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Imperceptible evil

Juan Manuel Guerrero

To the ones that give first.

Foreword

This book is a compilation of short stories. They vary in theme, form, and color. This edition comprises a selection of the best pieces from four other books in the same series, originally written in Spanish: *Punto Rosalía*, *Una aventura miserable*, *Esto no va a ser fácil*, and *Sucesión de despertares en una ciudad desconocida*.

There is also another way of presenting this book: it is the best I have to offer. It encompasses an internal peace, an Epictetus-wise one, of not having kept anything to myself, and the tragic confirmation that this is all I have, no more. All those so many hard-working hours reduced themselves to this debatable handful of pages, and to the resignation to print this book despite knowing or wishing (perhaps these two are one) that the best writings are yet to come.

In other introductions, I have digressed on the limits between fiction and reality in my short stories, or on their themes, or on how much I suffer from writing forewords such as this. More than once, I have tried in vain to include some reflection on the last motivations of my writings. However, I will not write about these matters today. The Argentine peso devalued again and translations are more and more expensive.

I will only tell you that I was born, live and will always live in Argentina, a country beyond all understanding, a fertile soil for soybeans and literature, the land of Borges, Messi and Pope Francis. A country that insists on going forward by going back.

A little bit more about me is sketched in the Brief Biography section at the end of the book.

The short stories were originally written in Spanish. The devoted translation to English was in charge of Natalia Barry and revised by Michael Dwerryhouse, both literary translators (see page 145).

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Dream in Uppsala

For Karina.

*“All this is like a dream,” I said, “and I never dream.”
—Javier Otálora, in the tale “Ulrica”, by Jorge Luis Borges.*

I just woke up. It is still the wee hours of the early morning, but dawn already reigns over the large window in my room. Through its double glazing, from my bed, I can see only a vast tree-alley of a wide range of greens that must turn white in winter. I can't go back to sleep.

I remember everything with striking clarity.

As if it were another saga of the Flateyjarbók, our myth-scented encounter took place by the shores of river Fyrisån.

“What were you doing?” I asked her, although I already knew it.

“Nothing special, walking alone.” She gave me a gift of space that reality would never have offered me.

“Like me. Perhaps we can do it together.” I made use of Schopenhauer's joke cited by Javier Otálora.

We walked. Just a few steps into meeting her, I knew I was in love. Until that moment, I had never been in love.

Thanks to one of those reasons that only take place in a dream, I could establish that everything would be defined some hours later, at midnight. However, it was not a matter of waiting until then just for the sake of it, but to give a shape of free will to that shapeless mass of inevitable time.

Almost without noticing, we walked most of the Stadsträdgården. When we were back at a higher altitude, we could make out the Slott, that is, the castle. It was pink, with friendly plump towers, a building worthy of the purest and finest fantasy. She could not decline my challenge and we ran toward it. Despite being in great shape, she could not beat me, maybe for being a man, or perhaps because in daydream utopias, the enamored always triumphs.

As we gasped for breath, I felt certain that an unexpected kiss would not be forbidden to me. I held back because, despite the unmistakable security that mutual attraction produces when appearing, it was still unacceptably soon. I felt I knew her from the remote times of Ýmir, but the time shared could still be counted in minutes.

She was thirsty although I did not think it was due to the race, but to something more fundamental and perennial. I felt she had been thirsty from the moment we met or, perhaps, from long before, maybe forever. In the center of the Slott's courtyard, there

was a fountain. We drank, but mostly she drank, a huge amount, as if she breathed water instead of air.

We left the Slott and walked along its garden lawns, the Slottparken, as old King Jans must have done so many times. Aloneness around us was absolute, and it highlighted the closeness growing between us, just like the longer days of the Scandinavian spring do. A few brown rabbits, with strokes of white and black on their ears, were playing along the left side of the lawn.

She had the rare habit of slowing her pace up to a point where she stopped and faced me, while continuing her talk. She probably didn't know that, in the Southern Continent, that delay was an invitation to kissing. When we reached the end of the road, some bells started chiming. Instinctively, I searched for the Domkyrka, always so imposing and visible, but I could not see it. She halted once more.

I spoke of a desire, of the garden, of the aloneness all around, of the bells, of my anguished chest, of the vain attempt to hold myself. I tried to kiss her. She stopped me, looked down and didn't say a word. Our intimacy, which I had feared to crack, deepened.

Once more, as if she had lost her memory, she confessed being thirsty. I looked at her, startled, for an undecipherable lapse of time.

We left the gardens. A walk with a life of its own, steered by something superior to our will, led us to the city center. All the people who were not in the gardens were there. We discovered a bar I had never seen before despite my meticulous knowledge of the city. On the central table, there was a large amount of bottles of water displayed. It seemed as if the people in charge of that place alien to my memory had known that she and her thirst would soon arrive. With strange familiarity, she drank devotedly and seemed to be filled with certain ease that I guessed too fragile.

The night was still disguised as afternoon. Across the bar, the same river flowed. Over it, there was a delicate bridge whose side pillars enjoyed the company of countless multicolored flowers. We went there, as if looking for that image to be part of our memory.

Quietly, we leaned on the bridge rail next to the flowers. From that proximity to the scented air, we saw how the unusually clear sky took to fading. Words would have only added imprecision to that moment as crystalline as the sky. We looked at each other in the eyes and it was evident that we understood everything. We smiled. I tried to kiss her again but she stopped me once more by looking down.

Beneath our feet, the river flowed in a way that reminded me of time. A bit ahead, the tide fell into a small waterfall. The chant of the fall also made its contribution to the embellishment of that past that was still present. Even further, the most unlikely: a large number of Swedes singing, hugging and laughing.

We left the bridge and the city center. The people, just as they had suddenly appeared in the opposite direction, disappeared completely now. We were very much alone again.

It was almost midnight. My heart knew it.

We sat down on a bench which rested on the sidewalk of a large bookstore. The books exhibited on the window appeared inscrutable to me. The bench was long and had a sculpture adorning one of its ends. It was an elk, unless one stopped to examine it.

Lured by the trap of analysis, I also discovered that all elements of this scale model containing us suffered from a suspicious tidiness: the tiles on the sidewalk, the curbs, the luminaries, the bench, the young tree next to the bench, the dozens of parked bicycles. In short, each and every object that surrounded us.

Endless rows of windows of tidiness, equal in size and shape gazed at us from the façades across. In each window, just in the center, there was a lit lamp projecting a dim light.

The last glimmers of the sun still floated over the city. The dying clarity unfolded a romantic mantle of warm shades whose work seemed conceived by the very Freyja.

There was not a trace of wind, everything was frozen. I felt myself inside a photograph. Silence was complete, too. I could hear each of the slightest variations of her beautiful voice without any effort at all.

The cold, the eternal cold, was simply not there.

I felt that she, in her Nordic way, was trying to get closer. Once again, I tried to kiss her. She stopped me, but did not look down this time. Silence presented to me as a petition for help.

“May I know why?” I asked her, going against my deepest convictions on how to face rejection. “You may tell me, 'I am not attracted by you', the ultimate reason, and that will be a relief to me”.

She lowered her eyes and, as adequate as her land, pondered her answer.

“Another love”, she said, and condemned me to confinement.

“Are you going to kiss me?” I insisted on finding a way out to so much uncertainty.

“Not today”. She sought to postpone that small death with an apple of Iðunn. Instead, I felt her answer like a sharp axe buried in my heart because tomorrow is — almost always— too late.

I took her hand. She did not put it away.

The bells chimed again. It was midnight.

From that moment on, the end — disintegration following the end— speeded up like a free fall, a fall to the point of nonremembrance.

I am alone, sitting on my bed, looking toward the large window that multiplies the greenery. It was all so unusual, so magical. All except the pain. That pain was, still is, and will always be too real.

Imperceptible Evil

For Germán.

Each man's true mission was to find the way to himself. One might end up as poet or madman, prophet or criminal; that was not one's affair; ultimately it was of no concern whatsoever. The importance lay in finding one's own destiny, not just any given one, and living it out wholly. Everything else was only a would-be existence, an attempt at evasion, a flight back for shelter in the ideal of the mass, conformity, fear of one's own individuality.
—Herman Hesse, *Demian*

And is it just possible to enjoy life without transgressing the laws of morality?
—Maxim Gorky, “A Priest of Morals”

I am an evil fellow. Celebrating it is part of my evilness. In my favor, I can say it is a relatively harmless evil, subtle, maybe indecipherable. And besides, most importantly, I can say that evilness has led me to a shivering truth, one I mean to share with you throughout these writings.

To reach such revelation, it is imperative to make myself known a little more. Or better said, make more of my routine be known.

In the morning, when I wake up, I don't get up immediately. Firstly, because I don't need to, given the fact that my job allows for quite flexible starting times. Secondly, and I'd say fundamentally, because I wait for my roommates to wake up. When the first of their alarm clocks goes off, *then* it is the right time: I run to the bathroom and get in. I use it at great length. I sit on the toilet and give myself plenty of time for my primary needs, regardless of whether they are urgent or not. Then, I shave slowly and carefully, paying attention to every detail in my beard, and allow me to clarify: not because I take any special care in it. After that, I take a warm and comforting shower. If it is a special day for my roommates, I treat myself to a hot bath in the tub, with candles and incense. My roommates are of the most predictable nature. First, they wait, as they know their rights are equivalent to mine when it comes to the using of the bathroom. After a reasonable time, they knock on the door. “Taken”, I respond in a neutral tone, which is not totally easy, as the situation often provokes an intense laughter in me which even conceals some happiness at times. After another sensible lapse of time, they ask me to “come in without looking”. “No, I'm coming out”, I lie, cruelly. As I don't come out, they start hitting on the door and insisting. “It is advisable to get up earlier,” I answer.

When the situation is extreme, *then* I come out. Analogous situations “take place” in relation to the kitchen, grill and other common rooms in the house.

Of course, every time we have a roommate meeting, these matters are discussed in detail. Then, only to extend the meeting for as much as possible, I rehearse the longest of explanations dating back to my childhood. In these amends, I never spare any psychological concepts poured by my psychoanalyst in my therapy sessions, which I have been attending for ten years now. When my roommates are tired of listening to me, they try to intervene, but I won't allow it: “I have listened to each and every one of you attentively and patiently, I ask nothing more of you than the same treatment, to have a little respect for my words and let me wrap up on the matter; otherwise—”. In the end, they realize that interrupting me is more painful than listening, so they give in to putting up with me and, in a relatively short period of time, end up not opening many of the discussions that, of course, should be opened.

It is important to highlight that my malicious acts arise in my roommates the need for them to be better. They need to be quieter, or shrewder, or more organized. They must reason better, and prevent giving any space to my evilness. By this, I don't mean to say that I am good. I am evil, undoubtedly, even when people don't manage to notice it completely. Instead, they regard me as somewhat complicated or, more often than not, consider themselves the cause of these situations in which they end up being entangled when they relate to me.

The huge difference between all of them and me —and I don't just mean my roommates— is my ample time availability, my rocksolid patience, and my absolute impassivity at conflictive situations.

When my roommates have finally left the house, then I do, too. In general, I go to the usual café. Not due to the quality of its products or service, but because there is a table just facing a broken floor-tile, with which an amazing amount of people trip on. This causes me to burst into laughter, especially when they fall to the ground, sometimes even scattering papers everywhere, or even better, food and drink. Quite often, I talk to them as they pass by, in order to maximize the distraction and promote the fall. If they do fall, I run swiftly to their assistance, mainly to enjoy the performance from a front seat. The people, once recovered, don't know how to thank me.

I also like this café because there are several regular customers, from whom I love to snatch their favorite newspaper. Given the fact that regulars are quite many, and each has their reading preference, I shift my victims in a random fashion, not only to entertain myself with a manifold variety of upset faces, but also to make the phenomenon something unexpected. So when I get to the place, I identify which regulars haven't arrived yet and, according to this, I choose the papers to get hold of. I sometimes choose more than one and make sure the second one I select supports the opposing ideology, so that when they come and ask me for one of the papers, I apologize by saying I am reading it and offer the other one. They almost always accept, through clenched teeth, and with that, my evilness and I contribute to the political

tolerance in our dear country. In any case, once I pick a paper I never return it until the regular has left. This sometimes implies that I must arrive late for work, which does not represent a real problem, as I enjoy a stable work position. Besides, bothering my superiors by coming in late is not something I dislike.

If I go to a new café, I look for one of a large size, especially in length. This preference can be explained by the fact that I wish to sit as far as possible from the counter, so that the waiter must walk a long distance to serve me. Of course, the poor bastard can't know this in any way. When he approaches for the first time, I comment with huge politeness I am waiting for a very beloved friend and therefore, I would appreciate it if he could please come back in a few minutes. The scene repeats once or twice. When the waiter gives up, then I call him, I comment with grief that my dearest friend will not be able to appear in person, and proceed to ask him the most reasonable questions, which exceed the menu and demand an answer from the kitchen. The waiter goes in, asks and returns to report information that usually results insufficient to me. Everything seems most natural and, many times, waiters don't know how to apologize enough for their inaccuracies. I calm them down and, finally, order. During the meal, I call them several times and, apart from highlighting the quality of the service, I produce new inquiries or requests.

I must admit that, apart from evilness, I possess an admirable logic-mathematician capacity, which allows me to act with huge consistency. People feel the consequences of my evil intentions but cannot, by any means, assign a responsibility to me, not even within their own inner conscience. A few of them, the cleverest, suspect that something weird happens with me. I, at the same time, can sense they sense it, so I generally stay away from them. I like to bother people, not to make my life difficult.

Once I have finished breakfast, I fetch my car. Traffic in the city can be such disarray that abiding by the rules may mean torture to the rest of the drivers. Therefore, despite the heavy traffic, I let by every pedestrian that crosses my way, I respect each and every yellow traffic light and I systematically yield to other drivers in every corner. This last case causes more than one internal conflict in me, since the upset I create in the ones coming behind is compensated by the relief of those to whom I yield. That's life. Sometimes it is not possible to mortify everyone at the same time, and it becomes inevitable to select who is to be wronged. In any case, under no circumstance do I yield to vehicles coming behind me. It is not that easy to get away with me or the law. No one, of course, has the right to raise the slightest complaint to me. Sometimes, I can see through the rear mirror how drivers get mad and wave their arms around violently: they open them wide, hit the wheel or hold their heads, while complaining to an imaginary person next to them. I have been yelled at: "C'mon ugly old creep!", and have smiled and showed thumbs up, as if acknowledging the witty remark, but above all, to block the expected discharge. Of course, I am not a purist, and can shift sides, and stop abiding by the laws whenever the situation calls for it. For instance, if traffic is too

paralyzed and horns begin to blow, I join in with strong will and intensity, leaving the horn pressed endlessly just to add to the stress of stuck drivers.

As anyone can easily imagine, the workplace is a great site for me to display my evilness. On arrival, I never greet the security guard, since I have noticed my indifference irritates him especially. Past the guard, I head toward the elevator and wait as much as necessary in order to get in alone. Why? Because I take great pleasure in the delicious moment I am alone inside the elevator and see another person rush toward it, with the intention of getting in. I react with exaggerated response and press the “closing” button as many times as possible. If the person gets in, they naively believe they’ve managed to do it thanks to me, so they thank me. If the person cannot get in, I offer them my best face of “we did try” and, once the elevator door closes, I smile my way up to my office floor.

My boss almost never has anything to say about my arriving late. In the first place, because he doesn’t care, since it is not his money at stake. In the second place, because when he’s tried caring, he’s ended up exposed to my everlasting reasoning, an aforementioned situation which any person in their right mind would wish to avoid.

The work I do is irrelevant to everyone, except to the poor citizen who has started an errand. Those poor bastards will never get to meet me, will have no means to complain and, in the long run, will learn to resign to waiting. Given the only incentive to move forward in the errand is my will, the processing of forms moves with huge arbitrariness and sluggishness. It is exclusively my decision how many forms to do per day and, more importantly, which ones. For example, there are forms which I postpone because I simply dislike the citizen’s name on it, or errands I cancel because there is an incomplete field (perhaps one of almost no importance). Then, the whole errand goes back to scratch and must restart.

My coworkers have learned to avoid me, which is a gain in general, as I am not interested in interacting with them either.

There are people that report to me, too. Thanks to them, I have discovered some sophisticated corners of my evilness. However hard to believe, there is some greatness in it, since I don’t display it, especially with my subordinates, but distribute it in democratic fashion among the whole organizational chart of those who relate to me. It is as though pride and evilness, at least in me, were dimensions that unfold in independent ways.

When I finish work, I generally go to university. I can do that thanks to my free time and the tuition-free nature of the system. I have no interest whatsoever in obtaining a degree, but rather in class participation with awkward questions or endless interventions. “I am not sure why, but I am against it” is my ideology in that respect. This involves, almost always, adopting the most utmost right-wing positions in order to maintain tense debates with the neverending Marxist hordes¹ which populate the university. In the library, I put special care in requesting books that don’t exist, or on topics that have nothing to do with the center of high studies where the library is. I

enjoy too, indeed, complicating the administrative work of nonteaching staff. As a matter of fact, I must concede that this action embodies a considerable act of justice².

Back home, I make myself dinner. As much as possible, I try to give rise to some last conflict with my roommates before going to bed, mainly to disturb their sleep. As part of my complaints, I never forget to mention “I have had a tough day” and that “it is no longer possible for me to put up with this kind of nonsense”. If there is yelling, crying or slamming, much better.

Already in bed, I go through the events of the day and fall into a placid sleep, full of peace, like an angel.

Do I feel proud of my evilness? I wouldn't say so, I just accept it wholeheartedly. Moreover, I accept myself wholeheartedly, blamelessly, as a true Steppenwolf would.

My family, instead, does not accept me as I am. That is the reason why they have decided to finance the psychological therapy I mentioned earlier. I have accepted their proposal most of all to evidence the futility of such an enterprise, and to increment to maximum levels the degree of frustration in my dear parents and siblings.

My psychologist doesn't know that the therapy is financed by my family. Undoubtedly, this secret is the embodiment of the key that, by being ignored, prevents him from actually extracting himself from his state of bafflement. “Why would this guy come here to waste time and, on top of that, pay money for it?”, I am sure he wonders every time my visits end. If he came to find out that it is my family who pay for his services, then I myself would start paying him so as not to give him the satisfaction of understanding.

Friends, I have none. Who would want a friend like me? And more important, who being like me, could want a friend?

Let alone a girlfriend!

Instead, I do have readers for I am also a writer. I enjoy playing with them, too. For example, I love promising striking truths that seem to never come forward, extending the issue with entertaining and promising paragraphs which, nonetheless, lead nowhere. In the last paragraph, the most dreaded scenario becomes true: there is no truth at all, it was all a sham. In this moment, readers feel stupid at having trusted an evil guy. And although it may hurt, they are. So they decide to abandon the material, in rage. And at that point, the superior magic occurs, supreme magic: actually there was a striking truth after all; or maybe there wasn't.

Successions of Awakenings in a City Unknown

Every once in a while, I wake up in a city other than mine. It happens in a way that seems random. I am not sure it is always the same city or not. I am sometimes sure it is, but with some variations. Other times, I have the certainty they are different cities, but twinned by a repeated and irrefutable fact: my bewilderment.

In any case, the sensation when waking up is often more or less the same. I open my eyes and see a strange bedroom: a bigger bed, colors I would never choose, too many electronic devices, and other unimportant details. But what strikes me the most are not these little unfamiliar features, but the singular dynamics that time acquires.

To start with, there is no alarm clock. The coming back to consciousness takes places natural and placid. I just hear some distant birds, chirping peacefully. I am in no hurries either, but not because I lack due activities, but because my body brings from within the inertia of an infrequent but secure ease. An unconcern that knows not of beginnings or ends, and takes me back to my childhood, when distances in time seemed endless. Then I lie in bed, in peace, until I feel some almost forgotten wish to get up.

At the beginning, fear was greater, but with time I learned to undertake the strange sensation of waking in another world. I dare say I am not startled anymore. I just feel invaded by amazement.

Once I get up, I leave the room and get lost in an apartment which, broadly speaking, appears strange to me. With that impression, I wander until I find the bathroom. Once there, I see myself in the mirror and confirm it: it is me. Everything is very clear, as if it weren't a dream. I wash my face and try hard to make my mind wake up too with the instinctive need to start understanding.

The craving for comprehension remains unsatisfied as there is no reasonable way to explain it.

Back in the room, I get dressed. The clothes are the usual ones. Once dressed, I look for the kitchen. On the way, as I see the walls and the doors at the end of the isle, I have the certainty of not knowing the apartment, although it conveys an astounding familiarity in me, as if I had actually lived there for months but could not remember.

When I find the kitchen, I open the fridge: it is empty. I never expect anything different or can help my disappointment. The need for breakfast pushes me to go outside and that is, even if it doesn't look like it, good news.

I go through the entrance door and down the stairs. I wonder how many floors I will descend. Fortunately, only two. I leave the building.

I am standing on a street I have never seen. I look around and feel like a child again after many years. I have no clue of where I am, or where to go, or why. It is cool but the sun, like a father, offers me some warm caresses. I receive them pleasantly,

willingly and unhurriedly, closing my eyes and letting out a smile on my face. Taken by surprise and not even imagining it, I realize that in this moment I am happy.

Holding on to serenity, standing with my face to the sun, I understand my erraticism liberates me. I have neither a fixed location, nor any reasons. I don't know the others, nor wish to. Nobody waits for me, or demands anything from me, or needs me. I have no obligations. I have nothing to do.

When the sun on my face is enough, I drift in search for a café where I can have breakfast. I find it. It is tiny and cozy, with sturdy wooden tables and chairs. It is on a silent street with little traffic. I sit at a table, most quietly. It is something I am always hoping to do in my own town but, for some reason, never do so. I am always so busy, so restless.

I never read newspapers but I ask for one. The waiter offers a paper whose name is not known to me. Still, I accept it, pleased. I scan it as if those titles doomed to disappear mattered to me. Despite my contempt for these irrelevant news, I enjoy it. Truly, more than the newspaper, I relish the moment of paralysis (or of stretching) of time. It could even get better: if there was a tomorrow, I'd bring a book to read.

As I don't have a schedule, I stay at the café. I realize that many others too, although I am under the full impression that, to them, this *is* their city actually. And these *are* actually their lives. My exceptional freedom is, for them, an accessible habit; even more so, an ordinariness.

I leave the café. I pause and look around. I feel everything is possible. I close my eyes and yield to the refreshing nature of this unexpected license. I walk aimlessly again, this time around the city center. I do it for a long while until I find a bookstore. I go inside.

The bookstore is an oasis inside the oasis. The temperature is lower, as when one enters a cave. The same happens with the feeling of stillness; and with silence. It brings me back to the idea of past. But these are only sensations, I dare say, literary ones, wholly incomparable with the unprovable reality of waking up in another dimension.

Without need for patience, I go through each shelf filled with old and dirty books. I buy some classics, though I don't know very well what for, since they will probably vanish with the rest of the experience.

I approach the counter, where a man is reading. He seems eternal. Or almost the same, he seems as old as the books he sells. His manner tells of a plenitude in his mutual belonging with the bookstore.

The man I take for a bookseller goes through the books I am buying with a never-ending sluggishness. He cleans them with a tiny wiping cloth and places a bookmark with unjustified dedication. I am not disquieted. On the contrary, I seize this window in suspended time to ask myself a great deal of questions.

Why don't I do this in my city? Why do I need to reach the extreme point of a life in blank to devote time to these small pleasures? In which exact moment did I quit my

simplest and purest desires? When was it that turmoil dragged me away to its conditions?

The man finishes and hands out the books. Wordless, he resumes his seat and his reading. He never claims the money (doesn't even seem to expect it), but I leave it on the counter. I go out into the street again.

The sun is still with me. I try consulting my watch but I don't have it. I ask a passerby: it hasn't been as long as I imagined. As soon as I come to this conclusion, I realize it is useless and outside of time. Such considerations belong to my city, not this one.

I buy a salad, I go to the park to eat it. I glance at the flowers, the trees, the people. I watch the street: the cars disturb me, but not as much as always.

The rest of the day passes in a similar fashion, in a manner that does not require description.

The succession of awakenings in the unknown city leads me to a subtle wisdom. Little by little, with each awakening, I gradually abandon the search for explanations. Instead, I yield to the simple rejoicing of extraordinary experience. Even more so, I begin to hope that the phenomenon will never become clear.

The night and the end, they station themselves in my room. I fall asleep feeling calm.

Back to my city, and my life, continuity becomes impossible to me.

The journey in space (and time) defies me. It opens windows and queries. It forces me to face my routines, my desires and my fears, as if it were a good story, a good book, or a good work of art.

Recurrent Lovers

For Mara.

She is gone. Her absence is painful, almost as much as was her indefinite presence. Her leaving is unwanted, but it brings certain convenient quietness to my life. Slowly, time goes back to transpiring normally. I can fall asleep without grief. The night, which had belonged to her, is now a big empty void space. Submerged in it, remembering comes easy to me.

I pour myself a measure of whiskey and approach the window.

Up above, the full moon reigns. An endless royal court made of stars accompanies her. They are so many and so beautiful. There are no clouds.

Down below, I see them both coming up the street. They come accompanied by a silent tension. They stand in front of the door. He can't find the key. She looks around, perhaps with certain nervousness.

Neither of them can see me.

He looks calm and resolute. He's wearing a T-shirt, jeans and sport-shoes, as almost always. He seems to trust —perhaps too much— in the invisible.

She is her own sparkling eyes. A battle seems to be fought within her. She's younger, but above all she is sensuous. She wears black, and a display of earrings, necklaces, and rings. She is not seeking to seduce him: she simply can't help it.

They go inside the house of broad, open windows.

She imposes a distance, goes about the place unhurriedly, and examines each of the objects located there. She pauses with particular interest on the books. They speak about them, that conversation pleases her.

He stations himself at a corner, standing. From there, he tells her details about the aspects of the house that interest her. As he does so, he opens a bottle of wine, and pours two glasses.

They sit at the table and chat. He senses her too far from him so moves to a closer chair. After several minutes, she goes out to smoke. He hunkers down in the vast sofa and glances at her. She wavers as she comes back, hunkers in the sofa herself—for a moment but soon quits it. The shifting of places and positions carries on. They spin around an invisible axis, while seeking each other with patience and rigor. They attract and repel from different ridges, dancing a subtle tango while talking and drinking.

He bursts with desire but contains himself, he does not want to push her.

A part of her is up for anything but another —a stronger, subterranean one— keeps her tethered.

As always, time demands resolutions. He comes up to her and tries for her lips. She consents but with such complete passivity that resembles indifference. They kiss for

a couple of minutes but he cannot manage to untie the internal chains that shackle her. Or perhaps she doesn't want to kiss him, but for some undecipherable reason, she does.

That is the dull pinnacle of the evening. As from that climax, tension recedes and she begins to drift away. He is unable to hold the bleeding. She convinces herself that it is best to leave. The eager excitement becomes frustration. The conversation continues but is just a mere formality, a kind route leading to goodbyes.

Both leave the house and get lost in the darkness of the night.

Sad outcome, I think to myself.

I decide that my day must end, too. Thus, restorative night ensues. So do placid morning and yellow afternoon. I prepare dinner with some pleasure, and live it with nostalgia. As I finish, the candle has burnt out completely.

I pour myself a measure of whiskey and approach the window.

Up above, the moon is almost as full as yesterday. The million stars are misted barely by a few clouds moving rapidly.

Down below, I hear voices. It's them. They are coming up from the street. They come accompanied by the same silent tension. He can't find the key. She looks ~~at~~ around again with certain nervousness. They wear striking clothes, just like the day before.

They never can see me.

He is equally calm and eager. She keeps her sensuality intact. They enter. She goes about the place again, as if it were the first time. He looks at her, inflamed, from the stillness of the same corner. The tango is about to start.

However, as from that moment, the scene changes. It is not as indelible as the first one but is still real. The seducing dance repeats itself, although the music is another one. He looks more resolute from the very beginning. She clearly acknowledges it and reacts by drifting away. Tension is held at that level. The resolution is the same but it comes in faster.

He kisses her, she concedes, but the kiss is void.

The encounter collapses. Conversation goes on —it must go on— but bleeds out until it dies. Together, they leave the place and head into the night.

Sad outcome, I think to myself once more.

The night, the morning, the afternoon and dinner, all waste away again.

I pour myself a measure of whiskey and approach the window.

Up above, I can see the full moon filed in one of its borders, getting old. The great starred immensity is damaged by a handful of clouds.

Down below, I hear their voices. They don't surprise me anymore. They come from the street, they are accompanied by the silent tension, he can't find the key, and she looks around. They are dressed the same.

They go inside. She goes back to examining the place for the first time, he goes back to staring at her with flaming desire. The tango begins.

The music (and so, the dance) changes again. He abandons his corner and tries getting closer by means of caresses. She doesn't react. He feels himself dying of helplessness at facing this wall which is unassailable to him. He knows —he can feel it — that she holds feelings but can't reach them. He doesn't give up, does not retreat.

He kisses her, she concedes, but the kiss continues to be void. The evening crumbles.

Sad outcome.

The almost twenty four hours ensue. They couldn't help but do so.

I pour myself a measure of whiskey and approach the window.

Up above, only clouds. The moon and the stars, I can only hint at them.

Down below, both of them come from the street. Everything is the same. They go inside. They tango.

The kiss is void.

Sad.

The scene reoccurs again, night after night.

Up above, the sky tries in vain to exhaust the infinite number of layouts of the moon, the stars and the clouds. The moon decreases until it dies, to later be reborn from darkness. Not always can I see it, because the clouds play at hiding it. The stars take up the rest and, being so many, seem a universe to me.

Down below, instead, the same happens always, exactly the same, except for the color of the dance which alters the a grey painting which insists in coming back.

Thus, future moves forward, to the rhythm of tango, the void kiss and the sad outcome.

One night, however, a deep cleft breaks into the story.

It all repeats, as always. They are sitting on the bed. Like every night, he kisses her but stops right after. He stands up, turns off the main light —it is too bright— and comes back. He kneels on the floor in front of her and attracts her to him. She concedes to hugging him with her legs. Perhaps by chance, perhaps by fate, this approach born from two knees on the floor frees her. The kiss, finally, overflows.

This night, the outcome is not sad, nor they leave the house. When they finally fall asleep in an embrace, I put down my glass of whiskey next to the window and also yield to the following day.

Nights don't go back. From then on, they resemble the last one. And they become less and less indelible.

Up above, the moon, the stars and the clouds combine in so many ways that I lose track. They become the same to me.

Down below, the same initial dance always leads to the lovers sitting on the bed. He kisses her, turns off the light always too bright, kneels in front of her, attracts her to him, she is freed, and they make love.

Variation does not disappear but is transferred to the moment when they love each other.

The nights that follow are countless repetitions of the ritual of seduction. They unfold until the moment of the kiss. They then diverge, and the adventures of the love encounter are different. Each night, with passion and drowsiness, the recurrent lovers explore new ways of loving each other. There is no hurry, they feel the shared nights shall never end.

But shared nights always end. In the last one of them, the story cracks open again in a way that I understand definite. It is the end.

Up above, I see the sky fully black. There is no moon, neither stars. Nor clouds.

Down below, I hear the steps of a man, lonesome and miserable. I need not the whiskey or the window to know it is him,. He stands in front of the door, finds the key and goes inside. He prepares dinner. He eats until the candle burns out. Remembering comes easy to him. Immediately after, he does those two things.

My Aunt is a Vampire

I love my aunt very much. This doesn't keep me from suspecting, for some time now, that she is a vampire.

It is not easy to be conclusive on the subject. She does not seem to be dead, not even undead. She does not have sharp fangs or wear black cloaks. She does not live in Romania or Hungary, neither a castle, but in a modest apartment downtown in the Argentine city of Córdoba, not far from La Cañada, an area near a brook where she leads a placid and solitary life. I should mention that in the past she worked as lawyer, which is of no relief to me.

Her body is a lot more than human-like; it is completely human: quite, quite far from resembling a Penanggalan, or anything like it. Her head is small and her hips wide, following the genetics on her mother's side. She has, it is true, very white complexion indeed, but it is mainly because she is red-haired. Her skin is frail, prone to green bruises after blows or frictions, but under no circumstance would I call it bright. Her nose, rounded and regal, has both nostrils in it. Her lips are not too red and she generally puts make up on them to go out, as she does with the rest of her countenance, which makes her more glowing and masquerade-like. Her tongue is not sharp, nor does it have any stings, although it is quite short; it is not black, like a Chudail's, but pink as the rest of the mortals'. Her nails are neither long nor hard, however not entirely normal either, as she most often has to visit a pedicure who, on the other hand, has never presented any inquiries about her, except some complaint every now and then on her unpunctuality and proneness to excuses.

Her wardrobe is extensive, sober and conservative, with the exception of a light T-shirt of beige color, quite original in style in fact, of The Ramones, a band I'm not sure she knows. She doesn't seem to have any preference for the color green, as baobhansiths or langsuirs do.

Her lifestyle is far from healthy and it worries me. She smokes. She leads a sedentary life, far away from any form of exercise. With difficulty, I manage to convince her to do some walking every day. She has tons of books and assures to have read them all. That unsettles me, not so much for the impossible time it must have demanded of her, but for the unbearable quality of the authors. When she is not reading, she watches a no less disappointing TV selection. Regarding food, a healthy diet is not among her priorities. She prefers the direct pleasure provided by coffee and meals loaded with salt or sugar. She has a special weakness for Rogel cake, which is fully understandable. Garlic, quite far from freaking her out, appeals to her. I should say she eats it excessively, as with mayonnaise. She compensates for such highly disorderly eating habits with medication in the form of pills of a wide assortment in shape and

color. She takes them at night and, if her glasses are not around, she gropes for them and chooses by feel, despite my warnings. I know, it is not exactly a portrait of horror for someone who could be a vampire.

In the religious scope, she defines herself as nonpracticing Christian, a kind way to say that she doesn't care much for religion. Holy water and crucifixes are not unbearable to her, despite her most reasonable criticism of the ecclesiastic institution. When she makes reference to God, she calls him "The Guy Upstairs".

Discreetly, I have confirmed that she can be seen in mirrors. She has many and takes care of them fondly. I think that breaking them would bring about enormously bad luck, especially considering how much they have gone up in price in the last years. Her shadow seems to function normally and always follows the unhurried motions of her figure. Everything indicates that she possesses, indeed, a human soul.

As with every other elderly city woman, bats and wolves terrify her. No more than any other manifestation of nature, such as a mouse or cockroach. Even worse and mostly different, is her reaction when I mention werewolves. Together with terror, the feeling aroused in her reminds me of scorn.

When she watches a film, she is startled at the bloody scenes. More than the yearning for blood, or The Beast inside her, her reaction suggests an instinctive and common fear. The same happens at episodes in which the elementary red liquid presents itself live. Not long ago, a collision between cyclists and a little visible blood led to an ambulance coming for her, due to a steep drop in her blood pressure.

She does not have much strength or is very swift, as one would expect from a vampire. In fact, given her age and scant exercise, she starts panting relatively easily. It takes her a great deal of effort, for instance, to move the dining-room chairs or to open a bottle of sparkling water. Her cane, hypothetically, could reveal mysteries or meanings of a hidden nature, but it doesn't. It is a common, most ordinary cane, made of ebony or walnut. Rather than lean on it, she uses it to move things while sitting, or cut in line at the bank.

Her capacity to befuddle people (in the least common of its meanings) is eminently poor. On the contrary, she is quite absent minded and noisy. A lousy maneuverer, the least she provokes among her acquaintances is fear. Her heart is precious and naïve. I am certain there are people who take advantage of her noble feelings. And they shall soon pay for it.

Physical wounds, she suffers most frequently. If she cuts her finger with a knife, she swears and sucks it, as any reasonable person. More than once, I saw her pout. Whenever she's been in tears, they haven't been of blood. Scarring takes the expected times according to nature, whenever an infection does not delay the process. These observations have led me to rule out, or at least postpone, any kind of experiment with sticks or firearms (avoiding, of course, stakes on the chest or silver bullets).

Spiritual wounds, she also suffers them in a human-like fashion.

In another sphere, I have been able to verify that she does not suffer from arithmomania, that is, the neurotic obsession to count everything, historically attributed to vampires. After throwing a handful of rice at her, the most conclusive test on the matter, she ignored the grains, flew into rage and flung her cane at me.

The truth is she seems harmless. She doesn't even have the limited purpose of bothering people, like the famous vampire Cuntius.

Why, then, do I suspect her of being a vampire?

Maybe because she lives almost in isolation, among loneliness and half-light. Her closest friends call her apartment the Cemetery Niche, a remark as witty and accurate as cruel. A black cat wanders about the entrance of the building every time I arrive or leave. However, it appears only when I am alone. She says its name is Black and it belongs to the neighbor, Coco.

Her hands are always cold and she finds great pleasure in holding hot objects; for instance, a cup of coffee. Her gaze is deep, as if ancestral or primal. Her hair is unusual, her mane standing on end, Oliver Atom's style, though neither green nor pink. She does not have, it must be noted, any hair on her hands or ankles, neither pointy ears. However, their minuscule size is suggestive indeed. And her eye-bags are highly marked.

Her habits are significantly evening habits. She carries out her modest activity exclusively from dusk onwards. I've never seen her go to bed before me, and I don't know what she does later at night. She usually goes out, mostly alone, theoretically to the theater or to try her luck at bingo.

During daytime, she stays at the Cemetery Niche, all windows closed. When I come to visit her, she refuses to open them, resorting to flimsy and heterogeneous reasons such as the dust in the street or the high temperature. I refuse to listen to her pretexts and open the windows anyhow. Her scant air of authority does not exactly remind of that of Vlad, the Impaler. If her vampire nature were to be confirmed, surely she must probably occupy quite a low social position in the vampire strata, and belong to one of the most recent generations: a newborn, below princes and counselors, or a Caitiff.

With the windows open, light invades the Cemetery Niche and upsets her noticeably, although not so far as to cause shrieks and disintegration. She blames it entirely on the blondness of her eyebrows and lashes. While persisting in her ongoing claims, she secures her precious sunglasses, which suit her especially when she wears the aforementioned beige T-shirt of The Ramones, slows down her already slow pace and takes shelter inside her bedroom, door closed.

She is eager to remain unnoticed with salient determination. A trace of remarkable humility? Her friends think that it has more to do with a marked social disinterest. She never ever visits another house if she hasn't received an invitation. Although when she has, she often declines.

Her refrigerator is permanently empty. To tell the strict truth, there are always a dozen mayonnaise packs in it. She attributes this to her incapacity as a cook. She almost never eats, but I have seen her do it every once in a while, almost always at night and in a restaurant. She adores the so called *bife de chorizo*, a local steak, and always asks for it very rare; more than once, she has sent it back to the kitchen for being too cooked.

She dislikes water, especially if in motion, like in rivers or seas. This does not extend to showers and her personal hygiene is, indeed, exemplary. Perhaps this is why she has decided to settle in Córdoba, although this could be due merely to having been born there.

I once caught her filing down her teeth in the bathroom. The awkward scene motivated a confusing explanation on her part, adducing some difficulty in her orthodontics. Then, she closed the door slowly in my face and never mentioned the topic again.

After years of adventures and misfortunes, I am hugely familiar with her. That is why, faced with the impossibility of coming to a conclusive verdict, I asked her openly whether she was a vampire. She said she wasn't. I insisted, then, as I needed to know whether her refusal was in the most general and emphatic terms or merely technical. I demanded specific answers on whether she wasn't a vampiress, a Strigoi, a Succubus, a Cainite, an azeman vampire, or any other type of supernatural creature. She didn't look at me when she said to cut the crap as she was watching the soaps.

Such evasive answers most certainly deepened my ponderings. It is widely known that neither humans nor vampires tend to openly admit their blood-sucking nature, mainly due to reasons of social acceptance. Her sister (my mother), for instance, would never accept it.

I wonder, finally, what's most important: if she is immortal. Ever since I can remember, she looks the same in my mind's eye: holding my hand, treating me to some delicious tea time, taking care of me. Possibly, she feels the same towards me, although I have stopped being a baby and have gotten to be almost seven feet tall. Immortality tends to be especially difficult to confirm. And, at the same time, it is very plausible that it may be the central aspect of this whole matter. These may not be suspicions, or clues, but wishes. I love my aunt so much that I don't ever want to lose her.

In that World

For Anja.

In that world, I don't need to know you. I don't need any introductions to draw near you, neither tales, nor reasons. I don't need to know your name in order to hold you, neither know your past, nor have to talk to you. Only a gaze will suffice for me. And you look at me. So I go to you, slowly, enjoying a risk that no longer exists. I smile at you and, protected within the deepest secrets, I try to guess how far you will allow me to go.

I am still far off but I can feel your skin already. It is firm, malleable and golden. It shines like a jewel. It covers your dense, present figure, immune to indifference. Only then, once I am close enough, I extend my hand to you.

You take it, and my emotions resound like a storm: thunderous, vibrant, electric. The encounter was rain then, but it is now gale. Water shrouds me and floods over and over until the very last corner. I feel it charged, agitated and instinctive, with a distant taste of violence. It is pure discovery.

There are no words.

I close my eyes, the gazing becomes embrace. It strives to be warm, intimate and closed. It travels all over me, explores me, seeks to recognize me. Onto the fertile pasture of my body, it sprouts and expands with soft firmness, with patient security, holding on to me with the serene force of one who has no choice other than to face death.

Once clutched, it is time for subtleness. The persistent rubbing of your hands gathers in my chest and the smooth friction of your arms stimulates me to the point of sweet anguish. Your unworried hair caresses me and its scent imprisons me, subdues me. I consent it, I want more. Depending on one another, we let ourselves be carried away by the complacency of immediate pleasure; underneath which a silent, quiet doom conceals.

It doesn't matter. Clung to your body, the future does not exist. Your back, my chest, your legs, breathe over me. They come closer and move away, they resist and surrender, like waves to the beach. They beat, they are your heart. Embraced to it, I can feel your feelings' choir tuning a nostalgia...

Rather than air, we breathe a music so sad and sensual, black colored, barely wept by violins. The cadential drama feeds on pianos. Beheld by the anxiety of a remembrance, melodious sadness breaks down in the open weeping of a bellow. The lament, unable to retain itself, grows until decanting into agony, in an endless parade of harmonicas breeding up agitation and giving it birth.

The embrace flows into a river of emotions. It carries us away, a gentle and serpentine flow. In every turn, we resist vertigo through shelter. Time dissociates from our existence, stops running and squeezes through the crevices that still connect us to reality. These surroundings, this unappealable proximity, also pauses and begins to vanish until its disappearance.

Unexpected, like a revealed fate, air extinguishes. We choke. I open my eyes and the river, now dry, begins to flow like a glance. I see your eyes very near, very open and very deep. They talk to me, saying the same as your embrace said before. Together with your faint, complicit smile, they soothe me, they give me support.

Erratic, reluctant to the end, the air returns. With it, from between the glances, embrace resurrects. Rather than discovery, there is reencounter, desirable return to the already familiar pleasure. With our senses in plentiful, free expansion, we find ourselves predestined to each other, born for each other.

Your heart beats forcefully and each pulse carries your blood to all of my limits. Whispers ripen, I perceive them with intense charm, although I ignore who they belong to. Your agitation and my excitement alloy to the level of the inseparable, of the indivisible.

The amalgamated puzzlement is lively, arborescent and autumnal. The embrace ramifies into caresses that turn yellower and yellower and, finally, blast like a storm of dry leaves. Gusts of hot sap of open resistance to imminent winter, flow over me to the root, and penetrate my soul. I need more of your soil, your breeze, your light.

My mouth struggles. It seeks to refrain from yours.

Indomitable, caresses take the form of a kiss. Yes, the kiss *does* take place, although I never get to touch your lips. We kiss subtly, with passion and at length, without me having the pleasure of getting to know the fire of your tongue, which I desire with unstoppable fervor, with compelling urgency. In this bonfire of dissatisfaction I incinerate myself and I consume myself in the flames until what's only left of me are some ashes of melancholic impotence.

I can't. There is no other thing I'd wish more, but I can't. Your eyes, your embrace, your caresses, your incorporeal kiss, the river of emotions, all of your being, all of mine, ask for it, demand it, but I can't. I can't! And you can't, either. As much as you would want to, you can't...

In the ethereal vastness of that world, the kiss melts into tears.

There is no time or space to cry. Authoritarian, the air extinguishes, again, but this time never to return. Suffocation and fear grow. I open my eyes. Tears fuse into a glance, although they don't abandon us fully. I see your eyes very near, very open and very full of love. They are a mirror. In your never-wetting tears, I see mine.

Being imminent, we accept the end, and then the end begins. We believe death inevitable and with that belief, we encourage it. Our world revives and with that, we die a little.

The crumbling begins. Sadness is too big; literature, too limited. The moment, so as not to die, so as to squeeze like iron-smelting in our memory (the only thing that counts, after all), must give way to coldness, which will search in vain, with its firmness, to defy time.

There are no words, there never are.

We look at each other with molten intensity, with burning pain. In your eyes, I can guess a deep longing and a farewell. For the one and only time, I see your back. Before the door devours you, you dedicate one last look to me. Like a tattoo, like red-burning iron on my flesh, your eyes become memory. And does so forever.

Non-flame

I hadn't paid any attention to my new neighbor. This was not too strange, for I was not used to paying attention to unknown people, whether they be neighbors or not.

It had taken me an entire lifetime to understand how unlikely it is to encounter the blessing of a valuable stranger. At the same time and on a parallel lane, a thorough understanding gradually unfolded in me of the fact that time is scarce and mine was running out at a distressing speed. And each time faster, speeding up more, the more aware I became of its scarcity. Or the more I squandered it. This pitiful conviction had led me to a certain social isolation, by means of which I sought to get away from the trivial and focus on the important, that is to say, on that by which I would judge myself at the end of the road. And it almost never proved to be the neighbors.

Nevertheless, the deliberately indifference-based relationship with my new neighbor changed dramatically the day of the strong hailstone.

It is important to mention that to talk about "a neighbor" is just a convenient approximation. It was more of a temporary neighbor, a vacationer neighbor, simply a man with whom I would share my tourist resort during the holidays. As a matter of chance or fate, our modest bungalows turned out to be next to one another. I had barely noticed him or his family since the temporary nature of their presence made it even more insignificant to my eyes.

Until the day of the hailstone, I had exchanged no more than eventual greetings with him. I did not know his name, or remember his eye color or clothes. With his almost invisible going by the resort, he was far from calling my attention. Moreover, his complete unimportance could have aroused some form of interest in me. He was a quiet, inexpressive man, a complete effortlessly anonymous individual. One of the many classes of the dead. He wandered by, holding no visible convictions, almost dragging himself. Cold and miserable, not even worthy of compassion, he looked like a boiler without a fire, someone incapable of bearing an inner flame. That's what he was: a flameless man.

To put it bluntly, I had respected Flameless until the day of the hailstone. Better said, I had ignored him entirely, which constituted a form of respect. His moribund style did not bother me at all and resulted almost instrumental to my needs for quietness, focus and rest. In fact, it distresses me only to imagine the alternatives with which I could have encountered. For instance, an unacceptable, uncivilized individual who would hustle about all over the resort with yelling and loud music. Or an extraordinary character, someone out of the common, who would expose my mediocre life out in the open, and force me to glance at my own misery. Not to have neighbors at all would have been the only better option. Undoubtedly, I had been fortunate.

But the hail came. I had seen it coming. At the beach, from where all horizons can be seen, I had noticed the ominous southeast, always so threatening and black. Rather than black, greenish black. The wind had changed, it had turned cold and tough, and it seemed to want to impose the end of the day at the beach. So had the beachgoers understood, running away in a horrified, chaotic manner, like a coward army in retreat, clumsy at crossing the sand dunes which separated the beach from the tourist resorts. I refused to retire in such a lily-livered fashion, forced only by a couple of wind slaps. And let alone in the midst of that unfaithful and fearsome horde, running the risk of becoming one of them. No, no, and no way, sir. I would not become one of them. I settled down at the beach despite the cold that began to penetrate the skin of my feet and hands, despite the sand that hit my face and invaded my eyes. I stood against the wind and, from my rehearsed indifference, observed the quivering flock that left the beach carrying clothes and towels in rolls, running after the items that the wind threatened to snatch away from them forever. When everyone had left the beach, then I *did* retire, slowly and calmly, so that the southeast stormy wind would understand that *he* wasn't sending me out but I was leaving by myself, by my own will.

I was proud indeed but not stupid. So when I arrived at the resort, I parked my car under a huge pine-tree that seemed ready, firm and steady to resist the strong beats of the imminent storm. Hailstone was just a distant probability, so those were all my precautions.

But the hailstone did surprise *him*. I would have bet that Flameless hadn't been at the beach and hadn't seen the threatening eyes of the storm looming over the sea, so agitated then, neither felt its menace directly on him in the form of a wild wind, nor had he seen the tender lambs fleeing away while looking back from behind their reddened shoulders. Flameless had left his car in the middle of a clearing that was too exposed. It was almost a provocation to the storm's rage, as if the car looked up to the sky, opened his arms wide and cried out, "Hailstone! Here I am and I am not afraid of you!", and the hailstone replied with noteworthy aggression. With stones so unusually big bouncing on the roof of that poor car like the stabbings of an unleashed murderer, frenzied by the furor of a passionate crime.

I watched the rain, the stones, and the car being beaten by the stones from behind my window, while having a warm *mate*³. Its warmth was not a setback or the unwanted consequence of a delay, but an intimate pleasure pursued with dedication and pleasure. Avoiding extreme temperatures in *mate* was a major issue for me, especially during my holidays. If water was too hot it burned the flavor of the herb inside, while if too cold, it lacked the ability of comforting the soul. Regardless of the incident of the stones on the car, which I did not especially enjoy, I felt very quiet and enjoyed that moment of sublime rest in a way so difficult to transfer with words, sitting next to a slightly misted window. From time to time, I closed my eyes and gave in to the unique, sensuous scent of my warm *mate*. I could hear and even feel the rain, the wind and the storm; and the stones too, immolating themselves on the bungalow's roof, on the garden benches and

on Flameless' car. This latter sound, a metallic one, added an artificial element to the natural symphony of the tempest but I was wise enough to manage to resignify it. To me, it represented the omnipresence of Mother Green over the finite, plastic reign of manhood.

That moment of satisfactory trance, of warm and soft introspection, was interrupted with levels of inconsiderate disregard never experienced in me before. With unconceivable brutality, Flameless burst into the peaceful, revealing scene, as if his yelling of expanded *NOOOOOs!* and his insults could turn back time and undent that roof, that hood, those fragile and economical sides so archetypal of present times. In despair, he ran to and fro the bungalow carrying blankets that he would lay on the already irreversibly damaged car. His face was extremely red and active, as if his forty facial muscles had suddenly awoken from a long sleep. The expression was unequivocal and denoted anger, sadness and impotence. For a moment, I thought I saw an incipient weep. Besides, and with ongoing yelling, Flameless gave unintelligible instructions to his poor wife, who also ran to and fro but in an even more confused state, maybe because she could not understand the vociferous blabbing of her overwhelmed husband.

I was outraged.

But not at the inconsiderate interruption of my moment of private communion with nature, neither because that would have blocked the reflexive abysses into which I had managed to plunge, not either because the gratifying *mate* had turned cold forever. No, it wasn't due to any of that. My deep, nonnegotiable and long-lasting outrage, which would not abandon me until the end of my holidays, had one unique, undeniable explanation: the unacceptable insubstantiality of the facts that had managed to instill life back into Flameless, an individual who now, from one moment to another, showed emotions and feelings I had not foreseen, something that would not be entirely inadmissible if its *raison d'être* were a fair cause.

It was no longer possible to continue referring to him as a flameless man. Now everything was much worse. This wasn't a man unable to bear some inner flame but rather one who was unable to bear a decent one, a healthy one with some sort of meaning. As if his flame, despite existing, couldn't be red or hot or flaming. Yes, that's what he was: a non-flame.

To make matters worse, Non-flame did not return to his prior state. That would have allowed for a truce, a minimal hope of being able to forget what had happened, of pretending it had all been a bad dream. I just needed an excuse that would let my strict consciousness bury away his traumatic experience forever in the wide fields of forgetfulness. But no, Non-flame and his distorted hierarchies insisted in upsetting me, in settling with force at the very core of my quieted inner garden, to which I turned for shelter in the time that inescapably drifted away. The weather did not recover during the days that followed and, consequently, neither did Non-flame. Each time the sky would turn a threatening black, Non-flame would run —yes, run!— to cover his car with blankets taken from his own bed. He would sacrifice the blankets and with them, worse

than that, his warmth at night, for the dense, hail-less rains would wet them entirely. And would wet him too, as he would sit next to his beloved car to accompany it in its suffering, like a father tending to his sick son, telling him with his mere presence, “Don’t you worry, son, you are not alone, I am here to protect you, to suffer together with you until this whole nightmare is over”.

Let there be no doubts about one point. It didn’t exasperate me to the peak of my tolerance that Non-flame should worry so much, and even sacrifice himself, for his car in a way so immature and infantile. Of course not. After all, who could enjoy seeing a rain of stones pour their fury over one’s car? I myself had put my own under the shelter of that big pine! It would be too inflaming not to, inflaming and non-flaming! What truly enraged me was that hailstone on his car were the only thing that moved him. That was much, much worse than an overall indifference to everything. That was of a non-flame-hood that was unheard of.

My fixation with Non-flame, no matter how fair, did not prevent the consequences. I don’t want to refer only to the impossibility of enjoying a well deserved vacation rest, but also to the influence the events had on my family’s mood. My dear wife would not cease to express her discomfort and lack of understanding, despite knowing me to the last detail.

“Julio, please, I ask of you to end it with the neighbor. And with that ridiculous 'non-flame' thing. Why did you take it out on that poor man? He didn’t do anything to you after all”.

Didn’t do anything to me? Is that so? My dear wife could not understand me. She couldn’t understand. My own children either but at least they had the decency of keeping quiet, of accepting they were too young. Yes, those lads, those pink-white sprouts looking at me with wide open eyes were undoubtedly wiser. Buried deep inside their incomprehension, they surely suspected I was right. Because truth is always known, even though one may not understand it. How could anyone remain indifferent to so much indifference?

Deep down, I didn’t want to accept the situation. No, that is not quite accurate. It was something else. I wasn’t willing to accept the situation. I didn’t want to put up with Non-flame being a non-flame. Forgive me, I need to be more accurate again. I didn’t want to be a man that would tolerate Non-flame’s non-flame-hood. I wanted somehow to save him. In order to save myself.

Then I decided to look for other reactions in Non-flame, some other nervous enclaves that would make him react the way he did when hailstone fell on his car. If those weaknesses existed, no matter how insignificant, then his mortal sin would be washed away, diluted. A man who reacts to a thousand trifles is as non-flamed as one who reacts to just one, but he is more difficult to acknowledge and, therefore, more acceptable to his circle around him. That would save him in front of the eyes of his children although they didn’t know it. Not in front of mine, but I was willing to play that game in an extreme case like this, where both my holiday and my family’s were at

stake. Instead, the maximal aim, true salvation for all of us, consisted in finding something truly important to which Non-flame would express an emotion, whatever that would be. This would, no doubt, redeem him, even with me.

The first results were disappointing. I had decided to start at the cushioned world of words and ideas. There would always be time later to resort to the unquestionable resources from the physical world. They had always proved to be more solid but also more traumatic. The following morning, for the first time, I suggested Non-flame some conversational topics that went beyond the usual, formal and void greeting. From a footballing perspective, I could say that I started making short passes. The weather, the resort, the beach, the vacation-season. Nothing. Non-flame remained nerveless, far apart from that world where hearts beat and fists close. He would answer “yes”, “no”, “fine”, (not even “not so good”), “ehm” and that was about it. He then proceeded to the next activity in his monotonous, indefinite day. To be honest, I would have reacted in similar ways to such irrelevant, boring themes. Perhaps Non-flame bore within himself some unsuspected depths and I simply offended him, without knowing it, with such conversation proposals. An in a more transcendental level, with my secret and implicit accusation of non-flame-ness. The next days, I anxiously took to follow-up topics. I spoke about food, work, family. Nothing. I went on. The economy, politics, our country. Nothing. History, wars, injustice. Philosophy, religion, finite existence, the meaning(less nature) of life. Nothing. Nothing at all. Zero.

While gradually being forced into accepting his incapacity to react, I felt my muscles gradually tensing, an unknown stiffness expanding in my chest, neck and finally, head. My strong headache got hold of the night and, together with the acrid sweat, prevented me from sleeping. My semblance quickly withered more and more, with growing eye-bags and a somber expression. I wanted to seize Non-flame by the shoulders and shake him very, very hard, to yell at him, “Come on, man!!!! React!! I can’t see you like that!! Cut the crap with that non-flame-hood!!!” As should be expected, when my short conversations with Non-flame ended, I was in an understandable state of turmoil.

I had run out of conversational topics. I was almost defeated. I had no choice but to resort to the last topic available, the one I had avoided in the most surgical way, going around it with extreme care unfolding my discursive abilities. Resigned, I had no choice but to ask Non-flame about the day of the hailstone and his car. He transformed himself in a spectacular manner, as a superhero would have when faced with the imminent need of confronting injustice. He almost ripped his shirt open and flew up in the air. He opened his eyes and mouth, took his head in his hands and began to paint a most dramatic, heart-braking scene, with which he managed to drive me into the shaken sea of his stormy tale. The voice was not his voice, it was another voice, there was another person talking inside of him. His intonation shifted from the plainest uniformity to the wealth that only a million hues can provide. I felt tethered to his despair, caught by my foot by a huge sea beast that pulled me down to the bottom. Moreover, I was one step

away from yielding to his concern, one step away from understanding him, supporting him and offering any help I could provide. I felt in front of an incredible artist of the hailstone-car drama, to whom there was no choice but to give in, weep with emotion, and give a standing ovation. But no, thank God —my deepest gratitude to dear God— I was strong. The other part of me, the fundamental one, resisted and restricted itself to proving that my observations had been, once more, accurate. Only one conversation topic moved Non-flame.

Despite my emotional turmoil, and the inner contradictions revolting inside of me, I was not willing to abandon that man, no matter how non-flamed man he was. I was a battered fighter, swaggering, true, but also under the self-imposition of never to abandon, never to quit the fight.

There had come the time of travelling to the physical dimension of concreteness. Also here, I decided to be gradual. I would stretch Non-flame's hand, increasing the strength of the grasp day by day. I would do so until my neighbor returned from that distant, private world, from that personal and unknown galaxy, where his flame had been inevitably captured.

Hand-shaking is a language in itself. Non-flame offered a sturdy but hollow hand, void of any content at all. The stronger I stretched his hand, the more he did, too. No. Wrong. *He* didn't do that, his body did, in a reactive manner, as a reflex. A mirror. Content was kept unseen, his still, inexpressive eyes could confirm it. Toward the end, the hand-shake was even painful, but neither of us said anything. In my case, for obvious reasons. In his case, incomprehensibly.

Inspired by that coming and going to and from non-flaming planets, I conceived then the brilliant idea of attempting the inverse way. In the privacy of the night, I quietly left the bungalow where my dear wife and children slept. I searched for Non-flame's car. To puncture a tire or crash a windshield seemed very attractive ideas, but too noisy. I did not wish to expose myself in that way. I would go for a classic side scratch, silent and straightforward. I did it in passing, quite matter-of-factly, so that no one could point at me and say I had done it. I kept going and took a walk round the block, just in case. I returned to the bungalow unconcernedly. Everyone was asleep. I thought of the issue for a moment and fell asleep feeling satisfied, bearing a smile that only served duty can provide.

Night rest, apart from well-deserved, was long and deep. When I woke up the next day, a certain nervousness invaded me, for the re-encounter with Non-flame would come sooner than later. When I met him at the common places of the resort, his paleness seemed ghostly to me. I shook his hand, not so strong this time, and asked him about the undisguisable seriousness in his face. Devastated, at the verge of tears, he confessed to me the dreadful find-out that he had come across that morning. The sadness in his tale seemed endless and extended way beyond his words, as if it had a floating trail that could remain pending in the air. My emotions betrayed me again. A furious hurricane took over my silent inner being and filled it with a jarring roar. I had to display inhuman

efforts not to give in to that black cyclone that crushed me and put all my balanced emotions at risk.

When Non-flame finished his story, I was in shock. With huge effort, I managed to regain speech and, only then, could I try to comfort him. I tried in vain to tow that huge avalanche of ill-parked sensitivity against the truly important aspects of life. I tried to convince him that a small scratch —it wasn't that small, in fact— on his car instilled something insignificant if one could put it, wisely, under a calibrated perspective, in a context in which the priorities of life were adequately scaled. Or at least, in one where the values that humanity had put in the summit for centuries, painstakingly, occupied a more important place than the door —both doors and the whole side, actually— of his car. I spoke with remarkable patience about the good, the beautiful and the truthful, about the essential and the transcendental. And on its drawbacks. It was useless. His answers restricted themselves to different versions of “Why me?” and “What am I going to do now?”

I was lost, one step away from capitulating. I didn't know what else to do for this incurable Non-flame. Should I abandon him? Who else would help him if I didn't? I was alone, confronted to Non-flame and his tragedy. It all depended on me and my proved capacity to help others.

The answer to my queries came in a dream, that mysterious channel through which encapsulated truths —very far away from us, in some deep underworld— manage to leave the capsules of our unconscious and flee to us. The solution to Non-flame's enigma was absolute, it admitted no conditions or alternatives.

It was very early, my family was sleeping. I left the bungalow with determination, without wasting time in reviewings or explanations to my dear wife. I walked with secure step toward Non-flame's bungalow and knocked on the door with resolution. No one answered, so I knocked harder. After a minute, still knocking, I started shouting Non-flame's name. The neighbor at the house next door opened. He seemed upset and asked what was happening. He was wearing a classic pajamas with stripes and had an expression on his face that seemed grumpy, although most probably it was only concern about Non-flame. The light of dawn seemed to affect his pale eyes, which he kept scraping. Excitedly, I explained that our neighbor, Non-flame, needed my help urgently and I needed to find him right away. He looked at me with an expression of bewilderment that I suspected as discrediting, while wanting anxiously to go back inside. “He left last night,” he informed me, and re-entered his bungalow slamming the door behind him, which struck me as quite inconsiderate toward the rest of the neighbors' sleep. Disturbed, I ran out to the street and confirmed, disappointedly, that Non-flame's car wasn't there.

It is so difficult for me to put into words the huge, uncontrollable feeling of defeat, of unserved duty, of betrayal to Non-flame, and the whole humanity, that invaded me in that moment! I had failed him, I had failed everyone. I thought I would never leave such a deep-black-hole pit of depression filled with different forms of guilt.

I fell to the sand street. I couldn't help but shaking my head with my hands. I stayed in that position for a long impossible-to-measure time, until my dear wife came to lift me and took me back to our bungalow.

She had prepared a magnificent breakfast, full of her characteristic love and, more importantly, the most delicious *churros* stuffed with *dulce de leche*⁴. I could see the shining sun ascending lightly over the diaphanous plenitude of a blue sky. My mood began to shift and hope, warm as the *mates* in whom I had learned to take refuge, gradually came back to my body.

It wasn't going to be easy but, one way or another, I would find Non-flame. I would save him. The easy or the hard way.

The Secrets

For Sabri.

I had to reveal my secret in a way as insignificant as unexpected.

The owner of the cabins asked either of us to register in the complex. The data required in the check-in form were little, however enough to expose the secret of whoever took over the task. Without showing a single sign of her total understanding of the situation and its consequences, she remained by my side and contemplated the scene, impassively.

I hesitated in vain an imperceptible instant. I looked for reasons that would push me to avoidance of what I knew inevitable from the very beginning. Without looking at her or hinting at the defeat invading me, I took the pen that the owner's hand extended at us, and assumed the forever difficult task of opening up, of becoming vulnerable. In doing so, not only did I condemn myself to revealing my secret, but also protected hers, in a double gesture of make-believe chivalry with which I hoped, at least, to seduce her.

She was snow-white and civilized, like the land she came from, almost-in-everything distant to Cambodia, almost-in-everything distant to mine. In a manner both simultaneous and indispensable, a dark drive inhabited her (and her land), which I had the privilege of meeting and sensing.

We both knew about the secrets, although each knew only their own. We knew always, from the first moment we met, only a day before, when our eyes stared and I came close to talk to her openly, without excuses, as I invited her to walk along the lonely golden beach of M'Pay, early, on a dry and sunny morning, with the tiny Koh Koun island as the only reserved witness. We knew it that same morning, when I kissed her for the first time and she let herself go, crystalline and calm, like the warm waters of the sea that wrapped us. Also in the afternoon, when it was hard for us to take our separate ways. And in the evening, when shaken by a moon dawning on the horizon, we kissed naked in a black sea that shone white-greenish shimmers, to the rhythm of our unfinished love maneuvers, contained only by the healthiest of fears. We knew it during the following day when we walked, without knowing it, toward the cabins, under a withering sun that seemed an adverse fate, when we boarded the small local boat that brought us to the shores of the magnificent Saracen Beach and were touched, incredulously, by the natural spectacle opening ahead us, and when, in ecstasy, we fell asleep on a white sand mattress under the shade of a stoic tree that seemed to have been there for ever, expecting us.

Yes, we knew about the secrets all along. And all along we were cautious not to mention them, perhaps to convince ourselves that they were not important, despite their silent presence, their constant and artificial absence that suggested the contrary, or so

that their knowledge would not come between us, or perhaps, much simpler, because the secrets even further stimulated the already unstoppable attraction we felt for one another, just as the exotic distance of Koh Rong Samloem did on us.

The secrets were not, however, indecipherable. We ourselves had guessed their existence no sooner had we discovered each other, and suspected the silhouettes in which the mystery enclosed. The others too could perceive the secrets, but the necessary simplification of facts prevented them from interpreting them as only we could.

I leaned over the elementary document that would crush me in a couple of sighs. Rather than the falling, what surprised me was the having to do so in such naive way. I disguised the search for alternatives with a general reading of the paper. I couldn't find any, except lying without risks, which I discarded for not considering it to the level of my self-esteem. She decided to stay in the room rather than leaving with an excuse and, in doing that, forced me toward a truth. I filled in my data with determination, like things must be done—in the wrong or not—once one has decided to do them, and I exposed myself to her clear eyes which, of course, noticed the revelation and brightened, although I never looked at them so as not to give myself away.

Once registered, we went to our cabin. It was just like all cabins, just like everything unimportant tends to be the same. It was on the sand, a few steps away from a sea that sang to the tune of the waves' coming and going, the musical background score which we had learned to get used to. The sunset had not yet come, but as we entered the first thing we saw was the irremediable night. After leaving our things, we went for a walk along the bay. We did it slowly and nonchalantly, as if we were the same as before, as if my unmasked secret had no consequences. More than once we stopped to kiss with determination, with certainty, to establish clearly the border of our omissions. When we came back, at dinner, we looked into each other's eyes with the silent help of the candles that lit the small tables along the beach. Driven by improvisation, just the way in which Happiness likes things done, we got rid of our last coins there.

Encouraged by the heat, by the immediacy and by the certainty of being in front of (or inside) an indelible memory, we submerged ourselves again in the night of the sea and got lost in the magical labyrinth of salty kisses. Maybe because the double secret seemed excessive to me, maybe because it couldn't be any other way, I finally told her what we already knew:

“Now you know my secret.”

“Yes,” she said, in a serene manner. There was nothing to add and she did not. We looked at each other without speaking for several minutes which fixed the moment in the future, as if with red-hot iron.

“Do you want to know mine?” She decided, in the end, not to leave me alone.

“I don't know,” I answered, and it was true.

Again, the stare. Again, the silence. With her legs, she embraced my waist, took my neck between her hands and brought her mouth close to my ear where, in a whisper,

she spilled her secret. It was brief and unmistakable like a number.

We stayed very close to one another, protecting ourselves from the extraordinary of the moment, suspecting all of that might turn into pain some other time to come.

“I’m cold, let’s go in,” she said, and extended her warm hand to me which rescued us from the sea, and guided us to the privacy of our cabin.

From our souls, without the crossed secrets now, nakedness extended up to our bodies and we loved each other for the first time, being free, with craving but without fears, under the whitish protection of a humble veil that, nevertheless, nourished the idea of fantasy, of a mirage. Her young body, her smooth skin and her shy love heightened in the faint lunar beams that filtered into the hut, just like the resonance of the sea and the jungle. Her usually-smiling mouth adopted this time the contours of pleasure when reaching the edge with pain. Each of the flavors of the skin, each unconditional yielding, eventually everything, proved insufficient to quench our instinctive desire for eternity. Dawn brought night to our impossibilities and plunged us in the other dream.

We slept little. When we woke, reality found us exhausted, hungry and penniless. Filled with the unforgettable, we declined the obligatory view from the Old Lighthouse. The paradise surrounding us, but also that of our own recent time, provided us with the energy needed for a return that promised to be long and uncertain.

Holding hands, still clinging to the unrepeatable, we left behind the whitest beach, the joy and the secrets. We walked for several hours without speaking, since words transcended us as they had before. The sun reigned in the bluest height, it was pure energy. Fire, like our complicit gaze, like our secret.

Train to Zurich

For Guido.

I dare say that we were expecting something, perhaps some form of normality or boredom, because when we opened the compartment door, what we saw surprised us. In the first place, the music sounded very loud and seemed Balkan to me and, after dozens of times of going through this story in my memory, I ended up concluding that it must have been gypsy music, conceived in Hungary or some other Eastern Europe corner. In the second place, because those responsible for the music were two young women, attractive enough, in tight clothes, wearing eyeliner, on a pair of very black eyes, eyes that seemed to get up again always. For a moment, I felt like being in a suburban train in Buenos Aires. Before entering and after a first hello, I saw my good friend Gino pop up from behind my shoulder.

The compartment was one of the many that composed the train coach. Coaches were numerous too, and exceeded the roofed area of the station. The day was fading away. It must have been seven in the afternoon more probably than six, but mostly, it was late. We had arrived at our train just in time, literally running. With Gino, we played by ear, except when it came to punctuality. Partly because of that, my friend was “all one was told about Buenos Aires”, in the words of a Swiss passenger on the same train, whom we were to meet a few hours later.

The train was departing from the magnificent Keleti station, the most important of the greatest railway stations in Budapest, the city where the arbitrariness of my dreams would usually take me back. There had been no time—as is always the case with wrong priorities—to enjoy its eclectic architecture. Its huge halls, separated by large wooden gates, were guarded by solid pink marble columns and almost always by Karoly Lotz’s frescoes.

The final destination was Zurich, located about a thousand kilometers from there.

We went inside the compartment and greeted the two women with a smile more suggestive than necessary, stretching our hands as we introduced ourselves in English. The greeting, restrained, sought to balance the disorderly desire to explore our new traveling companions with the civilized remoteness that people prefer when greeting for the first time. The women responded with moderate enthusiasm, perhaps because they did not understand a word we said, as they apparently only spoke a language that was incomprehensible to our ears, probably Hungarian.

The compartment had six beds. We checked that the assigned numbers were the correct ones and sorted out our luggage. Meanwhile, the women did not turn down the music, which I am not sure bothered me, but did catch my attention. “Weird that they

are not turning down the music”, I told Gino after chatting for a while. “Yes”, he answered.

My comment was almost a provocation for Gino, who took one of the women by the arm and, pointing at the music device, asked her vaguely about the origin of that music. Apologetically, they put down the volume immediately while they seemed to excuse themselves. Gino omitted clarifying further and sought to know their names instead: Dika and Malina. He let them know we were from Argentina and some basic related information, such as the fact that we spoke Spanish. The effort toward the intentions managed to extend the conversation, something that effective understanding would never have achieved. Dika, the least attractive and maybe because of that the most determined, contributed with some key words in English which helped unleash some of the knotted conversations, not to say nonexistent ones.

Shortly after the train started, a third woman joined our compartment. Her name was Rozi and she knew the other two. After making herself comfortable in bed, she joined our will-intended dialogue and, without much effort, snatched from Malina the title of the most attractive in the group.

When the initial conversation effort ran out and the comfort of each one’s own language finally prevailed, Gino and I decided to go out into the hall. We looked out the window, it was already night-time. We guessed the cold and the blackness of late autumn settled over the invisible Hungarian plain, which our train was going through without much haste. When we paid attention to the corridor, as narrow as two people passing by, it was impossible for us to remain indifferent. Other passengers had also left their compartments, perhaps to stretch their legs, or to refresh their dreams in the darkness of the window, or to recall a hell they were leaving behind, or to imagine one that was coming ahead. We did not know. “Man, why are there so many girls in the corridor?” I asked Gino in my most Argentine slang, using the words *che* and *minas*.

The bursting in of the train-guard postponed the suspicions that were beginning to grow already, and sent us back to the compartment, where we searched for our tickets and passports. The guard, who like almost everything on the train seemed Hungarian, took our documents and examined them thoroughly, with a remarkable ability for not getting bored. When he came to a conclusion, he announced in labored English that the tickets were invalid, because we had not completed the date of usage. He therefore had to retain the documents until we paid a fine worth a skyrocketing price. It was useless to explain to him a thousand times that we did not know the procedure, and that until that moment, guards were the ones who had always filled out the date on tickets. The argument extended for over an hour. Dika, out of experience or fun, encouraged us not to give in. The guard, exhausted, decided to close the controversy by threatening to get us off the train at the next stop, whose name was unrememberable but meant essentially the very icy center of Hungarian nothingness. With all argumentative instances depleted, we told him very well, we would pay the piercing fine, but after an hour of arguing with us he knew very well that we were not lying, we were from Argentina and we didn’t

have money to waste, as surely neither he or his children. To close it, we told him that he would carry that guilt until the end of times, giving a decisively emotional closure to our final argument. Then, for the first time, the guard's gaze diverged from his words, and he told us that he was truly sorry but the rules were the rules, so he would go for the receipts and return to collect the fine.

While we waited for the guard who would never return, we realized that we had caught the attention of all the passengers in the corridor, or rather, of the women passengers, since almost all of them were women, and young ones. Gino looked at me, then focused on the corridor again, and threw a visual rope whose end was anchored in the eyes of one of the girls, Lumi. He adjusted that imaginary rope and pulled it until he got to be standing very near her. Then he discovered that Lumi's gaze—that is, Lumi—was hard, tough and bold.

They ended up facing each other, at a one-breath-away distance, sparks flying all around them. Gino spoke to her in Spanish and Lumi answered him in her own language, both of them with striking decisiveness. Connection flowed and they seemed to understand each other, despite the incompatible languages, or perhaps thanks to them. He took out from his pocket a little guide of Budapest. Among other resources, it offered about thirty phrases in Hungarian, including some that challenged the tourist to try their luck in the difficult art of Magyar seduction. He showed Lumi the palm of his hand, asking her for patience, while he read the guide in silence. The entire corridor, now turned into a kind of football stand, observed expectantly. The six passengers in the nearest compartment had already gone to bed, but did not hesitate to open their door and lean out from there. Almost like a silence, the sound of the train moving on the rails and sleepers had occupied everything. Long before being ready, Gino began to shoot words in Hungarian with the help of his little guide, while the women in the corridor burst out in cheers and claps. Lumi laughed too, while alternating with impenetrable comments to the women who seconded her. The public display of intercultural courtship lasted several minutes. Lumi did not retreat, not even an inch, and Gino could not get any closer, so he attempted a caress on her arm or hair, while unsuccessfully trying to take her hand.

What followed—which, at this point, could be anything—was interrupted by the appearance of a woman as young as the others, but very different and very angry. She was blond, with her hair tightly stretched back, tied in a pigtail adjusted above the line of ears. Almost shouting, she ordered the girls to retire to their compartments. With reluctance, they obeyed her. I could see the disappointed eyes of Lumi, who granted Gino one last look of recognition, told him the name of a hotel and left with her head down, almost dragging her feet, until disappearing at the end of the corridor. Gino had his back to me, but I didn't have to see his eyes to know that his disappointment was even greater.

Not happy enough with the liberation of the corridor, the blond woman confronted Gino and ordered him in perfect English to stop talking to the girls, as if anyone could

be in a position to enter through the window and intimidate a true *porteño*⁵. Gino glanced at me and then, in the purest Argentine tone, asked her “who the fuck are you?”, with all the sentimental help he was able to gather in his hands and body. The blond woman charged again with her preaching while Gino transformed himself into gestures only, a whole inability to accept made of gestures: he shook his head, took his face in his hands, bit his lips, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Look, woman, I have only one mother and she is in Liniers⁶, so get out, vanish, go”, he ordered back, while stretching his arm pointing to the end of the corridor. It was impossible to know if the blond woman had understood anything, but not that she left screaming some quite unpleasant things in German.

The corridor had been left deserted. I approached Gino and it was little what we could comment on what had happened, as one of the passengers who had witnessed the show from his bed, got up to talk with us. He introduced himself as Rapha and was happy, smiling. As most Swiss, he could speak Spanish and several other languages. He looked at Gino for a few seconds, dazzled, as if he were facing a legend that suddenly turned real and became reachable to him. “You’re all I was told about Buenos Aires”, he confessed, almost in tears. He won our affection easily and we talked with him for almost an hour, until a passenger of impatient sleep asked us for silence. We said goodbye with a hug and went to our compartment.

Dika, Malina and Rozi were awake, talking, or maybe waiting. They looked at us in a new way, which I didn’t understand fully. Without too many detours, Dika tried to tell us something, with the help of her hands. She pointed at everyone and then hit the top of one fist against her other palm. She was proposing group sex to us. I looked at Gino. Acting my part without any innocence, I told Dika that we thought it was an excellent idea, I took off my shirt, and tried to advance on her. She stopped me by putting the tip of her index finger on my chest and made it clear, gesturing, that few things in life are free. I looked back at Gino. “No, no... We’re not going to pay... In any case, you should pay us...”, I counterattacked in English, with a grin, while slowly putting my shirt back on again and while Dika, maybe disappointedly, tried to reel back the negotiation by means of more signs, perhaps offering me a large discount. My stubbornness made her search for Gino, who smiled next to me. “No, no... We are Latin Lovers... We can do without money, but we will not pay”, he confirmed in English, too. Dika looked at her companions and there was a brief and incomprehensible deliberation. Once they agreed, Rozi turned off the light.

The Swiss police was responsible for waking us the next morning. Nothing of what had happened during the night had distracted me from sleeping hugged to my backpack. The train was stopped at the border and the Swiss officers were checking passports. Everything was fine in our compartment, but there came a stir from the platform. As the delay was getting longer, we went to the hall with Gino to look out the window. There were half a dozen Swiss officers, three guards, some twenty girls, and the forever angry blond woman. The main dialogue was between a Swiss officer and the

guard who had forgotten or forgiven us the night before. The men's inexpressiveness of gesture prevented us from guessing if they agreed or not, although remembering our guard's last look, and judging by simple opposition against the Swiss officer's, I presumed that they didn't. After several minutes of contemplating the operation, it became clear to us that the twenty or so girls didn't meet the necessary conditions to cross the border into Switzerland. It seemed incredible to me that people could embark on that train during the night without having the minimum security of being able to cross the border. My questions kept multiplying. The men's conversation flowed on, fueled by the recurrent intervention of other officers, the calls through the radios and the moody blond woman. Sunk in silence, I was uncertain on whether I wished for the girls to cross the border or not. I looked at Gino, he didn't know either.

Finally, the girls couldn't continue the trip and we saw them walk away from the train, which continued its way to Zurich running, from that moment on, on Swiss territory. Dika, Malina and Rozi had returned to bed after the checking of their passports and slept peacefully, oblivious to the conflict in the border, as if it had nothing to do with them, or as if it were a normal thing in their trips. Not to wake them, with Gino we had breakfast in silence, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle that now, from the present, seems so clear.

We reached Zurich with mixed feelings. We said goodbye to our roommates with a kiss that tasted like abandonment, like impotence. We left the station fast, as if escaping. We walked with determination, more to get away from there than to reach our apartment, located in one of the many homogeneous constructions that populated Hardstrasse Street.

The day was long, insubstantial and somewhat sad, like a waiting. Maybe naively, that same night we went in search of the hotel, whose name had been Lumi's farewell. It wasn't hard to find it, but they did not know any Lumi, or any Hungarian girl, or anyone. The endless story of the train had ended, at least until today. Literature is, sometimes, a way to resist endings.

With the desirable adventure of Lumi buried behind us, our resignation was to visit Zurich in the recommended, reasonable way. We walked its gray, neat, perfectly kept streets, which somehow always led to the clear waters of the Limago River. We visited the peaceful churches of Saint Peter and Fraumünster, whose translation had never been fully resolved. We savored the famous chocolate and admired the efficiency of the transport system. We contemplated from the distant viewpoint of Ütliberg how the beautiful landscape of lakes and gentle hills embraced the city.

Zurich presented to us in a kind, silent, civilized manner. It couldn't, however, hide its side most secretive, primitive, brutal and black, its beastly starving corners of Dikas, Malinas, Rozis and Lumis.

The Duel

Alexei was nineteen years old that December day. He woke up early enough to have his usual breakfast and arrive on time at the agreed place. He considered quitting, but not out of fear of dying, but due to the extreme weariness that had been weighing down on him for the past few months. More than anything he wished to stay in bed, safe from the painful outside world.

He stood up, wrapped himself in his blanket and sat down in front of the small heater. He remained there, still, for several minutes. When he finally reacted, he heated the water and made a cup of tea. He drank it with some pieces of hard bread. When he finished, he took the small mirror and looked at himself. He looked at the untidy mane and the grown beard. He could find nothing of value instead, nothing that would push him to cowardice.

His life was a heavy cross to bear. In his own words, he was “as sick as someone could possibly be”, a condition as terminal as full of opportunities. The first of these, The End.

He walked to the window and looked through it with a gesture more apathetic than reflexive. The flatland of the city only allowed him to see the other houses in the neighborhood. By contrast, he remembered the unevenness of his hometown, Nizhny Novgorod, a provider of more generous views, which were an invitation to dreaming. He felt an unusual nostalgia for that place which he had never come to appreciate. When he could not linger anymore, he pulled on his coat. He tidied up the room and closed the door with the instinctive hope to return.

He walked up to the River Kazanka, slowly and resignedly. The river flowed on calmly, silently and unstoppable, like death. He looked to the west and could make out the city Kremlin, with the stair-shaped Siuyumbiké Tower sticking out. He then looked to the east where his opponent, dawn, and The End would be waiting for him.

The cold was beginning to make itself felt in Kazan, although the worst was yet to come. It had always been like that, but he could not get used to it. Worse than that, he loathed it with all his heart. This visceral hate had become his last anchor, his most determined hope. If The End was to be postponed, he would not hesitate, he would leave all confinements behind and head toward any given south: Caucasia, Italy... It really didn't matter.

The path opened along the south bank of the river. The true possibility of his last day made him see everything brighter and he could perceive many details that he had overlooked until then, like the cracking of the frosted surface or the hard caresses of the wind. Light was gaining more and more space. It became more evident that the dense clouds of an almost black color threatened to unleash a rain or a snow, although in the

horizon, the sky seemed clear in all directions. He did not believe in the inexplicable, but yet, he gave in to the temptation of seeing a good omen in the weather composition, like his opponent probably did in some other part of town.

Under the guise of common sense, fear appeared on the scene eventually. He had to admit that the duel would not solve anything for anyone, everyone would lose in the end, but there was no way back any more. The man that was looking at him from a highest point of the hill did not even imagine that Alexei, with his weary and monotonous step, could be hesitating. Little can fear offer, when it is time to halt fate.

No. As always, it was not about that woman, neither honor, nor about a sworn word. He was in need of that critical moment to free himself. And with any of the possible outcomes, freedom would come.

He arrived at the place, where his opponent was already waiting for him. He felt a strange satisfaction: stories, he preferred them in twos. He walked towards him and, once they stood face to face, they shook hands firmly, seeking to win the duel in advance. They agreed that the dispute was to be private, without any witnesses or filed complaints. The winner would walk away and anonymously give notice to the police. As they had already convened, the weapons would be the same for each and be shot only once. They shook hands again and the code of honor was set.

From that moment on, everything that happened was beyond his will. He saw himself building the outcome of a huge meaningless nonsense which he was, however, unable to stop. He saw himself walk slowly and take position, relax his neck, breathe deeply, load his weapon. He saw himself, indeed, become a foolish and fatuous character, like those with whom he had shared his short, hard life. Those who had fascinated him so much, and he had thought impossible to become.

The outcome seemed short to him, surprising, and only a while later, painful. He fell on his knees, with redder and redder hands holding the lower part of his chest, eventually coming to be lying on the snow. He could see his opponent run to him, grasp his shoulder in an unequivocal gesture of support and set off west, running. He could also see The End getting closer, slowly.

The pain and the cold increased. But his freedom even more so, to the point of attaining plenitude. Once the essential settled, the only thing remaining was to know whether he would live or not. Two police officers arrived to intervene in the incident. They lifted him up onto one of their horses and took him to the (orange colored) house of Fedorovsky, a renowned doctor who lived a few minutes from there.

Fedorovsky believed to be facing one of those cases in which the patient's recovery is decided in his own deepest soul. The doctor did his part and applied the recommended procedure, which proved effective after a few hours. When Alexei woke up, the police proceeded to question him but only got evasive answers disguised by pain. The experienced doctor requested a moment alone with the patient. After a few minutes, he came out of the room to inform that it had been "a mistaken, but necessary

suicide attempt.” The police looked at each other for a moment. Uninterested in aimless truth, they made a note in the report and left the place.

The Hotel

For Vili.

We met again by the Danube shores, next to the magical Chain Bridge (whose official name is Széchenylánchíd). Given the sepia color in the air, which also had a subtle hue of violet, I am now under the impression that dusk was to reach us soon. Judging by our clothes, I guess it was probably an incipient fall.

You arrived very late, although I hardly noticed. We hugged warmly during what I regarded as a long pair of minutes. Conversation flowed on, loaded with sweetness, while everything around us seemed to have stopped in time. Not without caresses, we began to reconstruct the intimacy we had once come to have.

I had come up to Budapest to see you. Apparently, I had missed you a lot. Everything suggested it was not the first time we met in the city and that we had been happy there once. And by “everything” I mean your eyes, so special, always full of shine.

After many years in your beloved Sofia, you had moved to Budapest. You lived in the district you had always wanted, on the west side of the city, not far from the Buda Castle. I did not remember you having ever mentioned that wish, but I am sure it was your wish.

You wanted to show me something, a surprise. We walked a few blocks holding hands, moving away from the river, until we reached your car. No doubt it was a red car but I remember it bluish. I thought you more determined, or impatient, or with less time (or maybe it was all the same).

We headed north, not far from the city center. We were looking for “the hotel”, as you commented naturally. The idea of “the hotel” rang a bell in me, although I still didn’t quite grasp its meaning, nor the reason why we were heading towards it. When we were almost there, you pointed at it: a very big hotel, on a slope, the other side of the Danube. It was stunning, as almost everything in Budapest is, but from all stunning things, it reminded me of the building of the National Archives. And it had a multicolored tiled roof in a serpentine pattern, as the one in the Matthias Church.

I knew that in the past we had searched for “the hotel” persistently but had never found it. I did not remember, nor do I remember now, the reason why. I also knew that the reason for that search was in the phrase inscribed on the construction’s façade, just below the roof.

I could see the phrase but I couldn’t —nor ever could I— know what it read.

We looked at each other in complicity, as if I had understood the meaning of the phrase too. It puzzled me that we should gaze at “the hotel” for several minutes, in

silence, perhaps fearing never to see it again (or worse, never to see it again together). In silence, too, we returned to the car and headed back to your apartment.

You had prepared a meal with an intense and delicious Slav scent, although I wouldn't be able to say what it was, or what it looked like either. As you finished lighting the last candle, which oranged the entire scene, I held you tightly from behind. Dinner was postponed, necessarily and indefinitely, since we hugged, kissed and loved, in despair, until the candles went out. Then, when darkness was complete, it all turned black forever.

The Applause

For Jakun.

Thirty years ago exactly, in 2016, I was sitting where you are now. In those days, I was only twenty years of age. Next to me, there were three young foreigners somewhat older than me. After a short casual conversation, I learned they were two Argentines and a Korean. Due to our geographic proximity, I had met other Koreans, but this was the first time I saw an Argentine. The relationship among them seemed very good, although I got the impression that the Korean did not fully enjoy the company of the Argentines at times like the ones I will describe as follows.

In this place, from where I speak to you now, was the President. He was about to offer us the opening speech of an event addressed to young university students of this institution, like you. The motto of the event was “Make your voice be heard”.

The President had been in office for more than thirty years, in a system that had little of a democratic nature. And maybe that was why he was treated with such reverence (behind which, almost always, hides fear) and the monotony of his speeches was tolerated. Lacking the faintest empathy with the audience, those speeches could last up to three hours, no matter how insignificant the event.

That was the context in which the President started his speech and all of us got ready to listen to him for a long time.

After fifteen minutes, it was evident that no one was listening to him any longer. And besides, that this fact didn't matter to him at all.

However, the Argentines sitting next to me began to show signs of impatience. First, shuffling in their seats, then talking to each other, and finally laughing openly. I remember they kept repeating the phrase *Vamos redondeando, querido* (an Argentine expression used for requesting to finish an exposition, something along the lines of “round it off, pal”) and that made them laugh a lot.

Twenty minutes into the speech, the Argentine next to me began to fill in the form of the satisfaction survey. He didn't seem too aware of the fact that the event was just starting. On the question about the rating of the event, he scored a four. In the area for justifying that number, he completed the textbox with this message: “The President's opening has been too long and lacking of interest”. Taking into account he did not speak the language, the justification struck me as something of considerable boldness. It is true, though, that a mere glimpse to the public —everyone was at their cellphones— justified it. Some minutes later, he decided to reinforce the argument: “The President's message has headed in a direction contrary to the motto of the event”. He distanced himself from the paper, looked at it with satisfaction, and put it away inside his folder with extreme care, as if he was dealing with a document of the utmost importance.

Forty minutes into the President's speech, the other Argentine (who wore a blue and red T-shirt) began to explain to his fellow countryman what, judging by its abundant body language, seemed like a plan. And one which involved all the students surrounding them, since after finishing with his fellow countryman, he began to provide discreet instructions to the Korean, and to everyone around him. The first Argentine did his own part too, in this case, including me.

“Next time the President pauses again, we will start clapping. And we won't stop until he leaves the podium,” he told me, with his thumb up, and a facial expression of optimism (raising his eyebrows and nodding) that opened no space for rejections.

Indeed, the President *did* pause every ten minutes or so, took a sip of water, and kept going.

When the first of the expected pauses came, the Argentines began to clap with determination. Driven more by the discomfort of leaving them alone than the wish to join this almost adolescent idea, the neighboring students like me followed them. And the rest, being so absent minded, followed us out of pure inertia. The applause surprised the President, as he hadn't said anything of relevance. First, he opened his eyes looking at the audience and then he searched for explanations among his advisors, but they also looked among one another in puzzlement.

The applause, besides, extended more than the common. As it began to decline, the Argentines clapped with greater strength and muttered encouragement by means of *Vamoooo* (a very informal Argentine expression of encouragement, something along the lines of “hell yeah”), which increased the courage of the students around. When the discomfort of the students was greater than the cheering of the Argentines, the applause ceased, and the President continued his speech.

The Argentines congratulated us in a low voice and signaled to us (by moving their index finger in a round motion and nodding), in a way that we all interpreted as “when he pauses, we do it again”. Meanwhile, the Korean sunk his head between his hands and shook it in frank disapproval.

So we did. Some ten minutes later, when the President made his expected pause and drank some water. A huge applause, its epicenter in the Argentines, burst out and became uncomfortable a lot earlier, as it was actually an extension from the previous one. In spite of this, the applause managed to expand for a while even longer. The discomfort of the President and his advisors became evident. Also the fear in some of the students. The applause, finally, gave way.

The President resumed his speech, but his voice showed signs of tension and exhibited a higher tendency to make mistakes. The murmuring grew as the minutes passed and he would not do the pause we all expected. After twenty minutes nonstop, the President could hold it no longer and had to produce the expected rest. Then, the applause exploded again and this time extended twice the time before.

The applause only stopped when about five security people went towards the end of the hall and ordered the Argentines to follow them outside the premises. The

Argentines refused to stand up and, with crossed arms, asked for explanations on the reasons for the requirement. It was a risky move: they said they would only take orders coming from police officers. The act remained interrupted, with hundreds of students, some officers, and the very same President staring perplexedly at the tense argument and an incipient tussle. Some minutes later, the police came. After repeated requests for explanations, which never came, the Argentines agreed to leave the room. In a most noble gesture, the Korean voluntarily left with them.

Escorted by the police, the three foreigners went towards the exit in the midst of the most puzzled looks from everyone present. Then, an inner strength that I had never known until then took over me. It was my fate. Without the faintest option of a choice, I started to clap. My classmates looked at me in surprise, but grasped it quickly and joined in. The applause no longer sounded like fun but more of a demand to end with all that. It was firm, harsh, and monochord like the President's speeches.

After a few minutes, the President understood the message fully. Filled with rage, he struck his fist on the podium and left, swearing, followed by his advisors.

When all the officers had already disappeared, the applause became jolly and festive. The students added some singing and chanting. As the celebration extended, we would look at one another incredulously, and each look embodied a form of gratitude.

Like a waterfall, lessons fell over me, one after another. These are the lessons I want to share with you today.

Do not accept any preachings or unilateral speeches. Do not present reverence, let alone fear. Resist with intelligence, with originality and even with rejoicing. An applause can also be an act of rebellion. Ask for explanations and do not yield until you obtain them. Ask, ask always. Do not leave the fair ones alone, do not leave the one who is right alone. Do not speak too much and, instead, listen to others attentively.

As President of this great Nation, I propound to you that, today and forever, more with facts than with any words, make your voice be heard.

The Saddest Day of my Life

I have clear images of that time, although a little mixed up, like in a documentary film in the middle of its making. Besides, the context presents to me in a blur. Let's say I was about ten years old. Or let's say something more precise: I could still feel the anxiety prior to a football match, play without thinking about time, and cheer my team with passion. Those were the times we would play football in a kind of *potrero*, a clearing of dry earth in the middle of a park that seemed big back then. The neighborhood kids, many of whom we only knew by nickname, used to go up there (often with their relatives). My sister played as well. Him, too.

It was in one of those games that I had to face a new reality. I had started to play better than him, despite having been him precisely who had taught me to play. I refused to accept it. That oppressive battle against the inevitable extended for many matches, in which I deliberately lowered the level of my playing skills, in the hope that my new superiority was not too evident. However, that way of (not) playing proved unsustainable and in time I had to give in to the fact that things had changed. Gradually, this new state of affairs became the new normal, and extended itself into the future. Years later, almost without noticing, there were no more matches in the park nor with him.

This was not, however, the saddest day of my life.

Many years later, that plight I had thought extinguished decided to return, with another countenance but the same harshness. He had an accident from which he would never fully recover, and had to have emergency surgery. For the first time, I felt responsible for him. Then, apart from feeling the pain caused by his suffering, I felt selfishly lonely, defenseless, and filled with the urge to cry, as I feel now while I delve into the memory of those sensations.

I also understood that one can still be happy even within a deep state of sadness. That is why I rejoiced, despite everything, at being able to be by his side in that moment of need, and tried to give him, for once, the security he had always given me. Fortunately, he could recover from the operation, although something had changed forever... and its taste was decisively bitter. Also that time, like all times, the inescapable became normal. But second times always bring a lesson that neither first nor third times bring: the possibility of repetition.

This was not, however, the saddest day of my life.

The saddest day of my life is yet to come. But it is so painful that I can feel it already.

The Term

*The explanation of why I forgive her everything resides in my love for her...
but which is the explanation for my love for her, I really don't know.*

—Anton Chekhov

I

I love Claire. It is she, instead, the one who does not love me. Or maybe she loves me the way she can, in her own way, a transactional, efficient, capitalistic way. Or maybe she cannot love me (or love), but she tries. In any case, she expresses her love (I am not certain for it to be love) in a way so strange to me, so alien, that it comes across as incomprehensible to me. I sometimes feel I am a guest, a visitor to her life, adapting to the theoretical profile of a man that she wishes to have by her side. Or like a piece, sometimes desirable, sometimes necessary, within her chessboard. That is the case. Her love has sophisticated contours, subtle and inexpressive. It has the body of formality, of planning, of efficacy, perhaps the forms in which her love manages, or attempts, or is able to manifest itself. And despite all these clues, all these roads which merge at one common point, I find it hard to understand reality, which is not visible since there is a veil, sometimes made of the opposite of visible, wishing to cover it. But there must be some way of summarizing all this, of transmitting it without so many considerations, without so many contours. There is. It is the term.

II

It is not easy to love Claire, but I do it, and it doesn't surprise me. She's smart, beautiful and has a strong temper that I sometimes accept as personality. She is a woman of action and ideals. We could do great things together if only we could understand each other a little more, if only we wished to understand each other a little more. And I wish to, because we share something very special: our rejection to accepting the terms of reality. Or that is, at least, what I want to believe.

If I had to abridge Claire in one only word, I would undoubtedly use the term. If that possibility were banned to me, then I would say she is a hard woman, like a rounded river pebble, with all the good and the bad hardness has to offer. A rational hardness that covers a heart as sensible as postponed, a hardness with which I inevitably crash a lot more than I would wish to, and our relationship can bear.

Only once did I mention the term to Claire, in passing, when I still would talk to her in the most spontaneous and unconcerned way. When I had not fallen into her logic.

I did it a lot before believing the term was the best way to define her, as I do believe now. It was the only way to describe accurately what happened just after one of the most important moments of our relationship: the first time we made love.

It all happened in that city in the north, so convenient and functional to all, especially her. Maybe it was our love for train rides that made us meet at the central station at six in the afternoon. Claire arrived with planned unpunctuality. We walked and seduced one another unhurriedly, beneath the dim light of an autumn sun that greeted goodbye among the modern towers of the financial district. Night caught up with us and, with it, dinner. We let ourselves be wrapped around our intimacy, our gaze and the smoke of the students that stuffed the place, one of the most traditional bars in town. Once at her place, the first kiss took us to bed, where we loved one another with burning anxiety.

Soaked in sweat, it wasn't hard to predispose ourselves to the refreshing pleasure of a warm shower. She did it first. When I got out of the bathroom, ready to fall asleep next to her, I had to adapt myself to a change of plans: she asked me to sleep on the couch. Being in her house, she had the utmost right to ask for it and my naïve times had long passed but, still, it came as a surprise. While staring at the sofa in search of answers, I tried to convince my disappointment that our loneliness there would not be that bad. I could not understand how Claire was able to interrupt in that way the incredible connection we had achieved. I had no doubt then, nor do I have it now, that it had been mutual.

And thus I revealed it to her some time later, when we recapped on the details of that night. I still did not understand it. That was the time when I used the term once and for good. I added that perhaps it was a matter of cultural differences. It was not the first time I encountered those types of behaviors in those central lands, where pragmatism reigned over symbols, and life tended to reduce itself, with no conflicts whatsoever, to a bunch of contentions. In those regions, after all, I had witnessed long debates on the convenience or not of having children, in which positions were held by means of additions and subtractions on quantities of time, money and professional development. Even more surprise than the sofa scene, now afar, aroused in me her disproportioned reaction to my viewpoint. At the verge of wrath, she explained to me that her behavior was not extraordinary at all, and it was not the first time she sent someone to the couch or got sent there herself. She did not answer when I asked how she felt when being in my place. Undoubtedly, she was very upset by the use of the term but I would only understand the deep meaning of that anger a lot later. She omitted it and steered her discharge at my "generalization" of human behaviors in those winter-like countries. As if cultures did not exist or were not different from one another. As if these differences could be explained without resorting to general terms. As if one could deny, and I would use a painful example from my own land, that in Latin America there is a machismo culture that kills.

Tension reached a point that we had to interrupt a debate which had become abrasive and lacerating. Only about halfway into the next day could we get back to normality and in the hours that followed it hurt me to understand that we had wasted the precious opportunity that conflict offers in order to come closer and enrich one another.

Claire's tendency to early, explosive irritability was the new surprise I found within hand-reach and, unfortunately, would find again and again more frequently each time. It wouldn't be the last time I would sleep in that couch either, one of her many resources, subtle or not, to impose her conditions.

She rejects, eventually, the complicity I have proposed to her. She prefers an empire instead. I don't know yet whether it is a personal or cultural difference.

III

Arguments with Claire are difficult. She considers them unnecessary, a waste of time. They quickly bring to dead ends, ideal scenarios for tension to mount. She doesn't think worth it to devote any energy to understanding and softening our differences, both personal and cultural. It is better to ignore, forget and move on. In the end, time is scarce. It is not odd, then, that she should seek to close arguments unilaterally: "This must be so, there is nothing else to say, accept it. Period". If that won't work—it never does—then she won't miss a chance to close them by slamming doors. When it is time to open them, Claire usually warns me that I shouldn't be mad at what she is about to tell me, something that has never happened. In the end, to get angry is the clearest way to admit oneself intolerant or lacking of arguments.

We almost always speak Spanish, except when we quarrel. In that case, we switch to English by my own initiative, in order to contribute neutrality and fluency to our exchange. Besides her own language, Claire speaks excellent English and a very good Spanish. No doubt she would prefer to quarrel in Spanish, but in fact it is an obstacle when it comes to expressing oneself, which I prefer to avoid in order not to complicate matters even more.

Our dull quarrels are just one edge of our communication problems. We have no trouble when it comes to exchanging information of a practical application, such as timetables, places, or tickets. More so, she takes the initiative. Perhaps the only problem is that all that information comes as secondary to me. Things get complicated when we move away from the coasts of concreteness and it is not strange for Claire to ignore my conversations on books, ideas or feelings. If we ride our bikes, she prefers speed to conversation. When we travel, she won't answer my messages; or would do so with complete detachment, as if physical distance transferred to our conversation. And I am not a dense guy. It so happens that she is very busy. She works so much. And she likes only to answer properly. And she wants to do it in Spanish, to practice the language.

This demands time, quietness and concentration from her. All of which, she lacks. Therefore, she won't answer me.

When we talk about our relationship and our feelings, Claire "ponders" on each and every aspect that worries her. If it is a difficult time, she informs me that she is not willing to "invest feelings" in vain. She thinks our conflicts are due to, most of all, my irresponsible practice of "power games". For her, our relationship may go "from a hundred to zero" in a blink; if periods are longer, she draws in the air the time evolution of those scores, by means of functional curves that go up and down, with peaks at some quarrel or reconciliation. Claire does not study math, or economy, or anything close to an exact science. Luckily. She is aware of all this and admits it with a pride I can't believe. She defines herself as a "practical" and "nonromantic" person when it comes to love. Thanks for clarifying, Claire.

When it comes to "administrating her time", Claire always keeps a schedule handy, ready to be consulted or filled. It is like an extension of her body, almost an organ. Sometimes, that little notebook seems to pulse. It reflects her optimized life, full of work and social events that can be booked a full year or more in advance. During the time of ecstasy, the summer, it is not impossible that we have to book a moment to go for a walk, maybe the following week. There is no room for intimacy in her schedule (which need not be physical), that unproductive activity. Her social life is much more nourished than mine, which does not represent a great merit... after all, I am a writer. That does not mean that she is less lonely (it might even explain it), as many of the people we encounter in those events we attend. Not even I can penetrate that loneliness she confuses with independence. Eventually, schedules, like budgets, are the best way to express priorities. And our priorities are different. For instance, in relation to family or work.

Claire considers her family as a set of adult individuals who share the same last names, almost an administrative issue. They must take charge of their own responsibilities, there is no reason whatsoever why she would have to mind them or their troubles. She has a hard time understanding the importance my family has for me and considers an exaggeration that I should consider them a "source of unconditional love".

As many of the people in her circle, Claire works a lot and is proud of it. "I have been working real hard" or "I have a lot of work to do" are her top favorite phrases. She often works on Saturday and always takes with her some work materials, just in case. Thanks to this dedication, she has a successful career and is on the way of becoming an expert in her field. Her professional life projects solidly into the future and with it, she contributes to the development of her already developed country. And that reminds me of something: she doesn't like me to say "developed" for it is a word that "crystalizes the existing domination relations". As I don't want to be a semantic oppressor, I correct myself: her country of a high per capita income.

Claire's interest for politics was one of the things that most thrilled me when I met her. For whatever reasons, in the town where she lives (which is not her hometown, as none is), she helps the ones in need with determination, and that is of priceless value to me. She is a vegetarian and has a strong ecological awareness. She practices quite a tough, progressive, anticapitalistic discourse, nourished by the use of strong words such as "resistance", but which does not prevent her from adoring New York and secretly craving to live there some day. She does not fall, at least not in my presence, in the naivety of proposing socialism as an alternative. To my disappointment, we haven't developed political conversation. Perhaps she is not really interested or perhaps she considers me an interlocutor of little value. After all, I am merely a liberal and, perhaps, my belief in equality of opportunity may strike her as somewhat naïve or insufficient. When we finally establish a political conversation, she doesn't like for us to be lying down or "in positions where one may be symbolically predominant over the other", which translates as one being standing and the other, sitting. She believes most people are not prepared to vote. Because, as everybody knows, the only ones prepared to vote are the progressists.

As any good progressive woman, she justly repudiates nationalism and all notions of male dominance. She does it with devotion, detecting them and pointing at them all the time. Sometimes exaggeratedly, as if she had the urgent need to be politically correct. Almost everything is nationalism from her standpoint: signaling a cultural difference, my Argentine soccer T-shirt, and the humble peasants who celebrate a national holiday by wearing typical clothes. She doesn't understand love for one's own home-place, which needn't translate as negative attitudes toward others. Almost everything is, besides, machismo: to open a door for her, to dissent on machismo with a woman, and some female occupations with a marked gender in their naming. Not only does she believe (like me) that women have the same rights as men, but also that men and women are exactly the same. Any excuse is good to qualify me as a nationalist or bigot, although she could end up admitting later, once storms are over and I demand explanations from her, that no, I am not.

The micro-rules network does not restrict itself to our physical positions for political debate. On the contrary, it expands entropically to all corners of our life together. Some of the micro-rules, it is fair to say, have their positive side even, like the compulsory nature of doing something on Saturday nights. Others have the color of extravagance, especially during the limited summer-time, like having to stay outside the house until night falls. This is not about general statements, but nonnegotiable laws. I could enumerate the specifics of Clairecian legislation until invading the whole story, but there would be no point. To sum up, all these micro-rules together turn out to be decisively exhausting.

The regulatory swamps where Claire shambles shows nothing but her inflexibility, her structured way of being. She believes that having an explanation for something means being right. Period. This leads her to an incapacity for admitting mistakes and,

consistently, offering apologies. She prefers to leave counterpoints unresolved or to accept both parts to be right, although positions may contradict themselves. Only as a last resource, will she accept to offer an apology, always after me and never by her own initiative. When she does so, it is almost never genuinely (I couldn't demand so much from her), but rather a practical resource to finalize an argument that she considers too long. She loves, or needs, to be in control. She acknowledges that she "hates surprises" and that in the past, she has been called "a dominant woman". Her love switch allows her (she thinks it allows her) to decide on her feelings, which can change abruptly with just one click, as if they were a lamp.

Sometimes, her ideas about privacy and intimacy confuse me. Sex doesn't mean much to her, something I began to understand the day we first had it. Instead, sharing a bed (literally, sleeping) sparks in her a much more intimate experience. She goes running several times a week but would not let me go with her for "it is a very personal and private moment". She doesn't like to have photographs taken. She practices yoga and meditation, judging by the results, insufficiently. She has trouble, which doesn't surprise me, sleeping.

Nothing from what has been said prevents her from believing that she is an open-minded woman. And maybe she is, according to her ideas on open-mindedness, limited to having a politically progressive discourse and the exercising of sexual freedom. However, these ideas do not include flexibility, or tolerance, or humbleness at other ways of seeing the world or of doing things, however small and insignificant they may be.

A complicated woman, Claire is.

IV

I believe Claire suffers from a disassociation. It is the conflict between her reasons in charge and her heart, subdued. Everything to prevent the inconveniences of suffering. However, her reasons know that it is no good to live without a heart, so they seek to emulate it in a way so artificial that it would minimize the risks. They erect a façade to the image and looks of her heart which does not demand from them to yield control. This unstable castle of artifices generates a collateral curiosity: Claire tends to see causes where there are consequences. Then, she confuses temperament with passion, courtesy with kindness or brutality with honesty.

The term lays bare this conflict entirely and that is why it hurts her so. Nothing from everything that happened between us, which was a lot, produced such a deep impact in her as the only time when I mentioned it. It defines solidly the way in which her reasons steer her behavior, contrary to her heart. The heart which chose me and with which I can still encounter at times. That is why a part of Claire brings along the memory of the term in a recurrent manner: it is her heart asking for help.

Then, in the only manner possible, with my heart ahead of me, I go in search of hers, without any calculations or speculations. I accept my defects, my mistakes, my faults. I become flexible, beyond the reasonable. I run risks and expose my feelings, now loaded with contradictions. I become inconsistent and often feel an idiot. I doubt. And in every false move, her reasons punish me and do not hesitate to humiliate me.

V

I am willing to love Claire, despite everything, forever. I know it and she knows it. But her reasons won't allow it, and they manage to make her heart distance itself more day after day. Meanwhile, the term inside her moves ahead, over me, and I am unable to control it. The situation, I admit it, is beyond me. I wither, weaken and fade. She perceives it, reproaches it and —it couldn't be otherwise— blames me. In my place, she would have left herself a long time ago, perhaps on the very day of our first quarrel; or perhaps on the second, as she partially did. But I am not like her, and I am not willing to be. So I resist, futurelessly, against the evidence. I not only say I am not giving up, but also do I not do it. I will not be the one to abandon her heart. She will be the one to do it, in the end, when she leaves me for good.

The Picaresque Report

*To my mom, the literature teacher,
and my dad, the engineer.*

I could say that this is the story of the first engendering —and its death, maybe?— of the Picaresque Report, a literary genre born by the shores of the Rio de la Plata. But I could also say that it is the story of its creators, two students of the Engineering Department of the University of Buenos Aires, pushed by fate to the very limits of existing literature. In neither of the cases, would I be straying from the truth.

A short biography of the students becomes indispensable. Coming from the margins of the city of Buenos Aires originally, they could commute up to two hours to get to the main headquarters of the University's Department, located in the nostalgic district of San Telmo, the ideal setting for a sad story like this one⁷. It is possible that on these long trips they nourished their literary knowledge. Besides, it is proven fact that they acquired a great deal of knowledge on the city's public transportation system, poured some years later in a few informal writings. The daily dealings with the suburbs made them surly, flexible and daring.

To be fair, it is necessary to acknowledge that these students did not lack aptitudes for science but rather the interest to display them. Moreover, some former classmates have qualified them as "rather good students". This elusive behavior is not, however, incomprehensible. After all, people should not devote themselves to something only because they are good at it. In fact, they don't even have to because they want to. And the reasons for that can be many, such as a sense of duty, the pleasure for rebellion or the aversion to boredom.

In any case, these two students decided to innovate in the field of Science, by injecting a good dose of Literature in the precise, static and dull Scientific Reports. In this way, inspired in the classic Picaresque Novel, they gave birth to what they entitled the Picaresque Report.

The Picaresque Novel is a rich literary genre developed in post-medieval Spain during what was called The Golden Age. It was born as a satire to the narratives of knighthood (and the society who had given them their origin) from previous centuries. The protagonist of this literary genre is the rogue, a character of low social status, with no ethics or morals, seeking to survive at any cost. Its story entails a criticism to the society that surrounds him and, eventually, condemns him. When required to choose a title of reference among Picaresque Novels, the genre's creators did not hide their preference for *Justina, the Rogue*, over other more famous titles such as *The Life and Adventures of Lazarillo of Tormes* or *The Life and Adventures of Buscón, the Witty Spaniard*.

How it is possible for two Engineering students to be so up to date on this information, remains a huge mystery. Most probably, it must have been some form of error, that event as undesirable as potentially enriching.

A linear analysis could lead us to thinking that these students should have signed up for a Literature Major instead of Engineering. The argument appears solid and rational, but does not contemplate that artistic creation sometimes follows mysterious roads. Or not so much. The odds are that a student from the Literature Major will never know (fortunately for them) what a Scientific Report is and, therefore, it seems difficult for them to picture its conceptual evolution.

Almost certainly, the students' weariness and boredom when it came to producing the Scientific Reports were the bases on which the Picaresque Report was built. However, these arguments deemed insufficient when it came to exposing and defending the new creation to the academic authorities, a moment that sooner or later would come. They then devoted themselves to a major conceptual development that would justify the birth of a new literary genre.

It is important to record the fact that the students decided to focus on the Department's Scientific Reports, based on experiments whose results were known beforehand. They called this case "special" and postponed the case including all other Scientific Reports, which they called "general".

The traditional Department's Scientific Reports, they reasoned, were doomed to extinction, by repeating results that were well-known to everyone. And it was understandable for that to be the case. Therefore, they deduced, it was necessary to add some additional and peculiar value that would allow them to submit to the natural call par excellence: their survival.

After an extenuating creative work process at the southern banks of the aforementioned river, fed almost exclusively based on the meat sandwiches sold there, prepared under questionable sanitary conditions, the students defined the main characteristics of a Picaresque Report, inspired in the general guidelines of the Picaresque Novel:

— First person narrative. The author of the experiment and of the Picaresque Report is the protagonist, who impersonates the role of the rogue (from now onwards the Picaresque Reporter). The complementary characters, generally the protagonist's accomplices, can be some other student-rogues or, even better, the very instruments used for the experiment, like a test tube, a pipette or a glass of water. Naturally, these instruments are to be personified and with this, to give a neverending field of development to the protagonist's imagination. Only to give an example let's say: "Julia, the pipette, better late than never, poured her contents on the fearful preparation which still remained anonymous".

— Profile of the Picaresque Reporter. In order to highlight the impact of the critique and pay homage to its mother genre, the Picaresque Novel, it is recommendable to include some information, real or not, on the protagonist. Its questionable or

nonexistent morals must be made clear, as its marginal origin and its lack of hope in a better future for him and for everyone. An antihero that goes against the ideal of a student who gets the best grades thanks to the production of a report as correct as empty. Someone who is not afraid to say the truth because, in the end, he doesn't care about the consequences. The Picaresque Reporter is not here to save his readers, but to drag them into the mud in which he is already submerged.

— Prose as the form of writing, with elements taken from the Scientific Report, particularly when it comes to displaying results, and from the chronicle, as we are talking about the chronological narrative of an experiment.

— Precision. Leaving aside the unbearable degree of imagination to which the readers are to be submitted, the accuracy and clarity of the experiment results are nonnegotiable. Not to do so would turn the Picaresque Report into a story. Not that such is not the case, but that also it must be a Scientific Report. However, these results will mainly be the lead shelter from the inevitable attacks of the representatives of established order. It is very important to take into account that if results are not correct, the Picaresque Report will not get a passing mark. It is also true that, if correct, they won't either. But the difference will be huge: an injustice will have taken place.

— Critique. Once the correct results ensured, the Picaresque Report relies on an open field where to give free reign to the satirical tone. Science, professors, institutions, society, and even the international economic system are some of the favorite target topics. Critique need not be moralizing, so that it can reach everything and everyone, including the very protagonist and its accomplices. Irony, wittiness, irreverence and, above all, intelligent humor are the recommended resources.

— Determinism. Despite the creative purposes of a reforming and even socially progressive nature of the Picaresque Reporter, the end is always the same: repression and failure. Almost a prophecy on the fate of the genre-creating students.

Equipped with the necessary theoretical background, the two students wrote the first Picaresque Report in history, entitled “A Passion of Tuning Forks”. It narrated the experiment known as “Resonance between two tuning sports”, whose report is presented by the dozen, every semester, by the students of Physics I (Class of Dr. Carlos Muslera). Foot note: a tuning fork is an instrument in the shape of a hairpin that is used to emit sounds (vibrations) to a known frequency, very popular when tuning musical instruments.

The report they made had sixty seven pages, while the average Scientific Report settles the matter in only eight.

The piece opened with a citation by Alejandro Dolina, which entailed a dedication: “The final question (how much should the kilo of rice be sold for?) becomes insignificant when put next to other queries which are not put on paper but very wisely suggested by professor Frascarelli, 'Is there a meaning to life? is there a purpose in the universe? do we comply, without our being aware of it, with some divine or diabolic plan?’”

As a general structure, the narrative had the traditional sequence of an experiment, but the plot went far beyond, to the point of becoming a tale of knighthood characteristics. In it, the students (that is, the Picaresque Reporter) included themselves in the skin of a character called Ñu, a merely petty thief, a position from which they developed the narrative. The tuning forks, in their own right, adopted proper names and personalities, and turned into protagonists of the second order. One of the tuning forks turned into beautiful Sharon, while the other took the form of unstoppable Alejandro. Naturally, before starting with the adventures proper, Ñu presented his painful personal past, his role in the story (for the least honorable of reasons, he became a kind of squire to Alejandro), and his first series of criticisms to the other characters, to the society that surrounded him (with clear allusions to present society) and, out of mere tradition, to the knighthood tone of the story itself. The formalities of the genre once established, the action (and the experiment) finally began. Sharon was abducted by a disagreeable dragon of mucus-like skin, coincidentally under the same name as the subject's TA, and was taken to the very core of the Unitary Kingdom of Muslera. There, she was exposed to the most terrible tortures, the highlight of which were the long dissertations of incomprehensible mathematical displays of the evil albeit informed King Carlos, aimed at having her reveal the deepest secrets of her own Realm. Naturally, Alejandro decided to go to the rescue of his beloved, an action that demanded the overcoming of innumerable obstacles (the process of the experiment, documented in the addenda spreadsheets). In the most critical moment of the story, one of those obstacles seemed undefeatable and put Alejandro on his knees, to the point of making him choose between abandoning her beloved or giving up his own life in vain (the detail of the scene, a mere step of the experiment, made a masterpiece metaphoric allusion to the "vocational crisis" that engineering students undergo when hard sciences overwhelm them). Our hero, of course, decided to give up his own life and with that, he actually saved her. The end, a happy one for them, reunited Alejandro and Sharon in an eternal love (a resonance). Ñu, on the contrary, went back to his life of hardship after, from his viewpoint, his contributions had not been sufficiently acknowledged.

It is possible that the artistic value of the piece wasn't too clear (or perhaps it was excessively clear), since Ema Gasparini, Physics PhD. and Chief Associate Teacher, summarized her appreciation on the work as "an utter disrespect, a supreme insolence, a joke of the worst taste". The furious tone seemed to confirm the inexistence of metaphor or in-between-line messages. As she held her head with one hand and shook the report with the other, she yelled again that she had never seen "anything like it", a comment that the students acknowledged with huge satisfaction while trying to disregard it as they considered it excessive flattering, and said: "leave it at that, please, leave it at that".

The students posited to Ms. Gasparini a brief genesis of the new literary genre and its theoretical foundations, but she gazed at them with puzzled eyes. In astonishment, she wandered in a loud voice if "all of that was true" or if, instead, it was "a continuity out of our cheek". Cornered by the students' contentions, she decided to close the

controversy by demanding them to “re-do the report in the traditional manner”, and threaten them with having them fail the subject or being recipients of disciplinary sanctions.

All things taken, from a resultative perspective, it is possible that the students had made a mistake by not attaching an appendix that would develop the concept of Picaresque Report and give context to their new creation. However, the authors considered that “a piece must impose itself on its own strength”, and that “like humor, art need not be explained”.

Cornered, the students finally gave up, betraying themselves. They elaborated a grey report, abandoned their creative ambitions and followed the path that obtaining Bachelor’s Degrees demanded. One of them got a good position in Germany afterwards. Of the other, track was lost, though some have described him as seen “wasting time in the first or second ring of Greater Buenos Aires”.

Men shall pass but good ideas always find, sooner or later, a free spirit that shall insist to bring them out into the light.

The Formula of Success

[Professor Armando Sanguinetti, Doctor in Engineering, comes into the classroom where he will teach the first class of his course in Probability and Statistics, already a classic, at the Engineering Department of the University of Buenos Aires. He wears, of course, a red and blue checkered shirt, black jeans and a pair of very wornout shoes. His figure has been damaged throughout years of sedentary life and apparently his eyesight too, as he wears a pair of glasses with huge magnification. Besides, he seems to have some trouble with one of his eyes as, before he starts talking, he must adjust his eyelid a couple of times (with his ring finger, after salivating on it), an adjustment he will keep on doing during the whole introduction and later, during the whole class. After the general greeting, he begins with the introduction.]

I often like to start this course by asking what is mathematics used for.

[Sanguinetti glides his eyes over the class, inviting the students to respond. Some of them, timidly, contribute some responses that work as cues for him to carry on.]

As you can see, most of the answers describe tangible applications, such as building a bridge, launching a satellite or keeping the accounting of a company. Or the studies of other sciences based on mathematics, such as Physics, Electronics or Informatics. The answers are correct from a technical standpoint, but sometimes correctness is the best way to hide truth.

The true answer is much simpler: mathematics is used for understanding. It is all about having a tool that will allow us to organize concepts, make them interact, see what happens with them and draw conclusions.

[Sanguinetti makes a pause in order to let students digest the ideas he has just poured.]

Let's see how this applies when it comes to think about the famous and generally elusive "formula of success".

Each day, legions of people in error seek success, that ephemeral outcome. They believe, mistakenly, that it will take them to the so-much-promoted happiness. And they do it with such stubbornness that it becomes impossible to suggest them otherwise.

The most efficient and improbable way of hitting the target consists in not making mistakes. A more human-like alternative is to make few mistakes and, above all, make them quickly. Quick mistakes save valuable energy and allow for a soon return to the road of success.

Summing up, since we are unable to prevent all those people from seeking success, we shall try to help them find it quickly. In order to do so, we shall provide "the formula of success". And when I say formula, I mean formula, not blabbering.

Let us start by agreeing on the meaning of the phrase “formula of success”. What we understand by “formula” is the symbolic structuring of factors resulting in a repeatable outcome. And by “success”, the consecution of a pre-established objective assuming that time and form are submerged in it.

To achieve success, it is only necessary to develop four fundamental factors: Capacity Effort, Creativity and Courage. It is clear that if we maximize our quantities of them, we will improve in the achievement of objectives, while if we minimize them, we shall obtain little or none of them. For this to be useful, it is necessary to find not only the factors that contribute to success (well-known by so many people) but also their combination, in such a way that we optimize results.

The first thing we must know is that two of the factors, Capacity and Effort, contribute to the outcome in a linear way; while the other two, Creativity and Courage, do so exponentially.

[Sanguinetti goes towards the end of the room, picks a black marker and, with his back to the class, gets ready to write on the board. The students make use of the pause to exchange incredulous gazes.]

Let us suppose the following nomenclature:

CA = Capacity

EF = Effort

CR = Creativity

CO = Courage

SU = Success

exp. = “exponential”, i.e. the function that multiplies a value by itself as many times as the exponent that appears with it.

A possible formula that expresses the previous could look like the following:

$$SU = (CA + EF) \text{ exp. } (CR + CO)$$

[Sanguinetti looks at the class again, but leaves his hand pointing vaguely at the “formula of success” he has reached. He then proceeds.]

This first version of the formula allows us to demonstrate some phenomena that we have always hinted at with our intuition, but can now formally appreciate with clarity.

Capacity and Effort are important and necessary, but linear, predictable and restricted. Creativity and Courage are the ones that contribute some vertigo to the achievement of an objective.

Maximal Capacity and Effort with null Creativity and Courage may reach farther than null Capacity and Effort with maximum Creativity and Courage. Though not very far.

At similar levels of all, we have various possible situations. If these levels are low, Capacity and Effort make the biggest contribution. If these levels are high, Creativity and Courage do so. Obviously, if values are medium, then factors contribute to success in a more balanced manner.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this formula do not end here, but I think we have already grasped the functioning mechanism, the most important part of a process of understanding.

[Sanguinetti lowers his hand and leaves it at a rest, adopting a much more relaxed bodily posture.]

Generally, Education and Work focus on developing Capacity and Effort, to the relative detriment of Creativity and Courage. In the case of Education, most university subjects have to do with increasing Capacity in several technical areas, by means of Effort. This renders effectively and positively in an improvement of both. However, although it is possible to find some exercises through which one may exercise Creativity, I can't remember even one in which the explicit aim was to develop Courage.

At the same time, I dare say Courage is more important than Creativity, as its presence renders indispensable for the latter to have some value. If we assume that Creativity consists in conceiving new and unexplored ways, sometimes risky ones, Courage is the only fuel that may set us in motion in order to explore them.

For this reason, in my free time, I have been working on a little book about "Strategies, Techniques and Exercises to Develop Courage".

[Sanguinetti pauses almost unperceptively, perhaps to measure the level of reaction or interest in his student. Then, he turns to the board, to where he points with his marker once more.]

Therefore, we could perfect our formula in the following way:

$$SU = (CA + EF) \exp. (CR \exp. CO)$$

A possible follow-up step in the development of the formula would be defining a scale for each of the factors, some objective criteria to their settling, and the incorporation of adjustment factors in order to obtain a comfortable range of results (for example, from 1 to 10).

In this simple way we have reached the "formula of success". Now, thanks to mathematics, we understand better. But let us not betray ourselves, conclusions are only fruitful if they lead to new questions.

[With his unequivocal body language, Sanguinetti brings the introduction to an end. Some few lukewarm claps are heard from one of the corners of the room. He clears the board, after this he looks at the students again. He wonders, rhetorically, what probability is, and begins to expand on the subject.]

Final Notes

You can help me a lot if you:

- Write to tell me with blunt honesty what you thought of the book. Undoubtedly, both positive and negative reviews will help me improve in the future.
- Contribute with donations to my literary work and its future financing (see the book's first page).
- Pass the book around.
- Share your favorite stories, quotes or pictures in the social media. You can find the stories in my blog.
- Write a review in platforms like GoodReads.
- Get me in contact with some publishing house who could be interested in my books.
- Help me by translating some short stories to your native language.

Other books I wrote:

- Punto Rosalía
- Una aventura miserable
- Esto no va a ser fácil
- Sucesión de despertares en una ciudad desconocida
- Libro del futuro

All of them can be downloaded (for free) at my website www.jmguerrera.com.ar

Cover Illustration

The author of the cover is Mariano Jofré, great friend and illustrator. His Instagram account is [@jofremariano](#)

English Version

The author of the English translation is Natalia Barry, technical and literary translator and performer, specialized in art and literature. Her website is: [nataliabarry.com.ar](#)

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“Thank the flame for its light, but do not forget the lampholder whose foot, standing in the shade, holds it constant and patient.”
—Rabindranath Tagore

To my readers, for their support.

To my sister Mer, for her proofreading of all texts, but also for helping me find the depth that could be in them. I admire her honesty and courage to face truth, her own truth in the first place. I recommend her blog *Última estación: fideos con queso* (Last Station: Noodles with Cheese) and her short-story books.

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To everyone who helped me in the process of creation of this book.

To everyone who hasn't helped me yet, but soon will.

Brief Biography

“...there is no nakedness more genuine and terrible than artistic expression —if authentic— since every work of art is an autobiography, not in the literal sense of the word, but in the deepest, most serious one: a Van Gogh tree is Van Gogh himself; it is his own, naked soul among us.”
—Ernesto Sábato

If Sábato is right, you will get to know me more by reading the stories in this book than by the few lines that follow. Still, I will write them, as my most committed advisors have insisted me to do by saying “cut the crap with Sábato and Van Gogh, people wanna know the facts”.

I have always written, ever since I learned how to, somewhat in 1989. I started publishing a lot later, let's say when I was eighteen. I first did it very informally, with humble photocopies, then in a local district newspaper, and later on a couple of blogs. Between 2016 and 2019, I self-published the Spanish editions of *Punto Rosalía*, *Una aventura miserable*, *Esto no va ser fácil* and *Sucesión de despertares en una ciudad desconocida*.

I never took part in any writing workshops, which may explain the results in this book, whatever they may be. Not that I am against them, much on the contrary, but whenever I have time for literature, I prefer to devote it to writing or reading.

I am not against editing with a publishing house, but the effort of finding one is a project in itself, a burdensome one, not too related to literature most of the time. Fortunately —or by determination— there are alternative roads.

A long time ago, when I published through photocopies, I used to take part in literary contests. I don't do that anymore for a number of reasons: the tedious processes involved in participating and my instinctive, unjustified distrust to juries.

For this reason —or because I am not that good— I haven't won any awards or acknowledgements of any sort. This is of no importance to me, but is sometimes mentioned in biographies.

I don't make a living out of literature. That facilitates the writing and publishing with huge freedom, without any conditions.

So, finally, here are the facts. I was born in the district of Palermo, Buenos Aires City, but grew up in the suburbs, in my neighborhood, San Andrés. There, I attended Colegio Agustiniano (elementary and high school), Tres de Febrero Club (where I got certified as Life-Guard), the public Library Diego Pombo and the community association Vecinos de San Andrés. Later, I got a Bachelor's Degree in Informatics Engineering at the University of Buenos Aires. In parallel, I read the first year at the Political Science Major of the same university. After graduating, I funded two small

companies with my friend Mariano: Glidea and Drupal Soul. In the last years, I have been able to travel a lot, mainly to Latin America, Europe, Asia and North America.

Last and most important, I am extremely happy of being able to write, publish and share this book with you.

Bureaucracy

One of the positive aspects of self-publishing is that it can give itself to bureaucracy in its well-deserved place: the worst place, not at the very end but just before it.

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Translators' warning

What is a good translation? My belief is there is nothing as such. Not generically. Not by definition. In the same way, there is no good or bad literature *per se*. What could define something like that? Of course there is literature I like and literature I don't like, translations included, and I could certainly define why. I could therefore say there is a set of descriptors that define what I like in a text or, what is equivalent, what makes the text "good"... for me... today. And what I like—like all aesthetics for all humankind—has changed over time. Literature, translation in it, is always immersed in a period, in a place, in a people, a culture, a paradigm surrounding it. Then again, how to talk about a "good" or "bad" translation *per se*.

In the same way as medieval art would never have been conceived as "good" without God's representation in it, the general impression of a good translation today seems to be linked to the notion of meaning. Translation cannot be considered good if it omits or miscommunicates the slightest of meanings by the so-called author, if it lacks the so-called "faithful rendition" (as if meaning were univocal, on the other hand, faithfulness straightforward). No reader "should" like a translation that sins in that way in the contemporary world.

My belief is a translation should not be focused on meaning alone. Of course it should not disregard it but there is a wider intention for the translation to aim at. There is a wider idea of what should be understood as "a faithful rendition". I am not writing here in defense of translators or translations. I am certainly not writing to defend mine. I am not taking a stance, either, for benevolent generalized subjectivism. I write these words in the hope of expanding a notion on what a translation can be, particularly today, particularly in Latin America and particularly into English.

I would like to reflect upon the translation of this book, in the hope that readers will read the work through that lens. The writings of a traveler, a viewer on things already from the outside, Juan's literature is a literature of otherness from the start. In this second stage, in a second language, I have tried for the translation to preserve that most of all.

If there is something of a general imagery of what "good" translation is—at the least, an enjoyable piece of writing inviting to be read, coincident with what "good" literature is—all of that was pursued here. All of that, plus the intention not to betray Juan's attempt at otherness.

My contention is "good" translation *per se* does not exist. There are, if I may say so, good translators. Those would be hardworking authors aiming at "good" literature by using the words of others, using another layer of otherness. And in the case of this book, another traveler in another travel. I hope your eyes place a layer of your own and integrate intentions as a whole, and without any evilness other than the intended originally—and imperceptibly—by Juan.

Translators' relation with the text

When I first received the sixteen stories comprising *La maldad imperceptible*, it was the South American Summer of 2019. I had met Juan Manuel some ten years before, when we worked together in a web-design project, and he studied English at my classes, and we had shared many hours of talk. A friendship had evolved, but we hadn't stayed in touch.

To receive the work of a friend giving his first steps in literature —because, yes, first steps may take ten long years in the literary world—can be disruptive in so many ways. Plus, to receive it to be translated into English can be a scary enough experience at the least. So many times had I kindly dismissed work proposals in the sole pursuit of not losing friendships that I almost said no immediately. No, I had not read his literature in Spanish so far (except for a few fragments online) and yes, I would certainly do so —thoroughly— before any decisions.

I sat down ready for the worse. However, I found myself enjoying a piece of witty, pace-changing, attractive literature, which was easy to relate to. Juan's writing not only depicted our Argentine world in a loving yet complex way, but also filled words with humor, the type of humor we like down here, the acrid one, that helps us survive by laughing at ourselves. I felt like getting involved in the project. He wanted to reach a wider readership. Yes, it would have to be in English. Yes, he was self-publishing. Yes, an English version would definitely need proofreading by native speakers. And yes, better be someone involved in the world of letters.

So many times had I kindly dismissed work proposals on great material in the sole pursuit of not losing track of my freelance working hours that I almost said no then. However, I was just writing a piece on translation into a second language, so-called *traducción inversa*. In most cases, I claimed in my paper, it is a call to action for the translator, in the words of Lawrence Venuti (1995), the same who insists that “faithful rendition” is defined partly by the illusion of transparency. My work would replicate Juan's call to action for his literature, a very Argentine-like call: of self-publishing author and freelance translator. Yes, I would find volunteering English-speaking proofreaders. Yes, I would get the English version ready before Juan flew to European Spring and yes, the first edition of *Imperceptible Evil* in English would see the light in July. It would certainly be a rush among other work-projects but I was willing to hurry and the deadline would be met (perhaps with some room for improvement later).

After two face to face meetings and about a dozen voice messages and phone calls, with nourishing discussions on what some specific word or line meant (as in the different hues of “chauvinism” understood by Claire in “The Term”), and after a final meeting to allow me to share my decisions on the reviews by native speakers, the work went into print. Distribution started in Berlin's alternative scene of bookstores, pubs, beaches and parks. Then, exactly a year later, I was far off finishing my postgraduate course in Literary Translation, when Juan came back, ready for more.

Yes, a year had gone by and, bly me, how time flies. Yes, he had lots of feedback from his new readers in the different formats of social media. Yes, some had said the translation was “good” and some had called it other things (or, what is equivalent, some had liked it and some hadn’t). My translator’s attempt of great care in not “domesticating” the translated text had been appreciated. For instance, where some words were meant to sound strange in Spanish and proofreaders had expressed lack of naturalness in English, but I had found it deliberate (as in the recurrences of the adverb for the similarities between both characters of “The Secrets”, in Spanish *lejana en casi todo*, in English the “almost-in-everything” adverb) I had refused to make changes. I wanted the reader to be reminded they were reading a translated work, to bear in mind the text had been born in another layer of otherness, perhaps the very first one, in another language. Yet, some comments had been quite straightforward on the need for more “flow” in the reading. What could that be? The exchange in social media was not willing to go that far (as is often the case in networking and translation in general). I would concede for translation not to be a discomfort and farfetchedness. Yes, room for improvement had meant time for improvement we had not had. And even being a detractor of something like “good” translations myself, I could see that.

Juan was writing to me this Summer for he was about to have the work reviewed, and would I be ok with that. My response led to an exchange of long emails on the nature of translation, authorship, call to action, and the non-existence of “good or evil” in words (at least, not without the examples to sustain it). The result: of course I would review my own work, but not without direct collaboration from a native speaker. This time, not volunteering his work. So that was when Michael came along.

By January 2020, I laid out a timetable with deadlines for my contrasting of the English and Spanish versions, and Michael’s reading of a new English version with “better flow” of the language (or what I thought that to be, at least). Both rounds of reviews led to changes mostly in language, structures and various forms of smaller adjustments from punctuation to word choice. We shared nourishing debates on the precise hue of terms like “nagging” versus “indelible” or “dude” versus “man”. There were talks about the need or not for footnotes in a piece like Juan’s (as a result, they were reduced to half their number) or about a consistent criteria for contractions in English according to what they evoked (and the result was a detailed Manual of Style in which examples, and their reasons, were compiled).

It was also a relief to be able to discuss the stories I considered to be rounder in effect, more harmonious in rhythm and pace, better achieved (both in initial version and first-edition translation), to discuss what to change and what not to, to share intentions and criteria. Knowing that Michael came after, I dared structures and words I had perhaps avoided before. I took more risk (like in adding a new version to my list of possible names for Non-flame and finally agreeing to change the intermediate one from With-no-flame to Flame-less) and became more daring (seeking humorous effects, as in “the deliberately indifference-based relationship with my new neighbor” in “Non-

flame”; or poetic effects, as in “with my heart ahead of me, I go in search of hers” in “The Term”). Many times I relied on Michael’s native ear for precise, accurate color in direct speech (as in the words used by Gino’s Argentine informal slang in “Train to Zurich”), the right cultural term (as in university jargon present in “The Picaresque Report”), or his wonderfully good eye for (sic) unpublishable subjectless sentences, a feature I had not been strict enough to look for earlier. And finally, I will confess to the finding of three of the ominous translation “omissions” that so many times render a translation to be considered a “bad” one.

In terms of reading analysis, Michael’s views reminded me of some forgotten first impressions (for instance, having exchanged with Juan on why the title of the book for the first edition). Michael observed how “Imperceptible Evil” had a kind of foundational nature in its tone, which could be tracked in the selection as a whole. A story as window to the author’s intention, a nerve-wracking character in its annoyance to his roommates that would replicate the intention of most stories toward their readership, in both languages. If an excessive fluency, a normalcy, were achieved in the tone of “My Aunt is a Vampire”, “The Picaresque Report”, “Non-flame” or “The Applause”, at times, a bit of that annoying eloquence, the precise hue, the sarcasm would have been lost.

This first group of stories managed a delicate tone clearly related to Argentine idiosyncrasy, as shown eloquently in the words of the Argentines kept in Spanish and explained later in “The Applause”(“Vamo’ redondeando, querido”); or the words with similar tone but translated in “Train to Zurich” (“Who the f- are you?” for “¿Y vos, quién carajo sos?”). Perhaps the most difficult to classify in these groupings, “Train to Zurich”, with its changing scenes and atmosphere, made for a difficult-to-adjust tone in general. Clearly, the most modified story from first to second editions.

In a second group, more related to love and romance, we would include stories like “Recurrent Lovers”, “Successions of Awakenings in a City Unknown”, “The Term”, “The Secrets” and “The Hotel”. Perhaps more subtle in pursue of style, these were clearer in effects such as the recurrence and repetition mentioned before. “The Saddest Day of My Life” and “The Duel”, without the romance-related plot, would be in this group, as well.

Coinciding with the local hue of the first group is “The Formula of Success” with its semantic field of the national Argentine university we both, Juan and myself, know so well. Other hints at this were present in the perception of “Imperceptible Evil” narrator (in the “Marxist hordes populating” the university and the “sluggish administrative staff”) and in the environment created for “The Picaresque Report”. These stories reminded me of how often I had felt uncomfortable at reading depictions of the Argentine world in a language that tried hard at becoming standardized for publishing. The so-called Argentine variant has so much of the Argentine nature in it: grey yet lively, dry yet spiced with the structures of romance language Spanish. Juan achieved a nice balance of humor, abstraction, romance, light and darkness, scientific

critique and sweet-melting tenderness, and kept the color of *porteño* along the way. A *porteña* myself, I was hoping to preserve that, even in English.

Finally, stories like “Dream in Uppsala” or “In that World” stood by themselves in language choice, ambience, plot and so-called effect. They would also have to stand on their own in translation. They would include themselves in the fine thread that sewed the stories together in their Borgenean word choices as in “undecipherable”, “normalcy” (in its lexical variants), “as always”, or direct allusions like the “scale model” of a city in which the narrator is submerged, or in resources such as the already mentioned recurrences (Borges himself quoted in one of the epigraphs), sided with Dolinean and Castanedan references, too.

Both Michael and I had our favorite stories, for sure. Or better said, we discussed for and against the best and worst achieved scenes. We had our stances on the need for more or less cultural references (and whether necessary or not in English). Details like these would lead to pages and pages so I will not go further.

I will round it off by saying I am not quite sure the feedback received could be changed by any of these points. Neither could I be sure that some other proofreaders would have come up with these changes instead of others. What I can assure is that this second version is better achieved in many senses. And, more importantly, preserving the translation direction I had laid out originally. Yes, it is still a piece that reminds of its conception in a foreign language. And yes, it “flows” better in English without losing that touch. And it is my call to action to the place of Latin American literature in non-Spanish reading realms. I hope it can reach readers as a continuation of that call to action.

Natalia Barry

Notes

[←1]

TN: the Marxist Party is very popular in some departments of the University of Buenos Aires and has a lot of followers among students.

[←2]

TN: non-teaching staff are often criticized due to the amount of bureaucracy often required by errands.

[←3]

TN: a hot drink, equivalent to a herbal infusion, popular in Argentina and other countries in South America, prepared with the herb *yerba mate* and often drunk with very hot water, especially on rainy or cold days.

[←4]

TN: *churros*, the popular pastries originally from Spain, are often filled in Argentina with *dulce de leche*, a typical Latin American caramel spread made from sweetened stirred milk.

[←5]

TN: "people from the port", name given to Buenos Aires Port- City dwellers within Argentina.

[←6]

TN: a humble district in the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

[←7]

TN: San Telmo is located in the historical quarter of the city, being its foundation site, and the birthplace of tango, it is usually considered a nostalgic part of town.