

## Driving home

It's a hot day that makes objects seem transparent and improbably clear, a day like a memory suddenly surfacing from infinite depths as Pelusa hurriedly takes her leave of the Joyce Meyer Ministries' parish meeting, jumps into her car and sets off.

The tarmac on the four-lane highway leading to the western communities' entrance gates is black as outer space and marked out in gleaming yellow. The mirages dancing above the road's surface hint at huge holes leading only to an unknown, hazy nothingness. The heat renders the tyres soft and giving. There's an indescribable sense of peace even though, between the carriageways, a few gardeners are pushing their mowers along grassy strips where palms and acacias alternate. Pelusa drives on past numerous of the more expensive communities until she reaches the outskirts of Nordelta where her own community, *La Lansia*, is located.

Pelusa rubs her temple. She's really in a rush but the speed limit prevents her from driving any faster, while on the cycleway next to the road a line of athletic-looking older men on racers are pedalling away. They're all wearing specialist polarised sunglasses, their skin is strikingly tanned and taut. The one at the back reaches for the water-bottle in the holder fitted to the bike's frame, then sits up straight to squirt blue liquid into his open mouth while cycling 'no hands'. The column passes Pelusa's car window and so vanishes from her rear-view mirror. Pelusa's doing exactly eighty. There are only a few vehicles on the road. She overtakes no one and no one overtakes her. All the cars are going in the same direction. All at the same speed.

She turns off the road and heads towards her community which starts immediately beyond the neo-classical entrance gate. Behind the windows of the gate-house sit the security guards in their black trousers, patent shoes, white shirts, each wearing a pin badge bearing a flag fluttering in the wind, sunglasses, their peaked caps elegantly inscribed *Nordelta*. In front of them are the screens.

Pelusa holds up her residents' pass against the dull grey magnetic surface and acknowledges the staff. She'll probably never manage to shake off her anxiety about missing the green light. Every time she imagines she'll set off an alarm and sees herself surrounded by security guards dragging her from the car by her hair and bludgeoning her in the face. But there's no alarm; the barrier lifts soundlessly. With a gesture of thanks to the young guards, she moves the car forward again with a light touch to the accelerator, so light that only the little wooden cross swinging hypnotically from the rear-view mirror gives any indication that the car is in motion.

Because immediately, immediately after passing the entrance gate there's a yellow sign to the effect that driving at more than ten kilometres an hour is forbidden within community confines, and everyone round here knows that.

The community is extensive, full of houses under construction and interspersed with lush lawns and multiple electric fences. The sky is absolutely cloudless. Only the distant four-stack cluster at the district power station brushes against it, like toes gingerly testing out the water. Shortly after the entrance gate the road winds its way round the edge of a circular meadow planted with three identical palm trees. This circle is *La Lansia's* umbilicus from which the road splays out in three directions and continues alongside the artificial lakes in the community's interior. There are no straight lines, no crossroads or street names. Instead the road wanders freely like tumbled twine, a serpent devouring itself. The wide kerbs of light sandstone mark the unambiguous border between metalled road and green lawns whose chorus of sprinklers, almost permanently on during this unbearably hot summer, twist and turn their dark heads in unison. And at the side of the road there are trees, lamps of billiard-table green, and curved benches. There's no pavement.

Pelusa eases herself deeper into the soft upholstery of her seat. There's a film of sweat covering the steering-wheel and her left foot taps irritably on the accelerator. She knows she has to hurry. Her housekeeper had wept down the phone so hysterically that Pelusa could barely understand her at first. But then she got up right in the middle of the parish meeting, presented her apologies to all those present, said she would have to finish for today, that she had no alternative, her dog looked as if he was at death's door and her young housekeeper, Anita, was in a spin because she didn't know what to do. She urged the meeting to carry on with planning for the community centre's opening celebration, saying she'd be sure to be there tomorrow.

She looks out of the window. The lake, bound by wood, is a dark gelatinous blue which permeates the whole area. A father paddles a kayak with his son in the middle of the lake. They rest their paddles, relaxing, while one of the huge African black ducks hovers above the water and lands with frighteningly loud wing flaps, practically capsizing the boat. Looking at the two makes Pelusa think of her own family, of Hector on a company away-day, of her younger son, Ignacio, almost certainly playing tennis with a school friend, and of her elder son Henny whose deformed facial features pursue her in dreams. She imagines them all sitting in this boat, the weather glorious.

A shining white Caddy overtakes Pelusa, hooting as it passes. It's security, patrolling the gated community. One drives while the other keeps watch for suspicious activity – rubbish gone astray, garages left open, defective sprinklers. The estate management had recently started to expect more of security staff because of increasing disturbances in urban districts to the south of Nordelta. Supermarkets were said to have been looted, cattle carriers ambushed, water purification plants poisoned, major roads repeatedly blocked with burning tyres, and even police killed. And, what's more, a troop of imposing mounted police had been ordered out on patrol, something which still made Pelusa think she was hallucinating if she happened to see them trotting through *La Lansia* or the commercial area.

Pelusa has the feeling that everything around her is somehow unmistakable. The gleaming solar panels on the neighbours' roof, the countless little owls perched everywhere, watching with indifference as she passes by, the young delivery man

carrying plastic bags full of food to one of the houses, and the postman dropping letters at the Benedetti's home. And even at this time of day smoke is already drifting up from the clubhouse barbecue, and beyond the hedges Pelusa can see mothers reading on sun-loungers or - using this time alone at home – fishing inflatable whales and crocodiles out of the pool so as to swim a few lengths.

Eventually she reaches the house she's lived in for ten years. It's large and white, with a flat, black roof. Directly in front of the house a small, curving, paved driveway has been added, in imitation of something more countrified. There's only room for one car but Pelusa likes a bit of a show and a prettily placed tree seems to grow from the drive itself. She applies the brakes gently, not abruptly, while her neighbour dives unassisted into his pool, arms extended.

The living room is empty and ablaze with light. A plate's been dropped, smashed to pieces on the large white tiles. Close by is a heap of freshly prepared pasta, its tomato sauce now splattered across cushions, table-legs, chair-legs, reminding Pelusa of images of crash victims. And yet the room itself is odourless. Crouched in front of the fly screen which covers the sliding door leading out to the terrace, the cat stares outside and miaows. She has not noticed Pelusa arriving at all – most unusual. Pelusa puts her handbag on the solid dining table. Carefully nudging the cat to one side with her foot, she steps onto the terrace. There she sees her housekeeper, Anita, kneeling on the floor.

“Thank God, you're here.”

Her face startles Pelusa. There are ugly red marks around her bloodshot eyes and her skin is white as white can be. She must have been crying for more than an hour and looks as if she might vomit at any moment. Anita's dressed in her work clothes. She stands up, embraces Pelusa and this produces yet more tears. Her neck smells of limes and cleaning fluid and her fleshy body's warm.

“This is what's been happening the whole time. The cat, she was mewling so strangely, I went to have a look and he was making these really weird noises and couldn't stand. I think he's dying, Señora.”

It's only now that Pelusa notices the foul smell on the terrace. Looking past Anita, she sees the dog on its side. Buzz is a big, well-fed animal, greying a little under the chin but otherwise with golden fur that matches the beige tiles on the terrace. Only his encrusted eye gives away the absurdity of his age in human years; one hundred and twelve. He's been seriously incontinent for some time and this is why over the last twelve months they've practically never had him in the house and besides, he's pretty well deaf, nearly blind and demented enough to lose his way in the small, square garden, to bump into a chair in a panic, or just fall over. One night he was standing on one of the upper steps leading up out of the pool, the water half way up his legs, and barking confusedly for help until Pelusa and Hector set him free, together lifting him out of the water. A year ago, arthritis had made him lame in one of his back legs and this meant he could do his business in the garden only. Since then Buzz always gets up from his raffia basket,

hobbles the few metres to the garden, turns in a small circle and then tries with the greatest difficulty to lower his pelvis a little, his back legs shuddering as they bend and, his jaws hanging open and his facial expression vacant, he empties his bowels, then only to return to the terrace, exhausted, and throw himself down in his basket or straight onto the grass. Hector and Pelusa would try not let it get them down and help Buzz to his feet again, even walk along next to him and encourage him with applause and whoops of support.

A unique creature, bought from a breeder to stop Pelusa being scared of dogs, this Labrador became a permanent fixture in their lives, such a good and sweet-natured dog, so faithful they couldn't take him on a beach holiday because as soon as any of them went in the water he would dive in after them, get hold of them by the arm and drag them from the waves because he thought one of the family was in mortal danger. Now this dog, the best in the world, is stretched out on his side, whimpering and looking out blankly at the garden.

Pelusa bends closer him. As she strokes Buzz, he lifts his head and tries to look at her. Then his body begins to twitch. The faeces coming from his backside get spread around the terrace with the uncontrolled wagging of his tail.

"Not again, he's gone and done it again," shrieks Anita and fetches some kitchen paper to wipe it up, while Pelusa tries to calm Buzz down again.

His breathing's quite haphazard even though his tongue's no longer hanging out and he scratches clumsily at the rough tiles with his good back leg, as if dreaming of running away from something, or of panting after one of his rubber toys which squeal in imitation of the final cries of his make-believe quarry.

Pelusa holds her hand right in front of his nose, so that he knows she's back, the woman who raised him and fed him, whose smell he would know from that of a thousand others, whose house he's guarded all his life, whose children he carried on his back, the woman whose fear he sensed and so whenever she put down his food bowl he would wait until she'd withdrawn her hand before he began eating. This woman is now here, stroking the top of his head, rubbing his lower jaw.

"Have you phoned the vet?"

"Can't get hold of him."

"Everything's OK, Buzz," says Pelusa over and over again, "Hush, hush now, it doesn't matter, shush now, it'll all be OK," she says, if only he can just stay awake, then, "It's alright, you can have a little sleep."

Something's already pushing its way out of his rear again, something white, a bit dried out, squeezing its way piece by piece out of his lower abdomen, as if the dog's soul wanted to escape the dying body.

'He's lost control of his bowels. The boys won't be able to cope with this,' Anita says, weeping.

“Henny’s got physio ‘til 6, Ignacio’s still playing tennis.”

“Should we fetch them?”

“Oh, do look at him now.”

Buzz is struggling for breath. Pelusa goes into the living room to get a cushion to put under his head.

“We could get him into my car and drive him to the vet.”

Pelusa turns to her housekeeper and looks uncertain as Anita fills up again. Meanwhile Buzz tries to stand up and bark. Both women immediately bend down to him again, soothing him by stroking his head, neck, flank, stroking him all over until he is calm again.”

“Hector’s still on a work trip.”

“So isn’t there anything we can do?”

Anita’s bearing suggests complete defeat. Even Pelusa’s eyes were filling with tears. She is afraid. Buzz is going to die. What does it mean that the dog is going to die, Pelusa asks herself, that must mean something, after all. She straightens up again, tries to take in the complete serenity of that moment, the hot air and everything that it holds, while over on the other side of the fence the pool boy is brushing out the neighbours’ swimming bath with the greatest of calm. He’ll be calling by soon. Anita will have to pull herself together and the pool boy will fish chlorine tablets out of his bag, Hoover the base of the pool with his special machine, brush down the sides, make an appointment for the coming week, get his tip and move on to the next house.

*Translation by Deborah Langton*