 'Hello!', but gave him a hug and pulled him closer to her rocking chair. She then gave him a gentle kiss and Fernando was relieved to note that his cheek wasn't left moist. He was impressed that Inés didn't interrogate him about school, lessons, teachers, or the other students. Instead, she made comments about films and football. He was amazed that a woman could know so much about football. Not only that, but she said she was a fan of Nacional. He was also a *bolsiyudo*¹. A fine start. Marcelo, in contrast, supported Peñarol, but seemed satisfied to play his part in this premiere, like the clandestine writer of a good screenplay.

Inés had brought some food in tupperware, so they ate dinner at home. Afterwards, they watched a little television (news on famines, floods, and terrorist attacks), but as Fernando's eyes became heavy, his father carried him to bed, although not before suggesting that he brush his teeth.

At midnight, Fernando was woken up by a noise coming from the bathroom. Someone was wrestling with the chain-lock. As his bedroom door was only half-shut, Fernando could spy from within. Inés, in a night-shirt, left the bathroom and entered into Marcelo's room.

Fernando went back to his bed and for a while was unable to sleep. Inés was beautiful, friendly, and even supported Nacional. However, before falling asleep, Fernando decided

¹ Transl. note: A *bolsiyudo* (or *bolsilludo*) refers to a fan of Nacional, a Uruguayan football from Montevideo, one of the most successful in the country's history. Their fiercest rival is the equally successful, Peñarol.

to reiterate his loyalty to Luisa. His mother had never liked football, but to him she was even more beautiful and even more kind.

Through Saturday and Sunday, Fernando enjoyed both the company of his father as well as his own. It was not the moment to dwell on the situation. As if she had concluded a script, Inés didn't speak any more about football. In fact, she became so reserved that on Sunday evening Marcelo pulled her in close, swept aside her lovely hair, and asked her if something had happened.

“Nothing important”, she said. “It's just that I have to get used to this”.

She spoke in a murmur, only for Marcelo's ears, but Fernando heard it (his grandmother always used to say he had good hearing) and he came to the conclusion that he also had to get used to things. Yet would he ever get used to this?

On Sunday night, Marcelo returned the boy to his mother's world. She called up from below and when Marcelo heard the voice of his ex-wife, he went over to the intercom: “Luisa, I'm sending Fernando down to you. Bye”, “Thanks. Bye”. The intercom sounded more crackly than usual.

As they were on the sixth floor, Fernando went down in the lift. Luisa was waiting for him at the bottom. She kissed him. Her face was a little like a pancake, but he didn't care.

Soon after, she gave him an orange juice and began to observe him curiously. She thought it absurd, but it seemed that somehow her son had grown up in only forty-eight hours.

Just to break the silence, Luisa asked:

—And your father, how's he?

Fernando realised: neither had she said 'Marcelo', rather 'your father'. He brought up some saliva before answering:

—Alone. He's alone.