

DETECTIVE STORIES FROM MADRID:  
TRANSLATIONS OF  
*ONE DEAD CAT* BY JUAN PEDRO APARICIO &  
*THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS* BY ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA  
by  
Jenell Weitz

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Phyllis Zatlin, Ph.D.  
and approved by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DETECTIVE STORIES FROM MADRID:

*ONE DEAD CAT* BY JUAN PEDRO APARICIO AND

*THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS* BY ANTONIO MUNOZ MOLINA

TRANSLATED BY Jenell Weitz

Thesis Director: Phyllis Zatlin, Ph.D.

The two detective stories, by Spanish authors, appear in the collection *Historias de detectives* by Angeles Encinar, and both take place in Madrid. While the authors' styles are distinct, both contain ironic plot twists and character developments that leave the reader surprised. Furthermore, the reader learns about new lifestyle changes in Madrid that gain popularity at the end of the twentieth century. These are more than detective stories, they encompass themes of post-modernity, revenge, and life's ambiguities.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1 *Introduction*

My project was a translation of two short stories, each by a different Spanish author, that appear in Angeles Encinar's collection *Historias de detectives*. This collection has many interesting detective stories that encapsulate diverse themes and sometimes have a message about society.

Antonio Muñoz Molina was born in Úbeda in 1956. He is a member of the *Real Academia Española*, and recently served as the director of the Instituto Cervantes in New York City. As a writer he is very prolific, having written over thirteen novels, plus many short stories and essays. He is the winner of numerous book prizes. Several of his works have been translated into English, including *The Polish Horseman*, *Sepharad*, and *A Manuscript of Ashes*. Some themes that arise in his works include postmodernism, ties between past and present, and the romanticism of normalcy.

Specifically, these themes and others appear in *The Kindness of Strangers*. There is an interesting allusion to *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. First, the title is a line from the play, secondly there are parallels in the life situations of Blanche Dubois, the play's protagonist, and Mr. Walberg. Both characters have to hide their past when they move to a new place, and they both feel that only strangers have pity on them or exhibit any type of compassion. Blanche had also had an affair with an underage student while she was a teacher, then had to leave her job, and relocate, thus causing her to lose her hold on reality and experience a nervous breakdown. Mr. Walberg speaks of an old black and white movie he saw (the film adaptation of the Tennessee Williams play) and quotes the exact line from it: "Someone said [in the film], 'I have always

depended on the kindness of strangers” (Muñoz Molina 261). The author includes this allusion because he wants to show readers that Mr. Walberg allowed his life to be completely formed around the desire (and its consequences) for his young student, just as Blanche lets desire take charge of her life.

Juan Pedro Aparicio was born in 1941 in León, a city that plays an important role in his writing, although not in the story I translated. He is an accomplished novelist, short story writer, poet, travel writer, and essayist. Winner of several Spanish book prizes for his works, his repertoire is varied, from the detective genre to travel books to historical fiction. Currently, he is serving as the director of the Instituto Cervantes in London, and giving readings from his latest publications. Some of his works have been translated into English, Chinese, and Russian, while Aparicio himself has translated a Max Beerbohm novel from English to Spanish.

In Aparicio’s *One Dead Cat*, the important themes that surface include postmodernity and revenge. Although the two deaths in the story are an integral part of the plot, they are not the main focus; more than a detective story, *One Dead Cat* is about moving to a new suburb of Madrid and what this lifestyle change means for a small group of acquaintances. The characterization of Berta, without her physically being there when her friends are talking, is deeply intense all the way until the end.

Postmodernism is a difficult subject to define, but Mary Klages of the University of Colorado attempts to explain it in her essay on literary theory.

“Postmodernism...doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that.” Furthermore, she writes, “for postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no

signifieds....Postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge.” These ideas, though abstract, do apply to *One Dead Cat*. Throughout the story the neighbors, especially Valeriano and the narrator, who, coincidentally, is a writer, ask themselves for an explanation for Berta’s behavior and her strange, unexpected death. They attempt to organize this knowledge, to go over the facts again and again, even after the police close the case. However, as Klages mentions, postmodernism celebrates the fact that a storyline, or any artwork for that matter, remains fragmented. The opening pages of *One Dead Cat* exemplify this fragmentation, when the narrator discusses how he recalls certain cities or people, with one image playing over and over in his mind, blocking out other scenes related to the subject. Additionally, the reader’s knowledge about what happened to Berta and Picazo consists of bits and pieces recounted by various neighbors. We never find out what led them to be in Picazo’s love nest; rather the other characters’ present us with their opinions and conclusions, and sometimes they only tell one other neighbor, or, in the narrator’s case, only the reader knows about his permanent image of Berta in her red bikini. Therefore the whole story is made up of fragments and different ideas melded together by the narrator, a writer, a fact that helps the Inspector make sense of the deaths of Berta and Picazo.

On a more personal note, I chose these two stories because I translated an excerpt of *El jinete polaco* (*The Polish Horseman*) by Antonio Muñoz Molina for my Theory and Practice of Translation graduate course with Professor Phyllis Zatlin. I enjoyed the author’s style and how he expresses his world through writing. When I had to choose works to translate for my Master’s thesis, my professor lent me a collection of detective

stories, and in it was the work by Muñoz Molina. So I decided on his piece and I picked another story that attracted me, after reading a few in the collection.

It was a bit of coincidence that they both took place in Madrid, because the following year, while I was still working on the translations, I went to live in the Spanish capital for one year. My experience there helped me have a clearer idea about the places mentioned in the stories, and it let me see how people live there, therefore adding to my ability to render many descriptions more accurately in English. The neighborhood where Quintana is from (Carabanchel), was where I worked; thus I understood why I had to include the definition as a “working class neighborhood,” it still qualifies as such today. While working at a Madrid public school, I was able to ask many native speakers for their opinions on the translation of certain words or expressions. Both authors used literary Spanish phrases and so it was important for me to discuss them with native Spaniards. Even though some of the people I spoke with could not speak English, I asked them to explain what a phrase meant in Spanish so I could wrap my mind around the best English translation.

Fortunately, I had the chance to briefly meet both authors and obtain their e-mail addresses. Antonio Muñoz Molina came to Rutgers to speak, I collected his information there, and in June 2008 I went to the “Feria del Libro” in Madrid’s Parque Retiro, where Juan Pedro Aparicio was signing books at his publisher’s booth. I introduced myself and he gave me his e-mail address, and seemed nostalgic in recalling *One Dead Cat*, which he wrote a long time ago. Aparicio was kind enough to write me back in time with his suggestions for my translation. While I incorporated some of the changes right away, there were others that I debated including, and will discuss further on.



During the translation process, I had to confront many issues that required me to use the translation theory I studied in order to solve them. Sometimes there were multiple solutions to a translation problem. Other times, there was not a way to render the message as close to the source text as I would have liked, so I researched an alternate way to express the phrase, allusion, or word. Occasionally such alternatives led to either overtranslation or undertranslation. First there will be a discussion about translation issues common to both texts and then aspects unique to each story, with more specific examples to illustrate certain problems.

In addition to the popular and commonly used online resources, *wordreference.com* and *rae.es* (online version of the Real Academia Española), I often turn to Google images to help me translate nouns. An image search with the Spanish word gives me a visual suggestion of the thing, and then I experiment by doing a search using the English word to see if similar images come up. For example, *esclava de plata* (Muñoz Molina 256) is a specific kind of name bracelet worn in Spain by men and women, often given to their respective girlfriend or boyfriend. Knowing what it looked like from observing Spanish people wear them, I did the image search using the words “silver name bracelet” to see if the same pictures appeared. In this case, there isn’t such a specific English term to describe that sort of bracelet so I settled on the abovementioned phrase and used a footnote to explain my choice. Another example that arose is the word *infiernillo* (Aparicio 59), which I could not figure out, but after reading a comment from my professor, I did an image search and saw it was not a “little hell,” but a small, old fashioned gas stove used for heating parts of the home, or used under a dining room table.

General stylistic problems encountered in both texts include the length of the sentences. Spanish tends towards longer sentences, often using many semi-colons, commas, and subordinate or relative clauses. Also, an author's style may lend itself to the use of semi-colons. Throughout the translating process I had to make decisions of detail regarding the sentence structure, to either keep the semi-colons, or break up the sentence, thus departing from the source text. At times I rearranged the order of the clauses, since Spanish favors the verb-subject pattern while English tends toward the subject-verb model. In *The Kindness of Strangers* there were some particularly long phrases, and I tried to maintain a balance, by splitting up those I thought necessary to have a flowing, coherent story, and left semi-colons in where I could. In *One Dead Cat*, the author's style did not include as many long sentences, so I was able to minimize my sentence dividing.

In the translation theory offered in *Thinking Spanish Translation*, a conversation arises about cultural borrowing, a technique I found appropriate throughout both of the pieces I translated. I left the original Spanish in the text and hope that the reader understands the cultural differences, given the characters live in Spain. For example, in Aparicio's tale, Picazo has a tiny apartment in the center of Madrid, in a fancy area, and pays "five hundred thousand pesetas per year." I left the pesetas, not converting it, because with the currency change to the euro, inflation, and the annual real estate value increase, the resulting numbers wouldn't make sense for readers. Pesetas also help date the story and remind readers it took place in the early to mid 1990s. When the story took place, it was very common, and affordable for Spanish families to have more than one apartment. Readers may think Picazo was very wealthy because these days it is

expensive to have another apartment in the city center. Another example of cultural borrowing arises later in the plot, when the narrator and Valeriano go to FNAC, a European chain of book and music stores, much like Barnes and Noble. Though I left the store name in, I added a phrase before it, “after browsing CDs and books, [we] came out of FNAC...” so that readers would not be distracted thinking about what FNAC meant.

When cultural borrowing did not seem to be the answer, I turned to cultural transposition, which entails replacing the source text’s cultural features to those specific to the target text (Hervey, et al 221). For example, I translated a phrase that referred to the suburb of Monte Rubio being a few kilometers outside of Madrid, but instead of leaving it as kilometers, I first put in the word *miles*. In the final version, I decided to write “a short distance outside of Madrid,” because in this case, the important idea to transmit was that Monte Rubio was not located in Madrid’s center, but rather right outside the city. Similarly, a character gained “*un montón de kilos*,” and instead of translating it as “many kilos,” I wrote, “he put on a lot of weight.” Again, the idea in the story was more important than the proper metric measurements, and readers might have stopped to convert the measures, thus detracting from the story’s flow.

In order to leave a hint of exoticism, I decided to leave in Spanish names of places and cars. Exoticism is the lowest level of cultural transposition (Hervey, et al 221). To leave the “foreign element” in the text, I did not change the make of Quintana’s French-made car, a Citroën, in *The Kindness of Strangers*. While translating the first draft, I considered replacing it with a popular American sedan, for example, Toyota, an idea the author agreed with, but in the end I figured people would know that there are different kinds of cars in Europe, and this small detail reminded readers of the characters’

Europeanness. In the same story, Mr. Walberg lives in Chueca, a neighborhood in downtown Madrid that at the time had a population of drug dealers and users, as briefly mentioned in the story. Today Chueca is famous for its gay bars and nightclubs. I wanted to explain the location of the area, which is actually very close to the Gran Vía, but I decided to let the story explain itself and I thought it was enough that the readers know the story takes place in central Madrid.

Another difficult cultural and lexical issue involves the parts of the houses and apartments in Spain. For example, *patio de luces* is a common feature in apartments in Spain, and any Spaniard reading the story would instantly know what it is; however, that is not the case for American readers. My best solution was “narrow interior courtyard,” but for me it still does not get across the Spanish structure as well. Google image search helped me come up with this solution. There is another example with the phrase “*la pequeña lámina de cobre que tapaba la mirilla*” (Muñoz Molina 276). I knew that *mirilla* was the peephole, but when I went to look up the word *lámina*, I saw it meant “sheet or plate,” which did not make too much sense. Then I thought of my apartment in Madrid, a building from the 1920s, with its heavy door and peephole, and I realized the *lámina* referred to the tiny copper disk that loosely covers the hole so that people in the hallway cannot see inside the apartment. Knowing the parts of the home seems basic, however, some of these parts require cultural understanding since people in different places have various customs and lifestyles. Translations do exist for parts of the home, but sometimes these are infrequently used words in English, meaning the audience may or may not be familiar with them.

Although it only arose a few times, there were instances of alliteration in the source text that I tried to remain faithful to. My favorite phrase was “*el picadero de Picazo*” (Aparicio 51). I translated it as “Picazo’s pleasure pad” to maintain the alliterative quality, but other ideas were “love nest,” or “Picazo’s pied-a-terre.” Later on, there is another sentence, “...*cambiaron de coche, de casa y de compañera*” (60). To start the list with all the same letter in English required some creativity. With some thought and help from my professor, I came up with, “changed their cars, chalets, and companions.” Of course using chalet instead of house may evoke an image other than a single-family home, depending on the geographic origin of the reader, but it is essential to keep the author’s style if possible when translating a literary text. In this case, some extra brainstorming allowed the alliteration to remain a part of the work.

More specific translation issues arose in each of the stories, so first I will discuss *One Dead Cat*, which contained many colloquial expressions. An expression repeated at least three times, therefore important to the revenge theme was “*una vendetta con cuernos*.” Literally, the phrase means, “a vendetta with horns,” but that is confusing or meaningless to American readers. Talking about horns in Spanish refers to adultery or someone who is made a cuckold because his wife cheated on him. In this story, Berta and Picazo were thought to have cheated on their respective spouses, since they were found naked together, although there was no proof they had sexual relations. To generate ideas and observe translation decisions a literary translator must make, I read Edith Grossman’s translation of *The Feast of the Goat (La Fiesta del Chivo)* by Mario Vargas Llosa. She translated, “Like Don Froilan, they had to resign themselves to wearing horns,” where the source text says, “*Como don Froilan, debían resignarse a los cuernos*”

(Vargas Llosa 50). In my story, using horns did not exactly fit, so I ended up with the phrase, “a bedroom vendetta,” which I still am not wholly satisfied with. Spanish has a richer variety of terms to label adulterers and contains many more biblical references than English.

Equally as difficult to translate was the phrase “*Y todo eso en un pis pas, como dijo Candido entre riego y riego*” (Aparicio 52). This is a very colloquial expression, and even after hearing the opinions of several native Spanish speakers, the last part remains difficult. *En un pis pas* translates as “in the blink of an eye,” but *entre riego y riego* means something like “between watering the lawn, and watering the garden,” In context, the narrator means to say that Candido was unfazed by the quick promotions of their neighbor Antonio, about whom they are talking as Candido waters his garden. Luckily, the author had a suggestion for me as well. He edited my translation so it read, “And all of this in the blink of an eye, gossiped Candido, while trying the watering system again.” A solution I think works well, and author-approved. A different, creative solution came to me by fellow translation student and listserv-member Laura Bush: “...said Candido, sprinkling comments as he moved from plant to plant.” She tried to evoke the melody of “pis pas” by adding that he sprinkled his comments rather than simply stated them. There is a repetition of sprinkler references, since the characters use the installation or breakage of the automatic sprinkler system as an excuse to get together to discuss Berta’s case or other neighborhood gossip. Perhaps it is another reminder that these characters are pioneering a new lifestyle in Madrid; no one in the city would have to worry about a sprinkler system.

Aparicio's title, *La Gata*, presented a problem as well. Since I could not fabricate a literal translation, such as "The Female Cat" or "She-Cat" as the title, I had to brainstorm another solution that played on the idea of Berta as a cat. I came up with *A Dead Cat*, *One Dead Cat*, and *The Cat House*. I opted for *One Dead Cat* although the author preferred *The Cat House*, which, upon further thought, I found to have too strong of a connotation for the story. The reader infers that a cat house implies a brothel, and while I do think there is a subtle portrayal of Berta in this way, I do not think it dominates her character. Also, we know Picazo was a womanizer, but the original title focuses on Berta, not him.

Adding to the theme of whores and womanizers, the author tweaked another part of the story. In the source text, Antonio says, "*¿No te gustan las gatas? Yo tengo una granja de gatas*" (60). I had originally translated it as, "Don't you like cats? I have a house full of them." However, upon the author's suggestion I changed the last part to "I have a house full of pussies." After a closer reading, I realized that he specifically wrote "*las gatas*," female cats, to emphasize Antonio's desire for other women and without writing "pussies" in the American version I lost this allusion to whores. The translation problem presented here stems from gendered nouns in Spanish, which is usually lost upon translating into English.

In *The Kindness of Strangers* there were also problematic phrases to translate. Most importantly though, was a major issue throughout the entire work: since both characters were men and the story is narrated in the third person, there was an abundance of "he, him," and "his." Furthermore, both characters refer to each other using the formal *Usted* form, which uses the same direct object pronouns and personal pronouns as the

*él/ella* form. I did my best to clarify which character was being referred to, and in many cases I added their names to be clearer. Due to the author's style with many semi colons and the fact that there were only two male characters, I did sometimes have to break up longer sentences with periods.

A word that gave me difficulty, even up until now, is *catedrático*; it appears several times throughout the text. The problem with translating this word stems from the difference between the American education system and that of Spain. *Catedrático* can refer to a person who is a university professor or a secondary school teacher who has advanced education, something that is common in Spain but not in the United States. So, to show Mr. Walberg's higher education - he could not be simply a high school teacher, or a professor, which implies working at a university – I settled on “department chair.” Similarly, there is no exact translation for *bachillerato*, the two years after the required public secondary school until age sixteen, and only for students who want to take their exams to attend university. The Spanish system of secondary education is quite different from the American one, and while living in Madrid I talked to many educators and students to understand the system. This helped me come up with a succinct solution: “college-preparatory” education.

Culturally specific words formed a part of Mr. Walberg's life in Madrid, and emphasized the fact that he seemed to be living in the past, disconnected from society, without a radio or reading a daily newspaper. The author uses the Spanish terms *ultramarino* and *merceria* (266), both of which suggest nostalgia for Spain's past. The first, *ultramarino* is a small, local grocery store, almost like our modern day convenience store, only it was not commercialized. An article in the *New York Times* accurately



describes one of the last of these stores, Ultramarinos La Confianza as, "...a thoroughly homey place, a dry-goods store where packaged white bread shares table space with the specialty chocolates, and where housewives can purchase rice or flour and children come to buy candy after school.... The store is also known for its distinctly personal character." Although the article suggests "dry-goods" store as a translation, I used "local convenience store," but of course, the choice is ultimately disputable. My solution involved overtranslation, in this case necessary so that readers could imagine the implicitly old fashioned scene. A *merceria* is a shop where one finds ladies panties, bras, stockings, socks, and tights, as well as buttons and patches of fabric. There was one right below my apartment in Madrid, and it was quite unique from shops I have seen in the States.

Overall, it is clear that translating the two short stories presented many challenges, and at times was frustrating to locate the correct word or phrase. My experience was positive and rewarding. Coincidentally, the two stories had many similarities that I did not notice until further analysis. While writing the introduction I realized how many subtleties there are when translating from another language. I could have included pages more on other interesting words, phrases, or expressions. Hopefully, with the authors' collaboration I can publish the stories in a literary journal. These two authors are well-known in Spanish literature, so I feel that the publication of their works in English would be beneficial to the American audience.

Chapter 2:  
*The Kindess of Strangers*  
By Antonio Muñoz Molina  
Translated by Jenell Weitz

The most pitiful thing about Mr. Walberg was his manual clumsiness. He was a learned man, Quintana thought, with an almost fearful admiration, overwhelmed by the evidence of the books he had read, the ancient and modern languages he spoke, the things he knew. But at the same time, he was a pitiable man, a fact that provided an even greater contrast between his knowledge and his shortcomings; he was a pitiable man who was absolutely, completely useless. As they say in the army, such white hands, with clean and well-trimmed nails cannot possibly know how to do a single thing, except, of course read books; they can't even change a light bulb without causing a short circuit, or open a tin can, nor are they able to turn the doorknobs in the proper direction – such as in the house where Quintana went to visit him throughout the autumn, and almost the entire winter; a memorable winter since it was one of coldest on record in Madrid, and also because of a series of grossly sensationalized crimes that appeared on television.

“I'll never get used to it,” said Mr. Walberg to him on the very last day, when he decided to show him the dirty magazines he found under the laundry room basin as well as the alcohol-filled flask still sitting in the fridge, with floating bits in it that looked like swollen, violet-colored slugs, moving, as if they were alive.

“I never got used to the fact that the doors in this house open in the opposite direction from all of the other doors in the world. I always turn the knob downwards and push the door inwards and I can never remember that you have to turn the knob to the left, upwards, and you have to push the door outwards; and then I panic, I think I am locked inside and won't be able to leave.”

This is how Mr. Walberg was; his daily efforts were dedicated to hiding his own talents and remaining unnoticed; he did so by working as a copy clerk or an accountant in a sordid office that didn't even have a typewriter, and they paid him a salary that barely put food on the table.<sup>1</sup> Not only did he hide his recent shameful past, but he also remained secretive about his origins and accomplishments. It took Quintana months to discover that he was the son of an eminent Berlin-born doctor who emigrated to France, and then to Madrid in the thirties. He was like a hermit, who, upon taking the strict vows of the order, renounces his name along with all the world's vanities. He made the more complicated things become simple: the declensions of the German language, or the legal organization of the Roman republic, to use two examples that he treasured. And the infinitely difficult, almost impossible became simple, his fluency in Latin and Greek held much less importance when compared to Quintana's mechanical abilities or the skill with which this man drove the Opel Rekord he bought in January, shortly after he was named director of the group. Right after bringing the car home from the dealer he took Mr. Walberg for a ride, excitedly pressing the accelerator on the M-30 highway, going way above the posted speed limit, with delirious and controlled pride, and then slamming on the brakes in the narrowest city streets, so abruptly that if Mr. Walberg had not been wearing the automatic seat belt, he would have been knocked against the windshield more than once.<sup>2</sup> His forehead was sweating a little and he was clutching his knees with his two small, white hands, with fingers that became thinner towards the nails; hands belonging to a professor, someone wise, someone useless. These same hands, years ago, were perhaps dirtied with chalk, and yet after living one year in that house, they did not

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<sup>1</sup> Sueldo de hambre – ironic, not sure if I could reproduce the same effect in English.

<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of the paragraph was one whole sentence, so I broke it up.

even possess the instinctive capability to turn the doorknobs the other direction. If they had touched the skin of a much younger woman, how they would have trembled. When Quintana finally stopped the Opel in front of the house, Mr. Walberg still didn't move, his lips pressed together to stop his chin from shaking, and he smiled cowardly at Quintana without looking him in the eye; he wore an expression of gratitude and almost loathing, as if he were thankful that Quintana braked in time to save his life, a gratitude similar to someone who suffers from Stockholm syndrome, Quintana thought later. He had, of course, learned the meaning of this condition thanks to Mr. Walberg: his teacher in everything, as he said, and then Mr. Walberg waved his hand to dismiss the idea, to swat away the sound of the words that deep down made him feel proud. And since it wasn't that unusual that he became emotional in front of Quintana nor that he wanted to hide it, Mr. Walberg took off his glasses and with the corner of a white handkerchief, cleaned the lenses, revealing his reddened eyelids without eyelashes and his moist, feeble blue eyes, unfocused, myopic, as colorless as his skin and the little hair he had left. One day Quintana was flipping through pages of a cinema encyclopedia and he recognized the shape of his face and eyes and his malleable, desperate mouth: Mr. Walberg looked just like Edward G. Robinson, the American gangster movie actor.

Shortly after he met Quintana, there was a moment when Mr. Walberg instinctively decided that he was going to either protect him or educate him. Mr. Walberg, with his years of experience as a teacher, was sure he had discovered an unpolished and almost lost talent in Quintana, a talent that had been wasted due to the incompetent, frivolous educational system, towards which Mr. Walberg professed an obsessive revulsion. This feeling arose not only in recent years, but was present a long

time before, when he was a respected teacher without any outwards hints of resentment. He liked his career so much, he was so thoroughly convinced that a secondary school<sup>3</sup> education was important for training youth, that he did not care about the administrative stupidities; nor did he care about the Francoist professors' conspiracies, which blocked his way towards obtaining a university teaching position for two decades, even though he was one of the highly esteemed Spanish Latin scholars. He felt proud of holding a senior teaching post in a high school,<sup>4</sup> well, of having held one, he corrected himself dismally, and murmured to himself, "I always confuse the verb tenses - I can never get used to conjugating the past or the future tenses."

One night, as they were both sitting in his narrow dining room, drinking a glass of champagne, celebrating the first significant success in Quintana's professional career, Mr. Walberg said to Quintana that what caused him the most pain was realizing he was a man full of resentment, and consequently a sick man. Bitterness was one of the most serious moral sicknesses, equivalent to a tumor not worth removing because it has already taken over the healthy organism. The word he had used then was "metastasis," and Quintana liked it so much that he took note of it, determined to use it whenever he could, preferably when Mr. Walberg could hear him. "Look at the injustice," he said, his eyes on Quintana, looking as severe as a judge, with a firmness that at first bothered Quintana because it seemed like he was clairvoyant,<sup>5</sup> but this was actually the result of his nearsightedness.

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<sup>3</sup> Bachillerato – there is not an exact equivalent.

<sup>4</sup> Problem with professor vs catedrático de secundaria. We don't have that in English.

<sup>5</sup> Adivinatoria – the idea is that Walberg looks like a fortuneteller.

“I had everything given to me since birth and at fifty-five I find myself with nothing. The few moments I lose control of things I blame the world for my misfortune, which I am responsible for. I had it all and I lost it all. I’m like the unjust steward in the Gospel of Luke,<sup>6</sup> my friend Quintana. You, on the other hand, came from nothing, you were almost destined to become a criminal, one who would have better reasons than I do to blame the world for the never-ending hardships and suffering (*never-ending hardships*, Quintana made a mental note). You knew how to overcome adversity without anyone’s help and now you are a healthy, helpful man, to yourself, to everyone else, to your family, when you have one, and to me, in these difficult times.”

Mr. Walberg remained lost in thought, head hanging down, as he often did, with the glass still half full of champagne, pressing his big lips together in an instinctive, habitual gesture of bitterness, exactly like Edward G. Robinson. Quintana, sitting on the sofa, was about to get up because he wanted to walk over to Mr. Walberg and put a protective arm around his shoulder, but suddenly realized it was ridiculous and humiliating for the pitiable man, who would come out of his trance very shortly, cheered up, and he would smile to apologize for being so lost in thought, and then he would look down at his hands to discover there was still champagne left in his glass.

Usually they both drank tea on those winter afternoons, a drink that Quintana found repugnant, but he would finish off a full cup of it at each visit so that he wouldn’t offend Mr. Walberg; he also assumed that drinking tea was a rule of being refined. One December night, one of those dismal, freezing nights shortly before Christmas, he dared

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<sup>6</sup> Mal administrador de evangelio- A reference from Luke 16:14. The Parable of the Unjust Steward.

to show up at Mr. Walberg's house with a flask of cognac. He took it out from inside of his winter jacket as his friend served him the mug of tea, and casually asked if Mr. Walberg minded if he made himself a tea with a shot of cognac.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Walberg, who Quintana had never seen try any alcoholic beverage, stared at the flask for an instant with a professor's look of silent disapproval, but he didn't say anything. He still hadn't admitted to Quintana that some time ago, two years ago, he drank a lot, and he had been about to become an alcoholic, or in fact had already been one but didn't realize it or didn't care. He was so meticulous now, so self-restrained in his words and gestures, so regular in his habits that it was impossible to imagine him drunk, unshaven, stumbling shamefully around at night. This was in the very same city where he had been a high school teacher, where they had seen him walk, handcuffed, into the holding cell at the police station, covering his head with a newspaper to hide from the cruelty of the photographers. When he recounted these things, a few days after they finished a bottle of champagne between the two of them, Mr. Walberg asked Quintana nervously and timidly if he still had the *brandy* flask – he never called it cognac. After taking a gulp, he kept his eyes closed for a moment, relaxed, breathing through his nose. That night he told Quintana everything, hardly looking him in the eye, in a low voice, speaking as slowly as he drank the cognac. The next morning he woke up destroyed by regret and a hangover; he felt he had committed a desecration. He went out to the dining room and sitting between the two glasses that still smelled like cognac, was the snapshot he had showed to Quintana the night before. He shuddered with tenderness and desolation as he looked at the girl's face, her features blurred in the photograph, illuminated by a distant glow from

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<sup>7</sup> There is not one word in English that means carajillo. We just say with a shot of brandy, liquor, etc. Also the drink doesn't have a specific name, like Irish coffee.

the wintry midday. He recalled how her navy blue sweater and her hair felt to the touch, as if he had just brushed up against them. She was the best student he had ever had, he said to Quintana, who nodded in agreement to everything; as if he were able to understand, as if he were witnessing one of these romantic melodramas on television. She was a fifteen-year-old girl, almost sixteen, not particularly good looking and of course not provocative, not like those adolescents who wear tight fitting shirts and low necklines and come to class at nine in the morning on Monday, made-up for a night club. Average, or rather, shy, with light hair and eyes. He remembered the slowness with which he used to watch her, looking for her presence each day in the same seat, listening to her voice while she read a translation. He recalled the anachronistic melancholy that began to possess him, and the gradual way that this routine turned into desire and anguish. Up until then he had never committed adultery (Mr. Walberg said this word with a judicial intonation), nor had he ever felt attracted to adolescents, as does occur to men after a certain age. Something happened, unexpectedly, without warning, hidden from view; they threw themselves at each other in the shadows of an empty library on a Friday afternoon. For several months, a mutual incredulity, secrecy, and fear kept them united more effectively than desire. In such a small provincial capital it was inevitable that they would be caught. Upon hearing the end of the story, tears came to Quintana's eyes.

“Sexual abuse,<sup>8</sup> my friend,” said Mr. Walberg, “Sexual abuse, statutory rape, and corruption of a minor. As if I had been a rapist. I couldn't go out on the street. Women

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<sup>8</sup> From <http://www.sdneyinterpreters.org/glossary.php> abusos deshonestos = sexual abuse (Es)



spit on me. At the school's entrance, the girl's father punched me in the face, breaking my nose, in front of the other teachers. Jail was almost a relief."

"Sometimes jail isn't a stain, Mr. Walberg," said Quintana, "I, without an education, am telling you, as I have been schooled in the university of life."

"She wanted to testify in my defense but they didn't let her." Mr. Walberg wiped his nose noisily with a kleenex and then he lifted his head up little by little to look at Quintana. His eyes were moist and the corners were very red. "You don't know what it is, dear Quintana, to suddenly become the entire city's object of hatred. But the worst of all was seeing how the faces of those who knew me the best started to change, how they began to look at me, those people known as loved ones. I still don't know why I didn't take my own life."

"Don't even joke about that, Mr. Walberg," said Quintana, and he offered his friend the flask of cognac again. "I am one who believes that while there is life, there is hope."

They met each other in October. Quintana, a salesman who offered encyclopedias, literature collections, and classical music compact discs, had knocked one afternoon on Mr. Walberg's door. He had a small, dark apartment, in the Chueca area. It was in an old building, although it did have high ceilings, on a narrow street that saw little traffic. Mostly older people lived there; pale drug addicts, whom nobody stopped or even looked at twice, frequented the area occasionally. Quintana was a young, heavy-set man who was persistent, and smiled easily. He was prone to perspiring and wearing suits that were a size too small for his broad frame. He tended to raise his voice, eat quickly, with a piece of bread in his left hand, and he hung up telephones abruptly. On his left hand, he

wore an insignia ring and a silver name bracelet;<sup>9</sup> on his right hand, at the base of his thumb he had a blue dot tattoo. He also didn't confess right away to Mr. Walberg that he hadn't always been a saint, and during his turbulent adolescence he almost strayed down the wrong path. He was born in Carabanchel, a working-class neighborhood,<sup>10</sup> and since the age of twelve, he tried to make a living in whatever way he could. Mr. Walberg encouraged him to complete his secondary school education, and to prepare for the exams to attend university for students aged twenty-five and over. At present, without having studied, as he used to say, he was one of the leading sellers for the company, something he spoke about proudly, almost boastfully, with an almost patriotic passion. At the beginning of January, after a few years of working his tail off, he moved up to be leader of the group. When he heard the news, the first thing he did was buy a bottle of champagne and bound up the wooden stairs that led to Mr. Walberg's apartment. He didn't stop pushing his thick index finger on the doorbell until the former Latin teacher opened the door for him. That was another habit of Quintana – ringing doorbells and banging on doors with the urgency of the police. That night, drinking champagne out of water glasses, since Mr. Walberg didn't have others, they remembered the details of Quintana's first visit, which took place almost four months before, in October. After Mr. Walberg kindly turned down his sales pitch to purchase various encyclopedias and compact discs, Quintana asked if he could please have a glass of water.

“You were so pale that day,” recalled Mr. Walberg, “as if you were exhausted.”

When he came back from the kitchen with the water, Quintana had sat down in the chair

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<sup>9</sup> Esclava de plata – a specifically styled, engraved name bracelet popular in Spain.

<sup>10</sup> Added “working-class neighborhood” to explain where he came from. A Spanish person knows this already.

in the foyer, closed his eyes, and leaned his head against the wall. “No,” corrected Quintana, “not exhausted, I was sick, demoralized, disillusioned with everything, suffering from a streak of bad luck that I feared would continue forever. Because working in sales has its ups and downs, like gambling, one day you are on top and the next you are in the gutter.”<sup>11</sup>

“You brought me luck,” said Quintana, and he wanted to pour a little more champagne for Mr. Walberg, since it was warm and losing its fizz, but the latter covered the glass with his hand, a small, clumsy hand that still preserved a touch of chalk marks on fingertips and cuticles. That first afternoon, after drinking two glasses of water, Quintana asked Mr. Walberg if it was possible to make a phone call. Mr. Walberg took him to the dining room, through a dark hallway that faced an interior courtyard, struggled with the doorknob before opening it outwardly. He said that because he had been living in the apartment for a short time, he still wasn’t used to the doors opening the opposite way. While Quintana spoke rapidly with the home sales office, Mr. Walberg flipped very carefully through the glossy, full color pages of *History of the Classical World*, a book that Quintana, at this point, had given up on the possibility of selling to anyone. That same afternoon, a client rejected it, saying that he did not like Roman books or films. When Quintana hung up the phone, Mr. Walberg had moved closer to the window with the open book and was reading something in Latin, moving his lips slowly; it was the inscription on a headstone, in a full-page photograph. He murmured the words solemnly, as priests read liturgical texts.

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<sup>11</sup> Alcantarilla- means sewer, but our expression is being in the gutter.

“In this business you have to have a lot of psychological intuition, Mr. Walberg” said Quintana. “As soon as you opened the door I realized that you were a learned man who had studied for many years.”

“But I couldn’t buy anything, my friend,” said Mr. Walberg. “You don’t know the shame I feel in still not being able to buy anything from you.”

Quintana, upon discovering Mr. Walberg’s interest in the encyclopedia volume, as well as his evidently weak character, gave an exhaustive explanation of the work’s qualities and the convenience of making monthly payments to be able to purchase it. Quintana also explained the added benefits that buying the book would bring: a pine bookcase to store the volumes, a Japanese alarm clock, a bust of Julius Caesar the same size as the one in the Vatican Museum, ideal to put on the shelf. It was obvious that Mr. Walberg lived in extreme poverty, although with good taste. Quintana liked to say he was a romantic salesman, who could dedicate all of his seething energy and unflagging patience to convince or even excite a client; yet as he was talking, he knew he wasn’t going to sell anything for a simple reason: the unfortunate soul didn’t even have a bank account. In his romanticism, however, there was a practical part, better said, a mercilessly shrewd ability to discriminate; the poor people with weak characters tend to be more easily convinced than the rich or the astute, they sweat and bite their lips in fear of saying no, and it isn’t completely implausible that they will get themselves into debt for a whole decade after buying a twenty to thirty volume set of encyclopedias. They tell themselves that any sacrifice is worth it, in the name of their children’s future.

“I felt ill at ease for you,” said Mr. Walberg. “I felt bad for all of your enthusiasm, and for the conviction you had in your work. I realized how tired you were,

and how much effort it took you to climb up the stairs to the door, and you knocked on the door with the fear no one would open it for you or if someone did open it, he would slam it in your face. I saw you standing there in front of me, showing me the encyclopedia's illustrations, and I had the urge to tell you: don't wear yourself out, young man, please, your effort is in vain, save your breath. And please pardon me for bringing this up, but you had a ring of saliva on your lower lip, from talking so much."

Quintana returned the following week with a sample volume of the impressive *Encyclopedia of Humanity*, which, as he explained to Mr. Walberg, covered from man as monkey until the present. Mr. Walberg seemed older and more pitiable than the last time, and the apartment seemed emptier. Quintana had set down the tome on the dining room table, and Mr. Walberg leafed politely through the volume's glossy pages. This time he listened to the explanations without hiding his impatience and without inviting Quintana to sit down. He wore a sport jacket and tie under his corduroy robe.<sup>12</sup> That afternoon it was cloudy and turning cold, but Mr. Walberg didn't have the lights turned on, nor was there heating in the apartment, except for a small gas heater that reminded Quintana of the first black and white commercials on television. He was about to leave, but then he smelled a strong coffee aroma and heard the whistle of a coffee pot. He looked towards the door of the kitchen at the same time as Mr. Walberg and he seemed to redden as if he were caught in the middle of doing something he wasn't supposed to. Mr. Walberg stood between Quintana and the closed door of the kitchen, the instinctive gesture of an unsociable and solitary man who wasn't used to having others present in his house. Presumptuously, Quintana smiled at the man and put his briefcase back down on the table

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<sup>12</sup> Batin de paño – decided on corduroy

again; Mr. Walberg asked him if he wanted to have coffee, and with a vague kindness invited him to sit down.

“Who would have been able to tell that we would end up being such good friends, Mr. Walberg?” said Quintana. “Who knew that my bad luck streak would be over so soon and I would end up learning so many great things from you?”

“You have taught me, Quintana,” and perhaps due to the champagne, or from not having the habit of doing so, Mr. Walberg’s eyes filled with tears. “Without your visits I would have died of loneliness this winter. You know what it reminds me of? This black and white movie that I saw many years ago, surely before you were born. Someone said ‘I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.’ That is what happened to me: the people I used to know became strangers. Only true strangers had sympathy for me. The woman who sold me milk and bread helped me go on living by saying good morning everyday. And you, my friend, you have literally saved my life.”

At first, during their initial meetings, Mr. Walberg spoke very little, but Quintana had a tendency to ask unrelentingly about everything. During the second visit, he found out that Mr. Walberg had not been in Madrid for very long; he used to live in a small, inland capital in Andalusia for many years. In Madrid, he had a job as an administrator or file clerk in some Central European studies academy located on Calle Fuencarral, in a fourth floor interior apartment. That’s strange, Quintana said, usually I don’t make mistakes about people, yet I thought you were a teacher; you weren’t wrong, Mr. Walberg answered without looking into Quintana’s eyes. I have been a teacher, and later

he corrected himself, I was one, a Latin teacher, with a senior teaching post.<sup>13</sup> He hesitated a few seconds before responding to the next question; Quintana had an uncontrollable fault of turning any conversation into an interrogation. That time Mr. Walberg said that he had retired early due to health reasons and when Quintana asked him if he had any family, he appeared to not hear him or became distracted. He bent his head down over the table to read a headline from the newspaper that Quintana brought with him, a bit about the murder investigations that the press was calling “the cut-off lip murders.” Incredibly, Mr. Walberg had not the faintest idea about them or at least pretended not to, despite the fact that, as everyone recalls, they received so much attention, which more than one person described as morbid. In the newspapers and on television programs, they related the facts without leaving out or concealing any of the bloodiest details. Beginning in the summer, three women, all around thirty something years old, who lived alone and were successful professionals, had been found stabbed in their homes. The killer’s signature, according to a tabloid news presenter, was to cut off the victims’ lips and take them with him as the only trophy: in all three cases, nothing had been stolen. Quintana noticed that Mr. Walberg carefully reread the article; he leaned over the paper and moved his glasses away from his nose to see the smallest text. He never bought a newspaper and there was no television or radio in the house. He was probably the only adult in the country that hadn’t heard about the murders.

“It says here that the police have a definite lead,” said Mr. Walberg.

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<sup>13</sup> catedrático – decided to use senior teaching position, not necessarily head of dept.

“And if they catch him, so what?” Quintana shrugged his shoulders, “These days, it’s like they go in one door of the courthouse and out another.<sup>14</sup> As long as he shows he’s crazy, they’ll let him go.”

Caught off guard, Mr. Walberg’s usually weak and polite smile twisted shamefully for an instant. In a moment, he was smiling again, but it was clear that he was not listening to Quintana’s words and his presence clearly was making Mr. Walberg uncomfortable. A few months later as they were finishing off the bottle of champagne, that conversation arose again, and Quintana apologized, but Mr. Walberg shrugged and told him not to worry about it. He didn’t feel offended or hurt by Quintana’s innocent comment; at that time he couldn’t have known that his new friend had actually been in jail, and that almost two years passed between his entrance and exit through the revolving door. But he didn’t want pity, Mr. Walberg said. If he thought about it honestly, he didn’t have the right to complain about any kind of injustice. He acted against the law, against his professional code of conduct and decency, and so he was judged and punished. In Greek cities, he explained to Quintana, when someone committed a particularly serious crime, their punishment wasn’t prison, but rather ostracism, exile. Outside the city, the wide-open world was like prison, and exile was a very slow death. After completing his sentence, Mr. Walberg felt he was destined to be a captive as long as he lived. “But despite everything,” he said, with surprising serenity to Quintana, the night he let him into the kitchen and showed him the things hidden in the apartment since before he rented it. “Despite everything, I must confess to you, my friend, that if shame sours me, then I won’t experience regret.”

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<sup>14</sup> Entren por una puerta del juzgado y salen por la otra – colloquial expression.



“Did you ever see her again?” said Quintana, and then, as if he were unsure of his right to ask certain questions, he added in deference, “I meant your friend, the girl.”

“The only thing I know for certain is that today or tomorrow she will be eighteen years old.”

Having said this, he took a drink of cognac, and fleetingly, he looked like another man, or he was one: arrogant, younger, with a straighter back. He had a flash of pride and lucidity in his normally neutral eyes, almost always cowardly, so guarded that it was very difficult to catch his expression. When he gave the flask back to Quintana, he was the usual Mr. Walberg. He wiped his lips with a tissue and didn’t make eye contact with Quintana. Instead he stared into the emptiness in front of him, his face was pale and his mouth contorted with same expression he must have had as he opened the fridge and saw the container of alcohol with something that looked like a pair of slugs floating in it.

“Don’t be silly, Mr. Walberg,” Quintana said in a tone similar to someone who gives advice to sick people. “What you have to do is go to the police. I will go with you myself, if you want, and I will make the call.”

“They’ll never believe me, my friend,” Mr. Walberg’s eyes were moist and lighter behind his glasses, “I can already imagine how they will look at me when they consult their files and find out who I am and what I’ve done.”

“You haven’t done anything wrong, Mr. Walberg,” Quintana said passionately. He spoke about Mr. Walberg’s love story as if were a part of his own life. “You did what humans do: you let yourself be swept away by your emotions.”

Mr. Walberg slowly raised his eyes to meet Quintana's, and looked at him with gratitude, almost with mercy. Quintana thought himself a practical man, a fighter, and ever since Mr. Walberg explained the English phrase "self-made man," Quintana painstakingly committed it to memory to explain to himself what he was. But in reality, thought Mr. Walberg, Quintana was a victim of poverty and romanticism, of degraded dreams and cheap heroism sold for a low price on television and at the cinema. He believed in true love and culture with the same blind innocence with which he believed in personal success: above all he believed in his company and in Mr. Walberg, who sometimes thought with a distant sadness that Quintana would one day stop believing in him. But he literally had no one, no one else in this world, Quintana's absolutist sayings were contagious, he thought, he had no one else whom he could trust. He didn't expect Quintana to save him from any danger, nor that he would continue indefinitely with the same devoted faithfulness – he had seen lifetime loyalties disintegrate in minutes, without leaving even a trace of compassion. Yet Quintana's regular visits, generous, sometimes excessive, attention, the practical favors that he did for him, caused Mr. Walberg to continually count on him. Gradually, without Mr. Walberg realizing it, these factors sanded away the resilient remains of an inextinguishable shame and shyness. And so, on that last night, he found himself telling Quintana what he never believed he could share with anyone: that he was sure the mastermind of the lip-cutter crimes used to live in his apartment, and still had a set of keys. That very same afternoon, while Mr. Walberg was out, the killer entered the house, opened the refrigerator, and left a bottle of alcohol, in which floated the lips of his latest victim.

It was the first time that Mr. Walberg called Quintana on the telephone. He called him from a phone booth, struggling a bit,<sup>15</sup> since he wasn't familiar with the new public telephones. You could say he wasn't familiar with real life or the present day, as if he had been in prison for twenty years rather than two. In order to be connected to Quintana's office, he had to be transferred by two secretaries. This gave him a hopeful idea of his young friend's professional hierarchy. Upon hearing his voice, Quintana hesitated a few seconds before he knew who it was, surely because the secretary who transferred the call did not pronounce the last name Walberg correctly. He heard the distant jumble of voices and telephones ringing, and suddenly he felt childish and ridiculous as he imagined the office's white walls, fluorescent lights, and computer screens that his call interrupted. It took a lot of effort not to hang up while Quintana still didn't recognize his voice and asked who he was. Wouldn't it hurt his job to maintain a friendship with an ex-convict? But Mr. Walberg was so scared that he was capable of overcoming his modesty. "Please, I beg you, Quintana, come over to my house."

It was a Monday in the beginning of March, the weather was cloudy and there was a very cold breeze, but the sun had already started to set later. On the building facades there was still a fixed, clear sunlight, stained by a dirty gray sky and traffic exhaust. At a newspaper stand, Mr. Walberg glanced sideways at a headline about the previous night's crime, but he didn't dare to even stop or look directly at it. In the small fabric<sup>16</sup> shops and the local grocery stores,<sup>17</sup> the electric lights were already turned on, and on the market stairs, women wearing jackets carried their shopping bags, sometimes

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<sup>15</sup> No sin dificultad – double negative, I wanted to make it clearer for readers.

<sup>16</sup> merceria – the dictionary says haberdasher's, or notions shop, but I didn't like either of those translations.

<sup>17</sup> Ultramarinos – very old word for local grocer or sundries or convenient store

the protruding tip of a baguette appeared, or a few dark, broad lettuce leaves stuck out. On his way home, Mr. Walberg felt the intense sensation of a cozy, normal life, hardworking mornings in the neighborhood, dining rooms with balconies, television on, and someone beginning to serve dinner. Although he saw this world right in front of eyes, and to any witness he seemed completely absorbed in it, such a world was, in reality, as inaccessible as the frozen Nordic lands<sup>18</sup> or an hour from the past.

He thought that he would live hidden from society<sup>19</sup> forever, that this dose of unending misfortune was reserved for him alone. He looked at the usual faces in his neighborhood and thought bitterly how the kindness of strangers could become hostility and terror. Perhaps this very afternoon he had crossed paths with the killer who chopped off women's lips; perhaps his face would seem familiar and welcoming. At the main door to his apartment building, he stopped for a few seconds in the darkness before pushing the light switch on his stairway. Due to a vague, cautious superstition, he didn't use the elevator and he tried not to make the stairs creak under his steps. He struggled with the apartment door, alarmed for a few seconds, thinking someone could have entered during his absence, and then he bolted the door shut so as to not be caught by surprise. As usual, he had been turning the key to the right and pushing the door inwards. He was entering a stranger's home, a killer's home. The smell of dankness and propane filled the hall. Mr. Walberg didn't want to go into the kitchen; he would go in when Quintana arrived. But Quintana had said that he would not arrive for at least an hour. Mr. Walberg turned on the small gas heater and, without flipping on a light or taking off his coat, plopped himself in the dining room chair, in which he had spent so many hours

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<sup>18</sup> Pais de hielos –Reference to Nordic countries

<sup>19</sup> clandestinamente - overtranslation

reading during the past few months. Suddenly, he felt nostalgia for the period in his life that had been, until a few hours ago, the most dreadful and solitary. Hours passed as he read Tacitus and Montaigne in complete silence and stillness, until he discovered, looking up from his book, that it was already nighttime and it was freezing cold. During occasional conversations with Quintana, Mr. Walberg, without realizing it, sometimes slipped into a tone of extreme confidence or used pedagogical semantics. He found it refreshing that Quintana never tired of asking questions or learning, and Mr. Walberg admired Quintana's ability for life's practical matters: fixing washing machines, knowing where to get a propane gas cylinder<sup>20</sup> on Sunday, identifying a fault in the electrical wiring, finding the only store in Madrid that sold a certain type of outdated sockets. Now, this afternoon, after having found the alcohol bottle in the refrigerator, Mr. Walberg waited for Quintana as if it were an involuntary act of faith.

Night already fell when Quintana arrived, apologizing for his lateness, his new raincoat and his enormous black leather briefcase with golden buckles behind him like an atomic trail.<sup>21</sup> He rubbed his hands together in the dining room as if he were about to undertake something vigorous.

"Tell me, Mr. Walberg," he said, almost benevolently, "what fire must be extinguished, what device has broken down." Until that moment, Mr. Walberg had not said a single word. Nothing intimidated him more than other people's straightforwardness, especially if the person possessed tip-top health and physical strength. Then Quintana noticed his silence and pale face, and launched himself

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<sup>20</sup> bombona – actually a butane gas cylinder, but here we use propane gas.

<sup>21</sup> Estela de energia- trail of energy? Comet's tail?

immediately towards him, in a reverent avalanche. “You can’t fool me, Mr. Walberg, you already know that I have psychological intuition. Something very serious happened to you, you are saddened again, isn’t that right. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Remaining silent, Mr. Walberg led him to the kitchen. Until then, Quintana had not been allowed to go beyond the dining room. The kitchen was very clean and organized, especially so for a single man. The furniture and silverware were poor quality and quite outdated – Quintana knew because he used to sell kitchenware at one point, before deciding on books – but Mr. Walberg’s fastidiousness made them seem like new.

Quintana imagined him preparing a meager, routine dinner each night, and lunch the next day, still wearing his tie, house slippers on his feet, an old apron knotted around his back. He would be washing the glass he used to pour himself a little bit of water, and the glass bowl he used to eat his instant soup.

“Let’s go out here, Quintana, we can’t stay inside” Mr. Walberg invited him out to the tiny terrace, where the washing machine was. “I want you to see something.”

Underneath the utility sink there was an empty space covered by a small plastic curtain. Mr. Walberg moved over and motioned for Quintana to kneel down next to him. The dark, moist space was filled with hundreds of old magazines, piled there for so long that the pages curled with humidity. Mr. Walberg took out an armful and placed them on the kitchen table. They were pornographic magazines, and their unedited dirtiness and violence highlighted a detail that more than once had caused Mr. Walberg’s nightmares: every single woman in each and every photograph had her lips cut out, either with a razor blade or very sharp scissors, without tearing any of the pages. Some of the cut out spaces

were almost a whole page while others were no more than a mouse bite. Instead of red-colored mouths that feigned a monotonous series of eager gasps or screams of ecstasy, the women had empty spaces in their faces that gave their eyes a look of amputated stupor. While Quintana examined the magazines, Mr. Walberg looked away, as if he did not want his friend to think he derived pleasure from any part of such an exhibition.

“Don’t say anything yet,” Mr. Walberg said, “first I have to show you something else.”

Next they went into his bedroom. A medieval monk’s cell couldn’t have been more austere, empty, and cold, Quintana thought. Facing the bed there was a built-in wardrobe. While Mr. Walberg opened it and moved aside the clothes that hung from a few wire hangers, he asked Quintana to turn on the light, and then signaled cautiously for him to come over, as if afraid of scaring someone. At first, there wasn’t enough light to easily make out what was painstakingly covering the inside of the wardrobe from top to bottom, leaving no surface uncovered. It looked like the inexpensive flowered paper used to line cheap kitchen furniture. In fact, Mr. Walberg was not only near-sighted but also very absent minded, so it took him a while to discover that they weren’t fleshy red flowers that he could barely make out in the bedroom’s dim lighting. No, they were actually lips, cut-out mouths, hundreds or maybe thousands of wide-open mouths, with wet, colored lips, and rigid, asphyxiated tongues that looked like they were licking, or poking through the teeth. There were mouths like eyes, like blind holes, like wide cuts. The same hands that had cut out the women’s mouths from the magazines hidden under the utility sink had then gone and just as carefully glued them inside the wardrobe, spending weeks, months, or even years, until the stranger who lived in the apartment had

left. Or maybe he had to flee, who knows, said Mr. Walberg. Perhaps he needed to look for a safer haven, or he was tired of glossy paper and photographs and so he decided to cut off real women's lips. But, less than three hours ago, while Mr. Walberg was at work, he had come back, he had loitered in the street, waiting to see Mr. Walberg leave. Hidden in a jacket pocket, briefcase, or in a plastic bag he had the container of alcohol with the chopped-off lips. He had gone up the same stairs and crossed the same kitchen where Mr. Walberg and Quintana were standing right now, and his presence hung over them, they had a suspicion that he was still walking around somewhere nearby, perhaps he would come back that night, or the next day, feeling attraction and nostalgia for his old refuge.

"A madman, Mr. Walberg, a crazy person," said Quintana, looking very pale in the open refrigerator's light as he watched the two lips floating in the bottle Mr. Walberg held up in front of him. "A dangerously crazy person."

"He isn't crazy," said Mr. Walberg sadly, "He wants me to go crazy. Don't you realize, my friend? He wants me to be accused of his crimes. He must have recognized me. Our paths crossed a few times when he came back to the neighborhood. My photo was in the newspapers, some had big headlines, as you can imagine."

"Let's be practical," Quintana walked around the dining room, head bent down, rubbing his hands together, as if planning a business strategy. "We must anticipate his movements. First we should make an inquiry to the agency that rented you the apartment. Tomorrow, first thing, I will do this. And you won't spend the night alone here, of course..."



“I already went to the agency,” said Mr. Walberg, “When I began to have suspicions, that time you brought me the newspaper with the article about the crimes. They couldn’t tell me anything. They began managing the apartment last summer, just before I rented it.”

“We will look for the owner,” Quintana would not give up, “We will go wherever we have to.”

“I looked for the owner,” Mr. Walberg’s voice became quieter and quieter. “He is ninety years old and is completely senile. He lives in a nursing home.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Quintana, “Why didn’t you tell me anything before? How could you have such little confidence in me?” Mr. Walberg shrugged with an air of remorse, as if caught by surprise doing something he shouldn’t. He wiped his nose with a kleenex and then drank a gulp from the flask that Quintana had left on the table. He sunk back down into the armchair in total, listless abandon.

“My dear friend,” he said, now making eye contact; he was looking from bottom to top, since Quintana was a very tall person and remained standing, leaning on the table with both of his broad hands. “I do not want to force your loyalty. I do not want you to feel obligated to believe me. I have seen too many faces of people who completely trust me, and then change just when they begin to accept not just a suspicion, but the possibility of there being a suspicion. I never want to go back to a police station. I do not want them to look at me, then look at each other. I do not want to have to smell the odor of those places. Try to understand me, if you can. Perhaps this individual, who killed the women and cut off their lips, understands me. He knows that I will keep my mouth shut, and in any given moment I will go crazy.”

“Don’t say that, Mr. Walberg.” Quintana bent down as someone might lean over the sickbed of a patient who just gave up his fight for life. “No one is going to mess with you as long as I am alive. I will beat up anyone who accuses you of anything, I swear to you.”

There was something theatrical in Quintana’s gestures; the unlearned man’s fascination for sonorous words and the proclamation of principles, Mr. Walberg thought with melancholy and appreciation. He saw him as younger than he actually was, futilely rash and enthralled, in love with a love story that wasn’t his, a story that now only existed in Mr. Walberg’s skeptical, distraught memory, and in Quintana’s fervent imagination. He wanted to get up for a glass of water, but Quintana wouldn’t allow it, not only was he the protector, but also the nurse. He opened the door to the kitchen, disappeared through it, and then came the sound of running water and glasses under the sink. After a few seconds of silence, Quintana reappeared at the kitchen door with the glass in his hand, and found himself looking right at Mr. Walberg, who had stood up, and suddenly his eyes were wide open as if he were seeing something that had always been right in front of him but he had never noticed.

As he put the glass of water on the table, Quintana smiled with unexpected shyness. Mr. Walberg didn’t touch it, he instead asked Quintana to please bring the pill bottle from the bathroom. Quintana went for it and left it next to the glass of water. They both sat down slowly in an uncomfortable silence, listening to the worn springs squeak in the chair that Mr. Walberg always occupied. Quintana ran his hand through his hair and then he put his hands together to crack his knuckles. Mr. Walberg spoke in a voice so quiet that Quintana had to lean over to understand what he was saying.

“It’s you, right?” said Mr. Walberg.

“Excuse me?” said Quintana, reddening like a first-time fibber.<sup>22</sup>

“It was you who killed those women, my friend Quintana, you used to live here, you came by this afternoon and left the lips in the fridge. Don’t give me that face, don’t tell me no. Don’t insult me, Quintana.”

“Mr. Walberg,” said Quintana, but a knot was forming in his throat and he couldn’t continue. He squeezed his hands together, looked at the floor, and little by little raised his head to meet Mr. Walberg’s eyes, but abruptly avoided them. Then he was able to articulate a few words, stuttering, “Mr. Walberg.”

“Now, since I know who did these things, I am not afraid anymore,” his voice sounded a bit louder, neither intimidating nor frightened, but calm. “I don’t feel hatred towards you, despite what you have done, because I am not afraid. Nor can I say I am no longer your friend. But answer me, Quintana, look me in the face and tell me I am wrong.”

Quintana breathed heavily, his head lowered and both hands under his chin, biting his powerful thumbs. It seemed like he was shrinking into himself, becoming clumsy, disheveled, and vulnerable. Mr. Walberg thought he was about to cry because of his breathing. What amazed Mr. Walberg was not the sudden clarity of the disclosure, but rather the speed at which things changed, how the normal can become grotesque and the familiar strange. He had been sure that Quintana would deny it; first he would look surprised and then offended. Now his eyes were moist, noncommittal, and he gazed out at Mr. Walberg over his joined fists, as if in the posture for prayer.

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<sup>22</sup> Un embustero primerizo...couldn’t find exact expression in English.

“You could have continued with your plan, my friend,” continued Mr. Walberg. “Pushing me a little more, one day leaving another flask of lips in a place that I wouldn’t see right away, inside my night stand for example. But just a minute ago you went to get a glass of water and I suddenly understood everything. By accident, of course, because you know that I don’t see well and I don’t usually notice anything. I wasn’t sure, and so I repeated the test. I told you to get my pills from the bathroom...”

Quintana straightened up, his eyes gleamed with cleverness and cold curiosity. Mr. Walberg looked silently at him, and hesitated a bit before continuing.

“It was the way you opened the door. You never had entered the kitchen until today, nor had you used the doorknobs in this house. I mean, in my presence. The doorknobs turn to the left, and instead of pushing the doors in, you have to pull them open. Opening doors is one of the most repeated acts in our life, my friend, and one of the most instinctive. I always get it wrong in this house, even though I have been living here for so many months. You weren’t wrong before: you didn’t even hesitate, not at the kitchen door, or at the bathroom. Your hands haven’t lost the instinct to turn the doorknobs the other way. Those big hands, my friend. Do you feel shame for having tortured and murdered those women? I don’t hate you but I don’t have any pity for you either.”

Mr. Walberg did not move when Quintana began to slowly walk toward him. He shuddered briefly when he heard the click of a pocketknife opening, but he did not stop looking right at Quintana, whose right hand moved towards him brandishing a curved, shiny blade. It wasn’t Mr. Walberg who let out a long, horrible, sharp groan, but rather Quintana, as the knife pierced the abdomen and slashed upwards to the chest, stopping at

the sternum. Then, when the breathing of the other body had ceased, Quintana, with some effort, moved his hand away, and went back to sit in the same place he was before, in front of Mr. Walberg, whose eyeglasses had fallen off. Behind the armchair, on the little side table, was Mr. Walberg's wallet. Quintana coarsely wiped his hands on his jacket and opened the wallet. Under the circumstances, Quintana thought, Mr. Walberg's identity card photo was unbearably pathetic. He looked at the other photo for a few moments, the snapshot of the light-haired girl, her thin face, and high-cut navy-blue sweater, smiling in the morning winter light. Dead, Mr. Walberg appeared drowsy or sleeping in front of Quintana, with his chin sunk into his chest, his flaccid mouth, his large, heavy eyelids, just like that American actor.

Quintana drank the one gulp of cognac left in the flask. He went to look for his big, black, golden-buckled briefcase, where he had another identical flask and he finished it off noisily without stopping, not even when he was out of breath, throat burning and his eyes filled with tears. Staggering, with the knife in his hand again, as if he feared a possible enemy, he went into Mr. Walberg's bedroom, collapsed onto the bed with his legs spread eagle, and fell asleep instantly.

He opened his eyes and saw a faint gray brightness, and then blue in the window. He sat up in the bed, wrecked by a brutal hangover. It took a little bit for him to remember where he was, what he had done earlier, he didn't know how many hours ago, and when it was. It also took him a little while to realize that he had woken up because he heard the doorbell. Suddenly he was agile, stealthy and lucid, he took off his shoes and silently walked towards the door, pressing the knife handle in his right hand, stroking

the spring release.<sup>23</sup> With the left index fingertip he lifted the small copper disk covering the peephole. The doorbell rang again, and the light in the hallway lit up. Right in front of Quintana, separated by a few centimeters of an old sturdy wooden door, looking exactly towards his eyes, was the girl from the photograph Mr. Walberg had kept in his wallet for the last two years. Sometimes, Mr. Walberg had dared to imagine the impossible; that she would travel to Madrid to find him when she turned eighteen.

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<sup>23</sup> El resorte – the knife spring

Chapter 3:  
*One Dead Cat*  
By Juan Pedro Aparicio  
Translated by Jenell Weitz

I did not see her dead nor did I have the chance to; I just remember her wearing a bikini on the first day we met, and this has always been my vision of her.

The same thing happens with people as with cities, at least with some cities. My memory of Antwerp is an unending succession of grey streets; just as London is marked by the river Thames and the RS Hispaniola, a floating restaurant that I used to frequent. I have not been back to Antwerp but I have returned to London, and although I retraced the streets and saw a good many of the monuments, my mental picture, which sums up everything, will always be that image. Like a scene imprinted on my memory, a moving scene in which there was only one sequence.

I would say that the same thing happens with people. I saw Berta many times; we were neighbors for more than seven years. I saw her often, drank coffee with her and her husband, or we ate dinner in her house or in mine, which wasn't at all rare, especially in the beginning. No matter how she dressed or what my eyes saw, in my mind she wore a bikini, a red bikini that accentuated her arms and legs and embedded her tight, pale stomach like a gem. I can recall the flat bridge between her long legs, the angle of her pubis, which lacked volume, in other words, the absence of what we colloquially call the "package." We men have always thought of this as a miracle, both amazing and attractive.

I do not, however, want to give the wrong impression. The image of Berta wearing a bikini is in fact the first one associated with her, but I must add that she was not in a pool when I saw her, but rather in the middle of the street, on the sidewalk

between her house and mine. It was very hot outside, I had just pulled up in my car, and she had come out to wait for the moving truck. At that moment we introduced ourselves as neighbors. Seeing her like this, with the asphalt reflecting and melting, the beauty of her subtle, unfolded, contoured body, the watery reflection of her blue eyes, happy and deep, young and mature... resulted in an unforgivable attractiveness. And so this first image of her is the one I always had and the one I always will have, since, as I have already said, Berta is dead.

## II

We had been talking about cycling – I think Indurain was about to win his first Tour de France – when we heard about Berta’s and Jose Luis’s deaths, although we never called him that. It was Valeriano who told us that they had been found in an apartment in Madrid’s Salamanca district, it was the first time we had heard him referred to by that name. He said, “Berta and Jose Luis have been found dead.” Later, he told us the details, which we also read in the papers, that they were naked, etc. Him in the bathtub and her lying on the bed in the bedroom. The police investigations quickly labeled it an accident due to the defective combustion of the gas heater. Then, as I said, we stopped talking about Indurain.

Berta and Picazo, who I won’t call Jose Luis, were neighbors. We all lived in a suburb called Monte Rubio, a short distance<sup>24</sup> outside Madrid. She lived in a single home and he had a duplex. Berta’s husband, Antonio Jordan, was an executive; Picazo was

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<sup>24</sup> I used miles but then I undertranslated so the audience gets the idea. It is actually very close to the center of Madrid.



married to Berta's good friend. Sometimes people talked about it, especially after her death, "Berta's best friend, some people are like that."<sup>25</sup>

In Monte Rubio we were pioneers, imitating the American lifestyle by living in small, two-story houses, either duplexes or single homes, in the suburbs. Given that fact, we paid the price of being the first ones. We went from having barely spoken with anybody when we lived in our Madrid apartment, to having a neighbor over almost every day, at least to have coffee or a drink, if not for lunch or dinner. Not to mention the weekends, when appetizers turned into a late lunch, or even into supper. Sometimes we had over forty people gathered together in just one house, of course including the children, all of them small, noisy, and annoying, continually climbing up and down the stairs.

I must say that Berta was the first to stop being fascinated with our new life. Some of us didn't like her attitude. Perhaps her distancing herself coincided with Antonio's promotions; within two or three years he was named Chief Executive Officer of Endeavours Iberica and had a salary that was five or ten times any of ours. By us, I mean his neighbors; some of us were biologists, university professors, pharmacists, chemists, doctors, and there was even a writer. I said earlier that Berta was the first to stop coming to these get-togethers. But, to tell the truth, it wasn't really her but Antonio, who some days was away traveling, as he told us, and other days was behind at work. And, when he did come, he was the first to leave if we were not meeting at his house. At the beginning, it didn't bother anyone. Antonio wasn't the most pleasant person in the world, and if his absence was noticed it was because he was, in some way, the object of

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<sup>25</sup> Que asi es la gente...not sure if I am getting the right idea across.

our jokes. It bothered us that he made so much money. This seemed unfair, although he did have a great skill for numbers and a certain hardness of character required to manage a large group of people. Berta had this look in her eyes, which glowed with a shrewd and mischievous light, a look that showed us we were right; she never surrendered to him. In her eyes, which, however, did hold other things, an expression was missing; one that made it clear what kind of relationship linked them.

No one, except, of course, Antonio and Alicia, Picazo's wife, had noticed Berta's and Picazo's disappearance one Monday morning, and not even they were able to relate the events. In fact, if Antonio did not call Alicia at once to ask her the whereabouts of his wife, it was because they had barely talked to each other since Picazo had become unemployed.

What can I say about Picazo? I told the police everything that day and they filed the case away. While Picazo was employed, it was normal that he didn't sleep at home because he traveled often; occasionally he let someone know that he would be away and sometimes he didn't. So, although he was unemployed, knowing his connections, he could have had an interview far away from Madrid, perhaps related to a potential new job. Some people got along with him much better than others, which, I know, doesn't say much. To me, he didn't seem especially worried at finding himself out of work. Rather, he treated the time off as a little vacation, or maybe something more, looking back at what happened. To some, however, he was a great guy, but not to me nor to Antonio. At least we did agree on this one thing. Picazo was an inveterate womanizer. He had four daughters with Alicia, and they loved him and spoiled him rotten; it was true that he was cheerful at home, unlike Antonio and I; another coincidence, we were more serious than

shy. But Picazo was happy at home and everywhere. Especially at the Madrid bars: Gijon, Albany, Chicote, or Vanity, where he was known for how easily he could score, or as he said, picking up chicks and unsheathing himself, so he could ram his sword into them. We could not fathom how a guy like him had been able to hook up with Berta. Toni, Candido's wife, put it this way: "It is like gift-wrapping a potato peel in cellophane." But we didn't know who Toni meant to be the potato peel and who was the cellophane. Malo, the policeman from Lot who questioned the neighbors, commented: "I would never have pegged them as a couple." In fact, when they did the autopsy, Picazo (his glands) was full of semen; however, Berta did not have any in her, meaning that they had not made love yet, or had not been together. And that was one of the most morbid mysteries in this matter full of morbid fascination.

### III.

I already said that the police shelved the case. I must add now that it was done very quickly, as soon as the autopsy was complete and it proved that Berta and Picazo died by suffocation, without any signs of violence. The apartment was on Calle Ayala in a restored old building. Picazo had rented it for five hundred thousand pesetas per year, paid all at once, in advance. He had been paying this same rent for two years. Actually, it was more like a tiny studio, with a living room/bedroom, a kitchenette, and a bathroom. The windows were carefully closed, no doubt because they faced a narrow interior courtyard, and the neighbors could be heard across it. This was a decisive factor in their death. The first to die was Picazo, who was in the bathroom, exactly where the heater was turned on; then, half an hour later, Berta died.

Out of all of the neighbors, it was Valeriano who was Antonio's closest confidante, perhaps because he was a doctor, and he did not stop repeating Antonio's bitter comments: "That bitch closed the windows so that they could not hear her howls of pleasure." This is what he said, at least to Valeriano, into whose arms he almost threw himself, only to interrupt his own tirade with a sudden flood of tears. Poor Antonio! Yet still, some dared to comment that money doesn't buy happiness. On the other hand, we did not know if he had said anything about Alicia, despite living next-door, or rather wall-to-wall, with Toni and Candido. After the incident, they spent more time with Alicia and the girls than in their own house. Alicia and her daughters, however, exhibited pain without anger, as if more distraught by the sudden disappearance of their loved one, rather than the insult or the betrayal (which was a lot) of the incident.

We never shelved the case, perhaps because it had provided our suburb with a new halo of sad modernity. And the initial surprise of the incident had immediately generated a chain of questions that we first shared with the police but then with whoever wanted to hear us. Why, if they had not already made love, was Picazo naked in the bathtub – when the most normal thing would have been the opposite? Candido, who always found humor in things – and it must be said that he did so very well – said that this was the strangest thing in the whole strange incident. "There are two kinds of people," he commented sarcastically, "those who wash their hands after peeing and those who wash them before." And of course a little discussion ensued, until we understood. According to Candido, Picazo was of the latter type. He would give you his unwashed hand after having gone to the toilet, but he was also one of those types who would wash before touching himself, just in case. I wasn't sure yet if Candido was surprised by the

revelation that emerged from his joke, reasoning that such a person would never have cleaned himself before making love, but rather have done so afterwards, and for the same motive. Such a revelation, Valeriano quickly deduced, did not support the facts shown in the autopsy, given that, as I have already said, they did not find any traces of semen in Berta's body. And so we moved on to the next question: Was this their first meeting or one of many others that had taken place? Yet, everyone recognized the fact that the relevant part was the existence of a first encounter, which would be irrefutable proof simply because if there had not been any previous encounter, then this would be the first one. Of course if this was the first, and a sexual union hadn't occurred between them as the autopsy indicated, then this meant that a union had never occurred or could ever occur; so, their adultery would remain in the degree of intent, as lawyers would say. Candido, with his somewhat black humor explained it as well, "The first stab is the one that kills. After that you might as well be stabbing a cadaver." I don't think when he said this that he had in mind Picasso's familiar expression, the one about picking up chicks, unsheathing himself and ramming his sword into them.

Yet I didn't know what comfort Antonio could have found in knowing that the lovers had not carried out their plan due to defective combustion of the gas heater, which caused their death, perhaps as a punishment for their sin, as Maribel, the wife of an INI executive, Antonio's ex-colleague, was heard saying, we had all kinds of people in Monte Rubio. Antonio, from what I knew, was not religious and did not think about sin, he only thought about what we would call "civil sin." It wasn't important if Picasso had pricked Berta or not, or rammed himself into her; what remained obviously, unequivocally, ostensibly clear was the message sent by their naked bodies: an irreversible message of

betrayal. And what was even worse, nobody could ever change it since it was written with their deaths. As Antonio said to Valeriano, “This is the inheritance that she left to me and to Toni...” Toni was the son of Antonio and Berta. “A legacy that will last as long as we both live.”

As Valeriano gravely commented again, Berta, as she died, had stripped Antonio of the sweetness of apologizing, or perhaps, worse yet, of the unavoidable necessity of apologizing. Antonio could not forgive because he was incapable of understanding. To do so, he needed Berta’s words. And Berta was dead.

#### IV

On his second visit to Monte Rubio, Malo, the police inspector from the Salamanca district who was in charge of the case, came to see me with Valeriano, whom he knew from Lot. I don’t know if he wanted to see me because I also was from Lot or because I was the neighbor who lived closest to the Jordans. Before, he had spent close to two hours locked up with Antonio, tracing over each and every room in the enormous home. According to Valeriano, it was a traveling interrogation; Inspector Malo advanced and Antonio backed up, not so much due to an unconscious effort to avoid the inspector, but perhaps due to his desire to show the Inspector the monstrously large interior. This was what the house had become to him since Berta’s death. Like a domestic monster<sup>26</sup> that chased him with giant octopus tentacles, robbing him of air, and pressing down on his chest.

Inspector Malo left Antonio’s house like a bankrupt gambler who makes his last bet without the tiniest bit of hope, with plans to trail a source of hidden income. Who

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<sup>26</sup> Originally I said Kraken – but the author changed it to monster, which flows better.

would know if it were a front for drugs, which could explain, among other things, the luxury of Picazo's "pleasure pad"<sup>27</sup> on Calle Ayala.

Inspector Malo sported a thick black mustache, which gave him the air of former Spanish president Aznar, who at that time was just leading the opposition. Other traits, some unflattering, became apparent: he seemed shorter and weaker than he actually was, and perhaps also more dim-witted than he was, or stated more positively, he did not seem as bright as he actually was. Such was the case with the president, according to those who had the chance to speak with him.

Candido was in my house that day, I remember because I had broken the automatic sprinkler system and he was helping me install a new switch. Inspector Malo had taken an immediate interest in the reaction of Picazo's wife, Alicia, who was more determined to file the case away than the police themselves. It seemed like her daughters had already done so; the two eldest girls never stopped jumping rope in the street in front of their house, or swimming, the ones who could do it on their own, in the baby pool in the common residential area.

Candido told the Inspector that Alicia had inherited a significant amount of wealth, from an old spinster aunt who lived in Badajoz, a fortune that not only included a rural estate but also shares in the stock market that Picazo had been in charge of managing. Malo insisted that he wanted to know, more out of methodology than conviction, for example, which brand of cigarettes Picazo smoked, when he used to smoke, and what kind of whiskey he preferred. But it was almost like we were comparing the biography of Picazo with that of Antonio as if they were characters in a

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<sup>27</sup> El lujo del "picadero" de Picazo... play on words which I will have to compensate for. "pick up pad" "pleasure pad" otherwise just "love nest"

novel.<sup>28</sup> So we described Antonio's professional successes. From the mere scholarship recipient to the perpetual entry-level employee<sup>29</sup> at INI, he had become, just a short time after Felipe Gonzalez's important electoral victory, the head of the company that he worked for, and then moved immediately up to president. After the company's privatization, this position was reconfirmed by the multinational American Endeavors Corporation, which had holdings in Portugal and northern Africa. We had seen Antonio move from the duplex to the single family home with a heated pool and a huge yard; we had seen him trade in his Citroen<sup>30</sup> for a BMW 725, with a company chauffeur. And all of this in the blink of an eye, gossiped Candido, as he tried the watering system again.<sup>31</sup>

But Inspector Malo was unmoved, like a vehicle forced to continue in its current lane, he even asked us if we had ever seen Picazo smoking a joint or snorting a line of cocaine. Candido was crouched down over the ground, he sighed with exasperation and exclaimed, "It has nothing at all to do with drugs!"<sup>32</sup> His annoyance was still funny, because it was almost always followed by an amusing effect. "Everything has absolutely one hundred percent to do with a bedroom vendetta, Inspector," he added.

At the edge of the garden gate, Inspector Malo appeared enthralled with the rainbow that sparkled in the hose's spray. I think I have already mentioned this, but, there was something very unsettling about Inspector Malo. Investigators, for example,

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<sup>28</sup> author's suggestion to add the part about "characters in a novel;" I liked it.

<sup>29</sup> Sempiterno interino -cannot think of exact equivalent in English, put best suggestion.

<sup>30</sup> Left as European car so readers know the characters are in Spain, not America.

<sup>31</sup> Very colloquial expression. "Gossiped" added on authors suggestion; other idea is "sprinkling comments as he moved from plant to plant."

<sup>32</sup> "Nada de nada," followed by "todo de todo" – looked for equal expression with a similar effect, both in the text and in the meaning.



are assumed to possess a certain shrewdness, which in him appeared camouflaged by obvious signs pointing to the exact opposite.

Candido got up and stretched as if giving his words more weight. He was much more explicit, “Antonio put Picazo in the street. That is what happened.”

We had never linked the promotion of one with the dismissal of the other, perhaps because we weren’t malicious enough. When Picazo lost his job during the Solchaga period,<sup>33</sup> Antonio’s company had still not bought out the company Picazo worked for. Of course, as soon as the company belonged to Endeavours, thus dependent on Antonio, he did not lift a finger to re-employ Picazo.

“Revenge is a dish best served cold,”<sup>34</sup> Valeriano commented unexpectedly, as if he was revealing a transcendent truth to us.

Inspector Malo seemed more confused than ever, so he went back to the beginning. “What are a naked man and a naked woman doing in a house, away from their respective spouses?” he asked. But he didn’t want a response, since he then answered himself. “Either they are committing adultery, have already committed adultery, or are getting ready to commit adultery.”

Putting it that way seemed too harsh, especially with Berta in mind. Adultery refers to adult, to pre-meditated betrayal, exclusive to adults, and it is full of unpleasant and churlish, almost perverse, connotations. Even more perverse than the word cuckold, which is tacky and antiquated, adultery labels the victim as an utter fool with a single

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<sup>33</sup> Political reference to Carlos Solchaga.

<sup>34</sup> Our common expression.

word, disgraced with a scarlet *A*<sup>35</sup> or a *Star of David*; a mark of ignominy that makes a person stand out as inferior, something almost fantastic, to be mocked and ridiculed, branded as animals, marked forever like Christ carrying the cross.

Candido smiled proudly. He added emphatically, “Like I said, ‘a bedroom vendetta,’” as he made the sign of a cuckold’s horns with the index and pinky fingers of his right hand, and looked at us with ridiculous arrogance.

“It is all very clear,” he added, while the rest of us seemed to consider the matter. “Picazo had a golden prick, he’d screw a wasp that passed in front of his eyes. But he wanted to score with Berta just to snub Antonio, to get back at the person who had fired him or at least at the person he thought was responsible for having him fired.” And it was then he changed his voice to a falsetto, not to imitate Picazo but to give his words a sharper, more acerbic edge. “Everything going well with you? Is it? Well you are going to be fucked because your wife is cheating on you with me.”

## V

A bedroom vendetta.

Well, that is how we left it that day, while Inspector Malo was with us. This way, we were also able to think about shelving the case. But it wasn’t like that. Not because Picazo’s dismissal was out of Antonio’s control, but because of her, Berta, whose motives we did not understand. Finally, it was Valeriano who formulated the question we had all asked ourselves.

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<sup>35</sup> I used a reference from *The Scarlet Letter* because *sambenito* is what was “official garb of the Inquisitional victims” and today is used to mean someone who is disgraced. The idea is that the person is marked with shame and therefore suffers.

“Yes but her...Berta? What about her? Did she also want revenge? Why was she open to cheating on Antonio and why exactly with Jose Luis?”

Such was, or rather, continued to be, the true mystery; this was the truth that bothered everyone, because we could not comprehend, nor probably would we ever, what Berta had seen in Picasso. Antonio didn't talk to us anymore, in fact he left Monte Rubio soon after. So we discussed it more and more, reinitiating those unending Sunday cocktails, and even with Inspector Malo, who, one month later, came by my house, avoiding the crowd. He had intentionally left Valeriano's house although, I must say, in vain. It was a Saturday morning and Candido was at my house again, taking another look at the sprinkler that still didn't work well, and Valeriano was also there. I don't recall if it was because he had brought over the bread that we bought every day in town, or if he entered the garden when he saw Candido.

The inspector did all that was in his power to try to meet alone with me. My wife, who understood right away, went up to the second floor, but Candido would only leave after he had pressed the button, and made the sprinkler go on five or six more times; Valeriano stayed there and remained there long after Malo himself had left. Valeriano had become accepted by all of us as the chief advisor of the matter, the spokesperson for the event, the family's representative, the comfort-provider for the widower, and for all of us, in a way that was important to Valeriano and seemed right to us.

“There is a writer here, is that right?” grumbled the inspector unexpectedly, although he did not seem to be accusing me of anything. Before we could seem surprised, he added, “Writers have imagination, don't they?”

That could be as much an insult as a compliment and Valeriano and I looked at each other, perplexed. No need to mention how happy I felt that he had stayed. Subsequently, Malo changed his tone and formulated the same question, in almost the same way that Valeriano had asked it earlier, with the same quiver in his voice.

“What was she doing in that bed? Did she also want revenge? Hearing this from Malo’s lips, I was warned about what he had come to find: a phrase, even just one word that would serve as a verbal stamp, in order to seal the incident for all time. Perhaps because of this he had alluded so crudely to my situation as a writer, as if referring to the skills implicit to the occupation.

Valeriano repeated then, with more emphasis, if that was possible, the saying about revenge as a dish best served cold, without any other apparent objective other than to show his sincere homage to the phrase’s prominent fascination. But Inspector Malo decided to ignore him.

“How would you explain,” he directed this towards me almost provocatively, “Berta’s attitude, if you had to write a novel?”

I shrugged and took my time answering him.

“Everyone thought,” I said, and looked at Valeriano, “that there was something strange about Berta, almost inhuman. I mean some kind of condition...almost irrational, I’ll just say it: animal. Not because she was lacking good manners or something like that, but because of this big indifference she showed towards everything that wasn’t in the moment. One time I was on the street with her and she didn’t appear to see the little gypsy who was insistently asking for charity. It’s not that she ignored the beggar; I am saying that it was like she didn’t see her. It is hard to explain, but if you have ever had a

cat in the house you'll know what I mean. Only seeing what interests it, but not voluntarily, rather as instinctive and natural. A cat meows when it wants food, or more precisely, when it wants you to give it food, and also meows in order to receive and attract all that life offers in that moment, without any bigger complications.”

Malo shook his head, not too convinced. “A cat, yes, but, a dog?”

“As you say inspector, a cat is not like a dog. A dog will react violently if its owner is assaulted, or in some cases it will intervene in its owner's scuffles. The cat doesn't see anything – it isn't in its nature to see what doesn't have a direct effect on it. And that is the question. Berta only seemed to be directly affected by the amount of money available to her at the end of the month. But, besides you shouldn't think of it as anything out of the ordinary, given that she didn't like parties or going out. She also was reluctant to go to social events that she had to attend due to Antonio's high position. I mean to say she did enjoy her life, definitely, but not in the conventional way; not like those women who don't work, and wait for their husbands to take them out to dinner, to the movies, or to a play. Berta almost never left the house.

That house absorbed her.<sup>36</sup> She had a part-time housekeeper who got there at nine in the morning and left at five in the evening, but she barely spoke with her. There was also a gardener who came two times a week, but she truly liked being alone. She took her son to school and went to get him in the afternoons without ever missing a day. When the housekeeper came or went, Berta left or came back with her son. So most of the time she was alone but she never got bored or complained. If one of the neighbors came and rang her doorbell for whatever reason, it wasn't unusual that she didn't open

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<sup>36</sup> Estaba en ella como embebida – no exact translation, had to play around with a lot.

the door, if the housekeeper wasn't there, because she didn't hear it, since she was so distracted with her own activities. To me she seemed to live like a cat."

Valeriano smiled and looked at Inspector Malo. I didn't know if he was agreeing with what I was saying. I continued.

"To men, the contentment a cat can reach seems very limited. I suppose because the cat doesn't travel, or go to work in the morning, nor does it read or go to the cinema. However, in exchange, nothing bad seems able to affect it, no worries, no lack of affection, nothing, absolutely nothing. I am talking about a well-fed cat and one who lives in a good house. In this way, the limit of its happiness is converted, paradoxically, into an unlimited happiness. For me, to glimpse the peak of satisfaction, it is enough to watch one of these little animals lick itself, caring for its hygiene with such absorbed dedication."

Inspector Malo smiled. Evidently, he had found what he was looking for.

## VI

I said that we hadn't closed the case. Only Inspector Malo had. And of course, the police. And not because we had even the smallest doubt about the unplanned nature of Bertas's and Picazo's deaths, but because we were unable to understand the nature of the relationship between them. Nor had Antonio closed the case. He had moved to a small apartment in the Salamanca district, not too far from where the incident occurred. We stopped seeing him, although we knew something about him during some period of time, through Valeriano, who continued prescribing him a much higher dosage of anti-anxiety medications than he had ever prescribed to any of us, and then he eventually

stopped seeing him as well. That day – I think it was summer because we also had been talking about Indurain, about how much dignity he displayed at his defeat, so it must have been six years later – Valeriano and I, after browsing CDs and books, came out of FNAC<sup>37</sup> when we saw him. It wasn't easy to recognize him. Sometimes things happen like that, it is possible to recognize the person precisely by the changes he has undergone, something that never ceases to be a paradox. When that individual stopped us on the Gran Via, I was alarmed, but Valeriano knew immediately who he was. But I didn't, I only saw a person with a rosy, poorly shaven, ruddy face; looking robust but unkempt, or better said, scruffy in the body and soul, like those professional athletes who retire and put on a lot of weight in just a few months.

He moved towards one side of me, getting very close, leaving a trace of breath or body odor on my face that wasn't disagreeable nor was it agreeable, but nonetheless a strong odor. This was something that I had no desire at all to smell at that moment, like an intimacy I wasn't seeking. Of course at that angle I could see something else, as if I were lifting the skirts of a covered table and had discovered a fire, one of those little portable burners that we knew<sup>38</sup> as kids in my grandma's house, spreading through the table's skirts, the kind of fire that could devour the house. The fire in this case belonged to a husband made into a fool, a fool even beyond her death. And suddenly, all of him, all of this muscular man, this pro athlete type, like a soccer or basketball player, unkempt and neglected, seemed about to contract like those Valencian papermache figures<sup>39</sup> that are destroyed by fire.

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<sup>37</sup> A European chain of book/CD/electronic store. Overtranslation to make that clear.

<sup>38</sup> Un infiernillo – a little burner used to heat inside houses a while ago.

<sup>39</sup> Regional Spanish cultural reference, overtranslation explains them.

“Antonio!” I exclaimed. Antonio smiled.

“Do you guys want to come whoring with me?” And he made a gesture that caused him to become so unbalanced that he almost fell. He signaled to a Mercedes that was following him with a chauffeur at the wheel. “I’m inviting you both. How long has it been since you shoved your sword into any sheathes outside of the house?” The chauffeur stopped the car and got out so he could open the door for us.

“Let’s go,” insisted Antonio.

“No, Antonio, maybe some other day,” Valeriano declined with a nurse’s tactfulness.

Instead of upsetting him, our negative response seemed to further his determination. He looked intensely into my eyes for the first time, like he was scrutinizing me. He wanted to say something special to me, something that would change my mind, but nothing came to him. Finally, without breaking my gaze, he said, “Don’t you like cats? I have a house full of pussies.”<sup>40</sup>

And he let out such a roaring guffaw that he lost his balance again. Bitterness had much more of an influence on him than drinking. We made him get into the car, not without effort, and we said goodbye rather quickly, almost hiding ourselves. Right then and there, on the corner of Callao, we agreed we had to have a drink. In between the many American hamburger places, we were able to find an old fashioned café and we went in. We sat at a table and ordered whiskeys.

“Poor Antonio!” exclaimed Valeriano. “He spent a fortune on detectives and criminologists, pushing them to give him a hypothesis that would exonerate Berta, in

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<sup>40</sup> Author’s suggestion – pussies has sexual connotation, better for theme.



vain. He had this idea that Jose Luis had been assassinated by the drug mafia, in a settling of scores, and Berta was the front for the crime, the innocent victim, she was the one who would lend the incident the aspect of a sudden accident of two lovers.”

Valeriano shook his head. “Of course if he had brought her there by force, the autopsy would have revealed it.” Then, after a pause, he added, “Remember when you spoke of Berta as if she were a cat? That is what Inspector Malo said to Antonio, that Berta was a cat, and so he closed the file. But it wasn’t the way you would have said it, rather it was blunt, like the way a military surgeon operates. Your Berta was as much of a whore as a female cat, something like that should have been said to him.”

I took a big sip of whisky.

“Poor Antonio!” it was my turn to exclaim abruptly.

“Do you remember what was said about those guys called “the three Cs,” the ones that changed their cars, their chalets, and their companions,<sup>41</sup> under the protection of the Felipe Gonzalez government? Berta died before Antonio could do the same with her. Her attitude, that isolation that you say is cat-like, was a continuous reproach to Antonio’s professional life.”

I nodded.

“I am sure, contrary to what we were able to imagine, that Berta also considered that there was something like moral degradation in Antonio’s surprising professional leap, from an INI scholarship recipient to president of his company. Later, due to some strange workings of the soul, she reciprocated with her own degradation by hooking up with Picazo. This is the only way to explain how she could have accepted a relationship

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<sup>41</sup> three Cs- had to be creative in my list to maintain alliteration.

with someone so disheveled. Yes, it was revenge, but not Picasso's taken on Antonio, but rather Berta's taken on Antonio."

I had never told Valeriano or anyone else, perhaps I didn't think it was that important, that whenever I thought of Berta I always saw her wearing only her red bikini.

We drank another sip and I added, "Berta wasn't a cat. Perhaps Alicia is, Picasso's wife. Have you seen how well she is adjusting to the new situation?"

We finished off our drinks, and as we were paying the bill, I was still talking to Valeriano, "I never told you that once I went to Berta's house to use the telephone since the storm cut off ours, and she did not open the door until I had waited at least twenty minutes. She was painting a picture with oil paints in the living room. I didn't know that she painted. She let me in, but she turned red and would not let me see the painting. To be honest, I didn't know what to do because if it seemed like I wasn't interested, then I would appear very rude. She showed it to me. It was a very large blue sphere that took up almost the whole canvas. What interested me the most was the color, a beautifully clear blue. She told me it was an apple. She said this as she turned red as a tomato." "Eve's apple," said Valeriano, with a wink, something he did not usually do.

"No," I said.

"No," he agreed.

And we left.

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## Appendix

From: "juan pedro aparicio" <juanpedroaparicio@gmail.com>  
To: "Jenell Weitz" <jenellweitz@yahoo.com>  
Re: el cuento suyo La Gata  
Date: Wednesday, September 24, 2008

Querida Jenell:  
Te adjunto el texto con mis sugerencias que van en negrita. He quitado algunos párrafos porque creo que así el texto queda mejor.. En cuanto al título no estoy muy seguro, acaso prefiera The Cat House.  
Espero que te sirvan mis sugerencias.  
Me gustaría saber qué vas a hacer con este texto. Formará parte de tu tesis? ¿De qué manera? ¿ Se publicará la tesis?  
Abrazos  
Juan Pedro

From: "bush.laura@comcast.net" <bush.laura@comcast.net>  
To: jenellweitz@yahoo.com  
Re: [Span\_port\_trans] literary translation help  
Date: Sunday, September 28, 2008

Hi Jenell,

Did anyone answer you? I did not see any replies. Did you already come up with a solution?

I am not a literary expert, but I have some thoughts about the second phrase. I can't come up with a way to keep that beautiful rhythm of the original, or the way the "pis pas" evokes the sound of water, but perhaps you could compensate by including a word like "sprinkled," as in:

2. Y todo eso en un pis pas, como dijo Candido entre riego y riego

..., said Candido, sprinkling comments as well as water.

..., said Candido, sprinkling comments as he moved from plant to plant.

Not a total solution, but perhaps an approach to get there.

Laura