

READING GENDER IN TRANSLATION: TRANSLATOR'S INTERVENTION IN
ISAAC CHOCRÓN'S PRONOMBRES PERSONALES

BY

MARKO MILETICH

B.A. in Spanish, Hunter College, 1987

M.A. in Hispanic Civilization, New York University, 1991

M.A. in Liberal Arts/Translation Studies, CUNY Graduate Center, 2007

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Translation Studies
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2012

UMI Number: 3556840

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3556840

Published by ProQuest LLC (2013). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

© Copyright by Marko Miletich 2012

All Rights Reserved

Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Translation Studies
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2012

August 28, 2012

Dr. Carrol Coates, Chair
Department of Comparative Literature, Binghamton University

Dr. Marilyn Gaddis-Rose, Member
Department of Comparative Literature, Binghamton University

Dr. Joshua Price, Member
Department of Philosophy, Interpretation and Culture

Dr. Salvador Fajardo, Outside Examiner
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

Abstract

This dissertation discusses my translation into English of a Venezuelan novella by Isaac Chocrón entitled in Spanish *Pronombres personales*. The discussion will include my own translation interventions as to differences in grammatical gender between the two languages, as well as choices made when translating descriptions, interactions, and exchanges of women and men in the text. Although ideas regarding translation as a mere transferring of a static meaning and once defined in musical terms (as echoes), painting terms (as copies or portraits) or as sartorial terms (as borrowed or ill-fitting clothing) have been mostly defunct for some time, some still cling to the idea of the translator as someone who does not intervene in any considerable way. Translator intervention is an inevitable part of translation in particular in reference to gender issues in literary texts. These gender issues may include grammatical gender as well as representations and/or behaviors of female and male characters, and relations between women and men. For some translators, a textual intervention is not only possible but also necessary when dealing with such gender(ed) matters.

Acknowledgments

It has been a personal quest to seek a Ph.D. in Translation Studies, a field of study that interested me since I was in my teens. I would like to thank the individuals who have helped me made this experience possible. First of all, I am truly indebted to my dissertation director, Doctor Carrol Coates whose enthusiasm for translation, professionalism and whose continue support and comments on my project were precious. I would like to thank Doctor Marilyn Gaddis-Rose, whose input was crucial for the completion of the project. I am also indebted to Doctor Joshua Price whose knowledge of Latin American Literature, Gender Studies and Translation, were an invaluable help in the project. Doctor Salvador Fajardo was instrumental regarding issues related to literature and served as the external reader for my dissertation. His interest in my project, support, advice, and suggestions, have also made this project possible.

I specially thank the late Isaac Chocrón for giving me permission to translate his novel and for his help and enthusiasm during the project. I also wish to thank the people who contributed in many ways to an undertaking of this magnitude and whose help and support have been priceless. Doctor Nora Glickman who was responsible for my meeting the author and for arranging a meeting with Isaac Chocrón, without her support, telephone calls and correspondence, it may have never been possible. Thanks also must go to my friend Victor Wheeler for editing my never-ending stream of drafts, both of the translation and the dissertation. Finally, I am truly indebted to my friend and colleague José Dávila Montes whose moral support, encouragement, and vast encyclopedic knowledge in translation theory were exceptionally helpful.

Marko Miletich

Binghamton, New York

August 2012

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: Gender Intervention.....	4
1.1 Translator Intervention.....	4
1.2 Grammatical Gender Intervention.....	10
1.3 Human Gender Intervention.....	17
CHAPTER TWO: Novelistic Intervention.....	39
2.1 Proposing Translator.....	39
2.2 Isaac Chocrón.....	44
2.2.1 Plays.....	46
2.2.2 Novels.....	49
2.2.2.1 Pronombres personales.....	53
CHAPTER THREE: Intervenient Translator.....	63
3.1 Interventions.....	63
3.1.1 Tags.....	64
3.1.2 Footnotes.....	66
3.1.2.1 Linguistic Information Footnotes.....	67
3.1.2.2 Background Information Footnotes.....	68
3.1.3 Interpolations.....	69
3.1.4 Corrections.....	70
3.1.5 Gender Interventions.....	71
3.1.5.1 Grammatical Gender Interventions.....	72
3.1.5.2 Human Gender Interventions.....	77

PERSONAL PRONOUNS 90

ADDENDUM: Interview with Isaac Chocrón..... 309

WORKS CITED 320

Introduction

This project was conceived shortly after meeting Venezuelan author Isaac Chocrón and discussing with him his novella *Pronombres personales*.¹ The novella contains several challenges for a translator from the gender markings of chapter titles that would usually go unnoticed when traditionally translated, to many facets of the different female and male narrators as they collectively tell about their lives surrounding a national disaster in Venezuela during the month of December 1999. My reasons for translating this captivating novella are then twofold. First, to bring to English-speaking audiences, outside the anglophone world, a contemporary work by a relatively unknown Venezuelan author and second, to show the ways in which I “intervene” as a translator in order to show issues regarding gender in the text.

Translator intervention, apart from the necessary linguistic adjustment due to differences in languages, is usually considered a suspicious activity since it goes against the usual view of translators as mere objective agents that provide a text written by another. Interventions in the target text to express descriptions, ideas and exchanges charged with gender show a subject stance by the translator who uses translation decisions to make manifest something that s/he believes would otherwise go unnoticed. The notion of translation as a purely linguistic endeavor is becoming superseded. My study aims to highlight translator’s choice for intervention, particularly when dealing with gender issues.

¹ I am using the term *novella* in the modern sense. The only current distinction between a *novel* and a *novella* is the length of the text. In this dissertation, *novella* means a short novel, following *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by John Anthony Cuddon (1999).

My defense for translator intervention is not based on a view as translation as pandemonium. It is motivated by the belief that translators take responsibility for their choices as they accompany the text through the journey it makes from one language to another. When it comes to the grammatical gender, interventions may be necessary particularly in a text like Chocrón's, so dependent on gender specific words to lead chapters. The particular behaviors of women and men and their relations are often textually expressed to portray a particular way of thinking and may require an intervention on part of the translator to reflect a textual otherness.

Chapter One is devoted to exploring the various ways in which translators intervene in literary translations. It examines grammatical gender, human and literary gender, and what happens when these get translated; specifically how issues related to gender may be enhanced, censored, diminished, subverted and/or eliminated. I briefly analyze grammatical gender in English and Spanish and provide an example that demonstrates how three different translators have dealt with translating a gender marked word in Spanish into English. I present different cases in which intervention has resulted in censorship. I discuss translation choices made when dealing with a text that represents homosexuality. I also underscore the very noticeable translator presence in feminist translation.

Chapter Two presents Venezuelan writer Isaac Chocrón as a case of a lesser-known author whose work may be made more visible through the "intervention" of a translator that decided the work merits translation. An examination of Chocrón's works reveals his look at the multifaceted gender issues of Venezuelan society that this author's fictional worlds portray.

Chapter Three discusses several instances of my “interventions” when translating Chocrón’s novella. Such interventions were carefully examined as part of my translation decisions in a text rich with gender so as to provide a rendition of the Spanish text that will clearly show these issues in English. Chocrón’s gender-laden novel, *Pronombres personales* presents a great opportunity to discuss my “interventions” and to explain the decisions behind them.

Chapter Three is followed by my translation from Spanish into English of *Pronombres personales* by Isaac Chocrón which again, illustrates my interventions.

The Addendum contains an interview I conducted with Isaac Chocrón in August 2011.

CHAPTER ONE: Gender Intervention

1.1 Translator Intervention

This dissertation discusses my translation into English of a Venezuelan novella by Isaac Chocrón entitled in Spanish *Pronombres personales*. The discussion will include my own translation interventions as to differences in grammatical gender between the two languages, as well as choices made when translating descriptions, interactions, and exchanges of women and men in the text. Chapter One discusses some of the ways in which translators intervene in literary translations, particularly in issues regarding gender. It will provide a brief discussion of grammatical, human and literary gender as well as examples of translator intervention in novelistic texts due to these issues. These gender issues include grammatical gender, as well as representations of the characters' behaviors and the relations of the fictional women and men. For some translators, a textual intervention is not only possible, but also necessary when dealing with such gender(ed) matters.

All translation is intervention. It transforms a text from one language to another through the mediating actions of a translator or translators who re-write passages first written in one language in order to make them available in another. Intervention has been such an important part of translation that it is reflected in one of the most transcendental texts of Western Civilization, the Bible. The creation of the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, as a letter attributed to Aristeas from around 130 B. C. E. explains (2002, pp. 4-6), was believed to have been possible through the translation provided by seventy-two translators. The story retold by Philo Judeaus (15/10 B. C. E. – 45/50 C.E.) adds that the seventy two translators were able to produce translations that were identical while being totally isolated from each other; something achievable only by

divine inspiration and an essentialist concept of meaning.² Although ideas regarding translation as a mere transferring of a static meaning and once defined in musical terms (as echoes), painting terms (as copies or portraits) or as sartorial terms (as borrowed or ill-fitting clothing) have been mostly defunct for some time, some still cling to the idea of the translator as an intermediary who as Theo Hermans notes, “does not intervene in any substantive way. The ironic pride of the absent, empty-handed translator consists in the awareness, or at any rate in the ideological self-assurance, of offering the reader an absolutely clear view of the original” (1997, p. 15). Translation is now seen by many as a very subjective enterprise where translators exercise a sophisticated number of layered activities that allow clear active and critical interventions as Sherry Simon emphasizes in her seminal work *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the politics of Transmission* (1996, p. 37). Yet most readers, including translators, will frown upon particular interventions by translators when reflecting gender issues in literary texts.

Apart from a translator’s usual interventions to provide an idiomatic translation³ through what is often referred to as “shifts”, a term used by J. C. Catford (1965, p. 73), or structural or linguistic changes,⁴ and interruptions in the translated text through footnotes,

² The letter attributed to Aristeas (around 130 B.C.E) states that the translators consulted with each other. Philo’s addition was also used in later versions of the account of the Septuagint translation “a long succession of ancient authors repeated Philo’s invention with great enthusiasm, including Irenaeus in *Against the Heresies* (175 C.E.), Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromateis* (‘Streams’ or *Miscellanies*, late second or early third century), Epiphanius in *On Weights and measures*, [...] and Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine* (Robinson, pp. 413-426).

³ An idiomatic translation follows the conventions of the language of the target text and observes native speaker ways of expression. There is also a way to translate literary texts that is currently known as *foreignizing*, which aims to make the source text more conspicuous in the translation and avoid fluency. This term is usually associated with the ideas of Lawrence Venuti (1995) which in turn are influenced by ideas from the German Romantics, and, in particular, Friederich Schleiermacher (1813).

⁴ For example the Spanish sentence *Este estudiante se llama Paco* [This student call himself Paco], would usually be rendered in English as *This student is called Paco*.

there are instances where translators intervene in a more conscious, conspicuous and purposeful way, in particular when dealing with issues related to gender. These gender issues include grammatical gender, as well as human gender which can encompass the intricate arrangements between women and men, power struggles and relationships between the sexes (between women and women, women and men, men and men), views on reproduction and labor, sexism, femininity, masculinity, social position, heterosexuality, compulsory heterosexuality, homosexuality, or homoeroticism. This conspicuous intervention I am addressing, then, refers to what Juliane House describes as “a manipulation of the source text beyond what is linguistically necessary” (2008, p. 16).

Translation is a target culture phenomenon in which norms play an important part. Norms, as defined by Gideon Toury, are considered to be: “The translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right or wrong, adequate or inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations” (1995, p. 55). For translation, these norms influence the translator’s decisions either in a direct or indirect way, while also being reflected in the target text (1995, pp. 67-69). What constitutes a good translation is usually established according to the expectations of the target community. Andrew Chesterman points out the existence of what he denominates *expectancy norms* (1997, pp. 64-70). These norms directly or indirectly affect the translators’ decisions, since they may choose to follow them or ignore them. Translations that follow the established norms usually have a better

reception that those that do not. Interventions that go against the expected norms will often be then looked at suspiciously.⁵

Unusual interventions fly in the face of the well-known concept of *fidelity*; which produces a translation that as Jean Delisle, Hannelore Lee-Jahnke, Monique C. Cormier explain, “respects the presumed sense of the source text as much as possible, and whose expression in the target language conforms to appropriate target language usage” (Delisle, Lee-Jahnke, & Cormier, 1999, p. 140). For most people (including many translators) a good translation is one that provides a target language that is “faithful” to the source language; free of biases and unmotivated by anything that is not an accurate rendition of a presumed meaning in a particular text. Acceptable interventions are limited to lexical, syntactical (occasionally semantic) shifts due to differences between the source and target languages. Any other intervention will often be subject to scrutiny. Jorge Luis Borges produced a heavy critique of fidelity in his exemplary 1939 text “Pierre Menard autor del Quijote” (usually translated as “Pierre Menard and the Author of the Quixote”) in which a writer attempts to become the author of the famous Spanish novel by producing a line-for-line text identical to Cervantes’s. Though the story never uses the word translation, it can be seen as an impossible attempt to reproduce an identical equivalence. The absurd way in which Pierre Menard attempts to reproduce is described by scholar Rosemary Arrojo in “Translation, Transference, and the Attraction to Otherness: Borges, Menard, Whitman” as something that “could be viewed as an ironical criticism of the call for faithfulness and invisibility typically associated with traditional

⁵ Translation norms are not stable and change through times as Douglas Robinson points out in *Becoming a Translator: an Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Translation*, “in the Middle Ages translators often wrote their own glosses or commentaries and built them *into* their translations” (2002, p. 108); a translation behavior that would now be heavily condemned.

translation theories and practices. The story is in fact a brilliant illustration of how absurd it is for a translator to claim (or even to try) to be absolutely faithful to someone else's text" (2004, p. 32). Yet a blind fidelity is often seen as something intended or desired to be attained by translator's efforts.

Perhaps a basic example will suffice to show how intervention in translation is often necessary, as it goes beyond merely providing the previously mentioned linguistic or structural shift.

Here is the example:⁶

There are seven words in this sentence.

A non-interventionist translation into Spanish would read:

Hay siete palabras en esta oración. [There are seven words in this sentence.]

Certainly a rendering that is idiomatically adequate and faithful, but one that will provide a false statement, since the number of words in the Spanish sentence is 6 and not 7 as the English sentence states.

Other possible renderings in Spanish could be:

Existen siete palabras en esta oración. [There exist seven words in this sentence.]

La oración tiene siete palabras. [The sentence has seven words.]

⁶ This example is taken from David Bellos' *Is That a Fish in Your Ear: Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (2011, p. 277).

Both choices would still leave us with an inaccurate statement that does not reflect the English assertion since the first Spanish translation above contains 6 words and the second one, 5.

The translator may decide to intervene here either by:

- a) adding a footnote to explain the numerical discrepancy
- b) reducing the number of words referenced: *Hay seis palabras en esta oración.*
[There are six words in this sentence.]
- c) adding a word to the Spanish: *Son siete las palabras en esta oración* [Seven are the words in this sentence.]

The example above serves to illustrate the point that intervention is very often needed in translation to explain, or make clearer a particular statement. When it comes to issues that reflect gender, whether grammatical or human, the translator may often feel justified when intervening. As Hermans states: “all translation implies a degree of manipulation of a source text for a certain purpose” (1985, p. 11); in literature, translators have to manage a text and skillfully intervene to render a fictional work into a particular language.

Yes, all translators intervene. As previously stated, the mere act of translating requires intervention. The translator is then, as Carol Maier describes, an “intervenient being” (2007, p. 2) a term that defines “the translator’s position with respect to both location and activity, and also with respect to language” (2007, p. 2). Some translators, however, go beyond the linguistic or structural changes in their interventions and intervene in a more visible way through several strategies. When it comes to gender, both grammatical and human, translators may intervene for several reasons: to make explicit

an otherwise unnoticed gender marking (such as the translation of certain words in one language, as in the case of pronouns from Spanish into English [as I did in my translation of *Pronombres personales*]), to make the representation of male and female characters conform to norms regarding gender expectations of a particular time (as in the dubbing of foreign films, translation of fairy tales), to bring about a particular ideology (as in feminist translation) or to signal a marked gender presence in the translation that would otherwise go unnoticed (as in particular sociolects reflected in expressions occasionally used by homosexuals). My own reasons for “intervening” while translating Chocrón’s novella will be discussed in Chapter Three.

1.2 Grammatical Gender Intervention

One obvious matter that comes up frequently when translating texts from Spanish into English is grammatical gender. The existence of texts that contain words that can be feminine, or masculine in Spanish present a challenge when transforming a Spanish text into a language such as English that does not seem to have such an abundance of these explicit terms.

The English language used to have a grammatical gender system, similar to other Indo-European and Indo-Germanic languages, that was prevalent in Old English (750-1100 or 1150 C. E.) as Anne Curzan points out in *Gender Shifts in the History of English* (2003, p. 12). Around the twelfth century, the English language started to develop what is commonly referred to as a “natural gender” system: “a tri-partite gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) in which the classification of nouns corresponds for the most part to the real-world distinctions of male animate (or male human), female animate (or female human), and inanimate (or non-human)” (2003, p. 17). English then, as

Suzanne Romaine explains in *Communicating Gender*, relies more on biological sex and humanness to produce gender markings (1999, p. 73). In English usually third person singular pronouns and possessive determiners show clear gender markings (*she, hers, he, him, it, its*). There are also certain nouns that have a different form or ending to signal they are feminine or masculine (*woman, man; waitress, waiter; widow, widower; actress, actor/actress* [although the modern usage prefers *actor* for both sexes], *lord/lady; king/queen; master/mistress*).⁷ At times, certain nouns are given a feminine gender and referred to as *she*, such as modes of transportation (*ship, train*) and musical instruments (*guitar, trumpet*). Nouns with a masculine gender are often used to describe both males and females (*mankind, cavemen, sons of God, manpower*). Gender markings in English are then limited in comparison with other Romance languages such as Spanish.

The Spanish gender system is modeled after the classification used in the Latin language. Ralph Penny, famous sociolinguist and Professor Emeritus of Romance Philology at Queen Mary University of London, informs us in his *History of the Spanish Language* that one of the most notable changes from the Latin is “the change from a three-gender system (masculine-feminine-neuter) to a two gender system (masculine-feminine), with the consequent reassignment of surviving neuter nouns to one or other of the remaining genders” (1991, p. 119). Grammatical gender, in this language, is used to classify nouns into classes that then agree with other parts of speech (adjectives, pronouns, past participles functioning as adjectives). Spanish nouns are either masculine

⁷ Some of the words that represent a female term, at times, acquire a different meaning that is derogatory such as *mistress* (besides being the counterpart of *master* also means a woman involved in an extramarital affair) and *madam* (besides being the counterpart of *sir* also means a woman in charge of a brothel).

or feminine.⁸ Although their ending does not always indicate a particular gender, most nouns that end in *-a* are feminine (*casa, mesa* [house, table]) and most nouns that end in *-o* are masculine (*suelo, cuaderno* [floor, notebook]) There are many other nouns that can end in consonants or other vowels that can be masculine (*amor, espíritu* [love, spirit]) or feminine (*flor, tribu* [flower, tribe]); there are also nouns that end in *-a* that are masculine (*día, mapa* [day, map]) and nouns that end in *-o* that are feminine (*mano, libido* [hand, libido]). In Spanish the masculine is often understood to encompass the feminine, so that *diputados* (people's representatives in government) usually refers to both female and male people holding that position, although in modern usage there is a tendency to specify (*diputadas y diputados* [female representatives and male representatives]). There is also a class of nouns known as *epicenes* that are used to refer to animals (*tiburón, rata, jirafa*, [shark, rat, giraffe]); the sex of these animals has to be specified using the word *hembra* or *macho* (*jirafa hembra, jirafa macho* [female giraffe, male giraffe]). Spanish also has a neuter gender that is given to some demonstratives (*esto, eso, aquello* [this, that, that far away]) the article (*lo* [*the*, usually in conjunction to non-animated entities *lo bueno*; the good thing]) and personal pronouns (*ello, lo* [it]). All parts of speech that refer to a noun or function as a noun must agree in gender (also in number) with the noun they refer to, or take the function of a noun. In this way, articles, adjectives, pronouns, and past participles functioning as adjectives must agree in gender with the words they modify.

⁸ Nouns do not have a neuter gender, only the demonstratives adjectives such as *esto, eso, aquello* [this, that, that one far away], the definite article *lo* and the pronouns *ello* and *lo* [*it* personal pronoun, and *it* direct object pronoun] are considered neuter. The gender of these adjectives does not differ morphologically from the masculine. (Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 2010, p. 24).

Pronouns deserve a particular mention in our case since the novella being translated here makes abundant use of these types of words for chapter titles and it is one of my clear “interventions” in the translation. Several personal pronouns, for example have a distinct gender marking in many more instances than in English (*nosotras*, *nosotros*, *vosotras*, *vosotros*, *ellas*, *ellos* [we feminine, we masculine, you plural feminine, you plural masculine {these two forms, *vosotras*, *vosotros* are used almost exclusively in the Spanish spoken in Spain}, they feminine, they masculine]). Gender is also visible in the Spanish demonstrative pronouns *esta*, *este*, *esto*; *esa*, *ese*, *eso*; *aquella*, *aquel*, *aquello*⁹, [this one feminine, this one masculine, this one neuter; that one feminine, that one masculine, that one neuter; that one far away feminine, that one far away masculine, that one far away neuter]. The clear gender markings in Spanish differ a great deal from those in English and very often suppose a challenge for the translator who, as I did, decides to intervene to make them visible since they may be an important part of the gendered representation. Hopefully, this will become evident when reading the discussion regarding my translation choices in Chocrón’s novella in Chapter Three.

One example of translator intervention due to grammatical gender can be seen in *Don Quixote* (1605); a novel full of interventions. Apart from the constant meddling by its main character, Alonso Quijano, the whole text can be seen as an intervention if we are to believe Cervantes’ words regarding the creation of the text. The author tells the readers (First Part, Chapter IX) that the novel is a translation of several manuscripts done

⁹ These pronouns used to require an accent mark. According to the latest orthographic rules they do not require it unless there is a chance of confusion with demonstrative adjectives which are spelled the same way. (Real Academia Española, 2002, p. 49.)

by a suspicious Arab by the name of Cide Hamate Benengeli [Sir Eggplant]. Cervantes is supposedly just the editor (intervenient) of these tales.

Part I, Chapters XXIII to XXXV of *Don Quixote*, contains what is known as a *novela intercalada* [interpolated novella];¹⁰ the story of “El curioso impertinente” [The Impertinent Curious Man].¹¹ This novella is almost completely independent of the main story of *Don Quixote* with the exception of a brief resurgence of Alonso Quijano (Don Quixote) as he fights some imaginary giant that turns out to be skins filled with red wine. This particular story takes place in Florence and shows a notable Italian influence that Adrienne Laskier Martin explains in *An Erotic philology of Golden Age Spain* as manifesting an “inspiration and style following in the tradition of Renaissance *novellieri* such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Matteo Bandello, Masuccio Salentino, and Ser Giovanni” (2008, p. 175).¹² This tale focuses on the domestic life of an upper-class married couple, and it chronicles a husband’s intention to test the faithfulness of his wife, and the tragedy that his decision ensues.

The translations examined are those of Tobias Smollett, Samuel Putnam and Edith Grossman; one female translator and two male translators and all translating in different centuries (eighteenth, twentieth, and twenty first, respectively).¹³ These translations were

¹⁰ There are several of these such as “Marcela y Grisóstomo” [Marcela and Grisóstomo] Part I, Chapter XI-XIV, and “El capitán cautivo” [The Captive Captain] Part I, Chapter XXXVII-XLI.

¹¹ This is my translation of the title. The translators I am discussing have translated it differently and I will address their options.

¹² It should be noted that during the seventeenth century the south of Italy was a part of the Spanish Empire.

¹³ All translations cited in this section are from Edith Grossman, Samuel Putnam, and Tobias Smollett and appear in Works Cited.

selected because they are considered to be three of the best known translations of *Don Quixote*.¹⁴

The very title of the novella “El curioso impertinente” [The Curious and Impertinent Man]¹⁵ already reflects a grammatical gender issue since in Spanish it is clear that the subject of the sentence *curioso* is masculine.¹⁶ The fact that English does not often show grammatical gender in language makes the translation of what seems a simple title, challenging.

The title of the story is called in Spanish:

“*Donde se cuenta la novela del “Curioso impertinente”*”¹⁷

[Which Recounts the Novella of “The Curious Impertinent Man”]¹⁸

¹⁴ Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) was a Scottish author who trained as a surgeon. He became known as a writer after the success of his novels *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle*. He also became the editor of the journal *The Literary Review*. His translation of *Don Quixote* was published in 1775 and, as Thomas Hart explains, is “historically important, for it is one of the principal versions in which Cervantes’s novel was known to several generations of English and American readers” (1988, p. 118). There are, however, some allegations of Smollett’s translation as being just a revision of a previous one by Charles Jarvis as explained by Tomas Hart in his review (1988, p. 120).

Samuel Putnam (1892-1950) was a Romance Language scholar and a translator. He worked for several newspapers and became a literary art critic for the *Chicago Evening Post*. He translated from French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. In 1949, he produced a translation of *Don Quixote*, that apparently took him 12 years to finish and one that is considered the first version of that novel using more contemporary English than previous ones.

Edith Grossman (1936-) is currently one of the best known translators of Spanish literature into English. She has translated the works of Mario Vargas Llosa, Álvaro Mutis and Gabriel García Márquez, among others. She received the 2006 PEN/Ralph-Manheim Award for Translation. Her translation of *Don Quixote* was published in 2003, and it has been praised by writers, such as Carlos Fuentes, and critics such as Harold Bloom.

¹⁵ This is my translation of the title.

¹⁶ As mentioned, Spanish nouns have grammatical gender so that they are either masculine or feminine which is usually shown by different endings. Nouns agree in gender with articles, adjectives and past participles. *El curioso* refers to a man; a woman would be *La curiosa*.

¹⁷ As Francisco Rico points out, the word *novela* in seventeenth century Spain had the idea of a short story, similar to the current English notion of a long short story or a short *novella*. (2004, p. 326).

Smollett translates the title:

“The novel of the impertinent curiosity,” (336)

This translator has intervened to remove several words from the Spanish (*donde se cuenta* [which recounts]) The translation does not portray any type of grammatical gender and, in fact, makes it more impersonal than the Spanish title suggests.¹⁹

Putnam translates the title as:

“In which is related the “Story of the One who Was Too Curious for His Own Good” (280)

This translation does reflect grammatical gender (*his*), but there is a clear intervention to make something explicit in the translation²⁰ (*Too Curious for His Own Good*), and gives away the plot from the very beginning.

Grossman translates it as:

“Which recounts the novel of The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious” (272)

Her version does show the gender and follows the Spanish closely although intervenes adding the word *man*, not in the Spanish but necessary to mark the gender of the subject. Grossman’s choice would also appear to add a moralizing idea: that of being

¹⁸ This is my translation.

¹⁹ Smollett could be said to be using a translation “procedure” known as *modulation* by followers of linguistic approaches to translation (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p. 346) in which the target text uses a different point of view than the source text.

²⁰ This is a known as *explicitation* in linguistic approaches to translation (See Vinay & Darbelnet, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: a Methodology for Translation*, 1995, p. 342).

careless, with her choice of the word *reckless*, while the Spanish title would appear to call more attention to the intrusiveness of the individual (*impertinente/impertinent*).

All three translators have intervened in their own particular way to provide a title that, in Spanish shows a very clear grammatical gender. All three translators have gone beyond the already mentioned linguistic “shifts” and added /omitted/modified words in order to intervene and provide their interpretation of the Spanish title in the interpolated novel. The decision to translate the apparent gender marking has taken the translators through different directions. The titles of this tale in English are either genderless (Smollett) or clearly gendered (Putnam and Grossman). All three translators have transformed the Spanish title of this story to differently introduce the readers to the impertinence curiosity of a foolish husband.

1.3 Human Gender Intervention

Textual fictional beings constantly serve as stand-ins for humans and carry with them their gendered fictional selves. The novel frequently sketches societies and their understanding of gender roles as well as expected gendered behavior. It shows the construction of female and male characters as they interact with each other in a fictitious society where race, class, status, ideology and gender intersect and are profoundly important factors. Literature is a place where the representations of female and male behaviors are characteristically shown; as Elizabeth Weed describes in “Feminist Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism,” it is “one of the privilege sites for the congealing of notions of femininity and masculinity and, at the same time, the site of their perpetual

disturbance” (2006, p. 263). The novel serves as a unique tool for gender representation.²¹

It appears that “doing gender is unavoidable” as Candace West and Don Zimmerman rationalize in “Doing Gender” (1987, p. 137); it is only reasonable to assume that gender would be present in the human characters in novels. Babies, girls, boys, adolescents, women, men, the middle-aged, the elderly, all appear as vehicles of gender identities that influence how characters are read, viewed and how they act, interact and react to each other. As Barbara Johnson states in *The Critical Difference: Essays in Contemporary Rethoric of Reading*, gender plays such an important role in fiction that “[i]f human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would be no need for literature” (1980, p. 13). Literature, novels in particular, constantly represents this biological human division and culturally induced behaviors. Literary authors represent, through language, attitudes towards femininity and masculinity to construct femaleness and/or maleness, which make up gendered identities.

Since novels are filled with issues that have to do with gender (that as discussed previously encompass the intricate arrangements between women and men, power struggles between the sexes, views on reproduction and labor, sexism, femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, or homoeroticism), it is important to carefully examine these issues when expressing in English a fictional text that was first written in another language. Many translators may choose to intervene, beyond the linguistic and structural changes mentioned, to emphasize/reject/comment on these

²¹ Novels, of course also serve to provide entertainment, help readers escape from their lives, denounce a wrong doing in a society, praise or denounce love, or relate a self-discovery or path taken, among other things.

issues. Because the illustration of these gender relations is manifested in novels, female and male behaviors become of paramount importance when translating literary texts since they affect the translation decisions a translator must make in order to interpret the femaleness and maleness of fictional characters. If novelistic translation is considered an interpretation of a particular text as it illustrates representations of masculinity and femininity, then target audiences (audiences that read a translation) are in fact reading gender in translation.

Human beings are gendered beings. They behave in particular ways determined by social expectations that label them as women and men. In the human species, following other mammals' analogy, these behaviors are forcefully decided by the genitalia they acquire while gestating inside the womb. Since literary beings in fiction mostly represent humans, we commonly find in literature shared peculiarities attributed to both women and men. Gender is inevitably embedded in human characters that populate the textual fictions that we define as novels.

Even before humans are born, they are already assigned a biological category that will influence them in many ways. It is this sex difference that will determine particular behaviors and arrangements between the sexes and bring forth “those complex gender-loaded individuals we call men and women” as Anne Fausto-Sterling clarifies in *Myths of Gender* (1985, p. 270). This gender process becomes a never-ending practice that starts with gestation. It is difficult to provide a succinct straightforward definition of gender (as difficult as providing a definition of translation). One of the definitions that seems to integrate all the aspects that affect this complicated term is the one offered by Harriet Bradley in *Fractured Identities: Patterns of Inequalities*: “Gender refers to the varied and

complex arrangements between women and men, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual division of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity” (1996, p. 203). The way in which women and men relate to each other is therefore based on the attitudes held by the sexes regarding procreation, work, and cultural space. As Robyn Wiegman and Elena Glasberg point out in *Literature and Gender: Thinking Critically through Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, the notions of femininity and masculinity play a vital importance in gender. Femininity is construed as actions, characteristics and behaviors carried out by persons characterized as females (although not limited to this sex) while masculinity is seen as actions, characteristics and behaviors carried out by persons characterized as males (although not limited to this sex). (1999, pp. 400-401). This social and cultural category; that is, gender, is determined by preconceived notions of what it means to be female and male based on particular culture attitudes and beliefs as Lizbet Goodman informs us in the Introduction to *Approaching Literature: Literature and Gender* (1996, p. vii). It should be noted that the Women’s Studies movement of the 1970s and 1980s, as Harriet Bradely points out in *Fractured Identities: Patterns of Inequality*, is mostly responsible for the academic use of the term *gender* as it used nowadays (2007, p. 14).²²

It is through Simone de Beauvoir (1949) that the social construction of gender is best seen. She is the author of the renowned statement that appears in her influential book *The*

²² It should also be mentioned that, since the nineteenth century, feminist movements were largely responsible for the new articulations of gender issues and the examination of inequalities between the sexes. The feminist movements are usually referred to in a series of *waves*. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan describe in *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, First Wave Feminism (1848-1960) concentrated on women’s right to vote, access to education and professions, rights in marriage and divorce, and birth control. Second Wave Feminism (1960-1990) was preoccupied mostly with economic equality and rights, sexual preference and lesbianism. Third Wave Feminism (1990-) challenges gender and sexuality concepts and looks at the realization of one’s politics through mass media and popular culture. All years indicated are approximate. (2004, pp. 48-172)

Second Sex: “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”²³ De Beauvoir suggests that the role of women is created by the society she is a part of, and in response to, expectations that particular society has of this sex. Men on the other hand, are also constructed, for “manhood – masculinity – is just an idea, one that each society constructs in its own way” as Michael Kaufman indicates in *Cracking the Armour: Power, Pain and the Lives of Men* (1993, p. 18). The roles for both women and men are created in response to expectations that a particular society has regarding the normative behavior of the sexes. Much later, this idea is expressed by Judith Butler in her prominent book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, where the scholar maintains that gender should not be regarded as something essential, but as a continuous performance (1999, pp. 178-179). Butler believes that gender identity is an effect of repeated performances, a series of acts and manipulated codes, customs and behaviors (1999). These continuous representations are constantly portrayed in novelistic genders and are important facets of the fictional beings shown in novels.

Human beings (as well as human characters in fiction) are said to have a *gender identity*, which represents the identifications of individuals as female or male. This concept of the self is formed during early childhood, and it does not usually change for most adults throughout their lives, although it could. As Hilary Lips illustrates in *Sex and*

²³ This quote is from the 2010 translation by Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevalier. The translation most referenced in English used to be the one produced by Howard. M. Parsely in 1953. Many scholars (among them feminists) were unhappy with that translation and accused it of being simplistic and incomplete. There have been several articles dedicated to this issue such as those by Margaret Simons, 1983 and Toril Moi, 2002. The meaningful statement *On ne naît pas femme: on le devient* has been translated differently by the translators mentioned. Parshley translates “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” while Borde and Malovany-Chevalier translate “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” without the article. Borde and Malovany-Chevalier point out that their decision was made to reflect their understanding of Beauvoir’s intention since “Woman in English used alone without an article captures woman as an institution, a concept, femininity as determined and defined by society, culture, history.”(2010, p. xviii).

Gender: an Introduction, the majority of people form a gender identity that coincides with the usual view of the expected behavior of their biological sex (that is, a heterosexual behavior where females are attracted to males, and males to females) (1988, p. 49). People, then, usually follow *gender roles*, which are linked to gender identity, and involve the set of behaviors that are deemed appropriate for one's sex as defined by a particular society (1988, p. 49). Humans (along with fictional characters that depict them) show a particular *sexual orientation*, which encompasses the attraction or predilection of an individual for sexual partners of the other sex (heterosexual), the same sex (homosexual) or both sexes (bisexual) (1988, p. 202). There are also individuals who have no desire for sex (asexual). Both gender identity and orientation may not necessarily be constant throughout a person's life, although very often it is the case.

Apart from the male/female gender identity, there are also people who were assigned a gender at birth, based on their genitals, but do not agree with this description assigned to them. These people are known as *transgender*, a term that dates from the 1980s and is attributed to Virginia Prince, an advocate for heterosexual male transvestites. As Wendy McKenna and Suzanne Kessler point out in "Transgendering Blurring the Boundaries of Gender," the term *transsexual* is also often used (2008, p. 480). Some practices associated with transgenderism are *transvestites* who often change into the clothes of the sex different from their own and *transsexuals* who permanently change their genitals through operations; a *transgender*, however, as Susan Stryker reveals is someone who decides to change "social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation" (2006, p. 4). McKenna and Kessler go on to clarify that transgender people may feel no need to change their genitals to accommodate to the

division into two mutually exclusive groups (2008, p. 483). Stryker emphasizes that transgender reflects a different view of the dominant and usual construction of gender (2008, p. 19). There are characters in fictional worlds that also question the dichotomous sexual division female/male and navigate the world as transgender. One of the most famous examples appears in the 1966 novel by Chilean José Donoso *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*) where readers are told the story of transvestite, La Manuela, co-owner of a brothel in a small town in Chile who alternates the use of feminine and masculine words when speaking of herself/himself.

Judith Butler also states that gender is not done by itself “[m]oreover, one does not “do” gender alone. One is always “doing” gender with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (2004, p. 1). The presence of others is a great influence in our lives. Michael Kaufman calls attention to the fact that gender influences the clothes we should wear, the way in which we often sit, the parts of our body to shave and expose, the type of jewelry we wear, the way we laugh, the sex to be attracted to, whether we can cry or not, the jobs that are appropriate for each sex and if we go first or second through a door (1993, p. 20). All of these decisions are marked by the proximity and interaction with others. R. W. Connel points out that both femininities and masculinities are represented through discursive practices (talking, arguing, reasoning) non-discursive practices (wages, labor, sexuality, domestic labor) as well as through routine everyday activities (2005, p. 841). Textual beings also represent their gendered selves through their words, actions and habitual activities while interacting with others. Human characters in fiction, novels in particular, are shown continuously “doing” gender throughout their fabricated

existences; a fact that should be carefully considered when translating the “performances” shown in a given novelistic cosmos.

Because gender is difference constructed and reinforced in language as Louise von Flotow argues in *Translation and Gender: Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism’* (1997, p. 8), it is only safe to assume that this linguistically expressed diversity will show up in the translation of textual differences as well. The reader of a translation often does not have or seek texts written in a language s/he does not know or fully understand and “is a dependent reader who must read the text via the lens of a third person’s interpretation, which is inspired by his/her unique temperament” as Valerie Henitiuk makes clear in her article “Translating Woman: Reading the Female Through the Male” (1999, p. 470). The gender-related issues on a text are, therefore, interpreted by the translator that expresses them according to the way s/he views that particular issue. Grammatical genders, descriptions, thoughts, actions, desires, regrets, represented linguistically, are transformed into another language when translating. The translation of grammatical gender markings (as the common ones in Spanish and the sporadic ones in English), is an important issue and one that often has translators intervening to clarify otherwise unnoticed grammatical distinction. Translators also take into account the textual representations of masculinities and femininities and the social constructs drawn from those representations when rendering a fictional text from one language to another. Grammatical gender and the textual representations of femininities and masculinities are not mutually exclusive, but interrelated so that the masculinities and femininities may be represented with grammatical gender, particularly in the case of Spanish. Gender is a very important part of identity in novelistic characters; it is a significant element of the

cultural identity(ies) in fiction that revolves around a particular social environment. Most novels continuously reflect gender in order to affirm, reinforce, argue against or show different perceptions of the behavior of female and male characters at a particular point in their lives. It is in these instances that many deliberate interventions occur.

As Douglas Robinson points out “a useful way of thinking about translation and language is that translators don’t translate *words*; they translate what *people do with words*” (2002, p. 142). It is what the words are doing that may determine the intervening action of a particular translator, in particular when it refers to translation decisions regarding gender shown in a text to be translated. There could be many reasons for a translator to intervene; one of them is through censorship.

One very covert form of intervention sometimes happens with a form of audiovisual translation known as dubbing. In this type of translation the voices of actors in a film in one language are replaced with voices in another language while trying to carefully synchronize the lip movements of the actors on the screen.²⁴ As opposed to subtitling, which provides a written version of the speech in a film usually displayed at the bottom of the screen; dubbing does not provide a chance for an immediate comparison to what is being translated.

Countries, like Spain, rely heavily on dubbing and prefer it to subtitling. Camino Gutiérrez Lanza in her essay “Spanish Film Translation and Cultural Patronage: The Filtering and Manipulation of Imported Material during Franco’s Dictatorship” discusses

²⁴ I am including Cinema as part of Literature. Some contemporary scholars consider Literature as including oral traditions, as well as audiovisual sources such as television and cinema following Paul Hernadi, (2001, p. 55).

issues related to subtitling. During the Franco dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975), dubbing fell under the supervision of Government institutions that made sure the content of films was appropriate to the prevailing ideas regarding religious and political thought (2002, pp. 141-147). In some cases in films dubbed in Spanish, the interventions by the translators and/or censors resulted in comical effects as in the case of the Spanish version of the American film *Arch of Triumph*, (directed by Lewis Milestone, 1948) which was called *Arco del triunfo* in Spanish. In the movie, Ingrid Bergman is asked whether she is married to the man, who happens to be her lover, in a particular scene, when she shakes her head to give a negative answer to the question, the dubbed character replies in the affirmative; *sí* [yes] (2002, p. 148). The censors intervened in the translation to remove what they perceived as a flaw related to a concept of inappropriate gender conduct: immorality in the character's behavior.

The American film *Love in the Afternoon* (directed by Billy Wilder, 1957) was given the inoffensive title of *Ariane* when shown in Spain. Before given permission to be shown, the movie was heavily discussed since it showed an adulterous relationship between a wealthy American man and Ariane. Lanza explains that censors removed several kisses and a love scene (2002, p. 149). There was deliberate intervention to replace specific words that were deemed inappropriate: "The constant replacements of *hombres*, 'men' (which in such a context could only refer to Ariane's lovers), by *novios*, 'boyfriends' (which implies a kind of stable, pure, and socially acceptable relationship between two people who love each other chastely), is the most remarkable modification of this type" (2002, p. 149).

The interventions in these audiovisual translations serve to enforce a particular ideology to maintain exemplary gender roles. Censors in this case have used their interventions in the translations to remove all references to particular conducts that went against the political, moral and religious standards of the time.

One curious example of translation intervention due to human gender issues can be appreciated in the translations of fairy tales. As Karen Seago discusses in her article “Aspects of Gender in Translations of ‘Sleeping Beauty’” (2004), most fairy tales were morally dubious and did not really have a didactic purpose (p. 24). The translation of some of these fairy tales, as in the case of the ones by the Grimm brothers, were treated as children’s literature and “introduced a more consciously socialising framework in which the representation of male and female characters was made to conform to norms of nineteenth century gender expectations” (2004, p. 24). Several nineteenth century translations into English of what is now known as *Sleeping Beauty (Dornröschen)* tended to make female and male characters conform to the nineteenth century normative behaviors of those sexes (2004, p. 24). The translations show a clear intervention by the translators to conform to particular societal expectations.

A clear instance of translator intervention can be appreciated when the pregnancy of the character of the queen in the tale is examined. In the German texts (which include editions by the Grimm brothers), the pregnancy happens in a pond when a crab, and later a frog, are in the water *with* the queen. In the 1823 translation by Edgar Taylor, the queen finds out about her state when a fish pokes its head out of the water and tells her. In this way, the translator appears to be “protecting her modesty and virtue against any implications” (2004, p. 32); that is, the character is not in the water with the animal. In a

later version by the same translator, the queen is walking by a river next to the castle when she encounters the fish on the bank gasping for air and throws it back into the water; the fish then prophesizes that the queen will have a child (2004, p. 33). This particular translator intervened in order to carefully depict a behavior that was more in accordance with the beliefs of his target culture.

In the same fairy tale, the king is shown reacting to the birth of his daughter in a very emotional way. In the later editions in German, he is so pleased with the event that “he loses control of his faculties, even to some extent his reasoning faculties” (2004, p. 26). The English translations, however, wanted to show the king in control at all times following nineteenth century conceptions of what it meant to be a man. This can be appreciated with:

The meaning of the German phrasing 'vor Freude sich nicht zu lassen wußte' (1819:176; 1857:257) is that the king 'did not know what to do for joy' but also 'did not know what to do with himself for joy'. This excessive emotional state and loss of control is a feature which the English translations are careful to temper and in some instances even remove.

(2004, p. 27)

Interventions by the translators in this fairy tale served to maintain and reinforce a view preferred for a particular society reading gender expectations. The translators have no qualms about changing, replacing or removing parts of the texts that may go against their ideology or that of the society for which they are translating.

The combination of a particular sexual orientation and a sociolect associated with it has, in many occasions, given rise to intervention. There are fictional texts that may represent a particular sexual orientation such as homosexuality; a sexual orientation that is abundantly present in *Pronombres personales*. Characters that are gay reflect a particular sexuality that is very often textually marked, so as Alberto Mira describes in “Pushing the Limits of Faithfulness: A Case for Gay Translation,” it becomes relevant to “be able to read the signifiers in an informed way, and more importantly, to be able to transfer them to a different culture” (1999, p. 111). For some translators, it is imperative to see how the gay culture works in the source and target culture and, then find a way to express this cultural manifestation in the translation (1999, p. 123). Intervention may be deemed necessary to signal aspects of a gay culture.

Keith Harvey (1998) discusses at length the translation of a particular form of gay speech known as *camp*. Harvey defines camp as “an interactional space that gay men, in particular have developed for both defensive purposes and for reasons of bonding and solidarity with other queers” (2000b, p. 147). As this scholar points out, “fictional representations of talk are *constructed* deliberately by an author for the purposes of character development and narrative advancement: real language use is a reflection of the sociolinguistic group(s) to which speakers belong” (1998, p. 298).²⁵

²⁵ Harvey (2000b) also describes four strategies used to signal camp talk: *Paradox*, *Inversion*, *Ludicrism* and *Parody* (p. 243). *Paradox*, for this scholar, involves discrepancies in register; *Inversion* is manifested through reversal of gender proper names or grammatical gender markings; *Ludicrism*, a term that for this author has its roots in the Latin *ludere* (play) and ludicrous (absurd, ridiculous), uses names that reference physical characteristics, puns and word-play and double entendres, and *Parody*, which is represented by innuendo, hyperbole, exclamation and vocative terms (pp. 243-256).

Harvey (1998) cites an example from a 1998 French novel by Renaud Camus entitled in English *Tricks*. The narrator of the novel meets an acquaintance while *cruising* (walking around in a public space in search of potential sexual partners) and exclaims: *mais vous vous dévergondez!* [but you, you are shameless!] The translator, Richard Howard (1996), translated this expression as *you whore!* As Harvey points out, the French text appears to make a comment on the behavior of the person seen cruising while doing so in an insulting manner through the use of a formal register (*se dévergonder*), the English translator intervenes by using a more vulgar word *whore* which is a camp tactic of employing a term associated with women (1998, pp. 303). The translator believes it necessary to intervene to mark this particular encounter and make the gay man more visible in order to surface a specific homosexual identity.

There are obvious interventions used by some translators to signal a particular ideology. Feminist translators intervene in a very overt fashion and openly justify their strategies. Feminism has been concerned with the position of women in society and the existence of patriarchy (the predominance of higher authority for males in a society or group). It is also concerned with language as an instrument to express patriarchal ideas. The decision for many feminists translators to intervene in their translations is based on their ideas regarding language which as Oana-Helena Andone describes in “Gender Issues in Translation” see as “an important cause of women’s oppression because it is the medium through which women were taught their subordinate place in the world,” (2010, p. 141) or consider the “standard syntax and the established literary genres as means of reflecting and perpetuating patriarchal power structures” (2010, p. 141). The driving force behind feminist translation is to undo the patriarchal establishment through various

strategies that want to either make much more visible patriarchal ideology or hide it from view. Feminist translators also attempt to provide awareness regarding the position of women in society by translating works by women and adding female authors to a particular literary canon. To achieve their goals they often explain feminist issues in paratextual matter or intervene in the translated text.

The concept of Feminist translations, Louise von Flotow informs us, appears “to have developed as a method of translating the focus on and critique of “patriarchal language” by feminist writers in Quebec (1991, p. 72). Intervention is very often used in feminist translation. Françoise Massardier-Kenney in her 1997 article entitled “Towards a Redefinition of Feminist Translation Practice” divides feminist translation practices into *author-centered* or *translator centered* (58). Under the author-centered strategies she includes *recovery* (expanding the literary cannon of women writers through translation and *commentary* (the use of paratextual matter to signal the importance of the feminine/woman). Under the translator centered, she includes *commentary* (which is the same as the one included in the author-centered category but serves a different purpose: employing paratextual matter to describe the motives of the translator and the way they affect that particular translated text), *parallel texts* (texts in the target language produced in a similar situation that serve as reference), and *collaboration* (working with other translators and/or the author of the source text) (58-65).

The ways in which feminist translators carry out their task has also been described by Louise von Flotow (1997). She names the strategies used by these translators as *Supplementing Prefacing and Footnoting* and *Hijacking*. *Supplementing* in feminist translation is a strategy that can be seen in the English version of a line in a 1976 play by

Nicole Brossard entitled in French *La nef des sorcières*, translated in English as *A Clash of Symbols* by Linda Gaboriau in 1979. The line in the play ‘*Ce soir j’entre dans l’histoire sans relever ma jupe*’ (which could be translated as *Tonight I shall enter into history without lifting up my skirt*) was translated by Gaboriau as “tonight I shall step into history without opening my legs” (1979, p. 35). The translator intervenes with her translation to create a stronger image that describes a more physical action with a much more explicit sexual connotation. *Prefacing and footnoting* are usual ways for translators to reflect on their work, but are used by feminist translators to stress their active presence in their translations; that is, intervening. The term *hijacking* was taken by Flotow from “a critic of a feminist translation, a Montreal journalist (a translator himself), who attacks Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood for her excessive interference in the translation of *Lettres d’une autre* by Lise Gauvin... (1991, p. 78). The term, therefore, indicates the deliberate intervention in a text by a translator in order to incorporate or make more visible contemporary feminist ideology where there was none. Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood in her introduction to her translation of *Lettres d’une autre* by Lise Gauvin explains “this translation has used every possible feminist translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language” (qtd. in Flotow, 1997, p. 29). The novel in English is entitled *Letters from an Other* and very noticeably shows the translator’s name as co-author on the cover; an strategy that some feminist translators consider an important translation strategy and one that serves to give equal footage to a text and its translation. She also avoids general English word order and prefers *her and his* and *women and men*. In addition, Flotow informs us that she:

translates Québécois, the adjective designating the population of Québec, into English as *Québécois-e-s*. She thus takes the French masculine plural adjective (which supposedly includes all the female habitants of Quebec) and uses a source language feminist neologism, which specifically adds the female component with the hyphen plus the silent *e*, to translate the term into English”

(1997, p. 29).

The strategies used by feminist translators originated many negative comments. One of the criticisms of feminist translation has to do with the extensive notes, both footnotes and endnotes, that often accompany a feminist translation; something that can be regarded as a distraction from the actual text. A strong criticism of feminist strategies comes from Brazilian scholar Rosemary Arrojo. She believes that “the idealism of feminist translation appears simply to be a reverse-image of masculinist configurations” (qtd. in Simon, 1996, p. 28). Arrojo’s criticism against some feminist practices of translation is based on three issues: feminist translators claim to be extremely faithful to the original but take possession of it and intervene for feminist reasons; feminist translators see other theorists as aggressive, yet they employ strategies like “highjacking” which aggressively exploit feminist theory for their own gain; and feminist translators are not consistent with poststructuralist and deconstructionist ideas as they claim (1994, pp. 147-163).

Recent detailed explanations for intervention in a translation can be seen in several essays related to the translation of *La Habana para un infante difunto* [Havana for

a Dead Infante], translated as *Infante's Inferno* by Suzanne Jill Levine. The author of this lengthy novel is the Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929-2005). Suzanne Jill Levine is a scholar, critic and renowned translator and author of several books on translation.²⁶ As it is the case with some of her other work, the translation of *La Habana Para un Infante Difunto* was a collaboration with the author. The novel was translated with the author, and Cabrera Infante described the process as “Closelaboration with the author” (1991, p. xiii). This translator makes use of co-authorship, utilizing one of the feminist translation strategies previously discussed. *La Habana Para un Infante Difunto* was first published in 1979 while the translation dates from 1984.

For Levine *Infante's Inferno* could be described as a semibiographical chronicle of the sexual escapades of an unnamed narrator in pre-Castro Havana. It is an adolescent's quest to become a man through his many experiences with women. Levine reminds us that at the end of the novel the protagonist is taken inside a vagina, regressing to the stage before infancy (1991, p. 90). Isabel Álvarez Borland explains that the novel contains 11 chapters and an epilogue, and it alternates between descriptions of the Havana of the sexual mores of the 40's and 50's and the narrator's own sexual adventures (1985, p. 44).

The title in Spanish is a play on words of a piano piece by Maurice Ravel entitled *Pavane pour une infant défunte* [Pavane for a Dead Princess]. In addition, the title of the musical piece in Spanish is *Pavana para una infanta difunta*, and when compared with the title of the novel *La Habana para un Infante Difunto*, it can be seen that Cabrera

²⁶ Suzanne Jill Levine has translated many Latin American writers into English such as José Donoso, Adolfo Boy Casares, Manuel Puig and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, among others. She was the recipient of the first PEN USA West Elinor D. Randall Prize for Literary Translation.

Infante plays with the similarities in both titles (pavana/Habana, Infanta/Infante). The English title already shows a clear intervention by the translator when she uses *Infante's Inferno* as her translation and decides to use an allusion to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* section of *The Divine Comedy*. For Levine "[t]his book is a Dantesque voyage into the Havana of Infante's youth, in search of not one but many Beatrices, in search of love, or rather sex: the dead *infante* remains caught in the circles of the hell and heaven of Havana" (1984, p. 114).

Suzanne Jill Levine is conscious of her intentions when translating this novel and has explained her decisions in detailed in two of her writings: "Translation as Sub(version): On Translating Infante's *Inferno*" (1984), and *The Subversive Scribe* (1991). This translator explains her position as a woman and translator regarding the apparent sexism of the male narrator: "Where does this leave a woman as translator of such a book? Is she not a double betrayer, to play Echo to this Narcissus, repeating the archetype once again?" (1984, p. 92). Levine then argues that her role as translator is not to repeat the sexist model shown by the narrator of Cabrera Infante's novel. Levine decides to intervene on many occasions and subvert, eliminate, soften or change the sexist views of the male narrator. It is a feminist strategy that is questioned by scholars like Rosemary Arrojo: "Levine deliberately rewrites Infante's text and turns a novel which "mocks" and "manipulates" "women and their words" into one that mocks and manipulates men and their words" (1994, p. 152). Arrojo later adds: "Levine's "womanhandling," of Infante's text can also remind us of an act of "castration" which is "justified" by the feminist need to subvert an obviously sexist "original"" (Ibid, p. 152).

Levine's subversion of the text and her interventions, according to Arrojo, appear to make this translator just as guilty of the sexism that the Cabrera Infante's narrator shows.

Levine further explains the reasons for her subversion: "When the Havana narrator makes the jaded statement "no one man can rape a woman," the infernal translator undermines this popular myth with the book's own corrosive mechanism of alliteration and writes "no wee man can rape a woman" (1984, p. 92). Levine justifies her intervention to attenuate a particular macho ideology and believes she is justified in belittling the man. She adds:

Since *La Habana para un infante difunto* mocks popular sexual mythology, subverts traditional narrative, and sets verbal reality above all others, the more subversive *Infante's Inferno* is, the better. Verbal logic supplants fidelity when "fines de siglo" is translated not as "turn of the century" but as the "gay nineties," or when "Amor propio" (the title initiating a chapter in praise of masturbation) is translated not as *amour propre*, self-esteem or self-love but as "Love Thyself." (After all the Bible is the book of books!) And the text continues to metamorphose blasphemously into another text when the following chapter (about the narrator's pursuit of women in movie theaters) is titled "Love Thy Neighbor" instead of false love, a literal translation of the Spanish saying "Amor trompero" (the original chapter title).

(1984, pp. 92-93).

Levine's extensive interventions can be appreciated in the translation of the titles of many chapters of Cabrera Infante's novel. Her decisions reflect a clear ideology that Levine is not afraid to point out since she believes her interventions are justified.

The re-expression of an otherness expressed in a fictional text is carried out by the subjective interpretation of a translator who intervenes in particular ways to produce a linguistic transformation. This transformation, however, is not an act of prestidigitation, a deceitful wondrous trick but a careful conscious intervention where a human re-tales the adventures and misadventures of fictional characters. As Kathleen Davies points out in *Translation Theories Explained: Deconstruction and Translation*, translation is a creative project: "the translator can never simply re-present an intended meaning, but must make performative decisions." (Davies, 2001, p. 57). Literary translation is interpretative otherness.

I believe translators have the choice to intervene, beyond structural and linguistic reasons, when providing the transformation of a text from one language to another. Grammatical gender very often needs to be made explicit not only to show the subject of a particular sentence, but to reflect a particular gendered stance. The descriptions, interactions and thoughts of fictional beings often reflect a particular gendered view that may need to be made more visible through an intervention. Some translation scholars, such as Juliane House, believe that the linguistic and the social worlds represented by words should be separate: "I have always pleaded for separating linguistic, textual considerations from social ones" (2008, p. 16). Contrary to what Juliane House states "In many – if not most – cases it might be wiser to not intervene at all" (2008, p. 16), in many cases translators, myself included, feel they should intervene. As Sherry Simon

makes clear “[t]he translator, the agent of language, faces the text as a director directs a play, as an actor interprets a script” (1996, p. 143). That is s/he intervenes at every step of the way through choices, alternatives, and careful selection of words, particularly to represent the femininities and masculinities portrayed in a particular novelistic text.

I believe my translation does not censor, supplement, “highjack” the source text or create neologisms. I do intervene in unusual ways when I deem it necessary to express a particular word or series of words that, in my view, reflect grammatical or human gender, or both. Following Robinson (2002) I did not translate words, I translated what a novelist, Isaac Chocrón, *did* with words to bring to the surface gender issues that, in my opinion, would not have been as noticed in the target text. Transforming fictional texts from one language to another requires careful analysis of the human characters in the narrations that we read under the category of novels. Grammatical gender plays special importance when a text to be translated has many more markings of this kind than the target language. The textual representations of femininities and masculinities and attitudes of both female and male characters towards each other also require particular examination when making translation decisions and may require an intervention that goes further than the usual translation shifts previously described. Although many translators reproach deliberate interventions in translations, these are often conducted when dealing with issues related to gender: be it to censor particular cinematic behaviors, modify actions and feelings in a fairy tale, adjust quixotic notions, reinforce homosexual speech, signal feminist ideology, undermine patriarchal beliefs, or make more noticeable issues related to gender markings and/or female and male representations and behavior. We may

agree/disagree, condone/condemn, accept/reject interventions by translators, but the fact of the matter is that these do occur.

The following chapter discusses the life and works of Isaac Chocrón, an author with an ample contribution as a playwright and novelist in Venezuela. My reason for translating a little-known author is to “intervene” by making one of this author’s works more visible to an English speaking audience.

CHAPTER TWO: Novelistic Intervention

2.1 Proposing Translator

This chapter considers my intervention as a translator when deliberately choosing to translate the novella *Pronombres personales* into English.²⁷ It briefly examines the life and works of the author, Isaac Chocrón, and provides an analysis of the novella while discussing the reasons for my particular selection (intervention).

Recently, the role of the translator as someone that directly intervenes in the selection process of literary texts to be translated has been examined in more detail by scholars such as André Lefevere, in his essay “Translation: Its genealogy in the West” (1990, p. 24) and Susan Bassnett, in “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies” (1998, pp. 123-140). There have been many instances in which a specific text has been translated into another language thanks to the actions and efforts of a translator who believed a specific work should be presented in another language. Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko

²⁷ The term *novella* is not really used in Spanish where the term *novela* covers both short and long fictional works. Spanish would use *novela corta* (short novel) for the English *novella*. A few centuries ago the word *novela* was used to describe some short stories inside a novel, such as the one I described from *Don Quijote*.

also point out that when translators take part in the selection of texts to be translated, they also “participate in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape culture” (2002, p. xxi). Translators of literary texts often have a much bigger role in originating the translation process. Translators of non-literary texts (financial and business documents, medical information, etc.) almost always rely on a client for the selection of a text to be translated.

The conscious intervention of translators in the selection of literary texts to be translated into another language has had a rich history. Margaret Tyler (birth and death dates unknown, fl. 1678) is one of the better known female translators of her time. She is responsible for the translation into English of a novel by Diego Ortuñez de Calahorra entitled in Spanish *Espejo de príncipes y cavalleros* (1555) and to which she gave the name *A Mirrour of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578). Douglas Robinson describes at length the role of this translator in “Theorizing Translation in a Woman’s Voice.” Robinson informs us that in her translation, Tyler includes a preface in which she defends her translation covering “two separate points: why she chose to translate a “manly” tale about ‘princely deeds and knighthood;’ and how she felt justified in translating anything at all” (1995, p. 158-159). This female translator intervenes in two ways: by making members of her sex more visible as translators, and by selecting a literary text she feels should be translated. Tyler was not only an important figure in the history of translation because of her role as a forerunner for other women, but also because of her intervention as far as the selection of a text to be brought into another language which, as Sherry Simon points out, “seems to have introduced this genre [chivalry] into England; its immense influence created the fashion for Spanish chivalresque romances in England,

and it was the first of many similar works to appear after it in English” (1996, p. 48). It was because of the intervention by this translator that this sixteenth century Spanish novel and its particular genre became known in another culture.

Feminist activism has been responsible for unearthing works written by women from earlier periods. It is through the intervention of several translators that the works of early women writers were brought to light. An important work of this nature is *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece*, a collection of lyric poetry by women of ancient Greece translated and edited by Diane Rayor (1991). This translator's decision to intervene has uncovered works that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Projects such as *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing, 1780-1830*, edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (1994), have made known valuable texts by women that discuss the important issues of race and slavery. Included in this Kadish & Massardier-Kenney collection of essays, is a discussion of the importance that Aphra Behn's 1696 novel *Oronooko* had when translated into French, and its effects to stimulate further anti-slavery writing in French which Sherry Simon identifies in *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (1996, p. 59).²⁸

Intervention by translators was greatly responsible for bringing forth many 20th century Latin American writers into the American readership. It was thanks to translators

²⁸ The 1754 translation was by Pierre Antoine de La Place and it contains several changes (interventions). The translator, for example, changes some of the characters and the tragic ending. It should be noted that, as Kadish & Massardier-Kenney explain, at the time of the translation, as it was “the accepted standard for translators to change the original substantially” (2009, p. 20)

such as Gregory Rabassa, who worked closely with the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, that this was possible. As Rabassa describes in his book *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Discontents, a Memoir*, in the 1960s, the Center became “the organization most responsible for the dissemination in the United States of the works of the Latin American “Boom”” (2005, p. 75). As Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz argue in *Translation and the Rise of Inter-American Literature* Rabassa has been said to have mentored fellow translators at the Translation Program at the Center for Inter-American Relations and to have played an important role in the marketing of Latin American literature to both publishers and agents in the United States and Canada (2007, p. xvii). Rabassa selected or recommended many of the literary texts written in Spanish and Portuguese to be translated into English, and as Low and Fitz mention, it has been argued that “it was actually Rabassa’s superlative talents as a writer/translator that not only influenced but helped ignite a reinvigoration of American fiction during the late 1960s and 1970s” (2007, p. 137). It is believed, as María Constanza Guzmán points out in her essay “Translating Latin America: Reading Translators’ Archives,” that Rabassa “played a key role in the internationalization of Latin American Literature, which turned out to be a significant element in the formation of its canon and the configuration of its global image” (2011, p. 92). Rabassa’s intervention, as Tyler’s before him, had an effect in making known a particular literature written in Spanish to an anglophone country.

Since the last half of the 20th century, important works from Latin American writers have been continuously translated from many parts of Spanish-speaking Americas. Works from Mexico, Argentina, and Chile, however, have predominated in the Latin American literary field and many literary translations south of the United States come

from those nations. Writers from countries like Venezuela, with the exception of the well-known Rómulo Gallegos (1884-1969) and Arturo Uslar Petri (1906-2001), have not gotten as much attention as writers from other parts of the Spanish-speaking worlds and therefore have not been translated into English as much.²⁹ Authors like Isaac Chocrón, remain virtually unknown outside of Venezuela and a handful of cities in Latin America where some his plays have been occasionally staged.³⁰

Although most novels, as discussed earlier, represent, in one form or another, gendered individuals that share and/or struggle with members of their own or different sex, Chocrón's novels provide a rich look into the societal norms that regulate women and men's behavior; his novelistic worlds often reflect the ideas, mores, and attitudes, apparent in Venezuelan society regarding issues of gender. Because of my interest in the field of Gender Studies and the representations of femininities and masculinities in literature, I have chosen to look at an author fairly unknown outside of his native country, and to explore the way in which this writer represents the range of possibilities of behavior for women and men. I am not equating my selection of the text with the influential decisions of the translators mentioned (Tyler, Rabassa) but merely pointing out my intervention and reasons for selecting Chocrón's novella. To date, only some of

²⁹ Venezuela has a rich literary tradition. The first novel published in this country dates from 1842, and bears the title *Los mártires* (The Martyrs) and is the work of Fermín Toro (1806-1865). Other important writers were Eduardo Blanco (1838-1912), Manuel Vicente Romero García (1864-1917), Miguel Eduardo Pardo (1868-1905), Manuel Díaz Rodríguez (1871-1927), Rufino Blanco Fombona (1874-1944), José Rafael Pocaterra (1889-1955), Teresa de la Parra (1891-1936), Enrique Bernardo Núñez (1895-1964), Mariano Picón Salas (1901-1964), Manuel Otero Silva (1908-1985) and Francisco Herrrea Luque (1927-1991). Among the more contemporary writers we can find Francisco Rivera (1933-), Luis García Britto (1940-), Ana Teresa Torres (1945-), Juan Carlos Chirinos (1967-), Vicente Ulive-Schnell (1976-), and Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez (1967-) among others.

³⁰ Two of his plays were staged in Spanish in New York during the late 70s and 80s at El Repertorio Español, New York's SpanishTheater Repertory Company.

Isaac Chocrón's plays have been translated into English: *OK, La máxima felicidad* [*The Ultimate Bliss*] and *Clipper* (1995).

2.2 Isaac Chocrón

Isaac Chocrón was a playwright, essayist, novelist and theater director who was born in Maracay, Venezuela in 1930. He died due to cancer-related complications in November 2011 in Caracas, Venezuela. I was fortunate enough to interview this author during the summer of 2011 and I have included this interview in the Addendum. In an interview conducted by L. H. Castillo and published in the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional* in 2002 the author commented "I was born left-handed in Maracay and in the bosom of a well-off Sephardic Jewish family" (p. 17).³¹ Chocrón, along with Román Chalbaud and José Ignacio Cabrujas, founded El Nuevo Grupo, a theatrical institution that during its twenty-one years of existence (1967-1988), was of substantial importance to Venezuelan theater. His plays have been presented in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Lima, Madrid, México City, Montevideo, Miami, and New York. He is better known as a playwright, although he has authored several novels.

In the interview I conducted with this author (see Addendum), Chocrón describes himself as Venezuelan Sephardic Jew (2011). He is quoted by Susana Rotker as saying he grew up studying in a Catholic school where he received "impeccable catechism lessons" (1991, p. 137).³² He also studied Hebrew at a synagogue in Caracas. He was openly homosexual, and homosexuality plays an important part in all his work. In 1945, at fifteen, his father sent him to military school in the United States where Rotker quotes

³¹ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

³² This is my translation of the Spanish text.

Chocrón again, “it was mandatory to sing Protestant hymns and say Protestant prayers” (1991, p. 140).³³ He went on to study Comparative Literature at Syracuse University where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts and later obtained a Master’s Degree in International Studies from Columbia University. It was during this time that he wrote his first novel *Pasaje* (Passage/Voyage) (1956). This work contains one of the preoccupations of this author described by Darrell Lockhart in *Jewish Writers of Latin America: a Dictionary*: “the presentation of individuals who feel like foreigners within their own country, and even within their own family nucleus” (1997, p. 77). In 1956, he returned to Caracas to start a career as an economist in the Venezuelan State Department; a post he left a few years later to dedicate himself to writing. He also did postgraduate work in Economic Development at Manchester University in England.

Apart from being one of the founding members of the theater group El Nuevo Grupo, he also served as President of the Asociación Venezolana de Profesionales del Teatro, President of the Consejo Nacional de Teatro, and Vice-President of the Teatro Juvenil de Venezuela. He was a professor at Simón Bolívar University in Caracas at the Escuela de Arte de la Universidad Central de Venezuela and at the Escuela Nacional de Teatro. The author was, for several years, a professor of theater at Simón Bolívar University, at the Escuela de Arte de la Universidad Central de Venezuela and the National School of Theater. He was recently awarded the honorary degree Doctor Honoris Causa by the Universidad Central de Venezuela. In addition, he held visiting faculty positions at several universities in the United States.

³³ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

2.2.1 Plays

Isaac Chocrón was a successful playwright who wrote more than 20 plays which were presented on stages throughout Venezuela and Latin America. As mentioned, two of his plays, *OK*, (1969) and *La revolución* [The revolution] (1972), were presented in Spanish at El Repertorio Español, New York's Spanish Theater Repertory Company. Chocrón often mentioned that his plays were not written with the intention to shock or change people's attitudes. In an interview with Gloria Waldman in *Latin American Review*, the playwright stated: "My plays are about people; the theater is people. Of course they [sic] are people who move around our society, so they have to reflect values and situations in our society; after all, any serious work of creativity is necessarily a reflection of the society it comes from" (1977, p. 107). These reflections permeate the plays of this author who strives to give spectators a glimpse of the gendered interactions of women and men in Venezuelan society. Susana Rotker believes that this author's plays are written in such a way that Chocrón's audiences can identify with the conflicts of minorities presented in the texts (Jewish-Venezuelan, homosexual, artist, being foreign in any country) even though they may not be included in them (2009, p. 52).

Chocrón's first play was entitled *Mónica y el florentino* (*Monica and the Florentine*) (1980) and it was first staged for the Primer Festival de Teatro Venezolano in 1959. Two years later, in 1961, he wrote the play *El quinto infierno* (*The Fifth Hell*) (1961). His first real success on stage, however, was *Animales feroces* (*Ferocious Animals*) (1963). As Foster points out, the play uses scenes in a non-linear fashion to portray a disorganized Jewish family that blames one another for their failures and for the suicide of one of the

characters (1994, p. 111). Chocrón's Jewish identity surfaced again in his play *Clipper* (1987) which deals with the relationships of members of two families of Sephardic origin as Darrel Lockhart describes in *Jewish Writers of Latin America: a Dictionary* (1997, p. 79). The protagonist is sent against his will to a military academy, to learn to behave according to societal expectations and also so that he "becomes a man."

Another important play is *Asia y el Lejano Oriente* (Asia and the Far East) (1966) where a group of people sell their homeland to foreign investors. A year later, he wrote an experimental play that contains no real argument, *Tric-Trac* (1967). This play has either a male or female cast with characters that are identified only by a number and who try to find a culture for themselves. Chocrón also wrote the libretto for the opera *Doña Bárbara* (1967) based on the novel by the same title by Venezuelan writer and Nobel Prize winner Rómulo Gallegos with music by Caroline Lloyd. The opera had its premiere at the Juares de Barquisimeto Theater in Caracas on July 15, 1967 with Rómulo Gallegos in attendance.

Sexual orientation is a topic very often present in the works of this author. Some of Chocrón's plays show a sexuality that could be considered shocking and unusual. One play that received a lot of attention was his play *O.K.* (1969), in which two older women share a younger male lover until one of them decides to sell to the other her rights to the man. One of Chocrón's most polemical plays is his work *La revolución* (The Revolution) (1972). In this case an old transvestite and his former lover, who is also his manager, fight with each other while they prepare to act in front of an audience. This play, which the author suggests should be staged without any particular set design including only a circle of light with the rest of the stage in semi-darkness, offers a homophile content,

which is as Rubén Monasterios explains in his introduction to *Teatro Completo I: Comedias Inciviles, La revolución, Los navegao, OK* (*Complete Plays I: Uncivil Comedies, The revolution, The Navigating, OK*) “exhibited a criticism, not to homosexuality itself, as far the possibility of its existence, but to marginalization understood as a psychological phenomenon” (2008, p. 146).³⁴ The play *La máxima felicidad* (The Great Happiness, 1974) showcases a homosexual couple who take on a wife who happens to be a prostitute one of the men brought home. Far from becoming a disaster, the trio accepts one another and forms a peculiar family arrangement.

The diverse and complex arrangements between the sexes take center stage in Chocrón’s plays. Many of this playwright’s characters question the traditional normative conducts expected of women and men as they navigate through their fictional lives and portray diverse femininities and masculinities while struggling with their imaginary existences, actions that intersect with their views regarding their own social position, religion and sexuality. As Leonardo Azparren Giménez describes in *El teatro venezolano y otros teatros* (Venezuelan Theater and Other Theaters) Chocrón provides texts that illustrate “a growing skepticism regarding the transcendent value of human actions” (1978, p. 126).³⁵

³⁴ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

³⁵ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

2.2.2 Novels

This famous Venezuelan playwright has also written a total of eight novels, his first one being the already mentioned *Pasaje* which the author wrote when he was 21 years old. The novel takes place on a ship returning to Venezuela from New York. The main character, Ismael, is a Venezuelan native going back to his country after a prolonged stay in New York and discusses the social conventions of his time with fellow Venezuelan passengers. In order to return to Venezuelan society, he learns that he must comply with specific societal norms.

In 1970, he published *Se ruega no tocar la carne por razones de higiene* (Please Don't Touch the Meat for Hygienic Reasons). In the novel two loners, a woman and a man, who are continuously looking for fresh experiences and new sensations, travel to rural Venezuela but are unable to communicate with each other even though they share a common solitude and several frustrations.

Isaac Chocrón is responsible for what is considered the first homosexual novel in Venezuelan literature, *Pájaro de mar por tierra* (*Bleached Seagull*)³⁶ (1972) which is the story of a homosexual (bisexual) young man who goes to study in New York City and later returns to Venezuela. The novel is narrated through several narrators. The protagonist is Miguel Antonio Casas Planas, also known as Mickey, whose father is a macho, middle-class, drunken man who constantly curses and whose mother is usually pregnant and at the mercy of her tyrannical husband. Micky gets to New York, escaping his native Venezuela while undergoing a series of adventures, and becoming a hustler

³⁶ This is the way this work is sometimes referred to in English (see Foster, 1994, p. 111). The same critic refers to this work as *Landlocked Seagull*. The Spanish title could be interpreted in several ways in particular since the word *pájaro* is often used in Latin America as a euphemism for homosexuals.

who is later temporarily kept by a gay lover. He also marries a woman of Honduran descent, a psychiatrist, in order to be able to remain in the United States. When he returns to Caracas, he continues having several adventures and mysteriously disappears. The story is reconstructed by several narrators who are being interviewed by the author, Isaac Chocrón (a character in the novel), as the characters write him letters recounting the life of Miguel/Micky. As Foster describes, the two main narratives in the novel are the self-identity search by Micky and the continuous efforts by the women and men surrounding him to pursue him sexually (1991, p. 51). The novel shows the sexual and emotional exile of the protagonist through statements of the people that knew him, and, as Foster reminds us, portrays “a gay protagonist who looks and acts natural, a story that recognizes the existence of a gay subculture, even if that recognition gives prominence to the cruising and promiscuity of the gay world” (1994, p. 113).

The epistolary *Rómpase en caso de incendio* (Break Glass in Case of Fire) was published in 1975. The novel is composed of letters that the main character, a Sephardic Venezuelan, sends to several friends, including the author Issac Chocrón (who again appears as a character in the novel). It follows a protagonist after the death of his wife and son in a Caracas earthquake as he sets out on a journey to Madrid, Melilla, and Tangier to try to find his roots and obtain spiritual harmony.

One of Chocrón’s most famous narrative texts is a detective novel published in 1982 entitled *50 vacas gordas* (*50 Fat Cows*). The protagonist is a woman, and Chocrón narrates the story in first person. The writer explained to Miyó Vestrini in *Isaac Chocrón frente al espejo* (*Isaac Chocrón Facing the Mirror*) that it was “very difficult for [him], since the narration is in the first person and the one doing the talking is a woman. [He]

had to get information about many feminine things, from menstruation to endless other things typical of women” (1980, p. 12).³⁷ The female protagonist is someone who has enjoyed the prosperity of Venezuelan oil fields, and one day happens to accidentally witness a murder of a woman she does not know. Her actions to identify the murderer change her passive life into an active one. Her accidental witnessing of the event motivates her unsuccessful attempt to bring the culprit to justice. The female character fights against the conventions set for women and unsuccessfully tries to bring to justice the powerful man responsible for the murder.

In 1988, he published *Todo una dama* (A Complete Lady)³⁸, a look at the world of Latin American émigrés and diplomats in Washington D.C. The main character, Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, is an important Venezuelan diplomat who is very much respected by his peers and who represses his sexual attraction toward his male driver. The protagonist holds back his homosexuality for fear of jeopardizing his bureaucratic position. He even enters into a conventional marriage. His colleagues, however, refer to him as *todo una dama* (a real lady/he’s quite the lady) because of his excessive politeness and good manners.

His last novel, published in 2005, was *El vergel* (The Orchard), and it is an autobiographical novel that brings forth the nostalgic views of the author’s place of birth, Maracay, during the 1930s. The main themes present in the text are living at home with

³⁷ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

³⁸ The title in Spanish is actually grammatically incorrect. The author uses a masculine adjective (*todo* [complete/whole/all]) to modify the feminine noun and article (*una dama* [a lady]). This is purposely done to show the sexual ambiguity of the main character who represses his attraction to men, therefore making him closer to the heteronormative concept of woman. It would be difficult to accomplish this effect in the translation which could be perhaps rendered as *He’s Quite a Lady* or something similar. *A Complete Lady* is the name usually given in English when discussing this novel (see Foster, 1994, p. 113).

loved ones, the chosen “family,” Judaism, love, and the search for a sexual identity that is different from the norm.

Chocrón’s novels are filled with women and men struggling to adapt to societal expectations of the sexes. From his very first novel in which a young man struggles to be accepted into a society and the expected behaviors that this entails, to his penultimate, *Pronombres personales*, where several characters reflect on their lives while questioning/accepting societal positions of women and men, Chocrón’s fictional characters often struggle with their gendered identities, their lives and, in many occasions, with their sexualities. The genders of this writer’s novelistic characters are often questioned/discussed, and gay characters are frequently present in many of Chocrón’s works; Foster reiterates that for this author: “homosexuality is often interpreted and regarded as another dimension of human sexuality” (1994, p. 114).

Chocrón’s novels provide an inside look into societies and their understanding of gender roles as well as expected gendered behavior. The female and male characters interact with each other in the fictitious societies, be it a young man who struggles with his identity aboard a ship (*Pasajes*), a lonely couple who tries to communicate with each other through new experiences (*Se ruega no tocar la carne por razones de higiene*), a young man who travels to New York in search of himself and his sexuality (*Pájaro de mar por tierra*), a woman who tries to redefine her position in society as she attempts to get justice (*50 vacas gordas*), a civil servant who struggles to hide his homoerotic desires (*Todo una dama*), and a group of women and men who display their relationships while wrestling with themselves in an attempt to overcome disaster(s) (*Pronombres personales*).

2.2.2.1 Pronombres personales

Pronombres personales was first published as a serial story in the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional* in 20 installments during the month of August in 2002. Later during that same year it was published as a novel. The novel takes place in the course of two years and it revolves around two tragedies: the torrential rains in December 1999 that occurred in the state of Vargas in Venezuela and that left more than 14,000 people dead and caused millions of dollars in damage, and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. A society in crisis is one of the central themes of this captivating novella, and the characters of the novella reflect on Venezuela and the natural disaster that desolated the Vargas Province of that country during the month prior to the new millennium. The protagonists are members of a chosen “family” having mostly rejected their biological one. The novel takes place in different locations: Caracas, Vargas, New York and Weston, Florida (nicknamed *Westonzuela* because of the large number of Venezuelans living in that town) and it is divided into two parts of ten chapters each. The first ten chapters are named after personal pronouns while the last ten chapters are titled after different types of indefinite and demonstrative pronouns. The novel also serves to illustrate the hypocrisy of the Venezuelan middle class. The disastrous torrential rains serve as a catalyst for the reflection that this tragedy ensues. The Vargas disaster and the increasing instability of Venezuela, force the characters to reevaluate their current priorities and to make decisions about their immediate futures.

There are 19 narrators, 7 female and 12 male, that alternate to weave an intricate description of a society consisting of members preoccupied with matters as diverse as

love, marriage, sex, approval, money, weight problems, children, politics, and nationality; issues that constantly intersect with gender and sexuality through the characters' Christian, Jewish or agnostic beliefs. The novel carefully depicts the power struggles between women and men, attitudes regarding employment for each sex, and views on femininity and masculinity. There are also secret love affairs while maintaining a marriage front, multiple marriages, heterosexual relationships, closet gay youths, confirmed bachelors, an openly gay couple, a young teen coming out and homoerotic desires. The novel narrates the impotence of a whole country after the Vargas catastrophe, examines the effect on peoples' psyches of a natural calamity, and portrays the political situation of Venezuela, a nation divided between those who remain in their homeland and those who migrate to the promised land of capitalism in search of fortune.

Pronombres personales brings the reader to a time and a place in the twenty-first century as seen through the eyes and perceptions of several narrators whose versions of the same facts often vary according to the person retelling the events. Most narrators recount what happens to themselves and to the people in their own social circle. The situation of each of the narrators is represented by a pronoun which brings forth the social network of the characters. Each narrator is reflected in the particular world of the people they describe, be it a friend, lover, client, Venezuelan, foreigner or family member. While the characters struggle with their lives, they also wrestle with their understanding of their femininities and masculinities. The richness of these fictional women and men perhaps relies in the way in which this author created his characters, in an interview with M. Larson published in the magazine *Confluencia* in 1991 the playwright explained that his characters for him “surface from personal experiences and observations that [he] make[s],

and all are composed from people [he] know[s] with a little bit of invention” (1991, p. 119).³⁹ *Pronombres personales* presents a multifaceted perspective on the issue of gender. Chocrón shows us complex individuals that either adhere to stereotypical male roles, admit/question their submissive roles as women, explore their (homo)sexualities, assume their bisexuality, pursue asexual religious callings. The characters question their gender roles as they remember moments they shared during a particular period of time. Gender is a palpable element in all of Chocrón’s works, and the author is very careful to reflect the influence of societal norms in the behaviors of the fictitious women and men.

Pronombres personales is divided in two parts. The first part is called *Al borde* which I translated as *On Edge*.⁴⁰ The second part is called *Desterrados* which I translated as *Expatriates*.⁴¹ The first part has ten chapters that use personal pronouns as titles: *Yo, Tú, Él, Ella, Nosotros, Nosotras, Ustedes, Ustedes, Ellos, Ellas*. [I, you, he, she, we masculine, we feminine, you plural, you plural {this pronoun does not reflect gender in Spanish}, they masculine, they feminine].⁴² The translation of some of the pronouns for

³⁹ This is my translation of the Spanish text.

⁴⁰ Much thought went into this particular decision. *Al borde* could be translated as *On the Edge* (since the Spanish *al* is a contraction *a + el*) but would make it three words in English. I considered *On the Verge* also, but I thought it would remind some readers of the English title of an Almodóvar movie (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*). I also considered *By the Roadside*, *By the Riverside* (since the novella deals with an aquatic disaster). I decided, however, to use *On Edge*, because it is just two words, providing a very strong title similar to the Spanish and because, in my view, it conveys, the idea.

⁴¹ Also a challenge since the Spanish *Desterrados* has within it the word *tierra*, so *desterrados*, becomes also *without land*. I looked at *Exiled* (a logical choice), but decided to go with *Expatriates* since it has a similar meaning in English and also uses a prefix as the Spanish (*des-/ex-*) and a root *patria* (native land). *Exiled* could have also been broken down into *ex* and *illum* (banished person) but the prefix is not as apparent.

⁴² These are the usual ways in which these pronouns are translated. My translations of these titles and my choices (interventions) will be discussed in Chapter 3.

the titles in the first part presents a challenge, specifically *Nosotros, Nosotras, Ustedes, Ustedes, Ellos y Ellas*⁴³ since in English many of these pronouns would not show the gender marking they have in Spanish, both *nosotros* and *nosotras*, for example, although different words in Spanish, would be the same word in English, *we*. The second part of the novella also uses pronouns as titles; the titles, however, are indefinite and demonstrative pronouns: *Alguien, Aquéllos, Éste, Ésta, Esos, Aquéllas, Eso, Algunos, Aquél, Éstas*⁴⁴, [someone, those ones {distant} masculine, this one masculine, this one feminine, those {near} masculine, those {distant} feminine, something, some (people), that one {distant} masculine, these feminine].⁴⁵ This again presented quite a challenge since gender is clearly seen in each word in Spanish (except in the case of *Alguien*, [someone] who is used for both masculine and feminine, and *Eso* which is neuter). These particular challenges served also as an incentive that made me want to translate this work. It provided an opportunity to posit several options and truly reflect on the possibilities of an intervention by a translator since the gendered marked pronouns go hand in hand with the characters and/or situations described in each chapter.

The different narrators in the novella provide a mosaic of the characters' chosen "family." The novella has no real plot but a series of vignettes that depict the actions of women and men as they cope with disaster and relate to one another. I charted and

⁴³ Although *Ustedes* does not show a gender marking, one of the *Ustedes* refers to female characters. The author uses the usual form of *you* plural common in Latin America, Castilian Spanish would have used *vosotros/vosotras* and the gender marking would have been apparent.

⁴⁴ I am maintaining the accent mark on the pronoun because the Spanish text uses the mark. As mentioned before, these marks on pronouns are no longer required except on some occasions.

⁴⁵ As Lynn M. Berk points out in *English Syntax: from Word to Discourse*, the demonstratives usually indicate spatial deixis (1999, p. 61). These pronouns, as Emilio Allarcos Llorac explains in *Gramática de la lengua española*, in Spanish contain three degrees of proximity, *éste, ése, aquél*: this one near, that one farther away and that distant one (1994, p. 92).

analyzed the characters that serve as narrators before I started translating as part of my usual textual analysis previous to translation. Laying out all the characters helped me examine the characters and aided me in maintaining a certain consistency in the way each one of them intervened. Of course, I took into consideration that characters, like people, do not always speak in the same way, (formally, informally, often changing register) but may change the way they speak according to particular situations. Nevertheless, on many occasions, characters, as people, maintain a similar way of expressing themselves. This was useful, for example when translating the interventions of gay characters that could be described as using the already mentioned *camp*.

The very first chapter of this book entitled *Yo [I]* covers the description of the Vargas tragedy. The narrator of the first chapter is an economist. The text does not give any indication of the character's identity (something very hard to accomplish in Spanish since, as mentioned, adjectives and past participles functioning as adjectives have distinct masculine or feminine endings on almost every occasion). It is only by the second chapter that a different narrator (who like the first one is also an economist) tells us that the first one was indeed a woman.

Perhaps you thought the writer to be a very refined man, maybe even a player from the other team; you know what I mean. Who could blame you, sir or madam, if María Teresa Sánchez, that's her name, did not write using the feminine form, as she should have done to conform to our new Magna Carta. (10)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *A lo mejor tú pensaste que se trataba de un señor bastante refinado, incluso jugador del otro lado de la cancha. Ya me entiendes. ¿Quién podría culparlo(a) si María Teresa Sánchez, ese es su nombre, no ha*

The fact that the first narrator works for an oil company and travels extensively to the United States makes readers think of a man; the character's predilection for musicals only questions the sexual orientation of that individual. Chocrón manages to maintain a genderless narrator by using the first person and using adjectives without gender markings.⁴⁷ The author then uses adjectives like *consciente* (conscious), *jóvenes* (young), *lo mío* (my thing)⁴⁸, *damnificados* (victim, even though this word could also have a feminine ending [*damnificadas*], the masculine plural is usually meant to encompass both masculine and feminine), *unipersonal* (individual). He has purposely chosen these types of adjectives to create that ambiguity of this first chapter. From the very beginning, the preoccupation for gender in this novel is clearly reflected when the author decides to start the tale in a way that Chocrón himself describes as “enigmatic” during the interview I conducted with him (see Addendum).

This first, and temporarily sexless, narrator is MaríaTeresa Sánchez, a retired middle aged economist who worked for an oil company and belongs to the Venezuelan middle class. As one of the main characters, she appears often. She is a strong, independent woman and one of the leaders of the circle of friends who helps a young adolescent, José Figuera, become a photographer. She is very open about sex and may have had a lesbian relationship when she was younger. She also has a not too serious

escrito en femenino, como debería hacerlo para cumplir con lo pautado en nuestra nueva magna carta. All page numbers in parenthesis in the translations refer to the Spanish text *Pronombres personales* by Chocrón (2002) that appears in Works Cited.

⁴⁷ There are many adjectives in Spanish that are the same for both grammatical genders (*inteligente, interesante*, etc. [intelligent, interesting] as are some of the adjectives used for colors *azul, verde, gris*, etc. [blue, green, gray].

⁴⁸ The word *lo* signals a neuter form which is neither masculine nor feminine, but, as mentioned before, follows a masculine ending.

relationship with the policeman investigating the death of one of her friends, Bernardo Salvatore.

Several members of the Campos family serve as narrators. The second narrator is Agustín Campos, a 58-year-old freelance economist who has been married three times and has two children (Agustín, 16 and Aura Marina, 12) from his third marriage to Aura, his current wife. He is a promiscuous homophobic and in the past had a relationship with María Teresa Sánchez. His son, whose name is also Agustín Campos (Jr.), is a confused adolescent who lives at home and is unsure of his sexual orientation. He is attracted to his best friend, Aarón Waimber. Agustín Jr. finally comes out as gay during a Thanksgiving dinner at home. Another prominent member of this family is Aura Campos the school psychologist, married to Agustín. She regrets having to put up with a sexless marriage and her husband's infidelities.

A number of members of the Waimber family function also as narrators. The Waimbers are a Venezuelan Jewish family that, for the most part, tries to keep with religious traditions. The patriarch is Moisés Waimber, who is married to the beautiful blonde urban planner, Rebeca Waimber, the love of his life. He is a well-off, non-practicing Jew who runs a clothing factory inherited from his father. He has two children, Aarón and Rebeca. He shows a no-frills personality, and he is mostly preoccupied with his business. Rebeca Waimber is an urban planner who is married to Moisés. She, like her husband, is Jewish. She is very frustrated with her inability to help during the Vargas disaster, even though she is an urban planner. Before getting married, she had a relationship with a character named Arturo López, and she and Arturo become lovers again shortly after Rebeca's marriage to Moisés. The Waimber's son is a prominent

figure in the novel; his name is Aarón Waimber and he is an 18 year old Jewish man who is very good friends with Agustín Campos Jr. He is competitive young male who claims to have no sexual attraction to any of the sexes although he appears to have homoerotic tendencies. He decides to go to Jerusalem to study at a Yeshiva and becomes an Orthodox Jew. The matriarch of the family also recounts her view of events. The mother of Moisés is Euduvigis “Yayú” Waimber a Jewish widow from Poland. She is a very strong woman who has had to suffer through discrimination and who hates the treatment given by some to older people like her. She complains about being a woman and discusses the many discomforts associated with being female such as menstruation, giving birth and menopause.

There are several gay characters who have prominent roles in the novella. Bernardo Salvatore (AKA PING) and Juan Carlos “Juanca” Gómez (AKA PONG) also serve as storytellers. These two characters are a gay couple who have lived together for many years and who end up separating. Bernardo is 50 years old, going through a midlife crisis, and relies on his friend María Teresa Sánchez to help him. He dies under mysterious circumstances after an acquaintance, someone who has sex for money with Salvatore, and the acquaintance’s brother pay him a visit after he returns from a trip to New York. Juan Carlos “Juanca” Gómez (PONG) is a 45 year old university professor of literature and the gay partner of Bernardo Salvatore. Like his partner, he is going through a crisis, one that stops him from writing poetry. The other gay character and narrator is Manuel Martínez, an Associate Professor at a School of Arts at a university and who is also a critic. He is openly gay and is very open about his sexuality. Manuel eventually dies of AIDS.

The López family also report on their friends' situations. Victoria López is a psychologist in a Ministry and is married to 56-year-old Arturo López and is incapable of having children. The couple goes through some problems and begins divorce proceedings, which are interrupted by the sudden death of her husband in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Victoria's husband is Arturo López who, as mentioned, is also Rebecca Waimber's lover. He is an economist who fed up with his life and the situation in Venezuela following the Vargas disaster, decides to look for work in New York City. He obtains a position, works at the World Trade Center and dies in the terrorist attack on September 11, the day he was supposed to fly to Venezuela.

There are several minor characters who nevertheless express their opinions and contribute to the narration. Luis Ángel Jaramillo relates some of the events in the story. He is Colombian and works for the Waimber at their factory. He has been married, has two children, has sex with women but also has had gay experiences. Inspector Brito brings the readers the details regarding the death of Bernardo Salvatore. He has to deal with a loveless marriage and a hypochondriac mother. He has a brief affair with María Teresa Sánchez. Rita is a school psychologist who is single and overweight. She criticizes upper-class plastic women who only try to perfect their beauty and sexuality. She lives with her mother and finds it hard to hard to establish relationships with men. For her, sex is just a sweaty ordeal. Edwin Suvanto works at the United Nations and is married to a Jewish woman named Joan who works at the New York Philharmonic. They have two daughters. He is a good friend of Arturo López, whom he knows from graduate school. Xiomara is a young attractive woman who flirted with Arturo López. She becomes a television reporter and becomes José Figueira's girlfriend. José Figueira is an

adolescent male university student whose father owns a grocery store. He becomes friends with María Teresa Sánchez who supports his vocation to become a photographer.

The last chapter is narrated by the same person who started telling the story, María Teresa Sánchez. This character recaps some of the issues depicted throughout the novella and recounts several issues portrayed in the text such as the Vargas tragedy, the coming out of Agustín Junior, Aarón becoming a Hasidic Jew, and the September 11th attacks. She also reflects on the untidy web that unites the circle of friends referred to as a “chosen” family.

This novella is a personal account of several characters, who are members of the same circle, and the experiences and decisions taken by them shortly after a natural disaster. The novella from the very start questions the traditional gender roles with the neutral-gender-but-appears-masculine first chapter. It reflects on the gender roles assigned to each sex and the different views on sexuality that the characters portray. I chose to translate this particular text because of the gender issues that are prevalent in the novella; gender issues that are as varied as cultural and social construction of femininity and masculinity, relations in the workplace, intimacy, and compulsory heterosexuality. I took great care to notice how my decisions in my translation may influence the representation of the gendered identities and the gender relations that appear in the text. I also paid special attention to how gender difference may have been constructed and emphasized in language and this is the reason that on some occasions I decided to “intervene.”

The following chapter discusses my translation of Isaac Chocrón's *Pronombres personales* and my interventions as a translator. Although concentrating mostly on the interventions related to gender issues, both grammatical and human (the translation of chapter titles as well my interventions to make more visible representations of femininities and masculinities that may have otherwise been less obvious or gone unnoticed), it also mentions my interventions regarding tags, footnotes, interpolations, and corrections made to the Spanish text.

CHAPTER THREE: Intervenient Translator

3.1 Interventions

This chapter discusses my interventions in the translation of *Pronombres personales*, which go beyond the already discussed linguistic and structural changes. It details my interventions in the translated text, specifically regarding the selection of the text, the tags to the Spanish text, and footnotes added in the translation.⁴⁹ It also details the interventions carried out due to grammatical gender, as well as those conducted in order to better represent the femininities and masculinities present in the text.

As already mentioned in Chapter Two, my selection of this particular text could be considered an intervention on the part of this translator since, as stated previously, I chose to translate an author unknown to most of the world who, in my view, has given readers a text filled with representations of gender, a topic that greatly interests me. Apart from this intervention, there are several ways in which I decided to intervene.

⁴⁹ Chapters One, Two and Three could be considered as an intervention in the form of paratextual matter since they serve as a commentary to my translation.

3.1.1 Tags

There were several occasions in the Spanish novella where characters used English. I believe Chocrón uses English phrases in the novel to provide an air of cosmopolitanism, and to make some characters seem more sophisticated than others (all Economists in the novel know English). I also believe it was a way for the author to display his knowledge and fluency in the language. To mark this peculiarity in the text, I added the words *in English*, *she said in English* or *he said in English* to indicate that these words were in English in the Spanish text. In other words, I intervened to let readers know that this particular phrase appeared in English in the source text. In the second chapter, Agustín Campos is referring to María Teresa Sánchez, the narrator for the first chapter, and states:

I know that the whole geisha pose of looking over the fan is simply flirtation, *flirt* as she would say in English since she undoubtedly splatters her sentences with words in that language. (10)⁵⁰

Although the Spanish text mentions that the character, María Teresa Sánchez, uses English, I found it clearer to add the tag *in English* and include *in that language* at the end where the Spanish text uses the words *en inglés* (in English).

In the following chapter, Agustín Campos Jr. at one point refers to to María Teresa Sánchez:

Anyway... as María Teresa would say in English,... (15)⁵¹

⁵⁰ ...sé que toda esa pose de geisha mirando por encima del abanico es simplemente coquetería, “flirt”, como diría ella que inevitablemente siempre salpica su fraseo con palabras en inglés. Numbers in parenthesis in the translations indicate the page number of the Spanish text.

⁵¹ “Anyway” como diría María Teresa...

I again added the tag *in English* to point out the usage of that language by the narrator.

Later on, the same character is talking about María Teresa Sánchez again and states:

... bows as if she heard applause, swings her hair and kisses my cheek while she hands me an empty glass and asks me in English: “May I have another drink, baby?” (16)⁵²

Although the Spanish text just shows the English without any indication, I intervened again using the phrase *in English*, to make explicit the usage of English in the Spanish text.

Another character and narrator, Victoria López, also refers to María Teresa Sánchez’s singing in English right before the lyrics of the song are shown in English in the Spanish text:

And on top of the voice of the old man, she sang in English at full blast...
(41)⁵³

Once more I added *in English, not in the Spanish text*, to signal that use of that language by the character.

⁵² ...hace una reverencia como si oyera aplausos, bate su pelo y besa mi mejilla mientras me das su vaso vacío: “May I have another drink baby?”

⁵³ Y por encima de la voz del viejo, cantó a todo pulmón...

When Arturo López is describing comments made by his friend Manuel Martínez, he also uses English words attributed to his friend. The words *in English* are also added here:

On the ceiling, an enormous mirror; round bed, ‘the works,’ he would say in English. (69)⁵⁴

Later the same narrator explains:

...until one day “out of the blue,” to use one of the sayings that diabolical Manuel would use in English (69)⁵⁵

These tags were used to signal the reader that the characters are using English in the Spanish text, since the translation is into English; these indications help the reader see that the characters are using a different language when discussing issues in Spanish.

3.1.2 Footnotes

Footnotes are one of the most noticeable ways in which translators intervene. Translators have to make a decision whether to use footnotes or not, while keeping in mind what Clifford Landers states in *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*: “Footnotes break the flow, disturbing the continuity by drawing the eye, albeit briefly, away from the text to a piece of information that, however useful, is still a disrupter... (2001, p. 93). The temporary interruption may not be well received by some readers and, usually, in translations not destined to the academic circles these are kept to a minimum. Footnotes serve many purposes and when used in translations. As Richard Blight asserts in his

⁵⁴ Por techo, un enorme espejo; cama redonda; ‘the works’.

⁵⁵ Hasta que un día, “out of the blue” para usar otra de las frases favoritas del Diablo Manuel...

article “Footnotes for Meaningful Translations of The New Testament” they can be categorized as ones that provide “background information, linguistic information, and interpretational information. Each of these may be further subdivided” (2005, p. 11). In the same article, Richard Blight goes on to specify that background information may provide geographical data or unknown historical events; linguistic information informs readers of diverse meaning of words, and interpretational information, examines alternate interpretations of a particular phrase or sentence (Blight, 2005, pp. 13-14). In my case I decided to use footnotes to provide linguistic and background information.

3.1.2.1 Linguistic Information Footnotes

Examples of footnotes that provide linguistic information are the ones I included when French was used in the Spanish text. The chapter narrated by Victoria López (*NOSOTRAS, WE'RE GALS* in my translation), contains a Jean Cocteau anecdote:

‘Il s’est passé une catastrophe. Je vous en prie de venir chez moi’ aussitôt que possible. ‘Bien sûr, bien sûr,’ (35)⁵⁶

A few sentences later the Spanish text again contains two phrases in French;

‘Il s’est passé une catastrophe’⁵⁷ adding ‘Je suis tombé amoureux de vous. (35)⁵⁸

⁵⁶ A catastrophe has occurred. I beg you to come to my place as soon as possible. Of course, of course.

⁵⁷ A catastrophe has occurred.

⁵⁸ A catastrophe has occurred. I have fallen in love with you.

I decided to use footnotes to provide the linguistic information by translating the French text. I felt many English readers may not be as familiar with French as Spanish readers might be. French, like Spanish is a Romance language and it there are many more similarities with that language; similarities that may not be as obvious to English readers.

3.1.2.2 Background Information Footnotes

There was one occasion where I used a footnote to provide background information. I intervened in this manner to explain to readers the references made regarding prominent figures in Venezuelan history and politics. These facts may be unknown to English-speaking readers (even Spanish readers outside of Venezuela may not be familiar with much of Venezuelan political history). One section of the text mentions several prominent figures in Venezuelan history:

...gave it the name Alberto Carnevali, one of the heroes of the Democratic Party resistance during the Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. In fact, they covered their asses pretty well, because they gave the streets prominent names such as Andrés Eloy Blanco and Ruiz Pineda (just to name two of them) to the few streets they designed. (95) ⁵⁹

This is the most extensive footnote added after this selection. It provides brief biographical information, about three members of the Democratic Party that are well-known to Venezuelans but, it is safe to assume, they will not be known to people outside of that country.

⁵⁹ "... Le pusieron el nombre de Alberto Carnevali, uno de los héroes de la Resistencia adeca durante la dictadura de Pérez Jiménez. En realidad, se cuidaron las espaldas requetebién porque a las pocas calles que trazaron, les pusieron nombres de adecos prominentes: Andrés Eloy Blanco y Ruiz Pineda, por nombrar dos no más".

3.1.3 Interpolations

There were some foreign words and expression where I did not use footnotes; nevertheless, I intervened by incorporating the translation of the word of expression along the English text. In lieu of footnotes, translators at times use what Clifford Landers refers to as *interpolation* which makes clearer information already known by the reader of the source text and basically means “nothing more than adding a parenthetical word or phrase, as unobtrusively as possible...” (2001, p. 94)

One example of this interpolation is seen in a section of the text where an Italian word appears:

The news item is something else, and I prefer to let it out after this
passeggiata, or stroll... (37)⁶⁰

I felt the clarification was needed since English is not as close to Italian as Spanish is, and the Italian word maybe not as easily understood by English readers.

I did not use footnotes on several occasions where phrases and sentences in Italian appear, and used instead the above mentioned interpolation and incorporated a translation in the text. The reason for this decision was due to the nature of the narration. The Italian expressions, phrases and sentences appears to have a faster pace and seems more colloquial than in the previous occasion when I did use footnotes for the French. Nevertheless, I did intervene by incorporating the translation of these passages into the English text.

⁶⁰ La noticia es otra y prefiero soltarla después de esta ‘passeggiata’.

Non voglio dire che Rodolfo sia così, ma mio fratello è liberissimo. È strano” that is, I’m not saying that Rodolfo is like that, but my brother is extremely free. (97)

And also:

“Io non ho fatto niente, io non ho fatto niente,” meaning I did nothing, I did nothing. (97)

3.1.4 Corrections

Another way in which I intervened was by making corrections to Chocrón’s text. I intervened and corrected what I felt were mistakes in the Italian that appear in the Spanish text. After consulting with several Italian translators I decided to correct the words that were misspelled or incorrect in the Italian. One sentence that appears in Italian in the Spanish text reads:

Non voglio dire que Rodolfo é così... (97)

I corrected as:

Non voglio dire che Rodolfo sia così...⁶¹

It appears that the author used some words in Spanish in the text (*que* instead of *che*). Also the subjunctive, (*sia*), instead of the indicative, (*é*), is usually preferred in constructions of this nature. I felt it was necessary to make this correction since the author’s mistakes do not appear to be intentional. Also the expression:

⁶¹ I am not saying that Rodolfo is like that...

È strano.

Has the accent going the wrong way it should be a grave accent instead of an acute one.

*È strano.*⁶²

3.1.5 Gender Interventions

Pronombres personales (Personal Pronouns) brings the reader to a time and a place in the twenty-first century as seen through the eyes and perceptions of several narrators as they struggle with their lives and their understandings of masculinity and femininity. The assumptions of sex based on profession, the hypersexuality of traditional Latin males, homoerotic feelings, homosexuality, bisexuality, and women's patriarchal place in marriage are important themes reflected in this novella. My gender-conscious translation decisions, serve to go beyond a pure lexical transmission of a text into another language, thus taking into consideration the intricate power plays included in gender. I approached the translation taking into consideration the many gender issues that are prevalent in the novella; gender issues that are as varied as cultural and social construction of masculinity and femininity, relations in the workplace, intimacy, and compulsory heterosexuality. The occasions where I intervened, I took great care to notice how my translation decisions may influence the representation of gendered identities and the gender relations that appear in the text. I also paid special attention to how gender difference may have been constructed and emphasized in language.

⁶² It's strange.

3.1.5.1 Grammatical Gender Interventions

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the titles for the chapters in the novella are named after different pronouns. I did not translate the pronouns as they are usually translated but intervened to mark the particular gender of the pronouns (otherwise unnoticeable in many of the English pronouns such as *nosotros*, *nosotras* in Spanish, both *we* in English; *ellos*, *ella* in Spanish, both *they* in English) and to emphasize the gender issues present in the text that I feel combine the grammatical with the human. These are my most noticeable interventions in the text.

The following table shows the translations of the chapter titles for the first part:

Spanish Pronoun	Usual Translation	My Translation
<i>YO</i>	I (NON-GENDER SPECIFIC)	I AM
<i>TÚ</i>	YOU (NON-GENDER SPECIFIC)	YOU ARE
<i>ÉL</i>	HE (MASCULINE)	HE IS
<i>ELLA</i>	SHE (FEMININE)	SHE IS
<i>NOSOTROS</i>	WE (MASCULINE)	WE'RE GUYS

<i>NOSOTRAS</i>	WE (FEMININE)	WE'RE GALS
<i>USTEDES</i>	YOU (NON-GENDER SPECIFIC)	YOU'RE STUDENTS
<i>USTEDES</i>	YOU (NON-GENDER SPECIFIC)	YOU'RE PEOPLE
<i>ELLOS</i>	THEY (MASCULINE GENERIC USE)	THEY'RE TWO
<i>ELLAS</i>	THEY (FEMININE)	THEY'RE WOMEN

This is my most obvious intervention in the text. Many translators may have translated the pronouns and then mark their gender specific pronouns with additional words in the rest of the text. My intervention then would not only add a word for each chapter title, but would slightly change the structure of the first (and/or second) sentence. I decided to use two words for each chapter title throughout the novel because the translation of the single pronouns used in Spanish as chapter titles, would in many instances (*éste* this one, *ésta*, this one) require two words in the English translation. I used contractions (*WE'RE*, *YOU'RE*) to maintain the number of words to two for each chapter. I chose words to indicate grammatical gender such as *GUYS* and *GALS* and *WOMEN*. By intervening in this way, I make sure the reader is exposed to the gender implicit in the

Spanish word that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Although *ELLOS* (*THEY*) is a masculine pronoun is referring to both a men and women (as mentioned before something that occurs frequently in Spanish, which uses the masculine to include the feminine) I chose a phrase without a clear gender marking, *THE'RE TWO*, for that reason. *YOU'RE STUDENTS* which like the Spanish, *USTEDES*, does not show gender was chosen, for the same reason.

The following table shows the translations of the chapter titles for the second part:

Spanish Pronoun	Usual Translation	My Translation
<i>ALGUIEN</i>	SOMEONE (NON-GENDER SPECIFIC)	ANYBODY COULD
<i>AQUELLOS</i>	THOSE ONES (MASCULINE GENERIC USE)	THOSE WERE
<i>ÉSTE</i>	THIS ONE (MASCULINE)	HE WAS
<i>ÉSTA</i>	THIS ONE (FEMININE)	I'M MATERNAL
<i>ÉSOS</i>	THOSE ONES	THEY'RE FELLOWS

	(MASCULINE)	
<i>AQUÉLLAS</i>	THOSE ONES (FEMININE)	THEY'RE LADIES
<i>ESO</i>	IT (NEUTER)	IT IS
<i>ALGUNOS</i>	SOME (MASCULINE GENERIC USE)	THEY'RE RIGHT
<i>AQUÉL</i>	THAT ONE (MASCULINE GENERIC USE)	ANYONE MAY
<i>ÉSTAS</i>	THESE ONES (FEMININE GENERIC USE)	THESE ARE

The titles that used pronouns that were non-gender specific, that is did not specify whether they referred to women or men, I did not mark. The ones that showed a particular gender marking like *ÉSTA* (This one [feminine]) I used an adjective in English that shows a feminine quality (MATERNAL). I added LADIES for *AQUÉLLAS* (those far away [feminine]), and FELLOWS to *ÉSOS* (those ones [masculine]) to portray either as feminine or a masculine gender where none would have been shown in English. The

rest of the chapter titles were generic and showed no particular gender marking or were used to include both the masculine and the feminine (AQUÉLLOS, ALGUNOS, ÉSTAS [those, some, these]).⁶³

To maintain some consistency I used two words for each chapter title in the second part as well. Also, the titles I chose can stand alone as a complete thought or expression, just as the Spanish pronouns do in the Spanish text. As already mentioned, several of the pronouns in Spanish would have produced the same translation in English such as *Aquéllos, ésos* (Those ones although they could be further marked by adding proximal [*esos*] and distant [*Aquéllos*] and *Éste, Ésta* (this one, masculine and feminine respectively). Otherwise, I would have had chapters with one word and chapters with two words. Of course, that would have been an option, and one that many translators would have adopted, but as discussed, I felt I should intervene to mark the gender of the words and the gender present in the titles of the chapters.

My interventions denote a preoccupation with gender issues in the text. I felt that gendered marked pronouns in the Spanish language were important in the overall body of the text, since they refer to characters and their feminine and masculine selves. I paid special attention to how gender differences were already marked at the beginning of every chapter and therefore I chose to signal them in English by adding additional words. I decided to intervene to make more evident to the English reader the gender preoccupation of the author.

⁶³ Although *ÉSTAS* is a feminine pronoun, it is used in the title of the final chapter, in my view, in a generic form since it refers to people (*gentes*) which could allude to either women or men (feminine or masculine).

3.1.5.2 Human Gender Interventions

The novella contains ample representations of masculinities and femininities since each narrator (female or male) provides a view into her or his own gender beliefs and those of other characters involved in their lives.

As already mentioned the very first chapter of this book, entitled *Yo* [I], covers the description of events during the massive rainfall in the state of Vargas in Venezuela in 1999. The narrator of the first chapter is an economist who does not give any indication of her/his identity. The lack of clear gender markings in English makes it a challenge to create that apparent ambiguity of the first chapter of this novella in the English translation. In addition, an American readership may be much more used to the idea of women economists than a Latin American one in which a woman's role in the workforce, even nowadays, is somewhat different in comparison to that in the United States.

As discussed, it is hard to discern if the narrator from the first chapter is a woman or a man:

¿quién necesita un economista más? Hace dos años me jubilaron de una petrolera. (6)⁶⁴

I translated it as:

Who needs another economist? Two years ago, an oil company offered me retirement.

⁶⁴ All Spanish quotes from this section are from *Pronombres Personales* that appear in References. Numbers in parenthesis in the translation indicate page numbers in the Spanish text.

Chocrón uses an economist, *un economista*⁶⁵ which in Spanish could be used to describe both men or women that practice that profession, although *una economista* could have been used, it would have shown the sex of the character. Also Chocrón's use of *me jubilaron de una petrolera* [I was forced into retirement from an oil company] instead of something like *soy jubilada de...* [I am {female} retired from...] would have given away the nature of the character's sex. The translation, therefore, does not specify the sex of the narrator, but as stated, this is more easily accomplished in English. The type of occupation of the narrator may still have readers thinking of a male.

The attitude of prototypical male behavior is seen as one of the narrators, a 58-year-old man, Agustín Campos, Sr., who uses a description to showcase his gendered male behavior and sexual appetite:

...me derrito o, mejor dicho, me erecto frente a un buen par de senos como meloncitos, frente a unas buenas nalgas redondas y duritas, frente a unas piernotas que prometen placeres desde el tobillo hasta tú sabes dónde. (11)

I chose to translate this fragment as:

...I melt; or rather I become erect in front of a nice pair of breasts like small cantaloupes, in front of good, plump, tight buttocks, in front of a pair of thick-ass legs that promise pleasure from the ankles up to you know where.

⁶⁵ *Economista* belongs to a category of nouns known in Spanish Grammar as having a common gender (*género común*) that do not have a specific masculine or feminine ending, so that gender is marked by the preceding article (Alarcos Llorach, 2002, p. 73).

A woman is pictured as a sum of parts designed to provide pleasure to a man. So in my translation I took care to not only worry about the lexical idiosyncrasies of this passage but on the attitude that the narrator is trying to show as an image of a stereotypical heterosexual Venezuelan (and Latin) man. To reflect this, I used *buttocks* for *nalgas*, although *ass* or *backside* could also have been used. I used *plump* for *redondas* because I felt it provided more of a sexual connotation than *rounded*. I chose *a pair of thick-ass legs* for *piernota*; a clear intervention. In Spanish the suffix *-ota* is often added to magnify the nature of the object (size, quality), at times as a term of endearment but more often used in a pejorative way when referring to something as Gómez Tarrego illustrates in his *Gramática didáctica del español* (2007, p. 21). In this case, I believe the author combines the two to express not only desire but also objectification. My decision, like the Spanish text, also has a pejorative connotation and a sexual undertone.

Agustín Campos Jr. at one point describes his older friend María Teresa Sánchez in a playful way using a play on words that has explicit sexual references:

...como diría María Teresa que por cierto me cae de pinga aunque su rollo es que no encuentra pinga. (15)

This supposes a challenge since the play on words with *pinga* (literally *prick* [meaning *penis*]) would be difficult to achieve in Spanish. The first *de pinga* usually means *cool* so that *me cae de pinga* could be said to mean *I think she is cool* while the second one *no encuentra pinga* means *she does not find a prick (penis)*.

I translated as follows:

as María Teresa would say in English, who by the way I don't think is nasty although her deal is that she doesn't get to do the nasty.⁶⁶

An intervention that I believe makes clear the intention and playfulness of the expression by the character.

Homosexuality is an important topic for this author, and representations of homosexuality are depicted in several ways. There are three gay narrators, each with his very distinctive characteristics: Juan Carlos Gómez, “Juanca”, partner of Bernardo, who is a Liberal Arts professor; Bernardo Salvatore, who is an Economist; and Manuel Martínez, a Professor of Art History. Chocrón goes to great lengths to describe homosexual relationships as straightforward, without considering society's usual heteronormativity while also showing how an adolescent, Agustín, struggles with his homosexuality.

In the chapter where the homosexual couple argues with each other, *NOSOTROS (WE'RE GUYS)*, PING, Bernardo Salvatore, is telling PONG, Juan Carlos Gómez, about the time when they met and Bernardo Salvatore helped Juanca come out of the “closet.”

Y yo te saqué. A mucha honra. Al no más verte, presentí que tenías eso que llaman “un toque técnico”, un ligero devaneo en tu comportamiento. Como un aleteo. Eso es lo que llaman “un toque técnico”. (30)

I translated as follows:

⁶⁶ The addition of *in English* was already discussed above.

And I got you out. And proud of it! Just seeing you, I had a feeling you had what is known as “panache,” a certain flamboyant behavior. Like a mannerism. That’s what is known as “panache.”

This proved to be a difficult passage since the Spanish appears to be using a euphemism, *un toque técnico*, (a technical touch) but also an expression that can be considered as the particular sociolect between gays previously described as *camp*. I decided to intervene and just relate the expression with the word *panache* which is a term often used to suggest a man that acts, dresses or talks in a stereotypical gay manner. The three words in Spanish become just one in English. Another reason to use *panache* is because it is etymologically related to *wing* (from the Latin *pinnāculum*, diminutive of *pinna*, meaning *wing*) and the Spanish in that fragment uses *aleteo* (flapping of wings, but also a mannerism particular of gays) so that both terms have a connection.

The narrator of the chapter entitled *ÉL* [*HE IS*, in my translation] is an adolescent man, Agustín Campos, Jr., who questions his best friend’s, Aarón curiosity as well as his own:

Crecimos juntos y aunque vamos a colegios diferentes pasamos nuestro tiempo libre haciendo pesas, mirándonos de reajo, oyendo música, mirándonos de reajo, hablando paja, mirándonos de reajo, cacareando sobre las jevitas, mirándonos de reajo, duchándonos uno al lado del otro, con la cabeza hacia arriba recibiendo el chorro de agua con los ojos cerrados, mirándonos de reajo. (17)

I rendered it as:

We grew up together and even though we go to different schools, we spend our time, lifting weights, sneaking a peek, listening to music, sneaking a peek, talking shit, sneaking a peek, boasting about chicks, sneaking a peek, taking showers next to each other, with the head up receiving the water stream with eyes closed, sneaking a peak.

Chocrón repeats the use of the phrase *mirándonos de reajo* five times to show the persistence of that action. I repeated the phrase just as many times while deciding to use *sneaking a peak* for *mirándonos de reajo* because of the furtive connotation in Spanish. I could have used *out of the corner of the eye* but I felt it did not reflect the homoerotic insinuation of the text.

In the Chapter *AQUELLOS (THOSE WERE, in my translation)*, Aarón comments on Agustín's incessant looks when they are taking a shower at the gym:

No dice nada. Me mira y mira, eso sí. ¡Qué tanto coño me mira! (81)

I translated as:

He doesn't say anything. He looks and looks at me, that he does. Why does look at me so fucking much!

The last sentence reflects the frustration of the character as he deals with his friend's attitude. The word *coño* is the vulgar way of describing the external part of the female genitalia (the character could have also said *cojones* [testicles]) as well as a vulgar phatic exclamation, for that reason, I decided to use *fucking*, which like in Spanish, is part of the vulgar vocabulary that has sexual connotations.

In the Chapter *ÉSTAS (THESE ONES*, in my translation), Agustín finally comes out during the family’s Thanksgiving dinner and his father describes the event as follows:

Fue en la de “Acción de Gracias”, ¡vaya ironía!, cuando el hijo anunció, claro y raspado, que era gay. “Yo hice como que no entendía, y ¿sabes lo que me contestó el muy cretino, María Teresa? ‘Soy maricón, papa, un maricón. Eso es lo que soy’. Me dio un soponcio, ahí mismo en la mesa, y Aura salió corriendo, buscó no sé qué pepa y me la atragantó en la garganta”. (133)

My translation reads:

It was during “Thanksgiving” how ironic! when the boy announced, clearly and straight out, that he was gay. “I made believe that I didn’t understand, and you know what the moron replied, María Teresa? ‘I’m a faggot, dad, a faggot. That’s what I am.’ I nearly passed out, right there on the table and Aura ran out, got who knows what pill and threw it down my throat.”

The father, in a family of staunch heteronormativity, obviously takes the news very badly, since being gay is a stigma for many families in many Latin American societies. I chose to translate *claro y raspado* as *straight out* to play against *gay* (gay/straight) since the Spanish has *raspado*, which is *bluntly* but also could be expressed by *straight out*.⁶⁷ To translate *maricón*, which is a derogatory term for homosexual, I

⁶⁷ *Raspar* is often used in slang as meaning sexual relations (fuck), so *raspado* could mean (fucked).

chose *faggot* because I thought it was the strongest of the options I looked into. I could have used *homo*, *queer*, *fag*, *fruitcake* or *fairy*.

The novel also mentions bisexuality in the chapter *ÉSTE (HE WAS*, in my translation), in which Luis Ángel, a Colombian man working in Venezuela, describes his (bi)sexuality as he refuses the advances of a gay character while providing a summary of his sexual history. For him gender identity and sexual practices are not just mere extensions of each other:

No me las estoy echando de macho y como buen hijo de Medellín, experiencias de ese tipo tuve en mi adolescencia y aún, de repente, en un arranque de locura, hasta hace poco antes de venirme a Caracas. Me lié con un adolescente y ése fue uno de los motivos principales por los que acepté el contrato de los Waimber. Años antes me casé y me divorcié. De ese lío, me quedaron dos hijos tan adolescentes como el loquito que quiso llevarme por la calle de la amargura, y desde entonces, he reincidido con damas cuando no he podido frenar las ganas. Solamente de vez en cuando.
(85)

I translated it as:

I am not bragging of being macho and like a good son of Medellín, I had those kinds of experiences as an adolescent and even, suddenly, in a fit of craziness, a short while back before coming to Caracas, I got involved with an adolescent boy and that was one of the main reasons that I accepted the Waimbers' contract. Years before that, I got married and got

divorced. From that mess, I was left with two children as adolescent as that little queen who wanted to make my life a living hell, and since then, from time to time, I have relapsed with ladies when I couldn't stop the urge. Just from time to time.

I translated *loquito* as *little queen* to maintain the pejorative connotation in the Spanish. I believe this intervention is justified. My decision implies a grammatical gender change since I transformed *loquito* [little crazy boy] a pejorative/term of endearment in a masculine form into a feminine term used for women *little queen* but also often used to refer to a flamboyant male homosexual. I used *urge* for *ganas*, which in Spanish is often used as a euphemism for sexual desire, as is the case with the English word.

Women also discuss issues regarding the particular behavior of the sexes. In the chapter *ALGUIEN* (*ANYBODY COULD*, in my translation), the narrator is a married woman, Aura Campos, and complains about the many affairs of her husband, Agustín Campos, Sr.:

He aguantado variadas infidelidades de mi dilecto esposo, siempre recordándome que a mi edad y con lo que gano jamás podría independizarme y correr con todos los gastos familiares. Agustín frecuentemente se arrebató con la primera que lo tome en cuenta, pero como me dice su madre: “Déjalo tranquilo, mujer, que eso se le pasa. Ignóralo, que eso se le pasa”. (74)

My translation reads:

I have put up with several infidelities from my loving spouse, always reminding me that at my age and with my salary I could never be independent and meet all the family expenses. Agustín frequently goes gaga with the first one who would pay attention to him, but as his mother says: “Let him be, girl, he’ll get over it. Ignore it, he’ll get over it.”

Here *se arrebatada* has the idea of losing one’s mind so I chose *goes gaga* which is often used in English to express the idea of people becoming infatuated. The passage also reflects the idea that men are unfaithful by nature and that it is a temporary state that will have a quick ending if not given importance. The Spanish text also shows the idea of a man’s infidelity; as long as a man provides for his wife and family his extramarital affairs may be overlooked. The text also portrays the patriarchal notion that a woman is dependent on a man and needs him to maintain a particular lifestyle. Since a married woman cannot become independent, she must put up with the husband’s behavior. The advice from another woman (her mother-in-law) is given to help the character deal with the fickle nature of men. The last quote is important in that it reflects this idea: “*Déjalo tranquilo, mujer, que eso se le pasa. Ignóralo, que eso se le pasa,*” I maintained the repetition “that will pass. Ignore it; that will pass,” which I think is important to emphasize the particular advice. I used *girl* for *mujer* instead of *woman* to mark the condescending tone of the mother-in-law.

In the Chapter ELLAS, (*THEY’RE WOMEN*, in my translation) the narrator, a 56-year-old man named Arturo López, reminisces about his student days in New York.

Si Shahira fue poesía (erótica, muchas veces imaginativa), si Francesca fue un mundo de intelecto con ocasionales arranques de ternura, Kuzminski (porque así siempre la llamé, desde que nos conocimos al sentarnos en pupitres contiguos) fue revolcones a toda hora y en todo lugar, como si se mantuviese hambrienta de más y más, jamás indiferente o cansada. (66)

The text narrates the youthful sexual escapades of the narrator described from a typical male point of view that I tried to reflect in the translation:

If Shahira was poetry (erotic poetry, many times imaginative poetry), if Francesca was a world of intellect with occasional loving outbursts, Kuzminski (because that's the way I have always called her, from the time we met sitting next to each other in adjacent desks) was rolls in the hay at all times and everywhere, as if she were starving for more and more, never indifferent or tired.

The word *revolcón* in Spanish literally means *to get on top of something, to roll about* but it also has the meaning of having sexual relations. I used *rolls in the hay* to express this idea since it is also a colloquial way of expressing that thought in English. It also provides the movement implied in the Spanish *revolcón*.

The interventions discussed show a clear visibility of the translator; decisions were carefully examined and decided upon after much reflections and taking into consideration the importance of the translation task. The tags added, not in the source text, point out the use of English in a text first written in Spanish. The footnotes served to

provide translations from the French and to offer background historical information. The interpolations help understand passages in Italian. The corrections amend unintentional mistakes in the source text. The gender interventions deliver grammatical gender and showcase the femininities and masculinities.

My investigation is not meant to provide universal conclusions regarding why a text has been translated a certain way, nor is it intended to provide a prescriptive approach to the translation of texts regarding interventions by translators. It could, however, help us discern the particular understanding of gender issues prevalent in literary texts and how translators reflect/disregard/adapt/transform/subvert those important issues.

It has been my premise that novels are usually concerned with the representation of gender relations in the fictitious societies that they portray, and that literary translators are in fact translating gender when they undertake the transformation of a literary text from one language to another. After all, many translators may believe that a mere linguistic approach and common sense will suffice when translating literature. Nevertheless, I believe that the textual examples discussed here will show the reasons for my interventions and how I tried to portray the intricate issues reflected in fiction when describing women, men, and their interactions with each other.

Gender-conscious approaches to translation point not only to the gender markings and to issues in language, but also to the textual representations of masculinity and femininity as well as the social constructs drawn from those representations. Gender is a very important part of identity in novelistic characters; it is an important element of the

cultural identity(ies) of a fiction that revolves around a particular social environment. Gender awareness in the practice of translation becomes extremely helpful for translators since it aids in the interpretation of the complexities of masculinities and femininities performed by the fictional beings in a narrative and their gendered interactions. For the reasons described throughout the dissertation, I considered appropriate to intervene as I did. My goal has been twofold: to provide an English translation of a little known Venezuelan literary text written in Spanish, and to discuss the translation strategies and challenges I encountered when translating this fictional gender rich Spanish text and propose a way of rendering it into English.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

A NOVELLA BY

ISAAC CHOCRÓN

TRANSLATED BY

MARKO MILETICH

PART ONE

ON EDGE

I AM

fully aware of my audacity, of my insolence, when writing what you have now decided to start reading. Writing is a most peculiar business, is it not? It is the opposite of a conversation which can take turns or even be conducted simultaneously. Writing is but *dead letters* or *live ones*, I cannot tell anymore, and as such, I will never know the exact moment you start reading what I am currently writing.

As I write in the strictest of solitudes, I imagine that you are also reading me without anyone at your side talking to you. From solitude to solitude, certainly the most ideal intimacy ever invented. I invoke our two spirits, or are they souls? And I begin.

I can guarantee you that you could have never imagined the extent of the disaster. It swept everything away and left us in a state of shock.

Even worse: no one imagines, or even dares to predict, what this new nation will be like. We are standing at a crossroads, knowing that the path that brought us here disappeared as if swallowed by one of those tornadoes that, from time to time, pound the South of Missouri.

The tornado swallowed the path that brought us here and left us stuck at the crossroads. What we see is an open field, a place which corny poets used to refer to as “off the beaten path.” but we are not sure if it will become a road forward, or if, on the

contrary, we are going to remain “off the beaten path” going round and round like those dry tumble weeds that fly about, going up and down, dancing at the mercy of a whirlwind.

This is the current stage where our events take place, but from time to time, as in all back-and-forth in life, we will have to go backwards so that you also know the previous stage, the one that, in spite of its gradual and apparent deterioration, seemed to us, if not the promised land, the land of promises. Obviously we were younger, and prone to generate and feel optimistic impulses. “Nevertheless...,” “However...” were pet phrases we used in our conversations when referring to our country, the few times we managed to mention it. At that time, there was little talk about politics; a little more about corruption and none whatsoever about change. We mentioned the future as if it were a round, syrupy fruit that would ripen at the height of its lushness. We would caress it, we would predict it, and because of all that daydreaming, we did not realize that it had ripened, rotted, and fallen to our feet, breaking into foul-smelling chunks. No sympathy or pity, please. Go on reading and then draw your own conclusions.

That month of December 1999, drew on through a whirlwind of electoral propaganda focused on the two basic monosyllabic words in any language: YES and NO. There were supporters for each side, and the YES and NO cries could be heard through the atrocious traffic on the streets and avenues and over the incessant honking of horns. Anyone who had seen this frenzy from above would have concluded that it was nonsense promoted by thousands of lunatics escaped from hundreds of loony bins, or if you would perhaps indulge me, that one was looking at a completely odd oligophrenic population.

The annoying habit of honking car horns non-stop is one of our wild traditions that had always been popular; it is used either to signal emergencies -such as the transportation of a dying person to a hospital- or to announce blessings. I live on a street two blocks away from a church and every Friday or Saturday from seven p.m. on, at about one and a half hour intervals, a line of cars comes down blaring horns. I do not need to go out to the terrace to confirm that down the street comes first the nuptial car, usually a white convertible model with a very pompous couple, sitting at the edge of the back seat like parade marshals, blowing kisses upward towards the stars, (thanking them for their happiness, I suppose). They are followed by ten or fifteen cars with their noisy fanfare, which disappear down the road, unfortunately not sucked up by the spiral of a tornado. We would then regain the silence of the night, but half an hour later, bam! Another wedding parade would emerge. It just occurred to me that after the tragedy, during the remainder of December and the rest of the year up to now, the newlyweds have disappeared.

I digress. I am going off on a tangent. I admit it. But, to my credit, I should clarify that I am retelling things and not delivering a planned and timed speech. I promised to tell you the incidents and from all of them, I assure you, the magnitude of the impact of the event will come out.

While the YES or NO argument, which would decide the future of a new Constitution that hardly anyone had read, was heating up, it continued to rain. Every day it rained violently and people attributed it to EL NIÑO or LA NIÑA phenomenon, which supposedly had changed the usual climate in many regions. People either took out their umbrellas or preferred to get wet screaming their slogans. It continued raining until

Wednesday December 15th, the very day of the election. Images of what was happening in Vargas started to appear on television in the midst of the roar of airplanes and helicopters that were supervising the voting process from sunup to sundown.

If those first images showed rain, landslides, and mudslides, they were soon followed by news from the early morning hours of the 16th reporting more than thirty thousand dead and ninety thousand casualties. The extent of the tragedy grew just as the rain dragged everything down. On the 17th there was mention of “hundreds of dead and thousands of casualties” as the sea dragged everything to the shore. By the 18th it became impossible to determine the exact number of victims, but the images of sea waves engulfing people were shown repeatedly; an incessant noisy water avalanche. If by Tuesday the 21st, the victims had reached the 100,000 mark, two days later there were 330,000 casualties and “perhaps” 30,000 deceased. We would later avoid looking at each other’s faces that Christmas Eve.

This is how we began the so much anticipated millennium. What has come afterwards has kept our eyes wide open, a bad taste in our mouths and our ears ringing with an incessant echo of torrential water. But “life goes on” people started to say, “no way out.” Of course, life goes on; here I am describing it; but, how and with what?

With more politicking. The new Constitution had passed while electoral campaigns were started to elect all kinds of government officials, from the top post down to the last councilman in the most obscure district. As if our existence were made up of a parody of consecutive cheap circus acts, we were not allowed a rest period to fill our days with the sluggishness of mourning. Meanwhile in Vargas, named the Epicenter State of

the tragedy, everything was paralyzed, as if the huge rocks together with the gigantic dried tree trunks that descended from the Ávila were monuments from nature impossible to eradicate. The Book of Genesis had ended.

And the Book of Exodus began. Those who could, began to go abroad; because they had the means and could afford to, and many others who did not have the means, or could not afford it, did so influenced by the extent of the disaster, by the vast amount of crime in daily life, and because, excuse the repetition, they saw and smelled at their feet the foul-smelling fruit, that, to them, now seemed the most accurate forecast of that long ago relished future. Bidding farewell to friends became almost a routine, as did stopping by the homes of the ones leaving to say goodbye to them, among boxes filled with their belongings. Some of them assured us that they would return, “when things get better.” All of them encouraged us to follow suit.

Why are we still here? Each one of us must have an answer. I offer mine. I have remained, and I remain simply because I have nowhere else to go. “Poor me!” Not at all; I do not have huge amounts of money but I am not without means either. What I really meant to say is that I do not have people anywhere else waiting for me. My family vanished without a trace a while back, and I was no longer fond of any of them before their gradual disappearance. I had started replacing them, as most people do, with friends. I must confess that I have a half a dozen, or perhaps a dozen, ten at most, who fill my days. I constantly change the number, which reveals my emotional instability. None of them have left, and I think that none of them will, for the same reasons as mine. You will get to know them. I am sure that they will make comments about what I say. I can hear their antics, their scorn, and I know that they are not serious. Deep down (really deep:

their souls) they love me and they need me, as I do them. But that need does not stop me from admitting that they are a hornet's nest, a pack of hounds. If you do not get infuriated by reading my observations, if you go on, you will add to your awareness a new dimension of human behavior similar to that of those giants that showed their affection by eating their loved ones. Utterly passionate anthropophagy.

I remain also because of the age issue, my longevity. Those who emigrate, do so to start a new life which usually includes finding a satisfactory occupation that brings an additional income to the one they already have. But in my case, who is going to hire me at my age? And even worse, who needs another economist? Two years ago, an oil company offered me retirement. The proof I did my job well, is that I stayed there the mandatory 30 years to receive my pension. Right away I rented my apartment in Caracas, and with the money from the retirement pension, I paid cash for this place that has a living-dining room, a kitchen and two bedrooms with bathrooms. Miraculously, like the rest of the building, my apartment suffered no damages. It was even spared from the packs of looters who like vultures, came out night and day to steal or destroy everything they found. You have already figured out that I live in Vargas, facing the sea.

Seven months after the disaster I have electricity, running water that is turned on for a half hour three times a day, but no telephone, which I do not miss because in the following days, like everyone else, I bought a cell phone with its charger and three spare batteries, that I have on at all times. That Wednesday the 15th, under torrential rain, instead of driving I chose to go up to Caracas in one of those shuttle vans, because a couple, friends of mine, had invited me to eat at their place: "Have lunch here after you vote, and you'll hang out with all of us. Later, at night time we'll take you back." "All of

us” are the friends I mentioned earlier. It rained so much, that I did not vote because the school where I was supposed to vote was closed. And at *night time*, I had to stay with them followed by another *night time* and many others, changing into clothes they lent me and receiving *little Christmas gifts* like toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, a comb; everything a human being needs for daily hygiene. I stayed with them and with others at each of their homes in front of the television, the whole day, waiting to hear if it was safe to go back down. By early January, two lanes on the throughway were opened and I went down with some friends who offered to take me. Everything was dirt, rocks, uprooted trees with their dry roots, and silence. The miracle of my undamaged building was as amazing as the devastation that surrounded it; there was electricity and we could take the elevator to the 12th floor where I lived, there was water, bought from some water trucks, and my apartment was just as I had left it. We opened the terrace glass doors and from there we saw, from one side to the other, a savanna that resembled a desert; there was nothing but dirt where there used to be a spa, streets and life.

I decided to stay, in spite of my friends’ opinions, who, irritated and stunned because of what they had seen, insisted that I go back with them. I preferred to remain because the apartment, like it or not, offered me the comfort of my things, my furniture, my clothes; in short, my possessions. What was not mine, but completely foreign was the presence of the one thing that I did not notice until they left worried, promising to call non-stop, something that enveloped me like a giant glass bell or a huge tent as soon as they left; silence. No car noises, or dogs barking, or little birds singing. No sound of engines in the sky or the sea. Nothing. No voices. Not even the echo of my voice repeating aloud: “Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

That silence engulfed me, surrounded me, it followed me everywhere; almost as if it were a gigantic animal whose breath puffed on me and whose odor made me feel dizzy. That is how this silence was: not a bell or a tent, but that omnipresent and omnipotent animal appearing everywhere, at all times, its sound stronger than the waves across from me or the television that I got used to leaving on, and that would stun me with its news flashes about the tragedy, or with its American dramas full of violence and cowboys tearing each other to pieces. Apart from that sole company, because that was television for me, silence prevailed.

In the afternoon, I walked to the only open store that the doorman pointed out to me. I was able to buy food and drinking water. I bought so many things that luckily the owner's son offered to take them up to my apartment. When we went in, the only sound that we could hear was the pounding of the waves against the rocks. The young man left everything on the table and on the floor and refused to accept a tip, but put it in his shirt pocket when I insisted. He went up to the terrace and looking over the entire panorama like a cabin boy on the high seas, turned around and barely looking at me, asked: "Doesn't this silence bother you?" As if feeling embarrassed for what he had just said, he bowed his head and left.

I then understood the force of that silence. It was like what silence after death must be; the silence that prevails after receiving the last shovel of dirt over the coffin. There you are with your silence. That is how I felt, and I was about to slam shut the door, go up to Caracas, and ask my friends for shelter again. I don't know why, however, I grabbed a chair, and decided to sit down on the terrace, facing the divinely blue sea with its waves pounding one after the other like experienced chorus girls from any music hall.

I took a deep breath and exhaled noisily, as if to quiet the silence. I inhaled and exhaled that way several times. For a moment, it seemed as if I had obnubilated silence listening to myself and listening to the rhythm of the waves across from me.

I felt tranquility replacing my former hesitation. To celebrate it, not only did I pour myself the first whisky of the evening (it was still dusk) but I looked for the “Hello Dolly” record, the one with Carol Channing singing. I played it as loudly as I could. Over her drunken saxophone voice, mine sang at the top of my lungs, quashing that moribund silence, that, of course, remained present, and has continued to be present, but without frightening me.

So here I am, watching the day-to-day return to daily life. Little by little, some building tenants have returned. Little by little, I can see from my terrace crews cleaning the streets, big trucks throwing dirt into the sea and tractors coming and going; everything going on as if it were some type of construction and not the consequences of destruction. On weekends more cars emerge with their passengers almost hanging out of their windows, looking again and again at the huge rocks, at the wide plain that used to be the sea and that now has retreated much further away. The cars travel slowly, raising a cloud of dust as if without destination. Silence continues to reign supreme.

Before, when I used to work at the oil company, I used to dream about living here, facing the sea. I thought I deserved this calmness or this tranquility after having fully lived through blessings and tragedies. *Dance your troubles away* as the saying goes and I danced so much that little by little I started forgetting all the steps I took, under each and every circumstance. Perhaps it was reasonable that after all that hustle and

bustle, I would be part of a list of victims of some disaster. It was, I imagined, the only thing left for me to do. As the immortal Frank Sinatra song goes, I have lived “My Way.”

My references to gringo songs (by Channing, and now Sinatra) are due to a (mis)education for which I blame the oil company. I used to travel very often to meetings, conventions, symposia, in cities in Texas and Oklahoma where I would always do the same thing: take notes about what was discussed each day, from nine to six, from Monday to Friday in any given week. Upon my return, all those scribbled notebooks would turn into memoranda for my superiors. They would skim through most of the summaries, written in the correct hydrocarbon jargon, and then, with another memorandum attached to them, four lines at the most, they would be placed in the file room.

During those nights of travel, I had more than enough time to cultivate what became a principal predilection: attend as many musical comedies as possible showing at the so-called *Dinner Theaters*, that besides offering food and drinks, would have two showings, at eight and at ten thirty, presenting a summarized and sweetened version of Broadway hits performed by novice actors who more than likely would never set foot on a New York stage. I did not care about the mediocrity of the production. There were even nights when I saw two showings, one after the other, preferring that to the only other alternative: going back to the motel room and falling asleep watching some television series. I stayed also, because I would always share the table with traveling salespeople, couples celebrating their anniversaries, old maids entertaining a friend soon to be a bride, and I would impress everyone with my encyclopedic knowledge of the American musical

theater. Let's say that I was quite an authority on the subject. One might add that I showed a despicable vanity.

Of course, I would always come back with some records, and once here, expanded that despicable vanity, tormenting my friends, not only by forcing them to listen, but also by singing my own versions above the recordings, adding gestures. Sometimes they would laugh. Sometimes, having drawn out excessively the extent of my very individualistic performance, one of them would desperately scream at me: "Enough already!"

Enough blabbering already! At least, I have made you forget the inconclusive tragedy that I described in so much detail. We should not forget the chorus of another immortal song from American musicals; the one that Ethel Merman repeats in the musical *Gypsy*: "Everything is coming up roses." Everything is coming up roses, yes sir. Everything is coming up roses and whoever doubts it would do well to read what the others —those friends that mentioned— will tell you.

YOU ARE

not just going to buy that story, are you? Logically, you could burst out: "What the hell is all of this?" or more sensibly ask: "Who wrote what I have just read, a man or a woman?" Because, what did you learn from what you have just read? Hardly anything. That's no way to start a friendship. That's no way to satisfy curiosity. One reads to be told, to be hooked from the beginning, not to have information omitted and specially not to have confessions kept in the dark. Since I know that character, and we have in our "credit," or maybe "debit," an enduring friendship, I know that the whole geisha pose of

looking over the fan is simply flirtation, *flirt* as she would say in English since she inevitably splatters her sentences with words in that language.

SHE, dear male or female reader, just as it reads: SHE. Note that I follow the respect for the sexes that has been imposed on us by the text of our Bolivarian Constitution. Perhaps you thought the writer to be a very refined man, maybe even a player from the other team; you know what I mean. Who could blame you, sir or madam, if María Teresa Sánchez, that's her name, did not write using the feminine form, as she should have done to conform to our new Magna Carta. She writes everything using the neutral form, or as she herself calls it "in the correct hydrocarbon jargon," though I doubt she would have gotten a raise based on that last narrative.

Her name is María Teresa Sánchez and my name is Agustín Campos. Every character must have a name, and here both of us are characters. If we were people like you, we wouldn't need to identify ourselves (I haven't demanded you tell me your name for you to read me). Anyway, María Teresa worked for a zillion years as another economist at the oil company and, like with every bureaucrat, she got in and remained there as if in a convent. She did not have a rosary of jobs as I did, since also being an economist, I've gone from one job to another, thank God, but always upwards; a good example of the upward mobility that reigned in what we then used to call "Great Venezuela."

I mention God, and I even make the sign of the cross because the calamity in Vargas has made us feel if not God's preeminence, at least God's dominance over our lives. Of course, I could have said "destiny" instead of God, or if I were a biologist "the

vicissitudes of nature.” The word “vicissitudes” is a word that I like even more now after having guessed its meaning while we watched the Venezuelan version of the TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The contestant was already on his way up to the two million mark (and, so was I, because I had guessed all the previous questions), but he got stuck on this damn word and lost everything. My two children (from the third marriage; maybe later I will tell you about my conjugal hardships), a virile sixteen year old boy, named Agustín, like the undersigned, and a twelve year old girl, Aura Marina, were jumping and screaming: “Daddy, Daddy you are a genius.” Their mother poked her head from the kitchen door, looked at me and twisted that mouth that I now rarely kiss, telling me with her grimace: “Bah, quite the genius.” Envy; sheer female envy, which is the worst kind.

I often wonder, usually when I am in traffic, why it is that men and women like each other so much if we are so different. I know, I know, opposites attract, but that’s in the physical plane, not in personality. I confess to you that without being a sex maniac, as Aura accuses me of being (she is the current one), adding that a doctor should control my sex drive, I melt; or rather I become erect in front of a nice pair of breasts like small cantaloupes, in front of good, plump, tight buttocks, in front of a pair of thick-ass legs that promise pleasure from the ankles up to you know where. By the way, María Teresa had, years ago, some of those attributes, but..., the eternal “but”, is that time went by and it continues to go by and I don’t have either the hard and hairless biceps that drove her crazy, nor the flat abdomen and even less, even less, the banner that with the slightest touch would stiffen like a flag’s mast. It was truly quite an excellent flag, while now... well now; it still behaves, thank God.

We go back to God, and I thank him for what I have received from life, in spite of my “vicissitudes,” and I give more thanks because of the things that He has saved me from. Like from the Vargas event, certainly. Being here in Caracas, in the middle of that torrential rain, which was falling day after day, nothing happened to us, however, except the amazement and the fear we felt watching what the television showed us. Right away we thought that María Teresa (Aura has a great regard for her and though she suspects we had our rolls in the hay, since it was so long ago, she does not get upset) and thank God that we had invited her to spend Election Day with us, because she managed to get out that day before everything got worse. Needless to say, it bothered me that she would call us “a couple of friends”, just like that, without names or last names; why couldn’t she say “Agustín and Aura Campos?” She is always such a slacker.

It was I who suggested that she would stay overnight at our home that first night and Aura, who could be magnanimously hypocritical when she wants to be, loaded her with things, put her in the baby’s room and I think she was about to suggest to her that they sleep together in our bed. As far as I’m concerned, just like I learned years ago from the sweet whores of Calle Echegaray in Madrid, when I used to screw them one after the other “I couldn’t care less.” Neither could, together or individually, get my flaming flag to fly in the wind at high mast. To do it, they would need my assistance (from that time at the Echegaray Street when I was doing my master’s at the Complutense, my poor flag has seen a lot of action) and, that night, I must confess, after having drunk a zillion whiskeys and talked and listened to so much nonsense, what I wanted was that Moisés and Rebeca Waimber, Arturo and Victoria López, Juanca Gómez and Bernardo Salvatore (a couple together for more than twenty years), and Manuel Martínez (he truly is a sex maniac), the

last three players from the other team, would gather all their crap and leave. By the way, I have given names and last names like a social correspondent, so that you know who makes up that “honest nest” that “pack of hounds” that our darling María Teresa simultaneously adores and hates.

In order to provide you with additional information, here is a “résumé” for each one, though she would have thought it more correct to attach their curricula vitae. First, let’s mention the coincidences: we are all graduates from Venezuelan universities, and some of us have done post-graduate work at institutions abroad. We all come from the middle to upper middle class, and we are all children of immigrants in Caracas; either from the country’s interior (my family is from Maracaibo and Aura’s from Valencia) or from abroad (Arturo and Victoria’s are Spaniards; Bernardo’s Italian; Moisés and Rebeca are from I don’t know where in Central Europe. I don’t know much either about the parents of Juanca and Manuel; they almost never mention them).

Four of us are economists (María Teresa, Arturo, Bernardo and I). Moisés is a manufacturer, or salesman, or rather is both at the same time, and his wife Rebeca, a city planner with a “Suma Cum Laude” that has taken her to the top from the moment she graduated. Two are psychologists; Victoria in a Ministry and Aura, my wife, who works in one of those elegant pre-schools where our children studied, fortunately charging us half tuition. Who is left? The two Central University professors: Juanca an occasional poet who teaches Humanities, and Manuel, a fearful and feared art critic and instructor at the Art School, of course.

We met years ago, and I regret not being able to detail how each one appeared or how friendships were forged. Don't believe that we are like a club or fraternity. We just see each other often. Our children got used to calling us "uncles" or "aunts". Some of us have taken vacations together and we remember, and sometimes celebrate, our birthdays. Isn't that what most people do? Besides a family, we have what Aura and Victoria call in their psychological jargon a "social nucleus."

The nucleus works smoothly and without friction, its emotional strength shows up when one of us faces an unforeseeable problem, like María Teresa's in Vargas. We then become a platoon, shoulder to shoulder, trying to solve, or at least, minimize the conflict. That's what we did with her each day at that end of that year which for all of us turned out being sad and endless. I state my objection therefore; to the way she defined us. She is ungrateful. At the same time, I know, and each one of us could claim to know, why she branded us as "hornet's nest," and "packs of hounds." She happened to remember unpleasant or tense events that took place in our common past. Don't count on me to recall them. Let's move on.

I would like to clarify, however, as far as I am concerned, that the things that happened involving me, came about by mutual agreement, like our little rolls in the hay. Those were rounds of wrestling, the result of alcohol and curiosity and just plain urges. These last ones (my sweet Madrilenian girls would call "appetite"; they should include this word on the television show so I can guess it right when it appears on the screen), those appetites overpower us without warning, and there is nothing we can do but give in. Give in, puffing like a sweaty beast.

My life has been splattered with these adventures, but I am no beast. I have fallen in love twice like a cowboy howling at the moon, and three more times like a grieving bolero singer. The last three ended in marriage; the first two remain in my memory as if they were alive, as if refusing to stop fucking up my existence. They were extremely perfect, extremely intense, extremely impossible, and because of all those “extremely,” they ended up at the bottom of the cliff. The three marriages, however, corresponded to logical stages in my life. The first was youthful, unrestrained, it burned and left ashes plus a son already a man, whom I sometimes see and with whom I have nothing to talk about. The second: a real disaster, fortunately brief. The third one, and I swear the last one, you already know about, and, in spite of the disappearance of desire, it keeps me entertained, because I am living the process of watching my two children grow. The girl is a sweetie; she pampers and spoils me as if she were my mother. With the boy, Agustín, I keep trying to get him to see me as a friend but without success. It’s as if he had a secret that he doesn’t want to tell me. A good student, he talks little, much less than I do, as you have realized, and it would seem that he doesn’t know what he wants, if he really wants anything. I just realized that I wasn’t able to develop a friendship with either one of my two boys. I didn’t have it with my father either, dead years ago, so that I can conclude mockingly; “like father like son.” This is my life.

That’s a lie. It’s missing a qualifier. I should have said: “This is my family life.” I’ve had less honorable ones and I don’t mean just rolls in the hay. I have been involved in professional scams, successful frauds, tricks, everything in exchange for money, of course, contributing to modestly establish the bad reputation that the majority of independent economists of this country have. Everything in exchange for money and

without the possibility of a scandal. Always shielded behind the famous and lucrative “consulting firms.” I have gone from one to the next, always with some up my sleeve, sometimes betraying one with the other. Perhaps you have already listed me as a lowlife, but I’m not one. Not evil, nor despicable, nor low class, the curious thing is that people who get my “advice” are my best advertisement; they are grateful for my advice and they recommend my services all over the place.

I still have to tell you what I expect from the rest of my life. This year I will turn fifty-eight and I am apparently healthy. I don’t have bad habits, except for a little drinking at night when I get home tired from having to deal with the public, as any salesman would say. So if I have twenty or twenty-five years left, what will I do? Stay here, of course. This is my country where I was born and here is where I learned which end is up. I admit that these are difficult times; more than hard, confusing. It’s as if we had lost the compass. As if the ship were dancing in the middle of the sea. Did you notice how María Luisa described the shopkeeper’s son, the one that carried the bags that afternoon? “Cabin boy on the high seas.” I translate it into her favorite language: “desirable.” As if I didn’t know her, always craving one more affair. By the way, I forgot to add another coincidence: all of us speak English more or less well. Another legacy that “Great Venezuela” left us.

So each one tries to keep his or her flame alive, and with luck, alive and kicking, so that “everything is coming up roses.” We live day to day, we try not to get involved,

we make it a point not to become desperate, and here we are. As characters. We were lucky to be people long ago, when that period seemed endless to us all.

HE IS

suspicious and thinks that I have a secret but I don't want to tell him. Instead of being an economist he should've been a policeman because that stuff about the secret is absolutely true. But, how can I tell him? By drawing him cartoons? Do I draw myself more confused than a cow in a milk factory? I can make a list of the things I don't like, but I don't dare put in writing what I suspect I like. For example, it bothers me and bugs the hell out of me that they keep telling me all the time how to use my time. As if they were paying me a salary: "Here's your two week's allowance, little fucker and let's see what you do to deserve the next one." Nothing. They can stick it up their ass, they can stick that two weeks allowance up there also, if they are actually giving it to me, and let them stick up there also their advice, suggestions, warnings, threats, dissatisfactions, and that never-ending question that drives me crazy: "What are you going to do with your life, little fucker?"

Does one have to do something with life? It's life that does things to us and what we gotta do, is avoid most of those things that life does to us. We have to be jumping around, avoiding each puddle not to step on it, be like a grasshopper or a frog, dare to be as we actually are. That's where I mess up. I don't dare. I spend my days bottling things up, and they have the balls to proclaim that I don't talk and to advise me to get things off my chest and talk to them. Shit, it is because of them that I'm frustrated! "Take it easy," I tell myself repeatedly, "Take it easy and be cool and keep your mouth shut because your yapping can get you into trouble. Or did you forget Mrs. Aura practices psychology?"

I don't understand why my mom studied all that crap. Psychology for me is just pure crap. She is a behaviorist: big shit! That means that according to your behavior, people know who you are, and vice versa, that according to your behavior, they can change it so you are as the behaviorist thinks you should be. Ain't that something! The worst thing is that she and her buddies talk about that and they swear that it helps, that it cures, that it gets you better, that anyone can be a big shit by following the behavior that they order. *Anyway...* as María Teresa would say in English, who by the way I don't think is nasty although her deal is that she doesn't get to do the nasty. She says in English *Anyway...* and she lets that word drag like a sigh. Whoever hears her is left with a wide-open mouth waiting for the conclusion of that *anyway* that she started, and she doesn't say anything. Not a peep.

I like María Teresa with her insistence on talking to us in English to see if they're really, really teaching it in school and with her huge smile when she hears me answer at full speed. If there's anything I have learned in that reform school, it's that non-stop English talking. That's why when Mr. Agustín begins again with the never-ending questions about what I'm going to study when I graduate from high school next year, I answer, so as not to confess that I haven't got the slightest, with my little fucker smile: "I'll go abroad. Since I speak English..." and without getting rid of the smile I add: "At school they offer scholarships to go to North and since I've good grades..." His worrisome face almost turns into a jolly Santa Claus, offering a little smile similar to mine. Good old María Teresa, who has been listening, backs me up: "Don't worry. I will help you with the oil company. A scholarship you shall have, my love, and when you are there, I will take you to all the musicals." "I suppose that your craziness will not be

contagious,” states sluggishly, her ex, my daddy (of course I know everything that happened between them. Is there anything I don’t know?) She, so divine, without missing a beat answers him: “No my dear, crazy habits are not contagious. They are acquired.” Tell me, isn’t my “aunt” a trip?

At times I think that I’d like to be like her. Wait a minute: Not dressing up as a woman or being trans or any of that fag shit. I’d like to be like her because one doesn’t have to be an adult to realize what that incredible woman has done with her life; whatever the hell she wanted. I’d like to be like her because she is not ashamed to start singing and dancing in front of everyone and enjoy herself doing it. People yell: “You are nuts!” “You’re really nuts!” and she shakes it off, bows as if she heard applause, swings her hair and kisses my cheek while she hands me an empty glass and asks me in English: “May I have another drink, baby?”

She’s the only person who treats me as an equal. Buddies. Tight buddies, that’s what we are. With the others... shit! If I could tell what the three others are plotting when they see me! I can tell. Even worse if I could tell how, although they are supposed to be like my uncles, they can put an arm on my shoulder, lower it to my waist, bring it up and rub the back of my neck with their hand, and mess my hair saying over and over: “He’s getting taller and taller” or clinching my arm: “Look at his muscles!” When all of them know that I don’t have one fucking muscle. Well, I have the normal ones, nothing to be ashamed of. There are those who say that I am somewhat pumped up. I am pretty lucky, pal.

Aarón (like that with a double *a* to assure that they know he's Jewish) exaggerates when saying I am really pumped up, dripping with sweat after we finish our workout at the Hebraica Gym, the club that allows me to go there without being Jewish because my "aunt and uncle," his parents, arranged it with the guy in charge over there. We're supposed to be like brothers. We grew up together and even though we go to different schools, we spend our time, lifting weights, sneaking a peek, listening to music, sneaking a peek, talking shit, sneaking a peek, boasting about chicks, sneaking a peek, taking showers next to each other, with the head up receiving the water stream with eyes closed, sneaking a peek. That's it: I revealed the secret that torments my daddy. By the way, I hate it when he calls me "buddy" and worse "little buddy," as I hate it when Aura refers to me all the time using the English expression "my baby." I hate everything, but nothing as much as that sneaking a peek out of the corner of our eyes between Aarón and myself. We've been doing it for ages, and we haven't gone on from there because we are little fucks from good families and that's not done. Besides, I wouldn't dare because losing Aarón as a result of a screw up, would mean losing my every-day hope of becoming a major dude.

So you tell me: what do I do with everything I am exposing and everything I'm holding back? Good question for the millionaire game show daddy insists we watch each Wednesday, just to brag about being a know-it-all. He's not a bad guy; on the contrary, he always has something in mind. He invents walks, lunches in restaurants on Sundays at noon, he sends Mom flowers when he notices that she's extra grouchy, and he tells us over and over that we have to be united, that we should tell each other everything, that we

should imitate the Waimbers, who as good Jews make, and I quote, “a temple” out of the family.

The Waimbers’ “temple” is a huge house, super comfortable, with a front lawn and a full library in the back, a play room as God intended; everything arranged by some faggy interior designer who must have charged them a small fortune. Aarón’s room, for example, is double or triple the size of mine, and with a desk; a laptop (and not just an old computer for everybody, like ours), his bathroom, because the little fuck enjoys his own bathroom so he doesn’t have to share the one in the hall with his sister as I do, that huge bathroom includes a huge bathtub and also a shower that you can set as you like. “How long are you going hanging out in that bathroom?” he asks me and proposes: “Stop behaving like a fag, undress and get in the tub and stay there all afternoon.” What I don’t understand about Aarón is that by being so super intelligent, always excelling in everything, participating in the Chemistry or Math Olympics and making it to the end or maybe even winning, I don’t understand how that exceptionally gifted little fuck, gifted in everything, and especially with that body that’s got it going on, although it’s missing the foreskin because of the Jewish thing (I have seen it several times, sneaking a peak, carefully, sneaking a peak), I don’t understand how he doesn’t get the hints, how come he’s not aware of our mutual peeking since he does it just like me, how is it that he doesn’t show any interest in seeing what can happen. So; what could happen to us? It’s not something that’s going to be washed up. Although I confess with a hand on my heart and by that God that daddy constantly mentions since the Vargas tragedy, that if Aarón decided to be ballsy I would shit in my pants. I wouldn’t know what to do or how to do it.

That's it: I'm bragging about being all that when up to now the only thing that I know to do is *manual labor*. God help us!

If God exists, I trust that He'll help me not only with the situation with Aarón, but with everything. Like Daddy says, "The proof that God exists is that he saved us from the Vargas event." After things halfway calmed down, I went down with Aunt María Teresa one Saturday morning. She was so cool running around in her car, which, like her apartment, was not damaged at all, and all of a sudden, she invited me to go with her. "Get your backpack and let's go. I will bring you back tomorrow." Mom screamed: "No way, none of that! Your pretty boy has to do his homework for Monday." "Put the homework in the backpack. We will do it together in the evening." "Let him go, woman," said Daddy without lowering the newspaper that was covering his face: "I mean, he is a man already." "And what does that mean?" asked the aunt, letting out one of her divine laughs; "That he can rape me or I can rape him?" "Get out, get out and stop talking so much nonsense!" said mom kissing and hugging us.

So, we drove down the throughway to the sounds of one of the aunt's favorite musicals. I think it was *Oklahoma*. She was singing the choruses as loudly as she could and dancing while driving. After passing the pier, we became disgusted and she turned off the music. I don't know how to describe what I saw and what I felt: A cloud of dust everywhere that, thank God, didn't get in our throats, because we had the windows rolled up and the air conditioner at full blast. Huge rocks from side to side next to immense trunks with their roots all over the place. No one anywhere, although all of a sudden I saw a small old lady, carrying a small bag, barefoot, walking far away in the distance, as if she were lost. "Horrible, isn't it?" said María Teresa, probably seeing my face. I

couldn't say anything and continued watching. I think she got worried when she saw me like that and she took one of my hands, got closer, kissed my cheek and very lovingly said: "We will be fine at the apartment. You will see. Nothing happened to it. And we will eat extremely well. Wait until you try the exquisite things I bought at the delicatessen."

That's how it went: Once there she treated me like a king. From the terrace one could see a whole savanna, like the ones in cowboy movies, and at a great distance, very far away, the sea more green than blue. From time to time, someone would appear walking alone as if lost. In the afternoon I proposed to her we get closer to all of that and we went on. Swallowing dust, squinting our eyes so that the wind, full of sand, would not get into them, sneaking a peek at each other as Aarón and I did. I messed up when I almost sighed: "If I had imagined that it was going to be like this, I would've asked you to bring Aarón. When I tell him, he's not gonna believe it." And she placed an arm on my shoulders and answered: "Of course, he will believe you. He is your best friend, right? Friends believe each other. A shame you did not think of it."

We came back covered in dust like a dessert covered with powdered sugar. After we showered, we did my homework and I was surprised by her enthusiastic way of helping. It was as if she liked doing homework. She asked me to serve her first whiskey. I opened a can of soda for myself and we sat on the terrace as if we were old friends, marveling at the explosion of that dusk: intense red, shining yellow, everything turning pink little by little, everything like those cool multimedia effects at a rock concert. It was as if that sky never knew what had happened there. As if God were paying no attention to us. When I told her all of this, do you know what she screamed with watery eyes looking

at me? “How lucky is it that I invited you to come! Never say again, as you keep repeating at home, that you do not know what you are going to do.” “And, you know that because of what I said to you?” “Obviously,” she answered; “If you have noticed the sky’s indifference or God’s indifference to everything that has happened here, indifference, I must add, that it repeats itself every evening like now and every morning when the blue sky is born brand new, if you know how to see, you are going to know how to live.” That’s when I started crying, and she took me in her arms, held me very, very tightly and I continued to cry as I swear I had never cried before.

I don’t know why I told her everything that night. Well, not everything, EVERYTHING. I do know why: because I trusted her. Because, as she said, friends believe in each other, and I felt, and I feel, that she’s my friend. She also told me everything about her life when she was my age: “It is like the lyrics of that old tango that you probably don’t know, young man. It says high school love is like a flower for a day, or something like that, and that is what is happening to you and what happened to me. In the school run by nuns where I studied, my best friend was a little blonde girl who because she would accompany me in every crazy adventure that I thought of, drove me crazy. I even proposed to her one day that we leave home, that we go live very far away. And that is when love appeared, to her, not to me. It was a boy she met at a party. He appeared, he distanced her from me, we graduated, we separated, I went to the university, she, I do not know where, and thanks to you tonight, I remembered her again. I have no idea where she could be or what she has done with her life.”

“Do you then agree with dad that you can do what you want with your life?” I asked her, hanging on to her arm. “Of course you can, up to a point, you can.” “And,

what's that point?" "Circumstances, situations will indicate it to you and even will bring out the courage to do what you want to do. For example, dance. Do you want me to teach you some steps from the musicals?" She put on one of the records, she got me up from the chair, she took me by one hand and we danced liked crazy, boogying, as if we were the first two people in the world, "in all history," that's what she told me, "since the invention of dancing." Then, I fell in bed exhausted and slept until noon.

On the way back home, when we were almost there, she stepped on the brake, she stopped the car on the side of the road and looking into my eyes right in front of me, she told me: "Now we are friends because we have a secret. I will keep yours it and you will not mention it. We will see what happens. Meanwhile, when you want to let things out, come to me." I nodded my head affirmatively several times and kissed her cheek. "Oh, my dear boy, get rid of that worried face. You know what you have in front of you? That whole sky you liked so much."

SHE IS

not the same since the Vargas disaster. Who besides me could notice her level of alarm day after day, her restlessness, and her anxiety? I could continue adding nouns to the possessive “her” with other symptoms that would flow like the bursting waters we saw in television. We saw them descending from the mountain to the sea.

What has descended upon her is a mixture of fear and anguish, both of which made her aloof, skeptical, and cynical until one dawn, several months later, she woke up suffocating, unable to breathe, all cold and sweaty. I called Matilde and Nora, our two maids, who prepared herbal tea for her while I called the Emergency Service with which we had registered years ago and had never used. Fifteen minutes later a doctor, a nurse and a nurses’ aide came. They checked her, gave her a shot, gave her oxygen, and a half an hour later she was calm, sleeping next to me.

That afternoon she insisted on going to our internist alone because she knew about an urgent labor problem that I had to take care of at the factory. The doctor found her pressure to be very high and immediately sent her to a cardiologist who after conducting several types of electrocardiograms and taking her blood pressure again, diagnosed Rebeca with “auricular fibrillation and rapid ventricular response” (I did not ask myself what that means: it seems to be what is called *arrhythmia*) and “systemic arterial hypertension” or what is the same as a “hypertensive crisis.”

The cardiologist wanted to admit her immediately, but she convinced him to prescribe medication for 48 hours to see how she would react. Then she went to the pharmacy and came back driving her car, knowing that the doctor had forbidden her to do

so. Sitting calmly in our living room, surrounded by our two children, Aarón and Ruth, the two maids and I, she told us slowly what had happened. As she was telling us, she would look at us one by one as if forbidding us to speak. We would lower our eyes when we felt how she looked at us. She finished talking, she got up from the armchair and she warned us: "I am not a doctor, but I know that all of this means the beginning of a new life," and she went to our bedroom. Rebeca is like that.

"Like that" is not like that at all. Let's go little by little. Not necessarily from past to present but from circumstances to situations, so to speak. Let's say that in the eighteen years (or is it nineteen or twenty? I am not good at remembering anniversaries) that we have been together she has never shown signs of hesitation, imprecision or indecision. Very much on the contrary, she has always been strong-minded and precise, blunt and even authoritative. "This is done this way or that way." "Don't interfere because you always mess up" "Leave it to me." Phrases that were repeated so much, they became our code of conduct for our domestic relationship. She takes the reins. "The Mrs. is in charge."

Probably my docility, or call it submission, is the inheritance that I received from my own family, where my mother was able to do and undo everything she pleased with all of us. That is probably one of the most common characteristics of many Jewish families. Doesn't the Torah or the Talmud, or whatever, say that the mother is the center of the home? More than the center, I would call her the total organizer of our lives and the relentless tyrant of the twenty-four hours in each day. Besides an appointment book where she writes down all her appointments and ours, Rebeca has notepads throughout

the home where she writes in its pages “things to do”. That’s why our families, like our friends, say over and over that our home is like a temple.

If I sound like describing a robot, I am dead wrong because it would be sufficient to describe her evident physical beauty to humanize her and admire her. Since we met at the Hebraica School, she attracted everyone’s attention because of her abundant wavy blonde hair, her height, her curvy figure thanks to her fondness for swimming, her eyes, green or blue that changed according to the light and luscious lips that reward with generous smiles showing white, even teeth. Does my description sound corny? Probably. But you will get to know me and you will find out that I am pretty corny. Do you want more corny stuff? I fell in love with her at first sight and I told myself that I would convince her, little by little without any hurry, that when we graduated from College we would marry. As simple as that. In our Jewish world, many couples are formed that way. Since we go to the same parties and we pray at the same synagogues, since we practice the same customs, we know we are like that, “different” I would say. Few of us decided to leave the pen.

Rebeca also, was amused since we met because I used to call her my “perpetual adoration.” She liked to humor me, to know that I, behind my shortsighted big spectacles, would drool and would resign to follow her like a hound dog. We continued seeing each other, going out, during the time at the university when I, as an incurable slacker, chose the favorite major of all incurable slackers, business administration. In my defense, it was logical for me to choose it because by then I was working at Dad’s clothing factory during my free time, very lucrative by the way, and I knew that there I would have a

future without having to think or decide. Such circumstances turned me into what is known as “a good catch,” something any Jewish girl could consider.

“My future wife”- that is what I would call her and she burst into small laughs and pushed me away when I tried to hold her in my arms- chose the field of architecture- urban planning, knowing full well that her job market would be limited to joining a bureaucracy in some government office or municipality and relinquish any dream to plan ideal cities, settling to the supervision of repairing potholes in streets or designing automatic traffic changes. Rebeca, however, insisted that it was what she wanted to do and her perseverance got her the highest grades in her class, plus the invitation to join the University as a professor as soon as she graduated summa cum laude.

During those five years, I would encourage her to continue to be as productive as she could be and I repeated to her over and over that she should not to worry about her uncertain economic future, because there I was ready to take care of everything, so much so that in the week of her graduation, it was she who proposed marriage. I remember her question: “When do we get married?” and I felt that, finally! my life had a purpose: to dedicate myself to her and her happiness.

I think we have been happy. We arrived at marriage almost virgins: me completely; she, with one or two affairs that little by little she confessed to me. She insisted so much they had not been related to love, but to desire, that they did not matter to me. Besides the first-timers were not Jewish and just as they appeared, they disappeared. At least she assured me as much, and I believe her. Everything she tells me, I believe. A few years ago I even suspected one of those two to be Agustín or Arturo: the

first one, because of his reputation of being macho, conceited and a Don Juan; the second one for the super-affectionate way he has always treated her. Or maybe it was both of them. Why not if they studied with her at Universidad Central? Meanwhile, I was going to Universidad Metropolitana, the private paradise of the rich.

Whatever had happened, I have been happy with her since we came out of the synagogue married and went on to the big party that our parents financed. Each Jewish wedding is a flood of drinks and food, ending with a gigantic table of fancy little desserts made a whole month before by the women of the two families. Add to that the two orchestras, the party favors that are distributed as if it were a banquet during carnival, the video camera operators for the color movie that we may have even watched on a few occasions and then gets forgotten until eternity behind some shelf; and photographers jumping up and down like monkeys to capture the countless poses that will later be shown in luxurious silver frames, on living room tables of all the family tribe. It just occurred to me (something that has occurred to thousands of people who are more intelligent and wiser than I), that is where the secret of the survival of Judaism has lain for its long-lived history: the family. Whoever starts a family is a good Jew. That person will have permanent affections to show others. That person will be entangled in its demanding nets and everything else will always be an external and strange world. Maybe friendships will be forged, but they will never replace the family. That brilliant idea of María Teresa which she says and repeats as soon as she has had a couple of whiskeys, that we are her chosen family comes up against the bulk of the inherited one that does not allow any Jew to ignore it or replace it.

“What a spiel this orthodox rabbi is giving me.” Far from it, I could not even call myself a practicing Jew since I attend the synagogue only to recite the prayers for dead relatives and during the “high holidays”: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As far as dinners on Fridays go, when our children started growing up, we started having them on a weekly basis, more so because of the insistence of my son Aarón, supported by Rebeca in what she calls “necessary values.”

Aarón inherited from his mother that aspiration to compete and on top of that, the drive to win in everything that he sets himself to do. He is a dynamo: from the moment he gets up until he goes to bed he does a thousand things and all with excellent results. At school he is the best one in the class and the best one at sports he plays. In the Hebrew classes he comes out on top like no one else, and he has already decided that when he graduates from high school he wants us to send him for “a year or two to Israel” to study in a Yeshiva. He is tidy and disciplined, and it would seem that he has the stuff leaders are made of. For example, Agustín’s son, of the same age but not as tall and somewhat of a weakling, is controlled by him as he pleases, so much so that he asked me to sign him up in the Hebraica gymnasium to help him develop muscles. You should see them both together doing push-ups and lifting weights: Agustín Junior, dark-haired and very friendly against the bloneness of Aarón, Agustín obeying everything that Aarón tells him to do. Day after day they go to the gym, the torturer with his serious face and the tortured, all smiles.

My son seems so preoccupied in his fascination with competing that he appears to have no time for girls. When I was his age, seventeen, not only did I have time, but a relentless appetite that would torment me. Of course, when I met Rebeca, the appetite

became love, and I controlled myself with the only pastime all people this age have. When I ask him about girls, Aarón answers me without changing his serious face: “There will be time for that, Daddy.” As long as he does not become a rabbi!

Ruth, our thirteen-year-old daughter is more conventional. Rebeca says she is a little like me: a little lazy in her studies, a little conformist, and too fat for her age. Her pediatricist insists all that will go away when she gets to her real adolescence. If it does not go away, Rebeca will make sure to drive her crazy until it goes away. If it goes away, I am sure she will want to marry as soon as possible to have children and form a home. Because of all this, I think, and I tell Rebeca so, that more than being like me, she is the perfect image of my mother. For example, she has not even blinked at her Mom’s depression. Rebeca told me that all she did was hug her and give her little pats on her back and repeat: “Calm down, Mom, calm down, the team is winning.”

Aarón, on the other hand, with his analytical mind and his tone of a specialist in all things, gave a diagnosis while we had dinner: “What you are going through, Mom, is a state of frustration.” Rebeca and I remained looking at him and he protested: “Don’t look at me as if you were shocked.” Those big words are his specialty and after a pause he continued: “Your frustration is not personal or because of family issues, but professional. We all know that as soon as it came to be what everybody has decided to call ‘the Vargas tragedy,’ your university, Mom, gathered their urban planners, you among them, so that they would come up with immediate proposals for recovery. And they came up with them. You showed me and read me things. You all sent your reports to the government authorities and what did they do? Nothing. They filed them; like the reports Aunt María Teresa says they filed at the oil company. They didn’t even respond. Therefore, why

shouldn't you feel depressed, hypertensive and all that stuff the cardiologist told you? That's why I want to go to visit Israel. Nothing happens here. Perhaps there..." The four of us remained silent each looking at our respective plates, even though I was about to exclaim, as my mother does from time to time when she hears some terrible news: God of Sinai! What mess did we get ourselves into?" Right away half-smiling and crossing his arms, he sighed and said in a tone of absolute resignation: "God is very powerful! Don't worry because He will help us."

It is perhaps our belief in God that impresses our non-Jewish friends. Especially after the Vargas incident, when they saw us from day one dedicated to collecting food and clothing. I stopped going to the factory for almost that whole week and I felt good being able to help. What I remember the most was the discussion I had with a fellow believer while we packed the donations at Hebraica. He told about eight levels of charity proposed by the immortal Maimonides at the end of the twelfth century in his "Guide for the Perplexed" and the next day he gave me a small sheet of paper telling me: "Here. Keep it and don't forget it." This is what that small sheet of paper that I always carry in my wallet says: "The lowest of those levels is when the donor is pained when making a donation and does it as if with sadness. The second level is when one gives less than appropriate is given, but in a good mood. The third, giving only after it has been asked. The fourth, giving before being asked. The fifth, giving in such a way that the donor does not know whom the beneficiary is. The sixth, giving in such a way that the beneficiary does not know whom the donor is. The seventh, giving in such a way that neither the donor nor the beneficiary knows their respective identities. And the eighth, the purest form of charity is not giving donations but helping the beneficiary to rehabilitate, to

improve, because that way the purpose is achieved without anyone losing his or her self-esteem.”

What happened during the Vargas incident is that the third and sixth levels prevailed. What should have happened –although the day that this could happen is not yet in sight– is for the eight level to become the norm. That’s how we stand. Perhaps, and as usual, Rebeca was right in considering this the beginning of a new life.

WE'RE GUYS

who resemble fanatic Ping-Pong players. Every day, for more than twenty odd years...

PONG. Twenty-five to be exact.

PING. Twenty-five years hitting the little white ball to each other. One shoots it and the other returns it. Each one with a little paddle that looks like a rubber hand. Over and over, incessantly, inevitably. That's why, during the most intimate moments and with plenty of love we like to call each other those names. I, Ping. He, Pong. Got it?

PONG. You are on the first half of your first whiskey of the night and the nonsense has already started.

PING. How many times do I have to ask you and beg you not to count them for me? My whiskeys, not my nonsense expressions. Well you see, my dear sir, madam, miss or young gentleman (it takes all kinds to make the world go around), perhaps our nicknames remind you of characters from "The Mikado" the superb English operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan that we know by heart, or...

PONG. Your mental health is beginning to worry me. I am serious.

PING. Or our nicknames could remind you all those muttering servants that enter and exit, exit and enter without caring about the pathetic tragedy that drowns the *piccinina*, little, Madame Butterfly. That one really produced some ravings. Beautiful word, worthy of a laureate Professor of Elizabethan English Literature, like you. Another

beautiful word: “Laureate.” Both of them a little gay, but I must admit that they are beautiful.

PONG. Why is it that we don’t talk seriously lately?

PING. Very well, propose a serious topic.

PONG. Us. We look like two fossilized old men that live in another world.

PING. Here comes a new poem I suspect a magnum opus. I like to see you like this. Disturbed. That’s not a good word, but no one doubts that it is efficient.

PONG. You don’t tell me about your job or your plans anymore.

PING. Neither do you, but why talk about very well-known matters? Do you want a forty-word summary? I’ve been in the same firm for thirty years, half my life, and I can’t wait for the time they decide to force me into retirement with full pension and a watch or a commemorative plate. You are getting towards fifteen, or is it twenty? More than a third of your life in the Liberal Arts Department, teaching two different courses each semester and regretting that you don’t have time to write your poetry. Each one of us regrets what he is doing. Why confess to each other? To serve as consolation? I went over the forty words.

PONG. There was a time when we seemed to be full of steam.

PING. We used to devour each other, but so much of the fixed menu, even the set-price executive lunch, gets boring.

PONG. And if I bore you, why don’t you decide to end this?

PING. You would like that. So I would play the role of villain, but unfortunately for you, I'm the young guy in the movie. Well, one of the two young guys. I could not do it without you.

PONG. Make fun of me if you like, but who looks for your glasses and finds them when you don't remember where you left them? Who checks you before you leave to make sure that you have everything with you? How many times have you left and come back from the elevator, from downstairs, from the car, because you're missing your keys, your wallet or your dammed glasses?

PING. You see? It's pure and simple: I don't know how to live without you.

PONG. And what do you intend to do with the fixed menu?

PING. Set-price executive lunch, not fixed. It has more *cachet*. I'll do what I've been doing: eat it from time to time.

PONG. Even if it does not tempt you?

PING. Without being a poet like you, just an economist of medium success, I'll use my imagination. Not so difficult. It must be because as a descendant of Italians...

PONG. You prefer the comfort of what is familiar, like an old armchair, that after sitting so much in it has acquired your shape.

PING. But, what is happening to you tonight, Juan Carlos Gómez, Associate Professor at the Universidad Central? Get up from that couch, freshen my whiskey and serve yourself one. If there's a fight in the program, let's get on with it.

PONG. Give me your glass, Bernardo Salvatore, because tonight there will be a fight. I will be right back.

PING. Tell me, God, up there above, or somewhere, or in all places, what the fuck is going on with this one? It's said that men also get menopause, but for Juanca at his forty-five years of age it would be an outrage. I can swear I never had it. Bye, bye, menopause, no hangin' around here. Neither of us brags, like my esteemed colleague Agustín Campos, of his sexual prowess.

PONG. Here's your glass. Don't you realize that now, more and more frequently, I find you talking to yourself or rather going on by yourself?

PING. I have always done it. But now I articulate my monologue. Out loud, I like it better. Truly I admit and I brag of being a good friend to myself. That's the truth. You, on the other hand ...

PONG. I, what? I am not a good friend to myself?

PING. Sometimes you sound like almost an enemy. It's not the first time I'm telling you: almost an enemy of yourself, a total enemy to me. Cheers!

PONG. Cheers! If being almost an enemy to myself means not to be satisfied with what I have accomplished in my life, I agree. If being your total enemy means rejecting your new way of being, I agree. I hate living next to all your resignation, all your coolness, all your programming of precise schedules for everything. What I mean to say with all this incongruent speech is that we cannot continue living like this.

PING. What is “this”? Isn’t this the way we’ve been living since we met? Sharing the same likes, negotiating each day our differences...

PONG. What is that “negotiating” business? Save that economist jargon for someone else.

PING. Savings also falls under the jurisdiction of my title. But listen to what just occurred to me. It must be these nocturnal whiskeys that bring me clarity. It just occurred to me that everything in life boils down to learning how to negotiate. Even relationships among couples. Negotiations are done at all times to reach an agreement that will reduce the difference that started the negotiation. It’s not going to disappear but is reduced, and the next time the difference appears it’ll be negotiated but in different terms, but there’s always negotiating. That is the secret of our longevity and our happiness. I shout it out from the rooftops: we are happy!

PONG. We were. There is no doubt about that. We were! But let’s be frank: we are not happy now.

PING. Compare us with our “social nucleus” as our esteemed behaviorist psychologists Aura and Victoria call us. Aren’t those three couples and the two bachelors much more messed up than we are? Those three couples that together with us make up the “nucleus” Aren’t we, as some of them say sometimes, their envy?

PONG. What they envy is the manageability of our relationship. They know, as we know, that at any time and for any reason we could separate without any major obstacles.

PING. I don't think that is the reason. They envy us because they hear us telling each other truths face to face. Ping-Pong. They don't play that way. They settled, except María Teresa and Manuel who would give even what they don't have so that someone would throw them the little ball. Especially Manuel and especially if you were the one throwing it.

PONG. He does not like me.

PING. Oh! That means that you'd like him to like you.

PONG. Playing Ping-Pong is tiring.

PING. I watch you with my beady little mouse eyes when we are together. All that whispering back and forth!

PONG. We gossip about the university, as colleagues. That's all.

PING. As intimate colleagues, emeriti.

PONG. That is enough, please.

PING. But it's only a game, just a game, and in this Ping-Pong game, you and I are also Emeriti Professors.

PONG. We have not cleared anything up.

PING. What's there to clear up? That I'm on to your dealings with Manuel? Empty glasses? It's my turn to refill them.

PONG. I understand that all this is starting to become an obsession, a psychosis, a rage too contained to placate it.

PING. I can't hear you. Here I come. What were you saying?

PONG. I wasn't saying anything.

PING. No lies. Unless you were talking to the One above, as I do.

PONG. Maybe it is me. Maybe I am not good for you. Listen: do you remember when we met? You were twenty-five and I was twenty. You had graduated already and I was studying Liberal Arts. You were a know-it-all, while I did not dare come out of the closet.

PING. And I got you out. And proud of it! Just seeing you, I had a feeling you had what is known as "panache," a certain flamboyant behavior. Like a mannerism. That's what is known as "panache."

PONG. Like the one that Agustín's son has. How long ago did we notice?

PING. For a while. Since forever, but he'd better not rely on me to give him the push. Why did you mention him? Because you would like to be the one that...

PONG. Stop moving around and sit down. You are disgusting. Three drinks and you are drunk already.

PING. I am sitting. If you got offended because of what I feel I sensed, remember that's not the first time that you're gliding into dangerous territory. Remember also, that I never cared. In love, everything is forgiven. My only suggestion is to be careful because

Economist Campos, that Venezuelan macho, will beat you up like that sergeant that peppered our past.

PONG. I went to our past precisely to question why I was not loyal to my poetry, and you interrupted me to call me a whore.

PING. I didn't call you anything.

PONG. Well you mentioned Manuel, you mentioned Agustincito, the affectionate way I call Agustín Junior...

PING. Agustincito, how affectionate! I take them both into account, and friendship requires a full account of events. The economist spoke again. Why do you feel that you were not loyal to your poetry?

PONG. Because just when I confronted the indifference of critics and readers, I got intimidated and made a hobby of what for me was a vocation.

PING. You didn't have it so bad. Your first book *Amphibians* pleased some critics.

PONG. Some of those were actually two; both colleagues from the Department and what they wrote was more cryptic than my very own poems. "Cryptic" "dark" and "enigmatic" was the expressions those two queens who call themselves my friends pontificated.

PING. Well truly, *Amphibians* was a difficult volume, more so because its division into "Anuras," "Urodeles" and "Apods" Check that out, I still remember those big words.

PONG. You are a piece of shit and a son of a bitch. Fifteen years have gone by and you're still mocking me.

PING. Why would I mock you if I were the inspiration for some of those poems? At least, that's what you told me.

PONG. Those were metaphors. You never even knew what a metaphor was.

PING. Correct. Nevertheless, I fell in love with you, and you have been the great metaphor of my fucking life.

PONG. A declaration of love at 11 p.m. on a Friday?

PING. A declaration of love at any time of every day of these last twenty odd years.

PONG. You don't even remember the exact number of years.

PING. Don't lose your sense of humor, because then it will be true that we will have to negotiate.

PONG. I want to negotiate my life, my freedom.

PING. To write cryptic poems again? Did I ever stop you by any chance?

PONG. I want to feel a rush, as you always say.

PING. Be precise because there are two types of rushes: the one life gives us without prior warning, and the one we ourselves provoke, with a warning. Which one of the two would your Majesty like to feel?

PONG. It does not matter, as long as it happens. If life brings it, it will be welcome. If I decide to create it myself, it will be equally welcome.

PING. A great rush in life would be that the son of you-know-who would offer himself to you. A great rush initiated by you, would be to pursue him.

PONG. Do you realize why I want to get away from you? You solve everything very easily by giving me permission or suggesting to screw that minor. I would rather go to bed.

PING. On the way to bed, please make a detour and bring me the bottle.

PONG. A bottle with water and ice your Majesty?

PING. It might be too much bother. Just the bottle. Before that, clarify something for me: if *Amphibious* did not happen a thousand years ago, why do you resuscitate it now as a reason for your departure?

PONG. If I lived alone, maybe I would redo all that.

PING. You mean, more alone than here? Please! You spend most part of the day precisely here and alone, don't you? I leave at seven thirty and come back at six. As far as I know, you only go to the university the three afternoons that you have classes. The rest of the time you are here. You are so comfortable that you receive your students so they read you their poems and you read them yours. I suppose that is all that they do. I don't have evidence to the contrary nor does it matter. The evidence that I have and what matters is, that you continue to love me. Do you want me to go to the study and bring you

the folders where all of the thousands of poems that you have written in your life are kept?

PONG. You are right that I have written, but that I am not writing. I have not written anything for a long time. Not even what happened in Vargas gave me a rush. Not even when we accompanied María Teresa the first morning when it was safe to go down. I remember the disaster of that desert...

PING. Good line that you just mentioned. "The disaster of that desert." Go on.

PONG. Go to hell with your sarcasm. That sea —so dirty and calm— wave after wave breaking against the rocks, indifferent to what had happened, as indifferent as María Teresa's decision to remain in front of all that horror. She's brave, our friend. She does what she pleases.

PING. And so do we. Don't we go to New York each December to stuff ourselves on opera because we feel like it?

PONG. That's to please ourselves. To do what one feels like spontaneously is to revolt.

PING. If you didn't write anything about the Vargas event it is because there weren't and there haven't been words that transmit the tragedy and sadness reflected in the faces of those survivors that appeared on television screens the whole day, every day. It was the television and the pictures from the newspapers that imposed silence. That's why when we came down with María Teresa and stood on her terrace, what could we say? How could we verbalize it? But nevertheless we go on living because the measure

we call “time” continued passing, and now with months, almost a year gone by, still no one is able to talk about that.

PONG. We do not talk or write, but it has changed us. We are more fearful, less prone to be alone with ourselves. We insist on looking for company to feel protected, surrounded by the famous “nucleus.” And I wonder, why is it that none of that motivates me to describe it, to interpret it? Thank you Ping, now we are talking seriously.

PING. What do you mean? That you are giving me another chance?

PONG. Maybe that I want to give myself one.

PING. Since when have you felt that I am in the way? Since Vargas?

PONG. Vargas has nothing to do with our situation.

PING. Which one of us is drunk?

PONG. Neither one. You’ve had three and I’ve had two.

PING. What an obsession you have with counting drinks! Let me pour us another one.

PONG. You have one. I’m going to my bed.

PING. Subtle fellow! “My bed!”

PONG. We are beginning to understand each other.

PING. You’re leaving. Pity. I sometimes wondered who would bury whom.

PONG. Neither one. Did you forget that we made arrangements to be incinerated? They still deduct the monthly charge from my salary at the university. And you paid it off a long time ago.

PING. It's true, but I prefer to be buried. None of those sublime ideas to spread my ashes wherever. I want my ashes underground.

PONG. Make that clear to your lawyer.

PING. You couldn't even do that for me?

PONG. You still believe that we are playing the Ping and Pong game. You're helpless. Good night.

PING. I hope so; a good night, but I better take the bottle with me just in case... Confess to yourself, Bernardo Salvatore: didn't you see it coming? Was it as much of a surprise as the heavy rains of that December and the fury of the Ávila that swept everything down? I serve myself a good drink and I go to the terrace to ask that massive being what happened to it. Is it similar to what's happening to me? Plenty of ice, little water and the toast of the legionnaire: "*Salute, commendatore!*" Greetings Commandant! Let's see, let's see, in this darkness I can hardly see you, magic mountain. Tell me why you broke into pieces that night as dark as this one. Your huge belly that looks like mine exploded. Where did the reluctance begin? With the growing of my belly? And why did I turn that reluctance into pure love, good love? Why does it seem that I don't matter to him? Because my potbelly got bigger than his? Because of my boldness, less pronounced than his? Because of my drinking, the only relief at home since we didn't have children, or cats or dogs, or even little birds? Questions and questions and

questions. Do questions never end throughout the whole life? They come up and come up and come up. We'll see each other tomorrow my dear Ávila. Now I am going to sit in my armchair. No, just armchair. I better lie down on the sofa. I get comfortable. I close my eyes. I try not to move to achieve what they call Alpha state. Calm down, Salvatore, calm down. Bring everything down to zero.

PONG. I am going to drink a glass of water and then I'm leaving. He fell asleep on the sofa. I am not going to make any noise. I will pass my hand over his bald spot. Like this. I am truly sorry Bernardo, but I have no other choice.

PING. I heard everything he said. He left. Like a cat he left. Not even a slam of the door. *La comedia é finita, caro amico*, the comedy is over dear friend. Curtains.

WE'RE GALS

with Rebeca at the wheel of her luxurious Mitsubishi, just bought by Moisés to “lift up her spirits,” Aura next to her, and “yours truly,” as my mom would say beating her chest, in the back seat were coming down fast on the highway to spend the day with María Teresa, who had invited us, as an “emergency,” to consult with us, not wanting to add what it was all about.

“A catastrophe has occurred” she stuttered at me and without even pausing so that I could ask, she continued talking. To liven up the trip, I told my companions imitating her voice and her tone, especially when she pronounced French words with obvious pleasure. Every now and then, they would interrupt me with their laughter. “The great writer Jean Cocteau,” she told me somberly, “met at a party the young and very beautiful actor Jean Marais; did you ever get to see him in any movies? Stunning, spectacular, I assure you! But on that occasion, he paid him no attention whatsoever. Marais was swarming around him all the time; he even gave him his business card, while Cocteau showed no interest at all. A few days went by when all of a sudden the telephone rang at the apartment that Marais shared with his sister. She answered it and told Jean: ‘A Mr. Cocteau is calling you’ Jean ran to the receiver and heard the nasal voice of the old man: *‘Il s’est passé une catastrophe. Je vous prie de venir chez moi aussitôt que possible.’* *‘Bien sûr, bien sûr,’*⁶⁸ Jean answered and, as with all young actors, he didn’t have *dinero*, my dear. Since it was Cocteau, he asked his sister for money and took the first taxi he found to rescue his eminence. He arrived, rang the bell, and an old maid answered and

⁶⁸ A catastrophe has occurred. I beg you to come to my place as soon as possible. Of course, of course.

she took him to a dark living room where snug in a big-eared chair, as if hidden behind it, was the *grand homme des lettres françaises*⁶⁹. He looked up, stared into Jean's eyes and he repeated what he had said on the telephone: *'Il s'est passé une catastrophe'*⁷⁰ adding *'Je suis tombé amoureux de vous.'*⁷¹ And from that moment on, *Cher amie Victoire*, Victoria my dear friend, they lived together for a gazillion years." I couldn't take it anymore and I burst out laughing. "What catastrophe has happened to you? Don't tell me that you have fallen in love with the son of the Portuguese deli owner." "Please Victoria, don't say stupid things. You'll see."

So we went down without knowing the reason, but sure, of course, that María Teresa would offer us the "fantastic lunch" that she promised, sprinkled with wine and her anecdotes. The three of us always had an obvious weakness for her, forgiving her craziness and encouraging her not to surrender to aging. Correction: not only the three of us but also our husbands and the children of Agustín and Aura as well as the ones from Moisés and Rebeca all shelter her and spoil her. I think that it's thanks to her that we have kept being such good friends. I could almost agree with what she calls "the chosen family." At least for Arturo and me, it is. Since we couldn't have children, we surround our friends with love. Why couldn't we have children? It's a story kept secret, not talked about, but that we all know. Perhaps one of these days, "*un de ces jours*" as Cocteau would say, or maybe later I will summarize it. It's a behaviorist technique that works for me; talking about myself as if I were speaking about a third person.

⁶⁹ Great men of French Letters

⁷⁰ A catastrophe has occurred.

⁷¹ I have fallen in love with you.

The three of us were surprised by the general changes that Maiquetía and La Guaira showed, clean from the traces of the disaster, the yellow lines on the pavement as if recently painted on, and a lot of people on the streets, perhaps because it was Saturday; a street market day, perhaps because on that sunny day with blue skies, the festivities for the carnival started, a carnival continuously announced in Caracas with slogans that seemed more like wishes than reality: “Vargas is reborn,” “Vargas has not died,” and “The carnival returns to Vargas,” or similar signs. What could not be denied is that there wasn’t the usual crazy traffic and traffic jams along the highway. On the contrary, we came down and went on to Macuto at good speed. Looking to our left there were all kinds of debris, and houses in ruin; dirt and dust where before there used to be the square Plaza de las Palomas and La Guzmania, summer home for former presidents. Rebeca stopped the car without rolling down the windows, we remained silent, looking at all that despair.

Rebeca then told us again what we already knew: that immediately after the tragedy she had worked day and night with some colleagues precisely for the urban rescue of this kind of neighborhood. Macuto, more than a city, is a small parish that with time became an old retirement folks home. Its few streets housed rest homes, withered hotels that were used for the same purpose, everything as old as its inhabitants although not grim or smelling of cemeteries. On the contrary, being in front of the sea with two or three soft beaches, it was a popular place, with restaurants with tables on the sidewalks, justifying the boardwalk called “El Paseo de Macuto.” The torrents that came down from the Ávila during those three days, buried everything, surely also a great number of old people without any strength to run out of their rooms and save themselves. Rebeca told us that that it became impossible to know precisely how many dead there were, partly

because many of those old folks no longer had relatives to look for them or claim them. What her team decided to do was a restoration, keeping the character of the neighborhood, or as she told us, sadly touched “resurrect it; not make it into something else, but resurrect it.” A year and three months after the catastrophe, because that was a real catastrophe and not the faggy Cocteau affair, nothing had been done and what remained there was dirt and dust, debris and starving dogs going around like lost souls, one or two old men or women also dragging their feet without a particular direction in mind.

Rebeca took off along the highway that borders Macuto, and Aura called María Teresa from her cell phone to let her know that we were getting closer. She told us that she would wait for us at the entrance of the building in case we wanted to “stroll” around the area. Of course, Rebeca preferred to walk toward Macuto to see up close how much or how little was done by the Office in charge of development: “Autoridad Única de Área del Estado de Vargas” (Sole Authority of the Area for the State of Vargas) or as that pompous title was abbreviated “AUAEV” which became a tongue twister.

We greeted María Teresa with a kiss and started walking, pretending that was the reason we came, let’s say to accompany our friend the urban planner in her inspection, but we would look at her, so conspicuously hidden behind enormous dark sunglasses, that after a few steps she stopped and said: “Fuck! Stop sniffing me as if I had the plague!” Taking off her glasses she confronted us showing her face, divinely made up as usual, adding: “See! Zero bruises. Nobody hit me, nobody robbed me, nothing happened to me. The news item is something else, and I prefer to let it out after this *passeggiata*, or stroll, when we open at my place a wonderful bottle of Chateau Laffite before we fill up with

the items bought at the *delicatessen*, not in Caracas, *mes cherries*, dear ones, but right here in Caraballeda where the Hungarians already reopened their celebrated feast of Balthazar at imperial prices.”

Fortunately the next two or three streets on the way to Macuto had the same luck as María Teresa’s building. They looked as they always had, and the only strange thing was the distance of the sea that had formed a sand beach where before waves would break against the rocks. At a distance, however, they were still breaking and María Teresa commented that their murmur was one of the reasons that had reconciled her to come here. Sleeping while hearing that distant murmur calmed her.

“In the beginning,” she told us, “all this silence impressed me and depressed me. Hear it?” It was true; with none of us four speaking, nothing could be heard, or, better said, something like an emptiness was heard and even the murmur of the waves was like an emptiness. I don’t know how to explain it better. I’ve never been very expressive with words. Is the eternal criticism that Arturo makes of me: “Woman, you never say anything. You never complain or get happy or mad or decide to tell me to go straight to hell.” I prefer that he talk, that he take out his frustrations, knowing that later he will feel better and, as always, he will end up patting my hair and smiling at me as if he were dealing with someone retarded. Maybe that’s what’s happening to Arturo and me: that I resemble that empty silence that surrounds us, and I resemble it because he knows that I know about his secret love that keeps torturing him.

To get María Teresa talking, Aura asked her the other reasons that caused her to continue living there. “That except for the lack of a telephone line, everything else is

already working. We always have water and of course electricity. Each day new stores keep opening up, or old ones are reinvented.” “Including the Portuguesse delicatessen?” insisted Aura sarcastically. “You are really love to gossip. That’s why you studied psychology, to get to know everyone’s life. Why don’t you learn from Victoria, who is a psychologist too and behaves very peacefully, very like a respectful woman from Madrid, liker her mother?’ We laughed as we always do, because we already knew each other too well to know that we didn’t mean anything to be taken seriously. Only Rebeca and I never joked with each other and always kept a distance: her just enough, mine showing resignation. We knew very well the reason for our caution.

Aura insisted that the romance with the Portuguese was another one of María Teresa’s myths, and she, shaking like a wild beast, shouted at her: “It’s not a myth at all! We see each other from time to time. I mean he visits me, and, why not? I am like Martha Graham, the only priestess of modern dance. Last night I read an article in *The New Yorker*, because even mail has begun to arrive, dear witches, where I found out that the illustrious one died in 1991 at the age of 97, imagine that? leaving as sole heir some photographer forty years younger than she, who had been her sentimental companion during the last twenty years of her life.” “Then” concluded Aura with her cutting irony, “the little Portuguese man has his future assured or at least will inherit your two apartments.”

This time no one smiled, because we were in front of the remains of what had been the hotel and restaurant “Las Quince Letras” (The Fifteen Letters). Next to it was an arid and dry area, that didn’t even have one of those immense rocks that had caused the complete destruction of what the small castle, called Castillete, and the museum named

after the famous Venezuelan painter Armando Reverón, called Museo de Armando Reverón. How many times did we visit these places when we would all come to spend the day with “auntie” María Teresa! Agustín and Aarón, Aura Martina and Ruth, our four “nephews and nieces” would run ahead and each time repeated the same questions when going into the Castillete. The adults would take turns telling them incidents about the peculiar way in which the famed painter, Armando, and his companion, Juanita, erected it, filled it with all those rag dolls with terrified eyes that he made, forgetting the whole time about the world around them and without worrying about people calling them crazy. I remember one of those visits when Aarón upon hearing the story again, told us, with his emphatic seriousness that always made us laugh, the story of a Rabbi named Akiba, who left his wife and home to retire to a cave for ten years, just to obtain the discipline to study the Torah. Agustín, his friend and playmate, would listen to him fascinated to later make fun of him yelling and dancing around him: “Akiba, Akiba, little rabbi Akiba!”

I didn't say any of that. How would I dare remember happy times? Why make them sad? It was enough with the silence. And if I dared to remember, they definitely would have thought that I did it with the resentment and sadness of not being able to talk about the children I never had. Rebeca kneeled down, picked up four pebbles, and gave one to each of us. “It's what we Jews do when we go to the cemetery. We look for a pebble, and we leave it on top of the headstone of a loved one. At this place there is not even the consolation of a headstone.” She threw hers far away and María Teresa and Aura did the same. I made the same motion but I held mine tightly held inside my hand, and without them noticing, put it in my bag. Why? I don't know why.

We went back and instead of going towards Macuto, without anyone saying anything, we took the way back to María Teresa's apartment. It is well kept; full of light and with a gigantic aloe plant that occupies almost half the terrace. According to her, "It brings good luck and also makes face wrinkles disappear." We each showered and we laughed when we saw that we coincided in changing the clothes we came in for Bermuda shorts and T-shirts. María Teresa took out the feast from the refrigerator: smoked salmon, turkey pastrami, red pepper salad, cucumber and yogurt salad, potato salad, fruit salad, and two bottles of white wine. We helped put the place mats on the table, along with the silverware and napkins plus whole-grain bread and farmer's bread. Wet and happy, we toasted with the first glass and we sat down to enjoy our feast. It was then that María Teresa calmly, as if she were commenting on the weather, let out her news item: "What I wanted to tell you, to know what to do, if there is anything to do, is that Bernardo came over the day before yesterday, in the wee hours of the morning. It must have been around four, to tell me while collapsing in tears that Juanca had just left home." Our questions kept coming out "What?" "How?" "Why?" "And he came here at that time?" "Couldn't he have called you?" "I said that he collapsed in tears. You know what he told me? That he was scared to death, that he was feeling scared to death, that he was so scared that he could not remain alone and he remembered me. I imagine because of being the only single one." "But, why didn't he go to Manuel's who lives closer to his place?" "To get on to that lonely highway at that time!" "Excuse me María Teresa but I don't understand a thing." "Eat in peace and let me talk."

"The doorman downstairs called me on the intercom, telling me that a man who claimed to be my brother just arrived. Of course, I was scared, and the only thing that

occurred to me, was to ask him to let the man talk to me. When I heard the voice, I knew it was Bernardo. 'María Teresa I'm scared' was all he said, and I told the doorman to let him come up. Eat more; this is a drama not a tragedy. Well, when I opened the door and he threw himself in my arms, I smelled that he had been drinking, but precisely because of that smell I sat him on the sofa, I served him his whisky and I sat across from him waiting for him to talk. 'Aren't you going to drink? Please, I don't like to drink alone. It must be because until now my whole life, Juanca, has served me and drank with me...' 'What happened to him?' 'Nothing. Serve us and I'll tell you, nothing's happened to him. It's to me that something is happening. When I couldn't take the silence of my place anymore, I thought of you and I came running.' Of course with that news item, I served not one drink but a double for each one. What did he tell me? I'll summarize. Eat more of everything; otherwise, the leftovers will be in the refrigerator for days. I can't even offer them to the cabin boy when he shows up because he will say that he doesn't like 'that bitter taste. You know that my thing is pasta and black beans, all mixed up.' I go on with the summary. As far as I understood, the problem originated because Juanca was unable to write even one poem, as long as he was surrounded by the comfort that Bernardo provides him. He wants to find that which gringos call 'his own space.' My definition, not Bernardo's who put his head down, cried, asked for more whiskey, then I would serve him, and insisted that what Juanca was looking for was 'a new love.' That phrase was his. I would never think of something so corny. So, he fell asleep on the sofa, and I went to the terrace to look at the almost purple dawn beginning to cover the sky."

Of course it was Rebeca, always so conventional, the first one to get up from the table, passing judgment: "That was childish of him, to come all the way here, at that hour,

to involve you in one of their fights. I would have put him right back on the street.” That was the worst thing she could have said because, first Aura, and then I, agreed that Bernardo in his desperation could not remain by himself and besides, he knew that he could count on María Teresa more than on the rest of us, and count even less on our husbands who always treat the three “from the other team” with a condescendence bordering insult.

“Don’t thank me or congratulate me yet, my dear sisters, because the best part is yet to come. He woke up around twelve, took a bath, and I insisted that he wear my kimono. This amused him a lot, and he even modeled it for me, holding in his stomach imitating geisha mannerisms. He then cooked delicious pasta as only he, the son of Italians, knew how to do, and later on while seated on the terrace having coffee, came up with the following proposition:” “What’s that?” “What proposition?” “Don’t fool around María Teresa, Marité, don’t fool around.”

“As they say in English ‘Take it or leave it’”. There it goes: he proposed that we live together. What do you think? He argued that we would enjoy ourselves, the proof of it was that wonderful day that we spent together; that we would enjoy two places, the one in Caracas and this one on the beach, that I shouldn’t worry because he would take care of all the expenses; that he immediately invited me to go to New York until we get tired of watching musicals, with him paying for everything, the deal about paying and paying, he repeated over and over; and finally that it wouldn’t be something definite, but for a period necessary to remake his life. ‘C’mon buddy, c’mon, don’t say no. See how great we are. Put on your music and let’s start dancing. You are everything that I have and maybe when Juanca sees us living together, so happy together, he will feel sorry and

come back.’ ‘He will feel sorry alright, but for me’ I answered” and then María Teresa could not continue talking because a deafening noise of drums that seemed to make the building shake, came up from the street. We ran to the terrace and what did we see? A parade of eight to ten floats; in fact, hauling trucks half disguised with color paper and on top of each one a bunch of people dancing to the sound of drums that were not keeping rhythm and even less a melody. It was such pathetic confusion, so sad, so inexperienced and fortunately so short that as it passed by, as any of the participants would say, “without grief nor glory.”

We turned our backs to the parade, without even mentioning it, as if it were a plane that had all of a sudden crossed the sky. One did; a plane crossed the sky from left to right, and it disappeared. “Nobody would believe what we had just seen,” said Aura. “Not the plane, but the stuff in the street. I think it deserves a whiskey, as Bernardo would say.” “Just one and we’ll go,” warned Rebeca, “because like all Saturdays and to keep tradition, Moisés and I have to go to a wedding. Speaking of weddings, what are you thinking of as a response to your strange suitor? Yes or no?”

María Teresa looked at her wanting to strangle her and served the whiskeys without uttering a word. Then she looked for and found a record that she placed on the record player and before the music started, she informed us: “Walter Huston is singing, do you remember him? The actor and director? It is from a musical that was not very successful and now I can not even think of its name, but the lyrics are perfect for the occasion. Ready? And no more questions or advice. This “summit meeting,” like all summit meetings, was a disaster, but I love you all and I will continue to love you.” And on top of the voice of the old man, she sang in English at full blast:

“But it’s a long, long while

from May to December,

and the days grow short

when you reach September.

And I have lost one too,

And I walk a little lame,

And I haven’t got time

For the waiting game.

And the days turn to gold

As they grow few,

September, November,

And these golden days, I’d spend with you,

These golden days, I’d spend with you.”

YOU'RE STUDENTS

who are about to graduate from this School that bears the enigmatic name “Social Communication” (later I will justify the adjective I just furnished), who had the audacity of thinking of yours truly so that today, on this gray morning that is an omen for a phenomenal downpour, I would tell you what they labeled “Life Story.” Mine, of course. Can you hear and see the first drops?

When last month two of your classmates visited me at my School of the Arts cubicle to propose this “meeting” (that’s what they called it) I proceeded to ask them to let me know their expectations, Xiomara told me to talk about whatever I would like; that it was not an autobiographical lecture but a desire to hear my comments regarding what mattered or didn’t matter in my life. Martín, on the other hand, being more specific, suggested the convenience of writing down my “Story,” and reading it to you, so that you in turn would write down questions. Of course I rejected his suggestion. The idea of sitting down to write such a “Story” would mean not only spending a good deal of time that I do not have, but transforming a polite invitation into fulfilling a task that, if I had thought of it, it would be better for me to publish, and of course, for you to run out and buy.

So, as an obedient professor, always willing to cooperate with his students, I agreed to come, forgetting my umbrella like any gullible citizen of our always surprising Caracas, but demanding to do what I am doing: talking to you in an improvised way without even checking notes. Regarding the written questions, as far as I was concerned,

they could also be oral even interrupting me so that, with any luck, we would achieve social communication that would merit the name of this School.

I paused so that we could hear the rain, not in an attempt to boast my poetic abilities, but on the contrary, scared to death by the memory of the Vargas tragedy, as it probably happened to all of you also. Your silence and your looks tell me that we are beginning to understand each other or at least that you have gotten the same expectations I have. Here is the question that I asked myself when I accepted to come, and the answer I gave myself.

Why did it occur to you to invite the Adjunct Professor of the School of the Arts, Manuel Martínez, to present to you his “Life Story” and not pick someone among the many eminent people who teach at said School? I imagine it is because he combines his pedagogical duties with that of a visual arts critic and publishes weekly in a well-known newspaper from the capital. Notice that I said “Visual Arts” and not “Plastic Arts” or even worse “Fine Arts.” This last label was buried because of the preeminence of ugliness. Does someone remember something that was *fine*? A completely opened rose, dusk at sea, a human head resembling an imperial crest of feathers, a well-built body, an Alexandrian sonnet, a symphony from the Romantic period. That is the definition of what was fine: fine was everything from the Romantic period.

When the romantic was minimized or deformed it gave birth to the nomenclature “Plastic Arts” that allowed the incorporation of opposite concepts: the figurative versus the non-figurative, the concrete versus the abstract. And since where the truth of the passage of time is more convincing is in what we call trends, that is; the new, by having

enjoyed the beautiful so much we started to discover the rarity of the ugly, and the Arts instead of “Plastic” became “Visual” to make room for the unpleasant or monstrous as a valid alternative of expression.

“Visual Arts” are a trend that praises the ugly. Like that thunder that just exploded. The ugly has spread outside of museums and galleries to fill the streets with human beings competing to appear ugly. Whoever doubts it, come here and take a look at many of you. Who are the ones following the trend? Those dressed in clothes five sizes bigger than their bodies, earrings everywhere, colored and uncombed hair, eyebrows and biceps and buttocks and ankles all with tattoos. From that trend come the variations of “Visual Arts”: *happenings, performances, installations, environments, body art*, and a public that is following all those confrontations (because that is what they are: aggressive confrontations) even if they do not speak English, they use English terms and all that linguistic paraphernalia.

That is what I strive to do for a living: I am trying to guide, direct, all that traffic as congested and confusing as that on any highway during rush hour. Why do I do it or how did I arrive at this? Am I a professor and critic, or a critic who also teaches? Do both professions complement each other or, on the contrary is one of them more important than the other one to me? And if it is, is it my reason for being, as all authentic creators state? In conclusion, were life’s unexpected events what brought me here doing what I do? Or is this what I always wanted to do, as any legitimate artist who always felt predestined?

Questions and questions, as the ones from Hamlet, only all of mine have easy answers. Here is my record: about to graduate from the Lyceum and facing the possibility of joining this honorable university, I confirmed that the only possibility to get close to Art, ART all in capital letters, was by applying to the School of Humanities. I suppose that I preferred to dedicate myself to Art because I wrote more or less well, I liked to visit museums and galleries, and listen to classical music, but mainly I was attracted to artists' temperament that I knew or saw and that I could summarize as a constant transgression of the canons of society. When I was your age, to be different was a sin, but there were enough sinners to entice me to be one of them. Enough said... I raise my voice because the noise from the rain is increasing. Can the ones in the back hear me?

Well. So I joined the Humanities, with its comfortable evening schedule that ended at ten, an appropriate time to get to bars or taverns (the trend of cafes had not started yet) and allowed me to stay up until dawn and sleep a good part of the morning. To support myself, I found a part-time job at the Central Library, called Biblioteca Central, from eleven to four where the only thing that I did was put back the volumes that had been consulted or borrowed. I loved my job; I got exercise by walking back and forth through those dark hallways where more than once I was caught by "an object of desire" as any exemplary Humanities student would say. I'm glad that you are laughing. That's what it is about: to enjoy ourselves, even if this storm is responsible or not for making me lose my voice.

But I did not do all that in my part time. I had enough time, especially during the two hours for lunch when most of the patrons would disappear, to sit down and leaf through art books. I started to discover an unsuspected universe. I point out, for example,

my encounter with Vermeer's paintings, which dazzled me with their light, their apparent plainness of topics and his mastery of transforming them into that strange enchantment that hides everyday routines. By the way, a while back, a couple who are friends of mine, that is, a male friend and a female friend who were going to New York on vacation, asked me to recommend something artistic to see and not only did I recommend but I begged them not to forget to go to the Metropolitan to look at the fifteen Vermeer paintings that until recently illuminated its halls in an exhibition dedicated to Delft painters, the small Dutch town that served as the recurrent landscape. From there, a woman unlike any other sent me a postcard with a message that, as soon as I read it, I memorized: ""Thanks for your recommendation. We saw Vermeer through your eyes." You cannot deny that she is a unique gal. You should invite her to this "Life Story" business. Believe me she would change your lives forever.

So I divided my university time leafing through the wonderful art books that the library provided me, attending classes, generally speaking humanly incomprehensible in the Humanities, and behaving contrary to society's rules without ever saying "Enough!" It was in the School of the Arts where I started to learn the university language, that kind of indispensable jargon, indispensable if one wants to get the highest grades or in the case of the faculty to climb the promotion ladder with an "Outstanding" followed by the notification, "Publication is recommended," a fact that never becomes a reality due to the well-known economic shortages at the university.

It just occurred to me that in the middle of this wet chaos, I prefer to provide the details of that jargon instead of continuing with my life. That can be summarized in a minute: I graduated with honors, of course. I was offered a scholarship to do a Master's

and I chose “Art History,” going to Mexico for two years where I stuffed myself eating “*mole poblano*,” chicken with chocolate sauce and about twelve spices, which are the most sublime items that our neighboring country has produced. I came back and they hired me in the School of the Arts that had just opened and there I remained like a pious nun until the hurricane of today, except for another stay in Mexico where I went to submit and defend my Doctoral Dissertation, this time History with double adjectives: History of Contemporary Latin-American Art.”

Let us now go to the jargon. Take out your notebooks and pens and write down everything like scribes from the Middle Ages, and if by chance you want to come into the convent after graduating from what is called “Social Communication,” you will become Mother Superiors as long as you are fluent in the lingo that I will teach you. Of course, the best way to define it, is to first attack the name of the school. It used to be “Journalism” but when including the so-called “Audiovisual Media” some genius came up with that nonsense, because what is “social communication”? What you and I are doing: communicating with each other. Of course, the press, radio and television are types of communication, but why the adjective “social”? Is there any type of communication that is not social? Well, there is also the sexual one but that’s something else. Let us not get confused, however, because of the absurd name of your school. Someday someone in here will realize it, and will change it. In here, because out there, ages ago, everybody is asking my very question.

To talk and write the university jargon, one has to learn to shuffle, like a deck of cards, a series of key words and phrases. I have divided them in two categories: Fundamental and Supplementary, and, with your permission, I now do take out the small

list from my pocket that I always carry, so I do not forget any of them. Because of time restrictions and fear that we will end up drowned by this strong rainstorm, I cannot stop for each one and, not even, for their meanings. This last part will be your homework, looking them up in the Spanish dictionary of the Real Academia Española. By the way, some of these words are so infrequent or so “new” that they do not appear in that old tome. Perhaps because they do not mean anything, even though they sound good.

Fundamental Words: the absolute queen of them all, everyone’s passion is PARADIGM. Whoever doesn’t use it can kiss the university goodbye. I quote a phrase that I found recently in a graduate paper, which is a jewel (the use of PARADIGM, not the paper): “Problematizing monolithic paradigms.” Good fucking writing! And excuse my impropriety, but it deserves it. PARADIGM must be used at least three times a day, just like any cough syrup.

The following ones, if not queens, are princesses and the order in which I mentioned them does not suppose any hierarchy whatsoever. ONTOLOGIC, DECODE, METABOLIZE, DECONSTRUCTION, METAFICTION, and if it is PRODUCTIVE METAFICTION, so much the better! METATEXT, and really any words with the prefix META becomes prestigious. And when referring to a prefix I must name, ipso facto, the most respected suffix: “ITY.” Everything that ends with it is valid and adorns the person using it. The most common words with such suffix are: SITUATIONALITY, SPECIFICITY, SUBSTANTIALITY, REFUNCTIONALITY, LINEARITY, ALTERITY, PLURALITY, INTERIORITY, and the “Miss Venezuela” of all: POSTMODERNITY. And if they are preceded by the words “the eruption of” the essay or dissertation will be rewarded with the highest marks.

Among the supplementary words and phrases that I have chosen are: MIMESIS OF THE PROCESS, COHORT, ARBITRATED AND INDEXED MAGAZINES, NUTRIENT LINK, MULTIDISCIPLINARY, INTERDISCIPLINARY and TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES, SPECULATIVE REFRACTION, DECENTERING, FEEDBACK (using the word in English; when speaking Spanish, using the Spanish word for this term is no good) DRAMATURGICAL, NARRATOLOGICAL and GLOSSEMATIC METHODS. We are missing, of course, the ineffable PROFILE OF THE GRADUATE that has nothing to do with face or body characteristics.

I do not think of myself as a know-it-all. I know that my list is not comprehensive, but with it you can take the first few steps into your university social communication. I will give you just an example, not to tire you and because it seems that this storm that has been going on for two hours is dying down. It is taken from a guide to evaluate papers presented for promotion at the Institute of Pedagogy. You don't need to write anything down. Just listen to these gems and then we will have questions, few, I hope.

Whoever is going to face papers presented for promotion at said Institute has as a task the "Study, research or systemic reflection of problems or problematic situations that follow the production of general knowledge about them, independent of all subsequent application." What is expected are "instructional works with a significant value" the focus of which would be "an aspect of the novelty that it presents while describing the essential points of a problem, to characterize it or solve it according to a frame of referenced ideas." What is sought is "cognitive value" "external compatibility with the existent tasks," "univocal usage of methodology." All of this to specify (tighten your seat

belts, please): “early or late vocations.” Those who want to work towards a promotion in said institution, please line up to the right or to the left. It doesn’t matter.

Finally, and as another present, make sure to never pronounce the sound *s* that follows the *m* or *n* in any Spanish word that has them. Do not say *circunstancia* but *circuntancia* say *contitución* instead of *constitución*, *conciente* and not *consciente* and one very much in vogue, *contituyente* and not *constituyente*. Down with the sound *S*! If the laughs that I hear denote skepticism, turn on your television tonight, and you will be convinced that from the President of the Bolivarian Republic to the most seasoned anchor, they eliminate every *s* following an *n* in Spanish.

Questions. Here comes Martín and his fascination with having them in writing. Thank you. Only three. I was afraid there might be several dozen. After answering them, we can accept three or four oral ones, so that they add to seven, a cabalistic number according to a Jewish friend whose wife sleeps around, I do not know if with seven, but that’s another story, “*La petite histoire*” as someone said.

First: “How does a writer and art critic live?” I don’t mean your intimate life but your daily living. Do you have routines or do you prefer no order? And the person who asked added in handwriting: I imagine that you still enjoy looking at reproductions in Art books, but now, already famous, do you surround yourself with originals?”

Answer to the lady, because only an ironic woman will express herself in that way: I live in a building named: “Olympic Mansion” (I had nothing to do with that name) where they rent furnished apartments to singles or at most couples. I should own the place I live by now, but the Professors’ Association always has a “but” when I ask for a

loan because they argue that the waiting list is extremely long and the first option is always for married professors and if they are parents, they are the very first option. I like living there, however, temporarily, as a transient, because the rent includes the cleaning and change of linen, doorman, a line of taxis at all times and a gym where I go three times a week, not to make myself perfect, but to keep in shape. In the gym, by the way, time or space does not exist. One can stop going for centuries, and when one comes back the same old farts are there and the same *musclebitches* on the same old machines doing the same old exercises, which are called “routines,” that they will continue to do all their lives. Since I rented the apartment without any paintings on the walls, I have left them bare. If I spend my life looking at art, I’d rather not see anything when I am home. I do not have a schedule to write or to do anything. I do what I feel like. I am unorganized. A very perceptive lady, I am not doing so badly, however.

Second question: “Do you have a collection with a particular or heterogeneous profile? Do you buy or do you get it free since you are a critic?”

I do not collect anything and least of all paintings as I said. The budgetary restrictions of a full-time professor prevent me from that. With what they pay me here and what I get from the newspaper, it’s just enough to live “decently,” as my grandmother used to say. Truly, I have never collected anything; just people that come and go, if anything. There are those who try to stay to set up a home for me, but, as soon as I suspect such a wish, I refine my rudeness so that they do not want to see me anymore. As far as little presents from artists, I have never accepted one, and the very few times they suggested it, I always answer the same way: “Give it to such and such museum; that way I can go see it whenever I want.”

Third question: “How do you see the outlook of the Venezuelan plastic arts?”

Here whoever asked crossed out “plastic arts” and handwrote “visual arts” adding, do you think that your criticism and teachings have had an influence on them”?

Nice double question. The outlook, not only in Venezuela but in the world, is not a view but confusion, where the important thing is to seem like a novelty, invent a gimmick. Even though like everyone else, sometimes these “surprises” amuse me, what I see in the outlook, or better yet in the future, is a Renaissance (I am using the term in the historical sense) towards the mastery of pictorial language, like in the great epochs. The artist will again become, besides the creator, efficient, precise and an expert in his or her language. To put it simply, he will return to paint as Vermeer even though his or her subjects, of course, would be different from those of Vermeer. There are some around who already follow those steps. I prefer not to mention them, but I have suggested it when I have written about their recent exhibitions.

As far as the influence from critics or my criticism, I never thought that a liking or an opinion would make or break an artist. That reputation, so to speak, is given by the public and not immediately but little by little. Nevertheless I have lived in amazement and delight by the acceptance that my writing has had recently and, also, why not? my behavior. I have felt special, and because of that feeling I continued writing and behaving as I am.

There is a raised hand over there: you ask, “what do I fear?” Nature, and even more, human neglect against nature. What happened in Vargas is the best example. Nature always takes us by surprise. We cannot control it and even less plan it. It brings us

misfortune without a previous warning. All the horror of Vargas changed me forever; it changed me and my friends. Don't think I don't have any friends. There are few, but I do have them, and I noticed, and they noticed, that for a year and a half now our lives seem tense, sleeping between nightmares, altering our lives in a negative way, as if not realizing what we are doing.

Another hand: you want to know whether I consider myself a cynic? Obviously you consider me one when you ask. And, what is a cynic? Did you know that in ancient times "cynics" were people who tried to live according to nature and opposed to all social conventionalism? I have just confessed my fear of nature, but if being a cynic also means giving up those conventionalisms, then cynic I am. What does it matter?

Second to last hand: you ask, whether I think that the Vargas tragedy will affect our artists? It is too soon to know. We are still angry about the official apathy, about the imprecision of the projects, what do I know? It seemed that the disaster occurred and, ashamed, they turned their backs on it and nothing got spelled out. But, wait: it just occurred to me that I know a poet; a good friend of mine who since Vargas, is "stuck," unable to write even a line. Not that he wrote a lot before Vargas. A while back, he published a book that few read, and from time to time they publish about two or three of his poems in the Saturday papers. By the way, did you notice that they are getting more and more unintelligible? Those are not really "social communication." Going back to my friend, his being "stuck" has included a change of address. Suffice it to say that he goes around as if he were stupefied, and had lost his bearings.

Seventh and last so that we can go to lunch: You want me to speak of my friends, the few of them I mentioned? I suppose it is fundamental to include them in any “Life Story.” They are seven or eight; no, nine and with me, that makes ten. Another cabalistic number; even more important than seven. Did you know that in the Jewish religion ten is the number that permits one to carry out any worship, rite or prayer? By your smiles, I gather what you are thinking: “Here he comes with another tall tale.” That’s your prerogative: to diagnose who I am and what I have told you this morning is based on... look out the window, the sun has come up after the downpour. Going back to my friends, Xiomara and Martín have their names and numbers in case you would like to interview them. I imagine that they will say that they feel love for me and they will immediately ask to be as anonymous as possible, they will talk at length about my dissipated life, about my chronic selfishness and my cynicism; yes, some of them, I am certain, will share with some of you that irritation with my way of seeing the world. Before they end, however, they will reiterate their affection and I will hope they would reinforce my cardinal belief: the only thing that remains, that never dies, is art. Its creators die, of course, but their creations live forever and ever: “Dor Vador,” (from generation to generation) said in Hebrew and learned from the friend I have mentioned several times and whom I would like to simply define: Moisés is a saint. “Dor Vador” is God, for those who believe in Him, it is the sea and the rocks and the masterpieces that will remain as long as there are men alive on Earth. Did you know that Vermeer died in 1675 at age forty-three? Do the math and rush to find out about him as soon as possible. Thank you for having me and putting up with me.

YOU'RE PEOPLE

who belong to a group of successful professional Jewish women and who have granted me an enthusiastic round of applause (after having given me this medal of excellence that hangs on my chest) and who would probably scream like hens locked up in a coop, if you were to find out that I live in adultery and that my co-protagonist in this never-ending melodrama is a goy, and to make it an even a worse sin, he is over there standing at the back as if he had come in because he was curious, waiting for me. He does not get close to me when I go near him now. We look at each other, we give each other a tiny smile and we know that in half an hour he will knock on the door of my room, and when I open it, he will hold me in his arms.

I did not ask him to come to New York to share this distinction, nor did I ever ask him to do anything. Our adulterous relationship, on equal terms since we are both married, has been maintained under the clear understanding that there is no solution. This is the reason why he manages to surprise me, as he does now in New York. I arrived yesterday from Caracas to this two-thousand-room Hilton, invited by the Federation of Jewish Professional Women to accept with five others from several countries, the medal on my chest and the diploma that I am carrying in my hand.

By two o'clock I was already in my room and while I was hanging in the bathroom, next to the scalding shower, the dress that I would put on that night for the Federation Dinner, someone knocked on the door and it was him. He had managed to invent some sort of business in Miami, and very cautiously, even showed his wife the Caracas-Miami-Caracas ticket with the round-trip confirmations. He will return to Miami

the day after tomorrow and then to Caracas and it will be a perfect “crime.” As perfect and cautious as the “criminal” who had found out where I was staying, and who is even here in this very hotel, but on a different floor.

This story, my dear friends is not recent, and since it would be impossible to tell you individually how my double life exactly started and how it continued and continues, I want to do it now as if it were one of those anonymous calls that, Chana Henkin, my table-mate, was telling me about last night. She coordinates from Jerusalem, together with seven other orthodox women, a help-line for those women who do not want to confess to a rabbi their marital or sexual problems and prefer to do it via telephone to a woman that advises them. The program is called “Family Purity” and the people who answer the call not only have finished one thousand hours of training regarding Jewish legislation from two thousand years ago, but have passed a four-hour oral exam before eminent orthodox rabbis to get the title of advisor on Jewish law or “Halakhah.” They receive approximately 125 calls, five days a week, all anonymous, from Israel as well as from the United States, South Africa and Chile. Well, my friends, here is my hypothetical call. May it be good to let it out. In any event, I kept the number that the very nice Chana gave me, asking me to inform my community about this service. It’s possible that I may be the first one to call from Caracas.

Where shall I start? At the end, that is getting closer and closer each time we see each other. I think we are getting tired of juggling so many things to hide what they already probably suspect, or even know, the people closest to us, including our respective spouses. I also think that the only thing remaining from the initial foolishness when we fell in love when he was my professor at the university, is a true affection, almost like a

fraternity. "I need you more than you need me" he told me a while back, "You are my fantasy, the reason for my rapture." "Where did you get that big word and what does it mean?" I asked him. "From Teresa de Ávila. She would feel rapture with holy love, and I feel rapture having you near me. You should read her to get to know her better. Yes, I know that Jewish people do not believe in saints, but maybe you would like it. Do you know that her grandfather was Jewish and fearing the Inquisition tribunals he became a New Christian?" "*Marranos*," was what I answered, adding "I am glad they referred to them with that term since they were such cowards, so lacking in conviction." Laughing, he hugged me and kissed me on the cheek.

I describe this recent scene so that you can corroborate that, if I behave in such an unfriendly way, it must be because I want to end our relationship. Surely, a very witty friend of mine, whom I love very much, would have said: "But dear, you are the one that runs the show!" She truly knows how to run the show and take advantage of her life. She has no husband or partner or economic problems or anything, and that is why she has everything. She is right across from us, at the Warwick, invited by a mutual friend to accompany him to be distracted, because of the anger caused by his life partner when one night, the guy left him. Divine and optimistic as always, she accepted and there she is: happy that the unhappy guy would pay for everything and take her to see her beloved Broadway musicals.

I will have dinner with them tonight, without him, without them even knowing that he is here because of me, in this very hotel because of me, waiting for me to return after seeing them, because of me. The three of them know each other; in fact, we have known each other for years. We are, together with a few others, like a crew, or as one of

them defined us: “our elected family.” I do not remember and it’s not important now when that collective friendship started, but the curious thing about the nexus is that except for my family, none of the others are Jewish. What I do remember is that as soon as I graduated I got married, and that he continued chasing me. I didn’t pay any attention to him for a long time. It was after having my two children, that, as they were growing up, my boredom grew with my marital relationship. My husband has never shown a great deal of imagination for those affairs. His thing has always been to tell me that he loves me, that he adores me that he was born to please me. So certain is he of that infatuation that he boasts that he was a virgin when we got married, and it was not important at all for him to find out that I was not.

On one occasion, when he was on a business trip, just to flirt, to feel desired rather than adored, I went back to him, and it was such a spectacular satisfying and tiring afternoon that we continued to meet in an office that he rented, telling his wife that he needed that space to study and receive clients requiring outermost discretion. The only thing that he neglected to add is that I was his favorite client. As if he had a premonition that I could get tired and leave him, he took great care to surprise me with his lovemaking skills, consummated on all the furniture and in all the corners of that office. I do not think it necessary to give you more details. The only thing that I can say is that I do not regret living that dangerous experience. I lived it and not once, but for many years; I became an expert in the double-life business.

“What double life? If according to what you said it would seem your business was just a strictly sexual affair...” the astute ones will ask. There have been years, not months, when besides fulfilling my obligations as a wife, mother and teacher of urbanism

full-time at the university, I fulfilled the role of mate and confidant of that man who stopped loving his wife, if he ever loved her, from the first day he met me. According to him, I became his obsession and I believe it. He consults with me about everything. He doesn't do or say anything without having heard my opinion. He has gone to the extreme of preferring to eat with me, rather than to go home and sitting facing his legal partner. He tells her that he had an urgent meeting with a client. I could not count the thousands of times that, to please him, I had lunch or dinner twice: once with him, then with my family, swallowing what I served myself on each plate as if I were starving. If he doesn't get a divorce, and he probably never will, it is because he feels a kind of compassion for her, like pity, due to her submission, her conformity and her inability to live without him. Those are the threats that keep them tied together like Siamese twins. In the beginning, they tried to have children and couldn't. It seems that she could not retain the fetus more than three months; as soon as she was pregnant, she would toss it out.

His is a sad situation and so is mine. I stopped thinking about it when I crossed the street and I went in the bar at the Warwick. There were María Teresa and Bernardo showering me with kisses and hugs, congratulating me for the distinction they had awarded me across the street, encouraging me to remain for a few days to share with them their "special cruise" as María Teresa defined that "divine vacation," adding: "You can stay with me. We can share my room that seems like a suite." Bernardo seemed as happy as she was, calling the Filipino waiter to bring me a whisky and when he asked if he should bring the champagne already, Bernardo answered that we were waiting for a friend and smiling he said: "Guess what? Whom do you think I just ran into on the corner? Arturo. He is here because of some business and he's leaving tomorrow. I invited

him to accompany us. I almost had to beg him on my knees so that he would promise to have dinner with us. ‘How could it be possible that the four of us be here in New York and not celebrate Rebeca’s medal?’ I insisted.” “Is he coming?” is all I could manage to say. “Of course, he is coming, darling,” answered María Teresa, winking at me, “You know that he adores you. Well, we all adore you. Or better yet, we all adore each other. We are a lodge of adorers,” and finishing what was left in the glass, he told Bernardo: “Adored friend, call your Filipino to bring another. One must always have drinks in even numbers.”

And he arrived. Without looking into each other’s faces we greeted each other with kindness; we toasted repeatedly with the champagne that the Filipino opened, we walked a half block to the Copenhagen where Bernardo had made reservations, we ate, we drank, we let María Teresa speak, who, of course, was the lead as if sensing that something was happening that she was unaware of and was not able to guess. Not even mentioned was Juanca, Bernardo’s ex, nor the details of the vacation of our two hosts, even though it was evident that they continued to be just friends, “tight buddies” as my son Aarón refers to his best friend, Agustín. At the door of the restaurant, Arturo said goodbye and went up the street alleging that he was going to be very late to a commitment. The three of us went down to the entrance of the Warwick. We kissed each other again, they objecting that I did not accept their invitation to stay a while longer. María Teresa repeated that I looked very good: “Happy, I see you happy, my love. Do you realize your good luck? Your whole project to rebuild the poor Vargas State that none of those idiots took into consideration was converted into this lecture for which you have now received a distinction that honors you. I swear that remembering the

indifference that you suffered and how awful you looked, I feel like selling everything that I have over there and coming over here. Of course, I would never have enough to live in this hotel, but maybe they can offer me a job as a waitress. The one that cleans my suite is Venezuelan, from Maracaibo, to be exact. Check that out! Or better yet, let's ourselves out! We, who once called ourselves: 'The Great Venezuela!'"

María Teresa's chitchat stirred up all my recent past, and Arturo's audacity in showing up for dinner without even warning infuriated me. I did not answer the telephone when his ringing went on about a thousand times. I did not answer his fists hitting the door. He will think that I stayed with them over there at the bar. What he must start to believe, from this night on, is that this is as far as we go, or better yet, this is as far as I go. I decided to return the next day; luckily when I called the airline, they confirmed that there was space available. I called Moisés, who half asleep, when he heard my voice, told me and repeated that he needed me a lot, and that he would be happy to be at the airport, waiting for me. I undressed and put on my nightgown. I washed my face and brushed my teeth. I lay down and with open eyes looked at the ceiling. There I saw all the images from television that we saw over and over, moving as in slow motion: a gigantic and never-ending vomit coming down from the hill, dragging with its gigantic torrent rocks and tree trunks, cars crashing into other cars, people drowning in that great whirlpool that did not stop until it got to the sea, where it would mix with the waves following one another, all as high as the cascade that kept coming down. I think I cried so much that I fell asleep.

At noon, when I was checking out, Chana came over to say goodbye. She gave me an envelope and said while hugging me: "At your service. Just in case, I wrote down

the number again.” I put it in my purse, and it was at the airport while I was waiting for my flight announcement, when opening the purse to take out the powder-box and in its mirror to see the horror my face must have been, I almost dropped Chana’s envelope. I opened it and in a card was her name and address on the upper side, handwritten in the middle was only: NUMBERS-NASO, V. Obviously, the fourth book of the Pentateuch. And V is the fifth book. I will read it in Caracas.

THEY'RE TWO

who have just returned from New York. Manuel told me when I ran into him on the elevator, adding with his sharp sarcasm: "It seems that the honeymoon was a huge success. They had a jolly good time." "And what is a jolly good time?" I asked him laughing. "How should I know? Don't start being 'scholarly.' That's how you say it, or that's how María Teresa told me. By the way, they brought me the catalog of the Vermeer exhibition at the Metropolitan as a souvenir. Fabulous! One of these nights I'll call you so that you can come up and see it."

He has never called me since I moved here thanks to the fact that when he knew I was looking for an apartment, he helped me by recommending me to the manager of this "Mansion." I was fortunate since someone just moved out of one of the smallest units with a reasonable price, three floors down from Manuel. I am happy with this place, enjoying such small pleasures like sitting each morning on my modest terrace that faces the garden to have my coffee while I look at the plants and the small birds that fly all around it. Where I lived before with Bernardo, the only thing that I saw from the terrace was the massive Ávila. It does not matter if I do not see it again. Here, I could swear that I see the plants grow and bloom every day. I enjoy the birds because they seem cheerful. They come, they eat things they find in the dirt and they leave. Unfortunately, one cannot notice whether they are growing or getting old. They are always so similar that one can never know if they are the same ones each day or if they are migratory birds that appear every now and then.

The diagnosis, product of the aforementioned: I am going through a depression. I am not suffering from it, or at least, I do not have the symptoms of suffering from it, but I know that I am depressed because I go from euphoria to sadness in a blink of an eye. I imagine that I am going through what they call a “process.” When my prior routine disappeared, or more precisely, when I made it disappear all of a sudden, I seemed to be a blank page, without any strokes or doodles to adorn it and amuse myself when seeing them. Don’t think, however, that I am on my way to becoming a hermit. Since my financial situation will never allow me that luxury, not only do I carry out my university duties punctually, but also I have managed to collaborate weekly on the literary pages of a newspaper, and there I write, for a small sum, reviews of any book that the editor assigns me. I even had the advantage of using a pseudonym, a requirement imposed by the newspaper according to what they told me, to avoid litigation or beatings because of what I wrote. How do I sign? “Table Tennis,” like that, as if it were a first and last name.

I’ll describe one of my days, any of them, besides the obvious start with the coffee, plants and small birds. I spend mornings either preparing the classes that I will teach (Tuesday afternoon: English Lit.; Thursday, also in the afternoon: American Lit.) or reading or writing the reviews of usually awful texts (three per week so that they come out on Monday, Wednesday and Friday). At noon, I walk to the corner and buy the newspaper where I write at a newsstand. The old lady already knows me, but we limit our conversation to saying good morning. Almost next to it is a MacDonald’s and there I sit to eat the customary hamburger where I sip through a straw the soda that I prefer to change each day, although they all taste the same. I return to the apartment (funny, I

haven't gotten used to calling it "home") and I lie down half an hour in the sofa. I check the newspaper and I look at the ceiling.

On the afternoons when I do not have to go to the university, I like to sit with an open book, hardly reading it, in one of those deck chairs that surround the pool. My fondness for birds has convinced me to buy them birdseed and spread some around me, delighted in seeing them surround me. Recently, a guy about Bernardo's age but with a much better body, strong and well-built, dressed only in a T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, came up to me when I was coming from the gym. "You never get into the pool? I see you here sitting, feeding the little birds." Just like that, he told me all of a sudden using a familiar form of address with an Andean accent. I smiled, not knowing what to tell him. "If I'm bothering you, I'll leave, but let me tell you that you look awful," and since I still did not answer him, he grabbed a chair and sat next to me, extending his sun-tanned legs on the floor and his sun-tanned arms towards the sky. "Under this sun, completely dressed as you are, you'll sweat and you'll feel worse."

I assured him that I was feeling fine and to make him stop the questioning, I started questioning him. He is from Medellín, "the paradise for drugs, but I have nothing to do with that. A women's clothing factory has hired me for six months, as a consultant. They have production problems. They rented me an apartment here because it's more than a hotel, but less than a home." Every afternoon he goes to the gym "to get rid of stress, having to deal all day with the Jewish owners of the factory it's quite a job." I remembered Moisés, and I was really surprised when he told me that the factory belonged to the Waimbers. I told him that I knew them and I was even more surprised when I heard him say that "poor Moisés" was the cause of his stress because apparently

he has household problems, “and instead of leaving them at home, he swallows them and transforms them into nonsense explosions of rage that bother all the personnel. He should go to a psychiatrist. Do you know what’s up with him?” “I haven’t seen him in a while. Him or his family.”

It’s been a while since I have seen any of them. I am referring to the “social nucleus,” except for Manuel, of course, by the way, I saw Agustín’s son, “your adored Agustincito” Bernardo would have said, when I ran into him the other day at the entrance of the building. He was going to Manuel’s so he could help him do some homework for Art class. That is what he told me. Who knows what else his “uncle” might be helping him with. When he saw me, he also called me “uncle” and before going up he said smiling to me: if I mess up in “Spanish and Literature” I’ll come get you, Uncle Juanca, so you can give me a hand.” Agustincico is already on the right path.

Much better than me, sitting next to the Colombian who did not tell me his name but did tell me his apartment number, inviting me to come over for a drink tonight. I accepted, imagining what could come after the drinks. I accepted because one day, today for example, my life must go on. I’ll never see the “nucleus” again. I realized that all of them were more Bernardo’s friends than mine. Even worse, I think they considered me just his appendage. Their silence after our separation made it apparent.

As is apparent now that the obvious question would crop up: “Well, did your separation help take up your poetry again? Are you writing a lot, daily, divinely obsessed with what you write?” I think I have already answered that: if my life, as I said before, seems to me like a blank page, blank are all the pages that are waiting up there, next to

the desk, so that at least I may scribble on a few of them. I excuse myself saying that is part of the “process,” but I punish myself suspecting that I will never again write line after line, creating a melody full of images. I understand and I can describe the development of the creative act: wanting to attest to what is seen and lived, not being satisfied with just feeling it, but having the need to share it, offer it, provide it to receive the reaction and response of someone who reads me. As I am doing here.

Maintain your silence. It's part of the game. Am I turning certifiable? There were many years since, speaking of games, I played “house” with Bernardo. When we met, I remember that I was in a situation similar to the one now: desiring without daring to express my desires, wanting to slide down that toboggan that I knew was in front of me and not having the courage to even step up to it. I lived with my parents and my two older sisters, in a home that was quiet and without ostentation. But without splurges of sincerity or affection either. Each one seemed to have his or her goals to accomplish: Dad, an accountant in a company that appreciated him; Mom, managing the house; Ernestita, the oldest, fat as a cow, a Chemistry teacher at a private high school; while Eulalia, a carbon copy of a giraffe, was a hospital nurse. Neither one of them ever had suitors, perhaps because they weren't that good looking or because of their parochial names, chosen to honor our grandmothers. Both of them, together with my mom, would say over and over that they did not understand how it was that in a family of ugly people I was born handsome, according to them. I was never beautiful, maybe cute because of being well proportioned. Their compliments confused me because I was afraid that it was a way to rub in what they sensed as my “difference.” So these five adults lived together under the same roof of one of those old apartments, with high ceilings and flaking toilets. We half

saw each other each morning when we were going out to take care of our obligations, and then late in the afternoon, or early in the evening, when we sat down to eat what Mom had prepared for dinner: always soup from a soup mix, followed by somewhat hard pasta or a small portion of chicken or fish, served with white rice and banana slices. Always gelatin for dessert, of different colors and the same taste each day, just as I now switch the colors of the MacDonalD's' soda.

It can't be difficult to imagine after having described the infinite sadness of my home, that when I met Bernardo it was such a cataclysmic sensation as what we all felt with the Vargas tragedy. When he showed up my life changed. His spontaneity, brazenness, talent, sense of humor, all of that which people call, "attitude towards life" made me feel that all the windows of the world were opened so that I could see, know, enjoy trees, plants, small birds, larks, in a much more exciting manner compared to the calmer way in which I look at them now. We saw each other for the first time in a hallway at the University, or better yet, he saw me and not only did he follow me, but as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he grabbed me by the arm saying: "Come with me for a coffee."

When we finished the coffee, we had already agreed that I would visit him at his house that very night. "Come have a drink," the same invitation from the Colombian in the swimming pool, though without Bernardo's big smile and chatter that used to get me stupefied. By the middle of the second whisky, he said as if ordering me: "Pull down your pants" Prudish as I am I asked with a quiet voice: "What for?" "All the better to see you as the wolf said to Little Red Riding Hood," and if the end of that fairy tale is that the wolf ate Red Riding Hood, Bernardo not only did the same with me, but by the following

week he already had me living with him, a move that strangely enough did not provoke complaints or regrets from my family. It was as if they were happy that *finally* I would make a decision in my life! “You are a man already. Live your life,” were my father’s words, said in the tone of a verdict as if fearing that at the last moment I would change my mind.

The rest you know because you know the story me made up by calling each other Ping and Pong. They were “our happy years” as the Barbara Streisand song goes, the one that María Teresa could not stop singing, after seeing the movie I don’t know how many times. We lived playing “house,” with Bernardo cooking brilliantly and me cleaning with so much reluctance that several maids appeared and disappeared because “they are all just like you: they think that just wiping the top with a rag is enough” It was no tragedy. I knew how to maneuver him. We seemed happy. We were.

When the Vargas thing happened, a cloud appeared over our heads. I could not explain it. I still can’t explain it. It went no further than enumerating details that started to appear in our lives, so calm, believe me, like my experience living at my parents’ home. The first thing I remember is the fear that was around those days, not only when we would see over and over scenes of the disaster on television, but because of the sense that if it continued raining, the mountain could split the same way towards Caracas and perhaps towards our building that was at the bottom of the Ávila.

Together with the fear appeared doubts about the soundness of our own existence, as if we were chronic patients at a clinic whose symptoms would return with the passing of time. The patient could die at any moment or could survive to die later. So that the fear

and doubts incited us to live as if we were riding one of those roller coasters that, with its turns, shocks passengers making them feel a cold sweat and lose their voices from so much screaming. What I mean to say is that we became irresponsible, insurgent to all rules or habits. Bernard took a liking to drinking, whisky mixed with wine or vodka or whatever, alleging that getting drunk each night calmed him. After ten years of not smoking, I went back to it, sometimes even two packs a day, and when I let out smoke through my mouth and nose, as if I were one of those boats that cross the Mississippi, María Teresa assured me, “You look just like Ava Gardner in *Showboat*.”

As time went by, friends who had opted for “other horizons,” as one of them told me, came to say goodbye. They left alleging that the political and economic situation was deplorable, some because they had even been fired from their jobs. I always thought, however, that their escape or moving was a consequence of not being able to overcome the terror of what happened in Vargas. It was like a distrust of nature, that all of a sudden, as if to show its omnipotent strength, chose the Ávila, icon of painters and poets, to tear it up in pieces and throw it to the distant sea. Let the sea swallow up everything the cascading water took down their path!

“What’s that?” asked Luis Ángel, the Colombian listening to me digressing like a lunatic. We were already on the second whisky, which I had insisted in serving to show off my expertise with this *aqua vitae*. “You are a bastard or better said a poetic bastard. You are telling me that you don’t write and what you’ve been doing since I asked you what’s up with you is writing by talking. You are an asshole if you don’t sit down and put all that on paper. Idiot! It could be... What is the name of that damn book that all of you

professors cite over and over? The *Odyssey*? That's the one: an odyssey's what you have between your balls. Bring it out and forget about the birdseed and the little birds.

In Bermuda shorts and with a sleeveless-shirt, barefoot, he was lying down stretched out on the sofa, continuously moving his toes, and at times, rubbing them while he continued his long speech. He did not show Bernardo's sarcasm or his mocking tone. On the contrary, he expressed himself calmly and without stopping, reminding me of my dentist who does not stop talking so that I do not feel the pain when he is drilling me. "If you lived in Medellín, if you were born and raised in my city surrounded by mountains, less beautiful than this superhuman and persistent Ávila, you would've gotten used to the continuous migration of your neighbors, almost always to Miami, where according to the gringos, we are the third largest colony. You would've gotten used to the small 'For Sale' signs in houses, apartments and cars, the same as you see here, but also to the sound of gunshots at night or in the middle of the day. That Vargas disaster that made you crazy is a daily disaster in Medellín and it's not Nature's idea, but the idea of the people from our same land. Our misfortune is and will continue to provoke a vast literature about the violence that the foreigners admire and reward. So don't be stunned. The fucked-up thing about ending up as you are, sitting on that armchair with your legs crossed and over-crossed, is that you haven't realized yet that energy comes from the feet."

I thought that, like Bernardo with a couple of drinks in him, Luis Ángel started to ramble on about stupid things. But when he extended his empty glass without saying a word, and, born with an obedient soul, I went to the kitchen to serve us a third one, "Don't count them," I told myself, "Stop counting already." When I returned, Luis Ángel was standing up and taking his glass; he said: "Take off your shoes and your socks and

lie down on the sofa. The masseur in the gym, the one you have never visited because of fear of being seen naked, (see how I know you already?) sits in a stool at my feet and starts working each one of them. He rubs them, stretches my toes, he puts the tips of his fingers on my soles, assuring me that relaxation starts there, that my stress begins to disappear there. Not being a masseur let me try and let's see if I can help you."

And he helped me. I closed my eyes not to show my embarrassment. I felt his hands on and between my feet as if he were kneading them and I liked it; I was delighted. It was as if I had gotten rid of my body, as if I didn't have it. When I think that I was about to be unable to stop showing my excitement, I heard his voice saying: "Open your eyes. Don't lose the opportunity of knowing that you like it." I opened them and I saw him leaning in and softly slightly touching the instep of my foot with his lips. I extended my arms and I caressed his head with both my hands. He lifted it and laughing said: "Damn! Not everything is lost!"

He jumped from the sofa and he went inside. I did not know if he had gone to the bathroom or to the kitchen to prepare himself another drink. He came back without a glass in his hand and he told me: "It's time to throw you out. Tomorrow I have to be at the factory very early. I don't like it one fucking bit. Let's see what's up with your friend Waimber. You know what I think? That he should go to the eye doctor. Maybe it's those horribly thick glasses he wears. Maybe if they prescribe some contact lenses he starts to see the world as a newborn. If you run into him, give him that advice."

Don't ask me where I got the courage to tell him: "Tomorrow afternoon I will go to the gym. Maybe I'll get a massage. What's the name of the masseur? And

accompanying me to the door, kissing me on the cheek, he answered me: “Luis Ángel.
That’s your masseur.”

THEY'RE WOMEN

who were born to gossip. They are delighted by any rumor. Why should they prefer discretion when they're more amused by indiscretion? I am not fond of puns but this "discretion" and "indiscretion" came out without even trying or because of my constant eagerness for being precise. Professional (over)development.

They protect themselves from each other. From us, of course. They show, to use a word very much in vogue, "solidarity" as when it is used to express "solidarity-based economy." They are generous to hear confession and generous to confess. I am sure that my mother, a "Sevillian through and through," as she describes herself, shook and flung her body like the wings on a butterfly as soon as she heard the rumor: It's going 'round by word of mouth, but this shameless guy hasn't opened his since he arrived." Someone who must have reacted much more badly is my mother-in-law, a Galician from A Coruña, who swallows up any piece of gossip passing from side to side in her jaws, sucking it, even if the drool comes out on the sides of the mouth that never stops talking: "the other mother-in-law called me and told me but I kept my mouth shut; not a word." From mouth to mouth, goin' on and on.

The two ancient eighty-year-olds are close friends because their husbands have also been close from the time they met after arriving to this country in 1953, the first year of Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. My parents came carrying me around already at age eight, my middle brother was six and the little one was two. "Three machos, by God, and *olé* and *olé* and *olé*," victories that my father celebrates as if he were a bullfighter twirling his cape. He likes to announce it in front of the other male in-laws who only had

two daughters, “as sad as Sunday afternoon drizzle. C’mon, c’mon let’s dance, I offer you my three little machos for whatever you want!”

What the oldest one was thinking of, was me. In fact, I believe that’s what the two couples were thinking of, since they always encouraged and pushed what would become our future relationship. As the one who, up to recently, has been my wife told the whole universe, the: “they raised us to be husband and wife. We never had another choice. At least I didn’t have one. The first man that I danced with was him. He was the first one who kissed me, I remember it was under a tree full of papayas at the Galician Center *Hermandad Gallega*, one Sunday at noon. We came out of the pool, he dragged me to the tree, pressed his lips onto mine, opened my mouth and I felt his chlorine flavored tongue. When he graduated and obtained the scholarship to do a Master’s at Columbia, I imagined that we would get married upon his return because our two mothers did not stop making plans for the wedding that of course they also celebrated at the *Hermandad*. Notice that I said ‘they celebrated’ and not ‘we celebrated.’ I had already graduated from Universidad Central where he returned as Assitant Professor; I was already working at the Ministry for the Family; we weren’t that young anymore; there was nothing left to do. My father-in-law was right when he talked about the congenital sadness of my sister and me.”

I said, “the one that up to recently has been my wife.” She’s no longer my wife because I made that decision, but also because of the back and forth of all of them: mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, friends, all trying to find out what’s going on with me. What’s going on is that I got tired of feeling pity for her and more so, even more so, pity for myself. What’s going on is that at fifty-six years of age I look back and see rows and

rows of conformities. Ten years at the San Ignacio as a diligent pupil of the Jesuits. Five more years at the Economics School of Universidad Central, graduating just Cum Laude but passing the exam of the Foundation, Fundación Ayacucho, to study for a Master's in Economic Development at Columbia. Living in New York from twenty-three to twenty-six was the first of the two happy exceptions that have happened to me in the long string of conformities. The first two years I had my own room at the International House, a kind of student United Nations and club for multiple activities. If that residence was very comfortable for me, it also became very exciting because during these first two years it provided me intense love affairs. It will suffice to remember the three main ones, so that all those that did not have my good luck would die of envy.

Shahira was Egyptian, from Cairo, supposedly the cousin of King Farouk, that chubby tyrant who boasted of having the largest harem in the whole history of his kingdom. Shahira spoke English with a somewhat British accent that was left by her British colonial past. She studied Comparative Literature and wrote very sweet poems that were published in such prestigious magazines as *Partisan Review*. Having her was wonderful. Possessing her was a refinement that I could never have imagined when I lived in Caracas. That paradise like the one in *A thousand and One Nights* ended at the end of the first year, when Shahira moved to the Sorbonne to start a Ph. D. Up to now we have stayed friends, writing each other and telling each other our events: many things for her; three divorces and two children. For me, it is not necessary to rub in what's obvious.

With Shahira gone, Francesca came in; a Londoner with that Florentine name. An architect, and at times I think it was like a premonition of the future architect who has almost destroyed my life. A premonition because she was also Jewish, although from

such a liberal family that when years later she got married, it was her own father who got together twenty or thirty friends that had fulfilled the bat-mitzvah rite in his home, and he conducted the ceremony himself. He was an important editor, and such an iconoclastic individual that his heterodoxy made him seem similar to any orthodox synagogue fanatic. I met him several times when he was visiting New York and I think that if I kept the relationship with Francesca, it was pretty much because of the admiration I felt towards her father. I would have liked to be like him, secure in his ostentation.

Francesca went back to London without me due to my cowardly neglecting to join her brave family. Her place was immediately taken by Alana Kuzminski, with Polish parents, with a deficient performance in her Economics studies (we were classmates) and with an insatiable sexual appetite. If Shahira was poetry (erotic poetry, many times imaginative poetry), if Francesca was a world of intellect with occasional loving outbursts, Kuzminski (because that's the way I have always called her, from the time we met sitting next to each other in adjacent desks) was rolls in the hay at all times and everywhere, as if she were starving for more and more, never indifferent or tired. I could sum her up by saying that she was a classic hippie, and so much so, that one day she disappeared from my life and then I found out from a classmate, one of her close friends, the reason: "She decided that all this was a bunch of shit and she would be better off going back to Oklahoma or Arkansas. I never really knew where she came from."

My dear New York was not just love and sex. It was freedom, art exhibitions, and theaters and concerts and Asian restaurants, and first-rate libraries, and I say it again, it was freedom: having that sensation that you walk down its streets as if they belong to you, stepping up the pace as a Manhattan veteran where everybody converges so that you

get to know everybody. Now that I just came back, I was there just for two days, now that I come carrying with me the failure brought on by my surprise visit, now I would like to go back and stay so that city, my city, would cure me of all sadness and all this discouragement that inundates this office that I have turned into a home for now.

I didn't go back to mine. The day I arrived, I came here. The next morning I called her at her job and asked her to meet me at a café that afternoon. I chose the *Arábica Café* because I knew that she likes it and that it is discreet, like her. When I arrived, she was already sitting at one of the back tables, without ordering anything, looking forward. I realized that she knew what I was going to tell her. I asked what she wanted to drink: "the usual." I went and ordered a "big coffee with milk, not too dark and lukewarm" and for me, an espresso and a non-sparkling mineral water. I brought them on a tray. Each one opened the small sugar packet and put it in their respective cups. Each one stirred his or her coffee with a teaspoon. Each of us sipped our coffee. Our silence was as loud as thunder. We didn't look at each other just as when the Vargas thing happened, too surprising to understand.

"So, you finally agreed," she asked without raising her eyes from the cup. "On the contrary. There will be no agreement. There'll be nothing." "Then..." she repeated and I swear that I almost saw hope in her face. "Between us neither. I mean between you and me. If there had ever been anything, we knew that it disappeared a long time ago. Years. Let's not persist because we will continue to hurt each other." She got up as if to leave and I stopped her, asking her to stay a few more minutes, so that we could "organize" our lives. She made a gesture as if to slap me with her purse, but she held it tightly against her body while she was telling me, smiling pure poison: "You are the one

who needs to organize. Come by to get your things whenever you want. You have the keys. I'd appreciate it if you didn't come in at times when I'm home. What else has to be organized?" And she stayed there standing, looking at me from her height as if I were some weirdo. "The apartment is yours. We will sort things on good terms. If I don't love you it's not because I love another woman. I don't love anyone at the moment, but what I'd love to do is to behave toward you with affection, with fondness. We lived together for so many years..." and she did not let me finish because, then, she did slap my face with her bag and ran towards the street, down the stairs, stumbling and almost falling. An employee who was sweeping came running back to help her but she had already gotten up and she ran down the street. The sweeper came back, got closer and looked at me sadly, raising his shoulders and opening his hands as if trying to console me.

From that afternoon on, calls from the family members started. The story line about everything that happened was developing with several versions in which I was always the criminal. I remember when Rebeca congratulated me for my "perfect crime." She should be told that it doesn't exist: there's never a perfect crime. Let someone else tell her: Bernardo or María Teresa, or both in unison, because the story line was started by our two dear friends. That's why Victoria and Aura, as mediocre psychologists, liked to call us the "family nucleus." When we became a group, we assumed all the defects that torment an inherited family. I can imagine how they will take care to accompany Victoria in her Calvary. The same as they did before, as I did, encouraging María Teresa for the period of time she went through without knowing what had happened to her apartment on the coast. We all suggested that she could move into our homes, all of us, but especially

the women who dedicated themselves to buying whatever she needed to reduce her distress.

And what has happened to Vargas eighteen months later? Nothing. Plans over here, plans over there, but none have been put into practice. María Teresa was saying during that fateful dinner at the Danish restaurant, that little by little businesses were opening, that they continued cleaning and paving the roads, more life was present and she added: “I think that I will remain living there, facing the sea. Unlike Bernardo, I don’t need the Ávila,” and he assured us: “It’s true. I don’t feel good if I don’t look at that mountain every day, but what we will do is divide our lives, some time in front of the sea, some time in front of the mountain, and so on...” He stuttered at María Teresa’s inexpressive face, as if she were listening to a talk about fantasies, and he had no choice but to try to fix the situation: “Well, we’ll see. First I have to retire. Aren’t you thinking of retiring Arturo?” “And how am I going to retire if I am my own boss?” Bernardo, poor guy, cornered again, let out two or three laughs and raising his glass, he almost wailed: “Well, let’s toast for the happiness of us all.”

Rebeca and I toasted knowing that we were doing it for the end of the happiness that the two of us intermittently enjoyed. Her face spat out my treason. Not having told her before about my running into Bernardo and even worse, accepting a get-together with all three of them. That had never happened before. We had maintained the necessary separation that our relationship demanded at all times. At all times, like when we met, she one of my students in Economics I, an elective course open to all degrees. From the first class I noticed her presence, not only because she was a beautiful blonde, but also because she would look into my eyes while I was talking. She didn’t take notes. The only

thing she did was look at me non-stop. About the third or fourth class, at the end, I pointed to her with my finger, and I asked her why she didn't take notes. "Because I have a good memory. Because what you are teaching us is more common sense than anything else," she told me and added smiling: "Because I find your mustache amusing, Professor. If you weren't dark-skinned, I would swear and fear that you were Hitler."

That's how things got started. I say "things" because then it didn't occur to me to get involved with her or any students. I have heard of scandals of that nature and because of my apprehensive nature along with my Jesuit education, I would never dare look at anyone. I had been married to Victoria for several years, and our relationship provided me with a comforting peace. Although she never excited me, we made love two or three times a week, repeating the routine that we had grown used to, without inventing anything new or aspiring to enlarge or vary that calm lagoon we lived in. Our marriage was like a lagoon: calm, confined, waveless. We had even resigned ourselves to the fact that Victoria could not have children. It's not worth getting into the details.

And "things" continued with more jokes about my mustache, with her statements that, with it, I was trying to hide something, or tried to seem less attractive, or that I feared that I would be seen "naked" without it. You may have noticed that the little Jewish girl, as I used to call her, was a flirt who tormented me, showing me possibilities that seemed unattainable. "I have a boyfriend. I have had one all my life and as soon as I graduate, I'll marry him," she would say as she leaned over the desk with an open book as if making believe she was asking me something when she really wanted me to look at her breasts showing at the neckline of her undershirt. "If I were your boyfriend, I would give you a good beating," and she laughed, and standing up confronted me and said: "Give it to me."

As my mother would say: What had to happen, happened,” in a motel on the road to Guarenas that a friend, Manuel Martínez, recommended, an expert in those matters although openly gay: “It’s fabulous. Expensive, but fabulous. On the ceiling, an enormous mirror; round bed, ‘the works,’ he would say in English. So whoring around, eh?... Truly there’s no one to believe in anymore.” No one. I agreed with him when I found out that Rebeca, the femme fatale, was a virgin. I couldn’t penetrate her. I got scared. That first time there was cuddling and crying on her part, although she wanted it by all means; she did not care what her boyfriend would say on their honeymoon. And there was a second time where I pleased her and I pleased myself and then I lost count of how many times there were.

She graduated and, as she had said, she got married and we didn’t see each other again for about ten years. Sometimes to mess with her, to torment her I would call her. She flirted as had always been her way, but she never gave in until one day “out of the blue,” to use one of the sayings that diabolical Manuel would use in English, she showed up, she offered herself and she surrendered at my feet as a “slave to her desires,” another one of Manuel’s sayings. I mention him over and over because a student named Xiomara something, called me today asking me to give her an interview for a paper she has to do about Manuel. I think she called it “Life Story.” Since I liked her nearly hoarse voice, I set a meeting for tomorrow, at the same time and the same place as my meeting with Victoria, but contrary to my victim, she made me wait almost half an hour until she showed up short of breath and her hair messed up by the breeze.

She was so cute: fresh, smiling, nice: “When I first saw you I knew it was you. Because of the mustache. Professor Martínez told me: ‘look for like a pencil mustache,

and that's him'." Son of a bitch! She seemed happy to recognize me, however, and without letting me ask her if she wanted something to drink, she left her book bag on top of a chair and came back with a bottle of water that she was drinking in slurps from the bottle, meanwhile, she had turned on her tape recorder and asked me to tell her "things" about Martínez. Again the "things." I limited myself to speaking well of that bastard, showing a subtle decorum about his private life (the most public life that I have ever known). She seemed surprised by my enumeration of his virtues and my not mentioning any defects. "I assure you Professor that everything you tell me will be anonymous. A Life Story cannot include gossip. So feel free to criticize him or condemn him. Other friends, that are also yours, did that already, even your very wife." "And, what did Victoria say? You can tell me because I am her husband. I'll never repeat it." She looked at me, bit her lips, turned off the recorder and almost whispered: "That he is scandalous, but that all of you envy him precisely because he dares to be scandalous."

Poor Victoria! Hasn't she realized yet that her envy will not vanish while she keeps on staggering through life? I told Xiomara that I never felt envious of Manuel, simply because I never wanted to be scandalous, that my favorite behavior has always been to go by unnoticed. "You are not getting by unnoticed by me," she told me and her flirtation repeated the same beginning I had with Rebeca as if it were the same theatrical text acted by two different actresses. The red traffic light that we all have inside the forehead went on and its warning stopped me for the rest of the interview. She thanked me, she got up and slinging her book bag on her back she pretended she was going to extend her hand, but instead she leaned over, touched her cheek with mine, straightened up and said: "Maybe we will see each other in the University hallways."

I stayed alone at that table for quite a while, so long that one of the waiters came over to ask if I wanted something else. I asked him for a whisky with water and then another, and then another, and after paying I got the car and came here, to the office that is also my home. While I poured another whisky, I remember the drunken tales of Bernardo each night. Sooner or later it had to be my turn. I repeated the question that's going on inside all the time" "What's happening to me?"

Little by little, the whisky brought out other questions that tried to answer what's going on inside me: "Is it that I just can't get Rebeca out of me? Is it that I don't know what my life will be like from now on? Is it that I am afraid to have an affair like the one that could happen with Xiomara? Is it that my work, luckily intense, does not thrill me? Is it that nothing seems to be the same and everything seems to have stopped as it happened with Vargas after its tragedy? Is it that I seem like Vargas? Is it that I no longer belong in the world that surrounds me? Is it that I should get away from all this and try another place and other "things"?"

The place will be New York. It won't be difficult for me to find work there. I even have clients over there. Even Edwin Souvanto has asked me several times if I wouldn't be interested in working at the United Nations Secretariat, in the Second Committee, the one that deals with Economics. What's happening to me here will not happen to me anymore once there, because I will be surrounded by new things and nice memories, some passionate ones. That's my goal. Meanwhile, I could take a walk through the University hallways to see if I run into Xiomara, or just ask Manuel for her phone number. He would give it to me repeating "So whoring around, eh?..." Meanwhile

I will do something I haven't done in years. I will masturbate, like a good little macho son of my Andalusian father.

PART TWO

EXPATRIATES

ANYBODY COULD

continue to be pestered by an insistent question, any of us or any of them, be it from here or from abroad, could ask the question that, just by repeating it to ourselves, multiplies itself into many others as if by making it specific, as if by insisting in analyzing it, we would crave one sole answer that would explain everything to us and would soothe us for the rest of our lives. Why are we as we are? Was it by the rage of Nature on that December 15th, which buried Vargas without warning? Didn't we receive from that very Nature a similar surprise, and maybe an even worse one, when an earthquake not only nearly annihilated poor Vargas but also a great deal of East Caracas? The ones who remember that tragedy are also witnesses to the fact that it did not alter the foundations of our society as the cracking of the Ávila has done now because of the never-ending downpours of that December. The earthquake was on July 29th, 1967 and I remember it well, prior to it not a drop of water fell, nor was there any indication of what was about to happen. Surprisingly, we felt a tremor whose strength and roar grew as a whirlwind and minutes later stopped, leaving a silence among the ruins of who knows how many buildings that came down with all their residents inside them. Right away, the whole population, without yet recovering from the impact, collected the rubble, buried the bodies, and little by little, daily life regained its natural course. A completely different reaction to what happened in Vargas.

The first images showed us water, collapses and dead people, but also looting, rapes, murder, as if all that underlying aggression had been repressed, and the cascading torrents brought it to the surface. We were already paying close attention to the generalized crime that frightened us daily, both because of its growing presence as well as for its professionalism that was getting more refined each day. The stealing of vehicles included the gunshot that would kill the people driving them. Express kidnappings had timetables as precise as first class trains. The robbing of banks and elegant homes was carried out by properly trained teams, dressed up in military uniforms or uniforms of known private companies. All of those crimes that surrounded Vargas, forced us to set up police posts on each corner, but when a mob of people committing crimes as if they were groups at a sinister carnival flourished, we realized that we were starting to live in a new and very strange country.

Cornered, we are seeing the shape of this new country that was, and continues to be on edge, that seems to be endlessly plunging downhill, as if breaking its final descent. We maintain a glimmer of hope for something to happen so that, each day, this new country will no longer be on edge, until it reaches a position free of risks. Meanwhile, everything scares us, be it the daily August rains, be it any stranger that comes up to ask whatever, because we pick up our step when the person gets close to us and we go in the first building entrance or store to avoid that person. We are dispossessed and that's why so many, with numbers growing each day, have preferred to become expatriates.

I am sure that was the reason for the sudden interest shown by the Principal of the school where I worked, when some young couples, who until recently had their little ones in our daycare and kindergarten, proposed to her that she open a branch, at least for those

levels, in Weston, Florida, where they had already moved. The proposal was very flattering because they were determined not only to be their financial partners, but to obtain all the legal paperwork that the American authorities required. They even had looked at the location where the school would operate, and they had polled their friends to make sure they would have enough students and competent teachers. What they wanted from our school was what one of the mothers, a bleach blonde and a shameless nouveau riche, summarized in the meeting where the offer was made to us; she clarified: “We need your ‘expertise’” and when we voiced our surprise that there was not even a competent preschool in that town, another one of the mothers summarized: “There are two or three, all in English, but what we want for our children is one in Spanish, with the quality that you have attained. They’ll learn English, whether they want to or not, with daily activities, but we don’t want them to forget our language.” One of my colleagues, Rita, famous among all of us for her sharp irony, asked them with a stupid look: “So what you want to do is to lessen your nostalgia,” and right there and then, abruptly, the petitioners got up and the meeting was over.

It was over for that day, but on subsequent days they came back to the Principal and insisted, warning her that they would not want to include Rita, and that they obviously preferred to have, besides her, Teresa and me, I think it was because we were the ones who didn’t open our mouths in that first meeting. Their main demand was that the preschool have the same name as our school, “because over there that name is famous, Principal Gutiérrez, I am telling you since I am in Real Estate, and when I sell a house to anyone and ask if they know it, they assure me that they do, and that they would

like their little children or grandchildren to learn in a similar setting until they graduate from high school. That is, dear Principal, from here to eternity.”

When I told Agustín, my husband, the surprising offer that the school had received, he burst out laughing as if it were a very original joke: “So then, Westonzuela, the paradise of our compatriots, the kingdom of tranquility and security and mediocrity, aspires to have a school like yours. What balls! Of course, what else could they ask for if everything that there is here they already have over there? They are not going to ask for a McDonalds, or a Pida Pizza, or a Sambil shopping mall, or a multi whatever, theatres.” I didn’t dare tell him that they have also requested me. It didn’t even occur to him because he kept ranting and raving about the Principal: “That Gutiérrez is pretty slick. I bet you she was the one who ran to propose it to them. That old lady has an eye for business, God bless her. Besides, what is more secure than having something on the side, just in case...” There I became a second Rita and going towards the kitchen, I answered him: “You should know, you are pretty good about having something on the side.”

Because Agustín continued with his little jokes and his irony while we were having dinner, the kids found out and they reacted with enthusiasm, something which enraged him: “Hey, Mom, how great! I hope that Principal Gutiérrez chooses you. Finally, we could go to Orlando all the time” and my baby added: “It’s perfect for me. I’ll graduate and go to one of those exciting colleges in Florida. Light a candle to San Jude Thaddeus so that you get it.” “What candle are you talking about? If you want to go to Disney, you have a father who can spend his money taking you, and as far as you are concerned young man, just take care of your grades because María Teresa promised to

get you into a real university, none of those fake Miami colleges where the only thing you graduate from is swimming or underwater fishing. Pure fag shit!”

I decided also to forget about the possibility that the Principal would choose me together with Teresa, or someone else, to go to Weston to get the preschool started. I liked the idea more than anything just to get my two children out of this damned city. After talking to the three mothers who had come specifically to propose the project, I got scared because of their memories of what had happened to their families and others that made them decide to emigrate. Some had their children kidnapped at the end of the school day, demanding immediate ransom or certain death. Others had their pickup trucks taken at gunpoint, or had their credit cards cloned or, as had just happened to poor Bernardo, they forced in the front door of his apartment and when he resisted by screaming for help, they shot him, they stole what they could carry and left him bleeding to death in the middle of the bathtub. When neighbors came in after hearing his screams, he was already dead. I don't want to remember anything else about that horror. It destroyed all of us, his friends. We were never the same after that. We avoided each other to stop sharing the rage, and the crying and repeating that question that I mentioned at the beginning: “Why are we as we are?”

When the Principal sat right across from me to offer me, in a very formal tone, the possibility of being, as she called it, “part of the scouting party,” I argued that it would be very difficult for me to leave behind my two children and my husband, especially during those last months of the school year. “Nonsense,” she told me “Agustín and Aura Marina are grown already and can take care of themselves while you come and go. Besides, they would be staying with that jewel of a father, so that, he would, finally, take

responsibility!” In all these years that I have been one of the three psychologists hired by the school, there were more than enough opportunities for Mrs. Gutiérrez, (as all employees called her, never did anybody dare call her Sara and much less treat her in an informal way) to find out about my marital difficulties. I have put up with several infidelities from my loving spouse, always reminding me that at my age and with my salary I could never be independent and meet all the family expenses. Agustín frequently goes gaga with the first one who would pay attention to him, but as his mother says: “Let him be, girl, he’ll get over it. Ignore it, he’ll get over it.”

It has been easy to follow my mother-in-law’s advice because since God knows when, we just share the bed to sleep. Nothing else. Very rarely, but especially when he’s had a couple of drinks, does it occur to him to kiss my cheek or stroke my hair. I am not sure if it’s due to a hint of responsibility or because of plain pity. Then, suddenly as if foreseeing that I would go crazy, and could mount him right away, he wishes me “good night” turns around and starts to snore. I am sure it’s not true that he’s already asleep, but a moment later, he is, indeed, sleeping like a log. I just remembered that once, a long time ago, Victoria, my psychologist colleague and close friend, told me that Arturo, her husband, was behaving exactly as I have just described Agustín was, and she told me that even then, in that “shameful situation,” as she called it, she preferred to put up with it. She didn’t have to put up with it for the rest of her life, because Arturo did not go back home, after a quick trip to New York (and not a trip to Miami -he had lied to her showing her a ticket), and all of a sudden, he got divorced and disappeared.

Agustín will not disappear from my life. I know him. It’s been 17 years of marriage, plus two before that, when we frequented several motels. If he doesn’t like me

anymore, I don't care. He seems happy in our home, always paying attention to what gets spoiled, what is needed, and making sure that his infatuations outside our walls be instantaneous and fleeting. I am sure that if I go to Weston, he will love the role of housewife, and he will love, even more, to implement a military schedule for the kids. Especially for Agustincico, who I admit needs it because lately he has turned quieter, more reserved, going out into the street without telling us when he's going out and when he's coming back. Because of that and for some other reasons, I would like to take him with me because the place is a town with a population of barely fifty thousand, according to what I've been told, with strict laws that stop teenagers' craziness.

So when the moment arrived, I told the Principal yes. Trina and I are going first to organize the place until she gets there. The three of us will choose the teachers depending on the number of students enrolled. Once the classes start we will take turns coming and going during that first year and with time, as Mrs. Gutiérrez said, "We'll see how it's going, who wants to stay permanently or if no one wants that, whom should we train to direct our first international preschool. Aren't you happy? To me it's like a dream!"

The one who thought it wasn't a dream at all, was Agustín. While I was telling him, he kept opening his mouth wider and wider, and he let himself fall on his armchair in the living room, and if I hadn't known him so well, I would have feared that he was having a heart attack. Then he closed his mouth, and slightly slapping his knees, he breathed deeply to scream: "So you are leaving me? So you want to do with me what Arturo has just done to Victoria? What symmetry! He leaves one psychologist and another psychologist, you, leaves me. And where is all that talk about 'I am from here. Where would I go my dear girl?'" To Westonzuela. Call her and tell her: 'I am going to

Westonzuela, my dear, the gringo paradise, to start a new life. And Agustín and my children? They'll manage. They are grown. Let them start a new life as well." He stood up all of a sudden and I swear that he was coming over to slap me, but when he saw my eyes filled with tears, what he did was to open his arms and give me a hug, a big, big hug, which he hadn't done in years. With the hug came the kisses, and with the kisses, right there in the living room, because none of our children were home, he made love to me but in a hasty way, as if his resentment and rage made him want to hurt me. He bellowed a few times and exhaled air, plus everything he had inside. I regret to confess that I didn't feel anything. Not true: I felt so much compassion that I kissed his cheeks several times. Mother kisses, I suppose.

So, I am leaving. We have organized everything efficiently. Agustín will take charge of the house. Our children will finish their classes; fortunately we know that they will pass their final exams without any problems. Agustín will come at some point, "and I will take you to Orlando. We'll see everything and I'll pay for everything." Suddenly, I noticed something like happiness on his face. Of course, he will take a break from this pain in the ass: me. We promised to keep communicating by Internet once a week. Each one will send me his or her confidential e-mail. "That sounds like a spy movie," said my baby girl. I know that his messages will be anything but confidential.

I end by remembering what one of the mothers who is bringing us told us; "Don't make such a sad face, Aura. It's not like you are going to Australia. And even then, with Internet you can read as much as you like from all the newspapers from here. From far away, each news item will seem like a disaster worse than the one in Vargas and you will thank God for your fortune." What a relief!

THOSE WERE

people who still thought that everything would be getting better, but admitted their mistake when we found out about uncle Bernardo's murder. Not only did they admit it, but they started to make preparations to get out of here. Among them, my family members. Mom and Dad seemed speechless when Aunt María Teresa gave them the news. Ruth and I watched them looking at themselves as if through their eyes they wanted to understand what had happened, or if as they preferred that the two of us didn't understand a thing. I wanted to have everything explained to me, it was little by little and thanks to other people, however, that I was able to recreate the crime. I am not trying to sound like a detective, but isn't that the correct term? Recreate?

It was done little by little because Mom and Dad kept repeating over and over what we couldn't do: "From now on, I'll take you to school and your Mom will pick you up. No school transportation;" "No going out at all from now on," "If anyone wants to see their friends, invite them over," "From now on, better not invite anyone. Talk to them on the phone," "Better yet, don't even think about answering the phone from now on; let Matilde or Nora do it." When they couldn't think of any more "from now on" statements, I dared to ask them why they feared that the murderers of Uncle Bernardo would have us on their list of next victims. "Aarón do me a favor and don't play stupid, it doesn't suit you. What your mother and I are demanding is prevention." "Prevention until you graduate and we organize everything to accompany you to your dear yeshiva in Jerusalem." I asked why they were going to accompany me if we had always said that I would go with the school trip, and that then I would stay on my own. "Because we want

to see what your dear yeshiva is like before we, as you said, leave you on your own. Are we or are we not your parents, my love?”

I preferred to be quiet and tolerate it. I realized that this wasn't the time to confess to them my desire for freedom, and independence, not to mention my intention of learning to become a good Jew. How could I make them understand all that when Mom, every minute, on the phone with her friends or in front of us, for no reason, did not stop repeating as if it were a Hindu mantra: “They have killed Bernardo, they have killed Bernardo, they have killed Bernardo” and right away she cried and rubbed her eyes with a very wrinkled handkerchief. I never imagined that she, always so precise and bossy, would now resemble my grandmother, my father's Mom, who is really a star in the yelling, crying and yelling again department, after any bad news. If we noticed Mom had changed because of the Vargas thing, feeling depressed, now she had changed again, behaving as if she were hopeless because of the murder.

It was murder, and while I tell what I have been able to find out, the perpetrator or perpetrators are still unknown. I found out what had happened thanks to Agustín. We continued going to the gym every afternoon, now Mom taking me to the front door and Agustín's Mom doing the same with him. Then, they would take turns so that one of them would wait at a small café until we came out to take us home. “It is like being in a war,” Agustín told me and I asked him while laughing: “When in the fuck have you been in in a war?” “Never, but I am sick and tired of seeing them on television.” Just to brag, I assured him that I would soon see a real war when I got to Jerusalem. “You and your fascination with becoming a rabbi. What you should do is come with us to Weston. Mom

says there are more than enough Jews and synagogues there, so you, my friend, would feel right at home.”

While we were in our respective treadmills, I asked him what he knew about the murder. “I know everything,” he confirmed, gloating and squinting his little eyes. “Don’t forget that my father blurts out anything without caring that “the children” are listening. Not like your mommy and daddy who lock themselves up in their room to whisper to each other.” “Well, c’mon, let it out, and stop bragging to me or I’ll throw you to the floor and put you in a hold that will bring tears to your eyes,” “Oh yeah! Do it!” he answered laughing.” Sometimes I think it’s true. It seems that he likes when I hit him, twist him, that I get on top of him, grab him with both his arms behind his back. He likes it. I don’t know why.

“Tell me first and then I will give you the pleasure,” and this is what he told me. María Teresa and Bernardo (let’s stop that bullshit of calling them “uncles and aunts.” That was OK when we were kids and the “social nucleus” worked) arrived together from New York as they left together but at the airport, she insisted on going to her apartment to see how everything was while he set out to Caracas, he was disappointed because for the hundredth time she had repeated that she preferred to live alone, as always, and that later on they would see if they could live together. Something like that was what happened, because Agustín’s father did not get to find out what happened during that vacation.

So Bernardo arrived at his home, alone and lonesome and as usual he must have gotten shit-faced that night. Since he was more there than here, it is sure that, nearly at dawn, there were several knocks at his door. They must have knocked like crazy, because

a neighbor woke up when she heard the knocking. Obviously, he opened the door and that was his big mistake. About a half an hour later the neighbor heard him screaming, “Help, help!” and right away a gunshot was heard, and then another and another. The husband woke up and both neighbors went running up the stairs to Bernardo’s apartment. The door was open; the living room was in shambles with the two suitcases turned over and clothes everywhere. They looked in the kitchen, in the bedroom where it seemed that they had gone through everything, but where they actually found him was in the bathroom, bled to death inside the tub, totally naked except for his socks and shoes. The neighbor said that his face was full of terror, with bulging eyes and half his tongue out.

They called the police, but when they got there one hour later Bernardo had been dead and cold for a while. The neighbor knew about the trip to New York with María Teresa and they called her, they also called Juanca whom, of course, the neighbor also knew. They stayed until daybreak. The police took the body and the gun that had been used in the shooting, which, strangely enough, had been left on top of Bernardo’s stomach. It was later discovered that whoever fired, cleaned it, so as not to leave fingerprints. What did he, or they, take? It was not known if it was one or several people that committed the burglary. Supposedly money was taken because his wallet was empty, his checkbook and credit cards gone; gone was his gold chain that they must have torn from his neck because his nape showed the marks of a struggle, gone was the ring that he was wearing because one of his fingers had a mark; apparently some items of clothing and several bottles of liquor were also gone.

After they cremated him, Juanca took the box with the ashes and along with María Teresa, called Bernardo’s family in Italy and gave them the news. It seems that

they asked for the box to be sent. The next day, they, as well as Agustín's Mom and Dad, my parents, Arturo, and everybody showed up! Even the Colombian guy, the consultant, in daddy's factory went to the police to give a statement. None of them were able to give any information to help them discover who was the one or ones that committed the crime. The police assumed it was the local thugs, or perhaps a gang, or maybe just criminals that were going by the street when they saw him step out of the taxi with his two suitcases. But how did they know his floor and his apartment number?

Agustín concluded by telling me: "Do you know what bugs my Dad the most? The fact that not even the newspapers published anything. There was the announcement of the burial, even though it was not a burial, because Daddy paid for it, and two days later an obituary from the company where he worked. Nothing else. No more announcements. Nothing else was known. The police disappeared. And as Dad said: 'why shouldn't it disappear, if right away after Bernardo's crime, more crimes will take place? Even according to statistics, one every hour on weekends.' Now you know everything I know. Should we shower? With all this story telling I don't feel like lifting weights."

The strong stream from the cold shower gave me goose bumps. I put my head back and I closed my eyes. Nice! When I opened them to start using soap, Agustín as usual was looking at me. He always does that: he starts using soap and doesn't stop looking at me. I pretend I don't notice. It's been a while since I stopped asking him why he does it. He always answered: "Is it illegal?" or "Where should I look to the floor or to the ceiling?" and when he wanted to make me mad: "You see, you are the first circumcised man that I have seen in my life." To tell me this at the Hebraica bathroom

was too much. “Stop fucking around” and he, always smiling, would whisper: “Take it easy my little rabbi, take it easy.” I don’t care about his circumcision spiel. At least I don’t have to pull on my prepuce, like he does with his squid. That’s what it looks like: a squid, or a turkey’s crest.

I don’t want any misunderstandings. Agustín has nothing against Jews. Sometimes I even thought that it wouldn’t bother him to be like one of us. At any given moment he asks me why we do such and such thing and we don’t do another. I tell him that it’s a way of life, a clear and defined behavior. That’s what I tell myself over and over. I don’t deny that sometimes I have doubts but it’s because of them that I want to study for a while in a yeshiva. I want to determine what my religion is about, why that book called the Torah is more than a book of prayers, a book of conduct. Or like Maimonides wrote in his “The Guide for the Perplexed,” which Dad started reading when the Vargas thing happened: “Reason and faith reveal all things.” During those days when Hebraica became a center to store food and other things to distribute among the victims, a friend gave him a piece of paper where he had noted the eight ways to be charitable, that the wise man enumerates. Dad liked so much what he read, that he bought the book, precisely at the San Bernardino bookstore with a similar name to Bernardo’s. I don’t know if he finished reading it, but I asked him to lend it to me, and read it all; it never occurred to me, however, to become a rabbi. It is an invention of others, a product of hearing me express my curiosity about my religion, and I have that curiosity because, at times, I wonder: Will I be one of the last Jews? There are already so few of us. An issue of “New Israelite World,” the weekly magazine of our community, published a while back the statistics for the Latin-American Jewish demography in eighteen countries,

which totaled less than half a million people. Here in Venezuela there are only twenty two thousand of us and in El Salvador there are just one hundred twenty Jews. Could it be that we will disappear from the Earth so that in the future we will be referred to as one more of those extinct civilizations? Will they remember us as they do monkeys, Egyptians, Greece or Rome?

I don't think I'm interested in becoming a rabbi. I don't know what I'll become either. I am like Agustín in that respect. He and I and so many others are in the same boat. What is the origin of our indecision? What has made us so laid-back? The country, our families, schools? Nothing seems to really, really matter to us. Not the Vargas thing, nor the episode with poor Bernardo. The only thing that matters is to leave. The only thing that we don't admit to, is our cowardice. I have told Agustín all of this, not once, but over and over because I truly consider him to be one of my best friends, perhaps, my best. He seems to listen but he doesn't answer. He doesn't say anything. He looks and looks at me, that he does. Why does look at me so fucking much!

I am not stupid at all. I am aware of everything. I humor him, as I do with my parents, my teachers, my fellow coreligionists. An ugly word to name the fellow members from my own religion. I know where I stand. I show confidence because I feel it. I don't speak more than I should and when I do, as my Mom says, I pass judgment. For example, what is it that I like best? Learning how to get knowledge. And learning about science, above all things. I also like to compete. Test myself. Be the first at everything. If I suspect that I will be one of the last ones, I will not participate. And, what do I like the least? The clothing factory that my father inherited from my grandfather and that they suppose I will also want to inherit. I wouldn't live that routine for anything in the world. I

would like even less to work in one of those transnational companies where you are a number that must always be promoted. And even less, less do I like all that social life of birthdays and bar-mitzvahs, of weddings and little rice dishes where what you do is eat and dance; plus I don't know how to dance. Everyone wants to find someone to stay with for life. That's what happened to Mom and Dad. I realized that a while back.

I suspect, let's remind ourselves that I live by suspicions, that it did not work as they had imagined between them. They have survived thanks to Ruth and me. Instead of paying attention to themselves, they are paying attention to us. Instead of being a couple, they are two caretakers, two supervisors, two partners making efforts to have the business working. The business is their two children. They care and protect us so much that they have now come up with the idea of going to Israel for a few months with the excuse of getting to know my yeshiva. I bet it's fear of staying here, of remaining here, with the danger that this city offers but also with the danger that when we grow up, when we are "grown up", as it is called, the two of them will end up all alone realizing what they had been during their whole marriage: two strangers.

Don't flatter me by calling me mature for my age. Anyone who's eighteen like me thinks the same way. That may be why adults complain that they don't understand us. What is there to understand? We want to live our lives, put them together, and design them. I know what I will do. As far as Agustín, I have my doubts. First, he has to confront himself. Accept what he is and believe in what he can be. That's what I would like to tell him one of these afternoons, before his trip to Weston. I don't know if I will dare. What I dare hope is that they choose me for the graduation speech at school. If it's determined by grades, I have no problem. I doubt there are any better than mine. If it is

because of extracurricular activities, I have more than enough. I would like to stand there, in front of all those people and repeat many of the things I have been thinking. I'd like to say: "I am leaving, but I'll come back. This is my country. The Israel stuff is just a spiritual necessity."

Not true. It's more than that. I don't feel capable of establishing a love relationship with anyone, you see?. Of any sex. It's as if it would scare me to imagine that I am going to go to bed with someone. Agustín is right when he asks me jokingly: "And in Israel are you going to be wearing the little cap on your head all the time? What is it called?" It's called *yarmulke* and it's my shield.

HE WAS

the fellow (or was it that other fellow? or some other fellow?) who got me into this mess of the murder of that guy Bernardo Salvatore, a guy I never met. How do you like that? Imagine that I found out what happened three days after it happened, in the afternoon, when after getting back from the office it occurred to me to call again his ex, Juan Carlos Gómez, above all, because I hadn't seen him or spoken to him for days. It was also odd that he hadn't contacted me all that time. As everyone knows, we are tenants in the same building where his university colleague Manuel Martínez also lives, a fucker who doesn't even say good morning if you run into him in the elevator. His only expression is something like a smirk that doesn't even come close to a smile, but that's another story. I mention him, because seeing that Juan Carlos didn't respond, it occurred to me to call him, but, without letting me finish asking him what he knew about the guy, he spewed it out (excuse the expression, but that's how it was, he spoke as if spewing): "But, what world do you live in? How is it that you don't know that some criminals killed your friend Bernardo? Poor Juanca is going out of his mind" and he hung up.

Since then, I've been out of my mind or half out of my mind, because not even a half an hour had gone by after the darling Professor gave the news, when they called from the lobby to tell that me that two police officers wanted to see me. They came up, I opened the door, they informed me of the murder and how they had investigated all Bernardo's "close friends" at the "Precinct" and they also wanted to interview me. I assured them that I had never met him, and that I had just learned about his death about half an hour before when my neighbor, Professor Martínez, had told me. "In any case, we would like you to come with us. We'll take you and bring you back. It'll be a short time.

Oh! Don't forget your passport and your work contract, because you are Colombian, aren't you?"

Extremely Colombian, synonym in this blessed country of drug addict, terrorist, smuggler, and feel free to add as many shady businesses as you can think of. Surprisingly, however, the chief of police who took care of me was very kind. I would say, as people from Bogotá would remark, utterly polite. He repeated about three times that the interrogation was mere routine, that they knew that I did not know the "deceased" -that's what he called him- but that I knew his close friend Juan Carlos González, and he asked me if I had ever heard him complain or express any resentment towards the one they had found as a "corpse that had an orifice in the occipital bone." I answered that I was sure that Juan Carlos was unable to hurt a fly. "Apparently you are right," he told me, "Do you know that all the people interviewed have used the same adjective to describe the poor Professor: 'generous'?" We became quiet, he lowering his eyes to his papers, and I waiting as if I were "maintaining that minute of silence," that is usually observed to honor the dead.

He stood up and so did I. He shook my hand, saying: "By the way: I congratulate you. Mr. And Mrs. Waimber speak very highly of you. They say you are a great manager. I wish you a lot of success in this, your country. We shouldn't forget that we are Bolivarian brothers. Thanks for coming, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't go abroad these next few days. Until we find the murderers." Seated in the back seat of the patrol car, with the two policemen in the front, I remember what centuries ago my father repeated at the dining room table: "One must learn to live above and below the

circumstances.” Refrain from leaving the country, and remain with the Waimbers; things that had already occurred to me.

When I got out of the car in front of the building, the doorman consoled me by telling me that he had already been taken to the police the day after the murder, but that they realized that he hadn't known what he called the “Italian” either. And he added ruining the night that I wanted to spend alone: “Professor Gómez is at his apartment. He asked about you and I told him everything. He asked me to call him as soon as you got back.” “Don't do it,” I said, “I'll do it as soon as I go up and take a bath.”

Now is the time to summarize what that first encounter with Juan Carlos turned out to be, that seemed, according to his version, the beginning of a possible close relationship. You understand? Well nothing at all. So much nothing that many days later after that first night when I gave him a foot massage, I ran into him at the gym, coming out from getting another massage from the professional masseur. “You were right. It is very good and it relaxes you.” Here my dissecting of his personality starts (I use a veterinary term). He's a friendly guy, intelligent, I don't know if he's a good poet because I don't know about those things either and when he gave me his book, *Amphibians*, I started reading that very night after he left and I didn't understand shit. In the beginning we saw each other two or three times per week, always here at my apartment always having some whiskeys and eating any cold stuff, salmon with salad, that he would bring from some delicatessen. We would talk about general crap, politics, the weather or the little birds that he continued feeding in the afternoons and I would always explode, complaining to him to stop being chicken, to stop being afraid, to sit his little ass down to write like a good bastard. He smiled and his smile would cut off the

scolding, because then I would fear that he was misunderstanding me. I feared that my efforts would seem to him like a declaration of wanting to share not only his frustration of not being able to write anything, but all his life.

He told me something one night and from then on we started to distance ourselves. Do you know what he told me? Or better yet the story he told me? Let me see if I can transcribe his way of talking. It's a shame that even if I could transcribe his tone, you couldn't hear it: "Guess what occurred to me this afternoon while I scattered the bird seed for your hated little birds. It occurred to me that I was living with you the same way as I lived with Bernardo. At least, at night, when we see each other. He would get home from the office; I had set dinner, always something light so as not to get fat and to sleep well, he would pour us the first drink, like you do, and the next ones were up to me, as I do every time I visit you. Each one of us commented on his day, we gossiped about our friends, including the Waimbers, the whiskies incited his aggressiveness, as they do to you, and then began the rosary of criticism, scolding, complaints, many, many more that you bring to me. Because of repeating that game day after day, Bernardo, whose creative spark was an object of admiration for all of those who knew him, thought of calling us Ping and Pong, like the game. He was Ping and I was Pong. We lived together for twenty five years and it terrifies me to feel that I am repeating that routine with you."

"No chance. Don't get all worked up," was all that I answered, devouring him with my eyes and he understood. It was true. If, however, since those times that I saw him lying on the deck chair by the swimming pool, like a tormented soul, I realized his nature, it never occurred to me to share it. I am not bragging of being macho and like a good son of Medellín, I had those kinds of experiences as an adolescent and even,

suddenly, in a fit of craziness, a short while back before coming to Caracas, I got involved with an adolescent boy and that was one of the main reasons that I accepted the Waimbers' contract. Years before that, I got married and got divorced. From that mess, I was left with two children as adolescent as that little queen who wanted to make my life a living hell, and since then, from time to time, I have relapsed with ladies when I couldn't stop the urge. Just from time to time.

I didn't come to Venezuela to get involved with anyone. I came to make some good money in dollars and breathe a different air. I came without knowing much of anything. For example, I didn't know anything about Vargas and after four months here, I haven't even gone down to check it out. I work like a dog from Monday to Friday and Saturdays and Sundays I like to sleep, go out with a friend, usually a fellow Colombian, to a good restaurant not very far from where I live, watch TV, what else? Have my drinks and as I said before from time to time... but I learned my lesson a while back: "Hi, how are you? This and that..." We spend time together and let each one go on their merry way.

I think I mentioned Vargas lightly, and I beg your pardon. How could I be so insensitive if, from the time I arrived I keep hearing everyone still talking about it? Definitely. Vargas drove them crazy. It's understandable. That it wasn't terrorists like in my country but nature that brought on that disaster is hard to understand. If Juan Carlos hasn't been able to write even one line of his incomprehensible poems because of the disaster, the Waimbers were pulverized by it. Especially the Mrs., a blonde who must have been spectacular and still preserves that curious charm that betrays all unsatisfied women; I mean a way of looking as if yearning to find other possibilities. At the factory it

is rumored that what preserves her are her infidelities she has made that stupid ass Moisés suffer. The official version however, is that during the Vargas incident she worked incessantly to get to participate in the town's recovery, but they paid her no attention whatsoever. She only received recognition by a federation of Jewish women that awarded a prize to the project she had presented.

I take back the term "stupid ass" that I awarded to Moisés. He's a good guy, and as soon as I arrived to take care of the restructuring of production in the factory, he had the courtesy to invite me to dinner at his house. I spent a nice evening with him, with that Rebeca, who, as they would say in my country, knows how to be a good hostess, and their two children, a fat little girl who said almost nothing and the male, a know-it-all who wanted to know and speak out on "the climate of violence that reigns in your country." I remember that it was exactly what he asked me and I limited myself to telling him that not even we knew how it all started or was going to end. "The same as Israel. Because it's unknown, and because I don't know it either, I want to spend some time in a Jewish school in Jerusalem when I graduate from high school." The kid is a trip.

He is such a trip that his wish will become true because he is not the only one leaving, but also are his parents and his sister, "for a while" as Moisés told me, asking me to extend my stay at the factory and offering me a really attractive raise. When I told him to give me time to think about it, on top of the raise, he proposed that I could move into his house that would be kept up by their two housekeepers, taking care of me as if I were a family member. That way, he added, I would save on apartment expenses. No way. When I didn't accept his hospitality, he assured me that they would not be absent for too long: "enough to see if Aarón gets used to it and for my wife to recover from everything

that has happened to her.” Your highness understood: they left because of the fear that something could happen to them here, especially after the way in which they killed his friend Bernardo.

Fear was not what I saw in Juan Carlos’ face when I opened the door for him that night. It was panic; not just a little fear. It was panic what covered his face and his whole body and made him move with difficulty as if he were an android. He sat down he sighed, more than a sigh, it was as if he were exhaling all the air he had inside. I was about to sit in front of him when he asked me to prepare him a whisky. I brought one very strong, like mine. I didn’t dare clink my glass against his, but I sat down and waited. I thought he was going to start crying because he didn’t raise his eyes, his gaze fixed on the floor. He was sipping his whiskey a little at a time, as if it were medicine he disliked. And, here again, I try to transcribe everything he told me. I didn’t open my mouth until he closed his.

“I’m very sorry Luis Ángel! No the other thing. The other thing has been the strongest blow that life has given me. I am very sorry that I got you involved in all of this. I mean, that our friendship should have been the reason that the police took you in for a statement, you who have nothing to do with anything. It wasn’t me who mentioned you. I don’t know who, but I suspect it could have been Manuel. He’s the only one who knew that you and I were seeing each other. I can’t imagine why he mentioned you. It might have been to make it known that he never saw him, while he knew that I was seeing you. I beg your forgiveness.”

Of course I assured him that the police business had not upset me, nor did the warning not to leave, because I didn't have plans to go anywhere since the Waimbers were leaving and I had accepted to remain in the factory until their return. I think he wasn't paying attention to what I was saying, as if once the procedure of asking for forgiveness was done, he had gone back to being as lost in himself as when he arrived. It was a natural thing for me to ask him if any clues were found regarding the one or ones that had committed the crime. It seems they had left enough fingerprints while they searched suitcases and things, he told me, but none of them belonged to criminals already in the police system. He added that they were looking for two Italians, brothers of the owner of the corner butcher shop, because strangely enough their business remained closed the whole day after the crime. The youngest, very good looking, by the way, was said to have visited Bernardo, after Juan Carlos moved out. The lady who was the building caretaker and the neighbors had already reported seeing him going up several afternoons and then coming back down again after a while, always using the stairs, as if he didn't want to be seen. Since they did not find any record of them going to the airport, the police suspected that on the very early morning of the crime they could have escaped to Colombia. My poor country always was an immediate asylum.

To complicate Juan Carlos' life even further, one of Bernardo's brothers was to arrive from Italy the next day in order to have his will read and decide on what to do with the apartment and the ashes. "Maybe he has left everything to you," I mentioned, "or at least the apartment." He burst out laughing and stated: "Brother kills pawn! Like in chess. According to my lawyer, if what you say is true, there will be litigation. And he added that nothing awakens more the eagerness of relatives than the death of a family member.

Their world opens up. He had warned me.” I offered him another whisky that he rejected; he apologized again because his friendship got me involved in all of this, and already standing, about to leave, sighing he kissed my cheek and whispered: “What will be really good for me now is a massage.” I lead him to the door and I also whispered: “Go to the gym tomorrow, first thing in the morning. The masseur is there from seven on.”

I was thinking of letting the rest of the week go by, and maybe even the next week, without calling him. So that destiny or he himself would decide his life, but the events, all of them favorable, urged him to keep me informed of each one of them. The brother came, the will was read: Bernardo left his family everything he had in his bank accounts and the apartment to Juan Carlos; they were all in agreement. The brother took the money and the ashes, plus the police statement that petitioned the Colombian, as well as the Italian, authorities, the extradition of the two butchers, main suspects of the crime. It would be a matter of a short time to find them and turn them in. When I asked Juan Carlos if he would move to his former home, he answered me that he preferred to sell it and continue being my neighbor for now.

That “for now” intrigued me but since the Waimbers had gone to Israel, I didn’t have much time to think about anything but the factory, now under my sole responsibility, including the eighty daily calls from Moisés’ Mom, a kind of nice old lady but with nothing to do, who I imagined feared that the family business would go under or that I would appropriate it at midnight. I was doing the work of two people, even if my collaborators insisted that my workload did not increase because, suffice it to remember, Moisés never worked himself to death in the factory.

I was taking care of those things when Juan Carlos turned up again, by telephone. He wanted to inform me of the good news; the university had given him a scholarship to do a dissertation about the work of a Venezuelan poet at the University of Salamanca. I misunderstood, thinking it was about his own work and he laughed and reminded me: “My work is not so extensive that someone can do a dissertation about it. It’s about Ramos Sucre. You don’t even know him. He committed suicide in Switzerland ages ago.” I hoped that he wouldn’t think of doing the same in the cold winter of that university town. Of course, I didn’t tell him anything about that, but I wished him good luck and that if he could find some time before leaving, to call me to have a drink on his success. “No success yet, Luis Ángel. You also don’t know that a doctoral thesis can take years to complete.” I answered that I didn’t care about that, and I recommended that he take as the motto of his new life the one used by a radio station in Bogotá that I had appropriated to define mine. “What’s the motto?” “A station for the vast minority.”

I'M MATERNAL

and I really love you, my dear son, and I know you are surprised by this e-mail written all by myself, in my own computer that cost me \$1,990, (do you know how much that is in shekels?) after more than half an hour haggling over the price with one of our kind who was recommended to me because he gives lower prices to people belonging to our community. I paid that amount, but also got him to include free classes given by his daughter, three times a week for two weeks from six to eight p.m., after she would finish at her father's store. And as you can see: I'm in control, not of the daughter but of the machine that runs at a higher speed than my thoughts. I haven't even decided what I want to write, when the computer is already showing it on the screen. I also bought a laser printer, that cost me twice as much as the computer, but I did it for you, to have your e-mails on paper and sit, smack in the middle of my loneliness and smack in the middle of the rocking chair, facing the terrace where the whole square called Plaza Altamira can be seen, to reread your lines and imagine that you are here, sitting across from me in the easy-chair that belonged to your father, may he rest in peace, holding on to one of my hands while listening to my old lady's tales.

I prefer to call myself "old lady" and am very proud of it, and not consider myself in that ridiculous way invented by the Mayor of Chacao, my Mayor, by calling us the "extended youth." What cynicism and hypocrisy! May he be struck dead! If not him, since perhaps he wasn't the one who came up with the idea, but some stupid advisor -they are now called consultants- who tricked him into announcing, as if it were the Last Judgment, that from now on all of us old people are "the extended youth." If anyone doubted the fact that we were considered as such by City Hall, they distribute

fliers offering classes for physical exercises at this very Plaza Altamira, in front of my apartment, I'm not sure which mornings during the week. When by chance I see them, right away I pull down the blinds and turn on the TV, always CNN that gives the news every hour on the hour, and the only thing that interests me from them is what they may say about Israel. I shudder with every bomb and each gunshot.

I don't shudder when I respond to the lady who is building caretaker that I am not interested in doing exercises in the middle of the square, and I'm even less interested in flower arrangement classes, pastry baking, parlor games (what are those?) and many, many more "courses" (that's what she calls them "courses"), all "free of charge" she says as if licking her lips. Each day she seems more and more like one of those street cats licking their faces, and I am convinced that she is a paid spy for City Hall. That is precisely why I am always very kind to her and I bring her either kosher doughnuts or kosher bread from the supermarket, all those baked goods that are now sold and authorized by a rabbi (amazing what rabbis are willing to do!). By the way, Mr. Jaramillo, very nice man, sends me Tomás to take me wherever I want to go and bring me back. Where am I going to go, an old lady all alone? To the supermarket once a week. I prefer to do the grocery shopping than send Digna to the corner grocery store. One never knows what arrangements can be made between her and that Portuguese guy. Digna treats me very well. She comes in very early three times a week and she doesn't leave until four in the afternoon, leaving me cooked food, clean and ironed clothes, everything in order. She always asks about you, wondering if you had called, how you are doing, and I answer her: that now with the Internet invention, you hardly call me, I

mean, never call me, but once a week you write me to the factory's address and Mr. Jaramillo sends Tomás with your message.

Mr. Jaramillo is one of a kind. Well, I also have a lot to do with that because I treat him like a *mensch*, lord of lords. It's time to tell you that I invited him last Friday for the Sabbath dinner, something that I never do because, why should I make it if I don't have anyone to come and eat it? I thought of inviting him because he's always saying over and over: "You already know, Mrs Waimber, anything you need, tell me." I feel like screaming to him: I need people! I'm fed up with the three old farts I get together with now and then to play canasta. Mr. Jaramillo sends me Tomás, who picks me up at around two thirty and comes to get me at seven. Four hours playing canasta with those cockatoos is the best proof of my irreparable loneliness. Yes, I know they have been my friends my whole life. Yes, I know that we have a lot of things in common, besides being Jewish. Yes, I know that they love me; otherwise, they wouldn't insist on inviting me each week, but you can't imagine how depressing it is to walk into the *Beit Avot*, the nursing home, and see all those old people looking at the floor or the ceiling, not even answering to my enthusiastic "Good afternoon!" I pick up the pace towards the table where the *young girls* are sitting and between hands dealt I have to put up with their recriminations that I would be better off living there than at my Cadore apartment, that I'll come running to live with them the day that they rob me and beat me up. They know the whole story of that friend of yours, what was his name? Bernardino... Bernardo... whatever his name is, I never met him you see, as I have never met any of your friends. I was just introduced to him, and I don't remember when or where, the two Spaniards, mothers of friends of yours, I think at Aarón's bar mitzvah. They call me from time to time and invite me to visit them,

but I told them a thousand times that I hardly go out, that I am all right with my loneliness and my memories. As you can imagine I am not going to tell those two *goyim* that I play canasta with my lifelong friends, twice a week at *Beit Avot* (if those poor things would hear me they would be livid with anger and shame). Well, they are aware of everything regarding the murder, of how the police concluded that two other Italians killed him, that they can't find them, and they have put the wife of the older one and their two male children in jail to force the two brothers to turn themselves in. Do you know how they know? Because at *Beit Avot*, they organize different "events", that's what they call them, to entertain the residents. I think the Mayor found out about those events and copied the idea from *Beit Avot* to organize his, but stupidly making the announcement that they were for "the extended youth." Over there no one calls them by that name. They prefer to refer to them all as part of the "golden age." More stupidity.

So, one of those events taking place is an art history course given by a University professor. They love this man because they find him very funny and full of gossip. When they told me his name was Manuel Martínez, I very proudly, stated: "What a coincidence! I know him. He's a friend of Moisés, my son." They insisted that then I had to attend one of his classes because they were fabulous, and that they would speak with the Director so that she wouldn't charge me for the complete course because it was half way through already. "And what is half of art history?" I asked them and they looked at each other without knowing what to answer until one of them stuttered: "Well, half means, my dear, that he will then give us the other half. Truly, I must confess that I almost fell asleep half way through, the class I mean, not the course."

I remember Martínez as someone who does not stop talking and with, what seemed, effeminate mannerisms isn't that right? Let me know when you answer my email if he's the one I'm thinking of. I never make a mistake. It seems that he splatters his classes with gossip, not just about the murder of the poor Italian guy, your friend, but even about the intimacies of the President of the Republic. Can you imagine? And that he tells them "everything." I didn't ask what "everything" was because since I was losing the hand, I preferred to concentrate on my game to recoup. You know that I always win. At least I have the satisfaction of bragging in front of good old Tomás that I won again. With his smile of a big-lipped black man he tells me: "You're are pretty sharp, Mrs. Yayú."

When writing my name down for you, or my surname, or as everyone calls me since your father, may he be blessed in Heaven, thought of calling me when we were boyfriend and girlfriend in Poland, I just remembered that I didn't tell you about the Sabbath dinner with Mr. Jaramillo, whom I now address informally and call Luis Ángel; he also addresses me informally and calls me Yayú. So it happened that we became friendly with each other: of course I had asked Digna to stay over that night, and that rascal reminded me that night time was considered overtime. No problem. She behaved very well, just like I have showed her to entertain people, cook and serve the table. Mr. Jaramillo came with a bouquet of huge red roses, Colombian, of course. I offered him a whisky which he accepted. Digna brought the bottle, ice and water because he takes it as I do, as Doctor Katz prescribed. Being a gentleman, like a good Colombian, he offered to serve the drinks, and when he asked me how I wanted my whisky, I told him just a pinch with a lot of water. Then, seeing me with my unlit cigarette in my hand, he approached

me with his lighter, and rejecting it, told him how the forbidding and cruel Katz had warned me that if I continued smoking my two daily packs, I could die at any given moment. So I quit smoking, I told him, more than a year ago, thirteen months and twenty one days to be exact, but I decided to keep one in my hand, although unlit, by force of habit or nostalgia or an old lady's quirk. He smiled. He has a nice smile.

Let's talk about the name issue now: "Don't call me Mr. Jaramillo, please. Call me Luis Ángel. I'm almost the same age as Moisés and if my mother were alive, I think she would be your age." When I asked him what she had died of, he pointed with tensed lips to the cigarette that I had in my hand. Putting it on an ashtray, I told him that he could also call me Yayú "what everyone calls me." He repeated my name aloud, as if savoring it, and when I told him the story of your father and that my real name, the one in my passport, was Eduvigis, he couldn't believe it, because truly, it doesn't sound Jewish. I have no idea why my parents decided to give me that name, I suspect, really we have all suspected, that it was in case I run into difficulties I could pass as a Catholic or whatever." I did not want to tell him everything about my country, Poland, because as we all know, we pretend to have forgotten it although it occupies my thoughts every day, but I did ask him if by chance he knew who the Viennese-American film director Billy Wilder was. Of course he knew and remembered his delicious comedy *Some Like It Hot*. Then I told him what your father use to tell over and over, God bless him! that when Wilder found out there were people who doubted the existence of the Holocaust, he would ask: "If the concentration camps and the gas chambers were all imagined, tell me please, where is my mother?"

The menu prepared by *your* mother my prince? Everything that you love: chicken liver pat , gefilte fish with horse radish, chicken consomm  with matzo balls, roast chicken with potatoes and carrots, beet salad and the usual Friday desserts, apples and pears in syrup and honey cake. Of course I miss you and your father, who is in heaven, and members of your family, especially my only two and dear grandchildren, whose pictures so moved that kind man Luis  ngel. By the way, he had a thousand compliments about Aar n’s intelligence. I didn’t tell you, nor did I tell him, I told no one in fact, what my dear grandchild whispered when we said goodbye. He whispered in my ear as if kissing me: “Take care grandma. There are so few of us left...”

Of course there are so few of us left, and I have fewer than anyone, without seeing you, my only family, you who filled the hours of my day and the days of my week. I know what you will answer me: that you will come back soon, that the trip is for Aar n’s benefit and to humor his insistence of studying in a yeshiva, but aren’t there like two or three or maybe more *yeshivot* here in Caracas? I am certain that there are although I have never set foot in one of them, not because I am not very religious, in fact I’m not very religious at all, in case anyone is checking, but because I suppose that they don’t accept women. Our wise men proclaim that we are the queens of the home, the center of the family unity, but... Oh, my love! One has to be a woman to be able to know the horrors of being a woman: periods with their monthly blood, giving birth with its pains, breastfeeding with that monster or creature (you weren’t one, my love) sucking on your nipples until you scream in pain, menopause when you think you got rid of the monthly horror and osteoporosis appears with pain in your bones and the fear of falling, breaking your bones and ending up in a wheelchair like poor lady Mandelbaum from *Beit Avot*.

How horrible and how disgusting it is to be a woman! Before I forget give my regards to yours.

I forget many things and many people. Things like having to go down to the bank to take out money. Even people like the very lady at the bank who takes care of me. I detest her because she scolds me. Do you know what she told me the last time I went there? That I should sit down to practice my signature many times, writing it over and over, because I have been changing it so much that according to her it already looks like scribble and perhaps in the near future, they may not accept a check signed by me, suspecting that it may be counterfeit. I stared at her and I just asked her: “What’s up with you?” I counted to ten in silence as Efraim suggested to scare people, and then I threatened to close my account at her bank and I also informed her, because I am sure that she had never heard it, that General Gómez signed with an *X*. An *X* was enough. One day when someone complained that it was not a signature he answered: “You do it.” The guy did it differently, of course, and Gómez pointing at the *X* the man had made, concluded: “That is the counterfeit one.” Do you remember that story? Of course you remember. Your father, the only man I had in my life, used to tell it all the time and he would laugh before the people that were listening to it, did. Do you know that not a single day goes by that I don’t think about Efraim many times? It’s as if he continued living inside of me as well as in this apartment that we shared for so many years. Even I confess to you, because you are my son, that I talk to him. Aloud. Digna sometimes hears me and starts her litany of advice: ‘Madam, madam, stop talking to yourself because if someone hears you they may think you are cuckoo,’ or “How are you going to tell me that you are talking to Mr. Efraim? The dead should be left alone.” I don’t pay her any attention.

Digna doesn't understand. You do understand, right my son? I recommend you talk to your father when you feel like it, because he will answer. He will answer silently.

Before you get alarmed by the length of this letter (I will continue to call them "letters" and not "e-mails" because after all they are letters), let me clarify that I've been writing it for three days, from time to time. I'm telling in case you agree with Digna that she's right in calling me crazy. Imagine how much the phone call to tell you all these things about my daily life would have cost. I see your surprised face, your happy face, when you realize that I haven't fallen behind the times, that I'm not a senile old lady, that I joined the Internet and that they will never get me out. I confess that I don't have a lot of people to write to. All the ones who were around me, except you, my beautiful family, have died.

Speaking of tragedies, please don't tell Rebeca that as far as Vargas is concerned, it is just like two years ago, just like that. They haven't done anything. They showed a program on television that showed everything just like during the tragedy. The only thing missing was the fast-moving water coming down the hill to show it was happening right at that moment. The people that lost everything, lost hope and are still scattered throughout the country. It would have been better if the sea swallowed everything up. I repeat "everything" and "everything" and "everything" because they haven't done anything. I even think that many people have forgotten what happened. I believe that by the reaction of the lady who takes care of the building, whom I ran into yesterday morning when I was going to the hair salon, do you know what she said? "Oh, Mrs. Yayú! Did you by any chance see the program last night where they were showing the Vargas tragedy? How long are they going to depress us with documentaries about that

disaster?” I couldn’t believe her indifference. I half looked at her, and without speaking, went on my way. The reason for the hair salon is because Luis Ángel called me to invite me to the movies on Saturday afternoon. Of course I accepted, “but not one of those horror things,” I warned him. Maybe I sounded just like the lady who takes care of the building.

I don’t even know what I am writing anymore, it’s almost eleven p.m. I’ll finish and lie down to watch television. I’ll take the pill that Katz prescribed and I will fall asleep. Or better yet, I’ll have a whisky. Katz told me I could have two at night. I’ll have them and I’ll leave the pill for tomorrow. Every time when I get up, I thank God for giving me one more day. You take good care; all of you take good care. I miss you all so much! Come back soon. Remember that I don’t have time to spare. All that I have to spare are my blessings.

THEY'RE FELLOWS

who we found in Carmen de Uria, just like that, as if they had been two little lap dogs, lost from their owners, with sad eyes and their tails between their legs. The person who reported where they were, was a young man, son of a Portuguese guy, who is the owner of nearby grocery store called Las Quince Letras (The Fifteen Letters) and he did it in person at the Precinct named Comisaría La Guaria, accompanied by a very elegant lady that the young man said was his godmother. Let's go step by step, or the record of this event will become, as it had happened to many others, the perfect plot for a soap opera script.

Let's start with the location where the arrest took place, and let's admit right away that we messed up, supposing that they had escaped to Colombia or Italy. We thought they were professional killers when they were mere amateurs; not even, because they had never before committed any wrongdoings. We also supposed that they had killed the guy with the gun found in his apartment and that they got scared by the dead body. The shock drove them to hide, and they didn't think of anything better to do, than to run to the dilapidated house of a compatriot named Enzo in the upper part of the Carmen de Uria area, a coastal neighborhood that grew at the foot of a mountain crossed by a river called Uria. At the beginning of the seventies, during the presidency of Rómulo Betancourt, unscrupulous builders built on top of the river making it the main street of the town and to save their asses, gave it the name Alberto Carnevali, one of the heroes of the Democratic Party resistance during the Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. In fact, they covered their asses pretty well, because they gave the streets prominent names such as Andrés

Eloy Blanco and Ruiz Pineda⁷² (just to name two of them) to the few streets they designed.

It seems that those plots of land, let's say they belonged to the township, were little by little allocated by a certain Mrs. Carmen, a hard core member of the Democratic Party, and that's where the name of the neighborhood came from. Most of the settlers built their houses themselves, many of them Catalan, Galician and Italian. In the beginning they would use them on weekends or during their children's vacations, but after a while many, already old, ended up living there permanently. Then the '99 disaster happened: the river ran downhill from the mountain and devastated the whole area. According to statistics, 98% of the 750 properties were destroyed. However, even without having power, transportation or water, and nothing but long-legged birds, buried cars and the smell of dead bodies, a few people insisted on remaining and trying to rebuild whatever possible in the two banks of the river that since then flows easily downstream. One of those people is Enzo, the friend of our two main characters.

They are brothers: Mario, aged fifty something, (Sofía's husband and the father of Mario, Jr. and of Adriano, whom we arrested right after the murder to speed up the capture) and Rodolfo, a thirty something whose name fits him well because he behaves as if he were the double of the famous Valentino. At least that is what the female officers called him, one of them adding: "Darn! He thinks he's God's gift to women." For many

⁷² Andrés Eloy (Cumaná, Sucre State, Venezuela, 6 August 1897 - Mexico City, Mexico, 21 May 1955) was a Venezuelan poet, politician, and member of the *Generación del 28*, as well as one of the founders of Acción Democrática (AD). He fought against the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez who was a dictator in power during the years 1952-1958 and responsible for dissolving several political parties among them the Democratic Party: Acción Democrática. Ruiz Pineda Leonardo Ruiz Pineda, (September 28, 1916, Rubio, Táchira, - October 21, 1952, Caracas) was a Venezuelan lawyer and politician, and one of the founders of Acción Democrática (AD) He also fought against the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

years Mario has worked at his butcher shop: “Like a donkey from sunrise to sundown, from *sole* to *sole*,” that’s what he said. “Rodolfo helps me from time to time but not all the time. He appears and disappears and since he is the only brother, *fratello*, that I have here the other ones remained *nel paese, che cosa puoi fare?* That is, remained in the country, what else can one do?” Bernardo Salvatore was their client, also for many years, “since he was one of ours I always treated him with respect and affection, getting his orders by telephone, selecting the best cuts and sending them with the delivery boy, or at times, when the bastard didn’t show up, Rodolfo would do me the favor.”

Both brothers stated that they had always noticed “Signor Salvatore’s *weakness*, but with respect, without being disrespectful”. They knew him for so many years that they also knew “by sight not by interaction” Juan Carlos Gómez and they knew he was a university professor. As Roldolfo summarized for us, without taking out the match stick that he always used to bite on between his teeth, blackened by nicotine, “They were a couple, that much I you could tell, I imagine a happy one; I am one of those that believes that each should do what they want with their thing.” His belief was so firm that little by little, during the interrogations, came out his availability to please “guys like Bernardo, but of course, very discreetly, to take into account the friendship. The “account” was the amount he proposed and the limits he would demand.

According to him, with Salvatore, nothing ever happened until “his friend moved out. I used to see him sad, almost sick and since I like to bring joy to people, when I took the meat to him, now half of what he used to order before, I would kid with him, I would tell him that he was going to ruin us if his orders kept getting lower, that he had to eat more and he wouldn’t even look at me. He already had the check ready for the amount

that Mario had told him on the phone and he would give it to me at the door. Even if I told him that I could take the package to the kitchen, he would grab it, if anything he would say ‘thanks’ and would close the door right away. At that time, I started to think that he didn’t want me to see the replacement of the other, get it? That he already had someone else there and he didn’t want me to know. Why? Who knows?

Mario insists that he didn’t know any of that and even less that he knew of the dealings of his brother “with gentlemen, *signores*.” According to him “Rodolfo has always been free, *libera*, like the *donna* of *La Traviata* do you know it? The opera character? *Non voglio dire che Rodolfo sia così, ma mio fratello è liberissimo. È strano*” that is, *I’m not saying that Rodolfo is like that, but my brother is extremely free*. It’s odd. When he was getting nervous, when wringing his hands, when sweat came up on his forehead, he would speak Italian, and right away, he started to sob and repeat: “*Io non ho fatto niente, io non ho fatto niente,*” meaning *I did nothing, I did nothing*. That was the time to take a moment, offer him a glass of water and suggest that he could use the bathroom. He would get up from the chair, stooped, the head bent toward his chest and dragging his feet he followed the officer who would take him to the bathroom and then he would leave him alone, to calm down, in the empty office next door. It was obvious that the poor guy never would have thought of shooting, and even less, killing Salvatore.

Not so obvious was Rodolfo’s supposed innocence. He even maintained his leading-man manners and never said a word in Italian. On the contrary, what was noticeable was his effort to seem just like another criollo, using expressions from television comedians. He wanted to make it clear that he did not consider himself Italian, as the teenagers would say “no way José”. That’s what he said when he started talking

about his getting closer to Salvatore. At the end of an afternoon was the first time that he invited him to come in since he was delivering the meat package; he also invited him to have a drink. “Whisky, the good stuff; twelve years old. They sat facing each other in the living room and since Rodolfo, according to what he said, did not think of “things to tell him,” he remained looking at the Ávila already covered in mist. He noticed that Salvatore would look at him as if inspecting him from top to bottom and he preferred “not to open my mouth, because the client is the one in charge of the game. He deals the cards and one realizes which way the game will go.” It wasn’t necessary to deal any cards. Salvatore got up from his armchair, got close to him and with one of his hands squeezed his fly. Do I need to get into the details inspector?”

From then on, Rodolfo went back to visit him without bringing any meat packages. “Things were clear. I would call before; he would answer: ‘Come’ or ‘Not today, tomorrow.’ I would get there, he would pour me a whisky, I realized that he had already had a few, he would seat me in the same armchair as the first time, facing the Ávila and I would open up my pants myself. He would kneel down and... Why go on? Then I would go to the bathroom, I would wash myself and when I got back to the living room he had already poured me the second whisky. Sometimes we talked, or he talked, commenting on the colors of the mountain, the heat of the last few days, who knows? Never anything personal like asking me where I lived or where I worked or what I did when I didn’t come to get that done by him. Nothing. When I would place my empty glass on the small table next to my armchair... sorry for laughing, it’s that it’s funny to me that I would call it ‘my armchair’ as if it were mine; he would stand, he would take the bills out of a pants pocket; I would stand, he would put the bills in my pocket, he

would go to the door, I followed behind him, and when he opened the door he would say: 'Call' and I would go down the stairs, to avoid finding someone in the elevator. The End."

Not "The End" at all. The last scene is yet to come. It so happened, that one of those afternoons Salvatore commented to him that he was going to go on vacation to New York. He had invited a woman friend to accompany him. Rodolfo, "just to fool around, trying to be funny," proposed that he be invited also, since he had never gone further than La Guaira. "With my spoiled boy voice" he assured him, that he was prepared to please them both, although "one by one; no acrobatics." Salvatore laughing told him that perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea and in successive dates they talked about New York again, he telling Rodolfo at great length everything about the wonders that the "capital of the world" offered. He talked to him about the theaters that they would see, the restaurants where they would eat, of the enormous department stores where they would buy everything they wanted, but he never specified that he would accompany him. Rodolfo, however, to incite him to do it, turned more affectionate, he would undress and lie in bed affably and allowed himself to be handled and licked as much as Salvatore wanted. "My doctor visits," as he called his previous dates, "turned into long encounters between lovers, all for the hope of the trip."

There was a trip, but without Rodolfo aboard. Even worse, without telling him anything. He realized it when he noticed that Salvatore was not answering the phone. No one answered, until he decided to go to the apartment one morning. He rang the bell once, timidly, and to his surprise the door was opened by an "older black woman" who informed him that the Mr. Salvatore was on a trip and when he asked when he was

returning, she answered: “Friday” and without another word, she slammed the door in his face. “*Vendetta, vendetta!*” Rodolfo said to himself over and over, his ancestors coming out at that moment.

He had bragged so much in front of Mario that Mister Salvatore had invited him with a woman friend to New York, “as a bodyguard, understand? Like to take care of them, just in case...” that upon returning to the butcher shop, he shared his rage with his brother and he convinced him to accompany him that Friday to demand an explanation from that “son of a bitch. Nobody mocks me and whoever mocks me, mocks you. Fucking fag!” The warning and requests of Mario to leave things “as they were” were of no use, and when he saw increasing his “*follia, veramente un’ enorme follia ha presso,*” that is *his madness, really a terrible madness had possessed him*, he decided to accompany him to avoid that he would assault the traitor or “*tradittore,*” as Rodolfo was calling him, yelling non-stop, while on the phone finding out from the airlines at what time the flights from New York got in on Fridays. They remained inside the closed butcher shop until almost midnight, drinking two bottles of Chianti that Rodolfo had brought, stating to the scared brother, “Before vengeance, comes celebration. Cheers!”

From eleven on, Rodolfo started calling Salvatore’s number every few minutes. He would hang up and say: “Not yet.” About twelve thirty, his smile warned Mario that Salvatore had answered. He slammed down the phone without saying a word and he told his brother: “Let’s go.” In front of the building, they saw the lights on in several apartments. Rodolfo calculated their number and rang several of them. Someone opened the entrance door and they quickly went up the stairs to Salvatore’s apartment. Rodolfo rang the bell once, softly. The second time stronger and the third time he left his finger

pressed on until the door opened and there he was, Salvatore, gun on hand, eyes and mouth wide open, truly scared. “What’s up?” said Rodolfo pushing him aside with a blow of his hand and coming in as if he were in his own home. “*Siamo amici*”, *let’s be friends*, was the only thing that Mario managed to say following his brother who was walking around the living room going around the two suitcases that were in the middle. He put an arm on Salvatore’s shoulders as if hugging him and told him: “Drinking alone? That’s not right. That’s what friends are for. Welcome! Congratulations!” Salvatore smiled, hugged Rodolfo, shook Mario’s hand and didn’t stop talking, asking for forgiveness for his behavior, insisting that because of the hour he was scared, and he didn’t know why. The two brothers had already realized “his reason why.” He was obviously drunk.

He went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of whisky, glasses, ice and water. “Help yourselves, help yourselves, and feel right at home.” Rodolfo took it upon himself to pour the three drinks, he distributed them and with his, went to sit on “my armchair,” almost immediately stating: “How cool! I never imagined that at night from here you can’t see the Ávila. Your dear mountain, Mister Salvatore. Didn’t you miss it in New York?” and getting up, he went to where his host was sitting; he got so close that it seemed as if was going to kiss him, and forehead against forehead, nose against nose, he asked him mockingly: “You didn’t miss anything, not even me?” And he spat right on his face. Salvatore put a hand through his face and as if begging him told him: “I got you something. Some other day I’ll tell you what happened.” He kneeled in front of one of the suitcases, he opened it, and between the clothes he took out a white T-shirt with the known logo of the city: the letter I, followed by a red heart and the letters NY. He offered it to Rodolfo, who squeezing it between his two big hands as if it were a wet cloth, leaned

over and put it around Salvatore's neck, squeezing it as if to choke him. Mario yelled two or three times "No!" and he fell to the sofa. Rodolfo let go of Salvatore, went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water that he threw in his brother's face. Mario opened his eyes he half got up and yelled: "*Qué hai fatto, cretino? Ma sei matto?*" meaning *what have you done, you idiot? Are you crazy?* Salvatore taking advantage that Rodolfo had his back to him facing his brother, got up. Grabbed the gun that was on the table and pointing the gun at them said: "You get out, or I don't know what could happen."

Up to this point the brothers', memories are precise. Now the contradictions begin, although both swear that neither one touched the gun and even less, shot it. They struggled with Salvatore, trying to take it out of his hand, but he pulled the trigger and the shot rang out that made him stagger and then two more that laid him out on the floor. Neither one of them knew how to explain why they decided to take off his clothes and even less, why they laid him down in the bathtub. Both insist that they didn't grab "any of his jewelry" or robbed him of his money, or took anything. Quickly they cleaned the gun of prints and they placed it on top of his stomach. Why? "Because it was his," answered Rodolfo cynically, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. Even more quickly, they ran down the stairs, scared to death, "scared to death, inspector, more scared to death than death itself," confirmed the leading man without losing his smile. All they could come up with, was to hide in Enzo's house. Since it was already the early hours on Saturday, they could allege that they had gone to spend the weekend with their victimized compatriot.

“Porca miseria!” meaning *Holy shit!*, Mario said he yelled when he got there and realized that he couldn’t call his house because in Carmen de Uria there was no telephone and neither Enzo nor his neighbors had a cell phone. That Saturday morning, however, he offered to go to a grocery store close to that sector called Las Quince Letras because they knew that the owner, a Portuguese friend, had one. What none of the three imagined was that, when Enzo got to the grocery store and asked the son of the Portuguese man to borrow the cell phone to call Caracas, the one who answered was one of Mario’s children who didn’t seem to understand what Enzo was yelling in Italian. So, in Spanish, Enzo repeated that his father and his uncle were with him because “they had a situation, a small problem, but no worry; nothing serious. They are fine and they will return at the beginning of the week for sure. Your father says to open the butcher shop on Monday, as usual, and that your Mom can make the cuts, that she knows how to do them.”

As soon as Enzo left and Ferreira, the owner, arrived, his son José ask permission to take to Mrs. María Teresa a box of cereal, one liter of milk and as his father said: “Some other crap. I told him again what I had already told him a thousand times, that he should stop with all that visiting, the lady was making those small orders just to see him, that he should remember that the sale of the store was already a fact, and that on the one hand, the buyer, another Portuguese, would give me the money and on the other he would pay for the tickets for all of us to fly to Madeira. With everything that happened, we don’t want to go on living here and the business, believe me, is not enough to live on. Do you know why he was telling you this inspector? Because his mother and his little sister and I knew very well that when it came time to go, he would say that he would prefer to stay.

All of that because of that ‘friend’ as he proudly calls her, has put in his head that he should study, that at twenty-two he has his whole life ahead of him, she even took him to register at an institute to learn to be a personnel manager! What she wants to be is his manager; you know what I mean. Nobody can get that out of our heads, but... as he says himself, he is of legal age, ‘I’m a man, Dad, a grown man.’ So... what can we do?”

As soon as he surprised María Teresa, telling her the call Enzo made, the two of them, José at the wheel, “as it should be,” went to the entrance to Carmen de Uria. María Teresa remained in the car because it was impossible to drive it up that dirt road and José ran uphill avoiding the big rocks that took him off course. He came right back and he described the two visitors: “one fat and chubby, I couldn’t see his face because he had it against the wall, lying on a cot; the other one, tall, skinny, with a toothpick in his mouth, was drinking and smoking with Enzo. By the way, where did that bastard buy what looked like wine? He asked me to borrow my cell, he used it without paying me a cent, and he didn’t even buy me food or wine.” “Those are the ones,” María Teresa said adding: “Let’s go to La Guaira now to report them to the precinct.”

In less than an hour, so those that complain about our incompetence can see, the officers brought in the three of them, including Enzo, not to La Guaira but directly here to Caracas, where they are and will continue to be until we clear up the disappearance of the money, the jewelry and whatever else. We still have to question the couple who were his neighbors and were the first ones to get in the apartment and, of course, the police inspector and his two subordinates who arrived one hour later. Anyway, no one will be free until everything clears up. Well, the wife and Mario’s two children are free since we

have already let them go. At least, they can open the butcher shop that for sure will be filled with curious neighbors, dying to find out.

To find out what? The stuff about the robbery, the stuff about their fight among them, the stuff about the supposed non-intentional suicide, the stuff about Salvatore's private life that I bet will be the juiciest part of the gossip. Meanwhile, we decided to cancel the order forbidding their friends to leave, the majority of them, as we have corroborated, run to get out of the country, off like gunshot, like bullets, like the three bullets that killed or with which poor Salvatore killed himself. "I haven't left, Inspector Brito, and I have no intention of leaving," announced categorically Mrs. María Teresa Sánchez when she came into my office before sitting down in the chair that I offered her. She's quite a woman. She insisted on looking me in the eyes and she wouldn't take her eyes off mine.

"Why did you call me back in? The last time I told you everything that I knew. Do you suspect that I'm hiding something?" I assured her that her innocence was evident and she burst into laughter: "I'm everything except innocent!" She reminded me of some Mexican actress from the forties. She reminded me of her because more than speaking, she seemed to be playing a role. That's what she was: a woman so sure of herself that she could, simultaneously, comply with the questioning and flirt openly with me. Of course, I felt flattered. With that group of people who fill my days, sitting across from me, one after the other, who moan, squeeze their handkerchiefs, deny, and deny, and deny. Finally I get someone that wants to look me in the face, check my body, as if she was the authority and I the interrogated! Definitely, I urgently need to take a break or a vacation away from this office.

Let's go back to what she said about Salvatore, and let's leave my digressions for some other time. "He did not commit suicide, Inspector Britto," she insisted stressing my last name, "I was his friend, perhaps his best friend, I know it. His death was an accident, for sure as a result of the drinks. Why did he get drunk as a skunk? That is another story. Do you want to hear it or would you rather keep asking me?" What I would have preferred at that instant was to invite her to get out of here, to go to her apartment across the sea and to sit to watch the arrival of wave after wave. I don't know where I got the courage to propose it to her and even less where her natural answer came from when she said: "Inspector Brito, you have my telephone number and address and you can come when you please. Calling beforehand, of course. If what you are thinking is that by questioning me in private you will be able to get out what you suppose I am hiding, you have solved your problem and have your solution. So I will await your call, Good afternoon." She got up and left. I was left with my mouth wide open, with the growing desire, and, what did I do? Well, I burst out laughing.

THEY'RE LADIES

who bolted out of town to the earthly paradise of what they supposed was to be Mecca (extremely appropriate name because of what happened afterward), but found themselves in a bureaucratic mess that stopped them on their tracks. It wasn't as easy as pie or, better yet, as popping a cork from a champagne bottle and bang! start the classes of the brand new kindergarten at the end of August, following the usual calendar of the Florida schools. The hot ladies who so enchanted Principal Martínez, assuring her that they already had the site and more than enough money to buy "immediately" as one of them bragged (the blonde who detested me on sight), furniture, equipment, adding "we have planned everything, everything, Principal," they didn't even know they had to obtain God knows how many permits to be able to operate in the area they had selected. Or if they planned it, I imagined that with the usual Venezuelan insolence, they were prepared to grease the palms of all the government employees to obtain them. They fell on their behinds, not to use a more vulgar synonym (on their assess) that never should be pronounced by any kindergartner professional.

I know what you will be thinking about me: typical Rita, always roaring with her sarcasm and cynicism, to hide her resentment for not being one of the chosen to embark on the great adventure. They didn't want me and I didn't need it at all. I am happy to be here, as a member of the institution as well as in this Caracas, a city going crazy by a confusion that, day-by-day resembles more and more a labyrinth. It's difficult for us to get our bearings and more difficult to find the exit. That's why, five hours per day, from Monday to Friday when I guide my kids through the essential uneven territory of learning to relate to their kin, those five hours per day tire me, but also distract me because I forget

all that stuff out there. Besides, who has my good luck of listening all day long to comments and vociferations of those who are never tired of discovering everything they have around them?

I am so happy to be with them that it has never occurred to me to conceive, one or more, of my own. In that respect I am the perfect kindergartner professional, an old maid who gets paid to be “the other mommy.” My “maternal” responsibilities are restricted to teaching them how to live with others. I get them at seven thirty, bathed, dressed, hair combed, having eaten breakfast already when they come into the room, running to throw themselves into my arms and fill both my cheeks with saliva. Tell me, what other job starts with such an abundance of love? A generosity that I stop right away, ordering them to sit on the carpet to start the reading and writing exercises; then games to learn numbers and addition and subtraction tables; later, songs and poems by other people or invented by the children themselves. Anything goes! It’s impossible to list what happens until 1:00 p.m. when they leave, because the dominant factor is the vitality and energy that they shoot out (and I use that verb because it’s the most precise one) as if every child were a machine gun that never stops. They leave me again with my face full of saliva and running, which is their favorite way of moving forward, they disappear until the next morning. It is then, when, in the empty classroom, before confronting my colleagues, I prefer to sit down alone to breathe. I swear: I just sit down calmly to recover my breath.

I come out and the comments from this one and the other one start. I come back to real life. The most talked about subject nowadays is Weston. In all those weeks, Principal Gutiérrez, has gone and come back three times already, leaving Aura and Teresa there to deal with the investors and the authorities. Poor Gutiérrez! Or better yet poor Sara! That

way my lamentation sounds more personal. She has been my boss for 11 years, since the school opened and in all that time I have never called her by her first name, I have always maintained the distance that she continues to maintain with all of us. She is kind, cordial at times, but she goes no further. We suppose that the formality in her treatment comes from wanting at all costs to hide her private life. We know that for ages she has lived with her cousin, a woman who is an engineer, of a very masculine look with a hoarse voice and monosyllabic speech. Of course, they do not give out any impressions. Very correct, very sanctimonious, regulars at the eleven o'clock Sunday mass, and not just any church, but to the Catholic chapel of the Universidad Católica, where the holy father Padre Baquedano celebrates mass. The *holy* part I am not sure of because I don't even know him, but he must have something when Ms. Gutiérrez assures that "He is comfortably seated at the right hand of God the Father" (sic). The cousin I may have seen two or three times in all that time, never at school but at colleagues' weddings we had been invited to. They went to the church and didn't go to the receptions. When greeting me, Ms. Gutiérrez passes a hand affectionately along my shoulders, while the cousin whose name I don't even know, shakes my hand with a strong shake. Whatever rocks their boat.

We guess what they are, but it doesn't bother us to know it. Besides, Principal Gutiérrez is so proper, so honest, and always so strong-minded that we all respect her and obey her orders gladly. The result of that behavior has been that none of us wants to leave the school, while the young women, who intern here every year, when they are close to graduation, apply all their physical attributes so that she will hire them. "We have all the

personnel we need, but if I need someone, be certain that I will remember you,” she tells them when she gives them the boot.

She applies the same rigor to the representatives of the children, always showing that for them it is a privilege to have their children in a school that has the best reputation in the city. Even nowadays, with the recession and the migration of so many couples, we maintain a waiting list where, as is common knowledge, is better to sign up as soon as the mother gets pregnant. And when mentioning mothers, my admiration for the principal has no limits because of the strict resolution with which she treats most of them, women of good standing, married to high-level executives who never show up at the school, letting the women come to meetings with parents and representatives or to ask about their children’s performance. The appearance and behavior of that flock is one of the reasons, I think, for the disaster that this country has become.

The best way to describe them is by remembering the song of a Broadway musical that a friend of Aura’s, very nice, called María Teresa Sánchez, translated for us over the record she was playing. It was one evening when Aura invited me to celebrate her birthday. There, by the way, I met her circle of intimate friends, a group that seemed extremely peculiar because they seemed to compete among themselves, throwing each other ironic comments and improper remarks. Funny that I should say that, famous for what my Mom calls my “bad attitude” which can give you an idea of how much effort she dedicates to demonstrate her affection. Well, they aren’t the ones I was going to refer to (I can do that later), but the lyrics of a song called “Ladies who Lunch” that I remember because that’s the way the moms of our school are: women who are dedicated to perfecting their beauty and their sexuality, to looking like colts that will become race

champions. They spend their time in boutiques, hair salons, and gyms, always with fingernails and toenails painted in scarlet red. They accessorize with very assorted jewelry that they alternate: earrings, necklaces, broaches, rings, bracelets, and a few of them, have a thin bracelet on each ankle, just above the huge platforms shoes where they place those naked feet with their phosphorescent toenails.

Don't misunderstand me. I am far from being like that cousin, the woman who is an engineer, but honestly I should admit, as people used to say, that nature did not favor me and therefore I have avoided all adornment that would make me look grotesque. I have always been fat, too fat, and I have always been on a diet, without any hopeful results. I am so flabby that from time to time I get fat lumps on my body. The first time I noticed them: one on the left side of the neck and another one on the right thigh, I went running (like my students) to the dermatologist, who laughingly said that they weren't malignant and he prescribed a daily pill; I don't remember the name, which would make them disappear. Mom, always being so typically from San Fernando de Apure where she was born, was raised and believed in all kinds of hocus-pocus (I love that word, I have the kids repeating it, just to hear it in unison), decided to sell my two lumps of fat to the moon (just as I say it: SELL THEM!) when it was full and during those four days, each night we would go to the terrace while she pressed her fingers against each lump, doing the sign of the cross, she would repeat three times: "Moon, I sell you this rubber. You found her with rubber: without rubber you shall leave her. God, her and moon without any rubber soon." Sacred remedy. The two balls of rubber disappeared. After a while it seemed that they wanted to reappear, we repeated the incantation and they were history.

It's obvious that I live with Mom, the two of us alone in the apartment where Dad also lived, may God keep him in his glory, and my two brothers who got married, between the two of them they have given my mother three grandchildren and three nephews to me. The day that she dies, I won't know what to do. She does everything to such extremes, because she considers me useless, her favorite thing is to say the opposite of what I say. "It's your personality, my love," she tells me over and over, "With that personality you drive men away." I've had a few of those that are not scared of fat women. With none did it get to be anything serious. I have slept with all of them, but I confess my lack of skill, my annoyance and my discomfort. There's a lot of sweating. As soon as the thing is over, the only thing that I feel like doing and I do, is jump out of bed and stand under a cold shower for a long time.

The last one who came up to me and soon disappeared was a Chilean high school teacher in some nuns' school. Trina brought him to the party at our school, and he, very well behaved, like he couldn't hurt a fly, asked for and wrote down my phone number on a napkin. He called and we saw each other, (I'm not going to bore you again by repeating the stuff from the previous paragraph) without any drama or altercations we stopped seeing each other. Why? Is there anything sadder than a Chilean? With his manner of speaking as if singing, with their fascination of speaking with diminutives, with their Andean sadness, of course not as bad as with the Bolivian (I had one from there) who have the most monumental sadness that can be imagined. Don't give me that crap about the Latin American prehistoric richness. You can have it! Like I let Trina and Aura have their utopian Westonzuela.

It's not that I don't want to go with them. Having been already once in Disneyworld with Mom and the three descendants from our family, I knew that there I would find the comfort and security of a country that is organized and not a continuous mess. I would imagine Mom's happiness, walking more than a postman through those malls and supermarkets. Also, I thought that would be an opportunity to get breast reduction, the hugest part of my greasy body. When I undo my brassiere, they fall almost to my belly button as if they were two elephantine twins. They weigh so much that it gives me a constant backache, and the doctor has already told me that it was urgent to get their weight down. I have lived with them, however, because I'm unable to get enough for the cost of the operation and partly, why not admit it, because I seem to be the only one who detests those two exotic hanging fruits. There are men who like them; at least the ones that have been with me. It must be because of them that they call me *mamacita* to mean *sexy*. Even one or two of my children have commented that to hug me is like throwing oneself on a soft mattress. Oh well! I will get the operation here next year, if the year comes. How could we not doubt it in view of the hecatomb of the New York twin towers last September 11th that, by the way, has also been one of the reasons to postpone the opening of the kindergarten in Wetzuela? Here we would never think of calling that town by that name in front of Principal Gutiérrez. She defends their strict laws regarding the maintenance of houses and gardens, she supports the rules that regulate the behavior of teenagers and cites as an example the problems that Aura's son has gotten himself into with the police. It seems that he even spent one night at the precinct when they found him about 2:00 a.m. drinking and smoking with some hoodlums from a neighboring town. They left the other teens in the middle of the road, but Agustín was placed in a cell and

was not let go until the next morning when Aura went and signed some papers and she swore that her son would never do such a misdeed again. “That young man is crazy. It’s not unusual. Like father, like son.” With such a statement, none of us brought up the subject again.

The subject that we all brought up over and over again, was the fear we felt because of the twin towers, which had caused several cancellations at the kindergarten. Surprisingly, some seem ready to come back, preferring our difficult life to a collective extermination in that oasis called Weston. “It is like a plague” commented Doctora Benítez, another one of the psychologists, (she likes and insists on being called “Doctora”) in one of those weekly meetings where reports regarding the development of classes are presented. And she clarified: “The fear they feel is like a plague that spreads and extends itself. We must be alert, Principal, because as a result of this, the beautiful project can be ruined.” Ominous words.

One Monday, Principal Gutiérrez returned to Weston and the following Monday she was back already, with a face as if she had been present at the fall of the two Manhattan towers. She called a meeting with all personnel that very afternoon and with a gloomy voice informed us “the size of the project” had been reduced, that our school had freed itself of all responsibilities with it; that of course, such decision had meant a “considerable” economic loss, but that it was better to take it on, than to damage our good name (neither I nor anyone understood this) and she finished informing us that Trina had decided to come back while Aura preferred to remain “with the new authorities.” She looked at all of us and when each one opened our mouths as if to ask or make a comment,

she shut them saying: “No more talk of this. And least of all to outsiders.” She stood up, took her purse and went out towards the parking lot.

You can imagine all the confused yelling that followed, so much so that those students remaining behind in the so-called “Fun Evenings”, until six, when their parents came to pick them up, got all excited, laughing and yelling thinking that we were celebrating the birthday of one of the teachers. Doctora Benítez, like a good trooper that she thinks she is, got hold of the reins of the mess sending the children to their classrooms and asking us to sit down “just for an instant; I am not going to give you a speech” and to raise our hands if we wanted to say something. It was all so instantaneous and surprising that even though we did sit down, no one raised their hand. What we did was look at each other, as if waiting for an announcement. After her “just for an instant” Benítez just said: Do you see? We don’t know what to say. We have to digest this sad news. Tomorrow will be another day. Let’s go home, like every day.”

May the Doctora forgive me because even though I don’t know hardly anything about psychology, I think that she should had stimulated us to continue efficiently with our jobs, as any sports coach would have done. By the way, because when it rains it pours, that very night, throughout my neighborhood, and it is said through all Caracas, there was another gathering with banging on pots, which has become the most spontaneous way to protest the current government, I don’t need to describe the syncopated noise that is produced by banging all those pots with a large spoon, nor the incessant monotony of the noise. It reminded me of the music, if you can call that “music,” that aerobics teachers use in the gym. A long time ago I registered for one of those, close to my home, because I wanted you know what, and got out after a month,

shouting out as my kids do because such stridence as well as the high volume of those repetitive tunes (I don't think they even make to the category of tunes) was deafening, I also left because I discovered that I lack the basic coordination to follow the movements. They seemed to be designed for trained animals to learn. I decided to remain fat, as I was and as I am, exercising only the arms when I accompany mom banging on the pots. She loves to bang and bang. To please her, I join her in her efforts and also to avoid listening to her political opinions: "Girl, we have to protest. We are as much citizens as the rest of the country. We have the right to protest for what we like." Etcetera, etcetera.

What I told my colleagues the next evening, bragging as a know-it-all, was that we were waiting for Trina's return, she would surely tell us what happened and why she decided to return. It's not that she is a chatterbox, so to say, but, little by little we will pull out the details of the fiasco. I myself am interested in knowing why Aura decided to stay. I hope it wasn't because of the police problem she had with her son. I suppose that her husband remains here, a guy who when one sees him, seems to be checking you out. I remember that he took a quick look at me and never paid attention again. Good for me! I understand that, with all his macho ways, he is not a bad guy. I don't know who told me that he behaved very well when the murder of the Italian friend took place. By the way, it is said that they let go of the two butchers already because the ones who stole from the suicide victim (it seems it was an accident) were the policemen as soon as they arrived at the apartment. My mom is right to insist on banging the pots. Aura may be right to remain there, to avoid the risk of her son continuing his escapades here.

Poor Aura, poor Ms. Gutiérrez, poor dead Italian guy, poor Aura's friend, María Teresa, who lives in mourning for her best friend, poor all of us who don't know what's

going to happen to us and who live day by day thanking God for each new day! That's why mom gets anxious and with reason, always adding that some "curse" had come down on us since the Vargas tragedy. Two years after that tragedy already, nothing has been revived, and on the contrary, new rains have made the rivers overflow again. All this I can forget the five days of the week when I am with my children, playful and innocent who have no idea what time means, nor the weight of the past. They make a racket today and tomorrow, enjoying the magic of the illusions. In that they resemble the television program from channel 8 that mom and I watch without fail every Saturday night. Each week they show an opera, without commercials, act after act. Everything is fake: the wigs, the beards, the plucked eyebrows, the jewelry, the costumes as heavy as carnival floats, we cannot explain how they can move in them, the houses, the flowers, the applause that seems to never end, after each aria, or duet, or quartet. Everything is fake, but thanks to the music and the legitimate performances of the famous singers, everything becomes reality. Everything seems real and will continue to be real, forever and ever. It will never disappear.

IT IS

a common belief people have about all of us who live in New York; thinking we sit each night at the Met to enjoy an opera, and then we sit again around a table in one of those extravagant restaurants where unimaginable flavors are mixed -it is a lie, a misconception. They're part of so many other lies that make up the scintillating character of our city. The daily reality is as conventional and demanding as that of any other metropolis in the planet. That belief that just by stepping on the streets of Manhattan, anyone gets to breathe faster and that the black and white movie that has been his life, becomes another one in color with stereophonic sound may be true for people passing by. When someone lives here permanently, believe me, the movie is closer to a shade of gray.

All this was affirmed by Arturo López, of whose life you know quite a few things, even his decision to move here to "start a new life." That's how he defined it in the email he sent me, asking me if there were still chances for him to become part of the staff at the United Nations Secretariat, where I have been working for the last 25 years. I told him that I would start the paperwork and keep him informed, but his urgency to start that life he called new was so urgent for him, that he decided to come in advance. He told me over the phone and called me again two or three times so I could find him a place to stay while he was getting organized. I started telling my wife each step of his move and, since our two daughters are at their universities and only return home during vacations, it was Joan who urged me to invite him to stay with us the first two weeks, while he found a place to

move into. I think her hospitality was the result of my comment about the anxiety that I felt in Arturo's voice when he would call me, probably as a result of his divorce and the economic crisis that his country is going through. Whether we have or not whatever we had, the hope of starting "a new life" must resemble, I think, the enjoyment of receiving all the oxygen from one of those huge tanks in the hospital. What he, we, or anyone, never imagined is that his "new life" would be so brief.

But, who is this person starting to tell the misfortune that happened to my friend? My name is Edwin Suvanto and everywhere I go, I get everyone's attention because of my height, six feet, four inches, because of my hair that was blonde and light and is now almost all white as my beard and moustache. I look like a Viking, I have always been told, and I imagine that I am because my parents were natives of Stavanger, a Norwegian town, and they migrated here to Truro, another town in Massachusetts, both filled with snow in the winter and with a mild climate in the summer. I was born and grew up there; I even studied Economics at the State University. Then I went to Columbia to get my Master's and I managed to get admitted into the International House, as part of the allotted number of students from the United States. There, Arturo and I met and there we let go of our provincialisms when we lived together with students from all over the world. That residence, as well as the city, became an exorcism for both of us.

It was the sixties, with their crazy hippies, their beatnik poets, their free love, their flower children and a whole population that was openly brimming over with their desire to try everything. Those were the times to become fond of Asian religions, smoke marihuana and keep incense and aromatic candles lit everywhere. If I were pressed to summarize in just one memory all those days: smells everywhere are my evocation.

Within that rapture (I sound like a poet), Arturo and I were awakened. An anecdote will suffice: at the International House almost all students occupied individual rooms. Small of course, but each one converted his or her room into a small home. My neighbor was from India and contrary to the rules that forbade cooking to avoid any fires (besides, we had a cafeteria that was open all night), got himself a hot plate from where each night came the smell of curry and God knows how many other spices from Indian gastronomy. The hallway became impregnated with that mixture of smells and almost all who occupied the adjacent rooms, reported the Indian guy to the Administration. The tiny olive-colored man, head down, always with a pot in his hand, flip-flopping away, half naked, from his room to the bathroom and from the bathroom to his room, just repeated: “Excuse, excuse me,” pretending to speak little English. He would stop cooking for two or three nights and then he went back to his business. Now forty some years later, as I am telling, I smell it as if he were next to me.

With smells everywhere, what we liked most was making love with any female student who showed she was willing. We would make love, but did not mention the word “love” and even less swore to feel love for the one who, without any worries, upon entering into our room would take off her clothes, would take our clothes off, and carried out the task readily although without any emotion. There were exceptions in that libertine behavior and Arturo was one of them. According to what the girls say, because of the “Latin lover” deal. It was I who introduced him to Shahira, one noon at the cafeteria. His face became illuminated as someone who had seen a spirit and he almost didn’t talk. That was the hook by which he hooked the Egyptian girl. A few days later, I realized that they had not separated from each other since they met. I even remember that the serpent of the

Nile did not call him “Arturo” but “Bendigo,” why that nickname? I never knew. I suppose it was one more quirk that is caused by love.

Because of that love, they moved to a small apartment at 113th Street, but the three of us continued to see each other often until Shahira had to go back to her country. Arturo continued fooling around as much as he wanted, until, once he graduated, he went back to Venezuela. At that time we wrote each other frequently, air mail, of course, and I remember that with his wedding invitation he included a message pleading with me to attend so that “the predicament wouldn’t be as hard.” I thought that it was another one of his jokes, perhaps because I was crazy in love with Joan, begging and imploring her that we get married. We did and I also sent him my card, but neither did I go to his wedding nor did he come to mine. Like every postgraduate, we were too immersed in our work, perhaps to prove that we felt capable of conquering the world.

Arturo seemed to be well on his way, because working on his own he managed to build up a good client portfolio. Proof of that was that he travelled continuously to Europe and to cities in our country. He came to New York several times a year and he always found time to meet and eat at one of those extravagant restaurants, taking care of the check that he would charge to his business account. I, who was hired to work for the United Nations Secretariat as soon as I received my diploma from Columbia, did not have such privileges. I had good salary, let’s say, as I have up to now, and combining my salary with Joan’s who works at the management office of the New York Philharmonic, getting tickets for groups and institutions, we were able, we have been able to, give our two girls a good education in good schools which have resulted in being awarded

scholarships at the universities where they now study. So we had a calm, peaceful life, like any other middle-class professional couple.

When I would meet Arturo or he would come to eat at home, he would say over and over that he envied us. On one occasion, glass in hand, he even toasted for what he called “this oasis” and Joan, representing her typical Jewish New Yorker humor, clarified: “Oh my love! This is no oasis at all, no water or vegetation. Just bills to pay.” He insisted that he saw us very connected to each other, that he admired how our different religions did not create friction, that to raise those two girls who kissed him and hugged him when he arrived with presents for each one was a blessing. When she heard him, Joan turned into the Yiddish mamma, stroking his hair with one hand and assuring him that for us, he was like a brother. In one of those trips he brought Victoria, his wife. We couldn’t get to know her much because she hardly spoke English, but our oldest daughter who was studying Spanish at school at that time, exchanged a few sentences with her. That night when they left, Vicky stated: “Poor thing! One can tell that Arturo hardly loves her.”

Neither Joan nor I said anything because we were already aware of the fascination that he had for a Jewish architect there in Caracas. “You see you Jewish women are irresistible,” he commented to Joan, “must be because of the sin thing,” and she attacked him ferociously: “I have never felt like a sinner because of my living with Edwin. Of course it must be because he is my husband and not my lover.” The last time he came to New York was because of her. He told me he came to surprise her and she paid him no mind at all. Something like that, I don’t remember, but once in Caracas, he never mentioned her again in his emails. He just told us about the unpleasant incidents of his

separation and the resistance from Victoria against finalizing the divorce. That was the cause of his urgency to come.

He arrived and the next day we went to the personnel office of the Secretariat where not only did he impress all with his resume, but with his confidence. “He is charming,” one of the assistants commented and “he doesn’t look Latin.” It was then that I realized that he came without a moustache. When that night already in bed I mentioned it to Joan, she laughed and said: “It was the first thing that I saw in him or didn’t see in him when I opened the door. I suppose it is part of his new life.” Because of that rush to get his new life started, when he was informed by the Secretariat that they will consider his request and that he would be told the decision “in a timely manner” he went back home and when Joan and I returned at dinner time, he seemed happy because he had already called and set up an appointment with friends that were executives in Merrill Lynch for the next morning. “While the wheels of international bureaucracy turn, let me try the speed of private banking.” Indeed: he hit it on the nose. They offered him a position in a department in charge of Venezuelan clients and even though the base salary was not worthy of a first line banker, he would get a commission for successful transactions.

Next week, hardly four days after starting to work at the 102nd floor of one of the World Trade Center’s twin towers near Wall St., he moved to a furnished apartment on 17th Street, between Sixth and Seventh, that belonged to a photographer who was subletting it, in order to cancel her debts with the condominium. One of the bankers, the woman’s friend or lover, got it for him, warning him that the building was great except that the neighborhood was predominantly gay. “I don’t care. It’s perfect for me. You’ll

see.” And we saw it the first night of his move when he received us for an all-out dinner, as if he had been living at that ample space for a long time. A table with a yellow tablecloth, first-class white china, candelabra and flowers, white and red wine, menu bought at Balducci’s, the very expensive delicatessen a few blocks away from his place, and soft music as accompaniment to our voices that first were spontaneous exclamations filled with surprise, once we managed to close our mouths, open in admiration since we got in. “Congratulations my love. Here you will live like a maharajah!” said Joan hugging him, and I, to make him mad, warned him: “All that’s missing now is the harem.” “It’ll come,” he said laughing, “Not a harem, but a new woman.”

From that night on, we did not see him as much as the three of us would have wanted, but we talked on the phone very often. We had already decided to spend Thanksgiving at home, together with our two daughters and their two boyfriends: “You have never eaten a turkey the way Edwin makes it. You will lick your fingers, my love.” Apparently he was doing “well in all respects.” He liked his job that was growing each day, while already having the accustomed expense account. “Set the date and will have lunch in one of those lunch places that you call ‘extravagant’, because of being beyond your salary.” The Secretariat, however, sent him a notice stating that from next January on, there was going to be an open position at his disposal. “We’ll see. Let’s take it one step at a time. Don’t you think?” What he loved about Merrill Lynch is that he would start travelling to Caracas with certain regularity. He even knew that he was set to leave for his first visit to Caracas on the afternoon of Tuesday September 11th, with American Airlines, with a hotel stay paid, at the Tamanaco no less, a five-star hotel, until Sunday

the 16th. “I will spend the weekend with my folks. You can imagine that they are very excited with the return of the prodigal son.”

And what was going to happen, happened. At ten thirty a.m. of that 11th I was already crossing the city from the East River, where United Nations is, to our place on 78th and Broadway. They closed our offices and they told us to check the television to know when we should return. I crossed the whole of Central Park, packed with people walking aimlessly as scared, silent and downcast as I was. I wanted to get into Joan’s office in Lincoln Center, but everything was closed. Since I jumped from my desk when I heard the news, I had tried to phone her. But neither the office phones nor my cell phone had any service. The same happened to her, whom I found at the entrance to our building, as if waiting for me to appear. Not even at our wedding, not ever, did we hug and kiss as strongly as we did at that moment. It wasn’t a hug, we threw ourselves onto one another and we slobbered our faces with our tears.

At the apartment, almost right away, we received calls from our two daughters, from Joan’s mother who lives in Boca Raton; and from I don’t know how many family members and friends, all the ones that live outside Manhattan. We continued crying with them, saying over and over that, thank God, we were fine. I must confess that it was not until very late in the evening when we remembered Arturo, supposing, according to the news seen and repeated over and over on television, that his flight to Caracas had been cancelled. It was no use to insist on calling him, because, if at the beginning his number did not ring, then we heard him repeating his message in English every time we dialed: “Please, leave your message and I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

Almost at midnight, a man with an old man's voice called who said his name was Pedro Luis Hermoso. He was a friend of Arturo's parents and he had spent the whole day locked up in his 48th Street apartment, horrified because of what had happened, but waiting for Arturo's visit who had told him he would stop by to pick up some documents that Mr. Hermoso was going to send with him to a lawyer in Caracas. "You can imagine, Mr. Suvanto, in what state of anxiety I find myself, a 96-year old man, and not a day older, when Arturo did not show, someone who for me is like a nephew because I have been friends with his parents for years. Let's not talk about years anymore, but how can we know where he is and why he didn't show? Do you know how I found your number? I remembered that he mentioned you often as his university friend, I opened the phone book and there you are, by the way, the only Suvanto in the whole book. It was due to destiny, or God's will that I would open at the letter *S* and at first I thought your last name was with *ou*, Souvanto, but when I didn't find it I went all the way to *Su* and there you were. Pardon my talking so much, that I'm not letting you talk, but tell me for God's sake, where do you think Arturo is? At the airport even though all flights have been cancelled? Is he stuck in a waiting room at the airport?" I tried to calm him down and I promised him, that first thing in the morning, I would call his office and as soon as I found something out I would let him know. "Thank you very much. I'm very grateful. Please write down my number, although, let me tell you something, if I may, you and I are alike. I am also the only *Hermoso* listed in the phonebook."

Nobody knew where Arturo could be, and they told me over and over that since he was to travel to Caracas on Tuesday and had everything ready since Monday afternoon, they didn't expect him at the office. Two people even mentioned that he had

said that he had to stop by a friend of his father's place to pick up some documents. Nobody knew anything else. Mr. Hermoso also took time to call different offices, without anyone being able to give him any information. As the day went on, our uncertainty grew and started thinking that, for some reason, Arturo may have gone to his office when the disaster occurred. Mr. Hermoso thought of going up to the Venezuelan Consulate to report him missing. The consulate employee, who received him, perhaps thought he was sick at his apartment, or something even worse, and, right away, called the police so they would assign a police officer to accompany them to force open the apartment door.

They came in and the only thing they found was an open suitcase on top of the bed, half filled with clothes for the trip. From there the policeman called Merrill Lynch, where no one knew anything and immediately, he as well as the people from the Consulate, went on to report him missing to his superiors. Mr. Hermoso stayed at the apartment and as he told me "I found his phone book on the night table, and while I was seated on the bed next to the half emptied suitcase, I started to call from A to Z all the names there. For most numbers, either no one answered or they recommended leaving a message. I left the messages, giving my number as well as yours, Mr. Suvanto. I hope you forgive me for taking that liberty, but wouldn't you have done the same in my place? The ones who answered, only three ladies and two gentlemen, denied knowing anything about Arturo and they were moved when they heard the news or would say over and over: 'It can't be, it can't be.' So, Mr. Suvanto, I had no choice but to call Caracas and inform his parents and his wife, I mean, ex-wife. You can imagine the yelling and screaming and the crying of those three human beings. They agreed to call me back. Meanwhile, the Consul himself took charge of the case, talking to them and begging them

to come as soon as they could, even, that's what he told me, urging them to go to the American Airlines offices where they would give them their tickets, free of charge. Again I am the one who talks and talks, and I don't let you put in a word edgewise. I beg your forgiveness."

When Joan as well as myself went back to our jobs, several days went by in which we didn't get any more news from Hermoso or the trip by Arturo's relatives. Two or three times I felt the urge to call him, but due to my typical Scandinavian calmness, I stopped myself so it would not seem as snooping around. One evening, late already, (evidently that was his preferred time) Hermoso called again: "They are here already. They're staying at Arturo's apartment. The parents in his bed; the wife, who I must inform you is not an ex because they hadn't finalized the divorce procedures, in the living room sofa. Before they came, I went by there and I put everything in order, placing the suitcase in the closet. I also put away, rather I left in a garbage container in the street, the picture of a blonde that he had on top of a dresser where he put his shirts and other articles of clothing. It's a good thing I did it, because the wife, whose name is Victoria, a brunette with hazel eyes, as the passports say, was already down there with the others. The authorities, in the presence of the Consul and other employees, gave them a small black box with dirt from the place. Obviously, ashes would not be proper. I understand that Merrill Lynch gave the widow a letter where they promise that the compensation will get to Caracas when everything gets finalized with the insurance companies. Victoria told me that she once met you, your wife and daughters, and she asked me to invite you to come to a Mass they will have in memory of Arturo this Thursday at 6 p.m. at the church of the Virgen del Rocío, Eight and 12th Street. I don't know if you found out that Arturo's

parents are Spaniards: he is Galician, very restrained, while she is from Seville and of course she can't stop talking or crying. They don't speak English and Victoria just a few words, but I think they would like to have a few more people at the Mass, besides the people from the Consulate, from Merrill Lynch and yours truly, humble servant of theirs, as well as yours Mr. Suvanto."

The mass wasn't exclusively for Arturo, but one of those collective services where several of the deceased are mentioned. Fortunately, it was that way because the church was almost full. At the end, we greeted his parents and we met Hermoso. A man as handsome as his name which means beautiful in Spanish: tall, thin, impeccably dressed with a tie and a beret on his head, with glasses and the little hair left very well combed. The best thing he has, as Joan told me, is a smile that is open, frank and loving. We liked him so much that, without previously agreeing to, we asked him to have dinner with us in a nearby trattoria when leaving the church,. We said goodbye to Arturo's relatives and Hermoso promised them that he would stop by before they go back to Caracas the next evening.

In the little restaurant, almost empty because it was not even 7:00 p.m., the first thing he told us was "How strange and magic life is! I don't know where I read that God writes straight with crooked lines. Sometimes I think he gave us life as if it were a train: some get off, some get on. Arturo, didn't. He disappeared as the three of us just got on. He had to disappear so that we could start being friends. Let's toast to him and to us, with this fine sherry that Mr. Suvanto has ordered." Five minutes later we left behind the "sir" and the formalities. We address each other informally, eating pasta and drinking wine, we stayed there until well after ten. The waiter, a chubby Italian who was also probably the

owner, seeing us so happy asked us: “What are you celebrating? Grandpa’s birthday?” and when Pedro Luis answered: “My ninety sixth,” and took out an ID card from his pocket so he was believed, the Italian hugged him, left and came back with a bottle of sparkling wine. He sat next to us and we toasted “for the best ninety-six years of our lives,” as Joan said, adding: “Do you know that you are going to spend Thanksgiving in our home? You will meet our two daughters who will fall in love with you as soon as they see you. “You have never eaten a turkey the way Edwin makes it. You will lick your fingers, my love.” Without realizing it Joan had just repeated, word by word, what hardly a few months ago she had promised Arturo. Pedro Luis is right: God writes straight with crooked lines and that’s the reason life is like a train.

THEY'RE RIGHT

in thinking, and not without reason, my dear Martín, that it was our fault for selecting and imposing Professor Martínez as a character for our “Life Story.” I couldn’t tell you what we saw in him, and especially what you saw in him, because I remember, as if it were now, when you proposed him, you were going on and on in with such commendation as if he were already dead. By the way, that’s what he’s going through nowadays. I went to see him at the private clinic before humoring your mysterious request to meet you here in your beloved park by the name of Parque del Este, with you walking as in a procession instead of telling me what’s going on. It would have been better to sit at a café, calmly in the shade and not under this damn sun surrounded by these old farts who walk as slowly as you do. OK, don’t interrupt me. By your expression I know what you will ask me. Why is Martínez in a clinic and for what reason did I go to see him? Oh, my love! Don’t you know me already? I am filled with instances of “why” that cannot find the “because.” Don’t look at me with that “it wasn’t me” face. It was you and your fascination with honoring the Escuela de Comunicación Social, and “communicate” with other areas of the Humanities. And it was you who proposed it, arguing that he had the gift of gab, that he was famous for his gab, that it was a “piece of cake.” Did you or didn’t you say it? And you looked at me to support you. Did you look at me or didn’t you look at me? Me, the idiot, always your slave, I went on with a whole bunch of superlatives praising the virtues of the one I just saw, seated on a wheelchair, abandoned, in the middle of a room with light as faint as his health condition. When I arrived, he didn’t even recognize me and babbling, told me that he didn’t remember where he had seen me, adding: “So many students in so many years...”

“You deserve that. What made you visit him? Don’t tell me you felt the obligation to confess to him the complete failure of our project”.

“I wasn’t going to even mention it to him. I found out he was sick and I went for charity reasons.”

“And since when are you a member of Daughters of Charity?”

“Stop fucking around. You didn’t go with me, because you didn’t find out.”

“How could I find out if you didn’t even think of calling me? It was I who called you to invite you for a walk and you didn’t tell me about Martínez or his disease. Could it be that you didn’t do it because you intended to earn a place in heaven for yourself before me?”

“I didn’t call you because I know nobody likes to visit the sick. Only masochists like me go.”

“What does the little professor have?”

“That thing.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. After hearing so many rumors about his dissolute life, he would contract it.”

“But that dissolute life has been able to leave this man enough friends who would accompany him in his serious illness. Friends or family, what do I know? What do they call them? A companion?: “The sick patient has a companion?” There was no one, although when I got up from the chair to leave, three old ladies arrived with a fruit

basket. Really, really old like those three who are walking up there. I thought they could be aunts, but no way. With strong central European accents they came in screaming: “How did our dear Professor wake up?” “You look better than yesterday,” “We miss your classes a lot,” and they said a whole bunch of other stuff, because they were talking at the same time. One of them even asked me if I was also his student.”

“And what did you answer?”

“I am a friend.” And do you know what she told me the presumptuous swelling with pride: “Well *we* are his students and we adore him.” I smiled and I bolted out of there. Could it be that those mummies study at the Escuela de Artes?”

“I am his victim.” You should have screamed at them. A victim who together with fifteen more, were victims fooled by Professor Monroy so that each one wrote the “Life Story” What was it that she said?: “None of the papers even reach the lowest academic standard. You just transcribed the interview that you did with him that rainy morning, even including that weather report that has nothing to do with a ‘Life Story.’ You did not interview anyone else, you did not do research at the newspaper library, you did not cite from his articles, did not add addenda, did not even show a theoretical framework that will define the parameters that require such a journalistic style. So, each one of you look for another protagonist. No more group projects; that is, if you intend to pass my course with a decent grade.”

“Let’s sit down here on this bench, under the shade of this tree. I am tired of your marathon, you hard-working boy. So you memorized all the crap from that Magister!

You love to torture yourself, and I was calling myself a masochist in front of the most masochistic of them all!”

“I said all that crap to mess with you and I will repeat all that crap every time I see you.”

“Would you recite that crap as a litany?”

“You’ll see. If anyone was really to blame that everything came out wrong, was you: the only one who insisted we interview the list of friends that he gave us.”

“Nobody complained. We distributed the names of that list and I got three of them. I tried to make them all talk. You did the same with yours, and the same deficient answers was what you got.”

“Nothing. What kind of friends did Professor Martínez think he had! If, as Monroy would say, they are his “family nucleus,” well the poor guy never realized that he was an orphan. Check out the ones I got: the so-called Professor Gómez from the Humanities School called Escuela de Letras, or better yet, the poet, as I understand that he likes to be called, who besides living in the same building as Martínez, preferred to meet me at his cubicle, very professional set-up! to answer my questions using the same monosyllables he resorts to when writes that crap that he doesn’t call poems, but texts. “We know each other very superficially. Clearly we are in different disciplines.” What a son of a bitch! Whatever their “different disciplines” are, both have obvious similar preferences.”

“He’s had better luck than poor Martínez. Not only did he inherit the apartment of the one who was his partner, but he should already be on his way to Salamanca to enjoy the scholarship he won and do his doctoral thesis.”

“And what about my lady on the beach? I went all the way over there, by shuttle van of course, through all that dust, because it’s a lie that they are rebuilding Vargas. I saw it the same as when they showed the disaster on television. I arrived and I had to swallow her incessant talking for about four hours, not referring to Martínez, but praising herself, giving herself cosmopolitan airs, barking words in English or French. A “show” as she would say. I confess that it was a good “show.” The lady is super cool, but coming back, in another shuttle van, listening to the recording, was when I realized that she had hardly referred to my dear Professor. She merely said something like: “He’s very clever, beware of his tongue, because he is terrible. He speaks well of no one, except of himself. He oozes bitterness, like the hyenas, but if you accept him like that and his improprieties do not affect you, he is amusing. To me at least he is amusing. Because I can LOL, laugh out loud, as you young kids say nowadays.”

“Of all Martínez’s friends, perhaps she is the one who managed her life the best, or perhaps she has had had the good fortune of being protected by her destiny. Misfortune however, seems to have had a field day with López. When I saw in the paper about his disappearance in the Twin Towers, I swear that I started to cry.”

“He liked you” You enjoyed telling the whole class what happened that afternoon in Arábica Café.”

“I don’t deny it. Like I don’t deny that I confessed to them that I was attracted to him. The first much older man than me that I have liked. It didn’t go any further: a mutual likeness. And he left, and...”

“No tragedies at this time, Greek heroine. With the one about Martínez and your visit to the clinic we have enough for today. Let’s go to the small café nearby.”

“As long as we don’t walk anymore. Even though I respect your interest in sports you know that I don’t share them. By the way what is it that you want to propose to me?”

“All in good time. Stand up and let’s go. Do you know that I keep mulling over in my head this whole mess with Martínez and what it makes me feel is pity?”

“Or better yet, compassion?”

“Better. What I mean is that he and his friends made a nucleus, or a group, or what they supposed that it was, and it was never really true. They got together to celebrate all anniversaries or lament all difficulties, they imitated what any family does, and yet...”

“The idyllic group fell apart. That happens to all of us. I bet you don’t even remember who your best friends were, your buddies in high school. I remember the names of mine, but if I were to see them in the middle of the street, maybe I would not recognize them.”

“You and I will keep our friendship forever.”

“Come let me kiss you and hurry up so I can treat you to a beer.”

“At this time?”

“Noon. The time for apéritif. All good sportsmen who use those little shorts to show their exciting thighs deserve not a beer, but a keg. Sit down at that table and I’ll go get them.”

“Yes, my love. You are right: this park seems to have more and more older people. None of them, I’d bet, bursting with María Teresa’s self-confidence. She must have never set foot in a park in her life.”

“Talking to yourself, like the old folks of the other tables? Here.”

“You forgot the glasses.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Beer is drunk from the bottle. Bottoms up! Cheers! What were you thinking?”

“I was remembering that woman, María Teresa.”

“Don’t tell me that you want to go after old ladies?”

“She is ageless. I swear! She is ageless with a special vitality and a contagious laugh and a funny way of making fun of herself. That time we said that one of these days I would call her to see each other again. One of these days, I’ll do it and we’ll go together so you can meet her.”

“I’ll go if you promise to accompany me, also one of these days, to visit López’s widow to give her our condolences.”

“Widow? Weren’t they divorced?”

“The papers were not finalized when he disappeared, so she is the widow, the only owner of the apartment where she lives. Also, she will receive I don’t know how much in compensation from New York. The dead guy was really generous!”

“The one who seemed about to die when she found out about López, was one from that bunch, who called María Teresa from Israel when she got the news. According to what she told me, she was secretly López’s great love. Well, not so secretly, because if they told me, the rest of them must have known.”

“So López had a lover?”

“Don’t tell me that you are dying of jealousy?”

“You idiot! I am going to die because of heat exhaustion. I now understand why that Victoria woman seemed so sad when I interviewed her.”

“Why sad if back then the husband had not yet disappeared?”

“Sad because she knew, and I suppose that knowing it, she remained with him.”

What a fraternity! Each one involved with their many affairs.”

“The affair that you and I have to take care of is, who the fuck we choose for the damn Life Story. As far as I am concerned, I have decided to choose anyone who has a mom, dad, wife and children. Someone heterosexual, of legal age and who resides here. I don’t want anymore “abortions from nature” as Shakespeare would say, who I’m sure didn’t say it. That way, I’ll get away from Professor Monroy, and right away I will get my diploma and go on to do what I want most in life.”

“An on-scene television reporter.”

“Correct. I want to go around with a microphone in my hand all day. I want to be sent to any disaster. The bigger the disaster the better. I don’t want slow deaths like Martínez’s, a prisoner in that wheelchair, with his stained robe, thin as a war prisoner, without sight, without life. I prefer a shootout and a hundred bodies collapsing around me.”

“Just one beer and you’re flying already.”

“With just one. And also without it. That will be my life and have every right to get it. You on the other hand...”

“Here come the insults.”

“I have never insulted you and I would never do it. ‘Nature teaches beasts to know their friends.’⁷³ That does come from Shakespeare. I respect your ambition to work in the printed press. I respect your enthusiasm for writing. I know that as long as you can write and run every day you will feel great.”

“I feel so happy that you understand, that now is my turn to buy the beers.”

“I don’t want another one. I think this one didn’t sit well with me. You know that I’m not like that.”

“Like what?”

⁷³ I use a different quote since the Spanish text seems to refer to a non-existent Shakespeare quote. My quote comes from *Coriolanus*, Act II, Scene I. I used the *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare* edited by Philip Brockbank (1989).

“So violent, so aggressive. All that stuff I spat out must have been provoked by seeing Martínez, remembering López .”

“There’s another dead guy missing from the group. The Italian, friend of Gómez the poet, María Teresa told me...”

“Don’t tell me about any more deaths. Let me find someone alive to finish the Life Story.”

“Don’t get aggravated. Professor Monroy said that she would collect the papers at the end of the semester. We have time.”

“Totally true: we have time. At least we have all the time that we want ahead of us. But, tell me, all that horrible calm of yours, what does it mean. You already have a main character, perhaps?”

“Correct.”

“And can you say who it is?”

“I can. You.”

ANYONE MAY

suppose that María Teresa and I had something going on between the sheets, or that there is anything going on between the sheets now; but they are wrong. I don't mind such slander. She minds it even less. I am sure of that, as sure as I am that she started molding me as if I were soft clay. She made me into what I am today. We met each other when I was eighteen, on those days of the tragedy, when I helped her to carry the groceries she had bought at my father's grocery store. He's the one who told me to help her, and later, much, much later was one of the idiots who thought that she had fooled around with me. On the contrary, it was him who suggested to her that she phone in her order and not to bother picking it up because I would take it to her. With so few clients in those days it was better for my father to seem helpful. While I was placing the bags on the kitchen table, she used to ask me questions about my life. Back then, what she called "life" I didn't have, unless someone considers delivering groceries could be one. After I finished high school at a high school nearby, I didn't study anymore and I went on to work with dad full time, he very sure that I would remain at the grocery store forever. That was my future, nothing to do with that "life" that intrigued María Teresa.

I'm rambling. Even nowadays, I can't express myself very well. I know what I want to say, but what I want to say doesn't come out. As if I didn't have a lot of words to choose the exact ones. I realized that when she pointed it out in one of our first conversations. She told me something like, to say exactly what one is thinking one must have and expand one's vocabulary. Words are like money; that's how she put it: the more you have at hand the better you can express yourself. I remember that the example she gave made me laugh: "If you want to buy a Toyota Corolla like mine, you have to have

the money to buy it; if you want to say what you want to say, you have to have enough words to express it. Words of different denominations, like bank notes.” “But, how can I get to that if all the people around me talk the same way I do? They talk, as you say, Mrs. María Teresa (back then she still hadn’t asked me to address her informally): they speak in change, in coins, not in bills.” That afternoon she gave me two books so small that each one fit in the palm of my hand: *Platero and I* by Juan Ramón Jiménez and a pocket dictionary. She recommended that I underline the words I didn’t know and to look them up in the dictionary; also to underline the ones that I liked to use them daily. That’s where my “craziness” started, as my parents, my sister, aunts and uncles, cousins and even everyday clients said over and over. “But, what has gotten into this kid? Has he gone crazy?”

It’s true. I went crazy, and I still am. I didn’t pay attention to them. I sensed that such craziness was my path. I was impressed by Jimenez’s book as soon as I opened it, because in the foreword it said that, since it was first published in 1916, it continued to sell millions of copies in all the languages of the world. I didn’t continue reading that part, but rather I went to its first page and, since I almost have it memorized from that day that I read it for the first time, I don’t want to go on without copying it below:

Platero is small, downy, smooth —so soft to the touch that one would think he were all cotton, that he had no bones. Only the jet mirrors of his eyes are hard as two beetles of dark crystal.

I let him run loose and he goes off to the meadow; softly, scarcely touching them, he brushes his nose against the tiny flowers of pink, sky-blue and golden yellow. I

call him gently: ‘Platero?’ and he comes to me at a gay little trot as though he were laughing, lost in a clatter of fancy.

And at the end of the page, that I have also memorized, it says:

He is tender and loving as a little boy, as a little girl; but strong and firm as a stone. When I ride him on Sunday through the lanes at the edge of the town, the men from the country, clean-dressed and slow-moving, stand still to watch him. He is made of steel. He is made of steel. Both steel and quicksilver.⁷⁴

That’s how my adventure, or my life, started. Knowing that I didn’t know anything. I realized that the only thing that I learned in high school was to copy from my schoolmates, —more from the girls than from the boys— and I would pass all subjects. Plain piracy. It’s as simple as that. Anyone who had seen mom and dad’s faces at the boring and endless graduation ceremony might have thought they were awarding me a *Honoris Causa* Doctorate. Their pride, however, had a limit, since it seemed to them that I had studied enough. Too much, taking into consideration that both of them only made it to junior high school. To encourage me, daddy gave me the keys to the grocery store so that I would open it in the afternoon, while he stayed home with mom, lying down watching one soap opera after another. He would show up at about five, he would check my sales without finding any mistakes and he would repeat his daily complaint: “It’s a

⁷⁴ The translation of *Platero y yo*, (*Platero and I*) is by William H. and Mary M. Roberts, New American Library, New York: 1956.

shame that we are doing so badly, my dear José! You are ready to manage your own grocery store and this... you can see it's not enough. What a shame!"

Instead of pity, I felt relief. I would sigh happily, knowing that the sales would not improve. María Teresa, whom I was addressing informally, by now, had already put in my head the idea to register in an institute in Maiquetía, where I could study Human Resources. According to her, I would do very well at that job in any company, due to my "calm demeanor" in dealing with people. Daddy agreed to help me pay for the institute, because he already gotten the idea to sell the grocery store to a fellow countryman and go back to Madeira. "Over there you could use that Human Resources stuff that the lady is recommending." I registered and we changed our shifts: I would now open in the morning and close at one, while daddy opened again at two and remained until closing, at seven, so that I could go to night school.

We all agreed that it was an excellent project, including my mother who would say and repeat to her friends: "José will get his degree. Another one. Now he will have a degree from a Vocational Training Institute. What do you think?" To me it seemed like a parody of the high school classes, with the same copying between the students, the same conformist attitude to barely pass. Even the same vulgarity of my former schoolmates! I sensed, I knew secretly, that this wasn't my path. And the miracle occurred. Big as only a miracle can be! Incredible as all miracles are! One morning two Italians came to the store: Enzo, an old customer and a friend who had to call Caracas urgently. They asked to borrow my cell phone and the guy screamed first in his language and then in Spanish a bunch of things. As soon as they left, I remembered what María Teresa had told me about the murder of a friend, supposedly at the hands of Italians. That very afternoon, I went to

see her instead of going to the Institute, and as soon as I told her about the visit, we decided to get to Carmen de Uria, where Enzo lived, to find out who the other Italian was. When we were about to leave, Maria Teresa said to me: “Bring the camera. Maybe we can take their pictures without them noticing.”

Since she stayed in the car on the side of the road, because it was impossible to drive up through the rubble to get to Enzo’s house, she explained to me which way to look through and where to press to take the pictures. “If someone asks you, you could say that you are from a newspaper.” Who could have done so if I didn’t even run into a dog while I was going up the hill? Hiding on a side of an open window, I saw the three men inside who were talking in Italian. I looked through the lens of the camera and I started pressing the button. I felt a strange sensation: to be able to choose whom or what, not look, but rather watch. My cold hands were squeezing the camera while small beads of cold sweat appeared on my forehead. It was fast, as instantaneous as the bursts from a machine-gun must be. I realized right away that I had shot the whole roll. I ran down until I got to the car where I threw the camera on the back seat. I didn’t tell María Teresa what had happened to me, but I started the car, I stepped on the gas and we went straight to the precinct, where I testified to what I had seen. I forgot the rest of the story about the three Italians, because I only had that sensation in me. Three days later it became a reality when I arrived at María Teresa’s place and she told me showing an envelope and waving it as if it were a flag: “I have a surprise for you, my boy.”

It was the pictures. They were arranged as in a movie sequence, enlarged to letter size, accusing or “informing against” which was the phrase that she chose, the character or disposition of each one of the Italians. What words could someone have used to list

what the pictures revealed? I looked at them one by one, I reviewed them, and I looked up, I looked at her looking at me as if a spirit was possessing me inside, hitting the pictures with the palm of the hand, I screamed: “This is my thing! This is what I want to do for the rest of my life! It’s not that I found them! It’s that they found me!” María Teresa opened a drawer; she took out the camera and gave it to me. “It’s yours, of course. Who else could it belong to?”

Since that day was a Saturday, payday, I went to the store and I asked daddy for my pay. He gave me the money and when he saw the camera on my shoulder, he joked: “What’s that machine? Did you take it from the lady or did she lend it to you to take pictures of her? I went to the closest store and I spent all my pay in rolls of film. While coming and going I decided what I would photograph. Since I was born and grew up here in Vargas, always feeling that this was a paradise, why not describe its collapse, its fall? During the following months, not only did I go all over the place, shooting here and there, but thanks to the man at the photo shop, I learned how to develop them and even more thanks to María Teresa, I did it in one of her bathrooms that we converted into a dark room.

If I seemed “feverish” as my sister referred to me, María Teresa seemed “obsessed” as she described herself, to get me to learn the most in the least possible time. She started calling and visiting all her friends who knew photography in Caracas. I went with her almost every time, and that is how Maestro Fran Beaufrand, a celebrity in the field, after seeing my “material” as he called it, agreed to accept me as another one of his assistants, without any salary whatsoever, of course. From that afternoon on, when he congratulated me on my work, I started to live not one, but a double life. The last one was

a secret one. At home they saw me leaving in the afternoon, thinking that I was going to the Institute. What I was really doing was to get a shuttle van to Caracas, then another one to the study of the Maestro and stay there, at times, until very late at night, “They’re bleeding you dry” dad and mom would complain, deep down happily, he would say: They are going to kill my poor son!”

They didn’t find out anything, because at that time daddy finalized the sale of the store and immediately bought the three tickets to Madeira. Fortunately, we all agreed that it was better for me to stay at an aunt’s house until I finished my studies. Daddy even arranged with the buyer to give me a weekly allowance sufficient for my expenses. I took them to the airport in Maria Teresa’s car. It was mom, crying non-stop, who expressed the idea that it would have been better to suggest she rent me the room where I, at times, had stayed: “That woman is a lady and she loves you like I do. It’s a shame that we didn’t think of it.” Not only did it occur to her, but she also practically ordered me to move in immediately. She said everything with an “oil company executive” style, which she made fun of: “You’ll stay here until you get established in Caracas. You are not going to be coming and going your whole life like a seagull, and even worse, settle to be a small town photographer, looking for customers at the Plaza Palomas de Macuto, if they rebuild it someday. One thing: I need my space, and you need yours. Enough said...”

Her “space” referred to visits from friends, when she preferred to be alone. There was no problem with that since when I sensed that something was happening, because she would arrive from the Deli loaded with things, I would remain that evening almost until midnight working on my things at the Maestro’s place. Although I was helping with his projects and I didn’t receive a salary, I could use his equipment to develop my

pictures after seven p.m., the time that almost daily he would get all dressed up, put on perfume and go out to his social gatherings. “I adore people, my dear José and cannot live without being surrounded by people. Good night. Turn the lights off and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I knew about the visits from Police Inspector Brito, usually, an afternoon per week. “Brito is coming today” she would tell me sometimes and I would estimate the time to come back. Just in case, to be sure, I would call her on the cell phone. “Come whenever you want, my love”, she could answer so that I knew that he had already left, or “I’ll wait for you at eight” and then I imagined that he left at seven. From time to time also she was visited by someone called Agustín Campos, a member of that bunch of intimate friends that started to deteriorate after what had happened to us, the people from Vargas. “It would seem as if that tragedy also destroyed our circle” she would moan with a sad voice. By the way, in one of those visits by that guy Campos, with whom I believe she didn’t have anything with, except a nostalgic feeling, I came in and when he saw me from the terrace where they were seating having drinks, when he saw me coming in opening the door with my keys and going straight to my room, as if not to bother anyone, the fat guy must have said something obscene, because what I heard was a gigantic laugh from María Teresa, followed by: “But, are you crazy? How can you think that? He’s the son I never had, the one I always wanted to have! I ask you know who: what was the good deed I did, in my whole fucking life, to deserve this present?”

I ask myself that very question over and over, and all I know is that I couldn’t live without her. I feel that she teaches me, encourages me, and makes demands on me all the time. There have even been many nights where she insists that I learn to sing and dance

her dear American Musicals! Truly I am really clumsy for that. She laughs, messes my hair while caressing me and she resigns herself: “Good thing that you found what your Martínez named your ‘magic eye’. He wrote that after seeing my first solo exhibit which consisted of twenty-four pictures with the title “We Are Alive” a title I chose because of the amount of times that one can still see those two words scribbled on collapsed walls all over the seaside. It had been our battle cry and I wanted to honor it. Martínez went to the opening at the La Castellana Gallery a Sunday morning sitting on a wheelchair, pushed by a nurse that every now and then would wipe his mouth with a napkin. I am sure that he came to please María Teresa, but I am also sure that he liked my work, and because of that, in spite of his condition, he wrote what would be his last review. He died the following week, he was cremated and hardly anyone found out. They told María Teresa that he wanted it that way and to spread his ashes around a specific cedar at the Los Caobos Park.

I did well at the exhibit, both with comments and sales. “Now your professional life begins. Cheers!” Maestro Beaufran said raising his wineglass that Sunday morning. Little by little, it became true. The first surprise came when they awarded me the “Luis Felipe Toro” prize in photography given by the National Council for Culture, Consejo Nacional de la Cultura (CONAC). That distinction got me work at a fashion magazine and on a weekly newspaper, also, private assignments came, portraits mostly. Then, I told daddy to stop the weekly allowance; and he, as well as my mom, my sister and the whole big family that surrounds them in Funchal, call me and write and are very happy when they get the magazines and see my name under the pictures: José Figueira. That’s me. It’s so me that when I found out that María Teresa’s tenants were moving from the apartment

in Caracas, I offered to rent it to have my studio and home at the same place. What did she answer? “Fine, but under my conditions” and, sitting in front of me, at the dining room table while we had breakfast she listed them as if we were in one of those meetings at the oil-company where she worked for so many years. “Since there are three rooms, the main one will be mine and that way I can spend days from time to time in Caracas. The other two are yours. We share the common spaces and we prorate the expenses.”

When I took on remodeling our new home with painters and plumbers working day after day, playing the radio full blast, María Teresa called me to ask me to stop by the Gallery, because she wanted to introduce me to two “special friends.” I imagined they were a couple of characters who wanted a portrait. Once bathed, shaven and all cleaned up, I went over there. They were two young people about my age: Martín, muscular with a sincere smile and Xiomara, with long, curly and unkempt hair, a pair of huge dark eyes, and a small body like that gymnast decorated with medals at the Olympics. She seemed familiar to me, however, without knowing from where. Right away they told me that they were the ones who had interviewed María Teresa a while back for a university project. They had graduated already and Martín worked at a newspaper, while Xiomara was a news reporter at a television station. “Of course! That’s where I know you from. I see you almost every night. Yesterday, for example, I would have wanted to be next to you to start punching that idiot who was groping you.”

They had both been at the Gallery before and they were so thrilled when they left that Martín told María Teresa, adding that each one wanted to interview me to do “something special” with my exhibition “Nothing could be easier my darlings. José is my son,” that’s what she told them and now seeing us face to face she added: “Let’s get to

it.” While the camera and light guys that came with Xiomara were setting up and plugging in, we sat down to talk. Martín turning on his recorder and she her microphone. It felt easy and fun because from some time, I felt I was the owner of the words that I chose. The beautiful *Platero* was a memory from the past. Far away, standing next to the lady who owned the gallery, María Teresa was looking at us and a big smile covered her whole face when after hearing each question, I would think about it and after a pause, I would answer with precision. If my exhibit was called “We Are Alive” I felt even more alive answering those questions.

When we finished the interview María Teresa asked Martín to go with her to a nearby bookstore where she had to pick up a package. “Come with me and let those two wait until the technicians finish getting their stuff.” She had already noticed, maybe Martín did also, that there was a spark between Xiomara and me. What a great time! At least for me, because with all the excitement of this past year, I didn’t think, nor wish, nor even know how, to hook up with someone. It’s not that I was a virgin, not at all. There in La Guaira, at the high school, as well as at the institute, even in my neighborhood, I had my rolls in the hay, but that’s all they were, while what Xiomara and me we were doing was seeing each other, laughing; seeing each other and laughing again. “We are like two monkeys from the zoo. That’s what they do,” she told me and we arranged to go see them.

No one better than “Mommy” María Teresa can tell what has happened since then. She’s happy with the “romance” as she calls it, and she creates, or better yet “designs” our future with her usual haste, telling me over and over as if she were the clock at the cathedral, “It’s about time, my love, it’s about time.”

THESE ARE

the people or loose ends that I have to deal with. If I was the first one in telling, I accept the responsibility of being the last one in retelling. You can imagine who chose me. The obvious does not need explanation (I am not referring to the loose ends). I will try to pretend to be drafting one of my old oil reports where I was required to show “truthfulness and credibility.”

Here I am, sitting across the calm sea, at 6:00 p.m., while the sky above imitates it in its passivity, without exploding in a torrent of colors that sometimes makes one dizzy. Sea and sky will never change, the same way I suspect this land will never improve. The only things that persist are the government slogans preaching: The Coast Will Spring Back! “This is the time!” “Now!” “Immediately!” They do not even bother calling it “Vargas State” anymore, an appellation they forced on us a short time before the tragedy. There are those to affirm that this pomposity was the reason it brought so much bad luck: “They put a spell on it, my girl, and a spell does not go away just like that,” as María repeats, the one that comes once a week to clean, adding: “You are quite right preferring to spend more time over there in Caracas than being here, in front of this graveyard where everything is dead. Reminding us of the dead who died that Christmas of 99. What a Christmas bonus God gave us!”

I go back and forth. To be there a few days with José and Xiomara, who are already a couple, amuses me and when I get tired of them, I return to this solitude that calms me. Here I receive, each time more sporadically, Inspector Brito’s visits. I try to space them as much as possible; because I realize that he comes, as the old ladies from

before my time used to say, so that I am “a shoulder to cry on.” There was something more at the beginning, nothing spectacular, I confess, but now we limit ourselves to drinking more than half a bottle of whisky while I listen to his irresolvable afflictions, the ones from his job as well as the ones dealing with having to live with his wife, always sick with something, and with “her mother, about to die each day and managing to survive until the next. She doesn’t even deserve to be called mother-in-law.” His face gets happy when he talks about things regarding his children, already “men and women, each one living at their own place, carryin’ on. I wouldn’t know what to do with my life if it wasn’t for them and your kindness in receiving me.”

Another one who would not know what to do with his life, is Agustín Campos, who, as soon as he finds out I’m here, comes running to pity his loneliness while we drink half the bottle that was left from Brito and a little of another one that I open. As you can conclude I am all ears and whisky. Aura and the two children remain in Weston, “happy and delighted, doing what they please.” That summarizes all the information that I have received in each one of their monthly visits. With one at a time is enough. Aura is doing very well at the Kindergarten, Aura Marina is doing even better, she who at sixteen already has a boyfriend, two years older than her. He is “a very wholesome and very decent young man,” who studies at the same college with Agustincito “the biggest shame of all my life.” Such a mortifying epitaph comes from the confession that my “little macho man” made known to all the family, gathered together for Thanksgiving dinner. Agustín traveled for this holiday, as he does for all the other holidays during the year, with Aura always paying the round trip ticket because “it’s dirt cheap if bought over there.”

Let me clarify: when Agustín realized that Aura and the kids were going to stay in Weston indefinitely, he decided, in order to be with them, to try his luck over there. Fortunately, he did not say anything to his clients. “I went secretly to inspect the territory and to my misfortune, nobody was interested in my aptitudes, except a Venezuelan who proposed that I work with him in his *arepa* restaurant.” So he had no choice but to return to “this circus that I command,” and resign himself to seeing them during holidays. It was during “Thanksgiving” how ironic! When the boy announced, clearly and straight out, that he was gay. “I made believe that I didn’t understand, and you know what the moron replied, María Teresa? ‘I’m a faggot, dad, a faggot. That’s what I am.’ I nearly passed out; right there on the table and Aura got up, running, got who knows what pill I needed, and threw it down my throat.”

I, however, freshened his glass of whisky. I never told him that I knew everything because since they left. Agustincito, every now and then, sent me emails, and remembering our pact to “tell each other everything” had also told me about that. He wrote something like “you, my dear aunt, who realized my orientation before anyone, you must know that I have accepted it. That first secret love that I felt for Aarón, I shared with you. At times I wonder what became of him, over there in Israel, and I always answer myself that probably ‘nothing’ because he was not gay at all.”

Very shrewd my artificial nephew. None of that. If he could have seen him, as I did, a short while back, at the Unión Israelita Synagogue, next to Moisés when we led the prayer the month after the death of her grandmother Yayú. Victoria López, Arturo’s widow, who preferred to maintain his last name, called me to invite us to go, reminding me how intimate we had been with that family. She already knew that the ones who were

coming to the burial of the old lady were her child Moisés and her grandchild Aarón. There at the synagogue we hardly recognized them. Moisés now fatter and more nearsighted than before, looked hunchback and sleepy, with badly attended beard, as if he had stopped shaving for a few days, but it was Aarón who had totally turned into another being: white, like wax, hair curling over the shoulders and a beard that almost reached his chest, “the perfect Hasid” as I heard comment one of the women, seating, as all of us, separate from the men.

When the prayer ended, very emotional, by the way, we all went to the lobby where there were big round tables, filled with sandwiches, sweets, wine bottles, glasses, buffet style. We went up to Moisés and when we did, surprisingly Aarón turned his back to us. “Excuse him,” his father told us, “but the Hassid are not allowed to socialize with women.” He thanked us repeatedly for coming to accompany him and told us he was sure Rebeca would also thank us. He told us that she and the girl were fine and that Rebeca was very busy working for a women’s association that helped other women solve problems. Neither Victoria nor I dared to ask for more details. Truly, we did not dare to say anything and we heard him tell us how the death of his mother had been like a blessing because it happened at night while she was sleeping. Other people interrupted his story to hug him and greet him. Victoria and I got away and when she suggested that we leave, I stopped her for a minute and told her to get near Aarón’s back.

We did not even touch him. I whispered that I remembered him a lot, that when Agustín wrote, he remembered him and Victoria told him that she did not forget those times when we all would visit Reverón’s house and he told us the story of the rabbi Akiva: “Do you remember? Agustín driving you crazy, jumping around you, making fun

of you and calling you “Little rabbi Akiva.” A moment went by, and before we were turning to leave, he turned his head, he faced us, and his eyes filled with tears stuttered: “Thank you, thank you. I also remember you my dear aunts, thank you. Tell Agustín that I always remember him and that I will always love him very much.” He placed his hands in his mouth as if to blow us a kiss. When he realized what he had done, he turned around with a scared face and hurried away to get lost in the crowd.

A few weeks later I received an email from Rebeca. We hardly ever write each other and her messages always seemed to me more evasive than loving. That time it was different. So much so that I printed it and I have read it several times, without knowing how to answer her. I think she explains herself better than I can summarize it, as any master of ceremonies usually says, I give her the floor:

“A thousand thanks to you and Victoria for being with Moisés and Aarón the day of the prayer for my mother-in-law. She died so suddenly, although fortunately without noticing it, that we weren’t able to get reservations for the four in any airline. I would’ve liked to go, not just to accompany Moisés who felt so guilty for not being by her side, but to see the two of you and to express to Victoria my pain for the horrible disappearance of Arturo. We didn’t even know that he was in New York at the time. The news was given to us by our mother-in-law in one of her last emails. What do you think? At her old age, she became an expert in computers, and since she didn’t have a lot of people to write to, every few days we would receive her long messages. The poor lady was unique! As unique as Arturo was. Victoria must miss him a lot. Tell her please that I send her my sisterly hugs.

At this moment, we don't know what will happen to us: whether we will stay here longer, or permanently, or whether we go back. Moisés makes the decisions. He has received an offer to purchase the factory, by a Colombian company where Mr. Jaramillo used to work before. He is our current manager who by the way does a great job. Nothing has been decided yet, also because it would pain us to leave Aarón alone, each day more excited about his yeshiva instruction. I imagine that you didn't recognize him with his beard and his curls. The teachers tell us that he will be a *zadik* (wise man in Hebrew). Let it be God's will.

Perhaps you wouldn't recognize me either. To please Aarón I keep a kosher kitchen (just the food allowed, in two sets of china), and a number of more details that have to be complied with daily. Also to please him I wear long skirts, cotton socks, low heel shoes and I wear a hat. That's how they see me at the temple each Friday afternoon. Another life. I don't know why I do it, because I know that if I look horrible, I feel guilty. It is as if I were doing penance.

Dear María Teresa, let me know when you feel like visiting us. Jerusalem is very peculiar. It lives by God and with God. I know that you will tell me that you are an atheist, but I'm sure that you will feel, how can I put it? At least, the perfume of that essence that inundates us believers. They've made you into a religious freak! I can hear you telling me, bursting right away into your laughter and right away I see you singing and dancing for us your blessed musicals. Those were good times. It was great to live in Caracas, surrounded by green spaces everywhere. Here everything looks yellow. Let's agree to write each other more frequently. Not as much as my mother-in-law did may

God rest her soul! But enough so that the friendship that tied our whole group, that made us happy, does not disappear. A big hug, Rebeca.”

What can I respond to her? “No clue,” whoever knows Rebeca’s past would tell me. Religion could be a relief that becomes strength. Strength can take anything. Nothing becomes hopeless. And yet, how to forget that past? For Rebeca it is something present and that is why she seems like a soul in purgatory. A past that we all have, although we pretend that a better future awaits us, that things will get better, repeating over and over all that nonsense that pushes us to go on living day after day. Sad Victoria is another penitent who has not even found support in her religion. She seems stupefied and when we left the synagogue that evening, she driving her brand new Mitsubishi that she had bought recently, it was as if she did not know which direction to take. I showed her the way to my apartment and invited her to come up so that we have a whisky. “You and you whiskies,” was what she said, but added: “All right, then I can show you what *The New York Times* published about Arturo.”

I knew that since the Twin Towers disaster that newspaper had maintained a section entitled “A Nation Challenged” where it included a page called “Portraits of Grief” that at times our local newspapers reproduced. There were brief biographical notes of the dead and the disappeared, including their pictures. What I never imagined, was that Arturo be included among those. Victoria turned down the whisky, “When I drink it now, I get a headache,” and she begged me to prepare her a tea, “Or if you have chamomile tea, even better,” she did not move from the armchair where she sat down as soon as she arrived, crossing her legs and holding her purse against her stomach. She timidly greeted José and Xiomara, who came out as soon as they heard my voice, hugging and kissing me

and feeling shy because of the presence of that lady, all dressed in black, who preferred to look at the floor, after stuttering “Good evening.” She was so distant with them that both of them followed me to the kitchen, asking if I she was the wife of the man whose mother was dead. When I denied it, adding that on the other hand, she was *dead* serious, they started laughing and disappeared to their room.

“How wonderful you are, María Teresa” she told me when giving her the boiling hot cup and added, letting go of a small laugh, “I’m not saying because you prepared this chamomile tea for me, but because of your tenacity to, constantly, remake your life. Do you remember when we used to kid you about your Portuguese teen? And now it seems he became your son. I imagine that the beautiful girl and he are a couple. The three of you together, happy and delighted. How I envy you!”

She remained quiet, looking at me and smiling as if I were a vision that she had never seen before. I preferred to smile at her and not to let out one of my rude comments. I thought of several, I must admit, but all I had to do was to remember Rebeca’s email to remain still and silent. She was drinking her chamomile in small sips, and I did the same with my whisky, which as usual, I have made too strong. Suddenly, she placed the cup on the small table next to her and let out a “Ah!” that sounded as the deepest sigh that I had ever heard, she opened her purse, she took out the clipping from *The New York Times* and her glasses, she put them on and she read very slowly, as if she were dictating me a recipe:

Arturo López, native of Caracas, did his Master’s in Economic

Development at the University of Columbia many years ago. He returned

to his country and was very successful in his profession. He loved New York which he visited so frequently that a short while back he decided to try his luck in this city of fortune seekers. He insisted that he wanted to start a new life and he got it as soon as he came, because he was brilliant, handsome, fun, and a good drinker. Merrill Lynch hired him and they assigned him a trip to Caracas to visit their clients. He was to leave on the afternoon of September 11th. He was very excited because he was going to spend a week with his parents, Spaniards by origin, and with his other brother. No one knows how he disappeared.

Victoria remained with her mouth wide open, as if there were more text to read, took off her glasses and started to cry. I, the constant talker, remained silent, now looking at the floor as she had done before. She cried and cried, and I saw at the end of the hallway how Xiomara and José were looking with scared faces. Fortunately, they did not come over, perhaps because they heard that the intensity of the crying lessened. With all the grief that a human being can keep inside, she did a grimace of disgust and almost screaming she asked me: “What do you think sister?”

I decided to pretend to support her, asking her if she knew who had given all that information to the newspaper. “Of course I knew. The old witch, his mother, not only did she give me this, but was extremely thankful to an old friend of them, whom a journalist called to ask for information. You should have heard with how much malevolence she told me over and over that the friend, a 96-year-old man, gladly provided his version and more gladly had sent several translated copies of the clipping. As soon as they received them, that’s how she said it; they knew that one of them should be for me.” I tried to

soothe her, suggesting that probably Arturo had told the man that he had gotten divorced. “Probably not; for sure. Since he left, he would call me and insisted on speeding up the divorce. Who knows with which whore he was involved with.” That’s where I asked her emphasizing my words, that if that was true why did it bother her that the old man had left her out. Besides if he had ignored her, all the laws from Venezuela and the United States had recognized her as the legitimate wife and sole heir. I wanted to add that the husband, that she hated so much because he did not take her into consideration, had exceeded in generosity with her. If I did not do it, it was because she interrupted me bursting into tears: “He left me everything, but he always ignored me. Always, always! The only one he loved was that Jewish woman who destroyed his life. Because of her, he left me and went to New York. Because of her, he disappeared.”

I got up and went to pour myself another whisky, along the way thinking what I would do to conclude this confession session. “God is very great,” like that idiot Agustín likes to say over and over, and when I came back, she was standing, wringing her eyes with a handkerchief and she just said: “Pardon me, my love. I don’t know why I bothered you with all my craziness. That’s what’s happening to me: I’m going crazy and you know what I would really like? To disappear just like him. Become a fistful of ashes like poor Martínez. I digress, I know. Forgive me. I’ll call you one of these days and even if my head breaks into pieces because of the pain, I’ll have a whiskey with you.”

I forgive Victoria all the things she let out that evening, except for including Manuel in her bag of sorrows. His terminal illness was very recent, his rage against death, his insistence with I do not know whom so that they do not say anything to anyone, not even the date and time where they would scatter his ashes under the cedar tree in the Los

Caobos. I did not know it, and it was Xiomara who managed to be there because someone called her cell phone from the very spot commenting something like “I imagine that he picked that cedar tree in honor of all the pick-ups that he got near it.” Xiomara furious hung up without answering, she hurried to get to the park and there they were as she told me with her eyes full of tears, just five people: three men and two women, she knew none of them. They were looking at the dirt around the cedar tree, probably because they had already scattered the ashes and the oldest of the women was holding a little black box against her chest. It was enough that they noticed Xiomara’s presence to say goodbye to each other and go up the small hill that would take them away from the cedar tree, each one as if avoiding the rest. She stayed there for a while, trying in vain to distinguish the ashes in the dirt, I do not understand how such a successful man had such a lonely ending. She looked at me as if hoping that I, because of my age, could explain it to her. The only thing that occurred to me was to say that I always thought that success was a disaster, because it deforms you and alters your course. “Then, according to you is it preferable to fill your life with failures?” We laughed hugging each other, and José who at that moment was coming out of the bathroom that serves as a workroom for him, when he saw us like two frisky girls, asked: “What’s the joke?”

I do not know nor will I ever know “what is?” anything. As my dear Bernardo complained, another one made into ashes that some Italian wind had scattered around everywhere: “You can’t be helped, my dear. You were born a cynic, doubtful, rude, self-centered, conceited, but you understand your life and you live it. Blessed are all of us who have known you.” He loved to go around blessing everyone. It is curious that I remember him almost every day. As if I had him inside of me. But he really shared with

me all the faults that he attributed to me. We accepted each other, we put up with each other and we loved each other. If I had agreed to live together, he probably would not have had such an ambiguous ending that, as Brito called it, ended up being “case closed, accidental death.” They freed the Italians a while later because they did not find proof that one of them had shot him. But, with the interrogation, all the gossip came out, and the hypothesis of Bernardo’s suicide gained momentum since there were those who insisted that it was the result of “disappointment in love.” Gold medal for that subtle hypocrisy.

“The other half,” as they were calling Juanca, is still in Salamanca, and from him I also get emails from time to time. By the way, and before I forget, what I detest from this new form of mail is its immediacy. Before, one would receive a letter, written by hand, it was read and even reread and it was answered, also by hand, after due consideration, as the legal jargon states. Between arrival and departure weeks could go by. Now, as soon as we received an email and not answer it immediately, the sender sends another one and then another as Juanca has done several times already. What is it that bothers him so much if he always goes on telling me how well he is doing, that his new book of poems is about to come out (I wish for his sake that this time they will be understandable), he even tells me that he has chances of having a career at the university? It is as if he did not want to be forgotten, or as he says in the last email that I still do not feel like responding: “The ones that Bernardo loved the most, were you and I.”

It is not true. In our past we all loved each other. Otherwise we could not have strengthened the group with our affections and our worries for one another. If you need proof, I offer my thanks for the care that all of them provided me when the disaster

occurred. I do not know why at times that disaster seems similar to the one on September 11th in New York. It must be because it created a camaraderie that appeared to be eternal. We thought that, from then on, we would be united forever. United and happy. Now it is I, the self-confessed survivor in this bunch of deaths and exterminations, who realizes our involuntary error. We were not happy. We were not safe. We did not understand that life is not about being happy and safe but it is about being alert, like psychopaths faced with it. To feel like, above all, “pronouns”, not characters or people. If we had felt simply as “pronouns,” we would not have had the risk of losing identity, heritage, and *raison d'être*. We would have been one more of those who wrote on the walls of their houses “the battle cry” as José called it: “We are alive!”

It is 7:30 in the evening. Night has arrived and I will have a whisky. With a few, I forget everything. “Don’t count them.” Cheers!

**ADDENDUM:
INTERVIEW WITH ISAAC CHOCRÓN**

This is the interview with Isaac Chocrón that I conducted on Saturday, August 13th, 2011 at the author's penthouse apartment in Caracas, Venezuela. I decided to visit Caracas, Venezuela to become familiar with many of the locations mentioned in the novel (Vargas, Plaza de Altamira). I also had the opportunity to see a film about the life of Venezuelan modernist painter Armando Reverón which is mentioned in the novella. In addition, it gave me the opportunity to become familiar with the speech and attitudes of people in Venezuela, so exemplary reflected by Isaac Chocrón.

The interview was very informal in nature and there were many interruptions (telephone calls, talks with the author's housekeeper) that are not reflected in this transcription. Also, the author was very sick and receiving chemotherapy treatment at the time which is thought to have had an effect on his memory. Isaac Chocrón died just three months after this interview. The interview was conducted in Spanish and recorded. I transcribed the interview and then translated it. Please note that Isaac Chocrón's interventions will be marked by and *IC* while mine will be marked by an *MM*.

MM Good morning to Isaac Chocron. Today is August 13th, 2011. Thank very much for having me. I am going to ask you some questions that will be part, as we discussed, of an addendum to my doctoral dissertation.

IC Agreed

MM First of all, thank you very much because... to me it is a great honor to be able to interview...

IC No...

MM ...this great author

IC No, we have just met and we're already good friends.

MM Well, several days ago, well several months ago, I sent you some questions. Well. They are general questions about the text I am translating, which is *Pronombres personales*, a text that... has... very theatrical passages in some instances. Then, one of the questions was, if there is a distinction between Chocrón the playwright and Chocrón the novelist.

IC I don't think so. Because I believe that I was a playwright first of all, but in the theatre people would tell me: Why don't you write novels? And then... Well, I had already written *Pasajes* which was something I did while studying,

MM And how do you set out to write as a playwright and to write as a novelist?

IC Ah, I don't know, I don't know. I don't want to become the intellectual talking about why I have this or that theory. I don't know why. What I can tell you that since I starting thinking for myself, let's say around the age of 15, eh... my passion has been to write, and if I'm feeling this lack of... eh... of what?

MM Energy...

IC Energy, is because during all these years, 50 years, maybe more, eh... I would do hundreds of things.

MM OK, a question about *Pronombres personales*. *Pronombres personales* describe two catastrophes: a torrential rain and New York's twin Towers.

IC Aha.

MM To what degree do you think catastrophes are catalytic elements in our lives and also in novels, in fiction?

IC I don't know if they are catalytic elements, but they are tragedies and they affects us a lot, then... I could not believe, because remember, I consider myself a New Yorker, and the day of the Towers I had 5 to 10 friends there in those offices and they all died.

MM So, you had people that you personally knew that died there?

IC Yes, yes, my friends...

MM So, it affected you personally...

IC Yes, of course.

MM And that's why it was included in the novel...

IC Of course. The stuff in Vargas, you saw the disaster that... even today it seems people cannot go to Vargas...

MM Well, the catastrophe in Vargas in the novel also serves to criticize Venezuelan society.

IC Yes, of course because that was the beginning of Chávez (Chocrón is referring to the president of Venezuela Hugo Chávez).

MM Then, to a certain extent is a criticism...

IC Yes, yes a shameless criticism...

MM of what had happened...

MM Well, since I deal with gender issues in translation, I find very interesting that the... something we were discussing before, that the first chapter begins in a way that is...

IC ...enigmatic.

MM Enigmatic. And the female narrator, the male/female narrator is not known until the second chapter.

IC Yes, yes.

MM And it is a woman by the name of María Teresa Sánchez.

IC Yes, yes.

MM And as we mentioned before, it something that it's harder to accomplish in Spanish than in English.

IC Aha.

MM Because in English it's very easy to use adjectives without mentioning gender, but in Spanish...you chose a way that there is no way to see if it is a man or a woman, and it is...

IC Oh, thank you very much...

MM ...very well done.

IC Thank you very much.

MM What made you start the novel this way? Why that mystery of not knowing who it is? The sex of the person? The male narrator or female narrator in this case?

IC I don't know, but I suppose that I was in my apartment in Brisamar (Apartment complex in Macuto, a town in Vargas, Venezuela owned by the author and that it is described in the novel) when the Vargas disaster happened and my friends in Caracas started calling, to see how I was, to tell me to go over there (to Caracas), and other things, and she, if I am not mistaken, because I have just read your thing in English (referring to my translation into English of the first chapter that he had just read), has a whisky or whatever and sits at the terrace looking at the sea and then she decides, or he decides, this could have been me... I think.

MM But the fact that she is not.... The fact that the narrator is not known, in this case, was a decision... for a specific reason....

IC To fuck with you (readers)...

MM To fuck with us. (readers).

MM Well the subject of homosexuality is a fundamental part of this work, there are homosexual characters...

IC Where?

MM In *Pronombres personales*.

IC Aha.

MM There are several homosexual characters, there is a character that appears to be bisexual, there are people that seem to have homosexual tendencies, then... The subject of homosexuality, to what degree do you think represents the integration of homosexuality in Venezuelan society? Because this work is from the year 2000? Right?

IC Well, I think that since *Pasajes* (*Passage/Passings*, name of Chocrón first novel not translated into English) there has always been a somewhat homosexual context.

MM Well, the novel (*Pronombres personales*) was also a serial novel...

IC Aha, that was a success; it was in *El Nacional* (*The National*, main Venezuelan newspaper).

MM Exactly.

IC That was the great success of the novel that came out every Monday.

MM It came out on Mondays?

IC I don't remember what day it was. It was a chapter each time and the newspaper would sell...

MM But, was that your decision, the newspaper's, or did you get to...?

IC No, that was Simón Alberto Consalvi's decision, write it down.

MM It's Ok, it's being recorded...

IC Simón Alberto Consalvi was the director of *El Nacional* and he came up with the idea. Because at that time, there were other novels in other countries that were doing the same thing. And mine was going to compete with the one in Colombia... and it defeated the Colombian one and everything..

MM Well, in the novella there is a discussion regarding the gradual disappearance of Jewish culture in Venezuela... But, Jewish culture is part of many of your works...

IC Of course, because of my family... because my father was very much a practicing Jew and founded a synagogue that is on Avenida Buenos Aires in Los Caobos (name of area or complex) called Maguén David. Ah... I feel I am a Jew, but a Sephardic Jew, and I feel I am a Sephardic Venezuelan Jew.

MM But first a Sephardic Jew...

IC No, first Venezuelan, and then Jewish and I have just paid 150 or 1,500 for my place in Mari Pérez (name of area where the Sephardic Museum is located. It has a large room where several events are conducted throughout the year).

MM Well, the other day we talked about whether you consider yourself a homosexual author or not...

IC No, I consider myself the writer, me, Isaac Chocrón. That is, I am not going to attack homosexuality because it is part of my life, but I don't think that I am like that Argentinean, over there, who was a great friend by the way, who wrote all those gay novels, right know I do not remember his name... (Later on while we were having lunch, I asked him if he was referring to Manuel Puig and he said that he was.).

IC Extremely famous, who even lived in New York and died there (sic [actually, Puig died in Cuernavaca, Mexico]). Good friend of mine. No, because I am homosexual, like I am not political...

IC Two more questions and we finish.

MM Yes, two more questions. Is there something else you can tell me about *Pronombres personales* that you remember?

IC The stuff about *El Nacional* which I had forgotten.

MM Yes, the stuff about *El Nacional*.

IC It's extremely important because it was the only Venezuelan novel that was published as a serial in a newspaper, a national newspaper. It was a success, then when the book came out the people waited in line to get it.

MM Amazing! OK, one question about the translation, the last question.

IC I loved it, did you see what I wrote about your translation? (Referring to a note he wrote on the printed copy of the translation I gave him). I loved it, but I'm dying to read the whole translation.

MM Yes, well, I will send it to you when I have it all. Well, the chapters have different pronouns, but what happens in Spanish is that they are just one word.

IC I, you, he...

MM Exactly. Not all are personal pronouns, but there are demonstrative pronouns and things of that nature, my approach, the one I would like to do... although it has been criticized... is start with two words instead of just one word for each of the chapters.

IC Very well, do it ...

MM When for example reads *Eso* or *Ese* then in English had to be *that one* or *this one*...

IC That one (in English)

MM It would be two words ...

IC Of course.

MM While the other ones *Yo*, *Tú* and *Él* would be one word, my idea is then, eh... for example when it reads *Esos* I use *We're Guys*, *we*, contraction, *'re guys*. (This was subsequently changed to THEY'RE FELLOWS.)

IC Perfect.

MM So it remains one word, *We're*.

IC Very well.

MM Or... else I could start with another... I even considered about changing the title instead of *Personal Pronouns*, which would be the translation, I would use another title like *Up Close and Personal*.

IC No.

MM No?

IC No because it's not going to... it's not going to sell, better use *Personal Pronouns* and when it comes out in any language, people are going to say that they have already read it (?) and that they want to read it. If they publish your translation, you want it to sell, but it has to have *Personal Pronouns*.

MM It would be better that way?

IC Of course *Personal Pronouns* Why not? (In English)

MM Well I was just doing it because of the pronouns...

IC No, no.

MM To maintain the...

IC No, no don't be such a purist, that's your problem, that you are not a translator, but a purist.

MM Very well, thank you very much. I am not going to bother you any more,

IC For now...

MM For now ... perhaps later I will bother you a little more...

WORKS CITED

- Alarcos Llorach, E. (2002). *Gramática de la lengua española*. Madrid: Real Academia Española.
- Álvarez-Borland, I. (1985). La Habana para un Infante difunto. *Hispania*, 68 (1), 44-48.
- Andone, O.-H. (2002). Gender issues in translation. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 10 (2), 135-150.
- Aristeas. (130 B. C. E./2002). *The work of the seventy-two from Aristeas to Philocrates*. (D. Robinson, Ed., & M. Hadas, Trans.) Manchester and Northampton: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Arrojo, R. (1994). Fidelity and the gendered translation. *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction*, 7 (2), 147-163.
- Arrojo, R. (2004). Translation, transference, and the attraction to otherness: Borges, Menard, Whitman. *Diacritics*, 34 (3/4), 31-53.
- Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, A. d. (2010). *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*. Madrid: Espasa Libreo, S. L. U.
- Azparrén Giménez, L. (1978). *El teatro venezolano y otros teatros*. Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, C. A.
- Bassnett, S. (1998). The translation turn in cultural studies. In S. Bassnett, & A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Constructing cultures: Essays on literary translation* (pp. 123-140). Clevedon/Philadelphia/Toronto/Sidney/Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (2010). *The second sex*. (C. Borde, & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.) New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (1952). *The second sex*. (H. M. Parsley, Trans.) New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Bellos, D. (2011). *Is that a fish in your ear? Translation and the meaning of everything*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc.
- Berk, L. M. (1999). *English syntax: from word to discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blight, R. C. (2005). Footnotes for meaningful translations of the New testament. *Journal*

of Translation, 1 (1), 7-46.

- Borde, C., & Malovany-Chevalier, C. (2010). Translator's notes. In S. D. Beauvoir, *The second sex* (pp. xviii-xxi). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Borges, J. L. (2004). Pierre Menard autor del Quijote. In J. L. Borges, *Ficciones* (Undécima ed., pp. 41-55). Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Bradley, H. (1996). *Fractured identities: Patterns of inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Bradley, H. (2007). *Gender*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cabrera Infante, G. (2005). *Infante's inferno*. (S. J. Levine and G. Cabrera Infante, Trans.) Normal and London: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Cabrera Infante, G. (2005). *Infante's inferno*. (S. J. Levine and G. Cabrera Infante, Trans.) Normal and London: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Cabrera Infante, G. (1979). *La Habana Para un Infante Difunto* (2006 ed.). Barcelona: Seix Barral Biblioteca Breve.
- Castillo, L. H. (2002, Diciembre 15). Té con Chocrón: el gentleman de las letras. *El Nacional*, pp. 16-22.
- Catford, J. C. (1965). *A linguistic theory of translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cervantes Saavedra, M. d. (1605). *Don Quijote de la Mancha, Edición del IV Centenario* (2004 ed.). Madrid: Real Academia Española.
- Cervantes Saavedra, M. d. (1605). *Don Quixote* (2003 ed.). (E. Grossman, Trans.) New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Cervantes Saavedra, M. d. (1605). *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1970 ed.). (S. Putnam, Trans.) New York: The Viking Press.
- Cervantes Saavedra, M. d. (1605). *The history and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha* (2001 ed.). (T. Smollett, Trans.) New York: The Modern Library.

- Chesterman, A. (1997). *Memes of translation*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Chocrón, I. (1982). *50 vacas gordas*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1963). *Animales feroces*. Caracas: Editora Grafos.
- Chocrón, I. (1966). *Asia y el Lejano Oriente; Tric-trac*. Caracas: Ediciones del Rectorado de la Universidad de Los Andes.
- Chocrón, I. (1987). *Clípper; Simón*. Caracas: Alfadil.
- Chocrón, I. (1961). *El quinto infierno*. Caracas: Ediciones Zodíaco.
- Chocrón, I. (2005). *El vergel*. Caracas: Grupo Editorial Random House Mondadori.
- Chocrón, I. (2011, August 13). Interview with Isaac Chocrón. (M. Miletich, Interviewer, & M. Miletich, Translator)
- Chocrón, I. (1972). *La revolución*. Caracas: Editorial Tiempo Nuevo.
- Chocrón, I. (1980). *Mónica y el florentino*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1969). *O.K.* Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1972). *Pájaro de mar por tierra*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1956). *Pasaje: un relato*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (2003). *Pronombres personales*. Caracas: Los Libros de El Nacional.
- Chocrón, I. (1975). *Rómpase en caso de incendio*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1970). *Se ruega no tocar la carne por razones de higiene*. Caracas: Editorial Tiempo Nuevo.
- Chocrón, I. (1984). *Teatro II: Animales feroces; La máxima felicidad; Mesopotamia*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1990). *Teatro IV: Asia y el lejano oriente; Tric-Trac; Alfabeto para analfabetos*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.
- Chocrón, I. (1995). *Three plays by Isaac Chocrón / translation and critical study by Barbara Younoszai and Rossi Irausquin-Johnson ; with a foreword by Isaac Chocrón*. (B. Younoszai, & R. Irausquin-Johnson, Trans.) New York: Lang

- Chocrón, I. (1988). *Todo una dama*. Caracas: Alfadil.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19, 829-859.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. London: Penguin.
- Curzan, A. (2003). *Gender shifts in the history of English*. West Nyack, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, K. (2001). *Translation theories explained: Deconstruction and translation*. Brooklands, United Kingdom: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Delisle, J., Lee-Jahnke, H., & Cormier, M. C. (Eds.). (1999). *Translation terminology*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Donoso, J. (2005). *El lugar sin límites* (Sexta ed.). México: Alfaguara.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1985). *Myths of gender: Biological theories about women and men*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Flotow, L. v. (1991). Feminist translation: context practices and theories. *Traduction, Terminologie, Redaction*, 4 (2), 69-84.
- Flotow, L. v. (1997). *Translation and gender: Translating in the 'era of feminism.'* Manchester and Ontario: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Foster, D. W. (Ed.). (1994). *Latin American writers on gay and lesbian themes: A biocritical sourcebook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Foster, D. W. (1991). *Gay and lesbian themes in Latin American writing*. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Gaboriau, L. (1979). *A clash of symbols*, Toronto: The Coach House Press; translation of *La nef des sorcières* by Marthe Blackburn, Nicole Brossard et al, Montreal: Quinze, 1976.
- Gentzler, E., & Tymoczko, M. (2002). Introduction. In M. Tymoczko, & E. Gentzler (Eds.), *Translation and Power* (pp. x-xviii). Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gómez-Tarrego, L. (2007). *Gramática didáctica del español* (Novena ed.). Madrid: Ediciones SM.

Goodman, L. (1996). Introduction: Gender as an approach to literature. In L. Goodman (Ed.), *Literature and gender* (p. vii). London and New York: Routledge in association with The Open University.

- Gutiérrez Lanza, C. (2002). Spanish film translation and cultural patronage: The filtering and manipulation of imported material during Franco's dictatorship. In M. Tymoczko, & E. Gentzler (Eds.), *Translation and power* (pp. 141-159). Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts.
- Guzmán, M. C. (2012). Translating Latin America: Reading translator's archives. In M. Feltrin-Morris, D. Folaron, & M. C. Guzmán (Eds.), *Translation and Literary Studies: Homage to Marilyn Gaddis Rose* (pp. 90-100). Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Hart, T. R. (1988). Review by Thomas R. Hart of Tobias Smollett's translation: The adventures of Don Quixote. *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*, 118-122.
- Harvey, K. (2000a). Describing camp talk: Language/pragmatics/politics. *Language and Literature*, 9 (3), 240-260.
- Harvey, K. (2000b). Gay community, gay identity and the translated text. *Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction*, 137-165.
- Harvey, K. (1998). Translating camp talk: Gay identities and cultural transfer. *The Translator*, 4 (2), 295-320.
- Henitiuk, V. (1999). Translating woman: Reading the female through the male. *Meta*, 44 (3), 469-484.
- Hermans, T. (1985). Translation Studies and a new paradigm. In T. Hermans (Ed.), *The manipulation of literature: studies in literary translation* (pp. 7-15). New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.
- Hermans, T. (1997). The task of the translator in European Renaissance: explorations in a discursive field. In S. Bassnett (Ed.), *Translating Literature* (pp. 14-40). London: Boydell and Brewer.
- Hernadi, P. (2001). Literature and evolution. *Substance*, 55-71.
- House, J. (2008). Beyond intervention: Universals in translation? *trans-kom*, 1 (1), 6-19.
- Jiménez, J. R. (1956) *Platero and I*. (William H. and Mary M. Roberts, Trans.) New York: New American Library.
- Johnson, B. (1980). *The critical difference: Essays in contemporary rhetoric of reading*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Kadish, D. Y., & Massardier-Kenney, F. (Eds.). (2009). *Translating slavery, volume I: Gender and race in French abolitionist writing, 1780-1830*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press.
- Kaufman, M. (1993). *Cracking the armour: Power, pain and the lives of men*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Landers, C. E. (2001). *Literary translation: a practical guide*. Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, Sidney: Multilingual Matters LTD.
- Larson, M. (1991). Entrevista con Isaac Chocrón. *Confluencia* , 117-125.
- Laskier Martín, A. (2008). *An erotic philology of Golden Age Spain*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Lefevere, A. (1990). Translation: its genealogy in the west. In S. Bassnett, & A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation, history & culture* (pp. 14-28). London and New York: Cassell.
- Levine, S. J. (1984). Translation as (sub)version: On translating Infante's *Inferno*. *Substance*, 42, 85-94.
- Levine, S. J. (1991). *The subversive scribe*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press.
- Lips, H. M. (1988). *Sex & gender: an introduction*. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Lockhart, D. B. (Ed.). (1997). *Jewish writers of Latin America: A dictionary*. New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Lowe, E., & Fitz, E. E. (2007). Translation and the rise of Inter-American literature. Gainesville/Tallahassee/Tampa/Boca Raton/Pensacola/Orlando/Miami/Jacksonville/Ft. Myers/Sarasota: University Press of Florida.
- Maier, C. (2007). The translator as intervenient being. In J. Munday (Ed.), *Translation as intervention* (pp. 1-17). London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Massardier-Kenney, F. (1997). Towards a redefinition of feminist translation practice. *The Translator* , 3 (1), 55-69.
- Massardier-Kenney, F. (Eds.). (2009). *Translating slavery, volume I: Gender and race in French*

abolitionist writing, 1780-1830. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press.

- McKenna, W., & Kessler, S. (2008). Transgendering: Blurring the boundaries of gender. In M. S. Kimmel, & A. Aronson (Eds.), *The gendered society reader* (pp. 478-489). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mira, A. (1999). Pushing the limits of faithfulness: A case for gay translation. In *The practices of literary translation: Constraints and creativity* (pp. 109-123). Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Moi, T. (2002). While we wait: The English translation of *The second sex*. *Signs*, 27 (4), 1005-1045.
- Monasterios, R. (2008). La revolución: hoy más vigente que nunca. In I. Chocrón, & U. Ulive (Ed.), *Teatro completo I: comedias inciviles, La revolución, Los navegao, OK* (pp. 143-148). Caracas: Editorial Melvin.
- Penny, R. (1991). *History of the Spanish language* (Second ed.). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Philo Judeaus. (20 B. C. E./2002). The creation of the Septuagint. In D. Robinson (Ed.), *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche* (D. Robinson, Ed., & F. H. Colson, Trans.) Manchester and Northampton: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Pilcher, J., & Whelehan, I. (2004). *50 key concepts in gender studies*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Real Academia Española. (2002). *Ortografía de la lengua española*. Madrid, Editorial Espasa Calpe, S. A.
- Rabassa, G. (2005). *If this be treason: translation and its discontents, a memoir*. New York: New Directions publishing Corporation.
- Rayor, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Sappho's lyre: archaic lyric and women poets of ancient Greece*. (D. Rayor, Trans.) Brekely: University of California Press.
- Rico, F. (2004). In M. d. Cervantes, & R. A. Española (Ed.), *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (p. 326 fn. 31). Madrid: Real Academia Española.
- Robinson, D. (2002). *Becoming a translator: an introduction to the theory and practice of translation* (Second ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Robinson, D. (1995). Theorizing translation in a woman's voice. *The Translator* 1 (2), 153-175.

- Rotker, S. (2009). *Isaac Chocrón y Elisa Lerner: los transgresores de la literatura venezolana*. Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello
- Romaine, S. (1999). *Communicating gender*. Mahaw, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1997/2002). On the Different Methods of Translation. In D. Robinson (Ed.), *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche* (D. Robinson, Trans., pp. 225-238). Manchester and Northampton: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Seago, K. (2004). Aspects of gender in translations of 'Sleeping Beauty.' *Comparative Critical Studies* , 2 (1), 23-43.
- Shakespeare, W. (1988). *Coriolanus* (The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare ed.). (P. Brockbank, Ed.) London and New York: Routledge.
- Simon, S. (1996). *Gender in translation: Cultural identity and the politics of transmission*. New York: Routledge.
- Simmons, M. A. (1983). The silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess what is missing from the second sex. *Women's Studies International Forum* , 6 (5), 559-564. Sparrow Press.
- Stryker, S. (2006) a. (de)Subjugated knowledges: An introduction to transgender studies. In S. Stryker, & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 1-17). New York and London: Routledge.
- Stryker, S. (2008) b. *Transgender history*. Berkley, California: Seal Press.
- Toury, G. (1995) *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Vestrini, M. (1980). *Issac Chocrón frente al espejo*. Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas.
- Vinay, J.-P., & Darbelnet, J. (1995). *Comparative stylistics of French and English: A methodology for translation*. (J. C. Sager, & M. J. Hamel, Trans.) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Waldman, G. (1977). An interview with Isaac Chocrón. *Latin American Theater review*,

11 (1), 103-109.

Weed, E. (2006). Feminist psychoanalytic literary criticism. In E. Rooney (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo: Cambridge University Press.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1 (2), 137.

Wiegman, R., & Glasberg, E. (1999). *Literature and gender: Thinking critically through fiction, poetry and drama*. (C. I. Schuster, Ed.) New York, Reading, Mento Park, harlow, Don Mills, Sidney, Mexico City, Madrid, Amsterdam: Longman.