

WALLS

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For Mariña and Inma, always.

Over every frontier,
over walls and fences,
if we share a dream,
I speak to you as a brother.

CELSO EMILIO FERREIRO,
Long Night of Stone

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As far as Helen is concerned, her town is the most beautiful in the world. Some nights, when she can't get to sleep, she imagines she and Joel can fly and rise up high, like the eagles which scan the valley on clear days. Then they both slide down the air currents and, hand in hand, fly over the places they visit every day, which from above look even prettier than usual.

There are so many things Helen likes about her town! The houses, the trees, the river, the library and square... There are always people chatting in the streets and, in the early evening, the pavement cafés are full of smiley faces discussing

the day's events. Winter is never long and, in summer, the heat is never stifling.

Helen lives in a street of identical houses. They all have a chimney and two dormer windows in the roof facing the front, as well as a small garden each family has filled with different plants. In Helen's garden is an enormous bougainvillea which climbs up the wall of the house and blossoms with red flowers in the summer months.

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Every morning, when she leaves home, the first thing Helen does is go and call on Joel, who lives in a house on the lower side of town, where the streets are narrow and the buildings are older. There she waits for her friend, who is almost always late because he likes to sleep in. When he finally shows his face, the two of them greet each other warmly and make their way to school.

At that hour of the morning the High Street is already bustling. They love to stop in front of the shops, observe all the different fish on display in the fishmonger's, the

books in the bookshop window with their attractive covers, the fruits of a thousand colours in the greengrocer's... Though what they enjoy the most is the delicious aroma of freshly baked bread coming out of Rosa's bakery and flooding the pavement.

In the afternoons they always meet under the great oak tree on the other side of the park, in a field which slopes down to the river. The oak tree is so huge, even if they stretch out their arms, they can still only hold a small part of the trunk. It'd need a group of children to surround the trunk completely.

This tree could easily be called the House of Birds since every evening it fills with blackbirds, chaffinches, starlings, turtle doves, wrens, linnets and other birds which come to land on its branches. They make a deafening noise with their chirps and trills, like an orchestra in which every instrument does its own thing, which slowly diminishes as night closes in.

It's also a house for the two children. A house which protects them from the sun during the summer and from the rain unleashed by the clouds during the winter. They often climb up the tree to where the trunk divides into three large branches. From their vantage point they can see the river encircling the town, the fields of maize and potatoes, and the woods stretching as far as the horizon.

Up there they feel like castaways on a desert island, far from the gaze of people. Or, on days when the wind shakes the branches and rustles the leaves, like sailors on a solitary ship crossing a grassy ocean with open sails. The tree is like a secret hideaway, an ideal place for their games.

On the first day of the school year, their teacher had read them a story in class about a city where people wrote or drew their wishes on pieces of paper and hung them on a tree in the main square,





so that its branches were always covered in sheets of coloured paper which looked like flowers or exotic fruit. And though the wind plucked the sheets and carried them off, though the rain soaked them through and made the words impossible to read, that tree never knew winter and every morning was covered in new pieces of paper because the city's inhabitants would have died of sorrow if they hadn't been able to put their wishes into words.

They liked the story so much they decided to do something similar with their oak tree. But to stop anyone finding out their wishes, they wrote a word on the back of the leaves with a felt tip pen which recalled the wish they'd asked for. They agreed not to say them out loud, so Joel had to guess why Helen had written EAGLE, SHIP, KISS, ALWAYS... And she had to do the same with the words her friend wrote – PLANE, PIRATE, KISS and many others.