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## A shadow you will soon be

Daniel Alexander Berrones

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## ABSTRACT

### A SHADOW YOU WILL SOON BE

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In the first section of this thesis I explore how Osvaldo Soriano resorts to parody as a way to express his dissatisfaction with Argentinian politics in his novel *Una sombra ya pronto serás*. I reflect on the lives of the protagonist and author and reveal how they both share similar ideologies. I also explore the translation process in depth and provide solutions and explanations for my translations. I discuss how losses are inevitable in any type of translation, regardless if the translation has been domesticated or foreignized.

In the second section I provide a foreignized English translation of the first ten chapters of *Una sombra ya pronto serás*. Despite the fact that I keep the original Spanish syntax in my translation as often as possible, there are times where I domesticate the translation. This subtle balance that I make between the two translation types allows this translation to be highly readable to the native English speaker, while also closely matching the tone of the original.

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A SHADOW YOU WILL SOON BE

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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Thesis Director:  
Eloy Merino

## DEDICATION

To Adam for leading the way, and to Diana for believing in me.

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## LITERARY ANALYSIS

Simply put, the reason why I have chosen to translate a fragment of *Una sombra ya pronto serás* (1990) by Osvaldo Soriano from Spanish to English as the thesis for my Master's degree is because I fell in love with the way it was written. Soriano impacts the reader on such an emotionally profound level by using a language that is honest, expressive, thoughtful, colloquial, and often very raw. The smooth narration makes the reading experience a pleasure and the reader quickly finds himself submerged in the protagonist's life from the very first line: "Nunca me había pasado de andar sin un peso en el bolsillo" (Soriano 9). After reading this first line I became immediately interested in the way in which Soriano could alter the language to reflect the uncertainty and misfortune of the protagonist. The protagonist's plight, which I will soon explore, resonated with me on a very personal level because when he says that he made "un recorrido absurdo, dando vueltas y retrocediendo y ahora me encontraba en el mismo lugar que al principio o en otro idéntico" (Soriano 9) I felt like I had also taken similar journeys in my own life where I did not end up accomplishing what I had originally wanted to.

In the novel, Soriano's protagonist returns to Argentina after having spent time working as a computer engineer in France and Italy. The reader discovers tangentially that the protagonist had left Argentina for political reasons. Upon returning to Argentina the protagonist is saddened by what he sees. The protagonist wants to get to Neuquén

because he believes he can find a career there in computing. But getting there is difficult for him because Argentina's economic crisis discourages the protagonist; the more he travels along winding and desolate roads the harder it becomes for him to make sense of this unfamiliar bleak panorama. This is why Alicia Rolón-Alexander writes that *Una sombra ya pronto serás* "es un testimonio de desesperanza, de incertidumbre, de sueños rotos", and it's because his "regreso le presenta un panorama desolador y desalentador que varias veces linda con la miseria" (Rolón-Alexander 1). Seeing his country in this way forces the protagonist to turn inwards in an attempt to understand himself.

The novel centers on the narrator travelling through Argentina. "En su andar, el narrador y protagonista recorre sitios provincianos que otrora conocieron el esplendor y la opulencia" (Rolón-Alexander 1). It's obvious in the novel that these places "sólo son una sombra de lo que una vez fueron" (Rolón-Alexander 1) because businesses have closed, employees are on strike, and villages are empty. On his way to Neuquén he encounters countless people who reflect a reality that he cannot seem to understand. He rides in empty trains and he sees peasants riding on horses. He passes through abandoned villages. From his brief encounters with laborers, to the conversation he has with a Galician bartender, to his conversations with Lem about probability theory, or whether he is changing the tire for a person who he just met, the narrator does a fabulous job of going with the flow and allowing his circumstances in the present moment to lead him to his next set of circumstances without much regard for the repercussions. The times have

changed, and so has he. This realization disconcerts the protagonist and this is what allows the novel to impact the reader so intensely. The reader witnesses this man courageously hitchhike with complete strangers down roads without knowing what awaits him on the other side. The narrator confesses in the opening pages that he has backtracked so many times that he has no idea where he is. All of the roads have begun to look the same to him, and as Rolón-Alexander observes, these roads "metafóricamente se convierten para él en un laberinto asfixiante en el que por más que caminara siempre estaba en el mismo lugar" (Rolón-Alexander 1). There are so many chance encounters that the narrator comes into that it would be very difficult to provide a linear progression of them all.

But the reader cannot save the protagonist because the protagonist cannot save himself. He is jaded by the politics of his country. And now that he has come back to Argentina he is disillusioned with reality. He is sickened by the economic crisis that Argentina is experiencing but he doesn't know how to change his reality so he travels, he escapes, he flees. His "recorrido absurdo" gives him the opportunity to lose himself in the company of others and the friendships that he forms with characters such as Coluccini, Lem, and Nadia, is what ultimately holds him together.

When the narrator contemplates "tantas veces empecé de nuevo que por momentos sentía la sensación de abandonarme. ¿Por qué si una vez conseguí salir del pozo volví a caer como un estúpido? 'Porque es tu pozo', me respondí, 'porque lo cavaste



con tus propias manos” (Soriano 14) the reader becomes acutely aware of the depth of the narrator. When the protagonist is alone the reader gets a glimpse of his psyche because during this time he is contemplative and introspective. But despite this self-awareness that he possess at times, we never really see much growth from the protagonist. This is unfortunate because at the end of the novel the protagonist finds himself in the same place as in the beginning, and the reader feels bad for him because the reader knows that the protagonist has just travelled throughout South America for essentially nothing; he remains penniless at the end, just like he was in the beginning. This is why David Prieto Polo writes that the circular structure in the novel "se verifica en el hecho de que la acción se inicia en el pueblo de Colonia Vela y, después de pasar por otros lugares, concluye de nuevo en él. Asimismo, los personajes parecen estar condenados a deambular en círculos, de los que nunca son capaces de salir" (Polo 242). The only thing the protagonist takes with him from place to place is the memories that he makes with random characters who leave his life as quickly as they enter it. But these characters are also condemned to continuously walk around in circles, and this fate doesn't escape the protagonist.

The novel passes by like a whirlwind because the protagonist never stays in one place for more than a few days. To add to this level of transience, Soriano intentionally does not give his protagonist (a nondescript middle-aged Argentinian man) a name. This enables the reader to identify with him, but from a distance. Néstor Ponce believes that

this anonymity "lo identifica con un destino errante y colectivo de cualquier representante de la clase media argentina en vías de extinción" (Ponce 37). He believes that the reader maintains his distance to the protagonist and "se solidariza con el marginal en la medida en que éste captura una serie de valores humanos tales como la solidaridad, la amistad, la ternura, y cierta inocencia que remiten a la infancia" (Ponce 37). I believe my affinity with the protagonist is due to the way in which Soriano skillfully crafted his narrator and protagonist. Ponce believes that "la inadecuación del contacto referencial hace que el lector guarde una distancia crítica con el accionar de los protagonistas" (Ponce 37). The protagonist remains somewhat of a mockery due to his lack of identity and at one point in the novel Coluccini mistakenly refers to him as Zárate, which was the name of Coluccini's former business partner who betrayed him. By calling the protagonist this name, Coluccini trivializes his identity. The protagonist then tells Coluccini that that is not his name and the scene becomes absurd. The reader has difficulty viewing him as a hero. This is why Néstor Ponce writes that "los protagonistas de las obras de Soriano se destacan por su carácter antiheroico" (Ponce 37).

I believe Soriano's antiheros are a reflection of who Soriano was and they both share many of the same hobbies. There are at times in the novel when the line between the author and protagonist become blurred. Carmen Perilli, in "Un mapa del infierno: la novela argentina entre 1982 y 1992", writes that "a pesar de los diversos grados de relación entre el autor y el narrador se pueden encontrar zonas biográficas, verdaderas

firmas dentro del texto” (Perilli 97). I was able to conclude based on lines in the novel such as "de chico yo había tenido una de goma que picaba mejor, aunque todas eran igual de irresistibles" (Soriano 30), that Soriano had a passion for sports. When the protagonist is getting ready to hop onto the truck which is taking the kids to a soccer field Soriano writes “les dije que en mi tiempo yo había sido arquero de Banfield” but they didn’t believe him at the beginning. It’s not until they saw that he “movía muy bien la pelota que se interesaron en los detalles y uno de ellos me preguntó cuántos penales había atajado en mi vida" (Soriano 32). This shows Soriano's passion for sports. The author comments on his passion for sports when he says in an interview that "siempre que estuve muy mal o muy caído, yo me salvaba con el deporte" (Dhaine 113).

Another autobiographical element contained in the novel is the narrator's fixation with specific automobiles. He writes about car models such as "Gordini", "Falcon", "Bedford", and "Jaguar". Soriano, in a 1994 interview with Elisabeth Dhaine, said "Me gustan mucho los autos. Hay marcas que suenan bien escritas y otras que suenan mal: Fiat suena mal. Me gustan los autos y nunca tengo la plata necesaria para comprarme los autos que me gustan" (Dhaine 109). Based on this confession from Soriano, the reader of *Una sombra ya pronto serás* quickly realizes that the narrator and Soriano share the same thoughts. Beyond sports and automobiles, another theme that constantly reappears in Soriano's fiction is cats and dogs.

According to Soriano himself, he is a lover of cats but dogs were indifferent to him. He said that dogs are capable of doing good and bad but that cats aren't able to do both. In the novel the protagonist gets bit on his ankle by a ferocious street dog. On the other hand, there is a moment earlier in the novel when the protagonist is eating food next to a cat and the cat sits there motionless but contemplative. This dichotomy perhaps reflects the way Soriano feels about cats and dogs. Soriano even speaks about this directly when he says that in all of his novels there's a cat that passes by, and he says it's the moment in which the novel becomes irreversible. Soriano says that when the cat appears something has to end. He says that a cat is an amulet (Dhaine 110).

Perilli also writes that “los protagonistas de la novela argentina actual son letrados: médicos, historiadores, abogados, poetas, escritores universitarios” (Perilli 97). This is interesting to consider because Soriano’s protagonist is an educated computer engineer. After learning about the way in which Argentinian authors select their protagonists, I became interested in learning more about Osvaldo Soriano's personal life.

I discovered that Osvaldo Soriano was born in 1943 in Mar del Plata, Argentina. This is where the majority of the novel takes place. It is clear to the reader that Soriano writes what he knows. He seems to have inside knowledge of the local towns. Mar del Plata is a large seaside resort on the coast of the province of Buenos Aires. Soriano was a full-time journalist who contributed to *La opinión* and *Panorama*. He went into exile, just like his protagonist did, after the military coup of 1976 and then lived in Brussels and

Paris until 1984. Soriano's second novel *No habrá más penas ni olvidos* was finished just after the death of Perón around mid-1975, and during that period it was difficult to publish anything in Argentina due to the "State's repressive apparatus" (Smith 770). His biography resembles that of the protagonist's in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*. Soriano published the book in 1990 (Smith 771).

At this point in my introduction I want to analyze the novel a little more closely. I want to explore the reasons why Soriano wrote the novel in an absurd way. It becomes clear to the reader that Soriano appears to have written *Una sombra ya pronto serás* with the intention of mocking the status quo in Argentina. In her analysis of this novel, Alicia Rolón-Alexander writes that "la ironía situacional, frecuentemente usada por Soriano, revela los aspectos más grises de los muchos y diversos problemas que afectan a la sociedad argentina actual" (Rolón-Alexander 11). An example of this situational irony in the novel is when the reader encounters a gas station employee sleeping as cars pull into his gas station, and he is unable to make change for large bills because that gas station no longer does business. The sign was worn and it could be easily noticed that there hadn't been oil produced for a significant portion of time. Soriano paints a world in which better times existed before which is the title of the novel is so important: it reflects a time in which things used to be more opulent. Soriano avenges himself against the anger that he has towards the political dissension in his country by writing in an absurd and grotesque way. Alexander observes in every dialogue involving the narrator that this "significa la

develación tanto de la decadencia económica y de la corrupción que azota al país como de la desesperanza y pérdida de valores que por tales causas sufren sus ciudadanos” (Rolón-Alexander 11). In these dialogues we meet unreal figures who according to Néstor Ponce "alimentan la creación de una atmosfera surreal donde la realidad se acerca cada vez más a una trágica e irrisoria ficción" (Ponce 30). This laughable fiction that Ponce describes is what I refer to when I say that the book is absurd. An example from the novel which shows the loss of values is when Colucinni offers a truck driver money for his cargo. But he doesn't stop there; he insists on buying the truck also, which would've left the trucker stranded but with money. This unrealistic situation makes the reader laugh because it just doesn't make sense. A lot of times in the novel the plot doesn't seem to make sense. This is why Ponce states "El destino incoherente de los personajes se completa con los huecos en la memoria que borran el pasado, circunstancia sugestiva en un país cuya historia reciente está marcada por la tragedia" (p. 33).

An example of absurdity in the language is when Nadia, the money-hungry fortune teller, tells people lies and takes their money just so she can fund a trip to Brazil. When Nadia starts screaming at three o' clock in the morning Agent Benítez "se paró de un salto, sacó la linterna y desenfundó el arma con cara de haber perdido el puesto" (Soriano 63). At this point in the novel the reader has already laughed at Agent Benítez because he takes his job as a guard too seriously. When there is a downpour he stands in

the rain even when there is no threat. Soriano intentionally writes scenes like these which, according to Rolón-Alexander, depict a somber reality, but "siempre hay lugar para el humor. En verdad, es este último uno de los aspectos mejor logrados de la novela" (Rolón-Alexander 11). Soriano's use of ironic and sarcastic humor not only counteracts the effect of this sad reality, but it allows Soriano to offer hope to the reader. The reader realizes that the situation cannot be as terrible and exaggerated as it is depicted in the novel. The reader realizes that Soriano intentionally goes to an absurd and ridiculous level in order to express his disgust with reality but at the same time he is able to laugh about it and he wants us to laugh about it too. This makes the reader feel like all hope is not lost.

Soriano wasn't the only Argentinian writer who expressed his dissatisfaction towards the military dictatorship in Argentina in his fiction. Another Argentinian writer, Luisa Valenzuela, was outraged with the military dictatorship that came to power in Argentina in 1976. Valenzuela, a feminist with a strong passion for her voice to be heard, uses extreme violence in *Cambio de armas* (1982) as a way to jolt the reader into seeing the power that the military has over the citizens. Gwendolyn Diaz begins "Politics of the Body in Luisa Valenzuela's "Cambio de armas" and "Simetrias"" by stating: "At the heart of Luisa Valenzuela's narrative is a deep preoccupation with the use of power, the abuse of power, and the structures of domination which permeate the most basic aspects of our existence. These structures of domination are based on the struggle

implied in the idea of politics" (Diaz 751). This preoccupation with the abuse of power is the same for Soriano. Both authors succeed in empowering the reader to action, albeit in different ways. Valenzuela depicts violent sex scenes in *Cambio de armas*, and although Soriano's protagonist does become intimate with Nadia, there is no violence related to the act. Soriano doesn't have to resort to violence as a way to call attention to the problems facing his country; he simply mocks them and makes us laugh with him. Both Soriano and Valenzuela were outraged with the status quo in Argentina and each author resorted to different literary techniques to make their readers aware of the social injustice Argentinian's citizens were facing. Valenzuela, in *Cambio de armas*, mocked Argentinian authority by having her protagonist violated by a man of the military. This showed Valenzuela's lack of respect for her country's politics. Soriano, in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, mocks the status quo directly through the use of absurd conversations and impossible chance encounters. These two authors shared the same hate towards Argentinian politics, but crafted their novels in different ways to reflect this anger.

Another example in which humor and absurdity occur in the novel is just after the protagonist takes a bath using the cleaning detergent from a gas station and begins to watch as a cat slowly approaches him. The cat begins to eat his breakfast next to the narrator and the narrator notes that each one was concentrating on his own affairs, which is a very humorous scene to consider because Soriano gave human-like qualities to a cat. While the protagonist is deep in thought, contemplating giving up and starting over, a



man driving a Renault Gordini jumps onto the bank and makes a zigzag to the pump platform. He begins shouting in Italian! He says that the "l'avventura è finita!" (Soriano 28). The narrator describes Coluccini as being a fat man who had fifty badly lived years and "tenía unos anteojos sucios, la camisa sudada y los zapatos negros bien lustrados" (Soriano 15). This physical description of Coluccini makes him appear ridiculous. When Coluccini is first introduced in the novel he quickly pulls out a roll of big bills, which ends up being just one large bill with paper clippings underneath it. He does this to make himself appear more successful than he really is. He is a liar. This stark contrast between reality and fantasy is absurd. Coluccini has deluded himself into thinking that he is something that he is not. After Coluccini engages the narrator into a short discussion about what the narrator is going to do in the south, Coluccini quickly and erroneously concludes that the narrator is going for oil. Coluccini informs the narrator that if you speak to people in another language that they will let their guard down, but that you must also show them your money. The protagonist notes that Coluccini doesn't look like a winner even though he presents himself as one. Coluccini used to work in a circus and now he is heading to Bolivia because he believes he can find happiness there. It's important to consider the idea of emigrating from Argentina to a different place. This shows how the people of Argentina view life outside of Argentina: that it's a place where you can be successful. Regarding this geographical imprecision, Ponce concludes that "indica de por sí el vacío y la ausencia, la imposibilidad de construir un destino y de

hallar una identidad para hombres que constatan lo absurdo de la existencia individual y para una sociedad que constata lo absurdo de un país que se empecina en autodestruir su destino colectivo. De ahí que los personajes sueñen con destinos exóticos o imposibles" (Ponce 31). This idea of wanting to leave Argentina in search of happiness elsewhere is a theme which pervades the entire book. The characters in the novel mention wanting to go Copacabana, Australia, Japan, Roma, Alaska, and of wanting to go to Ohio, but the reader understands that the characters these characters are dreaming and that it's highly unlikely that they'll ever get there, just as Ponce asserts.

Lem is obsessed with beating the casino at roulette. He even gives the narrator his books which have data recorded for over a year. It's quite unrealistic to expect someone to have a book of date on roulette unless he was a fanatic. Lem's obsession with the numbers 17 and 21 drive the protagonist to share the same obsession. When Lem and the protagonist reach Triunvirato, the protagonist speaks with a Galician bartender who believes that it is now fashionable to be poor. He insists that people no longer go to the chapel to pray, but rather to eat for free. Soriano uses this Galician man as a way to let the reader know that there are people in Argentina who are sick and tired of seeing the collective lack of action. This pathetic and grotesque reality shocks the reader and the reader wants the other characters in the novel to take more initiative in fixing the economic decline. Lem and the protagonist find an inn to stay the night at and there isn't a telephone. This forces Lem to scream that "no hay teléfono en esta pocilga" (Soriano

44). When the protagonist first sees the room that they are going to sleep in he looks at "el techo descascarado y manchado por el humo de veinte o treinta años de tabaco. El revoque de las paredes era desparejo y entre los ladrillos asomaban unos yuyos enanos. Por debajo de la puerta pasaba una larga fila de hormigas que transportaban restos de hojas" (Soriano 44). Upon seeing the poor condition of the room, which reflects the economic downfall of Argentina, the protagonist sarcastically comments "por lo menos tiene techo" (Soriano 44). Obviously this is very thick sarcasm which reflects Soriano's way of addressing his disdain and disgust for his country. This is another example in which humor is taken to an absurd degree in order to shock the reader into seeing reality how it truly is.

### Reflection on the Translation Process

Before I started translating this novel I knew that I did not want to domesticate the translation, nor did I want it to be completely foreign to the English only speaker. I wanted the English translation to still retain its original Spanish linguistic essence because I felt like the texts identity was firmly rooted in the Spanish language and culture. In order to understand the advantages and disadvantages of domestication and foreignization I resorted to Wenfen Yang's "Brief Study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation". Yang observes that domesticating a translation makes it

easier for the readers of that target language to understand and accept. But translating in this way can only be achieved at the expense of altering the original style of the original text. Yang believes that foreignizing a translation does preserve the original text by keeping its formal features intact, but unfortunately its alien cultural images and linguistic features may cause the reader to feel overloaded with information (Yang 79). I believe in my translation I was able to preserve the source texts formal features in the dialogues. Yang observes that "both domestication and foreignization entail losses, as losses are inevitable in the translation process" and that "it's hard to say which strategy is better" (Yang 79). Due to the amount of time I spent translating in the three translation courses that I took at Northern Illinois University, I felt like I had been more trained to foreignize a text, which is what I sought to do in this translation.

Once I started translating this novel I recalled what Mona Baker said in her coursebook on translation: "Translators cannot resort to a mixture of intuition and experience to think through and justify the decisions they have to make but must constantly look to developments in neighboring disciplines to appreciate the varied, complex dimensions of their work" (Baker 4). She believes that having an understanding of modern linguistic theory can provide a basis for training translators so that they can be informed and guided while making important translating decisions throughout the course of their work. There were an incalculable number of times during the translation process when I found myself not knowing what to do when I couldn't find a word in the target

language that expressed the same meaning as the word in the source language. Baker reminds translators that our job is "primarily concerned with communicating the overall meaning of a stretch of language" (Baker 9). But Baker warns the reader that before we can communicate the entire meaning of sentences and phrases "we need to start by decoding the units and structures which carry that meaning" (Baker 9). That's why I began to look for ways in which I could extrapolate meaning beyond the word level, and that's when I learned about morphemes.

Baker suggests that we can "isolate elements of meaning in words and deal with them more effectively" (Baker 10) only if we understand the distinction between a morpheme and a word. In order to translate effectively Baker believes that it is important to keep the distinction between words and morphemes separate, "particularly in dealing with neologisms in the source language" (Baker 11). This insight was helpful when I translated "pajonales" into English, because at first I wasn't sure what the meaning of the word was, but I isolated the smallest units of meaning and I knew that "pajon" meant "curly" and "lank". It was from here that I had a starting point to understand the entire word itself. Another example is when I didn't initially understand the meaning of *ramal* in the phrase "... antes de darme la noticia de que habían levantado el ramal de Colonia Vela..." (Soriano 29), but I knew that the word had a smaller meaning, *ram-*, so I figured it had to deal with a branch of some sort. The word "oxigenado" in the phrase "estaba teñida de un rubio oxigenado" is composed of morphemes ("oxi", "gen", "ad", "o").

These smaller units of meaning can give important clues to the translator so he can break apart meaning from words which aren't familiar at first sight.

One of the main problems that I had while translating this text was in discovering the evoked meaning of the words and phrases in the Spanish variety that Soriano employs in this novel. Mathieu observes: "A medida que sus novelas tenían mayor éxito en todo el mundo, Osvaldo Soriano empleó cada vez más un lenguaje desprovisto de registros voseantes. Por lo que se refiere a los argentinismos, Soriano emplea gran número de ellos, ya que éstos le sirven para localizar geográficamente la acción de su novela. Soriano defendió siempre a pesar de todo, que él no escribía en español, sino en argentino, y lamentaba no tener la capacidad de Julio Cortázar para pergeñar un personaje mediante su lenguaje" (Mathieu 20). The language used in the novel's narration is different from the language used between Lem and the narrator, and that language is different from the language that Nadia uses with her clients, which is different from the language that the protagonist uses when he talks to Coluccini. Every single interaction in the novel varied in register; the evoked meaning of these phrases were cumbersome to translate.

Baker writes that evoked meaning "arises from dialect and register variation" and that a dialect "is a variety of language which has currency within a specific community or group of speakers and is classified as geographical, temporal, or social" (Baker 13). The novel that I translated takes place in late 1980s Argentina, so it is a very specific dialect

of Spanish. As such, this required me to look even beyond the meanings of words that I thought that I already knew in order to translate them accordingly. I knew that "señalar" meant "to point", but I didn't know that it could mean "to mark", "to fix", "to settle", "to set", "to signpost", or "to brand". This is just one word which presents six different possibilities to choose from when translating. The reader can only imagine the difficulties that I had when attempting to translate regional words such as "morocho", "pibe", "rebenque", "chimango", "cebar", "linyera", "bordó", "nafta", "escarbadientes", "chumbar", "renguar", "cédula", y "chanchó". Baker acknowledges the difficulty in translating specific words and phrases from one language to another. She believes that in order to find a suitable equivalent one must look to linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. She makes it clear that "the choice of a suitable equivalent will always depend not only on the linguistic system or systems being handled by the translator, but also on the way both the writer of the source text and the producer of the target text, that is the translator, choose to manipulate the linguistic systems in question" (Baker 15). I felt like I manipulated the linguistic system as little as possible so as to preserve the Spanish essence of the text. To accomplish this, I did three things. The first was that I hardly used contractions in English. I felt like doing this made the translation appear somewhat foreign, but it isn't distracting, or unreadable. Second, I tried to use the original syntax as much as possible. There were some phrases that I had to reword or else they would have sounded too clumsy in English, but I always sought to foreignize the translation and I did

that by keeping the original syntax. The third way in which I manipulated the linguistic system as little as possible was to be consistent in the way in which I translated verbs. Soriano writes with the imperfect and preterit very frequently so it is essential that there is coherence with all of these translations.

Another example in which translating the dialectal variation of Argentinian Spanish presented a challenge was when I discovered that the meaning of the word "frigorífico" varies depending on geographical location. When I first attempted to translate this word I thought the word "refrigerator" would suffice, but in this particular context: "Fuimos caminando juntos, el pibe silbando y yo tratando de andar derecho. Le pregunté dónde vivía y me respondió que más allá, cerca del frigorífico. Luego me contó que..." (Soriano 30) the word "refrigerator" does not make sense. I felt like a "cold storage plant" was the better solution. In order to arrive to this conclusion I recalled what Baker wrote about semantic fields. She states that "semantic fields are arranged hierarchically" (Baker 17) and this is important to consider when translating from the more general to the more specific. The general word is referred to as superordinate and the specific word as hyponym. In the case of my particular example, the more general word, or the superordinate, would be "refrigerator" and the more specific word, or the hyponym, would be "cold storage plant". As a way to understand this concept more clearly, Baker writes that "it stands to reason that any propositional meaning carried by a superordinate or general word is, by necessity, part of the meaning of each of its



hyponyms, but not vice versa" (Baker 17). Therefore, if something is a "cold storage plant" then it must be a "refrigerator", but not vice versa. Baker believes that translators can sometimes manipulate this feature of semantic fields "when we are faced with semantic gaps in the target language" (Baker 17). In the case of the word "frigorífico" I felt the best choice was "cold storage plant" because it is a hyponym which appears to be the best equivalent given the particular context.

According to Collins Spanish dictionary the word "pucha" when used as a noun can mean "bouquet", or "ring-shaped loaf". But in the novel the protagonist is telling a young boy what had happened to his leg and he shows the boy the dog's bite mark on his leg. The boy is shocked and then says "A la pucha, la pierna se le está poniendo azul" (Soriano 31). I could tell based from the context that the word "pucha" wasn't being used as a noun but rather as an interjection. Due to this research I was able to provide the appropriate context-fitting translation.

Although the Spanish word "patente" could be translated into English as simply "patent", this translation would not make sense in the context in which it is used in the novel. "La patente del coche era amarilla y antes del número tenía las letras RJ" (Soriano 39). I referenced Collins Spanish dictionary wherein this word was found to have a Cono Sur regional meaning of "license plate".

The word "pensión" was extremely challenging for me to correctly translate. Based on the synonyms that Collins Spanish dictionary offered I could've translated it as

"hostel", "boarding house", "guesthouse", "private hotel", or "flophouse". I chose not to use any of these words because I felt like they have a negative connotation when there isn't one implied in the novel. I chose a more neutral word "inn" which fit the tone of the narration in English more colloquially and semantically.

### Conclusions

I came to Northern Illinois University to become educated and I have become educated. While a chunk of my education did take place inside of the classroom, the large majority of my education happened outside of the classroom. Before I was formally accepted as a graduate student I knew that I would finish this degree, even though I knew the road would be arduous at times. Despite this early cognizance of the challenges that I would inevitably encounter, I knew that I would finish because of my unshakeable willpower and belief in myself. This final academic exercise is a testament to my willpower because I have completed what I set out to do. All of the classes that I have taken at Northern Illinois University prepared me for this final academic exercise because they have given me a sturdy Spanish linguistic and cultural foundation with which to translate. This foundation was built through endless readings and incalculable class discussions. I am so proud of myself for having the courage to attack this translation exercise in the same way a man would chop down a large tree with a small axe. At first it

seems impossible that a tree could fall from a small axe, but after time, and with enough chipping, the tree will fall. I made the tree fall down on this exercise by exerting every ounce of my intellectual ability and by never forgetting why I first started this degree. I started this degree so I could finish it. I enrolled into this program to become educated. I have completed my goal.

This particular exercise taught me a number of things. I learned how to be patient. When looking for target-language equivalents it is very easy to lose your patience because there are so many words to choose from. But by being patient I was able to stay the course and smooth out my translation so that it would be both readable and of high academic quality. I learned how to be even more analytical than what I was before I started. I learned how to quickly and efficiently seek out the most pertinent of information. I learned how to tirelessly revise my thoughts so they would be as clear as possible for the reader. In short, I learned how to become an academic. This exercise has already benefited me professionally because I can take everything I have learned and continue implementing it with my own students. I have worked as a private Spanish tutor and translator since I began this degree and I now feel even more confident in my language abilities while helping the individuals I work for. Mona Baker jokes that a translator doesn't become good until he is in his forties. I now understand what she means because a translator has to use every resource possible when translating, including his own life experiences. This exercise has unquestionably prepared me for any job that

deals with the Spanish language, and it has also laid down a solid foundation for me to walk on if I decide to pursue my PhD.

Lastly, I now have an appreciation for Argentina in a way that I never had before I started this translation. I feel like Soriano is a distant friend. I know him based on the way that he writes, which as the reader should have seen, can be at times very autobiographical. But my interest in Argentina was initially piqued after I researched the life and works of Luisa Valenzuela. In her writings, she wants to empower women to become independent but she doesn't do so at the cost of losing respect from her male readers. She is a strong woman and this quality attracted me to her. I now appreciate Argentinian Spanish more as a result of having read the works of both Soriano and Valenzuela. But it is Soriano who has impacted me the most. His ability to play with language, to make it literally come alive in his witty dialogues, entertains and challenges the reader. That's why in the beginning of this introduction I write that I fell in love with the way this text was written. In short, this final academic exercise was worth every single second that I invested into it because I can now read, understand, and translate Spanish very proficiently.

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## A SHADOW YOU WILL SOON BE

### Chapter 1

It had never happened to me to walk without a peso in the pocket. I couldn't buy anything and I had nothing left to sell. As I was going in the train I liked watching it get dark in the plains but now it was indifferent to me and it was so hot that I was anxiously waiting for the night to arrive to lie down to sleep underneath a bridge. Before it got dark out, I looked at the map because I had no idea where I was. I made an absurd tour, going around and going back and now I found myself in the same place as in the beginning or in another identical one. A truck driver who had taken me until the roundabout told me that I would find a Shell three or four kilometers away from there but the only thing that I saw was a stream winding below a bridge and a path of dirt which lost itself in the horizon. Two peasants riding a horse followed by a filthy dog were goading animals on and that was all that was moving in the countryside.

The stream was dry and it was enough to light a few branches so that the bugs and the snakes would leave immediately. At least that was what the engineer told me, with whom I made the first stretch on foot after the train abandoned us in middle of the field. The other passengers had stayed hoping they would come to look for them, but when on

the second night the guard and the engineer gathered the food and left by the road, I caught up to them running and that's how I began the walk.

Now I didn't know where I was headed but at least I wanted to understand my way of travelling. I lit up and I returned to the route to smoke the first cigarette of the day. It was already the dead of night and I kept listening for a while to the crickets and looking at the stars. Suddenly I remembered that German astronomer who came to see me indignant about the latest theories of Stephen Hawking and he proposed to me that I develop a program for him in order to calculate the gravitational wave of a shooting star. He wanted to present it at a conference in Frankfurt but when he brought me the first equations they had already kicked me out of the institute.

I had been sitting at the edge of the path for a while when a Sierra passed by honking its horn and it almost crashes into the roundabout ahead. It was the last car that I saw and at ten o'clock I went to look for some apples that the truck driver left me because my hands were shaking from hunger. In my handbag I was carrying some breadsticks that I had taken from the dining room of the train, but I told myself that it would be better to leave them for the next morning. I wanted to leave early, get something to eat and find someone who could drop me off at a train station where they would return the price of the ticket to me. With that I could buy myself some clothes because I was already looking like a bum. I let the fire die out by itself, I set the bag like a pillow and I smoked another cigarette before falling asleep.



I woke up at dawn and I went to see if I could find someone who could give me a hand. Far away I saw the peasants who were stuck to the horses as if they were just one piece. I needed a warm meal, a cup of coffee or something resembling what people drink when they wake up. Upon seeing that I was crossing over the fence, one of the laborers screamed and he came at me quickly with his whip at his shoulder. At a distance he gave me a good morning without regard and he asked me what I was doing looking around over there. He was listening to me while looking back as if my story didn't interest him.

"Are you the one who lit the fire?" he asked me and pointed to the bridge with the handle of the whip.

I told him yes, that I had slept there, and when he interrupted me in middle of the explanation I realized that I must have been looking pretty bad for a peasant to raise his voice at me.

"That is prohibited here," he retorted back at me as if he were the owner of the field.

We kept staring at each other for a while until the other one, who must have been the foreman, approached to see what was happening.

"I was coming to ask for a sip of water, that's it." I said and that disconcerted them. The other one took advantage of the situation to put himself in the role of the good gaucho and he reached me a jar of gin, which he was carrying on his saddle.

"If you want we will brew some *maté* before you leave," he told me and he pointed to a kettle which was boiling over the embers.

I was going to tell him no out of pure pride but I had my innards so dry that they were beginning to give me cramps. I took a shot, I gave him the thanks and I returned him the jar. The other one was annoyed because of the fire or because of my looks and he went away yelling at the dog.

As soon as they left me alone I brewed myself a couple of well-loaded bitter *matés*. The packet was half full and I took advantage of the opportunity to save myself a handful of herbs for later. After a while I was already feeling better. I filled a bottle with water, I put it away in the handbag and I waved at the peasants from far away. My stomach was putting itself in gear and that made me think that maybe that day things would go better for me.

I went out to the road and I did a stretch walking slowly, trying to orient myself, until I ran into a completely tattered sign that said "Shell, 3 Kms". I told myself that maybe there I would find some traveller who would take me until the next roundabout.

## Chapter 2

Seen from a distance the service station seemed to have been prosperous once, but now it had nothing more than a diesel pump for tractors and another one of premium

gasoline in case someone passed by in a bind. The oil that the advertising was announcing hadn't been produced for years. The tire repair shop and the dining room were closed and were beginning to fall into pieces. The employee was still sleeping with the curtains closed and he was only going to wake up if he heard the noise of an engine.

In the yard I found a pump that was trickling water. I undressed and I tried to wash myself with a windshield wiper detergent that I found next to the pump. At first it made my skin burn but if I rinsed myself quickly I could give myself the first complete bath since I began walking around the roads. I gave myself a good soaking sitting in the trough, trying not to make noise, until I saw a cat that was looking at me from the garage door. It was black and skinny like in the cartoons and it was showing me a mouse that it was twirling around the air. I acted like I wasn't paying attention to it, and I took advantage of the opportunity to shave very carefully, using the foam that had remained in the trough. Without a mirror it wasn't easy and I cut myself next to my mole. My neck was burning and surely I was going to get a great rash but I wanted to be clean in order not to scare people anymore.

I washed my underwear and I hung it from the wire fence. The cat came to eat breakfast next to me, and since the bath had made me hungry I took out a few breadsticks and I chewed them slowly to make them last. We were eating a long while, each one concentrating on his own affairs. Not even a fly was flying around but I imagined that at some moment someone would have to pass by going to the south. When he finished, the

cat threw himself in the sun and closed his eyes. It still wasn't eight o' clock and the sky was clear as on the best mornings of summer. I thought that it would be Sunday and that's why the guy from the Shell hadn't gotten up yet. The possibilities that some traveller would pass by were few but I didn't want to get bitter: I had given myself a good bath and I even had a little bit of yerba to make myself boiled *maté*.

I started over again so many times that for moments I felt the temptation to give up. Why if one time I managed to escape from the well I fell back like an idiot? "Because it's your well," I answered myself, "because you dug it with your own hands." A chimango came and positioned itself on the wire, close to my shirt, and the cat opened an eye. At the same time I heard the noise of an auto that was approaching down the road. I jumped up to go look for the shirt and the bird flew out close to my head. I hardly had time to put my shoes on and to grab the bag when a Renault Gordini entered the clear space full of suitcases on top of the roof and a tall fender like that of a truck. The body was full of patches and it had new tires as if it had been resurrected that morning. It jumped onto the bank, it made a zigzag and entered, triumphant, to the pump platform.

"Finito!" the one who was driving screamed, "l'avventura è finita!"

He could barely undo himself from the seat. He weighed some 120 kilograms and I calculated him to be fifty-five badly lived years old; he had dirty glasses, a sweaty shirt and some well polished black shoes.

"Fammi il pieno, giovanoto," he told me, and in order to impress me he took out a roll of big bills.

The car had been green but now it was unclear. The engine shifted with a noise of broken connecting rods; every now and then some garbage entered in the carburetor and the body would give a shock, but the fatso seemed to have a blind confidence in it and he didn't even pay attention to it.

I told him that I wasn't from there and that I was waiting for someone to take me south. In that moment the office door opened and a blonde man appeared, without hope, sheathed in the reddish overalls of the Shell.

"Il pieno," repeated the fatso with the bills rolled between his fingers, without responding to the good morning of the other one.

"And what are you going to do in the south if one may know?" he asked me, while he was resting a leg on the bumper and the Gordini was leaning almost towards to the ground.

"I'm going to Neuquén," I told him, even though I wasn't very sure.

"Oil!" he exclaimed and he raised his hands as if he had answered a riddle. I sat back down with the bag in my hand. The guy from the service station was sleeping standing up while the numbers from the pump were climbing and the fatso was scratching his head with the bills.

"And you're going just like that, hitchhiking?" he insisted with a smile. If he said everything in Spanish his foreign accent was favored. I raised my shoulders and told him that I had been left without work.

"Here one cannot be," warned the blond guy from the pump who had suddenly woken up.

Then the fatso jumped, outraged, as if the quarrel was with him.

"Come non può stare qui? Questo é un luogo pubblico!" he pointed to the banner of the Shell, as if he were one of the principal shareholders. "E l'immagine dell'imprisa, allora?"

"Give me the exact amount because I don't have change," the blond guy, who didn't seem very impressed by the sermon, interrupted him. Afterwards he looked at me like a villain and he pointed to something on my back.

"Is that yours?"

He had seen the underwear. The fatso took off his glasses and suddenly his appearance became less respectable. The employee left the tank cap on the hood and went towards the wire fence. I thought that he wasn't going to accept explanations and I became comfortable with the idea that I was condemned to walk through the field until the end of my days. Suddenly the fatso indicated the cap to me and he signaled to me with his head. Since I didn't have anything to lose I lifted the bag, grabbed the cap and threw myself in the dilapidated seat. The fatso took a longer time to arrive but he took

off just like if he drove an eight-cylinder turbo. He entered the road with a rather elegant maneuver, hit third gear and gave a kiss to the charm that he was wearing around his neck.

"Signore ti ringrazio," he muttered. On the dashboard he had a sticker of Gardel and a little stamp of the Virgin of Luján.

"He's going to call the police," I told him.

"There isn't a telephone. One should never go to places that have a telephone. That rag was yours?"

"I had just washed it."

He laughed for the first time. Then he changed his eyeglasses for sunglasses and he offered me a cigarette. I laid down in the back, lowered the window to let out the first puffs and I let myself be. Outside the air seemed crystalline water.

"Seriously are you going to the south?" he asked me.

"To Neuquén."

"Oh, ok! Oil you told me."

"No, no. Computing."

He tried to put it in fourth gear but the motor wasn't working well and he went back to third. He was moving his head from one side to the other, vexed, while his shirt was getting wet on his belly.

"Finito," he insisted with the cigarette on his lips. "L'avventura é finita."

"Italian?" I asked.

"My last name is Coluccini. If you talk to them in another language they quickly let their guard down."

"Does it always go well for you?"

"Almost always. You must show the bills, of course."

He showed me the wad: the first was big but underneath there was a stack of paper clippings.

"Ingenious," I told him.

"And then God does help me a little. I came to Argentina in '57, as a boy, and I began with a circus in Paraná. After a while I bought another in Bahía Blanca until I was left with the whole south. How's it going? Look at me now."

I looked at him. He didn't seem like a winner.

"What happened?"

"What happened! This turned into a great circus and mine was too much. Finito! Until Bolivia I won't stop!"

I remained a while in silence, trying to find out if he wasn't pulling my leg.

"A circus with animals and everything?"

"What! I had the only lion in the entire country for sure. It was the last thing I sold in Chile."

"I see. And now you are planning to go to Bolivia with that?"



"And what do you want? In another era I had a Buick and a 505 also, but bad times caught me. Forgive me for not staying out of it but you were also ruined, right?"

"Completely. Why don't you go back to Italy?"

"For the moment that matter is postponed. Now the thing is in Bolivia. Afterwards Río or Miami. God will tell."

He kissed the necklace again and he kept his sight stuck on the middle of the road.

"Are you going to put together another circus?"

"No, I am too old for that. I was an acrobat and a magician but now I need glasses and I don't walk well because of my spine."

He was starting to bug me and I wasn't going to let him impress me. Besides I realized that I was going again in the wrong way.

"Leave me at the first crossing," I told him.

"However you like, but I am going to take a local road. One must not tempt the devil. Maybe the guy notifies the police and you forgot your underwear over there."

### Chapter 3

We drove more than two hours down a dirt road and afterwards we reached a blacktop that looked like a line drawn to infinity. A yellow Bedford, that had lost two wheels, was sloped on the curb, waiting for someone to get it out of trouble. Coluccini turned right and entered onto the road abruptly. No sooner we approached the truck, the driver began to move his arms and the fatso went to pause under the shadow that the backload was projecting.

"I've been here for fifteen hours," said the truck driver who was smaller than a jockey. "Are you going towards Colonia Vela?"

Coluccini had the habit of moving his head sideways or maybe it was his way of shaking off the perspiration.

"Bolivia without stops," he said and suddenly as if he had forgotten something, he added: "l'avventura é finita."

"La Paz or Santa Cruz?" asked the driver, who looked like an expert.

"Whatever is closer," said Coluccini. "Were you going over there?"

"Desire I don't lack. The problem is the family."

There I realized that I was going to stay out of the conversation. I tried to look for a reference point on the road, but everything was the same: fences, cows, the occasional tree, a dim cloud that was drifting away.

"Where is Colonia Vela?" I asked the truck driver who was complaining of having two children in school or something like that. He pointed to the horizon for me with a finger and afterwards he told the fatso that he had a friend in Bolivia who was doing very well. That reenergized the conversation and I stepped down to stretch my legs and to put the cap on the gas tank. The Bedford axle had left a large mark on the blacktop. It was one of the first national models, from '58 or '59, and it might not go much further. The rear axles that had been blown from the car were among some scrublands, smooth like tiles. I turned around to see the load, climbed over the railing and without tugging much I pulled out a couple of watermelons. Upon returning I saw that Coluccini was hitting the steering wheel and he was trying to convince the driver to sell everything and to accompany him to Bolivia.

"The load isn't mine," said the truck driver. "It's coming from San Pedro, from a certain Rodríguez."

"And how much is it worth?" asked Coluccini.

"Ten million easy," said the other one.

"And we can get five more from the truck," added the fatso.

"At least, but we're going to jail for sure," said the driver laughing. "Alert in Colonia Vela so they may send me help."

"I can take you, if you want. When Rodríguez finds out we'll already be two thousand kilometers from here."

"And the family?"

"You'll take them afterwards, man. Do you know what is lacking in Bolivia? Argentinians are lacking. They pay them a fortune over there."

All of sudden there was silence. The fatso had taken off his black glasses and the other guy was looking at him with his mouth open, planted under the sunshine.

"Do you think so?" he said finally. "And you, what do you do for a living?"

"Here with my friend Zárate we are in computing," he explained and pointed at me with a gesture.

I was going to intervene but if I did it would condemn me to continue on foot. Coluccini wasn't getting out of the car and the other one was concentrated on his family and on the gold in Bolivia.

"I don't know, I have to think about it," he muttered.

"It's okay," said the fatso, disappointed, and he tore off without acknowledging to where the other had signaled. As soon as he put it in third gear, he got a knife for me and asked me to cut him a slice of watermelon.

We opened the windows and went slowly, spitting seeds in silence, until I asked him who Zárate was.

"Ah, Zárate!" he responded as if I had touched an old wound. "A partner that I had and who is now in Australia." He pointed his thumb backward and added: "That unhappy man is going to die around here."

"Who was he going to sell the merchandise to?"

"To another trucker. Those who pass by empty carry money and do business with the unfortunates who remain on the road. This country is rotten. Finito. Hey, I've wanted to ask you for a while: what is of that computing?"

"Programs so computers do what one wants."

"And you plan on saving yourself with that?" he asked, surprised.

"I don't think so. In Europe I had a good situation but it was time for me to come back. And as you say, it's a little late already."

"No, don't give in!" he screamed, and he seemed sincere. "Look at me. I am an old truck driver, Zárate. On the road when all seems lost, there is always one last maneuver. A jerk of the steering wheel, a downshift, something, but never the brake. You touch the brake and you're lost."

"My name isn't Zárate."

"Excuse me. I haven't had news for a while... we were together in the good and in the bad. But more in the bad, bah. One day Zárate introduces himself to me and he tells me "to hell with your circus, I'm going to Australia." And he took everyone: my woman, the boys, the clown... Everyone was saved."

"Why didn't they take you?"

Right there a little shadow fell over his face. A grayness that was coming from the poplars which lined the road. He put his glasses on and remained in silence until we

reached the Colonia Vela crossing.

"Good luck," I told him. "Don't get into trouble."

"Don't worry."

I put the watermelon in the bag, shook hands and walked towards a bus stop where there was a woman with two kids.

"Hey!" he yelled at me through the window. "If one day you go to Bolivia look for me through American Express."

"Okay," I told him and I watched him leave. The noise from the Gordini kept buzzing a good while in my ears.

The bus that was coming from Rauch took a quarter of an hour to arrive. I thought I wouldn't lose anything by speaking to the driver and I combed my hair the best I could. I walked up behind the woman and the kids and when the guy asked me where I was going to I told him to the station but that I didn't have anything to pay him with. He looked at me through the mirror and told me to go to the back, to the side of the aisle.

"If the inspector comes up I will signal to you and you get off," he informally addressed me [me tuteó]. He was a dark-skinned man a little more than twenty years of age who was wearing a handkerchief around his neck. I thanked him and I went to sit down. Almost all the passengers were laborers of the ranches and there was just one guy dressed in a suit who greeted me eager to start a conversation.

The first big business that we passed by was a tractor dealership. Beyond that a workshop appeared where they were preparing a race car and then a supermarket with two gatekeepers and a large barricade at the door. The lower houses, without a garden, had lost the charm of another time. It must have been the time of the power outage, because the only stoplight from the main street was without light. The bus stopped two times in order to drop off passengers and when it arrived to the town square the driver signaled for me to get off. In front there was a closed movie theatre and on the corner there was Banco Provincia and an insurance company. To my right I saw the church and on the other side of the town square a hotel and a bar that was open.

I was hungry and felt like washing my face. I took advantage of the fact that in the town square there were benches under the trees and I went to sit down to cut the watermelon. If I had taken the precaution of collecting an empty can I would have made myself a cold *maté* with the herbs that I was carrying in my pocket. I also needed a spoon and a bit of newspaper to start the fire. I glanced in the dumpster but I didn't see anything that would be useful for me. Facing the statue of San Martín was a monolith and beyond that a fountain. I made sure the keeper wasn't close and I went to wet my face. It bothered me to be without underwear because I had the feeling of being naked. The brown suit held the grime from the street well but the shoes were white because of the dust and I had lost a button from the shirt.

I went under the saber of the Libertador [Liberator] and looked for a sharp edge to cut the watermelon. I approached a monolith that had a good cement tip but then I read a name and below an inscription that said "Fallen in the war for our Islas Malvinas [Falkland Islands]". Since I didn't find anything else I opened it with the belt buckle and I lay down on the grass to eat. I asked myself if Coluccini would get to the Bolivian paradise or if he would end up in the dungeon of a shit hole. I wasn't sure if he was Italian nor if he had been an owner of some circus, but I regretted that he wasn't headed in the same direction as me. Upon looking up I saw a priest who was crossing the town square towards the church. He was bareheaded but seemed indifferent to the sun. He crossed the street and took out a huge key with which he opened the largest door. After a while a hearse appeared and another four cars in the rear which a few guys in suits and two women with their hair covered came out of. The men took out the coffin and placed it in the church. Then I heard the music of an organ and later, when I had already finished eating, they left with the deceased towards the cemetery. The procession moved away and everything quieted down again, as if there were a curfew. I dozed for a while and then, upon seeing that no one was passing down the street, I cleaned my shoes on the grass and I went to the bar to ask where the station was.



## Chapter 4

The boss was a Galician who spoke as if he had just landed. He liked to chat, like all the men who are on the other side of the counter and he immediately became interested in my case. He wanted to see the train ticket and complained about how bad everything was going before giving me the news that they had dismantled the Colonia Vela branch and the station had been closed for more than one year.

In banking days that had to be the meeting place for ranchers and traders because no women or young people were seen. Somewhere, behind the refrigerator, an electricity generator was running that was making the sound of a motorcycle. In the back there were tables where the clients were playing mus and Truc card game and there were two billiard tables that remained from better times. The Galician asked me what I was going to drink and I told him the truth that I was walking around without a single peso.

"The thing is that in this country nobody wants to work," he said and turned away to prepare two espresso coffees that the waiter had asked him for.

I had already heard that before. I inhaled the smell of the coffee that was coming from the steam of the machine and since the boss did not see me I saved a few sugar cubes that were on the counter for myself.

"I'm not saying it because of you," added the Galician, certain that I was still there waiting for his mercy, "the thing is that it is now fashionable to be poor. Go visit the

chapel; people don't go anymore to pray, they go to eat free. Young boys only know how to beg and the police are left without anything to do. You don't know how the supermarket turned out, here. They didn't even leave the toothpicks."

"Do you think I will be able to get a job?"

"Look," he turned around with a mug in each hand, "he who does not work it is because he does not want to."

"And where do you think that I should look?"

"I don't know, if you walk the land a little bit... Do you have family around here?"

I told him that I had a daughter in Spain but he didn't bat an eyelid.

"It is fashionable to leave," he said, and he served a Cinzano with a slice of lemon to a mustached man who approached the counter. He was one of those who had carried the dead and as they began to talk amongst themselves I realized that I had to leave.

"There is a trucker stuck on the road," I said before leaving. "Can you alert them to send him help?"

"Is he from here?" asked the mustached man.

"What does it matter? He is frying himself in the sun."

"They deal with the trucks in Castelnuovo," he said and showed me a mouthful of peanuts and French fries.

I asked where Castelnuovo was located and I crossed the plaza. I walked a couple of blocks in the shade until I found the avenue through which the bus had entered. Further ahead I passed by the club Unión and Progreso, which was barely a bowling alley with a soccer field. There they told me I had to continue straight until coming to a pharmacy and then turn left following the ditch. On a corner I found a thrown out can of beer but it was of no use to me because it was one of those that flip open and they don't leave enough room to put a spoon in. Just the same I did not have the spoon so I kicked it and I kept walking until I found the dirt road.

Castelnuovo had a small workshop and a piece of land where the trucks that were passing by had to stop. I slammed my hands and for a moment I imagined shouting "Hail Mary full of grace". I must have smiled but in reality I was in a bad mood. I took a look around the house until a good-for-nothing dog came to furiously bark at me and I had to step back to the sidewalk. Soon a forty something year-old woman appeared, who had just woken up, and she asked me what I wanted. The dog stood beside her, barking and wagging his tail. I shouted to her that someone needed the services of Castelnuovo on the road and she also answered with a scream that Castelnuovo was dead and that the truckers were ungrateful sons of bitches. I stood there without knowing what to answer; I opened my arms and looked at all sides to see if some neighbor was watching us. In order to rid myself of the subject I let her know that it was a Bedford loaded with watermelons, that it was a few kilometers down the road and then she wanted to know where I had left

my truck. I told her I didn't have one but since I was tired of talking from afar I told her to have a good afternoon. As soon as I returned I heard a scream and the whole mess. I tried to step aside, but the dog still managed to sink his teeth behind my ankle and continued the wild run, furiously, barking at the trees, while the woman screamed at him "keep still Moro", without leaving the front door. In the moment what most disturbed me was the ripped trouser. Now I really looked like any bum and I could not introduce myself anywhere. I felt ridiculous, and instead of bending down to see the wound I wondered what I was doing standing there, stuck in the lives of truckers, bitten by a worthless dog in an unfamiliar town while my daughter wrote me letters to a post office upon which I may never arrive. I retraced the street hobbling between vacant lands, in the shadow of the poplars which lined the ditch. The dog was running like crazy, kicking up dust, and passed by my side again before entering the house. Castelnuovo's widow must have hit him with something hard because the animal yelped and then silence returned. I sat on the edge of the sidewalk and I took out the handkerchief to wipe the injury. It was not much: he had glancingly caught me with one canine, but it was hardly bleeding. A boy who was passing by with a ball stopped to look at me. I smiled at him, but I realized that I had by then blushed.

"Are you tired, sir?" he asked and he made the ball bounce against the ground.

I answered that I was but since I didn't want to scare him I stood up immediately and I told him that it wasn't anything. The ball that the kid had was from a plastic that

resembled the strips from leather balls. As a kid I had a rubber ball that bounced better, even though all were equally irresistible. When he threw it against the wall and it came to my side I raised it up with the top of my shoe and returned it back to him without delay. Then I felt that my ankle was hurting me and I crossed the street in hops. The boy asked me if I had injured myself in the game and that made me laugh heartily.

We walked together, the kid whistling and me trying to walk straight. I asked him where he lived and he said further ahead, close to the cold storage plant. Then he told me that his name was Manuel and that he played as a forward in the kid's competitions at Unión and Progreso. He must have been eleven or twelve years old and he controlled the ball rather well; as we were walking he was making it dance on his head and he lowered it down his back as if he wore it tied to his body.

"Were you always a gimp?" he asked at last in a respectful tone.

I told him what had happened with the dog and he asked me to show him the injury.

"Jeez, your leg is turning blue," he said. "Do you live far?"

"I'm just passing through."

"Come to the club so they will put a bandage on you. It is just right here."

Little by little the street began to regain some life. It was nearly five o' clock in the afternoon and one could see peasants on bikes, pick-up trucks with laborers who were getting themselves ready for the dance and some cars always driven by men. On the

corner of the supermarket there was a policeman in the shade who had a cigarette butt between his lips and occasionally greeted someone familiar. Before passing in front of the guard the boy crossed onto the other sidewalk tugging at my jacket.

"Here they took my dad into custody," he said and added with some pride: "There is a photo of him on the shop window."

We continued in silence until we reached the club. It was a bare field, almost unmarked, with the fence broken and a few wooden locker rooms. Inside a few kids in athletic shoes were already kicking a ball about, led by a pot-bellied guy who was wearing a cap with the colors of San Lorenzo. The boy left me the ball and he ran looking for him. Everything seemed distant to me, as if it were happening to another one or as if I were seeing it in a movie. The coach came to see me and I let myself be without giving too many explanations. We went to the locker room and he made me lie on a table while the boys crowded together to see what was happening.

"If I were you I would allow someone to give me the shot," he said while he cleaned me with alcohol. Afterwards he put a tight bandage on me and convinced me to stay in order to rest until after the game.

Once they left me alone I made a pillow with the towel and fell asleep right away. I woke up after two hours, when the boys came to change themselves. The coach ordered them to take a shower and announced that those who were going to eat dinner in the chapel wait for him beside the pick-up truck. As soon as they left he asked me if I felt

better and without beating around the bush he wanted to know how long I had gone without eating.

"I don't know," I told him. "Enough."

"Come," he said, "the priest is going to give you a bowl of soup."

I climbed onto the pick-up truck with the boys, and since they were asking me so many questions about where I came from and where I was going to, I told them that in my time I had been goalie at Banfield. In the beginning they didn't believe me, but when the boy who had accompanied me told them that I moved the ball very well they became interested in the details and one of them asked me how many penalties I had stopped in my life.

## Chapter 5

The chapel was made from stripped bricks and it was still not finished. It was located on the other side of the station, near a neighborhood of adobe houses. It wasn't night yet but at the door there were a lot people getting in line. The coach parked the pick-up truck in a horse stable and the boys handed out to each other forks and spoons that they took out from a trunk.

"Take the silverware and then leave it to any one of the kids," he told me.

I thanked him and got in line. I wasn't even thinking about what I was doing. A few boys were getting tables ready on the patio, near a fireplace, and the priest who was in a shirt with sleeves helped to bring a basket with bread. I waited for half an hour leaning on my healthy leg until a huge dark-skinned guy, who was counting the dinner guests in dozens shouted that we could enter. I did like the others; I grabbed some bread, I served myself broth into a jug and some vegetables on the plate. The table that I had was moving a lot and a skinny guy, in a t-shirt, told me to secure it with a piece of rubble because he could not catch the few carrots that were dancing on the plate.

People were speaking little and they shot each other furtive glances. I ate slowly to not burn my tongue and I asked myself if they had gone to look for the trucker. Suddenly someone shouted that someone had stolen the bread from him and there was a commotion in which the priest also intervened. The patio was lit with gas lamps around which gnats and lightning bugs were flying. The t-shirt guy told me he was coming from Catamarca and asked me if I too was going down to Río Turbio. I told him that I was going to Neuquén and he was a little surprised but then made an ambiguous gesture, as if saying "that's your business" and he went to see if he could serve himself more.

Among the vegetables I found a piece of sausage and that made them laugh a little and caused envy to the others. I could not share it because there wasn't enough for more than a bite and I savored it alongside the last potato. Then we all got up to wash the dishes and go pray at the chapel. I didn't remember any prayer but the priest blessed us



and entrusted us to God without preaching. Upon leaving I returned the silverware to the kids and I went to take a look at the abandoned station.

It must have been a nice building once, with cast iron pillars and carved canopies. Now there was only the dirty floor where some hobos and people passing through slept. On the platform they had ripped out the benches and they didn't even leave the bell behind. On the wall I read graffiti in which they treated the priest as a communist. Between the rail tracks, tall and gawky plants grew that one day were going to cover everything. I sat on the floor, I opened the bag to see if the watermelon was still good and I ate the last piece. I had eaten something hot for the first time in a lot of days and I told myself that tomorrow I would find something else. Then I lit a cigarette but I realized that I was the only one who was smoking and I put it out to not arouse envy. The injury was bothering me a little but the bandage was holding up well. I still didn't know if I could walk a long distance, even though I needed to get away from there. It was a full-moon night and the rails were looking good. I went to the back of the platform, stepped down some steps and hopped over the sleepers. My leg was working, so I lit the cigarette again and I began to leave Colonia Vela. I thought about Castelnuovo's widow and her hatred for truckers and I began to suspect that the guy from the bar had made fun of me by sending me to see her. His trimmed mustache and the way in which he talked with his mouth full came to my mind but I thought about something else because I didn't want to burden myself with useless grudges.

At the first level crossing that I spotted there was a car stopped with the lights on and I rushed over to ask him to take me. While I was approaching I heard a conversation in which a mature man refused to say goodbye to a younger woman who had a commitment with another one. Because of the light of the cabin I managed to catch a glimpse of the man's gray hair and in order to not disturb them I remained hidden on the slope. She was begging him to not come back but he insisted on seeing her though not at mass anymore, but from afar. She accepted with a smile and a distant gesture. I heard her say that and I feared for him. I was going to leave but I needed company and I crouched behind the shrubbery. Each one of the things they were saying were taken from a soap opera but to me they sounded true because they were accompanied with gestures and unrepeatable pains. None of the words meant to hurt but said like that, for the last time, on the brink of a desolate road, weren't going to be easy to forget. After a moment of silence I lifted my head and saw the guy's face, broken by anxiety. A lock of silver hair was falling over his forehead and the sparkle in his eyes impressed me as if I also were in the car. She took an eternity to say "no" and a freshly lit cigarette flew through the window. The man kept begging her but the door swung open and some very high heels sank into the dust. I told myself that she was never again going to be able to put those shoes on: I saw her walk towards a small forest where another car was waiting concealed between the bushes. She was round but she walked with determination as she stored her handkerchief in her purse. I didn't want him to follow her and he didn't follow her; she

took out the car without turning on the lights, turned towards the side of the village and she went away. Maybe they did the same thing every night or maybe it was really the last goodbye. The guy remained stuck to the steering wheel, motionless, as hypnotized. I went down the road and picked up the cigarette that was on the ground, consumed halfway. I looked back at him. He had a smooth, bland face, one of those that are immediately forgotten. He let his head drop against the glass and he was like that for a while, pensive or sleepy. Finally I heard a noise and it seemed to me that he was serving himself a drink. I picked up the bag and I crossed to the other side of the road so he had time to see me arrive. At that moment I noticed that the car was a snazzy Jaguar and it had a flat tire. Suddenly I felt curious to know if the ugly luck of that guy could somehow change mine.

Upon seeing me he started the engine and turned on the high beams but I pointed out the wheel to him and I went to meet him, trying not to limp. In my pocket I was carrying the last cigarette that she had smoked beside him.

## Chapter 6

He listened to me with tired eyes and a grimace of disbelief but he seemed convinced that on that night anything could happen to him. He had a glass in his hand and the bottle on the seat where the woman had been. The car shifted more safely than

Coluccini's and with all the supplies that he carried in the back I could have survived one year. I stopped two meters from the window and offered to change the tire for him if he would take me out of there. Since he wasn't reacting I handed him my ID card but he didn't make a move to grab it. In that face you could have put a mustache, a beard or a pair of red glasses and he still would look to others as undefined. He took a big swig and then dried his lips with the handkerchief that was sticking out from his coat pocket.

"You're not from..." he asked me and looked around for some poster to remind him the name of the village.

"No. Just passing through."

He poured himself another whiskey and opened a bar of Swiss or Italian label chocolate.

"We are going to have to change the tire," I told him.

"Is it so necessary?"

He gave me the feeling that the things of this world bewildered him quite a lot.

"You must have caught a nail."

"And if we go to some place where they deal with that?"

"One cannot go on like that," I insisted, "you are going to destroy the cover."

That vexed him even further. The engine was still running but he didn't pay more attention to it than to the mooing of the cows. He finished the chocolate; he again passed the handkerchief over his lips and finally remembered me.

"I do not want to bother you," he said.

I waited a while for him to get out but he was lost in thought. Maybe he was with her or he reluctantly accepted looking at her from afar. I was beginning to get nervous and I told him to open the trunk or to let me do it. Just then the engine stopped and he handed me a leather key chain. Next to the spare tire I found a flashlight and the jack and I started to work seated on the floor. I was on the third nut when he managed to find out what I was doing. He brought two glasses and a bottle of Black Label.

"One drink will do us well," he said.

He poured me a good measure and then leaned against the car. The jack hesitated a moment but finally returned to its place.

"Do you work as a mechanic?" he asked me while he was looking around, as if he was expecting a ghost.

"No," I told him. "Anyone can do it."

"Anyone... I don't know where I heard the same thing," he said, even though he was thinking about something else. He wore a gray suit with discrete stripes that must've cost a fortune. I asked myself where he must've met the woman and if it was worth it having driven up there to see her. The license plate of the car was yellow and before the number it had the letters RJ.

"Did you eat dinner already?" he asked and he poured himself another glass.

"A little, yes." I held the wheel with my legs and I adjusted the nuts. He looked at me with a guilty face. He waited for me to finish and he invited me to sit next to him. He fixed his tie, handed me the bottle and straightened the rear view mirror a little bit.

"Where are we?" he became interested and glanced at a crumpled paper in which a woman's hand had drawn a path and the railroad crossing.

"This is called Colonia Vela," I informed him. "We are two thousand kilometers from Rio de Janeiro."

He looked at me startled, as if he had surprised me rummaging his papers.

"The thing is I like driving," he said and started the motor. "Once I was in Alaska and then I appeared in Kuala Lumpur. I don't remember ever having gotten on a ship."

"How did you return?"

"I don't remember. I have a blank here." He touched his forehead. "I am missing ten years."

We went into a dirt road without talking more. I lit a cigarette and with the flame of the match I saw that beside the handbrake he had a short barrel revolver. On the floor there was a bit of everything: aspirins, shaving cream, several bottles of beer, cartons of Winston and before the light faded out I saw an open velvet case and a bouquet of violets. On a card fastened with a red ribbon I managed to read "With all of Lem's love", or something like that.

"The road is the other way." I told him to annoy him a little.

"Do you think so?" he was startled and maneuvered to turn around. The Jaguar raised a cloud of dust and was headed through a narrow muddy road. It jumped quite a lot even though on the inside it was hardly noticeable. From what I saw on the switchboard I realized that soon it was going to need fuel.

"Are you going to the south?" I asked him.

"Further south? What for?"

"I don't know, I thought you'd go to Bariloche and you were lost around here."

"Bariloche isn't for me," he replied. He was looking at the road but before potholes he always reacted late.

"Sorry," I told him. "I didn't mean to be tactless."

"Don't worry. They told me that there was a casino around here and they made me excited to go to it."

"Around here?"

"I don't know, a place where they don't have those who always guess right listed."

"You won this like that?" I made a gesture that spanned the car and everything that it was carrying inside.

"No, no ... Roulette is unmanageable. You would have to bring a computer to beat it."

"It doesn't work either," I told him, "you would need data from an entire year to try it."

He opened the glove compartment to store the gun and handed me a very tattered red notebook. It was full of numbers, times and dates. On 17 and on 21 he had marked them with a circle in green ink.

"Theory of probability," I told him. "There are tons of books on the subject. The problem is in the variation of the rollers. If they change them from one table to another it's impossible."

He looked at me with interest. He was still saddened but now he had something else to think about.

"Suppose that they are marked. That one may know which one is from one table and which from another."

"If they rotate them frequently all the tables will correspond to all the rollers."

"Hey, you're an expert!" he was surprised. "What's wrong with you that you're so ragged?"

I told him the story about the train and some detail of what came afterwards but the only thing that interested him was finding out if I really was a computer engineer.

"I don't have a diploma on me but I know something. I worked a while in France and Italy."

"Okay. What do you say we go for dinner?"

"Where?"

"I don't know. Check out the map."



I turned on the light and looked for something that resembled a village. The car kept jumping and each time we got further away from the blacktop. After a while I saw a wooden sign tossed on the floor saying "Triunvirato, 5 kilometers" and I looked at the clock. It was near midnight.

"I don't think that they will serve us at this hour but we should have someone fix the tire, in the event that..."

"Listen, I cannot be so unlucky," he said and kept thinking for a moment. That must have made him change his mind and he stopped by the roadside. "Yes, you're right. Today all the bad numbers are coming to me."

## Chapter 7

Triunvirato had only one street and a town square identical to Colonia Vela's. There was one streetlight lit at the entrance and that was all. Across from the bank we saw an inn and Lem stopped to ask for a room. I suggested to him that we could sleep in the car but he answered that he was too old for that and he went to knock on the door. Soon a guy came out putting on his pants, quite agitated and he told us that he had just one room available. I took the opportunity to ask him where there was a tire shop and he pointed to a garage with a gable roof, on the other side of the town square.

"Take it," Lem asked me, "I have to make a call."

I started the Jaguar and I went around the town square. I stopped in front of the workshop and I honked the horn a few times, until a shirtless boy came out, who was playing cards with some friends. I asked him to fix the tire, and to keep the car until the morning. He took a while to bounce back from the surprise, he told me that he had never seen a car like that and he passed his hand over it as if he caressed his girlfriend. I waited for him to open the back door and I parked it myself in front of the tool shelf. I took out the gun from the glove box, put it in my bag and turned on the light to take a look at the rest. The car documents were from the state of New Jersey and were in the name of Lemmond Stanislas Cohen. On the back seat there were many unworn suits, beer cans, instant coffee, several Simenon novels in French and everything necessary to cross the desert. I picked up the notebook, a few packs of cigarettes, a chocolate bar and I also put them in the bag. Afterwards I took the flat tire from the trunk, locked the doors and stored the keys with me. I greeted the four boys who had come to admire the Jaguar and I went back to the street. The entire police station was there in an old Falcon but they didn't ask me questions. They were waiting for me to leave and they weren't going to like at all finding the car locked.

I crossed the town square slowly, looking at the gray houses that probably had long courtyards with a country house. In the distance I saw a drunkard on horseback pass breaking bottles against the walls. The noise gave me a stupid fear, almost childlike, and I hid behind a tree. The peasant was screaming "communism is over, damn't!" and he was

laughing as he was riding down the only road towards the field. The police did not move from the workshop where the light remained on. When the silence returned I crossed the street and I went into the hallway of the inn.

Lem had settled himself in one of the rooms that led to a square tiled patio. In the dark I dragged the flowerpot with me and before entering I knocked on the door and asked for permission. I depended on that strange man who I didn't know, who had come out of nowhere. Upon entering I found him walking around with a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was in his underwear but had forgotten to take off his jacket and that gave him a ridiculous and a little lonesome appearance.

"There isn't a phone in this pigsty," he announced with a gesture of annoyance and looked at the peeled ceiling, stained by the smoke of twenty or thirty years of tobacco. The plaster from the walls was uneven and between the bricks some miniature weeds were sticking out. Under the door a long line of ants was passing, that were carrying traces of leaves and a fallen petal from the patio flowerpots. The window was open but just the same one could smell the rancid smell from the mattresses.

"At least it has a roof," I told him.

"What do you say we go for dinner? I'm sick of eating junk."

"Dinner? Where do you think we are, in Copacabana?"

"There has to be a restaurant. A place where you can order a burger."

"Neither restaurant nor casino. Forget it."

He got sad as if it were I who would disappoint him. He must not have been more than fifty years old but his hair had dried like those bushes that wilt at the side of the road. He was wearing wool socks and shoes that matched the car.

"Will there be ice?"

"Did you not ask the owner?"

"The man was sleepy and I didn't want to bother him."

I sat on one of the beds and the noise from the springs sounded like music to me. I took off my jacket but since I didn't have underwear I had to keep my pants on. The sheets were sky blue and they were almost clean.

"I brought some chocolate from the car," I told him and I pointed to the bag.

He made a tired face, passed his handkerchief over his mouth and gently insisted:

"Do you not want us to walk a little? Maybe there is something open."

"I already went to look and everything is closed."

"You give up quickly, huh? If you allow me..." he pointed to the bag that was on the table.

"Go ahead," I replied and I watched him look through my stuff until he found the notebook and his eyes lit up. He put it on the bedside table, opened the chocolate and gave me my part. He didn't see the gun or he didn't care.

"I wanted to talk you about this," he showed me the book and sat on the other bed. He paused so to begin to explain to me and he suddenly got distracted. He stared at the

bandage that I was wearing on my leg and asked me if I had had problems with the police.

"Not that I know," I said.

"Is it true what you told me a little while ago?"

"What?" I asked him, even though I saw it coming.

"That you know about computers."

"I already told you that it doesn't work. Everyone tried it and there is no point, it doesn't work."

"You are a pessimist, it shows in your face."

"I know the subject, that's all."

"A hopeless pessimist," he said to himself and fixed his hair. "May I know what happened to your leg?"

"A dog bit me."

"Now I understand! That depresses a person... Notice that I'm not asking for a lot. I have a gap here," he pointed to a page from the notebook, "and I need to get a little closer. Just that I don't have the head for numbers. I'm already old."

"You already told me that. How about if we sleep?"

"Forgive me, I didn't want to bother."

Upon lying down he noticed that he had his jacket on and he got up to take it off. There wasn't a closet and after doubting a moment he hung it on the back of the chair, on top of mine.

"You could have escaped with the car," he commented in passing, as he climbed into bed.

"Do you think that he might've gone far?"

"Why not? I reached Alaska."

He remained quiet with his gaze set on the plain ceiling and he forgot about me and about turning off the light. I got up, I took the bandage off and I went to wash the wound that had become swollen. As I was drying myself I looked in the pocket of my jacket. Lem was still absent and where he had gone to he was having a bad time. I found the half-smoked cigarette, stained in rouge, and left it for him on the nightstand next to the clock. I lied down without making noise, turned off the night-light and fell asleep right away.

## Chapter 8

It was not yet six o' clock when I was startled by the mooing of a few cows that were passing close by. I felt the same fear when I was sleeping in the field and was dreaming that they were coming on top of me to trample me. At that time Lem was still

in his bed but when I woke up, at nine thirty, he had already left. There was no trace of him: neither the car key, nor the bottle of whiskey, nor the rouge-stained cigarette. Only the unmade bed upon which a dark and skinny locust was walking. I checked the bag and I didn't find the gun either. I prayed to heaven that he had paid the bill from the inn and I washed myself in a hurry with the dried up and dirty soap.

I left the bag in the room and when I was exiting through the hallway I ran into the owner who was wearing black trousers. The guy wanted to know if we had slept well and he asked for the ID card to register me in the book of guests. He told me that Lem had left early putting him in charge to give me the change from the bill. I kept the money without counting it and went to visit the corner bar. On the sidewalk were a few tiles covered with dry thistles that were clinging to my pants. The place had a long counter and a few tables where cards and dice were played. In the background I saw a grill and a reserved room. From the spot where I sat down I could read a sign with the fixture of a championship card game and another one that announced the visit of the degree-holding Nadia, fortuneteller and astrologer.

I ordered a coffee with milk and found out in what way I could accompany it. They brought me a countryside cookie upon which I put enough butter and caramel. I figured that with the stack of bills that I had in my pocket it would be enough for a good breakfast. I had a second coffee with milk while the customers leaning on the counter looked at me through the corner of their eye. My leg was responding and I told myself

that Lem acted like a gentleman even though I may have disappointed him. Now I could walk again or stay there and wait for another car. Through the glass I saw a Rastrojero pass in which they were carrying a tied-up pig and then a Dodge Polara without the top. On the other side of the town square there was an office with the flag and I assumed it must've been the town hall or the post office. The police Falcon was parked behind the shade of some trees. A boy who came out of the private room offered to shine my shoes and asked me if I knew the Italpark and if it was true that in Buenos Aires people had eaten zoo animals. I started laughing but he told me that the radio said it and I decided to believe him so he wouldn't insist. All of the customers were looking at me and I began to feel annoyed. In the corner of the town square they had a tall monolith, similar to the one at Colonia Vela and I asked the boy if he knew something about the soldier.

"He was a tanner in El Remanso," he told me, proudly, as if that were the country's most famous place.

"Is there a headquarters here?"

"No, we from Triunvirato do the draft in Tandil. I am off..." he counted the years with his fingers and came up to seven. It was hard for him to pronounce the word "draft" and he changed it to "service" to continue the conversation. At last, and I think he had come to me just for that, he wanted to know what I did for a living. I told him that I was a health representative but quickly regretted it because in his gaze I guessed that they didn't know about that there.



"I'm going to Tandil," I rectified and I gave him a tip.

In that moment I discovered that I had more money than I thought. I called the owner, paid him and told myself it would be wise to change pants. On the way I would buy a pair of underwear and some espadrilles to walk more comfortably. A very blond and sweaty guy who entered the bar with a sheepdog yelled that at night it was going to rain but the news did not make anybody give up their glass of red wine. The conversations were like a steady buzz from which every now and then a burst of laughter was detached. I got up slowly in order to not draw attention and went out to the sidewalk. Just then I saw the first women who were passing with groceries. I went to where the flag was and stopped a moment in front of the office; a lot of people were beginning to gather in silence waiting to be given something to eat. Those who were arriving were old people dressed with the best clothing and field laborers who obeyed everything that a female employee ordered of them. I asked her for a man in a suit who could have come to talk on the phone. First she told me no but I insisted and she said that maybe, that perhaps the man was there while she was helping those who carried the mail. Just the same, she cautioned me, the phone did not work because the lines were drying up with the heat, or something like that. Since she was looking at me in an ugly manner, I tried to find out where I could find a shop and a laborer directed me to walk to the next block. I left, I passed in front of the police station, which was a rundown house with bars on the windows, and I crossed to the workshop where I had left the Jaguar.

Two boys who seemed like brothers were working on an engine that was hanging from two chains. The kid who had helped me at night stood up, went to the tool table and handed me a crumpled envelope.

"The other gentleman left this for you."

"At what time did he come?"

"When we opened, he was already waiting."

"He didn't leave something said?"

"No. The envelope, nothing more."

I opened it in the street and found the notebook with red covers with a card in which Lem's name was engraved. "Why don't you try it?" it said with shaky handwriting, perhaps because he had written it standing up. On the back he had put "signal to me", and nothing more.

I walked to the store without taking my eye off of the dogs that were walking in groups, as if they were looking for something to eat. I had the feeling that a nighttime and unseen earthquake had occurred there, something that would have swallowed the people's soul. Perhaps I was beginning to feel alone again and nothing more, but I could not cast off the feeling that something was brewing that would change everything.

They didn't have much variety in the store. I found a pair of white underwear in my size and I chose Grafa pants that had to be hemmed. I also bought two shirts that do not require ironing but when I tried to pay the owner he told me to come back in the

afternoon because the prices changed so much that he did not know how much he had to sell them to me for. At least I was able to take the underwear and I went back to the inn before they closed to take a nap. I let the owner know that I was going to stay one more night and he said yes as long as I wasn't arrogant, because the room that we left had just been rented to a lady who could foresee the future. The one that he had free, he informed me, was cheaper because they had stolen the glass from the window.

## Chapter 9

I took the table to the front of the window and I started to study Lem's notebook. The handwriting was looser than the one from the card. Sometimes he let an indecipherable comment slip but someone had done a colossal job of tracking numbers over one year. I immediately discovered that he faced an obstacle when the ball, after an irregular cycle in the first two-dozen, fell suddenly on the last one.

I read carefully until I seemed to discover a certain logic in the recurrence of the number 17 after the changing of roulette drums. Something similar happened with 21, which was coming out several times in a short time and then it disappeared. If I would've been able to consult a few books it would have been easier, but just the same I didn't have anything else to do and the idea of refreshing my memory with algebra comforted me a little. I went to ask the owner of the inn for a pen and for a coffee before he went to bed.

The guy gave me the ID card back and asked me if I wanted a turn with Mrs. Nadia, who was beginning to receive people after her siesta. I told him no and I asked him for permission to make myself a Nescafé. In the kitchen I met his wife who remarked to me with a difficult accent to locate, the elegance of the young blond man who had come with me. I told her that Lem was a mature man, with gray hair, but for her he was as blonde as Robert Redford. I wanted to go back to my calculations so I agreed with her without arguing and I asked her for some cookies to go with the coffee.

I went back to the room, pulled out some blank sheets from the notebook and I hunkered down under the window light. Whoever stole the piece of glass had done an impeccable job with a penknife, separating the dry putty. I pictured him in bed at dawn, pulling the two plates and taking care not to cut his fingers. They probably weren't worth much, but the guy probably told himself that that was better than nothing.

For a couple of hours I forgot about everything. I wrote from memory, with the same care that when I used to work at the institute. I was just missing the computer and at some point I was going to need it to make the program work. Every time I looked up I saw more people arrive. At four in the afternoon the entire village was there, including the workshop siblings and a few locals who I had seen at the bar. They all wanted to know what the future held for them. The fortuneteller worked behind closed doors, just opposite my room, so that when a customer left and another entered, I managed a glimpse of her seated behind a large table that the owner of the inn had lent her. By late afternoon,

when I went to the store to get my pants, the police car arrived and it waited for her at the door until she came out with a bag and stood everyone up until seven. In all that time nobody moved from their place. It was a neighborhood meeting in which there were more women than men, and they all had something to give her: chickens, cakes, blood sausages, salami and other things that I did not know what they could be used for. At one point, while the fortuneteller wasn't there, a guitarist entered to perform but he didn't manage to attract her attention and left immediately. Later they kicked out a grumbling drunkard who was coming to complain about a broken promise. At first they approached my window surreptitiously, but afterwards they came in groups, as if it amused them to see me working over a piece of paper. One even dared to ask me for a cigarette but then there were so many that I had to hide the package. I was struggling with algebra when the degree-holding Nadia returned with a large package that smelled of marinated pork and the focus returned to the other room. The line was remade without arguments and at dinnertime there were only three or four women left waiting. Almost everyone had left smiling except two young girls who left crying without causing an outrage. The degree-holding fortuneteller had not made a lot of money but she was going to take the car full of supplies. For a moment I thought about Coluccini, who should be closer to his Bolivian dream if the Gordini answered to him. I looked at the pages full of numbers and I told myself that in early morning I would follow my path. Lem had put me in charge to signal

to him but he hadn't told me where nor how, so that I didn't feel like I had a special commitment to him.

Taken care of the last client, Nadia went to the courtyard, looked at me through the window and responded to my greeting. She seemed about forty-five years old, dyed peroxide blonde and had several kilos in excess. She wore baggy pants full of pleats and a flowered blouse. Upon returning to the room she closed the door and the shutters, surely to do the counting of the loot. I stored the notebook in the bag, moved the table to its place and got ready to go eat before they closed the bar. Since I didn't feel like exposing myself again to the people's meddlesomeness, I put on new pants, a sky blue shirt and gave cash to the owner's wife to wash and iron the jacket for me. Misfortune if it got ruined. Upon leaving I met up with the fortuneteller again, who hesitated in front of the door of the room.

"Are you from here, sir?" she asked me but she just wanted me to confirm that I wasn't. I did it and she told me she was from La Plata. It made her uneasy to leave the room alone, locked with such a simple key. I suggested that she talked to the owner but she made a gesture of disdain. She had very black eyebrows and a mole on one cheek. She gave me the impression that she didn't feel much respect for mankind.

"I'm going to have dinner and I'll be right back," I told her. "If you wait for me then you can leave calmly."

She studied me a bit but did not have enough light to read my glance.

"The chief of police told me that at ten o' clock he was going to send me a guard," she said. "Do you want us to eat something here? I mean, if you don't have another obligation."

I didn't understand if the thing about the guard was true or a clever trick to mark a limit on the night. The idea that the entire village would get together to watch me eat alone in a corner of the bar did not excite me too much and I decided to accompany her.

"Gladly," I told her.

She went back to the room, pointed to a chair for me and left the door half-open so nobody would think of her badly. On the floor, above the beds and inside the bathroom there was everything, like in a delicatessen: homemade meat pies, salami, cheeses, wine, cakes and even two tins of oil for the car. She put the silverware on the table, gave me something to open a bottle of red wine and told me that I could serve myself whatever I liked most. I grabbed a couple of meat pies and a piece of cheese while she took out two paper cups and apologized to me because she wasn't in the habit of receiving guests. That made her laugh, as if she was making fun of herself. On the table there were two decks of playing cards rather thumbed, half of a candle and several more that had melted away in the course of the afternoon. We ate heartily, exchanging petty phrases and when she found out that I worked in computing she made a gesture of horror.

"Now they do astrology on the computer," she said, "do you realize?"

"Do you go on trips very frequently?" I asked her.

"People are better in the countryside," she responded, "more honest."

"Then why do you stay to look after the room?"

I had not wanted to bother her but the observation sat badly with her.

"There's always someone lusting after your stuff," she defended herself and took a sip of wine with an affected delicacy. Then she went to look among the desserts that were on the bed and chose a lemon cake. She cut two good pieces, raised the cards with just one hand and while eating she shuffled them with the skill of a professional. On the wall she had hung an astrological map to impress customers.

"How do you work without a cat?" I asked her and then she opened her eyes, big as plums. Under the dyed hair she had a gypsy head that time had quite mistreated. Now she must have kept a gun somewhere, like Lem.

"Are you from the trade?" she asked.

"No, but they told me that without a cat around you cannot do anything."

She smiled. Underneath the blouse she had an opulent bust that still held firm. Even though the light was not good I could see the wrinkles in her neck. Suddenly, from the deck that she was mixing with just one hand flew a card that fell right in the middle of the table. It was a king of clubs.

"Excuse me," she said, "I need to know something about you."



"You could've just asked me it," I told her, but she wasn't listening. She served herself another piece of cake and a glass of wine while a four of hearts fell on top of the king.

"Have you been separated for a while?"

"A year or two, I don't know."

"You have a son or a daughter far away. I'm asking you if you've been alone for long while."

"Can you not find out without help?"

"I'm missing the cat," she said, mockingly, and passed her tongue on her lips to pick up a leftover of lemon. "You lived far away. Political problems, right? Perhaps you're an engineer but it is going bad for you."

"You don't need the cards to realize that."

"Why did you come back? You had a good position over there. There was someone very important that trusted in you."

"Where 'there'?"

She threw four cards face down and told me to give them back in the order that I wished. The game captivated me and humiliated me at the same time.

"Italy, France, a city where your child is now. Male or female, I don't see well."

"Female."

"In Spain," she said. "She writes you often and you do not answer."

She glanced up to see what effect it was having on me. I felt like speaking to her about the theory of probability, but I thought that she should have the car and it would be good for her to take me closer to the road.

"What do you do here?" I asked her. "Are there not enough customers in La Plata?"

"Lots of competition. Before my husband used to do the north and I the south but now I do it all. Next month we're going to live in Brazil. The boys are already there."

I looked at the supplies that they had left for her and commented that if she could not get cash it would be difficult for her to pay for the move.

"Seriously, this helps. Don't you want to know if your daughter is okay?"

"Do you know?"

She mixed the cards with the skill of a crook and asked me to choose two.

"This girl is okay, yes. As a girlfriend maybe. You didn't make her life easy."

"Would I have been able to do something else?"

She shrugged her shoulders and then shook her long yellow hair. I asked her if it would bother her if I smoked and she said no with a gesture.

"You're not going anywhere," she told me.

She loved the lemon cake and was going to eat it all. After each piece that she cut her eyes gleamed in another way, she would escape from the sadness of always talking about others.

"What sign are you?" she insisted.

"What importance does it have? I have made several astrology programs."

"Do you know what? Don't get offended, but you are tired from being trampled on."

We looked at each other for a moment. Maybe she was talking about herself but just the same she had managed to hurt me. It suddenly seemed to me that a cat was passing in front of the door, but it was the guard who was arriving.

"Two girls left crying this afternoon. Was it necessary?"

"I can't give good news to everyone. Nobody would believe me."

"Do you know who I am already?"

"Better than you. Where do you want me to drop you off tomorrow?"

"Anywhere. A guy gave me a job but he had to leave running."

She looked around at the dirty walls, full of cobwebs.

"He wants to cheat a casino," I added.

She ate the last crumbs from the tray, put the deck on the table and pulled out a card with so sharp a nail that it seemed like a scalpel.

"A man without a face, very grieved," she read somewhere.

I told her yes.

"Do the work then. It's the last chance for him."

## Chapter 10

As soon as Nadia turned off the light the downpour announced by the blond from the bar spilled out. The sky closed at once and the storm began with thunder and lightning before the rain came. Water was entering through the window of my room and it was falling on the bed, so I hurried to move it somewhere else in order to go to bed. I plunged into reviewing what I had written looking for errors and adding numbers, when I remembered the guard. He was a dark-skinned little guy who was wearing the uniform of another more portly person. I looked out the window wrapped in the towel and I saw him propped against the wall, soaked, with his cap drooping to his ears. The owner of the inn left the hall closed to prevent flooding and everyone had forgotten about him. I opened the door and called for him yelling amid the noises of the storm. The unhappy guy came without sheltering himself, taking the job seriously and stood firm in front of the door with his open hand against the visor.

"Agent Benítez at your service," he told me and waited for me to tell him what it was about. The holster that he was wearing was so old and was so disjointed that the gun was going to fall as soon as he took a wrong step. Inside the jacket he was carrying some old Spanish magazines that Nadia had given him to amuse himself during the shift.

"Come in man, you are going to catch a cold," I told him but he stayed there, under the rain. I was in underwear and the blasts of water made me move backwards.

"I'm on guard, buddy," he told me, "until four o' clock, I am."

"Enter and mount guard here," I yelled at him. Some very thin drops were sliding down his visor. The badge that he had on his chest ended in 21, which was one of the numbers that Lem was looking for and with which I had worked the entire afternoon. He hesitated a moment, looked back, took off his cap and entered with a quiet pace.

"Thank you, buddy. Just a drink, no more."

I closed the door and told him that I had nothing to offer him, except a cigarette. He looked at me a while, disappointed, wringing out the uniform on the floor, with the tips of his big shoes pointing at the corners of the wall.

"You are the mister from the car," he said, and made a gesture of admiration.

"Sit down," I told him and I gave him the towel.

"They stole the window," he commented. "Why didn't you ask for a few bags to plug the hole?"

He aspirated the s's and he swallowed a few letters to go faster. I insisted so that he would sit down and I told him that I was going to try to fall asleep. He hung his hat on the back of the chair, said that the rain was going to be good for the fields and he began to flip through the magazines even though occasionally he looked at me wanting to chat. I finished reviewing the program, stored the notebook and covered myself with the sheet. The guard asked me if he had to turn off the light and I said no, so that he might read quietly. He seemed fascinated by the illustrations in color and remained for several

minutes looking at the pictures of a Spanish yuppie that was playing tennis and tanning at the edge of a pool. He had already forgotten about me: he nodded a bit and fell asleep before me.

It must've been three o'clock in the morning when Nadia started screaming. First she gave a distressed shriek and then two or three groans that seemed to come from beyond the grave. Benitez jumped to his feet in one spring, took out the flashlight and drew the gun with a face of having lost the job. As I was putting my pants on I looked through the window but I didn't see anything strange. The guard left under the downpour, dragged the same pot on which I had tripped before and kicked Nadia's door without hesitation, just like the cops from television. I went behind him, cursing because my new pants were getting wet, but the door didn't budge and we stayed under the rain, looking like idiots. There was just our light and that which was coming from the lightning. Since Nadia gave another cry, Benitez looked at me like I was the chief of police and he distanced himself to reload again. He didn't have the proper physique for that and I had to help him a little. At last the lock sprang and we entered stumbling amongst cheeses and pies. Nadia was in a petticoat, seated on the bed and around her were a couple of empty wine bottles and one of gin that had spilled out on the sheets. She had her eyes turned around and with a finger full of rings was pointing behind us. "There, there!" she was telling herself. She didn't have the appearance of someone who is going to Brazil. Benitez turned around with the flashlight but he only found the wall where the astrological card

was. Nadia was stretching out her hands but she was not begging to us. I told Benitez to keep quiet, that it was nothing more than a nightmare but he didn't listen to me and he went to look under the bed where he found an empty flask.

"No, buddy, I think that the fortuneteller is drunk," he said and it was clear to me that he was a specialist in stating irrefutable facts. He raised the empty bottles, put them in a row against the wall and told me that he would have to report the incident. I went to sit next to Nadia, who touched my face like a sleepwalker. I lit a cigarette for her from those that were on the nightstand and put it between her lips. Out of pure reflex she gave it a hit but she choked and she started feeling bad again.

I tried to lay her on her side though initially she resisted and started to tremble from head to toe. In the struggle a breast escaped from the petticoat and it showed us a somewhat faded splendor. The nipple had a big violet areola or maybe it was the darkness that confused me. I let Benitez have a peek and I fixed her clothes. As soon as she calmed herself I moved a few jars of candy and some hams to lift the blanket from the floor. I covered her and looked for something that could make her vomit. Benitez said that one had to put drunks with their heads facing down and he assured me that he had experience with that. I left him preparing a pitcher of *maté*, some quince jam and I don't know how many things else while I went to the courtyard to look for a bowl. It had been a while since I heard thunder like that and I thought that the storm had worsened the drinks'

effect. The horizon had closed behind the wall that surrounded the courtyard and nobody else appeared awake. I emptied the bowl and went back to the room.

"My replacement is about to arrive," said Benitez, who was stirring the mixture in a glass. I assumed that he did not want the other guard to see him in trouble and I moved the bowl next to the bed. Then, when he signaled to me that he was ready, I lifted her head and closed her nose. She didn't need more than two sips to lie face down and spew everything. Benitez was smiling, satisfied, as Nadia was insulting us and asked us to call the police. As soon as she let me come closer I combed her a little, put a sweater over her shoulders and I took the bowl back. After a while I saw that she was coping by herself and I went back to my room, but Benitez stayed fulfilling his duty under the storm.

The other officer came half an hour late. I thought that Nadia would sleep all day, that with that storm it was going to be impossible to get out of town and I decided to continue on foot as soon as the downpour stopped. I wrapped myself up to my head because at times the wind was collecting in the room and I fell asleep before it began to dawn.

I was in a deep sleep when I heard Nadia's voice through the opening of the window. I woke up surprised. The wind was twisting her hat and she was smiling at me with lipstick on her lips. She had put on some sunglasses and a raincoat even though the rain had subsided. She wore freshly manicured nails and all her rings on.



"Let's go, help me load the stuff," she told me with an optimism that unsettled me. I told her to wait for me to get dressed and when I got up I saw that it was ten o' clock. I had to put the ripped pants on and another shirt and then I went to look for the jacket that the woman from the inn had ironed for me. The street was dirty like a horse stable and I thought no car could pass through there, but Nadia appeared at the wheel of a very old 2 CV, which managed to move forward.

"How's it going?" she shouted at me while she was backing in. "Would you like to spend another night in this paradise?"

I went back to the room and on the wall I wrote a message for Lem. I notified him that I was preparing what he had requested and that I was now on my way to La Plata.