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The reclamation of national trauma and cultural memory in Spain through the translation of Uchronia by Marin, Vaquerizo, Negrete, And Eximeno

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Hardin, Anna Christine. "The reclamation of national trauma and cultural memory in Spain through the translation of Uchronia by Marin, Vaquerizo, Negrete, And Eximeno." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2015.
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THE RECLAMATION OF NATIONAL TRAUMA AND CULTURAL
MEMORY IN SPAIN THROUGH THE TRANSLATION OF UCHRONIA
BY MARIN, VAQUERIZO, NEGRETE, AND EXIMENO

by

Anna Christine Hardin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Comparative
Literature - Translation
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Visiting Associate Professor Aron Aji

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Anna Christine Hardin

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Comparative Literature - Translation at the May 2015 graduation.

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War, from 1936 until 1939, continues to inform not only the way Spaniards imagine themselves historically, but how they represent themselves contemporaneously, especially in creative works. The outcome of the war involved the installation of a fascist dictatorship led by Francisco Franco, one which extolled the virtues of Spanish tradition while violently suppressing resistant cultural voices. This suppression led to a lapse in cultural memory, one that compels Spanish authors to continue writing about this period and its aftermath.

In this translation, a selection of four Spanish authors (Rafael Marín, Eduardo Vaquerizo, Javier Negrete, and Santiago Eximeno) from the collection *Franco. An Alternative History* re-imagine the outcome of the war, utilizing the genre of alternative history. More particularly, these stories are examples of *uchronia*, which are concerned specifically with alternative timelines of the world in which we live. As the title suggests, this collection seeks to reclaim control over the reign of Franco, and to re-situate it in such a way that any lingering cultural trauma regarding the war might be explored and understood. While these authors are not survivors of the war themselves, the contemporary publication of these stories demonstrates the continued importance of this event in the Spanish cultural imagination.

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Critical Introduction:
The Infliction of Spanish Cultural Trauma, and Contemporary Creative Recovery

Writing, re-writing, or translating the experience of the Spanish Civil War and post-war requires a deep engagement with the historical context of the event itself. This introduction seeks to establish an understanding of this context, in order to better facilitate appreciation for the significance of cultural products representing the experience. Because the translation which follows is intended primarily to reclaim control over cultural memory of the war and the Franco dictatorship, readers will first be guided through an historical overview of the conflict.

Essential to this overview is the exploration of the violence and oppression applied to individual voice and experience. The collection of short stories translated in part here represents a multitude of voices, each of which represents a subjective view of this particular cultural trauma. The concept of trauma, and of cultural memory, will be explained in relation not only to scholarship and theory, but with regard to the representations of the war and post-war each author has chosen to undertake.

Reclaiming history by re-writing it, as the alternative history genre in which these stories have been written allows, will be of particular interest in examining each author's approach and intent in composing their work. Understanding these motivations, as will be demonstrated, is essential to creating a successful translation of them, whether it be through the diction, syntax, or style of the piece itself. Examples of such choices will be provided, so that the reader might become more intimate with the process of communicating an author's text across cultural boundaries.

Finally, the importance of this collection to contemporary Spanish literature will be explored. Particular emphasis will be given to these stories as they are set in dialogue with each other, and the unique opportunities this presents for readers to comprehend a cultural trauma to which they were likely not witness, through an array of voices and subjective re-imagination.

The extreme divisiveness of the Spanish Civil War left in its wake a profound gap in

cultural memory. Two competing ideologies, the Republican and the Nationalist, polarized the population, regardless of any nuances of political opinion (socialist, communist, liberal, democratic on the one hand; conservative, fascist, monarchist, clerical on the other). The ultimate installation of a fascist regime, spearheaded by *el Generalísimo* Francisco Franco, brought with it a culture of repression, whereby the victors gained control of creative expression.

The subsequent violence implemented by Franco and his followers extended not only into the realm of physical suffering, but into ideological and cultural pursuits as well. The published history of and commentary about the war during the Franco regime came forth not only highly propagandized, but also heavily censored until legislation enacted in the 1960s allowed greater freedom for authors to publish (Bautista 31, 95). Because of this, according to Spanish author Juan Goytisolo, the novel form adapted to play a role in recounting historical events similar to that of press in other countries (83). After all, “What Francoism discouraged was not popular and mass culture, but the exercise of independent critical thought necessary to the development of any form of cultural analysis” (Graham/Labanyi 3). In other words, cultural production continued in this period, but only insofar as the government considered it “safe”, i.e., non-incendiary and/or in support of the government. The *franquistas* assumed, and rightly so, that allowing unbridled production of popular culture would lead to an increase in popular power, and to potential rebellion. As a consequence, if they chose to continue to write in Spain, authors had essentially one option: to write in support of the regime, or at least write in such a way that the regime remained unoffended. But heavy censorship in the press during the dictatorship, and regulation of many other genres of published materials including history, science, and morality, had an unexpected outcome, as it produced alternative and cleverly concealed forms of political commentary.

The publication and distribution of stories, allegorical and otherwise, certainly allowed the expression of repressed experiences in the postwar era, but: “...a continuity of context is necessary

for the next generation to perform the acting out of previously concealed events...With the support of a silent majority such acts have been protected by a continued context of violence, not questioning or reflecting on or into the concealed” (Bar-On 156, 201). While Bar-On's work focuses on the collective silence inspired by the horrifying acts of the Nazi regime, the “conspiracy of silence” he describes in his work resonates with the silencing of cultural memory in Spain which resulted from prolonged wartime trauma. Without a vocal majority willing to express their experiences, survivors of the war remained in a common, unbroken silence within which personal willingness to relate one's trauma would likely be discouraged.

Regarding the cultural memory of Spain in particular, Helen Graham describes this silent community further as a “fellowship of blood,” wherein through a failure to prevent the tragedies of the war, or through direct participation in them, civilians found themselves subjected to profound physical and moral suffering (315). Having failed to protect their families, their communities, and their country from violent trauma, a pact of silence formed in order to ease a pervasive sense of guilt and culpability. As a consequence, subsequent generations did not inherit a complete recollection of the events of the war, but rather an imperfect facsimile which alleviated the weight of blame from those who participated in the violence of the conflict and maintained a coexistence, however strained, among survivors.

The intervention performed by the authors in this project – Rafael Marín, Eduardo Vaquerizo, Javier Negrete, and Santiago Eximeno – responds directly to this suppression of dissent, especially as related to creative expression. The collection from which these stories are drawn, *Franco. Una historia alternativa [Franco. An Alternative History]*, makes use of the subgenre uchronia in order to exercise control over the historical events of the Civil War. It is worth noting that this category is distinct from historical fiction, which seeks to preserve a historical moment unaltered as channeled through fictionalized characters. However, unlike other types of alternative history, which can involve highly fictionalized narrative worlds, uchronic narratives are

concerned specifically with alternative timelines of the world in which we live. In this case, the collaborators involved were tasked with presenting short fictional works which are not speculative purely for the sake of speculation, but which have particular stakes in reenacting the war with a critical eye towards the actions of Franco and his followers. The following translation is comprised of four of these stories, told from the perspectives of a variety of characters and time periods, which demonstrate a desire to exercise creative control over an event which was for so many decades inexpressible.

This preservation of cultural memory of the Spanish Civil War through creative alteration of history continues to be a fascinating project, and my own revision of the translation seemed to be a natural extension of that process. I found that during this process I was more concerned than usual with returning to the original pieces, ensuring that the alterations were justified and that the best interests of each text were being served. Although these stories at first seem more straightforward than other works of fiction produced about the war, I've found that applying the process of translation to alternative histories is uniquely challenging, not only because of concerns about historical accuracy, but also because the contribution of each author's voice must be so carefully evaluated before its rendering in English.

Here, as in so many fictional works with this war as centerpiece, a greater emphasis on the personal undermines greater ideological power struggles, thus encouraging the individual production of memory to replace the politically tainted 'official history' of the Civil War. But this memory can also become tainted in its own way, as Republicans sympathizers react to the silence to which they had been subjected for so many years. As Helen Graham writes, "The defeated cast no reflection. No public space was theirs. Above all, their dead could not be publicly mourned. This necessarily produced a devastating schism between public and private memory in post-civil war Spain" ("Return of Republican Memory" 321). Because of the inability to express publicly the loss and devastation they suffered directly after the fact, Republican sentiment necessarily became

warped and politicized in order to serve as a denouncement of its repressors. These works counteract this politicization, emphasizing instead the “personal memory” Graham alludes to as a more productive means to resolve any inner turmoil remaining in the minds of all those who suffered or inherited the memory of suffering endured during the turbulent times of the war and postwar.

Even in the last decades before Franco's death, the security the regime felt in its cultural dominance allowed for a new wave of cultural production, largely unhindered in comparison with the persecution authors faced in the early days of the regime. Although the work of Idelber Avelar concerns Latin American countries in the wake of their own dictatorships, his acknowledgement of a “generalized return to 'common sense' and 'realism', understood as the accommodation to the limits of the possible” certainly held true in Spain during this tumultuous period as well (Avelar 105). Following the dismantling of the regime in the latter half of the twentieth century, therefore, many authors – not only the high-profile speculative writers in this project - have chosen to treat with this significant national event in their works of fiction.

While single instances recollecting the war cannot speak alone to issues of cultural or historical memory, collectively they help to comprise a greater cultural dialogue attempting to establish an acceptable representation of transpired events. Each published work contributes to the greater cultural discourse, and helps shape the ways in which the victims of trauma recall and express it, especially after the true facts of the situation have been obscured (Bar-On 158,166-67). In other words, while the recollection of the individual proves impermanent, and therefore impossible to rely upon, its contribution to a collective body of experience provides a means, however imperfect, of recollecting past events over time, even for future generations who may not have borne witness to the events in question. A reliance on “feeling-facts” (Bar-On 197) distinguishes literature which emerges from times of trauma; although not necessarily based in reality, this general sense of events that victims of trauma carry with them nonetheless speaks

more accurately to ideological disparities than any “official history” would.

Graham also describes an “...apparent tension between the need to remember, to achieve collective reparation — for reasons of living justly — and, on the other hand, the need to move on as a society, not to live shackled to the past” (“Return of Republican Memory” 324), a tension that has proved difficult to resolve, even under the strongly reactionary democracy which emerged in Spain after the dictatorship. Even in the last decades before Franco's death, the security the regime felt in its cultural dominance allowed for a new wave of cultural production, largely unhindered in comparison with the persecution authors faced in the early days of the regime. Although the work of Idelber Avelar concerns Latin American countries in the wake of their own dictatorships, his acknowledgement of a “generalized return to 'common sense' and 'realism', understood as the accommodation to the limits of the possible” certainly held true in Spain during this tumultuous period as well (Avelar 105). Following the dismantling of the regime in the latter half of the twentieth century, therefore, many authors – not only the high-profile speculative writers shown in this project - have chosen to treat with this significant national event in their works of fiction.

The first story in this translation, for example, is Rafael Marín's “Baraka”. Marín has chosen to not only discuss the regime in his work, but to inhabit Franco himself as a character. Entering the psychology of Franco would seem to detract from the purpose of assuaging the cultural trauma of the war, but in fact, it allows the author to explore and exploit his psychology. The Franco in the story is weak, frightened, and faces indecision. Rather than depict the height of his power or the strength of his authority, the story takes place in a moment of supreme vulnerability. This sense of unease is foregrounded in the text, as it drives the first paragraphs of the story (“The general is nervous. It’s not natural for him, as he has always been a cold man. His control has brought him where he is, and could raise him yet higher. But he fears moving ahead, being mistaken”). Preserving this uncertainty for as long as possible seemed crucial in relating

Marín's vision of Franco, and to exercising control over his character through language.

It is in this state that Franco is confronted by a future version of himself, one who fails to bring the regime to power, and by extension his own mortality. By opening the possibility of his failure – not in one timeline, but in many – Franco is shown as fallible. There are histories, we are told, where Franco never realizes his authoritarian aspirations: the “specter” of one of these Francos does, in fact, appear, to guide his past self to power. Although the restoration of Franco's confidence and his implied installation as dictator is not the outcome a Spanish reader might choose, putting the character of Franco in such a tenuous predicament is nonetheless empowering. By suggesting that Franco was not, in fact, autonomous, Marín engages Spanish historical memory in order to gain control over this figure, and disestablish the ethos he was able to maintain for so long. It is for this reason that the story appears first in this collection of translations – to replicate this effect for readers of the English, and establish the groundwork for the historical memory upon which all four stories are based.

This idea of historical memory emerges as a pertinent theme not only in “Baraka”, throughout the collection. Carolyn Boyd provides this definition of the term: “Historical memory is a form of social memory in which a group constructs a selective representation of its own imagined past” (Boyd 134). One representation of this imperfect recollection takes the form of published works, including printed news media, textbooks, and, most relevant to the discussion at hand, literature. Susan Sontag's “Regarding the Pain of Others” expands on the problematic nature of these secondhand representations:

All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened... Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.” (86)

Though fictional, all four texts discussed here provide the lens suggested by Sontag through which contemporary readers and pursuers of history view the events of the war. Because Sontag's work concerns images, and photographs in particular, it may seem incongruous to apply her theory to the fictional texts at issue here. But in fact, the role of photographs as representative cultural texts, with specific importance placed on the figures and events depicted therein via the photographer's intentionality, is not so different from an author of fiction combining a selection of representative events in order to construct a narrative. Underscoring the surface-level trajectory of the plot, similar to the underlying signification of the visual elements in a photograph, thematic elements such as destiny, spirituality, and physical violence, among others, pervade these stories, mirroring the deep moral and physical conflicts of a civil war. By writing works based in history which are so clearly fictionalized, this effect is enhanced, and highlights the efficacy of such practices in re-inhabiting a space of cultural memory, however fictionalized. Such works help to establish a framework in which these internal conflicts might be put to rest, and memories readily recalled without any lingering social anxiety or tension.

This is not to say, however, that interventions on behalf of the text by the translator never become necessary. Returning to Marín's piece, a story written well before the publication of the collection, the original Spanish shows some vestiges of a writer in his early years. Two dilemmas became apparent in the translation process. First, a noticeable shift in verb tenses from past to present, sometimes from paragraph to paragraph. As a reader of the Spanish, I am open to the idea that the author intended to present a warped flow of time, congruous with the idea of cross-temporal communication with past and future versions of one's self. However, with the consciousness of this piece in English as a translation, the inconsistency becomes a distraction to the more critical moments of the story (i.e., the fictional invasion of Franco's psyche). The decision to violate the author's voice in such a way was not an easy one, but by bringing the entire story into the present, readers should be able to more easily inhabit this isolated moment in

Franco's history. Encouraging this reading more clearly supports the original goal of the piece.

The second problem, less easily resolved, was the arbitrary injection of ornate prose to describe easily rendered images. An example, describing the specter of the failed Franco: "His reflection shimmers like mist, like the mane of an African lion who sates his thirst with the waters of a calm oasis." This excerpt demonstrates the author's tendency towards unnecessary metaphor, often using two needlessly evocative descriptive phrases in sequence. An early draft of this translation eliminated such sequences, favoring the more compact description and eliminating the other. Upon reviewing the text, however, this intrusion seemed heavy-handed. Although it doesn't suit my own sensibilities about legible prose, it would be wrong in such a project to stifle the author's language altogether. Unlike the tense changes mentioned in the previous paragraph, where the author's language simply changed form, this alteration involved a sort of editing and censorship that seemed contradictory to the goal of the translation.

A third challenge faced in the translation not only of "Baraka", but of all four stories, is that these instances of cultural memory recur in different cultural moments than the original event, and are changed and shaped by them, until "...even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu" (Halbwachs 49). I do not intend, therefore, to ascribe to any one of the short stories to follow a singular importance in the reformation of Spanish historical memory, but rather to read within them those narrative elements which make the trauma of the Civil War discussable. Narratives such as these, which depict such personal encounters with the war and dictatorship, can help us to understand the political climate which led to the traumatic ideological opposition which proved so devastating to historical memory in Spain, rendering individual accounts of history once again comprehensible.

Significant to this reclamation of historical memory of the Civil War is the re-enactment of trauma by survivors and their progeny influences the manner in which readers approach postwar texts. Adopting Caruth's definition of trauma as an all-engulfing, inescapable force

which, existing outside of the time and space we ordinarily experience, can not be subjected to the order of standard categorizations of memory (9, 158), it becomes clear that the unreliability of historical memory in Spain owes itself not only to censorship and the threat of violence by the Franco regime. The fragmented memory which arises from trauma suffered in the past makes reconstruction of the traumatic events difficult, if not impossible, even in the case of voluntary reiteration of wartime trauma. In the immediate aftermath of the war, for survivors, surrounded by others who had lived through the same events, any discussion of the war became not only undesirable, but unnecessary – the solidarity of shared experience in regards to the events of the war did not require spoken communication. A sense of complicity combined with a mutual understanding produced an aversion to cultural dialogue about the conflict, and an effective social silence on the subject.

This silence helped to instigate a cyclical absence of discourse about the war, and created a social environment in which each individual was left to repeatedly find themselves overcome by the trauma they experienced alone, and without a social outlet. Regardless of the wide extent to which the Civil War impacted Spanish citizens, “...traumatic conditions are not like the other troubles to which flesh is heir. They move to the center of one's being and, in doing so, give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special” (Caruth 186). This helplessness and victimization of survivors created a vulnerability in that those who experienced it suffered a loss of control over their own mental faculties. The isolating effect of this manner of thinking impeded the process of collective discussion and healing, and suspended a pursuit of accurate memory for decades. This vulnerable mental state allowed propagators of trauma from both sides to maintain their control over trauma victims, and to impose their universalized ideologies on a populace which might have otherwise existed as a diverse community capable of unique, cathartic expressions of trauma.

This confusion of shame and complicity is evident in the final selection from this work,

Santiago Eximeno's "Path to Heaven". The narrator of this story is confronted with an alternate future of genocidal internment camps in which the crematoriums of World War II are re-instantiated. In this version of history, Nazi Germany has reclaimed its autonomy, and now exercises political control over most of Europe, including Spain. Rather than expressing abject horror at the scene he encounters there, however, Fernando Aguilar instead displays a more realistic mindset from such a narrative world: the indoctrination he has undergone has left him with deep prejudices against demographics considered undesirable by the Reich. As revealed in the narration:

Ultimately, I lacked ideals... We had been trained since we were children, and now nothing could change our feelings about the rest of the world. Nothing could help me to believe that the Jews were human beings like us. They weren't. But perhaps they could be in my daughter's eyes.

Aguilar demonstrates these prejudiced patterns of thought throughout the text, resenting his own profiling based on his complexion and the suggestion that he might want a "gypsy" as a consort during his stay at the camp. Though he is put in the role of martyr and hero, tasked with assassinating the fascist leaders of Spain and Germany, like the scientist who serves as protagonist in Eduardo Vaquerizo's piece, he claims no romantic ideological aspirations. He is willing to die only to protect his family, and to do his part to ensure a more tolerant future for his young daughter.

This sentiment appears in the text as follows: "Everything that would happen from then on [i.e., the assassination] had nothing to do with my political ideas, or presumed revolutions, or the Truth, like that, in capital letters. No, everything that would happen was done for them." This line stands clear of the others in my memory of translating this piece, because it resonates so strongly with the ideas of victimhood and complicity so often explored in scholarship of the war. My revisions of this piece, then, were concerned with de-romanticizing the narrator's voice as

much as possible. The goal of this piece, as understood through the representation of this protagonist, is not to stir up nostalgia for a revolutionary past, or to inspire political engagement and violent upheaval. Here we see an example of personal motivations which are concerned with self-honesty, rather than entrenchment in sentimentality.

By his own admission, Aguilar harbors deep prejudices which are embedded so firmly in his psychology that they can never be overcome; he resents being profiled himself, but does not hesitate to engage with racially charged language and intolerant patterns of thought in response to this behavior by others. And yet, his character remains sympathetic. Rather than attempting to erase this character's flaws, the author prefers to establish him as a complex individual – one who has not been entirely formed by ideological conflict, but who rather struggles to come to terms with it in relation to his personal existence. The argument could be made that this lens of honesty is used to convey not only Aguilar's hopes for his daughter, but also Eximeno's hopes for future Spaniards – that they are able to resolve the trauma of the war, and value instead rich diversity and tolerance. As Helen Graham describes, there has been in Spain an “...apparent tension between the need to remember, to achieve collective reparation — for reasons of living justly — and, on the other hand, the need to move on as a society, not to live shackled to the past” (“Return of Republican Memory” 324), a tension that has proved difficult to resolve, even under the strongly reactionary democracy which emerged in Spain after the dictatorship. Eximeno's suggestion, through the self-reflective Aguilar, seems to be that the resolution for this tension lies in the acknowledgment of an unpleasant past, in order to prevent similar incidents of national trauma in the future.

Another issue of particular importance in these fictional examinations of authoritarian oppression involves the role of the clergy. The separation of religious dogma from state affairs became implicit in the struggle over national control and the rights of the individual during the Civil War. This secular liberal ideal left the Catholic Church inclined to align itself with the more

conservative Nationalists, allied under Franco, a staunch, lifelong Catholic who viewed the military uprising he engendered as a type of Crusade (Brassloff 6). The conflation of Catholicism with the oppressive, invasive policies of the conservative faction created a crisis of identity for the strongly Catholic Spanish nation, or at least for those Spanish Catholics with Republican sympathies. Frequently concerned historically with maintaining a power dynamic with Spain's governing bodies (Brassloff 3), the Church had, at this moment in history, completed its degeneration into an entity heavily invested in the conservative political realm, and, moreover, had become complicit in the morally objectionable actions of the franquistas. The increasing preoccupation of the Church with political affairs created a new subtext for the ideological conflict at the heart of the war. More than just a struggle of liberal and conservative values, the Catholic-Nationalist alliance created an equal and opposite secular-liberal identity. Republican ideology and literature produced a reactionary response to the Nationalist-Catholic alliance, portraying the Catholic clergy as spiders, insects, and mythical creatures, relegating Catholicism and its practitioners to the realm of myth and superstition, and that which impeded social progress (Santabria 79).

Such a representation can be found in the portrayal of the protagonist's clergyman instructor, Padre Vivar, in Javier Negrete's "The Red Angel". In this narrative world, the powers allying with Franco are placed in a morally unambiguous framework: the struggle of good versus evil in superhero comics. The aforementioned Padre Vivar, for example, transforms into a giant metallic mind-reading scorpion, from whom the main characters are saved by an American superhero, representing the power of democracy in its most idealized form as a means. Franco himself is rendered as a supremely evil supervillain, seeming never to age despite his advanced years, and though he never appears in the story in person, the Red Angel departs the final scene with the intention of defeating him once and for all.

Considering the historical context, a reading of these characters as ideological symbols

follows quite naturally. During the Civil War, the secular became, for the Republicans at least, a new source of morality, standing in stark opposition to Catholic doctrine. This definitive opposition between secular and religious ideologies led to terrible acts of violence enacted not only by the conservative faction, but by Republican sympathizers as well, particularly against members of the clergy. Many churches and monasteries of Catholic affiliation became collateral damage in the face of liberal forces. Nonetheless, this story is evidence that these diametrically opposed ideas of morality have persisted in the national imagination, and there is still a need to resolve them through creative expression.

It is true that Negrete's is a looser interpretation than the others in the collection, relying more heavily on character experience than historically plausible scene-building to gradually reveal the nature of the narrative environment. However, the voice of a child in Negrete's piece hardly came more easily than that of Vaquerizo's scientist, or Marín's military leader in crisis. This is not to say that Negrete has been negligent – the range of creativity the author demonstrates seizes a culturally painful subject and puts it to his own devices. Though it stretches the definition of uchronia to its utmost, Negrete re-situates the entire history of the regime, and erases any ambiguity on the subject of franquista morality through the dichotomous idea of 'good' and 'evil' which seem so natural to the child protagonist.

Establishing this character – like the three other author's protagonists, through voice – became immediately important to crafting a comprehensive version of this narrative in English. As it is told in the first person, word choice and syntax took on the utmost importance. An example of a less than successful first attempt to replicate this voice in English follows: “I came back to writing in this diary to practice being a scriptwriter, because Andrés told me if I want to make comics it would be better for me to write them and find someone else to draw them.” A tricky sentence in the Spanish, simply conveying it in a legible form was challenging. The edit I ultimately decided upon: “I started writing in this diary again to practice scriptwriting, because

Andrés said if I wanted to make comics I should write them and have somebody else draw them.” Grammatically, the beginning of the sentence has been simplified to something closer to a child's natural, confidential speech in a written exercise, while the specialized term “scriptwriting” has been preserved to reflect the protagonist's extensive knowledge of the subject matter. At the end of the sentence, the childlike formulation of “should” + conjugated present tense verb and replacing “someone” with “somebody” makes it easier to imagine this statement coming from the mouth of a young boy. It's still not an entirely smooth sentence, but it doesn't have to be – this is a young man at the start of his writing career, and as long as the writing is clear, it's important to preserve that sense for the character to remain believable.

Keeping the protagonist's language concise was another struggle. I tend to prefer longer, complex sentences, which Spanish support quite naturally – but in English, these sentences have a very different feel. For example, this line: “I did the same, even though I knew I couldn't stop the first punch.” Recalling a moment of violent trauma, especially shortly afterward in a private diary, a child probably wouldn't use quite such careful sentence structure (at least, not in English). Instead, I've now written: “I put mine up too, even though I knew I couldn't stop him.” Because fists are already the focal point of this narrative moment, no reference to the “first hit” is really necessary at the end of the line once “I put mine up too” doubles the presence of fists at the beginning. The sentence has been pared down so that this version reads faster, and allows the anticipation of that first hit to be resolved more quickly and satisfactorily.

An example of childlike diction is the Rat's, a school bully's, declaration of the protagonist's best friend Andrés as a “sissy”. I chose this term for the Spanish *nenaza*, though it's actually a noun rather than an adjective, because I believed setting this story firmly in the early 90s was important. Recalling the films and TV shows of my childhood, I remembered this term quite distinctly. Alternatives such as “little girl”, although more literal, simply weren't evocative enough. Establishing the setting firmly through language mirrors, in this translator's opinion,

Negrete's process of resituating Franco and his regime, and grounds an otherwise fantastical narrative concept in an intentionally alternate timeline.

As a social comic depicting a childhood in conflict, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* was particularly useful in editing the Negrete piece. The protagonist, Marji, has a similar attitude towards the world – sheltered and precocious, she seeks to understand by reading, and finds that in moments of conflict her preparation does not lead to comprehension. For this reason, I took moments such as “Sports don't agree with me” as a model, in order to demonstrate this parroting of external adult knowledge, and altered other sentences to match. “The school playground inoculates you against heroism” is another moment demonstrating this register of language, because although the choice of vocabulary is not that of a child, it's balanced in the surrounding lines by simple, childlike phrases such as “I guess” and “beat up on”. This keeps the protagonist as precocious, rather than a savant or prodigy. By manipulating this phrase about heroism, my translation is only clarifying his specialized knowledge of heroes and villains in comics, rather than suggesting he has somehow obtained a level of genius beyond his years.

Once I determined the effect I wanted that line to have, I found that the line surrounding it no longer worked as intended. I made the following change: “But my mom, I guess to keep me from picking on the Dwarf [the protagonist's younger brother], taught me that you should never beat up on people smaller than you. She says it's an injustice that cries out to heaven.” Here, the elements which were working before have been amplified by the surrounding grammar, specifically the use of the gerund (“getting bullied”) and the suggestive “should” as in the first example from this piece. This works in tandem with the final platitude, another moment of adult knowledge regurgitation, to complete a sense of childlike reflection on interpersonal power dynamics. These moments outside the action of the story, I've found in revision, are more important than I had realized for establishing the character of the protagonist.

Another helpful reference was Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. I chose this graphic novel not

only for its young protagonist, but for its poignant tragicomedy. Studying it, I found that this sense stemmed primarily from the author's attention to details of personal narrative. Mastering the voice of a young person in an oppressive environment has been, I think, a persistent barrier to my accurate portrayal of Negrete's piece in English. Bechdel's text is rich, but not overwrought – her reflection is the picture of concision. She says what is needed to give a sense of her character, and from this I remembered to think past the immediacy of the story's anecdotes and conceptualize the piece as a whole. It was a positive experience to realize I was not responsible for depicting a crystal-clear picture of every aspect of this character at all times, because a child with that sort of self-awareness would read as uncanny, but rather to create a controlled narrative environment which would do so subtly and naturally.

The constructed idea of a united Spain, as seen in the enduring regime of Negrete's supervillainous Franco and the resulting social milieu of the young protagonist, served the purpose of enforcing political stability, and obliterated the possibility for individual recollection by encouraging a monocultural viewpoint. In postnational Spain, however, following the definition of this term presented by Brad Epps, a more subtle expression of violence took place than in the terror-filled years of the war: the violence of a silent forgetting, ultimately necessary in order to negate the physical and emotional violence suffered during wartime (“Before Postnationalism” 134). The construction of Franco's Spain in the wake of the war involved a vehement insistence on national unity and the natural superiority of the Spanish state, a unity rooted in the Catholic faith as a “crucible of nationality” (Richards 18). This necessarily produced an “othered”, anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic identity for the Republican faction, highlighted by the anti-clerical violence which marked the period. The war proved a unifying “ideological tool” with which “the 'foreign virus' of liberalism” might be eliminated (21, 47). The abstract pursuit of an intangible Progress, whose pursuit benefitted future generations more than it bettered the present, could not hold up to the real and immediate “improvements” the nationalists, imposed

through the repeal of the reforms enacted by the Second Republic's Constitution for the purpose of returning to a glorified, traditional Spain.

Resistance to this repression can be found in the scientific work of Eduardo Vaquerizo's Jaime, the protagonist of "Cruel Light". Vaquerizo takes a more familiar approach to the genre than the other three authors discussed here, with weightier diction and attention to historical detail which lend considerable verisimilitude to the narrative. Vaquerizo's historical accuracy ensures that the objective truths of events, such as they are able to be known, are all arrayed before any alterations are made. This gives the author a great deal of control over the work, which is crucial to the performance of preserving cultural memory. The particular role of Jaime as a scientist supports this objectivity. Although it is stated repeatedly that this protagonist has no real investment in politics, his status as an intellectual passively allies him with the progressive movement. His martyrdom at the end of the story, then, appears all the more cruel: as his traitorous assistant states, in any other social environment, this man would have risen to intellectual stardom. Instead, because his intellectual interests have the potential to be weaponized and politicized, he becomes the unwitting victim of ideological power struggles.

Because the level of neutral detail and explication is relatively high in this piece, and therefore relatively simple to translate, my concern with Vaquerizo's piece was the development of character. Jaime is a strange combination of scientist and accidental revolutionary, and reconciling those aspects of his personality was a real challenge. The passage which is perhaps most important to establishing this character reads as follows:

A man of science, he had always believed himself incapable of any sort of passion, aside from the mania of those who have taken up with a flag or a woman. He had believed himself to be far from the maelstrom of instinct, lacking in reason – that is, free from beliefs, or irrational hopes. He laid with equations, conversed with the periodic table, and when he saw the sky on summer nights he saw not stars, but

distant nuclear furnaces.

The syntax of Vaquerizo's writing is extremely careful, and reads more formally than other writers in the collection. The gravitas this lends the piece was important to preserve in translation. I found myself taking more liberties with the sentence structure of this piece than any of the others: dividing long sentences which became unwieldy, inserting punctuation other than the original, etc. In this case, intervening deeply in the text became necessary to preserve Vaquerizo's solemnity, and therefore his voice.

I found that it was possible to carry the weightiness of the text too far, however. Given that Jaime is, in fact, capable of passion, as seen in the previous excerpt, the emotional distance I attempted to create in initial drafts of this translation became a concern as the story developed. An example, from the first page of the story, of the passive voice used to create this distancing effect: "The other man, who until now had remained seated, got to his feet." In this case, using passive constructions ("had remained seated", "got to his feet") simply delay the action of the moment, rather than revealing anything about Jaime's character. My revision, as it stands in this draft, is "The other man, who was seated, stood up." This change better conveys the emotional charge of the situation by allowing the protagonist's actions to be read more quickly before moving on to his physical description. This is appropriate to Jaime's role in this scene, as an impassioned advocate rather than a contemplative intellectual. It was with this type of revision that I came to realize Vaquerizo's carefulness was to be translated not as serious and stale, but rather paced according to the understated passion of its protagonist. The author is attempting to represent the individual voice of a civilian caught up in the conflict through his writing style, rather than imposing a dour sensibility about the matter as a whole.

The second struggle I faced in editing this piece was the dialogue between Jaime and Einstein. An obvious example: "No. The truth is, no. The prorogation is notable. I am not well

versed in the historical rationale. What I do know is that I concern myself with few things that are not scientific.” Here, my intention was to make Jaime sound as though he were trying to impress his idol, but the result is stiff and difficult to read. The difficulty here was in representing Vaquerizo's diction, which is just as careful as his syntax. The author uses, appropriately, the language of an intellectual for his protagonist – but is never posturing, which would be out of character for a nonsense man such as Jaime. My proposed solution: “No. Truthfully, no. It's obvious we're behind. I'm afraid I don't know much about the historical reasons. What I do know is that I generally don't concern myself with things that are unscientific.” As it transpires, the content of Jaime's words are enough to give a sense of his self-projection towards Einstein, without overburdening the choice of words themselves. He is trying to approach him in a way that makes it clear he is a fellow scientist, and that's enough for this character-building moment to carry. With a bit of syntactic reorganization, this is a much more manageable and revealing exchange of dialogue.

Another example of an edit reinforcing the cohesion of the piece is my change to the following line: “From a pocket he took a small rosary with red beads, most certainly made of coral.” This sentence is certainly descriptive, but it also has the potential to clarify the narrative voice. I've made the following change: “He took a rosary of small red beads, surely coral, from his pocket.” This arrangement calls less attention to the explicatory clause about coral than placing it at the end, replacing it with a more neutral phrase. Condensing the direct Spanish translation was done for much the same purpose. Finally, front loading the rosary with its red beads has the added effect of creating a stronger visual for the reader, foreshadowing the significance of this object for the story on a symbolic level. That Jaime is permitted to keep his faith, in however diluted a form, rather than being forced into the archetype of secular intellectual revolutionary, exposes the complexity of victimhood and culpability surrounding the war. Once again, individual experience is foregrounded as the most important aspect of national recovery.

But the return of individual and cultural memory that characters such as Jaime represent could not come about without some form of social tension. Holding the franquistas accountable for Republican suffering required recalling the circumstances under which that suffering took place, a feat further complicated by the amnesty demanded by top regime officials in exchange for the smooth implementation of democracy. Although political stability may have been achieved through this arrangement, it had the disadvantage of encouraging the continued division between liberal, secular values and those of the conservative right by allowing a lack of reconciliation for past trauma to persist in Spanish society. The binary ideological opposition between the secular and the religious, seen here in Jaime's surprising commitment to Catholicism (manifested through the symbolic rosary), which was maintained via this vacuum of historical recollection and ideological tension facilitated itself even in the Spanish constitution that arose from the Transition period in 1978, wherein "...el principio de laicidad supone la prohibición para el Estado español de convertirse en protector de dogmas, creencias o convicciones religiosas..." [The principle of secularism supposes the prohibition of the Spanish state from becoming a protector of religious dogmas, beliefs or convictions...] (Mazarío 47). More than a mere separation of church and state, the democratic Constitution dichotomizes without scruple the secular and religious elements of Spanish society, regardless of nuances of political opinion (such as that minority of the clergy which upheld Republican values).

Cultural products emerging from this period of confused recollection, such as the four stories discussed here, are necessarily marked by this uncertain victimhood:

...creation of a narrative out of survivor's fragmentary memories and out of their children's condensed images requires the slow dissection of affect that typically engenders defense. Survivors and their children typically defend against the empty circle with myth making and screen memories... (Auerhahn/Laub 375)

The production of a mythology of victimhood and sacrifice pervades both Republican and

Nationalist discourse in their recollections of the war, and the point at which this politicized mythology and historical fact intersect became relentlessly pursued after the memory boom, in an attempt to trace the origin of the misrepresentation of the war (Myth and History 121).

Although ultimately a fruitless endeavor, the prevalence and vigor of this obsession indicates an acknowledgement of a distortion of facts and historical accuracy, and a stronger underlying desire to correct this distortion in order to enact some sort of justice for victims of the conflict and their families.

These two factors, the repurposing of historical fact for the promotion of a political system combined with a preference for promoting the reclamation of memory, tell much about the reconstruction of Spanish cultural identity post-Franco. They create a sort of paradox, in which they utilize one system of identification to eradicate another, and “Esta paradoja puede ser explicada por el modo en que Frederic Jameson resume sucintamente el modelo de producción de la posmodernidad: 'a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system'" [This paradox can be explained in the manner in which Frederic Jameson succinctly summarizes the model of production of postmodernity: 'a system that constitutively produces difference remains a system'"] (Quiñones 39).

Despite rejecting the monoculture imposed by the franquistas, the new secular state nonetheless became complicit in constructing new systems of identification; while allowing the freedom for Spanish citizens to practice personal beliefs, whether secular or religious, these beliefs became relegated to the sphere of private practice, and remained in dichotomous opposition. The damage to collective memory caused by abuse of victim or martyr status in order to accomplish political goals occurred on both sides of the conflict. Although the newly secular Spanish state in the wake of the dictatorship did not turn to violence and oppression to accomplish their means, citing the memory of the war as a justification for the continuation of binary ideological systems abused political power just as readily as the oppressive monoculture

imposed by the Franco regime.

In order to combat this politicization of history, these stories by Marín, Vaquerizo, Negrete, and Eximeno facilitate a discourse which allows for the expression of personal trauma suffered in the war and postwar as a result of the two dichotomous ideologies. The societal pluralism which has emerged in Spain following the dictatorship stands as testament to the societal lessons learned from the Civil War. Furthermore, this embrasure of diversity differentiates Spain's modernization from that of other European powers, in that rather than forcing an entire populace into a single contrived national identity, Spaniards became acknowledged as individualized components of a greater democratic state, as contemporary subjects “fracturado, plural y en un constante proceso de consciente autodefinción” [fractured, pluralized and in a constant process of conscious self-definition] (Quiñones 74). These narratives serve as cautionary tales, which would see political dualism and deterministic identities disestablished once and for all in favor of the perpetuation of personal historical recollection.

Because most of the changes imposed in translation were aesthetic embellishments, to make the pieces less literal and more literary, I was often conflicted about whether they would interfere with the integrity of the author's imagined recollection. Again, although these pieces are largely fictional, I felt noticeably more anxiety about alterations than I normally would. However, this project has helped me to gain some perspective on the changes I was intuitively compelled to make, and to ensure each piece accurately represented the voice of its author. This is essential to the success of this project, because no one story can retell the Spanish Civil War or the reign of Franco. It is only by setting these pieces in dialogue with each other that they become meaningful for cultural memory. By permitting so many different modes of alteration and rewriting, translation included, importance is shifted from historical accuracy to personal recollection and experience, which is precisely what was lacking in the years of the dictatorship. Though readers of the English may be too far removed from their own civil wars to be able to

empathize fully with the protagonists, it is my hope that approaching this internal conflict with the assistance of a variety of historical perspectives will provide valuable insight into this period in Spanish history.

Baraka
Rafael Marín

Written more than twenty years ago, this short and powerful story marked the first appearance of Francisco Franco in a work published in a science fiction magazine, although his likeness had previously appeared in “alternative history” novels. This is one of the early demonstrations of the talent of Cadiz native Rafael Marín (1959), who would later open contemporary science fiction in Spain with *Lgrimas de luz* [“Tears of Light”] (translated into French and Polish) and has today become one of the masters of the genre, with a dozen books behind him. He has just published a uchronic novel with this editor, *Elemental, querido Chaplin* [Elementary, Dear Chaplin], and the superhero novel *Mundo de dioses* [Godworld] could also be included in this genre.

The general looked in the mirror. The reflection still seemed strange. The missing mustache, shaved yesterday, has left his face thicker, swollen his lip and paralyzed his expression. He can't even remember how many years the mustache, sacrificed for the cause, has been with him. Spy things. Maybe Carmen understands.

The general is nervous. It's not natural for him, as he has always been a cold man. His control has brought him where he is, and could raise him yet higher. But he fears moving ahead, being mistaken.

The general looks at the almanac to his right. Today is Friday, July seventeenth. It's hot. Margarita Xirgú puts a sheet over the red and black numbers, smiling. The general doesn't like that smile. Too frivolous for his liking, it seems to incite sin. There isn't time to lose on indiscretions when so much is at stake.

On the nightstand, mute and impersonal, lies the telephone. The general is waiting for it to sound, one moment to the next. The asepsis of this Hotel Madrid disturbs him, although its

name sounds portentous. Madrid, where he never wanted to be, which by the grace of God he will enter again shortly.

The general turns around and for a second his heart leaps to his mouth, his eyes cloud. His hand flies to his belt, and he curses having left his regulation pistol on the bed. The phone rings at just this instant, an added shock, a counterpoint.

The general, paralyzed, observes the image in front of him, the unmistakable profile, the halfnaked body of an old man who could almost be his grandfather. The telephone continues to ring, like a drum beginning the charge, like the detonation of a rifle in the middle of the desert. The general falls back against the sink, trying to hold onto his razor, but it slips through his trembling fingers. He reaches backwards at the same time as the apparently-old man reaches his arm forward, groping, blinded and mute. The phone rattles on its fork, making its call, its insistence, hostile.

The old man turns, with the slow movements of a ghost, leaving a hazy image in the air that marks the progress of his own gesture. His reflection shimmers like mist, like the mane of an African lion who sates his thirst with the waters of a calm oasis.

“Are you never going to answer?”

The general hears the voice, sunken in the larynx, issuing from the perforated caverns in the back of the esophagus. Although the apparition continues to put his hair on edge, he notices something in the image (the pain, perhaps, the same passage of time marked in the iron furrows in the aged skin, the defenselessness of this ancient body, nearly dead) that calms him. There is something soothing in the silvery movements the ghost is forming in the air, like a Maghrebi dance, like a silken veil in appearance. The general, moreover, has heard that voice before, in tape-recorded conversations, in short radio speeches, even in front of a film camera, there in the Rif. It has aged, is weaker, lost between vocal cords that are already no more than rags, but without a doubt the same voice that he hears replicated in his own throat, with a command that only he is

capable of achieving, that temperance that has been constructed since he first set foot in the Academy.

“It should be Yagüe. There’s still time.”

The response is succinct, as it has been the general’s entire life. A simple phrase, without embellishments. A short and accurate reply. Still somewhat startled by what he was seeing in front of him, the general’s reaction again demonstrates nerves of pure steel. Not everyone can strike up a conversation with, evidently, their own ghost and talk not about the person, but their sanity.

The reply, however, provokes a swell in the silvery image that now seems to float before the general, a couple of hands-breadth from the floor, weightless like a parody of a fetus.

“No,” says the apparition, shaking with cold or anxiety. “Time will not wait for you. Nor for me. You must decide, Paco. Now.”

The general doesn’t blink, or sigh. He knows what the specter is talking about.

“There are so many lives at stake,” he answers, giving voice to the concerns that have eaten away at his mind since he had still only half-decided to take this step. He turns back towards the mirror, and is unsurprised to find the image no longer reflected there. How had he done it? Even in his superstitious land it was known that glass didn’t bring back ghosts. “The future of the patria,” he goes on, talking almost doubly, talking perhaps for himself, maybe only for his invoked specter. “How could you want that to be decided in a second? Inciting a civil war. Spilling the blood of thousands of my countrymen...”

“Listen to me, Paco,” interrupts the hallucination, opening its arms, like an emaciated Christ recently taken from the cross. “Nothing you’ve told me seems strange. I know what you’re thinking. How could I not know? I am you. I’ve come from the future to warn you.”

“To warn me to answer the telephone?”

The question had been involuntary, the obligatory path, Galician irony. Now the general

knows what this presence is that confuses and intoxicates him, the origin of the ghost that floats like a shirt stretched out in the shade of a palm tree.

“To warn you that history escapes you,” the specter replied, humorlessly, as if he knew what the answer would be, anticipating the general's denial, his own terror. “I'm dying, Paco. You are dying with me. This body you see is lying in a bed, within thirty-nine of your years, in agony.” The general swallows. He's never feared death. He's felt his mortality in battle, against Moors and traitors, it didn't matter. But that fear was only known in the moment. and afterwards huddled in a corner of his stomach, lethargic, like a tapeworm and her larva, ready to appear at the least opportunity and once again take control of his teeth. The general rubs his lip, already smooth, cold, and sweaty. No, it's not pleasant to think this ghost foresees his own death.

“Listen to me, Paco,” reasons the apparition, with a clarity of exposition that the general himself lacks. “In a few hours troops will rise up in Melilla. They're all waiting for you. There will be a long civil war, but at the end... At the end you could hoist victory, be a leader of men. A modern Julius Caesar. Listen. If you don't decide now, others will do it for you. That's what happened to me. It all depends on what you do. The drum, the Legion, the African army. Middle Spain. And if you intervene, Paco, all of Spain.”

“At what price?”

“The price of history,” reaffirms the specter, straightening, almost to the point of touching the ceiling lamp. “War will break out on all fronts. But in the future I come from, I, you, don't participate. Do you want to spend your entire life lamenting not having intervened in the rebellion? Lamenting as I lament?”

The general looks at his double, aged, degraded, the skin and bones he will one day be, already shown so clearly in the remains of that body. For the first time, he doubts the reality that he's living, what he's thinking.

“How do I know I can believe you?”

“You only have to look at my face.” He points a finger bound to invisible tubes. “Forty years older, but still you. Forty years of reproach, illness, exile. Don’t waste, as I have, the future you could have in front of you.”

“Do you think history can be changed?”

“You have to try, Paco. That’s why I’ve come. So you don’t make my mistake. A group of *frentepopulistas* will try to assassinate you. They have it all planned. They will come for you, within fifteen minutes. That was what began my doubts. In the struggle, you will be shot four times in the stomach. You will be between life and death for a week. Once you recover, it will be too late. The war will be on track and you will not be its leader. You have to stop it.”

“How?”

“Whatever will make them think you’re protected. That you aren’t alone.”

The specter floats, undulating like a handkerchief caught in the wind, awaiting the other’s reaction, which is its own. The general only hesitates a moment. He turns towards the telephone and in that moment realizes it has been left ringing for some time. He affirms his decision, accustomed to authority. One tone. Two.

“Orgaz? General Franco. Pay attention. Circulate the rumor that I have ordered a machine gun placed. Where? Near here. In the literature department, for example. Wait for new orders.” The general hangs up. He holds the telephone in one hand, watches the wall clock, counting the minutes, his loaded pistol on the table. The specter hovers, not touching the floor. The minute hand advances like a snail. Its progress sounds like an ever-beating heart in the ears of the doubled man.

“This is it!” exclaims the old man, joyful, reaching remote conclusions before the general is able to capture their full significance. His smile is a sea of wrinkles in an ocean of skin and bone. “History can be changed! The time of the attack has passed, Paco! You’re unhurt. I don’t know what destiny awaits you. Death or glory. But I do know what awaits me, for my indecision.

Nausea in hospitals. An unjust banishment. And being forgotten by mankind. Forty years of doing nothing. Of being no one.”

The general looks confused, incapable of fully comprehending this summarized history, which could have been his own until half a moment ago. If history has changed, at any rate, the ghost's broken-down body doesn't show even minimal improvement.

“Paco, you are the youngest general of your time,” implores the hallucination, with renewed spirit. “The hero of Africa. They compared you to Napoleon, do you remember? Last-minute indecision will cut short your path to glory. You have baraka. Paco, good luck. Don't turn your back on destiny.”

The general rubs his chin, remembering past victories, denied by those who think themselves better suited to serve the patria. The memory of his legendary fortune is sweet, now truncated in exchange for banishment, disdain.

“Think of what your future could be, so synchronized with and yet so distinct from mine. The power in your hands, at your whim. All of Spain will be yours. You will rub elbows with the most important men of your time. You will not be a mere footnote in the history books, Paco. You will be history.”

The general imagines his future, stretched at his feet like a rug, everything so different from the unjust exile with which they have stifled his indomitable pride. The ghost observes, like a father infatuated with his tiny son, the same avenues of thoughts running through his transparent neurons, negotiating doubts, avoiding fears, ignoring shadows.

“Act, Paco,” he coos. “Go on. Don't look back. Don't be a pariah, like I was. You have in your hands the ability to change the world. Baraka, Paco, and I squandered it. I did it for you, and I regret it.”

The general keeps silent, concentrating. His vision begins to blur, to become yet less solid, the infinite force of connecting two minds across the unfathomable abyss of time now complete.

“*Baraka*. Remember that. I can’t.”

The general contemplates the transparent body stretched upwards, mouth open, the gums destroyed, the unmistakable expression of death he has seen so many times in others’ lives, scattering around him like a farmer tossing seeds to the transient wind.

“I die. Remember my words. Intervene.”

There was a final rattle, a restless fluctuation in the barely half-visible image, a whirl of sheets or medical equipment, perhaps, on the other side of the broken barrier, oxygen injected in only one direction, insufficient massages, belated injections. The general is a witness, and he recognizes his own distant death, his averted obscurity, in the midst of an almost adolescent bewilderment.

The clock continues to run, indifferent to all, unstoppable in its meeting with destiny, if destiny exists. Amidst the silence, the general only hears a nervous ticking that fades out little by little, each time further away, perhaps on its way to its resolution.

On the table, the black telephone waits. The general lifts it without further hesitation, dials the number, barely close enough to ear and mouth to deliver his delayed message, his decision now prudent. His voice doesn’t tremble, now. The moment has passed.

“Orgaz? Franco. Tell Bebb to prepare the *Dragón*. Yes. *Arriba España*. Now go.”

Luz inhumana / Cruel Light
Eduardo Vaquerizo

Madrid native Eduardo Vaquerizo (1966-) has been an indispensable figure in Spanish fantasy literature in recent years, and has practiced the genre of alternative history skillfully in his most recent works. Evidence of this is his position as finalist in the Premio Minotauro with “Dance of Shadows”, a story situated in a still-imperial Madrid at the beginning of the twentieth century. He has won various awards and is the author of four other books. In this story, written especially for this volume, he introduces a historical character in order to put a new spin on the Civil War.

“It's madness.”

Azaña jabbed with stubby fingers at the letter open on his desk. He rose then and, in a gesture most like him, lifted small round glasses to his face.

“No. It's not possible.”

“It's the only solution. Dedicate the resources to achieve it.”

“Resources? We have no resources. No one will sell us arms, munitions, uniforms, grenades. And let's not even speak of planes. Those hypocritical French, Belgians, English, and Americans are delivering us into the hands of the fascists. But it will cost them dearly, very dearly. They know not what they do.”

“That is why we must obtain the items on this list. These things cannot be found near the university; they must be bought abroad.”

“You're telling me exactly what's in the letter. Absurd! It can't be done, and even if it could, we would not win the war.”

The other man, who was seated, stood up. His stature was then made evident, almost two heads above Azaña's. He was a big man, gawky, dressed in worn pants and a pullover, which was trailing threads at the elbow and sleeve. Perhaps meaning to compensate for his untidy

appearance, he had buttoned his shirt all the way up, imprisoning a straining neck that struggled to free itself.

“Listen to me, sir! With all due respect. This war is lost. The fascists aren't the best soldiers, or the best men, or the bravest, but they have a better taste for fighting, and the support of the Germans and Italians. And us, what do we have? The International Brigades and an army in chaos. Some thousands of romantic volunteers, but they come barehanded, without tanks, planes, cannons, rifles...”

Azaña turned, affronted, to look at the insolent man who had arrived that afternoon only to... to speak the truth? He removed his glasses and, although they were already clean, rubbed them with an enormous, blindingly white handkerchief he retrieved from his pocket.

“This is an option. Remote, difficult, almost impossible, but one of the few that we have. What should we do? Renounce all? Shoot ourselves in the head and be done with it?”

Jaime Redondo left the President's office walking quickly, as he always did. The halls of the government palace, in the Puerta del Sol, were deserted. He only ran across uniformed officials or secretaries coming through doorways in a few of the corridors. It was already late; everyone had gone home.

At the end of the passageway was a window open to the outside. Jaime didn't stop - in his head there were no pauses. Even while he spoke with the president of their agonized republic, in his mind, numbers, tensioners, and formulas had tumbled in interminable succession. The broken window, however, let in a flow of fresh air, and successfully derailed his endless carousel of reason.

He considered his own face reflected in the fractured surface. It was the face of a forty-something man with a bushy, poorly-shaven beard, drawn eyes, flaccid cheeks, and large metal glasses. The broken face of a broken man.

He took a rosary of small red beads, surely coral, from his pocket. He looked at it for a moment, and then gripped it in a fist which trembled with the effort of squeezing, of destroying.

The cloud of tensioners, atoms, procedures, and experimental strategies cleared, swept away by a brutal wind. He had an objective and he was going to complete it. The red fury that invaded his mind was the only concession he made to irrationality, the dire, insane, intractable certainty that he would succeed.

And that surprised him. A man of science, he had always believed himself incapable of any sort of passion, aside from the mania of those who have taken up with a flag or a woman. He had believed himself to be far from the maelstrom of instinct, lacking in reason – that is, free from beliefs, or irrational hopes. He laid with equations, conversed with the periodic table, and when he saw the sky on summer nights he saw not stars, but distant nuclear furnaces. The postulations of Niels Bohr were the only poetry he permitted; the only prose, that which surged forth from the lips of Einstein.

Perhaps for this reason, the visit that the German – or at that time, Swiss – genius made to Madrid in 1923, when Jaime was a recent graduate and professor in training, with little experience and fewer publications, was one of the few moments in which his energy was diverted by a mundane event: a small reception put on by the Universidad Complutense for the Nobel laureate. Jaime happened to know Blas Cabrera, sponsor of Einstein's visit to Madrid. He was a physicist from the Canary Islands, paunchy and mellow, an excellent informer, and one of the few people that listened patiently to Jaime's ruminations, so remote from the common terrain of comfortable physics that were in practice then in the capital. Thanks to him, Jaime was able to attend the reception.

The salon, splendidly illuminated, had been packed with lecturers sporting long beards and politicians of every kind that didn't speak a word of German or English. Einstein seemed to endure it stoically, hair unruly, large mustache and eyebrows covering mouth and diverted gaze, impish, as if laughing at everything and everyone. Jaime felt a paralyzing respect in the presence of the physicist. He approached obliquely. Despite his height and his gait, halfway between a step

and an awkward fall, he had experience in going unnoticed. He reached the crowd surrounding the German without being intercepted by any of his university superiors, all occupied in capturing the attention of the politicians.

“Herr profesor.”

“Ja.”

Einstein turned, surprised to find someone who spoke his native tongue. Jaime had studied German in order to read all the works of Planck, Bohr, and, of course, Einstein, in their original language.

“It is an honor to have you with us.”

“Perhaps it will be an honor to repeat. I have requested a position as a lecturer at the university.”

“That would be... magnificent.”

“With whom do I have the pleasure...?”

“Jaime Redondo.”

“Redondo? I've heard of you. Aren't you the author of that paper published two years ago... *Atomabbruch mit gefiltertem und pausiertem elektron von einem catodic Schriftkegel?*”

“Yes. Have you read it?”

“Well... yes. A colleague called it to my attention. I was tempted to write, but in the end I thought I'd better not.”

“What?”

“Yes. I believe that your idea of using slow electrons, filtered through a graphite screen, is a great idea. So good that it could work. Which is precisely why I preferred not to say anything.”

“What? I'm afraid I don't understand.”

In that moment, one of the politicians, this time armed with a translator, appropriated the scientist. Before succumbing to the usurper, Einstein made a gesture of resignation.

“Come see me this evening, at 7, at the Ritz hotel. Room 512.”

Jaime spent the day suffering, conflicted. What error had Einstein found in his theories? Why hadn't he wanted to write if it had seemed that his ideas were good?

He hardly noticed the lavishness of the hotel when he entered. The thick carpets, the bronze accents, the gilded braids on the uniforms. He barely perceived the undisguised despair in the face of the receptionist when he asked to be announced. Nor the amazement when he divulged his name, which indeed authorized him to ascend and see the great scientist who was raising such a stir in the country.

Einstein awaited him, drinking coffee at a small table facing a picture window. Outside, the trees of the Paseo del Prado stirred gently. A fresh breeze blew, and the smell of coffee permeated the room.

“Come in and sit. I have taken the liberty of ordering you a coffee. Is that alright? Would you prefer tea, perhaps?”

“Ah... sure, coffee is fine.”

Jaime made himself as comfortable as he could in his seat, trying to rearrange his long legs so they would not protrude too much.

“You have a beautiful country, an excellent climate. And the people, very friendly. Although science does not have much of a voice, am I wrong?”

Jaime hesitated to respond. A hundred details distracted him from Einstein's words. The clothing hanging carelessly from chairs, the desk covered with papers, a violin out of its case on the bed. Finally, he noticed the physicist was waiting for a reply.

“No. Truthfully, no. It's obvious we're behind. I'm afraid I don't know much about the historical reasons. What I do know is that I generally don't concern myself with things that are unscientific.”

“Perhaps that is not such a good thing. We live in the world, and our actions are consequential and breed consequences, my friend.” Einstein poured the coffee deftly. “We, scientists, cannot isolate ourselves from the world, most of all because the world is out there and it does not forget about us - that much is certain.”

Jaime thought for a moment on the rumors running throughout Europe. The rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany was an undeniable fact. Though he did not lend much attention to politics, he knew of their ideology and the rigid obstinacy of its arguments, formed apart from logic or any other intellectual consideration. Beyond this general knowledge, the world was something that kept itself far from his concern.

“Now, I would like to talk to you about your work. You read science fiction, correct?” Jaime was very surprised.

“Well, I have read Verne and Wells, and a little more, in my youth. I remember those stories dazzling me, but now I don't consider them any more than fantasies.”

“You should pay them more attention. They are very free speculations about scientific ideas and their interaction with the world. In a work by Wells, 'The World Set Free', he writes of a mad device that no one believed possible. We scientists can be very conservative at times. For example, Rutherford considered any mention of atomic energy idiocy. Exactly these sorts of a priori obstacles are what my mental experiments, and perhaps also science fiction, destroy completely.”

“Are you telling me that my idea of rupturing a self-sustaining atom is feasible?”

“Of course. And you are not the first to think of it. Leo Silzard claimed something similar, although not with the soundness of your work, it is true. In petit comité many have set forth this idea. We lack the physical method to achieve it. Your article is the key to demonstrating, from the theoretical plane, that the concept is viable. Very difficult, but viable. Honestly, you have the privilege of having drawn me to travel here. It is one of the principal motives of my visit.”

Jaime didn't know what to do; he simply looked on with his mouth slightly open at the man with the extraordinary brain and cocksure grin.

“And you have allowed me to open my mind to a consequence that could come of all this. You, like others, have thought that perhaps demonstrating that something is possible, learning to do it, holds all the interest.” Jaime agreed, internally. “Perhaps you could also develop a practical application from this discovery, from the theoretical understanding. You know very well that the energy that could be loosed from the split atom is tremendous. Only someone who is not ensconced in the exquisite ivory tower of physics could know that there are others uninterested in pure knowledge, nor even in engineering practical utilities. What would leave them most intrigued is the final thing I mentioned: the tremendous energy released by the split. Wells arrived at that conclusion in one step. And others of us have feared that this intuition could be possible, as you have demonstrated.”

Jaime indicated his incomprehension of Einstein's words. The German scientist could not understand why it was so difficult for these ideas to penetrate his mind. Jaime, from a young age, from the solitude of the bedroom in his parents' home, since the death of his mother, had decided that the world should carry on outside his cranium. Now, he had to accept that there was an outside world beyond the most basic necessities of sustenance and rest; that others lived in it and that his intentions, his motivations, and his mind could deviate from those of a physicist dedicated body and soul to his work.

“Imagine thousands of metric tons of TNT unleashed, concentrated at one minute point. All of humanity's manufactured bombs could not equal something like that. Only the sun, the stars, a volcano, a meteorite could release comparable energy. This is why I beg you, even as you continue imagining and discovering things in this field, do not reveal them. We live in difficult times, times in which many stand for destruction and violence. Do not give them the nuclear fire, I beg of you.”

That conversation endured fresh in Jaime's mind. He thought on it for a long time. It was difficult not to publish his findings. To deny other scientists access to his theories, so that they might subject them to scrutiny, test them, confirm or refute them. Recognition, fame, and prizes did not interest him, but the longing to know whether his ideas were correct consumed him.

The Nazis rose to power, democratically, in 1933, two years after the installation of the Segunda República. That same year, in Germany, democracy burned along with the Reichstag. Hitler transformed into the supreme dictator of a new nation where book burning, eugenics, and barbarism were applauded, and established by decree the supremacy of the Deutsche Physik over the degenerate Jewish Physics. In 1935, Germany retook the Sarre, declared the Treaty of Versailles null, began to rearm itself, and promulgated the racist Nüremberg laws. Italy, surely impressed by the successes of its colleagues to the north, invaded the sad nation of Ethiopia.

Immersed in a solitary and productive routine, Jaime's theoretical works developed at an agreeable pace. Contrary to what he had anticipated, not publishing them did not detain him from achieving a post as a tenured lecturer in the Universidad Complutense, a small study, and a laboratory, spacious if meagre in resources, in the basement of the department. In fact, sometimes he believed he had been lucky. With his meek appearance and non-existent aspirations to rise in the hierarchy, he was no threat to any professor.

Jaime followed the progress of other, foreign physicists, realizing that they were still far behind his calculations. While others were still contemplating with suspicion the possibility of rupturing atoms and producing a chain reaction, he had already calculated how it would be possible to achieve it, and with which and what quantity of radioactive isotopes: barely 50 kilograms of uranium-235.

The images of destruction arriving from Germany, the expansionist desires of the recently born European and Japanese dictatorships, all reminded him of the words of the sage Jew, and he

did not send off his work. However, despite the danger, he longed to test his theoretical successes in practice. He knew that no matter how perfect his work, it was worthless without experimental testing, which he could not accomplish with the means at his disposal.

And so it was, until Pedro arrived.

Jaime arrived at the university by tram. The laboratory was in the basement of the Department of Physics and Chemistry, connected by a ramp that led to a treed garden. He descended the ramp and opened the door that gave way to the street. Immediately the man working inside turned to him eagerly.

“What? Did it work?”

Pedro, grease-stained, short, and olive-skinned, looked like a dwarf smith right out of a Wagner opera. And perhaps he felt like one, forging a Nibelungen Ring endowed with unimaginable powers.

He still remembered that student, now graduated, investing himself in his classes, perhaps the only one that asked intelligent questions, who demonstrated that he had assimilated all of the teachings in the required readings. Pedro succeeded in doing what no student had before him, enabling Jaime to stop considering all young people to be only scratching the surface of problems and hardly grasping the profundity of same, like scientists in training.

Pedro had found his confidence in class, and so when he solicited Jaime as advisor for his doctoral thesis, he accepted. He still remembered the fanatic interest of that much younger man, small and thin but strong like a bull, obstinate in penetrating the mysteries Jaime's mind contemplated as a matter of course. And he had succeeded.

Following uncountable meetings, analysis, revisions of Pedro's thesis, Jaime, one spring afternoon, had showed him the folder holding all the developments on nuclear atomic fusion. He still remembered the devotion, almost religious, with which the doctoral candidate had opened

the folder and began to read the proofs, the hypotheses and corollaries, the dense matrices of calculations, and the face of unadulterated wonder he had raised from the densely inscribed papers to see if Jaime himself was, in fact, a god fallen to earth.

It had been Pedro who had insisted on putting Jaime's theories to the test, despite the difficulties, to place their small university from a scientifically backwards country at the forefront of global physics, to be the first to achieve a self-sustaining fusion reaction.

“Can we get the steel, the turbines, the tools, the energy?”

“Yes.”

“I told you. I told you with the letter we could do it.”

“I believe the letter was the least of it.”

“What are you saying? It doesn't matter now, anyway. When will we have all the materials?”

“I gave him the list. He said it would take priority. Perhaps a week. More like a month. He said he was going to speak with the president personally.”

“All that's left is for Largo Caballero to deny us support. We have to refine that uranium and the only way is with those nozzles, none other.”

Jaime contemplated the laboratory as if he did not recognize the place in which he had passed the last few years. It was an illuminated basement, columned and completely packed with what an inexperienced eye would have classified as junk: generators, cables, piping.

Far from the light of the sun, Jaime felt a chill. That October was mild but the cold was hardly late in arriving. Perhaps it was not the only thing which arrived. Far afield from Manzanares, Franco's forces waited to overrun the capital. Jaime donned his usual lab coat while contemplating the reaction chamber, the construct which he, Raquel, and Pedro had built. The chamber was a wall of bricks made of graphite and lead. In the interior were a few micrograms of enriched uranium, the little that had been refined using the small prototypes they had

constructed. A Geiger counter crackled gently. Jaime approached it. He took a bar of iron and held it out. The bar had a layer of graphite at the tip. Immediately, when exposed to the air surrounding the enriched uranium, the crackling of the counter changed almost to a scream. It was little, very little, although it would have been enough for a Nobel. Jaime shook his head.

Who could think about prizes now? He remembered each day, sometimes each hour, the prophetic words of Einstein. "We, scientists, can not isolate ourselves from the world, most of all because the world is out there and it does not forget about us, that much is certain."

He went back to holding out the moderating bar, and it was with that same movement he he would stab at his own heart. That uranium; thanks to it, he had met Raquel. He returned to reviewing the calculations that had given him the knowledge of the critical mass of uranium, that had revealed it to him in his office in June of '36. They needed enriched uranium with isotope 235 in at least 90%, because the natural isotope, 238, was, unfortunately, a neutronic absorber.

"That's impossible. I have no doubt that your calculations are correct, but do you know the proportion of that isotope in the uranium that was taken from Almadén?"

"We have ten metric tons in the laboratory. We found them in the mining department. They have stores there for God knows what."

"1%, only 1%. And doubtless you know that the difference in weight between this isotope and the natural one is very low. The options for separating one from the other are few and complex. At most we will have 40%, and that with great effort. Besides, I honestly don't see the interest in producing a comparable quantity. The radioactivity is very dangerous."

"Well there has to be something!"

Jaime had almost shouted. Only then did he see the woman that was facing them. Until that moment his brain had been occupied exclusively with electrons and protons, and the fantastic chimera of the chain reaction. The woman looked at him open-mouthed. She wasn't attractive, but neither was she ugly. She was in her mid-thirties, and didn't seem to concern

herself much with physical appearance.

“I'm afraid that I am going to have to ask you to leave my office.”

Always the same scorn, always the same challenge to make them understand, to translate the things that he himself saw to be true – the mild reactions, the energy from fission that he intended to demonstrate with a self-sustaining chain reaction. He perceived them like lightning, but they only arrived to the others after a slow retinue of mental excavation, opening galleries on the difficult subject of reality. He was prepared. As an answer, he merely left the small file, with the entire design of the experiment, on the tabletop.

He said nothing, and made no other gesture. The woman, tempted to throw him out, could not resist looking through that small file, fastened with a rubber band. There had been a brief battle, pride against curiosity. She took the file and opened it, eyes fiery, not hesitating to look at it. Jaime lingered, contemplating her, seated facing her for the long hours she used to read everything. In his mind he continued to look for mistakes, alternatives to his method. He searched and re-searched the theory so that they could apply themselves to the chain-reaction experiment he had devised. However, her eyes opened a second line of attention, which in a short time would dim the first.

He considered Raquel, in charge of the applied chemistry laboratory. Her hair, very dark and fastened with a tortoiseshell headband, insisted on escaping its prison and a few locks fell around her eyes. She moved toward them with a slender white hand. Her skin was also white, with no imperfections, taut over large features - hardly graceful, but with an irresistible force. She wrinkled her very red mouth in a gesture of concentration broken only by occasional bouts of editorial fury. Her pencil traveled rapidly and with precision in her notebook.

Not once did she question him, nor interrupt her reading. She finished it and said only: “A self-sustaining chain reaction. That would unleash the power of the atom, an authentic chimera. I want to see that laboratory of yours.”

And they descended together. He and Pedro had been trying to find a method of refining uranium for months without any success. The rest of the different systems that it had occurred to them to employ, absent efficiency, lay scattered throughout the laboratory.

In contrast with Jaime's timidity, Pedro was expansive, and it was thus that he received Raquel, with an interminable torrent of enthusiasm.

"Have you read the papers? Yes, I see you have. I didn't believe they would convince you, you're more intelligent than we thought. Take no offense, please. Yes, over here, look. Here we had thought to install the reaction chamber. Jaime's theory predicts high emissions of ionized radiation, so we have to secure the area with lead and graphite. We haven't had much luck refining the uranium; we don't have the experience with industrial methods."

That same afternoon, when they had already left the laboratory and Raquel explained the methods that had occurred to her to deal with the mountain of slightly radioactive stones they had already stored, Pedro took the opportunity to make a suggestion.

"There's a rally for the Partido Socialista in the Retiro. I'm going. Come with me?"

Jaime already knew that, as opposed to him, Pedro had been contaminated by the wave of political unrest that permeated the República in those days before the attempted military coup. He made up part of the scientific committee of the Partido Socialista and, slowly but progressively, every time he went he was taking their leaders further under consideration. Raquel agreed and Jaime, hardly thinking, did also. Pedro looked at him strangely, but said nothing. It would be his first participation in a political act.

They waited around a little upon arriving at the Retiro in Pedro's car. People crowded the piazza behind the lake. They divided themselves among the trees and from there they climbed the lampposts so they could see something. Onstage, large flags with brown borders flapped in the wind. With them had been erected a small pulpit onto which one speaker after the other climbed with burning discourse on his lips.

Pedro left them alone. He approached the stage. He formed part of the security service that attempted to detect possible infiltrators charged with breaking up the rally.

Jaime didn't pay attention to any of the feverish diatribes. In fact, he didn't understand them. For him there was only one thing: physics. Or perhaps now two things. Raquel filled his senses. Silent, dressed in a light terylene coat, her hair perpetually contained, got him to his feet in order to see something among the sea of airborne fists. Finally she made to leave.

“I'm tired.”

“I'll go with you.”

They went off together when the loudspeakers began to amplify Azaña's voice, recently elected President after the victory of the Frente Popular. It was hard to find a spot that wasn't packed.

Finally, near the Botanical Garden, there was a discreet bench. They sat there, in the afternoon sun. It was a bright, tranquil May. As such, the sun still wasn't strong enough to warm their skin. Like two huge, idle lizards, they stayed silent for a long time.

“We don't have a future, do we?” Jaime asked.

“Well, I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Science has never been very important in Spain. We're doing something significant now, but how long will it last?”

“Sure, but we can't do anything about that.”

“No, or yes. I don't know. I've often wondered about it.”

Then: “Are you married?”

The question surprised him more than her. Jaime noted his damp palms as he waited for her response.

“I was. I'm divorced now. Chemist, divorcee, atheist, liberal. Jailbird if CEDA had won the election.”

“I’ve never bothered with politics. I guess I’m an atheist too.”

“Married?”

“N... no.”

She put her hand on top of his, and that’s how it all began.

It was only six months, but it took up a lifetime. Afterwards, Jaime understood that, just for that time, he had been something more than a physics-performing machine. He had emotions, aired outside the shell he used to hide from the world. He found fire there, where he hadn’t believed he could, nuclear furnaces that ignited at the touch of her lips, with the slow pleasure of cohabitation. For her part, she was passionate about scientific work. The reverse of the norm, it was she who insisted on returning to work, and he who left it for the rickety old bed in his study.

The disastrous failed coup occurred July 17th, 1936. Moroccan troops and many from the Spanish encampments rose in arms against the Frente Popular government. The shock was profound.

To Jaime, it seemed all of Madrid was a lit bonfire that had nothing to do with the summer heat. A sea of flags, of rallies, a wave of activity that only hid the panic about the future, invaded the city. It affected Raquel, too. From the time the attempted coup became an all-out military rebellion against the government, her kiss had a desperate character, the intensity of her embrace was painful.

There wasn't time, the minutes and seconds of happiness consumed them. And as if a direct fruit of their desperation, their work progressed quickly during that summer of disasters. By the celebrations of San Roque, Badajoz had fallen and the fascists were gaining strength just as the República's luck was abandoning it, one by one, through all the countries who were supposed defenders of democracy.

In their work, Raquel's intuitions and experimental procedural developments, which Pedro put to work efficaciously, attempting to refine that evasive material with the scarce means available, had spectacular results. At the end of the summer they had found a theoretically valid and feasible method of refining uranium. It only had to be tested.

It hurt. In his memory, the day they finished construction of the prototype and did the first test was a red diamond of pain.

The sound of a milling machine grinding metal brought him abruptly to the present. Pedro adjusted the blades of one of the nozzles, carefully sculpted to scale.

"Pedro, have you reviewed my calculations on the neutron screen?"

"Yes, they're correct, I think."

Pedro, thin and short-statured, with brown skin and wiry muscles, had permanently gelled hair. Jaime imagined he had great success with the ladies, although he'd never seen Pedro with one. "Then you'll know how to mount the firing mechanism."

"It'll be easy. One mass against the other, until they fuse. With the pressure and the neutron reflectors, it'll be enough."

"Could be, could be. But before that, you have to make sure those streams are working. Without the uranium, we have nothing. Feed it into the current."

Jaime went to a corner of the laboratory and activated the generator. It had been a complete nightmare to obtain the gasoline necessary to feed its motor.

"Have you thought about the amount of energy we'll need to refine ten tons?"

"We'll get there."

"Pedro, are you sure it's best for you to stay here, by my side?"

"What?"

"I really appreciate your help. In fact, if it hadn't been for you, none of this would ever have worked. I still remember your face when I showed you my work, that afternoon after class." What I mean to say is, maybe you would rather go to the front, or collaborate with the Partido. I don't know."

"Jaime, I'm where I believe I'll be most useful. If this works, the war will be over."

Jaime stopped the current. They waited half an hour, after which Pedro passed a Geiger counter over the repository where, supposedly, the isotope should have accumulated. The device crackled. For an instant its readings changed. Success left them exultant. But it didn't last long.

"I don't understand it. There should have been more. We have to better adjust the nozzles."

He introduced the gases into the repository needed to neutralize the hexafluoride and deposit the uranium in a fine, intensely radioactive dust, a few micrograms more that were added to his meager collection. Far away, the rumble of sirens. Jaime looked away from Pedro, as he dismounted the turbines once more.

"It will work, Pedro, it will work," he affirmed as he rubbed the rosary in his pants pocket.

Outside, the war roared. Cannon fire was audible past the horizon, and the buzz of large machines flying through the sky, spitting fire at one another. So much effort, such marvelous inventions, and, in essence, everything went on the same as when only spears and arrows were used. At one time he had felt distant from this humanity that was consuming itself; it didn't matter to him if they killed or loved each other. In his refuge of solid, universal laws, such conflicts didn't fit. Raquel had drawn him out of that refuge, exposed him to the pain of being human. Now they were just one more unthinking animal, compelled to destroy each other.

He couldn't stop to think about any of that. He had a job to do. It was the hate that motivated him. It wasn't science, nor the achievement of knowing, the blind passion of the scientist. Now he was an avenging angel. The most ironic thing, the most terrible, was that those

had been the exact words of Einstein, the pacifist - “imagine a million tons of TNT set loose, concentrated on one tiny point. Not all the bombs made by humanity could equal something like that” - which had put in his hand the weapon of vengeance.

Raquel. Sometimes he could forget why all the syllables of her name hurt, every memory, every echo of her touch on his skin. What never stopped was the real pain, the perpetual feeling of irremediable absence. Every morning as he got up, he remembered that he had lived that morning at the end of September, that it wasn't a nightmare, a bad dream, but rather an overwhelming reality that had developed in the same laboratory where he and Pedro continued to work.

They had finished adjusting the prototype the night before, making it work with only air until it was functioning perfectly. Once and a thousand times he had tested his calculations, the machines, the security systems. The process wasn't complicated. The uranium hexafluoride gas, synthesized by Raquel from the base mineral, accumulated in an aluminum container. Opening the spigot, slightly warmed by resistance, the liquid would evaporate and enter the separation circuit. The uranium hexafluoride formed by isotope 235 was slightly lighter than that formed by natural uranium, with 238 neutrons in the nucleus. If this gas was rotated at high speed, it could be separated into layers of two hexafluorides, given that they have different atomic weight. They didn't have the technology or resources necessary to build the centrifuges that the precise calculations showed for separation. It had occurred to Raquel what they could do was propel the gas at high pressure in a system of nozzles carefully designed to cause the gas to rotate inside it. Placing the outputs in the right position... they could fill each tank with different isotopes.

The theory was astonishingly simple, but the design and construction of a prototype on a small scale was an utter nightmare which, after hard work, they were able to overcome. With that small machine, it was unthinkable to get 50 kilograms of fissile material to provoke a chain

reaction, the ultimate objective, but it would be enough to prove the method was viable.

After switching on the generator, Pedro activated the pumps that began to generate pressurized air in a receptacle he had built himself using steel from a destroyed Russian tank. When the pressure gauge indicated 400 atmospheres, Raquel opened the spigot of the hexafluoride container. The gas hissed and began to enter the system. The whole assembly, the large tubes, the pressure pumps, shook with the strain. Jaime was afraid. The hexafluoride had shown itself to be a summarily dangerous substance. Toxic and corrosive, only the aluminum in contact with it created an inert layer in the metal, succeeding in containing it. The steel and many other materials were corroded by its presence.

The disaster came about simply, like a glass falling from a table and shattering, or childhood toys coming apart from tragic, fatal falls or unexpected cuts. The machine hissed and shook. The fluid counters worked, showing acceptable figures. Pedro approached to see if there was anything in the receptacles. In the 235 tank, they had installed a Geiger counter.

“Yes, there's something, there's something!”

“Raquel, wait.”

He didn't have time to restrain her, to do anything. She went behind the barrier and approached the tank where Pedro was watching the needle on the Geiger counter. The gas had to be liquid under pressure, and then the hexafluoride refined into uranium again, but essentially, the system worked. Perhaps because of this she forgot not to pass in front of the joint that had shown a worrying tendency during testing to leak and release gas. The discharge sounded like a gunshot. And just as a gunshot would have done, the stream of corrosive, high-pressure, radioactive gas hit her full in the face.

Jaime remembered how she screamed as the acid corroded her features, the bone beneath, and reached her brain. It didn't take long, fortunately for her. Barely a few seconds, followed by a minute of twitching, blood flowing, the final spasms until her body finally knew it was dead.

The Jaime who picked her up from the floor was already a different person than the man who had run toward her as Pedro staunched the bleeding and looked for the borox which would stop the effects of the fluoride. He was a fractured Jaime, broken by pain. Like an image reflected in a mirror that emerges suddenly, he was still himself, but in disorganized pieces. Everything was an absence, a memory with sharp edges that simply spun around in his head. Spun and spun.

Few people came to the burial. In all the time since she'd died, during the police interrogations, being pitied by the scant acquaintances still in contact with him, he had rubbed the rosary in his pocket. Only this pressure, the hardness of the beads that wounded his palms, had reminded him he shouldn't speak, that the rage and terrible pain that gripped him only needed a logical cause to come out. Just one.

After Raquel's death, Jaime, in complete silence, without eating and with little water, had been shut away in his study. Two days later, he descended to the laboratory and showed Pedro, without word or commentary, the calculation that gave the total mass that would be converted into energy in the chain reaction if they reached critical mass without fading. The figure was so astonishing that Pedro had seen it many times and had only begun to comprehend it when he figured its equivalence in conventional explosives. One thousand tons of TNT.

Jaime awaited the reactions of his collaborator. During one fraction of a second he saw what he was looking for in Pedro's face. Then, Pedro composed his features to perfectly imitate the appropriate surprise, comprehension, and terror.

“That would be a colossal bomb.”

“Yes. It would be the weapon that ended the war. It would only need to be used once.”

“But... that would be terrible. We don't know the effects of an explosion of that magnitude. Jaime said nothing. He didn't need to. He forewent an hour of conversation to convince Pedro of something of which he was already convinced.

The next day Jaime wrote to Einstein, still in Germany, asking for a letter to President

Azaña. The bomb was the only salvation for the República, the only way to stop the fascist dictatorships on the continent. He knew the scientist would concede, in the end.

“We, scientists, cannot isolate ourselves from the world, most of all because the world is out there and it does not forget about us – that much is certain.”

October passed, then November. The government transferred to Valencia, a clear sign of where things were in the war. For Christmas '36, the lost pieces finally arrived. A ramshackle truck transported them to the university district in enormous, well-marked wooden boxes.

“How many trips have these pieces made around the world? The motors are Swiss, the aluminum pieces are Russian. Here it is. All of it, all of it. Marvelous! What Bank of Spain gold can give, eh? With all this, if we refine the uranium and with the design we've made, it will be easy to build.”

“Yes. The hardest part is over. All for Raquel.”

“This needs to be celebrated. I'm going to see if I can find a friend with a couple of bottles of champagne and something decent to eat. See you later, at eight, here?”

“I'll be here. I don't intend to leave.”

Jaime watched his partner go. Afterwards, slowly, he took the rosary from his pocket and placed it on top of the receptacle where the uranium accumulated. Then he sat in front of the door with nothing to do but watch the afternoon die.

Pedro didn't take long to return. Jaime heard a pair of trucks stop outside first. The motors were left running, and voices and footsteps came toward the laboratory. Someone opened the double wooden doors. Some men entered.

“Come on, pack everything up carefully. I'll tell you how.”

Jaime saw Pedro. He seemed different. He didn't have his expression of concentrated worry, now he was authoritative, a commander controlling his followers. He walked up to Jaime,

and never stopped giving orders. They looked at each other for a long time, both suddenly silent.

“You don't look very surprised.”

“I'm not. Only betrayed, broken from within.”

Pedro walked to the uranium receptacle.

“We're going to take this too. We don't want to leave a single trace behind, not a single possibility.”

Then he saw the rosary and took it in his hand. He looked at Jaime.

“I gave it to Raquel. I found it in her papers one afternoon, looking for something in her desk.”

The desk was still in a corner. A man in a black shirt, armed with a machine gun slung across his body, was busy stashing all the papers in a wooden box. Jaime followed the man's movements with his eyes, how he secured the files with rubber bands, how he numbered them and placed them methodically in the box.

“I didn't believe her. In fact I convinced her that it was some reminder of family, one of those things. She knew people. Not me.

“It's a reminder of family, of my mother. Now it's mine. Yes, I'm a practicing Catholic. I believe in the Holy Mother Church.”

Pedro's face, freed from the necessity of pretending, was a mask of disgust, of concentrated hate.

“You have no idea what I've had to suffer, going to your meetings with those red sons-of-bitches, those ill-born bastards. All for the cause, for God and Spain. I, and many others like me, had the mission of observing from within. And the facts have shown we've done well. Now that supreme weapon will be ours.

“You are so ignorant.”

Pedro turned and indicated the large boxes that had arrived that morning.

“And then the final blow,” he went on, “it was the República itself which supplied us with the means to destroy it. It was a risk, I confess, but it's been a brilliant ploy.

“There are so many things which could have given me away, that alarmed me, but you're blind to reality. Only she realized. She was ready, far more than you.”

“Is that why you killed her?”

Pedro didn't answer. He gave an order and a few men entered with the wheelbarrows which held the containers of minerals.

“With all this I will build a laboratory in Burgos. All Madrid will fly through the air. And with it, all of the Marxist, heretical revolutionaries.”

“And at least some thousands of innocents.”

“You can hardly pretend you wouldn't do the same, somewhere else? There would be innocents there, too.”

He had a point. What small, pitiful motivations! He could do no more than feel sorry for himself. For them and that Spain consumed by passion. Ants, lizards, rats, fighting each other for a scrap of bread. He became furious again, inserted out of place into this insane humanity. But something remained, fury, a fury that hadn't been brought to life even one second after Raquel's death, from which he had understood that she was right to suspect Pedro and she had been killed without his believing her, convincing her that her fears were paranoia provoked by the war.

After the accident, after everyone had gone, he had returned to the laboratory. He found jagged marks on the joint which had burst. A regrettable accident. Everything could be reduced to that: regrettable accidents.

Pedro's men worked quickly. In a couple of hours everything would be packed away and stowed on the trucks. Jaime imagined the front would be passable, on that moonless night. Pedro, pausing in his dismantling work, packing and stowing, seemed to realize something and came over to where Jaime remained immobile, defeated.

“If you knew, why haven't you done anything?”

Jaime stiffened internally.

“What would I have done? Denounced you? Without proof? As a distinguished member of the Partido Socialista? I waited for you to make a mistake. I watched you, waiting for a misstep, I don't know, to find a document, hear a conversation that would give you away.”

Pedro smiled.

“Always so naïve. You don't survive as a spy if you don't keep in mind, every minute and every second, what it is you're doing.”

Pedro returned to work. They didn't take much longer. Even so, the wait was long. He had struggled much to reach this point. He didn't want to remember anymore, see it again, every time he closed his eyes, the Raquel's face ruined and her body twisted with convulsions. As is always the case with something you long for, the final minutes are always the worst.

All of the men left the laboratory. Only the two of them remained. A revolver, a large, heavy weapon, hung from the end of Pedro's arm.

“I have to do it. God knows what you would do if I left you alive. I know your intelligence, and your capabilities. In other times, you would have been the greatest scientist in the entire country, the world, you would have been put on a pedestal. But the circumstances are otherwise.”

Jaime smiled when he pointed the gun.

“What are you laughing at?”

“At you.”

Pedro pulled the trigger. The bullet took microseconds to find Jaime's brain. The same microseconds that it would take to reach critical mass after arming the bomb to detonate, according to the calculations – completely correct, completely certain – which Pedro was stealing. Correct, save one a small part of one equation, a third-order term which any mediocre physicist

would have discarded without even pausing to consider it. Any physicist like Pedro, or any other the rebel band could recruit.

Einstein placed the pen on the table, next to the letter Leo Szilard had written for Roosevelt. He had just heard the news on the radio. After all was said and done, he wouldn't have to sign that second letter, which had turned out to be so difficult for him. He had stopped with one.

Albert rose from the table in his study at Princeton, and took his violin from the top of it. He began to play Bach, Partita No. 1, a delightful juxtaposition of form and substance. He soon stopped. He couldn't imagine a half-kilometer crater; fifty thousand people dead; that little capital of Spain, Burgos, completely erased, the rebel army surrendering en masse. The paralyzed European war.

Reading the paper, at breakfast the day before, there had been a phrase that called particular attention, on top of the political declarations, the mobilization of military and diplomatic forces towards the peninsula, of minimal interest in a republic internationally condemned; practically extinct, but armed with the most powerful possible weapons.

The phrase was a translation of the declarations made by a member of a convent near the blast site:

“It was a cruel light, beautiful. It's how I imagine the splendor of the face of God.”

He understood they were on the brink of a new age.

Madrid, 17 October 2004

El Ángel Rojo / The Red Angel
Javier Negrete

Tuesday, 27 October

The last time I wrote in this diary was two years ago, when I was in third year. My writing was slanted, like we had to do in the green calligraphy notebooks. Now I write small, in print. That changed when I made my first and last superhero comic, because it wouldn't fit in the characters' speech bubbles.

The drawings weren't very good, but Andrés, my best friend, liked the plot. It was a Red Angel adventure, who's my favorite along with Spiderman and The Hulk.

When my dad found the comic, he threw it in the trash and told me not to waste time with stupid stuff, and that if I kept on liking superheroes I'd be in for it. He found two Spiderman comics, one of the Avengers, and another of the Red Angel, and he tore them up. Andrés got me more comics the next week, and this time I hid them better.

I started writing in this diary again to practice scriptwriting, because Andrés said if I wanted to make comics I should write them and have somebody else draw them. And because a lot of things happened today.

This morning we started with Don Serapio, the language teacher. The first thing he did was turn on the light, because the sky was all dark and cloudy. Then he reached up and wrote on the board: 27 October 1992.

'92 is such a busy year. In January, we celebrated the Catholic Kings finishing the *Reconquista*. This month, the fifth centennial of the *Descubrimiento*. How many times will we have to copy out "Spain is the mother of twenty nations"?!

Don Serapio, rubbing his hands together, reminded us that in December we'll have an even more important celebration. On the fourth the Generalísimo will be 100, and there'll be a

party in all of Spain. Zapata, the head of the class, says they're going to overlap Franco's birthday with Christmas vacation. But that's forever away. Almost two months...

Before that is my birthday. November 21st. This year will be special, because I'll be ten. My mom told me that she's going to make my cake herself this year.

After drawing we had geography. Don Luis is making us learn what the regions and towns in every province produce. It's torture. I get the names all mixed up. Las Hurdes, la Maragatería, el Bierzo, la Alcarría... When I answered that they grow rice in Monegros, Don Luis rolled his eyes and knocked me on the head.

At recess I tried to be a superhero and it went wrong.

My school is C-shaped. There's a red cement playground in the middle of the C, with lots of colored lines for basketball, handball, and tennis. That doesn't matter, though, because everyone plays soccer.

Everyone, except me. I play in my neighborhood sometimes, but at school no one picks me for their team. Zapata says it's like I have two left feet, and everybody laughs a lot. Sports don't agree with me. Mom says it's because I had asthma when I was little.

I usually hang out with my friend Andrés on one of the staircases that goes down from the porch to the playground. But this morning he wasn't there. I got up and craned my neck to see if I could find him in between all the others. The playground is always full of kids playing soccer, *churro-media-manga-manga-entera*, or leapfrog. Others play with trading cards, and the older kids, who are boring, walk around and talk to girls.

Finally I saw Andrés, in the middle of a circle of kids nearly two heads taller than him. Andrés is only a fourth year, and he's short for his age too. He's a really tidy guy. The part in his hair looks like it's drawn with a ruler and he smells like cologne. Instead of taking a bath on

Saturdays like everyone else, he showers three times a week. He covers his books the first day of class and his fingernails are always clean.

From the stairs I saw that Andrés was jumping, while the kids passed his bag from hand to hand, laughing loudly. The ones making him suffer were Matas and his friends, the Rat and Zumendi. The kings of the playground. They're sixth years, but they should already be in eighth.

I went closer, slowly. Andrés ran from one to the other, shouting for them to give back his bag.

“Look at ‘im!” said the Rat. “He jumps like a little toad! Hey, Toad! C'mere, Toad!” “Don't call me Toad!”

“Toad, Toad, Toad!”

“It's fine,” cut in Matas, the leader. “We've laughed enough. Take it.”

But when Andrés moved to take the bag, Matas put it up high again and tossed it to Zumendi. Everybody laughed a lot, except me. Andrés sat on the ground, even though it was wet, and started crying.

“Lookit, he cries like a girl!” the Rat started laughing.

“Why don't you go to school with the nuns?” asked Matas. “You can't paint here.”

“Give me my bag!” wailed Andrés.

“Take your fucking bag,” said Matas. (I hope my dad doesn't find this. Matas said the bad word, not me.)

Matas opened Andrés' bag and dumped it out on the ground. Books, notebooks, pens, pencils, and a pencil sharpener fell out. And an apple. The apple rolled a little ways until it stopped in one of the puddles that hadn't dried up yet. That made it even funnier for the people watching.

Andrés was so mad that he got up off the ground and kicked Matas in the shin. Everybody laughed again. Matas, with his eyes slit like a Persian's, closed them even further and

tightened his jaw. Andrés realized what he'd done and backed off, but the Rat grabbed him by the elbows and held him up.

“At least your dad will fix your teeth for free,” Matas said, rolling up his sleeves.

He said that because Andrés' dad is a dentist. I've never been very brave. The school playground makes you immune to heroism. But my mom, I guess to keep me from picking on the Dwarf, taught me that you should never beat up on people smaller than you. She says it's an injustice that cries out to heaven. I don't know what came over me. At best I thought my cause was noble enough that I couldn't lose. My favorite character, Spiderman, always beats supervillains more powerful than him.

I broke through the crowd, took a running start, jumped, and pushed Matas as hard as I could.

I bounced off him like a tennis ball. An oooooohhh came from the crowd of kids, and they all got out of the way. The Rat let go of Andrés and came for me. I looked at the clock. There were five minutes left til the bell. Five minutes... I started to back away. But the same thing happened to me as Andrés. Zumendi got behind me and pushed me at Matas. He ground his jaw and put up his fists like a boxer. I put mine up too, even though I knew I couldn't stop him. But instead of punching me, Matas kicked me in the pit of my stomach.

I started to sink to my knees, while all around me I heard another oooooohhh... I couldn't breathe. I put my hands on the ground and then lay down all the way, even though the cement was really cold. It hurt a lot, but not getting air was worse.

The Rat and Zumendi grabbed me, one on each arm, and lifted me up. Matas came over again, spit on his hands, and rubbed them together. I wanted to tell him not to hit me again, that if he did it could kill me, but I didn't have any air.

“Don't you think you've done more than enough?”

Matas stopped his fist and looked to the left. The ring of onlookers opened up, and there was Valentín.

Valentín Morales. El Loco. He's in my class, but he was held back. He's 11, or he will be. He's blond, and older than me, although not as old as Matas and his cronies.

“And who put you in charge?” asked Matas.

“I did, you lousy bully. Leave him alone.”

Matas started to laugh and went for Valentín. The Rat and Zumendi let me go and I gasped for air. Obviously, Valentín had come to defend me, just like I had come to defend Andrés. Valentín turned sideways and started moving his arms really slowly. He opened them, traced a circle, crossed them, and then opened them again, with his fingers outstretched. Meanwhile, those crazy blue eyes he has were fixed on Matas.

“He knows karate!” someone said.

“No,” he said. “Kung-fu.”

Matas stopped cold. Everybody knows karate is better than judo, but kung-fu is even better than that. A guy who practices kung-fu can beat eight enemies in a fight, while a karate guy can only beat five.

“You're a big fat liar,” said Matas, but he didn't look very convinced.

“Try me and see.”

Any doubt was resolved by the bell.

Everybody went running. I went over to Andrés and helped him get his stuff together. My stomach still hurt, but I could breathe again.

“Sorry I didn't help you,” he told me, drying his tears with a handkerchief. I'd done it with my sleeve, because I never carry a hankie.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “They would've beat me up anyway, and laughed some more. What's this?”

The last notebook was wrapped in brown paper. Once I had it in my hand, I recognized the shape. A superhero comic! I opened it and leafed through it as fast as I could. It was the Fantastic Four.

“Close that, so nobody sees! I brought it to give to you at the end of the day. Take it now if you want.”

“No, no. Put it back in your bag and take it with you to class,” I told him. “I don't have anywhere to hide it.”

“Put it under your shirt.”

I told him no, it was too valuable. We'd wait til the end of the day. We'd find each other behind some car and slip the comic from one bag to the other.

I hadn't thanked Valentín for saving me from a beating. When I looked around for him, everybody was already off the playground, forming up on the porches. Andrés and I raced each other, and my side started to hurt. It always happens when I run, because of the asthma I had when I was little, and it's even worse if someone kicks me in the pit of my stomach.

We got in our lines, me in 5.° B and Andrés in 4.° A. Then we filed down the halls. When I got to the classroom, I sat down and opened my desk to take out my bag. We had class with a monk who was new this year. Padre Vivar.

We waited, sitting silently, taking out our books and notebooks for science. A minute later, Padre Vivar showed up. He always sweeps in, and his white vestments fly around like Superman's cape. We got to our feet and all of us said “Buenos días” at the same time. He looked at us for a second, and then made a motion for us to sit down.

Padre Vivar is our oldest teacher, at least ninety. His face isn't fat, so he doesn't have a double chin or thick earlobes like my uncle Fermín. But his body takes up space like a church bell, and sometimes I think I hear metallic sounds, like he has pots and pans hanging under his robes. He has glasses so dark you can barely see his eyes. Sometimes I imagine that if he took

them off he'd shoot us down with lazer beams, like Cyclops. But Padre Vivar is more like a supervillain than a superhero.

He only smiles when he hits us. The second week of class, he went out of the room for a minute and left Zapata in charge. Zapata wrote my name on the board and put two crosses next to it, even though I didn't even talk. When Padre Vivar came back, I tried to explain, but he wouldn't let me.

“What a good record you had, Medina,” he told me, because I was the only one out of the whole class who'd been spared up til then.

To me he seemed like The Thing, striking me with his brick hand.

Today we started on the table of insects. I buzzed between my teeth, like everybody else, so that it seemed like the class was full of flies. What were flies? Oh yeah, diptera. Diptera, orthoptera, hemiptera, lepidoptera, coleoptera... Too bad we don't study pterodactyls. Dinosaurs are way cooler than insects, but they don't exist anymore, so we don't study them.

Suddenly there was a racket. I looked over at the window. Valentín was sitting there. There are thirty seven of us in class: nineteen pair desks, and Valentín's. He sits by himself because he likes to. The first day of class, I tried to sit by him. He looked at me all serious and said: “Go away. You're distracting me.” It's what he says to everybody. I don't know what we could be distracting him from. It can't be paying attention in class, because he's always looking out the window. He's repeating fifth year, but he still gets more zeroes than anybody.

The reason for the ruckus was a gigantic beetle, a stag beetle with a string around its neck that started flying around above our heads. Even though Padre Vivar called for silence, people were ducking and shouting. Valentín jumped up and ran to recapture his pet.

We had a window open, because Padre Vivar gets hot. The stag beetle escaped through it.

Valentín kept waving his arms through the window, like he was saying goodbye to his beetle.

There were some giggles, but quiet ones. Padre Vivar grabbed Valentín by the arms, dragged him to the podium, and put him firmly at the base of the chalkboard.

“Medina.”

I flinched in my seat; he gave me a fear-ache. Had I done something wrong without realizing it?

“What time is it?” he asked.

“Eleven forty-five.”

“Notify me when five minutes have passed, and again every five minutes after that.”

We kept studying silently while Padre Vivar passed between the desks. I couldn't take my eyes off my watch. When the minute hand landed on the ten and the second hand on the twelve, I leapt up like a spring.

“Now!”

At that moment, Padre Vivar was passing by the podium. Like someone who didn't want to do it, he turned mid-stride and smacked Valentín. He was looking out the window, and the slap almost got him on the nose. The blow was silent, but it must have hurt. Valentín cringed a little, but then he stood still again and didn't say anything.

“Every five minutes,” Padre Vivar reminded me.

A minute passed. The tension grew. I had put my watch on the desk and was watching the minute hand.

Usually classes go slowly, but I swear the minute hand was moving in front of my eyes. No one ever talked in Padre Vivar's class, but today it was super-silent. I could almost hear the gears in my watch, while the others raised their eyes slyly, looking first at me, then Padre Vivar, and finally Valentín.

The minute and second hands arrived where I didn't want them to. I said: “Now.”

I couldn't look. The second blow was classic, from the sound of it. I guess it hurt Valentín less than the first one.

Class lasted until twelve thirty. I had to alert Padre Vivar seven more times. At the end of class, nobody was studying. Everyone watched Valentín, who was still behind the podium, not saying anything. He didn't let out even one tear.

I realized I was starting to like him. He'd stood up to Matas, and now he was resisting Padre Vivar's torture without crying. It stunk that, when we left, he was going to break my face for this thing with the watch.

The ninth blow lined up with the end-of-class bell. Valentín went back to his seat. Then Don Jacinto, the math teacher, came. Valentín looked at me a couple of times during class. I felt like a cockroach.

I stopped writing because my mom called us for dinner. My dad still hasn't come home. There are times we only see him on the weekends, because of his extra hours at the factory. But he always comes to see us when he can. I turn out the light before he comes in. He gives me a kiss and I get sleepy.

“Until tomorrow,” he says.

“God willing,” I answer.

And then, after awhile, I turn on the light and keep reading. The Dwarf doesn't care, because he sleeps like a log. I don't always read comics. Right now I'm reading *Las mimas del rey Salomón*, that I got from the Bookmobile.

Moving on. At midday I met up with Andrés outside the school. Lots of moms come to see their kids, but mine isn't one of them. That's why I can go around with Andrés, kicking cans and talking about superheroes.

Andrés' mom doesn't pick him up because she helps out at his dad's practice. They live in a red block, with twelve floors, one of the tallest in City of Angels (our neighborhood). It has an elevator, not like mine. I already said his dad is a dentist. He makes a lot of money. I love going to Andrés' house, because he's an only child and he has a bedroom at the end of the hallway where nobody bugs us. He has a lot more toys than my brothers and I combined. He has all the Madelmans, and construction games and model kits for boats and planes that aren't even on TV. Andrés gets a weekly allowance. I think he puts it in his piggybank, but he keeps more than half for our monthly trip to Villaverde to buy back-room comics.

“Hey, could you pass me that comic?” I said.

We moved away a little, without crossing the street, because there's a guardhouse on the other side. There have been guards in all the posts for a few days now, and they yell at people if they get too close to the wall.

Between a Seiscientos and a Simca, Andrés passed me the comic. I opened it and whistled. Galactus, Devourer of Worlds! He's the most powerful of all the supervillains.

“Don't show it to anybody,” Andrés told me. “Look, here comes Valentín!”

I wanted to run out of there, but my nerves made me spill my bag between two cars. I grabbed the comic first, and then everything else. When I got up, Valentín was there, looking at me without blinking.

“Listen, it wasn't my fault, the thing with the watch.”

“I didn't come to talk to you about that, idiot. I know it wasn't your fault.”

“Oh... Hey, thanks for what you did at recess. Do you really know kung-fu?”

“Of course. But I didn't come for that either. You guys have superhero comics.”

“Me? No, I don't have any of those...”

“Why do you ask?” interrupted Andrés.

“I'm asking because I know you do.”

“You know that's a dumb thing to ask.”

“You guys like superheroes, or not?”

“If you want to read our comics for free, in your dreams.”

“Chssss!” I hissed at Andrés, elbowing him. But he ignored me and continued.

“You bring comics to share, or you get nothing.”

Trafficking superhero comics is serious business. I guess it's worse if you get caught with drugs, or dirty magazines. Last school year three boys got kicked out for reading magazines with naked ladies in them. I don't know if they would expel me for having superhero comics. For a week, at best. What's worse is that they would confiscate the comics and burn them.

There are kids who go between houses sharing superhero comics. Andrés and I have thought about doing it a thousand times, but we haven't dared. We prefer to wait for others to come to us. Sometimes, when we're at Andrés' house, they call the entryphone. The codephrase is: “We're trading soccer cards.”

“I don't care about comics,” answered Valentín. He didn't say why.

“Oh, no? Why do you say that?” asked Andrés.

“Answer me first.” Valentín looked to both sides, like he was going to rob a bank, and whispered: “Do you guys like superheroes or not?”

I kept looking at his eyes. They're so blue. More than just being blond, Zapata got into it with him because he looks German. Valentín got really mad, but Don Luis told him he shouldn't, that at best he has a little German blood, and that's a good thing. The Germans helped us in the war with the Reds, and we helped them in the final great war.

In the school lobby, there's a big photo of Hitler and Franco, together with Stalin, although I don't know why that Ruskie is in the same picture with them if he's as bad as they say. What's weird is that Hitler, being German, isn't blond like Valentín, but more dark-haired like me.

“Yes, we like superheroes,” I acknowledged. “Now will you tell us what you want?”

Valentín came closer and lowered his voice again. All three of us were squashed together between the bumpers of the Seiscientos and the Simca.

“I know a superhero. He’s got problems and I’ve been helping him. But I need someone to help me.”

I thought for a couple seconds.

“You’re nuts, man. I hate to say it, but you’re nuts.”

“And you’re an imbecile. I thought you’d be a little smarter than everyone else in class.”

He turned and walked away. But instead of going home (I know he lives on the same street as the school, next to the guardhouse, but way higher), he went back across from the gate and turned the corner around the wall. Then he turned right. That road would take him to the Andalucía highway, one of the borders of City of Angels. Andrés and I looked at each other. Then we went to eat, talking about other things.

I spent the whole day thinking, and that’s why I sat down to write this. What if it’s true that Valentín knows a superhero? I would love it if it were true. The world would be a better place if there were superheroes.

Friday, 30 October

This week has been really boring until today. It’s still cloudy, and sometimes it rains a little. The older people say there’s going to be the storm of the century, but we’re still waiting for it.

Today two kids came to share comics. I know them by sight, even though they go to the state school. They called the entryphone and said the codephrase: “Soccer cards.” My mom was knitting a sweater in the living room.

“Who is it, Carlos?”

“Some guys with trading cards.”

“Tell them to wipe their feet on the mat!”

“Yes, mama!”

I opened the door for them and led them down the hallway to my bedroom in the back. The Dwarf was playing in the street with a gang of other dwarfs, so I didn't have to kick him out. I blocked the door with a chair and the detergent drum we keep the Exín Castillos pieces in.

The boys opened a plastic bag and dumped it out on my bed. There were at least fifteen books. The paper covers said “Mathematics”, “Spanish Language”, “Etiquette”, things like that. Inside were comics. I started to look through them. There were three Spidermans, my favorite hero, because he tricks the bad guys while he covers them with webs. Two Red Angels; I love when he spreads his solar wings to collect energy. One Thor. Four of The Hulk. The Hulk is the strongest. I like it when he pounds the ground and you can read in capital letters: BRAAA-KOOOOM!! When Andrés and I play The Hulk vs. The Thing, we love making that noise. Andrés says The Thing has the strength of two hundred men, and The Hulk has the strength of five hundred. I don't know where he gets those numbers. We always argue about which superhero is the most powerful, just like the other kids in class argue which Madrid player is the best, Butragueño, Laudrup, or Van Basten. (Van Basten was chosen best player in Europe this year. That's all I know about soccer.)

Thanks to Andrés, I always have some comics to trade. There are a few copies which have changed hands so many times they're practically scraps. But I don't care as long as I can read them.

In the end, the boys took the six comics I had at home. In exchange, they left me with two Spidermans, two Hulks, one Red Angel, and a Doctor Strange. That one made me a little

confused with all the weird words, but it's awesome when he goes to other dimensions.

I haven't talked to Valentín again. He still sits by himself, and at recess he plays basketball with his old buddies in sixth year. At lunchtime he goes down the same road, the one that doesn't go to his house. I want to follow him, but I don't dare. If I'm late to lunch, my mom will yell at me or punish me.

Sunday, 1 November

This morning, my grandpa came to see us, like he does every Sunday. First we went to the bakery and bought a long loaf. We ate it while we walked to the Andalucía highway. I've always liked bread, but the stuff we get with Grandpa is the best I know.

We cross the highway on a grey bridge. On the other side of the bridge is what we call el campo. This morning there was a flock of sheep. When he saw them, my grandpa remembered being a kid and taking care of flocks in the village. The Dwarf asked him to tell the story again about the time he climbed a tree because the people next door wanted to beat him. Then my older brother, Julio, asked him about the war against the Reds.

“We're learning about it in class.”

My grandpa told us about being at the front of the Casa de Campo. I don't like war stories much. Although there are some superhero comics, like the Red Angel, Captain America, and Sergeant Fury, that talk about the final great war. They call it the “second world war.” My grandpa told us that it was going really badly, because there were more Reds and they had a lot of cannons, until Franco himself got involved.

“He came flying in and *zas!*, the Reds' cannons were smashed to pieces.”

Then I saw Valentín, far away. He was climbing up a slope. He was going really carefully, and he had a backpack. I yelled out to him, but he didn't hear me.

We came to Manzanares and decided to skip rocks. I'm really bad at it, so I looked for

smooth rocks and gave them to my grandpa, who's the best rock-skipper, and who's already seventy five years old. Sometimes the rocks bounce across the river and land on the other side.

It's harder every time to find good rocks for skipping. That could be because we come every Sunday. I kept looking and wandered off a little down the bank. Before I knew it, I couldn't see my grandpa or my brothers. I was about fifty meters from the railroad bridge. There was someone underneath it. I was kind of scared and I started to go back when I realized it was Valentín. I went a little closer and I saw he was talking to someone. It was a man, sitting with his back against the concrete of the bridge. Valentín saw me and signaled for me to come closer. But at that moment I heard my grandpa calling for me, so I waved to Valentín and took off.

I have to talk to him.

Friday, 6 November

The days I'd been meaning to talk to Valentín kept piling up, but he didn't give me a chance, not at recess or in class. Finally, I asked him why he'd signaled for me to come closer.

“I wanted you to go away.”

I felt so humiliated that I didn't talk to him again all week. But on Friday he came to us. Andrés and I were eating *gusanitos* on the steps. It was drizzling, because the clouds were still around, but the patio was full of kids playing ball.

“I need you guys to help me.”

“What, again?” said Andrés.

“Does it have something to do with the man under the bridge?” I asked. Valentín got so close his voice was almost tickling my ear.

“I have to be sure you're not going to tell anybody.”

“I promise!” I said.

“It's not enough that you promise.”

“Why not?” Andrés protested.

“You could cross your fingers and then it's worthless. I want you to swear.”

Andrés and I looked at each other.

“Swearing is a sin,” said Andrés.

“Only if you don't do what you swear,” I told him.

“Swear right now, damn it!”

Valentín usually talks like he's in a Roman movie. Andrés and I swear not to blab to anyone about what he tells us.

“I need you to bring me food from home.”

“What?”

“I'm taking food to... to Brais.”

“And who's that?”

Brais was the vagabond I'd seen under the bridge. He's sick. Valentín has been bringing him food from home for two weeks, but his mom was starting to catch on and was watching him. Now he could hardly bring Brais a pear and a *magdalena* every day. He was thinner every time and couldn't stop coughing.

“If we can't get him better before it gets cold, he'll die.”

“You're a liar,” said Andrés.

Valentín grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him up. He almost lifted him off the ground. I thought, *At least he's stronger than Matas.*

“If anything happens to Brais, it'll be on your conscience, Mejías.”

“Let go, you're ruining my jacket!”

“You'll bring food?”

“Yes, just let go!”

That afternoon I was home alone. I don't like going out much, because all the kids my age are always playing soccer.

I took advantage of being alone to make an expedition to the kitchen. I chose an orange and a banana. Also a can of chickpeas, and some chocolate squares. Well, substitute. Every time I go to Andrés' house and my mom gives me a snack, I throw the substitute in the gutter, because Andrés has real chocolate. No matter what Mom says, there's a difference.

That night, Mom missed the can of chickpeas. I don't like them, so she didn't even think I'd stolen them, and she didn't think to look in my bag.

“Must have been gremlins,” she said.

The next day, I went to school hunched over more than usual. At midday I gave the cargo to Valentín. Andrés had brought a piece of empanada and real chocolate.

“It's gonna be a pain carrying all this,” said Valentín. “Why don't you guys come with me?”

We told him that was impossible. Manzanares is so far away there wouldn't be time to get home for lunch. Valentín could do it, because his mom works and isn't home then. He never talks about his dad.

“It's Saturday tomorrow – I can come with you then,” I told him. “Me too!” said Andrés.

And that's how it started.

Saturday, 7 November

This morning I had the idea to take out Simbad, our dog. He's a six-month-old puppy. His mom was a Pekingese, and I don't know what his dad was. He looks like a German shepherd, but miniature. He's really naughty. At the beginning of the year he destroyed my science book and my mom had to buy another one.

When I brought Simbad back up, I told my parents I was going out. They thought it was weird, but it seemed okay to them. “You're always inside,” Dad said, and gave me ten extra duros. I don't know why they were so smiley when I closed the door.

It was 11 in the morning. I called Andrés' entryphone, and then we went to school. Valentín was waiting for us at the gate. There was a poster for the movie showing at the school that afternoon: Cristobal Colón: La conquista del paraíso.

“Are you gonna go see it?” Andrés asked me.

I remembered I had ten duros in my pocket. But I thought it was much better to save them for comics.

“I don't think so.”

“I heard it's kinda boring,” said Andrés. My grandpa says all movies are boring nowadays. That when he was young they had American movies, and they were much better than the European ones.

“*You* guys are boring,” said Valentín. “Let's go, it's getting late on us.”

We walked together to the school wall, and down a few streets until we came to the Andalucía highway. When we crossed the freeway over the bridge, it occurred to me that it was the first time I'd gone to the other side without my grandpa.

Even though we went pretty quickly, it was past one thirty when we got to the river. I found a smooth rock and threw it, but it sank like always. Valentín snapped at me for wasting time.

The vagabond was still under the bridge.

“I'd like you to meet Brais,” said Valentín, very seriously.

Brais tried to get up, but his knees gave out. Valentín ran to get ahold of his arm and help him sit back down. The vagabond stretched out a hand, and we shook it. His hand was big, but thin. When he tried to sit up I noticed he was really tall.

Brais has a really scruffy beard. His eyes are blue, and his hair is blond, although it's so dirty it almost doesn't look like it. He wears a long raincoat and black boots. The raincoat is covered with stains.

“It doesn't look like a superhero costume to me,” I said.

“He wears his uniform underneath. Show them, Brais.”

Brais was slow to understand Valentín, but finally he undid a couple buttons. Underneath were some kind of red pajamas. Valentín pulled back the lapels a little more, because Brais was so weak. On his chest was a black shield, and crossing it, two yellow wings.

“The Red Angel!” Andrés exclaimed.

Brais moved his chin to say yes, that was him. I thought he must be some nutjob who'd copied the shield from a comic and sewn it on his pajamas. Although he looked too old to read comics.

Brais was too weak to speak. Valentín gave him the food we'd brought. He put together bread and *salchichón* for him, and then peeled the fruit and put the pieces in his mouth. Which was impressive, because the vagabond reeked. And next to Manzanares, it's hard to tell if something smells bad. I took a couple steps aside.

“Hey,” asked Andrés, “How do you spell Brais?”

“Bee-ar-y-see-e,” Valentín answered.

“Oh, Bryce! The Red Angel's secret identity is Vernon Bryce!”

Andrés, who until then had been even more skeptical than me, looked excited. I told him a shield on some red pajamas didn't mean anything.

“Don't call Bryce's uniform pajamas,” said Valentín. “Can't you see how sick he is? I don't want you upsetting him.”

Bryce ate everything we'd brought. Which was quite a bit. Andrés said that showed he was a superhero, because superheroes eat a lot.

“What does that have to do with it?” I asked him.

“Well, because they need more energy for their superpowers.”

“The shrimp has a point,” said Valentín.

“Don't make fun of Andrés.”

We shut up and turned around. Bryce was the one who'd spoken. He'd straightened up a little. He talked funny. Instead of “Andrés” he said something like “Andurés”.

“It's because he has a U.S. accent,” Valentín explained. “Bryce is from the United States, right?”

“California,” he said. “Land of the sun.” (He said “tierua” instead of tierra).

“Tell them what city you're from.”

“Los Angeles.”

“Whoa!” blurted Andrés. “Like us!”

“Yes,” said Valentín. “But Los Angeles in the United States is a thousand times bigger than our neighborhood.”

Andrés started asking Bryce questions. Me too, but with an ulterior motive. I was convinced he was crazy, and I wanted to catch him slipping up. But Valentín wouldn't let us interrogate him.

“He's really weak. Don't harass him. We're going now.”

“And leave him here by himself?” Andrés asked.

“I'll come back tomorrow morning. If you guys want, you can come with me.”

“How can we leave him here, stranded under a bridge?” Andrés asked.

“We can't bring him home,” I said. “Think about what you'd say to your dad if he found a hobo in his office.”

“He's not a hobo!” shouted Valentín, and he just about punched me.

“Sorry, I meant to say he looks like a hobo. I know he's really a superhero.”

Valentín practically pushed us out of there. As we were leaving, Andrés insisted we couldn't leave Bryce exposed to the elements. Valentín shook his head the whole time. He'll be fine, he told us. He's much stronger than he looks, and he's getting better. It didn't look like it to me.

Thursday, 12 November

We went to see Bryce this afternoon, after stopping at home to drop off our bags. Neither Andrés or I could go at lunchtime, but we give food to Valentín every day.

Bryce was worse. Yesterday it rained a little, and it gets colder every day. The clouds are still so dark that I can't remember what the sun is like.

Even though it gave me the willies, I felt Bryce's forehead. It almost burned my hand. If we'd brought a thermometer to use, I bet it would've exploded.

"He's hot because his metabolism is so much faster than a normal human being's," Valentín told us. Then he explained what 'metabolism' was.

"Hey, with all the stuff you know, why are you so behind?" I asked him.

"Because I couldn't care less about the stuff they teach in school."

Bryce was lying down, and talked between his teeth. I couldn't understand a word he was saying. According to Valentín, when he's delirious he speaks English, his native language. I don't know English, or any other language. Next year we're going to start studying German. But there was one word I heard a lot.

"It sounds like he's saying *misión*."

"Yeah, that's right," said Valentín.

"Of course. He's a superhero, and he has to complete a mission," said Andrés.

I didn't believe it, but I kept my mouth shut. I made myself think about something else,

and suddenly I had an idea.

“Why don't we build him a house?”

I explained that stray dogs and cats took shelter under my building. There's a little vacant lot, too, with mulberry trees, where people play soccer and all that. There's a corner there, between a ledge and some stairs, where we've built huts for the dogs with cardboard fruit boxes.

“We've saved more than one dog's life during the winter,” I told them.

They liked the idea. Valentín suggested using something sturdier than boxes.

“There's a worksite up the river. There's nobody there at lunchtime. We could go steal bricks.”

“We already told you, we can't come at lunchtime,” said Andrés.

“If you want to help Bryce, you're going to have to make some sacrifices. What, do you think Spiderman cared about being late for some tests?”

Valentín didn't allow objections. He found the solution himself. After we left el campo, he came up with me to my house. I introduced him to my mom, and I realized he must have made a good impression, because she gave him pan y chocolate (substitute, of course). Simbad liked him too, and he kept chewing on his pantlegs to get Valentín to play with him. Valentín asked my mom if I could eat lunch at his house tomorrow.

“We have a science test. I want Carlos to help me, because he always gets good grades.”

“That's fine. But remember to clear the table after; your poor mother works hard enough without having to pick up after you later.”

I didn't know my mom knew Valentín's, but I didn't say anything. Andrés was waiting for us outside. When we explained what had happened, he couldn't believe it.

“If my parents found out I'd tricked them, they'd kill me.”

“If your parents found out you have superhero comics in the house, they'd kill you too,” I said. “Are we together on this?”

“Not me...”

“Are we together?” I asked again, and put my hand between the three of us, palm down.

Valentín put his hand over mine, and finally Andrés, with a whimper, did the same.

“For the supergroup of the Red Angel!” I said, although I still thought Bryce was just a crazy hobo.

“For the supergroup of the Red Angel!” my friends responded.

Friday, 13 November

Half the day has been a disaster, and the other half has been... interesting.

At lunchtime, we went to the worksite Valentín told us about. In my neighborhood and the others nearby, there are always worksites. Sometimes the workers come to the vacant lot next to my house and fill it with ditches. I like it when they do that, because then no one can play soccer.

Sometimes they leave the ditches open for days and days, and we use them as trenches and play 'final great war'. I'm always on the British side, even though they lost. I'm more sympathetic to them because of my comics.

We only had two hours before we had to get back to class, so we ate on the road. Andrés had money from his piggybank, and we used it to buy six bags of *gusanitos* and three chocolate-filled pastries. If my mom finds out that's what I ate today, she'll kill me.

When we crossed the freeway, instead of going to the bridge we veered left. There were mountains of debris formed up like dunes. Finally we got to the worksite. There were some huge holes in the ground, which according to Valentín were for foundations, but we didn't see diggers anywhere. There were half-fallen brick walls too, and metal-and-asbestos huts.

“I think this is abandoned,” I said.

“Well, even better,” Valentín replied.

There was a hole in the wire fence at ground level. Andrés said he didn't want to crawl, because he'd get dirty. I found some cardboard and laid it out like a mat so he could go through on top of it.

We saw bricks scattered everywhere, and many of them were intact. The best part was that there were huge piles of sand, too. Valentín and I started playing King of the Mountain, while Andrés told us we shouldn't be so rough, we were going to ruin our clothes. I fought with all my might, but Valentín is bigger than me, and in the end he sent me rolling through the sand.

"I'm the king of the mountain!" he shouted, raising his arms.

Then we remembered that we'd come to look for bricks for Bryce's hut. It was almost two fifteen, and we had to be back at school by three thirty. We started stacking bricks, until we had at least thirty.

"Hey," said Andrés, who hadn't carried more than three bricks, "now how are we going to carry them?"

Valentín looked at the bricks and scratched his head. He obviously hadn't thought about that. Neither had I.

"We could drag them behind us in some boxes."

It didn't seem like a good idea to me, but we split up to look for boxes in all the debris.

Suddenly, Andrés came running, his eyes wild.

"Matas is coming!"

We heard voices and went running. We didn't have time to get back to the fence, so we hid in one of the huts. It was full of junk and smelly stuff. When we came in, a rat almost as big as my dog ran out, and we had to cover Andrés' mouth so he wouldn't scream. We huddled in a corner. The voices sounded so close I thought they were going to come in the hut. Valentín got up and peeked out through a screen in the door.

"It's the same three as always," he whispered, "but El Flaco came too."

“Who's that?”

“The worst one of all. Look.”

I had to stand on my tiptoes to see out. Matas, the Rat, and Zumendi were next to the sand pile. But there was another boy with them, who was as tall as a grownup. I'd seen him around, but I didn't know he was Matas' friend. He scared me. He had a face like a crazy person, with bulging red eyes, a protruding Adam's apple, and his mouth hanging open.

“He went to our school,” Valentín explained. “He's fifteen. They kicked him out because he pulled a knife on a teacher.”

“Get up here, Andrés,” I said.

“No thanks. I just wanna get out of here.”

“Yeah, me too. But we can't go now. If they see us, they'll beat us up for sure.”

“Why would they beat us up?”

“Don't be dumb, Andrés. They'd beat us up because they can.”

I sat back down for a minute, because being on tiptoes is uncomfortable. Valentín told us what he saw, although Matas and his friends were so noisy we could have figured it out. They played 'King of the Mountain' for a while, and Matas and El Flaco won. Then they found our pile of bricks and started knocking it over.

“It's already past two thirty,” Andrés told us. “We have to go.”

“Wait,” I answered. “I'm sure they'll get bored and leave.”

But when I got back up, they'd sat down on the sand pile to smoke. Valentín told me it was a joint. I asked him what that was, and he told me it's drugs. I got more scared. Andrés started sniveling.

“We're not going to have time. We're going to be late to class. Just wait until my mom finds out...”

I felt the same as Andrés, but didn't say anything. Matas and his friends kept smoking, laughing harder all the time. They were talking about *polvo* and *paja*, or something like that. I asked Valentín what they meant.

“If you don't know, I don't think this is the best time to tell you.”

Andrés didn't do anything except look at his watch. He got so pale I thought he was going to throw up. Suddenly, he said “I can't stand it anymore,” and he got up and pushed open the door of the hut. But instead of getting the heck out of there, he just stood outside with his mouth and eyes wide open, like he'd seen a ghost.

“Hey, lookee here!” shouted Zumendi.

“Well, if it isn't the Toad himself!”

Valentín and I looked at each other for a second before leaving the hut. Our enemies were next to the sand pile, about fifteen meters away. I don't know what Andrés saw, but Matas and Zumendi were rolling up their pantlegs. Valentín grabbed Andrés by the arm and dragged him towards the fence, and I followed them. We ran like rabbits, while they threw stones and insults from behind us. One hit me in the back, but I was so scared I didn't even feel it. Valentín got to the fence first and wriggled underneath like a cat. I went next.

Andrés tried to go through crouched so he wouldn't tear his trouser legs. All that did was get his jacket hooked in the wire. The bullies were almost on top of him, but when they saw he was stuck they stopped and threw more rocks.

Valentín and I grabbed Andrés, one on each arm, and pulled as hard as we could. There was no other way – we opened the jacket and freed his arms. We left it hanging on the wire and went running, although Andrés slowed us down because he wouldn't stop shouting “My jacket, my jacket!”

“You want this, Toad?” the Rat asked.

Seeing they hadn't crossed the fence, we stopped a moment. It seemed like they didn't really want to come after us. The Rat put the jacket down in front of El Flaco and Matas, who unzipped their flies and pissed on it. Andrés cried and squirmed, but we didn't let go of him.

“Look, Toad!” the Rat shouted. “This perfume is better than that girly smell you use!”

“You guys are mean! Someone's going to punish you for what you're doing!”

“Ooo, I'm so scared! We're so bad we're going to *hell!*”

“Let's go, Andrés,” Valentín said.

“No!”

“Come on, right now, or we're leaving you here.”

Finally we convinced him and left, not looking back. Andrés never stopped sniveling. Valentín told us we couldn't go see Bryce, because Matas and his friends could be following us. And besides, it was late. We were going to have to hurry to get back to school before three thirty.

Andrés wouldn't stop repeating that his mother was going to kill him, that she was going to punish him until Christmas, and even worse he was going to get the flu because he was really cold. I got so worked up I gave him my coat. He looked like a penguin in it. I hate to say it, but all that whimpering was getting on my nerves. I can't be going around with eight year old babies.

That afternoon, Valentín and I went to see Bryce. Andrés told us we should forget about him, that he didn't want to know anything else about this story and that everything was our fault.

When we got to the bridge, we didn't see Bryce. We got kind of scared, but then we saw that he'd dragged himself over to the other mouth of the bridge. He was lying on the ground and shaking. Valentín touched his forehead and said it was still really hot. I wouldn't get too close, but he smelled worse than ever, like he was rotting inside. But Valentín didn't care. He sat next to him, lifted his head, and gave him bread, *mortadela*, and fruit. Bryce opened his eyes a little and ate all of it.

I'd brought some aspirin from home. I gave them to Valentín. When he saw them, Bryce swallowed four at once, without chewing. I was horrified, because Mom always tells me taking aspirin like that is really bad for your stomach, and she makes me dissolve them in a spoonful of water.

The aspirin and the food seemed to help. When he finished, he sat up against the bridge wall. His face was almost black from dirt, so his eyes looked even more blue. They had never looked wider than they did at that moment.

“Don't worry, boys. I'll get out of this. And then I'll fight the mutants and the ones who hurt me.”

I sat on the ground, without getting any closer, and asked him if he knew other superheroes.

I was convinced he wouldn't know a single one to tell us. He seemed like too much of a beggar to have read superhero comics.

“Yes, almost all. For a long time. Iron Man, Thor, Spiderman. I fought with Captain America in the war.”

Following the comics, he was right: the Red Angel often fought alongside Captain America, trying to keep heavy water away from the Germans. From what I've read, this water is used to make atomic bombs. In the end, the Germans did build them and dropped four on a city called London. The British had to surrender, and that's how the final great war ended. I read that in my brother Julio's books.

But even though his answers were right and he was called Bryce, I didn't believe any of it. I thought he was just a grownup who still read superhero comics.

“How old are you, a hundred?” I asked.

“No, not that old. I'm not even eighty yet,” he answered, with a cough. “That's impossible.”

“Have you seen our leader, Franco? How old did you say he was?”

I thought. Franco had aged well, it's true. He still stands very straight, and when I see him on the news or the Nodo he looks way younger than my grandpa.

“He's going to be a hundred, but he looks a lot younger,” I recalled.

“Aha! Superheroes don't age like normal people.”

“But Franco is no hero!”

Bryce looked at me for a moment, then let loose a guffaw that turned into a cough.

“Right. He's not a superhero. But he wasn't always the way you see him now. When he was young he was very short, and going bald. But in the twenties he took part in an experiment. The probability waves transformed him and made him more powerful. Like his accomplices, Hitler and Stalin. I came to Spain because of him.”

“I don't understand.”

“I came to kill him.” Bryce had spoken too much and had a coughing fit. But he pushed himself to continue. “I failed. I believe your Franco is more powerful than I.”

“If he's not a superhero, then...” Valentín began.

“Yes. Franco is a supervillain.”

Sunday, 15 November

This morning we didn't go to *el campo* with our loaf of bread, because my grandpa has lumbago. My mom thinks it's the weather. These black clouds have been around for more than three weeks, and there's been no way for the sun to get through.

In the afternoon we went to my grandparents' house, like every Sunday. The old folks settle in to play cards, chat, and watch the soccer match, filling the whole place with smoke. My brothers and I hang out in the side room. This Sunday we played a war series that's on Friday afternoons called “The U-boot”. It's about a German submarine fighting the British.

During breaks in soccer, the news comes on. Hearing the name Franco, I went towards the living room.

I'd heard right. There was Franco, cutting a white ribbon. The announcer said: "El Generalísimo, in company of the Minister of Information and Tourism Don Adolfo Suárez, has inaugurated a cultural foundry," I don't know, something like that. I was fixed on Franco. It's true, he can't be almost a hundred. You can barely see any wrinkles. He presented a palm to the Minister, and went faster than him or anyone else who followed. He was wearing a military uniform, but with a super-long cape that waved like a one in a comic would.

"Grandpa, what experiment did Franco do to look younger than you?"

I asked it without thinking, and I didn't expect what happened next. My uncle Paco, the bachelor, said between his teeth:

"What that man's done is make a pact with the devil."

"Not that again!" shouted my grandpa. "Francisco Franco is preserved by the Grace of God, and for the good of Spain. And there's nothing more to say!"

Everyone stayed quiet, and I thought I'd really messed up. My grandpa took me by the arm and told me to come with him to get some glasses from the kitchen. I'd never seen him yell like that, and I thought he could have whupped me then. But when we went in the kitchen, he closed the door and sat on a stool with his back all stiff.

"Why did you ask that, about the experiment? Where did you hear it?"

"I don't know. Some guys at school were talking about it. I just wanted..."

"Never speak of it again, if you don't want to get yourself and everyone around you in trouble. Franco was always the same as he is now, understand me?"

"But Grandpa, I didn't say anything about it. I just asked why he doesn't look older."

"Well, don't ask again. And when you're old like me, if your grandson asks the same, tell

him to be quiet.”

“I don't understand.”

“We'll have Franco for many years, Carlos. It's best you learn to live with that.”

“But Grandpa, why can't you tell me? I won't tell anyone.”

“Franco is much more powerful than you think. You should be careful what you say, and even what you think. He has spies everywhere, and some of them can read minds.”

My dad sometimes says my grandpa exaggerates and has strange ideas. But I've decided today he was trying to tell me that Franco is a supervillain.

Tuesday, 16 November

Andrés didn't come to class today or yesterday. At lunchtime I went to his house and called the entryphone to ask about him. His mom told me he had the flu, which makes sense, given that he's been out playing in all this bad weather. She didn't invite me up.

I haven't seen Matas and his friends at school either. I hope they got the flu, or something worse.

This afternoon, Valentín and I went to see Bryce. The aspirin I'd brought him didn't make him better by itself. Today he told us he needed our help.

“You've already helped me so much, boys. But I need a little more. I thought I could get by on my own, but there's one hangup.”

“What is it?” I asked him.

“The bullet your Franco put in me.”

“Are you hurt?”

He told us to take off his raincoat. It made me a little sick. I've never seen a dirtier garment in my life. He sat with his back straight, because he still can't get up, and Valentín took off one sleeve and I did the other. When we'd gotten the coat off, I was startled. Underneath he

wore the full uniform of the Red Angel. Not just the shield across the chest, but the stripes on the shoulders and the black bands on the pants. What surprised me most was his condition. He was really thin, but his muscles still filled out the pajamas.

The suit had a hole in the back, but it looked a lot cleaner than the raincoat. Bryce raised his torso to show us his kidneys. Next to his spine, he was injured. There was a black hole, big, that I could've fit two of my fingers in. There was greenish pus coming out, and that's what was causing the smell. The surrounding flesh looked green and yellow, with purple patches and lumps. I let out a disgusted sound. Bryce covered his kidneys and leaned back against the wall.

"It looks bad," said Valentín. "Like it's gangrene."

"It might look that way," Bryce answered. "But if I was a human mortal and that was gangrene, I'd be dead. It's a merolite bullet."

Valentín didn't even blink. I realized he didn't know what Bryce was talking about. At the end of the day, Valentín hadn't read that many superhero comics, let alone the Red Angel. For once, I knew something he didn't.

"Merolite is a radioactive metal that's really harmful to superheroes," I explained. "Most of all the Red Angel and the other mutants."

"We have to get you to a hospital," said Valentín.

"No! I would have gone myself. Don't say anything. They're looking for me."

He was quiet for awhile, with his eyes closed. Sometimes he'd bite his lips, like something inside was hurting him and he didn't want to scream. Eventually he looked back at us.

"They know I'm not far. That's why all the clouds. You two have to get the bullet out of me."

And that's what Valentín promised. That tomorrow we'd get the bullet out.

Wednesday, 17 November

Andrés didn't come to school today either. Better for him. I don't know if he could have stood it.

We went to see Bryce after class. I'd grabbed a cutter from my dad's box of tools with a really sharp tip. I brought cotton and bandages, too. Valentín was in charge of the alcohol.

The operation... Bfff.

Bryce lay facedown and asked me to bring him pieces of cardboard. Valentín settled at his side and moved his clothes so he could see the wound.

“Now what do I do?” asked Valentín. “Look for the bullet.”

“With what?”

“With the scalpel blade!”

It wasn't exactly a scalpel, but Valentín put it in the wound. I realized he'd closed his eyes, and I told him so. He couldn't operate like that. Valentín swallowed and opened them. He was getting pale. I guess I was too, because even though I was sitting where I couldn't see the wound, I could smell it. It was like a mixture of toilet and rotten fish, and it turned my stomach.

Valentín kept digging. Bryce yelled, and put a piece of cardboard in his mouth. I asked him if he wanted to grab my hand and he told me no, he could break a bone.

“I see it,” said Valentín. “It's almost out.”

Bryce stuck his fingers in the ground and dragged them. He was making gouges in the ground, and he'd already destroyed three cardboard pieces between his teeth. Despite the cold, Valentín's face was dripping with sweat.

“I'm caught on something hard. It won't come out...”

I realized it was bone, and that it had to be Bryce's spine. The smell was worse all the time. Valentín turned his face away and put a hand to his mouth. His cheeks bulged like he was

going to throw up, but he didn't. Everything started to look blurry, because I was crying. Valentín breathed deeply and put the cutter back in the wound. I saw him clench his teeth and his face get red, and finally...

“Here it is!”

Valentín separated the cutter and took out the bullet. Now I could look. Some kind of green purée with blackish lumps flowed out of the wound, but now there was clean blood too. Valentín put a ball of cotton on it and pushed. Then he showed me the bullet. It was yellow, and it glowed like the handles of my alarm clock.

“Throw it in the river, far!”

Valentín put it in my hand. I felt a mild heat that grossed me out a little. I got up, came out from under the bridge, and threw it as far as I could. For being me, it wasn't a bad throw. The bullet flew like a firefly over the river and with a plop it sank, almost on the opposite bank.

Valentín was cleaning the wound with a stream of alcohol. If he'd done it to me, I would have died from the pain.

“Do you want a bandage?” I asked him.

“A bandage for a hole like this? We have to stitch it up.”

“Don't stitch up anything,” said Bryce. “Leave me alone, please.”

“But we can't leave. You're still bleeding.”

“Get out of here now, I said!” he shouted.

He looked at us with such a scary face that we got out of there.

We hadn't gotten far from the bridge when Valentín asked me to wait. There was part of a wall in a pile of rubble that still had some tiles stuck on. Valentín leaned on it and spent a good while throwing up. When he finished, he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

“You were really brave,” I told him.

He just looked at me. For the first time, his eyes were filled with tears.

Thursday, 19 November, in the afternoon

I'm writing now, in my bedroom, right after school. I don't want to forget the things I've heard, because they're really strange.

Andrés still hasn't shown up. Or Matas and his friends. I think they've been expelled from school for days. Good!

At lunchtime we went to see Bryce. The day before, before the operation, he'd asked us to bring him shaving stuff. I was scared to bring so much from home, but I opened the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and took blades, a brush, and soap. I was hoping to put it all back that night. My dad shaves in the morning, before work, and I thought it would be better if he didn't find out. Valentín brought some scissors. He'd told me there wasn't shaving stuff at his house. I almost asked him about his dad, but I didn't dare.

Bryce looked way better. The raincoat was just as dirty as ever, but he'd washed his face in the river and he almost looked like a different person. He thanked us for helping him the day before, and started shaving.

“How are you today?” Valentín asked him. “Oh, much stronger.”

“Then you could tell us some things.” “Oh, sure, ask away.”

“Tell us about the experiment,” I said.

Bryce was trimming his beard with the scissors. He looked at me for a moment and closed his eyes halfway. I thought he was going to tell me what my grandpa did, not to mention it, but he smiled.

“The experiment. Sure, I'll tell you about it.”

He talked awhile, shaving the whole time. I don't know how he did that without a mirror. I guess he's had a lot of practice.

He told us the experiment was done in 1926, when he was really little. The idea came

from a scientist who must have been crazy, an Austrian with a weird name, like Sss-Ródriguez. Like that, first “Sss” and then Ródriguez, with that weird accent.

His experiment was going to demonstrate something about atoms. He locked some poor cats in a strongbox with some bottles of radioactive poison. The next day, he opened the box to see if the cats were still alive. According to Bryce, nothing happened to the cats, but the whole universe changed.

“The universe was one-of-a-kind until then, you follow me?”

“Sure...”

“But because of that experiment it split into nearly infinite universes.”

“What?” said Valentín.

“Are you talking about other dimensions, like in Doctor Strange?” I asked.

“Yes!”

Bryce explained that there were universes where Franco won the war, but without superpowers. In others, the republicanos won, and then allied with the Russian communists to beat the Nazis. There was another universe where Franco himself was a communist and staged a coup, and many where he's shot to death in Morocco and things were totally different.

“There are universes where you have color television and are ruled by a king.”

I'd heard other kids say there was color television in Germany, but I was sure they didn't have a king. Hitler was in charge there, and besides, kings are really old-fashioned, not a nearly-21st century invention like color TV.

As for us, Bryce went on, we live in the universe of superheroes. He told us about something called “probability waves” that crossed Earth from pole to pole and cause mutations and superpowers in lots of people.

“But there are three villains who knew how to take advantage of these waves more than the others. Franco, Hitler, and Stalin.”

“What superpowers does Franco have?”

“He can fly, like many superheroes, but he can also control the weather. Haven't you seen the clouds that have been around for weeks?”

“It's true!”

Bryce explained he'd come to Spain to get rid of Franco. There's a barrier, a forcefield, that stops the American superheroes from getting into Europe. This forcefield was raised by Stalin, Hitler, and Franco after they won the final great war. Together, Professor Xavier, Doctor Strange, and Mister Fantastic had succeeded in opening a breach in the forcefield, and the Red Angel had come through it.

“But I failed. I couldn't get Franco. It was the second time I'd lost, like I did in the Great War. He hurt me, and then made these clouds so I couldn't use the sun's energy, the source of my power, to recover. He must think I'm still alive, because he hasn't cleared away the clouds.”

Valentín and I listened, dazed. I still don't know if I believe it or not, because it all seems too fantastic, but I spent the time to listen to his story. Suddenly I looked at my watch and saw it was five past three.

“We're going to be late, Valentín!”

Bryce was still shaving. He really was another person now. His face looked like the Red Angel from the comic. He had the big chin, with a dimple, and without the beard his eyes looked bluer. But it's impossible for him to be almost eighty. He doesn't look any older than my dad.

“Go now, boys,” he told us. “I don't want you to be punished on my account. We'll see each other again tomorrow.”

Until then, I thought. He has to finish telling his story.

Thursday, 19 November, at night

It was terrible. Poor Simbad!

Mom made me take him for a walk, because my brother Julio had gone to buy bread and milk. I'd finished writing in my diary and I had to do some math problems. I asked why she never made the Dwarf do it.

“He's only five, and don't call him the Dwarf.”

“But when *I* was five, you sent *me* on errands.”

“It's not the same.”

“Why isn't it the same?”

“Look, Carlos, take the dog out or I'll give it to you with my shoe.”

It's impossible to win in an argument with my mother. She has a will that I lack. Besides, she's just really grouchy. It's not just her. My grandpa, for example, laughs a lot less. And at school the teachers have much... longer arms than normal. Valentín says it's the clouds, because we haven't seen the sun for days. That makes me think that there are a lot of people out there like the Red Angel, who get their strength from the sun.

So I went down with Simbad. It was six thirty. It was still daytime, but with the sky so cloudy and because the streetlights hadn't been lit yet, I could see less than at night. I crossed the street in front of the entrance to take Simbad to a vacant lot between my house and the neighborhood church. I let up on the dog a little, so he could run around some. But the troublemaker got away from me.

“Simbad, come!”

The dog didn't pay any attention to me. I saw he was going to cross the street, and that cars were coming. I went running after him, but I didn't get there in time. I heard brakes squealing, and closed my eyes.

When I looked again, Simbad had gotten across and was running up the sidewalk towards the block Andrés lived in. I went in front of the Seiscientos that had braked to avoid

hitting Simbad, and took some curses. My dog stopped at Andrés' entrance, like he knew, and he waited for me watching and wagging his tail.

“When I catch you...”

I had him right at the tip of my fingers when he took off running again. He went around the block and into the park behind it. Simbad sprinted around the park, and I chased him. Every so often he stopped, waited for me a bit, and took off again as soon as I reached out my hand. I'm not a great athlete. My chest burned and my mouth filled with saliva that stung my palate. It's the asthma. I know I'm still not cured, even though my mom says I am.

Finally, Simbad stopped to pee on a pine tree. I took the opportunity to snap on his leash, when he tried to run again he was in for a surprise. I was going to smack him, but when I grabbed him he licked my hand and started wagging his tail. I couldn't hit him. He's too sweet!

“You, moron.”

I recognized that voice. It was Matas. And El Flaco and Zumendi were with him. Only the Rat was missing.

El Flaco came towards me, grabbed me by the neck, and started squeezing. I scabbled at his wrist, but I couldn't get his fingers open – he's at least two heads taller than me, and much stronger.

“Why did you snitch on my friends?”

“I didn't do anything!”

“Oh really?” asked Matas, coming closer to me. “You know we got suspended for two weeks for taking your friend's jacket?”

“I had no idea.”

“You're all liars. No one took the Toad's jacket. He left it behind. Why did you tell the monks we took it?”

“I didn't tell them, I swear!”

El Flaco opened his coat and took out a knife longer than his palm. He put the tip on my neck and pushed until I almost bled.

“I'm going to cut you, shit dwarf.”

I started to cry and begged him not to hurt me. Meanwhile, Simbad, instead of defending me, nibbled at Zumendi's pants.

“If you snitch on my friends again, I'll stomp on your head and cut your stomach from top to bottom, got it?”

“Yes, yes.”

I thought I was safe. Zumendi had gotten his arms around Simbad, and showed him to Matas and El Flaco.

“Look at the pig-head's crappy dog.”

El Flaco grabbed Simbad by the scruff of his neck and lifted him up. My poor dog was hanging and flailing his paws, like he was trying to swim in the air. El Flaco laughed, openmouthed.

“I'm going to cut him from his guts to his crotch, and see what he says.”

I dropped to my knees, clasped my hands, and begged him not to hurt my dog, none of it was his fault.

“No need to kill him, man,” Matas suggested. “Just neutering him should be enough.”

El Flaco laughed again, put the knife on Simbad's ear, and cut it. Then he tossed my dog on the ground, next to the pine tree. I can still hear Simbad's howling. I threw myself on him and held him, crying as much as he was.

“The next time we'll do it to you, moron,” El Flaco told me, and the three of them went off laughing.

I went home with my dog in my arms and my sweater stained with blood. My mom screamed when she saw us, but then she calmed down. Poor Simbad was dangling his right ear. My Mom fixed it up, although that was nearly impossible because he wouldn't stop squirming.

"Tomorrow we'll take him to the vet. Who did this?"

"Some jerks," I said, drying my tears. "They were older than me."

"Do you know them from somewhere?"

"No."

"They must be scoundrels. How could they do something like this to a puppy..."

Simbad usually sleeps on the terrace, but I put his basket in my room. He's sleeping at the foot of my bed now, next to an old alarm clock. We put it with him like they told us to, because he was really little and used to his mother's heartbeat.

I hate Matas, but most of all El Flaco. I hope the Red Angel is a real superhero so they get what they deserve.

Friday, 20 November

Today I'm writing from bed. All there is outside is the sound of police sirens. My parents are listening to the radio in the living room, instead of the TV. They're with the downstairs neighbors, who came to the door after twelve. Sometimes on Fridays they came up to play cards with my parents, but today is different. They're just talking in low voices and changing the station. The tiny laughs I hear are nervous. I know something happened.

And it's our fault.

This morning, I said goodbye to Simbad before going to school. He licked my hand and gave me a pained look. The poor guy isn't going to be very handsome with half his ear limp, but it doesn't matter to me. He's still alive.

At school, I asked why Matas and his friends got suspended. A boy named Santos told me Andrés' mom had come to see the Director on Monday and made such a fuss that the monks had no choice but to kick them out for a few days.

“Great,” I said.

When the bell rang, I went running to the patio. Andrés had come back, finally. He was sitting on our stairs, eating some gusanitos. It didn't even occur to me to ask about his flu.

“Do you know what you've done?”

“What happened, Carlos? Why are you being like this?”

“What did you tell your mom?”

“I had to explain about the jacket! If I'd told her I lost it, she would have punished me for a whole month.”

Just then Valentín, who'd followed me, appeared, and hearing Andrés he grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

“Please, let go of me, this jacket is new!”

“Did you tell your mom what happened at the worksite? Have you betrayed the Red Angel?”

“No, no! I told her Matas had taken it, but that it was here, at school.”

“You're a liar,” said Valentín.

“No, no.” Andrés was already tearing up. I thought to myself that I was tired of seeing him cry. “What I told my mom was almost true. I didn't want her to punish me.”

“If you'd kept quiet, my dog would still have both ears intact,” I told him. “I don't want you to be my friend.”

I went off to the porch. Andrés kept crying, but I didn't pay any attention to him. Valentín came after me and asked me what happened. When I told him, he ground his teeth.

“They're horrible. I still haven't seen their faces.”

At lunch hour, Andrés came running after me and offered me a Thor comic.

“It's a gift.”

“Why? My birthday isn't til tomorrow. Presents are what you give on birthdays.” “It's so you'll forgive me.”

“Ah.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Sure.”

I put the comic in my bag, and we walked home together.

“Are you coming to see Bryce this afternoon?” I asked.

“No, no, no! I don't want to know anything else about him. I've gotten in enough trouble because of him.”

I told him that he had to stop acting like a chicken and a crybaby. He answered that he had the right, because he was the smallest out of the three of us.

“You would know,” I said. “I'm thinking of going this afternoon. Bryce is telling us some really interesting stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“Aaaah, if you don't come, you'll never know.”

When we came back to class after lunch, Valentín asked me if I wanted to sit with him. Borda, my desk partner, didn't care if I left him by himself. Honestly, we don't talk much, because he's always sitting with his mouth open, staring at the chalkboard and digging wax out of his ear.

And so it was that I sat with Valentín.

Friday afternoons we have natural science class. When Padre Vivar came in, we all stood up,

as silent as ever. This time he left us standing for a good while, and strolled around with his arms crossed over his church-bell belly. He kept looking all around, like something was bothering him. Finally he realized what was different today.

“You've changed seats, Medina. And whom have you asked for permission?”

“No one,” answered Valentín. “I asked him to sit with me.”

“And who are you to change the class seating arrangement, Morales?”

“I don't think we're hurting anyone, Padre Vivar.”

I was shaking. I stomped on Valentín's foot a couple of times, but it didn't shut him up. Padre Vivar stroked his chin. His eyes were hidden behind his glasses, so it was hard to tell if he was mad. I think he was actually pleased, because he had an excuse to beat somebody.

“Come up front, Morales.”

Valentín obeyed without protest. Padre Vivar still hadn't given us permission to sit down. He looked at me and said:

“Medina, you know what to do. Notify me every five minutes.”

“No.”

There was an ooooohhh from the class. Saying “no” to Padre Vivar was almost worse than shoving Matas. I'd done it without thinking, and now I had no way out.

“I didn't hear you properly, Medina. Did you say 'no'?”

“Valentín hasn't done anything wrong.”

I thought he would grab me by the ear, but instead he just looked at me for a minute. Aside from my normal fear-cramp, I noticed something really weird with my head, like the back of my neck was blocked off. It's the same thing that happens when I'm in a car and there are curves.

“You come up front as well, Medina.”

I put myself next to Valentín. The whole class was watching us. Some looked scared, but many others were whispering between giggles.

“A volunteer to keep time for me?” asked Padre Vivar.

There were five kids who raised their hands. That's how popular Valentín and I are. Padre Vivar chose Zapata, the same guy who put crosses on the board that time I didn't talk.

He started beating us at three forty, and the last time was at four fifteen, when the bell rang. Eleven blows. But Valentín didn't cry, so I didn't either.

The last class was drawing, the one I like best. My face really hurt, but it didn't matter, because it was going to be the start of the weekend. Almost two and a half days without setting foot in school.

Padre Domingo was drawing on the chalkboard when someone came to the door. It was Padre Vivar.

“Hello, Domingo. Do you mind if I speak with Morales and Medina?”

I looked at Valentín, terrified. Was he going to beat us even more? Valentín whispered:

“Don't be scared. Remember, we're the supergroup of the Red Angel.”

Padre Vivar waited for us, with his arms crossed, next to the large window in the hall. It was darker than the classroom, because the lights weren't on and the sky was still cloudy. It made Padre Vivar look taller and bigger than before.

“Don't you think you've punished us enough?” asked Valentín.

“Shut up, Morales.”

He said it in such a dry tone that Valentín fell silent. Then he ordered us to come closer, and looked us in the eyes. For a good while, he didn't say anything. The back of my neck started to feel heavy, like before. Suddenly, it was like someone was playing a movie in my head, sped up like in the Cinexín. The movie was everything that had happened the last few days with Bryce, and with Matas and his friends, including the scene with Simbad. My head started to spin inside,

like when I was a kid and I'd spin around like crazy until I got dizzy and fell down. Underneath his glasses, it looked like Padre Vivar had lit a tiny red lightbulb, and it startled me so much I took a step backwards. But a hand pushed me forward again. That was strange, because Padre Vivar never uncrossed his arms. Suddenly he turned around and left, without saying anything. I leaned against the wall so I wouldn't fall down, because I was really dizzy.

"I'm gonna throw up."

"Me too," said Valentín, covering his hand with his mouth.

There were some bathrooms nearby, so we went running for them. We both went to a toilet, and while I threw up I could hear Valentín retching. Afterwards we rinsed our mouths in the sink.

"It's from the beating," I said.

"You know it isn't. Padre Vivar did something to us with his eyes."

"Did you think about Bryce too?"

"Yeah. I saw it all in my head, like a movie."

We went back to class. We must have looked really bad, because Padre Domingo asked us if something had happened. We told him no and sat down together. While we copied the drawing from the board, Valentín told me in a low voice:

"We have to go see Bryce."

"Of course, that's what we've been doing."

"I mean right when the bell rings, without stopping at home."

"I haven't checked with my mom."

"Bryce is in danger."

"I don't think so. He's much better now than he was before."

"It's not that. Don't you realize Padre Vivar just read our minds?"

"You're crazy, Valentín. Comics are one thing, but..."

“Medina, Morales, please be quiet.”

We drew for a good while without saying anything. Then a tapping sound started outside, and we looked out the window. It was raining. At first it rained gently, but then it was coming down so hard that it looked like the patio was full of foam.

“We're going to get soaked,” I said.

“But we have to go.”

“Yeah,” I answered, because I knew there was no other way. I remembered what my grandpa had told me: “Franco has spies everywhere, and some of them can read minds.”

It was still raining when the bell rang. We took off in a hurry, but the gate was jammed up with mothers looking for their kids, and some of them, who had insisted on opening umbrellas inside, threatened to take our eyes out. Valentín and I put up our hoods and slipped through the crowd as best we could. We'd left our bags in our desk. Saving Bryce was way more important than our weekend homework.

A hand grabbed my sleeve and pulled me. My heart did a somersault, and I waited for Padre Vivar's dark glasses to show up again.

But it was only Andrés.

“You're going to see Bryce?”

“Yes.”

“But it's raining really hard.”

“He's in danger. We have to warn him.” “Can I go with you?”

“You won't cry?”

“I won't, promise,” he said, showing me his hands so I could see his fingers weren't crossed. Valentín was already on the other side of the gate. We caught up a moment later, and I put my hand between us, palm down.

“We are the supergroup of the Red Angel.”

“The supergroup of the Red Angel!” they echoed.

The road was hellish. Before we got to the bridge we had to cross a vacant lot that, with the rain, had become a swamp. It'd been threatening to rain for so many days that our moms had been bugging us to wear our rain boots, so of course we were wearing normal shoes and were up to our knees in mud. Andrés complained that his mom was going to take TV away for a month, but he didn't cry.

Crossing the bridge, I looked down. The cars had their headlights on and were sending up curtains of water. They looked more like boats than cars.

We kept going, almost running. I was thinking about the most important thing, helping Bryce, and so my chest almost didn't hurt. The slopes of the hills running up and down the field were so slippery I fell on my butt. Valentín helped me up, but his hand slipped and he fell too. Andrés burst out laughing.

“We're going to go home looking like we've been to war,” said Valentín, and shook off his pants, but it only stained them more.

When we got to the bridge, Bryce wasn't there. All that was left were the boxes we'd brought and some bottles of dirty water.

“He sensed it,” said Valentín. “He sensed he was in danger, and he took off.”

“What if they already took him?” I asked.

Andrés said maybe he'd just gone off for a second to “go to the restroom”. After all, the bridge was his bedroom, and you don't pee or anything like that in your bedroom.

“Well, he picked a great time, with this downpour,” said Valentín.

We passed under the arc of the bridge and came out the other side. The river shore formed a slope, and a narrow path went up through it. Valentín pointed at the ground and said:

“Look, boot prints!”

There were also prints from sheep hooves and dog paws, so I thought they could be from a shepherd's boots. But Valentín insisted that no, he knew how to distinguish between tracks as well as an explorer. We went up the path, and this time Andrés was the one who slipped, and when he fell he grabbed my coat and pulled me down with him. We reached the top, soaked.

And there, again, was our worst nightmare. The group of baddies. Matas, El Flaco, Zumendi, and the Rat.

“Well, well,” said Matas. “Here they are. The toad, the pig-head, and the wackjob.”

“What are you doing here?” Valentín asked.

“We followed you, moron. Yesterday we gave the pig-head a good scare. How's your dog?”

“Hey, Flaco,” said the Rat, “cut the pig-head's ear, so he can play with his mutt.”

Valentín grabbed Andrés and I by the arms and pulled us, slowly and without taking his eyes off the others. I realized we were moving away from the edge of the slope.

“I'm warning you guys, I know kung-fu,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah,” answered Matas. “Tell it to your dad, if you even know who he is.”

“You shouldn't mess with my dad.”

“Oh no? Let's see if you like this: I won't shit on your father for not giving you a clue.”

Valentín gave an angry yell and threw himself at Matas. He jumped in the air and kicked him in the chin. Matas stumbled backwards until he ran into Zumendi.

“I warned you,” said Valentín.

“Leave him to me,” said El Flaco, and took out the knife he'd used to cut Simbad's ear.

Valentín stepped sideways and started doing these weird motions with his arms. His hat had come off. His bangs were dripping in his eyes and I thought he must not be able to see like that. El Flaco came forward a step and moved the knife a little, like he was a bullfighter taunting a bull.

“I warn you, I'm going to use the Crane Technique,” said Valentín.

“Let's see if you've got the balls.”

Valentín opened his arms like a set of scales. Then he started to raise his left leg while he bent the right one slightly. I don't really know what he was trying to do. His right foot slipped in the mud and he fell on his back.

El Flaco started laughing so loudly that I couldn't decide if they were more like barks or whinnies. Without putting away his knife, he came over to Valentín and started kicking him, in the side at first, then the back, then the neck. Andrés and I were paralyzed; we didn't know what to do.

“Stop beating that boy. I need to speak with him.”

I spun around, startled, and El Flaco quit kicking Valentín for a moment. Padre Vivar appeared, coming up the river path. His robes were soaked and covered with stains, and his sandals sank in the mud.

“Who's this loud-mouth?” asked El Flaco.

“He's a monk from the school,” Matas told him. “Leave him alone.”

“And a shit. I don't have to pay any attention to them. You obey him, school boy.” El Flaco kicked Valentín again, who was still huddled up to protect his face.

“I told you to stop beating that boy. He's mine.”

Padre Vivar's voice had changed, suddenly. Getting closer to El Flaco, he changed completely. His robes burst, and I understood why his body had always looked like a church bell to me. There were eight metallic legs hidden under his clothes, folded and gathered up. The legs lowered to the ground and stretched out like radio antennae. Padre Vivar's body, which was made of metal plates, raised more than three meters off the ground. An articulated arm came out of his back, ending in a steel stinger.

The eight legs went full-speed at El Flaco, and the articulated arm fell towards him. The stinger slashed his neck from on side to the other. There were a lot of screams, but none of them were from El Flaco: when Padre Vivar lifted him in the air, he was already dead. The metallic arm shook him, then tossed him far away, like he was a ragdoll. Next to me, Andrés started sobbing hysterically.

Padre Vivar's legs passed over Valentín without touching him. Like a huge spider, he ran towards Matas and his friends, who had turned and run, terrified. Matas was the biggest and the slowest, so Padre Vivar reached him first. I saw the stinger stab him in the back and heard a crunch, like a broken branch. Matas fell facedown in the mud. Padre Vivar retracted his stinger, passed over him, and was lost behind a hill, chasing the other two.

“Let's get out of here!” Andrés said, pulling on my arm.

“Wait! We have to help Valentín.”

We went over to him and took him by the arms. Valentín grabbed onto our shoulders and got to his feet. He had one bloody eyebrow.

“I'm fine. He didn't hurt me much.”

It was like a nightmare. I knew we had to run away as fast as possible, but the ground was slippery and we were weighed down with Valentín, who was still stunned.

“Carlos, look...” Andrés said.

I looked behind us. Padre Vivar had come back around the hill. The Rat's body was still dangling from his stinger, but he tossed it in the mud and his eight legs started to chase after us.

“God save you, Mary...” began Andrés.

“Prayer will do nothing for you, Mejías,” said Padre Vivar, stopping five meters away from us.

His voice sounded more metallic, but it was still his. Only now our science teacher had a

head wrapped in plate armor and was surrounded by legs with pincers and a talon with a stinger.

I couldn't see his real arms.

“Medina, Mejías, and Morales. So good you're here. Where is your friend, the beggar who thinks himself a superhero?”

“Don't tell him,” whispered Valentín.

“But we have no idea,” I answered, also in a low voice.

“I can hear everything you're saying, Medina,” said Padre Vivar, still five meters away. “But I think you're lying. Come here, so I can read your minds.”

“Don't do it, he'll stab you!” said Andrés.

The three of us had our arms around each other, shaking with cold and fear. For all that I'd loved superhero comics, now I was going to be killed by one of their characters. If Padre Vivar had killed El Flaco, Matas, and the rest, it was because he didn't want witnesses. We were lost.

“Scorpion!”

Padre Vivar spun around. Or more accurately, his head spun around on his metal body. Another figure had appeared over the hill. I already knew who it was, from the voice.

Bryce.

“Why don't you fight someone your own size, Scorpion?”

Padre Vivar's legs extended again, until he was at least five meters up. “I don't see anyone my size here, Angel.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And you know we've covered the sun, Angel. You're no match for me.”

Then, a miracle happened. Or maybe the superpowers of Bryce's friends were acting from a distance.

To Bryce's left, a rainbow appeared. A piece of sky opened between the black clouds and

the horizon, very small, but it was enough for the sun to come through. I couldn't remember what the sun was like.

Bryce let his raincoat fall. Dressed in the uniform of the Red Angel, he opened his arms. White beams of light formed around them, with branching veins and nerves. In a few seconds, enormous, transparent wings, like an insect's, had grown. I already knew what was happening. The veins that ran through Bryce's wings gathered the sun's rays and started turning neon red.

Padre Vivar gave an angry shout and leapt at Bryce. But he moved his arms once and his solar wings propelled him up to the head of his enemy. Padre Vivar turned his head, stretched his legs to almost ten meters, and jabbed his stinger high. Bryce pulled away at the last second and rose a little higher, far from reach.

Then Padre Vivar looked at us, and I know what he was thinking.

“Come down here, Angel, or I'll kill your little mascots!”

“Don't even think about touching them, Scorpion.”

Evidently, Padre Vivar didn't pay him any attention. In the fight, he'd moved off a little, and now we had about twenty meters between us. He retracted his legs again and launched himself at us. Andrés closed his eyes and clung to my arm. I watched Bryce. He was still hanging in the air, like he wasn't going to do anything.

But his fists were clenched, and the veins in his wings shone and sparked. I wondered if they would be charged with enough energy. Padre Vivar was almost on top of us, raising his stinger over his head.

The Red Angel opened his fists. Two rays of light sprang from his palms. It was like a thousand flashes had gone off in front of my eyes. I heard thunder and ducked. Something passed over our heads with a metallic sound.

When I looked again, Padre Vivar wasn't there. Andrés, less blinded than me because his eyes hadn't been open, tugged on my sleeve so I'd turn around. In the middle of a green patch that covered the center of my vision, I saw a smoking wreck sinking in the river.

“It looks like you guys are short a science teacher.”

Andrés' comment was so absurd in that situation that Valentín and I started laughing hysterically. Someone made a sound from the air, and we looked up.

The Red Angel floated above our heads, with his wings open like an enormous alien butterfly. The veins didn't look red now, but lots of colors, like he'd swallowed the rainbow.

“I don't have time to say goodbye, friends. I don't know if I'll have even ten minutes of sun. Thanks to you, boys, this time I'll fulfill my mission. Third time's the charm!”

We waved towards the sky. The rain was stopping. The Red Angel stretched his wings, and soon it was like a hurricane had taken him.

“It's the solar wind,” I whispered, remembering the comics.

We saw a red spot get lost above the field, flying toward the City of Angels and beyond. Suddenly, there was a flash and a roar stronger than ten thunderclaps, and he disappeared.

“He broke the sound barrier,” said Valentín, awed.

“He has, and the speed of light,” I said.

“Why don't we get out of here?” asked Andrés. “My mom...”

“Yeah, I know. She's going to punish you for a month.”

So, soaked through and covered with mud up to our ears, we went back to our neighborhood.

Saturday, 21 November

Today I'm ten years old. Nobody has paid much attention to me, because everything's upside down.

This morning there weren't any cartoons, even though it's Saturday, and later there wasn't news, either. They're showing the same movies over and over, and there's only military music on National Radio. I hear police sirens, and some of the neighbors told us there are tanks in the streets downtown.

Right now it's nighttime. My parents left the door open, like all the neighbors, and they're all going from one house to another and talking in whispers.

"They say Franco has died," says our upstairs neighbor.

"I don't believe it," my mother responds.

I already know what happened. Our neighbor is right. The Red Angel has completed his mission and vanquished the supervillain. Franco is dead. I hope Bryce got out alive, and is on his way home, to the other City of Angels.

People look scared. I heard our neighbor whisper: "My God, I hope there's not another war."

I don't really know why she says that. *I'm* happy. In the first place, my mom has forgotten all about the punishment she promised when I got home yesterday. Even better, Andrés called to wish me a happy birthday.

"My mom won't let me go out." He lowered his voice and said: "She didn't punish me after all. Because of the mess with Franco. But I already have your present wrapped."

"What is it?"

"A surprise."

"Come on, tell me."

"One Spiderman comic, a Namor, and one X-Men."

Valentín, who'd been let out, came by later and had a snack with me. He brought me two

bags of plastic toy soldiers, and a packet of chicken bones for Simbad. I know he doesn't have money, so I appreciate his gift as much as if it were the full Avengers collection. Valentín stayed awhile and we talked about what happened yesterday.

“Obviously the Red Angel achieved his objective,” he told me very seriously. “Do you realize we've changed history?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Yes. You'll see. From now on, you won't just see superheroes in comics.”

It's true! That's another reason I'm happy. Comics will definitely stop being banned, and I won't have to hide them under my mattress anymore.

And there's something even better. When the forcefield drops, all the superheroes will come here. They've defeated one supervillain. But they still have to beat two more.

Camino del cielo / Path to Heaven
Santiago Eximeno

In a certain phase of their careers, some authors specializing in fantasy literature become ubiquitous: there is no magazine or fanzine in which they are not present. This has become the case in recent years for Santiago Eximeno (1973), who beyond his myriad stories - which have received various awards - has published two books and remains at the forefront of publications like the free e-zine Qliphoth (dedicated to mythological literature) or the horror anthology Paura. The present story was originally written for this volume.

You believe that your life has no value
because you have lost your family, your friends, your money.
It's not true.
Your life has no value
because you have lost all hope that it could get better.
Anonymous

Night had already fallen when I arrived at Atocha station. Trapped in a blockade brought on by an accident, we'd been stopped next to the plaza for more than an hour. It had crossed my mind several times to abandon the official vehicle, grab my briefcase, and continue on foot to the station, but the cold stare of the driver reflected in the rearview mirror had stopped me. It would have been useless to try and fool him. If they had supplied me with an armored military vehicle, it wasn't to protect me from potential attack: it was to watch me, and prevent me from doing anything imprudent.

The car stopped next to the sidewalk and a uniformed man I recognized as one of the station security officers opened the rear door of the vehicle. I stepped out into the cold autumn air of Madrid and looked around. People were gathered in the entryways to the mass of brick and aluminum that formed the station, reversing the path they'd taken to work that morning. They probably chose the train because trains were characterized, owing to the Germans' installation of their industry in the country, by their punctuality. I was accustomed to travel by streetcar for short

journeys, and occasionally I took the bus downtown. I bore no ill will towards the metropolitan trains, by any means. It was, simply, that I preferred to see the city as I passed through it. This time, however, it would be a long and tiring trip out of the city, out of the country, and the best option was the train. Marta had asked if I wouldn't have preferred to put myself on a plane to Berlin and, once there, to take the train that would carry me to Auschwitz. No, I'd replied. I still hadn't adjusted to those metallic monsters, noisy and loaded down with propellers, that struggled against hot air balloons and zeppelins for supremacy of the skies.

Really, I was terrified of planes. When I was a boy, their presence accompanied by the shattering roar of the sirens heralded air raids. I remembered the voices of alarm, racing through the streets, the rickety, poorly-constructed shelters in the basements. And the shouts and sobs of those who, surprised by the unexpected attack, weren't ready in time to take cover in their homes and, despite their desperate pleas, weren't allowed into their neighbors'. My own parents had gone through a similar situation during the air raids on the capital, when I was barely three years old, and they ran with me in their arms through the smoke and the flames. No one had let them in, no one had allowed them to hide from the death that descended from the sky. To think the planes that had bombed us, taken away my mother, had been built by the same people who now controlled commercial flights horrified me.

"I'll help you with your luggage," the driver told me, in German.

"Of course you will," I responded in Spanish, handing over my smaller bag but keeping my briefcase with me.

I knew the man spoke perfect Spanish. If they'd sent him to Spain it was because he'd studied our language, at least at an elementary level. Moreover, he'd lived in Madrid for more than three years, sufficient to communicate with real fluency. However, all Germans consider it improper to use a language other than their own if their conversation partner spoke German. I imagine it all has to do with the true pride of victory, completely unfamiliar to me and others like

me and much more familiar to the Aryans, who feel they are special for belonging to the Third Reich. We entered the station surrounded by men and women and children, letting ourselves through with gentle shoves and receiving in return murmurs of disapproval that faded into forced smiles once they spotted the insignia on my companion's uniform. We stopped in front of one of the windows to collect my ticket, and I took advantage of the half-dozen people waiting in line to slip away for an instant – after notifying my guard dog - in the direction of the telephones. I was carrying some loose change, but as I brought it out of my pocket my shaky hands dropped it on the floor, leaving the visage of our Caudillo face-up. Bad luck, the elders would say, and all I was missing at that moment was a bad omen. Some kids, alerted by the noise, came over to me asking for a hand-out. I sent them away with a gesture and stepped up to one of the booths.

“Next departure of the train with destination Barcelona-Toulouse, track six,” announced the station loudspeaker, while I put my briefcase between my legs and dialed my home number.

My guard dog had been consumed by the throng, trapped in an enormous human serpent that patiently waited its turn. I remembered I'd said I was going to buy a newspaper; I shouldn't forget it. The telephone gave a tone, rang once, two times, three times.

“Mario?” said Marta, and I sighed before speaking.

“It's me,” I said.

On the other end of the line was silence. I thought, for an absurd moment, that someone was listening, a third person had tapped the line and was noting our words. I had avoided using a mobile phone for precisely this reason. It doesn't matter, I told myself, in any case we know what we have to say.

“I'm watching television,” Marta said, her voice shaking. “Julia is next to me.”

I nodded my head, a senseless gesture in a phone conversation. I felt my ear burning in contact with the headset, and I held it so strongly to my face that it hurt my fingers.

“She should go to bed soon,” I said. “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“Of course,” Marta replied, and then, in a low voice, “I love you.”

I kept the headset in my hand a few seconds longer, after I hung up. I looked towards the windows and saw that my companion was at that moment collecting my ticket. I walked to the kiosk, picked up some newspaper or other, paid with a smile, and met him at the entryway to the platforms.

“It leaves in ten minutes, track nine,” the man told me in perfect German, holding out my ticket and lifting my bag.

“*Gracias*,” I responded, stashing the ticket in my jacket and taking the bag.

The man raised his arm with his palm extended in a signal of salute. I reciprocated apathetically. I descended the stairs that led to the platforms. People were piled on top of each other, sitting on their suitcases, standing next to the tracks, eating, smoking, laughing, chatting. Facing us, on the platforms reserved for the work camps, a hundred people were heaped. They avoided our gaze, conscious of their condition. I found some children among them, brown-skinned and blackhaired, clinging to their mother’s skirts like desperate leeches. They were going to Cádiz, Sevilla, Córdoba. To the work camps, to the metal barracks set up under a scorching sun.

I searched for a cigarette in my pockets, didn’t find one. I looked to one side, the other. I saw the gray, shining machine arrive, which would carry me to Berlin. It gasped as it advanced, as it came into the station and stopped at the platform, hiding the condemned from my view. The doors opened, and a few people descended the three steps that separated the cars from the floor. I could hear murmurs, laughs, hackneyed greetings of the reunited. I went along a few meters of platform, dodging half a hundred people, before reaching my car. It didn’t seem as though anyone had come down, because the door was closed. I opened it, climbed in.

In the passageway, two young Germans were smoking a cigarette. They shot me a menacing look when I passed between them spouting apologies. They didn’t say anything, why

are you wasting your time with me? I found my cabin at the end of the car. Fortunately the bed of my presumed companion was empty, and I could have the entire cabin to myself. I tossed my bag and briefcase on one of the beds, and sat down on the other.

I thought of Marta. Of Julia.

I heard a whistle, the train shook, and the car began to sway side to side as it accelerated over the tracks. Seated on the bed, I saw the station through the window as we left it behind. I hadn't gone back, I'd taken the step that would carry me to the most infamous extermination camp in the world, through the magnificent German railway network. A visit arranged ahead of time, a work visit that my employer, a subsidiary of one of the most important German funerary establishments in Spain, had prepared for various of its executives, myself among them. A visit to which, initially, I was not invited. I smiled sadly. In the end, I was no more than an employee without aspirations, another disposable gear in the machine of destiny. I took off my clothes and without even opening my bag to look for my pajamas I fell back on the bed and slept instantly.

I awoke at ten in the morning, and after tidying myself and getting dressed I went through the train cars until I found the cafeteria. There, I passed the remainder of the journey, seated at one of the tables, reading the newspaper I'd bought the night before, reviewing the conference papers and drinking one coffee after another. It was a shame they didn't serve alcohol: I would have appreciated a few beers before arriving at my destination. No one approached my table to exchange words, no one so much as glanced at me. It was, in sum, a solitary and agreeable journey. We crossed into Germany with various other trains, a mere burst of color and curious faces. Only one of many returning to Auschwitz. I saw the train stop us at one of the stations, silent and empty, seeking new passengers for the extermination camps. I noticed many people turning their heads to avoid looking at it, the same people who, years before, had denounced their neighbors to win the favor of the Reich. I appreciated the closed windows of the cafeteria car. I

didn't want to confirm the rumors regarding the smell given off by those trains.

On the front page of the newspaper, a photo of the bodies of Ezquerro and Wilson, confirming their execution. Significant news, which represented a difficult blow for the terrorists of the occupied territories. I recalled a conversation with some friends of my wife during a dinner. After a few cups of wine - perhaps too many - Beatriz's husband, one of my wife's close friends, who we suspected of having family in the occupied territories in northern Spain, had mentioned that ETA didn't only represent the vascos: it represented all Spaniards that opposed the regime and the German invasion. I believed we should all be afraid, well, at least adopt a view between resigned and terrified, as if by leaving, one of us would be reported. By the love of God, if we were friends. And, anyway, we did it, God forgive us.

We arrived at dusk, when a withered orange sun dissolved into golden shreds behind the clouds. We stopped at the last station before entering the annexed Polish territory, and when we continued our progress - after unhitching all the cars except the one I occupied and one other - we were invaded by German soldiers. Two of them came into my cabin and asked for my papers in authoritative voices. They were armed with light machine guns, and my limited knowledge of armaments permitted me to discern that they had the safeties off. Nervous, I presented my papers to one of them without making eye contact, a habit by which I had avoided embarrassing situations in the past. The soldier returned them to me and continued on his rounds without saying a single word.

A short while later we changed tracks and headed for Birkenau, the camp the Germans dubbed Auschwitz II, our final stop. I already knew all the occupants of my car were attending the conference, and that made me feel calmer. We entered a grove and could soon see the imposing entrance of the camp. We had already seen the barracks from afar, behind the electric fences, and the spectacle was unsettling, to be sure. The train passed through the entrance and stopped a few meters farther on. I took my bag and my briefcase and descended to the outdoors,

where another military contingent awaited us. One of the soldiers came up to me and indicated I should follow him. The protocol was repeated around me, and so I walked behind him, trying not to pay attention to the prisoners piled up next to the tracks.

I had never thought about it too much, had never wanted to give it the importance it deserved. We lived in difficult times, and admittedly, I didn't feel disquieted by those human remnants. I saw how they carried on, covered with gray rags, hair cut to nothing so that it seemed the skin was torn like the dead roots of an ash tree. They shuffled their feet across the ground, openly showing their broken faces, their battered, tortured bodies. Some of them carried rocks, others pushed wheelbarrows. I focused on one of them, more robust, who told them off in clumsy German. Kapos. Functionaries. The only ones guaranteed to see the next dawn, or at least that was the rumor. They, the members of the SonderKommando. These last returned to the activity of what was certainly building the new crematoriums. I resisted thinking about it, but it was inevitable. I was there to contemplate the inauguration of a new epoch of death, an epoch which had been delayed for more than twenty years due to pressure from social groups opposing extermination. Now, when the pressure of the other nations of the world didn't matter, supported by the majority of the German populace and the free men of the occupied territories, those red brick buildings and towers of cement again exhaled their cursed smoke.

The soldier preceded me through one of the gates that surrounded the improvised station, and I couldn't read the rusted words that formed the door's spined crown, a replica of those that marked the entrance to nearby Auschwitz. *Arbeit mach frei*, work will make you free. A macabre joke more than a way of life. Work continued around me, work that could be completed more easily using machines, but the Germans reveled in their victory by torturing the Jewish people. How many were left alive in Europe, outside of Birkenau? A thousand? How many had successfully hidden their faith and sheltered in the lie to save their own lives?

I ignored it. Ultimately it didn't matter much to me, anyway. The education I'd received,

biased by the prejudices of the victors, didn't permit me to see them as my equals. I tried, God knows I tried, but in the end it was impossible for me. The Jews had been born to be exterminated, they were an aberration that should be suppressed. A race born to amass money, with a plan for world domination, completely alienated from other human beings. Everyone knew The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, everyone knew they should be exterminated.

Like the gypsies.

While I went on in pursuit of the soldier, the long barracks replete with prisoners lying on either side of the tracks, I thought of the first extermination camps that had been established in Sevilla. Certainly, there had been prison camps during our civil war and in the years afterwards, but they couldn't be compared with what we had created now. Small, inefficient, still in their infancy, but already full of gypsies and Jews. We had received the first personal, interested visits from the Reich, supervising our first bobbling steps. Installing the first crematorium had been one of the most important decisions made by Carrero Blanco. It still wasn't operational, by any means, but our first visits were positive. For years the Reich had tempted Franco with the idea of creating the first extermination camps in Spain, but the Regime still wasn't prepared for something like that. Too much pressure from those who opposed them and dreamed of the democratic liberty of the United States or the egalitarian communism that permeated Russia.

We went in between a copse of trees, a frivolous detail sprouting next to one of the barracks utilized by the Germans. The soldier preceding me opened the door and ushered me inside. I saw in his expression true revulsion, true indifference. Difficult to establish which of the two sensations was the dominant one. I'm not Spanish for nothing, as my Mediterranean features and the brown of my skin demonstrate. I walked to a half-opened door.

"Come in," said a gruff voice from inside.

I hesitated for an instant, and then entered. A ceiling fan with wooden blades purred, cooling the room. Sitting at a table, with hands folded on top of it, an SS official was waiting for

me, with a rosy face and a wide smile.

“Sit,” he said, indicating a gray metal chair with his gaze.

I sat facing the Lagerführer, who kept his stolid smile, as I put my bag and briefcase down next to the chair. A woman - thin, too thin, and wearing a gray dress - came in and left two cups of coffee on the table. I lowered my gaze and removed the coffee with its silver teaspoon. The buzz from the hands of the wall clock, the clink of the teaspoon against the ceramic, the official's smile; all of it made up an abstract musical piece, indefinable, but tinged clearly with melancholy.

“Your name.”

“Fernando Aguilar,” I replied.

The official searched among the papers stacked on the table until he found one with my name on it. He turned then to the terminal that rested next to him and typed for a few seconds, probably putting my information in the system.

“Representative of the mixed Spanish funerary firm,” said the Lagerführer without looking at my face.

“That's it,” I said, confirming.

All the words that came out of my mouth sounded ridiculous hearing that man's voice. The fan fixed above my head continued to chill the air and I thanked it silently because, well, it kept me from sweating like a pig with nerves.

“So, attending as a representative of Spain, is that correct?” the official asked.

I nodded silently, took a sip of coffee.

“Private enterprise, of course. If not, you would have come with the official representation,” he said, toying with my passport and leaving it to one side.

I pulled out the invitation from the sealed envelope then, and he checked the dates against the ones in my passport. The coffee was lukewarm, watery, as if it had lost its fortitude in that ominous atmosphere. I remembered the moment they had given me the envelope, my wife's

apprehensive gaze, the mailman's forced smile. Now, while the official placed the invitation back inside the envelope, I felt that somehow I had been worrying this moment would arrive.

"You'll be in barrack fifty-two, next to the installation of the new crematorium," said the Lagerführer, and there was something in his voice, in his careful, calculated movements before, that inspired fear.

No, dread.

"Take this, it's yours," continued the official, handing me the envelope.

I took it, noting the distance the man forced between us, avoiding contact with me. The paper it contained was a valuable safeguard to move me through the camp, as had already been indicated by the men who had contacted me. I got up from the chair and headed for the door.

"Have you ever been in the occupied zones?" asked the SS official as I was stepping over the threshold.

I turned, searched for his eyes with my gaze, but he never even seemed conscious of my presence as a human being, as if I was rather another unremarkable piece of furniture. In the room's silence I noticed the purring of the ceiling fan, like the omen a mariner hears before a storm at sea.

"No," I responded.

The official consulted his terminal screen and, for the first time, he looked at me.

"That's not what your record says. You were in Bilbao last year."

I assented, noting the way I was flushing and the fear beading in sweat-drops on my forehead.

"For work. Order of the company, supervision of the campaign cemetery," I replied. "I thought you were referring to personal visits, vacations."

The official got up, showing me the weapon hanging on his belt. His black uniform seemed to shine under the lights as he came towards me and put his face close to mine. I smelled

soap, aftershave cream, cologne I couldn't have paid for.

"Don't speak," he said. "Only respond to the questions that are put to you. Don't forget that."

He remained next to me, standing, looking at me for scarcely a few seconds, but for me, an eternity passed. Then he returned to his desk and sat down.

"Before you go, collect your things," he said, and I went back to the table like a whipped dog, picked up my bag and briefcase, and fled the room.

Accompanied by another soldier, I walked to the barrack that had been indicated to me. The stench emanating from the recently reactivated crematoriums wafted through the air. I asked myself if all those walking cadavers felt as if death were floating in the air among them, like a living being that circulated through their lungs and established in them the apprehension of their own turn. I doubted it. With the passage of the years, German studies had shown that, in a sense, Jews lack a definite sensitivity towards their kinsmen. Lack of empathy, they call it. Some prestigious voices in philosophy and humanism, timidly and in limited circles, had risen against those manifests in other parts of Europe. Voices which had found echoes in the United States, where thousands of Jews still maintained their status as free men. In Europe they had been practically exterminated, and seeking empathy in Asia, under the cloak of Chinese and Japanese dominion, seemed foolish.

"Someone will come to collect you later, to take you to the presentation," said the soldier, leaving me facing the barrack. "Would you like a woman tonight? We have some gypsies in the encampment."

He turned and walked away without allowing me to answer. I guess, if he hadn't done it, I would have jumped on him like a starving wolf. That damn racist son-of-a-bitch had compared me with a gypsy, just because of my skin color and my difficulty with the language.

Damn son of a bitch.

With a gypsy.

I entered the barrack. Inside two people waited for me, one Norwegian and the other Danish. Both were attending as guests for their respective companies. Evidently, to be present at the inauguration of the new crematoriums was an honor, and so the three of us looked at each other with a certain sense of pride. We exchanged greetings, some anecdotes. I put my briefcase on my bed while I listened to their conversations about the details of the new crematorium and the immense gas chamber that went with it. I paid attention for a few minutes and then excused myself to the facilities, which was at the complete opposite end of the barrack.

The restroom smelled like urine, mold. I wondered if that barrack had ever been used for Jews or other prisoners. Controlling my unease, I urinated in the rusty bowl. I thought of my wife and daughter. Saying goodbye to them had been painful, almost traumatic. Now that everything was working between us, now that we had left behind the problems and arguments, I felt obligated to come here alone, to fulfill my part of the contract. It could be hopeless, certainly. But them? Did they deserve to go on with the life we had? No, I had considered for a long time, and concluded that it would be better for all of us if I accepted this trip.

I pulled the chain, and a surprisingly clear stream of water ran down from the cistern. I washed my hands in the sink, dried off with a little toilet paper and left for the barrack, thinking to chat a bit with my companions before preparing for dinner.

“I suppose we’ll eat something before the presentation,” said the Dane, an obese man who dried the constant sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief.

“Eat?” responded the Norwegian. “I don’t understand how you’re eager to see this.” “Come now, come now, let’s not be squeamish. They’re only Jews,” said the Dane, and I took the opportunity to step outside.

The encampment was barely visible from our barrack, dark behind an impenetrable wall of trees. I distinguished the mass of the new crematorium behind me, with its two tall, gray stone

chimneys buried in the sky. Cloud factories, my daughter had innocently called them once when she saw them on television. Cloud factories, I remembered. For the love of God, what were we doing to our children?

I decided to walk through the adjacent area, which delineated the entrance to the camp with a double fence. A few signs, *Vorsicht, Lebensgefahr*, alerted the possibility of electrical charges; others - more macabre, black skulls painted on wood - announced the fate of those who would try to escape the camp. I walked until the shadow of one of the new crematorium chimneys fell over me. The building rose into the sky like an ancient, sacred temple, anxious to devour its human offerings and turn them to ash for the God of Nazism. The builders had confirmed that they could work with half a hundred bodies simultaneously, and had reduced cremation times to limits believed impossible until recent years.

I thought of the Caudillo. His cremation in front of thousands of people had taken more than ten minutes, among sobs and applause and a massive police presence in the streets. What feeling would have come about in less time? Spaniards needed those moments, those images in their retinas to understand the glory of what had occurred. However, the present needs of the German extermination camps required the reduction of processing times. Now that the crematoriums were functioning again, the hurry had begun to do away with all the Jews still left alive. That was the principal reason for what we found there: to finish a job that had been started thirty years before and, for political reasons, had been delayed.

No one thought the Führer would lose his resolve before the Jewish people were annihilated, but the internal pressures from the military caused him to doubt. He had maintained the nonaggression pact with Russia, and now Europe found itself in a cold war with Americans, Russians, and Asiatics. Germany had stopped work on the crematoriums after some of the news of their most aberrant treatment of the Jews filtered through to the press. The German people supported extermination, but reticently. No one knew the reality of what was occurring until the

Red Cross, present in some of the work camps, disclosed the numbers. It then became necessary to cease the holocaust, end the hell, and wait more than twenty years, when American and Russian opinions no longer mattered, to begin again.

I returned to the barrack to change and get ready for the gala. When I arrived, two soldiers accompanied the Norwegian and the Dane in the doorway.

“You’re late,” said the Dane, winking at me. “Ten minutes and we’re leaving.”

With an uncomfortable smile I entered the barrack. I opened my bag, took out some dress pants and a shirt, and changed as fast as I could. It felt like that time my parents decided to take me to a theme park: anxious to see what I was waiting for, but terrified of what could happen to me. I was finishing buttoning up my shirt when one of the soldiers opened the door.

“Let’s go, it’s late,” he said.

I nodded and headed toward the door. I was just about to leave when I remembered my briefcase. I smiled weakly, apologetic, and returned to pick it up before accompanying the soldier outside. They guided us to the official’s barracks, an enormous gray building situated on the other side of the crematorium. While we walked, the Dane never stopped joking, hiding his nervousness. I realized I hadn’t even asked their names, nor they mine. In places like Auschwitz, it turned out, it’s very difficult to keep up the most basic social norms.

Or, perhaps, they considered me just one step up from the camp’s prisoners.

In the entrance to the barracks, the first test awaited us. We handed our passes to two security guards, who nodded before proceeding to search us. They made me open the briefcase and looked inside. They took out the blank pages, pen, cards, voice recorder, and my cell phone.

“You could have left it in your barrack,” said one of them, handing it back to me.

“I need to take notes for my company,” I furnished as an excuse, and they let us pass.

We went along for a few meters until we came upon the entrance to the conference room. We saw through the open doors that there were already several people inside, sitting at the tables,

waiting for the event to begin. Some waiters circulated among the invitees with drinks and canapés. Before allowing us to enter, two security men stopped us and proceeded to search us again.

“Hope you enjoy the event, friend,” the Dane said, going in first in search of his assigned table.

I smiled, waved to him awkwardly, which caught the attention of one of the security men. He asked to see my briefcase. I handed it to him and waited while they passed a metal detector over it, opened it, and inspected the contents. Closing it, they handed it to me and indicated I could enter.

“See you after, hopefully not too drunk,” said the Norwegian, losing himself in the multitude.

I went forward a couple of steps and saw the table number I’d been assigned, very near the entrance, as they’d shown me. It was empty; my companions still hadn’t arrived. I put my briefcase down next to my chair, waited. One of the waiters came over and offered me a tray full of glasses. I took a cup of red wine, drank a swallow. Propping my elbows on the table, I threaded my fingers together and watched the comings and goings before the presentation. Everyone knew what they should be doing, and executed their duties to perfection, like a masterfully choreographed ballet. I noticed my hands were shaking, and I put them under the table, pressing my palms and extending my fingers. It was hot in there. In one of the tables next to mine, a man was talking on the phone.

I felt the need to call Marta.

I opened my briefcase, took out the phone, closed it again, and stood up. One of the security guards stopped me in the doorway.

“Where are you going?” he said.

“To the restroom,” I replied, voice shaking.

“Hurry up,” said the man. “It will begin shortly, and once it starts we won’t want it to be interrupted.”

I nodded, smiled. I knew they could trace the call, that it wouldn’t be possible to evade the controls in place in the camp against mobile devices, but I didn’t care. I had a scarce few minutes to get back to the room before someone suspected and I wouldn’t have another chance afterward. I rushed through the main door and went down the carpeted hallways to the restroom entrance. I passed a pair of men - blond, blue eyes, noble bearing - that paid me no attention. For them I represented a form of life lower still than the Mengeloids, replicated from genetically modified twins and used as slaves in the German factories. I came to the restroom door, entered. I was startled by the reflection of my face in the mirror. I had a glassy stare, unruly hair, a face covered in sweat. I approached the sinks, lined up on the wall like a Semana Santa procession. I turned on the tap, splashed cold water on my face, my hands. I heard the sound of a cistern behind me, and one of the cubicle doors opened. A thin man washed his hands next to me and gestured goodbye. His features looked South African, and from his gesture I could almost confirm it. Those Aryans were known for being oddly friendly with other races, as if being part of a black-occupied territory had made them weak and sickly.

I entered one of the cubicles and latched the door closed. My hands shook as I extracted the phone from my pocket. I thought of the briefcase then, abandoned next to my assigned seat, at one of the tables closest to the entrance. I gasped. No one would open it, certainly. No one would be close to it.

That’s what I hoped.

If someone tried to lift it, they would notice the extra weight. What would they think then? What would happen?

I switched on the phone. I had the terrible sensation that, when I did it, the lights would go out, and a siren would blow out my eardrums while a red light tinged like blood flashed

everywhere. But none of that happened; just the ordinary sound of the phone while I waited for Marta to pick up.

When she did, I couldn't hold back a shudder.

"Hello?" she said, seeming on the verge of tears.

"It's me," I said. "You shouldn't be there."

Marta sighed, trying to control her tears, I thought. I heard my daughter's voice, like the whisper of far-off waves, asking who had called. She knew it was me. She also knew we couldn't talk; I wasn't strong enough for that.

"You said you couldn't call," she said.

"I know. It's true. I'm going to hang up soon. I just wanted to make sure you had already gone."

A sob, a distant noise. I realized my leg was shaking, and I stopped it.

"The ship leaves in less than two hours. I'm finishing the packing," said Marta.

I thought of the people listening to our conversation at that moment. Would they think it was important? Probably, but they didn't have time to act. We had already talked about it. I was running a risk, without a doubt an unnecessary risk, but I needed to hear her voice before I went back to the conference room.

"I wanted to tell you something," I murmured, and she kept silent, listening. "Once, I told you I loved you for all that you are, including your faults. I told you our love wasn't perfect, exactly because of those faults."

Marta sighed. I heard Julia's voice again, asking to be passed the phone. I could imagine her jumping at her mother's side, trying to grab the earpiece with her delicate little hands, begging. I felt a shiver.

"I was wrong. I'm sorry," I said, and hung up without waiting for an answer.

I couldn't bear it.

I turned off the phone and dropped it in the toilet bowl. I saw how it fought against the water from the cistern, struggling like a ship pierced by a torpedo that refuses to sink. How many ships had been sunk on their way to the United States? Although officially we weren't at war - not yet, anyway - there was a network of minor skirmishes and ill-timed responses, because of which all journeys from one to the other were risky. By ship less so than by plane, of course.

I wondered how long it would take for the United States to declare war on Europe after the reactivation of the crematoriums. Germany was certainly counting on it. We were prepared for a third World War, our allies were strong. But we also feared the United States. Their passivity during the conflict could only be understood after their invasion of Central America, and the subsequent expansion into Venezuela and Brazil. There were resources there, and wealth. Why would they get involved in the fratricidal war that had thrown Europe into upheaval? What did they stand to gain? I thought of my wife and daughter. They had assured me they would arrive on the American continent safe and sound, that was the deal. They would have a new life in a free land, a chance to start over far from old Europe, consumed by the cancer of Nazism, a cancer that had also devoured my conscience, a cancer that I harbored and, much to my detriment, I respected. Everything that would happen from then on had nothing to do with my political ideas, or presumed revolutions, or the Truth, like that, in capital letters. No, everything that would happen was done for them.

For them.

I left the restroom and returned to the conference room. The last guests would soon arrive, the most awaited, and the spectacle would begin. I couldn't miss it. When I arrived, the two men from the security team stopped me. I knew they were following procedure, because I'd gone through it just a few minutes before, but I couldn't stop the sweat which was starting to soak through my shirt.

"Wait here, on the sign," said one of the men, his black hair buzzed short.

The other came towards me with a metal detector and passed it over my body. I silently waited for a gasp, for him to raise the alarm with a shout. It didn't happen. One of the men opened the door and urged me inside. I smiled, dried the sweat on my forehead, and entered.

The room had been specially adapted for the occasion. Large halogen lamps hung from the ceiling, illuminating the red and white banners with swastikas hanging from the walls. The tables - round, black plastic covered by gray and black cloths - were arranged in a spiral, from the entrance to the stage. There, various chairs and microphones had been set up, flanked by two stone columns. Behind them, a large screen projected a still image of the new crematorium, under iron-forged letters which read *Himmelweg*, 'path to heaven'. That's how German inauguration parties were: solemn, elegant, but full of glamor. In this case, the glamor was provided by a pianist and a thin young woman, almost anorexic, body wrapped in a tight shroud, singing old patriotic songs.

I walked to my table, closest to the entrance. There was another Spaniard there, from a company specializing in cement manufacturing, one of the two funerary agents who had shared a barrack with me, and a representative from a small German funeral firm. They were all seated, chatting animatedly and drinking wine.

"We're still indispensable to the Teutons, eh?" said the Spaniard, showing me the bottle, a vintage from La Rioja.

I smiled. I imagined the ancient proprietors of the vineyards in the northern peninsula, expropriated when the Regime decided they should take care of zones occupied by terrorists, that they should be controlled by the military. They disagreed, of course.

"Let's toast to our Caudillo closing a good deal," said my colleague in Spanish, smiling, and I took the opportunity to fill my cup and toast with them.

The typical German frigidity was substituted in such international events by an extravagant mix of intensity and self-assuredness. As they served us the first course, several young

women with long blond hair, wearing loose black dresses, situated themselves in the rear part of the stage. They began to murmur a dark litany, soothing, but full of nuance, while another man, flanked by two lit torches and dressed in a disturbing variation of the outfits worn by SS officials, recited verses in German that he read from scrolls. It took me a few minutes to recognize the passages from *Mein Kampf*, despite it being one of the foremost readings in our schools.

“Impressive, eh?” said my Spanish colleague, and I noticed the wine was going to his head. I wondered if, when I needed to act, he would be an inconvenience. The other two diners wouldn’t even react, of that I was sure. Calm, accustomed to submission and obedience, they would hardly blink when I placed my briefcase on the table. But the curiosity and unrestrained spirit of my countryman could cause the whole thing to fall apart. In any case, I would need to do it, and God would commend me.

God.

It’s ironic that everyone, sinners and innocents, will turn to Him in moments of stress and anguish. I thought of my wife, stowed away on a supply ship, lost in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by men and women speaking English - that barbaric, unintelligible language. How was it possible, in a country as advanced as the United States, that they didn’t teach German in their schools? What language did they expect to treat with Europe in? In English? That barrier wouldn’t divide us forever.

And I, silently, was grateful for it.

They served the second course, then dessert, and I realized my right leg had been fidgeting unconsciously for several minutes. My dining companions had noticed it as well, but they ate in silence, not looking at me. The group had retired from the stage, and while several Mengeloids occupied it to remove some objects and prepare others for the official presentation, Wagner’s majestic *Götterdämmerung* overtook the room. The conversations, the murmurs, died, devoured by the music, and little by little we all raised our gaze from our plates and looked

toward the stage.

The screen lit up, and from a dark projector on the opposite wall poured a beam of broken light, which revealed the dust motes floating through the air. I thought they could be the remains of the incinerated Jews, floating in this longstanding place reserved for those awaiting death. Images of a swastika floating on a red background and a distorted image of the smiling Führer filled the screen.

What would Hitler think of the man who became his successor, a pale-looking, anorexic young man, anxious to uncover the hidden treasures of the Reich? Applause inundated the room when the image resolved into the silhouette of the new crematorium, the building we had all worked on. Everyone, including the Jewish prisoners, who had raised their own gallows. We would soon adopt that new building in the Andalusian extermination camps, and the flames would devour the gypsy race.

Would we lose our identity along with them? It didn't matter to me much.

Ultimately, I lacked ideals. While I lifted my briefcase and moved plates aside, placing it on the table, I thought about that. None of it made real sense to me. Or even to my wife. We had been trained since we were children, and now nothing could change our feelings about the rest of the world. Nothing could help me to believe that the Jews were human beings like us. They weren't. But perhaps they could be in my daughter's eyes.

Perhaps.

Some uniformed men came into the room, preceding the young Führer and the leaders of the other invited nations. Ezquerro and Wilson had been captured a few months after contacting me, thanks to the information a mole in ETA had procured for SECED. They should be here, not me. They believed in all that garbage, not me. And now that they had been executed and the attack against Carrero Blanco had been thwarted, I felt obligated to try for them. Just because of that damn visit, that stupid trip to Bilbao, to the occupied zones, when they found me and

kidnapped my wife and daughter. They knew I would hide it from the authorities, that I would come here determined to do what they couldn't.

For my wife. For my daughter.

I opened the briefcase. Everyone was waiting expectantly, listening captivated to the words of the young Führer, his presentation of the best center of destruction yet created. New chambers with higher capacities for prisoners, new crematoriums with faster incineration speeds. One should feel sick with it, I thought, but that didn't occur to any of us.

Not even me.

I looked for the ceramic pieces inside the briefcase. The Spaniard had turned, as I suspected, a little concerned about what I was doing, although far from guessing the truth. I rearranged the pieces just how I'd been taught. Pieces of ceramic, tethered to the hidden part of my briefcase, under the thin layer of lead that made them invisible to the Germans' metal detectors. I remembered that the Basque combatants had taken that absurd idea, of the lead as protection against metal detectors, from one of those illustrated magazines from the American empire. Magazines of fighters, superheroes, locked in a battle against Europe that never came. Damn cowards, I thought, abandoning us to our fate, more worried about invading the South American territory in search of its oil and richness in minerals.

"What are you doing under there?" asked my countryman in Spanish, and I raised my head and replied with a smile.

That gave me a few minutes before he decided to get up. I assembled the first pieces with shaking hands. The barrel, the firing pin. The ammunition, just two bullets, I would have to insert in a scarce few seconds. Then I would stand, fire. I wouldn't get a second chance. The applause returned; the presentation had finished, and the floor was passed to one of the architects, an old man with trembling hands who clumsily dropped the papers he was carrying before he got to the lectern.

I knew by memory the seat positions they all occupied. Third and fourth seats, left of the lectern, for Carrero Blanco and Prince Juan Carlos.

“Come on, what are you hiding? This is no time for work,” said the Spaniard.

I couldn't look up again, not until I'd assembled the final piece. I started to sweat, a cold sweat that caused a shiver. In the background I heard faltering sentences from the crematorium's builder. I didn't know what I should do. I remembered again my meeting with those men in the occupied zones, which we had before scornfully dubbed the Basque Country. Now that I knew my wife was safe, I believed in them. I hadn't been able to share their ideals, but who the hell cares about ideals in this world?

Suddenly the whole idea seemed absurd. Why hadn't I brought a bomb and set it off? I knew I had refused, citing the innocent lives I would end too soon, that I had concluded by convincing them I could shoot and be done with it. Absurd. I couldn't do it. I had drilled so many times that I could find their heads almost without looking. But, nevertheless, I knew I would miss. What would become of my family then? Would they search for them in the United States to kill them for my error?

“*Oye, qué cómo...?*” said my compatriot, and I interrupted him by getting up and closing the briefcase.

A few faces turned towards me, but, before anyone could interfere, I pointed the gun and fired. Everything slowed down then. I felt as if the world had stopped to watch my gesture, as if this story would last forever. Maybe the world didn't change, maybe it was just a symbolic gesture that wasn't transcendent in any way. Maybe. In any case, it would end up written in bloody letters in the history books.

Something that, beyond assuring the safety of my wife and daughter, didn't matter to me at all.

Carrero Blanco's face disappeared in a cloud of blood an instant before I took the second

shot, aiming at the young prince who hoped to rule our country. I felt a terrible pain in my shoulder, my chest, and I fell backwards, knocking over my chair. I saw how my table companions were riddled with bullets, twisting in a San Vito dance that turned them into unexpected extras in my death. I tried to get up, another explosion in my chest brought me down.

I felt how the crowd swirled around me, but I couldn't hear them. Somehow, I had lost my sense of hearing. The crowd, gathering around me. Faces contorted with hate, with fear, swept back by men in uniforms. One of the officials took out his gun, pointed it at my face.

I smiled.

Would the young heir have fallen? I didn't know, could only guess. With all that training, I couldn't have missed. Doubtless the prince lay next to the monster, both eliminated from the *franquista* chain of succession. Would my gesture change anything? Maybe not for Spaniards, certainly not for me.

But for my wife and daughter, it meant freedom, the start of a new life in a new world.

It was worth the pain.

The official shouted something, I couldn't understand him. Nothing hurt yet; I only felt a spreading numbness, as if I was going off and leaving my body on the floor. The official shouted again, turned his gun's safety off.

The face of Prince Juan Carlos emerged from the crowd, splattered crimson over his eyes, his cheeks. Spain would be left in the hands of a young, charmless, inexperienced man. Would he free us from the oppressive yoke of the Nazis? Would we really want to be freed? It certainly didn't matter to me. I hadn't done it for that reason. My only concern was now sailing to safety, toward the land of opportunities.

I smiled, feeling my strength fail. In that instant, as if destiny were mocking me, I recovered my hearing just in time to hear the epic chords of Wagner commemorating my actions.

And then, the man fired.

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