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Ángeles Prieto Barba

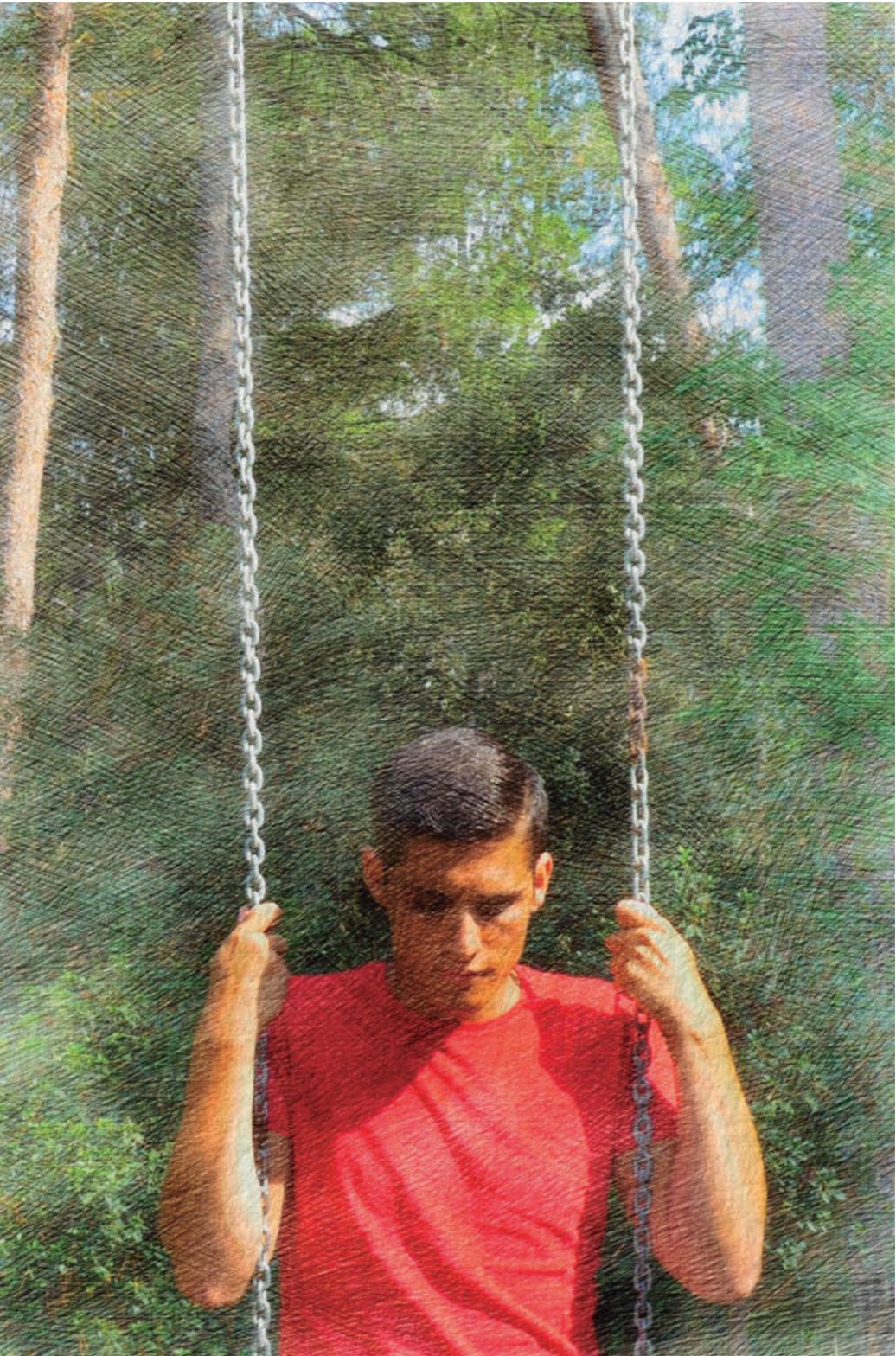
Ilustraciones de Mario Miranda

y Sonia Salvador Vicente

12-16 years old



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Accident Prevention and Road Safety Program in the Classroom for 12-16 year olds.

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Chapter I: BEACH OR MOUNTAIN?

The Manzanedo family, unlike many others, always started their vacations on the same day. They were long and identical vacations for all of them in that both parents were high school teachers. The only difference was that Jorge taught history and the mother, Amelia, literature. “A family with affinities!” as Virginia, their only daughter liked to point out. “And too many books!” was always the retort of Pablo, her twin brother.

In truth, although the twins bore no physical resemblance to each other, they did share some clear similarities with their parents: Pablo had inherited Amelia’s black curly hair, while Virginia was blond like Jorge. This similarity was not limited to their outward appearance. Pablo was more temperamental and affectionate than Virginia, who always thought long and hard before taking action. Yet both of them were studious and attentive, although lately it was quite a challenge to drag Pablo away from his new pastime: he was completely hooked on video games.

—Come on Pablo, don’t complain; it’s thanks to so many books that we’re able to go on holiday. We passed everything!

—Some with better grades than others.

—If you didn’t spend all your time playing...

—Just leave it there, will you; we’re about to get going —interrupted Pablo.

The school bus that would drop them off near home was about to leave. A big crush had formed due to the large group of students keen to get away from the school. But Pablo and Virginia didn't join them and decided to wait patiently in line, without trying to jump the queue or step off the sidewalk. It wasn't so long ago that one of their classmates, Julián, fell backwards going up the steps of the bus due to the pushing and shoving. Their friend only hurt his ankle but someone else behind him fell to the ground, grazing his arm and by some miracle not breaking it. The monitors tried to get things under control:

—Come on, kids, take it easy, there's room for everybody. Get on board slowly and put your backpacks in the overhead compartments. Keep hold of your cell phones and don't forget they can turn into mini missiles if we brake sharply. Fasten your seat belts securely. No shouting, loud music or throwing things to each other. Don't distract the driver.

And that is what they did. Once on board, Pablo decided not turn his cell phone on, to avoid Virginia's constant moaning and they resumed their conversation.

—Do you have any idea where we'll be going this year, sis? Have they mentioned anything to you?

—Nothing. But let's hope Dad doesn't want to take a long trip like in previous years when we get back just in time to start the new school year. We'll go away for sure; I don't believe we'll stay at home the whole summer. Dad would get very anxious.

—OK, I guess they'll let us know. I won't complain about where we go as long as there's swimming and Wi-Fi available.

—Me neither, so long as I can go bike riding. You know what I'm like.

Pablo and Virginia lived on the outskirts of the city, eight stops from school. As the journey progressed, the tall buildings and avenues gave way to roundabouts and beautiful parks, the green lungs of the city in which Virginia rode her bike. It was further on past the parks that the family homes started. In one of them, Jorge and Amelia were already waiting anxiously for them.

Once at their stop, the children got off using the back door of the bus along with other classmates. They then waited until the bus started up and pulled away before crossing. A few meters further on, there was a zebra crossing that practically took them to the door of their house. They always crossed very carefully, first looking left and right then left again, just as their parents had taught them when they were little, in case a car was coming at high speed. Their mother was already waiting for them at the front door.

—Now then, what about these grades?

—Here they are. I have two very goods and an excellent. But Pablo has only managed three passes.

—We'll talk about Pablo later. For the moment you can learn to be less competitive —said Amelia playfully to her daughter with a broad smile. The truth was that she was extremely happy and very proud of her children who had arrived home hungry with their schoolbags on their backs, their fantastic grades and absolutely dying to chat.

Meanwhile, Jorge waited expectantly for them in the lounge, quietly reading the newspaper, not wishing to reveal too much interest or concern for the final report. It was a sunny room that would have been much more spacious were it not for the four comfy wing-back armchairs, an enormous rug and five solid sets of bookshelves filled with books from floor to ceiling. There was no room here for televisions which were relegated to the upstairs bedrooms. The Manzanedo family's lounge was like a peaceful sanctuary: it was used to talk, share ideas and, above all, to read. The children came in quickly but without causing too much commotion to tell their father their news. As soon as they saw him, they were unable to control themselves and exclaimed as one, just like good twins should:

—We passed everything Dad!

—Well done kids, that's great! Well, it looks like we've earned a reward. Now let's see, don't you have anything to ask me?

As always, it was Virginia who took the initiative.

—Of course! We're a well traveled family and we've already been to Japan, Egypt, Rome, London and Disneyland Paris when we were younger. Where are you taking us off to this time? Which new world are we going to discover? Which new culture are we going to experience?

—Well now, the best thing would be for you to go upstairs, leave your school-bags in your bedrooms, get changed and then we can all eat. After that we can solve the mystery.

They did just that. Jorge went into the kitchen at the end of which was a large family table and a door leading onto a spacious back yard with a swimming pool and kitchen garden. It was here that Amelia tended flowers and vegetables in her free time. An apple tree, the symbol of the family, a laurel tree and a beautiful banana plant provided shade which made it a very agreeable place to be in the summer. For the last few days it was common to see Doña Quiteria there, the new neighbor in the adjacent house, a widow living on her own who wore extravagant clothes and who was a little mysterious but very friendly. She used to drop by later on in the afternoons, around tea time.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and the kids were hungry and so, even before Jorge had finished putting the plates and cutlery on the table, the children appeared with glasses and jugs of water, ready to do justice to a lunch that promised to be delicious. Amelia's renowned lentils and the four oven-baked sea bream smelled wonderful.

—The first present for my stars. And as a special dessert, to celebrate your grades, we've got your favorite apple pie.

—Everything's looks great! We're really going to enjoy this!

—Yes, being on vacation with no schedule to stick to means we can eat without being in a rush. It's much better.

—And so, going back to your question, I'll ask you one. Which do you prefer; beach or mountain? —asked Jorge.

Amelia didn't express an opinion. It was the twins, as always, who replied simultaneously at the tops of their voices. Only this time, Pablo said "beach!" without hesitation while Virginia exclaimed "mountain", with identical enthusiasm without a moment's thought.

—Well there you go, Jorge, as you see the kids don't agree, so what's to be done? Will you give them a few hours to think it over? —said Amelia.

—Granted, but be quick about it; we only have until breakfast time tomorrow to make a decision. We'll plan what to pack and, in the afternoon, we'll go and buy everything we need. Get on with preparing your suggestions.

The truth was that Jorge and Amelia's work as teachers was anything but light and easy. It took up most of their time during the school year. They gave classes throughout the morning and were unable to return home until late in the afternoon: tutorials, supervising in the library, preparing classes and correcting exams. During this school year in particular, in which they had both been appointed heads of department, they felt that they had not spent sufficient time with their children. What they missed more than anything was chatting together over lunch, something they only managed on occasional weekends. Dinners were quick and light without much time to talk; and it's not even worth mentioning breakfast time. Therefore, they always used their vacation to spend much more time together.

After the apple pie, Pablo and Virginia took charge of clearing the table. They rinsed the plates and cutlery and put them in the dishwasher which gave them the chance to exchange opinions.

—No way mountain, Virginia. I'm about to get into the youth swimming team. I have to train.

—We can go somewhere with a river nearby and you could swim there.

—One of those with pebbles at the bottom that you can slip over on? What's the use of that?

—Well I think that going somewhere with a beach is almost the same as staying here. We won't be doing anything but swapping the pool for a beach.

—And miss out on our vacation? That's a great solution.

—I've never cycled on a greenway; that would be a change and, if we go to the mountain, I would love to do that.

—A greenway? What's that, sis?

—Well, it's a long track set in natural surroundings. That means no cars, traffic pollution or motorized traffic of any kind. It's only for hikers, cyclists and horse riders.

It's all about health and safety. I could ride along completely freely without having to worry about traffic. Normally they are paths that have been created after dismantling train tracks and they run over bridges and through beautiful landscapes. Or else they're near those archaeological excavations that Dad likes so much. There are some Greenways that you can do in one day and others that take two days, camping during the journey and then going back.

— Yes, but you can't even contemplate swimming in those places.

— Just think, you'll be in the open air and exercising your legs. And that will be very good for you. Come on, don't argue. Come to my room later and I can show you leaflets about all of the nearby greenways so we can choose. Come on...

— But the beach, the fresh sea air, walks along the sand, eating ice cream... All of that is also really good. And I guess there's no chance of these greenway things having Wi-Fi, right?

— Of course not. If we are cycling there are no mobile phones, tablets or Internet. What for? I really can't understand why we're so dependent on those devices.

— Let's just drop it; in the end it's Mum and Dad who will decide.

— But they'll listen to us first; you know very well what they're like. And I'm sure they will go for my suggestion. It's very sensible.

— We'll see. See you later; I'm going to my room.

Pablo couldn't wait to get up to his room. He had more to do than just checking what comments his friends had made on Twitter since school finished. He had come up with a great idea to respond to the joke posted by Julián, the classmate who had been hurt when boarding the bus in the wrong way. He also had to carry on with "Hydras and Gorgons" a really cool video game that got you completely hooked and consisted of destroying all kinds of monsters so that the hero can complete his mission.

In truth, Pablo was very superstitious, one of those people who would never walk under a ladder, and who would spend several days down in the dumps if a mirror was broken, or a black cat crossed his path or if he saw a magpie or a raven perched in a tree. He had a phobia about hearing certain words spoken aloud and he liked to touch particular trees close to school as he thought they would bring him luck.

Winning games had become one of his main obsessions, although he was incapable of recognizing it and called it simply “his way of relaxing”, as he argued that it was his way of releasing adrenalin. It sometimes really disturbed Virginia in the bedroom next door because he would play with the speakers on and the noise prevented her from reading, concentrating and studying.

Not even half an hour had passed when the usual arguments began on the upstairs floor.

—Pablo, turn the sound off and put your headphones on! — Virginia pleaded—.

I just can’t read—. And Pablo usually replied that the headphones made him too hot. Or else, without the acoustic warnings provided by the program, he couldn’t play. When their father was nearby, he would remind Pablo how important it was to respect others’ feelings.

In truth, the fact was that Pablo playing so many hours continuously sat in a chair was incompatible with his beloved swimming. He wanted to get into the city’s youth team and for that he needed to train. So, after wiping out a great many hydras and very few gorgons, he put on his bathers and leapt into the pool. Also the heat was oppressive and he fancied the idea of cooling off before having an orange juice and a think. He had to come up with something better to defend his idea of going to somewhere on the coast. Apart from having Wi-Fi, he was convinced that he would meet up with some friends with whom he could spend long afternoons wandering around eating ice cream. They were so great, those promenades with terraces and those wide expanses of sand where you could play tennis or volleyball. There’s nothing like the beach. A greenway in the middle of nowhere? Bah! You couldn’t even begin to compare the two.

Suddenly he realized that someone had been working in the garden, despite the heat. Next to the apple tree the earth had been dug up to form a mound. He found it very odd that just one day before setting off, his mother had decided to plant seeds that she wouldn’t be able to water over the coming days.

Returning to his bedroom, he saw his mother in the kitchen in animated conversation with the neighbor, while Jorge was in the lounge with Virginia where the two of them were happily chatting away. And because he was convinced that she would be arguing for going to the mountains he thought about doing the same with Amelia and convincing her of his own plan. Amelia crossed in front of him in the hallway before going upstairs

—So only three passes in the exams you needed, eh?

—Math, Natural Sciences and Music, you know that sciences are not my thing. You told me the same thing happened to you when you were my age.

—Yes, I was very good at the Arts, which is why I tried even harder at studying mathematics to be able to pass it. It was a question of dedicating more time and effort and not giving up. The same as you do with your swimming. And I wasn't happy just to pass, because studying just the bare minimum is very risky. You could have failed.

—I know, I'll try to put more effort in, Mom, I promise. But now I'd like to ask you something....

—I really hope so, I trust in you and in the effort you put in. What is it?

—I want to go to the beach this summer. I need to swim. My sister has come up with the idea of making us all go cycling on one of those greenway things in the middle of nowhere out in the countryside. And it seems crazy to me. What if a lost wolf attacks us? Or we run out of water and there are no houses nearby? Isn't it better to go to the beach in another city? There'll be supermarkets, pharmacies, cinemas, terraces, concerts, museums; places you and Dad can enjoy as well. The beach is all about leisure and fun, but it's also safer because there are more people. For sure you won't come across anybody else in the mountains or on a greenway.

—Come on now, don't exaggerate so much! It's not like greenway is a desert island, son. But I understand where you're coming from. You don't need to be quite so insistent, Pablo, I'll speak with your Dad about it tonight. But I'm not promising anything because the decision will be made between the four of us. I want us all to be in agreement and happy with the place we go to. I'm sure we'll manage it, we always have done. And we better had, because if we don't come together on this, then Dad may decide to take us all to the North Pole in the freezing cold. Or to the tropics where it's too hot. Or to Australia, Vietnam, Mexico or India...

—OK, OK, ha, ha, ha. That's enough. There's nowhere that Dad thinks is too far.

—Nowhere. When there are interplanetary flights to Mars, he'll want to take us there for sure, ha, ha, ha.

It soon became clear that the teacher fond of distant and remote destinations was in a hurry to start his vacation. He had already talked it through with Amelia. The children were growing up all too quickly. Pablo and Virginia were already nearly as tall as Amelia, and their father was very concerned about them completing their education. This was not only just about learning subjects like languages and mathematics. They also had to learn a lot at home: how to behave and stand up for themselves, how to feel secure in themselves and to be responsible, to become independent and acquire the ability to take decisions and relate to those around them correctly. Everything they needed in life to be successful; the things that are never learned quickly or easily, but instead involve lots of time, patience, support and understanding; things that only parents can teach you.

The father summoned them all to the lounge even before they sat down to dinner. The first thing he did was ask if they had come to a decision. Seeing that the kids started to disagree again, he put an abrupt stop to the argument.

—I've already decided where we're going. I'm sure you'll love it.

—Brazil?

—New Zealand?

—Burkina Faso, perhaps? —joked Amelia who had been told in advance and was already in the loop.

—None of them. We're going to spend two weeks at the beach and another two weeks in the mountains. So everyone can be happy. And how, you ask yourselves? Well that's the best thing of all: two hours ago I rented a motor-home. We're going camping so that if we don't like what we choose we can change plans as we go along. We'll also be learning on this trip. Up until now we've traveled long haul to find out about other cultures. Now we'll get to know our own country as well as learning other interesting and useful things.

—Great, great, —exclaimed Virginia, very happy.

—OK, if I'm getting my days on the beach I won't complain, I promise.

Later on they enjoyed a light dinner of salad and fruit, which they ate quietly. In truth, they were all a little nervous and excited. The next day they would have to go and buy everything they needed and collect the motorhome. With none of them having seen it yet, each one of them had their own idea of what it would be like. Jorge had assured them that it slept four people. But Amelia was not convinced about its capacity; or how hot it would be. She felt it would be a good idea to take tents so that at least they could sleep comfortably in the open air at the campsites.

Before going to bed they went out onto the patio. On hot days they usually all went out there together for a while, drinking lemonade and admiring the stars.

— We'll have a good time, Amelia.

She laid her head on Jorge's shoulder and replied:

— We always have a good time so long as we're together. We make a great team, darling. I feel very proud of our kids.

They came up to them a while later.

— We love you lots, Mom and Dad.

— We love you too, kids.

It was then that Pablo noticed that the kitchen garden looked the same as ever and that the mound of disturbed earth was no longer there. He was very puzzled and wanted to ask his mother about it, but just at that moment Amelia announced she felt really tired and she went off to bed.

As the heat dissipated, the first night of the vacations passed slowly and pleasantly for the Manzanedo family. Despite the nerves, they all fell into a sound sleep.

On the patio, a few crickets began to chirp. A tranquil night, were it not for the fact that at four in the morning, Pablo woke with a start. His window looked out over the garden and he thought he heard a loud thump, as if something had fallen. On peering out, he was shocked to see the shadow of a man running towards Doña Quiteria's house.

First, he made sure he wasn't dreaming and then he decided to tell his parents straight away. He told himself that this couldn't possibly be an effect of hallucinations or playing too many video games. He rushed to knock on the door of the master bedroom.

—Dad, Dad! There's an intruder in our garden!

—What on earth are you saying, son?

—I saw a man running and he was heading straight for Quiteria's house!

—Let me go and see —said Jorge.

He went to check out what Pablo had told him and returned after a while.

—Son... I've woken the poor woman up for nothing. She says nobody has broken in. You must have had a nightmare. Don't worry about it and let's all get some sleep; tomorrow is going to be a long day.

Pablo obeyed his father but he was absolutely convinced of what he had seen. But right then he didn't connect it with the mound of disturbed earth during the afternoon; that was something he would do a few weeks later...

The next day, Virginia rose early, towards nine o'clock, only to discover all of the family already up and breakfast on the table. Fortunately, the shower was free. When she came down she found that Jorge and Pablo were not around; they had gone to pick up the motorhome.

—When they get back we'll all go shopping —said Amelia—. Meanwhile, finish breakfast and then we'll look at what clothes to take. Remember they have to be comfortable.

Not even half an hour had gone by when the powerful sound of a car horn drew them downstairs. Pablo came running in, exultant and very happy.

— You won't believe what it's like inside! It's like a home, it has everything. Please, come and take a look.

And so they all trooped out. The motorhome had just about everything.

— Welcome to the palace, my princesses — said Jorge upon opening the door.

Virginia got in first.

— Wow, how cool! It's got the lot! It's like a portable house!

— Yes. When we're driving Mom and I will always travel up front. Your seats are here, behind the table, which are fitted with seat belts, naturally. You can read, watch the television that's right next to you or play cards on the table. Then there's the kitchen. We don't have to bring anything from home except the provisions we think we'll need. We'll buy fresh food along the way. Here we have four bunks and four lockers for clothes. And at the back, behind this door, is the bathroom. And closing the door, just to one side is a washer-dryer. We'll always have to fill up at campsites or service stations. They'll be able to provide us with gas, water and electricity so we can charge our cell phones, the tablet and the cameras. Ah, and I still have to show you the enormous trunk. See, it can hold everything. We'll keep all the clothing we want for the whole month there. We'll take cans of fish, fruit and vegetables packed in boxes. Also a tent in case we fancy sleeping in the open air. Some beach chairs, a barbecue oven for the campsite, a... What else? Have I forgotten anything?

— Me — exclaimed Doña Quiteria out of the blue, without anyone having noticed where the neighbor had appeared from.

— That's right; I've invited her along — explained Amelia—. It turns out that her son and grandchildren are going to be at the first campsite we stop at, and we'll all be delighted to take her, won't we everyone?

— Of course — said Jorge —, we'll take her with us. It's the least we can do.

— You don't know how grateful I am. I'm going home to pack my case and to take a cake out of the oven that I've baked for you. We'll need something to take along with us for the journey tomorrow!

When Doña Quiteria had gone, Jorge told the family they should get in the car and go to the supermarket to buy provisions and everything else they needed. That way they could leave the following day.

Everybody made their way towards the garage. It was hot, and as it was hardly any distance at all from the Manzanedo house to the shopping mall, Pablo asked his father if he could sit in the front.

—No, Pablo, if you go in the back, there's considerably less chance of you being injured if we have an accident.

Jorge started the car and turned the air-conditioning on. Virginia, as usual, took the opportunity to ask another question once Pablo was sat alongside her.

—So, Dad, which is the safest seat in a car?

—By wearing a seat belt, all of them are much safer. It's also essential to adjust the headrest. If it's too low pull it up so that it covers your neck well, as that will protect you if we brake sharply. Is it adjusted? Have you fastened your seat belts?

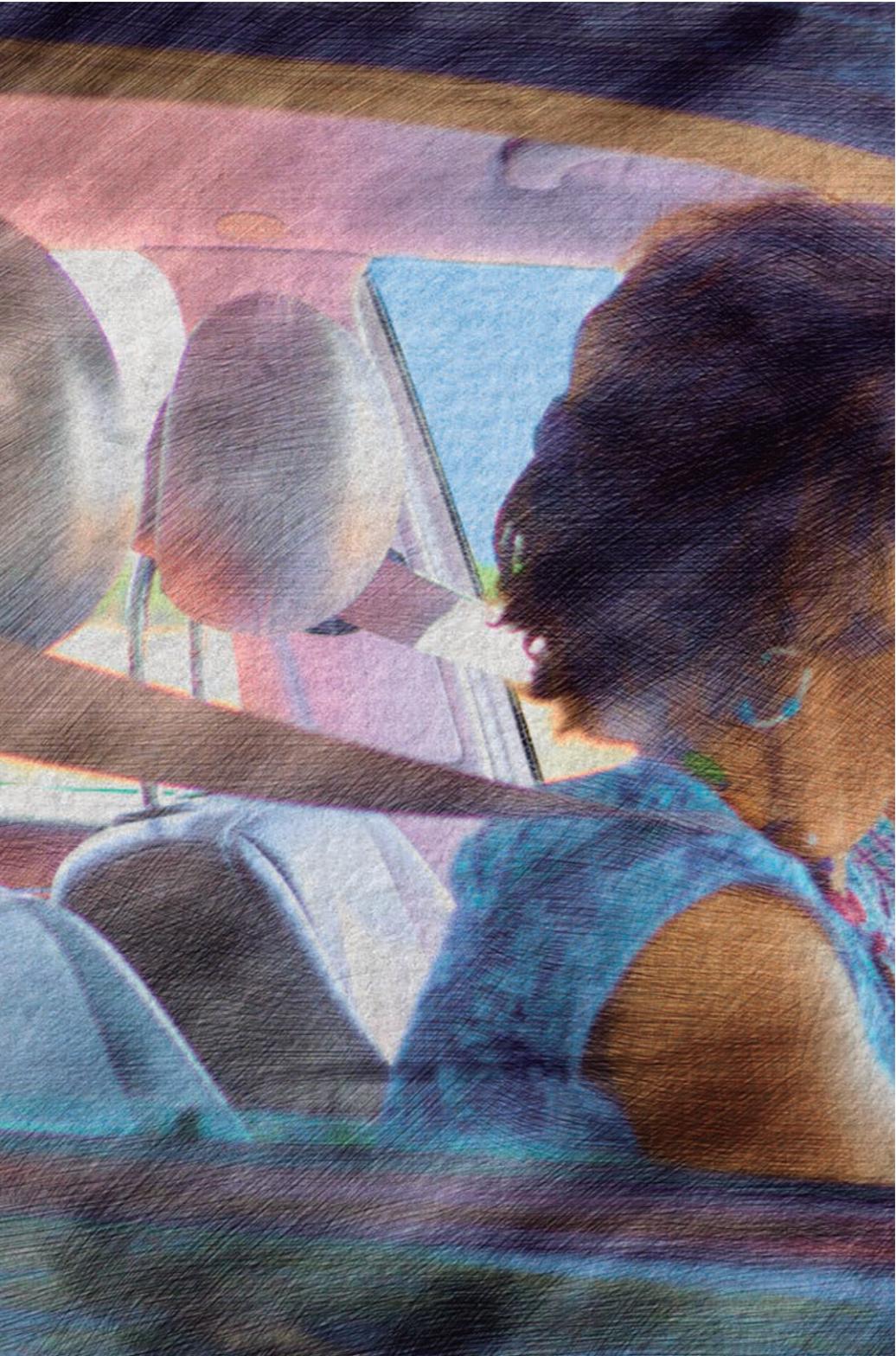
—Yes Dad. But you haven't answered my question. I asked you which is the safest seat in a car.

—The one in the centre of the back seat, right where you're sitting, Virginia. Come on now; let's make sure it's not getting too late.

—I hope not —said Amelia—. I've got two lists in my pocket with everything we're going to need and, when we get there, we'll split up. We'll take care of clothing and food. You two do the rest.

But they took three hours, which was only to be expected. It all took time to buy a new camera, a huge toolkit and ensuring that the first aid kits contained everything required. Tired of trailing from one place to another, they had some soft drinks and sandwiches before going home.

It was on the way back from the shopping mall, on the local road that led to their home that something unexpected happened to the Manzanedos. Jorge slammed on the brakes which startled the entire family; especially Pablo who was secretly in the middle of an online chat. His phone flew from his hands and ended up on the floor.





—Ay! What’s happened? Why did we stop? —exclaimed Amelia.

But her husband didn’t reply and immediately guided the vehicle towards the hard shoulder. Once there, he got out of the car and looked it over. He then went to the back of the car to take out the emergency warning triangles that he kept in the trunk.

—Amelia, Virginia, Pablo, get out carefully on the hard shoulder side and help me. While I put the triangles into position, please take a good look at the road and above all those trees opposite. See if you can find out what the shadow was that alarmed me when it crossed in front of us. If you see anything, let me know. In the meantime, don’t cross the road.

It didn’t take long for them to find out what it was.

—I’ve already seen it. There, next to the poplar tree standing apart on its own —said Virginia straight away—. It looks like a small animal; I saw it moving, just behind the tree.

—I’m going to get it —said Jorge—. Stay here.

He crossed and they saw him searching without finding anything. Then he bent down, whistled a couple of times, and stretched out his arm. He’d caught something. They saw him coming back with a small furry ball in his hands.

—It’s a tiny little puppy! —he said. Here it is. Look at him licking my hand as if he knows I’ve saved him.

—Can I hold him for a minute? —said Virginia tenderly—. The poor thing must be really frightened. He’s whimpering.

—Of course. Anyway, I have to drive. But what are we going to do with the dog then? There’s nothing at home for it and tomorrow we have to leave without fail.

—We’ll do all we can —said Amelia—. What’s clear is that here on its own, and with the risk of being run over by another car, we can’t just leave it. No way.

—That’s my Mom! —proclaimed Pablo proudly, once he’d put his phone away—. In any case, I think the first thing we should do is go to the nearest police station to tell them what we’ve found and ask if anybody has reported it missing.

—That’s what we’ll do; we’ll have to go back —said Jorge.

—And what if it’s nobody’s? What if it’s abandoned? —asked Virginia—. It could be that now summer has just started and lots of people are off on holiday, just like us, they don’t want to take their pets with them. They just abandon them. Look, the poor thing is still whimpering.

—It would be better for you take us home first, Jorge —suggested Amelia—. We don’t know how long it’s been since it ate or drank anything. We should take care of it first. Then we can let people know what we’ve found. Pablo, can you take a decent photo with your phone. We’ll have to leave it at the police station so that its owners can find him if they go there to enquire.

—Done.

What the photo showed was a small frightened face, framed with lots of black hair. With its small head and its short triangular ears permanently sticking up it looked like a very sharp little fox. But its tail was short and it showed no fear of humans. In fact it seemed quite happy to be with them. Otherwise, it seemed to be quite clean, despite its abundant coat. Their impression was that it was well looked after and might only have been lost for a short time.

Once back home, Amelia went to look for some cardboard boxes.

—This is perfect! I have an old quilt to cover the bottom with and it will do as a bed. And I’m going to give it some water in this bowl.

A good move, because the little animal anxiously gulped it all down. But Jorge was worried that the children would become attached to it in when it already had an owner. Little by little, he began to check its skin, searching below the coat in case it had been micro-chipped. But he found nothing. He thought that it was maybe a puppy just a few days old, one that hadn’t yet been taken to the vet. He therefore decided that, after going to the police, he would visit the nearest veterinary clinic. It was important for it to be identified and checked out for any diseases. Virginia immediately offered to go with him, as Pablo had already disappeared upstairs. They all know that he had gone to carry on with his videogame or to chat with his friends to tell them about the find.

—Pablo, your phone! We need it to leave the photo we took at the police station!

—Give me a minute, please. I'll print it for you now.

It took a while but the photo was duly produced. Meanwhile, Amelia had given the little dog some milk. She was insistent that they ask the vet what such a small animal could eat.

Once at the police station, the officers told them that no-one had reported the loss of a dog over the previous few days. The officer, who was very pleasant to them, kept the photo.

Next they went to the veterinary clinic. When their turn came, the vet immediately expressed his delight on seeing the little dog: A schipperke, that's fantastic! It's the first time I've dealt with one. It's a very special puppy and seems to be healthy. I'll examine him straight away. Schipperkes come from Belgium where they're really popular and don't get much bigger. They're not dogs that grow too much. Let's put him on this gurney and look him over... Let's see. Yes, the temperature is fine, the teeth healthy and the bones are good. He doesn't have a microchip. He hasn't been vaccinated either and I reckon he's about two weeks old. Remember that he'll need them after he's four weeks old. If you come tomorrow we can implant the identification microchip. After him saying that, the dreaded moment arrived for Virginia.

—We can't come tomorrow, we going away on a trip —explained Jorge—. The fact is it's not ours. We found him on the road a few hours ago, lost. We've told the police that we have him but no-one has reported him as missing. Where can we leave him? Who can look after him? Can we leave him at the municipal dog pound? Will they have room?

—But Dad, Dad, he's so small and all alone... couldn't we take him with us? I'm sure he'll fit in the motorhome. I'll take care of absolutely everything, I promise. I'll feed him, walk him, keep him clean...

—Virginia, bear in mind that owning an animal is a great responsibility. You can't become fond of him and make him feel the same towards us only to then ignore him and not look after him properly. And what happens when the academic year starts again? Mom and I have to work and you have to go to school. He can't be alone for all that time. Who are we going to leave him with then? Can't you see that keeping him is crazy?

And Jorge could have gone on and one. In fact, he already thought it rash to take it on these vacations that he'd planned with such enthusiasm. Because it changed all his plans and because it would be a catastrophe if any mishaps befell the little animal. He would need special food, vaccinations and supervision to make sure he didn't escape. They didn't even have a leash! They had no idea how to train him, or how look after him. But suddenly he noticed huge teardrops falling down Virginia's face and he couldn't stand seeing her cry.

That's why, when they left the vet's, not only was the dog with them in Virginia's arms, duly identified with a microchip but also Jorge was weighed down with everything they needed to look after it.

—Well, we're out of there at last. He's all set to go, look how happy he is. And here's us, tired and hungry. Come on, let's go home. And don't ever forget that if its owners show up we will have to hand it over. It's not ours.

—But they'll have to prove they are the owners first, won't they? And then give us a convincing explanation as to why we found him lost on the road, right?

Jorge's hunger didn't last long because when they arrived, Amelia, Pablo and Doña Quiteria were already waiting for them with the table laid. All of them ate heartily as they had expended a lot of energy. Pablo in particular, after having played two straight hours of video games.

—Well, did you kill many hydras son? —asked Jorge sarcastically—. I only ask because we still have to load the bikes and put them on the bike carrier, with the correct signage; load all the boxes of provisions, put the clothes in the cupboards and look for a space for the...pooch.





—Don't call him a pooch Dad. The poor thing deserves a name. Look at him, how quiet he is; he hardly makes a sound, always pensive...

—Sounds like a philosopher —said Pablo.

—Like Socrates —added Amelia—. Hey! Now you have a name for the dog.

—Socrates? A little thing like him?

—The real Socrates was also very short. A bit like me when it comes down to it; you kids are already taller than me. OK then, we're going to find out if likes it. Let's see... Socrates!

The dog lifted its head and stared fixedly at Amelia; with his ears pointing up more than ever.

—Look, Socrates, look at this lovely imitation bone I've got for you. Do you want it?

—Woof, woof!

—Right answer. Well that's it then. From here on in he'll be called Socrates. Virginia, you take charge of preparing that really comfy bed you bought for him. Put the old bedspread underneath. And everything else you bought for Socrates in the motorhome. Come on, there's still a lot of work to get through before we leave.

They finished in half an hour. Every member of the Manzanedo loved working as a team. They knew that if they all put in the same level of care and effort, they would get through any task that needed doing much more quickly. The following morning, they rose early and got ready to leave.

In about three and a half hours they would get to the first campsite they wanted to visit, where they would get to meet Doña Quiteria's family. They found themselves in a lovely spot, on the outskirts of the nearest city. Behind the pine trees, just two hundred meters away, they could visit some Roman ruins, prehistoric caves and further on, one of Europe's cleanest, largest and most beautiful beaches.

Chapter II: BEACH

In the hours leading up to departure, they gave Socrates something to drink but nothing to eat. They knew it would be best for him as he would be jolted around during the day's journey. Now he would require close monitoring. They had just found him, he had spent very little time with them and he could escape during the night. Two hours after setting off, they decided to stop at a service station and stretch their legs. Jorge and Amelia exchanged seats. By alternating time at the wheel they were able to drive in a much calmer and concentrated way.

When they got to the campsite there were still a few hours to go before nightfall. They decided to park their motorhome a little way off from the pine wood where most of the vacationers were concentrated. The scenery was spectacular once away from the pines. Over to the right, atop a hill, were some ruins that had once been a Roman city. Three Corinthian columns that remained standing showed where the temple had been, with the rest seeming to have been domus or houses. There were also remains of the ancient road. Grooves on either side indicated where water used to flow. But other more central ones showed the route that wagons and carts must have taken. It was incredible to see how the Romans were also concerned about traffic way back then; that so many centuries ago, it was important to them that drivers and pedestrians showed mutual respect.

And, further off in the background, the beach. A beach with meter upon meter of clean, golden sand. Perfect for playing beach tennis or volleyball. It seemed to them to be an absolutely marvelous spot. They therefore thanked Doña Quiteria for having recommended it. She made her hurried and happy farewells and went off towards the pine wood where her family would surely be expecting her.

The family decided to have a swim before the sun went down. Meanwhile, Virginia offered to stay with Socrates in the pine wood. Everyone rushed to change their clothes and don their bathing costumes. But, as Pablo was leaving, Socrates began to bark. He had spent the whole journey in a pet carrier on the floor of the motorhome, right between Pablo and Virginia's seats. He was well strapped in and very secure but he wasn't used to it. During the stops it had fallen to Pablo to take him out and it seemed that Socrates had taken a shine to him.

—OK, Virginia, you go with Mom and Dad and I'll stay with Socrates, I don't mind. That way I can chat with my friends.

—Goodness, you really do have a major addiction, don't you? I'm not sure I trust you. Please be very careful he doesn't escape. He still doesn't know us very well and he might be a bit frightened.

—Don't worry; I've got him well under control. He can't get too far, can you Socrates? —said Pablo.

When they had gone, the tiny animal began to bark, whimper and constantly look for attention. He tried every way possible for Pablo to take notice of him. It was non-stop. Until, in the end, Pablo abandoned his cell phone. First he tried giving him drink, but Socrates wasn't thirsty. Neither was he hungry. At the end of the day the puppy wanted the same as Pablo: to play.

When Pablo tired of distracting the puppy, he went back to his cell phone and his messages. He was so absorbed he didn't notice that Socrates had escaped.

—Socrates, Socrates! Where have you got to? Here boy, please! Why are you doing this to me, little dog? —moaned Pablo.

After half an hour the family returned from their swim. All three of them came back in a good mood and hungry. Virginia had come on ahead, really looking forward to playing with the dog, but she was surprised to find the motorhome in total silence. Pablo and Socrates weren't there. No matter how hard she looked, she couldn't see either of them. Alarmed, she told Jorge and Amelia.

—Calm down, Pablo always has his cell phone on him. It's guaranteed. We'll call him.

But there was no reply from the cell phone and Jorge went off to look for him.

—The truth is I don't know where to start. I'll circle round. Virginia, the best thing would be if you and Mom stay here in case Pablo comes back with the dog. Don't move from this spot.

Pablo continued missing, but not so Socrates, who made a triumphal entry in the arms of a very pretty dark-haired girl with plaits, as tall as Virginia and about the same age.

—Hi, is this your little dog?

—Yes, it's ours, he's called Socrates. Where did you find him?

—Behind the pine trees, in the sand. He was digging away as though he was looking for something. He's very good and he's behaved very well. I've been asking other families to see if I could find his owners and here you are, thank goodness. We have a much bigger dog, already an adult, called Dona and they've been playing together. Well then, here he is, I've got to get back to my family.

—Excuse me, what's your name?

—I'm Irene, Irene Guzmán. Although everyone who knows me calls me Irene Two Wheels. It's my father's little joke. It seems I was born only fifteen minutes after my Mom went into labor. It's as though I was launched into life. A year and a half later I learned to ride a bike and to skate before I could read. Always on two wheels. And what's your name? How old are you?

—I'm Virginia and I'm fourteen, but within a month's time I'll be fifteen — answered Virginia.

—I'll be fifteen in a few days. I'm really looking forward to my birthday. This year is going to be very special.

—Thank you so much for looking for us and bringing our little dog back. I don't know how to thank you. Would you like to stay for dinner with us? — offered Amelia kindly.

—Yes, please do stay; I would love to make a friend on my vacations — said Virginia—. And next time bring your dog Dona so we can get to know her. I'm sure you know a lot more about dogs than we do. We've just adopted this one and we don't know much about them.

Meanwhile Pablo appeared. He seemed extremely tired and worried; his face ashen.

—I've lost Socrates, forgive me, I'm sorry. I've looked everywhere for him but just can't find him.

He was surprised to see Virginia with a stranger, and what's more seemingly very calm. He didn't know that Socrates was already there, as Amelia had taken him into the motorhome to give him a drink.

—Did you hear me, Virginia? I've lost Socrates.

—Don't worry, Pablo —replied his sister—, this is Irene who is also on vacation here at the campsite. And relax, she's returned our dog.

Upon seeing Irene for the first time, Pablo's face lit up.

—Phew, just as well! I'm Pablo, pleased to meet you. I don't know how to thank you; it was me that lost him. You've taken a huge weight of my shoulders.

—Are you Virginia's brother or cousin?

—We're twins.

—Ah! I was going to say that you looked the same age. Well, excuse me but I have to go. I'm very late. I'm not accepting your invitation to dinner because I want to invite you. In about two hours, when it gets dark, everyone camping here is going to prepare a communal barbecue. We'll have a really good time. We have music, games, dancing... Come along and enjoy. I have to go; see you later!



Pablo entered the motorhome shamefaced, apologizing for having lost the dog. —I'm sorry Dad. I made a mistake. But it won't happen again, I promise. I was just playing with him and I got distracted.

—Pablo, I really hope it doesn't happen again. Tonight you're in charge of making sure he doesn't escape again.

Just then, Amelia came in.

—OK then, I'm going to look through the food we've brought to see what we can take to this communal barbecue we've been invited to. I'm really interested to meet Doña Quiteria's family as they've never visited her in all the time she's been living next door. I also think we should behave like good neighbors and thank Irene's parents. Right then, we'll take pork chops, bread and pickles, potato chips... we'll also need something to drink. Pablo, are you OK with taking this pack of soft drinks? Can you help me with it?

Pablo was delighted. Mom had seen straight away how much he had liked Irene. Virginia also thought that a communal barbecue was a great idea. He put Socrates on his lead and said that it was now her turn to take charge of the puppy. In no time they arrived at the pine tree area. Irene hurried towards them.

—It's so great that you've come! —she said—. We're celebrating today because my grandmother is with us. I was really looking forward to seeing her!

—Your grandmother?

—Amelia, is that you? But what are you doing, woman? How come you're so loaded down? —said Doña Quiteria.

—Oh, what a coincidence. I can't believe it! We've just met your granddaughter.

—My eldest granddaughter. Now I'll show you the other one who's also somewhere around. Look, there she is.

And straight away, Blanca appeared, with a beautiful golden retriever on a lead that they called Dona.

—Oh, what a pretty girl. Are you sisters, Irene?

—No, we're cousins —said Irene—. And that beautiful thing with her belongs to her father, my Uncle Antonio. It's a police dog, very intelligent, gentle and well-behaved. She takes good care of Blanca who is very naughty. In fact, we have much more faith in the dog than in her, ha, ha, ha.

—I should say so! —said Antonio—. Welcome and very pleased to meet you. This is my wife, Rosa.

They soon saw that the animals were playing together and getting on extremely well.

—Oh, what a lovely little dog. And how well she gets on with Socrates! —said Virginia—. I've already explained to Irene that our pet has only been with us for one day. We found him abandoned at the roadside. Can you teach me how to look after him?

—I can help you —intervened Rosa—. When you see them walking in circles or whining by the door, it's time to take them out. When you wake up, it's the first thing you have to do. At home, the one who looks after Dona the least is Irene, because she always reads until really late to the point where nobody can get her out of bed.

They all smiled at the comment, but especially Virginia, who felt less unusual for having found someone who read as much as she did. That's why she got in before Pablo when it came to asking Irene to show them round the campsite.

—Let's eat something first, Virginia, I'm really hungry...!

—I'm also starving to death —said Pablo emphatically, delighted for the opportunity to speak to Irene.

There were all manner of things on the vacationers' long table: salads, French fries, cold cuts, roast meats, chorizo, Spanish omelets, roast chicken, pies and tuna sandwiches. And at one end was a pile of plastic plates so that everyone could help themselves to what they wanted. While Irene filled her plate generously taking a little of everything, Pablo confined himself to a piece of chicken and some salad.

—Didn't you say you were starving? It honestly doesn't look like it, Irene commented.

—Well, it's just that my mother's gotten us used to having a light dinner. She says that it's much healthier. And it's true, I am hungry but I thought it would be better to hold back to be able to sleep well tonight. I'm sure the beds will seem a bit strange to us.

In the meantime, Virginia, who was there with them, kept quiet. In truth, she was rather taken aback by Pablo's surprising talkativeness, to the point that he seemed to be speaking to Irene too much. He was normally timid and not at all chatty, always glued to his cell phone. With Irene, it was as if the cell phone didn't exist or that he'd forgotten all about it. She was happy about this, but interrupted so as not to be left out.

—Well, Irene, I also read a lot just like you. What are you reading now?

—The book that all the adults have recommended. They say it's ideal for our age group. In fact I'm finding it very entertaining. It's a pirate classic: "Treasure Island".

—Wow! —exclaimed Pablo.

Virginia remembered the film and remembered the song from it. So she sang: Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!

—This is a beach. Pirates and buccaneers would have landed here as well—said Pablo—. Just imagine if here, maybe under the pine trees, there was some hidden treasure buried? I was just thinking about that when I was looking for Socrates.

It was then that Virginia, very alarmed, shouted:

—Socrates! Where is Socrates? He was next to me a moment ago...

She had been distracted and the same had happened to her as to her brother. She let go of the lead at the dinner table and Socrates escaped. She felt she had spoiled the barbecue for everybody. Now they would all have to go and look for him.

—Socrates, Socrates!

But it was Dona who answered them with a bark. A happy bark because Socrates was right by her side.

—Phew, just as well. Come here, little one. I promise not to get distracted and leave you all alone again. Ah...

—Hey, Virginia. These two get on too well together. Where did you find him?

—Lost on the road that runs between the shopping mall and our house on the outskirts of town. He had been abandoned.

—Or maybe he escaped —said Irene—, that could be a possibility. Didn't you know there's a police dog training school between here and the city? It's where Dona was trained and I was really surprised to see how Socrates, being so small, was digging just as well as her.

—Well I guess it could be. But don't police dogs have to wear a collar or have a microchip and something to identify them with?

—Of course, but maybe he belonged to a litter that wasn't properly supervised. In any case, let him come on a hike with us. Shall we meet up? I've heard a lot about a nearby cave. Do you want to come with me to investigate? Maybe we'll find some pirate treasure, ha, ha, ha.

Jorge and Amelia, who had just said their farewells to Irene's aunt and uncle, called them. It was time to go back to the motorhome, go to bed and try to get some sleep. It had been a long day, with Socrates very much taking the leading role, and they were very tired.

But Pablo wanted to carry on talking and strolling with Irene. Time with her seemed to fly by and he wanted to take advantage of it. Just as well Virginia had brought them together.

—Please Dad, can't we chat for a bit longer?

—OK, we'll go off with the dog. But don't be too long. Tomorrow we're here all day and there's time to do anything you want.

They returned very happy thanks to the mysterious plans they had devised with Irene for the next day. She wanted to make an in-depth exploration of that cave. It seems that there were all kinds of myths and rumors circulating about ghostly appearances and even children disappearing in it. They were stories too grisly for them not to conceal some dark mystery and were designed to dissuade anyone from wanting to go there. But as for Irene Two Wheels, she told them that nobody was going to frighten her off with old wives' tales.

When day broke the sky was dark and threatened rain. To make matters worse, as they approached the beach, they saw the sea was very rough meaning that it would be tiring and dangerous to attempt to swim. Jorge and Amelia decided it would be better to go into town to buy provisions but their children insisted on staying put.

— Would you mind going on your own? There's no need to worry, we can stay with Irene's family.

— We've only just met them and I don't trust you two for a minute. It bothers me having to ask them to look after you as a favor so quickly. They'll have things to do, like us, and maybe looking after guests won't be convenient. Will you behave yourselves? Will you stay with them? You won't wander off, will you?

— Yes, we promise — Virginia assured them—, and what's more we'll take Socrates. It would be a hassle to go shopping and have to think of the dog all the time.

The fact was that Amelia was far from convinced, but Jorge immediately agreed to go to Antonio and Rosa's caravan. They took them some donuts and asked not only if they could look after the kids but also how to get near the city without having to drive right into the center with the motorhome. It was so big that it would be a real hassle getting it down narrow streets, not to mention finding somewhere to park it.

Antonio happily agreed to look after the kids and showed them a nearby stop for a bus that would drop them right in the city center.

So, after Jorge and Amelia went off to catch the bus, the group comprising the three teenagers and two dogs set off towards the cave. In the past it had been a popular tourist attraction but now it was very much abandoned, something the kids found strange no sooner had they entered it. It was spectacular, full of stalactites and stalagmites of breathtaking beauty. After staring in amazement at the entrance hall, they continued along a small stone pathway that led to a Gothic spot with incredible light effects. The sound of water dripping onto the stalactites was reminiscent of bells. A central column and a sort of canopy at the far end completed the marvel of nature. But while the Manzanedos were taking all this in ecstatically, admiring every detail, Irene and the dogs seemed bent on avoiding distractions, fixing their eyes firmly on the ground. And, from time to time, Irene would feel the walls as if she was looking for some sort of opening, lever or door.

After leaving a really high chamber, they heard a very unnatural sound, as though crates were being dragged across the floor. The sounds were increasingly louder and nearer.

—Quick, I think they’re coming, we have to go! Pablo, pick the dog up. Let’s run! —warned Irene.

They got out as quickly as they could, heeding what Irene told them who then showed them - triumphantly - a piece of paper she had found on the ground and which contained an address.

—Pablo, Virginia told me you’ve brought your tablet along! Can you see where this address is for me later?

—With pleasure. I’ll look it up as soon as we get back to the campsite. But how come we rushed out? What do you think was happening?

—Crooks —said Irene—. If they’ve been spreading weird stories to frighten off visitors, they could be committing some kind of crime. Let me tell my uncle and my Dad.

—Your Dad?

—I’ll reveal all, Pablo. But right now I can’t.

—As you wish, Irene. In any case, this afternoon I'll find this address for you.

After lunch it didn't take too much time to discover the location of the mysterious address: Trocadero Street, 47. It was in the middle of a neighborhood away from the city center, on the outskirts next to the docks. It was predominantly an area of warehouses and garages called Zona Alfa. Irene suggested to Pablo and Virginia that, in order to find out what was going on, they could ask their parents to let them go there the next day. This time they wouldn't be able to take the dogs as they would need to go on the bus. After a lot of thought, Irene came up with a great idea.

—As it's still cloudy, what if we tell them that tomorrow we would like to go out on scooters? Think about it: you can't use them on the campsite as there's no suitable surface. And as the road is dangerous we're only left with the city. It's a perfect excuse. Don't worry; nobody in my family will be surprised: I'm a skateboard champion and I've been doing it since I was little. I'll tell them that, because the weather is still bad, we are all going scooter riding. I have some at the campsite; I can teach you. That way we can take a look at that place, snoop around enough to find out what's going on and then make a quick getaway. What do you reckon?

—Perfect. I'm up for it —said Pablo enthusiastically

—But it would be better to spend all afternoon with our parents —pointed out Virginia—. Since we arrived we've been out and about with you all the time and they mustn't suspect anything. If they knew we were carrying out a secret investigation they would stop us, for sure.

As the next day started cloudy once again, and faced with the impossibility of going to the beach, they were allowed to go and play with Irene. "A very pleasant and bright girl", they thought. —And it's very good for them to meet other kids of their own age and make friends —said Amelia to Jorge—. Especially for Pablo; I prefer him to have friends rather than spending whole afternoons in silence and hidden away playing with his tablet.

After breakfast the three of them caught the bus wearing shorts and protective pads for their elbows and knees. Irene had taken charge of finding helmets and scooters for everyone.

Just at the entrance to the city, not far from Zona Alfa, was a scooter track specially designed for scooters, where the best riders in the city went to train, some of them national champions. So, before going off to see what there was at that strange address, Irene suggested that they could go and watch and practice a little. If anyone saw them snooping around and they had to get going in a hurry, best on a scooter, -said Virginia-, for a quicker getaway.

—As I'm not sure how you're going to manage with them I've brought you foldable three-wheeled ones as they're safer and less prone to tipping over. See how the wheels have a large diameter which makes them much more comfortable for you to ride. Rule number one is never to get on anything with two wheels unless you're wearing a helmet, no matter how hot it makes you feel. Whether it's a scooter, bicycle or moped, always wear a helmet. It doesn't matter if you're going 50 meters or 200 kilometers, you have to wear one at all times.

—And look, I've brought you decent helmets. To be honest, I would never wear a plastic helmet, one of those which isn't officially approved and doesn't protect anything. Something like this one I'm wearing is best. See? A solid and rigid surface, interior shell with foam, it's not too tight but neither does it move around. And it also has a visor to protect my eyes. If it's left unfastened it's a waste of time, because it doesn't offer any protection at all. I also like the fact it's bright red to make me more visible to others.

—I always wear one, Irene, because I'm often out riding my bike —said Virginia—. And I was very interested in your tip about wearing a visor. Even though I usually ride wearing sunglasses, I'll think about it. A visor would protect my face much more.

—Very good, Virginia. Right, I'll move on now to explain how the scooter moves so we can practice before we set off. There are two techniques: twisting and the scissor motion. The first is really easy. Also the twist motion is ideal for scooters like the ones we've brought along, with three wheels. We just have to push with your legs and then move the balance of the body from one side to the other to make the scooter move forward. That's how you gain speed. OK, let's practice. Balance and bend down, as if you were dancing the twist. That's great, you're really good at it!

Both of them passed the test. And they had lots of fun. But after twenty minutes, Irene decided to make a change.

—I'll show you one more movement —she said—. It's called the scissor motion. It's more complicated because you have to push your legs inwards and outwards, which is why it's called the scissors. Let's see... Virginia, that's very good. Pablo, you need to practice more. Twisting suits you better!

In short, they had a great time. They went for over two kilometers and luckily nobody fell over. But they didn't forget what they'd come to do. The morning wore on, and they went off to fulfill their plans. They got to the Zona Alfa, a very lonely spot, where they came across a huge industrial unit shut up with huge padlocks.

—We'll have to wait —said Irene—. We'd better hide behind those bushes.

They didn't have to wait long, as a little while later a truck arrived and the warehouse doors opened, from out of which four men emerged, all of them burly and sweating, carrying large boxes. Upon seeing them, Irene was completely convinced.

—Now I get it! —exclaimed Irene in a low voice—. I reckon that what those crooks are carrying is contraband. First they bring it in by boat to the beach, they conceal it in the cave and then they bring it here, well hidden in the meantime, in order to distribute it and sell it later on. It's crystal clear!

—Ow! —exclaimed Virginia, after pricking herself on the bushes.

—Let's go; it's time make a quick getaway! Get on your scooters, you pair, we have to skedaddle.

And that's what they did, at top speed. Just as well for them that the loaders were inside and were slow in noticing that they were there. When they did, the teenagers had hurriedly rounded the corner, so the only thing they saw was some children running off which they didn't attach any importance to.

They got back excited, proud of their detective skills. Now it was a matter of reporting it, but Irene told them that they should only tell her father.

—I'll introduce you to him very soon, I promise.

The days passed by. Being with Irene, the time flew by really quickly as they never stopped for a minute and they had a great time. The three became very fond of each other and became inseparable friends. They were really sad when Jorge announced that the beach vacation was going to end in two days time and that they would be going to a campsite in the mountains, as they had agreed. They had found another beautiful one, not too far from this one. Moreover, it was very close to one of those greenways that Virginia was so interested in finding out about.

Straight away Pablo protested at this news.

—Why have we got to change when we're enjoying it here so much? —he said in an annoyed tone.

—Come on now, Pablo, we've also become very friendly with Antonio and Rosa, but we made our plans and now have an advance reservation at the next campsite. We agreed to go to the beach but also to the mountain. In two days' time we have to change. Don't worry; we'll have a great time there as well. You can keep in touch with Irene and tell her how well you're getting on.

—But it's not fair. Virginia and I have just got to know her and we're making friends. And just now, when we're having such a great time, we have to leave. Why don't we just cancel the other reservation and stay here?

—Think of your sister, Pablo, her greatest wish was to travel down a greenway on her bike. I made a promise to her and I'm going to keep it.

—No, no and no. I don't want to go.

Angry, Pablo shut himself away in the motorhome and turned his computer on. He didn't come out again. That afternoon, upset and rather sad, he got to the end of the "Hydras and Gorgons" game, the same one that he'd completely forgotten about during the vacation.

Chapter III: MOUNTAIN

When they arrived at the mountain campsite, Jorge and Amelia were surprised at how different it was from the other one. Here you could take part in all kinds of activities: Archery, horse riding, zip lines, etc. And next to it was a river to swim in. They were so content there with going hiking, swimming and fishing that it was only at the end of their stay they decided to take the greenway route that had filled Virginia with such enthusiasm.

The greenway near the campsite had been created by taking advantage of the closing of a railway line. It ran across a beautiful mountain range with rivers, pine forests, bridges, many tunnels and one of the best bird colonies in the world. That's why Jorge carried a good set of binoculars in the motorhome. He was hoping to study a species that he'd never seen before. The thing that most excited the teacher was the prospect of coming across a "Hermit Ibis", one of those quirky looking birds with leafy black plumage and a red beak that was in serious danger of extinction. But if Jorge was satisfied, his daughter Virginia was radiant. Those days taking care of Socrates had awoken in here what she believed to be her true vocation: to be a vet. She had made her mind up: she loved dogs and appeared to have a special gift with them. She also started to get enthused about the idea of getting to know unusual breeds of birds. Everything was new for her, and the closer she got to the world of animals, the more it attracted her.

As for Amelia, she felt fantastic: living in the great outdoors, far away from all the pollution, taking exercise and breathing in pure air.

Everything would have been perfect had it not been for Pablo. In spite of his family being so upbeat and the passage of time, Pablo remained downcast. He missed Irene and those days spent with her where he felt like a pirate, spy, scooter rider, IT expert and even a bodyguard due to the way he really liked to be at her side to protect her. It was really sad to have had to say goodbye from one day to the next with a “we’ll write to each other”, and “we haven’t had time to meet your father”, and “I haven’t had such a good time in ages...”

After those marvelous days during which he was open, affectionate, a chatter-box and a joker, it was now really difficult to get him to speak or to take part in the daily activities. He simply told them that he missed Irene and was sad not to be able to see her.

To cheer him up, they began to get their bicycles fully prepared. First they gave them a good hosing down, as they had become covered in dust during the bumpy journey. Then they did a thorough check of the brakes and tires, testing the pressure, adjusting the gears and oiling the chain. Finally they adjusted the seats, cleaned the drinks bottles and made sure they had a bag full of spares in case anything went wrong.

Meanwhile, Pablo took charge of looking after Socrates. He had also become very fond of the dog which was now not so small. He grew from day to day.

The next day, Jorge, Virginia and Pablo —who in the end decided to go— made their way to the greenway. They had agreed that Amelia would look after Socrates in the motorhome. Later in the afternoon, she would go and collect them using an access road half way along the route. Thus, with the bicycles fully prepared and with sufficient water and supplies, they decided to set off.

They put on their helmets and left on the road before getting onto the greenway. Jorge went in front with the twins behind in single file. After a while, his children saw him stretch out his arm and move it up and down assuredly and rapidly, before going towards the hard shoulder. The kids understood the maneuver: he needed to stop to do tie up his shoelaces up properly.

They then set off again until reaching the start of the greenway, the access to which involved taking a right turn. To achieve this, Jorge also gave sufficient advanced warning of the maneuver, this time with his left arm out to the side and bent upwards with the palm of his hand stretched out. The twins followed suit rapidly and with relief, because just at the end of this dirt track, they would get to the start of that other path where there would be no traffic circulating. No signals, no policemen, no traffic lights; just them, bikes and birds.

After two hours, it turned out that riding along the greenway was even more breathtaking than even Virginia had been able to imagine. The trees provided shade, lots of birds were singing and the sky was blue and cloudless, producing an extraordinary quality of light. They grew tired and decided to stop. They wanted to have a snack and to admire the fauna and the landscape using the binoculars. In a nearby beech tree they spotted a nest. Jorge and Virginia went off to look at it but Pablo wasn't really interested and decided to wait for them sat under a tree. He leaned his bike up against it and, after a while, he sensed he was being watched.

—Hey you, kid, the one with the bike. How would you like to earn a few euros? Give me your bike.

—What?

—It doesn't matter. I'm taking it anyway. I need it.

And, without a by your leave the strange guy got on the bike and rode off at top speed. Without time to react or the possibility to square up to an adult, Pablo let him go completely stupefied. All he could do was shout "Stop, thief!" at the top of his voice to let his father know.

Jorge and Virginia appeared straight away.



—But what happened, Pablo?

—My bike's been stolen out from under my nose! My God, I don't believe it; it all happened so quickly.

—Well, I'm not someone about to leave you alone to give chase. I wouldn't be happy about that —said Jorge—. I'm really sorry about the bike and for the excursion we wanted to do, but what can we do? This changes our plans. We'll have to carry on, alternating the bikes so as not to tire ourselves out too much, but one of us will have to walk. Come on, you pair get on. I'll do this first stretch on foot.

After half an hour walking another big surprise awaited them along the way. Just as well they got out of the way. This new apparition came in the form of a powerful motorcycle ridden at great speed by a man wearing a helmet and a lady riding pillion. The lady was known to all of them: it was none other than Doña Quiteria, Irene's grandmother, who dismounted from the motorbike.

—Hey hikers! Stop for a moment! I don't suppose by any chance you've come across a robber on your travels, have you?

—You bet we have! How great to see you Doña Quiteria. What a coincidence! Pablo had his bike stolen by a scoundrel which is why we're going so slowly.

—Well then, I'm going after him, see you later —said the motorcyclist. They all crowded round Doña Quiteria. There were so many questions.

—OK then, Doña Quiteria —asked Virginia—, how come you've got here on a motorbike if we're on a greenway and they're not allowed?

—That's right. And weren't you at the beachside campsite with your family? What are you doing here? —inquired Jorge.

—And how is Irene? —asked Pablo straight away.

—Calm down, calm down, let's carry on walking and I'll answer your questions as we go along. I'm sure my son will be back soon, the one you haven't yet met. He was the one you saw on the motorbike.

—Would he be Irene's father by any chance? —asked Pablo, very intrigued.

—The very same, the one who sorts everything out.

They carried on and two hours later stopped to eat some sandwiches and drink some water. Doña Quiteria didn't seem very tired. When they were about to set off again, a police van appeared on the road, which made her smile.

—That's my Thomas. He's come to rescue us.

As the van stopped she hurried over to speak to him.

—Well, son, how did it go?

—Captured and in jail. Finally; it was about time. I've spent the whole month hidden in your house waiting to catch him between his comings and goings, when his hideout was actually here on a greenway. He was planning to set up an illegal factory for electronic components, taking advantage of an abandoned station. Just as well that Irene put me on the trail when she told me about the cave and the warehouse used for clandestine distribution. I bet Sherlock Holmes would have liked a family like ours! By the way—he said looking at Pablo— my apologies, young man. I've brought your bike on the hood of the van so you can forgive me.

—Apologize to me, what for? —asked Pablo, very intrigued.

—For having frightened you. It was me who you saw running through your garden the night before leaving for your vacation. I was following that guy and believed that he had gone into my mother's house, who he was trying to ingratiate himself with, and he was dangerous. He was armed and we had to protect you and protect me. Nobody could know that I was living there with Quiteria at that time, I had to watch him, and that's why my mother couldn't tell you the truth.

A few hours ago you did very well not confront him when he stole your bike: Well done! Now we've got him well locked up. He'll be completely undone once we succeed in finding out about the jewels we believe he's also trafficking. Well now, if you like I'll give you the full details of the story, but it would be better if we went home, wouldn't it? What's more, a little bird tells me that at the end of the greenway, there are two beautiful women waiting for us in a motorhome. So all aboard; that's why I brought the van. Let's go!

At the end of the exit road they spotted their motorhome. Outside it was Amelia cuddling Socrates while she watched the road waiting for them to come. A young woman at her side took off her crash helmet, releasing a long mane of black curly hair. On seeing that, Pablo's face broke into a broad smile, for it was none other than Irene Two Wheels, with her inseparable helmet and, by her side, a moped.

—Helloooo!

—My God, it's Irene! Cooool! —shouted Pablo and Virginia simultaneously and they ran over to embrace her.

—I've really missed you both. It's great to get together again. What did you think of my Dad?

—Wonderful, I want to be like him —said Pablo.

—Me too, Pablo, believe me. I have some news. Like I told you, it was my birthday a few days ago. The best present was this red moped that my Dad gave me. Isn't it great? As I'm now fifteen, I managed to get a license to drive it from the Department of Transport within the last few days. I've been really busy passing the theory and practical tests. And you two, leaving aside the incident with the criminal, how did you get on with the greenway?

—Really good —answered Virginia—. There's an incredible bird colony and on the way we've seen all kinds of varieties. The scenery is very impressive, there are rivers to fish in, bridges, stations... it's a marvelous spot.

—Great, it sounds fantastic. Now that this is all coming to an end, do you think we could come back together another time? —asked Irene.

—Of course, but on bikes. They won't let you on it with a moped. It's a track exclusively for walkers, cyclists and horse riders - and, exceptionally, as happened today, for police vehicles. And it might be due to the heat, but the fact is that, apart from a farmer in the distance, we haven't seen anybody apart from the thief, Doña Quiteria and your father. Pablo was starting to feel a bit lonely. This was the same Pablo who had done nothing but smile constantly until that moment. Hearing his name mentioned, he finally said something:

—Irene, your moped's really fantastic looking. Would you let me have a go?
—Of course. Would you both like to get a license? It can't be long until your birthdays, can it? Maybe there's another road around here with no cars where we could practice?
—Yes, just where the greenway starts. It isn't paved and it's not very long but there's no traffic.
—Well that's it, tomorrow I'll teach you. All three of us can practice. It'll be great!

Amelia, interrupted by the insistent barking of a hungry Socrates, ended the conversation.

—Come on, let's go back. Antonio, Rosa and young Blanca are expecting us at the campsite for dinner. We have to set up two barbecues: they brought chops and we have fish. They're bound to be tired and hungry. So all aboard. Stow the bikes because we're off. What a day!
—OK. I'll go back on my moped as it won't fit inside. Pretend that I'm escorting you to protect you as if you were royalty —joked Irene—. Long live King Pablo and glory to Queen Virginia! Come on, let's go.

Maybe it was Jorge who was happiest about this fortunate highlight of the holiday. He loved to see his children happy. And alongside Irene Two Wheels, that spirited girl who seemed straight out of an action movie, they certainly were.

The evening passed quietly. Although Irene, Pablo and Virginia had lots to tell each other, they were very tired after so much exercise and excitement. So, after dinner, they all surrendered to the call of their beds. They would have time to talk the next day.

And how! They got up as good as new and tucked into a hearty breakfast. Irene, delighted with her moped, wanted to show the twins everything she's learned. They, however, not being in any hurry to get one for the time being, suggested a trip to the city. It was precisely that day that a major cycle race was passing through and they didn't want to miss it.

And so, after breakfast, they set off on a local road, because they weren't allowed to use freeways or highways while riding bikes or mopeds. And in spite of the heat, Irene wore sports boots and padded clothing.

—Skin is very delicate —she said—, better to wear something that doesn't catch on anything and that can protect me should I fall off.

The journey turned out to be very pleasant, all of them riding along the right-hand hard shoulder. They grouped closer together going round bends, when there was a change of gradient and when they came across other vehicles using the same road. Irene slowed right down so as not to be too separated from the twins, who were on bikes. When they stopped she said:

—See? The biggest difference between riding a moped and bicycle is that you should never ride a moped using just one hand. To signal maneuvers you use the indicators clearly and well in advance. Mopeds are much lighter than they seem, and if you drive with one hand it becomes unbalanced and it's easy to fall. And it's not the same thing falling off a moped as a bike, because of the speed. You fall much harder.

At the entrance to the city was a huge roundabout. Pablo became curious.

—Can I ask you something, Irene? The thing is I don't really understand how roundabouts work. How do you know when to go onto it? And when you don't have to wait, but just carry on round?

—Well, what you have to be clear on is that you never cross roundabouts in a straight line, but circle them leaving the center on your left-hand side. The vehicles already on it have priority, so as you enter, you must first give way to those already there. Then it's your turn, understand?

—I do, yes, but it seems that many car drivers find that difficult.

—Well, it's not that difficult; it's just like have a Yield sign in front of you. Before entering, you have to stop and let others by. And when it comes to setting off it's we who have priority.



I think overtaking is the most dangerous maneuver —continued Irene— .

You should always pass on the left, except if the vehicle in front is indicating that it's about to turn in that direction. I position myself behind the vehicle, slightly to the left and at a safe distance; then I look behind and in front to check nothing else is coming, I signal my maneuver and accelerate, getting as far ahead as I can of the vehicle I'm overtaking. Then gradually I move back into right hand lane. But many times I stay back. If I'm in any doubt or don't have full visibility I wouldn't dream of overtaking, for safety reasons.

—That's quite a lesson you've taught me, Irene. You're just like a walking driving school, ha, ha, ha. Thanks very much, it's all clear to me now.

Suddenly, Pablo's mood changed and he seemed a little sad.

—I was thinking about how few days we have left of the vacation. The day after tomorrow we have to go back. Well, at least we can still see each other. Just as well! —he exclaimed.

But the wind of farewells was in the air, and the looks between them conveyed the urgency of experiencing these last moments together as intensely as possible. They waited a few minutes and the multi-colored serpent of racing cyclists passed by right in front of them. They were enveloped in a festive atmosphere. Shouts of encouragement, banners, photos.... And when everybody was concentrating on the race, Pablo made the bold gesture of kissing Irene on the cheek, on the spur of the moment and with no warning.

—I love you very much, Irene. I don't ever want to be apart from you.

—Me too, captain. My captain.

—Listen, I've really enjoyed all these mysteries and investigations. When I'm older, I want to be a policeman. When's our next case?

—Ha, ha, ha. Very soon, I'm sure Dad will recruit you. You're the best there is.

That night they had yet another surprise, as all the adults had taken it upon themselves to prepare a surprise party at the campsite; a true shindig with music, a fabulous barbecue, drinks and fancy dress. They were all going dressed as cowboys. And everybody applauded when the most original costumes of the night appeared, those worn by Irene and her little cousin Blanca, both of them covered in hair. They said they had come as Yogi Bair and his friend Boo-Boo.

—Might there be any cakes for us here? —they asked when they arrived.

In the midst of all the fun, Pablo approached Irene's father Tomás enigmatically, taking advantage of a moment when he was on his own.

—How's the investigation going into the smuggler? Is it over yet? The thing is, I think I know where those jewels you mentioned might be. Are they important for the case?

—Essential; that way he'd be a lot longer getting out of jail which is where he belongs.

—In that case I should tell you that, before we left, under the apple tree at our house I saw that the earth had been disturbed. Twice. My mother wasn't working in the garden that day. Could it be that he buried the jewels there?

—Hmm... in your garden and not Quiteria's? Yes, of course! I had good reason to dig up everything but I couldn't find anything in our house. He must have thought the same and that it was safer to leave them in your kitchen garden. Under the apple tree, you say? I'll look for it tomorrow without fail. You have good powers of observation, young man. Have you thought of becoming a policeman when you're older? I think you'd be good at it. Ah, and another important matter: if you like you can keep the puppy.

—Keep Socrates?

—Yes, Irene asked me to look into the matter of the dog. I asked at the dog training school: he was one of our puppies that escaped from a litter of six. We wait until they've grown a little before we give them identification and that's why he didn't have a microchip. They didn't miss him at first and then, when they realized, they thought he wouldn't have been able to survive alone and would be dead by now. Another mystery solved, but would you like to keep him?

—Would you really do this favor for us? My parents will decide but we've all grown fond of Socrates, especially Virginia. If he gets taken away now she'll be really upset.

— Well, don't worry. I'll speak about it with your father. If you want him, he's yours.

— Well, is my eldest son a "Mr. Fixit" or not? — interjected Doña Quiteria, appearing out of nowhere as usual.

— You bet! — replied Pablo.

— Except with me, he frightens off any boyfriends that come my way, ha, ha, ha. And with that crook being such a good catch: smuggler, illegal factory, jewels, glamour...

Everybody laughed and the party became even more animated. When it got dark, they decided to turn on some sets of lights that they had strung between the motorhomes. This light enabled Pablo to contemplate from a distance how Virginia was thanking Tomás about Socrates and how Jorge enveloped him in a long and friendly hug. They had agreed that the next family reunion would be at Doña Quiteria's house. They had so much more to talk about.

Half an hour later Irene appeared looking radiant. She had exchanged her Yogi Bear outfit for a white dress and came looking to dance with Pablo. He, seeing her arrive looking so beautiful, suddenly felt everything else fade away. He thought about how much he had changed during these intense vacations. A summer during which they hadn't stopped for even a moment: his new pet, his parents, his sister and his new love, his Irene Two Wheels, who for him represented a whole new world of adventures, action and emotion, which from now on he would never give up.

He then came to the conclusion that life, his own life, really could be like an amazing video game, full of surprises. Playing it did not involve shutting himself away his bedroom, alone in front of a screen that couldn't listen to him or understand him, nor protect him or provide that warmth and joy that only other people can. That's why that autumn, in the Manzanedo family home, videogames were abandoned and replaced by the addictive presence of Irene and long afternoons of study and conversation.

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She regularly publishes essays, articles, literary reviews and short stories.

Mario Miranda, born in Socovos (Albacete). He is a photographer, musician and director of cultural projects at La Llave. Cultural Management and Production.

Even as a child, he felt the need to carry a camera slung over his shoulder and one fine day in 2002 he decided to devote himself full time to photography. In 2008 he began his studies in Cinematography at the "Ciudad del La Luz" (City of Light) film school in Alicante.

He has won numerous awards, one of the most notable being the FITUR International Photography Award in 2014.

Sonia Salvador Vicente, born in Albacete. She is a graduate in Law with a postgraduate degree in Digital Technology and a Master's in Archival Studies.

Very early on she discovered that her camera provided her with the perfect ally for fulfilling her artistic ambitions. She was practically still a child when she won her first photo competition. This was followed by many more. Individual and collective exhibitions are now a constant part of Sonia's artistic life.



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