

A TRANSLATION OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES BY COLOMBIAN AUTHOR

JULIO PAREDES

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Julio Paredes is a contemporary Colombian writer who has published two novels, three collections of short stories, and a biography. His stories are evocative, thought-provoking narratives of difficulties a variety of characters face as they relate to other human beings and search for meaning in this life. Throughout Paredes's work, emphasis is placed on the unknown, thus leaving many of his stories open-ended. His characters struggle with existential questions, and quite often, the text is representative of their inner thoughts and feelings.

The following selection contains eight short stories from three different collections. While the particular situations of each are quite varied, common themes such as relationships, love, passing from one stage of life to the next, and magic emerge among them. Paredes illustrates the fact that the type of angst felt by his characters does not discriminate; people of different ages and backgrounds share similar experiences.

Because these stories focus on the human spirit, which transcends geographic and cultural boundaries, they translate quite nicely from their original Spanish and can certainly be enjoyed and appreciated by an English-speaking audience.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Jonathan.

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INTRODUCTION

Julio Paredes was born in Colombia in 1957. He studied philosophy and humanities at the University of the Andes and later studied medieval literature in Madrid. He has worked as an editor, a translator, a professor, and a writer, publishing many translations as well as three collections of short stories, two novels, and a biography. A translator himself, Paredes was eager to find someone interested in translating his literature into English. As I read his fiction, I knew that such a project would be challenging, rewarding, and fun.

Excited about his work, in particular the short stories I had read, I contacted Paredes and asked his permission to translate them into English. He was delighted and immediately sent me copies of two books of short stories: *Salón Júpiter (y otros cuentos)* [Jupiter Lounge (and Other Stories)] and *Asuntos familiares* [Family Matters]. Soon thereafter, he also sent me an electronic copy of a story he was planning to publish in an upcoming collection: “La pañoleta” (Mother’s Shawl). The range of settings, characters, and situations of all these stories makes them fascinating to read and very entertaining to translate. I selected eight stories that I felt would represent Paredes’s work nicely as a collection. They share common elements such as characters that are brooding and melancholy, rising tension inherent in the language, and unresolved endings. Judging from our initial contact, I knew that Paredes was interested in playing an active role in this project. He has given me invaluable help throughout the process and eliminated guesswork altogether.

Paredes’s work is very evocative. Many of his stories contain elements of mystery and uncertainty, and there is a pervading sadness throughout the stories I have

chosen. However, it is not necessarily sadness in the traditional sense. Poverty and social injustice do not enter into any of the plots. On the contrary, the characters are educated, financially comfortable, and for the most part, they do not come from broken homes. The psychological angst Paredes's characters share stems from uncertainty within relationships with other human beings and also uncertainty as they pass from one stage of life to the next: from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood, and into old age.

It is important to note that Paredes explores the question of alternate versions of reality, the fantastical, and the unknown throughout his stories. He leaves each of the stories in this collection open-ended, forcing the reader to draw his/her own conclusions and decipher between reality and fiction. In their book, *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, Hoffman and Murphy discuss Todorov's theory of reading as construction. "Todorov notes that no two readings of a novel are identical because each reader does not *receive* the novel's image of the universe, but *creates* his or her own image from partial and composite information" (Hoffman and Murphy 258). The authors go on to explain that many writers of fiction offer their readers clues rather than concrete facts, so the reader becomes an active participant in the narration (258). Todorov's theory applies nicely to Julio Paredes's literature. In our correspondence, Paredes explained to me, "ya sabes, y creo que lo has descubierto mejor que nadie, mi interés como escritor en esos espacios sin resolver o que no parecen tener solución racional..." (See appendix.) This element in Paredes's work is very important to keep in mind as a translator. Capturing the mysterious, uncertain tone of his work is essential to preserving his style.

Because the underlying theme of Paredes's stories is the human spirit and experience rather than sociological issues specific to their settings, culturally-bound elements are fairly minimal; the characters' struggles transcend cultural boundaries. Therefore, over the course of this project it was not necessary to do any large-scale adaptation in terms of time period and setting. I left the characters' names in Spanish and the references to Latin America (cities, street names, etc.) as they are in the original works.

In general, the challenges I encountered were mostly syntactical in variety. Because of the nature of the stories, that is to say the fact that they are rife with personal analysis and emotional exploration, the sentences tend to be long and poetic. While the style could not be considered stream of consciousness, it is certainly representative in many cases of the inner thoughts of the characters. Many times I was torn between preserving the original style and breaking up these sentences into more manageable English phrasing. While I generally opted in favor of target language norms, in some cases I felt inclined to stick more closely to the original Spanish so as not to lose the poetic, flowing nature of the narratives. Specific examples of such sentences will follow. Paredes also uses a very high level of vocabulary throughout his writing, but luckily, the few times my dictionaries all failed me, I was able to ask the author himself for clarification, and he was always prompt and obliging in his responses.

Rather than organize the following description of specific challenges and difficulties by category within translation theory, I prefer to go story by story, in the order in which I translated them.

The first story I worked on is actually the one written most recently, “La pañoleta,” which I rendered as “Mother’s Shawl.” It is the story of a young girl whose mother mysteriously disappears after volunteering to participate in a magician’s act during the celebration of Carnival. She never returns, and the girl is forced to accept this truth and, since she is the oldest child in the family, mature more quickly than she would have had to if not for the sudden loss of her mother. The mystery is never solved; her father offers her no other explanation besides pure magic, and since the narrator is an adult thinking back to this bizarre experience, we can assume her mother never re-appeared. Although it is not blatantly suggested, a reader might guess that the mother abandoned her family and ran off with one of the circus performers backstage, and that the father never had the heart to explain that to his daughter or younger children. This is unlikely, however, since toward the end of the story the narrator says that there was a “blurb” in the newspaper about her mysterious disappearance, which suggests that adults as well as children were befuddled by the strange incident. It is up to the reader to either accept the conclusion that she vanished into thin air or to come up with his/her own theory as to what happened. This unknown, mysterious aspect of the story is what made it immediately appealing to me when I first read it. Incidentally, the author sent my translation of “Mother’s Shawl” to a friend of his in New York City who has submitted it to *The Brooklyn Rail*, an on-line literary journal, in hopes that it will be published and enjoyed by English speakers.

Despite the long, descriptive sentences in the original story, in most cases I was able to find a way to break them up and change the structure while still preserving the author’s tone. One particular sentence I had trouble dividing stands on its own as a

paragraph, which made me even more eager to turn it into at least two sentences, but in the end I couldn't figure out a way to do so. The original reads:

Sin embargo, y aunque se tratara de un territorio donde sucedían cosas sin explicación, nunca nada nos hizo presagiar que acarrearía posibles desventuras a sus espectadores y menos aún a una mujer que había agitado los brazos en el aire como una niña enloquecida para que el mago ruso, un hombre altísimo, de barba espesa y cejas que le tapaban los ojos, la escogiera entre el público.

Although I am not displeased with my translation of this sentence, and I think it flows and is easy to understand in English, I still would have liked to find a way to break it up for the sake of avoiding a one-sentence paragraph. My translation reads:

However, even though the circus was a territory where things happened without explanation, nothing could have made us foresee the misfortune it could hold for its spectators, much less for a woman who had waved her arm in the air like a crazed little girl so that the Russian magician, a very tall man with a thick beard and big, bushy eyebrows, would pick her out of the crowd.

Perhaps it is the sort of dramatic build-up in this sentence that prevents it from producing an equivalent effect as any combination of shorter sentences.

In the original, especially in the beginning of the story, Paredes uses fragments at times; I believe the reason for this is to make it sound like the narrator truly is working through an explanation or trying to figure out a way to describe such an unusual occurrence. It resembles speech in the sense that people often do not speak in complete sentences. However, in my translation, the use of fragments sounded too choppy and the reader's attention was drawn to the fact that they were fragments rather than to their content, so I opted to complete them by adding small words such as "it" and "it is." This makes the story flow more smoothly in English. For example,

Una fecha que, a veces, la dicta la llegada de una felicidad suprema o, por el contrario, la violenta irrupción de un desastre sentimental o familiar que nos deja petrificados en la oscuridad. Algo semejante a una puerta sin llave que se cierra a nuestra espalda.

became, “Other times, it marks the violent eruption of an emotional or family disaster that leaves us frozen in darkness: something like a door without a key that closes right behind us.”

Another minor challenge was the word “hermanos” in the original. Without being able to contact the author, I would have had no way of knowing whether this term referred to “brothers” or “brothers and sisters.” Paredes confirmed for me that it indeed referred to the latter. It is quite wordy and a bit awkward to use that term several times throughout one story, but the alternative “siblings” sounds stilted. I couldn’t figure out a way to get around the phrase “brothers and sisters” in many places. As Hervey, et al. explain, “hermanos” is a hyperonym of “brothers and sisters” (88). It cannot be rendered accurately in English without clarification, which in this case requires two extra words.

The second story I translated, “Flor enhiesta” (Sublime Flora) is about an adolescent boy who develops a crush on his older sister’s college friend, Flora, an albino girl. The narrator becomes obsessed with the translucency of her skin and with her eyes, which he doesn’t get to see until the end of the story. He, his sister, his cousin, Flora, and a couple other friends take a vacation together to his family’s country home, and during this time he cannot fight his desire for a sexual experience with Flora. He is tormented by strange dreams and feels restless and out of sorts. Finally, he achieves his goal of having a physical encounter with Flora, and as an adult relating this story from his past, he tells us that no sexual experience has ever compared to that one and that he will never be able to forget Flora. Because of the constant references to dreams and dream-like experiences throughout the story, the possibility exists, although it is unlikely, that the narrator has invented this encounter and that it never actually happened. Again, Paredes

inserts a degree of doubt into the conclusion of the story, which requires the reader to be active and make his/her own conjectures.

Aside from some syntactical challenges similar to those I came across in “Mother’s Shawl,” translating the title “Flor enhiesta” into English presented the greatest difficulty in this case. In Spanish, “Flor” is not only a common girl’s name, it is also the word for “flower.” Therefore, the original title compares the character’s beauty to that of a flower in two concise words and is understood within the first two lines of the story. For obvious reasons, conveying this idea into English wasn’t easy. There are several girls’ names in English that are also the names of flowers (Rose, Heather, Iris, Daisy), but if I went with an English name for Flor, I would then have sacrificed equivalency since in the original her name is not foreign. I certainly did not want to change all the characters’ names to English and transplant the action of the story, because at one point the narrator mentions the fact that his family was forced years later to sell the vacation house at which the story takes place because of the political situation in Colombia.

My first solution for the title was “Sublime Lily.” A reader in English would immediately think of the flower upon reading that title. Then, throughout the story, I planned to use “Lili” as the character’s name. That way, the reader would see the obvious connection and understand the play on words in the title, and since “Lili” is a Spanish name, I could leave the other details intact. An extra bonus, I thought, was that lilies are beautiful and quite often white, so it would make for a lovely comparison with an albino girl. In the meantime, I had contacted the author and explained my dilemma, and when he responded, his suggestion was “Sublime Flora.” At first I didn’t like this as much as “Lily/Lili,” but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it would be the

nearest equivalent and most concise option. I eventually opted to use Paredes's suggested solution.

One other detail that proved slightly difficult in "Sublime Flora" was the word "tuteo." Since in English there is only one option for the singular "you," as opposed to Spanish in which there are two (formal and informal), the concept of moving from one to the other simply does not exist in English and thus cannot be translated exactly. As a solution, I changed the structure of the sentence and communicated the idea in this way: "Flor insinuaba con el tuteo un piropo" became "Flora was paying me a compliment by speaking so openly." This is an example of grammatical transposition (Hervey 30).

The next story I worked on is called "Family History." It is a short, sad story about a boy whose mother is an actress; because of her high-profile career, she travels all over Central and South America and is virtually absent in her son's life. Years have passed since the boy has seen his mother, and at last they meet for lunch at the hotel where she is staying. He is very nervous and intimidated by his mother's beauty, but when she asks him if he would live with her if she moved back to Bogotá, he immediately responds that he would. In the end, when the boy asks his father if he thinks his mother will come back to Bogotá, he says he doesn't think so. This story is particularly heart-wrenching because Paredes makes us feel the boy's despair. The night before their meeting, he stays up late looking at pictures of her. He is sweating profusely on the way to the hotel because he's so nervous about seeing her. He is elated at the touch of her soft skin when they kiss hello and goodbye. Then, at the end, his hopes are dashed by his father's response to his question. His need for maternal love and guidance is so apparent, and yet his life will remain devoid of such love. One very interesting

aspect of this story is the father's lack of bitterness or even sadness about the situation. Obviously, the mother is the one who has abandoned her family, not the other way around, yet Paredes uses the words "contently" and "without sorrow" to describe the father's attitude toward her. Again, the reader is forced to wonder what really happened between them.

This story is narrated in third person, and the main character is never referred to by name. Therefore, it was impossible to avoid heavy use of the word "he." This is not an issue in the original Spanish, because the subject is incorporated into the verb. "Imaginó" becomes "he imagined." "Creyó" becomes "he thought," and so forth. Unfortunately, there is really no solution to this problem. The subject is mandatory in English, and without knowing the character's first name, "he" is the only plausible option. Parkinson de Saz points out, "En inglés generalmente no es posible omitir los pronombres como frecuentemente se hace en castellano debido a que, sin el pronombre, a menudo no se sabe a quién se refiere la acción" (17).

The fourth story, "El vástago" ("Offspring") tells of a tyrannical grandmother whose cruelly rigid upbringing of her children has affected her grandchildren. One of her daughters becomes pregnant out of wedlock at the age of sixteen, the gravest offense imaginable in her very Catholic household. The grandmother cannot find it in her heart to forgive her daughter, who is forced with her illegitimate son into a life of servitude and inequality. This illegitimate son, Mario, reveals to his much younger cousin the true nature of their grandmother's character, and after hearing the horrible tales, she is scared by her physical likeness to her grandmother. Furthermore, by looking at old photographs,

she discovers that all her aunts and great-aunts shared the same physical traits, which she has inherited, and wonders whether she will be able to avoid her genetic destiny.

This is perhaps the most syntactically complex story of my selection. It is full of extremely long sentences containing multiple clauses within clauses. Furthermore, the register of vocabulary is quite high. This style reflects Mario's point of view. Although he is not the narrator, his younger cousin is re-telling stories Mario has told her, not trying to conceal his bitterness and cynicism. While many of the descriptions she gives, particularly of her grandmother, seem quite stilted in English because of sentence length and word choice, I tried not to veer too far from the original for fear of downplaying Mario's palpable hatred toward his grandmother and blatant criticism of Catholic values. The language is quite exaggerated, but purposely so. While more common, plain language probably reads more smoothly in English, I believe it is important to preserve the tone of the original in an attempt to achieve equivalent effect (Hervey 14). The following is an example of such a sentence from the original:

Supe, aunque ella a mí siempre me trató con cariño y más de una vez me consideró su nieta perferida, que implantó, semejante a un dios en cuyas manos sería terrible caer, las leyes de una dependencia unilateral y con cerrada tenacidad sembraría entre sus hijos, especialmente en los mayores, el temor y el desconcierto.

In my original translation, I broke this very long sentence into two, but finally ended up recombining them into one in order to mirror the fact that Mario is angrily ranting about his grandmother through the narrator. Because of the way I restructured the sentence, I believe it reads smoothly in spite of its length:

I learned, despite the fact that she always treated me with affection and more than once said she considered me her favorite granddaughter, that like a god in whose hands it would be terrible to fall, she instilled with narrow-minded tenacity the

laws of unilateral dependence as well as fear and discord among her children, especially the older ones.

Next is a story called “Gertrudis la Magna” (“Gertrudis the Great”), the tale of a frustrated love affair between a man and his older cousin’s wife. The narrator is in Mexico City for a translators’ conference, and after some doubt and deliberation, he decides to call Gertrudis. He vaguely mentions a short romance between them that occurred several years ago, and apparently he has not been able to forget her since. They spend several days together, and during his last night in Mexico City he feels the time is right to act on his feelings, but she rejects his advances and is shocked at his behavior. The narrator falls into deep despair and suggests that the rest of his days will be spent in agony as he will never be able to enter into another romantic relationship. At the conclusion of the story, the reader is left to wonder whether he and Gertrudis will ever see each other again (not unlikely since she is married to his first cousin) and how it will be between them. Nor do we know if he will ever recover from this devastation. Naturally, the reader is inclined to side with the narrator, who paints an unattractive picture of his cousin, evidently undeserving of his wife’s affection. She is seen as trapped in an unsatisfying, unfulfilling relationship, but because of societal norms and her Catholic background, albeit undefined, she decides she must remain faithful to her husband in spite of her true feelings.

Throughout this story, Paredes mentions several landmarks and specific streets in Mexico City. I left these proper nouns as they appear in the source text, accent marks and all. Since it is mentioned very early on that the story takes place in Mexico City, it seems natural that the names of places the characters visit be in their original language. In the original, the narrator describes a walk they took “por el Paseo de la Reforma y

Coyoacán.” In Spanish, the preposition “por” has several meanings, and by using two separate prepositions in English, I was able to clarify that Paseo de la Reforma is a thoroughfare and Coyoacán is an area of the city: “down the Paseo de la Reforma and through Coyoacán.” A reader who is unfamiliar with Mexico City can still understand the idea, and the foreign words do not detract from the storyline. On the contrary, the mention of sites and streets in Mexico City reminds the reader that the narrator is a visitor there, and I believe they enhance the plot. As Hervey, et al. explain, at times it is necessary to employ the technique of cultural transplantation, which involves adapting the text to the context of the target audience. This can be achieved by changing details such as setting, time period, and vocabulary (23). However, for the reasons I list above, I did not choose to make such adaptations.

“Eme,” the next story I worked on, translated most smoothly of all into English. It is a description of a terrible night for a young girl during which her boyfriend is involved in a serious altercation at a bar. Eme is quite drunk and has trouble focusing throughout the story, which adds to the confusion. Since after hearing gunshots everyone runs out of the bar and scatters, we never find out what happened to Johnny. We don’t know whether he was shot, and if he was, we don’t know whether he is seriously injured. Eme wants desperately to return to the bar to find out what happened, but her more sober sister persuades her to wait since it could be dangerous to go back. The story ends with Eme fiercely praying to God for Johnny’s safety. The first time I read it, I was nervously awaiting the news that Johnny was dead, but in his usual style, Paredes doesn’t supply this information. He allows the tension to build and build, and it remains with the reader even after finishing the story.

Throughout “Eme,” Paredes uses short, uncomplicated sentences, often lacking transitional phrases from one to the next. This style reflects the fact that the main character is so drunk; in this state she is incapable of long, complex thoughts. It is a very effective technique. Every time I re-read the story, I feel a little bit dizzy and cannot avoid stepping into Eme’s character. Fortunately, a very direct translation into English achieves this same effect. Many of the challenges I encountered in the other stories I translated were not present in this case.

The next story in this collection is titled “Protection.” It describes the relationship between two brothers: one, a young, seemingly happy-go-lucky child, and the other, a sort of brooding, emotionally fragile older brother. As an adult, the younger brother is thinking back to an incident that took place when the boys were in high school. After the narrator is bullied on the school bus, the older brother challenges the bully to a fight and wins, thus proving he does in fact love his younger sibling and care deeply about him. The narrator explains that violence of any kind is completely contrary to his brother’s character, so his is an extreme reaction to the incident. Paredes sheds light on the often precarious relationships that exist between siblings, especially during childhood. As with many of his other stories, the author leaves this one open-ended to a certain degree. After the fight, the boys walk home together in silence, and just before entering their house, the older brother says “I’ll be right back,” and the action stops there. We never learn where he was going or how the incident affected their relationship.

In “Protection” I had to decide how to translate the proper name of the park in which the boys meet for this arranged fight. In the original text, Paredes refers to the “Parque de las Flores.” Rather than call it “Flower Park,” “Park of Flowers,” or “Las

Flores Park,” I opted to simply call it a “park.” In my opinion, this small detail has virtually no impact on the story, and since it is unlikely that a reader of the target text would be familiar with the actual park to which the author refers, I felt it made more sense to simply delete the name. Because it is not a well-known landmark that serves to remind the reader of the importance of the location, I felt the name of the park would go from being transparent language in the source text to opaque language in the target text, and I wanted to avoid such a change.

The final story of my selection, “Vanished,” is an intriguing tale of an old man who goes to visit a childhood friend he hasn’t seen in many, many years. This friend, Amador, was something of a natural-born magician, and the narrator describes tricks he performed when they were boys. His acts involved training cats, and Amador is described as having some sort of spiritual connection with their species that always fascinated and almost haunted the narrator. Despite his family’s protests, he cannot pass up the opportunity to see Amador again. Hoping for the revelation of some secret, the narrator is disappointed to find a very old-looking Amador in poor health with no important information to share and thus is completely disillusioned. This experience is a metaphor for the narrator’s disappointment at growing old; he wants to find something meaningful and magical, and when he doesn’t, he feels empty and dissatisfied. At the end of the story, he walks into the sea, apparently intent on letting it swallow him up and being received by “enormous silence.” Paredes does not definitively state whether this silence represents death.

Aside from a few phraseology issues, “Vanished” did not pose any extreme challenges. One of the reasons it reads nicely in English is that there is a lot of dialogue

throughout the story. Since the reunion between Amador and the narrator is a bit awkward, often this dialogue is made up of short, simple sentences. Although Bogotá is mentioned as the city in which they both grew up, the setting really has no bearing on the plot. The place where Amador now lives could be almost any small beach town, so the target audience does not lose out on anything by not being familiar with the particular area. This is a story about aging and disappointment at not being able to recapture one's youth that can be enjoyed and understood by any audience.

Although these stories have drastically different narrators and situations, there are close links in all eight as far as theme. The element of uncertainty and the sort of dark tone Paredes uses throughout this selection of stories unite them in terms of style. In a broad sense, the characters all question their existence and place in the world. Furthermore, they are all troubled by the idea of the unknown. I believe that within this broad theme, three more specific ideas are salient. Eme, the narrator in "Gertrudis the Great," and the narrator in "Sublime Flora" all depend on another person for their own happiness. Eme can't imagine a life without Johnny, the narrator in "Gertrudis" concludes that he will never be able to achieve intimacy with another human being after the debacle he describes, and the narrator in "Flora" will never have another satisfying sexual experience. The narrators in "Family History" and "Protection," as well as Mario from "Offspring" all crave love from members of their families. In "Family History," a boy longs for maternal affection. In "Protection," a boy needs reassurance of his brother's love. In "Offspring," Mario is angry at never having received his grandmother's love. Finally, the narrators in "Mother's Shawl" and "Vanished" are haunted by the idea of mystery and the unknown, as well as the thought of passing from

one stage of life to the next. In “Mother’s Shawl” a daughter never fully understands her mother’s disappearance and is confused by her rapid shift from adolescence to adulthood. The narrator in “Vanished” is dissatisfied with old age; he is searching for some explanation of the mysteries of his youth and comes up empty-handed. More than offering a criticism of all these characters, Paredes seems to be indicating that their behavior is a shared part of human existence; people of different ages and walks of life all experience these feelings.

Translating these stories, while certainly a very challenging undertaking, has turned me into one of their closest readers, and I’m grateful for this experience because they truly are beautiful depictions of our journey through life as human beings. I am honored to have been given permission by Julio Paredes to transform his literature into English. Not only did he give me his permission, he also gave me help and guidance throughout the project. Please see the attached appendix for some examples of communication between Paredes and me. His friendliness and helpfulness made this experience even more rewarding.

Mother's Shawl

*Upon a morning, he was not, and no manner
of search could make sure where he might be.*
Rudyard Kipling, "The Return of Imray"

You could say that we all have a sort of set date when our equilibrium is broken, and from that moment on our personal world and everything in it will never be what it was. Sometimes, the date marks the arrival of supreme happiness. Other times, it marks the violent eruption of an emotional or family disaster that leaves us frozen in darkness: something like a door without a key that closes right behind us. It is an exact date that separates life into two parts, and then, thereafter, we enter a sort of second world where the idea of before and after acquires a true, precise definition, like a border on a map. For me, that date came late one afternoon in March 1943.

Since at that time I had just turned twelve, I only had the slightest inkling about the sinister realm of adult men. It was a dimension in which they had been inflicting unusual cruelty upon each other for years, not just in this country but in the whole world. In a sort of prefabricated paradox, which obviously I only understood much later with the relative mental clarity I acquired as time went on, that universal loss of innocence seemed to coincide with my own, forever disturbed since that date. Simultaneously with the physical attack that transformed my body practically overnight, I would witness an extravagant montage that, despite my young age, would force me in a matter of minutes to act and behave like a woman too soon. I was like an adult creature whose timing and direction were way off course.

The sad joke that irreversibly turned my life around took place one afternoon the first week in March during the Carnival celebration. My father, my four brothers and sisters and I were at the festival, somewhere between astonished and terrified to see Mother disappear after the unsettling maneuvers of an illusionist who had come to Bogotá from Russia. Amidst white clouds of smoke, drumrolls, and long, colorful strips of cloth, the man changed her in seconds into a Bengal tiger who was sleeping in a narrow cage. The animal, as though he understood that the whole thing was just an act, had rolled over almost indifferently to look at the audience, which was applauding enthusiastically. The six of us were also applauding and waiting for Mother to come back from the other metal cage we had seen her enter. I could still see the image of her hand quickly waving goodbye, the same gesture that all the eager volunteers made as they were subjected to the hypnotic games of the magician of the day. In the other hand she held her little black hat decorated with a couple of silk clovers. It was a sort of classy accessory she kept with special fervor in a round box in her bedroom closet.

The magician's number wasn't new to us; ever since I could remember, it had always been part of the circus performances we attended. So, during the minutes after the transformation, none of us entertained the absurd notion that Mother wouldn't come out from behind the stage curtains. Eventually, among the whistles and applause, I heard the voice of the presenter, who was decked out in a red jacket and top hat, enthusiastically praising the magician's act as one of the best displays of "body transmigration" in the world. That term was incomprehensible to me at the time, an incongruence pronounced in some new language; however, the phrase seemed to feed the

excitement of the audience even more. Everyone sat wide-eyed, smiling stupidly at the tiger in the cage.

For having performed the most spectacular trick of any seen under the Big Top, the magician's act ended the show, and all at once the entire circus became a noisy, good-bye parade in which the jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, and even the magician appeared, while the clowns threw confetti at the spectators in the first few rows, who responded to this silly attack by jumping and screaming. No one, amid all the fuss and music, paid attention to anything else. Everyone was smiling. Even my little brothers and sisters had gotten up and were trying to clap along to the drums and bugles.

I also felt happy and looked without fear or distrust at the edges of the curtains, from which people and animals were constantly emerging and disappearing. But then the minutes kept passing and Mother's little hat wasn't reappearing anywhere. Until that day, the volunteers that we had seen go down onto the sandy floor had always rejoined their somewhat bewildered or worried friends and families after a little while, carrying a prize or maybe an autographed photo of the magician who had transformed them into a bunch of doves or some sleepy feline or another right before the spectators' eyes. I imagined that she was walking around backstage now, greeting and congratulating everyone who went by, thankful to have finally been able to gain entrée into a territory that had always fascinated her.

I looked at my father's profile, where there was hardly a hint of a smile. He was no longer applauding with much conviction. He had put Mother's shawl over his shoulders, and he, too, was looking at the edges of the curtain, where that other world began. I remembered how two or three days ago, she had come home in the afternoon

after being out and about and announced that a new foreign circus troupe, a wonder from the far ends of Europe, possibly escaping the war, performing marvels never before seen in these lands, had arrived in the city. We were immediately caught up in the feeling of excitement, and she proclaimed that going to see this circus would be the best way to finish off the Carnival festivities and get us through the dismal, rainy days of the already imminent Easter week.

During those days, despite the fact that this particular year the effects of a prolonged typhoid epidemic still resonated, the streets were filled with a sort of chaotic festivity, a contagious morning euphoria the week before Lent, as though it were another viral outbreak. The festivities were of course celebrated by college students, half-drunk devils and young girls wearing masks, climbing onto buses and trams, hanging like bunches of figurines, or racing through the streets downtown like crazy people with whistles and noisemakers. Children, when they let us, would join them or follow behind for a couple of blocks, shouting and dying of laughter, as if we were escorting ghosts who were enjoying this fleeting freedom with us. Circus spectacles also came to town with never-before-seen wonders, among which we could see acrobats on horses, a huge, bearded lady, parades of zoological phenomena, families of albino dwarfs, and little girls who could sing like birds. This world, parallel to reality, fascinated us kids, but it was Mother in particular who professed a sort of secret, almost fanatic devotion for all that could happen within the confines of a circus.

However, even though the circus was a territory where things happened without explanation, nothing could have made us foresee the misfortune it could hold for its spectators, much less for a woman who had waved her arm in the air like a crazed little

girl so that the Russian magician, a very tall man with a thick beard and big, bushy eyebrows, would pick her out of the crowd.

The people around us finally stopped applauding, and my father didn't allow any of the five of us to move. We waited until the stands were completely empty. A few people, before leaving the tent, looked up at us as they passed by, but without excessive interest. For a while we just sat there, completely alone, and the silence started to scare me. I suspected that any minute now they would turn off the lights, and although we weren't sitting very high up, the gaps between the bleachers were making me dizzy, and I felt like the whole framework of the tent was shaking. I didn't understand why my father wasn't moving and I supposed that he, like me, was paralyzed by confusion. One of my little brothers and sisters asked where Mother was, and then, before my father could answer, a man wearing overalls with a shovel and some type of rake over his shoulder came out from between the curtains that led to the other side.

Even though we were the only ones there, he paid no attention to us, and almost indifferently started to rake the fine sand covering the floor. As if he finally understood that it didn't seem real that the guy hadn't seen us, my father got up, and with surprising agility he jumped down the bleachers to where the other man was. I couldn't hear the question he asked him, but from the face the guy made, I guessed he didn't speak Spanish. Then, without waiting for a response or turning around to look at us, my father lunged toward the curtains, smacking them open, committed to solving this mystery once and for all. I wasn't sure when he had passed me Mother's shawl, which held a trace of her perfume.

For a moment I thought that events would hasten to a close and that in a few moments my parents would come back together, Mother holding my father's arm, chatting away, happily telling the tale of her trip and invisible transformation. I prayed silently with my eyes fixed on the curtains, and I discovered that my brothers and sisters joined me in a similar gesture. The lights in the stands suddenly dimmed and I felt that it was my duty as older sister to display some sort of confidence. It occurred to me, however, that the same perplexity, the same fear of being abandoned in those stands, was pestering me too. What's more, instead of progressing, the scene in front of us had turned into the repetition of one single movement: the man raking sand from side to side.

I started to think I was watching the silent maneuvers of a sleepwalker, when I noticed that he stopped. He had raked almost the entire circle that formed the floor, and then, still holding onto the rake, he searched for something in one of his back pockets. This movement forced him to lift his head, and his gaze fell on our group. He didn't act surprised – he barely opened his eyes any wider – but he stopped moving his arm, his hand still in his pocket. Perhaps the discovery of this unexpected quintet of stunned children persuaded him to continue an act he had thought was unobserved. For a few seconds he looked at the opening between the curtains, where my father rushed in. Afterwards, he turned back to our group, this time paying closer attention, and moved his head slightly. He finally took out his hand and put a cigarette in his mouth. Almost in the same instant, and as though he wanted to show us that he, too, knew some magic tricks, he lit a match that he seemed to have pulled out of the air by striking it with his thumb nail. After his first puff, he flashed us a little smile of stained, crooked teeth. He thought about saying something but changed his mind; no doubt he remembered that he

was in a city where the people spoke a language he didn't understand. He let out a sigh, and without taking the cigarette from between his lips, resumed raking the sand as slowly as before.

I became aware that my brothers and sisters were starting to crowd together and move anxiously. I didn't at all like the idea of having to go down and also walk over to the other side, moving alone through the cages and covered wagons in search of some clue that would lead me to my parents. As I attempted once again to find something to say that would calm us all down, I started to hear voices from behind the curtains. They grew louder and then softer, sounding closer and then suddenly farther away, and it was evident that a heated argument was in progress. I deduced that the people who were arguing were walking back and forth, and, although it was muffled by the curtain, I clearly distinguished my father's voice shouting out some demand.

The man who was raking stopped moving and that's when I realized that everything around him also became immobilized, amid a stillness and half-light that strangely seemed to intensify the smell of animals and dampness that filled the tent. The voices grew louder and then, after a few jolts that made the curtain bulge, my father came out gasping, stomping around like I'd never seen before. Right behind him were the immense magician, a woman dressed as a ballerina, and the man in the red jacket. Mother wasn't there.

As though the whole thing had been rehearsed, the group settled into a sort of rhombus almost in the exact center of the sandy floor, all four illuminated by one of the rows of light bulbs that were strung across the tent. My father stood facing us, and perhaps realizing that the way we looked in the stands was a little sad, he seemed to calm

down. Still, his hands didn't stop playing with his hat, turning it around as if he were mentally measuring the circular extension of the brim. He listened to the words the man in the red jacket mumbled, followed by a brief interjection from the woman to his right, who had turned a little to get a better look at us. After these few utterances, my father rubbed the back of his neck violently, lowered his head, and loosened his tie. I couldn't hear what they had said, but judging by their body language I understood that it wasn't good news. Perhaps so as not to be dragged into the conversation, the man in overalls walked away silently, disappearing into the bends formed by the stands.

All of a sudden, the magician turned around to face us and began to speak. He was several inches taller than the other three, and I thought I saw his eyes watering as he looked up at us and shouted words we would never decipher, extending and closing his arms like the blades of a windmill that helped fill his gigantic body with air.

Occasionally, he pointed his shaking fingers up toward one of the corners of the tent. The volume of his voice was rising, and for a minute I thought that if I paid attention to the rhythm and intonation of his words, I would understand them, I would finally discover the mysterious causes of Mother's disappearance and, therefore, the confusion that hung over all of us like a cloud. The ballerina, in turn, translated this complicated rant for my father, but with a shyness that didn't correspond to his wild flailing.

The magician suddenly let out his last sentence with the same vehemence with which he had begun to speak. This was followed by a long silence, interrupted only by the roaring of a wild animal. I imagined that it was the call of the tiger, also lost, that had replaced Mother. I understood that no one below was going to add anything more, and with a terror that made my throat tighten up, I saw my father shaking his head, with his

mouth closed and an clear look of resignation on his face. I squeezed the shawl between my fingers and I saw him move away from the group and walk up the bleachers to come get us. It was impossible to guess what he would say. From the lack of conviction with which he announced that Mother would be home later, I realized that he didn't have the energy to disguise the terrifying truth.

That night, and over the course of the next few months, while my grandmother and two aunts tried to adjust us to our sudden state of orphanhood, my father let the younger children sleep in our parents' bed. They had probably led him to believe that traces of some maternal energy or aroma remained there, reminiscences that would ease their anxiety. From that day on, he settled onto the living room couch, and when we said our good nights, he assured us he was fine. However, in the darkness of my room, where I couldn't get to sleep either, I listened to him toss and turn, mumbling things to himself like a ghost trapped in a cage. At the same time, I breathed in the perfume that was still on the shawl, although I did it lightly and only for a few seconds, with a solitary and timid devotion; I was afraid to use up, too quickly, the vapors that still held Mother's presence.

I found out from one of my aunts, or maybe from a classmate, that there had been a blurb about the strange incident in the paper, an event never before seen in this city, which not even the police knew how to go about solving. None of us were permitted to see the article, but I heard that next to the photo of the Russian magician, there was one of Mother. I didn't want to ask any questions and I figured I would just have to wait. Then, one Saturday evening, after finishing dinner, my father asked me to stay behind in

the living room for a while. It would be his first and only explanation of Mother's nonsensical absence.

Many years passed before I could make relatively plausible sense of what I heard that night. My father told me about the Russian's confession with almost excessive delicacy, searching for the words without a trace of uneasiness in his voice, with the calm of someone communicating a fundamental principle or trivial piece of information. Even so, he made me keep my head up and look him in the eyes the whole time, to make sure I understood the tale he was about to tell. I shivered when he held my chin and confessed that by an authentic and irreversible act of magic, Mother was transported to some far-off place we couldn't reach from our limited world. He added by way of a conclusion that he, however, would never give up his search for her.

I was never completely sure if my father cried from time to time lying on the couch, his little place of refuge, where it seemed he would continue to sleep rather than going back to his bed. Although he continued to get up early to go to work, it was easy to see that he was pretending to be happy and optimistic for our sake, creating an outward appearance of normalcy to disguise his lethargy and the pain of a broken heart. When the perfume on Mother's shawl faded, vanishing almost at the same time as my early childhood, I finally understood that if she had been there, Mother would have been the only one able to tell me what kind of little girl I had been. That little girl was a creature I no longer remembered, as though that year there had been another disappearance without a goodbye.

Sublime Flora

She was softer than water...

V. and H. Exposito, "Orange Tree in Bloom"

My older sister's best friend during her last years in college was an albino girl. Her name was Flora. As time went on I began to imagine her parents, paralyzed by vertigo from the sight of that translucent skin, that fine, inconceivable layer under which one could follow the blue paths of her veins. It must have been incandescent like a baby glow-worm would look in all its fury. I imagined they weren't able to come up with an appropriate name and ended up limited to a designation, almost an allegory of its members, discerning the unprecedented attributes of her future beauty from the very moment of her baptism.

The first time my sister brought her home for lunch, her presence at the dining-room table unleashed a kind of general commotion. It was a Saturday, and as the sun shone in powerfully through one of the living room windows, blanketing everything with a pervasive white light, she never took off her dark, oval sunglasses. My father was doubtlessly impressed by the dose of mystery Flora added to the scene with the color of her hair and the way it was cut, a long, almost white lock sometimes covering her face. With obvious difficulty, he was trying to remember old detective movies and compare her traits with those of some femme fatale, like Veronica Lake or Barbara Stanwyck, the unpleasant upshot being that she had no idea who they were. My mother, influenced by the vague superstitions that are passed on through families, imagined that behind the glasses a pair of light green eyes, not completely of this earth, would not only curdle the dulce de leche dessert, but, as if they cast a petrifying beam, would also shrivel the

bouquet of gardenias on a nearby table. My two younger sisters barely managed to suppress their nervous giggles.

In those days I was still going through the typically uncomfortable changes of adolescence, and the first sight of Flora hit me like a bolt of lightning. The fact that I'd never seen an albino woman up close before was a factor, and because of my inexperience, I didn't understand why the serious tone of her voice seemed inconsistent with the milky whiteness of her hands, whose phosphorescence was intensified by the green stone set in silver she wore on the index finger of her left hand. I hardly ate a bite during lunch, and when my sister introduced me by name I couldn't hide an insipid little smile. I was immediately certain that Flora had only seen a nervous young kid, somewhat unappealing, a bit lifeless in the midst of so much womanhood.

If memory serves me after all this time, I caught a glimpse of her many nights in my dreams. In detail, her smooth epidermis suggested a sort of armor assembled in sheets of marble. Restless, I watched her in silence and when I went over to touch her glow, a flash similar to that of a magnesium bulb blinded me. Since I had never before been prone to strange dreams, and since I also had a fundamental conviction at that time that dreams were but a reflection of reality, I found no signs to explain the meaning of those images, of the unexpected flash that left me in darkness. Guided by my inexperienced conjectures about love—I was still a virgin and in those last months of my first year of college I was involved in an unsteady love affair with a girl who was equally anxiety-ridden—I decided that these imaginary encounters masked my desire to see Flora again. One afternoon, about three weeks after the lunch at the house while we were

looking for a birthday gift for our mother, I asked my sister about her albino friend. I feigned disinterest in the tone of my question.

“I invited her to the vacation house,” she replied.

“To the vacation house? When?” I wanted to know, unable to hide my surprise. I thought I saw that my sister, still rummaging through some shawls, smiled before answering.

“When final exams are over, the weekend after next.”

She added that I could go with them if I wanted. It was likely, too, that a few other friends would also join us.

“Why don’t you call Pablo to see if he’ll come too?” she suggested.

I disguised my sudden euphoria as best I could, and since by that time I had already professed an aversion to butting into other people’s business, I replied that I wasn’t sure. However, after so many months stuck in Bogotá, the idea of traveling once again to the country and going down to the river with Flora, Pablo, and the others appealed to me. During the twelve afternoons I counted until that weekend, I reminisced about the happy times of past vacations. Every day we would go to the river (almost always with Pablo, our closest cousin and for years my best friend) as though it were some kind of a vice. It was only about half a mile from the house, down a path we had made through the thicket. Since it flowed down a nearby hill, at that height it was barely a stream that, after a waterfall, formed a couple of deep pools where we could swim. The water was always cold and clear. We liked to play the same game every time and go under water for as long as possible before coming back up to the surface. I was always nervous, and I would end up staring at the rocks and the vegetation swaying on the

bottom beneath a viscous light I tended to distrust, as if it illuminated the hallucination of a non-existent world. Afterward, I would lie on the shore under the brutal sun, dizzy from the heat. I'd let myself get so black that, in a couple of days, I would look like a burnt branch. Whenever we tried to go underwater at night, the complete darkness made me believe that life in this world had been interrupted.

Propelled by an exaltation totally new to me, I imagined that if the albino were to accompany me during this nighttime activity, her glow would transform that subterranean atmosphere into a welcome illusion.

We left after lunch on Friday. A nice, skinny girl named Laura came with Flora. Pablo was able to go, and a tall guy, bulky like a weightlifter, rounded out the group. I later found out that he was sort of dating my sister. He showed up in a yellow Subaru, and since my aunt had loaned Pablo her Renault, we were able to make the trip in two cars. The highway was practically empty and we got there early. We were greeted by the caretaker and his wife, a young woman who always seemed to be either pregnant or holding some potbellied baby. Seeing Flora get out of the car, the woman immediately looked down, and with an alarmed expression she hid the current baby behind her arms. Her body language was that of a person who suspects some insurmountable danger, and I supposed that she and her children slept in fear that night, surrounded by bedside lights. I didn't know whether Flora had noticed her anguish, but I imagined that she was used to it and no longer found the reactions of people who saw her for the first time insulting. The man, however, didn't seem to find Flora's extreme whiteness strange, and after handing my sister the keys to the rooms, he offered to go get us some beer.

During the few hours of afternoon that still remained, Flora, the skinny girl, and my sister shut themselves into one of the back bedrooms. It wouldn't have surprised me if the excessive green of the trees surrounding the house seemed blinding to Flora. I didn't know what effect the heat would have on her blood or transparent skin. It discouraged me to think that Flora was going to have to spend the whole time in the shade, shut in for the next three days as though in a penitentiary, her eyes hidden behind those dark glasses. Since I wanted to see her the eyes and, above all, wished that she would look at me for a while, the idea of her reclusion brought on—without my trying to avoid it, truthfully—the kind of sadness that I so much liked to nurture in those days. When I saw myself in the mirror of one of the bathrooms, I believed I had discovered the face of disillusionment and that only a hug from Flora would make me feel better. I decided to go out there, plop into an armchair, and pretend to be sleepy or—why not?—bored.

Pablo stopped me, though, and animated by the couple of beers he had had with my sister's boyfriend, suggested we play a game of ping-pong. We went and got the table and set it up on the patio, in a corner where the wind hardly came in. Before long, the jumping around, the effort to win every point, and the heat, which was still intense, made us all sweat. Guillermo—as I understood my potential brother-in-law's name to be—put himself in charge of the music and, with growing enthusiasm, the opening and handing out of beers.

Now and then, while he and Pablo were concluding some tough match, I entertained myself by looking out at the hills that rose to the left of the veranda. Although they were beyond our property line, years ago, with the energy of an

agricultural enthusiast, my father tried to convince the owners of that land (an old couple from Bogotá that let us use their pool during vacations if there weren't too many of us) to plant a bunch of different kinds of shrubs at the foot of the hills. His effort wasn't successful. One day my father, unable to conceal his disappointment, revealed that the old man was more interested in sitting down with a book and a glass of vodka than tiring himself out tending to vegetation.

The woman, small, robust, her hair always pulled back in a bun, showed no weakness for trees, either, and she contented herself with some little plants around the house. Her routine—a combination of long naps and leisurely swims from one end of the pool to the other—didn't involve a lot of vodka but rather whiskey. Suddenly, the old pair stopped showing up and I never found out whether they had died. One weekend, almost a year before, Pablo and I had seen a young woman sunbathing at the side of the pool while two kids were playing in the water. After that, no one ever returned. The hills remained as they were with half-eroded rectangles, patches of weeds, and a disorderly sprinkling of wild flowers. Sometimes I imagined that the old couple had planted them one night while they were drunk.

My sister and the skinny girl showed up when we turned on the lights. Flora was taking a shower. The heat had hardly diminished. Without a doubt, the beers Guillermo and Pablo had shared awakened a sudden, happy camaraderie between them, so when they saw the girls, they turned up the music and opened a bottle of rum. Laura offered to make orange juice with lemon and I noticed, as she walked away toward the kitchen, that Pablo was following her with his eyes. In her new outfit—a sleeveless shirt and light green shorts—the skinny girl revealed arms and legs that were thin but attractive.

Flora arrived a little while later. The warm air, I supposed, was making her hair a little bit curly, and since it was still damp, her golden-greenish locks shone under the light. She held a lit cigarette in her silver ring hand, and I noticed, disconcertingly, that she wasn't wearing a bra under her long, cotton, sky blue dress. As though the image were something out of the dream I'd had the other night, the idea of the fabric brushing up against the tip of her nipples sent an unexpected shudder through my body. Flustered, I suspected that behind the dark glasses (which she never seemed to take off), Flora, smiling continuously, had discovered my startling observation. While I tried to decide whether to get up from my chair or stay there without moving, intimidated by that serious tone of voice with which Flora accepted a drink of rum and which I immediately attributed to the cigarette smoke, a violent dog fight erupted a few yards from the patio. We looked out from the veranda and just a few seconds after the first growls and bites, we were astonished to see the caretaker, armed with some sort of bat, separating them with a couple of brutal blows to their legs.

"Dogs in heat," he explained from below, once the animals disappeared squealing among the trees. "Otherwise they'd kill each other," he added, just to clarify.

We were scared by the violent over-reaction of the guy's attack, which we saw clearly in the semidarkness, and so we immediately turned down the music. The unexpected disturbance left us in silence, each one of us moving about the patio as if we didn't know what to do. Finally, after a few minutes, Pablo suggested we play cards. Without completely leaving the commotion behind, we agreed with renewed spirit. Right away glasses were re-filled with rum, ice, and lemonade, and I decided to have another beer despite the slight dizziness I felt. I still remembered the unfortunate spectacle of one

of my first (and recent) drunken episodes, in which my mother intervened the following morning as best she could, unable to hide her annoyance and disappointment at my physical state. However, my innocence led me to believe that with a little more alcohol, I would most certainly get Flora's attention that night.

Convinced of that encouraging probability, a dormant confidence seemed to stir in me, and I ventured to light a cigarette. I had smoked before, at a couple of parties, but a sudden heat in my head made me sweat even more as the cards started to dance in my hand. If I fell, I thought, anticipating the embarrassment, Flora, sitting two places to my right, would laugh with everyone else and no doubt be disappointed. Like an additional ruse produced by the vertigo, I saw the refraction of a very light blue, a sort of fantastical watercolor around her bare arms. More than an extension of the shades of her dress, I imagined that it was the lining that accompanied every apparition.

I was grateful for the food, a pasta dinner prepared by Guillermo that slowly enabled me to recuperate sobriety. Without it, some premature misstep would have been inevitable. It would have been a sad slip-up at the wrong time that exposed the uncertain, lukewarm soul of a boy and not the amorous heart of a young man on the brink of adulthood. Flora would soon help bring about that transformation, although neither of us yet realized it.

Around ten, while we were listening to some of Pablo's stories about his college professors, the electricity went out. Because of the time, we figured that the power wouldn't be restored until the following morning. We lit candles, and both surprised and curious, I noticed that Flora, sitting with her legs curled up on a red love seat she was sharing with Laura, was taking off her glasses. She hardly lifted her eyes the whole time

they were off, her head cast downward. She was watching the shadows that the light from the candles made on the floor. When she said good-night, half-afraid I thought I saw an almost white and glassy look in her eyes.

In our room, Pablo, on the bed in shorts, with his legs open, said, “Laura’s pretty, isn’t she? But that Flora...weird, huh? I’ve never seen anyone so white,” and he added, before falling asleep, “She looks like an unbaked loaf of bread...a peeled fish.”

Like a ghost, I added in my head, without knowing why, to Pablo’s couple of lines that sounded like mocking verses of some dance song.

In spite of my fatigue, which for a while I confused with a slight boredom—as seemed inevitable for my meager nature of those years—I didn’t find it easy to get to sleep. I blew out the candle, and unable to get comfortable on the cot, tossed and turned in the dark. I blamed my restlessness on the absence of a fan, on the air that at that hour seemed hotter than during the afternoon (even though the trees wouldn’t stop swaying outside), on the possible delayed effects of the beer. I was also harassed by images of Flora, of her hands like fluorescent gloves.

More than once I had to get up and go to the bathroom, so I spent the whole night in a sort of intermittent insomnia, a suffocating coming and going that I didn’t yet know how to confront. At some point, which I supposed to be near morning because of the repeated crowing of a rooster, I heard steps in the hallway. I estimated a minute went by before I heard noises on the side of the patio. Since whoever was walking around hadn’t lit a candle, I figured he or she must have stumbled into some piece of furniture. I imagined the caretaker doing some routine exploration of the house, and although I wasn’t a big animal lover, I shuddered again as I remembered the blows he emotionlessly

delivered to the dogs. It was probably Flora, I started to think as I slipped back to sleep, searching for serenity in the darkness.

Pablo roused me after nine.

“To the river,” he said as though it was an order, waking me.

Without completely opening my eyes, I spied a clear sky through the curtains. The promise of a sun with neither obstacles nor shade hurried me along. After a quick shower I went out to the dining room. Guillermo, Laura, and my sister were chatting at the table. Flora, sitting at the head of the table, wearing a wide straw hat and glasses with blue lenses, was having a cup of black coffee and smoking a cigarette. I detected the sweet smell of insect repellent in the air. In the kitchen, Pablo was filling up a cooler with cans of beer, and the caretaker’s wife was washing dishes and silverware. Half an hour later we all set off for the river. Not surprisingly, although I was a bit disappointed, I confirmed that Flora was going to stay in the house. She assured us, as she said goodbye with a smile, that she would be in charge of lunch.

Submerged in the cold water, clinging to a rock to neutralize the force of the current, with my hair touching my shoulders, my body still warm from the sun and my lungs full of air, I was struck by a fleeting certainty that an implicit threat was approaching in what was left of my youth, one that would surge all of a sudden and leave me spiritless. For the first time in my life I felt subjected to the strange manifestations of the world. Even if this were a reflection I elaborated many years later, during some unexpected recollection of the scene when Pablo and I, because of the gloomy outbreak of the war and the killings, had auctioned off the vacation house and its half-hectare of land, at that moment I understood that I had to go back to the house. I let go of the rock

and then, pushed by the water, I headed for shore. I didn't think the others would notice the urgency in my gestures, but because of the apprehension that governs all confused young men, and perhaps to avoid suspicion, I invented the unnecessary excuse that my stomach was bothering me. As it was, anxiety was making my stomach do somersaults.

Once I was on my way, I took a deep breath and dried my hair and body a little bit with my tee shirt. When I got to the house it was my firm intention to look for Flora, but the vagueness of my plan paralyzed me. I didn't have anything to say to her, and if I did speak to her, surely something foolish would come out of my mouth, I thought, as though for a few minutes I had taken a sudden leap into the realm of adulthood. I heard noises in the kitchen and when I went into the hallway and was about to go into the bathroom, Flora's voice stopped me like a thud.

"Inés?" she asked from the bedroom.

"No," I answered nervously, without conviction. If minutes ago I thought I had pondered like a man, my timid response brought me back to adolescence.

"Ricardo?"

I looked in through the half-closed door. Almost in the dark and with a book in her lap, Flora was lying on the bed reading. She was wearing beige pants and a sleeveless shirt with green and orange patterns. She still had her dark glasses on, and I imagined that albinos must relish the feline ability to see in the dark.

"Did you all come back?" she asked, propping herself up a little against the headboard.

"No," I replied in the same tone.

She brought her legs up and crossed them like in a yoga position, pulled her hair back in a bun, and put the book down on the end table to her right.

“Is the river pretty?” she asked, looking toward the window. With the question she had lifted her chin in an exaggerated way, and it occurred to me with astonishment that Flora was almost blind.

“Yes,” I answered.

“The sky is really clear, right?”

“Yes...”

I tried to add something more but couldn't, and I had the feeling of being trapped within the terrifying simplicity of monosyllables.

“I would like to go,” Flora said then.

“So let's go,” I suggested, suddenly excited by the possibility of not only moving out of the doorway but also of leaving that bedroom as soon as possible. The puddle that had formed at my feet from my wet shorts had started to make me uncomfortable.

“No, I can't,” she replied.

“Does the heat bother you?”

“No, it's not the heat,” she said with a little giggle, as though she were apologizing. “The thing is, the daylight would kill me.”

I wasn't sure how to interpret this expression, so I kept quiet. It scared me to think, in my ignorance, that sunrays could destroy her as if she were some sort of fantastical being, stunned and struck dead by some savage brightness like the one that lit up the day outside. No doubt, I imagined again, she must stroll around contently at night,

relieved at last from the sun's siege upon her fragile skin. As if she also knew how to read minds, Flora confessed:

“I would love to have skin the color of yours.”

Her words came out without a trace of shyness, but I noticed that she was having a bit of difficulty lighting a cigarette. I tried to figure out the tonality with which she was seeing me and I concluded, without mockery, that because of the tint of her glasses, she must find everyone equally dark. Still, although my nervousness was helping to confuse me, I deduced that Flora was paying me a compliment by speaking so openly. My legs felt clammy and I realized that if I didn't start moving soon, my feet would go to sleep in a matter of seconds. I sat in a chair next to the bed and discovered the sudden reflections of an intense pink on Flora's arms and face. I suspected that she was undergoing a secret metamorphosis. Then, effortlessly, as though responding naturally to a foolish temptation, I didn't hesitate to declare that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Clearly driven by my intense emotion, I was unaware that there was no escape from a statement like that, and that, sincere or not, it could sometimes be perceived as a threat or a trick by the person on the receiving end. For me it was a critical declaration, significant because it gave me the strength to stay there looking at her. Flora, however, barely smiled, and after putting out her cigarette, took my hand in hers. I felt the brush of her ring, and sort of shaking, making an effort to breathe normally, I realized that I didn't know what the next step would be. I thought that mentioning the dreams I'd had during the past few days would serve to justify this apparently irrational outburst. I supposed, as

she softly squeezed my fingers, that Flora guessed the truth and was feeling compassion for my pent-up chastity, repressed in a pleasure that was only imaginary.

The heat of her palm surprised me, since in that immaterial whiteness—where now, because of its proximity I could make out the skin-deep blood vessels—I had intuited the coldness of a creature that didn't belong to our species. Without letting go, she wanted to know how old I was. I added two years to my recently completed eighteen. Flora, perhaps aware of my lie, smiled again and said:

“Inés told me you're the spoiled one in the family.”

I took her comment as a sort of affectionate joke and replied with a smirk. However, as though there were truth in what she said, I thought that my mother would not approve of this scene. No doubt—guided her whole life by the cautious dogma of not to go looking for what you don't need—she would ask with displeasure why I was seeking comfort that afternoon in an albino woman who was older than I. Like part of some sentimental recipe that would keep me away from juvenile perversions, in a recent conversation she had pointed me towards a brotherly approach to women. Passion, according to her beliefs, was a slow process, often depressing, an adult matter, and I was still too young to understand its mysteries.

Flora had leaned forward slightly. I saw her pointy nose, her lips like two thin, red lines, her neck, and at the top of her shirt, the start of her breasts, whose impermeable luminosity promised a heat and a softness that would leave me petrified. Persuaded by her sturdy gaze, I asked her to take off her sunglasses. She tilted her head, let out a sigh, and touched my face with her other hand. Then we heard voices in the hallway. I quickly let go of her hand and jumped to my feet. My pirouette made her laugh, and

possibly to calm my confusion, she asked if it was possible to go down to the river at night. I told her it was, and then she said without complaining, as if she were merely giving a warning:

“I’m a little cross-eyed and I don’t hear well out of my left ear.”

The concise diagnosis didn’t scare me, but for a couple of seconds I felt certain that this affair would hurl me—as if I truly were dealing with a ghost—into the distorted confines of the world. When I left, I heard the racket of the cicadas in the trees for the first time.

As was bound to happen, the afternoon went by excruciatingly slowly. After lunch, I decided to go back to the river. My sister and Flora stayed in their room, Laura and Pablo left to find a pool, and Guillermo, I imagined, was taking a nap. The sun’s rays were still almost vertical, and several times I went under the water and held onto the same rock as I had that morning. Through this repeated immersion I was trying to enter again into that sort of enlightening abyss that, with my pulse surging, I had subconsciously associated to my first graze with death. Not knowing that repeating this revelation would be a fantasy that no one was able to achieve at will, the effort quickly wore me out. I sought the shade of a tree and fell asleep.

I never learned whether what happened that night was as I had imagined it. It would remain suspended in the limitless form of a dream that would forever trouble my life, and for a long time, once Flora was no longer around, I would wander alone and disoriented. As a kind of premonition, before, during, and after dinner I was distracted and in a bad mood. I didn’t want to participate in the card game they had organized in the dining room, and I went out to the patio. Few lights shone on the hills. When they

would invite us to the pool—I suddenly remembered—the woman next door would always offer us snacks and soda. Once in a while, if we were making a lot of noise, she liked to scold us. Many times I saw her flit from side to side, her white hair a mess, waving her hands like some bird surprised by an unforeseen wind. One day, while I sat resting by the side of the pool, she came up alongside me and tenderly stroked my head. I didn't move, but her sudden affection almost scared me. My only living grandmother, who was probably the same age, had never touched me so lovingly.

My sister and Flora came over arm in arm like two little girls and snapped me out of that memory. They told me happily that they had convinced the others to come down to the river.

The night was really clear and we went without a flashlight. One of the dogs accompanied us for a stretch, but later she disappeared into the thicket, chasing a bug. Like in the predictable plotline of some second-rate novel, we arranged ourselves in couples between the rocks and the beach. No one seemed inclined to swim, and after a while I saw that Pablo was trying to kiss Laura. Although he liked to think of himself as bit of a womanizer, I imagined that after this strange weekend, we would share the thrill of the same discovery. Flora was looking toward the water, with her dark glasses on, her legs drawn up with her arms around them. I didn't know what to do, and I concentrated silently on the current, hoping for some inspiration.

“Wanna go back to the house?” Flora suddenly asked me, almost in a whisper.

I agreed and started to shake, perplexed. I didn't see my sister or Guillermo, and for some reason I thought that we were all acting out the same story.

I was painfully unsuccessful at controlling my trembling. Already in the bedroom, Flora hugged me tight and, as if wanting to calm the spasms of a sick person, she rocked me back and forth. After my shaking subsided, we lay down in bed. I understood, gripped by an imprecise hope, that I was allowing myself to be swept away against my will into an ambush, toward a serious crash about which I knew absolutely nothing. Even though we didn't turn on the light, I kept my eyes closed. By the time I opened them again, the world around me was a blur.

At first, I responded with a haphazard fury that Flora guided with a firm but careful hand. Flora moved back and forth like a blue light on top of me, a weightless, gyrating lantern, like the souls she illuminated on the walls of the bedroom in my impetuous vision. Consumed by a growing fire, I could only muster some vague words, incoherent like the mutterings of a hypnotized person. When she leaned down, exhausted, I finally saw above my face her watery eyes, slightly askew, her eyebrows white like in the negative of a photograph. In a moment of clarity, deceptively certain, I believed I saw the gaze of a clairvoyant, with the power of predictions despite the torment of light. I felt that she was offering me the first clue toward adulthood, toward the first real articulation of the enigma of life. Submerged in a sort of delighted desolation, we laughed for a while. It was impossible to tell how much time had gone by, and with no little difficulty, because of how tired my legs were and the weight of Flora's arms, I decided to get up and go back to my room. Thankfully I didn't see anyone on the way.

The miracle didn't happen again, and perhaps it was no more than the invention of a stormy fever. However, from then on (although neither of us ever looked for or

formulated an explanation for the cause or meaning of our unexpected encounter), later passions, future adventures, ardors that awaited me, would only be ephemeral repetitions and tiny parodies of that night. I was thankfully unaware of the irremediable exactitude of that sentence, and all I pondered, collapsing into a shapeless lethargy, was the possible origin of the engulfing aroma of Flora.

Family History

*He caught a glimpse of his mother waving from
an upstairs window, and that unfamiliar gesture
disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell.
Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory**

He never imagined he could sweat so much. He felt the sticky palms of his hands and a cool, steady trickle down his back. It was as though his shirt, which he hardly ever wore, was dripping water through the stitches. He figured it was from the sun beating down on the roof of the car and from the chaotic, noisy traffic. He hadn't been downtown in a long time and wasn't familiar with most of the streets they were taking. Without letting go of the steering wheel, his father cursed under his breath. He thought he must be nervous too, confused like he was. To calm himself, he tried to concentrate his attention on the people in other cars, but he didn't see anything interesting. Plus, he couldn't stop wondering what his mother would be like. He guessed that it had been more than three years since he'd seen her. He wasn't sure, but anyway that's what his father said. Until late the night before, in bed, he had gone through the latest photos he'd received. They were dated three or four months ago and the majority of them showed his mother's most recent appearance. In one that he guessed had been taken at a table in some restaurant, she was facing front, her chin resting in the palm of her hand. Her eyes were sparkling and she was smiling. He couldn't see any resemblance between her face and his own, as though hers were part of a dream.

"We're here," said his father, parking all of a sudden in front of the door of a small hotel. He left the car running.

"Are you coming in?" he asked, short of breath.

His father thought for a few seconds before answering.

“Not now. When I come back to get you.”

He asked for her at the reception desk and waited in one of the chairs in the lobby. Ten minutes later, his mother appeared. She was wearing a black, two-piece dress. Her hair was short and sort of reddish. She had just gotten out of the shower and wasn't wearing any makeup. He hugged her timidly, and he felt her smooth, warm cheek. When they pulled apart from each other, he discovered that she was carrying a rectangular package wrapped in purple paper, with a gold bow and a green decoration made of dried leaves that covered part of a card.

“We can have lunch here,” his mother suggested, taking him by the arm.

He let her lead him without resistance, scared she would detect an unpleasant odor in his sweaty shirt. Although he had only seen her from the front for a couple of seconds, he knew she was incredibly beautiful, much more so than in any of the photos he had received with her short letters—some, mysterious messages of love.

Once they sat down, she handed him the package.

“A birthday present. Late, of course.”

She had smiled as she said it, as though she weren't really apologizing. He thanked her and discovered that his hands were shaking. The sweat wasn't stopping. With growing intensity, he felt the thick drops forming on his forehead. Inside a beautifully carved box he found a chess set. The pieces, made of the same material as the box, had a piece of green cloth on the base. He didn't know what to say. He saw that the bishops were holding some sort of spear. On each knight piece, the horse had its front

legs lifted almost as high as its head, and there was a tiny, serious horseman on top. The black pieces shone like mirrors.

“Your father told me you’re a devoted player.”

“Yes,” he said, still holding onto the white queen. A never-before-seen beauty, like his mother, he thought.

He wasn’t hungry, but settled on a hamburger and a soda. His mother ordered a salad. In the silence that followed, he wanted to ask her if she’d like to spend a few more days in Bogotá, but he changed his mind. He was pleased to see that the dining room was empty.

“You’ve grown up to be a handsome young man,” she said, taking his hand.

He looked at his mother’s hand, covering his, with its pronounced veins, short nails, and a ring with a black stone on her middle finger. For the first time he clearly heard the thumping of his heart. He wanted to look her in the eye, smile, and tell her that he felt happy to be with her again, so close to her voice.

“What do you plan to study?” she suddenly asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Don’t you like anything in particular?”

“No.”

When they finished eating, she took him by the hand again and asked him to look at her. It was hard work for him to hold her gaze; her light brown eyes hardly ever blinked. She gently squeezed his fingers before asking:

“If I were to come back to this city, would you live with me?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation. Even though it was true, at least for the moment, his immediate assent took him by surprise. She looked away, toward a window. He wanted to know where she was going after Bogotá.

“Tonight I leave for Buenos Aires. They’re offering me a part in a movie. I just stopped in Bogotá to see you,” she replied without letting go of his hand.

They talked for a while. He told her about school and laughed when she asked if he had a girlfriend. Then his father appeared and contently greeted her with a quick kiss on the lips. He understood that the two of them had already spoken and agreed that his father would drive her to the airport. He assured them that he didn’t mind taking a taxi back to the apartment. She walked him to the door, and taking his face in her hands, she gently kissed him on each cheek. He thought he saw a sudden sparkle in her eyes.

A week later, after reading the postcard she had sent them from Argentina, he asked his father if he believed his mother would come back to stay.

“Not to this city, I don’t think so,” he answered without sorrow.

Offspring

The basis of sacrifice is desire, desire of a fruit that is the world itself...
Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*

I got to know my cousin Mario three years before he left the country. He had a textile shop on the first floor of his house, a few blocks from Bolívar Plaza. Since the store was on my way to the university, I ended up saying hello to him almost every day, and once in a while I would stay for a cup of coffee or tea. Before then I hadn't seen very much of him. On a couple of occasions when I was still in high school, I went with my mother to buy cloth or fabric from him for curtains. He wore skinny ties, and by the looks of his hairdo, you could tell he had been using gel for a long time. I never saw him at a family gathering, wedding, funeral, or birthday party. He was almost twenty years older than me, and I remembered that he was always formal with my mother, who was only a little older than him. His behavior was guided by the ceremony that family hierarchies instill.

We quickly became friends, and after about a year, he wanted us to meet for lunch every Wednesday with an acquaintance of his, an Uruguayan who served a Spanish menu and with whom Mario would stay afterwards to play checkers or chess. In one of his last letters, Mario wrote that he considered those afternoons to be the most valuable memories of his past, happy antecedents to his final experiences in Bogotá. Confiding in me, he confessed that he just couldn't understand why a young woman would decide to study physics, and more than once he tried to persuade me to change majors.

“If I’d had a daughter I would have bought her a piano,” he declared one afternoon in a serious tone.

Thanks to these lunches, I discovered that Mario, in spite of the sort of catastrophe that took place in his infancy and the early years of his childhood, was kind and discreet, rare qualities in my family. Once his Uruguayan friend confessed to me without emotion that Mario was like a saint to many people. In his neighborhood he had become a philanthropist who literally clothed his neighbors. Maybe it helped him to have inherited my aunt Jimena’s demeanor. Still, while he was a pleasant and clever conversationalist, his dark, prominent eyes gave him a look of permanent restlessness, as though he could only observe others from the perspective of inevitable discouragement.

Perhaps that’s why it didn’t seem strange to me at first to see him alongside that large woman who always wore her hair pulled back. She would greet me with hostility and disappear into the house as soon as I’d enter the shop. I wasn’t sure whether the woman’s displeasure, or practically annoyance, was caused by the fact that I was physically reminiscent of my maternal grandmother. As confirmed by photographs, her features and bone structure were reproduced in my face.

Through Mario I discovered that my maternal grandmother led a large part of her adult life in miserly distrust. I learned, despite the fact that she always treated me with affection and more than once said she considered me her favorite granddaughter, that like a god in whose hands it would be terrible to fall, she instilled with narrow-minded tenacity the laws of unilateral dependence as well as fear and discord among her children, especially the older ones. To almost all those who were dependent upon her orbit of power, like subjects—and Mario knew this servitude best of all—she proffered an

uncertain future. In her doctrine, fed by a personal and almost autistic religious manual, punishments were neither scarce nor light. Mario remembered that the severity with which she ran her household accelerated submission; penance didn't diminish her intensity, because that would have meant that wrongdoing was involuntary. As in the Old Testament, omission was for my grandmother the obvious origin of sin. Without exaggeration, she believed that as a result of an unconfessed sin relating to marriage or love (for example, in a sort of unverified family tale my grandfather left to seek his fortune in Galicia, Spain, and never returned), liberty was an inhuman mystery, a presumption that concealed disastrous premonitions.

True to the historical mandate that governs the majority of family arrangements, my grandmother treated the females most coldly. Their particular merits or goodness notwithstanding, a moral vigilance would be reserved for them, which following the typical adaptation of any stigma, was inherent in the conviction that women would always misuse desire. According to this order, men, though less virtuous, were covered by the shell of superstition: they were untouchable and very few of them were worth the trouble.

Following the rules under this system of justice was not necessarily a guarantee that one could imagine the promise of a reward. Still, Mario was aware that my mother, conversely, knew and experienced a somewhat less severe, different rigidity, possibly by virtue of being the youngest child. She was born when my grandmother was forty years old (when, perhaps, she was a surprise). Although he never knew my mother's version, Mario was sure that it was more my grandmother's fatigue than her remorse which allowed my mother a more or less normal childhood, with usual, intermittent happiness.

She didn't have to worry about the reasons. With surprising ease, she attracted (as Mario put it) the "residue" of maternal compassion no one suspected existed. It would be a difference that not only marked the special quality of her fortune but that, unintentionally, would preside over the dark meaning of destiny for her siblings. Of all of them, including the men, she would be the only one to eventually overcome the prediction invoked by my grandmother's authority. She used that authority since the time they were children to force them into an illusory experience of happiness. Mario would add of my mother:

"At least she married the man she fell in love with, in spite of the fact that, truth be told, your father was darker than many people would have liked."

When he said it, the controlled resentment in his tone unsettled me. But it was my aunt Jimena, Mario's mother, the oldest child, upon whom my grandmother imposed her distrust of the world most severely. As though she truly held in her power the key to happiness—and of course to misfortune—with Jimena the logic of her mercilessness would culminate in a precise, pure synthesis of punishment. For my grandmother (as for her parents and their parents) the aggravation of a fault in a close family member was life-long, like an extreme responsibility. The sentence, without considering the level of atonement, never varied.

Therefore, when she found out that my aunt Jimena was pregnant before even thinking about marriage and months shy of turning sixteen, my grandmother decided, with an almost organic pride that had been incubating in her blood for a long time, to immediately squash her daughter's spirit, which had been a force propelled by a bewitching beauty according to those who knew her in her youth. For Mario, an

unmistakable sign of his mother's early impetuosity was her ever untimely, contagious laugh, despite the fact that it had become less severe and more sporadic as the years passed. Mario declared several family members were jealous that they didn't have a laugh like that.

"Grandmother created a family version of Rapunzel," Mario told me on one occasion.

In a parody of drama, cruel and always ridiculous, my aunt Jimena's fate would remain forever shaped without a chance for her to respond. My grandmother was indignant to find in her daughter a passion that she herself lacked. With reiterated tenacity, she would strip her of any vestige of that bleak episode. Mario's father disappeared without a trace, and as though it were taboo, no one in the family ever mentioned his name again.

"It wouldn't surprise me at all if the crazy old lady hired a hit man," Mario said to the Uruguayan when he wanted to know what he thought.

There would be a child, but to remove the dishonor, my grandmother would confine Jimena to a meaningless daily existence, thus reinforcing the validity of her exclusive justice and as irrefutable testimony to her betrayed pride.

From that day on, Aunt Jimena would be nothing more than the mother of a bastard. Following the offensive logic that acts of free will are barbaric, he would be a clandestine offspring that would inherit not the mysterious vitality of his mother's young face, but rather his grandmother's irrational resolve. With the abandon that permits all types of abuse, my grandmother refused to acknowledge Mario's childhood, relegating

him from an early age to the role of personal messenger and subjecting him, without trying to hide it, to the mockery of a life of service among his relatives.

“For a few years, one of her younger brothers made me wash his car every week in the garage at his office. It was a huge Buick, dark blue with leather seats. It required gallons of water and the job took all afternoon. Afterwards the guy would thank me with a pat on the shoulder, a soda, and the sort of tip that, after bus fare, was practically nothing,” Mario once told me at lunch.

My grandmother’s displeasure, typical of the canon of laws on which she based her life and that of others, quickly reached the level of blindness that leads to all human sacrifices. In an effort to make Aunt Jimena forget about herself, Grandmother assigned her to kitchen work and the care of her five younger brothers and sisters. According to Mario, it was the all too typical story of women’s history perpetuated within families, similar to the quarantine of a close relative suffering from some ailment. It would turn her personal life into a misfortune as childish as that of a TV drama, or in my grandmother’s day, those radio shows they would listen to in the kitchen. However, more than any abstract order or script copied from dramatic plots, Grandmother’s mandate served as an effective prescription for blocking any new enthusiasm in my aunt’s spirit. Looking to hold onto some degree of sanity, some secret store of reason, Aunt Jimena simply gave into this deliberate fraud. As with a person abandoned at the edge of a desert, no one knew what the definitive path of her spirit would be. Not even Mario.

“Knowing it would mean wanting to decipher Grandmother’s true motives,” Mario said during one of our last conversations. He thought it was unnecessary to clarify

the grounds that justified why she turned terror into one of her privileges. The two women just played their roles in one of many awkward, unfortunate family sagas. Mario, by accident, contributed a concrete dimension to the punishment. He formed part of the superstition, of blind faith in the doctrines that attack insignificant people who are fearful of the happiness of others.

Although she never became close to another man, Aunt Jimena always seemed like a relatively happy, calm woman on whom no disaster ever befell. Perhaps as part of her resignation, she acknowledged the insulting assumption held by abusive adults that young people always make mistakes and should get what they deserve in a gradual settling of accounts. Therefore, anyone could understand as ironic (like a foolish moral, according to Mario), that of all the women in the family, she was the only true beauty. By following the sequence of innumerable family photos, aided also by two albums Mario gave me, I found that my grandmother, her sisters, and her cousins (some of whom merited disdain) all shared almost the same easily frightened face, big ears, broad forehead, and sort of skinny body. The dark, abundant hair that almost all of them wore past their shoulders in their youth seemed to fit naturally only with the fine lips and brown eyes of my aunt Jimena. On the others it looked like a disheveled wig. A meticulous examination of those faces could lead one to the unfortunate conclusion that these women would only be seduced by individuals who would surely leave the mark of an efficient but trivial existence. They were probably the bearers of a strong, healthy stock, and they operated under the philosophy of efficiency without conflicting fantasies or desire for insurrection. These were the sort of attributes that would compensate for the

absence of others such as wisdom, modesty or tolerance. Their god, the same as my grandmother's, had been stingy in awarding them such traits.

I was frightened to have descended from this cold, arrogant, feminine vine, and for a while I didn't believe that anyone would be able to possess me with true yearning. In my expression, as in the images of my grandmother, I feared seeing the reflection of the frozen energy left by a forever-excluded pleasure and the rejection of any demand of desire. I resisted falling, for fear of an irreparable loss, into the same behavior that ostracized Aunt Jimena and out of which Mario came, thus providing a pretext for this unpleasant family offense.

Gertrudis the Great

He sensed that this time there was no possible redemption.

Horacio Quiroga, "A Season of Love"

As the plane flew over that seemingly endless city, I decided that this time I would call Gertrudis. Two years ago, during my first visit to Mexico, I managed, without real despair, to avoid dialing her phone number. The reason was a combination of several things, or rather, in one single multi-faceted circumstance, divided among my actions those days like some voracious climbing plant. I was in love again with such desperation, with so much pleasure, that I convinced myself I could forget Gertrudis. During the two weeks I was there, I didn't look at her phone number, I didn't shudder at the thought of finding myself once again in the same geographic coordinates with her. That time, I stuck to the silly conviction, the pretentious, half-baked notion that I had been able to free myself of the obligation of that dead-end love. We were never together. We fell in love quickly, and once in a while, as in predictable stories, we would meet in a park. The passion with which we imagined a life together scared us, and Gertrudis always regretted the eagerness she revealed the few times we kissed.

Now, during the last maneuvers the airplane made before landing, I repeated the old number as I had done throughout the whole flight. It was the same one Gertrudis had written down three years before in a short note based on little lies in which she emphasized, as if someone were paying special attention to those lines, how happy she would be if I paid her a visit. The tone was excessive, and I understood it as a type of reluctant parody that needed no response. However, I jotted down the number in my address book before throwing it out. Five, six, four, five, zero, three, four, I recited in the

taxi that took me from the airport to my hotel, a murmur that confirmed for me, as in ancient spells, that this was a passion without end. I once concluded that it was almost a historical sentiment.

I slept for a couple of hours, showered, spoke with the people who were organizing the conference, and around seven I went downstairs to have a drink. While the bartender prepared my second whiskey, I wondered, already feeling pretty good, what would happen if by chance Rudolph picked up the receiver on the other end of the line. I wasn't sure whether I would hang up immediately if I heard his voice. Nor was I sure whether I'd insist on dialing the number again. Even though I had foreseen that sort of risk in Bogotá, it upset my stomach like a sudden bout of indigestion. Rudolph, I said after two small sips. That wasn't the guy's name. It was the name with which I had secretly baptized him years ago, when I had just started college and he introduced Gertrudis to me as his future wife.

For a while, Rudolph, my father's first cousin, was a regular visitor at our house. He would come to parties, for dinner, and he often spent the night or accompanied us on trips. He was some eight or ten years older than I (the same number of years he had on Gertrudis), and he always had dry, thin hair. When I entered into adolescence, as part of a general, accepted joke, he didn't hesitate to put me in the category of hopeless, pale boys to whom it was necessary, even useful every once in a while to give a spiritual, and if need be, physical lesson, in Rudolph's opinion. I could never defend myself against his guffaws, and perhaps the tedium of tolerating him led me to compare him to the famous reindeer from the song, not just because he had a prominent nose (though not as colorful as the animal's), but also because the guy, adopting a stupid and almost always deceitful

tone, had convinced himself that he was turning his shortcomings into virtues. He believed, for example, that his simple-minded, often vulgar humor was that of a truly funny guy, gifted with wit. Maybe the only, albeit relative, virtue that I could suspect him of having was that of a total lack of shame. He wasn't embarrassed by his idiocy, and I came to believe that he saw himself as admired. No doubt, among people who were like him (friends from the office, the club, his neighbors, cousins, brothers-in-law—a crew from which I always excluded Gertrudis), he would pass for an individual with acute intellect that had found a way, with the skill of false prophets, to conceal his ignorance and provoke not only amusement but also fear to some degree.

Because of vanity and disenchantment, no doubt distilled by the envy that had built up for so long, it remained a painful mystery to me how Gertrudis could still be in love with Rudolph and spend her life with him. It was a topic we never mentioned. More than once I believed her to be the victim of a lazy detour, of some disorder of the passions, immobilized in the submissive pose of those who have an embalmed heart. Although it would never be possible, I never stopped imagining a calm, day-to-day life at Gertrudis's side, spending every night for the rest of my life with her, being with her everywhere, blending our experiences. This was a beautiful spectacle I was still reluctant to concede to Rudolph in spite of the fact that he was the only one living it. But I no longer knew how to escape that type of impure truth. Perhaps Rudolph was, like many others, a wonderful husband.

I had a bite to eat, went upstairs, and dialed without thinking any more about it. Neither Rudolph nor Gertrudis answered. I did recognize, however, the voice of my faraway cousin on the answering machine and after a brief, almost silly, greeting to the

“family,” I left the name of the hotel and my room number. While I was being entertained by a soccer game on TV, I started to think again that if Rudolph had found out that on more than one occasion Gertrudis listened to me tell her (head leaning to one side, eyes looking at the floor, hands folded almost with ferocity) that I loved her, he would administer my final lesson in the midst of an understandably crazed attack. He would make sure that along with some teeth, my spurious right to continue loving her would go flying out the window. I imagined that his rage would be driven by the conviction that an obscene voracity, a dangerous blindness, since it was illusory, was hidden in my love. I attributed the drama of the scene to the two whiskies and the wine I’d had afterwards with dinner. As an ending, I imagined Gertrudis, dismissed by the family, stunned by the contempt of others, and perhaps by the shame of having participated in a scandal.

The ringing phone woke me up a few minutes before eleven. I turned off the TV, and by the tone of her voice when she said hello, I deduced that Gertrudis was excited.

“When did you get in?” she asked.

“This afternoon.”

“Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

In this second question I sensed even more happiness, and I imagined her gesticulating, pacing.

I replied that it had all been a bit sudden and told her that at the last minute I had received an invitation to a translators’ conference. I would be in Mexico City for four nights and the following weekend I would travel to Tepoztlán.

“They sell beautiful ceramics there, cheap too, and the trip is gorgeous,” she said immediately. Her emotion seemed to be growing.

A silence followed and I didn’t know where the sensation—almost the certainty—came from that in our short dialogue the tones of a previous one were being reproduced.

“And this time do you plan on seeing me?” Gertrudis wanted to know.

I didn’t answer right away, because I sensed reproach in her question.

“How’s my cousin?” I asked suddenly, for no reason.

Gertrudis didn’t answer right away either, and I imagined she must have thought that I still kept alive the illusion that I could rekindle our romance.

“He left for Ohio,” she answered.

I couldn’t help smiling at her response, and I concluded that in a work of fiction, like the book of stories I was translating at the time, the coincidence of my arrival and Rudolph’s departure would sound forced. It would be an extreme outcome resulting from the whims of an author intimidated by lack of resources and that would justify an otherwise improbable meeting, disoriented and scripted. However, thrilled by the opportune turn of events, I agreed to let Gertrudis pick me up the next day, after six in the evening at the cultural center where the conference was being held. After agreeing that it hardly mattered how many years had passed without our seeing each other, we said good-bye. I remembered, in the immediate silence that filled the room, the misery into which Gertrudis’s move to this city had sunk me. For days, I felt far removed from the world, mechanically moving through a terrible routine. Since my pale complexion and weight loss no longer scared anyone who knew me, family or friends, no one had noticed the more recent weakness in the state of my spirit. Out of distrust and incredulity, I didn’t go

to any type of confessor (fraternal, religious, or psychiatric) supposedly supplied with infallible instructions for me to escape my crippling sentimentality. I suspected, with alarm, I wouldn't get back to sleep for a long time.

Lying in bed, trying to identify the humming sound coming from the bathroom, I thought again that my story was the repetition of someone else's emotion. With parallel enthusiasm, cooped up in a hotel room, that someone also foresaw the possibility of a romantic date for the next day. When I was about to fall asleep again, I prayed with the naive urgency that endlessly impels passion, that Gertrudis would still be as beautiful as ever.

Gertrudis was exactly the same—that gaze with the same precision of her black, slightly almond-shaped eyes, the happy expression of her mouth, the indecision in the movement of her hands. According to Gertrudis, I had a new shimmer in my eyes. During the first two nights we walked around the city, down the Paseo de la Reforma and through Coyoacán, where I came close to getting completely drunk in a bar by having too much tequila. We talked about the family, about the sort of historical sanction entailed in belonging to a brutalized, brutal country, about Rudolph's constant travel, about my job as a translator, about her interest in becoming an expert on the many varieties of Mexican cuisine. As in a previously agreed-upon pact, with unspoken orders not to bring up our secret past, we never mentioned it. I was frightened by the concrete, unhappy possibility that Gertrudis wouldn't want to remember anything that had happened between us and was hiding the topic on purpose.

The third day, after hearing me whine several times about the translator's servitude, Gertrudis took me to lunch at Salvador Novo's old mansion, where we had the

famous flying dove cake for dessert. Afterwards, we set out for downtown, and when we found the CD I was looking for, she wanted to show me a small sixteenth-century chapel on Donceles Street, a few blocks from the Zócalo and the Templo Mayor. Because of the city's continuing drainage problems, the atrium had sunk about fifteen inches, and in the mortar of the facade, the red, Aztec stones were protruding. Silently, and with the solemnity of a devout Catholic, Gertrudis led me past the choir stalls and the altar to a small painting with niches for relics on either side. It was an oil painting, a portrait of a young girl saint created by some master from the nineteenth century. On the golden frame, below, I read GERTRUDIS THE GREAT. The image showed small, white hands in a pleading gesture, her head tilted toward one side, her pale mouth open slightly, as though it were about to let out a groan, and blue eyes. A ray of light illuminated part of her nun's habit. It occurred to me that there was something disagreeable in that fixed stare, in the static beseeching expression, as if the painter had tried to leave in those eyes not the mark of a pious soul but the face of a deviant, suffering heart.

I didn't understand Gertrudis's silence at my side and I guessed, almost sadly, that she would ask that we kneel in front of the image and say a prayer together.

"No saint is happy," she said, and without saying anything else she took me by the hand to leave.

Gertrudis didn't attempt to confess the reason for bringing me somewhat enthusiastically to the small painting, nor did I try to ask her. I speculated that Gertrudis had found in the etymology of the name that united her to the saint some mysterious coincidence with the latest phase of her life. Maybe when she found her, Gertrudis recognized the possibility of a miracle. However, the explanation that our visit to the

chapel might conceal a recent mystical reconciliation on Gertrudis's part made me nervous. As far as I could remember, the orbit of devotion through which Rudolph and most of my family passed contemplated only the spheres of the practical world. In bouts of sentimentality, Rudolph acted like a clown. Even so, I hoped that Gertrudis's enthusiastically dragging me into the chapel was in response to some intellectual or aesthetic valuation, and since I didn't see her cross herself, I concluded that it was the simple emotion to which any spectator succumbs in front of disconcerting images. Furthermore, I hadn't seen any melancholy shadows darkening her spirit. It seemed to me, though, that the silence we had shared in front of the image of the saint was altering the course of events, that it was a sign of a favorable preamble. In what remained of that night with her, I thought I would be able to overcome my fear, and in the midst of an altogether new conversation, pose to her the impertinent question of whether her life wouldn't be better spent with me.

The intervention of an annoying mishap deprived me of the possibility of starting that conversation. In the art museum, in the stairway that led to the murals, we met a couple of her friends who insisted, both the man and the woman, on inviting me to an "awesome" restaurant where they made the best tacos in the city. They were actually tasty, but I ate them with certain displeasure and imagined a prolonged stomachache that night. I could see that Gertrudis wasn't enjoying making small talk with her friends too much, either. When she dropped me off at the hotel, she squeezed my hand tightly and as she said good-bye she grazed my lips with a kiss, giving me just enough time to smell a sweet fragrance of flowers or fruit.

In the taxi that took me to her apartment the next night, as if I were again confronting the signs and reinventions of fiction, I devised the only final ending that could save me from danger, that would relieve my restlessness before leaving that city for the last time. I was still convinced that, in spite of its eternal unrest, my desire was fundamentally correct. In the scene that I composed in my mind, prepared beforehand so as not to display exaggerated intensity, we would embrace in the kitchen as Gertrudis finished making dinner. Then, we would exchange some timid kisses that would flow almost immediately into spasms and trembles. While we exchanged sweet nothings, we would understand that the moment had come to scare away misfortune, to overcome at last the type of sacrilege that had trapped us for years in Bogotá like a pair of hostages. Then, the weariness of having lived as two shadows subjected to the hard labor of immobility would disappear. Afterwards, with tired happiness, I would leave Gertrudis asleep there, lying like a fainted, hot animal that had swooned at my side.

No doubt because of their ardor, the image and circumstances I anticipated for the ceremony were imperfect. Perhaps for that reason, as I rode up in the elevator, I didn't correctly interpret the reaches of Rudolph's and my family's potential anger. As happens in all stories where insults are exchanged, it wouldn't have been crazy to suppose that in those containing sentimental inconsistencies with family law, the circumstances of a scandal would drive a household argument to unsuspected violence. Everyone knows that in this doctrine, rancor causes and justifies mocking and abuse.

No one relishes confirming that miracles never happen. As in the scene I created in the taxi, when I arrived at her house, Gertrudis was in the kitchen giving the final touches to a delicious dish. Since I was in a good mood, my conjectures about the lustful,

unexpected effects of thermal inversion made her laugh. She had her hair pulled back in a bun and was wearing a little bit of eye makeup. Impelled by the incredible wonder that made my destiny clear to me, I approached her and gently squeezed the bare nape of her neck. For a couple of seconds she bent her neck back and pressed my fingers. Suddenly, as though she had thought about what she was doing, she suppressed a scream, and with an agile jump, she moved away from me. She covered her face with her arms, as if she were expecting to be hit. In one hand she grabbed a wooden spoon smeared with avocado and in the other a small bottle of vinegar. In my bewilderment I imagined an emblem impossible to interpret. I apologized with hasty words, and to make her feel better, and also so that she would lower her arms, I offered her a glass of wine. We looked at the floor for a while. I was scared by how quickly the story had gone off script. When Gertrudis was able to speak, I was devastated to hear that she could only offer me friendship.

“A sincere, beautiful friendship,” she added.

So as not to increase her fear or my embarrassment, I restrained myself from throwing the glass against one of the walls. Her proposal didn't seem disdainful, but I took it as an insult. I understood that that lamentable scene would be from then on an inseparable part of my life; that I would lose clarity about what was to come in my future, and since in my apathy what happened in reality wouldn't matter to me, I wouldn't be able to detach myself from that night, from that day lost like no other. Since one absurd act leads to another even more absurd, I believed that the only useful consolation was the certainty that the scene would never repeat itself. If the anonymous painter of the chapel had looked into my face, he would have found the grimace of another unhappy person.

Although I wasn't trying to slight her, I couldn't stand to eat even a bite of food. When I got in the taxi and gave the address someone at the conference had written down on a piece of paper, I guessed that in this ending it was also foreseen that, drunk and directionless, I would mill around until five or six in the morning in the company of other people who were sane and not in ruins. I would find them irritating, and I wouldn't embrace them or look to them for intimacy.

Eme

She remembered that it had taken her a long time to fall in love with him, reluctantly.
Gesualdo Bufalino, "Eurydice's Homecoming"

Eme got drunk too quickly. She only drank once in a while and therefore didn't know how to accurately calculate her alcohol limit. She had an explosive spirit and acted as though she always had an excess of accumulated energy. However, she was happier than ever that night, and the horrible hangover she was anticipating for the next day didn't matter. Before going out dancing, they had made dinner at the apartment to celebrate the news of Johnny's new job with a renowned civil engineering firm. She loved Johnny. It scared her to measure the magnitude of her love, as if the idea could crush her. And that night she was happy because finally, after almost a year, Johnny had found a job.

Her forehead was resting on her numb arm, bent and limp on the edge of the table. Eme didn't want to move. She was scared that if she lifted her head, she'd have another attack of dizziness. She knew her sister and the couple of friends they had gone out with were still chatting beside her. Johnny had gotten up a while ago and hadn't come back to the table. She wanted to call out to him, but decided it would be better to take a little nap. To sleep until she was sober. But she couldn't stop following the beat of the music. How she liked to dance, she thought. Better than sleeping or working, as her wonderful Johnny would say when he was happy. Of course he wasn't a good dancer—what he really liked to do was sit in front of the stereo and listen attentively, concentrating as if he were trying to find the true, secret meaning of the harmony. He would throw himself at the system as if he wanted it to swallow him up, like a mirror, although he always ended

up invoking the regrets he felt for being a frustrated musician. That's when Eme would go to Johnny and hug him, and they would laugh. From the time they started living together, they didn't allow themselves to be carried away easily by despair.

She knocked over a bottle with her elbow and the sound of the glass woke her up. She opened her eyes, waited a while, and lifted her head. Her sister was dancing with one of her friends in the little space that served as a dance floor. She looked around for Johnny. He was at the end of one side of the small bar, talking to a couple of guys. Occasionally he would raise an arm as though he were in the middle of an argument. Eme saw his profile and thought she noticed that he looked upset. In the days before she met him, Johnny used to get involved very easily in fights. He liked to argue and curse and he habitually lost his temper. Johnny told Eme that during that time, he became extremely irritated over almost any little thing and looking for a fight became a sort of hobby.

"How are you doing?" the friend still sitting next to her asked.

"I wouldn't mind a seltzer with lemon and ice."

Her sister came back to the table and asked her if she wanted to leave. Eme assured them she was feeling better. She lit a cigarette but immediately had to put it out. She looked for Johnny again but one of the guys he was talking to was blocking her view with his back. She stretched her legs and had to pee. She calculated the distance between her and the bathroom door and doubted that she could make it without bumping into a table. She decided to wait a while until she didn't feel so dizzy.

Suddenly, she noticed a commotion around Johnny. The people at the bar jumped back. There was a silent pause among those who were yelling, and then she heard some

insult. Eme didn't know whether it was Johnny's voice. There was an abrupt, quick movement among the people sitting at the tables close to the bar. Eme got up. She walked closer and saw that some guy had Johnny trapped in a headlock. Johnny was throwing weak slaps at the air, flapping like a deflated doll. For an instant the two of them were motionless. They snorted, and when the second guy eased his grip, Johnny managed to break loose and kicked him really hard in the stomach. Eme tried to move closer but she was shoved backwards and she lost her balance. She looked frantically for her sister and as she was trying to get up, she heard people screaming in fear. Then, suddenly, a bang filled the room.

Someone grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward the door. She crashed into an incredible tangle of bodies, and in the commotion, she was hit in the mouth and almost knocked down again. Before she reached the street she heard two more shots. Once outside, she thought she heard Johnny calling her, and tried to go back in. She broke free from the hand that was gripping her arm, but she ran into two guys who were running out the door. She recognized her sister's voice screaming that they should run, shrieking as if she had fallen into a horrible ambush. Eme obeyed without putting up a fight, but as soon as she started running, the firmness of the ground made her weak and she fell to her knees. The pain gave her momentary clarity. She understood that she had to act quickly. She allowed her sister to lead her by the hand. They turned at the first corner, hurrying in a rash escape down the middle of the street.

After a while, they stopped. With difficulty, Eme swallowed the thick liquid that filled her mouth. She guessed that the last blow had knocked the roof of her mouth, which was now breaking up into little pieces. She leaned against a pole and couldn't

contain the vomit. The violent torrent made her tremble, and she had to sit down on the curb. Her sister put her arm behind her and forcefully rubbed her back. Eme stretched out her legs and carefully studied her stained, ripped pants. She bent her left leg and ran her fingertips over the injured knee. It was jutting out through the fabric like a muddy little lump.

“Let’s wait here a minute,” said her sister, sitting next to Eme.

“Wouldn’t it be better to go back?” Eme asked. She realized it was starting to rain.

“Jorge and Miguel told us to wait for them.”

“What happened to Johnny?” Eme mumbled, putting her head between her knees. She wrapped her arms around her body and tried to keep herself from shaking.

She tried to understand what had just happened, but the vomit came back like a strong wind. She didn’t have time to sit up and she threw up on the cuff of her pants. A sudden feeling of disgust overcame her, and she scraped the soles of her shoes against the pavement in anger. She started to cry with short, quick spasms that ended up mixing with another retch that made her bend over yet again.

“My tooth,” Eme said, catching her breath.

“What?”

“They knocked out one of my teeth.”

“Your tooth?”

“Yeah, on the bottom. I think I swallowed it.”

Her sister didn’t say anything.

“What do you call the teeth on the bottom?” asked Eme.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you call them?” Eme almost shouted.

“I don’t know. The same thing as the top ones. I don’t know, it doesn’t matter,” her sister answered in a sweet tone, delicately rubbing her head.

Afterwards she wiped Eme’s nose with a tissue and Eme noticed that her lips were swollen and hot. An unexpected wind swept the rain and seemed to lift the water toward the trees. The street was deserted, and curiously, no one else had gone in that same direction. Eme replayed the scene of Johnny’s fight again. Damn it, she thought. Johnny had assured her he would never fight again, that the days when he roamed around the city like a stray dog, stubborn and rabid, giving the same disorderly sermon as always, were behind him, forgotten forever like a painful love affair. She saw her sister’s shadow getting up and asked her what time it was.

“It’s two.”

“We can’t stay here.”

“Jorge and Miguel...” her sister said, looking toward the corner.

“We have to go look for Johnny,” Eme said, frightened by the horrible idea that Johnny was dead.

She shook her head violently as if the movement could cast that scary notion out of her brain. That was a forbidden thought, a speculation she always tried to avoid. Besides, no one had ever taught her how to cope with, in a normal way, the irremediable catastrophe of losing someone forever. Not her parents, her school, or her friends had prepared her to consider, even for an insignificant second, that the day would come when she would have to submit to the fact that from one moment to the next, Johnny wouldn’t

be coming back, sunken and still in nothingness. She opened her mouth for air and asked her sister to help her get up.

“We have to go back,” she begged, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“I don’t know,” her sister said, doubtfully. “It could be dangerous.”

“But we have to look for Johnny,” Eme repeated. She started to cry again, silently, controlling her spasms.

They decided to walk down the middle of the street, arm in arm. Eme was surprised that everything was so calm, as if the incident at the bar had happened someplace a dozen feet underground. She had to stop. She let go of her sister, moved to the side, leaned against a wall, and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes.

“Are you OK?” her sister asked, walking toward her.

She nodded and wiped the cold sweat from her forehead. Her sister looked toward the corner and Eme saw that her whole body was shaking, too. She thought that at any moment they would both stop breathing and drop dead.

“What’s the matter?” her sister mumbled, still looking toward the corner.

Eme didn’t say anything. She had the impression that her sister’s words were coming from a great distance away. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. The drizzle was slowing down little by little, until it disappeared. Eme crossed her arms and tucked her hands in her armpits to warm up.

“What time is it?” she asked again.

“A little after two-thirty,” her sister answered without looking at her watch.

All of a sudden they heard a siren. They saw a police car go by two streets up, going in the opposite direction of the bar. They waited attentively until the wail disappeared completely, without moving, without speaking.

“Where did everyone go?” her sister said. She seemed scared, like she didn’t know what to do from that moment on.

Eme thought about Johnny again and bit her lips. Her throat was dry and she felt the blood flowing violently through her head. She felt nervous, as though any minute her limbs would fall off and become scattered in the middle of the street.

“Just when everything was so good,” Eme mumbled, looking at her sister.

“What?” her sister asked, distracted, rubbing her arms, still looking toward the intersection where the police car had passed.

They decided to keep walking, but they stopped again when they reached the corner. They stood still for a while and neither one seemed eager to go on. Eme rested her forehead on her sister’s shoulder. They stayed like that for a few minutes, as if posed for a photograph. Eme sighed and suddenly remembered an afternoon long ago at her parents’ house. She was alone, reading the story of a woman who was anxiously awaiting a phone call from a guy with whom she was very much in love. Days before, the man had promised her he would call that evening at a specific time. More than two agonizing hours had gone by, and the phone hadn’t rung. The guy had sworn to her that he would call. The woman didn’t have a way to call him, and she started begging God to take pity on her and let the phone ring before more time went by. It was a small plea that would be no problem for God to grant. She would never ask Him for anything else if He would hear her prayer, and she would try to amend all her past errors, all the sins that had

led her from the path of righteousness. She begged Him for it because she was suffering terribly. She promised to be a sweet person, understanding of others, of her mother, her sister, but please, God, she prayed, let the phone ring. God could not be so cruel and harsh in the face of such a trivial, easy to grant petition. But time didn't stop and the phone didn't ring. Would God remember Eme that night? She knew that in this damn city something scary happened every night, people died and disappeared in the most horrifying ways, but Johnny had never been such a bad guy that he would end up like that. Both of them had done what was right. There were times when other people's suffering had affected them, but, above all, they wanted to live happily and in peace. Please, God, she prayed again, neither of us deserves such terrible pain. God, she kept praying in her head, this time was different.

She wanted to hurry along. She let go of her sister's arm and started to run. She didn't understand what her sister was yelling, but she could hear her running, too.

They found the bar closed. Some people were talking in hushed voices on the sidewalk across the street. Eme was surprised that everything was so calm, and she tried to believe that what had happened was a hallucination, an invention of her teasing mind. Then, as though she suddenly regained consciousness, she leapt toward the door and pounded on it several times with her open hands. There was no answer. Her sister talked to the others. Eme leaned her forehead on the wood and waited. She pounded again with the tip of her shoe, almost devoid of force. It was absurd that these things were happening. No one could tolerate this senselessness for long. She started to cry. Johnny always used to say she was a crybaby, that she liked to dramatize everything. But it wasn't true. She only cried when something hurt, when the pain was serious. She wasn't

a crybaby, she thought, but just the opposite—she liked to laugh at everything, laugh until she was all worn out.

“They say they don’t really know what happened,” her sister said. “Apparently the police came and arrested a bunch of people.”

Eme knocked again with her fist, hurt by the idea that Johnny could be injured and it was her fault, having abandoned him in a crazed attempt to escape.

“What should we do?” asked her sister, covering her face with her hand.

Eme kicked the door angrily until her sister held her back.

“Calm down. We don’t know what happened and Miguel and Jorge might come back. Let’s just wait.”

Eme took a deep breath and, after a while, sat down on the sidewalk with her back up against the door.

“Yes, let’s wait. Someone has to come back. Johnny must be looking for me too,” said Eme, calmer now. She carefully felt her swollen lip and touched the empty space of her missing tooth with her tongue.

She would remain there, without moving, immobile as long as necessary, until Johnny appeared and warmed her up with a big hug. She would think about something else. About the night sky, which was starting to clear. She would concentrate on the intermittent barking of dogs, on the water that was dripping somewhere to her right. She would count the seconds between each drop. She would think about Johnny’s new job. She knew the people would like Johnny. He was attractive and nice. He read books, he was interested in what was going on in the world, and he had a sensitive heart. Johnny wanted a cat, but the apartment was too small, and no doubt the animal would end up

running away. Johnny wanted to travel, to go to places it wouldn't occur to anyone else to visit, like Scandinavia or the Brazilian desert. Eme ran two fingers through her damp, messy hair. Her body started to shake again with renewed vigor. Her sister was standing up, having a cigarette, blowing the smoke upward parsimoniously. Yes, she would stay still, sitting against the wooden door like the image of a woman forever trapped in a painting. Waiting there until God let Johnny come back.

Protection

That's how it happens to everyone...

La Fontaine, "The Swallow and the Little Birds"

My older brother was always a serious guy. He didn't seem impatient, and in our house I never heard him talk much or bother to argue over any problem. He was a good student and he never had conflicts in school with his teachers or the priests. I don't think he had many friends during those years. On Saturdays and during vacations, there were two or three from the neighborhood who would invite him to play soccer, go to the movies, or spend the afternoon at a pool hall downtown. Later, when he was in college studying biology, he had a girlfriend with short hair and a pretty face, whom he only brought home for dinner a couple of times. He was affectionate toward my parents, and almost every party he liked to put on music, dance, and have a few drinks. Without explanation, he would sometimes leave me books to read, stories of travel and adventure, and with tolerance bordering on compassion, he would help me solve complicated math problems.

Like lots of people, as the years passed he became moody. Although he acquired a discreet distrust of others, as though he could sense some potential abuse, he hated all forms of aggression. Certain things irritated since childhood, like talking bad about people or stupid little things like the school bus leaving without us in the morning, or being caught in an unexpected downpour in the middle of the street. However, he never acted like an unhappy man or like he had a hard, bitter heart. In general he held short conversations, accompanying them by unenthusiastic smiles, but when he felt like it, he could be nice and charming to anyone.

Late at night, a few times when we still lived in the same house and shared a bedroom, in the dark with his face against the wall, I heard him say very quietly that he dreamed of going far away and settling in some remote jungle or starting a new life somewhere in another country. It scared me. I knew he was talking only to himself, undoubtedly reproducing or inventing in his head a long list of secret landscapes, probably extensive and luminous like the ones described in the books he lent me. There he would surely become a free man, an individual who could find in those forests or hot climates that someone loved him or that he could lead a simple life, free of disagreeable obstacles. Despite the fact that I knew they were sporadic outbursts, rare during his teenage years, his decisiveness alarmed and saddened me, as did the coldness of his words. As though in the silence of those moments of confession I became the keeper of that troubled spirit he was unburdening, I could only fall asleep when at last I heard the slow breathing of his deep sleep.

Perhaps because of our upbringing, he never told me directly that he loved me. Nor did I ever find the exact words to express my love for him, or in many cases, my admiration or envy. It seemed to be enough that we were always near each other, under the same roof, eating the same food at dinner, reading the same books, watching the same TV shows, sharing the darkness and silence of the same room. I eventually discovered that my brother never got tired of this common existence, and that later the memory of those days would be one of the few he would find worthy of happy evocation, without the delusions of basic nostalgia.

It's difficult to say whether my brother ever considered me foolish. If he ever did make fun of me or was rude to me, it was never over anything important, nor did it really

hurt my feelings. Even so, although there were less than three years between us, it was always difficult to find a way to be his friend, as if I were faced again with a mathematical axiom or postulate. Like everyone else, I got used to his not involving me in his plans or, for example, his not sitting with me on the school bus or not wanting me to tag along with him and his friends in the afternoon. But it was because of me that he had his first and only fight.

It was toward the end of the year, around November. I must have been a freshman or sophomore in high school and I still looked like a fragile or excessively excited little kid. Two weeks earlier, for my birthday, I had received some amazing animal pictures as a present, a collection of bestiary-type pictures that combined mammals, amphibians, and fish. Trusting and proud, I had started bringing them to school almost every day, and during recess and the bus ride, I'd show them to my classmates or look through them myself, astonished like a zoologist studying a new species. They were relatively fantastical, card-sized, and printed in Vienna, and a lot of them had rare examples of impossibly colored frogs in front of Greek ruins, flying fish with transparent wings like a dragonfly, or large-eared cats with human faces. Judging from the other kids' amazement, I knew no one had ever seen anything like them in their lives. I never learned where my father had found them.

One afternoon, while I was studying a bright pair of smiling apes, some senior passed by me, and, making fun of me, took a couple of my cards. As I tried to grab them back I ripped them, and I was so angry I spit in his face. He slapped me and pushed me down, making me cry. I supposed, without being certain, that my brother, who always sat toward the back, had witnessed the entire scene. However, that afternoon he didn't

react, and he was quiet the whole walk home. Although at night he helped me tape the cards, he didn't say, as I would have liked him to, that he would defend me.

Only a week later did I find out that my brother had told the guy to meet him at the park about ten blocks from our house. Of course, it was a Friday. I didn't know whether he wanted me to be there too, since he never said anything about it to me.

Luckily, that afternoon he didn't stop me from going with him to the park. There were five or six of us, and as in a reflection, the other kid was accompanied by his younger brother and a classmate. I wasn't aware of the future irony that the other little brother, pale, clutching a thick world atlas, would in time become one of my best friends.

Once in the park, my brother slowly handed me his books and denim jacket. He quickly stretched his neck, and right away there was a silence that seemed to stop the noises from the street and the shouts and laughter of the people playing basketball toward the back of the park. We had agreed to meet in the shade of two huge trees. Maybe none of us understood the nature of that silence, as if all of us, including my brother and the other kid, were about to witness a truly unheard-of event, the consequence of unfamiliar urges that, at our age, still formed part of the world's mysteries, like love or death.

As if they both woke up at the same time, each one began moving around the other, and without taking their eyes off each other, they traced a circle in the dirt with their feet. Whether out of naivety or simple terror, we all hoped without saying it that there would only be light slaps, harmless shoves, weak punches to the shoulders and elbows, a couple of unsure kicks into the air, nothing that caused any harm. Suddenly, breaking the silence, my brother threw a punch with his right hand into the other kid's mouth and nose, like some professional boxer. It was an amazing hit not only because it

seem unplanned, but it also contained no anger, the emotion that always accompanied fights between seventeen- or eighteen-year-old boys.

We were motionless, attentively watching the other kid's body on the ground, face up, a spot of blood on his lips, the body that in less than a second my brother had thrown into a sort of abyss and that, doubtless, had lost all notion of time. As if he knew the scene would end there, my brother asked me for his jacket, and while I waited for the other guy to sit up and wipe off his mouth, I saw that his eyes were tearing up.

We walked home in silence. I was a few steps behind, my legs shaking slightly. Then, as I looked at my brother's head, a few inches higher than mine, I understood that he had anticipated this event, that for several nights he had clearly imagined the fight, the punch that would break the silence that for a few seconds seemed like a mystery to us. Just as he went over the landscapes that beckoned to him, perhaps more than once he had gone over in his mind the exact trajectory of the impact that would win him his first and only fight.

At the door to our house he handed me his books again and, without raising his voice much, he said, "I'll be right back."

Even though as the years went by, I discovered once I was an adult that anyone else could tell a similar story, that this was neither a unique nor singular experience, I knew still that my brother would never abandon me, that from that day I could count on someone ready to pick me up, someone who would assure me beyond all doubt that I wasn't alone.

Vanished

Now, after 8 years, he was dreaming about him...

José Bianco, *The Loss of the Kingdom*

When I checked the postmark, I thought it was a mistake, a letter that had accidentally found its way into my hands. The name and address were correct, though. It had been sent ten days before, on a Monday morning. I opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet of lined paper ripped from a notebook. I found shaky penmanship, with the unmistakable traces of a hand that has followed a rigid writing method since childhood. The letter wasn't dated and seemed to have been written with a fountain pen. There was no signature, either. I read:

Dear Friend:

For more than eight years now I've been living in a place where the people are friendly and sweet. Innocent. Some of them are convinced that I honor them with my presence. It's flattering to someone who no longer expects much out of life. You probably remember my fondness for cats and my strange, natural talent for training them. Here, that mystery is almost sacred. However, a few months ago, the last animal I seduced with my tricks died. I know you will believe me when I tell you that my life these last few days has not been wretched; on the contrary, I've been happy to the point of not caring whether my fate is to end like a bad story. Of all those I abandoned, or who abandoned me, you are the only one I'd like to see again. I've never experienced a friendship like yours, even though it was short and, apparently, long ago. Protected by this delicious solitude, I stay out of harm's way.

I re-read it a couple of times and was surprised by the formal tone of the declaration. I intuited a hidden invitation, almost a request. It was a true surprise to hear from Amador after such a long time, and I interpreted his precise words as a note from a man about to die who was frantically looking for the only addressee who would show him mercy and provide consolation. I put the letter in a desk drawer and wanted to wait until Julia got home so I could ask her what she thought. I tried to continue correcting exams, but I couldn't get past the first answer I read.

Until I was fifteen, I spent almost all my summer vacations at Amador's parents' country estate. More than once I went by myself, without my family. I remember an immense house with empty stables and a deep lake where ducks and swans would swim. It was a place that in my memory seemed exaggeratedly blessed by the sun and by the natural wonders all around it. That impression stayed with me, despite the fact that on our trip to that area, Julia and I found it excessively hot.

Those years left me with a feeling of freedom I seldom experienced afterwards. I never stopped thinking that they were useful and more than once helped me to enjoy my life. I could clearly recreate its scenes, and as time went by, it became the only era sufficiently worthy of careful evocation, painstaking enough in its details to prevent the years from diminishing it. Later, almost daily, as Julia would confirm, I understood more and more the qualities of those days that not only elicited my wonder but also that ended up standing out among the blurred group of others (high school, college, first jobs). These were condemned to imprecision, confused and mixed up as if unable to emerge from their imperfect incubation. Luckily, even though later on I thought I might have exaggerated it, that period of time would be immune to oblivion.

And all the charm that captivated me even during the weeks prior to the letter's arrival was the result of Amador and his cats.

Amador performed his first act of domination over animals for me at that house. It always took place in front of the lake, several times a day. He would grab one of the many cats roaming around the estate and skillfully place it on his shoulder. Before heading toward the lake he would walk for a while, sometimes more than an hour, with the animal almost wrapped around his neck. He would wait until it got sleepy and started purring. From time to time he would move his hand along its back, and the light touch of his fingers would make the cat arch its back. While I walked with him we would talk softly. The ritual seemed to be a succession of natural acts, but there was premeditation in every one of Amador's movements. Suddenly, when we were at the edge of the shore, Amador would cautiously take the cat under the front legs, and in a single thrust he would toss it into the middle of the lake.

The first time I witnessed this singular spectacle, I thought it was a macabre joke, an inhumane experiment through which Amador was looking to investigate new forms of corporal punishment. I guessed he must be unusually devoted to satisfying common childhood cruelty. I immediately discovered, however, that this was no impure or sad act. Surprised, I watched as the animal, after being under water for a few seconds, would swim back to shore, shake itself off, and go to Amador, who would immediately pick it up and rub its body forcefully and affectionately. I never saw any of the cats put up resistance.

I watched this performance disconcertedly from the very beginning, and although it never ceased to entertain me, I took in the whole thing somberly and in silence.

Amador claimed that the unusual thing wasn't the almost absurd fact that a cat tolerated the water without getting angry, but that he could repeat his magic act, as he insisted on calling it, several times a day with the same animal.

We lived on the same street in Bogotá. After school, Amador would invite me to his house and show me new tricks to which he added details that for my eleven or twelve years seemed amazing, products of an impetuous dream I could barely conceive. I remember the image of a small mutt of a cat, in its own world, paying attention to the string beneath its paws, a tightrope that spanned the diagonal length of Amador's bedroom. Sometimes, Amador's maneuverings took place with his two older sisters present. An engrossed audience, they always applauded enthusiastically when the number ended. Often his mother would stand in the doorway and watch us with a smile. With a smooth movement, the animal's paws would set into motion out of a perfect stillness. I always suspected that the cat imagined, as did I, that during that crossing, Amador was forcing it to dream of a world outside its innermost nature, that this beautiful creature sensed an unusual danger in its little head. We all knew that if it slipped and fell off the string it wouldn't get hurt at all. Amador would walk alongside it in absolute silence, as though sending it the necessary inspiration and security to keep going and not succumb to imaginary dizziness.

I understood then that Amador had the ability to submerge himself in regions that for other would remain obscured, unreachable. Like an artist, he had been able to awaken his senses, and if he so wished, he could keep the threat of death at bay. I didn't know whether Amador had ever reflected on his power, whether he suspected that he made

those of us that witnessed this innocent form of wisdom happy, as if in the end we would completely understand the moral of the story: we would never witness a similar marvel.

It's possible that since that time I've given Amador a romantic, indestructible air, like Captain Corcorán, a hero I'd encountered in some book, who spoke to and exchanged secrets with his Bengal tiger. I knew that in spite of his boyish, defenseless appearance, Amador could forge for himself a strong, decided spirit, suitable for crossing a desert in absolute solitude, to overcome terror in regions where death exercised its sovereignty like a tyrant, a region like this city where I, paradoxically, lived for so many years. If I suspected a daring spirit in Amador's acts, I knew myself to be subject to a frightened, unsteady heart.

As the afternoon went on, I continued adding new pieces to my memory of Amador. Lying on the living-room couch, I tried to imagine the place from which he sent the letter. I knew it was in a subtropical area, humid and very close to the sea. It was a territory with its own, unknown laws. Amador mentioned kind, innocent people. I tried to calculate how much time could have passed since the last time we saw each other. It had been too long. Another mystery was how he managed to find my address. We had a few common friends, people from high school or the neighborhood, but although a couple of them visited me when I still had an office, I had no interest in staying in touch with them. I tried to imagine Amador in a way that would serve as a starting point to picture what he could possibly look like after all this time. I couldn't escape the blurry features of that adolescent with a fixed look, distant like that of his entranced cats. Surely the characteristics I invented for his current age would have nothing to do with my memory. He was probably a man who entered into old age as I had, with a face marked

by defined lines, and when he was least expecting it, he was probably beset by sudden, disconcerting shakes. He most likely didn't sleep much at night, struck by the permanent mirage of a free and proud youth.

I went back to the study and read the letter one more time. For a few seconds I thought clearly about the role I could play in the apparent denouement of Amador's life. His words seemed to be asking me to intervene as a witness to some sort of final show I had presumed to be lost and turned off forever. At least to me, the resolved tone of invitation in his severe sentences was evident. I guessed that Amador was imposing upon me the obligation of considering a trip to that coastal area, of visiting his house and accepting, without distrust or fear, whatever trick he might come up with, no matter how arbitrary or magical.

I jumped when Julia touched my shoulder.

"What's the matter?" she asked, surprised, unbuttoning her coat.

"I didn't hear you come in."

It was starting to get dark outside.

"I'd like you to read this letter," I told her as I handed her the sheet of paper.

She looked it over and changed glasses. She read attentively and handed it back to me.

"It seems like it was written by a crazy person," she concluded.

I admitted without saying so that she was probably right.

"Who sent it?"

"Amador."

"The cat guy?"

“Yes.”

We were silent for a while. I had the urge to go out. I looked out the window for clouds, but in the darkness I couldn't tell for sure if it was going to rain. I waited for Julia to ask something. She deliberately and calmly moved the papers I had on the desk.

“I always thought you had made this Amador stuff up,” she started to say, still playing with the papers. “An imaginary guy, like a childhood fantasy. Truthfully, I've never believed all those stories about cats who swam and danced on their paws on the tightrope.”

She spoke as though she had just discovered an uncomfortable, disappointing truth.

“So why did he write to you?”

“I don't know.”

She thought for a moment and said to herself, under her breath, “So then Amador actually did all those things.”

I smiled and looked at our two faces projected by the light of the room onto the window glass. It must have been cold outside. It had rained all the previous night. I couldn't remember if I had ever confessed to Julia my suspicion that the cats didn't talk to Amador out of simple stubbornness. When I still worked at the vet's office, in the middle of some surgery I imagined that I could find the source of Amador's success in carrying out his kitty shows. But my effort ended up being an uncertain fantasy with no conclusion. One time, while under the effects of anesthesia, a dog shot me an alarmed look. I thought the animal was trying to tell me not to let him die there on the operating table. But I never discovered anything, nothing that was any different than the internal

arrangement of organs I had memorized from my textbooks and classes. I was envious of Amador. He was one of the few people who could demonstrate that he wasn't like everyone else.

“Are you ready for dinner?” asked Julia.

I looked at my watch.

“Yes.”

“Are you OK?” she asked before leaving.

“Yeah. I'm fine.”

As I feared, I couldn't sleep for the next few nights. The letter, which I re-read constantly, had entered into my days like a legal summons, something requiring me to fulfill a tacit promise. It was upsetting my present equilibrium, which I had thought to be strong and steady. I started to get worried. Julia had no idea. As always, we watched some TV, read for a while, and after we turned out the lights, I pretended to sleep. I avoided moving around too much so Julia wouldn't discover my permanent restlessness. I was scared by the idea of going to find the little place where Amador, because of some loss of will, had gone to stay. But at the same time, the thought of my journey had reawakened in me a sort of joy that had been dormant since the latter years of my youth. Every night I drafted a possible final destiny for Amador, similar to that of the characters that inexplicably hurled themselves into the hidden deception of a refuge that for others would be remote and forever dangerous. One night I thought I would sacrifice anything to witness one of his spectacles again, to enter again into that magical circle, to go back to the huge trees of the estate and see once more the defiant figure of a little beast walking on fire with Amador at its side, directing it in silence with his big, dark eyes, on

the frontier of an unknown hallucination. It wasn't difficult to understand that all my actions, even the flawed, erroneous ones, were marked by Amador's secret maneuvers.

Two weeks went by and I continued with my activities as though nothing strange had happened. Luckily, classes at the university had ended and all that was left to do was hand in final grades. One afternoon, on my way home, I vaguely remembered a picture of Amador, which I assumed must be in some family photo album. I could see a blurry scene in the yard of my parents' house, but I wasn't sure. I was startled by the thought of seeing once again an image lost for so much time. I didn't want to give in to nostalgia or melancholy, emotional traps I avoided during recent years, because I saw them as inconvenient, sort of insulting laws, like going through valuable, irreplaceable files eaten by moths. That night, while I made sure Julia was sleeping, I felt my blood flow quickly accelerating. Distressed and lying still, I could hear the strong palpitations. I started to sweat profusely and closed my eyes tightly to control my shaking. I knew that death wasn't upon me, but I thought this was an unmistakable sign of its proximity, as if it had swooped down and just barely grazed me with its wing. It was one of those instants in which I believed life was contemplating me with disdain.

I got up carefully so as not to wake Julia. I saw the sun just starting to come up as I closed the door to the room where we kept the photo albums. While I went through the first pictures I started to think again about Amador's current appearance. The possibility of having to see the sad spectacle of a wheezing man, tired of summoning new miracles, with no immediate plan, waiting for whatever was ahead, was disconcerting. Still, I was certain that Amador continued to be faithful to life, regardless of the conditions it imposed upon him. Perhaps that was the secret of his letter. I hurriedly examined the

pictures, although in the middle of a quick glance I stopped at some likeness that surprised me, after having been completely lost somewhere in my memory. In one, I recognized my mother wearing a party dress, leaning against a column with her hands folded and a timid smile. I looked for myself in a family portrait taken on the veranda of a country house. I was amused by a series of pictures showing Julia as a child dressed up as a fisherman, as if I were seeing them for the first time. When I only had a couple of albums left to go through, Julia came in. I felt a bit embarrassed at the position in which she found me, sitting on the floor, the album between my legs, my nightshirt barely covering my thighs.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a nervous giggle.

“I thought there might be a picture of Amador in here somewhere.”

Julia was leaning against the doorframe, her gaze fixed on me. She didn't have any particular expression on her face, but she seemed to be scrutinizing me, perhaps fed up and exhausted, like a mother who doesn't understand her obstinate son's foolishness.

“No,” she said at last. “There isn't any picture.”

Then I sensed that she was starting to look at me a little nervously. I think that until that day she had heard the story of Amador only barely registering it, since I had told it to her almost every night. Perhaps she didn't recognize his true dimension until that moment. She was undoubtedly starting to understand that Amador's letter was no simple evocation of some far-off childhood game. I looked at her, not sure whether to get up, and smiled. I was afraid Julia was looking at me with the suspicion that at any moment I would start to act like a man prone to craziness, subject to a metamorphosis no one could fight. I observed Julia's body from the floor and felt like I was looking at her

from the bottom of a ravine. I couldn't find the appropriate words to offer her a plausible explanation. I tried to come up with a lame, sentimental excuse, but nothing seemed to clear up this uncomfortable situation. Before she left, she said she'd make some coffee.

That encounter ruined our next family conversation. When I explained that I needed to take this trip, my older son asked in the same arrogant tone as always, doubting the legitimacy of my memory:

“What does that absurd story about the cats mean?”

It pained me to hear his unbearable tone, but I kept quiet. Besides the letter, I didn't tell my family anything else that was motivating me, and I remained steadfast in my resolve to visit Amador.

“It'll only be for a weekend,” I said to defend myself when my daughters tried to accuse me of abandoning Julia for no good reason.

I felt obligated, not without certain shame, to try to convince them that this wasn't about the foolish revitalization of old memories or the whims or stubbornness of an old man who had just lost his mind and could no longer control or distinguish his most commonplace actions. As I justified myself, I knew my explanations weren't solid and that I had only a fleeting, hazy idea of what this anticipated trip really meant.

“I could save a man's life,” I concluded, conscious of the exaggeration of that statement.

I agreed to Julia and one of my daughters accompanying me to Santa Marta as a condition of my going on the trip. They would wait in the hotel. I wanted to minimize the drama of the situation, and although I wasn't sure of the true length of the visit, I

suggested to Julia that it would be one of the spontaneous vacations we had been waiting so long to take.

“It’s always good to get away from this awful city,” I said after turning off the light the night before our departure. Julia sighed and didn’t say anything.

We checked into the hotel and I confirmed that to get to Amador’s town I would have to take two buses. The journey would take four or five hours. When we said goodbye, Julia gently stroked my cheek and smoothed my hair. I thought that with that gesture I understood her silence the last few days, her effort to contain me, to keep me at her side, to prevent my losing control and falling into the type of vice acquired during childhood, which possibly hurt her since her presence at my side no longer seemed to be the answer to all my problems.

I got off at a small plaza with a huge rubber tree in the center. I looked for a place to get a drink and inquire about a hotel where I could spend the night. Someone pointed me to a house on one of the corners of the plaza.

In the small room they gave me, I re-read the letter several times. At one point the sentences seemed confusing to me, and it wasn’t easy to find a convincing justification for my visit. I told myself it was a good opportunity to break the recent monotony in my life.

From the curtainless window I saw the outline of the plaza, hazy through the growing darkness. I missed Julia as if I hadn’t heard from her in a long time, and I guessed it had indeed been unfair to leave her in the hotel room without much explanation. I was terrified by the thought that she would lose confidence in me. Although I didn’t want to let myself get dragged down by my old melancholy ways, I

remembered that one time I told Julia, perhaps not in these exact words, that with her in my life I could overcome any misfortune. For a few seconds I tried to recover the energy I had in those days that enabled me to make that kind of statement without feeling ashamed.

I got ready to leave.

The entrance to the house served as a store. There was a penetrating odor of fried fish and, at one table next to the counter, three men talked loudly, drinking whiskey from little glasses. When I ordered a beer they became silent, and it wasn't difficult to figure out that they were looking at me as though I were a strange, unwanted insect. I sat down at one of the tables outside and calmly drank from my glass. I was suddenly afraid that I wouldn't know how to ask where Amador's house was. Occasionally the guys looked at me over their shoulders, presumably to verify that I was still there. Not much time passed before they started to roar with laughter again. Wanting to speed along to meeting Amador, I waved over the girl who had served me the beer.

"I need to know where this address is," I said to her when she came over, and I handed her the envelope with a smile.

The girl hesitated and took it timidly. She asked me to wait a moment, spoke to one of the guys, and after a quick utterance, showed him the envelope. The man didn't answer. He looked at me for a few seconds and stood up. I saw unanimous surprise in the others' expressions.

"You know Mr. Amador?" he asked. There was contained alarm in the tone of his quick question.

"Yes," I answered, standing up.

He moved his head, looked me up and down, sizing me up, and loudly cleared his throat. He was behaving as if he had woken from a bad dream. His body looked like the stump of a huge tree after a meticulous pruning job. After a while he called inside, and immediately two boys appeared at his side. He gave a brief order, and I could see that he was putting them in charge of taking me to Amador. I thanked him for the favor and said good-bye in a barely audible voice.

I followed the quick pace of the barefoot boys, who were whispering without turning around, laughing and giving each other an occasional shove. We left the plaza and took to the streets nearest the beach. The sound of the waves produced a sudden fascination in me, an inexplicable form of immediate happiness. I thought that at any moment I could take my clothes off, find a path to the sea between the trees, dive into the dark water, and doze off to its rocking, conscious once again of the weightlessness of my limbs, my arms open, face up, leaving the land, out to sea. Thus I would be forever free from the periodic harassment of illness, poverty, or the panic of an untimely death.

Suddenly the boys stopped without saying anything in front of the entrance to a white house, where a powerful light post lit up a big yard.

“Is this it?” I asked.

“Yes,” they answered in unison, and disappeared, running off silently.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with a handkerchief and walked up a short gravel path toward the door. In spite of the light, the house seemed abandoned.

Trembling, I knocked a couple of times. I waited a while without hearing any noise inside. Finally I heard the sound of footsteps, and seconds later, a woman opened the door a crack. She looked at me distrustfully and asked me my name. When I asked for

Amador, she told me to wait. I imagined it was impolite to show up without a gift or a bottle of something to drink. Again I heard the sounds of the sea behind me. Moments later, I heard a tremendous laugh from inside, and then the woman came back to show me in.

She led me down a long, cool hallway that opened into a big, central, open-air patio. The woman pointed kindly to one of the rocking chairs next to a little table and immediately disappeared down the hallway toward the back of the house. I sat down and took a quick look around. On the column to my right was a series of reproductions of ink drawings that showed the same cat playing with a mouse. From the symbols, I guessed they were by a Japanese artist. Plants with big, green leaves were blooming in each corner of the patio. Despite the order and evident cleanliness, a film left by the salt in the air covered almost everything. I thought of a ruin that was sparkling but about to collapse. There was a gentle breeze. I finally heard Amador's voice and his footsteps approaching from the hallway.

He appeared dressed in a loose, white guayabera, linen pants the same color, and sandals. I noticed that he dragged his left leg a little.

"You got my letter, then," he said by way of a greeting, almost defiantly loud, holding out his hand.

I replied with enthusiasm that immediately sounded exaggerated to me. I was surprised by the unforeseen changes in Amador's physique. We sat down and I couldn't stop staring at his swollen hands. He was having trouble breathing, as if the simple act of taking in air was too much for him. I guessed he was ailing from some sort of blood disorder or cardiac problem. His body had reached a size that completely negated the

memory of that slender adolescent I had in my head. He had aged more than I, but contrary to what I had assumed after reading his letter, he was far from being a man overwhelmed by unbearable agony.

As if he read my mind he said:

“I wrote that letter over a year ago. I looked for your address and for a while I reconsidered sending it. I obviously doubted you would take what I said seriously. But,” he added as he took a tray with two glasses and a bottle of red wine from the woman, “those are just unimportant details. Of course if you want to, we can talk about all that.”

He served the wine and passed me an almost full glass.

“Cheers and welcome,” he toasted and gently touched the edge of his glass to mine. The wine was lukewarm and slightly bitter, and although I didn’t know the origin of its good flavor, I knew it was a bottle of excellent quality. Amador savored the liquid with an expression of pleasure and said:

“This area not only has pureness of spirit, but also marvels like this.”

Then he lifted the bottle and passed it to me. *Lagrime Christi*, I read from the label. I smiled without saying a word, trying to convince myself that the man in front of me had some connection to the boy I had come looking for.

We drank in silence, taking small sips, until we emptied our glasses.

“What do you think?” Amador wanted to know, interested.

“I like it,” I answered, letting him fill my glass again.

“Where do you plan on staying?” he asked.

“I found a place in the plaza.”

There was a long pause. Amador seemed to be thinking about what I'd just said. I was worried by the thought that he might feel insulted that I didn't come directly to his house. "Later we'll go get your things," Amador concluded, suddenly excited. Enthusiastically, he poured me more wine, as though he wanted us to finish the bottle as soon as possible.

As the night wore on, I couldn't help thinking this was not the Amador I had known. I had imagined a conversation immediately plagued by enthusiastic gestures, tending toward trivial anecdotes and the effusive exchange of secrets accumulated over all those years. Perhaps I was getting ahead of myself, but I saw the intensity I had glimpsed during the previous weeks that neither of us had sufficient energy to revive gradually being replaced by an inferior emotion. Amador was savoring his last swallow, and for a few seconds he closed his eyes as if our encounter required a quiet, mysterious offering.

"I don't imagine it was an easy decision to make," he said, seriously.

"What?"

"The decision to come here," Amador added.

I looked at him and smiled. I gently leaned my head back, feeling the first effects of the alcohol, and rocked lightly in the chair. From some corner, the slow movements of a young, revitalized Amador came toward me, going into places of the past I didn't recognize, defiant and happy with a black and white cat in his lap.

"Do you have the letter with you?" he asked.

I looked for the paper in my shirt pocket and handed it to him. Amador leaned forward a bit, his feet firmly on the ground, and read quickly. He let out a chuckle and

shook his head as if he weren't sure he understood what he had just seen on the sheet of paper. He gave it back to me and gave himself a strong push on the rocking chair.

"There are a lot of borrowed phrases there and a couple of lies," he said.

I shrugged my shoulders and remembered Julia's observation.

"But, as I told you, let's forget about the details," he added. "I feel like we're a little tense. Why don't you tell me about yourself? You look good. You've clearly taken care of yourself, unlike me," he concluded, and let out another laugh.

I smiled at Amador's analysis and looked at my glass without knowing what to say. Little by little, my suspicion about talking to a perfect stranger was confirmed. I didn't recognize the tone of his voice, the ease with which he laughed, his bulging, watery eyes. Surely, I thought, if I investigated a bit, I would discover an imposter that had usurped Amador's marvelous qualities within that robust body.

I didn't know where to start. Amador looked at me attentively, interested. I didn't have a talent for telling entertaining stories, and it was difficult for me to decide on an anecdote that would give our dialogue a natural, frank tone. From the moment I decided to make the trip, I knew our meeting would undoubtedly be marred by restlessness, immersed in a strained environment. I was excited by the feat of having reached that house, but I wasn't sure what to do or how to act.

"I'm flattered you came," Amador said, aware of my discomfort. "Not only because your presence confirms you haven't forgotten everything we discovered together, you as the first witness, but because from the beginning I knew there was always equality between you and me. We experienced life, how should I put it, bewildered. Yes. Bewildered."

He had searched for the word moving his fingers in the air, his face raised toward the dark sky with the grave expression of an actor at the end of a tragic scene.

“Furthermore,” he continued, “at this age, one avoids any unnecessary risk. There comes a time when, without any warning, we have to start living under certain conditions that are imposed on us without explanation. Perhaps, I should suppose that this is the normal path of aging. To accept what one cannot understand, most of all this final state...”

He suddenly shook his head as if he were regaining awareness, remembering that I was there in the other chair.

“Please don’t think that growing old has been easy for me. Has it been so for you?”

“Yes,” I stammered, a little confused by Amador’s unusual revelation and serious interrogations. “I probably do feel a little afraid of time now and the idea of being buried and all that...”

“Yes, yes,” Amador interrupted, almost happily. “I get carried away by these kinds of thoughts, too. I get sucked in easily...”

He wanted to say something else but just then the woman showed up. An obliging, hard-working attendant, she put a tray with food and another bottle of wine on the table. I was relieved by her sudden appearance because I wanted to postpone telling the story of my life. Besides, I had traveled to meet up with Amador to find out what had happened with the cats. The conversation had adopted almost an immaterial air that made me uncomfortable. Amador, who seemed to have recaptured his joviality, uncorked the bottle and filled the glasses again. We said cheers and although I wasn’t

hungry, I agreed to eat something. Amador delicately stirred the liquid in his glass, and after taking a couple of parsimonious sips, he said:

“Now, yes, tell me about yourself.”

I spoke for a long time. Amador’s expression, which I believed to be distant, as though he had been drinking prior to my arrival, seemed to urge me to describe truly essential, intimate facts. However, I limited myself to a concise account of general details and I purposely omitted what could be called the direct causes of each anecdote. The revelation, for example, of whether I considered the love I offered Julia enough to make her happy. Then I made brief references to what had happened after Amador and his family moved to Venezuela. I talked about my decision to study veterinary science, about my years abroad, about my marriage to Julia and my three kids, my time in the office, the university classes I was teaching the past few years. When I finished, Amador looked at me as though he were silently agreeing that I needed to add many details to the rudimentary sketch of my existence to make it sound credible. Still, he had listened to me attentively, constantly observing my hand gestures, nodding ceremoniously each time I paused to wet my lips with a sip of wine.

“It’s not easy to talk about the past,” he started to say after refilling the glasses. “I would like to tell you what happened to me, but any exertion I make wears me out and for some reason, whenever I make up my mind to do so, I feel like I end up talking about something else. As a friend once said, I lack a critical perspective.”

“What about the cats?” I asked, interrupting him.

For a while, Amador seemed lost in some faraway memory. Then he said:

“I don’t remember whether I told you, I don’t think I did, that I always knew those animals were superior to us, as intelligent as we think we are. They know that the world around us is worthless. As hard as we try we will never rival the grace or agility of their movements. Clumsiness is not in their nature.”

He shook his head again as he had a while ago. I realized then that he was talking to himself, searching for words as he looked downward, watching the shadows on the ground, preoccupied and as still as a statue. I wanted to tell him that long ago, during my first years in college, I discovered that in a cat’s brain there was no compartment equivalent to the one in which we store memory. Perhaps Amador could explain why his animals so skillfully learned the rules he established for the game.

“Little by little I understood,” he continued, after putting his empty glass on the table, “that it was practically impossible to penetrate the world of these creatures by will alone. I tried many times, during the years I spent wandering from one circus to another. I never wanted to admit to my father that he was right when he said that it was neither sensible nor reasonable to insist on my training games and also that they had nothing to do with real life.”

He interrupted himself and let out a short laugh, possibly amused by the memory. I was starting to feel a little drunk. I went over Amador’s features one more time, and when I tried to compare them to the boy recorded in my mind, the sense of strangeness became even stronger. I started to convince myself that I was listening to a mere emissary of the real Amador, who had already vanished. His words were like those of a survivor interpreting in his own way the final agony of his fellow shipwreck victims.

“I was just a boy when I ran away from my parents’ house in Caracas,” Amador said, raising his voice to get my attention. I leaned back and concentrated on the movement of his mouth. “In those days, when I was traveling through southern Mexico, I would wake up almost every night and think about my future plans for the life I was going to pursue. I thought about my cats and the fact that, at some point, they would abandon me forever.”

He stood up all of a sudden, almost with a jump, and disappeared down the hallway. I hadn’t even reacted to the surprise when he was already on his way back. He brought with him the stuffed body of a cat mounted on a piece of dark wood. I could see it was a fine specimen of an Abyssinian. The animal had maintained its defiant attitude, suspended in a mysterious arching of the back, its head facing slightly upward in a pre-attack position, its lower jaw stiff as though it had just seen the nearby outline of an invisible bird in the air. Amador set it on his lap, and because of its position, the animal studied me with a fixed, anxious gaze. I found it difficult to believe, until Amador turned it around, that it wouldn’t pounce at my face.

“This was the last cat I trained. I found it a couple of years before I came here,” Amador started to tell me, all the while looking at the motionless body. “One afternoon, after several days without sleeping, I went to a hotel with a woman. It was a date I’d greedily desired for a long time. Some of my friends assured me this lady would make me unhappy. But there I was one afternoon that I always remember being sunny.”

He took a breath and poured us more wine. We drank at the same time, an equally long swallow. But before he continued his description of the adventure, Amador

declared, seriously, “A while ago I told you that whenever I try to tell a story like this I easily get off track.”

“Yes,” I answered. “But go on.”

“I don’t know if you made this trip so that we could talk about our time at the estate and afternoons in the neighborhood.”

“It doesn’t matter. Go on,” I repeated. “I’m interested.”

He smiled, and with extreme caution, as if he were handling the only remaining piece of antique porcelain, he set the rigid figure next to the rocking chair. For a few seconds he left his hand on the animal’s little head, petting it with his fingertips. I wondered if Amador had ever been able to touch a different kind of skin, human and alive, with such enthusiasm. He lifted his glass and looked with interest at the sparkling wine. I remained attentive, like a confessor expecting to hear about an authentic mortal sin.

“It’s just a story. A little weird.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ll try to spare you details,” he added.

“Please...”

He stood up and didn’t let me finish my sentence.

“We need more wine,” he said.

While he was on his way back I decided, pretty drunk, to let myself go with whatever story Amador told, no matter how fantastical or absurd it was. Nor did I care if in the end I found out that all my memories, forgotten for so long, turned out to be fraudulent, based on deceit. I understood that I had come here for no reason, for a pretext

that would provide me, for a few days, with a way to stop being the guy who had started to grow old in Bogotá.

“I’m a little drunk,” I said when we clinked glasses again.

“You think?”

The question threw me off. There was a strong breeze and it shook all the leaves around us. I looked for the cat’s dark figure. I wanted to make sure it was still in the same spot.

“Go on with your story,” I insisted.

He took another breath and continued, “When we entered the room we found this cat, sleeping in the middle of the bed. After our initial surprise, the woman asked me to scare it away. When I refused to wake it up and suggested we change rooms, she felt hurt and insulted and immediately left. In those days I thought that if I didn’t win that woman’s love I’d be lost forever, but I didn’t follow her. I was going through a disastrous time. I wasn’t getting hired at circuses and the last of my cats had died from an infection. I sat in a chair for more than two hours, just about the same amount of time we had rented the room, and like a guard I watched the animal sleep. I stopped thinking about the woman and offered the hotel owner a few bucks for the cat. When I left Mexico I took it with me. It died in New York, a few days after we arrived. Maybe the winter killed it, I don’t know.”

He said those last words in a quieter tone as if he were overcome by a feeling of devotion and compassion for the animal’s memory. I waited for him to finish the story before excusing myself to use the bathroom.

“I sent it to a guy named Carl Pepi to be embalmed,” he continued, gently running his hand over the still body. “I spent almost everything I had, resolved to have it done. It’s nothing more than a doll made of resin, and it never was a cat that did anything extraordinary. It didn’t walk on flames and it looked at mirrors only with disinterest. But it stayed by my side all that time, and even though it might sound strange to you, its presence cheers me up.”

He interrupted himself again to pour more wine. Then some distant images came back to me. I saw myself again next to Amador, accompanying him in his game of throwing the cat into the middle of the lake. I was never going to understand what happened in those moments when the animal came back to him for a big embrace. Amador didn’t seem interested in revealing his secret, if there was one.

It was difficult to calculate how much time had transpired since I got to the house and, during the pause that followed, I felt like I was moving through fog, a bit unsettled by the dizzying drunkenness, and by my breaking the pattern of moderation that had governed me lately.

We sat in silence and I discovered a sudden glow in Amador’s eyes, perhaps brought on by the alcohol. He watched me as if measuring me with his gaze, and I remember that I had long ago discovered that Amador had converted his pastime into an art in order to achieve perfection. I tried to bring the outline of his face into focus. Amador said something I didn’t understand, but I nodded with a smile. At some point I thought that behind the ambiguous, illusory dimension he presented to his spectators, there was an uncontainable disdain for the human species.

“I always wanted,” I started to say, my mouth dry, aware of how drunk I was, “to have the power of seeing. To see what others couldn’t see, like a member of one of those secret sects that say they know someone before meeting him because they’ve dreamt about him. Like your cats dreaming about you.”

Amador let out another laugh and we said cheers again.

I didn’t know how or at what point we ended up on the beach. I was totally disoriented, taking big swigs from the bottle Amador passed me every once in a while. I was lying on my back, looking at the brightness of faraway lightning.

“Can I confess something to you?” Amador asked.

I didn’t respond.

“Here, no one has seen any of what I did, nothing of what you once witnessed. But the simple story of my life seems sufficient and marvelous to them, like the deeds of a hero from antiquity.”

I was trying to follow his words, but some of them were cut off by the noise of the waves, at times quite loud and very close to us.

“Sometimes,” he continued, and I knew he wasn’t paying any attention to me, that he was talking to himself, “they ask me to tell or repeat for them a scene from some movie, and even though I tell them it’s fiction, they consider it part of my life. I sit in the plaza and they almost always beg for a description of a love scene, like the one with that woman. They assume I made love to her and abandoned her for no reason, that she lay down on a couch, propped up like a sphinx, listening to the painful confession of her lover. My confession. Then the camera stops on her unemotional face, her distant gaze,

perfect features, bright skin, the arc of her eyebrows, the shadow of her eyelashes quivering with her first tears.”

At some point I got undressed and walked toward the sea, still listening to the words and an occasional chuckle from Amador, behind me. I felt like Julia was watching me from somewhere, surprised and bothered by my irresponsible, adolescent attitude, ready to reproach me for this ridiculous trip and my unfair, inopportune absence. I wanted to tell her, as I waded into the warm water, that I had lied to her, that in reality my secret had been to come to this place and encounter the enormous silence that in that instant seemed to embrace me so sweetly. I had dreamed, hardly knowing it, of that momentary and forgotten happiness, even though it was a common dream everyone had in the middle of some enthusiastic night. I let the warm tide take me away, without resisting the gentle, persistent pulls of the water, and I let the current drag me, without fighting the waves, out to sea. Amador didn't matter, far away on the shore. Perhaps he would gladly receive the approaching storm, believing that he was once again witnessing the splendor of the only cat ever to walk on fire.

APPENDIX

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>
To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>
Subject: RE: otra cosa
Date: Sun, 7 Oct 2007 09:52:16 -0500

Querida Andrea,
de nuevo gracias por tus "labores" de traducción. En el cuento se trata en efecto de brothers and sisters.
En cuanto a lo de la celda sumergida encontré que se trataba de dos tesis y no sólo de una tesis sobre el libro. Son tesis académicas para maestría en literatura. Las dos personas leyeron un texto breve, pero les pedí que me enviaran el texto final. Así que ya te contaré.
Por ahora un abrazo de vuelta. Por aquí el domingo está un poco lluvioso y frío...
Julio.

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>
To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>
Subject: RE: una pregunta – la pañoleta
Date: Tue, 30 Oct 2007 07:54:53 -0500

Querida Andrea,
muchas gracias de nuevo. En cuanto a la consulta de "racimos de figurines" te podría decir que la idea es como ver un "racimo" de plátanos. En cuanto a "figurines", la acepción sí sería la de esos modelos en papel. Me cuentas si te sirve la explicación.
No he tenido tiempo de leer tu texto. Espero leerlo hoy mismo.
Un abrazo,
Julio.

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>
To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>
Subject: RE: una pregunta – Flor enhiesta
Date: Tue, 15 Jan 2008 17:47:46 -0500

Querida Andrea,
Acabamos de regresar de vacaciones, estuvimos en la playa, en un lugar

fantástico, una especie de reserva natural en el Caribe, con un mar espectacular, donde uno podría quitarse todos los males. Logramos descansar unos días del rush de la city...

Por lo demás aquí las cosas van relativamente bien, ya sabes cómo es este país, en todo caso...

Igual, yo intento avanzar en mi nuevo libro de cuentos, a veces parece como si no se me ocurriera nada nuevo, pero así es el oficio, como tú también lo sabes. Y hablando de cuentos, la palabra que me preguntas, "maticas", es un diminutivo de mata o planta. En cuanto al título, seguiremos pensando. No se ve fácil pero habrá una solución.

A mí ese cuento también me gusta bastante (y coincidentalmente hoy me escribieron de una revista donde quieren publicarlo de nuevo!!).

Por otro lado, tengo un amigo en Nueva York, Mathew Fishbane, que leyó tu traducción de La pañoleta y quiere ponerse en contacto contigo.

Quizás él nos ayude a buscar un sitio dónde publicarlo. ¡Sería maravilloso! Así que le daré tus datos, si quieres.

Y también con mucha emoción de ver de nuevo a Marcy por estos lados.

Y tú cómo vas?

Abrazos de vuelta,

Julio.

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>

To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>

Subject: RE: información biográfica

Date: Mon, 3 Mar 2008 11:59:06 -0500

Querida Andrea,

pues no te imaginas la emoción de tener un libro mío traducido al inglés y casi listo. Además, con unas traducciones también maravillosas. Por supuesto que es tu trabajo también!! Estoy muy, muy contento, y me gusta mucho tu selección. (Te confieso que yo tampoco sé qué puede pasar con los protagonistas...ya sabes, y creo que lo has descubierto mejor que nadie, mi interés como escritor está en esos espacios sin resolver o que no parecen tener solución racional...).

Te mando un c.v. actualizado.

Cualquier otra cosa me cuentas y estaré ansioso esperando tus textos.

Una maravilla que nos hayamos cruzado en ese proyecto!!! Te estaré siempre agradecido.

Un abrazo de vuelta,

Julio.

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>
To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>
Subject: RE: una preguntita – El vástago
Date: Thu, 13 Mar 2008 18:19:15 -0500

Querida Andrea,
tienes razón con la referencia, un tinto es un café solo servido en una taza pequeña (aunque no es un espresso). Sigo con la emoción de leer tus textos. Y toda la suerte para tu tesis. Sin duda será magnífica.
Abrazos de vuelta,
Julio

From: "Julio Paredes Castro" <julioparedescastro@hotmail.com>
To: "Andrea Olsen" <aolsen918@yahoo.com>
Subject: RE: "Eme"
Date: Mon, 24 Mar 2008 12:48:30 -0500

Queri Andrea,
felices pascuas de vuelta para ti. Sí hay algo de tradición con los huevos de pascuas, pero no está tan extendida como otros rituales; igual, algunos sobrinos buscan los huevos y comen mucho chocolate.
En cuanto a tu pregunta sobre "eme": en realidad es el nombre de la protagonista, aunque hace referencia a un nombre que empieza por la letra eme. Creo que lo mejor es dejar el título así. ¿Te parece?
Me alegra mucho que ya estés por entregar tu libro final. Ya sabes la emoción que yo también comparto. Muchísima suerte!! Te la mereces.
Espero en unos días mandarte un nuevo cuento del nuevo libro que intento terminar...
Un abrazo de vuelta,
Julio.

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