

ellipsis

2018

Authors

Sebastián Castro
Laura Vargas
Ricardo Tello
Marlly Ocampo
Solange Rodríguez

Editors

Kimberly Díaz
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Cover: Shutterstock.com
Stories: Ricardo Tello, Solange
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PRINTING
Zetta Comunicadores S.A.

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FOREWORD

By Sylvia Ospina

Director of Arts, British Council

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We are tremendously proud to present this third anthology of Ellipsis. It is the fruit of the labours of a phenomenal group of ten literature students throughout 2018.

Their journey began in January 2018, when five aspiring young writers met up with five aspiring young literary editors at the Hay Festival in Cartagena, where they had the opportunity to speak personally with Geoff Dyer, Gabrielle Walker, Fiona Mozley, Jenny Valentine, and Michael Bhaskar. Further to these conversations about the writing profession and the editing process, they were also placed in the able hands of Marta Orrantia and Roberto Rubiano who would accompany them throughout the year-long process they were about to embark on. Cartagena was similarly where the process of writing those five promises was also initiated; a process that would force them to return, again and again, to the page in a constant dialogue not only with their tutors but also with their colleagues from Ellipsis.

They met up again in April at FILBO, where they had the opportunity to talk about the intersections between writing and illustration with William Grill and David Lloyd, and about the intersections between writing, film and music with Irvine Welsh. It was at this point in time that the burden to our young writers' started to become

lighter, as they handed the results of their writing over to our young editors, who were then responsible, from that moment on, to challenge them and study them, and listen to them in order to help the texts grow and flourish, preparing them for their inclusion in this volume.

There is no programme in Colombia quite like Ellipsis. There is no other initiative that accompanies a group of literature students in such detail during a year of collective writing and editing. Nor is there another programme that offers such exclusive access to some of the most outstanding writers of British literature. Our effort focuses on creating a literary experience that will have a profound impact on the very lives of the participants, as well as fostering their long-term creative experimentation process.

That is why Ellipsis has not only become the backbone of our work in literature in Colombia, but also been transplanted to Mexico where it had its first edition at the Hay Festival of Querétaro in 2018. In fact, Ellipsis is one of the most relevant initiatives in our work in literature at a global level. It is executed on the foundations of our mission in arts: to foster a deep understanding between people and empower talented young people through unique experiences and opportunities.

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“AGUACATA BEY”



Author
Sebastián Castro



Editor
Kimberly Díaz

I hadn't seen clouds that black in years. It seems like it was going to pour down with cats and dogs – and husbands, husbands with money! Hurry up fixing that hole, before the rain starts. Quick, son, can you hear the thunderings and the bellowing sea. You'd better have fixed that roof properly. If you haven't, I'll just have to change husbands. Well, ready? No prayers. How could my mother know that she was going to return to her homeland as fertiliser for a stick? Put the sapling into the ashes and step on that earth so that the wind does not knock it over again, this coming rain it'll either take – or die. Move then. And don't look at me with regret that these tears are of joy... My mother is already in her land, in the first avocado from the Bay, and when the tide rises her black man will embrace her. See, my face all wet now, let's go back inside.

What happened to my dad? Open that bottle and pour. Hadn't I told you? Everything was taken by the boar in a downpour of these. Don't bother yourself, we've a carafe, pour a decent double! The sea, a downpour and a sharp operator, as you'll see, they forced us into exile... Good health, then!

Everyone had found out before us. That morning we were awakened by the sound of a child crying out on the other side of the door: "Hey; m'am! Your man's drowned!" When we jumped out of bed and mum looked out, the boy had already run out of the hotel, without saying anything else. Fifteen minutes later we were on the street asking for my dad.

The murmurs left the hotel and paraded themselves through the streets, looking for the police station, they grew louder and louder. Among the noise, words could be distinguished. Even the mosquitoes had their own version of what had happened! They whispered it when we were close and shouted it when we left. People want to be heard, but not to be seen. They spit out their truth without shame, as if it were the very Gospel itself. All the voices agreed that someone had found Black Juan's fishing rod on a beach between Acandí and Capurganá. And Black Juan's fishing rod was Black Juan's fishing rod, there was no other like it. My mother had sent for it to be brought from the United States and all the fishermen envied it, although everyone preferred to fish with nets. In the confusion, the gossip was divided between those who bet that he was sleeping with the fish and those who said that he had taken advantage of the downpour to get lost, that he surely had debts to pay, my parents must have put *something* aside with those cabins they were building, etc. People are miserable and enjoy the pain of others and take advantage of the misfortune to let out resentments. As the saying goes: "it's easy to kick someone when they're down". And what they told us about my dad: well, we had to filter all the poison out. The bastards were jealous because my dad had left his poverty behind and they hadn't... they said that he was a poor black bastard who had gotten rich overnight, they didn't know how. That mum was a whore and that gringos like herself did nothing but spend and buy land to come and hang out and smoke marijuana, that because of them land was getting more expensive. We still learnt something despite the bullshit.

Just imagine! Well, in all that confusion, I was a young girl, walking through the town. I looked up in anguish at my mother who was pulling my arm without paying attention to anyone, enduring the rumours and the glances. I was trying to dodge the puddles and avoid getting my dress dirty while mum, without caring, splashed into the mud in her boots. Sometimes I looked at them, in their excitement, and I wanted to crush them as if they were cockroaches. The gossips who spewed their poison! I wished I could tear off their heads with my teeth. The police told us that they had not been informed about any other shipwreck

– aside from the one that happened in the afternoon that day we arrived, two days beforehand. Around twenty had drowned, not counting chickens and pigs. They called the Navy and completely dismissed the gossip of another shipwreck. They were not going to go looking for anyone. Jesus, it was Sunday! Followed by a bank-holiday Monday! They told us to return on Tuesday, as they were prevented from doing anything until then. There was nothing they could do. You know how things are around here.

It was a season of terrible storms. Even worse were the gales that weakened the houses and caused the bananas to rain down on us, as the banana trees flew through the air. It was possible that my dad had been shipwrecked. The only thing we were sure of was that my dad should have been at the bus terminal that Friday, but he wasn't. When we asked about him, they told us that in the middle of a false calm, there'd been a big storm. After a while, that a mad shipwreck of a big ferry had been reported, when the sky fell in on top of us yet again. And so we spent two days, almost imprisoned in the hotel waiting for him to come back, nervously chewing our fingernails that something had happened to him. The rain didn't stop pouring for two whole days! We were nervous but confident that my father was going to arrive for us, barely; by Saturday night, the water had died down somewhat. That was our hope, until that brat appeared with the bad news. And since the Police and the Navy were useless as always, my mother said that there was nothing else to do but to go to the dock and get someone to take us on the route out to the Bay to look for my dad. I had to go look for them, as he clearly wasn't coming or others were going to look for him for us. We took town down towards the Waffe. My mum walked confidently in her idea of going to look for her man, but I was afraid of the treacherous-looking sky that looked neither clear nor rainy. Rather, it was a suspicious shade of grey.

On the dock the women washed and sold fish next to the black water of the port and the swampy-looking dirt roads. The boatmen were knocking back rum in a bar across the street from

ON THE DOCK THE WOMEN WASHED AND SOLD FISH NEXT TO THE BLACK WATER OF THE PORT AND THE SWAMPY-LOOKING DIRT ROADS.

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the river, some were playing dominoes outside, while others appeared to watch everything. Mum stopped at the front of the shop, interrupted everyone with a greeting and offered a wad of dollars to anyone who'd take us to where we wanted to go. The glances tore through her muddy, confused feet, climbing up her trouser-covered legs and rested for a few seconds on her wide, unconcealable hips. The glances then curled around her waist and ambled up her abdomen to her tits, like ripe fruits crowning a stack of small but firm plums, that gave form to the button-down shirt, that passed through her heron, or garnet or any other kind of hunting bird-like neck; finally arriving at her blue eyes that stood out among the blond hair and the sun-burnt skin. It's pointless to repeat what they said, I'm sure you can imagine well enough. Mum was hot, and I'm not just saying that! In spite of their mocking, morbid laughter, she repeated the offer. A common voice answered:

"Fucking hell! Blondie, you'll have to wait for San Juan pull his finger in, because I'm not moving my arse. Can't you see the sea is mental? Very choppy. And with these massive downpours and

the storm! Massive bloody trunks have fallen off the banks, whole bloody trees! They've come down the Atrato. Let me tell you something for free! Do you want us to kill ourselves?"

But a voice with a different accent asked us:

"And where are you going, Blondie?"

"To Aguacate Bay."

"Aguacata bey" He put on a childish tone, exaggerating my mother's speech. He shit himself laughing and all the other men imitated him. My mother had been fluent in Spanish for years, but she'd not lost her gringo accent and she liked what *Aguacate Bay* sounded like. My mother seldom spoke much, but she was not shy; rather she was discreet and intelligent. She always said that silence gives an advantage. I didn't learn much from that, but hey. Afraid, I grabbed her hand to say we should leave. But my mum looked at me in a rage and made me stay still. But need's a bitch and we needed transportation.

When the laughter stopped, the guy stepped out from among the black faces and for the first time he threw us a defiant look showing his mysterious, intriguing, green eyes. He had a gold tooth and blew a puff on the cigarette toward us.

"To Aguacate Bay? So you're Black Juan's woman? I've heard about you Blondie, but I hadn't had the pleasure. And this is your kid? Ha! She must be the milkman's, she doesn't take after Juan at all"

He shit himself laughing again and everyone else joined in. Everyone's a mate when they take the piss.

"You can offer all the money in the world, but no one will take you. It's worth more than their life. If anything, the devil will take you", said an old man, knocking back a swig of rum."

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"Well, I'm the very devil from Aguadas, Caldas, and I'll take you. Also, I have some pending business with Juan."

"Paisa's gone crazy."

"No, Paisa is sane. Now he thinks he's a boatman. As if he worked at this..."

"Do I or do I not have a motorboat? And it's the best one here. There is no storm it can't handle with those motors. Neither could the Navy catch me! I'll take them, to show you all how tough I am... and come here now! I'll take this as I see it's weighing you down. I could even buy a soft drink with this!" He snatched the wad from my mum and stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

"What a giver! Look at him, fucking Mother Teresa of Calcutta... What bullshit! Watch out for him and his favours. It's all show, he's into some strange shit... he thinks he's such a boss", we were warned by a dodgy-looking black man who was leaning against the entrance of the premises.

"Then why don't you take them? Ah! True, 'cause you're such a poor bastard. You must be involved in this strange shit! After all, you do have a touch of the guerrilla about you... We can settle up when I get back. That'll work for you? Let's go," Paisa replied and started walking towards the dock. We followed him out under the gaze of the black man, who was murmuring God knows what to himself and smoking his fag in a gloomy mood.

"What is your name"? My mum asked.

"Everyone here calls me Paisa. That'll do for now.

Paisa began to walk with long steps towards the most beautiful motorboat I had ever seen in my life. It was completely blue, deep blue. the draught was blue, as was a small roof that was in the centre. A blue that stood out against the grey about us that was darkening.

1. Translator's note: Paisas are traditionally considered to come from Medellin and the Antioquia region in Colombia.

"Listen, Blondie, and what would you have done if you couldn't get anyone to take you?"

"Swim."

"Really? And leave the girl alone? I wouldn't leave a ripe, little fruit like that her all alone, they'd steal her away, and if they could steal her... they'd eat her all up!

I don't know if I blushed, but my face felt hot. I couldn't hold his gaze, I couldn't return it. He noticed, smiled mischievously and climbed into the boat. He took out a silver flask from his trouser pocket and took a drink, stifling laughter. The flask was reflected in the black waters of the Waffe, where I stared out to hide my eyes.

On that day, next to those waters, my mum and I were the only colour of the day. There we were quite a contrast in that grey tropical picture. I wore a little yellow dress and white shoes that I loved. Our green travel bags were beside us and looked like floating, rotten fruit. Despite the recent downpours, that constant, ever-present, suffocating heat of Turbo made my mother red. The pier was pungent with a dying smell that could be felt on your tongue – to the buzzards' great pleasure. The boat had two engines and was operated by a handlebar and power lever, not like my dad's and the other fishermen's boats which had to be operated by sitting beside the outboard motor. The guy kept up his commentary while he got the motorboat ready. After untying the ropes, he started the motors up. He filled them with petrol and, without taking the cigarette out of his mouth, put the propellers in the water and ripped them off.

"Get on board, make yourselves at home" Paisa said as he held out his hand, which Mum rejected.

Faced with the rejection of his gesture, Paisa took out a comb, took his hat off and ran it through his hair, combing his moustache afterwards. He was always combing his grey moustache, he was always planning something.

We sat in the centre, under its blue roof. Mum didn't let go of her suitcase.

"Blondie, put those suitcases forward, you have to distribute the weight."

She didn't respond. I put my suitcase on, obeying Paisa's order, but my mum kept hugging her suitcase while she held on to the rail with one hand and grabbed me with the other. She said nothing else to Paisa. Around the motorboat there was a crowd, murmuring like flies surrounding carrion. Children whose bellies were inflated by the parasites and the whores that barely escaped a dream-like state were all there to find out what was going on.

"The driver's fuel arrived," said one, approaching with a carafe of brandy that the Paisa had sent for. "Take care you don't kill yourself, brother. Even if you do, I wouldn't have to pay you any more interest!"

"Get away to mass, you idiot! Only the good die young! You'd better move your arse! I won't be long and I need my money!"

They laughed, drank a drink and then the Paisa started the motorboat.

We left slowly through the black waters of the port and leaving the malicious tongues behind us as the motorboat advanced through the drains of Turbo, a rotting, cesspit-like, boiling soup whose smell filled our noses and never left us. A heavy smell, if odours can have weight, which knocks the unsuspecting right out. It is the smell of people, rather than the fish, which makes it unbearable. Next to the wooden huts mounted over the mangroves, children swam in the oily water and women washed their clothes in the same waters right by where their own houses pushed their own shit in. Their shit... the world heritage of the miserable. Another little shot of rum? Hey, and the years go by and the shacks multiply.

The Paisa whistled the melodies that came over the radio. A mixture of *porro*, *vallenato* and other traditional dance music, pure Gildardo Montoya if I'm not wrong! I have to admit that he had a certain style,

**I DON'T KNOW IF I
BLUSHED, BUT MY FACE
FELT HOT. I COULDN'T
HOLD HIS GAZE, I
COULDN'T RETURN IT.**

**HE NOTICED, SMILED
MISCHIEVOUSLY
AND CLIMBED INTO
THE BOAT.**

truth be told. He was white, even if pretty sunburnt. I looked at Paisa from time to time and I saw him hum to himself and look around at the two of us. He was potbellied, but there was nothing that mum wouldn't have liked. But that didn't bother me at all. In fact, I liked Paisa... he was the first man I liked. Don't look at me like that! I was almost a girl but I've always grown up quickly. I'd have only been about thirteen at the time, I tell you! I didn't like kids my own age. Paisa was the first man whose gaze I actually enjoyed. It's just a vague memory of the first time I enjoyed desire's wild ride, the emptiness in my stomach combined with shame and fear... Yes, fear, desire is violent and intimidating, isn't it? I can only give you an impression that I never really lost, because in any case the guy was the very devil, and the devil tempts, so it's not really my fault. Finally, mum realized he was looking at me.

"Don't look at her much," she said.

"Don't worry, if you want to I won't look at anyone else in life," he answered, "but that girl has such blue eyes, very pretty. Why, I do

believe she's yours! I'm still not too sure about her being Juancho's!" I blushed and my mum made me sit upright.

"Silly," she whispered without Paisa listening, entertained as she was with music and engines.

You know, they both are and they're not my mum's eyes. They are similar, of course, and not by chance. She adopted me when I was a child, because she saw herself in my eyes. My 'real' parents had more children so they gave me to the gringa to get rid of a burden! All very irregular, but it doesn't matter too much – I had my mum's eyes and my dad's melanin. I could have been theirs! And it was because of me that she was here, because she'd come to have that child that she couldn't have in the North! She never found what she was looking for, as, in the end, it turned out that the problem wasn't the man: she was sterile. But she found the right black man; her knees got weak for that fisherman with a broad smile.

That was in Sapzurro. She was going up from the south with a couple of friends and they sat down to knock back rum and listen to vallenato. Pour some more, if you please. A black man got up from a table and asked her for a dance. He spoke close to her ear and looked at her with desire as he grabbed her by the hips. She did not understand him much, but she smiled, she let herself be courted. Ah, his firm hands on her waist felt good! The song finished and they both sat down. Then another vallenato rang and yes, I know what that one was! Matilde Lina, the song that makes bedsheets smile; and then another dark suitor asked her for a dance. He too squeezed her tightly at the waist, holding her close to him, as he should, while dancing on that dirt floor to Leandro Díaz. But imagine her surprise when he spoke to her in English. My dad had worked on commercial boats as a youth and had learnt to get by and do business in that language. And love is vital, fundamental business. But it didn't end there. Raging, the other man got up to fight. Then, they both sat down at a table to play dominos – the woman was going to be the prize! All because they were mates so there was no need to fight. You just had to let luck decide, lady luck! And dad won the game. That

should have settled the matter. My mum had no idea what that game was about, and neither did she care. Simply, luck worked in favour of them both, because how do you chose between two black men who can swing their bodies to the music and when both of them know how to move their feet? If he can swing and knows how to use his tongue... that's it, as the old woman said. You would have liked her. My dad sat at the table with her and the others gringos to knock back rum. When they decided to leave, he went out with them to accompany them. The other, who had been burnt, came after them looking for trouble. Mum told me that he had sat down at a table to drink alone after losing in dominoes and he had watched them dancing together with his red eyes full of rage and drunkenness. He called out to my dad when they were already in the street and without a word he was on top of him. But it would have been better if his mother had never given birth to him! The two gringos tried to separate them, but they couldn't do anything... you know, they got pretty punched up for their troubles. After a few minutes of beating him my dad stopped and let him get up, telling him to leave. And it took longer for the guy to get his machete out than for my dad to cut his hand with his blade. My mum had found the strongest male, one who was willing to kill for her. That was what impressed her, not the blood.

"My friend Blanco Herrera was paid his salary and, without thinking twice, he went out to waste it," Paisa sang. He had a decent voice, you have to admit, despite his smoking. "You have to have a woman to leave her money for groceries before anything else. You can't be that irresponsible. I'm looking for someone to leave my money with before I go to party. You heard me Blondie, sounds good?"

My mum acted like she didn't understand and looked towards the shore. We had to go through the Navy dock.

"How do you know Juan?" my mum asked, dodging the comment. Paisa laughed again. Before answering, he raised the bottle of *aguardiente* and offered her a drink. She took it.

"Yeah, we were mates when we were young. We both went to the school here in Turbo."

He paused for another drink. He lit another cigarette and offered *aguardiente* again to my mother. She drank it. I stretched out my hand as if it were included in the round. But my mum looked at me with a condescending laugh and passed me by. "This is not for kids," he told me in English. So, she said and so I say, because I talk in the language I want to. Pour some more. While they passed the bottle back and forth, I noticed that the water was no longer the black colour of the port of Turbo and its surroundings, but rather something that looked more like the sea. Well, to that mixture of sea and river that you see on the Antioquia side of the Gulf. The Atrato painted the sea. It filled it with the same earth that it had ripped from the shores during its passage through the Chocó, filled with the waste of companies and people.

The wind felt stronger and stronger and as we moved away from the shore, we began to see what was waiting for us. As I feared, the clouds went from grey to black. There was no way to clear out the day. My hair hit me in the face and both Paisa and my mum took off their hats. My mum tied her hair into a ponytail and the Paisa showed his slicked, perfectly combed black hair. He combed his mustache again, while he put the bottle top back on and looked at us. Then he kept talking, or, better, shouting, without anyone asking anything. He could talk the hind leg off a donkey!

"What happened is I left Turbo when I was still a lad. I went to look for my luck and I found it. I came back about a year ago for my dad's funeral and I stayed to make some cash. Soon, all those businesses by the Waffe will be mine and my partners. But hey, I've heard a lot about you and Juan since I came back and we had not had the pleasure of meeting you, Blondie. Tell me, where were you two? Travelling? But of course! For pleasure or for business? What a bad thing this whole leaving Juancho working all by himself over at the Bay. They've told me that you're building cabins for tourists! What a waste of money!

My mum dodged the conversation showing me some seagulls flying towards the shore, next to the motorboat. They were looking for shelter from the rain just like my mum wanted respite from questions about the trip. She grabbed the bottle, which was already only half-full, without Paisa offering, and took a long drink closing her eyes.

"What do you care?"

"Don't be rude, come over and tell us! Secrets are heavy and may capsize the motorboat."

"I was looking for a job in Medellin and making contacts."

"I don't believe you..."

"If you don't believe me, that's your problem."

"Good woman, don't wrinkle that pretty face! Let's just say I believe you," he said and took the last drag on the cigarette that was damp from the sea spray. It began to drizzle.

Of course, mum was mocking him! After falling in love with my dad, she had sold everything she had in the United States and had collected her money. With that they bought the land and built the house in the Bay, they bought a boat for my dad, and they invested in different things. From those profits, together with my dad's many jobs as a fisherman, hunter, building palm-roofs and plastering walls with shells that we collected together along the beach, working as guide for illegal immigrants in the Darién jungle, not to mention those which I have vague memories of others of, we got by and had begun to build those cabins for tourists which were causing so much envy. But money was scarce and we needed money to continue building those cabins, so mum and I went North to look for money. And we got it, what it took to pay what we owed and to finish those cabins. And all that money was there, in cash, in that green suitcase that my mum clutched.

Paisa had accelerated. Turbo was beginning to get lost from our eyes, with its ranches, its bustle and its mangroves. The thunder and lightning were still distant, but we still couldn't speak. But there was something that was feeding Paisa's curiosity and that, you'll see,

**“BUT COME HERE!
WHERE DID JUANCHO
GET THE MONEY
TO BUILD WHAT
YOU’RE BUILDING?”**

IS IT TRUE THAT...?

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had to do with his kindness, because after a long silence he tore his throat out screaming to satisfy his curiosity:

“But come here! Where did Juancho get the money to build what you’re building? Is it true that...?”

I’m sure he didn’t finish the question. He cursed, grabbed the bottle of *aguardiente* hard and I saw a huge tree trunk that came at us from front raised up on the top of a wave. Paisa had to make a violent manoeuvre to avoid it. That bloody trunk almost flipped the motorboat and threw my mother and me to the ground between the suitcases.

“We almost didn’t make it,” the captain yelled.

What didn’t make it was the radio that had been accompanying us. The first casualty of the trip. Only the pure, raw sounds of the storm remained, we couldn’t hear the normal sounds used by coastal dwellers to translate the sea. Paisa swallowed his questions and concentrated on surviving.

On a good day, the trip between Turbo and the Bay was horrible because it was always navigated against the direction of the tide and the sea’s pounding, suffered by the motorboat, was keenly felt in the flesh. But this was an angry and turbulent sea, and we were in a small speedboat and with lots of rubbish to dodge. The man sure knew how to navigate, it must be said. After all, we didn’t kill ourselves. He was one of those who say that they could drive better when they are shitfaced, and God bless Booze! As if that was the saint who he prayed to. Each time he could, he clung to the bottle, releasing the power lever and grabbing the liquor he held between his legs. Until in a fall of a wave it slipped from his hand and broke on the floor “Fucking hell! Fucking hell! Better to spill blood, and not booze!” He cursed, and he had to make do with what he already had in his veins, which, luckily for him, was almost all of it. By some, small miracle we did not cut ourselves with all the pieces strewn about the floor.

The situation became a matter of individual survival and my mother stopped hugging me to hold onto the seat so as to not fall into the water. If she held me, she would fall, and would I be able to hold on for us both? We would both fall in! No love was worth it. We clung to the seat with our nails and resisted the blows of the motorboat as best we could. Sometimes I even lost my breath and I had to suck in the sea, and my own tears and snot. I was left purple and bruised to the tiniest nail on my little toe. The wind was so strong that it ended up tearing off the roof. There I think we all realised that we had screwed up, that we had underestimated the storm. Paisa, with a worried face, threw the boat in front against waves that looked like walls. We rode on the crest of the wave and then boom! And we would fall on the next wave. One caught us half on one side, and we almost went into the water. We managed to hold on but the motorboat fell sideways and goodbye suitcases!

“We have to go back for the suitcases!” My mum cried in anguish.

“Return? We can’t return! If you want, you go and look for them, because if we turn back now, they’ll be looking for us on the seabed. Hold on hard. Look at that bloody wave that’s almost on top of us.”

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In the middle of the storm I couldn't hear mum's moans but I saw her gestures of anguish and the pain in her eyes. We could lament as much as we wanted for the suitcases which contained our future, for my dad and because we were going to die. The force of our hitting the deck made us groan and Paisa curse. He prayed the whole rosary, as they say.

"I'm a worse bastard than you are! You won't win!" He shouted at times as if he had the enemy in front of him.

Under favourable conditions the trip would have lasted two hours. It would have been at least two hours when we noticed that Paisa started to turn towards the beach.

"What are you doing?" My mum shouted.

"What do you mean what am I doing? Are you fucking stupid? I said I was going to take you but look!" And boom! Another blow as we fell from yet another wave. "This is impossible. The sea is getting worse and it'll end up killing us. There is nothing else to do than get closer to that village. When the storm is over, I'll take you as promised to the Bay. Juan could even be over there."

"Are you crazy or drunk? The breaking waves are killing us!"

"And we won't be killed going to the Bay? We're screwed, Blondie! If there is nobody there and we capsize... bye! At least, there someone might be able to pull you out alive."

My mum stopped in fury. She had stopped thinking and was about to go over to Paisa, but he took out a revolver from his pants, pointed it at her face and ordered her to sit down. My mum looked at me, red with rage, and obeyed. Despite the storm, I caught a glimpse of a couple of lights that were from the village. Paisa fired two shots in the air, kept the revolver and told us to hold on hard. He accelerated. The blow against the sea gave us no time to scream. The last thing I remember is seeing my mum grabbing me and swimming towards the beach and the bestial sound of the sea.

**IN THE MIDDLE OF THE
STORM I COULDN'T HEAR
MUM'S MOANS BUT I
SAW HER GESTURES OF
ANGUISH AND THE
PAIN IN HER EYES.**

I was awakened by the noise of a flock of parakeets. I was lying in a hammock outside a ranch. My mum was rubbing my head and drying her own tears. She was crying inconsolably. The storm had finally stopped.

The shots in the air had worked. The people of the village saw that we were struggling and, when we turned around, the bravest ones threw themselves into the sea and helped us to reach the shore. Paisa almost drowned and so did I. My mum had been a competition swimmer and managed to keep us alive until the men arrived with some floats. At least that's what she told me.

Upon reaching the beach and bringing me in, a fight broke out between them. She knew that Paisa was right, that it would have been the same or worse if we had continued towards the Bay. But finding my dad seemed to be more urgent than life itself and that was why she could almost kill him. She told him that he was a thief, that because of him she had lost everything in the sea and that he must return the money she had paid him. Paisa insulted her and would have beaten her, if those who had saved them from the water hadn't grabbed him. Mum was taken in by a woman who quickly understood the situation. He was dragged off towards the bar, while

Black Claudia took mum over to her shack. Because “no paisa was going to hit a woman in front of her,” as she said later.

The shack was next to the cabin that served as the bar, shop, and meeting point of the village. They hadn’t really separated the two of them very far. From the shack you could hear the noise of the petrol generator that fed the only radio and pair of bulbs in the village.

Mum took me to Claudia’s house, made sure I was fine, only passed out, and went to bed with me in a hammock. Claudia looked after her with all her children, who swarmed around the house and around her. From there mum saw Paisa, who had bought more *aguardiente* and bought all the men a drink, while watching the motorboat turned on the beach against which the waves broke.

Doña Claudia sat next to the hammock and asked my mother how they had even considered going out in a boat in that weather. Mum told her everything and explained that, aside from her concern for my father, when they left Turbo it seemed that there was a chance that the sky would clear up instead of closing in. *Doña* Claudia had been silent. She’d been right. Mum was the blonde woman that she thought she was. She went to the kitchen and brought my mum a tea made from Jamaica flower with marijuana. She told her that this was the perfect remedy for all the pain and that she had to tell her something.

On Saturday night, when the rain had barely begun to subside, one of Claudia’s children had found a fishing rod on the beach. The entire Gulf of Urabá knew dad’s fishing rod. Early on Sunday morning it was already a rumour in the whole village that Juan Moreno Mosquera, better known as Juancho or Black Juan, had drowned. And that rumour set off on a small boat towards Turbo as soon as the storm cleared. But the rumour had become complicated later that morning, because, as the storm died down, the men on the farthest beaches found Black Juan’s boat stranded over there. And so, everyone related the boat and the fishing rod with a body found near the village, who could have been one of the people drowned when the big motorboat sank, but now everyone was convinced was my dad. The body had been found far from the boat, but everyone assumed that whoever it was had held on to something to

try to survive and that the tide had dragged him along. Death had been caused by the head been bashed against a stone, those who found the body said, and that fitted in with the battered boat. That body was one of three that had been recovered by the people of the village and they were covered in the kiosk on the other side of the bar, Claudia told her, and she took the fishing rod out of her room.

What do you think of her way of telling mum that her man was dead? She ran out in the rain, which still was ongoing, ran through the bar to the kiosk where the bodies were. She removed the plastic sheet that covered them. The bodies were so swollen she didn’t know which one to cry over. They were all so bloated, like water-inflated meat balloons, it was difficult to recognise any features. She was going to start undressing the bodies to look for the signs of my dad, the scars on his chest, on his back, his moles... but Paisa, who followed her with the other men when he saw her running, stopped her. All agreed that the bodies should not be moved. It was necessary to wait for the priest from Acandí to arrive and for them to be taken for identification. My mum leaned on Paisa, the only person she knew there, and tried to restrain herself. It took eight men to take her back to Claudia, and, no, I’m not exaggerating.

When I woke up, it was already night, my mum was lying on me. She was stroking my head in silence. She was clearly in shock. I turned to the black woman and asked her why she was crying.

“Oh, my girl. Is that your dad is already with God,” he replied.

When *Doña* Claudia said that my eyes filled with water and the silence was broken. We cried together. Even Dona Claudia helped us to mourn him. Some of Claudia’s girls helped us too. My mum would take her head and pull her hair as if she was going to tear it away. Sometimes she tore at the wooden floorboards with her fingernails, as if she wanted to rip them off, while, in my sadness it sounded to me like the dogs of the village were howling, the cats meowing; the frogs, the crickets, the cicadas – they were accompanying us in our pain.

Together, mum and I fell into the hammock while *Doña* Claudia picked up a rosary and prayed with her group of children. After she finished she told us to go inside, that her children could sleep in the hammocks that were outside and in the living room, she would give us her bed. The men were drinking. Ah, give me a shot of rum! And a door wouldn't hurt as an obstacle for bad thoughts anyway. Mum gave herself over to Claudia's care. I hugged her body like the little girl I felt. I lent in on her and she carried me to the bed. There we lay down and fell asleep under a clear night sky, full of stars. It isn't easy to sleep when you feel such grief, but the body can't deal with such blows. I fell asleep quickly, another gift of childhood, but between dreams I heard blows and moans that called for my dad.

I woke up hours later because a bloody plague of mosquitoes was eating me alive and I couldn't feel my mum beside me. I left the shack and saw mum and Paisa sitting outside on the beach. They drank *aguardiente* and smoked Piel Roja cigarettes.

My curiosity won out over my sadness. How easy it is for kids to forget, don't you think? But how difficult it is to actually forget it. I crawled in as close as I could. I hid behind a palm tree and listened to what they were talking about. You're such a liar! Of course, I didn't hear everything, but, after all these years, mum wouldn't tell me? Don't get pissed off. There was Paisa comforting my mum. Convincing her that he wanted to help her. That she shouldn't worry about the motorboat, and that with what she'd paid him already he could buy a boat from one of those black bastards. He'd even had cash to spare!

"See," he pointed it out to her, "it's that one over there. Close to where my one was shipwrecked. Well anchored at the stern and tied with ropes to that pair of almond trees. A single engine and no cabin, but something is better than nothing.

Truth be told, it was an ugly boat. Orange on top and a dirty white on the bottom. He kept saying that he didn't even need the money, with all the business he was doing, he had cash to share. That he only offered to take us out of charity, because his blessed mother,

may she rest in peace, had told him to always help the needy. He wouldn't even kill a fly! Besides, he was a man, an adventurer... how could he leave two women wandering and suffering all alone in the world? It was something he couldn't carry on his conscience. He wanted to make sure that we knew that our well-being was his only interest. That he knew we were left with nothing. We had the land but we didn't know how to exploit it. Not to be discouraging and all, but, cabins for tourism? The business was in exploiting the wood!

"There's money in these jungles! Take a look yourself!" They almost busted me! "It is dark even if the moon was full, and why? Well, what good was all that wood being wasted? That was where the money is! It was just a matter getting it out. What happens is that these blacks are dumb and they only know how to be poor and have children. The place was full of blacks and Indians, that was why there was so much misery. Fishing? Being a fisherman, what kind of a life was that? Slaving away to get something to eat? Why, just to live? What kind of a life was that? Let them die like this. Just give him a couple of years and he'd make money off those hills. He'd sell those sticks and even look for gold and everything else that had to be in the ground. That's progress! You're smart, Blondie, you come from up North, you know how countries make progress. Honour your race!"

Mum was silent. Paisa was excited by explaining his ideas. *That* was his act of charity. He spoke waving his hands and gesturing wildly. He blew smoke upwards, towards the sky, he'd take a drink and keep talking. In the end he made the proposal that most interested him.

"I'm buying up all the land along the coast. I'll buy those Bay lands from you. We can go tomorrow down to Turbo to do the paper work. We'll get the deal done, and the day after tomorrow you'll have the money in your hot little hands and you can go wherever you want with your little daughter. Do it for her. Those lands are perfect for building a port to ship the wood out. And, from what I've seen, there's

a hell of lot of it there to be cut down. I know that this will have good profits, so I can offer you a good price. What do you think?"

"So, there won't be any trees left?"

"Then we sell the land to someone else to plant pine trees."

"But there'll be nothing left of what was there."

"What do you mean by nothing? The money will be left."

The Paisa looked at her convinced that she was going to accept. I looked her up and down. In that moment he ran his hand over her shoulder and tried to kiss her. My mum dodged it and stood up. The Paisa slipped a bit of tongue to the beach. Then he lay on his back and washed his mouth with *aguardiente*. He was very pissed.

"I'll think about it. See you tomorrow," my mum said as she made her way to where I was.

"Playing it cool!" Paisa shouted. "OK then. Let's talk tomorrow, Gorgeous..."

And he kept muttering things my mum saw me behind the palm tree and asked me, "What are you doing here? You!... Don't laugh, you little arsehole!"

And she looked at me angrily, but, I don't know, maybe she remembered something, so she bent down, kissed my forehead, took my hand and told me to go to sleep. From the door I saw Paisa lying on the ground. He went from singing to screaming and shouting "*a mí deme un aguardiente, un aguardiente de caña...*" He knocked back another drink and fell asleep, totally shitfaced.

I hadn't slept by the sea for a long while. I woke up every so often, woken up by the roar of that beast fighting against the beach. Then, over the years, it'd take me a while to get used to sleeping with that noise. But you can get used to everything, even the sea can become beautiful.

We get up early in the morning. The pain was muffled by breakfast. *Patacón* with *hogao*, cheese and *aguapanela*. Doña Claudia fed all her children, and us as if we were her own. We never asked her if she had a

husband, or who the children's father, or fathers, were. The question wasn't needed. My mum understood that and I understood it later. Claudia was a big, powerful black woman. She filled the dresses where they should be filled and walked so upright, like she had a stick in her back. That proud walk of the black woman. Those massive swaying hips! With her hair hidden under a scarf and white teeth visible in her broad smile. And always with her lipstick and makeup on her eyes, a vain woman. Yes, yes, like me, piss me off and you'll see. Now I think that her wooden shack had been sheltering under the same roof made of palms two women who were a strong contradiction. Claudia, the fertile earth, who lived in a shack by the bar, the one who was both protected by men and who protected them from themselves with her flesh. Who was complacent to their desire. And my mother, barren ground, ice that only burned with one fire and that had given everything to one man. That made my dad's death so serious, because, if I'm not wrong, there was nothing else contained in those ashes.

The morning was calm and the sky clear, so we bathed ourselves in the sea, this time voluntarily. We used the clothes that Claudia had lent us the night before; ours were still drying from the storm. The sea had again that transparent emerald colour that makes all this so beautiful. The sun was not yet out, covered by the jungles of Chocó, and we bathed in a dim light, without the fishermen's gaze. They had not yet returned. Only Paisa's overturned boat was on the beach, and his new boat was rocking in the waves. Paisa was nowhere to be seen and the tide had already erased his drunken shadow from the sand. My mum avoided looking over to the side where the bodies were.

Twenty-odd houses, if even that much, were in the village at that time. All were built from bamboo and other wooden planks, with palm leaves for the roof. The central mansion, the bar, shone out as the sun ascended, its metal tiles lit up. The kiosk was beside it, its circular roof covering the black plastic that covered the bodies. My mum had not let me go to see which one was my dad's body. We bathed trying to rejoice, but we cried in the sea. The crabs ventured out. Flies flew over the plastic and the vultures perched on the roof of the bar. The earth was ready to swallow them all.

When the sun had already risen above the mountain line, my mother and I went to rinse off the sea salt. We bathed in rainwater that Claudia collected in a tank, without taking off our borrowed clothes, while the grackles looked down on us from the sky and the iguanas from the trees, not to mention the odd black man from wherever he could. Already dressed in our half-dry clothes, Paisa appeared, bathed and quaffed and combing his hair. I've no idea where he had slept, but he had something in his hands.

"Yes, good morning," *Doña* Claudia responded. We just look at him. Again, we had cried a little, and constantly looked towards the kiosk.

"What did you think of what I told you last night? I may have been lightly sozzled, nothing else, but everything I proposed was serious. And there's something else I thought about this morning, but I'm telling you right now." Lightly sozzled! What bullshit! A pissed-up bouncer is what he was. Go on, bring me another shot!

Mum answered yes. That good. That'd she'd sell up. The papers were in a trunk in the house in the Bay. That she had the key in her pocket. It was one of the few things she'd not lost with suitcases. But they could not go directly to Turbo after that, they would have to wait for the Navy to arrive to accompany the transfer of the body and bury it. That she was not going to leave Juan's body abandoned.

Paisa said that surely the Navy was already on its way. They should have been informed. As it appeared that the bad weather had finally passed, surely navigation in the Gulf would have been normalised. We should go get the papers right away.

My mum accepted. Paisa got into the water and got into his new boat. He was seen cursing at the motor. Finally, he started and signalled over to us. We said goodbye to Black Claudia and we watched the body we were leaving behind with anguish. He brought the motorboat as close to the beach as was possible and we boarded. He backed up, put the tip of the motorboat towards the horizon and off we set.

**I HADN'T SLEPT BY
THE SEA FOR A LONG
WHILE. I WOKE UP
EVERY SO OFTEN,
WOKEN UP BY THE
ROAR OF THAT BEAST
FIGHTING AGAINST
THE BEACH.**

My mum was compulsively stroking my hair. It was not out of love, because I suffered when she pulled at the knots. She got the notion of combing my very curly hair to calm her stress! I looked, absorbed, at the horizon. I tried to free myself, but then I looked into her lost eyes and I put up with it. Paisa stared at us, serious, while fixing up his hair. After a few minutes Paisa let his tongue loose:

"Blondie, I'm even sorry to say this to you in front of the girl. But if things go well, it won't matter. What I was thinking this morning is that you don't have to go, the deal doesn't have to be exactly like we said. Or rather, we can add something even more important to our deal. What I want to say is that we could be partners, right? I can support you while you recover, you

could live with me in Turbo. My house is big. Everything I have is big! It may seem a bit early, but, as the saying goes 'life must go on,' and you know that I am a smart and reliable man. Don't overthink it! Also..."

Paiza interrupted himself when he saw that my mother wasn't paying attention as she was looking at a motorboat on its way to the village. Protecting her eyes from the glare and she observed the course of the approaching motorboat. I raised my hands over my eyes like my mum. As, unlike my mum who had lost her glasses with the suitcases, I saw my dad sitting between two black men who were holding him, as if he couldn't support himself.

"My dad! My dad is in there!" I cried, full of emotion. My mum almost left me bald. I confirmed her suspicions and she started to scream with eyes full of tears of joy:

"Juan! Juan! Paiza! That's Juan! We have to go back. We're not going to the Aguacata Bay anymore."

"We're not going to Aguacata bey..." repeated Paiza, exaggerating my mum's gringo accent like the day before. He couldn't hide the fact that the miracle of my father had appeared alive, when he had given him up for dead and tried to grab both his land and his woman, was not of his liking.

My mum and I looked at each other while Paiza stopped the boat thoughtfully. I hugged my mum. He rubbed his head and gave us a rare look with those green eyes. He looked like a cornered beast about to attack. He no longer had the usual smirk or the seriousness of the indecent proposal.

"What's he doing? See, they're leaving us behind."

"Nothing, nothing, is that sometimes I get a headache here in the back. No idea why it will be. If you told me it was a hangover, I'd say quite possibly. Pay no attention! We're heading off." He hid his weird look and headed towards the beach.

When there were a few meters to go and Paiza began to slow down, mum threw herself into the water and swam to the shore. My dad had been seated in a chair in the bar and over she went to hug his feet as if she were afraid that he would leave. It was never known who was the unfortunate bastard who drowned and got confused with my dad.

When Paiza and I arrived at the beach, my father had been moved to Claudia's bed and my mother, Claudia and one of her daughters were taking care of him. From outside they looked at the men who had brought him on the motorboat. I ran between them and hugged my dad, who looked at me smiling but mute, looking like a rag doll. When he saw me and my mum next to him, he fell asleep.

The fact that the fishermen found him was sheer coincidence. My father told them that, as we'd imagined, he'd left for the Bay just after midday, when we were getting into Turbo, perhaps an hour before the motorboat that got shipwrecked left. He saw that the storm was almost certain but he thought it would be temporary and was eager to go for us. The fact is that when he saw the storm that was coming in, he tried to return but, in his desperation, he sailed very close to the beach. The waves hid the rocks that rise like small islands near the Curve of the Devil. He crashed against them and they split the boat, according to the fishermen who saw it. He hit his head in the crash. Already in the water, the waves had crashed him against those coral rocks cutting deep wounds into his right leg. He still managed to reach the beach alive. The beach on which the motorboat had run aground was a midpoint between the village and the Bay. He bandaged his leg as best he could and set off limping towards the village, thinking it was the best option. Nobody had found him until then. He was stuck in the jungle eating what he could, trying to take shelter from the storms, surviving. They found him when he was at a couple of beaches over from the village, when only one a steep hill stood in front of him, where in his condition, it would have been very easy to slip up and end up swallowed by the jungle. The fishermen argued that he had been very stupid, that he should have stay by the boat so that they could find him easier, that

**—¡JUAN!, ¡JUAN!
¡PAISA!, THAT'S JUAN!
WE HAVE TO GO BACK.
WE'RE NOT GOING
TO THE AGUACATE
BAY ANYMORE."**

that's what they' have done. But then something else guides a dying man's instinct. He was a lucky black bastard in any case.

While I was sleeping, my mother cleaned the coagulated blood from three days from his forehead and the rest of the wounds. All hands were required to take care of her Juan's body. Paiza listened from afar. He looked at the men who told the story, freely giving us their opinion and then he set eyes on me as I was sitting listening to the men. He walked like a chicken looking for a place to lay eggs. He looked inside the house where my mother could be seen next to the bed and looked, again, at the floor. He never took his hands off his mouth.

After a while the men dispersed. I was already hungry and the heat hit with all its strength. It was almost noon. Outside Claudia was poking at the wood stove and cooking a fish stew. Paiza had left for the bar and I watched my dad wake up while my mum bandaged his leg wounds.

Dad was pretty bad. But a good fish stew will raise up the dead and Claudia was a great cook. He had lunch and soon was smiling once again. We told him what had happened with tears in our eyes and he laughed at us believing that he'd died. The sea can't kill me, he said, how could she kill her own son. But mum did not tell him

everything. She didn't tell him that the money had been lost at sea, or about Paiza's proposal. She didn't want to worry him. For what? Nothing could be done about any of it.

"Why did you leave without us?" My mother finally asked.

"Because they sent for me."

"That's what they told me, but how?"

"You see Karol, really they did not send for me. A mate came down from Capurga arrived in the morning, escaping the rains. He told me that he'd seen people in the Bay, who'd given him the impression that they were stealing materials from the cabins. What was I going to do? I had to go and see who the bounders were. I don't want to curse in front of the girl."

"And then you left instead of waiting for us."

"Yes."

"And?"

"And... well, we're going to need money because those bastards stole from us. They painted bullshit on the walls. But don't worry, everything will be fine. I'll tell you later," he said, squeezing my mother's hand and closing his eyes.

The two hid something, but the mystery did not last.

After lunch, while my dad was sleeping, Paiza came over whistling. Mum went out angrily to tell him to stop the noise, that he was going to wake Juan up.

"Well, then, come over here, let's talk," he said.

My mum went out to where the palm roof gave shade. Paiza suggested going over to talk at the bar, and he looked at me. Surely, he didn't want me to hear anything. But my mum wasn't going to leave my dad alone.

"What do you need?"

Paiza got to the point.

"What did you think of what I said to you?"

"I think Juan is alive and not dead. What we talked about we talked about because Juan was dead. But he is alive. There's nothing left to think about."

"Blondie, what money will you live on? As far as I know, Juan is ruined, and if you had anything, I imagine you lost it when you lost those suitcases. It is better that you sell up. Also, what is the situation around here? What are they saying about Juan?"

"Let's see, what are they saying about me?" We could hear dad from inside the house. He came over to the door limping. They were face to face. My mum and I were in the middle.

"Juan, you'd better stay in bed," said mum trying to stop him.

"How's that brother? You haven't told your woman that you're going to have to leave as you're so tight with the guerrilla?"

"Another bastard with that bullshit. That's what the bastards who ripped us off painted on the walls. And I'm not your brother, don't be too full of yourself, Paisa."

"Mate, get away with yourself! You know, I like you! A while ago I wanted to warn you that the best thing would be for you sell up to me. You know things are heating up here and that there's big businesses for those who are getting rid of the guerrillas and their collaborators in the area. You'd be better off listening up and heading off. God forbid something happens to you or your women."

"Are you threatening me? Ha! Hey, Claudia, what'd you think of this cocky prick," he asked the woman who was watching quietly by the stove, surrounded by her children. "That's how all these Paisas are, they steal everything and then they act the victim, and they want everyone to worship them. He wants me to leave from my land? Is that why he's back? Whose bitch is he? Don't give me any bullshit!"

"What do you mean, *your* land? You fucking moron, you don't have any land. Over at the Bay, many say that you stole it, others say that you got it thanks to the good graces of the guerrillas, you're their collaborator. I know from gossip what happened to its previous

owners. But I already know that it really belongs to Blondie here. You're a scrounger. Look, let Blondie sell up. That way, you'll leave here with something after not having anything and you'll clean your name here when you have nothing. It'll be better, when it gets about that you never had anything."

My dad was silent a few eternal seconds. I couldn't even hear the sea. The tension felt like it could explode at any moment, at the slightest movement, at the softest sound. Several men had begun to gather and everyone was waiting. My mum took me in her arms. My dad spoke and the world passed again.

"I'm a fucking member of the guerrilla? What proof do you have?... Bullshit!"

"Man, it may be bullshit, then again, it may not be. But you know how things here work. It doesn't matter what I believe, it doesn't matter what you are. The only thing that matters is what people believe. That's is the truth. Rumours kill here. Anyway, Juan, it's better that you sell up to me as a friend, before you have no choice."

"Buying cheap land from people who leave scared. Better yet, scare people to leave and sell up cheaply. The devil disguised as a saint. And does he only buy - or does he shoot too? Does he do his own dirty work? Or doesn't he? My woman has more balls than you, you faggot!" Lame as he was, dad walked over to Paisa.

"Ah, you're a little fighting cock. But I didn't come here to fight with anyone." He put his hand on his waist and took out the revolver, which reflected the brightness of the sun.

Doña Claudia rebuked the men, who were watching in eager anticipation. "Are you going to let that coward shoot a dying man?" The men looked at Claudia and then at Paisa as if they were going to take him down. With cat-like eyes, Paisa looked at the men with whom he had been drinking hours ago and realised that he was at a disadvantage. Two men were about to pounce on him, but Paisa said to them:

“HOW’S THAT BROTHER? YOU HAVEN’T TOLD YOUR WOMAN THAT YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE TO LEAVE AS YOU’RE SO TIGHT WITH THE GUERRILLA?”

“I’d prefer not to fight, but if I have to, I have to. Calm down, I was just going to let him go, not that I had to.” He threw the revolver on the beach. Claudia sent one of her sons to pick it up.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with,” my dad said expectantly.

“Let’s see, you’re going to die like an animal, because you took things personally. This was just a matter of business. But come on then.”

My mum released me and grabbed my dad. She told him that in his condition, he wasn’t going to beat anyone. My dad got angry, he pushed her aside and told Claudia to hold her and keep her out of things, that he had to assert himself. Claudia held her. She started yelling at the men not to let them fight. But it was dumb. No one was going to get involved as long as they killed each other with their bare fists, just like they should. I served double shots of drink as my hair stood on end with the nerves.

When my dad gave the first blow I was paralysed and I saw my mum slipp from Claudias grasp and ran to the side of the bar. Claudia let her go, thinking that she was hiding from a tragedy. I moved with the people following the fight. Paisa dodged and started dancing around my dad showing off his gold tooth. He laughed and said “ooleeeee” every time he dodged a blow. But my dad was cornering him against the sea, until he ran out of space he could run. The crowd huddled, shouted: “give it to him, Juancho, split in the bastard’s face.” Everyone enjoyed the show. Until dad hit him and Paisa hit him back. They grabbed each other and fell to the floor. They started to thrash around. You could see that, even if he was injured, my dad had the advantage on the ground. He sat on Paisa and began to punch him in the face. The blood of the Paisa splattered onto the beach.

“You should have shot me when you could,” my dad said.

“What the...” said the Paisa and spat out his gold tooth and blood.

He took advantage of the fact that my dad was distracted and talking. With his free hand he took a dagger from his pants and buried it in my father’s right leg, the same one that was wounded, before he could do anything to him. My dad rolled on the beach and pulled the dagger out. Just when Paisa was about to pick it up, before anyone could intervene, or think of holding Paisa back for fighting dirty, mum appeared from behind and stuck a bottleneck in his stomach. My mum always avoided talking about how she killed Paisa, and that’s why I never knew for sure, but I like to think that she used the neck of the *aguardiente* bottle that had broken on Paisa’s motorboat and somehow reached the shore. Before he could do anything, my mum picked up the dagger and stuck it in his neck. Not only my dad killed for his wife.

Paisa fell on his knees to the floor and as he drowned on his own blood he struggled to make sure “bitch” was his last word. It was an ugly death. I covered and opened my eyes. Imagine seeing your mum kill someone. She was paralysed for a while watching him die. I ran to her and stuck to her, crying. She came out of the dazed state, hugged me and then we ran to where my

dad, who wallowed and screamed in pain. My yellow dress was stained with Paisa's blood.

Some of them tried to save his life, but mum had stabbed him directly in the jugular. They tied a shirt to his neck and they pressed the gash in his stomach, but nothing worked. According to my own, personal theory, *aguardiente* actually killed him. That's why rum is better.

But my dad wasn't in good nick either. The stab wound had also caused him to lose a lot of blood and he was badly off before. He cried out in pain and looked at the sky as if he were going to faint. My mum, Claudia and I surrounded him trying to stop the blood. Some men, quite excited by the situation, ran between the fallen bodies wondering what to do.

When Paisa died there was a great uproar in the village. Some were offended because mum had got involved and killed him. Others argued that he had brought it on his own treacherous self. Betrayal brings betrayal. The woman did what she had to do. Claudia, whose influence on men was evident, began to shout that Paisa deserved what he got. Juancho had only done what everyone had to do. Many had already left with the same story. You had to defend yourself. Because they weren't always going to ask for the 'favour' of asking you to sell up. The bastards were going to kill them and they all knew that. Quickly, Claudia converted dad into a martyr and Paisa into the very representative of an evil that was lurking in the shadows, in the jungles and underworlds. An evil that was going to eat the region, like it had the country.

Claudia and some men bandaged my dad's leg. He fainted from the pain. Mum and I were stunned. We saw people helping my dad without knowing what to do. They tried to make him not die, even though we'd already cried for him.

A fisherman arrived in Turbo, and when he saw the show and they explained it, he said that it was better that the mess be fixed quickly because navigation had returned to normal and he'd heard that the Navy was coming to get the bodies from the wreck. They'd be arriving in an hour and a half, according to his calculations. Claudia also convinced him that everything had

been Paisa's fault and that they had to help. Why did Claudia do so much for us? Well, they said, and I realised many years later, that my dad was one of her regular customers, perhaps her most beloved lover. That maybe one of those little boys who looked at me was a little brother of mine. But I prefer not to take those lies seriously. My mum never believed them and neither did I.

But not all the people were convinced by Claudia. Several men who surrounded the dead body of Paisa, who blood bloodied the beach, looked at us with rancour. Some argued and others simply ran out to the internal parts of the village, to the jungle, as if searching for something or someone. My dad was delirious.

"You have to go now. I don't know what will happen here, the Navy is coming and Paisa is dead. That's serious. Also, some here won't be willing to behave as long as you're here. Go now, I'll fix this mess. Rodrigo, help them.

The boatman threw my dad over his shoulder. He woke up and tried to scream, but only managed a moan. When Rodrigo had already accommodated my dad in the boat and my mum and I were going to climb in, we looked at Paisa for the last time. People had made a circle around him and were muttering. Yes, once again we heard the noise of the murmur above the waves. Between the people, I could see that his eyes were wide open. Beautiful as they were, they didn't help him to see where or by whose hand death would come. At that moment my mum seemed to realise something. She put me on the motorboat and said she was coming. She walked along the beach to where Paisa's body was. People saw her coming and they made way, opening up. They were afraid of her.

"What is she doing to the dead man? See this crazy woman desecrating the corpse. Holy God!" Said a woman, impressed.

My mum reached down and put her hand in the pocket of Paisa's shirt. There was the money we had paid for the trip.

"She's stealing from the dead man!" Said the same old woman.
"Do something!"

The men were about to stop her, but they were still again when my mum looked at them threateningly, with the money in one hand and Paisa's dagger in the other. There was no need for more violence. Claudia intervened and calmed the people. She told them that this money belonged to her, that they let her go. And my mum got on the motorboat that Rodrigo started, impressed by what he had seen.

"where are we going, ma'am?"

"I'm not sure," my mum said angrily. Far away. But we have to go through the house first to pick up some things. Take us to Avocado Bay."

"Missy, I am a cooperative man, and I want to help you, but my children have to eat... and you know, petrol is very expensive these days."

Mum took out the crumpled, wet tickets that she had taken from Paisa. Some were smeared with blood on the corners. But hey, what dollar is not smeared with blood? Blood is merely ink and it has never really mattered.

"Look, this will have to do," she answered giving him a part of the notes, and no way was she about to give him the entire bundle. "Let's go, as an acquaintance of mine used to say, life goes on!"

"Yes sir!" Replied the boatman, grabbing the money.

On the way over to Aguacate my dad regained consciousness, understood the situation and said that we had to go to La Miel. That there knew someone who could look after him quickly, without worrying that they were looking for us. We stopped at the Bay. It was very beautiful, full of palm trees, this mountain covered by trees, avocados. It is going to be a hard to sow them again, after so many years... but we have already sown the first one, and these fucking downpours have to be useful for *something*.

My mother entered and collected the property deeds, put clothes in a bag and took the first aid kit from the medicine cabinet to see what could be done for my father. I saw her move from the bay dock. She looked sadly at the fallen door and the mess they had made. They had taken the money. Fortunately, they'd not taken the deeds. She looked at the graffiti that dirtied the wall of the house: "motherfucking guerrillas." She looked at the half-finished huts and climbed back into the motorboat.

"What now?" Rodrigo asked.

"Like Juan said, we're going to La Miel."

There isn't any more rum? Give me *aguardiente*, then. There is *Antioqueño*, that's it! Give me the bottle. The Paisa did not kill my dad, he was going to kill him! What killed him were the wounds the sea gave him. The sea killed my dad. What the Paisa did was only to reopen the wounds that had just closed and worsen the infection by stabbing him. But hey, he paid for his audacity. My mum and Rodrigo did everything they could for my dad, but he did not make it to La Miel. The boat made a stop under a completely clear sky, from where the sun cracked our skin. When my father died in our arms, no one wanted to close the eyelids over those eyes that had danced in a painful gesture to escape the light, until they became still, calm, looking with a grimace of sadness. What we did afterwards is a shame that haunted my mother until her death and that will haunt me too, but we had to survive and we could not walk around with a body, much less cross a border. What did we do? What were we going to do? Rodrigo convinced her that it was the best option... My mother promised that she would return to be at his feet and my dad sank, open-eyed and watching us, into the waves. It took a while, but she did. There the tide rises, the foam is watered on the beach like a shroud, if we neglect ourselves it'll bury us. And look, the water almost, almost embraces the stick. Sooner or later it will drag it underneath.

THE MOST RIDICULOUS MAN IN THE WORLD



Author
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Paola Moreno

She's gone!

I stretch my hand under the sheets and pat around the mattress, but Camila is not there. Her side of the bed is cold. I didn't even feel her leave. She didn't say goodbye as she always does, I'm sure I would have noticed.

I get up and go to the kitchen, but she's not there either. I look for her in the rest of the apartment.

She's gone! But where has she gone to?

Nothing indicates that she has left in haste for a work event at the office (when that happens I find her pyjamas on the floor and the wardrobe doors open), or that she has gone out to play sports and will return soon: her trainers are where she always leaves them.

I embark on a second tour of the apartment. Everything looks normal, I can't see any changes. There is only one thing out of place, that I've noticed so far – her red suitcase. The one she had that day she moved in with me. It's under the coat rack at the front door. Have I forgotten anything? A trip would explain everything, and it is quite probable that, with everything that I have going on in my life, I could have forgotten it. Probably Camila will soon return to pick up the suitcase and remind me, a little irritated by my forgetfulness, that she is going away for one or two days to Cartagena, Medellín or Barranquilla, that she has such and such a meeting, that her boss needs her. Her boss, that tall, pretty woman who always calls in the afternoons. Rocío.

I go to the bathroom. I open the medicine cabinet. Today, I have to take my twelfth dose. I look in the mirror after the injection excitedly. I can see some changes, although today is one of those days when I just want everything to happen faster. Will my beard grow soon? While I study the three scruffy little hairs that I catch glimpses of on my chin, I notice the makeup bag that Camila and I used to share perched on the sink. It now belongs to her. From what I see, she put her

make up on before leaving. “Nothing strange in that”, I tell myself, until I discover, by rooting around a little, that she has bought some new things that I don’t recognise. Before, it was me who used the bag the most and who filled it with new products. Before, when I tried to convince myself that I was “Sofia”, when I was still fighting myself. Camila, on the other hand, uses little makeup and only because she has to look formal at work (her boss likes to see her wearing makeup).

She hates spending too much time on her appearance and that’s why we shared the bag, my bag. It was Sofia’s.

When Luis, my ex, gave it to me, he said that he had bought it to see if I’d learn to like makeup more. Until that day, I had kept what little I had (an eyeliner without a tip, some lip gloss and powder that was too pale for my skin tone) in what had been my pencil case during my senior year of high school. Luis discovered it one day when he was helping me to organise the bathroom at my house. He decided it was necessary to get rid of it. “You are not a little girl anymore, Sofi, and this thing is so old it doesn’t even look like a pencil case.”

Poor Luis, if he only knew what had happened to his gift five years later. He still must be pulling out his hair every time he thinks of me, as he did the day he discovered the messages that Camila and I were sending. “The thing is, Sofi, I took your cell phone thinking that you were with another man, but this is the last straw. How do you expect me to compete with a woman? No, I just can’t deal with it.” That was the last thing he said to me. I didn’t even have time to answer before he got out the bag in which he packed what little of his remained at my place and left. I was outraged. It was as if I hadn’t pulled all-nighters biting my nails every time he disappeared off with one of his “friends.” “Who told him to check out your mobile? He should have waited for you to tell him yourself,” was the only thing Camila said on the matter. She doesn’t like us talking about Luis, but if I mention him, she listens patiently until I shut up and then makes a comment to change the subject.

I leave the bag where it was after rooting around a little more to make a mental list of the new things I’d found in it: shades of darker colours (even a green one, most unlike Camila), an eyelash curler and a thick blusher brush. Where did they come from? I haven’t

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**HAVE I FORGOTTEN
ANYTHING? A TRIP
WOULD EXPLAIN
EVERYTHING, AND IT IS
QUITE PROBABLE THAT,
WITH EVERYTHING THAT
I HAVE GOING ON IN
MY LIFE, I COULD HAVE
FORGOTTEN IT.**

notice any change in her appearance these days to give me the idea she'd used any of it, but when I look more closely I see that she must have done so at least once.

The image of the suitcase returns to my mind and I walk over towards the front door. With one hand I lift it: it is full. Before I open it, I stop. This is not me, I'm not that kind of man, that kind of boyfriend, who goes through his partner's things.

I go back to the bathroom and turn on the shower. I repeat that no, that we are not one of *those* couples and that I shouldn't interfere. I take off my clothes and my image reflected in the mirror leaves me stunned. For the first time since I started the process I realise how much things with Camila can change. Is it the same to live with Daniel as with Sofia? No, the makeup bag gives me the answer. Everything is changing. I shower and I get dressed without enthusiasm, listening out for her arrival. I want to ask her, I need to ask her.

Camila doesn't arrive and I'm ready to go to work. I can't wait any longer. I leave a note: "See you at lunch." Today we both have short days, it is our day to be together. I pack a banana and some nuts, because it's too late to make myself some breakfast. I leave with my bicycle without being able to put my doubts aside. On my way out the door I stumble over the red suitcase. Whatever it has inside, it's full.

I park my bike and walk to the department. I'd made good time and had arrived fifteen minutes earlier than I'd planned, but still I feel as if I'd forgotten something. I check my bag. I have everything. I check my schedule. I don't have any appointments today. Nevertheless, the sensation persists.

I arrive at the Department of Humanities and Literature, pulling out my id card from my wallet to go through the turnstile at the front entrance. I nod to the guard who nods back when he recognizes me and wishes me a good day. I cross the garden where some students are reading and enter the building passing through the corridor that leads to my office.

"Good morning... Daniel. Your girlfriend called a few minutes ago and asked me to tell you that she had to leave earlier than usual because of a work issue."

Carolina, the department secretary, avoids looking at me while she talks to me. She knows that I've noticed the small pause, that other name that has been about to leave her lips. "Daniel" is still strange in her mouth, both for her and for me, but I like that she can already say it. I enter my office and check my mobile. Camila hasn't texted or called me. She preferred to call here directly. Would she have calculated the time to do it before I arrived? No, why would she? Surely, she hadn't noticed. Surely, she is so busy at work that she didn't even think about it.

Carolina talks outside on the phone and types away on her computer. I could ask her and find out what time Camila called, but I don't want to deal with the secretary's elusive look for a while. Instead, I turn on my computer and look over my students' work from the Spanish class (the one I like teaching the least) that they had to upload last night to correct it. I only have eight students, the ones who didn't withdraw the class within a few weeks of beginning the semester. The faithful few, I always call them, the ones who weren't scared off when they saw me.

Faithful and all they may be, they still hadn't actually done what I asked them to. They had to review a text and, although we spent two weeks analysing it in class, taking its structure apart and understanding each argument, my students appear not to have anything particular to say about it. This is the second review I've asked them for and, as a result of what I see, I think it is difficult for them to be critical. They had no problem when I asked them for a summary, but now I am asking them to talk, to criticise, to interrogate the text, and the only thing I get is another summary. I didn't want them to explain what the text says (I can find passages practically ripped from the original text in some), but to point out what didn't convince them, the implications they believe that the contents may have on our lives, what caught their attention, etc. Not even Sara, the only student of the eight who is not in first semester (she left taking this class until the end of her degree and is now only taking it as it's a graduation requirement), managed to go beyond repeating

the basics, summarising the ideas. I'm disappointed. I'd expected something more interesting from her. I'd thought she'd be an interlocutor capable of debating the subject. I know she could, but something has prevented her.

Laziness? Lack of interest?

I get bored correcting and I decide to stretch my legs a little. The landline phone on the desk rings just as I get up. Carolina shouts at me from her office that it's Camila. I answer and I realise that my pulse is racing.

"Hello? Love?" As I speak, I remember the suitcase and I feel my pulse accelerate more.

"Hello Dani. Sorry I didn't wake you up before I left. We had an emergency and Rocío asked me to come in quickly. Did you get my message?"

"Yes, Carolina gave it to me, but I would have preferred you to call me on the mobile, I was very confused."

"Sorry. The truth is that I had left the mobile on my desk and when I called I was in Rocío's office. I found it easier to call the landline and leave the message with Carolina."

Camila laughs and I can hear another voice in the background that tells her something.

"So, what was the emergency?" I ask.

"What?" Laughter.

What are they laughing at? Who is she with?

"What was Rocío's emergency?"

"Ah, just something silly, love. Simply that Simón forgot to send a very important email last night and I had to come in and fix everything up with the client."

"And why couldn't Simón fix the problem?" I don't want to sound like I'm sounding. That is not me.

**THE IMAGE OF THE
SUITCASE RETURNS TO MY
MIND AND I WALK OVER
TOWARDS THE FRONT
DOOR. WITH ONE HAND I
LIFT IT: IT IS FULL.**

**BEFORE I OPEN IT, I STOP.
THIS IS NOT ME, I'M NOT
THAT KIND OF MAN, THAT
KIND OF BOYFRIEND,
WHO GOES THROUGH HIS
PARTNER'S THINGS.**

Camila is silent as if she had noticed the change in my voice when asking the question.

I feel ridiculous and I try to think about how I can apologise, but she ploughs on.

"Oh, love, you know he almost never answers in time and Rocío needed someone urgently. Besides, I have more experience in these things."

"Of course, it makes sense. You are indispensable, I get that." She laughs again and I hear the other voice, maybe Rocío, who is calling her.

"Love, I have to hang up. I'll see you at lunch and you can tell me how you've been, okay?"

“OH, LOVE, YOU KNOW HE ALMOST NEVER ANSWERS IN TIME AND ROCÍO NEEDED SOMEONE URGENTLY. BESIDES, I HAVE MORE EXPERIENCE IN THESE THINGS.”

We say goodbye and hang up. I didn't mention the suitcase because I didn't want to make her feel interrogated. I know she noticed the change in my tone of voice, but I'm not like that, *we're* not like that. Sofía and Camila were not like that, and Daniel and Camila do not have to be like that.

I leave the office and go to the toilet. It seems like a good time to do it because the department is almost empty. However, when I arrive in front of the doors I realise that I'm not alone. The door on the left, the "women's" bathroom, the door with that doll and skirt, is open. The other door with doll that doesn't have a skirt, the "men's" bathroom, is closed and I can hear someone washing their hands. My first impulse is to return to the office and wait for the toilet to be free, then I think about using the other bathroom. I don't do either.

Actually, I have never felt that the toilet one enters matters all that much, but the judgement in other people's expressions each time I've gone into the "wrong" one has made me careful these last few weeks to only use of the bathroom corresponding to *my* gender: no skirts. Eventually, I promise myself each time I wait in front of

those doors that I'll use whichever toilet I find free no matter if the doll on the sticker has a skirt on it or not.

The door with the skirt-less doll opens and Roberto, our expert in the Nineteenth Century, emerges. Roberto and I have known each other since we were undergraduates, but he acts as if we don't. Without looking at me, he mutters a dry "good morning" and disappears down the hall. His attitude makes the act of entering the bathroom feel like a great triumph and I imagine our using the same toilet must irritate him. Surely, he must be trying to forget the time he asked me out when I started working here. He told me he didn't care if I had a thing with Camila. Apparently, competing with a woman is not a problem for some men. But having flirted with someone who is now a man, apparently, is quite a different matter.

I'm back again at the apartment waiting for Camila. The red suitcase is still where I left it, challenging me. But I don't go near it to avoid the temptation to open it. I repeat again and again that my changes cannot include that type of behaviour, that this is not me and it has never been me. Daniel was never like that and should never become that. Camila and I are great as we are and I don't have to ruin everything nor do I want to. Camila and I are fine, in spite of everything. The fear of losing her was what made me doubt for so long whether I should go through with the change or not, and if she hadn't realised how things were, I don't know how I would have managed to get the courage to tell her. She pushed me to go ahead with it and celebrated my every step.

The door opens and Camila comes in. She still has her bike helmet on her head. She smiles at me and I smile back. I go over to kiss her, but I miss her lips and give her a peck on the cheek. I protest and she apologises saying that, as she'd had to leave in a rush that morning, she hasn't brushed her teeth all day. I laugh and kiss her, now, on the mouth. She's right. Her breath It is not that pleasant, but after the morning I had, I can't help being happy when I kiss her.

I look at her, but she quickly lets go of my arms, removes her helmet and starts taking things out of the fridge.

"Let's eat first, right?" I tell her.

"Always. Unless you want a monster for a girlfriend!"

I laugh because I know it's true. When Camila is hungry, everything irritates her. I approach her and touch her shoulder. She looks at me and I understand that she wants me to give her space. She mustn't have eaten anything all morning.

"So Rocío didn't give you any food in the office today? That's the very least she could do after making you go in so early!"

Camila doesn't answer. She just dishes out the lentils and rice onto two plates and puts one in the microwave. Her hunger must be unbearable (I can see how tight her jaw is), so I decide I better shut up. In the meantime I content myself with just watching her. She's wearing a light blue shirt that I haven't seen before and some black pants that we bought together a few months ago. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail; it's a little untidy as it's been crushed by her helmet. She's wearing makeup, but only a little, no shades of green or blusher. Her nose shines, as does her forehead and her cheeks are still red. I imagine that she will want to take a shower and I decide to suggest that we take one together when she is in a better mood. Then we can spend all afternoon in bed and watch something.

Camila looks at me. She gives a half-smile and takes the first plate out of the microwave.

She puts in the other dish, programmes the time, and sits down to eat.

The idea of the shower is spinning in my head and I'm impatient. I imagine her body against mine, the hot water on my skin, she smiling at last. All my body wants it. I need to relax and I need to spend some time with her, for us to enjoy each other. I realise that we haven't taken a shower together for a long time and right now

I don't remember when was the last time we enjoyed ourselves together naked, really naked, and not just because the routine demands it. I go back to the idea of the shower and I let myself go. No. I'm not going to suggest we tire ourselves out. I need something else, I need more.

"Your plate, love," she says.

I take my food out of the microwave and sit in front of Camila at the table.

"Tired?"

"Yes, I truly am. My back hurts and I feel a little dizzy. I only slept for four hours last night. Just pedalling my way back here took it out of me."

"I got scared when I saw you weren't in bed. Why didn't you say anything?" I thought I sounded calm enough not to bother her.

"I had to leave very quickly and it was very early. I didn't think it made any sense to wake you up. Besides, I wasn't thinking clearly because I was still half asleep."

I laugh, but it doesn't come naturally to me. I notice a cold tone in her voice and I'm not sure if I'm imagining it.

"I was thinking that, since you're so tired, we could take a shower together and then, I don't know, whatever you'd like to."

I feel ridiculous. Why don't I ask the question directly? What is that "...I don't know, whatever you'd like to?" I only needed to wink and I'd be officially the most ridiculous man in the world.

"I mean, I'd like to have sex. That's what I mean."

Camila is silent. I don't know if she's going to laugh. It's quite possible. I don't know if I'd prefer that or if she'd just ignore my clumsiness. I don't

know. I just want her to say yes. If she says yes then I can relax and forget the suitcase for a while. If he says yes, it means that I don't have to worry.

"The truth is that I feel very tired, love. I prefer to have a quick shower and nap."

I look at her and my face must be very expressive because Camila takes my hands and looks at me as if she felt guilty.

"Sorry. It's not that I don't want to, but I just don't have the energy. We could take a nap together and see if I want to when I wake up, OK?"

I feel an emptiness in my stomach and I don't understand why. This happens sometimes. I also have times when I don't want to have sex with her because I feel tired. There is nothing wrong, it is completely understandable. I know that's what I should say and that I have to stop looking so helpless. It is not fair to her. This is not me. Who am I? I feel uncomfortable and clumsy, as if we didn't know each other.

"Sure," I try to smile, but it doesn't come naturally. This is a disaster.

I stand and pick up the dishes, I wash them in silence and I can feel Camila stand up and come towards me. She gives me a hug.

"I love you," she says. *I love you*. In spite of the fact that I am behaving like an idiot.

She kisses my neck and goes to the bathroom, probably to shower. Without me. God, I'm an idiot. Instead of making such a big deal about these things, it'd be better to think of a way to make her feel better after the day she has had. It might help to have a hot-water bottle in her bed ready for her to have a quick nap. I go to our room to get it. While the water heats, I lower the blinds and get the bed ready. I can hear the water in the shower. The kettle whistles and I go to fill it. I burn myself a little, but I don't care. I want

I GOT SCARED WHEN I SAW YOU WEREN'T IN BED. WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING?"

I THOUGHT I SOUNDED CALM ENOUGH NOT TO BOTHER HER.

Camila to feel better. I would like to have a good afternoon with her. She may even feel like having sex after her nap. I smile. Now, that would be great.

I put the hot-water bottle between the sheets and sit down to wait for Camila to come out of the shower. How long has she been in there? From what I can hear, the water keeps going and Camila hums some song that I can't recognise. Didn't she want just a quick shower? She may have changed her mind and now doesn't want to leave the hot water. What if I go in? No. She said she wanted to shower alone. I'm sure she won't take much longer.

Five minutes go by and finally I hear her turn off the water. Will it be okay if I go in now? I feel like having her close. I could go in and sit on the toilet while she puts on some cream and puts on her pyjamas, I could tell her about my students' work and ask her for some advice.

Would she be in the mood for that? I can also simply accompany her in silence as I did before in the kitchen. In any case this doesn't

seem to be the best day to talk things over. I'm pretty awkward today and she's clearly not in a great mood. I can't help myself and I go in.

When I open the bathroom door I find Camila ready to come out. She kisses me on the cheek. Why, today of all days, did she kiss me there? She goes over to our bed. I follow her. I take off my pants and get in.

"Oh! You got the hot-water bottle ready for me. You're so sweet. I was just about to ask you to get it ready for me."

"I know you," I say, as we cuddle together in the bed.

She turns her back to me and I hug her. She loves cuddling like that. Her neck is just in front of my nose and I can smell the shampoo she used. Her hair is pulled back so that it doesn't get in my face. She takes my hand and places it on her chest. She mutters something, but I don't understand it well. Little by little I can feel her muscles relax – including her jaw. She falls asleep. I feel better. I kiss her neck and shut my eyes.

Camila's mobile phone is ringing. It's woken me up. She's still asleep, so I stand up to look for it. It's in the bathroom. I pick it up, still somewhat drowsy, and I look at who it is: "Rocío". That name wakes me up completely. This is not good, it can't be. I want to turn off the cell phone and go back to bed, but Camila would be upset with me if I did. I answer it.

"Sofia? Says the voice on the other side.

"Daniel" I answer. I notice that I try and make my voice sound a little more serious. She knows, she knew from the beginning, and still acts as if my name was something new, something that she's still struggling to learn.

"Daniel," she says, apparently annoyed, "I need to speak with Camila."

"Camila is asleep. She came back home exhausted today, do you want me to give her a message?"

I can feel how irritated she's getting on the other side of the line.

"No, look, she has to come back in, that thing with the client has gone off the rails again and I don't have anyone else to help me with it."

"Can't you ask Simón? Camila is really exhausted and I don't think it makes sense to wake her up."

"Daniel" Rocío makes an emphasis that bothers me every time she says my name, "it's urgent, I need Camila now. She told me to call her if I needed anything."

Camila wakes up and asks me from the room what's going on. I can't do anything: I hand the mobile over to her.

"It's Rocío. Apparently, she can't live without you," I say irritably.

She picks up the mobile and, against all odds, answers it happily. She doesn't appear to have just woken up. Camila usually takes time to wake up when she emerges from a nap, only talking in monosyllables and acting as if everything around her is immensely irritating. I've never seen her this cheerful in this kind of circumstances. This is not like her.

"Of course! See you in half an hour... No, it's cool, don't worry, it's no bother... you know that he always takes care of my sleep, that's it, but no problem... yes, yes... See you soon."

Camila gets up and begins to get dressed. The hot-water bag falls to the floor, I pick it up. I go to the kitchen to empty it and let it dry without being able to shake my irritation. I don't understand why Camila doesn't put limits on that woman. It doesn't make sense. I walk out of the kitchen, its door is right beside to our front door, and I stub my little toe on the red suitcase. The suitcase! I had forgotten all about it and now all the questions have flooded back to me and are mingling with the pain of my little toe and the irritation that I feel watching Camila going back to work. I hobble to our bedroom and find her ready to leave.

**“CAN’T YOU ASK SIMÓN?
CAMILA IS REALLY
EXHAUSTED AND I DON’T
THINK IT MAKES SENSE
TO WAKE HER UP.”**

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When she sees me, she realises that something is up and tries to help me get to bed. She kisses me and hugs me, and apologises for having to leave me. She promises that she will be back in time for dinner and asks if I need to put ice on my toe. I don’t want her to let go of me. I want her to bring me the ice and stay the whole afternoon giving me hugs and relaxing with me, but I’m so irritated that I can only answer with a grunt.

“It wasn’t anything, I just stubbed it against that bloody suitcase you left by the front door. You’d better go as that boss of yours goes mental without you. That’s why you should never work for friends; They always take advantage!”

Try as I might to detect any kind of reaction in Camila at the mention of the suitcase (or Rocío), I don’t succeed.

“OK love. Well, I’ll see you later, yes? I’ll try not to be too long.”
“I hope so,” I say.

She leaves and I’m left alone in our untidy room. My toe no longer hurts, but I feel ridiculous sitting without pants on the bed with my hair still ruffled by the nap. I feel like getting back into our bed, but it isn’t warm anymore and I’m not sleepy. I put on my pants even though I’m all alone in the house and I try to tidy the place up. That’s when I remember the suitcase again. I run over to the front door feeling the same emptiness in my stomach that I had this morning, but the suitcase is still there. She didn’t take it with her! She’ll come back.

I go back to the room restraining myself and my desire to root around everything in it. I can’t fall so low. I try to calm down and convince myself that everything is fine, but it takes considerable effort. If everything is fine, why didn’t Camila want to kiss me all afternoon? Why didn’t she let me get rid of Rocío and stay with me? Why didn’t she want to have sex when I suggested it? I keep thinking that something is not right. It’s all very strange.

I go into the bathroom and pick up the towel that Camila left lying on the floor. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and, seeing my reflection, I remember my conversation with Rocío: “Sofía.” I find it incredible that even after all these months, she still calls me “Sofía” and pretends that it is a mistake. She never agreed with this type of process. A woman, Rocío has said since we met her, must remain true to her gender and not “go over to the dark side”.

“Men,” she says in exasperation whenever she can, “it’s so hard for them not to be morons when all they have is a single neuron.” A few years ago, when I had told her about Luis’s reaction to my lesbianism, she’d said: “That guy is the perfect example, Sofía, he had too much testosterone and, obviously, he wasn’t going to be able to compete with Cami. Go figure! He’d have had to stop being so macho. Checking your mobile? Men!” And so on and so forth. She can go on for hours if you let her. That there is nothing more jealous or controlling than a bloke and that they even make it seem as if it’s the women who are jealous and controlling, that “we women never act so jealous among ourselves”, that only ever happens in heterosexual relationships. If anyone has the crazy notion of reminding her that her friend X went through her partner’s emails, convinced that

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she was cheating, Rocío would downplay it and explain that X grew up in a home with a “male bias” and learnt it from *them*, or the like.

When Camila announced that I had taken this decision, she almost started shouting. For her, I was being terribly unfair to my partner by putting her in such a situation. Once I even heard her say to Camila on the phone that if I had decided to make the change then she didn’t see why we were still living together “You’re a lesbian, Cami, you don’t like guys”. I heard it by mistake, the volume was very loud and I was very close to my girlfriend while they talked. I didn’t worry about it. Camila had always been firm in her decision to be with me even though those comments were frequent and not only from her boss. “I like Daniel, not what he has between his legs or however he wants to be called,” she said.

Did he still think that?

“What people like Rocío don’t understand is that you are not becoming another person, but rather that you are becoming *yourself*,” she once said. It’s true. I’ve always been Daniel. But what if Rocío was right? The memory of Camila’s refusal to have sex with me that afternoon comes back to me. What if she doesn’t like me now that my body is changing so much? “You’re a lesbian, Cami.” Of course, that’d be good for Rocío, because she’s also a lesbian. She is a woman and plans to continue being one. Did she really need Camila or was it just an excuse to see her?

“Stop it!” I say to myself in a loud voice.

This is not me. This is not what Daniel should be. But in my head the story is weaving itself as I feel the emptiness in my stomach: Camila didn’t want to kiss me today, she didn’t want to have sex with me, didn’t want us to shower together, it’s the second time she runs out to meet Rocío... She didn’t even appear to be irritated at having to leave again!

“Stop it!”

But I don’t stop and my ideas continue to dance around in my mind! The suitcase! What is inside that suitcase?

“OK LOVE. WELL, I’LL SEE YOU LATER, YES? I’LL TRY NOT TO BE TOO LONG.”

“I HOPE SO,” I SAY.

Before I know it, I have it almost completely open. I freeze and close it again. Am I not proving Rocío’s point? Isn’t this “going over to the dark side” and being “macho” like she hates? I can’t believe I’m becoming this – the typical controlling and jealous boyfriend. Just like the ones we always used to make fun of when I was still called Sofía and was barely discovering Daniel. The typical jealous boyfriend, Rocío’s possessive male bogeyman that she can’t stop slagging off. Just like Luis! What am I doing? I’ve never been jealous. I’ve never had to deal with this void that now I feel growing and growing and growing inside me. I move away from the suitcase.

I have to stop and talk things over with Camila. This very night I have to be honest with her and tell her how insecure I’m feeling, but I’m not going to go through her suitcase. I return to the room and lie down on the bed. It’s not so bad to have a moment of alone time out of the office, right? I can watch something and fall asleep until she comes back. I turn the television on and look for something to watch, but my mind keeps coming back to the suitcase. Every so often I look at the time on my mobile, but I don’t really know what time Camila will come back at, so it doesn’t really help me. What if I call her? I can suggest that we meet up somewhere and eat out, that I can pick her up in a taxi. At this stage, I really don’t want to cook and I’m sure she doesn’t either.

An hour and a half after she left, I decided to call her. My call is rejected three times. She texts me “I can’t talk now, I’ll call you

later.” It’s one of those pre-programmed messages! She couldn’t even send me an original one! That isn’t weird, is it? So, nothing to do. I guess we won’t be eating out then.

It’s half past six and it’s getting dark. She shouldn’t take too long to get here now. I put on a documentary about giraffes that we recorded the other day. It was for us to watch together today, but I opt to start watching it on my own. After all, she didn’t even remember we had plans.

Time goes by slowly. It’s 7:20 now. She *must* be on her way. I call her again. Again, my call is rejected. Another text: “I can’t talk now, I’ll call you later.” I throw the mobile on the bed so I don’t have to see it anymore. I feel irritated. How long does she expect me to wait for her?

On the television a giraffe mother walks with her baby in search of water. Where was she?

Is she really at the office? I could call and ask the secretary, although she probably has gone home already, at least she has. What if she didn’t go to the office? What if Rocío told her to go somewhere else? The image of Rocío comes to mind. Rocío and her long, curly hair that we both liked so much. Rocío and her long legs. Rocío and her soft voice. Rocío always so feminine with her expensive dresses. Rocío and her love for beautiful women, just like Camila. Rocío and Camila, it makes sense. How could I not have seen it before now? Rocío and her style. Rocío and her intelligence. How can I compete with that? “Compete!” If she could only hear me, she would tell me that “my testosterone has gone up and I’m already thinking like a macho” or something like that. Rocío and her ignorance.

I call Camila one more time, but now I don’t even get that message. Nothing.

This time I can’t stop myself. In less than five minutes I have gone through all the red suitcase’s contents. I feel like crying. The suitcase is full of clothes, Camila’s clothes. I even recognise a dress that was mine and that I told her to keep when we gave away some of my things last year. She looks good in it. What does this mean?

It’s already 8:30 and Camila show no signs of coming home. I don’t even try to call her. If she comes back, let it be to take

her things and leave me alone in peace. What else could she be doing with Rocío if it’s not what I think? They’ve never had such long meetings before and now I realise that the number of calls and office emergencies have increased throughout this last month. There is no other explanation. Still, why didn’t she take the suitcase once and for all? Why does she torture me like this? Could she be frightened of accepting that she was wrong, that she didn’t want, that she couldn’t love, me as I am? I would have preferred her to tell me, getting it over with in one fell swoop instead of leaving me on tenterhooks, full of doubts. No, it can’t be. Camila wouldn’t do that to me. What’s happening to me? How ridiculous I must look in full meltdown, suitcase open and Camila’s clothes scattered on the floor.

I pick it all up and pack it up again and take the suitcase to our room. I have to talk to Camila. I’m going to tell her the truth and I’ll apologise for opening it. I’ll tell her to be honest with me. I can’t take it anymore. But, what if she doesn’t come home? I sit in bed waiting for her while the credits of the third episode of the documentary about giraffes appear on the screen.

I am awakened by the sound of the front door. I’m lying on the bed with my clothes on, mobile phone in hand. I have three missed calls from Camila. I hear voices in the entrance. Camila is with Rocío. This is the moment. There goes my life with Camila. Now she’s going to come for the suitcase, I know it.

The suitcase is at the foot of the bed, mocking me. Well, at least she’ll have to come into our room.

Camila enters. I must have a very particular face because when she sees me she stops in her tracks and looks at me for a few seconds, then she sees the suitcase and looks back me with wide eyes. Without saying anything, she takes the suitcase and goes back to the front door. I follow her. I’m willing to beg, at least so I think. I am willing to reproach her for handling things this cruelly.

Rocio is at the door smiling and Camila is heading towards her. I am not able to talk or move. I feel defeated. Camila hands her the suitcase and they say goodbye. Rocío greets me with her hand and disappears behind the closed door. Camila approaches me and kisses my cheek:

"Are you OK? I'm sorry I took so long. Have you eaten?"

I don't answer and I keep looking at her. What's going on?

"I had to give some things to Rocío, that's why she brought me home. I didn't tell her to stay for dinner because I figured you were already asleep as you didn't answer my calls. Have you had dinner yet?"

I nod. It's a lie, but I'm not hungry. Does this mean that Camila isn't leaving? She takes my hand and leads me to the room.

"I've already eaten. I tried to warn you, but you didn't answer. Go to bed and I'll be there, OK? I have to go to the toilet."

I undress and go to bed. Camila goes to the bathroom and then gets into bed. She turns off the light.

What has happened? Rocío took the suitcase, but Camila is still here. Could it be that I imagined everything? I try to hold her, but she moves uncomfortably and tells me she's hot. No, I didn't imagine it.

That's right? She got cold feet when she saw me? Right?

"I love you, see you in the morning," she says to me.

Will she? I close my eyes and curl up next to her, but I can't sleep. Every movement of Camila wakes me up. Is she slipping away from me? I move away from her and wait a few minutes. She doesn't move. She doesn't search for me. "I love you, see you in the morning," she said. What if she's just waiting for me to fall asleep? I imagine myself groping around the bed, looking for her with my hand like this morning. I imagine the silence in the apartment and a note, in the refrigerator or on the bedside table,

IS SHE REALLY AT THE OFFICE? I COULD CALL AND ASK THE SECRETARY, ALTHOUGH SHE PROBABLY HAS GONE HOME ALREADY. CLEARLY, SHE HAS. WHAT IF SHE DIDN'T GO TO THE OFFICE? WHAT IF ROCÍO TOLD HER TO GO SOMEWHERE ELSE?

with some cold and brief words of farewell. "I love you, see you in the morning." Will she? No. I won't be the one who wakes up alone tomorrow.

I get up slowly once Camila is sleeping deeply and I go over to the wardrobe. I take out the black suitcase, the one that's mine, from the top. It's bigger than the red suitcase. I will be able to fill it with almost everything I have. I don't have all that many clothes. I'm not a big shopper. I'll come back later for my books. I'll work that out later.

I smile to myself. That's it. I get dressed and I throw my pyjamas on the floor. They're already pretty old. I watch Camila sleep and I feel like undoing everything, but I know that I can't, I know I can't continue like this. Someone has to stop things. I pack my suitcase and carry it to the door. I leave it right where the red one, hers, was and I sit down to wait. Soon the sun will come out.

METASTASIS



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How could it be *my* fault if I've not slept well in over forty days? Amparo appears to understand the corrosive torrent of thoughts that torment me. She remains serene, picks David up and sits him on her shoulders. The sun is sifted through the dust of one of the corridor windows and is reflected in the tearful face of the child. I think I might have overreacted to her scolding. Crying like that is not good for his illness. I hold my breath for a few seconds and repeat in a very low voice: "It's not my fault." The elevator doesn't work and we were forced to climb a spiral ramp, one that felt like it would never end, to get to the Paediatrics pavilion. As we climbed up, I notice the ease with which David goes from crying to laughter, just seeing the carpark through the window and talking to his mother. I am impressed by his calmness, I fear him. Doesn't he know where we are? I see that they have invented a game with the colours of the cars. I don't understand it and I say to them:

"Doctors' cars."

Due to their silence I stop paying attention to them. I move forward and, as I move away, I hear them return to laughter. I quicken my steps: I want to be alone, to leave them behind, but something holds me back. It feels like the tension of invisible chains between our bodies. It makes the five-floor climb feel endless until, finally, I reach the door of the Paediatrics Ward, try to get my breath back. When I breathe in I feel a smell, subtle but definite, of crusty urine and rotten flesh. Amparo and David have been left behind.

The door is open, but I can't bring myself to enter. I look inside: I see several puppeteers trying to hide behind a black cloth and an improvised cardboard stage. I see the little patients in front of them, occupying almost all the chairs. The most deteriorated looking ones watch the show from their trolleys, making a visible effort to lean forwards on thin and uncomfortable pillows. They all have drips, and many of those who are seated also have needles, secured with tape, stuck into their arms. Almost none have eyebrows or hair, and some cover their heads with woollen hats. A single and carefree nurse accompanies them. I must seem crazy, I think, watching them from here, outside. At last Amparo catches up with me. She stands beside me. Her presence makes me restrain the impulse to cross myself. She no longer has David on her shoulders but is holding his hand. When he sees the stage and listens to the circus voices of the puppeteers, he lets go of his mother and starts walking as fast as he can, trying to hide his weakness, eager to be part of the audience. I stop him halfway with a hug and I whisper in his ear that I love him, and tell him that I didn't want to scream it out loud. My words don't matter to him. He tries to get away, to get away from me. I don't want to think about the children surrounding us. It's inevitable that I wonder just how can a body get sick and degenerate into something like that? I want to shake him, tell him to react, to see where we are. But I don't say anything. He insists on his useless struggle while I sit up without letting go of his hand. Amparo stands in front of me and I try to hide the tremors that shake my body as I say:

"What is that smell?"

"I can't smell anything, would that be it?" she says, pointing to a stretcher full of blankets. I know she's lying. Just like me, she knows the answer.

"They mustn't have washed them. Mind, the ventilation isn't helping," I say and point to a grate in the ceiling. Amparo is right to lie. It isn't wise to talk about it, but we both know that what we smell is cancer, the pure essence of the disease, emanating from each of the small patients' pores. What an unbearable injustice! David asks

me again to let him go, but I don't want to accept the idea of leaving him, to see him mixed up among that crowd of terminally ill children.

"Let him watch the puppets, he needs to be distracted," my wife says.

I get upset at that order and I wince, but David's hand is still loose. Amparo grimaces and sits next to the boy in one of the few empty chairs. I stop mattering, existing even. They watch the show, they laugh, they applaud, and, in an idiotic gesture, I stand next to them, petrified. Then I feel that other eyes are watching me, the opaque eyes of a creature in a wheelchair. He is in a corner of the room, against the wall, as if he weren't interested in puppets. I cannot tell if it's a boy or a girl. Maybe he's an angel and he doesn't even have a gender. I see the whitish skin of his arms, almost stuck to the bones. His bald head, covered with a blond and greasy lanugo, reflects the indifferent morning sun. Full of anxiety I look up, and I see the children's decoration of the walls: landscapes and puppets, and my sight returns to the black mat of my son's hair, resplendent and vital like his mother's, standing out even among the naked heads of the other children, abandoned in the middle of the saddest and slowest rain in the world: the dripping of the bags of serum.

I feel an unbearable need for solitude, and I walk away down the corridor of the doctor's offices. I see, through the wide window that extends beside me, the churches of Rosario, Santa Bárbara and Our Lady of Carmen; the latter with its opulent and protruding dome, as if trying to reach the sky to breathe better in the midst of the smoke of buses, rubbish, rubble and old capital buildings. That image transports me to the cathedral of Libano. In my childhood it seemed the most beautiful and largest construction in the world to me, now, however, it is only a bitter memory. A white cathedral like that could never exist in polluted Bogotá. It would get dirty – rubbish even floats in the air here. The city is so big that the very presence of God seems to evaporate.

Why am I thinking about the town? We haven't even been here for a week, trying to find out what is finishing our son off. But I want

to go back, to fly out through this window, return to Libano's parks, decorated with pink ocobo flowers, to its churches: the cathedral and the small church of Saint Anthony, with its purifying aroma of incense, its echoes of old canes, its supplicating voices reverberating through its bad acoustics, between the stone, the confessionals and the Blessed Sacrament. To feel again the warm pleasure of the smell of the earth that, together with my seminary companions, we shovelled to one side of the temple hill to make steps. How valuable was the past, before we were trampled by this enormous world with its horrors, its excess of death and life. I hear a voice resounding on my head:

*/ Relatives of David Cruz are requested in office five hundred and two
Relatives of David Cruz requested in office five hundred and two /*

The loud sound of the speaker returns me to the nauseating smell, to my trembling body, to Bogotá. I see that the office door opens and a small woman comes out carrying a baby. I'm going to cross myself, but the woman watches me and I stop. I silently ask God for forgiveness without knowing very well why. I walk back down the hall, with my right hand tucked into my jacket pocket, touching the few notes of cash left over from what Negro sent me a few weeks ago, when I told him on the phone that we had been referred to the National Cancer Institute and that David's case could be serious. Remembering the debt makes me feel uncomfortable, and it bothers me to be not thinking about my son, but rather about my own unemployment, my inability to provide my family with a decent life. When I return to the waiting room I see that Amparo has already gotten up and is talking to the child. I imagine she tells him to sit still, that we won't take long, and who knows what else? They speak softly, excluding me. Their complicity doesn't involve me.

In the office we are received by a doctor with the name Gretty Terselich; a woman with a huge body and a milky appearance, probably German. I greet her with great difficulty,

**I GET UPSET AT THAT
ORDER AND I WINCE,
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**I STOP MATTERING,
EXISTING EVEN. THEY
WATCH THE SHOW, THEY
LAUGH, THEY APPLAUD,
AND, IN AN IDIOTIC
GESTURE, I STAND NEXT
TO THEM, PETRIFIED.**

and she pretends she doesn't see me. Instead, talk to my wife with a familiarity that makes me uncomfortable. Amparo hands her a folder with x-rays of the child's leg. The doctor gets up from her chair and examines them for several minutes on a fluorescent board. Pointing to the obvious, a dark bite-shaped spot that occupies the central area of larger bone, she asks:

"Do you see this here? This shadow is abnormal, it looks like a carcinogenic lesion, Ewing's sarcoma. It is very unusual, because your child is too young for this symptomatology, but we will have to do more conclusive tests."

Although I want to surprise myself, I cannot, because we all know that it is not an injury. Even so, we are trained to never leave the cruel vice of hope. What's more, the more critical and extreme are the situations we face, the more we begin to believe in an future miracle that will solve everything. If we didn't even have that, how could we get up in the mornings?

"Sarcoma?" Amparo asks.

"A form of cancer in the bone."

"But, could it be an injury?"

"The probability is very low, really. The symptoms here are very specific; We need to know what we are facing. We need to do a biopsy. The real problem with this type of tumour is its tendency to replicate in other parts of the body, which would be very serious."

While Amparo and I look at each other, deciding what to say, the doctor asks us about medical insurance. We tell her that we have none, that we have paid for everything with savings. She explains that the treatment, the level of aggression and the price of the medications all depend on the result of the biopsy, which range between six and twelve million pesos. Much more than we imagined. I think about how we can get so much money and Amparo asks for more information about the procedures.

Gretty says there are different alternatives: radiotherapy, chemotherapy... each has its pros and cons.

"And what about amputation?" I say. Amparo and Gretty both look at me, scandalised.

"An amputation in a case of cancer of this type wouldn't solve anything without further treatment. Cancer cells travel throughout the body. Anyway, you shouldn't be thinking about that," the doctor says.

I don't say anything. She continues to talk, warning us about the benefits of explaining to David his situation as clearly as possible, and the advantages of his young age for recovery processes. Since we don't have money, we don't dare to schedule the biopsy. Gretty seems to understand, because she doesn't insist on the matter. I see Amparo crying with the soft cry of a defeated woman. The freckles on her cheeks darken under her trembling eyelashes. I rub my hand over my face and notice that my beard is wet, that I have also been crying without realising it. How long have I been like this? Since when do I cry without knowing it?

We try to recompose ourselves as best we can. We leave the office and from the waiting room, on the other side of the hall, we are welcomed by the child's shocking appearance. He stands up in the middle of the everyone and, to my surprise, he hugs me before he hugs his mother. I bend down to his height, put my hands on his bony shoulders, kiss him on the cheek and look for the smell of death on him, which I fear has adhered to him forever.

"How do you feel, son?" I ask. I think he must see my eyes reddened by crying and pollution, while I see his curious and careless eyes. Victims? Innocents? He is so young... How could he understand the magnitude of the unstoppable forces that flow over him?

"Today my leg has hardly hurt, where are we going?" he says.

I have no answer. It is amazing how much money we have spent in such a short time, eating on the street, paying taxis and staying

**IT IS VERY UNUSUAL,
BECAUSE YOUR CHILD
IS TOO YOUNG FOR THIS
SYMPTOMATOLOGY,
BUT WE WILL
HAVE TO DO MORE
CONCLUSIVE TESTS.**

at a hotel. There is almost nothing left of what Amparo could save working in the nursery, and although I still have some money. I don't even want to think about going back to Negro. But what else can I do? In this city, everything is so ridiculously expensive. I try to look for other options. I could reduce myself in the hope that it is only an injury and go back to Tolima, with the help of God. But it's safest to assume that Amparo would not allow it. There is no time to look for a job. And hostels? They say that there are shelters for families from other places that come to the Institute, but their conditions are terrible. Besides, I couldn't stand the constant presence of so much misery. How can one make plans for these situations? What is going through Amparo's mind? Will she be honest with herself and with David when the time comes and we have to explain the situation to him? Will he attentively perceive his mother's trembling voice when he lies? We walked in silence, outside the building. Amparo takes me by the arm and asks me:

"We have to eat something, do you have money?"

I hand her over a couple of coins and crumpled bills. She receives them with annoyance. She knows that it's Negro's money. She knows who Negro is. But she also knows that it isn't the time to worry about such petty things, so she counts the money and leads us to a dark and humid breakfast place. I see the red bricks and the name of the National Institute of Cancerology through the window. Everything feels as real as a bad dream. Amparo asks for eggs with bread for all three of us, while I observe a family that is finishing its meal at the table in the back. It's a young couple, much younger than us. A hooded creature, covered by a mask, wearing dark glasses and covered by a thick Scottish blanket, sits in a wheelchair besides them. He doesn't eat, he doesn't cry or move. While we wait for our food, his parents get up from the table, they pass by us on their way to the door, and I see the hundreds of bluish veins that cover the child's skin and the grotesque way in which his arms are twisted. My God, I think, free them from that burden, free us! Holding back from crossing myself for the third that day, I am surprised at the ease with which I have just wanted the death of a child. When they bring us the food I look at David's pink face, smiling in front of the plate of scrambled eggs, and I wonder if it really is so easy to get rid of a child. Maybe everything depends on visible deterioration, but my God, why do you torment me now with these thoughts of death and cruelty?

I am also bitter because of my anguish over money. It's one thing to ask Negro for two hundred, three hundred thousand pesos, it's quite different to ask to borrow several million. Both the uncertainty and the effort it takes not to show it are additional burdens. I don't think clearly, I can almost feel the passage of time damaging David. I don't even want to look at how much money we have left, I don't want to think about paying another hotel night. The only solution that returns, again and again to my mind, despite my attempts to find an alternative, is to call Negro. He's my only friend in town,

my only friend with money, David's godfather, my former seminary companion. Well, he's a decent guy and he'll understand. He's almost family! That's what I say, but I don't believe a word of it myself. The truth is that he is a stranger; although I asked for money a few days ago, I hadn't talked to him since the christening. I always rejected the path he chose, but in such a situation, what does it matter? I ask Amparo for my diary. She searches for a few seconds in her bag and gives it to me. She knows whom I'm going to call, I can see it in her resigned expression. I get up from the table, leaving the half-eaten eggs, and ask for the cafeteria phone. I dial the number. The dial tone sounds like an alarm, a warning: once, twice. When I think about it again, it's already late: someone picks up the receiver on the other side and I listen to a slow, expectant breathing.

"Negro? It's Jota," I say with insecurity.

"Man, are you already in the city?" Negro says, his voice warm and grim, as if he had been waiting for my call.

"Yes, we've been around running some errands with Amparo and David for almost a week. Thank you for everything brother. We've been getting by all this time because of you."

"It's nothing, Jota. When you visit me?" he asks.

"Indeed, my brother, that's why I'm calling. I'm on a borrowed phone, so I can't speak much, but I have to talk to you about something. It's urgent."

"I can always make a couple of hours for an old friend," he says. He gives me the address of a cafe in the city centre. I write it down on a napkin, hang up the phone, thank the store manager and I am pleasantly surprised to see that she doesn't charge me. I go to Amparo and tell her to take David to the hotel and wait for me there, that I will solve the issue of the money and the stay. I say it with the certainty that only fear produces. My plate of my eggs is already empty.

Before entering the cafe, a man calls over to me from one of the outdoor tables. I can't make out his face, it's obscured by the

wide green umbrella spread across the table, but by his harsh and condescending voice I know it's Negro. He is unrecognisable. He doesn't get up, as it must take a massive effort, and he waits, sitting down, for me to approach him. From the back of his chair is hanging a huge coat that touches the floor. The buttons of his shirt barely support the thrust of his well-developed stomach. He's toying with a spoon with a tall glass of ice cream with cream and cherries. He removes his sunglasses and leaves them on the table. The golden frame of his sunglasses makes noise when they come into contact with the glass table top. He says loudly "Sit down, Jota!"

I walk towards him with glacial slowness. He watches me, he smiles with his mouth open and I see the dark metal of dental amalgam at the bottom of his mouth and the remains of food on his tongue. I begin to feel that it has been a mistake to come here. He looks like another person. His present body is at least three times the size of the image I had of him in my memory. Has he devoured himself? Will he devour me too? I shake his hand firmly, trying not to look so reduced to that human bulk. I squeeze him hard in greeting, which seems to startle him. He releases me and extends his empty palm to the chair in front of me, before telling me again: "Sit down."

He speaks with the tone of someone used to authority. I feel and see the obscene prices of the menu. I ask for a black coffee that costs two thousand pesos while I think of a serving of eggs. Negro rubs a finger against the inside of the cup, cleaning the remains of his ice cream.

"You'd have become a bishop," he says and sucks on his anointed finger. "How's my little man getting on?"

I ignore the unexpected mockery and try to divert my thoughts, to reassure myself at the mention of David that Negro's concern is sincere, although deep down I know that it isn't. I explain the situation of the child in detail. Although he stops sucking his fingers, I see no alteration in his indifferent, almost mocking expression. As if he had been waiting for the revelation of my misfortune for his morbid

satisfaction. What is this ridiculous situation? How did I, who had to leave the seminary for something as big as the birth of a child, find myself reduced to begging? Why is this guy triumphant, after abandoning God's way to indulge in greed and lust? In my motives, love and family, there is much more nobility than in his and, even so, I see myself in the situation of having to kneel and surrender to his will. Why do these things happen? Heavenly Father, why have you forsaken me?

"I need help; a place to stay, a way to stay here in Bogotá while we solve the child's situation. Anything you can help me with would be immense. We have no one else to turn to."

He stares at me, his breath swells in his breath, tightening the indestructible buttons of his shirt even more, and he says with an artificial Bogota accent:

"Jota, I could never say no to you, neither to you nor to my beloved godson. Or Amparo, of course."

The kindness in his tone makes me shiver. A young waitress passes by and Negro follows her with his eyes. Amparo must be as or more worried than I am, but I hope that having a place to spend the night will serve to reassure her. If she could see how this man has put on weight! When they told me that Negro would be capable of killing and eating even a dead man, it was hard for me to imagine it literally! Now that I see him like that, it was easy to imagine it. We have only to lower our heads, accept it, participate in the injustices of the world. And so I do, I lower my head and take a sip of my expensive coffee and I keep it for a few seconds inside my mouth. It tastes like shit to me. I swallow it down. Then, without looking up, I say: "Thank you from the bottom of my heart, brother. But I want you to know that we are unemployed; Amparo was kicked out of the day-care centre when she asked for permission to come with David. And I have not managed to get anything stable."

**I AM ALSO BITTER
BECAUSE OF MY ANGUISH
OVER MONEY. IT'S ONE
THING TO ASK NEGRO
FOR TWO HUNDRED,
THREE HUNDRED
THOUSAND PESOS,
IT'S QUITE DIFFERENT
TO ASK TO BORROW
SEVERAL MILLION.
BOTH THE
UNCERTAINTY AND
THE EFFORT IT TAKES
NOT TO SHOW IT ARE
ADDITIONAL BURDENS.**

"Don't kill yourself for now; Sure, you'll find something soon. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks brother. And your family?" I ask motivated more from courtesy and not curiosity:

"I don't have any family any longer," Negro replies sparingly, awakening my curiosity! How satisfying are the misfortunes of others to calm one's own!

"What happened to your wife?" I ask. I try to remember the only time I saw her, two or three years ago, when Negro took her to town for a festival. A little redhead who looked more like his daughter.

"Stella had problems. She became pregnant and had an abortion. She was hooked on..." he says and stops in the middle of the sentence. "What envy," I think. "Now the guy is free!" Voluntary or involuntary abortion? I don't ask.

"Negro... I'm so sorry," is what I say.

He has a lost look, doesn't blink, as if focusing on a blurred memory. I cross myself in repentance of the infamous thoughts that have just crossed my mind, and, for some strange reason, a light of hope for David's healing rekindles within me. But I say again, with false sadness: "I'm very sorry about what you're saying, you can't imagine, my brother."

In fact the death of Negro's unborn child is so aberrant that it serves as a balm for my own situation, it might even minimise it. It was as if he had received his just punishment and me a second chance. The presence of the Lord manifests itself in mysterious ways.

"Whatever... she wasn't right. She never was," he says. Then he seems to come out from the spell and continues to speak as if nothing had happened. "I have an unoccupied house in Santa Barbara. There are a couple of beds there and you can stay there. Don't worry about me, man, rather worry about your people."

"I'm terrified, I'm very sorry, but I respect and understand it. Is Santa Barbara the neighbourhood of the church?"

"No, man, a neighbourhood in the north. We can go there in my car."

"Let's go," I answer.

"We're not going to pick up Amparo and David?" he asks me. For a moment I had forgotten about them.

"Sure, man, of course. My mind is a mess."

When we arrive at the hotel, the first thing the Negro does is recriminate me. "This place is a dump, why didn't you call me before?" he asks. Because nothing is free in this life, my brother, I answer in my mind, because nothing is fair. What I say is that he should wait in the car while I go in for my family. I say it by vocalising "my family" well. I enter the small hotel, I climb the stairs and in the room I find Amparo, with the suitcases packed. It comforts me to know that she has trusted me.

"I spoke with Negro. We have somewhere to stay," I say.

"I haven't managed to pack your things," she says.

So we put away my clothes and, when we go down to the reception, we find Negro paying our bill. Amparo and David greet him with a hug, while I think that my wife has greatly improved her ability to lie, because I don't perceive either a restless look or a trembling voice. I give the keys to the receptionist, I leave my family behind and, while I organise the suitcases in the trunk of the truck, I can hear them speak, but I can't understand what they say. David laughs. When I get into the car, silence follows me. On the radio, the cumbia sound, together with the central heating, takes me away from the city for a few seconds. "You are a shameless man, and you have to pay me," sing the *50 de Joselito* in their tune just before Negro turns off the radio. After almost an hour we reach the north. I see the opulent neighbourhood, and I notice that all the houses have walls. There is no rubbish in the streets, they are impeccable and full of security guards. We stop in front of an imposing white wall that, more than a house, looks like the entrance to a prison or a hospital.

Our benefactor opens the small door, which seems lost in the wall, and behind it is the house: a huge structure, also white, but covered by the orange flowers of the Black-Eyed Susan vine. We continue to the interior and see the ceiling of the room, in the form

of a dome, adorned with a great painting of paradise; a sky in which you can see many angels scattered. David, impressed, stands there looking up, while Negro shows us around spacious rooms, eight in total, all with jacuzzis and the smell of fresh paint. Most are furnished with huge beds of white sheets. What is this guy doing with a place like this? What's his own house like? I wait for the moment when Amparo asks about his family, but it never comes.

The tour continues to a large back garden, where a marble Virgin rests on an altar. I cross myself and close my eyes. While I am praying, I can feel the voices of Amparo and Negro moving away towards the interior of the house. Instead of a prayer, a lament arrives in my mind, a curse. It's not fair! How happy I would be to live in such a place, isolated from everyone, in a private temple, losing myself in a clean and heavenly solitude. What is it that I envy? The house, the money or Negro's funeral-like destiny? His detachment from faith, or, at least, the product of his own will? I hear them call me and I open my eyes startled. I leave the garden and approach them. Amparo goes to the living room, to accompany David, and I stay with Negro in the kitchen. He asks me if there is anything else I need. I don't know if he does it out of courtesy, or to force me to let go of the very last remnants of my pride.

"Man, I don't want to abuse your trust, but I need you to lend me something else to sustain us a few days and pay for a couple procedures. For now, they asked for a biopsy, they say that it's probably cancer and not an injury. Please, brother, as soon as I have the money, I'll return it with interest, but help me."

"Everything has a solution. Get that surgery organised and calm down. We can fix things up later," he says as he takes a wallet and a huge key chain out of his coat.

He gives the keys, explaining what each one opens. I look at his wallet, it's the master key. He removes a wedge of notes, keeps half, counts the rest and gives it to me. Then he tells me to keep him informed of the costs. "That's it," he says and heads for the door.

I hug him, I thank him again and we say goodbye. Amparo and David also hug him. Their hug looks so sincere and real that I think maybe everything will be fine, that Amparo is not as distressed as I am in the presence of a known criminal. The afternoon clouds begin to redden. When the Negro leaves, Amparo tells me that she is happy, that she is very happy to have a jacuzzi in the room.

"To bathe David after surgery," he says.

We unpacked in the room closest to the door. While she organises things, she asks me to move a single bed from the other room so we can sleep with the child, and I do that. It is a good idea that we are together, especially because of the cold that such a big place produces.

I sleep a couple of hours, until David begins to complain of pain at dawn. Amparo gets up and wraps the child's leg in blankets, trying to mitigate the effect of cold on its inflammation. When he finally stops crying, the sun has already risen. I have hardly been able to sleep. I get up, still drowsy, and I go to the image of the Virgin to pray. I pray for the salvation of my son, for Amparo and mine. I pray without knowing to whom, with words that have no meaning. It's almost automatic, like riding a bicycle. Going back inside, I see that David has knelt on a cushion, to slide along the lustrous floor of the room. Vile images of creeping animals come to mind. Later I notice how much my son looks like me when I was his age

"I don't like that," I say to Amparo.

"What? Your son?"

"Him dragged himself like this. He has to stay active or the leg will atrophy."

"That's not going to happen," Amparo says, turning her back on me and walking towards the boy. "Walking hurts him. I don't want him to feel pain."

My son drags himself under the paradise painted on the roof and I am looking for somewhere I can draw strength from, but my heaven

“EVERYTHING HAS A SOLUTION. GET THAT SURGERY ORGANISED AND CALM DOWN. WE CAN FIX THINGS UP LATER,”

HE SAYS AS HE TAKES A WALLET AND A HUGE KEY CHAIN OUT OF HIS COAT.

seems to be even more fake. Amparo doesn't waste time, and calls Dr. Gretty's office to ask for the biopsy order. It's Friday, and they schedule the operation for Monday. We agree to take advantage of the weekend to buy a wheelchair. On Saturday, we go to an orthopaedic store in the neighbourhood and I see David's enthusiasm for buying his chair. He and his mother choose one with an animal pattern. My insides are shaken by the indifference that they show in the face of imminent death. The colour of the chair reminds me of the hypocrisy of the mural of figurines I saw in the paediatrics section.

Monday comes quickly, and with it the desire to escape from David, from Negro, from my debts, from fear. I wake up full of guilt, without an appetite. I leave the room, I look up at the sky painted in the room, again the desire to fly away! I wonder about the circumstances that have brought me to this moment. The rupture

of my life, a dignified and full life, caused by the appearance of Amparo. Her young skin that made me forget who I was, her body that made me sin and stoop to earthly pleasures. I remember the fear of pregnancy and the perverse desire to interrupt it. The guilt, the shame, the impotence I felt when I was expelled from the seminary. The terrible conclusion, day after day, that I should have been a priest, that I should never have had a son, that's why he came out that way, badly done. It is as if everything was written, and whoever dared to challenge the natural flow of events was punished. But if things cannot be otherwise, how can there be punishments and blessings if we don't have power over our lives, but move according to His will?

It doesn't matter. We make mistakes, but also have faith and guilt, and that is good enough for me. I know that I am guilty with the certainty that only fear produces. And Amparo? Isn't she guilty too? I see her in the room, sitting on the bed, dressing in desperate calm, and I say:

“We have to do something, I don't know; a novena, go up to Monserrate. Penance is good.”

“What's up with you?” She says and laughs, as if I had said something stupid. But I'm serious.

“Look how things have happened. Like if the operation goes well,” I lie, “when recovery's over, we can do penance.”

“You know I'm not into such things.”

“It is a matter of respect, making a sacrifice from time to time. Even more in this situation,” I say.

“I respect you.”

“You just made fun of what I'm saying. Have you forgotten what our situation was a week ago? You have to be grateful.”

“Do you think this is a miracle? A gift from God? Look for Negro and tell him so if you feel so grateful. Is praying your solution? You should be looking for a job to see how we can pay him back.”

“You're the one who sits watching puppets with David in the hospital as if it were a circus, as if this were all a joke, as if it were

easy for me to kneel in front of Negro, as if it had been easy to leave my life for you and David. And on top of that you mock me and recriminate me!"

"Your life, you say. So I'm the one who's always going to have to take the blame?"

"You can't put your bloody pride to one side for a second? Have you ever thought that what is happening to David is our fault?"

"Our fault? What are you talking about?"

"Our fault for bringing him to this world! Yours for tempting me, mine for falling. Our blood is dirty from sin, or have you forgotten?"

"You're crazy!" Amparo says and begins to cry.

Finally the truth! I see David on his cushion, crawling out of the bathroom, crying. I leave the room, thinking about what I just said.

In this cancer, interrupted and unnatural death, I see penance: a slow and ruthless condemnation, an absolute corruption of the body. The symptoms are more like a curse than an illness. A death, dirty, impure, that corrupts bodies and prevents the rest of souls. A death that doesn't bring renewal or cleanliness. In the middle of that thought comes an episode of my youth: the first time I killed a goat. The animal hanging upside down, the smoke rising to the sky in dark spirals, the fear that a weak or misplaced cut would cause unbearable suffering to the creature, condemning it to an eternal moment of agony. The decision with which I sank the blade in its neck. My fascination at watching the brightness of life slipping from his eyes. The gurgling of thick blood, flowing towards a bucket. The still hot meat of the animal, the succulent smell of the embers and the gratitude of the living bodies before the precious food. A party around pure flesh, clean death.

David, on the other hand, is like a badly killed and convulsive goat, whose agony has spoiled his flesh and nobody wants to feed off him. His body destroys itself, as if it were aware that it doesn't belong to this world. Isn't that true justice? It is there where I perceive God's spirit, offering me a second chance, tearing the only thing that separates me from Him from my life. I can hardly stop crying when I think about the beauty of such a punishment.

Amparo ends up organising and dressing David. We call a taxi that takes us to the hospital in record time. The child's sadness is replaced by a gesture of pride when he enters the Institute in his new and colourful wheelchair. During preparation for the surgery, we are approached by a doctor with a face like giraffe, who warns us that they will use general anaesthesia, even though in principle they said that it was an outpatient procedure. We aren't able to ask him why. We say that it's fine, but we understand the seriousness of such a decision. After the anaesthesiologist examines him, David is transferred, and Amparo stays waiting next to the operating room, while I smoke on a small terrace not far away. Then we wait over three hours of total anguish, during which I move between the terrace, smoking cigarettes and the discouraging warnings of my wife, until we receive news of David's passage to the recovery room. When I try to come in to see my son, a guard keeps me at the door. He lets Amparo in.

"For now the mother is more important, sir. You understand," says the guard.

I feel unable to deal with his logic. After a few minutes, Amparo looks out the door, and tells me that the child seems to be fine, but that he has not woken up. She goes back inside and I don't see her again. She is not interested in letting me see David. He doesn't need me. It's her way of paying me back for this morning. I smoke until nightfall, and return to the hall of the recovery room where I fall asleep on a row of plastic chairs.

I wake up very early, stunned by the noise of the hospital loudspeakers, and I realise that someone has thrown a blanket over me. The guard at the door greets me, shaking his head. Was it him? No, it was Amparo, who is sitting right in front of me, chewing on an *arequipe* pastry, powdered sugar falling onto her legs.

"What's that?" I ask her.

"Negro gave it to me. He's finishing up the billing, Jota. He brought you one too. Go and say thank you," she says, holding a

brown paper bag stained with puff pastry fat. I look at the window at the end of the corridor, from where Negro approaches, papers in hand, his face deformed into an unacceptable smile. I get up and greet him. "Who told you where we would be? Amparo? Have you followed us?" He puts my heavy hand on my back and we move toward the terrace, away from my wife. I feel almost like Negro's dragging me, intimidated as I am by his size and smell. I can't help but ask:

"How am I going to pay for all this?"

"For your children? Whatever it takes."

I remain silent, thinking about what he has just said. Before my silence, he continues speaking:

"I'm not lending you money, Jota. I'm doing you a favour. That means you owe me a favour, but right now I don't need anything from you. OK?"

"Yes sir. You've have been almost like a guardian angel for David," I tell him, but deep inside I am horrified. I haven't only handed myself over to another man, to an infamous sinner, but I am now his property. "I haven't seen him, I should go to him."

When I try to return to the corridor, Negro stands in my way and says, "What is written cannot be changed, but it can be corrected; errors can be amended. I can't change the past, but I can recognise that I wasted many opportunities. Do you understand? I don't want to tell you what the death of a child is like, my brother. That's why I did not go into detail the other day."

"I can't imagine," I say, but he keeps talking, with his careful and clear words, as if reading a written speech.

"You are the last person that needs to hear it. Don't even think about what a possible relapse would entail, brother. God save us. When you feel the pain that we have all felt, the only thing you want

**THE DOCTOR
APPROACHES HER, AND
WHILE THEY TALK I GO
AWAY, INDISPOSED
AND DISORIENTED,
THINKING ABOUT WHAT
NEGRO JUST TOLD ME,
ABOUT HONOUR, SIN
AND ATONEMENT.**

to seek is justice. At least that's the only thing I look for: justice, a sense, an order in things."

"Yes, I understand."

"And just like we can't change the past, we can only change the future. Although you can't change the facts or avoid injuries, we have time. And nothing escapes time... When things happened all I wanted was for Stella to feel half the pain I felt. It's fair, right? More than fair."

"Yes, I can imagine."

"Yes, of course. And I thought that the more it hurt her, the less it would hurt me. But that, if she stopped feeling pain, I would also stop feeling pain, do you understand? Healing is possible, I know you understand me. Anyway, nobody understands what one is capable of doing for his children better than you, right?"

"Yes sir," I say, and my hands feel cold and drenched with sweat.

"Now go and see your son," he says and walks over to Amparo, who is waiting for us in the hallway. I walk behind him. He says

goodbye to my wife with a smile, hug and kiss on the cheek. When I pass her by I don't look her in the eye. Negro's words echo in my mind on my way to the recovery room. I walk through the door, I see David and I feel surrounded by emptiness, by a vacuum. He is pale, his eyes absent. I see the tube of the serum coming out of his arm, I feel the smell of the disease emanate from his body. He opens his eyes a little and when he sees me he says deliriously:

"I was with the cow lady" and lets out a weak giggle.

I briefly feel as in a dream, that all of this belongs to another time, to someone else. I dwell on the passivity of cows, ladies, domestic animals, David and myself until a thick voice startles me: it is Dr. Giraffe, who withdraws the serum from David and begins to explain his care to me, but I interrupt him and tell him to wait for Amparo to explain it to her. The guy grimaces in disgust and with his help I lift the child and put him in his colourful wheelchair. Amparo is waiting for us at the door. The doctor approaches her, and while they talk I go away, indisposed and disoriented, thinking about what Negro just told me, about honour, sin and atonement. Amparo finishes talking with Dr. Giraffe, she approaches me and asks:

"Why don't you listen to what the doctor says?"

"You know why... You can explain it to me later. How did you get on last night?"

"I couldn't sleep. David was complaining, so they had to give him morphine".

I perceive a change in her, but I cannot put my finger on it.. Her look? Her voice? Could Negro have told her anything? No, obviously not. She is restless. She hugs me and whispers in my ear: for the first time she is afraid. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"What does the doctor say?" I ask.

"We can leave now, but I don't think it's a good idea."

I get an unexpected sense of satisfaction once I see Amparo's hesitation. It is then that I decide to carry out some minor form of revenge.

"The doctors know what they're talking about. David will be fine."

When we get home, I notice a drop of blood running down the bandage on the boy's leg. The red colour erupts violently in the white neatness of the house, and the unbearable carcinogenic effluvium envelops the small child. I can't go over to him. Why a biopsy? I ask, one can smell how sick he is. What is there to check? It has all been a waste of time and money. We have not even begun the treatment and I have nothing else to give, I am practically enslaved, subject to Negro's whims, as if those of Amparo and David weren't enough! We are controlled by doctors and hospitals, and they all seem to control me. Everyone else has have power over my life, but me. Even a dying child, because he is my son, is capable of dominating me. Why does the weight of destiny seem to crush only me? Where is that impregnable force, that divine will, that sense and order in the world? It is so difficult to keep faith with so few signs!

I can't talk to Amparo; I can't even look her in the eye. I walk to the bathroom, where I take off my clothes and get into the jacuzzi. I contemplate staying there forever, hoping that the holy water fills my lungs with peace, but those suicidal thoughts are as light and ephemeral as God's presence. I try not to think, to ignore the passage of time, the growing presence of death. I spend almost an hour in the water. I can hear Amparo moving furniture on the other side of the door, possibly arranging the room for the tedious task of bathing, dressing and putting the newly operated child to bed. I don't want to go out to help her, I don't want to see them. Either of them. But I know I have to do it, so I get out of the tub carrying with me the unbearable weight of life itself. I try to leave my toxic thoughts in the water, but they latch on to me like a layer of oil. The noises stop. I look in the mirror for a few minutes, unable to recognise myself in the image of an old man with gooseberry skin.

**WHEN WE GET HOME,
I NOTICE THAT A DROP
OF BLOOD PENETRATES
THE BANDAGE ON THE
CHILD'S LEG.**

**THE RED COLOUR
ERUPTS VIOLENTLY IN
THE WHITE NEATNESS
OF THE HOUSE, AND
THE UNBEARABLE
CARCINOGENIC
EFFLUVIUM ENVELOPS
THE SMALL CHILD. I CAN'T
GO OVER TO HIM.**

When I go to the room to get dressed, I see David sitting in his wheelchair, looking at me coldly from a corner of the dark room.

"Where is your mum?" I ask him.

"In the kitchen."

I put on a tracksuit. I leave the room and I feel a delicious smell of herbs, bread and meat. It brings me a deep sense of well-being, although I'm afraid it'll be the last time I will feel that way. I go to the kitchen. Amparo is stirring a pot, lulled by the bubbling sound of the succulent soup. I know she has felt my presence, but she remains still, without flinching. She looks fragile, reduced, earthy. I look at her firm and small body, and I wonder at what moment I allowed her to gain so much power over me, when I let her impose her will on me. I look at her pale heels, the grey border between her sole and her foot, her ankles. Could she have wanted to end up here, with a child and with someone like me? I look at her calves, still full of youthful glow. I have aged much faster, perhaps because of melancholy or because I am waiting for miracles. I look at her hips and buttocks, wrapped in the soft swell of the thin fabric of her gown; I perceive her fertility, the warmth of her body, the vitality of her presence, but at the same time I know that these virtues no longer belong to me. He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap abundantly. I watch her dry, careless hair, and suddenly she turns to see me, with the eyes of a victim, with the same eyes with which any other woman could look at me. The broth continues to boil, emanating an aromatic steam that wafts through the house, and it is I who dares break the sublime silence.

"Did you know that the Negro had a son who was stillborn?"

With each passing day, David gets worse. We visit the Institute frequently during the weeks after the biopsy, for his treatment, but we see how the wound darkens, oozes and releases black clots. Almost twenty days after the procedure, I dare to ask.

"Why was it like that?"

"It was students' work," says Dr. Gretty, freeing herself of any responsibility.

"Your students?"

"No, surgery is another department. Today the results arrived, and the diagnosis is not encouraging. Fibroblastic osteosarcoma of the left tibia with a high degree of malignancy. The leg is compromised," she explains. "The problem is the tendency of these tumours to spread to the lungs. At this advanced stage, it may have already affected other parts of the body. I suggest starting a chemotherapy treatment as soon as possible and doing general examinations: check the femur, kidneys, liver and lungs."

"The goal of preoperative chemotherapy," says the doctor, "is to reduce inflammation and slow down the spread of the disease in the body. Once the tumour is removed, additional treatment sessions will be necessary to ensure the complete elimination of the cancer cells. We wait in silence, convinced that if we omit a single recommendation, a single word, David's chances for survival will decrease, but the jargon is alien, sterile, unknown words that are lost in the air; all the while, the body beside us convulses, my son's body, fighting against itself in order to not be devoured. The doctor continues talking, says that in such a small child there is a high probability that the blood vessels won't be able to bear the chemical load of the medicines. I look at him, lying on the stretcher, weighing half of what he weighed when we arrived in the city, unable to walk and to clean himself on his own, becoming an organic manifestation of everything that is wrong with me. While the two women talk, I get up, my vision stunned from crying, and leave the office through the corridor. The windows are dirty, the churches look small. Why do I owe so much to the past, to Negro, to David, to this hospital, to a missing God? I would like to be sure that I am a victim, that although I have sinned, I have remained true to my principles, but it is not so. During this time I have not expected David's recovery, but his liberating death. Amparo leaves the office and touches me with a cold hand that feels like a small

amphibious creature. I try to remember when was the last time we were away from the child, like now, and I can't bear to look at her, for fear that she might turn into another woman, any other woman.

"The doctor made some calls and they'll take David to the hospital right away", she tells me coldly.

Fly away, like a greasy pigeon, towards the dome of a church and beyond. Losing myself in the mountains, between the trees and the sky.

"Did you hear me?" Amparo asks, raising her voice.

"Yes..."

If I trust what a doctor says, why carry the burden of faith? Gretty leaves the office, pushing David's wheelchair. The child has a new and clean bandage, in which a new speck of impure blood can be seen. Amparo is herself again, as am I, and fate reappears, the machine of duty, pushing us to another of the buildings of the Institute: the building of hospitalised residents. The structure is completely white, quite different from the exposed brick that covers the rest of the hospital. We don't have to go too far, and when we get there we ride the lift up to the floor where the children are. Throughout the journey I am struck by the fact that Gretty pushes David's chair, and that she has decided to accompany us of her own free will. I wonder if she, Amparo and Negro are comfortable with what they do, if they don't see how they are affected by the child's condition or by the absence of the human will. If they believe that they act in their own interest or if they are also manipulated by some divine or dark force. What is it that moves me away from them, what makes me so different? We walk onto the floor and towards David's new room. I then notice both that the rooms have no doors and that most children are alone. The main corridor seems to extend beyond where the eye can see. I see the white walls of the interior devoid of hypocritical decorations. They are no longer needed. It's too late for them.

We put David into bed. Gretty says goodbye and leaves, and a pretty young nurse channels the child with the first of many bags of

chemotherapy. Before leaving, she tells us that only one companion is allowed per room. She adds that if we should ever need anything, please let her know. Amparo turns on the tiny television set in a corner, but it doesn't work. David falls asleep lulled by the static and the steady trickle of the serum. David falls asleep.

"What are we going to do?", she asks.

"Negro told me that now I owe him a favour," I say.

Because There is no time for lies now. We both know what that means, what everybody says around town. Nobody dares to speak. I sense Amparo's resolve to approach me, hug me and let her suppressed tears flow, but none of this happens. I stand by the stretcher, watching the soft, gentle face of the child, until the sky darkens.

The pretty nurse looks through the door and tells us that one of the us has to go. My body trembles as I turn around and face Amparo, who is staring at me. We remain still, completely aware of the finitude of this moment. The silence is unbreakable. I lean on the stretcher, kiss David and draw a cross on his forehead using my thumb. A cross on his forehead. Amparo is tearing up and looking at me with fear and hatred. She knows what I will have to do. But no tears or words come out. She doesn't say anything. She is unable to materialise what is imminent. I leave the unfamiliar room while trying to imagine what is going through this woman's mind. The woman who must now take care of this unfamiliar child. I look at the hospitalisation hall for the last time. When I walk down the stairs, it feels as if I were ascending. I leave the Institute feeling the visceral freedom of a martyr; a dying peace, the tranquillity of a condemned man. I am aware that I have left my family, but I feel free from all guilt, from all debt. I have given a lost man his family back, I have punished the blind pride of sinful woman and I have saved my son from agony through the embrace of life or the embrace of death. I walk among the rubbish and the rubble, towards the churches I saw through the window, longing for the sacred presence to uphold the meaning of my sacrifice. I peek inside the Lady of Carmen

**I TRY TO REMEMBER
WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME
WE WERE AWAY FROM THE
CHILD, LIKE NOW, AND
I CAN'T BEAR TO LOOK
AT HER, FOR FEAR THAT
SHE MIGHT TURN INTO
ANOTHER WOMAN, ANY
OTHER WOMAN.**

**"THE DOCTOR MADE
SOME CALLS AND
THEY'LL TAKE DAVID
TO THE HOSPITAL
RIGHT AWAY", SHE
TELLS ME COLDLY.**

church and catch a glimpse of a few parishioners in complete silence. They are listening to, but hardly understanding, the voice of a diminutive priest, a voice that becomes distorted and breaks down in the wind. And then I sense a nascent fear. Before it can get a grip on me, I walk on by and go about my way.

A MAN OF STATEMENTS



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One could never pay too much for sensations.
Oscar Wilde, *The Picture Portrait of Dorian Gray*

Before going to sleep, I like to read the last thing I have written down that day in the diary. *Confession number 02: I murdered my only friend. What makes this a confession is that I did not care. Friendship is a human pact and pacts, sometimes, are broken.*

The three days before this last note were strange. Before contact with Ecosystem Number 01, I was a mere wretch. Maybe because I wasn't human enough, or stupid enough, I had become a living being who completely lost the ability to be amazed. While certain experiences produce a startled "Oh!" in some, for me those same experiences produce questions instead of exclamations. A kind of "yeah, and...?" "Why am I supposed to be impressed?" I recognised this while reading research by Levick about the behaviour of a certain species of penguin. The explorer discovered some "odd things." *Adelaide penguins have sex between the males, rape the females, kill offspring and practice necrophilia.* I read the same finding twice and it still did not impress me. Surely an older version of myself would have been excited to read this.

Since I was left alone almost nothing has interested me. But time moves on. My memories tortured me unless I silenced them by occupying my mind with something. It was an hour before Tafur knocked on my door. I tried to exhaust that time looking at a photograph in which I was next to a tortoise asleep in the Galapagos Islands. No animal in an alert state ever wanted to be photographed with me. So, in order to look as happy as other people when they travel, I tried to take many photographs to provide evidence of the experience. When the animals fell asleep I took the opportunity to photograph myself with them. I even remembered that a tortoise

quickened its pace when I tried to capture it with the camera. The memory of the photo's origins saddened me.

Losing my capacity for wonder was like plunging into mud yet still managing to come out clean. Even this aseptic simplicity became problematic for me, as didn't let me enjoy anything, for better or for worse. I rarely dare to do anything. I only seek how to kill time while this simplicity abandons me and despair returns so I don't feel alone. Now, it isn't easy to work out if I was better off before knowing human company, or if I long for it despite my keen understanding of its hypocrisy and awareness of its fakeness. I was still unaware that Tafur would cause the perplexity to return to my life that very day. I spent only twenty minutes looking at the photo. I still had to do something for the remaining forty. Fortunately, when observing objects doesn't work, there are always other options. At least, I can agree with some of my species when I decide to waste time watching television. I usually relax watching programs about veterinarians and defenceless animals. It is one of the few things that manage to move me. However, these programs are usually broadcast in the morning. The rest of the programming is documentaries about certain species and their animal life. I didn't bother to change the channel. I was prepared to watch whatever they were broadcasting, even if it was just paid advertising.

After several seconds, the black screen changed showing a general plan of a beautiful African landscape, a clean sky, a green meadow, all accompanied by a gentle breeze, natural sounds and a fawn a few days old. The fawn, still clumsy, was swinging his tail while his mother licked his head. The deer and their young coexisted in the same habitat as the baboons. However, for this occasion, in which I was just the spectator, a dominant baboon decided to have that innocent fawn for his dinner. The deer mother knocked futilely against the baboon's huge and rigid body. He managed to confront her with a blunt blow to the head. The fawn was trapped in the baboon's other giant hand, trying to free itself in vain.

The deer mother, disoriented by the strikes, tried one last time to free her baby. She took a punch that made her collapse. Recovering, frustrated and wounded, she went away to witness the baboon devour her baby from a safe distance. I couldn't believe what I saw. She gave up.

She surrendered her fawn. Why don't you fight for your baby? I wanted to ask her. The camera focused on the face of the mother deer, her gaze answered my question: two deeply black and empty eyes. Who was I to judge? The inability to keep what we want is not just a defect of men, nor is it to surrender. I sensed her frustration, her uselessness. She looked so much like me: both static, from a distance, watching how others help themselves to what we want and leave us their leftovers, as if to replace their absence with charity. When I lost what I loved, I was left the minutiae of a false life, for charity. When the deer mother lost what she wanted, she was left with the small broken body of her offspring, out of charity. It is at that moment, when we are far from what we love, that we can recognise our own disability.

The baboon grabbed the fawn by its hind legs as if picking up a suit with tweezers and looking for wrinkles. He stuck his canines in, biting deeply. The fawn blinked as it was being devoured, passing from suffering to the void of death. After its hind legs and belly were eaten, only its front legs appeared to move during the baboon's final bites. The spasm disappeared along with its short life. The last images were recorded in my head: the baboon returned satisfied to his herd, the deer mother returned to her baby and sat down beside it. Transmission was interrupted by an ad break that showed non-stick pans in which the meat doesn't stick or burn.

I was somewhat disturbed, to my surprise. I had learned that baboons often break the covenant of coexistence not so much by survival instinct but, rather, by caprice, their vanity to ratify their superiority over deer, a gesture to maintain order and eliminate any hint of animal rebellion. It made me think how similar animals are to humans, no matter how much effort we make to remove ourselves from this inheritance. Some humans are just like selfish baboons, while others look like defenseless fawns or frustrated deer mothers. Yet, we have something in common with them all: we all establish pacts and sometimes we break them.

This short episode of animal life generated the first thought of that day. I took my diary, first I wrote down the date, then I consigned the idea. *Consideration Number 01: Living is, in all cases, both with animals and humans, a test of nature. Evidence: To die, that would*

mean not passing the test. I must admit that I am rarely terrified of the fierce beauty of nature. It is not bestial. Rather, it's perfect as it works according to rules that, while they may seem cruel, they allow the world to keep a balance, unlike human rules that unbalance everything simply for the benefit of one of the parties.

This programme triggered a series of thoughts that I thought were extinct. Suddenly, I inferred something and again I took my agenda to write it down. *Hypothesis number 01: The perfection of nature is also in death. Evidence: None.* That's why it's just a hypothesis. I signalled the thought with an asterisk to return to it at a later point to try to prove it. Days later I checked it. Again. I switched myself off, the hint of emotion had played itself out. The documentary wasn't strong enough to waste more time, but luckily, I heard the engine of a car approaching. Tafur usually arrives early. He is punctual. In fact, it is the only way he shows his manners. All of us who know Tafur have the unconscious habit of calling him by his surname instead of calling him by his first name, Francisco. This has been the case since we became members of Communist Youth. Apparently, the military regime struck deeper ground in him than in others, for whom it was an experience just like any other.

Three minutes passed since the sound of the engine stopped and Tafur had not knocked on the door. I went out to investigate. He was clearly demonstrating his manners. Tafur was chasing one of my sows, who had escaped from the small farm. The sow was very intelligent and made him run in circles to exhaust him.

"Don't bother her, Tafur," I shouted, but it was useless. The childlike smile on his face, the product of running after the sow, was undiminished.

"I'm not bothering her. She escaped from the farm and I'm going to catch her," Tafur answered.

"She won't escape from there. Leave her and let's go."

Tafur confessed, "no, man, I want to see what she has on."

To my misfortune, Tafur had noticed something strange about the sow's body, despite her being covered in mud. This was his

**SINCE I WAS LEFT
ALONE ALMOST
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INTERESTED ME. BUT
TIME MOVES ON.**

**MY MEMORIES
TORTURED ME UNLESS
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OCCUPYING MY MIND
WITH SOMETHING.**

entertainment. He had his usual expression whenever he discovered something potentially humiliating in others. He was a kind of shame hunter. I was always an easy prey. My friend took a while to recognise that the little sow was running him around in circles. As soon as he worked that out he stopped chasing her and waited for her to finish her turn. Conchita fell into his trap, Tafur caught her and began my degradation.

"Oh! She has clothes on. Mario, why is the sow wearing a blouse, ah?"

"Tafur, that's none of your business."

"Why? I want to know."

"I'll tell you later, when things are calmer."

"Ay, don't tell me you are moving in together."

"Stop talking shit, Tafur."

(Silence)

"Tafur, what do you really think?"

"Yes," he said confidently. "Suddenly you don't like your own species anymore and you want to try more exotic bodies."

"Tafur, you moron, I'm not fucking Conchita, I just put a fucking blouse on her. That's it."

My friend, surprised by my abrupt but weak anger, behaved like a dominant baboon. In other words, he acted, driven by his vanity to show his superiority over me. Only, Tafur did not devour me physically but rather through small doses of humiliation.

"Oh! It even has a name. Excuse me, *mademoiselle* Conchita. You look *spectaculaire* tonight *mademoiselle* Conchita. Allow me to take you to your mansion, *mademoiselle*."

Tafur improvised a guard of honour for the sow. I didn't think it necessary to take the sow to her sty, and I told him so. He didn't care, he did it anyway. My humiliation was overwhelming. Tafur approached the pig sty to lock Conchita in, and in doing so discovered that all the other sows also wore blouses. He could not contain the surprise and again he confronted me. He recognised the clothes. Tafur was amused to see the pigs in their sty wearing Vanessa's clothes. Of course, he misrepresented my intention.

"Very sick, Mario," he said with pleasure. He misunderstood the meaning of the garments.

"Your mind's a pigsty!"

"Well, they're pigs. What do you want me to think, Mr. Pig?"

"Tafur, I dressed them like that to see Vanessa like a sow and... hate her better."

"So, do you also give it to them in the ass from time to time?"

"You don't understand, you don't understand anything, just leave me alone."

"Don't get like that, look I think the idea is very good. Just don't go marrying them and having a harem like the Arabs, a harem of sows!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Tafur took the scarf that covered his neck and fastened it on his head, simulating a turban.

"Hi friends, may I introduce you to my pig wives."

This episode brought a simple problem to my mind: How many pigs with blouses are needed to make me look like a zoophile? Answer: only one. I approached him. He was still smiling. I managed to unearth the little dignity I had left and I showed it to him with all my fury. "I want you to go," I said. Yes, I still don't know where I found the courage. To be honest, I felt rude. I recognised the surprised look on his face. He wasn't surprised by my order, rather because it was becoming a challenge. Tafur had to recognise that, despite being at a disadvantage, weaklings are not defended by their resignation as he believed, but rather by self-preservation. Intelligent species don't waste energy on profit-less efforts, whether consuming a life or a simple sense of well-being. A species like Tafur spends all its energy imposing its superiority over others, so that when an apparent weakling gets confrontational, it cannot defend itself, as all of its strength is merely cardboard armour.

Discovering this attitude of Tafur gave me a new thought. I felt it was important. It was a mere consideration, but it had potential as a hypothesis. I needed to write it down in my diary. I started running towards the house, I repeated the thought in my head to not forget it. *Consideration Number 01: Humans operate with an egocentric motor that is a new embodiment of survival instinct.*

I managed to write down the thought that was beginning to overlap and disfigure in my head. Heads are not a safe place for ideas as they may deform or extinct forever. Tafur came in a few seconds. We crossed looks. His will was always done. I threw my look 'I really want you to go because you offended me a lot' and he responded with his look of 'I

don't care, I'm your friend and I'll give you something so that today you don't kill yourself and become a burden on my conscience.' We sit on the sofa that now is as my bed. Tafur noticed the disaster that my home has become. He looked at me uneasily. I wasn't surprised. He noticed my false naturalness and pretended to accept it.

"Mario, you are my mate and I think a lot of you. You know I do."

"Yes, I believe you, mate."

"So, are we OK mate? But seriously, that whole thing's very weird, mate. Look, I'm not going to push you, when you want to, you can talk to me, right?"

"Thank you for not pressing me."

"I have a surprise to raise your spirits, but the surprise will get here in a while."

"That's OK."

"Do you want to talk about anything in the meantime?"

"Yes I would like to very much."

"But no depressing shit, or Dagerman, or Borges, not even Camus," simulating my voice. "I'm stuck in the absurd, Tafur."

How did he know? He's my friend, and he knows me too well. Under those conditions I didn't have much to talk about. He was the philosophy expert. I liked to talk to him because he explained to me many ideas that seemed attractive, but he got tired of teaching.

"We can do something else then."

"Yes, what do you want to do Mario?"

"Do you want to watch animal documentaries?"

"What?"

"Yes, for example, to see how the daily life of the Australian red kangaroos... no, it's more like about the lives of all the mammals that live in the Australian red desert.

~...

"It starts at eight o'clock, it's very interesting.

"Hum, I can imagine.

"What do you say?

"And if we just watch porn?"

"Well if you want to."

Tafur was thrilled at the idea of watching pornography. He took some glasses from the kitchen and a bottle of rum from the old-fashioned booze cabinet, inherited, just like the house, from my alcoholic grandparents. Tafur prepared two drinks even knowing that he would end up taking mine. He does it to seem cordial and disguise his "alcoselfishness." Drinking alone bothers him because he feels his compulsion for drinking can be observed. He pulled out a clear, plastic baggie with coke from his trouser pocket. I thought he'd given up. He moved the coffee table closer. It wasn't in the centre, but in a forgotten corner and arranged everything on it. He began to change the channels looking for porn. They were deactivated. I could feel the incriminatory look in his eyes, he was blaming me for something. "I don't pay for porn," I said. "Then connect the Wi-Fi to the TV and put it on," he replied revealingly. "I haven't paid the internet," I said to end things. Tafur's face revealed his disappointment.

"We'd better talk."

"About anything?" I asked excitedly.

"Hum, well just don't get too heavy with the you want to die and whatever other mental shit you're going through."

"Tafur, what is time?"

"Oh no! Let's talk about your suicidal thoughts."

"You only want to know about my problems to avoid my concerns. I want to know some things that you understand better."

"But you already know what time is, you live it, it affects you."

"But what do the philosophers say? What is succession?"

"You already know or something you've heard. Remember when you were skipping off Biology and you'd slip into my classes."

"A long time ago. Remind me."

"Yes, that's what we talked about when we were in the class of... of... that bald fag, what was his name? Pachecho."

"Pachecho is a great guy. He is the most pleasant and intelligent person I have ever met."

"Yes, Mario! Pachecho was great. That's how fags are, great... and they have AIDS, like Foucault."

That last comment pierced my sensibility, which seems like a layer of water. I find attractive and strange the way Tafur always perverts everything. He manages to destroy the virtues of everything and reduce it to the most basic state, that of humans. A thought occurred to me about that. I should write it down quickly. I looked for my diary and discovered that Tafur was sitting on it. "Tafur, get up, quickly," I said anxiously. Tafur was amused to see my despair. He didn't stand up. I pushed him and he fell off the sofa to the floor. I opened the book hurriedly, put the pen on paper to write the idea but it had disappeared from my mind. It had vanished. Tafur stood up somewhat surprised and sat down again on the sofa. He was worried about my diary but had never pressured me to talk about it, in spite of his evident curiosity.

"What do you write in there, Mario?"

"Things," I said suspiciously.

"Just stuff?"

"Ideas."

"Yes? Tell me one."

"Well, they are more like affirmations."

"Well, tell me one."

"I don't want to, I'm still not ready."

"Mario, I've never been nosy about your diary, I'm just curious."

"They are notes about my ideas. I write them in the form of affirmations."

"OK, I won't judge."

"Consideration Number 01: Humans move by an egocentric motor that is a new embodiment of the survival instinct."

Tafur stared at a fixed point on the wall, his gaze was lost but his mind was focused, I know. Maybe he does care for what I write.

Maybe he will help me better understand these things that I think. His expression changed, he acquired the look of a specialist interpreting a painting that is not to his liking.

"Well, Mario, I don't agree with you. You are quite right about self-centredness as an motor, but I don't know if the desire for survival is its incarnation."

"Can you be clearer, please?"

"I find the idea of the diary interesting, I'll buy one."

"And what about my idea?"

"Well, the impression doesn't seem too developed, but it is understandable, you don't move in the field of philosophy, of ideas! I also have an affirmation about the motor of humanity, but for me it is not egocentricity in humans, nor is it something as basic as the survival of animals."

"Are you denying the instinct of survival?"

"No, Mario, nothing like that. My statement applies to humans and animals and it seems to me a bigger thesis. It's a shame to say it to you like this, it's just that I don't have it formulated like yours."

"Tell me the idea and we'll work on it."

"OK. It's simple, I suspect that all species, humans and animals, alike, are powered by an engine that is not egocentricity or survival, but death. Yes, death. Because the certainty of the death is what causes all the evils in the world, as well as all its virtues. Death is the true motor of life. What do you think? Brutal, right?"

"I think it sounds good."

"Sounds good? It doesn't just sound good! It's real. Are you blind? Maybe you haven't finished my readings. I can't blame you."

"Yes, maybe I haven't, but none of us can do anything about this. There is no way to prove it."

Tafur blinked in surprise. The questioning of his newly conceived claim was something he couldn't afford. He's never lost an intellectual fight. This is what our chats to burn time had become, all of my attempts to burn time and not feel lonely ended like this: in disaster.

TAFUR WAS THRILLED AT THE IDEA OF WATCHING PORNOGRAPHY. HE TOOK SOME GLASSES FROM THE KITCHEN AND A BOTTLE OF RUM FROM THE OLD-FASHIONED BOOZE CABINET, INHERITED, JUST LIKE THE HOUSE, FROM MY ALCOHOLIC GRANDPARENTS.

"And is that the reaction of people when they are going to die is not enough evidence. Have ever you seen a human being die, Mario?"

"I saw a fawn die."

"Monkeys, pigs, kangaroos, no. Hu-ma-ns, hu-ma-ns," said Tafur, showing some symptoms of irritation.

"Humans, no," I answered dejectedly.

"Hum... well, I think I have reformulated my statement and now it has the structure of yours. Look, when people knows that they are going to die, they are fragile, animalistic. They return to their most basic states, that I give you, but certainty the face of death reveals the incarnation of the true human motor that is life, itself."

"What do you want to come up with?" I asked.

"It's more of an aesthetic taste. Look, nothing is more beautiful for me than seeing the helplessness of someone who believes that they are going to die, or better, who is sure that they will die, because there is that motor of death pressuring life, to conserve it."

"I've never seen anything like that. But Tafur, as I say, they're only ideas, there is no way to prove anything."

At my insistence on the impossibility of corroborating the hypothesis, Tafur gritted his teeth. I made him despair. He gets very heavy when he despairs, but it was too late to remedy it.

"I'm going to prove it to you," he said defiantly.

We seal the pact with our eyes. Tafur put his little finger in the baggie to test the coke. His face showed his approval. He raked up two lines for each nostril. He became euphoric. I just wanted to keep killing time. Tafur is the kind of person whose competitiveness is based not on material reward. Rather, it's emotional. The benefit for him is feeding on the egos he destroys. My ego is so fragile because of the sustenance it has given to Tafur over the years that I don't understand why he still strives to surpass me. He is a man incapable of losing, I thought later.

That is not the best example of a conversation. However, it's been awhile that isn't possible to talk to me. Tafur strives to put up with me. I try to do the same. That's what our friendship is based on. We are like two magnets that repel each other when they are too close. We both knew how to handle distance: not be too close to feel the repulsion, or too far away to miss it. I had a thought about us and I tried to write it down quickly while Tafur poured himself a second shot of rum. *Hypothesis number 02: All friendship is mediated by chaos, which in itself is a form of equilibrium.* Even so, he is my friend. My only friend.

There was a knock on my door. Tafur jumped with emotion: "Your surprise," he told me. He opened the door and a woman came in

with a coat that reached her ankles. She pulled it off and I could see the long, black hair that ended just where the outlined shape of her buttocks began. Tafur greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. The woman arranged two large bags in my dining room. She stood with her hands on her waist on a Persian rug that belonged to my grandmother that I hadn't cleaned since Vanessa left. "Dominatrix Ducati," she said. Tafur presented himself with a false name but, when introducing me, he gave my real name. "Do you lads have anything in mind?" The woman asked. "I promised my friend a surprise, so surprise us," Tafur said somewhat flirtatiously.

Ducati installed her things in my messy room. Tafur and I watched the woman from the sofa. There was something in Tafur's vicious gaze, but it wasn't obscenity. He seemed anxious. I wasn't. I realised that with the little slut my mate is, at any time could he take his cock out and start wanking and forget our little intellectual altercation. However, it did not happen. He remembered it. "I'm going to prove it to you," he told me.

Ducati had a certain animalistic attitude that is usually an aphrodisiac for basic reproducers like me. Marked eyebrows added to her beast-like aura. She had on ten-centimetre heels, a latex suit with strategic holes for their breasts and nipple rings. Tafur discovered my surprise at her piercings. Ducati also wore a black collar, like those that are placed on pets; the necklace also had a ring. "Why?". "It's for her master to dominate her like a bitch," Tafur whispered.

Apparently, she was a dominatrix capable of alternating her power figure with a master. It was an interesting agreement. Pleasure was what mattered, prescribed in high doses of pain. Ducati spread out her sex toys on my dirty carpet. I recognised penis pumps, whips, dildos, handcuffs, but none really caught my attention. The dominatrix got comfortable. Tafur had a metallic expression that I did not understand. Just before, he looked turned on. Ducati colonised my room and I offered no resistance. Tafur gazed at me reproachfully, but why? She connected her cell phone to my sound system, and put on strange music. It modified the atmosphere of the whole room. I liked it. In fact, it is the closest thing to a state of relaxation that I will ever have.

♪ I don't know her from another miss
I don't know you from another
See me run now you're gone...dream on ♪

She opened a small suitcase and extracted a small battery. What's that for? I wondered. She sat on my dirty carpet with her sex toys. She connected two power cables to the electrical box, then crimped the wire clips to the rings on her nipples. The electricity invaded her body. She suffered small spasms. I liked watching the contractions. Her breasts were hidden and revealed constantly. More convulsions. Then, she closed her eyes, her mouth ajar. She stayed like that for a few seconds. She seemed to enjoy it. I was enjoying it to. The music continued to sound. At one point, she bit her lips and blood stained her shiny teeth. She blew me a red kiss, and then Tafur. She increased the electrical charge on her body, then spat on her chest. Her spit made her nipple sparkle. On the sofa, I also tensed up because of the sparks.

♪ Toy-like people make me boy-like
Toy-like people make me boy-like
They're invisible, when the trip it flips
They get physical, way below my lips ♪

I looked at Tafur. He had that contemptuous expression on his face, one that usually has when he thinks things are vulgar. I came to suspect, but I don't want to say anything then and be bad friend, that the purpose of bringing the prostitute was more a surprise for him than for me, one that I did not enjoy now. His appetite for sex is greater than mine. Well, mine is practically nil. However, Ducati managed to spark something in me, and awakening something from nothing is salvation. My deviant attention returned to the woman. She removed a clamp from her nipple. Tafur continued with his concrete look. Poker face, I thought. She will do something with that clamp, I sensed it. She blew me a kiss and with the head of the clip rubbed her clitoris until finally it

pricked up. I was captured. Now, lying down, her breathing stirred and the seizures increased. She held on tightly to the filthy carpet and... ahhhhh. A heavy white liquid came down her opening. She slid her index finger down the path that led to her anus and, chasing the fluid that escaped from her vagina, picked up a sample, put her finger to her mouth. She tasted it and smiled. I also smiled with her. Tafur didn't smile. He didn't appear to have liked it.

"That is all?" Tafur questioned Ducati.

"That wasn't good enough for you?" Answered the dominatrix, standing up and putting away her things.

"I promised my friend something special."

"Well, he seemed very comfortable."

"He doesn't know what he wants, I do. I was thinking of doing something else."

"Like what, my lovely?"

"Role play. What do you think?"

"I only submit to my master, my lovely."

"And what could make you change your mind?"

"Maybe I could do it for five hundred other reasons."

"Five hundred thousand? It's too much. Or is it that you have a gold-plated cunt or recite poetry or do charity work?"

"Look, my lovely, don't get too heavy, ok? That's what I'm worth. Can you pay it or not?"

Tafur changed his tone. The strategy of the abrupt hunter doesn't work with all species.

"My love, I thought of three hundred reasons. How about it?"

Ducati stretched her lips and lowered one of her eyebrows as if contemplating an opportunity that would change her life. Maybe it was.

"Three hundred seems good to me," she stated flirtatiously.

**THERE WAS A KNOCK
ON MY DOOR. TAFUR
JUMPED WITH EMOTION:
"YOUR SURPRISE,"
HE TOLD ME. HE
OPENED THE DOOR
AND A WOMAN CAME
IN WITH A COAT THAT
REACHED HER ANKLES.**

Tafur left the sofa. He approached Ducati slowly, it seemed a strange ritual. He removed his shoes and then his shirt, exposing the torso of an occasional sportsman which had some tattoos from when he was an irresponsible young man. Ducati was pleased to see the ink on Tafur's body, perhaps it made her think that he too found pleasure in the pain of a tattoo. Tafur took her by the hair and abruptly brought the prostitute's head down to his belly. She wanted to bite him, he stopped her. "You still have no freedom, you are my hostage," Tafur told Ducati, who was just beginning to understand his game.

Interesting. Tafur involved the concept of freedom to play. I like the little I know about the concept, although it's still not very clear to me why it's sexy. Why is this supposed to turn me on? I cannot imagine a couple of gorillas playing the kidnapper and the hostage. Ducati suggested creating a safe word. Tafur didn't consider it necessary but he accepted it anyway. Ducati requested that I

choose the word of security. “Baboon,” I said excitedly. “*Bambino?* Bedouin?” the woman tried to guess. Tafur scolded her for asking me. “Heat,” he resolved. “You say heat and I’ll stop, OK?” my friend asked Ducati, who accepted reluctantly.

Tafur tied her hands, put chains on her ankles (to simulate the chains of the kidnapped), spread a clean sheet on the Persian carpet and lay her down there. I still did not understand why this was meant to be sexy. Tafur whispered things in Ducati’s ear that I could not hear. I imagined that they were erotic things, key words for those rituals. Tafur began writhing while he cupped the woman’s neck with his big hands. He applied strength. I noticed the tension in his arms, Ducati only curved her body a little when she felt his strength.

He applied more pressure and Ducati became uneasy although she did not remove his hands. Tafur start to penetrate her rhythmically. He inserted the five fingers of his right hand into her mouth in an attempt to suffocate her. Ducati showed signs of choking but Tafur, instead of stopping, stuck his hand in more abruptly until she bit him. He withdrew his hand with an accompanying shout “you bitch.” “What the fuck are you doing?” the prostitute interposed. “We’re playing, calm down, we’re only playing,” Tafur said placing both hands around Ducati’s throat. By now she was trying to remove them. I understood what he was doing. Ducati looked at me. She knew she was going to die. Frustration has a certain particularity in its expression because it reflects fear and resignation, in addition to disability.

Ducati looked like the fawn I saw being devoured. She would go from a state of suffering to simple death, nor would she experience agony, for better or for worse. Tafur had a hunter’s concentration. As he writed in and out and over Ducati’s body he didn’t stop looking at her and pressing on her throat with his hands. “Heat, heat,” the dominatrix shouted, but my friend continued. “Mario, look at her, look at her,” Tafur ordered me. “She knows, she knows,” said Tafur, looking at her with his exorbitant eyes like two planets that went out of their orbit. “Heeeaaaagggggh, heeeaaaagggggh,” Ducati struggled to say

the word until she said nothing more. When Tafur took his hands off her, thinking only that she had fainted, the woman’s face looking at me, accusing me of being his accomplice.

Tafur moved away from Ducati’s body in the hope that her immobility was due to unconsciousness caused by a lack of oxygen. Tafur tried to revive her by applying artificial respiration but Ducati was only a prostitute and not Jesus Christ. Twenty seconds passed and Ducati did not wake up. Tafur covered his mouth with a hand so I wouldn’t hear him cry. He moved it and repeatedly kicked the dead prostitute’s body. “Mario, she isn’t coming to, Mario,” he said, about to have a nervous breakdown. “That’s because she’s dead,” I replied as I stopped him hitting the corpse.

It was quite obvious, but Tafur didn’t want to accept it. Tafur looked like a tender, baby hedgehog. Even in this state of vulnerability, he tried to protect himself with his childish quills. He tried to pierce me with one of his barbs by saying “if she’s dead, you’re an accomplice.”

I didn’t see the point in trying to bring her back to life. In fact, the woman looked much better now. She was more sympathetic dead, like she was trustworthy. Beforehand, she was a character named Ducati within another character with a name given to her by her parents and that they thought she represented. But now it seems more natural because death is the most authentic fact and captures the simulation of the living. I wanted to observe her a little more. It was more than simple morbidity, although the mere appearance of desire was enough for someone asexual like me.

The desperation, fueled by alcohol and drugs, destabilised my friend, who kicked, whimpered while threatening me, then asked for my help, and never stopping insulting me. I didn’t care what he did because, somehow, he had done it all for the highly respectable notion of testing an idea. I observed the emptiness in Ducati’s face and I noticed that death had printed something on her. I didn’t find it vulgar. As I watched the victim, lost in thought, I felt Tafur’s fist in my face. He blamed me for not stopping him. I managed to hold his hands and hold him, then I felt the dampness penetrate the fabric of my shirt. “What are we

going to do?" He asked in the midst of tears. In any other context he would already have a solution. In this context the act of leadership fell on me, so I tried to stabilise him.

"Tafur, calm down, we'll think something."

"You want me to calm down? Of course, it's not you, it's not *your* life that's going to be fucked up."

"What makes you think my life won't be fucked up?"

"It doesn't matter, when they catch us, you're going to turn on me."

"No, Tafur, it doesn't have to go that far."

"So how do you plan to fix this?"

"Well..."

"Well, what?"

"We have to... make her disappear," I said, doubtfully.

"Crazy shit. All this is your damn fault."

"Don't treat me like that."

"I wanted to help you, but you turn everything into shit. It's like you don't even care, look at yourself! You're so calm. How can you be so calm?"

Tafur spat out the anger that had taken him over. He looked like a mad dog. It is not good to be near rabid dogs. They can bite. I tried to be reasonable about the situation and see it in the most objective way.

"Well, because she's dead and that's it. We cannot do anything to bring her back to life."

"And that's it? Mario, tell me something different, fuck it."

"I got this."

"What?"

"I'll handle it. It's my fault and I'm going to fix everything."

Tafur's expression changed as a result of what I said. He began to gain confidence again, I saw how our roles had changed. I didn't care. Now he seemed to want to comfort me as if I were a repentant child after committing a prank.

"It's partly my fault, Mario, somehow."

"Come now, you've no head for this. You have to calm down and make sure no one discovers what happened here. I'll do everything else. OK?"

"And what are you planning on doing? Are you going to throw it to the pigs?"

"Hell no! When animals taste human flesh they get violent."

"So?"

"I'm going to study a little to solve the best way to disappear it. It must be as clean as possible, so I will look for a place near the river to make all of our traces disappear. Well, it doesn't matter, you don't know anything, you're going to go home and try to forget this. I'll take care of everything, absolutely everything."

"You won't give me up?"

"No, nobody will ever know. OK?"

"I trust you mate. I don't have the head for this, I'm not a killer."

"Right. Can you drive?"

"Yes."

"Get your things and go. I'll take care of it."

"Wouldn't it be better if I helped you?"

"How are you going to help me? You don't know about land or decomposition time, not even how to make human fertiliser, it is not a field that you know anything about. Go away! I got this."

"I have no head for this."

Tafur picked up his shirt, his shoes and dressed. He gave me one last hug, his desperation had diminished. He looked at me but his face did not say "thank you." It looked more like "don't mess it up any further". After Tafur left my house, I couldn't have felt sadder. He was right in everything. I recognised that I was wrong. It wasn't him who has the capacity to pervert everything, it was me. That last thought took on a certain structure in my mind, I felt I had to write it down. That day I recorded my first incongruity on my agenda. *Incongruence Number 01: My greatest capacity is to pervert the virtues of things, snatching the vitality of everything I touch. Evidence: my state of solitude.*

NOW HE SEEMED TO WANT TO COMFORT ME AS IF I WERE A REPENTANT CHILD AFTER COMMITTING A PRANK.

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Tafur cried for two minutes in the seat of his car. I checked Ducati's personal items. Tafur washed his face to erase the evidence of guilt. I put the prostitute's belongings in a bag. Tafur entered his apartment. I cleaned up the mess. Tafur lay down next to his girlfriend. I laid Ducati in my old bedroom. Tafur fell asleep after a while embracing Sara, feeling her human warmth, her heartbeat. He did not want to be alone. I went to bed next to a corpse. Nobody wanted to be alone.

I tried to sleep a few hours before thinking about what to do with the body. I deserved to enjoy her company a while longer. After all, she was my gift. She had a certain innocence now that I could contemplate her in silence. Without the distraction of her eroticism, she looked like an exhausted mother after giving birth. Does it sound ridiculous if I say that I felt attached to this woman? From her entrance, Ducati seemed like a helpless animal, those that are devoured when leaving the herd looking for independence. That how she appeared to me, like a stray baby.

If Tafur is right and I have the ability to pervert everything, then it was worth rehearsing how long it would take to pervert Ducati by my side. He complains that everything loses vitality with me around.

He says that he even feels older since we've become friends. But if everything loses its vitality with me then something that has no life has no vitality to lose. In other words, it can only gain something. The latter became my personal experiment and the only reason to live that day and the next. If Ducati is dead, then there is nothing of life that I can take from her. Therefore, I can spend time with her and not take anything from her that she is already missing. The next day I searched for my diary, wrote down the date and then my new project. *Personal Experiment: Share with a female corpse in replacement of an absent woman.*

Before Vanessa left, she had made many plans for us, rather dating ideas. Vanessa didn't like rural life. She was forced to live there when I received my inheritance from my grandparents. It was always in my plans to live outside the city, but she didn't want to smell shit all the time or to live disconnected from the world, but I wanted to show her what I found attractive in places like these. She didn't have the time or the patience for that. But now with Ducati who was up for everything, I could do it. I went back a few pages in my diary in search of those activities:

Model Date Number 1:

- *To ride a horse.*
- *Outdoor picnic.*
- *Feed the pigs.*
- *Play in the mud.*

I found the clothes that I once bought for Vanessa like those girls in westerns in case she ever decided to learn how to ride. She never used them, but the clothes were still there. Ducati was somewhat rigid, which made the horse-riding plan a little difficult. In the first attempts, she fell from the saddle after only a few gallops. I decided to tie her with a rope and I also put a cowgirl hat on her. She made two perfect turns until the rope broke loose and she was suspended by one leg while I chased her to tie her back up. Done. I ticked the activity off in my diary.

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Model Date Number 1:

- *To ride a horse.*
- *Outdoor picnic.*
- *Feed the pigs.*
- *Play in the mud.*

The first activity turned out well. I'm not crazy enough to prepare food for both of us. For the picnic I spread out a rug for us to sit on and prepared a basket with fruit and some wine. I left her glass empty as she's dead and can't drink. We made two toasts, although we stopped when I felt dizzy from alcohol. The heat accumulated in my head pleased me. Afterwards, I went to feed the pigs. Ducati did not accompany me in the kitchen while I prepared the food. She waited for me in the garage. I brought a single container and we fed the pigs directly from her hand. Pancho, the most anxious, almost devoured one of Ducati's fingers. I found it funny. It was easy to wrestle in the mud, which was even better. Ducati's stiff body prevented me from giving her a headlock and, so, she won. Before finishing what looked like a perfect day, I cleaned our bodies and left Ducati in her room. It was a productive day. I finished filling my notes in the agenda for that day.

Model Date Number 1:

- *To ride a horse.*
- *Outdoor picnic.*
- *Feed the pigs.*
- *Play in the mud.*

Conclusions: Model Date Number 01 meets the needs of socialisation and entertainment in rural contexts based on the elements provided by the environment.

Postscript: Tell Tafur to do it with Sara.

I slept with the image of her pale face in my mind. There are people who seem to be conclusions. In other words, who can summarise everything

in an instant, who can cause the most memorable experiences in a single moment that you could never achieve in a whole lifetime. This is problematic, especially for me. Could I say that my life was worth it because of a single moment of absolute happiness so intense it couldn't be repeated? Is it worth living alone waiting for that single moment? Answer: I don't know. At the moment, I can say that the nostalgia that I carried all these years was worth something, if only for this.

I prepared something to eat before going to sleep. I prefer not eating to eating on my own, but Ducati's presence activated my appetite, it made me hungry! As I eat so little, according to Tafur I look like the children of La Guajira. What an exaggeration! After all, I'm not that potbellied or even have such skinny limbs. Just as my mind stopped feeding my fantasies and I started to fall asleep, my cell phone rang. I checked the time: 3:15 a.m. I reckoned it was Tafur who was calling. Maybe, he had a glimmer of a guilty conscience.

"Hello Tafur."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Who else could call at three in the morning?"

"I had to wait for Sara to fall asleep."

"And how is Sara?"

"She's OK. Well, a bit pissed off, but that's is because she's got her period."

"Vanessa on her period used to had cramps up to her hole."

Silence on the line. Tafur changed the tone of his voice.

"Mario, I don't care. You know why I'm calling."

"I can imagine."

"Have you done what you had to?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Are you retarded? What do you mean what you were supposed to do, ah? Do I have to tell you again? Don't you remember or don't you want to remember? Or you want me to repeat it because you're

**THE NEXT DAY I
SEARCHED FOR MY
DIARY, WROTE DOWN
THE DATE AND THEN
MY NEW PROJECT.
PERSONAL
EXPERIMENT:
SHARE WITH A
FEMALE CORPSE IN
REPLACEMENT OF AN
ABSENT WOMAN.**

recording me. Are you thinking about turning on me, Mario? You cunt! Answer me? What do you mean you don't know, Mario?"

"Calm down! I know what you're talking about."

"Then why the hesitation you bastard?"

"I wanted to play with you a little."

"To play with me? Mario, you have to be stupid to play with that. I have nerves up my hole."

"You're frightened of farting and giving yourself away."

"What?"

"It's a joke, Tafur. Calm down."

Tafur began to calm down and lower his defence mechanisms correspondingly.

"Mario, I'm sorry. It's only that you know what would happen if anyone finds out. My life will be totally fucked up, Mario."

"Yes, mine too."

"Well, you don't have a family and you don't like being a teacher. So, it wouldn't be too serious. But Mario, I'm already full-time and I want to marry Sara. She won't forgive me if I fuck up again... I don't want people to think I'm a killer when it was an accident, right?"

"You have your future ahead of you."

"Right. But you know that what happened was an accident, I didn't mean to do it."

"Of course."

"So, what did you do with her?"

"I think it's better if you don't know, so you don't torture yourself."

"Yes, but... is she far away or is she far below?"

"I'm working on it."

"What do you mean? You haven't done it?"

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for? Right, I'm on my way."

"And what will Sara say to you if she wakes up and doesn't see you?"

"I don't know, I'll tell her you're going to commit suicide again."

"Tafur, wait, calm down! I'll take care of it tomorrow! Don't worry!"

"Mario seriously, if you don't take care of it, I'll go crazy."

"I'll do it tomorrow. Go to sleep."

"Really?" crying

"Yes, go to sleep, I'll take care of it."

"Thank you, I love you mate."

"Yes bye."

Tafur said he loved me before hanging up. I wanted to answer that I didn't believe him. I never had the courage to face him. Now that I did by lying to him, my victory didn't feel like I'd thought it would. My triumph over him feels like the reward of a hunter when he returns

home with a deer on his shoulders. I think I just skipped the hunt and now all I have is a skinned prey that doesn't really represent conquest but rather ruin. I resumed my intentions to sleep.

I woke up without any plans for us. Before entering the room, I felt a strong smell, similar to musk, piercing my lungs like needles. It became bearable after three breaths. The action of nature on man is evident; but human action in nature is only miserable. Even if mankind is an insignificant being for the world, nature takes the trouble to embellish it, turning his dirty, corrupt and selfish body into a place full of life, where organisms that inhabit it can take advantage of that crap that was once called 'human'. The thought that caused that first image had to be consigned in my agenda, the first thought of the day that returned my capacity of astonishment. *Consideration Number 01: Nature inverts the values of the human death. Dying becomes a reconciliation with the world.*

I sensed that the general heat and the mud affected Ducati's condition to some extent. The soft tissues began to disappear in her face. In appearance, her face came off. But, what was really happening was that she really was revealing her true face. The mask of her humanity was eliminated by one that showed the perfect laws under which we are governed: cycles. It starts, it ends, but it repeats itself. Man is born of nature and returns to it giving life in an apology for everything. The life of the organisms in bodies, more than an action of bacteria, is an apology to the natural world. It struck me as a kind of reconciliation.

I slid my gaze a little lower, accompanied it with the touch of my hand on her body. Her stomach looked arid like the desert. I pinched her skin hard and it didn't return to its original state, I pressed in other places and folds formed in her body like mountain ranges in a landscape. I projected what would come later, those soft tissues would not come off anymore, but would become liquid. Ducati would become liquid, that is free, containerless, formless. But nature also affects time, I knew that I didn't have much more time with her before she reached her state of liquid freedom. This wasn't what disturbed me. The woman, herself, didn't interest me.

**TAFUR SAID HE LOVED
ME BEFORE HANGING UP.
I WANTED TO ANSWER
THAT I DIDN'T BELIEVE
HIM. I NEVER HAD THE
COURAGE TO FACE HIM.**

**NOW THAT I DID BY LYING
TO HIM, MY VICTORY
DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I'D
THOUGHT IT WOULD.
MY TRIUMPH OVER HIM
FEELS LIKE THE REWARD
OF A HUNTER WHEN HE
RETURNS HOME
WITH A DEER ON
HIS SHOULDERS.**

I was fascinated by what she had become: a beautiful landscape, like a personal replica of nature, a model of the natural world only for my eyes. She was my personal universe. One that could be extinguished. I returned to the room to write the observations of the body, I noticed her dehydration and also the flies, escaping from her mouth as from a darkness that imprisoned them. Every moment she belonged to me less, which means that I approach loneliness once again. The disappearance of her body was the reflection of my abandonment and my inability to hold on to what I loved.

I located the safe. It was camouflaged in one of the shelves of the television table. My grandparents kept what they considered valuable items in it. After their murders, I inherited the house and with it the safe and I started to keep what I considered to be my own valuables in it. Frustration over Ducati's near disappearance created a desire to preserve some material memory of her. I hadn't put any new items in the box for a long time. That's why opening it and seeing its full contents made such an impact. I saw the lipstick used by Vanessa, her nail cuttings, abandoned in the bathroom, my grandfather's Rolex, my grandmother's dentures and the knife used for slaughtering pigs, that had been used to kill them both. I placed a lock of hair that I took from Ducati next to the watch. Then I deciphered that those objects were there for a reason: the people to whom they belonged were no longer in my life, and that last discovery increased my frustration.

I longed to have the possibility of saving more moments, either as memories or even torments. I finished the technical description of Ducati's body. Again, I looked inside the safe. I noticed that the knife was still functional and I put it in my right pocket. It was still there and it worked for some reason. So, the only thing that mattered to me at that moment was to devise a way to preserve my minimalist nature, the small natural universe in my room. I came up with only one thing: a life for a life. A single action to conserve my personal ecosystem. It was necessary to take action without the encumbrance of sentimentality, like a kangaroo mother who abandons her offspring when water is scarce. In the morning I left Tafur a message confessing

that I hadn't made the body disappear, although it would do so on very soon. I guess he got upset and became impatient, I know him. That's why he came to take charge.

After disturbing Tafur's peace of mind, I understood my situation. Ducati still existed physically but her presence no longer mattered to me, but what could I do with her. I imagined that if the water didn't finish her off, the bacteria would do so. This would harm our plans. For example, she couldn't be exposed to the room temperature, nor would I be able to touch her. Just imagining that she could disappear in my arms upset me. I did not want a body to contemplate but one to love, a silent and available companion. That simple desire was threatened by the possible effect of gases on the body, the swelling, the impossibility of moving it, and ultimately, of doing things together. I understood that she had stopped belonging to me.

I read the first page of observations of that day. Tafur entered the house insulting me. I read the second page without paying him attention. Tafur recognised the smell of the body I turn to the third sheet of entries for that day. Tafur discovered Ducati's body in my room. I turned to the last page of the day, I looked at what I wrote. Tafur cried and growled like a helpless baby. I felt his big hands shaking me. I pushed him back and picked up my diary from the floor. I heard his loud complaints about my apparent calmness despite the corpse's advanced state of decomposition. His very fragility made me happy. I came up with something about that. I opened my diary to write it down; Tafur was furious: "What the fuck are you writing down there?" He complained. He tried to wrest it from my hands. I managed to shake it off. Then I reconsidered it. Yes, it would be better if he knew. "Read what I wrote," I said. Tafur mentally read the last item on the agenda for that moment.

Confession Number 01: Today I will kill Tafur.

I located my right pocket and grabbed the knife. As soon as Tafur raised his gaze, I stuck it in his jugular. He bled like a pig. One cycle ends and another begins. That's how things work. Now I could make the final disposition of Ecosystem Number 01, rendered extinct at

11:00 p.m. that same day, two meters underground, next to the orange tree. Soon, I'd have to plan activities and experiments for Ecosystem Number 02, and our plans for the following day. For the time being, I wrote down the date in the diary so I wouldn't have write it the next day when I woke up. I experienced some anxiety and that's why I felt that the dream lasted the seconds it takes a cheetah to capture its prey. I was awakened by the sound of the phone, time: 6:00 a.m.

"Hello."

"Hi, yes?"

"Hello Mario, I'm Sara, do you remember me?"

"Sara, of course. How are you?"

"Well, Mario... well, not very well, I want to know if Francisco is with you."

"Eh no, he isn't."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Yes, Sara, but I don't know if you want to know."

"What? Tell me!"

(Silence)

"Come again?"

"Yes, but this time he seemed very determined."

"Did he tell you why?" Crying

"He said he was tired of you and his life."

"But..."

"It is better that you resign yourself."

"Is she very young?"

"Five years younger than you. He got her pregnant and he's in love."

"But, how?" Crying

"I'm sorry, I must hang up and please don't ask me anything about him because he also cut me out of his life."

"It's OK. I understand, you're a good person, Mario."

"Just try to accept it."

"It's OK."

"Get some rest, Sara."

HIS VERY FRAGILITY MADE ME HAPPY. I CAME UP WITH SOMETHING ABOUT THAT. I OPENED MY DIARY TO WRITE IT DOWN; TAFUR WAS FURIOUS: "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU WRITING DOWN THERE?" HE COMPLAINED. HE TRIED TO WREST IT FROM MY HANDS. I MANAGED TO SHAKE IT OFF. THEN I RECONSIDERED IT. YES, IT WOULD BE BETTER IF HE KNEW. "READ WHAT I WROTE," I SAID.

"You didn't deserve what Vanessa did to you."

I wanted to tell her that Tafur didn't either. But humans both create pacts and break them. Friendship is a covenant; therefore, it can be broken. That's how I came back to life. A life for a life.

STARTING OVER



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On Monday afternoon, Ángel heard his daughter arriving home. He went down to the living room and, when he went to greet her, Mariana quickly crumpled a sheet in her hands. Ángel managed to see the letters EZ on light blue paper and asked:

“Are you sick love? That paper looks like it’s from Márquez’s office.”

“No, Dad, what makes you think such a thing? This is something else,” she said, and crumpled up the paper even more tightly into her fist. “Although, now that you mention the subject, are you sick again?”

Ángel felt the weight of Mariana’s gaze. “Did you get the certificate?” he thought. “That’s it! One down, this show has started.” Then he ran his hand through his hair, smiled subtly and said no. Then he left the house.

Ángel was a well-respected motorcycle mechanic in his neighbourhood, despite the smallness of his workshop. He was very precise at detecting the faults of his *hot mammas*, as he called them. He only had to turn the engine on or take a look at the exhaust smoke or to feel the vibration to detect the problem. Ángel said that these women were never too hard on him, not like the women in his own house. For example, when Berta, his wife, said yes, she really meant no, although sometimes she wanted to say yes, but what was really dangerous wasn’t that, but rather when Ángel believed that she said yes and, in reality, she had given a resounding no.

When he arrived at the workshop there were already customers waiting for him: some were regulars, who came to get periodic maintenance done, and others who came by word-of-mouth. Most of the mechanics hadn’t committed to fixing fuel injection motorcycles, as it was necessary to buy expensive, specialised tools. Ángel had purchased the \$25 million fuel injector tester and cleaner two

years ago. That money came from Mariana's pocket thanks to a loan she requested from her work, because she believed that the loan would be paid back by the extra work that would go her dad's way. Once inside, Ángel took out the cell phone, activated the screen and realised that he had a missed call from Mariana. He deleted the notification and entered the contact list.

"Márquez, how's everything going?"

"Just here in the office with hundred different things."

"Thank you, brother, for the certificate. I saw Mariana with it."

"Sure you want to continue with this?"

"Of course! It's fair enough, with three women in the house I'm going crazy."

"And what happened to your princess Berta? You didn't use to say that when we were in town. Has she become a toad?"

"It's a nightmare, Márquez. In addition, the countdown has already begun and it would be such a pity to waste my last years of life like this."

"Oh, no! Mate, you've got adolescent airs! *Free, like the bird that escaped from its cage...!*"

"Stop fucking around! So, what's next?"

"Calm down, I'll let you know."

Ángel breathed out and smiled. He opened his wallet and found a picture of Berta at age eighteen: "Look at that *hot momma!* So tender, so innocent. Such a beauty! Can I take you out to eat? Don't worry, I'll find the cash to pay for it even if I have to get a loan. Sweetheart, my Ángel, don't worry, we already have God's blessing, he'll help us. Who'd have believed that fairy tales work in reverse? And yes: we didn't live happily ever after," he thought. The coffee-lady showed up across the road. He called out to her and asked for a strong one. She asked if he was busy. Ángel replied that yes, thank God he had a lot of work. He continued working in the workshop until nightfall, he only rested during his lunch hour, because it was a sacrilege for him to work on an empty stomach. That day the revenues were \$500,000 between the sales of accessories

and spare parts for motorcycles, not to mention the synchronised and preventive maintenance. Ángel kept the proceeds together with another lot of money hidden behind two loose brick blocks on the bathroom wall. Since he turned sixty, those savings had been growing, swelling up to having seven zeros. Meanwhile an accident and the arrival of old age had started to whisper the countdown of his life.

Upon arriving at the house, he found his wife sitting in the dining room.

"What are those papers, Berta?" He poured himself a glass of juice and sat on the sofa.

"What do you mean what are those papers, Ángel?!? Bloody hell! They're the water and electricity bills. Because of you, they are going to cut off our utilities."

"Because of me?!?"

"Yes! It's your turn to pay them!"

"My turn? What am I supposed to pay them with? Come on, Bertica. Pay them this time, I'll take care of them next month."

"What?!? That's what you told me last month. What are you even doing in the workshop?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I've no work! What do you think, that I shit money?"

"Close the workshop, then!"

"You can't help yourself, can you? Know what? Take these notes and coins, it's all I have. Oh! And don't worry, God will help us! Do you know where the television control is?"

Berta frowned, exhaled loudly and went to the bedroom. Soon the knock of the door was heard. Ángel took a sip of juice and thought: "Like hell I am going to pay for that shit! I already gave a lot of money all these years; Ángel, the water bill has come, Ángel, we need groceries, Ángel, the girl's school fees, Ángel, I no longer have shoes, Ángel, Ángel, Ángel. No more, Bertical!" In the living room, Ángel switched channels on the television until midnight. Before going to bed, he remembered to set the cell phone alarm at 6:00 am, since he still had bikes to deliver. Suddenly

a text message arrived on the cell phone: *"Dad, Dr. Márquez called to tell me that tomorrow we have an appointment at 3:00 p.m.; I know what is happening. Don't worry, everything will be fine."*

The next day, Ángel started work early. He began by synchronising the first motorcycle: he removed the covers, removed the injector, calibrated it and cleaned it in the scanner, decarbonised the contour of the thread with a metallic brush, checked the passage of petrol and installed it again. He dusted off the engine, oiled the bolts and put the motorcycle back together. He started it. The problem had been fixed. Then don Pacho arrived to calibrate five injectors for the motorcycles of a security company because he had to deliver them before noon. Don Pacho paid him \$500,000 in advance and Ángel did the job with the agility of a teenager. When Mariana stopped by to pick him up in her car, she was surprised to see her dad with so much work. She said to him that, thank God, he was doing well and that buying the scanner had been a good investment. Ángel told her not to claim victory, as they were only warranty repairs.

"Warranty repairs?! Didn't we get the scanner to make more money? Dad, the loan doesn't pay for itself! Make better contacts. Help me out here, please!"

Ángel didn't reply. While changing his overalls, he thought: "Oh, Marianita! How things change. When you were born I felt I couldn't be any happier! I had my two women! My baby needs milk, fruit, clothes, toys, garden, school, university, money for this and money for that. And I worked here and I worked there. And the money I made, where did it go? It was for you and your mum! And now you're pressuring me to pay you back? I've seen your true colours, my little one."

On the way to the office they took Avenida de Las Américas, 34th street and 16th street to the north. Mariana didn't say a word. She had her eyes fixed on the street traffic. Her hands held tightly to the steering wheel. Ángel, on the other hand, was busy making calculations in his head in order to estimate how much money he had saved up: \$30 million saved, plus sales made during the last few

**THAT MONEY CAME
FROM MARIANA'S
POCKET THANKS TO A
LOAN SHE REQUESTED
FROM HER WORK,**

**BECAUSE SHE
BELIEVED THAT THE
LOAN WOULD BE PAID
BACK BY THE WORK
THAT HER DAD WOULD
START TO GET.**

days, \$31 million. The goal was higher. That's why he couldn't slow down even if he was working excessively for his age: "happiness was just around the corner".

When they arrived at the doctor's office, Dr. Márquez was waiting for them at the door.

"Hello, there! And how is my patient? Come in, come in!"

Mariana entered the office. Avoiding eye contact with him, she struggled to hold up the corners of her mouth. They were collapsing.

"What's up Márquez?, You never leave this four walls, do you? What about those poker cards?!? Don't tell me you've returned to the ring!"

Dr. Márquez didn't answer him. While he was leading him over to the trolley, he motioned for Mariana to take a seat.

"Mariana, could you read the diagnosis I sent you?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Ángel is developing a mild cognitive impairment. Most likely, your dad's memory will be affected over time. The tests that were done on him show that he has some neurological damage caused by a blow. Do you remember when he fell two years ago?"

"And what a fall!" Ángel remembered. "I was a hair's breadth away from the tunnel, but no bloody way! I gave the fingers to the voice I could hear in the distance! Ha! I wouldn't have been surprised if it had been Berta's voice! Besides, do you know what it is to be on the verge of dying and to recognise that you have been under an old woman's skirts for over forty-two years? How was I going to go up to Saint Peter and say to him 'I'm Ángel, an unhappy man who didn't do shit in his life?' No, gentlemen! Enough is enough! I won't be screwed over anymore."

"Yes, yes. But, the exams went well, right?"

"That's what we thought initially. Unfortunately, this disease has worsened little by little. You must be patient. I will try to consult with other colleagues to see if we can do something for him. Don't panic if he suddenly can't remember his name."

"What do you mean doctor?! He won't remember his name?"

Mariana's exaltation made Ángel keep those last words in his mind. Then she closed her eyes and thought that in this new life he would also change his name.

"And those poker cards, Márquez?"

"Again, Ángel? You're just like Ber... like Bermúdez."

However, Mariana looked at him suspiciously.

"The Roulette Player. Don't tell me that you don't remember him?"

"Ah, yes, yes. Old Bermúdez."

Outside the office, Dr. Márquez gave Ángel a sheet with recommendations for food and physical activity.

When they got home, Berta was waiting for them in the living room. Mariana didn't give her mother an opportunity to ask questions, but chose rather to distract her with other issues: how Salomé had behaved, whether *doña* Maria came to pick up her trousers, if she had paid the bills, if there was something to eat and, finally, that she was going back to her apartment.

"And what did the doctor say, Mariana? I bet it's another one of your father's tantrums, right?"

"Mum!"

Ángel's gaze crouched over Mariana's eyes: "Marianita, tell her the news, don't hold it in anymore. For God's sake, tell her!"

The moisture on his forehead, the restlessness of his feet and the clumsy movement of his hands tortured Ángel's body.

"Mum, this thing with dad is serious: he's losing his memory."

"That!" The words in Ángel's mind spoke with joy. "There you go!" The words in Ángel's mind exploded with joy. "Have fun with it, ladies! Marianita almost couldn't say it."

"How lovely! Yes, do you see now Ángel? So much for knocking back all that beer! I did try and tell you, but you wouldn't listen! We are struggling for money while the gentleman is throwing it away in those bars."

Oh no, Berta! Wait. Don't start up that bullshit again!

"Mum!"

"Mum what?! Now you want to defend him? Let me ask you, who'll be paying the bills when he's in the hospital, ah?"

"Berta don't be so hard and long-suffering!"

ÁNGEL'S GAZE CROUCHED OVER MARIANA'S EYES: "MARIANITA, TELL HER THE NEWS, DON'T HOLD IT IN ANYMORE. FOR GOD'S SAKE, TELL HER!"

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"Ach, mum! Don't wish that on my dad!"

"You see now, Salomé? Can you see grandma's and mother's true colours?"

"He was asking for it!"

"Oh no, wait a second. What? So, it's all my fault?!? Brilliant!"

**

What's up! It's been fifteen days. Fake a lack of attention and concentration. Regards, M. Ángel woke up on Sunday with that message on his cell phone. He tried to go back to sleep, but the noise of the kitchen and the sound system at full volume didn't give him that pleasure. "Eeeepa! Just what I needed. They can't even leave me in peace!" he thought. When he went downstairs, he found Mariana, Salomé and Berta sitting in the dining room. Breakfast was served on the table: rib broth, chocolate, cheese, bread and scrambled eggs. Next to the meal there was a bouquet of flowers with a helium balloon that said Happy Anniversary.

"Oh, great, just what I needed!" He thought. "Women and their blasted hobby of remembering dates! How should I call them - reminders? So what, do we celebrate the dregs of forty two years of matricide? nagging? imprisonment?..."

"Come here, Dad. Sit here, next to mum."

"Let's see. What are we celebrating?"

"Forty two years of marriage! Isn't that nice, dad?"

"This is salty!"

"The broth? No, dad! It's right on. Besides, Mum let the potato get soggy, just as you like it!"

Just as I like it? What does she even know about what I like!

"Grandpa! Did you like the flowers and the balloon? Mum and I bought them in the shop over there and we had to walk loads and the lady didn't have your favourite colour and we finally found it and you must put it in the room and Mum said that it won't pop, but if it does it will stop flying and we will have to buy a new one, right, grandpa?"

And now this chatty kid, where can I switch her off? Another woman who thinks she knows what I like. Give an inch, and they'll take a mile. Faced with the expectant glances of Mariana and Berta, Ángel remained silent.

"Dad, the girl asked you a question! Dad! Dad!"

"What was it?!? Why are you screaming so much?!?"

"It's nothing! Yes, my love, Grandpa liked your balloon."

"Mariana, did you see? Your dad went from being an angel straight to being the very devil himself!"

"Mum!"

"Be careful with those words," Ángel added. "We don't want God to punish you."

"What?!? This house is already hell.. Damn the time I married you!"

"Mum, Dad! Please! This is not a good example for the girl."

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Berta threw the spoon on the table and went to the garage. Then the noise of the sewing machine was heard.

"Dad, why are you in such a temper?"

"In a temper, me?!? What?"

"Oh, dad! Please."

"What?!? Eh, now you! I better go to the workshop."

"To do what? To keep wasting your time."

"Don't be ungrateful, Mariana! That workshop has fed us for over thirty five years".

"When has it paid off the instalments of that loan I took out for you?!? If it weren't for Mum's patches and what I give you, we'd still have to pay off the house."

"So, it's all my fault then?"

"Oh, dad! I can't deal with this anymore."

"Leave him be! Don't waste any more time with that stubborn old man." Berta's scream could be heard from the garage.

"Well, then, you've both fucked up my morning."

Ángel went up, got himself ready and left for the workshop. On the way, while buying some boxes, he received a call.

"Whoh! Shit's ready."

"What did he said?"

"You know that Beto has peso signs in his eyes, just like at school. You've already sold the workshop in Villavicencio, right?"

"And the money?"

"I already have the \$70 million we agreed on. The motorcycles are included, right?"

"Don't worry, I bought them at an auction. So then, should I open a bank account now?"

"Don't be stupid! You can't have bank records because those women will take everything. It's safe here."

"OK, when is Beto going to move his things in?"

"Tonight at eleven. Where are the keys to the workshop?"

**"DAD, THE GIRL ASKED
YOU A QUESTION!
DAD! DAD!"**

**"WHAT WAS IT?!? WHY
ARE YOU SCREAMING
SO MUCH?!?"**

**"IT'S NOTHING! YES, MY
LOVE, GRANDPA LIKED
YOUR BALLOON."**

"I will leave them where I told you I would."

At the workshop, Ángel began to pack up all the tools and merchandise into boxes. "Right until now I tried to live up to you, Dad. It is now time for this old man to go through that door, and live and breathe tranquillity. Goodbye to everyone, the others, welcome me, welcome life," he thought. Then he took out the money he had kept hidden in the bathroom and deactivated the alarm. He left the workshop, took a look around and lowered the shutter. He checked both sides of the street, took the keys and put them behind the gas meter.

That Monday morning, the doors barely resisted their neighbours' blows. The anguish in the screams interrupted Berta's sleep, but to Ángel's ears it was a sweet melody.

"Don Ángel! *doña* Berta! Get up! Get up!"

"Holy Virgin! What's all this screaming about?!?" Berta leaned out of a window.

"*Doña* Berta! It's the workshop! don Ángel's workshop!"

"What is all this about, ah?!?" Ángel looked out the other window.

"Don Ángel, everything's gone!"

"What?!? Bloody hell! Say that again?!?"

Ángel and Berta left the house and went directly to the workshop. The rumours were true: the workshop was now totally empty. The silhouettes of the missing tools had been drawn onto the walls. On the ground, oil marks clearly marked spaces that were once occupied. There was a note taped to the back wall, "*Get out of here, you cunt!*"

Berta grabbed Ángel by the shoulders and shook him violently:

"Good God, Ángel! Who could have done this to us? And now, what are we going to do?"

"Berta! Calm down!"

"And the money?!? What are we going to live on?!?"

"That was the only thing that you cared about all this time: the money! Of course. As young men, we will give it all to any piece of skirt. Idiots."

When they arrived at the house, Mariana was waiting for them. Berta arrived with a pale face, trembling hands and her back soaked in sweat. Mariana asked if they were okay, what things had been stolen from the workshop, and if they had any idea who could have done it. Then, shedding tears of despair, Berta tried to explain, but Mariana, seeing her so distressed, took her to the kitchen and prepared an aromatic tea with valerian. Ángel, on the other hand, went up to the room and noticed that on his cell phone there was a text message: "*Deed done! I have your stuff here. How did you like that wildcard? I guess you didn't expect that message. M.*" Ángel leaned back on the bed, closed his eyes and began to do some calculations: he now had \$101

million. *Since both Alcides and that Crisanto fucker will soon be ready to pay me back the \$2 million I loaned them, the total would be \$106. How much will he ask for the farm? Even if we come up short there are ways to get more.*

In the afternoon, Berta went up to the room and talked to Ángel. She suggested that he give her a hand delivering her sewing while he was trying to raise up cash, so she would have more time to get on with the work at home. Ángel nodded, although he was convinced he would never go back to work again. Those thirty nine years amongst screws, grease and tools had been enough. It had been enough to work just to provide for Berta and Mariana. That wasn't the life he'd imagined as a young man. Where were the trips, the holidays, the outings with friends, the adventures, the women? Where was he? Everything had been consumed. Ángel wanted to come back from the ashes.

Those first days, Ángel enjoyed walking around the streets, visiting neighbours, and having the odd coffee and discussing the peace agreement. However, the next week the order for the sewing arrangements increased and Berta had to ask him to take care of the chores of the house as well.

"Do the washing up? Berta?!? Don't be like that. The water is very cold."

"Ángel, it is three plates and two pans. That won't take any time at all. Also, when you're finished, give a quick rinse to the bathroom and mop the living room, please."

"What?!? Well then, should I put the apron on too?"

"And what else will you do all day?"

"I can't take on too much, that's what the doctor said."

"Take on too much! Come on, help me out now that you can't provide for us."

"What?!?"

"That or go and work."

"Don't get mad, you'll have a nervous breakdown and take it out on me! Relax, Bertica. I'll help you."

Then, when Ángel cleaned the dust he put all the things upside down: the porcelains, the vases, the picture frames, the trash can and the chairs. When the dry clothes came in from the patio, he put the underwear in the kitchen cabinets, the pants under the beds, the socks in the bathroom sink, and the t-shirts on the windows of the living room. To rid himself of these chores, Ángel convinced her to let him help her with the groceries, so he could leave and have a change of environment; it might even cure his condition. During first two weeks he gained Berta's confidence, as he did all the errands properly. By the third week he had returned to his plan. The price of what he'd been sent to buy increased or he said that he lost whatever change he was given. Berta watched Ángel's eyes, while he excused himself like a child who had got away with his high-jinks. She reminded him that he wasn't sick on a whim, but rather it was a test from The Lord, and, furthermore, that they all needed to stick together. By this time, Berta was convinced that the disease was consuming her husband.

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"Look and see if he answers that fucking cell phone!"

"Don't harass me, man."

"Leave that bullshit, I don't have time for it! What did you find out?"

"The price is \$370 million. The farm is well located and has only had one owner."

"He won't lower the price?"

"No, he won't".

"Shit, now I am really screwed, brother!"

"Are things fucked up?"

"With what you have of mine and what I have here, I've got \$105 million."

"No, no, no! You are really coming up short. What about the house?"

"What?!? Noooo, I'm not that much of a bastard!"

"It's your estate, you moron! The deeds are in your name, aren't they?"

Ángel was silent.

"Don't tell me that you've suddenly found your heart again."

"I can't leave Berta out in the street; the old woman deserves a roof. And Mariana, she's enough to deal with with that husband."

"Let's see, in for a penny, or in for a pound? You can't be half-arsed about it. Stop being so stupid! Are you beginning to have cold feet? Mariana can look after the old woman. Think about it! We would have a royal flush."

"What??? Stop it with that"

"Listen! What if..."

"What if... What?!?"

"Relax man. Just like in the old days, I'm going to free you from the ugly bitches. Be prepared."

On Saturday afternoon, Dr. Márquez called Mariana, asked her how Ángel was getting on. She answered that things were getting worse and caught him up with the happenings of the last few months. He asked her to have patience. He had news. He had contacted a colleague who offered a treatment that could contain Ángel's disease: one month would cost \$1,600,000 pesos, with the meds, it'd be say, \$2,000,000. Dr. Márquez insisted he take it, because time was not on their side.

After a few weeks, Mariana went to the doctor's office. There she met Dr. Ruiz, who explained that the treatment the father would receive consisted of cognitive therapies to train memory, intellectual stimulation therapies, a regular physical activity programme, and a diet plan. The treatment would be continuous for the first eight days, then the patient would see the doctor only once every ten days. Dr. Ruiz showed her videos of hospital patients who had improved with the treatment. Mariana was convinced, paid and returned to the house feeling better.

"What was the urgency, Márquez?"

"This is Ruiz, Ángel."

"Dr. Ruiz!"

"Quit fooling around, you're no longer acting. Ruiz works here as a messenger, but today we discovered that he's also quite an actor."

"What are you talking about, Márquez?"

"This morning Mariana came to meet with Ruiz, the supposed doctor who is in charge of your treatment. By the way, Ruiz, how did you get those videos?"

"Easy, Doc! Some doctors here helped me make them. I told them it was for my daughter's homework!"

"And what did Mariana say, Márquez?"

"She's already paid."

"And how are we getting on there, Doc?"

"Don't worry Ruiz, you'll get your bonus. You can go now."

"Márquez, I've already put the house up for sale. I've already found someone to help me, do you remember Toño?"

"He's back in town! He's a sound man for business."

For the first eight days, Mariana took Ángel to the doctors' so he wouldn't be late for his therapies. He, on the other hand, took advantage of the visits to play *parqués* with the guard, drink coffee with the receptionist, and watch the news in the waiting room. One afternoon, after the time of treatment, Ángel heard Mariana's conversation from behind the staircase. 'Yes, yes sir. Hello, Dr. Márquez. How is everything? Yes? And what does the report say? Thank God! Wonderful! My dad should be calmer now, and so will we. "

Calmer? Can you believe this? Oh, yes, I'll be calmer when I'm alone on the farm, lying back in the rocking chair, drinking beer in my underpants, without you all. Ah, what a good life that'll be!

"Bit late there, right?"

"Eepa, Márquez! Can't you see that I can hardly leave the house? Berta started up with her barrage of questions about where I was going. Well, what about my business?"

"Here, in the safe. Did you bring more?"

"\$37 in savings. Listen, Márquez, is it safe to leave that money there?"

"Relax, this safe is safe."

"As safe as the one Rojas had in school?"

"Are you sure you're not really losing your marbles?"

"Oh yeah? Don't be such a moron. Don't you remember that you screwed him out of his savings?"

"But that was kids' stuff, Ángel. Remember you also made some cash there, or how did you think we paid for those empanaditas? Cut it out! How are you going to compare yourself with Rojas?!? We're adults. Better yet, if you don't trust me, you just continue on your own with this."

"Whoa! It's that time of the month again, right? Relax."

"And that other matter?"

"The house? I've a buyer lined up already."

"Excellent! Now we can move to senile dementia.. Listen now."

The suggestions made by Dr. Márquez were followed to the letter during the following week. Ángel began to mix up the jars in the kitchen: sugar and salt, milk powder and wheat flour, coffee and chocolate, lentils, beans and chickpeas, rice and seasonings. When Berta reached the kitchen, she yelled at Ángel and left him paralysed. He told her that he needed the jars to help him organise the trinkets that he had in the garage, so he would easily find everything when he had to sew. Berta pursed her lips, frowned and went up to the bedroom.

On Friday night, Ángel told Berta to rest, that he would check that the house was in order before he went to sleep. Then he went downstairs, left the main door half open, the fridge open and marked out a path in bread crumbs from the front door to the kitchen. Around midnight there was a loud noise. Berta woke up, shook Ángel and told him in a trembling voice that the thieves had come in, that he should go on and look. They went down in silence. The main door was open. Ángel, with a broomstick, and Berta, with a vase, went to the kitchen, where the noise came from. Upon arrival, they found Tobi, the neighbour's dog, devouring the food that had been in the fridge. Berta shouted at Ángel. She asked him

why he hadn't closed the door, and told him to be more thoughtful and not provoke her. Thanks be to the Virgin it had only been a dog and not a thief. He should think of her, of both of them, for the love of God.

On Saturday morning Mariana arrived with Salomé to visit the house. When they came in, Ángel was lying on the chair in the living room. He was naked.

"Holy God! Dad! Salomé, go to Granny in the kitchen! Dad?!? What are you doing?!?"

"This is a banana that your Mum brought from the store yesterday. Do you want some? Potassium helps me."

"You and your bananas! Go and get dressed! What are you thinking wandering around the house with no clothes on?!?"

"No, the banana is delicious."

"What?!? Go and get dressed!"

When Ángel was climbing the stairs, he stopped next to the pot, stood in front of it and began to urinate, saying: "Happy peeing, pee happily, but pee inside!"

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Daddy is peeing," Ángel replied.

Mariana told her mother that Ángel's senile dementia was unbearable, and they called Dr. Márquez. When they informed him of the facts, he seemed surprised and saddened. He recommended that Ángel be admitted to an asylum for adults with dementia, since there was no other solution. He told them that he knew of an institute in Fusagasugá where he could be taken care of more patiently and humanely twenty four hours a day.

**

"For fuck's sake, Ángel! You almost didn't call."

"Did the package arrive?"

"Where did you get all that dough?!?"

"The house was sold last Tuesday. \$270. We did the paperwork this morning. I got a break when Berta went out to pay some bills in the bank. They move in in a week's time."

"Way to go! Right on time! In three days' time you'll be free!"

"Finally, brother!"

"And will you invite me over once you are there?"

"Sure, Márquez! With some cold beer and food, and maybe, even a little poker game. But just don't scam me like you used to, OK?"

"No, brother, that was a one time thing. I've already lost the touch."

"Listen, don't forget to call that woman and tell her that I already have the money. Go ahead with the paperwork!"

"No problem."

On Wednesday, Mariana packed Ángel's things in a suitcase. Berta hugged him, looked him in the eyes and told him that that was the best thing for him. Mariana couldn't hold back the tears. Ángel felt a lump in his throat for the first time, but then swallowed it down, saying to himself "God, I'm an idiot! Why am I sad if I'm finally starting my new life? Guillermo, yes, that can be my new name." When they arrived at the Institute, Dr. Márquez was finalising details with the head nurse. She had Ángel's medical history, exams and authenticated treatments in her hands. She showed Mariana the folder and explained what her dad's treatment was going to be like. Mariana nodded and went to hug him. She told him he was going to be fine and not to worry, that he'd have all the comforts there that he didn't have in the house. She kissed him on the forehead and left. Dr. Márquez asked the head nurse if he could speak to Ángel for a minute.

"Ready, brother. This farm business has already been seen to. These are the deeds, sign here quickly before the head nurse gets here. I'll come and get you in a few days."

"Thank you, Márquez, for all your help!"

"That's what mates are for, right? Besides, you owe me a game."

“DAD, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”
“DADDY IS PIDDLING,”
ÁNGEL REPLIED.

“Count on it!”

Dr. Márquez hugged Ángel, winked and left the room. Ángel followed him with the intention of accompanying him to the door, but stopped when he saw him approaching the head nurse.

“Sister, may I?”

“Tell me, Dr. Márquez, how can I help you?”

“I would like to make some recommendations regarding Ángel.”

“Of course.”

“His senile dementia is very advanced. It’s advanced to the point that he may present severely violent episodes. In this case it will be better to isolate him and use a straitjacket and...”

“Begin pharmacological treatment; memantine 5 mg / day, perfect. Anything else?”

“Yes. Ángel is not yet aware of his problem, so he often says that he is not senile, and constantly asks for tests to verify his lucidity. In the clinical history that you have in your hands, everything is perfectly specified.”

“I understand Dr. Márquez. Let me see. Here it says that he has already presented cognitive changes, what exactly do they consist of?”

“Confusion and disorientation. He says that I stole a large sum of money from him that he was going to use to buy a farm! Can you believe it? Can you see how far gone his dementia is? My God!”

Enraged, Ángel stormed out.

“You’re such a cunt!” Ángel said as he rammed into Márquez. On the floor, Ángel hit him in the face with a fist that made him spit out blood. “And then you’re going to steal from me, you bastard? Give me back my money or I’ll kill you!” Ángel tightened his hold on Márquez’s neck, obstructing his breathing.

“Orderlies! Orderlies!” The head nurse shouted, while setting off the alarm.

“Just like I told you Nurse! “Márquez said when they took Ángel away and sedated him. “My God, the dementia has finished him off.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine here. You’d better leave the Institute now.”

When Márquez left, he felt something sink into his back.

“That’s exactly how I wanted to find you, doctor! If Muhammad won’t come to the mountain...”

“Wait! Don’t do anything to me!”

“Quietly now, this blade is sharp! I’m here for that \$400 million, my friend.”

“It’s in my office.”

“Don’t give me any of your bullshit now, the boss doesn’t like slackers. Oh! And don’t forget about the \$17 million interest!”

“Interest?!? Don’t do this to me! Where am I going to get that?!?”

“I don’t give a shit if you have to steal it from your own mother!”

“Give me some time, OK?”

“What fucking time! We have kindly given you a loan and this is how you pay us? Who asked you to bet everything? Say no more. Just let me know if you want to visit your church feet-first.”

“No, no. Wait!”

“Look at you, all dressed up in that penguin suit, and now you are going to get your blood all over it. Hurry up, you faggot!”

ellipsis

