

SENSELESSNESS

HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA

TRANSLATED BY KATHERINE SILVER



“FANTASTIC.” —JUNOT DÍAZ

Horacio Castellanos Moya

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Translated from the Spanish
by Katherine Silver

A NEW DIRECTIONS PAPERBOOK ORIGINAL

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TO. S.D.,
who made me promise I would never dedicate this book to her

ISMENE: My lord, the good sense one has at birth
never abides with the unfortunates
but goes astray

Sophocles, *Antigone*

ONE

I AM NOT COMPLETE IN THE MIND, said the sentence I highlighted with the yellow marker and eventually copied into my personal notebook, because this wasn't just any old sentence, much less some wisecrack, not by any means, but rather the sentence that astonished me more than any other sentence I read that first day on the job, the sentence that most dumbfounded me during my first incursion into those one thousand one hundred almost single-spaced printed pages placed on what would be my desk by my friend Erick so I could get some idea of the task that awaited me. *I am not complete in the mind*. I repeated to myself, stunned by the extent of mental perturbation experienced by this Cakchiquel man who had witnessed his family's murder, by the fact that this indigenous man was aware of the breakdown of his own psychic apparatus as a result of having watched, albeit wounded and powerless as soldiers of his country's army scornfully and in cold blood chopped each of his four small children to pieces with machetes, then turned on his wife, the poor woman already in shock because she too had been forced to watch as the soldiers turned her small children into palpitating pieces of human flesh. Nobody can be complete in the mind after having survived such an ordeal, I said to myself, morbidly mulling it over, trying to imagine what waking up must have been like for this indigenous man, who they had left for dead among chunks of the flesh of his wife and children and who then, many years later, had the opportunity to give his testimony so that I could read it and make stylistic corrections, testimony that began, in fact, with the sentence *I am not complete in the mind* that so moved me because it summed up in the most concise manner possible the mental state tens of thousands of people who have suffered experiences similar to the ones recounted by this Cakchiquel man found themselves in, and also summed up the mental state of thousands of soldiers and paramilitary men who had with relish cut to pieces their so-called compatriots, though I must admit that it's not the same to be incomplete in the mind after watching your own children drawn and quartered as after drawing and quartering other peoples' children, I told myself before reaching the overwhelming conclusion that it was the entire population of this country that was not complete in the mind, which led me to an even worse conclusion, even more perturbing, and this was that only somebody completely out of his mind would be willing to move to a foreign country whose population was not complete in the mind to perform a task that consisted precisely of copyediting an extensive report of one thousand one hundred pages that documents the hundreds of massacres and proves the general mental perturbation. I am also not complete in the mind, I then told myself on that, my first day of work sitting at what would be my desk for the duration, my eyes wandering aimlessly over the tall almost bare white walls of that office I would be using for the next three months—its only furnishings were the desk, the computer, the chair I was digressing in, and a crucifix behind my back, thanks to which the walls were not completely bare. I must be much less complete in the mind than all of them, I managed to think as I threw my head back without knocking myself off balance in the chair, wondering how long it would take me to get used to the presence of the crucifix, which I couldn't even

consider taking down because this wasn't my office but rather the bishop's, as my friend Erick had explained to me a few hours earlier as he was leading me toward it, even though the bishop almost never used it, preferring the one in the parish church, where he also lived, so I could use this office as long as I wanted, but I wouldn't be able to get rid of the crucifix and replace it with something else, something to hang on the wall that would lighten my spirits, something that would have been as familiar as removed from any and all religions as I was myself, even though at that moment and for the coming weeks I would find myself working there in the archbishop's palace, situated precisely behind the cathedral, another sign that *I am not complete in the mind*, I said to myself with real concern, because that was the only way to explain the fact that a depraved atheist like myself had agreed to work for the perfidious Catholic Church, the only way to explain that in spite of the hearty revulsion I felt toward the Catholic Church and all other churches, no matter how small, I found myself now precisely in the archbishop's palace facing one thousand one hundred pages of almost single-spaced text that contained the horrific stories of how the armed forces had decimated dozens of villages and their inhabitants. I am the least complete in the mind! I thought with alarm as I stood up and began to pace like a caged animal around that office whose only window facing the street was walled up so that neither the passersby nor anybody inside would succumb to temptation, I began to pace around as I would frequently do each and every one of the days I spent within those four walls, but at that moment, on the verge of going mad after realizing that I was so not complete in the mind that I had accepted and was starting a job with the church, a job that had already put me in the sights of the armed forces of this country, as if I didn't already have enough problems with the armed forces of my own country, as if the enemies in my own country weren't enough for me, I was about to stick my snout into somebody else's wasps' nest, make sure that the Catholic hands about to touch the balls of the military tiger were clean and had even gotten a *manicure*, because that was what my work was all about, cleaning up and giving a *manicure* to the Catholic hands that were piously getting ready to squeeze the tiger's balls, I thought as I fixed my gaze on the bulky stack of one thousand one hundred pages that lay on the desk, and, momentarily stopping my pacing, increasingly in a stupor, I understood that it was not going to be easy to read, organize, and copyedit those one thousand one hundred pages in the three months my friend Erick and I had agreed on: Shit! Having agreed to edit that report in just three months proved that my problem wasn't that I was not complete in the mind but that I was completely unhinged. All of a sudden I felt trapped in that office with those high bare walls as a victim of a conspiracy between the Church and the armed forces in a foreign country, a lamb being led to the slaughter thanks to a stupid and dangerous bout of enthusiasm that made me trust my friend Erick when, one month earlier—as we sipped Rioja in an old Spanish bar near police headquarters—he asked me if I would be interested in copyediting the final report of the project he was involved in, a project that consisted of recovering the memories of the hundreds of survivors of and witnesses to the massacres perpetrated in the throes of the so-called armed conflict between the army and the guerrillas, if I would be interested in earning five thousand dollars for spending three months editing about five hundred pages written by well-known journalists and academics, who were turning in a text that was almost finished, I would only have to look it over, a final proofing, it was really a great gig for five thousand dollars just to put the final touches on a project that dozens and dozens of people had

participated in, beginning with the group of missionaries who had managed to record the oral testimonies of the Indians, witnesses and survivors, most of whom didn't even speak Spanish very well and who were afraid above all else of anything that had to do with the events they had been victims of, followed by those in charge of transcribing the tapes, and ending with teams of distinguished professionals, who would classify and analyze the testimonies and who would then all write up the report, my friend Erick explained to me in detail, not very emphatically, very calmly. In fact, in that conspiratorial tone so typical of him, knowing that I would never refuse such an offer, not because of the enthusiasm a good Rioja might awaken in my spirit but rather because he perceived that I was so not complete in the mind that I would accept his offer and even get excited about the idea of being involved in such a project without weighing the pros and cons or negotiating, which is just what happened.

I flung open the door, terrified, as if there were no air in that closed room and I was about to pass out in a frenzied fit of paranoia; I stood in the doorway, probably with my eyes popping out of my head if the way the two secretaries turned and looked at me was any indication, determined to leave the door open while I got used to that place and my new job even though the open door would undoubtedly affect my ability to concentrate on what I was reading. I didn't care, I preferred any distraction, even if it interfered with my reading of those one thousand one hundred pages, to suffering new fits of paranoia provoked by such close quarters and my sick imagination set off by one not even very ingenuous sentence—just one among hundreds I would have to read in the coming weeks—which had sent me into a tizzy that could only paralyze me, as I confirmed now when I returned from the threshold to the chair, where I soon sat down and stared at the aforementioned sentence, *I am not complete in the mind*, and which I intended to skip over immediately in order to get to the one that followed without stopping to digress as I just had, in order to avoid the risk of getting dangerously bogged down in the job I was only just beginning, but my intention was thwarted a few seconds later by the appearance in my office of a little guy with glasses and a Mexican mustache, the guy whose office was right next to mine and whom my friend Erick had introduced me to about an hour earlier. He was leading me to my place of work, a little guy who was nothing less than the director of the entire complex of offices devoted to monitoring human rights, the second in command under the bishop, Erick explained to me as I was offering him my hand and peering at the framed and very prominently placed photographs of him standing with Pope John Paul II in one and with the president of the United States, William Clinton, in another, which immediately alerted me to the fact that he wasn't shaking hands with any old little guy but one who had given that same hand to the pope and President Clinton, an idea that almost managed to intimidate me, given the fact that the pope and the president of the United States were the two most powerful men on the planet, and the little guy who was now entering my office had had his picture taken with both dignitaries, no minor accomplishment, so I immediately stood up and asked him solicitously what I could do for him, to which the little guy responded just as kindly as possible, asking me to please excuse the interruption, he was aware that he was facing an arduous task, he said, as he pointed to the one thousand one hundred pages that lay on the desk, but wanting to take advantage of my having opened the door to enjoy what was surely my first break, he had taken the liberty of coming to invite me on a tour of the whole building so that

could meet the rest of the staff, a tour my friend Erick, always in a rush, had omitted when he led me directly from the reception area to what would be my office, stopping only at the little guy's office. I already mentioned, an invitation I immediately accepted and that carried me to each and every office in that building, which, truth be told, wasn't a building so much as a colonial structure attached to the back of the cathedral with the typical layout of an archbishop's palace: two stories of solid stone with wide corridors surrounding a square central courtyard, where we found several employees enjoying their morning break, and who, seeing me with Mynor, for this was the name of the little lay director of that institution, greeted me effusively and with some fawning, as if I were a new seminarian, while the little guy extolled my professional virtues thanks to which the report about the massacres would end up being a first-rate text, and I told myself that the good-looking girls had to be hiding somewhere because the ones the little guy had introduced me to were not only not complete in their minds but also in their bodies, devoid of even one attractive feature, an observation I did not share with my guide and, as the days passed, I discovered to be intrinsic to that institution and not only to the extreme left as I had always thought—that ugly women were an exclusive attribute of extreme left-wing organizations—no, now I understood that they also were intrinsic to Catholic organizations dedicated to monitoring human rights, a conclusion I reached later, as I said, and at no time did I share this with the guy who had posed for photographs with John Paul II and Bill Clinton, the little guy who took me all around, from one office to another, until finally he left me alone again in front of the one thousand one hundred pages awaiting me in my office, not before asking me if I'd like him to close the door, which I responded that it would be better to leave it open as we were in the quietest corner of the palace and there wouldn't be any annoying interferences to distract me.

TWO

IN ORDER TO CELEBRATE my first day of work as God intended I arranged to meet my buddy Toto noon at El Portalito, the city's most legendary cantina, fortunately located a mere two hundred yards from my office, close enough to prevent the onset of anxiety in someone who is afraid, above all else, of failing to be punctual, as is the case with me; someone who requires a drink to calm the nerves at the strangest moments, as is also the case with me, which made me consider the proximity of the archbishop's palace to El Portalito well-nigh miraculous, like a wink from the heavens that would enable me to do my work without faltering, as I explained to my buddy Toto once we were sitting down at a table in the cantina awaiting the voluminous mugs of beer, looking over the faces of the other clientele: the certainty of having a cantina so close by, right at hand, no matter what kind of office I am stuck in, lays the groundwork for a certain degree of spiritual peace, I was explaining to him at the very moment we picked up our mugs to make a toast, which Toto took advantage of to show off his peculiar sense of humor: "May you come out of this shit alive," the wiseguy pronounced in solemn tones, a joke that immediately made me suspicious of the men sitting at a nearby table knowing as I did that all kinds of thugs hung out at that dark and squalid cantina, including informants and torturers who belonged to the so-called Presidential High Command, torturers who usually drank alone, almost never looking up from the table, their eyes bloodshot and their grimace sinister, which could be recognized by the scent of the dense, ghastly aura surrounding them. "Don't worry, take it easy," my buddy Toto told me, unsheathing his equine teeth from under his Pancho Villa mustache, then right away asking me about my impressions after my first morning of work, how had the priests treated me, I should tell him all about it, but at the precise moment my story was about to begin, a marimba thundered deafeningly from a raised dais next to the door, a marimba played by two very old men, the notes sweeping all conversation away from the tables, especially those closest to the door like ours, and we would have had to shout in order to hear each other, which my buddy Toto then decided to tell me that this music was a kind of welcome march, that he had no doubt it was dedicated to me, he shouted with a mocking grin, knowing that if there is anything I despise with particular intensity it is folk music, and especially the sad, mournful music of the marimba, an instrument only a sad and mournful people can idolize, as I have said many times. "Cut the shit, man, and tell me all about it," he said, laughing at my expense, because I didn't have much choice, given the fact that the marimba was just beginning its serenade, and I would have to shout to be heard over that sad and mournful music, something that truth be told wouldn't be difficult for me, much less now that we had ordered a second round of beers, but also I had to forget about the marimba and its irritating music in order to concentrate on telling him my impressions after my first morning of work, a story that I could begin only by describing the strange sensation I'd had when I knocked on that enormous wooden door located behind the cathedral, as if I were asking them to open the doors to catacombs I had long feared and abhorred but whose bowels I was now destined to penetrate, that strange sensation of being above

to enter a forbidden and undesirable world I'd had early that morning while I waited for them to open the enormous wooden doors on that stinking filthy street already infested with street vendors and suspicious-looking characters, like the ones who also hung out at this cantina, where the marimba finally finished its first song and the waitress brought us our second round of beer. Once I'd made my way past the enormous wooden door following a porter who looked like an old sexton, I hastened to tell my buddy Toto, taking advantage of the interregnum of silence between one song and the next, I was led into a cold and intimidating waiting room, like the anteroom of a convent, where I remained alone for too many minutes while the porter went to find my friend Erick, sitting on a bench where only the prie-dieu was missing and where I could appreciate in all its dimensions the fact that I was entering a world ruled by the laws of Catholicism, which had always produced in me the greatest revulsion, which made me consider the possibility of rushing out of there at that instant, although I was immediately overwhelmed by an even stranger sensation, as if I had been there before and now I had come back to relive the same experience all over again, and that it would affect my life in some definitive way, I told my buddy Toto at the very moment the marimba started playing a new song, a chilling sensation, by the way, as if I were about to live out a destiny in which my will barely counted and whose principal feature was danger.

Before continuing I should state clearly that I felt especially safe with Toto, not only because we were in his city and he knew his way around easily, but also because he looked like a landowner—the wide-brimmed hat, the military boots, and the loose-fitting jacket—thereby commanding a certain respect, who knows why, and he probably was carrying a loaded pistol on his belt—forewarned and forearmed—and Toto defined himself as a farmer and a poet, a fact I alone knew, given our close friendship, but to the rest of the cantina's clientele he would look like just a landowner, a feared species in this country due to its aggressiveness and the little consideration it showed for other peoples' lives, as might be gathered from reading the one thousand one hundred pages that lay on the desk in the archbishop's palace and about which my buddy Toto now started to interrogate me. I told him that my friend Erick had stuck it in me crooked and without lubrication, the clever asshole. Instead of the five hundred pages we had agreed on, I would have twice that amount of text to edit without Erick showing any willingness to also double my remuneration. He was confident that at this stage I wouldn't change my mind because three hundred of those pages were lists of massacres and victims' names and the other eight hundred were very well written, as I was soon to discover, and he assured me, so my job was to only polish and touch up the final version, although of course I had carte blanche to change anything I thought necessary, without of course altering the focus—and his trust in me was such that it wasn't necessary to go into much detail, he said. And the truth was, I admitted to my buddy Toto, that the fifty pages I had read this morning were very carefully written; indeed, I would even say they were impeccable, in spite of the antiseptic and slightly academic style of the psychiatrist who had written this first part of the report, a Basque by the name of Joseba, whose I didn't know and who was now out of the country, whose method consisted of proposing several theses about the effects that the specific and generalized drawing and quartering had had on the physical, mental, and emotional health of the surviving population, only to then support his theses with the testimonies of some of those survivors, carefully chosen out of hundreds and hundreds

cases that were in the archives, some of which, read this morning, had unsettled my sick imagination. I admitted to my buddy, who drank his beer a little too quickly, or rather drank while I was talking and so got ahead of me, for example the case of the village deaf-mute, I continued, I don't remember which far-flung village up in the highlands this happened, I read it just before leaving the office, I was even mulling it over on my way as I crossed the city's main plaza, known as Parque Central, in front of the cathedral, because the poor deaf-mute had the misfortune of being interrogated by soldiers who didn't know he was deaf, the misfortune of being beaten to make him spill the names of those who had collaborated with the guerrillas, in front of the other inhabitants of the village and without saying a word the deaf-mute was beaten without saying a word after each question the sergeant who commanded the unit asked him, without anybody in the village daring to tell the sergeant that the deaf-mute couldn't answer even when they tied him to that tree in the plaza and the sergeant began to make incisions on his body with a saber to his shouts of "Speak, you Indian sonofabitch, before I really get pissed off!" but the deaf-mute just opened his bulging eyes so wide that it looked like they were going to pop out of his sockets from terror, unable to answer the sergeant, who, of course, interpreted his silence as defiance and unsheathed his machete to get him to spew out words as fast as a sports announcer and so that this herd of horrified Indians watching the scene would understand that the worst thing they could ever think of doing was to defy authority, a sergeant who was pretty stupid if we consider that he cut the deaf-mute to pieces without even realizing that his screams were not just screams of pain but also the only means for the deaf-mute to express himself. "What a stupid deaf-mute, why didn't he make signs with his hands?" my buddy Toto commented as he picked some potatoes and onions off the plate the waitress had just brought to the table, as if he had no idea that the first thing the soldiers do is tie a victim's wrists to immobilize him and as if I hadn't explained that with the first swing of the machete the god-damn hands of the deaf-mute went flying, tied and all, and that at that point nobody was about to start giving explanations with hand signals; therefore, after the deaf-mute every single other inhabitant of the village was worked over with the machete even though they knew how to talk and said they were willing to denounce the people who had collaborated with the guerrillas, but it didn't do them any good, the orgy had commenced and only a couple of them managed to survive and come and tell about it twelve years later, I said at the same moment my buddy Toto ordered his third beer while I still had half of my second one, which seemed wise, I must confess given the fact that it would have been quite inappropriate for me to arrive drunk and disorderly to work on my first afternoon, to pound on the enormous wooden door so that they would let me in to keep reading stories like the one about the deaf-mute or to pick through the testimonies to find sentences like, *I am not complete in the mind*, just one of the many that astonished me as I went through the pages, I explained to Toto, powerful sentences spoken by Indians for whom remembering the events they told about surely meant bringing back their most painful memories, but also meant entering the therapeutic stage of confronting their past, bringing out into the open those bloody ghosts that haunted their dreams, as they themselves admitted in those testimonies, which seemed like concentrated capsules of pain and whose sentences had so much sonority, strength, and depth that I wrote down some of them in my personal notebook, I said at the same moment I took my little reporter's notepad out of the inside pocket of my tweed jacket, realizing that my buddy Toto had

stopped paying attention because the cantina was filling up and some not-so-bad-looking girls were sitting at a few of the other tables. You're a poet, just listen to this beaut, I said before reading the first sentence, taking advantage of the marimba having just ended, and in my best declamatory voice, read: *Their clothes stayed sad . . .* and then I observed my buddy, but he in turn looked back at me as he were waiting, so I immediately read the second sentence in a more commanding tone of voice, that were possible: *The houses they were sad because no people were inside them . . .* And then without waiting, I read the third one: *Our houses they burned, our animals they ate, our children they killed, the women, the men, ay! ay! . . . Who will put back all the houses?* And I observed him again because by now he must have fathomed those verses that expressed to me all the despair of the massacres, but not to my buddy Toto, more of a landowner than a poet, as I sadly discovered, when I heard him mumble something like "Cool . . .," to be polite, I guessed, because then he stared at me with that your-money-or-your-life look in his eyes and said that I should take it in stride, that editing one thousand one hundred pages of stories about Indians obsessed with terror and death could breed even the strongest of spirits, infect me with malignant and morbid curiosity, the best thing for me to do was to distract myself, counter the effects, and, according to him, I should forget about my work as soon as I was out of the office, pointing accusingly at my notebook, I should be grateful that for security reasons they didn't allow me to take the manuscript out of the palace, because living with text like that twenty-four hours a day could be fatal to someone as compulsive as I was, it would ratchet up my paranoia to truly unhealthy levels, you shouldn't take that out of the priests' quarters and he pointed again at my notebook—just think of it as any other office job, my buddy Toto said and pointed with his chin to the table next to us and behind me, where a couple of damsels were conversing with some jackass, as if this were the appropriate moment to start flirting, as if I had read him those sentences out of my notebook to convince him of the righteousness of a just cause I was committing myself to, when what I really wanted, as I told him now a little pissed off by the circumstances, was to show him the richness of the language of his so-called aboriginal compatriots, nothing more, assuming that he as a poet might have been interested in their intense figurative language and their curious syntactic constructions that reminded me of poets like the Peruvian César Vallejo, and I proceeded to read, now with more resolve and without letting myself be intimidated by the marimba that again started up, a longer fragment so that Toto could have no doubts whatsoever: *Three days I am crying, crying I am wanting to see him. There I sat down on the earth to say, there the little cross, there is he, there is our dust and pay our respects we will, bring a candle, but when you bring the candle, the candle there's nowhere to put it . . .* And this sentence, tell me, I rebuked him now decidedly more pissed off, if this isn't a great verse, a poetic jewel, I said before reciting it with greater intensity: *Because for me the sorrow is to not bury him myself. . . .* That was when I detected alarm in my buddy Toto's eyes, as if I were shooting my mouth off and some informer were taking down notes without my realizing it, which sent chills up and down my spine, and I had the reflex to look nervously at the customers sitting at the tables around us, some of whom could well have been military informers, it wouldn't even have surprised me if many of them were, given the state of affairs in that country, more reason for me to put my little notebook away in my jacket pocket and motion the waitress to bring me my third and last beer. "To not desire, this alone I now desire," my buddy

recited with a mocking smile, wiping the foam off his mustache, then said, "Quevedo."

THREE

I BLEW UP AS I HADN'T BLOWN UP for a long time, in the administrative offices of the archdiocese one afternoon soon thereafter, when the accountant told me there wasn't any money for me, that he didn't even know that he was supposed to pay me, heedless of the fact that my friend Erick had assured me that same morning that I could go by the accounting office in the afternoon to get my two-thousand-five-hundred-dollar advance, per our agreement that they would pay me half of the five thousand dollars upon commencement of the work and the other half upon termination of the same, which is why I walked from my office down the long, wide corridors to the other side of the archbishop's palace to collect the money without which it would be impossible for me to continue my work, as I explained to the accountant, so insignificant and dim-witted sitting behind his desk, and I so unwilling to believe that my friend Erick would have deceived me so blatantly. Or are you saying, sir, that my friend Erick lied to me shamelessly? I said, skewering the accountant, who kept his eyes down without responding, like an altar boy who'd been scolded, until from the back of the office a tall blond man with a Caribbean accent appeared and in a commanding voice asked what was going on, as if he had already figured it out, and he stood in front of me, a situation too good to be true, here was a Crusader in the land of the Indians whose face I could rub in the Catholic bureaucracy's inefficiency, which he proceeded to do without further delay by spitting out that it was inconceivable to me that my money wasn't forthcoming, for my friend Erick had given me his word—and I pronounced "his word" with adequate emphasis—that this afternoon I could pick up my advance, and as far as I knew the word of my friend Erick was worth something in this institution, which meant that somebody wasn't doing his job and was putting the entire project at risk, because I was not willing to correct even one more line of those one thousand one hundred pages if they didn't pay me my advance right now per our agreement. No great observational ability was needed to appreciate that the blond man was busting his balls trying to control himself, incensed by my tirade, which I hadn't even finished, as he soon realized when I nailed him by saying that not only did they expect me to do twice the work for the same amount of money, which was already a pittance by any measure, but they now had the gall to flagrantly disregard the very essence of the contract, the payment of my advance, this said in a loud voice and with a touch of hysteria, I must admit, as often happens when I find out that somebody is trying to cheat me, clearly the intention of the blond man, who was now muttering between clenched teeth that I would be paid at the latest the following day, that he as the office manager guaranteed that it was simply a matter of a short delay because he hadn't been there in the morning when Erick probably came to process the payment. Imagine how lucky I was when at that moment the little guy who had had his picture taken with Clinton and the pope appeared at the door, for if it hadn't been for his timely appearance who knows how the dispute would have ended between the blond man, who I must have thought I was some kind of moron who wouldn't fight for his advance, and me, who I thought that getting paid as promised had a value above and beyond everything else, as I told the little

guy once he assured me—resting his supposedly calming hand on my back, a gesture that awoke in me the worst possible suspicions—that on his word as director I would be paid my two thousand five hundred dollars early in the morning of the following day, asking me moreover if I preferred to have it in U.S. dollars or in the form of a check drawn on local currency, a stupid question any way you look at it for in all my discussions with my friend Erick we had always talked about five thousand dollars, never mentioning his local currency, those putrid, old bills that wouldn't motivate anybody even minimally in their right mind, as in my case, as I said to the little guy as he escorted me, without removing his suspicious hand from my back, to the wing of the palace where we had our offices, with a slow and cadenced step, as if we were elderly priests taking our evening stroll, and he took the opportunity to suggest I not get angry at Jorge, the office manager, that the delay in my payment was not his fault, and moreover he was a good fellow, from Panama, very dedicated to the project, I would soon get to know him better. Then he asked me, wanting to change the subject and thereby help me calm down, about the quality of the text of the report I had read so far, by my third day of work, which I responded that so far the quality was not the problem but rather the quantity, double what had been agreed upon while the time given to complete it had remained the same, as had the money, and my assertion that automatically got me all riled up again at the delay in my payment, a state that persisted after I took leave of the little guy, entered my office, and closed the door behind me, then sat down in front of that hefty stack of paper without even the ghost of a chance that I could pick up where I had left off, especially because the first sentence my eyes lit upon was, *With only sticks and knives they killed those twelve men they talk about there*, followed by a short statement that struck me as lethal—it said, *They grabbed Diego Nap López and they grabbed a knife each officer giving him a stab cutting off a small slice . . .*—because suddenly my fury grew into a paroxysm of rage, even though nobody could have imagined anything of the sort if they had seen me sitting there leaning my elbow on the desk, my gaze lost in the high bare wall, a rage focused on that despicable Panamanian who was to blame for my not getting paid my advance, who did that shit-face think he was? Didn't he realize he wasn't just another miserable Indian like he was used to dealing with? Then I stood up and began to pace around the room, by now I was utterly possessed, my imagination whipped up into a whirlwind that in a split second carried me into the office of the aforementioned, at that hour of the night when nobody remained in the archbishop's palace except that Jorge fellow there in his office, supposed to be poring over his accounts but really savoring the knowledge that he had shit on me, my humanity, so I focused on that thought that he didn't hear me arrive and thus couldn't react when I stabbed him in the liver, a blow that made him fall to his knees, surprise and terror in his eyes, mouth gaping, his two hands trying to staunch the flow of blood from his liver, making him even more incapable of defending himself when I stabbed him a second time under his sternum, with even greater fury than the first time, such was my spite, my zealous arm plunging the knife again and again into the body of that arrogant Panamanian who had refused to pay me my advance, until I suddenly found myself in the middle of my office imitating the furious movements of someone stabbing his worst enemy, of course without a knife in my hand, like a lunatic, as anyone suddenly and without warning who opened the door to my office, which I realized in dismay was unlocked, would have thought. I must admit, however, that once I sat back down in my chair, taking deep breaths in an attempt to lessen my

agitation, I felt as serene as someone who has been relieved of a great burden, as if the Panamanian had in reality received his retribution and I was therefore free to leave, for there was no way I could work until those two thousand five hundred dollars were in my pocket, which is what I did, without giving any explanations to anybody, I grabbed my jacket, walked through the vestibule between the two secretaries, reached the enormous wooden door, and stepped out into the street.

For a few seconds, before I took off like a shot, I enjoyed that hour in the afternoon when the sun had not yet set, the transparent light, a warm breeze blowing through the streets at the same pace as my own steps, and that's no joke, because I was walking as fast as my legs could carry me, first on one side of the street, then on the other, crossing impetuously in the middle of the block, not so much to prevent somebody from following me, how deluded could I be on such a crowded street, but rather to avoid the ambush I always feared, the one in which two pseudo-muggers—really army intelligence operatives—would corner me and stab me to steal something I didn't have on me so the priests would finally get the message, I was a foreigner whose murder in the course of a street crime would have major repercussions. At all costs avoid the always-feared ambush: I had this goal in mind every time I went out, obsessed, electrified, just like that afternoon they didn't pay me my advance and I threaded my way down Octava Avenida, a street stinking of piss and garbage that led from the archbishop's palace to the central market, a dunghill behind the cathedral I walked through with long strides, constantly scanning the field—behind, in front, to the sides—as if by descrying the murderer's face I could guarantee my escape, down a stretch of sidewalk crowded with people and street vendors, another stretch on the asphalt the old buses clambered down noisily, overusing their horns, not slowing my pace until I reached Novena Calle and turned up toward Pasaje Aycinena, my improvised destination because before going to my apartment I wanted to have a few drinks, I wanted some distraction, and the place I picked was a shabby bar-café named Las Mil Puertas, which, despite the name, had only two doors, not a thousand, territory of recycled communists but above all frequented by young men and women with artistic inclinations, bohemians, rebels perhaps, in any case an ambience as different from the archbishop's palace as could be, tender slabs of young flesh to lift my spirits, I told myself once I was inside and sitting at the corner table, ready to order a soda to catch my breath, because at that joint they served flat water, which I prefer, from the tap, a dangerous circumstance I'd learned about during my previous visits, when I had also sat at the corner table where the walls were marked up with those horrible verses written by mediocre left-wing poets, hawkers of hope, verses written without humility, in big prison-style lettering, but even so, a table that was preferable to those outside along the Pasaje Aycinena, a deserted walkway that led from Novena Calle to the entrance of Parque Central. So I ordered a whisky with soda and set about clearing my head of all mental associations related to my work at the palace, just as my buddy Toto had advised me to do, taking note instead of every single one of the girls in this bar-café, the good-looking ones, of course, who were few in number but enough to distract me, one of them in particular, a thin girl with lively eyes, orientated eyebrows, and a laugh that was flirtatious for being somewhat timid, whose features sparked my imagination so powerfully that I could picture, within seconds, as I rubbed the palms of my hands against my eyes, that girl's face as she was being possessed, penetrated, shaken by my rhythmic assault, and I could also see her expression of total abandon at the moment of orgasm and almost he

her plaintive moans, like a satisfied cat, an exercise in fantasy that managed to stabilize my mood and even generated a weak current through my groin, nothing to worry about, even less so now that she had brought me my whisky and soda and after relishing the delightful tickle of that first sip, I finally recovered my equilibrium and relaxed, capable now of observing the flow of my thoughts which remained separate from them, not identifying with them, as if they were somebody else's mental movie I was watching with a certain amount of indifference, a mood propitious for achieving spiritual peace but which I couldn't hold on to for as long as I wanted due to the arrival of a group of persons whom I identified at first glance as belonging to the office I had recently fled and which at that moment I didn't want to remember anything about, a truly impertinent interruption, for their appearance not only shook me abruptly out of my mood but also forced me to ask myself what the hell I was doing with my life, committing myself to such a project and having to dash madly around a foreign city, which is what I had just done by taking the longest route so as to throw off any possible pursuers, according to my thinking, as if in the end I wasn't going to find my way to this joint where any wretch could nab me if he wanted to. But I wasn't going to allow that group of so-called defenders of human rights to ruin my whisky for me, I told myself as I took another sip, and I proceeded to take my notebook out of the inner pocket of my jacket intent on calmly relishing those sentences that seemed so astonishing from a literary point of view, an observation I would never again share with insensitive poets like my buddy Toto, sentences I could, with luck, later use in some kind of literary collage, but which surprised me above all for their use of repetition and of adverbs, such as this one that said, *What I think is that I think . . .* Wow. And this one, *So much suffering we have suffered so much with them . . .*: its musicality perplexed me when I first read it, its poetic quality too high not to suspect that it came from some great poet rather than from a very old indigenous woman who with this verse had brought to an end her wrenching testimony, which wasn't the point at the moment. Both sentences should have been written on the walls of this bar-café instead of those horrible verses by leftist poetasters, I thought as I put away my notebook, asked the waitress for the check, and took one last look at the girl with oriental eyebrows whose face had fired up my imagination. Upon leaving I walked right by the table where my colleagues were sitting, though I refrained from greeting them, still irritated by their inopportuned appearance, and they didn't greet me either though there passed between us one or another look of recognition.

FOUR

BINGO: I FINALLY FOUND A good-looking girl. Allow me to clarify: she was no Demi Moore, but she had all her parts in all the right places, was well-proportioned, had fine features and a healthy expression without that resentment so typical of those ugly doyens of messianic causes who thronged the archbishop's palace, a girl born in Toledo, Spain, who had spent most of her life in Madrid, in the Salamanca neighborhood, which is no slum, and whose father was a well-known military physician, an admirer of Generalísimo Franco, whom he served under, she told me, but not when we first started talking, obviously nobody introduces themselves like that, much less so in the courtyard of the archbishop's palace, full of so many so-called guardians of human rights, where she was reading and soaking up a little mountain sunshine, sitting on the rim of the stone fountain. An apparition! I said to myself, Lord in Heaven! as I walked down the corridor toward the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, but there and then changed my direction toward that apparition, next to which I sat down, introduced myself without any preambles, and immediately asked her where had she been hiding all week, how was it possible that I hadn't seen her, hadn't even known of her existence until that very moment. She told me her name was Pilar, otherwise known as Pilarica, a graduate in psychology from the Complutense University of Madrid, for the past five months working under the supervision of my friend Erick in the archbishop's palace but also in indigenous communities in the province of Alta Verapaz, where she had been the previous week, that's why we hadn't met. A few hours later, at noon we walked together through the large wooden door on our way to a vegetarian restaurant located in front of the bandstand in Parque Central, conversing in a relaxed fashion, the first time I had left the archbishop's palace with someone else and without the devil nipping at my heels, a pleasure no matter how you looked at it, walking along and chatting calmly with an attractive girl, a foreigner and apparently intelligent, who moreover worked most of the time just a few feet from my office and with whom I could easily establish a closer relationship, too good to be true, as I soon discovered, for we hadn't even reached the vegetarian restaurant when I began to detect certain expressions that made me suspect that my delightful companion might be a fanatic of that nonsense called political correctness which put me slightly on my guard and thereafter made me think that the very fact that we were about to enter a vegetarian restaurant already constituted one alarming symptom, for only a minor person accustomed to absurd abstractions and fashionable activism could prefer that insipid food to a good cut of tender juicy meat, which is why so far I hadn't dared ask her why she had chosen that restaurant for our first meal together, hoping she would allege some digestive ailment resulting from her sojourn in inhospitable regions, but no, just as I feared, once we were seated in that environment infused with a certain sect-like air, which I immediately perceived, Pilar began her diatribe against meat, which was not only repulsive to her but also very unhealthy, enumerating the various harmful, even deadly effects of ingesting meat, with a lexicon and an emphasis appropriate for the daughter of a military physician and Franco supporter turned savior of indigenous peoples, which is what she did on her trip

to the countryside, she met with indigenous communities, victims of the atrocities committed by the armed forces, to help them overcome the trauma they were suffering as a result of not being able to go through the traditional mourning rites, she explained to me, for the worst thing was the absence of cadavers for sinister reasons, which prevented people from carrying out any mourning rituals, as a result of which they suffered all sorts of disorders, something I was already familiar with, as I told her, that's what the report's all about, so familiar that I proceeded to take my notebook out of the pocket of my corduroy blazer to read her a few remarkable sentences related to the subject she had just brought up, and I placed it on the table, open, next to my plate of soup: *My children say: Mama, my poor Papa where might he be, maybe the sun passes over his bones, maybe the rain and the animals where might he be? As if my poor Papa he was an animal. This is sorrow . . .*, I read between spoonfuls, and then I looked for a sentence that had electrified me that very morning: *The pigs they are eating him, they are picking over his bones . . .*, I enunciated as I reached for my glass of myrtle juice, because they didn't serve beer at that restaurant, a sip of something to soothe my throat so I could continue reading the sentence, *I want to see at least his bones*, but at that moment I perceived that Pilar was not enjoying my sentences, the astonished expression on her face indicated as much, so I did her stillness, so I decided to close my notebook but not before reading, only to myself, the last of the sentences that I would have liked to share with her, which said, *While the cadavers they were burning, everyone clapped and they began to eat . . .*

Luck would have it that the following evening after work I went out with Pilar to have a few beers—thank God she wasn't abstemious—to a bar called La Bodeguita de Enfrente, a rather odd name, for across the street from this bar, per the name, there was nothing besides a barbershop, and in spite of the diminutive ending in the name it was a large bodega whose walls were plastered with hundreds of posters with revolutionary slogans and at night they had live music, either the keening imitators of the so-called New Cuban Song, or danceable tunes in the style of the Gipsy Kings, but when Pilar and I arrived it was still early, only a few tables were occupied, and we found the best possible conditions for conversation under the congenial influence of the beer, I even revealed to her certain aspects of my life, a vice I am not addicted to, like the fact that a month before I had been forced to leave my country because I had written an article that stated that El Salvador was the first Latin American country to have an African president, a statement that was characterized as “racist” and that won me the enmity of half the country, especially those with power and my employers, despite my subsequent clarification that I was not referring to the fact, anyway verifiable, that the president looked like a black African, for the color of his skin didn't matter at all, but rather to his dictatorial attitude and his refusal to hear the opinions of those whose opinions differed from his, I explained to Pilar, therefore a month ago I was forced to immigrate to this country, my neighboring country, and accept my friend Erick's offer to edit the report she already knew about and was also working on. “How did you meet Erick?” she asked, as if I were confessing rather than carrying on a lighthearted conversation under the congenial influence of the beer, and after making vague reference to us having coincided in Mexico during my exile and his graduate studies there, I went on the offensive, now she was the one who had to loosen her tongue, come on, and I asked her with full impunity if her boyfriend also worked at the offices of the archbishop, my only intention being to jar her ever so slightly, never dreaming that I had

touched her gangrened wound, as I was soon to find out, for what at first was simply a sudden altered facial expression quickly became an outburst of tears, an inferno, abject discomfort, a human specimen crying because—I was certain—of so-called love, who would proceed to find in me a captive audience she could spill her guts to—still sucking in her snot—about her tragedy: the guy was named Humberto, he had also been working for the archdiocese when they met—*how did you know?*—but three weeks ago he left for the Basque Country to study for his Master's in Political Science, none of which justified her tears, I told her rather sharply; nobody in their right mind would cry because their lover had gone away to study, unless he had gone with somebody else and was sleeping with that person, I said, irritated, because the most irritating thing is a crying woman and her nose started dripping even more freely and she demanded I tell her who had told me about it, as if one needed a gossipmonger's loose tongue to discover what I had figured out using common sense, I explained I was already decidedly uncomfortable, with the waiter eavesdropping from behind the bar—*we don't want another beer, you gimp!* I would have loved to shout at him, but at that moment Pilar began wailing uncontrollably about how he had betrayed her since the very beginning of their relationship, but she had only realized it when Itzel, her victorious rival and, needless to say, colleague had also traveled to the Basque Country, just one week after Humberto, for no reason and without any explanation, she said still sniffing loudly, to which I responded that the reason resided in Humberto's crotch, speaking as an expert on couple relationships, and then I offered her my best homily: it's a sign of an intelligent person to be grateful when they manage, without the slightest effort, to rid themselves of a treasonous and slimy partner, in view of the fact that this immediately and without further ado renders them free to initiate a new relationship that will allow them to open themselves up in a way they never could with the traitor who didn't deserve them anyway. And I smiled at her, so she would fully understand my words. But Pilarica returned to her old ways, sobbing in a frankly grotesque manner, with no respect for me, who just wanted to drink a few beers and explore the possibility of seducing a girl who appeared to be good-looking and intelligent, what a crass mistake, mucus doesn't exactly enhance beauty nor tears intelligence, so I gestured to the gimp to bring a couple more beers, getting ready to stand up in deference to my bladder, but at that moment and in a quick broadside she muttered that what hurt her most was that she had lovingly loaned her darling Humberto one thousand dollars and he had turned right around and used it to pay for an airplane ticket for that very same Itzel. *Damn!* I blurted out at the gimp, who nervously placed the beers on the table. Did you hear that? This girl pays for her boyfriend's lover's trip, how many of us have got a girlfriend like that . . . ! The victim of her own stupidity suddenly stopped crying, sat rigidly up in her chair, as if she had just woken up from a dream, dumbfounded, perhaps tempted to become indignant, it seemed, and in response I raised my mug of beer and said, Cheers, not thinking precisely of her but rather of Humberto, a clever fellow from the looks of it and with a great future ahead of him, not to mention Itzel, whose total lack of scruples had fired up my imagination, which led me to ask Pilar what kind of creature was that girl who had taken her, Pilar's, money to run off with her, Pilar's, boyfriend, such a perfect scheme that could only have been conjured up by a woman, but my serious and indignant companion didn't utter a word. For the moment I found myself in an uncomfortable situation, for there is nothing more repulsive to me than a woman who cries as a result of her own stupidity and who in addition asks for

my commiseration, but at the same time nothing so stimulates my fantasies as the possibility of fornicating with a good-looking girl recently abandoned because of her own stupidity whom I could delightfully take advantage of during the act of love, so I didn't know whether to tell Pilar that we should call an end to our tearful date and proceed to pay for the beers we had drunk, or, on the contrary, activate my strategies of seduction so as to move things forward. My razor-sharp intuition told me that she was undergoing a similar conflict, on the one hand very upset that I had made fun of her stupidity, especially in front of the gimp, but on the other needing company and perhaps not wanting to go home right away only to sink into the murky mire of mortification. Fortunately, at that instant, two enthusiastic guys who worked at the archbishop's palace appeared at our table, very good friends of Pilar's, apparently, whom I knew only by sight, and without further ado they sat down, ordered beers, and managed to unravel the knot that had tangled up our date, which I interpreted as a sign from the heavens that I should persevere with Pilar because a good romp in the hay, if it were possible, would calm my nerves and gratify my senses after a week of being shut in a room reading about cadavers and torture.

When, after eleven o'clock, we got into a taxi that would take us to Pilar's apartment, I already had indigestion from the two hours I had spent swallowing one song after another of the much-lauded New Cuban Song movement sung by a primate with long curly locks who made Pilar a member of the chorus par excellence, for the Toledan screamed her head off as if by doing so she could recuperate the thousand dollars and her lost boyfriend, while I gulped down my beers, already a bit irritated though I was very careful not to show it, until finally the primate with long curly locks ended his set and Pilar looked at her watch with a start and said that she had to work the next day, the look on her face like that of a schoolteacher scolding her young charges, then stood up and asked the waiter to bring us the bill, which favorably impressed me considering the quantity of beer she had inbibed and the unsteadiness of her gaze, for I had assumed I was going to have to remove her feet first from the Bodeguita de Enfrente, which didn't happen, but instead both of us got into the taxi that would supposedly take us first to her apartment, where she would get out, and then to mine, where I would get out, another event that didn't happen as expected because when we arrived at her apartment it was suggested that I should take advantage of the opportunity to see it and have one last beer, with her consent, of course, it could not have been otherwise. I forgot to say that Pilar was a typical Spanish girl: thin, with a big ass, small bust, thick eyebrows, a turned-up nose, a nasal and rapid-fire voice; when her plaid skirt she climbed the stairs to her second-floor apartment, followed by my greedy eyes on her swaying ass I was tempted to grab, but we weren't on such intimate terms yet, despite our flirtations at La Bodeguita de Enfrente and one or another inadvertent brush against each other, so I deferred my attack until we were in the kitchen and after she had taken a couple of beers out of the refrigerator, God's will be done, my mouth on her mouth, which was not open enough for my liking, my hands caressing her neck, her back, then tightly squeezing her lovely buttocks, which would soon have to become meat to sink my teeth into, which I longed to do, while I led her, without releasing our mouths nor removing my hand from her buttocks, toward the sofa in the living room on which we fell horizontally, and I proceeded, directed by logic, to suck on her little tits and then, with one audacious move my palm was on her pubis and my middle finger slid into her dampness, something so natural

that her subsequent reaction left me utterly crushed, because suddenly she turned into a teenage virgin who'd been warned that the wolf comes disguised as a cock, my God, and she pushed me aside and stood up and said, "I can't," with two thousand years of guilt drying out her cunt, repeating "I can't" to convince even herself, her face twisted in a grimace of pain, because things with Humberto were so fresh for her that she was incapable of making love with another man, that I should forgive her, that I should understand her, that it had nothing to do with me, that until she had gotten over what had happened with Humberto she wouldn't be capable of being with anybody else, she insisted, even though she liked me and she felt good with me, she just couldn't. And then all the listlessness in the world fell upon my shoulders—I had gone to the wrong theater, which was showing a boring old movie I could follow with my eyes closed because I'd seen it so many times—a listlessness so overwhelming and paralyzing that I didn't even have the wherewithal to stand up and get myself a taxi, which I should have done, but instead crawled into an armchair facing her, clutching my beer and resigned myself to watching Pilarica act out her melodrama about that clever young man and the perfidious colleague, a whole litany about one's self-esteem blown to bits, the tears and snot and *rigueur*, until I had no choice but to return to the sofa where she was sobbing, comfort her, allow her to cry on my shoulder while I sniffed at her hair, because she used a shampoo I wasn't familiar with, one that had a strong scent, to tell the truth, almost unpleasant, and while I comforted her I could feel how soft the skin on her arms was and slowly I again began making maneuvers, with some hope, to see if I could breach her defenses with a second assault. I must admit this kiss lasted longer, I could even make her open her mouth the way I liked, my hand also lifted her plaid skirt and caressed her thighs, with largesse, delighting in her pubic hairs, even though they were a little thick for my taste, but the moment I approached her cunt and began to encircle it, she pulled my hand away, whispering "no" but didn't push me away, as if I were going to spend the whole night kissing her and getting hornier and hornier, so I decided to make a radical move and I went down on her to eat her out, and once and for all stick my middle finger up her ass, sonofabitch, my balls were about to burst, but suddenly she got up, a modest young lady at the far end of the couch, better to leave things as they are, she said, stern but without any reproach. I'm leaving, I said. Then she softened up, but not in the way I wanted her to, instead she said, "Don't go, I don't want to stay here alone," she needed company, the girl she shared the apartment with was away, another Spanish girl who worked at the offices of the archbishop and was traveling through indigenous regions, and I could sleep in her bed instead of risking going out so late at night, she said, standing up and taking my hand so that I would follow her to which I acquiesced because if at first you don't succeed, try, try again, and in her bed, all the better for I still wasn't intending to give up, by the way, that's why I barely paused in Fátima's room, that was her roommate's name, but rather accompanied Pilar to her quarters, where the bed looked wide enough for us to frolic to our heart's content, the desk was too small and the titles of the books on her shelves rather horrifying, as I told her when she was on her way toward the bathroom, I presumed she'd get ready for bed, and while I waited for Pilar to emerge in her short transparent baby doll, as sexy as could be, I set about riffling through her belongings, in the beating of a bird's wings, but the fact is I was waiting for the Toledan to give me a pleasant surprise, which is why when I saw her come out in one of those Franco-style pajamas worn in the convents of bygone eras so that the novices couldn't get

even their own hands onto their own private parts, my astonishment was absolute, I could only exclaim, And *that*?! never having seen such a garment, a garment she had surely inherited from her mother, or had been given to her by a strict mother superior, pajamas that really looked like a spacesuit, the only thing missing was the astronaut's helmet, I thought, still amazed, so much so that I asked her if under that spacesuit she wasn't also wearing a chastity belt, for I had never seen one in my life and she should let me see it, I begged her, but instead of answering me she crawled under the covers, said she was exhausted, and asked me to please turn off the light.

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