



SISTEMA PURIFICACION

Sue Thomas

The sun is already hot on Esperanta's back as she steps into the courtyard to water the geraniums. She bends to feel their loosening buds and smiles — only another week and they will be in glorious flower.

Just then the phone starts to ring and immediately her heart freezes — why would anyone call so early unless to bring bad news? Carefully and slowly she makes her way into the house and picks up the receiver.

The message has been conveyed hand-over-hand by radio and telephone until it is distilled down to a terrifying single essence — 'Senora Munez — yo sento — Juan es perdido.'

Finally, after all these years of wondering when it would happen, and which one of them it would happen to, it turns out that Juan is the one to be lost.

And she does not need to ask where.

La Sistema Purificacion is the deepest cave in the Western Hemisphere. Located just north of Mexico in the Sierra Madre Oriental, it is not yet fully explored, but is already known to be over 87 kilometres long.

Esperanta de la Cordoba and Juan Munez had met there in the late nineteen-seventies, when the caves were fast becoming the focus for every explorer in the area. They were both new to caving, both freshmen geologists at the University of Texas, and madly enthusiastic about their subject. When the rays of their helmets met 200 meters below the skin of Mexico, in the darkness of a cavern called The World Beyond, it was love at first sight. Esperanta had been the only woman on that particular trip and their meeting provoked much friendly jealousy from Juan's fellow students, although in practice most of them would never have dreamed of marrying a girl who shared their interest in the unlady-like pursuit of speliology.

That summer the young couple met together as often as they could in an igneous conjunction of fire and passion, celebrating their betrothal underground by making love urgently and noisily on rocky ledges to the tune of flood-swollen subterranean rivers or muffled and hidden in crannies just out of reach of their fellow-explorers.

Juan remembers those days as he wades through yet another water-filled passage. He has found no clue to tell him where he is save for the knowledge that this is unknown territory and that he is most seriously out of contact with his colleagues. His wetsuit has become extremely uncomfortable and there is a deep scratch on his face where carelessness had allowed an overhang to swipe him painfully.

His luminescent watch tells him that a new day has begun and he wonders whether they have informed her yet that he is missing. She will already have risen by this time. She will have finished watering the plants in the courtyard, the pots lined up geometrically so that she knows exactly where each one is, how many steps it takes to reach it, and where to position the can to direct the flow onto the soil and not onto the paving stones.

How ironic that such a large part of her time is now taken up with measuring her movements as she travels around the physical world, since

this practice so much reflects their joint working lives. For the last twenty years they have surveyed La Sistema Purificacion, opening its most intimate regions to the world by means of photographs, samples, measurements, and papers. They have increased documented knowledge of these caves by a great deal, and in doing so earned a good living from the ongoing biography of the flesh of that small slice of their home country. They have made a life together which, even despite the recent change in their personal circumstances, has been happier than he could ever have dared to hope for.

Esperanta too is looking back over their lives together and reminiscing. The caller had promised to send a car immediately to take her to Cueva de Infiernillo, where Juan and his group had entered the system and which entailed a forty metre climb to reach the entrance.

‘Are you sure, Senora, that you want to come? It’s a dangerous climb.’

She had held her temper. ‘Don't you know that I’ve mapped out as much of that system as Juan? We have always worked together. I could climb into that entrance blind-folded.’ And I have, she thought wryly.

The voice stuttered with embarrassment then ground to a halt.

‘Okay. We’ll be with you in two hours. Try not to worry,’ it said.

‘Bueno. I’ll wait.’

But she can’t sit still. Instead she goes to the table where a tray of samples is set out. She knows exactly how far to reach to pick up each piece in turn.

About a year after they were married they had discovered yet one more commonality — a longing to live in an underground house. Oddly, despite so many sharings of confidences, both had considered this to be such a bizarre idea that neither had mentioned it until one day when, as they lay together underground, Esperanta shyly revealed her expensive and seemingly impractical dream.

‘It could be dug out, like a bomb shelter. Parts of it would be well-furnished so that inside it seems just like any other house — except it

would have no windows — and other parts would be left as rough and natural as safety would allow.’

Juan had sighed, shifting position so that his left hip fitted comfortably into a hollow in the rocky floor. ‘A domesticated cave. It would be the perfect troglodyte life! I’ve imagined this too, you know, but it seemed so crazy... and anyway it would cost a fortune...’

She smiled in the darkness. ‘Yes. But worth every cent, don’t you agree? After all, what is money for if not for buying pleasure?’

They had joined hands then and pressed the fleshy knot against the damp wall of the cavern. ‘Ah, pleasure...’ he had whispered, rubbing his thumb against the sharpness of her fingernail as he leaned to kiss her.

From that day onwards the entire financial thrust of their newly-formed company was targeted towards earning enough funds to turn their wish into reality. Fortunately they lived in a continent rich in hidden and inaccessible minerals where it was not difficult to become wealthy if you knew how to uncover the secrets of the earth, and in the year they both celebrated their fortieth birthdays they finally moved into of the house of their dreams. Designed by an architect and fellow-caver suffering from similar longings for the subterranean, it comprised a warren of rooms hollowed out of rock and hidden beneath the surface of what would have appeared to be an ordinary stretch of grazing were it not pierced by cleverly-constructed port-holes spraying natural light into the spaces below.

The house was constructed in a series of linked chambers, each leading deeper and deeper into the rock. First, above ground, came the traditional Spanish courtyard surrounded by a high wall and entered through a dark-green door. Beyond the door lay a courtyard of vines and flowering plants, and beyond that ten steps dropped down into living area of the house. You descended more steps into the bedrooms, and down again into what they had christened ‘the catacombs’.

These last were a series of rough chambers cut from the sandstone platform and comprising the 'natural' part of the design, the home-from-home for contented cavers. Here, where the dry atmosphere provided an ideal storage environment, they installed a laboratory, and fitted racks of shelving for storing their samples. But there were always samples on display in the living area too.

Obsidian. Garnet. Feldspar. Tourmaline.....

Esperanta sits at the table and examines the stones with pride, rolling them between her fingers and inhaling their delicate earthy scents. This is the best of their several dozen collections, each gem acquired by either Juan or herself, and each marking significant moments in the long professional career of J&E Munez , geological consultants.

Now her hand shakes as she lifts each gem... but suddenly the chiming of the clock catches her unawares and throws her arm into a shocked spasm. She is instantly enveloped in a brief avalanche of jewels as the whole tray tumbles to the floor. Cursing, she drops to her knees and crawls between the furniture, feeling in crevices for shards of rocks, but bringing out only handfuls of old dust. They have never been tidy people and recently the mess in the house has got worse and worse as books and journals gather unread in swirling eddies around the furniture and boxes of samples fill every inch of living space.

Space. How much space is Juan occupying now as he waits for rescue in the airless black?

He is crouching in the darkness with his lamp switched off to conserve power. He is trying to stay cheerful, and treating himself to a piece of survival chocolate. He does not need to be able to see in order to be able to enjoy the hard chewy sweet.

The last time they discussed the issue, Esperanta had been adamant that food tastes just the same whether you can see it or not, but he remained unconvinced.

‘It must be different. Surely, if one sense ceases to operate then the others work harder to compensate for the deficiency?’

She had become angry very quickly — another thing which was new.

‘Juan... am I a person or an experimental subject? I can’t stand this constant analysis. I was in the lab when the aluminium went up — it fried my retinas — now I can’t see. End of story.’

‘But darling... don’t you think you should talk about it more? It’s only been six months. You can’t just pretend it didn’t happen...’

Before he could finish she had swept out of the room, knocking her elbow painfully against the door-jamb. Not daring to follow, he listened as she stumbled down to the catacombs. When she emerged two hours later her eyes had been swollen and red and he was afraid because he could not tell whether she had simply been weeping, or whether she had beaten her own flesh in the fury of her loss.

Suddenly there is a noise. He listens hard. Of course they will be looking for him. But nobody, not even Esperanta, knows the topology here as well as he does. They have maps and instruments but they do not have access to all the knowledge Juan keeps in his head.

While he rests, he mentally goes over the route again, trying to find his mistake. They had entered by the Brinco section and walked to the Dressing Room where they cached some equipment and put on wetsuits. Then there were two climbs — one up the 45 Chute to the Crack of Doom, and then a shorter one to the Mudball Crawl. The Mudball Crawl was exactly as its name implied — a belly-slither which you creep along pushing your pack in front until eventually, when you think you can’t stand another metre of the slick wetness, you suddenly burst out into the Rio Verde. From here you descend rapidly to the Canal and the beginning of yet another series of water-filled passages which must be waded and crawled through. Was it somewhere here that he had taken a wrong turning? It is inconceivable that he could have made a mistake in this section which he knew so well, but he cannot rule it out. And that is certainly the last time he remembers seeing the lights of his companions.

And he isn't as young as he used to be. The awful thought goes through him that maybe he's just getting too old for this kind of work, but he dismisses it straight away. He cannot dismiss, however, the sneaking thought that perhaps they are both guilty of mistakes. After all, Esperanta had been blinded by a lab accident so very avoidable that it was almost embarrassing.

She had been doing some tests in their small lab in the catacombs. It was well-maintained, with extractors taking dust and fumes to the surface, and they were both obsessive about safety precautions. So which one of them had, on that fateful day six months ago, left a bottle of powdered aluminium so close to the edge of a shelf that when Esperanta reached up to push back her hair, her hand knocked the bottle straight off? And how had she grown so careless, after so many years, that she did not immediately run away but instead shot out her arm to catch it? And why was she not wearing safety glasses, so that when the bottle burst as it hit the bench she had no protection from the blinding ultraviolet flash which instantly and totally burned out both retinas?

Mistakes. They have been making a lot of mistakes.

A polished slice of emerald glints at her from beneath the sofa but she is unable to sense its anxious glow.

Juan is missing.

Feeling around between the furniture she collects as many pieces as she can, replaces them onto the tray, and puts the tray back on the table.

Then, holding the newly-installed handrail, she makes her way carefully down into the catacombs. She cannot explain quite why, but she is driven to move as deeply into the earth as she can go.

She has just reached the lab when a burst of light cracks through her head and she falls, grazing her cheek on the coarse brown wall as she goes, her knees buckling underneath her as her head thuds down hard on the gritty packed-earth floor.

When she comes to, she thinks at first that Juan is with her. She can feel his warm breath pulsing softly against the skin of her arm, but after a while she realises that the breath is her own. The wet grazes on her cheeks feel sore, but the fizzing pinpricks in her head indicate something much more serious. It seems she has suffered a stroke.

She starts to crawl along the floor, edging her way through the darkness inside her head, until she reaches the place where the catacombs come to an end in a curved closure. Now here is something familiar. She has inched through many such spaces in her caving career, and this is nothing new. In fact, it feels more like home than the softly furnished areas above. They have often joked that quite possibly their own hollowings-out might join up with La Sistema Purificacion at some point. Perhaps one day they will break through and create a back-door into the entire complex.

Acting on instinct and squeezing in as deep as she can, she presses her body into the shallow crevice until she resembles the kernel of a walnut enfolded inside the interior curl of its shell. Now, inside the beat of her breathing she stares through the dark and sees nothing but Juan's smile that day thirty-five years ago when her lamp caught him in the blackness and she fell in love for the first and last time.

Juan is cold. Dozing in and out of sleep he wonders from moment to moment whether death has arrived, whether this is it, whether the end has already happened.

He switches on his lamp again, checks, and this time he is absolutely certain. He has never been here before. Nothing is familiar. And the sound has become clearer now — it is approaching water. The level below him is half a meter higher than the last time he looked. Then the lamp flickers and goes out, its battery exhausted.

Suddenly he has this really crazy wish which he can't explain.

He hopes that Esperanta is still at home. He wants her to be underground right now, in their private catacombs, listening for him in the rock.

He is listening for her. He can even feel her breath against the back of his hand, but after a while he realises the breath is his own. He imagines her secreted deep inside their home, somewhere on the other side of all this rock, and in his mind's eye he sees them both passing from the fast decay of the flesh into the slow metamorphosis from bone into stone.

He pictures each of them separately folded into diluvian mud, then liberated a million years later by the sharp hammer of some gigantic intergalactic geologist. They will emerge like trilobites to be reunited and laid down together in a snug collection box, side by side again at last.

FIRST PUBLISHED ONLINE BY PULP.NET at

<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/10/sistema-purificacion.html>

This file is for personal reading only. No element of this story may be reproduced, resold or retransmitted in any way without the permission of the author.