

***Perdidas en la noche***  
***(Lost in the Night)***  
***by Fabián Martínez Siccardi***

**Synopsis and English sample**

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## Synopsis

**Willow Halvorsen**, a young artist from San Francisco, travels to Argentina to volunteer with an urban art NGO. When she mysteriously disappears, her mother **Rose**, sets out on her own desperate journey to search for Willow. Unable to speak the language and lost in the chaos of Buenos Aires, Rose goes to a conference on missing persons, where she meets **Luciano Capra**, an Argentine interpreter. Something about Luciano's voice compels Rose to ask him to help her.

Luciano's backstory with his own daughter, **Annabelle**, makes him empathetic to Rose's distress and he agrees. As the Willow story unfolds, we learn through flashbacks that Luciano was thrown into single fatherhood after a disturbing phone call twenty years earlier. Annabelle, Luciano's 3-year-old daughter from a fling with a vacationing American, was left orphaned after her mother and aunt were brutally murdered in their home in Virginia. In his early 20s at the time, Luciano decided to upend his life and go raise Annabelle in the small southern town of Blackstone.

In Buenos Aires, Rose and Luciano set out to follow the few leads she has: a couple of contacts through the NGO where Willow was doing volunteer work, and a diary full of sketches peppered with musings in English and Spanish retrieved from Willow's last hostel. Their search takes a dark turn when one of Willow's friends turns up in the morgue. These clues lead Rose and Luciano through neighborhoods of Buenos Aires rarely visited by tourists, and reveal in broad strokes and stenciled images the fascinating world of its vibrant street art scene, graffiti and tattoo artists. The city itself becomes a central character in the plot.

As we follow the search for Willow, Luciano's reflections on his years raising Annabelle paint a vivid portrait of Blackstone and its inhabitants through the eyes of a foreigner living among them. We see how he managed to strike a balance between small-town US values and limitations, his own needs living outside his cultural comfort zone, and the delicate job of raising Annabelle alone in the wake of tragedy. Now that she's a young woman living on her own and Luciano has moved back to Buenos Aires, he is still torn as to the lasting effect of the "incident" – never fully revealed to her – on Annabelle and his ongoing role as a father from the other end of the globe.

While Luciano and Rose venture deeper into the darkness surrounding Willow's disappearance, Annabelle is on her own journey to confront her obscure past head-on. Through old news clips she pieces together the facts surrounding her mother's death, which lead her to start a strange correspondence with the jailed accomplice to the murder. She ultimately meets him face to face and finds closure.

Willow eventually shows up and reveals the details of the heart-wrenching secret driving her to paint at night: Before coming to Buenos Aires, she learned that she has the same degenerative disease that eventually left her father blind. The ensuing months of frenetic stenciling all over the city were her way of leaving her mark while learning to do it in the dark, but also led to the reckless behavior that left her friend dead.

All four characters navigate across languages, cultures and the borderless depths of human despair. Both girls find what they're looking for and their parents, in finding them, learn to let Annabelle and Willow go.

## Excerpt from *Perdidas en la noche* by Fabián Martínez Siccardi

Translated by Sarah Smith

ONE

*Blackstone, Virginia, December 1997*

Like a toy plane gone haywire, or a blind bird, the moth's wings beat against the lampshade. It retreats and butts up against it all over again. Once, twice, three times head-on. Its movement is erratic, as if uncertain whether penetrating the flower prints on the shade might be fatal. Four, five more times until it flies in a wider arc and discovers the opening at the bottom, the free and clear to the lit bulb. It flutters on the hot glass, searching for a way through to the glowing filament, a blur of wings for moments at a time. It keeps at it a bit longer until finally coming to rest motionless on the inside of the shade. I cover it with my hand and coax it up to the edge to enclose it with the other. Nestled inside my cupped hands, the moth makes one timid flutter and then settles. I ask Annabelle to open the front door. The cold night air hits me in the face. I step out, open my hands and launch the moth back into the darkness.

"Why are they always brown or gray?"

"They don't want to be seen, Belle. They like to hide against the bark of a tree or a rock. They hide so nobody will hurt them."

"Who is going to hurt them?"

"If we don't close the kitchen window, another moth is gonna fly in."

"Who's gonna hurt them?"

"Owls come out at night to hunt."

The clouds that blanketed the sky that afternoon in Blackstone close in on the night like a shroud. They are dry clouds, a sign of an ice storm instead of the white Christmas everyone in town is hoping for. From the screen door on the back porch, I can see the woods and the impenetrable night. There are lights on outside the other houses and along the main streets. Christmas brings a lighting frenzy to the three thousand inhabitants of Blackstone unlike anything I've ever seen. In addition to the porch lights on every night, there are also rosaries of colored lights winding around reindeer and sleighs, or on model Santas on their way up chimneys, always caught halfway up. Strings of red, white and green lights dangle like glittering icicles from the gutters, blinking on and off in tandem or flickering to the rhythm of carols crackling over terrible speakers. Blackstone may be a lavish waste of electricity in December, but from this angle, beyond the back porch and the woods, not even those lights are visible. Nothing cuts through the black.

“If we close the kitchen window, Santa won’t be able to come in.” The window is the alternate entrance. Annabelle is afraid Santa will get burned if he comes down the chimney.

“Santa isn’t going to come until midnight when you’re tucked away in your room.”

The silence of Blackstone is always heavier at Christmas. Christmas Eve dinners at neighboring houses, where there might have been roast ham and potatoes to differentiate it from any other night, are long over. Families go to bed even earlier than usual on the 24th since the children wake at five or six, anxious to see what treasures await them under the tree the next morning. The real celebration they’re all waiting for, the scandalous opening of dozens of gifts, happens on the 25<sup>th</sup>. But not at our house. Here *Papá Noel* comes early, at midnight. So our house is surely the only one with the lights still on inside, where a man is playing checkers with his seven-year-old daughter to keep her awake. Irresponsible parenting in the eyes of any decent citizen of Blackstone, like giving a child a cigarette or a glass of beer.

“If the moths get close to the light, the owls will see them. It doesn’t matter if they’re brown or gray.”

“That is one of life’s contradictions.”

“What’s a contradiction?”

There are three presents wrapped in red, white and green paper, just like the Christmas lights. Two for Annabelle: a book of stories in English and another in Spanish—the language that, other than me, only the Salvadoran migrants speak and the two Spanish teachers in town mispronounce—and a dollhouse that my friend Brighton let me know was on sale at the town antique shop. The third gift is for me: a blue sweater purchased and wrapped so Annabelle won’t think Santa has any reason to put me on the naughty list.

I add a log to the fire. There’s still an hour left until midnight. The cedar scent mixes with the turkey we ate earlier and the rosemary stuffing that our neighbor Dolores taught me to make.

“They can’t resist the light. That’s why they forget about the owls.”

“A little more ice cream.”

“They take the risk because they need to remember the light.”

“One more bowl.”

“You’re gonna have to try again. ‘Please, may I have more ice cream?’”

“Please, a little more?”

Annabelle’s inability to use verbs to ask for things is one of the more subtle after-effects of the incident. Maybe it’s that, and of course the darkness, that reminds me that this time three years ago, two men entered a house nearby and committed crimes that twisted the fate of Annabelle’s life and mine. The incident that brought us together in the town of Blackstone, where we wait for Santa this Christmas Eve. A chill runs down my spine. I run to the door and check to make sure it’s firmly locked.

“Okay, but this is the last bowl and then off to your room. I think Santa might be early this year.”

*Buenos Aires, September 2013*

The first time I saw Willow was in a photo taken in San Francisco, a few months before she came to Buenos Aires. The photo was cut off at the knees: a girl just over twenty, wearing a blue sundress, leaning against a yellow wall. Her hair fell in tones of chestnut and red to her shoulders. Narrow-waisted and wide-hipped, the combination of almond-shaped eyes and full cheeks gave her an unusual beauty. Aside from her age, she shared no common features with my daughter—short blond hair, thick lips, a shapeless body—but even so, she immediately reminded me of Annabelle. Something in the sternness of her face, the guarded way she held herself, that evasive look that offered a glimpse of some inner turmoil—all of this hinted at the same caginess that I used to sense in Annabelle.

It was Willow's mother who showed me the photo. Her hair flecked with grey, she wore a black dress and was holding the picture out like an ID card. Her hands and mouth trembled. She introduced herself as Rose Halvorsen and said her daughter's name was Mary Halvorsen; she clarified that everyone called her Willow. She told me that Willow had cut off contact with everyone she knew after finishing six weeks of NGO volunteer work painting murals in Buenos Aires. It had been three weeks since anyone had heard from her and two days since her mother had begun her search in a city that was equal parts hostile and indecipherable to her.

I was just coming off two hours of interpreting at a Missing Children's conference. I was at the bar, exhausted and staring into a cup of coffee with my mind on hold like a yogi after hours of meditation when Willow's mother came up to me. Everyone knows people sleep with each other at these conferences. Men and women in strange cities and countries become the objects of their own sexual fantasies. Interpreters are usually good hunters—or easy prey. From the shadows, our power over people is amplified, not to mention the false intimacy we get from whispering into their ears for hours on end, like the singers we think we deeply know after listening to them over and over through headphones. So maybe it was this habit of the profession, on top of the exhaustion and mental void, but I initially misread her 'Where did you learn to speak English so well?' and 'How long have you been an interpreter?' as an attempt to get me into bed. When what really drew her to me was a mother's profound sense of alarm, even though she tried to conceal it with these typical come-ons.

Ever since she was born, my daughter Annabelle has lived in Blackstone, a small, forgettable town in Virginia. Now she owns a small Victorian house with a front lawn, and an endless backyard that eventually merges with woods and a hidden creek beyond. She grows seedlings in the back. Depending on the season, there are perfectly aligned beds of zinnias, marigolds, eggplants, yellow peppers, or whatever she decides to plant that year. But they never reach full growth. All of them—Annabelle

is strict about this—she sells or gives away once they’ve grown a few inches above the soil.

During my last visit, she went out one morning in her pickup to make a delivery and didn’t come back for lunch. Past one o’clock, I called her cell and got no answer. A neighbor had lent me a car and left it parked outside with the keys in the glove compartment, but I couldn’t get it started. So I had taken the bike from the basement and gone out searching the streets at random, feeling uneasy and frustratingly adrift. Now, in Willow’s mother I recognized that same edginess, the same anxiety that had driven me to desperation until Annabelle finally showed up at dinner time without any explanation whatsoever as to where she had been.

Even from the photo, I could see the differences between mother and daughter couldn’t have been starker. While Willow looked guarded, perhaps a bit reckless and headstrong, Rose seemed level-headed, a woman who played her cards straight. In the first few minutes after sitting down, before asking her anything at all, she told me that after the first week with no news from Willow, she had filed a missing persons report with the San Francisco police department. Without a court order, the airline had refused to give out passenger information, so Rose had no way of knowing if Willow had taken her return flight or not. Rose had checked the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System and all other possible databases, including the one for the protection of persons with mental illness, even though she insisted Willow was in good psychological health. She had also contacted the Argentinean consulate in San Francisco without much success. With the help of a Guatemalan neighbor, she called police stations in Buenos Aires to no avail; nor had they gotten anywhere by calling local hospitals, an exhaustingly endless list. So she bought a ticket on the first flight available to Buenos Aires and rented a furnished apartment in Recoleta online.

On the same day she arrived, she went to the closest police station to file a report. At the precinct they informed her that she should also report the case to the Division of Missing Persons. That turned out to be a filthy, neglected office in an area far from the city center that the taxi driver took so long to find that it made her think the office was as lost as the people it sought to locate. Rose had done everything by the book, covered all her bases—she felt certain she was beyond reproach in this.

Her first ventures around the city had been frustrating, starting with her inability to understand the *porteño* Spanish, or the black clouds of exhaust spewing from the city buses. It all bewildered her. She had gone to the conference that afternoon in an act of desperation after reading about it in the *Buenos Aires Herald* earlier in the day. Even though at 23 Willow was too old to be included in the Missing Children network, Rose held out some hope of learning something she didn’t know, some clue that would help her move forward. But nothing at the conference differed in any way from what she’d already read or been explained. And other than me, no one had inspired enough confidence for her to approach them.

In my case, the conference had the opposite effect: it had shown me something I didn’t know, had never experienced. The cultural differences that normally require so much effort to neutralize in an interpretation had melted away. They were nearly completely erased when the subject matter was a missing child. The Q&A sessions, usually exhausting because of the rapid back-and-forth between languages and styles,

had been easy to translate. It was as if the descent into the pit of parental despair stripped people's feelings of any national veneer or cultural preconceptions; they became emotionally primitive, all natives of the same language, the same gestures, the same signs. Perhaps this was why the depth of Rose's desperation as she shared the details of Willow's disappearance, putting a name on the face in the photo, became contagious, hard to bear. My first instinct was to get away as politely as possible.

"Your daughter is nearly a grown woman. Isn't it possible she decided to go on a trip? Who knows, maybe she'll show up tomorrow with a story about crossing the Andes by bike, or maybe she fell in love--"

"My daughter isn't like that, Mr. ...?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean— My name is Luciano Capra."

Rose placed her coffee cup on the saucer, took a paper napkin and folded it over on itself again and again, as if she wanted to make it disappear.

"As I was listening to you over the headphones during the parts you interpreted into English, something in your tone of voice, in the way you spoke—not so much what you said but how you said it—deeply moved me. Maybe it had something to do with how exhausted this city is making me, I'm not sure. But I felt comforted for the first time in weeks. Something in your voice was soothing and brought tears to my eyes. That's why I decided to take a chance and come talk to you. For days now my life has been a shaky mess and your voice suddenly calmed me, and in that calm I could see my situation for what it really is: I am a woman alone looking for my daughter in a foreign country."

The glass walls of the eleventh-floor bar provided a full view of the Rio de la Plata river bend. Behind me, the afternoon sun turning to reddish orange fully illuminated Rose's face. She raised her arm to shade her eyes and took a pair of dark glasses from her purse. As soon as she had regained her composure, she apologized and got up to leave.

"My voice comforted you? Voices can be deceiving, Rose. If you knew me better..."

"I work with the blind. The words, the sentences people speak might be deceiving, but not the inflection or the texture or the changes in register. The blind know people instantly. When you stop seeing with your eyes, you start to see other things."

As she stood up, the weight of her purse and coat nearly tipped the chair over. In one swift movement, Rose caught it before it hit the floor. Over fifty, she was aging gracefully. She wore her un-dyed hair short, no makeup to hide her first wrinkles nor did her clothes attempt to conceal her age. She folded her coat over her arm, hung the purse from her shoulder and turned to go.

Maybe I'll never understand what led me to stop her and give her my card, but in hindsight the last few months have shown me that it wasn't a purely altruistic gesture. Even though my daughter was only a phone call away, something told me that Annabelle was slipping through my fingers. In some corner of my mind, helping to look for Willow was like going out in search of my own daughter.

I got home late that afternoon. I took the clothes off the line, did some ironing and went out to buy cat food for Sacco and Vanzetti, who were meowing at me next to their empty bowls. I kept seeing flashes of the photo of Willow overlaid with



Annabelle's face, and something in the combined image kept me from focusing on anything else.

My friend Pascal pretended not to hear me when I tried to reschedule our game of Basque pelota that night. Like any good lawyer, he took his time before saying anything in the locker room after the game. He finally said, "Aside from your charming voice, I don't understand what that woman was after. And I also don't get your interest in her. Your description makes her sound like a nun."

I got back from the club around ten that night and ate dinner. When I went to turn off the computer, the first email from Rose Halvorsen had arrived in my inbox.