

 HarperCollins e-books

Shorts

STORIES

Alberto Fuguet

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Translated by Ezra E. Fitz



HarperCollins e-books

Short (Middle English, from Old English *sceort*; akin to Old High German *scurz* short, Old Norse *skortr* lack), *adj.* 1. Describes those things of little length or that are small in comparison with others of their sort. 2. Of little duration, estimation, or worth. 3. Insufficient or defective . . . 12. A live-action or animated film of a brief, imprecise duration.

Story (Middle English *storie*, from Old French *estorie*, from Latin *historia*—more at HISTORY), *noun*. 1. The relation of an event or happening. 2. The written or spoken relation of a fictional, invented event. 3. A brief narration of simple, invented events, often done for pleasure or to convey a certain lesson or moral.

Storyteller, *adj.* 1. Describes a person known for telling lies, exaggerations, and gossip. 2. Describes a person known for telling or writing stories. 3. Describes a person who, for vanity or another similar reason, exaggerates or falsifies reality.

Inadvertently overhearing words that suddenly make everything clear.

—Anton Chekhov, from “Elements Most Often Found in Novels, Short Stories, Etc.”

Youth is wasted on the young.

—George Bernard Shaw

Why film a story when one can write? Why write it when one will film it?

—Eric Rohmer

I will not tell all in this story. On the other hand, there is no story but a series, a selection of very current events, of coincidences and accidents, the way there always are, more or less, in life. . . .

—Eric Rohmer,
from “My Night with Maud” (the story)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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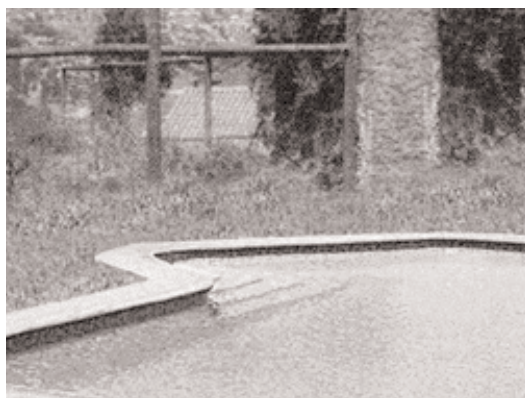
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THE TEST



I spent that year—the year I want to tell you about—attending a prep school for lost rich kids who needed to “find themselves.” I wasn’t rich, but I knew I needed to find myself, and that being “lost” wasn’t going to do me any good. I felt like that decorated cadet who stumbled in the middle of the Parada Militar. Remember him? They say it was Pinochet’s nephew, or somebody related to Lucía Hiriart, Pinochet’s fucking wife. I don’t know; the details were a little sketchy. But they’d coddled him and spoiled him with trips to Disneyland and South Africa, yet all that pampering didn’t amount to much in the end because the guy stumbled. And I don’t mean metaphorically—he tripped and fell right in the middle of the Parque O’Higgins ellipse with TVN broadcasting live from Arica to Punta Arenas. Falling in public sucks, because it comes with an added bonus: everyone can see you.

“He vanished,” Raimundo Baeza told me as we were leaving our advanced history and geography class. “He made their whole family look ridiculous.”

“But how?”

“He fucked up, that’s how. He had to leave the country. What did you think, Ferrer, that they’d give him a medal?”

I went to class every morning. I didn’t have friends per se, but I did have something of a clique. They’d also been left back, of course—Cristóbal Urquidí, Claudia Marconi (Florencia’s sister), and Raimundo Baeza with his thick eyebrows and his exaggerated smile. I’d met all of them during that year. We had two semesters to prepare ourselves by taking practice tests and answering the usual multiple-choice

questions. We were paralyzed by the idea that the rest of our lives would be defined by a single three-day exam. Our only goal was to do whatever it took to increase our scores on that exalted, famous, feared, arbitrary, and—at the time—detested assessment of future success that was the Prueba de Aptitud Académica, for we belonged to the hopeless group who'd scored in the 400–600 range. Those who'd triumphed by breaking the 700-point barrier were going on to college, while the gates of Higher Education had been slammed in our faces for at least another year.

Sometimes I would take the Metro to the Universidad Católica station, where I'd get off and just look at the big Casa Central. I'd stare at the students walking out into the sun, their faces lit up with happiness and their notebooks emblazoned with the pontifical logo. I was on the outside looking in. Those people had something I didn't have. Plus, they probably didn't even realize what they had, because you're only conscious of things like that when you don't have them. I couldn't deal with the fact that most of my friends, acquaintances, and former classmates had managed to get accepted, leaving me on the edge, on the fringe, on the fuckin' sideline.

The teachers at the prep school insisted to us that this was nothing more than a stepping-stone and didn't have anything to do with our abilities as students. Plus, a year to mature would do us good. Even so—or maybe even because of that—we felt like losers. And when you feel like a loser, you start to act like a loser. You're overcome by envy, your soul jumps out of you, it takes you over, it shakes you until it controls you. When you envy someone, you feel it so much that you stop feeling everything else. That year, I envied people I didn't even know. Those who scored in the nation's upper echelons had their names printed in the papers and were shown on TV. You could see the little geniuses in their homes, with their TVs and proud grandmothers in their living rooms. The moral imperative was: grow up, take the lead, and come out on top.

Chile wasn't a place for the weak, but at the time, that's exactly what I was: weak. Under a dictatorship, you do much better when you are strong.

Of my entire class, I was the only one who didn't end up going on to college. And for me, that fact was more than a mere statistic. My shame was such that I stopped hanging out with my old classmates. Simply because of numbers, the few friends that I'd had quickly became my worst enemies.

To make matters worse: my supposed "consolation prize" didn't console me in the least: I had been accepted—winning the last spot on the list—into a dubious arts program located in some distant shit-hole where it never stopped raining. It didn't seem like much of a prize, either. More like a way to highlight my failure in fluorescent yellow. But I did it: I paid my tuition, sent in my paperwork, and had my fucking passport-sized photos made. What else could I have done? What other opportunities did I have? The night before I was to leave for the distant South, I couldn't sleep. Everything terrified me: being so far away, leaving my mother alone, missing her, not knowing anybody, studying something I didn't want to study, and not becoming what I had planned to become.

I've never cried quite like I did that one afternoon on the highway.

"It's not healthy to travel with so much pent-up anguish," a woman in orthopedic shoes told me. She passed me Kleenex and caressed my hair.

I got off the bus at the next stop and started walking back home. It took me over two hours to get there. Along the way, in a dark alley that smelled like chicha beer, I puked. By the time I arrived, my hair was matted with sweat and my feet stung and bled. I opened the door to find the living room cast in shadows. My mother was on her knees on the floor with her head buried in the lap of a man who was sitting in an armchair, smoking. I knew him, but I never thought I'd see my mother in that position. Luckily, they kept quiet and didn't acknowledge me. Very slowly, I made my way up the creaky

staircase to my room on the second floor, where I collapsed on my unmade bed. I didn't get up until the next afternoon.



That year in which everything I'm about to tell you happened, I was barely eighteen years old, and disco music still dominated the radio waves. In physical terms, my face was blemished with acne, my hair was oily, and I was growing uncontrollably skinny. I felt like a one-armed juggler. My mind was under too much stress. I couldn't sleep for that entire year. At best, I slept fitfully, but I still couldn't dream. Ever. Sleeping without dreaming is like watching TV with neither picture nor sound. You start to imagine things.

The most annoying thing about not having been accepted to college was that it forced me to admit that the system might be right. I played the devil's advocate, reasoning that if a university didn't want me among its student body, then it was certainly possible that it was justified to feel that way. Maybe I really *didn't* deserve to be there. Maybe my intelligence really *did* max out in the 400–600 range. I tried to convince myself that I didn't want to belong to an institution that didn't want me among its members, but that proved futile: at that age, you spend all your energy trying to belong to groups that don't even realize you're alive. In any case, I wasn't the only one. That's how all of us at the prep school felt. Unwanted. Scorned. Like wrong answers in a multiple-choice question. But the thing that complicated matters was the fact that I knew I wasn't dumb. My fall—my exile—hadn't come about because of a lack of ability; rather, I was being punished. I was paying for my juvenile behavior. All those red marks that I picked up in all those poorly taught classes were now beginning to taint my destiny.

We didn't have many options back in those days. It was either study what we wanted to study, or study some-

thing that held no interest for us whatsoever. Period. If you don't like it, then pack your things and get out. If one of life's roads doesn't pass through college, then it's on very shaky ground. You had two choices—yes and yes—and there was nothing else to discuss. There were no private universities, and the few public ones that did exist were divided into those that “good people” attended and those that “the others” went to.

I was a member of neither group.

And so that year, the only thing that seemed legitimate, worthy, and bearable was to become a journalist. I just didn't see any other possibilities. Not studying journalism was tantamount to not being able to speak Spanish. To not breathing, to being cast off the planet. Sometimes I would cry when the nightly newscasts were over. I idolized Hernán Olguín and wanted to travel the world, interviewing people and learning about science and technology like him. I would have lunch while watching *The Navasals at One*, which was hosted by this old married couple, José María and Marina Navasal. Every day they would invite guests to be on the show to discuss current events, and I would call in with questions, though I never gave my real name. I invented pseudonyms inspired by the names of the foreign journalists whose work I read in the newspapers and magazines that the library at the Chilean–North American Cultural Institute on Moneda Street subscribed to.

The prep school curriculum I landed in was based in the sciences and humanities and populated by aspiring doctors, dentists, lawyers, and—as it happened—journalists. We split up into two irreconcilable factions: the “lost causes,” who were the more kind and free, and “those who almost made it but just missed.” I was part of the second group. Cristóbal Urquidi and Raimundo Baeza clearly identified themselves with those who had stumbled. Claudia Marconi, on the other hand, was quite content to take a year's sabbati-

cal. Nevertheless, all of us were confident that the second time would be the charm.

That year, which I still can't erase from my mind, the TV only had four channels, and none of them broadcast in the mornings. There was no such thing as cable, and food was neither fast nor lite. The smog was not yet suffocating, and you could see the Andes from any spot in the city. The city hadn't needed to institute emissions regulations yet. I remember also that that was the year when the first big department store opened; it was called Sears; it had air conditioning and sold thousands of imported items. The only way to send mail was through the post office; telephones were fixed to the wall with cords; and if nobody was home, then you just had to call back later. Recorded music was bought and not downloaded, and a few privileged students—such as Raimundo Baeza—had calculators to help them with their homework. Those were also the kind of people who had a machine known as a Betamax video recorder and who rented their movies at the kiosk just before exiting the grocery store. Our participation in that year's World Cup was a disaster. We missed a penalty shot, and the entire country realized that the wound we'd hidden away was beginning to get infected. A financial crisis was looming over our heads, but even then we still couldn't see it.

We couldn't see a lot of things. Later came the divisive protests that would fracture our country. But it's easy to contextualize things after they've sailed their course. In hindsight, everyone—even the dumbest—is wise. If we'd known the consequences, obviously we wouldn't have done what we did. That's how we protect ourselves. We're convinced that the worst is over and that the best is yet to come. That's not always the case. But that's how we are: blindness isn't so bad. It lets us wander near the edge of a cliff without fear. If we could see, then perhaps we wouldn't even dare to get out of bed in the morning. We want our own offenses to be forgiven, but we're unable to forgive those who offend us. To

forgive Raimundo Baeza, for example. At least *I* couldn't. Sometimes I ask myself if Cristóbal Urquidi will be able to. Able to forgive Baeza, or able to forgive me.



But what happened between Raimundo and Cristóbal took place *after* we suffered through The Test. Between Christmas and New Year's—December 28th, to be precise. The Day of the Innocents. What happened that day at Claudia and Florencia Marconi's house changed my outcome. Not my test scores per se, but rather what I decided to do with my life. In the end, I achieved the coveted 750 points—which was beyond my wildest dreams—but I didn't use it to stake any claim anywhere. Instead, I left the country. Just for a while, to get my head in order. I didn't want to stay there a moment longer, and so I started out by going back to Paraguay.

But that was later. At the year's end.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

I better rewind. One morning, our Verbal Aptitude tutor had me read—from my secret outpost in the back of the class—the five possible answers to a multiple-choice question that he'd written on the board. I couldn't make out anything more than a blur. I was frightened; I had to get up and walk to the front of the room. Gradually—luckily—the letters then came into focus.

After class, Cristóbal came up to me to examine my eyes. I don't know why, but I let him. It was the first time that we'd had any real sort of contact. A few months before, I'd spilled a cup of hot coffee on him, but acted like it was an accident. In class I would stare at his back and try to irradiate him with my bad vibes as if I had secret, super-hero powers. I secretly wished for him to flunk The Test. I drew pictures of him in my notebooks, and then pierced him with

arrows, hung him from gallows, and decapitated him in guillotines.

"You should let my dad check you out," he said in a voice so muted it was as if his batteries were running low. "I can get you an appointment."

When I think about Cristóbal—and I think about him a lot, believe me—the things I remember most are his soft, hesitant voice, his slight frame, his boring, almost gloomy clothes, and his eyes. His eyes, especially—gray, dense, and clouded with too many siestas.

"He has the eyes of someone who has seen a lot of things," is what Florencia once told me, after getting to know him.

"He hasn't seen everything," I replied. "That much is clear to me. There are things he doesn't know, and things he hasn't seen."

I knew one thing that Cristóbal didn't. It had to do with his father. I'd seen him a few times, at my house. He was the guy who I walked in on while he was smoking in the chair. You see, for the year I'm telling you about, Eduardo Urquidi was my mother's lover. Or rather, they were each other's lovers. I think that my mother, at least, was in love, but that he wouldn't have dared to leave his wife, who—as he put it—was such a wonderful person. Which is why their encounters were always conducted furtively, in passing, between seven and nine o'clock.

Before he abandoned us—that is, when he still lived in the house—my father had had several women, though we never saw them. They belonged to another world, a completely undiscovered country, as far as we were concerned. But my mother, on the other hand, was one of *us*. She stayed the same. More wrought-up, of course, but generally the same. In those days, she worked for a real estate company, leasing homes. She was out all day showing properties. It was hard for me to look at her with the kind of eyes with which Cristóbal's mother doubtless did, calling her a bitch or a whore or worse. You grow up believing that all mistresses are

evil sluts who wreck homes and aren't worth anything to anybody. But it's quite a different story when the other woman—the mistress, the one who's shaking up what's already been destroyed—is your mother. I would wake up at night thinking about the obscenities that Cristóbal's mother must be screaming at her husband, and how that coward would never be able to stand up for my mother.

I never made anything of the incident in the living room; never mentioned it to my mother or my younger siblings. I didn't mention it to Florencia, either, although she would have understood. Florencia had the gift of being able to understand anything. That was her grace, and what separated her from the rest of us. She was even able to understand me.

One night, around dinnertime, my mother came home with Eduardo Urquidi. My siblings had already finished eating, but I was still there and my mother introduced him to me as *a friend*. Eduardo covered his food in salt (even the dessert), and the fact that he had the same soft and hesitant voice as Cristóbal unnerved me. Everything about him seemed bland and unfinished. He used gel in his hair, and his jowls were flabby. He was the complete opposite of my father.

"I'm young. I've got a right to have friends," my mother told me after he'd gone.

"But he's married! Do you think I didn't see his ring?" I responded defiantly.

"We're just friends. Besides, he doesn't love his wife anymore. She's just a fat old frigid Catholic woman, but she won't stop having kids."

"You should choose someone who's not married. Someone who's single."

"You don't choose such things, Alvaro. Though I wish you could."

That night, as I struggled to fall asleep I deduced Cristóbal was the oldest. Just like me. And he lived his life like a firstborn, too: slowly, fearfully, guiltily.

"Eduardo makes me laugh. He's good company," she

explained the following morning as she opened a can of Nescafé. “That’s all that I’m looking for. Can’t you understand that? Can’t you support me here? Haven’t I sacrificed enough for you kids that I can have a little companionship in return? He’s a friend, period. That’s all, Alvaro. That’s all.”

But that wasn’t all. There was much, much more.

The third time Eduardo came to dinner at our house, he tried to strike up a conversation with me, as if he were my father. Out of the blue, he said:

“I’ve got a son who’s about your age.”

“Excuse me?”

“I just said that I’ve got a son who’s about your age.”

“And a tough age it is,” I replied, but the man didn’t respond to my comment. He either didn’t understand, or he just didn’t want to.

“He spends all day studying for The Test.”

“The Test that puts us to the test.”

“Cristóbal wants to become an ophthalmologist. What about you, Alvaro? What do you want to study?”

“I want to be a reporter. I want to write about things that people don’t see.”



Dr. Urquidi fixed me up with a pair of eyeglasses. Cristóbal went with me to the appointment. I had decided to go ahead and play with fire: I figured I’d squeeze him for everything I could, to make him pay for the harm he was causing me. I even considered extortion, but then decided against it, as I’d found a letter he’d written to my mother in the wastebasket. It wasn’t a romantic letter—he obviously had no idea what romance was—but at least he made it clear that he didn’t love his wife (that’s always the excuse), and that he feared both God and the eventual contempt of his children.

He became immediately nervous when he saw the two of us in his waiting room. It was as if he stopped breathing. He didn't know what to do with his hands. But that's what I wanted: to make him nervous, destroy him. It's why I accepted Cristóbal's offer. I wanted to get as much as I could out of him. It was payback time.

"Dad, this is Alvaro Ferrer, the friend I told you about."

I was a bit surprised that Cristóbal had called me a "friend," because we weren't. For a moment there I thought that perhaps he knew something, but then I thought not. Impossible. Cristóbal Urquidi—just like his father—was completely detached from whatever surrounded him.

"Good afternoon."

"So you two are classmates?"

"Yes. It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor."

"Please, call me Eduardo. You can be informal, as we're among friends."

"In that case, it's a pleasure to meet you, *Eduardo*."

"No, the pleasure is mine."

A photo of his wife and kids hung on one of the waiting room's walls.

"You have a lovely family," I said in my most polite voice. "How old were you then, Cristóbal?"

"Eight."

"I remember when I was eight. It's the best age."

"Yeah," Cristóbal said, "everything's great when you're eight."

As they began to get more and more involved in the affair, Eduardo stopped coming by the house. An act of modesty, I suppose. He'd wait in the car and my mother would go down to meet him. Sometimes they would just sit there, talking under the leafy trees. I hated that. The fact that he wouldn't come into the house, I mean. It made me feel like all of us were mired deep in some sort of corrupt activity. Then Eduardo would go, and my mother would go back up

to her room and cry. My younger brothers would ask me if she was sick.

"No," I would tell them.

On nights like that, I would picture Cristóbal studying at home, surrounded by the central-heated family warmth: his father sitting next to his mother, and his siblings playing together on the floor nearby. It didn't seem fair to me. I thought to myself, if he knew what I did—if he found out before taking The Test—then maybe not *everything* would turn out the way he wanted. Then we'd have something in common: he'd feel in his heart what I was feeling in mine.

Dr. Urquidi's diagnosis was that one of my eyes was weaker than the other. The right one was struggling to compensate for the weaker left one. I had an astigmatism, he decided. If a weak eye doesn't work, it starts to atrophy.

"It's like life," he explained.

"What do you mean?"

"When people do things for you, you get lazy. The only way to get stronger is by working."

Cristóbal added, "Up until now, you were all but blind. Now you'll be able to see things you've never seen before."

Dr. Urquidi fixed a patch over my left eye that I'd have to wear for at least six months day and night. I'd wear glasses, he told me, for the rest of my life.

"The rest of my *life*?"

"Yes, forever. But you'll get used to it. I know you will, Alvaro."

"Please—it's Mr. Ferrer."

Eduardo Urquidi looked away, but he didn't say anything. He never said anything to me. He just fell silent, thinking that perhaps he could wipe away his sins by treating me graciously.

Cristóbal was right: I was able to see things I'd never seen before. All of a sudden, the world came into sharp, clear focus. My first pair of glasses didn't last long, however. Three

months, tops. Ramiro Baeza broke them that night I'm going to tell you about. That night out on the patio at Claudia and Florencia Marconi's house.



The week before The Test, Florencia informed me that she was pregnant, and that I was responsible for the thing. We were in the frozen-foods section of the supermarket, and we were both wearing T-shirts and shorts. The frosty air coming off the cases of ice cream paralyzed me. This is serious business, I thought, and I ought to feel some twinge of emotion. But all I could say was, "I hope this doesn't affect my score."

Florencia wasn't exactly my girlfriend. She was my friend, but a friend "with benefits." For six months, I never left her side, and she showed me many things. She looked at things in a different sort of way, and I liked that about her. I liked it a lot. She made me feel better, experienced, and in control.

"Do you want to get married?" I offered. "It could work. I'm not afraid. We spend all our time together anyway."

"No," she very calmly replied. "I'm not going to marry you. I just turned fifteen last week, and I'm not getting married at fifteen."

"Why not?"

"Because all fifteen-year-olds care about are going to dances with cute guys and filling up their diaries."

"You're not into those things."

"Maybe not, but I'm still fifteen. Besides, you don't love me."

"Look, I love you. Or . . . what I mean is . . . I feel stuff for you."

"Stuff?"

"Yeah, stuff. Feelings."

Florencia stopped pushing the cart and looked me straight in the eye.

"You think you love me, but you barely even *like* me. You're just with me because the sex is good and easy and because I don't get on your nerves."

"And you?"

"Me what?"

"Do you love me?" I tried to take her hand, but she wouldn't let me.

"Don't be so dramatic, Alvaro. This is not a soap."

"Tell me."

"What?"

"You know."

"I want to get to know more guys, okay? You were my first. And it was fine. I've got feelings for you, too. And I feel a little bit sorry for you."

"Sorry?"

"Yes, sorry. It's not always a bad thing, you know."

"So you're not gonna marry me?"

"I don't believe in marriage."

"How can you not believe in marriage?"

"It seems like a dubious institution to me."

"Florence, you're fifteen."

"And that means I have to be an idiot about it?"

"No, but . . ."

"I'm not like my sister, okay? I don't always want to have a guy around."

"I'm not just some guy."

"Yeah, I know. But what's with all this talk about my age, anyway? What are you, in your forties? Mentally, men are always about ten years younger than they are physically, so maybe you should just shut up."

Florencia took out two cartons of ice cream and put them in the shopping cart. Nearby, a man with a toddler riding in his cart paused. The child was eating a piece of candy. His mouth, hands, and shirt were covered in gooey chocolate.

“Look at your mother, Alvaro. Look at mine. Two great examples. Why would we ever want to get married?”

“So we can be together and take care of the baby. So he doesn’t have to suffer through what we have.”

“I haven’t suffered so much. Don’t exaggerate.”

We continued on through the aisles. Florencia may have been young, but she talked like an adult and read like an old lady. In the snacks section, she said, “I should have gone to see my sister’s gynecologist. My father warned me about it that time he walked in on us, remember?”

Florencia was Claudia’s only sister. I met her when Claudia invited Raimundo and me over to her house to study. Back then, nobody invited Cristóbal over to do things, and I liked that. Claudia was fun and hyperactive and liked to skip class to go skiing. She was also interested in journalism, but would have been equally satisfied with a job in advertising or teaching something. And she was always coming to class with fashion magazines. Claudia, to be honest, was always very stylish. Their mother lived in Europe, and worked for some international organization. Sometimes she’d send them a box full of Toblerones. That afternoon, I remember, Claudia went up to her room with Ramiro, while Florencia and I had tea together. We watched a little TV, and she told me about her travels in other countries. She didn’t seem like a fourteen-year-old girl.

“So what are we gonna do?” I asked her as we shuffled through the checkout line. “I can help you take care of it.”

“Take care of what?”

“Of our kid.”

“Don’t be so naïve, Alvaro. I can stand anything except naïveté.”

Florencia wasn’t unattractive. She was *different*. And I’d never been with a *different* girl before. I thought that all of them were exactly the same. Florencia wore big, old, black-framed glasses, and she wore her black hair long and

smooth and straight so that it covered up the entire back of her school uniform. Once she told me that I was a believer who was lacking only in faith. Nobody had ever said anything so beautiful to me before. How could I not love her? But is that what it was?

Florencia lost her virginity with me, but not her innocence. She'd lost that many years before. We were complete opposites in that regard. She was much more worldly-wise than me. We did it at her house—out of pure boredom—almost every afternoon while listening to the jazz records that she'd bought downtown. She taught me vocabulary words and we worked through practice exams to prepare for the damn Test. Her father would come home at dawn; Claudia, meanwhile, sometimes wouldn't show up until the following day.

"So then what?"

"Then that's it. I've made my decision, and that's final. I can't go to study in France with a baby."

"And me?"

"You what?"

"What about what I think?"

"Aren't you a little big to be acting like such a prick, Alvaro? Do you really think that there's any other option? I'm fifteen, for Christ's sake. Fifteen. Do you really think that I'm going to have a baby that I don't want just so you don't have to feel bad about it? Don't you think we're a little too mature for that?"

"I don't know, Florencia."

"That's always been your problem. You don't know anything, and you never see what you have to see."



I blurt it out to Ramiro. "I'm gonna be a father," I say. "I don't know what I'm gonna do."

There are some things that you can't keep to yourself, that you have to share with someone else, even if he's not someone you usually confide in. Raimundo Baeza seems older than us—a lot older—but he's actually not. He's very dark and he combs his hair back with gel. He wears a gold watch on his wrist and a gold cross around his neck. Some of the other students say that he's foreign. Caribbean, maybe. But the most impressive thing about him is his broad shoulders. He goes to class in a T-shirt every day—even in winter—and he wears cowboy boots. Nobody else at school wears boots like that. Plus, there are hints that he lives in a whole other world outside of the prep school, and he drops anecdotes about weekends that involve outrageous women, motels that sound more like clubs, and vacation homes on the beach or in the mountains.

We're at his house, in his giant bedroom plastered with posters of bikini-clad girls and racing cars. Cristóbal is in the bathroom. Ever since I spoke with Urquidi, he started getting more erratic and irritable, and he started hanging out with Raimundo. Plus, Urquidi has started to lose weight. Ramiro told me that he swiped blank prescriptions from his father's office and forged them so he could get amphetamines.

"Look, I've got a whole bunch of 'em. Meth and diet pills."

"I'm not hungry anyway."

"So what? They'll improve your performance. *All types* of performance," he says, and laughs before swallowing a couple with a gulp of beer. "That Urquidi gets crazier every day," he says. "Remember when he first came here? He always looked like he was about to break down and cry. Now he's completely different. It's as if all of a sudden, that *huevo* doesn't give a shit about anything."

On the last practice test, Ramiro and I had both done well: in the top fifteen percent of the class. Urquidi's score, on the other hand, had dropped over three hundred points.

"I hope these uppers help with our scores," Ramiro

says before putting a cassette in his Betamax. It's a porno flick, in English. "My brother brought a bunch of 'em back from Georgia. He was in this sweaty little town called Fort Benning where there's nothing to do but sit around, watch pornos, and drink. You know what the School of the Americas is?"

"Is that where they send diplomats' kids?"

"Not *exactly*."

The flick starts out in an office where two nurses are filing their nails. A bell rings, and one of them—in a very short skirt—crosses the room and opens the door. Outside are two CHiPs-type cops, but they're both more Erik Estrada than blond. They're sporting Mexican mustaches and Ray-Bans.

"So you're gonna be a single father?"

"Yeah."

"I hope that never happens to me."

"I want to go through with it—I really do—but she's against it."

"Against getting married?"

"Against having the kid."

"I don't get it . . . you want to get married, and she wants to liquidate the thing? Is that it?"

"Yeah, more or less. I wouldn't use those exact words, but yes."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"Shit, Ferrer, that's some fucking luck, man. You were born broke. Nobody comes up with stuff like that. You should feel relieved. You're home free!"

Ramiro turns down the volume on the TV. He's wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts, and his legs are long, muscular, and so thickly covered in hair that you can barely see the skin underneath. I notice a turtle on the rug near the window. His head is hidden away inside his shell.

"You can't say anything to anybody," I tell him.

“Consider it a military secret. I won’t even talk to the turtle.” Then Ramiro grabs me by the arm and says, “I know people who can help you out. In case she changes her mind.”

“I don’t think so.”

“She’s a girl, and girls change their minds all the time. Better just to be prepared. My sister got mixed up with a friend of mine—ex-friend, the fucking son of a bitch. Anyway, we solved the problem. Easy, peasey, Japanesey. You don’t get away with doing shit like that to my family.”

“When was this?”

“Some time ago. The bitch was thirteen. Thirteen, and already she was doing it nonstop. Don’t you think that’s a little young?”

“A little.”

“So how old is your girl?”

“Florencia. Her name’s Florencia.”

“Don’t tell me . . . is she Claudia Marconi’s sister?”

“Yeah.”

“No way. Do you really like her?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, that bitch is, like, fourteen!”

“She’s fifteen.”

“Ah, well, that’s not so young.”

“No.”

Urquidi comes back in. He’s very pale, and sporting a bit of stubble on his chin. I never would have guessed that he was already shaving.

“What took you so long? Were you on the shitter?”

“No. I don’t feel good. I think I’ve got hypertension.”

“It’s nerves, man. You’re stressed out over The Test.”

Urquidi looks at me but doesn’t respond. It’s like he’s completely empty inside. He really looks like he couldn’t care less about anything. He sits down on the floor and begins to pet the turtle.

“They could hit you with statutory rape, Ferrer, because you’re an adult.”

"I'm not an adult yet, *huevo*n. I'm eighteen."

"You're over eighteen, and that means they can legally throw your ass in jail. But I guess you know what you're doing."

"I guess."

"And I guess you know what they do to punks like you in prison."

I'd been to his house before. Several times. We'd been studying for the social sciences part of The Test. Sometimes his father's driver would come and pick us up from the school in his official car. Raimundo called him "Chico" and would sometimes send him out to buy marijuana and burgers for us. He wants to be an attorney. Needs to become one. The family wants an attorney, and I don't think Raimundo wants to disappoint them. His father is a colonel who taught at the Academia de Guerra, but all of his family members have ties to the army: his older brother—the one from Fort Benning—had graduated with honors from the Escuela Militar. According to Raimundo, he'd bunked with the cadet who fell during the parade.

"I can help you out," he repeats. "I'm sure you'll figure out some way to return the favor."

I don't know what to tell him.

Urquidi releases the turtle, who pokes his head out.

"What's your turtle's name?"

"D'Artagnan," Cristóbal replies.

Raimundo sits down on his bed and starts clipping his toenails. Urquidi picks up the turtle and places it on the bed, but it's startled and quickly withdraws its head. He returns D'Artagnan to the carpet. On the TV, two firemen are banging an Asian doctor, who's moaning heavily.

"The black guy's bigger," remarks Urquidi.

"And the white guy shaves his balls," says Raimundo.

"But what'd they do to your friend?" I ask in a low voice.

"What?"

“What happened to your friend? The one who slept with your sister?”

Urquidi turned his attention from the television and looked at Baeza.

“He *ceased* to exist.”

“What?”

“Nothing. He just *ceased* to exist.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine, don’t.”

“Seriously—what did you do?” I insist. “What did they do to your friend?”

“My father took care of it. I didn’t want any blood on my hands.”

When Ramiro wanted to laugh, his smile could be fierce, almost frightening. But when he was serious, he could be much, much worse. Now he was being serious.

“Relax, man. He’s alive, but let’s just say that he’ll never have to worry about being a father again. It’s a shame, no?”



I began that year that ended so badly in Paraguay, in the middle of the jungle, on the banks of the muddy Paraná, in a suffocating, corrupt, and polluted place called Ciudad Stroessner. The town depended on cross-border smuggling with Brazil and the impressive new Itaipú Dam—then in its final stages of construction—for survival. Those who lived there called it “the armpit of the world,” and they got it right. I went there to visit my father, whom I hadn’t seen in three years. His idea was that we spend some time together and get to know each other. But we didn’t do either. Before I got to Paraguay, my father had to flee his home in the capital on account of some bad checks. When I arrived there, I rented a taxi and went out in search of him, but found that he was no

longer in Asunción. I took a bus out of the city and spent all night traveling along ruddy dirt roads. Eventually I was met by a woman named Laura, who had a deep voice and very long hair. Laura was as impressive as she was huge and perhaps because she was once a cabaret dancer, she had no eyebrows, just two straight lines that sometimes took the color of ground bricks. Laura lived and worked with my father. At night they would get drunk and fuck as if I weren't even there. Or maybe they wanted me to hear them.

I swam in alcohol. Cachaça and gin, mostly. Any drink that had ice in it. I tried to read a collection of short stories, but my eyes had trouble focusing. Sometimes I would go to the only foul little movie theater there was in town, but just about all they ever showed there were kung-fu flicks. Other times I would walk across the border with Brazil to Foz do Iguaçu, where I could see gringo movies with Portuguese subtitles.

I spent the majority of that rainy and rumored summer in a brothel frequented by both the local workers and the foreign engineers. My father left money for me every morning. He knew why: there wasn't anything else to spend your money on in Ciudad Stroessner. The local establishment was a humid house that was floored with broken glazed tiles and smelled of cinnamon. During the hottest part of the day, it was almost always empty. Giovanna's real name was Lourdes, and she was half Guaraní Indian, half mulatta from Minas Gerais. The sweat would roll down her body until it collected in tiny drops in her pubic hair. She would drink *mate* all day long, and we'd listen to the radio together; tangos from the far-off city of Posadas, in Argentina. We scarcely ever spoke, but I did like to feel myself gliding over the smoothness of her body. Giovanna taught me many things. She was always happy, and once she told me that I ought to smile more, especially when I was about to come, because otherwise I gave the impression that—deep inside of me—all was not well, and that I was sad and lost.

My father trafficked in alcohol, coffee, and cigarettes. His business associates were a Lebanese man and a guy from Hong Kong who went around sporting three-piece linen suits. Their office was on the top floor of the town's only skyscraper, which was a ramshackle-and-rustic thing that wouldn't have stood up to the slightest tremor. Stroessner himself attended that year's anniversary of the town's founding. Everyone painted their walls in red, white, and blue, and spilled out into the streets to party. A marching band struck up tunes. My father introduced me to the general, who offered me his hand. I took it, and I remember it feeling icy and slick. My father put his arm around my shoulders, and the general's face lit up. Then they took our picture.



We took practice tests on Saturday mornings. The real thing would begin at the same time, and end some four hours later. Whenever you finished, you could leave the exam room. Cristóbal was in the cafeteria. Light was falling on his back; he looked like an angel or a phantom. He was reviewing one of the practice essays, underlining sentences and marking paragraphs.

"How was it?"

"Fine," he said without looking up. "I had some time left over. You?"

"The geometry section was easy."

"Valdés says that it's best not to even go over your work. You should just turn it in, leave, and forget about it. If you second-guess yourself, you could turn a right answer into a wrong one. I think that's what I did wrong the last time."

"Don't forget about Valdés's other recommendations: don't study, don't drink, don't take any downers, and have all the sex you can."

Urquidí looked like he just might break a smile. He knew that Valdés had said no such thing.

“What do you think you’ll do the day before?”

“Go swimming over in Florencia’s pool. Claudia’s, I mean.”

Cristóbal paused for a moment to munch on my answer. He closed his test booklet and said, “I don’t know how to swim.”

“You could sunbathe, right?” I asked, surprised.

“I never have. I burn too easily. Can’t do it; they won’t let me.”

Cristóbal’s hair was cut very short. I noticed then that some gray was beginning to crop up.

“We could go see a movie the night before if you want. We could get a bunch of people together.”

“I don’t think so. I’m going to go over some stuff with my father. He’s got high hopes for me. Keeps asking me questions and quizzing me on vocab words. It’s what we did last year.”

“But you did bad last year.”

“I was too nervous. But I knew what I knew.”

Two more guys came in and turned up the volume on the radio. The whole cafeteria filled with the sounds of One-Trick Pony, a pop group that dominated the airwaves that year and about which we knew nothing else.

“How are your glasses? Good?”

“I can see a lot better. Thanks. I owe you one.”

“It wasn’t me. It was my father.”

“Your father. Of course. Once again, it’s your father.”

Then I said to myself: Here it is, this is your opportunity. The chance you’ve been waiting for.

“It’s weird how we’ve never talked about it,” I began. “It’s a complicated issue, I know . . .”

“What?”

“You know.”

“*What* do I know?”

"Look, Cristóbal, you seem like a good enough guy . . . we could really be better friends, after having spent all this time studying together."

"It's better to study in a group than to study alone."

"Exactly. But it's tough for me. You understand."

"It's tough for you to study? It's gonna be a lot tougher in college. That's where you really have to buckle down."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. I think you know what I'm saying here. I think maybe it's even tougher for you than it is for me."

"What?" he insisted. "I have no idea where you're going with this. What are you talking about?"

"About the connection between our two families."

"Huh? What connection?"

"I doubt you would've felt comfortable in my house, and I know that in yours—with your mother around—I would've had a real tough time trying to study . . ." There I fell silent, searching for the right words, but they didn't come to me. "My mom could be wrong, of course. She may well be making a big mistake, but that doesn't stop her from being my mother. I mean, put yourself in my position."

"I'm sorry, Alvaro, I really don't know what you're talking about. What are you trying to tell me?"

"About my mother and your father. About what we have in common. Do you think that he gave me these glasses for free just because I'm in your class? Especially when we're not really friends? It's as simple as two plus two."

"Look, if you want to tell me something, then just flat out say it."

So that's what I did. And seeing his eyes pop out of their sockets was enough for me to instantly regret the crime that I'd just committed.



In three more weeks, when the heat has driven everyone out of the city, we'll know our results. In the meantime, there's not much else we can do but wait. The results will appear, just as they do every year, in the papers, in three consecutive supplements bearing the full names and scores of each potential college applicant. It's over a hundred thousand names, all in alphabetical order. Some privileged students will get their scores a few days earlier. They're the ones who are privileged in all aspects of life, and I have no doubt that their scores will be fine. But I'm content to wait for the paper to come out. I'll get up early that morning and walk down to the kiosk on the corner to buy one.

Claudia had the house and the steaks ready, while the men brought beer and other drinks and the other women were in charge of salads and desserts. Mr. Amenábar is on the beach with a woman whom Florencia despises for her vanity. There are people here who only know each other by sight. They're from the prep school, too, but take mostly math courses. Claudia's currently dating José Covarrubias, who wants to go into engineering. He and his friends are here, and they've formed their own clique and are hanging out on the other side of the deep, kidney-shaped pool. They're all very drunk and telling dirty jokes. Cristóbal is with them. He seems out there. Totally wasted. Or stoned, I'd say.

Raimundo is in the living room with a girl in shorts. She's got short blond hair and she's wearing blue mascara. I was surprised to see her there, because Claudia said that the BBQ is only for the prep school guests. Not the walk-ins.

"Do you know who she is?" asks Florencia as she fixes a salad. I'm struck by how red the radishes are. They're whole, not sliced, and seem to float among the leafy greens.

"Who?"

"Raimundo's chick."

"I don't know. She's hot, though."

"She's on that skating program. It comes on on Sundays after lunch—have you ever seen it?"

"No."

"My classmates never miss it. I can't respect some chick just because she skates on TV. Only Raimundo would bring someone like that to a barbecue."

"Just to show off," I say.

"Obviously."

Florencia had visited a doctor who had confirmed what she'd suspected. He agreed that the best course of action would be to go ahead and eliminate the problem. After that, Florencia spoke with her father, who didn't get mad at all. Instead, he laid all the blame on her mother. But he would take care of everything. For a while I thought he was going to call me up or turn me in to the police or something, but in the end he did nothing like that. The procedure was scheduled for after the New Year. I offered to accompany her to the clinic, but she didn't want me to, and I didn't dare keep bringing up the subject. But it kept cropping up in my mind. I couldn't think about anything else.



Raimundo and the girl from the skating show were sitting very close together on the diving board, talking and flirting. He whispered something in her ear and she laughed. They seemed to be almost hovering over the water.

Santiago summers can be brutal. December and January are the worst months, and at three in the afternoon—with the dry Andes hanging like a curtain in the background—you feel like you just might melt. It's a dry heat, not humid, but the most annoying part is the harshness of the sun. But toward eight in the evening, the scene changes. You know that Santiago lies at the foot of a mountain range, and things start to freshen up. An icy breeze sweeps down off the slopes of the Andes, and by midnight everything has cooled off. The temperature drops some twenty degrees. Santiago nights—even the warmest ones—are always cool.

This night, on the other hand, was warm. So warm

in fact that we felt almost as if we were in another place—another country—entirely.

Florencia slipped off to the kitchen to get some drinks from the refrigerator. I sat down in a canvas chair and took off my glasses. Everything went blurry, just as before. It was already getting dark, and the only light was the glow coming from the pool. I tipped up my beer . . . I've had more than enough for the day, I thought, and closed my eyes.

"One, two, three . . . go! Man overboard!"

I looked up just in time. A group of partygoers had surrounded the diving board. Raimundo spun around in an attempt to defend himself. Cristóbal, José, and a third guy with a rugby player's build went to push him in. The skater girl was with them, too. She was in on it. Raimundo fought back, trying to take Urquidi down with him, but it was already over: his arms wheeled in the air and he fell in.

"Shit, those fucking assholes," said Florencia, re-emerging from the kitchen and drying her hands.

The assailants were having themselves a good laugh. One of them took off his shirt and shoes and jumped in, too. He was fat and gelatinous. Raimundo, I noticed, was still in the water. At the bottom.

"Let's get naked!" I heard Covarrubias yell.

I made my way over to the pool, but the grass wasn't cut and my steps were met with a strange sort of resistance. Claudia slipped out of her dress and stood there in her bra and panties. I noticed that her breasts were bigger than her sister's. The group continued to yell and whoop, trying to cop a feel. José had also stripped down to a pair of white boxers. Raimundo was still underwater—swimming, I saw—or rather gliding across the bottom like a manta ray. His dark clothes billowed out around him, and he didn't come up until he reached the shallow end.

José and Claudia jumped in and then turned to splash at the others who'd stayed up on the deck. Raimundo waded over to the steps and started to clamber out, but, weighed

down by his wet clothes, it wasn't an easy task. Once out, he pulled off one of his boots, and poured out what seemed like liters of water. His skater girl came up to him, stifling her laughter, but Raimundo slapped her so hard and so suddenly that she fell backwards onto the damp grass.

"It was your idea, right?"

He didn't yell at her; he spoke calmly and slowly, dragging out each one of his words. The others still in the pool fell silent and stopped splashing, though the water continued to ripple and lap at them, casting uncertain waves of light around the scene.

"Bitch, I know it was your idea. Admit it."

Raimundo walked up to her and leaned over as if to smell her. I remember the intensity I could see in his eyes—that of undistilled rage—and at that moment I knew that the lives of everyone there that night were about to be forever changed.

"Bitch, tell me, did you really think you could get a laugh at my expense? At ours? The Baezas?"

Raimundo slapped her again with such force that it sounded like a gunshot.

"Which of these guys are you fucking? You want to screw around with them right now, in the pool? Now I see why you had to come. Why you called me and called me until I invited you. So who are you gonna be blowing later?"

"Maybe the same guy as you, Raimundo."

Silence fell. Florencia took my hand. A few people slipped reservedly into the pool. Still drenched, Ramiro sat down on the grass and struggled to hold back tears.

"Chill out, man. It was just a joke," said one of the math guys. "We were all in on it. Relax."

It was then that Cristóbal Urquidi walked over to Baeza. His shirt was off, and his chest looked like that of a malnourished child, and his ribs showed through his skin.

"It was my idea, Baeza. My idea. Fool's Day, nobody gets pissed off."

Cristóbal's tenuous voice had taken on a potent quality. But it was still the voice of someone unpredictable, as if he were pronouncing each syllable for the first time.

"It's water, man. Water."

Raimundo just sat there on the grass, his face buried in his arms.

"Stop the bullshit, Baeza," he continued defiantly. "You're making too big a deal out of this. Water is water, man. Just water. It doesn't hurt, it doesn't stain. It just dries. It just dries."

Raimundo lifted his head and looked up fixedly at Cristóbal. A circle of people was gradually forming around the two of them. I crept closer, very slowly, so that nobody would hear me.

"Of course it was my idea," Urquidi insisted, building himself up. "You got a problem with that? It was *my idea*, and a damn good one, too, Baeza. I was the one who wanted to push you in. And you know why? Because fuck you, that's why. And because it was time to party."

Then Cristóbal Urquidi did something that crossed a certain line—the sort of line that should really never be crossed. It was the worst possible thing he could have done. You never corner a fallen, humiliated opponent, leaving him no other means of escape than violence. But what Cristóbal Urquidi did was to take the liter of beer he'd been drinking and pour it over Raimundo Baeza's bowed head.

"There," he spit. "Stop crying. You know what we're gonna think of you now, tough guy? All bluff. I know you make up all your big adventures, Baeza. *Now* are you gonna invite me over to watch those videos your murderer brother sends you? *Now* are you gonna jerk me off?"

Baeza didn't do a thing. It was almost as if he felt like he deserved it. Or enjoyed it. The golden liquid ran down over his head, and the foam collected in the collar of his shirt. I noticed that he even licked a taste off his lips.

But it couldn't just end there. Cristóbal knew that.

He had to. There couldn't have been any other way. Raimundo didn't even need to get up. He merely reached out to grab the sudsy bottle and—just as I thought that he was going to chuck it across the yard—it exploded on the side of Urquidi's skull. Cristóbal fell to the ground and Raimundo was on him in an instant. But Cristóbal didn't react—he was too dazed to even try to defend himself.

I ran over to where the two had fallen, but before I could say anything like "Enough! Break it up!" Raimundo hit me with a combination that shattered my glasses and knocked me rolling toward the edge of the pool. I tried to look up, but the world had gone dark and blurry and I couldn't make out what was happening. All I caught were cries of "Enough!" "Stop it!" "Leave him alone!"

Then I did something that I don't know how to either explain or justify. I rolled over once more and fell into the pool. My clothes gradually took on water as I sank like lead to the bottom. I stayed there in the aquatic silence until I began to run out of air. Somehow I managed to pull off my shoes, which were like bricks anchoring me to the bottom of the pool. I could hear the shouts and cries before I even broke the surface. Raimundo was walking back into the house, leaving a trail of water on the carpet behind him. Cristóbal was lying quiet on the ground, his face slick with blood. I hung back in the water; it felt warm and somehow protective.

Cristóbal Urquidi was alive. Raimundo Baeza had known exactly what he was doing, even in his moment of madness. He had straddled Cristóbal's chest, waiting until he regained consciousness. When he did, Baeza took his two immense thumbs and pressed them as hard and as deep as he could into Cristóbal's eyes until they burst from their sockets. I never heard the sound that it made, but Florencia told me later that she'd never be able to forget it.



The road connecting the capital with the coast is short and, in general, an easy drive. I like it and know it well. I wrote my engineering thesis about this road, which is why every bridge and curve is utterly familiar to me. It's since been expanded into a four-lane highway, and without breaking any laws, you can reach Valparaíso in an hour and forty minutes.

The country has changed a lot in a very short time—this much is true—but there are certain customs that refuse to disappear. Like making a quick stop along the way to rest and eat something. The most well-known and legendary of all the spots along the route is a low stone building that calls itself an inn. During the winter, smoke is always seeping from the chimney, and inside eucalyptus logs pop and crackle in the hearth's flames.

It's barely six in the evening, and I'm returning from a drizzly walk along the beach with Simón, my son, who's just turned ten. It's a watershed age, and a fairly uncomfortable one at that, when you don't know if what you've got in front of you is a boy with a dream or a cynical soon-to-be adolescent who's going to start challenging you at every turn. Simón and I were exploring the central shoreline while Florencia was studying for an exam. She's finishing up her doctorate, and when the schoolwork gets too overwhelming, Simón and I pack up and head out for a while, leaving her alone. It's best for all three of us. She'll miss us eventually, and Simón and I get a chance to talk man to man.



We had been at the inn for barely five minutes when I saw him come in. The waiter hadn't yet brought us our order, and Simón was getting impatient. Outside, night had fallen. It was raining, the place was practically empty, and Raimundo Baeza looked exactly as he did the last time I saw him on that one December night some eleven years before.

Over time, I've discovered that I have a somewhat unusual quality. I can sense the imminent appearance of someone whom I have no interest in seeing. It's like a sense of smell or early-warning radar. I could be walking down the sidewalk when—all of a sudden and without knowing why—I decide to cross over to the other side of the street. Later I realize that, thanks to this instinctive maneuver, I avoided bumping into someone undesirable.

If you're not careful, you can bump into a lot of people.

Maybe that's why—because of this ability of mine—I was so surprised to see Raimundo Baeza come in and sit down at the table next to mine. He wasn't alone; a woman was with him—a girl, really—perhaps twenty-two years old. Husband and wife, maybe, because I noticed that they were both wearing rings, and that there was a young baby sleeping in a stroller. I'm sure Raimundo recognized me—I stared at him more than I wanted to, and eventually he met my gaze—and for a moment I saw the same look in his eyes that I'd seen that night by the pool. But he simply feigned a look of ignorance. I know this—I'm sure of it—because I too know what it takes to stand right in front of someone and still do everything you can to avoid him. Baeza took off his sport coat and turned away. The waiter came up to them, and I heard the woman ask—in a foreign accent—for a glass of water.

Simón caught me staring and asked if I knew the man.

"Years ago," I explained. "Before you were born."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

What I said next was the pure and honest truth, if not the whole truth. I told Simón that—once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away—he'd been a classmate of mine, and that both Simón's mother and aunt had known him, too. But that was all I said. I paid the check on our way out and left our order on the table, slowly cooling in the night air.

SANTIAGO



How Time Flies

It's snowing. The night's snow is falling over Virginia, Maryland, and the small yet rarefied District of Columbia. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. *El Día de Acción de Gracias*. Nobody is left at the International Monetary Fund; the building is empty. They've all gone home to their families. I don't have a family, or anyone to thank. Or maybe I do: I've been here for twelve years now, at this same job. Should I be thankful? Twelve years is a long time. Too long. If I'm not running away, then what? Staying fixed, hitting pause, is also a means of escape. This is not my country, though perhaps it once was. Perhaps now it's my son's country, though I'm starting to feel that he's no longer mine.

Once, drunk at a party, I told some guy I despised that I had outgrown Chile. Instead of insulting him directly, I insulted his country. Which is also mine. In all these years that I've lived away, buffeted by the good and the bad that comes with being stateless, I've found two certainties: nobody leaves their country *just because* (people don't leave, they flee, they escape, they run), and when someone decides to speak poorly of their country of origin, it's because they hate themselves and—usually—they don't even know it.

Yes, twelve years. Plus that exchange year in John Cougar Mellencamp, Indiana. The best year of my life? Maybe. At the very least, 1981 was my favorite year, the year I had the most sex. Plus, I was young. When you're young you see things in another light. Or, more precisely, you don't see things at all. You feel a lot and do a lot, but you neither see nor think. The gringos found me exotic, Latin, cool. Will I ever be cool again? I was the FES, the Foreign Exchange

Student, the new plaything, and it was better than being in high school in 1980s Santiago.

Just a young Latin American kid living as hard as he can.

Shit, how time flies. Where the hell does it go? And why does it leave so little?

There was a time when I thought that all that partying would make me a better person. The theory was simple and easy to put into practice: the more chicks you conquered, the more you drank and flirted, the more records you listened to, and the skinnier you were, the better. First you achieve your goal. Victory is gauged by the number of guys who envy you and want to be like you. But you can never really win. The best you can hope for is a tie.

The other thing that's false—a despicable lie—is that bouts of happiness in life will protect you in the future. False. Life isn't a savings account. Nothing lasts forever. Memories are fucking overrated.

The snow continues to fall, and I am still at my desk.

Yesterday I did something unthinkable. I quit my job at the Fund and canceled my lease. I called Goodwill and donated everything I owned, which wasn't much. I'll stay in a hotel tonight—the one across from the White House. Tomorrow I leave, and leave behind this world that never really was mine in the first place. My sister Constanza is getting married in a couple of days, and I accepted her invitation. Luke Skywalker wrote to tell me that if I wasn't going to the class reunion, then he wasn't going to go either. "I can't, man. I'm too afraid of bumping into her."

Plus, in Santiago it's sunny. Spring has given way to summer.

My arrival is going to surprise them, but I'm the one who is surprised.

It is snowing tonight in the capital of the Empire; snowing on the homes of the bureaucrats and the diplomats and other government employees. It's snowing tonight in Washington, and finally I am leaving.

DOVE HUNTING

I watch the flat screen facing my seat. The air show. Our plane has already left American airspace, and now we're flying over the exquisitely blue Caribbean, whose countries—so hospitable—are never able to pay back their international loans.

They turn off the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign.

I get up and walk toward the bathrooms in the back. The plane is practically empty except for a compact group of some fifty middle-aged men who are . . . well, they look like hunters. Some are reading brochures labeled "Hunting in South America," and many are dressed in camouflage jackets. A chubby one wearing a cap and vest, as if he were a war reporter, is standing in the galley.

"Howdy," I say. I always liked this greeting, having picked it up in Indiana.

"Howdy," the guy says after flashing me a smile that reveals a mouth full of big, perfect teeth that are the same, clayish color as his hair.

"Flying down to Chile?"

"Nope. We change planes there. We're all going down to Córdoba."

He pronounces the name *kor-DOH-ba*, with the accent in the middle. He speaks with a southern redneck twang, and I notice his eyes have aged more than his peeling, weathered skin.

"Córdoba, Argentina?"

"Yeah, Argentina is really cheap now."

Don't I know. The devaluation hit me close to home. Meetings and meetings until three in the morning, and for

what? Once, in Buenos Aires, my car was attacked by a mob of people calling us “profiteers.” My bosses were shocked; I considered the possibility that the picketers were correct, but kept my mouth shut.

“You hunt too?” he asks.

“No, no. I’m just going home. I’m going back.”

“To Argentina?”

“No, to Chile.”

He tells me that Córdoba is the world capital of dove hunting. I thought that it was the world capital of the sweet treat alfajor. I learn that there are some twenty million birds cleaving the skies surrounding the city, and that even on a bad day a hunter can squeeze off 1,500 shots. Near the mountains, he tells me, there are ranches that cater entirely to foreign predators.

Only in the United States—more than any other place in the world—can you walk down the street or go into stores like Wal-Mart and PayLess and find faces like this one. You only see them in the U.S. Poverty exists all over the world—in some places more than others, obviously—but these American faces are the ones that scare me the most: jaws distended from so much talking to oneself, eyes bulging from watching TV so much.

RICH LITTLE KIDS FROM POOR COUNTRIES

I studied business administration for two years in Chile. Then I left to go study English at an institute, after which I worked as a guide in Patagonia. I met a lot of people there, including Antonia. We went to Yale together. Or she did, let's say. I accompanied her. I spent five years with Antonia in New Haven before everything went to shit. She wanted her Ph.D., but I . . . I didn't know what I wanted. I know it's chauvinistic, but it's easier for a woman to play the role of homemaker than a man. Especially if he's insecure. You'd have to be very, very secure in your masculinity to endure that, and I wasn't. I'd never felt unintelligent before in my life, but at Yale I felt downright stupid. Small-time. Inferior. She and all her friends studying while I would go to the supermarket or do various chores (like taking care of Baltasar). At night, I wanted to go out drinking or see a band. You can lust and laugh and make love on Sunday mornings, eat in ethnic restaurants and take all those damn trains into New York—all that's great, yeah—but when you're infected by the twin viruses of resentment and paranoia, none of that is worth a thing. Not a thing. Two people who don't know what they want make better couples than those where only one of them does. She had goals, and imagined herself standing at the finish line. Apparently, so could Jonathan Bradley, her golden-boy classmate. Who was it that said opposites attract? Sure, they do attract, but that's it. They don't understand each other. I wanted to smoke a joint after dinner and she wanted to read *The New Yorker*. In the end, Antonia graduated with honors while I—and I don't know how—ended up living in Cleveland for six months. Until I went back to

Santiago. After a short while—and thanks to my mother's contacts (she's the one who has them)—the whole Bank thing emerged.

Some guys have all the luck; some guys have all the pain.

How I came to hate those rich little Latin kids who wander across America, who poison the hallways of international organisms, who infect the elevators with their Carolina Herrera and Oscar de la Renta perfumes and colognes. Next to them, Antonia seemed like an upper-middle-class girl. There's nothing worse than rich people from poor countries: they're the most solitary, disconnected, and sad people on the planet. International Latin trash, scared of their own places of origin. I close my eyes and see that plague: with their silk shirts or stiletto heels, their strange necklaces and sunglasses, obsessed with the latest hip TV series, knowledgeable about everything and nothing, who remember their grandmothers' desserts and preglobalization traditions while they swill their damn cosmopolitans and gossip and chat in their fucking perfect English while planning their getaway to San Pedro Sula, Baranquilla, Maracaibo, or Cochabamba for the upcoming holiday.

I should know. I married one of them. After Antonia. Gisela Sánchez Torrealba studied at Georgetown and lived—actually, she owned it—in a house that looked out over the steps that descended down onto M Street. The steps from *The Exorcist*, of course. We met at her embassy, not mine. When you own half of Guatemala and can land on your own airstrip, it's easy to return to your country. Of course, people like that never stay long. They quickly begin to feel foreign, alien, strange—and it's easier to feel those things in a country that's not your own.

A PLACE IN THE WORLD

I see her under a giant tree. She's just an extra in an enormous photo from some fashion magazine. Its name, I see, is *SCL*.

Just like the airport.

Just like me.

Santiago Camus Letelier. Just *SCL*. And, no, there's no connection. I don't have anything to do with *those* Leteliers. In Washington, it's not easy to be Chilean and have that name. Plus, Sheridan Circle is located directly opposite our embassy. Luckily, in the U.S. you tend to use just one surname. Nobody can compensate for their middle name by arguing that his or her mother had a better one. You are what you are.

I turn back to the photo: it looks set up, choreographed. The section heading is "Social Life." It still exists, I see. Why do those people, with their glasses in their hands, look into the distortion lens? Why are they posing? So that we can all see them? So we can feel envy in not being there with them?

I would have liked to be there. To be a part of that open-air party. To be at that event with her. But what is she doing there? Why is she looking off to the side? Why is she alone, distant, distracted, different?

This, the truth, escapes me; I've expected many things of this trip, but I never expected to see her again. Especially at this altitude (and at this point), having reached our cruising speed and flying south over the immense equatorial night.

I look back at her face. I look back at Lorenza Garcés.

Lorenza Garcés—what were you doing at that party? Why didn't you look at the camera? Is it because you didn't want to pose? Or maybe you didn't even want to be in the magazine?

Lorenza—long time no see. A long, long time.

Lorenza Garcés—a strong name for a sweet girl. Girl? Woman. Of course she's a woman now. Yet I go on unchanged: a boy (a guy) in search of his place in the world. Everyone else has found theirs, but I lost mine by going out in search of it.

Lesson One: it is not necessary to travel the world in order to find your place in it.

Lesson Two: you don't have to experience the world in order to know the world.

Lesson Three: what good is knowing the world if you don't have a place in it?

GIVE ME A REASON

“You’ve got it made,” my brother Jonás once told me as we stood on the World Trade Center terrace. He was visiting; it was his first trip to the U.S., back when they still granted visas and didn’t humiliate people at the airports.

Why are you here? Why did you come? What do you want? When will you leave?

We met up in Manhattan, and walked all over the place. I paid for everything. I remember that we saw The Who’s *Tommy*, which wasn’t as good as the video we had back in Santiago. We went to a gallery exhibiting works by Claudio Bravo; they all seemed too expensive to us, and my brother mentioned that he’d prefer to have photos, that that wasn’t art. He explained to me that Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim was built before the Dos Caracoles de Lyon con Providencia. In a smallish bar near NYU we saw the bespectacled Lisa Loeb, who reminded me instantly of a girl who I went out with a lot in Santiago. I’d had three shots of rum, and Jonás and I had split a joint that we’d bought off a dirty, shady-looking character in Washington Square Park. Lisa Loeb started to sing, and I remembered then how I’d wanted to ask that bookish girl to marry me and how we both avoided the subject until there wasn’t any subject left to avoid. All in all, it was my fault, but that doesn’t make things any better.

There are so many things that you don’t do out of fear, but when the fear is gone, you find there’s nothing left to do.

“You’re here for the money,” my brother told me up on the Trade Center terrace. It was very cold, and steamy

breath escaped his lips as he spoke. "You can never go somewhere for the money. You can for love, for sex, for drugs, for power—I don't know—because those things hound you and will imprison and torture you . . . you can go for any of those things, but not because you've got 'a good job.' "

"Don't talk to me about my feelings, okay?"

"You don't have any feelings. You've never gone back. Never. Not in nine years . . . nine years! Give me one reason—but make it a reason that I'll believe—why you live here. Okay? So why is it?"

"I travel a lot. The damn IMF sends me everywhere. It was never my intention."

"Everything's either an intention or an opportunity."

"It's not like I escaped or lost myself. I write, I call, I invite people to visit. I went all over the Carolinas with Mom, as far as Savannah. We even went to see the graveyard from *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*."

"Did you take any pictures to prove it?"

"I took the old man all over Washington. Saw all the monuments. We had spider crabs for lunch in Annapolis."

"You're a saint, Santiago. A real saint."

"No, but . . . they're points in my favor."

"You're kidding, *boludo*."

"Don't talk like an Argentine, okay?"

"You're kidding."

GENERAL INFORMATION

Santiago is located in the country's so-called Zona Central, some 1,780 feet above sea level, though the city's "high neighborhood" actually sits even higher up. (*Many people think that it's so named because that's where all the rich people live, and of course they do, but technically the city begins to slope upwards starting at Plaza Italia.*) Santiago del Nuevo Extremo is some 1,275 miles south of Peru, and is 1,950 miles north of Punta Arenas, which is the southernmost city on Earth. (*Actually, it's not much more than a large town.*) The Pacific Ocean is barely sixty miles to the west, while the majestic Andes are practically part of the city itself and can be seen from any of its neighborhoods. (*This happens something like three days out of the year, after one of those storms that drenches everything. On one of these days, the city is perhaps the most beautiful on Earth, but the rest of the year you feel like you're living in a bowl of lentil soup: the smog won't even let you see the San Cristóbal, let alone the damn mountains.*)

Santiago has a mild climate, and the average temperature is around 58 degrees. In the summer, it can reach as high as 90, though the thermal oscillation can be twenty degrees. On the coldest day of winter, the temperature can drop a couple degrees below freezing, with a maximum interval of eight degrees. (*You're freezing all day.*) Annual precipitation runs about fourteen inches. (*Though I think it's more; the weather has changed a lot in some parts of the country.*)

The official language is Spanish (*the accent, though, is literally gross, a little embarrassing, to tell the truth; it's actually absurd that people who consider themselves civilized should have such a pathetic accent. We speak, with no doubt, the worst Span-*

ish in the world. According to a very beautiful Colombian I once dated, we are “the Australians of the Spanish language” because we butcher Cervantes’ tongue in the same way the kangaroos and the koalas butcher Shakespeare’s.).

Santiago’s—and the country’s—clocks run as follows:

In winter: four hours behind GMT.

In summer: three hours behind GMT.

(The mother of an attorney friend of mine once spent the summer in Nantucket, and was shocked to find out that, for half the year, we share the same time zone as the eastern U.S. She’d always thought that we were “much further behind.”)

The Aeropuerto Internacional Comodoro Arturo Merino Benitez (SCL; alias *Pudahuel*) is about ten miles west of downtown Santiago. There is a bus service (approx. \$1.30) as well as official taxis (approx. \$16).

Chile’s country code is (56). Santiago’s city code is (2). In the city, if you want to call a cell phone from a fixed-line phone, you have to dial (09) and then the number. Outside the city, if you’re making a similar call, you have to punch in (56-9) first. To call another country from Chile, you have to enter a three-digit key, which can vary depending on the carrier you subscribe to. There are many companies, and they’re always offering great new promotions. Telecommunications services in Chile are exceptional. Internet cafés are all over the central region, if perhaps not in as great numbers as in other Latin American countries.

Santa Lucía hill, right in the city center, is a historic monument. This little mound—today converted into an exuberant park (*and a sexual grotto, a sort of open-air motel*)—is the height of an eighteen-story building that rises in the middle of Alameda. It was at the foot of this craggy formation—baptized Huelén after the Indians of the region—that the conquistador Pedro de Valdivia founded the city on February 12, 1541 (*exactly 424 years before me*).

Due to its amazing geographic situation, Santiago is one of the few capitals on earth where the ski resorts (only

thirty miles up the mountain) and the beaches (sixty miles west) are so close to each other. You can do both activities in a single day. (*When did that ever happen? I haven't met a single person who ever went skiing in the morning and then turned around to go for a dip in the sea that afternoon; plus, our beaches are horribly cold and violent; we don't have decent spots like they do in Brazil or Mexico.*) Also, just outside the city lie the world-famous vineyards where the delicious Chilean wines are produced. (*They're not bad, actually, but the real reason that Chilean wines are famous is because they're cheap: not bad for the price.*)

Chile's population runs about 15 million inhabitants, of which some 5.5 million consider themselves *santiaguinos*. (*It could be more, but the fact is that we're a disenchanting lot. And on top of all this, when I think of Santiago I think of the neighborhoods I know and inhabit; it's not that I miss San Miguel, the land of Los Prisioneros or Peñalolén; I don't think that this shows me to be lame or insensitive, and I'd be willing to bet that a native of Cerro Navia or Quinta Normal or Avenida Matta or—I don't know—La Florida doesn't feel attached to communities like Vitacura, Maipú, San Bernardo, or—God forbid—La Dehesa; shit, I've never gone to Chicureo, where many of my former classmates now live; to me, even La Reina would be a completely unknown world if it weren't for the Casamilá disco where I was a regular, it occurs to me that when someone—wherever they may be—thinks of Santiago, he thinks of the neighborhood he lives in, the one he grew up in, the area where he went to high school or college, plus the downtown area, and—for a while—the closest mall; this, then, is Santiago; for me, Santiago is Providencia and the El Golf sector, and Vitacura, plus parts of Ñuñoa; that, for me, is Santiago, nothing more and nothing less; those who say that the whole city is their city—that they love places they've never been and call communities they've never seen a part of their own—need to stop lying or go to hell; I know that it would be more romantic to remember the shops in those narrow little streets near the Cementerio General, how we would buy*

bread from doña Audelia on Santos Durmont Street, and how my friends and I would sneak into the Hipodrómo Chile, but the honest truth is that none of that ever happened to me; annoying, perhaps, but that's how it is.)

The Metro service is excellent and features stops near all the major tourist attractions.

SOCIAL LIFE

I took the fact that I came across her face (her face, her lips, those eyes, that hair, and her soul) as a sign, a crystal-clear signal. It was so evident—so patently obvious—that it was just like something in a romantic movie.

Why don't they make romantic comedies in Latin America? Why does everything have to be either drama, melodrama, or a soap? Or comedy, broad and vulgar, local and easy?

Seeing Lorenza Garcés after so much time is destiny's design. This is no accident. How else am I to understand it?

I turn back to the magazine and try to read an article about a cool *rockero* who hates record companies and doesn't care about sales, but I find myself flipping back to the "Social Life" section, to the photo, to Lorenza.

The photo was surely taken in the Parque Forestal. You can see the museum. It looks like a well-attended party. Looking slightly moved (as is the style nowadays), a group of girls made up like the actresses from TV-Abierta smile excitedly. Behind the immense tree, near the D.J. and the edge of the page, my eyes zoom in on a particular detail: there, between the bushes and lit up by a spotlight, is Lorenza Garcés, walking a dog (which you can't see) and looking distractedly at something off-camera.

I dog-ear the page and stow it in my bag.

Lorenza Garcés.

I can't believe I'm thinking about Lorenza Garcés again.

BORDERLINE

A couple of years ago—maybe three—I was in Peru on business when I caught a plane to Tacna and from there took a taxi to Arica. I spent two days there. Alone. I read all the papers and bought all the magazines. I walked along the beaches. I went in Falabella. I bought a Mejoral in a Farmacia Ahumada. I slept a lot in Chile. It's easier to sleep when you're in your place. I'd fall asleep watching television. I'd listen to commentaries given by Pedro Carcuro, Julio Martínez, and Italo Passalacqua. Here they were, on live TV, saying the same things they always did. And it was strange, because just as I was about to insult them and criticize the provincial sense of confinement you get when faced with things that never change, I suddenly felt that my voice was faltering and that my vision was growing blurry.

FAMILY SITCOM

INT. A Vitacura home. A "Pereira Law" type of home. Night.

MOTHER

Where are you going to sleep,
Santi? In a hotel?

SCL

No, here. Can I?

MOTHER

Of course, it's your house.

SCL

Not anymore.

MOTHER

Yes it is. A son is always
welcome in his mother's
house. You can stay here till
you're eighty.

SCL

I'm hoping that won't be
necessary.

MOTHER

When are you off?

SCL

I just got here and you're
already kicking me out . . .

MOTHER

Ay, Santi. That's not it.
We're happy. What a won-
derful surprise! I was just
asking so I'd know, so I
could plan ahead.

(continued)

SCL

Two or three weeks. I'd like to stay for Christmas. I've been dreaming of a warm and sweaty Christmas. With a pool, and mazard cherries and ice cream. You have no idea how horrible Christmas is when it's all icy and white.

(Silence.)

MOTHER

Your room is exactly as you left it. I just changed the sheets, that's all.

SCL

Exactly the same? Are you serious?

MOTHER

Yes, I didn't poke around or touch anything at all.

SCL

But I didn't die, Mom. When kids die, their parents leave their rooms untouched. Didn't you ever see *Ordinary People*? It's about a family that loses a son.

MOTHER

I don't watch movies where they kill the children. I can't stand them. Anyway, if you had died, I would have donated all your things to the Hogar del Cristo. But I knew that you were coming back, and when you did I didn't want you to get upset because you couldn't find your favorite jacket. When

(continued)

your brother Jonás got sick, then, yes, he stayed in your room. I hope that's all right with you. He likes to act all independent, but when he catches a cold, he hops in a taxi and sets himself up here. He knows that we'll take good care of him, that mama's boy.

SCL

Why doesn't he use his own?

MOTHER

We remodeled it. Anyway, it's my room now. I sleep in there.

SCL

What?

FATHER

My birthday will mark the first anniversary. That was my gift to myself for my sixty-fifth: to stop sleeping with this old lady.

(FATHER laughs and hugs MOTHER)

SCL

But why?

FATHER

What do you mean, why? Because I wanted to be able to watch TV late, to read until four A.M., to hog the covers, and so she wouldn't complain when I let a fart rip.

(continued)

MOTHER

Ay, gordo, don't be so gross!

FATHER

As if I'm the only one who
ever farts around here.

SCL

Why didn't you tell me?

FATHER

Why would we have told you?
There are plenty of things
that you've never told us.

SCL

Because it sounds like
something important, right?

MOTHER

It's nothing, Santiago. Just
because you've been
separated twice doesn't mean
that we're going to do it,
love. We have our own
bedrooms now, that's all.

FATHER

And when one of us gets to
feeling a little frisky, we
go down to the other's room
and...

SCL

Dad, stop, I don't want to
know.

MOTHER

Santiago, I left a pair of
your father's pajamas for
you to wear if you didn't
bring any.

SCL

Thanks, Mom, but I don't wear
pj's.

MOTHER

Oh no! I may be your mother, but I won't have you walking around with your bits and pieces dangling. You're going to have to wear something.

SCL

I wasn't exactly thinking about prancing naked through the kitchen.

MOTHER

And what if there's a quake? At least they're there. You never know.

SCL

Okay, Mom. Thanks.

MOTHER

It's wonderful to have you back, Santi. You never should have gone.

FATHER

Everyone leaves at some point, woman. The important thing is that he's come back home. And I'll bet that he's not going to just take off again as easily as that.

SCL

We'll see. Thanks for everything, Mom.

MOTHER

That's what I'm here for. Goodnight, my love.

SCL

Goodnight.

THE TRANSITION

My uncle Tomás says that Chile isn't the same anymore. "This has not been a transition but rather a transversion," he says grudgingly. "In the end, Pinochet won, and he's still in charge."

My father maintains that this country is only for the strong.

"And the elderly," replies my sister Paula, who is twice divorced.

"Before, the country was more about solidarity," insists my uncle.

"That may be," says my brother Jonás, the architect, "but now it's more tolerant. It's better to be a tolerant egoist than an intolerant loyalist."

I notice that Jonás has gotten tattoos on his arms. His eyes are red and glassy.

My mother offers me some more of the three-bean salad and tells everyone that we need to think positively.

Mateo, a cousin of mine who works for a multinational corporation, tells me to try the wine, as it's from a very exquisite vineyard.

"Huh?"

"An emergent vineyard," he corrects himself. "They're all new vintages. And all the rage these days, too. You've got to try this syrah."

My sister Amelia, who is going to remain a virgin until her wedding night, asks if anyone wants to go with her to Home Depot.

"*Home Store*," corrects my mother. "These days they call it the *Home Store*."

Julián, my soccer-playing cousin, comes to pick me up. We drive the full length of the avenue, deep into the heart of Vitacura, with all its neon signs and pubs and billboards that remind me of the Oklahoma City suburbs.

"This is so cool, man," he says. "We're gonna have such a great time."

We're on our way to a birthday party for one Toby Zárate, who now plays soccer for the Universidad Católica. There are a lot of bleached-blond girls around, he informs me, who are quasi-famous and who appear in some of the trashier tabloids. My cousin is one of the few blond soccer players out there, which situates him in a rather privileged spot. His aunt and my mother save all of his press clippings. Julián has been on the covers of both *Caras* and *Cosas*, two magazines that have no time for soccer. He says that his level of fame is of a different species from that of these girls.

"If I were to fuck them, then their status would rise, but the bad part is that mine would go down," he explains. "That's why I only go out with chicks that nobody knows. So the paparazzi don't fuck with me."

The spot is called Pancho's (or Juancho's), and photos of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe hang on the calabash-colored walls. They serve me a drink. In the back, a group of dot-com nerds are celebrating something.

"Can I get you something?" asks a girl with dreadlocks and small, spectacularly green eyes.

"I'll take an Absolut and cranberry," I say, recalling Silvana, the Colombian woman from Foggy Bottom.

"What?"

"Un Absolut con jugo de arándano."

"Huh?"

"Um . . . an Absolut and tonic, then," I say.

"We don't have Absolut."

My cousin tells me to remember where I am. "Why would you order some foreign shit?" he asks. "We're in Chile. Think about it. Ask for pisco, *huvón*. Pisco rules. Pure Piscology. They asked me to do the commercial, but I chose the one for Hass Avocados instead. I guess they think athletes don't drink alcohol."

"The avocado commercial is just as nice," says the girl who's been listening in on the conversation. "I eat so much more avocado now. I swear, it used to make me think I had high cholesterol, when that wasn't the case at all."

"You see?" says my cousin, proud.

"Give me a pisco and Coke," I say, which reminds me of my old days.

"Regular or diet?"

"The pisco?"

"The Coke."

"Regular, that's fine."

My cousin smiles and says, "That's what I like about you, Santiago. You can adapt. Although this joint, *huvón*, has changed more than anything."

"For better or for worse?"

"For better, cuz. For better."

Toby Zárate makes his triumphal entrance. His hair has blond highlights, and the whole team from the local U. is following him in. The blond girls shriek.

I sip my drink. The same, even after twenty years. And it tastes good, I think to myself.

Welcome to Santiago, Santiago. It's missed you.

Salud.

Salud.

THE FORCE IS NOT WITH ME

I meet up with Lucas Walker, alias Luke Skywalker. He's less blond than Mark Hamill, though in those days he seemed more blond than he really was because he seemed to shine with some sort of internal light. Because of that, Lucas Walker was always first in line and we felt honored to follow him. Now, on the other hand, his batteries seem to be running low. I was watching *I Love the 70s* on VH-1 the other day when I saw an interview that Mark Hamill gave; he seemed run-down and tired. Luke, despite his faltering light, still looks frightfully young. It's as if his body convinced itself that it could go on being twenty.

Lucas Walker was born twelve years before *Star Wars* made its debut. Before that historic day, everyone called him Lucas, or sometimes Lucky Duck. But in 1978, Lucas Walker's luck changed: puberty appeared and found him ready to be made into God. Some nicknames come with extra baggage, with a past or a destiny. Then there are those that destroy you and drag you down like the black cloud that permanently encircles the head of Bad Luck. If everyone starts calling you Luke Skywalker, then it's worth your while to start acting like a hero.

"I knew it," Walker says after observing the slippery bottle of olive oil that they set down on the table. "It's made out of corn."

Lucas pours a bit of the pale oil onto a plate and dabs his fingers in it. "Look . . . it has no body, and it's rough. Fine olive oil can't have the consistency of white benzene, or even the slightest hint of a metallic taste."

We're in a popular steakhouse called Eladio. It's the

sort of restaurant where people prefer the quantity of food over its quality. The place is immense, and the ambient noise is such that the awful music that's piped in over the house speakers doesn't let you hear a thing.

"You chose the spot," I say.

"Yeah, because it's cheap. And I don't have much these days."

Luke continues to inspect the oil, and eventually leans his nose in over the plate and inhales.

"What do you smell?" he asks me.

"Nothing."

"A good oil has to have an aroma. Mine smells like a summer's morning."

"And what does a summer's morning smell like?"

"Depends on who you spent the previous night with," he says before cracking up.

Lucas lives in Ovalle, in the Cuarta Región, but he comes to Santiago every so often. He has a two-room apartment in a giant building on Avenida Colón and is a partner in an organic olive-oil bottling company. He says he still has yet to put the pedal to the metal but that he's sure things'll be taking off very soon.

"Olive oil will be the new wine," he proclaims as a way of changing the subject.

"If you say so . . ."

"Believe it. The trendiest and most expensive restaurants offer *our* oil. I'll send a few bottles over to your house."

Luke Skywalker is dressed like a local cowboy, in boots and a straw hat. His skin is red from the desert sun. In school, Walker was my best friend, but we fell out of touch. Our friendship was rekindled some ten years later when I randomly bumped into him at an outlet store near Miami. He was with his wife and young son. I was just passing through, on a layover before continuing on to Haiti and the Guayanas. We got together that night for a few daiquiris at the Cuban-owned Versailles, on Calle Ocho. I picked him up at melon-colored hotel on Ocean Drive where his wife, a freckly girl,

told me that she'd always wanted to meet me. Walker told me that upon his return to Orlando his wife was going to be leaving him for one of his colleagues from work. This was the goodbye trip, which they had set up so that their son would have a good memory of it. They had even promised themselves that they'd take a photo with Mickey, and that they would all be smiling.

"They always say that having a kid will change your life," Luke says as he chews on a piece of meat. The mini-grill warms the atmosphere. "They say that people with children are more stable and look at life differently. But it's a myth that kids make you grow, make you more stable, help you reach your potential. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think there's such a thing as paternal instinct?"

"All I know is that I don't have it."

"I don't believe in it. Or wait . . . yeah . . . maybe I do. I think that the instinct grows with time. Eventually you realize that if you don't get involved and engage yourself in your kid's life, then the poor *huevo*n is going to become something suspiciously like you."

"I've never thought about it, Luke."

"You should. How long has it been since you saw him . . . ?"

"A long time. Yeah, a *long* time. His mother and I decided that the best thing would be for him to have another father and for me to no longer be a part of his life. So I vanished."

"And is he no longer a part of your life?"

"Nope."

"Children, if they're with you, *compadre*, they change your life. They intensify it. But if they aren't a part of your life—even if you see them on Sundays—then they fuck it up. You wake up every day feeling like you're missing something, and that's the truth: you're missing a part of yourself."

I push my plate of steak with tomato and avocado to

the side. I've lost my appetite. The heat coming off the coals is intense, and I realize then that my shirt is damp with sweat.

"Everything went to shit. Everything, *huevoón*, went to shit. If I'd have known that this is how it was all going to turn out, I would have prepared myself for it. Do you think that the good old days were all that much better?"

"No. Or maybe it's that . . . no. I think the old days were actually *worse*."

"I don't. But sometimes I do. Then sometimes not."

"Which is it, yes or no?"

"I don't know, Santiago. I really don't. For a while now I don't get it. Strange. Before I thought I knew everything."

Walker, with whom I've been in touch via email since 1998 (when email really got up and running), doesn't want to go to the class reunion. The class has never gotten together before. We skipped the tenth year, and now they all want to celebrate the big two-oh.

"I hate all of them anyway, and . . ."

"And what?"

"You think that Pilar Ahumada will go?"

"I guess. She was part of our class. An important part, I'd say."

"Yeah, vital."

"I think that *I'll* go. Everyone will, Walker. They'll play all the old songs from our day, and we'll all dance."

"*Our day?* What are you talking about, 'our day'? Was it ours? Why isn't our time now?"

"It's just a figure of speech . . ."

"There's this radio station I listen to . . . it's called 'Retro Wave.' And they're always saying, *the music from the best years of your life*. And, I don't know, sometimes it makes me think . . . because you have a lot of time to yourself to think when you're driving down those country roads and . . . sometimes I think they're right. I don't think it will get any better. What do you think?"

"Yeah, that's what I think. Or that's what I hope. Yeah."

"You're so naïve."

"I'm an optimist. If I'm gonna stumble, it's gonna be because I go through life as an optimist rather than being a guy who thinks everything sucks."

"I don't hope anymore."

"Hope's the last thing you lose."

"Maybe, but these days it's the first thing to go. Plus, I think you and I are different types. Maybe you just never had an experience that was so . . . so good. You never had a Pilar Ahumada, Santiago. When you meet someone, and get to know them, and have a bond, a relationship, a love with someone like Pilar, after that everything else is downhill."

"You're exaggerating," I say, slightly moved by his ingenuous romanticism. "I think you're pushing it a little. Life isn't really like it's portrayed in the movies, Luke."

"I wish it were. Things would be better."

"Anyway, I had Lorenza Garcés. Remember her?"

"Yeah. Whatever happened with that? Why did you two split up?"

"I don't remember, but I think she broke up with me. We didn't last too long. But ever since I've arrived, I haven't stopped thinking about her."

"Look her up. Though . . . one should never fall in love with an old classmate. You were lucky not to."

"Great. So at least *you* won't have that problem anymore."

"You think I'm never gonna fall in love? Do I really seem that pathetic to you?"

"No, Luke. I just think that you're never going to be her classmate again."

"We'll always be in the same class. You never really graduate. Your class is your class for life. That's why I don't know if I'll go. I don't dare."

"It'll be fun. Plus, you'll be the youngest one of us."

"Shit, I didn't turn out to be what they thought I'd be."

"Who cares? All that matters is what you think of yourself."

"I feel the same way: I didn't become what I wanted to

become. Do you think this is what I wanted? I had something else in mind. Strange. I swear, there was this one moment—when I was with Pilar—where I thought I was gonna do it.”

“But nobody ever really manages to do it.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. There aren’t many—I’ll grant you that—but there’s enough of ’em to make your life look shitty. It’d be a lot better if we could just forget the past and stop feeling envy. Fuck, then things would be a lot easier.”

“The best way to erase the past is by going. That’s how all this shit simply becomes the present. Look—I happened to look you up, and now we’re hanging out. You’ve still got two weeks left: plenty of time to mentally prepare yourself.”

“I haven’t seen her in all these years, Santiago. Not even from afar.”

“Never?”

“Never. When I called her, two months after everything happened, she answered the phone and what she said to me was so precise, and so tough, that when I hung up I knew I’d never see her or speak to her ever again. I realize that what I did was a mistake—more than that, it was criminal.”

“But how was she gonna have it at that age?”

“Listen, if she was seventeen, then she wasn’t too, too young. No, that’s not what the crime was, Santiago. The crime was that I was so scared, that I left her alone, that I didn’t contribute a thing, that I disappeared and ran off to Mendoza.”

“You fucking idiot. Listen: you forget that you were that age too. You were a pathetic asshole; you *had* to act that way. When you’re an asshole, you act like an asshole. What else could you do?”

“Do the right thing. What I did scared me, and she scared me too. Pilar didn’t break down, while I, on the other hand, did. For the first time in my life, the force was not with me. I was a kid and she was a woman, even though we were both the same age. I only just realized it then—and the worst thing was that she realized it too. Sometimes life really puts you to the test. And I failed the most important part.”

I WAS MADE FOR LOVIN' YOU

Once, years ago, walking through La Paz, Bolivia, I stopped at the door of a cyber café, looked up at the Andes, and said to myself: The sky is candlewax blue. It's exactly like you would dream it to be.

Maybe it was the song surging out of that store full of pirated software. "I Was Made for Lovin' You" floated out over the Quechua crowd that filled the steep sidewalk.

I told Robert—a colleague—that that song reminded me of my country.

"Me too," he said. "Melbourne, Australia."

"Santiago, Chile," I replied.

Flashback (clear):

Ext. Streets of Los Dominicos. Night.

I drive on down by General Blanche, from Lorenza Garcés's multistoried house down toward the Santiago valley. The sun has just recently set, and although it's not dark yet, the streetlamps have come on and the clear summer sky has taken on a reddish tinge behind the mountains separating the immense city from the other valleys, and the beach, and the memory—the scent—of Lorenza is fresh on my skin. I press down on the accelerator. Touch my flamboyant drivers' license. I'm driving an Accord. I start to head down, and just then the Kiss anthem starts up.

(Okay, okay, all this is very mid-eighties, of course, but I was eighteen, I'd just gotten back from Indiana, and my hair was long and shiny. You can't choose your neighborhood, your parents, or the age in which you live, and whatever moves you, moves you. Period.)

Up until then, the only thing I could count on totally was my total insecurity. But not that day. What I realized on that distant afternoon was that I'd never again feel so happy, feel so in control, feel so complicitous with Santiago.

I was right.

That afternoon I felt that you really could be happy in Santiago, and that each one of us establishes himself in his own city. That afternoon I felt as free as I had back in Indiana and—at the same time—felt bound, with a direction, at home.

Maybe that's why I've come back.

I've returned to the only place where I've ever felt truly happy.

EVERYBODY KNOWS EVERYBODY ELSE AROUND HERE

My sister Paula meets me in a place that I immediately like: Café Budapest, on a corner where four plazas meet; in each of them are nannies and children and teenagers in their school uniforms, and some elderly folks paired with their white-clad nurses.

She's tried to help me track down Lorenza. She thinks it's so romantic. We've used the Internet, the phone book, and her entire social network. But no luck.

Just then my sister Constanza, who's already married, comes in. She lives nearby and was out walking. Her skin is bronzed by the Anga dos Reis sun. She orders a cappuccino—the cappuccinos here aren't like the ones up north. I ask her if there's a newspaper where I could run an ad that says something like this:

WHERE ARE YOU?

I saw you in the park, at the vodka launch party. You were walking a dog. Almost everything reminds me of you. I've been all over Stgo and haven't found you. Where are you? Santiago

09-733-2115.

"I don't think so," she says. "I doubt she'd see it."

"But someone could tell her about it . . . everybody knows everybody else around here," I say.

"Santiago's big, Santiago. Santiago's endless. I don't think that everybody here knows each other. Things have changed."

My other sister adds, "Sometimes I feel like I don't know *anybody*."

My sister Paula bumped into a friend of a friend of a friend in a pharmacy. There are more pharmacies than bars in Santiago; they're open twenty-four hours a day, and they're always packed. They're like a plague. That friend is the cousin of the guy who was paired with the guy who writes the society page for a paper. He works with the photographer who took the picture in the magazine I saw on the plane. The photographer—she tells me—knows everybody.

She put us in touch electronically. We were to meet up in Santo Remedio; at first, I felt like everyone was watching me because I had gone there alone, but then I realized that it was just one of my old drunken paranoidias. I order a Jack Daniel's because I liked the promoter sheathed all in black who'd offered me a sample at the door.

Just then, Ivo, the society columnist, comes in, dressed in the height of fashion. He kisses me once on each cheek, and I gather that the local customs have changed somewhat since I've been away. Ivo asks for a demi-sec champagne and tells me that tonight is going to be intense because he's got two birthday parties, a theatrical debut, a Chilean film premiere, and a photography exhibit by a guy who normally takes pictures of his relatives—in the buff. Then he asks me if it's true that my soccer-playing cousin is indeed dating that blond girl who is a model on the Don Francisco program; I tell him that I don't know and that my cousin doesn't talk to me about his personal life.

"In my town, I was always the one who knew everything," Ivo tells me in a taxi. "I was also the only one who read Truman Capote in the plaza. My mother told me that I

was going to burn in hell for being a liar, and now she's always the first to read me. But that's people: stupid, but gullible. Thanks to all those empty-headed people, I've got me a duplex and a yellow Mini Cooper."

We get out at a place called El Toro, which is where we meet Sarita. Sarita is heavy but not immense; rather, she's "thick," which is the term for those girls who, despite being a bit plump, nevertheless have style and are able to transform that physical shortcoming into something of a registered trademark. She's wearing glasses with thick red frames and smells of Barzelatto cologne, and she speaks with the same accent as other "alternative" people.

I ask her if she's Peruvian-Bolivian-Paraguayan.

"No," she says, "what happened is that I grew up watching a lot of shows dubbed into Spanish."

Sarita knows "the whole world." Or at least she's photographed it. "This is a small city, girl," she tells me. "Tiny. We are few."

"We?"

Sarita doesn't answer, instead, she fixes up Ivo's shirt, while he's on his cell phone with a friend in Barcelona.

I ask her if she knows who Lorenza Garcés is.

"Not yet," she says. "Should I?"

GIVE SANTIAGO A LITTLE PLACE IN YOUR HEART

My brother says that the true measure of a city is not what it gives you; rather, it's what it doesn't take away.

We walk down along the Alameda. Jonás is advising a crew filming a documentary on Luciano Kulcewski, the “most cool and gothic Latin American architect” in history. Jonás knows something about the subject; his thesis will be about that man, who, during the 1930s, tried to make Santiago into the city he always wanted to live in.

“Kulcewski wouldn't accept that this city was at the end of the earth, that it was a horrible place, or that the best part about it was getting away from it. Unlike others of his generation, Kulcewski never dreamed about traveling through Europe or living far away. He bet on Santiago, Santiago. And—I don't know—that just moves me. It pisses me off that everybody knows who Gaudí is but nobody's ever heard of Kulcewski.”

I have to admit that I didn't know who he was, but in crisscrossing the city with my brother as the sun set and the so-called “magic hour” lit up that man's gothic buildings, I realize that I've always liked them even if it never occurred to me to find out who their author was.

“It's always bothered me when people attack Santiago, Jonás,” I admit, “because I always feel like they're attacking *me*.”

“That's right . . . your name is Santiago.”

“Did you just figure that out, little bro?”

“No, but . . . it's strange. I'd never thought about it like that.”

“You think it's very nice when people say things like ‘I fucking hate Santiago’ or ‘Santiago is a shit hole’?”

"Santiago isn't worth a dime."

"Exactly."

"It should be fun to have a name like Santiago. It's the only name that doubles as a city. You never hear about someone called Rio Pérez."

"Or Montevideo Acuña."

"Caracas Sánchez. Oslo Vicuña. Osaka Lozada."

"Cities work better as last names: Ulises Lima. Eugenia Paris. Ricardo Lagos. Juan Madrid."

"Jack London. The Lisbon Sisters. Juan Carlos Valdivia. Daniel Trujillo."

"Santiago Santiago. It could work."

"That's a little much, isn't it? Nicolás Santiago sounds better."

"Sydney Pollack."

"That's it. Santiago and Sydney. Two names. Of course, Sydney would be a girl," he replies.

"But the director Sydney Pollack is a man."

"Yeah, it's a unisex name, but I think it's more feminine, don't you? Sydney, Australia, is definitely a feminine city. Plus, it's got a beach."

"So women have beaches now?"

"Viña has a beach, and it's feminine," he says.

"Acapulco too. Is that a woman?"

"Yes, but it's only an average-looking one. The same with Miami."

"I don't know. That's a strange theory you've got there, Jonás."

"Anyway, the point is that not many people have the same name as their city."

"Yeah. It reminds me of an Isabel Parra song. Damn, how I hate her and her protest songs. I heard her one night in a little alternative joint called Kafe Ulm, which was right next to the Normandie Theater."

"That's another one of Kulcewski's buildings."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"That's a coincidence. Anyway, the point is that Isabel Parra comes out on stage with her guitar and starts to sing that song about Santiago. It goes, 'Santiago, you're sinking . . . you're falling to pieces, pieces.' Something like that."

"It's an easy way out, to say 'fuck this stinking city,' 'fuck this worthless town,' 'fuck this godforsaken place.' "

"That's why people grow up loving Paris, Jonás."

"Loving Paris is easy. Of course couples are gonna end up kissing along the banks of the Seine. Why doesn't anybody end up kissing by the Mapocho?"

"It's because the stork brings babies from Paris."

"I hate Paris."

"Me too. And I hate Rome, Venice, and Florence too."

"Florence makes me sick."

"Have you been there?"

"No, and I'm not going to go there, either."

"It's all old."

"It's been done."

" 'Give Santiago a Little Place in Your Heart.' You remember?"

"Every day, man, every day. That's what I sing in the shower."

"Ask not what your city can do for you," he says before we cross Irene Morales Street. "Ask what you can do for your city."

"Love it."

"Shit, that's a great first step, little bro."

I say goodbye to my brother in front of a building called La Gárgola, across from the Parque Forestal. The taxi goes on up Providencia. It occurs to me that the one big difference between a happy little town and a city is that the town will never grow big, but if you close down enough of the city, it will eventually start to resemble a small town.

I watch and reminisce as I pass by places I've passed many times before.

The San Cristobal hill, and its funicular, which I now realize is another Kulcewski work.

The snowcapped sierras lit up by the rosy afternoon sun.

The National Library.

The City Hotel.

The Las Lilas Theater, that fish market, that florist, that snack bar, that shoe-repair shop . . .

I've been to all these places before. Each and every one of them is a part of my history.

I bought a record there, I ordered a cake there, I patched my bag there, I met Lorenza Garcés there just as it started to rain.

I remember: the important thing is not what it gives you, it's what it doesn't take away.

A GREAT CITY

My mother tells me two things: since I'm going to stay, I should look for an apartment. That, and we're out of detergent.

I head for the supermarket.

I've gone over the entire city; I've linked up with roving bands and tribes, with closed circles and separate groups. And yet nobody seems to have any contact with Lorenza Garcés.

Maybe she no longer exists, maybe she left, maybe she is no more. And maybe it's better that way. The past works best when it's past.

And then I see her.

Maybe it's true what they say: that once you stop looking for something, you find it. And I found her. In a somewhat less-than-expected place, granted, but I found her. There she is.

Right in front of me.

I follow her, follow her cart, keeping well back and discreet so that nobody notices.

She looks different. She's not eighteen anymore. She's wearing an easy gray turtleneck, her hair is up, and she's wearing glasses without those thick frames. In her cart she's got boxes of dehydrated milk, kids' cereal, chocolate-covered thingies, *alfajores*, and cartons of apple, pear, and quince juice.

She turns down the dog-food aisle, but walks swiftly, without stopping to pick anything up.

She stops in the pasta section and chooses a jar of tomato sauce. In the next aisle I feel a chill as I watch her

open a refrigerator case and select the zero-grams-of-fat yogurt with chunks of papaya in it from the hundreds of available flavors.

Do I talk to her? Do I say something? What?

Now she's in the liquor section. I decide to make my move. I go up to the shelves of wines and first pick one and then two cases of white. I move over to the pisco. She walks over as well and—without thinking, without hesitation—reaches for a bottle of Capel. I reach too, as if a reflection.

She looks at me and smiles. Then she pauses when she realizes that she knows me. That we know each other.

"It's been a while," she says, smoothly.

"Yes, it has."

"Are you in town?"

"Of course."

"Living here, I mean. Or just visiting?"

"I think I'm going to stay here for a while."

We look at each other and I suddenly feel very nervous. My palms are sweating, and it's hard to hold on to the bottle. I put it in the cart.

"I've been looking for you," I say.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I saw you in a photo."

"Me? That's impossible."

"No, it was in a magazine," I explain. "In the 'Social Life' section."

"I don't have a social life. I don't have much of a life at all."

I look at her and believe her.

"Do you have a dog?"

"No. At one point we were thinking about it but right now . . . no."

"And that Mandarin party?"

"The *what* party?"

"The launch party for the new vodka? Right? The one they had in the Parque Forestal?"

"I don't get invited anywhere. I wish!"

Lorenza looks at my watch.

"I have to pick up Tomás."

"Your . . ."

"Son."

I notice she's not wearing a wedding ring.

"Can I call you?"

"Yes, of course."

She places her bottle delicately on top of two bags of sea salt.

Pause. A silence.

"I'd love to get a chance to meet your husband," I say.

"Great, so then I can also meet him!" she says, gesturing at empty space.

We both laugh, me with some relief.

"I think about you every once in a while," she says.

"Funny that we should bump into each other in this place."

"It's been some time, hasn't it?"

"It has."

"I'll give you a call and we can take it from there."

"You could come over to my house and I'll fix you something to eat."

"Does that offer come with a drink?"

"You'll have to take care of that."

"Absolutely," I say.

Lorenza jots down her number for me, laughs shyly, and walks away.

"It was good to see you, Santiago."

"Good to see you too, Lorenza. Finally."

I stand there for a moment in front of the whiskeys, a bit confused. I take out my wallet and fish out the photo from the magazine, carefully unfold it and examine it closely. Yes, there is a girl standing there between the shrubs. But it's not her. It looks like her, true; it does look like Lorenza Garcés. Like the Lorenza Garcés of my memory. The seventeen-year-old Lorenza, but it's not her.

I watch her from a distance; she's over in the milk section. She catches me looking and smiles.

It's good to be back, I think. This could turn out to be a great city.

FAR WEST



Okay, whenever you're ready, let's get started.

Great. You mind if I record?

No, not at all.

Thanks. I've learned that it's better to record these things than to try and take notes. If I'm taking notes, I can't keep eye contact.

Why would you want to do that, man?

It's just . . . it's a trust thing.

I already trust you, or else you wouldn't be here. **D** you think I would have invited you otherwise?

Um . . .

Plus, I don't know you, so it's all good. I'm only suspicious of people who know me.

I understand.

I'm not so sure, but it doesn't matter. Look, in my life I've only been screwed by people I trusted: my old man, my friends, and women. Professors too, employers and bosses. But strangers have never tried to fuck me. Not yet, anyway. I hope you don't.

You can trust me.

Trust a journalist? **D**esn't that seem a bit naïve to you?

"All of my life, I've depended on the kindness of strangers."

What?

Nothing. My girlfriend's an actress. She was in this play . . . ah never mind. Anyway, it was the last line of the play which was actually quite famous.

I wouldn't know. I don't go to the theater. I hate that

stuff. And movies too . . . there are never any good ones around here. I don't even have a TV.

You're not missing much.

My partner and I were thinking about installing SKY in the bungalows so the summer folks can watch the Festival de Viña and all that shit. Plus, our reception here sucks.

All right, enough with the chitchat. Time to get down to business. If I can coax it out of him, I'll have a hell of a story. If I can get him to tell me the half of it, I'll have half a title and a great story. I'll knock 'em dead. Paula Recart will be happy; she'll love it, maybe even make me her star reporter.

Was your drive okay?

Yeah. To be honest, I thought it'd be worse. I was surprised that the road was paved the whole way. Should we begin?

If you want.

I brought a bunch of extra tapes and batteries, so we can talk for as long as we want.

As long as *I* want. I'm the one who's gonna be talking here, not you.

Of course, Pablo, but I was thinking we could simply chat . . .

Not exactly. You ask the questions, and—if I want—I'll respond.

Yes, of course.

This isn't gonna be a conversation, *compadre*. I'm the one who's got the power here. And that's thanks to you. Thanks to you and your journalistic curiosity. So if I don't want to talk, then you're up shit creek without a paddle.

I'm not so sure about that.

Then we're done here. Nice meeting you.

That's not what this is about . . .

Then you can hit the road, Jack. You'll just have to go

back to Santiago without my voice all over your little tapes. What you want—what you need—are the details, right?

Well, I suppose . . . Well . . .

Without the details, *compradito*, you're fucked. Your little boss isn't gonna be so nice anymore . . . she'll probably fire you. ~~Doesn't~~ sound too pleasant now, does it?

No. But that's your way of looking at things. I can respect that; I just want to help . . .

You just want to help yourself, *you prick*. ~~Don't~~ play innocent with me. You might not have bad intentions, but you're not about to do me any favors, either. ~~Doing~~ good just isn't in a journalist's nature. You people always end up hurting someone.

But this story could help people. I just think that your case . . .

That's why you've spent the last two months calling and hounding and stalking me. I don't know why, but what I have to say reaches out and touches you.

Yes, of course. I don't deny that. It's a great story. You don't often come across stories as good as this.

That's what I like. I know sincerity when I see it. Show me your fangs, Félix.

Felipe. Felipe Rivas.

Lift up your worries and your dark side, Felipe Rivas. Good. You like blood; you can smell it, and you know that I infect it. There's nothing to be ashamed about.

You might be right. I'll admit it.

What you want is a good article. And I think you're going to get one. Anyway, let's see what happens.

He's right: I can't get the story without him. Usually, the person being interviewed is the one who's nervous or afraid. So why do I now feel like the one being interrogated?

Hey . . . we don't have all day, Félix.

Felipe.

That's what I meant. I surf every afternoon, Felipe. Down there. To maintain my sanity. Surfing helps you find your sense of balance, you know?

No, I don't.

Can you swim?

Yes, but I almost never do.

You should.

Now that I'm freelancing, maybe I'll have more time.

Shit—what's anything worth if you haven't got time? It's time that slips away from you; not money, not people, not things. In the end, it all comes down to time. That, *huevoón*, is what I learned in Hawaii. Have you ever been?

No.

There's nothing quite like it. Someday you're gonna have to go to Hawaii.

I watch the sea. It's gray. Cloudy. You can't see the horizon. I'm cold, but Pablo seems to be used to it. He even looks a bit sweaty. Probably just nerves. His hair—it's long—is a bit damp around his ears. But I'm changing the subject. I'm going off on a tangent here. But I can't just roll out the heavy artillery and force him to open up to me. Maybe it's better if I just follow him into the current. Ease into it, bit by bit. Let him go on and on until he wraps himself up in his own story.

Is it always this cloudy at dawn?

If the clouds don't lift by one, then they stay.

We've got time, then.

I guess we do. Want a beer?

No.

You sure?

All right.

Mará, two beers, please. Wai t . . . actually, make mine a *michelada*. You want one?

No.

Do you want a crêpe?

No, I'm fine. Thank you.

If I write this in the third person, I should pay attention to the details. The place, the cabañas, his clothing. His T-shirt was once blue and once had sleeves. It says Puerto Escondido. Note to self: You should find out where that is. I think it's in Mexico. Maybe Baja? Surfers like Baja. I read that in the Sunday Magazine. Or was it somewhere else? I should just ask him.

Puerto Escondido's in Mexico, right?

Yes.

Baja California?

No, it's on the Pacific coast. Oaxaca. Mexico's a bitch. But Puerto Escondido is . . .

Heaven?

No, I wouldn't say that. They've got people there, and there can't be people in heaven. But at least Puerto Escondido is *escondido*. You know, hidden. It's always hot, unlike here. If you're a surfer, it's the shit. Fuck, it's cool. But I spend more time in Xpolite, because there you can walk around naked.

So they've got a nude beach?

I guess so. Sure. Why? Do you get off on that?

No.

Well, you look like a nerd, anyway.

Thanks a lot. So are you a nudist, Pablo?

There's the question. So it begins. Journalists will be journalists. They're the *lowest*.

Forgive me. You're right. It comes with the territory.

Maria brings us two micheladas. I'm not gonna complain. The dark beer is served with crushed ice. I take a sip. It's got bite. And it's got a hint of Worcestershire sauce or something in it. I decide not to admit I don't like it. I've got to win this guy over. He's got to talk. Paula's gonna crucify me if I come back without . . .

Okay, Felipe, shall we start at the beginning? Or do we go straight to that night?

Let's start with the end. Sometimes going from there helps give some order to the story. So what happened that night? It was . . .

October third. Just a few weeks after they hit the Twin Towers.

What happened that October third?

Well, that Wednesday night—because it was a Wednesday, a weekday, a normal day—I was at a birthday party for a friend of this girl I was dating at the time. It was a family affair: the birthday girl's parents were there. Usually when a birthday takes place on a weeknight and the girl says she'd prefer to celebrate with her family, it means she's got no one else to hook up with. But this chick was my girlfriend Cristina's best friend, so I went. I started downing pisco and Cokes out of pure boredom. To be honest, I can't stand that shit, I'd rather have rum, have a Cuba Libre, but the hosts, who were a couple of half-crazy-looking types, didn't have anything else. So the thing is, we get to talking about my brothers' situation. I don't know how it came up, but since I didn't know these people, I wasn't about to open up my heart or start talking trash about my old man, who some people thought was a crazy old rooster. But I did end up talking for a while about apartments and leases. Pretty soon, the lady whose place it was said, half horrified, "I don't understand, young man—in charge of your brothers? What about your parents?"

She probably couldn't believe that you had so much responsibility.

Of course. People are always surprised by that. But when I told her that my old man was a son of a bitch, and that my mother was dead, the lady just about fell flat on her back. She went white as a ghost and immediately changed the subject to start criticizing Vivi Kreutzberger, because people aren't used to dealing with such hairy issues on birthdays.

So what happened then?

I went to drop Cristina off at her house. She lived on the corner of Hernando de Magallanes and Bilbao. Around there. Cristina was an idiot; she never wanted people to see her come or go because she lived with her parents. Plus, she said she wasn't feeling well. Personally, I didn't really care. But Cristina just gets out of the car, and that's it. Nothing. Not even a kiss. So I left. The idea of going to my father's house came to me a little later when that song "Ausencias" came on the radio. You know that song?

From the eighties, right?

Yeah, by that Chilean band, Nadie, or whatever you call them. But they were good. At least I thought they were. That one song, anyway.

One-hit wonders . . .

I totally agree. But one hit can be enough to immortalize you. The thing is, this song came out of nowhere, after some tune, I don't know, maybe it was OMD. But this one song, "Ausencias," somehow connected me with something . . . with the past, with a better past. . . . but also with a shitty past, because the truth is that you never have a worse time than when you assume you should be having a great one. You know?

Yes. Totally.

But what gets me about that song . . . what really kills me is the chorus. Maybe it's a bit adolescent. But it's like when a teenager reads a philosophy book: he might not understand it, but he knows it's deep.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

That's also true.

Yes.

Though there isn't / one single reason / a bird up in the sky / can have a little bit of compassion / just a little bit of understanding . . .

I remember that song, sure.

So . . . soon I found myself bawling my eyes out, but

without wanting to, and I hadn't drunk that much really. As I dried my eyes, I realized that I was driving up through Las Condes, almost on autopilot. It was as if the car was driving itself to my father's house. Like in that movie *Christine*. Maybe the car knew that it had to go to him, that I had to go there to confront my destiny. I don't know. Actually, I don't even know how we got off on this tangent. Sorry, where was I going with this? I've lost my train of thought.

You dropped off your girlfriend and then it occurred to you to go see your father.

That's it. Because the song got me a little pumped up. Or gave me courage. If Cristina, who can be a bit motherly at times, had any idea that I might go see my old man that same night, she never would have left me. She knew that I'd gone once before, and she thought that it would be better for me to just cut things off at the root, once and for all. She once told me she thought it just wasn't worth the pain to keep in touch with him.

Why?

Because we always ended up in a nasty shouting match. And I always came out with the worst of it. Anyway, I went to see him that night to talk about our situation. My plan wasn't to beat myself up, but I did want some relief. There was so much shit flying around in my head that I hadn't been able to sleep. So I went to confront it all, which is something I'd never done before in my life. Because losing your temper and spouting off a bunch of shit isn't the same as sitting down with someone and talking calmly. In this respect it was a different sort of night. But, Christ, I had no idea that it was going to be *that* different. My father can be a son of a bitch—he always was—but it's something else entirely to be a . . .

A killer.

Exactly. Although he didn't kill me.

But he tried to.

Yes, he made a move.

A serious move.

Serious, yes. Plus, he came at me from behind.

Ah, I didn't know that.

From behind, just like a traitor would do.

Without warning?

Without warning.

Maybe that was the thing that disturbed you the most. Not so much that he would shoot, but that it would be in the back.

I assure you, if I'd been shot in the chest, it would have hurt no less.

I was referring to the act's symbolic meaning.

It doesn't matter whether Oedipus or ~~Ly~~sses or any other idiot shoots you. When your old man shoots you, all your worries fade away, and the only thing you're concerned about is not bleeding to death. Can I ask you a question?

Of course.

You've been in therapy before, right? Tell me. Have you?

Well, yes, but why do you ask? Is it that obvious?

Painfully obvious.

I see.

Why did you go?

For the hell of it.

But why?

I think these are personal things.

I'm asking you, why?

Fuck . . . It was because of problems with my father.

I see. ~~Id~~ he shoot you?

No.

~~Id~~ he try to?

No.

So then why did they take you?

Because I wet my bed until I was pretty old.

How old?

Jesus Christ . . . I was twelve.

Okay, but why? ~~Id~~ they beat you? Fuck you? What?

No, it was nothing like that. With time, I suppose it's all the same. I guess. You get by in the end. But when you're living through it—when you think that everything's your fault, or that you've done something really wrong—then, I don't know, it fucks with your brain. Your defenses give out, your backbone goes limp, and you're in a world of constant shit.

Hanging with the wrong crowd?

Let's say that I became a teenager before I was ready. I flunked a year. I didn't come out of my shell. Didn't speak. Chicks didn't dig me; they hated me, thought I was ugly, everything scared me shitless. I wasn't sure about anything.

Once you begin to doubt, you're fucked. If you live like that for long enough, it never stops. Uncertainty is the coke of bad thoughts.

I couldn't stop anything. Not a thing. I didn't have any friends. Not even one. I went around drunk and stoned. I tried to kill myself with a bunch of my mom's pills, but that didn't work. And then . . . In the end, you just live. You get through by the skin of your teeth, but you get through nonetheless. You emerge on the other side.

So it was the usual stuff.

Yes. Happy now? I don't pretend to be so different from everyone else. My life isn't worth a novel. Not even an article. Can we move on?

But you've got your past.

Not quite like yours, but I do have my past. Everybody's got something.

Yes, but not all of us have a future.

That's probably true. Not all of us. Do you think you do?

Let's say that I've got a present. And that—for now—is enough for me. I don't ask much of life. Want another beer?

I'm fine.

I'll take another. Because I'm getting tired, Felipe. I'm spent.

But how? We only just started talking.

Yes, I know, but . . . You know what I mean? I don't know if I want to keep going. All this is just so . . . I don't know. It's tough. I hope you understand.

He has to go on. He can't stop now; he's only just started to open up. I didn't leave La Nación only to fail at this. The only way I'm gonna make a name for myself is with a really strong piece, something that goes way beyond the ordinary. Without a controversy, there won't be any noise, and without any noise, nobody knows your name. But this is more than controversial. It's a coup. A heart-stopping coup, and that magazine only publishes pieces of that caliber. A piece like this could surely . . .

Something else, then?

Huh?

I said, would you like something else to drink? There's juice . . .

No, thanks.

Where were you just now?

Nowhere . . . I was just thinking, that's all.

About what?

About what I have to do when I get back to Santiago.

Relax man. You're wondering if I'm going to talk to you, right?

No.

Don't lie.

Okay, then.

I'll do it. Don't worry. But I need another beer. And a pisco. Mará—come out here, please. Eh . . . do you mind if I smoke?

A joint?

Yeah. You want one?

Um . . . I don't think so.

No?

No. And, um, don't you think that it'd be better for you if . . .

Better for me? Don't be an idiot. I've already got one father, and look what happened. Ah. Mará, bring out another michelada and a shot of pisco. And you?

Just a Coke, that's all. I'll be fine with that.

That's it, then. Thanks, Mará.

If you'd like, Pablo, we can start from the beginning.

I already told you I was tired.

Sometimes it's easier to tell things in the order they happened. It may take longer, but you don't have to think about things as much. It just flows.

Id your psychiatrist teach you that?

In any case, I think it's a good idea.

What is?

That we start—you start—from the beginning.

What beginning?

Your beginning. Look, Pablo, if you don't want to go through with this, of course I'll understand, but, please . . .

You mean when was I born and all that?

Yes.

It's a long story.

It doesn't matter. Long stories are the best ones.

Pablo lights his joint and inhales. I watch as the pirate flags fly in the wind. Smoke invades the entire space shadowed by the cabana. Of course there's nobody around. Only María back there in the kitchen. It occurs to me that she may already know this story. Something tells me she knows it by heart.

I suppose that it all began a long time before that night. A long time even before my mother died. I guess it all begins with them.

Yes. It all begins there.

Well, they got married in 1971, smack in the middle of the Allende years. I think they were missing a lot of things at the wedding because of the shortages and all, but it was nice anyway, held out in the country on one of my uncle's farms. He lived in Boco, near Qllota. My mother's name was Mariana Cruz Tagle, and she was seventeen years old. My father, Francisco "Pancho" Santander Ossandón, had just turned twenty.

Twenty?

Yeah, they were a couple of kids. Too young. Maybe that's why they had us: they did it without thinking. If they'd thought things through, they would never have had me—at least my old man wouldn't have. But, like I said, they were young. I'm sure my old man went around horny as hell, and I don't think he expected that every time he fucked my mom that another kid—let alone a whole new set of responsibilities—was gonna pop out. No way. They were hard up when they got married. And let's just say that I was the reason. They'd only been married for three months when I showed up. I really think they had no idea what they were doing.

You believe that?

I want to believe that. What I don't want to believe is that someone would set out intending to be a bad father, that someone would consciously want to screw up their kids. What happens is really very simple: you hope that you'll chill out as you grow up. You swear that time will make you a better person and, in turn, a better father, but of course that never happens.

No?

Unfortunately, no. Ah, thank you, Mará. Put it on my tab.

Thanks.

Mmmm. That's tasty. And it's beginning to warm up.

You're right.

Now, where were we?

Your birth.

So there I was. Pablo Alejandro Santander Cruz. Want to see my driver's license?

No. But what year was that?

Seventy-one. And you?

Seventy-two.

I was born September eighteenth, 1971. Just in time for the *Fiestas Patrias*, Chile's National Day. Christ, ever since around the time I grew a beard, I've spent my birthdays passed out on the muddy floor of some tavern, listening as they danced the *cueca* around me. What else?

Um . . . your childhood. What was that like?

Like hell. What else?

You could go into a little more detail . . .

Jesus fucking Christ! Look, for as long as I can remember, I've seen my old man beating up on my mom, and browbeating us. Those sack-of-shit sociologists can claim that Japanese monkeys are more violent than we are, but, hell, it's just not true. They don't fuck with your psyche like your old man, getting worked up into a lather over nothing. Don't you agree?

I do.

He whipped me with his belt since I was three, and he threw punches at my mom like a boxer. Once I invited all my classmates over for my birthday . . . He started to argue with my mom about something, and the next thing I knew he'd thrown the cake against the wall and punched her so hard that she started to bleed right there at the table. All the traumatized little idiots started crying.

How long did the marriage last?

They separated for good in 1985 when I was fourteen. But they had split up before, and once spent two years apart. But in 1980 they reunited for another five years, which is when Tere was born. This is all a bit tangled up, but with a family like that, you just can't expect things to be normal.

No.

When they split up again after this little reunion, my

mother left the house. She left with only the clothes she was wearing. The day she left, she asked me what I thought about it, and I said, "First you go, then I'll go, and next it'll be Connie's turn . . . It's the only way to escape." I took off two months later. It was a tough move to make, because for some reason I was the old man's favorite. Maybe because I was the oldest. You only hurt the ones you love. Connie's move was tough on him too. Martín and Tere stayed with him, since they were still pretty young.

So there were four of you kids, then.

Yeah, the four Santander Cruz kids: I was the oldest, then Connie (who is Miguel Ángel's mother) then Martín (who studies computer engineering at the Portales) and Tere, who's in Tercero Medio. As long as we were living with him, he would support us; that was the one condition. Connie wasn't about to sell out like that, and she ended up going to high school with our mother's help. After that, she dedicated herself to traveling. She wanted to get as far away as possible, and spent a good amount of time in San Pedro de Atacama. Just backpacking all over South America. Now she's in her third year of film school in Colombia. In the midst of all of this, my father got remarried. About twelve years ago. Martín left home the year before last. Juana, my dad's second wife, treated Tere very badly—she beat her—which is why Martín always had a lot of problems with her. That was a good cigarette. You missed out.

Let's back up a little bit. Rewind.

Fine.

Tell me about your teen years. What was it like?

I remember when we lived in a little house on Arizona Street, in Villa El Dado. There were a lot of kids in that neighborhood because that's what it was: a real strait-laced kind of place. I played in the streets a lot. I was maybe twelve years old at the time. I remember being able to hear my dad's car—a Fiat 12—coming from several blocks away. The sound of it would throw me into a panic. I didn't want

him to punish me, but he would all the same, even if he had no reason to. Just hearing that car come down the street was enough to make me vomit.

And when you were older . . . ?

It stopped, at least it seemed less important. It's easier for kids to be scared, because kids aren't supposed to have anything to be afraid of. Do you understand? It makes sense. Shit gets a lot more complicated when you're older, because you have to hide your fear. But it never leaves you . . . it gets transformed into other shit, but it's not going to leave you.

Transformed into wrath, perhaps?

Let's cut the psychological bullshit already, okay?

Sure.

I spent time at every school there. Every single one. So eventually, I just ran out of them. I spent a lot of time playing cards in casinos, and blew a ton of money. Just to be done with it, I got my high school equivalency. I was a lazy kid. So lazy. I admit it.

Were you very antagonistic?

I've hardly been in any fights, ever. I was about as brave as a lamb. I wasn't the class bully, or someone who went around looking for fights to pick. No way. I backed away from aggression. When I would see my old man start to get angry at my mother or us, I felt fear, not rage. But, on the other hand . . . it was rare, and sometimes my father would . . .

He would . . . what?

He wasn't such a bad guy. Not all the time. Or maybe he was. Fuck, yeah, he was. But the truth is that I do have some good memories of that asshole. What can I say? He bought me everything I wanted. He made me a part of all his bullshit. That was his trick. When I was with my old man, I had it all—memberships to tennis clubs where we could play, ski trips, summers at the beach, and vacations in Floriana-polis. I remember talking him into buying a dune buggy so

we could hit the beach. He bought Martin and got a bike for me as well, and we started competing in motocross. I was the '87 national champion in the 125cc division. I won a year's supply of Milo, and my picture was in all the papers. I got to race in Mendoza, Córdoba, Uruguay, and in a Pan-American competition in San Antonio, Texas. I've still got a photo of me standing outside the Alamo. My old man came with me, and after the competition we drove out to Houston to visit NASA. I had a KTM and learned the ins and outs of mechanics with her. I wouldn't have become a champion if it wasn't for my father's support. That, and the fact that our family was still together.

You never thought about going to college?

No. If you don't know what you're good at, then you'll never be good at anything. You'll go straight down the shitter. That's why I never gave it a try.

So what did you do?

My maternal grandmother, who had a lot of contacts, talked my mother into the idea of military service in Punta Arenas. That was in '92. My mom was going through some tight times economically, and I was backpacking around, here and there, so between the two of us it made a certain amount of sense for me to go and serve in the South.

How long were you down there?

About a year and a half. Both there and in the Air Force. After that, I went back to Santiago for about a year, but I couldn't resist it. That's why I came here, to Pichilemu. The *cabañas* hadn't been built yet, but the land was here. They gave me a loan and put me in charge of the Chile-España Hotel, which, in those days, was about to close. So that's it: I fixed it up, gave the place some character, and made it into a real refuge for surfers. We got a listing in the *Lonely Planet* guide, and they even mentioned my name. "Ask for Pablo—you can count on him."

And that's where you got hooked on surfing.

Nah, it was long before then. I think I started surfing

in the womb. My grandparents always had a house here. And a lot of other land, plus that field near Litueche. I've got a connection with this area. I guess this beach is my place. That's why I always come back here. It's the only place where I feel safe. It was here that I met the mother of my son, and I married her almost without thinking. We went to live in the Sierras de Bellavista for a year. Then another year in Santiago, where Lautaro was born. He's seven now. But I still had the bug, so we came back here so the kid could grow up with the sand and sun.

You have a son. I didn't know . . .

Yes. As a father, I consider myself responsible for what I could have been. While I lived with him he never lacked a thing, and his company was extremely motivating to me. I never liked going south very much. His mother is from Chillán. But they left, and I lost all contact. There was a big argument over the phone, and now she doesn't live here anymore. She's in Argentina now, I think. Somewhere in Patagonia. Puerto Madryn, I think, but I'm not sure. Maybe they're in Rio Gallegos. I don't know. In any case, we split up simply because of problems between the two of us. It wasn't because of problems with my family. In fact, those only got bad *after* she left.

So you have no contact with them. Not even with your son?

No. But it's not because I don't want to. Things just . . . happen. You know, none of my girlfriends—actually, I've had two since my wife left—knew that I had a son. I don't much look like a father, so it's easy enough to think that I'm not. But I've supported his mother as much as possible.

So you don't support him?

It's not that I don't want to, it's that I can't. I told you, I don't know where they are. They don't even call me.

But don't you think you could try to track them down and . . .

Sure. But it's my life. This article isn't going to be about what kind of a father I am.

I'm sorry.

It's all right. It's just complicated. I'm not sure why I told you. I guess it just slipped out. Maybe it's on account of everything I've lived through, I've picked up a certain distrust of romantic relationships. That happens. I prefer the less serious kind. Or I prefer not to have relationships at all. You don't miss out on much. It's not hard to get laid. And if you really think about it, it's not all that important, nor necessary. My current girlfriend—it's unbelievable, I know, but, yes I have someone, and I wasn't even trying—she really balances me. It's been four months now, but whatever happens, I know that I don't want to get married or move in together or have any more kids. I've already been married once, by the state and by the church, and I know that I'm never going to do it again. In fact, technically I'm still married, because Lautaro's mother and I have never gotten an annulment. But my plan is to never get married again, or have any more children.

That's understandable.

I suppose. But don't read anything into this, okay? Erase it. ~~Don't~~ even use it as a joke. You understand me?

It'll stay off.

Off what?

Off the record. It'll be as if we never discussed it at all.

All right. Nothing about Lautaro, Felipe. Nothing.

Off the record means off the record. You have my word.

Fine.

Would you like me to send you a copy of all this?

I don't think that'll be necessary.

Okay, then, shall we continue?

Yes. Let's move on.

What was your mother like?

My mother looked a bit like Mará Olga Fernández.
~~Does~~ that name ring any bells for you?

I remember the name.

She was on TV. Then she disappeared. I think she left the country . . . maybe for Miami. She even revitalized Viñ—he was the one who presented the Gaviota to Fernando Blergo.

For “The Time in the Bastille.” I can’t picture her face, but I do remember the song. We were pretty young then.

Yes, but she was in an Antonio Vodanovic show once, and I noticed her. Plus, I have a copy of *Cosas* with her on the cover. She was something else. Super-beautiful. Plus, she had class. She was one fine woman. You could tell just by the way she walked . . . like a model. My mother came from a large family: she had four sisters and two brothers. She was a salesperson for AFP Summa for a number of years before moving on to Provida. She suffered from a chronic ulcer that eventually degenerated into gastric cancer. I think that my father killed her.

Excuse me?

My father put her through a great deal of pain and suffering, which, of course, she wasn’t prepared for. Nobody could be prepared for that. It’s even worse when the person putting you through all that suffering is a loved one. That’s the worst. That’s what killed her. When they diagnosed her with cancer, the only thing she asked of us was that we didn’t grow closer to our father as a result. She told me, “Don’t live with him. Don’t pass judgment on him. Nothing. You’re to have nothing to do with him.”

How old was she when she was diagnosed?

Forty. And she died that same year. It all happened very fast. Like a shot. But maybe it was for the best that way. I don’t know how I would have held up if the disease had dragged on for years. One day she just vomited up some fruit that she’d eaten the day before. The worst thing was that it gave off a rotten smell, and she was very embarrassed about it. She said it was her damn ulcer acting up again, but no ulcer is that bad. So she went to the clinic, they did a biopsy, and there it was—a very advanced cancer.

How did you react?

I don't want to talk about it.

I understand. Then what happened?

She lasted barely six months after that. They saw how advanced the cancer was and operated almost immediately. But the treatments didn't work. My old lady was hooked up to a catheter, and she couldn't eat anything. Eventually she came to realize that there wasn't anything left to do, except pull the plug. The doctors told her that if she did that she wouldn't last a week. But she lived another two full months. And now she lives on through me.

How do you mean?

I feel like a vessel for her energy. To this day, whenever I have doubts about something, I go to her for answers. She shows me the difference between what's good and what's not.

And you, how old were you at the time?

I was grown up. More or less. Twenty-three, though I felt like a kid.

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What else can I ask him? Or should I let him take a break? Maybe we should stop. His voice, the sound of his voice . . . there's just no way to describe it. His tone conveys everything. It's as if it embodies everything he's lived through. He's suffered so goddamn much. And to think that I used to think that my life was bad . . . that my life has been worse than everybody else's.

Let's go back to your father. Tell me more about him.

A complicated man.

It would seem so.

My dad was always aggressive, violent, super-explosive, and proud. My mother was just the opposite. She always forgave him for everything; but he was fed up with crap from his in-laws. They could have had him arrested on any number of

occasions, but my mother wouldn't let them. For us. But I think that the thing that hurt my father the most was the feeling that somebody close to him was slipping out of his control. My mother didn't love him anymore. That's the key to it all. She didn't love him because he wouldn't give her any space. He was very jealous. He kept watch over her all day.

Did he drink a lot?

His problems didn't have to do with drugs; he just had a messed-up personality. A failed character. Eventually, of course he began to do other things. Everything, actually. And he didn't even share, the son of a bitch. But the real problem had to do with the wiring in his brain. He just shorted out. My mother told him countless times that he needed to see a therapist and all that, but he didn't give a fuck. Then came the separation, and that's when the shit really hit the fan. It made sense that they separated. Not only was my father crestfallen, he was deeply humiliated. Love had morphed into hate. Directed not only toward my mother, but to us as well. For better or for worse, we sided with her, and left him alone. That's why he never gave us a single peso for support. My old man is proud as hell, and—because of that—half crazy. Giving us money would have been a betrayal of his principles. The poor bastard . . . when you get down to it, I really do feel bad.

You feel bad?

A little. Yeah. I feel pretty bad.

. . .

. . .

And you think that . . .

Can I make a confession?

Of course.

I don't think that I've ever loved a woman the way he loved my mother. Ever. I'm not sure that I ever will. And that's irritating. It makes me mad. But on the other hand, I don't think that what happened to him will happen to me. I don't think that things will fall apart the way they did for

him. It was like an adobe house during an earthquake. As soon as she left home, everything went to shit. That's how it works with us men.

It's true. We fall apart at the drop of a hat.

He needs to hate. You know, they say that hate—like love—needs to be cultivated lest you forget the reasons for your hatred. He's the type of man who needs to have a constant opponent in order to feel masculine.

An enemy.

Yeah. That's why my father was pro-Pinochet, I guess. At heart he was a ruthless dictator and . . . I don't know . . . somehow he identified himself with that old asshole. He found him endearing. Entertaining, even. And he inherited all the personality traits of his own father. He's the oldest of six brothers, and was the only one to continue living with my paternal grandfather, Facundo Santander, when he separated from my grandmother. My grandfather, like any good man from those days, was compulsively unfaithful. I think he went to a brothel every Friday, and soon he had a regular lover. He rented a downtown apartment. He had very little to do with my grandmother. They slept in separate bedrooms. According to my mother, my grandmother was happy that her husband had these extracurricular activities, because that way he wouldn't be bothering her. That tacit agreement lasted for years, with no problems. That is, until my grandmother got involved—not for love, you know, just for the sex—with the man (*hombrecito*, they called him) who came by every week to weed the garden and clean the windows. The guy was about ten years younger than her . . . she must have been around fifty.

That sounds like something out of a José Donoso story.

It was some serious shit for my grandfather. He caught them *in flagrante*, and wasn't about to forgive. He kicked my grandmother out of the house, and she freaked because she never even loved this guy. He made her feel good,

sure, but he barely knew how to read. Plus, he was married, with a full regiment of children. So it's not like she had any plans of running off with him. Anyway, as chance would have it, a few weeks later, Braulio—the gardener—was found stabbed to death. Everyone figured it was your standard bar brawl, since his body was found near this shady joint called the Matadero. But from what I've heard, my grandfather was behind it. Of course, those rumors scared my grandmother even more. Braulio's death was like a warning sign: you don't mess with Facundo Santander. He turned against my grandmother and the children . . . all of them except my father, who, like I said, was the only one who stayed with him. He was nine at the time. My grandfather was a lawyer, but not what you would call a reputable one: he dealt with a lot of criminals who paid him in trade, and he had connections in both the underworld and in loftier circles. Those things pretty much allowed him to do whatever he wanted. Once I went out with a female attorney, and when she found out who my grandfather was, her face turned to stone. "That's disgusting," she spat, before apologizing. I said no, you're right, the guy was disgusting, but what's even more disgusting is that his blood runs through my veins.

But you can't choose your relatives.

Yes, I know, but still they mark you. Being the son or grandson of bad people doesn't necessarily make you bad as well, but it does fill you with shadows and feelings of doubt. And whatever you do, they follow you. Luckily, *huevoón*, I don't have a famous last name. I mean, not everybody knows who my father is. I've always wondered what it would be like to be the son of someone the whole world hates or despises. How could you go through life if your last name is, I don't know, Townley? Christ, how could you go to the movies with Mamo Contreras?

What happened with your grandmother?

She ended up living with her sister on a little piece of land in Olmué and never returned to Santiago. She died one

day during mass. Praying. My father was fourteen at the time, and they didn't let him go to the funeral or anything.

What is your father up to these days? He's pretty well off, no?

My grandfather died in '89 from cancer of the esophagus—too much smoking—and left a pretty extensive will. My father, who was by then completely separated from my mother, was the primary beneficiary—which set off quite a bit of fighting between him and my uncles.

What did he study? Anything?

After high school he studied mechanics, but never finished. He was a salesman for M, for, I don't know, maybe five years. After he took a managerial course, he changed jobs, and after he'd saved up enough money he started his own business. It has to do with ATMs and credit cards, department stores, electronic access mechanisms, bar codes, that sort of thing.

Is it going well?

Very well. Like I said, he inherited a lot of money, and money tends to generate more money. He bought a kick-ass house.

And you've never been in touch with him again?

Yes, all the time. Every so often.

How's that?

My father is a very erratic man. Up and down, coming and going. He's like a rollercoaster. He'll hate you and curse you one day, and the next he's charming and funny—even loving. Up and down. After the rollercoaster swoops down it has the ability to really make you cry. He's full of both guilt and regrets. That gets him depressed, and he'll ask us how he could have done such things, is he a good father or a bad one, and that's how it all starts: we feel sorry, and forgive him.

Sounds a little exhausting.

Exhausting because you never know what to expect. Never. For example, about three years ago I was here in

Pichilemu, living with some crazy gringo surfers, when my old man came looking for me. It wasn't for anything bad; in fact, it was quite the opposite. Of course, I was shocked to see him. I almost shit myself out of fear. But in the end we ended up drinking a few beers on the beach and talking about life. He convinced me to move back in with him; that he wanted to reunite the family. He even offered me a job in one of his businesses: a chain of printing and photocopying stores. At first everything seemed great, but eventually—of course—it all got fucked up, for, I don't know, the fifth time?

A vicious cycle.

Yes. One day it occurred to me to try and stop him, and he really kicked the shit out of me. You know it's bad when your father gives you a beating for no reason at all. He threw us out of the house. Marth too. Literally left us in the street. My mother's family—my uncles—took us in and hired an attorney to force my old man to help us out financially. But he said he'd rather waste his money on lawyers than give us a peso.

And that was what triggered you to confront him.

Yes. It was a night no different from any other. Because, really, we fought so often. I was tired of being in charge of things and of having all the responsibility fall on my shoulders. So I wanted to talk with him once and for all about my two younger brothers' situations. Because of his lack of interest, Marth was five months behind on his payments at the university. Tere was going to a free school, but most of the students there were problem cases, and the teachers walked around with paddles in their hands.

Wait, I don't understand . . . were your two siblings living with you or with him?

Marth was with me. Tere was living with my father, but she spent a lot of time in my apartment anyway. I was working in an auto dealership owned by my mother's cousin, and I'd rented an apartment on Avenida Coló. Since my father was so damn spiteful, Marth was screwed. He didn't

give Martín a single peso, and made him pay his own way through school. I had to take care of him, but I just didn't have the money. I couldn't manage. Plus, he's my brother, not my fucking kid.

Was your little sister doing okay?

No, but she was living in what was basically a palace. Our father had built this enormous house with separate bedrooms and bathrooms for each of us. It was to seduce us into coming back to him. Despite the fact that we were all pretty much adults by then. He had this fantasy that all five of us could live together like one big happy family. This house was several stories high, and had a game room with a pool table. The swimming pool was heated, and it had a built-in waterfall. The house was extravagant, but the best thing was the view. What a view. On very clear days, or after a hard rain, you could see planes taking off in the distance. And at night, shit, it was enough to make you want to live in Santiago. One summer, during a truce, he asked me to take care of the place The best part about that was being able to go down to the kitchen for a nightcap, and then staying to watch the spectacle of the lights. On summer nights, swimming in that pool, looking out over the skyline . . . you felt at peace, protected. But it was all just a fantasy. That house wasn't an oasis; it was a fortress. My father sequestered himself in there and planned his attacks. From that vantage point, he was able to repel any enemy, and—above all—poor people. My old man was terrified of them. He still is. I don't think all that much has changed. I swore that one day they'd take over his house. He could never understand why I would live here, where nobody has much to speak of.

What part of town was the house in?

In Qnchamalí. Know where that is?

I think so. Near Los Dominicos, right?

No, it's more toward Farellones. By Las Condes, before the Plaza San Enrique, and just before where the road splits off for Farellones.

Where the YPF is?

Right. The whole neighborhood there to the right—in other words, to the south—is Qnchamalí

It's a gated community. There's a guardhouse at the entrance, right?

One of the entrances is guarded, but only at night. But, yes, it's a pretty isolated neighborhood. All very nice homes. And the streets aren't full of potholes. It's like you could eat off the pavement. Our house—my old man's house, I mean—is right near the entrance. You have to go up this pretty steep driveway until the land levels out. And that's where the house was. I mean, that's where it is. When you were a kid, did you ever go to a crummy old theme-park kind of place called the Far West?

Of course. It was up around there somewhere.

It was in Qnchamalí . . . That's where.

Yes! That turn-off to Farrellones. Damn, I barely remember it. It was a western kind of place, right?

It was full of cowboys who walk the dusty streets. They did shows. The place was real cool because it wasn't all Hollywood. You know? When have they ever filmed a western around here?

Not even a spaghetti western.

The crazy thing is that it was one of Allende's inventions. I mean, it opened around 1970, when the Unidad Popular was starting up and when all things Yankee were considered highly dubious. I think it closed down in '76 or '77. I was pretty young, but I have pictures. There I was: with my hat and six-shooters, standing on Main Street in front of the saloon, and right next to me was my father with a couple of pistols of his own. I have another picture where this chick with decent tits is hugging me . . . she was playing the part of the saloon whore. According to my old man, at night the Far West turned into an adult sort of place, and it stayed open past curfew. They served alcohol, and the women in low-cut dresses weren't just actresses.

*The Far West. Wow, it's been a while since I last thought about the Far West. Has it? Once, years ago, they sent me on a junket to Los Angeles for **ID** Hard with a Vengeance. I had never been to Los Angeles. I had never even been to the United States. I stayed at a hotel called the Beverly Wilshire, and I got to interview Bruce Willis, Samuel Jackson and Jeremy Irons, who told me he loved Isabel Allende, and that playing the part of Esteban Trueba in *House of the Spirits* had definitely been one of the highlights of his career. To be polite, I told him I was also a big fan of hers, and that everyone in Chile simply adores her. On the last day, they took us to a place called Knotts Berry Farm, which was kind of like the Far West—First World style—everything was from the West, including a locomotive, wagons, and rollercoaster and all. . . . That's where I remembered the Chilean Far West. How precarious and dusty our version of the Far West had been.*

Far West Town, that was its full name. The Indians weren't Mapuches; they were Argentines. They were taller and better-built than Chileans, and they looked better in loincloths. Plus, according to my father, they didn't have indigenous features, which is really why they were hired.

I don't believe it.

My mother said that's what she hated about Far West. She thought it was pathetic. And she was right, because in reality there wasn't much to do. There weren't any rides or attractions like in Fantasilandia. But my old man liked the place. The owner was a friend of his. A guy from school who was affiliated with that anti-Allende group.

Patria y Liberatad.

That's it. I think they trained with real bullets there at Far West. Nobody every realized it. It was the perfect place to plan their terrorist attacks and kidnappings. Every once in a while we went to see the shootouts. Just to get used to the sound of gunfire, I guess. I remember one guy who jumped out a third-floor window and landed on a bale of hay. Then

the thing went bankrupt and they broke it up into lots. Pretty soon after that they started putting up houses. Qnchamali used to be Far West Town. Right where the First Pioneer Bank went up.

That was the house, then.

Yeah. The house I went to that night. I was a mad-man by the time I got there. Christ, it was really scary. Anyway, I grabbed an empty beer bottle and hopped the low gate, and started to bang on my dad's car with the bottle to set off the alarm. It was a brand-new Audi, but nothing happened. Soon, though, he appeared in the door of the courtyard, and I jumped. I didn't even think; I just jumped. I'd never hit my old man before, but right then and there I realized that I'd been wanting to kick the shit out of him for years.

You wanted revenge.

Yes, but at the same time, it's just how I reacted. He surprised me, and I jumped him. It was the strangest feeling: on the one hand you feel like you've really fucked up now, but on the other hand you don't. I just stopped and ran off, scared.

Would you say that you're a violent person?

I'm not aggressive, and I'm not violent either, but I am lethal in the sense that I'm not the type of guy to flinch or turn away from what I'm faced with. I react quickly and instinctively. There was this time back in February where I was in a club with a friend of mine, and he got into it with this wasted bum covered in tattoos. I pushed them apart, the guy tackled me, and I grabbed him by the throat just as he started punching me in the balls. Instinctively, I dug a finger into his neck, just below the Adam's apple. His eyes started bulging out, and as he loosened his grip on me, I loosened my hold on him. I didn't even think. Clearly I could have killed him. But aggressive as far as fighting or little after-school scuffles, that's never been my thing. Now, I know I fucked up that night. I'm not going to lie to you. It was wrong not to

wait until they came to the door. I know they could have called the cops, but . . .

But what happened next?

I realized that I had fucked up. I was shaking. I just wanted to get out of there. I was beside myself, really. That's why I never noticed that my old man had gone back into the house. I had gone maybe ten feet back toward the gate when I felt the first shot. It couldn't have been more than three or four seconds that had passed. But I was sure that he'd gone back inside to grab his .38 and then came out after me, shooting to kill. When I heard the first shot, I was still facing the street. I whipped around, and that's when I felt the second . . . the one that sliced through my stomach, right here. I was lucky, because as soon as one of those hits a bone, you're not even crawling out of there, let alone walking. It was all very fast. I don't think that my old man realized that his first shot had hit me before he fired for the second time. And I get the feeling that if I hadn't cried out, he would have put a third one in me, and that would have done it. He said he didn't recognize me—that he thought I was a burglar—but I don't believe him.

I don't either.

He was clear-headed that night. He must have been asleep, because he was in his pajamas. Plus, he knows the way I move and talk. I'm his son, for Christ's sake. A father's got to recognize his son, even if it's dark outside.

He knew exactly who you were.

Yes.

Were you in pain? I mean . . . could you get up? Or did he help you . . . ?

Look, anyone who tells you that bullets don't hurt is lying to you. I felt like I'd shit myself. Getting shot feels like someone's punched you, but with a knife between their knuckles. I knew that it had gone clear through and out my back . . . I looked at the hole in my shirt where the bullet had entered and I could see it smoking. I started begging him to

open the door, and just then I realized that someone inside the house was opening the gate with the intercom. It was Juana, his mistress. So I got up and walked out, and the only thing I could think of was how wet I was. I felt like I was covered in diarrhea. But it was blood, and it was warm and sticky.

You didn't have a cell phone?

No. Well, I guess I did, but it was turned off, and my first thought was just to get the hell out of there. So I got in my car, which was parked out front with the keys in the ignition, and I took off randomly. Without even realizing it, I turned on the radio, and somehow I must have switched it to AM because all of a sudden I'm listening to two guys talking about EOs. I drive to Avenida Las Condes, and nobody's there—no traffic at all—so I start heading down, and all of a sudden I start to feel dizzy. The next thing I know, I've driven up onto the median. It's a small car, a Suzuki Maruti, so I'm hung up on the median with the drive wheels in the air. I throw it in reverse, but I still can't get a grip, can't move at all. But I never completely lost consciousness during this whole episode. I kept telling myself, "Stay with it, Pablito, just stay with it . . . don't pass out." There were some mints in the car, so I ate them. I guess I thought I needed sugar. I wasn't driving anywhere at that point, so I decided to get out of the car, and that's when I realized just how bad it was . . . my show was almost over. The bullet had ruptured my intestines in seven places and I was bleeding internally. This is where I lost my memory, but not consciousness. I don't remember any patrol car showing up, and I don't remember any ambulance, but somehow I got in a vehicle reeking of disinfectant, and a policeman was asking me what had happened. I just kept repeating, "Ask my father . . . ask my father." When we got to the police station, I gave them my old man's address. Later they found my cell phone and called my maternal grandmother, because she was the first number in the alphabetical listing.

They didn't take you to the hospital?

An ambulance came to the station house, and I was in critical condition by the time they got me in. All I remember is that it was racing through the streets, and that I felt flashes of pain running through my wounds with every bump in the road, which actually woke me up a bit. All I wanted was to get to the Salvador Hospital so they could anesthetize me. We went right up to the emergency entrance, and I was going into shock: I vomited over and over again, and I kept asking for anesthesia. By that time I was having trouble breathing . . . I felt like I was drowning from my own internal hemorrhaging. When I finally saw that the anesthesiologist had arrived, I gave up and let go. I didn't have any energy left in me, nor was I interested in having any.

Did you lose a lot of blood?

They had to give me three liters. I'd lost two and a half liters *internally*. The bullet passed through my stomach, clipped my liver, and ruptured my intestines in seven places. I went into surgery at three-thirty and it wasn't over until seven A.M. According to what the doctors told me, the bleeding didn't stop until they finished stitching up my intestine. I didn't wake up until about noon, but I was beginning to stabilize. I spent the rest of that afternoon—a Thursday—in intensive care. My recovery went pretty smoothly, and I was even interviewed by some of your journalist buddies, who came to the hospital to find out what was up. But gradually, things calmed down. They took me to my grandmother's house, and that's it . . . I started to heal. Now all I have is this great big long scar.

Oof! Wow. I didn't think it'd be so long.

I look at it and touch it every day. You do what you have to do, you know?

You'll never forget it.

No. Though I did try. But now I don't know if I want to.

I understand.

Wow. I didn't think it'd be so long and scary. I'm sure he touches it every single day. In the shower, in his sleep. He looks at it in the foggy bathroom mirror. No matter what he does, he'll always remember that scar. He'll never forget. Even if he tries to. Shit. You always think you'll never forget the bad stuff, that you'll hate forever, that you'll never be able to forgive. But in the end, you wind up forgetting all about it. You forgive. Not necessarily wanting it, or planning it, you forget. How? When? But not this. No way. He'll never be able to forget. How would he? There are scars, and scars, but this is something else. It's a fault that divides the before and after. Shit, everything that has ever happened to me is really nothing. Nothing. What am I even thinking? What the fuck am I thinking? Compared to this guy, I have been through absolutely nothing. Nothing.

...

So what happened to your father?

The whole thing just about turned his hair gray. At least he paid my hospital bills, though I'm sure he only did it on the advice of his lawyer. Part of his defense, to mitigate his sentence.

What's he doing now?

He's in prison. He tried to get out on bail, but luckily it was denied. My aunts and uncles on my mother's side have taken care of the whole legal situation. They've been amazing—help us with food and rent when they're in Santiago. I try and visit them as often as I can. Plus, I have to go there from time to time to look after the cabañas.

You could say that now you're the father of the family.

I'm in charge, yes. I'm going to make sure everything works out well for us. And I think that we're going to win the civil suit too. My lawyer is working like a dog—it's like he's taking this case personally. To me, a victory in all of this would mean peace for my family and for my younger brothers to be able to go to school and have a place to live. It's not

about money or the chance to drive expensive cars and fly around the world . . . it's about being able to emerge from beneath the shadow of my father, and being able to live without the burden of his control. That's why we've filed criminal charges . . . aggravated assault, but not attempted homicide. Then there are the civil charges my brothers have filed seeking support payments. He's facing between ten and forty years. It's a big risk, because if my old man gets out of jail, he'll come looking for us. But if we don't file charges, chances are that he'll go free. So, if the legal system does its job—and we'll see to that—he'll stay in prison. I guess that's why you're here, and why I've told you all this.

That's it. And I thank you for it.

Do you think it'll be worth anything, Felipe?

Yes.

You do? I'm not so sure. Well . . . anything else?

I guess not. That's it.

I think so too.

Well, then.

See, in the end I also managed to survive. Or did you think I'd die?

No.

Are we done, then?

Yes. I don't have any more questions.

Thank God.

Hmm . . . looks like the photographer is scheduled to come by tomorrow or the day after. Is that all right with you?

Sure.

It would be best if we could show the scar. I don't know . . . maybe you in your board shorts in front of a neutral background. Or maybe the ocean.

That'll work.

And I'd also like it if we could show your face.

What good would that do? That wasn't part of the deal.

Yes, I know . . .

Then there's nothing else to discuss.

. . . That's why I said I'd *like* it if you could. I think it would make it stronger. Without that photo—without your face, Pablo, with only your torso and the scar—the article will have less meaning.

I don't know. If I show my face, I'm giving my name away. So obviously someone's going to recognize me and say, "Hey, that's Pancho Santander's kid." That would only piss my father off more.

Are you worried that your father might come after you again?

No. That shit only happens in the movies, not real life.

So?

So nothing. I've got enough problems as it is.

Just think about it. Do it as a favor to me.

Maybe. I'll think about it.

I really think this could help other families. Other children. Most people think things like this only happen on the margins of society.

When your producer got me on the phone and told me he'd been trying to locate me for I don't know how many months, and that he'd saved all the newspaper clippings about my case . . . I don't know . . . I should have hung up right then and there, but I didn't. I guess it was for a reason.

I think this will help change things.

I hope so.

That's it, then. Thanks very much for your time.

No, thank you. Are you leaving right now?

Yes, I have to start transcribing all this.

Shit, that's going to take you a while.

I'm going to have to find a way to organize all this, because there's no way my editors are going to give me this many pages. There's never enough space.

Never enough time, either, man. Remember that.

Yes, I will. I'll remember all of this.

Good.

Well, I guess I'll see you, then.

See you.

You know, this has been important. Really important. For me, I mean.

I know.

Good luck.

Same to you.

CHILDREN





We're a young couple with no children. But being "young" is relative. It's true, neither of us has turned thirty yet, but we've been together for seven years and haven't felt any real itching desire to start a family. I'd say we're more ambient than transient. Carla doesn't dance. Never has. But we're not missing anything. We get along fine. We laugh all the time. We finish each other's sentences, and read each other's minds. We don't own a car. We go for runs along the beach and order food for delivery. We aren't concerned with fashion or fashionable things.

We like to hold hands while surfing the net, which is why we've got our computers set up next to each other. We recently went to broadband, and use several Apple products. We collect them. It's where much of our budget goes, but we look at it as more of an investment than a waste. We like upgrading every three years. It might be something of a vice, but betting on the future doesn't seem frivolous to us. Carla has a grape-colored iMac, and I just bought a new G3 laptop. We've always been fanatically anti-PC. We believe in the Mac Brotherhood. Sometimes I'll send her affectionate emails in which I describe things that I'd never dare to reveal in person. She likes to snap digital photos of things that people usually overlook: display cabinets, billboards, cinema marquees. When we can't be together, we chat over Instant Messenger.

We don't earn a bad living. If you add our salaries together, you get a decent amount. The apartment in Recreo is ours. We're not originally from the area, but we both feel at home in Viña del Mar. We're not much interested in traveling, and we avoid Santiago like the plague. Sometimes, we'll

rent a car and head for Baños del Corazón, where Carla's cousin Cristóbal works. He's blind, and perhaps for that reason he works as a masseur—strictly first class. We enjoy submerging ourselves in the thermal waters and watching the older couples there. There's a calm rhythm about spas, and it does us good—both in body and in soul.

Regarding the subject of offspring: it's not that we *can't* procreate, it's that we don't *want* to. Maybe later, sometime in the next millennium. At least, that's what we say to the curious folks who don't (or can't) understand that we don't want to spend our nights awake or go into debt over some little creatures who, fifteen years later, will think of us the way we once thought of our parents.

My parents never separated, but they were never in love, either. They stayed together, bored, though still ready to lash out at each other whenever they had the opportunity. It's a sad thing, and yet it's exasperating too. We don't enjoy going to Linares to visit them, fearing that the negative energy they radiate will contaminate us and leave us irritable.

Carla, on the other hand, is the daughter of parents who are separated but—most of all—immature. We aren't in contact with either of them. They don't seem to be up for it. They chose to follow the path of their desires, and relegated their parental responsibilities to second place. Wanting to be happy sounds great to us—maybe it's the only important thing—but we also believe that happiness can only be pursued by single people and those who don't have any progeny. You don't get there by having children. If you become a father, you stop being an independent being. You can't act like a teenager anymore. Parents have to sacrifice themselves for their children.

We—as others have said of us—are not ready. We prefer being an egoistic couple to damaging others' lives.

A little over a year ago, something happened that reinforced for us the fact that children don't always bring stability to a home. Mauricio, one of our old college friends,

ended up marrying his girlfriend, a generic sort of girl whom he admired more than he loved. Nothing new there. They set up in a house with a garden in Villa Alemana, and ten months later they had a son, to whom they gave the absolutely horrible name of Benito. When Mauricio asked us to be godparents, Carla said no. There was nothing diplomatic about the way she said it, which is why I love her. She's a person who truly speaks her mind.

"Forgive me," she said, "but we aren't used to supporting anything but ourselves. My feeling is this: there's nothing more irresponsible than loading yourself up with responsibilities."

Six months later, the nanny Mauricio had hired to help take care of the baby slipped on the waxed floor and the little thing—which she'd been carrying in her arms—hit a brick wall, bounced off a sofa, and fell through a glass table, which exploded in a thousand pieces. Benito survived with only a few cuts and bruises, although he was unconscious for a couple of hours. But no brain damage, it seems. According to Mauricio, an avowed agnostic, it was a miracle. His wife, Sole, had to be given several sedatives.

We spent that night with Mauricio, and over dinner he told us of his unconditional love for Benito. We were struck by the force of his passion. We were in the presence of a truly exemplary father. He told us things that neither of us ever want to hear again; things that you sometimes think but rarely share, even with your closest friends. That night, Mauricio wasn't measuring his words; he was speaking the unadorned truth. Which is why we were doubly appalled.

"The bond I have with my son can't be compared to the one I feel for Soledad. One love has nothing to do with the other. Ultimately, your wife is a stranger. She's not of your blood. She's an outside being. When the baby was with the doctors—and not responding—it occurred to me that I could more easily see Soledad die than Benito."

That same night, Carla hinted at the possibility of

getting a dog for the house. Something small and civilized. A Chihuahua, for example. Or one of those “Hush Puppies.”

“Something to unite us, not to separate us,” she whispered in the dark.

The following morning, walking along the Vergara wharf, we realized that we had no need for an animal. No mascots, no intruders.

“Just you and me.”

“Just us. Who needs anything else?”

That was a year ago. Yes, a little over a year.



Carla and I enjoyed studying. We both had received M.B.A.s from the business school at Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez. After graduating, we decided to periodically attend continuing-education courses so as to keep sharp. Not long ago we participated in one on cloning and cybernetics. We really enjoyed another, held at the Federico Santa Mará, called “Parabolas of the Apocalypse: Hybridism and Chaos in Latin America.”

That semester, we signed up for a night course called “Tracking Shot: Documentary Films and Films as Documents” offered by the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. The professor was one Don Bartolomé Paternostro Villalba. He must have been about seventy and wasn’t very tall. Tiny, even. Almost a dwarf. Everything about him was in proportion; it’s just that he was short. Very short.

Professor Paternostro Villalba studied medicine and had worked for years—perhaps decades—as a pediatrician. In fact, his hands were like a child’s. His true field, however, was film. He meticulously directed and produced five documentary features during the fifties and sixties. From what we knew, all were considered legendary throughout Europe, and we had the privilege of seeing all five of them in class. We es-

pecially admired *Urchins*, which chronicled two vagrant children who roamed the hills of the port city.

The professor was married to a woman who was also quite small and round, almost like a ball. If you were to see them roaming the halls of the old university from a distance, you might think they were two children in disguise. Those who didn't know them often backed away with looks of shock on their faces.

The wife's name was Celinda del Valle, and she used to be a famous radio actress. Her voice was low, gravelly, and somewhat disquieting. She was older than Don Bartolomé, easily pushing eighty, and would sit in the front row of the class and note down every word that came out of her husband's mouth. Her skin was clear and bright, and her tiny green eyes lent a measure of cheer to her fragile, decrepit persona. But it was her hair—jet black, without a single strand of gray—that stood out above all.

Ever since we first met them, Carla and I couldn't stop talking about them. Sometimes we'd spend hours speculating about their respective lives and pasts. It's as if the Paternostros had taken control of our subconscious minds.



One night after class, we were out walking and—I'm not sure how—ended up having dinner with them at a restaurant called Hamburgo. It ended up becoming something of a ritual: every Thursday, after class, the four of us would get together for dinner. We took turns paying the bill.

Needless to say, Carla and I very much enjoyed the company of this unique couple. We learned a lot about the two of them, and found them both entertaining and surprising. It was the first time that we found ourselves trusting people other than ourselves. Maybe we were projecting ourselves onto them. It could be; I won't deny that. And unlike most

other elderly married couples, they showed no signs of fatigue or resentment. Of course, they didn't have any children. Nothing bound them together save for the desire to be together.

Two weeks ago, the professor showed us an old 16mm copy of *Battleship Potemkin*. Though the syllabus didn't include any Russian films, Paternostro Villalba used Eisenstein's work to illustrate two ideas he felt were crucial: the use of cinema as a revolutionary instrument, and cinema as manifesto. The famous scene on the steps leading to the Odessa harbor immediately reminded me of the Chicago train station sequence in *The Untouchables* with Kevin Costner. I pointed out the connection, but Paternostro didn't know what I was talking about. He didn't know—nor had he heard of—Brian DePalma's work.

That night, the four of us were walking down the narrow Esmeralda Street when the professor informed me that they owned neither a VCR, a TV, or a computer, much less a DVD. What's more, they hadn't been to a movie theater in years.

I immediately felt that this was an opportunity for us to grow, and explained to them what the Web was, complete with chat rooms and Real Audio.

"Now you can send letters without paper, without stamps, and without having to go to the post office. All you have to do is hit a button and presto, it's there."

They looked at us as if we were from another planet. For our next class we brought printouts of the Internet Movie Database entries on all of the professor's own documentaries. The tiny old folks were dumbstruck.

It was Carla who suggested that we give them our old PowerBook Gc, which was currently buried at the bottom of a closet.

"It could change their lives," she said, fascinated by the prospect.

That Tuesday we presented the Paternostros with our

offer, which Celinda immediately refused. They couldn't accept such an impressive gift, she said. We explained that it wasn't nearly as expensive as they thought, and that computers weren't luxury items anymore; they were simply appliances. I added that they should face the new century connected to the future.

"Plus, it's the best way there is to connect with the past," Carla said.

We continued to insist, even at the risk of looking foolish.

"You'll be able to read foreign newspapers, search for trivia, and load up on all sorts of information. You have no idea how much fun it is."

After lengthy deliberations and several detours through the city's streets, we ended up in front of the Plaza Victoria, with them surrendering in the face of modernity.

"All right. You win."

We made plans for a Saturday afternoon at their house in the Cerro Cordillera.

"You'll come over for tea."

Before saying goodbye, they drew us a map on a paper napkin. That night, we slept especially well, which may be why we woke up two hours late. Neither of us heard the alarm.



The house isn't a house but rather an apartment complex hidden behind some leafy pepper trees at the end of a narrow alley that smells of ammonia. The building is small and squat and looks like something that belonged near the docks. I ring the bell several times.

No answer.

The sea breeze batters against the zinc roof of the neighboring homes. The whole hill seems to be shaking, while down below, the sea is high and lightly golden.

A wrought-iron gate bars my way. I push it and it swings open: unlocked.

I go inside, my footsteps echoing like synthesized beats. A thick dampness has collected inside; the sun can't reach in here. I pick my way up a blind, spiral staircase to the third floor, where I find myself in front of a metal door and a sign that reads: **D . VILLALBA PATERNOSTRO, PEDIATRICIAN .**
HOURS : 4 TO 7 PM.

I knock.

Nothing.

Then I hear a sound, as if someone were ice-skating during a curfew.

I knock again.

Immediately, the tiny Celinda—her hair full of lacquer—opens the door.

"We were expecting you," she says, after noticing that I'm alone.

The professor is in the background, looking out a window that hasn't been cleaned in years. As always, he's dressed in a jacket and tie, though today—in this context—his clothes seem expired, anachronistic.

"Look out for Perséfona," he cautions.

"What?"

"Watch that you don't step on her."

Lying on the ground, on a spongy Persian rug, I see a cat as black as Celinda's hair. It's a fat, swollen, female cat to be precise. The light is weak and I can't make out much, but I do see a stain next to the animal.

"The poor thing is a bit ill," Paternostro explains.

Just hearing this seems to give my foot a life of its own. I have to control myself to keep from stepping on the beast.

"Do you like cats?"

I look at the doctor and, before trying to select a good lie, I respond with my eyes.

"You're more of a dog person," he says.

"Yes, actually."

"That's a big mistake. Like children, dogs will eventually abandon the home. Cats always return."

I'm not sure how to respond. I smile, tense and uncomfortable.

"Sit here at the table with us," Celinda orders. "We were just about to have an anisette. Or perhaps you'd prefer a cup of tea?"

"No, no, no. An anisette seems fine to me."

The professor goes into the kitchen, while Celinda observes me. After a while, she says, "And your woman, *muchacho*? Why didn't she come with you? The two of you are always together, it's like you're Siamese twins."

"She's not feeling well."

"Not feeling well?"

"Yes. Since yesterday," I reply. "But she sends her regards."

Celinda opens a cigarette case and selects a dark, exquisitely thin one. Before she lights it, she asks, "Does she have a headache?"

"She feels weak, she has a migraine, yes. And an upset stomach."

"Nausea?"

"A bit. It's just that we had some Chinese food for lunch yesterday that had been sitting in the fridge for a few days."

"And you didn't call a doctor?"

"No, she's not that bad. She just had a tough week at the bank, and I think all she needs is a bit of rest."

"So the Chinese food didn't bother you, but it did upset her. That's odd. She's not pregnant, is she?"

"I don't believe so."

Celinda looks me straight in the eyes. Her gaze seems challenging, intrusive even.

"You don't believe so or you just don't know?"

"I don't believe so. It's impossible."

"How can it be impossible? May I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you and Carla sleep together?"

"Yes."

"Often?"

"Yes, very often."

"Ah."

Celinda drags on her cigarette and exhales the smoke past the chandelier that hangs from the ceiling.

"Then why is it impossible?"

"Because we take precautions."

"I have seen many things in this life. Sometimes the most careful people are also the most combative. Every woman eventually wants to prove that she's a woman. Even if she changes her mind later. We, on the other hand, have always known that . . ."

Suddenly, Don Bartolomé walks back into the living room.

"We've always known what?"

"That film was really your calling."

He is carrying a tray with a bottle of Anis del Mono, three glasses, a bucket of ice, and a bottle of club soda. A cup

holds some two dozen quail eggs, their shells covered in tiny spots. Celinda serves the drinks like a professional.

"I see you've come without the machine," says Pater-nostro. "You've relented."

"The computer is in my briefcase, Professor."

"What? We thought that you were bringing a behemoth. We cleared off the whole writing desk."

"Nowadays they have computers that are even thinner and lighter than this one."

"Who would have guessed it!"

We sip our anisette. Celinda shells the eggs, removes the yolks, and sprinkles them with salt before offering them to the doctor. I don't know why she doesn't offer any to me, and I don't dare ask, either. The truth is, I don't want to taste them—much less on top of anisette.

"I'm thinking about finishing an unreleased documentary, young man. You might be interested in helping me. I've got a couple of rolls of film with images of María Luisa Bombal."

"That old drunk."

"Get, woman. Let me finish. There will be no sound, and I don't think it will run over twenty minutes. She's walking through Viña del Mar. Reading her books. That sort of thing. Do you think that, with modern technology, we could . . ."

There's a knock at the door.

We fall silent.

"It must be the veterinarian," says Celinda. "I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all."

"It shouldn't take but five minutes," replies Don Bartolomé before getting up from his chair.

I watch him as he crosses the immense living room. Celinda follows him. I notice that they both walk the same way.

A shaft of light filters in as the door is opened. It falls

on the cat. The three of them remain at the door, conversing silently.

The vet is a sandy-colored guy with Slavic features and crew-cut hair. He looks like a student. The contrast in age is obvious, even shocking. It's the same with their respective heights: he must be a foot and a half taller than the two of them, I figure.

Celinda closes the door, and once again the room is cast in dusky shadows. The veterinarian kneels next to the cat and examines it closely, probing and prodding it gently. Then he waves to Paternostro to come pick her up, which is no easy task: the cat must weigh a ton. They disappear through a door that I hadn't noticed until now.

The vet's medical case remains behind, on the floor.

I get up and, without knowing what else to do, take out the laptop and place it on the recently cleared writing desk. Celinda reappears to retrieve the veterinarian's case. I see her reflection in the mirror.

"I was just going to suggest that you get started. The doctor wants to examine Perséfona. She's not so young anymore; she's almost as old as me."

She then whispers: "I think we are going to have to put her on a diet."

"I'll need a phone jack."

"We only have one phone, the one over there. I hope you're not going to leave us without a line, *niño*."

"Just for a few minutes, that's all. Only while we're surfing the Web."

Celinda regards me with a look of incomprehension.

"Just make sure we're connected when you're done. No funny stuff."

"No funny stuff," I repeat.

I wait for her to go back into the room where the cat, the vet, and the professor are waiting. I unplug the phone and notice that it's one of those old models with a four-pronged plug—there's no way to connect the modem. Maybe I should call the phone company and ask for a better system.

I plug the phone back in and immediately it jumps to life.

I leap back as if electrocuted, seeking refuge behind a chair. The phone is veritably shaking with each ring.

As I return to it, ready to answer, it stops.

Silence.

Then I see the veterinarian. He's sporting a white coat and latex gloves, and has a metallic syringe in one hand. He contemplates me for a moment, then turns away and disappears back into the room.

The silence is broken by the wailing. Wailing that rattles the glasses on the table. I take a few steps toward the room. The cries rise and fall, like a tide. I reach the door and see the figure of Professor Paternostro Villalba stretched out on a bed. He's embracing the animal.

My shoe hits something viscous and transparent. I look down at the rug: a gelatinous, placental pool lies in the cat's place. In Perséfona's place.

The veterinarian appears with a plastic utensil and a stack of paper towels. She must be giving birth, I think. He looks down at my feet: "And you are . . . ?"

"A friend. A student of the professor's, actually. Is something happening?"

"The animal is very sick."

Don Bartolomé starts to cry again, his sobs mixing with words I can't quite make out. But it doesn't matter much. It's as if I understand. As if I understand it all.

"I'm going to have to put her down immediately," he says to me flatly.

No words escape my lips.

"There's nothing I can do. She's suffering from massive hemorrhaging. It's very bad; the poor thing is sunk so deep in pain that it can't even cry out."

"But now? Right this minute? Couldn't you . . ."

"I think it's best if you leave. I'll take care of everything here. Don't worry. I'll tell them that you said goodbye."

"Isn't there anything I could . . ."

"I think they'd prefer to be alone. You have to understand: they weren't expecting this. Childless people care deeply for their pets."

The veterinarian returns to his work. As I start to put the computer back in my briefcase, I notice the bottle of liquor. I take a swallow. Just then, I see her. Celinda. She's standing against a wall.

"~~D~~n't go. Stay with me."

Celinda offers me her hand. I look at the door, then take it. It's slight and fragile; I can feel the tenuous skin and the veins beneath. Even her pulse. Celinda walks over to a sofa, and I can do nothing else but follow her. She sits, and I do so as well. Then she releases my hand and covers her face with both of hers.

From the bedroom, I hear, "No, no, not yet! Five more minutes!"

Nothing I've experienced in my life has prepared me for this moment. How did I get myself into this? What am I doing here? What is all this about?

I try not to know. But I do: I know one thing. I know I cannot escape.

Celinda sits in my lap and curls up like a little girl. She's so tiny and slight. She remains like that: crushed, lifeless, in agony. I touch her hair, caress it softly.

The veterinarian emerges from the room. He sees us, and walks over.

I look at my hand: it's black, stained with dye.

"She's in heaven now. She's not going to suffer anymore."

Celinda looks up; the veterinarian helps her to her feet. Her makeup is running.

"~~D~~n Bartolomé needs her."

Celinda doesn't look at me. She walks, trembling, into the bedroom, and disappears. I remain on the sofa, trying to recover that which I've just now lost. Weak and heavy with grief, I am barely able to get up and make my way over

to the door. I leave. I walk down the hallway and descend the spiral staircase. I come to the iron gate. I push on it: it doesn't move, doesn't give way.

It's raining outside. Night has fallen, and I can barely see a thing.

Lost



In a country full of missing people, disappearing is easy. All the efforts are concentrated on the dead, so those of us who are among the living can fade quickly away. They won't come looking; they won't even realize you're gone. If I've seen you before, I don't remember. You see, everyone down there has bad memories. Either they don't remember, or they simply don't want to.

A professor once told me that I was lost. I replied that in order to lose yourself, first you'd have to know where you are.

Then I thought: What if it's the reverse?

I was erased for fifteen years. I abandoned everything, including myself. There was a quiz I never took. My girlfriend was having a birthday party and I never showed up. I got on a bus bound for Los Vilos. I didn't have a plan; it just happened. It was what had to happen, and there was no turning back.

At first I felt guilty. Then pursued. Would they be after me? Would they find me? What if I run into someone?

But I didn't run into anybody.

They say that the world is a handkerchief. It's not. People who say that don't know what the world is like. It's huge and—above all—strange and foreign. You can roam far and wide and nobody will care.

Now I'm an adult. In some ways. I've got hair on my back, and sometimes the zipper doesn't zip. I've been to a lot of places and done things I never thought I'd do. But you survive. You get used to things. Nothing is so bad. Nothing.

I've been to a lot of places. Have you been to

Tumbes? To the port of Buenaventura? Or San Pedro Sula? What about Memphis?

Like a puppy, I followed a Kmart checkout girl as far as El Centro, California, a town that smelled of fertilizer. The relationship started off better than it ended. Then I went to work in the casinos in Laughlin, Nevada, that lined the Colorado River. I lived in a house across the way in Bullhead City with a woman named Frances and a guy named Frank, but we never saw each other. We left each other notes. Both of them were bad spellers.

Once, in a diner in Tulsa, a woman told me that I reminded her of her son who'd never come home. "Why do you think he left?" she asked. I said I didn't know, but maybe I did.

Or maybe not.

Without wanting to, I ended up teaching English to Hispanic children in Galveston. The Texas flag looks a lot like Chile's. One of the girls died in my arms. She fell off the swing set: I'd pushed too hard and she flew out of her seat. It seemed like she flew for two minutes through the hazy Gulf sky. I didn't want to hurt her, but nevertheless I did. So . . . what?

What can you do?

Have you been to Mérida, on the Yucatán? In the summer there it hits 108 degrees, and they close off the downtown area on Sundays so the people can dance. Sometimes I find a girl and join in.

Last year I decided to Google my own name. Maybe they were searching for me. But even I couldn't find myself. Just a guy with the same name as me who lives in "Barquisimeto, Venezuela," and has a dental practice. He has three children and believes in God.

Sometimes I dream about living in Barquisimeto, having three children, and believing in God. Sometimes I even dream that they have found me.

MORE STARS
THAN IN HEAVEN



SCENE ONE; TAKE ONE. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. WIDE PANNING SHOT.

It's night, and the light bathing us flickers between an Agfa purple and a Fuji indigo. There's something unreal in the sky, almost as if everything were a stage set and the night were an American one. But in some ways it is. American, I mean. It's "day for night"—*día por noche*—or, in other words, filming a nighttime scene during the day. But you can tell . . . you can always tell. That's the problem with special effects. The moon doesn't cast such shadows, and the sea never reflects so much light. Or maybe it does. Tonight is exhibit "A". The moon is Kodak-yellow, full of acne and pus, and I see shadows. My shadows. I see them everywhere I turn, and they follow me everywhere I go.

It rained during the ceremony, but now the sky has cleared to reveal more stars in heaven than there are down here on earth. All over the city, spotlights are beaming up into the firmament. It's just like the Twentieth Century Fox logo. Exactly. A perfect replica. Further down from this hill, a wide valley yawns and falls away. Everything smells of jacarandas and magnolias, and jasmine too, I think; it's something intense, tropical, and exotic, like dancing with a sweaty girl who's just finished squeezing mango juice.

I look out through the giant storefront window: traffic is at a standstill, but yet it beats and breathes and seems almost to multiply.

Los Angeles, California. El-ay.

Welcome.

For English, press one. Para español, marque dos.

SCENE TWO; TAKE THREE. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. PANNING SHOT.

We're in a Denny's with aesthetic pretensions. Edward Hopper meets David Hockney, with a twist of Tim Burton for added flavor. The two of us are seated on chrome stools, propped up at the bar. Denny's purports to be a family coffee shop, but really it's just a vestige of the days when families still existed. The menu's big, laminated pages are stuck together with pancake syrup and covered with photos of the different things you can order: lots of whipped cream, french fries, sprigs of parsley, and glasses of water with too much ice.

They don't serve alcohol at Denny's, but they do serve coffee. The real white-trash American stuff. Like decaf rainwater. No Starbucks skim milk cappuccinos, or espresso with fucking panna. None of that European sophistication, please. Denny's is Denny's, and it doesn't care about the always-hip, always-happening, look-who-the-fuck-is-here Sunset Strip. Here they serve Grand Slam breakfasts 24 hours a day. Plus, Denny's is the only cheap joint on the entire hill. Talk is cheap, but love is not. It's crystal clear.

"Can I have a refill?" Gregory asks the waitress, a girl with curly, cinnamon-brown hair, full hips, and a green uniform that's about a size too small for her. She's wiping crumbs off the low-cal margarine-colored Formica counter and whistling something that sounds a lot like Gloria Estefan.

The English that Gregory—aka Gregorio, aka Greg de la Calle, or Greg from the Streets—speaks is a very British-private-school, striped-tie sort of English. He perfected it by watching too much *Nueva Yol* and PBS, Charlie Rose kind of thing. His Spanish, on the other hand, has sunk to the generic

Univisión level. I'm more "Yo quiero Taco Bell." It's a cute accent, but in the end it's still an accent.

"You want more coffee, bro?"

"No," I tell him. "I'll pass."

Here in el Norte, people are always asking me, "Where you from, man?" *De dónde eres?* It's a good question: Where am I from? They never ask, "What do you do?" Nothing, really. Nothing I like, anyway.

Rosie Perez is restocking the tables with pink and blue packets of sugar and Sweet-n-Lo. She doesn't seem to hear. I examine her shoes: they're plain and cream-colored, like a nurse's. Or like Michael Caine's in *Dressed to Kill*. Exactly. And whatever happened to De Palma? When did he go and step in it? When did I? Hell, I used to like him so much, I'd get off on his tracking shots. I remember when I first came to the States, I tried to talk like Tony Montana. Like Al Pacino in *Scarface*: "Who do I trust? Me!" But not anymore, pal. If you were to ask me now what my favorite De Palma film is, I'd say—without a second thought or a moment's hesitation—*Estallido mortal*. *Blow Out*. I saw it on my birthday: an eleven P.M. showing at Cine Las Condes with Viviana Oporto at my side. But that was a long time ago, in a far-off place called home.

And mi casa *no es* su casa.

"Can I get another refill?" Gregory halfheartedly insists.

"Free refills, honey," replies Penélope Cruz. "Las veces que tú quieras. As many as you want. All you can drink. Need a little half-and-half?"

"Thanks," he says in his dry, annoyed, hard-to-kill voice.

I slide a strip of bacon below my eggs and—with a slice of toast to cap it off—try to form a smiley face. But to me the thing just looks depressed, dubious, and cholesterol-ridden.

"Man, how did she know?"

"How did she know what?"

"Back in New York they always ask me if I'm French or Italian. Or they think I'm from Spain. Do I look Hispanic to you? Do I have Latino features?"

"More like Banana Republic."

"Watch it. Don't forget who you're talking to. I changed countries, but I changed my status too."

"You are what you are," I say, without believing it myself.

Later I thought: You are what you cease to be. That's the good and the bad of it.

"Banana Republic," repeats Gregory. "¿Te crees muy divertido?" You think you're funny?

"I used to be funnier. This country has sucked the humor right out of me."

"Just for the record: I might shop at Banana Republic, but I don't come from one."

"Relax, buddy. *Calma.*"

I sip a bit of coffee. It's lukewarm, dead. I look back out at the giant signs towering over Sunset: KROQCLASSIC ROCK. ABSOLUT HOLLYWOOD. SALMA HAYEK USES REVLON.

"I'm not just any old immigrant. I'm not here because I'm hungry."

"You sure about that?"

SCENE THREE; TAKE TWO. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. AMERICANA SHOT.

The lined-up limousines form a sort of train that halts traffic all up and down Sunset. Sunset Boulevard. The Sunset Strip. I can see the clubs and restaurants thronged with celebrities and TV cameras. Farther off—and a bit out of focus—I see Tower Records, the Chateau, and Whisky-a-Go-Go. Off camera—on the Mediterranean beach of a parking lot—sits a Jaguar convertible the color of Key Lime pie, a steel-gray Bentley, my own beat-up Mustang still covered with dust from the long road trip, and three stretch limousines with tinted windows.

It's four A.M. Do you know where your limo is?

A Panamanian man comes in, hawking copies of the *Hollywood Reporter's* special edition. I tell Rubén Blades that I already know who won. I was there. Behind the scenes, bro, taking pictures. Close—you know, so close—but it wasn't close enough.

I got my threads at the local Rent-a-Tux in Los Feliz—The Happys—an old neighborhood that's supposed to be cool and hip and all fucking designy. I'll return it later, in the morning, when I'm about to start the drive back to Atlanta. Two full days on the road: there's a lot of continent between California and Georgia. Suddenly I think that I might like to take a little detour through Mississippi or Louisiana and stop by the houses I once slept in. All those Rotarians I once met . . . are they still alive? Lucky for him, Gregory is staying here. For a while, at least. He wants to give this town a chance, since so far New York hasn't coughed up much at all. He doesn't think so, but in any case it's his decision. Gregory's decision.

This tux doesn't seem to fit me the way Lázaro Santander's fit him tonight. Lázaro was a classmate of ours back in film school. A friend, acquaintance, and an enemy. He was nominated for—but lost—the Oscar in the best short documentary category, and he had to pay his own way up from Santiago for the ceremony. The Academy only allocated him a single, upper balcony seat, and so he'd had to fly solo. Not that he'd had anyone to go with him, of course. But even so, he's the first one of us to make it this far. The first and—in all likelihood—*el único*.

Gregory bought his tux at a liquidation sale somewhere in Manhattan. It is (he informs me) from a very trendy designer. *Muy a la moda*. He considers it an investment, figuring that he'll be able to use it more and more as he starts to attend more galas and film festivals in the future. You won't last long in Los Angeles without a tux, he says.

"I feel like I'm in costume," I admit.

"It's because you don't believe in yourself, Frigerio. You don't have enough self-confidence."

"Not enough self-confidence. Interesting. You've been watching a lot of Oprah, I see."

"You done joking around? I'm just trying to help you out here, to give you some advice . . ."

"Fine, go on."

"You don't feel like you deserve to go through life in a tux."

" 'Go through life in a tux.' Nice line."

"Hey, man, you're just afraid of success. You've got 'loser' written all over your face. With a capital '*ele*.' "

"*I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me . . .*" I sing.

"That's it. And—forgive me for being blunt—that's the difference between you and Lázaro 'Oscar-nominated' Santander."

"And what about the difference between him and you? Can we ever know?"

Gregory takes a sip of water. A drop escapes his lips

and falls on the black fabric of his tuxedo jacket, where it just sits, like a transparent ladybug.

“It’s obvious you never used to wear a tux.”

“And you have?”

“Mentally, yeah. Since I was a kid.”

SCENE FOUR; TAKE FOUR. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. MID-RANGE SHOT.

"Hey man, what'll you do if you ever win an Oscar someday?"

"What?"

Gregory's hair is combed straight back off his forehead. One day, this guy will be bald.

"What were you thinking about?"

"About them," I say, and point. Two petite girls—looking like something out of a japanimation cartoon or Shonen Knife comic—are seated at the other end of the bar with their plastic clutches and digital cameras. They're watching us, and whispering like groupies. Sitting next to them and drinking milkshakes are three underage, PG-13 gringas. Real Aaron Spelling 90210 material. They're staring at us too, but it's not a bad thing. Not bad at all.

"I wouldn't mention Chile," Gregory proclaims. "No fucking way."

What would I say? Who would I thank? Would I start to cry?

"I'd like to pay tribute to all the great Hispanic cinematographers who have shined a light on Hollywood through a different sort of filter. This Oscar must also go to Néstor Almendros, Gabriel Figueroa, Juan Ruiz-Anchía, Reynaldo Villalobos, John Alonzo, Rodrigo Prieto, and Emanuel Lubezki."

I notice that the Sailor Moon girls have started taking pictures of us.

"Hey, they must think we're famous. I hope I used enough gel."

One of the 90210 girls whispers something to the other one, then flicks her blue-stained tongue at me.

“Man, if I win one,” Gregory rants, “I’ll get in my limo with one of those hot and horny sashimi chicks, roll up the privacy window, and let her go down on me . . . and my Oscar too. What do you think, bro? Nice idea, right?”

“Yeah, nice idea. You’re so romantic.”

SCENE FIVE; TAKE TWO. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. OPENING SHOT.

Lázaro's short documentary is on Víctor Jara. He interviewed everyone who knew the man with a digital camera (blown up to 35mm), but the piece focuses on a marginal character who was born the same week that Jara was assassinated. His parents baptized him Víctor Jara Carrasco. Santander even got in touch with Eduardo "Open Veins" Galeano, who provided the on-and-off narration. Very few politically correct foreign films have ever been nominated in this category (that's undeniable), which makes Lázaro's achievement the cinematic equivalent of scoring a goal all the way from midfield.

The winning documentary was done by a Kosovar-American from Berkeley. He and Lázaro both participated in a roundtable discussion at the Academy's offices which few people attended. We were there, though. Afterwards we went out to lunch with Lázaro at a bistro overlooking Santa Monica beach. He quickly filled us in on what his day had been like: rubbed shoulders with a few producers; did some networking and schmoozing and swapping of emails. It looks like there's a good chance he'll get the funding to do his next project, which Gregory insists on calling *Honey, I Kidnapped the Kids*. But the joke is done, and that day at lunch he just keeps quiet. The story deals with two kids from a military family who, as teenagers, discover that their parents were left-wing activists killed during Operation Condor, also known as the Guerra Sucia—the Dirty War.

"Man, check out the rack on that *gringuita*. You may have to cheat on your *cubana*. This is gonna be tough. Real tough."

Gregory studied at the Escuela de Cine on Macul Street with the rest of the group and me. Along with Lázaro and Teo, we filmed a short piece called *Matiné, Vermouth y Noche* that we entered in the Havana Film Festival, and then he and Lázaro made a slasher flick that they submitted to Avoriaz. Eventually, Gregory left to go off to NYU's film school, where he took intensive seminars with Spike Lee and Milos Forman, and he even went drinking once with Oliver Stone. Now he lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He's a correspondent for a pair of South American online publications, works at an alternative video store called Kim's, takes classes, uses Final Draft Professional Scriptwriting Software to write bad screenplays that nobody ever reads, and accepts the fact that his parents make periodic deposits into his Citibank account.

I went off to Miami—the real Miami, with zero South Beach and zero tropical glamour—where I started out with Don Francisco, our national hero and product of non-traditional exportation. Through a friend of my sister, I landed a pretty easy gig: segment producer. Within a month I was earning more than all my friends back in Chile. But there's no such thing as a free lunch. Selling out is expensive. I lasted there for two years, until I was offered an editorial position at CNN en Español. At first I said no, but then I changed my mind.

You get used to a certain way of life; you start to fear “middle-class poverty” and not being able to possess everything within reach. I wanted gadgets, digital cameras, and new-release DVDs. So I went to Atlanta. And there I am. Doing fine. No complaints.

Actually there are, but I keep them to myself.

Sometimes, late at night, I go online and chat with Chileans whom I don't know. I read *La Tercera*, listen to Iván Valenzuela on Real Audio, and follow the latest telenovelas. I like to be up-to-date; I like to feel like I never left, and that I'm one of them.

Lázaro stayed in Chile. He made a few more shorts and documentaries, and pimped himself for publicity. He filmed *Victor II*, which garnered him his nomination.

Disco music begins to ooze out of the Denny's speakers:

That's the way, uh-huh uh-huh, I like it . . .

"This is a disco kind of night," I mention to Gregory before taking a sip of my water-with-too-much-ice.

And now the water is spiked with gin. Gin from the blue bottle we swiped from any one of the many after parties we couldn't get into. Lázaro had told us that he'd try to get us on the list for the Miramax party at Spago's, but that didn't happen. Then Gregory tried to sneak into the *Vanity Fair* spot, but we were kicked out by a Hotel Mondrian bouncer. Drew Barrymore kept glancing over at us, looking astonished and aghast and even sorry for us.

"Yeah, man, very *Boogie Nights*, very *Last Dance*."

"Can we drink gin in here?"

"It's Oscar night. Everything goes."

SCENE SIX; TAKE ONE. A DENNY'S RESTAURANT.

INTERIOR/NIGHT. VERY OPENING SHOT.

Jennifer Lopez gathers up our plates.

"Would you like anything else?"

There's something sleepy in her gaze, but something flirtatious too. Or maybe it's just my imagination.

"Some more coffee would be nice," Gregory says ironically.

An old man sits down near us. His hand is trembling, and he smells of old cheese. His skin is very pale—almost transparent—and he's wearing cowboy boots.

"Yo deseo un jugo de arándano," I tell the woman.

"You'd like a glass of what?"

"Cranberry juice."

The old man takes out a pornographic comic book. Before he even picks up a menu, Christina Aguilera brings him a cup of coffee and a bowl of oatmeal. Tom Petty is now floating through the dining room:

*I don't wanna end up
In a room all alone
Don't wanna end up someone,
That I don't even know . . .*

"Great line," I remark.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Tom Petty is in charge of the soundtrack for this trip. I'm listening to him here; we listened to him in Paris, Texas, Tulsa, and Kansas City; we heard him at the 7-Eleven in Winslow, Arizona; we listened to him while crossing John Ford's Monument Valley. Tom Petty is everywhere.

I sing along with the music: *"I'm tired of screwin' up, tired of going down . . ."*

"You've got no voice, Frigerio."

"But I've got it right, don't I? You can understand certain lyrics and certain books better in places like this."

"I guess."

"The United States is the only country on earth that produces no art. Everything that comes out of the U.S. is a documentary. Innovation isn't worth anything here. Los Angeles isn't a city—it's a fucking set."

"Kim Basinger's in this video, right?"

"Tired of myself, tired of this town . . ."

"You want to leave L.A.?"

"No," I say. "Sometimes I want to leave the country."

"The country?"

"Yes, *huevo*n. I don't want to end up down-and-out like this poor old guy."

We both look over toward the old man. Bits of oatmeal have splattered on his shirtsleeve.

"That's us in forty years."

I think about the end of John Huston's *Fat City*. Stacy Keach asks Jeff Bridges if he thinks their decrepit old trainer was ever a young man. Bridges—who must have been about twenty at the time—says no.

"Have you seen *Fat City*?"

"What?"

"Ciudad dorada. Fat City. They had it on video back at school. It ends with Jeff Bridges and Stacy Keach in the café. Together yet alone. They don't have anything to say to each other, but there they are, keeping each other company."

"I haven't seen it."

"You should. Conrad Hall was the cinematographer. Filmed it in Stockton, California. It's not often that you see a place that ugly churn out something so cool."

"Look, I already said I haven't seen it. Why do you go around relating everything to films, anyway?"

"Christ, because films always come to an end, even if at the end everything is still up in the air."

"Okay! Okay! Sometimes I don't know why I put up with you."

I swirl my coffee and watch the old man. His gaze appears to be unfocused. His hands tremble. He hasn't got a single friend in all the world. But what about me? Do I have anybody? Why do I feel alone, even when I'm with Yamila? Or maybe solitude has more to do with being in the wrong place than with the right woman? Is she really the one? The only one? Why doesn't it feel like it? Why is it easier to be alone in Chile than to be with someone in Miami, or Atlanta, or fucking L.A.?

"Once again, you're mistaken," says that son of a bitch Gregory.

"Once again. Why not. So?"

"The opportunities are here."

I think about Lázaro, about what he gained by staying, and about all that I left without even realizing it.

"Hey, man, don't even think about going back," Gregory tells me. "Not yet. You're not gonna end up like that guy."

"You never know."

"We'll go back when we're rich and famous. You think I'm gonna stay here forever? You're loco, man. I'll go back when I'm ready to retire. I don't want to be buried here. Hell no."

"Then you're already screwed. You're not from here, and you're not from there either."

"I'm from here all right. I'm a man of the world, Frigerio, and the world is mine."

"If you really felt at home over here, you wouldn't care whether you were buried here or not. That's why Mexicans stay Mexican and keep on speaking Spanish. Everyone else left because they hated their countries."

"If I were Mexican, I'd hate Mexico. How can you

not hate a country that won't let you become what you want to be. Shit, if a country can't support me, then fuck it. Chile is like kryptonite. You get anywhere near that shit, and you lose all your strength. It'll destroy you. Goddamn shitty country."

"You've never starved to death."

"Culturally I have."

"I don't know. I'm staying. For better or for worse."

"Yeah?"

A couple of days ago I renewed my contract with Turner and got a green card. Yamila wants us to buy a house. We just made the down payment, after the bank approved our loan.

"Yeah, I'm staying. For now. She's from here, so what do you want me to do? Captain's orders, not the sailor's."

"She's Puerto Rican, man. She's not from *here*."

"She is. And I'm staying. We're staying."

The Mononoke Princesses are sharing a plate of waffles, while the three Charlie's Angels continue watching us. One of them winks at us. We wink back.

"Hey, she's coming over here. Watch her tits bouncing."

Her T-shirt reads "Lost In Place." She's chewing gum and playing with her hair.

"Can I, like, ask you guys something?"

"Sure," says Gregory. "What's your name?"

"Kelly."

"Nice name."

"Are you guys, like, driving somebody famous?"

Gregory doesn't answer. He looks away. Crestfallen.

I—and I don't know why—focus on the old man's spoon. Shivering. Jumping. Twittering.

"Driving someone famous?"

"Yeah."

The girl presses on: "Yeah, you guys are driving those limos, right? So who's inside? Brad Pitt? George Clooney?"

Could we meet them? We'll do anything, of course. Anything and everything."

One of her friends comes over.

"No," Gregory replies. "We're with the Chilean delegation."

"The *what*?"

"The Chilean delegation," I interrupt. "Lázaro Santander, best foreign language film. Does it ring a bell?"

"No," admits Kelly. "Was he on TV?"

"With Susan Sarandon."

"I love her," exclaims Farrah Fawcett.

"I'm Lázaro," Gregory says. "I directed the film."

"A short film," I add. "A short documentary."

"Wow! Nice to meet you. Hi. This is Heather. And over there, that's Jackie."

Shakira returns, watching us as she refills our coffee. She hasn't brought me my cranberry juice. I think about Chile and how far away it is. I think about kryptonite, Seminario Street, the Macul School, and immense and insipid Atlanta. I think about Yamila watching TV, the fried bananas she makes when she's feeling down, and about the noisy air conditioner that won't let us sleep. I think that being a cinematographer isn't the same as just taking photos. And I think that sometimes—and without warning—stories well up out of nowhere and we forget to film them.

I swill a bit more coffee. It's lukewarm, weak, terminal.

A short SalvadoranHonduran man comes out and begins mopping the floor. The little Japanese girls have already gone.

I think about the real Lázaro Santander, the one who stayed in Santiago while we took off running. Where could he be now? Who might he be talking with tonight? Whose email addresses does he now have that we never will?

I get up and walk over to the pay phone. I pick up the receiver and dial.

“Hi, honey,” I say before she even has a chance to say hello.

“Ay, mi amor. Where are you?”

“Close,” I say without thinking, though I realize that—despite everything—it’s the truth. I’m right there. Close by.

Outside, dawn is starting to break. I see no more stars up in the heavens. The limousines are gone too. All that remains are the buses, a pair of taxis, and trucks delivering bread, delivering milk.

Fin.

The end.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES



Simón feels that all this is a parenthesis. Parentheses are like boomerangs, he says. They even look like them. Parentheses come into your life out of the blue and cut your past off from your present with a sharp, well-placed blow. You're left shell-shocked, in a sort of wasteland that belongs to nobody, not even you. You're left to drift, watchful and terrified, though unable to move. Instead of acting, you wait. You wait and hope that the boomerang returns and closes off that which was so easily opened up. Deep down, you live hoping for a signal that will serve as an excuse.

Simón feels this dead time is being drawn out more than it should be. He's getting used to it. And that's the most surprising thing: getting used to it. He looks at the boundless sky and wonders if it sags under its own sheer size. Here everything is exaggerated, immense, and the sun burns and parches you even in the shade. This is a place for people who do not scare easily, he thinks; people who aren't afraid of geography and passions that exceed the human scale. Simón Rivas feels that he shouldn't be here, but he hasn't been able to come up with a better place. At least there's space to live in between the parentheses, he thinks.

Simón thinks that sometimes he thinks too much. And he often feels that he doesn't feel anything, that it's all slipping away. People tend to put off the difficult things in life. Maybe that was his error: Simón never planned ahead, and now he's paying the price of always having lived in the present. The problem is that his present isn't much different from his past, and if something doesn't change, his future doesn't look very different from his present. Simón is glad that nobody can read his thoughts. He wouldn't know how to justify them. He wouldn't know where to begin.

The first thing Simón did when he approached the southern rim of the Grand Canyon was vomit. He wasn't sure if it was the altitude, the flawless sky, the emotion, or the spectacular landscape that yawned and fell away from him. But whenever Simón thinks of the Grand Canyon, he thinks about vertigo. That's also what comes to mind when he thinks about his failed marriage.

Simón gets in his rental car and turns the key. The radio jumps to life, blaring some Tex-Mex music from a station across the border. In the United States, you're nothing if you don't have a car, he thinks. Luckily, money is not his problem. That's the worst that can happen: to lose everything of value, and not have a peso to your name.

Embezzling company funds is no good, he thinks. You shouldn't do that. But he did. They'd already canceled his credit card. They probably know where you are, he thinks. At least they know you're not in Africa, Brazil, or Cuba. When Gaspar Rivas, one of Simón's uncles, disappeared years ago, they all thought he'd fled to Cuba. Nobody ever heard from him again, though Simón thinks he's still alive. There was a time when he wasn't so sure, but now—driving through the American desert—he's certain that Gaspar is around here somewhere. They say that prophets look to the deserts when they need to get away. When they need to take flight. In order to begin again. Gaspar wanted to have that new opportunity. Simón only wanted to kill time. Or is it time that kills you?

Simón Rivas still has his travelers' checks. Plus, he withdrew a lot of cash at that bank in Barstow, California. He remembers that the temperature hit 114 degrees that day. Fahrenheit, of course. That would be at least 40 in Chile, maybe even 45. Then he passed by the Café Baghdad, but he didn't stop because there was a busload of old German tourists parked out front. Simón hates tourists. He's not here to gather memories; rather, to forget them.

Simón ripped off his company. He ripped off his family. He was supposed to return, but he didn't. Three days in Seattle, two in San José, three in Los Angeles, a Lan Chile

flight home, his sister's birthday, and then back to the usual routine. But he didn't go back. Not yet. He knows that eventually he'll have to. Yes: nobody wants to be a con artist. He's not as daring, crazy, or hip as he'd like to be. Simón's not Gaspar. Gaspar left for an agricultural conference in Portland and never returned, was never heard from again. If you want to be erased, you have to do it yourself. You have to make the others suffer. Simón is a coward, because suffering frightens him, especially when he's the cause of it. In that sense, he wouldn't have been able to do to his wife, Natalia, what she did to him.

Or would he?

What will happen when he goes back? He's not a kid anymore. When do you stop being a kid, anyway? Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four? Simón knows that he may well have already crossed the line dividing his youth from the rest of his life. His thirty-fifth birthday could be that signal. Plus, he's dangerously close to becoming mired in what he is, not what he wanted to be. Will he get to start over? No. Why would he? In any case, it wouldn't be all bad if things ended up differently.

Simón figures that they can't kick him out of the house, because he's not living there. They gave him his apartment, of course, and the lease is in his name. Could they revoke that? No. He could be fired from the company; there was no doubt whatsoever about that. None. He hoped they wouldn't press charges. Even though anything was possible with his father. Simón had committed no crime. Or had he? It was just a loan that eventually he would repay. And he wasn't spending a fortune. Plus, he's always conducted himself in a professional manner. He's *composed*. When he was diagnosed with cancer and they removed his testicle, he didn't break down or go crazy. He didn't even spend money on counseling. His parents can't complain. The rest of his family has put them through much more suffering than he has.

This is a parenthesis, he thinks. A parenthesis that may well end up being expensive. But in the end, they'll par-

don him. He hopes. He has an excuse: his wife left him. He can play the victim and enjoy the sympathy of men everywhere. She got involved with someone else. Slept with him. With Luke Skywalker, his former best friend, whom his whole family liked. It all happened like in the worst telenovela fashion. Simón didn't used to watch them, but now he does. Now he understands them. Now he sees Tomás Cox on TV interviewing some famous people who break down and confess their sins. Now he doesn't miss Alfredo Lamadrid's show where people "speak from the heart." God, how people change when they're feeling vulnerable, hurt, defeated. People talk about their pains on shows like that. Everybody hurts, like the song. One actor confessed to forgiving his wife after she cheated on him with one of his costars. The scandal was in all the papers. Is that possible? How is it done? Is it a case of burying the hatchet? Of forgive-and-forget? Is it really fucking possible to forget?

Why do these things happen, he asks. Because you let them. Simón is never going to have a better reason to flee. Never. That's why he left. If you're not going to go astray and mislead people now, then when will you? And if they don't forgive—if they decide to cut him off for good—then at least he's free. Free like Uncle Gaspar, who didn't want to know anything else about either salmon or families.

The wind blows horizontal, marching slowly across the land like the Foreign Legion. Simón pulls over onto the shoulder of the road. Ahead of him, the pavement is lost in a mirage that no longer deceives him. The wind carries no noise, picking up nothing but sand.

Simón hasn't had any real human contact in a long time. Even the gas stations are self-service, which helps explain why he hasn't said more than a few hundred words in the past three weeks. Simón loves maps. Nothing is quite as satisfying as stopping at a rest area, taking one out of the glove compartment, and studying it . . . inventing routes, calculating mileage, and betting on unknown places.

Simón feels like the United States is colonizing his unconsciousness. The southwestern landscape he's crisscrossing reminds him of places he's been. He studied cartography at a private university that nobody either respects or even knows. He still hasn't finished his degree. Simón doesn't understand why he's working in something else. Nor does he understand why he's working with his father.

Simón's been driving around in circles, coming and going from state to state, letting himself be carried away by the names of the towns he passes through: Bisbee, Winona, Mora, Yuma, Coachella, Kayenta. When he crossed Death Valley, he stopped at Zabriskie Point, the lowest point in America. A tiny wooden sign said how many feet it was below sea level, but he didn't even try to calculate how much that was in meters. In Twentynine Palms, in the middle of the Mojave Desert, he got himself a crew cut. It was the only style they offered, as the entire town is a military base. When

you're in Twentynine Palms, you feel like you're in Iraq, Iran, or somewhere else in the Middle East. Simón looks at himself in the mirror and feels like a soldier. In Twentynine Palms he also buys a package of Fruit of the Loom underwear, and washes his pants and shirts in a twenty-four-hour laundromat. He realizes then that he's never washed his clothes before. A woman with scars on her arm offers to help him. While the machines are running, he reads a couple of women's magazines; the kind with recipes and personal quizzes in them. Some of them have been answered already, but nobody ever added up the scores. He ditches his Atilio Andreoli suit and his Zara jackets outside the supermarket. At the Joshua Tree Hotel, he decides to stop taking baths. At least, not for a while.

Simón's looking to get to Tucson. Pronounced *Tú-zon* in Spanish, or, in English, *Too-sawn*. Simón thinks about stopping there for a couple of days. He'd like to stay in the legendary Hotel Congress. Take a bath there, like in the Josh Remsen record. When he finally does decide to bathe, it will be that mythical bath.

Simón has decided not to turn on the air conditioning, and drives with the windows down instead. At a gas station he buys a bottle of Gatorade and noncarbonated mineral water. Generally he eats frozen burritos reheated in a microwave. He's also got a stash of jerky that tastes more like plastic than beef. From time to time he drinks a bottle of V-8 just to feel healthy.

Simón smells. His own odor envelops him, keeping him awake, alert, and alive. It also surprises him. How could such a nice guy give off such odors? When he first picked up the car at the Hertz office, it had zero miles on the odometer and that new car smell. Now it reeks of perspiration. Of empanadas, he thinks, which is good, because it reminds him of his native country. It also reminds him of a woman with whom he went out twice. He met her on a plane. They sat next to each other. She spoke to him about his smell. When

they landed, they decided to smell each other completely. Simón knew full well that he needed a shower, but Claudia didn't want to. She smelled of almonds, mint, unsweetened chocolate, and arugula. Afterwards she told him that he came across as more of a lover than a husband. Simón replied that he thought she would make a wonderful wife. She kissed him and said thanks.

Simón has been wearing the same gray V-neck T-shirt for ten days now. He'd bought it in a secondhand clothing store in the decrepit town of Mexicali, California. When he gets to Tucson, he thinks, he'll throw the disgusting thing out and buy another one.

People say so many things that a lot of ignorance ends up disguised as common-sense wisdom. Love, health, and wealth. Do they guarantee something? Which one is the most important? Which of them have you got? And if you have all three, what happens then? Do you just exude happiness? Plus, how do you measure love, health, or wealth? If you love someone but they don't love you back, does it count? If you have more than your neighbor but still less than you need, then what?

Simón is now passing through Ajo. Not the garlic, but the town in Arizona. Why is it that in Chile, every time somebody's not doing well, they say things are like garlic? As in, "How you doing, man? Shit, like garlic. *Como el ajo*." Why is this? Hitting rock bottom is "hitting garlic." Strange. A clove of garlic by any other name would still smell as . . . Maybe it's bad for your cholesterol or something? *Le fue como el ajo*. They always say that. Will they say that's what happened to him?

He drives on. Is it better to go deaf or blind? To be alone or in a bad relationship? How bad a relationship? Suppose a man plants a tree, has a son, and writes a novel. Why? Who came up with this shit? To be transcendent? Is that why? Transcendence is overrated. Simón planted a tree once when he was in the scouts. Right at the foot of the Lonquimay volcano. He hasn't had any children, but it's not because he's infertile. He's *very* fertile, in fact. Just as he was before the operation. He wasn't left sterile. Clearly, having children changes you. But for the better? No. Do they bring you peace? More likely the opposite. Does planting a tree confer a sense of tranquility? No. Plants become bothersome and irri-

tating when they dry out, but even when they're green, it's not enough. Or is it? No. Let's not exaggerate. Plants aren't enough. Is writing a book the answer? He doubts it. Simón doesn't write. He thinks, which he doesn't think is quite the same. Once he tried to write a story about a guy with a neighbor who makes rather strange noises. Only there is no neighbor . . . it's a ghost. He sent it in to a radio program that reads stories over the air. They never read it. But once he was asked to review some text for a deluxe-edition book on salmon.

Simón Rivas knows a lot about salmon. More than he'd ever hoped to know. He can talk for hours on salmon-related topics. His older brother Rodolfo thinks that salmon will end up saving the family. Simón suspects they'll end up sinking it instead.

It's a hardcover book with luxurious photos on fine paper, titled *The Salmon of Chile*. Simón suggested something more poetic—*Stream of Life*—but the publisher rejected it. It was first published in Spanish, and then translated into English, Portuguese, Japanese, German, French, and Italian. It was intended to be a gift book, something to seduce potential clients with. Simón's father is one of the Salmon Kings, but he doesn't smell like fish.

Simón never looks at the sea and he never ever goes near the salmon. The company is Defoe-Selkirk and is part of the Robinson Crusoe Canning Company. The same money, the same partners. The family was wealthy. Does that guarantee anything? When Simón Rivas realized that he was going to be known as one of the Robinson Crusoe Rivasés, he promised himself that he would visit the island of Juan Fernández. The island of the real Robinson Crusoe. Everywhere he goes, people say to him, "That island must be so wonderful. What is it like? Is it warm? Is the water clear?"

The other promise he made to himself was to read the book. Or, at least, to see one of the film adaptations. But he hasn't done that. If you can't be true to yourself—if you can't keep your own promises—then what can you expect of others?

In a San José hotel right in the heart of Silicon Valley, Simón orders a Domino's Pizza. It tasted different from the Domino's in Santiago. He bought his first Dr Pepper from the soda machine down the hall, but didn't much like it. He turned on the TV and began flipping through the cable channels. He thought about watching a porno, but the soft-core stuff they had on turned him off. It was raining outside. Nobody was out in the street, or on the sidewalks for that matter. It was still early, yet it seemed like four in the morning. For a while he watched a cooking show. They were preparing a pesto dish. Then he came across a movie featuring a young Jack Nicholson. He hit a button on the remote and learned that it was called *The Passenger*. Originally released in 1975. That was all. Simón decided to stick with it for a while. Nicholson plays a jaded war reporter in the middle of the African desert. He's tired of himself. He finds his colleague in a hotel room, dead of a heart attack. They were more or less the same age. Then Nicholson's eyes light up. He's got an idea. The same idea that Simón had. Nicholson takes his colleague's passport, and assumes his identity. He leaves. Meets the girl from *Last Tango in Paris*. But the dead man had many enemies, and they begin to pursue him, as far as Barcelona.

When the movie ends, Simón goes down to the Jacuzzi for a soak. It is still raining, but he's warm there in the tub. It is then that he decides not to return to Santiago right away. He'll use the company's money to roam for a spell. And he decides to take on a pseudonym: the name of the street where he grew up.

Simón realized that things weren't going well between him and Natalia one night when she stayed at her sister's house and he ended up at the movies with a group of people he didn't know very well. The movie was a rather unfunny comedy, though the people he was with laughed loud and long. That was what he noticed: not being able to laugh. It seemed symptomatic of something.

Among the people at the theater was one Lucas Walker, aka Luke Skywalker. Simón considered him to be one of his few friends, though it was always clear that Lucas was more looks and charisma than intelligence and rigor. Lucas said he was suffering from separation anxiety and all that, but Simón thought that he was getting along well enough and didn't seem to be suffering in the least.

Luke Skywalker showed up at the theater with an architect who had recently taken the name of Roser, and who didn't stop criticizing the use of space in the pub where they all set up shop later. There were other people there too, but Simón has erased them from his mind. Like that couple who announced they were going to have a child. Or that right-wing lawyer nerd. Or the couple who lived in Buin and took the train into Santiago every day. Coné Cruza was probably there too, because wherever Lucas was, Coné was never far behind. Simón wished he had a Coné. Sometimes it seemed as if Coné's only role in life was to be Lucas's friend, and to Simón it looked like he was fulfilling that role admirably.

After the drinks came, along with a tray of cheese and grapes, the group tried to suffocate the silence with a number of topics of conversation. Simón felt that he was the one who

started things off, but that wasn't quite clear. Yes, he agrees that it was the architect who threw out the topics of conversation. Ultimately, she said, you can define a person's world as a series of concentric circles. Your closest and most indispensable friends—the ones with whom you share the most visceral and unbreakable bonds—occupy the innermost circle. Then, in the next circle, you have your standard friends. Roser, the architect, said that your friends are the people you hitch your wagon to, the people you tell things to, the people who are always on your side even if you see them rarely, or hardly at all. The outermost circle, then, represents acquaintances, not the people you really know. It's people you have lunch with, or see at parties or at the office. People who seem friendly enough.

Lucas Walker asked where the parents, siblings, children, and the couple were. Roser the architect said that her family was on a different level, thought the couple—not being very sanguine—ought necessarily to be in the inner circle. Simón remembers that at that particular moment, Coné Cruz hugged Lucas, and everyone laughed. Lucas pushed him away and then gave him an affectionate slap on the back. Coné, then, began to list all the people to whom he felt close. Lucas, of course, was one of his best friends, and Natalia, Simón's wife, was a friend too. Coné put Simón in his outermost circle. Simón was taken aback, though he knew full well that he'd never be one of Coné's friends, since he seemed rather dumb and a mere sidekick of a guy who wasn't worth much on his own. Even still, he was stung.

Lucas's cell phone rang, and he excused himself—to everyone except Simón, who realized this only later.

Coné then asked Simón for *his* list. Simón was caught a bit off guard and tried to think for a moment. He drew up a list of people in his head and at the same time tried to put them in some sort of order. Just then he felt that something terrible had happened: he'd wandered onto dangerous ground. He realized that no matter how he tried to break it down, every person he knew fell in the outermost circle.

Starting with Luke Skywalker. But that didn't mean anything. Far more important was the realization that Natalia—his exquisite, fun, and refined wife—also fell in this category. Simón felt as if his bones were grating against one another. Roser the architect pressed him to name his list. Simón replied that he wasn't about to get mired in such trivial matters, and then shut up. He didn't talk for the rest of the night, but he didn't have the guts to make an early exit, either.

The conversation continued obstinately along for another hour, after which everyone got up to leave. Simón didn't chip in to cover the bill.

That trip to the movies was exactly one year ago, he thinks, while driving through the desert. Your life can change a lot in a year. In a day it can change even more.

Outside, a cold wind swept down off the Andean foothills into Santiago's upper reaches. The icy vapor escaping from Simón's mouth blocked his view. He picked his way over to his car to find the windshield completely frozen over. He cranked up the defroster, but the thick coat of ice refused to budge. For a moment, all that existed in the world was the sound of the blower.

Simón thought about the couple that was going to have a baby. Natalia didn't want any children. At least not now, she said. She wanted to travel, though they never went anywhere. Maybe they just didn't want to grow up, he thought. Maybe they didn't dare. Natalia had had a good childhood, and she wanted it to continue. Simón, however, was more interested in aging than growing.

Simón met Natalia twelve days before she was to be married. It was on a Saturday, at a birthday party. When Coné told him that the wedding was only a few days away, Simón decided to roll the dice and play with fire. Nothing will come of it, he thought. And even if something does, it won't ultimately matter. What's the worst that can happen? He wasn't going to marry her, and she wasn't going to call off her wedding just to be with him.

The next day, Sunday, he went to see her. Her fiancé,

a reporter, was out working, so he invited her to lunch. She wanted to eat on the beach. They went, and ate sea urchins and empanadas with cheese and shrimp. They drank too much white wine, and got burned by the winter sun shining over the Playa Amarilla. They ended up in a hotel near Reñaca.

That was one intense week. Crazy. Fabulous. She would come to see Simón after being with her official fiancé. On Thursday, she told him that she wasn't ready to marry him yet. The wedding was off. Both families were angry, and the fiancé needed to see a psychiatrist. Natalia told Simón that, thanks to him, she finally realized that she wasn't in love with her almost-husband. She spent the night she was supposed to be married dancing with him at a seedy joint full of prostitutes in Valparaíso's Chinatown neighborhood.

They were married one year later. Before the wedding, they did a gram of cocaine between the two of them. The priest was astigmatic and smelled of body odor. Some of Natalia's friends played covers of Soda Stereo and Virus. At the reception, they served baked salmon in a ginger butter sauce. That night, in their room at the Hyatt, they snorted another gram of coke and only had oral sex. They slept all the way to Mexico, speaking barely a word to each other the entire flight. In Cancún, they befriended a couple of Ecuadoran millionaires, and went out to dinner every night with them.

Simón never asked Natalia if she loved him. Nor did he offer up the three little words to her. That night, in the car, watching the melting ice, Simón felt himself welling up with doubts. In the end he concluded that it was no coincidence Natalia was with her sister that night and not with him. Or was she with somebody else? Why did she spend so much time at her sister's place? Was it normal that they never took each other into account? That they didn't act affectionately toward each other? Sometimes they wouldn't screw for days, and then they'd shut themselves up in their apartment and not come out. He just thought that's how things were. Na-

talia wasn't the romantic type, and she didn't look up to him. Once she called him ignorant because he didn't know who Enrique Vila-Matas was. For his part, Simón did look up to her, but he never admitted it, for fear of putting himself at a disadvantage.

Simón looked out through the windshield. Pieces of ice were sliding down toward the hood. Then he thought about Luke Skywalker and his cell phone. Simón thinks that it was in the midst of this defrosting that the boomerang struck him in the back of the head, and suddenly the parenthesis opened up.

"Where are you?"

"At a restaurant in Gallup."

"But what country?"

"In the U.S.—New Mexico, *you idiot*."

"We thought that's where you went. Everyone here is worried sick, Simón. You really screwed up this time. Had all of us scared to death. You're a fucking idiot, you know that?"

"If you're going to insult me, I'll just hang up."

"So what have you been up to?"

"Just driving around."

"You with a chick?"

"No."

"You're by yourself?"

"Yeah. I'm The Lone Ranger."

"Isn't that driving you crazy?"

"It's not as bad as you'd think. I just have to get used to myself."

Simón is speaking with Felipe, his younger brother, who's still living with their parents. Simón is the middle child, which doesn't help things. Three men who didn't even add up to one, he thinks. Like Natalia, Felipe is a journalist; he interviews people, writes articles, and sometimes even appears on a TV news program discussing current events.

"What about Dad?"

"Defending you, as always. Typical. Rodolfo is furious, of course. He wants to cut you off. Says that it's your fault that a deal fell through with some guys from Los Angeles."

"Fuck Los Angeles. You don't know what a horror that city is."

"But you're there."

"I'm out west, but I'm not in L.A., I'm in Gallup. Anyway, you *can't* say anything to anybody, bro. Not even Mom."

"You really should come back and set everything right. Explain it to them."

"I can't. You saved yourself, not me."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"You're the first person I've spoken to in eighteen days."

"Everyone here thinks you're crazy. Rodolfo says you're an asshole, and he's ready to kick the shit out of you. Maybe even file a lawsuit. Have you been doing you-know-what?"

"Not here. I have no contacts. Though I *would* love to do a line."

The restaurant walls are decorated with black-and-white photographs of cowboys and outlaws. Simón looks over at his table and notices that his chili con carne is waiting for him.

"I saw Biosphere II. It's near a little town called Oracle. Oráculo in Spanish. The sphere itself looks like a mall built entirely out of fiberglass."

"What is it?"

"It's an experiment. Some millionaire built this thing that's sort of like Noah's Ark. It's full of plants and animals, and oxygen is piped in. It's even got a sea, with waves and everything."

"I think I saw something like that on the Discovery Channel once. You're crazy. You really should come home. Natalia called me to see if I'd heard from you."

"Natalia?"

"Your ex-wife."

"I know who she is. Anyway—and this is the strange thing—I really don't hate her. I try, but I just can't."

"She was with her mother. She said she feels cheated."

"Me too."

"She's thinking about selling the apartment."

"Tell her to deposit my share in my account so I can keep traveling."

"Running."

"Did she tell you that she slept with Luke Skywalker like eight hundred times?"

"I'm not so sure about that. But now she's with . . ."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"So tell me."

"With the guy she was going to marry in the first place."

"It makes sense."

"You're not coming home, then?"

"Not yet. There's no rush. Or am I about to miss something important?"

Simón watches as the turning blades of the fan are reflected in the mirror. The sun filters in through the blinds and falls in symmetrical patterns on the wall over his body. The window looks out over the train station and, beyond that, the hills surrounding the city of Tucson. Out in the streets, the homeless and vagabonds panhandle, in both Spanish and English. He's stretched out on a bronze folding bed. The room is spacious, and the carpet is decorated with images of cactuses, sombreros, and boots. The wooden desk has a red leatherette-bound Bible in one of its drawers, and atop it sits a black rotary phone, looking rather retro. The room also has a dresser, a bathtub (just like in the famous song), and an old radio. There is no television; only your imagination, memories, and dreams.

Simón wants to sleep, but he's too tired. He can't read anything besides magazines or newspapers. His attention span is nil. A copy of the *Tucson Weekly* gathers dust on a rickety wooden chair.

Simón holds his breath and examines his body. Sometimes he feels that the person inhabiting this body has nothing at all to do with him. He's not the man he once was. His body has changed. He draws his stomach in and contemplates his ribs. He notices that his neck and arms are tanned, though the rest of his body is not. This is a great room, he thinks. I could find peace here. If you're able to conquer solitude, you can conquer anything. Solitude is what people run from; it's what they fear.

It's worth it to stay at the Hotel Congress. It's an old two-storey brick building (the first floor has no rooms) set right in the heart of downtown Tucson. A dark and sometimes creaky place. The walls are all decorated with Indian motifs. It dates from the early twentieth century and has changed relatively little since then, since Tucson isn't a particularly touristy city. Just college students and Mexicans who ended up on this side of the border.

Simón has spent an entire week now shut up in his room at the Congress. He's taken his bath in the famous tub, and cleansed himself of his toxic odor. In the first-floor barber shop he got himself a shave, leaving just a goatee on his chin. The crew cut wasn't fitting well with all his facial hair. He's not sure if he's old enough to pull off such a look, but it's now or never.

The heart and soul of the Congress is the great lobby where you can go to read or to watch people coming and going. The Cup Café is the restaurant where he eats breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The Club Congress is the hippest nightclub in Tucson. Every night it's filled with students. You can't get to sleep until at least two in the morning. So that's why the place is cheap, Simón thinks. The only people who stay here are people who aren't in a hurry to get anywhere, or people who like rock music. The two go together well, he thinks.

The second floor boasts a small, private living room with a big old TV (no cable) and some well-worn armchairs. The Congress is a unique place in that it features shared rooms with a communal bath that are associated with the In-

ternational Society of Youth Hostels. Which explains why, in the lobby, there is a shelf with novels (almost all in German) left behind by travelers, and a set of brochures advertising nearby sights and attractions. Sometimes Simón sits in the second-floor room and watches TV. One night, after Conan, some New Zealanders who were passing through changed the channel and tuned in to the university's cultural station. The station was running a BBC travel show hosted by a multiethnic globetrotting couple with backpacks and a Super-8 camera. As fate would have it—and as strained as disbelief may be—that night's show was on Chile. They showed Valparaíso, those strange houses in Ritoque, and Punta Arenas. They interviewed children of *los desaparecidos*. Then the singer Pablo Herrera came on, and in his own schmaltzy way he began to wax on about Chilean romanticism. Images of the Parque Forestal and public displays of affection. In Chile, people take their affections to the streets, he says. Simón thinks it's because everyone lives with their parents, or because their "official" partners are back at home, but the singer has a different theory: "In Chile, you're nothing without a significant other. All your successes are meaningless. You're ostracized until there's nothing else you can do but leave." Simón went back to his room, but he couldn't sleep. Instead, he decided to go down to the club to get a Jack and Coke and watch the people dance.

Simón is horny, but he doesn't want to release himself. It's been two months since he either slept with a woman or masturbated. It's a strange challenge, and it makes him feel good, though at times weak or on the verge of bursting. He feels that when he finally does come, something mystical will happen, though he's not sure if he wants that to be with a woman or with himself.

Simón loves this room at the Congress. He could see himself living here. And he's getting to know the people who wander through the hotel's halls: an old cowboy with croc-skin boots, the one who looks like Elvis Costello, and the Eastern European writer who cracks a raw egg into every glass of beer she drinks and bangs out pages on a typewriter. She has the room next door to Simón, who can hear the keystrokes filter through the walls. The writer has gray, braided hair and listens to slow Johnny Cash songs, which also trickle into Simón's room, sometimes depressingly.

The backpackers who stay in the shared rooms are almost always European and rarely stay more than one night. Every once in a while, Simón bumps into someone traveling solo like himself, reading travel guides and jotting down ideas in notebooks. They don't seem like they're running from anything, but they don't seem like they're in any hurry to get on with their lives, either. The few Japanese travelers he sees are slight in stature and like to buy native arts and crafts. They go to bed early and rise at first light.

For two days now, a girl has been wandering the hotel halls. She looks to be roughly the same age as Simón. Maybe a bit younger. So, would "woman" be a better term? She

wears smallish, round glasses and her hair is short and reddish. Her chest isn't very big, but she does have a nice backside. Sometimes she watches the Spanish channel while she files her nails or knits. Simón surprised her one day during Don Francisco. Did she speak Spanish? He'd tried to strike up a conversation with her, but she didn't seem very interested. Still, he thinks she's the prettiest girl in the whole hotel.

Simón saw her again on two separate occasions. The first time was out in front of the hotel, on Congress Street. A very tall and surprisingly skinny Latino-looking guy on a mountain bike knocked her down. She shouted at him to come back, and then pushed the bike into the street. A car screeched to a halt. The girl yelled “Fuck you!” in a slight accent, and began to drag the bike inside the lobby. The Scandinavian guy tried to block her way, but she struck first with blows to his stomach and face. Blood began to seep from his nose.

The second time was at the Club Congress. Reggae night. Simón had drunk his fair share of Corona and mescal, and was beginning to fixate on a slightly anorexic girl from the university who was a regular there at the club. Simón didn’t like dancing much, but when she called him out, he couldn’t say no. He hadn’t danced in quite some time, and hadn’t been close to a woman in what seemed like centuries. With Natalia . . . they had stopped sleeping together months before he found out what was going on and went back to his parents’ house on Roberto del Río. Simón noticed then that the girl with the glasses was dancing alone, sporting a tight shirt printed with a photo of Josh Remsen. He was about to go up to her when she started kissing a fat guy with a folksy smile and a carrot-colored beard.

When the heat got to be a bit much, Simón invited the anorexic girl outside for some air. She said her name was Nicki and that she studied British lit. Simón replied that he’d studied the same thing, if only for a year before switching to cartography. Nicki said that she had no sense of orientation

whatsoever. Simón pointed out which way was north, and then Nicki kissed him on the mouth and teased him with her icy bottle of Dos Equis. She smelled of smoke and CK. Her belly button was pierced. She tried to remove his wedding ring, but it was on so tight that it wouldn't budge. Undeterred, she suggested that they go up to her room. Simón got nervous; he didn't like forward girls, preferring to take the initiative himself. Just then, a Greyhound bus rolled past with its interior lights on. They watched it continue on down the block before stopping at the station on the corner. Then they went up to the room. Neither one spoke. Nicki was drunk and only seventeen. Her belly was taut, without an ounce of fat, and her ribs showed through her skin. Simón took out a coin and bounced it off her stomach. He said his name was Roberto. Nicki said that she'd never been with a guy as old as he was. She didn't want to kiss anymore, let alone have sex, so Simón finished himself off right there on her stomach, covering her in semen. Nicki was shocked at the amount that spilled on her.

Simón was dreaming about Natalia—about the time before she stopped being a stranger—when the shots woke him up. The first one smacked into a wall; the second shattered a mirror. Shouts immediately began to fill up the hallways. People were talking anxiously in Czech and German. Another shot crashed through the window, sending shards of glass falling down onto a car below. Simón thought that someone was in his room. Terrified, he covered himself with his pillow. Shots continued to ring out, slapping, one by one, into the wall behind his bed. Then the banging on the door started. Simón then realized that the shooting wasn't in his room, but rather the one next door.

Open up! Open up!

Simón leapt out of bed in his boxers and opened the door. The hallway smelled of gunpowder and was full of people still in their nightclothes. The Mexican hotel manager came running down the hall and almost trampled him. He pulled out a key and opened the door next to Simón's room. There he saw the European writer stretched out on the ground in a pool of blood with a pistol in her hand and a good portion of her brains splattered across a poster that read *John Dillinger: Wanted Dead or Alive*. Simón felt a cold hand upon his shoulder. It was the girl with the glasses.

"This isn't going to be an easy thing to clean up," she said.

The girl began to cry. Simón tried to comfort her, but she edged away from him.

"Usually dead people don't bother me. But I knew Viveca when she was alive."

Her accent sounded familiar, but not enough to place it.

“I hope you can get back to sleep,” she said before disappearing back down the hall. Simón tried to follow her, but she was lost in the crowd. The Tucson Police Department was starting to arrive and close off the scene, and shortly thereafter they began canvassing the hotel guests. It was then that Simón realized that there was exactly two months left until his visa expired.

Simón looks out the window and watches as the train crosses an endless salt lake that now contains no water, only salt. He's on board Amtrak's *Sunset Express*. Final destination: Miami. He boarded the train a few hours ago, after returning his rental car in a Tucson suburb. Hertz charged him an additional fee, but Simón didn't care.

The train isn't very full. There's an Indian family riding in his car. Native American. Eating a type of fried bread not unlike a tortilla. Simón wonders if they've already left Arizona. He looks at the map. The train almost never stops, since there are very few places where anyone would want it to. Simón's wondering if he should get off in San Antonio, which is about a day's ride, or if he should go as far as New Orleans.

Simón thinks that last night's shooting at the hotel was no ordinary suicide. He thinks that something snapped inside the old woman's head, but he doesn't know what. Once the police were finished questioning him, Simón shut himself up in his room. He knew he should pull out of Tucson as soon as possible. He couldn't stay there much longer. He went down to the lobby, listened to some of the Mexican housekeepers gossiping, and found out that an eastbound train would be departing around noon. The hotel smelled of blood. Simón couldn't breathe. He decided to call Natalia. He heard the phone ring on the other end, and a man answered. Simón hung up.

The train stops in Deming, New Mexico. Simón gets off the train to explore the platform for a second. There are no vendors. No egg sandwiches, no fruit, no snack cakes. This isn't Mexico, he thinks; it's *New Mexico*. Two elderly folks in light blue carefully descend the steps. A guy in a cowboy hat gets on and sits down in economy class. Simón no longer has his goatee, and the sun is hammering down on his skull.

The train pulls out of the station. Simón decides to head to the all-glass viewing car. He takes a seat and stretches out his legs. The desert has the peculiar ability to annul any thought. Simón, without wanting to, falls asleep.

"The police say that she saved the last bullet to kill herself with."

Simón wakes up to see the girl with the glasses sitting next to him.

"Hi, I was at the Congress with you."

"Yeah, I remember your face."

"I'm Adriana Tejada. I know, it's a horrible name, but what can you do. What's your name?"

"Uh . . . Roberto. Roberto del Río."

"Are you from Chile?"

"For the most part."

"I used to go to Arica a lot when I was young. They'd take us to see the ocean since you guys took it away from us."

"You're Bolivian?"

"Yeah, but I was born in the U.S."

"Made in the U.S.A."

"You too?"

"No. I'm just a tourist."

"I suppose we all are on some level. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too."

"Am I bothering you?"

"No."

"Good, because I need to talk to someone. I'm glad it's you."

The train continues along, parallel to the border, like a stone skipping over the surface of a pond. It's the iron line, a fence, a cliff, and misery: this river that is known as Grande on this side and Bravo on the other. The Border Patrol jeeps make their rounds along the Yankee Riviera. There's no fence on the Mexican side. Just dry hills dotted with shacks. Atop one of these hills—the highest—stands a cross and a sign:

The Bible
is truth.
READ IT.

Hundreds of people stand along the banks of the river and watch as the train rolls past. They're waiting for darkness, when they hope to cross.

The train nears El Paso, but views of the city are obscured behind privacy walls. All you can see is Ciudad Juárez. The elderly folks on the train peer out the windows and look—frightened—at the Third World, lying in the cut just a few short yards away.

“Hey, Roberto, let's get off here. This place is great.”

“Huh?”

“Are you scared?”

“It's that . . . well, no, but I was thinking . . . I want to see the Alamo.”

“You'll see it another day. We can cross over. It's just

a bridge. You hit the other side, and in two minutes you're in Mexico."

"The next train comes through here in two days."

"So? We have time. We'll stay here for a while. Aren't you a tourist? A tourist should see the sights."

Simón turns off the radio, since it's not getting any reception. He checks the clock on the dashboard of the indigo-blue Geo that he rented at an El Paso Budget: 1:12 A.M. He's not tired. Adriana is sleeping in the backseat. Snoring. Simón hates people who snore. It makes him feel ashamed. So much so that he doesn't dare make them stop. Natalia never snored.

Simón finds it hard to believe that they're not in Texas anymore, and that they've gone back to New Mexico. But what's harder to believe is that he's spent so many days now with Adriana Tejeda on his hands. This wasn't part of his plans.

Simón and Adriana jump off the train and leave their few possessions in the custody of the old El Paso station. They walk five blocks down a crowded street dotted with cheap clothing shops until they reach the edge of the United States. Night is falling, and a breeze is sweeping down the Rio Grande that smells of frijoles and burnt oil.

After paying a quarter, they crossed the Santa Fé Bridge. Nobody asked them for documentation. Nobody even looked at them. When they reached the other side and stood there on Avenida Juárez, Simón felt that he was in a whole other world. The smells were different, and something made him feel uneasy. The United States and—somehow—his protected life back in the peaceful community of Providencia, now seemed very distant indeed. This, he thought, is the real world. This was his world; a world that he'd never before visited.

Adriana walked quickly and seemed to know the city. She said that they should get away from tourist traps for gringos and then they wandered off into a bad neighborhood. Simón didn't like being directed; didn't like not being in control of things. He didn't quite trust Adriana. She seemed unpredictable. Simón detests all things unexpected.

The city wasn't full of beggars. It wasn't Calcutta. It's not that it looked poor; rather, it's that it didn't seem rich, despite the fact that there was nothing but storefront after storefront illuminating the night. Nothing here seemed finished. Everything looked precarious, as if it were on the verge of crumbling. Too much movement, and—of course—too many people.

The two of them walked into a narrow, run-down dive with several rooms painted deep turquoise and red. In one of these, a fully naked girl danced to a song by Yuri and eased a bottle of Corona into her badly shaven vagina. In another room, a group of men were playing pool. Adriana ordered tequila and lemons. More specifically, she ordered an entire bottle of Cuervo Gold, *añejo*.

"I don't carry much cash on me. Can you get this?"

The exchange rate was favorable everywhere. Adriana had nice teeth. Simón was the kind of guy who paid attention to these things. Unlike most of his friends, the first thing he noticed about a girl was her smile. Her accent, however, didn't seem Bolivian. But he still couldn't quite place it. He thought he occasionally heard her use words indicative of other countries, but he just wasn't sure.

"And the worm?" he asked.

"Tequila doesn't have a worm. You're thinking of mescal."

"What's the difference?"

"Tequila is a kind of mescal, but mescal isn't necessarily a tequila. Mescal is more generic, understand?"

"No."

"Tequila is only made in Tequila, which is in the state of Jalisco. Mescal, on the other hand, can be bottled anywhere."

"Like pisco and aguardiente."

"Hold on—real pisco is Peruvian. It's better. Forgive me, but I was raised to hate Chilenos. It's nothing personal."

"Does that mean you hate me?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you saying you hate me now?"

"You don't want me to hate you, Roberto. I can be very dangerous. It's cooler for me to like you. You have no idea what I can be like."

Simón looked at her intently—too intently, perhaps—one of those looks that sends messages, and personal histories,

even flowers. He regretted it immediately. That kind of closeness was the last thing he needed. Especially with someone he'd just met.

"So the worm comes from the cactus? Are the cactus plants full of them or something?"

"Neither tequila nor mescal are made from cactus; they're made from agave. Hopefully blue agave."

"How do you know all this?"

"You learn by drinking."

Adriana threw back her shot, and her eyes betrayed no hint of irritation as the harsh liquid slid down her throat.

"You're an unpredictable one, Adriana Tejada. You know that?"

"And you're predictable, Roberto del Río."

Then they both smiled and watched as a dwarf went down on a girl with enormous fake breasts.

"I think that's so romantic."

"You think that's *what*?"

"I like it when a guy can drive me wild with something other than his cock. I used to date a short little Filipino guy who wasn't much to look at, but his tongue was just so silky. I don't know, but a man who takes his time and pays attention down there makes me feel confident. I don't know, it just seems romantic."

"But not in public."

"Of course not. But still, it's cool."

It wasn't long before the two of them were drunk. Seriously intoxicated. Adriana tried to tell Simón something about her life.

"You know Santa Cruz?"

"I know Santa Cruz, Chile. The wine capital of the country."

"I mean Santa Cruz de la Sierra, idiot."

"Should I?"

"Yeah. The best Bolivian women are from there. I might not be the best example, but the fact is that women from my city are striking. Everybody sleeps with everybody

else, and the racial mixing is always good for something interesting. It just goes to prove that desire is more productive than abstinence.”

“I don’t think you’re ugly.”

“I don’t either. But that’s not what we’re talking about.”

Adriana proceeded to tell Simón about her father, who got his Ph.D. in anthropology from Berkeley. When her mother, a Bolivian of Swiss origins, became pregnant, her father, a supporter of the Shining Path, didn’t want to have an American daughter.

“It didn’t bother him that he received California money to study that anticapitalist shit. But the son of a bitch knew that his colleagues back in Bolivia would be suspicious of someone who had penetrated so deeply into the Yankee empire’s vagina. So I was his sacrifice. He sent my mother back so that I would be born there, and then cursed my nationality. I don’t even have a green card.”

“What were you doing in Tucson?”

“It’s a long story. Lorenzo studied anthropology. I thought it was love, but it was something else entirely.”

“What was it?”

“What do you think? Why do people pair up with people they don’t love?”

Simón looked down at the table. The bottle of Cuervo was empty. He felt awful, sick to his stomach. Adriana started to cry and tried to put her arms around him.

“We’d better go.”

“Let’s have another round. I promise I won’t tell you any more sob stories. I’ve been through a lot of shit.”

“That may be, but I’m not going to stay here. Let’s get back to civilization.”

Simón helped Adriana to her feet and they stumbled out into the street, which Simón noticed was made of dirt. He had no idea where he was but didn’t want to ask for directions for fear of exposing himself as a tourist.

“I’ve seen more bad times than good,” she said on the way out. “My life isn’t what I wanted it to be.”

Simón looked at her, surprised, since he sometimes felt the same way.

"Not many people get exactly what they wanted. You're not alone."

"But you are. I can tell."

Finally they got to a paved road. After a couple of fruitless circles, they eventually found the avenue that led to the bridge. In a tourist shop, Adriana bought another bottle of Cuervo, this time blanco. Simón wished he'd never gotten off the train.

"You've had enough."

"Yes, *mami*."

On the corner, in front of a taquería that smelled of grease and chili peppers, Adriana pulled down her pants, squatted, and began to piss on the street while two bearded men dressed identically looked on. Simón decided to leave her behind and started to walk briskly toward El Paso. Adriana came running after him, furious.

"You don't just abandon your friends when they're wasted."

"True, but you're not my friend, nor are you wasted."

Simón took a swig from the bottle and walked on. Adriana followed him like a puppy. They crossed the bridge, and when they reached the other side, they had to pass by the immigration official. Adriana put her arm around him and began to rub Simón's stomach underneath his sweater. She winked at the Border Patrol officer and said, in perfect English, with no hint of an accent, "What a town!"

"You got that right," he replied and waved them through. No passports, no documentation.

"That was lucky. Because I'm illegal. My visa was up a while ago."

Simón felt like he'd just arrived in a ghost town. Silence and echoes dominated the night. No cars sped up and down the narrow streets. The only things stirring in the entire city were them.

The El Paso train station was closed, so they couldn't pick up their bags. Simón called the number of a taxi service that was pasted on the side of a public phone. Adriana was curled up on the stairs, fast asleep though still clutching her bottle of Cuervo.

The taxi driver's last name was Ramírez, but after several failed attempts Simón accepted that this guy with dandruff-flecked hair preferred to speak English. Simón asked him to take them to a hotel that wasn't too expensive but wasn't too cheap either. Ramírez looked suspiciously at Adriana and asked Simón if she was clean. Simón said that she was fine and shoved her in the cab before climbing in himself. Adriana laid her head down in his lap. Simón felt her heat and, without really knowing why, began to caress her hair.

Ramírez took them to the Hotel Gardner. A four-minute drive through the desolate city streets. Simón looked out at the sad art deco buildings that looked as if they had been condemned decades ago. A pack of mangy dogs was asleep in the main plaza. The Gardner rose up on the other side of the railroad. Ramírez said they owed him ten dollars even.

The Gardner was not unlike the Congress; perhaps they were built around the same time. They also both catered to young backpackers and smelled of leather and damp bricks. The concierge, a young man whose face still showed the effects of a rather severe case of acne, informed Simón and Adriana that the place was almost completely booked with European travelers. Simón didn't want to spend the night with her, but there seemed to be no other option. Indecisive,

he accepted the first price they quoted him. Through bleary eyes, Adriana watched him pay, without making any effort to chip in.

“Have you any luggage?” the concierge asked.

Simón and Adriana trudged up the lengthy staircase in silence. Room 236 was at the end of a narrow, dark, and warm hallway. Simón fumbled with the heavy key as he tried to unlock the door. He was feeling nauseous and exhausted. Inside, the room had two bronze beds and a window that looked out over a neon sign, which cast the entire room in an eerie green light.

“I think I’m going to sleep until tomorrow night. Don’t wake me up, Roberto, okay? You have no idea how tired I am.”

Simón shut the curtains, but the green light still managed to filter in. He turned around to discover Adriana removing her socks. She had already stripped off the rest of her clothes, revealing what Simón had previously imagined.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s hot in here. I can’t sleep in my clothes. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“It’s fine.”

Adriana smiled. Simón smiled back.

“Open the window, Roberto. I need some fresh air. And water. A lot of water. Bring me some, would you?”

Simón followed the narrow hallway around the entire hotel, but he didn’t find any vending machines. He went down to the lobby and asked the concierge, who suggested he try the hostel’s kitchen downstairs. Simón found the machine, put in a couple of bills, and bought a bottle of water for Adriana and a Lipton Iced Tea for himself.

When he got back to the room, Adriana was already asleep. Snoring like an earthquake. She was lying on her back on top of the covers, her legs spread. Her face and arms, on the other hand, were buried under several pillows. Her skin

was glowing green. Simón opened the bottle and set it on the fan. He walked over to Adriana and studied her belly as it rose and fell with her breathing. She was snoring, so she couldn't be feigning. She was really sleeping. Sleeping unabashed, as a matter of fact. Simón gently touched the skin of her stomach; it was smooth and quite warm. Almost as if she had a fever. He also examined her exuberant pubis under the flickering neon light. Simón bent down to smell her: he inhaled the mixture of fragrances and felt the tequila immediately vanish from his system. He wanted to touch her again, but he realized what he was doing and stopped himself. Ah, to hell with it, he thought, and gently brushed the curly hairs of her mound with his index finger. Adriana's body vibrated for a moment, and Simón jumped back. But she remained asleep. Simón then drew his finger underneath his nose and got into his own bed. He removed almost all his clothes, though he left on his gray sweater. He threw the covers to the ground and slipped his hand down into his boxers.

Simón woke up sometime mid-afternoon. In the light of day, Adriana looked more sexual, he thought, even though now only her face was exposed by the unbleached cotton sheets. He showered, left a note, and went for a walk through downtown El Paso. The hustle and bustle of the place reminded him of Santiago's Patronato neighborhood. Under the scorching sun he made his way to the train station, where he retrieved their bags. At this time of day, taxis were everywhere. He didn't see Ramírez among them and ended up hailing one driven by a man with an artificial hand. He asked the man to drive him to a 7-Eleven, where he bought junk food and Anacin. He swallowed five tablets there in the cab with a swig of grapefruit Gatorade.

On the ground floor of the Hotel Gardner was a run-down restaurant. Simón ordered some greasy enchiladas and watched a bit of *Noticiero Univisión*. Don Francisco was on, standing outside the Alamo and promoting a long-distance phone service. "Latinos need to keep in touch with home," he

pledged. Simón went up to the room, but before going in, he had the sudden sensation that something was very wrong. Two possibilities came to mind: either Adriana had taken off with his documents, or she had looked at his passport and realized that his name was not, in fact, Roberto del Río.

Simón opened the door and saw her there, sprawled out on the floor and twisted up in a sheet splattered with congealed blood. She was very pale and not moving. Simón thought instantly of Tucson, the hotel, the writer . . . He looked at the bed: it was bloody, and there was vomit on the pillow. He also saw the empty bottle of Cuervo. He bent down and checked to see if Adriana was alive. He spoke to her, but Adriana only groaned at him. Her mouth was stained with blood. Simón picked up the phone and dialed 911.

Adriana Tejeda was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver. A vein in her esophagus had burst. The force of the vomiting had done it. She'd lost a lot of blood. The doctor said that he'd found her just in time; that she could have bled to death. Simón didn't much like the idea of going around saving lives, but what was he going to do. Adriana needed a transfusion.

They asked him a lot of questions about her blood type, past diseases, AIDS, hepatitis, and allergies. Simón couldn't answer any of them. He went through her purse to see if he could find some insurance papers or medical information. In doing so, he realized that Adriana Tejeda was actually Ana Cecilia Salazar Tejeda. At least that's what her expired Bolivian passport said. He also found out that she was two years older than him, despite the fact that she looked to be five years his junior. And according to her passport she was married. She had a Pennsylvania driver's license, which gave her last name as Moorehead and listed an address in Bethel Park. When the nurse asked him about his friend's insurance, Simón grudgingly took out his MasterCard. Not the company card, but his own.

"You're a great friend," the Latina nurse said. "I hope I'd have someone like you at my side."

Simón finishes his soft taco and leaves the tray and wrapper on the table. The Sonic Drive-In is filled with soldiers from Fort Bliss. They all acknowledge him respectfully, and Simón is reminded of his crew cut. He decides to go to a movie. What else is there to do in El Paso? He gets in the rental car. Tom Petty's *Walls* pours from the radio as Simón

heads toward the downtown area. Adriana has spent four days in the hospital. The doctor thinks she'll be able to be discharged in another week. Simón decides to wait for her. Luckily, there are plenty of movies to see.

"I'm sorry. I think I drank too much that night in El Paso. I lost control."

"Definitely," replies Simón. "Anyway, it happens to the best of us. I know you didn't do it on purpose."

"But I *did*."

"What?"

"Yeah."

"You were trying to kill yourself?"

"No. I know what happens when someone commits suicide. It's not a pretty sight. I used to have a job cleaning up crime scenes. Not what you'd call easy work."

"Wait a sec . . . you had a job doing *what*?"

"Not all of us are dishwashers."

"You cleaned up dead people?"

"No, their houses or apartments. When I lived in Pittsburgh. I cleaned up all the shit left over when someone dies. You can't imagine what happens to an apartment after a charming little old lady has been lying there dead for five days, decomposing. Two lesbians had the idea for the business. They were very neat and tidy, and they were nice to others. One of them had been a police officer, and realized that family members were usually pretty averse to cleaning up. Plus, it's dangerous work. You can catch a number of diseases. You learn a lot about life when you do that kind of work."

"So . . . I don't understand. You lost me."

"I wasn't trying to kill myself. I have cirrhosis. I've had it for years. I was diagnosed in Cochabamba. After that: nothing. I can't drink. Not even a drop. But I lost control. I was nervous and exhilarated and I started up again. Overdid

it. And when I woke up and you weren't there, I started to freak out. I missed you. I was scared shitless, and so I kept on drinking. Big mistake, clearly. In the end, though, what are we but the sum of our errors? Right?"

Simón thinks about it and nods.

"Did you drink a lot before?"

"There are some things I don't talk about. Not even with you, and you saved my life. Though that doesn't mean you get to know everything about me."

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Roberto. I have an entire life to forgive myself. Let's change the subject, okay?"

The two of them are sitting across from each other in a booth at a Las Cruces Denny's. Simón had always thought that Las Cruces was a tiny little town, but it's actually a nice small city. It's hot outside, and the streets are packed with cars and trucks. Adriana looks at the remains of her grilled chicken with vegetables, the healthiest-looking item on the menu. Simón toys with his baked potato and sour cream. The bittersweet ribs were more sweet than bitter, he thinks. The place is practically empty. A Kenny Rogers record is leaking out of the speakers.

"You haven't told me anything about yourself."

"What you see is what you get."

"And that ring? Are you married? Where does she live?"

Simón tried to make up a story without seeming obvious.

"I'm a widower. When Paula passed away, I accepted a transfer to the United States. Now I live in Los Angeles."

"What do you do there?"

"Things. I *hate* it when people ask what other people do. It's so patronizing. What difference does it make? Does it matter if they do anything at all? Your job almost never has anything to do with who you are."

"You're asking about me."

"I work in customs at the airport. It's my job to make sure all the cargo is dispatched on time. Especially foods and other perishable items, like salmon, fruit, and flowers."

"Do you like your job?"

"Not too much."

"So . . . ?"

"I needed to get out of the country for a while. Needed to get away."

"You don't have kids, then, I assume."

"No," he says, although telling the truth at this point seems a bit odd.

"You didn't want any?"

"We couldn't, even if we did." Simón was back to lying. "My wife had uterine cancer. Luckily, it was over quickly."

"Did you love her?"

"In the beginning."

A waitress named Lupita asks if they'd like coffee, and Simón accepts. Adriana opts for ice water. Lupita clears their plates away. Simón talks about his fake, made-up childhood. About Coné Cruz's *real* childhood. He's always believed that Coné turned out the way he did because of an especially happy and comfortable childhood. He tells Adriana about his ambassador grandfather and about his summers in Kenya, Morocco, and New Delhi. About his English school, with its ivy-covered walls and striped ties. About his sisters and their multiple championships in rhythmic gymnastics. About how he scored game-winning goals and was inundated with phone calls and love letters from admiring girls. He spoke pointedly and with feeling about his mother, who produced telenovelas ("She discovered Claudia DiGironamo—I don't know if you know who she is"), and about his sportscaster father. ("Every Sunday he'd take me to the stadium with him. And the entire team would come to my birthday parties. Carlos Caszely, Elías Figueroa . . . even El Pato Yáñez, back when he was slim and cool and dating Viviana Nunes.")

Simón pays the bill. For one brief moment, he feels

that maybe Coné Cruz isn't such a bad guy after all. Outside, the air is so warm and dry that it's hard to breathe. They get in the car. Adriana rolls down her window.

"Too much air conditioning is bad for my condition."

Simón looks at the map and decides to take Route 70 heading north.

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know. We'll see where we're at when night falls. I want to see where the atomic bomb was tested."

"You like maps a lot, don't you?"

"Yep."

"Once I had a boyfriend who wanted to be a cartographer. But they killed him."

"How?"

"It's a long story, but it still hurts to remember. Maybe one day I'll tell you. That's why I went to Miami. To forget. And because I married Jeff, of course."

"Jeff?"

"Jeff Brink. But I never really loved him. I met Jeff thanks to Raquel Welch."

"Are you shitting me?"

"No."

Clearly she's jerking me around, he thinks. He doesn't like the fact that she's making things up. It's suspicious. He thinks she's going too far. Taking advantage.

"It's not like she's my real aunt or anything. Technically she's my cousin nine times removed or something. I'm no expert on bloodlines. But the fact is that all Tejas in Bolivia are from the same family. And in Bolivia, every relative, no matter how distant, is an 'aunt' or an 'uncle.'"

"Fine, but what does that have to do with the price of tea in China?"

"Raquel Welch's real name is Raquel Tejada. Every Bolivian knows that."

Simón remembers her passport. Tejada isn't an in-

vention. Could she be telling the truth now? How would he know the difference?

"Her first husband was named Welch—he's a gringo," continues Adriana. "But her father is as Bolivian as you get. A real paisano. He moved to Chicago in search of a better future. Her mother's a gringa though. Nobody's perfect."

"And you met Raquel in Miami?"

"No, calm down. What's the matter, don't you believe me?"

"No, I do."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"I believe you. It's just a bit of a stretch, that's all."

"But it's true. And simple, too: when Raquel Welch decided to get to know her father's country, she needed a translator. I studied at an American university. She picked me because of my last name. She was fascinated by the fact that I was a Tejada. In Bolivia, Raquel was received like a hero, like a goddess. Because she is. You can't imagine how beautiful she is. She gave me some contacts so I could work in show business, but nothing ever came of it. It was like I just went off her radar."

"How so?"

Simón looks her in the eye, searching for some twinge that would betray her lie. How can someone make stuff up and spit it out so easily, he wonders. How?

"Her agent wouldn't have anything to do with me. Never returned my calls. But I was already in Florida, so I wasn't too worried. I'd rather remember the times when I did know her. When she came to Santa Cruz for the Spanish-American film festival. I can't complain. She was so nice to me. Was all class. Gracious, too. Really, really gracious."

Simón and Adriana are sitting on top of a dune that looks as if it's made of sugar. All around them, other equally white dunes stretch far away, scattering the sun's rays.

They're at White Sands National Monument.

It's hot, but it's a dry heat. They're not sweating. Soon they'll have to be on the road again, looking for a town to spend the night in. Maybe Roswell, where the aliens landed. Or Socorro. Simón's not too sure about where they're going next, but he knows one thing: the idea is to reach the sea. The Pacific.

Adriana takes Simón's hand and kisses it.

"What's that for?"

"For everything."

Adriana traces the lines of his face with her fingers, as if she were blind. She scares him, but somehow she calms him too. Gives him confidence.

"You helped me out. You did me a great favor."

"I wasn't trying to. It just happened. What else would I have done?"

"You're a great guy. Despite it all."

"What does that mean, 'despite it all'?"

"Just what I said. Despite it all."

Simón feels that despite all the lies—both hers and his—they've already become something of a couple. He believes her. And that seems strange.

"I'm really glad I met you, Adriana," he says.

It's been quite some time since Simón felt that someone was telling him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Because everything they say to him is potentially a lie.

Simón reads the sign with help from his high beams. They've already passed Socorro. The town they're trying to get to is still some ways away. Eighty-one miles through the desert, on I-25. Adriana is sleeping in the backseat. She's snoring, and every once in a while she lets loose with a resounding fart. Simón decides to risk it. In another hour and a half they'll reach Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. *La verdad o las consecuencias*. The eternal dilemma, now less than eighty miles away.

Simón signals and takes the exit. The town sits at the base of a hill, and the moon reflects off the Río Grande, which—in this part of the continent—is in its very early stages and runs far from the border. Truth or Consequences has only one traffic light, but no cars are out on the streets. Simón reaches the edge of town, marked by a pair of gas stations. He pulls into one of them and gets out. Chats for a bit with a one-eyed Indian man. Learns that all the conventional motels in town are full, on account of the Hell's Angels having taken over the town. Simón is reminded of an old movie he saw on TV once about a biker gang that rapes and murders an entire town. As if reading his thoughts, the Indian assures him that these are decent people, and recommends a hostel he might be able to find a room at. Simón jots down the address.

“Adriana, wake up, we’re here.”

Adriana rubs the sleep from her eyes and looks around. Neither of them speaks. It’s cold outside. The cold of the desert at night.

“Where are we?”

“Truth or Consequences,” Simón says.

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s the name of the town. We’re going to stay here.”

Simón figures that there are about twenty blond Europeans currently staying at Riverbend. Most of them are male. Norwegians, Germans, Swedes, and Danes. Two Dutch girls who will laugh at anything. And a couple of freckly, Italian-speaking Swiss. The three Norwegians seem to belong to the old A-Ha group. They all wear leather pants and boots. The Danes have beards and dreadlocks. They're all young, college students maybe, and speak English like they do on MTV Europe.

Simón cracks a beer and sits down on one of the cement benches around the bonfire. Blue flames. Some of the Swedes are roasting marshmallows. A guy in glasses strums out a Dylan song on his guitar, singing along in a Scandinavian accent:

How does it feel . . . to be on your own . . . with no direction home . . . like a complete unknown . . . ?

Simón thinks that the blond guitarist has no idea whatsoever just how that feels.

Simón walks to the steamy covered patio. The sky is laden with stars. Adriana is in one of the tubs, naked. Despite the attack, she looks lean, strong, safe.

A Dutch girl finishes rolling a joint and hands it to a girl who looks either Hopi or Navajo. She's nude as well, and bears a set of smooth, excessively large breasts. A half-dozen other Europeans are also nude and bathing. One of them gets out of the tub to change the tape that's playing to something that sounds like Morphine. They're all very thin and hairless, and it's tough to tell the girls from the boys.

Adriana looks at Simón and signals to him.

"Come on."

Simón walks over. He can feel the water vapor coming off the hot springs.

"We still haven't been able to be together," she says.

"Damned Dutch."

"Danes."

"Whatever. It's all the same. We could move. You want to? The bikers are gone. There's a motel a little bit north of here."

"Let's stay here," replies Adriana as she reaches for his hand. "I like the vibe here. Reminds me of everything I never did when I was younger."

Simón notices that the sun has already set. The light lingering in the atmosphere has a slightly rosy tinge to it.

"Get in. What have you got to lose?"

"I'll get wet."

"I'll dry you off afterwards."

Simón agrees. A Swiss or a Swedish girl looks at him and smiles before getting into an empty tub. Adriana watches as he begins to get undressed. At first he does so slowly and with some difficulty, but once he gets into it, he smiles and picks up the pace. He feels the warm vapor against his bare skin.

"I imagined you more or less like that."

Simón smiles and eases into the bath. One of his legs brushes up against one of Adriana's. She grazes his penis with her hand.

"Sorry," she says, but it was no accident.

The tubs are deeper than Simón had thought. They're more like wading pools. And there's no more progressive music. In fact, the only sound is the bubbling water. One of the Danes comes over to them and offers a joint.

"It's so good."

Adriana takes a couple of puffs and passes it to Simón. The rolling paper is wet and about to fall apart. He tries to discern the stars amidst all the billowing white vapor. Leans his head way back while the rest of his body slides

under the water. Then Adriana's hand slides up his leg and caresses his remaining testicle.

"You'll tell me what happened here later."

One of the cowboys rings a bell and puts a pot of beans on the fire. The smell of barbecue wafts in.

"I'm pretty stoned," she says.

"Feels like I'm floating."

"That's the way to live. Floating. Sure beats sinking."

"You know why this town is named the way it is?"

"No. But I'll bet it's a good story."

"Back in the 1940s there was a game show on the radio called *Truth or Consequences*, and the host, Ralph Edwards, held a contest to see if any small town in America would change its name to the name of his show. I guess this town was tired of the name 'Hot Springs,' because they accepted. And then they started off fresh."

"Why don't we do that too, Simón? *Simón Rivas*."

They looked at each other, each feeling in the right. They stopped touching.

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for. Sometimes, you have to lie to find out the truth."

A breeze sweeps down off the hill and scatters the vapor coming off the surface of the water. Simón looks up at the constellations, searching in vain for the Southern Cross. He does, however, see a group of stars that he thinks forms a shape not unlike a boomerang.

"I think I'm going to stay," says Adriana.

"Here? To live? In this hostel?"

"No, I mean with you. I'm going to stick with you. For a while. At least until your trip is over. Or our trip. We'll see soon enough, Simón. I like that better than Roberto. Can I call you Simón?"

Adriana leans over and kisses him. Simón kisses her back. It's hard picturing her as Cecilia. Or Ana. Adriana looks like an Adriana, he thinks.

"But I like Adriana, Ana Cecilia."

“Whatever you want.”

“Adriana, then.”

“Adriana.”

Simón sinks lower in the warm liquid. As he does, he opens his eyes but can only see the bubbling, agitated waters.

Simón wakes up with the sun in his face. He's sweating. Inside the sheet-metal cabin, the heat is inescapable, paralyzing. Simón jumps down from the top bunk and sees that Adriana is still asleep. Across the way, a very skinny, very blond guy smells like dirty socks.

Simón pulls on his jeans and walks out into the open air. The cold is mountainous, and the wind rips at his face. The hostel is called Riverbend, and indeed it has a view of the river, in addition to being situated above some subterranean hot springs. He smells bacon cooking and campfire smoke. Riverbend is comprised of several metal cabins and one giant teepee painted an array of colors. At the water's edge sits a great covered patio lined with large wooden bathtubs shrouded in vapor. Simón thinks about how different things can look during the day than they do at night. It might even be true that it's better to arrive at places during the night. It's more surprising that way. The sun and the new day offer a whole new perspective. Truth or Consequences no longer looks quite so mysterious or abandoned. Now, in fact, it actually looks cozy.

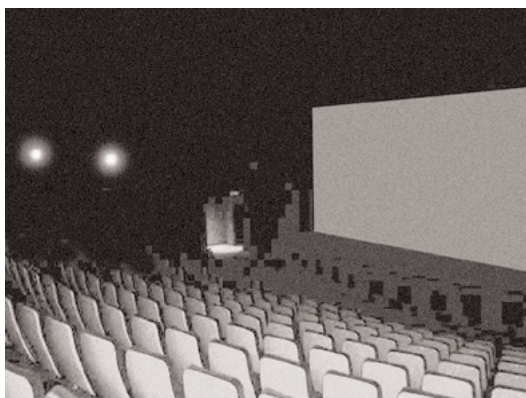
Simón goes down to the river. The landscape reminds him of Cajón de Maipo. And Siete Tazas. Natalia liked Siete Tazas, he thinks, although when he tries to picture her, the contours of her face fade and run together. This makes Simón feel happy. So happy, in fact, that he pulls off his wedding ring and drops it into a pool. It shines underneath the clear water. Simón thinks about that one summer in Vichuquén when he read the complete *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Then he decides to head into town to wander around

for a bit. There's a lot to get to know. But he's in no rush. Simón thinks he'll stay for a few days. We'll see. It's not important at the moment. No rush. No rush at all.

Simón watches as a couple hundred bikers clad in leather ride by on their Harleys. He feels the wind of their passing on his face. And he can't help but smile.

THE MAGIC HOUR
(MATINEE, VERMOUTH,
AND NIGHT)



THE TIME: Late twentieth century

THE PLACE: The theaters and cafés of Santiago de Chile
(Southern Hemisphere)

THE CHARACTERS

CLAUDIA MARCONI (b. Santiago, 1963)

Magazine editor, and lover of fashion and design.

Her eyes are brown and her teeth almost perfect, save for a tiny unevenness in the middle of her lower teeth. Her hair is the color of hardened honey, and whenever she walks, it seems as if there's always a breeze blowing by. Claudia is tall by local standards—nearly five foot eight—and despite her frequent fluctuations in weight, Claudia is perpetually thin, never more than 120 pounds. Her skin is the color of evaporated milk, and a garland of freckles adorns her back. On her right ankle is a light diagonal scar, the reminder of an old bicycle accident. The flesh of her nipples is something a bit darker than she would want it to be, and her right buttock has a mole in the shape of a turtle.

TEO GANDARA (b. Nancagua, 1972)

Producer of TV documentaries, and lover of movies and photography.

His hair is dark and curly. When it grows out, or when the weather is very humid, it inflates like a balloon and

blows out. His skin is the color of black olive water, and his charcoal eyes are set deep in his face and betray his mother's Arabic roots. There is a slight crack in his two incisors. Teo measures five foot ten in height, and he weighs a little over 160 pounds. Even so, he has a bit of a paunch that he tries to conceal. His arms are hairier than his legs, and the scar from an old dog bite sits just beneath his left eye.

BACKGROUND

Claudia's idea was to do a layout for the magazine, featuring some of the actors from a recently released movie.

That's how it all started.

This Chilean movie, made by a young director, was a sort of existential thriller about killer ants. I'd heard some talk about the film. In school. A guy in one of my classes had been the field producer's third assistant. He said that it wasn't up to the level of some others that were made here. "It's obvious that the *huevo*n loves the movies, and than he's seen quite a few of them. For that alone, my friend, I tip my hat to him," he said.

The day before I was to get together with Claudia, I'd read a review by the critic Lucas García that was so glowing with praise that I was worried that the final product would fall well below my expectations.

But here's the strange thing: I *had* expectations. Many expectations.

Both about the movie, and about her.

Claudia was the magazine's fashion editor, and since it was a fashion magazine, that pretty much made her God. She looked like a goddess, or at least a retired top model. Though she wasn't *old*; she was just older than I was. You could tell that she had seen one or two things in her life; but most of all you could tell that she had lived. She didn't wear

a ring, nor did she have any pictures of nieces and nephews in her office.

Claudia had viewed a few scenes from the movie on video. "I found it attractive, especially on a visual level," she told me one day when she called me at my crummy studio apartment.

"An independent film," I agreed, as if in Chile there was anything but indie films.

I had checked her out a couple of times. It was inevitable. She *made* you look at her. Everyone said she was a bitch. Perhaps. But she was also a looker. Claudia's voice was slightly hoarse, sexy, and thick like a mess of beignets. She thought that I should be the photographer for her spread. She'd seen some of my photos, but she was also taken with how I dressed.

"Perfection is out . . . now is the time for imperfection. Ugly, but with style. Like you. Being from the lower class is not a bad thing at all, Teo."

I was about to ask what she was talking about, but she was on a roll and wasn't about to let me interrupt her.

"I know you don't have much experience, but I feel that you're close to the material. Do you like techno?"

"I don't dance," I said, "but I've been to a few raves."

"The job is yours."

Here's the deal: I'm not exactly a photographer, but I can take pictures. Claudia had the idea of using actors as models and doing something "very alternative, very urban, very nightlife, but still commercial." According to her, only I could interpret that vision. Of course that pleased me. Made me feel good. I was being challenged. I'd had enough of being an assistant—a peon. Agnes didn't take me seriously, or even jokingly for that matter.

Spending your day surrounded by beautiful women is a stroke of luck, and an enjoyable one at that, but it's no way to make your mark. Photographing actor-models wasn't the path I ultimately wanted to be on, but at least it would put an

end to my usual routine of shooting gift catalogues, and interiors of rich people's homes, and—never again—doing lighting for the sample dishes that accompany those recipes in the back pages of women's magazines.

I was in my first year at the Escuela de Cine le Chile film school over on Macul. I wasn't poor, but I certainly wasn't rich, and I was living far away from my family. I hadn't spent much time in Santiago, and sometimes I felt like a yokel while everyone else was laughing at some inside joke. I needed extra cash, because my mother was short on funds after my old man died. Plus, I wanted to earn some money myself. I hated all the mama's boys I was working with, since they still got an allowance from their parents. Being a second assistant in the movie biz was fun, but it wasn't good money. So then I thought about being the second assistant to a famous photographer, and that's how it happened. I wanted to work in motion pictures, not still photography, but one of my professors, Carlos Flores, told me that the key to cinematic art was to "dig deeply into light," so I decided to accept the offer, no questions asked. When you don't have a Rolodex, no business card is unwanted.

Agnes was old—about fifty—and she knew a lot about advertising and fashion photography, but not about motion pictures. Everyone called her "Agnes B.," but I never understood why, since her last name was Kruger. She could make me laugh, but she could also make me scream. Her temper was on a hair trigger. She slapped me once, and another time she threw a cup of tea in my face. Luckily it was only lukewarm. I remember she bribed me with her old Pentax camera so I wouldn't go stir up a scandal about it. Agnes B. was single, little overweight, and not very attractive. She looked at me like a son, until one day she took me by the head and stuck her tongue in my ear. Another time, in her darkroom, I put my hands on her. She got wet right away, so I fucked then and there. I liked it, even if I was slightly disgusted. Her back was white and gelatinous, and it quivered to the touch. Bounced, even. How embarrassing. Agnes

told me never to tell anyone about it, and gave me a Polaroid, a tripod, and a wide-angle Zeiss lens in return for my silence.

I asked Claudia about the film, but the truth is she knew almost nothing about it. But she was so eager to be the first on the scene that I couldn't bring myself to tell her that even an amateur movie buff would consider the thing to be lightweight, a local product with foreign pretensions, a waste of good celluloid. Nobody gave her opinions much weight, no one gave her the time of day, everyone crossed their fingers and hoped she'd fuck up.

"It's weird," she said. "Gothic. There are clubs everywhere. It's completely ahead of its time, like me. Does Saturday sound good to you?"

"Sure," I told her.

"We'll have some tea, get ourselves ready, go see the film, then comment on it. Do a bit of brainstorming."

"Get the creative juices flowing," I added, though immediately I regretted it, fearing that she'd take it to mean something else entirely.

"Maybe we should get a bite to eat on the way out," she said.

"Sure, why not? We could grab something."

"Excellent. It would be an honor."

All this, as I think I said, happened a long time ago. At least that's how it seems to me now—now that I am so far removed from the asshole I once was. I was very young, and trying to act older.

I was confident about what we were about to do. I felt like an artist.

But I was naïve.

And, now that I think about it, she was too.

ACT I:
Winter, 1992

Scene One:

Café Villa Real, next to the Cine Oriente
Pedro de Valdivia Norte, Providencia,
Santiago de Chile
five o'clock in the evening

Claudia is waiting at a table. The café walls are decorated in a primitive design. She is alone. Leafing through a copy of the magazine for which she works.

The Café Villa Real is the kind of place you'd take your grandmother, if you have one, if you wanted to have tea with her. It's right in the heart of Providencia, on Avenida Pedro de Valdivia Norte, in a very French neighborhood. It's also right next to the Oriente, a movie theater that seems ripped from the past and which everyone agrees is an awful place, not least for being freezing in the winter.

Providencia was Santiago's first suburb. Nowadays the rich folks have fled to the base of the Cordillera. It's got a subway system, and a lot of traffic. Not many homes are left, but there are trees standing in ancient gardens. Providencia is a rare mix of boutiques and cheap shops, banks and offices, sophisticated bars and malt shops. The makeup is geriatric-adolescent. There are some giant apartments and some miserable studios there. A lot of people pass through Providencia, but not many stay very long. You go there either to start a life or to end one.

Teo sits down next to Claudia.

TEO

I'm sorry I'm late. I
overslept. Too much siesta,
I guess.

CLAUDIA

Did you go to bed late?

TEO

Around four or five. I went to the movies. A midnight screening. The damn film never ended.

CLAUDIA

Wasn't that a bit late to be going to the movies?

TEO

No.

CLAUDIA

Well, it's your life.

TEO

I suppose so.

CLAUDIA

Can I tell you something?

TEO

Something tells me that you're going to tell me, regardless.

CLAUDIA

It bothers me that you're late. A lot. I can't deny it. I just can't tolerate waiting. Not for anybody, do you understand? Those days, for me, are over.

Pause.

I also think it's inappropriate that the day before the shoot, you decide to go out partying.

TEO

The shoot?

CLAUDIA

The photo shoot. You really ought to cultivate yourself

a little bit. If you want to make your way in new circles, the least you can do is try to learn their codes.

TEO

Um . . . if you want, I can go outside and come back in so that we can start this over and we could leave it for another day when you're not so intense. All of this is very strange.

CLAUDIA

The only strange thing is how irresponsible you are. This is what I get for taking a chance on an idiot. You go out all night screwing around with God knows who, and then you show up late the next day, smelling like this.

TEO

Like what?

CLAUDIA

Like you do right now.

TEO

Look, Claudia, it's really very cool that you're interested in working with me and all, but I think that there's . . .

CLAUDIA

Forgive me. I know I'm a bit direct. Mediocre people tend to be afraid of direct folks. Now, I'm not saying you're mediocre. I'm betting you're not, but I don't want my confidence to be misplaced. If you want to leave, I'll understand. I'm not going to badmouth you at the maga-

zine. Maybe we should nip this in the bud—what do you say?

TEO

Um . . . give me a minute, would you?

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

What are you thinking?

TEO

The minute's not up yet.

CLAUDIA smiles. TEO does as well.

CLAUDIA

What are you thinking about?
I'm curious.

TEO

Tarkovsky.

CLAUDIA

I don't know who that is.

TEO

A Russian filmmaker. The *intelligentsia* love his work, because most people don't understand it.

CLAUDIA

And you do?

TEO

A little. It's slow. Too slow, if you ask me. But what's worse is that I don't identify with it . . . I don't know, to me that's the important thing. Enjoying it is important too, of course.

(continued)

But it's not just about
entertainment, because . . .

CLAUDIA

What's wrong with
entertainment?

TEO

Nothing. Nothing's wrong
with it. What I was try-
ing to say—before you
interrupted me—is that there
are many ways to be enter-
tained: through suffer-
ing, connecting . . . I don't
know, there must be a thou-
sand different ways. My
professor says that Tar-
kovsky is a genius. Could be,
but each of us has his or her
own list of geniuses, and I
don't think he'll ever make
mine. Choosing a list of fa-
vorites is a telling thing.
They don't just reveal your
likes and your morals . . .
they paint a complete pic-
ture of you. It's more impor-
tant to choose your favorite
movie directors carefully
than it is your friends. You
may have had the wrong par-
ents, but if you watch the
right films, you might come
out okay.

Short pause.

I used to watch a lot of
trash. Too much. One after
another, like popcorn. In
school they insist that all
things American are trash.
So now I have to start
getting my act together.

Pause.

(continued)

I've seen a lot more films than my classmates, but they know more than I do because they've seen more of the artsy shit. They go in big for the Normandie and El Biógrafo. But there aren't any art houses in the Sexta Región. No theaters at all, really. I admit I should see more black-and-white films. It's true. I don't know why, but for me watching black-and-white takes a lot of effort. I want to make films in color. Hell, why not, if life is experienced in color?

CLAUDIA

So you're a film student?

TEO

Yes, thank God. I can't see myself studying law or something normal.

CLAUDIA

You don't consider yourself normal?

TEO

Thank God, no. How about you?

CLAUDIA

I hope so. That's what it's all about, right?

TEO

Maybe I should have asked if you think you're like everyone else?

CLAUDIA

No. I hope I'm better than that, and I always want to be surrounded by people who

are better as well. Am I making sense? I want to be normal. I'm not interested in being strange. There's enough suffering involved in simply being normal, don't you think?

TEO

I don't know. You sound like a bit of a freak.

CLAUDIA

Careful, Teo. Remember... there are lines on the road, and they're there for a reason.

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

I thought still photography was what you did.

TEO

It's a job for now, that's all. It works for me. I'm learning. Let's just say I prefer pictures that move. Twenty-four frames per second, as a matter of fact.

CLAUDIA

You learned that in class.

TEO

I suppose. What did you study?

CLAUDIA

It's all the same. It doesn't matter what you study; only what you become. You'll see that soon.

(continued)

TEO

You sound like a seventy-year-old woman.

CLAUDIA

Sometimes I feel forty-eight, which is worse. I hope I can skip right over menopause, or at least get through it without too many issues, though that isn't very likely. But, anyway, according to Max, my problem is that...

TEO

Max is your boyfriend?

CLAUDIA

My analyst. But that's a private matter, I shouldn't have brought it up here. I try not to talk about my analysis in public. It's in bad taste.

TEO

You sound like Diane Keaton in a Woody Allen movie.

CLAUDIA

Am I supposed to take that as an insult? I never liked her. I think it's pathetic how she dresses herself. It's as if she's trying to hide.

TEO

I fell in love with her when I saw *Annie Hall*.

CLAUDIA

I really can't stand that woman. Especially her acting in that baby movie.

(continued)

TEO*Baby Boom?***CLAUDIA**

Actually, she wasn't dressed too badly in that one. But I'm definitely better-looking than her. And slimmer. And I don't have those crow's feet. Let's change the subject, shall we?

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

So, did you go alone?

TEO

What?

CLAUDIA

Did you go *alone*? Last night, I mean.

TEO

Yes, of course.

CLAUDIA

You did?

TEO

Yes. Why, is something wrong?

CLAUDIA

No, nothing. I was just curious, that's all. Where do you live?

TEO

Near Avenida Matta. By San Francisco. It's a nice street.

CLAUDIA

Pretty far.

(continued)

Pause.

You know, it would never occur to me to go to the movies alone. I've never done it. Alone. I don't think I could. Especially so late.

TEO

It's better to watch boring films with someone else, so you can mock them. But I always go alone. It's like reading. You always read by yourself. Going to the movies with somebody is redundant.

CLAUDIA

That could be. I watch TV alone—too much TV alone, actually. Almost all the movies I see are on TV. I get them on video, I mean. But going to the theater alone . . . that seems like too much. Imagine if somebody saw me . . . what would they say?

TEO

Let them say whatever. It's neither a sin nor a crime. Nothing to be embarrassed about.

CLAUDIA

But, then, you're not in my circle of friends. And you're not quite my age, either.

TEO

Forgive me, but how old are you?

(continued)

CLAUDIA

You should never ask a woman her age. Clearly you don't know much about women.

TEO

You look about thirty-two. To me, that's super young.

CLAUDIA

Idiot.

TEO

Clint Eastwood's something like seventy.

CLAUDIA

I'm twenty-nine.

TEO

Even better.

CLAUDIA

I live with my parents.

TEO

Beats living alone.

CLAUDIA

No, that's my goal. I think it's pathetic that I haven't been able to cut the cord.

TEO

I'm sure if you budgeted your money right you could afford something. And you can always share an apartment with roommates. My place doesn't cost me much at all. The only drawback is we all share the kitchen and the bathroom. And we've got this philosophy student who sings Pablo Milané's songs all the time—that sucks.

(continued)

Claudia smiles.

CLAUDIA

It's not a matter of money.
It's about fear. That's all.

TEO

Then you could live in a building with a twenty-four-hour doorman. Alarms, security cameras, the whole nine yards.

CLAUDIA

That's not the kind of fear I'm talking about.

Pause.

And what about *you*? Fifteen?

TEO

I'm an old twenty.

CLAUDIA

Meaning . . . what?

TEO

I've seen a lot of things for my age. When you're not the coolest guy or the best athlete, you have a lot of time to read and learn things.

CLAUDIA

And to go to the movies.

TEO

Absolutely.

Long pause.

So what did *you* do last night?

(continued)

CLAUDIA

I slept with this married guy but he doesn't love me, and now I don't think I love him either, since he's never going to take a chance on me.

TEO

Well. This is more fun than a day off from school. Why don't people talk like this all the time? If I'd known, I'd have brought a tape recorder with me today. I could have gotten the best grade in my dialogue class.

CLAUDIA

My life is no comedy, let me assure you.

TEO

Sounds better than a sitcom.

CLAUDIA

What?

TEO

Nothing. It's more like a drama, I guess. So did you have a good time with your married lover?

CLAUDIA

The sex part wasn't bad.

TEO

Well, that's an important part, right?

CLAUDIA

Yes, but the other part is, too.

Pause.

Afterwards I had to go to an opening by myself. A new

(continued)

restaurant. There were no photographers available. Nobody worth the effort, anyway. Totally aspirational, as Andrea would say. You've never been sent to do a social shoot, have you?

TEO

The first and only time I did something like that, the people I shot turned out not to be the real jet-set types. Andrea almost died. Told me it'd be better if I stayed in the studio. Better for *me*, I mean. It bothers me how people pose for photos.

CLAUDIA

But what if they're just having fun?

TEO

I guess. But I don't want to stoop to that. I have my dignity.

CLAUDIA

Everybody does.

TEO

I'm not so sure about that.

CLAUDIA

I am.

TEO

I don't know. It seems strange to me. Look at any famous person.

CLAUDIA

I don't think you and I have *anything* in common.

TEO

Luckily we're not on a date.
Otherwise we'd be having
some serious problems.

Long pause. A waiter comes up to the table.

We'd like to order *onces* . . .

CLAUDIA

We're going to have tea.
Don't say *onces*. Ever.

TEO

I grew up on *onces*.

CLAUDIA

And whose fault is that?

CLAUDIA orders for the two of them, while TEO examines the elderly women sitting about the café. They're all wearing gold rings set with glittering stones.

You want to be a photog-
rapher, right? A filmmaker,
I mean, not a fashion
photographer.

TEO

Yes, that's the only thing I
want. That's what I'm work-
ing toward. At least I think
I am. It's good to always
be working toward some-
thing. Toward being good at
something—even if it's only
that one thing. Everything
else stems from that.

CLAUDIA

In that case I'm well into
something.

TEO

Huh?

(continued)

CLAUDIA

Nothing.

Pause.

So why don't you?

TEO

Why don't I *what*?

CLAUDIA

Make movies.

TEO

Take it easy, I'm getting there. I only just started out. That's why I'm in school. If I already knew what I needed to know, I wouldn't be taking classes now, would I? Plus, college is expensive enough. Oof.

Brief pause.

And none of the decent directors have called me, either. The ones that actually have something to say, I mean. There are maybe two of those. Most of our alleged stars are nothing more than ratty little publicists trying to pass as artists.

CLAUDIA

You're full of personal opinions, Teo.

TEO

All opinions *are* personal.

CLAUDIA

And that's why people express them. Good. And here I was thinking that you

(continued)

didn't talk much. The quiet,
mysterious type...

TEO

When I'm on task I don't
talk.

CLAUDIA

Spoken like a true worker.

TEO

Everyone works at his
vocation. Sure.

Pause.

Plus, there's nothing wrong
with working for a living.
You look down on the working
class, don't you?

CLAUDIA

I don't look down on them,
but I'm clearly not one of
them.

TEO

Clearly. Though not everyone
has to be an artist, Claudia.
The world would be a
shitstorm if that were the
case.

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

Do you think that people who
talk less are more
seductive?

TEO

It depends. Why?

CLAUDIA

No reason.

Not-so-long pause.

(continued)

TEO

What time is it?

CLAUDIA

What?

TEO

The Killer Ants. Aren't we going to see the movie?

CLAUDIA

At "vermouth." We still have time. I invited you here early so we'd have time to talk.

TEO

"Vermouth . . ."

Pause.

Nobody uses that expression anymore. Not even where *I* come from . . .

CLAUDIA

Matinee, vermouth, and night. It's a saying. A custom.

TEO

One of our neighbors there had a lover, which, of course, everyone knew about. My grandmother used to say that she was "doing it matinee, vermouth, and night."

CLAUDIA

And then there was the "selecta."

TEO

What time was a "selecta"?

(continued)

CLAUDIA

I think it's at two. They also had an eleven A.M. showing for the kids.

TEO

My old man used to take me to Sunday matinees at the Plaza. I barely remember them, but he did.

CLAUDIA

Your generation invented the midnight show.

TEO

No, it was all about your de-generation. All about you not being part of your generation.

CLAUDIA

I'm flattered. But all generations lose themselves. Everyone knows that.

TEO

Have you ever seen *The Lost Boys*? It's not my kind of movie, but when I saw it, it really set my mind on fire. San Fernando is full of vampires, and Nancagua is plagued with zombies. The smaller the town, the eerier it is. People think it's pure folklore. To survive in one of those towns, you have to belong to certain circles, like the rockers or the movie buffs. Or you have to think that the world is all just one big cartoon. That's the only way out. The only way. Luckily, we have cable now. Cable was our link with Planet Earth.

(continued)

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

So you're not interested in directing, then?

TEO

I'd prefer to handle the cameras. I want to be a cinematographer. Just about everyone would rather direct. At school, only one other person is concentrating on cinematography. Did you ever read *A Man with a Camera*? Néstor Almendros is my idol. Vittorio Storaro is a master. Now I'm addicted to the "magic hour." Know what that is?

CLAUDIA

When the bars serve two-for-one drink specials?

TEO

It's the best time of day for shooting. It's a particular moment when everything and everyone looks good. At the magic hour, everything is so beautiful that it makes you never want to leave.

CLAUDIA

And when, exactly, is this magic hour?

TEO

Toward the end of the day. It can also be in the morning, but that's more often called the "blue hour," when it's no longer night but not yet day, and all the birds are still silent. The magic hour is

(continued)

more reddish and orange, because the sun is setting. But it really has nothing to do with that, because the notion of the setting sun is a cliché. There's no way to film one. All the settings have been applied by mistaken people. The magic hour is when the sun has already slipped below the horizon, yet it's still light out. It's a warm and very smooth light. Whenever I'm at sea and everyone else is watching the sun set, I'm watching the eastern horizon. The problem, though, is that the magic hour isn't even a full hour long.

CLAUDIA

So how long does it last, then?

TEO

Maybe twenty minutes. Not long at all. It's gone like *that*. Before you know it, it's already a memory.

CLAUDIA

I always thought that the magic hour was something else.

TEO

What?

CLAUDIA

I thought it was that hour you get back in March.

TEO

What do you mean? I'm not following...

(continued)

CLAUDIA

You know: when the summer comes, we set the clocks an hour ahead. That's why that particular Sunday is so short. You wake up thinking it's ten, but it's already eleven. But then in March you set the clocks back, so that when you think it's midnight, it's really only eleven. You get an extra hour. One to repeat. If you're with someone you like, or love, you have a chance to fix everything that you screwed up during that last hour.

TEO

I've never thought about it like that. Truth is, the only thing I remember about those Sundays is that they last forever. They're eternal; they just drag on and on . . .

CLAUDIA

You see? Each of us sees what we want to see. We all fixate on what affects or interests us.

Silent pause.

And you're thinking about filming something?

TEO

If we get the grant I've applied for from FONDART, I'll be able to do a short film with a few friends.

CLAUDIA

What's it going to be about?

(continued)

TEO

What's it going to be? The usual.

CLAUDIA

I don't know what that means.

TEO

I'm surprised. Take a guess?

CLAUDIA

Is there a murder?

TEO

It's about love. The only theme. Is there really anything else?

The waiter interrupts the conversation, serving the tea and biscotti.

CLAUDIA

Really?

TEO

Of course. No? Don't make me blush. All themes can seem ridiculous, but it's the most ridiculous ones that hit closest to home. Only the brave dare to be frivolous. Josh Rensen, for example, says that...

CLAUDIA

Who?

TEO

He's a singer. It doesn't matter. Anyway, he says that the only way of knowing if something you did is going to turn out for the best is if it makes you feel just a little bit ashamed.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

Some things make me feel very
ashamed.

CLAUDIA smells her tea.

Smell.

TEO

What?

CLAUDIA

It smells like the foothills
of the Himalayas.

TEO

I've never been there.

CLAUDIA

The smell of fine tea makes
me dizzy.

CLAUDIA leans in close to TEO and begins to smell his
neck, which is sheathed in a thick, black sweater.

You have a strong smell.

TEO

You already told me that.
Were you always this way? Or
did something happen...

CLAUDIA

It's a man's smell, but
there's something more.

TEO

You were telling me that
I...

CLAUDIA

Relax.

TEO

I was running to get here as
soon as I could.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

It's Old Spice. You should try using something more refined.

TEO

I'm not refined, I'm a hick.

CLAUDIA

And that Gillette deodorant.

TEO

It's their gel. The blue stick.

CLAUDIA

You use Le Sancy soap in the shower, and you shampoo your hair with . . . chamomile-scented Sedal.

TEO

I wouldn't know. I borrowed it from one of the other guys in my apartment.

CLAUDIA

You should wash your hair more often, Teo. You have beautiful hair, but when it's dirty it looks pretty harsh.

TEO

Harsh?

CLAUDIA

Yes.

TEO

My hair is a filthy stinking mess. Is that what you're trying to say?

CLAUDIA

No, but it doesn't shine. It's all matted. And since you hang out with smokers, it

(continued)

smells like cigarettes. And marijuana.

TEO

How do you know?

CLAUDIA

I can smell it.

TEO

Seriously? What's up with that? You got some special powers? You should go work for the CIA. You could sniff out people in the airports.

CLAUDIA

Anyway, your natural scent radiates energy. A very positive energy. And you sweat because you exude confidence. Not all guys have that.

TEO

Look, Claudia, I'll tell you . . . this conversation is getting a little too strange for me.

CLAUDIA

Are you tense? You shouldn't be.

TEO

It's just weird, that's all. I don't know. But now, yes, I am sweating.

CLAUDIA

Relax. Don't confuse scent with stench. Everybody's afraid of smells, but we each have our own aroma. Society fears natural odors. It's awful that only flowers and other sweet things are considered pleasant. Smell

(continued)

is definitely the most underappreciated of the senses.

TEO

Yeah?

CLAUDIA

Can there be any doubt? Ages ago I was begging Gracia to let me do a piece on aromatherapy. That's the future . . . mark my words.

TEO

What is?

CLAUDIA

Naturally scented oils.

TEO

I don't follow.

CLAUDIA

Oil is nothing more than the blood of some plants and flowers. It's like sap. Absorbing these oils is like injecting yourself with nature's blood. It affects your mind, body, and spirit.

TEO

You can't be serious . . .

CLAUDIA

I'm always serious. It's worth it to make an effort to get to know me.

TEO

I'm on that.

Pause.

I have oily skin. I really should eat less avocado. Sometimes I'll be in an

(continued)

elevator and I'll touch my face with my hands and then go around leaving greasy fingerprints on all the glass doors.

CLAUDIA

That's a secret.

Pause.

Thanks for sharing it with me.

CLAUDIA lights up a cigarette. With a gesture, TEO declines the offer.

TEO

I thought you didn't like the smell of cigarette smoke.

CLAUDIA

I don't like the smell of stale cigarettes mixed in with someone's hair. Please don't jump to conclusions.

TEO

Forgive me.

CLAUDIA

As I was saying . . . the human olfactory system is connected to certain areas of the brain that have to do with emotions and hormonal responses.

TEO

This is like taking a class. I should be filming this. The assholes back at school would never believe me if I told them about this conversation.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

May I finish?...The most effective way to experience aromatherapy is to dissolve ten drops of the scented oil in a very hot bath. Then you sit back in the tub and close your eyes. You don't have to lather up, add salts, wash your hair, anything like that. The idea is to sit there, breathing deeply and peacefully until the skin on your fingertips starts to wrinkle. But you're not just inhaling the aromas... you're absorbing it through your skin as well. That's how it gets into your bloodstream. And there are people who like to apply it directly to the skin, in massages.

TEO

How can you say that massages are relaxing? I had a couple at the spas in Las Termas del Flaco, and I don't know... I got pretty horny, which was embarrassing. I had to stop. And it didn't help that the masseuses were all those gross-looking old women.

CLAUDIA

In any case, the bathing quiets the emotions and calms your headaches. I recommend it; it would do you good. Also, it induces dreaming and reduces stress.

TEO

It always gave me headaches. Like it did my old man. Heredity's a bitch.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

So, that's it.

TEO

...

CLAUDIA

Bergamot is a citrus oil.
It's especially good for
calming the nervous system,
reducing anxiety and stress,
and diluting melancholy.

TEO

It "dilutes" it?

CLAUDIA

It alleviates it. Leaves you
feeling less sad.

TEO

In that case I'd like to try
it. Sometimes I wish there
was something you could take
to relieve the condition
permanently.

CLAUDIA

There is.

TEO

What, the movies?

CLAUDIA

Bergamot.

Long pause.

TEO

Are you always like this?

CLAUDIA

Like what?

TEO

You know.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

No, what?

TEO

Like *this*.

CLAUDIA

Does it make you
uncomfortable?

TEO

A bit.

CLAUDIA

Relax. You know how first
dates are.

TEO

Really? Ah, that's good to
know. I had no idea this was
a date. I thought you were
just bored and didn't have
anybody else to entertain
you.

Long pause.

CLAUDIA

That was spiteful. Are you a
spiteful person? Maybe you
need to work on that.

TEO

I think that underneath your
spiteful exterior lies a
spiteful woman. And a
vengeful one.

CLAUDIA

You have no idea.

TEO

Seems pretty clear to me.

They both laugh. A lot. Suddenly, CLAUDIA becomes
serious.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

We should try to find something we have in common, to set things right. If we can't talk with each other, we'll never know what our similarities are.

TEO

This is going to be tough.

CLAUDIA

Opposites attract.

TEO

Opposites repel each other. Didn't you study your physics?

Pause.

This might not be a date, but I have to admit, it's been more interesting than many dates I've been on. Colchagua girls aren't like you.

Long, eternal pause.

CLAUDIA

What does your father do?

TEO

What does it matter what he does?

CLAUDIA

For conversation's sake. Maybe I know him.

TEO

I don't think so. I doubt it very much. So don't jerk me around.

CLAUDIA

I know a lot of people.

(continued)

TEO

And? So what? It's like collecting.

CLAUDIA

You can be so dense . . .

TEO

My father doesn't live around here. His life took a sharp turn when I was about five, and I haven't seen him since. I think he lives in Chaco now. Transformed into some sort of Graham Greene character. Got hooked up with a Chilean guy from Ciudad del Este, in Paraguay. Something like that. Sometimes I find it on the map and think about him.

Pause.

He used to be a traveling salesman. He sold Bolocco TVs all over the Zona Central.

CLAUDIA

Cecilia's dad!

TEO

That old son of a bitch. The girl turned out worse than he did.

CLAUDIA

I think what she managed to accomplish is admirable: being Miss Universe, marrying the president of Argentina.

TEO

I'm sorry, but I can't stand it when people admire Cecilia Bolocco. For me,

(continued)

that's like the Omo detergent-whiteness test. It's even more damning than someone hanging a picture of Pinochet in their house. My town is full of old ladies who both admire and suffer because of Cecilia. Ugh. I hate them. I'd like to kill every last one of them. Someday I'll make a movie about a guy who goes around killing all the nosy old ladies and TV junkies in San Fernando. I'll call it *Colchaguan Psycho*.

CLAUDIA

Obviously you exaggerate. We can expect anything from the Boloccos. Cecilia is the type of woman who always achieves her goals. And to me, that's deserving of more than a little respect.

TEO

Cecilia Bolocco... she'll end up opening a chain of high-end massage parlors, complete with aromatherapy and Brazilian whores. Every customer leaves with a smile on his face and his balls oiled with bergamot and lavender.

CLAUDIA

That's just vulgar. And ignorant. What has poor Cecilia ever done to you?

TEO

Cecilia Bolocco is anything but "poor."

CLAUDIA

I sense a bit of resentment.

(continued)

TEO

And really, she's not even that hot. Nastassja Kinski is hot. Diane Lane in *Streets of Fire* is hot.

CLAUDIA

Stop it already. So what did Papa Bolocco ever do to your father?

TEO

He shit on him, though I'm sure he never even realized it, because my father was a minor little salesman there, nothing more. I'm sure all the secretaries there got a good laugh out of his get-up.

CLAUDIA

We say "suit." Don't ever say "get-up," not even in jest.

TEO

Give it up. You're all the same. I have my limits too, Claudia. And I can become violent when provoked.

CLAUDIA

Forgive me . . . I lost myself for a moment there.

TEO

Your kind were born lost.

CLAUDIA

Who do you mean, "my kind"?

TEO

You know full well.

CLAUDIA

Yes. Yes, I do. We are who we are.

(continued)

TEO

"Them." That's what you all
are to me: "them."

Pause. TEO gets up.

I'm going to the bathroom.
May I?

CLAUDIA

You're a free person.

TEO

More than you are, in fact.
I'll be back.

CLAUDIA is left alone. She finishes her tea and tries a bite of biscotti. She takes out her datebook and studies it. TEO returns.

CLAUDIA

So what happened with Don
Enzo's TVs?

TEO

All of a sudden, Pinochet
opened everything up, and
Sony and JVC hardware began
to pour into the country at
rock-bottom prices. The shit
hit the fan for Bolocco. He
took it out on his own
employees, which in the end
was kind of nice. My old man
turned to selling notebooks.
And I don't know how, but he
ended up on the road...
anyway, you've seen that
movie a thousand times.
Luckily, I was too young to
remember much of all that.

Pause.

On the other hand, my
stepfather—who became like a
father—worked in fashion.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

I don't believe you.

TEO

I'm serious. He clothed the entire region. I'd even go so far as to say he changed the face of fashion in Chile.

CLAUDIA

Now I'm really lost.

TEO

He opened up the first big secondhand American clothing store in the region. And he expanded all over the place: Rancagua, Santa Cruz, Pichilemu . . . even in Curicó. My stepfather is the man responsible for all the hicks starting to dress like pimps.

CLAUDIA

Strange.

TEO

But true. Once he even went to a secondhand clothing convention in Las Vegas. Almost all the clothes there came from dead Americans. People from the Midwest, who live in towns like Lumberton from *Blue Velvet*. My stepfather gave me Leonard Maltin's book once, and a box of videos to go along with it. He was more of a father to me than my biological father was.

Long pause.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

Tell me more about your film.
What aesthetic approach are
you planning to take?

TEO

You're really interested?

CLAUDIA

Of course.

TEO

You're not just bullshitting
me?

CLAUDIA

Tell me.

TEO

Well, I don't have it all
laid out just yet, but I do
know that I want to film the
female lead in a very loving
way. She's my girlfriend,
after all. My idea is to
shoot her in such a way as
to make the viewer fall in
love with her—just as the
protagonist does. I really
think that any actress can be
made beautiful on screen if
the cinematographer really
cares enough.

Pause.

CLAUDIA

Your girlfriend is an
actress?

TEO

Among other things. She also
studies literature, which is
good because she can help
with the screenplay. I can't
even write a simple letter,
but I come up with enough
visual ideas.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

Have you ever acted?

TEO

In some college productions. Real kid stuff. And in a few short films. Luckily, Octavia isn't an "actressy" actress. She's not all full of tics.

CLAUDIA

So why isn't she here?

TEO

She's in Madrid.

CLAUDIA

Does she live there?

TEO

She's there for the weekend.

CLAUDIA

She must be pretty well-off.

TEO

She's a flight attendant, and gets called for flights to New York and Los Angeles every once in a while. Which is great, because she brings back rolls of unexposed film, or goes to the 16mm film labs there. We made a very short film—just four fantastic minutes—with some other film students, and Octavia was in charge of developing it. That helps keep costs way down, and the end result is much better too. Especially if it's black-and-white.

CLAUDIA

So she's a stewardess.

(continued)

TEO

A flight attendant. It's a temporary thing. But the benefits are pretty amazing. In a couple months we're flying to Tahiti. For free. *Blue Lagoon*, here we come . . .

CLAUDIA

Why have I never heard about her before?

TEO

Because we've never really spoken before, Claudia. I think I said "good morning" to you once, but you didn't even look up.

CLAUDIA

You could have told me on the phone.

TEO

Huh?

CLAUDIA

Are you really into her?

TEO

We're together every night when she's in Chile. Does that strike you as weird?

CLAUDIA

It surprises me. I would never have guessed.

TEO

What did you expect?

CLAUDIA

You didn't mention her at all during our conversation, and now . . . I don't know. It's odd. Plus, you don't seem

like the type of guy who'd have a serious girlfriend. You don't even seem like the type of guy who'd have a girlfriend at all. In fact, I even wondered if maybe you had a boyfriend. What's a man doing at a women's magazine, anyway?

TEO

Get real, Claudia. If you're gonna take shots at me, at least try to get on target. Don't spend all evening trying to take me down, as if I'm an Almodóvar fan or something, or into musicals.

CLAUDIA

I think you've misunderstood me.

TEO

I don't.

CLAUDIA

Look, this is getting unpleasant, and I don't get involved in unpleasant, messy situations. Why? I'll tell you: Because life's just too short.

TEO

Relax. I like you. A lot. I'd even like to get to know your smells. All of them. It's just that I can't.

CLAUDIA

You're afraid?

TEO

No... I told you: I have a girlfriend. And I'm no cheater. Especially not for

(continued)

a one-night stand. She's my girl, and I want her to stay that way. I picked her and she picked me.

CLAUDIA

How romantic.

TEO

No, it's just the truth. When you love someone, you just love her. It's pretty simple.

Long, long pause. CLAUDIA checks the time. TEO looks out the window and tugs at his shoelaces.

CLAUDIA

Do you really think that any woman can look attractive?

TEO

It's a matter of finding the right thing about her to emphasize. There's always something there. Always. Listening is key...that's why you have to have a good rapport. Obviously. And you have to try and put yourself in her place. And then you rely on your light meter.

CLAUDIA

Put yourself in her place?

TEO

It's about understanding. I don't know how else to put it. Words were never my forte.

CLAUDIA

It would seem not.

(continued)

TEO

Look, it's...it's the light. I can't explain it without sounding pretentious.

CLAUDIA

The light. Go on.

TEO

In the end, it all comes down to light. It's the light in the eyes, I think. Depending on that, you know what kind of auxilliary lighting and filters to use. But it's not an exact science. It's more just a theory of mine. It's how I work.

CLAUDIA

Explain it to me.

TEO

I think it's legit. At least, I *want* to think so. Look at it this way: there are women who dazzle and amaze—almost blindingly—and then there are some who shine about as much as a space heater.

CLAUDIA

A space heater...

TEO

It's a broad spectrum. Obviously it has to do with the actress's personality—if somebody loves her, if she's feeling good, if she's confident and things are going well...

Pause.

You know that Frank Sinatra song? "The Shadow of Your

(continued)

Smile?" Great title, by the way. I honestly believe that smiles can cast shadows, and that a sad look can light up a room... I'm not sure I can explain it. Ultimately, light is like a shawl. I know that sounds weird, but that's how it is. It's what the cinematographer gives his subject to wrap herself in. So she can hide just a bit and feel protected on the set. If you expose everything, the sense of mystery will evaporate. Do you follow? And then everything seems false. That's the worst, because in real life you can never really see the whole picture. There are always going to be parts that are in shadow. Which is why the real challenge is to shine a light into the dark corners that each of us has.

Brief pause.

CLAUDIA

Go on.

TEO

Have you read André Bazin? Well, he says that sex and death are two things that can't be depicted in film. That's his theory, not mine. I don't understand it all, but I believe that all cinematography betrays who's behind the camera. To me, that's one of Chilean film's biggest flaws. Women never appear as well as they should. And that's because most of the actresses are the

directors' mistresses. I can only assume that they don't really love them.

CLAUDIA

Why?

TEO

Because if you really love a woman, that has to be evident on the screen. You have to shoot her lovingly. Caringly. You have to capture her on film just as she's captured in your imagination.

CLAUDIA

So how would you photograph me?

TEO

From a distance.

CLAUDIA

Idiot. I should be the one keeping my distance from you.

Pause.

TEO

I think we should go now. I don't like being late. I hate it. If I get to the theater and the film's already started, I won't go in.

CLAUDIA

That's neurotic.

TEO

Let's go.

CLAUDIA

Let me pay the bill.

Both get up to leave.

(continued)

Scene Two:

Cine Oriente
Pedro de Valdivia Norte, Providencia,
Santiago de Chile
seven o'clock in the evening

CLAUDIA and TEO enter the theater's foyer and look around at the posters advertising upcoming features, including *Basic Instinct* and *The Bodyguard*.

CLAUDIA

I want to see that.

TEO

I wouldn't see that if they paid me.

CLAUDIA

You're just prejudiced.

TEO

Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston? Who could believe that? And who's this Mick Jackson? Nobody. Just some geek off the street signed by the studio. Please.

They walk toward the doors.

TEO

Let's go in. I want to see the trailers.

CLAUDIA

The what?

TEO

You know, the previews. Plus, I like to sit in the best spot.

CLAUDIA doesn't respond. She's focused on the scar beneath TEO's left eye.

CLAUDIA

I didn't notice that before.

TEO

When you change the light,
you change everything. You
see things in a new way.

CLAUDIA

So how did that happen?

TEO

A dog bit me.

CLAUDIA

When?

TEO

I was only about a year old.
We were at a barbecue near
Agua Buena with some of my
mom's relatives. It was a
little plot of land they had
out in the country. Anyway,
I tried to take a bone away
from a Dalmatian that had
recently had puppies, and it
got me pretty good. I went
into shock, and blood was
running like a faucet. It
almost severed a nerve...
that wouldn't have been
good.

CLAUDIA

Poor kid.

TEO

You want to know what else?

CLAUDIA

What?

(continued)

TEO

For my sixth birthday, my uncle, Elías Zerené—he owns the hotel in Las Termas, though he's actually more poor than rich, because the place loses money like crazy—took me to the Plaza Theater. First we went out for *onces*—excuse me, “tea”—on O'Higgins Street, and from there we went out to the matinee, or the vermouth, I'm not sure. Maybe it was a matinee, which would make the *onces* more of a mid-morning snack type thing.

CLAUDIA

You mean brunch.

TEO

No, we're talking 1970s San Fernando here. I'm sorry, but no fucking way was it brunch. Anyway, Uncle Elías took me to see Disney's *101 Dalmatians*. I was fascinated going into the theater... I couldn't have been more happy. That is, until the dogs appeared. It was like a chemical reaction. I couldn't stop crying. I took off running, but couldn't find the exit. I was very young, and it was dark inside. It was the most traumatic moviegoing experience I've ever had. I still hate Dalmatians to this day. Any dog, really. If I see one coming, I cross the street.

CLAUDIA

You have every right.

(continued)

Pause.

CLAUDIA and TEO enter the theater. It's practically empty. They take their seats at the end of one of the rows, with TEO next to the aisle.

TEO

There's nobody here.

CLAUDIA

It's Saturday: the trendiest day to go. And I'm the idiot who reserved tickets.

TEO

What a fucking drag. Really. I don't get why people don't come to see what's playing here. You know what terrifies me, Claudia? I'm afraid of making something intimate and personal, and then not only do I get laughed at and torn apart by the critics, but people won't even show up. And the seats will be empty like these are today. Ugh. Just the thought of it depresses me.

CLAUDIA

Let's just hope the movie's good. You sure can be a pessimist, Teo. But there must be a good reason why nobody's here. Maybe we should leave. We're free to go, you know. I didn't make any promises to the production staff.

TEO

No, let's see it. Anyway, just because nobody's here doesn't mean it's a bad

(continued)

movie. Or do you think that labels like "commercial" and "popular" are synonymous with "good"?

CLAUDIA

At least they mean you're communicating with people.

TEO

You're out of your mind.

CLAUDIA

Look who's talking.

The house lights dim and the curtains open. The German newsreel "The World Today" begins to roll.

TEO

This is a shitty theater, but I like the fact that it has curtains. What's your favorite theater?

CLAUDIA

Maybe Las Condes?

TEO

In Santiago I like the Gran Palace. It has walls that change color. Really. I also like the Rex because they have love seats. The Astor has the best projection, and they show the best horror flicks there too, but the best sound is at Pedro de Valdivia. Most of the places here are falling apart, but they say the ones in the United States are incredible. They all have THX Surround Sound, not like this shit.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

Once, a long time ago, I went to Buenos Aires with my parents and sisters. It was during the summer—maybe because it was cheaper then, I don't know. The city was empty. And we were young; I was about fifteen, so my sisters would have been fourteen and twelve. Of course now they're both married, but that's beside the point. Anyway, we stayed in this incredible old French hotel, called the Castelar, I recall. We got two rooms—one for the parents and one for us—and they shared a common living room. Down in the lobby was a plaque that said Federico García Lorca had once stayed there. Of course, I didn't know who he was. Or I knew that he was famous, but I didn't know why. Anyway, my mother began to recite a few of his verses. Right there on Avenida de Mayo. But what was even more amazing was that my father knew the poem too, and started reciting it along with her. My sisters and I just stood there watching, and it was then that I understood that they loved each other, and that maybe—just maybe—they were in love with each other as well. I was really struck by that. Strange, huh?

TEO

No.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

One day they let us go out on our own. I mean, they gave us passes to the movie theater, which was across the street. They had something to do on their own. Grown-up things, I guess. A tango club or something.

TEO

I'll bet they stayed in the room. Fucking.

CLAUDIA

Maybe. Now that I think about it, you're probably right. They must've stayed in the hotel.

TEO

What movie did you see?

CLAUDIA

A Little Romance.

TEO

Directed by George Roy Hill. United States, 1979, with Diane Lane making her big screen debut. And Thelonious Bernard, Sir Laurence Olivier, and Sally Kellerman as the mother. Really good. Great, even. It is, in some ways, one of the movies of my life. I can't believe you've seen it. *Nobody's* seen it. Nobody I know, anyway. I saw it in Nancagua, at my grandmother's house, one afternoon.

CLAUDIA

It's about a movie buff like you. A half-ugly little French kid.

(continued)

TEO

And an uptown girl like you.

CLAUDIA

To be honest, I seriously identified with the girl. She seemed like the most beautiful girl on earth, and I wanted to be like her. Especially her hair, and the way she dressed. And there I was, completely captivated. We were captivated, I should say, because my sisters were also totally spellbound. We were focused on the screen . . . when all of a sudden the roof of the theater started to open up. It slid open like a door, and then disappeared completely. I'd never seen anything like that before. And I've never been in a theater like that since. The heat just melted away, and a sultry but fresh breeze swept in off the Río de la Plata. Suddenly the whole place was filled with stars, and Diane Lane escapes with the ugly little French kid to Venice.

TEO

Because they're in love, and because they need to kiss under the Bridge of Sighs.

CLAUDIA

Because if you kiss your beloved under that bridge, at sunset when all the church bells begin to toll, you'll be with that person for the rest of your life, right?

TEO

Something like that. Melodramatic and romantic, but real. I wonder whatever happened to them. If they met again as adults. Sometimes I ask myself if the boy ever managed to direct a film. That could be a very revealing movie in itself. But in the French mode... sort of *nouvelle vague*.

CLAUDIA

Some years later, I went to Venice. I ran away from Milan, where they'd sent me at the start of the new season. I spent a fortune just to pass under the Bridge of Sighs in a gondola. The gondolier, of course, was exceptionally handsome, and I almost asked if I could kiss him, but that would have been inappropriate. So I kissed my hand. And sighed.

TEO

I would have done the same thing. If you don't love yourself, nothing else really matters, does it?

TEO takes CLAUDIA's hand.

(continued)

Scene Three:

Restorán La Pérgola on the Plaza Mulato Gil
Lastarria Street, City of Santiago,
Santiago de Chile

eleven o'clock at night

A taxi makes its way up Costanera. In the backseat, CLAUDIA rests her head on TEO's shoulder. They are both looking out the window. TEO is caressing CLAUDIA's hair.

Neither one speaks.

The taxi continues on toward the Lastarria neighborhood, overlooking the Parque Forestal.

The taxi reaches the Plaza Mulato Gil de Castro, which is a Francophile, artistic, bohemian center.

Inside the candle-lit restaurant, the two order onion soup, two goat-cheese-and-nut salads, a cheese plate, and two bottles of wine.

They eat in silence. They examine each other with their eyes, but neither one says much until CLAUDIA decides to revive the conversation:

CLAUDIA

Why did the ants kill the people?

TEO

What?

CLAUDIA

Tell me, Mr. Cinematographer. Did you understand the movie? It seemed pretty strange to me.

TEO

They killed those who had never loved.

CLAUDIA

Those who had never loved.
Yes, I understood that.

TEO

So . . .

CLAUDIA

But how do they know? The
ants, I mean. How do they
know who is who?

TEO

It's a movie. They just knew.
That's beside the point.

CLAUDIA

What is?

TEO

It's a metaphor. Obviously
you're never going to run
into an army of ants that
only kills people who don't
love. The director is just
trying to say that you can't
live without it.

CLAUDIA

But you can, up to a certain
point. I know a lot of people
who get along just fine
without it.

TEO

They get along, but not "just
fine."

Pause.

CLAUDIA

All that stuff in the movie
about people not changing.
Do you think that's true?

TEO

Yes and no.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

How so?

TEO

If you set out . . .

Pause.

I'd like to think that, yes,
one can change.

CLAUDIA

Did you change?

TEO

Maybe. I think so. I used to be a certain way, and now I'm another. So, yes, I guess I have. But not much. It doesn't really matter at my age, anyway. I guess it remains to be seen. One way or another, I'm at the end of one stage of my life. So I don't really know. We'll have to wait and see if I do change, or—more importantly—if I manage to achieve what I want. See if my plan takes effect. Because why would you change if you're more or less happy with how you are?

CLAUDIA

What plan?

TEO

We all have a plan. Even if it's hidden deep in the unconscious mind. Each of us knows what we want, and each of us knows what we're lacking, too.

Long pause. The waiter brings over a cup of chocolate mousse and two spoons.

(continued)

TEO

A guy I know tripped on acid. Some guys played a trick on him...it was really sad, because he had no idea what was happening to him. He thought he was suffering from some sort of psychosis. He really thought he was going crazy.

CLAUDIA

What happened?

TEO

He told me about it not long ago. He works all summer at my uncle's hotel, up until Semana Santa. Have you ever been up there in Las Termas?

CLAUDIA

No, they say the road is horrible.

TEO

It's awful. You need a jeep or a four-by-four. It's so bad that they only open it from November to April. Las Termas is totally isolated during the winter. Only a few caretakers stay there at the hotel. It's like *The Shining*. Only, my uncle's hotel is bigger than the one in the movie, and it was never finished. The construction, that is.

CLAUDIA

Really?

TEO

It's true. The government started building it in the thirties...it was going to

be this giant place for workers to go for a little R&R. But an earthquake struck, money ran out, and it was never finished. If it was, it would have been the biggest hotel in South America. You can walk forever through the halls and not get anywhere.

CLAUDIA

At least it's open, though. You can stay there, right?

TEO

Not really. You get to the end of the road, and there, set amid the peaks, looms this immense structure. But it's completely empty. Nothing. Someday I'll go up there and make a horror flick about the caretakers. I'm sure they'll end up going crazy.

CLAUDIA

But that's what happens in *The Shining*. You can't do that—it's already been done.

TEO

Everything has been done before. What you've got to do is make it your own. Give it a new look, a new accent. *The Shining* set in Termas del Flaco is no longer *The Shining*. It becomes something new.

CLAUDIA

Could be.

TEO

Oh, definitely. Otherwise we'd be fucked. We wouldn't

(continued)

be able to tell any stories at all. Plus, in my movie, something will happen to the hot springs, so that every time someone goes to soak in them—because they're hot year round, even though the place is surrounded by snow—they become overwhelmed by the need to eat human flesh. The whole thing is kind of based on what happened to Urquidi.

CLAUDIA

Urquidi?

TEO

The guy I was telling you about. He's the masseur. During the summers he spends all his time at the hotel. Because my uncle owns the vacant hotel, but he built his own hotel nearby, with better cabañas too. It's almost as if a white elephant were protecting the dinosaurs' cabañas.

CLAUDIA

What dinosaurs?

TEO

It's one of my uncle's expressions. There are no dinosaurs, of course, but there once were. The land behind the hotel is full of fossils. They're right there, in the living rock, lying in plain sight.

CLAUDIA

So what's the deal with this Urquidi character?

TEO

He's a good guy. The quiet type. Suffered some sort of trauma, from what we understand. Something happened to him back when he was in school. I don't know all the details, but it left him blinded.

CLAUDIA

Was it some sort of disease?

TEO

No, no. Actually, it seems that it was a fight. Urquidi was from Santiago's upper class. Private school and all that jazz. He got into it with the son of the top military brass, and the guy gouged out his eyes.

CLAUDIA loses her composure and looks away, remembering.
TEO doesn't notice and continues on with his story.

TEO

So it's not that he was blinded; his eyes were literally ripped out. That's why he wears two patches: so people won't be turned off by his disfigurement. His parents sent him to Switzerland, I think. I'm not sure. But somewhere over there he learned how to be a masseur. Did you know that the best masseurs in the world are blind? And clients prefer them, because then they don't have to worry about being seen. Urquidi's pretty young—I don't think he's hit thirty yet—and all the other hotel employees say that if he hadn't been blinded, he

(continued)

would have become a doctor or something. When he's not in Las Termas, he works for a beautician who caters to rich old ladies. Sometimes he massages them in such a way that he manages to make those women come. He just slips his hand in there and they start howling. It'll all be in my movie; the blind caretaker and his group of freaks . . . from an animal-loving mule driver—there's a logic to all this, I promise you—to a stripper trying to pass as an evangelical maid.

CLAUDIA

And why are we talking about this?

TEO

I just remembered it, that's all. If you take a look, that guy with the girl is blind. The dog is outside. That's all. It simply reminded me of that story.

CLAUDIA

Didn't you tell me this was going to be a love story?

TEO

It's a short piece. You can experiment more with them. When you set out to make a movie, you've got to become a storyteller.

CLAUDIA

And you think this will make a good story?

TEO

You don't?

(continued)

CLAUDIA and TEO finish their dessert. The waiter brings them the check, and CLAUDIA takes out her credit card. They each have a Cointreau as a digestif.

CLAUDIA

So what exactly happened to Urquidi?

TEO

Nothing, really. A couple of kids—the sons of winegrowers from Santa Cruz—showed up one day. And, since Las Termas is an old-folks' town, they were bored. It's sort of a Third World version of Cocoon. And everyone who goes there is from the area. I mean, the people from Santiago never go. No, Las Termas is like the Cartagena of the Andes. But the point is that these kids arrived there in a helicopter with their parents, who were interested in investing. They were there two days, and at some point they tricked Urquidi into licking a tab of acid, after which they left him alone in his tiny little room, where the poor guy started to hallucinate.

CLAUDIA

Was he all right?

TEO

Well, he survived, but it was a real nightmare. A bad trip, for sure. I doubt I'll use that in my movie. Maybe I'll start off with the day he loses his eyes. What do you think?

(continued)

CLAUDIA

You obviously weren't there.

TEO

I would have loved to film it all. You think these things only happen in the movies, but they happen in real life, too.

CLAUDIA

Can we finish this story? You go off on all these tangents . . . What happened when Urquidi started to hallucinate?

TEO

It was awful, because he started to remember all the names of people he'd known. No Technicolor waterfalls or spinning galaxies . . . just names.

CLAUDIA

Names?

TEO

Yeah, lists and lists of people's names began to march through his head . . . like those recruitment lists that get posted on walls. But the worst part about it is that they just wouldn't stop. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of anything else. So . . . what do you think?

CLAUDIA

Poor Cristóbal.

TEO

You know him?

CLAUDIA

No.

TEO

Then how did you know what his first name was?

CLAUDIA

You must have mentioned it.

TEO

Did I?

CLAUDIA

Yes.

TEO

That's strange . . . But I can imagine what that trip must have been like. And the overwhelming thing is that we know more names than we know people. A person must know thousands of individual names.

CLAUDIA

You think?

TEO

Oh, at least. First you have the people you know. People you know personally, I mean. Your relatives. That's about twenty right there. Then there's all the people from school, including teachers.

CLAUDIA

And college. And prep school. Did you go to prep school?

TEO

No, but I studied English in San Fernando.

(continued)

CLAUDIA

And there's your accountant.

TEO

I don't have one.

CLAUDIA

Fine. And your neighbors.

TEO

Your sisters' husbands, and their families.

CLAUDIA

The people you work with. Office interns. Your dentist.

TEO

Of course. And the people you speak to on the phone. Are you on the phone with a lot of people?

CLAUDIA

All day.

TEO

Let's see . . . then there's the government. Mayors, ministers . . . and I don't know many myself, but I guess someone could know the names of a lot of military guys.

CLAUDIA

TV characters. Media personalities in general.

TEO

Singers? That's a couple hundred right there. What else? Journalists, comedians . . . I know the names of just about everyone on cable. Radio disc jockeys. And I know thousands of actors.

And cinematographers. Sven Nykvist, Miroslav Ondricek, Vilmos Zsigmond, Andrzej Bartkowiak. The best cameramen are Central European.

CLAUDIA

Top models, salespeople, my lawyer . . .

TEO

Screenwriters, directors, producers . . .

CLAUDIA

So many names . . .

TEO

And so few people we really know . . .

They both look each other in the eyes. TEO leans in to kiss her. CLAUDIA turns away.

CLAUDIA

You've got a girlfriend, remember?

TEO

Yes. You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that . . .

CLAUDIA

It's what?

TEO

Nothing. I just felt . . . I just felt close to you. Very close. Maybe we should go.

CLAUDIA

Maybe we should.

The two of them exit the restaurant. The night is cold yet clear and peaceful. The streets are empty. They set

(continued)

out walking, and turn onto Villavicencio Street. TEO takes CLAUDIA by the hand. She lets go. They walk in silence.

CLAUDIA

I think I'll get a taxi.

TEO

You'll have better luck on
the Alameda.

TEO moves closer to CLAUDIA, touches her hair, and kisses her on the lips. He kisses her deeply, softly, slowly. CLAUDIA pulls back, pushes him away, then covers her mouth with her hand.

TEO

Claudia?

CLAUDIA

Yes?

TEO

I wasn't quite honest with
you before. The part about
the scar was true, I swear.
And the part about the
Dalmatian.

CLAUDIA

I don't quite follow.

TEO

The whole *101 Dalmatians*
thing—that wasn't true. It
never happened. I never got
a panic attack from seeing
all those puppies on the
screen. I made that all up.
I'm not sure why.

CLAUDIA

To seduce me?

TEO

Yes.

(continued)

TEO looks intently at CLAUDIA, and kisses her again. On the cheek. He holds her for a while.

TEO

Are you sure you're all right?

CLAUDIA

I think so.

TEO

I'll see you on Monday, then.

CLAUDIA

On Monday, then. Like new.

TEO

Get some sleep. This can't go anywhere.

CLAUDIA

You really don't want to take things farther?

TEO

I do, but I don't. Really. I don't know. It's better if we don't. I'd feel guilty afterwards.

CLAUDIA

I already feel guilty.

TEO moves to kiss her again.

CLAUDIA

It's all or nothing. You can be unfaithful in spirit, Teo, and you've already done that tonight. What does a little bit more matter?

TEO

It matters a lot. I already feel bad enough. Don't make me feel worse.

(continued)

They walk in silence until they reach the Alameda. TEO hails a cab.

TEO

I just realized something.

CLAUDIA

Don't hurt me, Teo.

TEO

I know how I would photograph you.

CLAUDIA

How?

TEO

Exactly the way you look right now. This is how I want to remember you.

Pause.

CLAUDIA

Teo.

TEO

Yes?

CLAUDIA

This never happened.

TEO

Agreed. Don't worry.

CLAUDIA

Good night.

TEO

Good night. See you Monday.

ACT II:
Autumn, 1993

We didn't see each other again.

This is what happened.

She didn't go into the office on Monday, and since I didn't go in except for when Agnes specifically needed me, there was an open window through which escaped any possibility of continuing what we'd begun.

And on Tuesday, Octavia returned from her trip.

Agnes didn't contact me all week. Then one of Claudia's assistants called to tell me that "Ms. Marconi" had to leave on "urgent" business related to some production issues in Buenos Aires. To make matters worse, she also said that the idea of "doing something with the film" had been rendered void by the movie's weak showing at the box office.

The Killer Ants had, in fact, proved the miserable failure that almost everyone predicted, and it was pulled from theaters with extreme prejudice.

"We'll make something happen another time," the assistant told me.

Four days later, for reasons I still don't quite understand, Agnes B. let me go. She said she no longer required my services. She needed somebody committed, somebody who was truly interested in still photography and who was a bit older and a bit less of a movie buff. And because I was not a salaried employee, I received no severance pay. Agnes bid me farewell with a kiss on the forehead and a gift of an old Leica she still had lying around.

I never went back to the magazine. I never even picked up a copy to read. Two years later it ceased publication. I have no idea why.

*

That same week, in my dialogue and screenwriting class, our professor, Justo Naveillán—who was an obese, obsessive critic—had us write a script based on a dialogue. We had forty-eight hours to complete it, and the best one would be filmed by the entire class. He met with each of us individually, to see what ideas we had and what sort of themes were circulating. Professor Naveillán's approach was to weed out the premises he found uninteresting. He was one to find fault with *everything*, and in his entire career as a critic he had never given a film the full five stars. The rumor on campus was that he actually hated cinema, and the fact that he had to write about movies only angered him more.

According to Naveillán, our domestic cinema didn't need poor imitations of foreign films. He insisted that there were certain genres that were destined to fail locally no matter what. "Don't even bother with the western, the musical, or the film noir. They just don't work at our latitude," he spouted, his face red and his hair soaked with sweat.

Benjamín Sartori, one of my classmates who seemed to suffer from a case of perpetual nausea, was virtually massacred for suggesting that he wanted to explore a sadomasochistic relationship between a dominatrix and a transvestite.

"*What* do you know about this world? With *which* of the two are you going to identify? *Which* of them will take charge of your voice and your eye? Write about what you know and who you are, or else change who you are and then write to that effect. Your sexual fantasies are worthy of respect, even if they are crude and unoriginal. But, look—we're not living in the eighties anymore. Try and get with the times."

One of the most "resounding" guys in the class was Gregorio de la Calle. He said he wanted to do a story about a medical examiner who speaks with the dead, thus saving him the need to perform autopsies. For the deceased, these conversations are the first real therapy of their lives. They emerge

free, “ready to ascend to heaven without their excess emotional baggage.”

Naveillán took off his Coke-bottle glasses, walked a few paces toward where Gregorio was sitting, and said:

“*Nobody* is going to pay to see a film like that. I doubt even that anyone would see it for free at a second-rate film festival. There are some ideas, *muchacho*, that are born bad, and not even the best scenery or direction can rescue such *trash*. You’re the one who needs therapy. There are two things that I do not tolerate, Señor de la Calle: an intellectual without intellect, and a frivolous man who tries to *legitimize* himself through art. I have no time for uneducated people in my class. Write about yourself, *muchacho*, even if you end up with something wholly insignificant.”

When Naveillán looked at me, I blurted—out of pure terror—that my script was about a man and a woman.

“Not a bad premise. I’m intrigued. Who is the man?”

I came up with: “He’s a film student.”

“And *she*?”

“She . . . she’s a religion professor at a convent for deaf children. And she’s older than him. About ten years older.”

“They’re lovers?”

“No. It’s the first time they’ve met. But the man has a girlfriend he loves and wants to be faithful to. Still, something happens.”

“What?”

“She speaks to him in a way that nobody has ever spoken to him before. His girlfriend doesn’t really *speak* to him—she replies. But this woman is different. She’s unique. And she allows him to say things that he would never say otherwise.”

“Sex? Betrayal! What?”

“No, with her he can talk about art, photography, light . . . and love. He just opens up.”

“Good. Write it. But *change* the woman’s profession. Don’t make her a nun.”

"No nuns."

"Right. Make her something else."

"A fashion magazine editor?"

"Sure. Why not? Somebody has to do that."

*

A long story made short: I wrote the screenplay in one sitting. I'd never written anything before, because I'd never thought I had much of an imagination, but that night, sitting at my ancient computer, my fingers couldn't stop hacking away at the keys. You don't need to invent in order to create . . . all you need are memories, seasoned to taste. Before, whenever I would try and bang out the tale of, I don't know, a hired assassin or something, I could manage—with a great deal of effort and alcohol—to establish a few anecdotes, situations, and turns of the screw. But I was never able to get my characters to speak. *Now*, though, they spoke on their own. They wouldn't stop. And I had no way to make them stop.

I gave it a different ending, of course, because the real-life story was left open-ended, if you can even call it that. The two characters make their way to a hotel on a little street near the Parque Bustamante. There they make love—and the scene rushed out so intense, hot, and creative that I grew harder with every keystroke, and by the end I had to wipe the come off myself with a couple of Kleenex. After the sex, Jonás and Cecilia stay up all night talking, until they look at the clock and realize that soon it's going to be the "blue hour." They go out into the street, cross the river, and walk to the train station, which is closed. They bid each other farewell, as both of them have to return to their significant others. That was my other modification: they each have someone currently out of town whom they don't want to hurt. But Cecilia and Jonás decide to see each other on a single occasion every year. This is their compromise. Once a year, they will spend the night together, from that moment until they reach old age, or until one of them dies. The End.

*

The class selected my screenplay. I wanted to call it *The Magic Hour*, but *Matinee*, *Vermouth*, and *Night* ended up being more popular. This was in early 1993. I remember Alex Frigerio warning me that Octavia might be upset by the film's subject matter, but as it turned out I didn't have to face that problem. Three weeks after my evening with Claudia, Octavia informed me that we were through. She'd met someone, a music student in New York. Chilean, too. I asked her if she had been with him there in New York. She said I shouldn't ask.

"And to think that I was faithful to you one night when . . ."

She replied that she would always love me; I told her to go to hell. With time and the inevitable twists of fate, Octavia ended up living in Australia, not with the musician but with a Lebanese businessman. I bumped into her sister in a supermarket once, and she told me that Octavia had two kids who were spelling-bee champions.

*

Casting the film was no easy task. Especially for the role of Jonás. The old building on Macul was flooded with aspiring actors. We ended up choosing a young man who distinguished himself by admitting that his favorite actor was Michael J. Fox, and that the reason he wanted to be an actor was to become rich, famous, and well loved, since he was never loved. The guy—who became neither rich nor famous—was named Mateo Ruiz-Tagle, and he was a rich kid, which I didn't particularly like, since I wanted my alter ego to be somewhat more like me. I argued that we should look for someone less urbane, but Lázaro Santander (this is before he achieved all his national and international acclaim) was co-directing the film with Alex, and both of them felt that it was more important to have someone polished-looking, despite the fact that I clearly was not. Later I insisted

that it really made no difference to me, since Jonás was not in fact based on me. Everyone laughed in my face. Gregorio de la Calle, who was in charge of production and casting, thought that Ruiz-Tagle was going to be a star, and that somewhere down the line we might be able to rescue this thing and sell the TV rights.

He never became a star because he was killed. He didn't live long enough to appear in a major film. Just two small productions that nobody saw. Not even my friends and I. Mateo Ruiz-Tagle was snowboarding one day when he smashed into a rock. He was our James Dean. Nobody in the cinema world remembers him, except for me. Sometimes I think about Mateo, and sometimes I'm reminded of myself.

*

For the role of Claudia—or, rather, Cecilia—we decided to take a shot at an established actress, and, with the help of Carlos Flores, who pulled a few strings in the show biz industry, we were able to land Patricia Rivadeneira. Yes, that's the one: the famous underground muse who once walked around wearing nothing but the Chilean flag and who occasionally participated in that troupe of loony chicks known as Las Cleopatras. Patricia was the delinquent daughter of an upper-class right-wing father, and to earn a living she acted in telenovelas on TVN Channel 7. She is—or was, once—hugely famous: she was the actress anchored most deeply into our collective unconsciousness. This was long before they would appoint her cultural attaché to Rome, before she went out of style . . . in other words, before she ceased to be *the* Patricia Rivadeneira, the most controversial and feared actress in the country, and became just another upper-class woman.

Patricia did more “traditional” theater work as well, and when we found out that she might agree to play Claudia—I mean, Cecilia—we went to the Bellavista Theater to see her in one of Benjamín Galemiri's works. The strange thing about all of this was that Patricia came across as a much better actress

than we'd ever expected. She was also prettier, less crazy, and less threatening than what we'd heard. There was no messing around. Ultimately, we loved her performance, and ended up giving her a standing ovation, even though the rest of the audience remained politely in their seats.

After the "audition," we went to the Galindo. Patricia arrived a short while later. She ordered a tongue sandwich, and while we ate, she charmed us all. She was the only woman in a room full of men, and she played that part to its fullest. Every one of us thought that he was about to score with her, which may be what she wanted us all to think. But I think in the end I emerged at the front of the pack, because finally she asked who had written the text. And she said *text*, not script or screenplay. When I replied that it was me, she smiled, and then asked who would be the cinematographer.

"Lighting," she said, "is key. That's why I never look good on television."

Then I explained how I wanted to illuminate her.

"Ah," she said, "I think you and I are going to be working very closely together."

Let's just say that we did. That's all. I'm not going to say anything more, or get into any details, because Patricia Rivadeneira is—or, perhaps, was—Patricia Rivadeneira. I think I fell in love with her. At least for that week. It *all* took one week. The filming, plus the rehearsals. Because we did rehearse some things. Mateo thought that he had fallen for her as well. A case of "transference." Their sex scene together was particularly strong: strong because it affected all of us who saw it (I think they actually did the deed) and because the night before we filmed it, I slept with her at her place in Las tarria. (There, I said it, I'm human.)

"Jonás, call me Cecilia, call me Cecilia," she told me that first night.

The filming was chaotic: a frenzied mix of adrenaline, hysteria, ardor, paranoia, heat, admiration, and anger. The only thing deceptive about the shoot was that it was over so quickly.

I went to the movies with Patricia twice (*Reservoir*

Dogs, which she thought was “lovely,” and *The Untouchables*, which she also thought was “lovely”). We went out to dinner a couple of times too (once to a Vietnamese restaurant, and once for Arabic food). And we had what has to be the single most intense phone conversation of my life (six and a half hours without a break).

On the last day of filming, she said goodbye.

“In the beginning, I couldn’t *stand* that character, but now I think I’m in love,” she whispered in my ear.

“You mean Cecilia?”

“No . . . Jonás. Losers always seem to do something for me.”

I have a great photo at home. A poster-sized blow-up. It’s of the two of us, sitting there in the café, illuminated by a single candle. ClaudiaCeciliaPatricia looks exquisite. I don’t think she’s ever looked better. My ex would always look at the thing, but she never asked me about it. My wife never saw my film, and I never told her anything, either. I never shed light on it again. I didn’t become a director of photography after all . . . I ended up as a field producer. That’s what I was when I met her, and I don’t think she could ever envision me being anything else. I’ve got no complaints. I know I’m a great field producer, but it’s not quite what I had planned.

Does anyone out there ever realize his plan?

Maybe that’s why she left me. Or fell for someone else. She said that I didn’t talk to her. That I didn’t have goals or a sense of imagination. That I wouldn’t do battle with destiny.

Every once in a while I’ll watch *Matinee*, *Vermouth*, and *Night*. Late at night, after coming home from some function that didn’t turn out to be as much fun as I’d hoped. I slip the tape in the VCR and just watch. When I see Jonás, I can’t stop thinking about what it was all like. About what *I* was like when I was on the verge of becoming the person I’d wanted to be.

ACT III:
Summer, 2007

It's a summer Sunday. Santiago is deserted. I like days like this. My kids are up north with my ex-wife and her new husband. But today was an odd Sunday. I only get to see them on even Sundays. Sundays with them don't really seem like Sundays to me. Yet when I'm by myself, on the other hand, the bad reputation behind the day takes shape and consumes me.

To ease these feelings of abandonment, I usually take in a Sunday matinee. At the Hoyts de La Reina, the screenings begin at ten in the morning. You can often have a whole theater to yourself there. I've seen a lot of important films by myself, as if I were some tycoon with his own personal screening room. Sometimes I wonder if the reason I enjoy all the movies I see on Sundays is because I see them alone.

My Sunday routine when the kids aren't with me is a simple one: wake up early, put on my sweats, and head for the theater, picking up, along the way, the three main daily papers, a cup of coffee, and two Dunkin Donuts. Then, after the movie, I set up shop in the first-floor café, or, better yet, at the Tip Tap, where I can read the papers in peace. Sometimes, if I find something that looks interesting, I'll go to another movie, maybe a 12:30 or 1:00 P.M. showing. Afterwards I'll head home for a nap. And if it's a rainy day, all the better.

The movie I saw that morning was an independent U.S. film called *The Middle of the World*. It tells the story of a guy from New York who in the film's second minute, loses his girlfriend when she jumps from the roof of a building during a party.

Part One: The guy heads for Ecuador to escape and

recover. He gets a job as an English professor in Qto. He travels around the country, meets a few expat gringos, and returns home. His new friends bid him farewell at the airport.

Part Two: An Australian girl gets a job working at her country's embassy in Qto. She's coming off a bad relationship. There, in Ecuador, she makes some friends and begins to live again. She travels. Her former lover, a chef, contacts her, tells her that he's working at a hotel in Miami, and sends her a plane ticket. She accepts.

Part Three: During the flight from Qto to Miami—on which the New Yorker is also a passenger—something happens to one of the engines and the plane is forced to land in the Caribbean island of Martinique. They're there for eight hours. The guy meets the girl. They chat. Walk on the beach. Have dinner. Dance. Each wants to kiss the other. She admits that she's on her way to meet her lover. The plane is repaired and everyone gets back on board. They want to sit together, but a disagreeable woman refuses to switch seats. The plane lands in Miami, and they say their goodbyes there in the airport before the girl goes off to see her chef. She spends the night with him, but something isn't right. In the morning, she decides to go shopping, and takes the opportunity to develop a few rolls of film she'd shot in Ecuador. Two hours later, she returns to her all-white hotel, plops down in bed, and begins to look at her pictures. Soon she realizes that Mark—the guy from the plane—appears in several of them. He's in the photos she took in the historic neighborhood of Las Peñas in Guayaquil; he's standing in the background in the Galapagos; and he's there posing in front of the monument at “the middle of the world,” where the equator runs, just outside Qto. Elsewhere, Mark is in a darkroom developing his own photos. As they gradually begin to show themselves, he realizes that the woman, Nicole, appears in several of them. The most striking of these is a photograph taken at the monument at “the middle of the world,” where she is standing right next to him.

Epilogue: Time goes by. Eight years. Mark and his wife travel to Venice. They decide to take a touristy photo in the Plaza de San Marcos. Mark's wife taps a woman—her back turned to them, bundled up in a coat—on the shoulder, asks if she would be so kind as to take a photo of them. The woman turns around. It's Nicole. The Australian girl from the plane. From his photos. Their eyes meet; they are surprised. Nicole snaps the photo. The screen freezes. The End.

I enjoy staying to watch the credits. I almost always do. I like knowing where something was filmed, who the story was by, who gets thanked. That's when the house lights came up just enough so the audience could make their way out of the theater without stumbling.

It was then that I realized that there was another person in the theater. Three rows up and a little to the side, Claudia was crying. There was nobody at her side.

I tried to count up how many years had passed since that dim, distant Saturday when we went to a vermouth showing of *The Killer Ants*. It was certainly a long time ago, but—still—sometimes it seems like it was only yesterday. Then again, I sometimes wonder if it ever really happened.

Before the lights came up all the way, I got up and left. I think that's what she would have wanted. Maybe I was wrong. Was I? Maybe I should have stayed. Maybe I should have stayed with her that first night. But sometimes it's better to be left with a memory. Memories can be more compelling than photos or letters. What good would it do either of us to trade a few clumsy words there in the theater? She probably would have been uncomfortable with that. I remember her telling me that she would never be able to bring herself to go to the movies alone. So why did she? And why was she crying? I'll never know. One thing is certain, however. I'll never go to the movies with a woman like Claudia again. Ever.

And suddenly, he saw it all so clearly.

—ANTON CHEKHOV

About the Author

Born in Santiago de Chile, Alberto Fuguet spent his early childhood in California. He is one of the most prominent Latin American authors of his generation and one of the leaders of the literary movement known as McOndo, which proclaims the end of magical realism. He has been a film critic and a police reporter. He lives in Santiago.

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