

ALL RETURN

by

Juan Alonso Rodriguez Romero

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

December 2022

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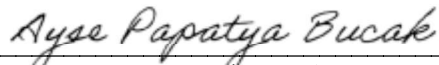
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Ayse Papatya Bucak, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

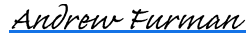


Ayse Papatya Bucak, MFA.  
Thesis Advisor



Sika Dagbovie-Mullins (Nov 22, 2022 12:45 EST)

Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, Ph.D.



Andrew Furman (Nov 22, 2022 14:30 EST)

Andrew Furman, Ph.D.



Oliver Buckton (Nov 22, 2022 15:22 EST)

Oliver Buckton, Ph.D.  
Chair, Department English



Michael Horswell, Ph.D.  
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts  
And Letters



Robert W. Stackman Jr. (Nov 23, 2022 12:01 EST)

Robert W. Stackman Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean, Graduate College

November 28, 2022

Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most sincere gratitude to my committee members Dr. Dagbovie-Mullins and Dr. Furman for all their guidance and support, and special thanks to my advisor Professor Ayse Papatya Bucak for her patience, encouragement, and kindness with me and my writing. Thank you to the FAU English department, the professors I was fortunate to learn from, and my classmates whose workshop comments helped shaped this manuscript. Thank you to Holly and Rick Henemader, for their support. Thank you to Arthur, for his loyalty. And, thank you to Michelle Botindari, because nothing would be possible without her love.

## ABSTRACT

Author: Juan Alonso Rodriguez Romero  
Title: All Return  
Institution: Florida Atlantic University  
Dissertation Advisor: Professor Ayse Papatya Bucak  
Degree: Master of Fine Arts  
Year: 2022

All Return is a short story collection centered on nostalgia, and the desire of going back to a place or time, which sometimes doesn't exist anymore. The characters that populate the collection, are all returning or trying to go back, either to a physical place, a language, to an age of innocence, or to loved ones.

While the book tries to portray stories of immigrant lives in parts of collection, the desire of immigrants to sometimes return to their countries of origin are not exclusive to them, but universal. The stories in All Return remind us that we are all going back, or long for a place or time that exists without us.

## DEDICATION

To Juan, Gladys, Marita, Annelisse, Alejandra, and Ernesto.

ALL RETURN

The Town .....	1
Three Stories for Half the Price of One .....	3
The President's Son .....	9
Campeones .....	22
Dinner .....	29
Lirio and the Purple Bougainvillea .....	30
Remember .....	38
Last Day .....	43
The Protest .....	47
Bridges and Tunnels .....	55
Alessandra .....	64
Appointment in the Study .....	71
Lost Kids .....	75

## The Town

On the third of day after his death, the rain stopped, but the smell of wet land that brought the memories of August hadn't left; his hometown seemed so remote, but inside of him he knew well he had never left that place of incipient rains; he tried to smell the wet earth one more time and thought of his mother the day he left, her beautiful face holding up the tears and telling him to never come back: to leave and forget about her and the town, to start a new future somewhere different, where ghosts don't hide between rainy days and memories; he thought about seeing her again, hugging her, telling her how much he loved her and had missed her, and how proud she would be to see his accomplishments; he thought about fixing the house up for his mother, making the renovations she always dreamed of, finally getting her hot water, a nice wooden floor perhaps, a fire place for the cold nights, and then he thought about his friends—perhaps they looked the same, would they recognize him, how long would it take them before they talked to him as they did when he was young and all they did was play soccer and run around all day; would the corner store still be open, would the plaza look the same or would things have changed due to the progress everyone was talking about; he looked down and saw his shoes and thought about running around his town barefoot as a kid, his mother would be so proud of his own progress; he saw the mountains in his memories and thought of the way the sun came back out after rainy days; *in these mountains she hides*, he thought, *the girl of my dreams, I've come back for you as I said I would, I never*



*forgot you;* in all of this he thought lying dead and forgotten in a room so remote and empty, so alike to him, and now when the time to die within dead came he finally understood he would never see the town of beautiful incipient rains again, and even though he thought he had never left the town, the town had long ago left him.

## Three Stories for Half the Price of One

To Julio Ramon Ribeyro and Julio Cortazar

I know what you mean, what can one do, when it's time to turn the lights off it's time, you know? You see that chandelier over there, with one of the candle covers a different color than the others, it's been like that for over a year now. The first time I noticed it, I was with the guys you know, after soccer, sitting at the bar over there. Back then, I only knew a couple of them well, but most of them I was just meeting, and it was the first time we were out for drinks. I remember seeing the chandelier with the odd candle cover, because of the family sitting at the table right under it, that one by the window. I can't believe I haven't told you about that night, I must have been quite tired when I got home, and you were probably already sleeping, I guess there are so many stories I don't get to tell you, perhaps more than the ones I do get to share with you. But yes, I was sitting by the bar, and since it was the first time meeting some of them, we were sharing some of our stories about arriving to this country. And it was interesting, because somehow we all had similar stories, with specific details of course, but similar immigrant tales, yet we still shared our early memories in this country-continent, so distant from our hometowns. They asked me how old I was when I moved here, and I told them I was 16 years old, and then Julio told us about his first days as a 17-year-old high school student in Georgia. Like most of us, Julio knew no English when he moved here and started school only knowing a few words, but unlike us he said, he wasn't in Florida but in Georgia, and there were way less people who spoke Spanish at his school,

and I wanted to tell him that actually, even though I came to Florida, there were only a few people who spoke Spanish at my school, or it felt like it, but I didn't want to interrupt him. Julio continued, and added that unlike me, and at this point he did single me out, he came from a small town in Cordoba, not like me who came from the capital of my country, therefore things were even more surprising to him, a kid from a small town going to high school in the middle of nowhere Georgia and speaking no English. But of course, just like for all of us, soccer was his way in and he joined the team since the first day of school, where he met a couple of guys from Mexico and a guy from Pakistan, who were the only other foreigners on the team and hung out together, and became his closest friends. They actually had a good team, Julio said, and they won many games and got to travel to different cities and stay at hotels, which he thought was great, and on these trips he roomed with his two Mexican and his Pakistani friends, and he couldn't believe the first time he saw his Pakistani friend ask the Mexican guys for directions to then proceed to kneel and start praying, which was something Julio had never seen, and as he explained with his eyes wide opened as if he had been transported to that moment, he added that that was what he loved since that moment about this country, the different kinds of people he could meet, and perhaps would never had met if he stayed back home. And as he got more excited about his admiration for the different people from different cultures he had met here, his speech got more and more animated, and I cannot do it justice, because Julio was speaking in Spanish of course, and when he gets going his Argentine Lunfardo slang comes out and it becomes a challenge even for me to follow him, and that first time I heard his Lunfardo I had to interrupt him for a second to tell him he sounded like one of Cortazar's short stories about a boxer, which is written all in

Lunfardo, and he told me he hadn't read it but he knew what I was talking about, and he kept saying things like "mis patas son mas largas que esperanza'e pobre," which means something like my legs are larger than a poor man's hope, and when the server took too long just like he is taking right now, he would say "este es mas lento que Only You," which would be this guys is slower than Only You, meaning the song Onnnnlyyyyy Yooouuuu, and then he would say "es que es asi, pibe, el que no llora no mama," which was straight out of an old tango song and means it's like that, kid, those who don't cry don't suckle. And he continued with his story, as the Lunfardo took over, and told us how a semester into the school year he started dating the Pakistani's sister, even though he didn't say dating, but you know, he was with her, until the brother found out and went up to Julio and told him that if he kept sleeping with his sister he would kill him, and Julio thought this fool is kidding, he thought he was jealous but he was one of his best friends, he was probably just upset, but the Mexican guys told him that no, he meant it, and Julio had better stop seeing the sister or the guy would in fact kill him, and Julio told them something like "Dejense de romper las bolas, pibes, solo somos amigos cariñosos," which meant stop breaking my balls, guys, we are just close friends, or friendly friends, or loving friends, you know friends who hook up, but they insisted, and Julio understood his Pakistani friend meant it. And, I know you are probably wondering how is this related to the chandelier, I'll get there soon, I promise, I just wanted to tell you how the night started, and the food is not even here and this place keeps getting busier. Anyway, after Julio's story, Ramon started talking, but he didn't share his coming to this country story, but instead told us softly to look over to the table under the chandelier, that same one we are looking at right now, and as we looked at the table, we saw a girl sitting, first we

thought she was by herself, but then we noticed there were two kids we couldn't see from our angle. The girl must have been in her 30's, and there was something in her profile that seemed simultaneously sad and intimidating, her blond hair covered her symmetrical eyes and nose, as if it had decided the world couldn't see them fully. Ramon asked us to not be so obvious, so we turned our eyes toward him, and he told us her name was Quinn, and I wondered if perhaps her parents had had a vision when they named her. Unlike us, Ramon told us, he moved here when he was only eight years old, so he spent his childhood around this neighborhood, way before this fast food place had even opened, when there was a bank here, he said. Ramon grew up in a neighborhood around here, running around and playing with his best friend, Juan Torres, whose full name was actually Juan de la Providencia Torres, and just like Ramon was eight years old and had just moved to this country. Ramon and Juan played in the park a few blocks from here, and spent the afternoons playing at the park, trying to learn English from the other kids in the neighborhood, and standing looking or sitting near a bench, watching Quinn, the prettiest girl in the neighborhood, play with her friends. Ramon said they had friends in common with Quinn, but him and Juan were shy and were still learning English, so they didn't have the courage to talk to Quinn, but going to the park and walking back home talking about one day playing with her was enough for them. Juan Torres was braver than him, Ramon said, and this not always played on his favor, and it definitely didn't the afternoon when Quinn was walking through the park carrying some books and as she walked by Ramon and Juan one of her books fell, and Juan had the courage to pick it up and offer it to her, and Quinn left Juan's arm extended and hit them with a perfect enunciation saying "I don't play with black people," even though she didn't say black

people but used the n-word, and even Ramon who was telling us the story in Spanish quoted her in English and also used the n-word, in a whisper but it still made us uncomfortable, but Ramon said not nearly as uncomfortable or hurt as Juan felt that cursed afternoon, because even though they were just learning English, they knew exactly what Quinn meant, since prejudice is universal, and Ramon put a hand on Juan's shoulder and told him to just leave the book by the bench, as Quinn ran away, and Ramon saw what he remembered as the last image of his friend Juan de la Providencia Torres, since he was convinced it was at that moment that his childhood friend decided to change as much as he could of himself. Ramon said Juan started by playing less, and trying to get rid of his accent. Ramon still saw him at school, but it was as if Juan had only one purpose in life, and that was to study and reproduce whiteness, every detail counted. Not much changed during the first years, but Ramon knew his friend was changing little by little. By high school, they were still friendly, but Ramon didn't see Juan anymore, Juan was involved in theater since he discovered that the theater department at school had a voice coach who could help with accents. After a couple of years of training, any trace of Juan's accent was lost. In the school plays, Juan had small parts, but his name on the play program appeared John Towers. He had changed his name, and his theater friends called him John, or Johnny. After high school, Ramon didn't see Juan much, but Juan invited Ramon to his goodbye party when he left to join the army, with pride Juan told Ramon it was his American duty. Ramon's voice got softer at this part, and I could see in his eyes the shadow of his friend. Juan went to Iraq, of course he went Ramon said, joining the other former Juans of this nation, who now fought proudly as Johns, and a year later the letter arrived, informing that John Towers from Providence, Rhode Island, had died in

combat. Ramon went to the funeral, and tried to explain to Juan's broken mother the confusion between Juan's former name, and why they must have thought he was from Providence, but she didn't understand him. By the time they sent a notification of the death gratuity, Ramon said, Juan's only survivor his mother, had also passed away, still confused about why would someone think her Juan was from Providence. As Ramon finished his story, and took a long-needed sip of his beer, Quinn got up from her booth. She picked up a boy and carried him on her right arm, as she held the hand of a little girl with her left hand. The children had her eyes and nose, but their skin was softer and the color of coffee, and their hair curled like steady waves. Ramon didn't see her leave, and Quinn of course had no idea we were seeing her leave as if we knew her. Ramon lifted his glass and cheered to his friend, John Towers, and we cheered with him, and I thought about how we are lost in these stories that take place faster than we can dream up, and end as we become sand, or salt, or dust, nothing.

## The President's Son

When I got home that afternoon, I found my father on the couch reading the newspaper. My mother had died three years ago and we hadn't said much more than hi and bye since. He looked to me larger than he was, as usual, somehow monumental. I asked how he was, and meant it. I was walking to my room when he asked, almost nonchalantly, "what are you doing tonight, Bruno?" I didn't want to tell him I had no plans, but I did. He had been invited to some event at an embassy he said, but refused to go. He suggested I go in his place, and for some reason I accepted.

I don't recall saying "my father" when I started lying about being the president's son; I always called him the president. "As the president said..." or "as Mr. president would say..." Everyone listened to me in much attention, as if I was saying something important. Perhaps, that was what I liked; their attention, their respect. After a while I didn't need an invitation to attend these diplomatic meetings anymore, everyone knew me as the president's son. I went that first time because I felt like I had to, to satisfy my father, and because I knew I would enjoy all of the formalities these kinds of situations represented. I thought I had been born for this; I had prepared myself for these occasions. That is why I didn't feel insecure that first time a man asked me who I was.

"I'm Bruno," I said.

"Bruno?" he responded, letting me know what he really was asking for: My last name. What family I belonged to, how important I was. As when someone asks you what



school did you go to or where do you live or what car do you drive. He was asking me how much I was worth.

“Bruno M.B.,” I lied, keeping the same tone of voice.

“Are you related to the president?” he asked, this time in a nicer way.

“Yes. I’m his son,” I lied again and counterattacked. “And you are?”

“Nice to meet you, Mister M.B. It is an honor for us to have the president’s son in our embassy. I am the supervisor of events for the embassy. I wish we knew of your presence; we like to assure that our most important guests receive the greeting they deserve.” His tone had changed. If we had been in his distant and beloved Buenos Aires, it was as if he had said, “Who are you, boludo?” and now he was telling me “It’s a pleasure and an honor to meet you, señor.”

“I have come on the behalf of the president, and from now on I will attend more of these events to show the government’s support to all embassies in this great nation. Now, if you excuse me, the show is about to start,” I said and walked towards the stage where a couple of tango dancers were looking at each other as if they were getting ready to make love in front of all of us. I didn’t even ask him for his name, it was not important. He was the guy in charge of events in the Argentine Embassy, and I was the president’s son. I was worth more.

The first few times I attended these types of ceremonies I used a paper we had at home with the seal of the government to identify myself. My father as a general of the army had plenty of them, and I had stolen one. I put my name on it and presented it as my identification. But after that I would simply look in the social pages of the newspapers for small diplomatic meetings at embassies, call and announce, “The president’s son, Bruno

M.B. will be attending your ceremony today.” I would then rent a limousine, introduce myself as Bruno M.B. and be received with all of the honors they thought the President’s son deserved. The fact that the president’s son and I had the same name helped; technically I was only lying about my last name.

One of my friends had told me of a place downtown where they could falsify any document, and I thought they could make some copies of my paper with the government’s seal, or even make me some business cards with the same seal and my name on them. When I went to see the guy who did this he laughed at my used paper. He had brand new documents with the seal of the government and the signatures of any of the last four presidents. He also offered me a passport, a Social Security number, if I wanted to go to the States, and said he would throw the business cards in for free, because I looked like a nice guy. I told him I only wanted a new copy of my document, because it was real, but he didn’t seem to believe in real documents and told me: His brother, who had his “office” two blocks from there, could get me any diploma from any university in the country that same day, but if I also wanted my transcripts with it I would have to wait two days. I understood then, in a country where the president was really a dictator making us believe he had been democratically elected, and the boundaries between what’s real can be bent, I was just one more person trying to figure out who I was.

Six months after pretending to be the president’s son I decided it was time to stop. The day that would be my last as the president’s son I went to the Brazilian Embassy in the morning and confirmed my attendance to the American Embassy for that night. The reason wasn’t of course shame, or guilt, or fear, but the oldest reason for a man to stop

everything and come out clean: a girl. I knew I would see her there. I could not wait; I wanted to tell her the whole truth: who I was. To her, I could not lie any longer.

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When I was thirteen we had to leave the capital and move to a small town in the mountains. We had moved from the capital to Marcacoto because they had transferred my father. As a general of the army he had to work a few years outside the capital to help control the rebels who opposed the dictatorship. My mother and I had to go with him because he didn't want us to stay by ourselves in the capital.

“When you are older you will go back to the capital Bruno,” my father told me. “If you finish high school, and we are still here, I will send you to live there with your grandma, but not now, you are still a kid. You are only thirteen. You are too innocent to be there by yourself. It's too dangerous for a kid, everyone there is a liar.”

Every day the General got up, and woke us all up, at five in the morning, with his classical music fully blasting. After showering with cold water, using the bar of soap that was used to do the laundry, he would put on his white linen pants, one of his silk shirts, and he would go to the patio to look for the Captain. He put on the leash and took the Captain for a walk.

In Marcacoto, six in the morning was the busiest hour of the day. The older ladies went to the bakeries to get warm bread for breakfast, children got ready for school, and there were always one or two drunks returning home. That is why everyone would see my father going out toward the plaza with the Captain. “Everyone says he is the best

rooster in the whole area,” said the neighbors when they saw my father walk with the Captain, his white and orange rooster whom he loved as a son.

“Good morning, General,” the neighbors greeted him. “How are you this morning?”

“Good morning,” my father would answer while walking with as much pride as his rooster. “Here, just walking the Captain,” was his usual answer. The neighbors talked about the breed of the rooster, his beautiful white and orange feathers. “The General says he will not mate him, that there is not a hen good enough for his rooster.” They commented as if they were talking about a man who was walking his dog.

In the afternoon, when my father came back from work, he would find me reading or listening to softer classical music than his own. He didn’t like that I read poetry or preferred softer melodies than his manly symphonies. One day he could not hold it in anymore and with his general voice yelled “Its okay to be refined, Brunito, but please don’t become a queer.” That was the General, my old man.

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Apparently I had chosen the worst moment to be the president’s son. The people were tired of the dictatorship; on the streets, rebels were repressed daily. Two weeks ago at a gathering, a lady, who had not been told I was the president’s son, started to criticize the government. Her tone was loathsome, as when ladies whisper about their friend’s gay son, or their friend’s pregnant teenage daughter. No one said anything, as if waiting for my response. I only said:

“Madam, this country is like a soccer player who is on the field injured. We, this government, are the ones that will take him to the ambulance. Perhaps, if there is enough time, they can even take this injured player to the hospital, but the next government has to be the doctor who cures this injured player. But everything will occur thanks to this government, thanks to the president who took the injured player out of the field.” They all looked at me with admiration. I knew I was doing the government a favor; they would never have a better image than the one I was giving them. That is what I enjoyed the most, the conversations, to prove myself I spoke better than them; they respected me because they thought I was Bruno M.B. and I proved that I was above them. The only time I got scared, during the whole six months, was that morning at the Brazilian Embassy, when a tall, black man approached me and asked:

“What are you?” I noticed his heavy accent and realized he probably meant to ask for my name.

“I am Bruno M.B.,” I answered.

“You are not Bruno M.B.,” he said. I turned pale and felt the sweat starting down my forehead; I didn’t know what to say. He probably noted my discomfort. He had a loud laugh, intense like his eyes. “Maybe you are Bruno M.B. but I didn’t ask you who are you, but what you are.” My body came back to my soul, but I still didn’t say anything. “You see; I am a heart. I play the bass and that is because I am a heart. PUM PUM PUM I can keep the rhythm because I feel it, because I am a heart. We are all something. My God is a lion; you look at him and he is a lion. My mother is a zebra, and I am a heart. I have traveled five times around the world; I have played music with the best; played soccer in Brazil, Africa, Europe, and everywhere they love me because I am a heart,

because I can feel different than the rest. I can take down guys twice my size; I can beat them because I know how to breathe. It's Chinese philosophy, you see, depending on what side of your nose you use to breathe you can control where your strength goes. But the strength is here," he said pointing at his heart. "Now tell me child, what are you?"

I wasn't sure what to say. I had enough problems knowing whom I was, to know what I was.

"I don't know," I said.

"Don't worry. It's better to not know than to lie. Everyone lies here, you see. These diplomats are not diplomats; these beautiful women are not beautiful; the ones that are listening to you are not hearing you; the ones that respect you do not respect you. Do not let those lies catch you." He left without saying anything else but left me with the impression that he was the only one who really knew who I was: A liar, just like him, like all the others.

I left the Brazilian Embassy, and on my way home I ran into two big protests. The country could not stand it anymore. A few nights before the president had gone into the house of his former henchman, who was now in jail, and taken out boxes filled with videotapes.

The press said those videos contained images proving the government's corruption. The president's henchman had made sure to film government officials, and himself, bribing journalists, judges, singers, and everyone who would support their dictatorship for some money. But the president spoke that same night to the nation explaining how those videos were nothing more than his personal collection of the "History of the soccer World Cups." He had lent them to his former henchman, and was

now taking them back as a way to punish this man who was in jail for acts of corruption he did not know about. Nobody believed him.

In one of the protests I found two guys with a photo booth offering to take free pictures. The photo booth was built with PVC tubes and covered with curtains, which gave it a photo studio resemblance. On the side of the photo booth they had a board with what I guessed was the name of their company: Florida Moment, and underneath a deceptive inscription, "*Where Love is an Illusion.*" When I went in the two guys explained to me they had ran out of photo paper long time ago, but used the photo booth to give out propaganda for their revolution. The whole time they talked about a revolution they were starting "from Israel to Florida" but couldn't explain well what they meant. They both seemed happy and it was strange to see the way they finished each other's sentences, as if they were connected or had a script memorized. When I left their photo booth I thought of their friendship, and suddenly felt lonely. Lonely in a city full of liars, and I wished they were my friends.

After I was finally able to escape from the chaos of the protest a man dressed completely in white came up to me. I recognized his outfit from the mental hospital and tried to avoid him, but he came straight to me.

"I need your help, Don Bruno." I had seen those blue eyes and that black-curly hair before. As he got closer I noticed his glasses were really lenses tied to two toothbrushes that hid behind his curls. He was a young man who had been at the event where I compared the country with an injured soccer player. I remembered him being one of the most polite and extroverted of the group. That day he even acted out the joke of

Clark Kent putting on and off his glasses asking his son, “Where is Superman, where is Superman?” Now I could see the brushes hiding behind his curls.

“I think I have escaped, but I don’t know from where, it can’t be far from here. I have nowhere to go, please help me.”

I took him to the mental hospital, five blocks from where we were, and when we got there, the nursing staff acted as if his escape was an everyday occurrence.

“Are you related to the patient?” the nurse asked me.

“No,” he answered for me, “This gentleman is the president’s son.”

The nurses seemed surprised by the way he spoke to me, even though we were about the same age. They ignored the fact I had been introduced as the president’s son; apparently the credibility of my new friend did not have much value.

“It’s time to pray!” He suddenly yelled, pulling me into his world. “Please come with me,” he said. I was in a hurry, I had to go home and get ready to go to the American Embassy.

“Only for a few minutes,” I said, and followed the nurse who took us to a small chapel. I had not prayed since my mother passed away, three years before, but the young man seemed much focused on his prayers, so I just sat next to him. I noticed he was crying; the tears were coming out of his big blue eyes, running down his cheeks.

“Are you all right?” I asked, hating myself for asking such a silly question.

“Can I tell you a secret, Don Bruno?” he asked me, while cleaning the tears of his face.

“Yes, of course,” I tried to sound interested.



“That man on the cross is my father, but nobody believes me.” He was not lying, he was being honest. His tears were real.

“Do me a favor, tell your father and grandfather to help me tonight, I am really going to need it,” I said as I walked away, and he said goodbye to me with a smile.

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The Captain passed away a month after my mother, and you could say for similar reasons. They both got tired of waiting for my father. After six months of moving to Marcacoto my father got a job, during the week, in the capital. He had to go to the Government Palace as part of the president’s personal staff. My mother and I had to stay and he would only come on the weekends. As time went by we got to see my father less and less, because some weekends he had to stay in the capital to help the President since nobody else would. Perhaps that was what killed the Captain, and my mother.

The few weekends he would come home and the three of us would have dinner, as a family, the conversation would always be about the president’s family. My father was careful not to call him the Dictator, like everyone else, but the President. “The President and his family are so happy,” “The President and his wife may get divorced,” “The President has a son your age, and he has your name Brunito,” “Bruno M.B. left last night to go to the United States, he will go to school there, so one day he can come back and be elected president by the people, as his father always dreamed,” “Bruno M.B. is on vacation in Palm Beach, Florida,” “Bruno M.B. sent pictures of his beautiful girlfriend at

the beach.” He used to tell us everything about the presidential family, and I never imagined years later I would use all that information to pretend to be the president’s son.

Three years after arriving to Marcacoto, a month after my mother passed away, my father was named President’s Assistant and we moved back to the capital. I never knew if my father was so affected by my mother’s death, or the Captain’s, but we stopped talking after I got into college to study literature instead of becoming a lawyer as he wished. He dreamed that I would be Bruno M.B’s personal lawyer when he became President.

Everything continued the same between us, as another three years went by. My father and I barely spoke, until the day, six months ago, when he asked me if I wanted to go to a diplomatic meeting and I accepted.

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The only time I’ve been in love before was with a mermaid, or at least that’s how I remember her. I recall the first time she took me to her room, the way the waterbed moved following the rhythm of our bodies. As I kissed her legs I saw for the first time the sea star she had on her upper thigh, blue with yellow borders it seemed to shine on the dark room. With every kiss I gave to the star I got closer to her, and as she, madly and ferociously passed her hand through my hair, I drowned in her.

It wasn’t long before the waterbed became uncomfortable, the sea star lost its shine, and her song, like every mermaid’s song, got lost in the vast ocean of my memories.

But this time was different; I had met her in a diplomatic meeting a month before and knew right away I had fallen in love. We talked all night about everything but me being the President's son. That was how I was introduced but she did not care, she was different. We talked about literature and she told me that, writers, just like politicians, transform reality into lies but unlike politicians they don't play with reality to take advantage of people but to escape from it.

The next day she had to go to Europe for a month but said she would call me when she came back. I knew she would go to the American Embassy that night. I had decided to tell her the whole truth; that I was not the president's son, that the last six months were like a dream, or maybe a nightmare, but I was ready to live reality with her, leave the country and start everything again.

I got into the limousine that was taking me to the American Embassy, put my window down to appreciate the city, and realized how much I loved it. Its noises, the grey sky, that incipient drizzle hitting the edge of the window getting my right arm wet. The city was dressed as a bride waiting at the altar. I had learned to recognize its different customs; one day the city was a soccer player, talented but with low self-esteem; another day a beauty queen, scared of a difficult question; another day a liar clown. I was going to miss this city but I had to leave.

I was waiting for her at the embassy when a group of men with guns came into the embassy yelling, "The man came down. The man came down!" The violin players stopped the music, and only then I realized they had been accompanying me on my thoughts. Everyone ran towards the back door and when I tried to do the same one of the

men with guns pointed one at me and said, “There he is, Bruno MB, the president’s son.” They captured me and put me in prison.

Later I found out the president had run away with his Personal Assistant, whom according to them, was his lover. When I tried to tell them who I really was and showed them my ID they laughed at me and congratulated me because my ID looked “real”. “Your father, the ex-dictator, said you were staying here for him, and you had all the money he stole all these years. Also, the guy you claim to be, the son of that queer that is the ex-dictator’s lover and Personal Assistant, lives in Palm Beach, Florida.”

When I asked about her, nobody knew whom I was talking about. Nobody knew her name; it was as if she never existed.

As much as I insisted on my real identity the new military regime never believed me, and every day I’m closer to believe my own lie, to escape from the solitude of my truth.

## Campeones

The phone rang for the second time and I still didn't know what I was going to say. Behind me Gomez, Salazar, Guantanamo, and Cascini began to express doubts about me being the right person to talk, even though just a few minutes before they were the ones who had decided I had to make the phone call.

“Hang up before you get the answering machine. Those are the only fifty cents we have,” said Gomez, as he pushed his hair to the side, and I nodded my head to let him know I knew.

I did not turn around since the whole time I had been looking at the arch in front of me to avoid their eyes. The same arch we walked by everyday when we came into the stadium for soccer practice. I knew behind it on the upper side of the threshold, with big blue letters that stood out on the white wall, was painted: *To succeed it is necessary Work, Effort, and Humility... Much Humility.* And pass the arch I could imagine the now dark and empty garage, and then outside Isabel La Catolica Avenue, where we waited for our bus to go home. I imagined the girls coming out of the school that was right across the street, with their white blouses and their grey skirts and thought of the way we all looked at them; we desired them as if they were our best friend's sisters. I also thought of the big pink and grey buildings next to the school and the long passages that seemed as if they had no end, where we had to walk sometimes to get to another soccer practice field. The smell of drugs, the

people outside, we were in one of the most dangerous parts of the city but no one would do anything to us. They thought one day we would be their heroes.

Every day we walked into the stadium and passed the arch to go to the locker rooms. We read the phrase in big blue letters, and saw the trophies on the side stands along the hallway walls towards the soccer field. Upstairs on the second floor, where we were not allowed to be but all of us had been at least once, were even more important trophies: big, shiny, historic. All of the weight of this history reminded us that we belonged to the youth divisions of the most important soccer team in the country, and that one day we too would win trophies, and some could actually take their families out of poverty. But that would be some day, now everything was silence, and the only thing to be heard was the ringing coming out of the phone, and our fear.

On Sundays this hallway was different, but I was the only one of the four of us, of everyone perhaps, who knew it. We were on the west side of the stadium, the most exclusive side. If my teammates went to the professional team games they went to the south side where the cheap seats were. I knew what this hallway looked like on Sundays. People with money came to see the team “of the people”, as they called it, with all of the comforts the “people” did not have. I knew those two worlds, I belonged to two worlds.

Gomez lived on the North side of the city, at the other end of where I lived. He had been a little more time than me on the team, but not as much as Salazar or Cascini. Even when he was not one of the best players, and was not the brightest one, he had the habit of

always being there on the important moments, as that day. He had only stayed to wait for Guantanamo because he didn't want to leave alone. Gomez had long hair, and we always recognized his way of putting it to the side during the games as an exaggerated effort to look as some European player. It wasn't until he did it after telling me not to wait for the answering machine that I realized he did it when he was nervous. Next to him, Salazar, still with his eyes bright red, looked at the floor and from time to time crossed his left foot over the right one, as if doing a badly learned ballet move. Guantanamo, whose real last name was Carrillo, was not laughing for the first time since I had met him. Only we knew that the nickname Guantanamo was not for the rude way he treated the opponents, but because that was the special nickname he had for his girlfriend.

“Guantanamo doesn't let me do anything, she is always controlling me, and if she catches me, man, she knows how to hit,” he would tell us in the locker rooms. “Last night I told Guantanamo *only two times tonight babe*, cause tomorrow I have a practice game.” He kept us excited with his stories.

“Why do you call your girl Guantanamo?” Gomez asked one day, when he could not resist the curiosity anymore.

“You are so ignorant, Gomez,” Guantanamo laughed at him, “don't you know Guantanamo is the prison where the Americans beat the shit out of their prisoners? And my woman is just like that, complicated, tough. *Principito*, you are going to have to educate Gomez,” he said to me. He had given me that nickname my first day when he found out where I lived, and according to him because I had golden curls that reminded him of a book written by a French man whose last name he could never remember.

“Yeah Gomez, Guantanamo is right, that is where the *gringos* don’t control themselves with their prisoners sometimes. But don’t ask me to educate Gomez, that I’ll end up more tired than a porn star after a week of filming,” they all laughed. Comments like that had given me their acceptance. They didn’t care I was not poor, or had golden hair, to them I was one of them. But sometimes they treated me in a different way, as when they decided I had to make the phone call to Salazar’s mom because they said I was the one who knew “how to talk.”

Cascini had a lot to do with the group accepting me. His grandfather had played his whole life on the team, and his father also played on the team and died, when Cascini was only four months, in the biggest tragedy of the team, when the airplane that was taking the professional players back to the capital went down in the sea and all of them died, most of them under the age of twenty-five. Cascini’s dad had been twenty-two. No matter how hard his family had tried to keep away from the team the coaches saw him playing on the street one day and took him with them, now he was the captain. That was his heritage, his cross.

Cascini lived only twenty minutes away from the stadium but he had discovered the bus he took also worked for me, so he would wait with me for the bus because he used to say that unlike with the other he could actually talk with me. At the beginning it had been difficult playing with them and being the new guy for me. When we had practice games they all tried to get advantage of my inexperience, since playing here wasn’t the same as just playing at school or in the neighborhood. Cascini told me:

“Here you have to be fast *Principito*. Daddy and Mommy are not here to defend you and everyone knows that. To be fast sometimes you have to lie. You have to learn how



to lie, you can't survive if you are a fool." He talked to me as if I was younger, even though we were the same age.

I was fortunate the first time I had a wake up experience about being in a different world Cascini was with me. Everyday after practice, when it was dark already, we would cross the Isabel La Catolica Avenue to wait for our bus, as the guard of the stadium looked at us from across the street to make sure nothing bad would happen. Sometimes we walked to the street corner, where there was a *bodeguita*, to get a soda and waited for the bus there. One day as we were walking Cascini started to say hi to every car that passed by. I didn't know if he knew them or if he was playing around.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Don't turn around, but *piranhas* are following us," he told me, in a way I would not get too scared. I understood he was saying hi to the cars passing by to pretend we knew them.

I also waved to a car, and when I turned around I saw them. A group of six or seven kids between the ages of five and seventeen were following us, ready to attack us. That was why people called them *piranhas*; they attacked in groups and were only kids. I would have been their food if Cascini was not with me. I had been walking as if I was in my neighborhood, not in one of the most dangerous parts of the city.

"Walk a little faster, but don't run. If we run we are screwed." He knew how to deal with these situations.

We got to the *bodega* and the group of kids stayed outside as if waiting for us. They knew we had to come out at some point to catch the bus, and that's when they had to attack.

We talked to the owner of the store, who knew Cascini and his family's story, and he went outside, kicked those kids out, and waited with us until our bus arrived. We had survived.

"Hello?" the voice on the other side of the phone answered.

"Hi, may I please speak to Salazar's... sorry to Eder's mom?"

"Yes, this is she."

"Hi, madam, how are you? I am calling from the stadium. Salazar- we always referred to each other by our last names, which made it difficult to get used to calling another teammate by their first names- I mean Eder had a problem..."

"My son! What happened?! Is he okay?" I could feel her fear, and the only thing I could think of was my mom at our dinner table picking up the best piece of meat from her plate and putting it on mine.

"Yes, ma'am, he is fine, nothing has happened to him."

"Oh, God! You scare me, I don't know what I would do if something happened to my Eder. But, why are you calling?"

"Well, Eder has lost his school shoes and he is afraid to go home because he thinks you'll be mad." After saying it, I realized how ridiculously sad and foreign the episode was to me. Salazar had left his school shoes outside his bag and somebody stole them. They were some old, black shoes that were not worth anything, but he didn't want to go home because he was afraid his mother would get mad. He knew they couldn't buy new ones. After an hour of listening to his crying and trying to console him, we finally got him to

accept making a phone call, with the extra fifty cents I had, but he didn't want to talk. "*Principito* should talk, he knows how," agreed the rest and the only thing I could think of is how much I wished I could buy him new shoes and end all of it.

"Is he barefoot?" I didn't understand why she asked me that.

"No. He is wearing Gomez's flip flops."

"Tell him to come home, nothing is going to happen. We'll see what we can do; he can wear sneakers to school. And I can talk to his teachers and explain to them why he doesn't have school uniform shoes, but tell him to come. It's late; your mom must be waiting for you too. My God, I thought something had happened to Eder, I don't know what I would do." She started crying.

"Everything is going to be okay, everything is going to be okay." I kept repeating to her while looking to my teammates, as if I was also talking to them.

I knew I was lying.

## Dinner

After the server left he turned to his wife, but the newspaper covered her face so he could only console himself by thinking of what she looked like when he loved her, when they were young and she was beautiful; then he looked at his son, whose eyes stared down at his videogame; the boy was dressed like him, but he could not recognize a single thing of himself in those eyes; people left and entered the restaurant, loudly, as if volume proved their happiness—plain, unhappy, average people—then he noticed the big, strangely-shaped glass bottles on the shelf next to the door, bottles filled with mushrooms, olives, peppers, different kinds of pasta, and behind them on the wall, big paintings reproduced New York—lonely bridges, imposing buildings, sad long-gone towers, just like his family, like him—when she turned another page and his son looked unrecognizable one more time, he finally decided to talk to them, but they were too busy to talk, so he looked back to his book—another dinner without a word.

## Lirio and the Purple Bougainvillea

On her last day on earth, Lirio heard his voice, next to her and from so far away at the same time. *Wake up, old lady, it's Thursday*, she thought she heard him say, as she got up from bed. Making sure, as always, to touch the floor with her right foot first, and remembering the story her husband used to tell her about the man who sadly found his death the unfortunate day he by mistake stepped first with his left foot. *Your stories hug me*, she thought, *your stories are around me and keep me company when you're not here. Our stories are what is left when autumn comes again, and we must go.*

Lirio got ready in the dark, without making much noise so as to not wake up Delma in the room next door. *Poor Delma, always worrying about us. Always putting us before her needs, she needs to rest too.* Lirio showered and dried herself, making the same sound she made when the towel hit her skin, *ppppp ppppp ppppp*, the same sound she made when she dried off her five kids and her twelve grandchildren, and the sound they would all remember long after she passed.

After changing, and stopping by the kitchen to drink a cup of cold coffee, Lirio Robledo; mother of five, grandmother of twelve, godmother of fifteen, and only love of one, went out before 6am for the first time since she could remember and faced the cold humidity of Lima, as she followed her husband's steps into the still dark city.

She decided to walk by the malecon, the pathway on top on the sea wall that faced the Pacific Ocean. She looked down the cliff and enjoyed the vastness of the ocean getting lost in the fog, and vice versa. *Our malecon keeps our promises, as the ocean our*

*dreams. Here I met you, love, and here I see you again, every time. Our malecon keeps our stories, and saves a space for our last words, words that will return to the sea when we are not here anymore.* Lirio smiled at her husband, and walked along the malecon, enjoying as always the purple bougainvillea hanging on the walls of the houses along the pathway.

When she made it to a newspaper stand she decided to stop by and get a newspaper; her husband had always bought the paper and she decided to get it herself this time. Traffic was still slow and the fog surrounded her, making her feel as if she was breathing water.

She bought El Comercio, and remembered the days when her youngest son was still in his 20's and used to work as a reporter for that newspaper. *Remember the excitement when we bought the paper the first time August published in it? The pride when we saw his name, our last names combined in print, we were so proud and August was so happy when he came to celebrate later that day. Do you remember, love?*

Lirio left the stand and went to a bench nearby to read the paper. Nothing that surprised her too much; a small female schnauzer named Tilsa had been given a medal of honor for helping find a bomb in a bar downtown, another case of police corruption had been caught on camera in a dangerous neighborhood, bringing the number up to five of these cases in the last two weeks, and congress had taken advantage of the distraction in the country due to a soccer game of the National Team to quietly pass a law that would make it illegal to have cameras in dangerous neighborhoods to control the police, but they insisted it wasn't control the citizens. *Nothing is new under the sun for a Latin American,* Lirio thought as she closed the paper and planned her day.

It was the first of the month, and even though Lirio knew her youngest son took care of paying the bills she decided she wanted to do it, going to each institution in person, as people used to when she was younger. *It'll be good for us to be out and enjoy the air.* She decided to stop by the phone company first, then the power company to pay the electricity bill, then the water company, and she should be back home by noon. All of this was new in some way for Lirio, as she rarely had to personally make any payments, since first her father, then her husband, and now her son, took care of the bills.

Lirio got up from the bench and continued walking by the malecon, as Lima also got up and started its day. She could see the traffic forming, that dance of interminable cars; the noise, the chaos, the panic, the shared solitude the Lima residents faced as they went to work, or school, or back from work. A gentle drizzle started falling, and Lirio could feel it on her face and going down her arms like tiny spiders. *Lima, our beautiful and ugly Lima, with its grey sky that looks like a donkey's belly. With this sad and gentle drizzle that falls down crying and reaches the deepest ends of our bodies, now with us not even realizing it. Lima hits you in the face with its dark sky, and its noise, and its residents walking by you, over you, pushing you, until you forget about them, you forget about Lima, and you become part of the chaos, you walk next and over people, you also push, and before you know it you are your city.*

August Ramirez Robledo was dreaming about his father when the phone rang. In the dream he was a kid, and he and his father were playing soccer. They passed the ball

back and forth, they laughed, and his father told him how to kick to make the ball curve. Suddenly in the dream, he wasn't a kid anymore, but an adult, and his father was still smiling, but August couldn't smile because he knew it was a dream, and he never remembered them.

He answered the phone call, and walked outside the room so he wouldn't wake up his wife. Phone calls early in the morning are always scary, he thought. Once you have gotten a few of them, always unexpected, always early, you learn to fear them.

"Mr. August, it's me, Delma." She was crying, "sorry to call you so early, but I can't find your mother. I don't know what happened, or where did she go. I don't know, I don't know what to do, she is always here and now she is gone, I don't know what to do, I'm sorry."

"Hold on, Delma, I can't understand you. Try to calm down, what do you mean my mother is not there?" He thought about his mother, how she never went out by herself, how much he would miss her if anything would ever happen to her, how he was going to see her that afternoon, how all of the family was going to see her for the one-year anniversary. Then he thought it had been a year, and he felt sad.

"I woke up as every day, Mr. August, and went to wake up your mother, just like every day, and tell her to get ready while I made breakfast, as usual. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer, so I got worried and walked in but she wasn't there. The bed was made, and I can see she got ready and must have gone out, but I don't know where." She kept crying, she almost lost her voice twice as she spoke.

"Okay, Delma, let's calm down. Maybe she went out for a walk, I'll come that way right now. I will look for her, call the cops, hospital, and my siblings to let them



know. Just calm down, we will find her and everything will be okay.” He recognized the voice of his father in his voice, it happened every time he had to deal with a problem. He could hear his father speaking through him, the same calmness, the same ability to rationalize things and not give in to fear, the same ability to lie and not let the guard down against emotions.

August went back to his room, still in silence to not wake up his wife, and when he got to the threshold of the bedroom door he could see her beautiful figure in bed, she was on her side not facing him. He saw the golden and brown hairs on the pillow, and even though he couldn't see her face he could imagine it; tranquil, peaceful, beautiful, and he thought about love in the mornings, how love can be endless as long as it is rebuilt every morning, by a gesture, by a word, by silence, by just being there.

“August, are you okay? It's so early.” She woke up, and August felt bad.

“Yes, I am fine, love. Delma called, she is having some troubles and needs me to come over, but things are okay.” He decided not to worry her, and let her rest a little more, he imagined it would be a long day. “You will have to take the girls to school, if that's okay. I need to go over to my mother's now. I will call you when I'm done and we can pick up the girls together to go back to my mom's. Today is the one year anniversary, remember?”

“Of course, I remember, my love. I still can't believe it's been a year, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am. It'll be nice to see the whole family at the old house again.” One more time he recognized his father's voice in his. “Anyway, I have to run. Kiss the girls for me, I love you.” He leaned to kiss his wife and she surprised him with a big hug, he felt

her warm arms around him and for a second he felt safe. One detail, he thought, all it takes, he had fallen in love with her again.

On the way to his mother's house he called his four siblings one by one, and after telling them what Delma had told him he calmed each one of them down, with the words he knew well that each of them needed. Then he thought about calling the police to report the missing of his mother, but decided to wait as he arrived to the old house.

The old house looked as he remembered it, but older, just like everything else, he thought. Delma was standing at the door, crying less than before but still crying. He hugged her and walked into the house with her. The house where he played when he was a child, the house where he kicked his first soccer ball with his father and two older brothers, the house where he used to play with his two older sisters, as they dressed him up as if he was their living toy. The house where he kissed a girl for the first time, the house where he made love for the first time. The house his parents had built, and as he thought of them he recognized the scent of the bougainvillea the wind carried from the malecón.

At noon, his mother wasn't back and it had become more difficult to remain calm. He called the police and reported the missing of his mother, then he started calling hospitals with the fear and anticipation only uncertainty can create. Standing outside he thought one more time how old the house looked, and for a few minutes he thought he would never see his mother again.

Lirio was a bit disappointed she couldn't pay any of the bills because her son had already paid them online. Still, she was happy she went out for a walk and could enjoy the morning next to the love of her life, the only man that had made her fall in love with him every morning since the day they met. She laughed at the fact she had to make a special line for seniors, since she had never stopped to think of herself aging. Lirio stopped thinking about how many years she had when the number didn't agree with how she felt. *Remember when for a year I had every single mirror removed from the house, because I looked different from how I felt? And you were so nice to agree with me, you were always so nice.*

She remembered the time she was 15 years old and had to wait in line to get into a concert, and how she pretended to faint to get ahead of the line and not have to wait. She had hoped she could do that this time, so she was also disappointed when she saw there was a smaller line for older people like her.

Lirio walked back home along the malecon again, and didn't stop laughing with him about how the day had gone. She was proud of herself for getting up, for having the energy to walk so much, and she thanked her husband for waking her up and helping her through the day. As she approached the house she recognized her son August's car parked out front, and wondered if she had made plans with him and forgotten. When she got closer she saw August and Delma, recognizing her and running towards her.

"Mom, where have you been?" August hugged her and she realized he looked like a scared boy, like the time he got lost in the street market that used to be two blocks from where they were standing. "We have been looking for you all morning, you gave us a big scare." He tried to sound like an upset parent, but did not stop hugging her.

“I went out for a walk, I was hoping I could pay the bills, but I see you’ve already taken care of that.” Lirio said as she held Delma’s hand, “It’s okay, Delma, I see you were scared. It’s okay, I am back, I just went for a walk.” She said as she walked into the house, suddenly feeling sleepy.

“But mom, you never go out by yourself, you never even wake up this early. Why today, how were you able to wake up?” He sounded much calmer now, he was happy she was back.

“Your father woke me up, son. He reminded me it was the first of the month and we had to make some payments. He actually came with me.”

August couldn’t believe what he was hearing, he felt sad and scared, but had to tell her, “Dad? Mom, perhaps you didn’t sleep well, or are a bit confused, you should rest. You know well dad died exactly a year ago, we are actually having a big get together here tonight for the one-year anniversary. You know this, we spoke about it last night.”

Lirio couldn’t hear her son well anymore, she walked into her bedroom and her son’s voice sounded as if it was coming from far away. All she could hear now was her husband’s voice, telling her it was okay. She looked out the window and all she could see was the rain of purple bougainvillea falling.

## Remember

The walls of the restaurant were covered with images from back home, and for a few minutes he forgot he was so far away from it. A painting reproduced some famous ruins he had visited with his brother a long time ago, when he still lived in his home country. He could see the ruins from a high perspective; distant but big enough to recognize their imposing presence. Behind them he could see other mountains covered in green, and the blue sky next to them. The lines of the painting seemed fake, offensively timid, as if the painter had been working with someone else's memories.

“Are you sure you don't remember Dario?” His coworker repeated the question, and only then he realized he hadn't been listening. “He was from the same neighborhood as you, I believe, and had a brother around your age. You had to have known him. Dario, the son of Delmira. A skinny, dark guy; lengthy, and funny looking. He always looked like he had done something bad, or at least that is how I remember him. He stayed back home when I moved here, so I didn't see him grow up, but you must have, you are younger than him, as I said he had a younger brother around your age, you might remember him.”

“I don't,” he lied. He had started lying about not knowing Dario, his brother, a few years back, when he felt too embarrassed of him. This made him sad, and he wished he hadn't accepted to have lunch with his coworker.

“Are you sure? He lived in the street downhill from the soccer field, his house

was the third to the left if you were going down from the soccer field, and the seventh to the right if you were going up. The same street that took you to the Marengo stable, where we would get our fresh milk in the mornings before they removed the stable and built the apartments. You were probably there during the whole renovation of the neighborhood, I only learn of it from the letters my mother sent me.”

The coworker started talking then about his mother and the letters she sent him, the way he would look forward to those letters when he first moved out of the country. Then he started talking about when his mother got sick, and how much it hurt him to not be able to go back for her funeral. While the coworker kept talking, stooping when his voice became weak, half because of the alcohol and half because of the sadness, he thought about his own mother. He hadn't called her in the last few weeks, he didn't know how she or his brother were doing. He felt like a bad son, a bad brother; a bad immigrant who has forgotten his family.

The sound of a familiar guitar and a voice singing about the sad life on the mountains through the speakers brought him back to the conversation, as he thought how appropriate the song was for his coworker's speech. He was surprised one more time by how he could just walk into a restaurant that served food from his country, and played their music, and could forget he was so far away from it, so far away from his family.

“He used to always wear the same soccer jersey, Dario, the one with white and blue vertical stripes. The jersey of his favorite soccer team, at the time at least. He was a talented player, not the best, but he had a nice touch and could always pass the ball back to your feet. I can't believe you don't remember him; he was a few years older than you. Anyway, apparently a few years after I left he started hanging out with a bad crowd, and

joined a gang. The weird thing is that he joined the gang of the kids that supported the other big soccer team back home, not his former team. People said he did it because he saw his friends liking that team and he just followed them, others said he was just looking for trouble. The thing is, he changed his white and blue soccer jersey for the almost faded cream-colored jersey of the other team, and started hanging with those guys. First it was just going to games with them, then starting trouble here and there, you know how it goes.”

The server brought two more beers and he was glad his coworker had stopped talking for a second. He felt as if a scorpion was walking around his throat, and the sun coming in through the blinds gave him a headache. He wished he hadn't gone to lunch with his coworker, he wished he hadn't lied about not knowing Dario, he wished he could be back home, not in this fake and sad reproduction of home that was the restaurant.

The cold beer made his throat feel better, but he knew the scorpion would come back. His fingers felt the sweat of the glass and he had another sip as the coworker continued talking.

“Then Dario got involved in some bad stuff; there were people that said they had seen him close to crime scenes, coincidentally walking by a house that later got broken into, getting into fights with the gangs from the other team, the one that used to be his own, even though then almost no one mentioned that. Eventually the charismatic and silly kid with the white and blue jersey became the feared and hard man with the ugly, sad, faded cream color jersey. Then one day he was part of another fight, against the same members of the other gang, but one of the members of the other gang died. He and

his friends disappeared for a few days, people were not sure but some believed he had been the one who killed the other guy.”

When the coworker was about to continue he cut him off, he couldn't listen to the story anymore.

“Why are you telling me all of this?! What do I care about some gang member that I didn't know? I don't care, I never knew him, and I don't care. If he killed someone, that's his problem, maybe the police would find him.” He couldn't keep listening to his coworker, he had to leave, the scorpion steps on his throat were deeper and deeper. He put some money on the table and got up to go, but his coworker stopped him.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, I just thought you might remember Dario, I can't believe you never met him. The police don't need to find him, he is dead. Apparently, it was a revenge thing. The members of the other gang found him and his friends, he was the only one who died. I was just telling you in case you knew him, people have been calling his mother, she is devastated, and apparently his brother hasn't talked to them in a while.”

He got up and left without saying goodbye to his coworker, and as he left the restaurant the Florida sun hit him right in the face. He started walking east, towards the beach, but without any destination. The scorpion kept destroying his throat, and the sun that he had enjoyed so many times pushed him down against the pavement that seemed dryer than ever. He headed towards the bridge that would take him to the beach, and as he saw the palm trees to his left he started to cry. He thought of his mom, and of his brother, Dario.



He remembered Dario walking around his neighborhood, always smiling, always taking care of him. He saw Dario with his white and blue striped jersey, following a soccer ball and asking him to keep up with him. He would never talk to him again, and he had denied him, too many times. He cried for his brother, for his mother, and for all the funerals he would miss. He cried for this eternal April in which he would always live, because any month is the cruelest when you are far from home.

## Last Day

One bark, two barks. People heard the dog, as the wheels of the car made a whistling noise. Rocky tried to alert Arturo, but Arturo turned around too late, and as he did the car was turning in circles about to hit him. Rocky saw Arturo's rainbow wig flying getting lost in the sun, his bright red nose formed an ellipse in the opposite direction, his big colorful shoes clapping in the air and then hitting the ground, and the blue and red suspenders breaking as he rolled in the pavement. As he ran towards Arturo he could see the blood mixing up with the white make up of his face, and the red of his lips.

They had started working at that corner only two weeks before, when a new costumes store opened and hired Arturo to hold a sign outside in the street corner. *All you have to do is hold this sign and look happy. You can dance if you want to, you can wave at people, just look happy and keep this sign up*, the owner of the store said, as he gave Arturo the used clown costume. It was a big success for them and they celebrated the fact they had a new job as they always did, by buying two mandarins and sharing them. It had been a few months since they had had any work, and a couple of years since the crisis hit the country and they were on the streets. They couldn't remember how long it had been, or they didn't want to, but instead celebrated the new temporary job as a new start towards better things.

Like many people in the country the crisis caught them unprepared and took everything they had. It happened before they met, thought Rocky, before they became

friends. Arturo had lost his job at some office, Rocky couldn't remember doing what, had also lost his house, and before he knew it he was in the streets. Since he had no family Arturo first stayed with friends, stayed at shelters, but he ended up living underneath the bridge where Rocky met him. Rocky had gotten there in a similar way and they became friends. It was easier to ask for food or money together and they could spend time together and help each other out. Days went by faster and were happier when they could laugh, Rocky still remembered the days when he was alone walking from place to place, eating whatever he could find. But when he met Arturo he found a best friend, someone he could trust and not feel so alone in the middle of the street.

Arturo was the one who got Rocky into eating mandarins, since Rocky didn't like them at first. But a nice girl who stopped at their intersection underneath the bridge always brought them mandarins, and sometimes that was all they had to eat, so Rocky got used to them. Arturo loved mandarins and liked to play a game asking Rocky to go far from him and try to catch mandarin pieces in the air as he threw them at him. People actually enjoyed watching this while they were bored stopped at the red light, and it helped them getting some coins and sometimes even a bill. The girl who brought mandarins was named Michelle they learned, and Rocky thought she was beautiful and could recognize that Arturo liked her too, and they were both disappointed when one day she stopped by with mandarins but brought her boyfriend with her. *I will find a girl just as beautiful, and we will marry and get a house, and we can all live together.* said Arturo, as Rocky smiled and really believed him.

Every day in the papers they would read about the crisis affecting the country, more people unemployed, just like them; more people in the streets, just like them; more

people who lost everything they had, just like them, but they were happy most of the time. When it was cold out, or they didn't have any food, they were not as happy. They both had lost weight, keeping clean was more difficult each day, and anywhere they applied for jobs the answer was always no. They had gotten used to rejections, everyone was looking for a job and there weren't any. They were two more people in the country going through the same thing; they were paying for someone else's mistakes.

On Sundays they walked to the beach, a three hour walk that was worth it once they could see the sand and the blue body of water. They loved the beach; Rocky loved getting in the water moving his legs and arms forward as he kept his head above the water. He wasn't the best swimmer. On the way to the beach they would see the mansions on the beach road; gigantic structures that represented all of the wealth they didn't have. *These people are not aware of any crisis, Arturo would say, they just live as if everything is okay and after it they will probably have more money while more people are in the streets.* They enjoyed mocking the design of the houses, the way they had been put together mixing different types of architecture to try to make them impressive. They laughed at the arches mixed with towers, the windows bars resembling jails, at the statues in front of the houses, so alien from everything else. They laugh at the house that had the elephant statue who looked more sad than imposing, and at the dolphins in front of a house that also had a fountain and a carrousel. They imagined the architects of this houses trying to get the owners to understand that these things didn't match, and then the owners just throwing money in the architects' hands and asking for more, more of anything, *anything that demonstrates our power!* Arturo would yell pretending to be the owner of a house, as Rocky laughed.

But things were going to change; they had gotten a job, finally. It was a seasonal job, but it didn't matter, they could save money and try to get back on their feet, try again. Rocky hadn't been feeling so well lately, each year that passed had felt like 6 or 7, and even though they didn't talk about it they knew they were running out of time, they were both getting tired.

One bark, two barks. Rocky ran towards Arturo and could see him in pain lying on the ground. Arturo tried to smile at Rocky, to calm him down, but as he did Rocky knew this was the end, they were both tired, at least they would leave together. Rocky thought about trying to lick the blood running down Arturo's face, but instead he lay next to him, and rested his head on his best friend's arm. He felt the pain accumulated in the last years all come to him at the same time and tried to close his eyes and rest. When the ambulance arrived they were both gone, the man and his dog, best friends had part together.

## The Protest

Father says I will remember tonight for the rest of my life, and I guess he must be right because after he said it he looked at mother and they smiled at each other as if they knew it was true. *Dress as if you were going to a party, and wear comfortable shoes*, he said. My sisters and my parents are also getting ready and the excitement has filled the house as the hour approaches. It is an excitement that has taken over the country ever since it was announced that a massive protest would take place tonight to march against the dictator and his regime. We decided to go to the protest a week ago when they announced it would be a completely peaceful protest, with the only intention of showing the dictator that people were tired of his regime and demanded new elections.

Things have not been easy for the country lately, or actually never says my father. But I only know about the recent years so I guess that is all I can speak for. After over 10 years of terrorism and political fear, a fear you could see by just going out on the streets and looking into people's faces, now we have had a dictatorship and that hasn't made things much smoother. I remember a few years ago when losing power at night because someone blew up a power plant was almost as natural as anything else. when a nation lives in terror the terror becomes quotidian.

I grew up hearing the story of when mother was about to deliver my oldest sister, during the times the whole nation had a night curfew. Father helped mother into the car and the whole way to the hospital, as father drove, my mother had to hold out her

window a white handkerchief in sign of peace, so the police would not shoot at them. In times of war no one could be trusted.

My sisters were the first ones who started talking about the protest, since at their university all of their friends were thrilled about protesting and getting the dictator out of office. For weeks they talked about going out marching with their friends, and they went to smaller protests, sang songs against the government, and helped recruit more people to protest. My father was proud, but he also told them to be careful, to keep their distance from the front line and to always be ready to run when the cops got there to break up the protest.

Father was proud because he remembered his days protesting, back when he was in college just how my sisters have been doing it now. He tells us stories about those days, when the whole world thought that going in the streets and expressing their voices could change things. He sounds nostalgic for something that could have been, but he also sounds optimistic, *while there are young people willing to go out and protest there is a future*, he says to us thinking aloud.

My father is certain it will be impossible to have a completely peaceful protest; he knows better he says. He believes the government will infiltrate people in the march to stir things up, start fighting with the police, their accomplices, and then use that excuse for the police to beat on the actual peaceful protesters. *They've done it forever, over and over again, they control everything, they use their power to break us down and continue with their regime*, he says, but even though he sounds hopeless there is a bit of light in his voice, a light that makes him think that this time could be different, maybe they will do all that, but maybe this time people will triumph.

We were born in times of war, and the excitement of being part of history rather than learn it from the older people has taken over us. At school one of our teachers asked us if we knew what was happening in the country and if we had heard of the peaceful protest that was being planned. Only two of us knew of it, or had an idea of what the teacher was talking about, and both of us knew because we had older siblings in universities. My friend Jonathan got up and said that we were marching for freedom, and without stopping started singing something he had heard his older brother sing, *Here and there/ fear is over, here and there/ fuck the government*, we all laughed nervously, as we were not allowed to curse in front of teachers. The teacher smiled uncomfortably, and told Jonathan that was enough, and thanked him for his contribution. After that everyone at school went around singing that same little song, and there was no more talk about it from the teachers.

Now we are here, the five of us, my father and mother, and my sisters and I surrounded by thousands of people that have come just like us to march and hopefully celebrate. People have marched from all over the country to come to the capital today; some started weeks ago, some joined on the way, and some like us who live here just came today. There are lights, and music, and excitement, and hope, there is definitely hope. People walk together like a dark ant moving forward, as if they knew each other, and everyone smiles at me when I sing as loud as I can and raise my hands with all of my energy. We are far behind the people in the front, in case something happens my father says, but we can feel the happiness of everyone around us. We hear the music and see different people going on a stage and talk about the country being free, and the dictator leaving forever.



Suddenly the noise grows and people start running around, smoke moves quickly through the air, and father hugs me and leads us away from the protest under the roof of a nearby house. People are running, some are scared and some look happy, we don't know yet what is happening, if it's good or bad, but we hide under that roof anyway. Then we see lights in the sky; a helicopter leaving from somewhere near us. People yell things at it, insults mostly, and some even try to throw whatever they have in their hands at it. I see my friend Jonathan in the middle of the crowd making a pistol with his fingers and pretending to shoot the helicopter down. My father smiles and looks at me and tells me one more time I will remember tonight for the rest of my life.

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The dictator woke up that day and did the same thing he had done for the last fifteen years of his life. He brushed his teeth, went to the toilet, took a shower, and stared at himself in the mirror for 36 minutes while he talked to his father who had passed away 20 years before. *Today might be the day, dad. I will do my best, but I don't know how much is left that I can do. I've tried to be the leader you wanted me to be, but they don't understand. I've given them order, I've given them peace, but all they see is my death, and the chaos that will destroy this forgotten nation without me.* He continued talking until he reached his 36 daily minutes, he felt proud for a second about not needing a watch to keep the time anymore, and kissed his reflection as if he was kissing his father.

He made his usual walk inside the government house to his office and on his way he saw the 13 portraits of himself lined up on the walls. As he passed them he saw each of them and thought of the time when those pictures were taken; so much time had passed

and he wondered if he was happy then, or was anyone else happy, perhaps back then he could still tell who liked him and who didn't fear him, and he thought that if that night went well he would have another picture taken and put it up. 14 portraits, he thought, one for each of the children I could have had; he smiled as what felt like the bitter taste of a long-gone happiness came back.

At his office, his personal team of assistants received him by getting up and saluting, as every morning. He saw they were tired and afraid, and he could see the end was closer than he ever thought. During the meeting they did anything to postpone talking about the protest of that night. They informed him that 46 of the 48 presidents they had invited had sent letters denying their presence at the ceremony taking place next month to commemorate the beginning of another year of his government. He almost allowed himself a smile and thought of the two presidents that had confirmed their presence, and the fact that he wouldn't have gone to theirs. They told him the owners of the 5 TV stations and the 6 newspapers the government secretly paid monthly to support the dictatorship had held a meeting about the dangers of continuing to support the government during this time of protest. *There is nothing they can do; we have videotaped every meeting with them and will blackmail them as soon as they say anything. Send them a little sample and they'll stop crying about it.* He recognized the fear and even some admiration from his team, and felt pride, maybe today was not the day.

Inevitably they had to talk about the protest taking place that night. A young man he didn't remember, probably someone new he himself had hired, started talking about it, and he could see the young man was fighting for his hands to stop shaking. As the young man mentioned that there would be thousands of people, and that many of them had been

on their way to the capital from almost every city in the country for the last two weeks, the president saw a line of ants going up a wall and into a tiny hall on the ceiling. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands of ants, and the president remembered being a kid and making circles on the pavement with his saliva around groups of ants to get them off of their paths.

He asked the chief of security if they had hired enough people to disturb the protest, and enough cops to repress the masses and when the chief said yes he got up and walked out without saying a word. Everyone else got up and saluted as he walked out of the office. As he was leaving he leaned closer to the chief of security and whispered, *you may want to get the helicopter ready for tonight, we may have to go out for a ride.*

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That night was a cold night, and if I tell you we were not afraid I would be lying. But we were also excited, and happy, and we could see in the faces of our friends, and in the vastness of the night, the faces of our future sons and daughters: your faces, and their freedom.

We had spent months coordinating with people from other cities, finding out when they were arriving, sending buses to bring more people to the capital, using the little money we had left to make pamphlets advertising our protest, our dreams of freedom, our hopes. It wasn't easy, and we knew most of us had been followed for months, our phones were tapped, but we still worked hard knowing our chance was little, but a chance anyway. That we repeated to each other daily, and especially that night, there was a chance and maybe this time it would work.

Back in those days, they were a lot more street dogs wandering the districts of our city, you guys wouldn't know because a lot has changed, but they were and we spent all night picking up dogs and bringing them all to the same place. Someone had thought of it; to paint all of the dogs we could pick up in different bright colors and release them during the protest as a sign of celebration, as a joke, as a statement that even the dogs wandering the city were with us. We used anything we could; bones from our meals, old left over beans, sweet potatoes that apparently dogs loved, and believe me when I say that even the dogs contributed and let us bring them to our places. We decided not to paint them, because we thought that would be cruel, but we clothed them with colorful sweaters. Animals know when a cause is worth fighting for, and they knew our cause was honest.

Some of us made signs, others sat up the stage, others coordinated with the people arriving from other cities; it was a big party we were planning and we were enjoying it. We couldn't take it anymore, we were tired of the dictatorship, we were tired of being repressed, and we hadn't forgotten of our right as free citizens. The dictator had changed the constitution to allow himself to be reelected for a third time, and even though he had been behind in the polls, he had a miraculous victory. It was no secret they had cheated; in some cities some votes were lost, in other somehow dead people had voted for him, they lied to us in our faces and the dictator stayed as president. But we were done with it, we were going to get him out of the government house, we were going to do it for you.

When the night came we were ready, and we had a lot more people that we had expected. Imagine it, please imagine it; thousands of people coming together in a peaceful protest. At seven at night, after the sun had set, we made our entrance. We had

divided ourselves in four groups, and at the same time we all walked into the plaza downtown from each cardinal point. South, north, east, and west; we walked in singing, dancing, laughing. The police followed us, but they couldn't contain us. They saw us as we walked in, and they could see it in our eyes; our hope, our fearlessness.

The plaza looked beautiful that night, and it looked even more beautiful as we walked in. We walked into the plaza and we could see around us the Government Palace, the Cathedral, the Archbishop's Palace, The Municipal Palace, and the Palace of Union. The old, dark-looking, historic buildings were brightening up by our songs, our dogs with colorful sweaters, our flashlights held up, and our dreams.

When the speeches continued, and everyone kept singing it occurred; the infiltrated people started to push, people started to scream, some ran to hide, and some started to fight. We had been prepared for it, but that didn't stop the chaos. Some started to fight with the cops, the cops started to beat on people. More people ran, and we started to doubt. Kids were crying, and punches flew in the crowds, even when some of us tried to calm things down. On the speakers they asked people to remain calm, they reminded everyone this was a peaceful protest, but the fights continued and we were losing control. Then it happened; the sky lit up and the strong wind made everyone immobile. We saw the helicopter and couldn't believe it, the dictator was fleeing, his private helicopter was leaving the Government Palace.

Silence took over for a few minutes, and someone hooked a radio to the speakers. The dictator had sent a press release minutes before saying he was leaving the country that night, due to the demonstrations against him. All of the news stations informed the same thing, there were no details, he had only said he was leaving, but that was enough.

The police and the infiltrated people disappeared, and we started to sing even louder. We were free, we were happy, and we had done it all for you, our sons and daughters.

### Bridges and Tunnels

“Javier. Javier. Javi.”

“Hey, yes, I’m awake. Sorry, was I doing it again?”

“Yes, you were making the same noises. I feel bad waking you up, you must be tired, but you looked so distressed. Another nightmare?”

“It’s okay. Yes, another one. I’m sorry, I should be keeping you company, talking to you, you have been driving for almost six hours now. Wanna switch seats?”

“It’s okay, I’m not tired yet. Even though the view is boring. Miles and miles of the same trees.”

“Large country of trees and sand.”

“Large country of bridges and tunnels.”

“Large country of highways and buildings.”

“Large country of melancholic people.”

“What do melancholic people have to do with bridges and tunnels, Daniel?”

“Everything, Javi. Wanna tell me about that nightmare?”

“Sure. We have time, still hours to drive. I dreamed that I was back home, we were done driving, and I was back home. You weren’t there anymore, maybe you had dropped me off. I was back home, and everyone was there to welcome me. Everyone came and said hello, and welcome back, just like in the movies, but when I wanted to say hello, I couldn’t say anything in Spanish, and only words in English came out and no one could understand me.”

“So, you were home, but you didn’t know how to speak Spanish anymore?”

“No, that was the worst part. In my head I knew Spanish, I understood what they were saying, and I had the words in Spanish in my head, but when I tried to speak, only words in English came out.”

“And no one understood you?”

“Exactly, they didn’t understand me, and I tried telling them, it’s me, Javier, and I still speak Spanish, and I missed you too, and I’m happy I’m back too, but couldn’t say it in Spanish. They just looked at me as if I was crazy, or maybe thinking I was someone else, or I thought they thought I was someone else, or perhaps I feared I was someone else. You know how confusing dreams are.”

“Of course, I know, but I never dreamed anything like that. No wonder you were making sounds and looked distressed.”

“It was horrible, and I could hear what they were thinking. They thought ‘Javier doesn’t want to speak Spanish anymore, Javier has changed, that’s not Javier.’ And, I didn’t want to say anything else, to stop speaking in English, but the words in English kept coming out of me, like a river bringing rocks, rocks with English words on them.”

“It’s okay, man, it was just a dream. We have one more day or so driving, and then you’ll be home, and you’ll speak in Spanish with anyone you want. Have you thought what you want to do first yet? After I drop you off, I have five more hours, and I’m not stopping until I see my wife and my kids again.”

“Of course, I know, I’m going to kill him. Then, go kiss my mom.”

“You still joking around with that? You gotta cut it out, or I’m going to start believing you and will have to kick your ass.”

“Careful, there, eyes on the road. What was that?”

“Just a raccoon, luckily, he was fast. It would’ve been your fault if I killed him, talking all that non-sense.”

“Country of raccoons and lizards.”

“Don’t avoid me now, Javier. The raccoon is fine, and I’ll keep my eyes on the road, but you’re not killing anyone. I won’t let you go back home after 15 years, to go straight to prison.”

“15 years, that’s a long time. That means you are going back after 12 years, that’s a long time too. Your kids must be almost as tall as you. When you are a kid years weigh more, you are 45 now, and I am two years older than Christ.”

“You wanna get religious now, after saying you are going to kill a man?”

“Plenty of that in the Bible, I think.”

“Stop kidding around, Javi, you are not killing anyone.”

“He was supposed to take care of Arcadia for me, Daniel, and he stole her. She was waiting for me, and he was supposed to keep her for me, not marry her.”

“I know, Javi, I know. Still, you’ll go to jail.”

“He was my best friend.”

“I’m your best friend now, and you are going home, and you’ll see your family and friends. And, I’ll come visit, but I won’t visit a fool in jail.”

“You know you would.”

“Perhaps I would, but I’ll still think you are a fool. 15 years working your ass off to go to jail, that’s a fool’s move to me.”



“Let’s say I won’t kill anyone, you know I am no fool. You don’t survive in a country of bridges, tunnels, and melancholic people, being a fool.”

“There I may have to disagree with you, sometimes the only way to survive is being a fool. Or thinking we are surviving is foolish itself.”

“Sometimes I don’t understand you, Daniel. All I know is, you don’t want me to kill him, and let’s say for now I won’t.”

“That’s better. Let’s talk about something more pleasant. What about Florida oranges?”

“What about them?”

“The smell of the groves at night, and the sweetness of the oranges in the morning.”

“They were good. That’s when things changed for the better, now I know what you meant by more pleasant things.”

“Yes, things got better after that orange season. Not easy, but manageable. Man, did we struggle before that.”

“Damn right we did, we had no work, and stood outside the Home Depot, waiting for someone to come looking for help moving furniture, or doing anything. With the cops around us, always coming and going, trying to pick us up. Who knew moving a little north to work with oranges would be the turning point.”

“Remember the last job we had, two days before we left for orange season?”

“Of course, I do, that must have been seven or eight years ago. With the Chilean guy and his mom, right, or was he Colombian?”

“Neither, he was Peruvian. I remember, because when they were dropping us off we told them your nickname was “Chivo”, because it meant goat in Spanish and you liked going around saying you were the greatest of all time, and he said that was fine, but to be careful when saying that to a Peruvian, because “Chivo” was slang for queer in Peru. We all laughed, and his poor mother misunderstood the conversation and said you should be proud to be a Chivo, and we laughed more.”

“I forgot about that! Of course, the guy was Peruvian, and his mother was sweet. Wasn’t the guy on crutches or something?”

“He was, he had had knee surgery, that’s why he went to look for help at the Home Depot, he needed two guys to help move his mother to a new place. He drove slowly and told us to jump in, and right away, before even asking how much we would charge, he told us to pretend we were his cousins if the cops stopped us.”

“Man, Daniel, you have such great memory. I had forgotten all of that, it’s been a few years. All I remembered is, the beers they gave us on top of our payment. There must have been 60 beers in the boxes they gave us, all nice beers too. I remember they had had a party and there was left over beer.”

“There’s no way there were 60 beers, maybe 20, 25 tops. Time has probably magnified your memories, as it often does. We had some nice beer for our goodbye to South Florida party, and some for the road.”

“People whistling in the streets.”

“Dogs standing on two legs on the roofs, looking down.”

“Kids playing soccer in the streets, and using rocks as goal posts. And cars having to drive slowly, as the kids motion to them with their hands to drive faster, so they can resume their game.”

“Public trash cans in parks in shapes of giant dogs.”

“Playing with water during carnivals.”

“Homemade food.”

“My mother’s homemade food.”

“Street kiosks selling newspapers, candy, and sodas.”

“My wife’s homemade food.”

“You are making me hungry, Daniel.”

“You are the one driving, if you’re hungry we can stop and eat.”

“I’m okay for now, let’s continue talking about back home. Sunday Mass.”

“Again, with the religion, I didn’t know you went to Sunday Mass, Javier.”

“I didn’t, but I miss it.”

“Half-finished houses, with naked walls.”

“Colorful birds singing. I barely heard birds singing here.”

“Maybe, you weren’t listening, and your eyes were closed. Going to the stadium.”

“Hearing everyone around you talking about the weekend soccer games on Monday mornings.”

“Strikes.”

“You miss strikes? They make traffic terrible, always someone complaining for something that won’t change.”

“I miss the chaos of it, it’s intrinsically connected to us.”

“Again, I don’t fully understand you, Daniel. But if you miss the strikes, that’s just fine. 50 cent newspapers with ladies almost naked on their covers.”

“The smell of wet soil after it rains.”

“Soda in glass bottles.”

“When random circuses come into town.”

“The morning drizzle, somehow different than the drizzle here.”

“August.”

“December.”

“Perhaps you’ll pull over so we can eat soon. But before, top three things we miss from home, I’ll start: My kid’s smiles.”

“My mother.”

“My wife waking me up in the mornings.”

“My neighborhood friends.

“Feeling home.”

“Knowing I’m home.” *Los besos de Arcadia, los pechos de Arcadia, las piernas de Arcadia.*

“What’s so funny?”

“I thought about the Peruvian guy telling me what Chivo meant, again, that was funny. I actually ran into him a couple of years after that job we did for him, I never got to tell you.”

“You saw him, and you couldn’t remember he was Peruvian? And you didn’t tell me earlier, when we were talking about that job?”

“I guess I forgot, or didn’t think of it. So much happens all the time, I don’t know what’s worth keeping. I went back to South Florida to visit some friends, remember, you didn’t want to come? I ran into him at a bar.”

“You recognized him?”

“No, the guy recognized me. I went to the bar, and I see this guy looking at me. I remember him clearly now, dark curly hair and all, and his eyes trying to remember where he knew me from. Then he goes ‘Javier, what’s up, man. How’s it going, how’s Daniel?’”

“He remembered me too?”

“He did, and he bought me a drink. He seemed so happy to have run into me, I thought he was drunk or something.”

“And, was he?”

“Not at all, he bought me a drink, but he was drinking water. But he seemed so happy to have run into me, as if we were good friends. He asked about you, he told me about his mother and how she went back to their home country. He seemed extremely calm, it made me wonder if I had ever been happy.”

“So, what else did he say.”

“Not much, he asked how was work, he remembered we were working in the orange groves, I guess we told him we were going when we worked for him. I told him we were already planning about going back home for good, this was some years ago, but you and I were already talking about doing this drive.”

“What did he say?”

“He stopped smiling, and got serious. No, not serious or mad, but his tone became more respectful. I wondered if he was really just drinking water, and he shook my hand and said, ‘Javier, we are all going back home, to the country of our childhood, but that country left us long ago.’ He said that, and he smiled and said goodbye, and I didn’t see him again.”

“I wonder what he meant, maybe he was drunk.”

“Daniel, this may be our last conversation in English. Tomorrow we’ll be back home, and we may never speak in English again. Why are we speaking in English now? We were speaking in Spanish during the first part of the trip.”

“I’m not sure, you woke up from your nightmare and spoke to me in English, and I just followed you. But also, you know how sentimental we get when we talk about back home in Spanish, perhaps we both were trying to not cry, we rarely cry in English.”

“Daniel, tengo miedo.”

“What are you afraid of, Javier?”

“Tengo miedo, Daniel.”

“I heard you, what are you afraid of?”

“Daniel, tengo miedo.”

“Yo también.”

## Alessandra

The almost empty bus moved slowly through the city road, hopping forward and side to side over the decrepit, and sinister pavement. Sitting by the window, in the second to last row, Alessandra saw the city get up in the early morning, while holding Duke in her arms tightly close to her chest. Winter had just begun, but the fog already covered every morning, and the grey sky produced a depressing and infinite drizzle.

Traffic was heavy, and the bus stopped constantly, moving only a few yards before stopping again and again. Out the window, Alessandra saw a group of street dogs following a female dog probably in heat, a kid pushing an old man in a wheelchair on the side of the road while selling caramels to the cars and people passing by, several men standing in front of a newspaper stand reading the front pages while some drank hot coffee, and the smoke of the cars floating around mixing up with the fog. Duke's legs rested in her lap, and she hugged him a bit tighter.

Alessandra was twelve years old, but she looked ten, so the image of her in the bus by herself holding an eight-week-old German Shepherd was at least intriguing, but the bus was almost empty, and no one seemed to have noticed her back there. Alessandra had never gone to the country club by herself or by bus, but she went with her family almost every Sunday during winter for as long as she could remember. When the city became colder, the country side, less than two hours away, offered a sunny escape. Her father drove and her mom sat next to him, while she sat in the back seat with her little brother. Usually, on the way back to the city on Sunday evenings, they were so tired of

playing and swimming all day, that she and her brother fell asleep and only woke up when they were back home.

But Alessandra had decided she had to go by herself that Monday morning, after thinking about it all night. It didn't matter how much her mother insisted to wait for her to come back from dropping off her little brother at school, Alessandra decided to go by herself, and her mother knew she wouldn't change her mind. In the bus alone, with Duke in her arms, she was glad she didn't wait for her mother, if her mother was there she probably would already be crying.

"It's okay if you don't want to go to school today, I understand, but you can't go alone. You'll have to take two buses, over 40 minutes each ride, and then walk half a mile to the club. It's too dangerous." Her mom told her that morning.

Alessandra's father had left for work earlier, but her mother was taking the day off to be with her.

"I know it's two buses, and I'll be okay. I want to do it alone."

"I know you are sad, Alessandra, I'm staying home to be with you. Don't go alone, you'll be even more sad alone." Her mother's voice was tender, so were her eyes, but Alessandra had thought about it all night long. She had to go alone, and she couldn't wait.

"Don't be too loud, he will hear you and cry again." Alessandra said pointing at her younger brother's room. "I can be back before he gets back from school."

Alessandra's mom knew it was better to not argue, her daughter had made up her mind, she was twelve, but acted like an adult. The mother gave her money, repeated over



and over to be careful, hugged her and kissed her for a long time, and ask her to call from the telephone at the country club as soon as she got there.

In the bus, Alessandra pet Duke's ears and belly softly, as he laid with his eyes closed. More people had gotten on the bus, and a few of them saw Alessandra and smiled at her and the puppy. The bus moved faster, stopping only so often to pick up passengers. All Alessandra could see were the political signs on the side of the road, for the upcoming election. *Ribeyro '92, Tu Amigo, Tu Presidente. Vota por De La Fuente para Presidente, Siempre Honesto. Bienvenido a los 90's, Vota por Marcos, el Candidato Ideal.* Alessandra read them all softly to Duke's ears.

The bus stopped to pick up passengers, and a man dressed in a clown outfit holding a bag of chocolates got in. The driver was about to tell him he couldn't sell his chocolates in the bus, but the clown smoothly shook his hand, gave him a couple of coins, and winked. The bus driver, probably to avoid the confrontation, frowned and signaled the clown to go ahead, and the clown started his routine. His limousine ran out of gas, he said, and his chauffeur decided to take the day off and run for President. He only got a couple of laughs, so he changed his tactic. He would be honest now, his kids were sick and he lost his job, any chocolates he could sale would help greatly. A couple of people bought some chocolates, but most still looked away. The clown walked up and down the bus, and saw Alessandra sitting alone.

"Why are you sad, with such a beautiful dog?" he asked Alessandra, but before she could answer he added, "I am a magician, and will make you smile."

Alessandra didn't like the attention of the clown, or the other passengers looking at her. She didn't want to talk to the clown, or someone telling her she looked sad. The

clown took a balloon out of his pocket, blew it up, tied a string to it, and gave it to Alessandra. She decided it was better to just take it and half smile, so he would leave.

“The biggest magic trick of all, to make a child smile.” the clown said and took a staged bow.

Some passengers clapped, and others quickly called him over to buy some of his chocolates. The clown kept talking about his gift of bringing joy to children, and how much the world needed clowns. When the bus stopped, he took another bow, and as he got out of the bus he looked in Alessandra’s direction and winked at her. She hated clowns.

After the clown left, the passengers went back to their conversations, and Alessandra could hide with Duke again. She found it hard to believe she was at the country club just the day before with her family, she felt as if time had been broken, and her days felt heavier and longer.

The day before was only the second Sunday of the year they went to the club, as winter had just begun. Alessandra and her young brother spent the morning swimming, throwing coins and going under the water to retract them, and kicking a blue beach ball around. Alessandra was not a good swimmer, and was scared of the adult’s pool, but she liked playing with her younger brother in the shallow end of the medium pool. Their parents sat in the lounge chairs and monitored their games, so Alessandra felt safe.

After lunch, Alessandra and her younger brother went for a walk. They were allowed to wander around alone for the last couple of years, since Alessandra was ten and her brother four. Now, that Alessandra was twelve, she didn’t even need to ask for permission. Alessandra’s younger brother liked to play a game where he asked if

Alessandra would join him if he went somewhere, and all Alessandra had to say was yes. “If I leave with the rodeo, would you come with me?” he asked, and Alessandra said “Yes!” “If I am invited to Mars, would you come with me?” Alessandra said, “Of course.” “If I become a singer, would you come with me?” Alessandra took some extra time and closed her eyes, as she did sometimes pretending to think about it to get him to laugh, when she heard him scream and the splash right after.

They were so distracted that neither of them had realized they were by the adult’s pool. Alessandra ran to the side edge of the pool to try to grab her brother’s arm, but she couldn’t reach him, as he moved his arms desperately and started to sink. No one was around, and Alessandra knew she didn’t have time to go get someone. She was afraid of the adult’s pool, but she jumped and swam towards her little brother. She tried to pull him out of the water, but he wouldn’t stop kicking and moving his arms wildly, and he kept drinking water. Alessandra was small, and couldn’t manage his weight. She kept his face above water and asked him to calm down and help her, but he was afraid and his desperate motion brought her down. Alessandra, using all of her strength, pulled her brother towards the steps, and carried him out of the water. Sitting in the grass, she hugged him, as he cried and spit water.

When they went back to their parents, they both cried and told them everything that had happened. Their parents consoled them, “We’ll never leave you alone again.” Their father said, and “It was our fault, we’re so lucky to have such brave children.” Their mother added. After Alessandra’s younger brother stopped crying, they decided it was time to go home, and walking to the car they ran into club workers who promoted a new litter of dogs for sale.

“Pure breed German Shepherds.” The man in charge said, “Just turned eight weeks old today, and can go home with you right now. These dogs will keep your house safe.”

Alessandra’s father was not a spontaneous man, but still shocked by his children’s pain and seeing how excited they looked about the puppies, he agreed to buy them a dog. “He’ll be a good watch dog”. he told his wife with a smile, and looking at the kids, she agreed.

Alessandra and her brother played with the five puppies, and almost instantly chose the same one as their favorite.

“He has such sweet eyes”. Alessandra told her brother, and asked him what would they name it.

“We’ll name him Duke”. He said with a large smile, having forgotten about almost drowning.

It wasn’t until that night, back home, when they realized Duke was blind. They hadn’t noticed when Duke played with the other puppies that his eyes were watery, and he had slept the whole way home. But under the household light, it was clear that Duke could hardly see, and it wouldn’t be long until he became fully blind.

“That guy conned us, this dog is no watch dog, he can barely see.” The father raised his voice, feeling deceived. He had paid for a guardian dog, he said, and got a problem instead. “Tomorrow we’re taking this dog back, and getting a good one.” He said, as Alessandra’s little brother started crying. Alessandra didn’t cry, but she didn’t sleep either.

Alessandra got off the second bus, with Duke in her arms, and started walking to the country club. Her mom had called the night before, and they would take Duke back and give them a new dog. Alessandra thought about what the guys would tell her to make her feel better, she thought they'd tell her that another family would adopt him, she thought they'd tell her that Duke was going to live with them, she almost thought of what else could happen to Duke, but she didn't allow herself to keep thinking.

She put Duke on the floor, and removed the thin rope they gave them as a leash the evening before. "Go" she cried. "Go. Run. Escape, get out of here." Tears went down her cheeks, but Duke just stood there, looking at her with his glassy eyes.

Alessandra didn't clean her tears, and picked him up. She pressed him against her chest, and as he licked her face, she walked towards the country club. She knew it'd be a long walk, and a long way back, and winter had just begun.

### Appointment in the Study

He's coming up the stairs, his steps heavy and loud as he hits the wooden steps; he rushes up, but he is not late, he is just on time to meet me. Downstairs two police officers stand with papers in their hands, and next to them his lawyer, unsure why his boss has to rush upstairs. It's 5:28am, and the residential street is still deserted; only a man with a cart filled with warm bread and pastries stands a block from the house, waiting for hungry passersby to grab some breakfast on the go. I see the man and his cart from the window, through the fog; it was a nice day, until I arrived.

His steps on the stairs get louder, booming like a funeral band, and I wait for him; he'll come to meet me, just on time. His study is dark, but the soft light coming through the window allows me to see his desk and the bookshelves behind it. Pictures of him with his family, pictures of him and famous friends, and hung on the wall, his old presidential sash. He is almost at the door, and he's sweating, a cold sweat of a man escaping from the law, while Death awaits on the other side.

He runs into his study, but he doesn't see me yet. He walks around the room, his hands on his head, wanting to scream, but he can't. He paces around the room, erratically, frantically, cowardly. I am here, but he won't face me. He goes through drawers, takes out papers, tears up some of them, and others he covers with ink, ink that runs down the pages slowly, like black larvae.

It's the top right drawer he is avoiding, and we both know it. Downstairs the

police officers are getting anxious, and one of them asks the lawyer, “Will the ex-president be down anytime soon? The captain said to get him out of his house without many people noticing.” His voice balances between insecurity and disrespect. “We have the paperwork and he should come with us,” the other one adds. The lawyer, experienced in buying the former president time, looks at the officers with disdain, “He will be down when he’s down, and never call him ex-president again, he is Mr. President for both of you.” Meanwhile, the man with his cart down the road makes his first sale, two pieces of bread, an empanada, and a cup of coffee; he grabs the coins, closes his fist, and does the sign of the cross, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It’s a good day for selling bread.

In the study, he continues going through papers, destroying them. It’s useless, there isn’t enough time to cover his crimes. His hands move desperately, and his breathing gets faster and faster. I could tell him I’m here, and help him, tell him to look in the top right drawer, and then he’ll be able to see me. But time is on my side, and I don’t like to rush what is written in the stars. I am Death, I am everywhere, and when he comes to meet me, he’ll be just on time.

He is still tall, but his body is not as lengthy as once was. His old dark and wavy hair, has some gray now, and his once handsome round face, has become too large and deformed. His wrinkles draw maps on his checks, hands, and forehead, maps of his sins and crimes. I’ve been waiting long to visit him, but I come when I can, and he’s been running away from me for a long time. His lips, those lips that delivered words so smoothly, with presidential speeches years back, are now dry. His lips will meet mine, and he will have kissed Death, and his words will vanish.

I've been to this country of course, Death is everywhere, countless times. I recognize the fog and the nostalgic gray sky. I've been to this sad land, many times, even when I didn't want it. I'm surprised of those who come to me, or call me back and back. I am Death, and Death arrives when she can.

His hands stop moving, and they rest on the desk's leather top. He reaches for the top right drawer, thinking he is being brave, but it's not bravery, he's only coming to meet me just on time. He unlocks the drawer, and sees the revolver, a Colt Lawman MK V. He looks up and sees me, Death standing in front of him as he holds the revolver in his hand. He points it at me, but it's just an instinct, you can't kill death. It is 5:35am, and as much as he tries, he can't cry.

"Death!" He finally speaks, and his hands shake. "Why are you here?"

"We have an appointment today, I've come as fast as I can."

"I don't want to go anymore. I don't want to die."

"You know it's not your choice, they are all downstairs, and we are both here, where we are supposed to be."

"I didn't call you, Death. But if you offer me freedom, I could go with you."

He tries to make one last deal, but there are no deals left to make. "There's no freedom with me." I tell him.

"If I pull the trigger, would I be remembered as the hero I was?" Even in front of Death, he's vain.

"I can't make people remember you as you want to be remembered."

"I sent you many lives in the past, you owe me, Death. I sent you old and young lives, all just to keep mine."



“Those lives were not yours to give, just like your own life. You’ll come with me, because that’s just the way things are.”

“Will I be forgiven after I die?” he says, and I get closer to him.

“You will be gone, and that is all. You will be a name, lost in time.”

The gun shot sound travels downstairs, passes the police officers and the lawyer in the living room, crosses the kitchen and the yard, and reaches the man at the end of the street with his cart. In the study, his body falls on the desk first, and then on the floor, on top of piles of documents. The blood runs down the pages like ink. When the police officers and the lawyer come upstairs, I am still here, lingering in the room and they can feel me, but all they see is the man. The man is all they see, just his body lying on the ground, I have taken everything else, everything that never was.

## Lost Kids

The first kid disappeared the day my mother fell down. I received her email that morning, telling me that she had fallen down the night before and had to go to the hospital, but she was doing well already she said, so well she added that she decided to email me rather than call because she knew I must have been busy going to work. Her practicality made me sad, I knew that a 70-year-old woman who had to go to the hospital after a fall, was most likely not well the next morning. What made me even more sad was that in fact her email was convenient for me, since it allowed me to reply saying I was glad she was doing better and I would call her that night after work to check in on her. I thought of her the whole ride to work, just as I thought of her every day, her memory appearing in my recognition of any daily act of love around me. I thought of her words, the sacrifices she had made for me, her embrace and the way I felt safe and like a child again in her arms. Yet, it was always difficult to find enough free time to call her, life got in the way I convinced myself, and calling her to speak for a few minutes never seemed enough. She had left the States and gone back to our home country three years ago, and at the airport as we cried goodbye, I promised I would call her all the time and visit her soon. But, three years went by and I hadn't yet visited, and the weekly calls became bi-weekly, then monthly, and ultimately sporadic.

When I arrived to the paper, still thinking of my mother, my editor James approached me before I even placed my things on my desk. "Possible good story," he said handing me some notes. "A kid disappeared not far from here. Hispanic

neighborhood, only one parent, and she doesn't speak much English so you'll have to interview in Spanish. Go see what you can find." I was used to his lack of sensibility, so the way he called the disappearance of a kid a possible good story didn't surprise me anymore. I took the notes from him, and he turned around to walk away adding, "This could be a good one, maybe the one you'll one day write a novel about. Don't mess it up, Poet." It was his usual phrase for me every time he personally assigned me a story, always putting the same emphasis on his chosen nickname for me *Poet*, with a mix of mockery and disdain. It was the nickname he gave me my second week at the paper, after I made the mistake to share with him that I liked to write stories.

At the end of my first week at the paper, I accepted the invitation to go out for drinks with some of the staff. James already seemed callous to me, but when he approached me at the bar that night, with a cold beer and what seemed like a welcoming smile, I thought that perhaps I read him wrong. Maybe he was serious at work, but nice outside and could become a mentor, so when he asked how I ended up writing for a newspaper I told him about my passion for reading and writing, and my secret dream of publishing fiction one day. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the fact that I was working for the first time in something that had anything to do with writing. Normally, I wouldn't have shared such personal information with him. But I did, and it didn't matter how much I told him later that I didn't even write poetry, or lied and said that I was kidding about the whole writing thing, he baptized me as *Poet*. As if with the weight of the word he questioned my presence at the paper, are you lost *Poet*? Get lost, *Poet*.

I've covered presidential elections, local political campaigns, dog talent shows, kid talent shows, concerts, book readings, college and high school sports, local over-50

bowling league games, and any assignment that landed on my desk. Like my mother, Luz Martinez de Rabassa, I never ran away from work. Any day at work is full of possibilities, she always said.

My mother and I moved to the States the year after my father passed away, I had just turned 15 years old. A pair of tourist visas, and some distant family members scattered around South Florida, were enough to make the decision to leave our home and cross the ocean. In reality, we both knew we were escaping the loss of my father, but we didn't need to mention it. "Hay futuro allá," my mother said, and in search of that future we went.

Quickly we realized that our distant relatives were quite distant, more like friends, or distant friends even. But through one of them my mother found out about a cleaning job at a fancy waterfront apartment, with a family that didn't mind paying under the table. The job was part-time and seasonal, but my mother's diligence helped her getting recommended to clean a couple of other apartments in the same building, a few hours here and there, enough for us to survive. After school and on weekends, I would go help my mom when she cleaned an empty apartment, since most of the people she worked for spent their time living between South Florida and the Northeast.

During the weekends when I helped my mom cleaning the empty apartments, we had our lunch by the balcony, looking at the ocean. The Atlantic Ocean was not familiar to us yet, perhaps it never became familiar to my mother, and I looked at it missing our Pacific Ocean with its long hyperbolic waves resembling white elephants. I sometimes asked my mother if she missed home, and she said of course she did, and I would tell her I did too. Do your homework, my mom would say when I tried to help, so one day when I

move back home you can be like these people and afford a place here and a place back home, and you can come visit me. I'll go where you go, I would always tell her.

I thought of this as I went to investigate the disappearance case. Three years, I thought, three years and I haven't visited her.

The information James had given me about the case was minimal, he could've just mentioned it in passing without giving me anything and I would've known as much. No police report had been filled, no name of the missing kid or his mother, and no address. Just the name of the neighborhood, and a church as a landmark. I made it to the church by noon, and started to walk around. The neighborhood was like many others in South Florida, east of the interstate, but not east enough to be affluent. Humble houses too close to each other, deteriorated yards marked by rusty metal fences, a few driveways with old cars sitting on blocks. I too lived in a neighborhood like this once, its hardship was familiar. Surprisingly for a summer Tuesday at noon, the streets were deserted. I was the only person walking around, looking for a case without clues, lost in a neighborhood that looked familiar but I didn't know.

The street names were letters, so I went in order. When I turned on D Street, I saw some kids playing soccer in the distance. I walked up to them, and only as I reached them, I noticed how sweaty and tired I was. The sun was oppressive, yet the kids glowed on the pavement running behind the ball, impervious to the heat. Six of them were having a game of three against three, and they kept playing, even though they noticed my presence, I was the only other person around. The kids kicked and laugh, narrating the game and giving each other directions in Spanish. When one kid kicked the ball away, and the game stopped, they finally turned towards me. I had learned in the past that it is

better for people to address you, than attacking them with questions. I couldn't be too anxious, or too friendly, trying something like speaking to them in Spanish to pretend I could relate to them. They had to choose.

“What do you want?” one of the oldest kids asked me, he must have been twelve. English it was.

“Just enjoying the game, you guys can really run under this sun.”

“What do you want?” the same boy repeated, “Are you a cop?”

“No. I hope I don't look like a cop.” A couple of them laughed, “I'm a journalist” I added.

“What do you want, Mr. Journalist?” another kid added, this time in a nicer tone. They were probably relieved I wasn't a cop.

“I'm just working on a case around here, doing some ground work. We're covering the disappearance of a kid, but I don't have a name. You guys haven't heard anything?”

“Which one?” the first kid asked, “kids are disappearing here every day.” He was serious, but some of the other kids giggled. By this time, the kid who had gone to get the ball was back, but the game was still stopped because of me.

“Is that so, you got any names? I really wanna help finding this boy.” I said, wondering to what extent was he kidding.

“You'll need another book, Mr. Journalist,” he said. His tone had changed, he believed me. “Go down the road a couple of blocks, to 625. The lady you are looking for is Doña Malena, and the kid is Antonio.”

“That's great, thank you so much.”

“You wanna play?” He said, as he kicked the ball towards me.

He knew what he was doing, passing me the ball with enough strength that I would only be able to control it if I had a soft touch. It was a test, if the ball bounced far away from me I’d failed, and he passed it at a speed and from such a short distance that most people would have failed. I lifted my right foot, twisting it so the ball would impact the inside part of it, at the same time I arched my back and put most of my weight on my left leg and backwards, so when the ball hit the inside of my right foot, the ball did not bounce forward, but instead lingered in the air in front of me, as I balanced my weight back so in the same movement and before the ball touched the ground I kicked it firmly back to him. The kid grabbed the ball with his hands, right before it hit his chest, and he smiled.

“I can’t play,” I said, “I have to go work.”

“Nice touch, Mr. Journalist. What’s your name? I’m Enzo.”

“Nice to meet you, Enzo. I’m Lucas, Lucas Rabassa.”

“Doña Malena is probably at work, she works all day. You’re probably better off coming back than walking there. Suerte.”

“Gracias.” I told him, and they resumed their game.

I walked away from the game, and decided to walk by Doña Delmira’s home. I trusted Enzo, but I figured I’m already there and it’ll help me to know where it is for when I come back. Enzo was right, of course, no one was home. I am tempted to go back and play with my new friends, but I am technically working, and my mother’s voice in my head tells me to go back to work.

Once, at an end of the year party organized by the paper, I sat next to an older lady during dinner. She wore a long blue dress, bright diamond earrings that glowed under the ballroom lights, white gloves that went up to her elbows, and her straight hair down to her shoulders resembling a tapered lamp shade. I immediately recognized she was a benefactor of the paper, and she corroborated this when she introduced herself. Her husband hadn't been able to attend, Mrs. Franz told me, and most of her friends were sitting together at another table, but her husband had made the mistake to get their tickets late. After I told her I was a reporter, she started asking me questions about my work at the paper, almost as if she was interviewing me to entertain her evening. I told her some of the stories I'd covered, and lazily tried to embellish the most exciting details for her. As dinner went on, and we became more familiar with each other, she finally asked me where my accent was from. I told her where I was from, and she mentioned her daughter had stopped by my home country during her South American backpacking trip. My daughter loved my homeland, she said, loved the mountains and also went surfing. She asked for the name of the famous mountains in my homeland, and I lied and told her I didn't remember. Something about giving her the name of the mountains, my mountains, bothered me. She could ask her daughter, I thought.

The dinner portion of the event was almost over, and I couldn't wait to mingle and go talk to some colleagues, or anyone else. Mrs. Franz was initially nice, but halfway throughout the dinner she had decided my job for the evening was to keep her company. Oblivious to my discomfort, she asked what was one of the first great memories I had from back home. I realized that the confidence and entitlement to ask such a personal question to a stranger could only be founded on her wealth. The dinner was almost over,



yet I couldn't get to share something so intimate with her, so I made something up about witnessing a car accident. But her question stayed with me, and if perhaps she had been kinder, I could have told her my real first great memory.

The first day of school in first grade, my new schoolmates and I realized during recess that we didn't have a soccer ball, and all we wanted was to play some soccer. It was the first day of school, and all of the kids in my classroom were new to me, or I was new to them. Most of them had gone to pre-elementary school together, so they knew each other, but that wasn't the case for me. The bell for recess rang, and my classmates realized there was no soccer ball. No one had brought one to school because their parents wouldn't let them bring a soccer ball on the first day of school, and the closet with the sports equipment was still locked as it had been all summer. It was then when someone found a round and long pebble, and kicked it to another kid, who pass it forward and made a run, starting a soccer game we all joined. Some kids used their bags to set as goal posts, teams were divided, and soon we were two teams of eight kids each, running behind a pebble, trying to score in the goals made of backpacks. It was difficult at first, a pebble doesn't roll like a soccer ball, instead it skips, but we were six years old anyway and our feet were small, so we got used to the pebble going from one side to another, and like most games between six years old, the game consisted mainly in chasing the pebble, without any organization or game plan. All of these memories are unclear flashes, as if someone had told them to me and then I recreated them in my mind, rather than actually experience them. Until a specific moment, when I saw Giancarlo kicked the pebble from our goal to the right, and I can feel the memory then, I can see and feel six-year-old me thinking this is it, and Giancarlo's pass to the right reached Jose Luis, who years later

would become Chivi Chivi, because he looks like a cartoon with that name, and later just Chivi as the abbreviation is easier for soccer purposes, and Jose Luis who for the next year will be the best player and later won't be the best anymore but a decent player, instead of just kicking the pebble actually dribbled an opponent, and a clear uhhhh was heard from most of us in admiration, but Jose Luis, who at this point was still just Jose Luis not yet Chivi Chivi or just Chivi, had the good sense to not celebrate his accomplishment but instead passed the ball to Ismael, who like all of the other kids I had just met that morning and would become my best friend, and would also receive his uhhhh years later when he told us he touched a girl's breast and we believed because we wanted to believe him, and Ismael inspired by Jose Luis' move had the audacity to pass the pebble from his right foot to his left foot and with his left he crossed the pebble to Jonathan, who became Pata Chueca which means crooked foot the next day, because of his terrible aim, but he wasn't Pata Chueca that first day of first grade yet, and he didn't become Pata Chueca in that game because he didn't go for goal, but instead crossed the ball back to the left towards the opponent's goal, where I was making my run thinking this is it, and I can feel it now how I felt it then, and I saw how Jonathan's pass was almost intercepted by Jimmy, who stretched out his leg not enough to stop the pebble, but enough to make it skip high, higher than we had seen it at that point, so as I ran towards the goal the pebble flew in the air turning as thin pebbles do and I looked up to see the pebble and try to read its movement, and I saw the gray sky of my hometown, which at that point is my only town, that gray copious sky that promises rains but instead only offers perennial drizzle, and I saw the pebble drop right in front of me, and instinctively balanced my six year old weight and kicked the pebble into the two bags that worked as

goal posts, seeing my first goal ever go in, which distracted me from my teammates running towards me, and when I saw them they were already jumping on me and took me down, celebrating the goal we discussed for years to come, as a memory we all know happened, but also feared we dreamed it.

I wondered what Mrs. Franz's reaction to the story would've been. "Poor thing," Mrs. Franz perhaps would've said, "playing with a pebble, you must have been so poor."

She would've missed the whole point of the story, it didn't matter if we were poor. Some were, some weren't, we were kids in a developing country, so probably yes, to her we were damn poor. But that wasn't the case, the case was the magic, but she wouldn't see it.

When the dinner ended, I made sure to avoid Mrs. Franz for the rest of the evening, fearing she would make me tell a story to one of her benefactor friends, presenting me as a success story, the poor kid who played with pebbles who now wrote news in his second language.

After confirming Delmira wasn't home, I went back to the paper to do some research. I considered calling my mother, but calling her in the middle of the work day didn't seem comfortable, I needed privacy I determined.

At six in the evening I was at Delmira's door, and as Enzo promised, she had returned from work. When she opened the door, I learned that James was wrong, she spoke English and Spanish. I introduced myself and told her I was there to inquire about Antonio's disappearance. I was aware of how intrusive this sounded, and explained to her I normally wouldn't proceed that way, but I was genuinely concerned and could help if she needed to file a police report.

“There is a police report,” she said. “My Antonio disappeared six months ago. 14-year-old, my baby, gone.”

That’s why I hadn’t seen the police report, I had only looked for missing cases for the last week. Delmira had small eyes, long salt and pepper hair, a sharp nose, and straight lips that made her look as if she was frowning when she spoke. Her wrinkles on her forehead and cheeks looked like the saddest map line I had ever seen.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Doña Delmira. Is there anything I can do? Have you followed up with the police? I’m surprised we didn’t cover it, we could do a campaign.”

Delmira smiled, her frowning smile, and I recognized in her eyes the same tenderness with which my mother looked at me.

“Kids disappear here all the time, son.”

“What do you mean? Is there anything making kids disappear?” I wanted to understand what she meant, she said the same thing Enzo said, kids disappearing all the time. Suddenly, I felt scared, but she was so calm.

“Kids are taken away, they run away, they are taken back to countries they never knew. Kids get lost in time, I’ve seen it many times. I want to believe my Antonio is coming back, and I’ll keep looking for him, and waiting for him. But I’ve seen it many times, lost kids make it back home.”

Her stoicism made me feel small, insignificant. I wanted to help, and she was beyond anything I could do.

“I don’t know what to say, I’m sorry to have bothered you. I’m sorry if I brought any painful memories.”

I felt tired, the house felt hot and I couldn't breathe. I realized the only thing I could do is leave before I started crying.

"It's okay, boy. Any memories from my Antonio are happy memories, only his absence hurts. Is your mother alive? What's her name? If you don't mind me asking, you've asked all the questions so far." Her sideways frowning smile appeared.

"I do. Her name is Luz, Luz Ramirez de Rabassa."

"Do you call your mother often?"

"I do." I lied.

"Good, that's what you can do for me, call you mother." She said it as a command, she saw through me, she knew I was lying.

When we first moved to the States, my mother took adult English classes at night. You'll learn during the day at school, and I'll learn at night she said. Of course, spending all day at school and being younger, it was much easier for me, and this made my mother happy. You learn, Lucas, she'd tell me, and then you can teach me. I would quiz her some nights after her classes, but she was so tired from work that after a few months she just wanted to rest at night. She had learned enough to understand the directions her bosses gave her about cleaning, and she was a smart woman so she found ways to make them understand her. I still remember those nights walking to pick her up from the school, so she wouldn't have to walk back home alone. Sometimes I'd be a few minutes late, and I'd see her standing in front of the school, wearing her white outfit from work, standing on her white small shoes, and hugging her notebook like a little girl, happy and a little scared. But when she saw me, she would embrace me, and walk back home holding my arm.

When I left Delmira's house, the Florida sun still pushed me down towards the ground. I was tired, and had no energy to go back to the paper. James could keep his stories, and his deadlines. I would really write a story and show him, a great fiction piece, where all the lost kids make it back home.

I had to call my mother, I needed to hear her voice. When she answered, I heard her voice and I couldn't hold it anymore, tears started to come down, and I couldn't get myself to talk. It's okay, my Lucas, she repeated, it's okay and I'm okay. It was just a scare, but I'm fine, she said. I told her how much I'd missed her and how much her absence hurt.

"No llores, hijo, ya vas a venir a visitarme." She calmed me down, repeating I could go see her soon.

"Si, mama." I told her, but deep down I knew that I was lost.