Tasting Other Tongues:
The Translation of Guillermo Fadanelli’s
¿Te veré en el desayuno?

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Translation Studies

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Abstract

The present thesis consists of two parts. Part One is a critical component of approximately 35,000 words. Part Two is a Spanish to English translation of the novel ¿Te veré en el desayuno? [See You at Breakfast?] by Mexico City author Guillermo Fadanelli. ¿Te veré en el desayuno? was first published in 1999 by Plaza y Janés and re-issued in 2009 by Editorial Almadía. My translation, published in Australia by Giramondo in March 2016, is the first of Fadanelli’s novels to be brought into English.

Part One proposes three key arguments, each contributing to the formulation of what will be referred to throughout as an alienating ethics of translation. The first, serving as something of a critical point of departure, is the argument that translation stands at the forefront of literary ethics. All literature, but particularly literary fiction, is intrinsically ethical in its capacity to reassign meanings and disrupt perspectives. The role of translation, I argue, is to facilitate and intensify the many (re)interpretations already inherent in the act of reading, both drawing the Other close and making patent the unease of their proximity. The second (and central) argument holds that a sound ethics of translation should encourage ‘violent’ and generative literary practices. This involves intervention at both ends of the translation process: first, in selecting challenging texts and authors for translation and acknowledging the role of such practices in the source text; and second, in implementing such practices in the production of the target text. The dual nature of this intervention presupposes a careful collaboration of forethought and practice, yielding a third key argument: theoria and praxis in translation are inextricably wedded, with the one inevitably informing and circumscribing the other, and the tension implied by this (never wholly
felicitious) marriage permanently underlies the structures and processes of translation. The practice of translation itself, in other words, forms a kind of unsettled and unsettling substratum, at once bearing and grounding the alienating ethics proposed here.

The key arguments of this thesis are developed across three chapters. Chapter 1.1 serves as an introduction to Guillermo Fadanelli and to the translation project itself, elaborating on the choice of novel and the fundamental aspects of my alienating translation approach. Chapter 1.2 explores the role and significance of translated literature, embarking from some of Fadanelli’s own reflections on the place of fiction in contemporary society and the indispensable human function that it fulfils. This discussion frames and fuels the ethics of translation elaborated in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2.1 frames Fadanelli as one of the most challenging and ‘insolent’ writers in contemporary Mexican literature, outlining the many ways in which his work refuses to sit within the boundaries of a single genre. It considers his uneasy position within the Latin American literary scene, analysing in particular the influence of two closely aligned literary movements that emerged in the late twentieth century: US dirty realism and Spanish realismo sucio. Chapter 2.2 examines Fadanelli’s departure from and apparent rejection of these established contextual frameworks, arguing that the violent and generative qualities of Fadanelli’s literature are entwined in his self-proclaimed association with ‘trash’ culture. A detailed review of the concept of ‘la literatura basura’ [trash literature] is framed by a discussion of the movement’s context – namely, contemporary urban counterculture in North and Ibero America – examining cultural parallels in visual art, cinema and music. Chapter 2.3 shifts the focus to the target culture, mapping the intersections and divergences between Fadanelli’s readerships (actual and prospective) in Mexico and in Australia.
Chapter 3.1 frames the act of translation as a method of cultural re-articulation and generation, approaching the concept of contemporary urban space via several key translation and cultural studies theories. Mexico City in particular, due to its ubiquitous and powerful presence in Fadanelli’s fiction, is analysed as an ambivalent site of unease and production, brimming with tension, cultural mutation and polyglossia. The act and concept of translation – both literary and ‘cultural’ (after Bhabha) – is considered within the framework of this constantly re-interpreted urban dynamic. Notions of ‘third space’ (Bhabha), ‘hybridity’ (García Canclini) and innovation are also examined. Chapter 3.2 develops this argument into the formulation of a translation ethics based on alienation, ‘violence’ and creative potential. Using the theories of Gayatri Spivak, Antoine Berman, Viktor Shklovsky and Slavoj Žižek as a point of engagement and departure, it calls for a translation approach that actively preserves the power and originality of the source text and culture. Translation, it argues, is both a product and producer of the liminal, inhabiting but also designing the dynamic verges of culture. It is through violence and estrangement – both natural states of language – that this ethical approach to literature is achieved. Chapter 3.3, the final section of the critical component, maps the practical application of the notions and methodologies developed throughout the thesis. It offers a narrative of translational praxis rooted in the translation of the novel itself, illustrating in concrete terms the vital tension caused by the constant push-and-pull of language in transformation.

Part Two comprises the full manuscript of See You at Breakfast?. All changes made to the published manuscript, causing it to differ from the one included herein, are discussed in Chapter 3.3. The Spanish source text appears as an Appendix courtesy of Guillermo Quijas and Vania Reséndiz Cerna at Editorial Almadía.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed:

Alice Rose Whitmore

24 January 2017
Publications during enrolment

Refereed Articles


Conference Papers

Keynote Address: “Cracking the Market: Tips from an Emerging Literary Translator.” *Trans-European Translation Mini-Conference*. 26 October 2016. La Trobe University, Melbourne.


Literary Translations


Forthcoming:


Reviews & Creative Writing

“love has nothing to do with it.” Tincture Journal, 2016.
“Tattered Stories: Review of Mario Bellatin’s The Large Glass.” Mexico City Lit, 2016.
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I am grateful to the reviewers at New Voices in Translation Studies for suggesting key additions to my theoretical framework on third space and Latin American hybridity. I also thank the editors and proofreaders at The Translator, Asymptote, Seizure and the Sydney Review of Books for publishing my work, as well as the conference committees of the ACLA, NZSTI and ATA for accepting my papers and providing such fruitful environments for academic cross-contamination.

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Part One: Critical Component
Introduction

Translation is entirely mysterious. Increasingly I have felt that the art of writing is itself translating, or more like translating than it is like anything else. What is the other text, the original? I have no answer. I suppose it is the source, the deep sea where ideas swim, and one catches them in nets of words and swings them shining into the boat.

— Ursula K. Le Guin

“Reciprocity of Prose and Poetry”

I begin this thesis with borrowed words. They belong to one of my favourite writers, Ursula K. Le Guin, who I also happen to consider one of history’s most entertaining critics of the creative writing process. I devoured the Earthsea books as a young girl, and I recall my father (a science fiction novelist, at one point in time) regaling me with tales from her inaugural Science Fiction Writing Workshop, held in Victoria’s Dandenong Ranges in 1975 – if his stories are anything to go by, the only thing sharper than Le Guin’s wit is her tongue. Her abovecited words on translation and the art of writing are widely quoted, mostly for their spectacularly pessimistic punch line: ‘[I]n this metaphor,’ Le Guin concludes, the captured ideas ‘die and get canned and put in sandwiches.’ As a writer, I sympathise with the sentiment. As a translator, too, I’ve often experienced that peculiar text-sickness, that feeling of being lost in the interminable sea of the source language, fishing for words that seem destined to die of suffocation the minute I haul them aboard.

1Address given at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, 1983.
More interesting than Le Guin’s grim realism, however, is her suggestion that writing and translating are, in many ways, twin processes. Ever curious (as most writers are) about the beautiful mysteries concealed in foreign literature, Le Guin is herself a translator of poetry; she relates how, when translating Lao Tzu and Rainer Maria Rilke, she begins by ‘[reading] the extant translations’ then ‘[collating] and [changing] them, referring back to the original to pick up any words, repetitions, echoes, resonances’ (Le Guin 10). The result, she admits, is less a translation (in the conventional sense) than it is her ‘own private Rilke’ or Lao Tzu. However unusual her methods, Le Guin’s observation is striking in its insight: all translation is, to some extent, the creation of one’s own private version of literature. The creative, the personal, the infusion of one’s self as a writer or curator as well as a translator, are just as essential to the art of translation as the comprehension and reproduction of source text meaning and nuance – for Le Guin, indeed, it seems the creative aspect is the most important of all.

In a bilingual poetry collection co-authored with Argentinean poet Diana Bellessi, entitled *The Twins, the Dream: Two Voices / Las Gemelas, el Sueño: Dos Voces* (1996), Le Guin reflects on the translation process as a kind of restoration of ‘the miraculousness of language’: after first ‘[falling] in love’ with Bellessi’s poems, she recalls how she ‘went on scribbling translations, every line a discovery, a shock of surprise and satisfaction. […] It’s like being two years old again. The words blaze out, they live lives of their own, mysterious, amazing’ (10). This rapturous assessment of interlingual translation is one that resonates with the experience of writing more broadly. Returning to the epigraph of this introduction, Le Guin notes that translation and writing are both ‘entirely mysterious’ creative enterprises, and ‘the art of writing is itself translating, or more like translating than it is like anything else.’ I have experienced this conflation myself, viscerally, throughout the course of writing this thesis.
Literary translation is impossible for me if not accompanied (or flanked, or otherwise ‘paralleled’) by creative writing, and the two crafts inevitably bleed into one another, sometimes to such an extent that I am unable to tell the difference. The inherent interdisciplinarity of my methodology is also borne out in my engagement with theory and criticism: unlike a traditional translation studies dissertation, this two-part thesis borrows from a number of frameworks, among them comparative literature, cultural and literary studies, philosophy, social anthropology and translation ethics. This somewhat ‘bastardised’ approach to scholarship is coherent within the broader context of the thesis, which argues above all for hybridity, multilingualism and creativity across all spheres of thought and culture. The thread that holds all this together is the elaboration of an ‘alienating’ translation ethics rooted in the concepts of estrangement, unease, literary ‘violence’ and innovation – all concepts that I believe are endemic and essential to literary language. I argue that, as a reflection and a refraction of literature, translation intensifies literature’s already deeply ethical aspects; both facilitate the approximation and (re)reading of a cultural or social Other, and, at their best, both favour multi over mono, difficulty over complacency, dynamism over stasis. The translation ethics I propose emphasises this disruptive and generative function of literature, holding that a sound translation framework is one that seeks to expose and perpetuate ‘violent’ and innovative literary practices across the shifting boundaries of language, culture and genre.

The structure of this thesis is unusual: it comprises an ‘exegetical’ critical component, by turns anecdotal and densely theoretical, as well as a translation component which, as I have hinted, is the product of a singular convergence of creative autonomy and the (often tortured) pursuit of textual ‘fidelity.’ The practical and tactical mappings of this convergence are laid

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2 Throughout this thesis I use the term ‘violent’ in the sense intended by Gayatri Spivak, Jacques Derrida and others, whose influence is discussed at length in Chapter 3.2.
out in Chapter 3.3 – “Translated Spaces: A narrative of translational praxis.” Like Le Guin’s brief preface (I hesitate to call it a ‘translator’s note’) in The Twins, the Dream, this narrative tracks the creative, personal and aesthetic processes of translation more closely than it does the linguistic shifts and compromises (those inevitable re-arrangements known for far too long as ‘gains’ and ‘losses’). The chief aim of this translation project, after all, is to produce not a taxonomy of translation problems but an overarching ethics of translation. Each chapter in the critical component works towards the ultimate end of developing and substantiating this central philosophy.

The critical component of this thesis, like the translation component that follows (and, in a sense, precedes) it, is the product of a coming-together. It represents an attempt to cross-contaminate translation scholarship with less conventional frameworks – to perform, in other words, the deconstruction of genres and established literary practices that it promotes in both source and target literature. See You at Breakfast?, too, is a consciously contaminated text, marked with inconsistencies, dialogical play, lexical difficulty and multilingualism. Both components are clearly and transparently indebted to their literary ancestors: a wealth of existing scholarship, translations, conversations, novels, poems, repartees, and cultural movements ranging from the miniscule to the seismic. The combination of these influences is mysterious and unique, because it is writing; because it is translation. Like all writing, it is original and unoriginal all at once: a new mosaic of borrowed words.
Chapter One: First tastes of Fadanelli

Yo, en primer lugar, diría que odio a mis lectores. / I would say, first of all, that I hate my readers.

— GUILLERMO FADANELLI

Noticias

1.1 Guillermo Fadanelli, Moho and ¿Te veré en el desayuno?

To approach the work of a writer like Guillermo Fadanelli is an understandably daunting task. Famed for his disparagement of the academicisation of literature, and ever equipped with an arsenal of wry aphorisms, the man behind the novel ¿Te veré en el desayuno? has cultivated a certain intellectual aura. This, I might point out, is the first of many paradoxes that emerge when one begins to examine Fadanelli’s fiction and persona: despite his apparent disdain for success and ‘high’ culture, Fadanelli enjoys a certain cult status in Mexico, and in spite of his reputation as a modern-day poète maudit his work has been publicly recognised by a number of prestigious national institutions. It is this proclivity to contradiction, coupled with a razor-sharp wit, that make the author and his work such fascinating – and alienating – subjects of investigation.

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The present thesis centres on the Spanish to English translation of Fadanelli’s third novel, ¿Te veré en el desayuno? [See You at Breakfast?]. The translation approach formulated and defended throughout this thesis is one of alienation and (re)generation, and these themes constitute the conceptual thread that binds together the three chapters of the critical component. An understanding and acknowledgment of alienation in source culture literature and its context(s), I argue, enables and informs the development and practice of an ethics of productive alienation in translation. The relationship between source and translation, indeed, is co-dependent and co-productive, as it is also true that the implementation of such an ethics enables and informs the translation and critical analysis of alienating literature. By first undertaking a close examination of Fadanelli’s work and his (uneasy) place within the socio-literary context of the late twentieth century, I aim to establish something of a conceptual Ausgangspunkt from which my translation ethics and methodology will embark.

To date, Fadanelli has published ten novels and seven collections of short stories, along with a significant number of long essays, crónicas, opinion pieces and book reviews. His most recent novel, El hombre nacido en Danzig, was launched at Guadalajara’s Feria Internacional del Libro in 2014, and he currently authors a weekly column for leading Mexico City newspaper El Universal. As the grand scale of such endeavours suggests, Fadanelli is now revered as a popular proponent of cult literature, publishing in national forums such as Letras Libres and Nexos and receiving recognition as a member of Mexico’s state-sanctioned Sistema Nacional de Creadores Artísticos [National System of Artistic Creators]. He has garnered considerable respect within Latin American literary circles, named ‘entre los narradores más relevantes del momento actual’ [one of the most relevant writers of our time] and ‘the best representative’ of Mexican ‘realismo sucio’ – the Latin American

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4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish, French and Italian are my own.
incarnation of dirty realism (González Boixo 12). Valeria Luiselli has described him as ‘uno de los exponentes más importantes de la literatura urbana contemporánea y, de un modo más o menos paradójico, […] una de las voces centrales de la marginalidad que reivindica’ [one of the most important exponents of contemporary urban literature and, more or less paradoxically, […] one of the central voices of the marginality it defends] (“La Ciudad” 88).

Fadanelli has been awarded a number of prestigious national prizes: the Premio Nacional de Literatura and the Impac-Conarte-ITESM Prize for his debut novel La otra cara de Rock Hudson [Rock Hudson’s Other Face] (1997); the Premio Nacional de Literatura Colima for Lodo [Mud] (2002), a novel that was also shortlisted for the prestigious Premio Rómulo Gallegos [Rómulo Gallegos International Novel Prize]; and the Premio Grijalbo de Novela for Mis mujeres muertas [My Dead Women] (2012).

If we take Fadanelli’s word on the matter, however, it seems he never sought such acclaim. On the contrary, Fadanelli is openly derisive of the institutions and cultural hierarchies that give rise to the world of literary celebrity. He began exhibiting his work in small counter-cultural publications such as La Pus Moderna and La Regla Rota in the late 1980s, establishing underground journal Moho in 1988 along with long-time partner Yolanda Guadarrama. Despite its deliberate marginality, the journal’s content was never overtly political; on the contrary, its founders sought to distance themselves from the political realm and its disenchancing cycles of corruption and nepotism. ‘Lanzamos la piedra,’ Fadanelli notes, ‘para hacer patente nuestra decepción, y sin embargo no deseamos que de esa decepción se construya una ideología. […] No me parece interesante ser el motor de ningún tipo de rebelión’ [We cast the stone in order to make our disappointment clear. Nevertheless, we don’t want that disappointment to become an ideology. […] I have no interest in driving

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5 Fadanelli’s uneasy place within the dirty realist genre is examined further in Chapter Two.
any kind of rebellion] (Martínez, *Cultura subterránea*). The defining feature of the *Moho* project, he recalls, was in fact its ‘non-objective’:

> Es decir, [era] un punto de reunión en el que un conjunto de personas estaban, se juntaban, para existir, para discutir, para hablar acerca de cualquier cosa mientras llegaba una enfermedad mortal o mientras encontrábamos un modo de diversión más adecuado. Un punto de reunión más que un vehículo de divulgación o de difusión de ideas.

[That is, [it was] a meeting place where a group of people got together to exist, to debate, to talk about something while we awaited some mortal disease, or while we found some more appropriate form of distraction. A meeting place, more than a vehicle for the dissemination or circulation of ideas] (Martínez).

*Moho* began as the micro-project of a small group of friends from Mexico City’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Fadanelli’s almost-alma mater. The aim was to publish an independent literary journal ‘de contenido absurdo’ [with absurd content], untethered to the financial or political agendas of other media. In this sense, *Moho* was an important precursor to Fadanelli’s nihilistic ‘literatura basura,’ which boldly embraces the most absurd, profane and transitory elements of literary culture. *Moho* ‘era y ha sido también una revista antiológica: no un camino recto y sí el camino sinuoso, inesperado; más lo humano que lo tecnológico’ [also was, and has been, an anti-logical magazine: not the straight path but the winding and unexpected path; more humanity than technology] (Martínez). In 1995, the winding path of *Moho* led to the founding of Editorial Moho, a publishing house that to this day remains dedicated to the distribution of marginal and generally ‘unpublishable’ Mexican literature. While it is tempting to liken the Moho enterprise to some of its more prestigious predecessors – such as *Vuelta*, the literary journal founded by Octavio Paz in 1976 –

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6 Fadanelli briefly attempted an engineering degree before leaving the UNAM to pursue his literary career.
Fadanelli’s devotion to underground literature remains deeply connected to his own endeavours as a writer. Moho, in other words, is more than a successful author’s contribution to the unearthing of new talent. Despite his success and growing popularity, Fadanelli is still very much considered a cult writer. More importantly, perhaps (if we are to understand the motivations that drive his particular style of writing), Fadanelli still very much considers himself a cult writer. If anything, the accumulation of fame and recognition has driven him further from convention, prompting him to venture into increasingly eccentric literary terrain. Rambling abstract essays, for example, have largely supplanted the novels for which he is best known, and his most recent foray into fiction – 2014’s *El hombre nacido en Danzig* – is a bizarre hybrid of dense philosophical musings, detective fiction, and ‘algo así como una genealogía de la misoginia’ [something like a genealogy of misogyny] (Raya). Although he writes regularly for popular newspaper *El Universal*, he generally uses his amplified public presence to propagate the work of the great, forgotten writers of Western philosophy and fiction. As signalled earlier, this is one of many paradoxes that emerge in the Fadanelli metanarrative. Fadanelli is a wolf in sheep’s clothing: a writer averse to both the beaten path and the idealisation of dissent, a marginal man who is nevertheless accepted within the parameters of mainstream media and culture. As a result, he is recognised as somewhat of a dirty prophet of the vile and vulgar. He is also, in some sense, a ‘translator’ between two subcultures: that of ‘lo culto’ (art, literature and so-called ‘high culture’) and the literal subculture of the base, the underground, that which lies beneath the plebeian façade of ‘la cultura masiva.’ Indeed, Fadanelli’s translation of the visual, guttural Mexico City idiom into the culturally ‘valuable’ discourse of fiction is an art form with which he has come to be

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7 cf. García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas* 237.
strongly associated. This condition of duality and contradiction is a key aspect of Fadanelli’s ‘author brand’—a concept that will be examined more closely in Chapter 3.3.

While Fadanelli is widely appreciated in Mexico and, to a lesser extent, in other Spanish-speaking countries,8 he is still little known in the anglosphere. Only a handful of his short pieces have been translated to English, although these appear in significant publications such as *Vice* and *Words Without Borders.*9 My translation of ¿*Te veré en el desayuno?*, entitled *See You at Breakfast?*, is the first of Fadanelli’s novels to be published in English.10 This is surprising, considering the fact that in Europe Fadanelli’s work has been available in translation since 2006; indeed, five of his novels have been translated to French, and his debut novel is available in German, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish and Hebrew. The precise reasons for the comparative reticence of anglosphere publishers are uncertain, but one might speculate that it has something to do with the relative conservatism of the anglophone publishing industry and its notorious (albeit subsiding) resistance to the translation of new authors.11 There is little doubt, however, that Fadanelli’s writing lends itself well to translation. Despite its undeniably Mexican qualities, which pose considerable challenges to

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8 Fadanelli’s status within hispanophone literature is confirmed by the fact that several of his books have been published by important Spanish publishing house Editorial Anagrama.


10 *See You at Breakfast?* was published by Giramondo in March 2016.

11 In his book *Where I’m Reading From* (2014), Tim Parks cites the now well-known statistic: ‘only 3 to 4 per cent of novels published in the States are translations’ (205). Parks goes on to relate how, at a 2014 conference in Milan, ‘the Italian literary agent Marco Vigevani lamented that fewer and fewer American editors are able to read novels in Italian, French, and especially German, and this inevitably has reduced their enthusiasm for publishing foreign literature, since they are obliged to rely on external readers for advice’ (206). Anecdotal evidence of this kind is profuse among those close to the US publishing industry. That said, it is unlikely that discouraging trends of this nature affect Spanish to the same extent, due to the proximity of Latin America and the growing population of Spanish-speakers in the US. In the UK, too, the situation is far from grim: the 2015 London Book Fair’s ‘Mexican Market Focus’ (an event mirrored at the 2015 Feria Internacional del Libro in Guadalajara, where the United Kingdom was named official ‘pais invitado’) are extremely heartening.
As I will argue in Chapter Three of this thesis, translation is a cultural act that must reveal, as well as bridge, difference. With a translation approach that seeks to engage readers through (rather than despite) alienation, my aim is to incite the same delight and aversion that Fadanelli conjures in readers of his Spanish-language texts. While the strangeness of Fadanelli’s fiction is clearly heightened for non-Mexican readers, who are already discommoded by the foreignness of its characters and settings, there is most certainly a universally disconcerting element to it. We find this in the sudden shock of perversion or violence, in the uncomfortable closeness of tragedy, in the contorted reflection of someone we recognise, or in the injection of abrupt twists into an otherwise unremarkable plot. Like Mexico City – the ever-present backdrop and protagonist of Fadanelli’s novels – Fadanelli’s writing at once beguiles and estranges, always testing and transgressing the limits of aesthetics. It is, to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s phrase, as far as one gets from ‘genuinely boring politically correct literature’ (“Rosa Luxembourge”). For this reason, only an ethically aware translation is able to do it justice. There is always the latent temptation to subdue an inherently disobedient text, or to cushion the impact of a particularly unpleasant word or image. Often it is mere

12 I will expand upon this ethical motivation in Chapter Three of this thesis. Chapter 3.2 sets out the conceptual framework of an alienating ethics of translation, and Chapter 3.3 identifies the practical applications of this ethics in the form of translation strategies and decisions.
The discomfort, or some deeply ingrained commitment to target-language poetics, that coaxes the translator towards this kind of textual mollification. An ethically and aesthetically sound translation, in my view, is one that continuously challenges these tendencies, always keeping the greater objective on the horizon of the practical playing field.

¿Te veré en el desayuno? was first published in 1999 by Plaza y Janés and re-issued in 2009 by Editorial Almadía after the release of a feature film of the same name. The work is exemplary of Fadanelli’s style and thematic preoccupations, fragmented into four intersecting narratives that unfold and intertwine within the cruel urban setting of Mexico City. The unlikely mix of characters, each of whom lend a unique voice to the story, is typical of Fadanelli’s polyphonic approach to fiction. Cristina is a cautiously optimistic prostitute managing work, police harassment and the demands of the men who fall in love with her. Ulises is a solitary office worker obsessed by a promotion he will never receive. His longtime friend Adolfo, a part-trained veterinarian incapable of distinguishing between a dog and a coyote, is infatuated with his neighbour, the beautiful and sheltered Olivia, daughter of Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose grim fate deftly weaves the four narratives together. Despite the violence and poverty enveloping them, Fadanelli’s four protagonists each strive to construct some small bubble of happiness; even if it comes too late, even if it is too fragile to last or disfigured beyond recognition. Remarkably, Fadanelli manages to capture the chaos and absurdity of Latin America’s largest metropolis without lapsing into the tropes of stereotypical or moralising discourse. Mingling internal dialogue with detached narration — tinged, inevitably, with the wry cynicism and dark humour that has come to distinguish his

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13 In a humorous (and most certainly tongue-in-cheek) moment at the 2014 Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara, Fadanelli declared: ‘Las buenas novelas no pueden ser llevadas al cine’ [Good novels can’t be translated to the screen]. One should hope that ¿Te veré en el desayuno? is the exception. The film was adapted and directed by Mexico City film-maker Rodrigo Pizá and filmed in Toronto, Canada in 2005. It is Pizá’s first feature film, made in collaboration with Mexican company Canal Once and Canadian companies Comité del Desayuno and Content One.
writing – Fadanelli constructs an entertaining, complex and intrinsically heteroglossic story that combines the mundane and the depraved in unexpected ways. Resisting portrayals of both the hero and the antihero, he paints a painfully familiar portrait of the modern urban dystopia; of its invisible disillusions, of the daily tragedies and anonymities of its inhabitants. As the novel’s epigraph forewarns, this is ‘la historia de cuatro personas cuyas vidas no merecían haber formado parte de novela alguna’ [the story of four people whose lives were never worth writing about in any novel].

I chose to translate ¿Te veré en el desayuno? for several reasons. First, the novel possesses many of the characteristics that exemplify Fadanelli’s writing, making it an apt representation of the author and his work. ¿Te veré en el desayuno? is one of Fadanelli’s earliest novels, and as such possesses the narrative and stylistic traits that first differentiated his work: polyphonic dialogue and narrative disjuncture; ordinary, impoverished, settings on the periphery of Mexico City; intimate portrayals of unlikable, if pathetic, protagonists; and the disquieting juxtaposition of humour and tragedy. However, unlike his debut novel La otra cara de Rock Hudson, or his longest and most critically acclaimed novel Lodo,¿Te veré en el desayuno? has not yet been translated into any other languages. I am therefore in the enviable position of being uninfluenced by the choices of other translators. Second, the novel and its translation lend themselves exceptionally well to inquiry and critique. Mexico City, which is central to several aspects of my analysis, has an enormous presence in ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, and the novel’s polyphony, alienating discourse and unpredictable narrative equally suggest themselves to a range of interesting theoretical frameworks. In Chapters Two and Three, the implications of these elements are discussed in relation to the socio-literary

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14 While these novels have not been translated into English, La otra cara de Rock Hudson has been translated into Italian, German, French, Turkish and Portuguese while Lodo has been translated into Italian, French and Hebrew.
context in which Fadanelli’s writing first emerged – in particular, dirty realism, the transatlantic McOndo movement, and the Mexican ‘generación del Crack’ – and an analysis of Mexico City as a heteroglossic space of unease and re-articulation is linked to the theoretical work of Néstor García Canclini, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Sherry Simon and Manuel de Solà-Morales i Rubió, among others. Through engagement with a number of diverse frameworks – among them cultural and literary theory, postcolonial studies, cultural anthropology and urbanism – there emerges a distinct ethics of translation, rooted in the notions of newness, transgression and creative potential. Third, and perhaps most importantly, ¿Te veré en el desayuno? is an engaging story, as confirmed by its popularity in Mexico. The 2009 re-issuing is testament to the novel’s enduring impression on several generations of Mexican readers. Fadanelli has also described it as ‘mi novela más cercana’ [the novel closest to me], and the intimate melancholy of its themes and portrayals would seem to bear out this statement. In any case, ¿Te veré en el desayuno? is an intriguing piece of fiction that, although by no means Fadanelli’s most popular or celebrated novel, perfectly illustrates the preoccupations and peculiarities of the writer whose work has become synonymous with Latin America’s largest metropolis.

1.2 ‘Una extensa grieta en el ser’: The role of translated fiction

The central arguments developed in this thesis depart from a key ethical premise: that translation stands, or rather should stand, at the forefront of literary ethics. This subchapter outlines the role of translated fiction within a broader characterisation of literature per se as an intensely ethical exercise. Literary translation, I argue, both allows and accentuates the

15 Quotation taken from a private interview with the author.
processes of (re)interpretation already endemic to the act of reading, magnifying the tensile force between Reader and Other. It follows that a sound ethics of translation is one that embraces and responds to this tension, encouraging ‘violent’ and innovative writing practices both in the selection and transformation of literary texts. The fundamentally dual nature of translatory intervention, arising as it does from the forced collaboration of theoria and praxis, forms a third and rather more insidious stratum of my argument; translation, in other words, at once embodies, exposes and enables the tension of language, serving thus as both metaphor and vehicle for the alienating ethics proposed here.

It is hardly necessary to enumerate the many ways in which translation has contributed to the circulation and invigoration of literature across the world. For centuries, translators have been bringing foreign audiences into contact with works of fiction that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to them, sculpting an increasingly borderless literary landscape. Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur, entangled from its very beginnings with questions of literary translation and reinvigoration, remains one of the most insightful configurations of this idea. When we talk about the role of translated fiction, then, we are really talking about two things: both the ways in which translation enriches and expands literature, and the ways in which literature itself enlightens the world we live in. The role of translated fiction, in other words, is inextricable from that of fiction in general. Few have made the point more elegantly – or more succinctly – than Jorge Luis Borges, in many respects one of Latin America’s most international figures: ‘Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción’ [No problem is more consubstantial to literature and its modest mysteries than the one posed by translation] (“Las versiones homéricas” 41).
As Goethe himself pointed out, one of the many boons of literary translation is its ability to revive and renew. Even the translation and international circulation of his own work, which he often described as a kind of ‘mirroring’ (Spiegelung), was a cause of great pleasure for Goethe; in his Gespräche mit Goethe (1835), Johann Eckermann notes that Goethe approved so wholeheartedly of the French Faust that he eventually preferred it to the original, finding his masterpiece ‘again fresh, new, and spirited’ (Damrosch, What is 7). ‘Left to itself,’ Goethe observed, ‘every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one’ (“Some Passages” 8). Indeed, the translation of new and emerging writers maintains a constant international flow of contemporary literature, and new translations of classic works serve to breathe life and relevance into what is often perceived as archaic or inaccessible writing. As Rita Wilson observes: ‘Literary translation is an active process, transforming what it transfers, creating something new, reinventing literature and keeping it alive’ (88). In an essay entitled “El Traductor” [The Translator], Mexican author Juan Villoro notes:

Una desgracia menor de la gran literatura es que no puede modernizarse en el idioma en que fue escrita. Aunque no entendamos de cabo a rabo a Cervantes, sería un despropósito renovar sus páginas. Para eso están las ediciones críticas, con profusas notas de pie de página. En cambio, los clásicos ajenos a nuestra tradición reciben cada tantos años un soplo refrescante. Así, disponemos de un Shakespeare del siglo XIX, otro de principios del XX, otro de fin de siglo, etcétera. Es dable suponer que los alemanes tendrán un Quijote futuro y los hispanohablantes un Fausto futuro. Las obras que atraviesan el tiempo pueden seguir cambiando de piel en otros idiomas.

[One of the minor misfortunes of great literature is its inability to modernise itself in the language it was written in. Although we might not understand Cervantes cover to cover, it would be inappropriate to update his writing. That’s why we have critical editions, complete with profuse footnotes. In contrast, classic works that don’t belong to our literary tradition are injected]
with new life every few years. Thus we have a nineteenth-century Shakespeare, another from the beginning of the twentieth century, yet another from the end of the century, etcetera. It’s feasible to assume that the Germans will have a future *Don Quixote*, and Spanish speakers a future *Faust*. Works of literature that traverse time keep changing skins in other languages] (210).  

This changing of skins, Villoro suggests, is perfectly consistent with the essence of literature itself. Readings of fiction are necessarily multiple and mutable, and the translation (interlingual or otherwise) of texts across generations and cultures is simply one aspect of the perpetual reappropriation of literature, both personal and collective, that occurs with each revisiting. Great writing, as Italo Calvino reminds us, is infinitely (re)interpretable, collecting and depositing the traces of other cultures and readings over time: ‘D’un classico,’ he writes, ‘ogni prima lettura è in realtà una rilettura. […] Un classico è un libro che non ha mai finito di dire quel che ha da dire [Every first reading of a classic is in fact a rereading. […] A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say] (Perché leggere 7). Truly timeless works of literature, Calvino continues, both change and are changed by the worlds they exist in, ‘portando su di sé la traccia delle letture che hanno preceduto la nostra e dietro di sé la traccia che hanno lasciato nella cultura o nelle culture che hanno attraversato’ [bearing upon them the traces of readings previous to ours and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through] (7-8). According to

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16 In 2015, no doubt to Villoro’s disapproval, Ediciones Destino published a new version of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ‘translated’ into contemporary Spanish by writer, critic and poet Andrés Trapiello. In defence of his controversial project, Trapiello notes: ‘Ha dejado de entender [el Quijote] la inmensa mayoría [de españoles]. El que quiera entender el original tiene que leerlo con notas, que distraen. He tratado de devolver el *Quijote* al habla, de donde salió. Es una novela hablada que había pasado a ser solo estudiada’ [The overwhelming majority [of Spaniards] no longer understand [Don Quixote]. People who want to understand the original have to read it with footnotes, which are distracting. I’ve attempted to bring *Don Quixote* back into the language of everyday speech, where it originated. It used to be a spoken novel, but it became a novel that was read purely to be studied] (Rodríguez Marcos).
Villoro, it is the ability of a literary work to incite new readings that guarantees its place in the cultural repertoire. ‘La escritura resistente es una materia porosa,’ he insists; ‘sus calculadas fisuras dejan que pase el aire, el ambiente, las renovadas indagaciones de la época’ [Enduring writing is porous; its calculated fissures allow the flow of air, atmosphere, the renewed inquiries of each new age] (“El Traductor” 208). In a 2012 work entitled Insolencia, literatura y mundo [Insolence, Literature and World], Fadanelli evokes a similar image: ‘[C]reo que la literatura es, a fin de cuentas, una extensa grieta en el ser que no puede cerrarse, una inmensa anomalía humana que solamente la muerte es capaz de reparar’ [I believe that literature, at the end of the day, is a vast rift in one’s being that cannot be sealed, an immense human anomaly that only death can repair] (18).

The metaphors employed here by Fadanelli and Villoro are more than mere rhetoric. Literature, and particularly fiction, indeed opens cracks in our culture that not only allow us to breathe but offer us a brief glimpse of something beyond the same old walls of our everyday existence. Similarly, literary translation serves as a window into strange new experiences that have the potential to invigorate and liberate thought and language. One is reminded of Theodor Adorno’s description of unassimilated foreign words as an ‘incursion of freedom’ into writing, ‘transparent crystals that may at some future time explode human beings’ dreary imprisonment in preconceived language’ (“Foreign Words” 289). For Villoro, the very term ‘literature’ implies a reassignment of meaning, a shifting of perspective that gives way to the creation of new and Other truths:

17 Although Fadanelli does not explicitly cite Calvino here, these words bear a close resemblance to a phrase that appears in the 1979 novel Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore [If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller]: ‘Sentii subito che nell’ordine perfetto dell’universo s’era aperta una breccia, uno squarciio irreparabile’ [I sensed at once that in the perfect order of the universe a breach had opened, an irreparable rent] (67).
entender algo literariamente significa darle otro uso al sentido común. La literatura, incluso en su variante naturalista, es siempre una superación de lo explícito, un deseo de que las palabras habituales, con las que compramos el pan y acatamos órdenes, digan sus verdades de otro modo. ‘El mundo es azul como una naranja,’ escribió Paul Éluard. Dos certezas científicas – el mundo es azul, el mundo es redondo como una naranja – se combinan y confunden en favor de otra verdad, la invención poética.

[understanding something literally means giving a different use to its common meaning. Literature, even naturalistic literature, always surpasses explicit language; it is the desire that habitual words, the ones we use to buy bread and obey orders, might communicate their truths in another way. ‘The world is blue like an orange,’ Paul Éluard wrote. Two scientific certainties – the world is blue, the world is round like an orange – are combined and confused in favour of another reality: poetic invention] (“El Traductor” 208).

Literary fiction, of course, is more than just a pleasant pastime or aesthetic endeavour. As Fadanelli puts it, the composition (and, dare I add, translation) of literature is ‘una actividad peligrosa, desafiante, crítica e inconformista’ [a dangerous, defiant, critical and nonconformist activity] (“La literatura es insolente”). Fadanelli distinguishes fiction from other forms of writing based on its unique ability to re-frame and re-define the limits of our apparent realities. In Insolencia, literatura y mundo he writes:

Los periodistas, sociólogos o científicos narran una realidad que en muchos sentidos es objetiva o verdadera, pero que de ninguna manera es la única que nos afecta. La literatura nos relata mentiras verdaderas, dibuja rostros desconocidos, abre grietas y fisuras en muros aparentemente sólidos, descubre órdenes inesperados de la realidad. Lo hace a partir de un lenguaje que no se agota porque no se domina, el lenguaje nos supera porque no lo inventamos nosotros, sino que lo heredamos y lo recreamos.

[Journalists, sociologists and scientists narrate a reality that, in many ways, is true or objective, but by no means is this the only reality that affects us. Literature tells true lies, sketches strange and unknown faces, opens cracks and fissures in seemingly solid walls, discovers unexpected orders of reality. It does this through a language that is inexhaustible because it is
indomitable. Language exceeds us because we do not invent it – we inherit it, and recreate it] (196).

The notion of language as an inherited yet indefatigable phenomenon is one that reappears frequently in postmodern literary theory. By harnessing the intrinsic liberty of literary language, the literary text intrudes upon the safe, routine worlds we have grown accustomed to and allows us to inhabit situations we might not have otherwise imagined. There is an inherently ethical element to this, stemming from the cultivation of imagination and empathy among consumers of literary fiction. Reading compels us to occupy, however momentarily, the place of an Other in the most intimate of ways. As Fadanelli notes, well written – that is, ‘moralmente apreciable’ [morally significant] – literary fiction brings us closer to the recognition of something beyond ourselves: the dignity and incommensurability of other people, perhaps, and the shared ‘tragedia inherente a la vida humana’ [inherent tragedy of human life] (Insolencia 41). In the Other, Fadanelli writes, ‘se reconoce al extraño, pero también se encuentra un espejo y es justamente en esta oposición donde nace cualquier clase de conocimiento humano’ [we recognise a stranger, but we also find a mirror, and it is precisely in this opposition that any kind of human knowledge is born] (Vagancia 46). Or again: ‘el otro representa un universo o un espacio misterioso, extraño o enemigo que no podemos conocer ni mucho menos dominar, pero que al menos podemos conservar como espejo o símbolo de la propia humanidad’ [the Other represents a mysterious, strange or adversarial space or universe that we can never know, let alone dominate, but that we can at least preserve as a kind of mirror or symbol of our own humanity] (Insolencia 41). This is the Mayan ‘In Lak’ech,’18 or Thomas Nagel’s ‘recognition of the reality of other persons’ that forms the foundation of true altruism (3). When we glance into the ‘mirror’ of fiction we see

18 This ancient Mayan phrase and teaching is often translated as ‘You are me and I am you’ (Men 81).
ourselves reflected there, strangely, in the image of the inscrutable Other. Through this process of voyeuristic reflection, we feel our own souls laid bare: ‘Yo,’ Borges famously wrote, ‘que sentí el horror de los espejos’ [I, who have felt the horror of mirrors] (El hacedor 61). The space of the literary Other is as immense and unfathomable as the place on the other side of Borges’s mirror, or Alice’s looking-glass; it is ‘inhabitable / un imposible espacio de reflejos’ [uninhabitable / an impossible space of reflections] (Borges, El hacedor 61) rendered all the more enticing by its impossibility.

Just as great works of literature ‘never finish saying what they have to say,’ so do we never fully grasp the infinitely Other worlds, fictional or otherwise, that they represent. For Fadanelli, the re-readability of fiction is a kind of ‘paradójica metáfora’ [paradoxical metaphor] for the arbitrary chaos of other people’s realities. Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela, Fernando Pessoa’s Livro do desassossego and Robert Walser’s Der Räuber, to take the three examples he cites, demonstrate ‘cómo es posible leer una novela comenzando de una manera diferente: se trata de un juego premeditado que puede extenderse como hipótesis al resto de la literatura de ficción’ [how it is possible to begin reading a novel in a different manner: theirs is a premeditated game that can be extended, hypothetically, to the rest of literary fiction] (Insolencia 197). The disordered narrative structure of these novels, while contrived, forces readers to reflect upon the infinite possibilities of the text before them. The indeterminate nature of a story like Rayuela points to the inevitability of its reinterpretation, and transformation, upon each subsequent reading; as Derrida put it, ‘Iterability alters’ (“Limited Inc” 62). The implications of this hypothesis go beyond literature and language, however. Fiction is an aperture onto the world, capable of provoking re-readings of everything we see and absorb in our everyday lives. ‘Una página es una ventana,’ Fadanelli writes, ‘en el sentido más legítimo y elemental del término, sólo que cuando nos asomamos el paisaje
nunca es el mismo: cambia con la mañana, el licor de medio día o de acuerdo al tono que
Glenda Jackson haya elegido esta noche para sus medias’ [A page is a window, in the most
legitimate and fundamental meaning of the word, only when we approach it the landscape is
never the same: it changes with the morning, the liquor we drink at midday, or according to
the colour of Glenda Jackson’s stockings] (Insolencia 197).

If literature is the aperture, then translation is the tool that widens it. Translation is
clearly a necessary cultural stimulus, aiding the natural movement of language. It extends the
reach of literary works, but it also succeeds in broadening the scope of those who engage
with them, bringing stranger and more distant landscapes into view. Translation, as some of
its most erudite defenders have argued, is essential to intertextuality, infusing literature with
the fresh themes, perspectives and stylistic idiosyncrasies that allow it to thrive. Perhaps none
have made the point so convincingly as Octavio Paz, whose 1971 essay “Traducción:
Literatura y Literalidad” documents the ways in which literary traditions are, and always have
been, inextricably intertwined:

Traducción y creación son operaciones gemelas. Por una parte, según lo
muestran los casos de Charles Baudelaire y de Ezra Pound, la traducción es
muchas veces indistinguible de la creación; por la otra, hay un incesante
reflujo entre las dos, una continua y mutua fecundación. […] Desde este
punto de vista la historia de la poesía europea podría verse como la historia
de las conjunciones de las diversas tradiciones que componen lo que se
llama la literatura de Occidente. […] Los estilos son colectivos y pasan de
una lengua a otra; las obras, todas arraigadas a su suelo verbal, son únicas...
Únicas pero no aisladas: cada una de ellas nace y vive en relación con otras
obras de lenguas distintas. Así, ni la pluralidad de las lenguas ni la
singularidad de las obras significa heterogeneidad irreductible o confusión,
sino lo contrario: un mundo de relaciones hecho de contradicciones y
correspondencias, uniones y separaciones.

[Translation and creation are twin processes. On one hand, as the works of
Baudelaire and Pound have shown, translation is often indistinguishable
from creation; on the other, there is constant interaction between the two, a continuous, mutual enrichment. […] In this respect, the history of European poetry might be viewed as a chronicle of the convergences of the various traditions that compose what is known as Western literature. […] Styles are coalescent and pass from one language to another; the works, each rooted in its own verbal soil, are unique… unique but not isolated: each is born and lives in relation to other works composed in different languages. Thus, the plurality of languages and the singularity of the works produce neither complete diversity nor complete disorder, but quite the opposite: a world of interrelationships made up of contradictions and harmonies, unions and digressions] (164).

Paz cites the example of Franco-Uruguayan symbolist poet Jules Laforgue, whose enduring mark upon both English and Spanish poetry (via the work of T.S. Eliot and Ramón López Velarde) demonstrates the relationship of utter interdependence that pertains between translation and original composition. Two poets with vastly different upbringings, he writes, ‘escriben, casi en los mismos años, en lenguas distintas […] dos versiones diferentes e igualmente originales de unos poemas que unos años antes había escrito un tercer poeta en otra lengua’ [Two poets writing in different languages […] almost simultaneously produced different but equally original versions of the poetry written some years earlier by a third poet in yet another language] (166). The constant process of coalescence and recreation that occurs in literature is akin to a symphony; a great cacophony of interweaving melodies from which original masterpieces emerge. If we take a step back from the examination of any individual work, Paz insists,

¡Oímos un concierto en el que los músicos, con diferentes instrumentos, sin obedecer a ningún director de orquesta ni seguir partitura alguna, componen una obra colectiva en la que la improvisación es inseparable de la traducción. […] A veces, uno de los músicos se lanza a un solo inspirado; al poco

19 As one colleague astutely pointed out to me, Paz’s metaphor is more evocative of jazz than an orchestral symphony.
tiempo, los demás lo siguen, no sin variaciones que vuelven irreconocible al motivo original.

[we can understand that we are hearing a concert, and that the musicians, playing different instruments, following neither conductor nor score, are in the process of collectively composing a symphony in which improvisation is inseparable from translation. […] At times, one of the musicians will break out into an inspired solo; soon the others pick it up, each introducing his own variations that make the original motif unrecognizable] (“Literatura y Literalidad” 165).

It is significant that Paz signals the innovative potential of this ongoing (re)creative process. What he describes is not simply the rehashing of tired tropes and styles, but rather a productive collaboration that allows for and encourages ‘inspired’ improvisation. Villoro expands upon this point, noting that ‘extranjería del estilo’ [strangeness of style] in literary translation often leads to curious and unexpected gains. ‘[C]iertos efectos,’ he writes, ‘sólo se logran con la tensión que proviene del desplazamiento desde una lengua ajena’ [Certain effects are only achieved thanks to the tension involved in the text’s displacement from a foreign language] (“El Traductor” 210). Octavio Paz’s translation of Gérard de Nerval’s El desdichado, for example, opens with the singularly beautiful line: ‘Yo soy el tenebroso – el viudo – el sin consuelo.’ The strength of this verse, according to Villoro, lies in its unusual ending (Paz’s ‘el sin consuelo’ for Nerval’s ‘l’inconsolé’). Thanks to its strangeness, the line succeeds in capturing the sonnet’s peculiar emotional ambiguity – something Villoro describes as ‘un incodificable exilio interior’ [an uncodifiable interior exile] (“El Traductor” 210). Perhaps this feeling of unnamable melancholy, of exile within oneself, is what prompted Nerval to give his French poem a Spanish name: El desdichado. He would not be alone in doing so. As Villoro notes, literature abounds with texts announced by ‘palabras extranjeras, descentradas, que aluden a una pesadumbre indecible en la lengua común’
[decentralised, foreign words that allude to some common, unsayable sorrow]: Fernando Pessoa’s *Lisbon Revisited*, Pablo Neruda’s *Walking Around* and Jorge Luis Borges’s *Ewigkeit* are but a few that come to mind (“El Traductor” 210).

Indeed, one of the fundamental roles of literature is to estrange, or, perhaps more accurately, to give voice to our estrangement. Paradoxically, the experience of reading (and thus sharing) an Other’s alienation is one that strengthens and extends our own humanity. Through the medium of literary translation the foreign is delivered compassionately, complexly, into the private realm of the familiar. In the words of Edith Grossman, translation extends to us all the possibility ‘to live outside our own skins’ (*Why Translation Matters* 14), just as fiction does. The two are, as Paz insists, siblings. Translation enables fiction. It assists and amplifies it. In rare instances, it even improves upon it. Both translation and fiction, for this reason, form part of that ‘immense human anomaly’ that urges us to recognise the Other in ourselves, and ourselves in the Other. Regardless of the metaphor we employ to conceptualise fiction – a mirror, a window, a crack in the wall – the central notion is one of connection and observation. The stories told in literature are not superfluous to reality but embedded in it, eliciting tangible reactions from the people who engage with them. The repercussions of this are social, as well as personal. Maruan Soto Antaki, Fadanelli’s peer and compatriot, is one of the founders of a new project that provides works of literary fiction to prison libraries in Mexico City. As recently as August 2015, he wrote: ‘La ausencia de los otros es un detonador a la exacerbación de la violencia, esa que aparece cuando no hay diálogo, cuando no hay con quién dialogar. […] Cuando la víctima no se percibe como a un semejante, tampoco hay limite en lo que se le puede hacer’ [The absence of the other triggers the exacerbation of violence, which rears its head where there is no conversation, or where there is nobody to converse with. […] When victims are not perceived as fellow human
beings, then there is no limit to what people will do’ (‘Leer en prisión’). To borrow Michel Houellebecq’s words: ‘Life without anything to read is dangerous’ (91). Fadanelli himself summarises this idea, noting:

Creo que quien no lee es por lo regular un ser limitado en sus concepciones éticas y un estorbo para el progreso civil. La literatura no es sólo un medio para narrar historias (eso es lo de menos) sino el ejercicio del lenguaje que permite a las personas más críticas, reflexivas, alertas no estar sumidas en la miseria social. Estimular la imaginación es necesario si se quiere encontrar salidas a los problemas comunes. Es mi opinión, aunque la verdad soy pesimista al respecto: vivimos entre bárbaros.

[I think people who don’t read are usually ethically limited and a hindrance to civil progress. Literature is not only a medium for telling stories (that’s the least important part) but an exercise in language that allows more critical, reflective, alert people to avoid being submerged in social misery. It is necessary to stimulate the imagination if we want to find solutions to our common problems. That’s my opinion, although the truth is I’m a pessimist in that regard: we live among savages] (“La literatura es insolente”).

Whether or not Fadanelli’s pessimism is justified, the point he makes is an important one. The more critically aware and ethically cultivated its citizens, the more progressive and imaginative a society’s responses to the problems afflicting it. So what does a world without literary fiction look like? If reading brings us closer to the visualisation of a more compassionate society, then a world without readers is one in which there is little contemplation of anything beyond our immediate needs and desires. If literary translators foster and foment conversations that would not – and indeed could not – take place without them, then a world without translated fiction is one in which our empathy is limited to those who share our language. It is one bereft of the timeless stories that have shaped our cultural canons: one without Raskolnikov’s agony and Josef K’s resignation; one without Quixotic journeys or the Proustian effect; one without the tragedy of Karenina, or the rambling
Buendía legacy. Perhaps, after all, it is on this simplest of levels that the enduring value of translated fiction is most apparent, for such a world is surely unimaginable.

The chapters that follow offer a critical examination of Guillermo Fadanelli’s work, its translation, and the contextual, cultural and theoretical schemata surrounding them. I hope, however, never to lose sight of the practical act that frames and informs this project: reading. I am reminded, by way of conclusion, of a charming exchange that takes place in Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. After witnessing the vigorous academic analysis of a passage in a fictitious novel, Calvino’s narrator ventures:

– Scusa, cercavo le altre pagine, il seguito [...]  
– Il seguito?… Oh, qui c’è già da discutere per un mese. Non ti basta?
– Non era per discutere, era per leggere… – fai tu.

– Excuse me, I was looking for the other pages, the rest [...]  
– The rest?… Oh, there’s enough material here to discuss for a month. Aren’t you satisfied?
– I didn’t mean to discuss; I wanted to read… – you say] (91).

When all is said and done, the objective of this translation project is to create a piece of literature that communicates with and engages its readers in a manner parallel (if never identical) to that of Fadanelli’s original text. It is, after all, the act of reading *See You at Breakfast?* that will decide whether the critiques and strategies contained within its creation stand or fall.
Chapter Two: Fadanelli, trash merchant

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder [...] Dirt offends against order.

— Mary Douglas

Purity and Danger

2.1 The Dirty Three: Carver, Bukowski and… Fadanelli?

Guillermo Fadanelli has professed an intense distrust of any attempt to categorise or dissect his work. This suspicion is not entirely gratuitous; as Stuart Evers notes, ‘grouping writers is usually a futile and ultimately hollow gesture’ (“King of the Dirty Realists”). Nevertheless, Fadanelli has been associated with a range of literary movements throughout the course of his career. This subchapter examines the extensive (and often contradictory) genre framework surrounding Fadanelli’s fictional work to date, focusing on the key proponents of North American dirty realism and its Latin American counterpart. Chapter 2.2 considers Fadanelli’s self-designation as a writer of ‘literatura basura’ [trash literature], a concept scavenged from a number of cultural media – among them film, visual art and poetry – and one that reveals a great deal about the aesthetic principles underpinning his writing. Fadanelli’s ironic embrace of the ugly, the shocking, the incongruous, the mutant and the ephemeral, his double rejection

of frivolity and elitism, and his constant flirtation with hypocrisy are illuminated and reinforced by a broad (counter)cultural context of alienation, transfiguration and violent interaction. This context, at once informing and responding to the trash/basura aesthetic, provides the cultural and theoretical framework for the translation ethics formulated in Chapter Three.

The insistent comparisons between Fadanelli’s writing and that of Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski – comparisons also spurred, one imagines, by Fadanelli’s professed love of these writers – have led critics to identify Fadanelli as a representative of Mexican ‘realismo sucio’: Latin America’s incarnation of the dirty realist (sub)genre that burgeoned in the United States in the 1980s. Certainly, the sad ennui – ‘that incurable convalescence,’ as Cioran put it (Decay 15) – of Fadanelli’s characters often recalls that of Carver’s hapless creations, and a careful ear will perceive Bukowski’s ‘deadly drone of existence’ in more than a few of Fadanelli’s works (Bukowski, Flowers at Last 27). With his depraved urban settings, latent pessimism and painfully mediocre (when not downright abhorrent) protagonists, Fadanelli would also appear to conform to a broader dirty realist aesthetic. As Mayra Ibarra notes, his stories constitute

un reflejo fiel de la vida que se desenvuelve en las calles de ciertas zonas de la Ciudad de México en donde las más bajas pasiones humanas, movidas por la necesidad y el desencanto, son capaces de transfigurar lo cotidiano en una vivencia sórdida y lo sórdido en un futuro estático e inamovible.

[a faithful reflection of the life that unravels in the streets of Mexico City, where the lowest of human passions, inspired by necessity and disenchantment, are capable of transfiguring the ordinary into a sordid existence and the sordid into a static and immutable future] (“Fadanelli o la Literatura Basura”).
In a similar vein, Rogelio Villarreal praises Fadanelli’s extraordinary ability to capture ‘la sordidez de la abrumadora vida cotidiana en las grandes urbes del planeta’ [the sordidness of overwhelming, everyday life in the world’s major cities], transcribing ‘la enrejecedora atmósfera de la posmodernidad y sus complejos y contradictorios efectos en las ideas y sentimientos del hombre’ [the tense postmodern atmosphere and its complex and contradictory effects on the emotions and ideas of man] (35). Both Fadanelli and his North American idols approach the unglamorous reality of postindustrial urban society with stark honesty, dark humour, and a hint of complicity. Certain thematic and narrative similarities also spring to mind, such as the frequent reappearance of certain character traits and semi-autobiographical circumstances – needless to say, it is not difficult to compare Fadanelli’s recurring alter-ego (also named Guillermo) to Bukowski’s infamous Hank Chinaski. The two also coincide in their portrayals of the cruel postmodern metropolis. Just as Bukowski is ‘writing [...] and addressing the city of Los Angeles,’ Fadanelli both writes and is written by Mexico City. The two ‘are reacting to the city, and the city reacts back: it is a relationship’ (Hemmingson 54). Fadanelli’s intimate urban discourses reveal him as an unlikely prophet of vulgar post-industrial modernity; if Bukowski is – as Time magazine gushes – a ‘laureate of American lowlife,’ then Fadanelli is his reluctant south-of-the-border counterpart (Iyer). Indeed, like most writers branded with the dirty realist label, Fadanelli is quick to deny the connection. As Mario Bogarín Quintana remarks, ‘cuando a Guillermo Fadanelli le preguntan si su literatura pertenece al realismo sucio, contesta que él sólo aplica esos dos términos en la cama’ [when they ask Guillermo Fadanelli if his literature belongs to realismo sucio, he replies that he only applies those two terms in bed] (‘Basura Literaria’). This contrarianism, characterised above all by a stalwart resistance to the norms and associations of any particular literary genre or movement, is echoed both in Fadanelli’s ‘trash literature’ aesthetic and – as I
will illustrate in detail in Chapter Three – in the alienating ethics and praxis that form the backbone of my translation project. In spite of this, it is important to examine Fadanelli’s complicated position within existing critical and literary frameworks. The influence of dirty realism and realismo sucio and the reasons (valid or otherwise) for Fadanelli’s association with them provide useful orientation points with which to map the cultural relevance of Fadanelli’s work; they also provide a vantage point from which to imagine the potential trajectories, translations and readerships of Fadanelli’s work within a world literature context.

The term ‘dirty realism’ was coined in 1983 by Granta editor Bill Buford in reference to ‘the fiction of a new generation of American authors,’ among them Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Richard Ford and Jayne Anne Phillips (Buford 4). In the space of a few years, the magazine dedicated two issues to the genre: Granta 8: Dirty Realism (1983) and Granta 19: More Dirt (1986). Despite Buford’s emphasis on the genre’s apparent novelty, dirty realism draws upon deep reservoirs of literary revolt. The French Realists of the late nineteenth century are, nominally, the movement’s most obvious antecedents, although something akin to a ‘bastard high style’ (to borrow Francis Spufford’s term) harks all the way back to François Villon and his fruitful marriage of ‘gutter argot and the language of the Schools’ (Spufford 23). The Realist rejection of Romanticism is also mirrored in the work of proto-Existentialist writers like Dostoyevsky, whose wretched Underground Man might well be the considered the original dirty realist antihero.

In his introduction to Granta 8, Buford describes the writing of Carver and his generation as ‘a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life’ (4). Their peculiar style, he observes, marked a significant departure from both the ‘ornate, even baroque’ traditional realism of writers like John Updike and William Styron and the ‘consciously experimental’ work of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon (4). ‘In the main,’
Stuart Evers notes, ‘the tone was minimal; spare to the point of the inarticulate’ (“King of the Dirty Realists”). Dirty realist authors also abandoned the ‘inflated,’ ‘epic ambitions’ of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer; their scope was minimal, limited to microscopic examinations of commonplace mediocrity that, in some sad and subtle manner, succeeded in representing ‘a whole culture and a whole moral condition’ (Buford 4). ‘These are strange stories,’ Buford wrote,

unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch daytime television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafés, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer and stay in cheap hotels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble: for stealing a car, breaking a window, pickpocketing a wallet. They are from Kentucky or Alabama or Oregon, but, mainly, they could just about be from anywhere: drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism (4).

Several enduring characteristics are already present in Buford’s initial appraisal: a focus on the small-scale and the mundane; pared-down narratives and a marked economy of expression; and an underlying preoccupation with postmodern consumer culture. Due to its austere style, dirty realism has often been subsumed under the umbrella of minimalism. Jenny Stringer’s brief acknowledgment of the genre, for example, describes it as a certain breed of ‘minimalist fiction’ identified by ‘elliptical dialogue, seedy settings [...] uncompromising descriptions of violence, sordid sex, and the dreary hopelessness of its downbeat characters’ (171-2). While the earliest works of dirty realism do possess unmistakably minimalistic traits – there is no question that Carver and Wolff are indebted to the work of Ernest Hemingway – it would be imprecise to equate the two movements. Robert Rebein notes:
On a purely technical level, the new fiction [of Carver, Wolff, Ford et al.] was indeed minimalist (‘unadorned,’ ‘unfurnished’) but it was also realist insofar as it dealt with a specific class of people (the working class) living in specific places (Kentucky, Alabama, Oregon) holding down specific jobs (construction, ranch work, waitressing). Its dominant themes – dislocation, drifting, malaise – presented an image of America as at once free and *pursued*: wealthy beyond words and yet crime-ridden, arrogantly confident and yet horribly dissatisfied. [...] In short, dirty realism was a kind of truncated documentary naturalism that told the ‘truth’ about America in the 1980s (42).

As Rebein points out, the original parameters of dirty realist fiction tread a fine line between specificity and universality, making the genre a profoundly localised one that nevertheless possessed great international potential. The ‘low-rent tragedies’ (in fact Carver’s words) of dirty realism are invariably played out by the most unremarkable of characters: epitomes of the Bukowksian factotum worn down by ‘numbing sameness’ (Dobozy 52); ‘interchangeable parts’ – to borrow Kurt Vonnegut’s phrase – ‘in the American machine’ (*Slapstick* 10). As Robert Towers observes: ‘Their ordinariness is unredeemed, their failures and fatalities of a sort that goes unnoticed’ (37). However, theirs is not a mainstream ordinariness but a marginalised one: these are the disenfranchised inhabitants of ‘the other America,’ the people discarded and forgotten by late twentieth century consumer culture. Dirty realist authors, Richard Evers notes, ‘were concerned with the dispossessed [...] the people at the margins and the trailer parks’ (“King of the Dirty Realists”). Themes of displacement and non-belonging often loiter behind the innocuous façades of dirty realist narratives. As the narrator of Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” observes: ‘We lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else’ (114). Dirty realism, then, is indeed the refuge of ‘drifters,’ people who, as Buford put it, ‘could just about be from anywhere’ (4). This notion is central if one is to comprehend the expansion of the dirty realist canon, which
now encompasses subsequent (and even previous) generations as well as a diverse range of cultures and languages.  

In the US tradition, writers like John Fante, Henry Miller, Charles Bukowski and Chuck Palahniuk have been comfortably accommodated within the dirty realist genre. There is no doubt a certain stylistic and thematic camaraderie binding these authors to the work of Buford’s original dirty cohort. The connection, however, is no longer defined solely within the initial parameters of the genre, nor is the resemblance shaped by friendship and the sense of belonging to a common generation. As Stuart Evers notes: ‘Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff and Richard Bausch were all friends with Carver, and the similarities [in their writing] come from a shared sensibility and a shared sense of what stories should convey’ (“King of the Dirty Realists”). This is not the case for writers like Bukowski and Fante, whose names have nonetheless become synonymous with the genre. There are obvious similarities between the writing of Bukowski and that of Carver. The two were, after all, contemporaries – acquaintances, even – and, as Hemmingson notes, Bukowski’s life ‘parallels the life of Carver’ in many ways (17). Both were sons of the working poor, both called California their adopted home, and both experienced first-hand the realities of alcoholism, domestic violence and tenuous blue-collar employment. Whatever the reasons behind his exclusion from Buford’s Granta editions on dirty realism, Bukowski certainly seems to have lived up to his unsolicited epithet as the ‘godfather’ of the genre (Hemmingson 11). More so than Carver,  

\[21\] Frederic Jameson takes issue with Buford’s remark that the characters of dirty realist fiction ‘could just about be from anywhere’ (Buford 4), noting that, invariably, they come from ‘nonurban areas’ (Seeds 148). Jameson argues that the dirty realist authors originally identified by Buford ‘are what have come to be called neoregionalist writers,’ representing ‘a flight from the realities of late capitalism’ and the ‘sentimentalisation […] of the nature of the social life and the socioeconomic system in the superstate’ (148). While this may be true of writers like Raymond Carver and Jayne Anne Phillips, the shift towards urban settings in dirty realist narratives – demonstrated above all in the work of Charles Bukowski and most realismo sucio writers (Fadanelli among them) – means that the scope of Jameson’s observation is limited to a small group of writers working in North America in the early 1980s. The ‘dirty realism’ moniker, as I will argue further on, has since been extended to include a diverse range of linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural contexts.
even, Bukowski has become the much-imitated poster boy of dirty realist literature. As Hemmingson points out: ‘Hundreds of would-be Bukowkis have written about drinking, whoring, hangovers, sex with the wrong people, and being down-and-out, whether they have experienced this or not’ (22). Bukowski’s tremendous popularity in the hispanophone world, which far exceeds that of Carver, was also instrumental to the construction of the realismo sucio canon in both Spain and Latin America. Bukowski is also the writer most consistently cited as a major influence on Fadanelli’s writing. Indeed, it is the debauched, urban landscapes of Bukowski’s dirty realism that most readily recall Fadanelli’s marginal Mexico City fiction.

Robert Rebein claims that, despite its minimalist origins in the working-class backwaters of the US, the dirty realist canon truly flourished in the 1990s with an expansion into darker and increasingly urban (yet persistently marginal) settings. For Rebein, the essence of dirty realism resides in this broader, gloomier definition. ‘Dirty realism,’ he writes, ‘as I would like to employ the term, refers to an effect in both subject matter and technique that is somewhere between the hard-boiled and the darkly comic. It refers to the impulse in writers to explore dark truths, to descend, as it were, into the darkest holes of society’ (43). Significantly, the narratives of this darker fiction unfold in milieus quite distinct from those conjured by Carver and friends, evoking ‘[n]ot the trailer parks and fern bars of minimalism […] but rather the more intense worlds of war, drug addiction, serious crime, prostitution, prison’ (Rebein 43). The transposition of dirty realist narratives from rural to urban settings has perhaps been the most noteworthy shift in the trajectory of the genre, accentuating its bleak tones of violence and commodified degeneracy. In terms of style, Rebein identifies

not the detached, ‘unconscious’ narrations of minimalism, but rather the probing, superconscious narrations of a Henry Miller or Hubert Selby Jr.
I’m thinking of a kind of fiction that goes beyond what has been called, at one time or another, ‘tough guy realism,’ ‘underworld realism,’ ‘hard-boiled fiction,’ ‘southern Gothic,’ and so on, a fiction that incorporates all this but also includes what Harry Levin used to call, following Melville’s view of Hawthorne, ‘the power of blackness’ (43).

It is in this sense that the ‘dirty realism’ label can best be applied beyond the particular context of its origination. Having exceeded its original parameters, Buford’s term now applies to a vast range of writers hailing from diverse linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In the words of Tamas Dobozy: ‘Application of dirty realism to Hispanic, Canadian, women’s, working- and middle-class experience makes it impossible to process the term as a unified national or theoretical school of writing. […] Disparity is dirty realism’s norm’ (65). Thus we recognise the urban poverty of Fante’s Bandini Quartet, the taciturn depravity of Cormac McCarthy’s grim Westerns, or the graphic violence and crude sexuality of Palahniuk’s transgressional fiction as elements that fit the broad dirty realist mould. We recognise, too, the impoverished sicarios of Fernando Vallejo’s Medellín, the peripheral debauchery of José Ángel Mañas’s Madrid, and the bare, dirty prose of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s Havana. That said, the dirty realist genre has experienced significant mutations since its birth in the mid-1980s, both within its home culture and abroad. As Cintia Santana points out, ‘when a term migrates, the new context inevitably transforms and informs its meaning and usage’ (Forth and Back 108). Realismo sucio, while clearly indebted to its progenitors in the US, is nonetheless a beast of different (if still distinctly dirty) complexion.

Translation naturally played a key role in the consolidation of dirty realism as a world-literary genre. As a tool of dissemination and (re)creation, then, translation is already superimposed upon the works of post-Carver literature that emerged from Spain and Latin America in the late twentieth century – often overtly so. The shifts and inspired explosions
that followed dirty realism’s migration from the US left profound impacts on a number of contemporary literary landscapes (including both Mexico and Australia), bearing testament to the enormous influence of literary translation as a cultural process and product. Thanks in large part to Spanish-language translations of Carver and Bukowski, Spanish and Latin American manifestations of dirty realist fiction began to appear in the early 1990s. The genre’s positive reception in the hispanophone world indicates, perhaps, a certain familiarity and affinity with the central themes and aesthetics of dirty realism. The work of Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, for example, or the short stories of Ecuadorian vanguardista Pablo Palacio, belong to a distinct Latin American tradition that pre-dates, and in some respects anticipates, the influence of Buford’s cohort. Nevertheless, the translation of US dirty realists played a key role in the popularisation of a new dirty realist idiom, setting the scene for the rapid propagation of home-grown fiction. In Spain, Ray Loriga’s novel Lo peor de todo (1993) is generally recognised as ‘el detonante’ [the trigger] of the realismo sucio movement, which subsequently erupted as ‘todo un fenómeno literario, editorial, incluso sociológico’ [an entire literary, editorial, even sociological phenomenon] (Gutiérrez Resa 19). Loriga’s Lo peor de todo, along with José Ángel Mañas’s Historias del Kronen (1994) and Benjamín Prado’s Raro (1995), comprise Spanish realismo sucio’s definitive trilogy of (un)holy books.

For the Spanish dirty realists, one of the most important influences was the succinct, austere style of writers like Carver. Santana notes that, as English syntax naturally tends towards brevity, it is not surprising that Carver’s clipped style, carefully preserved in translation, registered ‘considerably more oddly with Spanish readers accustomed to the comparatively maximalist syntactical conventions of Spanish’ (Forth and Back 66). While Carver’s truncated prose polarised critics in the United States, alternately revered as masterful and derided as ‘post-literate literature’ (Saltzman 5), it received an overwhelmingly positive
reception in Spain. Writing for *La Vanguardia* in 1986, Llàtzer Moix praises Carver’s ‘tono literario económico, descarnado, certero y abrumador’ [ economical literary style: stark, precise and devastating]. Carver’s stories, he elaborates, ‘empiezan en cualquier lado y terminan antes de que pueda decirse que algo ha ocurrido. […] A Carver no le hacen falta tramas, se basta con un estilo envidiable, cuya extrema frialdad consigue, con frecuencia, quemar’ [begin anywhere and end before anything can be said to have happened. […] Carver doesn’t need plots; he makes do with an enviable style which is so cold it manages, frequently, to burn] (Moix 43). This reverence is reflected in the work of the early Spanish dirty realists, who openly acknowledged the ‘foreignness’ of the novels they were producing. Furthermore, observes Santana, ‘they did so while repudiating autochthonous cultural models as inadequately reflecting the stories of their time’ (*Forth and Back* 118). In a sense, then, the first works of Spanish realismo sucio were themselves ‘translations’ of a certain (already translated) dirty realist idiom. Thanks to the work of literary translators such as Jorge Berlanga, Jesús Zulaika and Benito Gómez Ibáñez (the respective translators of *Post Office, Cathedral* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*), a defiant process of literary creation and adaptation was set in motion, allowing for the emergence of an entirely new generation of Spanish literature. According to Mercedes Monmany, Ray Loriga represented una cierta juventud, de los ‘80 e inmediato comienzo de los ‘90, juventud que ya no solo es autóctona, sino que es la de todos, la que no conoce mapas y geografías, como esos personajes de su novela que comparten las mismas canciones, el mismo rock, las mismas películas, los mismos mitos literarios y la misma basura de la televisión ya sea en Liverpool, Ohio o San Petersburgo.

22 Published with Anagrama in the 1990s, these three titles were among the most influential dirty realist novels translated into Spanish. Significantly (as far as the development of Spanish realismo sucio is concerned), in each case the translator appears to have embraced a distinctly foreignising translation approach.
[a certain youth of the 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s, a youth that is not only local, but from everywhere, a youth that knows neither maps nor geographies, just like those characters in [Loriga’s] novel who share the same songs, the same rock and roll, the same films, the same literary myths, and the same trash on TV, whether it be in Liverpool, Ohio, or St. Petersburg] (“Rock and Roll en la Plaza Roja” 22).

Loriga himself confirms this, stating of Lo peor de todo: ‘Mi generación convive con referencias culturales más globales: éste es un libro que podría haber escrito un tipo nacido en Liverpool. Para nosotros el folclor no supuso nada. […] Ya no se puede hablar de raíces’ [My generation lives with cultural references that are more global: this is a book that a guy born in Liverpool could have written. For us, folklore has meant nothing. […] You can’t talk about roots anymore] (Altaires 24). An undercurrent of displacement and non-belonging, so important in the dirty realism described by Buford, again connects the disparate works of dirty realist writers across continents and generations. From the outset, dirty realist writing has been ‘devoted to local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture’ (Buford 4) that nevertheless resonate far beyond the small, displaced lives of their stories’ inhabitants. The fact that Carver’s stories begin and end ‘en cualquier lado,’ as Moix noted, signals more than a mere absence of plot: there is a timelessness and a placelessness to them, a universally marginal quality that situates them at once nowhere and everywhere.

There are, however, clear departures in style, theme and milieu that identify Spanish and Latin American realismo sucio as a phenomenon distinct from, if heavily beholden to, the work of the US dirty realists. Santana observes that the novels of Loriga and Mañas are ‘substantially grittier and more nihilistic’ than the work of Buford’s dirty realists (Forth and Back 108). The ‘spectacular violence’ and drug abuse that characterise realismo sucio, in both its Spanish and Latin American contexts, is conspicuously absent from the benign narratives of Carver and Ford (Santana, “Dirty Realism” 36). We also see an urbanisation of dirty realist
narratives, which shift from the ‘nowhere’ of the American hinterlands to the ‘non-places’ of the postmodern metropolis. Santana illustrates these changes well, noting:

While the *Granta* dirty realist protagonists drink and listen to country music, the characters of the realismo sucio novels tend to be obsessed with violence, sex, hard drugs and hard rock. Dirty realism focuses on the lives of blue-collar men and women living in small towns, while realismo sucio’s protagonists are unemployed or underemployed young men in their late teens and early twenties living in urban and suburban settings (*Forth and Back* 108).

Although her analysis is limited, in this instance, to Spanish realismo sucio, Santana’s observations apply equally well to the Latin American context. In Cuba, for example, amid the economic turmoil that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, ‘proliferaron los textos sobre el jineterismo, las drogas, el homosexualismo, las zonas marginales de la sociedad cubana con su sobrecarga de alcohol y sexo, el mundo de los perdedores’ [there was a proliferation of texts about jineterismo, drugs, homosexuality, the marginal areas of Cuban society with its excesses of alcohol and sex, the world of losers] (Heras León 1). Dystopian narratives of this nature find their apotheosis in the work of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, whose grim urban tales encapsulate realismo sucio’s preoccupation with the peripheral and the abject. Fadanelli, too, reveals a third-world metropolis plagued by underemployment, dissatisfaction, sexual deviance and unhinged violence. These scourges are not limited to the poverty-stricken lower classes, however. While bargain-basement prostitutes and petty criminals certainly feature in Fadanelli’s stories, we are also privy to the mindless drug abuse and perverted sex lives of upper-middle class intellectuals and bored young women. The thread linking

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23 In *The Decadent City: Urban Space in Latin American Dirty Realist Fiction*, Jamie Fudacz identifies the ‘non-place’ (after Marc Augé) as a central and recurring element in Latin American dirty realist narratives. See, in particular, Chapter 2.2: Evacuation of Meaning and the Rise of the Non-Place.
Fadanelli’s work to that of the multiple dirty realisms found across the globe, in other words, is not necessarily economic destitution, but rather a broader, more disquieting sense of abjection that bridges national and class differences.

As Brian Jarvis points out in a study on the work of Jayne Anne Phillips, dirty realist fiction exhibits a certain ‘fascination with the abject,’ with ‘dirt and waste, both geographical and corporeal’ (193). The genre’s moniker alone betrays this fascination, and its close association with ‘lo sucio’ translates literally (in every sense) across the linguistic and cultural divide. With his unflinching portrayals of human detritus, Fadanelli is more than capable of holding his own among the ‘bad boys’ of dirty realism. We need look no further than the title of his most lauded novel, *Lodo* [Mud]: a work replete, like most of his novels, with sex, shit, blood and filthy words. There is a more unsettling idea at work behind the dirtiness of dirty realism, however, which Jarvis reveals through recourse to Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The cause of abjection, for Kristeva, is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour… Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject (4).

The pre-eminence of crime in Fadanelli’s fictional work clearly identifies it as a literature obsessed with abjection, in the sense Kristeva intended. Characters like Johnny Ramírez of *La otra cara de Rock Hudson*, or the Humbert Humbert-esque narrator of *Lodo*, or even *Malacara*’s eponymous protagonist, are at once despised and admired for their brazen disrespect for decorum, moral convention and the law. Such characters, vile as they are, are

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24 The appellation of Fadanelli’s literary exploits has been significant from the outset – consider the title of his first project, *Moho* [Mildew].
confuse us with their inexplicable charisma, shifting from vicious to comical – or downright pathetic – in the space of a few pages. It is not only the fragility of the law, or the systems it attempts to uphold, but the fragility of each human soul that strikes us when we delve into Fadanelli’s sinister worlds. For Fadanelli, nothing is sacred; everything is corruptible. In Lodo, a mild-mannered university professor and a young convenience store clerk evolve into cold-blooded murderers. In ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, a gang of bored rapists exhibit a lack of remorse verging on psychopathy. In La otra cara de Rock Hudson, a naïve young boy gradually assumes the place (both physically and figuratively) of a legendary killer. All of these ‘ambiguous’ and ‘composite’ characters operate within a growing web of lies and transgression. Writing of the 2007 novel Malacara, Roberto Frías makes this incisive observation:

El enemigo del eterno alter ego de Fadanelli ya no es sólo la ciudad o el sistema represor o unos cuantos imbéciles sino el mundo entero. […] ¿Cómo escapar a la conciencia y al mundo entero sin suicidarse? En el fondo éste es el dilema de Malacara, no extraña entonces su lúcida respuesta: mediante la transgresión del orden, la imposición de la voluntad. De ahí la promiscuidad y el asesinato.

[The enemy of Fadanelli’s alter ego is no longer just the city, or the oppressive system, or a handful of idiots, but the entire world. […] How to escape one’s own conscience, and the entire world, without resorting to suicide? This, essentially, is Malacara’s dilemma. His lucid response, then, should come as no surprise: through the transgression of order and the imposition of the will. From this stem promiscuity and murder] (67).

Fadanelli’s preoccupation with crime and debasement, then, is not simply the fulfilment of some gratuitous violent fantasy, as some critics have suggested.25 If murder and promiscuity

25 On the feminist front, for example, Diana Palaversich has criticised Fadanelli’s ‘pobreza de […] imaginación erótica […] y su incapacidad de liberarse de los esquemas mentales del machismo folclórico latinoamericano que contamina [sus] obras con clichés gastados’ [poverty of […] erotic imagination […] and
are the colourful and often sickening fruits of his characters’ behaviour, then the roots lie in a
deep and more disturbing notion of abjection that comes very close to that described by
Kristeva. When we force ourselves to look beyond the filthy façade of dirty realist narratives,
we find something yet more threatening: the disturbance of ‘identity, system, order’ that
Kristeva mentions. In US dirty realism, this disturbance is revealed through a fixation on
disease and disability, on the inelegant realities of the wasted human body, on the underclass
and its representation of a ‘socioeconomic abject in Reagan’s America’ (Jarvis 194). In
realismo sucio, the focus shifts to a darker place – one of drug abuse, rape, murder and
prostitution. At the centre of both genres, however, we find fragility: of the body, the mind,
our social systems, and the moral safeguards we rely upon.

In ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, abjection lurks above all in a zone of precarious
contradiction. Among the fragmented spaces inhabited by the novel’s four protagonists, we
find a number of disturbing juxtapositions: the archetypal and the aberrant, the traditional and
the postmodern, the pedestrian and the dissolute. Thus we endure graphic descriptions of
Olivia’s rape interjecting swathes of banal dialogue between her bickering parents (89-97);
we are privy to the perverse musings of Ulises as he encourages an unforeseen erection with
banal office banter (25-27); and we witness the compulsive voyeurism of Adolfo who, from
his bedroom window, observes the innocent and mundane activities of his teenage neighbour
(38-40). Such contradictions serve to jolt us from familiarity, having first tempted us with
glimpses of desire, comfort, or normality. It is in this sense, more so than any other, that they
engender abjection. As Kristeva notes, ‘the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverises
the subject’ (5), generating a timeless ‘vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one
haunted by it literally beside himself’ (1). Within abjection, she writes, there looms

his inability to disentangle himself from the mental framework of folkloric Latin American machismo that
contaminates his work with tired clichés (“Las trampas del sexo” 194).
one of those violent, dark revolts of being. [...] It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. [...] But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere that is as tempting as it is condemned (1).

When we consider this confusion, a deeper meaning emerges from Hemmingson’s description of dirty realist narratives as ‘ironic, sometimes savage, but insistently compassionate’ reflections of society (11). The ruthless lens of dirty realism brings into focus both the most ghastly and the most heartbreaking aspects of human existence. By wringing compassion from even the most brutal of situations, dirty realist literature prompts us to contemplate the flawed systems that give rise to them. For Tamas Dobozy (2001), the social commentary implied by dirty realism’s miscarried narratives is fundamentally tied to the moral deficiency of late capitalism. ‘The hypocrisy aesthetic so visible in dirty realism,’ he writes, ‘[...] mirrors the hypocrisy of capitalism itself’ (44). A certain preoccupation with the social ills of neoliberalism has been present in dirty realist literature since its inception. Buford, indeed, initially described the genre’s protagonists as ‘drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism’ (4). The America of Carver, Ford and Bukowski is one in which community has been sacrificed at the altar of capitalism, leaving behind a wasteland of isolated, disenfranchised people. Carver’s lacklustre nobodies, then, are also society’s ‘losers,’ victims of a merciless neoliberal meritocracy that drives its underachievers to booze and squalor. The dirty realist everyman, anonymous and unremarkable, represents both the inevitable debris and the mass-produced sameness of such a society. ‘We actually do live in a world where the identical apartment and department store
can be found from Seattle to Miami,’ writes Madison Bell; ‘In the face of such fearsome homogeneity, our individuality is hard to preserve’ (68).

The dirty realist narratives of the third world reveal an even darker side to neoliberalism. Fadanelli’s unlikely criminals (as well as those born into criminality) are entrenched in a culture of corruption, impunity and rampant consumerism, tantalised by visions of a life that they are continually denied. We experience this tension from the very first pages of ¿Te veré en el desayuno?. Cristina, despite being ‘la mujer que con sólo trescientos pesos [cualquiera podía] llevarse a la cama del hotel más cercano’ [the kind of woman [any passer-by could] take to bed for a mere three hundred pesos] (12), admires the luxurious interior of an expensive automobile, musing:

[D]ebía uno sentirse tan cómodo allí adentro, tan a sus anchas, escuchando música suavecita, aspirando el olor a terciopelo de las vestiduras, ¿cuánto dinero haría que tener en el banco para decir: “Este auto es mío?” ¿Cuántos negocios gordos tendrían que hacerse en la vida para darse el lujo de fumar allí adentro?

[Imagine how comfortable, how easy it must be to sit inside there, listening to soft music, breathing the velvet scent of the upholstery; how much money would you need in the bank to be able to say: “This is my car”? How many hefty deals would you have to have strike in your life in order to afford the luxury of smoking inside there?] (9).

A few pages later, Cristina is confronted by an even crueller temptation: ‘dejó a su mirada perderse entre las frases del cartel que anunciaba jabones en la cima de un edificio: Manos Suaves Matrimonio Largo, rezaban las letras’ [she let her eyes wander among the letters of a billboard advertising soap across the street: Smooth Hands Long Marriage, they read] (15). All of the novel’s characters, in fact, are tormented by impossible and unfulfilled dreams. Ulises schemes and frets over the unachievable promotion that will allow him to possess the
perfect woman; ‘mi mujer usará medias y zapatos de tacón,’ he affirms, ‘como la esposa del licenciado Fuentes’ [my wife is going to wear stockings and high heels, like Fuentes’ wife] (24). Adolfo is a university drop-out feigning a career as a veterinarian, so paralysed by fear and failure that he is incapable of even discarding his dead parents’ moth-eaten clothes and furniture. His misery is palpable: ‘era como estar dentro de una pecera mirando un mundo en apariencia inmutable o al menos uno en el que Adolfo no podía tener clara participación’ [he felt like he was inside a fishbowl looking out at an apparently immutable world, or at the very least a world to which he made no clear contribution] (43). And Olivia, by far the novel’s most tragic character, is punished in the most horrific of manners for her naivety in the midst of a selfish and treacherous world. Her metamorphosis from a vigorous and inquisitive teenage girl to a distant, disappointed and deeply unhappy young woman contains the weight of a whole society’s disillusion, conveyed with muted sorrow in the novels closing lines: ‘De pronto tuvo ganas de llorar y ocultó su rostro en la almohada para que el suave gemido no llegara más allá de las paredes’ [She suddenly felt like crying, and hid her face in the pillow so that the gentle sobs didn’t reach beyond the bedroom walls] (178).

It is clear, then, that the categorisation of Fadanelli’s writing as ‘realismo sucio’ is – at least partly – legitimate. As Jamie Fudacz points out, however, Fadanelli’s writing ‘is not quite stark or detached enough’ to fully fit the mould of a Carver or a Bukowski (5). In its representation of true abjection and criminality, too, it exceeds the parameters of the US genre, proving itself ‘even more “dirty” […] than Buford’s dirty realism’ (Fudacz 4). Indeed, the only movement to which Fadanelli truly belongs, as far as he is concerned, is one he created himself: a non-category that he terms ‘la literatura basura.’

The following sub-chapter examines the ‘literatura basura’ concept in detail, situating it within a broadly transgressive socio-cultural context that crosses both geographical and
generational borders. My aim is to uncover some of the many streams of counterculture – some converging, others running parallel – that feed into Fadanelli’s writing, and in doing so illuminate the creative potential of aesthetic violence, insolence and auto-exile. These practices, which I argue are key elements of Fadanelli’s work and the ideological context in which it operates, are also central to my translation practice and to the alienating framework, both ethical and methodological, set out in this thesis. It is through this lens of ‘trash’ and self-marginalisation that I will attempt to envision Fadanelli’s place within the contemporary Australian literary panorama. With a prospective audience of young, culturally engaged Australian readers, the question becomes one of meeting this readership’s standards while simultaneously courting their disappointment and disquiet, honouring the violence of the source text and of literary translation more generally. My challenge, then, as the translator of Fadanelli’s provocative ‘trash’ fiction, is itself something of a paradox: to make a place for the resolutely out-of-place.

2.2 The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Fadanelli and ‘la literatura basura’

In a 2014 article for Revista Crítica, Javier Hernández Quezada defines the work of Fadanelli and his most notable contemporaries – among them Mauricio Bares, J. M. Servín, Enrique Blanc and Julio Haro – in opposition to that of a previous, and now dwindling, literary tradition: that of the ‘escritores “buenos”’ of Mexico’s past. Quezada mentions authors like José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes and Carlos Monsiváís, who have proven themselves
incapaces de equivocarse; como escritores probos que, además de concebir una obra importante, de suma valía para el desarrollo de nuestras letras, se dieron a la tarea de generar proyectos, fortalecer instituciones. En una palabra: aportar desde las trincheras de la inteligencia y la sensibilidad.

[incapable of committing an error; principled writers who, as well as producing important works of art, of extraordinary value to the development of our national literature, took it upon themselves to generate projects and fortify institutions. In short: they fought from the trenches of intelligence and sensibility] (Hernández Quezada).

National treasures such as these – ‘good’ writers in every sense of the word – have little in common with their badly behaved successors. As Rogelio Villarreal noted early on, in an article for La Jornada Semanal entitled “Rebelión en el basurero” (1994), Fadanelli forms part of a distinct literary class that not only differs from, but actively undermines, the values and aesthetics of this earlier literary tradition. In the wake of ‘los buenos’ – ‘fieles y bien portados, arrogantes y seguros de sí mismos […] inteligentes y aristocráticos’ [loyal and well-behaved, arrogant and self-assured […] intelligent and aristocratic] – there emerged the ‘sucios, feos y malos’ [dirty, bad and ugly] (Villarreal 35): a countercultural generation whose deliberately provocative and unpleasant writing, infused with what Fadanelli has called a ‘belicoso romanticismo’ [bellicose romanticism] (Vagancia 109), reflected a disenchantment with, and deep disdain for, established social and literary hierarchies. It is important to note, however, that Fadanelli’s recalcitrant self-evaluation as a creator of ‘literatura basura’ does not indicate a complete severing from existing literary frameworks. All writers are embedded within a certain artistic, social and political context, regardless of whether or not they contribute to its dominant currents of thought, and the principles behind Fadanelli’s ‘trash’ culture do in fact align with those of other movements. By examining the origins of the ‘literatura basura’ epithet, this subchapter will also analyse the ways in which it intersects
with and departs from other (counter)cultural tendencies, illuminating the ethical and aesthetic underpinnings of the movements that precede, inspire, and coexist with Fadanelli’s work. These include the projects of postmodern visual artists, the influence of cult cinema and pop culture icons, and Fadanelli’s aforementioned literary contemporaries within dirty realism and the *Crack* generation. The themes of insolence, violence and alienation that run through this contextual framework serve to bolster my ethical approach to the translation of Fadanelli’s peculiar brand of ‘trash.’ Like Fadanelli, I have aimed to both resist and engage with, the tropes of established (counter)culture, however hypocritically.

Put simply, the concept of ‘la literatura basura’ signifies ‘una renuncia hipotética a la idea de durar, a las buenas costumbres literarias, y a la academización’ [a hypothetical relinquishment of the idea of longevity, of good literary manners and academicisation] (J.C.M.). On his invention of the now infamous term, Fadanelli writes:

> Parece arrogante y discriminatorio el llamar basura a los productos con que se entretiene o regocija una buena parte de la población cautiva en los medios. Yo, a principios de los años noventa, parodié el consumo chatarra escribiendo varios relatos que denominé literatura basura. La abierta carcajada del condenado a muerte, así recuerdo esa experiencia. No obstante, la basura continúa siendo desecho que si se acumula estorba, pudre, propicia enfermedades, mata los sentidos.

[It seems arrogant and discriminatory to dismiss as ‘trash’ all those products with which a large proportion of the media-obsessed population entertains or consoles itself. In the early 1990s, I parodied the consumption of this junk culture by writing a number of stories and calling them ‘trash literature.’ The belly laugh of a man on death row: that’s how I recall that experience. Nevertheless, trash continues to be treated as waste, the accumulation of which soon becomes bothersome – it decomposes, breeds disease, kills the senses] (*Insolencia* 158).
In this typically self-contradictory evaluation, Fadanelli both defends the relevance of the trash aesthetic and points out its inherently expendable nature. Trash is an affliction, yes; it clogs our landfills and our airwaves, failing to nourish our minds or our bodies. By virtue of its ubiquity, however, it tells us a great deal about the sensibilities of our culture. Beyond being a parody of the vicious consumer lifestyle, the rebellious and cavalier spirit of ‘la literatura basura’ has also been interpreted as a rejection of the coextensive mainstream currents of Mexican literature: both the commodified ‘literatura light’ produced by writers such as Laura Esquivel and Guadalupe Loaeza, and the incessant recycling of celebrated Boom era prose. This antagonism, which recalls Fadanelli’s dismissal of both the dirty realism and Crack labels, informs and vindicates the alienating and ‘placeless’ approach I have pursued in the translation of Fadanelli’s sui generis ‘trash’ fiction (see Chapter 3.3).

Villarreal, himself a purveyor of countercultural literature in the 1990s, was quick to praise the fresh expression of insolence encapsulated by the ‘basura’ movement. Fadanelli and his contemporaries, he remarked, ‘se burlan inteligente y despiadadamente de la pobreza temática y de la ampulosidad formal de la literatura “literaria,” más preocupada por perseguir en vano la perfección y un lugarcito cada vez más cerca de “los grandes”’ [intelligently and mercilessly mock the thematic poverty and formal pomposity of “literary” literature, which is mainly concerned with the vain pursuit of perfection and a place among “los grandes”] (Villarreal 37). ‘Los grandes,’ for Villarreal, are the self-same cultural heroes identified by Hernández Quezada, elsewhere described as the ‘vacas sagradas’ [holy cows] of Mexican literature (Villarreal 36).

26 It is no coincidence that the two writers singled out here are female; throughout Latin America, ‘literatura light’ is invariably associated with the domestic feminine realm, much as the so-called ‘new literary middle-brow’ (Driscoll 2014) is, in the anglophone world, defined as ‘middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminised, emotional, recreational and earnest’ (Driscoll 3).
With its anti-academic stance and its clear departure from revered cultural models, ‘la literatura basura’ in fact shares some of the most noteworthy features of dirty realism. Villarreal was among the first to connect the rebellious characteristics of dirty realism and ‘la literatura basura,’ observing in Fadanelli’s ‘textos crudísimos de hiriente perspicacia’ [incredibly raw and painfully astute texts] the cultural digression initiated by Carver and Fante (35). One of the driving forces of Spanish realismo sucio, too, as we have seen, was a distancing from existing literary paragons due to their perceived inadequacy and irrelevance. As Jordi Gracia notes, the work of Ray Loriga and company expressed ‘una forma retunda de rechazo de la literatura de librería y colección culta, y una contaminación consciente de medios y aficiones ajenos a la literatura [a categorical rejection of quality literature and a conscious contamination of media and interests alien to such literature] (240). We perceive a similar defiance in the work of Bukowski, the writer to which Fadanelli is most consistently likened. Take, for example, the following quote from Bukowski’s *South of No North*:

I have always admired the villain, the outlaw, the son of a bitch [...] I like desperate men, men with broken teeth and broken ways. They interest me. [...] I’m more interested in perverts than saints. [...] I don’t like laws, morals, religions, rules. I don’t like to be shaped by society (119).

As Bukowski resists being ‘shaped by society,’ Fadanelli resists being shaped by literary society, rejecting the norms and expectations of what he calls ‘la trascendencia literaria’ [literary transcendence] (Carrera and Keizman 112). Fadanelli is not shy about his antisocial tendencies, and indeed this has been a founding tenet of the Moho enterprise (both magazine and publishing house) since its conception. A candid confirmation of this is found inside the front cover of Fadanelli’s second novel, *Para ella todo suena a Franck Pourcel* [To her, everything sounds like Franck Pourcel], published by Editorial Moho in 1999: ‘Tienes en las
manos la novela que [...] otras editoriales se negaron a publicar al considerarla una obra frívola y poco correcta. En Moho nos arriesgamos a publicarla debido a que estamos interesados estrictamente sólo en aquello que no tiene futuro’ [You have in your hands a novel that [...] other editors refused to publish on the grounds that it is a frivolous and politically incorrect piece of writing. At Moho we have taken the risk of publishing it, as we are strictly interested in books that have no future]. For Fadanelli and his fellow enfants terribles, the Moho project was a kind of self-induced exile, a willed retreat into ‘la no-existencia’ [non-existence]. As he comments to Yolanda Martínez: ‘¿Qué mejor lugar para exiliarse, o autoexiliarse, que una revista? Una revista que además tiene [...] como finalidad el no existir, el [...] evitar el mercado, la grandilocuencia, los grandes anunciantes, la distribución precisa’ [What better place to be exiled, or to exile oneself, than a magazine? A magazine that, furthermore, has [...] as its objectives non-existence, [...] an avoidance of the market, of grandiloquence, of big advertising, of precise distribution]. This condition of ‘no-existencia,’ Fadanelli notes, affords him certain artistic liberties: ‘libertad para pensar, libertad para criticar, para hacer juicios, para abandonar’ [freedom to think, to critique, to make judgments, to abandon] (Martínez). Unlike the false freedom of mindless insolence, however, artistic liberty must be consciously cultivated ‘siendo crítico, alejándose lo más posible de los grandes medios de comunicación, renunciando a la fama y a la palabra pública, concentrándose en la destrucción de uno mismo’ [by being critical, by distancing oneself as much as possible from mass media, by renouncing fame and public opinion, by concentrating on one’s own self-destruction] (Martínez).

Self-exile and ‘non-existence’ are again characteristics that translate across both the dirty realist and ‘literatura basura’ contexts. In Ham on Rye, Bukowski openly admits his fear of being restrained by conventional systems:
I didn’t know what I wanted. Yes, I did. I wanted someplace to hide out, someplace where one didn’t have to do anything. The thought of being something didn’t only appal me, it sickened me. [...] To get married, to have children, to get trapped in the family structure. To go someplace to work every day and to return. It was impossible (192).

Novels like *Factotum* and *Post Office*, or any number of Carver’s placeless stories, carefully describe this no-man’s ‘place of nothing doing’ (to Borrow Barthes’s phrase) (*Pleasure* 3). The peripheral settings, marginal characters and sense of displacement common to dirty realist works also perform a subversive function. As Dobozy notes, the ‘nonbeing’ preferred by writers such as Fadanelli and Bukowski displays a willingness to endure (indeed, even to seek) ostracism and the ‘supreme disgrace’ of hypocrisy (64). The hypocrisy of Fadanelli’s position is clear: he is a self-described ‘exile’ nevertheless celebrated and honoured by important figures in the Mexican literary system. Indeed, by producing, publishing and commenting on his work, he breathes life into the very thing he claims to have willed into ‘la no-existencia.’ This does not render Fadanelli’s contribution meaningless, however, nor his intentions unsound. Hypocrisy, after all, is an essential element of the dirty realism aesthetic; in the words of Dobozy, dirty realist authors discard the ‘old spectre’ of logical contradiction and inhabit ‘the extreme limit of personal license, where one is not beholden even to one’s own rules’ (64). ‘In the postmodern world,’ Dobozy adds, ‘this is perhaps the last subversive position left to the writer: a willingness to be cast out by court, school, asylum, polite conversation and to endure contradiction without shame’ (Dobozy 64). Hence one of the declarations of the *Moho* manifesto: ‘Fuera de nosotros todo es marginal’ [outside us everything is marginal] (Martínez). Fadanelli’s interpretation, nearly twenty years later, of this phrase clarifies the gently anarchic aspirations of his Moho and ‘literatura basura’ movements: ‘Me imagino con ello queríamos decir que estábamos alejándonos del centro,
que estábamos formando un pequeño planeta el cuál habitar con pasión y tranquilidad’ [I imagine by that we meant we were distancing ourselves from the centre, forming a small planet which we could inhabit with passion and tranquility] (Martínez).

With this confessed act of self-alienation, Fadanelli would have us believe that his writing departs even from the marginal anti-framework of dirty realism. Unlike Bukowski and Fante, with their brashly masculine antiheroes – Carver himself has been called ‘un antihéroe de la “otra” América’ [an antihero of the “other” America] (García Posada, “Tres Rosas” 59) – Fadanelli claims to avoid the romanticism of the rebellious social outcast. In writing ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, he affirms:

\[
\text{tuve la intención de eliminar al héroe y al antihéroe, es decir a esos personajes conceptuales que han dado lugar a la comedia y a la tragedia, y que también son el motor de casi toda la literatura. Pensé que podría contar una historia con personajes mediocres, que no fueran el héroe que realiza hazañas físicas, intelectuales o sociales, pero tampoco el antihéroe, el hombre negativo que, al oponerse a su sociedad, de alguna manera la complementa, le da vida, la pone a funcionar. Vamos a hacer personajes que no tengan nada de bueno pero tampoco nada estrictamente malo. Han perdido su capacidad de respuesta, no lucharán por conseguir un mundo mejor. Están atados a una realidad que no les permite alternativas.}
\]

[I intended to eliminate the hero and the antihero, those conceptual characters that have given rise to comedy and tragedy and are also the driving force of almost all literature. I thought I could tell a story with mediocre characters who weren’t the hero, carrying out daring physical, intellectual or social feats, but who also weren’t the antihero, that negative man who, in opposing society, somehow complements it, gives it life, makes it work. I wanted to create characters who had nothing good about them, but who also weren’t strictly bad. Characters who have lost their ability to respond, who will not fight for a better world. Characters tied to a reality that permits them no alternative] (Carrera and Keizman 116).
Where Bukowski reveres ‘the villain, the outlaw, the son of a bitch,’ Fadanelli portrays the petty thief, the powerless wannabe, the man who fantasises about making a stand but fails to follow through. Take Ernesto, Olivia’s father in ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, who resents the tacit knowledge that he has ‘[ni] fuerzas ni carácter para poder llevar a cabo una venganza’ [neither the strength nor the disposition to carry out his revenge] (153). Or Adolfo, tortured by his own inability to protect his beloved, and barely consoled by imagined scenes of violent vengeance:

Él, que se soñó a sí mismo protegiéndola, peleando contra agresores ficticios. Incluso, le gustaba imaginarse con el rifle de su padre disparando contra todos los hombres que se acercaban a ella. Les disparaba a la cabeza ufanándose de que los sesos fueran a dar contra el cemento; disparaba a las rodillas, a los ojos. […] [S]e tiró encima del colchón, boca arriba, sollozando, imaginándose destrozar el cuerpo de los violadores, dispararles en los testículos, abrirles la espalda con un picahielo para sacarles la pulpa que tenían en los huesos, romperles el hocico a patadas.

[He, who had dreamed so many nights of protecting her, of fighting off her fictional aggressors. He even liked to imagine himself with his father’s rifle, shooting at all the men who came near her. He would shoot them in the head, watching with pride as their brains splattered against the concrete; he would shoot them in the knees, in the eyes. […] [H]e threw himself onto the mattress, face up and sobbing, and imagined himself destroying the bodies of her rapists, shooting them in the testicles, opening their backs up with ice-picks and extracting the pulp from inside their bones, kicking them in the face until their noses broke] (Desayuno 105-6).

While this reading is certainly valid on some level, the distinction between Fadanelli’s non-hero and the dirty realism antihero is by no means clear-cut. Unlike the ‘traditional’ American antihero of the 1960s,27 epitomised by characters such as McMurphy (One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest), Yossarian (Catch 22) and Eliot Rosewater (God Bless You, Mr

27Earlier iterations of the hardboiled American antihero hark right back to the 1930s, with characters such as Hammett’s Continental Op and Chandler’s Marlowe (cf. Messent, 35-37).
Rosewater), the dirty realist antihero is not a champion of humanity rallying against an unjust system. The disobedience of characters like Bandini and Chinaski is all but bereft of redeeming qualities: it is, in essence, bad behaviour born of disillusion alone. If we trace the origins of the dirty realist antihero to Dostoyevsky’s ‘Underground Man,’ as Juliet Jacques (2015) does, it becomes clear that his defining feature – aside from a disdain for authority – is a state of alienation and non-participation. The narrator of Dostoyevsky’s Notes from Underground, himself a self-described ‘antihero’ (117), is as wretched as he is bitter and isolated. He stands, in the words of Lionel Trilling, ‘as the antagonistic opposite to […] the Greek conception of the hero, the grave beauty of the countenance and physique expressing the strength and order of the soul; the Underground Man traces his line of descent back to Thersites,’ the ‘ugliest’ man who came to Troy (202). There are obvious similarities between Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man and those who populate the bleak, urban underworlds of dirty realism. The opening lines of Notes from Underground, indeed, could easily have been extracted from Bukowski’s Notes of a Dirty Old Man (albeit with better punctuation): ‘I’m a sick man... I’m a spiteful man. I’m an unattractive man. I think there’s something wrong with my liver’ (Dostoyevsky 3). True to his Dostoyevskian roots, ‘Chinaski moves through the world alienated and alone – a tough, hard-drinking womaniser most at home with the underclass and outcasts of society’ (Werlock). There is something deeper at play in this comparison, however: a poorly articulated despondency, and a hostile resignation.

28 In Homer’s Iliad, Thersites speaks out against Odysseus and is ridiculed, verbally and physically, for his dissent. Hideously deformed, and generally regarded with disdain, Thersites is by all accounts ‘a resolutely unheroic figure’ (Louden 142).

29 Indeed, in a 2014 interview with Javier Moro and Mun Raider of “Tripulación Nocturna” (a weekly literary podcast run by Mexico City projects Radio Efímera and Palabras Malditas), Fadanelli names Dostoyevsky as his favourite author and principal literary influence. Franz Kafka, he notes, comes a close second.
to one’s own meaninglessness, both of which bring us closer to the ‘no-existencia’ of Fadanelli’s non-hero. As the original Underground Man confesses:

[…] I never even managed to become anything: neither spiteful, nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. And now I’m living out my life in my corner, teasing myself with the spiteful and utterly worthless consolation that an intelligent man cannot make himself anything and that it’s only fools who manage to do that (Dostoyevsky 5).

This passage brings to mind the above-mentioned quote from Bukowski’s *Ham on Rye* – ‘The thought of being something didn’t only appal me, it sickened me’ – as well as the attitudes of a great number of Fadanelli’s characters. Indeed, all of the central characters in *¿Te veré en desayuno?* are somehow deadened by their own impotence and insignificance. By the end of the novel, Ulises, Cristina, Olivia and Adolfo are all imprisoned in situations they no longer have the strength to escape: Ulises in his dead-end Fonacot job, mired once more in the dissatisfaction that periodically provokes him to seek the company of whores; Cristina in a stifling relationship, the monotony of which only Bacardi for breakfast can assuage; Olivia in something akin to a sexless arranged marriage, her youth and beauty sliding inexorably away from her; and Adolfo, as ever, in his dead parents’ apartment, no longer even bothering to entertain the delusion that things might change. Adolfo’s penultimate words, indeed, reveal his shameless acceptance of this sad inertia: “‘Sí, todo va bien. Estoy planeando poner un consultorio,’ mintió’ ['Everything’s fine. I’m planning to open a clinic,’ he lied] (178). In *Lodo*, too, the protagonist displays a marked lack of motivation, having resigned himself long ago to a state of professional, financial and sexual mediocrity. So indifferent is he, in fact, that his own name inspires in him no sense of identity or ambition: ‘Qué más habría deseado,’ he admits, ‘que llamarme Guillermo de Champeaux o Juan de Salisbury, pero no moveré un
dedo para cambiar de nombre porque a nadie en la comunidad universitaria le importa un carajo mi apellido, y menos tratándose de un profesor que por lo regular no suele destacar en nada’ [I would have liked nothing better than to be named Guillermo de Champeaux, or Juan de Salisbury, but I won’t do a thing to change my name because nobody in the university community gives a damn what I’m called, especially since I don’t usually tend to excel at anything] (17).

The non-hero of Fadanelli’s literature, then, certainly seems oppressed by a heavy sense of resignation. These are undoubtedly characters who have ‘perdido su capacidad de respuesta’ [lost their ability to respond], as Fadanelli intended, characters ‘atados a una realidad que no les permite alternativas’ [tied to a reality that permits them no alternative] (Carrera and Keizman 116). Such a description is also true of the dirty realist antihero, however. The traditional antihero is still heroic in his defiance of the system, regardless of whether this resistance proves ultimately futile. The dirty realist antihero, on the other hand, is drowned and embittered by the system; he fights for no one, oftentimes not even himself, inhabiting the subterranean channels of postmodernity that constitute, perhaps, ‘the last avenue open to subversion’ (Dobozy 63). The distinction is subtle, but significant. Much of its explanation lies in the changing North American social context, which, over the course of half a century, shifted from a distinctly humanist post-war era to an increasingly desolate neoliberal dystopia. Literary sensibilities shifted in line with this. As David Simmons notes, ‘the 1960s antihero […] incorporates the Camusian proposition that revolt is of central importance in achieving social justice,’ an existentialist notion that found ‘great support in post-war America, chiming with an American fictional proclivity for the human’ (9). The dirty realist ‘rebellion,’ however, is the product of a very different era. It expresses, in Dobozy’s words, ‘a politic without a target, a politic only too relevant in Jameson’s
postmodern age where capital has become too diffuse for [...] protest’ (63). Buford, indeed, made the observation early on: the original dirty realists, he wrote, are ‘suspicious of heroes, crusades and easy idealism. It is possible to see many of these stories as quietly political, at least in their details, but it is a politics considered from an arm’s length: they are stories not of protest but of the occasion for it’ (5). The same statement could be made of Fadanelli’s heroless narratives. The abject failure of Mexican politics, always disclosed without fanfare and between parentheses, never fails to cast its shadow upon the lives of Fadanelli’s characters. Change, however, never eventuates, and we are left clutching only a handful of trivial lives: truncated, unresolved, and tinged with unassuming pessimism.

Fadanelli’s circumvention of the political and the (anti)heroic is tied to another central principle of the ‘literatura basura’ mission: the view that novels, as he puts it, ‘no deben ser una tesis’ [must not be a thesis] (Carrera and Keizman 116). This notion is one that Fadanelli has stated explicitly in a number of interviews and non-fiction works. It is perhaps best expressed, however, through the irrepressible mouthpiece of Lodo’s obnoxious protagonist, Benito Torrentera:

Como se sabe, el único fin de un moralista es escribir una nueva Biblia. Escribir nuestra modesta Biblia para embarrársela en las narices a los demás. Cuando tenía veinte años me di la tarea de contestarme algunas preguntas que yo mismo elaboré. A la pregunta de si me gustaba el dinero respondí negativamente. A la pregunta de si quería ser un artista maldito respondí que no. Al cuestionamiento de si deseaba ser un hombre apreciado por mi comunidad respondí que me importaba un pito. Resumiendo: ¿Estaba dispuesto a participar en el progreso de la cultura o el conocimiento humano? ¡No! ¡Ni madres! ¡Que le den por el culo al progreso humano!

[As we all know, the only aim of a moralist is to write a new Bible. To write our own modest Bible and then rub it in everyone else’s faces. When I was twenty years old, I gave myself the task of answering a number of questions that I had elaborated myself. To the question of whether I liked money, I
responded in the negative. To the question of whether I wanted to be a suffering artist, I answered no. To the question of whether I had any desire to be respected within my community, I replied that I didn’t give a toss. In summary: Was I prepared to participate in the advancement of culture or human knowledge? No! No fucking way! Human progress can go fuck itself!] (25).

In many ways, Torrentera’s unabashed ‘valemadrismo’ captures the essence of Fadanelli’s (anti)philosophical ‘literatura basura.’ Mentioned here are all the major tenets upon which Fadanelli claims to have constructed his Moho and ‘basura’ projects: a disregard for the opinions of his peers, for artistic integrity, for financial reward, and for moral, political or cultural relevancy; that is, for all of the usual markers of literary ‘success.’ Fadanelli’s insistence on the amoralism of his literature – an amoralism that seeps, unavoidably, into a sense of atemporalism – speaks to both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the ‘basura’ movement. As noted earlier, Fadanelli advocates a blunt rejection of literary transcendence and academicisation, the hallmarks of ‘la así llamada intelligenstia mexicana’ [the so-called Mexican intelligenstia] (Carrera and Keizman 122). In this regard, his departure from the Crack project is clear: far from a return to the golden age of the Boom, Fadanelli proposes a renunciation of concepts like greatness, endurance and profundity. ‘[N]o me interesa tanto,’ he states, ‘producir o llevar a cabo construcciones sofisticadas de estructuras literarias [I’m not so interested in producing sophisticated literary structures] (Carrera and Keizman 121). Rather than transcend, Fadanelli wishes to decompose, to enact a wilful ‘inmersión en el presente como único horizonte estético y ético del ser humano’ [immersion in the present as the only aesthetic and ethical horizon of mankind] (Carrera and Keizman 122). In no uncertain terms, he states:
Literatura basura: es decir nada de trascendencia, nada de futuro, nada de utopías. Leemos, tiramos. No encontraremos una moral en estos relatos. No formará parte de la historia literaria. Había esa intención.

[Trash literature: that is, no transcendence, no future, no utopias. We read books, we throw them away. We find no moral in these stories. They will not form part of literary history. That was my intention] (Carrera and Keizman 122).

The concept of ‘la literatura basura’ arose, Fadanelli relates, from an obsession with cinema, video, fanzines and artistic ephemera. Particularly influential was transgressive North American cult filmmaker John Waters, ‘America’s patron saint of sleaze’ (Sconce, Sleaze Artists 3), who gained notoriety in the 1970s and early ‘80s with his so-called ‘trash films.’

Auteurs like Waters, Fadanelli observes, demonstrated a certain ‘comportamiento juvenil’ [juvenile behaviour] that he admired; with their low-budget productions and amateur artists, such film-makers ‘rompían todas las reglas de la tradición del buen comportamiento cinematográfico’ [broke all the traditional rules of good cinematographic behaviour] (Carrera and Keizman 122). The ‘trash cinema’ epithet is one that has been evaluated extensively in its own right, and has been shown to reunite a number of countercultural positions. Jeffrey Sconce (1995) has suggested that the express manifesto of paracinematic culture, devoted as it is ‘to all manner of cultural detritus,’ is to ‘valorise all forms of cinematic “trash,” whether such films have been explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture’ (Sconce, “Trashing the Academy” 372). The exclusion, deliberate or otherwise, from ‘legitimate’ culture is a condition that Fadanelli’s literary ‘trash’ certainly shares. As Matt Hills notes,

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31 The term ‘paracinema,’ as employed by Sconce, denotes ‘all that exists outside the sacralising functions of academic film criticism, paracinematic aesthetics being either in excess of, or opposed to, those valued by official, legitimate culture’ (Hills 220). For its audience, Sconce writes, paracinema represents something of ‘a final textual frontier […] a staging ground for strategic raids on legitimate culture and its institutions’ (“Trashing the Academy” 379).
however, the coherence of trash cinema as a category lies not only in its antagonism to legitimate film culture, but also in its tendency to situate itself in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents. Transplanted to the Latin American literary scene, the same observation has been made of Crack and McOndo writers, whose objectives (to some degree, at least) Fadanelli undoubtedly shares. Certainly, Fadanelli’s work has little in common with ‘mainstream’ or popular Latin American literature. Like trash cinema, then, Fadanelli’s ‘literatura basura’ combines an exclusion from both legitimate (read: culturally ‘valuable,’ transcendental, Boom-inspired) literature and from the category of writing broadly referred to as mainstream. The deliberate nature of this double exclusion, however, means that Fadanelli’s trash movement more closely resembles an act of self-conscious ‘desparpajo literario’ [literary impudence] than a countercultural crusade (Carrera and Keizman 122). Indeed, as with trash cinema and other cult phenomena, the very condition of exclusion often brings about a transformation in cultural meaning and value, causing the products of cult or underground art to be resituated ‘in direct cultural proximity to [works] already deemed aesthetically (and legitimately) valuable’ (Hills 221). As Joan Hawkins has pointed out, such revaluations ‘erase the difference between what is considered trash and what is considered art’ (16), allowing certain ‘illegitimate’ cultural products (in the case of Hawkins’s analysis, ‘trash’ films) to coexist, however uneasily, ‘in a paradigm with “art” or “high” cultural [products] such as avant-garde material directed by Maya Deren, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’ (Hills 221). The mounting critical interest in Fadanelli, as well as the acclaim, visibility and cult popularity he has managed to accumulate, suggests that his work is currently undergoing a similar cultural shift. Tellingly, Buñuel has even been singled out as a subject of critical comparison.32 It would seem that, like the parameters of Fadanelli’s literary

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32 See Bernardo Gamboa Sánchez, “La ciudad rota: el México miserable de Luis Buñuel y Guillermo
‘non-category’ in general, the distinction between ‘trash’ and the legitimate culture it purports to evade is impossible to define with any certainty. Nevertheless, I propose that the cultural statement made by the trash aesthetic – whether in the form of literature, film or visual art – still fulfils a subversive objective, at once reflecting and critiquing the complex and inherently contradictory context of its genesis. It is this will to subversion – its implicit violence, its misplacedness, its refusal to cooperate – that I have sought to reflect in the theory and practice of my alienating translation approach.

Since the publication of Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966), the notion of the unclean as ‘matter out of place’ (50) has become well known and widely applied. ‘As we know it,’ Douglas writes, ‘dirt is essentially disorder. […] Dirt offends against order’ (2). Our usual reaction to the out-of-place, she argues, is blind ignorance; in other words, we often choose *not to see* that which is neither obviously complementary nor antagonistic to our particular world-view. As a result, ambiguous or contradictory cultural cues are generally integrated, ‘harmonised with the rest of the pattern,’ or distorted, ‘so that they do not disturb [our] established assumptions’ (Douglas 46). Despite this, Douglas notes, it is possible – pleasant, even, under the right circumstances – to confront ambiguity: ‘Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms,’ she writes (46-7). Poetry, music and visual art offer the best examples of this. Douglas turns to the work of Austrian aesthete Anton Ehrenzweig in explanation. The *terribilità* of Michelangelo, Ehrenzweig suggests, is explained in part by the ambiguity of his forms, ‘which defeats rational comprehension and evokes anxiety […] breaking the pernicious rule of preconceived design’ and ‘setting free the diffuse inarticulate vision’ (50). This diffuse vision, for Ehrenzweig, constitutes the very essence of artistic imagination – an inarticulate and disruptive idea that gives way to the
creation of unforeseen structures. Such ideas have the power to fracture and enlarge our perceptions of the world: ‘An incoherent fragment,’ he writes, ‘a disruptive form element is better able to break down the narrow focus of intellectual thought and produce a fissure in the mind’s smooth surface’ (Ehrenzweig 50).

The out-of-place, indeed, can also affect our worldviews on a larger, cultural scale. ‘[L]a basura,’ Fadanelli has written, ‘en su interpretación romántica puede llegar a considerarse enfermedad que da vida y estimula la imaginación o la conciencia creativa de la muerte’ [Interpreted romantically, trash might be considered a life-giving illness that stimulates the imagination or creative conscience of death] (Insolencia 159). This is a strange statement, but one that contains an important kernel of truth: in its will to infect and decompose, as in its plastic ubiquity and immortality, trash becomes the symbol of a morbidly innovative movement fashioned – as if from the ashes of some perverse Phoenix – from the debris of a sick culture. The postmodern qualities of pastiche, reciclaje artístico, impermanence and hybridity define the work of a number of Fadanelli’s principle artistic influences, many of whom he has explicitly cited as forerunners or contemporaries of the ‘basura’ aesthetic. An inherent formal hybridity, indeed, is characteristic of the dirty realist novel more broadly. The first works of dirty realism to emerge from Spain, Santana notes, blended an ‘almost cinematographic’ aesthetic with the musical sensibilities of Generation X grunge culture (Forth and Back 114). Fadanelli’s writing, too, is distinctly cinematic. One scene in ¿Te veré en el desayuno? is particularly (and disturbingly) visual, ‘cutting’ rapidly between two simultaneous locations and narratives: Olivia in the dark alley, and her father at home in the family apartment as he retrieves a glass of milk from the refrigerator. The effect is unusually visceral, and emotionally taxing. Generally speaking, the bald, graphic style of dirty realist literature, coupled with a certain colloquial orality, tends to lend itself to stage
and film adaptation: examples such as *Barfly* (1987), *Historias del Kronen* (1995) and *Birdman* (2014) come to mind. Remark ing on the genre’s evident obsession with music, Guillermo Altares has described Loriga’s 1993 novel *Héroes* (perhaps a touch nostalgically) as ‘una obra en la que los capítulos se suceden como las canciones en el vinilo’ [a work in which the chapters follow each other like songs on vinyl] (24). Visual art, too, is often evoked. As Juan Carlos Suñen has observed of Carver and Wolff:

La eliminación de todo cuanto sea superfluo, desde las descripciones ornamentales hasta las reflexiones de autor […] ha llevado a estos autores a utilizar métodos que en cierto modo recuerdan los adoptados por otras artes en periodos anteriores. Se diría que a la manera de algunos pintores pop, el narrador se limita a tomar un fragmento de la realidad y aislarlo entre dos paréntesis.

[The elimination of all that is superfluous, from ornamental description to authorial reflections […] has led these writers to use methods that somehow recall those adopted by other artists in previous periods. One might say that, like the painters of pop art, the narrator limits himself to taking a fragment of reality and isolating it between parentheses] (13).

Fadanelli himself has taken to mentioning visual art in an attempt to elucidate the objectives of his ‘basura’ project. He has admitted to admiring, in particular, the great US artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose innovative compound pieces anticipated the pop art movement and effectively smudged the boundaries between everyday objects and *objets d’art*. Rauschenberg is best remembered for mastering the ‘combine’: a hybrid form of painting and sculpture that purports to bridge the gap between art and life, integrating humble materials, trash from the streets of New York City, scavenged images and paint. 33 According to critic Michael Kimmelman, ‘It is largely, if not exclusively, thanks to Robert Rauschenberg that Americans

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33 Rauschenberg’s modus operandi also recalls the ‘readymade’ art (objets trouvés) pioneered by Picasso and Duchamp.
since the 1950s have come to think that art can be made out of anything, exist anywhere, last forever or just for a moment and serve almost any purpose or no purpose at all except to suggest that the stuff of life and the stuff of art are ultimately one and the same.’ This legacy, indeed, is capable of transforming the ways in which everyday people perceive and inhabit their surroundings. As Rauschenberg himself notes: ‘I really feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes or mirrors or Coke bottles are ugly because they’re surrounded by things like that all day long […] it must make them miserable’ (Kimmelman).

Rauschenberg’s repurposing of junk materials, borrowed items and mundane objects clearly resonates with Fadanelli’s understanding of trash as a ‘life-giving’ affliction. It recalls, too, the work of another of Fadanelli’s major influences: Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, the Mexican poet immortalised by Roberto Bolaño as fictional oddball Ulises Lima. In his prologue to a recent anthology of Papasquiaro’s work, aptly entitled Arte & Basura (2012), Luis Felipe Fabre notes: ‘Mario Santiago escribió sin cesar en servilletas, portavasos, facturas y, sobre todo […] en los márgenes de libros ajenos’ [Mario Santiago wrote tirelessly on napkins, coasters, receipts, and, above all […] in the margins of other people’s books] (8). In light of this, Papasquiaro’s writing (literally ‘marginal,’ and always deliberately provocative) possesses ‘algo de vandálico […] algo de grafiti y algo de intervención’ [a certain air of vandalism, of graffiti and intervention] (8), forming a collage ‘un tanto sucia’ in which the borders between art and basura ‘se superponen y contaminan’ [are superimposed and contaminated] (12). The work of Rauschenberg and Papasquiaro, then, like the ‘trash’ produced by Fadanelli himself, speaks to the notion that art and life, ‘literatura’ and ‘basura,’ do not necessarily inhabit mutually exclusive realms. The ugly, the unwanted and the insolent, in other words, also have their place within the creative sphere.
The self-designated ‘Pretty Ugly’ movement, initiated in Barcelona by designers Martin Lorenz and Lupi Asensia, explicitly unites several of the subversive elements present in the visual work of Rauschenberg, Papasquiaro and Fadanelli. In the 2012 publication *Pretty Ugly: Visual Rebellion in Design*, Lorenz and Asensia compile the work of a number of (predominantly European) artists, designers and photographers working within the paradigm of counter-aesthetic visual communication. The themes signalling this work as ‘rebellious’ are consistent with those identified in the anti-literature of Fadanelli: the ‘deviant,’ or that which goes ‘against established criteria […] embracing what is disliked and considered incorrect’ (3); the ‘mundane,’ or ‘converting ordinary into extra-ordinary, old into new, elevating ugliness to a new kind of beauty by changing its function or message’ (47); the ‘impure,’ the ‘unpredictable,’ the random and the ‘seemingly un-composed’ (103); and the ‘mishmash’ of ‘interlaced images’ which combine to ‘establish new meaning and spaces’ (153). Despite the movement’s conspicuous failure to acknowledge the earlier movements that informed and inspired it, the design principles favoured by Pretty Ugly’s founders are essentially an addendum to a rebellion that took place decades ago. In a 1993 article for *Eye* magazine entitled “Cult of the Ugly,” Steven Heller identified an emerging trend in visual communication inspired (like its literary contemporary, the Spanish realismo sucio movement) by musical countercultures – politicised 1970s punk, most notably, as well as 1990s grunge. For Heller, the ‘ugliness’ of this new work represented ‘a conscious attempt to create and define alternative standards’ (54). ‘Like warpaint,’ he reflected, ‘the dissonant styles [of] many contemporary designers […] are meant to shock an enemy – complacency – as well as to encourage new reading and viewing patterns’ (54). The line separating parody from serious critique in such work is thin, mirroring the kind of dark and unsettling humour that characterises so much of the concurrently emerging literature. The result of this tension,
Heller writes, is a ‘valid, even refreshing’ breed of ugliness; ‘an indigenous language,’ almost, expressing alternative ideas and cultures still unpalatable to mainstream tastes (59). The parallels with translation are obvious here: through the drawing and re-drawing of cultural and linguistic patterns, translation allows for the emergence of potentially ‘shocking’ new ideas and expressions – all the more shocking, perhaps, for subtletly of their transgression. Like the products of the Pretty Ugly movement, indeed, the fruits of subversive translation strategies are sure to elicit responses at both extremes of the spectrum: either ‘refreshing’ or ‘unpalatable,’ depending on one’s taste.

One of the most interesting questions raised by Heller is as relevant now as it was in the early 1990s: do the social and cultural conditions of our time merit the kind of ‘critical ugliness’ (to borrow Rick Poynor’s phrase) created by these movements? Applying the yardstick of twentieth century crises – a world war, for example, or crippling economic depression – Heller concluded that the rebellious culture of the 1990s lacked sufficient justification. As Poynor notes, however, ‘1990s ugly design was still a response to its time’; the complexity and awkwardness of form, he writes, ‘is a means of projecting the authentic human element in design work, and though this might seem too mild an aim […] to deserve the word “rebellion,” it is certainly a vital gesture of defiance against the curbed ambitions and conformity of so much market-led design’ (35). As Heller himself observes, the emergence of the so-called ‘Cult of the Ugly’ was inextricably linked to an increasing disillusionment with the homogenised and dehumanising tropes of capitalism. A shameless engagement with the anti-aesthetic, he writes, offered ‘a critique of the slick design practised throughout corporate culture’ (59). As noted earlier in this chapter, dirty realism in all of its manifestations has also been analysed as a reaction to the isolating and homogenising tendencies of neoliberalism. There is a sense of imminent social apocalypse, even, in the
dystopian atmosphere of Fadanelli’s consciously marginal literature.\textsuperscript{34} The very notion of ‘trash,’ whether applied to literature, cinema, visual art or music, implies a certain vertiginous gravitation towards destruction and desolation.\textsuperscript{35} Recent times have seen the formation of what Adam Harper calls a ‘notionally accelerationist Zeitgeist in art-pop,’ referencing the work of post-Situationist philosopher Nick Land. Writing predominantly in the 1990s, Land proposes that the irrepressible conclusion of capitalism’s ‘angular momentum’ is something like ‘a run-away whirlwind of dissolution’ (113); capital itself, he insists, is, at its core, ‘a headless lurch into the abyss, an acephalic catastrophe’ (197). In many ways a kind of socio-political reappropriation of the Freudian death drive, Land’s theory echoes the (spoken or unspoken) motif of the trash aesthetic: ‘Death, wastage, or expenditure is the only end, the only definitive terminus’ (Land xviii).

In this ambiguous embrace of waste and ugliness there is a twice-veiled rejection of mainstream culture. Fadanelli’s ‘literatura basura,’ as noted earlier, was formed with the

\textsuperscript{34} Visions of Mexico City, in particular, as an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic metropolis recur frequently in the literary imaginary. As Guillermo Sheridan notes, for many Mexicans the dystopian future dreamed up by science fiction is already a reality: ‘En México,’ he writes, ‘la ficción cataclísmica no es cosa de echar a andar la imaginación, es cosa de paciencia. Cuando pasaban Mad Max hace años en los cines, con sus imágenes sobre lo espantoso que iba a ser el mundo posterior a la guerra atómica en el año cinco mil, los mexicanos nos sentíamos timados: hacía décadas que ese pinche futuro ya estaba en Iztapalapa y no cobraban por mirarlo’ [In Mexico, cataclysmic fiction is not a matter of imagination, it’s a matter of patience. Years ago, when they showed Mad Max in cinemas, with its frightening images of what the world would be like post-atomic warfare in the year 5000, we Mexicans felt cheated: that fucking future had existed for decades in Iztapalapa, and you could go there and see it for free] (63).

\textsuperscript{35} The notion of ‘vertigo’ as a symptom of widespread postmodern malaise is also examined by Camille Paglia in her illuminating book \textit{Glittering Images} (2012). Paglia describes our current hyper-communicative culture as an ‘age of vertigo’ characterised by a disorienting, ‘swirling barrage of disconnected data,’ ‘dizzily swooping compressions and tunnel-like warpings of space’ (xviii). The result, she argues, is a society ‘assaulted, coerced, desensitised’ by overstimulating media. This assault erases the individual in a manner similar to that described by Madison Bell (see page 56 of this thesis) in regards to dirty realist representations of neoliberalism. ‘The exhilarating expansion of instant global communication,’ Paglia writes, ‘has liberated a host of individual voices but paradoxically threatened to overwhelm individuality itself’ (vii). For Paglia, the remedy for vertigo rests in the ‘stillness and receptivity’ cultivated through the contemplation of art – ‘a society that forgets art,’ she warns, ‘risks losing its soul’ (xviii).
explicit objective of distancing itself from the cultural elite. Going underground, however, is a short-lived form of exile in a culture so thoroughly invaded by commodification. At the heart of the trash aesthetic, I suggest, lies a rejection not only of legitimised forms of cultural production, but also of the cultural ‘transcendence’ of the (briefly) countercultural. In short: ‘la literatura basura’ intends to alienate itself, like the truly ‘ugly,’ from the good/bad dichotomy. Among his many incisive observations on postmodernism, Frederic Jameson notes that the assimilation of ‘low art’ into the mainstream is one of the key features of neoliberalism’s drive to colonise the communities and subcultures that resist it. In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Jameson examines Buford’s appraisal of dirty realist literature as an illustration of the manner in which the ‘prodigious enlargement of what we call culture’ has led to the effacement of all barriers between art and merchandise (147). As a product of postmodernity, dirty realism’s ‘transformation of […] daily-life materials’ into an apparently subversive art form is, Jameson argues, ‘a dual process: on the one hand, […] narrative raw materials, which (in an earlier “realist” moment) could still look non- or precultural, now slowly seem to undergo the process of a transformation into images and simulacra’; on the other, modernism’s ‘radical separation’ of so-called high literature from ‘the daily life and the kitsch cultural consumption of the great middle-class public’ is done away with, blurring the once-clear boundaries between high and low art (*Seeds* 147). Like all of the countercultural output discussed in this chapter – cult cinema, ugly art, pop-cultural parody – dirty realist literature has made a serious contribution to this shift in the conception of artistic value. This process, however, coexists with another, more insidious one. In the United States, Jameson notes (and inevitably, therefore, across the world) culture has become

standardised from one coast to the other and all along its new superhighway system, everything in American life thereby falling into commodification.
The imagification or culturalisation of daily life thus accompanies and is virtually indistinguishable from the gradual identification of mass culture with Culture itself, the end of modernism, of the canon, the arrival of pop, and later on of the postmodern, in short: the harnessing of modern elite cultural forms of all kinds to big business and corporate production for mass consumption (Seeds 147).

The scope of dirty realist literature, Jameson suggests, ‘follows and reflects this transformation of everyday life by the penetration of a corporate mass culture into its utmost recesses and crannies’ (Seeds 147-48), depicting the alienation and powerlessness of a society in which all culture is inextricable from capitalist culture. In such a society, there can be no such thing as true ‘counterculture’: the removal of all boundaries renders the notion meaningless. Instead, we see the ‘colonisation and elimination of any of the residual enclaves that had hitherto remained exempt’ – a process that applies equally to ‘spaces of high culture’ as it does to the ‘ghetto’ (Jameson, Seeds 148). The standardising force of neoliberalism, in other words, does not discriminate between the alternative and the elite. It consumes all.36

In the midst of this shifting cultural landscape, Fadanelli’s heady pursuit of expendability and non-participation could well be the only surviving path of resistance. Jameson, with his usual prescience, argued in the early 1990s that the advance of ‘aesthetic populism’ in the late twentieth century marked the rise of ‘ephemeral [...] disposable works that wish to fold back immediately into the accumulating detritus of historical time’ (Postmodernism 78). This phrase, originally applied to the emerging genre of ‘experimental video’ (rather fittingly, I might add, considering that trash cinema provided the original inspiration for Fadanelli’s ‘literatura basura’) could scarcely be a more apt description of the kind of self-annihilating statement Fadanelli wishes to make. Trash literature, like all cultural

36 The long arm of corporate capitalism, indeed, has already reached this translation project; it is a delightfully wicked coincidence that multinational cereal empire Kellogg’s has used the phrase ‘see you at breakfast’ as a marketing slogan since 2012.
movements, is a reaction to a given reality. More precisely, it represents a kind of contradictory submission to the forces it would appear to criticise. The tension of this contradiction is not only mirrored but magnified by the act of translation; in the case of alienating translation, indeed, it is this very tension that draws the translator to the work, and in preserving or re-drawing the tensile structures of the source text a new layer of friction is added – friction between the source and target cultures, between thought and action, as well as an internal friction within the target poetics, the old resisting the new. The theoretical and practical implications of these interlacing tensions will be examined at length in Chapter Three, forming as they do the core of the alienating translation ethics proposed here.

Tensions aside, it is clear that Fadanelli’s project occupies a uniquely subversive position within the Mexican (and, indeed, Latin American) literary panorama. The question then naturally arises: how does this position translate across geographic, linguistic and cultural borders? The anglophone literary polysystem, according to Even-Zohar’s systems theory (1978/1990), is established or ‘crystallised’ enough to force translated literature – even that imported from a literary culture as significant as Mexico – into a peripheral, rather than central, position. For a literature already as marginal as Fadanelli’s ‘trash literature,’ this shift is unproblematic. What systems theory fails to account for, however, is the potential effect that peripheral literature can have (or at the very least should aim to have) on the established literary polysystem into which it is introduced; far from modelling itself on conventionally established or dominant norms, thereby exerting a conservative force and ‘[preserving] traditional taste’ within the target culture (165), I argue that marginal literature can and should model itself on marginal literary norms, appealing, in consequence, to non-mainstream yet culturally powerful readerships. Given that See You at Breakfast? is the first published translation of Fadanelli’s work in English, it is important to conceptualise the niche that it will
occupy (theoretically, at least) within the Australian, British and US literary landscapes. Since Giramondo is an Australian publisher, I will limit my discussion here to Australia, although a thorough examination of Fadanelli’s place within the UK and US markets may certainly be a worthwhile – perhaps even necessary – task in the future.

2.3 (Re)readerships: Fadanelli in translation

Given that, as I have argued up to this point, Fadanelli’s writing resists and distorts the usual literary labels and teleologies, it would be disingenuous of me to imagine that its translation could (or should) reside within any one literary category. Nevertheless, it is possible to theorise the place that Fadanelli might occupy at the margins of Australian literary culture. Although Fadanelli is neither a true ‘dirty realist’ nor a writer of anything Australian readers would commonly expect of – or recognise as – typically ‘Mexican’ literature, he has, as we have seen, cultivated a distinct and influential author brand. The baseball caps, the pithy tweets, the self-contradiction, the carefully sculpted pessimism: all of this contributes to the construction of a particular identity that, in its provocative self-consciousness, reveals the artifice and irony at the core of the trash aesthetic. The important question, from a publishing perspective, is how this author brand translates from one peripheral context to the next. The speculations that follow are based on discussions with the editors at Giramondo, as well as a brief comparative study of realismo sucio, dirty realism and Australian ‘grunge lit.’

One of the benefits of publishing See You at Breakfast? with an independent, university-based press like Giramondo is the possibility of evading market pressures – conventional literary ‘marketability,’ in other words, is nearly as unimportant in Fadanelli’s Australian context as it is (or seems to be) to Fadanelli himself. Indeed, See You at
*Breakfast*’s greatest strength, according to Australian editors Ivor Indyk and Alice Grundy, lies precisely in its fresh perspective and in the unusual, challenging ways in which Fadanelli broaches his subject matter. Giramondo’s view conveniently coincides with my own ethical and methodological objectives – outlined in detail in Chapter 3 – to retain strangeness and emphasise alienation in the target text. This said, there are certain literary comparisons that may prove useful in defining *See You at Breakfast*’s prospective readership, or Target Audience (TA). As noted earlier, Fadanelli has been the subject of much comparison, particularly with the iconic dirty realists of the US. The translation – in conceptual terms – of Fadanelli’s writing into literary resemblances, or cultural analogues, is perhaps the most obvious way to assimilate his writing into a new literary context. These analogues, however, ought to extend beyond Bukowski and Carver. Valeria Luiselli is one of only a few critics to draw different – and, in my opinion, more pointed – comparisons. Fadanelli’s protagonists, she observes, might in fact have more in common with Dostoyevsky’s underground man or Pessoa’s disquieted alter egos than with Bukowski’s rude alcoholics (‘La Ciudad’ 89). Discussions like Luiselli’s that situate Fadanelli within a broader international framework – one that includes, crucially, other translated writers from Europe and Latin America – help represent him as something more than a Mexican facsimile of Bukowski, contributing also to a growing awareness of the role and presence of literary translation within the anglophone polysystem.

The well-documented correlations between Fadanelli’s ‘literatura basura’ and North American dirty realism, however belaboured, call for an examination of how the TAs of these two subgenres might also overlap. In Australia, a local avatar of dirty realism emerged in the

37 Private correspondence.
38 Despite this, some minor changes have been made to the published manuscript, on the recommendations of the book’s editors and reader’s reports. These changes will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.3.
1990s (as was the case in Spain) in the wake of Buford’s newly baptised US cohort. Due to its grimy focus and obvious affinity for dissident ‘90s rock, this new generation of Australian literature was dubbed ‘grunge literature.’ As with the early exponents of realismo sucio in Spain, the authors and readers of Australian grunge were invariably young, feckless urbanites hailing from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Paul Dawson, who uses the terms ‘dirty realism’ and ‘grunge lit’ interchangeably in reference to Australian literature, writes: ‘Dirty realism, supposedly, really is real. It describes the world as experienced by a particular section of society: young, urban Australians suffering the existential ennui characteristic of “Generation X” and finding solace in an inner-city life of drugs and sex’ (120). Dawson suggests (somewhat tenuously) that the genre’s autobiographical element is a defining, even ‘prerequisite’ feature of grunge literature, casting the penning of a grunge novel as some kind of (w)rite of passage; grunge, he argues, ‘is like a transient introductory genre for a new “generation” of writers’ (121). The prima facie comparisons to Bukowski and Fante have been drawn by a number of critics, and, as Dawson notes, ‘attempts at a literary genealogy of “grunge” have made mention of people like Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Bret Easton Ellis, American writers for the most part who lived the lives they wrote about’ (120). Perhaps the most striking point of coincidence between Fadanelli and Australian grunge, however, is the distinct lack of engagement with the dominant literary establishment. ‘Grunge,’ Dawson notes,

39 While Andrew McGahan’s Praise (1991) is generally considered the first true grunge novel, Helen Garner’s Monkey Grip (1977) is often hailed as ‘the harbinger of grunge in Australia’ (cf. Dawson 120).
40 It is worth noting here, parenthetically, that the Beat generation have little in common with writers like Easton Ellis (who belonged to something of a 1980s literary Brat Pack) beyond a banal association of the terms ‘wayward youth’ and ‘semi-autobiographical fiction.’ More than anything else, Dawson’s cursory acknowledgement of the grunge ‘genealogy’ highlights the fact that matters of literary classification are just as addled in the Australian context as they are in Fadanelli’s Mexican one.
is meant to be a raw description of contemporary youth, something closer to reportage. In this sense it could be described as anti-literary. It is also anti-literary in the sense that it targets a specifically non-literary audience. […] [Young grunge writers] don’t feel they owe dues to the literary establishment, nor are they about appealing to the academic literary crowd (122).

Murray Waldren dubs the TA of such writers ‘literature’s missing link’ (13); Christopher Bantick describes them, rather dolefully, as ‘Generation X-ers who are “sort of nowhere”’ (9).41 According to Kirsty Leishman, in the early 1990s this market constituted ‘a previously unmapped demographic of sub-thirty year old readers’ (94), the elusive inhabitants of growing cities and subcultures across the country. Grunge literature, it was claimed, ‘charted the territory of Australia’s inner cities and the disenfranchised young people who lived there; gritty, dirty, real existences, eked out in a world of disintegrating futures where the only relief from ever-present boredom was through a nihilistic pursuit of sex, violence, drugs and alcohol’ (Leishman 94). It also offered something of an antidote to the ‘purity’ and rural themes that had dominated Australian literature until that point.

The terminology used to describe both the protagonists and readers of Australian grunge literature already signals a clear analogy with the many dirty realisms of Europe and the Americas.42 Most worthy of note in the above observations, however, are the feverishly reiterated mentions of youth. The notion that dirty realism represents or resonates with the

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41 Like the dirty realist protagonists discussed in the previous subchapter, the characters of Australian grunge fiction are quite deliberately cast as marginalised people inhabiting a grim ‘nowhere’ of crude corporeality and wilful social exclusion. Christos Tsiolkas’s Ari, the protagonist of Loaded (1995), makes this sentiment clear: ‘I’m not a worker, I’m not a student, I’m not an artist, I’m not a junkie, I’m not a conversationalist, I’m not an Australian, not a wog, not anything […] My epitaph: he slept, he ate, he fucked, he pissed, he shat’ (149-50).

42 Another point of comparison between Australian grunge and dirty realism is the prevalence of visual adaptation: examples include John Curran’s Praise (1998), Ana Kokkinos’s Head On (1998), and Richard Lowenstein’s He Died with a Felafel in his Hand (2001) (a film based on a play based on the 1994 John Birmingham novel).
values and worldviews of the youth is one that emerged ex post facto; Carver was thirty-eight years old when his first short story collection was published, and by the time Bukowski was signed by Black Sparrow Press he was forty-nine years old. The connection has nevertheless proven to be a powerful one. As Santana notes of the Catalan context:

dirty realism came to be associated with youth to such an extent that when a reviewer [of 1987 anthology Dirty Realism / Realisme Brut] noted Richard Ford’s age [forty-six] he was sceptical of Ford’s affiliation with dirty realism, even though Ford had been one of the writers to appear in the Granta issue coining the term (Forth and Back 87).

In the early 1990s, when writers like Ray Loriga and Andrew McGahan (and, lest we forget, Fadanelli) were first garnering their cult statuses, the term ‘youth’ was synonymous with Generation X: that ominously labelled and notoriously pin-holed demographic, as persistently fascinating to social anthropologists and cultural theorists as to filmmakers and booksellers. The focus on Gen X has since shifted, with alphabetic predictability, to Gen Y (also known as the Millennials), and cursory observations suggest that the key dirty realist readership has shifted in line with this. Such is certainly the case in Mexico. As numerous re-prints attest, Fadanelli’s novels have grown more popular since the turn of the century, circulating predominantly among the universities and youthful inner suburbs of Mexico City. Fadanelli’s public appearances and book launches are held in hip, dank bars across the metropolis, typically crowded with pulque-sipping twenty-somethings. Evidently, some kind of intellectual and aesthetic chemistry is afoot. In a 2011 video for Portal Jóvenes Lectores, Feli Dávalos suggests that young readers feel a certain ethical and (a)political affinity with Fadanelli’s stark, dark fiction. Fadanelli, he remarks, ‘[escribe] desde el punto de vista de una persona muchísimo más cercana a los paradigmas éticos de las generaciones nacidas a partir de 1980’ [writes from the perspective of someone much closer to the ethical paradigms of the
generations born after 1980]. Despite clear differences between the political and social contexts of Australia and Mexico, it is reasonable to suggest that a similar demographic exists here, concentrated – one presumes – in the major cities. This demographic, while not limited to Millennials, is likely to comprise young, educated Australian readers from 20 to 35 years of age with a keen interest in world literature, Mexican culture and/or dirty realism. It is this readership, I suggest, that forms the prospective TA of See You at Breakfast?: a newly translated (yet appropriately retro) quick and dirty novel penned by an unknown but appealingly provocative Mexican author. If this is the generation most likely to appreciate Fadanelli’s work, I would stress that my translation has not been targeted to any particular national TA. As I aim to illustrate in Chapter 3.3, See You at Breakfast? strives to achieve a kind of geographical neutrality, preferring a blend of cultural terminology (borrowing equally from Mexican, British, Australian and US slang) in the hope of unsettling readers’ sense of place and familiarity. This strategy, I argue, is aligned with the sense of unease and alienation I have sought to preserve and provoke throughout (and within) the translation process.

As is the case with most writers of dirty realism and grunge fiction, imagery is fundamental to the communication of Fadanelli’s author brand: the dark, urban streets, the far-flung barrios of Mexico City’s lower middle class, the acts of mundane violence, all jarring wickedly with the urbane wit, the floral shirts, the wry smile of their transcriber. Rafael Lemus evokes the vision well in a 2004 review of La otra cara de Rock Hudson:

Uno dice Guillermo Fadanelli y piensa en Moho. Basta apenas su nombre para imaginar barrios sucios, personajes violentos, libros extremos. Fadanelli es, según la leyenda, el escritor más oscuro de la literatura mexicana presente y, al mismo tiempo, su mito menos oculto. Todos han visto, al menos una vez, sus camisas estampadas de flores y sus textos salpicados de polvo. Todos han escuchado, también, las etiquetas que acompañan su apellido: realismo sucio y literatura basura. Fadanelli es, por
decir algo, un nombre de nueve letras y una firma que incluye, obligadamente, óxido y cerilla. Empieza con una efe y termina, casi siempre, en un balazo o con un escupitajo.

[Say “Guillermo Fadanelli” and Moho comes to mind. The name alone conjures dirty barrios, violent characters, extreme books. Fadanelli is the darkest writer in current Mexican literature – or so the legend goes – and, at the same time, its most visible myth. We’re all familiar with his flowery shirts and dust-specked texts. We’ve all heard, too, the labels attached to his surname: dirty realism, trash literature. Fadanelli is a nine-letter word, a stamped signature that leaves an obligatory trace of rust and earwax. It begins with an f and almost always ends with a bullet hole or a gob of spit] (“La otra cara de la apatía”).

While the easy association with dirty realism and trash literature is particular to the Mexican context, much of Lemus’s imagery translates quite well to an Australian public: the allusions to vulgarity, the dirt and violence, the superlative darkness, the bulletholes and gobs of spit. While Lemus no doubt homes in on the abject – rather than the tragic and mundane – aspects of Fadanelli’s work, the gist of his evaluation is sure to spark interest. The nuances of the texts themselves, one hopes, go part way towards mitigating the reductivism of critics fascinated, like Lemus, by their ‘trashy’ bravado. Despite a number of (mostly scholarly) endeavours to identify and accentuate these nuances, they have barely registered in the realm of critics and publishers, and are unlikely to do so in Australia. That said, whispers of hope do exist; Enrique Macari, in a 2012 review of Mis mujeres muertas, successfully pierces the dark façade, writing:

Debajo de la desesperación y de la angustia, de lo grotesco y de lo patético, debajo del cinismo y la ironía y la insolencia que abundan en los libros de Fadanelli, podemos encontrar o al menos entrever un pequeño destello de fe: fe en la importancia de la novela, en la literatura como posibilidad de diálogo, en el valor vital y real del acto de lectura. La escritura de Fadanelli toma toda su fuerza de esta convicción.
[Beneath the desperation and the anguish, beneath the grotesque and the pathetic, beneath the cynicism and the irony and the insolence that abound in Fadanelli’s books, we find – or at least glimpse – a small glimmer of faith: faith in the importance of the novel, in literature as an opportunity for dialogue, in the real and vital value of reading. Fadanelli’s writing gathers all its strength from this conviction.]

It goes without saying, perhaps, that Fadanelli is unlikely to be received in the Australian literary scene as he has been in Mexico. Despite the apparent resurgence of translated Mexican literature, epitomised by the long-awaited translation of acclaimed authors like Sergio Pitol as well as relative success of ‘new’ talent like Valeria Luiselli and Laia Jufresca, translated fiction does not often manage to breach the confines of its limited market. Even outside the Mexican capital, in the smaller (albeit still sprawling) regional cities patronisingly referred to as ‘la provincia,’ Fadanelli’s fame is limited to the halls of literature faculties and the beer-halls of artsy neighbourhoods. If his welcome can be made marginally warmer thanks to some conceptual or aesthetic connection with dirty realism, or even with Australian grunge literature, then so be it. When all is said and done, the transformation from ‘literatura basura’ to geographically ambiguous Mexican-Australian-dirty-realism is an unavoidable symptom of the dislocation experienced by all translated literature. World literature, in the sense that David Damrosch theorised, is unavoidably altered by the act of migration, setting down new roots (or routes?) in the target culture that stem from, but do not sever, those reaching back to the source. To borrow Vilashini Cooppan’s phrase, such literature becomes at once ‘locally inflected and translocally mobile’ (33). Just as a ‘specifically Australian accent’ (Leishman 97) permeated the formation of the grunge canon in the 1990s, so will the accent and inflections of See You at Breakfast? – a translation and a

43 For a good, if limited, overview of this recent revival, see MacSweeney, Christina. “Why The Comeback in Mexican Literature?” Voices (April 2016). Web.
‘refraction’\footnote{I borrow this term from André Lefevere, who defined refractions as ‘the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work’ (‘Cucumbers’ 205).} in several senses – permeate the formation of Fadanelli’s new context and readership in the English-speaking world. This creative and conflicted process, however, is very much out of my hands. All writing, as Damrosch observes, ‘takes on a new life as it moves into the world at large’ (What is 24). I can only hope that the new life of this novel will prove to be a full and prosperous one.

Whether or not See You at Breakfast? succeeds in rallying a new party (un?)faithful here in Australia, the act of its physical and interlingual translation surely reinforces Fadanelli’s obsession with exile, with the marginal, and with the transformation of waste and rejection. The insolence of a literature that declares itself ‘trash’ suggests a knowing engagement with its social and cultural milieu, both on a local, introspective scale and on a global, human one. Marked, perhaps inevitably, by the indicia of postmodernity, Fadanelli’s work is a self-conscious expression of the context from which it emerges. Like other cultural products of its time, it is ‘empirical, chaotic and heterogeneous’ (Jameson, Postmodernism 1), constituting a kind of ‘sordid’ celebration of ‘the schizophrenia of modern-day consumer society’ (J.C.M.). As a result, it treads a fine line between engagement and disengagement, humour and serious social critique. Certainly, beneath Fadanelli’s disposability and will to atrophy there is a palimpsest of farce; hints of the metalinguistic betraying something akin to a dark parody of both pop- and sub-culture. This is ‘the irony, the sarcasm, the sly wink before the inevitable precipice of the utopia’ (Martínez Rentería 9) that defines ‘la literatura basura’ as something beyond countercultural. Mirrored and fed by other cultural output – be it music, cinema, visual art or literature – the trash sensibility is entwined in a web of intertextuality and mutual inspiration that, when considered at a certain distance, reveals an ambiguous
postmodern Zeitgeist of which Fadanelli is but one reluctant herald. In the following chapter, this sense of artistic ambiguity will be examined as one element of a hybridised and chaotic socio-physical context in which we find several intersecting analogies for translation (both ‘cultural’ – after Bhabha – and literary): that of urban Mexico in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
Chapter Three: Translation and other spaces

It’s blue—with a pink movie neon
E-changing in the jungle sky [...] —
Urk, the brown strange glare of
modernized Mexican architecture /
housing projects can’t be deAztecfied
— Jack Kerouac
“Mexico Rooftop”

3.1 Urban Spaces: Mexico City and the mutant text

Worlds away from the streets of downtown Mexico City, in the idyllic beachside town of Mazunte, Oaxaca, there is a hotel named after one of Fadanelli’s novels: Hotel DF. A real-life Hotel DF, perched on the shores of paradise, becomes the distorted reflection of a fictional Hotel DF embedded in the heart of urban chaos. During a recent stay at the Mazunte hotel, Fadanelli commented: ‘En Mazunte pienso que sólo un loco o un atormentado desearía volver al DF, pero al DF no vuelves: más bien de ahí nunca sales’ [In Mazunte I think that only a mad or tortured soul would choose to go back to Mexico City. But one does not go back to Mexico City: rather, one never leaves] (emphasis added). With this wry remark, Fadanelli summarises what has become a central and recurring preoccupation in both his fiction and non-fiction work: the ubiquitous presence and all-consuming nature of the city.

46 Tweet: March 2014.
This subchapter will examine Fadanelli’s portrayals of urban space through the lens of ‘cultural translation,’ drawing primarily upon the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, James Clifford and Néstor García Canclini. Fadanelli’s Mexico City, I will argue, is a site of great unease, brimming with tension, cultural mutation and heteroglossic dialogue; in its dynamism and resistance to statis, however, it is also a site of great creative potential. Fadanelli’s ‘trash literature,’ like the city in which it was conceived and to which it pays constant and conflicted homage, is as much a site of creation as it is one of tension. As I will show, Fadanelli’s work carries with it, and consciously engages with, the rich and hybrid history of a city and a nation steeped in translation, contradictions, and the perpetual re-writing of physical and cultural borders. This vital and complex dynamic lies at the core of the alienating translation ethics elaborated in Chapter 3.2, and the interrelated processes of estrangement and invigoration are central to both the theoretical and methodological aspects of my translation.

As noted in earlier chapters, Fadanelli’s writing is firmly rooted in the inexhaustible metropolis of Mexico City, ‘esa cárcel imposible que parece haber salido de la mente de Piranesi’ [that impossible prison, like something out of the mind of Piranesi] (Frías 67). Unlike the ‘exiled’ Latin American writer – I am thinking here of figures like Carlos Fuentes, Roberto Bolaño and, more recently, Valeria Luiselli – whose work has historically dominated the exported literature market, Fadanelli does not look in (or back) on Mexico City from the

47 According to George Yúdice, the almost exclusive translation of exiled Latin American writers perpetuates a kind of soft neocolonialist approach to so-called literary multiculturalism. ‘If we focus, for example, on the selection of foreign texts to represent foreign cultures,’ Yúdice writes, say those of the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, it is necessary to take into consideration certain circumstances that are likely to go unexamined: that as one of the canonised writers of the Latin American literary “Boom” of the 1960s and early 1970s his work was promoted within a particularly felicitous conjuncture in the newly consolidated transnational publishing industry; that his concerns with the definition of a continental...
outside. On the contrary, his literary presence and trademark have become thoroughly entwined with his place of birth. Indeed, Fadanelli’s work is as much a part of the city as the city is a part of it. In Luiselli’s terms:

[L]a obra entera de Fadanelli es indisociable del DF, de sus personajes – reales o arquetípicos –, de sus ergástulos, puteros, cantinas y alcantarillas; y también es verdad que hay un DF que es ahora indisociable de este escritor – hay lugares y personas reales que parecen una mala broma de Fadanelli.

[Fadanelli’s body of work is inseparable from Mexico City: from its characters, real or archetypal; from its ergastuli, whoremongers, cantinas and gutters. There also exists a Mexico City that is now inseparable from the author – there are people and places that seem like a bad joke played by Fadanelli] (“La Ciudad” 88).

This strange co-dependence is multiplied by the writer’s own physical entrapment within the city’s expanding borders. Leaving the city, Fadanelli confesses in his many tweets and letters, becomes increasingly impossible with each passing year. There are hints of escape – some of his earliest short stories take place in Madrid, while another, “Poeta en Nueva York,” narrates a youthful stint selling Christmas trees on the sidewalks of New York City – but if these are anomalies in his youth, they are practically non-existent in his later writing. Fadanelli’s apparent incarceration, both literal and literary, within the ever-shifting confines

Latin American culture reflected the aspirations and anxieties of elites and by no means those of Mexico’s own non-hegemonic groups; that Fuentes’s equivalent in the US would likely be someone like Styron, not an Ishmael Reed nor even a Doctorow, and much less Latino writers like Rolando Hinojosa or Oscar Hijuelos; and that his work is grist for an academic mini-industry, initially in mainstream Spanish and Latin American literature departments in the US and increasingly in those English departments that have begun to capitalise on and absorb – often with little expertise – so-called Third World literatures as part of their cultural or multicultural studies programs (Yúdice 204).

48 When invited to Melbourne for the launch of See You at Breakfast?, Fadanelli politely and poetically declined, noting: ‘Mis huesos reclaman la gravedad de la tierra más que aires nuevos’ [my bones crave the gravity of solid ground over new scenery] (personal correspondence).
of Mexico City means that Fadanelli’s representations of the place itself remain uncontaminated by nostalgia, romance or political critique. Instead, they are contaminated by the smog and filth of everyday urban reality, and inhabited by a menagerie of slowly decaying souls: ‘[la] paloma flacucha, olorosa a mierda’ [the scrawny, shit-stinking pigeon] (Mariana 30); ‘la gente que se alimentaba de humo y mierda’ [the people subsisting on smoke and shit] (El día que la vea 69); ‘[los] olores ácidos, intestinales’ [the acidic, intestinal odours] spat out by the city’s drains, ‘como si allí en el estómago de los albañiles se cocinaran las docenas de perros que los autos atropellaban todos los días’ [as if there in the gut of the sewers stewed the corpses of the dozens of stray dogs hit by cars every day] (Rock Hudson 11).

Mexico City then, in all its dirty glory, forms the indispensable framework of Fadanelli’s novels, and the strange or tragic predicaments of the characters who move within it enact the uneasy relationship that persists between the writer and his milieu. Fadanelli is often quick to criticise the intrinsic violence, corruption and derangement of the Mexican capital. In his numerous interviews and non-fiction pieces, Fadanelli paints a relentlessly grim portrait of ‘el caos inabarcable de la Ciudad de México’ [the vast chaos of Mexico City]. The city is described as ‘[un] territorio de guerra’ [a war zone]; a ‘metástasis’ (Herrera-Pahl); ‘una enfermedad que mata al espíritu, pero no al cuerpo’ [a sickness that destroys the spirit, but not the body] (Ramos Martín). In a 1997 article entitled “El ocaso de una ciudad” [The decline of a city], Fadanelli explains that this sense of chaos and malaise originates in a deeply set social ‘fissure’; ‘el desconcierto,’ he observes,

proviene de una fisura histórica a partir de la cual el habitante de la Ciudad de México se encuentra en un estado de guerra permanente: la calle es un territorio cuya propiedad ha dejado de ser comunal, no es ya el espacio público, no la plaza donde la comunidad se congrega sino el territorio que se ofrece a quien es capaz de apropiárselo
[the disorientation originates in an historical fissure, ever since which the inhabitants of Mexico City have found themselves in a state of constant warfare: the street is a territory whose property is no longer communal; the plazas where communities used to congregate are now territories that offer themselves to whoever is fit to take them] (4).

In his fiction, too, this war-like vision is reflected. Fadanelli’s bleak urban narratives offer manifold representations of an agonising ‘via crucis mexicano’ characterised by ‘chantaje, corrupción e impunidad’ [extortion, corruption and impunity] (“Viaje al Centro” 35). This rather predictable conjunction of ardent Catholicism, political ineptitude and deeply entrenched violence is, nevertheless, a deliberately misleading one. Fadanelli’s entire aesthetic, as noted earlier, is shot with threads of contradiction and artifice. His attitude to the city is no exception. As he admits in an interview with Rosana Ricárdez, the ‘caos constant’ [constant chaos] of the capital at once seduces and repels him, producing a kind of ‘vértigo necrológico’ [morbid vertigo], ‘una tensión que transgrede las fronteras de lo estético’ [a tension that transgresses the limits of aesthetics]. ‘Me atrae la idea de habitar una locura,’ he observes, ‘y vivir en permanente desasosiego’ [I am attracted to the idea of inhabiting madness, of living in permanent unease] (Ricárdez). This ‘permanent unease’ is a condition of tension and anxiety, a constant wavering and motion that belongs most fully to sites of transition and translation. Such sites, to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s term, can be thought of as ‘contact zones’: social spaces where disparate forces ‘meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination […] or their aftermaths’ (4). It is this condition of tension and contact that defines Fadanelli’s Mexico City as a postmodern interstice, ‘[un] metrópolis sin límites ni centro precisos’ [a metropolis with no precise limits and no precise centre] (Luiselli, “La Ciudad” 88) that does not lie between borders, in any essentialising or spatial sense, but rather dissolves the binary suppositions that
impose such borders. This notion is central if we are to comprehend the potential of translation (both ‘cultural’ and interlingual) as it applies to Fadanelli’s work.

Fadanelli sows deliberate seeds of unease throughout his depictions of the sprawling Mexican capital. Most plainly disorienting among these is the way in which he disperses and confuses the notion of a ‘city centre,’ concentrating his narratives within the marginalised urban pockets that, like distinct solar systems within an unfathomably large galaxy, obliviously orbit their own barycentres. As noted in Chapter Two, Fadanelli’s focus on the marginal and the mundane is a central tenet of his *Moho* and ‘literatura basura’ philosophies. Just as Bukowski’s *Los Angeles* is centred not on Sunset Boulevard but on the run-down apartments and dingy taverns of East Hollywood, novels like *¿Te veré en el desayuno?* and *La otra cara de Rock Hudson* negotiate, in intimate detail, the Chinese cafés and housing estates of Mexico City’s lower-middle class barrios: Tacubaya, Taxqueña, Portales. This conscious decentralisation is made explicit in *Hotel DF* when, in reference to the ‘Centro Histórico’ (the nominally central barrio spiderwebbing outwards from the city’s Zócalo and Catedral) the narrator notes: ‘No, no es éste el Centro verdadero, qué poco significan para los citadinos esos ridículos montículos de piedras e historia acumulada; lo nuevo, el Centro verdadero se ubica ahora en la antigua periferia, en Santa Fe y Cuajimalpa’ [No, this isn’t the real Centre; those ridiculous mounds of stone and accumulated history mean little to we city-dwellers. The new Centre, the real Centre, is located at the old periphery, in Santa Fe and Cuajimalpa] (*Hotel DF* 143). In an analogue of this shift, Fadanelli substitutes the ostensible nucleus of the city for an indefinite number of half-seedy purlieus, enacting a kind of ‘literary

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49 Like Fadanelli, Bukowski was obsessed with, and increasingly enveloped by, the city of his literature. He often spoke of Los Angeles as his favourite subject. In a 1974 interview he notes: ‘You live in a town all your life, and you get to know every bitch on the street corner and half of them you have already messed around with. You’ve got the layout of the whole land. You have a picture of where you are. [...] Since I was raised in LA I’ve always had the geographical and spiritual feeling of being here. I’ve had time to learn this city. I can’t see any other place than LA’ (Wennersten 38-9).
sprawl’ that points to the fragmentation and disorientation of postmodern urban and literary space. The cityscape framing his narratives is a continually signalled as an irrational and incongruous construction. ‘¿Quién inventó las ciudades?’ – ponders Cristina in the opening pages of ¿Te veré en el desayuno? – ‘¿Quién tuvo la idea de poner una casa tras otra?’ [Who invented cities? Whose idea was it to put houses one after the other?]’ (13). Throughout Fadanelli’s oeuvre, the postmodern metropolis is construed as a complex ‘mosaico humano’ [human mosaic] (Desayuno 39) composed of heterogeneous fragments, sitting uneasily between the third and first worlds. It is a space where the structures of neoliberalism (which, as a form of cultural colonialism, might still be considered within a postcolonial framework) are by turns absorbed and othered by a series of fractured and plural narrative voices; a place where the ‘tortillería’ and the ‘Unidad Habitacional’ coexist with ‘el Seven Eleven’ and ‘el Blockbuster de la Avenida Taxqueña’ (Desayuno 39).

This plurality is perhaps most visible in the short story “La posmodernidad explicada a las putas” (1992), which constructs a revealing dialogue between two prostitutes, a literature professor and a middle-class yuppy gathered at a hot dog stand. At this most Mexican (and most postmodern) of crossroads, the hybrid identities of Mexico City are neatly summarised in a playful microcosm of the postmodern megalopolis. With an elegance and humour that recall the words of Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez Peña – ‘Me estoy desmexicanizando para mexicomprenderme’ [I am demexicanizing myself in order to mexicomprehend myself] (García Canclini, Culturas Híbridas 302) – Fadanelli superimposes capitalist iconography and snippets of English terminology (Pepsi, Cartier, hot dogs, ‘el young professional’) upon a thoroughly Mexican setting and vernacular (‘¡Vivan los tacos, hijos de la chingada!’), resulting in a dynamic that falls somewhere among the interstices of ‘[p]osmexica, prechicano, panlatino’ culture (García Canclini, Culturas Híbridas 302). The story’s final
sentence, scrawled in ‘salsa catsup’ upon an anonymous city wall, echoes the postmodern maxim underlying much of Fadanelli’s work: ‘Todos somo mutantes, no habrá ya juicio final’ [We are all mutants, there will be no judgement day] (El día que la vea 118).

The recurring images of mutation, mosaic and hybridity are significant here, as they tap into a longstanding tradition that views Latin American (and especially Mexican) culture as a powerfully creative postcolonial organism. Mexico is, and always has been, an unusually diverse society. Despite the founding myth of its ‘central’ city – Tenochtitlan, the navel of the moon – the nation’s history is an age-old tapestry of interlacing cultures, traditions, languages and ethnicities. As José Vasconcelos pointed out nearly a century ago:

Quizá no hay otra nación en la Tierra donde se pueda encontrar, en la misma acentuada forma, una coexistencia de tipos humanos separados por siglos o incluso épocas de desarrollo etnográfico; pueblos distinto en sangre, raza y hábitos. […] El México de hoy muestra rastros de la múltiple experiencia de nuestra historia.

[There is perhaps no other nation on Earth in which we find, to such an exaggerated degree, the coexistence of human beings separated by centuries – entire eras, even – of ethnographic development; peoples of diverse bloodlines, races and habits. […] Modern-day Mexico bears the traces of our multiplex history] (La Otra Raza Cósmica 27-29).

What constituted ‘modern-day Mexico’ for Vasconcelos, of course, is a distant memory to his twenty-first century readers. Today, however, the diversity of the Mexican population is even more pronounced, and its culture vastly more connected to the rest of the world. In Fadanelli’s writing, this diversity is often represented as a kind of physical mutation: Mexico

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50 The text of La Otra Raza Cósmica (2009) is based on a series of lectures Vasconcelos gave in Chicago in 1926. The lectures were originally given in English, although they appear widely in Spanish translation. According to his translator, Heriberto Yépez, Mexico’s professed ‘caudillo cultural’ had close ties to the US since childhood. The degree of Vasconcelos’s bilingual and bicultural sensibility, Yépez notes, render him ‘más que mexicano’ [more than Mexican]; indeed, he might well be considered ‘el primer escritor post-national, el primer fronterizo’ [the first post-national writer, the first frontier writer] (24).
City, as well as a character, is a living creature, an epic cephalopod ever unfurling, consuming and excreting, adapting tirelessly into myriad forms. The physicality of the city is often palpable; in *La Otra Cara de Rock Hudson*, for example, the streets of Portales are described in (quite literally) visceral detail, from the ‘pavimiento sucio y desfigurado, llenas de baches y tumores’ [dirty, disfigured pavements, riddled with potholes and tumors] to the gastric stench of the city’s endless and overflowing bowels (11). This organic yet inherently literary space, ‘hermosa y monstruosa por partes iguales’ [as beautiful as it is monstrous] (Luiselli, “La Ciudad” 89), is above all a site of converging traditions: the mythical and the contemporary, the foreign and the national, the metaphysical and the corporeal, conjuring thus a kind of palimpsestic living mural, ‘una visión de Anáhuac contemporánea’ [a vision of contemporary Anáhuac] (Luiselli, “La Ciudad” 89). 51

In this sense, indeed, Fadanelli’s literary concoctions have much in common with the iconic painted murals that, like ‘high culture’ graffiti, adorn the public spaces of Mexico City. As Néstor García Canclini notes:

Rivera, Siqueiros y Orozco propusieron síntesis iconográficas de la identidad nacional inspiradas a la vez en las obras de mayas y aztecas, los retablos de iglesias, las decoraciones de pulquerías, los diseños y colores de la alfarería poblana, las lacas de Michoacán y los avances experimentales de vanguardias europeas.

[Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco proposed the iconographic synthesis of national identity, at once inspired by Mayan and Aztec works, religious altarpieces, the images adorning pulquerías, the colours and designs of artisanal pottery, the lacquer art of Michoacán, and the experimental work of the European avant-garde] (*Culturas Híbridas* 78-79).

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51 Anáhuac is a Nahuatl placename for the ancient Aztec area roughly coterminous with modern-day Mexico.
Just as the ‘synthesis’ proposed by Mexico’s celebrated muralists drew from Mexico’s hybrid culture a thread of unprecedented creativity and innovation, so does Fadanelli’s writing suggest new readings of Mexico City as an inherently translated crossroads of histories, cultures and tongues. In his seminal work *Culturas Híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990), García Canclini foregrounds the notion of hybridity as an intrinsic characteristic of Mexican (and, more broadly, Latin American) society. ‘La perspectiva pluralista,’ he writes, ‘que acepta la fragmentación y las combinaciones múltiples entre tradición, modernidad y posmodernidad, es indispensable para considerar la coyuntura latinoamericana de fin de siglo’ [the pluralist perspective, which accepts fragmentation and multiple combinations among tradition, modernity and postmodernity, is indispensable for considering the Latin American conjuncture at the turn of the century] (329-330). Mexico City in particular – itself a focus point of García Canclini’s anthropological and cultural theses – is construed as a site of deeply entrenched historical and social hybridity. The city’s irremediably chaotic and remarkably fertile commingling of cultures, voices and creative styles almost seems to serve as a symbol of postmodernity itself: ‘El posmodernismo no es un estilo,’ García Canclini writes, ‘sino la copresencia tumultuosa de todos, el lugar donde los capítulos de la historia del arte y del folclor se cruzan entre sí y con las nuevas tecnologías culturales’ [Postmodernism is not a style but the tumultuous co-presence of all styles, the place where the chapters in the history of art and folklore are crossed with each other and with the new cultural technologies] (*Culturas Híbridas* 307).

The notion of crossbreeding evoked here (one that also recurs with some frequency in translation discourse) betrays the biological origins of the ‘hybridity’ metaphor, which has met with considerable debate since its integration into the field of literary and cultural studies. As Josef Raab and Martin Butler note, the term ‘hybridity’ has long since shucked the burden
of ‘negative implications and connotations of inferiority, contamination, miscegenation and perversion’ (2) to become a familiar metaphor in the conceptualisation of cultural contact, transfer and exchange, especially in the field of postcolonial studies (cf. Zapf 303). In seeking to describe that ongoing condition of transculturation that allows no space for ‘zones of purity’ and homogeneity (Rosaldo in García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures xv), the concept of hybridity stands in direct opposition to essentialist conceptions of culture or identity; ‘wherever it emerges,’ in other words, ‘it suggests the impossibility of essentialism’ (Young, Colonial Desire 27). That said, the concept of hybridity is itself a hybrid construct. As Robert Young points out, ‘there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes’ (Colonial Desire 27). The term’s shaky foundations, straddling a number of (often divergent) theoretical perspectives, thus ensure that the term itself, like the cultural phenomenon it attempts to name, remains in a state of perpetual change and contestation. Despite this, García Canclini’s observations remain pertinent: his evaluation of Latin America as a site of ‘echoes’ and ‘contradictions’ considers both its ‘historia híbrida’ [hybrid history] (Culturashíbridas 69) and its ever-changing cultural hybridity, establishing a base from which a number of analyses, in diverse areas of knowledge, can be launched. The translatability of García Canclini’s terminology itself points to the potential fertility of ‘hybridity’ as a cultural concept. Much like de Andrade’s notion of ‘antropofagia,’ the process of hybridisation involves a significant degree of interpretation and translation; the way in which a culture receives and incorporates various elements might even be described as a kind of ‘reading,’ ultimately resulting in the creation of something new and unrepeatable.

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52 The space of ‘transculturation,’ itself adapted from the Cuban context – where it originated as Fernando Ortiz’s transculturación (1940) – is described by Gustavo Pérez Firmat as ‘a liminal zone or ‘impassioned margin’ where diverse cultures converge without merging’ (25). This characterisation resonates with the descriptions of postmodernity and third space discussed in this chapter.
Indeed, in a hybrid context like Mexico City, to create means ‘importar, traducir, construir lo propio’ [to import, to translate, to construct one’s own] (Culturas Híbridas 73).

Fadanelli’s fragmented city of ‘mutants’ and García Canclini’s hybrid sites of Latin American difference both occupy what many theorists (after Bhabha) have come to call a ‘third space.’ This terminology, however, should give us pause. The abstract notions behind words like ‘hybrid,’ ‘translation’ and ‘space’ diverge significantly, in Bhabha, from conventional scholarly use. As a result, Bhabhian theory is often misapplied in other branches of scholarship; it is worth keeping in mind Ovidi Carbonell’s remark that ‘postcolonial translation studies simplify Bhabha’s concept of a third space’ (48). In order to evade naivety, then, some elucidation is required. James Clifford’s notion of ‘re-articulation’ proves helpful in this respect. Clifford (2000) defines social and cultural formations as collective yet contingent constructions, or ‘articulated ensembles.’ These formations do not come about organically, as terms such as ‘hybrid’ and ‘mutant’ might suggest, but rather are artificially configured and constructed: ‘An articulated ensemble is more like a political coalition or, in its ability to conjoin disparate elements, a cyborg,’ Clifford writes (478). Clifford’s terminology helps to clarify, to some extent, the murky waters of the in-between. If the elements of interstitial space are understood as both contingent and constructed, then its inhabitants are agents who navigate and ‘negotiate’ that space at will, hooking and unhooking parts onto their respective structures and (re)constructing themselves intermittently. When we think of the in-between state as ‘articulation,’ we avoid misleading connotations of passivity, absence and indecision and approach ‘the actual contingent and liminal state of all contemporary subjects’ (Ashcroft 150). As Young reminds us, ‘the third space is above all a site of production, the production of anxiety, an untimely place of loss, of fading, of appearance and disappearance [...] of contestation and of negotiation’ (“The Void” 82-3).
There are echoes (or, better, presages) of these ideas in the work of García Canclini, whose contributions to Latin American cultural theory offer a kind of parallel to those of Bhabha. Raymundo Mier’s observation in an appendix to Culturas Híbridas brings these connections to the fore: ‘Lo híbrido,’ he notes,

\[
\text{designa una liminaridad, una materia cuya existencia exhibe la afirmación
dual de una sustancia y su falta de identidad, lo que está en el intersticio, lo}
\text{que se perfila en una zona de penumbra, lo que escapa, cuando menos en su}
surgimiento, a la repetición}
\]

[The hybrid designates a liminality, a material whose existence exhibits the
dual affirmation of a substance and its lack of identity, that which is in the
interstices, which profiles itself in a zone of shadow, which escapes, at least
in appearance, repetition] (361).

The space of cultural translation, then, can be described as an arbitrary, unstable, hybrid (cyborgian) space situated somewhere in between the Self and the Other. For Bhabha, this in-between site is inextricably related to his concept of ‘third space,’ which is likewise inseparable from the concept of cultural translation. Bhabha’s descriptions of the third space as a ‘split-space of enunciation’ are notoriously slippery, but it is clear that he intends translation to be a ‘motif or trope’ (“The Third Space” 210) through which to grasp and discuss the concept. In a 2009 essay entitled “In the Cave of Making: Thoughts on Third Space,” Bhabha illuminates this connection through a choral metaphor, describing the

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53 The translation of Latin American theorists into English in the mid-1990s signalled an important moment in postmodernism, offering, too, an interesting example of the nexus between the translation practice and theory. As Román de la Campa puts it: ‘la crítica literaria y el mercado de diseminación en lengua inglesa del pensamiento literario-posmoderno han sido, y siguen siendo, los códigos predominantes del discurso sobre la posmodernidad en general, y sobre la literatura latinoamericana en particular’ [literary criticism and the English-language dissemination of postmodern literary thought have been, and continue to be, the principle codes for the discourse of postmodernity in general and Latin American literature in particular] (22).
moment when, amidst the movement and multiplicity of voices, a ‘momentary stillness’ emerges as ‘several voices hold the same note’ (ix). He continues:

The precarious tension involved in holding the thought – or the note – in common, vibrating beyond the control of any one voice, is the timbre of translation working its way into our thinking [...] To hold, in common, a concept like third space is to begin to see that thinking and writing are acts of translation. Third space, for me, is unthinkable outside the locality of cultural translation (ix).

Within this interstitial site of enunciation, of language in actu, ‘of splitting and a hurried stapling together,’ the I is displaced, fractured, constantly ‘refashioned, reconstructed, stitched together’ by the recognition of the Other, for the subject comes into being ‘only as a signifier in the field of the Other’ (Young, “The Void” 85-6). This specularity ‘does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid’ (The Location of Culture 114). As Bhabha himself notes, this process of ‘identification’ is often theorised ‘through a psychoanalytic analogy’ (“Third Space” 211); terms like ‘anxiety’ and ‘tension’ thus emerge as fundamental states of the hybrid subject. Michael Cronin interprets this tension in kinetic terms as a ‘continuous oscillation,’ one which maintains the interstitial space of translation in a state of perpetual motion. The gap of the ‘entre-deux,’ he writes, ‘should be conceived of less as a space, a reified entity tending towards stasis, than as a constant movement backwards and forward in which there is no fixated identification with either of the poles’ (Across the Lines 166). As these passages indicate, hybridity is not a reconciliatory term capable of resolving, ‘in a dialectical play of recognition’ (The Location of Culture 14), the tension between two cultures; on the contrary, it is an inherently uneasy term immersed in a space of cross-contamination and instability.
Both the megalopolis and the postmodern work of fiction, with their respective cacophonies of voices and images, are apt and well-worn symbols of the multiplicity and anxiety of cultural spaces. Viewed through the lens of cultural translation, then, a place like Mexico City (and particularly its fictionalised manifestation in the work of Fadanelli) can be analysed not only as an interstitial space of oscillation and anxiety but as a site of great productivity and creative potential. In her illuminating work *Cities in Translation* (2012), Sherry Simon examines the postmodern metropolis as a site of friction and transformation, a place composed of incoherent parts (and languages) threaded together by ‘simultaneous, parallel conversations taking place across urban terrain’ (2). Drawing upon the theoretical work of Catalan architect Manuel de Solà-Morales, Simon cites the notion of the ‘esquina urbana’ [street corner] as the ‘single most salient feature of the urban landscape’ (2).

54 For de Solà-Morales, indeed, the street corner is ‘el lugar de mezcla e intercambio, lugar plural y contradictorio por excelencia’ [a place of mixing and exchange, plural and contradictory par excellence], a place defined by ‘la diferencia y la fricción, del acuerdo forzado o fortuito, de tensión y conflicto permanente’ [difference and friction, forced or fortuitous agreement, tension and permanent conflict] (131). The phrase recalls one of Walter Benjamin’s

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54 In a short story entitled “Brasilia” (something of an ode to the sterile beauty of the Brazilian capital), Clarice Lispector paints the portrait of a city without street corners and, by extension, without life. ‘Brasilia,’ she writes, ‘é uma cidade abstrata. […] É uma cidade redonda e sem esquinas. Também não tem botequim para a gente tomar um cafézinho. É verdade, juro que não vi esquinas. Em Brasília não existe cotidiano’ [Brasilia is an abstract city. […] it is a rounded city with no corners. Neither does it have any neighbourhood bars for people to get a cup of coffee. It’s true, I swear I didn’t see any corners. In Brasilia the everyday does not exist] (576). Brasilia, indeed, seems to be the antithesis of the dirty realist city. ‘Agora me pergunto,’ Lispector muses: ‘se não há esquinas, onde ficam as prostitutas de pé fumando? Ficam sentadas no chão? […] Em Brasilia não tem posto para cachorro fazer pipi’ [I wonder: if there are no corners, where do the prostitutes stand smoking? Do they sit on the ground? […] In Brasilia there are no lampposts for dogs to pee on] (578-83). Brasilia, she concludes, ‘não é. É apenas o retrato de si própria’ [is not. It is merely the picture of itself] (583). This characterisation appears in stark and constant contrast with the mad, debauched chaos of that other city: ‘Rio, cidade turbulenta de meus amores’ [Rio, turbulent city of my loves] (592).
reflections from *The Arcades Project*: ‘Streets are the dwelling place of the collective.’\(^{55}\) The collective is an eternally wakeful, eternally agitated being that – in the space between the building fronts – lives, experiences, understands, and invents’ (879). This is the dynamic that palpitates in Fadanelli’s Mexico City: an inherently agitated space fraught with contradictions and (often all too visible) tensions. The taco stand of Fadanelli’s “La posmodernidad explicada a las putas” is, perhaps, the Mexican epitome of de Solà-Morales’s ‘esquina urbana’; a place of encounter, friction, understanding and misunderstanding.

Of course, the fragmentation of the city (Mexico City, but also any and every city) is linguistic as well as cultural. In the words of Juan Villoro, ‘La gran ciudad carece de lenguaje estructurado; la energía con que avanza, su exuberante desorden, requiere un mosaico roto’ [Large cities lack a structured language; the energy that propels them, their exuberant chaos, requires a broken mosaic] (“El Cielo del Metro” 138). Simon notes that ‘[a]ccents, code-switching and translation are to be valued for the ways in which they draw attention to the complexities of difference, for the ways in which they interrupt the self-sufficiencies of ‘mono’ cultures’ (*Cities* 1). For her, the multiplicity of voices and the movement between them implies an unease or ‘friction’ that has positive repercussions for culture (if what we perceive as positive is heterogeneity over homogeneity, ‘multi’ over ‘mono’). This concept of disruptive, translatorial friction applies to Fadanelli’s writing on several levels: both internally, through the heteroglossic nature of his fiction, and externally, through the proposed translation of that fiction into other languages. As their etymological origins suggest, ‘heteroglossia’ (different tongues) and ‘polyphony’ (many sounds) are useful concepts when it comes to the convergence of literature and language. Of particular importance is Bakhtin’s

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\(^{55}\) This idea is reiterated by Jameson in reference to the urban settings of dirty realist literature: ‘We must think of the space of dirty realism as a collective built space, in which the opposition between inside and outside is annulled’ (*Seeds* 155).
theoretical enrichment of these terms, in which literary analysis – especially of the novel, ‘the genre that most favours [...] polyphony’ (Todorov x) – plays an important role. For Bakhtin, the variation and stratification within literary language means that words are set or ‘scattered’ on different planes, implying the existence of ‘internal contradictions’ as well as a kind of social heteroglossia: a ‘Tower of Babel confusion of languages’ (Speech Genres 300). For the writer of prose, then, the discursive object is ‘a condensation of heterological voices among which his [the writer’s] own voice must resound’ (Imagination 91-92). From this perspective, Fadanelli’s writing is undoubtedly heteroglossic, giving place to a multiplicity of social voices. As I will argue in greater detail in Chapter 3.3, the fractured dialogues of ¿Te veré en desayuno? illustrate this well, mingling the distinct tongues of its four protagonists (as well as those of a number of minor characters) and snatches of internal dialogue with an overarching, omniscient narration. If this polyphony houses the internal ‘friction’ of Fadanelli’s writing, then the external friction is a result of its contact with the Other: in this case, with non-Mexican (and, in particular, anglophone) readers of Fadanelli. Supposing that Simon is right in her assertion that ‘the friction of languages [...] is a good thing’ (Cities 1), then the notoriously ‘mono’-lithic anglophone culture has much to gain from embracing Fadanelli’s abrasive, unsettling, translated literature.

3.2 Strange Spaces: Translation and the ethics of unease

If Fadanelli’s Mexico City is, as I have argued, fundamentally a space of friction and difference, then it is also – perhaps above all – a space of negotiation, in the Bhabhian sense of the word; it is the hybrid and heteroglossic site of a clash of traditions, where culture and identity are constantly unsettled, interbred, re-produced and re-articulated. This space,
oppugning the separation of Self and Other into binaries and archetypes, is a breeding site for innovation and creation. Such notions lie at the centre of contemporary translation ethics. This subchapter will attempt to situate the act and concept of translation – itself a play of tensions and differences – within a similarly uneasy space across and between cultures, an intersite where anxiety gives way to production. Like Fadanelli’s Mexico City, I argue, the hybrid site of translation not only represents Otherness but itself engenders difference, multiplicity and ‘newness.’ This is one of the central notions of the alienating translation ethics that I propose; it is the beguiling challenge of ‘newness,’ indeed, that drives the translator towards alienating texts and authors, and it is the desire to create that drives her towards the alienation of her own (re)readers.

There is little doubt that the contemporary institutions housing translation often shun the unconventional, the complex and the foreign (although not, one notes, the exotic).56 Theorists like Andrew Chesterman (1997) have claimed that, at least within the modern Western context, translation theory and practice tend to favour target-oriented norms that facilitate communication and understanding rather than innovation and complexity. Descriptive translation theories thus reveal an unmistakable normative trend towards

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56 As Borges noted, there is a falseness, an exaggerated and invariably alluring strangeness, to literary renderings of the exotic. ‘[L]o lejano,’ he wrote,

> lo forastero, es siempre belleza. […] Todo se vuelve poético en la distancia: montes lejanos, hombres lejanos, acontecimientos lejanos, y lo demás. […] El anunciado propósito de veracidad hace del traductor un falsario, pues éste, para mantener la extrañez de lo que traduce se ve obligado a espesar el color local, a encrudecer las crudezas, a empalagar con las dulzuras y a enfatizarlo todo hasta la mentira.

> [The faraway, the foreign, is always beautiful. […] Everything becomes poetic in the distance: faraway mountains, faraway men, faraway events, and so on. […] The announced purpose of truth makes of the translator a charlatan, since to maintain the strangeness of what he is translating he finds himself obliged to condense the local colour, to roughen the rough edges, to render the sweet saccharine, and to emphasise everything to the point of falseness] (“Dos Maneras” 51).

Such renderings stand in stark opposition to the sense of alienating strangeness I have aimed to achieve in See You at Breakfast?
conformity and conservatism, particularly in anglophone literary systems (cf. Toury 1995 and Venuti 2008). Antoine Berman (1984), one of the first to critique the deforming, homogenising tendencies of ‘naturalising’ translation strategies, argued that translators too often allow their work to diverge from its ‘visée proprement éthique’ [properly ethical aim]: that of allowing readers to receive the foreign as foreign, the Other as Other (“La traduction” 68). ‘L’essence de la traduction,’ Berman insisted, ‘est d’être ouverture, dialogue, métissage, décenrement’ [The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering] (L’épreuve 16).

The notion of cross-breeding and dialogue as ethical guides is essential when we consider the interlingual translation of a distinctly postmodern writer like Fadanelli. In my own efforts to translate the already manifoldly translated space of Fadanelli’s fiction, I have attempted to engage in the same subversive process that Fadanelli himself epitomises: intermingling traditions; multiplying voices; strewing the text with contradiction and irony. Rather than cloning Fadanelli’s monstrous, mutant fiction, I have aimed to dismember it and create a new monster in its place. Returning to Bhabha, we see that this notion of re-creation is in fact central to his theses of third space and cultural translation. ‘The importance of hybridity,’ Bhabha writes, ‘is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge’ (“Third Space” 211). The kernel of insight to be extracted here is that the anxiety and uncertainty implicit in the hybrid space – that is, in the uneasy space of Fadanelli’s fiction – does not inhibit but in fact enables acts of subversion and creation. The ‘other positions’ that Bhabha mentions find their parallel in the perspectives (themselves both subversive and creative) opened up by interlingual translation. If the meanings and symbols of culture are never fixed, always hybrid, then acts of cross-cultural communication can no
longer be likened to the mere relaying of a unitary and immutable reality. Rather, they become processes of Bhabhian negotiation. As Sherry Simon observes: ‘Instead of serving as a bridge between already given cultural entities, translation becomes an activity of cultural creation. The bridge, in other words, brings into being the realities which it links’ (Gender in Translation 143). Simon’s ‘bridge,’ a rather too spatial metaphor that still relies on images of binary opposition (two opposing shores), might perhaps be replaced with Bhabha’s ‘boundary’; unlike bridges, which must be burnt, boundaries can be blurred, blended, or erased altogether.57 Metaphorical terminology aside, however, this ambivalent border space is the site of important innovations: ‘The boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing’ (Bhabha, The Location of Culture 5). Echoing Walter Benjamin, Bhabha argues that something as arbitrary and hybridised as culture cannot be captured – nor indeed translated – via mimesis. ‘The specificity of signification,’ he writes, ‘cannot be reproduced in an imitative sense; it can only be re-presented as an iterative, re-initiation that awakens the sign (as mode of intention) to another, analogical linguistic life’ (‘Cave of Making’ xi). As Benjamin put it: the ‘original’ (culture, text, signification) ‘can only be raised anew and at other points of time’ (‘The Task of the Translator’ 77).

Bhabha anchors his discussion of ‘newness’ in Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, and it is from Rushdie himself that Bhabha borrows the crucial phrase ‘how newness enters the world.’ A brief glance at the words’ original context reveals a clear correspondence with Bhabha’s favoured themes of hybridity and migration:

57 Michael Emmerich takes things a step further; in an article entitled “Beyond, Between: Translation, Ghosts, Metaphors” (2013), he proposes ‘a shift from the metaphor of the bridge to that of the ghost’ (50), taking as a point of departure ‘the haunted, haunting experience of being simultaneously within two languages, cultures, and nations but belonging fully to neither’ (51). This fascinating reimagining of translation resonates with the concept of language and literature as shifting, unstable spaces in which the translator operates as a kind of disembodied architect of chaos, ‘violence’ or harmony.
*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas [...] It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves (Rushdie 394).

Fadanelli’s writing is perhaps closer to a sad and sleazy burlesque than a love song, but it certainly revels in its own mongrel spirit, assaulting readers with ‘new and unexpected combinations’ of people, place and culture. Among the cultural and discursive ‘hotchpotch’ of Mexico City, Fadanelli’s characters are continually thrown into cruel, bizarre and often repulsive scenarios. Fadanelli makes a point of defying the expectations of his readers, routinely combining the erotic and the offensive, the dull and the scandalous. His early short story collections, in particular, are riddled with nasty surprises. One story, entitled “Las hijas de Pedro,” concludes with an interminable, graphic sex scene between a male character and two mentally disabled adolescents in his care. In “Suicidio en las calles de Tacuba,” a disgruntled office employee about to throw himself off a building is persuaded out of suicide not by some reassuring, life-affirming encounter but by the jeers and insults of impatient onlookers. In “El llanto de los corderos,” a young boy’s innocent recounting of the pro-life meetings hosted by his religious father reveals an entire childhood desecrated by sexual and emotional abuse. Fadanelli’s writing, just like the city it evokes, so thoroughly transgresses the limits of aesthetics that any attempt to confine it within conventional boundaries is, at best, ethically questionable; at worst, it is doomed to inadequacy. As Fadanelli’s translator, I therefore seek to commit a new act of transgression and ‘violence’ (to borrow Spivak and
Derrida’s term), a new act of ‘change-by-fusion’ and change-by-confusion, deliberately violating target language expectations just as Fadanelli violates those of his own culture.

Gayatri Spivak is one of the most influential theorists to propose an ethics of translation along these lines. In her 1994 essay “The Politics of Translation,” Spivak foregrounds the ‘specificity of language’ as a condition of tension and interplay – in her terms, a ‘jagged relationship’ – that pertains between logic and rhetoric in every language. Working ‘in the silence between and around words’ (that is, in an interstitial “third” space), she argues that rhetoric disrupts the ‘logical systematicity’ of language; the translator’s responsibility, then, is not to take the ‘safe’ path of the logical (at the expense of the rhetorical) but rather to take risks, to brave the possibility of ‘violence to the translating medium’ (“Politics” 180). Drawing upon Derrida’s notion of dissemination, she writes:

[Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a dissemination cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages, we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into frayages or facilitations (“Politics” 180, emphasis in original).

58 In “La traduction comme épreuve de l’étranger,” Berman proposes a similar dichotomy. Writing of Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles he notes that, in literature as in language, there exist ‘deux principes antagonistes, dont l’un est la violence immédiate de la Parole tragique, ce qu’il appelle le feu du ciel, l’autre la sainte sobriété, c’est-à-dire la rationalité qui vient contenir et recouvrir cette violence’ [two opposed principles: on the one hand, the immediate violence of the tragic Word, which he calls the fire of heaven; on the other, holy sobriety, the rationality that comes to contain and mask this violence] (67). For Hölderlin, he continues, ‘traduire signifie d’abord libérer dans la langue traduisante, par une série d’intensifications, la violence refoulée de l’œuvre: en d’autres termes, accentuer son étrangeté. Paradoxalement, cette accentuation est la seule manière de nous ouvrir un accès à elle’ [translating first and foremost means liberating the violence repressed in the work through a series of intensifications in the translating language – in other words, accentuating its strangeness. Paradoxically, this accentuation is the only way of giving us access to it] (67).
Translation, in other words, is a special act of reading capable of ‘fraying’ the contained (logical) edges of language and meaning. Spivak’s ‘frayages’ and ‘facilitations’ are French and English translations, respectively, of the Freudian term *Bachnung* – also discussed by Derrida – which is perhaps better translated as ‘breaching’ or ‘path-breaking.’ For Freud, the term related to the forging of new neurological pathways in the brain when neurone resistance was finally overcome; for Derrida, ‘breaching, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path, which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to effraction. The path is broken, cracked, *fracta*, breached’ (“Freud and the Scene of Writing” 200). Derrida visualises this process as a kind of translation, albeit in a less-than-literal sense; it is a process, in other words, that occurs in all acts of information transfer, whether literary, dialogic, or purely internal. ‘We are all mediators, translators,’ he writes elsewhere, and all communication implies both the risk and unease of incomprehension. The writer, indeed, ‘can invent, break new paths only in “difficulty,” by taking the risks of a reception that is slow to come, discreet, mistaken, or impossible’ (*Points* 116). This ‘problem of communication and receivability,’ as he puts it, ‘in its new techno-economic givens, is more serious than ever for everyone; one can live it only with malaise, contradiction, and compromise’ (*Points* 116).

Derrida’s theory helps elucidate Spivak’s reference to the ‘fraying’ of the language-textile. Translation strategies that engage with the rhetoricity of a text, that are willing to explore the ‘spacy emptiness’ of its silences and alterity, are capable of disturbing the smooth, established patterns of target-language poetics and thus engender new ways of perceiving and reading the world. To return to Rushdie’s phrase, they bring ‘newness’ into the world. In an echo of Spivak’s textile metaphor, Bhabha reminds us that the generative
potential of the ‘in-between’ lies in the very instability of the interstice, in the unease of the postmodern text-space. It consists in

the ‘foreign’ element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the ‘unstable element of linkage,’ the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which ‘newness comes into the world’ (The Location of Culture 227).

Another iteration of this textile imagery is found in George Steiner’s philosophical memoir *Errata: An Examined Life*, this time employed to describe what Steiner terms those ‘momentary lapses from fluency’ with which the polyglot is occasionally afflicted. Amid the generally controlled turmoil of multilingualism, Steiner notes, one is susceptible to a kind of linguistic cross-contamination; ‘there can be involuntary interference-effects,’ he writes, ‘the one language interposing, insisting on primacy in the midst of the other’ (78-9). The sense, he continues, ‘is that of a brusque tear in a lattice of shot silk. The idiom needed, the turn of syntax seems, suddenly, to spring from the other tongue’ (79). As Sylvia Molloy notes in her own more recent musing on language, *Vivir Entre Lenguas* (2016), Steiner’s comparison is striking in several ways. ‘Me gusta la violencia de la imagen,’ Molloy writes, ‘acrecentada por el hecho de que en inglés *seda tornasolada* se dice *shot silk*, también me gusta la referencia a la textura, por último me gusta el hecho de que la seda (¿pañol materno?) no sea de color uniforme sino cambiante, según le dé la luz del sol’ [I like the violence of the image, heightened by the use of the English term *shot silk*; I also like the textile reference, and lastly I like the fact that Steiner’s silk (maternal cloth?) is not of a uniform colour but volatile, changing according to the way the sunlight hits it] (57). Again, there is an emphasis on the ambiguity and instability of the ‘language-textile,’ the frailty of its constituent threads, as well as the suggestion that some form of ‘violence’ – Steiner’s ‘brusque tear,’ Spivak’s
‘frayages’ – is capable of disrupting and transforming language in not necessarily negative ways; a tear, after all, always reveals something, and if patched its repair embroiders the fabric irremediably, stitching the parts together in new and potentially meaningful ways (reminiscent, in this sense, of the Japanese art of kintsugi, or ‘golden joinery’\textsuperscript{59}).

It doesn't take much of a conceptual leap to liken such textile tears with the ‘cracks’ and fissures that literary translation – and, indeed, literature in general – aim to prise open in the walls of human experience and culture. As noted in Chapter 1.2, the translation of literary fiction serves a fundamentally ethical purpose: it should aim to re-present Berman’s étranger (the stranger-foreigner) without collapsing the distance between the one and the Other. It is important to note, however, that once the walls between cultures and selves have been breached, peaceful coexistence does not necessarily follow. For Slavoj Žižek, indeed, the proximity of an Other inevitably implies notions of violence and alienation. In his 2008 work \textit{Violence: Six Sideways Reflections}, he writes:

\begin{quote}
Since a Neighbour is, as Freud suspected long ago, primarily a thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of \textit{jouissance} materialised in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, when it comes too close, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction. […] As Peter Sloterdijk put it: ‘More communication means at first above all more conflict’ (Žižek, \textit{Violence} 50).
\end{quote}

Conflict, here, can be conceived of not only in a literal, social sense but also – perhaps even primarily – in a linguistic or discursive one. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism contains this assumption, observing that the intertextuality and refractability inherent in all language

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Kintsugi} (金繋ぎ) or \textit{Kintsukuroi} (金繕い) (golden repair) is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold, silver or platinum lacquer. As Christy Bartlett explains: ‘recording the moment of rupture, a wide swath of repair abruptly courses across the surface. The fragment it surrounds is isolated, discontinuous in line from neighbouring elements, even as the [ceramic] is structurally reunified as a whole’ (11).
involves an intense (and ‘dynamic’) communication with the strange and irreducible Other: ‘The word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context’ (Imagination 284). Our social aversion to conflict explains, at least in part, what Žižek calls our ‘fear of the over-proximity of the Other […] the need to decaffeinate the Other, to deprive him or her of their raw substance’ (Violence 49); in other words, the denial of the foreign in favour of something more familiar, more palatable. It is only in struggle, in discomfort and unease – even, to borrow Nick Land’s phrase, in utter ‘failure’ – that a meaningful re-presentation of the Other is able to take place.

Representing the ‘Other as Other,’ then, is (after Spivak) a matter of exposing the tensions involved in the translatory interplay with the foreign, tensions that are brimming with productivity, creativity, potentiality. In order to engage with this violent and inventive process (which, significantly, mirrors the transgressive yet insightful aesthetic of dirty realism) the translator must facilitate dialogue and cross-contamination between texts – the ‘opening’ that Berman mentions – and descend into the hybrid site of the interstice, ‘a space that is ruptured and imaginatively transformed’ by its subjects (Gopinath 79). As the basis of an ethics of translation, this stands outside the traditional domestication-foreignisation dichotomy. An ethics of unease, or alienation, or even of ‘violence,’ is not limited to the realm of linguistic and cultural re-presentation. It resides in the overlap between texts and borders, in the conflation of author and work and the conflation of author and translator, in the spaces where discourse and narrative interact, converse, and contradict one another; it resides in incompleteness and ambiguity, and reflects this by embracing its own state as an ambiguous and incomplete practice.

60 In The Thirst for Annihilation, Land’s self-styled ‘essay in atheistic religion’ and nihilism, we read that ‘it is only in the twisted interstitial spaces of failure that contact, infection and – at the limit – the anegoic intimacy [of] “communication” can take place’ (xii).

61 These terms will be discussed from a translation studies framework in Chapter 3.3.
An ethics such as this need not always be performed on such a grand scale, however. At
text level, too, we find traces of rupture and resistance that play into a larger sense of
alienation. De Solà-Morales points out that, if cultural diversity is to be comprehended, then
the cityspace must be imagined not as a ‘mosaico de exotismos’ [mosaic of exoticisms] but
rather as a place that breaks away from the usual ‘reducciones demasiado simplistas o
sistemáticas’ [overly simplistic or systematic reductions] (131). As a writer who openly
declares his antiestablishment leanings, Fadanelli might well agree. His work, in any case,
certainly suggests a rejection of facile exoticism in favour of the gritty yet nuanced realism he
has come to exemplify. As noted earlier, the heteroglossic and contradictory nature of
Fadanelli’s fiction allows him to capture the complex and multiple realities of Mexico City
without lapsing into the tropes of stereotypical or moralising discourse. The question of
defining a Mexican identity or Zeitgeist is thus replaced by more open-ended questions: ones
of tension, crisis, becoming. In the words of Bernardo Sagastume:

La mexicanidad de los retratos que pinta Fadanelli toma distancia del
culturalismo y de cualquier obsesión por determinar una identidad del
mexicano. Se limita a ver la vida de la gran capital como el destino no
deseado de un país que aún está por ser.

[The Mexicanness of the portraits Fadanelli paints distances itself from
culturalism or any kind of obsession with Mexican identity. It limits itself to
looking at life in the capital as the undesirable destiny of a country that is
still on the brink of being] (102).

The cultural products of the city often reflect this postmodern state of incompleteness – a
state, to borrow Clarice Lispector’s phrase, that is ‘por um triz. On the verge of’ (591). The
rambling and marginal poetry of Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, for example (discussed in
chapter 2.2) serves in many ways as a poetic topography of Mexico City, captivating in its
boundless chaos and seeming lunacy; in Fabre’s words, ‘permanece inabarcable, excesiva, inestable, sospechosa, forajida […] será siempre incompleta [it remains vast, excessive, unstable, suspicious, fugitive […] it will always be incomplete]’ (14). Instability and incommensurability, Fabre suggests, are inherent traits of the megalopolis, which proves to be ultimately unmappable, inconceivable in its sheer enormity.

Fadanelli’s writing represents the incompleteness of the city in a very different way. His narratives, so often truncated, never fully satisfying in their vignetted sadness (a trick borrowed from, or at least inspired by, Carver) inhabit a space that is always *not quite*. Fadanelli – both the man and the author – constantly treads borders, by turns overstepping and honouring them, blending and disobeying categories with unapologetic, almost schizophrenic zeal. Like Mexico City itself, his work is neither quite local nor quite global. Fadanelli, who has written extensively on the merits of walking and inhabiting the (inherently ‘uninhabitable’) city,63 envisages himself, from time to time, as a kind of chilango flâneur,64 traversing at length the humming streets of Doctores and Escandón. While the shift from nineteenth-century France to the beleaguered Mexico of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries could hardly be more extreme, several similarities persist. There is a quality, in both

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62 If we subscribe to the thinking of Bakhtin and Derrida (among others), then all communication can be viewed as a product of this Papasquiarian – or Lispectorian – instability. ‘Dialogic expression,’ Bakhtin writes,

is unfinalisable, always incomplete, and productive of further chains of responses: meaning is never closed and always oriented toward the future. There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalised, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue’ (*Speech Genres* 170).

Again here, themes of incompleteness and renewal go hand in hand, suggesting that the fruits of human expression are, by their very nature, always already mutated (or translated) and for this very reason alienating, irreducible, and inexhaustible.


64 ‘Chilango’ is a slang term for residents of Mexico City.
contexts, of voyeurism and liminality, a tension between the walker’s deep-seated alienation and his absolute embeddedness in the cityscape – without the city the flâneur does not, indeed cannot, exist. This tension is at once symptomatic and prophetic of an abiding (post)modern malaise. In Benjamin’s words:

[Baudelaire’s] poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller. The flâneur still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home (The Arcades Project 10).

I will not attempt, here, to develop a comprehensive case for the Fadanelli-as-flâneur hypothesis. I would like instead to linger on the element of alienation and not-quiteness present in both contexts. Fadanelli, as both a marginal figure and an observer of the city, writes from within the chinks and cracks of culture, perpetually alienated there, at the brink of his self-inflicted exile. In order to approach such a writer, one must sit in this alienation, reading the city and its characters as entities apart, always just out of reach. Fadanelli’s writing, intimately ‘local’ on one level, is also inherently global, both in the breadth of its foreign influences (as we have already seen) and in its conflicted visions of a postmodern, postnational urban dystopia. As Luiselli notes:

no podemos seguir leyendo la obra de este autor desde ese localismo tan arrogante como ingenuo – las dos cosas suelen ir de la mano – con el que solíamos leer a casi todos nuestros escritores nacionales. El DF de Fadanelli está más cerca del París de Genet o del Manhattan de Dos Passos, que del DF de Fadanelli.

[we must not continue to read this author’s work through the lens of that arrogant and naïve localism (arrogance and naivety tend to go hand in hand) with which we approach nearly all Mexican writers. Fadanelli’s Mexico
City is closer to Genet’s Paris, or Dos Passos’s Manhattan, than it is to Fadanelli’s Mexico City] (“La Ciudad” 88).

If, as Luiselli suggests, we are to abandon localism in favour of a more complex and culturally nuanced framework, we may soon find ourselves in unstable territory. How, indeed, does one begin to inhabit this city in which one is, by definition, never quite at home? How does one comprehend – as a reader, as a tourist-pedestrian traipsing the streets of literature – this place that is at once everywhere and nowhere?

These are ethical questions as much as they are methodological ones. The notion of literary estrangement, while often approached from the framework of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theory of ‘Vermfremdung’ or ‘foreignisation’ (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.3), is perhaps best illuminated through the work of Viktor Shklovsky. In his 1917 essay “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky introduced the notion of ‘ostranenie’ – making strange – into poetics. Ostranenie, varyingly translated as estrangement, alienation, defamiliarisation and deautomatisation, denotes an artistic distancing from habitualised forms of perception. Conventional thinking, Shklovsky argued, attempts to make the unfamiliar as easily digestible as possible, resulting in the proliferation of trite, fluent phraseology. It is in art and poetry, he thought, that we find the key to breaking apart this process. In their introduction to a collection of Shklovsky’s essays, Lee Lemon and Marion Reis make the point well: ‘When reading ordinary prose, we are likely to feel that something is wrong if we find ourselves

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65 Ernst Bloch notes that, since its first recorded use in literature, the German word ‘verfremden’ – to estrange – has been linked to the notion of linguistic alienation. According to Bloch, the term first appeared in Berthold Auerbach’s 1842 novel Neues Leben, in a confrontation between a couple and their two children. ‘[T]he parents,’ he writes, ‘feel verfremdet – that is, deeply wounded – because their children speak French, which the parents do not understand, in their presence. Presumably, the parents are being discussed; they feel estranged, treated as if they were not present, or as if they were servants who were not supposed to understand’ (121, emphasis in original).
noticing the individual words as words. The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice’ (“Art as Technique” 4).

A good example of the practical potential of estrangement and its symbiotic connection to creativity is given by Sylvia Molloy. Availing of her polyglot’s dexterity with language, she describes one of her more successful methods for overcoming writer’s block thus:

Me imagino en el otro idioma, el que noy voy a usar para el texto que estoy por comenzar, y así me largo a escribir, provisariamente, consciente de que es una escritura pasajera, un desperdicio, algo que no va a durar. La trama, por forzada que sea, suele funcionar. Al rato me detengo y traduzco lo que he escrito al idioma en el que pienso escribir el resto del texto, texto que me resulta ya menos difícil ahora que el otro idioma le abrió camino. Este laborioso ejercicio de traducción me permite la entrada en una escritura que al comienzo me apabullaba. Tal como lo veo he practicado un acto de contaminación saludable.

I begin to imagine in the other language, the one I’m not planning to use for the text in question. Then I start to write, provisionally, conscious that this is a fleeting thing, something that will not last. The trick, forced as it is, tends to work. A while later I stop and translate what I’ve written into the language I plan to write the rest of the text in. The words now seem less impenetrable, as if the other language had managed to force open some pathway. This laborious exercise in translation allows me to enter a writing process that initially seemed overwhelming. I see the practice as an act of healthy contamination (Molloy 70).

Molloy’s ‘contamination’ metaphor neatly weds the tropes of translation and alienation, while conveniently tying them to some of the central themes of Fadanelli’s literatura basura project. Contamination, as Cintia Santana observes, has been a key concept behind the rise and effect of dirty realism beyond its point of origination in the United States: ‘in the case of [Spanish] realismo sucio,’ she writes, ‘the critical dis-ease such novels provoked was tied to the translated literature they claimed to appropriate’ (Forth and Back 109). The imported stylistic ‘strangeness’ of the early Spanish dirty realists, in other words, was mirrored by the alienating
content of their narratives, offering a two-fold contamination of literature – both linguistic and thematic. The reality of realismo sucio, or indeed of Mexican literatura basura, is thus a reality polluted, ensuciado, by estrangement, in the healthiest possible way. If we consider the Latin roots of the word ‘contamination’ – contaminis, a touching, a contact – the plurality of this concept becomes clear. In the words of Gianni Vattimo, postmodern literature is steeped in ‘the intersection and “contamination” (in the Latin sense) of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions’ (7). To contribute to such a literature, whether as writer or as translator, surely means to embrace this multiplicity, along with all of the collisions and infections it entails.

A number of groundbreaking movements emerged in response to, and in tandem with, Shklovsky’s theory of ostranenie, including Dada- and Surrealism and, in the realm of dramatic theory, Bertolt Brecht’s famous ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ (Brooker 216). Despite the viscerally negative associations attached to the concept of estrangement – in regular use, indeed, the word conjures immediate feelings of isolation and exclusion, and in an existentialist context terms like ‘alienation’ are inevitably linked to the banal necrosis of nausea and taedium vitae – estrangement as a deliberate artistic and literary principle is far from a divisive practice. As Ernst Bloch notes:

Strangeness that does not betray and sell us has a wholly different effect. It makes the beholder look up; it seems artful, not artificial; it reveals its own quality in its otherness. Such estrangement evokes surprise, and certainly has some shocking characteristics, but its effect within a purposeful context will not be uninviting (123).

Žižek argues a similar point, observing that alienation, as well as indicating a certain conflict, can also be a tool for social cohesion. ‘One of the things alienation means,’ he writes, ‘is that distance is woven into the very social texture of everyday life. […] I am allowed not to get
too close to others. […] Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that sometimes a dose of alienation […] is not a problem but a solution’ (Violence 51).

The same principle holds, mutatis mutandis, for Spivak’s principle of translatory violence. When harnessed and construed in the right way, violence need not be a senseless act of cruelty and destruction; indeed, violence has the potential to create and renew, and can be a force of unification as well as division. Returning to the notion of the Americas (and Mexico, in particular) as a space of productive hybridity, we see that violence, both colonial and postcolonial, is implicit in this hybrid forcing together of cultures, and indeed remains threaded into the sociocultural fabric of the continent. Jean Baudrillard put it well when, writing of the birth of America’s ‘eccentric modernity’ – a birth brutally induced by that first trans-Atlantic migration of myths and bloodlines – he noted:

Du décentrement initial, il restera toujours, dans la sphère politique, une fédéralité, une absence de centralité et, au niveau des mœurs et de la culture, une décentralisation, une excentricité qui est celle même du Nouveau Monde par rapport à l’Europe. […] [Les Américains] sont d’emblée, dès le deuil de leur histoire, une culture de la promiscuité, du mixage, du mélange national et racial, de la rivalité et de hétérogénéité. Évident a New York, où successivement chaque building a dominé la ville à sa façon, et où pourtant l’ensemble donne une impression non hétéroclite, mais de convergence dans l’énergie, non d’unité ou de pluralité, mais d’intensité rivale, de puissance antagoniste, créant ainsi une complicité, une attraction collective, au-delà de la culture ou de la politique, dans la violence ou la banalité même du mode de vie.

[In the political sphere, there will always remain of this initial decentering a federalism, an absence of centralism and, at the level of mores and culture, a decentralisation, an eccentricity which is that of the New World in relation to Europe. […] [Americans] are from the outset, from the very dawn of their history, a culture of mixing, of national and racial mix, of rivalry and heterogeneity. This is clearly visible in New York where each successive skyscraper and, after its own fashion, each ethnic group has dominated the city, and where the whole nonetheless still gives the impression not of a
heteroclite mishmash, but of converging energies, not of unity or plurality, but of intensity born of rivalry, of antagonistic power, thus creating a complicity, a collective attraction, beyond culture or politics, in the very violence or banality of the way of life] (“Utopia Achieved” 82).

America, Baudrillard argues, ‘is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects, nor reconcile them’ (“Utopia” 88). What Baudrillard senses in the streets of New York is the very thing that must not be silenced in translation: the liminal pulse of the New World, a place at once thoroughly alienating and laced with violent potential. ‘Here’ – to candidly misappropriate Henry Miller’s phrase – ‘all boundaries fade away and the world reveals itself for the mad slaughterhouse that it is’ (Tropic of Cancer 182). In Baudrillard’s America, as in Miller’s Paris, anguish is vitally infused with creativity and enigma, engendering a particular kind of chaos in which social and linguistic codes painfully (and fantastically) ‘take on new meanings’ (Miller, Tropic of Cancer 182). To participate in this chaos, as a translator or as any other creative agent, is to take a bold stance in its midst. This means not simply bearing violence, but also wielding it. Heidegger’s words offer inspiration here: ‘The violent one, the creative one who sets forth into the unsaid, who breaks into the unthought, who compels what has never happened and makes appear what is unseen – this violent one stands at all times in daring’ (Metaphysics 115).

Since the 1990s, when André Lefevere developed his influential notion of translation as ‘rewriting’ and Mary Snell-Horby signalled the momentous ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies scholarship, varying degrees of ‘daring’ translation have been legitimised. Post-cultural turn literature has largely conceived of translation as a transformative and dynamic
process; more than dynamic, indeed, Lefevere saw translation (and all other forms of rewriting) as inherently manipulative. ‘Whether they produce translations, literary histories or their more compact spin-offs, reference works, anthologies, criticism or editions,’ Lefevere wrote, ‘rewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time’ (Rewriting 8). If, as David Damrosch has argued, the recent prevalence of ‘minoritising or foreignising translations’ constitutes one such dominant current, then what I have called my ‘alienating’ approach to Fadanelli’s novel is very much a product of its ideological milieu. Be this as it may, the overarching ethical framework presented here remains one of resistance over passivity, conflict over resolution, difficulty over comfort. This framework – to embellish another of Lefevere’s favoured metaphors – acts as something of an angled medium, one that effects a (possibly violent) change in the text’s refractive index. Considering that writers and their work are always ‘refracted through a certain spectrum, just as their work can refract previous works through a certain spectrum’ (Lefevere “Cucumbers” 204), it follows that translation constitutes the projection of a distinct world, a ‘counterworld’ that at once distorts and remains beholden to the original. To embrace the deformities of such a world is to admit both the fascination and revulsion they

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66 A number of feminist and postcolonial theorists in the 1990s challenged traditional notions of translation as an inferior ‘copy’ of an ‘original,’ arguing that such terminology was representative of a distinctly Eurocentric, imperialist and patriarchal worldview (Bassnett 129). The Brazilian anthropophagist movement, to take one striking example, called for a reconceptualisation of translation not as imitation but as cannibalism: ‘the antropofagos,’ as Johnson put it, ‘do not want to copy European culture, but rather to devour it [...] creating an original national culture that would be a source of artistic expression rather than a receptacle for forms of cultural expression elaborated elsewhere’ (Johnson in Bassnett, 129).

67 In the chapter “Translation and World Literature” (2012), Damrosch argues that the reigning popularity of foreignising translation ‘clearly accords with the rise of multiculturalism and our new attention to ethnic difference; just as the melting pot has lost favour as a model for immigrant experience, so too assimilative translation is increasingly disfavoured. “Foreignising” efforts are the translational correlate of the contemporary championing of ethnic identity’ (427).
provoke; it means, at times, to betray, to estrange, to contaminate, to cannibalise, to sit in alienation and stand in daring.

Literary fiction, then, as a culturally embedded creative product, can and should be approached from the standpoint of an ethics that acknowledges and, where possible, seeks to preserve its violent and generative energy. The translator, after all, garners ‘poetic legitimacy’ not through prosaicism but through innovation and ingenuity (Bourdieu 51). This intertwining of two conceptual threads – alienation, violence, estrangement and unease on the one hand, and creative force, newness and invigoration on the other – forms the backbone of the translation ethics I have proposed. Such an ethics responds to both the conflicted context and the countercultural drive of Fadanelli’s literature, but it also resonates more broadly with a contemporary understanding of translation as more than a simple act of imitation or failed conservation. As Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky note in their introduction to the 2013 anthology In Translation: ‘To perceive the translator as endowed with agency, intent, skill, and creativity is to destabilise the foundations of the way we read’ (xix). This disruption in turn destabilises the way we encounter source cultures. In empowering the translator, in other words, one also empowers the source text and culture to inflict their presence in a way that subverts the dominant narrative of source-target interaction. The following (and final) subchapter will examine the methodological implications of this conclusion, attempting to marry the theoria of an alienating translation ethics to a text-based praxis of translation.
3.3 Translated Spaces: A narrative of translational praxis

In his seminal work on language and translation, *After Babel* (1998), George Steiner argues that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a ‘theory of translation’ (viii). At best, he writes, we have narratives of translational praxis: ‘reasoned descriptions of processes,’ ‘narrations of felt experience, heuristic or exemplary notations of work in progress’ (xvi); in less verbose terms, ‘storyline[s] of […] literary translation’ (Bush, “Toil” 119). For Steiner, such narratives are our best tool in the pursuit of a keener understanding of translation methodology and ethics. Certainly, to articulate the translation process is to approach the fusion of theory and practice – a goal any translator should strive to achieve. It is also an act of reclamation, a reassertion of the translator’s relevance and power in an industry that still insists upon her silence and invisibility. Antoine Berman (1984) made the point well, noting that ‘la réflexion sur la traduction’ [reflection on translation], when undertaken by translators themselves, ‘indique la volonté de la traduction de devenir une pratique autonome, pouvant se définir et se situer elle-même, et par conséquent se communiquer, se partager et s’enseigner’ [indicates the will of translation to become an autonomous practice, capable of defining and situating itself, and consequently to be communicated, shared and taught] (L’épreuve 12). As both a literary translator and a scholar, I share Berman’s vision of translation as a self-affirming practice rooted in the communication and sharing of experiences. The documentation of translational praxis contributes to a growing reservoir of knowledge and an increased awareness of the creativity, compromise and profound consideration involved in this most complex and misunderstood of communicative acts. To borrow the words of Peter Bush: ‘Breaking the silence that mystifies the art is perhaps the best form of self-defence for a
profession that has for too long worn the hair shirt of modesty wished upon it by those who exploit the fruits of its alchemy’ (“Writer” 32).

In this final subchapter, I will weave the ethical and theoretical concepts developed throughout this thesis into a narrative of their practical application, focusing on the key decisions and challenges that have shaped the (re)writing of See You at Breakfast?. As I have argued up to this point, literary fiction is intrinsically ethical in its capacity to reassign meanings and disrupt perspectives. With translation and the many layers of (re)interpretation it implies, this capacity is multiplied and intensified, allowing and exposing the nearness of Other worlds, Other words. According to the ethics I have proposed, the translation of literary fiction should therefore encourage and perpetuate the infliction of ‘violent’ and generative literary practices, both in the selection (and discussion) of challenging source texts and in the (re)creation of such practices in the target text. My attempt in this subchapter is to erect a practical scaffolding for the (re)writing of See You at Breakfast? upon this ethical foundation – a task that sees the many aggressions, capitulations and compromises of translation finally put into action. The uneasy marriage of theoria and praxis, I argue, is yet another iteration of the tension that vibrates at the heart of my translation ethics, illustrating in concrete terms the uneasy interaction of languages, cultures and aesthetics. The translation strategies discussed in this subchapter are illustrated with examples from the source and target texts; they include the retention of source terminology, heterogeneous or geographically non-specific vocabulary, anachronous slang, the obstruction of fluid phraseology, syntactic and typographical estrangement, and the re-production of idiolect and heteroglossia.

Within the frameworks of both literary interpretation (or hermeneutics) and translation studies, much thought has been put into the relationship between theory and practice. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s influential theoria-praxis binary is indicative of a number of approaches
that emphasise the inextricability of the two concepts. In his essay “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” Gadamer writes:

As the theory of interpretation or explicitation, [hermeneutics] is not just a theory. From the most ancient times right down to our day, hermeneutics quite clearly has claimed that its reflection upon the possibilities, rules and means of interpretation is immediately useful and advantageous for the practice of interpretation (232).

The essence of practical philosophy (or praxis), Gadamer argues, is that of a ‘science’ – in other words, ‘a knowledge of the universal that is as such teachable’ – that requires the fulfilment of certain conditions. It demands, first and foremost, that ‘the person learning it [maintain] the same indissoluble relationship to practice [as] the one teaching it’ (232). The relatively young discipline of translation studies,68 itself inexorably bound to the concept of interpretation, also highlights the importance of wedding practice and theory. Berman, ever a forerunner of his field, was among the first to propose that translation studies should be centrally concerned with reconciling its thinking and making modes. He maintained that translation scholarship should conceive of itself as a form of experience-based reflection constructed within the existing ‘labyrinth’ of theory, much of which he thought to be lamentably disassociated from the practical act of translation (L’épreuve 30). Theories divorced from practice, Berman insisted, ‘comportent fatalement […] de nombreux “point aveugles” et non pertinents’ [inevitably contain numerous “blind spots” and irrelevancies] (L’épreuve 11). In Translation and Globalisation (2003), Michael Cronin refines Berman’s notion of ‘reflective’ theory, arguing that an engagement with practice is vital to the facilitation of complete and meaningful reflexivity. Translation is thus envisaged as a binary

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68 While the concept of translation is as ancient as language itself, the academic discipline generally known as translation studies was only developed in the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Munday 10).
activity, a praxis made fully intelligible only by reference to the framework in which it takes place (Cronin 42–76). ‘Translation,’ in other words, ‘is theory and practice in dialogue’ (Fawcett et al. 7). Drawing upon Bert States’s notion of ‘complementary perspectives,’ David Johnston makes a similar argument. Theory and practice in translation, Johnston writes,

constitute a kind of binocular vision; one eye enables us to see the world in terms of models and paradigms, in which things are what they are; the other enables us to see the world in terms of the processes of creative shaping, in which things are what they may become. To bring them together is to assert practice not just as active understanding, as a method of discovery or a hermeneutic tool, all of which it certainly is, but also as a mode that brings together what Barthes depicted as ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ approaches to text (368).

Translation in practice certainly condenses the exquisite tension between passivity and intervention, bridging the space between ‘consumer’ and ‘co-writer’ (Barthes, S/Z 4). With this in mind, it is clear that both a strong theoretical framework and an understanding of translation in actu (as well as the myriad ‘gains’ and ‘losses’ that this entails) are required in order to gain a more complete understanding of the nature and possibilities of translation. Translation is, quite obviously, inextricable from practice; yet practice without theory – the act alone, unsustained by scholarship – is difficult to defend as a legitimate literary project. This thesis therefore relies upon a coherent merging of the two, with theory at once defending the practical approaches employed during the translation process and informing those approaches as the process unfolds.

As Steiner would no doubt agree, there is no fixed template for the narration of one’s translational praxis. This kind of reflection most commonly takes the form of translators’ notes and prefaces, although there is a rich history of translation scholarship centred around practicing translators’ (sometimes unbearably apologetic) explanations of their craft. In the
writing of my own narrative, I have been fortunate enough to draw from such diverse sources as Ursula K. Le Guin’s “About Translating Diana” (1996), Juan Gabriel López Guix’s “The Translator in Aliceland” (2006), Paul Valéry’s “Variations sur Les Bucoliques” (1953), John Rutherford’s “Translating Fun: Don Quixote” (2006), Margaret Sayers Peden’s “Building a Translation” (1989), Alberto Mira’s “Being Wildean” (2006), Peter Bush’s “Toil, Trouble and Jouissance” (2012), and Vladimir Nabokov’s wickedly entertaining “Problems of Translation: Onegin in English” (1955). Rather than referencing these sources explicitly, however, I have taken their cues in a much broader sense. To begin, however, I would like to turn to a somewhat less scholarly ‘narrative.’ The translator, in this instance, is Italo Calvino’s fictional Professor Uzzi-Tuzii, the last surviving scholar of what he calls ‘una letteratura morta in una lingua morta’ [a dead literature in a dead language] (52). Listening to the professor translate viva voce, Calvino’s narrator observes the following gentle metamorphosis:

Combattuto tra la necessità d’intervenire coi suoi lumi interpretativi per aiutare il testo a esplicitare le molteplicità dei suoi significati, e la consapevolezza che ogni interpretazione esercita una violenza e un arbitrio, il professore, di fronte ai passaggi più ingarbugliati, non trovava di meglio per facilitarti la comprensione che attaccare a leggerli nell’originale. […] Poi, a poco a poco, qualcosa aveva preso a muoversi e a scorrere tra le frasi di questa dizione stravolta. La prosa del romanzo s’era impresa alle incertezze della voce; era diventata fluida, trasparente, continua.

[Torn between the necessity to interject glosses on multiple meanings of the text and the awareness that all interpretation is a use of violence and caprice against a text, the professor, when faced by the most complicated passages, could find no better way of aiding comprehension than to read them in the original. […] Then, little by little, something started moving and flowing between the sentences of this distraught recitation. The prose of the novel had got the better of the uncertainties of the voice; it had become fluent, transparent, continuous]69 (68-69).

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This brief and delightfully evocative narrative highlights some of the most salient challenges for any practitioner of interlingual translation. First of all, it articulates the seldom confessed frustrations of that initial gloss. The kind of deep reading necessitated by literary translation attunes the mind to the nuances latent in each utterance. Translation feels, at times, like a hapless attempt to steer a safe course through a sea of clamouring possibilities. Calvino’s mention of ‘arbitrio’ [caprice] is entirely pertinent: every translator has known the extraordinary weight of a word’s inadequacy bearing down upon her. In this short passage, however, Calvino (himself the translator of Raymond Queneau’s Les Fleurs bleues) also hints at the deliverance that drives and sustains the best literary translations. Putting aside the ethical implications of a translation described as ‘fluida, trasparente, continua’ [fluent, transparent, continuous], Calvino’s allusion to the transformative process of literary translation captures a crucial aspect of its phenomenology. At the risk of lapsing into hyperbole or mysticism, I am tempted to describe this moment as a kind of becoming-one with the text: a subtle erosion of the bristling exteriors of both languages that allows, ideally, for an uneasy cohabitation of this new literary space. As Peter Bush notes, this process is often difficult to map coherently, taking place as it does at the disintegrating verges of both reading and writing. ‘Translatorly readings of literature,’ he observes, themselves provoke the otherness within the subject of the translator, work at a level not entirely under the control of the rationalising discourse of the mind, release ingredients from the subconscious magma of language and experience, shoot off in many directions, provoked by the necessity of the creation of new writing (“Writer” 25).

The difficult coupling of close reading and creative intuition hinted at here, combined with what Bush describes as a kind of stirring of the translator’s own ‘otherness’ as she approaches and re-draws the limits of an Other text, are key elements of the translatorial
tension argued for throughout this thesis. The translator, indeed, must also be alienated by the translation process, acknowledging and allowing occasional eruptions of violence within both the source and target texts.

The translation process, regardless of whether it achieves the kind of harmony described in Calvino’s above passage, is marked with several striations ranging from the micro (syntax, semantics) to the macro (ethics, ideology).\(^{70}\) In the narration of my own translational praxis, I have found it most helpful to start with big-picture considerations and work my way inwards, to word-level. I will begin, then, by commenting on the overarching strategy that has informed, to the greatest extent possible, each of the decisions made throughout the translation process. In line with the ‘alienating’ ethical framework of this thesis, I have pursued a generally foreignising strategy in the translation of *¿Te veré en el desayuno?*. The key dichotomy behind the concepts I refer to as ‘foreignisation’ and ‘domestication’\(^{71}\) was originally signalled by Schleiermacher in his iconic 1813 treatise “Methoden des Übersetzens” [On the Different Methods of Translating]. Schleiermacher declared that there were only two possible methods of translation: ‘Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader’ (42). The former method (Verfremdung), advocated by Schleiermacher himself, involves retaining a certain sense of foreignness in the translated text. Rather than naturalising the inherent strangeness of the original, foreignisation implies ‘sending the reader abroad’ (Venuti, *Invisibility* 15), thus transforming the reading experience into one of alienation. Over the past

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\(^{70}\) In his book *Memes of Translation* (1997), Andrew Chesterman makes the distinction between macro-ethical and micro-ethical matters, the former concerning ‘broad social questions’ and the latter ‘the translator’s action during the translation process itself’ (170). I will make no such distinction here, although the focus on praxis in the current sub-chapter could perhaps be interpreted as a ‘micro’ application (in Chesterman’s sense) of the ‘macro’ considerations examined in Chapter 3.2.

\(^{71}\) After Venuti (2008).
five decades, Schleiermacher’s dichotomy has been redefined, reformulated and renamed by a host of different translation theorists. However, whether we refer to the foreignising (verfremdend) approach as ‘overt’ (House 66-69), ‘documentary’ (Nord 45-52), ‘anti-illusory’ (Levý 32), or ‘resistant’ translation (Venuti), the underlying notion is essentially the same. A foreignising translation, simply put, is one that is marked as a translation. It typically involves the adoption of a non-fluent, alienating or heterogeneous translation style in order to make the translator visible. Domestication, in contrast, involves translating in a transparent, fluent style in order to minimise the foreignness of the target text. Significantly, foreignising translations do not attempt to conceal the foreign identity of the source text. This idea has been defended by a diverse range of thinkers throughout history. Heidegger, who studied and translated the pre-Socratic philosophers, pursued a ‘poetising’ strategy riddled with archaïsms, thus doing ‘violence’ to everyday language and thwarting the expectations of his readers (Greek Thinking 19). Nabokov, for his part, reviled the ‘evil’ of domesticated, paraphrastic translations that ‘conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public’ (“Art of Translation” 160). 72 Like Schleiermacher, both Heidegger and Nabokov believed in leaving the author in peace as much as possible, thereby forcing the reader to forge their own approach to the text, to strive for understanding, and to grapple with the text’s intrinsic foreignness. Both felt that the aim of translation should not be to disguise its product as an

72 Nabokov was an outspoken critic of domesticating tendencies in literary translation, deploring what he termed ‘an era of inept and ignorant imitations, whose piped-in background music has hypnotised innocent readers into fearing literality’s salutary jolts’ (Pushkin xiii). Some of Nabokov’s most searing commentaries were directed towards Constance Garnett, one of the first English-language translators of the great Russian writers (among them, of course, Fadanelli’s beloved Dostoevsky). ‘I have lost a week already translating the passages I need from [Gogol’s] The Inspector General,’ Nabokov reportedly complained, ‘as I can do nothing with Constance Garnett’s dry shit’ (Boyd 45). Apparently, Nabokov was not alone in his condemnation of Garnett’s work. In his analysis of her early translations, David Remnick notes that the poet Kornei Chukovsky esteemed Garnett for her work on Turgenev and Chekhov, but lamented that the characteristic ‘convulsions’ and ‘nervous trembling’ of Dostoevsky’s writing became, in Garnett’s domesticating hands, ‘a safe blandscript: not a volcano, but a smooth lawn mowed in the English manner – which is to say a complete distortion of the original.’
original text crafted in the target language, but rather to make visible its relationship with the foreign source text.

With a text like ¿Te veré en el desayuno?, it is crucial that readers be aware that this is, indeed, a Mexican novel by a Mexican writer. Thankfully, much of the novel’s foreignness is taken care of by Fadanelli himself. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Fadanelli’s writing eschews the reductive, the exotic and the predictable and engages the reader in a perpetual game of invigoration, disturbance and displacement, where even readers well acquainted with the ways of Mexico cannot help but feel uncomfortable. There are also obvious markers in the text itself that identify its foreignness to anyone but a Mexican reader (even, in some cases, to anyone but a Mexico City reader): Ulises is employed by infamous Mexican credit institution Fonacot, which appears to have no equivalent in anglophone countries; the streets and colonias of Mexico City are named and traipsed through with an ease available only to locals; Mexican vernacular, slang, obscenities and proverbs abound; and there is, inevitably, the odd gastronomic reference, so beloved by peddlers of pseudotranslation.73 The foreignising translation strategy I have decided to pursue involves retaining those references without signalling them as exotic, and without simplifying or stereotyping them. Such a task is more difficult than it might appear. To illustrate this, let us take the example of Rosalind Harvey’s 2011 translation of Juan Pablo Villalobos’s Fiesta en la madriguera [Down the Rabbit Hole]. The book retains Mexican culinary references and

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73 Gideon Toury (1995) defines pseudotranslations, or fictitious translations, as ‘texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed’ (40). According to Toury, such texts constitute ‘a convenient way of introducing novelties into a culture [...] especially in cultures reluctant to deviate from sanctioned models and forms’ (41). The notion recalls Goethe’s first and most lowly epoch of translation: that which ‘acquaints us with the foreign country on our own terms’ (60). Like Carol O’Sullivan (2004) and Brigid Maher (2013), I believe the concept of pseudotranslation can be broadened to include works of contemporary anglophone literature (often taking the form of genre fiction) that ‘behave’ and ‘are consumed’ as translations, incorporating foreign concepts, terminology and settings in order to evoke a certain foreign flavour (O’Sullivan 66).
place-names, explaining them in a brief glossary at the end of the book. Beyond this, however, little is done to mark the novella as Mexican. The vulgarities and nicknames scattered throughout the Spanish text – words like ‘jefe’ [boss], ‘El Rey’ [The King] and ‘marica’ [faggot] – are fluidly transposed into English, and what remains of Mexico is portrayed in an exotic and almost unreal light. Part of this exoticism, I must concede, is conjured by the author and not the translator – the narrator, after all, is a young boy with a limited understanding of the world around him. This fact does not mitigate the impact upon a naive anglophone readership, however. Significantly, the only culture depicted in the novella is that of a predictably sordid (and obscenely wealthy) ‘narco’ who resides in an unspecified part of the country. It is worth mentioning, in passing, that a distinct preoccupation with Mexican drug-related violence has managed to seep into just about every publishing house in the hispano- and anglophone worlds. As Argentine novelist Andrés Neuman notes in his *Crónicas de América Latina*:

[México lindo. Librería del aeropuerto. Títulos en primera fila, de izquierda a derecha: Historias de impunidad; Los cómplices del presidente; País de mentiras; El reto de Calderón y el nuevo mapa del narcotráfico; Las FARC en México; Las historias más negras del narco, impunidad y corrupción en México; Crónicas de sangre; Los brujos del poder, y un explosivo etcétera. Se diría que hay más entusiasmo que indignación hacia los crímenes, escándalos y catástrofes. No sé si esta bibliografía denuncia un negocio o funda otro.

[Beautiful Mexico, México lindo. Airport bookshop. Titles on display shelf, from left to right: *Stories of Impunity; The President’s Accomplices; Country of Lies; Calderón’s Challenge and the New Narco-Map; FARC in Mexico; Blood Chronicles; The Sorcerers of Power,* and an explosive etcetera. One might conclude that there is more enthusiasm than indignation towards the country’s glut of crimes, scandals and catastrophes. I’m not sure if this bibliography is denouncing one business or founding another].
Subject matter aside, however, Villalobos and Harvey’s combined portrayal of Mexico is a decidedly simple one. The only references to Mexico’s past hint at Aztec sacrifices, and all of the book’s characters are endowed with unlikely Nahuatl names, also explained in the glossary. Here, the translator describes Nahuatl as ‘Mexico’s main indigenous language,’ yet nearly all of the book’s reviews misinterpret or simplify this information, citing Nahuatl as ‘Mexico’s indigenous language.’ In my view, the lesson to be learnt here is this: the trend towards domestication is powerful, and as a result the pursuit of a foreignising approach requires a concerted effort on the part of the translator, especially when there are already elements in the original text that suggest themselves to stereotyping or simplification.

In light of this, my translation of ¿Te veré en el desayuno? possesses a number of deliberately alienating elements. I have decided to retain a number of words in Spanish, without italicisation or any other method of typographic distinction. I have also decided against the inclusion of a glossary or explanatory footnotes, not because I believe that foreignising translations ought not to indulge readers in this manner – indeed it was Nabokov (enemy of all things ‘smooth’ and ‘readable’) who wrote: ‘I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers [...] and the absolute literal sense’ (“Problems of Translation” 143) – but because nothing could be further from the spirit of Fadanelli’s work. The experience of reading See You at Breakfast? should be one of immersion; it should not feel like a guided tour of Mexico City, much less an academic study of some impenetrable literary giant. Fadanelli’s characteristic irreverence, of which we catch occasional glimpses in the dark humour of this book, is one of his most fundamental.

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74 In fact, there are many varieties of Nahuatl spoken in Central Mexico, some of which are mutually unintelligible and none of which are identical to the so-called Classical Nahuatl of the Aztecs. There are, moreover, another 63 distinct indigenous languages recognised in Mexico. Nahuatl is indeed the most widely spoken, but it is closely followed by the Maya, Mixtec and Zapotec tongues (cf. Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas: Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales, 14 Jan 2008).
attributes. As his ‘portavoz’ [spokesperson] – literally, the one charged with ‘carrying his voice’ into a new domain – I bear the responsibility of representing that voice in the most loyal manner possible.\footnote{I refer to ‘loyalty’ here in the sense that translation scholar Christiane Nord (1997) imagines it: as an interpersonal concept primarily founded upon ‘a social relationship between people’ (125). Loyalty, in other words, pertains above all to the translator’s human context, implying a bilateral commitment to both the source and target texts. This is quite distinct from the outdated and restrictive notions of ‘fidelity’ and ‘faithfulness’ that persist within translation commentary.} This means making decisions beyond word level, in order to capture the air of intelligent burlesque, the ‘sly wink’ so central to our enjoyment of Fadanelli’s writing (Martínez Rentería 9).

The words and phrases left untranslated in \textit{See You at Breakfast?} include place and street names, references to food and drink, styles of music, song lyrics, company names, banal endemic terminology (‘pesero,’ ‘tortillería’) and the occasional appellation or insult. Terms referring directly to people are generally retained in Spanish: examples include ‘viejita,’ ‘patrón,’ ‘jefe,’ ‘muchacho’/‘muchachita,’ ‘mijita,’ ‘mamacita,’ ‘mano,’ ‘güey,’ ‘pendejo’ and ‘hijo de la chingada.’ The terms ‘señor,’ ‘señora’ and ‘señorita’ are also retained in some (but not all) instances. I will return to this point further on, in relation to register. To aid comprehension, untranslated words are sometimes preceded by a contextual auxiliary: the old woman being addressed as ‘viejita,’ for example, has already been established as an old woman, and the expletive ‘hijo de la chingada’ is framed as ‘motherfucking hijo de la chingada.’\footnote{For these examples in context, see pages 175 and 170 of the present thesis.} Other words are justified by precedent: the words ‘mano’ (a contraction of ‘hermano’) and ‘buey’ (an orthographic variation of ‘güey’) are retained, albeit in italics, in Natasha Wimmer’s 2007 translation of Bolaño’s \textit{Los Detectives Salvajes [The Savage Detectives]}, and Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Díaz is known for peppering his English-
language texts with Spanish terms like ‘mija,’ ‘vieja,’ ‘jefe,’ ‘tía,’ ‘barrio,’ ‘ya,’ ‘pendejo’ and ‘cojones,’ among many others.

Díaz, indeed, is something of a hero of alienating literature. Rebecca Walkowitz relates how, when one of his stories was first published in *The New Yorker*, Díaz refused to comply with the magazine’s in-house style guide (which mandated italicisation of all non-English words), eventually succeeding in bringing about a new policy ‘in which foreign words are no longer distinguished typographically from so-called English ones’ (35). In this, Díaz is in good company: Mauro Javier Cardenas writes of his homeland, Ecuador, in a rapid-fire English-Spanish hybrid bereft of italics and quotation marks, and bilingual US writer Lucia Berlin set much of her fiction in Latin American and the American South-West, seamlessly weaving Spanish into her rich textual landscapes. Perhaps the most notable aspect of Díaz’s writing, however, is the way in which the voices of his characters are so richly communicated, despite a less-than-perfect semantic transfer. The Spanish words sound perfectly at home in the mouths of their Dominican-American owners, precisely because they are at home. Their seamless incorporation into the language of the text issues both a challenge and an invitation to readers: an invitation to participate in, or at the very least to witness, the intimate cultural discourse of another social group. This involves a great deal of confidence, forging a degree of connection – between reader and subject, or reader and author, or reader and work – impossible to achieve through exoticising strategies that hold the ‘source’ culture at arms-length. Díaz himself has acknowledged this; ‘I trust my readers,’ he confesses, ‘even non-Spanish ones’ (Stewart). Indeed, the peculiar tension between alienation and trust has become one of the distinguishing characteristics of his writing. As Leah Hager Cohen notes:
Junot Díaz writes in an idiom so electrifying and distinct it’s practically an act of aggression, at once alarming and enthralling. […] Breaking easily and often out of first-person narration to address his readers directly, Díaz flatters us with his confidences. Yet his prose also throws up walls, equally abruptly and equally seductively. […] This, then, is the Díaz rhythm: a syncopated stagger-step between opacity and transparency, exclusion and inclusion, defiance and desire (“Love Stories”).

Just as Díaz deliberately unsettles monolingual readers by facilitating, without recourse to explanation or identifying markers, a constant and unannounced infiltration of foreign words, so is the literary translator able to adopt a position of defiance and power – in a persistently modest sense of the word, of course – by exposing her readers to a particular and complicit kind of discomfort. In any case, she can rest assured that this discomfort is of the beneficial and short-lived variety. Díaz’s immense popularity confirms something that James Joyce, Anthony Burgess, William Faulkner and Irvine Welsh proved long ago: the fact that readers are willing to adapt – surprisingly quickly, in fact – to language that initially presents itself as difficult.

The incorporation of foreign words into philosophical and literary language has been thoroughly discussed throughout the ages. Walter Benjamin’s famous reference to ‘a foreign term as a silver rib’77 (“Polyclinic” 85) inserted into the body of language echoes the sentiments of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his German Romantic contemporaries, who praised the ability of the foreign to transform the ‘expressivity and depth of meaning of one’s own language’ (von Humboldt 56). In two essays dating back to the middle of last century, Theodor Adorno makes a similar case. Foreign words, he writes, constitute an ‘incursion of freedom’ into writing (“Foreign” 289). What we seek (and find) in their use is ‘a kind of exogamy of language, which would like to escape from the sphere of what is always the

77 I prefer Gary Shteyngart’s culinary reworking: ‘foreign words like raisins shining out of a loaf’ (132).
same, the spell of what one is and knows’ (“Abroad” 187). The intrusion of the foreign, for Adorno, effects a ‘beneficial interruption of the conformist moment of language’ (“Abroad” 189). Perhaps inevitably, this interruption is veined with violence and tension: Adorno describes foreign words as ‘an expression of alienation itself’ (“Foreign” 289), like ‘arrows […] little cells of resistance’ whose ‘explosive force’ lies in their ability to demonstrate the incompleteness and inherent Otherness of language (“Abroad” 186). To arm oneself with foreign words in this manner, however, is to court indignation. As Adorno concedes: ‘Attempts at formulation that swim against the stream of the usual linguistic splashing […] arouse rage because they require effort’ (“Abroad” 185). Derrida, too, was no stranger to the hazards of paddling against the current: ‘No one gets angry at a mathematician or a physicist whom he or she doesn’t understand at all,’ he observes, ‘[…] but rather at someone who tampers with your own language’ (Points 115). Translators committed to an ethics of foreignisation must face unrelenting resistance from both interior and exterior sources. There are, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, documented trends in the publishing industry that give preference to marketability, fluidity and readability, often resulting in translations that possess only token portions of palatable and appropriately packaged foreignness. There are also dire (and decidedly murkier) straits of a different kind: these are the translator’s own aesthetic prejudices, coupled with the quiet tendency to edit herself (along with the foreignness that betrays her presence) out of existence. The translator, as both reader and writer, plays out this conflict on every page. I make this point not to portray myself as some kind of martyr – on the contrary, I tread a path well worn by generations of brave translators who have lived (and died) by the principles of their craft – but rather to vocalise a struggle that is all too often concealed beneath the many layers of silence and inadequacy that characterise this profession.
Needless to say, the retention of foreign words is not the only strategy I have pursued in my translation of ¿Te veré en el desayuno?. My approaches to style, voice and syntax are similarly informed by the ethical and methodological schemata of foreignisation. Like Lisa Dillman, the translator of Yuri Herrera’s Señales que precederán al fin del mundo [Signs Preceding the End of the World] (2009/2015), I am acutely aware of the difficulty of rendering modern Mexican sociolects in English. In her translator’s note at the end of the book, Dillman explains that, when faced with the ‘colloquialisms, slang, expressions and culturally-embedded references’ peppering the speech of Herrera’s characters, she grappled with the tension between the ‘meaning of these conversations’ and their ‘regional flavour and intimacy’ (111). ‘Should Mexican gangsters speak like mobsters in The Godfather?’ she asks, and if not, ‘is there another group they should speak like?’ (111). Her answer, I am grateful to discover, is no: rather than seek a non-existent ‘linguistic “parallel”’ for culture-specific language, Dillman chooses to ‘mark’ her language ‘in non-standard ways that are not geographically recognisable’ (111). Dillman’s ‘geographically non-explicit’ approach appears to borrow from one of Lawrence Venuti’s many formulations of foreignisation, perhaps best illustrated in his 1998 work The Scandals of Translation. Using his own translation of nineteenth-century Italian novelist Iginio Ugo Tarchetti as an example, Venuti argues that the juxtaposition of heterogeneous linguistic elements, coupled with a close adherence to the structure and syntax of the source text, effectively marks the target-language work as foreign and makes visible the hand of the translator. For Venuti, who was working with a text both geographically and temporally removed from the target context, this meant mixing calques, archaisms, modern American slang and British spelling into the body of the translated text (Scandals 15-17). In some respects, I have taken similar steps in my translation of ¿Te veré en el desayuno?. I have deliberately tended towards a heterogeneous vocabulary
– which, to borrow Walkowitz’s term, can also be described as ‘ephemeral’ (35) – mingling British/Australian and American English norms at different points in the text (within the limits of style) in order to signal the text as a self-aware and self-proclaimed translation. The recognisable Americanisms scattered throughout the target text – such as ‘sweatshirt,’ ‘trunk’ and ‘trash’78 – are carefully meted out, weaving a fine thread of discord into the voice of the story. These words contrast with other, deliberately British, choices such as ‘trousers,’ ‘trolley’ and ‘garbage.’79 In another example of this geographic hybridising, the distinctly North American concept of a high school ‘colour guard’ is subject to British orthographic norms. In other places, I have preferred a geographically non-specific vocabulary: the phrase ‘generic brand condoms,’ 80 for example, avoids the tension between ‘home brand’ (Australia), ‘store brands’ (Unites States) and ‘own brands’ (Britain).

The inclusion of somehow off-kilter slang and imagery has also been a deliberate strategy throughout the novel. Raquel Urbina, for example, refers to Cristina as a ‘bird,’81 a somewhat dated and markedly British term that, incidentally, draws a rather fortuitous link with several references later in the text.82 In a similar fashion, a little old lady notes that dogs ‘don’t mince words’83 (a quaint and humorously redundant adage), and an urban streetscape is described as ‘[resembling] a costumbrista vignette.’84 To ensure that the story remains rooted in Mexico, however, there are a number of reminders throughout the text. Adolfo recalls hiding, as a child, among ‘sacks of lime’ (the chemical compound, not the fruit) in the

78 For examples of these translations in context, see pages 196, 169 and 172 of the present thesis.
79 See pages 203, 198 and 171.
80 See page 171.
81 See page 248.
82 Elsewhere in the text, Cristina is referred to as an ‘ave de malos aires’ [ill omen] (116), which I render as ‘bird of the night,’ and an ‘ave hermosa y de buen agüero’ (181) which I translate as ‘beautiful bird of good omen,’ offering a compensatory nod to the previous reference (see pages 249 and 254 of the present thesis).
83 See page 248.
84 See page 270.
hardware section of the ‘ISSSTE supermarket’;\textsuperscript{85} he also adorns his bedroom wall with Cruz Azul football pennants and frequents the local tortillería. More broadly, translation choices at word-level have often reflected a close allegiance to their Spanish source. Several examples are noted in the following passage:

Adolfo no conservó en la memoria los escasos conocimientos adquiridos durante sus estudios de veterinaria. En la actualidad se veía a sí mismo incapaz de aliviárle el estreñimiento a Dogo, su perro, o meter una aguja en su piel dura y correosa. Prefería, a lo más, dedicarse a tareas no tan complicadas como cortarle el pelo a los pequeñines de su vecina Gertrudis o atender los constantes partos de la perra de la tlapalería. Los vecinos acudían a él con cierta frecuencia ya que la mayoría pensaba que se trataba de un veterinario que, además de todo, cobraba una baratija. Él nunca le confesó a sus clientes que de sus años en la Facultad pocas veces entró a clases y, por lo tanto, no tenía demasiada idea de cómo le funcionaban las tripas a la mayoría de los animales. Sin embargo, Adolfo disfrutaba que le llamaran doctor y que le demostraran confianza; si bien no había logrado hacerse de un título, al menos tenía una función dentro de su comunidad y se ganaba a la semana unos cuantos pesos (44-45).

[Adolfo no longer recalled the few scraps of knowledge acquired during his veterinary studies. At present, he considered himself incapable of alleviating his dog Dogo’s constipation, or even of inserting a needle into the animal’s hard, leathery skin. At the most, he preferred to dedicate himself to uncomplicated tasks such as grooming his neighbour Gertrudis’s Pekingese, or tending to the constant parturitions of the bitch that lived in the hardware store. His neighbours turned to him somewhat frequently, as most were under the impression that he was in fact a real veterinarian who, as an added bonus, charged peanuts for his services. He never confessed to his clients that he had barely attended any of his university classes and, as a result, had little idea about how the insides of most animals worked. Nevertheless, Adolfo liked the way they trusted him and called him Doctor. Although he

\textsuperscript{85} See page 201. ‘La tienda ISSSTE’ is a supermarket run by the Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado [Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers] that aims to provide basic goods at affordable prices across the Mexican Republic. Lime (calcium oxide) is an important ingredient in the nixtamalisation process of corn-based foodstuffs, and is used in the production of tortillas, hominy and tamales. For this reason, it is commonly found in Mexican markets and supermarkets.
had never managed to get a degree, at least he fulfilled a function within his community, and was able to earn himself a few pesos a week.]86

There are several instances, here, of words and structures that echo the original in manner that impairs the fluidity of the translated text. The ‘escasos conocimientos adquiridos’ become ‘scraps of knowledge acquired,’ mirroring the syllabic rhythm and phonetic quality (escasos-scrap, adquiridos-acquired) of the source text. The phrase ‘incapaz de aliviarle’ is similarly mirrored by my ‘incapable of alleviating’; ‘función’ becomes ‘function’; the reflexivity of ‘se ganaba […] unos cuantos pesos’ is retained in the phrase ‘earn himself a few pesos’; and ‘los constantes partos de la perra’ is unusually rendered as ‘the constant parturitions of the bitch,’ which, as well as retaining the word order of the original and opting for etymologically related word choices, attempts to compensate for the alliteration of Fadanelli’s ‘partos de la perra’ with the inherently musical ‘parturitions of the bitch.’ Similar cases are scattered throughout the text; one example is my habitual translation of ‘más de’ as ‘more than,’ rather than ‘over,’ in sentences such as ‘Ulises drank for more than three hours’87 and ‘They walked together for more than an hour.’88 Offsetting the strangeness of such strategies is the jarringly colloquial phrase ‘charged peanuts for his services,’ which attempts to mimic the laid-back tone of the source text’s ‘cobraba una baratija.’

On a syntactical level, I have sought to elect the stranger option wherever possible, opting for the structure that best approximates an aesthetically viable version of the Spanish syntax. In the above passage, this is reflected in sentences such as: ‘At present, he considered himself…’ (‘En la actualidad se veía a sí mismo…’); ‘Nevertheless, Adolfo liked…’ (‘Sin embargo, Adolfo disfrutaba…’); and the splitting of the sentence ‘…and, as a result…’ (…y,
por lo tanto…’). This approach has also meant the retention, to a certain degree, of the text’s unusual punctuation. While meandering sentences and over-use of semi-colons is more common in Spanish than English, I have only altered Fadanelli’s punctuation when the meaning or flow of the translated sentence is severely impacted. One notable example arises in the first pages of the novel, when Cristina muses:

En ese aspecto era mejor no quejarse: muchos hombres, a pesar de que nunca se había considerado afortunada y a pesar de las cicatrices, –cuatro enormes en las nalgas– y el dolor tal vez anodino, aunque eterno, que le consumía las vísceras; a pesar de sus axilas exageradamente tupidas de matorrales negros y su halitosis pasajera, el hombre volvía, meses o años después si quieren, pero siempre volvía (10-11).

[It was best not to complain: there were always men, despite the fact that she had never considered herself lucky, and despite the scars (four enormous ones on her buttocks) and the pain (insignificant, perhaps, but constant) that consumed her entrails; despite her armpits, overly-dense with black growth, and her occasional halitosis, the men always came back. Months, even years, later, but they always came back.]89

I was reluctant to circumscribe the unwieldy, yet somehow graceful, flow of Cristina’s thoughts in this passage. Through the introduction of parentheses, and the elimination of Fadanelli’s dashes, I was able to retain the sentence’s unusual structure (semi-colons and all) without rendering the passage overly cumbersome. Liberal scatterings of commas (‘insignificant, perhaps, but constant’ / ‘her armpits, overly dense with black growth, and her occasional halitosis’) serve to retain the sentence’s fluid, stream-like quality, allowing a lengthy sequence of thoughts to drift languidly towards their punctuated conclusion. I strove for a similar effect with the internal dialogue of Cristina’s delinquent brother, Alfil:

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89 See page 170.
Después de todo, las peleas estaban ganadas de antemano; en caso contrario, en caso de que la suerte se fuera del otro lado, estaría lo suficientemente drogado como para no sentir la navaja clavada en las costillas. Una botella de alcohol blanco y barato como el agua, pastillas, humo dentro de los pulmones y luego a esperar el día siguiente para recuperar los músculos y uno a uno los sentidos, para reconocer que la suerte seguía siéndole fiel y que la moneda continuaba cayendo del lado del águila (131).

[At the end of the day, fights were always won in advance. And if this weren’t the case – if luck went the other way – he’d be so out of it that he wouldn’t feel the knife puncturing his ribs. A bottle of cheap white alcohol, like water; pills; smoke inside his lungs; and then it was just a matter of waiting for the next day, for his muscles to recover and his senses to return, one by one, until he realised that luck was still on his side, that the coin still showed tails: the eagle.]

In this particular instance, an assortment of punctuation marks came to my aid. Troubled by the growing number of semicolons edited brutally out of existence, I sought to redeem myself here – in what Hervey and Higgins would call an act of ‘compensation in place’ (37) – by replacing commas with semi-colons. The regular interruption of commas again forces the jarred and lengthy flow of the sentences (‘A bottle of cheap white alcohol, like water’ / ‘that luck was still on his side, that the coin still showed tails…’).

In a similar manner, I have chosen throughout the text to imitate Spanish typographical norms regarding the punctuation of dialogue, preferring dashes to quotation marks. In the translation of sayings and proverbs, too, I have preferred not to seek a natural-sounding English alternative but, where possible, to communicate something of the strange sense of the original. Susana Olvera, a character with a marked penchant for cliché, offers a good example of this. My translation of her phrase ‘Aquí cada loco con su tema’ (23) retains an unsubtle

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90 See page 265.
nod to the original: I render it as ‘Cada loco… each to their own.’\textsuperscript{91} Another example is given by the little old lady quoted above, who describes her ailing canine companion as ‘un alma de Dios’ (111). Given that the literal translation [a soul of God] was clearly inadequate in this instance, I decided to resurrect the religious connotations of the Spanish version through reference to the phrase ‘lamb of God,’ drawing upon the notion of the lamb as a gentle, pure-souled creature. Hence my translation: ‘he’s as gentle as a lamb.’\textsuperscript{92} A third example is offered by Cristina as she contemplates the nature of an ideal death: ‘la muerte es mejor cuando es más cruda’ [death is better when it’s more raw], she reflects. My translation (which confusedly references the English idiom ‘revenge is a dish best served cold’) again departs from the literal sense of the phrase. I feel it is consistent, however, with the tone of Cristina’s meditations throughout the novel: ‘death,’ my Cristina muses, ‘was a dish best served raw.’\textsuperscript{93}

Considerations of tone and idiolect are of course incredibly important throughout the novel. Each chapter has a distinct feel, calibrated by the particular voice of the character through which it is narrated; compare the gentle adolescent musings of Olivia’s passages, for example, to Cristina’s smart-mouthed tone, or again to Adolfo’s timid self-loathing and Ulises’s sad misogyny. These voices, when placed in direct contrast with one another and with the eloquent neutrality of the omniscient narrator, prove to be particularly powerful tools in the construction of personality and narrative depth. It is important that these contrasts survive the translation process, allowing Fadanelli’s linguistic nuances of character to be revealed. The rough idiolect of Alfil and his delinquent pals, for example, is distinguished not only through the use of quotations marks (signalling, in this case, internal dialogue) but also through the use of markedly colloquial language:

\textsuperscript{91} See page 179.
\textsuperscript{92} See page 249.
\textsuperscript{93} See page 266.
[L]e habían tocado ya dos muertos, uno que se murió de pedo, y el otro “no nos dijo nada, llegó, se acurrucó en un rincón, dijo que tenía sueño, que si no teníamos un trago, luego se durmió y amaneció muerto. A nadie le dijo que se lo habían picado, tal vez pensó que tres picahielazos no eran nada, el pendejo.” Al Alfil le tocó sacarlo del cuarto, junto con el Toro; lo fueron a tirar a dos cuadras, en plena calle (133).

[Two had already died, one from inebriation. The other “didn’t say a word, he just arrived, curled up in the corner, said he was tired, did we have anything to drink, then fell asleep and in the morning he was dead. Didn’t tell anyone he’d been stabbed. Maybe the pendejo thought three rounds with an ice-pick was no big deal.” El Alfil and El Toro had been the ones to remove the body. They’d dumped it two blocks away, in the middle of the street.]94

In this instance, my translation exaggerates the linguistic neutrality of the surrounding text in order to accentuate the non-standard nature of Alfil’s speech. The phrase ‘le habían tocado ya dos muertos,’ which has a colloquial ring to it in Spanish, becomes ‘two had already died’; the slang term ‘pedo’ is similarly swapped out for ‘inebriated.’ In contrast, the sentences ‘thought aloud’ by Alfil are rendered with a deliberately oral tone: pronouns and conjunctions are omitted (‘curled up […], said he was tired, did we have anything to drink’) and word choices carefully reflect the unrefined nature of the character’s speech (‘pendejo,’ ‘three rounds with an ice-pick,’ ‘no big deal’). The effect, one hopes, is to mark Alfil’s speech in a subtle yet loaded manner, at once distinguishing him from other characters and tying his speech to that of his particular ‘clan.’

As mentioned in the previous subchapter,95 the Bakhtinian notions of ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘polyphony’ are of central importance to Fadanelli’s writing, and the fractured narratives and superimposed dialogues of ¿Te veré en desayuno? illustrate this particularly well. Within

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94 See page 267.
95 See page 138.
the first few pages of the novel, five distinct tongues have already differentiated themselves, all speaking from within the sphere of Cristina’s experience (which, come the second chapter, is juxtaposed to those of the other three protagonists, adding layer upon layer). The following passage provides a neat example:

Encima de la cajuela, árida y fría como el aire de la noche, Cristina colocó su polvera y a un lado el maltratado y esbelto tubito de gas lacrimógeno que escondía en el bolso; no porque creyera que lo necesitaría alguna vez, “como si no pudiera defenderme con mis propias uñas,” sino por tratarse de un regalo del Alfil, su hermano menor.

– Tómalo, las armas nunca están de más, siempre hay un hijo de la chingada que te quiere joder.

– Te ves muy delgado, tienes que cuidarte, Alfil.

– Apuntas a los ojos y aprietas aquí.

– ¿Cuántas veces comes al día?

[On top of the cold, arid trunk of the car Cristina arranged her powder compact and beside it the slim, battered tube of pepper spray she kept hidden in her handbag, not because she thought she’d ever need it, “as if I couldn’t defend myself with my own two hands,” but because it had been a gift from her younger brother, Alfil.

– Take it, you need a weapon, there’s always some motherfucking hijo de la chingada trying to fuck you over.

– You look thin, Alfil, you have to look after yourself.

– Aim at the eyes and squeeze, right here.

– How many meals do you eat a day?]^{96}

The above passage exhibits three contrasting modes of speech: the erudite voice of the narrator; the internal dialogue of Cristina; and the colloquial spoken exchanges between the two characters, each of whom displays a distinct vocabulary or ‘accent.’ Indeed, the dialogue between Cristina and Alfil is less a conversation than a case of two voices talking past one

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^{96} See page 171.
another, patently illustrating their dissimilarity. A little further on, amid the beige surrounds of the Fonacot office, the disparate idiolects of Ulises and Susana are similarly contrasted:

–Oye, Susana, ¿no sabes si vamos a trabajar el jueves? –le preguntó, cada vez más excitado, colocándose a espaldas de la mujer para mirar desde la cima de sus hombros y apuntar directo a los canutos blancos, inmóviles.
–Yo creo que no, acuérdate que es día feriado y por ley nadie trabaja – dijo ella, sin descuidar la atención en los papeles que como naipes barajaba encima del escritorio.
–Ojalá no porque tengo pensado ir a divertirme –Ulises quiso imaginarse, cubiertas por la falda de tela medio descolorida, las pantaletas convencionales de Susana: “Ojalá fueran Carnival, negras,” tan negras como la probable araña de su pubis, como su cabello tieso y los pelos de sus axilas.
–Dichoso tú que puedes. Yo voy a aprovechar el día para lavar las cortinas de mi casa; tienen más de diez años sin una lavada y ni siquiera me acuerdo cuál era su color original (26).

[–Hey, Susana, do you know if we have to work on Thursday?’ he asked her, his excitement increasing.
He positioned himself behind her in order to look over her shoulders and glance directly down at her motionless, cigarette-white pins.
–I don’t think so, it’s a public holiday, remember? Nobody is supposed to go to work, she said without lifting her gaze from the papers she shuffled like playing cards on the desk.
–I hope not, because I plan to have a good time.
Ulises tried to imagine Susana’s conventional panties, covered by the half discoloured material of her skirt: “I hope they’re Carnival brand, black,” black like the probable spider of her pubis, like the taut little hairs under her armpits.
–Lucky you. I’m going to spend the day washing my curtains; they haven’t been washed in more than ten years and I can’t even remember what colour they used to be.][97

In the above passage, the slimy and vaguely menacing voice of Ulises is brought into sharp relief beside Susana’s chirpy innocence. In the space of a few sentences, we learn more about

[97 See page 182.
these two characters than we might from an entire paragraph of descriptive prose. Fadanelli’s reliance on dialogue to convey the personalities and inner machinations of his characters is one of his most striking features as an author, and as such demands an unusual degree of attention in translation. In the excerpt above, several subtle strategies help to conjure the distinct voices (both spoken and unspoken) of Ulises and Susana. When Ulises registers his colleague’s ‘canutos blancos, inmóviles,’ the use of language is at once colloquial and somehow misplaced. The word ‘canuto,’ clearly intended in this context to mean ‘legs,’ denotes both a thin tube – to look at things ‘por un canuto,’ for example, is to have myopic or ‘tunnel’ vision – and, in the argot of the Spanish-speaking youth, a marihuana cigarette. My translation attempts to incorporate both the imagery of the cigarette and the oddness of Ulises’s appropriation of it. The term ‘cigarette-white,’ which resonates with later descriptions of Susana’s legs as ‘snow-white’ (‘niveas’) and ‘milky-white’ (‘lechosas’), is coupled with the outdated ‘pins,’ adding a casual and mildly unsettling touch to Ulises’s discourse. In light of this, the sentence ‘tengo pensado ir a divertirme’ (uttered as Ulises stands leering over his seated colleague, envisaging her cheap black underwear) takes on a vile tone. The abrupt abortion of the perverted daydream renders it humorous, and all the more inappropriate, while Susana’s thoroughly unsexy comment on the colour of her faded curtains acquires new and provocative connotations. This mismatched coupling of voices is an excellent example of Fadanelli’s distinct brand of heteroglossia, and serves to add depth and breadth to the intensely intimate characterisations developed throughout the novel.

One final observation regarding translation strategy is my approach to register. The Spanish formal register, signalled by the pronoun ‘usted,’ obviously has no direct equivalent in English. That said, there are a number of other devices employed by both Spanish and English-speakers on a daily basis to denote respect and an adherence to social norms. These
include the way we refer to people (titles, honorifics, etc.), the tone of our conversation, non-verbal cues, and the specific words or constructions we choose to communicate with. In the following exchange, for example, the formal relationship between Adolfo and his neighbour Gertrudis is illustrated in several ways:

–Es la muchachita que vive aquí enfrente, señor Adolfo –dijo Gertrudis, desde el pasillo, sin atreverse a entrar, oteando curiosa hacia el interior del departamento […]
–¿Usted sabe que ellos, los Testigos, piensan que sólo unos cuantos podrán ir al cielo?
–No lo sabía.
–Y esos pocos que irán al cielo serán de su secta, tendrán que ser Testigos. Mire nada más qué bonito. Tampoco creen en la Santísima Trinidad…
–¿Sabe usted a dónde se la llevaron?
–Se la llevó la Cruz Roja, pero no sé a qué parte.
–¿Y sus padres?
–Si hubiera usted oído los gritos que daba la señora se le hubiera roto el corazón. Dios no quiera que a mis nietas les sucediera algo parecido. Yo siempre que salen les doy la bendición y rezo La Magnífica. Se burlará usted pero nunca les ha pasado nada. A la mejor no nos vamos al cielo, como los Testigos, pero al menos en la tierra todavía no nos ha pasado nada (103-105).

[–It’s the muchachita who lives here across from us, señor Adolfo, Gertrudis said from the hallway.
She didn’t dare enter, but peered curiously into the apartment […]
–Did you know that they, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, think only a few people will go to heaven?
–No, I didn’t know that.
–And the few people who’ll go to heaven will be from their sect, they have to be Jehovah’s Witnesses. How nice for them. They don’t believe in the Holy Trinity, either…
–Do you know where they took her, señora?
–The Cruz Roja took her, but I don’t know where to.
–And her parents?
–You should have heard the cries of her mother, it would have broken your heart. I pray to God that nothing like that happens to my granddaughters. Whenever they leave the house I bless them and say a prayer: La Magnífica.
You’ll laugh at me, señor Adolfo, but let me tell you, nothing has ever happened to them. We might not be going to heaven, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but at least here on Earth nothing terrible has happened to us.]98

In the Spanish version of this passage, both characters employ the term ‘usted’ a number of times. Formality is also signalled in other ways, however. Gertrudis’s hesitation to enter Adolfo’s apartment, for example, tells us that their relationship has developed no real degree of intimacy. Adolfo’s polite restraint, too, in spite of his well-established antipathy towards Gertrudis, is another signal of the degree of ‘respect’ he holds for her. These elements pose little difficulty to translation, and carry more or less the same significance in anglophone societies. Considering the inevitable loss of the term ‘usted,’ however, I have taken a few additional, compensatory steps. As well as retaining the phrase ‘señor Adolfo’ in the opening line, I include it in the penultimate sentence, transforming ‘Se burlará usted’ to ‘You’ll laugh at me, señor Adolfo.’ Similarly, Adolfo’s ‘¿Sabe usted a dónde se la llevaron?’ becomes ‘Do you know where they took her, señora?’ The result (if my strategy is successful) is to emphasise the air of both formality and foreignness in a dialogue that, by virtue of its tonal and contextual clues, has already done much of the work for me.

I have been extremely fortunate to have my translation published by an independent press that both understands and is willing to promote the stranger and more challenging elements of Fadanelli’s writing. As a result, very few changes were made to the published manuscript. There were, however, some points of contention worthy of discussion. Particularly obscure cultural references, such as Fonacot and the ISSSTE supermarket,99 raised a red flag with editors, who insisted on adding a degree of explicitation. Fonacot thus became ‘Fonacot Credit Union,’ and the ISSSTE supermarket ‘the Institute of Social Security

98 See pages 242-43.
99 Discussed earlier; see pages 150 and 160 of the present thesis.
Services supermarket.’ The most significant editorial intervention (Junot Díaz would be disappointed to discover) was the general italicisation of foreign words, according to a logic that verges on the arbitrary: the word *colonia* is marked, for example, but ‘Avenida’ and ‘Calle’ are not; likewise *fonda* and *papelería* but not ‘cantina’; *tortillería* but not ‘tortillas’ (despite *frijoles con epazote, tacos de canasta* and *nopales*). Terms like *hija, viejita, patrón, pendejo* and *hijo de la chingada* were universally marked, in spite of of their established appearance in the work of other Latino writers. In the grand scheme of things, however, I remain grateful; I am satisfied that the novel has retained its uneasy, alienating feel, and the Spanish terms rooting it to its homeland, if marked, have at least not been eliminated. Some minor victories were even won: I managed to avoid the translation of José José’s song lyrics, for example, and wrested ‘cuba libre’ from the grasp of italics.

In line with my view of translation as (re)writing, the strategies discussed in this subchapter have been subject to overall stylistic considerations. In order to do Fadanelli justice, the translation of his novel must encase its foreign bones in a new and enticing skin; in other words, it must also be an entertaining and aesthetically pleasing read. In this sense I, like all literary translators, have had to master a certain ambidexterity. At the core of every translation act, but particularly in literary translation, there quakes an invigorating tension between alienation and readability. ‘Too much foreignness,’ as David Damrosch puts it, ‘can produce a text that will baffle or bore its new audience, while too much assimilation may lose the difference that made the work worth translating to begin with’ (*How to Read* 75). While I have generally attempted to harness, rather than eradicate, this tension, I am mindful that the translator’s ethical framework must always coexist with the aesthetic objective of her translation project. Dominant norms, I have argued, should be tested and transgressed wherever possible; I am by no means impervious, however, to the burden of style placed
upon me by virtue of my role as a (re)creator of high quality (if deliberately ‘trashy’)[100] fiction. In a 1976 essay for Argentine literary magazine *Sur*, Borges helpfully illuminates this conflict. Reiterating a point made over a century earlier by Matthew Arnold, he writes: ‘Si se tradujera [buenas noches] al francés como bonnes nuits o al inglés como good nights, se estaría cometiendo un error, porque se estaría creando un énfasis que no existe en el original’ [If I were to translate [buenas noches] into French as bonnes nuits or into English as good nights, I would be committing an error, because I would be creating an emphasis where none existed in the original] (“Espíritu” 338). Put another way: the literary translator always treads a fine line between respect for her ethical (read: alienating) objectives and the unwarranted accentuation of certain linguistic or cultural irregularities. A sound methodological framework must attempt to accommodate this inherent bipolarity, acknowledging the flexibility required to engage in a project that is at once ethically and creatively motivated.

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[100] The best works of dirty realism (and realismo sucio) master the balancing act between the trashy and the literary. Jonathan Glancey put it well in a 2001 review of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s work: ‘The Dirty Havana Trilogy,’ he wrote, ‘is a good bad book.’ To paraphrase this notion, I would venture that Fadanelli is a ‘good bad’ writer, and I, in turn, strive to be a ‘good bad’ translator.
The critical component of this thesis has attempted to do two things: first, to develop an ethical and methodological framework for translation that responds to the alienating nature of Fadanelli’s literature and the context in which it arose; and second, to demonstrate the ways in which this framework has been applied in my translation of ¿Te veré en el desayuno?. An alienating ethics of translation, I have argued, must depart from the premise that translation is, always and already, an intensely ethical act. The ethical nature of translation, indeed, is inextricable from that of literature itself: both allow us access to the Other; both occasion the disruption of perspectives and the re-reading of experience; both favour multi over mono, difficulty over complacency, dynamism over stasis. The translation ethics I have proposed emphasises the disruptive and generative role of literary translation, holding that a sound translation framework should aim to expose, encourage and perpetuate ‘violent’ and innovative literary practices. This means selecting challenging texts and authors for translation – little-known or ‘subversive’ authors like Fadanelli; atypical texts like ¿Te veré en el desayuno? – and acknowledging the role of unusual literary practices in the source text, as well as implementing similarly disruptive practices in the production of the target text. It means both noticing and wielding the power of what Esther Allen has termed ‘the ambiguous polyvalence of words and contexts’ (68), and attuning oneself to the vibrating pulse of language. The double nature of this intervention, I have argued, implies an underlying tension – the tension between theoria and praxis, between reading one cultural artefact and (re)writing another – that is also integral to the translation process as I envision it. The practice of literary translation, in other words, forms a kind of uneasy understructure for the
alienating ethics proposed here, with praxis both informing and informed by, both constricting and constricted by, the theoria to which it is inextricably tied.

Fadanelli, I have argued, is one of the most challenging and ‘insolent’ writers in contemporary Mexican literature, deliberately situating his work at the peripheries of established literary genres and blurring, wherever possible, the boundaries of those genres through constant self-contradiction and re-invention. While his ambivalent position within the North and Latin American literary scenes is framed by the parallel movements of dirty realism and realismo sucio, Fadanelli departs from, and indeed claims to reject, every critical context into which his work is placed. In this sense, Fadanelli is also something of a (counter)cultural translator, operating in the controversial spaces between and around established literary genres. The difficulty of classifying Fadanelli’s writing as either ‘high’ or ‘low’ art – a difficulty exacerbated by his dark and self-aware humour, the polyphony and sociocultural diversity of his character-scapes, the regular injections of smut and violence into otherwise cerebral or aesthetically sophisticated texts – makes his work an ideal platform for exploring and developing a translation ethics rooted in alienation, friction and multilayered unease. Fadanelli’s resistance to categorisation and analysis, I argue, amounts to a constant striving for dynamism and artistic ‘violence’ – notions closely aligned with Fadanelli’s re-interpretation of ‘trash’ culture. A better understanding of this notion is gleaned through an inter(con)textual examination of Fadanelli’s cultural precedents and contemporaries in the disparate fields of visual art, cinema and music. With the alteration (or refraction) of this cultural context through the lens of interlingual translation, it is possible to examine the intersections and divergences between Fadanelli’s current and prospective readerships, also shedding light on potential new spaces for alienating translation in the anglophone literary world.
Fadanelli’s literatura basura is, at its core, a reaction to the postmodern reality of the urban Americas. It represents a submission to, and parodying of, the false, throwaway culture that came of age in the final decades of the twentieth century – a culture defined by abjection, poverty and pollution of spirit, but also by intense hybridity and pastiche, by the reinterpretation and reassembly of old codes. The tension of this multi-layered contradiction is not only mirrored but magnified by the art of translation; in the case of alienating translation, indeed, this tension constitutes the driving force of the translation project. The frictions and contradictions within and around the source text find their reflection in those created by the translator herself: friction between the source and target cultures, between theory and practice, as well as the internal frictions of target poetics – the conventional resisting the unconventional, the strategic placement of linguistic contradictions and inconsistencies, the subtle subversion of expectations.

Mexico City, at once the fictional arena in which Fadanelli’s literary tensions are played out and the real-world site of their creation, plays a central role in the development of this alienating approach. Analysed through the interlocking lenses of literature, cultural translation and anthropological studies, Mexico City is read as a deeply fragmented and powerfully (re)generative city, a ‘broken mosaic’ of linguistic and cultural codes. The interplay of voices and cultures is enriched through works of literature that, like Fadanelli’s, layer and disrupt the multiple tiers of social and cultural interaction. An ethical approach to an author like Fadanelli, then, is one that recognises and engages with this dynamic of polyphony and playful disturbance. Literary translation, I have argued, is itself a creative and liminal process that operates at the verges and intersections of culture. It is through violence and estrangement – both natural states of language – that an ethically alienating approach is made; one that actively seeks to preserve the power and originality of the source text and culture.
As a translator working in (and for) a literary milieu that too often considers itself a self-sufficient cultural monolith, the decision to promote resistance and unease is an important one. While the alienating ethics of translation developed here is indebted to a wealth of existing scholarship, its attempt to place translation as a cultural act reflected by (and within) a particular cultural location – Mexico City, but also the postmodern city in general – and its attempt to cross-contaminate translation scholarship with less conventional frameworks – to perform, in other words, the deconstruction of genres and established literary practices that it promotes in both source and target literature – constitutes a potentially fruitful contribution to the ever-evolving field of translation studies. As well as expanding and recontextualising the ethics of literary ‘violence’ developed here, future directions for research include closer (i.e. more localised) examinations of the literary topography of Mexico City, as well as specific explorations of the city’s hybrid history and its shifting representations of translation (both literal and metaphorical) through the lens of contemporary Mexican literature.

For the moment, however, my main contribution to the literary world is the introduction of one more novel into the anthology of translated anglophone literature: the first by an untranslated but undoubtedly important Mexican author, and a short, strange novel that, were it up to the conventional publishing industry, would never have been considered worth translating at all. With any luck, it is only the first of many of Fadanelli’s novels to be brought into English. In any case, I am fortunate to have completed this translation under extremely generous conditions; as both a writer and a translator, I have been empowered throughout the course of this project to decide precisely how and where the aesthetic and ethical elements of my work will converge. It is a privilege to affirm that I am satisfied with the final product, and confident that it holds true to its underlying principles.
The very notion of a ‘final product,’ of course, is nothing more than an external assessment, quite divorced from the complex and interminable processes that give rise to it. Any work of art, as Paul Valéry knew well, ‘n’est jamais achevée que par quelque accident, comme la fatigue, le contentement, l’obligation de livrer ou la mort; car une œuvre, de côté de celui ou de ce qui la fait, n’est qu’un état d’une suite de transformations intérieures’ [is never completed except by some accident, such as weariness, satisfaction, the obligation to deliver, or death; for, in relation to who or what is making it, a work is but one stage in a series of inner transformations] (“Souvenir” 305). Fortunately, the accident of See You at Breakfast?’s ‘completion’ is, in the main, a cause for wary satisfaction on my part – this is, after all, a project built upon firm ethical convictions, and under the auspices of many great minds. That said, the transformative system of translation, like any creative endeavour, is intrinsically open-ended. After a certain interval it is necessarily truncated, always incomplete, and the ultimate arrangement of words on paper is merely an imperfect facsimile of some vaster, interior vision. And yet, as Euripides wrote, nothing has more strength than dire necessity. It is at the very moment of closure, indeed, that theoria and praxis converge with the utmost tension. With this final caveat, I deliver the fruits of my labour – imperfect, perhaps, but digestible enough – into your hands.

Breakfast, as it were, is served. ¡Buen provecho!
Part Two: Translation Component
SEE YOU AT BREAKFAST?

Guillermo Fadanelli

Translated by Alice Whitmore
The following is the story of four people whose lives were never worth writing about in any novel.
I. 169
II. 178
III. 191
IV. 202
V. 211
VI. 220
VII. 231
VIII. 239
IX. 247
X. 256
XI. 265
XII. 272
XIII. 281
XIV. 292
XV. 298
Memories shouldn’t last more than three or four days, thought Cristina that night as she approached the trunk of the car with cautious steps, not for fear of being caught perverting the solitude of a seemingly calm evening, but because the brazen sound of her high heels on the pavement stirred in her an air of victimhood, of intrusion. Cristina had seen that car before, parked in the same place, and she recognised it easily: almost brand new, with impeccable duco and glossy tyres. Imagine how comfortable, how easy it must be to sit inside there, listening to soft music, breathing the velvet scent of the upholstery; how much money would you need in the bank to be able to say: “This is my car”? How many hefty deals would you have to have strike in your life in order to afford the luxury of smoking inside there? In the ivoried light of the streetlamp, Cristina noticed that her handbag took on a hue similar to that of the car seats: burnt red, like the colour of blood when it blooms at night and, seeking the sun, is forced to thread a passage through the shadows. If you carry all those memories, Cristina speculated, you end up sinking beneath the weight of them, that’s why my memories will never go further than three days, why keep going over the same stuff again and again? After all, history always repeats itself; sooner or later we’ll bump into the same sons of...
bitches we thought we’d gotten rid of forever. It’s all just walking in a circle until we sink, exhausted, into the centre of that same circle, never knowing anything, never knowing why things ended so quickly.

Cristina occupied her corner three nights a week. She preferred to work on paydays, or on Thursdays and Fridays, although always after nine at night, at that evening hour when pedestrians began jumping at their own shadows and digging inside handbags in search of house keys, when children disappeared and stray dogs roamed confidently through the alleyways and streets. Cristina was optimistic about her clientele. By the time they changed the billboard atop the pockmarked building across the road, the face of her lover changed many times. It was best not to complain: there were always men, despite the fact that she had never considered herself lucky, and despite the scars (four long stripes across her buttocks) and the pain (insignificant, perhaps, but constant) that consumed her insides; despite her armpits, overly-dense with black growth, and her occasional halitosis, the men always came back. Months, even years, later, but they always came back. Sometimes they had a hard time believing she was a prostitute. Why here, on a dull street in a middle-class suburb? To most passers-by she seemed like an ordinary woman, perhaps a housewife waiting for her children, or the lover of some businessman who, discreetly, kept her two or three blocks from his office.

On top of the cold, arid trunk of the car Cristina arranged her powder compact and beside it the slim, battered tube of pepper spray she kept hidden in her handbag, not because she thought she’d ever need it, “as if I couldn’t defend myself with my own two hands,” but because it had been a gift from her younger brother, Alfil.

–Take it, you need a weapon, there’s always some motherfucking hijo de la chingada trying to fuck you over.
—You look thin, Alfil, you have to look after yourself.

—Aim at the eyes and squeeze, right here.

—How many meals do you eat a day?

—You don’t need to be close, from here you just point it at his mug and that’s it, a metre should be enough.

—Look after yourself, Alfil, if you die I really will be all alone.

It was a somewhat time-wearied gift; like Cristina’s shoes, and her run-of-the-mill nail polish, it was worn but effective.

—It doesn’t work, I bet you found it in the garbage.

—It works, I swear.

—If it doesn’t work I’m screwed, you can’t play around with weapons.

—It’s not weapon, it’s a toy.

Inside her bag, Cristina also carried an ID accrediting her as a blood donor, a plastic key ring with the key to the hotel reception, and a strip of generic brand condoms. If she managed to use all of the condoms in one night, if she slept with twenty men a week, if her vagina didn’t already smart after the second client of the night had deflated upon her stomach, if not for all of that, then before long she’d be able to make a down payment on a car like the one currently serving as her dressing table and mirror. But it was best not to get her hopes up, because she’d never live that long. Before she had gathered enough money, before she had pressed the valve on the little tube of pepper spray and before she was no longer desired by men, something would surely happen and she would no longer be standing on street corners offering herself to the scarce passers-by. Scarce indeed, and many of them so distracted that they often didn’t realise Cristina was the kind of woman they could take to bed for a mere three hundred pesos; a woman with an air of serenity, whose occupation even
the most experienced of clients had difficulty divining at first glance. A discreet whore, albeit somewhat pessimistic for her thirty-something years. She’d had that pointed out to her more than once, although she’d never really been bothered by such comments. She didn’t consider herself a pessimist, after all she still swept and mopped the narrow little room she rented in Tacubaya – a tiny room, cold as a freezer, to which she often dreaded to return. The bed in the hotel, where she could remain until one in the afternoon, was much more comfortable: a soft, warm bed, still imprinted with the trace of her last client’s alcoholic breath and excited blood. “If I were a pessimist my house would be a mess and I’d never bother to wash my dresses: not everyone can bear to plunge their hands into a basin of cold water, or to sweep a floor where the cracks are full of cockroaches. If I were a pessimist I’d simply have thrown myself under a car, and I wouldn’t brush my teeth or shine my shoes on the weekends.” She painted her lips red, breathing the baleful air of a night so like the others, so concentrated in a handful of streets. “Who invented cities? Whose idea was it to put one house after the other?” She saw the police car rolling slowly along the opposite corner, stalking her like a treacherous animal: great big numbers tattooing the doors, beacons of hepatic light licking the pavement as the tyres shattered the skeleton of a bottle against the bitumen. “Here come these sons of bitches again,” Cristina thought as the patrol car pulled up beside her. An eroded face, like an old pumpkin gnawed by voracious worms, emerged from the window.

—I saw you putting out the trash this morning, one of them said to her, a smile opening upon his waxen lips as he looked greedily, stubbornly, at Cristina’s legs.

The car was still, like the shell of a great tortoise encrusted into the spines of the two men, under which they chewed their daily ration of meat and bread, letting the little crumbs accumulate in the grooves of the seats. The oily fingerprints on the steering wheel and rear-
view mirror, the smell of salsa in the compressed air of the cabin, the wrappers and plastic bags collected under the seat: all signs of their bestial feast.

–No matter how often you take out the garbage, there’s always something left, she responded.

Dried sweat darkened the necks of the men’s singlets, and a lizard stench, a sharp smell of old reptile emanated from the interior of the car. The street was empty, as if abandoned in the wake of some tragedy. The only sound was the occasional whisper of cars speeding across the freeway, and the barking of a dog that seemed to come from beneath the pavement.

–So you can’t make do with the salary your boss pays you? said the policeman without shifting his gaze from Cristina’s handbag which, unzipped, flopped open like a slashed stomach.

–Does your whore of a wife make do with you?

Cristina closed the bag. Would this be the last night? And if so, how long would it take her to die?

–Let’s see your identification.

The policeman tried on a more serious voice, which only made him sound like a grunting pig.

–I don’t need one, she responded in frank rebellion, reluctant to let herself be intimidated by a pair of dogs. She recalled the tube of pepper spray and the instructions that Alfil had recited to her, and yet: “By the time I grab the fucking tube, I’ll already be fucked,” she thought.

–Well I say you do need one, the policeman warned.
Cristina glanced at her surroundings. She was alone, as alone as she had always been, since as long as she could remember.

–I’m waiting for my brothers, if you want they can tell you who I am.

Cristina let her eyes wander among the letters of a billboard advertising soap across the street: SMOOTH HANDS LONG MARRIAGE, they read. She secured her bag, passing the strap across her chest like an ammunition belt, and returned her gaze to the policeman. He said:

–No need to be scared, sweetheart, you caught us in a good mood.

–I only get scared when it’s worth it, she said flatly.

“Maybe a new soap would leave my hands smoother, soft as porcelain, soft as cotton, soft as... The important thing is not to let them realise you’re shitting yourself.”

–Why don’t you bring us a little sandwich tomorrow, eh?

Why did that man have such a strange coloured mouth? Was it just a trick of the light? Cristina walked a few steps away from the patrol car, stopped, turned around to face them again. They were gone, turning right, slowly, searching the stretches of parked cars in Vicente Suárez for the unlucky couple who, blinded by the light of the torch, would open their eyes and see the policemen’s faces, their yellow teeth, the deep caverns of their noses, would hear them belch out the sentence, the price for kissing in public and spurning the comforts of a hotel. “There’s a little hotel just a block away. Get a job, son.” The same hotel Cristina turned to when fishing for a client: The Cadillac, a cheap place with a yellowish facade, darkened windows and seemingly impenetrable doors. A real dive, old before its time, where they happened to give her a generous discount, half price, no less, as long as she visited more than twice a week and her lovers took care not to cause a scandal. That last part wasn’t a problem, since Cristina was a discerning woman who knew how to pick her clients:
mostly employed men in their forties, or abandoned old wretches adrift in the world whose only desire was to embrace the body of a younger woman while they waited for death.

Absorbed in following the imaginary trace of grease and blood left by the tyres of the patrol car, she didn’t notice the old lady who had wandered silently over and now stood by her side. “They’ll be back,” she thought to herself. “They look pissed.” Then she heard the stream of urine falling close to her heels.

–You’re out late, viejita.

–Yes this little fellow always needs to pee at the worst times. Aren’t you cold?

–No colder than usual.

–Well the usual things have a way of tricking us, you shouldn’t trust them. If you want I can lend you a sweater.

Cristina looked at the dog, wrapped up like a sausage in a knitted sweater. She imagined herself in a similar sweater, a leash around her neck, shoving her snout day after day into a plastic bowl full of hard dog food.

–No, viejita. It’s ok, I was raised on beans and tortillas.

–You ought to eat soy, it’s very nutritious and inexpensive. I raised my children on nothing but soy. You should see their teeth, solid, strong, they could chew through stones.

–I’m too old to eat healthy, I only like things that are bad for me.

–Have you been reading the Bible I gave you?

Cristina smiled again as she remembered how, a month ago, the old lady had approached her to present her with a well-preserved copy of the Bible. She would have rejected if it hadn’t been offered in good will, and without any accompanying sermons. That is, with respect.

–When am I supposed to find time to read the Bible, viejita? I’d rather eat than read.
–You could read it now, for example, while you’re waiting.

–If I get distracted it’s all over. The street isn’t a library, you’ve got to know the time and the place.

–You’re right, mija, may God forgive you. And may He also forgive all those men.

–Why should he forgive me? I haven’t done anything, Cristina added, entertained by the conversation. Why did old ladies always make it their business to fix all the world’s problems if they were already on the way out?

–Don’t listen to me, I’m just old.

The gossiping old woman allowed her dog too many liberties. He was the one who called the shots. On a sudden impulse, the dog turned and dragged the lady’s weak old body back towards the dwelling that would one day become their tomb. Cristina rested against the wall and lit a cigarette, she imagined herself reading the Gospels, reciting a verse from Saint John while she waited for the man who, after a hasty arrangement, would drive her to the hotel and take off her underwear. The image of herself naked, holy book in her hands and panties around her ankles, provoked a grimace that ended as a smile. Then she realised that she, Cristina the pessimist, was in a magnificent mood. A positive attitude – she thought – would bring her luck, and quite possibly the man approaching her now with a wad of papers under his arm would forget about his wife that night, forget the cries of his pestering children, and bet everything on a different woman, on a different coloured bedspread. That was how the most fortune came to pass: it had to be invited, provoked. It was the perfect night for adultery, for renouncing the insipid family dinner and the tooth brushing and the voice of the television presenter imposing itself over the snores of the woman he would have to share a bed with every night for the rest of his life. It was then that Cristina, proud and enthused by the sudden optimism surging somewhere in her, promised herself that if the man now
approaching her – his shape becoming clearer and clearer with each step – accepted his
destiny and slept that night in the bed of room fourteen, she would give him the best blow job
anyone had ever given him in his life.
He had the cup of coffee in his hand, an insipid coffee that, due to some strange law of physics, steamed despite being tepid. Beside the cup lay his fountain pen, poised to begin its day-long task of signing invoices and documents. Beyond the pen was a photograph of an actress, protected inside an aluminium frame. An image that roused positive remarks among his colleagues and had even earned a smile from his superior, Otilio Fuentes; an image he preferred to the classic family photographs and other decorative objects that, along with the usual work instruments, cluttered the desks of the Fonacot branch office.

That afternoon Ulises was meditating upon his chances of being promoted. Some day one of the guys above him, Jiménez the accountant or Gurrola the assistant manager, would make a careless mistake and then, just as new skin supplants the old, he would simply take his place. It wasn’t a matter of possessing some singular talent or being able to wax rhetorical, it was a matter of being in the right place at the right time, and being patient, reflected Ulises Figueroa, absorbed in his philosophising. He sat at a cold aluminium desk with semi-empty drawers: a desk, his first after many years of idling through useless jobs, of
always being the last in line, of eating tacos de canasta with soft drink, leaning on walls, watching the smart new cars of the heads of department cruise by, the cars of managers who only dropped in to work for two hours a day and earned ten times more than any clerk. His desk represented the only stone in the stream, the foothold he needed to jump to the other shore and, from there, run to a better life. A desk of his own was, without a doubt, an important step towards eventually managing the office as he pleased. Once he held a position of power, nobody could prevent him from smoking inside or turning up the volume on his portable television, or wearing sneakers on Saturday mornings when the office was closed to clients and all the employees of the accounting department had to turn in their accounts to the administrator.

Ulises got up from his chair and took a brief stroll around the neighbouring desks, passing as close as possible to Otilio Fuentes’ section before turning around and retracing his steps. That was his style, it was how he relaxed, getting a spot of exercise while the others kept on with their noses buried in mounds of invoices and memos. His colleagues were already accustomed to this brief stroll, each time they noticed it less and less; after all, everyone was the master of their own habits, and nobody, no matter how discreet, was able to keep them hidden for eight hours straight. “I think he has haemorrhoids,” Raquel Urbina – one of the front desk employees Ulises preferred to avoid – had commented once. “Cada loco...each to their own,” piped skinny Susana Olvera, who was in charge of certifying the authenticity of the documents provided by credit candidates. Once they had been meticulously checked, the documents were sent to the credit department. “I’ve got a knack for this job, nobody can complain, I always do my best to help them out.”

–Sit down, Ulises. Move your feet, lose your seat, Susana said to him in a preachy, sing-song tone.
—Why don’t they just chain us to our desks and only let us free for our lunch break, responded Ulises.

“Was that supposed to be some kind of complaint?” He massaged his beard as he examined Susana’s low-heeled shoes, placed neatly on the floor beside her feet. What was the point of wearing shoes like that if she took them off at work anyway? He liked high heels, nylon stockings and skirts that sat a little above the knee: a seductive combination that regularly provoked a light tickling in his testicles. Susana didn’t wear any of those things and as such she couldn’t really be considered a woman, deduced Ulises, for whom hosiery advertisements and billboards represented the closest a man could come to everyday eroticism. The only thing feminine about women these days are stockings and heels, he concluded, observing with disgust the sad figure of Susana Olvera.

—Don’t you like high heels? he asked, feigning disinterest.

—Of course not, Ulises, they tire my feet out. And anyway, my husband doesn’t like me to go out in heels. You know how it is, once you get married you can’t even decide how to dress yourself anymore.

—You poor thing.

—Truth be told, I don’t mind. When I did have to decide it was a lot of work. Besides, it’s not like I have that many clothes, I’ve only got two pairs of shoes.

—What about stockings? Does your husband let you wear stockings?

—Of course, it’s just that they run and you have to keep buying more. We don’t have that kind of money, Ulises, you either eat or you wear stockings.

—They’re not that expensive, you can get Cannon and Dorian Gray ones for twenty pesos.

—Twenty pesos buys four litres of milk.
–Or you could use knee-high stockings.

–What for? In the olden days nobody wore nylon stockings and people got along just fine.

“I don’t give a fuck about the olden days,” though Ulises. My wife is going to wear stockings and high heels, like Fuentes’ wife, like a real woman, not like Susana Olvera, thirty years old and already a lost cause. He returned to his seat, polished the photo frame with a moist thumb, and went back over the list of approved candidates. A refrigerator, a three-piece lounge setting, a television, surnames, first names that for him signified only anxiety and poverty. He had been the recipient of several loans himself over the years. So had Susana. In fact, every one of the workers in that office had been afforded credit in order to buy some piece of furniture or some domestic appliance, and at a good price too. He couldn’t believe it, how could he accept that Susana’s skinny milk-coloured legs were capable of exciting him? One look at those ugly, badly shined shoes with their shabby straps, forgotten there beside her feet, was enough to convince him that she was not a real woman. So why this stupid tingling in his balls? What was the cause of this almost electric sensation running through his skin? He flicked again through the list of fortunate souls who would obtain credit the following month, pronounced their surnames from Avendaño to Zamudio, trying to expel the increasingly acute image of Susana Olvera’s legs from his head. He checked all the pages to see if he recognised any of his colleagues’ names in the list. He would like to be the bearer of such good news, to approach the lucky person’s desk and say: “Congratulations, mano, you’re finally getting that new refrigerator.” But not this time, no colleagues were among the chosen ones, only names that were not even remotely familiar to him, mostly men, government employees, workers who had perhaps been dreaming every night about the day they would have a stove in their house, or that new dining table their family deserved. He
remembered the anticipation he’d had awaiting a loan to acquire the two armchairs that now furnished the living room in his Tacubaya apartment. “My God, what am I doing?” Although he refused to acknowledge his excitement, he was burning with the desire to get up, walk towards the document authentication desk, and look at Susana Olvera’s legs again. It didn’t take him long to decide, two minutes passed and...

–Hey, Susana, do you know if we have to work on Thursday?’ he asked her, his excitement increasing.

He positioned himself behind her in order to look over her shoulders and glance directly down at her motionless, cigarette-white pins.

–I don’t think so, it’s a public holiday, remember? Nobody is supposed to go to work, she said without lifting her gaze from the papers she shuffled like playing cards on the desk.

–I hope not, because I plan to have a good time.

Ulises tried to imagine Susana’s conventional panties, covered by the half discoloured material of her skirt: “I hope they’re Carnival brand, black, black like the probable spider of her pubis, like the taut little hairs under her armpits.”

–Lucky you. I’m going to spend the day washing my curtains; they haven’t been washed in more than ten years and I can’t even remember what colour they used to be.

Susana chatted without neglecting her treatment of the documents in the slightest. She underlined a name with red pen and checked again. A line with the red marker on the surface of a credit request meant something like: credit is denied owing to the fact that these papers are not in order, and every time Susana was obliged to use it, she experienced genuine unease. It moved her. “Perhaps I’m putting an end to the dreams of an entire family, just like that, with the stroke of a pen.” Despite her regrets, however, she never lost her firm hand, that sharp guillotine that was the product of ten years in the job.
Meanwhile, Ulises was looking at her legs imagining himself in bed with her, with a different, more provocative Susana, one capable of wearing high-heeled shoes, transparent stockings, and a stronger smelling but still generic perfume. After all it had been more than two months since he’d been with a woman, and he deserved that inoffensive fantasy. His loose pants hid the painful and unexpected erection. She continued talking, without noticing that he had returned to his desk and was observing her with suspicion and a certain incredulity, rubbing his anxious dick with his fingers, pressing it as if moulding a piece of plasticine. But he stopped, he couldn’t let himself get distracted if he wanted to occupy the office next to Susana’s desk: the office of Otilio Fuentes.

He tried to concentrate on his work, but the afternoon was hardly a quiet one: the workspaces brimmed with an unbearable murmuring and the employees made a din even lifting a coffee cup to their lips. From her seat at the front desk, overcoming a distance of more than ten metres, came the distastefully energetic voice of Raquel Urbina, whose role consisted of personally attending to aspiring credit candidates. Ulises knew that Raquel changed the tone of her voice when confronting a particularly obstinate applicant. “Nobody demands anything from me, pendejos, I’m not the government.” It was the most common of problems, although for obvious reasons it was also the most difficult to resolve. “I know it’s hard, but we’re not being paid to twiddle our thumbs” – Ulises thought, encouraging himself – “we have to deal with these problems on their own merit, it’s our duty.” More than motivated, he got up from his seat and walked confidently towards the reception desk. The third seat from the wall belonged to Raquel Urbina.

–What’s up? he asked, rubbing Raquel’s rigid back with his fingertips. On the other side of the desk stood an elderly man.
This gentleman doesn’t want to understand that we can’t grant him credit if his employer hasn’t registered him with Social Security, Raquel responded.

How many times had she found herself obliged to use that same phrase to deny credit? Ulises enjoyed the fact that, despite her hostile nature, Raquel had deigned to explain the motive of the discussion to him, and for a moment he imagined himself invested with sufficient authority to respond: “Raquel, authorise the credit please. There’s no need to waste any more of this poor man’s time.” However, only Fuentes was able to make a decision of such magnitude, and Ulises was forced to make do with a routine response, directed not at Raquel but at the old man who had set his hopeful eyes upon him.

—I don’t think there’s anything we can do about it, sir. What is it you’re requesting?

—A refrigerator, sir, it’s urgent. I was explaining to the young lady that I’ve been unwell lately and they’ve been giving me these injections that need to be refrigerated, you understand. If they’re not cold they don’t work and...

—Of course I understand.

Ulises lowered his eyes. At thirty-seven years of age he was incapable of resolving a bullshit problem like this. A man might die simply because he didn’t have the talent to occupy a position of greater authority.

—Look, here’s what we’ll do sir, I’m going to give you my address, where do you live?

—Just over there, close to the Observatorio metro station.

—Okay, while we sort your paperwork out I’m going to give you my refrigerator. I live in Tacubaya, in Calle Juan Cano, number 87, if you come on Saturday morning you can take it. In the meantime we’re going to do everything we can to get you the credit.

—The removalist will be expensive, snapped Raquel.
–Don’t worry about it sir, for twenty pesos they’ll take it for you on a hand trolley. I’ll see you at my house on Saturday. If you don’t have twenty pesos, I’ll lend them to you.

Ulises withdrew from the desk and returned proudly to his seat. He had the pleasant sensation of having relieved himself of his daily burdens: he could fly like a paper aeroplane from one side of the office to the other. “This is how it must feel to be powerful,” Ulises reflected as he caressed with his fingertip the lips of his beloved actress. By that time his colleagues were beginning to leave the office, except for Susana Olvera who was still in Fuentes’ cubicle countersigning the credits she had approved. Ulises took the opportunity to approach Jiménez the accountant’s desk and make use of the sole telephone made available to employees. He dialled a number and called someone who for many years he had considered his only friend: Adolfo Estrada. He felt like drinking some alcohol, just a little, and then, if things went well, maybe going to that bar where two months ago he’d met, what’s her name? Martha? Marlene? He wasn’t sure but he knew he’d be able to recognise her among the rest of the waitresses, a short little thing with black hair and a grateful smile who’d approached him that night to keep him company. He hung up the telephone, lamenting the lack of answer. He felt the need to speak to someone, to tell them about Susana Olvera’s snow-white legs, about the Kelvinator refrigerator a stranger would be picking up from his house on Saturday, about his projects and the ephemeral sensation of power. Aside from Adolfo Estrada, however, the existence of that someone was improbable. It was hard to imagine someone aside from Adolfo who would be interested in his stories.

Nevertheless, he was not prepared to let adversity defeat him. He put on his double-breasted, three-buttoned jacket with the padded shoulders that he’d bought on sale at a shop downtown, and headed towards the exit. Susana’s voice stopped him.

–Have fun, Ulises, you deserve it.
—How do you know I deserve it? he asked.

—Everyone deserves to have fun, today it’s your turn, tomorrow it’ll be someone else’s.

In the suburb of Escandón there was a somewhat weathered cantina that he used to frequent, years ago, with his friend Adolfo. It was called El Fuerte de la Colonia and it was in Calle José Martí, one block from Avenida Patriotismo. It was only a matter of walking ten or fifteen blocks and he would find it. Why precisely that cantina in a dubious locale? Why must he always strive and suffer just to obtain a skerrick of pleasure? He asked himself these questions often, although they never made him change his mind: it had never been easy for him to enter a place for the first time, which meant that El Fuerte was a magnificent choice, despite its remoteness. How easy it seemed to walk long distances once he was out of the office, he could even run if he had to. He headed for Calle Zamora, skirting the edges of Condesa. Whenever he had the opportunity he would walk through the suburb of Condesa, stopping to look at the two-storey houses, the stone cornices darkened by time and bird shit, the ornamental plinths, the octagonal arches, the black stone pedestals, the manicured gardens, the cafés and restaurants open into the early morning, establishments that he would never dare enter dressed in his second-rate jacket and cheap, glossy shoes. “How dare I criticise Susana, if I’m no better?” Ulises accused himself good-naturedly. Under his arm he held a bundle of typed papers that he planned to look over at home; if he was lucky, he might be able to withdraw one or two credits and recommend the old man with the vaccines. It was only a matter of finding a repeated name, or comparing the list of credit recipients with last month’s list to see if anyone had been a beneficiary two months in a row. If he encountered any of these two scenarios, the old man would have his loan. Meanwhile, what would he do without a refrigerator? Nothing, it was the same, exactly the sam. Suddenly, when he was on
the point of giving up – according to his calculations he should already have arrived at his destination – he found himself facing the cantina, with its aged grey brick walls and its freshly painted wood door, always freshly painted. Isn’t this wrong? How long had it been since he’d drunk alone in a bar? Though it wasn’t a habit of his, he would allow it this time because, in his opinion, today was a special day. “If you want to be happy you have to celebrate the everyday victories, no matter how small,” Ulises philosophised, for the first time finding meaning in the adage. To encourage himself further he remembered all those movie heroes who, unlike most people, preferred to drink alone, slouched immutably at the bar while the world collapsed at their feet. He was carved from the same wood and considered himself one of them, perhaps even better than them since El Fuerte de la Colonia was a real cantina and not a set in a movie studio. How many apparently normal lives, like his own, ought to be turned into films? He pushed the door with the palm of a hand marked all over with ballpoint pen, and boldly entered. He searched for the furthest table from the jukebox and ordered a drink from the waiter before sitting down.

–I’ll have a cuba libre, please, and don’t skimp on the rum.

–Don’t worry, jefe, we always mix a good drink here, the waiter responded.

The place had changed somehow, and it was difficult for Ulises to determine exactly how. There weren’t many tables and more than half were occupied. There were no women but on the back wall, next to the bathroom, was a poster of a woman in her underwear.

He felt like putting a coin into the jukebox but gave up when he realised that another man with the same intention was walking past him with a coin between his fingers. Never mind, he would have to make do listening to other people’s music. Next to the poster, disrespectfully, the members of a ranchera band were resting, looking sideways at their instruments: the faded wooden double bass leaning against the wall, the accordion, the guitars
abandoned in a corner. One of them, out of discipline, got up from his chair and headed indifferently for the table where Ulises was consuming his first drink.

—What shall we sing for you, patrón?

—Thanks, but I don’t know anything about ranchera music.

—What, weren’t you educated properly? the musician joked without smiling. Anyhow, we’re just over there if you think of something.

Though El Fuerte was usually an agreeable place, even raucous sometimes, tonight it was soaked in somnolence and boredom. Ulises drank for more than three hours, until he had accumulated sufficient energy to move somewhere else. He knew exactly what his next destination would be, and his mind strained to recover the image of the bar-girl who, months ago, he had dared to invite to his table. Would she remember him? Of course she would: “Somebody is always thinking of you, where you least expect it,” he told himself. He stood up and went to the bar to ask for the bill. This was a trick one of his uncles had taught him when Ulises was still an adolescent: skip the waiter and deal personally with the guy at the till, catch him unprepared and oblige him to add up the costs in front of you. A spectacular trick which, at the end of the day, seemed utterly useless. “If they’re going to fuck you over they’ll do it anyway,” he reflected. Despite considering it an act of idiocy, the fact of getting up when nobody expected it and asking for the bill at the bar still represented a kind of original conduct that the barflies would be sure to appreciate, something to make him feel different, to make him feel good, really good.

He wasn’t so drunk when he received the two five peso coins in the palm of his hand. He looked at his watch with the skinny hands and the suede wrist strap: it wasn’t past ten, which meant he could go on foot. Nevertheless, his house was almost as far as the bar. What if he just said “fuck it all” and went to bed? The papers under his arm represented a
compelling argument in favour of the second option. What if he just went home and masturbated thinking about Susana Olvera’s legs? It was evident that he wouldn’t stop, that he’d keep going. Six cuba libres in a row wasn’t something he did every day, therefore it was more reasonable to take advantage of that impulse and continue, to go out in search of that hypothetical waitress with the footballer’s thighs and the tiny hands. What was the risk? Didn’t he deserve some small reward after the remarkably human gesture of gifting his Kelvinator to a terminally ill old man? He headed towards José Martí, a street as dead at night as it was alive in the day, a street of locksmiths and markets, of cheap cantinas and papelerías, of schools and of small shops attended by old women with bovine movements and bald, sour-faced men. He walked slowly, figuring that six cuba libres was no small feat, concentrated on his steps, ignoring the pet dogs that growled behind iron bars and snapped at their imaginary victims. He turned onto Carlos B Zetina instead of continuing on to Revolución. The street was empty, the footpaths flanked by two rows of immobile cars waiting to be stolen, dismembered and sold at a market in the suburbs of San Felipe de Jesús or Buenos Aires. Ulises let his energy, unleashed by the alcohol, dissipate with the effort of a long walk. He crossed Benjamín Franklin and then Patriotismo, he looked at his watch again and then at the cloudy sky: would it rain? It might be best to turn back now and head in the right direction, in search of his bed, his uncomfortable but familiar pillow, and listen to some José José.

He was in Calle Pachuca, right where it intersects with Calle Michoacán. Behind him was Tacubaya, with its dark streets and Chinese café aromas. Perhaps the bar he was heading for had never existed, perhaps the waitress, and her smile, had never existed: reality was never where you expected it to be. A few blocks ahead, Ulises distinguished the shape of an
old lady that promptly disappeared, swallowed by the avarice of a wall. In its place, the silhouette of a woman took shape.

—A woman on her own at this hour? Ulises asked, murmuring to himself like a drunk. If his calculations were correct, she was standing on the corner where he would have to turn right. He was unable to confirm this, however, because once he arrived it was impossible to go any further. In front of him, wrapped in the smoke of her cigarette, a beautiful young woman fixed upon him her impressive black eyes.
III

That afternoon, as he watched the television and chewed the last mouthful of his Maizoro cereal, Adolfo Estrada looked around and wondered how it was possible that he’d managed to live in this place for so many years. Why had he never taken the possibility of selling his apartment seriously? Once he reached forty he was sure that everything would come to an end, and then it really would be impossible to make a transcendental change in his life. Despite the fact that taking the stairs was no longer as simple as it once was – more than three flights made his face turn red – he still considered himself a man capable of any kind of physical activity. The problem wasn’t the state of his body but rather the fact that most men of his age were already married with children and a stable job. “I’m on the verge of reaching that age when nobody will call me young ever again,” he thought, looking at the reflection of his face in the bottom of the empty bowl, lamenting that any other fortyish man could boast of having constructed a life by now, a life it would already be impossible to betray. And he, at his thirty-nine years of age, was still cultivating the image of the same woman, still inhabiting the same house in which his childhood and adolescent years had been forged, carrying out the same routine almost to the letter, a routine imposed by a remote sense of inertia and by the disconcerting impossibility of alteration. “How can I start something
different? Is it even possible?” Adolfo asked himself. He couldn’t attest that he was unhappy, or that he regretted to any great extent his lack of accomplishments over the years. Rather, he was bored by the fact that the days could still surprise him with the same activities, and puzzled to realise that he had managed to accumulate only a handful of friends – one of them being Ulises Figueroa, his high school colour guard companion – over the course of his lifetime: “What would I do if I had friends?” Adolfo asked himself. “We’d probably be planning to start a business that would make us rich.” Regarding the woman he claimed to be in love with, it had never crossed his mind to confess his feelings to her, nor even to imagine that anything more significant than an occasional greeting or dull conversation might transpire between them. “In love, do I even know what that means?” As far as women in general were concerned he considered himself an idealist; while he’d had a few bland flings as an adolescent, and in his twenties had occasionally come to require the services of a prostitute, most of his youth had been consumed spying on his neighbour from his bedroom window. Adolfo’s apartment comprised three small bedrooms, a blue-tiled bathroom with a bathtub covered in a layer of chipped enamel, a kitchen in which more than two people felt uncomfortable, and a living room of twenty square metres. As the apartment was on the third floor, his bedroom window commanded a view of the entire ensemble of duplex houses, as well as the diminutive garden designed for nearly two hundred families. He was accustomed to his stupid obsession and the fact that it should form part of his everyday life, like the private manias one cultivates with no apparent objective, only to find that, at the end of the day, they are impossible to eradicate. After so many years of patient voyeurism, he knew the most intimate details of his neighbour’s daily routine by heart, as well as the itinerary of her sporadic excursions. Judging by the time of day and the clothes she was wearing, Adolfo knew if she was heading for the supermarket, to some shop in the neighbourhood, or if she
was venturing to the Blockbuster on Avenida Taxqueña to rent a video. Intrigued, he observed her leave the house and wander through the passages and walkways of the complex as if she were just like everyone else: pausing at the kiosk to buy canned food and iodised salt, placing her beautiful feet where dogs sniffed the urine of other dogs, lining up at the tortillería like any one of the many other women who formed the human mosaic of the Francisco Villa Housing Complex. “How can she be standing there, in the sun, waiting for a kilo of tortillas?” Adolfo asked himself.

The Francisco Villa Housing Complex was six buildings of six storeys each, as well as an ensemble of flat-roofed duplex houses with wooden doors and iron window frames. It had been built in the mid-seventies to house the athletes who arrived in Mexico City to compete in the Pan-American Games. As soon as the competition was finished, the houses and apartments were sold at affordable prices and nobody, except the owners, took on the responsibility of maintaining them. As the buyers were mostly struggling middle-class people of humble means, incapable of undertaking a sustained renovation of the buildings, cracks and leaks began to emerge; the façades aged, the small gardens filled with dirt and dried yellowing tree stumps. The old national flags of the participating countries, mounted atop the highest buildings, slowly wore thin. Eventually they disappeared completely, leaving only the rusted flagpoles, mute and useless.

For Adolfo, Olivia’s naivety regarding her own beauty was difficult to comprehend: “Doesn’t she have a mirror?” Be that as it may, he would not let himself be fooled; he never imagined that the simple fact of their being neighbours, of transiting the same walkways or bumping into each other on occasional mornings, gave him any right to approach her, to introduce himself and talk to her, as so many idiots had no doubt done already.
And what about him: how had he come to live so many years in the same room – Adolfo again questioned himself – with the same posters and sporting pennants that had papered the wall since his adolescence? The poster of Farrah Fawcett and the photograph of his football team’s logo: the golden days of Cruz Azul, when they were champions three seasons in a row. He didn’t understand how he had let three lustrums go by without letting her know he was interested in her. Perhaps the fault was not his own but rather a condition of time itself, of the days that trudged along with their prudent and apathetic rhythm, only to fall on top of him unexpectedly, transformed into voluminous decades: homogenous time, without doors or palpable limits, in which adolescence was only seconds from old age; deceitful time, that only showed its face when one stopped to reflect upon it.

If one looked at it objectively, one might say that Adolfo’s parents were fortunate in that they died without suffering: his father suffered a heart attack coming out of the shower, one hour after enjoying a magnanimous dinner that included meat and frijoles con epazote. Months later, his mother went to bed after watching her last late-night television program, and didn’t open her eyes again. Both had been approaching seventy, and in neither case was death the consequence of any evident illness. Orphaned, Adolfo’s two older brothers (one a private contractor, the other a businessman) abandoned the apartment and made their own lives. Only he still locked the front door every night, like his mother used to do, and sat down at the family dining table to eat his food; only he still slept in the same narrow old bed, among the high-school textbooks and notes he’d taken at university.

He had decided to study veterinary science for two reasons. Firstly, he had felt compassion towards animals since he was a pre-schooler. Secondly, becoming a qualified medical surgeon would have taken close to ten years (counting professional placement and specialisation), and what was the point – Adolfo reasoned – of going to all that fucking effort
if someone who could cure a dog could presumably just as easily cure a human? For all his arguments, however, and despite how easy it would have been to obtain a veterinary qualification, he had abandoned university four semesters in.

It was true that the apartment was his property, he had inherited it and, if he wanted to, he could throw out all the old furniture: the moth-eaten dressing table, the wardrobe of splintered and melancholy cedar, the clothes belonging to his deceased parents – including a tin box that contained his mother’s nightgown and underwear – the chipped crockery spattered with burn marks, with which he had been eating and drinking since childhood, the utensils his mother refused to throw out despite their evident uselessness. But he wouldn’t touch a single object, certainly not now that he was a man approaching forty who had begun to need the memories; a mature man who would never abandon his home, who would forever urinate in the bathroom where the dressing gown worn by his father on the day of his heart attack still hung from a hook on the wall. Adolfo wasn’t someone who found throwing out furniture or adapting to new rhythms agreeable: he felt like he was inside a fishbowl looking out at an apparently immutable world, or at the very least a world to which he made no clear contribution. “How can people change things if it’s not even possible to reach them?” Even the dog that slept in his bed was a sickly animal that snored at night and suffered from painful constipation: a droopy haired, short-legged, slobbering, obese dog, prone to howling on cold days and vomiting under the bed. All of a sudden, Adolfo realised that the house had always had a sweet odour like cooked apples or rotten sugar, a smell and a dust that lingered on his skin and in his hair, that melted into the walls of his septum and into the fabric of the dressing gown that hung from the bathroom wall, forever and always, in that house.

He knew that his neighbour’s name was Olivia Sánchez and that her parents were Jehovah’s Witnesses, although he couldn’t say with any certainty what kind of religion that
was or how it differed from Catholicism. He also knew that she was in the habit of going to bed early and, on Saturday mornings, as a form of exercise, she would run around the Complex dressed in a white cotton sweatshirt. When it came to her clothing he was an expert: he was able to recognise each of Olivia’s items hanging from the washing lines on the terrace — he knew that the Sánchez family washed on Wednesdays and Sundays — and noticed, without effort, the arrival of a new purchase. He was also well informed about the times at which she usually got up to go to the bathroom: twice a night; once at midnight and again at approximately five in the morning. Aside from that, Adolfo was aware of the existence of several suitors whose feelings were never reciprocated, opportunists all of them, “pendejos” unaware of their own stupidity: “There’s nothing I hate more than men who aspire to what they don’t deserve.” Nevertheless, he felt neither jealous nor bitter. Quite the opposite: on the two occasions he had seen his neighbour in the company of another man he had experienced a sense of forced resignation and, after a brief assessment, he had arrived at the conclusion that at least a man would protect her from harassment. Nobody in Mexico City, and much less a woman, should risk walking the streets alone.

Adolfo no longer recalled the few scraps of knowledge acquired during his veterinary studies. At present, he considered himself incapable of alleviating his dog Dogo’s constipation, or even of inserting a needle into the animal’s hard, leathery skin. At the most, he preferred to dedicate himself to uncomplicated tasks such as grooming his neighbour Gertrudis’ Pekingese, or tending to the constant parturitions of the bitch that lived in the hardware store. His neighbours turned to him frequently, as most were under the impression that he was in fact a real veterinarian who, as an added bonus, charged peanuts for his services. He never confessed to his clients that he had barely attended any of his university classes and, as a result, had little idea about how the insides of most animals worked.
Nevertheless, Adolfo liked the way they trusted him and called him Doctor. Although he had never managed to get a degree, at least he fulfilled a function within his community, and was able to earn himself a few pesos a week. He often stopped to think about how much he would have loved for the Sánchez’s daughter to own a pet. That way he would have had an excuse to turn up at their home carrying the black bag where he kept his stethoscope, a few ointments, hypodermic needles and a multitude of little empty bottles that had once contained antibiotics and sedatives; to enter, if only once, and validate his hypothesis regarding the apartment’s décor; to become acquainted with the patterns on the wallpaper, the shape of the table where Olivia ate her food; to listen to the spiels of her fervently religious mother. Nevertheless, had the opportunity ever arisen, Adolfo would have turned it down. He was not sure he could ever summon the courage to get so close to the imagined bedroom, neat and perfumed, so near to the dirty laundry basket – paradoxically, Adolfo imagined, filled with immaculate white panties – and the four pairs of shoes she kept under the bed: the black boots, the ochre-coloured leather shoes, the grey flats, and, Adolfo’s favourites, the olive-green pair with the strap across the front. Of course he would never do it, what was the point of swimming against the current?

Adolfo heard the muddled growl of the dog, busy entertaining himself with a piece of carpet in his mouth, and remembered that the supermarket would close in a few hours. He put on a mustard-coloured corduroy jacket and a scarf that made little sense in a climate that rarely descended below twenty degrees. He unhooked the keys from the nail embedded in the front door and put them in his pocket. Before leaving, he went into his bedroom and, from the window, observed Olivia’s illuminated room. What would she be doing? He imagined her naked, stretched out on the bed reading a novel, crying over the death of a child or the misfortunes of the poor. He knelt down to stroke the dog and asked him: “Do you want to
come with me?” so that the animal wouldn’t feel he made decisions without consulting it. He went to the bathroom and placed his hands under the stream of cold water. The soap was Camay brand, the towel blue and rough-textured. One day he would throw out the toothbrush that had belonged to his mother – not today, not tomorrow, but perhaps one day. When he left the bathroom he tripped over his father’s body and saw the pale tense upturned face. How is it that nobody realised he’d had a heart attack, how did he remain sprawled there on the floor for hours while the noise of two televisions flooded the tiny apartment with its persistent chatter? How is it that he still hadn’t managed to rid himself of that damned image that assaulted him every time he turned to face the bathroom door? Adolfo buttoned the corduroy jacket and walked into the dining room. He couldn’t decide if he should just buy dog food or if he should do the whole week’s shopping all at once. He would decide when he was inside the supermarket, although he knew that once there it would be very difficult to avoid the temptation to push the shopping trolley idly through the aisles, dithering between one brand and another, hesitating over the pinkness of a label and the raspberried bottle of diet soft drink. Many times the store had been closing while he, still inside, lingered over whether to buy chocolate Quick or Milo. The latter was linked to the image he had formed of himself when he was a child. In those days, his mother used to buy the little container with the green label and, pointing at the athletic cartoon figure it sported, she would say to him:

–If you drink a lot of milk you’ll look like that when you get older, and no woman will be able to resist you.

–What do I want women for? the child asked.

–Every man needs a woman.

–I don’t, I want to live with you forever, I don’t want any other women.

–One day you will, my son.
–I don’t want to one day, I don’t want to be strong or have women.

Unfortunately, nowadays the tin of chocolate Milo was considerably more expensive than the tin of Quick, almost ten pesos more, which made the purchase impossible. Ever since he could remember, the supermarket had seemed to him like a kind of theme park. At the age of five, while accompanying his mother on the daily shop, he would wait until she was distracted and then hide under the tables of fruit, or among the sacks of lime in the hardware section. Like a soldier huddled in a trench, he would wait there until he heard his name called over the supermarket speaker, his name and a man’s voice pleading that he come back to his mother’s side: “Adolfo Estrada, your mother is waiting for you in the supermarket office. If you don’t know how to get there, please ask one of our employees.”

–Good times, Adolfo mused aloud, and without stopping to consider his less than desirable economic situation he decided that tonight he would allow himself a small luxury and buy a large can of chocolate Milo. He looked at his watch: he only had a few minutes left. He walked towards the front door, turned the knob, and when the door opened he found himself face to face with his cadaverous, elderly neighbour, Gertrudis Guadarrama.

–Good evening, I don’t mean to bother you. I just wanted to ask you something, she said, grimacing.

–It’s no bother, Señora.

–Tell me, you’re a doctor: what’s good for varicose veins?

–Garlic, Señora.

–That’s all?

–That’s all, he responded, glancing at Gertrudis’ ankles: two peeled eucalyptus trunks.

–And what’s better, spreading it on the skin or eating it? the old woman asked, disappointed with the mundane reply.
–Both ways, said Adolfo, rummaging through his head for some sophisticated remedy, a medicine with a complicated name, a recipe with eccentric ingredients, anything to make Gertrudis believe that he, Adolfo Estrada, had sufficient learning and authority to prescribe a cure.

He would have liked to explain to her that animals don’t suffer from varicose veins, and as a result veterinarians tend to be unfamiliar with that particular ailment: “Just imagine, have you ever heard of a rhinoceros with varicose veins?” Despite that, garlic seemed like a plausible enough remedy. Didn’t his mother used to say that garlic cured everything? Garlic, arnica, nopales and aloe vera: with those four things you could even cure cancer, according to his mother.

–My varicose veins are so bad that sometimes I wish I could crawl instead of walk.
–I understand, Gertrudis, just keep in mind that there are more severe illnesses out there. What about AIDS, or cancer? I’d rather have my mother alive, with or without varicose veins.
–May she rest in peace.
–She’s resting in peace, don’t worry about that.
–How is it possible that a good man like you still lives alone? I’m sure there are plenty of women who would give anything to have you as a husband.
–Really? I’ve never met any of them, said Adolfo cheerfully.
–The problem is you’re always locked away inside your house; go out, have fun, if you don’t you might regret it one day.
–I’m already regretting it, Gertrudis.
–You see?
Adolfo said goodbye and went down the stairs, thinking about what Gertrudis had said. Some children were playing football in a tiny garden encircled by a tenuous fence, the same area of sparse lawn and abundant dirt where he and his brothers used to chase each other as kids. He stopped to contemplate the melancholy figure of a yellow-leaved tree, and wondered whether it was a poplar or an oak. He had forgotten the names of the trees his father had taught him as a child, now all trees were the same: indifferent. If he wanted to reach the supermarket on time he would have to walk faster, perhaps run. Why not? Go for a run, get a bit of exercise: he had rolls of fat on his stomach and his skin was beginning to sag. If he didn’t do something about it, soon he would have the body of an old man. Before entering the walkway that would lead him to Avenida Miramontes and the ISSSTE supermarket, he looked up at Olivia’s room and was able to confirm that, at that very moment, her bedroom light went out. It surprised him that Olivia should go to bed one hour earlier than usual. Perhaps she was feeling sick, or just a little tired. “Maybe she’s got her period,” Adolfo speculated before breaking into a run and disappearing among the lights of Avenida Miramontes.
Rum had more than a cheering effect on Ulises. He felt as if his words and actions were cloaked in a new and peculiar meaning: any image or idea his brain produced could only be the fragment of some higher intelligence, some force that, without being entirely his, was inside him and propelled him forward. It was a fleeting sensation that illuminated everything with an uncommon clarity, as if things and ideas, matter and spirit, existed in a space in which he, Ulises Figueroa, occupied the centre – if only for an instant. And not only that: the abandoned and tranquil street, the quiet horizon of slumbering edifices and anaemic trees, the figure of that beautiful woman whose shoes gleamed upon the pavement like opalescent cherries, the placid babbling of thousands and thousands of televisions, all of this turned his thoughts inwards. He felt proud of having offered his refrigerator to the old sick man, he was also pleased think that he was, in comparison, still relatively young – despite his age, he was still only halfway. “I’ll live another thirty-seven years, and that’s almost a whole lifetime.”

What were his workmates doing at that very moment, when he was the freest he had ever been? What was Susana Olvera doing? The cards had been dealt, and tonight Ulises had
the best hand. He had no doubt, at that moment, that he would soon be made a manager. And then, naturally, he would never set eyes on Susana Olvera’s legs again. The woman a few metres from him, on the other hand, was dressed the way he liked women to dress: bright high-heeled shoes, nylon stockings, and a skirt that clung tightly to her thighs, thighs that were thick like her lips, like her round buttocks, like the sizeable bulge of her breasts. He had never been down this street before, and yet it seemed implausible that it could be a haunt for prostitutes. He looked brazenly at the reddish car: was there someone inside, her pimp? She was definitely a prostitute, if not why was she looking at him so coquettishly? Instead of approaching her, Ulises stopped and took a mental count of the money he had in his pockets. He subtracted the cuba libres, and the tip: he couldn’t have more than two hundred pesos on him. No one in this stingy day and age would go with him for such a pittance, he lamented, and yet he felt he had enough heart to give it a shot. What did he have to lose? Wasn’t today his day? They appeared to be alone. If only he could do what he had done with the old man, offer her his television or radio in exchange for that brief nocturnal service, say to her: you can swing by my house tomorrow, Juan Cano 87, and take my TV or my lounge suite or whatever you want.

She had decided not to let him get away, especially now those damn pigs were gone. Pleased with her good fortune, she observed the loose trousers and the bundle of papers jammed under his armpit, his gentle and enthusiastic eyes, the badly fastened tie with the horizontal stripes. She would go with him for whatever he had, she didn’t care if it was twenty pesos. She longed for the warmth of a defenceless man and the warmth of the hotel bed. A defenceless man, good right down to his bones.

–It looks suspicious to walk alone at this time of night, she said.
She wanted to convince him quickly. He remained in silence. It was clear that he needed more time to prepare a response. Cristina didn’t wait.

–You don’t want people to think you’re queer. Where’s your girlfriend?

–I don’t have one, said Ulises at last. I went to have a few drinks and listen to some music. By myself.

–Well I can imagine how you must treat them if they kick you out in the street.

–No.

Ulises took a step towards her; they were standing very close.

–Do you want to see my house?

–So that’s why they kick you out, the wandering eye.

Cristina relaxed. This wouldn’t be as hard as she’d imagined.

–How much will it cost to take you to my place? he countered, pleased with himself for finally taking the reins of the conversation.

–My place is the hotel two blocks from here, the Cadillac. You know it?

–Is it very expensive?

–Depends what you want it for.

–I don’t follow you.

–If you’re just looking for a fuck it’s a little expensive, but if you want to stay the night it’s good value.

Ulises calculated again the amount of money he had on him. Why did they say “fuck” instead of “make love”? He didn’t understand women, weren’t they supposed to have a little more tact? If he had been so bold as to mention his house it was because, that way, he wouldn’t have to pay for the hotel room, and also because inside a drawer in his closet he had
another hundred and fifty pesos, three fifty peso notes that he had managed – with great
difficulty – to set aside in order to pay last month’s gas and electricity bills.

Cristina, ever astute, had no need to ask about such matters: she had already guessed
that her suitor had no more than one or two hundred pesos in his pockets. Nevertheless, she
pretended to engage in negotiations.

– How much have you got? she asked.
– Only two hundred pesos, he said.
– Don’t worry, that’s all I’m worth. You’re in luck, what sign are you?
– Capricorn, but I don’t really believe in that stuff.
– It doesn’t matter if you believe in it or not, the stars affect you anyway.
– If you say so.
– It’s kind of like if I told you I don’t believe in the rain or the sun. You know the sun
is a star, right?
– Yeah, sure.
– And when it’s hot your mood changes, right? Me, I get a headache. It’s the same
thing with the other stars, except because they’re further away they only affect your soul.
– Maybe.
– I have a brother who’s the same sign as you, and he says Capricorns like blondes
better than brunettes.
– Hey, sorry, I’m not sure if I explained myself. I’ve only got two hundred pesos and I
can’t pay for the hotel.
– I already told you, the hotel is my house. You can stay for free, but only this once,
yeah? Just don’t go acting like some kind of pimp.
Although Cristina had her own room in Tacubaya, she experienced a certain pride in affirming that the hotel was her house.

–Of course I won’t, I really appreciate it, Ulises told her, truly grateful.

–They all start off that way, she said, taking his arm and pulling him maliciously to her waist.

They walked without haste, as if part of a cortège. They crossed the street at a weary pace, not seeing the old woman behind them who, obscured by the hollow of her doorway, blessed them with one hand in the air and her fingers crossed. “May God bless you and keep you, hija mía. You are not to blame for anything.” Ulises could hardly believe that things had worked out so simply, although he supposed there was nothing so extraordinary about it: a young man meets a woman, they like each other and they go off walking arm in arm. Wasn’t that an acceptable and logical narrative? An aroma of old flowers, of chamomile and cheap shampoo emanated from Cristina’s hair and skin and made him want to follow through; to arrive at her bed and kiss her like the girlfriend he’d had so little luck finding – his last romance having expired twenty years ago, when Ulises was still in high school – to share lovers’ whispers and tickle her underarms, and, finally, to give her his two hundred pesos as if, with those, she could buy the whole world. Wouldn’t such an outcome be the ultimate vindication of his optimism, of his triumphant optimism?

They crossed the threshold of the Cadillac, four stories of discreet windows, saffron façade and half-lit rooms. At reception a tar-scented man of chalky complexion scrutinised Ulises, more out of duty than curiosity. Cristina spoke to him as though she knew him well.

–Put it on my tab, she told him. I’ll pay you on the weekend.

–Of course, boss, we’re partners no?
–If I were your boss I would have fired you already, she replied, and a cackle escaped her lips.

They negotiated the staircase and entered a somewhat bleak, albeit clean and tidy room. Ulises compared it with his own bedroom, with his entire house, in which everything was dirty and in a state of disarray: the enamel of the kitchen stove eclipsed by years of accumulated filth; the sink choked with dirty dishes – even though he only ate at home two or three times a week; the bed always unmade, sheets scarred and stained with mustard and ketchup, aftershave, grease from his hair (“Why the fuck is my hair so greasy?”); the clothes sown across the floor, dead and infertile; the stiff socks, the spoiled necks of his white shirts. Only on Saturdays did his standards improve marginally, when that slight separation from daily routine made him realise that he couldn’t go on living in such a dump. On such occasions, exhibiting extreme caution, he would situate his favourite record atop the loyal old turntable (the José José record, the only one that, in his own words, had ever managed to touch his heart), and as he sang softly to himself, simulating the artist’s pained gestures, he would push the broom from one end of the apartment to the other, tidy his clothes into equal piles, and submerge the dirty dishes in soapy water.

–I don’t like José José, he’s monotonous.

That was Adolfo’s opinion. The two had shared intense conversations on the topic.

–You have no idea what you’re saying. That man has lived more than you and I put together, how could his songs be monotonous?

–He doesn’t write them, he just reproduces something written by someone else. His composers are the only reason he’s successful.

–You’re fucked up, Adolfo. So what kind of music do you like then?
–Instrumental music, I only listen to instrumental music. When you want to relax, meditate, it’s the best, you have no idea.

Where would he be without his José José record, the possession of which constituted one of his life’s few pleasures? He even had two copies of the same record: one to play, and the other to keep, so that he wouldn’t be caught off-guard the day they stopped selling them. That was perhaps the only time he had ever exercised foresight. Where everything else was concerned he was much less provident – in the paying of his rent, for example. Despite having resolved to do so several times, he had always found it impossible to accumulate two months’ worth at once. The same thing happened with the gas and electricity bills. Thanks to Cristina’s refusal to go to his house, the money he had set aside for those expenses would remain intact in the desk drawer. Had she accepted, he would have been in the dark for god knows how many days, with a dead stove and a cold boiler. He thought that, if he were a little more methodical, he would have organised his time better, saved up some pesos and made his room more liveable, into a place like Cristina’s modest hostel room.

–What are you looking at? Don’t you like it? she asked

–It’s so clean.

–What did you expect, a pigsty? My house is clean, too. Since I have to be poor, I might as well afford myself the luxury of cleanliness. You’ll see the dirty side later, when we turn off the lights. Or do you prefer to do it with the lights on?

The scarce furniture, the curtains clean and pleated – though a little shabby – the dustless wardrobe, the bathroom with its deodorant aroma and rough but clean towels, the bed, the stiff but clean sheets, the overly hard but clean pillows. The only thing missing was his José José record, then everything would have been beyond perfect: a woman with warm stockings, high-heeled shoes, a humble and impeccable room…All he needed was his
favourite song, the one that went: *Esta noche te voy a estrenar y a beberme tu amor de un solo trago*…That said, he didn’t think he’d miss the song too much: Cristina, searching under the bed, conjured a portable cassette player and a bottle of white Bacardi.

— I have my own bar under the bed. So I don’t have to put up with waiters, or leave a tip. And this way we don’t need a jukebox.

— If I drink any more I’m going to get drunk, I was drinking in a cantina.

— Even better. If you talk all night it’s a sweet deal for me.

Ulises took the bottle and poured a little into a plastic cup. Sitting on the edge of the flimsy bed, they drank and talked. She was in no rush to return to the street and face the unexpected. If things went as planned, she’d be able to stay in the hotel all night. He, too, was reluctant to walk home in the wee hours, alone but for the dogs that entertained themselves hunting rats and pursuing pedestrians. Better to take it easy, wait for the five o’clock metro service, even if he did only live one station away. He liked Cristina, not just her generous body and her dress, not just her whiteness – if she wanted to, he thought, she could have dyed her hair and passed for a gringa– but the fact that she refused to let him take any initiative. With her it was a matter of letting himself be led, of following the protocol. If only he had a woman like that of his own…Yes, a neat house, the manager’s job, his José José record, and a woman like Cristina – then Ulises would never ask anything of life ever again.

— And what do you do for work? she asked him, her lips wet with alcohol.

— I’m a company manager, I work for the government, Ulises lied.

— A manager? she asked, surprised. She was weighing up the precise meaning of the word *manager*.

— Yeah.
—So why don’t you have any money on you? You know what I think? I think you’re just another gato trying to impress me. I’ve seen it all in this room, even Presidents of the Republic. They get drunk and all of a sudden the whole world feels too small for them.

—Don’t think that way, it’s cruel.

—Cruel? But it’s the truth. What, you don’t like to brag?

—The truth is I’m not exactly a manager, but it doesn’t matter because I will be one, very soon.

—You see? Where’s the cruelty?

—In trying to destroy someone else’s dreams.

Cristina felt a pang of affection. It had never crossed her mind to try and hurt her new friend. Wasn’t it obvious she was just kidding? Most of her clients enjoyed that kind of banter; they accepted the game and even responded in kind, often with comments that went beyond a joke.

—Hey you, Capricorn, what do I care if you’re a manager or not? Feelings are all that matter, Cristina said before setting her painted lips upon the mouth of the bottle.

Ulises didn’t respond. He was enthralled by her neck, the little mole, the pale green branches of her arteries, the plastic sheen of the day’s sweat. Cristina placed the bottle on the floor and, playfully, raised herself onto Ulises. She forced him to lie down and bury his head in the pillow. She kissed him tenderly, clearly wanting him to forget what she had said. She unzipped his trousers and took the hard, willing flesh into her hand. She thought that, if her new friend weren’t so sensitive, she would have said something like: “Let’s pretend you really are a manager.” But she would commit no such indiscretion, nothing that might upset this apparently docile creature. She closed her eyes, and moments before her lips began their placatory task, a dribble of warm semen lashed her cheek.
She was still surprised that her mother should have an answer to every conceivable question. How was it that she always had access to such infallible wisdom? Sometimes the woman didn’t even require an interlocutor: she would ask herself questions out loud, as if she’d lost her mind, and then answer them right away.

—You’ve got to stay on the ball, Ofelia Sánchez explained to her daughter. You never know what kind of rubbish a Catholic might ask you.

Olivia, on the other hand, didn’t see the need for explanations. Things happened whether they were understood or not, and it seemed unreasonable to resist them. This included, of course, the life her parents had chosen for her, a life Olivia would never have described as unfortunate. Unlike her mother, Olivia didn’t have access to large reserves of adjectives, and she didn’t pay much attention to definitions of virtue or happiness. A monotonous life? For Olivia, the phrase didn’t bear much significance. In her own way, she had always managed to enjoy herself. She wasn’t frustrated by her daily chores, and in fact she found the routine somewhat purifying: “Clean house, clean soul,” her mother often
exhorted. She wasn’t accustomed to complaining, and accepted her family gladly. What could she achieve by doing otherwise? Although she had never travelled, she felt no sense of disdain for her city, nor for the colonia she had lived in since childhood. She had learnt to keep a monastic routine and go to bed early; for her, night was associated with sleep, and unless something extraordinary happened that was how it would always be. Every afternoon, after she had eaten lunch and cleaned the kitchen, her mother would extract from the desolate bookcase a volume of the Quillet Encyclopedia and dictate lessons to her daughter. She preferred to teach the girl herself, rather than allow her to be indoctrinated with ideas that contradicted their religion.

–Mathematics has nothing to do with saluting a flag, my dear. Let’s not confuse sugar with salt.

This was something Ofelia had said to her husband once. Arguments over Olivia’s education had become a common occurrence ever since Olivia had graduated from her third year of high school.

–I think we’re being unfair, Ernesto Sánchez had replied. Olivia needs to have friends her own age. Try to understand; she’s not a pet, she’s a human being.

Ernesto had worked on the railroads until he was forced into an early retirement at the age of fifty due to a spinal condition the doctors feared might be the beginnings of paralysis. They were wrong; not only had the retired machinist stopped experiencing pain in his spine, but he had also managed to cure his hunch by applying a strip of packing tape along the length of his back, from neck to waist.

–I’ll give you an example, sweetheart. If I were to ask a black man and a white man what two plus two is, what do you think their answer would be? Four, of course; even if they respond in different languages, the answer is four. But if you ask the same two people what a
nation is, they won’t give you the same answer. For example, if someone were to ask me that question I would tell them that nations, states, all of those things are meaningless, they don’t exist.

–And what’s that got to do with anything?
–At school they don’t just teach you what two plus two is, they put ideas into your head.

Ever since she was very young, Ofelia had set herself the task of constructing an orthodoxy. Her home, which she had acquired through a great deal of hard work, also functioned as a church, a refuge from the arid outlook of an overwhelmingly Catholic neighbourhood.

–They are good people, peace-loving people, but they are incapable of taking responsibility for their souls, Ofelia opined whenever she was obliged to speak of them as a whole.

Olivia was the only child of a long and apparently smooth marriage. She was beautiful and clever, although her skin and her hair…

–Have you ever thought that Olivia doesn’t look like either one of us?
–Why would she? her husband would grumble in reply, annoyed that his wife’s accusations always began with a question. That was her way.

–If she hadn’t grown in my own belly, I would seriously doubt that she was our daughter.

–Leave that nonsense for other people to think about; haven’t you got more important things to occupy yourself with?

–I’ve heard so many stories of nurses getting it wrong and bringing couples a baby that’s not theirs.
–Well in our case that’s impossible. I was there the whole time. Carajo, would you stop thinking about it? If we had more kids then you could spread your doubts around more.

–Do you know why I only wanted one? Have I ever told you why? Because people with more than one child are committing the sin of pride. They want to create, they want to be like God.

It wasn’t just the skin and the hair. Olivia differed in her rhythm, too. She possessed neither the mechanical and meticulous gait of her mother nor the aggrieved gracelessness of her father. She moved with an agonising and somehow elegant cadence, as if she were walking on a tightrope with the unwavering certainty that she would not fall. She had exhibited this confidence since childhood, and it was instilled deeply enough to ensure that she would survive not only the world of the living but also – with her mother’s blessings – the world of the dead as well. All she needed to do was recall the words Ofelia repeated whenever they visited a Catholic household, words that, despite being directed towards others, served as a balm for her own spirit: “We Jehovah’s Witnesses are convinced that when the Kingdom of God puts an end to all governments, many of us will survive just as Noah and his family survived the flood.” All of Olivia’s memories were bound to such daily sermons of salvation: the incontrovertible maxims her mother would brandish over breakfast; the scholastic discussions that took place between a valiant Ofelia and her idle neighbours; the constant squabbles that Olivia herself, due to her religious apathy, was ensnared in. Olivia didn’t see the point in being so strict in her own observances when her mother’s faith was clearly great enough to ensure the salvation of the entire family, at the very least. That much was obvious.

On the last night of the month of February Olivia was lying in bed, naked, touching her stomach with her fingertips. Her skin still retained the traces of warm water as she went
over tomorrow’s responsibilities, pleased to be at the centre of a room that, over time, had come to be as much a part of her as her own face, as much a part of her as the pyjamas she had decided not to use anymore because of the red stain that, despite intense applications of Zote soap, she hadn’t managed to remove from the crotch.

—I told you to use Ariel soap; leave your underpants soaking overnight and rinse them the next day, Ofelia counselled.

—That soap doesn’t do anything, the TV tells lies.

—Listen to me, hija. You’ll wear your hands out if you keep scrubbing like that.

That moment had signified a real change in the rigid programme of her day to day existence: the abandoning of the floral pyjamas, the patterns on the fabric so offensively similar to that of the wallpaper with its little purple flowers, so similar to that of her mother’s dressing gown, and the kitchen tiles, and the wrapping paper her birthday presents came in, and the jumpsuits of new-born babies, and the plastic cups she used to drink milk out of when she was little. Now, naked, suspended in mollusc-like respiration and concentrating only on the reaction of her skin, she took her hand to her pubis and touched the golden moss that flowered messily between her legs.

—Olivia, I want to tell you something. Today, while I was showering, I saw your underwear, and, well, I know I’m not the one who ought to talk to you about these things, really it’s your mother’s job, but the thing is, men don’t normally have much respect for women who use that kind of underwear. You know what I mean?

—Yes, Papá, I get it. I’ll remember not to hang my underwear up in the bathroom.
–No, mija, it’s not just that. I know it’s not something a father should do, but next time you buy underwear I’d like to come with you. I have experience in these matters, I’m sure I can help you. If you want, we can go to the outlet tomorrow.

–I don’t need underwear right now. I have more than enough.

–OK, well let me know.

–Sure, Papá.

–And I think it’s best if you don’t mention this to your mother. I find it strange that she hasn’t spoken to you about it herself.

–Don’t mention what?

–Our conversation. This is just between you and I.

–OK, Papá.

… golden moss that she covered now with the palm of her hand, pressing the hidden clitoris with one finger, remembering the only time she’d had sex with a man, a friend from high school whose face had already slipped into the mists of the past. Both had been sixteen at the time, and they had done it on the kitchen floor, taking great care not to make a sound. It was that mute midnight hour when any noise might have awoken the couple sleeping innocently in the master bedroom. Of that experience she now recalled only a pleasant pain, an intimate whimpering that had never blossomed into tears, a strange and tense flesh that her friend hadn’t known precisely how to accommodate, a smell of sweat and disinfectant, of urine and freshly boiled beans, the sweet flavour of his lips like fruit compote, and an animal excitement contained, tamed, by the fear of being discovered. It hadn’t been such a bad experience for a sixteen-year-old girl, she concluded now as she observed her stomach, her white thighs of migajón and natural yogurt. She admired her body, not from a sexual point of
view but rather as a svelte and functional object. She liked it, and this sense of self-acceptance flooded her with strength. Perhaps one day she would find a man to share her body with, a man who would improve upon the memories of her first time. If not, if destiny chose not to present things to her in such a way, she would continue along all the same, confident that matters of such importance were out of her control. After all, she was hardly alone: she had herself, her parents, and – by way of her mother – God.

Apart from that one night, she had never been alone with a man. While not unpleasant, it was as if the sexual act itself didn’t matter enough to her to warrant the seeking out of new adventures. She raised herself from the bed, her body arched, and propelled herself forward, testing the plasticity of her muscles. She walked slowly, feeling the touch of the smooth carpet against her feet, uneven in patches and worn thin through years of use. She turned off the light and stretched out once more on the bed. There was no pervading air of tragedy, no sign that Olivia might have interpreted as a bad omen. Her life would change in a matter of hours, but in her eyes there was peace, that camel-like peace even her own mother envied.

–Sometimes it seems like you’re not my daughter, Ofelia had declared one morning while Olivia was scrubbing the breakfast dishes.

–Papá says I’m a lot like you were when you were young, Olivia responded.

The soap lather dripped from her rubber gloves.

–If you hadn’t grown in my own belly, I’d swear you’re not my daughter.

Always the same sentence, the same words.

–Why do you say that, Mamá?

How she hated washing plates with mayonnaise on them. The white goo invaded the scourer like a cancer.
–You’re so different from me, I could never take so long to drink a damn glass of milk.

–I like milk, that’s all.

–Nobody could ever say they’ve seen me sleeping naked on top of the covers, either, understand? Nobody, not even your father.

–I don’t sleep naked on top of the covers, you’re making that up.

Now she’d have to wash the scourer as well as the plates.

–I’ve seen you, why are you denying it?

–That was only one time, it was really hot.

–If I hadn’t seen you being born I could swear you’re not my daughter.

–I don’t like it when you say that, Mamá.

She’d had many conversations of this nature with her mother, hundreds perhaps, over the last few years. And each time she’d retired to her room afterwards to lie crying on her bed, until an hour later the short, inoffensive-looking woman with dramatic glasses would come looking for her, repentant yet unwavering, reluctant to modify the militant tone of her voice.

–Olivia, don’t pay too much attention to what I say, you know what I’m like.

–Not even when you talk about God?

–That’s different, hija. God is above all of this nonsense. I’m talking about those times when I feel so sad I wish I could die.

–Don’t say that, Mamá. What would we do without you?

Things would continue this way for hours until both mother and daughter opened their arms seeking forgiveness, Olivia whimpering softly, her mother stoic, digging her chin into Olivia’s shoulder as she remembered the promises she’d made before God to protect her
family. Nobody, she thought, had the right to treat a child badly after bringing her into this world.

–When you were born I was used to seeing your father very infrequently: he spent all day on the damn train. Then, when they moved him into the workshops, we began to have a normal life and I realised that living together wasn’t easy, that we got along better when we only saw each other twice a week. When he retired I thought I’d never get used to having him in the house all day. That’s what caused the change in my mood. You have to forgive me, sweetheart. Of all the young women in the world I’d recognise you with my eyes closed.

–That’s not what bothers me, what bothers me is that you want to die. You shouldn’t talk that way.

–I say that, but I don’t mean it. I say it when I realise I’ve spent my whole life inside this house ironing your father’s shirts and washing the floors. God didn’t want this for us; I’m sure God got distracted somewhere along the way.

On the last night of February Olivia slept naked with one hand on her stomach, dreaming something she would never remember, something alien to the feelings she roused in the man who, for so many years, had watched her from his bedroom window, patiently cultivating a precise mental log of her movements, fearing that others might look at her with a love similar to his, thinking of her with a mix of vehemence and resignation, the way one thinks of a city one will never visit and yet, for some reason or another, one knows and inhabits within one’s mind, street for street, colour for colour.
Although he wasn’t in the habit of sleeping in, Ulises Figueroa decided to stay in bed an extra hour that morning. What was one hour compared to all the time he’d spent working for someone else? He settled his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. From his bedroom he caught a melody, the footsteps of a woman as she hung damp clothes to dry on the roof terrace. Noises after nine in the morning were so different where he lived; mothers would come home after taking their children to school and turn up the radio, safe in the knowledge that only layabouts would still be in bed at that hour. Ulises understood that he would not be able to enjoy his extra hour in bed, and so decided to get up. He was unsure of how to best apply his sleeplessness; there was nothing to do that he couldn’t do on Saturday. He wasn’t a fan of reading, either, and he thought newspapers were too expensive: people who bought them every day ended up squandering one hundred and fifty pesos a month.

When Figueroa finally got to work, most of the employees were already seated at their desks. Was this really happening? When he walked through the door separating the office from the public waiting room he realised that, while his workmates were certainly
inside, things were not normal. No one was seated in the right place. Raquel Urbina was at Ulises’s desk, looking nervous and sucking meanly at a cigarette, and the accountant Jiménez was embracing Susana Olvera. Only one of the service windows was open to the public and more than five people loitered impatiently in the waiting room, peering through the protective glass in the hope of identifying the employee responsible for attending to them. Ulises looked carefully at Susana’s pale face and he could tell she’d been crying. Something very serious must have happened for three of the four service windows to be closed. He approached Raquel in the hope of gathering information. She alone could be trusted to bring him up to date without resorting to euphemism or futile mewling. Raquel did not disappoint him. She was well aware that this kind of news was best served without delay or emotion, and before he had even asked the question she whispered:

–You won’t believe what happened. They just told us that Fuentes died last night. The old bastard’s dead, what do you think about that?

Raquel was chewing a fat piece of gum, and the rhythmic movement of her jaw seemed to mitigate the gravity of the tragedy. In reality, it didn’t matter much to her that the manager was dead; she’d barely spoken two words to the man. Her job required her to report directly to the accountant Arnuldo Jiménez Ponce.

–How did he die? Ulises asked.

–Nobody knows exactly. Maybe he was murdered.

In Ulises’s opinion, Raquel didn’t dress quite as badly as Susana Olvera. Even so, he was bothered by her aversion to the cold: she was always covered up in a faded wool sweater, even at three in the afternoon when bright rays of sunlight streamed through the windows of the reception area and drenched the desks. Although the office was air-conditioned, he felt that it was surely unnecessary to wear jeans every day and rug up from head to toe. Maybe,
Ulises thought, Raquel had horrific scars or some kind of skin condition that she had to hide at all costs. Maybe she had suffered severe burns as a child, and was now suffering the consequences.

–Murdered? Who could have murdered him? Ulises asked.

–Who knows. Anyone. In the olden days only murderers murdered people, now anyone can do it.

–But Fuentes wasn’t an important man, why would anyone want to kill him?

Ulises didn’t understand the import of his own sentence. But what was said was said.

–Ay, Ulises, you’re so naïve. Here, the only people who die are the unimportant ones.

–Do you know if they’ve chosen a new manager?

–Not yet, or maybe they have and he’s on his way. It’ll be someone we don’t know, as always.

–They should give someone from the office a chance, Ulises complained.

“Should.” Who “should,” exactly? Who are they, he wondered. Who, indeed, were these people he didn’t know, these people who nevertheless made all of the most important decisions in the office? Where were they, and what were their criteria for choosing a new manager? Shouldn’t they know that he, Ulises Figueroa, was an outstanding candidate due to his efficiency and longevity; that he was perfectly capable of resolving with dexterity any issue related to the Fonacot credit system?

–In your dreams, Ulises. They could kill ten more managers and it would never occur to them to promote one of us.

The murmurs and speculations continued. Susana Olvera extricated herself from Jiménez’s arms and, with tiny rat-like steps, walked over to where Ulises was standing. She
was wearing the same skirt and the same shoes and the same blouse and the same gold ring
she had worn yesterday: an unforgettable portrait.

–How are you, Ulises? I imagine Raquel told you…

–She told me he was murdered, Ulises interrupted. And that the new manager might
be here any minute.

–Nobody knows exactly what happened. Don Otilio didn’t come home last night, and
at dawn his wife received a telephone call. They told her he was dead.

–The old lady had to identify the body, Raquel added.

–Was he robbed?

–Nobody knows why he was killed. We’re collecting money to buy a wreath, a nice
one.

–What does it matter if it’s nice or not? retorted Raquel. Nobody’s going to see it.

–God will see it, and that’s enough.

–We’d be better off saving that money to buy a gift for the new boss, Raquel said.

You’d think after so many years we’d know how things work in this fucking office.

Having said this, Raquel returned to the service window. Ulises placed a hand on
Susana’s collarbone and smiled. In a certain manner, she had been responsible for his
meeting Cristina a few days ago, and he was grateful for that. How to let her know? How to
explain to her the ways in which that stupendous evening had changed his life? He was aware
that his meeting Cristina would not have occurred had she, Susana Olvera, not been the
owner of those thin milky-white legs that (despite their austerity) had motivated him to seek a
fleeting moment of reprieve. It had been so long since he’d spent the whole night with a
woman, so long since a woman had shared her time with him so generously, since he’d been
treated like the sensitive man he was – he didn’t give a damn if she’d been faking it. Cristina
was a woman capable of staying by his side until six in the morning, an hour at which Ulises usually awoke screaming, pushed up against a world that smelt of brick and death, with the sensation that he was just one more piece of refuse in an infinite garbage pile of memos and yellow pencils, a feeling of lime and cement in his guts, knowing that he would be alone until the day he died, remembering his mother’s wrinkles and the cologne his father used to apply in the mornings before taking him to school. Thankfully, the previous morning Cristina had agreed to remain by his side and help him regain some of his lost tranquillity, making that moment of awakening somewhat less inhospitable. Once out of bed she had offered to accompany him to his house. Then, without further ado, she had gone into the kitchen to prepare him scrambled eggs the way he liked them: seeping oil, with a blob of ketchup on the side.

They ate breakfast in silence, as if they’d been doing it all their lives. Then they went into the cold tiled bathroom and showered together, letting the warm water from the old boiler fall over them while they listened to the José José record. She said she enjoyed the music of José José and knew it well.

–If you like José José it means you must have a very big heart, Ulises said approvingly.

–Your house is nice, but it’s a little messy. You can tell you live alone.

–I’ve always lived alone. I’m used to it.

–Psychopath. Only psychopaths live alone, Cristina answered.

It wasn’t the first time she’d been to a client’s house, although never under circumstances like these: no alcohol, no money involved. She was there because he was a nice man, and he stirred something within her that she could only guess was affection.
Although, truth be told – she thought – she was there because she, too, was as lonely as a dog.

– Why a psychopath?

– You have too much time to think about depraved things. Don’t tell me it’s not true, this is one thing I have a lot of experience in.

Ulises gave up on the conversation. Cristina’s comment struck him as foolish.

– I’m moving out soon, to a better neighbourhood. In the meantime we’ll just have to make do. Forever just passing through, you know how it is.

– Are you saying that for my sake? You don’t really think I’m going to stay here, do you Casanova?

– Passing through careers, through jobs, through life.

– That’s true. Passing through the hotel…

– Our days are numbered, even though we’re not counting.

– I’d rather not know.

– Exactly. Why would you want to?

And despite everything, without doubt Cristina was the most important visitor he had received in his house in years. He knew this from the moment they’d decided to leave the hotel and head for Tacubaya on foot, as if the sleep-wrecked workers beginning to populate the streets and the cold chambers of their cars were somehow foreign to them, as if everything formed part of some alien commotion, the remains of which had been abandoned by mistake. Ulises realised that he would arrive home in the company of a woman wearing high heels, an extravagant dress – inappropriate at this hour of the morning – and carrying a vermillion bag. However, this didn’t bother him. On the contrary, he felt a certain pride at being the kind of mature man who could go out with whores any night of the week and not
come home until the following morning. It was no small feat, with only two hundred pesos in his pocket, to spend the night with a woman like Cristina. If not a great beauty, Cristina at least possessed an impressive personality and a sense of humour that any woman – Otilio Fuentes’ wife, for example, despite her elegance – would envy. Ulises was aware that Fuentes’ wife represented the most finely polished model of the woman he would like to have for himself: she always dressed in sober and probably expensive outfits, she used Paloma Picasso stockings, and she showed solidarity with the employees in a way that, to Figueroa’s mind, could only come from a woman of style. How did she show it? One example – the one that most impressed Ulises – was the way in which, approximately once a month, she would visit the office and distribute a lottery ticket to each of the employees.

–Let’s hope you win something and finally break free of this prison, Fuentes’ wife would exclaim.

–I don’t think of it as a prison, Señora; this is my workplace, and even if I win the lottery I’ll keep coming to my desk every day, Susana Olvera would reply, politely.

–Ay, mijita, you don’t know what you’re saying. Money trumps responsibility, you’ll see.

Once all of the employees had received their ticket, Mrs Fuentes would return to her husband’s office, quietly satisfied.

–Fucking crazy old bitch, Raquel complained. Who does she think she is, giving me shit? I bet it makes her feel all superior.

Ulises listened incredulously to the comments sparked by this admirable act of philanthropy. He supposed it was only natural: he could hardly expect anything better from Raquel Urbina and Susana Olvera.

–And you? Why are you late? Susana questioned him.
Behind him, his workmates were beginning to wander about the office, animated by their sudden freedom. They exchanged opinions on the boss’s death, lining up for the coffee machine. Some of them harboured the hope that they would be sent home for the day, thanks to the rumours and confusion. Susana’s question encouraged him, not so much because it set him up to tell the story of his great adventure the night before, but because the question itself brought back delightful and still-fresh memories: Cristina’s aromatic skin, the expertise of her hands rubbing his thighs.

Ulises lowered his voice. He wanted to make it clear that this was a confession.

–I’ve been going out with a lady friend.

–Lucky you, it must be nice to be able to afford those kind of luxuries. I can barely afford to eat at home.

–We like to go out for dinner, get something to drink, and we always end up going to bed a little late. You know how it is.

With the phrase “going to bed,” Ulises’s voice assumed a slightly malicious tone. He hoped to pique in Susana the desire to take this further than a trivial conversation. He hoped she would respond to his boldness with curiosity. If she didn’t, how was he meant to make her understand that he, Ulises Figueroa, was a man who led an interesting life, the kind of life she should pay closer attention to?

–Be careful, it’s dangerous to be on the streets late at night in this city. And you shouldn’t go too far from the areas you know; we’ve seen what happens.

She looked towards Fuentes’ office with her sad dog eyes.

–Don’t worry, I know how to look after myself. We always get a taxi from the restaurant.
—Taxis are dangerous. The drivers are all in business with thieves; if you’ve got nothing on you, it’s even worse, they beat you up.

Disappointment was knocking at his door. This is what came from bringing up his personal life with a stupid woman like Susana who was incapable of asking a single question. Who did you go home with? Where did you get dinner? Did you go out with your wife? A question, any question; some insinuation capable of unravelling the full confession. He had no choice but to resign himself to the fact that Susana Olvera was not the kind of woman who was interested in intimacies. She was just an insipid secretary, with no joie de vivre.

—You can’t go through life thinking about tragedies all the time. You’ll end up being one of those bitter old people who are afraid of birds. Anyway, yesterday I only had time to think about good things.

—Well while you were thinking about good things, Fuentes was dying, Susana stated.

The accountant Jiménez interrupted them. His serene and resonant voice made the employees realise that, in lieu of Otilio Fuentes’ presence, he represented the highest authority in that office. He had even more authority than the assistant manager Gurrola, who despite his position was nothing more than a highly trusted employee. Jiménez had dark tobacco-hued skin, and his nose – a thick, rigid nose – hung from his face like a doorknocker.

—We have just been informed that our manager, Fuentes, was killed by a shot in the back of the neck

His tone of voice was indignant, yet solemn.

—It was an attempted robbery. In Tacubaya, down by your neighbourhood, Figueroa. We’re all pitching in fifty pesos for the wreath. If you don’t have cash on you, we’ll lend you some from the till and charge it from your salary at the end of the month.

—I’d prefer a loan. Last night I spent everything I had, but it was worth it.
Jiménez ignored Ulises’s comment, and added:

–The wake is tonight. I hope all of you will take the time to pay a visit. I’m sure the new boss will be there.

–I can’t make it, Susana said hastily. You know I’m not the one who decides these things.

–I’m going with my wife, Jiménez Ponce replied. There’s no excuse when it comes to matters like this. Don’t think it’s convenient for me, either: nobody likes going to funerals. This is about moral duty.

–My duties are and always will be with my husband, my home and my children: that’s my moral duty.

–We mustn’t let family become a prison. We are not islands, Jiménez responded, somewhat disdainfully.

–It’s the prison God intended for us.

–God gave us the freedom to decide what is best for us.

–Do you know where the wake is going to be?

–No, but we’ll know very soon. It’s just a matter of waiting.

–Waiting for what? Nobody cares what we know. They only want us there as background scenery.

This was the voice of Raquel Urbina, who had returned with her scarf tied around her forearm and a cup of coffee in her hand. Ulises took advantage of her uncovered neck and observed it openly. There were no marks, no scars.

–You’re always underrating yourself, aren’t you Raquel? Susana said without changing her tone of voice, as if recrimination were part of a language she had been inoculated with at birth.
–They’re the ones who underrate us, don’t you think?

–They? Who are they, Raquel?

–I don’t know, the ones in charge. The ones who are going to appoint a new boss, the ones who, if they feel like it, can have you out in the street with a snap of their fingers. Who cares what their names are? I don’t care about names, I care about actions.

–Well we’ve all seen what happens to the people in charge, Susana Olvera noted. She regretted feeding this kind of argument at a time when she should have been in mourning.

–They get shot in the neck, she continued. And then they have to make do with a wreath.

Ulises also felt that the argument was absurd. After all, he thought, life was a big deal and the proof was undeniable: one night before, while Fuentes was being murdered for the sake of a few pesos, he, Ulises Figueroa, had been basking in the memories of a woman who…
That night an astronomical number of televisions, scattered across the length and breadth of the city, transmitted images of the holy Pope kissing the soil of a Caribbean island. This was—reporters suspected—likely to be his last visit to the American continent. Pope or not, he was unlikely to live beyond the age of a hundred.

The Sánchez family home was an exception, due to the fact that recognition of the Church and its chief apostle did not figure in their religious customs. As their neighbours followed the motions and watery, unintelligible prayers of the Pontiff on the screen, the couple reclined on the sofa listening to a record that brought back old memories. They took it for granted that their daughter would be home any minute to serve them dinner, as always: crumbed chicken breasts, mashed potato and a glass of Boreal brand milk. The mother, however, regrettably, was not enjoying the music as much as she had on previous occasions. She held her concave glasses in her hand, a recurring symbol of worry, and her jaw was rigid; the drumming of her fingers on the armrest of the sofa was another sign that this particular Friday would end badly. It was nine thirty at night and there was still no sign of her daughter.
She was never this late, especially not on Fridays, the night when the family would sit around the television after dinner to watch a cowboy movie – Ernesto’s favourite genre.

–The same thing always happens in these films: the good guys suffer the whole time and in the end they’re rewarded.

This was Olivia’s most frequent complaint when it came to cowboy movies.

–And why should it be any different? her father had responded once.

–I don’t know, to make it less boring.

–Do you get bored of eating, by any chance?

–No, but eating is a necessity and cowboy movies are not a necessity.

–When you live a quiet life and nothing much ever happens, then cowboy movies are a necessity.

The last song on the record stopped playing. Mrs Sánchez got up, bothered by her suspicions of a nearly ruined Friday evening, and went to the window. There weren’t many people in the walkways, the shops were all closed and the trees were as still as stones. “Damn Catholics” –the thought bloomed involuntarily in her mind– “if you hadn’t created this kind of world, Olivia wouldn’t be in any danger.”

–Why don’t you go out and look for your daughter, she demanded of her husband. Can’t you see I’m worried?

A little after ten, Olivia was hurrying home; she took the forbidden shortcut in order to return as quickly as possible. It wasn’t forbidden by anyone in particular, but it was a matter of common sense. The shortcut involved passing through a narrow and dimly lit laneway, enclosed on either side by six-storey brick walks. The faint penny of light that half illuminated the laneway came from the stores situated behind the gates of a small shopping plaza, usually closed at this time of night. The laneway was therefore impassable at night.
Not for Olivia, however, who in her haste had disregarded the dangers of walking forty metres in almost complete darkness. Under her arm she carried the two movies she’d hired for her father from the Blockbuster on Avenida Taxqueña. She was proud of her selection, as the last few Friday nights she’d found it impossible to choose a movie they hadn’t already seen more than three times. This was precisely why she was late: she’d gone all the way to Avenida Taxqueña in order to find something new. She knew her father would forgive her tardiness once he recognised the titles of the both films. One was called *Unforgiven*. The other was a Mario Almada film, which was enough to gain the family’s approval. Danger? What could seem strange or dangerous in a place she knew so well? It was like being afraid of getting out of bed to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The housing complex, the shops with their greasy counters and half-empty shelves, the trodden earth covered with gravel that reeked of dog urine, even the shady, solitary laneway seemed to her like an extension of her own house, an external accessory to its rooms.

–Would you stop thinking so negatively? Your daughter knows how to look after herself, more so than you and I.

Ofelia found her husband’s attitude discomforting – disrespectful, even.

–If you were thrown into the middle of the ocean you would drown, even if you knew how to swim, she said. I know my daughter is intelligent, but in this day and age stupidity is the highest authority.

–A true sailor always finds the shore, he responded, growing animated.

He couldn’t arm wrestle with a woman, but he could argue with one. And win.

–For God’s sake, Ernesto, don’t talk rubbish. Our daughter is not some marine experiment, and she shouldn’t be alone in the streets at this time of night. Tell me something, wouldn’t you rather she be at home than out there?
—At her age you were already married to me, and she was almost in school.

—Well I hope she thinks about things more than I did.

—That depends; there are times to think and times to act. If you think too much life just rolls on by you, why don’t you play the record again? The Rita Pavone one?

As Olivia made her way towards the laneway, she mechanically pressed her handbag and the two videos tight against her chest. There wasn’t much inside her bag; nevertheless, she recalled the reproaches of her mother (“You’re just giving thieves an excuse to rob you”) to which Olivia responded in self-justification: “Half of the women who carry a handbag have nothing inside.” She was struck by the persistent stench of urine that seeped from the pavement: “Repulsive people,” she thought. She held her breath, she knew how to hold it for a whole minute, she had timed herself. In just a few more metres she would be out of the laneway and her lungs would be released. That was when her eyes registered a solid, albeit spectral, figure approaching from the opposite direction. How did she not notice this before, if it was already so close?

—If the majority of people stopped to look at what they were doing, the world would be a completely different place, Ernesto Sánchez added from his armchair.

—Do you mean we’re only together because we didn’t think things through properly?

—If that’s what you want to hear…

—Things are the way they are, and if we don’t think them through it’s because we’re idiots, she said.

She wanted to turn back, but this seemed like an exaggerated reaction, perhaps even provocative. After all, a lot of people lived in the Complex and surely some of them were in the habit of using the laneway at this time of night. She heard a whistle from behind her. Did she hear it at that moment or had the whistle sounded a few seconds before? She didn’t want
to turn around so she hugged the wall as closely as possible, the brown bricks staining her blouse.

Only a few more steps and she would break into a run, she wouldn’t stop until she’d reached her apartment and fallen into her mother’s arms, and she would tell her mother how she’d felt so afraid, a strange and terrible fear that had erupted in a single moment: in the preamble of a glance, in the discovery of an unforeseen shadow that had appeared, suddenly, as the embodiment of a premonition.

–Only God knows why he chose this life for us.

–This has nothing to do with religion, if you’d married someone else you’d be saying the same thing. You think we’re different but we’re the same, just the same as everybody else. You should be ashamed, complaining about your life just like everyone else, I’m ashamed to be like everyone else, where’s the originality, damn it?

–We’ve been listening to this music for so long, aren’t you sick of it? Ofelia asked.

Her husband idolised Rita Pavone even more than he did Clint Eastwood and Mario Almada. Ofelia wanted to hurt him, to make him realise that she didn’t need to resort to threats or insults in order to demonstrate her contempt. For a woman, it was so easy to hurt a man: it was enough to tread on his dreams.

–I prefer to pretend and make do with the little I’ve got, Ernesto responded, already regretting having taken the bait.

It would be the same story the next day, and the next, he thought.

–You didn’t answer my question, she insisted. Aren’t you sick of this music?

–Sometimes I get sick of the sound of your voice.

–My voice will be heard eternally, because it belongs to the Kingdom of God. My voice is better than your music.
—Damn it, woman, at least my music isn’t eternal.

She didn’t get a chance to see the face of the man who blocked her path, because other arms fastened around her from behind and threw her to the ground. She tried to cry out but she had missed her opportunity. Now she could only pray, and hope that once her aggressors discovered her handbag was empty they would leave her alone. This wouldn’t be the case; she knew this as soon as she felt a hand beneath her skirt pulling her underwear off in one violent motion. She understood that the intermittent pain she felt in her buttocks was a man digging his sharp teeth into her skin. When she finally managed to scream the noise was weak, but it was enough to unnerve one of them; he kicked her in the face, splintering her cheekbone. In spite of the violence, the silence was imperturbable. It was like the hissing of bodies pushing through hay, or the sound of a fist against a sack of wool. Despite the blow to the face Olivia tried to turn her body to one side, to kick her feet, to see the faces of her assailants. There were three of them, maybe four, and one of them was opening her legs now, grabbing her thighs with his bony fingers. She felt the pain enter her vagina like sharp stone, a pain that surpassed even that of her broken cheekbone. She cried out again but this time she was not punished; on the contrary, the arms loosened about her, the weight of the body against her back diminished and she was able to turn herself, slowly, lift her knees, compress her body until it disappeared, but the men were still there and now it was much easier for them to manipulate her, to lie her on her back, to open her legs again and push their cock into that cave made slick with the blood of its own walls, one of them even tried to kiss her while he squeezed her breasts with his hands, kissing her first on the neck and then on the mouth, an abhorrent and untimely kiss that the others celebrated with sniggers and that Olivia managed to kill, clamping her teeth with unanticipated strength and cutting open the lips of her aggressor; he began to hit her with his fists in retaliation, bathing Olivia’s breasts in the
stream of blood that dripped from his mouth. He didn’t succeed in killing her because the narrow passageway was filled with the high-pitched howls of two women screaming, cries that Olivia didn’t hear because her mind was fixed on one place and one objective only: biting that piece of flesh as it were the very body of her killers, releasing with that act all her anger, biting until the skin, the eyes, the bones of those motherfucking hijos de la chingada had turned to dust and disappeared forever.

–I’d prefer to watch the television, I wouldn’t mind seeing what the Pope has to say, maybe he has something interesting to tell us, Ernesto said.

This was the final move in his game plan: praising the enemy, showing his wife that he, too, could cross the line.

–You can’t see words, don’t be silly, she continued, although her thoughts were no longer with her husband but with her daughter’s increasingly blatant absence.

–I want a glass of milk.

–Go and look for your daughter, Ofelia demanded. Go to the bus stop and wait for her there.

–You’re right, Ernesto conceded, glancing at his watch.

He took his corduroy jacket from the rack by the front door. Before leaving, he went to the refrigerator and drank a glass of milk. Why did they insist on drinking fat-free milk? It seemed like a waste of money, buying milk that didn’t taste like milk. He felt the same way about diet cola and soy meat. He closed the refrigerator door and, at that moment, heard several knocks at the door. It couldn’t be Olivia, they both deduced: their daughter never forgot the key. Ernesto Sánchez left the glass of milk on the formica bench and went to the dining room, where his wife was standing with her back to him. She turned around and looked at him in fear. If it wasn’t Olivia, then something bad had happened. She hurried to
the door and flung open the lock. The moment she saw the red, horrified face of her neighbour she knew that the life of her family would never be the same again.
Adolfo awoke that morning with the curious sensation of being the same as ever. Not a new man, not someone prepared to write a new page in the history of his community, but exactly the same as ever: not a millimetre taller nor a gram heavier. And, as he did every morning, he recalled the amount of money he had in his bank account and calculated approximately how long it would take him to spend it. Perhaps three more months, and then the necessity of looking for a job would lead him to get up earlier, buy the newspaper and browse through the classifieds, visit his brothers, praying that one of them would have some position for him, knock on the doors of all the veterinary clinics in the area offering his services as a dog groomer or medical assistant, even offer to walk his neighbours’ dogs in exchange for a few pesos. That morning there had been a big fuss in the Complex and the noise had reached his bedroom, waking him an hour earlier than usual. Drowsily, he set to planning the cuts he would make to his daily spending: he would stop buying corn flakes and would swap out his Pétalo toilet paper for a cheaper brand, maybe Vogue; he would stop washing his clothes with Ariel detergent and would buy a gigantic bag of Roma soap; he would say goodbye to his
little indulgences, to the Clavel condensed milk and the boxes of hot cakes and the frozen pizzas. He noticed the alarm clock and thought of Olivia, of how he would like to touch her warm sheets at that time of morning: what would those sheets smell like? He closed his eyes and imagined his hands infused with the warmth of her recently abandoned bed. He imagined a scent of shampoo and urine, of freshly amputated flowers still moist from the morning cold. He had grown accustomed to possessing her only in this way, to conversing with her with his eyes closed – “Would you like me to take your shoes off, my love? You must be so tired” – smelling her from a distance, inventing the necessary elements in order to craft a simple piece of theatre, and then masturbating. Who washed her underpants? Did she use rubber gloves when she washed the pots and dishes? And afterwards, what kind of moisturiser did she apply to her skin? Atrix? Ponds? Maybe Anabella? Did she have scars on her knees?

He heard Dogo scratching at the door, half-asleep and confused, demanding his morning walk an hour earlier than expected. Why the insistent, idiotic chatter outside his apartment door? He got out of bed in a bad mood and was affronted by the dog’s gestures of delight, its tail wagging like a ceiling fan as it scrabbled its paws against the doorframe. Adolfo looked towards Olivia’s bedroom from his window and was surprised to find her curtains closed: below, a man carried a gas cylinder on his back, another was pushing a plastic box along with his foot, and a third, dressed in a tracksuit, was running in circles on the grass, moving his arms about with apparently gymnastic intentions; nothing new there, so why that one extraordinary detail?

The night before, Adolfo had arrived home a few minutes before midnight. He’d been out to look for his friend Ulises Figueroa, and had waited for three hours on the patio of his Tacubaya tenement. He’d spent so long waiting because he had nothing else pressing to do and didn’t feel like watching television. Nothing pressing, that is, except run to the metro.
station ten minutes before twelve and try to catch the last train, go home, make himself some scrambled eggs with salsa verde, and take Dogo for a quick walk. It had been almost a month since he'd seen Ulises, although his friend had left several messages for him at his brother’s house.

–Your friend Ulises has been calling you, and last time he was kind of drunk. Why don’t you tell him to stop being a jerk?

–He hardly drinks. Did he tell you what he wanted?

–Just bullshit stuff, how long it’s been, things are going really well for him, crap like that. If he wants to talk, he should find a damn woman…

The dog lifted a leg, threatening to urinate on the worm-eaten doorjamb. “I’m coming, I’m coming, cabrón perro,” Adolfo muttered, accustomed to this kind of blackmail. He put on his brown robe and slipped his feet into the old pair of slippers that, like almost everything in that house, had also belonged to his father. He turned the door handle and, with a friendly kick, pushed the dog into the hallway. He went out after him, but before he could reach the stairs the voice of Gertrudis stopped him in his tracks. “What the hell does this woman want now?” Adolfo thought. He wouldn’t be surprised if she turned out to be the cause of the hen-like clucking and murmuring that had forced him to get up at the wrong time. Why, if his parents were already resting in their graves, must he still suffer the presence of old people?

–A tragedy, Señor Adolfo!

The cries of her granddaughter prevented Gertrudis from elaborating on this exclamation:

–Abuela, it’s on the TV again!

–Señor Adolfo, go back inside and turn the television to channel two!
–What’s going on? Why channel two? Adolfo asked the old woman, who ignored him and went after her granddaughter.

Did this have something to do with the damn Pope’s visit, again? Dogo raced down the stairs, certain that Adolfo would follow, but instead Adolfo went back inside his apartment, briskly crossed the living room, and turned on the television. As long as it had nothing to do with a Papal mass he would try to remain calm. What reasons could Gertrudis possibly have for believing that this news would be of interest to him? He flicked the control and began to fiddle with the antennas until there was a more or less legible image. The dog had returned and was whining in the doorway, compelling Adolfo to turn the volume up. He calculated the amount of money he spent on dog food every week, and didn’t hesitate to add this to the list of wasted expenses: a packet of Pedigree cost up to thirty pesos. They would go back to bones and scraps from the butcher’s, like when his parents had been alive. The image became clearer and Adolfo recognised the skinny trees and cheap metal fences and sad lawns he had played among as a child; he saw the macabre and aggrieved faces of several neighbours and the stupid, authoritative countenance of a policeman being interviewed by some television reporter. It was a low-ranking policeman, babbling explanations while the camera focused in on the image of a stretcher that two men were lifting off the ground to place in the ambulance. On top of the stretcher lay a motionless woman, covered up to her chest in a white sheet.

–It’s the muchachita who lives here across from us, Señor Adolfo, Gertrudis said from the hallway.

She didn’t dare enter, but peered curiously into the apartment.

–Who? he asked.
He was paralysed, eyes fixed on the television screen, his stomach knotted and his heart drowning in blood.

–The daughter of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

–Olivia.

–Yes, she was raped in the laneway. I’ve been pestering them for years to put some streetlights down there. Let’s see if they finally listen to me now.

–Is she dead? he asked.

Again and again, the image of the stretcher entering the ambulance returned to the screen.

–No, she had her eyes open when they took her away. She’s not dead, that’s for sure, although she might have gone mad. It’s not easy to get over something like that. And besides, the ambulance took over an hour to arrive. All day I hear goddamn ambulance sirens, but when you need them who knows where they are.

–Who was it?

–Some lowlifes, I don’t think they were from the Complex. What they do know is that there were three of them, a neighbour saw them, or saw their shadows anyway. Do you think it has anything to do with her parents being Jehovah’s Witnesses?

–Yes, it’s God’s way of punishing them, Adolfo said, surrendering to the idiotic current of the conversation.

–Did you know that they, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, think only a few people will go to heaven?

–No, I didn’t know that.

–And the few people who’ll go to heaven will be from their sect, they have to be Jehovah’s Witnesses. How nice for them. They don’t believe in the Holy Trinity, either…
–Do you know where they took her, Señora?

–The Cruz Roja took her, but I don’t know where to.

–And her parents?

–You should have heard the cries of her mother, it would have broken your heart. I pray to God that nothing like that happens to my granddaughters. Whenever they leave the house I bless them and say a prayer: La Magnífica. You’ll laugh at me, Señor Adolfo, but let me tell you, nothing has ever happened to them. We might not be going to heaven, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but at least here on Earth nothing terrible has happened to us.

By the time Adolfo managed to pull himself together and stand up, Gertrudis had left and the dog, desperate now, had left an enormous puddle of urine in the bathroom. Adolfo heard Gertrudis praying in the hallway, and the squeals of a little girl calling her. If he had been with Olivia nobody would ever have laid a hand on her: he, who had dreamed so many nights of protecting her, of fighting off her fictional aggressors. He even liked to imagine himself with him father’s rifle, shooting at all the men who came near her. He would shoot them in the head, watching with pride as their brains splattered against the concrete; he would shoot them in the knees, in the eyes. It was impossible for him to accept that he had been so uninvolved. Maybe if he hadn’t stayed so long at Ulises’s house, standing there like an imbecile, feeling no sense of foreboding, he would have noticed Olivia’s absence and gone out to look for her, to watch over her from a distance, to act as her bodyguard and accompany her to her door. Surely his heart would have given him some sign, even the smallest hint, enough for him to go to her aid and kill, tear apart with his bare teeth. It was as if destiny or some supernatural hand had decided to keep them apart because it knew that he was the only one capable of preventing that crime. He punched at the plaster wall with his fist until his knuckles hurt, the dog watching him fearfully from his sanctuary under the bed. Then he
threw himself onto the mattress, face up – sobbing, and imagined himself destroying the bodies of her rapists, shooting them in the testicles, opening their backs up with ice-picks and extracting the pulp from inside their bones, kicking them in the face until their noses broke.

He went to the window and took in the view, the room where nothing would be the same ever again, the pedestrians unconnected to the tragedy that had just occurred, the women discussing the minutiae of the incident that had also changed his own life. There he was, immobile, trying to place his ideas in order and contain his hatred. Then, as if lit by a spotlight, the truth leapt into sight. It was not a truth that he was able to confront directly, much less translate into words, but it was a kind of certainty, engendered in his subconscious, which from that moment on would drive his actions in a single direction. And although he was reluctant to accept that such a thing had occurred to him, the idea was to take permanent root in his thoughts: if he had never had the strength of will to approach Olivia before, now, after what had happened, things would be different. She was alive and he had only to run to her side.

He dressed himself as well as he could, in a white shirt he’d bought in instalments at Hecali and his black cashmere trousers, and took with him a wool sweater in case the wind came up later. He had decided to go to the Sánchez’s home and offer them his help. He would present himself at their door and they would know immediately – through that intuition all parents have that allows them to recognise what is good for their children and what is not – that he, Adolfo, was there to make their lives easier.

Just as he was about to leave, Getrudis drew close to the door – it was as if this were some kind of curse he might never escape – which had been left open and was swinging in the gusts of wind that came and went through the bedrooms.

–I found out where the muchachita was sent. I could tell you were interested.
—Yes, I am interested.

This changed his plans. First he would go to the hospital. He needed to know what kind of state she was in.

—She’s in the public clinic, on Calzada del Hueso. Last night they took her to the Cruz, but her father has insurance so now they’re looking after her there.

—I appreciate it, Gertrudis.

—I’m praying for her, it doesn’t matter if her mother thinks we Catholics won’t be chosen.

—Won’t be chosen? murmured Adolfo, caught off-guard by the old woman’s comment.

—Of course we will! Gertrudis continued. We’re all children of God, for Christ’s sake. Our acts will decide whether or not we join the good Lord in heaven, only our acts.
IX

Several nights had passed since he’d met her, in this very place, and now he was back. It was not a hasty decision, but rather the result of a persistent compulsion that he had resisted only because he hadn’t wanted to return empty-handed. Now, however, he had a fortnight’s pay in his pocket: six two-hundred peso bills, brand new and shiny, handed to him by the accountant Jiménez mere hours earlier. He had even braved the late-afternoon queue that formed in front of the till twice a month and asked Raquel Urbina for an advance on his next month’s pay.

—What do you want it for? Raquel had asked him.

—For a woman.

Ulises had a feeling the advance would be denied, that Raquel would consider his excuse frivolous. This was only natural, thought Ulises, since nobody would ever spend a peso on a woman like her: not on Susana, not on Raquel, and much less on Señorita Reyna. How could he expect them to understand his needs?

—A woman? What do you mean?
–I’ve made a booking at a restaurant, I’m taking a woman to dinner. It’s a really nice restaurant, in Condesa.

–No chance, you’ll have to wait until next month. If we give you an advance we’ll have to give everyone an advance, like me for example, and that’s impossible. The things men will do for a bird.

–This isn’t just any bird.

–Be careful, Ulises. Don’t waste your money, don’t get ahead of yourself.

He’d been standing on the street corner for more than half an hour, and it looked different from the way he’d pictured it. His memory wasn’t much help to him, and his surroundings were confusing. Could he be in the wrong place? No, this was definitely the spot, although perhaps not the right day. Cristina probably only came here once or twice a week, Figueroa deduced, dismissing the possibility that she might be in bed with somebody else, some nobody who, like him, needed her body and her company. He felt uncomfortable with the possibility that Cristina had deceived him, that in reality she would take anyone with two hundred, one hundred, even ten pesos back to the hotel with her.

From his station in the lonely Calle Zamora, Ulises could hear the sporadic humming of vehicles as they raced across the Circuito Interior towards Chapultepec. A few steps from the barrio of Tacubaya, close to where it intersected with Escandón, he dithered – as he had the first time – between going home and waiting for fortune to manifest itself once more. It couldn’t have been later than ten thirty when the ridiculous barking of a dog made his nerves jump. An old lady held a lead that was tied around the animal’s neck. She smiled, as if she took it for granted that her dog would strike anyone as humorous rather than menacing.

–Forgive him, but this is his territory, and you know what animals are like: they don’t mince words.
Don’t worry about it, Señora. Does your dog bite? Ulises inquired, although the question he would have liked to ask was very different: “Do you by any chance know of a woman…”

Not at all, he’s as gentle as a lamb. But what am I saying? I shouldn’t be confessing that to you, what if you’re a thief?

I’m an honest man, Señora.

I don’t doubt it. But you know what it’s like. The things I’ve seen here on this very corner.

Do you live nearby?

Yes, in that house, the old woman said.

She pointed towards a two-storey building with a pink façade and vaguely oriental detailing.

But the truth is I shouldn’t be telling you so much about myself. What if you have evil intentions?

I told you, I’m not a thief. I’m just waiting for someone.

Be careful, you don’t want people to think you’re here doing business.


Entirely unintentionally, the conversation had taken precisely the turn he’d been hoping for.

Well, a certain bird of the night sometimes perches on this corner.

What do you mean? A murderer?

Not exactly, the old woman murmured. Let’s say this is a woman who hasn’t gotten close enough to God.

You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, Señora. That’s the easy way out.
—At my age, it’s the years that are suspicious, not me. Do you read the Bible, young man?

Ulises felt uncomfortable. He hadn’t come to talk about the Bible, although to be honest he wasn’t sure exactly what he planned to say to Cristina, were he to find her. Perhaps they would just exchange a few words, and she would leave. As far as God was concerned, he didn’t have too much to say, but he was convinced that he would start thinking about Him when he was older. Anyway, why read a book in order to learn something everybody already knew? If the Bible talks about anything, it’s God – via infinite circumventions and parables, via gossip and old stories, but essentially it talks about God, Ulises thought as he observed the small animal straining at its lead, headed to urinate on a car tyre. He, too, had once had a dog, a large dog with a pointed muzzle that used to sleep under the sheets at night. One day he awoke to find the animal rigid and cold beside him. “He died of old age,” Ulises told his father in consolation, and his father put the dog in a big black plastic bag and carried it to the garbage truck. Years later, when even the animal’s name had escaped his memory, Ulises wondered how many hours he must have slept embracing the dog’s corpse. “It must have been quite a few, because in the morning he was stiff as a board.”

—Well, young man, I’ll let you wait for whomever it is you’re meeting. Good night, the old lady concluded, tugging at the dog’s lead.

Ulises stayed for another thirty minutes before retracing his steps. It was time to face the void, that ineluctable desperation that surged through him every time life disappointed him. He considered visiting Adolfo Estrada, but quickly rejected the idea. A visit at this hour would mean spending the night away from home. What if he took a taxi? That way he wouldn’t be restricted to the metro timetable. But how did he even know Adolfo would be home? So many weeks had passed since they’d spoken, Ulises thought, that it wouldn’t
surprise him if Adolfo had changed his habits. He placed a hand into his pocket and pulled out the bundle of bills. He counted them beneath the anaemic light of a streetlamp: in his palm lay the total worth of the past fifteen days of his life. Who decided the price of a man’s labour, he wondered. He put the bills back in his pocket and, lifting his gaze to continue on his way home, found himself face to face with Cristina.

—Look what the good Lord sent us, she said.

At first Ulises thought he’d confused her with another woman, but after the first startled impression had worn off he recognised her enormous eyes and the cynical expression on her lips. She wasn’t as pale as he remembered, nor as tall, and this time she wasn’t alone: a man with a pharisaic air stood beside her, his mouth obscured by a bandage that was wrapped all the way around his jaw. Ulises noticed two small, oily eyes that watched him with disdain and vague curiosity. A lock of black hair fell across the man’s forehead, and his hands were ensconced in his pockets. He couldn’t be more than twenty years old. Ulises, for his part, couldn’t think of a thing to say. He was too surprised by the encounter. Should he say hello? Tell her he’d only come there to wait for her? The presence of the half-hidden stranger inhibited him. He might be a family member, or perhaps a client.

—This is my brother, Cristina said. They call him El Alfil. He’s here to protect me, but as you can see he’s had his face broken.

—Protect you from what? Ulises asked, immediately regretting the idiotic question. All that came out of his mouth, he lamented, was stupidity.

—What do you mean ‘from what’? You can tell from a mile away that you’re a little angora kitty. And I’m an alley cat, remember?

—An alley cat, right, Ulises repeated.
A dark bloodstain moistened Alfil’s bandage. It was clear that the flesh beneath the fabric was raw and festering.

–Shouldn’t you see a doctor about that? Ulises suggested timidly, pointing at the dressing.

Ever since he was a child, the sight of blood had terrified Ulises. As long as the red stain was there in front of him, he would be unable to think of anything else.

–That would cost money. And besides, he deserves it for being a scumbag, Cristina said.

–In the public clinic they don’t charge you, you can go to the emergency department and they won’t charge you a cent.

El Alfil preferred silence. He slapped Cristina on the shoulder, turned around and walked off. His back was slightly hunched and his steps came out short and hurried, like raindrops in a downpour. Ulises was glad to see him go. The red blemish had finally disappeared, and Ulises felt a deep and sudden sense of relief. He was surprised when Cristina took him casually by the hand and invited him to walk with her.

–Let’s take a stroll, like newlyweds, and see if people believe us, she joked. It had been a long time since he’d walked hand in hand with a woman. He would have liked to bump into one of his workmates – the accountant Jiménez, perhaps, or Susa Olvera. Cristina wore a knee-length skirt, a little orange jacket, and very high, elegant shoes; more like a fashion model, he thought, than a prostitute. Fuentes’ wife could only dream of possessing such sophistication and self-confidence. The only difference between the two was the amount of money in their wallets.

–No chance, honey. I can’t give it up for free every day. I should be so lucky.
—No, Cristina, on the contrary. I want to invite you out for dinner, something to drink. And I want to pay you what I owe you.

—Invite me? Where?

—We can go to my place if you want, Ulises suggested.

Acting natural was hard work. He knew his words sounded false, that they suffered from some absurd defect. How could he avoid this? He had never been a conquistador. He remembered a phrase from one of his favourite songs: A man is not what he wants to be, but what he can be. He, Ulises Figueroa, could not be anything other than what he was. And if Cristina really possessed the goodness he thought he’d discovered within her soul, then she would have to accept him as he was, and not mistrust him, and not imagine that he was concealing some grim purpose behind his seemingly innocent dinner invitation.

—But I barely know you. What if you’re a murderer and you’re taking me to your apartment so you can cut my legs off, or put poison in my soup?

This was the second time in a matter of minutes that she had been suspicious of him. Was there something peculiar about the way he looked? He was an honest man, as any of his workmates could attest. He couldn’t help feeling depressed, and grew quiet. He would have to let Cristina, a whore to whom he was offering his home, humiliate him without sparing a single thought as to whether or not there were any worthy feelings inside his heart.

—Don’t make that face. I appreciate the invitation, but I have to work. I’m not a manager, like you, and these happen to be my work hours.

—I’ll pay you.

He was encouraged by her mention of the word manager. He took this as an unequivocal sign that she remembered the details of their first conversation.
–I know you’ll pay me, but a dinner date isn’t the same as a whole night. I’m not as cheap as you think. Here’s what I propose: if I haven’t got anything by one o’clock, I’ll go to your house.

–How much do I have to pay for you to come with me? Ulises asked, disappointed.

He didn’t want to talk about money; if it came to it, he’d give her his whole fortnight’s pay. Wasn’t that enough? If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that a night with Cristina couldn’t be worth more than fifteen days of his sweat and tears – eight hours a day without seeing the sunlight.

–Seeing as you’re already a client of mine, I’ll charge you the same as last time, plus a little extra.

–I’d like to pay you what you deserve. You’re beautiful, Ulises said, surprising himself.

But she really was beautiful, he thought. A princess from a storybook, a beautiful bird of good omen. With her legs as smooth as porcelain, her complexion like fine sand, her Barbie-doll hands, her marvellous eyes, she was the kind of woman you could keep for life, a woman made for Ulises Figueroa.

–For compliments like that, sure, I’ll go with you. Even if you are a murderer.

Before they got into the taxi, Ulises made some calculations under his breath: they couldn’t possibly charge him more than eight pesos, maybe ten if they stopped at the Súper Seven to buy a bottle of something. Bacardi, she liked that. He also thought about which records he should play on such an important night. Something soft and gentle to begin with. And at the moment of truth, when she was in his arms: José José. Yes, no doubt about it. And José José would say to her, with his sweet emotional voice, what Ulises never could, even in
dreams: *A little of your love is enough for me, whatever you’ve kept inside, whatever you’ve forgotten, that’s enough, enough for me.*

His calculations were perfect. Ten pesos for the taxi and forty for the bottle, plus twenty pesos for some Fud sausages and Oaxaca cheese. As they crossed the threshold of his tenement, Ulises remembered how messy his house was. He tried to recall how many dirty socks were tossed on the floor. He wasn’t too worried about the rest, but the socks represented something distinctly disagreeable and they would make him feel uncomfortable in front of Cristina. He considered a man’s socks to be his most intimate garment, even more so than underpants. Another detail that threatened to embarrass him was the soap in the bathroom, which had some of his black hairs stuck to the surface. This terrified him. However, unless his memory was playing tricks on him, neither of those two things—the socks on the floor and the hairy soap—would be in plain sight. He was happy about this, and placing his arm around Cristina’s shoulder he said:

–My love, from this moment on my house will be *our* house.
Ernesto Sánchez had worked hard in his youth, and he’d had no regrets about retiring a few days before his fiftieth birthday. He had never been interested in luxuries, and believed himself to be happy living a modest life. Nevertheless, he was not satisfied as he walked through the corridors of the clinic. He noticed the bleakness of the rooms, the complaints of a pair of convalescing patients vainly demanding attention. Although it seemed that the nurses and doctors performed their duties efficiently enough, Ernesto decided that his daughter would not remain in a public hospital any longer. He wished to have her transferred to a private clinic as soon as possible, where he was certain she would receive better care. He could demand this because he was her father, and he had enough money saved to make it happen.

–We’ll sell everything if we have to: the television, my rings, Mrs Sánchez offered.

In this, at least, she agreed with her husband.

–My watch. What’s the point in keeping it now?

–We’ll mortgage the house if we have to.
They were informed that, although the situation was no longer critical and their daughter was in no immediate danger, she had suffered serious psychological damage. The attending physician believed that it was necessary to keep her under observation for a few more days.

– If it’s not critical, then why do they want to keep her under observation?

– I can’t answer that question, señora, the nurse answered. Please wait to speak to the doctor.

– Which doctor is attending to her?

– Your daughter is lucky, Señora, she’s being looked after by the deputy director of the hospital.

– My daughter is not lucky, Señorita.

Following this brief conversation, the old couple remained seated for twenty hours on a pair of uncomfortable plastic seats screwed onto a metal tube. The waiting room was enclosed by bony partition walls and smelled of alcohol and vitamins. Twenty limp hours, marked by the slow pilgrimage of two clock hands and the subdued footsteps of the shift nurse. Time accumulated in their joints and in their necks. They remained in absolute silence after hearing the doctor’s diagnosis. If one thing was for certain, it was that they would never again speak of what had happened to their daughter. Ofelia sobbed as she remembered the ultimately futile precautions, the daily rations of advice, the prayers she had pronounced in vain. Ernesto recalled the time he’d declined to buy a gun, arguing that it was a pointless artefact. He’d refused emphatically, even though the gun had been an absolute bargain. “I will not bring death into my house,” he’d said to the salesman. His mind focused now on that distant conversation, on the salesman’s arguments regarding the benefits of self-defence. How could he have been so obstinate as to convince himself that a weapon was unnecessary?
Ofelia, meanwhile, occupied herself by replaying her life’s most tragic events, perhaps in the hope of balancing out the misfortunes and convincing herself that, in effect, such a shocking thing could have happened to anyone. In spite of this, nothing came close to being raped by three men in a dark, reeking alley.

In her zeal for martyrdom, Ofelia recalled an almost unforgettable event that had taken place one month after her fifteenth birthday. It involved her father’s brother, a thirty-something journalist with a prominent gut and a badly shaven beard. In Ofelia’s opinion, her father’s brother was just “a malingerer, a pedant who pretended to know everything just so he could offend everybody else,” and the two years they’d shared a roof had been a kind of unwarranted punishment for her. The incident had taken place on an afternoon just like every other, when Ofelia was reclining on the suede easy chair – one of the few pieces of furniture she remembered in minute detail – taking her compulsory siesta after having washed the lunch dishes. Her parents had gone to church to practice their songs for the Sunday choir, and her younger brother hadn’t yet returned from school. She’d woken to a light tickling between her legs that, still half asleep, she’d confused with the careful footfalls of a cat. She’d opened her eyes to discover the journalist engrossed in the task of licking her skirt with the tip of his chameleon tongue – rough as broken glass – his eyes closed and nose trembling. Was this the destiny of all women? she asked herself now as she waited to hear the worst possible news from the doctor’s mouth, seated beside a man who preferred to watch a few more minutes of television than protect the women of his house; protect them, furthermore, from other men, from the menace that, without exception, came hand in hand with being a woman and having young skin and living among beasts.

Sitting there, bathed in the artificial light that glazed the waiting room, Ernesto and his wife seemed like two stony-faced strangers sharing the same tragedy. Opposite them,
occupying one of the plastic seats, was a young man whose presence neither of them had noticed. Had they been more observant, neither of them would have had trouble recognising him: it was none other than their neighbour Adolfo Estrada, from Building 15. The veterinarian, the son of the man who, it was said, died of a heart attack in his own bathroom. Despite how easily they might have recognised him, the Sánchez didn’t pay Adolfo the least attention. He was simply another human shape, someone who, at that moment, was surely suffering much less than they. The smell of alcohol became more and more penetrating – was it alcohol? –, a smell, Ofelia figured, that spilled into the air from the rooms where the patients slept. That air was also impregnated with the scent of her daughter, the smell of her wounds, the remains of her dead spirit. If he’d bought that gun, Ernesto lamented, he would be out looking for his daughter’s attackers right now. The pride he’d felt at having never been a violent man meant nothing to him now. What had once been a virtue had suddenly become a flaw, an unforgivable defect.

As if coming to life, Adolfo’s inert figure suddenly abandoned its seat and discreetly approached the old couple. The last thing he wanted to do was make a bad impression, although his plan implied taking that risk. His fears were unwarranted. No sooner had he taken a few steps than Ofelia recognised him: a familiar face. Even if he’d been emerging from their family bathroom, it would not have seemed strange to her. How was it that one came to feel so close to a person one had never spoken a single word to?

–Olivia’s going to be ok, don’t worry, Adolfo said.

In reality, this wasn’t what he’d wanted to say. What did he know about the future? Was he a doctor?

–Thank you, young man, her mother replied, breaking into tears once more.
–The nurses aren’t worried, that’s a good sign, Adolfo added. I spoke to one of them and she told me the doctors have seen a lot of similar cases. What your daughter needs from this point on is love.

–The nurses worry about their own families, and we worry about ours, Ernesto said dryly.

Who was this weirdo who thought he knew what Olivia did and did not need?

Adolfo didn’t answer and, resigned, returned to his seat. He looked at his shoes and regretted not having cleaned himself up more diligently. What was the point in having a shoeshine kit with all the accessories if he never polished his shoes? Occupying a place in that half-lit, near-empty room, he considered himself another member of the family. It was crucial that the Sánchez’s acknowledge his sorrow and realise that, aside from them, he was the only one who had made the effort to visit the hospital. Being with them at this time signified, for Adolfo, his definitive encroachment upon the family. It was as if he were in their living room watching television while Olivia – his wife – attended to the child – their child – a child who would resemble its mother in its tall, willowy, princely figure but would possess its father’s physical strength and love for animals. Together, they would let the hours pass as they wished.

Ofelia and Ernesto remained alert to the murmurs of the hospital, to the slightest indication of any new announcements; Adolfo, on the other hand, made a great effort to resist the heaviness of his eyelids. Submerged in that state of sombre awareness, he delivered himself – just like the Sánchez couple – to the memories that entered his head at random, images as old and worn as the one he had of himself as a child stealing the loose change from his mother’s purse. He also remembered the day when the Ochoa family’s Maltese terrier had been mounted by a much bigger dog. Why did that particular image spring to his mind? The
animals had been stuck together for nearly ten minutes, while the owner of the Maltese cried out for help. Because the dogs were still linked—muzzles ajar and looks of remorse on their faces, the bitch whining in pain and her relieved lover panting loudly—the owner had raced to her apartment and returned with a bucket of water, which she’d emptied onto her dog’s assailant. The panicked animal had bolted, dragging the Maltese with it for more than a block. Adolfo had been the one to tend to the wounds and console Mrs Ochoa, promising her that he would visit the patient at least once a week.

The doctor’s footsteps brought Adolfo back to the present. Ernesto sat up, his joints and the plastic back of the chair creaking.

–Doctor, we want to know how our daughter is. We’ve been waiting all night.

His mouth was dry, and the last word didn’t quite make it out of his throat.

–First off, I can tell you that your daughter is going to be fine, and her recovery requires times and close care. It’s not her physical health I’m worried about.

The doctor, with his black chin and thin glasses, searched for the right words to explain the state of his patient. When talking to family members, he liked to employ an unhurried and monotonous tone of voice, as if by doing so he could reduce the weight of his words.

–Is she awake right now? Ofelia asked.

–No, the damage to her body is too severe. Her cheekbone is fractured, but it’s still in place. The haemorrhaging, normal in cases like these, will stop within a month. She may still experience some excoriation in her anus, and some light vaginal bleeding. It’s a matter of being patient and applying simple remedies that you, Señora, will have to administer.

Ernesto stepped between the doctor and Adolfo. There was no reason for their neighbour to hear such things; this information was of concern only to Olivia’s closest
relatives. Ofelia, noticing Ernesto’s unease, decided to intervene in favour of the interloper. Without realising that these were the first words she’d directed to him in several hours, she said to her husband:

–Don’t worry, he’s a doctor too.

–Are you saying there’s nothing wrong with her? Ernesto asked the physician, disregarding his wife’s words and stamping the floor nervously with his heel.

–Let me explain. During the assault, your daughter bit one of her attacker’s lips. She defended herself, as anyone who values her dignity would do. The problem is, it would appear that she still has a piece of the man’s flesh inside her mouth.

–A piece of flesh? Ofelia asked, disconcerted. You mean she bit his lips off?

–Yes, a piece of his lips.

–And she’s got it there, in her mouth?

–Yes, we believe she has it clamped between her teeth. Your daughter refuses to open her jaw, it’s if she’s still biting her attacker.

–I don’t understand, doctor, said Ernesto.

–Although she’s well on her way to physical recovery, she needs some kind of psychological stimulus to return to normality.

–And what’s going to happen?

–As of tomorrow, in a few hours, I’m turning her case over to Doctor Z Bermúdez. He’s a competent psychologist and we trust he will be able to resolve this delicate issue. The mind is a difficult terrain to explore, much more complex than the body. I only ask that you remain calm and refrain from visiting your daughter’s room for the time being, unless the doctor asks you to do so.

–I want to be with my daughter, doctor.
–I understand, and as soon as the nurse has finished attending to her you can go in, but only for a few minutes.

When the doctor had left, Adolfo thought it was appropriate to let himself cry freely. What better time to demonstrate that he, too, was suffering, that he shouldn’t be treated as an outsider. Despite being calculated, his tears were sincere; repressed for so many hours, a few ridiculous high-pitched whimpers escaped intermittently. If he hadn’t made the stupid decision to spend the previous night waiting for Ulises, Adolfo brooded, he might have been able to prevent what had happened. The one night he ought to have stayed at home, and he’d spent it leaning on the orange brick wall of Ulises’s tenement like an idiot, enduring the inquisitive gazes of the neighbours and a long, absurd conversation with a drunk who’d insisted on telling Adolfo his life story. He had the impression that Tacubaya was a dangerous neighbourhood. Ulises had told him that people sold marijuana in the street, and Adolfo had feared being approached by the late night passers-by crossing Calle Juan Cano. Acutely aware of such dangers, how had he endured such a long wait? His remorse left him no alternative: he was forced to accept full responsibility for Olivia’s rape. The only ineluctable duty for a man such as him, with no great ambitions in life, consisted in caring for those weaker than himself. Wasn’t that clear? He had failed, and it would be very difficult to for him to forgive himself for this. She wouldn’t forgive him, either. Nor would her parents. Nor would God. This is why he cried now: for Olivia and for himself, for the little Maltese bitch and for all of those who suffered on this earth. Adolfo realised that, while his tears were quite opportune, they must have seemed unfathomable to the Sánchez couple.

–Did you know my daughter, young man? Mrs Sánchez asked, moved by the sudden display of grief.
Her husband observed Adolfo’s tears warily. While they seemed sincere, he wondered at the motives behind the man’s intense sorrow.

–I’m your neighbour, Señora. I’ve known Olivia since she was little. We aren’t friends, but only because we haven’t had the chance. People nowadays only have time to think about themselves.

–How did you find out about this? the husband asked gruffly, reluctant to let himself be convinced.

–I saw the television coverage, and there’s something I’d like to say, Señor. I will help you find the ones responsible. This isn’t the end of it.

–Look after your own problems, I’m sure you have plenty. But thank you, anyway, for taking the time to be here. You’re the only one.

–This is my problem too, Señor. This concerns all humankind.

The waiting room was beginning to fill with people: the morning shift nurses, hair still damp from showering; the patients’ family members, some bearing baskets of food or clean clothing; the first visitors of the day. The sun had risen, and a gentle light leaked through the two vents that gave onto the street. Olivia’s parents returned to their seats. Adolfo sat down beside them. An ambulance siren screamed from a nearby avenue. Then, as though stirred by the dawn, an idea, a sensation of terror and disgust overpowered the three of them: the flesh of that degenerate was lodged in Olivia’s body; the semen, the flesh, the scent, the essence of some stranger was there, would be there forever, perhaps, worse than a scar, rotting away beneath the roof of her mouth, staining her teeth and her spirit. The eyes of the two men found each other, only for an instant, but it was long enough to establish a tacit agreement. It was their duty.
When it comes down to it, fights are always won in advance. And if this weren’t the case – if luck went the other way – he’d be so out of it that he wouldn’t feel the knife puncturing his ribs. A bottle of cheap white alcohol, like water; pills; smoke inside his lungs; and then it was just a matter of waiting for the next day, for his muscles to recover and his senses to return, one by one, until he realised that luck was still on his side, that the coin still showed tails: the eagle. His friends weren’t really his friends. They’d met on the streets, recognising each other as equals. They communicated through monosyllables and, at times, punches. The group was always changing, because a few months never went by without someone getting their skull broken, or going for a long walk from which they never returned. The police, of course. And not just them.

They would have lived with their mother a little longer if she hadn’t died so young. Cristina knew that Alfil would die young, too. Sooner or later someone would bring her the news that, finally, she was completely alone. And it wouldn’t be a sad announcement; quite the opposite, so long as his death wasn’t overly cruel or unjust. She wished life would have
mercy on her brother, although she knew there was never enough mercy to go around and
death was a dish best served raw. “There’s nothing worse than a hesitant death,” Cristina
thought. She had no regrets, because from the beginning everything had been clear to her.
The fact that they were siblings was an accident just like any of the many other accidents that
happen every day, like tripping over a drain or losing a tooth.

Cristina understood the nature of chance. It wasn’t strictly a philosophy, but rather a
kind of shield against the continuous pain of existence: everything is more or less free, and
it’s always possible to ask forgiveness, so why bother feeling regret? Nor did she harbour
resentment about that night, two years ago, when Alfil had come into her hotel room – she,
still reeking of her last client’s rancid sweat – and taken her with desperation, as if he’d
convinced himself that his own sister would surely put up some kind of a fight. She’d let it
happen, however. At the end of the day, it had been an act of love, like that of a mother
allowing her son to cry in her arms. Alfil had smelled of glue and alcohol. He’d had the look
of madman who has lost his way, thin and defenceless between the hard, experienced legs of
his older sister. Cristina, surprised, had felt him tremble in her arms as he bit her nipples, his
eyes closed tight, as if trying to imagine himself with someone else, with anyone else and not
with his sister, crying and asking forgiveness once the spurt of semen had penetrated the
depths of the maternal vagina. Cristina felt no resentment afterwards, nor did she blame
herself for never having been close to him. It was clear that, under circumstances such as
these, men were destined to live away from their family. Those were Cristina’s thoughts, but
Alfil had no opinion on the matter. All he knew was that, at a certain time, on a certain street
corner or in a certain hotel, he could find a person who claimed to be his sister. He’d ask her
for money, or if she could look after a television for him while the storm died down, or
whether she could “ask one of her girlfriends if he could have a go, just a quickie, she won’t even feel it, I’ll pay her afterwards.”

El Alfil slept in a room along with several others, each of whom had a key. Nobody knew who the landlord was, nor who had been there the longest, but that was where they spent their days. Two had already died, one from inebriation. The other “didn’t say a word, he just arrived, curled up in the corner, said he was tired, did we have anything to drink, then fell asleep and in the morning he was dead. Didn’t tell anyone he’d been stabbed. Maybe the pendejo thought three rounds with an ice-pick was no big deal.” El Alfil and El Toro had been the ones to remove the body. They’d dumped it two blocks away, in the middle of the street.

El Toro was the only one of them that Alfil might call a friend, and only because he’d lasted longer than the others. Time passed, and they still saw each other’s faces. Sometimes one of them would disappear for weeks on end, but eventually he’d return. It was El Toro and El Bobadilla who’d gone with him that night to sniff glue in the alleyway of the Complex, and it was El Toro who had first gone for the girl. That was El Toro: he didn’t ask anyone’s opinion, he did things without caring whether or not people would follow his lead. The first impulse was the best. They were only there because El Bobadilla had said the parking lot was good for stealing. No lights, few witnesses, only the orphaned cars whose parts went for a good sum in Calle Buenos Aires. You could get up to two hundred pesos for a Tsuru tail-light, and a little less for a rear view mirror, so long as they were original parts. They’d gotten there early because El Toro wanted to take a look around first, and Alfil had agreed because he’d never been to the Complex either. Although to be honest, he’d said, “I don’t give a shit. But sure, let’s go get fucked up for a while.” So there they were, passing the little tin of glue around in silence, waiting for midnight at the very earliest. “If you want, I can take a look
around now,” Alfil had murmured. And then they’d heard the gentle footsteps, a woman’s, and seen the silhouette: “She was fucking hot,” El Toro said afterwards. “I can even remember her perfume,” said El Bobadilla. They’d remained perfectly still, as if they really were the bags of garbage Olivia had first imagined them to be. None of them could have guessed what would happen next.

El Toro was the first to stand up and block the girl’s path. “I’d rather fuck this güerita than steal a fucking mirror,” El Bobadilla thought, or later claimed to have thought. It was he who’d jumped on top of her, throwing her to the ground. And El Alfil had kicked her in the face so she’d shut up: “I had to fuck up her face to calm the bitch down,” he said. He kicked her in the face and then went to the end of the laneway to take a piss while the others gave the little slut what she needed. “Then I came back for my share.” By then she was submissive, and he kissed her, squeezed her breasts desperately while El Toro laughed and said: “Qué güey, is she your girlfriend or something?” It was while El Toro was laughing that she bit him, tearing off half his lip. “With the amount of blood you lost, I reckon she bled you dry,” El Toro declared.

He tended to the wound with white rum, enduring the burning that seemed to reach right into the marrow of his bones. He listened to El Bobadilla’s drivel and El Toro’s taunts: “I don’t kiss birds, I just fuck them.” Alfil spent more than a week in his room mulling over his own stupidity, stinking of rum and eating El Toro’s leftovers. Then he remembered Cristina and went out to look for her. She’d tell him how to heal his face because women know more about these things, not because they learn it at school but because that’s just the way it is. “We’re good at fighting, and women are good at cooking and healing,” Alfil reasoned. He went to the hotel to find her.
—Come and take a walk with me, she said, and we can chat. I’ve been stuck inside this fucking place all day.

They walked together for more than an hour. Part of her face was obscured by her black hair. He was covered up in an exaggerated bandage; his eyes locked on the pavement, few words in his mouth.

—It was a fight, Alfil said suddenly.

—Fucking stupid is what it was, Cristina said. You’d better look after yourself, or your whole face will rot off.

—It’s even starting to smell bad.

—If you find maggots just eat them, they’re nutritious, she joked.

—I’ll bring them to you and you can whip up some tacos.

—It’s that fucking cloth that stinks. Buy some gauze, and dress the cut with alcohol every day. And get some Mejoral tablets for the pain, you can crush them up and sprinkle them on the wound. You have to be careful, if it gets infected you could die.

—Nobody ever died from being bitten.

—People die from next to nothing: if a cell starts to rot it fucks up the ones next to it, and so on and so on until everything’s gone to shit.

—The worst thing is, I can’t even eat. It burns like a motherfucker.

—Drink juice through a straw. It’s not like you eat much anyway.

She recognised him at once: the compact body, the pitch-black hair, the torso drooping forward like a coat hanging from a hook. She didn’t remember his name. Luis, or Ulises. Men were like children, Cristina thought, always drinking from the same cup. “This one’s already got a taste for it, does he?” She saw him standing on the corner, her corner, and felt a certain sense of delight. Generally speaking, the ones who came back for more were
considerably older than Ulises. And they were labourers, or retired shopkeepers, or old office workers, not managers. The streetscape resembled a *costumbrista* vignette: she, walking and chatting with her brother as if they were part of a real family; Ulises, like an anxious boyfriend awaiting her arrival, longing to kiss her then take her back home to fuck in a warm bed.

–Look, Alfil, that guy over there is waiting for me. If you come by later, I’ll give you some money for the pharmacy.

–I can’t come back later, I want to sleep, he replied, slurring his consonants. I’m fucked, honestly, I don’t have a cent to my name.

The truth was, he’d heard from El Bobadilla that El Toro had just made a big score: some guy in a car, who’d tried to put up a fight and ended up taking a bullet in the head from his own gun.

El Toro was a fucking hero, with his money and his nice gun. When he came back, Alfil would ask him to lend him a few pesos. If only we were all like El Toro, he thought. “He’s probably hiding out somewhere, or celebrating. What a fucking hero.”

Cristina responded by placing a twenty peso note in his trouser pocket.

–It’s not much, come back tomorrow. Maybe tonight this guy will pay me what he owes.

–Be careful. And any problems just let me know, I’m happy to kill a few flies for you.

–I can look after myself. You want to get beaten up again? Go to bed, I’ll see you tomorrow.

Before leaving, El Alfil looked Ulises in the face. He seemed like a good man, like all the guys who ended up with his sister: good, cowardly, cry-baby men.

–Look what the good Lord sent us, she said.
Alfil wasn’t jealous. He looked at Cristina’s men as if they were new scars she would never be rid of. Every now and then he worried about those scars, and made recommendations. Once, not so long ago, it had even occurred to him to give Cristina a little tube of pepper spray.

–This is my brother, Cristina said. They call him El Alfil. He’s here to protect me, but as you can see he’s had his face broken.
That morning, along with her fake leather handbag, Susana Olvera arrived at the Fonacot office carrying a basket brimming with chocolates. As soon as she’d settled herself at her desk, she deftly removed the cellophane that enveloped the basket. Then she stood up, smiling, and began to distribute the chocolates among her colleagues.

—One each, otherwise there won’t be enough, she warned pleasantly. Over the years, her workmates had grown accustomed to Susana’s sentimental caprices. They knew that if anyone in the office was capable of finding something enjoyable in sitting down for eight hours a day, it was Susana. How, they wondered, did so much fortitude fit inside that fragile body?

—And Ulises? Hasn’t Ulises arrived yet? Susana probed.

—Not yet, Raquel replied. Ever since Fuentes died he turns up whenever he feels like it.

She placed her chocolate inside a tissue box, already fearing Susana’s inevitably defensive response.
–Ulises would never take advantage of a situation like that, he’s very responsible, Susana snapped. Wake up in a bad mood, did we?

–If I’d woken up in a bad mood I wouldn’t have come to work. I’m always in a good mood, even if I don’t hand out chocolates. Ulises has been getting in late recently, what’s that got to do with my mood?

–It’s not so much the fact itself, said Susana, but the way you interpret it. No doubt you think I give out chocolates because I want something from you, see what I mean? You’re misinterpreting things, that’s all.

–I’m not interpreting anything, Susanita, I’m just telling it like it is.

–The truth is relative, it depends on your interpretation, on how you colour the things you see.

–We’re not going to argue about this. I surrender.

–The other person who seems to be missing is Señorita Reyna. Do you think she’s ill? Susana asked.

Señorita Reyna attended window number four. She was single and wore bright red lipstick. She had studied to be a nurse, with little success: she detested white clothes and the smell of hospitals, and claimed to have a strange aversion to old people.

Raquel looked Susana Olvera up and down. The same pale skirt, the crappy shoes, the hair pulled back. Why didn’t she buy some new clothes instead of handing out shitty gifts? Raquel found the singularity of that slender and martyred figure difficult to comprehend. There was something saintly about her, like those faceless nuns who smell of starch and disappear behind a habit only to be transfigured into stones. Susana, too, was like a stone: solid. How was it possible, Raquel wondered, that the most insignificant person in the office seriously felt it was her duty to protect the rest of them?
–Señorita Dolores Reyna? Raquel mocked. Please, Susana, here everyone calls themself señor and señorita and at the end of the day they’re neither one of those things.

–Look who it is, said Susana, noticing the opaque figure of Ulises crossing the client service area.

Sweaty and preoccupied, like a messenger arriving late to his destination, Ulises walked in and sat down at his desk without speaking a word. It was hard for him to believe how much time had thinned ever since Cristina had agreed to live with him. The things he used to do with his eyes closed now seemed stupidly complicated. Knowing Cristina was in his house made him distracted and clumsy. It wasn’t the being-in-love so much as the novelty: he’d never shared a bed with a woman before, and wasn’t sure if he should close the bathroom door when he urinated; he didn’t yet know the limits of his spousal authority, nor whether or not it was normal for Cristina – whom he already considered to be his wife – to drink a glass of rum at breakfast. Up to what point was it reasonable to impose limits? Where were the appropriate boundaries between a man and a woman who planned to live together for the rest of their lives? Since her arrival at the apartment, Cristina had taken to imposing order: no more yogurt cups or plastic containers on the floor; no more dirty clothes heaped behind the bathroom door. Now, the little boxes of Maizena maize flour were lined up in the pantry, and the crusts of salt residue and yellowing grains of rice inside the salt shakers had been replaced with fresh white rice and salt. Cristina had brought with her only a pair of suitcases and a bag of shoes, along with a medallion depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe and a slender photo album. No family photographs, just Cristina; a younger, usually solitary Cristina, occasionally accompanied by one or two men, a table and a bottle of something. Ulises found the photographs repugnant, especially the ones where Cristina was embracing a guy on the prow of a colourful trajinera barge in Xochimilco.
–You should get rid of those photos. You have a different life now.

Although he didn’t say it to her face, he found it outrageous that a woman should keep photographs of other men.

–It’s my past. What if you throw me out in the street tomorrow? Then I’ll have nothing.

Cristina found living with a thirty-eight-year-old man a little troubling, and somewhat absurd. Would she ever get used to it? Would she grow to tolerate the diet of a single body, a single face? It was certainly absurd, but so was living in a hotel waiting for some creep to cut her throat. “All in all, if it doesn’t work out, I’ll just end up back on the street. Although I really have no right to be so pessimistic,” she thought. If experience had taught her anything, it was that Ulises would not cause her any serious problems.

She still hadn’t established firm rules, but there was no need to be too strict so long as he continued to allow her daily glasses of rum, and the right to decide her own bedtime. How far-reaching was a man’s authority? How much would she have to endure for the sake of a roof over her head and the possibility of being someone’s wife? Their relationship had not yet suffered the usual vicissitudes, except for that one incident with the photographs and a certain argument about the dentist.

–Why don’t you go to the dentist? My friend Adolfo can recommend one to us.

They were sitting on the edge of the bed. It was midnight, and Cristina had just turned off the television set.

–Do you always tell your whores to fix their teeth?

–Cristina. I don’t know how to respond to that…

–What else would you like me to fix, so that you’ll like me? Maybe I could get surgery on my arse?
—I don’t care about your appearance, Cristina, I care about your health. It would be better if you looked after your mouth. Wouldn’t you like to have strong, white teeth?

Ulises didn’t want to talk about the scars on her buttocks. They were part of the past, and he had accepted them. But the teeth…

—Isn’t my tongue enough?

—Besides, it’s not just a question of health. We’re a couple now and we have to help each other. Why else do you think people form couples?

Ulises was surprised that life could be so difficult, that there was always someone willing to break the laws of logic. What woman didn’t want to be more beautiful? He hadn’t said anything strange, or offensive, or unprecedented. When people had bad teeth they went to the dentist; that was all. Cristina moved closer and caressed his crotch. She had never been to a dentist before in her life, she brushed her teeth once a day, and she always carried a packet of mint-flavoured chewing gum. Wasn’t that enough? If people’s teeth fell out, it was because they used them. Or did he think they were there for decoration?

—I hear those things are really painful, she added in a conciliatory tone.

—What things? What do you mean by things?

—Dentists. I’ve never been to one.

—It’s fine, they give you anaesthetic if you need it. And Cristina, I don’t ever want to hear you say that you’re a whore. If you’re going to live with me, you can’t go on thinking the way you did before. You’re a woman and that’s all there is to it. My woman.

—I’m sorry. The thing is, words don’t hurt me.

—Well your pessimism hurts me. I’d like to believe we can have a different life together. We’re not kids anymore.

—Having my teeth pulled out hurts much more than calling a spade a spade.
They didn’t drag out the discussion. Ulises learnt that it was best not to make any allusions to the dentist, and Cristina took care not to mention words like “whore” and “hotel.” She avoided referring to her past altogether. They learnt these rules quickly, since they both had the feeling that they would probably never get an opportunity like this again. They had no choice in the matter. Ulises would have liked to share his house with a different kind of woman, but he was aware that he couldn’t afford to wait much longer. Why not give Cristina a chance, even if she had been a street whore? Just like the old man he had gifted his refrigerator to. Giving away the refrigerator and inviting Cristina into his house were proof – perhaps the only proof – that Ulises was no ordinary man. He didn’t simply act in accordance with his own needs; he was original. Above all, he was in charge of his own life. The only problem was that, having lived with Cristina for two weeks, he felt he no longer had complete control over his own house. Now he was forced to share his bed, his hot water and his television programs. Now he had to make sure the bathroom wasn’t occupied and prepare coffee for two; indeed, all of his activities were now multiplied by two. His one consolation was that Cristina was not a meddlesome or exploitative woman. On the contrary, it was he who insisted on sharing everything with her, he who gave and regretted, he –idiot that he was– who would never know the true meaning and direction of his own feelings. He was further discouraged when, walking into the office, he noticed Raquel’s disapproving expression. He was late again, and only because that morning Cristina had insisted on ironing his shirt and trousers. She’d plugged in the broken iron without first asking Ulises if she could use it. The outcome was a short circuit and a pair of ruined fuses, and Ulises had had to head out in search of a hardware store, halfway through breakfast, in order to replace them. Just as Ulises perched himself in the unstable desk chair, Susana Olvera approached him and offered him a chocolate.
–Look, Ulises, this is the last one. I kept it especially for you.

–Thanks very much, Susana. I didn’t expect to get in late this morning.

–Don’t worry, until they choose a new boss, nobody’s watching.

While it was true that a new branch manager was yet to be elected, things were not quite as Susana made them out to be. The accountant Jiménez, in lieu of superiors, had taken it upon himself to keep the employees in line. Ever since the death of Otilio Fuentes, the burden of responsibility had fallen squarely upon his shoulders. Not only was he the oldest employee in the office, he’d also held his position since the very day the Fonacot branch had opened its doors. He approached Ulises and Susana solemnly, determined to initiate a confrontation. He coughed, touched a hand to his creviced forehead, and looked directly at Ulises.

–You shouldn’t get too comfortable, Figueroa. People die, but there’s still paperwork to do.

–Sometimes we can’t do the things we want to, Ulises responded irritably.

Why should he explain himself to a pendejo like Jiménez? Susana intervened on his behalf.

–If only everyone were as responsible as you, Ulises. I find it strange that someone would insinuate otherwise, since we all know what you’re like. Hopefully they send us a new manager soon.

–Why are you late this time? You couldn’t make it on time, or you wouldn’t? Jiménez insisted.

Raquel Urbina walked over on the pretext of borrowing a hole-punch. She didn’t want to miss a word.

–I couldn’t get here any earlier because I got married this morning, Ulises said.
He was more surprised than anyone by the spontaneous lie.

—What do you mean you got married? Susana Olvera asked, breaking the expectant silence that had ensued.

—Cristina and I went to the civil registry first thing this morning. Then she went home, and I came here. I didn’t want to miss a day’s work.

—Wow, Ulises, I don’t believe it. I suppose congratulations are in order.

The accountant Jiménez held out his arms, the flesh asphyxiated by his cheap cashmere suit.

—Forgive me, muchacho. Susana was right.

Raquel took a few steps towards Ulises and, reluctantly — she still suspected some kind of chicanery behind this unexpected revelation — offered a congratulatory embrace. Susana let her tears flow freely.

—Something’s wrong with the world when a man has to work on the day of his wedding, she said, her thin voice faltering.

—You should have told us, Figueroa. There are more important things in life than signing receipts. Why don’t you go home for the day?

Ulises looked at Susana. He hadn’t meant to reduce the woman to tears. He didn’t want his lies to cause anyone pain. Nevertheless, and in spite of himself, he felt proud to have spoken Cristina’s name aloud, to have let them all know that he had a woman waiting for him at home. It wasn’t a complete lie, after all: Cristina did exist, and she was his partner. What did it matter if they’d gotten married or not? What did it matter if that bunch of jerks knew the truth or not? His life wouldn’t be any different if they knew. Ulises took Susana’s chocolate.

—Thanks, this can be my wedding present.
School holidays were in full flight, and from early in the day the children escaped the confines of their houses to play in the street. It wasn’t yet eight in the morning and already the clamour of pre-schoolers bounding through the Complex laneways made its way into the Sánchez’s apartment. When Olivia opened her eyes, she noticed something familiar in the smells and the hesitant, duplicitous light of the room. She was home, but the bloody cracks in her lips and the medical scent of the hospital were still there. Finally, she was far from the inscrutable faces of the nurses. One in particular had insisted on trying to cheer her up with tired adages, despite the fact that Olivia neither desired nor needed any such counsel: “You’re not the first to go through something like this. You’re a very beautiful young woman, and you deserve better than to let your life go to waste. You need to pick yourself up. God is great and only He knows the reasons for his acts. How can we hope to understand his motives? Here on earth, all we can do is accept what comes from above and be good.” This was the general calibre of the nurse’s speeches, always pronounced with an unwavering rhythm, as if she herself realised that her words served no greater purpose than to comply with some ritual;
they were mere consolations she muttered to the air as she replaced the patients’ drips, checked the valves, cleaned the waste bins, or covered their sleeping bodies with blankets.

After nearly a month of convalescence Olivia was back in her own bed, safe at last from the psychologist’s routine interrogations and the compassionate glances of her roommates. How many social workers’ surveys had she been forced to answer over the course of that last week? Ernesto opposed this kind of intimate cross-examination, but Doctor Z Bermúdez had made it clear to him that patients were obliged to fulfil certain requirements in the interests of society at large.

–From the outset we asked for our daughter to be transferred to a private clinic. At least there she would have had a room to herself, and nobody would have bothered her with unnecessary questions.

–You must understand, Mr Sánchez, that the government is doing its best to ensure our patients enjoy the best possible medical service. However, this is a poor country, and there are some luxuries we simply cannot afford.

–It’s not our fault the country’s so poor. I’ve worked my whole life, and I’ve always been an honest man.

–What I can guarantee you is that your daughter will be very well looked after. I’ve already requested that her roommates demonstrate their consideration in this regard, and they will not be permitted visitors during your daughter’s stay.

The imprisonment had come to an end, and the Sánchez’s daughter was back in her own room at last, at peace, blanketed in her old familiar quilt. She could not have imagined a stranger by name of Adolfo Estrada was reclined nonchalantly in the living room armchair just a few metres away. For weeks now, Adolfo had been visiting the house with a certain degree of familiarity. Had Olivia risen from her bed that very instant, opened the bedroom
door and seen him sitting there, she would not have recognised him. Most of the neighbours were anonymous to her, animated shapes whose idiosyncrasies melted away into homogeneity: they were simply part of the landscape. As the daughter of a Jehovah’s Witness, Olivia had grown accustomed to being considered a rare stone in that landscape, although she’d never understood precisely what it was that made her different from the rest. Her mother’s answer was: “Because we love our God Jehovah with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and because we love our neighbours as we love ourselves, we are not divided by national, racial or social borders.” As it was, if she were to leave her bedroom and see Adolfo – who at that moment was sharing a cup of coffee and an animated conversation with Ofelia Sánchez in the family living room – Olivia would not have known who he was. Adolfo took care to ensure that the volume of his voice did not disturb the girl’s rest. He was surprised to find himself so at ease, so well received by his ageing neighbour and her rigid hairdo. Ofelia listened to what he had to say and demonstrated, it seemed to Adolfo, a deep and infinite gratitude towards him.

–I saw your father’s coffin from my window, Mrs Sánchez said. We never spoke a word, but I’m sure he was a good man. It was a very elegant coffin, and the sun was shining brighter than ever.

–Yes, I remember it clearly. It was an extremely hot day, although in the afternoon it began to rain heavily. It was as if all the seasons had been concentrated in one day, and the smog had lifted forever.

–The day he died I remember there was an impressive silence. Even the dogs were quiet.

–Dogo was howling all night, I couldn’t make him stop. He knew the head of the household had left and would never be back. Dogs sense these things, I know because I’m a
veterinarian. In the morning, when we put my father into the coffin, the dog fell silent and didn’t make another sound for weeks.

–And now you live alone?
–Yes, it’s just me and the dog.

The voices became clearer. The faint noises that, laced with dreams, had seemed like the bleating of an oboe and the cough of a bassoon were transformed, now, into words. Yes: there were two voices, her mother’s and that of an unidentified man. She was even able to disentangle the meaning of some of the words and loose sentences, mostly those spoken by Ofelia, in that familiar tone…

–And do you have a girlfriend?
–No, in actual fact no, I don’t have a girlfriend, Adolfo responded, noticing a photograph on the wall. It depicted Olivia at the age of ten, or thereabouts: white as an apple core, and smiling.

–I got married very young, and I regret it. I married the right man at the wrong time, you know what I mean?
–Yes, my mother used to say something similar. She said men are always coming in through the back door.

–That’s right. As if they’re miscreants.

It wouldn’t be easy to forget what had happened. The days had a way of reminding her of the past, and when she least expected it her sensory memory would relive the ordeal all over again. Without warning, the sound of a coffee cup hitting the table or the creaking of a closet door would remind her of that child-like voice –the voice of a child who had grown up– and the sharp pain in her vagina, of the kick to her cheek and the stench of brick and urine. And she would scream the way she hadn’t been able to on the night of the attack, a cry
that Ofelia suffocated immediately, taking the girl into her arms and whispering a prayer between her teeth while Ernesto, rigid in the doorway, watched on impassively. Hearing the shrieks of his daughter, Ernesto resented the tacit recognition that he had neither the strength nor the disposition to carry out his revenge. Adolfo, for his part, kept himself at a prudent distance. It would be impolite, he felt, to come too close to Olivia’s bedroom, despite the fact that he, too, suffered at the sound of every cry. He recalled the pain of those unpleasant days in the hospital, and the cryptic explanations of the doctors and psychologists. On a few occasions, taking advantage of the Sánchez’s absence or distraction, Adolfo had wandered from the waiting room and sought out the doctor in order to enquire after the details of Olivia’s physical condition. He wanted to know if what had happened would prevent her from having children in the future, or if tests had been undertaken to identify any kind of strange illnesses contracted during the rape. Doctor Z Bermúdez, hostile to what he regarded to be boorish inquisitions, would respond in complex sentences riddled with obscure technical terms. Despite considering himself qualified to understand the doctor’s convoluted medical expressions, Adolfo found Bermúdez’s responses impossible to decipher. Resigning himself once more to the waiting room, he would plunge into a celestial state of meditation, thinking to himself: “Don’t animals have hearts and lungs, just like people?” Life was not easy for Adolfo, least of all when, as he suspected, certain cretins conspired to make things even more complicated than they needed to be.

One day Olivia got up from her bed without saying a word to anyone. Nauseated, she breathed in the ointment and arnica scented air of her bedroom. She crossed the dining room wearily, gathering up the familiar images – the furniture, the smells, the sounds of the boiler and the stovetop kettle – and entered the kitchen. At first she mistook Adolfo for her father. Then she noticed the details: the drooping shoulders, a little broader than Ernesto’s – the
cheap, tight jeans. “Who’s this guy?” she thought. Adolfo was at the sink with his back to her, rinsing a ceramic salad bowl. He didn’t feel the gaze that scrutinised his movements from behind, a distant and half-lunatic gaze that he would never grow accustomed to. For Olivia, the presence of a strange man in her house was just one more item in a long list of odd occurrences she’d encountered since the rape. Nothing surprised her anymore. The fact that a stranger was washing dishes in her kitchen wasn’t even worth dwelling on. As she watched him, she remembered the two videos she’d been carrying with her on the night of her attack. Had her rapists stolen them? In that case, there would be a significant fine to pay with Blockbuster, or else they’d be removed from the members’ lists. As soon as her mother returned from the market she would ask her about it. In the meantime, she’d forgotten what had drawn her to the kitchen and, carefully masking her footsteps with the sound of the running water, she returned to her bedroom. It was as if she’d resigned herself to the fact that Adolfo’s image would repeat itself many more times in the days and weeks to come. He was still engrossed with the soapy scourer, pondering the conviction that, despite everything, he was a fortunate man: there he was, so close now to the woman he desired. He felt a surge of optimism and foresaw that, very soon, his life would take on a new shape and meaning.

After several months of constant attention, Olivia appeared to have made a full recovery. She no longer felt the searing, stabbing pains in her vagina, she’d stopped vomiting, and her crushed cheekbone had turned hard as a rock. The frequency of her trips to the clinic’s doctor and psychologist were reduced, and one by one the medicines were abandoned in the bathroom cabinet. The bloody cotton buds, the balsamic aromas, the plates of orange and watermelon seeds beside the bed all disappeared. So, too, did those insistent visits from the representative of a feminist group. Her mother had played a significant role in this last victory, as she was opposed to the idea of Olivia taking part in any kind of therapy. The
feminist came from a group called Apis, and she’d heard about Olivia’s case on the television. The group she belonged was funded by a German philanthropic institution dedicated to protection of human rights in several Latin American countries.

–Señora, you mustn’t oppose this. Your daughter needs to meet other women who have suffered similar cases of sexual assault. Her experience could help other people to overcome their problems, the feminist had said.

She was a slight woman with short hair who wore a checked shirt and corduroy pants. Judging by the firmness of her voice, there was no doubt she believed in what she was saying.

–I appreciate your concern, but Olivia is fine. We mustn’t dredge up the past unless absolutely necessary. We should focus on positive things. Are you telling me you enjoy thinking about tragedies? Of course you don’t. Perhaps you’re not aware that we Jehovah’s Witnesses believe in something beyond this life. In time, when all of this is over, we will be resurrected from among the dead to populate a new future. We will be chosen, Señorita. Tell me, why should we dwell on the misfortunes of this earth if soon we will be with God?

–I respect your religious beliefs, Señora, but we’re talking about the present. As you say, we can worry about the future when it comes.

–The world passes away, but he who does the will of God remains forever. Those aren’t my words, Señorita, they are the words of Saint John the apostle. Are you a mother?

–No, Señora, but I don’t believe you have to be a mother to understand the needs of another human being.

–When you are, you’ll understand that we mothers sacrifice ourselves for our children. We may make mistakes, but a mistake made in love is never a complete mistake.
Don’t worry about Olivia. She is with people who love her and suffer with her, not with a group of strangers who relive their own misfortune anew every day.

Olivia decided to throw out a great part of her wardrobe, principally her skirts and dresses. From then on she preferred to wear black jeans and white shirts. In addition – as if it were of no great consequence – she shaved her head, so that her appearance began to approximate that of a young Texan preacher. Ofelia concluded that her daughter no longer wished to be a woman, and left her alone. Ernesto wasn’t so worried about his daughter’s physical transformation as he was about the changes in her behaviour. Upon leaving the hospital, Olivia had begun to sleep through the afternoons; usually she didn’t stir until the following day. She had also become less scrupulous in her personal hygiene, and had generally lost interest in her daily chores. Ofelia took advantage of this newfound apathy to foment her daughter’s friendship with Adolfo, a friendship that even Olivia knew to be far from innocent. Everyone in that house had already guessed its natural conclusion. Nevertheless, Ofelia had made her decision. Now it was simply a question of waiting for things to take their course, avoiding the stumbling blocks of regret and guilt. Adolfo’s visits to the apartment had gradually become more and more frequent, and he now enjoyed privileges that had previously only been granted to Olivia’s father. He was even allowed, on occasion, to choose the family’s Friday night film. To Ernesto’s delight, Adolfo, too, was a Mario Alamada addict, and together the pair was able to test their erudition on the topic. Olivia, on the other hand, was forced to suffer Adolfo’s company and listen to his long, tedious speeches about the future. What did this man want? Why was he suddenly part of the family? she wondered. It intrigued her to observe how – in accordance with her mother’s orders – he followed her around everywhere. She didn’t exactly find him disagreeable – he was too unremarkable, too similar to everyone else in the world – but she didn’t understand
precisely when, and why, her parents had decided to invest so much trust in him. How could they be sure he wasn’t one of her attackers? Olivia asked herself. Despite the homilies and speeches her mother espoused in Adolfo’s defence, and despite Adolfo’s own affirmations that he had known her since she was an adolescent, Olivia wasn’t interested. Adolfo, for his part, abhorred Olivia’s new haircut, and he loathed seeing men’s shirts and shoes on the woman he had already begun to consider his property. He missed the brightly coloured dresses, the hair that fell to her shoulders, the high-heeled shoes with the buckle at the front, and the cheap cotton skirts. Nevertheless, he consoled himself with the thought that Olivia’s recently formed habits would dissipate with time. They would both start again from scratch, together. Although his wife’s appearance made him uncomfortable, Adolfo was encouraged by the certainty that he had become a kind of benefactor. As the lover of a disgraced woman, he was doubly smug: not only was Olivia a physically beautiful specimen – that much nobody could deny – but in choosing her he was doing her a favour.

Apathetic in the face of her neighbour’s intentions, Olivia complied disinterestedly with the decisions made on her behalf. One day, for example, she found herself at the front door of Adolfo’s house. The night before, the apartment had been meticulously cleaned in preparation for the visitor who, according to Adolfo’s calculations, would soon be its newest tenant. Dogo emerged from his usual hiding place, shaking his tail and the lump of fur that covered his stomach. Olivia didn’t notice the dog – despite the fact that it insisted on licking her feet – so much as the stagnant smell of mould and dead entrails that permeated the apartment.

–I’ve lived in this house my whole life.

–That’s nice, but I don’t remember you, she said.
She took a few steps and observed the figures stencilled upon the fading wallpaper. What were they? Birds, or tree branches?

–I’m going to fix the place up, change the wallpaper. We’ll put up some paintings you like.

–I don’t like paintings, I prefer photographs.

–Then we’ll bring all the photographs from your house and we’ll put them up on this wall. That can be Olivia’s wall, Adolfo suggested, getting excited like a child planning the details of his next vacation.

–If you’re going to hang up photographs of me, I want new ones. The way I am now.

–Sure, that’s fine. But your hair will grow and you’ll be just like before.

–I’ll be nothing like before, but do whatever you want, she replied bluntly.

She walked towards Adolfo’s room and, as if it were a well-rehearsed scene, approached the windowsill to locate her own bedroom.

–You can see your house from here, Adolfo said. You could keep an eye on your mother.

–Or she could keep an eye on me, as always.

–We can close the curtains, I don’t need to look out that window anymore, he said, hoping that Olivia would perceive the tenderness in those words.

Ignoring the dog that still sniffed her feet, Olivia opened the closet door and looked inside. All four walls of Adolfo’s bedroom were covered in Cruz Azul pennants and posters depicting actors and actresses Olivia barely knew. There was also a photograph of Adolfo as a nine-year-old boy, with gummed-back hair and a white smile. “I will never live here,” she thought. Nevertheless, one cloudy morning – as if she had no choice in the matter – Olivia placed most of her belongings into a suitcase and, with no civil or religious formalities of any
kind, moved house. Outside, the birds spat the smoke from their lungs, and the people of the Complex felt more hatred for humanity than ever before.
Cristina feared she’d made a mistake. Beside the stove, atop a small pine table, the bottle of rum presented itself as evidence to the contrary. Now she lived with a man, and it appeared that, although they’d never come to any kind of agreement in the matter, the task of cleaning the house fell to her. Simple things like making the bed, washing Ulises’s socks, even stocking the fridge and pantry. While she served coffee, strong and loaded with sugar, Ulises fingered his breakfast and crunched savoury biscuits between his teeth. His hair was a mess, and he sat with his forearms fixed to the table. He was yawning in front of a little notebook, in which he calculated the weekly expenses and compared them with the amount he’d received in the previous fortnight’s pay. If he earned a little more they could abandon the dreary habit of eating beans three times a day: how different life would be if he just had a little more money! The first thing he’d spend his disposable income on would be a few cuba libres in the cantina. Then he’d find a prostitute, one that recalled the beauty of the first Cristina – “to fall in love again,” he told himself – and relive that moment, that sensation of meeting the new love of his life.
More than a year had passed since she’d first set foot in Ulises’s house, and by now things rarely diverged from their established routine. She’d never spent so much time watching television, or in the kitchen. In the past, she’d only ever had to walk into a fonda and order a plate of soup, which would always be accompanied by warm tortillas. At night, the rum cauterised her stomach and kept her company until dawn came. She would never stop drinking rum, despite the fact that, according to her calculations, she was two months pregnant. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d lost control and ended up pregnant, and it wouldn’t be the last. Although, Cristina reflected, perhaps a child represented her only real chance to establish a stable, secure life for herself. Why did she waste her time thinking about such stupid things? It would never have occurred to her to have children, especially after witnessing the kind of life Alfil led. The novelty of the situation consisted of something else entirely: having been confined to the interior of Ulises’s apartment for so long, she was beginning to fear the street, the solitude of the night, the policemen who had stalked her for so long and who, until recently, she had always resolutely confronted with a certain ferocity. “Children are for fearful people; I don’t want them and I don’t need them,” Cristina concluded. In spite of her instincts, she was unable to think of the pregnancy as an unassailable fact, especially since late periods were common in women her age. She wouldn’t mention anything to Ulises. Maybe in a few days, and then only if she felt like it: there was still time to abort.

—I hope you’re ready when I get home, Ulises said.

—I’ll be ready at whatever time you want, you don’t have to threaten me.

—I’m not threatening you, this is an important day for me and I don’t want to argue.

Ulises pushed away his breakfast, nibbled at a biscuit and took a long sip of coffee. Absorbed in imagining Adolfo’s reaction upon meeting Cristina, he found it impossible to
concentrate on food. How could he make sure this first encounter was a success? In any case, the fact that Adolfo lived with a woman would make introductions much easier.

–Would you believe it: I called him to tell him that I’d gotten married, and he said the same to me.

–I didn’t know we were married. You should have told me, first.

There was no trace of acrimony in Cristina’s words. It was just a comment.

–We’re going to tell them we’re married. Nobody will bother going to the civil registry to check whether it’s true or not

–They might ask for a photo.

Ulises pushed the coffee cup away and got up from his seat. He kissed Cristina on the neck and left the house in haste, heading towards the Gigante supermarket on Avenida Revolución. He didn’t want to turn up at Adolfo’s house empty handed. This was their first date as a married couple, or at least the first time they would play the role of a married couple. The fact that Cristina was to meet his old friend Adolfo Estrada was far more significant than any wedding. Would Adolfo remember how, when they were partners in the school colour guard, they had both been in love with Carmela the flag bearer? Ulises wanted nothing more than for the flame of their friendship to be rekindled, and it would give him great satisfaction if both Cristina and Adolfo’s wife were to share that sentiment. It wasn’t much to ask: all he wanted was to go on living, to experience the chapters of life that mark the existence of all men. That was hardly a crime.

In order to get to Adolfo’s house they would have to take Calle Juan Cano all the way to the Miramontes Canal. Then would catch the metro, line eight, at Tacubaya station, and change at Chabacano in order to reach Taxqueña. Cristina wasn’t used to travelling such long distances, nor was she familiar with the metro. Most of her activities were concentrated
around Tacubaya, and when she needed to go somewhere else she took the bus or hailed a pesero. Only once had she accompanied a client all the way to Xochimilco, because he’d insisted on partying past dawn. With Cristina in tow, he’d hailed a taxi, then they’d rented a trajinera barge, with mariachis and beer and the works.

–This is the happiest day of my life, mamacita, the man had said to her.

–Why is it that men are always drunk on the best days of their lives?

–I came here with my first wife, to Xochimilco. She was young, like you.

–Oh well, I suppose I’ll have to make do with being someone else’s reflection, Cristina complained.

She’d abandoned him at midday, beneath the eaves of a closed shop. He’d been incapable of taking another step, let alone getting into a taxi and recalling where he lived. These days, however, she was nobody’s whore. She was the wife of Ulises Figueroa. She took another swig from the bottle of rum – her last – and went to rinse her mouth. She took the lid off the little jar of mouthwash she’d discovered, brand new, in the medicine cabinet on her first day in Ulises’s house. “We don’t want them to think Ulises lives with an alcoholic,” she chided herself. Deep down, she was terrified. What would they be like, these friends of Ulises? To begin with, she promised herself not to say anything that wasn’t strictly necessary. That meant no jokes, since Ulises had pointed out how much she seemed to enjoy hurting other people’s feelings.

–I’m not saying you do it on purpose. It’s a habit.

–Only uptight jerks get offended by jokes, Cristina had rebutted, surprised by the reproach.

–You see? You always have to insult someone.

–I only insult people who deserve it.
–Your jokes are always about hurting someone, or mocking them. It’s like you’re constantly at war.

–That’s the way I was when you met me, so why are you harassing me about it all of a sudden?

–I’m not harassing you, Cristina, I love you.

–If you loved me you wouldn’t try to change me. You went and got involved with a whore, and now you want to dance a waltz? Well go fuck yourself.

–You’re not a whore, you’re my wife, goddamn it!

The argument had never been resolved, because Cristina was proud of the way she spoke. “My tongue is all I’ve got to defend myself in this rotten life, and now he wants to cut it out.” On the other hand, if she thought about it, the reproach was somehow flattering. Unlike the allusions to her ruined teeth, or the lectures about her fondness for drinking in the mornings, this complaint had something to do with her personality. Her teeth, her drunkenness, even her past as a prostitute didn’t define who she was as a person. The fact that Ulises reprimanded her for her cruelty filled her with pride: “They deserve it; everything I say, they deserve it all,” she thought. Despite everything, she would keep her mouth shut during the visit to Adolfo’s house. “If I wanted to start wars, I would have stayed in the hotel,” she thought as she painted her lips in front of the bathroom mirror. “My eyes are too big and I have a horrible mouth, a dick-sucking mouth, and I’m starting to look old… Goddamn it, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

She spat the mouthwash into the sink and returned to the bedroom. Ulises couldn’t complain: everything was neat and tidy, shoes lined up under the bed, wooden wardrobe free from dust, tiled floor glossy and clean. Suddenly she heard the sound of paper bags and the clinking of bottles. Her husband was home.
–It’s time to go, he said.

–I’m ready. How much did you spend?

–Eighty pesos.

–Did you buy cigarettes?

–Yeah. And sausages and cans of beer.
XV

Excited about his old friend’s impending visit, Adolfo awoke early. He intended to tidy the house and make detailed preparations for Ulises’s arrival. He took the dog out to pee an hour earlier than usual, and then set himself to a number of uncommon tasks. First, he cleaned the crusty residue in the toilet with hydrochloric acid. Then he took down the photographs of Olivia and wiped the small amount of dust that had settled on the frames. Before throwing himself into these activities, he placed a tape of instrumental music into the cassette player. It was the same tape his father used to listen to when cleaning his gun: a thirty-eight calibre pistol he’d sold for a bargain one week before his death, as if he’d known that the money from that sale would end up paying for his funeral. The ostentatious brass and percussion made the photographs and glassware quiver, and shook the high school diploma that hung from a nail on the wall. Meanwhile, Olivia was dragging the threadbare bristles of a straw broom across the carpet, not because she was bothered about the cleanliness of a house that had struck her as grotty from the beginning, but because Adolfo had asked her to do so, as a special favour. Most of Olivia’s behaviour around the house gave the same impression: her
acts were, or seemed to be, always favours. After one year of living together, Adolfo had only succeeded in copulating with Olivia on four occasions. The first came after six months of sleeping in the same bed. Olivia opened her legs and he cautiously entered her – the undertaking never lasted more than five minutes – discharging his semen inside her cold vagina. She didn’t offer the least resistance: it was her duty. If some strangers had done it to her, why not let the kind man who shared her bed do it? Olivia reasoned.

–I want this to be important for you, too, Adolfo said, endeavouring to arouse her enthusiasm in the visit.

–When something is important it’s important, and when it’s not, it’s not. There’s not much you can do about it. But don’t worry, I’ll still help you out.

–Ulises is my only friend. I’m looking forward to seeing him, we went to primary school together and we’ve stayed in touched ever since. We were in the colour guard; we carried the flag for a whole year. Those kinds of things bring people together.

–I’m happy for you.

When the first notes of the melody reached Olivia’s ears, she stopped what she was doing for a few moments and gazed curiously at the apparatus, as if the machine itself – a two-speaker Gold Star cassette player – were responsible for the music selection.

–Do you like it? My father used to listen to this music when he needed to concentrate on something.

–Yes, I like it, she said. It sounds like church music.

–It’s gorgeous.

–It is.

Olivia looked out the window and spotted her parents just as they were leaving the house. Her mother lifted her hand in salutation, but Olivia remained still. They looked more
and more worn out with every day. She could see it better from a distance than she could up
close. Him, especially, Olivia thought. She turned her back to the window and returned to the
dining room, where Adolfo was shaking a stuffed dog’s head that usually lived amid the dust
at the back of a wooden cabinet.

—What is that? she asked.

—It’s good to see you showing interest in something, Adolfo said, brushing the dust
off the animal’s head. This is a coyote my father hunted when he was very young, out in the
Sierra de Hidalgo. He was so proud of his catch that he had the head stuffed and mounted.

—That’s not a coyote, Olivia said. It’s a dog.

Adolfo couldn’t mask his disdain at such a remark. This was a family trophy, after all,
and even though Olivia was now technically part of the family she had no right to defame his
father like that.

—What would you know about it, you’ve never even left the city.

—It’s a dog.

—How can you claim that with such authority? I’m a veterinarian, remember, I went to
school…

—Don’t lie. It’s a stray dog.

This last accusation wounded Adolfo deeply, and for a moment he felt as if all hope
of a pleasant afternoon had been irredeemably lost.

—After that night something must have gone wrong with you, you can’t even tell the
difference between a dog and a coyote.

—It’s a dog and your father is a coward, she said, vehement though distant.
She felt somehow distanced from the growing anger her words inspired in him. She simply wanted to make it clear that the head indeed belonged to a dog, and she didn’t understand what that had to do with her rape.

—How could you keep that piece of flesh inside your mouth for three days, my god, how could you?

Adolfo let a juicy tear appear on his face. Why did he cry so often, lately? Did Olivia have something to do with those impromptu bouts of sadness? Or was he only now beginning to feel the absence of his parents? Adolfo had no satisfying responses to these questions. Olivia ignored his tears and returned to the kitchen; she picked up a knife and began to cut the cheese into small cubes. “If I’m careful, I can get more than a hundred cubes out of this block of cheese,” she said to herself. Then the doorbell rang.

Adolfo dried his tears with the sleeve of his new shirt — he’d bought it on credit at Hecali, only fifteen pesos a week — and hastily took down the still life that presided over the living room. In its place, he hung the dead animal’s head. His best friend, Ulises, had arrived. The guests entered and automatically sat themselves down in the largest armchair. Ulises held Cristina’s hand nervously, aware that such a gesture would prevent the need for introductions. The important thing was to demonstrate their love without preamble. At least, that’s the way he’d planned it the night before.

Adolfo, proudly assuming his role as host, dragged a chair from the dining room for himself and left the comfortable single armchair for Olivia. She appeared from the kitchen with two platters, one piled with cheese cubes and the other with rolled up slices of ham, which she placed on the coffee table.

—I’ve been looking forward to meeting your wife, said Ulises.
At that moment, the dog approached Cristina’s feet and began to lick her shoes. “Get out of here, Dogo,” Adolfo ordered. The dog stopped licking, but remained seated submissively beside the armchair.

–I hope you like dogs, Adolfo said to Cristina.

–Yes, I do. But to tell you the truth, I don’t like them enough to have them stuffed.

–That’s not a dog, Adolfo responded tiredly. It’s a coyote my father shot in the Sierra de Hidalgo.

–It’s strange that you, being a veterinarian, would keep something like that, said Ulises.

–What’s your name, Cristina asked, impressed by her hostess’ youth and beauty.

–Olivia, she said, her tone dry yet polite.

Of the two guests, Cristina was the one she was most inclined to take a liking to.

Cristina was calmer now. The Estrada’s home was a house just like any other, and its inhabitants, despite the stuffed dog, seemed normal and inoffensive. There was no need for pretence, or to be on her best behaviour. All of a sudden, she got the feeling that Ulises and his friends were just children: she could punish them or let them play as she wished.

–I never thought we’d be here like this, us and our wives. It’s been so many years since we were colour-guard buddies, Ulises said, bombastically.

He raised his glass of beer. Only Adolfo joined him in the toast. Olivia left her seat without offering an excuse and, seconds later, returned from the kitchen with a glass of water in her hand. Cristina ignored the beer that Adolf had placed before her on the coffee table. She’d never been a fan of beer; it struck her as a bitter, pointless beverage. Reaching into her handbag, she extracted a little metal flask, freshly polished that very morning with a flannel cloth.
– Is that a special drink? Adolfo asked, taken aback by the sight of the silver container in Ulises’s wife’s hand. Should he interpret this as a sign of contempt?

– It’s rum. Beer makes me sleepy.

Adolfo got up and retrieved a brand new bottle of Bacardi from the glassware cabinet. Ulises observed Olivia. She was so pretty and elegant, not like Cristina, whose skin was already wrung with age. Despite this intimate observation, he didn’t envy Adolfo. He didn’t want to envy anyone ever again, let alone his best friend.

– If you like rum, the bottle is yours.

It felt good to be able to cater to his guest, and Adolfo figured it was a good omen; due to a lucky stroke of fate, the one bottle of alcohol he’d bought was rum.

– Cristina doesn’t drink that much, Ulises interjected. She’s drinking now because she’s happy.

– Olivia doesn’t drink either. Just water.

– When I was young I drank beer, Olivia added abruptly.

Even to Adolfo, it seemed that she was overly willing to participate in the conversation. He momentarily forgot about their altercation that afternoon, and her face again evoked in him that voyeuristic love he’d first felt for her, from afar.

– What do you mean ‘when you were young’? You’re still a baby. You can say things like that when you’re forty-something, like me.

– No, I’m different now. Look, that was me before.

Olivia pointed in the direction of her photograph. Everyone turned to look; even Dogo, it seemed, fixed his bleary, bloodshot eyes on the girl’s portrait. Then Ulises began again:

– And how are things, Adolfo? Are you still working as a vet?
–Everything’s fine. I’m planning to open a clinic, he lied, Here in the Complex, where people know me and I’ve already got a firm client base.

–I’m sure there’ll be plenty of sick dogs for you, Ulises joked.

–Plenty, to be sure.

–If you need an assistant, I can recommend one for you, Cristina interrupted, thinking of her brother, The poor thing never got the chance to study, because he had to work from a young age, but he’s a good man. The truth is, he’s had a tough lot in life.

–That’s just what we’re looking for. I’d prefer someone without studies but with a good work ethic, someone ambitious. You’ll have to introduce us.

Olivia got up from her seat and headed for her bedroom. She was tired. She closed the door behind her so that the murmuring voices faded. She knew that, a few metres away, in the apartment she’d grown up in, her parents were thinking of her. She suddenly felt like crying, and hid her face in the pillow so that the gentle sobs didn’t reach beyond the bedroom walls.
La siguiente es la historia de cuatro personas cuyas vidas no merecían haber formado parte de novela alguna.

I

Los recuerdos no deberían durar más de tres o cuatro días, pensaba esa noche Cristina mientras se aproximaba con pasos cautelosos a la cajuela del auto, no por temor a ser descubierta o sorprendida pervirtiendo la soledad de una noche al parecer tranquila, sino porque el ruido descarado de sus tacones provocaba en ella un aire de víctima, de intrusa. No era la primera vez que aquel auto se encontraba estacionado en el mismo lugar, de modo que Cristina podía reconocerlo fácilmente: un auto casi nuevo, de pintura impecable y neumáticos lustrosos; debía uno sentirse tan cómodo allí dentro, tan a sus anchas, escuchando música suave, aspirando el olor a terciopelo de las vestiduras, ¿cuánto dinero habría que tener en el banco para decir: “Este auto es mío”? ¿Cuántos negocios gordos tendrían que hacerse en la vida para darse el lujo de fumar allí dentro? Cristina se dio cuenta de que bajo la luz amarillenta del farol callejero, su bolso adquiría un matiz semejante al color de los asientos del auto: rojo quemado, como el de la sangre cuando brota de noche y busca la luz y tiene que
abrirse paso entre las sombras. Si uno carga con todos los recuerdos termina hundiéndose, medio especulaba Cristina, por eso mi memoria nunca irá más allá de los tres días, ¿para qué darle vueltas a lo mismo? Después de todo, todo vuelve a aparecer y tarde o temprano nos encontraremos con los mismos hijos de puta que pensábamos se habían perdido para siempre; todo es caminar en círculo para después hundirse, exhaustos, en el centro de ese mismo círculo, sin saber nada, sin saber por qué las cosas terminaron tan rápido.

Cristina ocupaba su esquina tres veces a lo largo de la semana. Prefería trabajar los días de quincena o los jueves y viernes aunque siempre pasadas las nueve de la noche, hora en que los peatones comenzaban a tener miedo hasta de su sombra y escudriñaban dentro de su bolso en busca de la llave que les abriría la puerta de un hogar seguro; hora también en que los niños desaparecían y los perros callejeros deambulaban con gran confianza en callejones y aceras. Cristina era optimista con respecto a su clientela, el rostro de su hombre cambiaba tantas veces antes de que el espectacular montado en la cima del edificio de aristas disparadas que tenía frente a sí fuera sustituido por un cartel nuevo. En ese aspecto era mejor no quejarse: muchos hombres, a pesar de que nunca se había considerado afortunada y a pesar de las cicatrices, –cuatro enormes en las nalgas– y el dolor tal vez anodino, aunque eterno, que le consumía las vísceras; a pesar de sus axilas exageradamente tupidas de matorrales negros y su halitosis pasajera, el hombre volvía, meses o años después si quieren, pero siempre volvía. A veces les era difícil creer que se tratara de una prostituta. ¿Por qué en una calle insulsa de una colonia de clase media? Para la mayoría de los transeúntes se trataba de una mujer como cualquiera, quizás un ama de casa esperando el retorno de sus hijos o la amante de un empleado que lo aguardaba, discreta, a dos o tres cuadras de su oficina.
Encima de la cajuela, árida y fría como el aire de la noche, Cristina colocó su polvera y a un lado el maltratado y esbelto tubito de gas lacrimógeno que escondía en el bolso; no porque creyera que lo necesitaría alguna vez, “como si no pudiera defenderme con mis propias uñas”, sino por tratarse de un regalo del Alfíl, su hermano menor.

–Tómalo, las armas nunca están de más, siempre hay un hijo de la chingada que te quiere joder.

–Te ves muy delgado, tienes que cuidarte, Alfíl. –Apuntas a los ojos y aprietas aquí.

–¿Cuántas veces comes al día?

–No necesitas acercarte mucho, desde aquí le apuntas a la jeta y ya; con un metro tienes.

–Cuídate mucho, Alfíl, si te mueres ahora sí voy a quedarme bien sola.

Se trataba de un obsequio algo viejo, deteriorado como los propios zapatos de Cristina y el barniz corriente de sus uñas, pero eficaz.

–Esto no sirve, seguro fuiste a sacarlo de la basura.

–Sirve, te lo juro.

–Si no sirve los rateros me acaban de chingar, con las armas no puede una andar jugando.

–Esto no es un arma; es un juguete.

En el interior del bolso, Cristina coleccionaba también una credencial que la acreditaba como donadora de sangre, un llavero de plástico con la llave de la recepción del hotel y una tirita de condones marca libre. Si lograra gastar los condones en una sola noche, si cada semana se acostara con veinte hombres, si no le ardiera la vagina apenas después de que el segundo cliente de la noche se desinflara encima de su vientre, si no fuera por todo eso, entonces no tardaría mucho tiempo en dar el enganche de un auto como aquél que ahora le servía de
tocador y de espejo. Pero no podía hacerse ilusiones porque su vida jamás sería tan larga y antes de reunir el dinero suficiente y oprimir la válvula del tubito de gas lacrimógeno y antes de ya no gustarle a los hombres, algo habría de suceder para que ella dejara de estar parada en una esquina ofreciéndose a los escasos peatones que pasaban por allí. Escasos y distraídos algunos, que no llegaban a percatarse de que Cristina era la mujer que con sólo trescientos pesos podían llevarse a la cama del hotel más cercano; la mujer de aspecto sereno cuyo oficio no era fácil reconocer a primera vista, ni aun para los más avezados; una puta discreta aunque quizás algo pesimista para ser una treintañera. Se lo habían hecho notar más de una vez sin que a ella le importaran gran cosa los comentarios. No se consideraba pesimista, después de todo continuaba limpiando el piso del estrecho cuartito que rentaba en el barrio de Tacubaya, un cuarto estrecho, frío como una nevera al que Cristina, en muchas ocasiones, prefería no volver. Después de todo era mucho más cómoda la cama del hotel en la que podía permanecer hasta la una de la tarde; una cama suave, tibia, aún con las huellas del aliento alcohólico y la sangre excitada del último cliente. “Si fuera yo pesimista tendría mi casa tirada y mis vestidos sucios: no cualquiera se atreve a meter las manos en el agua fría de la pileta ni a barrer un piso en el que las grietas le sirven de casa a las cucarachas. Si fuera pesimista simplemente me habría tirado ya debajo de un coche y no me lavaría los dientes y no bolearía mis zapatos los fines de semana.” Se pintó los labios de rojo aspirando el aire torvo de una noche tan parecida a las otras, tan concentrada en unas cuantas calles. “¿Quién inventó las ciudades? –se preguntó– ¿Quién tuvo la idea de poner una casa tras otra?” Vio el carro de policía rodando despacio frente a la esquina, acechando como animal traicionero: sus números grandotes tatuando las puertas, los fanales de luz hepática lamieno el pavimento y los neumáticos astillando el esqueleto de una botella. “Aquí están otra vez estos hijos de puta”, se lamentó Cristina cuando la patrulla se detuvo a su lado y de la ventana emergió un
rostro erosi\~nado, como el de una calabaza vieja mordisqueada por gusanos voraces.

–Te vi en la ma\~na\~na cargando el bote de la basura aqu\~i mismo –le dijo uno de ellos, abriendo la sonrisa en sus labios de cera, mirando las piernas de Cristina con gula y obstinaci\~on. La patrulla quieta, como la caparaz\~on de una tortuga que los dos hombres llevaban incrustada en el lomo y al resguardo de la que masticaban su raci\~on cotidiana de carne y pan dejando que las migajitas se acumularan en las hendiduras de los asientos. Las huellas de aceite en el volante y en el espejo retrovisor, el olor de la salsa en el aire comprimido de la cabina, los papeles y bolsas almacenados bajo el asiento; todos signos de su comilona bestial.

–Por m\~as que uno tire basura, siempre queda algo –res-pondi\~o ella. El sudor de los hombres, seco, oscureci\~a el cuello de sus camisolas y un tufo de camale\~on, de reptil viejo, emanaba desde el interior del auto pellizcando la nariz de Cristina. La calle vac\~a, como si hubiera sido abandonada a causa de una tragedia, acaso s\~olo el lejano siblido de los autos que a gran velocidad cruzaban el Circuito Interior y el ladrido de un perro que parec\~ia venir del fondo del pavimento.

–¿No te conformas con el sueldo de la patrona? –dijo el hombre sin apartar los ojos del bolso que, abierto, palpitaba como un est\~omago reci\~en navajeado.

–¿Y la puta de tu mujer se conforma contigo? –Cristina cerr\~o el bolso. ¿Ser\~a \~esta la ultima noche? Y si lo era, \~cu\~anto tiempo le llevar\~ia morir?

–¿Tienes una identificaci\~on? –el polic\~ia ensay\~o una voz m\~as seria aunque s\~olo consigui\~o gru\~nir como un cerdo.

–No la necesito –respondi\~o ella en franca rebeld\~ia, renuente a dejarse intimidar por los perros. Record\~o el tubo de gas y las instrucciones que le hab\~ia recitado el Alfil; sin embargo: “Antes de que agarre el pinche tubo, \~estos ya me chingaron”, pens\~o.
—Yo digo que sí la necesitas —advirtió el policía. Cristina echó una ojeada a su alrededor. Estaba sola, tan sola como siempre desde hacía quién sabe cuántos años.

—Estoy esperando a mis hermanos, si quieres ellos te pueden decir quién soy —Cristina dejó a su mirada perderse entre las frases del cartel que anunciaba jabones en la cima de un edificio: manos suaves matrimonio largo, rezaban las letras. Aseguró el bolso pasándose la correa por el pecho como si fuera una charretera y regresó a los ojos del policía. Éste le dijo:

—Andamos de buenas, chula, no te asustes.

—Yo me asusto sólo cuando vale la pena —dijo ella, contundente. Quizás un nuevo jabón le dejaría las manos más lisas, suaves como la porcelana, suaves como algodón, suaves como...

“Lo importante es que no se den cuenta de que te estás cagando de miedo.”

—A ver si mañana nos traes un sangüichito, ¿eh? —¿por qué aquel hombre tendría la boca de un color tan extraño? ¿Sería sólo un efecto de la luz? Cristina caminó algunos pasos en dirección opuesta a la patrulla, se detuvo, dio media vuelta y volvió para enfrentarlos. Se habían ido, doblado a su derecha, lentamente, buscando en la fila de autos estacionados en Vicente Suárez a la pareja de enamorados, a los afortunados que al abrir los ojos deslumbrados por la luz de la pequeña linterna, verían sus caras, sus dientes amarillos, las grutas profundas de sus narices; y los escucharían eructar la sentencia, el costo de besarse en la vía pública despreciando las comodidades propias de un hotel. “Hay un hotelito a una cuadra. Póngase a trabajar, joven.” El mismo hotel al que acudía Cristina cuando pescaba un cliente: el Cadillac, un hotel barato de fachada amarillenta, cristalería opaca y puertas aparentemente infranqueables, un hotelucho, viejo antes de tiempo, en el que además le hacían un descuento atractivo, la mitad nada menos, siempre y cuando lo visitara más de dos veces a la semana y sus amantes se cuidaran de provocar escándalos. Cosa fácil para ella pues Cristina era una mujer perspicaz y sabía escoger a sus hombres, en su mayoría empleados.
cuarentones o carcamanes abandonados a la deriva que sólo deseaban estrujar el cuerpo de una mujer más joven mientras les llegaba la muerte.

Estaba absorta siguiendo un imaginario rastro de grasa y sangre que los neumáticos de la patrulla habrían dejado en el suelo, y no reparó en la anciana que, discreta, se había desplazado casi veinte metros para colocarse a su lado. “No tardarán en volver, tienen cara de ojetes”, dijo para sí misma. Entonces escuchó el chorrito de orines caer muy cerca de sus talones.

–¿Todavía en la calle, viejita?
–Sí, a éste le dan ganas de orinar a la peor hora. ¿No tienes frío?
–El de siempre.
–Pues el de siempre puede traicionarte, no hay que confiarse. Si tú quieres puedo prestarte un suéter –Cristina observó al perro envuelto como una salchicha en un suéter tejido a gancho. Se imaginó a sí misma luciendo un suéter semejante y una correa al cuello, metiendo todos los días el hocico en un recipiente de plástico lleno de croquetas duras.

–No, viejita. Yo me alimenté bien de niña, tortilla y frijoles a todas horas.
–Deberías de comer soya, es muy nutritiva y además barata. Yo a mis hijos los alimenté con pura soya. Tendrías que ver sus dientes, sólidos, fuertes, podrían masticar piedras.

–Ya estoy grande para comer cosas sanas, a mí sólo me gusta lo que me hace daño.
–¿Estás leyendo la Biblia que te regalé? –Cristina sonrió de nuevo al recordar que un mes atrás la vieja se había acercado para obsequiarle un bien conservado ejemplar de la Biblia. Lo hubiera rechazado de no ser porque le había sido ofrecido de buena voluntad y sin sermones añadidos. Digamos que con respeto.
¿A qué horas quiere que lea la Biblia, viejita?, prefiero comer que leer.

–Ahorita, por ejemplo, mientras estás esperando.

–Si me distraigo me chingan. La calle no es una biblioteca, hay que saber dónde y cuándo.

–Tienes razón, mija, que Dios te perdone y perdóname también a todos los hombres.

–¿A mí por qué? Si yo no he hecho nada –añadió Cristina, divertida, ¿por qué las viejas se empeñaban en hacer bueno el mundo si ya estaban de salida?

–No me hagas caso, son cosas de vieja –la anciana, alcahueta, le permitía demasiadas libertades al perro. Era él quien llevaba la iniciativa. De pronto, el perro tuvo el impulso de volver y arrastró el cuerpo endeble de la anciana hacia la morada que algún día habría de convertirse en la tumba de ambos. Cristina se recargó en la pared y encendió un cigarro, se imaginó leyendo el Evangelio, recitando un versículo de San Juan mientras esperaba al hombre que después de un apresurado arreglo la conduciría al hotel para “bajarme los calzones”. Su imagen desnuda con el libro sagrado en las manos y las pantaletas en los tobillos le provocó una mueca que culminó en una sonrisa. Entonces supo que ella, Cristina la pesimista, se había levantado aquel día de un magnífico humor. Una actitud positiva –pensó– le traería suerte y posiblemente el hombre que ya se aproximaba llevando un fajo de pa-pleres bajo el brazo, se olvidaría esa noche de su esposa, del llanto de sus hijos pedigüeños y apostaría por una mujer diferente y una cama tapizada de otros olores. Así era como se presentaban los acontecimientos más afortunados; invitándolos a manifestarse, provocándolos. La noche era perfecta para que cualquiera se ausentara del lecho matrimonial y renunciara a la cena cotidiana e insipida y al cepillo de dientes y a la voz del locutor televisivo imponiéndose sobre los ronquidos de la mujer con la que tendría que compartir todas las noches de su vida. Fue entonces que Cristina, orgullosa y entusiasmada a causa del
repentino optimismo surgido de algún lugar de su alma, se prometió que si el hombre cuya figura se aproximaba tornándose cada vez más clara aceptaba el destino de dormir en la cama de la habitación catorce, le daría la mejor chupada que jamás en su vida le hubiera dado nadie.
Tenía la taza de café en la mano, un café insípido que, por extrañas razones de la física, humeaba a pesar de estar tibio. Junto a la taza su pluma fuente, quieta, dispuesta a comenzar la tarea de firmar facturas y oficios a lo largo del día. Más allá de la pluma la fotografía de una actriz, protegida con un marco de aluminio. Una imagen que había despertado comentarios positivos entre sus compañeros e incluso le había valido la sonrisa del licenciado Otilio Fuentes, una imagen que él prefería a la clásica fotografía familiar y a la mayoría de objetos que además de los utensilios de trabajo decoraban y daban vida a los escritorios de la sucursal fonacot. Esa tarde Ulises meditaba en las posibilidades que tenía de ascender. Algún día los que se encontraban en puestos superiores, el contador Jiménez o el subgerente Gurrola, se descuidarían y entonces, simplemente, como los tejidos nuevos suceden a los viejos, él ocuparía su lugar; no se trataba de poseer un talento singular ni de hacer alardes retóricos sino de estar en el lugar preciso y saber esperar, cavilaba Ulises Figueroa, absorto en su filosofía, sentado frente a un escritorio de lámina fría y cajones semivacíos: su escritorio, el primero después de tantos años de vagar por empleos inútiles y de ser siempre el último de la fila, de comer tacos de canasta y un refresco mientras, recargado en una pared, veía pasar los flamantes autos de los jefes de departamento, de los gerentes que sólo se paraban dos horas en la oficina y cobraban diez veces más que cualquier empleado de mostrador. Su escritorio representaba la única piedra en el río, el apoyo que requería para saltar a la orilla y luego correr hacia una vida mejor. Un escritorio particular significaba, sin duda, un paso importante para poder, en el futuro, regentar la oficina a sus
anchas. Una vez colocado nadie le prohibiría fumar ni subir el volumen de su pequeña televisión, ni usar tenis los sábados por la mañana cuando la oficina se encontraba cerrada a los clientes y los empleados del departamento de contabilidad tenían la obligación de rendir cuentas al administrador en turno.

Ulises se levantó de su silla y dio un breve paseo alrededor de los escritorios vecinos, se aproximó lo más que pudo al apartado del licenciado Otilio Fuentes y luego volvió sobre sus pasos. Era su estilo, su manera de relajarse, moverse un poco mientras los otros continuaban con las narices hundidas en los montículos de facturas y memorándums. Un paseo breve al que sus compañeros se habían acostumbrado prestándole cada vez menos atención; después de todo cada uno era dueño de sus propias manías y nadie, por muy discreto que fuera, podría ocultarlas durante ocho horas seguidas. “Yo creo que tiene almorranas”, había dicho en cierta ocasión Raquel Urbina, una de las empleadas de mostrador a quien Ulises prefería no enfrentar. “Aquí cada loco con su tema”, opinaba a su vez la flaquita Susana Olvera, encargada de certificar la autenticidad de los documentos que los aspirantes a un crédito entregaban en el mostrador. Una vez revisada minuciosamente, Susana enviaba la documentación al departamento de crédito. “Tengo buena mano, nadie se podrá quejar, además siempre les doy su ayudadita.”

–Siéntate, Ulises, el que se va a la villa... –le dijo Susana, dientes afuera, algo melcochosa.

–Deberían de encadenarnos al escritorio y soltarnos para ir a comer –respondió Ulises. ¿Era eso una especie de queja? Se palpó la barbilla mientras examinaba los zapatos de tacón bajito que Susana colocaba a un lado de sus pies. ¿Qué caso tenía preferir esa clase de zapatos si de todas maneras, al llegar a la oficina, se despojaba de ellos? A él le seducían los
zapatos de tacón alto, las medias de nailon y también las faldas usadas un poquito arriba de la rodilla: combinación que regularmente le provocaba un ligero cosquilleo en los testículos. Susana no usaba una cosa ni otra y por lo tanto no podía ser considerada mujer, deducía Ulises, para quien los espectaculares y carteles de medias representaban el punto más cercano que podía tener un hombre con el erotismo. “Lo único femenino que nos ha quedado de las mujeres son las medias y los tacones”, concluía observando asqueado la triste figura de Susana Olvera.

–¿No te gustan los zapatos de tacón? –preguntó él, dizque abúlico.

–¿Cómo crees, Ulises; me canso mucho. Además, a mi esposo no le gusta que salga a la calle con tacones. Ya sabes, una vez que te casas ya ni en eso te dejan decidir.

–Pobre de ti.

–La verdad es que tampoco me quejo. Cuando tenía que decidir me costaba mucho trabajo. Además, ni que tuviera tanta ropa, sólo tengo dos pares de zapatos.

–¿Y medias?, ¿no te deja usar medias tu marido?

–Sí, claro que sí. Lo que pasa es que se rompen y tienes que estar gastando todos los días. No estamos para eso, Ulises, o comes o te pones medias.

–No son tan caras, hay Cannon y Dorian Gray por veinte pesos.

–Con veinte pesos compras cuatro litros de leche.

–También puedes usar tobimedias.

–¿Para qué? En la antigüedad no se usaban medias de nailon y nadie se moría por eso.

“Me importa un carajo la antigüedad –dijo para sí Ulises–, mi mujer usará medias y zapatos de tacón, como la esposa del licenciado Fuentes, como cualquier mujer que quiera gustarle a su hombre, no como Susana Olvera que a sus treinta años, por más que le busque, ya no tiene remedio.” Volvió a su lugar y luego de limpiar el marco del retratiero con el pulgar húmedo,
repasó la lista de los créditos aprobados. Un refrigerador, una sala de tres piezas, una televisión, apellidos, nombres propios que para él sólo significaban ansiedad y pobreza. Él mismo había sido sujeto de crédito varias veces; Susana también; cada uno de los trabajadores de la oficina había podido comprar un mueble o un aparato doméstico en abonos y a un precio poco considerable. No podía creerlo, ¿cómo podía aceptar que las piernas flacas color de leche de Susana Olvera hubieran podido excitarlo? Sólo había que observar esos zapatos mal boleados, de correas ajadas, feos, olvidados allí junto a sus pies, para descartar que se trataba de una verdadera mujer. Entonces, ¿por qué razón lo acometía ese estúpido hormigueo en los huevos? ¿A qué se debía que una sensación casi eléctrica recorriera toda su piel? Hojeó de nuevo la lista de los afortunados que obtendrían el crédito para el siguiente mes, pronunció sus apellidos desde Avendaño hasta Zamudio, tratando de expulsar de su cabeza la imagen cada vez más incisiva de las piernas de Susana Olvera; revisó todas las hojas a fin de reconocer en la lista a alguno de sus compañeros. Deseaba ser el portador de la buena noticia, llegar hasta el lugar del afortunado y decirle: “Por fin vas a estrenar refrigerador, mano, felicidades”. Pero no en esta ocasión, ningún compañero se encontraba entre los elegidos, sólo nombres que de ningún modo le resultaban familiares, hombres en su gran mayoría, empleados de gobierno, trabajadores que quizá soñaban durante las noches con el día en que tendrían en su casa la estufa o el comedor nuevo que su familia merecía. Él mismo recordó con cuánta ilusión aguardó la llegada del crédito para adquirir los dos sillones que ahora formaban la sala en su departamento de Tacubaya. “Dios mío, ¿pero qué es lo que estoy haciendo?”, aunque se negaba a reconocer su excitación, ardía en deseos de levantarse, caminar hacia el escritorio destinado a la investigación de documentos y verle de nuevo las piernas a Susana Olvera. No tardó mucho tiempo en decidirse, sólo dos minutos más y...

–Oye, Susana, ¿no sabes si vamos a trabajar el jueves? –le preguntó, cada vez más
excitado, colocándose a espaldas de la mujer para mirar desde la cima de sus hombros y apuntar directo a los canutos blancos, inmóviles.

–Yo creo que no, acuérdate que es día feriado y por ley nadie trabaja –dijo ella, sin descuidar la atención en los papeles que como naipes barajaba encima del escritorio.

–Ojalá no porque tengo pensado ir a divertirme –Ulises quiso imaginarse, cubiertas por la falda de tela medio descolorida, las pantaletas convencionales de Susana: “Ojalá fueran Carnival, negras”, tan negras como la probable araña de su pubis, como su cabello tieso y los pelos de sus axilas.

–Dichoso tú que puedes. Yo voy a aprovechar el día para lavar las cortinas de mi casa; tienen más de diez años sin una lavada y ni siquiera me acuerdo cuál era su color original. Susana parloteaba sin descuidar en nada el tratamiento de la documentación, rayoneaba un nombre con un plumón rojo y revisaba de nuevo. Una línea hecha con el marcador rojo en la superficie de una solicitud significaba algo como: no hay crédito debido a que estos papeles no están en orden; y cada vez que Susana se veía forzada a utilizarlo, experimentaba una sincera desazón. Se conmovía. “Quizás estoy poniéndole fin a la ilusión de una familia, así, nada más de un rayón.” Y sin embargo, a pesar de sus lamentos, nunca perdía la mano firme, la afilada guillotina producto de diez años de trabajo. Ulises, en tanto, le miraba las piernas imaginándose estar en la cama con ella, con una Susana diferente y provocadora; una capaz de usar zapatos altos, medias transparentes y un perfume más oloroso, aunque fuera corriente. Después de todo hacía más de dos meses que no estaba con una mujer y se merecía esa inofensiva fantasía. Su pantalón holgado ocultó la erección; una erección dolorosa e inesperada. Ella siguió hablando sin percatarse de que él había vuelto a su escritorio y desde allí la observaba con recelo y cierta incredulidad –como se mira a ése, que de repente y de un modo arbitrario, ha entrado sin permiso en nuestra vida– frotándose con los dedos la verga
ansiosa, oprimiéndola como si moldeara un trozo de plastilina. Pero se detuvo, no podía distraerse si quería ocupar algún día la oficina que estaba a un costado del escritorio de Susana; la oficina, cubículo, de Otilio Fuentes. Trató de concentrarse en su trabajo pero no era aquélla una tarde silenciosa: un murmullo insoportable colmaba todos los espacios y los empleados alborotaban hasta para llevarse a la boca una taza de café. A su lugar, salvando más de diez metros de distancia, llegaron los resabios de la enérgica voz de Raquel Urbina, empleada de mostrador cuya función consistía en atender personalmente a los aspirantes al crédito. Ulises sabía que Raquel cambiaba el tono de voz cuando se veía en la necesidad de enfrentarse a un solicitante obstinado. “A mí nadie va a exigirme nada, si yo no soy el gobierno, pendejos.” Se trataba del caso más común aunque por obvias razones el problema más difícil de resolver. “Yo sé que es difícil, pero no estamos aquí para cruzarnos de brazos –se animó a sí mismo Ulises– tenemos que enfrentar los problemas en su propio terreno; es nuestra obligación.” Más que motivado se incorporó de su asiento y caminó a paso seguro hasta el mostrador de clientes. La tercera silla junto a la pared le pertenecía a Raquel Urbina.

–¿Qué sucede? –preguntó rozando con la yema de sus dedos la espalda rígida de Raquel. Al otro lado del mostrador se hallaba un hombre de edad avanzada.

–El señor no quiere entender que no podemos otorgarle crédito si su patrón no lo ha dado de alta en el Seguro Social –respondió Raquel. ¿Cuántas veces se había visto obligada utilizar la misma frase para negar un crédito? Ulises disfrutó íntimamente el que Raquel, a pesar de su carácter hostil, hubiese accedido a explicarle el motivo de la discusión y por un instante se imaginó investido de la autoridad suficiente para responder: “Por favor, Raquel, autoriza el crédito. No hay por qué hacer perder más el tiempo a este pobre hombre”. Sin embargo, sólo el licenciado Fuentes era capaz de dar una orden de tal envergadura y Ulises debió conformarse con una frase rutinaria, no dirigida a Raquel sino al viejo que ponía en él
sus ojos esperanzados.

–No creo que se pueda hacer nada, señor. ¿Qué es lo que está solicitando?

–Un refrigerador, señor, me urge. Le estoy explicando a esta señorita que he estado muy enfermo últimamente y me están poniendo inyecciones que necesitan mantenerse en refrigeración, ¿me entiende? Si no están frías no sirven y...

–Claro que lo entiendo –Ulises bajó la vista. A sus treinta y siete años era incapaz de solucionar una pendejada como ésa. Un hombre podía morir sólo porque él no había tenido el talento necesario para ocupar un puesto de mayor altura.

–Vamos a hacer algo, mire, le voy a dar mi dirección, ¿usted por dónde vive?

–Allá, muy cerca del metro Observatorio.

–Muy bien, mientras arreglamos su asunto le voy a dar mi refrigerador. Yo vivo en Tacubaya, en la calle de Juan Cano número 87, y si me busca el sábado en la mañana se lo puede llevar. Mientras tanto vamos a hacer lo posible para que le den el crédito.

–Le va a salir más cara la mudanza –espetó Raquel.

–No se preocupe, por veinte pesos se lo llevan en un diablito. Lo espero en mi casa el sábado. Y si no tiene los veinte pesos, yo se los presto.

Ulises se retiró del mostrador y volvió a su lugar, orgulloso. Tenía la confortable sensación de haber hecho de su cuerpo un objeto ligero, exento del peso de su carga cotidiana: podía volar como un avión de papel de un lado a otro de la oficina. “Así deben sentirse los poderosos”, reflexionó Ulises mientras acariciaba con un dedo los labios de su querida actriz. Para entonces sus compañeros comenzaban a despedirse, menos Susana Olvera que aún se encontraba en el cubículo del licenciado Fuentes refrendando los créditos aprobados por ella. Ulises aprovechó para acercarse al escritorio del contador Jiménez y tomar el único aparato telefónico destinado al uso de los trabajadores. Marcó un número y llamó al que por muchos
años consideró su único amigo, Adolfo Estrada. Quería beber un poco de alcohol, sólo un poco, y después, si las cosas se daban, ir al bar en el que dos meses atrás había conocido a, ¿cómo se llamaba? ¿Martha? ¿Marlene? No estaba muy seguro pero sabría reconocerla entre el resto de las meseras, una chaparrita de cabellera negra y sonrisa agradecida que aquella noche se había acercado a él para hacerle compañía. Colgó el teléfono lamentándose de no obtener respuesta, tenía la necesidad de hablar con alguien, contarle acerca de las piernas níveas de Susana Olvera, del refrigerador Kelvinator que un desconocido pasaría a recoger el sábado a su casa, de sus proyectos y de la efímera sensación de sentirse poderoso. Sin embargo, fuera de Adolfo Estrada, la existencia de ese alguien resultaba improbable. ¿Quién además de Adolfo podía interesarse en sus historias?

A pesar de ello no estaba dispuesto a dejarse vencer por la adversidad. Se puso el saco de tres botones al frente, solapa cruzada y anchos hombros que había comprado al dos por uno en una tienda del centro, y se encaminó hacia la puerta de salida. Lo detuvo la voz de Susana.

–Que te diviertas, Ulises, te lo mereces.

–¿Y cómo sabes que me lo merezco? –refutó él.

–Todo el mundo merece divertirse, ahora te tocó a ti, mañana será a otro.

En la colonia Escandón se encontraba una cantina algo maltratada a la que años atrás solía ir en compañía de Adolfo, su amigo. Se llamaba El Fuerte de la Colonia y estaba en la calle de José Martí, a una cuadra de la avenida Patriotismo. Sólo era cuestión de caminar diez o quince cuadras y se encontraría con ella. ¿Por qué exactamente a esa cantina de dirección dudosa? ¿Por qué tenía que esforzarse siempre y sufrir para obtener un mínimo placer? Se hacía estas preguntas a menudo aunque jamás cambiaba su decisión: jamás tampoco le había resultado fácil entrar a un lugar por primera vez, de modo que El Fuerte era una magnífica
elección a pesar de su lejanía. Qué fácil le parecía caminar largas distancias una vez fuera de la oficina, podía correr si fuera necesario. Se encaminó por la calle de Zamora bordeando las faldas de la colonia Condesa. Siempre que había una oportunidad, recorría las calles de la Condesa para detenerse a mirar las casas de dos pisos, las cornisas de cantera oscurecidas por el tiempo y la cagarruta de los pájaros, las peanas ornamentales, los arcos ochavados, los basamentos de piedra negra, los jardines bien cuidados, los cafés y restaurantes abiertos hasta la madrugada, establecimientos a los que jamás se atrevería a entrar vestido con su saco de medio pelo y sus zapatos lustrosos pero corrientes. “¿Cómo me atrevo a criticar a Susana, si yo estoy igual?”, se autoacusaba Ulises, de buen humor. Bajo el brazo sostenía un fardo de hojas mecanografiadas que revisaría en casa; si había oportunidad podría dar de baja uno o dos créditos y recomendar al viejo de la vacuna; sólo era cuestión de descubrir un nombre repetido o comparar la hoja de los afortunados con la lista del mes anterior para advertir que alguna persona había sido beneficiada durante dos meses seguidos. Si se encontraba con alguno de estos dos casos, el viejo gozaría de su crédito. Mientras tanto, ¿qué haría él sin su refrigerador? Nada, era lo mismo, exactamente lo mismo, “para lo que tengo allí dentro, chingados”. De pronto, cuando estaba a punto de darse por vencido –según sus cálculos tendría ya que haber llegado a su destino–, se encontró de frente con la cantina, con sus paredes añejas de ladrillos grises y su puerta de madera recién pintada, siempre recién pintada. ¿No estaría haciendo mal? ¿Cuánto tiempo hacía que no se metía a un bar a tomar solo? Si bien no era su costumbre, esta vez se lo permitiría porque se trataba, según él, de un día diferente. “Si quieres vivir feliz tienes que contar todos los días con un motivo para celebrar, no importa lo pequeño que sea”, filosofó Ulises encontrándole por primera vez sentido a esa frase. Para animarse todavía más recordó a los héroes de película, que a diferencia de la mayoría, preferían beber solos, inmutables en la barra mientras el mundo se desmoronaba a
sus pies. Él estaba hecho de la misma madera y se consideraba uno de ellos, incluso mejor que ellos pues El Fuerte de la Colonia era una cantina real y no la escenografía de un estudio de cine. ¿Cuántas vidas tan aparentemente comunes como la suya deberían ser llevadas al cine? Empujó la puerta con la palma de una mano marcada con rayones de pluma Bic y entró a paso firme. Buscó la mesa más alejada de la sinfonola y antes de sentarse le pidió al mesero una cuba.

–Dame una cuba bien servida, por favor.

–Aquí siempre las servimos bien, jefe, no se preocupe –respondió el mesero.

El lugar había cambiado en algo y a Ulises le era difícil determinar exactamente en qué. Había pocas mesas y más de la mitad se hallaban ocupadas. No había mujeres pero en la pared del fondo, a un lado del baño, estaba el póster de una mujer en ropa interior.

Le dieron ganas de meter una moneda en la sinfonola mas desistió al darse cuenta de que otro hombre con las mismas intenciones pasó a su lado con una moneda entre los dedos. Ni modo, tendría que conformarse escuchando la música de otros. A un lado del póster, displicentes, los integrantes de un grupo de música ranchera descansaban mirando de reojo los instrumentos, el contrabajo de madera ajada recargado en la pared, el acordeón y las guitarras abandonadas en un rincón. Uno de ellos, por disciplina, se levantó de la silla y con andar abúlico enfiló hacia el lugar donde Ulises consumía su primer trago:

–¿Cuál le cantamos, patrón?

–Yo no sé nada de música ranchera, muchas gracias.

–¿Pues qué no lo educaron bien? –bromeó el músico, sin sonreír–. Allí estamos por si se acuerda.
Si bien el Fuerte era un lugar agradable y hasta cierto punto ruidoso, esa noche estaba hundido en el sopor y el aburrimiento. Ulises estuvo bebiendo durante más de tres horas hasta acumular el brío suficiente para mudarse a otro lugar. Sabía bien cuál era su próximo destino y su mente se esforzaba en recuperar la imagen de la fichera a la que meses atrás se había atrevido a invitar a su mesa, ¿se acordaría de él? Por supuesto que sí: “Siempre hay alguien que está pensando en ti, donde menos te lo esperas”, se dijo a sí mismo. Se levantó y fue hacia la barra para solicitar la cuenta directamente en la caja; se trataba de un truco que le había enseñado un tío suyo cuando Ulises era todavía adolescente: saltarse al mesero y tratar personalmente con el encargado de la caja, tomarlo desprevenido y obligarlo a sumar frente a tus narices. Un truco espectacular que al final de cuentas le parecía inútil, “si te van a chingar lo van a hacer de todas maneras”, caviló. A pesar de considerarlo una tontería, el hecho de levantarse cuando nadie lo esperaba y pedir la cuenta en la barra no dejaba de representar un tipo de conducta original que los parroquianos sabrían apreciar, algo para sentirse distinto y bien, muy bien.

No estaba tan borracho cuando recibió en la palma de la mano dos monedas de cinco pesos. Miró su reloj de manecillas flacas y correa de gamuza; no eran más de las diez de la noche y podría desplazarse a pie. Sin embargo, su casa se hallaba casi a la misma distancia que el bar. ¿Y si mandaba todo a la chingada e iba a dormirse? Los papeles bajo el brazo representaban un fuerte argumento para inclinarse hacia la segunda opción. ¿Y qué tal si mejor volvía a masturbarse pensando en las piernas de Susana Olvera? Era evidente que no se detendría y seguiría adelante. Consumir seis cubas al hilo no era algo que llevara a cabo todos los días; por lo tanto, era más razonable aprovechar el impulso y continuar, ir en busca de la hipotética mesera de muslos futboleros y manos diminutas, ¿cuál era el riesgo?, ¿no merecía una
mínima recompensa después del humano gesto de regalarle su Kelvinator a un viejo desahuciado? Enfiló por José Martí, tan muerta en las noches como viva durante el día, una calle de cerrajerías y mercados, de cantinas baratas y papelerías, de escuelas y pequeños locales atendidos por viejas de movimientos bovinos y hombres calvos y malencarados. Caminó despacio, suponiendo que seis cubas no eran poca cosa, concentrado en sus pasos, ignorando a los perros domesticados que tras los barrotes de acero gruñían lanzando al aire dentelladas imaginarias. Dobló en Carlos B. Zetina en lugar de seguir hasta Revolución. La calle estaba vacía, flanqueando las banquetas sólo dos hileras de autos inmóviles a la espera de ser robados, descuartizados en partes y vendidos en la San Felipe de Jesús o en la colonia Buenos Aires. Ulises dejó que la energía que le infundía el alcohol se disipara en el esfuerzo de una larga caminata; cruzó Benjamín Franklin y luego Patriotismo, miró otra vez su reloj y luego el cielo nublado: ¿llovería? Lo mejor era volver y tomar la dirección adecuada, buscar su cama, su almohada incómoda pero tan familiar, escuchar a José José.

Estaba en la calle de Pachuca justo en el cruce con Michoacán. A sus espaldas, Tacubaya, sus calles obscuras y su aroma a café de chinos. Quizás el bar al que se dirigía no había existido nunca, y tampoco la mesera, ni su sonrisa: la realidad jamás se encontraba en su lugar. Unas cuadras más adelante, Ulises distinguió la figura de una anciana que desaparecía tragada por la avaricia de un muro. En su lugar, la silueta de una mujer iba tomando forma. “¿Una mujer sola a esta hora?”, se preguntó Ulises, murmurando como lo hacen los borrachos cuando hablan solos. Si sus cálculos no eran falsos ella estaba en la esquina donde él tendría que doblar a la derecha. No pudo comprobarlo porque una vez allí le fue imposible seguir adelante. Frente a él, envuelta en el humo de su cigarro, una mujer joven y hermosa le clavaba encima sus imponentes ojos negros.
Esa tarde, mientras miraba la televisión y masticaba los últimos trocitos de su ración de cereal Maizoro, Adolfo Estrada miró a su alrededor y se preguntó cómo era posible que hubiese llegado a vivir en ese lugar durante tantos años. ¿Por qué jamás había tomado en serio la posibilidad de vender su departamento y largarse de allí? Una vez cumplidos los cuarenta, estaba seguro de que todo terminaría y entonces sí sería imposible darle un giro trascendental a su vida. Pese a que subir escalones no era tan sencillo como antes –más de tres pisos lo hacían sonrojarse– continuaba considerándose un hombre capaz de realizar cualquier tipo de actividad física. El problema no era su estado corporal sino el hecho de que la mayoría de hombres de su edad estaban ya casados, tenían hijos y también un trabajo estable. “Estoy a punto de envejecer y de que nunca más nadie vuelva a llamarme joven”, pensaba mirando el reflejo de su rostro en el fondo de su plato vacío, lamentándose de que cualquier cuarentón a esas alturas podía presumir de haber construido una vida a la que sería ya imposible traicionar. Y él, a sus treinta y nueve años, cultivando todavía la imagen de una misma mujer, habitando la casa en que se fraguaron su infancia y también sus años de adolescencia, ejecutando casi al pie de la letra la rutina impuesta por la inercia originada en un tiempo remoto y por la desconcertante imposibilidad de realizar alteraciones en la misma. “¿Cómo puedo comenzar algo distinto?, ¿es acaso posible?”, se preguntaba Adolfo. No podía afirmar que fuera infeliz o que estuviera demasiado arrepentido de lo poco que, según él, había hecho a lo largo de su vida. Más bien se hallaba aburrido de que los días lo sorprendieran realizando siempre las mismas actividades, y extrañado de haber acumulado sólo un par de amigos –uno de ellos Ulises Figueroa, su compañero de escolta– en treinta y nueve años: “¿Qué haría si
“¿Alguna vez te preguntaste si tendría amigos?”, se preguntaba Adolfo. “Probablemente estaríamos planeando un negocio para volverse ricos.” En cuanto a esa mujer de la que se decía enamorado, jamás le habría pasado por la cabeza confesarle sus sentimientos ni imaginar siquiera que entre ellos sucedería algo más importante que un saludo ocasional o una conversación desangelada. “Enamorado, ¿acaso yo sé lo que eso significa?” En relación a las mujeres se consideraba un idealista; si bien cuando adolescente había tenido un par de aventuras insulsas y pasados los veinte llegó a requerir de los servicios de una prostituta, la mayor parte de su juventud la había consumido acechando a su vecina desde la ventana de su habitación. El departamento de Adolfo contaba con tres pequeñas recámaras, un baño de mosaicos azules y una tina cubierta por una capa de esmalte despostillado, una cocina en la que más de dos personas se sentían incómodas y una estancia de veinte metros cuadrados. Como el departamento se hallaba en un tercer piso le resultaba sencillo dominar desde la ventana de su cuarto el conjunto de casas duplex y el minúsculo jardín que los diseñadores de la unidad habitacional planearon para cerca de doscientas familias. Estaba acostumbrado a su estúpida obsesión y a que ésta formara parte de su vida normal, algo parecido a las manías que uno cultiva sin finalidad aparente y que a la postre son imposibles de eliminar. Luego de tantos años de paciente espionaje, conocía de memoria los más íntimos detalles de la rutina cotidiana que seguía su vecina y también el itinerario de sus esporádicas salidas a la calle; a juzgar por el horario y la ropa que llevaba puesta, Adolfo sabía si ella se dirigía al supermercado, a algún comercio del barrio, o se aventuraba a rentar un video hasta el Blockbuster de avenida Taxqueña. Intrigado, la observaba salir a la calle y pasearse por los andadores y los pasillos de la Unidad como si fuera una igual que las otras, deteniéndose en el estanquillo a comprar latas de conserva y sal yodatada, pisando, poniendo sus hermosos pies en donde los perros olfateaban los orines de otros perros, haciendo la fila en la tortillería como una de las tantas
mujeres que formaban el mosaico humano de la Unidad Habitacional Francisco Villa.

“¿Cómo puede estar allí parada, bajo el sol, esperando un kilo de tortillas?” se preguntaba
Adolfo. La Unidad Francisco Villa constaba de seis edificios de seis pisos cada uno y un
conjunto de cuarenta casas duplex de techos planos, cancelería de hierro y puertas de madera.
La Unidad había sido edificada a mediados de los años setenta para albergar a los deportistas
que llegaron a la ciudad de México con el fin de competir en los Juegos Panamericanos. En
cuanto terminó la competencia, las casas y departamentos fueron vendidos a precios
accesibles y nadie más, exceptuando sus propietarios, volvió a ocuparse de su mantenimiento.
Como los compradores eran en su mayoría gente humilde y de clase media venida a menos,
incapaces de llevar a cabo un remozamiento continuo de los edificios, comenzaron a surgir
las grietas y las fugas de agua, las fachadas envejecieron y los pequeños jardines se llenaron
de tierra y tocones secos y amarillentos; las viejas banderas de los países participantes,
colocadas en la cima de los edificios más altos, fueron deshilachándose hasta desaparecer por
completo dejando las astas oxidadas, mudas y sin función alguna.

A Adolfo, la ingenuidad de Olivia con respecto a su propia belleza le parecía difícil de
comprender: “¿Qué acaso no tiene un espejo?” Fuera como fuera, él no se dejaría engañar;
jamás pensaría que por el hecho de ser vecinos, transitar en los mismos andadores o
encontrarse de frente una que otra mañana, poseía algún derecho para acercarse a ella,
presentarse y hablarle como seguro lo habían hecho ya tantos estúpidos.

Y en cuanto a él: ¿cómo había llegado a vivir esa cantidad de años en la misma habitación –
volvía Adolfo a cuestionarse– con los mismos carteles y banderines deportivos que desde su
adolescencia tapizaban la pared de su cuarto?: el póster de Farrah Fawcett y el cartel con la
fotografía del cuadro titular de su equipo: el Cruz Azul de los buenos tiempos, cuando lograba ser campeón durante tres temporadas seguidas. No comprendía cómo había dejado pasar casi tres lustros sin hacerle saber que estaba interesado en ella; quizás la culpa no era suya sino de la condición misma del tiempo, de los días, que se sucedían a un ritmo abúlico y discreto, e inesperadamente le caían encima convertidos en voluminosas décadas: un tiempo homogéneo, sin puertas ni límites palpables, en el que la adolescencia se encontraba a segundos de la vejez; un tiempo engañoso que sólo daba la cara cuando uno se detenía a reflexionar en él.

Si se mira con frialdad, se puede decir que los padres de Adolfo Estrada fueron afortunados debido a que murieron sin agonía: él, sufrió un infarto recién salido de la regadera, cuando una hora antes acababa de disfrutar una cena magnánima que incluía carne y frijoles con epazote. Meses más tarde, ella se fue a la cama después de haber visto su último programa de madrugada y no volvió a abrir los ojos. Ambos estaban de frente a los setenta años y en ninguno de los dos casos la muerte fue consecuencia de una enfermedad ostensible. Huérfanos, los dos hermanos mayores, profesionista uno, comerciante el otro, abandonaron el departamento e hicieron su propia vida. Sólo Adolfo continuó girando la cerradura de la puerta para correr el seguro todas las noches como antes lo hacía su madre, y siguió tomando sus alimentos en el costado de la mesa del comedor y durmiendo en el mismo camastro angosto, entre los libros de preparatoria y los apuntes de las clases que alguna vez tomó en la universidad. Decidirse a estudiar veterinaria obedeció a dos razones: la primera fue que desde párvulo sintió compasión hacia los animales; la segunda, que obtener el título de médico cirujano le habría llevado, contando el servicio social y la especialización, cerca de diez años. Y no sólo eso, ¿qué sentido tenía –según Adolfo– “chingarse” tanto si por razones de lógica
el que curaba a un perro podía curar también a un hombre? No obstante sus razonamientos y a pesar de lo fácil que resultaría obtener el título de veterinario, a los cuatro semestres de comenzar a tomar clases abandonó la universidad.

Cierto que el departamento era de su propiedad, lo había heredado y podía, si quería, tirar a la basura los muebles viejos, la coqueta apolillada, el ropero de cedro opaco y astillado, la ropa de los difuntos –incluyendo una caja de lámina que contenía el camisón y la ropa interior de la madre– los trastos abollados y salpicados de quemaduras en los que había comido y bebido desde pequeño: utensilios que su madre se negaba a desechar a pesar de su inutilidad evidente. No tocaría un solo objeto, menos ahora que se descubría como un hombre cercano a los cuarenta y comenzaba a necesitar de los recuerdos; un hombre maduro que jamás abandonaría su casa y orinaría por siempre en el baño donde todavía colgaba del perchero el albornoz que vestía su padre el día del infarto. No era alguien a quien le resultara agradable tirar los muebles ni adaptarse al ritmo de los nuevos tiempos: era como estar dentro de una pecera mirando un mundo en apariencia inmutable o al menos uno en el que Adolfo no podía tener clara participación. “¿Cómo se pueden cambiar las cosas si ni siquiera es posible llegar a ellas?” Hasta el perro que dormía en su cama era un animal achacoso que roncaba en las noches y sufría de un doloroso estreñimiento; un perro de pelos lacios y patas cortas, babeante y obeso, al que le daba por aullar en los días de frío y vomitar debajo de la cama. De pronto, Adolfo descubrió que la casa había tenido siempre ese olor dulzón como de manzanas cocidas, de azúcar podrida, un olor y un polvo que estaba en su piel, en su cabello, fundido en la pared de sus tabiques nasales y en la bata que colgaba del baño: en esa casa desde siempre y para siempre.
Sabía que ella se llamaba Olivia Sánchez y que sus padres eran Testigos de Jehová, aunque no podía precisar con certeza qué clase de religión era ésa ni en qué se diferenciaba de la católica. Sabía también que su vecina tenía por costumbre dormirse temprano y los sábados en la mañana, a manera de ejercicio, paseaba por los alrededores de la Unidad vestida con una sudadera de algodón color blanco. Tratándose de su ropa era un experto y podía reconocer una a una las prendas de Olivia en los tendedores de la azotea, sabía que los Sánchez lavaban los miércoles y los domingos e incluso descubría con facilidad la llegada de una nueva prenda. También estaba enterado de la hora en la que ella abandonaba la cama para entrar al baño: dos veces en la madrugada, una a media noche y otra aproximadamente a las cinco de la mañana. Además de esto, Adolfo conocía la existencia de pretendientes nunca correspondidos, oportunistas, “pendejos” que no se habían visto la cara: “Si algo detesto es que los hombres aspiren a lo que no merecen”. Sin embargo, no sentía celos ni tampoco amargura, al contrario; las dos únicas veces que vio a su vecina en compañía de un sujeto experimentó una forzada resignación y, después de un breve balance, llegó a la conclusión de que un hombre la protegería del acoso de los otros: nadie en la Ciudad de México, y mucho menos una mujer, debía arriesgarse a caminar a solas en la calle.

Adolfo no conservó en la memoria los escasos conocimientos adquiridos durante sus estudios de veterinaria. En la actualidad se veía a sí mismo incapaz de aliviarle el estreñimiento a Dogo, su perro, o meter una aguja en su piel dura y correosa. Prefería, a lo más, dedicarse a tareas no tan complicadas como cortarle el pelo a los pequeñines de su vecina Gertrudis o atender los constantes partos de la perra de la tlapalería. Los vecinos acudían a él con cierta frecuencia ya que la mayoría pensaba que se trataba de un veterinario que, además de todo, cobraba una baratija. Él nunca le confesó a sus clientes que de sus años en la Facultad pocas
veces entró a clases y, por lo tanto, no tenía demasiada idea de cómo le funcionaban las tripas a la mayoría de los animales. Sin embargo, Adolfo disfrutaba que le llamaran doctor y que le demostraran confianza; si bien no había logrado hacerse de un título, al menos tenía una función dentro de su comunidad y se ganaba a la semana unos cuantos pesos. En varias ocasiones se detuvo a pensar cuánto le habría gustado que la hija de los Sánchez tuviera una mascota. De ser así no habría tardado en presentarse en su casa con su maletín negro en el que guardaba algunas pomadas, un estetoscopio, agujas hipodérmicas y multitud de frasquitos vacíos que llegaron a contener antibióticos y calmantes; entrar aunque fuera una sola vez para certificar sus hipótesis al respecto de la decoración del departamento: conocer el estampado del papel tapiz, la forma de la mesa a la que Olivia acudía para tomar sus alimentos y escuchar las peroratas de su madre, religiosa hasta el tuétano. Sin embargo, en caso de haberse presentado la oportunidad, Adolfo hubría renunciado a ella puesto que no estaba seguro de poder acumular el valor suficiente para estar tan cerca de la recámara que imaginaba estricta y perfumada, tan próximo al cesto de la ropa sucia –paradójicamente, se imaginaba Adolfo, repleto de pantaletas muy blancas– y de sus cuatro pares de zapatos guardados bajo la cama: los botines negros, los zapatos de piel color ocre, los zuecos grises y los preferidos de Adolfo: el par de zapatos oliváceos con correa al frente. Por supuesto que jamás lo habría hecho, ¿qué sentido tenía ir en contra de las cosas?

Adolfo escuchó el gruñido ebrio del perro, que jugueteaba con el pedazo de una moqueta en el hocico, y recordó que dentro de unas horas el supermercado cerraría sus puertas. Se abrigó: una chamarra de pana color mostaza y una bufanda que no tenía ningún sentido en un clima que pocas veces descendía de los veinte grados. Descolgó las llaves del clavo empotrado en la puerta de entrada y las metió en el bolsillo. Antes de salir, entró a su recámara y desde su
ventana observó el cuarto iluminado de Olivia. ¿Qué estaría haciendo? Se la imaginó desnuda, tendida sobre su cama leyendo alguna novela, llorando por la muerte de un niño o por la desgracia de los pobres. Se acuclilló para acariciar al perro y preguntarle “¿quieres ir conmigo?” Lo hacía para que el animal no creyera que tomaba decisiones sin consultarlo. Fue al baño y metió las manos en el chorro de agua helada, el jabón era Camay, la toalla de color azul y textura rasposa. Algún día tiraría a la basura el cepillo de dientes que perteneciera en el pasado a su madre; no ese día, ni mañana, pero quizás algún día. Cuando salió del baño tropezó con el cuerpo de su padre y vio de cara al techo su rostro estirado y pálido, ¿cómo es que nadie se dio cuenta de que había sido presa de un infarto y que permaneció tirado en el piso a lo largo de tantas horas mientras el volumen de dos televisores colmaba con garrulería pertinaz el minúsculo departamento? ¿Cómo es que aún no se había deshecho de esa maldita imagen cada vez que se encontraba de cara a la puerta del baño? Adolfo se abotonó la cazadora de pana y pasó al comedor. Dudaba entre comprar sólo croquetas o de una vez la despensa para toda la semana. Lo decidiría cuando se encontrara dentro del súper, aunque sabía que estando allí sería muy difícil sustraerse a la tentación de empujar el carrico y pasearse por los pasillos titubeando entre una marca y otra, entre el color rosado de una etiqueta y el frasco aframbuesado de un refresco dietético. Cuántas veces la tienda cerraba mientras él, allí dentro, seguía dudando entre comprar una lata de chocolate Quick o una lata de Milo. La segunda marca se hallaba relacionada con la imagen que se había hecho de sí mismo cuando era niño. En aquella época su madre compraba el botecito de la etiqueta verde, y señalando la atlética figura de un deportista, le decía: “Si tomas mucha leche te vas a poner así cuando seas grande y ninguna mujer se te va a resistir”.

–¿Y yo para qué quiero mujeres? –preguntaba el niño.

–Todos los hombres necesitan de una mujer.
–Yo no, yo quiero vivir contigo siempre, no quiero otras mujeres.
–Llegará el día, hijo.
–No quiero que llegue ese día, no quiero ser fuerte, ni tener mujeres.

Por desgracia, en la actualidad, el bote de chocolate Milo resultaba bastante más caro que el de Quick, casi diez pesos más, cosa que hacía imposible su inclusión dentro del carrito de Adolfo. Desde que tenía uso de razón, el supermercado había significado para él una suerte de parque de diversiones. A los cinco años, cuando acompañaba a su madre a hacer las compras del día, aguardaba a que ésta se distrajera para ir a esconderse debajo de la mesa de las frutas o entre los costales de cal en la sección de ferretería. Allí, como en una trinchera, esperaba a escuchar orgulloso su nombre en el altavoz del supermercado, su nombre y el ruego de una voz masculina pidiéndole presentarse al lado de su madre: “Al niño Adolfo Estrada lo espera su madre en las oficinas de este supermercado. Si no sabe cómo llegar, pregunte a cualquiera de nuestros empleados”. “¿Qué buenos tiempos aquellos”, se entusiasmó en voz alta Adolfo, y sin detenerse a pensar que su situación económica no era del todo buena, decidió que esa noche se daría un mínimo lujo y compraría una lata grande de chocolate Milo: estaba más que decidido. Miró su reloj, le quedaban sólo unos minutos; caminó hacia la salida, giró la perilla y al abrir la puerta se encontró de frente con la figura enjuta y avejentada de su vecina, la señora Gertrudis Guadarrama.

–Buenas noches, no vengo a molestarlo. Sólo quería hacerle una pregunta –dijo ella con fingido nerviosismo.
–No se preocupe, mientras se pueda.
–A ver, dígame, usted que es doctor, ¿qué es bueno para las várices?
–Ajo, señora.
–¿Así, nada más?
–Así, nada más –respondió él mirando de reojo los tobillos de Gertrudis: dos troncos de eucalipto, despellejados.
–¿Y qué es mejor, untarlo o comerlo? –preguntó la vieja, decepcionada de recibir una respuesta tan común.
–De las dos maneras –dijo Adolfo hurgando en su cabeza la fórmula de un remedio sofisticado, el complicado nombre de algún medicamento o, en todo caso, una receta que incluyera sustancias extravagantes, cualquier cosa capaz de hacerle ver a Gertrudis que él, Adolfo Estrada, tenía conocimiento y autoridad suficiente para recetarle. Hubiera querido explicarle que los animales no sufrían várices y los veterinarios desconocían en gran medida ese tipo de enfermedad: “Imagínese, ¿cuándo ha oído de cirugía que un rinoceronte sufra de várices?” A pesar de ello le pareció consecuente mencionar el ajo. ¿No decía su madre que el ajo lo curaba todo? El ajo, el árnica, los nopales y la sábila, con eso curas hasta el cáncer, decía la madre.
–Estoy tan mal de mis várices que a veces preferiría arrastrarme que caminar.
–Yo la entiendo, Gertrudis, sólo tenga en cuenta que existen enfermedades más graves.
¿Qué me dice del sida o el cáncer? Yo preferiría tener a mi madre conmigo aunque tuviera várices.
–Que en paz descanse.
–Descansa en paz, de eso no se preocupe.
–¿Cómo es posible que un hombre tan bueno como usted continúe viviendo solo? Habría muchas mujeres que darían cualquier cosa con tal de tenerlo de marido.
–¿Ah, sí? Yo no conozco a ninguna –dijo Adolfo en tono jovial.
–Lo que pasa es que siempre está allí encerrado; salga, diviértase, no sea que un día se
vaya a arrepentir.

–Ya me estoy arrepintiendo, Gertrudis.

–¿Lo ve?

Adolfo se despidió y bajó las escaleras meditando las frases de Gertrudis. Varios niños jugaban a la pelota en un diminuto jardín cercado por una escueta empalizada, en ese mismo espacio de césped ralo y tierra abundante donde él y sus hermanos se persiguieron unos a otros cuando eran niños. Se detuvo a mirar la melancólica figura de un árbol de hojas amarillas y se preguntó si se trataba de un álamo o un encino. Había olvidado los nombres de los árboles que su padre le enseñara de niño, ahora todos los árboles eran iguales: indiferentes. Si deseaba llegar al super tendría que acelerar el paso, casi correr, ¿por qué no?, correr y hacer un poco de ejercicio: tenía lonjas y la piel desmayada; pronto, si no lo remediaba, tendría el cuerpo de un viejo. Antes de tomar el andador que lo llevaría hasta avenida Miramontes y luego a la tienda del issste, miró hacia la recámara de Olivia y pudo constatar que, justo en ese momento, la luz de su cuarto se eclipsaba. Le sorprendió que Olivia se fuera a la cama una hora antes de lo acostumbrado. Quizás estaba enferma o sólo un poco cansada. “A la mejor está en sus días”, dedujo Adolfo antes de echarse a correr y perderse entre las luces de la avenida Miramontes.
El ron provocaba en Ulises un efecto más que alentador. Tenía la sensación de que sus palabras y también sus actos se revestían de un nuevo y particular sentido: cualquier imagen o idea producida en su cerebro tendría que ser el fragmento de una inteligencia mayor, de una fuerza que, sin pertenecerle del todo, estaba en él y lo lanzaba hacia adelante. Se trataba de una sensación momentánea que irradiaba las cosas de una claridad poco frecuente, como si las cosas y las ideas, la materia y el espíritu, tomaran un lugar dentro de un espacio en el que él, Ulises Figueroa, era, aunque se tratara tan sólo de un instante, el centro. Y no sólo eso, la calle abandonada y tranquila, el horizonte quieto de edificios dormidos y árboles anémicos, la figura de esa bella mujer cuyos zapatos resaltaban en el pavimento como cerezas cárdenas, el murmullo sosegado de miles y miles de televisores, todo ello lo enfrentaba a sí mismo: se enorgullecía de haberle ofrecido su refrigerador al anciano enfermo y se alegró también de ser más joven que él; se emocionó al imaginar que, a pesar de su edad, todavía le faltaba la mitad del camino, “viviré otros treinta y siete años más y eso es casi toda la vida”. ¿Qué hacían todos sus compañeros de oficina justo en ese instante en que él era más libre que nunca? ¿Qué hacía Susana Olvera? Las cartas habían sido repartidas y esta noche Ulises tenía en sus manos el mejor juego. Le resultaba imposible dudar que muy pronto sería gerente y entonces, por supuesto, jamás volvería a poner sus ojos en las piernas de Susana Olvera. No en ella, aunque sí en la mujer que se encontraba apenas a unos metros de él, vestida como le gustaban las mujeres, con los zapatos altos y luminosos y medias de nailon y falda pegada a los muslos; muslos carnosos como sus labios y sus nalgas redondas, como el bulto considerable de sus senos. Nunca antes había recorrido esta calle y sin embargo le parecía
inverosímil que fuera lugar de prostitutas. Miró descaradamente hacia el auto rojizo, ¿habría alguien allí dentro, cuidándola? Definitivamente se trataba de una prostituta, si no, ¿por qué ella lo observaba con tal coquetería? En lugar de acercarse, Ulises se detuvo y contó mentalmente el dinero que guardaba en sus bolsillos. Descontó las cubas que había consumido en el Fuerte y también la propina: no llevaría consigo más de doscientos pesos. Nadie en estos tiempos tacaños aceptaría irse por una cantidad semejante. Se lamentó y sin embargo, tenía el ánimo suficiente para intentarlo. ¿Qué podía perder? ¿No era su día? Ambos parecían tan solos. Si al menos pudiera hacer lo mismo que con aquel viejo, ofrecerle la televisión o el radio a cambio de ese breve servicio nocturno, decirle puedes pasar mañana a mi casa en Juan Cano 87 y llevarte la televisión o mi sala o lo que quieras. Ella se propuso no dejarlo escapar, menos ahora que la fortuna se había llevado lejos a los “malditos cerdos”. Complacida, observó sus pantalones holgados y el fardo de hojas atorado en una axila; sus ojos tiernos y entusiasmados, la corbata de líneas horizontales mal anudada; se iría con él por lo que fuera, qué importaba si llevaba sólo veinte pesos. Cómo ansiaba el calor de un hombre indefenso y el calor de la cama de hotel: un hombre indefenso y bueno hasta los dientes.

—Andar solo a estas horas es sospechoso —dijo ella. Quería convencerlo rápido. Él guardó silencio. Era evidente que necesitaba tiempo para confeccionar su respuesta. Cristina no lo esperó y completó su frase:

—No vayan a pensar que eres volteado, ¿dónde está tu novia?

—No tengo —dijo al fin Ulises—, fui a tomar unas copas y a escuchar música. Yo solo.

—Pues así las has de tratar que te echan a la calle.

—No —Ulises dio un paso hacia ella; estaban muy cerca—, la verdad es que vivo solo. ¿No quieres venir a conocer mi casa?

—Con razón te echan a la calle, por resbaloso —Cristina se tranquilizó, después de todo
le costaría mucho menos trabajo del que se imaginaba.

—¿Cuánto me cobras por ir a mi casa? —contraatacó él, satisfecho de hacerse por primera vez de las riendas del diálogo.

—Mi casa es el hotel que está aquí a dos cuadras, el hotel Cadillac. ¿Lo conoces?

—¿Es muy caro?

—Depende para qué lo quieras.

—No te entiendo.

—Si lo quieres sólo para coger es un poco caro, y si te quieres quedar a dormir te va a parecer barato.

Ulises volvió a calcular la cantidad de dinero que llevaba consigo, ¿por qué decían “coger” en lugar de “hacer el amor”? No entendía a las mujeres, ¿no se suponía que ellas tendrían que guardar cierta discreción? Si había tenido el descaro de mencionar su casa era porque de ese modo no tendría que pagar la habitación del hotel y porque además, en un cajón del ropero, contaba con ciento cincuenta pesos más, tres billetes de a cincuenta que, con mucho trabajo, había apartado para pagar el gas y el recibo de luz del bimestre pasado. Cristina, astuta, no tenía necesidad de preguntar para adivinar que su pretendiente no llevaba más de cien o doscientos pesos en la bolsa. No obstante, simuló entablar una negociación.

—¿Cuánto traes? —preguntó.

—Sólo doscientos pesos —dijo él, apenado—; es todo lo que tengo —Y ella:

—No te preocupes, eso es todo lo que valgo. Estás de suerte, ¿qué signo eres?

—Capricornio, aunque no creo mucho en eso de los signos.

—No importa si crees o no, de todos modos las estrellas te afectan.

—Si tú lo dices.
–Es como si dijeran no creo en la lluvia o en el sol. Tú sabes que el sol es una estrella, ¿no?

–Sí, claro.

–Y cuando hace mucho calor tu humor cambia, ¿no? A mí me duele la cabeza. Así es con las estrellas más lejanas, sólo que éstas te afectan el alma.

–Puede ser.

–Tengo un hermano que es de tu mismo signo y dice que a los capricornios les gustan más las rubias que las morenas.

–Oye, perdona, no sé si me expliqué. Sólo traigo doscientos pesos y no puedo pagar el hotel.

–Ya te dije que el hotel es mi casa. Yo te invito aunque sólo por esta vez, ¿eh? Nad más no te me vayas a sentir el muy padrote a pesar de que Cristina tenía su propio cuarto en Tacubaya, experimentaba cierto orgullo afirmando que el hotel era su casa.

–Cómo crees, te agradecí mucho –añadió Ulises, en verdad agradecido.

–Así empiezan –dijo ella tomándolo del brazo y pegándose llena de malicia a su costado. Caminaron sin prisa, como si fueran parte de un cortejo, cruzaron la calle a paso cansino sin mirar que a sus espaldas una anciana, oculta en el vano de la puerta, los bendecía con una mano en el aire y los dedos en cruz: “Que Dios te bendiga y te lleve con bien, hija mía. Tú no tienes la culpa de nada”. Ulises se resistía a creer que el asunto se hubiera resuelto de modo tan sencillo, mas si lo pensaba bien, no había nada extraño en ello; un hombre joven se encuentra con una mujer, se gustan y se van juntos del brazo. ¿No era ese un guión adecuado y lógico? El perfume a flores viejas, a manzanilla y champú corriente del cabello y piel de Cristina lo estimulaba a seguir, a no dudar y llegar hasta su cama, a besarla como a la novia que tanto trabajo le costó tener –su último romance había expirado veinte años atrás,
cuando Ulises estaba todavía en secundaria— a decirle palabras de amor y hacerle cosquillitas
en las axilas, y darle sus doscientos pesos como si con éstos Cristina pudiera comprar el
mundo. ¿No era tal cosa el premio a su optimismo y a su deseo de triunfo? Cruzaron la puerta
del hotel más cercano, el Cadillac, uno de cuatro pisos y ventanas discretas, de fachada
azafranada y cuartos a media luz. En la recepción un hombre de tez calcárea y olor a brea
escudriñó a Ulises, más por oficio que por curiosidad. Cristina se dirigió a él familiarmente.

–Apúntalo a mi cuenta, el fin de semana te pago.

–Claro que sí, patrona, somos socios, ¿no?

–Si fuera tu patrona ya te hubiera corrido –dijo ella soltando una carcajada.

Recorrieron los peldaños de la escalera y entraron a un cuarto medio lóbrego pero limpio y
ordenado. Ulises lo comparó con su recámara; con su casa entera, en la que todo estaba
desordenado y sucio: el esmalte de la estufa eclipsado por el cochambre acumulado durante
años, el fregadero ahogado de trastes sucios –a pesar de que cenaba en casa dos o tres veces a
la semana– la cama siempre destendida, las sábanas llenas de cicatrices y manchitas de
mostaza y catsup, de loción y grasa de su cabello, “¿por qué mierda tengo tanta grasa en el
pelo?”; la ropa sembrada en el piso, muerta e incapaz de florecer, los calcetines tiesos, el
cuello percutido de sus camisas blancas. Sólo en sábado el aspecto de su morada cambiaba
cuando, apartado de la rutina cotidiana, tomaba conciencia de que no podía continuar
viviendo en tal muladar. Entonces, haciendo gala de un cuidado extremo, colocaba sobre la
fiel y vieja tornamesa su disco preferido, el de José José, el único disco que, según sus
propias palabras, había logrado llegarle al corazón. Y mientras canturreaba simulando el
gesto adolorido del artista, paseaba la escoba de un lado a otro de su departamento, ordenaba
la ropa en bloques iguales y sumergía los trastes sucios en el agua jabonosa del fregadero.
–A mí no me gusta José José, es monótono –era la opinión de Adolfo, con quien había tenido en el pasado fuertes discusiones al respecto.

–No tienes idea de lo que dices. Ese hombre ha vivido más que tú y yo juntos, ¿cómo van a ser monótonas sus canciones?

–Él no las escribe, sólo repite lo que otros escribieron. Si ha tenido éxito se lo debe a los compositores.

–Estás jodido, Adolfo; a ver, ¿a ti qué tipo de música te gusta?

–La instrumental, yo sólo escucho música instrumental, no sabes lo buena que es para meditar y relajarse.

¿Qué haría sin su disco de José José cuya posesión significaba una de las pocas cosas que alegraban su vida? Incluso tenía repetido dos veces el mismo disco: uno, el de batalla; el otro, para guardarlo, para no estar indefenso el día que jamás volviera a ser reproducido. Quizá fuera ése el único detalle en el que verdaderamente se había comportado con precaución; para lo demás resultaba mucho menos previsor, por ejemplo, en el pago mensual de la renta. A pesar de habérselo propuesto más de una vez le había sido imposible reunir dos mensualidades simultáneamente. Y lo mismo sucedía al respecto de la luz y el gas. Gracias a que Cristina rehusó ir a su casa, el dinero destinado a tales gastos se conservaría intacto en el cajón del buró; en caso de que ella hubiese aceptado lo habría dejado a oscuras quién sabe cuántos días, con la estufa muerta y el calentador congelado. Pensó que de ser un poquito metódico habría organizado su tiempo para ahorrar algunos pesos y hacer de su recámara un lugar habitable, tanto como lo era el modesto cuarto de hotel de Cristina.

–¿Qué tanto miras?, ¿no te gusta? –preguntó ella.

–Está demasiado limpio.
—¿Y qué querías?, si no soy un puerco. Y mi casa está igual que este cuarto: ya que me tocó ser pobre, al menos puedo darme el lujo de la limpieza. Lo sucio lo vas a ver más adelante, cuando apaguemos la luz. ¿O prefieres hacerlo con la luz prendida?

Pocos muebles, las cortinas plisadas y limpias aunque un poco manoseadas, un armario sin polvo y un baño con olor a desodorante, equipado con toallas ásperas aunque limpias, una cama con sábanas tiesas pero limpias, con almohadas duras en demasía pero limpias. Sólo faltaba su disco de José José para que todo fuera más que perfecto, una mujer con medias tibias, tacones altos, un cuarto humilde e impecable, sólo faltaba su pieza favorita, la que decía: Esta noche te voy a estrenar y a beberme tu amor de un solo trago. Sin embargo, la canción no se extrañaría ya que Cristina, esculcando bajo la cama, hizo aparecer una grabadora portátil y una botella de Bacardi blanco.

—Tengo mi propio bar debajo de la cama. No tengo que aguantar a los meseros, ni dejar propina. Y con esto nos ahorramos la sinfonola.

—Si tomo un poco más voy a ponerme borracho, he estado bebiendo en una cantina.

—Mejor, así te pones a hablar y me sales barato.

Ulises tomó la botella y sirvió un chorro en un vasito de plástico. Sentados en el borde del camastro bebieron y conversaron. Ella no tenía ninguna prisa por volver a la calle a enfrentarse con lo inesperado. Si las cosas sucedían como las había planeado podría permanecer allí de una vez para toda la noche. Él tampoco sentía deseos de caminar en la madrugada acompañado sólo de los perros, que divertidos se entregaban a la cacería de las ratas nocturnas y a la persecución sistemática de los peatones. Mejor tomarlo con calma y aguardar el metro de las cinco de la mañana, aunque fuera sólo para avanzar una estación. Cristina le gustaba, no sólo su cuerpo generoso y su vestido, no sólo el que fuera tan blanca,
tan blanca que podría, si quisiera, teñirse el cabello y pasar por una gringa, sino el hecho de que no le permitiera tomar ningún tipo de iniciativa. Con ella sólo era dejarse conducir, seguir el protocolo. Si tuviera una mujer así para siempre, una casa ordenada, el puesto de gerente, su disco de José José, una mujer como Cristina, entonces Ulises jamás volvería a pedirle nada a la vida.

—¿Y tú, en qué trabajas? —le preguntó ella, los labios mojados de alcohol.

—Soy gerente en una empresa del gobierno —mintió Ulises.

—¿Gerente? —preguntó ella, algo sorprendida, sopesando el significado exacto de la palabra gerente.

—Sí.

—¿Y entonces por qué no traes dinero? A mí se me hace que eres cualquier gato y me quieres apantallar. En este cuarto ha habido hasta presidentes de la República, nada más se ponen pedos y el mundo les queda chico.

—No podemos pensar así, es cruel.

—¿Cruel? Pero si es la purita verdad, ¿o a poco a ti no te gusta ser fanfarrón?

—La verdad es que no soy precisamente gerente pero eso no importa porque muy pronto voy a serlo.

—¿Ya ves? ¿Dónde está la crueldad?

—En querer destruir los sueños de otro —Cristina se enterneció. Jamás había pasado por su mente la idea de herir a su nuevo amigo. ¿No era evidente que se trataba de una broma? La mayoría de sus clientes gozaban ese tipo de observaciones, aceptaban el juego e incluso le respondían fuerte, con frases que no tenían nada de amistoso.

—Oye, tú, capricornio, qué importa si eres gerente o no, lo importante son los sentimientos —dijo Cristina antes de posar sus labios pintados en la boca de la botella.
Ulises no respondió porque, entretenido, le miraba el cuello, el lunarcito, las ramitas glaucas de las arterias, el plástico brillo del sudor diario. Cristina depositó la botella en el piso y, juguetona, se montó sobre Ulises. Lo obligó a recostarse y a enterrar la cabeza en el almohadón. Lo besó con ternura, con el obvio deseo de hacerle olvidar sus palabras. Le abrió la bragueta y tomó en sus manos la carne dura y dispuesta. Pensó que si su nuevo amigo no fuera tan susceptible le habría dicho algo similar a: “Voy a tratarte como si ya fueras gerente”. No cometería ninguna indiscreción ni nada que pudiera molestar a un ser en apariencia tan manso. Cerró los ojos y un instante antes de que sus labios comenzaran su labor conciliatoria, un chorrito de semen tibio azotó sus mejillas.
Le causaba sorpresa que su madre tuviera siempre respuestas a todas las preguntas. ¿Por qué disponía de respuestas infalibles? A veces la vieja ni siquiera requería de un interlocutor pues en voz alta, como si hubiera perdido el juicio, se hacía preguntas que en el acto ella misma respondía. “Hay que ponerse en forma, nunca sabes que estupidez te puede preguntar un católico”, recomendaba Ofelia Sánchez a su hija. Olivia, en cambio, no tenía nada que explicarse: las cosas sucedían a pesar de ser comprendidas y no era muy razonable oponer resistencia a su paso. Y esto, por supuesto, incluía la clase de vida a la que sus padres la habían destinado, una vida que de ninguna manera Olivia habría calificado de desgraciada. A diferencia de su madre, no disponía de un gran número de adjetivos y no hacía mucho caso a las definiciones de virtud o felicidad. ¿Una vida monótona? Para Olivia la frase significaba muy poca cosa. A su manera, siempre encontraba el modo de pasársela bien: el quehacer rutinario no tenía nada de frustrante y sí mucho de purificador: “Limpiar tu casa es como limpiar tu alma”, le repetía siempre su madre, demagógica. No acostumbraba quejarse y aceptaba a su familia de buena gana, ¿tendría algún caso no hacerlo? Aunque jamás había viajado, no desenaba su ciudad ni tampoco la colonia en la que había vivido desde que era una niña. En esa casa aprendió a llevar una rutina monacal y a meterse a la cama temprano; en su caso, la noche se hallaba asociada al sueño y si no sucedía algo extraordinario así lo estaría siempre. Todas las tardes, después de comer y asear la cocina, su madre extraía de un desamparado librero algún volumen de la enciclopedia Quillet y se daba a la tarea de dictar lecciones a su hija. Prefería hacerlo ella misma a permitir que fuera instruida con ideas contrarias a su religión.
—Las matemáticas no tienen nada que ver con ponerte a saludar a una bandera, cielo, no confundamos el azúcar con la sal —argumentó en una ocasión Ofelia a su marido. Las discusiones acerca de la educación de la hija fueron constantes una vez que Olivia cumplió el tercer año de secundaria en una escuela oficial.

—Creo que somos injustos. Olivia tiene que tener amigas de su edad, entiende, no se trata de una mascota sino de un ser humano —replicaba Ernesto Sánchez, antiguo ferrocarrilero, jubilado a los cincuenta años a causa de una afección en la columna vertebral que los médicos temieron fuera el principio de una parálisis. Se equivocaron, ya que el maquinista jubilado no sólo dejó de sentir dolores en la columna sino que eliminó el andar jorobado colocando una tira de tela adhesiva en su espalda, desde la cintura al cuello.

—Te voy a poner un ejemplo, vida. Si yo le pregunto a un negro y a un blanco cuánto es dos más dos, ¿qué crees que van a responderme?: cuatro, por supuesto, aunque respondan en idiomas diferentes. Pero si tú le preguntas a las mismas personas qué cosa es la patria, no van a contestarte lo mismo. Yo, por ejemplo, si alguien me preguntara, les diría que la patria, el estado y esas cosas no tienen sentido, no existen.

—¿Y eso qué?

—En la escuela no sólo te enseñan que dos más dos son cuatro sino que te imponen ideas.

Desde muy joven, Ofelia se dio a la tarea de construirse una ortodoxia. Su casa, adquirida con gran esfuerzo, hacía también las funciones de iglesia: un refugio para sustraerse del árido panorama de un vecindario poblado en su abrumadora mayoría por católicos, “hombres pacíficos y buenos pero incapaces de tomar la responsabilidad de sus almas”, opinaba la señora Sánchez cuando tenía que referirse a ellos en su conjunto. Olivia era la única hija del
matrimonio longevo y aparentemente sin fisuras: una hija hermosa y lista, aunque la piel y el cabello...

–¿Te has puesto a pensar que Olivia no se parece a ninguno de nosotros?
–No tiene por qué parecerse –refunfuñaba el marido, fastidiado de que los alegatos comenzaran siempre con una pregunta. Se trataba del estilo de su mujer.
–Si no es porque estuvo en mi vientre, dudaría que fuera nuestra hija.
–Deja que eso lo piensen los demás, ocúpate de asuntos más importantes.
–He sabido de infinidad de casos en que las enfermeras se equivocan y te llevan un hijo que no es tuyo.
–En este caso es imposible. Yo estuve allí todo el tiempo; deja de pensar en esas cosas, carajo. Si hubiéramos tenido más hijos podrías repartir mejor tus dudas.
–¿Sabes por qué sólo quise tener una hija? ¿Te lo he dicho alguna vez? Porque la gente que tiene más de un hijo está pecando de soberbia, quiere crear y parecerse a Dios.

Y no sólo la piel y el cabello sino también un ritmo diferente, ajeno a los movimientos mecánicos y minuciosos de la madre y al desgarbo acongojado del padre; un ritmo que imprimía a sus actos una cadencia agónica y en cierto modo elegante: como si paseara sobre una cuerda teniendo la absoluta certeza de que nunca caería. Una seguridad que le había sido concedida desde pequeña, suficiente no sólo para vivir entre los vivos sino también, vía la bendición de su madre, para cuando hubiera que estar entre los muertos: no había más que recordar las palabras que Ofelia repetía toda vez que visitaba la casa de algún católico; palabras que a pesar de estar dirigidas a otros, funcionaban como un bálsamo para su propio espíritu: “Los Testigos de Jehová estamos convencidos de que cuando el Reino de Dios ponga fin a todos los gobiernos actuales, muchos de nosotros sobreviviremos así como Noé y
su familia sobrevivieron al diluvio”. Los recuerdos de Olivia estaban ligados a la monserga diaria de la salvación, a las sentencias definitivas que su madre solía esgrimir durante el desayuno, a las discusiones escolásticas que la aguerrida Ofelia sostenía con los vecinos ociosos, y a las constantes escaramuzas en las que ella misma se veía involucrada a causa de su apatía religiosa. No le encontraba sentido a ser tan estricta cuando la fe de su madre alcanzaría para la salvación de toda la familia y aún más. Era obvio.

La última noche del mes de febrero, la hija del matrimonio Sánchez se encontraba recostada en su cama, desnuda, palpándose el vientre con las yemas de los dedos, todavía con la huella del agua caliente en su piel, repasando las obligaciones del día siguiente, satisfecha de ser el centro de un cuarto que el tiempo había hecho tan suyo como su rostro, tan suyo como la pijama que había decidido no utilizar más debido a que la mancha roja, a pesar de las refriegas con jabón Zote, no había logrado ser eliminada totalmente de la entrepierna.

–Ya te dije que uses Ariel; deja los calzones remojando toda la noche y enjuágalos al día siguiente –recomendaba Ofelia.

–Ese jabón no sirve para nada; la televisión sólo dice mentiras.

–Hazme caso, hija, te vas a acabar las manos.

Ése había sido un verdadero cambio en el rígido programa de su vida diaria: abandonar la pijama de estampado tan groseramente igual a las florecitas violetas del papel tapiz, tan parecido al batón de su madre y a los mosaicos de la cocina y a las envolturas de los regalos de cumpleaños y a los mamelucos de los niños recién nacidos y a los vasos de plástico que cuando chica le ponían en la mesa, rebosantes de leche. Ahora allí, desnuda, suspendida en su respiración de molusco, concentrada en la reacción de su piel, llevaba su mano a la entrepierna para tocarse el musgo dorado que crecía en desorden alrededor del pubis.
–Olivia, quiero decirte algo. Hoy, mientras me bañaba vi, sin querer, tu ropa interior y, bueno, yo sé que no soy el indicado para decirte estas cosas, más bien tendría que ser tu madre, pero, lo que pasa es que los hombres no respetamos mucho al tipo de mujeres que usa esa clase de calzones, ¿me entiendes?

–Sí, te entiendo, papá. No volveré a colgar mi ropa en el baño.

–No, mija, no me refiero sólo a eso. Yo sé que no es propio de un padre pero quiero acompañarte la próxima vez que vayas a comprar tu ropa interior. Soy un hombre experimentado y estoy seguro de que podré ayudarte. Si quieres podemos ir mañana mismo al almacén.

–Ahora no necesito ropa interior. Tengo de sobra.

–No vayas a dejar de avisarme.

–Sí, papá, como quieras.

–Y de todo esto es mejor que tu madre no se entere. Me extraña que no te haya dicho nada.

–¿Que no se entere de qué?

–De nuestra conversación, esto es sólo entre tú y yo.

–Está bien, papá.

...musgo dorado que ahora cubría con la palma de su mano presionando con un dedo el clítoris oculto, recordando la única vez que había fornicado con un hombre, un amigo de la secundaria cuyo rostro se había desvanecido en el pasado. Ambos tenían dieciséis años y lo habían hecho en el piso de la cocina, cuidándose de no hacer ruido en una media noche muda en la que cualquier sonido anormal podría despertar al matrimonio que dormía sin prejuicios en la recámara mayor. De tal experiencia recordaba sólo un dolor algo placentero y un
lloriqueo íntimo que jamás se transformó en lágrimas, una carne tensa y extraña que su amigo no supo exactamente dónde acomodar, un olor a sudor y a desinfectante, a orines y a olla de frijoles recién hervidos, el sabor a compota de unos labios dulzones y una excitación animal, contenida, domada por el miedo a ser descubierta. No había sido una mala experiencia para una mujer de dieciséis años, concluía ahora mientras observaba su vientre, sus muslos blancos de migajón y yogurt natural. Le gustaba su cuerpo, no desde una perspectiva sexual sino como un objeto esbelto y funcional; le gustaba y aceptarlo le infundía fortaleza, quizás algún día encontraría a un hombre para compartir con él su cuerpo y mejorar el recuerdo de su primer coito. En caso contrario, si el destino no lo disponía de esa forma, seguiría de largo, como si nada, sabiendo que no estaba en sus manos decidir acerca de un asunto tan importante. Después de todo no estaba sola: se tenía a sí misma, y a sus padres, y por conducto de su madre, a Dios. Luego de aquella noche jamás tuvo la oportunidad de estar a solas con otro hombre, como si a pesar del placer el acto hubiese carecido de suficiente categoría como para esforzarse en buscar una nueva aventura. Se levantó de la cama arqueando su cuerpo y se lanzó hacia adelante, probando la plasticidad de sus músculos. Caminó despacio, palpando con la planta de sus pies la moqueta lisa y en algunas partes áspera, gastada por lo años de uso constante. Apagó la luz y volvió a tenderse en la cama. No había en el ambiente ningún signo de desgracia, ninguna señal que Olivia fuera capaz de interpretar como un mal augurio. Su vida cambiaría en algunas horas pero en sus ojos había tranquilidad, una paz de camello que incluso su misma madre le envidiaba.

–A veces me parece que no eres mi hija –lo dijo a bocajarro una mañana mientras Olivia tallaba los platos del desayuno.

–Mi papá dice que soy muy parecida a ti cuando eras joven –respondió. La rebaba del jabón escurría en sus guantes de látex.
–Si no hubieras estado en mi vientre juraría que no eres mi hija –la misma frase de siempre, las mismas palabras.

–¿Por qué dices eso, mamá? –cómo odiaba tener que lavar platos con residuos de mayonesa. La sustancia blanca se impregnaba al estropajo como si fuera un cáncer.

–Eres tan diferente a mí, yo jamás podría tardarme tanto tiempo en tomar un maldito vaso de leche.

–Me gusta la leche, eso es todo.

–Nadie podrá decir tampoco que me ha visto dormir desnuda encima de las cobijas, ¿comprendes? Nadie, ni siquiera tu padre.

–Yo no duermo desnuda sobre las cobijas, estás inventando –ahora tenía que lavar no sólo los platos sino también el estropajo.

–Te he visto, ¿por qué lo niegas?

–Sólo fue una vez, tenía mucho calor.

–Si no hubiera sido porque te vi nacer podría jurar que no eres mi hija.

–No me gusta que digas esas cosas, mamá.

¿Cuántas discusiones de este tipo había tenido con su madre a lo largo de los últimos años?

Cientos, quizás. ¿Cuántas veces había vuelto a su recámara para tirarse a llorar en la cama y esperar a que una hora más tarde aquella mujer de baja estatura, aspecto inofensivo y gafas espectaculares fuera en su busca, arrepentida y no obstante firme, sin modificar el tono de su voz marcial?

–Olivia, no hagas mucho caso de mis palabras, ya me conoces.

–¿Ni siquiera cuando hablas de Dios?

–Eso es otra cosa, hija, Dios está más allá de estas tonterías. Me refiero a que a veces me siento tan triste que quisiera morirme.
–No digas eso, mamá. ¿Qué haríamos nosotros sin ti?

Así durante horas, hasta que ambas, madre e hija, se abrían los brazos para pedirse perdón. Olivia gimoteando, la madre estoica, clavando la barbilla en el hombro de su hija, recordando las obligaciones que ante Dios contrajo con su familia, consciente de que nadie tiene derecho a tratar mal a una hija después de haberla puesto de pie en este mundo.

–Cuando naciste yo estaba acostumbrada a ver a tu padre muy poco tiempo: todos los días se la pasaba dentro de su maldito tren; después, cuando lo pasaron a los talleres, comenzamos a llevar una vida normal y me di cuenta de que nos era difícil convivir, que estábamos mejor cuando lo veía dos veces a la semana. Una vez que lo jubilaron creí que jamás iba a acostumbrarme a tener un hombre metido todo el día en la casa. Eso es lo que me ha cambiado el humor. Tienes que perdonarme, mi vida, de entre todas las jovencitas que hay en el mundo te reconocería con los ojos cerrados.

–No es eso lo que me preocupa, sino que quieras morirte. No debes hablar de esa manera.

–Lo digo pero no está en mi mente. Lo digo cuando me doy cuenta de que he pasado toda la vida en esta casa planchando las camisas de tu padre y lavando los pisos. Dios no quería esto para nosotros; estoy segura de que Dios se ha distraído.

La última noche del mes de febrero Olivia durmió desnuda, con una mano en el vientre, soñando algo que nunca más recordaría, ajena, por tradición, al sentimiento que despertaba en el hombre que desde su recámara la había perseguido con la mirada por tantos años; cultivando pacientemente la bitácora exacta de sus movimientos, temiendo que otros la miraran con un amor similar al suyo, pensando en ella, con vehemencia pero también con resignación, como se piensa en la ciudad que jamás vas a conocer y que, sin embargo, por
alguna razón, conoces y está en tu mente, calle por calle, color por color.
VI

Aunque no era su costumbre, esa mañana Ulises Figueroa decidió permanecer en la cama una hora más. ¿Qué significaba una hora comparada con el tiempo que había trabajado para otros? Acomodó su cabeza en la almohada y cerró los ojos. Hasta su recámara llegaba el rumor de una melodía y los pasos de una mujer que colgaba su ropa húmeda en la azotea. Qué distintos eran los ruidos en la vecindad pasadas las nueve de la mañana. A esa hora las madres volvían a sus casas después de haber llevado a sus crios al colegio, y encendían el radio confiadas en que nadie, exceptuando los holgazanes, permanecería aún en cama. Ulises comprendió que no podría disfrutar de su hora libre y prefirió levantarse. Había perdido el sueño y no estaba seguro a qué clase de actividad podría destinar su vigilia. No se le ocurrió nada que no pudiera realizar el sábado. Tampoco era aficionado a la lectura y el periódico le parecía demasiado caro. Las personas que compraban el periódico todos los días gastaban ciento cincuenta pesos al mes, un despilfarro.

Cuando finalmente Figueroa llegó a su oficina, la mayoría de los empleados se encontraba ya en su lugar. ¿Era en realidad así? En cuanto cruzó la puerta que separaba la oficina de la estancia destinada al público, se dio cuenta de que, si bien sus compañeros estaban allí dentro, las cosas no eran como él se había imaginado. Ninguno estaba en el lugar que le correspondía. Incluso Raquel Urbina chupaba tacañamente un cigarro, nerviosa, sentada en el escritorio del propio Ulises, y el contador Jiménez mantenía abrazada a Susana Olvera. Sólo una de las ventanillas continuaba ofreciendo servicio al público y frente a ella más de cinco personas,
impacientes, husmeaban a través del espejo protector buscando al empleado que tenía la obligación de atenderlos. Ulises fijó su atención en el rostro pálido de Susana y supo que había llorado. Algo muy grave habría sucedido durante su ausencia para que tres de las cuatro ventanillas al público estuvieran clausuradas. Se aproximó a Raquel en busca de información. Confiaba en que sólo ella sería capaz de ponerlo al tanto de los nuevos acontecimientos sin acudir al eufemismo o los lloriqueos inútiles. Raquel no lo decepcionó, antes siquiera de escuchar la pregunta y consciente de que ese tipo de noticias tenían que darse de frente, le dijo en voz baja:

–No te imaginas lo que ha pasado, nos acaban de informar que el licenciado Fuentes murió ayer en la noche. Se murió el viejo cabrón, ¿cómo ves?

Raquel masticaba un chicle voluminoso y el vaivén de sus mandíbulas hacía que la tragedia perdiera volumen y seriedad, en realidad le importaba muy poco lo sucedido puesto que jamás había cruzado más de dos palabras con el gerente: su trabajo dependía directamente del contador Arnulfo Jiménez Ponce.


–Nadie lo sabe exactamente, tal vez lo mataron –Raquel, a opinión de Ulises, no vestía tan mal como Susana Olvera; aun así le molestaba que fuera tan friolenta, siempre cubierta con un desteñido suéter de lana, a cualquier hora, incluso cuando a las tres de la tarde el sol brillaba más fuerte y sus rayos luminosos traspasaban las ventanas de la recepción e irradiaban el salón de los escritorios. Si bien la oficina era fría, no había razón para seguir usando los pantalones de mezclilla y abrigarse hasta el cuello. Quizá, sospechó Ulises, Raquel tenía cicatrices o cierto tipo de erupción cutánea que le era imprescindible ocultar, tal vez había sufrido quemaduras graves durante su infancia y ahora pagaba las consecuencias.

—Cualquiera. Antes sólo mataban los asesinos, ahora puede hacerlo cualquiera.

—Fuentes no era un hombre importante, ¿por qué habría que matarlo? —Ulises no comprendió el sentido de su propia frase. Pero ya estaba dicho.

—Ay, Ulises, cómo eres ingenuo. Si aquí los únicos que se mueren son los que no tienen importancia.

—¿No sabes si han nombrado a un nuevo jefe?

—Todavía no, o tal vez sí y ya viene en camino. Será alguien que no conozcamos, como siempre.

—Deberían darle oportunidad a los que trabajamos aquí —se quejó Ulises. “Deberían”, ¿quién “deberían”?, se preguntó a sí mismo, ¿quién eran ellos? ¿Quiénes que él no conocía y sin embargo decidían acerca de las cosas más importantes en esa oficina? ¿Dónde estaban y cuáles eran sus motivos para elegir a un nuevo jefe? ¿No tendrían ellos la obligación de saber que él, Ulises Figueroa, se destacaba entre los otros empleados por su eficacia y antigüedad, y podía, perfectamente, llevar con destreza cualquier clase de asunto relacionado con los créditos otorgados por fonacot?

—No sueñas, Ulises, podrían matar a diez gerentes más y jamás se fijarían en nosotros. Los murmullos y las especulaciones continuaban. Susana Olvera se desprendió de los brazos del contador Jiménez y se desplazó con pasitos de rata hacia donde se encontraba Ulises. Llevaba la misma falda y los mismos zapatos y la misma blusa y el mismo anillo dorado que el día anterior: un retrato inolvidable.

—¿Cómo estás, Ulises? Me imagine que Raquel te ha dicho...

—Me dijo que lo mataron —interrumpió él— y que el nuevo gerente puede llegar en cualquier momento.
–No se sabe exactamente qué pasó. Anoche don Otilio no llegó a su casa y su esposa recibió una llamada casi al amanecer. Le avisaban que estaba muerto.

–La vieja tuvo que ir a reconocer el cuerpo –añadió Raquel.

–¿Fue un asalto?

–Nadie sabe todavía por qué lo mataron. Estamos juntando dinero para comprarle una corona, una corona bonita.

–¿Y qué importa si es bonita? –dudó Raquel–. Nadie la va a ver.

–La ve Dios y eso es suficiente.

–Mejor ahorren dinero para comprarle un regalo al nuevo jefe –dijo Raquel antes de volver a la ventanilla–. Como si después de tantos años no supiera cómo funcionan las cosas en esta pinche oficina.

Ulises puso una mano sobre la clavícula de Susana y sonrió. De alguna manera había sido ella la responsable del encuentro con Cristina unos días atrás y le estaba agradecido. ¿Cómo hacérselo saber? ¿Cómo decirle que aquella noche estupenda le había cambiado la vida? Estaba consciente de que el encuentro no habría tenido lugar si ella, Susana Olvera, no fuera dueña de esas piernas lechosas y flacas que, a pesar de su frugalidad, lo estimularon a buscar un fugaz desahogo. Hacía tanto tiempo que no pasaba una velada entera con una mujer que le regalara su tiempo de un modo tan generoso, que lo trataría –le importaba un carajo que estuviera fingiendo– como lo que él era: un hombre sensible; una mujer capaz de permanecer a su lado hasta las seis de la mañana, hora en que Ulises solía despertar gritando para encontrarse frente a un mundo con olor a ladrillo y a muerto, con la sensación de ser un objeto más de un infinito basurero repleto de memorándums y lápices amarillos, de tener en el estómago cal y cemento, de saber que estaría solo hasta el día de su muerte, de recordar las
arrugas de su madre y el agua de colonia que se untaba su padre en las mañanas, antes de llevarlo a la escuela. Para su fortuna, la mañana del día anterior Cristina había accedido a permanecer a su lado devolviéndole parte de la tranquilidad perdida y haciendo menos inhóspito su despertar: una vez fuera de la cama se ofreció a acompañarlo a su casa y, sin anunciarlo, entró a la cocina para prepararle los huevos revueltos tal como a él le gustaban, rezumando aceite y con una plasta de catsup a un costado.

Desayunaron en silencio como si lo hubieran hecho así toda la vida. Después entraron al baño de losetas frías y se bañaron juntos dejando correr el agua tibia que escupía un calentador viejo, mientras escuchaban el disco de José José, cuyas canciones ella decía disfrutar y conocer muy bien.

–Si te gusta José José es que debes tener un corazón muy grande –la felicitó Ulises.

–Tu casa es bonita pero está un poco tirada. Se ve a leguas que vives solo.

–Siempre he vivido solo, estoy acostumbrado.

–Un psicópata, todos los que viven solos son psicópatas –añadió Cristina. No era la primera vez que visitaba la casa de algún cliente, aunque nunca en estas circunstancias, sin alcohol ni dinero de por medio. Ternura era la palabra, estaba allí porque el hombre le era agradable y despertaba en ella algo que sólo acertaba a denominar ternura. Aunque en el fondo, pensaba, la razón era que ella también estaba más sola que un perro.

–¿Por qué un psicópata?

–Tienes demasiado tiempo para estar pensando en cosas perversas. Y no me digas que no porque al menos en eso sí tengo experiencia.

Ulises renunció a esa clase de conversación. Le parecía estúpida la afirmación de Cristina.

–Pronto me mudaré de aquí a un barrio mejor. Por lo pronto tenemos que aguantar.
...Siempre está uno de paso, hay que saberlo.

–¿Lo dices por mí? ¿A poco crees que me voy a quedar? Ni que estuvieras tan galán.
–De paso por el trabajo, por el puesto que uno tiene, por la vida.
–Eso sí, y también por el hotel.
–Los días están contados aunque nosotros no llevemos la cuenta.
–Mejor ni saber.
–Sí, ¿para qué?

Y a pesar de todo, Cristina representaba, sin duda, la visita más importante que había recibido su casa en los últimos años; lo sabía desde que decidieron salir del hotel rumbo a Tacubaya, caminando, como si los trabajadores somnolientes que comenzaban a poblar las calles y los autos de carrocerías heladas les fueran ajenos, como si todo formara parte de un tinglado cuyos restos habían sido abandonados allí por equivocación. Ulises se dio cuenta de que llegaría a la vecindad escoltado por una mujer de altos tacones, bolso bermellón y vestimenta extravagante, no muy apropiada para usarse a tal hora de la mañana. Sin embargo, esto no lo perturbaba, al contrario: le causaba orgullo ser un hombre maduro que cualquier noche se va de putas y no vuelve sino hasta el día siguiente; no cualquiera podría, con sólo doscientos pesos en el bolsillo, pasarse una noche entera al lado de una mujer semejante, si no guapa al menos dueña de una personalidad imponente y de un humor que ya quisiera tener, por ejemplo y a pesar de su elegancia, la esposa del licenciado Otilio Fuentes. Ulises era consciente de que la mujer de Fuentes representaba el modelo más acabado de la mujer que desearía tener para sí mismo: ella vestía siempre conjuntos sobrios y probablemente muy caros, usaba medias Paloma Picasso y tenía para los empleados gestos que sólo podría tener, según Figueroa, una mujer con estilo. ¿Qué clase de gestos? Uno de ellos, el que más impresionaba a Ulises, era el hecho de que aproximadamente una vez al mes la señora...
Fuentes llegaba a la oficina y repartía un billete de lotería a cada uno de los empleados.

–Ojalá se saquen un premio y logren abandonar esta cárcel –decía en voz alta la señora Fuentes.

–Para mí no es una cárcel, señora, es mi lugar de trabajo y aunque me sacara la lotería seguiría viniendo a atender mi escritorio –le replicaba, amable, Susana Olvera.

–Ay mijita, no sabes lo que dices, el dinero te quita lo responsable, ya verás.

Una vez que cada empleado era dueño de un billete, la señora Fuentes volvía satisfecha al despacho de su marido.

–Pinche vieja loca –se quejaba Raquel Urbina– a mí qué me tiene que andar regalando, se ha de sentir muy chingona.

Ulises escuchaba incrédulo los comentarios que despertaba en algunos el acto filantrópico de su admirada señora. Era natural, ¿qué se podía esperar de Raquel Urbina y de Susana Olvera?

–¿Y tú, por qué llegaste tarde? –le preguntó Susana. A sus espaldas los empleados, entusiasmados a causa de su libertad repentina, se paseaban yendo de un lugar a otro, intercambiando opiniones acerca de la muerte del jefe, haciendo fila frente a la máquina de café. Algunos de ellos abrigaban la esperanza de que las actividades fueran suspendidas, al menos en ese día lleno de rumores y confusiones. La pregunta de Susana lo estimuló, no tanto porque le diera una pauta para contarle la aventura de dos noches atrás, sino porque la sola pregunta le hacía gozar de los recuerdos todavía frescos: la piel aromática de Cristina, sus manos expertas sobándole los muslos.

–He estado saliendo a cenar con una amiga –Ulises bajó la voz. Quería hacer patente que se trataba de una confesión.

–Dichoso tú que puedes darte esos lujos, a mí apenas me alcanza para cenar en la casa.
Nos gusta ir a cenar y a tomar algo, y ya sabes, siempre terminamos acostándonos un poco tarde.

Ulises había dicho “acostándonos” con cierta malicia. Esperaba despertar en Susana el deseo de llegar más allá de una conversación trivial. Ojalá ella correspondiera a su confianza mostrándole mayor curiosidad. Si no, ¿cómo le haría comprender que él, Ulises Figueroa, era un hombre de vida interesante, una vida en la que debía de ponerse más atención?

–Cuídate, la ciudad no está para andar muy noche en la calle. Y no te vayas muy lejos, ya ves lo que sucedió aquí –miró con ojos de perro triste hacia la oficina de Fuentes.– No te preocupes, yo me sé cuidar. Saliendo del restaurante tomamos un taxi.

–Los taxis son más peligrosos. Los choferes están de acuerdo con los rateros; y si no traes nada, peor, te golpean.

La decepción estaba en puerta, esto le sucedía por confiar su vida a una estúpida, porque no era capaz de hacer al menos una pregunta: ¿con quién fuiste a tu casa? ¿Dónde cenaron? ¿Saliste con tu mujer?, una pregunta, una insinuación capaz de desatar la confesión completa. Se resignó, Susana Olvera no era el tipo de mujer a quien le interesaran las intimidades, era sólo una secretaria insípida, sin gusto por la vida.

–No puede uno estar pensando sólo en desgracias. Terminas volviéndote un amargado al que le dan miedo hasta los pájaros. Además, ayer sólo tuve tiempo de pensar en cosas buenas.

–Mientras tu pensabas en cosas buenas, Fuentes se moría –precisó Susana.

El contador Jiménez los interrumpió. Su voz impostada y serena tenía como fin hacer notar a los empleados que, a falta del licenciado Otilio Fuentes, él representaba allí la autoridad más
alta, incluso más alta que la del subgerente Gurrola, quien a pesar del cargo, era sólo un empleado de confianza. Jiménez era moreno como el tabaco y su nariz, gruesa y férrea, pendía de su rostro como el aldabón de una puerta.

–Nos acaban de informar que el licenciado fue muerto de un tiro en la nuca –dijo indignado y también solemne--; quisieron robarlo. Fue allá en Tacubaya, por tus rumbos, Figueroa. Estamos poniendo cincuenta pesos cada quien para la corona. Si no tienes dinero te prestamos de la caja y el fin de mes te lo cobramos.

–Prefiero que me preste la caja. Antier me gasté lo último que tenía, aunque valió la pena.

Jiménez ignoró el comentario de Ulises y añadió:

–Hoy en la noche van a velarlo, ojalá se den un tiempo para hacerse presentes. Seguro allí va a estar el nuevo jefe.

–Yo no puedo ir –se apresuró a decir Susana–. Tú sabes que yo no me mando sola.

–Yo voy a ir con mi esposa –respondió el contador Jiménez Ponce–. No puedo dejar que un pretexto me impida cumplir con mis obligaciones. Y no piensen que es conveniencia, ¿a quién le convienen los funerales? Se trata de la moral.

–Mis obligaciones están y estarán con mi esposo, mi casa y mis hijos; eso es para mí la moral.

–La familia no puede ser nuestra cárcel, no vivimos aislados –respondió Jiménez, despreciativo.

–Es una cárcel que nos manda Dios.

–Dios nos da libertad suficiente para decidir lo que nos conviene.

–¿Sabes dónde lo van a velar?

–No, pero lo sabremos muy pronto, sólo hay que esperar.
–¿Esperar a qué? A nadie le preocupa que nosotros sepamos, si acaso nos quieren como escenografía –era la voz de Raquel que volvía con la bufanda atada en el antebrazo y una taza de café en la mano. Ulises aprovechó que llevaba el cuello desnudo y la observó con disimulo. No tenía manchas ni cicatrices.

–Tú siempre te menosprecias, ¿verdad, Raquel? –dijo Susana con voz natural, como si la recriminación formara parte de un lenguaje que le había sido inoculado al nacer.

–Más bien son ellos los que nos menosprecian, ¿no?

–¿Ellos?, ¿quién es ellos, Raquel?

–No sé, los que mandan, los que van a nombrar a un nuevo jefe, los que si les da la gana te ponen en la calle con sólo tronar los dedos. ¿Qué importa cómo se llaman? A mí no me importan los nombres sino los actos.

–Pues ya ves lo que sucede con los que mandan –apuntó Susana Olvera, arrepentida de alimentar una discusión en un momento en el que sólo se debía guardar luto–, les dan un tiro en la nuca y tienen que conformarse con una corona.

A Ulises también le resultaba absurda la discusión: después de todo, pensaba, la vida no era poca cosa y la prueba era inocultable: una noche antes, mientras al licenciado Fuentes lo asesinaban por robarle unos cuantos pesos, él, Ulises Figueroa, disfrutaba los recuerdos de una mujer que...
VII

Esa noche, la televisión difundió las imágenes del santo Papa besando la tierra de una isla caribeña. Un número astronómico de televisores, esparcidos a lo largo y ancho de la ciudad, multiplicaban la figura del anciano calvo descendiendo por la escalinata metálica del avión. Ésta sería probablemente –según dejaban entrever los cronistas– su última visita al continente americano: por mucho que fuera el Papa no viviría más de cien años. La casa de la familia Sánchez era una excepción debido a que sus costumbres religiosas no contemplaban el reconocimiento de la Iglesia ni el de su apóstol mayor. Por tal razón, mientras sus vecinos seguían a través de la pantalla los actos y las oraciones acuosas e ininteligibles del Pastor, la pareja de viejos reposaba sentada en el sofá, escuchando un disco que les llevaba recuerdos, dando por sentado que en cualquier momento su hija estaría de vuelta y serviría la cena como era ya una vieja costumbre: pechugas empanizadas, puré de papa y un vaso de leche Boreal.

La madre, sin embargo y a su pesar, no disfrutaba la música como en otras ocasiones; sus gafas de vidrios cóncavos en la mano, símbolo recurrente de su preocupación, la mandíbula fija y el tamborilear de los dedos en la antebrazera del sofá eran signo de que el viernes terminaría mal: el reloj marcaba las nueve treinta de la noche y su hija aún no daba señales de vida. Jamás demoraba tanto y mucho menos tratándose de un viernes, día en que la familia acostumbraba, después de cenar, reunirse en torno al televisor para ver una película de vaqueros, género favorito de Ernesto. “Siempre pasa lo mismo en estas películas, los buenos sufren todo el tiempo y al final son recompensados”, era el reclamo más frecuente que Olivia hacía a las películas de vaqueros.

–¿Y para qué quieres que sea diferente? –le preguntó en cierta ocasión su padre.
—No sé, para no aburrirme.
—¿Te aburres de comer, acaso?
—No, pero eso es una necesidad y las películas de vaqueros no son una necesidad.
—Cuando llevas una vida tranquila y nunca pasa nada, entonces las películas de vaqueros son una necesidad.

La última melodía del acetato dejó de sonar. La señora Sánchez se levantó, molesta por el barrunto de un viernes casi arruinado, y se dirigió hacia la ventana. Había poca gente en los andadores, los comercios estaban cerrados y los árboles quietos, como de piedra. “Malditos católicos –le nacía en el cerebro–, si ustedes no hubieran creado esta clase de mundo, Olivia no correría peligro.”

—¿Por qué no vas a buscar a tu hija? –explotó al fin– ¿Qué no ves que estoy preocupada?

Poco después de las diez, Olivia, con el paso apresurado, tomaba el atajo prohibido para llegar lo antes posible a su casa. La prohibición no provenía de nadie en particular sino que era obra del sentido común. El atajo consistía en un pasillo angosto y poco iluminado que tomaba forma entre los muros aladrillados de dos edificios de seis pisos. La escasa luz que como limosna medio aclara ba el pasillo, llegaba de los comercios albergados tras los portales de una pequeña plaza comercial que regularmente a esa hora había dejado de funcionar. El corredor, por tanto, se volvía intransitable durante las noches. No para Olivia a quien la prisa por llegar a tiempo a su casa la había empujado a despreciar el peligro que representaba recorrer cuarenta metros en la oscuridad. Bajo el brazo aseguraba las dos películas alquiladas para su padre en el Blockbuster de Taxqueña, orgullosa de su elección, ya que las últimas
veces había sido imposible escoger alguna que no hubiesen visto en más de tres ocasiones. Ésa era precisamente la causa de la tardanza, ir hasta Taxqueña en busca de una novedad. Tardanza que sería perdonada en cuanto el padre reconociera los títulos de ambas películas: Los imperdonables, se llamaba una. La otra era de Mario Almada, requisito suficiente para obtener el asentimiento de la familia. ¿Peligro? Nada podía parecerle extraño ni peligroso en un espacio tan habituado a su memoria. ¿Acaso le producía miedo levantarse de su cama y caminar en la oscuridad para, a tientas, encender la luz del baño? La Unidad Habitacional, los comercios de mostradores pringosos y anaqueles semivacíos, la tierra apisonada, cubierta de cascajo y olorosa a miasmas de perro, incluso el corredor turbio y solitario, suponían para ella la extensión de su propia casa y el complemento exterior de sus habitaciones.

–Deja de pensar en lo malo, tu hija sabe cuidarse; más que tú y que yo.

–Si te arrojan a mitad del océano te ahogas aunque sepas nadar; yo sé que mi hija es inteligente pero en estos tiempos es la estupidez la que decide –dijo ella. Le incomodaba la actitud de su marido, un displicente.

–Si eres un viejo marinero, llegarás a la playa –respondió él, entusiasmado por la discusión. Con una mujer no era posible jugar a las vencidas pero se podía discutir. Y vencer.

–Por Dios, Ernesto, no digas tonterías. Nuestra hija no es ningún experimentado marinero y no debería estar sola en la calle a estas horas de la noche. Dime una cosa, ¿no estaría mejor en casa que en la calle?

–A su edad tú ya estabas casada conmigo y ella estaba a punto de entrar a la escuela.

–Espero que ella lo piense mejor que yo.

–Depende; hay momentos para pensar y otros para actuar; si piensas mucho las cosas la vida se sigue de largo, ¿por qué no pones otra vez el disco?, el de Rita Pavone.
Olivia se enfiló hacia el pasillo y mecánicamente apretó su bolsa y los dos videos contra el pecho. En realidad llevaba muy pocas cosas dentro del bolso; sin embargo, frente a los reproches de su madre, “nada más vas a darle pretexto a los ladrones”, Olivia se justificaba: “La mitad de las mujeres que llevan una bolsa no traen nada en el interior”. Le afectó el pertinaz tufo de orines que desprendía el pavimento, “malditos asquerosos”, dijo. Soportó la respiración, podía hacerlo hasta un minuto, reloj en mano. Sólo faltaban unos cuantos metros para salir del corredor y liberar los pulmones. Fue entonces cuando sus ojos registraron a una figura sólida aunque espectral aproximándose a ella en sentido contrario. ¿Cómo es que no pudo apreciarla antes si se encontraba tan cerca?

–Si la mayor parte del mundo se detuviera a ver lo que hace, este mundo sería completamente distinto –añadió Ernesto Sánchez desde su sillón.

–¿Quieres decir que estamos juntos porque no pensamos bien las cosas?

–Si es eso lo que quieres oír...

–Las cosas como son, y si no pensamos bien es que pensamos mal y somos estúpidos –dijo ella.

Tuvo el deseo de retroceder pero le pareció una reacción exagerada, hasta provocativa; después de todo eran muchas las personas que habitaban la Unidad y más de una la que acostumbraba cruzar el pasillo a esas horas. Escuchó un chiflido a sus espaldas, ¿lo escuchaba en este momento o el silbido se había producido varios segundos antes? No quiso voltear y pegó su hombro derecho lo más posible a la barda manchando su blusa con el tinte marrón del ladrillo.
Sólo faltaban unos pasos y entonces se lanzaría a correr hacia su departamento, correría sin detenerse hasta llegar al regazo de su madre y contarle que había sentido miedo, un miedo terrible y desconocido, capaz de engendrarse en un solo segundo, en el preámbulo de una mirada, en el descubrimiento de una sombra que no estaba prevista y que aparecía de súbito encarnando un presentimiento.

–Sólo Dios sabe por qué escogió esta vida para nosotros.

–La religión no tiene que ver en esto, si te hubieras casado con otro estarías diciendo lo mismo, parece que somos diferentes pero somos iguales, iguales a todos. Te debería dar pena quejarte como lo hace cualquiera, a mí me avergüenza ser uno más, ¿dónde está la originalidad?, maldita sea.

–Hace tanto tiempo que escuchamos esta música, ¿no te cansas? –preguntó ella refiriéndose al disco de Rita Pavone, la cantante italiana que su marido idolatraba, aún más que a Clint Eastwood o a Mario Almada. Quería lastimarla, hacerle saber que no requería de amenazas ni insultos para mostrarle su desprecio. Para una mujer resultaba tan sencillo lastimar a un hombre: bastaba pisotear sus sueños.

–Yo prefiero fingir y conformarme con lo que tengo, aunque sea muy poco –contestó Ernesto, arrepentido de haber mordido el anzuelo: ¿acaso el día siguiente sería distinto?

–No has contestado a mi pregunta –insistió ella–, ¿no te cansa esta música?

–A veces me cansa tu voz.

–Mi voz se escuchará eternamente porque ya es del Reino de Dios; mi voz es mejor que tu música.

–Caray, pues al menos mi música no es eterna.
No tuvo oportunidad de mirar a la cara del hombre que le cerraba el paso porque a sus espaldas otros brazos la sujetaron arrojándola al piso. Quiso gritar pero su oportunidad había pasado y ahora sólo debía rezar, esperar a que sus agresores descubrieran vacío el bolso y la dejaran en paz. No sería así, lo supo cuando sintió una mano entrometerse debajo de su falda para arrancarle las pantaletas de un violento tirón, cuando comprendió que ese dolor intermitente que sentía en las nalgas eran las mordidas de un hombre que le clavaba en la piel sus dientes afilados. Cuando al fin pudo gritar, su gemido fue débil, aunque no lo suficiente para evitar que uno de ellos, acobardado, le pateara el rostro astillándole el pómulo. Y a pesar de la violencia, el silencio seguía imperturbable, acaso un sisear de cuerpos de paja o un sonido similar al que haría el golpe de un puño contra un costal de lana. Y no obstante el golpe en el rostro, Olivia intentaba girar su cuerpo hacia un costado, patalear, ver la cara de los maleantes. Eran tres, quizá cuatro, y uno de ellos le abriría ahora las piernas encajándole sus dedos huesudos en los muslos. Entonces sintió el dolor que entró como piedra afilada en su vagina, un dolor que superaba incluso el de sus pómulos rotos. Volvió a gritar pero esta vez no fue castigada, al contrario, los brazos se aflojaron, el peso de un cuerpo en sus espaldas se evaporó y pudo girar su cuerpo, lentamente, recoger sus rodillas, comprimir su cuerpo hasta desaparecer, pero ellos aún seguían allí y ahora les resultaba mucho más fácil manipularla, ponerla boca arriba, abrirle otra vez las piernas y meter su verga en aquella cueva aceitada con la sangre de sus propias paredes, incluso uno se atrevió a besarla mientras con las manos estrujaba sus senos, besarla primero en el cuello y después en la boca, un beso extemporáneo que los otros celebraban con risitas y que Olivia logró matar apretando los dientes con una fuerza inesperada, cercenando los labios de su agresor, que en venganza, la golpeaba con los puños mientras bañaba los pechos de Olivia con la cauda de sangre que escurría de su boca. No pudo matarla porque los aullidos tipludos de dos mujeres pidiendo...
auxilio colmaron el espacio del pasillo angosto, gritos que Olivia no podía ya escuchar porque su mente se había concentrado en un solo lugar y en un solo objetivo, morder ese trozo de carne como si fuera el cuerpo mismo de sus victimarios, desfogar allí todo su coraje, morder hasta que la piel, los ojos, los huesos de aquellos hombres hijos de la chingada, se convirtieran en polvo y desaparecieran para siempre.

–Yo preferiría ver la televisión, a mí no me molestaría ver lo que dice el Papa, quizás tiene algo interesante que decirnos –dijo Ernesto. Era su última jugada, alabar al enemigo, hacerle ver a su esposa que él también podía transgredir los límites.

–Las palabras no se pueden ver, no seas tonto –siguió ella, aunque su mente no ya concentrada en su marido sino en la cada vez más notoria ausencia de su hija.

–Quiero un vaso de leche.

–Ve a buscar a tu hija –ordenó a su marido en tono enérgico–, ve a la parada del autobús y espérala allí.

–Tienes razón –consintió Ernesto echando una ojeada a su reloj. Buscó la chaqueta de pana en la percha de la puerta de entrada. Antes de salir, fue al refrigerador y tomó un vaso de leche, ¿por qué insistían en tomar leche descremada? A él le parecía un desperdicio gastar dinero para comprar leche que no sabía a leche. Y lo mismo pensaba de la cocacola dietética y la carne de soya. Cerró la puerta del refrigerador y en ese momento escuchó varios golpes en la puerta. Era imposible que se tratara de Olivia, dedujeron ambos, ya que su hija jamás había olvidado la llave. Ernesto Sánchez dejó el vaso de leche en la mesita de formaica y salió al comedor, donde se colocó a espaldas de su esposa. Ella volteó y lo miró temerosa; si no era Olivia, entonces algo malo había sucedido: se precipitó hacia la puerta y de un tirón liberó el seguro. En cuanto tuvo frente a sí el rostro acalorado y horrorizado de la vecina,
supo que algo terrible había sucedido y que la vida de su familia ya nunca volvería a ser igual.
Adolfo se despertó esa mañana con la rara sensación de ser el mismo de siempre. No un hombre nuevo o un ser dispuesto a construir una hoja más en la historia de su comunidad, sino exactamente el mismo de siempre, sin un milímetro más de estatura ni un gramo extra de carne. Y como todas las mañanas, recordó la cantidad de dinero guardada en su cuenta de Invermático y el tiempo más o menos aproximado que ocuparía en gastarlo. Quizá tres meses más y después la necesidad de buscar un empleo lo llevaría a levantarse más temprano, comprar el periódico y revisar la sección de oportunidades, visitar a sus hermanos rezando para que alguno de los dos tuviera un trabajito para él, tocar las puertas de todas las veterinarias ofreciendo sus servicios de cortador de pelo, de auxiliar médico o, incluso, prestándose a pasear las mascotas de los inquilinos a cambio de unos cuantos pesos. Esa mañana la alharaca de sus vecinos se había colado hasta su recámara despertándolo una hora antes de lo acostumbrado. Somnoliento, se dio a la tarea de planear los recortes que haría a su gasto diario: dejaría de comprar hojuelas de maíz y cambiaría el papel Pétalo por uno de menor precio, tal vez Vogue; dejaría de lavar con Ariel y se compraría una bolsa gigante de jabón Roma; le diría adiós a los antojos, a la leche condensada Clavel, a las cajitas de hotcakes y a las pizzas congeladas. Observó el reloj despertador y pensó en Olivia y en cuánto le gustaría tocar sus sábanas tibias a esa hora de la mañana: ¿a qué olerían esas sábanas? Cerró los ojos e imaginó sus manos contagiadas por la calidez del lecho recién abandonado. Imaginó un olor a champú y orines, a flores recién cercenadas, todavía húmedas por el frío matinal. Se había acostumbrado a tenerla sólo de esa manera, a conversar con ella cerrando los ojos, “quieres que te quite los zapatos, mi amor, debes estar muy cansada”, a
olfatearla a distancia, a inventar los elementos necesarios para crear una sencilla obra de teatro y después masturbarse, ¿quién lavaría sus calzones?, ¿usaría guantes de látex para lavar los platos y las ollas?, y después de hacerlo, ¿con qué tipo de crema protegería su piel? Atrix, Ponds, ¿tal vez, Anabella? ¿Tendría cicatrices en las rodillas? Escuchó los rasguños de Dogo en el guardabarros, confundido, medio sonámbulo, exigiendo su paseo mañanero una hora antes de lo previsto. ¿Por qué el palabrerío insípido, idiota, a las puertas de su departamento? Se levantó de mal humor haciendo frente a las señales de alegría que demostraba el perro agitando su cola como un ventilador y metiendo las pezuñas en el quicio de la puerta. Miró desde su ventana la habitación de Olivia y le extrañó encontrarse con las cortinas corridas: un hombre cargaba en las espaldas un tanque de gas, otro más empujaba con el pie un cajón de plástico y un tercero abrigado con ropa deportiva daba vueltas alrededor del césped moviendo los brazos con intenciones gimnásticas, ¿por qué entonces aquel detalle extraordinario?

La noche anterior, Adolfo llegó a su casa minutos después de la media noche. Había ido en busca de su amigo Ulises Figueroa, a quien esperó durante tres horas en el patio de la vecindad de su casa, en Tacubaya. Se tomó tres horas esperándolo porque no tenía obligaciones ni tampoco deseos de estar mirando la televisión: ninguna obligación, acaso correr hacia la estación del metro diez minutos antes de las doce e intentar tomar el último convoy, volver a casa, prepararse un par de huevos revueltos batidos en salsa verde y dar un breve paseo con el Dogo. Tenía cerca de un mes que no le veía la cara a Ulises, a pesar de que éste le había dejado varios recados en casa de uno de sus hermanos.

–Te ha estado llamando tu amigo Ulises, y la última vez estaba medio borracho. A ver si le dices que no chingue.

–Él casi no bebe. ¿Te dijo lo que quería?
—Sólo pendejadas, que hace mucho tiempo que no te ve, que a él le va muy bien, que no sé qué. Si quiere platicar que se contrate una vieja...

El perro levantó una pata amenazando orinar la jamba apolillada de la puerta. “Ya voy, cabrón perro”, farfulló Adolfo habituado al chantaje de su mascota, arropándose con la bata color marrón y metiendo los pies en el par de pantuflas viejas que, como casi todo en esa casa, habían también pertenecido a su padre. Giró la perilla y de una patada amistosa empujó al perro hacia el pasillo. Salió tras de él y antes de consumir el primer escalón, la voz de Gertrudis le cortó el paso. “Y ahora qué carajos quiere esta mujer”, se preguntó Adolfo. No sería raro que hubiera sido ella la responsable de los murmullos, cacareos de gallina, que esa mañana le habían obligado a levantarse a destiempo. ¿Por qué tenía que seguir soportando a los viejos si sus padres descansaban ya en la tumba?

—¡Una desgracia, señor Adolfo!

Los gritos de su nieta impidieron a Gertrudis extenderse más en el asunto:

—¡Abuela, está otra vez en la tele!

—¡Señor Adolfo, regrese a su casa y prenda la televisión en el canal dos!

—¿Qué sucede? ¿Por qué el canal dos? —preguntó Adolfo a la vieja, que no se preocupó en ignorarlo e irse detrás de su nieta. ¿Sería otra vez algo relacionado con la maldita visita del Papa? Dogo corrió escaleras abajo seguro de que Adolfo lo seguiría, pero éste volvió a su departamento, cruzó apresurado la sala y encendió el televisor. Mientras no se tratara de una misa del Papa haría lo posible por mantener la calma. ¿Qué razones tenía Gertrudis para creer que a ambos podrían interesarle las mismas noticias? Giró el selector y comenzó a luchar con las antenas hasta que obtuvo una imagen más o menos legible. El perro había regresado y chillaba desde el umbral de la puerta, obligando a Adolfo a subir el
volumen del aparato. Calculó el dinero gastado semanalmente en las croquetas del perro y no
dudó en aumentarlo a la lista de dispendios: un paquete de Pedigree llegaba a costar hasta
treinta pesos. Volverían a los huesos y a las sobras de carnicería como en los tiempos en que
sus padres vivían. Entonces las imágenes se volvieron más claras y reconoció los árboles
flacos y las cercas de herrería corriente y los prados tristes donde jugaba cuando era niño, vio
los rostros morbosos y acongojados de algunos vecinos y el semblante estúpido y autoritario
de un policía entrevistado por el reportero de un canal de televisión. Un policía de bajo rango
que balbuceaba explicaciones, mientras la cámara se concentraba en la imagen de una camilla
que dos hombres levantaban del suelo para introducir a la ambulancia. Sobre la camilla,
inmóvil, estaba una mujer cubierta hasta el pecho con una manta blanca.

–Es la muchachita que vive aquí enfrente, señor Adolfo –dijo Gertrudis, desde el
pasillo, sin atreverse a entrar, oteando curiosa hacia el interior del departamento.

–¿Quién? –preguntó él, los ojos puestos en el televisor, paralizado, con el estómago
hecho nudo y el corazón ahogándose en sangre.

–La hija de los Testigos.

–Olivia.

–Sí, la violaron en el callejón. Desde hace años estoy jodiendo para que pongan un
foco en ese lugar. A ver si ahora sí me hacen caso.

–¿Murió? –preguntó él. En la pantalla volvía, una y otra vez, la imagen de la camilla
entrando a la ambulancia.

–No, cuando se la llevaron tenía los ojos abiertos. Muerta no estaba, de eso estoy
segura aunque a la mejor quedó loca. Uno no se repone tan fácil de estas cosas. Además, la
ambulancia tardó en llegar más de una hora. Yo todo el día escucho el chillido de las malditas
ambulancias pero cuando se les necesita quién sabe dónde andan.
–¿Quiénes fueron?
–Unos mierdas, no creo que fueran de la Unidad. Lo que sí es que eran tres, una vecina los vio, o más bien vio sus sombras. ¿Usted cree que esto tenga que ver con el que sus padres sean Testigos?
–Sí, es un castigo de Dios –dijo Adolfo, entregándose a la estúpida corriente de aquel diálogo.
–¿Usted sabe que ellos, los Testigos, piensan que sólo unos cuantos podrán ir al cielo?
–No lo sabía.
–Y esos pocos que irán al cielo serán de su secta, tendrán que ser Testigos. Mire nada más qué bonito. Tampoco creen en la Santísima Trinidad...
–¿Sabe usted a dónde se la llevaron?
–Se la llevó la Cruz Roja, pero no sé a qué parte.
–¿Y sus padres?
–Si hubiera usted oído los gritos que daba la señora se le hubiera roto el corazón. Dios no quiera que a mis nietas les sucediera algo parecido. Yo siempre que salen les doy la bendición y rezo La Magnífica. Se burlará usted pero nunca les ha pasado nada. A la mejor no nos vamos al cielo, como los Testigos, pero al menos en la tierra todavía no nos ha pasado nada.

Para cuando Adolfo logró recuperarse y ponerse en pie, Gertrudis se había marchado y el perro, desesperado, había dejado un enorme charco de orines en la coladera del baño. Adolfo escuchó los rezos de Gertrudis en el pasillo y los chillidos de una niña llamándola. Si Olivia hubiera estado a su lado jamás le habrían puesto una mano encima. Él, que se soñó a sí mismo protegiéndola, peleando contra agresores ficticios. Incluso, le gustaba imaginarse con
el rifle de su padre disparando contra todos los hombres que se acercaban a ella. Les disparaba a la cabeza ufánándose de que los sesos fueran a dar contra el cemento; disparaba a las rodillas, a los ojos. Le era imposible aceptar haber estado tan al margen. Quizá, de no haber permanecido tanto tiempo frente a la casa de Ulises, parado como un imbécil, incapaz de presentir nada, habría notado la ausencia de Olivia y habría salido a buscarla, a vigilarla a distancia, a escoltarla hasta las puertas de su casa. Su corazón tendría que haberle dado una señal, una mínima señal, suficiente para salir en su ayuda y matar, despedazar con los dientes. Era como si el destino o una mano sobrenatural hubiera decidido mantenerlo lejos porque sabía que él era el único capaz de evitar aquella infamia. Entonces golpeó con el puño, una y otra vez, lacrando con los nudillos el yeso de la pared ante la mirada temerosa del perro que lo vigilaba desde su refugio bajo la cama. Luego se tiró encima del colchón, boca arriba, sollozando, imaginándose destrozar el cuerpo de los violadores, dispararles en los testículos, abrirlles la espalda con un picahielo para sacarles la pulpa que tenían en los huesos, romperles el hocico a patadas. Fue hacia la ventana y contempló el paisaje, la recámara dentro de la que ya nada nunca volvería a ser igual, los peatones ajenos a la desgracia que acababa de suceder, las vecinas rumorando los pormenores del incidente que a él también venía a cambiarle la vida. Allí estuvo, inmóvil, tratando de ordenar sus ideas y de contener el odio. Entonces, como si una línea de luz atravesara su mente, saltó a sus ojos la verdad. No una verdad que fuera capaz de afrontar directamente, ni mucho menos de traducir a palabras, sino una especie de certeza engendrada en el inconsciente y que en adelante impulsaría sus actos en una sola dirección. Y pese a que él se resistía a aceptar que algo semejante había pasado por su cabeza, la idea arraigaría en su pensamiento para siempre: si antes no había la suficiente voluntad para acercarse a Olivia, hoy, después de lo sucedido, las cosas serían distintas. Ella estaba viva y él sólo necesitaba correr a su lado.
Se vistió lo mejor que pudo, con su camisa blanca comprada a plazos en la tienda Hecali y su pantalón de casimir negro, y un suéter de lana en las manos por si más tarde el viento enfriaba la temperatura. Había decidido ir a casa de los Sánchez para ofrecerles su ayuda. Se presentaría en su puerta y ellos sabrían inmediatamente, con esa intuición que los padres tienen para reconocer qué hará bien a sus hijos, que él, Adolfo, estaba allí para hacer todo más fácil.

A punto de salir, como si fuera una especie de maldición de la que sería difícil escaparse, Gertrudis se acercó a la puerta que había permanecido abierta, oscilando en medio de una ráfaga de aire que iba y venía por las habitaciones.

–Ya le averigué dónde está internada la muchachita. Como vi que a usted le interesa.

–Sí, me interesa –esto cambiaba sus planes. Se presentaría primero en el hospital, tenía que saber en qué estado se encontraba ella.

–Está en el Seguro Social, en la clínica de Calzada del Hueso. Anoche se la llevaron a la Cruz, pero su padre tiene Seguro y ahora la están atendiendo allá.

–Se lo agradezco, Gertrudis.

–Yo estoy rezando por ella, no importa que su madre piense que nosotros los católicos no seremos elegidos.

–¿No seremos elegidos? –murmuró Adolfo, desprevenido frente a la abrupta sentencia de la vieja.

–¡Claro que lo seremos! Si todos somos hijos de Dios, hágame el maldito favor. Lo que decidirá que estemos o no al lado del Señor serán nuestros actos, sólo nuestros actos.
IX

Habían transcurrido varias noches desde su encuentro con aquella mujer y ahora estaba de vuelta en el mismo lugar. No era una decisión precipitada sino más bien un impulso persistente al que se había resistido sólo porque no deseaba volver allí otra vez sin dinero. Ahora, en cambio, llevaba el sueldo de la quincena en los bolsillos, seis billetes de doscientos pesos, nuevecitos y lustrosos, que el contador Jiménez depositara en sus manos apenas unas horas atrás. Y como a Ulises no le parecieron suficientes, abandonó la fila vespertina que dos veces al mes se formaba frente la caja y buscó en su lugar a Raquel Urbina para rogarle le adelantaran el dinero de la tanda que le correspondería el mes siguiente.

—¿Y para qué lo quieres ahora? —le había preguntado Raquel.

—Se trata de una mujer —Ulises presentía que le negarían el dinero de la tanda debido a que Raquel consideraría el pretexto bastante superfluo. Cosa natural, pensaba Ulises, ya que nunca nadie se gastaría un peso en ellas, ni en Susana, ni en Raquel y mucho menos en la señorita Reyna. ¿Cómo entonces serían capaces de comprender la necesidad de Ulises?

—¿Una mujer? ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Hice reservaciones en un restaurante para ir a cenar con una mujer. Un restaurante muy elegante, en la Condesa.

—Ni madres, te esperas hasta la otra semana, si te adelantamos el dinero tendremos que hacerlo con todos, por ejemplo conmigo, y eso es imposible. Lo que hacen los hombres por una vieja.

—Ésta no es cualquier vieja.

—Cúdate, Ulises, no malgastes tu dinero, no te aceleres.
Tenía más de media hora parado en una esquina que él se imaginaba diferente. Su memoria no le resultaba de gran ayuda, el paisaje tampoco, ¿se habría equivocado? No, definitivamente se hallaba en el lugar preciso, aunque no en el día. Lo más probable era que Cristina se ubicara allí sólo una o dos veces a la semana, dedujo Figueroa haciendo a un lado la hipótesis de que estaría metida en la cama con algún otro, cualquiera que como él necesitara de su cuerpo y de su compañía. Le incomodaba suponer que Cristina no había sido sincera y en realidad se iba al hotel con cualquiera que le pagara doscientos, o cien, o hasta diez pesos.

El zumbido esporádico de los vehículos que a gran velocidad atravesaban Circuito Interior rumbo a Chapultepec llegaba hasta la solitaria calle de Zamora. A unos pasos del barrio de Tacubaya y también de la colonia Escandón, Ulises dudaba, igual que en la primera ocasión, entre volver a su casa o esperar a que la fortuna se manifestara de nuevo. No serían más de las diez treinta cuando el ridículo ladrido de un perro lo puso en alerta. Sosteniendo la correa atada al cuello del animal, una anciana sonreía, como si diera por sentado que su perro podía resultarle gracioso a cualquiera.

–Perdónelo, pero éste es su territorio y ya sabe cómo son los animales, no se andan con rodeos.

–No se preocupe, señora. ¿Muerde su perro? –preguntó Ulises, aunque la pregunta que hubiera querido hacerle era una muy diferente: “¿Usted conoce a...?”

–No, qué va; si es un alma de Dios. ¿Pero qué estoy diciendo? No debería confesarle esto, ¿qué tal si es usted un ladrón?

–Yo soy un hombre honrado, señora.

–No lo dudo. Pero ya sabe usted cómo están las cosas. En esta esquina he visto pasar
la vida.

—¿Vive usted aquí cerca?

—Sí, en esa casa —dijo ella señalando hacia una casa de dos pisos, fachada color rosa y ornamentos medio orientales—. Aunque la verdad yo no debería darle tanta información, ¿qué tal si usted tiene malas intenciones?

—Ya le dije que no soy un ladrón. Estoy aquí esperando a una persona.

—Tenga cuidado, no vayan a pensar que viene usted a hacer negocios.

—¿Negocios? ¿Pero con quién? —preguntó Ulises. Sin quererlo la conversación tomaba el rumbo que justamente le convenía.

—Bueno, en esta esquina se para a veces un ave de malos aires.

—¿A qué se refiere? ¿Un asesino?

—No precisamente —murmuró la anciana—. Una mujer que no se ha acercado lo suficiente a Dios.

—No hay que juzgar a primera vista; eso es lo más fácil.

—A mi edad son los años los desconfiados, no yo. ¿Usted lee la Biblia?

Ulises se sintió incómodo, no había acudido a esa esquina a hablar de la Biblia, aunque tampoco, en caso de encontrar a Cristina, sabría exactamente qué proponerle. Tal vez sólo intercambiaría algunas palabras con ella y se marcharía. En cuanto a Dios, no tenía demasiadas ideas al respecto, sólo estaba convencido de que comenzaría a pensar en Él cuando estuviera más viejo, además, ¿por qué razón tenía que leer un libro para conocer algo que todos ya conocían? Si de algo habla la Biblia es de Dios, con infinidad de rodeos y parábolas, de chismes e historias antiguas, pero esencialmente de Dios, especulaba Ulises mientras observaba al pequeño animal forzar la correa para orinar un neumático. Alguna vez
él también había tenido un perro, uno grande de hocico puntiagudo que dormía en las noches bajo las sábanas a un lado de su amo. Un día el animal amaneció tieso y muy frío. “Se murió de viejo”, consoló a Ulises su padre quien metió al perro en una gran bolsa de plástico negro y lo entregó al camión de la basura. Años después, cuando incluso el nombre del animal se le había escapado de la memoria, Ulises se preguntaba cuántas horas habría dormido abrazado al cadáver del perro, “tuvieron que ser muchas para que haya amanecido más rígido que una tabla”.


Ulises permaneció allí treinta minutos más antes de volver sobre sus pasos y afrontar el vacío, la desesperanza que le provocaba que la vida se pusiera otra vez en su contra. Por su mente pasó la idea de visitar a Adolfo Estrada, sin embargo la desechó ya que una visita a hora semejante le obligaría a pernoctar fuera de casa. ¿Y si tomaba un taxi? De esa manera no tendría que estar atenido al horario del metro. ¿Y quién le aseguraba que Adolfo estaría en casa? Después de tantas semanas de no cruzar palabra no sería raro, dedujo Ulises, encontrarse con que hasta el mismo Adolfo había cambiado sus costumbres. Metió la mano en el bolsillo y extrajo de allí el bulto de billetes. Los contó bajo la luz anémica de un farol callejero: en la palma de su mano estaban materializados los últimos quince días de su vida. ¿Quién ponía el precio al trabajo de los hombres?, se preguntaba. Guardó nuevamente los billetes en el bolsillo y al levantar la vista para continuar su camino, se encontró de frente con Cristina.

–Miren lo que nos mandó el señor –dijo ella.

A Ulises le pareció que se trataba de otra mujer aunque, luego de una primera impresión, la
reconoció por sus ojos enormes y el gesto cínico de sus labios. No era tan blanca como él había creído, ni tan alta, y esta vez además no estaba sola: la escoltaba un hombre de aspecto fariseo que llevaba un esparadrapo alrededor de la quijada cubriéndole la boca. Ulises podía distinguir sus ojos pequeños y aceitosos observándolo con desprecio y también con leve curiosidad. Tenía un mechón negro sobre la frente y las manos arrinconadas en los bolsillos: no tendría más de veinte años. A Ulises, por su parte, no se le ocurría qué decir. Estaba demasiado sorprendido por el encuentro. ¿Saludar? ¿Decirle que había acudido a ese lugar sólo a esperarla? Ademá,

–Te presento a mi hermano, le dicen el Alfil –dijo ella–, viene a cuidarme, pero ya ves, le rompieron el hocico.

–¿A cuidarte de qué? –preguntóUlises, pero se arrepintió al notar que su pregunta era estúpida. De su boca, se lamentó, no salían más que brutalidades.

–¿Cómo que de qué?, se ve a leguas que eres gatito de angora. Acuérdate de que yo soy gato callejero.

–Claro, gato callejero –repitió Ulises. La mancha de sangre humedecía el esparadrapo del Alfil. Era obvio que debajo de aquella tela estaba la carne viva, supurando.

–¿No sería mejor ir al médico? –sugirió tímido Ulises, señalando el vendaje. Desde niño la sangre le producía terror y mientras la mancha roja estuviera allí, frente a él, no podría pensar en otra cosa.

–Eso cuesta dinero, además se lo merece por andar de cabrón –dijo Cristina.

–En el Seguro no te cobran, puedes ir a emergencias y te atienden sin cobrarte un centavo.
El Alfil prefirió el silencio. Palmeó la espalda de Cristina, dio media vuelta y se alejó: era ligeramente jorobado y sus pasos se sucedían cortos y apresurados, como aguacero. Ulises se alegró al verlo marcharse. La mácula roja había al fin desaparecido provocando en Ulises un repentino alivio. Se sorprendió también de que Cristina lo tomara familiarmente de la mano para invitarlo a caminar. “Vamos a pasear como recién casados, a ver quién nos cree”, bromeó ella. Hacía mucho tiempo que no daba un paseo tomando la mano de una mujer. Le habría gustado tanto encontrarse con alguno de sus compañeros de oficina: el contador Jiménez, o Susana Olvera. Más ahora que Cristina vestía una falda arriba de las rodillas y un saquito de tono naranja y unos zapatos altísimos y elegantes, más propios, según él, de una modelo que de una prostituta. Ya hubiera querido la mujer del licenciado Fuentes poseer la elegancia y la seguridad de Cristina. La diferencia sólo estaba en la cartera.

–Ni modo, rey. No puedo fiarte todos los días. Qué más quisiera yo.

–No, Cristina, al contrario. Quiero invitarte a cenar, a tomar algo, y pagarte lo que te debo.

–¿Invitarme?, ¿a dónde?

–Si quieres vamos a mi casa –ensayó Ulises. Le estaba costando mucho trabajo mostrarse natural. Sabía que sus palabras guardaban el absurdo defecto de parecer falsas. ¿Cómo evitarlo? Nunca había sido un conquistador. Recordó la frase de una de sus canciones preferidas: Uno no es lo que quiere sino lo que puede ser. Él, Ulises Figueroa, no podía ser de otra manera, y si ella era buena, si en verdad poseía la bondad que él creía descubrir en su alma, entonces tendría que aceptarlo así, y no desconfiar, y no creer que tras la invitación a su casa se ocultaba un propósito torvo.

–Si apenas te conozco. ¿Qué tal si eres un asesino y me llevas a tu departamento para cortarme las piernas, o pones veneno en mi sopa?
Era la segunda vez en unos minutos que alguien desconfiaba de él. ¿Acaso su aspecto no era el adecuado? Se trataba de un hombre honrado como podía atestiguarlo cualquiera de sus compañeros de trabajo. No pudo evitar deprimirse, callar, soportar que Cristina, una puta a quien le estaba ofreciendo su casa, se permitiera humillarlo sin detenerse a pensar si había sentimientos valiosos dentro de su corazón.

–No pongas esa cara. Te agradezco que me invites pero tengo que trabajar. Yo no soy gerente como tú y éstas son mis horas de trabajo.

–Te voy a pagar –le entusiasmó que ella sacara a colación la palabra gerente, señal inequívoca de que recordaba los detalles de su primera conversación.

–Ya sé que me vas a pagar, pero no es lo mismo un ratito que toda la noche. Así como me ves no soy tan barata. Te propongo esto, mira, si a la una no he agarrado nada, me voy a tu casa.

–¿Cuánto quieres por venir conmigo? –dijo Ulises, decepcionado. No tenía deseos de hablar de cantidades, al fin y al cabo le pagaría con todo el dinero de su quincena, ¿acaso no era suficiente?: si de algo estaba convencido era de que no podría valer más una noche con Cristina que sus quince días de trabajo: ocho horas diarias sin recibir siquiera la luz del sol.

–Como ya eres mi cliente te voy a cobrar lo mismo de la otra vez, y un poquito más.

–Me gustaría pagarte lo que mereces, eres muy guapa –dijo él, sorprendido de su propio halago.

En realidad muy guapa –pensó Ulises–, una princesa de cuento, un ave hermosa y de buen agüero: qué decir de sus piernas lisas como cerámica, de su cutis de arena fina, de sus manos de Barbie, de sus ojos maravillosos: una mujer para toda la vida, una mujer para Ulises.
Figueroa.

–Así con esos piropos me voy contigo, aunque seas un asesino.

Antes de tomar el taxi, Ulises realizó algunos cálculos en voz baja: no podrían cobrarle más de ocho pesos, acaso diez si se detenía en el Súper 7 a comprar una botella. Bacardí como a ella le gustaba. Reparó también en los discos que pondría en una noche tan importante, un ritmo tranquilo, suavecito para empezar, y en el momento culminante, cuando ella estuviera entregada en sus brazos, José José; sí, no había duda, él le diría con su voz emotiva y dulce lo que Ulises jamás podría, ni en sueños, confirmarle: Me basta, con un poco de tu amor, con lo que tengas guardado, con lo que hayas olvidado, con eso, me quedo yo. La cuenta fue perfecta, diez pesos del taxi más cuarenta de la botella más veinte pesos de unas salchichas fud y un poco de queso Oaxaca. Antes de cruzar la puerta de entrada a la vecindad pensó en lo desordenada que estaría su casa. Intentó hacer memoria, recordar cuántos calcetines sucios estarían tirados en el piso. Lo demás no le importaba demasiado, pero los calcetines representaban algo desagradable y lo harían sentirse incómodo frente a Cristina. Los consideraba la prenda más íntima de un hombre, incluso en mayor grado que los calzones. Otro detalle capaz de avergonzarlo sería que el jabón de baño tuviera adheridos a la superficie algunos de sus cabellos negros. Le parecía aterrador. Sin embargo, si su memoria no le jugaba sucio, ninguna de las dos cosas, calcetines en el piso y el jabón lleno de pelos, estarían a la vista. Se alegró de ello y pasando el brazo por los hombros de Cristina, le dijo: “Mi amor, de ahora en adelante mi casa será nuestra casa”.
Ernesto Sánchez trabajó muy duro en su juventud y no sentía remordimiento alguno por haberse jubilado unos días después de haber cumplido los cincuenta años. Los lujos jamás llamaron su atención y creía ser feliz viviendo en la modestia. A pesar de eso, no estuvo conforme cuando recorrió los pasillos de la clínica y se percató de la pobreza de las habitaciones y del reclamo de un par de enfermos convalecientes que exigían inútilmente una mejor atención. Si bien las enfermeras y médicos mostraban tranquilidad y destreza para hacer su trabajo, Ernesto decidió que su hija no permanecería más tiempo en un hospital público. Deseaba trasladarla cuanto antes a una clínica particular en la que, estaba cierto, recibiría mejores cuidados. Podía exigirlo porque era su padre y tenía ahorrado el dinero suficiente para llevar a cabo el cambio de hospital.

–Si es necesario vendemos todo, la televisión, mis anillos –ofreció la señora Sánchez, que al menos en eso estaba de acuerdo con su marido.

–Mi reloj, ya para qué lo quiero.

–Si es necesario hipotecamos la casa.

Entonces les informaron que si bien el caso no era grave y su hija no estaba en peligro de muerte, había sufrido un fuerte daño psicológico y el médico de planta creía necesario mantenerla unos días más en observación.

–Si no es grave, ¿para qué quieren tenerla en observación?

–Yo no puedo contestarle, señora –dijo la enfermera–. Espere que el médico hable con usted.

–¿Quién es el médico que la está atendiendo?
–Su hija tiene suerte, señora, la está atendiendo el subdirector de nuestro nosocomio.
–Mi hija no tiene suerte, señorita.

A partir de esa breve conversación los viejos permanecieron sentados durante veinte horas en dos incómodas sillas de plástico atornilladas a un tubo de metal. Se trataba de la sala de espera, de paredes óseas y entabicas, de olor a alcohol y vitaminas. Veinte horas laxas en las que el tiempo se acumulaba en las articulaciones y en el cuello, horas marcadas por el lento peregrinar de dos manecillas y los pasos apagados de la enfermera de turno. Aguardaban en silencio absoluto el diagnóstico del médico; en silencio porque si de algo estaban seguros era de que jamás volverían a hablar acerca de lo sucedido a su hija. Ofelia sollozaba, recordando las precauciones al fin inútiles, los consejos diarios, las oraciones que había pronunciado en vano. Ernesto rememoraba la ocasión en que rechazó una pistola por considerarla un artefacto infructuoso. Se había negado rotundamente a comprarla a pesar de que en verdad se trataba de una ganga: “No voy a meter la muerte a mi casa”, le replicó enérgico al vendedor. Su mente estaba ahora concentrada en aquella lejana conversación, en los argumentos esgrimidos por el vendedor acerca de los beneficios de la defensa propia. ¿Cómo había podido ser tan obstinado y convencerse de que un arma no era necesaria? Ofelia, entre tanto, ocupaba su mente repasando los acontecimientos más trágicos de su vida, tal vez con el deseo de equilibrar las desgracias y convencerse de que a cualquiera podían sucederle algo tan indignante. A pesar de ello, nada podía acercarse al hecho de ser violada por tres sujetos en la oscuridad de un callejón con olor a miasmas y porquería. En su afán de martirio, Ofelia rememoró para sí un hecho casi olvidado: éste se dio un mes después de cumplir los quince años, cuando el hermano de su padre, un periodista treintón de barriga prominente y barba mal rasurada, aprovechó que ambos se habían quedado solos para tocar el cuerpo de su
sobrina. A opinión de Ofelia el hermano de su padre era sólo “un vago, un pedante que aseguraba saberlo todo para ofender a los demás”, y los dos años que compartieron el mismo techo significaron para ella un castigo inmerecido. El incidente tuvo lugar una tarde de éas tan iguales a las tardes de toda la vida cuando Ofelia estaba recostada en la dormilona de gamuza (uno de los pocos muebles que ahora recordaba con minuciosidad) cumpliendo la siesta obligada después de haber lavado los trastes de la comida. Sus padres habían acudido a la iglesia para ensayar las canciones que cantarían en el coro dominical y su hermano menor aún no regresaban de la escuela. Se despabiló al percibir un ligero cosquilleo en la entrepierna que, somnolienta, confundía con las cautelosas pisadas de un gato, abrió los ojos y descubrió al periodista ensimismado lamiéndole la falda con la punta de su lengua camaleónica, rasposa como un camino de vidrios, con los ojos cerrados y la nariz temblorosa. ¿Acaso era el destino de las mujeres?, se preguntaba ahora mientras esperaba escuchar las peores noticias de boca del médico, al lado del hombre que prefirió mirar unos minutos más la televisión en lugar de proteger a las mujeres de su casa, protegerlas de otros hombres, de la amenaza que, sin excepción, suponía ser mujer y tener la piel joven y vivir entre bestias.

Allí sentados, regados por la luz artificial que barnizaba la sala de espera, Ernesto y su esposa, los rostros pétreos, parecían dos extraños compartiendo una misma tragedia. Frente a ellos, ocupando una de las butacas de plástico, se hallaba un hombre joven cuya presencia había pasado inadvertida para ambos. De haberlo observado con mayor atención, ninguno de ellos habría tenido el menor problema para reconocerlo: se trataba nada menos que de uno de sus vecinos, Adolfo Estrada, del edificio quince, el veterinario, el hijo del hombre que, según decían, había muerto de un infarto en el baño de su casa. A pesar de lo sencillo que hubiera sido reconocerlo, los Sánchez no pusieron ninguna atención en él: un bulto cualquiera,
alguien que en ese momento debía sufrir mucho menos que ellos. El olor a alcohol era cada vez más penetrante, ¿sería alcohol?, un olor que se derramaba en el aire y que, según Ofelia, provenía de los cuartos en que los enfermos dormían. En ese aire estaba también el olor del cuerpo de su hija, el olor de sus heridas, los restos de su espíritu muerto. Si hubiera adquirido la pistola en este momento estaría buscando a los agresores de su hija, se lamentaba Ernesto, para quien el orgullo de no haber sido nunca un hombre violento no tenía ya ningún sentido. Lo que antes significaba una virtud se convertía de pronto en una tara, en un defecto imperdonable.

Como si de pronto tomara vida, la figura inane de Adolfo abandonó su asiento y con pasos discretos se aproximó a la pareja de viejos. A pesar de que sus planes contemplaban correr ese riesgo, lo que menos deseaba era causar una impresión negativa. Fue todo lo contrario. Apenas dio unos pasos más allá de su asiento, Ofelia lo reconoció: se trataba de un rostro tan familiar, incluso si lo hubiera visto salir de su casa no le habría parecido extraño. ¿Cómo podía uno llegar a tener tal familiaridad con alguien con quien nunca se ha cruzado una sola palabra?

–Olivia va a estar bien, no se preocupen –dijo Adolfo. En realidad no era eso lo que quería decir. ¿Qué sabía él del futuro? ¿Acaso era un médico?

–Gracias, joven –respondió la madre, rompiendo en llanto otra vez–. Si nosotros pudiéramos decidir...

–La enfermeras no están preocupadas, ésa es una buena señal –añadió Adolfo–, he hablado con una de ellas y me dijo que los doctores han atendido casos muy parecidos. Lo que necesitará su hija de ahora en adelante será amor.

–Las enfermeras se preocupan de su familia y nosotros de la nuestra –dijo Ernesto,
seco, ¿quién era ese tipejo para saber lo que necesitaba o no su hija?

Adolfo guardó silencio y resignado volvió a su lugar. Se miró los zapatos y lamentó no haberse aseado con mayor esmero. ¿De qué le servía tener un cajón de boleo con todos los implementos dentro si jamás lustraba sus zapatos? Ocupando un lugar en aquella sala vacía, medio en penumbras, se consideraba uno más de la familia. Era indispensable que los Sánchez reconocieran su aflicción y notaran que, además de ellos, él era el único que se había tomado la molestia de acudir al hospital. Permanecer a su lado en ese momento significaba, para Adolfo, su definitiva intrusión a la familia; era tanto como estar en la sala de casa mirando la televisión mientras Olivia, su mujer, cuidaba del niño, de su hijo, un hijo que se parecería en lo espiritual y principescos a la madre pero tendría la resistencia física y el amor a los animales del padre. Juntos permitieron a las horas avanzar a su antojo: Ofelia y Ernesto permanecieron alerta a los murmullos del hospital, al menor indicio de noticias nuevas; Adolfo, en cambio, hacía grandes esfuerzos por mantener los párpados ligeros. Sumido en ese estado de conciencia sombría se entregó, de la misma manera que el matrimonio Sánchez, a los recuerdos que el azar introducía en su cabeza, imágenes tan gastadas y antiguas como las de él mismo cuando era un niño y robaba la calderilla del monedero de la madre. Recordó también el día en que la perra maltesa de los Ochoa había sido montada por un perro de mucho mayor tamaño. ¿Por qué tenía esa imagen pegada en el cerebro? Ambos animales permanecieron pegados cerca de diez minutos mientras la propietaria de la perra gritaba pidiendo ayuda. Como los perros continuaron ensartados, con el hocico abierto y la mirada de arrepentimiento, la perra gimiendo adolorida y el perro con la lengua de fuera, ya desahogado, la dueña corrió a su departamento y volvió con una cubeta repleta de agua, la cual arrojo encima del agresor. Presa del pánico el animal echó a correr arrastrando consigo a la maltesa
más allá de una cuadra. Fue Adolfo quien curó sus heridas y consoló a la señora Ochoa, prometiéndole que a partir de entonces visitaría a la paciente por lo menos una vez a la semana.

Los pasos del doctor de guardia lo pusieron de nuevo en alerta. Ernesto se incorporó haciendo crujir sus articulaciones y el respaldo plástico de la silla.

—Queremos saber cómo está nuestra hija, doctor. Hemos esperado demasiado —tenía la boca seca y la última palabra no había ido más allá de su garganta.

—De principio le diré que su hija está bien y su recuperación dependerá del tiempo y de los buenos cuidados. No es el terreno físico en el que voy a detenerme —el doctor, barbilla negra y gafas de poco aumento, buscaba las palabras más adecuadas para explicar el estado de la paciente. Cuando se trataba de dar noticias a los familiares de sus enfermos utilizaba regularmente ese fraseo pausado y monótono; como si con ello quisiera restarle importancia a los hechos.

—¿Está despierta en este momento? —preguntó Ofelia.

—No tiene lesiones demasiado graves en el cuerpo, el pómulo está fracturado pero está en su lugar; los derrames, normales en estos casos, desaparecerán antes de un mes. Acaso sufre todavía de algunas escoriaciones en el ano y una leve hemorragia en la vagina que ya está controlada. Es cuestión de paciencia y curaciones sencillas que usted, señora, va a tener que llevar a cabo.

Ernesto se interpuso entre el médico y Adolfo. No había razón para que el vecino escuchara una información de tal naturaleza, información que sin duda incumbía sólo a los parientes cercanos. Ofelia, sensible a la preocupación de Ernesto, decidió intervenir a favor del intruso.
Le dijo a su marido, sin reparar en que éstas eran las primeras palabras que le dedicaba después de muchas horas: “No te preocupes, él también es médico”.

–¿Quieres usted decir que no hay ningún problema? –preguntó Ernesto al médico de guardia, despreciando las palabras de su mujer, golpeando nervioso el piso con el talón del pie.

–Le voy a explicar. Durante la agresión, su hija mordió los labios de uno de sus atacantes. Se defendió como lo haría cualquier persona que aprecia su dignidad. Bueno, la cuestión es que, según parece, conserva un trozo de carne dentro de su boca.

–¿Un pedazo de carne? –preguntó Ofelia, desconcertada– ¿Quiere decir que le arrancó los labios?

–Sí, al menos una parte.

–¿Y la tiene allí, en la boca?

–Sí, creemos que lo tiene atrapado entre los dientes. Su hija mantiene la quijada cerrada como si aún continuara luchando contra su victimario.

–No le entiendo, doctor, no entiendo nada –dijo Ernesto.

–Aunque ella se encuentre físicamente en vías de recuperación, necesita de estímulos psicológicos para volver a la normalidad.

–¿Y qué va a suceder?

–A partir de mañana, en unas horas más, se hará cargo del caso el doctor Z. Bermúdez; él es un psicólogo competente y confiamos en que pueda resolver un problema tan delicado. La mente es un terreno difícil de explorar, mucho más complejo que nuestro cuerpo. Sólo les pido que mantengan la calma y no frecuenten el cuarto de su hija, a no ser que el médico se los solicite.

–Quiero estar junto a mi hija, doctor.
–Sí, en cuanto la enfermera termine con la curación puede usted entrar, pero sólo unos minutos.

Cuando el médico se marchó, Adolfo creyó conveniente dar rienda suelta a su llanto. Qué mejor momento para demostrar que él también sufría y no debía ser tratado como un intruso. A pesar del cálculo, sus lágrimas eran sinceras, unos gemiditos ridículos que después de haber sido reprimidos durante horas aparecieron agudos e intermitentes. Si la noche anterior no hubiera tomado la estúpida decisión de aguardar la llegada de Ulises, habría tenido oportunidad de evitar lo sucedido, rumiaba para sí Adolfo. La única noche en la que era necesario permanecer en su casa, la había consumido recargado en la barda de ladrillos naranjas de la vecindad de Ulises, como un estúpido, soportando el oteo de los inquilinos y la conversación absurda de un teporocho que se empeñaba en hablarle de su pasado. Tacubaya le parecía un barrio peligroso, sabía por boca de Ulises que la marihuana se vendía en plena calle y temía verse enfrentado a cualquiera de los transeúntes que a esa hora cruzaban la calle de Juan Cano. ¿Cómo había soportado la espera con la certidumbre de esos antecedentes? El remordimiento no le dejaba otra alternativa y en lo concerniente a la violación de Olivia tenía que asumirse como culpable. Probablemente su destino, la única obligación a la que debía estar sometido un hombre sin grandes metas en la vida, consistía en cuidar a los seres más débiles que él; ¿no estaba todo tan claro? Había fallado y sería muy difícil perdonárselo. Tampoco ella se lo perdonaría, ni sus padres, ni Dios. Por esa razón lloraba, por Olivia y por él mismo, por la perrita maltesa y por toda la gente que sufría en esta tierra. Adolfo se dio cuenta de que a pesar de lo oportuno de sus lágrimas, éstas tendrían que resultarles incomprensibles a los dos viejos.

–¿Conocía usted a mi hija, joven? –preguntó conmovida la señora Sánchez.

El marido observaba precavido el lagrimeo de Adolfo. Aunque su llanto parecía sincero se
preguntaba cuál era el motivo para que lo hiciera de modo tan intenso.

–Soy su vecino, señora. Conozco a Olivia desde que era pequeña. No somos amigos porque no hemos tenido oportunidad: la gente hoy en día sólo tiene tiempo para pensar en sí misma.

–¿Cómo se enteró de esto? –preguntó el marido, huraño, sin dejarse convencer.

–Vi las imágenes en la televisión y quiero decirle una cosa, señor. Voy a ayudarlo a encontrar a los culpables, esto no va a quedarse así.

–Usted preocúpese por sus problemas, que no deben ser pocos. De todos modos le agradezco que se tome tiempo para estar aquí. Usted es el único.

–También es mi problema, señor, se trata de la humanidad.

–Él tiene razón –intervino nuevamente Ofelia–, se trata de la humanidad.

La sala de estar comenzó a poblarse: las enfermeras del segundo turno aún con el cabello húmedo por la ducha matutina, los familiares de los internos, algunos de ellos portando canastas de viandas o ropa limpia, las primeras visitas. Había amanecido y una suave luz solar se colaba por dos respiraderos que daban a la calle. Los padres de Olivia volvieron a acomodarse en sus sillas. Adolfo junto a ellos. La sirena de una ambulancia chillaba desde una avenida cercana al hospital. Entonces, como si hubiera llegado con el amanecer, una idea y una sensación de terror y de asco se apoderó de los tres: la carne de aquel degenerado se encontraba alojada en el cuerpo de Olivia, el semen, la carne, el olor, el ser de un extraño estaría allí quizá para siempre, peor que una cicatriz, pudriéndose bajo el arco del paladar, manchando sus dientes y su espíritu. Los ojos de ambos hombres se encontraron, fue sólo un instante, el tiempo suficiente para, sin necesidad de una palabra, establecer un pacto. Era su obligación.
Después de todo, las peleas estaban ganadas de antemano; en caso contrario, en caso de que la suerte se fuera del otro lado, estaría lo suficientemente drogado como para no sentir la navaja clavada en las costillas. Una botella de alcohol blanco y barato como el agua, pastillas, humo dentro de los pulmones y luego a esperar el día siguiente para recuperar los músculos y uno a uno los sentidos, para reconocer que la suerte seguía siéndole fiel y que la moneda continuaba cayendo del lado del águila. Sus amigos no eran realmente sus amigos: se habían encontrado en la calle reconociéndose como iguales, hablaban a través de monosílabos y a veces se daban de golpes. Nunca eran los mismos porque no pasaban meses sin que a alguno le madrearan el cráneo o se lo llevaran a un paseo sin regreso. Los policías, ¿quién más? Y no sólo ellos.

Habrían vivido un poco más tiempo juntos si la madre no hubiera muerto tan joven. Cristina sabía que el Alfil moriría también joven, como su madre. Tarde o temprano alguien le llegaría con la noticia de que, ahora sí, se había quedado completamente sola. Y no sería una noticia triste, al contrario, siempre y cuando la muerte no fuera demasiado injusta ni demasiado cruel. Deseaba piedad para su hermano aunque sabía que la piedad no alcanza jamás para todos y que la muerte es mejor cuando es más cruda. “Nada es peor que una muerte que no se decide”, pensaba, y no tenía remordimientos, ella, Cristina, porque desde un principio todo fue muy claro. Ser hermanos había sido un accidente, como cualquiera de los que suceden a diario, como el que mañana se tropezara con una coladera o se tirara un diente. Cristina conocía la naturaleza del azar, no era estrictamente una filosofía pero sí un escudo
para defenderse del dolor continuo: todo es más o menos gratuito y siempre se podrá pedir perdón, ¿para qué entonces los remordimientos?, tampoco rencores por la noche de hace dos años cuando el Alfil entró a su habitación de hotel, ella todavía olorosa al sudor rancio del último cliente, y la poseyó desesperado, como si se hubiera convencido de que su hermana tendría que oponer alguna resistencia. Sin embargo, ella se dejó hacer; total, se trataba de un acto amoroso, como el de la madre que permite a su hijo llorar en sus brazos. El Alfil olía a cemento y alcohol, tenía el semblante de un loco que ha perdido otra vez el camino, delgado y desvalido entre las piernas duras y experimentadas de su hermana mayor. Cristina, sorprendida, lo sentía temblar en sus brazos, mordisquear sus pezones, él con los ojos clausurados, como si quisiera imaginarse que estaba con otra, con cualquiera y no con su hermana, llorando y pidiendo perdón una vez que el chorro de semen penetrara los rincones de la vagina maternal; ella, sin rencores después de aquella noche, ni autocastigos por no haber estado jamás a su lado. No era tan difícil saber que, en ciertas circunstancias, los hombres estaban destinados a vivir lejos de la familia. Eso creía Cristina, pero el Alfil no tenía opiniones, sólo la certeza de que en determinado momento podía acudir a una esquina o a un hotel y encontrar a una persona que decía ser su hermana. Le pedía dinero o que le guardara una televisión mientras pasaba la tormenta o “dile a una de tus amiguitas que me deje con ella, rápido, ni lo va a sentir, después le pago”.

El Alfil dormía en un cuarto junto con otros que también tenían una llave. Nadie sabía quién era el dueño ni quién había sido el primero, pero allí se la pasaba uno, incluso le habían tocado ya dos muertos, uno que se murió de pedo, y el otro “no nos dijo nada, llegó, se acurrucó en un rincón, dijo que tenía sueño, que si no teníamos un trago, luego se durmió y amaneció muerto. A nadie le dijo que se lo habían picado, tal vez pensó que tres picahielazos
no eran nada, el pendejo”. Al Alfil le tocó sacarlo del cuarto, junto con el Toro; lo fueron a tirar a dos cuadras, en plena calle.

De todos, el Toro era el único que podía decirse medio amigo del Alfil, y no por otra razón que la de durar más que los otros. Pasaba el tiempo y continuaban viéndose las caras, a veces uno se ausentaba por semanas pero luego volvía. Fue con el Toro y el Bobadilla con quienes estuvo metiéndole al cemento en el callejoncito de la Unidad, y fue el Toro el que se lanzó primero encima de la chava ésa. Así era el Toro, no le pedía opinión a nadie, hacía las cosas sin saber si lo seguirían: el primer impulso era el bueno. Estaban allí porque el Bobadilla decía que era muy fácil robar en el estacionamiento, sin luz, sin testigos, sólo los autos huérfanos cuyas refacciones eran bien cotizadas en la Buenos Aires. Por una calavera de Tsuru te daban hasta doscientos pesos y un poco menos por el retrovisor, siempre y cuando fuera el original. Llegaron temprano porque el Toro quería darse una vueltecita e irse ambientando. El Alfil estuvo de acuerdo porque tampoco conocía la Unidad, “aunque en realidad me vale madres”, decía, “pero vamos y nos cementeamos un rato para ponernos chingones”. Allí estuvieron, pasando el botecito de mano en mano, sin hablar, esperando a que por lo menos dieran las doce. “Si quieren yo puedo entrarle de una vez”, murmuró el Alfil. Entonces escucharon sus pisadas, las de una mujer, suaves, y vieron la silueta: “Estaba bien buena”, dijo después el Toro; “Yo me acuerdo hasta de su perfume”, dijo luego el Bobadilla. Se mantuvieron quietos, como si en realidad fueran las bolsas de basura que Olivia creyó ver en un principio, serenos porque ninguno se imaginó lo que sucedería después.

Pero fue él, el Toro, el primero que se levantó y le cerró el paso a la intrusa. “Yo prefiero cogerme a esta güerita que robar un pinche espejo”, pensó, o dijo que pensó el Bobadilla, que
se le fue encima y la tiró al piso. Y el Alfil le pateó la cara para que se callara, “le tuve que madrear la jeta para que se alivianara la hija de la chingada”, dijo. Le pateó la cara y luego fue al final del pasillo a echar aguas mientras los otros le daban a la perrita lo que necesitaba, “y después regresé por lo mío”; ya estaba bien domada, y la besó, y le apretó los senos con desesperación mientras el Toro se reía, “pues que es tu novia o qué güey”, decía. Fue cuando el Toro se burlaba que ella mordió al Alfil y le desprendió de golpe la mitad del labio. “Con tanta sangre que has tirado ya debes estar seco, güey”, sentenció luego el Toro al Alfil.

Se estuvo curando con chorros de ron blanco, soportando el ardor que le llegaba hasta la médula, escuchando la retahila del Bobadilla y las burlas del Toro: “Yo a las viejas no las beso, nomás me las cojo”, decía. Pasó más de una semana metido en el cuarto, comiendo lo que le sobraba al Toro, oliendo a ron, pensando en lo pendejo que había sido. Entonces recordó a Cristina y salió a buscarla. Ella le diría cómo curarse porque las mujeres saben más de esas cosas, no es que lo aprendan sino que así son: “Como los hombres somos buenos para los madrazos, ellas son buenas para cocinar y para curar”, suponía el Alfil. Fue a buscarla al hotel. Ella le dijo:

–Ven, acompáñame a dar un paseo y ahí me platicas. He estado todo el día metida en este pinche lugar –caminaron juntos más de una hora, ella con los mechones negros ocultándole parte del rostro, él con un esparadrapo exagerado y la vista atenida al piso, sin muchas palabras en la boca.

–Fue una pelea –dijo de pronto el Alfil.

–Fue una chingadera –opinó Cristina–. Tienes que cuidarte o se te va a podrir toda la cara.

–Ya hasta huele mal.
–Si te salen gusanos te los tragas, son nutritivos –dijo ella, bromeando.

–Te los traigo para que te eches un taco.

–Lo que huele mal es ese pinche trapo que traes. Cómprate una gasa, ponte alcohol todos los días. También agarras un mejoral, lo haces polvito y te lo pones encima de la herida. Estas cosas son delicadas, si te infectas hasta puedes morirte.

–De una mordida no se muere nadie.

–La gente se muere muy fácil, si una célula se pudre, jode a las de junto y éstas a las de junto y así hasta que a todo se lo lleva la jodida.

–Lo malo es que no puedo ni comer, me arde como la chingada.

–Toma jugos con un popote; además, ni que comieras tanto.

–Prefiero ponerme pedo, y dormirme.

Lo reconoció fácilmente, de cuerpo compacto y pelo negrísimo, la espalda caída hacia adelante como si estuviera colgando de un perchero. No recordaba muy bien su nombre, Luis o Ulises. Los hombres eran todos unos niños, pensó Cristina, siempre quieren beber de la misma taza: “A éste ya le gustó”. Lo vio parado en la esquina, su esquina, y le dio cierta alegría. Por lo general los que acostumbraban volver tenían encima bastantes más años que Ulises, y no eran gerentes, sino trabajadores o comerciantes jubilados o empleados viejos. El paisaje callejero asemejaba a una estampa costumbrista: ella paseando con su hermano, charlando, como si formaran en verdad una familia. Ulises, esperándola, como el novio que se preocupa y aguarda su llegada y quiere besarla para luego irse a coger calientitos en la cama.

–Mira, Alfil, el tipo que ves allí me está esperando, si quieres venir más noche te doy lana para las curaciones.

–No puedo venir más noche, quiero dormir –respondió él tratando de fingir las
consonantes—, de veras no tengo un quinto, estoy jodido —a pesar de que se había enterado por el Bobadilla de que el Toro había dado un buen golpe: un automovilista a quien tuvo que meterle un tiro en la cabeza con su propia pistola. El tipo había querido ponerse cabrón.

Qué chingón era el Toro, con dinero y un arma de las buenas. Sólo había que esperar a que volviera al cuarto para pedirle unos pesos prestados. Ojalá todos fuéramos como el Toro, pensaba el Alfil: “Debe andar escondido o celebrando por ahí, qué chingón el Toro”. Cristina respondió metiéndole en la bolsa del pantalón un billete de veinte pesos.

—No es mucho, date una vuelta mañana, a la mejor éste me paga lo que me debe.

—Cuídate y ya sabes, nada más me avises, al menos te puedo ayudar matándote las moscas.

—Yo me sé cuidar, ¿o qué?, ¿quieres que te rompan la madre otra vez? Vete a dormir, nos vemos mañana.

Antes de marcharse el Alfil miró de frente a Ulises; tenía facha de ser un buen hombre, como todos los que se metían con su hermana, como la mayoría, hombres buenos y cobardes, llorones.

—Miren lo que nos mandó el señor —dijo ella. El Alfil no sentía celos, miraba a los hombres de Cristina como si fueran nuevas cicatrices de las que ella jamás podría deshacerse. De vez en cuando se preocupaba por esas cicatrices y hacía algunas recomendaciones; incluso cierto día no lejano se le ocurrió regalarle a Cristina un tubito de gas lacrimógeno.

—Te presento a mi hermano, le dicen el Alfil —dijo ella—, viene a cuidarme, pero ya ves, le rompieron el hocico.
XII

Susana Olvera llegó esa mañana a las instalaciones de fonacot cargando, además de su bolsa imitación de piel, una canasta repleta de chocolates. No bien estuvo instalada en su escritorio, apartó con destreza el papel celofán que envolvía la canasta, se incorporó y sonriente comenzó a repartir chocolates a los empleados. “Uno para cada quien; si no, no van a alcanzar”, advirtió con tonito alegre. Ellos, sus compañeros, se habían acostumbrado con los años a las ocurrencias emotivas de Susana. Sabían que si alguien en esa oficina era capaz de encontrarle placer a estar allí sentado durante ocho horas diarias era Susana. ¿Cómo podía caber en ese cuerpo frágil tanta fortaleza?, se preguntaban.


–No, desde que murió el licenciado Fuentes llega a la hora que se le da la gana –dijo Raquel colocando su chocolate dentro de una caja de pañuelos y temiendo, ya era una costumbre, la defensa que haría de Ulises la flaquita Susana.

–Ulises no se aprovecharía de eso, es muy responsable, ¿acaso amaneciste de mal humor?

–Si tuviera mal humor no vendría a trabajar. Yo siempre estoy de buen humor aunque no ande repartiendo chocolates. Ulises ha estado llegando tarde, ¿qué tiene que ver eso con mi humor?

–No se trata del hecho en sí –dijo Susana– sino de cómo lo interpretes. Seguro que vas a decir que les doy chocolates porque quiero pedirles algo, ¿entiendes? Estás mal interpretando el hecho, nada más.

–Yo no interpreto nada, Susanita, sólo digo la verdad.
La verdad es cosa de cada quien y depende de la interpretación, del color con que mires las cosas.

No vamos a discutir por eso, me rindo.

A la que no veo tampoco es a la señorita Reyna, ¿estarás enferma? —preguntó Susana. La señorita Reyna atendía la ventanilla número cuatro, era soltera y usaba para los labios un bilé color rojo subido. Había estudiado la carrera de enfermería sin gran éxito: detestaba el olor de los hospitales, la ropa blanca y decía sentir una extraña aversión hacia los ancianos.

Raquel miró a Susana Olvera de arriba abajo. La misma falda color pálido, las zapatillas gachas, el cabello recogido. ¿Por qué en lugar de estar regalando pendejadas no se compraba ropa? Le era difícil comprender la singularidad de aquella figura heroica y espigada. Tenía algo de santa, como esas monjas que huelen a almidón, que no tienen rostro, que han desaparecido detrás de un hábito para transfigurarse en piedras. Susana era sólida como una piedra, ¿cómo podía ser posible —se preguntaba Raquel— que la persona más insignificante de la oficina se tomará tan en serio el papel de proteger a los otros?

—¿Señorita? ¿Señorita Dolores Reyna? —se mofó Raquel—. Por favor, Susana, aquí todos dicen que son licenciados o señoritas, y a la mera hora ni son licenciados ni son señoritas.

—Mira quién llegó —dijo Susana, apenas notó la opaca figura de Ulises transgrediendo el área destinada al mostrador. Sudoroso, preocupado, como el mensajero que llega tarde a su pesar, Ulises entró y sin saludar a nadie se instaló en la silla de su escritorio. Le costaba trabajo comprender cómo, desde que Cristina aceptara vivir a su lado, el tiempo se había adelgazado y lo que antes podía realizar hasta con los ojos cerrados hoy se complicaba de una manera estúpida. Saber que Cristina estaba en su casa lo hacía más distraído y torpe. No se trataba de enamoramiento sino de novedad; jamás antes había compartido la cama con una
mujer y no estaba seguro si era correcto cerrar la puerta del baño mientras orinaba, no sabía hasta qué punto debía llegar la autoridad del esposo ni si era normal que Cristina, a la que consideraba ya su mujer, bebiera un vaso de ron durante el desayuno. ¿Hasta dónde podían llegar las prohibiciones? ¿Cuáles eran los límites pertinentes entre un hombre y una mujer que planean vivir juntos para siempre? Desde su llegada al departamento, Cristina se había hecho cargo del orden: no más vasos de yogurt ni envolturas de plástico en el suelo, no más ropa sucia arrinconada detrás de la puerta del baño. Ahora las cajitas de Maizena estaban dentro de la alacena, una detrás de otra, los saleros repletos de arroz blanco y sal en vez de granos de arroz amarillento y costras salitrosas. Cristina sólo había llevado consigo un par de maletas y una bolsa repleta de zapatos, también una medalla de la virgen de Guadalupe y un delgado álbum de fotografías, no familiares, sino de la misma Cristina, más joven, sola la mayoría de las veces, a veces acompañada por uno o dos hombres, tras una mesa y una botella. A Ulises le parecían repugnantes las fotografías, especialmente una en la que se encontraba abrazada de un tipo en la proa de una trajinera en Xochimilco.

–Deberías tirar esas fotografías, ahora tienes una vida distinta –aunque no se lo decía abiertamente le parecía indignante que su mujer conservara fotografías de otros hombres.

–Es mi pasado, ¿qué tal si mañana me echas a la calle? Entonces sí me quedo sin nada. A Cristina le resultaba un tanto inquietante y absurdo vivir con un hombre a sus treinta y ocho años, ¿se acostumbraría? ¿Podría soportar la dieta de un solo cuerpo y una misma cara? Era absurdo definitivamente, pero también lo era continuar habitando un hotel a la espera de que algún loco le rajara el cuello. “Total, si no me va bien, siempre estará la calle, aunque tampoco tiene uno derecho a ser tan pesimista.” Si la experiencia le servía de algo podía asegurar que Ulises jamás le causaría un problema grave.
Aún no ponía las reglas pero tampoco tendrían que ser demasiado duras, mientras le permitiera beber su vaso de ron y acostarse a la hora que a ella le diera la gana, ¿hasta dónde llegaría la autoridad de un hombre? ¿Hasta dónde tendría que aguantar por un techo y la posibilidad de ser la mujer de alguien? La relación no había sufrido altibajos, exceptuando el incidente de las fotografías y una discusión al respecto del dentista:

—¿Por qué no vas al dentista? Mi amigo Adolfo puede recomendarnos uno —estaban sentados en el borde de la cama. Era media noche y Cristina acababa de apagar el aparato televisor.

—¿Siempre que vas con putas les pides que se arreglen los dientes?

—Cristina, no sé qué decirte...

—¿Y qué más tengo que arreglarme para gustarte? ¿No quieres también que me haga cirugía en las nalgas?

—No me importa tu apariencia sino tu salud, estarías mejor si te cuidaras la boca. ¿No te gustaría tener los dientes fuertes y blancos? —Ulises no quería volver a hablar jamás acerca de las cicatrices en los glúteos, eran parte del pasado y estaba aceptado, pero los dientes...

—¿No te basta mi lengua?

—Además, no sólo es cuestión de salud sino de tomar en cuenta que somos una pareja y debemos ayudarnos. ¿O para qué crees que se forman las parejas?

Ulises estaba sorprendido de que la vida fuera tan difícil y que siempre hubiera uno dispuesto a romper las leyes de la lógica. Cualquier mujer siente deseos de ser más bella, no había dicho nada extraño, ni ofensivo, ni nuevo. Si uno tenía estropeados los dientes iba al dentista y listo. Cristina fue junto a él y acarició su entrepierna. Nunca antes en su vida había acudido
a un dentista, se lavaba los dientes una vez al día y siempre tenía en su bolso un chicle de menta. ¿No era suficiente? Si los dientes se caían era porque uno los usaba, “¿o qué?, ¿acaso son de adorno?”

–Me han dicho que esas cosas son muy dolorosas –añadió conciliadora; después de todo, Ulises estaba preocupándose por su salud. No se trataba de ser una mal agradecida.

–¿Qué cosas? ¿Qué quieres decir con cosas?

–Los dentistas, yo nunca he ido a uno.

–No pasa nada, te ponen anestesia si es necesario. Además, Cristina, no quiero escucharte nunca más diciendo que eres una puta, si vas a vivir conmigo no puedes seguir pensando como antes. Eres una mujer y ya, mi mujer.

–Perdóname, lo que pasa es que a mí no me duelen las palabras.

–A mí me duele tu pesimismo, quisiera creer que juntos tendremos una vida diferente. Ya no somos unos niños.

–A mí me duele más que me saquen los dientes que decirle a las cosas por su nombre.

Aquella discusión no se prolongó. Ulises aprendió que no era conveniente hacer ninguna alusión al dentista, y Cristina se reservó de mencionar palabras como puta y hotel, y también de aludir a su pasado. Lo aprendieron muy rápido ya que ambos tenían el presentimiento de que probablemente jamás volverían a tener una oportunidad igual. No había elección. Ulises hubiera querido compartir su casa con otra clase de mujer, pero era consciente de que no podía esperar más tiempo, ¿por qué razón Cristina, a pesar de haber sido una puta callejera, no podía tener una oportunidad? La tendría. Igual que el anciano a quien había obsequiado su refrigerador. Deshacerse de su refrigerador y permitir que Cristina se hospedara en su casa habían sido pruebas, quizás las únicas, de que no era un hombre normal, un ser que actuaba
sólo en función a sus necesidades, sino alguien original y, sobre todo, dueño de su propia vida. El único inconveniente fue que después de dos semanas de vivir junto a Cristina había dejado de tener absoluto dominio sobre su casa; ahora debía compartir la cama, y el agua y los programas de televisión, ahora tenía que cerciorarse de que el baño no estuviera ocupado y preparar café para dos: todas sus actividades multiplicadas por dos. Para consolarse se convencía de que Cristina no era una mujer entrometida o abusiva sino que él deseaba compartirlo todo con ella: era él quien daba y se arrepentía, era él, un estúpido, uno que jamás lograría conocer la dirección ni el sentido de sus propios sentimientos. Se entristeció todavía más cuando al entrar a su oficina se percató de la mirada reprobadora de Raquel. Había llegado tarde una vez más, y sólo porque esa mañana Cristina se empeñó en plancharle su camisa y sus pantalones conectando una maldita plancha inservible, sin preguntarle a él, a Ulises, si podía usarla. El resultado fue un cortocircuito y un par de fusibles arruinados. Por tanto, Ulises se vio obligado a abandonar su casa a mitad del desayuno para ir en busca de los fusibles a una tlapalería. Apenas Ulises acomodó las nalgas en la endeble silla de su escritorio, Susana Olvera se acercó a él para ofrecerle un chocolate.

–Mira, Ulises, éste es el último, lo guardé para ti.

–Muchas gracias, Susana. No esperaba llegar tan tarde hoy.

–No te preocupes, mientras no eligen al nuevo jefe ni quien se fije.

No obstante que el nuevo encargado de la sucursal no había sido aún elegido, las cosas no eran como Susana creía. El contador Jiménez, a falta de una autoridad mayor, había tomado para sí la responsabilidad de mantener en orden a los empleados. Desde la muerte de Otilio Fuentes, la autoridad había recaído indirectamente en el contador. No sólo era el mayor de edad sino también el que ocupaba su puesto desde el primer día que la sucursal de fonacot
abrió sus puertas a los trabajadores. Serio, se aproximó a ellos decidido a reclamarle a Ulises su tardanza. Tosió, se pasó la mano por su frente agrietada y miró de frente a Ulises.

–No hay que relajarse tanto, Figueroa. La gente se muere pero los papeles siguen sobre la mesa.

–A veces no podemos hacer lo que queremos –contestó Ulises, malhumorado, ¿por qué le tenía que dar explicaciones a un pendejo como ése? Susana intervino por él.

–Ojalá todos fueran como tú de responsables, Ulises. Me extraña que el contador te pregunte eso, si ya te conoce. Ojalá nos manden ya a un nuevo director.

–¿Y ahora por qué llegaste tarde?, ¿no pudiste o no quisiste? –atacó Jiménez, impertinente. Raquel Urbina, con el pretexto de buscar un perforador, se acercó a ellos. No quería perderse ni una palabra de aquella discusión.

–No pude llegar más temprano porque fui a casarme –lo había dicho. Era una mentira espontánea que en nadie causó tanta sorpresa como en él mismo. ¿Hasta dónde llevaría ese juego?, ¿cuál sería la siguiente mentira?

–¿Cómo que te fuiste a casa? –preguntó Susana Olivera rompiendo el silencio expectante de los otros.

–Sí, me casé a primera hora en la delegación. Fui al Registro Civil con Cristina y nos casamos. Después ella fue a casa y yo me vine para acá. No quería faltar al trabajo.

–No puedo creerlo, caray Ulises, no me queda otra más que felicitarte –el contador Jiménez, sus carnes asfixiadas por su traje de casimir barato, le extendió los brazos–. Perdóname, muchacho, Susana tiene razón.

Raquel dio unos pasos para acercarse a Ulises y a regañadientes, sospechando alguna triquiñuela en tan inesperada revelación, le tendió los brazos para felicitarlo. Susana dejó
correr las lágrimas y con voz quebrada, tipluda a causa de la emoción, dijo:

–Si un hombre tiene que trabajar hasta en el día de su boda es que el mundo no está bien.

–Nos hubieras avisado, Figueroa. Hay cosas más importantes en la vida que firmar facturas, ¿por qué no vuelves a tu casa? –recomendó Jiménez.

Ulises miró de frente a Susana. No hubiera querido provocar lágrimas en esa mujer, no quería que sus mentiras le hicieran mal a nadie. No obstante y muy a su pesar, estaba orgulloso de haber dicho en voz alta el nombre de Cristina y de hacerles saber que tenía una mujer en casa. A fin de cuentas no era enteramente una mentira: Cristina existía y era su pareja. ¿Qué importaba si se casaban o no? ¿Qué importaba si ese montón de desgraciados sabía la verdad? ¿En qué cambiaría su vida si lo supieran? Ulises tomó el chocolate de Susana y dijo:

–Gracias, éste es mi regalo de bodas.
XIII

Era época de vacaciones escolares y desde muy temprano los niños se escapaban de sus casas y pasaban la mañana en la calle. El reloj no marcaba aún las ocho y el vocerío de un grupo de párvulos que corría por los pasillos de la Unidad llegó hasta casa de la familia Sánchez. Cuando Olivia abrió los ojos encontró algo muy familiar en los olores y la luz hipócrita y titubeante de la habitación: estaba otra vez en su casa, pero todavía conservaba las grietas sangrantes de la boca reseca y en las narices el olor a medicamentos del cuarto de hospital. Se hallaba al fin lejos de las enfermeras de rostros inescrutables y en especial de una que durante su estancia en la clínica se empeñó en infundirle ánimos cuando ella no pedía ni requería de ningún tipo de consuelo: “No es usted la única a la que le ha sucedido algo así. Es usted muy bonita y no merece que su vida se eche a perder. Tiene que reponerse, Dios es muy grande y sólo Él conoce la razón de sus actos. ¿Qué podemos nosotros saber de sus motivos? Aquí en la tierra no tenemos nada que hacer sino acatarlo que venga de arriba y ser buenos”. De calibre semejante era el tipo de discursos que la enfermera pronunciaba en un ritmo plano, como si ella misma se percatara de que sus palabras no guardaban más sentido que el de cumplir el ritual impuesto por las costumbres en ese caso de desgracias; consolaciones que farfullaba para sí al aire mientras reemplazaba el recipiente del suero, regulaba la válvula de administración, limpiaba el bote de los deshechos o cubría con una estera el cuerpo dormido de las pacientes.

Después de casi un mes de convalecencia, Olivia se encontraba en su propia cama, a salvo de los interrogatorios rutinarios del psicólogo y de las miraditas compasivas de sus compañeras.
de cuarto, ¿cuántos cuestionarios se vio empujada a responderle a una trabajadora social a lo largo de la última semana? Ernesto se oponía a que su hija fuera interrogada acerca de aspectos íntimos de su persona, pero el doctor Z. Bermúdez le hizo saber que los pacientes estaban obligados a cumplir ciertos requisitos de interés social.

–Desde un principio pedimos se nos permitiera llevar a nuestra hija a una clínica particular. Allí tendría un cuarto para ella sola y nadie le estaría haciendo preguntas innecesarias.

–Debe usted saber, señor Sánchez, que el gobierno hace lo que puede para que sus afiliados tengan el mejor servicio. Sin embargo, estamos en un país pobre y hay lujos que no podemos darnos.

–Si el país está tan pobre no es por culpa nuestra. Yo he trabajado toda mi vida y siempre he sido honrado.

–Lo que sí puedo garantizarle es que su hija va a estar muy bien atendida. Ya he dado órdenes para que sus compañeras de cuarto sean pacientes que no reciban visitas.

La reclusión había terminado y la hija de los Sánchez descansaba al fin en su propio cuarto cubierta por el cotidiano edredón, relajada, sin imaginarse que a unos metros de ella, tirado a pierna suelta en el sillón de la sala, estaba Adolfo Estrada, un desconocido que desde semanas atrás entraba y salía de su casa con gran familiaridad. Si en ese momento abandonara el lecho, abriera la puerta y se encontrara con él no podría reconocerlo. Para ella la mayor parte de los vecinos eran una suerte de bultos animados que perdían singularidad a fuerza de parecerse tanto: eran el paisaje. Olivia se acostumbró a ser una piedra rara en ese paisaje, a ser la hija de una Testigo sin saber en qué tal cosa la hacía diferente a los demás.

“Debido a que amamos a Jehová nuestro Dios con todo nuestro corazón, alma, mente y
fuerzas, y a nuestro prójimo como a nosotros mismos, no estamos divididos por barreras nacionales, raciales y sociales.” De modo que si atravesara la puerta de su habitación le sería imposible reconocer a Adolfo que entonces tomaba una taza de café mientras animado conversaba con Ofelia Sánchez, cuidando que el volumen de su voz no fuera a interferir con la recuperación de la enferma, sorprendido de encontrarse tan a sus anchas, tan bien recibido por la vecina de rostro avejentado y peinado inmóvil que condescendiente lo escuchaba y le mostraba, según él, infinito agradecimiento.

–Desde mi ventana vi el ataúd de tu padre –comentó la señora Sánchez—, nunca cruzamos una palabra pero estoy segura de que se trataba de gente de bien. Era un ataúd muy elegante y el sol brillaba más fuerte que nunca.

–Sí, lo recuerdo con claridad. Hacía mucho calor aunque en la tarde comenzó a llover, también muy fuerte. Era como si todas las estaciones del año se hubieran concentrado en ese mismo día y el smog hubiera desaparecido para siempre.

–El día de su muerte se produjo un silencio impresionante. Hasta los perros estaban callados.

–El Dogo estuvo aullando toda la noche, y no podíamos callarlo. Sabía que el jefe de la casa se había marchado y nunca volvería; los perros saben esas cosas y yo sé que las saben porque soy veterinario. En la mañana, cuando metimos a mi papá al ataúd, el perro se calló y no volvió a ladrar hasta semanas después.

–¿Y ahora vives solo?

–Sí, con mi perro, nada más.

Las voces se volvieron más discernibles, el rumor que entre sueños le pareciera el gemido de una chirimía y el carraspeo de un fagot, ahora se transformaba en palabras. Sí, eran dos voces: la de su madre y la de un hombre desconocido. Incluso pudo descifrar el sentido de algunas
palabras y frases sueltas. Sobre todo la voz de Ofelia, tan familiar:

–¿Y tiene usted novia?

–No, en realidad, no, no tengo novia –respondió mientras observaba en la pared una fotografía. Era Olivia aproximadamente a la edad de diez años, blanca como la pulpa de una manzana, sonriente.

–Yo me casé muy joven y me arrepiento. Me casé con el hombre adecuado en el peor momento, ¿sabe a lo que me refiero?

–Sí, mi madre decía algo similar, decía que los hombres siempre entrábamos por la puerta de atrás.

–Claro, como maleantes.

No sería sencillo olvidar aquel accidente. Los días tenían siempre manera de hacerle recordar el pasado y cuando nadie se lo esperaba, todo volvía a suceder en la memoria de sus sentidos. De pronto, el sonido de un taza golpeando contra la mesa o el crujido de una puerta de clóset volvía a recordarle esa voz de niño, de niño que se había vuelto mayor, y también el dolor punzante en la vagina, y la patada en el pómulo, y el tufo a ladrillo y a orines. Entonces gritaba como no había podido hacerlo la misma noche del atentado. Un grito que de inmediato Ofelia sofocaba tomándola en brazos y susurrando una oración entre dientes mientras, rígido bajo el marco de la puerta, Ernesto contemplaba la escena, impávido, ocultando el resentimiento que le producía escuchar los alaridos de su hija y saber que no tenía fuerzas ni carácter para poder llevar a cabo una venganza. Adolfo, por su parte, procuraba mantenerse a una distancia prudente pues no consideraba educado acercarse demasiado a la recámara, ni mucho menos a Olivia, a pesar de que resentía cada vez más sus lamentos, los cuales sumaba a las desagradables jornadas en el hospital y a las crípticas explicaciones de los psicólogos y doctores. Sucedía que aprovechando las esporádicas
ausencias de los Sánchez o su distracción, buscaba a los médicos para cuestionarlos respecto a los detalles del estado físico de la paciente. Quería saber si lo acontecido no le impediría tener hijos en el futuro o si se habían realizado los estudios necesarios para localizar algún tipo de enfermedad extraña, incubada durante la violación. El doctor Z. Bermúdez, sensible a lo que él consideraba una patanería, le respondía haciendo uso de sentencias obscuras y tecnicismos que a éste, a pesar de que se consideraba capacitado para comprender el vocabulario médico, le resultaba imposible descifrar. Resignado, volvía a la sala de espera, y allí, sumido en una expectación sideral, volvía a preguntarse: “¿Acaso las personas y los animales no tienen todos corazón y pulmones?” La vida no era fácil para Adolfo, sobre todo cuando, como él sospechaba, los cretinos se conjuraban para hacerla aún más complicada.

Un día Olivia se levantó de su cama sin avisar a nadie. Respiró asqueada el aire con olor a ungüento y árnica de su habitación y se conformó. Atravesó el comedor a paso cansino, recolectando para su memoria las imágenes familiares, los muebles, los olores, los sonidos del boiler y de la tetera en la estufa, y entró a la cocina. Al principio creyó que se trataba de su padre pero los hombros caídos y un poco más anchos, los pantalones de mezclilla ajustados y vulgares la pusieron en alerta. “¿Y éste quién es?”, se preguntó. Adolfo estaba de espaldas a ella y de frente al fregadero, enjuagando una ensaladera de cerámica, sin percatarse de que unos ojos escrutaban su figura y sus movimientos: una mirada medio lunática y distante a la que él nunca se acostumbraría. Para Olivia la presencia de un hombre desconocido representaba uno más de los acontecimientos extravagantes que le venían sucediendo a raíz de la violación. ¿Qué podría sorprenderla ya? El hecho de que un extraño se encontrara lavando trastes en la cocina de su casa era algo tan poco digno de tomarse en cuenta. Mientras observaba la figura de aquel individuo, recordó las dos películas que llevaba consigo la noche en que fue atacada. ¿Se las habrían robado? Si era así tendrían que pagar
una cantidad importante al Blockbuster para no ser eliminados de la lista de socios. En cuanto su madre volviera del mercado le preguntaría al respecto; entre tanto, olvidó el motivo por el que decidió trasladarse a la cocina y, cautelosa, ocultando sus pasos en el ruido que producía el chorro de agua, volvió a su cuarto, resignada, como si supiera que la imagen de Adolfo se repetiría en su vida muchas veces más adelante. Él continuaba ensimismado en la espuma de jabón impregnada al estropajo, cavilando, convencido de que a pesar de todo era un hombre afortunado, allí, tan cerca de la mujer deseada, optimista, presintiendo que muy pronto su vida tendría sentido y también una forma real.

Después de unos meses de atención constante, Olivia pareció recuperarse totalmente. Dejó de sentir punzadas y ardores en la vagina, los vómitos cesaron y el pómulo se puso duro como una roca. Las visitas al médico y al psicólogo de la clínica se redujeron y los medicamentos fueron poco a poco abandonados en el botiquín del baño; gradualmente, los algodones sangrientos, el olor a bálsamos, los platos con semillas de naranja y sandía a un lado de la cama, desaparecieron. Las insistentes visitas de la representante de un grupo feminista se hicieron también mucho menos frecuentes. Y en esto último la madre había tenido mucho que ver puesto que se oponía a que Olivia formara parte de un grupo terapéutico. La feminista provenía de un grupo denominado apis y se había enterado del caso por medio de la televisión. El grupo al que pertenecía se mantenía con el dinero que una institución alemana destinaba a actividades filantrópicas para la protección de derechos humanos en algunos países americanos.

–Señora, no debe usted oponerse, su hija debe conocer a mujeres que han sufrido atentados sexuales parecidos al suyo. Su experiencia ayudará a otras personas a superar sus problemas –dijo la feminista, una mujer menuda de cabello recortado, camisa a cuadros y
pantalones de pana. A juzgar por la firmeza de su voz, no cabía ninguna duda de que creía en sus propias palabras.

–Le agradezco mucho su preocupación, pero Olivia está bien. No debemos recordar el pasado si no es necesario, sólo las cosas buenas, a ver, ¿a poco a usted le gusta estar pensando en las desgracias? ¿Verdad que no? No sé si usted sabrá que los Testigos de Jehová creemos que esta vida no es todo cuanto hay. Más adelante, cuando esto termine, resucitaremos de entre los muertos y poblaremos un futuro que será diferente. Seremos elegidos, señorita. Dígame usted, ¿qué nos pueden importar las desgracias de esta tierra si viviremos muy pronto al lado de Dios?

–Sí, señora, respeto sus ideas religiosas, pero de lo que se trata es del presente. Como usted dice, nos preocuparemos del futuro cuando éste suceda.

–El mundo va pasando, pero el que hace la voluntad de Dios permanece para siempre, y eso no lo digo yo, señorita, lo escribió el apóstol San Juan, ¿usted es madre?

–No, señora, aunque no considero necesario serlo para comprender las necesidades de un ser humano.

–Cuando lo sea, sabrá que las madres nos sacrificamos por nuestros hijos, podemos equivocarnos, pero un error cometido con amor no es enteramente un error. No se preocupe por Olivia, ella está junto a personas que la quie-ren y sufren con ella, no en medio de un grupo de desconocidos que sufren cada quien por su propia desgracia.

Olivia decidió deshacerse de una parte importante de su guardarropa, principalmente de algunas faldas y vestidos. A partir de entonces prefirió usar pantalones de mezclilla negra, camisas blancas y también, como si fuera un hecho insignificante, se rapó el cabello de modo que su aspecto podía confundirse con el de un joven predicador texano. Ofelia concluyó que
su hija no tenía deseos de continuar siendo mujer y la dejó en paz. A Ernesto le preocupaban no tanto las modificaciones de su aspecto físico sino las que tenían que ver con su naturaleza: desde que abandonó el hospital, Olivia comenzó a dormir durante las tardes y en la mayoría de las ocasiones no abría los ojos sino hasta el día siguiente, se volvió menos escrupulosa respecto a la limpieza y en general perdió interés por el quehacer cotidiano. Ofelia aprovechó su apatía para obligarla a establecer amistad con Adolfo, una amistad que ni la misma Olivia podría considerar desinteresada, pues todos en esa casa vislumbraban ya cuál sería la conclusión natural. Sin embargo, la decisión de Ofelia estaba tomada y sólo era cuestión de esperar a que las cosas se dieran de manera natural, evitando así remordimientos y culpas. Adolfo frecuentó cada vez más el departamento gozando de atribuciones que antes sólo le correspondían al padre, incluso en ocasiones se le permitió elegir la película que la familia vería el viernes en la tarde. Para beneplácito de Ernesto, el vecino era también adicto a las películas de Mario Alamada y pudo medir con él sus conocimientos respecto al tema. En cambio, Olivia se vio obligada a sufrir su compañía y a escuchar sus extensos y tediosos discursos acerca del futuro, ¿qué quería ese hombre? ¿Por qué de pronto era parte de la familia?, se preguntaba ella, intrigada por el hecho de que el veterinario la siguiera a todos lados, previa orden de su madre. No era tanto que le pareciera desagradable, ¿qué podía tener de especial si era uno igual a tantos?, lo que no comprendía exactamente era en qué momento sus padres decidieron depositar en él tanta confianza. ¿Cómo podrían tener ellos la seguridad de que no se trataba de alguno de sus atacantes?, se preguntaba Olivia. A pesar de las homilías y los discursos que, dirigidos a su hija, Ofelia improvisaba a favor de Adolfo, y a pesar de que éste le aseguraba conocerla desde que era una adolescente, ella se mantenía muy poco interesada. A él le repugnaba su actual corte de cabello y aborrecía las camisas y los zapatos de hombre que había comenzado a usar la mujer que él consideraba ya de su
propiedad. Extrañaba los vestidos de colorido intenso y el cabello que le caía hasta los hombros, los zapatos altos de correa al frente y las faldas corrientes de algodón. No obstante, se consolaba pensando que los hábitos recientes se desvanecerían con el tiempo y todo volvería a comenzar para conveniencia de ambos. Por otra parte, si bien el aspecto de su mujer le incomodaba, la certeza de ser una especie de benefactor le infundía nuevos ánimos: el ser a ojos de todos el amante de una mujer desgraciada, lo hacía doblemente vanidoso; no sólo estaba con una mujer de hermosa apariencia sino además, y eso nadie podría rebatirlo, le estaba haciendo un favor.

Olivia, apática frente a los intereses de su vecino, acataba las decisiones que se tomaban sobre su persona. Por ejemplo, un día, sin pedirlo, se vio a las puertas de la casa de Adolfo, el departamento que una noche antes él limpiara con dedicación para recibir la visita de la que sería, según sus cálculos, su próxima inquilina. El Dogo emergió de su escondite habitual moviendo la cola y el bulto de piel que recubría su estómago. Olivia no reparó demasiado en el perro, a pesar de que éste se empeñó en lamerle los pies, sino en el olor a humedad estancada y a vísceras muertas.

–En esta casa he vivido toda mi vida.

–Me alegro mucho, pero no me acuerdo de ti –dijo ella y se adelantó unos pasos para observar las figuras del viejo papel tapiz, ¿qué eran aquellas figuras? ¿Pájaros o ramas de árbol?

–Voy a arreglarla, cambiaré el papel de las paredes y pondremos los cuadros que a ti te gusten.

–A mí los cuadros no me gustan, prefiero los retratos.

–Nos traeremos todos los retratos de tu casa y los pondremos en esa pared. Aquella
será la pared de Olivia –sugirió Adolfo vehemente, como un niño que planea los detalles de las próximas vacaciones.

–Si vas a colgar mis retratos quiero fotografías nuevas. Así como estoy ahora.

–Sí, está bien, pero el pelo te crecerá y serás como antes.

–Nada va a ser como antes, pero haz lo que quieras –añadió ella, contundente. Luego se encaminó hasta el cuarto de Adolfo y como si representara una escena muchas veces ensayada, se acercó al filo de la ventana y ubicó desde allí su propio cuarto.

–Tu casa se ve muy bien desde aquí. Podrás vigilar a tu madre.

–Ella me vigilará a mí, como siempre.

–Cerraremos las cortinas, ahora ya no necesito que la ventana esté abierta –dijo él, deseando que Olivia se percatara de la ternura que había puesto en sus palabras.

El perro continuaba olisqueando los pies de la intrusa, mientras ella, ignorándolo, corría la puerta del clóset para husmear en el fondo. En los cuatro muros de la habitación de Adolfo se repartían los banderines del Cruz Azul, las posters de actores y actrices que a Olivia le resultaban muy poco conocidos. También estaba la fotografía de Adolfo luciendo el pelo engomado y la sonrisa blanca de un niño de nueve años. “Jamás viviré aquí”, se dijo a sí misma. Sin embargo, como si la historia ya no tuviera remedio, una mañana nublada, cuando los pájaros escupían el humo de sus pulmones y los habitantes de la Unidad sentían más odio hacia la humanidad que nunca, Olivia introdujo la mayoría de sus pertenencias dentro de una maleta y sin ningún trámite civil o religioso se mudó de departamento.
Cristina temía haberse equivocado. Junto a la estufa, encima de una mesita de pino, la botella de ron se proponía como una prueba de lo contrario. Ahora compartía la casa con un hombre y al parecer, aunque no habían establecido al respecto ninguna clase de acuerdo previo, las labores cotidianas de limpieza le correspondían: cosas tan sencillas como tender la cama, lavar los calcetines de Ulises, e incluso ir a comprar comestibles cuando éstos hicieran falta. Mientras ella servía el café, cargado y abundante en azúcar, Ulises se entretenía manoseando el desayuno y tronando con los dientes las galletas saladas. Tenía los cabellos fuera de su lugar y los antebrazos clavados en la mesa. Estaba bostezando frente a una pequeña libreta en la que calculaba los gastos de la próxima semana, comparándolos con el dinero de su más reciente quincena; si sólo ganara un poco más podría abandonar la odiosa costumbre de comer frijoles a toda hora del día: ¿cuántas cosas no cambiarían en su vida con sólo un poco más de dinero? Lo primero que haría con un excedente en el bolsillo sería ir a tomarse unas cubas a la cantina y luego buscar una prostituta, una capaz de recordarle la belleza de la primera Cristina, “volver a enamorarme”, se decía a sí mismo, revivir el momento y con él la impresión de encontrarse con una nueva Cristina.

Más de dos años habían pasado desde que pisara la casa de Ulises por primera vez y en pocas ocasiones la rutina tomaba un atajo distinto. Ella nunca le había dedicado tanto tiempo a la televisión ni a la cocina; en el pasado no tenía más que meterse a una fonda y pedir que le llenaran un plato de sopa y le sirvieran tortillas calientes. En las noches el ron cauterizaba su estómago y la acompañaba hasta ya entrada la madrugada. Jamás dejaría de beber ron, no...
obstante que según sus cálculos sospechaba tener dos meses de embarazada. No sería la primera vez que perdía el control y terminaba encinta, tampoco sería la última. Sin embargo, reflexionaba Cristina, un hijo representaba la única posibilidad seria de asegurar un lugar estable y definitivo en la vida. ¿Por qué ocupaba su tiempo en esas tonterías? Jamás se le hubiera ocurrido pensar en hijos, y menos después de ser testigo de la vida que llevaba su hermano el Alfil. La novedad del problema consistía en algo muy distinto: al permanecer recluida dentro de el departamento de Ulises, comenzaba a tener miedo de la calle, de la soledad nocturna, de los policías que la acecharon durante tanto tiempo y a quienes hasta hacía muy poco acostumbraba enfrentar con decisión y fiereza. “Los hijos son para los que tienen miedo, yo no necesito ni quiero”, concluyó Cristina quien pese a sus especulaciones no podía dar el embarazo como un hecho verídico, y menos cuando sabía muy bien que el retraso en la menstruación representaba una afección normal en mujeres de su edad. No comentaría nada con Ulises. Lo haría unos días más adelante y eso sólo si le daba la gana: todavía estaba a tiempo de abortar.

–Espero que cuando regrese estés lista –la apuró Ulises.

–Yo estoy lista a la hora que quieras, no necesitas amenazarme.

–No te estoy amenazando, éste es un día importante para mí y no debemos pelear –Ulises despreció el desayuno, mordisqueó un par de galletas y dio un sorbo grande al café. Le resultaba imposible concentrarse en la comida mientras se imaginaba la reacción de Adolfo al conocer a Cristina. ¿Cómo se las arreglaría para hacer que esta primera reunión resultara un éxito? De cualquier manera, saber que Adolfo vivía con una mujer haría mucho más fácil las presentaciones.

–Imagínate, le hablé por teléfono para darle la noticia de que me había casado y resulta que él me dice lo mismo.
Yo tampoco sabía que estábamos casados. Me hubieras dado la noticia a mí primero—en las palabras de Cristina no se descubría ningún atisbo de rencor. Se trataba sólo de un comentario.

Nosotros vamos a decir que somos esposos. Nadie va a ir al registro civil a comprobar si es verdad o no.

Te pueden pedir una fotografía.

Ulises apartó la taza de café y se incorporó de la silla, besó a Cristina en el cuello y, corriendo, salió rumbo al Gigante de Avenida Revolución: no quería llegar a casa de Adolfo con las manos vacías. Se trataba de la primera cita de casados o, al menos, de la primera cita en la que desempeñarían el papel de un matrimonio: Ulises deseaba que Cristina conociera a su gran amigo Adolfo Estrada y eso para él significaba tanto o más que una boda, ¿se acordaría Adolfo de que ambos, cuando formaron parte de la escolta escolar, estuvieron enamorados de Carmela, la abanderada? Cuánto deseaba Ulises que renaciera otra vez su amistad y que tanto Cristina como la mujer de Adolfo quisieran tomar parte en ese sentimiento. No era mucho lo que pedía sino continuar con los capítulos que la vida le va marcando a todos los hombres, ¿era eso un crimen?

Para llegar a casa de Adolfo tendrían que desplazarse desde Juan Cano hasta el Canal de Miramontes. Tomarían la línea ocho en Tacubaya y luego en la estación Chabacano harían un cambio de línea para llegar a Taxqueña. Cristina no estaba acostumbrada a recorrer distancias tan grandes y tampoco a viajar en metro, todas sus actividades se concentraban cerca de Tacubaya y cuando tenía que ir más lejos tomaba un autobús o un pesero. Sólo una vez se vio obligada a acompañar a un cliente hasta Xochimilco: uno que quiso seguir la juerga más allá del amanecer. Con Cristina de escolta, tomó un taxi y le dijo al chofer “llévenos a
Xochimilco”, y luego alquiló una trajinera y después los mariachis y las cervezas.

–Éste es el día más feliz de mi vida, mamacita –le dijo el hombre en aquella ocasión.

–No sé por qué los hombres pasan los mejores momentos de su vida siempre borrachos.

–Aquí vine con mi primera esposa, a Xochimilco, era tan joven como tú.

–Ni modo, tengo que conformarme con ser el reflejo de otras –se quejó entonces Cristina que lo abandonó a mediodía bajo el alero de una tienda clausurada porque a él le fue imposible dar un paso más, y mucho menos subirse a un taxi y mucho menos dar la dirección de su casa. Ahora, en cambio, no iría como la puta de nadie, sino como la mujer de Ulises Figueroa. Dio un trago más a la botella de ron, el último, y fue a enjuagarse la boca. Destapó el frasquito de astringosol que había descubierto nuevecito en el botiquín el primer día que habitó esa casa. “No quiero que piensen que Ulises vive con una alcohólica”, se amonestó. En el fondo estaba aterrada, ¿qué clase de personas serían los amigos de Ulises? Para empezar se prometió no decir más de lo necesario, mucho menos bromear, mucho menos eso ya que un día Ulises le había hecho notar cuánto se divertía lastimando a los demás.

–No quiero decir que lo hagas conscientemente. Es una costumbre.

–Sólo los mamones se ofenden –le había rebatido Cristina, sorprendida ante reproche semejante.

–¿Lo ves?, siempre tienes que insultar a alguien.

–Yo sólo insulto al que se lo merece.

–Todas tus bromas tienen que ver con herir a alguien, o burlarse, parece como si estuvieras siempre en guerra.

–Así me conociste, ¿ahora porque me estás jodiendo?

–Yo no te estoy jodiendo, Cristina, yo te quiero.
–Pues si me quisieras no querrías cambiarme, te fuiste a meter con una puta y ahora quieres bailar un vals, vete a la chingada.

–Tú no eres una puta, eres mi mujer... ¡Maldita sea!

La discusión no había tenido ni fin ni conclusiones porque Cristina estaba orgullosa de su lenguaje: “Es lo único que tengo para defenderme de los canallas y ahora éste quiere cortarme la lengua”. Por otra parte, si lo pensaba bien, que le hicieran esa clase de reproches le parecía halagador, no las alusiones a sus dientes estropeados ni las reprimendas causadas por su afición a beber alcohol en las mañanas y en las noches, sino aquellos que hacían resaltar su personalidad. Ella no estaba en sus dientes, ni en sus borracheras, ni siquiera en haber sido prostituta. Que Ulises la recriminara por su crueldad la llenaba de orgullo: “Se lo merecen; todo lo que yo diga, se lo merecen”, pensaba. A pesar de todo, permanecería callada durante la visita a la casa de Adolfo. “Para hacer la guerra mejor me habría quedado en el hotel”, se reprendía mientras, frente al espejo del baño, paseaba la punta de un bilé encendido encima de sus labios: “Tengo los ojos demasiado grandes y la boca horrible, de chupapitos, y ya se me nota lo vieja; carajo, no se puede hacer nada”.

Escupió el astringosol y volvió a la recámara. Ulises no podría quejarse, todo ordenado, los zapatos en una fila debajo de la cama, el roperito de madera sin polvo, el piso de mosaico lustroso. De pronto, advirtió un ruido de bolsas de papel y golpeteo de botellas. Su hombre había llegado.

–Es hora de irnos –dijo él.

–Estoy lista, ¿cuánto gastaste en eso?

–Ochenta pesos.

–¿Compraste cigarros?
–Sí, y también salchichas y cervezas de lata.
Estimulado por la visita de su antiguo amigo, Adolfo se levantó desde muy temprano con el fin de ordenar su casa y preparar detalladamente la recepción. Sacó al perro a orinar una hora antes de lo normal y se dedicó a realizar tareas no muy comunes en él: limpió con ácido muriático las costras del excusado y descolgó los retratos de Olivia, quitándoles el escaso polvo que forraba los marcos. Antes de entregarse de lleno a sus actividades, introdujo en la casetera una cinta de música instrumental que su padre solía escuchar cuando limpiaba su arma, una pistola calibre treinta y ocho que vendiera una semana antes de morir, malbaratándola, como si supiera que ese dinero −como efectivamente sucedió− pagaría los gastos de su funeral. Los metales y percusiones rimbombantes hacían vibrar las fotografías y la cristalería del trinchador, también el diploma de preparatoria que colgaba de un clavito en la pared. Olivia, mientras tanto, barría la alfombra arrastrando las cerdas gastadas de una escoba de palo. No porque le interesara la limpieza de una casa que le pareció mugrosa desde el principio, sino porque Adolfo se lo había pedido como un favor especial. La mayor parte de las acciones positivas que Olivia realizaba en esa casa tenían el mismo sello: eran o parecían ser favores. A un año de vivir a su lado, Adolfo sólo había conseguido copular con ella en cuatro ocasiones; y la primera seis meses después de vivir juntos y dormir en la misma cama. Olivia abría las piernas y él entraba precavido no más de cinco minutos, descargando su semen en la fría vagina de su mujer. Ella lo dejaba hacer sin oponer ninguna resistencia; era su obligación. Si lo habían hecho unos desconocidos porque no el hombre que compartía su lecho y que se había comportado tan amable y comprensivo con ella, razonaba en consecuencia Olivia.
–Quiero que esto sea importante para ti también – Adolfo se esforzaba en convencerla y en despertar su entusiasmo.

–Lo que es importante lo es y lo que no pues ni modo, no te preocupes, de todas maneras voy a ayudarte.

–Ulises es el único amigo que tengo. Me da alegría verlo, fuimos juntos a la escuela primaria y desde entonces no hemos perdido el contacto. Estuvimos en la escolta y llevamos la bandera todo un año. Ese tipo de cosas unen a la gente.

–Me alegra por ti.

Cuando las primeras notas de la melodía llegaron a oídos de Olivia, ésta suspendió unos instantes su actividad y se concentró en el aparato, curiosa, como si la propia máquina, una Gold Star de dos bocinas, hubiera sido responsable de la selección.

–¿No te gusta?, mi papá escuchaba esta música cuando necesitaba concentrarse en algo.

–Sí, me gusta –dijo ella–, suena como a música de iglesia.

–Es preciosa.

–Sí.

Olivia miró por la ventana y se encontró a sus padres saliendo de casa. La madre levantó la mano en señal de saludo, pero Olivia permaneció inmutable. Cada día estaban más acabados. Se les notaba más de lejos que en persona. Sobre todo a él, pensó Olivia antes de darles la espalda y volver al comedor donde Adolfo se encontraba sacudiendo la cabeza de un perro disecado que reposaba polvosa en el fondo de un trinchador.

–¿Qué es eso? –preguntó ella.

–Que bueno que muestras curiosidad por algo –dijo Adolfo sacudiendo el polvo de la testa del animal–, éste es un coyote que mi padre cazó cuando era muy joven, allá por la
Sierra de Hidalgo. Estaba tan orgulloso de su hazaña que mandó disecar la cabeza.

–Eso no es un coyote –precisó Olivia–, es un perro.

Adolfo no pudo ocultar el desprecio que le causaba una afirmación semejante. Después de todo se trataba de un trofeo familiar y el que Olivia fuera ya de su familia no le daba derecho a calumniar a su padre de esa manera.

–Tú qué vas a saber si nunca has salido de la ciudad.

–Es un perro.

–¿Cómo puedes afirmar algo con tanta autoridad? Acuérdate que yo soy veterinario, fui a la escuela...

–No mientas. Eso es un perro callejero.

Esto último le dolió mucho a Adolfo y por un momento tuvo la sensación de que la esperanza de una tarde agradable se perdía sin remedio.

–Después de aquella noche quedaste mal, ni siquiera puedes distinguir entre un coyote y un perro.

–Es un perro y tu padre un cobarde –dijo ella, altiva pero también distante, ajena al creciente enojo que sus palabras suscitaban en Adolfo. Ella sólo quería dejar claro que se trataba de un perro y no entendía qué relación tenía eso con el hecho de haber sido violada.

–¿Cómo pudiste tener durante tres días ese pedazo de carne dentro de tu boca, Dios mío, cómo pudiste?

Adolfo dejó que una jugosa lágrima apareciera en su rostro. ¿Por qué últimamente lloraba tan seguido? ¿Tenía Olivia algo que ver con esa tristeza repentina? ¿O es que hasta entonces comenzaba a sentir la ausencia de sus padres? Eran preguntas que Adolfo se hacía sin encontrar respuesta que le dejara satisfecho. Olivia hizo caso omiso de su llanto y volvió a la
cocina, tomó un cuchillo y comenzó a cortar el queso en pequeños cubos. “Si tengo cuidado lograré hacer más de cien cubos con esta rebanada”, se propuso. Entonces sonó el timbre de la puerta.

Adolfo secó sus lágrimas frotándose los ojos con la manga de su camisa nueva –la había comprado a crédito en la tienda Hecali: sólo quince pesos semanales– y descolgó apresuradamente el bodegón que regenteaba la sala. En su lugar colocó la cabeza del animal muerto. Ulises, su mejor amigo, había llegado. Los invitados entraron y sin pensararlo ocuparon automáticamente el sillón más grande de la sala. Ulises, nervioso, tenía a Cristina tomada de la mano, consciente de que un gesto así evitaría las presentaciones; lo importante era que el amor se manifestara sin ningún tipo de preámbulo. Al menos así lo había planeado la noche anterior.

Adolfo, orgulloso de su papel de anfitrión, arrastró una silla para ocuparla él mismo y dejó a Olivia la comodidad del sillón individual. Esta última salió de la cocina para llevar a la mesita de centro dos platones, uno repleto de cubitos de queso y otro con rollos de jamón.

–Tenía muchas ganas de conocer a tu esposa –dijo Ulises. En ese momento el perro se acercó a los pies de Cristina y, como era su costumbre, comenzó a lamerle los zapatos. “Vete de allí, Dogo”, ordenó Adolfo. El perro dejó de lamer, sumiso, aunque permaneció echado junto a la silla.

–Espero que le gusten los perros –dijo Adolfo a Cristina.

–Sí, me gustan, aunque la verdad no tanto como para disecarlos.

–No, ése no es un perro –respondió Adolfo, resignado–, es un coyote que cazó mi padre en la Sierra de Hidalgo.
–Es raro que tú, siendo veterinario, conserves una cosa así –manifestó Ulises.

–¿Cómo te llamas? –preguntó Cristina, impresionada por la juventud y la belleza de su anfitriona.

–Olivia –dijo ella, seca, aunque amable. De los dos invitados era ella quien, a primera vista, le despertaba cierta simpatía.

Cristina estaba ahora más tranquila. La casa de los Estrada era una casa como cualquier otra y sus habitantes, a pesar del perro disecado, le parecían normales e inofensivos. No había necesidad de fingir o de conducirse con cautela, de pronto había tenido la sensación de que tanto Ulises como sus amigos eran unos niños y ella podía dejarlos jugar o castigarlos a su antojo.

–Nunca nos imaginamos estar así, juntos al lado de nuestras esposas. Han pasado tantos años desde que éramos compañeros en la escolta –dijo Ulises, retórico, levantando el vaso de cerveza para brindar. Sólo ellos, los hombres, brindaron. Olivia dejó la silla sin dar ningún tipo de excusa y segundos más tarde volvió de la cocina con un vaso de agua en la mano. Cristina ignoró la cerveza que minutos antes pusiera Adolfo frente a ella en la mesita de centro. Nunca había sentido afición por la cerveza ya que le parecía una bebida amarga e inútil. Prefirió abrir su bolsa y extraer de allí la anforita de metal que en la mañana limpiara con un líquido pulidor y una franela.

–¿Es una bebida especial? –preguntó Adolfo, algo extrañado al descubrir el recipiente plateado en la mano de la mujer de Ulises. ¿Debería tomar ese gesto como un desprecio?

–Es ron; la cerveza me da sueño.

Adolfo se levantó y del trinchador de cristalería opaca cogió una botella de Bacardí nuevecita. Ulises observaba a Olivia, le parecía guapa y elegante, no como Cristina a quien la edad
comenzaba a estrujarle la piel. A pesar de su íntima observación no envidiaba a Adolfo. No quería envidiar nunca a nadie más y mucho menos a su mejor amigo.

—Si te gusta el ron, esta botella es tuya —Adolfo estaba orgulloso de poder complacer a su invitada y consideró una señal afortunada que la única botella que había comprado para esa tarde fuera precisamente ron.

—Cristina no bebe tanto —corrigió Ulises—, ahora lo hace porque está contenta.

—Olivia tampoco toma, sólo agua.

—Cuando era joven tomaba cerveza —comentó repentinamente Olivia. Incluso a Adolfo le pareció que se encontraba demasiado dispuesta a participar. Por un momento olvidó la escaramuza y el rostro de su mujer volvió a sugerirle el amor que había sentido por ella antes de conocerla.

—¿Cómo que cuando eras joven? Si eres una niña todavía, ¿qué diré yo que ando cuarenteando? —apuntó Cristina.

—No, ahora soy diferente. Mira, ésa era yo antes —dijo Olivia señalando con un dedo en dirección a su fotografía. Todos fijaron su mirada en el retrato. Daba la impresión de que también Dogo lo contemplaba con sus ojos lagañosos y sanguíneos. Entonces Ulises comenzó otra vez:

—¿Y cómo te va, Adolfo?, ¿sigues trabajando como veterinario?

—Sí, todo va bien. Estoy planeando poner un consultorio —mintió—. Aquí en la misma Unidad, donde me conocen bien y ya cuento con una clientela segura.

—No faltarán perros enfermos —bromeó Ulises.

—No faltarán.

—Si te hace falta un ayudante, yo te recomiendo a uno —intervino Cristina pensando en su hermano. ¿Si no en-tonces para qué servían las amistades?
–Yo te aviso, seguro que lo necesitaré, ¿qué estudios tiene? –preguntó Adolfo para hacerse el importante.

–Para qué voy a mentirte, se trata de mi hermano. El pobre no pudo estudiar porque tuvo que trabajar desde muy chico, pero es un buen hombre. La verdad es que no ha tenido mucha suerte.

–Eso es justo lo que estamos buscando, yo prefiero a uno sin estudios pero con ganas de trabajar y deseos de superarse. A ver si me lo presentas.

Olivia se levantó y caminó hacia la recámara. Estaba cansada. Cerró la puerta tras de sí y dejó que los murmullos se perdieran lejos de su cabeza. Sabía que a unos metros, en el departamento donde había pasado su juventud, sus padres estarían pensando en ella. De pronto tuvo ganas de llorar y ocultó su rostro en la almohada para que el suave gemido no llegara más allá de las paredes.
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