



VINTAGE

THE LONE WOMAN

BERNADO ATXAGA

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Authors

Also by Bernardo Atxaga

Title Page

1. The Lone Woman

2. The Dream

3. Second Dream

4. Third Dream

Acknowledgements

Poem, Song & Prose Bibliography

Copyright

About the Book

Irene is 37 years old and just out of prison after serving time for terrorist activities. Deciding to return home to Bilbao, she takes a bus journey across Spain, striking up conversations with the passengers who include two plainclothes policemen. As the journey progresses, so the tension builds.

About the Authors

BERNARDO ATXAGA, a Basque, was born in 1951. He published his first work at the age of twenty in an anthology of Basque writers. He has written plays, children's books, radio scripts and novels, including *Obabakoak*, which has been published in fourteen languages including English, and won several prizes. His last novel, *The Lone Man*, was described by Peter Millar in *The Times* as "a spellbinding, sympathetic odyssey into the mind of a former terrorist".

MARGARET JULL COSTA translated *Obabakoak* and *The Lone Man*. She is also translator of works by Javier Marías (including *A Heart so White* which won the Dublin International Impac Award), Carmen Martín Gaité and Arturo Pérez-Reverte. Her translation of Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* made her joint-winner of the Portuguese translation prize.

Also by Bernardo Atxaga

OBABAKOAK
THE LONE MAN

Bernardo Atxaga

THE LONE WOMAN

*Translated from the Spanish
by Margaret Jull Costa*



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SHE WAS A woman of thirty-seven who had spent the last few years in prison. Slight and serious-looking, she was dressed neatly in clothes of a somewhat masculine cut; when she walked, she did so slowly, calmly; when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly husky; when she looked, her eyes seemed hard - two brown spheres that time had polished to a sombre gleam. After her release from prison, she had spent a terrible night, wandering the bars of Barcelona, and ending up sleeping with a man she had only just met. Then, the following morning, after more bars and more walking, she had decided to return to the city where she was born, Bilbao. Forty minutes later, she was standing outside one of the sets of automatic doors at the railway station.

The door sensed her presence and trembled slightly, as if the two glass leaves were about to part at any moment, and then, acting instead as a mirror - for she had stopped and was looking at herself - it reflected her own figure back at her in precise detail: the leather suitcase she was holding with both hands, her black tights and black moccasins, her suede jacket with the red AIDS ribbon pinned to the lapel, her white shirt, her cropped hair. She kept looking herself up and down, like a woman who has just got dressed and is uncertain about her appearance.

"Not bad," she said quietly, staring at her legs. After all those years inside, it was odd to see herself full-length. The mirrors in prison were rarely more than two feet high.

The door trembled again and two hefty young foreign women, carrying rucksacks taller than themselves, emerged from the station and occupied the space where her image had been. They took a couple more steps and stood before her.

“Could you help me, please?” asked one of them, unfurling what appeared to be a plan of the city as abruptly as if she were opening an umbrella. There was something vaguely insolent about her tone of voice, reminiscent of fifteen-year-old school-kids in TV sitcoms.

“No, I can’t,” said the woman, without even looking at her. She was in no mood to start poring over the map of a city in which almost the only thing she knew was the prison. Besides, she despised tourists, especially tourists carrying rucksacks.

The abruptness of her reply startled the two young women, although, after the initial shock, their look of surprise became an exaggerated grimace. How could she treat them like that? Had she no manners? Why was she so aggressive?

“You stink of sweat. Why don’t you go and have a shower?” thought the woman, shifting her suitcase to one hand and going in through the door. She didn’t understand what the two foreign women shouted after her. The English she had learned in prison was good enough for her to be able to read and, to some extent, speak, but not enough to understand the insults of British or American tourists.

Once inside the building, she felt as if she were about to faint, as if her legs would give way beneath her if she continued walking towards the people milling about in the waiting rooms or by the ticket office. She hurriedly sought refuge in the area behind one of the shops, less crowded, emptier than the rest. Things were happening all around her, everywhere: a red light began to blink, a child bumped into the luggage cart and fell flat on its face on the floor, someone rushed past, their head turned to look back at the electronic departures board. And in moments of calm, when the general bustle died down, her eyes collided – like the child who had fallen flat on his face – with the glittering glass columns or the loud yellow or red plastic surfaces.

“So, you’re leaving us. Well, congratulations. I mean it. From now on, you’ll have all the electric light you want.”

The inside of the station more than bore out the truth of those words addressed to her, just as she was about to leave prison, by Margarita, one of her cellmates. There were lights everywhere: in serried ranks across the ceiling and reflected on the paved floor, creating a brilliant atmosphere that affected everything in the building, from the magazines and books to the sweets in the sweetshop. It was in stark contrast to prison, of course, because there, in the cells and along the corridors, darkness predominated – a kind of grey dust that filtered through the air and drowned the feeble glow from light bulbs and fluorescent tubes.

She looked restlessly about her, at the pizzeria to her left towards the rear, then over at the area full of coffee shops, but she couldn’t see the information office. It wasn’t where she remembered it, opposite the ticket office. As for the departures board – which again was new to her – Bilbao was not amongst the destinations of those trains about to leave.

She compressed her lips and gave an irritated sigh. The station clock – a very sober, black and white Certina – said it was twenty past two in the afternoon. According to her wrist-watch – which was also a Certina, a man’s watch – it was two twenty-three. She regretted not having phoned the station that morning. She was used to the rigid prison timetable, to a life that passed, not like a river or a current in the sea, but like the little wheels in a clock, always turning on the same axis, never changing speed, so anything unusual, any uncertainty, made her feel uneasy. She must find out what her travel options were as soon as possible.

She picked up her suitcase again, this time in her left hand, and joined the group of passengers who were waiting in an area furnished with green plastic chairs. She spotted

a young man in soldier's uniform, reading a sports paper. She went over to him and asked for his help. Could he tell her where she might find the timetables?

"Why don't you ask the computer?" the soldier said to her, pointing to a rectangular column. Halfway up the column was a window filled by a bright blue screen.

She put her suitcase down on the ground and struggled to follow the instructions. She could only get the machine to tell her about trains travelling to places near Barcelona or to cities like Paris, Zurich or Milan. She sighed again. This was beginning to get on her nerves.

"Do you need any help?"

The soldier had joined her at the computer. She told him that she couldn't find the timetable for trains to Bilbao.

"There isn't a train until eleven o'clock tonight," said the soldier, with a slightly flirtatious smile. When he saw the look of amazement on her face, his smile broadened and he spoke to her rather differently. "Is that too late for you?" he said. "You could spend the rest of the day in Barcelona."

She wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere, not even to Bilbao, and she was on the point of accepting the invitation that lay behind the soldier's words. After all, it was the first invitation, albeit only half-spoken, tentative, that she had had in a long time, at least from anyone of the opposite sex, and she needed all the help she could to bolster her self-confidence; she needed to be looked at, spoken to, desired, as if she were a normal woman, not a whore - the role she had passively undertaken on her first night out of prison. However, barely twenty-four hours had passed since she left prison, and still less, only about ten hours, since her encounter with the stranger with whom she had gone to bed in a cheap hotel, and she felt like being alone. She looked at the soldier and declined his offer. She couldn't stay in Barcelona, she had to get to Bilbao as soon as possible.

“I’ll tell you what then,” said the soldier with a sigh. He was rather disappointed. “The best thing would be to go by bus. It leaves at about half past three and goes straight there on the motorway. You’ll be home by ten o’clock tonight.”

“You seem to know a lot about timetables,” she said, forcing a smile.

“I’ve got a friend back in the barracks. He always gets that bus. He usually buys his ticket over there, behind the station. The company’s called Babitrans.”

The soldier said goodbye to her, joking about lost opportunities and sketching a military salute. For a moment, she thought of continuing the joke and adding a further thread to the relationship that had grown up between them, but, instead, she simply watched him walk away.

The soldier disappeared amongst the crowd, down the escalator that connected the station with the metro. Yes, it was a bit of bad luck not to have met him ten or twelve hours earlier. Or perhaps the real bad luck lay in having met the other man, the awful guy who had picked her up in a bar, the fourth or fifth that she had visited that night.

She noticed the cigarette machine next to the entrance to the pizzeria, and the thoughts going round in her head immediately changed direction and flew off to the period in her life when she could choose any brand of cigarette she liked or, rather, choose the brand with which she identified and which she would carry with her, at least on certain occasions, like an amulet. She felt suddenly happier and thought that her recovery could begin right there, with that trifling realization, her recovery of herself through the objects that had surrounded her in her previous life.

“Try to find your own things,” Margarita had advised her when she said goodbye. “They wait for us and they are the only things that can help us when we get out of prison. When you leave here, try to remember what they were and

set about finding them. They'll help you a lot. I'll do the same some day. I'll go back to Argentina and I won't stop until I find my knee-high leather boots."

The laughter with which her cellmate had closed that brief conversation floated in her head as she went over to the cigarette machine. Margarita was over sixty and still had a long prison sentence to complete. It was highly unlikely that she would ever return to her native Argentina.

Her favourite brand, Lark, was in the last column in the machine. She put three coins in the slot and pressed the button.

"At last!" she exclaimed to herself.

She hadn't been able to smoke that brand, her usual one, for several years; it was a brand she had chosen as an adolescent, as an emblem almost of her own personality. She had been "the girl who smoked Lark" and now, after spending four years in a prison cell in Barcelona, there was a chance of being that girl again. On the other hand, the maroon packet - an extremely rare sight inside the prison walls - proved to her that she really was out, that before too long she would have a new handbag, and in that handbag a key, the key to her own house, the object that best characterized those who were free.

She placed the packet on her open palm.

"Lark has an inner chamber of charcoal granules to smooth the taste," she read. Above the letters, there was a cross-section of the filter showing the granules.

She put the pack in her jacket pocket and crossed over to the other part of the station via a side passage. Even before she reached the exit, she spotted two buses parked on the station forecourt; the first was white, the second yellow and white, and she had the impression that both had their engines running and were about to leave. She quickened her step and almost ran through the automatic doors at the end of the passage.