



LAIA FÀBREGAS  
**LANDEN**



ROMAN • ANTHOS



## **Laia Fàbregas** *Landing*

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*SHE*

*He died during the landing.*

*When we were taking off I noticed how he grabbed his knees with his hands, how the veins under his skin swelled up gradually and I hoped he was not in pain. As soon as we were in the air, he calmed down. The cabin lights made everything clear. Contrary to my habit I started talking to him. I asked him if he had fear of flying. He said it was ten years ago since his last flight.'*

During a flight an old Spanish man sits next to a young Dutch woman. They start to talk. After landing, she waits until all people except the plane crew have disembarked. 'He died during the landing,' 'she' says at the start of this puzzling story. She has the urge to take the wooden box, that the man carried with him, home.

'He' moved to the Netherlands in the sixties as a labourer, married a Dutch woman and has three sons. 'She' works for the tax office, doesn't like to be home alone, and therefore eats often in the pub of her friend, barwoman Karen Abram. She spends the weekends visiting people whose names are on a list. Between the hundred names she expects to find the person who is connected to the wooden box.

In alternating 'he' and 'she' chapters Laia Fàbregas shares with us an intriguing tale of a search: for nostalgia, happiness and unconditional love.

Laia Fàbregas (1973) was born in Barcelona and lives alternately in the Netherlands and Spain. She studied Visual Arts at the University of Barcelona and Cultural Management at the University of Rotterdam. Her debut 'The Girl With Nine Fingers' (2010) was sold to Spain (incl. Catalan) Denmark, Norway, France and Italy.

Press on 'The Girl With Nine Fingers': 'An extraordinary debut which kept a firm grip on me.' *Elle*

'A remarkable debut. Laia Fabregas' language is evocative, poetic and straightforward. She catches young and adult insecurities in startling prose.' *De Telegraaf*

## SHE

He died during the landing.

During take-off I saw him gripping his knees with his hands, the blood vessels bulging under his skin, and I hoped that he wasn't in pain. He relaxed as soon as we were airborne. The cabin lights illuminated everything. Unusually for me, I spoke to him. I asked if flying made him nervous. He replied that it had been ten years since his last flight.

He was on his way to his eldest son. 'My Dutch son,' he had mumbled. He spoke haltingly, searching for words in an imaginary dictionary that he clearly hadn't opened in years. His words unfolded like fragments of a poem with an unusual rhythm. Although all three of his sons had been born in the Netherlands, he explained proudly, only the eldest was really Dutch. The other two had been endowed with more Spanish genes than the first-born, Arjen. Perhaps this choice of Christian name had determined his future. If he had been called Simon or Robert, like the other two, he would never have had to spell his name in Spain and he would have felt more at home in his father's country. But no. His name was Arjen and now, forty-four years later, his home was in Amsterdam, while that of his brothers was in Barcelona.

He talked to me as though we had known each other forever. I felt an affection for him that was both compelling and uncomfortable. Without any further prompting, he told me that he was born in a village somewhere in the interior of Spain. He had come to the Netherlands as a migrant worker in the sixties. Learning Dutch hadn't been easy at

first, but when he met a remarkable woman he realized that he wanted to marry her and that he had to learn her language.

He paused a moment and relished the memory.

The flight attendants approached with the trolley service. He lowered his tray in anticipation of a nice meal. When I told him that the food was no longer free, he looked disappointed. I showed him the menu, but he didn't actually fancy any food. He muttered that he just wanted some distraction, that I distracted him by listening and then resumed his story.

For ten years he had been the happiest man in the world, he said. The Netherlands was a good country to live in and the summers in Spain had been warm and familiar. But then his wife had fallen ill. At first the doctors couldn't work out what it was. In the end they said that a milder climate would do her good. The children were between six and eleven years old in the seventies when they loaded up the car and moved to a village north of Barcelona.

He was quiet for a moment and turned to me. I saw the look in his eyes: the eyes that must have been dark brown once were now light grey and full of experience. It dawned on me that I seldom spoke to elderly people, that I rarely sat beside elderly people. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen and admired an elderly person.

It had been such a long time since his last trip to the Netherlands that his Dutch had grown rusty. He told me this as if I hadn't noticed myself. When I told him that his Dutch was very good he looked proud.

He had brought along the wooden box on the seat between us to show to his eldest son.

Later I switched on my iPod and fell asleep. I woke up when the captain announced that we were preparing for landing. I switched the music off. The man felt apprehensive again. His hands grabbed hold of his knees, like they had during take-off. When I looked at him again he smiled at me and in my mind I wished him a safe landing; then I turned to the window to look at the landscape down below.

When the wheels hit the tarmac, I felt an angel sigh in my ear.

The aircraft came to a standstill and everybody on the plane got up to put on their coats, grab their luggage and leave. His body remained in the same position, with his hands clutching his legs and his head bent slightly forward. I looked at his face, I touched his shoulder and I felt my heart sink.

We were united in a shared silence while the rest of the plane was a hive of activity. I knew that everybody had arrived home, except him, and I felt alone. Much lonelier than I'd ever felt. We were sitting in row 22. After everybody had left, a flight attendant began to inspect the seats. She was going about it in the belief that the aircraft was empty. I wasn't sure if I wanted to catch her attention or if I needed a moment to say goodbye. To make myself invisible, I sank back deeper into my seat. I looked at the man and tried to remember everything he had told me. There might well be a son with a wife and grandchildren waiting for him in the arrivals hall. A sense of guilt washed over me: I happened to be the one granted the privilege of hearing their father and grandfather's final words.

The flight attendant started when she saw us. She asked me why we hadn't left the aircraft.

'He's not moving anymore.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think he's dead.' The flight attendant reached for the man's head, but an invisible force stopped her hand from touching his body. Instead she reached across the man's head for the panel underneath the overhead lockers. Clearly agitated, she repeatedly pressed down hard on the red button.

'How long has he been dead?'

'I think he died during the landing.'

The flight attendant kept staring down the aisle.

'I'm going to find assistance. Will you wait here?' she asked hesitantly. I nodded.

The woman walked away and I felt claustrophobic. I got up, leaned forward and tried to get out of the row of seats. I pressed the button on the man's armrest to recline the back of his seat. This gave me a bit more space to step over his knees and reach the aisle. I took my handbag and the paper that I'd bought at Barcelona airport and lifted my right leg over him. I briefly held the back of the seat in front of him and as soon as my right toes touched the floor I lifted my left leg and shifted my weight with a little skip. I nearly tumbled onto the seats across the aisle, but I hadn't touched the man, nor had I inadvertently kicked him, which is what I had been dreading most.

I looked at his face from the other side; he appeared to be another person now. I didn't even know his name. I only knew his late wife's name: Willemien. And those of his three sons: Arjen, Simon and Robert.

All of a sudden I noticed the box again; it sat untouched on the middle seat. I took it. Then I retrieved my small trolley from the overhead locker and put the box into it.



In another overhead locker I found the man's coat and a small suitcase. I put them on the seat in front of him. I fought the impulse to touch his shoulder again, promised to take good care of his box and left. In the jet bridge I ran into the flight attendant, who was accompanying two men in uniform to the entrance. I told them that I didn't know the passenger and that I was in a hurry.

'I think you ought to wait until the police get here,' the younger of the two mumbled, his eyes searching his colleague's for confirmation.

'Why?' I asked. This turned out to be a difficult question. The men stared at one another until the elder one spoke up: 'You know what, why don't you give us your phone number, then the police can call you if they have any questions.'

I handed him Ana Mei Balau's business card and left. I took the train home. Outside it was peaceful and dark, flat and orderly. Inside it was busy with commuters going home, an ordinary Monday. I found a vacant seat opposite two women who were having an intense conversation. I always went for seats near couples or nattering girlfriends. Throughout the journey I sat still and never once felt the urge to strike up a conversation. That day I also decided that from now on I would always sit next to young people. I didn't want to feel anyone else dying beside me.

At Central Station I spent ages looking for my bike on the crowded parking deck. I tied the trolley to my luggage carrier and cycled up Haarlemmerdijk. I stopped at The Movies, bought a ticket for a Japanese film and entered the dark cinema.

That day I got home earlier than usual; it wasn't even midnight yet. I parked the trolley beside my bedroom door and jumped into bed, in the hope that the fatigue of the flight would help me get to sleep.

The alarm went off at six. Life was as dark and cold as ever and out in the street people were scraping their car windows. An hour and a cold bike ride later, I was at my desk at the Amsterdam Tax Office.

## HE

I don't like flying, I've never liked it, but the choice of life in a foreign country forces you to fly. Not just once, but every time you want to shorten the distance between past and present.

The days were getting longer and longer, filled with silences and memories of other places. Willemien died just as I was getting used to life without the boys, to the fact that now we were two, instead of five, four or three. All of a sudden I was alone. In the same year that Robert went to work in Barcelona Willemien died, leaving me with few reasons to stay in Figueres. With Willemien suddenly gone I began to notice the inanities around me. The sharp angles of the house, the neatly organized wardrobe drawers and the street noises began to manifest themselves with unprecedented intensity. I realized that everything around me was inextricably linked to Willemien. I didn't hear the noises outside or the upstairs neighbours' pipes myself, it was Willemien who heard them and who sharpened my ears so I could listen with her. I didn't know whether the walls of our hallway at home were white or cream; during a visit to friends, it was Willemien who drew my attention to the fact that our hallway was darker than theirs.

It was this realization that hurt me most. Feeling her absence in something as mundane as the noise of a lorry carrying gas cylinders down the street. Because I was in danger of disappearing altogether I was forced to take some drastic action.

I cleared out the house. I stacked everything in a room with a lock so that I could rent out the house in Figueres without having to move or sell all of our things.

All of my things.

That's when I spotted the little box again that I hadn't seen for years. The box was locked and despite my best efforts I couldn't find the key that fit the iron padlock. I thought of forcing the lock or taking the box to a locksmith, but I figured that it would turn up later, in some random place. And so I ended up going back, with the locked box, to my native village. I also took a small suitcase with some clothes and two books.

In the train back to the village I imagined that the box was full of sand from the beach where Willemien and I had gone on our first trip to look at the sea. That day I told her that she was the most beautiful girl in Scheveningen and that made her laugh because she was always lost for words after a compliment or because I had mispronounced the name of The Hague's most famous beach.

I arrived in the Netherlands during one of the harshest winters in the country's history. People said that the mercury had dropped to its lowest level in fifty years. It wasn't uncommon to see frozen canals and lakes, with Dutch men and women gliding across on skates, but that year the winter was even harsher, that year even the pipes froze and we were briefly left without running water. It was February 1963 and I had come over to work for a year, after which I would return to my country, with money, experience and the wisdom that comes with living in other worlds. That was the original plan. A plan that had been simmering in my mind for some time.

It had all started in October 1962. I had worked on the farm all day, in the blazing sun. My father and brother had already returned to the village to take some equipment to the blacksmith's for repairs. So that

day I walked back on my own. I was nearly home when I bumped into the union leader, who showed me a letter he had just received from Madrid. It came from the Ministry for Work and was about international corporations looking for workers. He asked if I felt like going to a foreign country and earning lots of money in a short space of time. Without thinking I replied that I didn't fancy that at all.

But that wasn't the end of it. It stirred something inside, something that reminded me every day of the opportunities offered by this new adventure. I could go to another country, where I would earn lots of money in a short period of time; I could help my family without working on the farm, before returning to my country and building my own house. I could create some distance between Mariana and me. Enough distance to return with a new lease of life. I would leave the past behind.

Then I began to dream about it. In my dream I found myself in another country, working in a gigantic warehouse with towering ceilings and circular skylights. My job involved building enormous light bulbs from chunks of thick glass, which were fitted together like pieces of a puzzle and which then magically fused. The effort produced an enormous, perfect, transparent light bulb. Then I took a minute to inspect it and realized that if only I wiped it I could make it shine like the sun. So that's what I did.

I was surrounded by light bulbs that were identical to mine, each with a man piecing it together. Just like my father took care of the tools with which he cultivated his rented farm land, each of us looked after his own light bulb. I remember being immensely happy in my dream, feeling a sense of familiarity that reminded me of home, the

camaraderie that I occasionally glimpsed from a distance when I saw my brother and father working together.

When I woke up I knew that I had to go.

I knew that my father wouldn't be pleased. He had been irate when I told him that I was going to be a bell-boy at La Moraleja del Peral, at the Café de los Señores. But we all knew that farming wasn't for me, or rather, that I wasn't cut out for farming. For as long as I can remember, I've known that I've let my father down. He had primed me as his successor, but bit by bit I handed back the title that he had so carefully bestowed on me. Fortunately my brother Pedro could and would gladly inherit the job. And in addition to the job he gained my father's respect.

I continued to lend a hand on the farm, but we all knew that there was a clear distinction between lending a hand and working. Besides, when Mariana got into the habit of popping round and delivering our lunch, I stayed away more often. That's why I applied for a job at the Café de los Señores. And so Pedro won. He won everything, even though he never fought for anything.

Despite the fact that I was merely lending a hand on the farm, I still worried that they would miss me, because six hands can always do more than four. And the girls, as we used to call my three sisters back then, were much younger than us and couldn't help out yet.

Without telling anyone, I went to the union office. It was there that the Netherlands was first brought to my attention; they said I could get a job with Philips. I thought of the radio in the Café de los Señores, of the gleaming letters that I thought said 'pilix'. I pictured myself building or varnishing these radios and other gadgets of the future – they were still

made of wood at the time – and registered along with four other villagers.

The next day my father learned that my name was on the list. He combed the village for me, found me in the pub and told me to come out. There, in the Calle Mayor, walking the 15 feet that separated the pub door from the shadow line drawn across the street, I anticipated a good hiding and dreaded hearing that he had arranged for my name to be removed from the list.

But when we reached the other side of the street, when we were well-protected against the afternoon sun of Extremadura, he said that it was good that I was leaving. That it was good for me to get a job that suited me better and that would earn me a decent wage.

Words failed me. He continued and said that I had to come back when I had saved enough money, and that I had to write regularly, especially to my mother and the girls, who would miss me a lot. And so the unforeseen did happen after all.

Families move in mysterious ways.

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