elipsis 5

2020

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Foreword

Tom Birtwistle
Director, British Council Colombia

We are living through what may be the strangest time of our lives. The year 2020 forced us to turn the way we do everything around: how we go out, how we relate to the people we love, how we study, and how we work. The group of twelve young emerging writers and editors who began their journey in writing and editing through the British Council's Ellipsis program in January 2020 were no exception.

When they met for the first time at the Hay Festival in Cartagena, we were already seeing headlines about the virus that was scaring the world, but without any confirmed cases in our continent, that reality still felt distant and alien. The workshop in Cartagena went as it has since the beginning of the program in 2015: everyone gathered in a room with Marta Orrantia and Alejandra Jaramillo, the programme's two outstanding academic coordinators. We were even joined by a writer and an editor from Argentina, who travelled to Cartagena for the meeting and were scheduled to return to Bogotá for the second gathering at the Bogotá International Book Fair (FILBo).

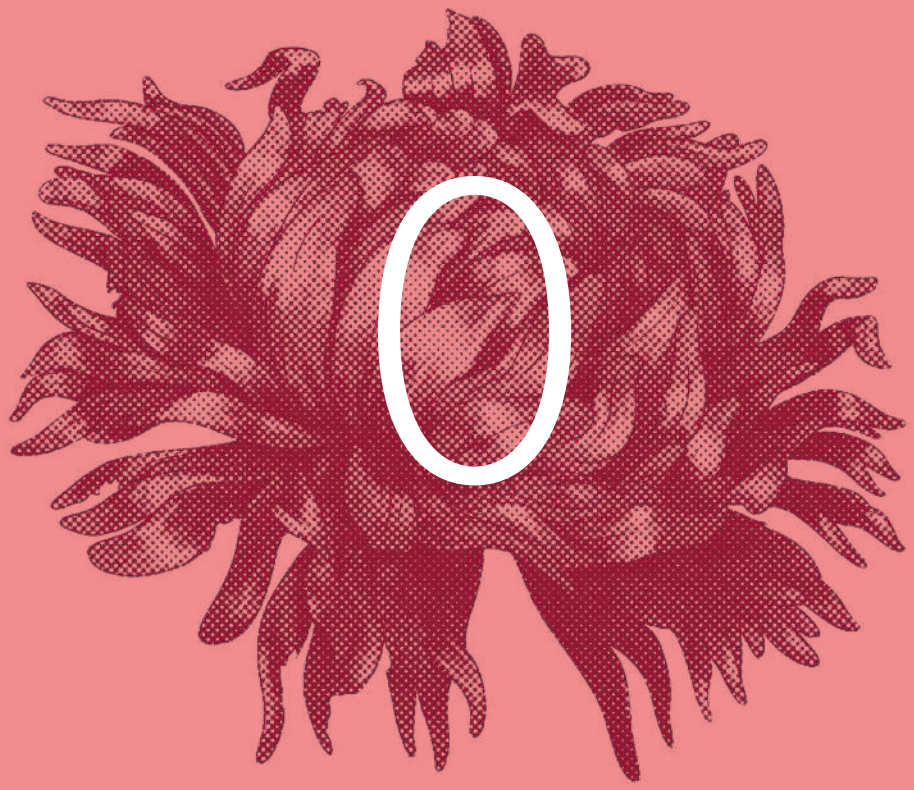
Five weeks later, everything changed dramatically. The possibility of meeting again at FILBo fell apart, and we each began our lives in quarantine. The continuation of Ellipsis was put on hold, as were the vast majority of cultural and artistic events throughout Colombia, the Americas, and the world.

However—and fortunately for readers of this book—writing cannot be stopped. These twelve young people continued writing, and in September we were able to hold the second Ellipsis workshop remotely, with Marta and Alejandra each in a different corner of Europe, and the talented writers and editors participating in this cycle from their various confinements in Colombia and Argentina. The writing continued, and with it began the editorial process that culminated in the publication of this volume.

The pandemic confirmed what we already knew, that when the doors to our world are closed, we turn to the arts and culture as open windows that let the outside world in and allow us to express what we have to say. Because the arts feed our minds and our spirit in ways that sustain us, they are essential to our good health.

Ellipsis is the backbone of the British Council's work in literature, and we could not be prouder of this programme, particularly this year when its continuation demanded the utmost fluidity, adaptability, and perseverance from everyone involved.

It gives me great pleasure to present this anthology, the fifth edition of the British Council's Ellipsis writing programme. I wholeheartedly congratulate the twelve emerging talents we were fortunate to have in 2020, the strangest of years.



Time, Ineffability, and Surprise

Marta Orrantia
Editors' coordinator

Alejandra Jaramillo Morales
Creative writing coordinator

This book represents the culmination of the fifth cycle of *Ellipsis*. This writers-in-training project by the British Council, which six years ago was an intuition and today is the realization of the type of support young people require to develop their writing processes, is now in its fifth edition. It is our great joy to have been there from the beginning of this training, writing, and editing process for these five books of short stories.

First, there is the everyday experience: the wonder of meeting with our groups of students, the reading process, the conversations around literature, the act of creation; the different moments in which, as part of the creative process, we support the writers in training until the first drafts of the stories are ready. Then, the process of training the editors to approach these texts, to read them, comment on them, and shape them follows. The encounters between editors and writers are tremendously rich because

they show us that writing is a process of continuous correction and cooperation, a process of getting to the bottom of what the first draft wants to say to discover greater particularity, the true narrative impulse that lies beneath the words that a writer has placed one after another to build a text. Then comes the copyediting experience that lasts several months during the second half of the year. Finally, we arrive at the wonderful moment when we find ourselves in front of a book translated into English, a book that is a great boost to young writers and young editors in their career in literature and publishing.

Secondly, we want to talk about this book, this copy that you are holding in your hands. Ever since we met with the first group in 2015 at the Hay Festival in Cartagena, the idea emerged that all the work we did during the year, the writing of each story by each of the writers in training, would have a theme that would give unity to the book. In the year 2020, the chosen theme was the experience of time—an abstract, difficult, complex theme, which implied long conversations, doubts, and many questions. Was it necessary to think about the theme of time only in terms of experience? Would there be technical demands on the writing to recreate this temporal experience as an unfathomable, almost ineffable human experience? Was time something that could be subjected to storytelling?

The editors received these stories, at first with some trepidation. They wondered if they had found the relationship between the theme of time and the story that each writer wanted to tell. They wondered how much they could correct, edit, suggest. Who was this author they were meant to maintain a year-long dialogue with? This has been the case since 2015. The young writers and editors meet in Cartagena, and slowly they get to know each other, becoming closer until at FILBo they create a lasting and deep friendship, an unbreakable collaboration, a sense of teamwork. But this time, upon returning from Cartagena in 2020, the world ended. The pandemic forced everything to slow down, and then time, as a theme, took on enormous weight and an ominous quality. Writers and editors

alike were paralyzed, their work suspended while the planet and its leaders pondered how to get life going again.

Those were months of questions, fears, and sadness. Isolation was a parenthesis in which we all held our breath. But when we exhaled, everyone returned to their texts—writers and editors both—with a new sense of what they had before them. They were transformed, certainly, even without knowing how or how much. From a distance, interrupted relationships were re-established and strengthened through bonds based on a collective experience that, although not face-to-face, was stronger than any other we had ever had.

Thus, readers will find here a book of six stories, five by Colombian authors and one by an Argentine author, invited to the training process through the British Council Argentina. These stories deal with the ineffability of time in the lives of human beings. Parallel time, spiralling time, paused time, time that expands to the point of obsession, overlapping time. In short, time foisting itself imperiously and with surprise, both in the writing of these six writers in training, as well as in the process of editing as exercised by their colleagues.

This book is unique. Not only because of its subject matter, but also because of the process through which it was conceived and the circumstances in which it was produced. Each of the previous *Ellipsis* books is unique as well, with the authors and editors having created a particular symbiosis, simultaneously a reflection of their personal experience, their individual quests, and the particular moment in which the writing of the stories takes place. *Ellipsis* is perhaps the most tangible proof that the writing process can be a collective experience. The editors say it in these pages, and we reiterate it here. Far from being a solitary craft, writing is a process that benefits from and requires the creativity of the author, the acuity of the editor, and the curiosity of the reader. That is why we invite readers to participate in the surprise that is this new issue of *Ellipsis*, produced in the year in which time stood still.

Round and Around the Roundabouts

Natalia Soriano Moreno
Editor

To be an editor, you have to know how to walk like a shadow, learn to be in the background, and understand that you follow the movements of another.

Borges said that there's nothing sadder than starting something that won't leave us any kind of memory, and Josué, a poet friend of mine, once told me, "When you're editing, think about the author, not yourself."

Ellipsis was nightfall by the bay in Cartagena, a rocket-shaped cloud in the sky, an orange moon. It meant putting myself to one side to listen to the words of another.

I wanted to work with José because he said he was planning to write a text that would play around with circularity, and that drew me in because it reminded

me of Borges. It also attracted me because that idea is related to the spiral, a figure that I'm interested in exploring from a literary perspective. Being an editor means thinking about yourself from the standpoint of the other. Respect and empathy are required to be able to understand what the author intends to communicate.

The first thing I did was to think that "Round and Around the Roundabouts" wasn't my story, my creation. I had to ask for permission to walk into Darwin's life. It was necessary for me to grasp how the story was structured, why the incident with the old lady kept repeating itself, and what changed as the events unfolded; it was important to understand the world that José had built to allow dialogue to be created. I was a guest who gradually earned herself a space with each edition, who got closer to each of the characters little by little to the point of feeling that I was also part of that circularity. Perhaps the reader will never know that Natalia also walked through the text; only the words that José put there will remember conversing with me.

During the process, I accepted that I held no power of decision over the story, that I was only an adviser. José listened to me and thought about what to take on board and what to reject. Being an editor means acknowledging that you're not the other person and stopping at if I were you, because you're not the author. You only lay paths for the writer, and they decide whether to stay still or travel along the shortest, the longest, the widest, or the most

winding route. When they make that choice, you travel behind, walking together with them.

Being José's shadow led me to ask myself how I, too, could create through editing. I arrived at a story that had already been constructed, in a place in Boyacá that had already been explored, in the life of a taxi driver that was already in motion, but, as Borges also said, some silences existed that I could inhabit. "Round and Around the Roundabouts" allowed me to play. I was able to propose a different structure for the text, shape images when I didn't find those that were already there to be powerful enough, and ask catalytic questions that helped José to redraft certain things. This process taught me to be curious, to focus on the details and to constantly doubt everything I was presented with. Being an editor showed me a new space for thought and creation.

Ellipsis helped me to think about writing as a collectivity. In the end, I felt that a part of "Round and Around the Roundabouts" stayed within me. I was the voice that detached itself from José and that speaks from him, the voice that would shout and get angry when he added something new that complicated the story, or didn't change some detail that still didn't work. I'm grateful to José for allowing me to be the shadow behind Darwin's taxi that followed the old lady and collapsed with Milcio. The shadow that walked through the text time and again and recognized itself as part of that circular movement.

José Inocencio Becerra Lagos
Author

The hours of that day were like streets full of slow-moving traffic to Darwin, particularly like those streets in the upscale neighbourhoods that he sometimes drove around without a single thing arousing his interest. There he was, the same as ever, with his portly frame wedged behind the wheel of one of his grandfather's taxis, running over the reasons that had turned him into the king of family shame. He mulled over his mistakes one by one, relapsing into the feeling that his life had slipped through his fingers. Even so, since his eyes opened that morning, he had known that that day was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: in the middle of the afternoon, after so long, he would have Eliana less than a metre away from him again. But before that happened, the day kept crawling along, a ceaseless torrent of hours.

Time had stood still just when he felt such a strong desire to speak to her, stretching out like a rubber band that was stopping him from reaching her, from reaching Juan Grande Park at 4. He didn't go near that part of town all morning, choosing to leave that closed landscape for the moment of truth. Either alone or with passengers, he traced and retraced routes, the streets glistening from the brief rain shower, his automatically semi-activated senses telling him which direction and routes to take and protecting him from putting his foot down too much or slamming his brakes too hard. He wasn't even bothered about making enough for the day, and after a few fares he went to the market to eat lunch and take a short nap at the table with his head resting on his elbows.

When he woke up, he realized he hadn't bought anything: he needed something to surprise her with, and also a first present to give to his son. Given that he was starting a new school year, he thought that it'd be perfect to buy him some brand-name trainers with flashing lights in the soles. After passing through the section with the herbalists and fruit sellers, he reached the cramped clothes shops where, after asking what size a boy of nearly five that was about to start school could be, he chose a pair of white trainers because there weren't any with lights. He bought some chocolates for Eliana in the shop next door, knowing that he would find it embarrassing to get out of the taxi and cross the park with a bunch of flowers in his hand, and put them in the same plastic bag as the shoes.

When he walked out of the market and saw the stationery shop in among the fish stalls, he remembered that he had to renew his insurance and took advantage of the fact that he still had time to get his ID card photocopied and not leave the procedure to the last minute, like he had done with everything that really did matter to him now. He put the bag down on a table while he fished his ID card out of his wallet. After asking for two enlarged copies, he handed the cashier a note and stood in the doorway looking out, from where he watched the porters bent double under the weight of the sacks of potatoes that were arriving from Toca and Belén. He realized that, after having dawned with rain, the day had become full of light and sweltering heat. He picked up his ID card and the photocopies and went back to the taxi without counting his change. He stuffed the papers into the pouch behind the seat that displayed the fare rate and put on some aftershave, as he usually did after lunch. After putting the bottle away in the glovebox, he glanced at his old gold watch and slipped it on his left wrist. He lowered the sun visor to block out the rays and rolled down the front windows. His hairstyle of a chubby, handsome and good-natured man was still pristine and well-gelled.

He would take a couple more short fares and then head straight to the meeting point, giving him time to look for a parking space and search for the words that he was going to greet her with. To get to the avenue

without going down a one-way street he would have to drive all the way around the block where the market was located. He started the car and moved forward at a slow crawl that coaxed the engine into life. He realized that the taxi hadn't broken down for a long time, and thanked it for its good service with a caress of the dashboard. When he had finished looping around to enable him to turn onto 10th Street, he saw an old lady hailing him and braked. She put down the two shopping baskets and the sack of flour that she was carrying and, leaning in towards the passenger window, pleaded in a voice cut through with sadness:

"Please do me a favour and take me to Santa Teresa, won't you dear, because nobody else will take me."

Wrinkles drooped down over her eyebrows on that round, concerned face, and her shoulders were covered by a brown shawl. Darwin was forced to respond awkwardly:

"I'd have to pay for the out-of-town permit, madam, and I'm in a bit of a hurry right now. It's because Santa Teresa isn't part of Duitama, but I don't have time to go to the office."

"That's what all the others said, but my husband is at home dying and it's like nobody could care less."

Although the old lady's pleas tugged strongly at his heartstrings, he tried one last way out:

"There's a police checkpoint before the roundabout, and if I try to get through without the permit, they'll come down on me hard."

The elderly woman, however, made an artful move:

"What was that, sir?"

He started the car and moved forward at a slow crawl that coaxed the engine into life. He realized that the taxi hadn't broken down for a long time, and thanked it for its good service with a caress of the dashboard.

Darwin found this deafness so endearing that he couldn't resist agreeing to take her. He got out and loaded the sack and baskets into the boot while she climbed in, and then he opened the door, settled into his seat, and drove off.

"What's the matter with your husband?"

"He's always suffered with his heart, and he called me all scared saying that his chest and arm were giving him a lot of pain."

He sped down the streets around the María Auxiliadora church, while thinking again that his life had been a failure. The first mistake on the list had been decisive, despite not being his fault: expulsion from university. He remembered his mediocrity, about having got in via his money and contacts because his grades didn't cut it, about passing subjects after taking them two or three times; learning little, but passing the chicha- and aguardiente- fuelled Thursday gatherings with flying colours, perched comfortably on the substitutes' bench of the rugby team.

The incident occurred at the beginning of his 7th semester: in front of the School of Metallurgy, someone scratched both sides of the dean's car with a sharp stone. At first, nobody had said or seen anything, and there were only rumours that the culprit was a chubby guy from that school who had made his escape on a bicycle. With no further information, the dean had no way of bringing to justice the 'little fucking vandal' that had damaged his rolling piece of real estate. Nothing came of it until the morning of the following Friday, before the Faculty Committee meeting, when the office was flooded with a steady stream of unsigned letters, posted under the door and pointing the finger at Darwin López as the guilty party.

By adding a few prior run-ins to the accused's charge sheet, the dean only needed to lodge a couple of complaints and make a phone call to get Darwin thrown out. He had no way of defending himself, and had so many enemies that it was almost impossible for him to know who had

incriminated him. He wiped away his tears with both hands, let out a few swearwords and walked unceremoniously out of the university, three semesters short of graduation. Ever since, when he recalled the Volkswagen incident, he would repeat one of his lifelong maxims: 'you're a good person until other people change you.'

Behind the clinic some workmen were filling potholes in with gravel, and he had to turn right to get to Las Américas by following the railway tracks, before the Cyclists' Roundabout.

"Here, this is where we have to bring him, to the hospital."

When the old lady said that to him, it dawned on him that he had crossed a good part of the city almost unaware.

"God'll bless you for taking me."

"Amen, madam. What's your husband's name?"

"Milcio. When we argue he goes back to being Juan Milcíades . . . oh, and we'll give him his little poncho and his walking stick to take him to the hospital."

He raced through the traffic light at the corner of the Hipinto factory, just squeezing ahead of the cars coming from Paipa as they accelerated off, and drove the entire length of 42nd Avenue as if in a video game. After the pedestrian footbridge at the end of the avenue lay the redesigned Juan Grande park, with the city's first public bike station, the multi-sports pitch with its freshly painted lines and brand-new goal nets, and the solar panels that supplied energy to the two blocks that hemmed the park in against the avenue and the stream. It was he who was in a hurry now, rather than the old lady, but he couldn't avoid looking over towards the park steps when they were passing by. Nothing. It wasn't time yet.

"And what's your name, madam?"

". . . and we'll put some slippers on him so he doesn't get cold when they're looking after him in accident and emergency."

"Damn it!"

"Sorry, sir?"

"Nothing, it's just that I left, I forgot … some trainers."

His gaze came to rest briefly on the seat next to him, as if wishing to bring the gift back with his eyes. The light was green, but he couldn't accelerate much because the checkpoint wasn't far away, and speeding was harder to justify than not having the permit.

His unjust dismissal from university plunged him into a well of apathy so deep that it caused him to gain a lot of weight, overdo it with drugs, and lack interest in starting another degree or finding a job. He felt aggrieved and waited for a letter addressing him as dear sir with his full name, and respectfully offering him an apology for the procedural error through which he had been kicked out like a dog from that church where he was an average worshipper — neither obedient nor wicked — and from which he would have been able to graduate as an engineer, albeit by the skin of his teeth. Since his parents were unwilling to keep frittering away funds on the laziness of the 'idle stoner' he had become, he was notified of his second expulsion in his bedroom.

With no home or university degree, he had to suck up to his grandfather so that he would take him in like a king in exile, but the old fox made him work hard in the López family tradition and live in a rented house in another part of town. Since then, although they weren't hugely fond of each other, the taxi had been his sidekick, and it was inside it that he made the last mistake on his list. But there he was, inside the taxi again, ready to put

it right. He knew that, if he could get into a good conversation with Eliana, he could clear up his guilt and alter the path taken in order to become a responsible father, to grow up once and for all and leave behind the regret that ate away at him so much. For the time being, he had to concentrate.

He went round a couple of curves and drove by the strip of motels, which seemed to be dying of sadness under the afternoon sun, before passing between two sand-coloured mounds and reaching the checkpoint. Just as he'd imagined, two police officers waved at him to pull in at the side of the road. He lined himself up along the curb and came to a halt near a tent, where another officer was taking notes. One of the two officers asked him for his taxi registration and driving licence, and the permit. The other peered at the old lady through the window before dropping his eyes to the private world of his mobile phone. Darwin handed the documents to the first officer and started looking at the elderly woman's sad eyes in the rear-view mirror while awaiting a complaint about the missing permit. Sure enough, joyous in anticipation of giving out another fine, the police officer asked him about the permit receipt. Darwin responded that it was an emergency, that they hadn't had time to get the permit because his passenger's husband was in danger, just over there in Santa Teresa, that he was having a heart attack and they had to take him to hospital, to ask the old lady if he wanted. She only had to nod for the disappointed police officer to hand back the papers and Darwin to accelerate off again.

They went around the plain, dry-grass-filled roundabout without letting anyone get ahead of them, and drove on for nearly a kilometre before turning down an unpaved alley. The old lady pointed out a pastel-blue house to Darwin, standing out further than the other dwellings set back from it, which all seemed to flow into a large vegetable plot containing a single crop and a high-powered irrigation system. The house was poorly protected by white railings, and partially surrounded by an incomplete and battered barbed wire fence. Darwin saw three farmers working the black earth in the distance. He parked the taxi next to the curb, put on the handbrake, and got out, before opening the left-hand door for the old

lady. She clambered out, and removed a small cloth bag with the house keys inside from her cleavage while Darwin took out her shopping. As they reached the railing, she inserted the key, and while she was fiddling with it Darwin tried to scan the front of the house, without the door or the space between the curtains providing any clues. The metal gate gave way after a couple of pushes and a creak, and the old lady's sluggishness made Darwin want to dash past or push her out of the way to kick down the door and find out what was happening inside.

Darwin left the small sack and the baskets on the small cement protrusion that served as the doorstep. With the second key ready in her hand, the old lady opened the wooden front door. The scene that lay behind was striking: her husband was sprawled on the sofa with his head lolling heavily towards his left shoulder, like a little chick that had fallen into the bottom of a box, and a sense of coldness in his body that infused the objects around him. Both of them realized that it was too late. Darwin embraced the old lady and she returned the gesture with a quick, tender squeeze, as if he needed it more, before letting him go in order to watch over her husband's first minutes of death. She positioned his head to rest on the top edge of the sofa, caressed his cheek and behind his ears, and kissed him on the forehead. With streams of water flowing either side of her nose and without saying a word, she disappeared down a dark hallway diagonally across from the sofa, in a corner between death and the kitchen. Darwin crossed himself three times and made a slight bow towards the old man while looking at his long neck, and he compared his stiff frame with his grandfather and boss: the same moustache and just as skinny, but with darker skin, although perhaps just as dead on top of his fortune made from cars and garages.

The old lady, in contrast, was as sweet as anybody could be, and Darwin was thinking about that without taking his eyes off the corpse, dressed in corduroy trousers, when she emerged just as tearfully from the same hallway holding a dark wool poncho for the deceased's cold. She held the back of his head to lift it up and it struck Darwin

that, despite how brusque it appeared, deep down it was a very loving gesture. She then straightened him up to pull the poncho down over his back until it was nicely arranged around his torso, before smoothing out the fabric over his arms. When he seemed more protected to her, she took out a banknote and walked over to Darwin to pay him the fare, her face now free of tears. As if words had still not been invented, Darwin gestured for her to stop with his open hands held up, casting back her weeping expression like a mirror. He asked if there was anything he could do for her, call somebody, bring somebody; the old lady, however, was a master of saying no and, pressing her lips together, she moved her head from side to side, thanked him, and accompanied him to the door.

Darwin turned around and ambled to the car, while pondering the fact that he had no idea how long he'd been in the house. He exited the alley and turned onto the avenue with his mind on Eliana and their meeting. He looked at his watch: he wouldn't be late if he stepped on it. He had just enough time to go back and pick up the present, and also to enter the boy's world and try to get back into his mother's world. That opportunity, and the vision of the dead man in his mind, made his eyes well up. He rubbed them with the knuckle of his right index finger and passed through the checkpoint without caring whether or not there was a police inspection on the way back. He advanced along the entire stretch of road until the traffic light at the entrance of town and, as he had already planned, turned onto Camilo Torres in the direction of Rancho Grande and San José, overtaking recklessly on the Chieftain's Roundabout. He continued to the left along the newly-paved 20th street in order to make his way back to the market. He made a U-turn at the old train station, and trained his sights on the stationery shop where he had got the photocopies done. He made a half-baked attempt at parking and ran up to knock on the window to retrieve his package. Before the coin could touch the glass, the daughter of the shop owner looked out and held the bag out to him. Darwin said nothing and thanked her with a smile, his eyes still moist, and hurried back to his taxi.

There, on the same corner stood the old lady, with the same packages, flagging him down. The car was travelling slowly, but seemed to brake abruptly when he stopped next to her.

He had met Eliana amid the fervour of a night of revelry during what was his booziest month, soon after turning twenty-one and getting the taxi. She was slim and a little older than him, with extremely delicate features of which none particularly stood out to Darwin. Her svelte figure and porcelain skin inspired him to invite her out on a couple of dates, and she accepted. At the end of their second rendezvous, they finished up entwined in the back seat of the car with an overpowering ferocity that was interrupted by nobody and expected by neither of them. They demonstrated their affection a couple more times in Darwin's apartment, and when their passion had been fully put to the test, they gradually went their separate ways, saying when bidding farewell that they were acting like someone who knows to get up from the poker table when they're winning.

After those nights, Darwin kept working for the same reasons that he had since the start: going out drinking on Fridays, and sleeping with company on at least one night of the weekend. But although the number of notches he carved on his bedpost was more than satisfactory, a blunder forced him to think again of Eliana's butt cheeks on the shiny new leather of the back seat: he had got her pregnant. Eliana called him and searched for him, only to be met with the same reaction: denial and insults. She didn't persevere, telling him she was going to have an abortion without his help, and that she would never come looking for him. All the time that had passed would come to an end with their encounter that afternoon.

He left the bag on the seat next to him and did the same loop around the block to set off towards Juan Grande park. On the block before the final turn, he had to wait for a few minutes while a paramedic was loading a man who had been stabbed into the back of an ambulance on a stretcher. In his impatience, he regretted not giving a tip to the girl in the shop. But when the ambulance drove off and cleared the way for him, he was struck cold: there, on the same corner stood the old lady, with the same packages, flagging him down. The car was travelling slowly, but seemed to brake abruptly when he stopped next to her. Darwin thought that he would have been less spooked if the recently-deceased old

man in corduroy trousers had been the one to hail him down. He went pale and raised his eyebrows in amazement, before climbing out of the taxi to question her.

“What are you doing here, madam?”

“Because I had to do some shopping”, she replied sorrowfully.

Darwin’s legs were shaking, and he grimaced and said the first thing that crossed his mind:

“How did you get here so quickly?”

“Get where?”

“Here,” Darwin answered.

It was impossible to know who was more bewildered. The old lady wrinkled her brow and Darwin wasn’t sure if it was because of her deafness again, or because she genuinely didn’t know how to respond.

“I came out to look for a taxi, but none of the ones that went past stopped.”

“Hmm, and where do you need me to take you?”

“Santa Teresa, be an angel, won’t you…”

“But I’ve already driven you there!”

The old lady looked him in the eyes hesitantly:

“I’m not following you.”

“It’s just that we’ve already been there!”

“Don’t you want to take me?”

“No, it’s not that. The only thing is…I don’t know. It’s like I’ve already seen you today, don’t you feel the same?”

“No, sir.”

As she seemed sincere, Darwin gathered up the sack of flour and the baskets and quickly opened the back door for her. He opened the boot and organized her shopping just like the first time, only now his breathing was agitated out of surprise. He prodded the bags and from the outside they seemed to contain the same items: fruit and vegetables, and the small sack of flour for making arepas. Darwin interrogated himself while he closed the door and got in the car. What the hell was all this? How had she got there? How had she travelled so quickly? Was someone using the old lady to have fun at his expense? While Darwin was pulling away, he looked at her in the rear-view mirror and said:

“I don’t know what’s going on.”

“It’s my husband, he called me. He’s always had heart problems and he’s scared because he’s got pains in his chest and arm.” As she spoke, she touched her left side between her breast and her shoulder. “So please hurry, to see if we can manage to take him to hospital.”

Her reply was astonishing, but Darwin didn’t think it was the work of the devil, who gives no second chances. His thoughts were taken over by the feeling that someone — a god, or an angel of destiny — was putting him to the test, and that the old lady could make it. Just as he was going to undo his mistakes, so she would be able to get her husband to hospital.

“Let’s go then,” he answered, and despite his dizziness and sudden headache, he massaged his forehead and focused his attention on speeding along the same route he had used before.

Along the avenue, he noticed new details that hadn't been there before, or that he had missed. A Spiderman hanging in his web from the bough of a tree, two girls selling cookies, a cardboard sign with red letters telling a story of forced displacement. None of it interested him. He had a mission, or rather two, and he was going to accomplish them. Time belonged to him, and everyone had to lend him some so that he wouldn't be late. "Here, this is where we have to bring him," Darwin heard again. The old lady's expression and movements were the same, identical to last time. Finally, Darwin's questions flowed.

"What's your husband's name?"

"Milcio. When we argue he goes back to being Juan Milcíades. When we get there, we'll give him his little poncho and his walking stick to take him to the hospital."

"And what's your name, madam?" he asked, the pain pounding in his head.

"It's just that he always feels the cold so much."

"It must be a really nice and warm poncho," Darwin replied a few seconds later.

"It is. I gave it to him as a present last year."

"And do you have children?"

"Yes."

"So why don't they take you there?"

"What was that, sir?"

"Why don't your children take you there?"

"They don't live here. And even if they did, they wouldn't drive me."

"Why?"

"Because we don't matter to them," she said, her eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror, with sudden firmness just after having spent a while gazing out of the window, miles away.

Darwin thought that the same thing was happening to him too, but he didn't know whose side to take in the matter. He was the indifferent son and the forgotten father all at once. He felt anxious about the meeting, about making it up to her, about the mistake that would soon be five years old. He had gone on with his life with a qualm that had temporarily returned to torment him: he had made her get an abortion alone. Every time the sense of mortification came back — almost always in his taxi — he calmed himself down by thinking that someone who felt nothing can't feel the stab of pain, see death arrive, or fear it. For relief, he reflected on the number of foetuses that other people had cast aside, telling himself that it was nothing out of the ordinary, especially at the age when she, without him, had gone to deal with that matter. He called her once to ask how it had gone, if she'd felt any pain and how she was, but she didn't pick up. Later, the dark, invisible something that he felt in some part of his body gradually left him, and he forgot it. With regular income and expenditure, Darwin tried to follow his life path as normal: taking passengers and living up to his grandfather's expectations with hours of work and a share of his earnings.

He went into autopilot, oblivious, pushing everything about her out of his mind, until the day he drove two nuns to the library. He made the journey without striking up a conversation, and when they arrived a man approached the car, asking insistently to be taken somewhere. Amid this coming and going, Darwin recognized the slim figure of his former goddess, walking across the front courtyard of the library with a small boy, who was strolling along smiling at the Batman comic he held in his hands. There was

only a courtyard, some railings, and a street between them, and that mere sight, disturbed by his hurried passenger, set Darwin shaking. Was he his son? Hadn't she aborted it? Why didn't anyone tell him? But what could it matter to him, then and now, if he had been the one who wanted to wipe everything from his memory and forget? Something told him it was his son. His height, his confident steps, and the possibility that his little book contained letters and that he understood them, were vague signs of the age that the boy could be. In Darwin's mind it coincided with the times of chaos when he didn't want him to be born. It was his. A sweet, painful jab in his chest told him so. There's no way she could have done it with someone else and given birth so soon after having an abortion. The boy was definitely hers; he looked a lot like her. After his series of gut feelings, he found it impossible that she was his nanny or aunt. He went back to the library but couldn't find her. He called and looked for her with no response. He never even found out where she lived. He had been blocked on social media for years, but a bit of investigation gave him something: they had an acquaintance in common who he might be able to use to get a message to her. That distant 'friend' agreed to copy his message and pass it on to her. After beating around the bush with some trivial small talk, he asked her if the boy was his son. She replied with a curt 'no.' After this response, Darwin slept badly and ate little, in the knowledge that it was a 'no' branding him irresponsible, but not a 'no' that denied his genes and blood: 'no, because you didn't help to raise him, but unfortunately yes, he's yours.' He was enduring punishment for his own personality. In this way, a year went by in which his everyday life was defined by nostalgia instead of nights out. He roamed the city in the hope of seeing them again, but that first glimpse was never repeated.

He turned left at the end of Las Américas and sped up. It was that time of day when the city was overrun with buses, but Darwin was able to dodge them — like a little kid among the big boys — when they stopped to let passengers off, or fought bumper-to-bumper to pick up new ones. He made brisk progress, but at Juan Grande there was a delay due to the long queue at the lights. He stayed in the left-hand lane and his

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view of the park was only blocked by a couple of motorbike helmets: like a kilo of sugar, Eliana was preparing to sit down on one of the wooden benches near the pitch. She was fancily dressed-up and looked stunning and, despite the smell of petrol and the heat that clung to the car, that sight was an oasis to Darwin. He imagined that his son would look as smart and handsome when he was big, and he no longer felt dizzy. He held out hope that they would reach the house in Santa Teresa in time, and the fact that Eliana had only just arrived settled him down and meant that he had time to go and come back, and … The beeping and shouting made him return his attention to the road and accelerate off. The traffic had thinned out as most of the vehicles were heading towards the city centre.

Now further away from Eliana, Darwin followed the grassy mound that was decorated every five metres with small trees jammed into truck tyres. He ignored the motels and passed the hills at high speed. Ever obedient, he pulled in at the perimeter of the police checkpoint. In front of him the two officers were inspecting the load of a van, and this time the female officer that had been taking notes before was requesting the documents. She walked up to the window and Darwin didn't wait for her to ask for his papers to lead the charade:

"All my papers are in order, but we don't have the out-of-town permit. It's an emergency, this lady's husband is dying over there in Santa Teresa and we have to go and save him."

"He's not dying," the old lady chipped in, shaking her head.

"Sorry, sorry, he's got symptoms of a heart attack and he called her, didn't he?" Darwin watched the old lady nod with the same wrinkles and movements as…. how long ago? An hour? Half an hour? How much time had gone by since they passed through there? Not even his gold watch could tell him the answer, as every time he looked at it, he had been oblivious to the numbers that were measuring time for him.

"Keep going, keep going, go on," said the officer, and Darwin heeded her instruction. When he drove past the side of the van, he could see the surprise on the faces of the two policemen, who recognized him immediately. In the right-hand wing mirror, he noticed that they had let the van driver proceed and were approaching the female officer.

"We came past here before, don't you remember?" The old lady didn't look at him. "They must think we're playing games, driving around and telling lies as if it were the height of fun."

"We're nearly there now."

Sure enough, the entrance to the alley was already in sight, and he only had to drive a few metres down it for the blue house to come into view. Darwin didn't wait for any instructions and hurried to park the taxi in the same place as before.

"How did you know the way here?" the lady asked.

"Run and get the poncho and I'll turn the car around, so we don't get held up leaving." The old lady sprang into action. Darwin was dying with anxiety to know what the inside of the house would reveal.

The taxi stopped, the back door opened, the little bag came out, the keys saw the light of day, the car was left facing in the direction of the avenue, the gate swung open, and some footsteps were followed by others. Pricked by doubt, Darwin turned his gaze toward the vegetable plot: diagonally to him at the far end, the three farmers were shielding their eyes from the sun with their hands and looking over at the house. His eyes left them as the old lady was already turning the key in the lock. Her wrinkled hand pushed on the wood with exasperating slowness. Darwin, standing tall behind her, was the first to see: there was Milcio, lying on the floor with his head resting on his left arm. The old lady swayed as if she were about to collapse, and Darwin managed to reach out and hold her up, before

opening the door the rest of the way and allowing her to lean on him until she could reach the sofa and sit down. She was dumbstruck. Darwin looked again at the body. He wanted to touch his corduroy trousers, and heard the old lady asking him to lift him up. He felt a great deal of fear, but managed to pick him up by the armpits and sit him down on the sofa, like a doll that's in the wrong place. The old man weighed nothing to Darwin, who was afraid he would fall to pieces in his hands.

After Darwin had positioned him on the sofa, he lifted up his head as it had been the first time. He felt an urge to go and look for the poncho, but it seemed like a foolish idea, and he sat down, drained, between the two of them. He looked at the old lady, before hugging her and planting a kiss on her forehead. It was the same story again: he was the one who needed it. He wanted to talk, to recount what he had just seen to somebody, but how? How could he tell the old lady, or Eliana, or any future passenger, about something that not even he understood? He turned around to focus his attention on the deceased and noticed every detail: the colour of his skin, his clothes, the temperature of his body … it wasn't a hoax. Despite Darwin appearing disorientated from this unheard-of magic, something told him that Milcio really had just passed away, for the second time. It then dawned on him that the same thing could happen again. He was being boxed into something that he didn't fully understand, but he wanted to keep investigating blindly in the darkness. He leapt up, without waiting for the scene with the poncho and the money, and said 'see you in a bit' like a grandson dashing from the house. He didn't look back to see her reaction, and retraced his steps towards the taxi.

He had no time left to start crying, and got in the car and pulled out of the alley at full speed. He reached the roundabout in no time, and the road signs for the three towns that its spidery legs made their way towards flashed by him in a blur. He set off for Duitama without releasing the accelerator, to the alarm of the drivers around him, who watched him grow smaller in the distance, swerving between the lanes like a sturdy machine that was refusing to give up its ground or be pushed backwards.

Children stared open-mouthed at the speed of the passing yellow blur, while everyone else either yelled or swore at him. It occurred to Darwin that he was leaving time itself, that his progress could shatter the glass of any timepiece that tried to measure it, just like the glass of the traffic lights that were coming into view. He could already see their two illuminated colours, which forced him to lift the pressure of his foot gently and gradually, until he had brought the car to a controlled speed at which he could make a 90-degree turn in the direction of the market. He dodged cars and buses, and recognized a couple of his fellow taxi drivers at the Chieftain's Roundabout, but he didn't have chance to shout them a greeting or even beep the horn back to them. He took the same route for want of a faster alternative. The traffic lights before La Dorada and the bottleneck towards the centre drove him to despair, but neither thing could stop him. He floored it along 20th Street, endangering some children riding tricycles who were left behind in tears by the roar of the car.

The taxi was a noise, invisible to most, that was spreading across the sector. Darwin dropped his speed and stuck closely to a line of parked cars in order to go the wrong way down one block to avoid another three. He made the sign of the cross in front of the church, looked faithfully at the grey leather ceiling of the car as if making the last birthday wish of his life, and finished off the illegal manoeuvre. He came to a stop on the corner where he had already picked up the old lady twice, only this time he was surprised not to see her there. He had no idea what to do. Only during that pause did he remember Eliana and his son. Without even looking at his watch, he felt he could still make it in time and explain himself with the story of the old man's death. Should he tell her that he made two trips or only one? One was sufficiently tragic, and very believable. He glanced at the trainers in the plastic bag and smiled. All of these repeated loops had to be a sign. He wasn't old yet, and he was going to manage to change things. With a bit of effort he could be a good father, and be part of Eliana's life again. When he caught himself touching the soles of the trainers and the chocolates, now melted by the sun, he remembered that he had

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handled the corpse and raised his hands abruptly to the wheel. Looking through the windscreen, he felt a current of energy in his chest when he saw the old lady on the pavement opposite, attempting to cross the road. She was struggling to carry a basket in each hand, and clutching the sack of flour between her fingers and the handle of the basket in her right hand.

Although he still had doubts and a look of surprise was etched across his face, he allowed himself to be moved by instinct. He got out, said good afternoon to the old lady, grabbed the sack and received one of the baskets from her. He rushed to open the rear door before sitting down on his throne. He closed the door behind him, before pushing the bag containing the presents down towards the floor and placing the basket and sack on the passenger seat. The old lady got in on the right-hand side, set her basket down next to her and closed the door. Darwin turned the car around deftly in order to change route. He thought that making the journey in the other direction, going back the way he had come into the city and to the market, could make it possible for things to unfold differently.

“Where are we heading?” Darwin asked.

“Santa Teresa, please … are you going to turn here to get the permit?”

“No, I don’t think the checkpoint’s there today. Let’s take Camilo Torres Avenue, there isn’t as much traffic.”

“Fine, but please hurry as it’s an emergency.”

“Why, what’s happened?” he asked as they reached the end of the block with the church, curious to hear her answer.

“He’s always suffered with his heart, and he called me all scared saying that his chest and arm were hurting.

Once again, the taxi was transformed into an arrow, and darted the wrong way down 20th Street.

“Let’s save him!”

“God willing!”

The potholes forced him to slow down slightly but Darwin tried to maintain his speed, the firm sole of his shoe never releasing its pressure on the accelerator. He turned onto the street of haulage companies, with their trucks parked on the grass behind the hill, then made another turn to drive past the San José Chapel. He allowed two cars to go by, and then merged nervelessly onto the avenue, making a cyclist pump his brakes and plant both feet on the ground. Once more the roundabout of Chieftain Tundama lay before him, ringed by a circle of lilies, only a few in flower, lined up like the heads of little girls with their green hair styled like small palm trees. He cleared the roundabout and put his foot down, without his passenger uttering a word. This avenue, lined with bars and factories, would help him shave off a few minutes.

“And what’s your husband like, madam?”

“He’s always been very tender-hearted. He’s slim with a moustache, and he used to be a teacher.”

“How many children do you have?”

“Six.”

“And do they look after him, or live with the two of you?” He already knew the answer but wanted to see if it would be repeated, to torment himself by hearing it once more.

“No. We don’t matter to them.”

“And how many years have you and your husband been together?”

“Forty-six or forty-seven. I can’t even recall at this point.”

Darwin sensed they had saved time on the journey. One block away from the traffic light at the junction for Tibasosa, he thought that if he sharpened his sight, he would be able to see whether Eliana was still sitting waiting for him on the park bench. He did just that as the leader of the pack of cars, out in front below the red light. He lifted himself slightly off his seat and craned his neck towards Juan Grande. Beyond the chaos of a basketball game he saw her, with her arms crossed and a look of pure annoyance on her face. It occurred to him that he could get out before the lights changed. Leave the old lady. Walk across 42nd Avenue and shout with all his might for her to do him the favour of waiting. Tell her that it was a matter of urgency, that he was needed like never before in his life, that he was going to talk with her again soon, in order to plan the first day with his son and rekindle their old romance, to decide if they would live on the Eastern Plains, where she had ended up, or here in Duitama, and whether it would be under the same roof or separately. Ask her to give him … how much? Another half an hour, another hour, before she left the city again.

He couldn’t miss that conversation after having waited so long for it. During the time he spent looking for her, he tried to make contact through their mutual friend, asking: can I send you money every month? Let me meet him, what’s his name? What’s he like? But he heard nothing back, the pride forged over so many years wouldn’t budge. A year after Darwin had seen him, his friend and intermediary informed him that her entire family was moving to Villavicencio: her, the boy, and those who weren’t his in-laws. There was no change in his demeanour. Deep down, he felt it was positive that the conundrum wasn’t in the city any more, but the fact that it was still an unsolvable riddle hurt him greatly. His own certainty that the boy was his son made him feel old: there was someone further back than him in this race of life, who would sprint from being a child to being a young man and push him into the adult lane. Nevertheless, the

same child who made him feel old could also be the reason for his revitalization. This journey had been of use to him in becoming aware of his slowness, and of his torpor in living life and doing things.

Eliana was coming back to Duitama for the funeral of one of her friends' mother. Two days before, she called Darwin to invite him to visit her in what had once been her neighbourhood. A financial misstep on her part opened a window of contact for him, the possibility he had awaited for so long. The fundamental reason, and indeed the only one that she had outlined on the phone, was that they had to discuss the boy and Darwin's financial contribution for his starting school. Just as seriously, she told him that he was the father, changing his life and making him imagine details about the boy: his white face; the gel that stiffened his hair; the feeling of his freshly ironed uniform; his fingers sticking playdough on top of a figure of dad in a doodle of a family; the same surname as Eliana on his line of the attendance list; his shaky handwriting filling a page with the word 'dad' to learn the letter 'D'; his eyes gazing at those fathers from the Eastern Plains, carrying his classmates on their shoulders, walking home with them hand-in-hand, or sitting them on their bicycle handlebar in the safety of their arms, wearing their rucksack.

Amid such intensive imagining, he was stirred into action again by the sound of car horns. He stopped looking in Eliana's direction and concentrated, hopeful of leaving the city and reaching Santa Teresa before death did. He passed right by her for the third time without being able to stop, but that time it wasn't a defeat. He had to get there to witness the full-of-life hug between the elderly couple in order to redeem himself, so that accomplishment would save him from continuing to drift through life. Again, he stuck closely to the roadside, with the little trees in tyres, and stepped on the gas once more once more. He drove past the brewery and the motels before turning at the hills and continuing unstoppably without lowering his speed, in no mood to brake when the arms of some authority signalled him to. Again, it was the policewoman who asked him to stop, more insistently this time; but Darwin kept going in the inside

lane, staring straight at her without slowing down, and rapidly approaching the next curve without knowing whether or not they were going to follow him, and without the old lady saying anything. He struck up a conversation to distract himself.

"As soon as we get there, we have to get his slippers ready and put the poncho on him so we can take him to hospital quickly."

"Yes, sir," she said with deep sadness.

Darwin chose the same leg of the spider and, after arriving at the fork in the road, he entered the gravel alley surrounded by pine trees. They travelled down it, and no sooner had they turned to look at the house than they saw Milcio crumple to the ground in front of the grey pavement, like a spectacle that had been waiting for them in order to begin. It was a fall that left no room for doubt, but both of them got out and ran to open the gate to see how he was. Trembling, the old lady took the keys out of the little bag and handed them to Darwin. The three farmers sprinted towards the house, although their location prevented them from catching sight of the old man. Darwin opened the gate in the railing and, while the old lady was crouched over her husband, he walked straight on to open the front door and enter the house. He looked closely at the part of the floor where the old man had fallen the time before, and steeled himself to continue towards the kitchen and the bedrooms to see if they contained a twin or some kind of hidden camera, and to check if there was anyone hiding, revelling in his fear, or if a god was sitting there delaying the old man's demise. He assured himself that the house was empty before walking out. The old lady was still on her knees, weeping over her husband. Darwin didn't bid her farewell or even approach the deceased.

The three farmers reached the old woman breathlessly when Darwin was inside the taxi. It was obvious that they wanted to pursue him, but the shock of seeing the dead body stopped them in their tracks. The two youngest ones helped the lady to her feet, while the man who seemed to be their father stood there watching the trail of dust kicked up by the

departing taxi. They wouldn't have any answers for him, so why waste time asking them? He set off towards the roundabouts again in pursuit of another chance. He wasn't fleeing from anything: quite the opposite, Darwin thought proudly, he had strived stubbornly to get there in time and resolve that matter, which he didn't understand and that no-one would be able to explain to him.

His tyres skidded on the gravel and the green landscape made him feel faint. It was beyond belief that Milcio would collapse there and then, so close to being picked up by the taxi; the previous time, Darwin himself had touched him and carried him in his arms, and he was as dead as a doornail, as cold as the bare earth. How had he returned from the pit of death? Darwin exited onto the dual carriageway. And the old lady … equally sad after three deaths in a row. What message were they trying to send to him by playing around with his time? On and on and on, born to plunge perpetually into disaster. He drove half way around the now near-empty roundabout at top speed and pressed on, sure that he really would make it this time. The thing was, if the old man had kept his vision steady before falling, the hope of help being close at hand would have been enough for him to survive, for him to reach the hospital and be treated and saved. He raced through to the other side of the checkpoint and noticed that the first two policemen weren't there. He thought they must have left by motorbike, and that they would have kept straight on, surely believing that he had made off in the direction of Sogamoso. It was a joke that they believed that. What he had done was a joke too, passing through with the same excuse and the same lady. But he didn't care. He was going to do it one more time, he was going to do it until he managed to save the husband of that old lady, who didn't deserve loneliness. He drove past the brewery again, and his speed caused the basket on the back seat to flip over. He was going to make it, he himself was going to risk his life, both present and future, in order to save his life: he would admit that he actually had scratched the dean's car, that it was no false accusation. He would leave the childishness and lies behind, salvage his relationship with his parents, sweeten his bond with his grandfather, and make it up

to Eliana and the boy. He had taken a few wrong turns in life, but he still had time to become someone else.

He turned at the irremovable traffic light with a feeling of exhaustion. This wasn't the afternoon he had planned. Maybe he didn't deserve that giddiness of going from circle to circle. Why that exact day? But he looked at the other side of the coin and told himself that he hadn't earned it for being despicable, but that he was unworthy of saving another person. Now he was faced by the monument to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, on a small neighbourhood roundabout in Rancho Grande against whose colourful railings Darwin had seen so many young motorcyclists meet a grisly end, and he wondered whether he was responsible for the journey not having a happy ending. If he quit the game, it would let the elderly couple win. Then he was overtaken by another taxi being driven more aggressively than his, and he realized the answer. He drove on, skirting the empty fields separating him from the Chiticuy River, and asked himself whether anyone else, anywhere in the world, had experienced what he had, whether it was happening to someone else at that very instant. He left a petrol station, a health spa, and a shop in his wake, and didn't drop his speed until the roundabout, where he fixed his eyes on the pointed arrow of the chieftain, shooting up against the sky, and continued on. It started to rain as he entered the queue of traffic. He turned on the windscreen wipers, feeling hungry and bored. He felt an urge to make a U-turn and head straight to Juan Grande, but his desire to never again abandon anyone led him to stiffen his resolve and, when a space opened to the left of the crowd of cars, he set course again for the market on the best paved road in the city. He reached the train station, and saw the person who was going to bring the strategy to completion: a taxi driver with a face like an iguana, his glasses held on with string, who was drinking coffee next to the row of DIY shops, two blocks away from the first corner of the market. He belonged to the other taxi company, but this didn't bother Darwin and he shouted at him from his seat, his elbow resting on the window frame:

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"Excuse me, mate. Fancy a fare? I'll give you 70,000 pesos if you go and pick up an old lady that needs to get to Santa Teresa."

"Whoa, OK then. Let's do it", he answered, his voice shaking with each syllable as if nerves were his personality.

"She's over there at the market. We don't need to claim a permit because it's an emergency. Go on ahead and I'll follow you. It's the corner of 10th and 22nd Street."

Darwin waited for him to set his empty cup on the table and start his car. He reversed a couple of metres to make space for the other taxi to turn onto the street, and when they were wheel to wheel, he stretched out his hand holding the two banknotes.

"It's an old lady carrying two baskets, but you've got to get a move on!"

He allowed the taxi to pull in front and stuck closely behind it in a state of agitation, watching the windscreen wipers moving from side to side. They drove along the three blocks at a medium speed and there she was, on the same corner as the first time, with a pout of sadness on her face and the baskets and the sack of flour in her arms, her shoulders hunched in an attempt to get less wet. The human iguana got out, gathered up her shopping and put it in the boot. Darwin watched as the old lady's tiny lips formed words that he knew off by heart. She opened the rear door herself and the taxi driver set off: 10th Street, the clinic, the girls' hands receiving coins, the Cyclist's Roundabout in commemoration of the 1995 World Road Championships, the short white hair of the old lady, the hospital, Hipinto, a left turn, a taxi an off-shade of orange following another pale-coloured one on their way to save an old man. The rain was persistent and their tyres rolled along unsafely, barely kissing the black tarmac. On 42nd Avenue the taxi in front slowed down, and Darwin spurred him on with a long beep of his horn that drove them both to continue on their way. The sound made the old lady turn around to see who it was that was

in more of a rush than her, and Darwin could see her deep, dark eyes more clearly than at any other point of that circular nightmare.

A truck sticking out over the middle of the road to avoid some potholes prevented Darwin from following the other taxi. In any case, he preferred to keep his distance to avoid that stiff gaze, which could remind the woman of something and change the situation for the worse. The light went green when they were passing underneath the pedestrian footbridge, and Darwin was able to rotate his head to confirm that Eliana was no longer in the park. He realized that he would have to make a long journey in order for the doors to the life that he now coveted to open again, the life in which he would love Eliana so much that she would one day rush to their elderly couple's house to save him, so much that he would deserve a son to whom he mattered. The other taxi driver ignored the inside lane and left Duitama on the exit road. A few curious onlookers stood around watching the chase in astonishment.

They passed rapidly over the stream and crossed the city limits at full speed, before driving past the Bavaria brewery and the large motels that were beginning to welcome the first couples of the afternoon. Darwin decided to move alongside the taxi and accelerated suddenly until they were side by side. With no regard to the shock it could cause the old lady, he shouted at the other driver not to stop at the checkpoint, to keep going in the direction she told him, that he would pull in to explain what was going on. The man nodded fearfully, knowing that this journey really was an emergency, but puzzled by Darwin's attitude. They reached the curve by the hills, and the way the human iguana took it told Darwin that he wasn't as skillful a driver as he was. The rain was relentless, and the police officers were huddling together for warmth under the tent. Nobody stopped them, and the other driver clung obediently to the roadside while Darwin slowed down slightly to give the impression that he was going to make some kind of gesture of apology. But he didn't, and that gentle use of the brake was like a taunt to the officers who had watched him pass by so many times without the correct paperwork.

As if due to inertia after the drop in speed, a light on the car's dashboard blinked followed by a final glint of light on the fuel needle and, exasperated because the engine was cutting out, Darwin was forced to pull over as if an invisible arm was instructing him to. The police saw the entire scene from their shelter and, behind the trails of water rolling down the glass of the windscreen, Darwin watched as the other taxi neared the roundabout while the driver followed the final few directions to reach the blue house. They weren't going to make it. The taxi emerged onto the straight towards Tibasosa and in the opposite direction another taxi, vaguely orange, accelerated and overtook a grey Chevrolet Optra in a dangerous manoeuvre. The human iguana was startled to see the other one so close in front of him, and the slippery surface was unforgiving of his twitch to the wheel. The taxi veered towards the edge of the road, and a post devoured the entire front nearside wing, complete with light and seat. The Optra braked carefully before joining the roundabout, while the orange taxi kept straight on imperturbably. After seeing and hearing the accident, Darwin got out to go to the aid of the old lady and the human iguana. The police officers did the same, and while he was walking in the rain that was sheeting down diagonally, Darwin realized in horror that in the opposite lane, travelling towards Duitama at over 100km per hour, was his taxi; behind the wheel, a duplicate of himself was looking at his gold watch, without noticing the collision he had just caused. When he stopped in order to watch him continue his acceleration towards the market, Darwin wondered how many baskets that other man might have inside his taxi.

Sleep Paralysis

Rocío Cely
Editor

The Ellipsis program experience is one of the most valuable I have had in my professional career. Not only because it granted me the opportunity to travel to Cartagena and attend the Hay Festival, but also because of all the lessons I learned and the valuable people I met along the way. In January, everything felt possible and exciting, and we counted the months, days, and hours to see each other again at FIL-Bo, to share our laughter and emotions once again. When this whole pandemic situation started, I felt that the theme we had chosen (and which felt strange when we chose it) made much more sense. The theme was time.

From that moment until now, we have certainly thought about the subject of time once and again. The slowness, strangeness, and specificness of the months that have followed, in addition to the changes we have experienced in our daily lives, are a trigger for

creativity—and, of course, for writing. Despite the uncertainty as to whether the Ellipsis program would continue or not, we all knew and felt that it would be necessary to share our texts and not abandon what had brought us together initially. We feared getting notified that the program would be cancelled and that we would become the lost generation of Ellipsis, the ghost generation.

However, when things began to normalize a bit (within what this infernal virus will allow), we jumped for joy when we learned that we were going to resume the process of Ellipsis and that soon we would have in our hands (or in our mailboxes) the stories that we had been waiting so many months to read. Since that warm afternoon in Cartagena, when each editor selected the writer with whom we would work, there we were, tremendously expectant and immensely anxious to see the idea that the writers had proposed materialized. When I heard Gabi's idea about dreams and a sort of parallel reality, I knew I wanted to work with her, and so it was. From the moment I read the first version of the text, I understood that we would face the huge challenge of working at a distance and, in addition, of supporting each other along the way to achieve an incredible story.

Every time I received new versions of Gabi's story, I understood that being in this program was, above all, the perfect opportunity to reaffirm what being an editor means to me: to support. Many believe that the figure of the editor corresponds to a soulless person, who slices and destroys texts and despises writers. And that is really not the case. For me,

this experience has meant being able to accompany Gabi in her writing process, trying to understand her intentions, her ideas, trying to get into her head and understand her text. As an editor, my job is, above all, to be a kind of translator, to understand and interpret my writer's text so that it can be received and welcomed by readers. And that is what I have tried to do during this process with Gabi. I have tried to show her that we editors don't just cut texts for the sake of it or that our word is unassailable. On the contrary, I have shown her throughout our process, and thanks to Marta Orrantia's guidance, that in a given text the priority must always reside with the writer. We can suggest, support, and recommend, but we must not get into the text to make and unmake.

I really enjoyed sharing this process with Gabi and being able to accompany her and support her in her moments of doubt, being there to talk about dreams, about narrative, and being able to show her how valuable her writing is, along with all its potential. The Ellipsis experience has been very gratifying and I am excited to be able to present, through this text, a portion of my work as an editor.

I am deeply grateful to Alejandra Jaramillo and Marta Orrantia for so many things learned in such a short space of time and for their belief in us to become a new generation of Ellipsis.

Gabriela Carrasquilla
Author

The day they met, Helena was beginning to feel comfortable in her new apartment. Changing spaces was familiar to her and always refreshing. Something akin to taking a shower after spending a whole weekend in bed. All the times she had moved had taught her that you only lose something to gain something larger. You shed the old to make room for the new. For Helena there was no better ritual for cleansing the soul, even when paralysis was always looming.

The first time she felt it was ten years ago, when she was twenty years old. She dreamed of a small earthquake, and her first impulse was to run, but she could not. Her body would not respond. She tried to move her feet, but they wouldn't follow her head's commands. Anguish ramped up her heartrate and breathing. Futilely, she attempted to scream. She felt that she needed someone to shake her firmly to awaken her body, which seemed to have been left behind in the world of dreams. In that first episode, she discovered that concentrating on her breath and trying to open her eyes was the only thing that would guarantee her return to the earthly world. Throughout her twenties, her sleep paralysis reappeared at times, and although Helena had learned to handle it, she experienced episodes so fierce that even once she managed to come to back, she felt detached from the Earth for a while.

Over time, Helena was able to determine that episodes of paralysis came about during times of major change: changing homes, new loves, new jobs, deaths. It was a pattern: with change came paralysis, and with paralysis came the second-guessing of decisions. However, a conviction

that she herself questioned urged her to change the course of her life frequently, even though she knew that the paralyzing episodes would not be held off for long. Secretly, Helena was always hoping that after a change the paralysis would not come, and so she would have the confirmation that life was on the path she had dreamed of.

Martin liked parties where he could talk to people, parties where the music was a complement to the night and not the centrepiece. The hangovers of the recent years had taught him—forcefully—that he had to lay off the cheap drinks if he was going to be productive the next day. But tonight was an exception, one of those days when the urge to get out of control won out over enforced self-care. He wanted to pass out and didn't mind feeling like shit the next day.

He saw her for the first time at the bar. He thought it was cute that even though she was wearing heels she had to crane her neck to hear the barman. He smiled to himself, wondered if she would remember him, if the passage of time had made him unrecognizable, thought twice about whether to go over and say hello. He decided to wait for the cheap drink to make him more shameless; he wasn't particularly good at chitchat, except when he was nearly drunk.

Martin smiled at her from afar and, as he approached her, poured two shots of aguardiente. Arriving to where Helena stood, he offered her one, they toasted, and faster than either of them remember, they were exchanging kisses flavoured with aguardiente and marijuana.

Helena didn't remember the first fuck with Martin. She was too drunk that night, but she remembered the next day like a movie she could replay as often as she liked. The first rays of sunlight broke through the curtains of Helena's apartment, jolting her awake. She wasn't hungover, so she figured she was still drunk. She knew she had come home with Martin. She knew they had slept together, and judging by the lack of clothes and a slight ache in her leg muscles, she supposed they had screwed. While

Martin snored, Helena got up to make coffee. The view from her home looked so beautiful to her that it made her want to spend the whole day on the couch.

Martin woke up some time later with what felt like a bomb going off in his head. He didn't know where he was, but he remembered in a matter of seconds. Helena's room looked familiar, as if he had been there before. The light coming in through the blinds drew lines that warmed sections of the wooden floor. With clumsy steps, he left the room. Helena was on the couch.

"Are you dying there?" asked Helena as she walked to the kitchen to serve him a glass of water. She gave him two painkillers and sat back down on the couch.

"Thanks," said Martin. "I feel like I jumped out of fifth story window. What the hell happened last night?"

"Don't get upset. I don't remember anything. I was drunk as fuck. Still am, I think."

"Oh, you don't remember? That's how shit it was? Hey, I'm sorry," said Martin, half in jest.

Helena laughed heartily and sat down on the couch. Martin followed her. They were silent for several minutes. The morning light streamed in through the living room window and warmed their bare legs. Helena stared at Martin's legs. His skin colour frustrated and fascinated her in equal measure. She had never been able to get a tan and Martin sported the colour of her dreams.

"What are you looking at?" Martin asked, caressing her face.

"Your legs... they're lovely," she said, smiling.

He saw her for the first time at the bar. He thought it was cute that even though she was wearing heels she had to crane her neck to hear the barman. He smiled to himself, wondered if she would remember him, if the passage of time had made him unrecognizable.

It had been years since Helena had felt a shiver through her body when a man touched her. She had always been good at separating sex from love, and for her, the shivers only came with love.

"You're lovely, Helena," Martin said, leaning in for a kiss.

Helena ran her hands through his hair, a new place that felt strange to the touch. Martin smelled like an old drink. She ran her hands over his skin and it seemed to Helena that the belly he had added to over the last few years made him seem older than he was. The orgasm came fast and her body felt less heavy, as if she had just had a massage.

The days that followed that first meeting were intense and broad. Life, they both felt, was lengthening with each encounter. Spending time together was urgent, important. Their embraces felt familiar and Martin's raucous laughter had begun to seep into every corner of Helena's apartment, so much so that she could hear it even when Martin wasn't there.

Their conversations were like a thread that little by little and with increasing intensity sutured the wounds they both carried on their shoulders. No matter how small the wound, they both felt it always deserved attention.

For Martin everything was so unexpected that it merited obsession and adventure. His past relationships had always unfolded in the expected manner, without much room for surprise. It had been years since Helena had felt seen, since someone showed themselves to her with the same generosity she offered.

"Hey, Hel. Are you awake? Would you pass me the water, please?" asked Martin in a sleepy voice.

Helena sat up in bed. She had woken up at the same time as Martin. She took the glass from the bedside table, sipped it, and passed it to him.

"Thanks," said Martin. "I had a really weird dream."

"Man, so did I, Martin. I can't remember exactly. You were there. So weird. We were kids, I think."

"Okay then," Martin said, rolling his eyes.

"Okay what? Why are you rolling your eyes?"

"Well because I was probably sleep talking, is all. Stop messing around and let me tell you the dream, because it was really weird."

"I don't understand, Martin. I have no idea if you were sleep talking. I was sleeping too," said Helena, disconcerted.

"I dreamed that we were kids too. We were playing in a sandbox and—"

"We became friends," Helena said.

"Yes," Martin said, turning in bed to look at Helena.

Both were silent for a while. They were stunned. The idea that they dreaming the same thing was strange and curious. Neither was particularly superstitious, and they led rather rational lives. They did not believe in God or in higher forces, and so this coincidence was especially puzzling. How was it possible to dream the same thing as someone else? Would it work if they were not in the same bed? Was it related to something they talked about or saw during the day and repressed in their subconscious? There were no clear answers.

"Have you noticed how groups of friends who spend a lot of time together start to talk alike?" asked Helena.

"Yes. It also happens with couples and people from the same office," Martin answered.

"Maybe that's what it is, Martin. But instead of talking alike, we are dreaming the same thing."

"It could be, Hel. It may be an effect of spending time together, an expression of the subconscious."

The day went by normally and although they knew that having dreamed the same dream was very strange, they agreed that rationally it was impossible for it to happen again. As the hours passed, and as usually happens with dreams, Martin and Helena forgot about the event while the cares of the day occupied them. Until the night returned.

"How incredible to meet you here, Hel," said Martin.

The place was familiar, but there were strange things that made it impossible to recognize it completely. They passed through a corridor full of mirrors in whose reflection they could see themselves in other moments of their lives. Martin looked thinner and had a boyish face, while Helena was digging through her hair looking for greying.

"Look at all these grey hairs, Martin," she said in surprise.

They walked along corridors where they bumped into people they knew and had senseless conversations. Helena ran into a teacher who had died recently. Martin hugged his friends and showed them that there were stars glued to the ceiling.

A few seconds later they appeared in Martin's car, or what looked like Martin's bed, and they desperately searched for a way to get someplace that neither of them knew how to find.

Helena woke up first. She had a feeling that the shared dream was no coincidence but rather something enigmatic that was happening to them, but she still couldn't find the words, nor an explanation that made sense.

She didn't know if it was a good idea to wake Martin. What if dreaming together was really happening to them and she woke him up early? Or did waking up first mean that the dream had been hers alone?

Martin woke up two hours later. In the meantime, Helena had taken it upon herself to investigate the phenomenon that was taking place: shared dreaming. In her nervousness, which drove her to investigate anxiously, Helena had discovered that it could only happen to people who were emotionally close and that they generated a kind of joint subconscious. However, in everything she read there was not sufficient explanation for the accuracy of what they shared and so, for her, it remained an unexplained gift.

Martin woke up puzzled. He didn't quite understand if he was still asleep or if he was fully awake. He called to Helena in confusion. Helena came running, lay down next to him, and hugged him tight.

"Good morning," said Martin between yawns, "Did you wake up long ago?"

"A while ago," answered Helena as she released him to look him in the eyes. "What did you dream?"

"You were in the dream, Hel. It was very real. It felt very real."

"So did I."

"You look pretty with grey hair," Martin said as he stroked Helena's hair.

Tears filled their eyes. There was no need to speak, since they both knew: they had the gift of dreaming together.

The following months for Helena and Martin were a discovery of new worlds. Eventually they understood that to share the same dream they did not have to sleep together or at the same time. They had discovered

a universe that called them to continue experiencing inexplicable worlds, that invited them to venture into new experiences.

For Helena, managing time in dreams led her more and more to want to fall asleep. She had been able to travel back to her childhood several times and understand some of her traumas, as well as to see herself as an old woman and talk to herself. As time went on, Helena had begun to realize that although it was a world she had known with Martin and in which he was always present, they were journeys she was fascinated to make for herself, to discover and understand herself.

The paralysis had progressively reappeared and the episodes began to occur more and more frequently. But this time, unlike the others, it didn't bother her. It allowed her to be in that place between sleep and wakefulness. Sleeping had become her favourite state, and the more she dreamed, the more tempted she was to find a way not to wake up again.

For Martin things had changed a lot since they had discovered the phenomenon of shared dreaming. In the first trips, Helena always looked for him and they had wonderful adventures where imagination and possibilities had no limits. They had experienced worlds without gravity, universes at peace, fascinating conversations with people they never imagined they'd meet. Helena, for example, had met Madonna in a swimming pool and they had danced and sung on a waterproof karaoke machine. Martin had played chess with Bobby Fischer and learned a few tricks that he had forgotten by the time he woke up. They had toured cities that looked like places they had seen before but had something different about them. Martin discovered that in his dreams timidity did not exist, and he sought the people he had always wanted to confront but couldn't: abusive bosses, his parents, friends from the past, teachers who had traumatized him. The only person he could not question was Helena, because she was neither a figment of his unconscious nor of his imagination.

Little by little, Martin saw how Helena left him behind on their journeys and how she progressively stopped looking for him. Although they always crossed paths or caught a glimpses of each other, they no longer shared the same dream, and for him the experience without Helena did not have the same meaning.

The last night they dreamed together, they slept at Martin's house. They had gone to a party, also the last one they shared. They used to enjoy those encounters. They liked to get drunk and have meaningless conversations. Their tongues would run wild and their love would spill out of their bodies, coming out in words that made them feel lucky to have each other, to have found each other, to share the gifts of dreams. But for some time now, when Helena began to disappear in their dreams, it was hard for them to connect in real life and that day it was impossible to ignore.

They had arrived late because Helena had insisted on taking a nap. Martin woke up first from the dream. He waited for her for an hour, but Helena would not wake up, so he began to gently nudge her. Her body reacted slowly to Martin's attempts to bring her back to the real world. First, she rearranged herself on the bed and gradually opened her eyes. She had never liked being woken up, and even less so now that she enjoyed the dream world so much, so she was not in a good mood.

They were the last to arrive at the party. They had arranged to meet some friends at a bar in Chapinero, but in the cab on the way to the place, Helena seemed more interested in what was happening on the streets than in having a conversation with Martin. She didn't look at him once and sat as far away from him as she could. Martin wanted to get closer, but Helena's body language wouldn't let him. Already at the party, the music in the place was so loud that they had to shout at each other to be understood, so inside it was easier for Helena to be distracted and harder for Martin to get her attention.

Martin sat down next to her and handed her an ice-cold beer.

Their tongues would run wild and their love would spill out of their bodies, coming out in words that made them feel lucky to have each other, to have found each other, to share the gifts of dreams.

"Do you remember the first time we came to this place?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered abruptly. "I'd like to leave soon. I was having an important dream, talking to my grandmother about my childhood."

Martin felt that Helena was no longer present, that she didn't enjoy the things they used to do when they were awake. She always seemed to be longing to go to sleep, and they didn't meet anymore in dreams.

"And if we leave, can I come to your dream, Hel?" Martin asked.

"Come if you want, no problem. But let's go, yeah?"

When they arrived at Martin's house, Helena topped up two glasses of whiskey.

"There you go." She handed a glass to Martin. "So we fall asleep faster."

Martin drank it all in one long gulp. Helena did the same and they went to bed. It didn't take them long to feel absolutely drunk and fall asleep.

The poker table was square and his playing partners were Maradona, his childhood friend El Pollo, his brother Gabriel, and his mother. Maradona didn't say a word and only smoked tobacco with his left hand, which was full of gold rings and bracelets. El Pollo was laughing and when he looked Martin in the eyes he said, "Your mother is winning this round." His brother was eight years old and was wearing the uniform of the Colombian national football team. His mother was playing poker with tarot cards. It took Martin a while to understand that he was dreaming. He had discovered that when he fell asleep drunk it was hard for him to understand what was happening. Although Martin enjoyed Maradona's company very much, despite his silence, he knew he had to go and look for Helena. He kissed his mother on the cheek and left the table. As he walked away, El Pollo shouted after him, "Your mother is winning this round."

Martin found Helena in a car. He was driving and in the back were Helena and her grandmother. It was a small car, and the road seemed to end at the edge of a snow-covered mountain. Martin was so focused on driving that he couldn't hear any of Helena's conversation in the back seat. He noticed that the car was not slowing down and they were going so fast that in a matter of seconds they would crash into the mountain.

"Hel!" Martin cried in anguish.

He opened his eyes to find himself sitting up in his bed, with Helena asleep beside him.

Helena heard Martin's cry, but paid no attention to it. She didn't even realize that the car had crashed into the mountain. Now she was sitting with her grandmother on a beach in Santa Marta, and as she wiggled her toes in the sand, the two of them watched the sunset.

Martin noticed Helena wiggling her toes and took advantage of the movement to wake her.

"Hel, is everything alright?" he whispered in her ear.

Helena stirred uneasily. Martin had managed to wake her up, but her body was still in the dream. She was paralyzed, so she had to make an effort to move and wake up, or else stay still and finish the conversation with her grandmother. With practice, she had learned to use paralysis to stay in the dream world.

"Wake up, Hel," Martin tried again, but to no avail. Helena was elsewhere.

The next morning, Martin got out of bed. Helena closed her eyes again to see if she could fall back asleep, but her hunger wouldn't let her. She heard Martin in the kitchen and decided to join him to make breakfast. They didn't say a word to each other as they cooked. From a distance it

looked like a coordinated and practiced dance in which each one knew what they had to do and so they didn't need to talk. Helena waited for Martin to serve the eggs on the two plates and took them to the dining room. She grabbed the coffee pot and set it on the table. Martin sat down and poured himself a cup of coffee. Helena did the same.

"Hel, I think we need to talk," said Martin, putting his hand on hers. "I feel that things have changed a lot between us. I feel you're absent."

"Absent how?" Helena asked as she put her coffee mug down and looked at Martin.

"Absent, Helena. You know what I mean, please don't play dumb. We are in bad shape. Ever since we discovered this dream madness, I feel as though you always want to be sleeping," Martin answered. "Yesterday, for example, don't you think that was a bit much?"

"I always want to be sleeping," Helena repeated thoughtfully. "I don't know, Martin. Maybe I'm still shocked by what's happening to us and I want to take advantage of it. On the other hand, I'm a little surprised that you don't want to sleep so much."

"Don't get exasperated. I'm saying that something is hurting us because I want to fix it, but it seems that things are fine for you, aren't they?" Martin said, upset. "Do you remember, for example, what it was like to have a good time at a party? Yesterday you had a bitch face the whole time. You didn't talk to anyone and you got drunk so you could fall asleep quickly. What's going on, Helena? Do you find our life so boring that you always have to go off and dream?"

Helena looked at him stunned. She knew Martin was right about some of the things he was saying, but it was also clear that Martin didn't fully understand the implications of the discoveries they could make while dreaming together. Their confrontations, she didn't know why, made her want

to sleep. Perhaps her body became too charged and she had the urge to run away to another world, a happy and peaceful one. Knowing what her reaction could produce, Helena stood up from the table and, looking Martin in the eyes without saying a word, walked to the bedroom, locked the door, and laid down on the bed to sleep.

Martin stayed in the kitchen for a few minutes. He decided it was best to let Helena calm down before they tried talking again. He got up from the table, washed the dishes, left everything in order, and then went to look for her. The locked door sent a rush of cold air through his body. He knocked several times, but there was no answer. Helena heard the knocking in her dream and it sounded so loud that it echoed throughout the dream universe and threatened to destroy it.

“Helena, open up!” Martin shouted, knocking desperately, but there was no answer. Helena was deeply asleep.

Helena felt her head starting to wake up, but her body did not move, she felt paralysis coming on and she needed to use the trick of putting her mind back to sleep. Martin’s screams were making it hard for her to concentrate.

Martin decided to look for Helena in his dreams. He went to the kitchen, poured himself a huge drink of aguardiente and downed it so fast. Within minutes he was knocked out.

Helena was still struggling to bring her mind back to sleep, and without Martin’s shouts it was easier to concentrate until she fell asleep.

With the aguardiente, it took Martin a few minutes to understand where she was, but it felt like the countryside.

“Helena! Helena! Helena!” Martin shouted as he moved through a thick fog that obscured the landscape.

Helena heard him in the distance. She thought it was Martin’s voice trying to wake her up again. She tried to run away to see if the voice would go away. She felt her breathing speed up, her pulse raced, and her heart beat outside of her chest. No matter how hard she tried, she could not run and it seemed to her that Martin’s voice was going to reach her, but her legs did not respond. Helena was paralyzed.

Martin searched for hours, but Helena was nowhere to be found. He woke up with a sense of foreboding. He ran towards the bedroom and kicked the door down. There was Helena, deeply asleep, making noises as thought she was struggling, as if she wanted to say something.

“Helena, please wake up!” Martin shouted as he shook her, but she did not react.

“I have to run,” Helena thought, but her body would not respond. She wanted to scream, but she could not. She felt someone shaking her, but she didn’t know what to do. Her body would not react in either world and she stayed there forever, stuck in a paralysis that she thought she had learned to control, but that had left her in limbo forever.

The Sun Doesn't Come up on This Side

Nicole Bedoya Rodríguez
Editor

To me, editing for Ellipsis has meant learning about possibilities: the possibilities of an individual story, of writing, and of life. Initially, I approached this process with a thirst to know everything, a desire to tackle the text and all its possibilities, as a whole, by myself, to take it quickly to another place: hopefully, a better place. I don't think the fact that the process proved much slower than I expected is only the result of the pandemic. From every symbol, every word and every opinion that I left on the screen—often while questioning myself about the limits of my role—I learned not only how to handle this text, but also how I want to approach the writing of others, the texts that come in from budding authors, and those that I come across in major media outlets.

Here, I learned to cherish possibility and celebrate sudden epiphanies. Marta told us that when we edit a text, that story also becomes ours and we have a duty to know everything about it. Editing Andrea was much more than sending a file back and forth: it meant never-ending voice messages, and long confessions in which writing and life blended together for us. I think we found common ground in order to meet on the path of possibility. What I'm trying to say is that I'm infinitely grateful that Andrea gave me not just this story, but also her life story and her friendship. I believe that, in her writing process, we were searching desperately for much more than the possibility of this story. We were also searching for our own possibilities: hers as an author, and mine as an editor. I'm not certain that this search will materialize here, but I do know that we have a world of possibilities in life and, more importantly, in words.

Andrea Restrepo Hernández
Author

Years and years went by before my dad's death came back to my mind. I hadn't thought about my first fifteen minutes of life without him for a long time. All my efforts to block out that feeling of guilt have been in vain. Lots of things happened that he missed, so many Lucias he never met, so many moments we never shared. Inhale. Exhale.

The sweat and the pressure rise in my hands when I get in the taxi. If only I could cancel my trip and be eclipsed by the curtains of my apartment.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. Where am I taking you?" The man behind the wheel greets me.

I can only muster a vague nod of my head and a request for him to take me to Rionegro Airport. I seem to hear my dad's voice as we drive down avenue 33rd, telling me where we are and explaining how the street numbers go up according to the points of the compass. The Santa Gema roundabout, the junction of 76th and avenue Bolivariana. He enjoyed telling me how the city had changed: the construction of the metro, new roads and towering buildings. Now I come to think of it, when he told me those stories his voice had a hint of nostalgia. I remember that other, different Medellín that witnessed my dad's death, the Medellín I long for today.

We come to a halt at the Unicentro traffic lights. A woman is sitting on the curb, swapping sweets for coins while she plaits her daughter's hair.

"Are you gonna help me out, sir?" she asks the driver.

"Sorry lady, I don't know how to do plaits."

The serious tone of his reply brought out a giggle in the girl. I'm surprised by his witty retort, sure that the woman will be lost for words in response to such a joke, and all she can do is join in the laughter that gradually fades away amid the noise of the engines.

On the move again, I can only smile almost imperceptibly through the window. I remember dad finding amusement in the events of his day-to-day life, and imagine how he would have said something similar back to the woman at the lights. Breathing out makes my skin shiver. The driver looks at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Did ya like the joke? I wanted to put a smile on your face because you looked pretty down when I picked you up" my silence stifles the possibility of a conversation.

The smile drops from my face. Comments about my moody face annoy me—my ex-husband used to do it constantly—but it's worse when someone I don't know tries to make me laugh. My phone rings, interrupting my mental griping. Inhale. I don't want another call to change my plans. Exhale. I put it on silent and allow it to get lost in the depths of my purse.

This morning, I didn't feel this sense of unease when I was making my coffee. I wandered the house for a while in my pyjamas, while thoughts of starting the day with arepa, hogao sauce, and scrambled eggs filled my mind. I sank down into the sofa and pictured myself sailing along the Xochimilco canals in a gondola, chatting with people to start putting together my article and taking photo after photo. The thought of my trip to Mexico thrilled me, as I'm fascinated by its street food. I think my cup of black, liquid happiness was half-finished when Martha's call changed the course of my day. The need to put on makeup and high heels put a stop

As we drive down avenue 33rd, telling me where we are and explaining how the street numbers go up according to the points of the compass.

to my plans of writing the report I had to finish before leaving for the airport. The perfect breakfast was replaced by glasses of water and cups of coffee, and they're still waiting for the report in the office.

I've avoided wakes of any kind for twenty years. I'm afraid of going back to those fifteen minutes that I never dealt with, that stretch of time that reawakens feelings in me I'm not ready for. Martha's call changed everything. On the phone she told me that Evelio had died and there were no excuses for getting out of his funeral. Before he was my father-in-law, even though he treated me like a daughter, Evelio was my mentor at the newspaper. Thanks to him I learned the trade. Saying a final goodbye to him was the least I could do.

I arrived at the funeral home under the heat of the 11 o'clock sun, and shaded my face with my hands while getting out of the car and walking up the steps of the building. As I passed through the doorway of Room 5 I saw the coffin, the flames of the candles eclipsed by the light bursting through the bay window, and the white roses that imbued the scene with extra lustre. Ricardo was in the first row on the left-hand side, wearing dark sunglasses and his head immaculately shaved, with his mother sitting as closely to him as her wheelchair allowed. I headed towards a free seat on the right-hand side, slightly further away from the attendees.

I hadn't laid eyes on Ricky since the divorce was rubber-stamped at the notary office six months previously. I suppose that we both shared an inner desire to end on good terms, to have a drink for one last time and talk about his father's health without discussing legal matters again. At the end of our appointment in the notary office, without looking at each other intently, I think we both decided intuitively to leave things as they were.

He seemed calm, although I understood the position he found himself in. I wasn't the comforting presence that he undoubtedly needed; my focus was on banishing that young, impulsive Lucía. I concentrated on maintaining my composure at his father's wake, until staying in the room was rendered unbearable by a woman starting to sing Schubert's "Ave Maria."

When the first vibrato rang out, I felt the dam holding back old tears start to crack. I ran out towards the patio and stayed there for a while, gazing up at the sky. I gulped in air to push the knot in my throat back down into its place and forced down a sip of harsh coffee. I couldn't see the coffin any more, but those long-buried memories of my dad's funeral rose up in my mind like a tidal wave. I looked at my watch in a daze and felt relieved: I just had to get through the funeral Mass and it would all be over.

A few minutes later I felt a presence at my side. Turning my head, I saw Ricky standing there silently. His almond-coloured eyes were hidden, but his nose was sore from all the tissues of the last few hours and made me imagine them brimming with tears.

"You've got a terrible look on your face. Now I get why you don't like wakes" he said.

Not even he knows my reasons, as he was largely unaware of my relationship with dad. If he had been, this long-repressed guilt would have weighed less and maybe today we could have exchanged a few words of empathy. While in my mind I was battling a wave of reminiscence, he asked me if I could take him to the church.

"I'll tell Jorge to take care of my mom. Everyone's all over me and I can't take it anymore" he told me, almost in a whisper.

I tutted at him and we shared a spontaneous smile. I remembered our first year as newlyweds, and how our eyes would wander from the task at hand to mischievously seek out the eyes of the other. I felt like I was on the sofa next to him. I'd be drinking coffee and writing my next article, and he'd be resting from the working week and eating the chocolates I'd brought back from my trip. After hours without a word, I'd get up, grab the car keys, and we'd go out in search of a steak. The taxi stops for a second, but I don't pay any attention. I prefer to return to the funeral, to when I agreed to help Ricky get away from his family for a while. It felt good to hold out my arm to him so we

could leave together. Maybe it was better than giving him my condolences or asking him how he felt.

"Which is your gate?"

Have fifty minutes gone by already? You can't even reach Rionegro that quickly in a dream. Have I been thinking for that long? I pay the driver, still impassive to his smile, he takes my suitcase out of the boot for me and I thank him for getting me here so quickly.

"It's good you didn't get stressed out by that traffic jam in San Diego." I look at him in disbelief: I suppose that, like dad would say, time passes more slowly when there's no hurry.

There are still a little over five hours until boarding. When I got back from the Mass, an anxiety attack began to unnerve me. I escaped as quickly as I could, but at this point I don't know if it was worse to have left my house. What a coincidence that everyone seems happier today. The laughter on the journey reminded me of what I feared amid the silence of my apartment. I definitely didn't manage to ignore it. My hostility always works well for me, but right now in the airport it bothers me to see that the people are so cheerful.

The sweat and pressure in my hands hasn't gone away. Inhale. Airports remind me of my fear of heights. Exhale. I've always enjoyed travelling and I don't know when I started with this stupid idea that planes I'm on are going to crash. I walk towards the check-in desk to offload my suitcase and be able to move more freely while waiting to board. Obviously, the place is deserted. No queues, no airline personnel. I don't have any choice but to add more weight to the load I'm already carrying. For the time being, a good meal might help me to quell my vertigo and calm these nerves.

I enter an empty restaurant, order the first thing I see on the menu, and sit down to wait at a corner table. Some tables begin to fill up and the place comes to life. My attention falls on a few fidgety children and their mother,

speaking loudly on her phone. Mealtimes were always sacred to dad. The dinner table was where we laughed about the day's trivialities and addressed matters of substance. He liked to eat and savour everything. Although his illness brought with it weight loss, an intolerance to certain foods, and the metallic taste caused by the chemo, that moment was always important. Even when he was ill, our routine never changed, although, now that I think about it, I think I concentrated on listening to him more, only intervening when he asked me how something had gone or about some household matter. I think that part of me sensed that time was ticking away for him. I was so foolish, that had been the place to ask him about things like whether he was afraid of dying, or if he thought he was going to get better. Maybe then I would have understood the signs that revealed his fear. I suppose that the questions arise when there's no longer anyone there to answer them.

The dinner table is still important to me, despite my solitude, or the simplicity of the meal or the spaces I'm able to make for it during my trips. My order arrives, and I fill the silence with the sound of my cutlery. It was at the table, during lunch, when he told me:

"With this medication now I really will go bald," letting out an infectious laugh.

"You'll be just another bald guy" I answered him, joining in his mocking of the ironies of life.

He refused to have his head shaved and waited patiently for his hair to fall out, one by one. He would chuckle when I was sweeping up the thick black fluff, and say:

"I'm moulting like a cat."

If dad had got better and recovered his hair, I don't know how much he would have liked to have a bald son-in-law. Another piece of irony. It pains me to remember the faith he placed in the doctors' recommendations.

I finish my lunch and sense the weight of a dense energy. Feeling slightly faint, I walk out of the restaurant but the heaviness of my suitcase stops me from regaining my strength. The stream of memories pouring into my mind drives me to despair. I still find it unbearable that, every time I think about dad, all I can do is beat myself up about what happened on that Sunday night. It's as if cracks were beginning to form in my perfectly-set concrete wall. I can't allow it. If my wall crumbles to the ground, my whole life goes down with it. I need to get into 'work trip' mode. Going through a wake isn't going to make me abandon the strength I've acquired over my forty-two years. My arm hurts because of this suitcase, which is heavier than it looks.

My commitments always get me out of tight corners. Finding any table where I can sit down and take out my notes and computer will be enough to get me to focus on the job. Before that, I have to relieve myself of my suitcase so that my writing isn't interrupted. My rhythm of work played an important role in my divorce: the stories of others distancing me from my problems. Work also helped dad to forget the wound opened up by losing his place at the family dinner table, even if I eventually joined him at his new table for one. It was like a union of two solitudes. I like to think that my arrival a few years later helped dad to get back part of what he'd lost, despite a consequence of the healing process being the loss of some of his boundless joy. I've always believed that a bit of support never goes amiss, even if it's late in coming. But although he had perhaps one final opportunity to be happy, I failed him. I wasn't up to it when the chips were down. I feel exhausted from dragging around these oppressive memories, memories that have taken on an insufferable physical weight. It seems like gravity stands against me with every step I take. The check-in desk is further away than I remembered.

A journalist's life is very frenetic. I suppose that I chose a career that was similar to life as a salesman like dad. Never ending haste. Long periods away from the city. It's as if everything boiled down to permanent escape. In my case, on top of this were entire days spent writing articles and organizing my life around a story. Dad would have told his friends proudly "Man, things have gone great for my girl since she graduated. She works

at El Colombiano and makes good money. She's been so focused since she was young, travelling and working is her life. Part of her dad had to rub off on her. There was me thinking about working all my life but mate, she's the one looking after me." On the way to the check-in desk, I come across my favourite shop and make a short detour. Although I hate airports, the shops are their saving grace. I like the ones that combine music and books the most; they always offer interesting material for my articles, and for amusing myself in the limbo in between destinations.

I walk to the back of the bookshop, which has a different atmosphere to the checkout display. The lighting is dimmer, dust has taken over and it's almost deserted. A Nino Bravo poster hangs on one of the walls. Images form in my mind of classical music records, and the records by other singers from the seventies lying forgotten on the shelves of my house. Dad was a heavy-handed man who treated his stereo with the utmost care. He bought it when he was very young, and it was his most treasured possession. While I never parted with it, I never turned it on again. I loved it when he played his records while making breakfast. I can hear him singing Joan Manuel Serrat or whistling the melodies from the solemn Masses, but instead I hear "Ave Maria" from the wake and feel dread. I leave the shop, taking clumsy steps due to my tear-clouded eyes.

I think I hear someone offering me help, or the woman from the shop saying 'come back soon' or 'happy to help.' I must have come across as unfriendly, but I ignore everything in my rush to reach the desk. My pace quickens when I realize the time. I haven't got time for this. The suitcase constrains my movement. My breathing becomes agitated. I feel sweat trickling down my back and making its way across my face. My hands can pull no more. I slow a little to get my breath back and see that the desk is nearby. Some people are in the queue waiting for their turn. At last, I'm here.

I stand in line and take off my jacket to rid myself of this suffocating feeling. With my jacket in my hand I feel even more overburdened. There's nowhere to put it. I feel the need to tie up my hair, but can't find a way to

free my hands. I close my eyes and try to breathe deeply. An angry man's voice filters through the air from the desk of another airline. He pounds the counter, and I relive the divorce sessions that I couldn't avoid. During those days I needed to hear what he would have told me, but I never found his voice in my memories. When my turn comes I forget about what's going on at the other desk. Under limit! What a relief!

At last, a bit of freedom. I can walk more comfortably, but I still have no idea what to do with my jacket. Now without luggage to drag around, I imagine what my life would have been like with dad after the divorce. He would definitely have come to live with me to start another life together. Every morning, he would have sat on the edge of my bed and stroked my hair, without saying a word, to wake me up. The scent of his arepas made with blended corn, soy and wheat bran would have filled the house, with Rocío Dúrcal playing in the background. He would have garnished my portion with cheese from the corner shop, poured me hot chocolate and put the plate of toast in the middle of the table. Those same pieces of toast were replaced, during his illness, by a ludicrous amount of pill bottles that brought nausea. I shake away the memory, feel a cold sensation in my body and put my jacket on again. I start daydreaming again about how, if he had been by my side, I would have been able to fall asleep next to him on the sofa, while he watched over my sleep in front of the glowing TV.

The irritating noises around me enter my consciousness again. Maybe a toilet would be a good place to escape from the muffled sound of the back and forth of suitcases, from the unintelligible announcements of the loudspeaker and the disagreeable hum caused by the conversations of so many others. It bothers me to hear everyone's laughter amplified. I'm the only person in the toilet. There are no windows to allow the air to circulate. The sound of the running water and my heavy breathing ricochets off the white walls with grey decor. Room 501 of the Vida Clinic. White walls, grey wardrobe, no windows. There we were, dad and I. The only light was emitted by the LED lights in the ceiling and the colour TV. Like here, day was indistinguishable from night. The Lucía of the past comes into view, her face damp and breathing fitfully. There's no

A Nino Bravo poster hangs on one of the walls. Images form in my mind of classical music records, and the records by other singers from the seventies lying forgotten on the shelves of my house.

turning back, I can't keep on holding it in. Unrelenting jubilation shattering the calm of that Sunday night. It's the ghost of the first fifteen minutes without dad.

In my reflection, Lucía sees remnants of what was her body and recognizes herself in subtle features moulded by the passage of time. She looks at the couple of grey hairs already peeking out, at the linen and lace clothes and the clear signs of deterioration on the back of what were once her delicate hands. There are no signs of the haughty expression of before, and almost no trace of the temperament of her mother that so troubled dad. She looks at me in silence, with a look of anguish and no vestiges of what was her joy on that Sunday night. The hysterical laughter that preceded doom echoes out. We look worn out by defeat. Annoyed, I look at the mirror. I'm exhausting every last drop of strength I have to evade the whirlwind bearing down on me.

At my age, I'm able to grasp that I wasn't the only one who was coming to grips with the difficulties of living together. He would say in life everything is a matter of adaptation; today, I understand the challenges of adopting a role that he never thought would fall to him, that changed his pace of life so dramatically. On my way out of the toilet, I imagine dad shouldering the burden of that motto, repeating it like a prayer before going to bed or after a fight. In spite of it all, his calm demeanour never changed. I suppose that imitating his tranquillity is one of the few things I can still give him. I guess that way I can make some amends for my mistakes.

Now, not only am I hounded by the laughter in the airport, but also by the giggles of the girl at the traffic lights and my cackle that began the fifteen forbidden minutes. I avoid the gaze of the security guard while I hand him my boarding pass, before taking my jacket off again to go through security. Computer out of hand luggage. No metallic objects in my pockets. I get dressed slowly and make sure not to forget any of my belongings. I close my eyes. Inhale. Exhale. I continue my way.

I haven't even typed a single line today. As well as losing a day of work, all the concentration I had for it has vanished too. My motivation melted away the

second my mind set foot in the past. Thinking about writing makes my taste buds long for the bitter flavour of coffee. It's a little after six, and through the large windows of the departure lounge I can see the little yellow lights flickering on one by one while the grey sky turns black. I think of dad leaning on the rail of the apartment balcony, his serene gaze lost in the distance and half his body hanging over the precipice. I liked taking in that sight by his side. Watching the lights from this empty gate makes me feel more alone than ever. A disturbing sensation that this night will never end comes over me.

The gate has filled up in the five minutes it took me to buy a coffee. I have no choice but to sit in a distant corner to get out my computer and notebook. The white page reminds me of the day I moved in with dad. I was twelve, and had made the decision to start a new life at his side. When I was younger, living with mom and seeing dad occasionally was the natural thing to do. Sometimes we'd watch new releases at the cinema on Tuesdays, with popcorn and fizzy drinks, or go and eat pizza on the odd Saturday even though he didn't enjoy it much, but Sundays were my favourite day. I used to go early to watch him play basketball, running, scoring baskets, and blocking big strong men. That indelible image of a man in rude health with unquenchable energy stopped me from reading the signs in his body that would become, years later, the symptoms of a terminal illness. We used to stay behind by ourselves to shoot baskets, before going for a swim and finishing with lunch at the shopping centre. When he dropped me off at home, I don't think I ever got used to seeing his languid figure disappearing over the horizon before dusk.

The Lucía of the past has taken control of my thoughts and she insists on telling me about a life that, at times, feels unfamiliar. She takes me on a tortuous exploration of my sins, and compels me to picture dad in moments when I never saw him: on the way home on the bus, staring through the window and longing for the following Sunday to arrive. Or in front of the TV, watching the 7 o´clock news to occupy his solitude. I never heard him cry, but I imagine now that was a common occurrence in his life. I wish I could swap all our Sundays out for a little more time sharing the same roof with him.

My untouched coffee no longer gives off steam. The boundary between the mountains and the sky has blurred, and the dancing yellow lights are of a different intensity to those of the city. Despite feeling loved and at ease by dad's side it meant not living with mom any more, as well as assuming household responsibilities and enduring long hours of enforced solitude. When I moved out, I had the chance to live in the city and study at a better school, although I didn't like where dad was living. It was an apartment made from sombre brown wood that my siblings called 'the birdhouse,' 'the pigeon coop' or 'the ranch.' Some children laugh shrilly in front of me, and I think I see the living image of my siblings. Just as jokey, just as pesky. I still feel anger at their rebelliousness and their way of criticizing what dad worked so hard to give us.

Boarding is announced and I don't know whether my trembling hands are due to fear of flying or the effect of the past on my body. I dry my hands on my trousers, but the sweating won't stop. I try to slow down my walk through the boarding tunnel to delay my arrival at the plane, although the sound of suitcases stalking me makes me step up my pace. What am I going to do sitting still for five hours? I'm afraid of feeling myself fall into that depression again, the depression I dragged myself from kicking and screaming in order to show my family that I could come to terms with what had happened. Everyone expected me to adapt, to not need anybody, to stay focused on my progress, or maybe to get married. Losing a parent made everything more difficult. It's not easy to satisfy the expectations people have of you. It was a matter of time, and a funeral was all it took to trigger the implosion. The sense of guilt never waned. The pain lingers. The memories returned. I hesitate at the door. Inhale. I force myself to walk in. Exhale.

Two women take their seats next to me. The way they treat each other tells me they must be mother and daughter. I listen in on their conversation about the plans for their holiday in Acapulco in the coming weeks. My parents' relationship didn't recover after the divorce. My belated decision to leave with dad altered the roles. Since my mom couldn't spend as much time with me, we maintained a relationship of evening phone calls, weekend visits, and

occasional trips away. The women laugh loudly and my past joy comes back to leave me in a daze. The world is conspiring to destroy me today.

Inhale. I try to keep my mind on my trip itinerary while this thing takes off. Exhale. I can't manage to concentrate on anything other than the plane making its way down the runway, or the rising tension in the joints of my hands. I open and close my palms quickly without succeeding in soothing the pressure. The taxiing continues. I put in earplugs to cut myself off from the noise of the engines and close my eyes. Inhale. The plane vibrates. Exhale. It picks up speed. Inhale, exhale. My heart is pounding and I clutch the armrests. Inhale. The plane takes off. My eyes remain locked shut but I calm down in the air. Cruising speed takes me back to the passenger seat of dad's truck. I can feel him driving smoothly to stop me from getting carsick on the numerous curves we rounded. I liked being with him when he was driving. He ran out of time to keep his promise to teach me to drive.

Two flight attendants pass by offering drinks. I ask for an iced tea to go with a bag of peanuts. The aeroplane shudders, sending my peanuts flying through the air, and one of them bends down in the middle of the aisle to pick them up. Another lurch; the first flight attendant stumbles, while the other grabs hold of a couple of seats and checks her colleague is OK before starting to make fun of her. The laughter spreads to the woman lying on the floor, who is unable to get back to her feet. The mother and daughter next to me join the commotion. Nobody can stop laughing and, while aware of how comical the scene is, I can only wonder about the reason for the violent shake.

The flight attendant picks herself up with a red face amid tears of laughter and apologizes. Her high-pitched little giggle pierces my eardrums, and I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe deeply. The fasten seatbelt sign comes on. Over the intercom, the captain announces our entry into an area of turbulence, cuts short the trolley service, and asks us to put our seats in an upright position and fold up our tables. The flight attendants walk away but their chit-chatting is still audible. I respire profoundly, massage my temples, and move my head around to loosen the muscles in my neck. Inhale. Exhale.

Veryone expected me to adapt, to not need anybody, to stay focused on my progress, or maybe to get married. Losing a parent made everything more difficult. It's not easy to satisfy the expectations people have of you.

Vida Clinc. Sunday. At 7:45pm. I called mom to update her on dad's health. The background was filled with the sound of the jazz station and the electronic beeps marking a weak rhythm. We burst out into fits of laughter, for what reason I forget. My stomach and jaw were aching. At 8:01 I hung up the phone to avoid a telling off for my mirth. I walked up to the hospital bed to pass on mom's greetings and noticed a solitary beep coming from the heart monitor still connected to his ring finger. Dad? I waited for the same chest movement that used to pacify me when I stood there motionless at home to check he was still breathing.

Nothing happened. At 8:05 I reacted and went off in search of one last hope. I stood at the end of the bed to observe the movements of the nurse examining him. She put an oxygen mask on him, and this time he didn't remove it stubbornly. The heart monitor gave one last jump. Nurse?

The silence in the cabin is broken by murmurs of a possible landing gear failure. Nobody understands what's going on. There's no announcement. The same void in my stomach, the one from 8:08 that night, when I felt abandoned for the first time. I felt out of place. Because of an uncontrollable fit of laughter, I missed the final moments of his life. Dad went away from that bed and had no-one to say goodbye to. Heavy turbulence jolts the plane. The cabin is filled with the passengers' groans, just like my dad's moans of pain on his last night at 'the pigeon coop' before being admitted to hospital. I watched him impotently from the door, and noticed how each 'aah' gradually lifted the veil of my innocence. Each 'aah' was life's rebuke, blaming me for not having done more. Inhale. I realize that we're flying over what seems to be a coastal city. It must be Panama. Exhale.

I always knew something like this would happen to me. Inhale. My heart is going a million miles an hour. The pressure floods back into my hands. Exhale. The void in my stomach is filled by fear in the same way that, in those long-gone ten minutes past eight, the void opened up by losing a parent was filled by regrets for having been a mediocre daughter. For the times I let dad go off on his own. For rebuffing him in favour of being with my friends. For the

occasions when I chose not to pay attention to the lumps on his back. For not helping him cut his nails, or not preparing him a meal when he got home from work tired. For the Lucía of the past, walking so blithely out of the room thinking that the hospital would only be a passing episode. The ultimate indifference: the only daughter in the room, but without really being there. The women next to me tremble and clutch hands. Another jolt heightens my panic. Inhale. I feel more mortal than ever and an intense heat washes over me. Exhale.

More regret comes at 8:13. The dying need whispers and stillness; instead of that, dad got the banal chuckle I let out at the precise moment of his death. I'm going to die here and I didn't live long enough to rectify my faults. I never took words like oncology or melanoma seriously; it still makes me shiver to imagine the phrase that immortalized those fifteen minutes. The macabreness of that simple "my dad died while I was laughing" causes me heartache. If he needed something in his dying moments, there was nobody there to request it from.

The intercom crackles on and the captain's voice confirms that we'll be making an emergency landing. At 8:15 the nurses confirm my suspicions. More than that, my convictions. I had already been dealing with his definitive absence for ten minutes. Living with him wasn't enough. Being there didn't cut it. I was just another disinterested daughter. I had to begin my life without dad, and my first action was to take his scent from the walls and drawers with me. Five minutes to vacate the place we had inhabited since the 13th of some month, or for 13 days, I'm not exactly sure which. Five minutes to stuff the guilt into bags and hide it away forever like a secret. Another five minutes later and dad's body disappeared from my sight, before time entered a 22-year-long pause.

Inhale. We're plummeting downwards. I hold my eyes shut with all my might. Exhale. I picture dad arriving with his black Samsonite suitcase from one trip or another on any old morning, smiling at me from the doorway of 'the pigeon coop.' Another void opens up in my stomach. Inhale. And what if my laughter allowed him to stay that way? What if, when the body

dies, the soul preserves the last sound heard and its echo rings out for all eternity? Dad walks away with his suitcase, smiling at me. Exhale.

I surrender to the inevitable. For death there are no worthwhile actions or reasons. I feel nauseous. Inhale. Those of us who knew dad well were aware of his characteristic way of finding humour in life. Dad would have tried to flash his yellow teeth genuinely, even if he had no strength for anything else. If he hadn't been so run down, maybe he would have poked fun at my clumsy laughter and said a few final words, 'always happy.' Or he would probably have made one last effort to pull me towards his weak chest and hold me there. He wouldn't have minded missing out on a few gulps of air for the sake of hugging me for the last time. The constant beep would have begun to sound, and I would have squeezed the last drop of air out of him while his smile faded away to the rhythm of the beats of the only active heart in the room.

The plane shakes and its wheels seem to make contact with the tarmac of the runway. Silence. Inhale, exhale. We seem to be rolling along at full speed. I open my eyes slowly. I look at my hands, and the pressure in them is replaced by an uncontrollable trembling. My heart is racing. Inhale. I look to the left and see the mother kissing her daughter fiercely. Exhale. The unbearable feeling of emptiness has gone. Dad would have laughed at this story. He always teased me for my paranoia. I feel a forgotten contraction spread across my face. I return one final time to the longest fifteen minutes of my life. Once again, I hear the declaration of the end of a failed struggle. Dad is declared dead, and this time the everlasting pause comes to an end. The plane keeps moving along the runway. Jubilation breaks out; I half-close my eyes, my cheekbones rise, and the dimples in my cheeks appear. I smile at the little yellow lights on the other side of the aeroplane window.

Dinosauria

Deiver Juez Correa
Editor

Until very recently, editing was not one of my artistic or personal quests. All I had was a vague knowledge of invisible—or invisibilized—subjects who remained in the shadow of the writers. I knew, for example, that Rulfo, Bolaño, and Sábato had editors, even García Márquez and Vallejo, but little was known about those first readers. At best, their names have been relegated to the credits pages, in tiny, almost indiscernible letters. Perhaps many of us have internalized the image of the editor as one who is an expert in grammar and punctuation, who corrects spelling and syntax, commas and periods. It is likely that this idea has to do with the prevailing lack of knowledge of the editing profession. I, in a way, thought the same, at least at first. What do editors actually do? An editor proposes, suggests, but, above all, asks questions, generates inquiries (detective-like) about the structure, the dialogues, the verb tenses, the construction of the characters, the description of the spaces and, in general, the verisimilitude of the text. Throughout this process, editing becomes an assertive dialogue with the writer in which communication is always respectful and frank.

An editor is a great reader. Someone able to establish relationships between and with other texts, knows genres and forms, techniques and methods. This allows for a broader vision from which to ask questions in an attempt to understand the needs of the text. An editor, like any good reader, is a keen observer. He asks about everything, no matter how small and insignificant it may seem. He observes in detail. He analyzes, examines, investigates, and reconstructs the text to understand its internal logic. However, there are no principles or fundamentals in editing. Each text is unique, with its own characteristics and particularities. There is only one rule that admits no discussion: the text must not be touched or modified. Only these: comments are deposited in the margin and a general impression at the end, without correcting even a single point or comma. This protocol, as simple as it may seem, reveals the enormous respect for the text itself and for the writer.

Even after everything, it is still difficult for me to define this profession in words. It occurs to me to think that editing is intuition. Sometimes you don't have the arguments, but either by ingenuity and sensitivity, or by instinct and suspicion, an idea emerges, a sort of hunch that can contribute a lot to the plot. And that is valid: as long as that intuition is communicated to the writer in an assertive way. So yes, editing is partly intuition. That's why it is also—like writing—a creative act.

I like to think that writing is, like cinema and theater, a collective art beyond the individual creative experience. It is not only the person who writes, but also the people who read and edit. During the process of

editing Dinosauria, I encountered many fears and insecurities. To edit is perhaps to face a reading of oneself, of one's knowledge and references. Fortunately, along this path full of challenges and learning, a less ambiguous idea of the editor's job has been molded.

Generally speaking, I know of very few publishing projects that give equal importance to writing and editing. The mere fact that the names of the editors are next to those of the writers on the cover of the book—the final product of the learning process and all our efforts—is a symbolic act that makes visible such an important and necessary profession. That is why I would like to thank the British Council for developing and promoting Ellipsis as a training program for young editors and writers. To Marta Orrantia, for taking us by the hand on this path, for sharing her experience and knowledge. To each and every one of those involved in this project, to those who work in the shadows, like editors. To each and every one of my colleagues, now soul friends. And especially to Tito, for the privilege of being your editor.

Tito S. Martínez
Author

One glance at Uncle Manolo's chickens was all it took to remind me that these animals were descended from dinosaurs. They were fat and thick-legged, which made them walk with a certain crushing wobble around the coop. They had strong beaks with which they broke the branches of the noni trees in the yard when Uncle let them roam around, and they did not seem to have learned to cluck. This last fact was the strangest one; they preferred silence. Perhaps it was an attempt to remember how to roar with their chicken throats.

During my only visit to his house, one of my uncle's hens quietly laid an egg; she just sat there in the garret, three feet off the ground, her eyes glued on me (or so it seemed to me), flapping her wings as if trying to take flight. For a moment I thought she would and imagined everything I would have to say to my uncle, who must have been using the bathroom just then or picking up sacks of corn from the room he used for storage. Marciana is gone, Uncle, she flew off to who knows where—to Paris? To Chocó? she flew away eastward, she migrated, but where do chickens migrate to? And there I was until Marciana stopped her flapping and came down from the garret with a leap that embedded her feet to the damp earth upon landing. There where she had been now was an egg, glistening in the distance from the contrast with the black wood of the chicken coop. When my uncle returned, I said nothing to him, he simply returned to the chair he had placed beside me and lit the joint we had abandoned halfway.

Uncle Manolo sat there for the seconds he needed to let out all the smoke and then went back to work. He went into the henhouse and picked up the egg that Marciana had just laid. Using a rag, he cleaned it of the shit and feathers that had stuck to it and put it in the fridge. Then he came back and opened the gate for his five favourites, who were bumping into each other in their eagerness to get out into the yard. While the five hens piled up against the gate to get out, the others strolled about rather calmly, moving comfortably inside the fencing that took up more than half the yard. Still, Uncle explained to me, when the five hens didn't go out for long, the atmosphere inside the coop became violent. Carelessness had cost him two of the smaller hens, which the five had pecked to death, and several broken wings and bruised eyes among the calmer ones.

Once outside, some hens pecked at the leaves of the noni trees while others scratched the ground feverishly, which made me wonder if they might know where the worms were or if all that effort was guided just by some kind of hunch. The other hens stayed inside the coop, not making too much trouble, picking at each other's feathers, drinking water from a bucket in one of the corners, and wandering along the fence to watch the other five scamper on the other side.

The yard where the chickens roamed was the centrepiece of the house and contained nothing but the noni trees and traces of the plants that my uncle tried to grow and the chickens prevented. When he let them out, the chickens would roam around the yard, digging up the places where he had planted new seeds. If any managed to grow a couple of inches without taking their notice, they would tear them out when they reached eye level or peck at the leaves until the plant simply withered under the sun." But it's either let them out or they kill the others," my uncle had said when he showed them to me. If they really did come from dinosaurs, those five hens had something predatory about them, something like the Tyrannosaurus rex, and they couldn't be handled just like that.

Somehow, those chickens seemed to deny my uncle the possibility of changing the house they shared in the slightest. The lot of land was a lengthwise one, with the yard and the washing room dividing the property in two. There was the front—with the façade, the living room that opened to the yard, and the four rooms that made up the building—and the back, where the chicken coop was made of dark wood and thick wire. Every morning, Uncle Manolo had to let them out so that the hens could stretch their legs and walk around. Otherwise they would start pecking at the bars and stomping on the eggs laid by the others. Even so, they were clumsy animals and required too much attention, so my uncle would put two chairs on the invisible border between the living room and the yard, and receive visitors while ensuring that none of the chickens entered the house.

As we sat there, we played at holding the chickens off with air kicks and hollers. If they got too close, we would blow smoke in their faces and watch them shake their necks from side to side to get out of the smoke. Then they would stop and look at us with each eye in turn, which seemed to transform their expression of confusion into a threat. At some point, Carolina, the only one with dark feathers, jumped into the washing room and dumped a bucket full of clothes into the yard. The others observed the situation for a moment and then jumped onto the clothes. My uncle and I began to carefully pick up the clothes, but some of the chickens had already run away with clothes in their beaks.

I made an effort to remember the names of the five hens, which my uncle had told me already, to call after them like dogs, but I soon realized that it was a stupid idea. I chased after Martina, who had come down with something my uncle could not explain to me and now walked limply on one leg, until I had her against the bars of the chicken coop. My uncle caught two other ones and removed the wet clothes from their beaks, but Marciana had reached a tree and was now looking down at us from the highest branches with a sock clutched like a giant worm. Uncle Manolo looked at her with one hand shielding his face from the sun and for a moment smiled with what looked to me like some defeat on his face.

As the chickens roamed around the yard, I tried to talk to my uncle and tell him why I was there. I had travelled from Bogotá the night before and planned to stay at the little hotel I had found in town for the rest of the week. That was my way of not exerting pressure, of remaining distant and cautious so as not to make Uncle Manolo uncomfortable; after all, we had never really been close. To me, Uncle was a topic of gossip more than anything else. I had come on an impulse that I couldn't quite explain. I hadn't seen Uncle Manolo for years and all I knew about him were the things my mother and the other uncles and aunts said. In the family albums, which my mother kept when they sold the house they had all grown up in, there were pictures of Uncle Manolo when he was younger. He always wore his hair short and posed in a carefree fashion, almost ignoring the camera. In the photos, mostly taken in his youth, Uncle Manolo was neither much the guy from my childhood or the guy with the chickens: he had a smooth tan, and in some photos a moustache that gave him the air of a joker. All very different from the skinny, worn-out old man my mother talked about, coming back concerned every time she went to see him.

It was from those photos and family stories that I knew of the time he left college to become a barterer, swapping objects and traveling the country on a borrowed motorcycle, of his years in the Chinese merchant navy, and of his final retirement to the house with the chickens. My uncle had studied philosophy for a few years and then decided to become a writer and put everything else aside. The family traded in theories and silly explanations to place him somewhere in their minds. He was the second of eleven siblings, the first to sneak a smoke in the washing room of the old house, according to my mother, the one who had once beaten to death a dog that bit one of my aunts, the one who had almost drowned three times and always brought porcelain dolls to grandma when he travelled with the merchant navy.

My uncle's stain stretched formlessly into every family comment. It was a horror story full of versions, essentially a vessel for gossip in a cap and trousers. The few remarks I heard growing up flew by in discussions on other matter, small memories, never the central theme. Maybe that's why the image of Uncle Manolo was murky. The stories told by my other

uncles seemed like warnings, all narrated in a low, concerned register, as if the neighbours shouldn't know they were talking about him. Such was the gaping hole my uncle left in the family that my cousins and I made up stories about him to get through the boredom of family reunions. He had killed a friend by accident; he had killed him because he owed him money; in his travels, he had found a secret stash of money and hadn't wanted to share it with the family. To think about Uncle was to fill in family silences, and we had so much fun inventing his adventures that, the few times he showed up at one of the reunions, we preferred to not to talk to him so that he would not have the chance to refute the life we had created for him.

When I decided to travel to Acacías to see him, I was finishing my degree in literature and had just published my first novel. I had already given some talks in the city and my friends had celebrated having the book in their hands, but it had all felt terribly transient and formal. Several family members had gone to buy the book and sent me photos of it, but I never got any comments on it. I felt the excitement of the moment begin to wear off and, in what I thought at first was an attempt to find a person who would be happy for me, I thought of my uncle. The only other little writer in the family, just as ignored, with a body of work as forgettable as mine.

I asked my mother for the address of the house in Acacías, and then I booked everything to see him. The money was the little that remained of the advance from the publishing house, and I secretly enjoyed paying for that urge with my writer's salary. During the trip I repeated to myself several times that I was going there in search of the real uncle, one free of all those stories my mother told. But maybe all that mattered very little, and even long after my uncle disappeared, I continued to ignore the literary urge that had moved me—my need to make a mirror of my uncle, the meticulousness with which I had turned him into a mystery storyline or some kind of point to place on the map and go after.

The days before the trip I was looking for clues among the boxes my mother kept from the old house. I was moved by an incessant burning in my stomach,

a crazy impulse to know something about my uncle that was real, something free of the words of the rest of the family, but I only found a handful of photos, a bunch of letters that Uncle had written from abroad, and some cassettes marked with his name, which I couldn't figure out how to listen to and that were lost when my mother moved (years after Uncle's disappearance) without ever leaving that box. I reread the letters until I learned every detail: the orderly way in which he wrote (a page of updates and stories for his mother and then a paragraph of varying size for each sibling still living in the house); the drawings of Chinese letters in the margins, which he had surely copied from a street or perhaps from the metal shell of the containers on the ships; the constant insistence that his siblings go out onto the street. Everything aggregated around the image of Uncle Manolo, which, rather than clearing up, seemed to swell like a balloon, blurring his figure the more it grew. What was most striking was the tone in which he wrote his letters. It was mechanical and extremely affectionate at the same time. He knew they would read them all together in the living room, so he made a point of mentioning each of them, of not forgetting to ask about how the younger ones were getting on at school and the health of all the relatives. Albeit with some effort, the uncle from the letters seemed intent on maintaining family duties and keeping the family together.

The anecdotes he told his brothers came through sort of ciphered, with references to old neighbours, parks, and streets that he himself seemed to question, small details that said nothing to me. In the end, the letters took on a melancholy and mysterious tone. He insisted on the need to stay on board, to keep traveling until he found what he was looking for, or until he knew what it was he was looking for. He asked for money. Uncle Manolo, who, according to the others was a bum, and according to me was a writer, suddenly had a tone that I hadn't calculated on before: he sounded like a loser, like a castaway in the middle of the Pacific or one of those boxers who do not know when to stop.

The fight over his return seemed to be a regular theme. In the letters he would argue with his mother and try to explain that he wouldn't come back. All this in an evasive tone as if he didn't want to say what was actually going on. The

I was moved by an incessant burning in my stomach, a crazy impulse to know something about my uncle that was real, something free of the words of the rest of the family, but I only found a handful of photos.

photos he sent, on the other hand, came with little descriptions of the journey in an extremely festive and joyful tone. They were exaggerations through which he tried to show them that everything was alright. He spoke of the buildings and ships that appeared behind him in the snapshots as irreplaceable elements of his life, true gifts from the world, mystical monuments in which he found new meanings. All this with the sole intention of being left alone. Then, at a point that the letters did not allow me to determine with certainty, this discussion ended and Uncle Manolo began to mark the photos he sent with little phrases from Gulliver's Travels and Persian Letters, travel novels he surely read in his cabin. The letters continued until a few months before the death of my uncle Juan Carlos, who was the eldest of them all. According to my mother, uncle Manolo had been informed by an international phone call in the middle of the night, and after Grandma ordered him to return, my uncle stopped writing to them.

That's how I spent the days before my trip. The few signals that my uncle had left behind were not enough to make sense of his figure, but it was still better than asking my mother and the other uncles, who visited him by turns once or twice a year to bring him old clothes and appliances they no longer used. For them, the roles had already reversed, and now their duty was to take care of their brother, to not let him die alone and lost, as Grandma had so feared. The few times they got to talking about him, they all referred to the visits, to the afternoons they spent with Uncle and his chickens before getting back in the car and driving back to Bogotá. They spoke of how thin he was, of the weariness that had settled on his eyelids, of the piles of damp books that he piled up in the living room and that he had to dodge to get to the bathroom or the kitchen. Everything always expressed in a tone of concern, as if they were holding the last rope that kept Uncle Manolo tied to this world.

When I listened to them, something in me assumed that those were the very words they spoke about me—or worse: the words they hoped they would never have to speak. The little writers in the family, lost in their books, alienated from life. Everything they said to me was a warning, one more chance not to turn out like my uncle. But everything they said only

brought me closer and closer, if not to being him, then to the gigantic fantasy I had created as a placeholder for him. When the day of my trip finally arrived (all planned secretly, with neither Uncle nor almost anyone else suspecting anything), I packed more books than clothes, still hypnotized by the idea of meeting him. I made up several excuses to get through the week without answering my cell phone and set off with the intention of not running into anyone who might ask where I was going.

I planned to leave as early as possible in the morning, but the students were protesting all along Carrera 26. I joined the march with some friends until we were near the terminal, and then I hugged them goodbye. At the terminal, I was told that the only buses departing would leave at night because of the protests. I had packed a copy of my novel to give to him, so I spent the whole afternoon reading to myself rather lackadaisically, checking the waiting room television from time to time to see how they were breaking up the demonstrations. The bus left at about eight o'clock. There were only a few of us on the bus. A woman and her son sat in the front seats, and I could see how she covered the boy's eyes as we passed through the graffitied stations with broken glass. The reality of the journey only hit me in the darkness of the road. As the bus advanced through the mountains, I felt as if something was peeling away from me, as if the closer I got to Uncle Manolo the closer I got to disappearing altogether.

I checked into the hotel late at night and chose to wait until the next day to visit Uncle. The musty wood floor squeaked all the way from the front desk to my room on the second floor. The boy accompanying the guy at the front desk led me as he jangled the keys, and all the way there I could smell the expired insecticide coming from the electrical outlets. In the room, which barely fit the single bed and a nightstand full of old magazines, I rolled a joint and smoked it out the window while watching the people who were drinking at the store across the street. It was a very popular corner for such a small town, and for a while I was scanning for my uncle. The people drinking at the tables outside were laughing and waving at one and all who came into the store, inviting him to sit down for a bit and jeering him on his way out if he

declined to join them. I tried to guess what kind of person my uncle would be. Would he sit down with them? Would he go there for that very purpose? Were they his friends or did he only barely know them? My mother said that Uncle Manolo worked as an arts teacher at the county jail. Would they perhaps turn him away because of that?

At last I got tired of looking for my uncle among the people in the store and tried to distract myself with the sky, but the clouds covered everything, and after a while I went to bed and tried to sleep. Lying down, I worried that my uncle would come to the store while I was sleeping. After all, he had a reputation as a drinker among the family, and it was barely twelve o'clock. I went back to the window and felt like a fool when I saw that nothing had changed, but I still held back the urge to pee so as not to miss what was going on. I ended up sleeping with my head on the ledge and my arms for a pillow. When dawn broke, the sun hit me head-on and I had to go back to bed to sleep the remaining hours before breakfast. After eating, I went straight out to see him. I was carrying the book in a grocery bag. As I approached the address my mother had given me, every place was invaded by my uncle's ghost, by his confusing and inexplicable presence. In front of the drugstore on the main street, the corner restaurant, and the liquor store where I bought cigarettes, I kept wondering if he had been there. I was looking for a mark of his passage through those streets, a clue that would tell me if I was really getting to know his world or occupying spaces that he had ignored for years.

In front of the house, I realized I didn't know what to say to him. I crossed to the other side of the street and lit a joint to calm down. Standing in a cloud of smoke, I stared at the façade. Over the only window facing the street were posters advertising potato chips and beer, which I later learned were souvenirs from the brief season during which my uncle tried to open a store. The paint on the front was peeling near the ground and around the door frame, leaving large gaps of cement between the dirty whitewashing of the house. When I found myself alone on the little street, I peeked through the windows, but there seemed to be no one inside,

which made me think that maybe Uncle Manolo was still in classes at the jail, so I kept smoking with my eyes glued to the house.

After I had been sitting for a few minutes on the sidewalk, the door opened. My uncle looked the same as ever, old in that weathered way that the family attributed to his life of travel, with an unkempt moustache and a sun-worn blue cap with orange lettering. His lanky body leaned out of the doorframe, hauling a garbage bag that he carried to the street corner. He wore rubber boots and stained blue overalls with the sleeves tied at the waistband. He stopped and noticed me as he was walking back with his hands free, and for a moment (maybe it was the distance or the smoke or that time had already changed me) he failed to recognize me. I waved at him as if he were a ship from across the street and said "Hello, Uncle, long time no see." "Manuelito!" my uncle shouted, "It's been a while. What are you doing here?" I replied that I was there to see him, with smoke still in my mouth and my sweating palms. He motioned for me to come with him and went into the house without waiting for me. He left the door ajar, and when I entered my uncle was already at the back, washing the water basins for the chickens.

I wanted to get around to the bit about the novel slowly, so as to not look like that was all I was there for. As I entered, I stopped in front of all the rooms before reaching the living room that opened onto the yard. The first was a storage room full of gardening materials, old shelves that had probably been part of the store long ago, and the bundles of feed and sawdust for the chickens. Then there was my uncle's room, the study, and finally the kitchen. In each room there was a pattern of clutter that was funny: little paths made out between objects strewn carelessly in attempts to get to something on the other side of the room. The study was the most difficult to explore. The stacks of books looked like towers in the middle of the room, raised on bricks or anything solid enough, because, as my uncle told me a little later, during the rainy season the house would sit in a few inches of water. On the sole table there was a laptop that one of my other uncles had given him so he would stop using his typewriter (now sitting under dust in that first room), a couple of old books with curled pages, and some dirty dishes.

From where I stood at the door, my shadow entered the room and stretched over the books until it touched the old sofa that was in one of the corners. On top of the cushions was a stereo, a coffee pot, and some clothes stuffed in a bag—all gifts from my uncles and aunts, things that they had upgraded in their own homes. My uncle didn't seem to mind. When I asked him about it, he told me that he saw in this somewhat idiotic and somewhat pious custom his siblings' only attempt to understand him, so he never let it bother him. "Anyway, I sell what they bring me and then I tell them that it broke," he said that day as he showed me a printer that Aunt Lucia had brought in the last box of goods. But even with Uncle Manolo's sales, the house was full of things that he didn't use often enough to make his own. Blenders, mats, nightstands, and other family leftovers were lying around, in piles against the walls, or stuffed in the closets (one of them also a gift from the family) in the study and my uncle's bedroom.

When I got to the living room, I stopped to look at him: he was standing on the ledge that separated it from the patio. My uncle Manolo thanked me for being there and asked if I had come with my mother, which then made me guess that when he saw me, he was expecting some of those gifts that filled the house. Then he approached the fences of the chicken coop and introduced me to his hens. He passed by the ones that were calmly wandering around the coop. He didn't ignore them exactly, but clearly, he didn't have to pay as much attention to them; they seemed more content and calmer than the five that kept ruining the yard with their stomping and pecking. "These crazy ones are my companions," he said. "This is Martina, that's Carolina, the one over there is Clarita, the little white one hiding over there is Belluci, and the big one that's up on the pole I call Marciana."

"Why Marciana?" I asked. Marciana means Martian in Spanish.

"When she comes closer, look at her feet," he answered, excited by my interest. "They're webbed, like with ducks and frogs. She's an aquatic hen or something, from the planet Neptune."

In each room there was a pattern of clutter that was funny: little paths made out between objects strewn carelessly in attempts to get to something.

I waited for quite some time for Marciana to come down from her stick to look at her feet, but every time I looked at her, she seemed to take notice and just stood there, still, as if she could pass herself off as a fruit. It was then that I first became aware of the absence of clucking. Since I had entered the house, there had been an almost bucolic silence, just the sound of the water in the washing room or my uncle's footsteps on the damp earth of the yard, but the chickens seemed to only make noise with their feet and their wings.

When Uncle Manolo let them out into the yard and went for a moment to the storage room, I was curious and tried to pester them to see if I could get some sound out of them. But when I had Clarita cornered against the fence of the chicken coop, she jumped at my chest with a combative attitude. I fell to the ground and crawled off a bit to be at a safe distance. Clarita was looking at me with her head cocked and her wings half spread. Around us, the other hens were walking in such a way that I could not tell if they were completely uninterested in what had happened or if they were waiting for a signal from their friend to throw themselves against me.

I got up quickly and went back to the chair. My uncle returned to the living room with some gardening shovels and a joint in his mouth. He asked me about Bogotá, about my mother, whether I was already on vacation, or if I had run away to visit him, and I then told him that I had finished my degree in literature a few months ago. Uncle Manolo stopped for a moment to look at me before putting the tools on the floor. The smoke between the two of us made us strain to see each other's faces.

"How wonderful," he said, but he looked confused, his face in a curious grimace that made me guess my mother had never told him what I was studying or what I wanted to do with my life once that was all over. "Your mother must be so happy."

"I just graduated, Uncle. It's not like I have a job yet or anything to get me out of the house," I answered.

Uncle Manolo laughed a little and began to dig a hole in the ground. All about him, the five hens continued their uneven and silent march. Martina's limp made her stumble every few steps, after which she would get up with the strength mustered from her neck and her good leg. The silence of the hens rubbed off on us for a while, and while he dug the hole, I was content to watch them walk. Then I got up to approach my uncle and picked up one of the shovels he had brought.

A little out of breath from the effort, my uncle left his shovel jammed in the hole and took me into the study while he caught his breath. He told me the plan was to enlarge the coop. The animals were already getting desperate for space and his five hens had taken to pecking at the others when my uncle was slow to let them out into the yard.

He spread out a series of plans he had drawn up on the table. According to his calculations, he would lose a little more than half of his yard, but the chickens would have more space. He might even get a rooster, which didn't really excite him as they were noisy, and he feared the hens would change up their routines with the addition of a male. But he was considering it mostly on the insistence of a friend of his, who promised to pay for the rooster's care if it turned out to be good for exhibitions or cock fights. Besides, with that money he would be able to change the whole fence, this time making it with better material so that nothing would be able to get in.

"What might get in?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"Frankly, I'm most worried about the possums. The thieves you can take care of with a machete, but those animals..."

From the yard came the sound of the shovel hitting the ground. I looked out and saw that Carolina had clambered up onto to handle and knocked it down with her with weight. Carolina stayed there for a moment, still gripping the shovel that had fallen to the ground, and then the other hens drew closer and started pecking at the handle with their beaks.

Uncle Manolo stuffed the designs into the pocket of his overalls and ran out to shoo them away. When I followed him out, the brightness filtered through the blanket of clouds that covered the sky. It seemed as though the morning had been terribly extended. Had I really spent so little time in the house?

Uncle Manolo was digging the first hole again, so I went to get another shovel and help him. We passed the design back and forth, measured the steps between poles. We had to dig very deep so that the sticks wouldn't fall when the possums tried to get under the wire.

"Are they really so dangerous," I asked him.

"You can't imagine. They come at night and take my chickens by the neck," said Uncle Manolo as he lit another joint in the living room and went back to the patio to pick up the shovel. "Sometimes they yank so aggressively that they leave some tangled feathers. Once I even found the whole body. The possum had torn its head off trying to pull it through a hole in the fence."

"So, you think this will be enough?"

"We'll have to wait and see," Uncle said. "Who knows if they'll come back. I killed one the other day—one shot and bam. I hope at least that scares the others. They all come from that fucking construction site next door. They've been at it for two years, but they ran out of money halfway through, and the house is now full of those animals. There's no plumbing, no electricity. The few doors they installed are already chewed up and full of holes. The possums come through the patio wall, eat whatever I leave outside, and then try at the chickens. The one I killed had a grey back and its eyes glowed when I pointed the flashlight at it. It was far away, already inside the coop, so I took out the blowgun and hit it with a dart. Right in the eye. You don't forget how to do that stuff. Before he died, he screeched and crashed against the bars. You can't imagine, Manuel, the chickens woke up and were running around; I could feel their fear, the anguish of not knowing which one they were going to take this

time. They hadn't realized that I had already saved them, that everything was all right. I had to wait for them to calm down to go into the coop and get the possum out, but when I got there, the animal was stuck to the floor. They had pecked at its mouth and eyes; they had run it over who knows how many times in their flurry. When I pulled at it by the tail to take it away, the animal split in two and left a puddle between both halves. In the end I preferred to throw it all away. I didn't venture to take the dart out as you're meant to."

I tried to laugh at the dart joke. A joke postponed for years that now could hardly seem so funny to me. I saw in his dedication to the coop and the chickens an act of defeat, of failure. I had come there looking for him, as if that would give me some clarity about myself, but I found nothing. My uncle was trapped, stuck in his patient waiting for who knows what. The day would come when he would be free, the day would come when he would write his great work, the day would come when he would find whatever it was, he went looking for with the merchant fleet and was still looking for in the chicken coop. In the meantime, he had his chickens, his miniature dinosaurs who, like him, had once had the world at their feet and were now nothing more than harmless animals.

"Do you remember, Manuelito," my uncle insisted and put a hand to his mouth to imitate the yodel of the Motilón Indians.

In fact, neither he nor I knew what the call of the Motilón Indians was. What we were doing was the classic Indian yodel from the movies, although we added words here and there to let each other know what was going on around us. It was the only image of my uncle that I truly believed was my own. His bored face at one Christmas, perhaps the first since he had lost his job with the merchant navy. Uncle Manolo had decided to go up to the terrace where we kids were. He had smoked a cigarette while watching us play at being cowboys and had told us that we were pussies, that we were playing Yankee cowboys, that we had to learn to play Motilón Indians so we would have more fun. It's quite easy, he told us. All we had to remember was that the Motilón Indians were rather quiet people, they didn't fight among themselves nor did they like to run

amok invading everything; rather their job was to stay protecting what was theirs, to be alert, always awake, ready to defend themselves from enemies.

Then he rummaged through the clutter in the house until he found a pipe and cut it into short pieces, one for each nephew. "These are your blowguns," he said. "If you lose them, kids, there's no way to defend ourselves." He went down again and took a ream of paper out of the study, carried it up to the terrace, sat down with us and taught us how to make paper darts. "If you want to kill the enemy, just take a sewing needle and stick it through the tip of the paper dart," he told us quietly, "but don't tell your parents that I told you any of this."

That Christmas Uncle Manolo taught us how to defend the terrace from enemies. One by one he taught us how to use the blowgun until we perfected the technique of hitting neighbours' windows, the cars parked outside, and policemen passing by on their motorcycles. Every time we got it right, Uncle would celebrate with an Indian yodel and we would all copy him. He said that we had to do it every time so that the other Indians would know that we were defending our home and would remember to defend theirs as well. He told us that every time we did it, he would remember and do the same.

That summer I spent every morning stealing paper from the printer to make darts that I would shoot into the street at lunchtime, when everyone was watching the news. Eventually my mom noticed because the paper kept disappearing and some piping in front the house got clogged with paper. The day she confronted me I was in my room, shirtless and with my face painted for war, pointing at a couple who were saying goodbye on the street out front. I told her everything and she immediately called Uncle Manolo to scold him. The call was very long and I remained locked in the room, where at times I looked out at the street full of crushed and filthy darts while I tried to remove the paint from my face. Finally my mom put the phone to my ear without letting go and let me talk to my uncle. I apologized for telling on him, but he didn't mention anything about it; then he told me that my mom was mad at me for using all the paper, that I shouldn't worry about the rest, that he had told her it was just a game.

"The thing about the paper is important," he said. "It's wasteful and the Motilón Indians were not wasteful. You have to launch the ammunition and then go to pick it up when you have done your thing. The more things a single dart has killed, the better it becomes."

"Are you staying for a few days, Manuelito?" Uncle said as he smoked. "Maybe we can even finish this and then we'll go hunting possums, so they stop messing with us."

"A few days, Uncle?" I asked. My eyes wandered around the courtyard before I looked up in search of some confirmation that the day was still advancing. "At this rate I'm going to have to let them know I'm not coming back this year."

"Well, yes. Maybe not finish it, I don't know. Think about it. Would you like a beer?"

Uncle put the shovel aside and went to the kitchen. As he brought the beers the chickens came to the hole, pecked and stomped on the dirt around it, and plugged it back up. Frustrated, I stuck my shovel in the hole and felt it bury itself in the soft earth. I understood then, in the silence of the smoke and the chickens, that the soil had already been disturbed, that it was not the first time these holes had been dug, that the sticks had been waiting for a long time for the moment when everything would finally be ready.

When he arrived with the beer, I was still focused on the clouds. I was thinking about the Motilón Indians and about my uncle, who, behind our parents' back, had decided to spend that day on the terrace teaching us how to be just as contrary as he. I remembered how, for several days after that afternoon on the terrace of the old family house, my mother asked about what my uncle had told us. At meals, to gauge what he had told us about, she would ask after names of old communists that I wouldn't hear again until college, insisted that I pick a

course to take in my spare time, and seemed to obsess over the question of what I wanted to be when I grew up. Over the years, I realized that something in her and the other uncles had begun to tremble since that afternoon on the terrace; they suspected that one of us bore the same stain as Uncle Manolo, the same fate (same life) from which they now had to guard him.

"What time is it, Uncle," I asked, as he passed me the bottle.

"No clue," he said, and started digging again.

I took a sip of beer, put it down on the table with the ashtray and picked the shovel up again. All around me the chickens made space and let me get to the place where I was to dig the hole, the place where my uncle had probably already dug an infinite number of holes that they in turn had covered. In the yard, the sun gently beat down on everything through the cloud that stretched its drab whiteness across the sky, so my shadow was barely a speck beneath my feet that followed me with every step. With each lull in our conversation, the impression that nothing was happening in that house grew. Cigarette butts were accumulating and clothes were getting dirty, but nothing else seemed to change.

"And how's university?" he asked after a while. "Is it still shitty?"

"It's never not," I answered. "These days there was a fight and yesterday there was a march, but as always... The truth is that I don't even know what to think about all that anymore. You go to bed every day and the only thing left is the desire to get up and make bombs."

"And you came here in the middle of all the commotion, Manuel?"

"I had already planned it before it went down, Uncle... the hotel and everything was already booked."

"Are you going to stay at Villa Real?" he asked me. "There's less chance of the roof falling in on you if you stay here, Manuelito. That place is not what it used to be."

"Ha. Just like the university."

"Just like everything, right?" he answered, measuring the hole he had made with his palms. Then he fell silent for a moment. He continued, "I hope you don't think I'm a boring old man ruminating on the past. Not to say that things were better before. I don't know if your mother has told you, but when I was studying there.... Well, protest is protest, right? You are angry because nobody listens to you and everybody dies and nobody says anything. There's a desire to break everything, to grab them all and smash their faces in the wreckage and say, well now, look here. Just imagine all those buses we used to take to the square to burn in front of the library." My uncle laughed for a second, his eyes glued to the hole in the ground that was already starting to grow. "Too bad, Manuelito, I must sound like a nostalgic old man. Deep down I don't pay much attention to all that anymore. Just look at me. Here waiting for something to happen."

"Why do you say that?" I asked as Uncle Manolo shooed Belluci away with his foot.

"What do I know, Manuel. Did your mother tell you that I left the university? Sure, I'm sure she did. They always say that. I left because everything seemed to be going to hell, because I didn't think I had any other choice. In my first semester I had started to go to the marches, to speak up in the assemblies, to paint banners and stuff like that. That's when I met Mireya and a lot of other people. That year a lot of us got involved, probably because it was '69 and people were reading who knows how much bullshit about Paris. In any event, there were a lot of us. When I started my third year, I had already spent more time in those collectives than in class. We would spend a few weeks walking sidewalks.

"...The truth is that I don't even know what to think about all that anymore. You go to bed every day and the only thing left is the desire to get up and make bombs."

We would get on the busses with boxes full of newspapers that we printed at the university, and we would spend our days selling them in the squares. Every day we would get up early, hand out a few newspapers, go out walking in pairs. I felt I was doing important things, informing the world about the future and God knows what else. Most people accepted us. Those were different times and being a left-winger or even a communist and all that didn't seem so crazy.

"I was a little shy, but that's why I went with Mireya. The way that woman talked—to everyone, no qualms. Once she told a couple of old people who were feeding pigeons to go to hell. Just like that: if you don't like the world we want, then fuck off. And then she shooed away all the pigeons that came near them until they went to another bench. Other than that time, she was well liked. She made conversation, got people's names, invited them to meetings, and always sold all her newspapers before I was through. Then she would sell mine while I rolled a joint or sat and watched people pass by. When I saw someone young or looking like they were going to help us, I would wave Mireya over and she would sell to them. That made her happy: the people, the contact. Since she was amazingly fast, we usually had time to sit somewhere in the afternoon and smoke. We always looked for a corner overlooking the square or a park to see who would show up with the newspaper in their hands. When the sun set, we would begin to see the others arriving with their sweethearts and we would start singing or discussing some aspect of the trip while drinking aguardiente until the police came to get us out of wherever we were."

Uncle Manolo finished the hole he was making and went to the studio for a moment to check the designs for the location of the next one. At that, the chickens crowded around to examine the bottom of the hole. By turns they craned their necks into the hole and burrowed around looking for worms. I stood there watching them, waiting for something to happen, and it occurred to me that maybe that was what my uncle did every day: observe their violent presence, defend himself from them, knowing that

it was all just a game, a way to kill time while waiting for the day to come, any day, a better one. The sky was still cloudy and the light that reached the courtyard hardly seemed to change. It hit us softly on all sides and left a tiny, pathetic shadow under each body. When he came back, Uncle pushed the chickens away by tapping the hoe against the washboard. He started at the next hole.

"One of those times I simply realized,"" he continued, "that that was not enough. The noise from Cuba was around everywhere and that had made us think that everything was coming at us imminently. Selling newspapers, going around the country begging for food in the marketplaces, hanging on to the trucks without them taking notice when they stopped at the tolls—these were all things that we could do with more ease of mind by thinking that at any moment the bastard president was going to get careless and—whack! —we were going to win. But no, nothing happened. Nothing happened, and nothing continues to happen. I remember that one of those times we were all in Huila, in a town called San Isidro or San José or some other one. Mireya and I had already left school and we were seen as the older ones. Among the first semester recruits was a girl from visual arts, a cute girl named Rocío who ate chewing gum after every cigarette so her mother wouldn't find out. It was the first time she was traveling with us. She was doing alright. She sold her stuff without much difficulty and she could make us laugh. Mireya liked her, so that day we went to look for her and Alfredo, who was her partner that time, after selling our newspapers. If she's finished, we'll sit with her, and if not, I'll help her so we can sit down sooner, Mireya said that time. But no matter how much we walked around the area we couldn't find them. When we returned to the plaza to meet with everyone, we realized that they were not there either. Rocío and Alfredo were lost and we had no clues. No one had seen them for several hours. We searched for them, trying not to attract too much attention in the village: we asked in the stores, we signalled with flashlights next to the cordoned off paddocks, we returned again and again to the square hoping to find them sitting there."

"In the end we decided to camp another night in town to wait for them, so we walked out along a side road and pitched our tents in a nearby hamlet to sleep. The next morning we found a pile of our newspapers next to the beams of a footbridge. One of the columns had been written on: LEAVE NOW. They had put Rocío's shoes on top of the newspapers to keep the wind from blowing them away. Mireya was the only one who approached pile. I remember how carefully she went and picked them up, cleaned them a little and came back with them hugged like a baby, then we all left. We were destroyed. We didn't know what to do, how to explain to the parents when we returned—nothing. Back in Bogotá, Mireya moved away from the rest of the group. As I was living with her, I managed to see her for a few more days, I guess, while she gathered her things and thought about where to go. Then she disappeared completely. The last night we cried together. She still had Rocío's shoes in a bag and she hugged them and told me that she was through, that we had done all that for nothing, that one day we could be raising a revolution and the next we could miss out on it if we were caught by a bullet. I tried to calm her down. I held her hands carefully so she would stop hitting the walls. I promised her a million times that everything was going to be fine as one does when everything is shitty. I stroked her hair until she fell asleep with a hoarse throat and her lips full of dry snot. Maybe, deep down, I could already smell that Mireya was going to leave us. I could see her going from house to house with the shoes in her hands like a madman in some novel about the war and the only thing I wanted was to save her from the pain, but deep down I knew she was right."

"About what?" I asked.

"Well, about the revolution, Manuelito, about the revolution," he said. "See, we were there selling newspapers and, I don't know why, but everything felt possible. In Cuba, they had overthrown the government. People were talking about socialism and revolt, not only here but all-over Latin America. Trust me—I know about that because it was precisely the sort of thing

we published in the newspaper: the workers' meetings in Chile, the student marches in Argentina. Everything began to fit together like a puzzle. Who knows what we were experiencing at the time, but the revolution felt just around the corner. You would close your eyes, go to sleep or something, and there was a possibility that it had already happened. The revolution. Just like that, with that vague image that we didn't even know how to explain."

"But Uncle," I said, "we're still at it. We're still trying."

"Yes, yes, but it's more of a dream now. The revolution we were chasing was just about here. It announced itself in the bottoms of coffee cups. It wouldn't be long now."

"Isn't it still just around the corner?" I said, cuttingly.

"Then it must be that time is no longer going anywhere. I've felt that way here. That's just people's sense. Look at the sky: the day doesn't budge. All day I'm working for the chickens: don't do this, don't do that. I am still here waiting for the day to come that I can go out and see the revolution walking around as if it had never made us wait, but we are still frozen in yesterday."

Uncle Manolo had just finishing digging the second hole when the hens covered the first hole with their feet. When Uncle Manolo noticed this, he whistled in the air and chased them away with his hands, but the hens moved away just a little and came right back. I went over and buried the shovel where the hole had been so they wouldn't come any closer. Their dinosaur legs halted mid-step and they walked back around the yard.

I was looking up at the sky, trying to decipher where the sun was behind the blanket of clouds that covered us. It was something or other in the morning or afternoon. It was just a day, the eve of something: the

revolution, the literature, the chicken coop. But the next morning was not to come. We were there waiting for the slightest sign that the day would come, but there were no roosters, and the hens didn't know how to crow so that the days would keep coming to us.

I took a gulp of beer and spit it at the chickens. They ran off, flapping around the yard, and I drank again to keep spitting at them. They climbed up onto the washing area, onto the living room chairs, onto the branches of the noni trees, which could barely hold them. My uncle tried to stop me, he stood in front of me and tried to take the bottle out of my hands, but I resisted and ended up filling his overalls with beer and drool.

"What are you doing Manuel!" he shouted at me. "What are you playing at?"

"These fucking chickens," I answered, "this fucking chicken coop, all of this. I came here to talk to you about literature, to tell you about my book, to... to feel less lonely, but all this is shit. I don't want this, I don't want to end up like this. To be here, doing nothing, finishing nothing. Time doesn't move here, things never happen, you just stand there and get older while the world keeps going to shit. How long have you been building the chicken coop? How long have you been waiting for all this to stop being shit?"

Uncle Manolo leaned back silently and sipped his beer. The light passing through the clouds was shining softly on our faces, seemingly originless. The chickens, my uncle, and I were standing on the small black circles of our shadows, which went nowhere.

"Those chickens are an excuse, Uncle," I said. "An excuse to not go out and take back everything the world took from you."

And I left. I left the bottle on the table, took a last puff of the joint that was on the plate we were using as an ashtray, and opened the door, standing

for a moment in its frame. I did everything very slowly, as if waiting for him to say something, but he didn't.

I didn't want to go back to the hotel, so I walked through the streets of the town asking after the river, which supposedly wasn't that far away. I got to see it from a bridge that was part of the road, but I couldn't find a way down to the banks, so I preferred to go back to the bridge to lean on the railings and watch the river go by while the cars occasionally drowned out the sound of the water. It was there that I realized that I still had the book in my bag.

I thought about going back, but every time I thought I had calmed down, the memory of the chickens came back to me. I imagined all the hours my uncle had wasted shooing them out of his living room, or repairing what they damaged, or taking care of them, which was, out of everything, the strangest gesture those animals evoked from him. The chickens seemed so much like my uncle—already toothless, clumsy, dull, silent. Once, the Tyrannosaurs from which they descended were the masters of the planet, but time had polished them like stones in a river, filed them down into these helpless animals, incapable of remembering their original glory.

In the end I stayed there, waiting, until it began to get dark. I sat smoking on the edge of the bridge, my legs dangling and my body leaning on the first railing. I don't know how long I waited until the sky began to turn pink. I ran out of weed and cigarettes. I went at least twice to the nearest store for a beer, but finally the day had completed its course. The sun was setting behind the trees that populated the riverbank, so the light barely reached me. I stayed there waiting until the night was a sure thing and there was no trace of morning left. Then I went back to the hotel and read in my room. Every now and then I would look out the window at the shop from the night before. The same old guys were playing a game on a table that was out of sight and shouted excitedly every time someone won a round.

Although I gave him a lot of excuses at the time, I knew I was still there to find my uncle again. I didn't dare go back to his house, to see the yard still without a chicken coop and the chickens parading around, but I hoped he would pass by.

Back in bed, I thought of returning to Bogotá the next day and asking the hotel to give me back the money for the other nights, but when I went down to the front desk the next day, I found out that a student had died in one of the protests and the city had exploded into unrest so that the terminal preferred to cancel all journeys to Bogotá.

Still full of rage and nervous about running into my uncle somewhere in town, I decided to stay in the hotel until the day of my return. I asked for the phone number of the restaurant that was right next to the hotel and we arranged to have my three daily meals delivered to the front desk for the duration of my stay. I bought several cartons of cigarettes at the store across the street and locked myself in my little room to eat, smoke, and read while the city worked itself up and returned to its natural calm.

In the days I spent in the hotel, whenever I couldn't concentrate, I would look out the window. I learned when the old men would arrive at the shop to drink, I saw the storekeeper's sons playing football in the street and got to know a drunk who by came some nights to serenade a woman who, according to the receptionist, had stayed in the hotel for a week three months ago (according to him, during that time the drunk had slept with her one night), and had left without further explanation. Since I never left the hotel, everyone inside learned my name. On one of the last days, the boy who had led me to my room the first night caught me as I was going down to the front desk for lunch and asked me why I kept looking out the window. Although I gave him a lot of excuses at the time, I knew I was still there to find my uncle again. I didn't dare go back to his house, to see the yard still without a chicken coop and the chickens parading around, but I hoped he would pass by. After all, he knew where I was staying, and if he, like me, was too proud and foolish to come and talk to me, then at least I might catch him spying on me from behind some post or going to the store just to see if he saw me there.

But nothing happened. The days at the hotel passed without me finishing any books, without me really noticing anything other than people passing by the window. The week I had scheduled for my stay was long enough for the police to put an end to the demonstration, and on the last night, as I went downstairs to pick up dinner, the man at the front desk told me that the terminal had rescheduled rides to Bogotá. That night I packed up, relieved to be able to return, but something in me suspected my willingness to exile, the almost familiar disposition with which I had decided to make that room my sport while everything was being sorted out.

The next day, as I was leaving, the fellow at the front desk asked me why I had spent those days there.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“It’s to fill out a hotel questionnaire, Mr. Marcí,” he said.

I gave him a random reason and walked right out of there. I wanted to stop by to say goodbye, talk to my uncle again and maybe give him the book this time. I had just enough time to catch the midday bus, so I ran to Uncle Manolo’s house with my suitcase. I knocked several times, but no one answered. On the other side, I heard only a repeated and very close knock, as if someone were knocking on the same door from the inside. I gave the door a shove and it opened; the bottom hinges were broken, pecked at by the Belluci, who was close to making a hole clear to the other side to get out of the house. The chickens had taken control of the place. They had broken furniture and books. The electrical sockets were destroyed, the wires pecked. There was dirt everywhere and corn and lentils and other things they had scavenged from the kitchen and scattered on the floor in their attempts to open bags with their claws and beaks. With everything important already broken, they had begun to pick at the doors of the rooms and even the walls; some even had holes through which one could peek through to look at the other side.

I looked everywhere for Uncle Manolo, but I couldn’t find him. At the back of the yard, the chicken coop was wide open. Corn and flaxseed were scattered on the floor. There were no eggs in the garret, and the branches of the noni trees, now laying broken on the ground, had no fruit left. I scanned as best I could the mess the chickens had made in the rooms. I stood there looking for signs among the pecked books and the cupboards full of boxes damp with urine. I was hoping for a clue, something that might allow me to understand what was going on. But I stood there for who knows how long while the chickens continued to eat the house up. At some point, tired of rummaging through what was left of the rooms, I sat down on the floor to smoke. With my eyes closed, I concentrated on the noise the chickens were making as they tore up everything in their path. I imagined that, from inside the closets and under the bed, they were pulling out little letters that my uncle had written to explain everything to me. I saw them as if out of focus, as if I would inevitably miss out on what was written there, while the chickens were tearing them apart with their pecks and gobbling them up like worms.

When I opened my eyes, smoke was twisting the light coming into the room. From the door frame, Martina was looking at me with her head cocked and her body leaning towards her good leg. In her beak she had a children’s bedsheet with an airplane print that had once been in my closet, before my mother gave it to Uncle Manolo. Suddenly, Belluci finished pecking at the inches of wall dividing the bedroom closet and the study closet, and poked her head out to look at me. The other hens arrived in turn. Clarita and Marciana entered the room to watch me from behind the broken drawers that separated us; Carolina, on the other hand, stayed at the threshold, stomping on the sheet that the other one was dragging in her beak. Like by a stupid premonition, I knew I was surrounded. The day outside the room was beginning to take on that almost static light of the previous time I had been there. Something about the way the chickens just stood there told me they were waiting for something; they had stopped pecking at things and were now just watching

my movements, my smoky breath, the hot earthy sweat that had made my clothes stick to my body after all that rummaging all over the house. For a moment I thought they were looking at me with the hypnotic eyes with which they had looked at Uncle Manolo all those years. I thought I was there because they needed someone, someone to stop them, someone to stay with them on that endless day just so they wouldn't peck the future to pieces, but after a long moment, when we all stood still, they went on doing their thing.

I felt that there, in that last second of stillness, the hens and I had buried the hope that my uncle would come out from under some book lying around, that he would peek out from the building next door with his blowpipe and some possums caught by the tail, that he would return from the store and re-establish order and pretend to build the coop for ever and ever. Without evidence, that was the first moment when I knew that my uncle would never return to the chicken coop, that I would never see him again, that that was how everything would remain. From then on, I seemed to detect something sad in all that mess; maybe the chickens were there just to waste time, breaking things that no one cared about anymore while they came up with something to do. After all, out there was time, which degraded everything to the point of absence, which had taken away their teeth and claws, which had dwarfed them and made them clumsy; and now they had to go back out there, go out and face it to see if it wouldn't tear off their beaks or blind them.

I decided to stay another while. I was no longer looking for him, I just wanted to feel how much he was missing, that void behind every movement of the hens, as if a piece of the environment was missing. After all, I didn't know where to find him, I didn't even know if that was something I should do. My uncle had left just like that: no where, no why; perhaps, just as when he joined the merchant navy, that was precisely what he had gone out to find. I smoked a joint I had brought with me while the chickens scavenged my uncle's mattress, ripping off pieces and throwing

them back, emptying it until only shreds of cloth stained with sweat and dirt remained. Before leaving, I left my book on the living room table while Clarita and Martina pecked at its the legs. The vase and the ash-filled dish on top shook with each peck and the other hens watched them flutter with hungry eyes.

On the way out, Marciana intercepted me in the corridor. We stood facing each other like in some cowboy movie. Then she flapped her wings silently as if to take flight and I saw in her bearing the old gestures of the Tyrannosaurus, just as I imagined them as a child. Still, I suppose, the scene must have been sad: a fast draw duel where both parties are already tired, where there are no bullets left and the whole town prefers to go watch TV. So, I put my hand to my mouth and made the Motilón Indian call hoping something would hear me. I raised my voice as loud as I could so that the possums from the construction site next door would know that we were still there, so that they would run far from the house that was already beginning to not exist. I continued with my yodel as I walked toward the door. At first the chickens just watched me, but then they started clucking with their necks craned toward the clouds and Marciana gave way for me to get out of there. I had to run to the terminal. It was late, something novel inside those pockmarked walls.

The Ninth Wave

Mateo Orrego
Editor

When we were asked to describe our experience as editors in a short text, I didn't quite know what to say, I didn't quite know how to begin. And so I decided to start with that device that I suppose everyone who writes has used at some point; namely, to say that I haven't the faintest idea what to write.

That's what made me think about how difficult it is to begin to tell a story, how difficult it is to shape an idea, a story that has been floating around in our imagination for a long time, and then to expose it to the critical eyes of others to see what they think. They then tell us that the part we like the most is the one that works the least, or that the character that moved them the most is the one we least expected to, and so we have to change what we had originally planned. Writing, I think, is the most difficult part of the creative journey.

Editing, in contrast, is a relatively simple process. It begins when the writers trust us, the editors, to read their text, because they feel that we are that ideal reader, that person who they thought would

be able to understand all the references in their text, that person who would recognise all the spaces, and be able to visualise every single scene in detail. So we see that little creature that the writer has given birth to for the first time, and we look at it with critical eyes. We look at every part of its body in the hope of finding something wrong with it, to notice it promptly, and suggest a way to change it. It is easy for us; we have no attachment to this creature. So with full determination and conviction we say, “its legs don’t move, you need to change them” or “its eyes are crooked, you need to fix them”. And the writer, who sees her creature as the most beautiful and perfect being, has to clash with the opinion of others and muster the courage to amputate its legs and make new ones, or to correct those eyes she had so painstakingly fashioned.

But sometimes the writer does not agree with the changes, and when we see the creature for the second time, we realise that it still has the same malfunctioning legs. Of course, we understand that it is not so easy for the writer to amputate parts of her creation, but we insist that she should do so anyway, because we feel that it’s the best decision. So this is where the difficult part of the process comes in; the writer says no and we say yes, and she says no and we say yes, until finally one of us has to give in.

Sometimes we are the ones who resign ourselves and stop insisting, because we understand that the writer will not change another thing in her little creature, not out of stubbornness, but because each part was so carefully crafted that changing any of it hurts. At other times, it is the writer who finally accepts our changes and does what we ask of them.

In the end, when our time is up, both of us, writer and editor, know that it may not be the perfect creation, that there may be some more changes to be made, but we know that we have produced it together and that we have done our best.

Now, in my case, from this experience as an editor, I have learned to value detail. We have always been told that the editor’s job is an invisible one that involves taking care of the details of the text, but I don’t think I really understood that until I saw how exactly this is done; I learned that you have to read each word carefully and memorise it, so that you can check that what you read on the first page matches what you read on the last page. I learned that you have to constantly ask yourself whether certain words are really necessary or whether they can be taken out: a noun, an adjective, a verb, a sentence, a whole paragraph. And, above all, I learned that the editor’s job is a reasoned one; everything we change has to be justified, there has to be a reason as that’s how we can make the writer see that some things might work better if they are put differently.

Last but not least, I want to express how grateful I am for the experience; that from now on, I will never stop studying, reading, and paying attention to detail so as to become a progressively better reader and better editor.

Alejandra Ovalle P.
Author

Summer

He leaves the hospital, taking one slow step at a time, and not trusting of his feet. His body feels heavy, as if it were laden with a dark secret. His gaze is an uneasy and heavy picture that stands the test of time. A salty breeze shudders through his body, autumn is drawing near. "Now it turns out I'm sick," he mutters to himself, and my time warps are nothing but hallucinations. He carries his scan results in his shirt pocket, and feels the piece of paper jutting into his left rib. He looks around quizzically, trying to guess where he is, but his eyes don't recognize the space. Slowly, he acknowledges the white walls and the name emblazoned in gold letters on the building: Hospital Español de Mar del Plata.

He doesn't know where to go. He no longer uses his car because he gave up driving three months earlier, in the spring. He knows how to get home, but since his time warps started to appear alongside other things —which he was now forced to call symptoms— getting around the city had become a challenge and it took him hours to travel just a few blocks. He wanders the streets without a destination, barely aware of his wandering around. He feels a twinge in the left side of his chest. A clammy draft draws the smell of the sea and reminds him of Parque Colón, where he often used to go. He liked to read there with the water in the background, but since his time warps had become more frequent, he had started to avoid the park. He even abandoned his regular gloom sessions, those rituals he had invented for himself every time his existence became heavy and unbearable: like sitting in the dark on the balcony of the apartment, where he lived alone since his cat disappeared, spending hours listening

to an extended version of Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9, n.º 2. He notices the surrounding buildings, their facades, colours and styles; some trees on the sidewalks, the shop names and street layout suggest that he is a couple of blocks away from Parque Colón, so he decides to pay it a visit.

He stops, runs his fingers through his beard, moves them over the scar on his left cheek and lightly pinches his nose, as he does whenever he is nervous. He waits for the traffic light to change and the river of traffic to finally allow him to cross. He scans each corner that separates him from the park and tries to recall the features of each of the streets in his mind. He moves thanks to his memory. His hands tremble slightly and his body sweats. He finds it difficult to trace the route. The events of the last few hours invade his thoughts.

Evening falls and he notices innocent gleams appearing in the clouds. He walks several blocks comparing what he sees —a certain café on a corner, a sign, a steep street, the tiles on a sidewalk— with the images of the streets stored in his memory. He feels ridiculous. He detects the sea emerging discreetly among the trees in the background. It is like an illusion. He can see it, but it is silenced by the endless roar of the cars and motorcycles, making it seem remote.

He sits on a park bench and thinks of his mother; from one of his trouser pockets, he takes out a pencil and a brown envelope, from which he extracts some half-wrinkled sheets of paper containing words he has been writing to his mother for months. He tries to write her another note, but it is difficult to concentrate and trace clear letters. He looks at his hands, he doesn't recognize them, those long, skinny fingers are not part of his body. His hands move on their own, they have a mind of their own, one that is superior to his. Hands... hands had always intrigued him, they did so many things, they could knit, strike, caress, write, wield weapons, throw stones, play pianos, tie shoelaces, link up with others... He felt his chest tighten and suddenly found it hard to breathe. He takes the piece of paper from his left shirt pocket and reads, Patient's name: Julio Vanegas, Age: 35, Diagnosis: Visual Anosognosia.

During the test, before being given the conclusive diagnosis, he felt like a frightened, penned-up little animal. The walls of the neurologist's office were too white, empty, with nothing to look at. The doctor's voice was the only thing that kept him there. It filled the space with stern questions that he tried to answer as best he could. He looked at the doctor, he had big ears, delicate white hands, pale eyes, an aquiline nose, and thick lips. He could not tell from his face what the man was feeling, so he gave up looking at him. When he spoke to him again, he had already forgotten his features.

"Tell me more about your symptoms."

"I feel that the word symptom is not quite right, but I understand what you're saying... I can't control it, for some time now, I have had certain... peculiar... abilities. Basically, I can journey to different temporal planes."

Julio paused, he thought the doctor was going to ask him about these trips, but all he did was nod. He then unfolded several photographs, lay them out on the desk and pointed to one showing El Torreón del Monje.

"Where in Mar del Plata is this?"

Julio examined the photograph with great care.

"There are orange and grey bricks, old windows, a narrow and ample cylindrical construction attached to others of different shapes and sizes... Oh, I know this place." He paused, looked into the air as if it were revealing something to him, and said, "it's near the sea, it's Torreón del Monje."

The neurologist then showed him a photograph of Evita, Juan Domingo Perón, and their two dogs. They were smiling in a black and white middle ground shot. Julio contemplated the image for a while, his eyes tracing over it from right to left.

"No idea, I don't know who they are."

He looked at the doctor, he had big ears, delicate white hands, pale eyes, an aquiline nose, and thick lips. He could not tell from his face what the man was feeling, so he gave up looking at him.

"Now tell me what this is."

The doctor put his watch in front of him. It was a smart, digital wristwatch. It took Julio longer to inspect it. He did so carefully. He examined the texture. When he touched the screen, it lit up; he brought it close to his nose and was about to put it in his mouth and bite it, but he felt a bit self-conscious with the doctor there. Puzzled, he replied:

"I have no idea what this leather object with a glass screen could be. A kind of medical instrument, maybe?"

"Another one."

He held out a photograph of a bicycle. Julio promptly said:

"It's a wheel. It could be a bicycle or a car."

He was becoming more and more uncomfortable, he felt lost. He didn't understand the senseless questions the doctor was asking him. Was he pulling his leg? Did he think he was mad? He couldn't read the man's expressions, at times frowning and looking at him intensely, interested, but at other times, completely absorbed in thought; very white thought, Julio imagined. It took him a while longer to do other tests with objects, colours, and, finally, a picture-matching test, for which he had to look at a series of pictures. Julio had to decide whether they belonged to the same semantic category or not.

"Based on the ophthalmologist's report, the MRI, and the tests we performed today, I can make a conclusive diagnosis. The time travel you told me about, the connection with other dimensions and that slight inability to recognize some objects, which seems so odd to you, are clear symptoms of visual anosognosia."

"Ok... which means...?"

"Don't worry. It's treatable. Anosognosia is a complication that affects an area of your brain; your eyes are perfect, but your brain isn't able to process the information correctly."

The doctor typed some information into the computer; he turned to Julio:

"As you leave you can pick up the patient diagnosis and authorization to begin neuro-integrative rehabilitation and psychological therapy."

Julio nodded. He didn't ask any questions, thanked the doctor and walked out, feeling more confused than he was when he had walked in.

Autumn

Julio had been working at the School of Philosophy and Letters at Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata for eight years. Nine months before receiving this diagnosis, he had been planning his trip for the upcoming winter holidays. Back then, his days were spent between classes, fly surfing, and his beloved gloom sessions, which, along with Chopin, included long walks and writing bitter letters to his mother. What he loved most about this time of year were the changing colours of the leaves and the bare branches. He was captivated by their silhouettes against the light.

One morning, he gave his students a quiz and watched them as they worked through the questions. He was struck by how young they were, their hands were just beginning to discover the world and already they had had to decide on much of what their future life would be. He stopped at Agnes, a pale girl with short hair. He suddenly pictured her older, around twenty-five perhaps. She was sitting on a bed, probably in her room, staring contemplatively at the wall. What was she trying to decide? One by one, three scenes appeared, were they a number of possible lives or different periods of her life? In one of them, she was surrounded by books, she seemed to be teaching; in the other, she was carrying a backpack on her shoulders and hitchhiking in Europe; in the

last one, she was wearing a flowery apron and was standing behind a glass case, organizing a variety of desserts and cakes.

He turned his attention to Mauro. He saw him banging on a wall, aged twenty-three or so. He was shouting at his father who, from the other side of the door, was telling him that the only future Mauro could have was the one he was telling him he could have. He had to stick with the family business; the salon could not shut its doors just because Mauro had decided to study arts, that nonsense for lazy people. He saw him painting a huge picture. It was the sea in the style of Hokusai, only sad. A powerful picture of loneliness and nostalgia brought on by the dark blue water. A little red boat in the middle of those stormy waters conveyed a sense of overwhelm, of complete abandonment in the midst of chaos.

He looked at Belén, who stared at the page in bewilderment. Fate had given her a microphone and a rock band that would travel the world; her name was written on the wall of fame. But a different path portrayed her locked up in a very white space, despairing from abstinence.

What was he doing in that room? He jumped up from his chair and, with a start, pushed the desk, from which his computer and a few markers flew to the ground. The crash shattered the silence engulfing the room. The students stared at him. Julio, trembling and frightened, swept his gaze over several of them. Inés' scowl, Mauro's tattooed hands, and Belén's voice brought him back to the reason he was there. He tried to crack a joke:

"Hey, guys, just making sure you weren't falling asleep" he said, feigning a smile.

But it didn't work, quite the contrary, the tension increased, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. He rearranged the chair and sat down again. One of the students picked up the computer and put it back on the desk.

He tried to distract himself with a book. But he couldn't ignore the fact that the event had been implausible; how could he tell them that many of them had such disastrous life prospects? Indeed, for some, all paths led to the tragic. Could he warn them? What if his warning upset the proper flow of the world? Why had he never been told how to act in the face of such discoveries? He looked at them again. Some had gone back to their quiz, others, still startled, quickly concealed their astonishment and turned back to their papers.

Julio got up and walked to the door. He was no longer trembling with fear but he began to sweat as a warm feeling verging on happiness rose from his chest. No one had that ability, no one could see what he saw, what he discovered, through others. It was his alone, he was unique, or if anyone else could do so, it was not common knowledge... "There must be a reason," he thought.

Mar del Plata, August 2019

Mother:

It's your forsaken son writing. I am about to embark on a new journey. I am going to the Iguazu Falls. I have felt uneasy over the last few months. September approaching frightens me, and Grandfather's death still saddens me very much. Do you know that Grandfather died? I would have liked to have inherited the calm strength with which you face the darkest conflicts in the world... I'm not like that, drama permeates everything and life hurts me too much. I wonder where you are now, Mother. Which part of the world are you warming with your presence? The only contact I ever had with you was through Grandfather, but once he died, you disappeared too... I was left all alone. I used to visit him, we would chat, I would catch up on the news from Colombia and then we would call you. Each time I asked, he always refused to give me your number, and I guess he did the same with you. He said that he knew what time he could call, that he knew how to protect us. I should have insisted more, I should have taken advantage

of his carelessness and copied the number, I should have forced him to clarify so many things and put an end to his reiterated response: “it won’t be long before everything is solved, you’ll see, you’ll see.” Now I am alone, I know nothing of my origin, and nothing of you.

It has been so hard for me to take care of the legal problems that flooded in after his death. I even had to go back to Colombia, and twenty years later, walk the forgotten streets of Manizales. My illusive search proved to be in vain. I thought that if I was actually there, it would be easy to find you, to come across clues, to talk to people. But even the sloping hills of the neighbourhood where we lived in that city and the house in the mountains where I later grew up were, although familiar, completely alien to me. There was nothing. The curse of time and Grandfather’s ruses had erased everything and three months did not suffice for anything other than having to contend with the mysterious past that shrouded me. Did you know who Grandfather really was? Did you know what he did for a living? Did you know why he disappeared for long periods of time? But, ah, the truth, the truth. Such a complicated word.

I am starting a new paragraph because I gave in to epistemological conflicts that are irrelevant. In Manizales I found out that Grandfather was not only the governor’s right-hand man, but that he was his most faithful henchman, the one in charge of running “errands” for the highly respected dignitary. I had to prove that I have been living in Argentina since I was fifteen years old and that I did not know the old man’s ways and, worst of all, that I knew nothing of your whereabouts.

In the courts, I so often crossed paths with mothers who came to report the death of their children. How could I look them in the eyes when I loved the cause of their pain? They were kids, moms, students, who at some point went out to look for work and Grandfather killed them. He killed several of them, deceived them, took advantage of their obvious financial needs. What would he have promised them? In exchange for what did they decide to get into his car? The charges against him included the

mass murder of innocent civilians that the National Army passed off as guerrilla casualties who had fallen in combat. It seems that Grandfather was the material author of some of these crimes; he merely laid out the plan that the military later executed…

Did you know this man? I can no longer contrast this image with the one I had before; despite it defending itself with all its might in my heart, whatever image I had of Grandfather no longer holds up. I wanted to force myself not to believe, I wanted to think that it was all a mistake, that Grandfather was a good man, the only one who tried to protect us both… but protect us from what? He said there were bad people looking for us in Colombia, but why? What did we do? “You did nothing, my son. Neither of you, but that’s just life.” With so few words, he shut down any chance of unravelling the mystery, and Grandfather’s figure was too overwhelming, I couldn’t stand up to him… That’s how the years went by, that’s how life went by. What did he say to you?

Mom, I don’t just want to talk about that trip to Manizales; I want to tell you about my days here, after my return. My life is summed up in giving classes at the university, going surfing, watching the sea, walking along lonely streets, reading books and listening to piano concerts. But, beyond that there is nothing left; those rituals sustain me, even if they imprison me hopelessly in the comfort of my own sadness… There is something else: strange, but very interesting things have been happening to me lately. I think I have developed a special faculty, I can visit other planes, cross time as if it were a street. I have been able to see the life prospects of my students, their future in different times, I have even been able to see you and me in the mountain house. I recently saw you serving coffee in the white enamelled cups, listening to Todelar broadcasting the radio soap opera Kalimán on the old Sanyo radio. The cups were steaming and you remained absorbed in the voice emanating from the speakers. You were sitting in the dining room, you had a ponytail that uncovered your young neck, you took slow sips of coffee and watched like a cat whose gaze was fixed but whose attention was either elsewhere or on something else entirely.

I have put all my efforts into improving this new skill. What I have been able to see and discover about you, about the past, about myself is amazing. The sea and my new talent are the only things that remind me that I still breathe. You don't think I'm mad, do you? Because I can assure you, I'm not. In fact, I'm still working just fine. My classes are still the same, and the kids are still bored out of their minds with my spiel. I think discovering this has brought me a little closer to that state that others call happiness and that I never understood because it was always alien to me.

I wonder how you are. I wish I could listen to you tell me about your days, about your every step. I know it's impossible, but I would so love you to write to me about your world.

-J.

Winter

The train roared under his feet as it slowed down; it would make a short stop at an intermediate station. He noticed the people: they were gathering their things and leaving the seats their bodies had occupied for hours. An indescribable halo floated around those seats for a while once they got up and Julio could not explain how people could leave tiny pieces of themselves behind. Outside, he saw his grandfather sitting next to Albertina, the woman who had been with him for some time following Grandma Adelaida's death. The old man saw him too and beckoned him to get off the train. Julio stepped off, with nothing but a brown envelope in his hands. As he walked towards his grandfather, he thought that, if he told him that he had some letters for his mother in that envelope, the man whose eyes had seen everything would finally tell him her whereabouts. He promised himself to be relentless this time. When he was only a few steps away, he saw a little boy, perhaps six years old, hiding nervously behind the old man who was trying to cover him with his body.

Curious, he cast his gaze after the little boy. He stared at Julio with dark, frightened eyes. He had a bloodstained cloth stuck to his left cheek and a large straw hat. Albertina said something to the boy which made him remove the red cloth. On that childish face, right on the left cheek, she discovered a wound about four centimetres long; it was deep, and seemed to reach his cheek bone. He stopped crying, as if crying were more painful than the wound itself. Grandfather did not look up from the floor or say anything. Albertina, with eyeliner on her eyes, looked towards the boy from time to time, she looked restless, but continued to sit. Julio touched his left cheek. He ran his fingers along it and noticed a thin line of protruding skin under his beard. He remembered how he got that scar. His mother had told him that they were at the farm in Risaralda one afternoon when they were alone because Grandfather had left for the city and would be returning on the last train, the four o'clock train.

Julio, not anticipating that his balance would fail him, climbed over the paddock gate and fell, burying the wire fence in his cheek. Griselda, his mother, ran frantically when she heard his screams; the only thing she had in her hands was a red rag she dusted with, so she used it to press on the wound to try to stop the bleeding. It had happened after six o'clock in the evening, two long hours before Grandfather arrived and they could finally take him to the town hospital. He was saved by a miracle, his mother would tell him, and every time she told him the story, she would add the same unfinished sentence at the end: "I wish life had been easier for us back then. If you had died because my father wouldn't let us leave the farm alone, it would have been unbearable."

The little boy put the cloth back to his cheek; the blood stained his clothes. Julio became restless; he could not move, he was unable to ask for help, to complain to his grandfather for not doing anything for the child. He wanted to speak to them, but he could not emit a single sound. His tongue twisted uncontrollably in his mouth. His desperation grew. The child stared at him again, as if judging him. Suddenly, the little boy shook the grandfather, leaving a red stain on the old man's

As he walked towards his grandfather, he thought that, if he told him that he had some letters for his mother in that envelope, the man whose eyes had seen everything would finally tell him her whereabouts.

shirt sleeve. With a high-pitched, trembling voice he said: “Grandpa, Grandpa, don’t let me die.” Julio was breathless; his body, as heavy as a huge stone, remained frozen, immobile, oblivious to his orders.

“Attention all passengers, this is our final stop. We thank you for traveling with us.” A woman’s voice jerked him back to the train. He noticed the other passengers, but no one was looking at him. He looked through the window and could see people getting off, but there was no sign of his grandfather. The train was leaving him at Constitución station; he got out of the enormous blue machine, looked at it almost affectionately, and silently said goodbye to it. He had the absurd habit of quickly becoming attached to inanimate objects; he looked for something in them, trying to find what humans had been incapable of giving him.

He was still confused, as his last journey in time had been strange and incomprehensible. Since it was too early to go to the airport, he went to have breakfast at Dambleé café, but before that he thought that Rivadavia Park would be a good place to write one more letter to his mother, which he would later put in that brown envelope that was beginning to annoy him so much. He took the A line and got off at Acoyte station. He went to the park. In his notebook, he took notes about his last meeting with his grandfather, Albertina, and the boy. His leap in time, on this occasion, had been surprising and disturbing. While it was strange to explore other times so vividly, he had somehow grown accustomed to this ability that revealed aspects of other people’s lives to him. This time, was it revealing something about his life? Perhaps he was becoming more adept. He turned back to the first page of his notebook, reviewed the date and realized that it had been more than six months since he had begun to feel this way, to feel special. The notebook’s pages were filled with the experiences he had had in those months. There was nothing more, just pages and pages that spoke of the past and the occasional book or movie title. It was obvious; that was what his life boiled down to.

He wrote quickly, then retraced his steps and returned to the subway that would take him to the Dambleé café. In his pocket, he kept a piece of paper that read:

Mom. I have come across something that refers to your name, it says that it was Bocaccio who invented it, apparently inspired by Grisja, a Germanic name that means grey and by hild which means battle or combat. So, Griselda is: the one of the grey battle. I have been thinking about the fact that names condition people's existence. What do you think?

-J.

At noon, he boarded the plane that would take him to Iguazu Falls. He felt light in the sky. He sat in the window seat. Next to him sat a young woman in a flowery blue dress; from her neck hung a necklace of thick thread with a pendant of Fatima's hand.

"Sorry to bother you. I would like to take a picture of the sky to send to my mother who has never been on a plane. Could you...?"

Julio looked at the girl's face: it was dark, she had a large mole in the middle of her eyebrows and dark eyes. She looked no older than twenty-five and her breath smelled of tobacco. That smell took him back to the day when his cat disappeared and he spent the whole night waiting for him on the balcony, smoking and listening to old jazz songs, letting himself be carried away by the sound of saxophones.

"... take a picture with your phone? It won't come out very well from here."

"Uh... yeah, sure, yeah," she said, stumbling over every word. The girl's raspy voice had taken him out of that night on his balcony... Had she noticed that he had been completely absent? The woman handed Julio her cell phone. He took it and was astonished. He had no idea what that black rectangular object was.

"Ehhh... what am I supposed to do with this"

"The photo..." said the girl, in a quizzical tone.

"I don't know how to..." he replied dryly, handed the phone back and turned to the window, ignoring the witness to his tremendous confusion and discomfort.

He arrived at sunset. He had made a reservation at the Damaris Hostel, a simple house, very yellow with flowers in the garden that had lived through the winter. As soon as he went through the gate, a little black dog barked at him. The next day he went to the Iguazu National Park. He paid the entrance fee, took the map and headed for the lower circuit. He was dying to finally see the wonders that his eyes had only ever contemplated in photographs. He couldn't find enough words to describe what he felt when he first saw the whitish cascades of water falling from the rocks forming veils of foam.

When he reached the upper circuit of the park, the Devil's Throat, where you could see the falls from above, he discovered it would be closed for at least three more hours. The day before, someone had jumped from that point and they were still looking for the body. Julio was filled with curiosity. Who could it have been? Why from there? Had the person gone there alone? Was it a man or a woman? He thought it was a woman. He wandered around other parts of the park, killing time and looking for information, but it was all conflicting: some spoke of a man who had gone to the park with his wife, others of a woman who was a professor at the university, others of a foreigner... In the end, he had no idea what was real and what wasn't; he promised himself to find out once he could get to that side of the park.

It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon when they opened the circuit. There was little time left: the park closed in an hour. Julio walked briskly, crossed the bridge and found himself in a cloudy semicircle

where several waterfalls concentrated, crashing into each other and sounding like a downpour. From there, eighty metres up, the falls were majestic, the view was beautiful. He looked down and was seduced by the drop, by the plunge. He could think of no more poetic place to end a life. He thought of the woman who had jumped the day before, and suddenly he saw the face of his mother, Griselda. She looked very young, in her early twenties, very much like the only photograph he had of her, very different from how he remembered her, very different from the woman who, in tears, had said goodbye to him when he left Colombia with his grandfather. The woman with his mother's face was dressed in a plain, lead-blue jacket and trousers suit. He watched her walk to the railing, slowly, not with hesitation but as if aware that each step brought her closer to the abyss and further away from life. She watched the water recede and, with unexpected ease, climbed over the top rail of the railing, threw herself over and dissipated into the whitish veil of the current. Julio felt sorry for having left her alone; he regretted not being there when she decided to jump, without anyone there that understood her, without anyone having, at least silently, celebrated her liberation.

Spring

He opened his eyes and there was the sea, oblivious in its inexhaustible greyness. The waves were thundering, trying to reach something; Julio wondered if they wanted to catch the sky. Ever since his grandfather showed him the sea and began to teach him how to surf, he felt close to them both, the sea and the old man. Both had been at great distances from him before, as in Colombia he had lived in areas far from the coast and the fear his grandfather inspired in him as a child had made any sign of affection, any possibility of intimacy, impossible for him. It was then that an intimate bond was forged between them, which could only be broken by the supposedly stray bullet which, on one of the mysterious whirlwind journeys he made, entered through his forehead and killed the old man. Julio always suspected that the

incident had little to do with chance, but the investigators added nothing to the case.

Following that death, whenever Julio returned to the sea, he imagined that the foam left behind by every crashing wave would evoke his grandfather, his hoarse, slow voice, his green eyes, and his gaze of an old man who has seen it all. That is why he turned to the colour blue whenever loneliness soaked his eyes; he went to look for his grandfather, the man to whom he owed seeing the sea and not being blind to its colour.

He had left home that morning intending to go surfing and, although he had not yet learned how, he consciously wanted to put his strange ability to travel through time into practice; he longed to master it. Once on the beach, he parked the black truck that he had not yet given up driving. He put on his wetsuit and finished organising his things in the truck bed, making sure not to forget anything. He grabbed the equipment and headed for the seashore. The morning was bright, despite there being some greyish clouds in the sky. He picked up a handful of sand and opened his hand; he watched it slip through his fingers, the wind carrying it towards him. The breeze was blowing ashore, in the direction his surfboard needed to go. He went through his equipment: board, kite, lifejacket, harness... He came across a yellow, cylindrical, hollow object. From it came a small hose with a nozzle at the end, what could it be?

"Hey, did your pump die? You need help with your kite?" said a tall, skinny guy who, it seemed, was also going surfing.

"Hey... yeah."

"Here, take mine. Do you want me to help with your kite?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Let me check your pump, I might be able to fix it."

"The pump? Julio looked around in bewilderment."

"Yes..."

"I don't think I have one."

"Hey, it's in your hand."

"Ah, the pump. He smiled trying to hide his embarrassment."

These situations were beginning to repeat themselves and filled him with curiosity and sometimes fear. Could they be side-effects of his new ability?

Before long, everything was ready. He launched the kite, entered the sea, and felt the waves hitting his body and pushing him towards the shore. He lifted the kite higher to build up power, climbed onto the board, and picked up speed. He changed direction and, when he had the kite at the zenith, he headed out to sea. He did a high jump, controlled it, then another, he jumped downwind, the kite went a little higher, hovered over the water for a few seconds, and came back down again. He did a basic back roll and a few more jumps; he felt alive, lord and master of the sea. As a child, he dreamed of being a sailor and, as a teenager, he wanted to work in a lighthouse. He never dreamed of being a teacher. His dreams never came true but his grandfather threw him into the sea and the path led him to fly surfing, which made short attempts at flying possible. He slowed down. He closed his eyes for a moment and surrendered himself completely to being in the water... He listened to the crashing of one wave against the other. It seemed to him that the sound was being made by a god, with metal brushes undulating on a rough drum. When he looked up again, he found a man with a scar in the centre of his forehead and green eyes that looked as though they had seen everything. In a slow, husky voice the man said:

~~Y~~ou're doing well, lad!

~~G~~randpa?!

The old man looked just as Julio had seen him the last time they had surfed: on his usual board and without a lifejacket. His movements were fast, showing a technique he had learned over many years.

"I honestly thought you wouldn't be able to learn to surf" he said laughing. "You were lucky, the day I decided to teach you I didn't want to be alone."

"Eh... How can we...?"

"You like the sea, don't you? I've been able to see you every time you come. Do you remember the first time we came to Mar del Plata? It was the first time you travelled without your mother. She almost died when I told her you were coming with me to Argentina... She had to force herself to understand that it was the best thing for you. You had to be far away; I was the only one who could protect you. Do you remember how your eyes opened like saucers at the sight of the sea? You never told me what you felt. Nor did I ask you. You were only fifteen years old, but it was already uncomfortable to ask you such intimate questions..."

"Yes... I think I felt small, standing before a revelation."

"Yes, yes, that's what the sea does to you."

They moved back into the water in silence. The only sound that could be heard was the sea rumbling. Julio thought about how strange the man's life had been. He was sensitive to music and painting and highly educated. He had graduated in law in Colombia and had left the country to continue his postgraduate studies. He returned before graduating and his life took unexpected turns...

"Be careful! Don't forget your power control. You'd better lower the kite, like this, look, the wind's changed direction" said the old man.

He felt like a teenager again. Grandfather's presence brought him back to those forgotten days. His white hair peeked out from under his helmet, damp from the sea and sweat. He pulled the brake and, slowly, the kite lost altitude. Grandfather did the same. He tried to guess what his eyes were like, hidden under the dark glasses. He imagined them to be greener than ever.

"Grandpa... I feel very lonely sometimes, and when I do I come to the sea."

"I know. That's why I'm here today. I also felt like talking about paintings."

"Yeah? Which painting brought you here?"

"Ah, if only you knew. There is a Courbet that won't leave me alone. I discovered that Miles Davis's Kind of Blue resonates in it, and I can't understand how Courbet managed to listen to the notes in that Miles album years before it even came out."

"And is it that way around?"

"Impossible. Miles doesn't capture a stormy sea."

The tide was rising. Was there a storm brewing? He said nothing. He was afraid that his grandfather would discover that after fifteen years at sea, he still couldn't read it. They stood in silence for a while; Grandfather stared at the clouds meeting the water. The old man's face darkened. Julio wished he had his camera and could take a photograph of him, although he knew at once that he would refuse, that he would do everything possible to prevent his face from appearing on paper.

Julio wondered why he had never liked mirrors or photos. He used to say, half-jokingly, half seriously, that it was because those gadgets could not

be lied to; they revealed a being as it was and that, at his age, he was not interested in being found out. Could there be any evil in that soul that took him to discover the sea? He didn't want to answer himself just then, he didn't want to remember everything that had happened after his death. Julio already knew many things because he had had to take charge of the accusations that rained down against him and, although after his death the evidence of his crimes was no longer of any use, Julio was able to discover much of the old man's mysterious life and the reason why he had ended up in that strange country, far away from his mother. The sky was losing its colour and Julio sensed that time was taking on a new shape, a different breadth. It was like a misty cloak that covered him and spread out as it pleased.

"Grandpa, did you like being alone?"

"Always. That's why I left your grandma."

"My grandma was killed..." Julio recalled, but then he wondered whether that was true. He stared at the old man's scar.

"Yes, I wasn't able to protect her; I had left her almost two years before she was killed."

"So why did you bring me with you?"

"Because you're my grandson and I had to protect you."

"And Grandma?"

"It's all been very complicated for us."

"Why?"

"..."

Julio wondered why he had never liked mirrors or photos. He used to say, half-jokingly, half seriously, that it was because those gadgets could not be lied to.

"And Mom? I need to talk to her. Where is she?"

"We have always been threatened by evil."

"Where is Mom?"

"Life is a mystery."

"Especially yours."

For the first time, Julio felt a hint of resentment towards the old man and looked away from his scar with displeasure. The sea began to chop hard; the tide was rising steadily. Julio heard snatches of lifeguard whistles from the shore. It was time to turn back. He dropped the kite; the waves were getting more and more violent. The wind was pushing him out to sea. He hugged the board and swam in the opposite direction. He made little progress; the current was stronger. He inflated his lifejacket and swam hard. He swam and swam. It was no use. The salt water kept pounding against his face, making it hard to breathe...

He heard the engine of a boat approaching. Someone shouted, a hand reached for him; he let go of the board, stood up, several hands took hold of him and helped him up. Minutes later, when he managed to calm his breathing, he recognised the face of the tall, skinny boy who had helped him with the kite earlier. He saw the sand nearby and realised that night had fallen. How long had gone by since they first met?

"Hey, are you ok?"

"I lost my equipment... the board was my grandfather's."

"Oh..."

The boy looked at him pitifully and then turned to talk to his friends.

Julio thought that once again he had managed to outwit time, once again he had been able to combine dimensions. He felt happy. His ability had improved significantly, although he was sorry he had lost his board.

When he got home that night, he was still savouring the feeling of victory that his last time warp had left him with. He made a cup of coffee and drank it at his dining room table with a few bills on it that had been there for a few days. As he was in good spirits, he picked up the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters magazine and absent-mindedly skimmed through the table of contents. There was an article entitled The mutant generation. He struggled through the pages as strange colours appeared and the words moved, slipping down to the next line.

It took him several hours to decode it word by word, and in the end, he didn't finish it. His mood had changed. He felt uncomfortable and annoyed and thought that it was because of how difficult he had found it to read the article. He wondered whether he might need glasses, but there was something else bothering him. He went into the study to write to his mother.

September 30, 2019

Mom, strange things have been happening lately. I have already told you about some of them. Others have been on the verge of discovering my special ability on several occasions because of a certain clumsiness I seem to have developed and that I still can't quite explain. I haven't told them about it because, how can I without them thinking I'm crazy? Sometimes I get curious and something makes me want to talk to one of my colleagues, but I never do. You'd say I was a coward, I'm sure. What would you tell me if I could get in touch with you?

My other news is that I think I should stop driving. I have had small accidents. I will have to go to the ophthalmologist.

-J.

When he finished writing, he could barely guess what he had written. He felt tired, he needed some air. Leaning out on the balcony, he thought about what his mother would reply.

"I didn't think you would be so irresponsible as a grown-up," said Griselda, in the same tone she used every time she scolded him.

Julio stepped back. His mother was standing on the balcony.

"You look skinny, are you eating properly?"

"What's all this about?" he said, as he moved towards the door without ever turning his back on his mother.

"About you. You're not well."

Julio turned around and hit his head on the window frame in the door. The blow left him feeling dazed for a few seconds. When he looked back out onto the balcony, there was no one there. In his mind a nagging voice came in fragments: it demanded that he go to the doctor.

Summer

Night has fallen, the sea is barely visible. Julio takes another look at his hands, which look stranger and stranger to him. You can see the summer heat in passers-by's damp clothes. But he feels cold, as if there were no life in his body. A few minutes ago he stopped writing to his mother, a letter made up of various fragments and notes that he had been writing for months and had not decided to finish and do something with. For him, there is still something that has been left unsaid. He takes out the diagnosis again. It is no longer digging into his ribs. His hands are cold and clammy. His chest no longer feels tight. The physical discomfort he has felt since he left the hospital with that loathsome piece of paper in his pocket has turned into sadness.

His life has lost its meaning. However, the hours he has spent sitting there watching the sea and writing to his mother have very clearly shown him the decision he must now make. He pulls out the diagnosis again and reads: Patient's name: Julio Vanegas, Age: 35, Diagnosis: Visual Anosognosia.

He crumples up the diagnosis that had complicated his existence for the last few hours and tosses it away. He leaves the bench with the courage that comes from knowing, with the utmost clarity, where his steps should lead him. He struggles home and packs his books into boxes. In the morning, he calls a library and tells them that he has several boxes of books to donate to them. He goes to the barber's and asks for a full shave. He needs to be beardless and hairless. He barely glances in the mirror when he sees in the reflection a dark-haired face in his thirties, with a broad nose and a scar on his left cheek.

He leaves the barber's and passes a clothes shop. He buys a pair of jeans —Julio has never worn jeans before— and a blue T-shirt, and leaves the shop in his new clothes. On the way, he orders a chocolate cake and a coffee in a café; he eats slowly while listening to Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2 on the telephone. It was the last thing left of Julio, that nostalgic composition that was part of his rituals; the rest was gone. Before leaving, he writes something on a napkin. The wind blows the napkin onto the pavement; a woman picks it up a few hours later and reads it. After coffee, he goes to the beach. There are still only a few visitors. He sits on the sand, takes a deep breath, and fills his lungs with the smell of the sea. He takes out the brown envelope in which he has kept the pages of the letter to his mother for months. He writes for a while and finally finishes the letters; he reads the dates on some of them: Mar del Plata, July 2019, Puerto Iguazú, August 2019, Mar del Plata, September 30, 2019. He stops at the last one he wrote:

February 12, 2020

A few minutes ago he stopped writing to his mother, a letter made up of various fragments and notes that he had been writing for months and had not decided to finish and do something with.

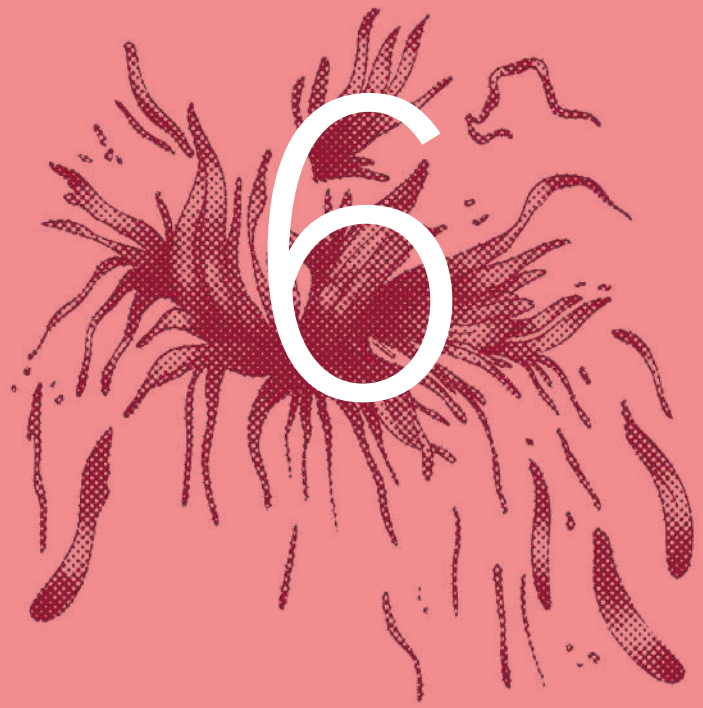
Mother, something has changed since I found out you were dead on my trip to Iguazu. I am just beginning to accept that the woman who jumped the day before I arrived at the park was someone else, not you, and that it was just another one of my trips that turned out to be nothing but a hallucination. This morning I received an unfortunate diagnosis. Earlier I told you about the particular ability I had; today I discovered that I'm just sick. I have a disease that has affected my vision. Some part of my brain does not process the information my eyes receive, so I attribute other names or uses to everyday objects. Even more astonishingly, I can't seem to read things in their entirety, but only in parts. I look at a bicycle and can only perceive its wheels, frame, and handlebars. The same is true for the streets that I often pass through; in fact, to get to certain places, I move around based on my memory. I have to compare certain specific elements and identify them in the panoramic views that are stored in my mind.

I think I have had the disease for nine months, but the doctor told me that it started much earlier. I was too slow to see it, and by the time I realised, my condition had advanced. Mother... for me those symptoms were a talent, and for someone whose description of the world is broad but whose sense of it is so unfortunate, to learn that it is a disease is an utter disaster. In short, my clumsiness, evident in my constant falling and stumbling, my talks with Grandfather, the trips into the past, the stretching and shortening of time, the visions of the future, and the images of events in the present for which I found clear explanations, are nothing but a product of anosognosia. Strange name, don't you think?

It's dusk. I'm sitting in front of the sea and trying to decide what to do. What would you do, mother? I think you would know how to choose. I am too stupid. I'm a lonely, ordinary man, who is unfit for life.

With love and cold hands, J.

When he finishes reading the letters, he takes out his lighter and sets fire to them. The envelope and the extroverted sheets of paper explode into red, orange, blue. He watches them burn until the last flame dies with no words left to burn. He feels calm. This was the only way he could get those letters to his mother. He stands up and enters the immensity of the ocean, he feels tiny. He disappears in an instant. There is nothing but the sea, forever alien. Somewhere else, a napkin rests in a woman's hand.



Constellations

Inés Kreplak
Editor

As a proper Argentine, I cannot think of literature without turning to Borges. Some of what he taught seems pertinent when considering this copyediting exercise I embarked on during this arduous and intense year that has forever changed what remains of our lives. One of the things he taught is that one becomes great not because of what one writes but because of what one reads. The other, without a doubt, is, and I quote, "Don't talk unless you can improve the silence."

For me, editing means trying to be the best possible reader. To take into account different perspectives, to contemplate multiplicity, backgrounds in education, wisdom, knowledge, and different feelings. It also implies thinking about the writer, to enter into his or her world, to respect the style,

and to break the silence involved in reading only if the text can be enhanced. But this silence does not evade conversation. Beyond all conventions of the solitary writer, literature is a form of dialogue and writing is always a collective act.

Paula, I hope you felt supported. I want you to know that I did my best. I think we made a lasting team. Thank you for placing your trust in me. Thank you, Marta, for your generosity and your guidance. Thank you, Ellipsis, for opening the door to this path of learning, knowledge, and Colombian love. Here's to many more exchanges.

Paula Galansky
Author

Mom walks a few metres ahead, trainers in one hand, torch in the other. It's been a couple of weeks since the summer break holidays to an end, and there are only a handful of teenagers left on the beach, sitting around a campfire, playing guitar. Snatches of distant conversations and songs mingle with the sound of our footsteps on the sand and, for some reason, I feel like this has happened before, like I have been here before. Maybe it's a childhood memory, although back then, Mom didn't have messy white hair sitting on top of her head like a little cloud.

She called me a couple of days ago; it was gone midnight. She let out a long sigh before saying anything. She asked me how my job was going, my house, my plans, Juan, my friends, my life. I took a deep breath. I felt stuck and bored at work, I complained, and then I mentioned that I was planning to look for a new job, even though I had promised myself not to say anything until I had actually had one. With Juan, things were the same as always. My friends, busy with their own lives. Life in general was fine but nothing to write home about.

She answered in monosyllables, and I could imagine her nodding on the other end of the line, lying on the living room couch in her panties and T-shirt, drawing little houses and trees with a blue pen in her notebook. Then it was my turn. I asked about a friend of hers who was in hospital. She told me that she was better health-wise, but that she was still sad. There was no visit, no word, no gift, nothing she could do to cheer her up. She feels lonely, her son is living his own life; her father passed away

last year. She thinks she is a burden on everyone, she said as if speaking to herself. She sighed and fell silent again.

I thought that was the end of the conversation, and usually it would have been. It's something we repeat every now and then, in an attempt to catch up, but she asks too many questions, I answer on autopilot, and the result is a clumsy chatter that comes out as if we were talking underwater. After that, we go for long periods of time without hearing from each other.

But this time Mom stayed a few seconds longer, breathing against the phone. "One more thing," she said, and let the mystery expand. A tense balloon inflated to its last millimetre between us, and only then did she speak again. She announced, like one would announce a prophecy, that she wanted us to go to a lookout point to look at the stars.

Although I struggled to understand what she was talking about, I can't say I was taken by surprise. It wasn't the first time Mom had decided to set some unexpected plan in motion. Perhaps a certain firmness and blind confidence in her voice had an effect on me, and made me accept even if I wasn't very convinced.

The lookout point, she told me that night, had been a popular tourist spot several years ago. Although it was now old and a bit neglected, it still had a beautiful terrace, and on the beach, the clear sky and transparent air displayed the stars as they would have looked centuries ago, before we had electricity. "There are hardly any places like this left," she repeated a couple of times.

Now that we've been on the beach for a while searching for the lookout, I wonder why Mom thought of coming all this way.

From up ahead she tells me that we are nearly there, she is sure we are close. The streetlights stretch out and disappear in the horizon, I can't see where they end and, to be honest, I don't see how we'll find the place

either at this point. I let out a long, whimpering sigh, but the wind blowing against us sweeps away almost any sound other than the noise of water and the crunch of the wet sand beneath our feet. "What?" asks Mom. "Nothing, nothing, let's carry on," I reply, relieved that she hadn't heard me, or at least that she decided to pretend she hadn't. When it comes to Mom, there is always an argument waiting to be had.

Like a bedsheet shared across two shores, the sea extends on this side of the world and shrinks on the other. The strip of sand between the street and the water is already a few metres thinner than when we arrived. Mom walks close to the shore, her hair standing out bright against the dark sky, reminding me of Coco, my dog from my teenage years, a tall greyhound, completely black except for the tip of his tail, which was white.

"Do you remember Coco, Mom?" "Yes, why?" "Nothing, he just popped into my head. I remembered when I used to take him for walks. I used to take him every night and Dad used to take him every morning. We used to go to the park by the lagoon because not many people went there, and Dad said it was wilder, less urban than a town square. Did you ever take him?" I ask on impulse, knowing full well what her answer was going to be.

"No, I never got along with that dog," she replies. She stops dead in her tracks and begins to turn on the spot, looking up at the sky.

"That one over there, the biggest one, that's Canopus, and you can only see it in the south; you can' t see it in Europe." "The one that's twinkling?" "Yes, yes, that one, and further down, those three in a row are called Orion, but here we call them Las Tres Marías."

Like an interstellar pencil, the light from the torch draws a line between the stars that Mom points out. I try to pay attention, but for a while now all I can think about is getting back to bed. I drove almost two hours to get here, and I still have to drive back and get Mom home before I drive home myself.

"That's Aquarius over there. Once you get used to looking at them, you find them more quickly," she explains, drawing the outline of a fish in the sky.

"That's the head, and that tip there that meets the one at the bottom is the tail." "Which one at the bottom?" "The one that's below the rest, dear." "There are lots of them, and they're all the same." "No, Ana, the one that's a bit bigger with the little shiny one next to it, do you see it, are you even looking, Ana?" she asks, and snaps me back to the present.

"Ah, yes. Now I see it," I lie, but she turns around and bluntly asks if there's anything wrong with me. "Nothing," I lie again.

When she wants to, Mom can look at you like you look at a broken appliance: first with astonishment, then anger, followed by reluctance and, finally, resignation.

"I thought you'd like to come and see the stars," she says.

Mom brushes her hair out of her face, turns around and keeps walking. She is wearing a windbreaker over her purple Hindu dress. The wind picks it up all the time, but she doesn't seem to care. She points the torch and her gaze upwards.

The group of teenagers we saw a while ago was breaking up into several couples tightly bundled under the same coat. I suggest asking them about the gazebo, but Mom dismisses the idea with her hand. "What would they know," she says. Next, and as if she needs to invoke something from those times in order to use it now, she starts to tell me a story I've heard a hundred times before: the story about the nights she slept out in the open.

It was on the roof of a house in the last inhabited village just before the edge of the Chilean desert. She and the rest of her travelling

Like an interstellar pencil, the light from the torch draws a line between the stars that Mom points out. I try to pay attention, but for a while now all I can think about is getting back to bed.

companions had rooms and beds available for everyone, but they preferred to sleep outside in sleeping bags, huddled against each other and unable to contain their laughter at being at the mercy of the intense, dry cold. The sky she slept under on those nights was the most beautiful, starry sky she could remember. She describes it as a black curtain covered in glitter and goes on to list more details about the trip: the food she tried, and the animals and the places she saw. Her travel companions were a theatre cast touring the prisons of Latin America.

Mom was not an actress; she had never acted. The show consisted of staging stories told by the prisoners, and to do that, she had explained to Dad before leaving, you didn't need to be an actor, all you needed was to be empathetic. I was eight years old and used to imagine her acting out swindles and kidnappings, pretending to jump over walls and fences, with a black stocking over her head.

For me, that trip had been a monster that had swallowed her up and spat her out a month and a half later, tanned, full of anecdotes and new stories, and with her lips cracked by the sun.

The day she came back, Dad woke me up very early. I hugged her, took the presents she had brought me (an embroidered wool doll and a wooden llama) and locked myself in my room to sleep for hours, so much so that Mom said they hadn't been able to wake me up.

"I was about your age back then," she reckons, and looks at me in surprise, as if she hadn't seen me for a long time.

Mom had long, curly, brown hair. Her mind, her sudden desires, jumped from one idea to another, and she followed them —fleeting and spirited— no matter where they led her. Dad and I followed her at our own pace, at a safe distance. Or that's the feeling I have now, as I find it impossible to imagine myself travelling with that group of colourfully

dressed, noisy thirty-somethings, who were always walking around the world together, as if suspended in the same jelly. I can still remember some of their names: Lorenzo, Renato, Abigail.

At some point, the road at our side disappeared and gave way to a long, thick pine forest. I can't see where it ends, just as I hadn't noticed at what point it appeared. Mom is still sure that we'll find the place any moment now. The only time she turns the torch away from steering us ahead is to point it at the sky. "That's the Southern Cross," she says after a while, "but I suppose you already know that." "I know the name, but I wouldn't be able to recognise it." "Look," she says, and makes a diamond of light appear between the four stars. "The one at the top always points south, hence the name."

I look, but I can't see a cross, nor can I imagine when I might need it to know where south is. I can't stand the cold any longer. The lookout, if we manage to find it, must have exactly the same view. As soon as I set foot on the beach, I realised that I shouldn't have agreed to this excursion. I don't know what I was thinking. I know nothing about stars, and I have no interest in knowing anything either.

I hug myself and hear my own voice: "Mom, I'm freezing."

"You got your sensitivity to the cold from your father," she replies, and goes on to talk about constellations and giant telescopes with which we can look at other galaxies.

"Could be," I interrupt her.

"Has it been long since you last spoke to him?"

"I spoke to him yesterday."

"Oh, and how is he?"

"Does the view from the lookout change much?"

"Ana, we're almost there."

"How do you know we're almost there? We've been walking for ages."

"That's why we must be close by now."

"Or not, we don't know."

She falls silent, and I can feel her disappointment floating in the salty air. She shines the torch on the ground again and continues walking, though perhaps a little slower, as if digesting what I have just said. A strange, charged breeze, quite different from the earlier gale, blows down through the pines and into our faces.

"Ma?"

"Why did you suddenly think of Coco?"

"What?"

"Coco, your dog. You were talking about him a minute ago."

"Ah, Coco. I don't know, I just remembered the walks with him."

"Don't you want to tell me?"

"Why wouldn't I want to tell you?"

"I don't know, but I sense something."

Mom stops and sits down on the sand, which is littered with bark, leaves, and dry twigs next to the trees. Something about her attitude puts me on

alert. In the last few years, every time the phone rings at odd hours, the thought that flits through my mind is that time is suddenly running out. The night she called to invite me over, the image of her empty rented flat made my heart stop for a second, until I picked up and heard her voice.

When I turn my attention back to her, she was in the middle of saying, "one day we came home and Coco had had a seizure, something like a stroke. He'd gone blind and the vet told us it was for the best."

"Yes, Dad told me."

"I know, but we never talked about it."

"It's okay, Mom. It was fifteen years ago."

"I thought that's why you mentioned it."

"Not everything I say is against you."

"Well, Ana, what do you expect me to think."

Two owls swoop down from the pines onto the sand. In the dark you can barely make them out, but their eyes give them away. I sit close to Mom, and wonder if I should say anything about them. Perhaps we could talk about those owls for hours, about how there's something human about their faces that both surprises and unnerves me. Besides, Mom probably knows some incredible facts about owl life that I don't. But I end up saying nothing.

"What do you think is wrong?"

"What's wrong with what?"

"Do you want to be here, honey? We can leave if you want."

"It's not that."

"What is it then?"

"Mom, not everything revolves around you" I answer curtly. But as soon as I hear myself, I remember something that shuts me up. When I was twelve or thirteen, when Dad moved out, Mom retreated into her shell for a long period of time. She spent her time pacing up and down the corridors, leaving behind her a trail of smoke and intense mental activity, but no words. I could stand next to her and say "Mom, Mom" several times and she wouldn't answer, until I would get nervous and raise my voice, and then she would turn around and ask, "What's wrong?" or outright "Why are you shouting?" with a face and a gaze that made me feel as if I had been struck by lightning. If things went on and I complained that she wasn't listening to me, the answer I invariably got was, "Not everything revolves around you."

Mom stays silent and I can't think how to continue. I light a cigarette and she looks at me sideways. I don't think she's going to say anything; if anything, she'll save it for later. But, to my surprise, she pulls out a packet of her own and asks me for the lighter.

"Are you smoking again?"

"I've been smoking since I was 28."

"Well, but you're not at that age anymore."

"You're no girl either," she replies. She looks at me with a serious expression and repeats: "If you want to go back, it's no problem, you can just tell me."

"I didn't say that; I just wanted to ask for directions."

"All right, ask if you want to."

"You could have asked me if I wanted to come."

"I did!"

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"What are you talking about then?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Oh, Ana. I wanted to come, and I invited you, nothing less, nothing more. You've had that look on your face ever since we got here. You could have just said no."

"And you would have been offended."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Oh, no?"

"Ana, what's wrong with you?"

A bubble of hot air rises from my gut and settles tightly in my throat. I don't want to start those endless arguments again. What's the point? After all, I'm not going to tell her that I don't realise why she calls me every now and again, when she remembers we haven't seen each other in a while, and why she invites me on these outings as if this were the solution. That I don't see why we can't just visit each other at our homes, as though, in order to see each other and talk, we needed to be on neutral territory. That, in the end, I'm not sure why I agreed to come either, but that an old instinct makes me follow her. She's not going to say anything to me either because, like me, she must not know what to say. So, I pass her the lighter, get up, and start walking.

"Where are you going?"

What's the point? After all, I'm not going to tell her that I don't realise why she calls me every now and again, when she remembers we haven't seen each other in a while, and why she invites me on these outings as if this were the solution.

"I'll be back in a minute."

"Ana!"

"I'm going to pee, Mom, I'll be back in a minute," I say. If she calls me again, I'll pretend I can't hear her anymore. I need to get away and have a minute to breathe.

The trees are all bent to one side as if a giant had caressed them in the same direction. The owls are still there, but now they are high up in the branches. I can hear them hooting and see them flying back and forth. I imagine that they are passing the baton to each other to escort me.

The air coming in from the sea is dulled and warmed by the pines; only at ground level do I feel a cold draft touch my ankles, along with splashing droplets of pee. I'm better off here, sheltered from the wind. I stand up again and pull up my trousers, look to the sides to get my bearings, and that's when I see him.

He is tall, very skinny, with a few white hairs. He takes two steps towards me through the trees. I move backwards. "Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you," he says. "Are you lost? Don't be frightened. I apologize."

When he speaks, he holds out his palms, as though he were going to restrain me. He asked me again if I was lost; if I needed help. Paralyzed, all I managed to say was "No."

"Are you going to the beach?"

"What?"

"If you want you can follow me, that's where I'm going. We're not far, but it's not that way," he clarifies. He starts walking in the opposite direction to me and doesn't turn to look at me once as he walks away.

His clothes match the colours of the forest. His thin back is easily camouflaged against the background of bark and low branches. “Is it that way? Are you sure?” I hear myself ask.

The man laughs, or so it seems, because he shakes his head a little and replies that it is and that he knows the way to the beach by heart. He sounds determined, but his voice is arrhythmic and swaying, as if the wind were blowing it from side to side, or as if he were concentrating on something else: tying his shoelaces, looking for something lost among the pines.

His general indifference towards me makes me somehow trust him. Besides, I reckon that in a hand-to-hand fight I could probably beat him. I continue to keep my distance, although I have to take long strides to make sure my eyes can follow him.

He is the gazebo watchman. In fact, he not only looks after it, he lives there, he tells me without my asking. In holiday season, he keeps it clean and makes sure that tourists don’t graffiti it with their names and the dates of their visits. But now he is busy tidying up the place and watching the stars himself every night.

What do you call that feeling you get when you want to remember the words to an old song, but all you can hear is its fuzzy melody in the back of your head? That’s what I feel when I hear his voice. I try to catch something in it that escapes me and, like an echo, as soon as it falls silent, it comes floating back to me. It is something distant and new at the same time.

As a child, when my mother was the centre around which much of my world revolved, as well as being a high school English teacher and freelance translator, she was paid by an anthropologist, as famous as she was tyrannical, to record hundreds of hours of interviews. She would spend entire afternoons hitting play, pause, play, pause, play,

pause on the tape recorder at a table piled high with books, notes, dictionaries, and full ashtrays, while I sat sketching next to her.

Among all of them, there was one interview in particular that was my favourite and that I always asked to listen to again and again. I liked it because the interviewee had a strange accent and an even stranger name: Maximiano, and because he paid no attention to the questions the anthropologist asked him. As if he were alone, and talking to himself, he said that his job was to look at the sky every night. Looking at the stars is like having a map of the past, he explained, because their light comes from thousands of years ago. I couldn’t believe such a job existed. In the end, when asked about his family, Maximiano would linger for a few seconds and then reply, as though talking about an augury of sorts, “I have nothing, but my house is beautiful, lost among the stars, and with no electricity.”

The day we heard it for the first time, Mom had a fit of what I first thought was crying. I remember seeing her face flushed, her mouth open and her eyes closed, gasping for air, as if she were choking. Then I realised it was laughter, a new kind of laughter, and, for some reason, I too laughed until I was red in the face.

“Is that where you were going,” the man repeats, and I nod yes. I tie up loose, distant ends: a man alone; a house surrounded by stars. They are tenuous links, but perhaps that was the reason Mom had wanted us to visit the lookout point.

I feel a kind of discomfort in my chest. A long time ago, I read a story about a man who had an accident and woke up fifteen years later. His friends were gone, his children were grown up, his parents were old. Everything had happened in its own time and yet, for him, it had happened from one second to the next. Thinking about it makes me feel a pang in the pit of my stomach and, for a moment, I am a little girl just waking up, after years of not seeing her mother.

Once again, I can imagine her in her panties and T-shirt on her living room couch, but this time smoking and googling how to get to the lookout point.

We reach the bottom of a pine tree that must be more than ten metres high. The man points to three owls sitting on one of the lower branches and says, "Look." They are smaller, with lighter, fluffier feathers than the ones I had seen earlier. In the owl world, they must be little girls.

"They won't hurt you," he says, and reaches out a hand to touch them. They look at him attentively and immobile. They seem to accept his closeness as they accept the closeness of the pines; the leaves; and the wind, which, although not very blustery, was strong enough to blow them over. With a gentle gesture he picks one up and shows it to me; it is greyish with honey-coloured eyes. "It's full of them here, it's breeding season," he says. "People are afraid of them, they think they bring bad luck, but they don't." Then he examines it himself; he brings it up to his eye level, smiles at it and puts it back where it belongs.

From now on, the forest becomes less dense until it ends in a few scattered pines. The light, which was barely filtering through the trees, now strikes me as powerful as a searchlight. I squint. The beach is, at first sight, empty.

I try to calm myself and think: Mom must be running around looking for me, there's no reason for me to worry, and yet I can feel my heart starting to beat faster and faster. I rack my brain for options: call her, scream, ask the caretaker for help. But before I can think of anything useful, I see a dark silhouette approaching us, showing no sign of hurry or surprise.

Mom looks at me and then looks at him, at me and then him, as if she were assessing a complex exam. I tell her that the man is with me, that

there is no need to panic. She, far from doing so, just observes him in silence, puts him under x-rays, and seems to decide that the stranger has passed the test. Sometimes I think her reactions are predictable, and sometimes I think they come from Mars.

They greet each other with a gesture, hardly any introduction. Mom hears that he lives at the lookout point and immediately tells him that she read about the place on the internet, but that we have been trying to find it since we arrived to no avail. He shrugs off the complaint, smiles and replies that it's easy to get lost at night.

"And when else would people come to look at the stars?" asks Mom, who never gives up. It's a dialogue of the deaf... or the insane. He replies that the view is simply beautiful. Then he offers to take us there.

Mom and I look at each other, silently considering and discarding options. Before either of us can open our mouths, the man starts walking. For a moment I thought Mom was about to say something to me, but she shook her head as if shaking off a thought, and then followed behind him.

"I saw three owl chicks in the forest," I say to break the silence. She doesn't seem to hear me and is struggling to keep her dress from blowing off. I guess she's worried now because we're not alone. She asks me not to get angry as she takes out the packet of cigarettes again. From up ahead, the man whistles for us not to lag behind.

"And he's even in a hurry," she says as she lights one up.

"When I met him, I thought of the guy in the interview, the one who talked about the stars. He reminded me of him."

"What interview?"

"The one we used to listen to."

"Which one?"

"The one about the man who lived with no electricity."

"This old man?" she answers me in such a low voice that I could hardly hear her. "No wonder you have a face on you. You didn't like him before either. Sometimes you asked me to listen to it again and it would stop you sleeping at night."

"What? You're remembering wrong. I used to love it."

"When your dad scolded you for something, he would say that he was going to send you to live with the old man from the tape recorder for a whole day, and you'd start crying. You'd make me promise that if he took you, I would go and look for you. Don't you remember?"

"I remember something like that," I lie, but none of it feels familiar, as if a part of our history remains unexplored. Or in disarray. A constellation made of distant and unconnected points. Just like our plans to come here tonight.

"I thought that's why you wanted to come."

"Because of that interview?"

"Yes, I don't know, it just occurred to me."

Mom looks at me in silence. Her expression makes me think that she too is trying to find something she can't quite grasp. A footprint, a distant trace. A few months ago, I answered the phone and, in my distraction, mistook her voice for my grandmother's. It was only for a second, but it was enough to throw me off. As I watch the smoke from her cigarette draw soft waves over her head, I have the feeling that the time around us swirls, freezes and expands, responding to underlying motives that we will never understand.

"What were you saying about owls?" she asks.

"That I saw three. It's breeding season."

"They're good luck," she tells me. She also tells me that somewhere in the world there must be a constellation in the shape of an owl. After all, constellations are nothing but stars drawing a picture in which we each of us see what we want to—or can—see. Gemini here, Aries there, and beyond that, why not, the eyes and wings of an imaginary owl. She takes a moment to think, gazes at the watchman's back, and adds: "Maybe he is the man from the interview. Now that I look at him, he looks about a hundred years old." "He's going to hear us, Mom," I warn her, but her stifled laughter makes me laugh too.