THE SILENCE OF THE WHITE CITY

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I was enjoying the best Spanish tortilla in the world, the egg still runny and the potatoes cooked but firm, when I took the call that changed my life. For the worse, I should add.

It was the eve of El Día de Santiago, and in Vitoria we were celebrating El Día de la Blusa, an homage to the youngsters who enlivened the early-August celebrations by wearing traditional smocks. The bar where I was trying to finish my tasty snack was so crowded and noisy that when I realized my cell phone was vibrating in my shirt pocket, I had to go out into Calle del Prado.

“What’s wrong, Estíbaliz?”

My partner didn’t usually bother me on my days off, and El Día de la Blusa and the evening before were too sacred for anyone to even think about going to work. The entire city was in a state of commotion.

At first, the noise of the brass bands and the flood of people following them prevented my hearing what Estíbaliz was trying to say.

“Unai, you have to come to the Old Cathedral,” she insisted.

Her tone of voice, and the undercurrent of urgency and bewilderment, struck me as odd. Estíbaliz has more guts than me, and that’s saying something.
I understood immediately that something serious must have happened.

Trying to get away from the ever-present racket that was engulfing the city, I walked automatically toward La Florida Park so that our conversation could be at least minimally productive.

“What happened?” I asked, trying to shake off the effects of the last glass of Rioja.

“You won’t believe it. It’s exactly the same as twenty years ago.”

“What are you talking about, Estí? I’m not at my sharpest today.”

“Some archaeologists from the company restoring the cathedral found two naked corpses in the crypt. A boy and a girl, with their hands resting on each other’s cheek. You remember that, don’t you? Come right now, Unai. This is serious, very serious.” She told me where to find her and ended the call.

*It can’t be,* I thought.

*It can’t be.*

I didn’t even say good-bye to my friends in the *cuadrilla.* They were going to stay in Sagartoki’s, in the midst of that flood of humans. It was unlikely any of them would even pay attention to their phone if I called to say that El Día de la Blusa was over for me.

With my colleague’s words echoing in my brain, I headed for the Plaza de la Virgen Blanca. I passed my own doorway and went up Calle de la Correría, one of the oldest streets in the medieval heart of the city.

It was a bad choice. Like everywhere else in the city center that day, it was packed. La Malquerida and the other bars lining the Old City were crammed with locals. It took me more than fifteen minutes to reach La Burullería Square, at the rear of the cathedral, where I’d agreed to meet Estíbaliz.

In the fifteenth century, the square had been the market of the
burulleros, or weavers, who made the city one of the main trading arteries in northern Spain, and it had retained their name. As I walked across the cobblestones, the bronze statue of Ken Follett seemed to watch me go by, as if the writer had anticipated the dark web of intrigue being spun around us.

Estíbaliz Ruiz de Gauna, my colleague and fellow inspector in the Criminal Investigation Unit, was waiting in the square, making a thousand phone calls, darting back and forth like a lizard. Her red hair framed her face. At five feet two inches tall, she just met the height requirement to join the force. Had Estí been any shorter, Vitoria would have lost one of its finest, most tenacious detectives.

We were both damned good at solving cases, although we weren’t quite as good at playing by the rules. We had received more than one warning for disobedience, and so we’d learned to cover ourselves. As for following orders, we were working on it.

We were working on it.

I turned a blind eye to some of the addictions that still slipped into Estí’s life. She looked the other way when I disobeyed my superiors and investigated on my own.

My specialty was criminal profiling, so I was usually called in when we had a case involving a serial killer or rapist—any delinquent who reoffended. If there were more than three events with a cooling-off period between them, I was your man.

Estíbaliz specialized in victimology, that great forgotten science. Why that person, and not someone else? She was also better than anyone at using the police databases, like the one that compiled the treads of every imaginable vehicle, or SoleMate, a guide to the footprints left by all the international makes and brands of shoes and sneakers.

As soon as she saw me, she hung up her cell phone and looked at me, distraught.
“What’s inside the cathedral?” I asked.

“You’d better see for yourself,” she whispered, as if the heavens—or perhaps hell—could hear us, who knew? “Superintendent Medina himself called me. They want a profiling expert like you, and they’ve called me in to examine the victims. You’ll soon see why. I want you to tell me your first impression. The crime-scene techs are already here, and so are the pathologist and the judge. Let’s go in via Cuchi.”

Calle Cuchillería was one of the ancient streets where the guilds had been established in the Middle Ages. Vitoria could boast an indelible record of our ancestors’ trades: La Herrería for blacksmiths, La Zapatería for shoemakers, La Correría for ropemakers, La Pintorería for the dyers’ guild. Despite the passage of centuries, the city’s medieval core was still intact.

Oddly enough, from Calle Cuchillería you could enter the cathedral through what looked like the doorway to an ordinary dwelling.

There were already two uniforms guarding the heavy wooden door at Number 85. They saluted and let us in.

“I’ve questioned the two archaeologists who found them,” my colleague said. “They came today to try to make some headway with their work: the Santa María Cathedral Foundation is pressuring them to finish the crypt and the vault this year. They left us the keys. As you can see, the lock is intact. It hasn’t been forced.”

“They came to work on the eve of El Día de Santiago? Isn’t that slightly . . . unusual for people from Vitoria?”

“I didn’t notice anything strange about their reactions, Unai.” Estí shook her head. “They were shocked, or rather horrified. Horror like that isn’t faked.”

All right, I thought. I trusted Estíbaliz’s judgment the way the back wheel of a bicycle trusts the front wheel. That’s how we functioned; that’s how we pedaled along.
We went in through the restored porch. My colleague closed the door behind us, and the noise of the festivities finally faded.

Until that moment, the news that two dead bodies had been found hadn’t really hit me; it had been too much at odds with the joyful, carefree atmosphere all around. But in that cloistered silence, with the archaeologists’ lamps dimly lighting the wooden staircase down to the crypt, it all seemed more plausible. And not exactly welcome.

“Here, put on a helmet.” Estíbaliz handed me one of the white helmets bearing the foundation’s logo that every tourist visiting the cathedral was obliged to wear. “With your height, you’re bound to bump your head.”

“I’ll be fine without it,” I said, busy peering around the room.

“It’s mandatory,” she insisted, holding out the white monstrosity to me again and brushing the edge of my hand with her fingertips.

This game we played had one very clear rule: So far and no further. In fact, there was a complementary one: Don’t ask; that’s far enough. I figured that two years without going any further constituted a status quo, an established code of conduct, and Estíbaliz and I got along very well. It was also true that she was busy with her wedding preparations, and I had been widowed for several—Well, that doesn’t matter.

“You’re going soft,” I muttered, but took the plastic helmet.

We climbed the curving staircase, leaving behind the models of the village of Gasteiz, the first settlement that had become the foundation of the city. Estíbaliz had to stop once more to find the right key to the door that would take us to the inner area of the Old Cathedral, one of our city’s symbols. It had been restored and patched up more often than my childhood bike. A sign reading OPEN greeted us on the right.

I knew all my region’s emblems. They had been stored in my
memory ever since the double crime of the dolmen had thrown the people of Vitoria into a panic twenty years and four months earlier. The dolmen, known as the Witch’s Lair; the Celtic village at La Hoya; the Roman salt pans at Añana; the medieval wall—those were the sites a serial killer had chosen that put Vitoria and the province of Álava on the world news map. And the morbid fascination created by his macabre staging of the murders had led to the establishment of tourist trails throughout the region.

I was almost twenty when it happened; my obsession with the killings became the main reason I joined the police. I followed the investigation day after day, with an anxiety that only a single-minded young person could understand. I analyzed what little appeared in El Diario Alavés and thought: I can do better. They’re being stupid. They’re forgetting the most important thing: the why. Although I wasn’t even twenty, I thought I was smarter than the police. How naive that seems now.

Soon afterward, the truth hit me in the face harder than a boxer’s fist. I was stunned, just like all of Spain. No one expected Tasio Ortiz de Zárate to be guilty. I wouldn’t have cared if it had been anyone else: my neighbor, a Poor Clare nun, the baker, the mayor. I wouldn’t have cared.

But not Tasio, our local hero who was more than an idol: he was a role model, a TV archaeologist who starred in a show that won record ratings each season, the author of books of history and mythology that sold out in weeks. Tasio was the most charismatic, entrancing character that Vitoria had produced in decades. Intelligent and, in the unanimous view of Vitoria’s women, very attractive. And duplicated.

Yes, duplicated.

We had two to choose from. Tasio had a monozygotic twin, and they were identical down to the way they cut their fingernails. Indistinguishable. An optimist like him, from a good family, cheer-
ful, full of fun, cultured, well-mannered. At the age of twenty-four, the brothers had Vitoria at their feet and a future that was generally expected to be beyond stellar, stratospheric.

His twin, Ignacio, leaned toward the law. He became a policeman in the tough ETA years and was the most honest man we’d ever had in the force. Nobody ever imagined things would end up the way they did between them. Everything, and I mean everything, was too sordid and cruel.

Ignacio uncovered irrefutable proof that his twin was the most wanted and, later, most studied serial killer since Spain had returned to democracy. Ignacio arrested Tasio, even though until that moment they had been as inseparable as conjoined twins. Ignacio became the man of the year, a hero worthy of our respect, the person brave enough to face the consequences and do what few of us would have ever done: hand over his own flesh and blood to a life behind bars.

As I stood in the cathedral, my reverie led to a disturbing thought: Our two local newspapers—El Diario Alavés and its bitter rival, El Correo Vitoriano—never ceased reminding their readers that Tasio Ortiz de Zárate would be leaving prison soon, released on parole after twenty years. And at that very moment, the city with the lowest crime rate in the north of Spain was adding two corpses to its ghastly scoreboard.

I shook my head, as if that could clear the phantoms from my brain. I forced myself not to draw conclusions until later and to focus on what we had in front of us.

When we entered the recently restored crypt, I had to duck because the ceiling was so low. The space still smelled of recently sawn wood. I stepped cautiously across the polished gray flagstones, so perfectly rectangular they could only have been made in the twenty-first century by a machine. It seemed a shame to get them dirty. Two thick columns in front of us did their best to support
the heavy weight of the centuries: the original foundations of the old, buckling cathedral.

When I saw the two lifeless bodies lying there, I felt the need to retch rise from the pit of my stomach, but I resisted.

I resisted.

The crime techs in their white plastic suits and overshoes had been examining the area for some time. They had brought in lamps to shed some light in the dark crypt, and it seemed they had finished photographing the scene. Estíbaliz asked for a sketch, studied it closely for a while, then passed it to me.

“Tell me they’re not twenty years old, Estíbaliz,” I begged her.

Any other age, but not twenty.

The previous serial killer had stopped at fifteen-year-olds: four naked couples, female and male, each affectionately laying the palm of one hand on the other’s cheek in an incongruously gentle gesture. Nobody had ever been able to explain this placement, especially since it was reported that none of the victims knew each other. They all had double-barreled names that originated in the Álava region: López de Armentia, Fernández de Retana, Ruiz de Arcaute, García de Vicuña, Martínez de Guereñu . . .

On the dolmen known as the Witch’s Lair, near the village of Elvillar, the lifeless bodies of two newborn babies had been discovered. Shortly afterward, in the remains of the Celtic-Iberian settlement of La Hoya de Laguardia, a boy and a girl aged five were found, their hands comforting each other, their gazes lost in the heavens.

In the Valle Salado at Añana, a prosperous salt pan dating to the time of the Romans, the bodies of a boy and a girl aged ten were found. By the time the crimes reached the city of Vitoria and two dead fifteen-year-olds had appeared close to the gate in the medieval wall, the population was in such a state of psychosis that we twenty-year-olds stayed at home all the time, playing cards with our grandparents. No one dared go out in the streets if they weren’t
in a big group. It was as if the ages of the victims were progressing according to the chronology of our region’s history. It was all very archaeological, very Tasio.

Eventually he was caught. Inspector Ignacio Ortiz de Zárate ordered the arrest of Tasio Ortiz de Zárate, Spain’s most famous and well-loved archaeologist. He was put on trial, convicted of the premeditated murder of eight children, and sent to prison.

The grim harvest of young people in Vitoria ceased.

My partner’s voice brought me back to the present.

The pathologist, Doctor Guevara, a slender fifty-year-old woman with smooth pink cheeks, was whispering to Judge Olano, a stocky, elderly man with broad shoulders and short legs. One of his feet was pointing to the exit as he listened, as if he couldn’t wait to race out of there. We decided not to approach them; they looked as though they didn’t want to be disturbed.

“They still haven’t been identified,” Estíbaliz said in a low voice. “We’re matching their descriptions with reports of missing people. Both the male and the female appear to be about twenty years old. Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Kraken?”

She sometimes called me by my adolescent nickname. It was a token of trust that had grown between us.

“It’s impossible,” I muttered between clenched teeth.

“But it is happening.”

“We can’t be sure of that,” I insisted.

She fell silent.

“We still can’t be sure,” I repeated, as much to convince myself as anything else. “Let’s concentrate on what we have in front of us. Later we can calmly discuss our conclusions in my office, okay?”

“Agreed. What do you see?”

I approached the two bodies, knelt beside them, and whispered my plea:

*This is where your hunt ends and mine begins.*
“Three eguzkilores, flowers of the sun,” I said eventually, “laid next to their heads and feet. I can’t grasp their meaning in this context yet.”

In Basque culture, the eguzkilore was an ancient protective symbol hung on the doors of rural homes to prevent witches and demons from entering. Except, in this case, they hadn’t worked.

“No, I don’t understand what they’re doing here, either,” said Estíbaliz, crouching beside me. “I’ll continue with the victims: Caucasian female and male, both aged twenty or thereabouts. Lying on their backs, naked, on the cathedral floor. No indications of wounds, blows, or any other form of violence. But look: they both have a small pinprick on the side of their neck. An injection. They’ve both been injected with something.”

“We’ll have to wait for the toxicology reports,” I said. “We’ll need to send samples to the forensic lab in Bilbao, to see if they find any drugs or psychotropic substances. Anything else?”

“One hand of each victim is lying on the other’s cheek. The pathologist will establish the time of death, but rigor mortis hasn’t set in, so I assume they’ve only been dead a few hours. I’m going to ask the techs to preserve the hands in paper bags. It doesn’t look as if they defended themselves, but you never know.”

“Come closer,” I said. “Do you smell something? It’s quite faint, but I’d say there’s an odor of gasoline.”

“You have a good sense of smell. I hadn’t noticed it,” she said after sniffing the bodies closely. “We still have to establish the cause of death. Do you think they’ve been poisoned, as in the earlier cases? Maybe they were forced to swallow gasoline?”

I took a close look at the young woman’s face before replying. It was frozen in a rictus of pain. She had suffered as she’d died, and so had the young man. I looked at his hair, recently trimmed on the sides. The forelock was still prominent, stiff from what looked to be expensive hair gel. He had clearly taken care of himself; he
was well groomed. She had also been attractive. Her eyebrows were plucked, no blemishes or acne. She belonged to the generation that grew up frequenting beauty parlors.

Little rich kids, I thought. Just like before. But then I realized the mistake we were making.

“Estíbaliz,” I said, “we have to reset and start again. We’re not examining the crime scene with open minds; we’ve immediately started comparing it to the other scenes. First we need to look at this one in a vacuum. We can compare later.”

“But I think that’s exactly what the killer or killers want. The staging is identical to the earlier crimes. If you’re asking me about the victims, Kraken, I’d say they follow the series from twenty years ago.”

“Yes, but there are differences. I don’t think they were poisoned. The kind of poison used in the past never appeared in the press. I don’t think they died from swallowing gasoline, either. The smell would be much stronger, it would have taken much more of the liquid, and there’s no sign of chemical burns. It’s as though they had only been in contact with one or two drops.”

I bent over the young man’s face. It was odd the way his mouth was closed with the lips pressed slightly inward, as if he had been biting them.

I had an idea, so I examined the young woman’s face as well.

“They both had tape over their mouths, and it was ripped off. Look.”

The rectangular mark from the adhesive tape stuck over their lips had left the skin slightly flushed.

It felt as though the Old Cathedral was staring down at us in horror. Then I thought I heard something.

A faint, annoying buzz.

I signaled for Estíbaliz to be quiet and brought my ear to within an inch of the man’s face. What on Earth was that sound?
I closed my eyes and focused on it, on its strangeness, trying to discover where the slight buzzing was loudest. I almost brushed against the tip of the victim’s nose, and then I moved down across the orbicularis oris muscle to his lips.

“Yes, do you have a pen?”

My partner took one out of her back pocket, a quizzical look on her face.

I used the tip of the pen to prize open the corner of the victim’s mouth. Suddenly, an enraged bee flew out. I fell over backward.

“Shit, a bee!” I yelled from the ground.

Everyone turned to stare at us. The techs looked reprovingly at me for having fallen over so close to the center of the crime scene.

Estíbaliz reacted quickly and tried to catch the bee, but it flew over our heads toward the covered remains of the model of the ancient village. In just a few seconds, it was out of reach.

“We should catch it,” said Estíbaliz, watching it escape. “If it is connected to the murder, it could be crucial for the investigation.”

“Catch it, in a church that measures ninety-six meters from apse to door? Don’t look at me like that,” I said when I saw the face she was making. “Whenever a friend comes to visit Vitoria, I bring them for a guided tour of the cathedral.”

With a sigh, Estíbaliz turned her attention back to the bodies.

“All right, let’s forget the bee for now. Can you discern whether there was a sexual motive?”

“No,” I said, approaching the bodies again. “As far as I can tell, the vagina is still intact. We can ask the pathologist. I think she’s finished with the judge.” In fact, the two were walking toward us.

“Your Honor,” said Estíbaliz, pushing up her hair under her helmet.

“Good evening, if you’ll pardon the expression,” said Olano. “My secretary will leave the visual inspection report for you to sign. I’ve had enough, especially on a holiday.”

“You’re right there,” I muttered.
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The judge walked quickly out of the crypt, leaving us with the pathologist.

“Did you find any biological residue?” I asked.

“We’ve examined the bodies and sprayed the surrounding area with luminol,” she said. “There’s no trace of blood. We’ve also searched for semen, but we didn’t find any. We’ll have to wait for the autopsy results; they’ll be more precise. I’m afraid this is going to be complicated. Do you need anything else, inspectors?”

“No, doctor. Not at the moment,” said Estíbaliz by way of good-bye. When the pathologist left, she turned to me: “Well, Unai, what’s your read on the staging?”

“They’re naked, so there’s a definite sexual aspect. By placing their hands in that odd gesture, the killer seems to be suggesting that they are a couple, although I think that was done postmortem, when the killer brought them here and lined up the bodies facing...”

Taking my cell phone from my pocket, I opened an app that served as a compass. Bending down again, I took my time until I was sure.

“They’re pointing to where the sun rises at the winter solstice,” I told her.

“Meaning? I’m not a wild soul who communes with Mother Earth on weekends like you.”

“I don’t align with any telluric forces. I simply go back to the village to help my grandfather with his farm. If you had a ninety-four-year-old grandfather determined never to retire, you’d do the same. But to answer your question, the bodies are facing northwest.”

Like the first double crime at the dolmen, I thought nervously. That much had come out in the press.

But I didn’t say it.

I didn’t want to appear to contradict myself, and I didn’t want Estíbaliz to realize that, despite my attempts to isolate this crime
in my mind, I, too, was comparing it to our adolescent terror. She 
was probably doing the same thing.

The fact was, something was vibrating inside me. I couldn’t 
help thinking that I was breathing the same air the murderer had. 
That only a few hours earlier, some asshole with an undiagnosed 
psychopathic illness had stood on the same spot. I peered at the 
air trapped inside the cathedral as if he had left visible traces in 
the void. His movements flashed through my mind. How he must 
have transported the bodies, then placed them in the crypt without 
leaving any sign. I knew that he was meticulous and that he had 
done this before.

This display was not his first.

I could picture his face. Could the answer be so simple and yet 
impossible, a riddle that was solved before it had even been posed?

Estíbaliz was watching, waiting for me to emerge from the 
mental spirals I occasionally got lost in. She knew me well, and she 
respected my silences and rituals.

Finally, I straightened up. We looked at each other, and I real 
ized we were ten years older than the pair of detectives who had 
entered the cathedral only half an hour before.

“All right, Unai, what does your profiler’s brain tell you?”

“This person is an organized killer. It’s not a random choice. 
Yet I could swear he didn’t know his victims. He turned them into 
objects. And there’s an absolute control of the scene. But what con-
cerns me most is the disconcerting lack of any clues. That coincides 
with the profile: the murderer has an almost pathological aware-
ness, and that’s very worrying.”

“What else?” she pressed me. She knew that I hadn’t finished, 
that I was thinking out loud. We often did that; it allowed our 
thoughts to flow more freely.

“The victims’ eyes are wide-open, which means the killer felt 
no compunction or pity. That’s a psychopathic trait.”
“Any mixed traits?”

“No, there’s not a single trait that would indicate a disorganized killer. Do you know how uncommon that is? Disorganized murderers usually leave behind a scene marked by brutal, explosive violence. There are attacks to the face, or the victims are disfigured. Blows with improvised instruments like sticks or stones. This is different. This guy isn’t psychotic; he’s more of a psychopath or a sociopath. He’s meticulous, he plans ahead, and he doesn’t suffer from mental illness, which means that, fortunately for us, he is fully responsible for his acts. What troubles me is the kind of weapon he used, if that’s what it is. Bees? That’s a fetishistic weapon.”

“Objects that normally are not weapons but that have a special meaning for the killer,” said Estibaliz, pondering aloud.

“That’s my fear,” I said. “We need to check what poison the murderer used twenty years ago. We’ll have to ask for the old files when we get back to headquarters. And if we accept that these murders are a continuation of the series of four crimes in 1996, we’re talking about a cooling-off period of two decades. When we talk about ‘organized serial killers,’ the longer the gap, the calmer the psychopath’s personality, but statistically we’re usually talking about weeks or months. Do you have any idea what it would mean if we’re facing someone who can wait twenty years?”

“That’s for you to say, Unai. And say it out loud. Because the whole of Vitoria is going to be asking that question in a few hours, as soon as it starts trending all over Spain, and we have to be prepared to answer when the press is on our backs.”

I sighed.

“All right. I’ll ask the obvious questions. We’ll see where that takes us.”

“Go on, then.”

An idea settled on my left shoulder, like a black butterfly. I knew it with absolute certainty: if I’d had a crystal ball, if I’d
known I was going to be put in charge of this case, I would never have become a homicide detective.

It was as clear and undeniable as that.

I would have stayed in Villaverde, sowing wheat with my grandfather.

Because I didn’t want to have to face it. Not this. Any other case. For years I had been preparing myself mentally, and until now things had gone well for me. Good statistics, cases solved in a reasonable time frame, congratulations and pats on the back from my superiors. But not this, not with Tasio Ortiz de Zárate involved.

But I had to put it into words, to make it real. I couldn’t leave it buzzing annoyingly above our heads.

“All right,” I said, giving in, “I’ll say it out loud: How on Earth has Tasio committed two more murders with the same signature as the killings that happened twenty years ago, when at this very moment he’s locked up in Zaballa? Can a person, however devilish they are, be in two places at the same time?”