



Miguel Quemada

CHIMERA

A patient's journey of hope through transplantation



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through transplantation**

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For Cécile

Prologue

The conclusion was undeniable: If I wanted to stay alive, I would have to become a chimera. I would also undergo periodic chimerism tests to ensure that the new state I had reached was stable. Doubtful, I signed the consent form despite being warned that I would have to go through a painful transformation process.

I left the office with uncertain steps and a puzzled mind. After much thought, I consulted a dictionary for the meaning of the word "chimera" to find out what future awaited me. It's striking how different the meanings of the word are; not all chimeras are the same, and each represents something different.

A Chimera is a mythological monster with very ancient origins, composed of the union of several animals. The classical myth describes a lion with a goat's head growing from its back and another head of a serpent on its tail. It breathes fire, and its representations show not a beautiful or

attractive animal but rather a terrible and unsympathetic monster that ravages the earth's surface whenever it ascends from its lair in the depths of the earth.

Chimeras are also a product of the imagination. They are passions that are longed for or pursued even though they may not be possible. To be generous, we can think of them as having a positive side, since most chimeras are youthful daydreams that we pursue naively or with good intentions, even if they cannot become reality. The word itself still carries a certain negative connotation because, as unreachable illusions, they can lead to frustration or cause people to abandon more realistic goals, driving them away from rational analysis.

In biology, a chimera is a living being resulting from the union of genetically distinct cells from different organisms. In the past, chimeras in higher animals were not viable, but modern medicine has managed to develop them through transplants and keep them alive with treatments. A person who has received an organ transplant has become a "human chimera" because their body is composed of cells

with different genetic compositions. They will remain a chimera for the rest of their life, and although there may be rejection between the receiving body and the donated organ, these can be medically controlled to ensure coexistence.

Among these forms of chimerism, there is a particular case: that of bone marrow transplants. These are performed to cure blood or lymphatic system diseases. The patient's dysfunctional bone marrow is destroyed, and the new stem cells implanted from the donor will give rise to new bone marrow. This bone marrow takes root in the bones and begins to produce blood, spreading throughout the body. The patient changes blood type and adopts the donor's, becoming a chimera with cells of both genetic compositions: Those of the new blood and those of the original body. This is a true rebirth, achieved after a traumatic treatment. The feeling of being reborn is reinforced during recovery, when it is necessary to repeat the childhood vaccination schedule, as the immune system's memory is lost with the replacement of the bone marrow.

In my case, the donor was my sister. The chimera I accepted to become harbors my new XX chromosomal bone marrow alongside the rest of my cells, which are XY. The blood generated by my new bone marrow is also XX. The periodic chimerism tests I undergo consist of checking that my blood is feminine. As long as it is, the transplant is stable; if masculine cells appear in my blood, it indicates a problem, immediate hospital admission.

I am proud to say that now "feminism runs in my blood." On the other hand, the idea of the "chimeric beast," representing destruction and ancient depths, both imposes respect and fills me with dread. That is why I write this novel, to discover who I have become and to make sense of this monstrous chimera, which at the same time can be the embodiment of youthful dreams.

The theft of the black pearls

It all began with a phone call. It was Saturday afternoon, and some jewelry had disappeared from the luxurious home of a respectable family in Madrid. The previous night, a dinner party had been held with six guests joining the owners of the house. As on other occasions, after dinner, the guests moved to the living room, where they had a drink surrounded by some of the finest art the family owned.

At the far end of the room, covering an entire wall, hung an excellent painting by Tàpies. On the side walls, prominent engravings by Picasso and Miró were displayed, and on a ledge between the windows were two exquisite small Flemish oil paintings from the early Renaissance. In one of the corners, a glass case housed about a dozen large, smooth black pearls, which, placed on a green velvet cushion, could easily go unnoticed on a first visit. There were

many other jewelry pieces of goldwork displayed on the shelves around the room, but the stolen items, taken after breaking the case, were the black pearls.

Among the guests was the owners' son, accompanied by his new girlfriend, an American woman with a calm smile and an intelligent gaze. They had met at a party hosted by the American company he worked for, where she was doing a professional internship. What initially seemed like a brief romance had already lasted over six months, leading him to introduce her to his parents. She was very attractive—tall like her boyfriend and of athletic build, with a determined air she seemed to want to conceal. A New Yorker by origin, she spoke grammatically perfect Spanish with a slight, almost imperceptible Anglo-Saxon accent.

Another guest was a Colombian businessman, accompanied by his wife, who was also very beautiful and from the same country. He was involved in maritime trade, although I couldn't specify much more about his work despite receiving a detailed description of what he did. In summary, it was about the buying and selling of various goods, and he

managed the ships and containers that transported them. It was a complex job, highly exposed to geopolitical conditions, requiring his full dedication as well as that of his employees and collaborators in his Swiss office. He traveled frequently between America and Europe, and had recently acquired an apartment in Madrid's Salamanca neighborhood to have a base in the city. He often used nautical terms in his vocabulary—"base of operations," "ports of destination," "crew"—and if he occasionally let slip a term from the jargon of other businesses, like "wheeling and dealing" or "speculating," he would immediately correct himself without giving it much importance. He had planned to fly to Bogotá on Sunday night but had postponed it to the following week at the request of the police investigating the case.

The dinner party was completed by a couple of well-preserved men in their fifties with an elegant appearance. They were married and had been friends of the hosts for many years. One of them, the younger one, worked in the fashion world, while the other, who sported perfectly manicured nails, was involved in the art market. They owned

a gallery near Alonso Martínez, descending toward Chueca, where they exhibited works by national and international contemporary artists. The older man was dressed elegantly but casually, and it was clear that he took great care of his physical appearance. He was the more dominant of the two and told me that most of their clients who purchased art came from Salamanca or from private residences in the Madrid area, such as those in La Moraleja, with whose owners they had had long-standing relationships. The information about the clients was strictly confidential, and he could only tell me that they sold visual art—paintings and sculptures, mainly—but also various types of design and combinations that could be described as "indefinable." His partner, though only four or five years younger, had a youthful face, spoke little, and smiled a lot. When I interviewed them for the first time, they came to my office together, and I had to insist on speaking with them separately as I needed independent accounts.

Following the police investigations, I was allowed to interview each of the dinner guests. I obtained statements

from all of them in the days following the theft, and, for better or worse, contradictions began to surface that I won't dwell on here. That night, only the homeowners had slept in the house. Almost all of the others had left around midnight, with the son and his girlfriend staying about half an hour longer to chat with the parents.

The pearls were shown to me only in a photograph taken at the pedestal where they had been displayed until the theft. Although large for their species, they could easily fit into a fist and could have been hidden together or separately to smuggle them out of the house. At the crime scene, there were shards from the protective glass case, which had been broken with a sharp object. An irregular opening allowed a hand to pass through the glass, leaving little doubt about the method used in the theft. Whoever had done it didn't seem to be a professional, but they were careful and skilled enough to accomplish it. There were traces of a putty applied to control the breakage, which was fairly clean except near the side closest to the living room, where there were some imperfections in the hole. No fingerprints or traces of tools

were left—only one misstep that could lead to the thief's downfall: A shard of glass had lightly scratched the skin, leaving a small trace of what appeared to be blood. Forensic scientists took a sample, which they sent to the hematology lab. We had the analysis results within a week.

A mistaken interpretation of the evidence is a surefire path to error. The only available vaccine is distrust. Suspicion of the evidence, because it motivates us to verify and cross-check it. Doubt of oneself, because it keeps us away from presumption and gullibility. If I had followed these simple premises, I would still be working as a private detective. However, there are occasions when letting mistakes carry us away can bring satisfactions that we can only appreciate in hindsight.

The insurance company had hired me to find the culprit, but from the beginning, I was warned that the pearls were only insured for ten thousand euros, a trivial sum compared to the ten million euros covering the rest of the collection. We were to provide excellent service, as this was an important client, but the theft itself was considered minor.

Apart from my financial interest—I earned better fees when the stolen items were of high value—I couldn't help but wonder why, among other items with higher monetary value, the black pearls were the ones stolen. There were obvious reasons: Their size made them easy to hide and transport, and with the right contacts, they could be sold quickly and profitably. However, other pieces in the collection, like some gold items inlaid with diamonds, were insured for larger amounts and weren't taken. The Flemish paintings were the size of a laptop and could have been stolen without much difficulty. As for their resale price, I wouldn't dare to estimate, but it was likely to have several zeros attached to it. Unless I was mistaken, the thief had entered with a specific target in mind: the black pearls.

About the author



Miguel Quemada (Logroño, Spain, 1964) is a Full Professor at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain). He is included in the World's top 2% scientists' list from Stanford University and he has published more than 110 research articles focused on developing sustainable food production systems in the current and future climate conditions. In 2023, Dr. Quemada went through an acute myeloid leukemia (MLA) and a bone marrow transplant that save his life. He writes this book to show his experience in

the transplant process and to share it with readers who may approach this book as patients, friends, physicians or merely out of literary curiosity.