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Editors

Iván Darío Forero
Josué Cabrera
Andrés Londoño
Gabriela Melo
Katherine Cano

ELLIPSIS

2019

4



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ELLIPSIS₄



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.PUNTOAPARTE BOOKVERTISING

ISSN

2711-158X

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FOREWORD



By Sylvia Ospina

Arts Director, British Council



We are very pleased to present the fourth Ellipsis anthology. This publication contains the works of ten literature students that participated in this program, offered by the British Council since 2015. With tutoring from Alejandra Jaramillo in creative writing and from Marta Orrantia in editing, these students worked over approximately eight months to produce the five short stories you will find here.

Ellipsis 2019 brought together young people from Bogotá, Tunja, Zipaquirá, Bucaramanga, Medellín, Pereira, Cali, and Villavicencio. Their first meeting was at the Hay Festival, held in Cartagena in January. The students attended various festival events and had the opportunity to participate in talks directed specifically to the Ellipsis group with the British writers Sarah Churchwell, Philippe Sands, and Dylan Moore, along with the Canadian authors Madeleine Thien and Kim Thuy. Over four days, the students attended various workshops on writing and editing led by Alejandra and Marta, and thus began the collective creative process that resulted in this publication.

In April 2019, the Ellipsis students met once again at FILBo, the Bogotá International Book Fair. There they enjoyed the various

events offered by one of Latin America's largest book fairs and conversed with the British authors David Keenan and Alexandra Christo, as well as the Colombian editor Carolina Venegas. Over these four days of work, spaces for reflection and training helped to consolidate each of these short stories. Afterwards, over a period of approximately three months, the five writers and their editors worked together to refine the final vision conveyed in the stories you are about to read.

Every year, the Ellipsis program offered by the British Council allows ten students to participate in a process of training for creative writing and editing that results in the first printed publication for the young writers. It also allows them to attend two of the most important literary events in Colombia and hold intimate conversations with acclaimed British writers. We are convinced that these spaces of dialogue, learning, and exchange will have an impact on the professional and personal development of these young Colombian writers. We invite you to savor each of the stories that they chose to tell.

LEANDRO: A NOVELISTIC MIME AND FIVE SHORT STORIES



By: Alejandra Jaramillo Morales

Writer and tutor of the Ellipsis program

From the first time we trained writers for the Ellipsis program in 2015, we saw that several elements were necessary to create cohesion and a dialogue that was interesting, rich, and affectionate between the students and the British Council team. This has happened at many levels: in various meeting places from Cartagena to Bogotá, in the process of translating and editing the stories and the launching the books, etc. All of this has allowed us to say that over these four years we have created bonds and certain very assertive ways of building these encounters around the creative process. But one element that was central from the beginning was a decision that we made with the first cohort to create some kind of cohesion between the different stories that were to be written. We felt it was necessary to have a common element that would create a conversation.

The first year we decided to pay tribute to the city of Cartagena, which was welcoming us for the first time, and also to the Hay Festival. So, we decided that all the stories to be written that year would take place over the same weekend that we were experiencing. Beyond

that, the theme was open. The following year, with the second cohort, we made the decision together to produce a thematic book, and the theme we chose to bring the stories together was cowardice. The third cohort, led by the writer Roberto Rubiano rather than me, chose the theme of desarraigo, which translates to something between uprooting and alienation.

This fourth year, the conversation was very interesting. There were proposals for multiple themes and places that might unify the stories. Then someone asked, "Why don't we have a character in common? Let's use one character in all the stories." We all liked that idea very much and that's what we chose to do. We began to imagine who that character might be. Coincidentally, we had all seen a mime the day before in Cartagena. We had seen him at different times; we hadn't been all together and yet we each saw him, a mime performing in Cartagena. So we chose him; only later did we discover the complexities implicated in having one character run through all the stories.

He was going to become a character under the rules of a novel—that is, he had to change throughout the book taken as a whole—and at the same time he had to be a good character in each story independently. They went looking for him. They wanted to see him perform one more time. They wanted to watch the mime carefully.



They needed to see how he moved, his gestures, his physical expressions. Later, when we were no longer in Cartagena, it became necessary to create a temporality for the stories. We decided that all the stories had to take place during the last year of the mime's life, that it was the year 2019 and that the story of our character would begin in Cartagena at that moment. Later, we decided that during that year that character was going to die. Therefore, the stories had to be divided between the months of the year in question. Each one would take place in a different place, to which the mime would travel in his flight from his previous life. He was a man at the end of life, a man who discovered he had lung cancer and whose death was imminent. He had made the weighty decision to leave everything behind—work, family, partner—and embark on a different path. At the beginning of the trip he would decide to dedicate himself to travel, and in Cartagena he would resolve to become a mime. All his life he had been a theatre artist and had learned the techniques of mime. And, of course, during those days in Cartagena he would settle on that as a means of survival.

Obviously, we came across many difficulties in building the character. We had to know many things about this being to build a protagonist that would ultimately serve all the stories, a being that each

of us would come to know, including the editors who also helped to shape the character. It was a very interesting job. We had to answer questions about the life of the mime. Why does he leave his whole life behind? Why does he leave his family? Why does he choose to travel? What psychic or physical processes does the illness induce? How does a human being face the end of his life? These questions found ways to be presented and narrated by our writers in training.

Hence you, the reader, will find here five stories that tried to bring life to this character that we built together; five stories that take us on a journey from the time he leaves everything behind and arrives in Cartagena without knowing much about where he is going, the journey on which he decides to become a mime, and then the various journeys that life poses throughout the year until he lands back in Bogotá in December, at the end of his days.

You will be the one, as you read these stories, who will be able to say whether we managed to make a single character, Leandro, a powerful presence in each story, a being that is transformed in the particular modulations of each story, as if he were a novelistic character that cuts across the creations of these five writers in training.

A VOICE SLIPS THROUGH MY FINGERS



IVÁN DARÍO FORERO

Editor

For me, Ellipsis began with a call from the Department of Literary Creation of the Central University of Colombia. I was informed that I had been selected to represent the institution in a British Council event. Sebastian and I had to decide who would go in as a writer and who would go in as an editor. Seeing the shadow of doubt on Sebastian's face, I said, "Do it, dog, I'm going in as an editor, no problem." I have complete confidence in my friend's writing skills; after all, lawyers are known for their eloquence. It's also worth saying that I am completely distrustful of my poetic capabilities. The day of testing arrived: one hour and a text to be edited—and it wasn't about proofreading. I was at an event at the school where I work. I did the comments as well as I could, always with the premise that an editor must look for the gold in a text, and then it was a matter of cleaning up the mud. It seems to have worked: Cartagena and the Hay were waiting for me. Throughout the process, I learned how to let a writer know which scenes needed to be made clearer through the images and rhythm in his text. All of this became more rigorous with Karina's story, which initially had good intuitions, but lacked concreteness. Together we made that happen over more than five months of work.

The memories from last January seem to belong to someone else. All those the sessions with Marta Orrantia and her very fine criterion, which tattooed precious advice into my memory. The workshops

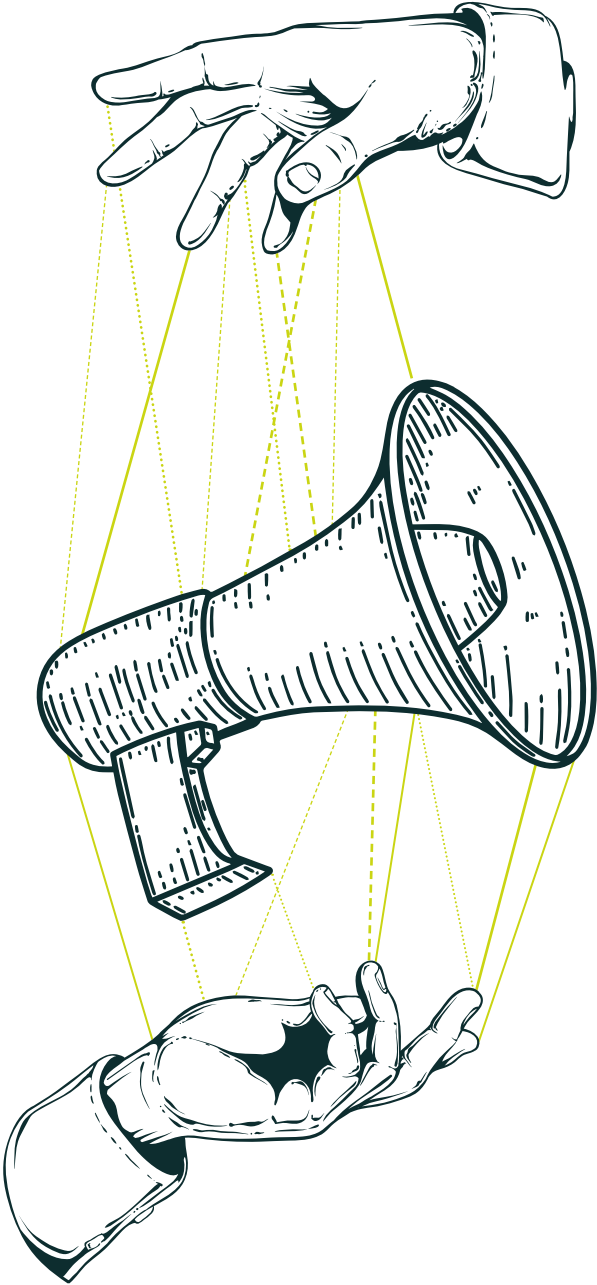
Alejandra Jaramillo offered the writers, workshops I would have liked to attend but which I only did vicariously through my colleagues' notes. The events and contact with writers from all over the world, who did not just talk to us about their ways of seeing writing, but treated us as if we were friends from time immemorial and they had read our complete works. How short is this space to speak of the joking around with Kim Thuy or the discussions with Phillip Sands, and others I ungratefully won't even mention. Then came FILBO, all ten of us, our badges billowing in the wind, proud, laughing at each other for showing off our invitations, although every one of us did. And why not? We represented different corners of this grisly nation: Medellín, Pereira, Tunja, Villavicencio, Bucaramanga, Cali, Bogotá, and, of course, the salt from Zipaquirá that Egan Bernal now helps me spread all over the world. Every time I tell my acquaintances about this downpour they say to me: "That was an opportunity that won't repeat itself." No, I reply. This was a big step, but merely the first in a long life of writing and editing. It won't always be with so much support, true, but *Ellipsis* was the opening chapter for several of us that have thrown in our lots with the letters.

KARINA LOPERA

Writer

Early on, I thought no one understood my idea, my characters, or my style. When I started rewriting, I realized that they had actually done a better job than I had. Then I learned to see the cracks that made the story wobble, or the small opportunities I missed out on exploring. I also learned to use the eraser, delete not just words or sentences but entire scenes. My process with *Ellipsis* was an exercise in detachment: letting go of a paragraph you've worked on for days, of an image, of an idea. Things you obsess over but that, ultimately, once you begin to read yourself critically, you realize you would be better off without. This is a story written with two pairs of hands and twelve pairs of eyes.

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A VOICE SLIPS THROUGH MY FINGERS



Karina Lopera Uribe



Iván Darío Forero

*There was once a girl who could hear her hands
and who listened to touch
and whose hands would sometimes
fly away*

— Eduardo Cote Lamus

JANUARY 7

Leandro stares at his painted face. At this hour of the night, barely illuminated by the faint glow of yellow bulb above the sink, all he sees in the mirror is a white face. A few days ago, he left everything: his theatre company, his flat, his friends, his love. Everything. He left his life elsewhere and all he had now was this white face in the mirror. Leandro takes a sip of rum and glares into his own eyes: “Cheers, man, here’s to your new life.” The words stumble bitterly across his tongue and when uttered make the past appear along the edges of his face, escaping the mouth of darkness. The white begins to make him feel queasy. He rinses the seemingly indelible white layer of paint over and over again. He rests his hands on the sink and watches the whirlpools of stained water wash down the drain. A white drop rolls off his chin and explodes into pieces scattering along the porcelain. Another drop rolls off his nose. Three. Four. Five. Everything. Leandro dries himself unceremoniously with his t-shirt, takes the bottle and turns off the light to avoid accidentally coming across himself in the mirror. He walks across the room and, standing at the window on the other side, lights a cigarette. Gethsemane is empty, and the lights in the buildings have all been switched off. The ashes from his cigarette fall on an old book by Marcel Marceaux, resting on his desk. Everything. Can anyone possibly abandon everything? Leandro sips from a white-stained bottle. Nothing happens. Everything. In the distance, a vallenato. Everything. Another cigarette. Everything: “Here’s to my new fuckin’ life.”



MARCH 15

Once again, Maria Luisa dreams that she is a jellyfish. She can't see herself, but she knows it: she feels swathed in a dense medium, contracting and expanding as she moves a body that she can barely feel, a naked soul. She stops. Waits. Life seems suspended. She feels as though she were melting into the heaviness. Time sways, as does she, along with the undulating hot and cold currents. She feels numb, trapped in a daze, swaying. A tingling slowly ripples through her numbed arms, and Maria Luisa becomes aware of how long she is. Maybe she could go around the world. She swims off. With each push, she feels time lengthening alongside her as she moves through the deep blue. She gets nowhere. There is nowhere to get to. All she can do is push herself until she wakes up.

Maria Luisa struggles to stretch out her slumber. She has only a week's holiday and refuses to obey her body, which, used to getting up early, always wakes her up at the same time, as the noise of the world never could. Mother had told her that although her ears were born muted, her body would never let her go through life as if she were half asleep. Maria Luisa confirmed this when she began to wake up from a grumbling tummy, a cramp, an unexplained itching in her feet. Her friends at the school for the deaf slept with their cell phone under their pillow, so they could be woken up by the vibration. Maria Luisa didn't need to: something always woke her up at the right time, as if clicking a switch. This is how she spends her first morning in Cartagena, under the weight of rising heat, twisting from side to side as she presses her pillow with her legs, shifting between a dream that she vaguely remembers as a swelling and the increasingly suffocating and all too real light that slips through the blinds. Maria Luisa stretches out her slumber until her eyes open on their own and cannot deny that she is fully awake. Defeated by the weight of the day, she is no longer a jellyfish, but an avalanche that spills the sheets over the edge of the bed and crawls lazily to the shower.



MARIA LUISA SITS AT THE DRESSING TABLE TO COMB HER HAIR. SHE FINISHES WRINGING THE ENDS, RUNNING A LITTLE CREAM THROUGH THE DARK CURLS.

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Maria Luisa sits at the dressing table to comb her hair. She finishes wringing the ends, running a little cream through the dark curls. She imagines her mum standing behind her, a younger mother, still with black hair, that used to sit her down in between the two bathroom mirrors every morning to teach her the art of braiding. She sees her reflected, looking into her eyes, slowly going over the movements to pull together a crown braid, a tiara, a cascading dragon braid, a double Dutch fishtail braid. She remembers sitting there, her hands clasped on her green school skirt. Sometimes she would gaze into the mirror at the back and try to memorise the steps; other times she would peek into the mirror in front only to see a shadow that had begun to grow under her mum's almond-shaped brown eyes that narrowed as she laughed. She sees her pointed fingers weaving from top to bottom, from ear to ear, she sees her crossing, tying, tightening, untying. She sees her gathering her hair into a tail, separating it in two, releasing a lock to the side, weaving a braid around the ribbon with the three sections and hiding the tip with a hairpin. She

sees her smiling, satisfied with the result. María Luisa smiles back and adds her own touch to her mother's crown, a clip in the shape of a white flower. She feels her stomach grumbling. She looks at her cell phone: it's noon. She has spent the whole morning sleeping. Mrs Elsa, a friend of the family who agreed to take her in, leaves early for work, so she must have been alone already. She prepares a quick breakfast and packs her sketchbook and some tourist brochures she took from the airport. For today, she decides on a tour of the museums in the walled city. Before leaving, she looks into the mirror to check that the end of her braid is still hidden under the ribbon. Suddenly notices a faint shadow appearing beneath her almond-shaped brown eyes that narrow as she laughs.

According to the map she checked on her cell phone, Mrs Elsa's apartment is on a street that leads directly to the walled city, just twenty minutes away. María Luisa walks with both hands clinging to the shoulder strap of her backpack. The street seems another, heavier; different from the one she took last night in the taxi. At night she had felt it cool, still, light. Today, in the midday sun, there is a strong sour smell in the air: cement, dust, dry pipes, hot fruit, perfumed sweat, cigarettes and late-night whiskey. Her skin crawls when the taste of fried meat from restaurants mixes with the smell of rubbish beginning to rot in the plastic bins. She chokes on the mish-mash of smells. Were she not on holiday, she would rush through, but she wants to take her time in getting to know her block, hers for a few days. A sudden breeze left by a taxi passing sweeps away the smells just long enough for María Luisa to notice the green and creamy aroma of her shampoo. She breathes, relieving the tightness in her chest. It strikes her that this must be what it is like to hear a song. She turns her head and looks back at the stretch she has just walked along and feels like she is in the middle of one of those symphonies that she has sometimes watched, curiously, in videos: the tarmac, the people, the shops, the street sellers with their fruit or fried food, all arranged like instruments on a stage, filling the air with a presence that throws you back inside yourself as soon as it

**AS SHE PASSES
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vanishes. At school she was taught that sound is a vibration that travels through the air. That intangible entity, Maria Luisa suspects, must be like a smell that breaks the world and passes through the centre of the stomach.

She recognises the Clock Tower at the end of the street. As she walks towards the walled city, Maria Luisa spots a little view of the sea appearing to her left. Despite the heat, a chill rises to her head: the first time she went to sea 14 years ago, she almost drowned and swore never to return. She is excited to think that she has a new bathing suit in her suitcase, and wonders if the sound of the waves reaches all the way to Mrs Elsa's apartment. Tomorrow, tomorrow will be the day. As she passes through the arch of the Clock Tower, some white-clad men approach her with photo books and she looks away, uninterested. Whatever they are, she doesn't care. She just wants to get to the first museum as quickly as possible. Who knows: maybe here she'll find the inspiration she needs to stop working as a seamstress and finally dedicate herself to painting.

Her excitement only lasts for three of the ten museums recommended in the guidebook. Maria Luisa walks slowly through the Modern Art Museum, stops at each piece to read the cards and takes notes in her notebook; at the Naval Museum she sketches of replicas of ships and submarines; at the Gold Museum she walks with her arms crossed and without stopping. When she gets to the History Museum, she decides that she has already seen everything there is to see as far as museums go, and turns around before even entering. Tired, she crosses the street to the park, sits on a bench and sighs. She stretches her calves, rotates her ankles, extends her back. She can just about make out the words "Parque Bolívar" on a far fence and asks herself why there isn't a sign for Bolívar if there are so many places named after him. It could be a mixture of 'soldier' and 'short', or 'soldier' and 'big nose'; she has always thought that Bolívar had a very pointy nose. And given that the places named after him tend to be tree-lined parks, the sign would also have to be



above the chest, a high up sign that gives shade. She invents one: 'soldier's shade', 'big nose tree', 'nose with shade'.

A woman passes by: tall, bald, dark-skinned and wearing a long skirt that waves in the wind like a flag, showing off its charming red and blue patterns. Maria Luisa paints it in her notebook. As soon as she gets home, she will sew one the same and wear it in the August wind when everyone in the city goes out to fly their kites. She takes a look at her previous drawings: lots of sketches of skirts, dresses, scarves, loose shirts, Aladdin pants. She remembers exactly who was wearing them, where, and how they fitted to the body's movement, and as she flicks through her notebook, she feels like she's at the most beautiful fashion show on the planet. She never made any of the designs. But this skirt she will, without a doubt. The afternoon is over and Maria Luisa gets up to watch the sunset at sea. She notices people gathering in a circle on one side of the square. They are laughing. She comes close. She can't see anything even if she stands on tiptoes, so she makes her way through the crowd until she gets to the front. In the middle of the circle there is a puppy barking at a mime showing his teeth, as he goes down onto his hands and knees.

Leandro looks up at the crowd of people as they laugh. He doesn't normally imitate animals, but sometimes, if it's been a hard day, it's the best he can do. So, as soon as he saw the woman sitting on the bench with her Dalmatian beside her, Leandro went down on all fours and went towards her as though he were a dog going to say hello. He immediately sparked empathy in the woman and the curiosity in the dog. The latter looked at him while tilting its head. He grimaced at it and the pup started barking. The woman pulled him by the leash. "Oh, don't worry, he won't bite, he's just a little playful." Leandro tilted his head too, reminding her that he was a dog and could not understand what she was saying. He moved closer and let the dog smell him. By then, the barking had taken effect and people were beginning to gather around. The dog took Leandro's old hat and, as the woman tried to get it back, it managed to tear the brim with its new fangs. Leandro



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cursed to himself and continued to imitate the dog in its playfulness, pretending to lick his legs and panting with his tongue hanging out. He listened to everyone laugh at him and be sweet to the Dalmatian. He had them where he wanted them. He put his hat on the ground with his mouth and placed his hands on his chest as if begging for a bone. But all this effort only earned him a few coins. "It's unbelievable what I have to do to get these penny-pinchers to part with a bit of change," he thought to himself. Leandro decides to be more direct: he crawls around the circle holding his hat with his teeth; broad smile, wagging tail. A woman wearing a clip in the shape of a white flower crosses her arms as the mime passes in front of her. Leandro frowned like a fierce dog and pretended to pee on her. They all burst into laughter and some begin to pull out their wallets. The woman leaves, annoyed, and Leandro goes around to everyone until there



are no spectators left. Finally he gets up, shakes the dust from his knees, bows to the woman and then to the Dalmatian and puts the money away in his pocket.

Despite the fact that she keeps crashing into the other pedestrians, Maria Luisa walks with her eyes on the ground. She knows that she should always be alert in the street, but she is so embarrassed that all she can think about is the crowd laughing at her. It was the mime's fault. He could have ignored her, but he looked for a way to make her part of the show. He had no right to expose her in front of everyone. She could just about make ends meet with her dressmaking. To be able to come to Cartagena, she had had to save for three years and even so, she had a strictly calculated budget with which to travel comfortably and, at most, be able to treat herself to something nice to eat. Besides, she wasn't the only one who hadn't given him any money. Why pick on her then? Taking long strides, Maria Luisa flees through the streets towards the old city wall, climbs up a ramp and walks until she finds a small door to a tunnel. It's so dark that she can't see the end, but when she looks out over the edge of the wall, she can see that it connects with a lower level that extends out towards the road. She lies on the wall. She watches the sea, the street, the people walking along the lower part of the wall. Gradually, she manages to relax her jaw, her neck, her hands. And then, all of a sudden, she sees the mime appearing down below. He walks slowly towards the end of the pavement, resting his elbows and stomach on the wall, and there, he washes his hands with a bottle of water. He takes a handkerchief out of his pocket, wets it, and with it removes the make-up from his face. Maria Luisa sees him from behind and tries to remember his features, but all that appears in her mind is a white face. So she imagines it: a little paint that remains stuck to the hairs on his temples, white drops that drip down his neck and become trapped in an incipient beard, skin reddened by the rough handkerchief. She imagines him looking tired around the edges of his eyes. The man hangs his hands over the wall and lights a cigarette. Maria Luisa doesn't feel annoyed with him anymore. He looks



exhausted and lonely. She even feels a bit of remorse for not having helped him: surely mime work is not easy either, like being a seamstress. She takes out her notebook and enthusiastically begins to draw. When she finishes, the man is still there, unperturbed. Maria Luisa runs down the tunnel to the lower level of the wall.

Night-time is usually best when it comes to attracting an audience, but today Leandro is tired and decides to stop work for the day. His chest has felt tighter in the last few days and he has to keep reminding himself that it is too early to experience any symptoms. "Leandro, you're just afraid. Relax," he tells himself. Today, however, the anguish has not abated and consumes his strength to the point that he wishes he had never left Bogotá. He eagerly inhales long puffs of a cigarette. Two and a half months have passed and he still thinks it could be a mistake. The doctor had told him that it was very unusual to develop lung cancer at his age. "Do you have a family history?" "Yes, sir, my grandfather, my father, I think a distant relative." "It's not common, but unfortunately it's a genetic cancer. Take a few days to discuss it with your family. Don't rule out chemotherapy, I'll expect you here next week to discuss other options. And quit tobacco, greasy food, and alcohol." "Thank you, doctor, that's very kind of you." As soon as he left the office, he smoked two Pielroja in about three breaths. Maybe he should have asked for a second opinion before packing his suitcase that same night and coming to Cartagena. This has got to be a mistake, he thinks. It could still be a mistake.

Leandro was about to light another cigarette when someone taps him on the shoulder, making him turn around. A woman smiles at him and hands him a drawing: a landscape of the sea, the road, the wall and a small figure of a person from behind. Leandro recognises the view he was contemplating a moment ago and intuits his own figure in the character. He asks her if it's him; she nods. The woman has dark, bright eyes. He thanks her for the gift; she plays it down with a gesture. Leandro looks at the drawing again, tells her how good it is and thanks her again. When he looks back at her, he notices that



LEANDRO RECREATES THE ENCOUNTER OVER AND OVER AGAIN IN HIS MIND AND IMAGINES A MYRIAD OF BETTER WAYS IN WHICH HE COULD HAVE MADE IT GO.

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she has inclined her head a little; he squints his eyes and contemplates her lips. Maria Luisa straightens up and points to her ear. Leandro takes a couple of seconds to understand; they seem eternal to her. He suddenly realises that all this time she has not stopped looking at his lips. It's cold. He apologises to her, although he doesn't know why, and slowly says: "It's-gr-ea-t." Maria Luisa is uncomfortable with his exaggerated pronunciation and so she frowns. With four fingers he touches his chin and hits the palm of the other hand as he lowers them, the sign for gratitude he remembers seeing in a movie. Leandro laughs nervously, scratches his head, plays with a corner of the piece of paper. Maria Luisa says goodbye. He sees her walking quickly towards the tunnel and disappear.



Leandro recreates the encounter over and over again in his mind and imagines a myriad of better ways in which he could have made it go. Anchored to the floor of the wall, he becomes obsessed with remembering every one of the gestures on his face and wonders what else they might mean in sign language. Could he have said something insulting? He was nervous and moved his hands a lot, although he no longer knows what he did. Could he have said something without knowing it? Something obscene? Did she laugh at seeing so much babbling in his hands? The woman was obviously lip-reading, so why didn't he just talk to her straight on? In any case, there is no way he can apologise, as she had left without even telling him her name. And, anyway, would she have understood? The drawing is already completely wrinkled in Leandro's hands, who unsuccessfully tries to smooth it. He looks at it more closely: the strokes are thin, bold; the wall reflects the texture of its stones, and the sea, the texture of waves; the shadows resemble the shape of the objects they are casting shade on. It is full of almost imperceptible detail like boxes on ship platforms, the checks on his shirt, the beaks of seagulls. He thinks it is a good drawing, very good, in spite of the wrinkles. Clumsy, he tells himself: years of theatre and everything about you is sheer clumsiness.

Night falls suddenly. Leandro climbs the tunnel towards the wall and walks with his hands clasped in his pockets. It tortures him to think that a few years ago this would not have happened to him. He would have gracefully found a way out of the mess, or at least he would have laughed at his clumsiness and started all over again as if it were no big deal. Now, in contrast, he is paralysed by doubt. Since when do I think so slowly and let embarrassment take control? Is this part of...? No, no, don't be stupid; it's not brain cancer. I'm just distracted, too many changes. He tries to slow down the rhythm in his head by listening to the waves, but the fear imposes itself again. What am I going to do when everything gets worse? What if I run out of money? When will I get so sick that I won't be able to work? If I die in a hostel room, how long will it take for someone to find me? And if I



die in the middle of the street, what are they going to do with me? Where are they going to dump my body? I should have told my family, at least my mother. But he immediately anticipates the questions, the insistence to return home, to do chemo, the 'Why did you stop talking to us? - Understand me, I don't want to.', and the crying and the remorse. He concludes, as he does many times in a day: it is better this way. I was not born for pats on the back and puppy eyes.

On the way to Doña Alba's house, Leandro buys a new pack of cigarettes, two bags of lemon-flavoured crisps, and two beers: that's all the appetite he expected to have that night. Across the street is an Internet café. He hasn't checked his mail since he left Bogotá. Leandro gulps, sighs, and then asks for a computer. The man at the counter points to a cubicle. He sits, his heart in his throat. He goes into his mail. The page takes ages to open. He fixes his gaze on the hourglass that keeps turning: one, two, three, four. I hope someone has written. Five, six. No, on second thought, it would be better for there to be nothing, for no one to have written. Seven. Well, one, maybe one from Lena. No, not from Lena. Eight. The screen displays the list of unread messages. Three from Lena.

Hello, please contact your doctor immediately...

Hey, what the fuck? Have you left without...

Dear customer, please find attached the extract for...

Good morning, please contact us to resched...

Hi love, I keep calling but it goes straight to your voicemail. Are you ok?...

Good morning, please confirm appointment with doct...

Hi honey, did you go on holidays without me? Haha b...

He feels something hot, sticky, bitter, growing in his stomach. Lena's last mail is from a week ago; she must hate him by now. He closes the session without opening any messages: the decision has been made and it's better that way. Leandro approaches the counter trying to swallow his remorse and when he takes out his wallet, he finds the wrinkled picture in his pocket. He remembers the woman: big eyes,



creases at the edges, small teeth, broad smile. When he was a theatre student, he performed scenes with his hands, feet, mouth and eyes blindfolded, but he had never performed without being able to hear. Scenes without dialogue or music, yes, but always a noise from the audience, a breath on the side, the heartbeat in the head, something. Leandro can hardly imagine it. Then he goes back to the computer, writes “Colombian Sign Language” and begins to look for information.

MARCH 18

Leandro dreams that he is gliding high. The mountains extend underneath; in front, distant clouds pass. He flies alone. The wind hits his ears like a dry drumbeat. If I could fly like a condor. He hears a groaning voice in the distance. I would go far, far away, where no one would ever know. Suddenly, the beating drum becomes an unbearable whistle and he feels the air passing through, cutting layers of skin. He’s plummeting. Leandro recoils in a raw embrace and gradually falls into a stunned silence. The mountains, the clouds and the whistling come to him like a distant echo. He thinks he might be dying. Around him a table, a lamp, a wrinkled drawing begins to appear. Leandro wakes up and discovers a song through the door, from the back of the kitchen, which repeatedly cries out: I better go, I better go, like the wounded condor. His hand on his throat, sore from a coughing fit.

The ceiling of the room is so cracked that Leandro fears that the roof could fall in with the first drizzle. Fear doesn’t keep him awake; rather, it plunges him into a careful observation of the house’s wrinkles. Leandro spends a good part of his mornings in Cartagena following the lines on the roof, building constellations with the damp patches that whiten the blue paint and listening to small steps that run hurriedly across the roof. In the meantime, he smokes half-heartedly and drinks a can of beer getting warm on the nightstand. Anyway, mime work in the mornings is useless: everyone is rushing to keep



to their daily schedules and has no time or patience. Sometimes, if he's up to it, as soon as he finishes his beer, he goes to cook with Alba, who has been a little blessing for him since the first day. When he arrived in Cartagena, Leandro could not find a spare room near the historic centre. He had walked all afternoon until Alba, who had heard him begging a hostel manager to let him sleep on the sofa, came to offer him a room. Leandro slept there that night and, when he saw the roof, planned to leave the next morning, but he kept postponing departure until, a week later, he was enamoured with Alba's stories. With Marlon, her husband, he has barely crossed a few words since he arrived. He looks much older than her and is becoming deaf in one ear. He spends all day on the rocking chair at the entrance, watching the tourists in silence. Every day Alba complains to Leandro that the neighbourhood has become so expensive that his neighbours had long since sold their houses and left them on their own. Since Marlon no longer works and she sells fried foods and lunches to order, to be able to continue living there they have to rent out the room, but with such an old house in the middle of such modern hostels, it is becoming harder by the day. Leandro always insists: "Doña Alba, a foreigner would pay you a fortune for this place, why don't you sell and go somewhere quieter? But Alba, serious and without stopping cooking, replies: "Cachaco, you die better where you were happy." Then she tells him some new story about the house, which Leandro associates with a crack or patch on the roof. Even Marlon, who never seems to take his eyes off the street, discreetly turns the chair to listen to Alba's stories through his good ear, she, in turn, raises her voice when she notices, and both smile at the memory.

Leandro's stomach finally protests and makes him drag himself out of bed. The water in the shower is spine-chillingly cold, so much so that it distracts him from his hunger, but at least it takes away the heat. He still shudders when he remembers the time when he asked Alba whether they had hot water. Laughing, Alba replied, "Eche, cachaco, you can do it, that icy water will stop you from getting cancer,

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you know.” Two weeks under the icy spurt almost convinced him that if some malignant cell didn’t die inside with such a thermal shock, at least frozen lungs would last a little longer and stop the cancer spreading. Lena would go crazy if she heard him say something like that. In any case, he thinks to himself, a little humour about the disease is good for him: it lightens the load. Leandro leaves the room and Alba pours him some coffee, while she hums along to a vallenato that’s playing on the radio. Marlon is still rocking in the doorway. Leandro looks at him there in silence. He’s a big, heavy man, with a thick neck and saggy cheeks. A man of few words, a hoarse and powerful voice, imperative. Then, he remembers the deaf woman. Leandro goes up to Alba, who is plucking a chicken in the kitchen, and asks her what it is like to live with someone who is going deaf. “Cachaco, you find a way to understand each other.” “How? “I don’t know, I talk to him loud, I point to things.” Leandro thinks for a moment. “And if he had never heard anything, what do you think you would do then?” Alba cuts up the chicken and puts it in the boiling broth. “I don’t know, cachaco, you ask very difficult questions.” Leandro laughs and sits grating coconut in the dining room.

MARCH 19

Maria Luisa left the guidebook so that she could devote herself to the beach. She spends most of her time drawing, sunbathing, reading or falling asleep from time to time on a towel on the sand. Every now and again she gets up and stands in front of the sea, the water up to her ankles, the sun burning her shoulders. Nearby, some children play at jumping the waves. The first time she saw the sea she was the same age as them. It was when she went to Coveñas on holiday. They warned her that she was not to swim alone, but Maria Luisa realised that all the other children were going into the water by themselves. To her complaints, her mother replied that the tide was dangerous at that time of year and, if something happened, she might not be able to shout for help. Furious, Maria Luisa went

to sleep without saying good night. It was a mother's whim: the sea had to be like a very big swimming pool and she was the best at doggy-paddle. The next day she ran off to the beach before lunch. She liked to feel the warm water on her chest and cold water on her feet. But the current carried her out, and when she couldn't swim to shore and her legs began to tire, she realised she wouldn't have the strength to go back. She yelled so hard that all the veins in her body quivered. Still, no one seemed to hear her. She screamed for help with the few words she had learned to articulate, but her state of panic made the letters stumble over each other in her mouth. Maria Luisa began to worry that she might not have a voice. She kept trying to scream one out without realising that someone was swimming quickly towards her and that her mum was sobbing on the shore. The rest happened very quickly: when she was wrapped in a towel, she was still hollering and, even in the midst of the tears, she realised that the other children, hidden behind their mothers' legs, were looking at her in terror. She must have had the most horrible voice in the world. That night, shivering with cold from the wet curls soaking her pillow, she swore she would never return to the sea. Maria Luisa dips her feet in the sand and gets her hands wet. Tomorrow, tomorrow for sure.

Leandro goes out to work with the feeling that, while everyone slept unawares, someone had turned the world upside down. Stunned, he stops at the threshold of the Clock Tower and leaps from sound to sound, from the furthest to the nearest, until the distances merge. Fragments of voices parade in all directions, laughter erupts from undefined spots, at least three different songs fill every corner of the square. Every so often, a breath of a breeze caresses his ears. The carriages with their battered wheels run along the cobblestones and the horses leave a metallic echo in their wake. Someone shouts a name, the tires splash in the water, in every corner, someone shouts out prices and the names of a variety of street food. Leandro covers his ears, but the world doesn't disappear. He squeezes harder, but instead of silence, he finds a strange layer that presses



A MIME APPEARS BEHIND THE ENSEMBLE AND TRIES TO MEET HER GAZE.

on his head and sounds like a whistle. At times a woman catches his attention and he follows her with his gaze. He walks distracted, stunned, spinning his wristwatch, make-up melting down his neck.

In Parque Fernández de Madrid, Leandro recognises the deaf woman sitting at an open-air table. Her hair is tied back in a braid that stretches from the back of her neck to her chest. Her loose-fitting blue dress, reaching just below her knees, reveals her tiny shoulders and thin ankles. Slightly arching her back towards the table, one hand receives the weight of her cheek and the other carries a half-empty beer to her thin, serious-looking lips. She had her eyes fixed on a vallenato ensemble playing a classic track by Escalona two tables ahead. Leandro rearranges his hat, takes a deep breath, and walks towards her.

After the beach, Maria Luisa has lunch in the historic centre. She finds a cool place under the trees and puts her meal on the table together with a beer. A group of musicians approaches a couple drinking half a bottle of rum a few tables away. She's always liked to watch music. With her friends from the school for the deaf, she used to look for concert videos and, in time, she began to notice that music changed people's bodies: some songs penetrated through the fingers, others through the hip or the head, some were calming on the body, others moved people's feet, and others still changed gestures into sadness or sensuality. Sometimes the children from the other school she went





to, a school for hearing children, told her that she would never be able to feel the power of music: how could she if she didn't know what a sound is? She would begin to sign with extravagant, quick and abrupt gestures, her face would change, her eyes open, and her nose wrinkle, until she was asked to calm down. With a triumphant smile she would slowly sign: yes, even I know what a scream sounds like.

Maria Luisa stares at the toing and froing of the accordion. Leaning on a chest, it looks like a lung that swells with the air. She imagines that the accordion's voice feels like a surge in her body that lifts the hairs of her arms one by one as it runs over her skin. Suddenly, a mime appears behind the ensemble and tries to meet her gaze. Maria Luisa recognises the man from a few days ago. She waits. He stands next to the guacharaca and begins to imitate the musicians, one by one, while looking at her. She sees him transform: he goes up on tip-toes to reach the height of the young man playing the guacharaca, then sits down and hits his air box, bends his shoulders to simulate the accordionist's muscles, inflates and deflates his cheeks as he plays his accordion, and finally folds his whole face to mimic the singer's wrinkled gesture. She laughs entertained. At the end of the presentation, the mime bows facing Maria Luisa and walks directly to her table. He greets her in sign language. She hesitates and returns the greeting. Leandro introduces himself and spells out his name. Surprised, she spells hers. Leandro looks at her hands, but gets lost at some point. He doesn't remember all the letters he learned in the café, but what he does remember very well is how to say: "Slower, please." Maria Luisa laughs, amused by his slowness in signing. Then she slowly spells her name with her hands and mouth. After a pause, Leandro lifts his shoulders and she understands that's all he knows. She asks him to wait. She leaves money on the table and gets up. Maria Luisa knows that there are signs that any hearing person can understand: she points to herself, and then to him, and 'walks' with two fingers on her left palm. Leandro nods.

At first the silence feels heavy, not because it made him uncomfortable in itself, but because it seemed strange to him not to be able to



choose it. Sometimes he spies on Maria Luisa out of the corner of his eye looking for some proof of discomfort, but he invariably finds her calm and serious. He would like to know what she is thinking, to ask her something about her life, but he is afraid that he won't understand her. He feels at a disadvantage: at least she can read his lips. Leandro tries to relax and lets himself be led to the wall. The heat subsides and the breeze shakes the brim of his hat. He touches Maria Luisa on the shoulder and asks her what the sign for wind is. She shows him: as he expels a breath of air through her mouth, her two palms move sideways and her body sways. Leandro imitates the sign, but expands it more and more until his hands wave disorderly through the air. María Luisa would like to tell him about the woman in the long skirt she saw yesterday, and that in August she likes to fly kites on Cerro del Volador, but there is no way in which she can easily sign or articulate it. She thinks of something simpler to intuit: she asks him, slowly, in sign language, what the wind sounds like. Leandro stops walking and looks at her. She has a subtle smile on her face, almost as though she were testing him. A notebook sticks out of her backpack, and it reminds him of the drawing. He comes up with an idea. He asks her for the notebook and something to write with, opens it on a clean sheet of paper, puts the pencil in Marie-Louise's hand and indicates that she looks at the sheet of paper. She lets him lead her hand across the sheet of paper. Leandro draws circular lines all over the sheet, without stopping, changing speed, and blowing lightly in her face. Maria Luisa closes her eyes and imagines that her pencil travels around the world drawing waves in the sea and dancing skirts, and that the wind that moves her strokes inhabits her drawings.

The afternoon isn't over yet, so Leandro decides to go to work for a while longer. He says goodbye with his usual bow. Maria Luisa wishes him good night and watches him leave. There is something she likes about Leandro. She can't talk to him as she would like, but she doesn't feel uncomfortable as she usually does with other hearing people. She spent the afternoon teaching him sign language, amused by his interest and humour, but she knew nothing about him.

She runs behind him and touches his shoulder. She knows that he wouldn't understand this if she signed it to him, so she tries to make more intuitive gestures: she points to him, to her, draws a tall tower with her fingers, imitates the moving hands of a clock, makes the number four and points to his wristwatch. Leandro looks at her and is slow to respond. Maria Luisa holds her breath: she doesn't know if he is taking his time because he didn't understand or because he is having second thoughts. Finally, he accepts the invitation. Both go off in opposite directions along the wall. At dawn, Leandro dreams that Maria Luisa's hands disappear into the air and caress his face.

MARCH 20

Maria Luisa is lying on the sand. The tide refreshes her toes. It is almost three o'clock in the afternoon, so she ties back her dry hair, gets dressed and puts a towel around her neck. As he walks back to the apartment, she thinks of Leandro. Some hearing people tend to get overwhelmed when they spend a lot of time near her; they say it's because of the silence. When she was a child, Maria Luisa didn't understand what silence was. It seemed to be something she carried with her wherever she went, a burden that weighed on everyone. Everyone but her. It made other children not ask her to go play with them. To her, it still seems like something strange, like a moment in which things fade away and become inert, cut off from the world. She has been told that she lives in silence, but she can't imagine herself in anything like it. In every place where she is told it stands, she sees something that speaks. Even at night, alone, she talks to herself and fills the room with presences. Perhaps it is more like a moment of waiting in which the world reveals itself, like when she sits still on a bench and looks at people. Perhaps she could even touch it; it must be as light as switching from one sign to another, and as ephemeral as the instant in which the synchrony between a hand and face is captured. Who knows if Leandro understands this, but it doesn't matter. At least he seems to understand that there is something other with which to speak to each other that is not a voice. She



always finds this pleasant. Maria Luisa gets into the shower with this thought and, as she rinses the sand from her curls, imagines herself swimming in the sea and she tastes the salt that runs down her face.

When she reaches the Clock Tower, Leandro is already there waiting for her in the shade of the arch. She finds it strange to see him like this, without his makeup or hat, in jeans and a T-shirt. Today the breeze is stronger and Maria Luisa has gathered her hair into a ponytail that flutters in the wind along with her purple frilly dress. Leandro sees her walking towards him and is reminded of the sign for wind. He signs good afternoon and she imitates his bow. Leandro laughs and makes way for her with a ceremonial gesture. This time Leandro let Maria Luisa lead him through the streets at her own pace. They walk side by side, stop in the houses adorned with bougainvillea at the entrance, look at the old animal-shaped doorknobs, and try to touch the cats that stick their heads out through the bars on the windows. They stop at an ice cream parlour and Leandro asks for a taste of all fourteen flavours and then leave without buying any before the exasperated eyes of the girl behind the counter. Leandro hears Maria Luisa's laughter for the first time as they leave the ice-cream parlour and he feels a shudder. It's like a striated voice that comes out unrestrained, out of tune. A few people on the street stare at her, she doesn't seem to notice or care. When they arrive at the Adolfo Mejía theatre, María Luisa points to the wall and runs to see the sun go down. Leandro sees her climb the stairs and sit on the wall. He pauses before following her. Something in that laughter has gotten under his skin, something that he had ignored until then and that was slowly appearing.

Night falls as they're sitting. Leandro hears a man walking down the street playing guitar and turns to look at him. Maria Luisa follows his gaze towards the musician. He imagines that Leandro's voice must be like the skin on his face, a dark voice, weathered by the wind, but that she still caresses as though it were a cloth. She touches him on the shoulder and signs that she knows what the guitar sounds like. Leandro looks at her surprised. Maria Luisa unties her



MARIA LUISA NOTICES LEANDRO SPINNING HIS WATCHSTRAP AND FEARS THAT HE MIGHT BE GETTING BORED ALREADY. SHE DECIDES TO INVITE HIM TO DANCE

hair, brings all of it forward to her chest and closes her eyes. Little by little she pulls her face into a moaning grimace, and with both hands divides her hair into five locks that she holds between her fingers. She begins to weave a braid, swings her body, and blows a little piece of air through her mouth. It reminds Leandro of the first time he heard a live harp: it had to be almost two years ago, in a restaurant in the historic centre of Bogotá. The harpist who played that night also wore her very long hair loose on one side of her chest, and whistled a beautiful melody as she played. That night the music had shaken him to the bone. He still feels dizzy at remembering parts of the concert. It's funny, he thinks that he should have forgotten that concert: it was one of his first dates with Lena. Maria Luisa ends her performance and spots Leandro smiling; she imitates his bow. Leandro thanks her and immediately takes his eyes off her. His memory of Lena left a bitter gurgling in his stomach. Suddenly he feels terribly uncomfortable. Maria Luisa notices Leandro spinning his watchstrap and fears that he might be getting bored already. She decides to invite him to dance, and the invitation catches him

**MARIA LUISA WAVES
HER HAND IN THE
AIR FROM NEAR THE
BAR. SHE IS SEATED
AT A HIGH, CIRCULAR
TABLE NEXT TO TWO
HUGE SPEAKERS.
LEANDRO MAKES HIS
WAY THROUGH THE
PEOPLE AND SITS
WITH HER AT THE
TABLE. HE ASKS FOR
TWO BEERS.**



off guard. He sees her there, waiting, smiling, with her eyes shining, and accepts without giving it much thought. Leandro sees her rush down the stairs, and when she turns and finds him still sitting there, she waves her hand to hurry him to follow. He takes a deep breath and goes down the stairs after her.

Leandro points out all the places where they play music along the way, but Maria Luisa takes a quick look inside, and asks him to continue on. As she makes no effort to let him know what she is looking for, he simply walks, unhurried, and waits. When they start to run out of options, Leandro guides her to Gethsemane. The night is cool and the neighbourhood crowded. As he passes the house, Leandro sees Alba and Marlon sitting on the sidewalk. He tries to pass by without them noticing, but it's too late: Alba shouts his name and he has to return a quick hello without stopping. Maria Luisa looks at him. "See," thinks Leandro, "this is what you get for not paying attention." He points out dryly that this is where he sleeps and looks away to avoid further questions. He regrets having taken this route. At the end of the block, Maria Luisa saw a board that read "Live Salsa". She cheerfully points to it, and Leandro leaves her to run towards the place. He doesn't rush to follow her. Since she takes her time to come out, he assumes that she has finally found the place she was looking for. He goes in after her.

The place is bigger than Leandro imagined: at least fifteen tables surround a large dance floor that in turn surrounds a stage full of instruments, microphones, and amplifiers. Cuban and Puerto Rican flags hang from the ceiling; the walls are covered with posters and old photographs; everything is softly lit by a mixture of yellow, orange and red lights. In the background, Maria Luisa waves her hand in the air from near the bar. She is seated at a high, circular table next to two huge speakers. Leandro makes his way through the people and sits with her at the table. He asks for two beers. The musicians begin to settle on the stage. The singer announces the first song and his voice sounds so loud on the loudspeaker that it



makes Leandro jump. Maria Luisa, who is closer, has not moved an inch. The loudspeaker explodes with a bongo drum, loud son fills the place and very soon, people begin to fight for the few empty spaces to dance. Leandro rests a little on the wall and looks at Maria Luisa, who has a hand on the speaker and is moving along to the percussion. Leandro is surprised to see that she keeps up with the rhythm with great precision. So this was what she was looking for: the vibration had to be powerful enough for her to be able to feel, if not hear, the music in her body. Leandro has fun watching her joy. As the night passes, however, the trumpet begins to turn into a scream and the bell into a pinch on Leandro's eardrums; he can't help but feel that something in his head is about to explode. Maria Luisa, on the other hand, has stood up to be closer to the speaker and dances with her eyes closed, moving at ease. The bar's windows fog up and everyone starts to sweat. Maria Luisa turns for a moment to ask him to dance, but sees Leandro scratching his ears with his knuckles. She's embarrassed. She looks at him smiling and points to the door. He nods trying to hide his discomfort, as if it weren't a big deal. Leandro gives the waitress a note, and without waiting for the change leaves the premises. At the exit, a current of cold air makes his skin tingle. He looks at Maria Luisa, coming out after him, smiling, shivering from the cold, looking like there were no other difference but the temperature.

Despite the terrible headache, Leandro offers to walk her home. Maria Luisa shows him the directions she has written in her notebook; she's staying just a few blocks from Alba's house. They walk side by side, without saying a word to each other; the cold wind accompanies them through the streets. Maria Luisa recognises her block and shows Leandro the building. When they arrive at her door, she thanks him and says good night. She looks at him attentively, like the first day when she gave him the drawing. Maria Luisa gives him a long hug. When he moves away, Leandro thinks that he feels his lips brushing against her cheek. He quickly leaves with his usual bow and hurries back up the street. Leandro walks

quickly, without being able to tell if the noise in his ears is still the music from the bar or if it is something from Maria Luisa's laughter that stuck to him, and now returns as an echo.

MARCH 21

Leandro didn't sleep much and his headache is getting worse with the insomnia. As soon as he hears Alba in the kitchen, he gets up and asks for an aspirin. "You look pale, cachaco, are you getting sick?" "Just a little headache, Doña Alba." He goes back to the room with a glass of water and goes to bed to wait. He thinks of Maria Luisa. Did she want to kiss him? Did she stay there at the door after he left? What is he going to do now? He'd have to avoid her, even if he had to stay home and not work for a few more days until she left. Hopefully, she won't remember where he was living. Or she wouldn't be interested in coming to look for him. "Yes, me and my imagination, there was probably nothing there." Leandro manages to sleep a little until he is woken up by a knock on the door. "Cachaco, someone's asking for you." Leandro's blood runs cold. "Who, Doña Alba?" "Yesterday's woman, the pretty one with the long hair." "Alba, tell her I'm very sick." "Eche, don't be like that with the poor girl." "Albita, I don't feel well, do me a favour, will you?" Alba murmurs and recriminates him with her eyes. "As you wish, cachaco" she says as she closes the door. A few minutes later, Alba knocks on his door again. She gives him a drawing: him grouchy with his arms crossed next to Maria Luisa dancing, and in the background a platform with a salsa band. "No one can run away all their life, cachaquito, believe me, I'm telling you like I would a son." Leandro feels a chill. "Yes, Doña Alba, you're right." "You're so skinny, come to the table, I already served breakfast." "Thank you, Albita, you always take such good care of me."

Leandro looks in the mirror for a while. It's hard for him to know if his skin has always been so weathered and his cheekbones so protruding. He scans his bare chest in the mirror. Everything seems to



**HE HAS TO LEAVE
BEFORE IT GETS
WORSE: BEFORE
MARIA LUISA
COMES BACK,
BEFORE HE HAS
TO TELL HER WHY
HE IS LEAVING,
BEFORE ALBA
REALISES THAT
SOMETHING IS
WRONG WITH HIM.**



be in order: why, then, does he suddenly feel so old? He examines his profile; he straightens up. Maybe he is paler. Definitely a little thinner than when he arrived. Last week he had started to lose his appetite. Nothing serious, just a listlessness that could be a simple cold or a general tiredness. Time only would tell. Something inside him grows cold: three months. Three months since the diagnosis. Time falls on his chest and causes a coughing fit. Three months and it's starting to show. He has to leave before it



gets worse: before Maria Luisa comes back, before he has to tell her why he is leaving, before Alba realises that something is wrong with him. Leandro puts on his shirt, packs his things quickly, makes the bed, organises the nightstand. Maria Luisa's drawings are still there, wrinkled; he hesitates. He doesn't know why, but he finally decides to keep them and puts them inside a book. He leaves the room with his backpack over his shoulder and says goodbye to Alba. "Are you leaving?" Leandro nods. He takes out his wallet and pays her what he owes her for the room. Alba hugs him goodbye. "Cachaquito, I hope you find what you are looking for, eat well." Leandro contains his urge to cry. Yes, it's better this way.

Maria Luisa went back in the late morning to see how Leandro was doing and she was told that he had left. A cold wave made her stomach tremble. How strange that he should have left without saying goodbye. She continued on her way to the beach. When she gets there, she puts her things on the sand and sits down to watch the seagulls. The day is sunny, warm, and there is a delicate breeze. Maria Luisa lies down on the sand, closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She remembers Leandro leaning over the wall, his arms hanging down. Now she can put a face on him and she imagines him being deep in thought and with a distant gaze. She thought that sometimes he seemed to be fighting, but she never knew what he was fighting against. Perhaps against another current that was pushing him far, out into the sea, in a drowned-out cry. Maria Luisa gets up and walks to the water. It is cold and cloudy. She goes in a bit further, up to her knees. She wonders what has become of the children that stared at her in terror all those years ago. They could have crossed on the street and not recognised each other. Today it's just her and the seagulls that fly over her, indifferent. She walks until the water touches her chest. She thinks that she could maybe go around the world. Maria Luisa dips her head in the water and opens her eyes. All she can see are grains of salt and sand shining in the sun and her hair, moving, suspended like tentacles in the still morning water.

WASTED ENERGY



Josué Cabrera
Editor

Working with Germán during the Ellipsis program was a personal challenge. One of the things that most interested me in the classes with Marta was her recommendation to endeavor to understand the “literary proposition” of the author that had been assigned to us. With this in mind, I approached Germán’s story with an open mind, not wanting to deploy my preferences everywhere, but to do what worked best for the text. Throughout the process, Germán and I shared some impressions and I was able to see that, despite our differences, there was common ground upon which we could understand each other and seek improvements to the text. Ellipsis was ultimately a process from which I drew an important lesson in teamwork.

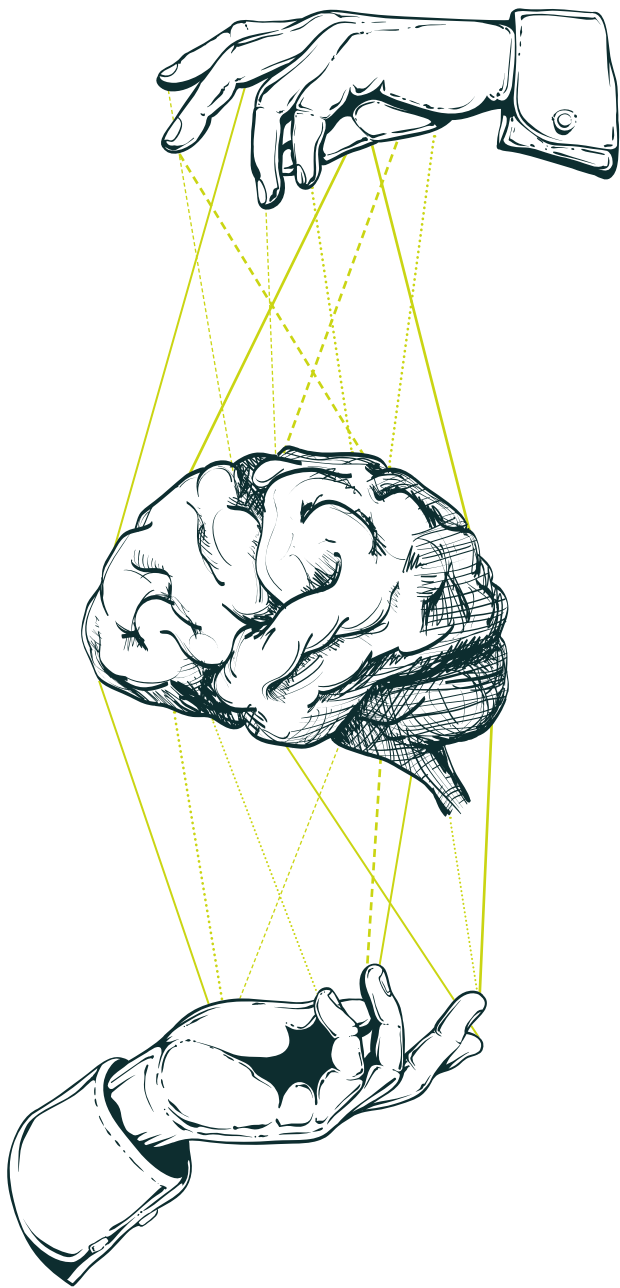
Germán Augusto Valencia

Writer

The time spent learning in the Ellipsis program is a treasure for memory and the heart. The moments of concentration with our teachers, the interaction with the writers, and the hard work of writing and editing in which freely, although not alone, we were able to make out an image of our future, perhaps the very story of our lives, did not and has not ceased to seem like a dream to me. I learned the beauty of difficulty and the importance of telling stories to endow what we discuss with a soul, because everything that has a soul is relevant and therefore irreplaceable. The world deserves more stories.

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2019



WASTED ENERGY



Germán Augusto
Valencia Pérez



Josué Cabrera



The world will explode into a thousand pieces. We don't know when, but explode it will. Maybe it already exploded at the beginning of time, just once. Maybe we're fragments that are still flying out in all possible directions, careering towards the outer void and colliding with each other, in the entropy caused by the cosmic kick dealt to us by some idle god in their eternal boredom, seated on their nonsense. I'm still falling and doubt that a providential hand will appear to halt my fall, because there isn't anything out there really. The outside is nothing more than perfunctory movement, a repetitive and asymptotic going forth. And the inside? Nothing more than a dream.

It had been a long time since I last noticed the burst of glory created by the light when it enters the half-open window, its dancing specks of dust. Dust is what's left after an explosion, when the solemn particles carry out their Brownian motion touched by the rays of the sun, the zenithal dance of the sparks of dust that we all are. Today I'm going to do it; today I'm going to blow up the plaza. Today the city will lazily emerge from its slumber to see the dust strut its stuff.

When I left the university I felt the same sense of calm; the pleasant feeling of having made a decision can only be surpassed by the pleasant feeling of not having to decide. I didn't take a shower as I wanted to leave early to walk around the city centre, which I knew would be a blazing inferno a few hours later. I had decided to set off the bomb at 3pm. I found it amusing to think of starting to count forwards — not backwards, as is usually the case — from 2.57: one, two, three, three o' clock, and bang! Everything would begin again like a mythical tale, trinitarian like the divine nature of the Christian God; like Trimurti, the three divine forms of the Hindu pantheon, a multiple unity: creation, preservation and destruction. The tale of tales...I walked down the stairs and towards reception, accompanied by my usual pain. There was the porter, the do-it-all and do-nothing of the hotel: receptionist, security guard, cleaner, plumber, electrician, and one of the biggest layabouts I've ever seen in my life- about the only role he really took seriously. He had a foul temperament, like those people that greet you

by spitting out 'good morning' through gritted teeth, like those who respond to a request for a favour by saying yes and nodding, before doing nothing and getting angry and indignant when you complain about it, as if you had insulted them.

- "Good morning, Don Román!" Wow, this time the asshole managed to say hello properly.

- "You've been in room twenty-four for exactly a week today."

- "Yes, I know."

- "So will you be staying on in the room?" What he meant to ask is whether I'd be paying or not.

- "Don Misael, first I have to go out and do something. When I get back I'll let you know, or settle my bill."

- "And will you be long?"

- "No, I don't think so," I responded impatiently.

He looked at me as if he wanted to tell me a secret then spread his giant hands out over the reception desk, hands that could strangle a bull but that only came in handy for scratching his belly and taking money from the guests.

"Have you seen the news? A lady threw herself off the bridge with her two little children in her arms." While he was speaking he held out his hands as if he were carrying two pitchers of beer. "The country's screwed and this city is another Sodom. That woman should have left the little ones out of it and jumped by herself. What a bitch. Everything really is in decline, my God." His face swelled up like a toad from the outrage the subject stirred in him, although I'd be more inclined to think that it was a kind of fury that rose up within him as he listened to his own words. I looked him in the eyes.

"What you call decline, I call spiritual progress." I turned around and walked out of the hotel door, without managing to witness the



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end of the grimace that had begun to emerge mid-sentence on his face like a scar.

The last time I saw Marina the wind was buffeting her face. Her half-closed eyes let slip a few tears that she wiped away with her hands, about the same time as she rearranged her wild hair

mechanically above her right ear and bit her bottom lip, as if wanting to say something that had been bottled up for a long time. I can't remember the words I said to her but they must have been appalling: she turned around and crossed the plaza among the pigeons, sending them flapping off as if in a painting, a sad painting. The sun was setting for good on that afternoon in the city of Pereira. She was the sun.

I could still picture the scene in my mind. I thought about her more than ever, about how stupid I had been to drive her away like someone throwing away the last coins they have in their pocket. My bloody leg still hurt, and I was limping more than usual when I walked down the hotel stairs. I only needed to see the head of the naked Simón Bolívar statue decked out with a crown of pigeons — there wasn't much naked about him, given his fine coating of shit — to begin to remember my hobble. Maybe it was because seeing that monument to national fiction got me thinking of myths, and that led straight on to the usual: how the hell had they managed to cast that 14-tonne beast in bronze? Now that really is glorious. One thing then led to another and I pondered Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, the forger who must have created things similar to that proud monument, only with no pigeons and no shit. I remembered that they say he was hurled from Olympus by Zeus and left divinely lame forever.

The day I saw Marina for the first time she had already seen me. That's what she told me a few days later when I chanced upon her in one of the corridors of the university. I asked her awkwardly about any old thing, on a whim, just to speak to her. She answered me with a transparent smile. "Of course Román, I've already noticed you; we're in the same history of modernity class! Román the sceptic." That left me dumbstruck and stammering, and she took me by the arm in the most spontaneous and innocent way and led me breezily towards the cafeteria. The first time I saw her she'd already seen me. I rarely lifted my head to look at my classmates, only looking

at my notes and the professor when he stood up to draw attention to one of his historical meanderings, or to write down the date of some event or other on the blackboard. The day I saw her for the first time I didn't actually see her, I heard her.

"Professor, is there a connection between historiographic tales and myths? Because obviously historiography is defined precisely by its accuracy and method, but when we think of modern history we also think of the history of idealism, revolutions and the heroes of freedom." There was no indifference in what she was saying; on the contrary, it seemed to have been planned in advance. She tailed off for a moment then went on. "I say that because...said accuracy and method was conceived on the basis of idealism itself, and of that same zeal for the progress of humanity."

Her words landed on me like one, three, six, like a dozen Newtonian apples. She must have heard me and been paying attention when I expressed a similar idea to the professor a few days ago in the same class. The only difference was that I hadn't posed a question. I launched into a lengthy, tedious and judgmental diatribe of which I remember only fragments, things like how myths and history end up being the same when either one is given too much credit, how we should maybe have a bit of faith in myths and mistrust the historical every now and again. I mentioned Abraham, Diderot and an 'encyclopaedic Pentateuch' with a prophetic enthusiasm that now causes me embarrassment. From that moment on I couldn't take my eyes off her. I realized that unlike me and our other classmates she always had ears for everyone, even for the most vapid question or comment. Her legs tended to tremble under her desk, and her sharp-edged face and pointed nose rose up from her long neck like a Potoo bird. It gave me pleasure to watch her observing the world with those dark eyes, eyes that give no hint whether they are gazing off somewhere or simply observing nothing at all, while they cloak her constant daydreaming behind a delicate fringe. When we were in the cafeteria she revealed that on the day a dozen apples fell on



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me, she had asked her question because the subject interested her and she found the seriousness with which I took the class amusing. To her, I seemed like one of those guys who didn't tell lies, or that if I did tell one then maybe the shame would eat me up to the point of disappearing. She went on to speak of my 'upright posture and gritty voice', and of the times she would have liked to run away from home, not because she had something to blame her parents for, but precisely because she had nothing to blame them for. They were not a perfect family but they did act like one, if such a thing even exists: there were no arguments or raised voices, and they didn't get worked up over irreconcilable disputes or keep an overbearing watch over their daughter. This strange regularity led Marina to a curious conclusion: that her family was 'founded on a lie, that there was something shameful about lacking deficiencies and the absence of imperfection'. Her legs were shaking under the table as she traced a circle with her finger around the lip of her cup of coffee.

This memory of Marina arrived to nest in my head on today of all days, as if it were connected in some way to my reasons for blowing



up the plaza. But no, that wasn't the case. Perhaps an image of her had formed inside me as a symbol of my final weakness, not because it's a tender view of the past, an amiable representation, but rather because memory is, in itself, everything that stops us allowing ourselves to open the floodgates of oblivion. It's everything that makes us want to preserve a corpse that is rotting under our noses. It's the things that stop us from admitting what is real due to their constancy: loss and surrender. It's what keeps us clinging to the bronze, like the pigeon shit on the naked Bolívar. My leg still hurt and the plaza was still virtually deserted. The old ladies who sold coffee were only just beginning to arrive, and the usual pigeons were swooping down to collect the crumbs abandoned the night before. The city was turning yellow again. Every city has its own colour, and Pereira is yellow in the morning, at midday and in the afternoon. At night it's black while still conserving a yellowish tone at the same time, with dark corners for hatching evil plots and bright expanses to show them off outrageously. Pereira is an enormous bridge, made to be short-lived. It welcomes you with the grace of a plump and generous host, but bids you farewell with the pleas of the same host, now gaunt and stingy, who stretches her hands out like a beggar and asks that you return the favours received one by one. One should not assume that a place described as the City Without Doors is a place to stay in. On the contrary, the precise fact that this openness has no limits also tells you that if you enter, you must leave quickly; that it is not a place to be in but to pass through, that what is there is a non-place. In this case, Pereira is not a place of any kind.

It was now eight o'clock in the morning and I was still on my feet in front of the pigeons who were noisily flapping and fluttering around, when the squeaking of four small wheels announced the arrival of Doña Ana and her little cart stocked with flasks of coffee, chocolate and hot water for tea, empanadas, bread rolls of various sizes and single cigarettes. There were already other street vendors out and about with their respective carts, but hers stood out from the rest. Its rickety wheels made a different sound because she always pushed with considerable

force, as if she were about to take flight with the pigeons. She also tended to scare them away, and would let out a cackle when she did. She sold her products on credit if she deemed the client honest on any grounds, but always for subjective reasons: a client could be trusted as much because she saw them regularly in the plaza, as because they wore a tie or a smart waistcoat, or because they had a particular way of walking or styled their hair in a certain fashion.

"You're up bright and early today, Don Román." Her sun-beaten face showed a hint of a smile beneath her white cap.

"No fags left when I woke up, you know."

"Just as well!" As usual, she took a plastic cup and filled it with dark, steaming coffee, passed it to me, then pulled a cigarette out of a packet and offered it to me.

I sparked up and the cigarette began to die slowly in my mouth, crackle after crackle. Doña Ana always walked around the plaza, passing in front of the cathedral and crossing herself regardless of whether she had already walked by fifty times already. I thought that, depending on her route that day, she could be far enough beyond the reach of the blast and the shrapnel not to be sent flying with the pigeons; I planned to leave the suitcase filled with explosives on the marble base directly beneath the Bolívar monument, like a votive offering. A definite participant in the sacrifice was the mime who acted around the statue every afternoon, or at least I hoped as much: he had become a vital part of my fantasy. He arrived around two in the afternoon and stayed until nightfall. The same was true of the two photographers who, resisting against time, hung around waiting for one of their few fellow nostalgic souls to ask them for a family photo next to the unshakeable Bolívar with his crown of pigeons. For what reason did they keep plying their trade if hardly anyone requested their services anymore? I don't think it was out of nostalgia alone or because they couldn't do anything else, but

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because they are the memory of a community resisting being forgotten. Therein lies the strength of myth, as if they knew they represented something bigger, as if they were aware of being a symbol: myths inhabit a different, non-historical time. It's an idea that endures as an enigma, a riddle that must be discovered in order to then become history. It's a demand that sets out how events should be, how they should be restored and unfold. The attitude of those photographers was like that of the mime and the monument to the Liberator: a ridiculously optimistic attitude of founding, longing for its own time. That's why they are the perfect offering. They had to disappear and embrace oblivion in order to then endure shockingly in the memory, like the idea they have always been. I thought that, along with them, the absurd characters that took photos with their mobiles to aid their bad memory would be blown up to boot, as well as the masses of pigeons with shit and everything, of course. The cigarette continued dwindling between my lips with small fizzes.

"Don Román," as ever, Doña Ana shook me out of my introspection, "Have you seen the news yet? That poor woman and her kids..."

"I haven't seen anything, but someone told me about it." I said, while puffing out smoke and waiting for the same theatrics as from the hotel porter.

"Well, that's life for you Don Román. That woman was a real mother, they were her kids and she tied them up with belts and hurled herself off the bridge. You see? We carry them in our belly for nine months, how are we meant to separate from them in any way when we share the same soul? Even if they say it wasn't her choice to make, but it was. It's the right of a mother who knows that if they're left on their own at that age, their spirit, past and sustenance get ripped from 'em, she was at her wits' end. Why would she leave them behind, that's worse than killing them. A falling tree always takes its fruit with it, don't ya think?



"I'm not sure, Doña Ana. There's always a reason for everything, but not everything's reasonable."

I tossed the cigarette to the floor and took a sip of the hot coffee. I had never conceived of such an idea; what I had said to that man Misael was related to another matter. It turns out that in this country so accustomed to violence, revolutions and counter-revolutions are made by machine-gunning the enemy: here, we eliminate problems by eliminating others. But that woman who sacrificed herself with her little ones had behaved like a martyr; hers was a spiritual gesture, once more like a symbol, like an ancient mythical image she avenged her woes: poverty, bad lovers and indifference. Or not, maybe she just exploded. That way she would remain; like a resounding image she would become an event, a memorable deed; like the mistreated Medea, also a child killer, she posed a question with her expression of tragedy. The victim of an unforgiveable offence. I sensed something similar in the strength of Doña Ana's words. I took another sip of coffee.

"You might just be right." I paid for my coffee and walked off limping with the plastic cup in my hand.

"See you later, Don Román," she shouted after me, when I was already too far away to answer.

I walked away from the plaza and stopped next to the cathedral, still holding the cup, gazing at the mango trees that surrounded the rectangular-shaped park, the palm trees that graced the interior angles of the central quadrangle, and the cross formed by the entrances and steps of the plaza. I remembered that it used to be called Plaza Victoria, before some ingenious president ruled that every plaza in the country was to be named after Bolívar to bolster the legend by turning it into a national decree. I took my last swig of coffee, chucked the cup into one of the rubbish bins that adorn the corner of the cathedral, and decided



NOWADAYS WE THINK OF AN ACTOR AS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO ‘GETS INTO THE ROLE’ OF SOMETHING OR SOMEBODY



to walk — leg pain and all — to the El Lago square, whose ‘lake’ was more like a puddle. I wanted to know if the mime had already arrived as he tended to work in that square first, which during the morning was usually packed with students and still half-asleep drunks from whom he went around picking up coins until noon. Then he would vanish until two in the afternoon, when he appeared like just another pigeon to collect the crumbs left by visitors to the Plaza Bolívar.

It must have been nearly nine in the morning when I got to the El Lago square, after slowly walking the seven blocks that separate it from the cathedral and the main plaza. The mime was already there, his face painted like a full moon, round and sweaty under his tattered hat, pursuing two students who were walking across the square.



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I had come across him a week before, beside the pigeon-covered statue of Bolívar. I was smoking a cigarette and blowing out puffs of smoke while watching the photographers, and he stood next to me and started doing his whole mime thing. I scowled at him and walked off mid-act. To be honest I've never been a fan of mimes. Maybe the fact they're like a mirror makes me afraid of them. Some time ago, on the day Marina left, I almost punched one's lights out; or rather, one almost punched my lights out. It's funny because, unless I'm mistaken, the word mime was formerly used to describe

actors, and mimesis wasn't exactly imitation, but possession: actors didn't imitate anyone, but instead were possessed by the spirit of those they played. Nowadays we think of an actor as an individual who 'gets into the role' of something or somebody. That's not how it used to be; it was the role of something or somebody that got into the actor, and all the characters that passed through the city centre got into that poor, tired-looking mime. That guy had to bear the whole weight of the world, and the day I met him he decided to bear my weight.

He walked behind me for a few metres at a lame man's pace, unsteadily just like me, and I shouted 'That's how you do it, like those thrown out of heaven!' He smiled at me and I detected a gleam of intelligence in his aboriginal eyes. At that moment I felt I identified deeply with him, maybe because I had got inside his body. I handed him a few coins from my pocket and he followed me for a few more steps, before curiosity got the better of me and I asked his name. He responded by slowly tracing his name in the air with his fingers. It took me a few seconds to connect the syllables in my mind and then I hit upon it. Leandro! He nodded with a smile, patted me on the back and retraced his steps.

There he was, having fun with the students. It was amusing to watch him: if a dolled-up woman walked past, he started to walk with a straight back, like a pigeon walking along a power line. He followed executive types loftily with his hand closed over an imaginary briefcase handle, peering over his shoulder with watchful eyes. He walked along with attractive women with his hands on his waist, moving his neck in the same way as those nodding dogs that people have on car dashboards. Children and the elderly, however, were given performances from the mime repertoire: palm and finger games, 'Peek-a-boo' or 'Row, row, row', which consisted of making rowing movements with both arms and looking around as if searching for someone. Sometimes he acted like he was riding a horse while shielding his eye and scanning the horizon; he made



them laugh and they sent a few coins his way. Meanwhile, I thought about how anachronistic his trade was; to me, it seemed like an ancient institution that, due to its beauty, had to disappear in order to become important. In any event, now I had seen him and, my mind made up, I walked back to the hotel at a slow pace, thinking of nothing but Marina.

My journey back to the hotel passed as slowly as the day was proceeding, with an unbearable limp. The pain in my leg grew more intense and I had to stop and lean against a cafe window. The noise of the chatter inside was audible from the street. I went in, sat down, stretched out my leg and ordered a white coffee. The smell of the coffee urn was pleasing and penetrating and hadn't changed in thirty years. All my thoughts were distilling and acquiring a strange concision. I picked up the hot cup, held it close to my nose and took in the whole aroma.

My childhood memories are sinking into a bottomless pit. Of the town I grew up in, all that's left are the streets and the wooden balcony where I would daydream for hours on end while awaiting my mother's return. Only the face of my grandmother Gertrudis remains, as do her words. Once, while I was leaning on the wooden railing with my eyes fixed on the corner from which pedestrians occasionally emerged, I felt my grandmother's warm embrace and her voice very close to my ear: 'Mummy's gone to the city to search for a better life for you. She'll be back soon, one of these days. She'll bring you sweets and a present that's a secret.' My mother never returned and over time I stopped peering out from the balcony, but I didn't lose hope of seeing her again.

I wanted to study history because, as a child, everything I heard from my grandmother was about the glory of the past, more luminous than our present day. All the stories that came out of her mouth were wonderful because they were old. The real and the fantastical coalesced and I was no longer able to imagine a future.

I dreamt backwards and the horizon was behind me. ‘They were different times,’ as Gertrudis would say, and I set off after them.

I struggled enormously to learn to distinguish between reality and fiction. Over the years, that impression punctuated the most crucial moments of my life. My studies kept me anchored to the ground and far away from my tendency to daydream. I gradually became a sceptic, like someone covering up a leaking tap with a rolled up rag. As the years went by and the more I studied, my own past darkened and got lost among the stories of my grandmother and the images of my balcony. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on the establishment of my town because I thought it would contribute something, as if merely describing the events surrounding its genesis would shake it out of the state of torpor in which it remained. Reconciling with the past often awakens an appetite for progress in men. Thoughts of this nature were the basis for my master’s thesis, whose title I still recall: ‘The Mythical Foundations of the History of Quindío.’ Even today, I hold the belief that we tell ourselves stories not to remember, but to advance, to go towards the future with our arms open like children.

I became a professor in spite of myself, my colleagues and my students. I was always an insufferable bloke, overly critical and demanding with the rest of world but never sufficiently so with myself. Admitting this doesn’t make me any better, it makes me an even bigger bastard. One day I received a letter of dismissal saying ‘Many thanks for your services provided, but they are no longer required in our institution.’ At that moment I felt I was freeing myself from a heavy burden, and I left without putting up a fight. My limp is what I have left from university. Following my dismissal I dashed to my neighbourhood watering hole and didn’t emerge for three days, after which I went back to the university for my books and some notes that I had piled up on my desk over the years. I walked out of my office carrying two hefty boxes, crossed the corridor and headed to the stairs I had to go down, which were



followed by another corridor and then more stairs, and so on four more times until the ground floor. But on the second step of the third floor staircase I slipped and fell spectacularly, and I left Olympus making a racket in an ambulance to the sound of murmurs of pity and mocking sniggers.

I wandered from here to there without staying in one place for very long. I tried going back to teaching but was plagued by another need: despite my leg I needed actions and deeds, not waffle and hot air. The present was pulsating within me like never before. I applied for various jobs and found work as an editor and administrator, but they still involved a lot of words and I soon quit. I worked as a security guard, an inter-city bus driver and, finally — thanks to a contractor I met on one of my many journeys from one town to another — as a material transporter in a mining company. I faithfully dedicated my days to that job, which required nothing more than paying attention to what was in front of you.

It couldn't have been more paradoxical: the fall that left me lame gave me the movement I had been lacking when I could walk straight. I ended up as a truck driver at a coal mine in the Chocó region where, thanks to constant contact with the materials and the controlled explosions of entire blocks of earth, the idea of the bomb gradually took root in my mind. I began weighing up the idea of blowing up the world. I managed to get hold of the four hundred and fifty grams of pentolite that I had carefully stored in a suitcase in the wardrobe of my hotel room. I had collected them patiently over the course of a whole year, stealthily extracting a bit from one tube here and another tube there, and making the most of being assigned the task of transporting them: five tubular containers that I hid riskily under my bunk bed, among the boxes of books that never merit suspicion. I witnessed many blasts and learning to set the explosives was simple. To be honest, if the shells are properly covered there's no reason for them to explode due to heat, not even if you start a fire in very close proximity. After that it's just a case of wrapping them in industrial tape and



I NEVER HAD A LASTING RELATIONSHIP BECAUSE I NEVER FELL IN LOVE, OR BECAUSE I NEVER REALISED IN TIME THAT I HAD FALLEN IN LOVE.

burying a detonator, which is nothing more than a small piece of cork that works in the same way as a switch, tied up with a detonating cord ending in a pulse that can be activated from distance. Things like these are never really beyond the reach of ordinary people; in fact, ordinary people find it easier to obtain such materials, precisely because nobody believes that they could use them. Being a big nobody makes you an actual nobody. And then no-one bothers to ask, or even cares.

Time had ground to a halt in the café and begun to tick backwards. My leg had stopped hurting, and I paid and left quickly for my hotel. I walked through the entrance and the face of the porter appeared to me like a sunflower rotated towards the light of the television, which was lodged bizarrely in a crooked nook in the wall. It's weird that they didn't use a simple steel mount for the porter's sun, but





WE PASSED CLOSE BY THE STATUE OF BOLÍVAR AND A MIME SET OFF AFTER US, TALLER AND HEAVIER-BUILT THAN LEANDRO.

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around here tending to opt for the most complex solutions instead of a more straightforward option is the most normal thing in the world. He didn't see me, or didn't want to. I walked up the stairs, looked at the number 24 hanging on the door, walked in, threw myself down on the bed and closed my eyes. I must have had a nightmare that I couldn't remember, as when I woke up I was sweating and clutching one of the pillows tightly to my chest. My world and my ideas were closing with the day. I put the pillow under my head and reminisced for the final time.

I never had a lasting relationship because I never fell in love, or because I never realised in time that I had fallen in love. Love can be a highly rational affair, even if it is motivated by feelings and desire.

Capturing and conquering it is a matter of measure and method, a game of distance and proximity, a game that I never learned to play. Marina loved me, I know she did. I loved her too but didn't realize it in time, in her time. It dawned on me when I saw her walking off into the distance that afternoon in the plaza. Right then everything made sense: her question to the professor, the force of her grip as she led me towards the cafeteria, the never-ending patience with which she tolerated my lengthy accusations against the system and my criticism of the professors and our classmates, who I branded as idle and naïve.

The last time I saw her we had arranged to meet in the Plaza Bolívar and then go to see a film. I arrived a bit early, enough so to see her appear in a gust of wind that whipped her skirt and blew her hair around wildly. She moved like the image of a mermaid on a ship's sail. I walked forward to meet her, we both smiled and our hands interlaced. We were strolling among the pigeons and the crowds in the plaza, and then I stepped up my pace and pulled her along slightly; it was getting late and the film was about to start. We passed close by the statue of Bolívar and a mime set off after us, taller and heavier-built than Leandro. I didn't like him following us, and as he walked he imitated my posture for a moment then began putting on feminine mannerisms, opening his eyes just like Marina. I couldn't take any more and exploded into a shout, ordering him to leave us alone. The mime, startled, refused to give up and puffed out his cheeks, eyebrows arched and hands on hips in the manner of a rebuke. I brusquely snatched my hand away from Marina's and pushed him.

"Román!" she shouted at me, with a note of fear.

"What? This bloody mime is taking the piss out of us."

"Leave it Román, he's not doing anything wrong."

"Why the hell are you taking his side though?"

"No, that's enough Román. I'm sick and tired of this attitude of yours," she said with desperation, on the verge of tears.



"So now I'm the guilty one then!"

"Yeah, the guilty one because the only thing you do is nothing at all, put obstacles in the way of everything." Her face turned red.

"In that case why are you even with me?"

"I don't know, I don't know what I'm doing with someone as full of fear as you, with a guy who can't stop being the centre of his own universe!" She couldn't take any more.

"Go to hell then!" I glanced at the mime, who held out his hands as if to say he had nothing to do with it.

I had managed to exhaust her, not because of my actions but because of all the walls I raised between the two of us and the future. Every invitation to design a shared life together was turned down with a curt 'no' on my part, along with a question about the usefulness and reason for doing whatever it was she was enthusiastically pushing me towards. She wanted to say something but instead bit her lip, turned around and walked away, scaring off the pigeons that were flapping around her as she went. I was left paralyzed watching her disappear behind one of the mango trees in the plaza. I found it such a beautiful image that I wanted to run after her and hug her. But I didn't.

I threw the pillow across the room, rose from the bed and got in the shower. It must have been nearly two in the afternoon. I walked over to the wardrobe, took out the suitcase and checked the explosives. It was a simple procedure: I was to leave the suitcase on top of the marble base that supported the statue of Bolívar, and ask the mime to keep an eye on it because I'd left something in the hotel. I would walk three blocks away then, at 2:57, I would count each minute up to three and set off the bomb. Pentolite is a mix of 50% TNT and 50% PETN, with a blast wave of up to a kilometre. Pereira would be transformed, forced into a new birth; Leandro would be transformed, another little boy; and I would be transformed.

I descended the stairs for the last time. Don Misael had his elbows propped up on the reception desk, and he raised his head and looked

at me unblinkingly. I went up to him, paid my bill without a word, and walked out of the door without noticing the leer of joy that spread across his face as he counted the notes. I reached the plaza limping at 2:30pm and looked around in all directions. Leandro wasn't there. I walked around with the suitcase in my hand, looking for Doña Ana. I caught a glimpse of her near the chess players, who crowded together in the shade of the trees just after lunch to take turns playing their games. Despite the pain in my leg I quickened my pace.

"Doña Ana! Where's the mime?" I shouted nervously as I neared her. "I haven't seen him today, Don Román," she responded quickly while shaking her head.

My eyes searched for him anxiously as I completed two laps of the plaza, yet there was no sign of the mime. I looked in the direction of the trees, but nothing. Among the hustle and bustle of the coffee sellers, nothing. I checked every access point to the plaza in case I saw him approaching. It was 2:50pm already and the miserable bastard had vanished. As a result of being possessed by all those who passed him by he might have transmuted into a spirit; everyone who was walking through the plaza seemed to me like fragments of him. Everything was coming crashing down, the huge bonfire that had to burn made no sense without him; without the actor who contained all the city's pain, my fantasy was spoiled. I had imagined myself as the sole author of a tragedy that would shake the bones of the inhabitants of this unconsciously inhabited place. Without my hero, without my demigod, there would be no drama and there would be no myth. It was simple: a man whose job consisted of getting a smile out of hurried passersby, out of those who remain unmoved and emotionless before something that has become quite familiar to them: his everyday work. Those who populate the streets of the city with no voice other than the one in their own throats, a speechless voice that murmurs through time with the sole destiny of becoming a futile echo in the pitiful day's commerce. Leandro, the one who acted out my limp; that



YOU CAN'T GET RID OF THE MEMORY OF MARINA, AND NOR CAN YOU OFFER ANY BLOOD TRIBUTE BEFORE THIS STONE- HARD IMAGE.

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damn mime who cut across my path when I was heading to the cinema with Marina; and all the mimes in the world evoke man as an anachronism. That man who wasn't a man but rather just an intelligence, a sign to be read in his tense fingers, without saying a single word, without metaphors, a battler answering the raucous chorus of progress: he had to shatter into pieces like a mask of Bacchus, revealing himself while hiding away in a lone cry, in the bang of one final explosion.

The mime was going to be the story. He had to be the cathartic lament that would call attention to what was being lost under the boots of the march of time, not in order to recover it, but merely not to forget that something has been left behind. Because every time someone takes advantage of a historical event it would seem

like it was signifying a gain, a step forward, a lesson, when that whole moving forward thing is nothing more than an expulsion, a loss. The mime, Doña Ana, the photographers, the trinket sellers: they all had to be lost in order to be gained. No, he's not here, he didn't come, it couldn't be done; and because it couldn't be done I got it, like an idea pulled from the void left by the flight of a pigeon launched into the air. Myth is truer than history because it's veiled, because it's the memory of frustration and of loss. Its mysterious language indicates the nothingness from which something once emerged, perhaps a pigeon.

An old song began to sound inside me that could have come from somewhere in the plaza. "La capa del viejo hidalgo se rompe para hacer ruana y cuatro rayas confunden el castillo y la cabaña..." My eyes clouded over and anguish like a funeral candle made me tremble while all the noises of the city piled up chaotically in my ears. The song kept ringing out in my inner ear until it took over and everything around fell silent. Ditties play over in the heads of mimes; outside they are left with silence. I can't stop time.

You can't get rid of the memory of Marina, and nor can you offer any blood tribute before this stone-hard image. Your path lies not in advancing, but returning. The mime's not here, the world swallowed him up before the bomb, but it doesn't matter. Why not set it off? There's no need for the mime. So why not then? Because even with him I wouldn't have done it. It's all been wasted energy.

The idea stayed in my closed fist; I clutched it without wanting to let it go, just like the suitcase with the explosives. There was a boom in my head. I thought that the noise of the news would be louder than that of the detonation. I would go to jail in any case. I started shouting "Police, police, a bomb!" We had exploded a long time ago, pushed out by a cosmic kick. 2:57, 2:58, three, three o' clock!

A mango fell from one of the trees in the plaza.

YOU SHOULD LEAVE, SEÑOR TORRES



Andrés Londoño
Editor

When I decided to study literature a couple of years ago, I did it out of pure pleasure, because reading was something I liked to do in my free time and I wanted to continue doing it, perhaps with a little more dedication. I ran into Ellipsis by sheer coincidence and entered the group not knowing what to expect. It wasn't until our first meeting in Cartagena that I realized that this was something serious, that I was spending time with talented writers and editors from all over the country and learning from great national and international writers. I must say that I felt intimidated; I, a simple graphic designer/illustrator who never regarded literature as something serious.

I took on my job as an editor with the mission of bringing a different perspective, and I believe that my writer and I, working together, have succeeded. It has been an arduous process of reading and rereading the same story and patiently building a better one. In the end, what sets us apart is not how good we are at writing or editing, but staying open to learning and never taking for granted what we believe to be true. I conclude this project by thinking that, perhaps, literature can offer me much more than I thought.

Antonio Hernández

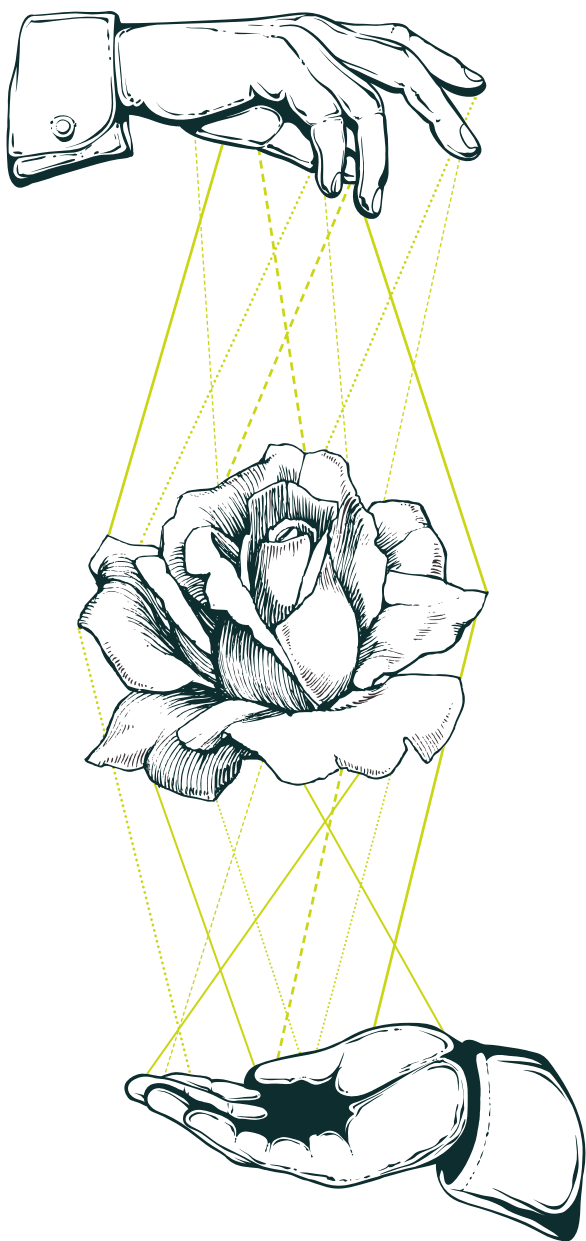
Writer

On the first day of Ellipsis 2019, in Cartagena, Andrés Londoño was the last to arrive. That coincidence allowed us to play with the possibilities of what his appearance might be and assign to him a mystery that was soon resolved. He found us fast. Now I imagine that he oriented himself and walked through the streets of Cartagena with the same ease with which he walked through my story and found the fragments that required more work. Days later I found out that he would be my editor and we talked for the first time about the process that was about to begin. That morning he suggested that I turn the simplest, most ordinary situations into memorable moments brimming with intensity.

In the coming weeks, Andrés always had time for my questions and to help me straighten out certain parts of the plot that I couldn't even understand myself. All of his comments and advice—including opening with an abstract and reflective first paragraph, increasing psychological narration, never losing sight of plausibility, and improving the rhythm, punctuation, and aesthetics of the prose—were pertinent and advanced the story. I hope I've incorporated them well. The story, underneath, contains a blend of our conceptions of literature. I credit Andrés for that result.

ellipsis

2019



**YOU
SHOULD
LEAVE;
SEÑOR
TORRES**



Antonio José
Hernández



Andrés
Londoño

There is neither randomness nor fate, there are risks and there are conspiracies. Luck is controlled from the shadows: we once attributed misfortune to the ire of the gods and later to the destiny of fate, but we now know that in reality it involves conspiracies and hidden control.

Ricardo Piglia, Nocturnal White

For María Alejandra.

He tried to escape from his thoughts of death so as not to feel devastated and defeated, but they always caught up with him in the end. Its inevitability wasn't what bothered him, but rather its threat to arrive so soon, in the company of ravaging symptoms that ate away at his physical strength and tempered his enthusiasm. He thought that refusing treatment and choosing to roam, taking refuge in the silence of mimes, meant that he had come to terms with his fate. The crux of the paradox was that, at the same time, he had no wish to die or experience further pain. While he was walking to Señor Torres' house, Leandro told himself that he would give anything to live that last year knowing the exact date of his death, but without having to cope with the irremediable symptoms. Was something worse awaiting him? The sight of the open door interrupted his thoughts. He went in and called out to the owner, without response.

The living room lay in complete silence with the lights off, although Señor Torres always turned them on to read the newspaper on the sofa and take delight in mocking the opinion columns. At times Leandro would dwell on his future, lose track of time and linger there. Señor Torres would then read out loud to him, as if he was in front of a crowd and didn't want to be left alone, speaking each word solemnly and taking dramatic pauses in order to look at the audience, which consisted solely of Leandro. The newspaper from that day — Tuesday, July 30th — sat untouched on the sofa. Leandro called out again, more loudly, but again nobody answered. The strain of raising

his voice made his throat hurt, but he squeezed his neck with one hand and felt slightly better.

He visited Señor Torres every other day at quarter past eight in the morning, and had never found the house open. Despite this he was not overly concerned; maybe Señor Torres had opened the door to receive a delivery, forgotten to close it again and gone to the toilet. He'd show up in no time. Leandro sat down on the sofa and looked around. The living room walls were covered with around fifty photos of various sizes. The absence of light imbued these now-unrepeatable moments with a melancholic mood, and they seemed content with the mere fact of having existed. Leandro's favourite photo was one where a young Señor Torres was pictured sitting next to his daughter, Eloísa. Both were smiling. The girl had short hair and was wearing a blue dress, while Señor Torres had on a green shirt with a black tie and blazer. Eloísa was holding her father's hat and glasses, playing at being like him. Señor Torres was smiling. It was a pity that Eloísa wasn't around anymore. Leandro stood up, walked to the dining room and knew that something was wrong when he saw Señor Torres' glasses on the floor, with the left lens missing.

For an instant he considered the possibility that it was all a joke, although that made no sense. Then he ran down the hall, opened the bathroom door and saw that it was empty. He called out to Señor Torres for a third time, but nobody answered. The house had four bedrooms, one of which Señor Torres used as an office. Leandro decided to start looking for him there. He walked forward a couple of metres, pushed open the door and the colour drained from his face; he felt that every muscle in his body was cramping up in unison and stooped slightly forward before vomiting on the floor, allowing his black hat to fall to the ground.

The body was on the floor, eyes open and fixed on the ceiling. Blood had oozed out from three holes in his chest. Leandro's eyes welled up, and he immediately held his eyelids tightly shut to prevent the tears



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from transforming into a desperate wail. He imagined himself lying in bed, slimmer than usual and dozing peacefully, until he opened his eyes and felt as if they were falling out of their sockets. Everything was turning dark. He forced himself to prise open his eyelids by blinking

several times, keeping his gaze from the body and concentrating on the rest of the room. It was spacious and usually looked spotless, as if it were cleaned more than once a day. This time the lights were switched off and the desk drawers were open, with several folders resting on a wooden chair. Papers were strewn across the floor and there were some spaces in the rows of books lining the bookcase. Leandro's heart was pounding so furiously that his chest began to ache. Before leaving his rented room that morning, finding Señor Torres dead was the last thing he would have imagined.

He felt an uncontrollable urge to look at the body again. He stared at it in the same way a child looks at the porcelain vase they have just broken, hoping it will fix itself, and despite knowing it was no longer possible he wanted to see him wake up. At that point he felt nauseous again and something inside him longed to escape, to flee. He had an acidic taste in his mouth and his stomach and throat were burning. Besides that, the stench in Señor Torres' office repulsed him; it seemed like a mixture between the smell of a decomposing animal and that of a sweat-soaked shirt that hasn't been washed for days. He picked up his black hat and ran to the bathroom, which was directly in front of the office. This time he managed to keep it in until he reached the toilet.

The scent of Señor Torres' cologne still hung in the air. The blue-framed mirror that had reflected his face so many times in life now only had a few white marks, splatters of toothpaste; it lacked shine and seemed to have no purpose. It was as if the objects in the bathroom had been deprived of their reason for being, in the absence of the person who most used them. The tap dripped and the markings on all the tiles resembled swallows. Leandro noticed this detail, and wished they would fly off in a flock with their weak yet relentless wings and carry the pain far away. The sky, so infinite, so filled with sad clouds, was contained within the white of each tile and only the swallows could break through it. Leandro would have liked to escape with them, but his body was more attached than ever to



the recent earthly affairs and it was a struggle to move it. This heaviness gradually gave way to a feeling of emptiness. He had lost something. All he seemed to have left was the drip-drip of the tap, constant and heartless. He wanted to drift off to sleep and wake up in another city, free of cancer and with Lena. The door of the house hadn't been closed. It hadn't been closed. He should have known something was up before he came in.

Leandro wondered what he should do. He was consumed by doubt, and as much as he tried to put his thoughts in order the recent events clouded his judgment, raining down on him mercilessly and leaving him more and more bewildered. He was finally about to get up when he heard the sound of the front door of the house opening and someone walking, first in the living room and then down the hall. It was impossible: he himself had closed the door. He hid in the shower behind the thick plastic curtain, and crouched down as if wishing to vanish into thin air. Being there gave him the feeling of being miniscule and vulnerable, like an animal just before being hit. The footsteps grew ever closer, approaching furtively and unhurriedly. The door handle creaked. Someone had entered the bathroom.

The washbasin tap stopped dripping and let out a stream of water. There was an audible sigh, followed by a woman's voice that hummed a tune with a note of tiredness. Leandro found the melody familiar but was unable to place it. The tap was turned off, this time completely. Leandro was perspiring and beads of sweat trickled down his neck, making him feel like an index finger was teasing his skin. The footsteps moved away as calmly as they had approached seconds earlier, before being cut out by the sound of the front door closing. Then there was only silence. Leandro thought that they would soon return to kill him. Should he make it clear there was no need, as the cancer was already taking care of that? That he had been feeling weak and tired for several weeks, with an unbearable heaviness that sometimes forced his eyes shut and stopped him from working? He was trapped, and it was he who had shut himself away.



THE FOOTSTEPS GREW EVER CLOSER, APPROACHING FURTIVELY AND UNHURRIEDLY.

Coiled up in the shower, Leandro thought about leaving the bathroom but fear held him back. It seemed like death was lying in wait on the other side of the shower curtain, irremediable and inevitable. The sound of the footsteps had crept into his mind, accompanied by a myriad of sighs and ceaseless murmurs that were concocting a conspiracy to trap him and murder him. The voices whispered words that were all unintelligible except one – Leandro's name – as if he were being sentenced. He trembled until the voices subsided, then picked up his black hat and turned it over and over in his hands. He tried to not think, to erase his consciousness entirely, but he remembered that Señor Torres had given him the hat; the same Señor Torres who was lying on the floor, his eyes looking into the nothing. He let go of the hat and covered his face with both hands, then wept for Señor Torres, but also for himself; it seemed like it would soon be him that would be looking into the nothing.

Perhaps Señor Torres had interrupted a burglary and that was what had caused his death. Leandro thought that the prime suspect would undoubtedly be the mime who had mysteriously begun to visit the house of the local politician. A chill crept up his spine. He deemed it unwise to stay there and call the police, because who would believe him? And sooner or later his family and Lena would find out and want to see him, to help the wrongly accused man, an innocent man who also had cancer, and they would say how terrible it all was! He had to



leave and never return. But guilty men flee. That doesn't matter! He hoped they wouldn't be able to identify him. He would do everything he could not to be found. At the end of the day nobody could give Señor Torres his life back, or even Leandro's. He decided to get out of the shower, make a break for it and keep escaping.

He paused for a second in front of the mirror. He saw that he was pale and had bags under his eyes. The splatters of toothpaste resembled stains on his brown skin, as if the blue-framed mirror was slowly trying to turn him into a mime. He tried to smile but was unable to form one. He took two steps towards the front door of the house, clutching the black hat with both hands, and thought about Señor Torres' body again. So Lena would be going through something similar when she saw him dead? Would she even see him dead? Leandro walked down the hall with long, hurried strides. He wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, but Verónica stood blocking the front door, dressed in black, her gloved hands aiming a revolver at him.



It was five o'clock in the evening on the day Leandro saw Señor Torres for the first time. The breeze was captivating the people in the park, blowing their hair around unexpectedly and billowing loose-fitting clothes. A young dark-skinned girl was chasing a banknote that the wind was trying to snatch away from her. The intensity of the sun was only just dying down and the hillside park of the San Antonio neighbourhood was starting to fill up already. Shouts and laughter began to fill the air. Leandro walked to the grassy area, turning his back on the church and the old stone wall that formed the viewpoint. He worked there as a mime in the afternoons and stayed until eight at night, tiredness and cancer permitting. On this occasion he felt in high spirits, euphoric. His face was painted white and he carried a black threadbare hat with a torn brim in his right hand. He had on a plain white shirt; white gloves; a somewhat creased pair of trousers,

his favourites; some black leather shoes; and a pair of braces that on that day were red.

Leandro walked up to where the Argentinean girls were selling handicrafts. Ada was tall and blonde, and Margarita had black hair and pale skin and was wearing sunglasses. He waved at them and they returned his greeting.

"Having a good afternoon, Mr. Mime?" asked Ada.

Leandro stuck out both hands and put his thumbs up.

"You almost tripped over when you were walking over here," she added with a giggle.

Leandro shook his head. Ada nodded. He repeated his gesture and she burst out laughing again.

"I like those gloves of yours a lot, Mr. Mime. They really suit you."

Leandro smiled in pride at his outfit, then caught sight of a woman and boy walking across the grass a few metres away and set off in pursuit. When he caught up with them he mimicked the woman first, swaying his hips exaggeratedly, and then impersonated the boy by making small jumps. They smiled without stopping. Leandro pouted petulantly while walking alongside them. The boy said something to the woman, who stopped. She rooted around in her pocket for some change, and Leandro did the same in the pocket of his creased trousers while the boy smiled. The woman eventually handed Leandro a one thousand peso note and he clutched both hands to his chest, at the height of the heart, and blew them a kiss. In a flash he held out a clenched fist, and the boy did likewise and bumped fists with the mime. Finally, they waved goodbye to each other.

Leandro thought about going back to the Argentinean girls, but saw that a young couple were preparing to sit down on the grass. He waited for them to get comfortable and then walked over. After making sure that they had noticed his presence he started to make crude ballet movements. The girl laughed. Once Leandro was in front

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of them he sat down on the grass and took her hand. She stopped laughing, and the guy wasn't sure whether to remonstrate with the mime or make fun of his girlfriend. Leandro leapt to his feet, then crouched down on one knee and pretended to open a case. This made the girl laugh again, and Leandro began fluttering his eyelids, cupped his face in his hands and winked at her. Her boyfriend said that right then they didn't have any money. Leandro joined his hands as if in prayer, but the guy shook his head from side to side. The mime nodded, shook hands with them and waddled off, heels together and toes apart. After a few steps he started moving his right arm as if he were holding a cane.

Leandro was going back to where Ada and Margarita were when a man walked up to him. Upon seeing him the mime began to imitate him by stooping over and limping slightly. The man beamed and generously handed him a five thousand peso note, but didn't walk off. He greeted him with such excessive cordiality that Leandro felt like a powerful monarch and decided to answer in a parodic style. The man said that his name was Miguel Ángel Torres and that he had been watching Leandro's work closely for the last few afternoons, as there hadn't been a mime in that park for years and he found it amazing that one had arrived. He added that the Chaplin impression that Leandro had just done would have delighted his daughter Eloísa and made her break out into fits of laughter. Leandro thought he heard the laughter of a little girl – perhaps one of the ones that were playing in the park – and imagined that it belonged to Señor Torres' daughter. He expected her to come running up to hug her father, but no-one appeared. Señor Torres then seemed to wear a sad expression, although he tried to conceal it. The laughter gradually got further away from them until it fell silent.

"Has it been going well? Look, I'm working on something and thought that it might interest you."

Leandro raised his eyebrows.



“It’s a project that I want to submit to the governor’s office as soon as it’s ready. I’ve been putting it together for two months. It’s to request support for street artists like you, you’re talented and it might just be of use to you. I know, I know, it sounds strange, but it’s nothing untoward. Everyone knows me around here so there’s no problem with that. Are you interested in being a beneficiary?”

Leandro shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows at the same time, and stretched out the corners of his mouth as if he wanted them to almost reach his ears. His hands were open and angled downwards, showing his palms covered by the white gloves.

“Why don’t you speak?”

Leandro pointed at his face.

“OK, I get it. What time do you get here to the park?”

Leandro held up three fingers.

“Look, how about if you come at two without the face paint, and we can talk. Sound alright?”

Leandro crossed his arms, then raised a hand to stroke his chin, knitted his brows and began to tap the floor gently but continuously with one of his feet.

“What do you reckon?” Señor Torres said, smiling.

Leandro nodded, and the man shook his hand and left.

“That guy’s an important politician, Mr. Mime. Around here they all say that everything he touches turns to gold. A week or so ago he told us about a project he’s working on, but we said no because we’re just passing through, and staying in one place isn’t our thing. It’s a miracle that he’s going around inquiring about the poor, who knows what his motives are?” Ada said, after Leandro had asked her about Señor Torres through gesticulation.

At 2pm the following day, Saturday the 6th of July, Señor Torres was standing waiting for Leandro in the lowest part of the park, next to some stone steps. Walking up the hill to get there made Leandro



WALKING UP THE HILL TO GET THERE MADE LEANDRO AGITATED AND HE MOMENTARILY FELT LIKE HE WAS CHOKING.

YOU SHOULD LEAVE, SEÑOR TORRES



Antonio José Hernández



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agitated and he momentarily felt like he was choking. The same thing happened every day but despite that, and despite the relentless heat that he had to endure, he liked the city of Cali. A sweaty Leandro introduced himself to Señor Torres and they shook hands. When he saw that Leandro's forehead and neck were dripping with sweat he offered to buy him a glass of lemonade. While they were walking over to where they were sold, Señor Torres explained that the project required a few easily obtained documents and a couple of presentations in public places. That was enough to earn participants a decent amount of money, and they would continue to be paid for six months. Proof they were still doing street performance, at least during that period, was also a requirement. At that moment they reached a small shop, and Señor Torres ordered and paid for two large glasses of lemonade. The cold liquid soothed Leandro's throat, although at first he drank too greedily and his palate froze. Señor Torres added that the money would give them stability, allow them to make ends meet and also situate them as important elements of contemporary urban culture. The project was likely to be approved.



Leandro watched Señor Torres attentively in order to catch every detail, but he didn't share his enthusiasm. He was sure that anyone else would accept the offer without thinking twice. He weighed up the possibilities for a few seconds and found them all adverse and unfavourable. He couldn't do it, as he wasn't going to stay in one place for that long.

"Look mate, Señor Torres, let me think about it for a few days. The thing is I'm not planning to stay here for such a long time and it's best to be sure," he said, despite having already made up his mind.

He expected Señor Torres to tire of waiting for an answer, but no such thing happened. Every afternoon the following week while out on his customary stroll, he went to the park to say hello and ask about Leandro's decision. And every time Leandro shrugged his shoulders and trotted off.

A week later, Señor Torres invited him to have breakfast in his house and said that he himself would be cooking. Leandro considered turning him down but accepted, if only because a free meal would do him good, particularly seeing as the cancer compelled him to keep fairly still and exert himself as little as possible. The conversation flowed naturally between them, although Señor Torres spoke for longer than Leandro. He explained details of the project, which was as yet unfinished, and from one moment to the next without knowing how they found themselves talking about Chaplin, in particular City Lights and Modern Times. Upon returning to his rented room, Leandro told himself that Señor Torres loved being listened to, and that was why he kept accepting his breakfast invitations every other day.



One morning, while they were eating a breakfast of *arepas*, grilled beef, diced fruit and coffee, Leandro asked Señor Torres what he thought about people's opinion of the country's politicians. He

smiled as if he had been expecting that question to come up for a long time. Señor Torres never served up much food, as Leandro usually left over half of his portion on his plate.

"I don't know what people think of politicians in this country," Señor Torres lied.

"That they're corrupt," said Leandro.

Señor Torres looked at him with intrigue.

"You could have asked me that straight off the bat."

Leandro nodded and kept silent.

"And what do you think?" Señor Torres added.

"I think that most of them are, but there are others who are clean."

"Do you think I'm corrupt?"

Leandro then had the impression that Señor Torres was looking at him contemptuously, and had even stopped eating.

"I don't know, Señor Torres. It's not something I've given much thought to."

"Don't tell lies, son. You've thought about it, you asked for a reason. You saw all of this and wanted to know how I manage to pay for it all without working day in, day out. Or am I wrong? Come on, I'll be honest with you."

Leandro's feet began to shake.

"I've done bad things," Señor Torres added in a sombre tone, "Things that I shouldn't have done, but there's a little bit of bad in all of us, right?" He smiled abruptly in an attempt to downplay his comment. "And today are you actually going to tell me whether I can include you in the project?"

Leandro had a knot in his throat and coughed a couple of times.

"I'm still not sure, Señor Torres."

Señor Torres nodded. Leandro ate slowly and sometimes took as long as an hour and a half to eat breakfast. He had no appetite for food and always felt full. It was as if after four mouthfuls his stomach and throat did their best to let him know that they couldn't take any



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more, and that he would be overwhelmed by intense nausea if he continued to eat. Leandro felt that his body was either demanding solutions or preparing for the end, even if he didn't want it to be so. On occasions food began to taste bland, and that made it easier to leave it on his plate. He felt embarrassed during his first two visits to Señor Torres' house as leaving over half of what he had served made him self-conscious. Thankfully Señor Torres noticed and started serving him smaller portions.

Leandro and Señor Torres sat in silence for several minutes.

"I've invited an artist to our next breakfast. I met her about 3 weeks ago and she leapt at my invitation to participate in the project. She sells paintings in the park, although it's not going that well for her," Señor Torres sighed, "It seems like nobody does very well here, but



I managed to convince her to sell them outside in my front garden, so it would be more convenient for her. She's about five years younger than you and is very good at what she does. She hasn't brought me all the paperwork yet but it won't take her long. Between the two of us we'll persuade you, Leandro, you'll see."

Leandro smiled.

"You're ill, aren't you?" Señor Torres asked, out of the blue.

"No, I'm fine. It's just that the heat gets to me sometimes."

"You're not a good liar, Leandro. You keep touching your chest, you've got some kind of respiratory problem. I've noticed that you breathe heavily and almost seem to whistle through your nose at times. And that's without mentioning that you barely eat. That must be why you've lost weight, and you sweat a lot and look tired. Don't try that on me. Just tell me you don't want to talk and..."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Señor Torres kept quiet, then leaned slightly to the right and took his wallet out of his back trouser pocket.

"Take this so that you can go to the doctor and buy whatever they prescribe for you. Private doctors are expensive," he said, while handing two fifty thousand peso notes to Leandro.

"There's no need for —"

"Go on, take them! Don't make me offer twice."

Leandro took the money grudgingly. Señor Torres looked him in the eye for several seconds and Leandro felt like he was being examined, as if he were a patient. It had been a long time since he last experienced that unpleasant feeling.

"You're not caught up in drugs are you?" Señor Torres said at last. Leandro smiled while shaking his head.



The sky was cloudy and excessively grey; after two balmy weeks, it looked like it was finally going to rain. The cold weather and freshness in the air made Leandro feel like he wasn't in Cali. He and Verónica looked at each other for the first time; Señor Torres had just introduced them and returned to the kitchen to finish preparing breakfast. Leandro was bothered by the way Verónica looked him up and down, and then seemed to reject him. He was wearing a creased black shirt with long sleeves that were ideal for the cold, and had just taken off the new hat that Señor Torres had given him. She, in turn, didn't strike him as extraordinary, but rather arrogant and proud. She had white skin, short hair and her nails were painted with black nail varnish, and Leandro had the impression he had seen her before, although he couldn't be sure.

Verónica got up from the sofa, walked over to one of the living room walls and took down one of the many photo frames. Leandro's attention left her and switched to his disease. The night before he had been unable to sleep because of a sharp pain in his chest and a burning sensation in his throat, and just for a change he had been short of breath. He even got up several times, bathed in sweat, hoping to throw up and feel better, but all that came out was spit. The situation was unbearable, so much so that Leandro lay wondering for two hours whether he should visit the doctor, if only to assuage his discomfort. But the thought of having considered it irritated him and he decided against it, even if the next few nights were even worse.

Señor Torres told them to go through to the dining room, and he brought them two cups of coffee and a plate of pastries. He had already eaten breakfast. Verónica hung the photo back up and sat at the head of the table. Leandro positioned himself to her left, while Señor Torres dropped into the seat to her right and started to tap the wooden table with two fingers. He soon quickened the pace of

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the tapping. It was the first time Leandro had seen him in person with a tie. Señor Torres waited for his two guests to start chatting, but neither did. Verónica covered her nose with her right hand and sneezed three times.

“Could I please use your bathroom?” she asked, her hand still over her mouth.

Señor Torres nodded, and she left the dining room and advanced into the hall.

“Don’t be shy,” said Señor Torres, after finishing chewing on the nail of his index finger.

At that moment someone knocked twice on the door. Señor Torres stopped tapping and got up from the dining table to answer it; he moved slowly with a hunched back, as he usually did, and called to mind a large animal during a migration. He came back accompanied by an elderly man who was also wearing a blazer and tie. Leandro thought that the recent arrival looked like Señor Torres would in old age, and couldn’t avoid smiling.

“I wasn’t expecting you so early, Dr. Lopéz. Please do make yourself at home, take a seat on the sofa and make yourself comfortable, won’t you.” Señor Torres said, formally and unsmilingly.

“I’m fine right here, don’t you worry,” Dr. López answered, after running his tongue over his teeth, “I’m not planning to stay long. You know I’m only here for what we spoke about on the phone.”

Dr. López stopped speaking when he saw Leandro in the dining room as well as Verónica, who was only just getting back from the bathroom. Señor Torres noticed this and walked towards them in such a hurry that he stumbled and narrowly avoided falling to the ground.

“Could you two do me a favour and give us a minute? Go out and talk on the patio, I’ll let you know when we’ve finished,” he said frostily.

Señor Torres' house was old and sat on a corner. It had two entrances, as unlike most of the residences in Cali it hadn't been divided up into small apartments, and the patio door led out to another street. Leandro and Verónica walked in silence down the hall like two ghosts, not even glancing at each other. Upon reaching the patio they discovered that the garden was large, with orchids, irises, daisies and anthuriums that were all in flower. A hummingbird flitted from one to the next, unconcerned by the overcast sky or the threat of a torrential downpour. Leandro looked around with curiosity as that part of the house was new to him. There were also three rocking chairs, and Verónica sat down in one and began to sway back and forth. Soon several shouts could be heard from within the house and both of them moved closer to the hall to listen. Dr. López was demanding that Señor Torres pay all the money and that he had two weeks to do so, that in politics there were no favours, only debts. Señor Torres retorted that they already had a payment agreement and he had no plans to alter it. They spoke of money under the table, and of what each had done for the other.

"Don't play dumb with me!" said Dr. López, "I helped you out when..."

The conversation reached Leandro and Verónica just like the buzzing of an insect. At times the voices sounded close by, as if the two of them were still together with Señor Torres and Dr. López in the living room; on other occasions they dropped to an almost imperceptible whisper and seemed to emanate from the bottom of an abyss, distorting any understanding of the facts. At any rate, their words revealed resentment.

"I need my money now, Miguel Ángel! I need it now," raged Dr. López, "Do you think votes sort themselves out magically? I need what you've owed me for..." his voice gradually lost strength.

An angry Señor Torres mentioned the payment agreement again, and added something about the documents of someone who knew



**LEANDRO LOOKED
AT PHOTOS OF
DR. LOPEZ, WHO
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too much and had ended up dead. In that instant Leandro felt a chill; his black long-sleeved shirt suddenly seemed incapable of keeping him warm enough, or of providing the necessary security to cope with the mood of that day. Verónica made no mention of the argument that was taking place in the living room. Dr. López dictated a period of a week and a half for payment of his money or threatened consequences. Then the house was left in silence.

Señor Torres went out to find them with a smile on his face as if nothing had happened, but he was perspiring and slightly hoarse. He invited them back to the dining room table, and while they were

walking down the hall Verónica hummed a melody that Leandro had never heard before, and it took his mind off the confusion caused by what had just happened. The coffee had gone cold and the breakfast pastries had lost their flavour. Señor Torres talked to them about the project he was drawing up for submission to the governor's office but he missed out parts and seemed disinterested, and Leandro felt his words lacked the enthusiasm of previous days. A few minutes later the rain unleashed itself on the city, smashing against the streets and tiled roofs. Señor Torres lent an umbrella to Verónica, but Leandro preferred to wait for it to clear up while sitting on the sofa next to Señor Torres, who didn't read the newspaper or speak excessively that morning.

The next day Leandro searched for information on Dr. López and Señor Torres in an internet café. The former had been elected several times to the Senate, and the latter had worked as his assistant at the outset of his career. Leandro looked at photos of Dr. Lopez, who was old and had short hair, and the skin under his eyelids was extremely wrinkled. The newspaper articles described him as an exemplary man. No controversies were mentioned, except for the suicide of his son and two recent hospitalizations. He had announced his candidacy for mayor of the city three months previously, and Leandro thought that his political career gave him a chance of winning.

While he was there he also decided to look up information on his disease; the last few nights had proved challenging and been plagued by nightmares in which he lost weight to such an extent that he was unable even to move, in which he was lying prostrate in bed, eyes on the ceiling, doing nothing more than thinking of death. He felt more exhausted with each passing day. Finally, he tried to re-read Lena's emails and check if any new ones had arrived, as in the days before he had had the feeling that certain details of her face were fading from his memory. After opening several pages he soon had a change of heart, let out a sigh and closed them again without reading their contents, abandoning himself to his fate.

**SEÑOR TORRES
STARED AT THE
CUP OF COFFEE HE
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THEN HE RAISED HIS
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EYES THAT SEEMED
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DISINTEGRATION.**



"Eloísa was my whole life."

Señor Torres stared at the cup of coffee he held in his hands. Then he raised his head and his gaze met Leandro's, who felt moved by those bright, black and fragile eyes that seemed on the verge of disintegration. It almost seemed like Señor Torres had Eloísa hidden away inside them.

"She was my whole life, even if she could be a real pain. Do you have kids, Leandro?"

"No, Señor Torres, no I don't..."

"In that case you won't understand me. That girl meant everything to me. Imagine having it all, and then losing it in the blink of an eye. Just imagine. After that there's nothing left for you to do."

Leandro thought about Lena and felt that he understood Señor Torres.

"She had a mole on her right cheek. I used to spit on my thumb or grab a damp cloth, and then chase her all around the house. She would laugh her head off. When I caught her I would set about cleaning her cheek. We used to say it was dirt, that a little bit of chocolate had got stuck on her."

A smile flickered on Leandro's face at the thought of them playing together.

"She liked films with Chaplin in because we used to play at mimicking after watching them. And we used to tickle each other to see who could last the longest without bursting out laughing."

Señor Torres looked intently at his cup of coffee and kept talking with his head bowed.






“She liked visiting a farm that we used to have in Palmira as well. One weekend she went there with my ex-wife; I was busy working and couldn’t go with them. She climbed up a tree and had an accident. That was where...”

Señor Torres kept looking at the cup of coffee with such devotion that Leandro decided to do the same. On it, the silhouette of a little cat could still be made out, worn away by the water and the years gone by, but it doubtlessly remained unchanged in the memory of Señor Torres. He clutched it tightly, clinging to it as if it represented a life together with his daughter.

“My wife became depressed and almost didn’t overcome it. I never did. She’s a photographer, she took those,” Señor Torres said, while pointing at the wall bursting with photos. “And she wanted to take them down because they made her sad. I wouldn’t let her,” he said, attempting to smile. “We separated five years later. Things come to an end, you know. No matter how hard you try, they always come to an end. She wanted another child, but I wasn’t ready for that.”

Señor Torres’ mobile phone then started ringing. He peeled himself away from the cup and wiped his face with a handkerchief. Leandro wondered whether Señor Torres might have spent more time crying for his daughter than he had listening to her laughing.

It was eight o’clock at night, and Leandro was heading away from the park in San Antonio when he heard a woman’s voice calling him. For a second he thought it was Ada, the Argentinean girl, but he remembered that she and Margarita had already left the city. The previous Friday at three in the afternoon he had bumped into them in the lowest part of the park, next to the stone steps where he had met up with Señor Torres. Both of them left red lipstick marks on his right cheek when they kissed him goodbye.



AT THAT MOMENT SOMETHING INSIDE HIM SEEMED TO BREAK AND SHATTER.

“Goodbye, Mr. Mime. Don’t be a sad mime. Have some good days, won’t you?” Ada whispered, her eyes brimming with tears.

The woman who was calling him was Verónica. She greeted him with a smile and asked him if he had time to talk. Leandro found this suspicious after the way she had treated him on the morning they met, but said yes anyway. Verónica then began to walk in the direction of the San Antonio church. The place was almost deserted, and the moon high above followed them stubbornly. They both sat down outside the church. She had a bottle of beer in her hand, but didn’t offer it to him.

“Do you believe in God, Leandro?” she asked suddenly.

Leandro didn’t answer, and gazed at the buildings and lights of the city of Cali without taking his mind off Verónica’s question. He told himself that it didn’t make much difference whether he had faith or not. At that moment something inside him seemed to break and shatter. Nobody had approached him for a long time without demonstrating compassion or concern for his appearance. Maybe speaking to Verónica with even a small amount of honesty was a good idea. He didn’t want to mention his illness, but he did ask her about Señor Torres. She remained silent for a while.



"It's a shame he's right wing," she said at last, after taking a swig of beer.

Leandro liked that statement, and he decided to tell her what had happened to Señor Torres' daughter, before adding that at the time he hadn't known how to respond to the news.

"I get it, you know. It's tricky," Verónica said, as she brought the bottle of beer closer to her lips, "A lot of the time you can't find the right words. Well, he hasn't told me about that."

Leandro's hands were sweating, so he took off his white gloves and placed them on the ground.

"We both know that Señor Torres is never going to finish putting together that project, don't we? It's just an excuse to not be on his own," Verónica said quickly, "Nobody's that kind-hearted. That man must have done some terrible things, and now he only wants to feel good about himself. And there's nothing wrong with that, is there?" "What do you mean?" Leandro asked. "You heard me, mime." Verónica looked into his eyes.

In the distance the bark of a dog rang out suddenly and made Leandro jump; since the last few nightmares he had felt vulnerable for several days, and anguish had become an everyday part of his life. Verónica looked at him and smiled.

"I haven't offered you any because you're ill," she said, holding up the bottle of beer, "Your voice is all hoarse. Don't go telling me that it changes at night."

"No no, I'm fine. The heat bothers me but it's cool out here tonight. I'm OK."

"No no, I'm fine. The heat bothers me but it's cool out here tonight. I'm OK. I'm OK!" she said, putting on a raspy voice to imitate Leandro. "Why would someone who claims to be fine, but who actually isn't

fine, come to a city like this? Wouldn't it be better to be somewhere else, mime?"

"Maybe it would."

Verónica looked at him inquisitively, before allowing the buildings of Cali to fill his eyes with lights. Those yellow and red spots tried fruitlessly to imitate the night sky, as the moon alone made them appear insignificant.

"And if you could leave, where would you go?" Verónica asked.

Leandro offered no response. It didn't matter where he was any more. In that way the conversation was filled with silence.

"Where would you go?" Leandro returned the question.

"Italy. But first I have to do something and I don't know whether I should."

This time it was Leandro who looked at her curiously. He was sure that he wasn't important to Verónica, but that last phrase seemed like a hint of a secret aimed at him alone.

"And where shall we send Señor Torres? Where would you tell him to travel to? I'd buy him a ticket to the past," Verónica added.

Leandro seemed to liven up. He liked this game.

"I'd tell Señor Torres to look for his ex-wife and try to make a go of it with her again. If he was standing right here in front of me, I'd say: 'Señor Torres, go! Of course! Go and look for your wife and live out the rest of your days in her company. Leave, because I'm not going to sign up for your project. I can't! You should leave and not be alone. You should leave, Señor Torres.' That's what I'd tell him!"

Verónica was looking at him with a smile, and then asked him how long he was planning to stay in Cali. He said at least a month. They



VERÓNICA TOSSED ONE OF THE GLOVES TO THE FLOOR. LEANDRO WATCHED IT FALL IN COMPLETE SILENCE, AS IF IT WERE A FEATHER.

sat looking at the city until close to midnight and then nodded goodbye to each other.

Leandro looked at Verónica, opening his eyes as wide as he could. He tried to walk towards her but stopped after a couple of steps and raised his left hand, as if wanting to stop the shot that had not yet been fired. His right hand clenched his black hat. He thought she would pull the trigger immediately without as much as a word to him, but all she did was look him in the eye. Then she dug around in her trouser pocket without shifting her gaze from him, and finally took out a pair of slightly stained gloves. Leandro recognized them immediately and remembered leaving them outside the church on the night they had sat there to talk. At that moment he understood what was happening. So this was how he was going to die, far from it all, in a house that now belonged to nobody? Verónica tossed one of the gloves to the floor. Leandro watched it fall in complete silence, as if it were a feather.



Then he recalled the first time he had seen Verónica, the way she had looked at him and rejected him, and the argument that Señor Torres had had that day. His muscles were tense, as if his life itself was trying to cling to them, reminding him of its weight and demanding that he survive. Meanwhile, Verónica reached into her trouser pocket again and pulled out a black mobile phone, then dialled without taking her eyes off Leandro and held the device up to her ear.

"He's asleep now," she said, before hanging up.

She put the phone back in her pocket with a ceremonious slowness that Leandro found fateful. He remained motionless as if preparing himself, as if taking in the fact that he would never again be able to move. Verónica changed the gun to her other hand so she could look for something in her other pocket more easily: another mobile phone. She dialled more quickly than before and held the phone up to her ear again.

"I need help," she said, almost in tears, "I need help! I'm in the San Antonio neighbourhood, two blocks away from the park, on the road there from the hotel. Someone's robbing a house. A few seconds ago I saw a man in a white shirt forcing his way in. You have to come quickly!"

She put the phone away while keeping the gun trained on Leandro, and then fell silent. At that instant he thought that a noiseless death would be no bad thing; that way, he would have time to listen to himself, to hear what he would be thinking about when he was slipping away, if he had at least a couple of seconds and everything didn't happen too suddenly. Verónica told him that when it was over she would leave the country and head to Italy, like she had said, and start again. And what was he going to do? She looked at him in a way that suggested sadness to Leandro; he tried to say something, to say goodbye, but couldn't find the right words.



"It's OK," were the only words he could form from the stammers.

Verónica let out a sigh.

"Not exactly, mime. You've got to get out of here fast," she said, looking into his eyes for the final time.

Without knowing how and without asking himself any more questions, Leandro found himself running down the hall towards the patio and the second door. Everything around him was turning blurry, and he felt like he was wading through the mist of a dark forest. The back door was open. They had planned it all, right up to the smallest detail. Leandro was almost unable to breathe. He was close to fainting but had to leave immediately. He stopped running to avoid attracting attention, gripping his hat with both hands. Soon he was outside the house where he rented a room and he went inside without greeting the owners, an elderly black couple who had a son who lived in Chile. As soon as he was alone, the first thing he did was take off his white shirt and put on a black one. He stuffed his clothes and personal belongings into his rucksack and wheeled suitcase, but left some shirts in the laundry room and others hanging out on the line. He had paid for the month of June, which was almost over anyway. He told the owners that his mother had been admitted to hospital in Bogotá and that he had to depart straight away. They reacted with surprise and sadness but wished him good luck.

Leandro would have preferred to stay for another month at least, but that was no longer an option. While he was walking down to the city's main avenue, Calle Quinta, carrying his luggage in both hands, he thought he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. His heart was beating furiously, and for a moment he imagined that Señor Torres was pursuing him, had caught up with him, and was looking at him with eyes from another world that seemed to reprimand Leandro for leaving him on his own. The footsteps seemed so real that he felt obliged to stop. When he turned around



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he believed he could see Señor Torres in front of him. "There's nothing I can do, nothing! I can't stay!" The illusory Señor Torres then looked him in the eye without reproach, and seemed to say the same thing that Leandro had said before to Verónica: that it was OK. He closed his eyes to stop himself being overcome by sobbing, and continued on his way.



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On the Calle Quinta he hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to the bus station. It was twelve noon. He looked out of the window but

the landscape beyond was still blurry, and consisted only of spots and lots of colourful lights. Leandro rubbed his face forcefully. The only thing he wanted was to forget Señor Torres' body, to erase it entirely from his being, although he suspected that it was a memory that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

He left the black hat on the back seat. After all, the worn-out old one with a torn brim was inside one of his bags. The taxi driver saw it in time and got out of the vehicle to return it to him. Leandro had no option but to thank him. He had no idea what to do, or where to go. He remembered Verónica and felt afraid, then walked towards the escalator. Once on the first floor he looked for somewhere to sit and tried not to draw any attention, but he couldn't help himself and his eyes darted from one place to the next. He felt lost and with nowhere to go. Then he pictured Verónica again, aiming the revolver at him. He felt enraged and wanted to scream out. Suddenly he was seized by a single thought. It no longer mattered where he was, and he didn't care in the slightest if there was still violence; large buildings or trees that sang the praises of the shadows; cars or birdsong; confinement or open air. The end was fast approaching all the same. He walked through the bus station in search of potential destinations, and decided on one where nobody would look for him.

Perhaps in Florencia he would have some good days, like Ada had said. Leandro again wondered why he had suspected nothing when he found the front door open, and why Verónica had wanted to let him live. He would have liked to have seen Señor Torres' documents, to not have entered the house that morning. After boarding the bus that would take him to Florencia, he also wondered how long he would take to die. He had no idea, but he would soon find out.

Ten minutes later he was already on the move. He opened the window and let the wind tear the black hat from his hands. For a few seconds it sailed through the air like a swallow, before falling to the ground as if exhausted.

ATAJACAMINOS



Gabriela Melo **Editor**

You can't predict the appearance of an opportunity. It simply occurs, as with so many strokes of fate. Call it luck or coincidence; it ceases to be the purview of an unintelligible game of chance when that opportunity is seized with both hands and molded into a path, a mountain, a light. Ellipsis was all of those things: it was learning, difficulty, results. Facing complex processes in the fields of professional publishing, getting to know recognized writers and figures firsthand, listening to that polyphonic voice of literature in various talks and events—all of this was that distant dimension appearing suddenly before our eyes and declaring: I am real.

I read somewhere that we are the sum of our past selves. I know that one of them, whom I remember with longing and affection, was the Gabriela who was part of the British Council's Ellipsis program, the one who built a significant portion of my past, is in my present, and will influence my future. Ellipsis was a significant event that changed the course of my life.

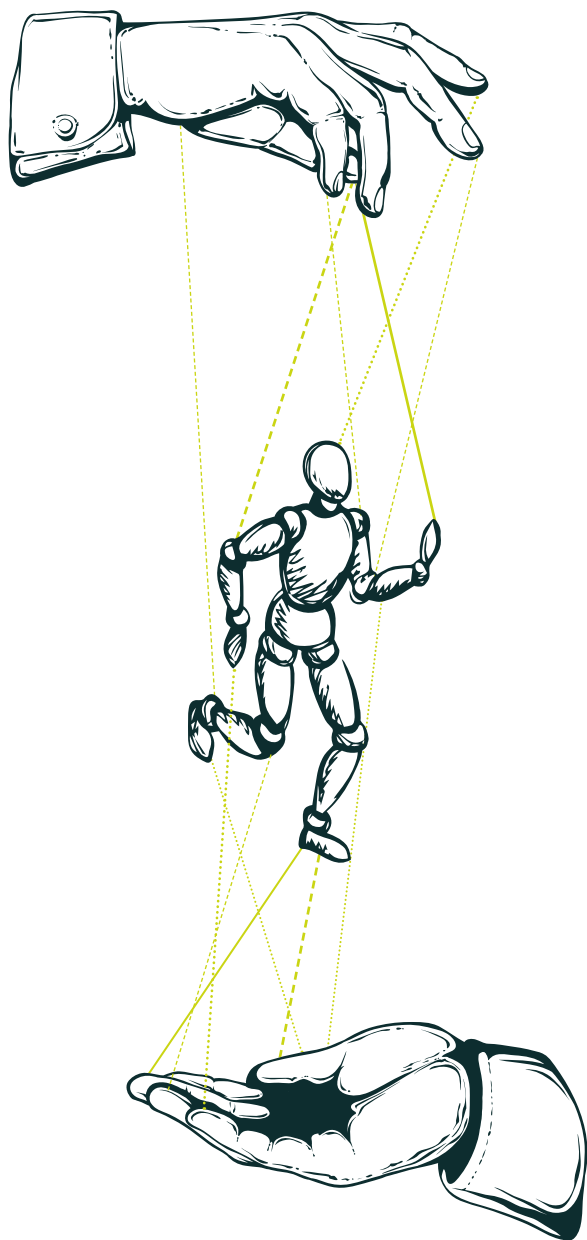
Juan Sebastián Cubides

Writer

I thought that writing was a matter of sitting down and filling a blank space with words. And ultimately that's what it is. But there is a road for each word that you decide to write. From Cartagena's absent sea through the voluminous amount of work we had to complete in time for the well-attended Feria del Libro, one story bounced around in my head over and over again. Parks, children's games, a ball, a mango tree—this was the material that I tried to bend into a story. So many images that many times they had to draw the line on me: Alejandra and her critique of the “as if” and her insistence on time, Marta and her way of understanding so completely what I as writing that she wound up finding things that I hadn't seen. And Gabriela, my editor, with her comparisons between one draft and the next. I could talk a lot more about what this meant to me. A critique of something that is produced with such affection is always a personal attack. But also personal is the gratitude that here, in this short paragraph, I want to render to all those who had a hand in this process that really allowed me to have the experience of what it is to be a writer.

ellipsis

2019



ATAJACAMINOS



Juan Sebastián
Cubides Salazar



Gabriela Melo



For Pame and Pablo.

When I asked Leandro what one needed to become a mime, he said: silence and paint. I have been silent for a week, and also, without Mum finding out, I painted my face white, but nothing worked. The moon, my bicycle, the walls of my house: these have white paint. But being a mime is hard as far as silence goes—more so if you think you might get a friend back by spilling a secret. My story with Leandro ended that night. Perhaps the trick is not so much about shutting up and painting your face, but in running from so much noise.

I met Leandro three months ago. My fan had burnt out from so many blackouts, and Mum had made guava juice at lunch, so my tongue was sticking to the roof of my mouth. The air was full of the buzz of cicadas and crickets. The boys from the neighbourhood had agreed to meet after lunch, because Jorgito had found an empty *aguardiente* bottle in the street, and we knew from experience that they were the best receptacles for capturing fire ants and watching them fight.

In the afternoon I went out on my bicycle with a Jet chocolate in my pocket and a pouch loaded with marbles. There were two types of bicycles in my neighbourhood: the ones with the brake on the handlebar and the ones that braked with the pedals. I had both, but my favourite was the old one, the one I learned to ride on and that had the frame painted white. Being able to brake with my feet was important, and although the one Dad gave me was taller, I preferred the white one because I could skid on Moni's block and leave a big cloud of dust behind me. I didn't always manage to make the tire squawk. There were afternoons when Moni's mum would leave the hose open for so long that the water would pool on the street's rocks and dust, forming small puddles that would leave a stain on my back when I ran over them with my bike. But the open hose wasn't an everyday thing, and that afternoon I arrived at the corner of the park with a clean shirt. Ricardo and Jorgito's bicycles were there already. I parked mine and looked for my friends.

I found them under a guayacán tree, focused on what appeared to be an ant fight.

‘Hey, you started without me?’ I said, and kicked a pebble.

‘Shhh,’ Moni replied, just like my science teacher.

They were all there: Jorgito, Moni, Ricardo, Cindy, Lucas, Migue. Maybe they had decided to go out because the power was gone, but it was a novelty for Cindy and Moni to laugh so hard when it was ant fight day. I decided it was best to keep quiet and elbow my way through the group.

‘Hey, Nicolás!’ Jorgito rebuked me for my shove. ‘I was here first.’

When I made it to the first row, I looked at Ricardo and then at the ground, glancing around for the bottle. But it wasn’t there. A thin line of ants carried pieces of pink leaves on their backs and scaled the tree trunk. ‘They’re repairing the tree,’ I thought. I looked up and saw that everyone was looking at the street.

‘What’s up, guys?’

‘Look,’ said Moni, her forefinger pointing ahead.

Under the red spotlight was a man with his face painted white. He was wearing earth-stained jeans, black shoes, suspenders, and a blazer that made him sweat like blackboard that’s been swiped with an eraser. He walked in short steps, and in his attempt to imitate the conversation of two ladies that were crossing at the spotlight, his arms were stretched out like a marionette.

‘He’s been imitating people for a while,’ said Moni.

‘I saw one in Bogotá,’ I said, as I took the chocolate bar from my pocket. ‘He’s a mime, and Mum says they are like bums.’



I COULD SEE THAT THE MIME WAS HUNCHED, WALKING WITH ONE HAND OVER HIS MOUTH AND THE OTHER IN HIS PANTS POCKET

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‘I think he’s more of a clown than a bum,’ said Cindy.

Cindy, in a class of her own: the only kid in the neighbourhood that couldn’t ride a bike. I unpacked the chocolate without Jorgito’s noticing.

‘Hey look, I think he’s coming towards us.’

The mime walked towards the park, slowly, as if measuring the sky with every step. We squeezed so close that Jorgito saw the chocolate and asked for some. ‘Humph,’ I said. I broke off a square and handed it to him. I could see that the mime was hunched, walking with one hand over his mouth and the other in his pants pocket. He wasn’t poorly dressed, but the shirt didn’t fit him right—I’m not sure if it was because his shoulder bones jutted out like the prow of the



ship or if it was because the shirt was big on him. When he reached us, he sat on the dry leaves that were under the guayacán tree.

'Mister mime, are you alright?'

'Stupid!' Moni interrupted me. 'Mimes don't talk.'

Moni was right. That afternoon the mime kept quiet. The only thing we heard was the tractor wheeze that came out of his throat every time he finished coughing. At first, he had leaned back on the tree, but he seemed to choke on his own cough, and he had to spend the rest of the afternoon with a straight back, the same posture required at my school. It wasn't fun to see someone cough that way, so only Ricardo, Jorgito, and I stayed, plucking antennas from the ants and putting them inside the bottle, betting a marble for every duo that faced off. The shadows of the trees began to disappear and there was a discarded leaf or two on the road the ants had walked. Sometimes the veiled light from the cars reached us and we could see one ant biting another inside the bottle. Jorgito's mother appeared in the park and ushered him inside. Ricardo and I didn't have anyone to tell us it was time to go to bed when the night announced itself with fireflies and the wind that rushed up from the gully, so we walked to one of the cement benches, sat down, and from there watched the mime, who had his eyes shut and was leaning against the tree that the ants had been climbing.

'You think he doesn't have a place to sleep?' I asked.

'People don't believe in mimes,' said Ricardo. Then he spat on the floor. 'So they don't pay them for what they do.'

'Well, in that case, it's very likely that he doesn't have a place to sleep.' We looked at the mime for a while in silence. He slept like my grandfather, clearing his throat and swallowing saliva. Ricardo let out a sigh and got up from the bench.



‘Twelve marbles to whoever gets home first.’

‘Deall!’ I answered.

A week went by. The guerrilla had knocked down another utility pole and without telly or PlayStation the house was getting as boring as a Sunday mass. There wasn’t much to do outside. Dad had forbidden me from going out on account of public safety. Besides, I’d bet my last twelve marbles that I’d beat Ricardo in a bicycle race and had lost. My pouch was empty and they wouldn’t take me in any game, so I spent all weekend in bed, trying to make Dad understand how difficult it was to live in a neighbourhood like ours and begging him, if we couldn’t move somewhere else, to at least take me with him on his next trip.

Dad visited us one weekend every other week. Although sometimes, when he and Mum fought and threw things, he’d slam the door on his way out and wouldn’t be back for a month. When Dad left, Mum would come home late, her high heels tapping like the second hand on the clock and the shine of aguardiente on her teeth. The fights weren’t just in my family; you could hear the arguments in house number six from my bedroom. But they didn’t have kids, and in a way, that made me happy.

It wasn’t just the fights at home. Sometimes Dad would give me advice over lunch. He would say, for instance, that the first sin of a trader was to not teach his son to negotiate. Then he would pull his sleeves up and look me in the eye to see how I reacted. That weekend Dad came home with his advice. I had asked him to take me with him to Bogotá and he had only let go of his spoon and pulled up his sleeves. The excuse was always that the road was dangerous, but he came and went with his boxes safe and sound, and I really didn’t understand.

‘Well,’ I pressed my eyelids to squeeze a tear out and down my cheek, ‘in that case I’d rather have the soldieries come in with their



THERE WASN'T MUCH TO DO OUTSIDE. DAD HAD FORBIDDEN ME FROM GOING OUT ON ACCOUNT OF PUBLIC SAFETY.



planes and bombs and have them shoot outside the houses. At least that way a kid wouldn't die of boredom,' I answered.

'Don't be dramatic, Nicolás,' Mum said.

Dad smiled.

'I'm leaving tonight, but in the afternoon we could turn on the generator and watch a movie that I know you'll like.' Then he got up and took a napkin to his whiskers, as if expecting me to play along with the negotiation and all that.

'I'm not that interested in movies lately.'

'It's about soldiers.' I must have pursed my lips and moved my legs under the table, because he immediately knit his brow and left the soup-smeared napkin on the tablecloth.

'I might consider it.'

**SOMETIMES DAD
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I SET UP THE BOX
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ENTRANCE TO MY
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'Don't worry. If the movie isn't interesting, we could go take some flowers to Grandpa.'

'No way,' I said. 'Which one is it? Tell me what it's called.'

'You see?' he said, turning to Mum. 'He still has his weaknesses, but with all his drama he's going to make a great businessman.' When he finished speaking, he loosened his belt and started walking towards the bedroom.

'Dad? And the movie?' He kept walking away. 'What's the name of the movie?'

'Troy,' he answered, yelling from the bedroom.

The generator made the glass around the house vibrate. I had painted a cardboard box red and told Mum to write box office on one side, to make it look better. Sometimes Dad was right and negotiating was something a kid in need of marbles had to know how to do, especially if his friends had also gone a week without going out to play and without power. I set up the box and a chair at the entrance to my house and waited.

The first to arrive was Moni with her mother. We called Moni Moni because she was blonde and her name was Mónica. When Mum wanted to give me a hard time about my grades at school, she always brought up Moni. 'Look how applied she is. Her Dad disappeared and even so she performs at school. And you, complaining all the time about nothing.' So out of fear of having Moni start to talk about school, I decided to charge her only three marbles for the ticket and let her in right away. Then Jorgito arrived and I charged him eight—I would have charged him more, but he has the aim of a cross-eye and loses a lot when we play. Ricardo, for his part, arrived with a full and thundering pouch.

'Well, Ricky, if you want to watch the movie, it's twelve marbles to a ticket,' I said, extending my hand like a bowl.

‘Twelve?’ Pfff. With twelve marbles I could play for weeks,’ He answered. Then he started walking away from the house.

‘Because you’re my friend,’ I said, in a hurry, ‘let’s leave it at ten.’

‘It’s not even a great movie, Nico. Eight.’

I was counting up how many marbles I would lose if I accepted his eight, when the mime showed up on my sidewalk. He wasn’t wearing the blazer anymore, and it looked like he was woozy. It was hard to know how old he was because although he didn’t have grey hair, he had arrived without the face paint, and both the yellowish color of his skin and the bags under his eyes made him look like an old man.

‘How many marbles for a ticket? It’s been a while since I’ve seen a movie. I saw your sign and would like to come in.’ Leandro’s voice was hoarse and it was hard to hear him. Before I could answer he came up to a chair on the sidewalk and sat. From his pocket he took a handkerchief and wiped his brow.

‘Well, I don’t know if my Mum would let a mime in the house. Let me ask her.’ I got up from the chair and ran into Dad.

‘Where do you know him from?’ he asked while he lit a cigarette.

‘He’s the mime that works in the park,’ I said. Mum had already come to the doorway as well.

‘Ah, it’s you.’ Dad offered his hand, and Leandro got up in a hurry from the chair and stumbled. Mum pretended to smile.

‘Are you alright? You want a cigarette, man?’ Dad asked. ‘Yesterday I had a good laugh thanks to you, while I waited for the stoplight.’

‘I’m fine, thank you, sir. But I can’t smoke anymore.’

‘Ah,’ Dad said, surprised. I thought I saw him look the mime up and down, as if he was looking at my grandfather. ‘Come on in, man. Make yourself at home.’

Moni’s mum and my parents had settled into the dining room chairs. Jorgito and his parents were on the couch. The rest of us sat on the floor, next to Leandro. From the kitchen came the smell of burnt popcorn, which Mum handed out in soup bowls. We drank warm soda out of plastic cups and talked about a handcraft fair that would come to town next week, until the Warner Bros. Pictures sign came up and then a dog was sniffing a dead horse.

■

Leandro didn’t see the whole movie because the tractor in his throat started up again. He got up, covering his mouth with one hand, and ran out the door, while onscreen Achilles was dragging Hector’s body across the sand. At the end of the movie, we went out too, excited by what we had seen. Hollering war cries, we lept into the street.

A while ago I had learned a new way to ride the bicycle: my chin resting on the handlebar and my legs clenched tight around the frame. And although I had gotten good results with Jorgito and Migue, I couldn’t beat Ricardo, because the stones on the unpaved street made the handlebar knock my chin. I didn’t mind losing the races at school, but with Ricardo there was always something more at stake, and I had only won once or twice so far that year. That’s why I threw my bicycle hard on the sidewalk when I got to the park.

‘Hey, slowpoke. Pay me what you owe me,’ Ricardo said. I began walking towards the guayacán tree. Each pebble I came across I kicked.

‘Nicolás, hey!’ Ricardo grabbed me by the shirt. ‘Let me go,’ I said, and gave him a shove.



‘You’re a real cheat. You don’t know how to pay your debts.’

‘Anyone would win on a bicycle with tires as wide as yours.’ I kept on walking until Ricardo pushed me and I fell on the ground. The others began to arrive.

‘Don’t come here to fight.’ I turned. It was the mime. ‘He’ll pay you your marbles later, boy. Isn’t that right?’ He gave me his hand to help me up, but I quickly let it go when I felt how thin it was.

‘Yes, but I’ll only give him eight,’ I said, dusting the sand from my hands.

‘Pfff,’ Ricardo huffed. He turned and walked to where the bicycles and my friends were.

‘Thank you, mister mime,’ I said.

‘My name is Leandro,’ he said. Then he started prodding me on the back for me to walk in front of him towards where everyone was.

‘So, what did you make of the movie?’ Moni opened her eyes as soon as she heard Leandro speak.

‘Amazing, magnificent, although I think...’

‘Well, are we going to fight or not?’ Moni was going to set off on one of her academic talks and I decided it was best to interrupt her.

‘Yes,’ they replied as a chorus.

‘Hey, look at Jorgito,’ Cindy said.

Jorgito was at some distance from the group. He had a large guama in hand. He waved it from side to side, whacking it against a tree like



THE TREES BECAME A PROBLEM IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD WHEN IT CAME TIME TO PICK WEAPONS, BECAUSE THE STICKS WERE VERY THICK.

a Trojan warrior would a sword. But on one of the whacks he hit it so hard that the guama split open and out poured its seeds. Ricardo cackled and then we all laughed. Leandro didn't. He looked at me before walking away from the group and towards the guayacán, and I thought his eyes had the same look in them that Mum's have when I wake her from the sofa to get her to bed.

'Well, guys. I'm Helena, because I'm blonde.'

'Aw, Mónica, but I wanted to be Helena too,' Cindy said.

'Let's do heads or tails.'

They stayed there tossing a coin up into the air and deciding who would be Helena while the rest of us ran through the park looking for a branch or anything else that could pass for a sword. The trees became a problem in our neighbourhood when it came time to pick weapons, because the sticks were very thick. Most had already





THE LEAVES ON THE TREES SHOOK. I KNEW THAT WHEN THE WIND CAME UP THE GULLY IT WAS THE MONTH FOR FLYING KITES AND GOING FISHING.

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found their sword, so I looked around quickly among the dry leaves on the ground and found a straight, dry branch, one of those that you could crack over your knee. I thought it would work. I picked it up and looked at Leandro, who was holding a book and sitting under the guayacán. That didn't seem like the right way to sit if you were laying on the grass. You had to stretch out your legs and let your back take the shape of the tree, with your hips ahead and your shoulders further back. If adults understood these things, they wouldn't walk around with the face the mime was wearing that day—a ragged, uncomfortable one. I looked away and went back to where the others were.

'Well, we're all here.' Moni had a heliconia flower behind her ear and was talking louder. 'Cindy won the coin toss, but she says she'd rather be Hector's wife, so I'll be Helena.' Cindy let out a humph and knit her brows.

Ricardo had selected a branch similar to mine. Jorgito had a heavy trunk and looked more like a giant from *The Lord of the Rings* than a Trojan warrior. Migue was gripping a guama and others had little sticks the size of rulers.

'You,' Moni pointed at me, 'will be Achilles because of your sword and because you have long and blond hair. Jorgito will be Menelaus because he has a belly and cheeks. Ricardo will be Hector because he has curls and because that's what Cindy wanted.

Noooo,' we all protested.

'If you keep going on like this I'll leave and won't play,' said Moni.

'I'm not planning on letting Cindy be my wife,' declared Ricardo.

I saw Dad's car come down the street. He stopped in front of my bicycle and honked. I ran towards him. I reached the passenger's window, and he reached out his arm and began cranking the window down. The smell of cigarettes and beer issued from the car.

'I'm off. Take care of your mother for me. Call me if you need me, ey?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'Alright. I told your mother no going out late. They're say that guerrilla is close by and you know what they're capable of, don't you?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'Alright. Don't look so glum, Nico. I already treated you and I don't want any problems. I'll see you later.' He patted my hair with his hand. Then he pulled up the window and was gone.

The leaves on the trees shook. I knew that when the wind came up the gully it was the month for flying kites and going fishing. In the distance, I could see my friends tapping each other with the tips of



branches and guamas in slow-motion movements. Taking a sword in the arm, the neck, the leg. Some fell to the ground, gripping their hearts, others would take their hand to their shoulder, wounded. Ricardo ran swiftly between the bodies that later would become food for vultures and dogs. I wiped the tears from my cheek, squeezed my weapon, and went to war, our war, with the sound of the wing rustling the branches.

■

The Greeks observed the nighttime as strictly as my friends' parents. They came for Moni and the game was over.

'You come in right now,' hollered Mrs Cielo, her mother, from the park's corner. 'Tomorrow curfew might end and you may go back to school.'

Migue, Lucas, and Cindy left together. Ricardo came up to me. 'I'll be Hector, as long as you let me kill you.'

'Well, I wish I could, but the movie doesn't go that way, and there's nothing we can do about that.'

'I'll give you Prism and I won't ask for the marbles you lost in the race.'

Prism was Ricardo's favourite marble. It had brown, black, and green spots, and it looked like camouflaged fatigues. Jorgito had once offered Ricky ten marbles for Prism, and now I had my chance.

'Well, sometimes movies lie. So can we. I'll accept but only if you include your sword in the deal.'

'Deal.' He removed the marble from his pocket, which I could barely see in the night, and he gave it to me with his weapon. Then he spat on the floor.

**FROM MY ROOM,
I FELT AS IF THE
LIVING ROOM TOO
WAS A GLASS
BOTTLE IN WHICH
DAD'S SCREAMS
AND BLOWS TO
MUM BOUNCED OFF
THE WALLS, AS IF
THEY TOO HAD HAD
THEIR ANTENNAS
CUT OFF AND BEEN
FORCED TO LIVE
TOGETHER.**



BUT LEANDRO DIDN'T SMELL LIKE SWEAT OR WAX. THAT NIGHT HE SMELLED LIKE DAMP EARTH AND GRASS.

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Ricardo remained quiet. I thought he was looking at the headlights of the cars and the red of stoplight gleaming in the middle of the night. I thought about school. My thing was street life. That was for sure — life was better on bike than sitting at a school bench. Never mind home life. From my room, I felt as if the living room too was a glass bottle in which Dad's screams and blows to Mum bounced off the walls, as if they too had had their antennas cut off and been forced to live together.

'Another guerrilla attack would be nice, wouldn't it? Then we wouldn't have school,' I said.

'I don't care,' Ricardo said. His farewell was a punch.

Mum was probably in the living room, a cigarette at her lips and a bolero playing at full blast. Despite the blows, Ricardo's branch still had two leaves clinging to its stem. I tore them both off and ripped



them into several pieces. I brought my fingers to my nose: lemon smells just like leaf blood. Do soldiers smell like lemon? I'd fight in any war just to not go home.

'Nicolás.' It was Leandro's voice.

'It must be nice to sleep on the grass and the leaves,' I said. Then I sat down next to him.

'It's better than a sidewalk,' he said, while wiping the sweat from his brow with his shirt sleeve. 'But I don't sleep here.'

When Leandro wasn't wearing his blazer, his shoulder blades looked like a pair of islands. When he sweat, his shirt became as see-through as the wax paper we used at school to trace maps. But Leandro didn't smell like sweat or wax. That night he smelled like damp earth and grass.

'Where do you sleep then?'

'I'm renting a room near here.'

He opened his black backpack. Inside I saw a bag full of medicines like the ones Mum took at night to help her sleep. He took out the sandwich that was next to a pack of cigarettes.

'Leandro?'

'Yes?'

'You have a hard time sleeping too?' The mime didn't answer. He just offered me one half of the sandwich.

'Thanks,' I said and bit into it. It was a tuna sandwich with mayonnaise and lettuce. 'It's really good.'



He started eating too. He looked at the cigarettes and opened the bag's zipper. I thought he was going to put them away, but before he did, I swallowed the bite in my mouth and said:

'Those were my grandfather's.'

'What?'

'Marlboro.'

'They're the best.' He spun the pack around twice on his palm and removed the plastic that encased it.

'Well, what are you waiting for? My grandfather would've smoked one already.'

'For my cough to go away.'

'Haha. For my cough to go away. When my grandfather was sick Mum forbade him to smoke, but he always said that not doing whatever the hell you wanted was like being a living dead man.'

'He was right, your grandfather,' he said. He zipped the backpack shut and dumped the remains of the sandwich on the ground. Then he opened the pack and lit up. 'Where is he now?'

'Who? My grandfather?'

'Mhmm.'

'He died a few months ago.'

We both sat in silence until we were done eating.

'Are the lights always out here?' he asked.



'No. Not always.' With my index finger I hit an ant that was running up my left arm. 'But it's been like this for a while. It's the guerrilla.'

'So I heard,' he cleared his throat and stubbed the cigarette on the earth. He lay back on the ground. I thought I saw him close his eyes and settle down to sleep.

'Dad says they're close to town, but Mum doesn't agree. She thinks they say that just to scare us.'

From the street, I could hear the sound of the cars every so often. Otherwise, everything was so quiet that when you moved you could hear the crunch of leaves on the ground and the hum of the cicadas.

'I don't like the guerrilla,' he said after a while.

'Who does?' I looked among the leaves for the ant I had just whacked. Next to a small rock I found a dead ant with no antennae. I took it with my fingers and showed it to him. 'I had never found one after the bottle.'

'I don't like fights either and I like animal fights even less,' he said.

'Then why did you let us fight?'

Leandro sighed and turned around. I know that when an adult gave his back to me it was because he wanted silence. So, I laid back with my hips forward and my back leaning in a certain way so one of the roots worked like a pillow. I studied the ant's body. Leandro had gone into the same position, and if it wasn't for that tractor snort, I would have thought I was alone that night.

'Because I think that kids should be taught to not be stupid—taught to dream, to rebel,' he said finally.

'Can I stay a while longer?' I asked.



‘Your mum won’t get on your case?’

‘She won’t notice. She must be asleep by now.’

‘And your dad?’

‘Dad’s gone.’

Leandro sat up and handed me his backpack.

‘It works like a pillow,’ he said, and smiled at me.

I must have fallen asleep, because he woke me up saying that the birds and the wind had ceased their ruckus and it would be best for me to go home.



Curfew wasn’t lifted because the power was still out. Days after my conversation with Leandro we decided to replace our swords with the marble guns that had arrived with the handcraft fair. The guns didn’t fall apart with the blows or the passing of time and the shots hurt more than a sword whack or a fire ant sting. On television they never showed a guerrilla fighter with gun, but if weapons in the jungle were any colour, I was sure it was the colour of moss, so I painted mine green.

The park had become a battlefield. The trees supported empty soda cans that we aimed at for target practice. The one who knocked over the most with a single cartridge would win anything from marbles to fallen teeth and worms. But the August winds kept approaching and many cans fell before we even began shooting. So soon we began shooting at each other.

We broke into two groups and hid behind the tree trunks in the park. The aim was to eliminate the enemy, so each time you were shot, despite the pain, you had to raise both arms and shout, ‘For honour and country,’ before exiting the battlefield to await the winner.



**THE GAMES WERE
MEANT TO BE FUN,
NOT PAINFUL.
ALTHOUGH I HAD
BEEN SHOT TWICE
IN THE ARM, I
HADN'T WANTED
TO SHOUT, 'FOR
HONOUR AND
COUNTRY'.
I WAS LOSING.**



Leandro hadn't been back to the park. Moni said that she had seen him near the hospital stoplight and assured us he'd be back to our neighbourhood. He was my friend, but I understood that he needed to work, and around that time when we were shooting it was better that way, because we missed shots and he would likely have found himself the target at some point. In the heat of the game, we hardly dared to peek our bodies or heads past the tree trunks, and



DURING THOSE THREE WEEKS LEANDRO BECAME BORING WHEN IT CAME TO IMITATION.

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we took aim so fearfully that most of the pellets wound up embedded in the ground or piercing trees' leaves. It wasn't a good idea for someone foreign to the game to be lying around in the middle of a shootout like that.

The game had become Jorgito's favourite because he could handle point-blank shots to his belly. The fact that they didn't wound him and he could shoot back made him an invincible person. Ricardo got tired of losing and suggested that we shoot ants, but it wasn't the same to kill ants with pellets as to take out their antennas and watch them fight. We decided that for the fifth and last war, Ricardo and I would be on the same side. Jorgito could have defeated an entire battalion on his own and together we stood better chances of beating him.

The games were meant to be fun, not painful. Although I had been shot twice in the arm, I hadn't wanted to shout, 'For honour and country'. I was losing. I wanted to cry, but that was not allowed in war, and I began shooting blindly with my gun. Ricardo's screaming at Jorgito was drowned out by the sound of my shooting. I ducked to reload the chamber pellet by pellet. Then I heard that both the shots and the screams had vanished and I looked up. The first thing



I looked for was Ricardo to my side, but he was gone. In fact, no one was behind their tree. Everyone, like on the first day we saw the mime, was huddled together over Jorgito, who had started to wail: 'I'm blind, I'm blind.'

I couldn't help but laugh. My friends turned to look at me angrily. Ricardo walked away from the group and sat on the ground, taking clumps of earth and breaking them into bits. He didn't dare look at anyone, but he couldn't leave either. Jorgito quit screaming and began to sob. I threw my weapon on the floor and ran to get his parents. They were going to put us in jail, I was sure of it. As I got closer to his house I began calling out, 'Missus Maria, missus Maria. We've shot your son and he's blind.' Instead of his mother, their housemaid emerged, and we ran together to the park.

Jorgito was taken to the hospital. The next day he came back with the good news that he was not blind. He returned with a black patch over his eye, a pair of boots, and a hat, saying that he was a pirate. We also received news that by order of the authorities all our weapons were to be confiscated. Jorgito's dad, who was a policeman, said so, and organized a demobilization day in the park. Each kid handed over his gun in exchange for a donut. When I was in line to hand in my green gun, I heard on the radio that was attached to his belt: 'Civilian dead from wound occasioned by firearm projectile on the fifth kilometre of the road to Sua-za. Over. Patrol the area. Over.' I decided it was best not to hand mine in.



'Why don't you sit comfortably? I don't know how you manage to sit that way,' I said as I approached Leandro. He had returned to the neighbourhood and just like before was leaning against the pink guayacán in the park, resting.

'How do you mean?' he said, lifting his gaze from a book called *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix*. Every time he tried to breathe his chest would fill and empty quickly and the air would escape his nose



with effort. I thought the sound of his breathing embarrassed him a little, and when he got his breath back, he would start breathing through his mouth.

‘With your back so straight,’ I said, and sat next to him, making sure that my bum was thrust forward, and my back slouched just enough to fit nicely between the roots and the trunk. ‘It’s much more comfortable this way.’

Leandro smiled, looked down at page fifty-three of his book, and then closed it.

‘Why were you gone all this time? We were talking with Ricardo about how you must not make a lot of money imitating people, but you can rest well in this park.’ Leandro began to cough. ‘Besides,’ I said, raising my voice so he could hear me, ‘you are one of the few people that can make our parents smile.’

‘Thanks,’ he said when he was done coughing. He opened his backpack, pushed aside the bag with medicines, and pulled out a magazine called Condorito in the Jungle. ‘I bought it downtown. What do you think?’

The cover surprised me. It was a kind of human bird that was swinging from a liana. I opened it and turned the pages rapidly. The colours were mostly green, red, and orange.

‘These are my favourite colours. Thank you very much,’ I said, excited, and hugged him.

Three more weeks went by like that. After school and the Trojan war, I would stay in the park and, like the Spartans, Leandro and I would honour the gods with ham, cheese, and sausages. We spoke little, because we preferred to read. But in the brief moments of chatter I told him that I wanted to be a soldier when I grew up, that my



favourite soldier was RoboCop, and that I didn't like school. He talked about things I hadn't heard of: Filip Bizot, Mo-lee-air, and birds—a whole bunch of birds. Parrots, hummingbirds, doves. He spoke so excitedly about the plumage of the doves, the rapid flight of the hummingbirds, or the hoarse song of the parrots, that his chest and his breathing got quicker.

During those three weeks Leandro became boring when it came to imitation. He had set up a wooden stool under the spotlight and preferred to stay still, as if frozen in time, and I didn't think that was fun. People didn't laugh at him anymore, but they gave him more coins, and he seemed to sweat less. The only fun moment was when he would start to cough and would take his hand to his mouth, because he reminded me of the statue games at school. Run, cough, and then—STATUES. But Leandro couldn't keep still. It was too hard for him.

In the third week, school was shut down again, and Mum forbade me from playing far from home. They announced another guerrilla attack on the radio, a new curfew, and an estimate of two weeks for power to return. Dad had to cancel his return trip because the roadblocks had increased, and it wasn't so easy bringing the cardboard boxes he bought in Bogotá that were marked 'DELICATE' written in red letters and had an 'X' in the box next to 'aguardiente'. So, at home evenings continued to smell like cigarettes and sound like stilettos, and the glasses were smudged with lipstick.

Zeus, Poseidon, Athena: they all watched the Trojan war. But I could not understand how Achilles, Menelaus, and Hector could fight and enjoy themselves while being watched. Our Trojan war had ended when we weren't allowed to play in the park and had to play close to home. Some adults would come out to sidewalks to watch us play, and we couldn't fight, wound, and die in the same way anymore.

I tried to kill time during the day with Prism and the other marbles on my bed. Sometimes I would get the Condorito book and start

**WHEN I GOT THERE, I
STARTED WHISTLING
OUR CODE AND
RICARDO CAME
TO THE WINDOW. I
SHOWED HIM THE
NYLON. HE LET THE
CURTAIN DROP AND
BACKED AWAY. A
SHORT WHILE LATER
HE CAME OUT OF
THE HOUSE ON HIS
TIP TOES, ALSO WITH
A ROLL OF NYLON
AND A JAR FULL OF
EARTHWORMS.**



reading it again. The orange dresses reminded me of the park with its marbles strewn on the ground, its dry leaves, its birds, its fire ants, and Leandro's odour of wet earth. But even a funny book can't entertain for an entire afternoon, and I had to play with whatever I found in my room—swords, the pellet gun, spinning tops, and a collection of little plastic soldiers that I would order in two groups.

Finally Sunday arrived with a wind that ran in the streets shaking the zinc roofing. For me that was the arrival of August, of kites, and of fishing. I took the marbles out of my pouch and in their place packed a bale of nylon and a fishing hook. I also packed a yoghurt and Prism. I snuck out of the house. The road to Ricardo's house was boring. I had been up it a hundred times. I had to get to the top of the hill on my bike and my legs ached, but the way back was fantastic because I would fling myself down without brakes and from that height I could see the muddy colour of the Hacha River and the roof of the prison and imagine that there were helicopters flying above, armed soldiers, and sharpshooters.

When I got there, I started whistling our code and Ricardo came to the window. I showed him the nylon. He let the curtain drop and backed away. A short while later he came out of the house on his tip toes, also with a roll of nylon and a jar full of earthworms.

'Where did you get those?'

'From my patio. Yesterday I was so bored that I began to poke around just like the chickens, and I found several of these,' he said, handing me the jar.

The worms were alive and made excellent bait. I gave back the jar and told him I had read Condorito that morning.

'Condorito my ass. I'm not the least bit interested in reading that talking bird.' I knew that when Ricky cursed it was because his aunt had knocked him up again, so I let it slide.



‘Mum forbade me to go out, but I managed to escape without any trouble,’ I said, as Ricardo raised the barbed wire for me to pass.

The trees were tall, knotted, and dense. You couldn’t see to your side or ahead beyond a meter or two. Last year, I had gone down the same path with Ricardo, so I felt confident and paid more attention to the noise of the monkeys and the crickets in the distance. It was hot and my skin was sticky. The mosquitoes were getting to me and had already left two welts on my arm and hand. A flock of parrots flew overhead.

‘Hey Ricky, did you know that they kill hummingbirds to decorate hats?’

‘What are hummingbirds?’

‘Hummingbirds, stupid. Those tiny, colourful birds that you see sometimes in the park.’

‘And how do you decorate a hat with a bird? You tie it on by its legs or what?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t really ask Leandro, but there must be a lot of them around here.’ I spied two marmosets moving across the canopy in a hurry. They squawked so loud that Ricardo froze for a moment, looked around, and then continued along the path.

‘Since you’ve been hanging out with Leandro, you talk about nonsense, Nico. I don’t know how you can believe a mime. Everything in the jungle looks either green or brown to me. I don’t think those birds are here.’

As soon as he said that, Ricardo stopped. I couldn’t see what was in front of him, so I scurried around him and looked ahead. The river was about five meters wide and the water passed the rocks lazily. Next to the river were two lads dressed as guerrilla fighters. One



**NEXT TO THE
RIVER WERE TWO
LADS DRESSED
AS GUERRILLA
FIGHTERS. ONE
OF THEM WAS
SMOKING WHILE
HE PUT HIS HAND
IN THE WATER.
THE OTHER WAS
HOLDING A RIFLE.**



of them was smoking while he put his hand in the water. The other was holding a rifle.

The one that was smoking said something that I couldn't make out because the monkeys were still making a ruckus. The hair of his beard and moustache didn't let me see his teeth. His hand seemed so big that the water made waves around as if it were a rock.



I TRIED TO SLEEP THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON AND DECIDED THAT I WOULD RUN AWAY AT NIGHT TO TELL HIM EVERYTHING.

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‘Yes. But the commander wants to see the terrain first,’ shouted the man who was standing.

‘What should we do, Ricky?’ I asked in whisper so weak that my voice was lost in the sound of the water.

Ricardo’s gaze was fixed on the two men’s guns. On the bank of the river were two stone slabs covered in a slippery moss. The water lapped against a few sleepy logs that had run up against the bank. And under the sun’s reflection I could see the movements of a few catfish swimming near the surface. Before we could run, one of them saw us and turned his rifle on us.

They spoke to each other. They’re only here to fish. The earthworms. Please. Rat us out. What the hell, for Christ’s sake. They’re just kids, fucking hell. The attack. Free our comrades. The prison. While only the murmur a word here and there reached us, I gazed at the muddy, wet ground where a column of ants was transporting a dead beetle. One of the men yelled something we couldn’t make out and signalled to us with his hand and eyebrows for us to get out of there.



We both ran. As we ascended, we left the trees behind and a few rays of sun managed to make their way through the spaces between the leaves. I was out of air and I fell on the mud. I got up and kept on running with bloodied knees and with two wet leaves stuck to the palm of my hand. We stopped to catch our breaths. We looked back towards the path, but we only saw the deformed trunks of trees. A dead hummingbird, a dead beetle—everything in the jungle looked dead. Ricardo looked at me. Then, he took his index finger to his mouth and whispered, ‘Let’s not tell anyone.’ I nodded and we started running again. The leaves crackled behind me. I sensed that someone was following us, and although my legs ached, we crossed the fence in one leap, without saying goodbye. Ricardo went into his house and I continued towards mine.



It’s true that Jorgito looked like a pirate with his patch and his boots. With Moni too, it was true that she was the best in our class. But no one in our neighbourhood had lived through something like that—having a gun pointed at you, a real gun—and come out alive. The proof was my knees, my scrape. Two men that had probably been on television. The ones responsible for taking Moni’s dad and disappearing him. But next to the river they looked more like two lads from school than RoboCop soldiers.

Mum started pounding on the door to my room. Then she said lunch was served. I left Condorito on my bed and went out. Mum had gathered her hair into a bun and was wearing a white dress with a flower print. While she served the lentils with rice and beef, I saw that on her dress, next to one of the camellias on her back, there was a hummingbird with its beak inside the flower.

‘What happened to your knees, Nico?’

‘I fell off my bicycle.’

‘Are you alright?’ She brought the back of her hand to my forehead.

‘You don’t have a fever, but you look dreadful.’



‘When does Dad get back?’

‘I haven’t been able to speak to him. My phone is out of battery and at the store they saw they haven’t got any signal.’ She sat down at the table.

‘He’s never here.’

‘Please, don’t start. He works so that we are taken care of.’

‘And are we taken care of?’ Mum dropped her fork onto her plate and glared at me.

‘We are.’ She picked up her fork. ‘Are you sure you’re alright?’

‘I’m a little bored of being cooped up, that’s all.’

Mum had already picked up the mess from last night and the house smelled of moss. When Dad was home, you couldn’t have lunch in silence, since he always had the radio or the telly on. There were going on about attacks, guerrillas, thieves, and crimes. But every time I asked about it, Mum would say it was nothing but lies. ‘They want to scare us,’ she would insist.

‘Can we turn off the radio?’ I said. Mum knit her brow and then switched it off.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘They’re always dumping on the guerrilla.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘aren’t you going to eat any more?’

‘I’m not that hungry.’

‘Look, Nico. Try to play with your soldiers or something. But you can’t go sour over nothing. You have to be happy in life, no matter

what happens. It's the best way to win the war against everything: boredom, fear, horror—anything you like.'

She drank, but she could recognize when I was worried or about to get sick, and somehow, she always knew how to say a sentence or two that would leave me calm and dumb. We finished eating in silence and I went back to my room.

The soldiers were still ordered on the night table. The plastic soldiers didn't look like the guerrillas I had seen hours before. They were made out of green plastic and had round helmets around their heads, hiding a face that could've belonged to a dad for all I knew. But the two that we had seen didn't have anything on their heads, and their faces were like those of the boys at school, only with beards and moustaches.

I wanted to talk, but Ricardo and I had sworn each other to silence. Which of my friends had had a gun pointed at them? None of them. I was sure that not even my parents had. How many of my friends had escaped from a situation like that? The answer was the same: none of them. I had to tell someone. Mum wasn't an option because she'd get on my case for sneaking out. Dad wouldn't be home for a long time. Moni would get scared and cry about her dad. So, the only option left was Leandro—he would understand my adventure. I tried to sleep the rest of the afternoon and decided that I would run away at night to tell him everything.

■

I woke up at ten. Mum always left a candelabrum on the nightstand. I got up and looked out the window: full moon. I opened the night table drawer and looked at one of my fallen teeth, the Iliad that my grandfather left me after dying of cancer, a top, a yo-yo, and my pellet gun with the painted backside. The guerrilla fighters' guns weren't green. On the white wall of the closet leaned a guama with



brown splotches, the one that had been Jorgito's sword, dashed against the tree. It let off a sugary odour. I took the gun from the drawer, took the reclining guama, walked to the kitchen, and dumped both of them into the trash.

When I got back to my room, I looked at the soldiers again. The little plastic soldiers died all the time. I would fling them in my play when a tank shot at them, a bullet hit them, or they received a punch. Would the guerrillas die too? Were all the soldiers in that war man ants without antennas? Had they played Troy or Pellet Gun games? Had they ever played?

The living room clock rang eleven times. Mum usually kept the keys in the nightstand, so I went in to look for them. Her room was full of shadows from the light that leaked in from the street. On the nightstand was a Bible, an ashtray, and the keys. I took the keys and left in a hurry. I opened the fridge and the smell of rotten milk went up my nose. I packed the last peach yoghurt and two apples and left. There were no stars up above, and although usually a full moon night was clear, tonight the light was weak. I took the white bicycle, put my things in the basket, and started peddling towards the park.

It seemed as if the people that lived in the houses had gone to a party on the other side of town, because the doors were shut and the curtains were rigid. The windows of the cars parked on the streets were fogged up and the August wind had disappeared.

While I listened to the sound of the chain and my pedalling, I thought of asking Leandro which bird sang during the night, which bird would open its beak, perched on a branch, and make a noise loud enough to wake the rest of the birds sleeping at its side. Which one would be there for boys on their bikes when they ran away from home? Suddenly, in the distance there rang out a thunder so loud that I braked hard. The windows shudders, the alarms of the cars went off, and the dogs started barking. Thunder, I thought, and kept on going.



**IT WAS HOT. I WOULD
HAVE LIKED TO
GET UP FROM THE
GROUND AND SHOUT,
'FOR HONOUR AND
COUNTRY,' AND
DISAPPEAR FROM
ALL THAT, ALL THAT
NOISE, ALL THAT
PLAY, ALL THAT WAR.**



I would have liked to hear the racket of the sound system at home, the knock of the bottle on the table, or Mum's humming. I left behind the wailing of the cars and began to feel Moni's unpaved street through the handlebar. Moni's house was the first on the block. From it you could see the whole park. I thought the sound of the bicycle over the stones would wake up the entire neighbourhood. Boom! Again. Then shots in the distance and an alarm that I had never heard before, but that sounded louder than the rest.

I ditched my bicycle on the street and ran to Moni's house. I pounded on the door, but no one opened up, so I laid down behind the



THE SOUND OF BULLETS PERSISTED. THE GUERRILLA TOOK A RADIO FROM HIS PANTS.

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sidewalk balustrade and kept still. The trees shook and from the canopy emerged parrots, tanagers, hummingbirds, and doves, all fleeing the park. Was Leandro fleeing too? My arms and legs trembled as if something behind me was shaking them. The entire night seemed to be a storm of shots and bomb falls.

I dragged myself to Moni's door and knocked again. No one opened. I thought of running to the park and hiding with Leandro, but when I finally made up my mind to, I saw him with a cigarette between his lips, crouching behind the trunk of a mango tree.

I knocked again. I peered between the columns of the balustrade again and on one side of the street, where I had heard the first thunder on my bicycle, I saw a group of eight armed guerrilla fighters jogging down the street. I wanted to start screaming at Moni's door, but the men were already close, and I couldn't get any words through my throat.

As they passed me, I saw that their boots were mud stained. Most of them were young, armed with big black guns that shone under the metallic light of the moon. Their uniforms were the same colours as Prism. They had a radio from which came a hoarse, thick voice,



similar to the one from the radio Jorgito's Dad kept, and I couldn't make out what it said. One of the last men shot a blast into the air. My ears rattled. Those were not guamas or pellet guns—they were weapons. And those were real soldiers.

I turned my head and saw Leandro. He saw me too. He took a draw and I could tell, because the tip of the cigarette glowed. I thought I saw his legs buckle, and if he hadn't had his back to the tree, he would have fallen to the ground. He sat on the cement park bench. I wanted to yell to him to hide, to do something to save his life, but it was too late.

I closed my eyes. I heard the stomping of boots on stones, the twinkling of weapons and metal, the echo of shots that rang out in the distance, and the wind that shook the trees. It was hot. I would have liked to get up from the ground and shout, 'For honour and country,' and disappear from all that, all that noise, all that play, all that war.

My teeth chattered and I was squeezing my hands so hard they fell asleep. When I opened my eyes, I saw that one of the men was pointing his gun at Leandro. The man with the weapon yelled something I couldn't make out. Something grabbed me by my shirt, from behind.

'It's me, shhh.' It was Mrs Cielo, Moni's mother. She threw me in the house with a shove and closed the door. 'Don't cry, Nico. Everything is going to be alright.'

She was armed. She had a pistol in her hands and I could see that they were shaking. Moni was not in the room. I ran to the window and opened the curtain a little. For an instant, I remembered Ricky doing the same thing that morning. Leandro had gotten up from the concrete bench and was now standing with one arm extended and the other with his forefinger curled as if around a trigger. The



ONE OF THE GUERRILLAS SMILED AND SAID SOMETHING TO THE OTHER.

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guerrilla fighter still had him in his sights, and they both looked like statues pointing at each other.

The sound of bullets persisted. The guerrilla took a radio from his pants. Leandro too took a hand to his thigh and pretended to take a device to his ear. It was the best imitation I'd ever seen him do—he had achieved every detail, the same creases in the face, the same gruff movement of the arms, the same shine in the eyes. One of the guerrillas smiled and said something to the other.

'What the hell is that guy doing?' Mrs Cielo asked. Then she added, 'Shit.'

One of the guerrilla fighters smiled at Leandro's imitation. The one that was pointing at him raised his rifle and again said something to the other men. Then I saw Leandro break into a jog. My white bicycle was on the street. The moon's face was also painted white. The moon left that night.



Leandro left that night too, like the first man out in a pellet war, or a Trojan war. He took off down the street, and I was left glued to the window pane, waiting for the noise of the bullets to leave. For him to return. But although the noise stopped, I didn't see Leandro again. Moni's mother took me to her daughter's room until it was dawn and people began, little by little, to take to the streets to discuss what had happened.

Jorgito's father was the first to come out with a notebook in hand. He knocked on each door and asked if everyone was alright. 'Did they take anyone?' 'No, nobody.' 'Thank you, ma'am.' 'You're welcome.' Then he would continue, radio on, emitting more worried voices spouting larger figures of dead civilians. Mum hadn't stopped clinging to me since we were reunited at Mrs Cielo's. 'From now on you'll be home by eight,' she said. 'Okay,' I said. Before everyone went back inside, I picked up my bicycle and walked to the park. The pink guayacán tree was all alone.

Three weeks have gone by since then. The ants finished their repairs on the guayacán. On its branches, two doves built a nest. The red, yellow, and green of the stoplight goes on, but people don't smile like before. At first, I thought it was because of Leandro's absence, but Mum is right—the best way to beat everything is with happiness, and here in Florencia it seems as if we're all losing. We have gone back to the marbles because war bored us.

I think that if I had said something about what I saw that morning with Ricardo down by the river, if I had broken my vow of silence, Leandro might still be under the stoplight. But I never heard from Leandro again. School started back up. I try to sit in my chair with my back straight now, and in science class I asked about a bird that sings at night and the teacher said that there was one called atajacaminos, which means short cut. Dad came back home. 'I won't be leaving again,' he told me. A little while ago they said on television that Philippe Bizot would have a show in Bogotá. I already convinced Dad to take me. Maybe I'll find Leandro there.

THE GIFT



Katherine Cano **Editor**

When I thought I was finishing a process of professionalization without further ado, I suddenly came across this open call that pointed out an essential but still untraveled path: that of editing. The open appointment that I kept with authors already scattered in space although not in time became a real personal interaction, encounters in cities I hadn't been to, with people whose profession it is to write and edit. I inhabited new places and became a creative "tourist". The process of the Ellipsis program brought me not only to participate in events such as the Hay Festival and FILBo—which I referred to as medium-term projects—but also to discover the work of an editor, which hides itself behind carefully constructed and thought-out stories. Reading a colleague's work and thinking about them in their text was a challenge to the commonplace that is the passive reception of information; it led me to question my own writing. Ellipsis was a ship that took me to learn, in Cartagena and Bogotá, from British writers and experienced editors, as well as to enjoy the most lively of landscapes—my colleagues.

My gaze has changed: I want to zealously review what I write and read to my friends and colleagues. It has been a great step forward to be able to study more closely what we produce here and to think of ourselves as a country that is not only a receiver of ideas and

knowledge, but also a producer of them. I have learned to trust what is ours and the possibility that, through interactions like the one we had with the British Council, people will come to see in Colombia a vigorous display of multiculturalism. I hope that this process does not end here, but that instead relationships are maintained and that our friends at the British Council continue to believe in our most cherished value: pluralism.

Zulma Rincón

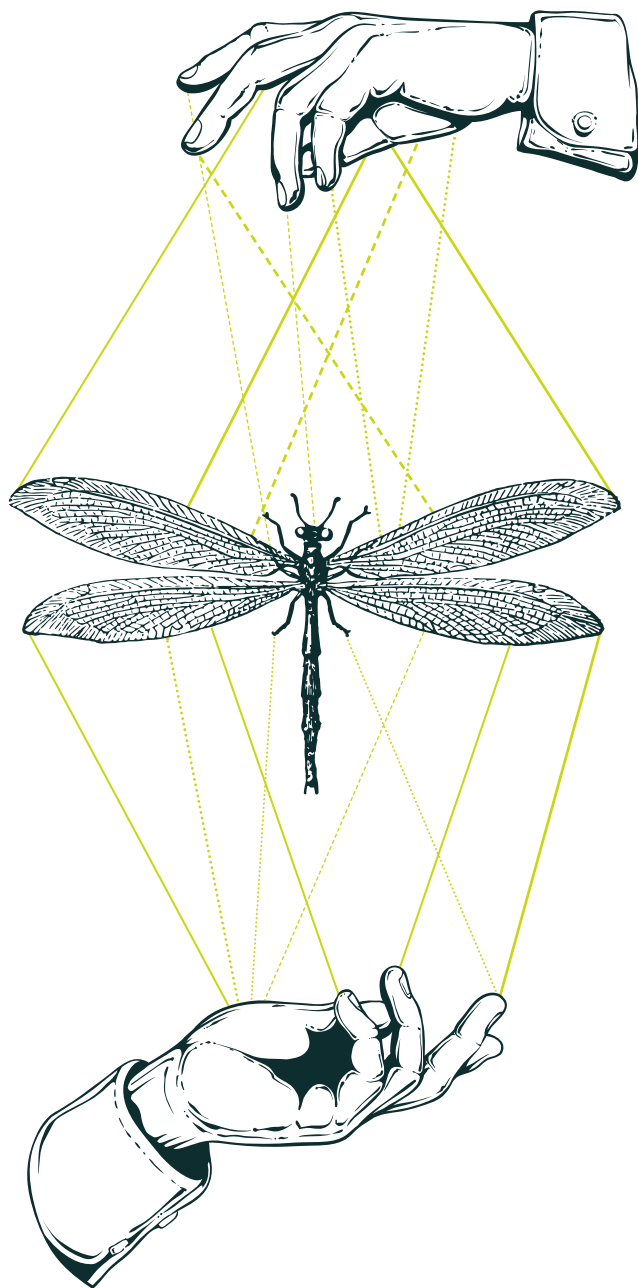
Writer

This process has been a metamorphosis and being a butterfly has not been easy. As a caterpillar I came and went, eating from this or that book without worries; nobody asked pretty things or charming movements of me. I must thank all my teachers (Oscar, Paco, Juliana, María Paz, Ricardo), who in one way or another accompanied me on the path of writing, and Ellipsis for allowing me to meet such great human beings. Thanks to them I know that the efforts are worthwhile: the late nights, the research, the sketches, the words, the cross-outs, the readings. All this has made me different, and it has strengthened me.

Being at the Hay Festival and FILBo has not only been a dream come true, but an opportunity to learn from Kim, Luna, Madeleine, Dylan, David, Sarah, Carolina, Philippe and Alexandra that writing is a space in which to expose yourself and give the best of yourself with humility and joy. I thank my fellow writers and editors for this mime that we build little by little. I especially thank Katherine for the love with which she wrote her corrections. And, of course, thanks to my supreme guides, Alejandra and Marta, who with care and patience polished wing by wing while they waited for the butterfly to fly. Being a butterfly has never been easy, I repeat, while I weave together words that buzz around in my head wanting to escape, finding paths that are now possible and are built letter by letter.

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THE GIFT



Zulma Rocío
Rincón Díaz



Katherine Cano



What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof

Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can.

Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

When Lena sees the sunlight come in through the curtains, she turns over and buries her head in her pillow. She moves her feet to the cold part of the bed, where Leandro used to sleep, and tries to escape lethargy. Her head squishes the pillow until it is almost gone, as if this morning her head weighed more. The night had been long; the street dog fights had wounded a dam that had gone on to wail all night. Now the dogs were barking outside, as if to call her. Lena had had a bad night: dreams of death, of ghosts, spun in her head. She woke up every so often in the early morning to plan what she would do, how she would dress. What would happen that day. What surprises her friends would bring. What would happen with Leandro. She thought of the Leandro she knew and tried to picture the Leandro she would see. Was it possible to start over?

She moves her feet from that side of the bed. She had taken down the pictures of him, given his clothes away, thrown away the masks that decorated the walls, but had never been able to resolve the absence on the other side of the bed. Even if she changed the mattress the emptiness wouldn't leave. It was a space she could not make tangible in order to toss out the window.

The first time she had seen him was at a theatre with a troupe of actors. Today too she would see him at the theatre. Would he be alone? Would he be willing to continue with a life alongside her as if nothing had happened? He must have an excellent explanation! Maybe Sandra and Laura had been right. She shouldn't be doing this. It's been long enough time to go without hearing from him. Thoughts twine and untwine on the blank ceiling with each blink. Her eyes roam the room, looking for answers in the tiny cracks, in the stain on the



ceiling, in the pair of Monet reproductions, in the small library full of books that one day she would read. If objects spoke, it's not like they have anything to say. One day Leandro was there and the next he wasn't. That was that.

It's cold. Fog shrouds Bogotá, making her look more grey than usual. Lena stretches her arms and legs, tightens her whole body, yawns, moves a little under the covers, enjoys the feeling of her nakedness against the cloth. She decides at last to get up. She turns for gravity to help her from the bed. She plays music. That song reminds her: One December 20, three years ago, she became Leandro's girlfriend. They had met in a theatre called La Candelaria. There was a theatre festival and Lena and her friends had gone to see a play. As psychology students, they were in the habit of going to the theatre as a way of studying human behaviour without engaging therapy. They sat across from Leandro and his group of actors, and it was the first time they exchanged smiles. She thought she knew him, and he responded with a nod in her direction. When the play was over, she didn't clap or rise to honour the performers. She was left confused and disappointed because she didn't discover what ended up happening to the main character, she couldn't understand the totality of the play, and this frustrated her. She liked to understand things; if she couldn't, they seemed futile. As a child she had always asked the whys of everything and was not satisfied until she obtained an answer. That's why she had decided on psychology. Upon confirming that everything had an explanation, she'd never stopped seeking it.

Leandro and his acting group gathered to talk in one of the theatre's cafés. They were in the habit of holding forums on the plays they saw. The tables in the café were full, but they found some chairs near the table where Lena and her friends were discussing the play.

'Not everything has to have a why. Don't fixate on that. Art doesn't always have an explanation,' Sandra was saying to Lena to try to get



SHE ATE IT ALL UP, NOT ONLY DINNER, BUT LEANDRO'S WORDS, WHICH ARRIVED LIKE AN ENTRÉE TO A MAIN DISH.

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her to drop it. Lena saw Leandro approach the table and assured herself that she didn't know him and that she had smiled to him by mistake. The light had played a trick on her.

'Do you mind if we sit here?'

'Sure, go right ahead,' Lena said, looking into Leandro's eyes.

'What did you think of the play?' Leandro asked as they all took their seats.

Sandra and Laura looked at each other and shook their head. Lean, on the other hand, entered the conversation convinced that she could find answers.

'Frankly, I didn't understand the end. It's unexpected and doesn't connect to the rest of the play.'



Lena felt her friends' eyes piercing her and heard murmurs. She knew what awaited her.

'You like him!' Laura whispered into Lena's ear when she saw that she didn't stop looking at Leandro as she held forth.

'No!' she whispered back, uncomfortable.

Her friends went back to their murmurs.

'Shhh,' Lena said, tired of their whispering.

After a chat, Leandro invited them to dinner. Lena accepted gladly, but Laura and Sandra preferred to go home. Over dinner, she was fascinated by his knowledge of theatre and his hunger for learning. But besides stage plays, they discussed photography, music, and psychology. She ate it all up, not only dinner, but Leandro's words, which arrived like an entrée to a main dish. After eating, they exchanged numbers and promised to speak again. Thoughts won't let her move. For every action there is a moment of stillness that stretches out as long as the memory. She can't stop thinking about her attitude or her reaction when she sees Leandro, in the reasons for his disappearance and her abandonment, in the possible excuses. She must move a little more quickly. Her friends are expecting her early for a walk at the mall. Maybe they'll buy her something and then they'll get lunch together. Despite their differences, they were her only friends. They had met when they were psychology freshmen and had been inseparable ever since. She felt loved, and the time spent together on assignments had brought them closer. Their differences meant they always had something to talk about. At the end of the day they would go to see Philippe Bizot—Lena's choice. Neither Laura nor Sandra had heard of this Bizot, but they knew it was important to her.

Stopping time with a hot bath. Leaving the shower wrapped in a towel with soaking wet hair. Choosing the best undergarments and

the red dress he had given her when they were sweethearts. It had been a little over a year since she'd worn it. As she puts it on, it feels a little loose, and she realizes that she is thinner, but in the mirror she confirms that it still fits her well. Looking for a light coat. Having eggs, café latte, and bread for breakfast—their favourite morning fare since they moved in together. Looking in the mirror. Applying enough makeup to hide the bags under her eyes until evening. Lena cannot believe that Leandro has accepted the invitation after a long year of silence, distance, and abandonment.

Yesterday she printed the tickets bought almost a month ago and prepared a rice-with-the-kitchen-sink for lunch, making sure there would be enough in the event that Leandro stayed in Bogotá. She fixes her hair, orders the table and room, and goes out. Walking towards the TransMilenio, she feels a bit like an idiot and her friends works return to her: 'Leave him be,' 'He won't come back.' But while her head does it's best to forget him, her body follows instructions and prepares for his arrival.

The TransMilenio is as overcrowded as her head. When at last she manages to take a seat, she checks her phone. She thinks of the communication she had with Leandro. She never went without his messages and now she has no way to communicate. She's not sure whether she's been clear in her invitation email, so she sends off from her home to confirm the place and time of the meet. She lets her friends know that she is on her way and checks the birthday congratulations from friends and family. She remembers Leandro's last message: 'I love you.'

The first days after Leandro left, Lena was desperate. When she got home, he was gone. It was normal for him to travel for work at times, but it wasn't normal for him to go without saying. She opened the closets and looked at what was missing: she noted the empty spaces for pants and shirts. She tried to remember some scheduled trip, checked her messages and wrote him right away, but no



LENA CANNOT BELIEVE THAT LEANDRO HAS ACCEPTED THE INVITATION AFTER A LONG YEAR OF SILENCE, DISTANCE, AND ABANDONMENT.

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answer came. She called him hundreds of times, but it was always the same—voice mail. She went to the theatre in search of answers. It was cold, but her body felt warm. She wasn't sure whether it was out of worry or rage or the pace of her walking. It was a Saturday, around the day of Epiphany. She knocked loudly on the door to the theatre, but no one opened. Leandro was usually working there regardless of the time of year, and if there was a show, someone would be in charge of the theatre. Something serious was wrong. Monday was a holiday and she would have to wait until Tuesday to hear from him, so she went to Leandro's family house, and although it was a difficult decision to make since neither of them was close



to his family, it was her last remaining option. She got no answer there either. She thought they might be out for the holiday. Maybe he went with them? she thought. That's impossible. He would have said something. She called their closest friends and received the same response from each. She didn't cease searching for him in every crevasse of her memory. She even sought him among the friends they no longer spoke to, and their response was the same. That weekend she cried out of anger, fear, and a profound sadness that settled in her throat. She left him messages of every variety: voice messages, WhatsApp messages, Facebook messages. If Leandro had been on more social networks, she would have written to him on them. She decided to write him an email in which she blended insults with supplications, in which she rebuked him, scolded him, and then asked for an explanation. Her hands moved rapidly and her eyes moistened with every curse she wrote. Angri-ly she wiped away the tears that got in the way of the screen. She couldn't believe he had taken his things and left without saying a word. He had taken almost everything. He never liked having too many belongings. The empty space felt like a hole in her stomach that made her eat out of anxiety. With every advancing hour, the fear that something had happened to him decreased, and her hate at having been abandoned grew.

On Tuesday, she went back to the theatre to confirm what she imagined. Andrés, an actor and Leandro's right-hand man, welcomed her.

'Come in and have a coffee. I just got in and found this letter from Leandro. I didn't know he had left, I'm so sorry. He left you this, too,' he said, and handed her a little red box.

Andrés's words hit Lena in the head like an avalanche of dense mud. After a deep sigh, she opened the box. The letter said that he left Andrés in charge of everything. He had trained him for seven years to be able to handle the troupe without any trouble and he thought he had enough experience to do so.

'He left me a copy of all the theatre's keys. He doesn't say where he's going or when he'll come back. He says not to look for him.' There was a long silence between Andrés and Lena.

'It's a dragonfly,' said Lena finally, with her eyes full of tears, showing Andrés the pin that was in the box.

Lena barely touched the coffee. She got up from the table, hugged Andrés, and left the theatre very slowly. Her thoughts raced faster than the wind outside. The weather was lazy and empty, or at least that's how it felt to her. She didn't know what to think. 'Is this goodbye for good? A so long? Is he alright? Where might he have gone to?' She asked herself these questions as she walked away from Icarus Theatre. La Candelaria began to take on new shapes. Memories arrived in her mind like waterfalls that did not cease. It had been only two years, but it felt like much more. At that moment she wished to erase the memories of Leandro, perhaps out of hate, perhaps out of confusion. What happened? Where are you? She repeated these questions once and again without receiving any response other than the sound of his voicemail: Please leave your message after the tone. She was torn, not knowing where to go or what to do. She wanted to go to each place they'd been to together in the hope of finding him sitting down with a coffee, cigarette in hand, regarding the horizon, or walking along one of his usual streets. He says not to look for him. Andrés's words echoed in her head. She wasn't about to lose hope of seeing him again. She had decided to write every day until he responded.

Now her routine was to check her mail for a response. The letters she wrote were becoming a diary of emotions that changed with every thought. She wrote that she had thrown his things away. She asked for explanation. Then she apologized for having given away his favourite artwork. Then she cursed Leandro. Some of the insults were dry and limp, others full of rage and jealousy. How was his silence even possible? Why didn't he say anything before leaving? How

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REMIND HER.**



could he be so stubborn and selfish? These questions assaulted her all the time and that she couldn't help but ask in her emails. After the initial anxiety, rage and obliged her to stop eating. She couldn't stop crying over Leandro's absence. Her eyes were liable to water at any moment—sometimes at night, sometimes in the day. Any object at home, a conversation, a reading, a song, a street, a smell, a word could remind her. After two weeks, she couldn't bear the physical and mental confinement any longer. She dressed up as best as she could, put on high heels and a dress, applied makeup, doused herself in perfume, and went out to the movies with her girlfriends. That day she decided two things: to begin throwing out everything that made her sad, to cleanse the house of his presence, and to stop writing to him every day—she couldn't be sure if he was reading her emails. And she understood quite well that a relationship involved two people and that she had to hold on to her dignity. Despite how much she loved him, she couldn't put her life on hold for someone that was no longer around. That night she applied herself to writing the last email. After a month, she realized that writing was much more important to her than to Leandro. And almost once a month, she would write something sprinkled with hate, anger, and even humour, in order to process the emotional abyss she held within.

The TransMilenio trip is so slow that it seems to stretch like warm cheese that refuses to break even when bitten. She gets off and walks a little until she reaches Iserra 100. Sandra and Laura are at the door. Two hugs, two kisses, and two gift cards straight into her hand: Laura's for clothes and Sandra's for food. Lena was sure that she would have bought what they would have liked to get if they were the birthday girls. But Lena expects the best gift that evening.

'Birthdays look good on you. Leandro doesn't deserve it,' says Laura.

'We invited Andrés to lunch with us,' Sandra says. 'We hope you don't mind.'



‘You ruined everything. It was a surprise,’ Laura says to her friend.

‘Lena doesn’t like surprises. It’s better this way. Right?’

‘Andrés is a friend, it’s alright. Besides, he’s coming to the play as well. It’s not a problem. I imagine he’ll want to see Leandro as well.’

‘But, do you really think he’ll come?’ Sandra dares to ask. Laura raises an eyebrow and widens her eyes in an attempt to silence her. ‘We have to be realistic. He’s been gone for a year and now he’s supposed to just show up? I don’t think so,’ she says, before Laura drags her towards the shopping mall.

Once inside, Lena tries to enjoy herself with her friends and forget about the anxiety that grips her stomach.

When Lena got off work early, she would walk and think. She was tormented by the thought that Leandro’s reasons were stronger than all the love he professed towards her. She tried to understand it. She walked confused, talking to herself with her earbuds one—the only way to not look crazy while she reprimanded an imaginary Leandro. From email by email, she held on to hope. She gathered memories and tried to write in order to escape from the bewilderment she felt. No matter how often her friends told her to forget him, something always prevented her. Maybe it was her stubbornness or her capriciousness, or the fact that she didn’t accept things without a reasonable explanation. Among boxes she found packets of his cigarettes, which she smoked little by little to try to consume his memory, but his essence only stuck to her clothes, her flesh. It would have been easier if they had said goodbye. But her only goodbye had been in the form of a dragonfly.



THE NOISE, THE CHAOS, AND THE RADIO WAKE LEANDRO. HIS FEARS AND THOUGHTS BLEND WITH THE COMMOTION OUTSIDE AND HE TRIES TO OPEN HIS EYES.

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The bustle and honk of vehicles makes it just another day in Neiva. The noise, the chaos, and the radio wake Leandro. His fears and thoughts blend with the commotion outside and he tries to open his eyes. He feels pulverized. His body weighs on him. As soon as he wakes, a wave of coughs struggles out of his body. He has set the alarm for an early hour in order to travel to Bogotá. 'Neiva, December 20, average temperate 23 to 32 degrees Celsius, mostly sunny. And in other news, the mayor elect finds himself embroiled in....' He switches off the radio. The headache is unbearable. He does everything he can to sit up in bed to assuage a coughing episode that sounds every time more like retching, and tries to gulp the air so as not to suffocate. He doesn't want to stay in bed, but his strength



EVERY STEP IN HIS TINY ROOM SENDS PAIN THROUGH HIS BODY.

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is almost gone. His heaving exhausts him. Although the bed calls to him, he gets up in order to make it in time to speak to Lena before the play. After a yearlong absence, he must apologize for having been so clumsy and leaving her without explanation. But his body will say much more than his words. Upon seeing his wasted, transparent skin, the bags under his eyes, and his bony body, Lena will guess the reason he fled.

He turns the fan on at its lowest setting in order to breathe a little air, but the coughing attack forces him to turn it back off. Every step in his tiny room sends pain through his body. He readies the clothes he will wear. He bathes quickly and feels the impact of the warm air as he exits the shower.

As he changes, he packs his last things. He feels slower every day and that makes him angry. He thinks he shouldn't have gotten out of bed that day, but he is so looking forward to seeing the love of his life and Philippe Bizot, to see him perform before he dies. So many experiences along his journey have taught him that it is worthwhile to say goodbye. He has learnt a lot this year. He has finally stopped



running, from himself, from others, and especially from death. He has started saying goodbye, and he must bid farewell to the theatre as well. It's not that Leandro isn't afraid—he doesn't want to be seen in this state. A year of distance has registered like ten on his skin. Lena may not recognize his sunken eyes, wasted skin, clumsy steps, and personality that is every day more sparse. But the things he left hanging call to him. The opportunity has arisen to address them.

He wants to do a few things for the last time. He wants to wake next to Lena and see her clear, sunflower eyes with dark deep lines. He wants to embrace his sister and his parents despite the distance. He fantasizes about doing one last play, if time allows. He is grateful that the theatre gave him the chance to experience so many things through the characters he has portrayed. Every role has been an opportunity to savour the world from a different perspective.

What the devil is death? He thinks: Love is a cliché full of small deaths. Like *la petite mort*, for the French, which takes place immediately after an orgasm, an instant during which consciousness is lost and transcendence achieved. The death of a child expected by the love of your life, the death of a good moment spent together, the death of a bad moment after a reconciliation. Some deaths are less traumatic than others: the death of a feeling, the withering of a flower, the rotting of a tree. There are moments of rebirth, like when a tsunami sweeps everything in a place away so that life may spring forth there again. The irony is that we don't pay attention to that part that is alive, only to what dies, without considering that death is not the end. It is killing the twelve-year-old boy so that the thirteen-year-old may come into being.

He wants to shout from the rooftops that he is dying of cancer, as if this might help him feel less pain and die in peace. Beyond death, there is a vacuum that he needs to fill urgently. He doesn't care about dying anymore. He has overcome that panic. Now he can begin facing what remains of life, if there is still something left of it.



Lena had seemed more and more distant and uninterested in her emails. He was very much surprised by last month's invitation and wound up accepting it. He thinks about his life while he clumsily puts on his socks. His movements have become heavy. Every so often he looks at a single point ahead of him and keeps still. If someone were to see him, they'd think he looked more mad than ill. He had found out about the cancer a year ago, end of December. They had travelled from Bogotá to Tunja to spend Christmas with Lena's family, and Leandro went back home the next evening. He would have liked to stay longer, but he felt an unbearable pain that turned out to be stronger than the desire to feel Lena's naked body at his side. He didn't want to worry her. He never liked being seen as sick. He thought of himself as someone unbreakable, even though he wasn't. He made up a strong case of the flu, and said that Tunja, up in the mountains, wouldn't help him recover. Lena asked if she should go with him. He said no, for her to stay with her family, and she knew that his stubbornness wouldn't allow him to change his mind.

Leandro left, and although he rarely went to see doctors, the next morning he went to the emergency room. He felt worse and worse, but didn't want to tell anyone. He hated the spectacle of condolences. When the doctor saw him, he hospitalized him immediately and ran every kind of test. He was diagnosed with lung cancer on December 28, the Day of the Holy Innocents. The joke was in poor taste, sick, but the doctor didn't end up saying *pásala por inocente*.

'It is a very strange case. You must stop smoking immediately. The cancer is quite advanced. Chemotherapy may help you, but right now you don't have a lot of life left,' the doctor said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He didn't wish to hear any more, and asked to be let out as soon as possible. The doctor told him that he had to stay a few days longer until his condition was stable. The thoughts and nostalgia of that day haunted him. He was frightened of having to go back to Bogotá and face a doctor again. At the same time, he thought no one could force him or decide for him how he would



spend him last days of life. Maybe Lena would understand. He felt clumsy. He thought it might have been better to stay and pay attention to the doctor, going to see the oncologist, getting chemo and radiotherapy.

Leandro finishes dressing, goes out to the patio, and lights a cigarette. With every draw, his nicotine anxiety increases. Perhaps this is his last cigarette.

At the hospital, he had tried to keep in contact with Lena so she wouldn't worry, keeping his hospitalization—and of course his illness—from her. He would loath to see her suffer over his disease. He would hate for her to stop loving him upon seeing him ill. Just thinking about all the appointments and chemical tortures his body would go through tormented him. Not to mention, he hated the almost corpse-like stench of hospitals. So as soon as they released him and he was holding in his hands the doctor's orders for appointments, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, he decided to live out his last days without torturing himself or others. He was full of fear, and his fear decided for him. He decided to go as far away as possible before the whole world began to notice his decadence. The first thing he did was go shopping for his journey. After thinking it through, he decided to get some presents for his family and for Lena. He went to the apartment, organized his things, and began making his bag, his last travel bag. He wrapped the presents. The next morning, he took some things to the theatre and took out others that were there and that he had decided to take. He left a letter for Andrés and a little box for Lena. 'Don't let the troupe die,' he said at the end. He went to the terminal and took the first express to Cartagena.

So many memories weighed on him. He threw the cigarette on the floor and hurried out as much as the pain allowed. The room was almost empty. His luggage was lighter all the time, although it had never been very heavy to begin with. As he walked, he began to feel that he had lost the two things he most cherished in life: his theatre group and Lena.



The first time Leandro saw Lena's emails several days had gone by. He went to an internet café and upon signing in found a torrent of unread messages, most of them from her. First, he shut his inbox without reading a thing. After marshalling his courage, he signed back in to read them all. He thought of sending a brief note saying he was alright, and to please not look for him. But even that notion he contained. Back then, his mission was to disappear from his own life, and a single word might give her hope. Lena's messages somehow gave him strength to fight the pains of his disease. Every email made him feel more alive. He felt jealousy, rage, sadness, and he remembered how much he loved her. He felt pain over the distance that was his own fault.

A couple of months later, on one of those days when Leandro felt awful, when the pain, frustration, and sadness were consuming him, he didn't go to work. Sometimes he felt like breaking the bathroom mirror that was constantly announcing to him his deterioration and ruining his mood. Nevertheless, he went out like a warrior to read Lena's monthly email. The theatre group was going to disappear. The projects were not finding support and state funding was dwindling. They were about to shut everything down. His body revolted. He couldn't stop crying. He was frustrated at the thought that Andrés hadn't been able to keep everything together, that everything he had built—Lena, the theatre, everything—had been abandoned and was being lost. For the first time, he realized what was happening to him. After a long period of denial, he was beginning to feel his disease murder him and everything around him. He wrote her an email, but didn't send it. He erased it before leaving the internet café and locking himself in his room. He wept all day and shouted from rage. The next day, thanks to his stubbornness, he resolved to go to work.

Lena took the June holiday to go to Medellín. The city was having a festival and she wanted to find out if anyone had seen Leandro. If there was one place he would have liked to live, it was Medellín. The place seethed with theatre and culture. So she travelled to the

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festival to find his friends, near and distant. Her search was fruitless, and she returned to Bogotá resigned to never seeing him again. She kept writing to him in the hope that he would answer. Lena was at least as stubborn as Leandro, and she kept on writing despite everything. He didn't respond until several months later, in an attempt to see him, Lena wrote a final, resounding email. 'A year of silence. How ironic. The play Philippe Bizot is presenting in a month's time is called 30 Years of Silence. It's at 6 pm at the La Castellana National Theatre. I can get ticket. It's up to you whether you want to come. Take it as a goodbye gift.'

When Leandro saw the email, he didn't know what to think. He was very excited that Philippe Bizot, the living disciple of Marcel Marceau whom he had never seen on stage and always admired, would be visiting Colombia. Besides, now that he had spent a year as a mime, he admired him all the more. It wasn't easy not to have a voice. It



was the perfect moment to see Lena and perhaps his family. He knew that if he went to Bogotá, he'd have to stay there. Lena might not love him anymore. Maybe it was time to go back home and die next to her. It was time to let his relatives mourn in the company of their loved ones. After going back and forth in his head, he finally responded: 'Save me a ticket. I'll see you there. Thanks for the invitation.' Leandro was shaking after hitting send. He didn't know why he'd done it, nor if what he'd answered had been right. Had he left emotion get away from him? Maybe he had matured enough to understand that he had to say goodbye. His decadent body was more intelligent and knew it could no longer wander across Colombia. Perhaps it was his last chance to bid farewell properly. He had to prepare his best clothes, buy a couple of things with the money he had left, save for the journey, and begin preparing a good speech for when he saw her. What to say to her after all this time? His face and his body would speak for him and would shout through every pore the pain of a hopeless silence.

He left home early enough to spend some time in Children's Park. The birds in the park calmed him down. His heart was jumpy from the pain in his body. He is agitated about the journey. It's been a week since he's gone out. He didn't feel well enough to work. There are fewer tourists every day. The country's economic situation didn't afford many journeys. Sometimes he missed Cartagena, where he had been very well received. Foreigners paid much better than his compatriots and tourists never lacked.

He took a cab and made it on time for the 5 am bus. He begins the journey to his unexpected Bogotá. He recalls all the times that he has gotten on a bus that year. The long journey to Cartagena. The short stay in Medellín. His time in Pereira. The terrible fright in Cali, where he thought he might die or go to jail. The violence of Florencia and noisy Neiva. Throughout his odyssey he had felt that he was fleeing: fleeing from his family, fleeing from Lena, but especially fleeing from himself. He didn't want anyone to see the way

cancer whittled away at his body, so he didn't stay anywhere long. When he felt a bond with someone, he decided to leave. Except for Cali and Florencia. The country was getting worse all the time and no one said anything about it. It was best to run—or at least that's what everyone did. And sometimes he wanted to do the same. He couldn't know exactly how much life was left in him. All he wanted was to experience what was left for him and die in peace.

The smell of the bus makes him feel worse. His head spins. It's easier all the time to become nauseous. He cannot stand the asphyxiating heat of the buses. The conditioned air makes him cough, which upsets the other passengers. A few days ago he began to cough up blood. His paper handkerchiefs now filled with red dots that were growing larger. His heart beats progressively faster, and he is surprised by the urgent need to cry, which blocks his throat and quickens his heart. Tears stream down his cheeks. He tries to calm himself and sleep, tries to think of Lena, of her smile, her eternal non-conformism. He never said it, but he knew that she wanted to change the world with her stubbornness. He liked to make her feel like royalty. He not only called her princess, but he behaved like a fool, venerating her, putting his jacket around her shoulders to shield her from the cold. Although she enjoyed conveniences, her tastes were quite simple. Leandro would play with her and play the role of the pleb, doting on her to an absurd degree. He wanted her to feel more beautiful than she was. She played along. She was more concerned about others than herself, and that made her more beautiful. He always dreamt of acting with her in clown love. She would have looked perfect with a red nose and a colourful dress, but her shyness never allowed her to act.

Although he rests a little, his chest starts to hurt when they enter Bogotá, and the bust becomes insufferable. One year without a mobile phone and he hadn't missed it until this moment. Maybe he shouldn't have tossed it out the window that day. He would have liked to send a birthday message to Lena and tell her he was on his way. He arrives at the terminal almost at midday. He looks for food,



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but feels so off that he prefers to go to the apartment to rest. He rings to see if Lena is home. When no one opens, he thinks that maybe she went out to lunch for her birthday. Maybe she is going out with someone else already. Once again he wishes he had his phone. Then he would call her to let her know he is in Bogotá and ask her if he can come in.

A coughing spell again. He takes the keys from his bag. To wait for her in that cold would be suicide. It's been a year since he's used the keys. The key won't go in. When it finally does, it gets stuck in the lock. Maybe she changed the lock. Finally he is able to open. When he enters the apartment, he doesn't recognize it. The spaces are larger than he remembered. The walls are painted another colour. The decoration has changed. His masks are gone, as are his clothes, as are his books. He feels the pain in his chest more like a blow now. He begins to cough. He goes to the bathroom, washes the blood off his face, and dries himself with her towel. His stomach growls, demanding food. He hasn't had a bite since yesterday. He opens the fridge and sees cake and wine. Perhaps there is a party





tonight. He sees a provocative rice stir fry and his mouth waters. He warms some up in the oven and eats less than half. His appetite has been dwindling for months, and more drastically in the last weeks. His body is heavy, so he decides to lie down for a bit on his side of the bed. Although he is afraid to fall asleep because Lena could come in at any moment, he stares at a fixed point on the ceiling and sleep wins the battle.

The appointment is at 6 at La Castellana National Theatre. It's still three hours until the show. Lena goes to the bathroom to touch up. She is sweating from the nerves and her makeup has run. When she leaves the bathroom, her friends suggest that they watch a movie.

Leandro wakes up at around four afraid of having slept too long. He rises with difficulty to see if Lena has arrived. Everything looks the same. He coughs, as is now his habit upon waking, and goes again to the bathroom. His pale face terrifies him more all the time, and he prefers to avoid mirrors, but the bathroom is so large that it is difficult to ignore it. He wipes the drops of blood that he accidentally splashed on the mirror, and looks into his yellow eyes. He tidies up the bathroom, the bedroom, and the kitchen as best he can. His movements are slow and clumsy. He looks for something to ease the pain. He finds ibuprofen and takes two. He wants to feel better for the show. He would go to see Philippe Bizot at any price. It would take him a little more than half an hour to get to the theatre, depending on traffic, so he takes the television control and begins to change channels to pass the time. He wishes Lena would appear in the doorway so he could talk to her.

He is not tired, although everything weighs on him. He doesn't want to move too much; he's saving energy for tonight. He falls asleep again with the television on. When he wakes up, he is drenched in sweat and has an intense headache. She hasn't arrived. It's late and he must clean up a little for the show. He gets up and the weight of his body drags him down onto the floor. Dazed, he picks himself up, takes a quick shower, and puts on his best. He feels ungainly; things fall from his hands and



moves with difficulty. He is quite weak. His headache is more intense by the minute. He sits for a moment at the edge of the bed to think about whether he should go out in that state. The chest pain subsides. He thinks of Lena and finds the strength to go out. He takes the keys and money, and leaves the apartment. He hails a cab. 'To La Castellana National Theatre please.' He begins to shake uncontrollably and breaks into a cold sweat. He puts his fingers to his neck and feels that it is hot.

Lena searches for Leandro among the crowd. She goes back and forth along the line but doesn't find him. She moves to the back of the line to give him more time. Her breathing quickens as she approaches the door. She lets the last people move ahead while she scans the distance, looking for him. Her friends are whispering, as they always are when Lena's attitude confuses them.

Leandro is taken by another coughing spell. The taxi driver looks at him through the rear view mirror, worried. The hacking is insistent. The taxi driver hands Leandro a bag.

'Are you coming in, ma'am?' the doorman asks.

'Can I ask a favour?' Lena says finally. 'I'm waiting for someone.'

'I'm afraid I have to close the door. The show is about to begin,' the doorman says. 'Are you coming in? I could open up again during the intermission.'

Leandro opens the window to catch a breath, but a wave of exhaust fumes enters the cab and he feels airless. The taxi brakes suddenly. They are not far from the theatre, but Leandro feels his vision clouding over. He hallucinates, thinks he sees Lena on the other sidewalk.

'Can I leave you a ticket for someone? His name is Leandro.'

'Please, let's go in,' begs Sandra. 'I feel like a fool standing here.'

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THINKS OF LENA AND
FINDS THE STRENGTH
TO GO OUT.**



Lena leaves the ticket at the door and enters, almost shoved along by her friends and the doorman's insistence. If it were up to her, she would have stayed outside waiting for him.

'You're shaking,' Laura says to Lena, once inside the theatre.

'It would appear your birthday gift did not arrive,' Sandra says, looking behind her as they hear the final call.

Leandro lowers his gaze and sees that his nose and mouth are spouting blood. The taxi insists on driving him to the emergency room. Leandro looks on with sadness and frustration as the taxi heads towards the nearest hospital, getting further and further from the theatre.

The show begins, and in the midst of the silence, Lena feels a strange nostalgia. Several tears run down her cheeks. During intermission, she gets up to look for Leandro. She goes to the doorman, but no one has come for the ticket. She returns to the theatre. In the middle of the play, her moments with Leandro pass before her eyes like a pantomime. Little by little shame invades her face, which becomes a knot under her friends' stare. She never wants to see him again. Now the tears are of rage.

The taxi pulls up in front of the emergency room. 'I have cancer,' Leandro says, before going unconscious.

The curtain falls and everyone is at their feet with applause, except for Lena. Her friends and Andrés watch her weep. None of them knows what to do. The only gift she wanted for her birthday won't happen now. She leaves the theatre furious, saying a feeble goodbye. She doesn't want to hear the I told you so from Sandra and Laura, but neither does she want to be alone. When Andrés offers to take her home, she accepts. She hears a horn blare, and it sets off a headache. Andrés only embraces her while she curses Leandro. It is the end, the death of everything. Is the moment to be reborn from the ashes and start over.

ellipsis

