

# Ellen Adams

## I Will Not Be Basque Again

My mother does not speak Euskera because she is not part of our nation. She tries sometimes with the man who comes in from the bars to wash dishes in the evening. My brothers say, “Mother, let it go. Speak to us in Castilian.” I listen to her when we are back in the kitchen. She gets the *h*’s wrong and her voice is too jumpy, but I listen. In recent years, she speaks to my father only in Castilian. He calls her a Fascist.

The first time my sister said it aloud, it was in Euskera, in the dark behind the restaurant. Minutes before, some boys had come in and one had put his hand beneath her apron, sliding up her skirt to her thigh. She came into the kitchen crying without an order or her notepad. My mother told her not to act foolish in front of my father’s customers. “Not again, Nekane,” she said, turning back to her half-peeled potato.

“It’s not about boys,” Nekane kept saying.

My mother took her by the wrist and led her behind the restaurant to talk some sense into her. The man who washes dishes stared at the drain. We listened to their voices coming through the window above his towel rack. “Mamá!” Nekane screamed. “Why don’t you believe me?”

Later that night, floors mopped and counters wiped, my mother cried as she told me that she hadn’t understood the first time. Nekane had to say it again, there next to the dumpster, in Castilian. My mother had never heard the word rape in Basque before.

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He used to pull her onto his lap. He'd say, "Come here, Nekane," as she carried a platter from the kitchen to the long family table at the back of the restaurant. "Set down the fruits of my labor. Come sit on your handsome father."

There are nine of us, and we gathered each day in the restaurant for lunch, eating my father's food. Nekane and I are the only girls, the end to a long string of boys. She is a year older, but I am albino. My father has never asked me to sit on his lap. My mother once told me that I'll be lucky if I can find a man to marry me. "A Swede, maybe."

My mother is practical and let me quit school. The boys in my class said that I was born without color because my family is inbred. They chanted it in front of our teachers. They said that my mother slept with her brother, and that is why my siblings got away with having color but not me. I sometimes repeated their rhymes without thinking as I walked to the restaurant at the end of the day. Later, my mother put me to work and told me to look for a husband.

I am seventeen, the youngest, and the only one not to have a Basque name. My mother named me Alba, like her sister who died. I knew the boys at school were lying. She had only one sibling, a sister who couldn't have gotten her pregnant. They grew up in Andalucía. My mother came north to Bilbao with her fiancé, who was in the Civil Guard. She left him when she met my father. She told me once that they had been inappropriate. They moved into the mountains, into the village.

I used to wonder if I was born because my father wanted another daughter to touch, and that I was his punishment, born to disgust him. But Nekane said that he didn't start touching her until she was eleven, so I had long been alive by then.

I am on a bus leaving San Sebastian. I get to Madrid before noon, and then I will buy my second ticket and switch buses. I said goodbye to my mother and sister before the sun even came up. The woman in the seat next to me has curly hair, hardened with gel, and a flattened packet of Pall Malls poking out of her purse. She was the last one on board, having spent her final minutes in San Sebastian kissing a white-haired man under the station lights. He looked up at me, stepping away from her and to the side, one hand sliding up the back of her sweater. The driver called out, waving his hat, and she hurried to the door.

She stood at the front of the bus, her purse clutched close. The only other empty seat was next to the Moroccan, two rows in front of me. She eyed us both. She chose me, but didn't say hello.

Now she crosses her legs, pivoting the large bulk of her thigh away from me.

She stares down the length of the aisle. The engine starts up and the city disappears. It will be morning soon. The bus won't stop until Madrid. The woman nods off, breathing heavily. Her head bobs with each turn of the mountain road. She has the rest of the trip to sleep.

I was a waitress for three months at the restaurant until my mother realized that boys were coming just to stare at me. I was sixteen. The boys would order only a small glass of beer, a few pintxos. I knew them each from school. They would leave puddles of olive oil, shredded napkins, overturned glasses. My mother told my father I should stay in the kitchen. My father said, "I didn't want her out there to begin with." He'd heard what they said at school.

The boys who came to see Nekane would laugh, too, but only into their palms as they turned as red as a tomato. The boys who laughed at me didn't cover their mouths. They didn't blush. Nekane's admirers ordered pintxo after pintxo. "Oh, sure, Nekane," they would say. "You could bring us another handsome pintxo." She laughed with the boys. She had big black hair and didn't wear the ETA hairstyle like the girls in our village who went away for University. My father watched her bring back plates and carry platters. She would return to the kitchen and talk about red-faced boys. My mother would say, "They are trying to trick you, Nekane." The oil in the frying pan spit into the air, onto the stove. "Nice words, yes, but don't listen too hard."

In the restaurant, my mother, father, seven brothers, and my sister spoke in Basque. My brothers would stay longest at the table, speaking loudly. They'd come from the hardware store, a construction site or an early-occupied barstool in the village. They ate my father's food, staring at his long peaked nose as they watched him drink glasses of blond beer. On the days that they brought their girlfriends, my mother and I fetched more chairs. When they couldn't find work, my mother would bring them more beer. Nekane always sat at my father's side, facing the restaurant, watching for raised hands or empty plates. My mother and I were the last to sit down, at the far end of the table.

Most afternoons they talked about the car bombings, tilting their berets as my

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father did. The eldest brothers twirled the ends of their moustaches and spoke about the old times in the Resistance and the Liberation. My father clapped his palms together, sometimes spilling his glass as he flung his hands out, saying, "You boys, you only ride the coattails of my struggle!"

Nekane did not want our father's struggle. "I want my nation," she said. She didn't read the Basque papers or go to the meetings with my brothers, who shamed my mother when she slipped and called us Spaniards instead of the people of Euskadi.

At the lunch table, my mother spoke to me in a soft voice, most often in Castilian, about what was left in the freezers, or whether or not we needed more bread. She didn't like the political talk. "If I had wanted to marry a radical, I would have picked an Opus Dei," she said every now and then. She prayed before each meal. When my father pulled Nekane onto his lap, my mother stared at him and didn't smile.

Once when he wouldn't let my sister go, my mother cried out, "Mikel!" In the silence that followed, my brothers' faces turned toward her, some of them rising onto their elbows to lean forward, gawking. "Your daughter is a woman now!" she said, crumpling a paper napkin in her hand, looking straight past her sons to my father's seat.

My father dropped his hands to his side. "And do you have something against my daughter's womanliness?" he asked slowly in Euskera. Nekane stood up, thin and small-chested for her eighteen years. She flapped her apron against her thighs and tucked her dark hair behind her ear. She sat down again in her chair beside him. My mother picked up her fork and bread again, pushing the food around on her plate. My oldest brother picked up the old scandal of political prisoners. My father clapped his hands and said, "ETA never thanks its elders! My comrades died in prison and all you faggots can do is sit at my table and argue that ETArras are not sleeping well enough in their cells." He didn't look at Nekane.

Sometimes I wonder if my mother knew before the night at the dumpster when Nekane told her. I don't know how she could have missed it. I don't know how many Basque words she needed to know. Some days after lunch she'd get angry, shaking a towel at the kitchen wall. "I wish your father wouldn't talk like that," she said. Sometimes, when the orders stopped coming and we stood in the doorway of the kitchen, I found her watching my father as he stared at Nekane. She crossed her arms and sighed, one hand running up her breast and shoulder to return the clasp of her crucifix to the back of her neck.

Nekane said it only happened for one summer, until she turned twelve and started her period. He didn't want her pregnant. I believed her, but I don't anymore. I think he did it to her for years. I try to remember things, late-night things, doors opening, the sound of footsteps in the room next to mine. Wouldn't my mother have heard these things, too? The sound of the mattress springs as my father left their bed; the draft from the hallway moving across her bare shoulders.

I think of Nekane, whose name I have always hated, at eleven and I think of my father separating her legs. She had thin legs.

The sun is coming up and I don't want to think about it. We have left the mountains now and are entering the dry lands. The driver turns up the air conditioning. I want to get my sweatshirt—second hand and from my sister—from my backpack on the rack above, but the woman next to me is still asleep. The road has straightened and her head droops low, unmoving. I stand up, my back hunched against the plank of plastic that runs above our heads. My white hair touches her shoulder. "Excuse me, I need to get out," I say in Euskera.

She jerks away from me. Among her curls, crushed in her sleep, I see flakes of dried gel. "Sorry," she says in Castilian. She twists her knees into the aisle and I squeeze past her.

My mother bought me the backpack two days ago. "For your trip," she said. "What color do you want?"

"I don't care," I told her.

I pull the sweatshirt from the big pocket. I put it on and go to the bathroom. I pee a long time, clean myself, flush, then stand at the small sink. I push the tap, but no water comes out. In the mirror, I look the same. I put my fingers to my nose. I still smell like potato skins.

In the bus, everyone snores in their sleep. Their thoughts don't keep them awake. Even the woman next to me has dozed off again with ease, and I have to poke her to take my seat.

We have two more hours until we reach Madrid. I have another half day ahead of me after that. I am going to Jaén, to my grandmother's. My mother and I have quit the restaurant. She's stayed behind to convince my sister to come with her, allowing me to leave before her. I've left because I can't bear to look into his face. I don't want to hear my brothers call my sister a pervert, or blame her for dishonoring their father. I didn't say goodbye to him.

The night before I left, my mother found out that, during the hours she sat

in the unlocked church, Nekane had been letting him back into the apartment. I imagine her making peeling motions with her hands as she prayed, and later as she walked back along the sloping streets of our village. Meanwhile, my sister would open the door, watch as he gathered clothing, washed his face, took the last liter in

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the fridge. I stayed in my room, in my nation, and waited for the sound of the lock turning when he left.

Nekane refuses to leave because she calls herself a Basque. She said she doesn't remember my grandmother, or Andalucía, or even the old photo from her apartment: white lace pillows on the couch, doilies on the small coffee table, a daughter with balled knees and an albino sister in the dim light of a living room. “I won't leave my nation,” she said, wrinkling her nose, sharp and pointed like my father's, like a Basque. She is moving to Bilbao where there are more restaurants, where she will find work.

My grandmother will meet me at the bus station. My mother warned me that she will want to pray over me. “She will be suspicious of you because of your color,” she said. “She will ask you things about me.” They have not seen each other since I was born. “I married a Basque and an atheist, and on top of that I am a sinful woman,” my mother said. My grandmother marches in the third row of women in the Holy Week processions, and she still wears black, two decades after my grandfather's death.

I close my hands into fists and lean against the cool window of the bus, but I can't sleep. I think of the political prisoners awake in their cells and of the dark hair of my father's arms as he wrapped them around Nekane. They will have to hire someone for the kitchen now, to keep the meals coming, the men's elbows on the table, berets on their heads. They already fired the man who washes dishes, after he told the men at the bar. I'd never find a husband now. Neither could Nekane. Everyone knows. It's best to leave. No one in our village could want me after this, and besides, my mother says prayers for the restaurant to close.

My mother will join me in Andalucía in a week. Nekane will find a job as a

waitress in Bilbao. I will take my new black backpack from above, file out behind the woman wheezing next to me, and claim my suitcase below.

I notice that the traffic has thickened outside. The Moroccan's cell phone rings. He speaks in Arabic. The woman next to me wakes. She frowns and searches in her purse for the pack of Pall Malls. He finishes in Castilian: "We're almost there."

Nekane didn't come with us when my mother dropped me off at the San Sebastian bus station just before dawn. She came into my room last night and sat next to the last pile of clothes I was putting into my suitcase. She peeled back a layer of clothes on the bed to see the one below. She said, "It will be hard for you, Alba. Because of your skin."

"It can't be worse than here," I said.

"You shouldn't go. The sun's so strong in the South." She took my hand and pulled it onto her lap. She opened my hand, pale against the browned skin of her own. "I always hated this about you. It kept him from touching you." Before she said goodnight, she told me to remember to speak Euskera with our mother. "She might let herself forget, but you can't." I already knew, before she said it, that I would not speak that language to my mother.

I stand behind my suitcase in the bus station in Madrid before the large screen where the red letters of the cities rise higher with the departure of each bus. San Sebastian is in the middle. Jaén is three quarters of the way down. My mother has given me money for my ticket, but I haven't bought it yet.

No one speaks Euskera. A man stands next to me with a girl in his arms, her thin legs wrapped around his waist. He points to the screen and says, "See, Alba?" He glances at me—because I shuddered, or because of my skin?—and hoists the girl higher. He turns back to the screen. He repeats my name. "There! We're going home!" He walks away and the names of the cities rise up.