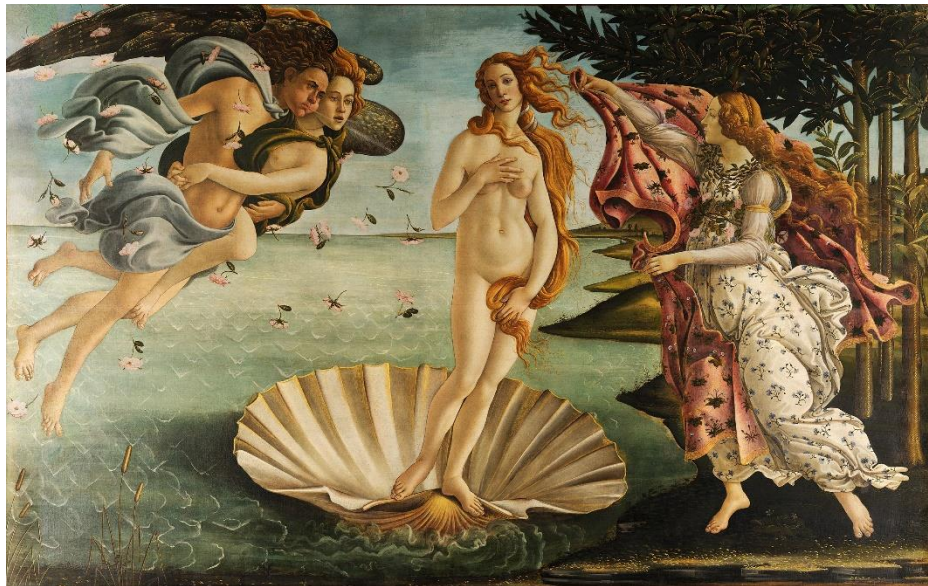


“Herna or Love as a Case of the Hives” by Mauricio Koch

I met her at a birthday party for Martina, a friend from work. I arrived late and didn't have a chance to make out where the sandwiches were or to spot a familiar face because as soon as I walked in, the first thing I saw was Herna. Or better put, not Herna, because I didn't know her name then, and it wasn't that I simply saw her, but rather that a light enveloped me and from the center of that blinding light, she appeared like Aphrodite emerging from the foam, white and immaculate. I am not exaggerating. She wore a colorful Hindu tunic, the kind that only a select few look good in, and on her it looked so natural that I thought this is how she must have come into the world: perfect, in that very instant and solely to stand before me, give me her blessing and vanish. But what actually happened is that she walked by, looked at me, smiled and said *Hello*. I don't know how long it took me to react, only that when I recovered from the shock, I tripped all over myself to return the greeting, give her a smile, offer up my insignificance on a tray and so much else, but she had already made her way to the bathroom.



Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus"

My taste in women has always coincided, if not with that of the majority of men, with at least enough of them so that the girls I like also attract the interest of others. Or at least one other, and that tends to be sufficient. And the night of Martina's birthday was evidently no exception: no doubt I had seen the most beautiful woman at the party, and, obviously, there must have been some forty guys at that moment with the same inguinal fever and intentions as mine. At least forty. Of course they would all be more interesting and attractive than me. Super cool guys, hippie chic, blond and square chinned, a loosened tie, hands in their pockets, with titles like project manager or *positif planifier* for companies with names like Meeting Point or Network Trust, dark and handsome students of intelligent marketing or behavioral finance with four MBAs from Harvard and impeccable two-day beards, emerald eyes and a slight white-

toothed grin welded onto their faces, boys with a rebel lock of hair over their tanned foreheads, toned but not excessively muscular, sensitive souls with a two-stitch scar over one eyebrow, a souvenir from their rugby-playing days, and, when you get up close enough to notice, impeccable fingernails; the type of man chicks say they can never find but that I see everywhere. Although it would be unjust of me if I did not acknowledge that it is mainly my fault, not theirs, for being passive, self-pitying and basically an idiot. But this time I wasn't going to allow it. This time I was radiant. I was sparkling and exultant. And I promised myself that that woman would be mine, mine, mine, and no one else's.

That said, I went to get a drink to work up the courage.

I've always figured that the only way to be sure of yourself when you make your move is to have a good strategy. Not the typical cassette, the pre-devised speech, but rather a plan for every situation. As methodical as ever, the first thing I established was the lay of the land: at the moment, she was with her girlfriends, which numbered several, too many. I counted seven or eight, and more kept joining them, all of them hysterical, intolerably stupid. They wouldn't make it easy for me. I took up a position behind a column, which I felt was the ideal place: not too far so that I could make my move if some square-chin tried to beat me to it, but also not too close for her or one of her friends to notice me, which wouldn't be good. One possibility was to wait for her to go to the bathroom, which women tend to do in smaller groups of two or three, and then wait by the door. But I discarded it immediately as too obvious, almost treacherous. Besides, she had gone just five minutes ago and there was no time to lose. I determined that the best thing would be to ignore her friends, pretend they didn't exist and just head over there, with the naturalness that characterizes me. After all, I said to myself, what was she here for if not to meet guys? To be seen as part of the in-crowd with a frozen strawberry daiquiri (light) in her hand? To act all hysterical with her friends, like they always do? Deep down they are all looking for the same thing: the man of their lives. And in her case, that man is you. Good, very good, I said to myself, with that very attitude you are now going over there to say hi. Without making yourself out to be a ladies' man, you spontaneously, simply say *Hello*. And she? She'll surely return the greeting. She looks like a well-mannered girl. But wait! What do I do if right when I'm standing in front of her and about to say it she turns her head and starts talking with a friend? That's not going to happen. But, what if it does? What do I do? Do I tap her on the shoulder? Do I take her hand? Do I stand there waiting for her to finish the conversation? Say *Hello* anyway? Or do I turn around and go home? And if she sees that I got that far and then turned around? Or if one of her girlfriends points it out and they all laugh? If that happens, I'll have to quit my job the next day. Oh, come off it! It's because of that kind of thinking that you are where you are now; the key is to observe, pay attention and seize that moment when she's not talking, that second when she disengages from her friends and looks around expectantly, as if waiting for a miracle, and that's when you come in, friendly and confident, and say *Hello*.

I examined my clothes to make sure everything was in order, fixed my hair with my fingers, cleared my throat and, when I took the first step, saw that a guy was standing before her and talking into her ear. I wanted to chew up the glass I was holding and bleed out right there. She smiled, he gestured and offered her a light-blue colored drink. Right then I saw a waiter go by and I asked him for a glass of wine, something genuine. I was the only genuine guy at the party and she, because of her haste, was never going to find out. I leaned against the column and reproached myself for even being there because I'm not one for these kinds of parties, I don't like the type of people who go to them, I don't like the music they play, I almost don't like any of the food they serve. I didn't want to look in her direction, but I couldn't help it. The guy was still there. I took a better look at him. He had short hair in the style of David

Beckham and a tight-fitting black t-shirt, the kind that accentuates the chest, and I said to myself that after I finished my wine I'd go over there and beat the hell out of him, what did I care, let them arrest me, let them take me out on a stretcher. That's when I saw him turn and walk away, maybe headed for the bathroom, or perhaps to get another post-modern cocktail, whatever, and I felt at that moment that Providence had given me a wink, a now-or-never chance in the law of the jungle, and I took it, totally determined, feeling with each step that after all it was worth it to die for a cause like this.

I said *Hello* and she returned the greeting and smiled at me again. I saw then that she had dark eyes. Like "jet black mirrors"¹ I said aloud. *What* she asked. *I'm Alexis* I said. She said *I'm Herna*. I said *Ah* and fell silent, I couldn't think of anything to associate with that name and I also couldn't think of why I should, until -- don't ask me why -- the movie "Good Bye, Lenin!" popped into my head. I had seen it a few days earlier and found it interesting, and so I began to talk about it. She listened attentively, and when I finished she responded that she hadn't seen it and had no interest in doing so: "Politics are the refuge of senseless men who have strayed from the spiritual path and carry a very high karmatic load." She said it with all seriousness. I waited for her to laugh, so that I could join in on the joke, but that didn't happen. I thought then that there were two possibilities here: one, that she had shot me down Olympically in a weird but effective way -- maybe she had made a bet with her girlfriends and was waiting anxiously for me to leave to tell them what she had told me and to have a good laugh at my expense -- or two, much less likely, that she was in effect being serious. Since I had come this far already and I didn't see any sign to confirm the first hypothesis, I decided to stay. I changed the subject to music. I told her that lately I was listening only to English rock from the '70s -- The Who, Small Faces, The Kinks, bands like that -- and that American rock didn't compare, that the only good thing it had going for it was Hendrix, who we know about precisely because he moved to London and ... that's when she interrupted me to say that we grow old when we no longer feel the vibe of new things and remain attached to the past, and that is what I was doing, but that it was up to me to change because the fountain of youth was in my hands, and there is no getting old when we grow spiritually. The shock was so immense that my memory registered every word.

This second blow left me reeling on the verge of a knockout. I hadn't prepared for something like that. Left with neither a plan nor a safety net and driven on more by inertia than any kind of hope, I told her that I worked in a cosmetics factory, but what I really liked was the cinema, especially writing screenplays. "We are what we believe ourselves to be. The world is a reflection of ourselves," she said in a monotone voice, like a first-grade teacher repeating the alphabet to children who didn't want to learn it. "We deserve love and respect simply because we are what we are. Yogi Ramacharaka tells us that the human species is like one great body: every human being is a cell, all division is disintegration, and disintegration is death." As if more needed to be said, she added that at that moment my aura reflected a nervous state in crisis, and that the shape of my cranium and my earlobes were inherited from an inferior race called *lemuridae* that had inhabited the Earth ten thousand years ago.

¹ The phrase "espejos de azabache" from Nobel Prize winning author Juan Ramón Jiménez's "Platero y Yo".

That's when I had had enough and became angry. This chick was a real bitch, I said to myself, a princess bored of it all, sick and tired of guys hitting on her because she is so pretty, and so she gets a laugh out of feeding them this stupidity, surely one of her girlfriends is filming it all on her cellphone so she can post it on YouTube later. But she wasn't going to toy with me that way. A part of me in the form of a fireball rose up from my lungs to my throat and demanded that I tell her off, but at the same time, another part of me, no less powerful and perhaps more urgently, gave me a tingle lower down and made me take notice of how stunning Herna was while she went on about invisible chains of luminous energy that bound us to the essence of some incorporeal angel, and I imagined the tips of my fingertips frolicking in some hidden fold, gently blowing the fuzz in her bellybutton, thinking at the same time that if she didn't stop talking about Osho, Chopra and the ancestral wisdom of the incarnated flow, I would never be able to bed her. I, who for some time now had ceased to believe, sensed that God was mocking me.

As if hypnotized, I couldn't help but lose myself in her voice and had become completely abstracted from my surroundings. When I finally looked around, her friends had moved away and left us alone. Herna kept talking, and in the middle of all that blather that I could no longer absorb, I sensed that in some way she was interested in me, that Herna really felt a connection with me, and having found in me an attentive and intelligent interlocutor, she felt at ease and said all she was saying without restraint, and that surely to some degree she too was surprised by her conduct, and when she had a moment to herself, she would no doubt blame herself for having behaved so awkwardly. I thought all this while she spoke, I think, about some harmonization exercises based on the sacred geometry of Taoist mandalas.

At some point that night, Herna paused. I was exhausted and in need of some fresh air, and she told me she was going to leave for a little while to find her friends, that surely they were waiting for her to give Martina the surprise they had all prepared for her. *I'm also going to say hi to some friends*, I lied. *We'll see each other later*. She smiled and said, *Yes, of course*.

I went to get a drink and then walked to a far-off corner because I know how I am and I felt odd. I didn't understand what was happening to me and I started to itch all over. My head, arms, belly. I couldn't stop scratching myself. It was as if ants were crawling all over me. I confirmed on other occasions that, for me, love begins as a case of the hives. And I can't help but scratch myself, which only intensifies the itch, and the love, I feel. It was Herna. Herna who had penetrated my defenses and was spreading. Suddenly, I heard her voice: "My love, would you like to grow old with me?" I didn't answer because I was on my back under our car, a light blue Renault 12 that we had bought with our savings, trying to repair something. We were alone on a dirt road deep in the countryside, far from any sign of civilization. The sun was setting and it was getting cold. She insisted:

"My love, will you stay by my side forever?"

"My love, do you believe in a love that lasts a lifetime?"

"My love ... my love ..."

I grunted from underneath the car, but she went on:

"My love, will you ever get tired of me?"

I finally poked my head out and looked at her. The beam from the flashlight she was holding shone into my eyes:

"Why don't you point that where I tell you? Bend down a bit and give me some light over here, love of my life," I said; my forehead shimmered with sweat and lubricating grease. It had gotten dark and we were in the middle of nowhere, stranded on a remote road that we had mistakenly taken. But she didn't do as I asked. She walked away and gestured at some lights that, as night fell, began to shine on the horizon. And said:

"My love, I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I responded, and shouted: "This axle is about to break any second now, understand!"

"Of the bugs, what else!" she said. "You know that I'm horrified of spiders, snakes, weasels. The thing is ..."

"But you aren't listening to what I'm saying, Herna; do me a favor, get some cardboard, kneel on it and give me some light. In what language ..."

"I'm wearing a full-length dress, in case you haven't noticed. And high heels ..."

I didn't say anything.

"Are you almost done?" she asked.

"If you don't give me a hand ..."

"I need to pee."

"Hand me a 14 mm wrench; look for it in the toolbox and get the 12 or 13 mm, whatever you find and I'll see if it fits because I can't see a damn thing ..."

"You didn't answer my question ..."

"What do I know? Go pee over there, who is going to see you?"

"I asked you something else ..."

"You said you were afraid, that you had to pee ..."

"I'm not going to repeat myself because I was perfectly clear."

"Can't you see that my mind is on something else. Did you find the wrench I asked for? Check the trunk, see if by chance there's some wire back there. Maybe we're lucky. I'll tie the wire around it and see if we make it to the next town."

She squatted down and shone the flashlight on my face: "I told you from day one that I didn't like this car. Maybe it's the color, I don't know, but this color brings bad luck. I explained that to you. But you said what did I know, that this was a great car, that it would never leave you stranded. What do you have to say now about this pile of junk?"

"Pile of junk! Hand me the wrench already and see if you can find some wire! You're blinding me with that flashlight!"

"Its always the same. Always you, you, you! Do you want me to fan you too!"

"Herna, my love, this isn't the time ... "

"You don't love me, you never loved me, the world begins and ends with you ... "

"But of course I love you ... it's just that ... "

"I didn't hear you."

"Come on, really?"

"It's not that hard, but because you are so proud ... "

"Look, here's a loose cable. Where is this supposed to go? You can't trust mechanics, they do a half-assed job and charge you an arm and a leg ... Are you listening to me? Herna ... did you move the car? Check the tire stopper, will you ... Where are you?"

Herna's voice came to me faintly, from far away:

"I'm peeing," she said. "I couldn't hold it in any longer. Don't look ... I'm afraid, my love ... You didn't answer me when I asked you if you wanted to grow old with me ... "

And then I saw her standing in front of me:

"I was worried," she said. "I thought you had left."

"Why would that worry you?"

"Remember a little while ago I was telling you about my yogi?"

"Not really."

"I told you I have a spiritual guide, an illuminated being named Norberto, a direct reincarnation of the Yogi Ramacharaka, and he spoke to me about you."

I laughed.

"Don't laugh. I talk with him over the phone every day, and last week he told me that he had recurring dreams and visions of a person – a young man – that, based on what he could perceive, had some sort of connection or relationship with me. And he described this man he's been dreaming of: dark, he said, tall, with long hair down to his shoulders and with eyeglasses. And I felt despair because I didn't know anyone who fit the description. But now I can see it clearly: he described you to a tee, from head to toe. At first I didn't recognize you – its that sometimes my mind wanders – but there is no doubt about it: the master spoke of a name starting with A and of thick lips like Sandro's.² I've known Norberto for six years and whenever he's had a vision or a premonition, it comes to pass. He never fails. And for me its all very exciting, because I've been waiting for you for so long! The time is right for the arrival of a special incarnation with an important mission. And we are going to undertake it together!" said Herna joyfully and it seemed to me as if she were about to start jumping up and down.

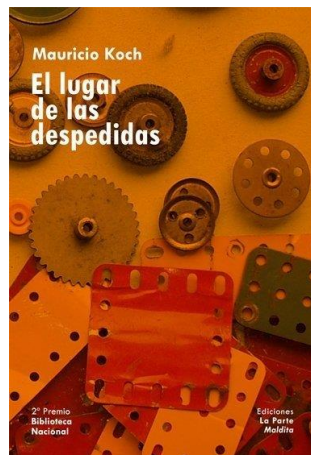
² Sandro is an Argentine rock icon who rose to fame in the 1960s. He was dubbed the Argentine Elvis.

And that's when I, who, while I heard her out, had only thought of hugging her and kissing her on the mouth to shut her up, said with a coldness and certainty that were unlike me, that I also had premonitions, that they were my own, and that they did not coincide with those of her master Norberto.

She clamed up immediately. Now it was she who looked disconcerted. Now surely it was her who was waiting for me to laugh so that she could see it was a joke. But that's not what happened. I told her I was very sorry but she would have to keep searching for her Sandro somewhere else:

"Maybe you'll find him this very night," I said. And I left, sensing her sad eyes fixed on my predestined back, on the luminous sway of my hips.

Outside it was very cold and there was no one out on the street. But I didn't feel like going home, so I walked a few blocks and ducked inside a bar. I ordered gin and a while later, when the sadness that alcohol fills me with began to wear off, I grew certain that yes, I did believe in love for life, and that I would like nothing more than to buy a sky blue Renault 12 with a woman who, peeing in the middle of the countryside, asks me if I'd like to grow old with her.



Translated by Dario Bard from "Herna o el amor como urticaria" as printed in El lugar de las despedidas, published by La Parte Maldita, 2014, available from [Ediciones La Parte Maldita](#). The Spanish version of this story was also published in the newspaper [Pagina 12](#).

Mauricio Koch was born in Villa Ballester, a suburb of the City of Buenos Aires, and grew up in the Province of Entre Ríos. El lugar de las despedidas was his debut work. Since then he has published Cuadernos de crianza (2016), a diary of his relationship with his daughter, and the novels Los silencios (2017) and Baltasar contra el olvido (2020).

In this interview (in Spanish) with the department of the humanities, arts and social sciences, University of Entre Ríos, Mauricio Koch discusses his novel Baltasar contra el olvido:

<https://youtu.be/3VAY2hzMZj4>