

Flee without looking back

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Chapter One

There are so many things I want to tell you that I don't know where to start. And it feels weird doing it, especially since I know you're never going to read this. That's what makes me saddest of all; makes me think twice about doing it.

Victor says I'm not bad at writing, making up stories and all that. I don't know if he's telling the truth or if he's just saying it to encourage me. Mum thinks I'm pretty good too. Although I don't think she's read much that I've written, other than the essays and stuff they get us to write at school. It's the only subject I get decent grades in, other than PE. Probably explains why she's been pushing me for a while to write down everything that's happened to me over the last few months, or years really, depending on how you look at it.

What I'm really good at — without wishing to sound big-headed — is judo. I can't imagine you're that surprised because, as I've been finding out, you did judo too. I've seen some photos of you, although if I'm honest, there's not many at home. Mum says you never liked having your photo taken. I don't either. I prefer to be taking them. There's one of you in your judo gi with a medal in your hand; I imagine you'd just won it in a competition. They say you were really good and that you won a lot of tournaments. Sadly, I don't remember. All of my memories from that time have gone, or rather, all my memories of you have gone, which isn't quite the same.

What happens to me is really strange: I look at all the photos Mum has, and I hear people talking to Victor about you, but I don't remember ever having been with you. It's as if they're talking about a stranger. I have no images of your face, no memories of your voice, or anything about you. Sometimes I make it up. It's a stupid way of fooling myself, I know. I remember lots of things that Mum and Gran have told me that you and I did together, but you don't appear in any of those memories. You've been wiped out. According to the "specialist" — that's what Mum calls him — when "it" happened to you, I had an enormous shock and since then, my brain has been making its own decisions about which things hurt me and which things don't. And it's wiped everything in the first group, or nearly all of them. I don't know if what's happening to me is a good thing or not, but according to the "specialist", it's saved me a lot of suffering. And he should know.

I guess that's why I've struggled with my schoolwork as well. I say "as well" because there's several other things that haven't gone particularly well since you've not been here. Just to give you an idea, I'm 15 and should be in the fourth year at secondary school, and yet I'm only in the second. Yep, you got it, I had to repeat a year at primary school and then another one at secondary. All the kids my age will be going off to college next year, while I'll be stuck here for a few more years with all these new friends, who are all just a bit little, like they're a size too small for me. Believe me when I say I'm not being rude; I try to deal with it all through humour. It just makes me really angry that I'm not with my old friends because they're all somewhere else now. And as well as all that, changing schools really hurt, even if Mum doesn't want to see it.

What I want to tell you is that I've ended up adrift from lots of things. The girls in my class are all two years younger than me. They're kind of childish. And the ones I actually like are two years ahead of me, or even three. Even though they don't say anything while I'm there, I know they look at me as the repeater, the one who's stayed on the rung below. Once Carolina, a fourth year, said to me, "The thing is, you're problematic." If anyone else had said that, I'd have sent them packing, putting it nicely, but I liked Carolina. And what she said hurt. The school psychologist has tried to convince me many times that's not the case, that my friends — specifically "including the girls" — think highly of me and I shouldn't feel marginalised. I wonder how a shrink like him knows anything about people

who are marginalised and their stories. Did he by any chance repeat two out of five years, like me? Well no. Besides, I asked him, and he confessed he'd been a good student. I can well imagine he spent his whole school life alongside the friends he made at primary school, went off to university and married one of his classmates, like all psychologists. That's what Victor says, that shrinks marry shrinks because they're always talking about themselves and there's nobody else who will put up with them other than another of their kind. Victor's amazing. I don't know if you remember Victor Salcedo. He says he remembers a lot about you, and I feel really jealous. Angry too because I can't do anything about this fucking memory loss.

Sorry, I didn't mean to swear. I promised Mum I wouldn't. Swearing's one of the things Mum hates. She says I never swore before and that you used to get really annoyed by people who'd speak like that. I swear a lot, it's true, although I am trying to cut down. It's almost under control.

My relationship with Mum hasn't exactly been good over these last five years. I know you wouldn't be very happy to find that out, but it's the truth. In my defence, I can tell you that things are now changing. Yes, over the last couple of months, more or less. And during all these years, I've suffered too. At the beginning, I blamed everyone else because I thought they didn't understand what was happening to me. Now I know it's not anyone's fault. Or rather, it's just that life's a bitch. "Bitch" isn't a swear word. I read it in a book that school told us to read for a project. And if it's in that book, it can't be bad. What I mean is that I know now that none of what's happened to me in the last few years is Mum's fault. Well alright, perhaps her only fault has been to try and control what I've been doing. Sometimes it was overwhelming. "Enrique, call me when you get home." "Enrique, do your homework." "Enrique, there's more to life than judo." "Enrique, you weren't like this before." "Enrique, I'm worried about you." I think Mum is changing now too, like me, because we've both started to understand lots of things we didn't understand before. That's what I think anyhow.

She's still a social worker. Nothing's changed there. But it's been a while since we lived in Madrid because Mum said the house was too full of memories. Memories? Yeah, right. What memories? They must be hers of course, because mine barely exist. I've always held it against Mum for having moved us; if we'd stayed there, perhaps things might have been different. At the beginning, when "it" happened to you, we went to live with Gran. Mum said it would just be for a little while, but that ended up being two or three years because she didn't want to go back to the house. Then we came to Coslada on the outskirts of Madrid, because Mum wanted to start a new life. She didn't ask me if I wanted to start a new life as well, or change schools. You can't imagine how much we argued about it. Let me tell you, starting again means far more than just moving a few kilometres down the road, much more than that, because the rest of her life has carried on exactly as it was; she goes from work to home and home to work. Once a week we go and visit Gran in central Madrid. And that's about it. Now we live in a two-storey house that's meant to be very pretty — and I'm not saying it isn't — with a loft space and a little garden, as well as a garage with space for two cars, even though we only have one. But anyway, I don't know if you'd like it. I don't like it or hate it, because I can barely remember our old house so I can't compare them.

Mum says that when "it" happened to you, I became depressed. I think she's exaggerating. I don't know if something like that can even happen to a ten-year-old. What I do know is that I lost all interest in my schoolwork. It seems I'd always been a good student up until then, even better than Victor. I was good at Maths, but what I really liked best was Spanish. And sport, of course. I'm the same as you where sport's concerned. Then I started giving up on everything, except for judo. It was very traumatic for Mum because it was all happening really quickly. I don't mean quite overnight, but still, it was fast.

When I turned eleven, Mum took me to the “specialist”, a shrink that someone recommended to her. What a recommendation! I used to say that to wind her up because had she just searched for someone online, she couldn’t have found anyone as bad or as expensive, because he charged an arm and a leg. She was very worried about me. In a short space of time, I didn’t just lose interest in school, but I stopped eating, started having horrendous nightmares and turned into an absolute pain in the arse to my friends. I did things without thinking them through. The “specialist” taught me that phrase. He always told me I had to learn to weigh up the consequences, and I’d crack up imagining myself holding a set of scales and running around all day chasing the consequences so I could weigh them. You can’t tell me that such a serious, strait-laced guy didn’t have a joker hiding somewhere inside, even right down at the back.

One day in the fifth year at primary school, I picked up Pilar de Pablo’s mobile phone from the table — she was our Science teacher — and I threw it down the toilet. You can’t even begin to imagine the trouble I got into. They called Mum at work and she had to come to school right away. Everyone was angry with me and I didn’t understand why. Now I realise what an idiotic thing it was, but in the moment, it seemed completely normal. I felt like the world was spinning in one direction while I was spinning in the other. And on top of that, Pilar liked me a lot, and I liked her. When she taught me in the third year, I was thrilled. All the head teacher and Mum did was keep asking me why I’d done that to her phone and all I did was shrug. *Why not?* I wondered. It was as if the teachers’ mobile phones were just sitting there waiting for someone like me to grab them and stuff them down the loo. I couldn’t understand their problem. The “specialist”, who must have been the most intelligent being in the whole world — I say that sarcastically; emojis don’t fit here — told Mum that I was behaving like that because it was a form of attention-seeking, or asking for help, but I don’t agree. Clever old chap.

I do acknowledge that I’ve made Mum lose her patience many times. But I’ll also confess to you that I don’t feel proud of that.

Once on the school playground I punched Victor Salcedo in the jaw and he fell to the ground. He went all dizzy and started saying things that didn’t make any sense. At that moment I thought he was pretending, but when I saw the faces of everyone looking at me, I realised I’d gone too far with the punch. And my hand really hurt. Seriously, poor Victor, especially as we’d been such good friends since we were little. Well, we still are, even though he’s two years ahead of me now and I’ve changed schools.

The punching Victor episode was all over something ridiculous. I can’t remember what we were talking about, football, I think. And Victor disagreed with me about something, I don’t know what. Probably something trivial. I started to get upset and he said, “What’s wrong? Come on, don’t be like that, calm down.” He repeated it two or three times, but the more he told me to calm down, the angrier I got. Then, seeing me so worked up, he said sorry. And instead of shaking his hand, I lost it even more to the point that Victor grabbed my shoulder and said, “Calm down, man. It’s all OK.” And I pushed him away angrily and shouted, “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me!” I was absolutely furious. And Victor opened his arms and said, “So what, are you going to hit me?” And that was precisely what I did. But I did it without thinking, I promise. I raised my fist and gave him everything I had, right in the jaw. You can’t imagine how much I hurt myself. What you *can* probably imagine though is just how surprised poor old Victor was and how much it must have hurt him. He fell to the ground like a half-empty sack. Suddenly, everyone around me started calling me an animal and things like that. And the more they yelled at me, the more livid I got. In the end, they called the nursery teacher

and as I wasn't calming down, two others came along as well, and they took me to the head teacher's office.

I don't feel proud of what I did, honestly. On the contrary, I cringe every time I think about it. Victor was my best friend. Fortunately, he still is. But there are lots of others who have turned their backs on me since that day. Now I get it. I *was* an animal, they were right. But back then, I didn't see it that way. I thought they were weak and boring. The commotion was huge, just like the incident with Pilar's phone, or worse, because I wasn't really a child any more. They gave me a record and suspended me for two weeks. At the beginning, I was pleased about it, but it was worse than going to class because the teachers all sent work home and Mum forced me to do it all. I did it grudgingly, mainly so as not to argue with her.

A few hours after hitting Victor, I felt very remorseful. That's happened to me a lot; I'd blow up and up, and then deflate like a balloon and I'd hate myself for what I'd said or done. In a bizarre kind of way, I was looking for problems. According to the "specialist", it was to do with a lack of self-esteem. I believed I was inferior, or so the clever-clogs said. I tried explaining to Mum that I didn't feel inferior, just different. Now I see that I was both.

When I'd done my two-week suspension, I went back to school, ashamed. I wanted to apologise to Victor, but I didn't dare. I guess I was scared he'd tell me where to go. I saw Victor with his classmates at break time, from a distance, and the idea of going up to him made me panic. I really did feel like cow dung. That self-esteem thing probably made me feel like that, I don't know. But two or three days later, Victor came up to me and said, "What's up, bro," and I replied, "Not a lot, man. I'm just a mess." And then he said sorry. You heard right; Victor apologised instead of me. The whole world's been turned upside down, I thought. We hugged and I started crying. And he didn't say anything else other than just, "It's alright, man, it'll all be OK." And it passed, of course it did. And then I said to him, "Promise me one thing." And he looked at me and without asking, he replied, "Promise." "Promise me you won't tell anyone you saw me crying." And Victor said, "Oh what, were you crying? I thought you were laughing." And then I pretended to punch him in the face again and he made out like he was falling backwards, like in slow motion, and we started laughing. Then he said, "You see? You're laughing!" It was great.

Fortunately for me, Victor Salcedo is still my best friend, even though we're separated by so many things. We see each other less often than we'd like because when we moved to Coslada, I had to change schools, I told you that already. But when we get together, it's like we're still in primary school, with bibs round our necks, eating that revolting mush that makes me want to throw up. See? I remember all those details, the mush, and the green stripey bibs they put on us at lunchtime. And yet I don't remember you dropping me off at the school gates, standing there talking to the caretaker for a while, or when you'd come and pick me up. Victor does remember and that's how I know some of those details. He says that sometimes you'd give us both a lift home and tell us jokes aimed at four-year-olds. Are there even jokes for four-year-olds? I guess if Victor says so, it must be true. I've no reason to doubt what he says.

When the whole punching Victor thing happened, it affected Mum a lot. She tried to understand what was happening to me, but it wasn't easy, I know. The last five years have been really hard for her and I know I'm partly to blame. Something strange would come over me; the more I saw her suffering because of me, the more I felt the need to hurt her. Or not necessarily hurt her, but pull her strings to see how much she would take, as if I needed her to demonstrate just how far she would go for me. Mum's always thought my problems could be solved by talking about them. And I ended up getting so fed up with all the little chit-chats, her trying to pretend we were friends. I don't

know how many courses, classes and talks Mum's been to over the last few years, but there's loads, I swear. And all to try and understand me, as if she needed an instruction manual that the child hadn't brought home with it from the factory. Any course about raising children, she'd sign up as a student. Talks about drug addiction, she'd be there with her little blue notebook, writing it all down. It made me really angry. Particularly the one about drugs, because I never got involved with any of that shit, even though I could have got my hands on it if I'd wanted. The same goes for alcohol. I'd tell her and she'd pretend to listen, but in the end, she'd always give me the same response: "That's fine, but it's still good for me to hear". Mum saw danger everywhere, even when I spent the afternoons training at the gym.

Judo has been my best friend —after Victor — over the last few years. Generally speaking, I like all sports and I'm pretty good at most. Before I turned ten, I wanted to be a footballer like just about everyone else. I was also into basketball for a while. But it seems you planted the seed with judo. I was eight, I think. I remember a lot of things: my first training session, my first trip to the gym, my first belt, basically all of that. But I don't remember you sitting next to the tatami watching me train, even though Mum tells me you spent hours there. I don't remember practising with you either. What I *do* remember is that from the age of ten, I took it very seriously. Until now.

Mum's never dared to ban me from judo, although she worried for a while because of the amount of time I spent doing it. She always took me and picked me up from training, she'd go with me to tournaments and she bought equipment for me as I got taller and grew out of my judogi. I think she even felt proud when I moved up a category. Judo has been the only constant in the last five years. Mum knows that, hence why she's kept out of it for the most part, although it does sometimes come out in some little phrases of hers — although it has been a while since I've heard them — things like, "If you dedicated the same amount of time to your schoolwork as you do to judo, you'd be flying." The thing about flying has been her favourite catchphrase for years now. She doesn't say it as much any more.

Sometimes Mum would sit with me and ask if I'd ever thought about my future. And I'd say no, that the future is for grown-ups. She'd try to convince me I was wrong and that you reap what you sow, and stuff like that. I've got a whole list of her phrases somewhere. These little speeches made me laugh at the start. Then they stopped being funny. One day in the kitchen she asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I replied straight away, "Police officer."

I said the first thing that came into my head, without thinking. Mum went quiet for a while, and then when she looked at me, her eyes were full of tears. Then I understood; she was crying for you.

"What's wrong? Don't you want me to be a police officer?"

And she replied, "I want you to be whatever you want to be."

That wasn't true. I know it didn't make her happy. And I'm sure she was thinking that because of you, because she didn't want her only child to end up like you when "it" happened, the thing she never wanted to talk to me about.

Once, not long after we had moved to Coslada, I went into her bedroom to look for something and I opened the wardrobe. In there was your uniform, stuffed in a plastic bag. I'd never seen it before, or at least, I don't remember it. I also found your cap among some of your other things. I stood there staring at it like I'd seen a ghost. I must have been stood there for ages without moving because

Mum came in to look for me. She found me with my eyes wide open but my expression completely blank, like I was disoriented. She shouted at me, which snapped me out of my trance.

“What are you doing? Close that wardrobe right now!”

She gave me such a shock and my heart began to race. I felt all light-headed and had to sit down on the bed because I went dizzy. Mum carried on yelling, even more scared than I was.

“What’s wrong?” she repeated urgently, over and over again. “Are you OK, Enrique? However much you don’t want to, just speak to me, say something.”

I couldn’t speak. I moved my lips but nothing came out. Mum said I blacked out, but I think I just fell asleep from the shock of all her yelling and the exhaustion from training that afternoon. When I woke up, I was in a bed in A&E. The doctor gave me some technical name for what had happened to me. I can’t remember it and I’m not bothered what that weird word was. They prescribed rest and a course of vitamins. Well, I think they were vitamins. Some red capsules that looked like plastic and were really difficult to swallow. A few days later when I thought I was ready to face the world again, I went back into Mum’s room and your uniform and all your stuff had gone. I looked in the other cupboards at home and in the loft, but nothing. Mum and I hadn’t spoken about the incident that day until a few months ago when things changed and somehow we embarked on the road to reconciliation.

No, it wasn’t true that I wanted to be a police officer. I don’t like weapons or uniforms; I don’t like the risk or the violence. Or rather, it’s fine at the cinema, but not in reality. Because of all that, you’re not with us anymore. I do, however, like sport. Any sport, not just judo, I said that before. I like competing and I like winning, but I don’t feel gutted when I lose because I always think the other person was just better than me.

Dedicating your life to a sport and living professionally off it is really hard. It’s not just the training but the mental preparation too, sacrificing lots of things that other people your age are doing. I don’t think that’s what I want to do. I like the competition but what I prefer is competing against myself, setting myself challenges and trying to achieve them. And now I’m going to confess what I’d really like to do. If I could, I’d love to be a sports journalist. I’ve only told Mum and Victor. Alright, and Teisa and some of her friends. If I’m not telling everyone about it though, it’s because I’m scared they’ll all laugh at me. “How are you going to be a journalist when you’re so slow? You have to study hard to be a journo. You can always hope...” and stuff like that. Mum reckons there’s still time for me to catch up with my schoolwork. I don’t know if she’s just saying that or if she really believes it. But right now, I’m willing to fight for what I want, even if it is half in secret. I’m sure you’d have liked what I’m doing.