"Amorous ghosts" by Paco Ignacio Taibo II : translation of "Amorosos fantasmas" from the Spanish

Shevon Porter

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This thesis is a translation into English of Paco Ignacio Taibo II's Mexican detective novel Amorosos fantasmas. The approach used in translating is in line with Lawrence Venuti's concept of foreignization. It was employed in favor of a more common style of domestication. Foreignization allows the translated text to retain some linguistic and cultural elements that are important or distinctive in the source text. In doing so, it evokes a feeling of foreignness. The reader of this translation may feel aware that he or she is reading a book that was not originally written in English; it is intentionally less fluent than a domesticated translation would be.

The first introduction is an essay explaining the translation approach, why it is appropriate, and some of the difficulties encountered in the task of translating. The second is an analysis of the protagonist and a brief study of the previous novels in the series, of which Amorous Ghosts is the sixth. The series features Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, Mexican private detective, and is written in the novela negra, or noir style. Paco Ignacio Taibo II uses the devices of this genre in order to criticize and call attention to social inequities, government corruption and bourgeois apathy in Mexico City. In Amorous Ghosts, Belascoarán finds himself at a particularly low and lonely point, haunted metaphorically by ghosts of his own past as well as those of his clients. He is propelled on by the strength of his ideals, however, to solve two murder cases and bring his own brand of justice to the perpetrators.
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AMOROUS GHOSTS BY PACO IGNACIO TAIBO II:
TRANSLATION OF AMOROSOS FANTASMAS
FROM THE SPANISH

BY
SHEVON PORTER, M.A.

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Eloy Merino
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I first read Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *Amorosos fantasmas* as part of a class called *Estudios transatlánticos: la novela detectivesca hispánica* [Transatlantic Studies: The Hispanic Detective Novel]. Having read a fair number of detective novels in English prior to the course, but never considering myself an expert, I enjoyed analyzing the genre as an important literary tradition in Latin America and Spain. I chose to translate this short novel because it is both a good read and a cultural commentary that allows for deeper thought and analysis. My approach to the translation is in line with Lawrence Venuti's concept of "foreignization." This approach is appropriate, given the strong cultural appeal of Taibo's original. I also feel that the sometimes disruptive reading experience that a foreignized translation provides can mimic the experience a non-native reader has in reading the source text. As a reader of Spanish-language novels, I enjoy this sense of foreignness and hope readers of *Amorous Ghosts* will feel something similar by means of this faithful, not-always-fluent translation.

Taibo's Héctor Belascoarán Shayne detective series, of which *Amorous Ghosts* is the sixth novel, is distinctly Mexican in its perspective and its spirit, and draws heavily on the culture, history, politics and vernacular language of that country. The author uses the noir, or *novela negra* genre as a vehicle to explore and critique the society and culture of Mexico City; his ultimate aim is to "reinvigorate a form of socially engaged literature" (Nichols, 11). It is the setting of the city itself and the distinctly Mexican characters Héctor finds within it that best portray the cultural nuances on which the reader's social engagement depends. In the introduction
to No habrá final feliz: la serie completa de Héctor Belascoarán Shayne [There Will Be No Happy Ending: The Complete Héctor Belascoarán Shayne Series], Taibo tells us:

"Belascoarán vive en una ciudad apasionante y terrible, donde lo criminal desciende de las alturas del poder, bajo la forma de abuso, corrupción policiaca, desastre del sistema judicial y carcelario, ilegalidad permanente para los ciudadanos y privilegios de intocables para los oligarcas. Pero vive también en el paraíso del humor negro, de la solidaridad del barrio, de la generosidad y del absurdo. [Belascoarán lives in a thrilling and terrible city, where what is criminal descends from the heights of power, under the form of abuse, police corruption, failure of the judicial and prison system, permanent illegality for citizens and untouchable privileges for the oligarchs. But he also lives in the paradise of black humor, of the solidarity of the barrio, of generosity and of the absurd.]" (xiv)

Héctor's explorations of this "thrilling and terrible city" and his interactions with the people in it are more important than any particularly clever way he tracks down criminals. In most cases, including Amorous Ghosts, the plot does not feature extravagant twists, red herrings, or other devices commonly found in crime fiction. In this description, as in the novels themselves, Taibo evokes a strong sense of place, which is at the heart of Héctor's investigations.

A key question for the translator of a Belascoarán Shayne novel, then, is how to preserve, or at least authentically replicate, the social representations of this landscape that are so central in the source text. There is a danger that in Americanizing (where American refers to the culture of
the United States) the language, the translator will Americanize the characters or settings which
in the original are so distinctly Mexican. Changing or omitting certain phrases to make the text
flow more naturally to the ear of the English speaker risks altering the essence of who a character
is or in what kind of place he or she finds herself. As a result, in the reader's mind that character
or that place may become an analogue of someone or something known in the U.S., rather than
existing as a distinctive (if possibly alien, to the reader) part of Taibo's Mexico City.

Many translators use strategies that prize fluency in the target language above
faithfulness to the original text. A general term Venuti uses for such techniques is
"domestication;" this approach is popularly used in the English translations of many novels,
technical writings, and other forms of fiction and non-fiction published in the United States.
Domestication strives to make the translation feel natural, as though it were not a translation at
all. The difficulty with this philosophy, which Venuti sees as a question of ethical attitudes
toward a foreign text and culture, is that it leaves certain values and understandings inherent in
the source culture completely out of the picture in the translation. He summarizes
Schleiermacher's idea of the translator's choice in using domestication as "an ethnocentric
reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti
2008, 15). Perhaps because the Belascoarán Shayne novels are genre fiction and many readers in
the U.S. enjoy them for that reason, other translators of works in the series have decided to
minimize the awkward language sometimes created by foreignization, wanting the reader to be
able to read the text fluidly and without being jarred out of the flow of events. An example of
this can be seen in an excerpt from the English translation of Cosa fácil [An Easy Thing]. The
original contains the following passage, taken from the diary of a teenaged girl: "Decirle al
maestro de historia todo esto: Es engreído, se siente caifán, tiene un tic, ha de ser impotente, le gusta seguro su madre, y desde chiquito está así… Y no sabe nada de historia"(Taibo 179). The translation, in this instance, significantly modifies the passionate yet clipped language, ostensibly to make the girl's ramblings more recognizably adolescent to the U.S. reader's mind: "That stupid history teacher. What a conceited pimp. I wish I could tell him how much I hate him. He's got that stupid tic, I wonder if he even knows it. I'm sure he's impotent and he probably has the hots for his own mother. Ever since he was a little kid, I bet. Besides which, he doesn't know a damn thing about history!"(Taibo 2012, location 602 of 3986). In this domesticated translation, entire phrases not present in the original have been added: "That stupid history teacher," "I wonder if he even knows it," "I bet..." This embellishment portrays an entirely different kind of teenager in the English version than what is presented in the original. The character Taibo created actually turns out to be remarkably restrained in what she says, even choosing to keep a secret although it places her in danger. The girl in the English version seems ramblingly superficial in comparison. The translator may have felt the original would not convincingly reproduce the language of a teenager as readers in the U.S. think of it; the changes made here do, in fact, give readers an "Americanized" teenage girl. This seems to me an egregiously free translation because the stereotype does not match the individual portrayed in the original. It may be true that the average reader in the U.S. who picks up a detective novel will not necessarily have the patience to engage in the challenging and disruptive reading experience afforded by a faithful translation, but when a translator chooses the opposite extreme instead, what is lost can be fundamental to the social representations and distinctive Mexican point of view Taibo so consciously cultivates throughout each book in the series.
In contrast to domestication, the "foreignization" strategy I have used in the translation of *Amorous Ghosts* is linguistically marked rather than fluent. My aim, rather than evoking American character and setting "types" already known to the reader's mind, was to make clear that Taibo's characters are not ordinary, and might not always speak or behave as a U.S. reader expects. The approach is described by Venuti as "an ethnodeviant pressure on those [cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (15). Because crime fiction is so widely translated into English, it might at first be argued that the selection of this particular novel for translation is not well suited to a foreignizing approach. The "dissident" quality of foreignization intends to select not only translation strategies, but also source texts, that deviate from what is common or expected in the receiving culture. Keeping in mind the huge success of translations of crime novels by Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, Jo Nesbø, Andrea Camilleri, and many others in recent decades, the genre cannot be said to fall outside the mainstream. However, because of the strong cultural and political themes that recur in Taibo's novels, *Amorous Ghosts* offers many opportunities in translation to highlight distinctly Mexican perspectives within an already-known genre.

The foreignization of the translation of *Amorous Ghosts* presented here will be evident at word level in most passages, where a certain sentence may not sound as though it were originally formulated in English. I have endeavored to translate the novel as faithfully as possible, without omitting any words or phrases that defy a natural-sounding equivalent in English, as domesticated translations frequently do. Philip Lewis refers to an "abusive fidelity" which causes what Venuti calls "resistancy," and which "challenges the receiving culture even as it enacts its own ethnocentric violence on the foreign text" (18). This strategy not only challenges the
English-speaking reader to remember that this is a foreign novel; it also in some ways reflects the experience of reading foreign literature in its original form and language. As a reader of Spanish-language fiction, I enjoy experiencing the differences in syntax and other linguistic elements between the two languages. There is a process of discovery beyond the actual events of the story, a heightened consciousness of particular words and phrases, that takes the reader out of her or his element and adds to the sense of immersion in a foreign place. Because of this, it was important to me to be faithful to the original text. In so doing, I hope to create a reading experience which closely resembles that of the reader sitting down to read in a foreign language.

Of course, exact faithfulness is not ideal or even possible in all circumstances, nor does it imply literal, word-for-word translation. One salient feature of Taibo's writing, which contributes much to its distinctive Mexican-ness, is its use of vernacular language. This is particularly true in his characters' dialogue. This was, for me, one of the most challenging elements of the translation process. My goal in these passages was to convey Taibo's intended tone, which varies depending on the speaker and context, in addition to the intended meaning. Héctor Belascoarán, in general, uses a Mexico City vernacular and my intention was to translate the slangy phrases in a way that English-speaking readers would understand to be laid-back and colloquial, as he comes across in Spanish. In the case of dialogue, then, I have remained faithful to the original but I have substituted equivalent phrases where needed in order to convey an appropriate tone and meaning. The result, I believe, is sometimes stilted-sounding dialogue that is nevertheless obviously informal and idiomatic. This minimizes the risk that readers will draw their mental pictures of characters using a preconceived American template.
I chose to translate this book because the Héctor Belascoarán Shayne series interests me on several levels. I enjoy crime novels, from Arthur Conan Doyle to Patricia Highsmith, John D. MacDonald to Robert Galbraith, Stieg Larsson to Alicia Giménez Bartlett. There is something intriguing about detective novels that has attracted readers worldwide, and drawn literary writers known for their work outside the genre to try their hands at it, as well. Ray Bradbury, Thomas Pynchon, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, and countless other authors have published one or more such novels. Taibo has also published a number of books outside the genre and is considered not only one of the most popular authors of detective fiction in Mexico, but also a "serious" literary talent. There is something satisfying and somehow fitting in having the exploration of the human condition tied to the investigation of a crime. Knowing I would be spending a lot of time with whatever book I was going to translate, I started my search in this genre. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Amorosos fantasmas, one of the books I'd studied in that class on crime novels, had not yet been translated into English. As 28 countries have printed books in the series, and five of the Belascoarán Shayne novels already have English versions, I consider myself fortunate. Having already read and studied it within the context of transatlantic studies of the genre as literature, I had an appreciation for the story from the beginning.

Amorosos fantasmas was my introduction to the character of Héctor Belascoarán Shayne. I was well into the translation before I began to read the other books in the series, starting at the beginning. I read the two books immediately before and after Amorosos fantasmas: Return to the Same City and Frontera Dreams, in English translation, although I frequently compared the English and Spanish versions to see how other translators treated Taibo's work. Reading the
other novels and understanding Héctor's back story helped me in the later stages of the translation process, sometimes in little ways and other times in more profound. I did not, for example, understand until then the full importance of the cultural undercurrents in the story. These are somewhat less pronounced in *Amorosos fantasmas* but still present, as they are in every one of the novels in the series. This knowledge gave me a much better appreciation for Héctor's character and for Taibo's work. Another mystery solved by digging into Héctor's backstory was why his landlord is called *El Mago* [The Wizard]. I had originally translated his nickname as "The Magician." In an earlier story, however, he is introduced as Merlín Gutiérrez: The Wizard Merlin. The pieces of Héctor's life, his social circle and his city come together over the course of the series. In some instances, knowing how Héctor got his scars or why he cares about people who are disenfranchised allowed me to translate *Amorosos fantasmas* better than I could have otherwise; in others, it only helped me like and admire him as a character who has suffered a great deal for his convictions. Overall, beyond any practical benefits, knowing the full story of his journey from healthy engineer to one-eyed, limping, resurrected detective made the project of translating the sixth book of the series more interesting and enjoyable.

There are other, more technical elements of this book that I had enjoyed initially upon reading it and which I rediscovered during the process of translating. In the opening scene, Taibo manages to evoke vivid images of the colorful group of caped and masked wrestlers carrying the coffin in the rain, the graveside offerings and mourners, and the mariachis playing "Son de la Negra." Yet the remoteness of the detective is presented in short, simple sentences: "It was raining."

"The death of The Ángel, he didn't like." "The water began to penetrate the gabardine and he felt cold." The imagery and measured pace of that scene were delightful to translate and
immediately sparked my interest in the project. I found similar contrasts throughout the novel.

The dialogue, as I have previously mentioned, was particularly challenging, but enjoyable. The "solidarity of the barrio" Taibo speaks of is apparent in the lines Héctor exchanges with the pork rind vendor, his officemate Carlos, The Ángel II and others. Héctor's interior ruminations about love, loneliness, and his city preceding or following these exchanges provide an appealing balance, tonally and linguistically.

Taibo appeals to the reader in the final lines of his introduction to the complete Belascoarán Shayne series, "Espero que gocen esta saga tanto como yo escribiéndola, y que el goce no se quede en eso sino que añada la posibilidad de ver criticamente este mundo que a veces tenemos tan cerca y tan lejos"[I hope you enjoy this saga as much as I in writing it, and that the enjoyment doesn't end there, but rather adds the possibility to see critically this world that we sometimes have so close and so far]"(xiv). As a reader who has enjoyed the series and appreciated the Taibo's critical commentary, I am pleased to offer the opportunity for an English-language audience to discover this piece of Héctor Belascoarán's story. Given that the author clearly has higher expectations for his Spanish-language readers than to simply take the story at face value, I feel that the translation should similarly demand more of readers in English. The translation that follows will give English-language readers a window onto the unique characters and nuanced culture of Héctor Beláscoarán Shayne's Mexico City. If it is sometimes dark through the glass, it is my hope that the images that appear upon closer examination will open up a new perspective that can only be gained, if not by reading the original, then by pushing through the resistance of a foreignized translation.
SEEING GHOSTS: THE ART OF DETECTION IN *AMOROSOS FANTASMAS*

It is dangerous, in Paco Ignacio Taibo II's Mexico City, to go looking for ghosts. By the time Héctor Belascoarán Shayne attends the funeral of his friend in the opening pages of *Amorous Ghosts*, the beleaguered detective has already, in two previous stories, died himself and also indirectly caused the “death” of the author who created him. Resurrected by the fictionally deceased author Paco Ignacio, Héctor inhabits a city that is filled, metaphorically, with ghosts. In the installment translated here, Héctor finds himself at a low point, lonely and questioning the relevance of the work that has cost him so much. Still, he continues to seek out these elusive echoes of things lost. He has taken it on as a professional duty, since it is a task few people in modern Mexico City willingly undertake. Seeing ghosts requires a person to peel back a layer of grime and acknowledge what Héctor calls “la parte más jodida de la patria [the most fucked-up part of the homeland]” (Taibo 2009, 418). The most fucked-up part of the homeland, in Taibo’s view, seems to have two components. On the one hand, there is the deep-seated corruption that pervades law enforcement agencies and structures of power and victimizes the lower classes. On the other is the willful blindness of the modern middle and upper classes in the face of this corruption. A prevailing theme in all of the Belascoarán Shayne novels is Paco Ignacio Taibo’s critique of these two facets of Mexico City, fueled by a longing for days now past in which people used to care enough to fight back against these injustices.
Though the character of Héctor Belascoarán now embodies the pursuit of those ideals the revolutionary 1960s failed to achieve, he was not always a crusader. In his previous life as a middle-class engineer, he used to drive to work each day with the windows rolled up, unwilling to look at or hear the sights and sounds of the lower-class portions of the city, intent on reaching his job and earning his paycheck so that his wife could buy new carpet for their house. He was as impassive as anyone else in the city: he was safe, comfortable, and unthreatened by the violence to which he would later be exposed. From his nice home, from his insulated car, he saw no ghosts. When, in the first book of the series, he hangs it all up to hunt the serial murderer of a number of women, he sets off down a path that will lead to many attacks, many injuries, the loss of an eye, and, at the end of the fourth book (ominously and appropriately titled *No Happy Ending*), his own death. He is resurrected in *Return to the Same City*, the book preceding *Amorous Ghosts*, but death and injury have, by this point, taken their toll.

Each injury weakens him, but many times one will also strengthen his conviction that he has chosen the right path. This path is different in a very literal way, and one that is important to his ability to see the ghosts in his city. In his life as a detective, he no longer drives to work. Instead he walks, takes public transportation, or relies on the chauffeuring services of his on-again, off-again, race-car-driving girlfriend. Héctor the detective, unlike Héctor the engineer, does a lot of walking. He walks for hours, all over the city, sometimes with a purpose and sometimes without. The salient feature of his meanderings is that he absorbs everything. Since he sold his car and quit his engineering job, Héctor has gotten to know his city inside and out, for the first time in his life. What he absorbs with his senses is a city that is vibrant, rich, and full of the best and worst life has to offer. He falls in love with his city, hates his city, is afflicted with
“mal del D.F. [Federal District malady]” (Taibo 1994, 32). From pork rind vendors to striking union workers; electronics repairmen to café waiters, the members of the working class are no longer shadows to be ignored, but rather the part of the city most worthy of protection from the corruption of those in power.

Viewed in this way – that one only has to roll down the windows or head out on foot in order to see the ghosts the rest of the country ignores – it would seem that the art of detection is a relatively simple one. And, at least as Héctor practices it, it is. William J. Nichols, in his transatlantic analysis of Taibo's and Spanish author Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's literature, asserts that Taibo uses "detective fiction as a political tool that exposes society's problems through the detective's investigation…. Ultimately the solution to the mystery in these novels becomes secondary to what the investigation itself unveils, and the political, social, and economic reality of… Mexico…." (Nichols, 22). Héctor, who for most of the series has only one eye, is still a more skilled observer than most. Certainly better than the those who are officially charged with preventing and solving crimes. What he sees is that the comfortable lives such as the one he left behind come at the expense of the people he now passes on the street during his walks. The police and other law enforcement agencies are known to be corrupt; in Algunas nubes Taibo (in the voice of his eponymous character, novelist Paco Ignacio) claims that 76% of all major crimes committed in the city can be traced back to the police (Taibo 2009, 368). The victims of the crimes and the loved ones they leave behind have no recourse to justice. There is no one to point out the corruption, and therefore no one acknowledges it with more than a shaking of the head or a few choice, cynical words. This is the logic behind Héctor's character. In
the course of his investigations, he shines a light on what those in power would prefer to keep in the dark.

In the earlier novels of the series, much is made of the absurdity of the idea of a Mexican detective -- so much so that Taibo often refers to Héctor as a "sui generis Mexican detective" (Taibo and Dail, 155). That anyone would want to wade into the murky waters of corruption and call attention to what lies beneath the layers of political influence to find truth seems, to judge by the reactions of a number of characters, incomprehensible. Even if he discovers the truth, the question remains: what to do about it? Turning the criminal or criminals over to the authorities is rarely an option. So it is that one of his tasks, seemingly just as important as seeking out the truth, is to involve the public, rather than alert the authorities, in the chase and in the capture. To do this, Héctor often employs various media as a sort of bullhorn -- just as Taibo himself uses detective fiction and the character of Héctor Belascoarán Shayne to comment on social injustice. In the first novel of the series, Héctor draws attention to the offenses of a serial killer of women by appearing on a popular TV game show and answering trivia questions in the category of "Grandes estranguladores en la historia del crimen [Great Stranglers in the History of Crime]" (Taibo 2009,47). He also appeals to his old friend, and Laura's predecessor as late-night radio show host, El Cuervo [The Raven] to pass along vital information to listeners. In a later adventure, Héctor simultaneously saves himself from attracting retribution from a corrupt police official and exposes the truth of this officer's guilt by alerting a good friend who works for a newspaper of what he has uncovered in an investigation. In many earlier novels, then, it is necessary for Héctor to draw in members of the community -- a tactic that has the side benefit of drawing the attention of the masses to the corruption against which he fights.
In *Amorous Ghosts*, however, it is not Héctor who seeks out the media, but rather the media that seeks out Héctor. Laura, the late-night radio show host, employs him to find the murderer of Virginia, and Héctor is at first reluctant. It is now Laura who continues to call attention to the public, and who refuses to let the death of the teenager be forgotten or her murderer go unpunished. In contrast, Héctor urges her to be cautious in what she says on air regarding his investigation. He has essentially ceded his part in this tactic to Laura, who takes it up with passion and determination.

This is one of several indications that by this time, in the sixth novel in the series, Héctor has been beaten down to an especially morose and melancholy state which pervades the novel from start to finish. He finds little joy in the chase. He does find one impassioned moment as he faces the murderer of the teenage girl, Virginia, who tries to buy his silence by writing a check. In previous novels, he has pursued the likes of a serial killer, an allegedly still-living Emiliano Zapata, and a corrupt commander of the judicial police. The ghosts he must deal with in *Amorous Ghosts*, meanwhile, run the gamut from an old friend to an unknown teenager, and more personally, to a lover and a homeland that have both slipped away and left him feeling empty.

"After all," the author himself laments in an introductory note to the novel, "they were only impossible love stories, teenagers in suicide pacts, nostalgic wrestlers and sad detectives…." Taibo, like Héctor, mourns the ghost of a past when death could have meaning, when there was something to fight against. A history professor who has written a book on the subject, Taibo evokes the ghost of the Revolution of 1968 in Mexico City in nearly every novel.
in the Belascoarán series. Taibo and Héctor lament what has been lost in the generations since that turbulent era. The author has peppered the series with characters that highlight his sympathies: striking union workers, an aged Emiliano Zapata, a villain who cut the hands off the corpse of Che Guevara. Héctor, who did not participate in the student demonstrations of his generation but who has since allied himself with similar causes, in one case joins a group of protesters in solidarity, not even knowing what they are protesting. In contrast, one can see what Taibo depicts as the confusion and aimlessness of the current generation, a longing for meaning that is muddled with the interests of the self-absorbed, when he describes the tape-recorded messages of the murdered teenager, Virginia: "She told about things like CEU demonstrations mixed with anguished appeals to eliminate acne…” (30-31). Even among the young, who are most likely and most willing to rise up and fight against corruption and societal injustice, there seems to be no outlet for their angst. Sadly, Virginia seems to suspect that she is living in less vital times, even as she struggles against the idea. "They say that people don't love like they used to anymore, that our experiences of love are stupid, they're crummy, that they're from a sad generation that has no passions. It isn't true" (22). But her shortened life reveals the opposite. She was never given the chance to experience real love. Instead she was murdered by a much older man who dealt in prostitution and who manufactured a love affair and suicide pact between her and a boy she did not even like, let alone love. While she lived, having no revolution in which to participate, she is resigned to sending lonely, disorganized musings on tape to a late-night radio show in a desperate attempt to be heard, and to search for meaning where there seems to be none.

The other case Héctor investigates in this novel, the murder of the dead wrestler, turns out to be a similarly senseless act perpetrated by a ghost from the past. Héctor finds little
satisfaction in tracking down Zamudio "The Ghost," who turns out to be a sad, purposeless ex-wrestler haunted by the loss of a woman he'd loved who had chosen another. Again, it is a solution that leaves him feeling empty because the motive for the killing is nothing but a ghost from the distant past and a love affair that never was.

The ex-wrestler's nostalgia for his old love comes dangerously close to Héctor's own emotional state in this novel. The girl he loves most in the world, whose name is Irene but who is almost always referred to as "the girl with the ponytail," seems to have slipped dangerously far away in *Amorous Ghosts*. She is the girl who once wanted to be murdered by the strangler whom Héctor defeated in the first novel in the series; Héctor's on-again, off-again girlfriend, briefly a fiancee, who comes and goes but whom is never far from his mind. But in this novel the girl with the ponytail seems farther away than ever, and there is a new marker of all that he has lost. His apartment, which he has previously shared with a rabbit, two ducks, and briefly, the girl herself, is now not only completely empty of companions, but filled with thousands of photographs of this girl who got away. Héctor has always used photographs to connect himself to the victims of crimes he investigates. The photos serve as reminders of who they were, that they existed, that they lived. Now it seems Héctor's girl has become a ghost herself, only present in the various poses in the pictures on his wall, and his home has never felt so lonely.

The girl with the ponytail has been, from the beginning, a symbol of Héctor's departure from his old life, and of the ideals he now embraces as a Mexican detective *sui generis*. In the first novel of the series, *Días de combate* [*Days of Combat*], his mother urges him to go back to the safe life he left behind. She has arranged a reunion between him and his ex-wife, who is
waiting for him in the next room. As Héctor considers, he hears a motorcycle outside. His moment of doubt vanishes as he walks out of his mother's house and joins the girl with the ponytail on the back of her motorcycle, and in so doing fully committing himself to the life of the private detective.

The girl serves as an important connection to a past revolution in which Héctor himself did not participate. She was personally involved in the student movement of 1968, and was profoundly affected by it. His association with her, as well as his renewed closeness with his brother, Carlos, who also participated, link Héctor to the ideals of that revolution, and in some ways legitimize his efforts to pursue what was pursued by that group of young revolutionaries. Like Héctor, the girl with the ponytail came from a life of privilege, but her disillusionment with that life came much earlier, coinciding with the events in Mexico City of 1968. She was active in the movement, though not a leader, and when the massacre of Tlatelolco occurred in October of that year, she was out of town. Still, the revolution left an enduring mark on her and was one reason she, like Héctor, would soon abandon her comfortable life and become an outlier. As Nichols points out, "Her individual experiences in the student movement represent a microcosm of the disillusionment after Tlatelolco and she embodies the turmoil and disenchantment of 1968…" (126). Héctor, during the same time, had been a serious student of engineering and had not become politically involved. He stayed on the path toward conformity even as his younger brother, Carlos, joined in with the revolution. The two grew apart and for many years, until Héctor broke with his old life, they rarely saw each other. His decision to become a detective suddenly brought him into contact with people who were involved in that movement, and who still embody the nonconformist spirit born in the late Sixties.
By reestablishing ties with Carlos and by choosing the girl with the ponytail instead of reuniting with his ex-wife, Héctor not only definitively abandons the bourgeois life they had given up before him; he also aligns himself firmly with their ideals. Renunciation of the kind of materialism that prevails at the expense of the oppression of the lower classes, intolerance toward the government which suppresses freedom and promotes corruption, and determination to shine light on certain truths obscured by the corrupt authorities are the moral imperatives inherited from the movement of 1968 and which he now defends as he pursues his investigations as a private detective. As he goes deeper and deeper into these investigations, he begins to directly oppose the police and other structures of power, which he comes to regard as "el gran castillo de la bruja de Blancanieves [the great castle of the witch from Snow White]" (Taibo 2009, 482) and as "las fuerzas del mal [the forces of evil]" (492).

The absence of both the girl with the ponytail and Héctor's brother, Carlos, in Amorous Ghosts points to Héctor's loss of confidence in his own ideals in this particular installment of the Belascoarán Shayne series. In other stories, it is these two characters, along with Héctor's sister, Elena, who form the innermost circle of support for Héctor. A sense of loneliness is created by the fact that none of them are present in this story. Even the pair of ducks, given to Héctor in the previous novel by the girl with the ponytail, are absent. He is left only with the thousand-plus photos of the girl tacked to the walls of his apartment. The image of so many photos is sad, lonely, like many of the other characters in this book. It evokes more clearly than anything else a sense of loss, as Héctor finally has to admit. "They were only photos, he told himself. He didn't fool himself in the slightest. There were no photos; there were memories, there were ghosts" (102). When the absence of the girl with the ponytail is taken along with the hopelessness he
feels regarding the murders he's solved, the failings of the ideals of the revolution are more clearly pronounced, giving them a ghostly quality of their own. The days of meaning seem to have passed, leaving only hollow acts, shadows and illusions of things, like love, that once mattered. As hard as he has worked to vindicate the murders of Virginia and of his old friend, The Ángel, even solving the crimes leaves him feeling empty. For all that has happened, nothing has essentially changed. "No matter how they tried, Virginia's voice would sound empty. As much as Laura's words tried to help her, to revive her, Virginia's voice would sound like what it was: a dead teenager" (101).

"In his decalogue on mystery novels," Héctor muses wryly in the novel preceding Amorous Ghosts, "Chandler forgot to prohibit detectives from getting metaphysical" (Taibo and Dail, 48). That period of Héctor's recovery from death finds him afraid and searching for a way back to life. In the present novel, it seems he has stopped being afraid but is still trying to rediscover meaning in what he does. He once abandoned a life of comfort because the murders of a number of women had begun to haunt him; these women seemed to him like ghosts that most citizens of Mexico City couldn't or wouldn't see. The ghosts of the past, whether they be those of his clients, his own life, or of Mexican society, threaten always to dissolve and be forgotten. In Amorous Ghosts, Héctor sometimes worries that perhaps it doesn't matter if they are. But he will continue to solve cases in future novels in the series, propelled by the strength of his ideals. He is, after all, one of a kind. If he doesn't look for the ghosts, nobody will.
After all, they were only impossible love stories, teenagers in suicide pacts, nostalgic wrestlers and sad detectives. People died easy in Mexico City in those days, and Belascoarán's soul weighed on him, as if a damn tango were being sung in his ear.

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The city is Mexico City, although the characters belong to the most vile fiction. And the novel is for Miguel Bonasso, Ciro Gómez Leiva and Juan Hernández Luna, for various reasons, though for indisputable friendships.

And who, sons of bitches, was the one that said Chopin was tacky?

-Guillermo Cuevas

ONE

There are people who say that I hang around on the bad side of life. God save me!

-RAYMOND CHANDLER
Héctor looked at the masked face of a wrestler down which a tear was running. He was surprised. First, wrestlers don't cry, this is an indisputable axiom; second, there was a technical problem: the mask should have hindered the natural flow of tears. Even so, in spite of the two objections, the guy was undoubtedly crying. He approached, discarding his previous wish to see it all from a distance. In the middle of the street, a group of masked wrestlers, with capes and uniforms of festive colors (orange, canary yellow, black with silvery touches) carried over their shoulders a great metallic-gray coffin. Behind them the mariachis set it off with the *Son de la negra*; a little farther back the relatives, justifiably and normally tearful; a numerous family of popular origin in mourning, friends, neighbors, onlookers. Héctor lit a cigarette. It was raining.

The cortège, reorganized at the entrance of the cemetery, began its slow march toward The Ángel's final shelter. The mariachis finished their first take on the *Son de la negra* and started the reprise.

Héctor remembered that someone had told him one time, when he was younger and the city was different, that if you can't choose the place where you are born, much less can you choose the place where you're going to die. This city in particular didn't let you choose anything, neither the place nor the way; only to share its fate. It wasn't worth it to go around saying of this fate *yes* and of this one *no*. All of them or none. You take it or leave it. You stay with it or you get under the bed so it doesn't bite you. And meanwhile, you couldn't avoid continuing to be surprised, because even if you knew all the corners, all the alleys, all the crazy things the city could imagine, there would always be another macabre incident.

The death of The Ángel, he didn't like.
The attendees of the burial lit candles before portraits of the deceased wrestler and placed them beside the coffin, while the earth was being opened to receive it. The mariachis insisted. Would The Ángel have requested the *Son de la negra* as the music of earthly farewell?

It's true that the burial would have made the very Jorge Negrete pale with envy, but The Ángel didn't deserve an exit scene like that. The least the survivors owed him, according to the very unilateral decision of Héctor, was the head of his murderer wrapped in cellophane and with an enormous pink bun.

The water began to penetrate the gabardine and he felt cold.

Carlos Vargas, his office mate, was working on some stripped pieces of furniture opposite the detective's desk. Héctor was watching him do it. The upholsterer had put on a Walkman and was dancing to the mysterious rhythm of a music that Héctor couldn't hear. The detective began to go from curiosity to amazement. Carlos was moving, facing the piece of split-open furniture, with the plastic stuffing welling up out of the wounds, doing made-up steps, dancing with the mysterious rhythm while he stuck tacks into the upper part of the fabric, which was getting attached to the wooden frame like the new skin of the furniture. The detective had taken off his shoes and, with his feet on the desk, was drinking a soda while he glanced over a wrestling magazine, as a way of paying the last homage to The Ángel.

"You're practicing a backbreaker hold," Hector said suddenly, "for example, something simple, a full Nelson, some vulgar scissors, no offense, only as training… right?"
Carlos Vargas nodded, realizing by the attitude of his neighbor that the detective had asked him something, although it was obvious that he cared absolutely crap about the matter and the only thing that interested him was the music.

"And then some random guy arrives and greets him, gives him a bro hug, a hug of lifelong comrades, and he puts a .38 special on the back of his neck…"

Carlos began then to work on the complex steps of a danzón while he continued tacking the furniture.

"Do you hear me, Vargas, Doctor of Upholstery?" asked the annoyed detective.

Belascoarán’s face made his neighbor and friend take the hint and take off one of his earphones.

"No, it seems like a bloody mess to me, too, that the price of sodas has gone up," Carlos Vargas agreed, very serious.

Héctor gave up; with a gesture he considered the matter finished and continued with the monologue.

"And he's embracing a buddy and then the bullet leaves the .38 and blows out his brains… It's not right. The embrace of Judas, right?"

Héctor stood up. Not just the upholsterer was able to slip into autism; he, Héctor, could also join the army of the expressionist theater. He took a nonexistent person in his arms, took out his revolver, made a gesture of bringing it to the temple of the man he was hugging and pretended to shoot.

"The embrace of Judas…” insisted Belascoarán, sitting down.
Carlos, without paying him much attention, broke out humming: "Negra, negra consentida…" [Black woman, spoiled black woman…]

"That's a good way to have a conversation, what they call a chat, no bullshit," concluded the detective, talking to himself.

The telephone rang, making Hector jump from the chair. After all he wasn't as calm as he was telling himself he was. He stretched to be able to answer it.

"No, right now he's busy," he looked over at Carlos Vargas, who continued with his upholsterer's danzón, "I'll take the message for him… A love seat in pink chiffon… that had to have gone out Wednesday…"

He took note on a piece of newspaper that was on the table. His handwriting came out very crooked because he was twisting himself around.

"Of course, ma'am…"

Hanging up, he observed his office mate and smiled.

"And then, going back to the story… You are a wrestler and you're all alone in the ring, the lights lit up for you alone; training after hours because the muscles aren't what they were before and you're already getting old, and then a son-of-a-bitch arrives, he hugs you…"

A wrestler masked in white (it was a familiar mask; The Ángel was coming back from the grave thinner from a long walk in purgatory) was practicing alone in the immensity of the ring, in the enormous empty space of the wrestling arena, emptier still because it had been created to be full of howling faces. The floodlights fell over his figure, which was dancing the ballet of the solitary fight, with the blows on the canvas marking the rhythm. The lighting
contributed its own elements of unreality. Hector gazed at him. Suddenly, something in the air made him turn his head. A new presence in that unreal night. At his side a floor cleaner had stayed motionless at his side with a dry mop in his hand, gazing also at the wrestler.

"Who is it?" asked the detective.

"The Ángel's son, The Ángel II. The kid has balls, to come here after what they did to his old man last week..."

"It could be that's why, for what they did to the old man last week."

The wrestler flew in the air, throwing a flying kick at an imaginary enemy. He got up. His face behind the mask was sweating, the glassy eyes seemed to have lost the quality of vision.

Héctor approached the ring. The wrestler watched him do it, but continued with his routine of throwing flying kicks at a nonexistent enemy, absent everywhere, except in a corner of his thoughts.

Héctor went up through one of the corners, swung on the ropes.

"You were the friend of my father? The detective?" asked the wrestler, panting.

Héctor nodded, lighting a cigarette.

"Is anything else known?"

"Nothing. They say it was an attack, that it was a buddy who hated him from right here, from wrestling; that it was a thing about women... Pure crap, garbage. Money, he didn't have on him; so, if he was in the ring, where, in his boxers? About chicks, which one? My dad was divorced, he went out with whoever he wanted; my mom left Mexico City years ago, with a Spaniard, to Sonora, she pays us no mind at all, years since she's written. About wrestling, nothing; here we're all friends, and the ones that aren't so much, well they're more or less good
people, sort of dumbasses, but not at all mean, anyway. See, here there are neither dead men nor
injured, all a sham, show, just love taps. You see, someone gets injured for being dumb, for
being a dumbass, for coming plastered, for not warming up, for being careless...

The Ángel's son hit the palm of his hand with his fist. He felt the blow had been very soft,
that it wasn't worth the trouble, that the pain wasn't reaching his head. He did it again. It was
useless. Héctor returned to battle. He knew a lot about those moments in which pain didn't take
away pain. It was an old story.

"Did you see your father regularly?"

"Every day. We trained together. We were partners in some combats, we always went on
tour together, we even cooked at home together. He raised me, friend. I was all of him. He taught
me how to fall and he made me study chemistry, but he let me wrestle while I did my studies.
You knew him, wasn't he like I say? Tell me, let's see if I'm not right."

"He was super cool, but then, who killed him?"

The Ángel II didn't have an answer and reacted in the only way his body remembered, he
went back to warming up. Héctor insisted.

"Why didn't you come yesterday to train with him?"

"He didn't tell me he was coming to train, he said he had to see an old friend, one of those
from before I was born; an old friend who owed him some dough. It seemed to me like it was a
pretext, I thought he was going to see a lady and for him to not tell me anything..."

Héctor smoked, trying to look away while the kid began to cry. He had questions, but
obviously The Ángel wouldn't have answers.
"Who could have wanted to kill him? Who had something against him? Was he mixed up in some trouble? Who were his friends here in the world of wrestling?"

"I don't know. No matter how much I think about it I don't know. I sure as hell don't know."

It was raining but Héctor was hot. The stifling heat rose up to the window in little clouds of vapor as it soaked the asphalt, reheated during the whole day. Héctor had kept only the lower half of his pajamas. He was smoking the third cigarette of a series that was supposed to go a long way. One night of insomnia before the window. From time to time the lights of the cars altered the landscape changing the lighting. The air blew in a different direction and the rain began to drum on the glass. He walked toward the other room to close the windows; this time he had the healthy intention of not letting his books get wet. He crossed the hall trying to overlook the decoration: dozens of photos of the girl with the ponytail put up with tacks. There were a lot; really a lot. Héctor, sometimes, felt there were too many. An absence in this way became a presence, but the cost was high.

As he passed alongside the telephone, placed on top of the selected works of Steinbeck in two volumes, and therefore in fragile balance, the bell began to ring, as if it had guessed the movements of the detective.

"Please, Hector, put on the program!" said Laura on the device.

Héctor set aside the telephone and walked toward the stereo. He imagined Laura: headphones on, the right lightly raised to be able to talk on the phone, positioned in front of the
mic. Like the portrait of one of those intellectual women that the Hollywood movies drew so badly and so well at the beginning of the sixties, those PhDs that when they undid the bun in which they gathered up their hair, they changed into wild-haired vamps with full lips. Who of the two was older? Laura, two days older than Héctor. That calmed him.

The voice appeared in the middle of the static, but it wasn't the habitually sensual voice of Laura. He looked at the device, suspicious.

"...And when I leaned out the patio window, you could just see the bodies stretched out there. You can see blood is coming from his temple, miss, that's why the thing about the tape I sent you..."

Laura interrupted the woman: "Thank you, Doña Amalia. Here, live, Laura Ramos, in The Hour of the Lonely Ones, broadcasting from the XEKA studios on Revolución Avenue. For those joining our program now, we're going to give you the background."

Héctor thanked Laura for the personal message and began to look for the cigarettes. Where the hell had he left them? He imagined Laura talking to the microphone as if she were in love with it, caressing it. Maybe it was for that reason that the voice was so sensual, so devilishly turned on. The voice of a woman in love with a microphone could do wonders. The cigarettes appeared under an old edition of the magazine Encuentro [Encounter].

"Near nine o'clock at night a cassette containing a confession of love arrived at our studios; the tape came accompanied by a note from Mrs. Amalia González, who was saying she had sent it to us after having found it in on the staircase next to Apartment 3, at 121 Rébsamen Street, in the Del Valle district, where something terrible had just happened. In contact with the
Federal District police, we were informed that in the aforementioned Apartment 3, there has just occurred what looked like a double suicide: a pair of young adults had killed themselves…"

Some words were frankly disturbing to Héctor, who was trying to reconstruct the scene, to imagine with precision the street, Apartment 3, the number over the door. The adjectives annoyed him: "terrible." What was that? "We were informed." Who informed who?

From the radio Laura's voice continued constructing the story:

"...after drawing up a love pact, of which this tape was public record… With the terrible document in our hands we confirmed with Mrs. Amalia González that she had found the tape in an envelope addressed to this program, near the door of the apartment where the crime occurred, and that she was the one who sent it to us. If you have followed us from the beginning of the broadcast, you have just heard Doña Amalia, telling how around nine o'clock at night she heard the shots, observed through the window of the patio the bodies of the two adolescents united in the deadly pact, discovered the tape on the floor of the hallway and sent it to us with a taxi driver friend of hers."

Héctor summarized: a meddling lady, a tape thrown in the hallway in an envelope, two shots, dead bodies glimpsed through the window, a taxi driver friend.

"In a few moments and after a commercial break," Laura continued, "you will hear this strange document. We have identified the female voice as belonging to Virginia Vali, who other times had sent tapes to us at this program, and who died today around nine o'clock at night in the company of Manual J. Márquez… Later we will talk to you about these two young people…"

When the commercials began to run Héctor spoke into the phone.

"Héctor, did you listen to it?"
"Everything. What's going on?"

"I'll tell you now, did you take down the address?... It's very odd. Listen carefully to what they say on the tape and later take a drive over there, the radio station authorized me to pay you to work for us."

Héctor, who suspected that those things didn't happen in reality and felt obligated to differentiate clearly between reality-reality and the reality of lies which his life sometimes turned into, tried to slow Laura down.

"Listen, wait..." but he was left with a telephone that had a busy signal in his hands. He hung up.

From the radio came the voice that from now on and for a long time, he would know as the voice of Virginia.

"My name is Virginia, I'm 17 years old and I don't want to die..."

Héctor connected the tape recorder. A goodbye had to be heard many times in order to be real. Without realizing, he was erasing the last live concert of Bob Dylan.
I'm sitting on the edge of a road,
the driver changes the wheel.
I don't like the place I come from.
I don't like the place I'm going to.
Why do I watch the wheel change
with impatience?
-Bertolt Brecht

"My name is Virginia, I'm 17 years old and I don't want to die… How ridiculous, right? It sounds like an Alcoholics Anonymous message… but I really don't want to die, not at all, when you're 17 everything is yet to come, even the things that were already done once. I don't know why I think goodbyes should be public, that's why I'm recording this tape that I'll pass on to you at the radio program…"

Héctor went through, making his way among police officers and stretcher-bearers, forensic technicians and journalists, curious neighbors and onlookers; no one seemed to pay him much attention. There was a shitstorm in the apartment on Rébsamen Street. It seemed as if the vultures were attending to the remains of a party. Héctor went through the rooms: in the bedroom some medics with not very clean uniforms were working. On the bed there was a girl stretched out, covered by a sheet, only the head and the neck free; at the height of the heart, a bloodstain. The sheet seemed to have been put there after death over the naked body. It was a very beautiful face which the absence of life, the pallor, didn't rob of the expression of serenity. A mixture of the girlfriend we could never have in high school and the girl next door, who if we had married on time could have been a daughter of ours and we would contemplate her sleeping, wishing her the best of luck, the best lovers, the best battles. Each time he saw himself invaded by more
paternal images, he would soon begin to think about women with a grandpa's mentality. In another corner of the room another naked body was visible, that of the young man, of which only his arms could be seen outside the sheet. Héctor lit a cigarette. He was smoking too much, but who the hell cared.

Virginia's voice floated to him in his mind:

"...goodbyes should be public, that's why I'm recording this tape that I'll have you receive at the radio program... The last one I'll send, that's why I'm saying goodbye. I don't feel in the mood to talk about love anymore, because it seems like for now I won't be able to know it. They say that people don't love like they used to anymore, that our experiences of love are stupid, they're crummy, that they're from a sad generation that has no passions. It isn't true. I suppose that if you happen to play this tape it's because all that is a lie. I thank you for the moments I've robbed from you, Laura, and I also thank all those who listen to this program."

A hand covered the face of the dead girl with the sheet, as if making her vanish with a magic trick. Héctor threw his cigarette to the floor and began to wander around the house.

There are times when, even if he looks like it, one isn't thinking. Emptiness is something easy to feign even without wanting to. Idiots, lauded poets, ministers, practice this matter constantly. Héctor had the look of thinking and nevertheless had remained trapped in a loop of time, an almost interminable pause from which only the sound of the door could remove him. When this occurred, the detective reacted slowly. He checked: he was alone, it was daytime. He stuck his head out of the window: down there a group of newspaper vendors was playing soccer. He opened the window. The noises of the street rose up, tropical music from the record stores. In
the doorway a young man dressed in a suit and tie and a photo album in his hand was looking at him. Héctor invited him to come up with a gesture.

"After what we talked about yesterday, I was going over it and I remembered what I had been talking about that night with my old man."

Héctor, bewildered, looked at the character. What was this about? In his head he did the math.

"You're The Ángel's son? Sorry, bro, I had never seen you without the mask."

The Ángel II without costume, outside the ring, smiled. He turned out to be beardless, too young, excessively formal.

"The one from yesterday was the wrestling uniform, this is the one for teaching chemistry classes at the high school. Sometimes I think my students and the public would be grateful if the uniforms were reversed."

"I have my suspicions that your students at the high school would adore you plain and simple. I always wanted to have a chemistry teacher that wore a mask."

The Ángel II placed the photo album on the table with great care. There was something from his dead father hidden between the greenish leather covers.

"My dad was playing with this at night, paging through it. Maybe it was this guy, maybe this woman who had hung around with them. As if he wanted to say something to me, but he couldn't bring himself to do it."

"Can you reconstruct it exactly?"
They bent over the photo album. The Ángel handled it, turning the pages quickly. He stopped first on a photo of two fat guys, in jackets, hugging like loving and affectionate pals whom life did not abuse much.

"This was the first one he talked to me about, of his buddy Zamudio, who was from where he was from, his town right by Guadalajara. They were partners for a time, I didn't know him. When I remember my old man's first fights, he used to fight alone, always solo, he didn't like partners, he didn't leave the solo fights until we started to fight together, but this guy had been his first partner, they called themselves 'The Ghosts.' Look at them here."

He pointed to a picture in the album where a pair of bloody masked men dominated the ring. They were in a small town arena.

"And what did he say to you?" asked Héctor.

"No, he was just talking about the old times."

"And what did he say about the woman?"

["That she was a woman that they both loved a lot, and he went through the album, but he never showed me the picture of that woman."

"Are you sure he didn't say at all that he was going to see this man, that he had talked to him, that he had reappeared? He didn't give you the impression that they would see each other again? Something like that. Could this guy be the man that went to look for him at the arena the next day? Or that he had a date with that woman."

The Ángel II hesitated, then making up his mind he put his finger on top of the photo of his father's partner.
"No. Because of the things he said it seems to me more like he was talking about him as if he were dead. His friend the dead man…"

"Zamudio? Zamudio what?" asked the detective.

"Zamudio 'The Ghost'… Just that."

The sun was shining. Héctor was sitting on a bench, with a little kid next to him who was trying to roll his toy truck over his feet, a thing which the detective tried to prevent. Laura passed running at his side, dressed in pants and sweatshirt, the uniform of the young and still childless wives that ran through the parks, with the ever more remote hope that a municipal gardener would pick them up; but the crisis had forced the municipal gardeners to double and triple employment and lately they weren't screwing so much, and they passed the time with their heads buried in the grass, pulling out weeds and cursing their luck. Laura wasn't wearing the glasses that gave her the habitual cover of the intellectual and therefore, she looked more like an American model from a Miss Clairol ad, her long hair shaking to the ups and downs of the running.

"How many do I have?" asked Laura without stopping.

"Seven laps…" Héctor responded and later, raising his voice, because she was disappearing on him behind the trees… "And her, how did you know her?"

"She was the daughter of a frienddd…"

Héctor watched how Laura ran. He liked it. She offered no resistance to the air, she undulated, gained space in the curves….
"And him? Did you know him?" But Laura already found herself very far as to have heard him.

Héctor opted for patience. The other possibility was to go running off after her, and frankly he was suspicious of the metallic grinding that his bones would produce. When you are less than 1.2 meters tall, better to be a midget. He took it with calm and began to smoke. Old people reading the newspaper (they didn't share it with one another, each one brought his own), girls from a kindergarten dressed in little red sweaters dancing on a wheel. The fountain.

Laura was an inheritance. When the Raven [el Cuervo] had disappeared, Laura appeared. The Raven announced one day to the public that he was leaving his nocturnal program and a week later Laura Ramos appeared, radiant and with a voice of velvet. She called him a couple of times to tell him stories, Héctor called her another two to tell her others. Sometimes they had coffee in a disinfected Vip's on Insurgentes Avenue. She was the one who told him that the Raven sent him a hug and that he was in Sierra de Puebla, managing a radio station for the indigenous communities, producing programs in Nahuatl; disappeared for those from before, in another country thousands of light years away from this one. She said that he seemed happy, that a halo of half-primitive saintliness surrounded his face; that each time he was more nearsighted, that he was reading Don Quixote. In short, Héctor had sent the best of mental blessings to his old friend and had inherited Laura Ramos.

"In theory there should be 10 laps, but since I have you here, I'm going to leave it at eight," said Laura, panting, and she let herself fall at the foot of the bench.

"Only you believe that thing about doing me a favor. You're on the verge of a heart attack. You smoke more than I do, you live in Mexico City, you drink Tecate beer as if it were
apple juice and later you want to be healthy. The only sensible thing about doing eight laps is that no rapist would be up for it; in general they are a bunch of lazy bums, they like the ones that do three turns and nothing more."

Laura asked him with a gesture for a cigarette, Héctor passed it to her. They smoked in silence. Later Laura began to cough.

"How do you know so much about rapists?"

"I read the society reports of the daily newspapers, and the front pages, the openings of public works…" answered Héctor. Later, changing the subject he asked, "Him? Who was the kid who died last night?"

"She was 17 years old, the guy 19, I never met him, I didn't know of his existence. You, what have you found out?"

"Little things, what they were saying around. Suicide pact of two teenagers, he shot her, she died first, he killed himself after. Her: a gunshot to the heart; him: a shot to the temple. Two bullets, two cartridges. Paraffin test positive in his right hand. Borrowed house. Owner is an English teacher from the school of both of them, she's on vacation in Houston or in some place like that where they sell hot dogs. Virginia hadn't had sexual relations that night, nor before…. She was a virgin. They were naked…"

"How do you know so much?" Laura asked.

"Asking around, fool," Héctor answered. "Who didn't let them be a couple or have formal relations? That's what suicide pacts are for, no?"

Laura made a face, tossed the cigarette far.
"I suppose his parents. But it's nonsense. Do you know teenagers who kill themselves because they don't let them be together at 17 years old? She wasn't like that."

"No one is like that until they're not shown to be otherwise. What is it, do you seriously have some doubt or is it happening to you what happens to all of us in the face of suicide?"

"This is the third time that Virginia sent a tape to me at the program, strange messages, monologues, a lot of necrophilia, a lot of teenage desperation: she told about things like CEU demonstrations*¹ mixed with anguished appeals to eliminate acne, descriptions of lions making love in the zoo, mixed with interpretations of Shakespeare's love sonnets. In none of the previous ones did the boyfriend's name appear. I don't know…. I got a week's salary for a detective on behalf of the station, they liked the idea a lot, they felt modern. Continue with the story, tell it to me. Who was Virginia? Did she really kill herself?"

Héctor put on the face of not buying that lottery ticket even if they guaranteed him all the fat prizes in the world.

"What's wrong with you? I don't convince you? Don't tell me you have a lot of work, from when they have here…."

"I have a story of a friend pending."

"Do you still do favors?"

Héctor nodded, smiling.

"Do me this one."

Héctor was slow to respond.

¹ University Student Council [Consejo Estudiantil Universitario]. The student demonstrations were part of the Movement of 1968 [Movimiento del 1968] in Mexico City.
"I saw the face of the girl... already dead. Suicide pacts don’t bother me, each person can go however they want and whenever they want…. I don't know, that fixation one has of thinking that people don't love each other anymore like before, that no one shoots themselves for love anymore. She was laid out on a bed, all covered by a sheet, except her face. She was a very beautiful dead kid."

Laura appreciated the detective objectively. Ruinous could be the word to describe his appearance. But you never knew with Belascoarán.

"Much worse that the owner of a radio station is a romantic detective. I'm positive the girl was much more beautiful alive, don't fuck around," Laura said, taking him by the arm and squeezing.

"Do you have the tapes she sent you before?"

"And the address of her house, and a note for her mother introducing you, and a letter from the station saying you work for us...."

She took out a packet from her purse that she had left on the bench next to the detective and spread the papers over Héctor's lap.

"What is it that gets you moving?" asked Laura, watching the detective fixedly.

"I don't know, I suppose a mixture, between inertia, curiosity, minimum wage…. Lately I've been very strange. I understand people less and less. Federal District malady. It's like a mixture of flu and pollution. I must be getting old."

Héctor stood up, walked up to the fountain and stuck a hand inside, the water was hot, but it flowed through his fingers. Laura, from the bench, winked an eye at the detective, it was a very decent goodbye on her part.
Later, going over the conversation with the radio host, Héctor thought that lately he was very strange, absolutely out of focus. That certainly his motivations were a mix of the eternal and insatiable curiosity, of the letting himself go in someone else's stories, of making himself a living sticking his nose in the stories of others; that he was also sometimes paid for that. But the matter failed, because with greater frequency he was a spectator that understood people less and less; that left the first part of the stories all right, but helped little to resolve them. Probably not all the blame was his. Probably, even if Laura had told him this as a joke, he was a victim of one of those common illnesses that were devastating Mexico City in recent times, and they began to be called generically Mexico City native malady, Federal District leprosy, produced by viral colds and frequent inhalation of the shit that was in the air. Héctor considered a new possibility: he was close to turning 40, he was getting old. He thought about those things, because slowly the original motivations for justice whatever it took were dissolving in his head and settling, like a solitary sediment, was the eternal dose of curiosity. Material illness: curiosity without the intention of righteous revenge.

Even so he entered the arena, lost half the afternoon asking questions without answers. Later he realized that he should have looked in the appropriate places, the phone books, the walking human Bibles, the historical trade union memories. Then he went directly to the character who would have the answers. He found "Mr. Charming" [el "Encantos"] in a hallway. He was dressed as a person, without the mop of pink hair and the fluorescent mask with which he had performed in recent years. He seemed much smaller, covered in smallpox scars, skin-and-
bones, old, calm. The first fag wrestler of Mexico City. Before homosexuals gained their right to public existence by way of the street and the law, Mr. Charming had imposed it in the arenas by a sheer kick in the balls.

"Tell me about Zamudio?" asked the detective.

"First you say hello, dude," said Mr. Charming, holding out a hooked hand to him. At their backs could be heard the howling of the public cheering on some openers.

"Very good evening," said the detective, squeezing his hand.

"The simple truth," said Mr. Charming, considering himself satisfied, "only they called Zamudio "The Ghost" when he was partners with The Ángel, that's why nobody tells you about that, because you're mixing it up. Zamudio was "The Devil" of Jalisco, and before "The Blue Rebel" and before, but this was just for a little while, like two months that he was fighting in a little arena over in Mexico State, he was called "Deadly Bedhead." That dude had more names than me."

"And how many did you have?" Héctor asked.

"Five, and one nickname, but the nickname I can't tell you because it's a filthy curse word. The five were: "The Dandy of Tecamachalco," "The Golden Stylist," "The Archangel San Gabriel…"

"Gabriel…"

"No, 'Gabriel.' Gabriel is the real one. And later I was "The Dog of the Meadows," and then at the end when I was myself…"

"And "Zamudio The Ghost," who was also called other things, what happened with him?"
A particularly loud shriek attracted the attention of the old man toward the ring. One of the opening wrestlers was bleeding.

"They already kicked Crispín's ass. I told him. Cause he's stupid…. Zamudio. No, Zamudio disappeared in '68, or in '71, when there was that thing with the students. One day he left from a fight he'd had with The Ángel as his partner. Then, yeah, then they called them "The Ghosts." He went off and said to his second, "I'm coming right back, bro, I'm going to see one of those student demonstrations, they really pump me up." And he never came back. Not here, not anywhere."

"What happened to him?" asked Héctor.

The old wrestler didn't respond because he had been watching the face of said Crispín, who was passing by his side on a stretcher. Extending his hand with an arrogant gesture, he stopped the stretcher-bearers. Héctor studied the mess that they had made of the guy; the old man affectionately stroked his head.

"I told you, Crispín, not to open your mouth when you did the scissors."

The wounded man babbled something incomprehensible. The stretcher-bearers took him away.

Héctor, although he was almost, almost more interested in what was going on with Crispín than his own story, returned to the attack.

"And what happened with "Zamudio the Ghost?"

"God knows, he vanished, like the ghosts. Look, how funny, Zamudio became a ghost… Maybe he was really in love. That happens, you know?"

"What do you mean he was really in love?"
THREE

Sighs are air
and go into the air.
-Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer

"And she was really in love?"

"Not at all. Virginia, with that dumbass?" answered the first of the two teenagers looking for confirmation in her friend with her gaze.

"She didn't even know him well. Sure the fool killed her because he wanted to rape her or something like that and she didn't let him. The suicide pact… Oh, what nonsense the papers say," said her friend, giving the detective a second inspection.

Héctor had found them by investing a little time in asking questions at the door of Preparatory School # Six of Coyoacán. The miniskirts of the two teenagers made him nervous, but he repressed the image and tried to reinforce his paternal appearance.

"Virginia only fell in love with the guys who are in the soap operas, guys who are in poems, she was in love with Bécquer and Mario Benedetti; she knew by heart that one poem: "If I love you it's because you're my love, my accomplice and all….""

The man selling pork rinds drew near the conversation, pushing his cart. They must be getting close to the end of the school day, because the torrent of fugitives from university prep education toward the street began to increase.

"And you guys didn't get along with her?"

"Here, everything happens so fast. She just scared me. We weren't her friends," answered one of the girls; the one who every so often wet her lips with her tongue.
"And who was her best friend?"

"Ask Lolis, who goes around here playing the flute. But I think she didn't have a best friend. She walked through the halls alone reciting that stuff from Bécquer that the literature teacher read to us: 'Sighs are air and go into the air/ Tears are water and go into the sea/ Tell me, woman, when love is forgotten/ Do you know where it goes?' I learned it from hearing it so much."

"What I liked was the part from the end about the swallows," said the pork rind vendor, sticking his nose in the conversation, "the part that says: 'Ardent words of love will return/ To sound in your ears/ Your heart from its profound dream/ Perhaps will awaken…'"

Héctor, surprised, scratched his head. With that gesture very much his own, learned from the movies of Stan Laurel. Then he gave the character a better look.

"And you, how do you know it?"

"The girl showed me the whole thing, do you want me to recite it?: 'The dark swallows will return/ In your balcony their nests to hang….'"

"No, that one I know… And what, when did you study Bécquer?"

"She used to show it to me after class. We finished it quickly, like in three days. She told me: 'if you're going to be selling pork rinds at the door of a prep school, well, you have to learn, right?'"

"And did you know the boyfriend, the one who died with her?"

"He wasn't the boyfriend, he was a kid who was trying to get with her, but she didn't pay him much attention. That guy was an asshole. One time he wanted to give the young lady a ride,
he was coming with his dad, and she told them to go to hell. Believe you me, here I see everything and I know everything, don't believe the newspapers, cause those only mislead."

Héctor walked the hallway of his house taking off the pistol he wore in a shoulder holster and went to leave it inside the refrigerator. It was the best place. Taking advantage of the trip, he took a Coca-cola and two eggs. He walked through the house with the soft drink and the eggs in his hands. On the bedroom floor he had the photo album, open to where the two "Ghosts" could be seen. He began to review the pages. There were no photos of women, only of wrestlers and wrestling. Falls, blood, village stages, big arenas, bullfighting rings, tight-fitting and golden belts from national championships, masks and uprooted heads of hair, hugs, publicity poses, food, rings, flying kicks, bandages, fractured arms, work.

The story was beginning to capture him, while the death of his old friend grew farther and farther away from him. It was a ghost story and had the enchantment of something rancid, of old passions; of old, dirty passions. A love story with ghosts. Of a nonexistent woman who came from the past. In the album there were no photos of the woman that the two ghosts had fallen in love with. Héctor hesitated. Maybe it was that he was going into the story from the wrong side. Maybe it was a story that had nothing to do with lovers. If it was so, everything had been ruined, because what was attractive to him was going after that shadow of love that killed. And this perhaps because one wasn't safe from the only true loves, those marvelous killer loves.
He turned his head to look at the pictures of the woman who adorned the whole room. Each one was the holder of his ghosts. Ghosts that killed. The only ghosts worthy of being taken into account.

A fit of trite morality made him go back to the origin of everything: The Ángel had been his friend, now he was a murdered friend and that constituted a debt. He found himself with the eggs in his hand and he walked toward the kitchen. Before falling into the album like someone sticking his head in a well, he had spent the morning with the old tapes of a teenage girl in love with shadows. In Virginia's tapes there were no traces of the boy who had died in the same room as she. Maybe it was that Héctor was going into both stories by the wrong side. Virginia could have been the woman ghost of the two wrestlers, the woman ghost could have been a reincarnated teenager looking for an impossible love and committing suicide with a little jerk. The thing about little jerks was in the judgment of pork rind vendors, who are the best observers of the human soul, and who without making mistakes could act as helpers of Saint Peter at the gate of heaven. Pork rind vendors to the side, Héctor Belascoarán Shayne was building up new debts with life and with the dead. Would Virginia have liked wrestling? What would The Ángel have thought of the poetry of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer? If he wanted answers he was going to have to look for them outside, the same as always, in a city that sometimes was his; but in which most times was feeling, himself too, a ghost without love of its own to appeal to.

A man was washing a car at the gate, a woman was sweeping the sidewalk, a private detective *sui generis* was interrogating the woman.
"Then, yes, he used to come often, but she was the first time…” Héctor summed up for the woman who was sweeping in front of #121 on Rébsamen Street, a woman whose voice he had heard on a tape.

"That's it. He came often, with friends, because the teacher lent him the apartment when she wasn't there, but the girl I hadn't ever seen before; only after she was dead, through the window, you know?"

Doña Amalia was a robust, muscular woman, who hoisted the broom with strength. The man who was washing the car had drawn close to hear the conversation. Héctor waited to see if he decided to intervene, but the guy kept on with his own thing, bringing out the shine in the part that already had the most shine already. Héctor gave up and returned his attention to the woman.

"And the taxi driver?"

"What taxi driver?" asked Doña Amalia.

"The taxi driver who took the tape to the radio station."

"Oh, that one," said the woman, raising her shoulders, as if that story weren't part of the story and therefore no measly detective could go into that.

Carlos Vargas, the upholsterer, studied Héctor, with a mysterious air, seated in one of his works of art. The detective was reading with great meticulousness a few pages taken out of a folder.

"Do you know when those button tufts that are placed in the center of sofas turn out best?" asked the upholsterer.

"Do you know how much a forensic report costs?" countered the detective.
"When one is between the sixth and the seventh beer," insisted Carlos.

"Ten thousand pesos in guaranteed photocopy," Héctor informed him.

"I should be a detective," said the upholsterer.

"And I, an upholsterer," replied the detective. "You saw how well I stuck in the tacks?"

"But you still don't know how to put them in your mouth and take them out with the hammer; as long as you can't do that, you won't be an artist."

"Do you want to dedicate yourself to detective work a minute?" asked Héctor suddenly.

"I'll trade you for teaching you how to have the tacks in your mouth. It's easy," answered the upholsterer.

Carlos Vargas moved on to actions. He put a handful of tacks in his mouth and he was taking them with the magnetized tip, affixing them to the fabric and using the back part, the rounded part of the hammer to drive them in. The fabric was ending up adhered to the wood and the shapes appeared. It was like returning a skeleton to life. Héctor observed it, delighted.

"It is never, ever going to turn out right for me," he said after a while.

"And then the deal isn't valid? You're no good as an upholsterer, and I can't try at detective?"

"No, I'm the dumbass here," confessed Héctor.

"And me, what do I do?"

"You have to go to this address," he said, handing him a little paper, "and offer your services. We'll see how you do to get into that house. I want to know what it's like, who lives in it, what type of people. The nephew of the owner just died, they should be ticked off, but I'm
counting on your already demonstrated skills to deal with anyone, so you can find out everything you can. Just go carefully, because this isn't your territory, it's a house in Las Lomas, pure enemy territory."

"Land of the Euro-bourgeoisie," said Carlos reflectively.

"That's it."

"And what, how is the business?"

Héctor thought about it for an instant before answering: "If you overcome this task without destroying yourself and without screwing it all up, you'll go up to the next category, to double A."

"And you're not going to give me my sheriff's badge?"

"That's triple A, when one is a democratic sheriff and with proven services provided."

Héctor watched again the face, charged with tension, of the woman who was screaming. He had been contemplating her for a good while. It might be that in the ring everything was a farce, but here below, the joke was over, things returned to life or death; the woman was spitting out the worst of herself in each shriek.

"Kill him, lynch him, faggot!"

She was a woman of about 50, who still had a certain faded beauty, although covered by excessive makeup. Héctor decided and advanced down the hall to sit at her side. The arena was semi-full, the cigarette smoke was floating above the heads and up to the ceiling.
"They told me that you could help me."

The woman directed a cloudy gaze at him, without paying him too much notice; years ago, many men used to talk to her without her inviting them to do it, she retained the instinct of rejection. She went back to looking at what was happening in the ring.

"Kill him, idiot! Fuck him, pig!"

Héctor insisted.

"They told me you knew the woman that "The Ghosts" were in love with."

The woman looked at him, as if she hadn't heard.

"It was my sister, Celia," she said suddenly.

"Was?"

"She committed suicide about fifteen years ago, young man. Because of those two assholes. Break his arm, Enrique!"

"What was it that happened?"

"Two beers… ."

"What?" asked Héctor, lost.

"You pay me two beers and I tell you," responded the woman.

Héctor made a gesture to the vendor, this man reacted slowly, he had his gaze on the fight. He served two beers. The woman didn't drink them, but rather she put them at her side and continued watching attentively what was happening in the ring.

Later she began to talk, never ceasing to watch the quadrilateral, as if the story had not the least importance. As if it were from another era, from another world. And the space for hatred wasn't back there, but rather here in front of her.
"It was said the two of them were in love with her, that one day it would be one of them and the next day the other, and flowers and everything they brought her, and one day the one and the next day the other, but she said no, because it hurt her to say yes to one and no to the other, and that it was going to break up the pair. At that time they were about to win the world belt, The Ángel and Zamudio. And they were after her, like a game to see who won, because they couldn't fight one against the other, so they went around fighting for Celia, and The Ángel won, but only for a day, and later he kicked her out; a while later Celia swallowed a box of those rat poison pills. She was really sentimental, the fool, I'm not like that, I myself like beer. And the partnership didn't even survive, because Zamudio almost kills The Ángel with his fists, boxing, not in a clean fight, and then they even separated."

She had told the story. She took one of the glasses of beer and drank it up in a single gulp. Héctor studied her. She continued with her gaze fixed on the ring, although the round had ended. She wasn't the same anymore. She had remained in silence. She wasn't screaming. The sadness that came from the past had penetrated her, infecting the detective, who slowly stood up and began to walk toward the exit. Halfway along the way something crossed his mind and he went back.

"Do you have a photo of her?"

"Yes, take it, for another two beers you can take it, I don't want to see it again anymore. I already looked at it a lot. Entire nights looking at Celia."

Héctor made a signal to the vendor, who returned with another two beers. The woman took out from her enormous purse a picture that had wavy edges, with that cut that had disappeared from photographs years ago. She handed it to him with a smooth, almost caring
gesture; she put her beers next to the last one that she hadn't drunk. Héctor looked at the photo: a very beautiful woman, her hair in the style of the 50s, with a tailored, two-piece suit and a little vest; she was smiling, taken by the arms by two well-built wrestlers; in her left hand she carried a little bouquet of flowers that could be seen now, upon the passing of time, half withered.

Héctor stopped in a lighted zone to light a cigarette. Lately, the Delicados were tasting to him like horseshit. Like Marlboros, which must be why horses liked them so much, to judge by the TV ads. He began to walk among candy sellers and market vendors, moving away from the arena. The traffic toward the south intensified along Revolución Avenue. If it weren't because he couldn't quit smoking, he could very well quit smoking.

Suddenly, he collided head-on with a corpulent man who hurled him toward one side. He hadn't recovered from the surprise and tried to see his aggressor better, when a second character approached to help the detective stand up, but instead of that he threw him to the ground.

"What's your problem, fool, why'd you push me?" asked the first, without a doubt the more corpulent of the two.

"He wants a fight," the second man informed his friend, raising his voice so everyone heard him. "He pushed me, too."

Héctor, from the ground, smiled to himself.

The first of the two men, a guy whose suit fit badly and who showed a few good centimeters of belly encased in a lilac tee shirt under the vest, took out a razor. Héctor looked,
fascinated, at the metal, which began to turn slowly in little circles following the movements of
the man's wrist. The second man covered his partner's back, keeping market vendors and
onlookers at bay.

Héctor pulled back on the ground, dragging himself over his hands and continuing to
smile. A sad smile, in which there was no challenge. The guy with the razor came forward.
Héctor took out the pistol and cocked it in a slow but continuous motion. The guys stopped. In
the crowd that had gathered a murmur began.

"You're going to have to make do with passing me the message; but there's not going to
be a hole as a memory, bro," said the detective without abandoning the sad smile.

The guy threw the razor to the ground and left running. A woman, the owner of a candy
stand, gave him a blow with her elbow that made him shake as he passed. His accomplice lost
himself in the crowd. Héctor put away the pistol.

He turned toward the woman. The curious followed him with their gaze.

"Thanks a lot, ma'am," he said, shaking the dirt from his pants.

"I did it so they would stop with the abusive stuff…"

"Did you know them?" asked Héctor.

"No, they're not from here; but they're the same as the others," said the old woman with a
wide, toothless grin.
FOUR

I believe nobody dies
while they know that someone
is loving them.
Emilio Súri

"Do you want a pork rind vendor who recites Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer for your program?" asked Héctor.

"Which one does he know?" answered Laura Ramos, protecting the microphone with one of her hands, as if the detective's nonsense threatened it.

"'The Dark Swallows Will Return,' the whole thing."

"No, the Director of Provisions from the Department of the Federal District already came to recite that one the other day, it's already old hat."

She interrupted Héctor with a gesture and smiled at the microphone before talking to it:

"And with you again after these messages, in The Hour of the Lonely Ones."

On a signal to the ones in the booth, the program's theme music went on the air. Héctor lit a cigarette, Laura took it out of his hand and gave it a fierce pull.

"And now a love song from Ornella Vanoni, Toquinho and Vinicius de Moraes, to loosen up the best sensations…."

Without looking at the board, she flipped the switch with a hit from her fingers. Then she turned toward Héctor:

"What did you find out?"

"That you were right, he wasn't her boyfriend. He was a teenager who had tried to win her, but he didn't know her well, they hadn't been intimate with each other. Where did you get
that his parents didn't want them to date? There are no such parents, the kid lived at the house of a bachelor uncle, who was the one who paid for his studies…. They had never before been in the house where they died together.

Ornella Vanoni told a story with Portuguese rhythm but in the Italian language, about a red stop light. Héctor tried to concentrate on what he had discovered in his first hints to the suicide of Virginia.

"No, you're right. Here there's another thing. No one kills themselves in a love pact with someone that doesn't interest them…"

"Can I tell it on the air?"

"You can raise doubt, and tell those that knew them to communicate with you and to tell you their stories."

She thought about it while she stole the cigarette from him again. The detective dedicated himself to contemplating the legs of the host of *The Hour of the Lonely Ones*. They were some truly accompanied legs.

Héctor left the pistol inside of the fridge, took out a soda and walked to his room. He sat on the bed, his joints hurt. He looked for an aspirin in the bathroom and took it with Coca-Cola. Well, the photos were there. They hadn't gone anywhere. On a TV with excessive volume, that had its base of operations in one of the nearby apartments, a news show was narrating the disaster that the rain had produced in the traffic of the city, in particular on the southern *Periférico* [Beltway].
Well, the photos were still there. He looked at them. The endless photos of the girl with the ponytail that were hung on the walls. She stayed there, stuck to them. Without being able to move. He ran his eyes over them. He broke the spell hitting the palm of his hand with the fist of the other. The gesture learned from The Ángel II. He walked over to the window, lit a cigarette, watched the outside, distracted. Suddenly he noticed a strange character leaning against the streetlight on the corner; it was the gunman who threw him to the ground when he left the wrestling arena. The number-two of the team, the one who hadn't shown him the razor. The guy was looking toward a car. Then, he raised his head looking for Héctor's window, and wasn't surprised to find him in it. They watched each other, the guy sent a wide smile toward the detective. Héctor returned it to him.

In the parked car was the second man. He saw something gleam in the night. The detective's healthy eye was slow to find the small signals, the shine that identified the object; finally he did. The guy in the car had a gun between his legs.

Héctor raised his gaze, searching the landscape of lights of the nocturnal city, the stains of light, the sad Christmas tree. In other times, when Héctor Belascoarán was a less distracted guy, but also full of more innocent confidences, he used to like to stay like that, absorbed by the lights of the city, thinking that they were the only collective, free festival of fireworks that we inhabitants of the monster had. Lately, they seemed like lights of a vigil, candles lit for those that were left halfway through the journey, dead from a knife wound, from a shotgun blast through the back, from torture, from lovesickness, from unemployment, from vile fear. The most common of the causes of death in the Federal District, according to a dead writer friend of his. Well, he had all night to think about it, or he could go after them…. 
He remained immobile for an instant, then suddenly made up his mind, and a little unwillingly he walked to the refrigerator and took out his .45. He checked the clip, passed the first bullet into the chamber, reached the bedroom and picked up a jacket. When he was about to leave he went back and rummaged with patience in one of the drawers of the closet, took a cherry-red bandanna as the finishing touch and tied it around his neck. Wearing a uniform for war, obviously. When he crossed through the door he laughed at himself.

He descended the stairs of his house at a fast pace. Upon reaching the landing of the lower floor he came across the open door of The Wizard's ["El Mago's"] house. His landlord was playing dominoes with two of his buddies, the one from the grocery store and the dry cleaner.

"Distinguished detective, now you saved us," said The Wizard, rubbing his hands together.

"And what are you doing playing with the door open?"

"Waiting for the one who will be a fourth for dominoes."

"Are you going to make one beg you?" asked the dry cleaner.

"Man, you guys aren't catching me at the best time…" Héctor responded, hesitating. "I had something pending down there."

"You're flaking out. It's clear, after the beating last time, where it was demonstrated that detectives don't have scientific thinking, you're flaking out."

Héctor hesitated.

"It's just that there are some guys down there who… No, forget it, it's too complicated to explain. I'm going and I'll come back. If I don't come back in fifteen minutes, look for another to make the foursome."
The players protested, but Héctor was already going down the stairs in little bounds, refusing the debate.

Covered by a column behind the glass door, he watched how the two gunmen were conferring in the car. The detective's movements followed one another in a rigorous order: he took out the gun, brought it to one side of his face, removed with the metal a drop of sweat that was running down his temple. He began to count out loud.

"One… two… three… four little lambs… five little lambs… six little lambs…"

He was still laughing when he leapt toward the street.

The two guys reacted at seeing Héctor jump from the door of his house armed with a gun. The one outside the car shot over the detective, splintering and blowing the glass door to pieces behind his back. Héctor raised the .45 and aimed. The guy, afraid, threw the gun to the ground. The other started the car and accelerated, sound of tires burning and everything; his partner, who slowly was starting to raise his arms, felt vilely betrayed.

"Don't leave me, Lavanderos! Don't be a chicken! Pussy!"

His scream was lost in the night. Héctor followed with his gaze the disappearance of the car. Then, he approached slowly, picked up the gun from the ground and put it in the pocket of the jacket.

"Good night…" said the detective.

He watched the gunman for a few seconds, then he turned around, leaving him surprised. The three domino players, armed with the strangest utensils, kitchen knife, hammer, Swiss army knife, were at his side.
"You know what? In two years that makes three times you busted this door," said El Mago. "I'm going to change it for a barred one, those ones that are so pretty, from Zacatecas; those ones the bullets pass through the little holes."

"What? Do we do something to this asshole?" the dry cleaner asked, watching the man standing on the sidewalk with his best sadist's face.

Héctor shook his head. He said to El Mago:

"If you want to be paid for the door, there you have the one responsible."

He gestured with his head at the gunman, who still had his hands in the air, probably entrusting his soul to the Virgin of Guadalupe, whom he hadn't remembered for shit these last few years.

"Should we interrogate him with a hammer?" suggested El Mago.

"This guy isn't the one I'm looking for, this one only knows that they hired him to scare me…" Héctor responded. "Truth is, I don't feel like it."

The gunman said yes with his head, that he didn't feel like it, either.

The lights of some apartments began to come on, little by little. The street was lit up.

"Better leave me the gun, in this city you don't know what can happen anymore," El Mago proposed to the detective.

Héctor passed it to him. Taking advantage that no one was watching him, the gunman left running. He ought not to earn a very high salary.

"Maybe he played dominoes better than me," suggested the detective, watching him disappear.
"Let's be partners, young Belascoarán, you have a suicidal style. Which I like when it's time to close with sixes in the hand," said the dry cleaner.
If the answer is yes, there are three
ghosts that each one has to face once in a
while. In the darkness.
-Joseph Wambaugh

Maybe they kill you, they take your life and carry it around, to take it for a walk along
other paths. But maybe you're the one who kills and at first you feel almost the same as though it
were the other way around. There are continuous mirror effects in these grave stories in which
life and death go along playing. Later it's not like that; later arrives the drop in adrenaline and
you discover that you are lucky to be alive. And then there's nothing of it being the same, you
like yourself, you want yourself in the land of the living, the ones who play soccer, dance to the
rhythm of Rubén Blades and Son del Solar, go to protests next to Superbarrio and read novels by
Howard Fast. Those moments, the ones of knowing yourself to be alive, make you forget the
others, the ones of guilt.

Héctor was playing with his gun, remembering the shot that had broken the door of his
house and he felt alive, disgustingly alive.

"Did you sleep very very badly?" the upholsterer asked him suddenly upon seeing him
yawn.

"Don't worry, nothing is going on with me, it's because of the dominoes."

"Ah, OK," said Carlos Vargas.

But he wasn't very convinced. With the other office mates missing on strange vacations,
he felt responsible for the detective and sometimes, to Héctor's liking, adopted an excessive
maternal tone. It was not a bad idea to have an upholsterer for a mother, but no more than five
minutes a day.
"And what did you get from your detective's brilliance?"

"Everything, chief. You just say what you want to know."

"Is there a house?" the detective asked. "Who lives in it? What does he do for a living? Who was the young man who died? Everything. Begin there and go on."

Carlos Vargas took out from his upholsterer's backpack a large, hardback notebook; it looked like an account book. He read with difficulty his gibberish of notes, sometimes spinning the notebook to turn it over.

"The first mystery: the owner of the house and uncle of the young dead man is called Elías Márquez and he says that he's an industrialist. But not of industry; he dedicates himself to the trafficking of white girls, dark girls, blonds, mulatto girls and black girls. He's a pimp, like las Poquianchis [sisters who ran a brothel and were convicted of murdering many of their prostitutes -- N. of the T.], chief. That's for sure. Right there in the house, once in a while, he gives services to friends. Not ours, his."

"That's the whole mystery?"

"It starts there. Second mystery: he doesn't give a crap that his nephew has died. He neither mourned, nor did he go to the cemetery. The next day, very happy, there he was having chilaquiles for breakfast, as if nothing had happened."

"And the nephew?"

"He was a little clown. The sister's son. He had him living with him over there. He had a car at 18 years old, the dumb kid was a totally arrogant preppie and it seems to me that he worked in the testing of the uncle's merchandise. Do you know what they called the nephew?"

Héctor made a gesture of interrogation, lifting his head.
"He was called Manuel and they called him Manolé. Not Manoleté, not Manolo, Manolé. Like he was ashamed," said the upholsterer, thinking how, in the middle of the crisis, the ascent to power of the scummiest sons of the middle classes was beating up this country.

"And what do they say over there about the suicide?"

"They don't say anything about that. What suicide? One day he was there and the next he wasn't. Very strange. As if he had gone on vacation to Tlaxcala, or to fucking hell. I mean, on vacation to Fucking Hell, Tabasco."

"Report with precision, damn. And the house? A lot of hired guns in the house?"

"Hired guns…? Let me see. A doorman who isn't a doorman, a driver who isn't a driver, two hired guns that are in fact hired guns."

Héctor considered the conversation finished, lit a cigarette and went toward the window. Carlos, bothered, watched him do it, things still remained for him in the notebook.

"You aren't going to ask me more?" the upholsterer asked after a moment.

"What do I ask you?"

"How do you get in? Where does Mr. Márquez have his businesses? Why wasn't the nephew's car in the street, in front of the house where they were killed?"

Héctor looked at his accidental helper, surprised. If things continued like this, it would be better for him to dedicate himself to upholstery and leave the business to the other one.

"You are a genius."

"Really? I used to say. Vargas, you are too fucking much. Vargas, you're good for everything. Vargas, you really do it, not the damn Belascoarán, who's just a private eye."

He swaggered, very proud, as though carrying the rhythm of the national anthem.
"Let's see, how do you get in? Where does Mr. Márquez have the businesses?" asked the detective.

"Look… I have a map of the house, if it serves you."

The upholsterer tried to pass him the notebook, but Belascoarán refused it.

"It already seemed strange to me that you knew so much."

"Enough, I know enough. When I was talking with the servant woman, she said to me: that's the deceased's car, and she pointed to in front of the house; and it occurred to me to ask her if they had taken it from the "scene of the crime" and if it didn't need a new upholstery job to remove the blood, and she told me that they'd killed themselves on top of a bed, stripped naked, and that he hadn't even taken out the car that day, that since the day before it was real calm swallowing dust, so that it didn't need upholstery…" 

"Then they didn't use the car, or they went walking or someone took them!"

"That's exactly it."

Héctor stamped a loud kiss on the upholsterer's forehead, who fled to look for alcohol in the medicine chest. While Héctor was putting away the gun in its case, the upholsterer returned, disinfecting the place where he had been kissed and making faces of disgust.

Héctor was looking at the rain on the window. He needed a soft drink but he didn't dare ask for one from the woman. It was raining buckets. At his back the voice of Virginia's mother was narrating with a monotonous voice:
"It's like a nightmare. Virginia never would have killed herself… What the newspapers say about the suicide pact, that's not true. She wasn't even in love with that boy. She would have told me."

The women didn't resemble each other. Héctor had tried to look at the beginning of the interview for the features of the dead teenager in the living mother. He hadn't been able to, and he had concentrated on the rain.

"Would she have told you? Why? Why would she have told you, because you were her mother? They don't say those things to the parents."

"And what do you know of that? Virginia used to tell me many things, we used to talk. She wasn't in love. She wanted to write. Do you know what she was reading? Simone de Beauvoir. She said she wanted to be like that forever, independent. Alone. No fights, no anguishes, no tears, no nothing… Nothing happened in this last month. It's a lie. Virginia didn't kill herself. They killed her, and I don't understand why. I don't know why they say there was a suicide pact. She wasn't even going out with that boy. That boy, I only saw him once. I know the friends that went out with Virginia. They came around here. They chatted. Besides, it wasn't one, there were several. She didn't have any boyfriend… They killed her."

The woman began a sob mixed with coughs and little spasms, as if she were drowning. Héctor stopped looking at the rain and watched her. Then he returned to the window.

"And that tape they're playing on the radio, it wasn't even the last, that was old, she'd recorded it last month; I had heard it at home. And it wasn't about suicide, it was a farewell, because she wasn't going to send more things to the show anymore. The last one should be another, one she recorded the day before."
"Do you have it?"

The woman walked toward the interior of the house; Héctor followed her, they went into Virginia's room, still very teenage-like, with many more books than the usual. The photo of the girl gazed at the intruders from the wall. Héctor remembered other photographs, on other walls. Over the bed a portable tape recorder. It was open, it didn't have a tape. Héctor looked at it, the woman looked at him as though apologizing, who knows where the tape would be.

Days later, months later, he would remember the rain of that afternoon. Thick drops, pot-bellied, that made a "plof" upon bursting against the window, that bent the leaves of the trees, that struck against the glass panes dripping along the edges. He would remember the rain, but he had erased from memory the face of Virginia's mother.

Celia's face, the woman surrounded by the two wrestlers in the photo, was now between both. Héctor pushed the old photograph over the table of his office toward the young The Ángel II.

"Did you know her?"

"No. Who is she?" asked the wrestler.

"And the one who's to the left of the woman, on the side opposite your father?"

"It has to be Zamudio "The Ghost." I saw some photo of him around here, although I didn't meet him in person."

It was hot, sweltering. They had met at the entrance to the prep school where The Ángel taught classes, per telephone appointment. Héctor hadn't been sure if he should dedicate himself
to the role of asking or to that of settling in to paint fences with a few stubborn activists of the CEU [Consejo Estudiantil Universitario/ University Student Council] who were squandering the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, a few meters away from there.

"He never talked to you about her? Her name was Celia."

"Maybe she's Celina's mom?"

Héctor became suddenly interested. The woman seemed to want to stop being a photograph.

"Who is Celina?"

"A goddaughter of my dad. We used to see her all the time. She lives with her grandparents. Today I have to go to her party, I promised her, and dressed as a wrestler. What a stupidity."

"Party for what?"

"Sweet Fifteen party."

Sweet Fifteen parties reveal with their ritual some of the greatest popular defeats in Mexico. They are the proof that we want to be like others. That we have accepted the leftovers from the banquet. The quinceañeras descend a prop staircase amid clouds of dry ice. All the pomp that hides the lack of economic resources is present: vases with gladiolas, half of them of plastic, fans even if it were in February, yes, but also tables with the logo of Cartablanca beer covered by half dirty tablecloths.
An orchestra was playing the triumphal march of Aida. Héctor watched, curious, the faces of the teenage girls with their hair done in beauty salons by their worst enemies. He looked among the radiant faces for one that resembled the one from the photo of Celia. He didn't take long to find her and he followed her with his gaze without losing her, while he drank a soft drink with the masked The Ángel in one corner of the hall, where a small bar had been arranged.

"Sweet Fifteen parties make me vomit. It's all a lie," said The Ángel II, making a face through the mask.

"I love them," Héctor replied. "Now only this and presidential reports remain to us of tradition."

The march continued to be heard, the teenage girls, dressed with vaporous white and bluish tulles, descended the prop staircase as though taken from a bad imitation of a Visconti movie. The Ángel found himself obliged to abandon his place next to the bar to receive very ceremoniously, giving her his arm, the girl who Belascoarán had selected with his gaze a few minutes before. The resemblance of the real Celina with the Celia from the photo was remarkable. Abundant dry ice was producing thick clouds of white smoke upon being thrown in buckets of water by self-sacrificing waiters that acted as special effects technicians. The volume in the bottles of brandy on the tables was going down, given the emotion of the parents and godparents. They were cooking a barbecue in the open air over there. The popular party penetrated even the best imitations of Maximiliano's empire.

The Ángel left his companion in the center of the hall and moved away, following the rehearsed traditions. A waltz from Strauss began to play, without violins, with the rock group's
synthesizer adapted for the circumstances. A robust, old character came out of the crowd and came close to dance with the teenage Celina.

Héctor drew near the edge of the dance floor.

"Will you allow me this dance, miss?" said the old man.

"I have to dance it with my escort, sir," the girl answered, startled, searching with her gaze for her masked companion.

Héctor observed the old man. Zamudio "The Ghost" had lost weight, his face was changed; he had as though broken the primitive tension that had kept his muscles in their place; the steely gaze remained the same, he was badly shaven and his hair a little long. Where had he gotten that horrible, greasy tie with drawings of little birds?

The Ángel moved closer, following the footsteps of the intruder. Approaching from the old man's back he touched him softly.

"Pardon, this dance was reserved for me."

Zamudio's face became agitated; he was looking at a dead man. He backed away, tripping. Celina, flustered, didn't know what to do; The Ángel decided for her, opening his arms and taking her so that everything would be rosy again, Saint Strauss in between. The couples, following the rehearsed order to the point of boredom, began to dance. The parents sighed; nothing had been ruined.

Héctor walked rapidly to cut off Zamudio's exit, who was abandoning the dance floor in fits and starts.

"Did something happen to you, sir?"
Zamudio, making efforts so that nothing could remove him from his thoughts, continued backpedaling toward the door.

"Did you see a dead man?" insisted the detective.

The old man, without prior warning, swiped his hand at Héctor, and upon hitting him in the shoulder sent him rebounding against one of the tables. The Ángel came running to help the detective. Héctor tried to get up. Random screams were heard; the waltz continued playing. The Ángel caught Zamudio when he tried to slip out; they embraced. Wrestlers have an instinctive memory, a series of work-related reflexes that now came unwanted to the actions of both. Fight or parody?

They spun in an embrace, knocking over some tables. Suddenly, Zamudio took out a gun. Héctor saw the scene he had invented and that he had told to Carlos Vargas, the reproduction of the embrace of Judas.

"Don't shoot! It isn't The Ángel, it's his son…!" Héctor shouted.

Zamudio responded to the detective's scream, freezing for an instant. Then with a slap he ripped off The Ángel's mask. It was someone else, the face of the aged Zamudio "the Ghost" seemed to say. It was another ghost. Héctor, from the floor, began to take out his gun. Zamudio ran toward the door, bringing down infuriated parents of fifteen-year-old girls and waiters in little white jackets. The vision of the unholstered guns created a passage between the old wrestler and the detective.

Héctor hesitated. Then he lowered the gun and began to get up. Zamudio had disappeared through the door of the hall. As he put away his .45, the waltz began to play again. This world still believed in scenic effects.
"What happened?" asked The Ángel II, putting his mask back on and shaking the dust from Héctor's jacket. "That guy was the one who killed my dad?"

"One ghost who saw another ghost. He thought he'd have to kill your father twice."

The detective was preparing some refried beans with chorizo sausage in the kitchen; while he did it, he looked at the photo of Celia and the two wrestlers. He ended up putting it next to a photo of his girl with the ponytail that was stuck to the fridge with magnets. He cooked with old wisdom, with a scientific technique, controlling the height of the flame, without oil, using the prior grease that the chorizo had left upon being fried. It was a cure against solitude.

Héctor knew, because he was an inveterate listener of boleros, that there are loves that kill. That come straight to life issued from the worst soap operas, that are born so that you don't stop believing in them and you look at them out of the Cartesian corner of your eye. Loves neither true nor false, children of our movie melodramas that insist on reappearing as though they came from pure reality, under the sinister influence of Channel 2. The story of the death of his friend The Ángel I seemed to have come from a Pedro Infante movie… Whom was Celina the daughter of? Of The Ángel and of Celia in that moment of love that lasted hours? Of Zamudio the Ghost, who seemed to demand the paternal right of dancing the first waltz? What time machine had Zamudio come from?

He stopped looking at the photo because the beans were getting burned. He threw over them the pair of eggs that he'd found on the little night table in his bedroom and stirred it all slowly and with care, while he lowered the heat. When the smell of the stew convinced him, he
left the gas at the minimum and left the kitchen, went to look for his jacket thrown on the floor a few steps from the door. He removed from it the photo of Virginia that he had asked her mother to lend him. He returned to the kitchen with it in his hand and he placed it next to the one of the ghosts and Celia. He stirred, tasted the seasoning. He ended up sticking the photograph on the fridge one beside the other and ate dinner watching them.

Virginia's was another love story, only this one had never existed, someone had invented it in order to be able to kill her. Too many loose ends remained. They seemed the fringes of a rug: there was the "last" tape that wasn't, a neighbor who had testified falsely saying that she'd found the tape of the dead girl on the stairs that night. There was the teacher that lent her house to Virginia's companion. A companion who had never been a boyfriend. There was a car that hadn't gone out on the night in which it should have. And above all, there was a disappeared tape. Why had they killed Virginia? For what she said on that tape? For what she knew?

He carefully cleaned the plates and the frying pan with hot water and abundant detergent. He tried not to let his gaze run into the photos, into any of the others. He turned off the lights and went to his room in the darkness. In the darkness he took off his eye patch, undressed and let himself fall on the bed. If he slept, he slept with his eye open. Like ghosts. Like the dead.

Laura stretched, stretched her limbs and her hair came out from the conservative bun she wore. Héctor looked at her, taking very good precautions against making observations. If he made them, maybe she would try to go back to her former style. Laura leaned over the controls and dropped in a tape.
"You all remember the voice of Virginia, the teenage girl who died three days ago in a strange suicide pact in the Del Valle district. A voice that perplexes us, which, joined to the tragic end of its author, moves us… This voice:"

She started up a cassette player. The voice of Virginia filled the small studio and leapt out to storm stereos and Walkmans, VW Motorolas and transistor radios on the bedside table of teenagers like her:

"There are days when I don't know how to put names to things. There are days when I don't know what I call myself or who I am in love with."

Héctor reconstructed his entrance to the room where the young people had died, remembered Virginia's face on the pillow, saw again the rest of the body that was covered by a sheet. He saw clearly the face that was covered sometimes by a medic, by the stretcher-bearers who were unfolding the stretcher and putting it together, but a face that, who knows how, emerged again from under the sheet, immobile so that they could gaze at it.

"Today should be one of those days I talk just to talk," Virginia's voice was saying from the cassette player in the studio, "and I'd like to find with my voice someone who would be an echo of it. Something like to stop hearing myself in order to be able to hear another. In order to know that solitude is some nonsense that a girl invents by playing, but that it's only about that, a game…"

Laura did a smooth fade with Virginia's last words, and took control of the program.

"This is the voice of Virginia on one of several tapes that she sent us before her death. Well, it seems that not everything is so clear. Shadows emerge over the till-now-accepted version of the suicide of this 17-year-old adolescent. We're going to talk to you about it now, in the final
part of *The Hour of the Lonely Ones*, in a few moments. But first, a little music, music to live for."

As if she were a tight-rope walker, while she did a fade on the controls of her microphone with her right hand, she started up the turntable with the left. A popular version of Beethoven's Fifth began to play. Laura left the controls and looked at the detective.

"Go slow, don't tell everything, just insinuate," said Héctor.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want them to get too nervous."

"Who?"

"Them. In every story there is always a 'them.' Well, let's not have the 'them' of this story get nervous."

"Is there something you haven't told me?" asked Laura, carrying the rhythm of the symphony with her fingers, tapping on the console without realizing.

"A couple of guys who are following me. Nothing serious."

Laura looked at him without knowing if she should make useless calls for caution. She opted for staying quiet.

"What was your relationship with Virginia?" asked Héctor.

"Her mother is a friend of mine, we saw each other once at her house. She, Virginia, was interested in radio, she asked me all about it. Suddenly, one of those tapes came to me by mail, I put it on the air, I talked with her. And she began to send them to me. Five or six there must have been. It was nothing out of this world, but they expressed very well the most direct existential anguishes of a teenage girl."
Laura approached the microphone, took it between her hands and flipped the switch. She forgot temporarily about Héctor and talked to the radio listeners.

"Two elements that produce a strong doubt in the case of the suicide pact that gave rise to Virginia's death have emerged in an independent investigation ordered by this program: the tape that they sent us was not recorded the day of the death, it was an old tape; and listened to knowing this, it doesn't seem so clearly the last message of a suicide victim, as it did at first, but rather only the reflections of a teenage girl about life and death. In the second place, Virginia and Manuel, the boy who appeared dead next to her and who shot the gun, hardly knew each other, and of course they weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. With this information in our hands, we can't stop asking ourselves: what is it that really happened that night in the Rébsamen Street apartment?"

Laura turned up the music and moved away from the mic.

"With that you're going to make it twice as hard for me," said the detective.

"They're the problems that working with the Fourth Estate creates, Héctor."

They stayed for a while in silence listening to the merry and happy Beethoven, full of songs of hope. When the music ended, Laura approached the mic. Again she talked to it with sweetness, as if it were an object dear to her.

"Don't let the loneliness feed off you. Come closer. We will always be able to share it. Lean out the window. Someone is halfway into the hells of this city's night, feeling that he has a story to tell you, and through the magic of the radio that story can touch all of us; we can share it, make it ours… Even if it's a story like Virginia's, disappeared three days ago in strange circumstances. Even if it's a story without a happy ending like Virginia's… which we'll continue
talking about tomorrow, on this channel of magical communication that travels from the stars, covers the city with the wind and arrives as far as to you all… From *The Hour of the Lonely Ones*… Laura Ramos… saying good-bye."

She threw a kiss to the microphone and let the ending musical theme run.

Laura did a fade on the controls. She stretched, looked at Héctor. With a gesture she waved goodbye to the solitary booth technician whom she almost never let operate the controls. The lights were being turned off, only a small lamp remained on over the mic, half ghostly.

"Your house or mine?" asked the radio host.

"Yours. Mine seems like the house of Usher, it's full of ghosts," answered Héctor not very sure of what he was saying.

"Mine is inhabited by a six-year-old daughter. Do you know I was married before?"

"Before…" Héctor began, with the intention of piecing together her story, but gave up with the first word.

"We could go for a walk around here."

"Paseo de la Reforma Avenue at four o'clock in the morning, it wouldn't be bad in another era," said the detective. "Lately the darkness scares me. They assault people around here, they rob your wallet and the courage to go for walks."

"I don't have a wallet," Laura said.

"I don't either."

It was Reforma after all, on a cloudy night, blacker than others, darker. On the avenue of the enormous demonstrations, on the street chosen by the emperor for his rides on horseback, now almost deserted, if it weren't for a couple of taxis.
The pair chose the median strip, at a prudent distance from the assailants and thieves, that night nonexistent, of also nonexistent wallets. They ended up at the Presidente Chapultepec, before a receptionist, with the impassive face of an English customs official who has already seen it all, and also many times, and who this time hardly observed the strange couple without a suitcase that wanted to rent the room for one night, which they thought would last more than five hours.

Héctor let himself fall on the bed while Laura looked at the room. Then the radio host walked around it, taking little steps and small jumps until hiding herself behind the curtain. Héctor stretched in the bed awaiting the events. Suddenly, a sweater flew though the air and fell over his face. Still far from the moment of doubt, when he would have thought that that woman wasn't another woman, but rather a woman, he took off a shoe and threw it at Laura, who had hidden herself behind a horrible salmon curtain. She flung him her emerald green blouse. Héctor in just retribution threw her his jacket without hitting her. When Laura threw him a bra, peeping only a bare arm out from behind the curtain, Héctor began to take the matter seriously and in rapid succession he threw her a shirt, his belt, another shoe and two gray socks. Laura responded with a skirt, a pair of moccasins and a pair of pantyhose. Héctor thought about it for a moment, and only after her laugh, the smooth laugh that he sometimes listened to on the radio, he threw her his pants, which for lack of flight remained in the middle of the path, over a chair. Then, not having boxer shorts, which he'd given up since his washing machine broke in '82, the detective covered himself modestly with the bedspread. Again Laura took the initiative and a solitary arm peeped out from behind the curtain and twirled around some emerald green bikini panties that then floated in the air a couple of meters before falling languidly at the foot of the bed. Héctor
wondered if he could postpone the moment of truth throwing the pillows at her, he thought about it very seriously, then he came out from under the bedspread and moved toward the curtains. She was waiting for him, almost without being able to contain her laughter. They made love behind the curtains.
SIX

On the calendar the day has not been marked yet.
All the months, all the days
are still free. One of the
days will be marked with a cross.

Bertolt Brecht

A couple of hours later, Héctor sat on his bed and contemplated the photos of the girl
with the ponytail that were hung on the walls of the whole house. He remained there as fixed on
them as they were to the wall. Without being able to move. He was going over them with his
gaze one by one: her dancing ballet when she was fifteen years old. Her sleeping naked, barely
covered with a corner of the sheet. Her two years before, on a beach near Las Hadas. Her getting
into a fixed Renault, her hands stained with grease that she was cleaning off with burlap. Her
eating spaghetti. Her drinking coffee, without seeing him, without seeing anyone, sunk in some
dark presentiments that were showing above the edge of the cup. Her in Venice, a Venice
without gondoliers but with the Grand Canal within hand's reach. Her in Chapultepec watching
the lake, both out of focus, an almost impossible photo, worthy of a manipulated box camera.
Her trying on a tee shirt that was at least two sizes too large for her. Her smoking. Again, her
smoking. One more time. Releasing the smoke. Her cooking shrimp on the grill, smiling. Her…
The walls full, the halls, the bathroom, the doors, the door of the refrigerator, on the kitchen tiles,
on the dining room baseboards, on the table, framed, loose, piled up, taken always by a third
party, because Héctor was afraid of photographic cameras. He knew that they robbed the soul.
Ten photos made a nostalgia. A hundred made an obsession. And 898 a benign form of insanity.
Of course, 1,300 produced a suicidal love lunacy. He had 1,145, at least he had that many the last
time he had counted them. Maybe there were a few more. The last arrived to him by mail, sent by her from constantly changing places, with stamps always of different colors. Therefore, he found himself halfway between well-mannered insanity and suicide, according to his own behavioral tables. There was no doubt, we were right when we wanted to stop the photographers from *Life* and *National Geographic* from taking our photo. Those sons of mother-fucking whores wanted to rob our souls. And when they published it, it would rob the soul of whoever looked at it.

That night, his neighbor The Wizard came to draw him out of his insanity and saved him, inviting him to play dominoes again, the revenge match, with the dry cleaner and the office worker from 7A. Héctor won all the games. He won even closing with double sixes in his hands, suicidal play much admired by the dry cleaner. He suspected that they wouldn't invite him again.

The teacher who lent her house to her students so they could commit suicide was a young woman, about 25 years old, without a doubt born in the United States. Her voice had a strong accent, raspy, and her attitude had something suspicious. She seemed a mix of cooking instructor in morning TV slots and luxury prostitute from Kansas City. She showed her legs generously upon sitting down.

"Not to be very good. I lent him the apartment… As a favor [she said in English]. "As a favor. True?"

"As a favor to whom?" asked the detective.

The teacher pretended to be disconcerted. Her nervous face affected a look of incomprehension. She was smoking distractedly, forgot where she had put the cigarette, found it
after a few moments of turning around. Her face seemed to ask for help, her legs were showing themselves even more because her skirt had gone up a few centimeters around her thighs.

"Did you know Manuel's uncle?" asked Héctor.

"No, I don't think so."

"How strange, I have a photo of you with him, sitting in a restaurant."

"Do you mean to say Manuel's uncle?"

"What relationship do you have with the milkman?"

That disconcerted her. After all, maybe she was screwing the milkman.

"With who?" she asked, stretching her skirt a little.

"With whoever, what does it matter. I came for you to tell me why Manuel had keys to your house, but I realize that it wasn't Manuel who had them, that there's a bunch of strange things happening here. I suppose you won't want to tell them to me… Did you know Virginia?"

The teacher-whore from Kansas didn't know very well how to go on, very clearly she sensed the boggy terrain. She tried again after biting her fingernails.

"No, I had never seen that girl. She isn't a student of me."

"I have an enormous curiosity to know what classes you teach."

"English, of course,"[ she said in English], "it's clear."

"No, but apart from that…"

The woman hesitated, maybe she should tell him something. Héctor didn't wait for an answer; he had the sensation that he already knew it. He stood up, turned his back on her and left toward the door.
Nevertheless he didn't leave the building, he went down two floors and knocked on a
different door. From the hub of the stairs, two floors up, he knew he was being watched by the
English teacher, who offered classes of Legs 102. Doña Amalia opened her door suddenly. Her
face was swollen, probably she was crying with the soap operas of Verónica Castro.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. Do you remember me? I'm investigating…"

"Yes, of course, young man."

"Just one question, ma'am: How much did they pay you to turn in the tape to the radio
station? Did they threaten you? How much did they give you so you would say that the girl had
dropped the packet in the hallway? It's not that I want to create any problems for you, it's that if
you tell lies you are an accomplice of the murder, ma'am…"

The woman began to cry. Héctor looked at her in silence, then he gave her a pat on the
back. When he went down the last flight of stairs, the teacher was still following him with her
gaze. The detective felt like a character in a movie about Irish priests.

"If you tell me what you want, I don't see that I'll be forced to guess it. You'll understand
I'm not feeling very much at peace with my nephew dying in that sorry accident…” said
Márquez.

He was a man of about 50, a bit greasy. With a benevolent aspect, he didn't seem capable
of ripping off the wings of a captured fly. Héctor looked at him without saying anything. They
were seated in a hall at the foot of the stairs; the gunmen he'd met before were making a discreet
act of their presence, passing from the living room to the kitchen with some sodas in their hands,
going up the stairs, pretending they didn't see, as if wanting nothing to do with the matter. A far-off rumor of music could be heard.

"The truth, Mr. Márquez, I'd like to know so many things that I don't know where to begin…" said the detective.

Márquez stood up, walking toward a chest of drawers situated in the corner of the room. Standing there, on the opposite side of the room, he had created a situation a bit unreal; Héctor let himself fall on a chair. Márquez took out a checkbook and began to extend a check.

"Five million pesos seem good to you? And we save ourselves the whole conversation," he said in a loud voice while he signed.

Héctor didn't answer. Márquez approached with the check in his hand, in front of him, as if clearing a path. The detective took it between his fingers. Márquez moved away again, he went back to the other side of the room, as if the detective could contaminate him with a flu virus.

"So, five million pesos and the conversation ends here," said Héctor, watching the guy out of the corner of his eye.

"That's right," Márquez answered.

Héctor took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, applied the flame of the lighter to the check. He let it grow, and with it he lit the cigarette.

"Damn, a cigar has never tasted so good to me," he said, almost talking to himself.

"So we're doing this the hard way. Pretentious people are a pain in my balls," said Márquez, making a gesture of disappointment. He looked at his checkbook as if to verify that there were still more remaining and sighed.
"Pretentious, the ones who walk around offering millions so that one can light a regular filtered Delicado, asshole. Instead of going around giving me a check, why don't you tell me the place your nephew had in the organization you have… Or what it was that Virginia Vali found out that bothered you so much… Or what your relationship is with an English teacher who shows her legs when she teaches her class. By the way, I told her I had a photo of you two together and she got really nervous. It wasn't such a big deal, you wouldn't be a bad pair dancing tangos, or foxtrot, or *paso dobles*; old dances, of worn-out sons of bitches, anyway."

Márquez laughed.

"You have a lot of questions, too many, friend. You ask more than the police. My friends from the police don't go around lighting checks on fire like you, they just cash them…. You seem to me… how do I say it, like a dead person, an asshole, like a suicide victim… what's more, you don't even seem Mexican, because…."

A scream that came from the floor above interrupted Márquez's speech. Héctor raised his head. He made out in a flash a teenage girl, almost naked, who was running through the back hall. Only for an instant. He didn't even try to move because at that moment one of the gunmen was on the stairs blocking his way, and with a promising hand in his pocket. They exchanged a look. Márquez continued.

"It seems to me we have little to talk about. If you ever discover what happened in that room between my nephew, the poor little guy, and that girl, I'd like you to tell it to me, I would even be willing to pay well for your services…."

Héctor stood up, walked as though floating toward the door, in spite of his rusty leg on rainy days, in spite of the tiredness of his bones. The Delicado had tasted divine. Márquez had
remained smiling, but he was wrong. The bad guys of the new stories didn't know the complete
ass-kicking that was waiting for them, they didn't know the enormous resources he had when a
small dose of cynicism and an abundant dose of insanity were added. The sons of bitches didn't
have even a remote idea of what the infuriated masses were going to do to them one of these
days. How they were going to burn all their checks for five million one after another. What a
tremendous raging bonfire.

Upon leaving Márquez's house, Héctor knew what he needed; now he had to find a
halfway intelligent idea in order to get it. He walked down Palmas and when he got bored of the
sun, of the long sidewalks empty of pedestrians and of the smog that the cars threw at him, he
took a collective taxi and went back toward a zone of the city where he felt safer. In a gas station
near the Chapultepec Metro stop he discovered an old soft drink refrigerator full of little Cokes.
There weren't many in the city anymore; little by little they were substituted by the Coke
machines with cans or simply disappeared into nowhere. He drank one, then another and in rapid
succession he tossed back the third. Apart from the fact that small Cokes were better than the
family-sized ones, as everyone knew, the bottles were the fundamental part of his plan. Right
there he bought a 5-liter plastic bottle and asked the gas station attendant to fill it with diesel.
Now he only needed a walk through downtown to obtain the chemicals.

The night is the territory of hope and the hour of great fireworks. At seventeen minutes
after two o'clock in the morning, Héctor entered the yard of Márquez's house jumping the fence
and whistling "La Bamba;" having no agility, he almost dropped the three Molotov cocktails that
he had spent the afternoon building (gasoline, a drizzle of sulfuric acid, carefully capped little
Coke bottles, which formed a packet tied up with masking tape and painted on the outside with
cola impregnated with potassium chloride). He moved forward through the yard in the middle of the shadows from the trees. He looked for the safety of the garage doors. He would have to throw the packet at least 25 meters away, a task for "El Gordo" Valenzuela without injuries. He calculated the place where he wanted it to impact. It had to be over the little cement rotunda that was before the front entrance. He counted to three and threw it. The tremendous blaze surprised him. He was almost expecting that the task would fail and he would have to reveal himself and take out some matches. But the explosion was beautiful, the burning gasoline spread rapidly and caught an awning. The yard was illuminated as if the dawn had arrived early. Héctor produced a wolfish smile, he had mistaken his calling: by night arsonist, in the mornings fireman. The landscape began to be populated with citizens in underpants. His old friends, the two gutless hired guns, appeared through a service door in one side of the building, with guns in their hands. Héctor slipped into the interior of the house through the garage. In a hallway of the upper floor he came across two girls of no more than 12 in nightgowns. He went opening doors. What was he looking for? A photo. Why? Because here there would have to be a photo, too. He discovered it in a bedroom with red rugs. It was on the night table, it was once again the face of Virginia, the dead teenager, who didn't look it in the photo. A photograph taken the same night of the crime, of a deceased girl whose body still hadn't been covered by the sheet.

"You're not going to believe it, but I fell in love with her," said a voice at his back.

"Before or after you killed her?" answered the detective without turning around, with his gaze fixed on the photograph.

Márquez was dressed only in pajamas, barefoot. He walked toward the photo coming to Héctor's side, and he took it in his hands.
"I have a weakness for very young girls; they're so soft. I like to fuck them, I have to admit. But not this one. I'm an asshole. I only saw her two times, once with Manolo, the other when she came to tell me off. And so, instead of fucking her I killed her. One never does what one wants. What was the name of that little shit? Whatever her name is. I fell in love with her."

With a grimace of rage, Héctor Belascoarán tried to get the guy out from in front of him, to make him disappear. Then he extended his hand so that the other man would give the photo back to him. Márquez backed two steps away. Héctor took out the .45 and shot him. He saw how Márquez's right arm, the one that was holding the photo, was almost cut in two. The guy screamed upon seeing the blood that was flowing from his ruined arm. The detective turned his back on him and left. When he jumped the fence he listened to the nearby sound of the fire trucks. Not even Tchaikovsky for a symphony.

The Ángel II didn't fight badly; he had an elegant style, a certain fluidity in the motions learned in his routines. He flew through the ring with a certain grace. Héctor, semi-hidden in one of the aisles, smoked a cigarette while he alternated his view of the fight and looked over the faces of the spectators. Faces that were performing for themselves with the pretext of the fight with fake blood occurring in the ring.

It seemed elementary that the only way to stop a ghost was when it attended a wrestling arena to watch another ghost's son fight.

The face of Zamudio "The Ghost" appeared in the crowd. He must have been there from the beginning, hidden to the detective's gaze with his face concealed by the lapels of his jacket. It
wasn't The Ángel II's best moment, something was failing now, he was fighting without the consistency of his father's class; it wasn't important in his life, he could go on being a chemistry teacher; the farce gave him a relative reserve, he wasn't having fun. Even so, when the fight ended, they raised his arm as victor. Zamudio "The Ghost" began to walk toward the exit without waiting for the headlining fights. Héctor followed him.

It was raining in that part of the Federal District. "The Ghost" entered the Metro with Héctor 50 meters away. Three stations later he got off; the detective gave him a few seconds and began to follow him through the crowd of the Tacubaya station. The Metro was in one of those movie-like moments. The magical lights, the faces that passed at full speed, without leaving record, the voices of the vendors in all the access hallways. It was raining at the exit, and Héctor gratefully accepted the air that was flinging drops on his face. "The Ghost" walked, lost in his darkest and most hostile thoughts, toward a third-rate hotel. Héctor watched him from afar. Zamudio went into his house. Into his temporary house. It was raining harder. There was "The Ghost," in the solitude of a room, with his ghosts. Héctor didn't want to go back home to find his own. He preferred the rain in his face. He remained motionless on the sidewalk, like a damned whore in the storm, illuminated by the red lights of the hotel Savoy that blinked in between the lightning.

The detective lit a cigarette while he sheltered himself in the entryway of a closed pharmacy, then concealed the tobacco between his fingers making a "house" with his hand. The Boy Scouts smoked that way, el "Gallo" ["The Rooster"] had told him once. He had never been a Boy Scout. He walked getting soaked, but without hurry, attracted by the lights of a fair.

He took shelter from the rain on the platform covered by a target-shooting stand.
"One-eyed guys have good aim," said the stallholder. "Why don't you try it?"

Héctor nodded and paid 1,000 pesos. He methodically began to knock down a row of brilliant, silver-plated Spanish imperial eagles. He had gotten eleven without missing one, when a real shot issued from behind him destroyed, centimeters from his face, the side wall of the stand. He turned, taking out his gun. There was no one. The stallholder contemplated the enormous hole without being very clear how the hell it had happened. Héctor raised his shoulders and lit a cigarette. His hand was shaking. He gave up on shooting the twelfth silver-plated figure in the shape of an eagle.

For a few days, Héctor didn't go to the office. He remained enclosed in his house with the phone disconnected, listening to Strauss's waltzes, cooking the rest of his very depleted pantry, looking for hours at the photos of the girl with the ponytail, and once in a while the photo of Celia surrounded by the two "Ghosts." His beard began to grow. He watched a golf tournament on TV. He went back to the photos with the sensation that they had grown in number. Two of them held him more time in observation, five, six hours. They were in the middle of the hallway. In one, the girl with the ponytail was playing solitaire, toying with a black queen in her hand, not sure where to put it; her hair had slipped out covering one eye, like Veronica Lake. In the other, she was taking a photo of a group of hunger strikers facing the cathedral. One of the strikers was smiling at her lying down on a mountain of old blankets.

One day he cooked canned garbanzo beans with cheese spread. It didn't turn out too well and he threw half of the stew in the toilet. Seeing the washing machine he remembered that the girl with the ponytail had arrived one day smiling and had convinced him to make love on the
washer. The clothes halfway pulled off her body, her stockings tangled at her neck, the two or three centimeters he was missing in order to reach her well and penetrate her and that made him raise himself up on his tiptoes; the ferocious vibrations of the machine that threatened to jump under the double momentum of his attacks and the centrifugation. A memorable orgasm. The Kama Sutra didn't say anything about washing machines. There were no photos of that time with her. They would have turned out blurry. He placed a pair of photographs of the face of the girl with the ponytail over the washing machine. He wandered sleepwalking through the house.

He went from one photo to another observing new details in each review. In the corner of one photograph where she was getting on a bus there was a bicyclist. In that photo, taken upon leaving the Philosophy film society, she had a wound on her elbow, a small wound covered by a band-aid. Her face was asymmetrical, one side of her lips seemed larger, juicier. The pictures in black and white, at dusk showed her chestnut hair, at night and thanks to the flash they showed it much darker. Héctor slept little, rather he remained looking at the ceiling with his eye open. One day, his soft drinks were running out, maybe it was a sign that the crisis was at an end, was moving on toward somewhere else. The doorbell rang a few times, he didn't answer it. He wasn't expecting anyone. His healthy eye sank inward on him, shadows of insanity appeared under both sockets. At the end of the week he smiled in front of the mirror when his own ghost looked at him and he went down to the street to look for a street vendor who sold juice who could provide him with three half-liter glasses of orange juice. He crossed before the photos of the hallway without looking at them. If he turned around he would turn into a statue of salt.
SEVEN

Through the window he confirmed that everything was in its place; the sky and the earth.

-Manuel Vázquez Montalbán

Héctor found himself seated in a rocking chair before Zamudio "The Ghost." Not only the pair of crippled characters was second-hand; the hotel was second-rate, too, to judge by the interior of the rooms: peeling walls and strange furniture on the verge of collapsing. The reddish, neon light could be seen through the window and sometimes changed the lighting of everything, staining the faces of the detective and the wrestler with blood.

They watched each other with suspicion. A long silence.

"OK, and if I killed him, what?"

Héctor raised his shoulders. The other was getting angry. His fury grew inside before the inaction of the detective.

"Each one of us has his own conscience. I have mine. Each one has his dead. I've already walked around carrying mine a long time. Twenty years. Only 20 years of walking my dead people around here and there. It seemed like a funeral home. Zamudio's funeral show."

"Were you very much in love?" the detective asked, to say something.

Zamudio "The Ghost" got pissed at the question, what dumbass question was that; then he thought about it a little, absorbed it. Little by little he began to smile.

"I was going to bust your face in for asking me that. But now… I don't even know anymore… How stupid. I don't even remember well anymore. It must be, because if not…"
His own words irritated him as they acquired meaning in his head. He remained silent a while.

"I must have been very much in love," said Zamudio "The Ghost" suddenly. "Do you think you kill a buddy after 20 years if it wasn't for that? Hatred doesn't last that long, only love endures so strongly. You all don't know what love is like, young man."

"What was it that happened between you guys?"

The Ghost seemed not to have heard him. He went toward an old chest and took out his mask from the old times, half worn out. A white mask where the bones of a skull could be seen.

"What hurt me wasn't that she left me. In the end, like that old lady, a lot did. What hurt me is that I did love her, and he didn't; he didn't care. It didn't matter to him…" he paused. "That isn't true, what hurt me is that he was my buddy. And then later we could never go on fighting together. And I threw my life away and I wandered here and there for 20 years, and I get here after 20 damn years and I say to him…"

"The Ghost" had run away from the room. His mind had transported him toward some place in the past, very close to the eternal ring. Clinging tight to death. He seemed to have returned to the scene of the crime, to the ring that so many times he'd shared with The Ángel. He had returned to the place of the murder. Héctor, without knowing why, thought that sometimes memory theatrically evoked events, with much greater dramatic force than reality.

"I said to him: 'You're old, Ángel, you don't know how to fall anymore!' And he answers me: 'Where did you come from, 'Ghost'?' And I tell him, 'Right here, from nothingness, man, it's your fault' and then, when we were hugging each other, he says to me: 'And me, I didn't even love her' and then everything passed in front of me again and I took out the gun…"
Without wild gesticulations, without grander gestures, the tears began to fall down his cheeks, he let them slip down his face.

"And what did you carry a gun for?" asked Héctor, almost sorry for not letting him cry peacefully.

"To kill him, what else would it be for? I knew the dummy was going to make me remember everything again. I've been saying for 15 years: one of these days I'm going to go back and kill him…. I didn't even see his face that day. I didn't see his face, he was masked…. After so many years…."

They remained quiet, in silence. "The Ghost" was the first to recover his voice:

"And what about you?"

"I don't know. It hurts me that you've killed The Ángel, in such a stupid way… The thing is so idiotic. I met him three years ago, he was a good buddy. Did you meet his son?"

"That one who fights? He isn't even worth a whole lot, it seems to me…."

"You know about wrestling or you also know about people?"

"No, I don't know about people. You don't see what things I've been doing for 20 years, pure atrocities, pure, total bullshit."

"Well we're going to see the son, and let him decide," said Héctor. It was the only thing that had occurred to him.

"Decide what?" asked "The Ghost."

"What your punishment is, if you're to be turned in to the police, if you have to disappear forever; who knows, let him decide. You killed his father, let him decide…. Me, what the fuck do I know about justice."
"None of that…. Another 20 damn years of purgatory…."  

He got up threateningly. Héctor put himself in front, closing his access to the door with a gesture of resignation.

"Are you going to kill me, too? Isn't it getting too much for you? Aren't there already a lot of dead people for a woman who you don't even know if you were in love with?"

Zamudio "The Ghost" stopped, looked at the detective and looked through him, thinking about a woman who maybe, if they had let him, he would have fallen in love with and later would have forgotten. Héctor approached him, confusing the look of disconcertedness with assent, and took him by the arm. The work-related instincts of "The Ghost" kicked in and the detective went bouncing off the wall propelled by an elbow jab. Héctor suffered from the impact, a strong pain grew from his ribs and rose up to his head. He reacted the opposite of how he should have and went back to approach "The Ghost" again, who received him with a blow from the forearm. Héctor fell to the floor feeling that his throat was closing on him. Yes, that's how the thing was going to be. He took out his gun, looked at it and put it on the floor next to the rocking chair on which he'd been seated. He moved toward "The Ghost" showing his open, empty hands.

It was an absurd fight. In silence. A silence caused by both opponents that was only broken once in a while by the panting and the noises of the furniture, upon being broken. Dancing bears without gypsy music.

After five minutes of shoves, forearm blows, punches and elbow jabs, which the detective assimilated like a bag of cement, "The Ghost" got him with a flying kick that hit Héctor in the chest, taking the air out of him.
The detective lay drowning, knocked down on the floor, trying anxiously to breathe again. "The Ghost" smiled at him. When Héctor recovered his breath he got to his feet again, bleeding by the nose. "The Ghost" applied a Nelson hold, squeezed with caution, in case his bones were weak, and flung him over the bare, rickety bed. The detective smiled amid the tears that were coming out of him, the blood and the snot, and he went back, stumbling over the wrestler. "The Ghost," alarmed, disconcerted, began to back away. The detective was causing him fear, an old sensation that he believed to have forgotten.

"Can I pass you a Kleenex?" asked Zamudio "The Ghost."

Héctor nodded, tried to get his breathing back to normal while the paper tissue was passed and then he said:

"I'm going to continue insisting, why don't you stop it already? We're going to see The Ángel's son and let him decide your fate."

Héctor wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. "The Ghost," defeated, nodded.

"All in all, I was going to end up killing myself around here anyway, on a bender, in a whorehouse. An asshole with a switchblade was going to kill me, with one shot. Not in a wrestling match. So anyway."

"Better, because I couldn't stand back up anymore," said Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, bleeding detective.

"You know what, man? I killed him for love, asshole, don't you realize? It was for love. And don't even say otherwise. Don't even say anything. Don't even open your fucking mouth. Don't even say anything. Nothing."
Héctor nodded.

First there was nothing, and it was very good. Later the nothing was broken by the ringing of a telephone. With his eye still closed he groped around for the receiver.

"Yeah, talk to me," Héctor said to the nothingness. Why did he speak informally to people without having been properly introduced?

"A tape arrived by mail, from Virginia…" said Laura Ramos, the velvety voice the same as ever. "You were right, it tells that she found out about the child prostitution business that Márquez had and that she was going to try to convince that idiot Manolo to help her report the matter to the police. I'm going to play it today at night and send a copy to all the newspapers…"

Héctor didn't know what to answer and hung up. He returned to the nothingness.

"The Hour of the Lonely Ones," Laura said, "tuning in with you. Not with you in general, with each one of you, with each individual, unique, unmistakable person, and therefore, a solitary character of the largest city in the world, the monster of the Federal District that threatens to eat us if we don't put the barriers of solidarity in front…"

Héctor looked at her from the other side of the glass, in the control room beyond the booth, without Laura being able to see him. He drummed softly with his fingers on the glass, but she didn't hear it. Without much hurry, the detective left the radio station.

In his house the radio was tuned in to XEKA.

"…the barriers that allow us, extending a finger, to be able to reach each other and stop being ones and others… Even if it's only so we can tell each other a story. Like the story that
Virginia wanted to tell us a week ago and that she couldn't tell. Do you remember Virginia, that teenager who was killed? All of you will have read about it in the newspapers, it's been on the front page because of the news of the capture of the murderer…. Virginia, who today, thanks to the magic of the tapes, is here. Let's keep her on the air thinking about her, let's listen to her story. Let's be careful with a city that threatens to swallow us. Silence is the worst form of death. We're listening to you, Virginia."

Héctor turned off the radio and then kicked the appliance, without fury, with civic consciousness, as though fulfilling an obligation that he had to fulfill. No matter how they tried, Virginia's voice would sound empty. As much as Laura's words tried to help her, to revive her, Virginia's voice would sound like what it was: a dead teenager.

One week later, he repeated the gesture again, walked toward the radio and turned it off halfway through a polonaise of Chopin. He gave a soft kick to the stereophonic equipment. He went toward the kitchen looking for a soft drink. He was tired, his ribs still hurt him; therefore, he needed sure things: a cold soft drink. Sure things: the photos of the girl with the ponytail, which were there, immobile, retaining a gesture forever. The street that hadn't moved, that continued waiting through the window. A week before, when they abandoned the hotel, "The Ghost" began to cry. The detective cried a little, too. He didn't like the memory of two guys crying, holding each other by the arm through Tacubaya, one of them with a bloody tissue covering his nose, the other carrying, as if it didn't weigh anything, an old, black suitcase. It was a strange memory, above all because he glimpsed them in the movie theater of his memory, from afar, from outside.
He remained a while observing the photos of the girl with the ponytail: dancing the twist at fifteen years old; walking around the islands of C.U. [University City] during the strike of ’68; giving a glass of milk to her nephew. They were only photos, he told himself. He didn't fool himself in the slightest. There were no photos; there were memories, there were ghosts.

When he finished the soft drink he left the empty bottle carefully on the floor and went for a second soft drink. We are always others, he told himself. The anxiety was beginning to ease. He remained watching the twilight. A red sun in a gray city.

The real ghosts, the one of a teenager who had been cheated, and not only of her suicide, but also of her goodbye, both falsified. The actual ghosts: the one of The Ángel I, a wrestler who always fell on the canvas well and who had promised to teach him, and the one of a woman named Celia, with whom the guy had been in love one day, and both eternally pursued by the ghost of Zamudio; they wandered sleeplessly without being able to find each other. They were love stories halfway there. Nonexistent love stories. Pure and shitty, lackluster love stories, defeated because they never were. "Like mine," the detective informed his unwilling subconscious.

He remained thinking about how, again, we had all lost another battle.

Mexico City, spring of 1989
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