



The 18TH
HOUR

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I recommend reading this story while listening to the [musical piece '18'](#)

written by **Federico Mercado** and **myself**



I can remember, once again, quiet Friday cafe.
I was a normal guy, I thought nothing could ever change.
Maybe a girl said she would go out that night, then I guess
A voice in my head said I'd die in that place, in that place.

The night begun.
The night begun.
Ahhh... Ah... Ah...
Ahah... Ahhh... Ah...

The night begun.
The night begun.
Ahhh... Ah... Ah...
Ahah... Ahhh... Ah...

Losing my head at once again, once again, once again,
Losing my nerve at once again, once again, once again,
Losing my head at once again, once again, once again,
Losing my nerve at once again, once again, once again,

The night begun.
Ahhh... Ah... Ah...
Ahah... Ahhh... Ah...

The night begun.
Ahhh... Ah... Ah...

F R I D A Y

I was sitting in the coffee shop in the gas station where I used to turn on my computer and organize my weekends. Yes, I organized my weekends better than my work days! It was a gray winter day in my gray city. I was served a steamy latte, but refused the croissants. The sky wasn't yet dark. The atmosphere in the coffee shop was perfect. I learned what comfort was more from that afternoon than from all the comforts I had ever had in the past. Memory is one of the strangest qualities in human beings; it seems to be fanciful, but it is certainly not. It was a perfect afternoon because I had rested a lot and worked little, but not only because of that. I guess it was because someone had mentioned the night club.

ce again;
e again.
i, once again;
nce again.

The night begun.
... Ahah... Ahhh... Ah...

Ooh, live and die tonight, yes tonight,
Live and die tonight, yes tonight.

Live and die tonight, yes tonight.
Live and die tonight, yes tonight.

Losing my head at once again, once again, once again;
Losing my nerve at once again, once again, once again. (Ahhh... Ah... Ah... Ahah...)
Losing my head at once again, once again, once again;
Losing my nerve at once again, once again, once again. (Ahhh... Ah... Ah... Ahah...)

Ooh, live and die tonight, yes tonight,
Live and die tonight, yes tonight.

Live and die tonight, yes tonight.
Live and die tonight, yes tonight.

Live and die tonight, yes tonight.
Live and die tonight, yes tonight.
Live and die tonight.



One can remember things from start to finish, but also vice versa. Today, I perceive to be inside that coffee shop at that gas station, remembering, with utter ease, what life would be later.

How different I see everything now! I am sure that the comforts so typical at that time would not have passed unnoticed. In fact, they didn't because I can recall every detail of that day, which back then I considered so ordinary; almost as if there was no real difference between perceiving myself there, and actually being there.

So, I was at the gas station. The sign outside read: "Estación de Servicio" and was intended for foreigners who actually very rarely stopped by. The "wi-fi" sign to my left, which I read "if-iw" from inside the convenience shop, seemed to decorate the doors of the cars stopped at the traffic light which I could see from the corner of the shop where I was sitting. One of the clerks at the little convenience shop (drugstore was the annoying English word that luckily was no longer used and had been replaced, if I remember well, by a shorter but no-less stupid one)...anyways, as I was saying, one of the clerks asked the other if she was going out clubbing that night. It was Friday. I knew the other girl had a boyfriend who used to stop by and visit her to receive those spellbound looks and sweet kisses. It seemed the guy was always on duty since he was always wearing a half-red, half-gray jacket with a label on it that I had never paid enough attention to to read. I loved seeing that tender look the girl gave him each time, and those other subtle expressions of love that he pretended to overlook in order to maintain his macho

image; but which kept him coming back every moment he could.

—“No, I haven’t gone clubbing lately” said the clerk who had a boyfriend. I was almost sure she was going to say that. I couldn’t picture that guy she loved dancing anything but the two-step. He was the type of guy you see with his elbow leaning on the counter and holding a glass of beer all night. She would be bored to death with him at every party! The same old story: the beautiful girl with sweet blue eyes who falls in love with her complete opposite.

—“I usually go to different clubs,” answered the nosy one as if someone would have cared, “I might go to the ‘Oasis & Rock’ today.”

When she mentioned the club’s name I wondered why I had never gone there myself. My mind responded, (I remember vividly) *“because if you go there you will die; so don’t you ever do that”*. It was the strangest thought I had ever had. I had never thought there was anything strange about that club; ever. Although I had never been there. But my thoughts told me it was not just because of that, but because my mind was responsible for preventing me from going there. For my own good.

Some two years or so later there occurred that brutal and relentless water pollution in the city, which we all know about. The same thing happened in almost all the cities. As we know, all the country’s resources, including private ones were confiscated against future payment – which actually never happened– and were used to avoid the poisonous rains caused by the evaporation of all the green crap. What a disaster! I know that is a cliché

mostly used by present generations, but what a disaster! And all this happened due to a failure of some 21st century geniuses who believed it was better to enrich themselves by selling an unproven experiment aimed at cutting expenses on vital liquids recycling, before guaranteeing it's safe results. But was *that* what actually happened? It wasn't. But that's what they told us.



This is the place
That you don't know.
No love, no meaning,
You find no hope.
You lack your people,
You have no job.
Like Alice you fell into a hole.

T H I S

This is the place
Where lies your fate;
You'll be a hero,
Don't you forget.
This place is treacky:
Don't hesitate.
It whispers lies;
You trust in yourself.

This is the place where reigns the loss.
This is the time you're on your own.

This is the place that you don't know.
This is a hell you can't control.

There is a force,
There is a meaning,
There is hope,
Fate rushes, feel it.

There is a force,
There is a meaning,
There is hope,
Fate rushes, feel it.



I S T H E
P L A C E



That infamous Great Disaster required me –with an unavoidable force– to move to one of the towns in the southwest where clean rivers and lakes would supply half of my country, along with a small region of Chile, with clean water.

It didn't take me long to accept the fact that my time working as a lawyer the way I had been working for the previous 6 years was over. We were under an indescribable military system. It was not completely new to me because its characteristics reminded me of my two years in military high school. It made me think how easily we forget terrible life experiences when they are not too traumatic ...and in that respect mine wasn't.

At the beginning of the Great Disaster, considering the whole situation, this new vertical system was undoubtedly considered the most logical one. During coups, the system could be criticized and even worse. When I grew up and learned about the so called "*Day after Tomorrow*" newspaper which had supposedly told everything, but in reality had actually swept the bad stuff under the rug. The good point of having had an orderly, military-type adolescence was that it was clear to me which things in the system I was and was not going to put up with. I also knew how the different pieces that supported that order worked. I understood how the system worked and I could tell whether they were doing things well or not. I wouldn't have expected much if they had asked me before. But things got so hard to handle during the "Era of Tainted Water" it seemed that tyrants and fools just followed their survival instincts –at least at the start– and only then eventually

listened to smart ideas from people who knew better. The engineers, architects, biologists, strategists—the real good ones—were able to prevent the entire country and region from falling into a situation of misery for the masses, for the benefit of a few.

I guess this smart choice derived from an unquestioned idea: the many would have killed the few if we had neglected to follow the rescue plan. In fact, it was no longer feasible to think of a few privileged families having luxuries like swimming pools with a lake view, while the masses sank in those toxic greenish potions that lined the city streets.

One afternoon I decided not to go for a snack, but just sit calmly on a mound of earth and stones. I was resigned and full of simmering hatred and yet somehow at peace. The mound lay under the shadow of a leafy pine tree whose thin needles and branches, colored by the sunset, concealed the outline of a volcano. I have always loved the crunchy soils of paths, trails, woods and parks that I had seen in movies and immersed myself in. They had nothing in common with the hard, concrete sidewalks that surrounded my home. There, where I decided to sit down that afternoon, the dry earth, the stones, the branches and the pine needles mixed together in a clay bed. My red, orange, black and ash armchair was truly a luxury. Just then, as I was enjoying that spirit-transforming magnificence, something made my heart almost jump out of my chest. Franky, my biologist friend, who had climbed up on a nearby tree, suddenly jumped down from one of the highest branches. He hadn't even noticed me. He was absent-minded and completely elated, as he usually

was. He was like that when I had first met him and he hadn't changed a bit. Some very intelligent people who had important positions in the government at that time had been smart enough to hire him to work for the National Biology Department, and luckily they had brought him back into my life. Actually, he had never been out of my life. At first, I thought he was just a clown; a person full of irony, and whose vivid eyes hid strong suffering and disgust. But I soon realized that he wasn't at all like that; Franky was simply Franky. He had an intelligent view on everything, along with that anger caused by the loneliness that highly-intelligent people suffer from. He had his own inextricable way, but he was a highly sociable, sensitive and sharp human being. My teachers always told me to reject stupid things and to stay away from intelligent people. The moment Franky said to me, "Hi Beef", I wondered how a guy like me could be helpful to a guy like Franky and what I could do to make him care for me and to keep him close to me forever (the guy brought more happiness to my life than anything else on earth). The answer came to my mind immediately: I could write the new law demanded by the circumstances we were going through.

If I had insisted on thinking about that other question that came to my mind at that moment, regarding that little gadget Franky was using, I would have never remembered the mission that I had already invented for myself, so I decided not to ask him anything about the gadget, and concentrate on my own thought "my job is to make the Law for the future... but not only for the future –also for now."

—“What is that thing you are using, Frank? What a scare you gave me when I was immersed in extremely saving meditation?”

—“ha ha... Yes, ‘Beef’, I realized I made your heart skip a bit, but you look young enough to get over it. I am analyzing the components of everything that serves as a base for moss in this area. This machine is great. I have never used such a tiny one. Look!” He came closer to show it to me. “I can put these cotton ribbons around each of my fingertips, climb everywhere I want, touch different things and then put each of my fingertips on one of these screens. The machine can then describe and classify all the elements I have touched. For example, if you place a drop of ‘Gusty’ soup the machine won’t show any red signs, which mean proteins but a lot of gray ones which mean...plastic.” Just then that Franky gave me that look, that mixture of a smile and seriousness so typical of his irony.

I will never be able to know exactly how and when I got to like him.

It was true. It was enough to have noodles with “Gusty” soup for three dinners in a row to guarantee that you would go nuts. And that was either the effect of the plastic the scientist was talking about or simply that you were just so sick of it. Unfortunately supply was expensive at that time: too many people to feed and supply trucks that only arrived on Thursdays and Saturdays. Town XII, where Franky and I lived, was one of the most organized towns in the country. Frank lived there because of his job, and I because of my connections. One could almost be happy living there but we knew sooner or later that the soup issue would

eventually lead to an uprising. One evening, when I saw that Franky had already received his dish of noodles and was about to be served his half-spoon of green pea “Gusty” (I swear the peas tasted exactly the same as the corn, the beef, the chicken and all the other flavors) I jumped in front of him just in time to prevent the kitchen assistant from wiping his spirit away with sadness. . .and soup. Frank didn’t understand what was going on so I grabbed him by his elbow and made him sit where I was sitting. He tossed his plate on the table, sat down across from me and frowned. Then, I took a piece of bread from my pocket, divided it in half, and put a piece on each dish. Nothing could have made us agree more than those noodles! He nicknamed me “Beef” when I told him that it was high time to eat a good rump steak, a reference to the benefits of cannibalism. Having to accept this nickname for the rest of my life would have been despicable under normal circumstances but nothing was normal, nothing was that normal or that despicable at the time. Neither was my comment. At that time nothing really mattered.



HOME

Patience, man.
I will save you from this war.
Patience, man.
You will find what you call home.

Two lives to wake up many more.
Our lives will wake up many more.
Two lives to wake up many more.
Ah...

Two lives to wake up many more.
Our lives will wake up many more.
Two lives to wake up many more.
Ah...

Nicholas,
Our people will find hope.
Patience, man.
Our land can be reborn.

Ah...

Our land, our land
A space to believe again.
Our hands, our hands,
Our hands will rebuild this place.
Our land,
A space to believe again.
Our minds will find a way.

Ah...

Nicholas...

Living to wake our land again,
And every seed to spread.
Living to wake our land again,
So every tree will raise.
Living to wake our land again.
Living to wake our land again.

Our lives are short,
It's time to start again, my friend,

To make our land
Our place in this world.

Our lives are short,
It's time to build a home for us,
A home for them,
For everyone.

For anyone.

Our lives are short,
It's time to start again, my friend,
To make our land
Our place in this world.

Our lives are short,
It's time to build a home for us,
A home for them,
For everyone.

For everyone.

For anyone.

Come on!

Time, life, ahead.
We need to make our home.
Time, life, ahead.
We need to do much more.

We need to make our home.



Anyway, without Franky the journey towards my personal search would have taken much longer, gotten on my nerves or taken me at least one year longer. Or maybe, I would have never even started it if some deadly incident, like the killing of that cook, had completely impeded my existence.

Yet, there he was, standing in front of me, the biologist that scared me to death when he jumped down from a tree. He was holding his tiny gadget in his hands, completely oblivious, indifferent to his circumstances paying no attention to the world around him. Franky was wearing knee-length tights and a shirt that billowed out from his chest because of the air he breathed in and out. He took his notes and carelessly threw the gadget inside the backpack he was carrying.

—“Beef, can you zip me up please?”

—“Of course.” I zipped his backpack up; he waved and went off to climb some other trees.

When I was alone again I started writing, “Jurisprudence in Times of Water Scarcity.” I needed to do something useful. Otherwise, Franky would leave town and I would be alone and of use to no one. I was never short of pen and paper. . . not to mention an ability to take advantage of anything that helped me to live again.

The darkness that came after sunset fostered that comforting rest which I so needed to continue the following day. To continue that job that would keep me away from crowds, away from the masses who kept themselves busy on matters like building their homes, or fixing an old wood-burning stove for the upcoming winter and such. They did all this with jokes, hopes,

and renewed laughter as a way to forget the most tragic moment of the day: “bath time”. Automatic lives.

Small, forced joys to be able to cope with the fear.

Some years earlier, I travelled to one of the most beautiful earthly paradises. No matter when you read my story, I must say that there were and may be many paradises on this Earth, and having visited many of them it is hard for me to say which is the best. Anyway, one morning while I was on that trip, a cheerful old man who was staying in the same hostel as I, jokingly said to the concierge that he had decided to stay and live there forever. It was some place in the south. Smiling, the concierge offered to exchange houses with him and said, “Ok, you come here and I will go live in your place”. He then asked, “Where do you live?” as if to show that the answer to the question was irrelevant and wouldn’t change his offer a bit... He wanted to make it clear that the place he was working at could be beautiful, but it was awfully boring and that he would willingly exchange it no matter what. Tension was in the air... The client uncomfortably said the name of his city –it was actually a beautiful city; I had been there once. The concierge said it didn’t matter and that he would make the exchange anyway. The client, who was stuffed into ski clothes, which made him look ridiculous because it was obvious he had hardly ever used them, left as soon as he could, revealing a gentle, mannequin-like smile. The moment was weird and funny. For sure, many people would tell the concierge: “I would come to live here tomorrow!”, but afterwards nobody wanted to work 8 hours a day in a hostel, in an isolated place that was only busy during

the winter and summer seasons. No matter what they said, the concierge knew the clients would always go back to their profitable Monopoly-board businesses and would continue to come back there twice-a-year to spend their colorful bills. In the end, nobody could live more than 10 years in that paradise. The concierge must have thought that they believed he was stupid. I remembered that morning quite well; it was really the height of human nonconformity. It made me think of my own.

Back then we should have realized that more times like those of the “Era of Tainted Water” would come. We should have prepared ourselves for them. During the Great 21st Century Disaster, people understood what I am saying. That is why they tried to have the best time they could. Converts increased, not because they actually believed in God, but because it was good and fair to give thanks for the little food they had on their plates each night. It was a solemn moment, good for teaching children not to forget. Anyway, World Wars and lesser but unforgivable wars, along with hyperinflations, hyper-recessions, famines in different regions of the world, everything, were all forgotten about. Everything was so easily forgotten. (In this moment I imagine a TV screen broadcasting a quiz show and see celebrities being interviewed by a boisterous host in shiny clothes whose forced smile seems tugged by the movements of a puppeteer’s invisible thread... so 20th and 21st centuries like). Everything is so oddly forgotten. Everybody wants to forget. Joy always supplants sadness, even when it is high-time to forget about the foolishness and reflect a bit.

But, trying to make things right once and for all people during the “Era of Tainted Water” began to rediscover the value of symbols. The father symbol, the man of the house who is grateful to God for every little crumb he receives, was a symbol that nobody wished to forget. That way, they believed their children would never give up and would be suspicious of such silly ideas like trying to speed up the water purification system. Sometimes speed leads to nothing. But neither does oblivion. It was a good try, but I think everything would have been forgotten anyway.

Frivolous happiness always wins out over sensible sadness, no matter how stupid that may seem.

We, Town XII survivors, were the luckiest in the country. We had the largest rivers and lakes. We were also lucky because the ratio of population to water supply was quite good. We were few compared to the populations in other towns. So we had become humble and grateful human beings. Yes, we were. In the past, the lucky ones used to boast about their high quality of life. They appeared on tabloids showing their cool smiles and bi-polar attitudes to the press. But those were not generous times. They were dark times. A lot of people had died. Just being alive was something to be grateful for. Everybody had lost someone. Religion had made a comeback but was a bit rigged, with no great dogmas or unnecessary glitter. The community was trying to become what it should have never stopped being. We all helped one another. I, a single man, often spent the day doing house chores in other people’s houses. To heck with titles. If I had to clean, I cleaned. If latrines were to get washed, I did it. People thanked me for being

kind and for always being ready to help. I had always been very clumsy with manual labor, but I did my best. Another person's daily accomplishments were considered as one's own. Even jokes were told in public again. Only during the Great Disaster did my country stop telling jokes. There had been no reason serious enough to make us avoid this centennial national practice –not even at wakes... let alone at wakes.

But even when all needs for survival seemed to be minimally met in Town XII, a bitter moment inevitably occurred each and every day. Every afternoon, at the 18th hour, the examination before the public baths took place. It consisted of one or two extremely bitter hours when you could almost feel a knife cutting inside your throat and seas of tears welling up inside. It was the moment of the examination. Assisted by police and border guards, nurses examined the population. There, every smile disappeared; there wasn't even a smile left on the most rebellious ones.

The afternoon Franky scared me to death I had skipped the daily examination. I didn't care if I got caught. Because if I got caught I would have just had to undergo a forced examination which I knew I would have survived very easily. While he was leaving earlier, good Franky had tossed a small piece of paper at me. The note written in ink said I had miserably failed the test on any of the substances that could send me to quarantine. It was obvious that he had performed it while I was distracted looking at his gadget; he had touched me with one of his fingertips well covered with a cotton cloth and made the early test with his machine.

After all Franky was a “los caquis” worker, the ones who were in command, so he could avoid that awful moment after sunset, when all that was heard was the silence of thousands of penitents who followed the lonely cries of a few families that would be torn apart forever.

Watching how some people were pulled out of the line was horrifying. Riots and uprisings had been so terrible that a police edict had to be issued prohibiting relatives from standing in the same line. Members of the same family could only be standing in the same line if separated by ten people, and three lines must separate them on either side. This made the process of sending infected people into exile (for who knows how long) a lot easier.

After the examination, many of us who agreed to take a bath in the cold lake in summer or in the showers the rest of the year, covered our faces with our hands not just to wash them but to wipe away the tears that we couldn't choke back. The screams of families that had been torn apart due to some infection or quarantine turned that cold bath into a hell of both nervous daily salvation and horror. I was so grateful to Franky the day I made it to skip the examination; I knew my fate was to stay close to him. You don't forget an act like that! Help in a desperate moment unites two souls eternally. In fact, I had no particular reason to think that life would make us stay together after that. But I knew, I don't know why, that it would. It was very nice of you dear Franky. No doubts about that. You were telling me that even though you had your privileges you were deeply sorry for what most of us had to undergo, the

most bitter and tormenting moment we could ever imagine: the 18th hour.

*

Before and after are concepts that I can only imagine in my own time mapping because there was nothing left of those concepts. “Before” and “After” were concepts that could no longer exist.

A few days after I skipped the medical exam and public bath, I wasted the whole afternoon at the waiting room of the local department of the Ministry of Justice Department melting along with the heat of the logs that place was constructed of and the sun that came through the side window and which burnt us all. From where I was, I could see the entrance to the Ministry Representative’s office whose door opened and closed every now and then. I could see the *Quinquela Martin’s* painting which I immediately guessed was an original. I distracted my thoughts for a while reminiscing about a Soldi art show I had been to in the Capital when I was fifteen.

After thinking about that, I felt my nervous stomach cramps coming again and no reading of law papers could help improve them. The secretary told me that after twelve the appointment would have to be postponed to the following day.

There was nothing else to do but to rehearse my presentation (thank goodness! those rehearsals really helped to improve what I was going to say!) I also continued adding more ideas and rules and regulations to the draft copy of the law that was coming to life. If I hadn’t had those issues to think about, the loss of time

and the thought of the 18th hour examination getting closer would have depressed me.

Eventually, several days after my first visit, the Ministry Representative received me. He loved my project (glossary) on Ad Hoc Civil Code and Ad Hoc Criminal Code of Procedures-*prima facie*. I survived an *in limine* refusal, though he made it clear that he was still going to thoroughly go over it, but I am sure he never did.

—“I think your proposal for a comprehensive review of the Law is interesting. I am glad you propose some concrete ideas because these days we can’t afford wasting time in long sessions with sleepy and or absent lawmakers who take 5 hours to justify if it is worthwhile or not to add an extra six months to a punishment for petty theft.”

—“I have to admit that my draft is tentative and perfectible.”

—“Would you like to give it to me right now or will you continue working on it?”

—“I would prefer to work with a team. To know from the inside about the current system’s dynamic difficulties, let’s say, to appreciate...”

“You mean that you would like to join the Government, the Legislative Power, or what is left of it?” he interrupted with a questioning sideways glance directed at me from his chair. I sensed a feeling of repulsion. I knew this man had no clue regarding law. But I also understood that the logic never changes. My only usefulness to him was to get him crowned with laurels. Perfect.

—“Actually, Mr. Representative, I would like to work in a friendly atmosphere, with wise and kind

people who are aware of the difficulties of our current community life. In this way I could offer you a more reasonable project. If you think the project is good, I could present it to the Minister on your behalf. Thus, the Executive Power could offer the Congress –or what is left of it– more sensible and immediate proposals. I don't know what position would be the best for me to be able to do that, but I accept whatever way you think would be more convenient”.

—“Oh I see.”

—“In our town, I could help create a Civil Registry, a Family Court and Arbitration Forum to settle neighbors' conflicts. But I could help you to design more substantive projects.”

The meeting was very useful. Thanks to it I met Débora and Erasmo, the two lawyers I would be working with in the following five or so months. Besides, I had the chance to drink coffee again. The Ministry Representative, Don Enrique Gómez Piña (“Don” was a word no longer used in the protocol during the fifties but to prove that to the Representative I would have had to find an Illustrated Larousse Dictionary, which I couldn't, so I decided not to say anything and avoid depriving this uneducated man of his “doctor” title which would have been like crippling him)...but the Representative offered me some watered-down coffee which made me cry for joy. Some people, who are not so good, sometimes do good things just by chance; which was Don's case.

★

There was still one local Central Complex left, a large hotel, a huge eyesore which welcomed visitors two seasons out of the only two that were left. Nonsense. Fall and spring had already disappeared when I was twelve. It was either rainy and windy or scorching hot. But, the fact was that during the “Era of Tainted Water” the Complex was used for medical and biological studies. It was Town XII’s city center. The building I worked in with Erasmo and Débora was near the complex, 400 yards away in one of the five small cottages that formed the Strategy Department. The local offices as a whole reminded me of the grouted UBA buildings in Ciudad Universitaria* as opposed to the privileged Law School pavilion hidden beneath the most beautiful pine tree, with no bothersome security guards. Nobody cared too much about us and that allowed us to work freely and efficiently.

I still tried to help out people in the Town but I had less time than before. Law took up most of my time. Anyways, I always had tried to spend some time with the families I had met during the times of the Disaster. I preferred visiting them for a short time, for example to help them fix a roof or with the laundry. In that way I was able to avoid the uncomfortable questions I knew they would ask if I stayed longer. During a break someone would ask me who I was living with and I would have to answer with a serious tone, “*I live alone. Period.*” It was better that way. That kept them quiet and I didn’t have to talk about the people I had lost.

* (Translator’s note) A group of buildings that form the state owned university campus in Buenos Aires.

The fact is I hadn't lost anyone in the whole affair.

I had nobody in my life. That is why in times like those, what was a disaster for everybody else was a completely different experience for me. That was all. It was just a different experience. A new opportunity in my life's loneliness. Before the so called "Era of Tainted Water" I had to put up with phrases like: "you don't know anything because you don't have children." People think you live in another planet just because you don't have children. They can't figure out that you can relate to their fears, envies, cares and wakefulness. If I had had a son I would have undoubtedly lived my existence wide awake and with dark shadows under my eyes. But people generally think that those issues go far beyond a single man's known universe. Well, when the Disaster came up it was no use to explain to my neighbors that I hadn't lost anyone in my family and that I had nobody to look after. They would have thought that I was completely out of this world. And they would have excluded me from thousands of conversations (useful or not): domestic, strategic or any other kind of issues. I didn't like to lie so I didn't tell them the truth and quickly took off from places to avoid answering probing questions.

When people said, (with a touch of envy in their voices) "you don't understand because you don't have children", I got furious. Idiots! As if the ones who received the gift of having a baby could be envious of the ones who didn't. As if the Three Wise Men had been more generous not to have given me any children; as if we could compare our toys: they got lost affections and I an eternal lack of them. Sometimes people are envi-

ous of those who have nothing because they think that this having nothing to lose makes them free. I wonder if they know what to do with their freedom and even if they see it. Anyway, nobody has ever needed to pass an exam to become a parent; even the dumbest guy can be a father. Yet they still say “you don’t understand because you don’t have children”.

Well, if during “Era of Tainted Water” someone had said to me that they were envious of my lifelong loneliness or had said something like: “you don’t understand because you haven’t lost anybody or ever had anybody”, I would have just punched him in the face. From the very beginning, my life had been marked by deep loses; I couldn’t even remember either the faces of those who had left me or their reasons for doing so. My last name “Espósito” was not in vain; People at the Civil Registry had entered an N in my Birth Certificate’s first names box without concealment and even with disdain. A lazy employee must have not wanted to think much or cross out or delete the document, and so just added a simple ‘Nicolás’ for the N. That was the reason why my name was Nicolás Espósito**.

I was afraid of going to work. I knew that sooner or later my coworkers would start asking questions.

But everything was different from the expected.



** (T.N.) Espósito is a variation of the word Expósito used in Spanish to speak about a foundling or child found abandoned without identification.

Time to begin,
Life is our creation.
Time to believe
We can find our playground.

Ooh, the sunny day comes.
The sunny day comes...
Ooh, the sunny day comes.
The sunny day comes...

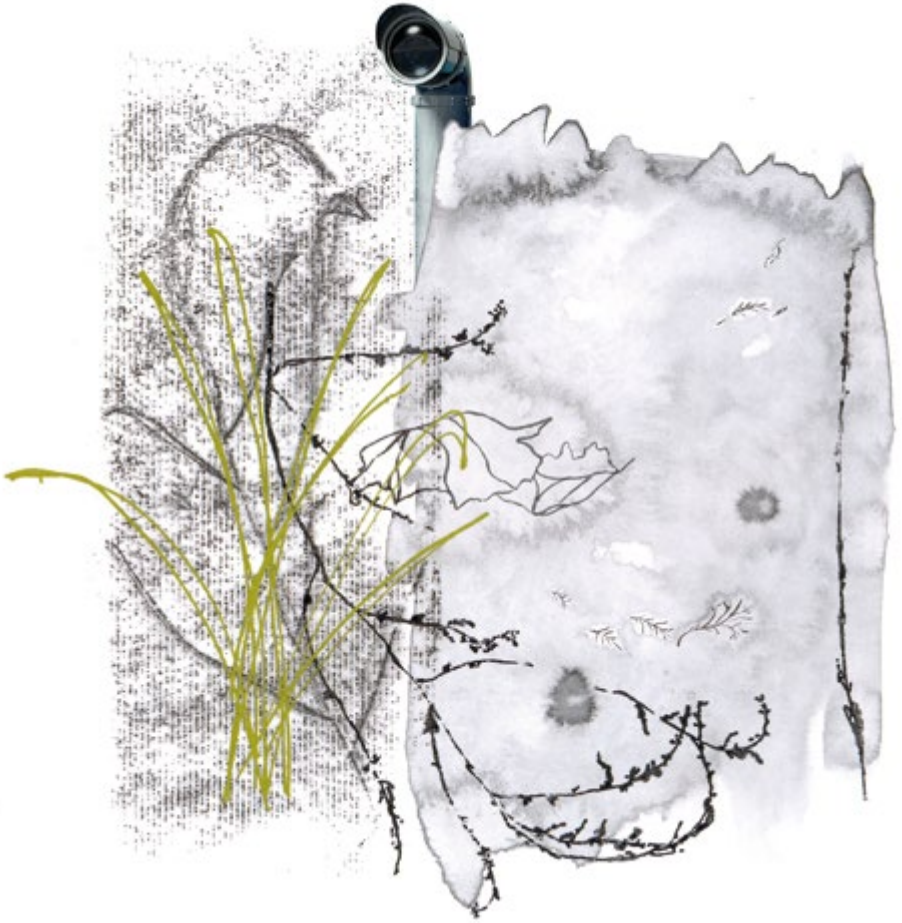
We can make it,
We can start a nation.
Just believing
In our true intentions.

Ooh, the sunny day comes.
The sunny day comes...
Ooh, the sunny day comes.
The sunny day comes...

Ooh, you make me
You make me feel so good.
Ooh, I make you
I make you feel so good.

Cause we know, cause we know,
We can start a family.
Cause we know, cause we know,
We can start it all right here.





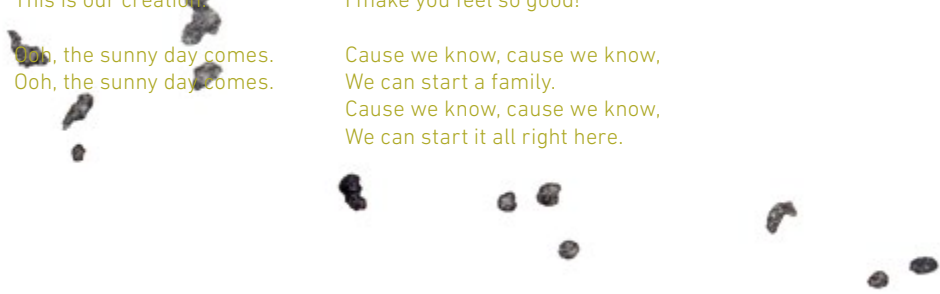
Time to live this.
Time for laugh and shelter.
Let's begin it,
This is our creation.

Ooh, the sunny day comes.
Ooh, the sunny day comes.

You make me
You make me feel so good!
Ooh, I make you
I make you feel so good!

Cause we know, cause we know,
We can start a family.
Cause we know, cause we know,
We can start it all right here.

SUNNY DAYS



One day after work I met Franky and we sat down under a tree which perfumed the air. While he was thinking, studying the grass and looking at the tree, I was thinking about my childhood and how I had spent it among buildings; unlike boys who lived in the countryside, I had never had a tree house. In fact, I had never climbed a tree. I had tried once, when I was eleven, and fell down because I had grabbed onto a dry brittle branch.

While Franky was resting and thinking I picked up some branches put them on the ground and stood in front of them looking around to find out what I could use to tie them up.

—“Fran, I am trying to build a small house, like the ones kids build on trees using whatever they have around. Can you help me?”

And he did so. Immediately we agreed on the house privacy: it would only be for our closest friends. We picked some branches and carried them to a hole Franky pointed out; it was among trees in a shadowy small hillside. He preferred to place the house on the ground and I didn't disagree because the place was perfect. We pulled spears from some plants whose names he knew and I didn't but which were soft, fresh and pliable enough to make perfect ropes. The plants had tall stems and the part that was underground was long and strong. We pulled up a bunch of them and, in less than three hours, had a place decent enough to live in and to welcome our guests.

We agreed on making a difficult access to the house;

we both were very happy about that. We also agreed on installing a periscope.

—“This will mean stealing some mirrors from the ladies in the Town, Beef, because there aren’t many mirrors around,” Franky said.

—“Who knows, I might find some mirrors if I work in the Town. When I said that, Franky smiled and pointed at me with his index finger:

—“Don’t go too far with ladies. If they leave their mirrors for you, I think I know what job you will be doing.”

—“Don’t even think about it, Franky!”

In the end, we did steal the mirrors.

Those were absolutely beautiful times. The small hideout gave Franky and I enough solitude to rest at different times of the day since our activities and schedules were very different. We also smoked weed which at that time wasn’t considered a vice at all. I found in Franky a person who didn’t surprise me for his intelligence, but for his innocent and affectionate heart. He trusted very few things but he trusted me. He was crazy about me just because of that.

We didn’t invite anybody to come to the house so we realized that we were living in it as a couple.

—“It is time to stop being a couple, Beef.”

—“It is true. I am sick of you, little brat”

Until then, sunsets were ours. Franky and I enjoyed silence, we understood it very well, we got on well with it and we knew how to share it. Moreover, he was very happy to see me coming back from that tormenting 18th hour. I guess that was what I liked the most about that great friend. He was so smart that he could under-

stand and appreciate everything, even silence whether it was comfortable or not. His face was expressionless and yet I could see he expressed relief every time he saw me again. In the evenings we went together to the “great town dinner” and we sometimes shared it with my coworkers Erasmo y Débora. To me Débora was a beautiful person. At a first glance I could tell she was a well educated, learned and sensitive person like many woman who devoted long hours in reading as a child. Her rounded face and pink cheeks framed intelligent eyes full of the world’s emotions and beauty. Above all, notwithstanding her intelligent eyes’ judgment, she had a smile and plump little hands that seemed to forgive everything. It was funny the way she was able to stay clean and tidy in the campsite we lived in. I used to make jokes about the latrines but she would easily avoid them with a smile or by changing the conversation to a less scatological topic. She reminded me of Denevi’s story “La Niña Rosa”, the Pink Girl. That young girl raised in her pink house that wanders off every day, sees the filth of the world but makes it back to her untainted pink bedroom where everything smells of roses, as if nothing had happened. I pictured Débora coming back home every evening and crossing the threshold where a stream of perfumed water washed away all my nonsense and the rotten life we had to live; her actual 18th hour bath. I realized that I had never seen her during that awful nightmare Erasmo and I and everybody else in the Town had to face every day. I was relieved to think she didn’t have to go through those examinations but I didn’t envy her. I would not have liked to see her being examined. She

was a lovely, delicate young girl. I have met very few people like her so I was relieved to think I didn't have to worry about her during those daily awful 18th hour quarantine arrests. It would have been unbearable to see Débora going through that. I believe that not only did I care for her but even loved her.

After dinner, Franky and I used to take a walk. We never spoke about what I was forced to go through at the 18th hour. We spoke about books. He had read far more books than I had. As we were not supposed to read either Hesse, nor Borges nor Andersen, we would tell each other the stories we had read and liked the most. He remembered every detail and he was able to retell many of them skillfully. Franky was a history and geography expert though he pretended not to be. I was good at creating mystery around each story. Life seemed to be better when we shared it. Not to mention the sports we practiced together: the “who pees farthest” contest, wrestling, fencing with branches among others such as Franky's survival lessons.

I spent most of my days working with Erasmo and Débora formulating rules for Crisis Law, going through the awful 18th hour examination, which Erasmo and I attended holding hands and praying for each other, and going to dinners and evening snacks when Franky would join the rest of us. Life wasn't so bad.

But every time I lay down on my lonely sleeping bag in that sort of hut I lived in, right in the middle of the townhouses neighborhood, deep darkness would assail me. It was not the darkness of the night but the reality we all avoided facing. At daylight, we made it to

ignore it but at night that underlying inevitable reality looked for me and found me every time.

Anyway, for more than three months we enjoyed life and were happy in our hideout like we were children. I am not sure if those were the best months of my life—I don't even know what I mean with "my life"—but the fact is that once we invited Débora and Erasmo over, we all turned into kids again. We did so openly, with no reservations. Franky was in charge of checking the periscope occasionally but each time was disappointed to find that no courageous stranger had ventured forth to be frightened.

A couple of days after finishing the house we already set a bunch of traps, alarms and stalking lights to frighten even the most courageous intruder. One night, while we were all telling jokes and smoking—well, all except Débora who wouldn't even take a toke—a teenage couple got the idea to hide near the entrance to our den. Franky saw them through the telescope and moved quickly as a cat to activate all the booby traps we had set. An old siren suddenly blared and the intense blinding light set the couple off; they run so fast it seemed they had left their souls behind. I cracked up laughing. But Franky was malicious; he wasn't laughing, he was just staring how the horrified couple was running away.

It was great to arrive at the hideout, after having passed all the obstacles and having said the password every five seconds (just in case Franky was hidden and ready to attack either with a snot remover or a worse weapon) and once inside find out that you were not alone; that one of the others had felt like meeting with

the gang. The best thing was to see that well-behaved Débora had often been the first one to arrive; she had regained that joviality that was so natural in her and that she had somehow lost when I first met her, who knows why.

Anyway, even when you were alone, that reduced place was where you could always find yourself. A place, which is part of a long chain of places formed by individual and distant links, where you can think about your past experiences, the days you lived and shape your life and reconnect with yourself. That place where one recaptures one's essence.

At that time we kept ourselves busy with our own responsibilities. It was a tough time but we had a steady job just as we had before the crisis; and we also had one another. Sometimes, it is hard for me to understand how we made it to stay away, at least for a while, from that crazy scenario that surrounded us. We were definitely very determined. We were determined not to let the disaster defeat us, and with great effort, we succeeded.

*

When Débora and I finished writing the Criminal Code for Crisis project, which was the result of our realistic and proper analysis of the circumstances, we made a toast with a chocolate liqueur Franky had stolen from his boss' wine cellar. Franky wasn't used to hanging out with his co-workers. He said he had more fun with me. That flattered me a lot; well, to be honest, it made me extremely happy and I didn't want anything else. The following days were very quiet at the Law Department

and there wasn't much to do. Débora, Erasmo and I had to wait for the Criminal Code project corrections in order to continue on with the Code of procedures Erasmo had been outlining. Free time made me spent many days thinking about that obscure thing that surrounded us and that we all pretended not to see.

One night Franky and I were alone for dinner. We avoided the Gusty soup seasoning by bribing the cook for something he really needed: a comb. A lame woman had given the item to me as a payment for having cleaned her cottage (a job that had taken me the whole day). The cook gave us a small bag of grated cheese. When we went for our usual night walk, Franky shared some of his life experiences with me. While I was enjoying his stories a lot I had to fight off that heaviness I had been experiencing those days. At a certain point, we remained quiet and pensive. I tried to forget about my worries and pictured all the stories Franky had told me about: his brothers living all scattered in different areas of the country (poorer ones than ours) and that 'sort of family life' he believed he had found while living in a crisis camp; he spoke about happiness and revelation. "Don't think I am crazy, Beef. It's another type of happiness; revelation is exactly that; a different type of happiness that comes from dealing with some things just the way they are."





YOU WILL KNOW / You will know what's happening... / You will know what's happening... / You will know... // You will know what happens / In time, not right now. / It's a truth we will discover. / It's a mystery we should have never / Ever been through. // You will know what's happening / By crashing our destiny into a wall / By staring to each other's faces in this road we're going to take / We'll see nothing has ever been what they said. / And nothing will ever be how it used to be. // You will know what's happening... / You will know what's happening... / You will know... // You will know...

He then asked me why I had been so worried the previous days. He had noticed it. That was Franky, he didn't miss a detail.

—“Fran, I feel an unbearable uneasiness. I didn't want to say anything because when we are together, everything is fine. But, I feel that our daily routine, our jobs, our night walks and our hideout are just a way of temporarily hiding the truth about what is actually happening. This surreal feeling hits me at night and I tremble with horror and fear. The thought of the quarantines and of the people standing in those long lines by the lake, at risk of being taken away every day, that's driving me crazy. It seems as if nobody wants to speak about these things in their own *'Happy World'* that has been created and imposed on us all in a Darwinian way. Losses nobody will care about, pleas which will never be heard. Every man for himself! Every day at the 18th hour, families are torn apart. The members of a family that are left behind are moved to other cottages or new bedrooms and are locked up for days. Afterwards, all you see is zombie-like people who don't speak to anybody and never, and never complain, Franky. Not

one family has complained about the procedure that has sent their loved ones to quarantine. Mothers losing their children, wives their husbands, men their women and nobody denounced the authorities; not even a claim, a question or a call for assistance. Silence and denial. I don't buy that. What's more, how long since we've had news from the capital or even from the nearest city, our previous city? Seven months?"

We were sitting by a trail among cypresses. Franky looked down.

—"You may have noticed that the 18th hour checkups don't affect me, Beef."

—"Yes, of course," I answered.

—"Each and every afternoon, between the 18th hour and dinner time, I lock myself in my room and tremble. For you and Erasmo. Débora doesn't go to the checkups either; you may have noticed that too."

—"Yes I have."

—"She worries too, like me; I know it. I am positive, Beef, that if I don't see you again, I will go crazy. Or worse, I will become a rebel. I don't care about the damned code you and Débora wrote, I will go out to the streets and shoot everybody. I don't have much left, Beef; you are a good friend. I don't want to lose anything more. I am so sick of what I see, even if I am exempt from it."

—"But, Franky, I don't want you to be with us at the 18th hour, not at all. Don't feel sorry for us, for me it is a relief you don't have to be there."

—"But it is not only because of that..."

—"What is it, then?"

We remained in silence for a long time. Several

minutes later Franky told me that there were many things he preferred not to tell me because he wanted to take care of me and prevent me from going crazy.

—“Well, what is that darkness you feel every night?” he asked me.

—“I guess it is all those sordid affairs you don’t want to tell me about, Franky. I feel powerless. I do nothing either to learn about those things or change them. I feel I am a coward. And you know how things work: cowardice creates ghosts of paranoia, which are worse than reality, until one day one completely loses it and does something stupid like jumping off a cliff.”

He laughed ironically and looked down again. His face looked contorted with angst. It hurt me to see such an enthusiastic, intelligent guy like him looking so depressed. Those times were killing us all, one way or another.

—“You can’t change anything, Beef. I can’t even change the minds of people I am working with at the lab. They feel they are the owners of the world. They don’t care about the things that matter to you. What’s more,” he said, now staring at me and pointing at me with his finger, “remember what I am about to tell you: some people are happy with what is happening, because now they have the power they wouldn’t have had if this disaster had never happened.”

I kept looking at him seriously, considering every word he had just said. He looked into my eyes for a few seconds then looked down, his chin pressed against his chest, and looked up again, this time staring into the distance. He moved his head slightly from right to left as if he was considering his own thoughts: “Don’t

bother me Beef, and make me explain all these things. Don't make me talk about these things anymore."

He didn't talk to me again that night until he said goodbye and went to bed.

*

Whether I like or not, I am a lawyer. I have always been a lawyer, for a reason, and nothing could change that, not even the Disaster. It may sound stupid, but my vocation has never been making money but living for justice.

The following day I stormed into our paper-pushers' law office. Débora noticed I was upset so she leaned back on her wooden chair waiting for a good explanation looking at me with her sweet, almond-shaped eyes.

Erasmus was doing his best to add some flavor to his watered-down coffee. Erasmus was just a kid of 23. He had graduated from Law School when he was twenty two and started studying Economics; a true genius. His life had completely changed when his inclination for business and trading companies became irrelevant in our town life. But the guy was used to life's trickery. He loved playing sports but, ironically, he had inherited a scrawny body. When he went to the gym to look better, all he came away with was back injuries. Unfortunately, he was smart enough to measure each and every consequence of this early disability. Once in awhile, we had to make him lie down to ease his back pain. We tried not to use up our precious storage of pain relievers and painkillers, in case supplies were eventually cut down. Anyway, the fact was that Erasmus was in no condition to pay attention to my mood that day; not

having a backache that day and the smell of that watered-down coffee he was able to improve a bit was enough to make his day. So, he paid no attention to me. Débora, instead, was waiting for an explanation to my really bad mood.



FANCY CLOTHES

Lose my fancy clothes
In the darkness.
In the darkness.
Lose my fancy clothes
In the darkness.
In the darkness...

To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,

You say
You say
You say alone I'll find my way.
You say
You say
You say alone I'll find my way.

Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.
Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.

To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,
To behave as a monkey man,

You say, you say,
You say alone I'll find my way.
You say alone I'll find my way.

Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.
Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.

Will I find my way?

La la la la...

—“Well, I think we need to stop waiting and get down to business, don't we, Débora?”

—“Good Morning, Nicolás Espósito. And, what is this urgent business that is causing such a mood?”

I moved forward towards her desk, put my elbows on it, my head resting on them, and slid them forward until my face almost reached the other side of the desk, right up to her face.

Counting all my movements,
They may be wrong.
Every little thing here becomes so strong.
In times like these, what can we do?
All right, I know it's true:
I am losing ground.
What about you?
What about you?

Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.
Don't believe
The sun will shine all the way.
Will shine all the way.

La la la la...

Counting all my movements,
They may be wrong.
Every little thing here becomes so strong.
In times like these, what can we do?
What about you?

La la la la...



—“The exiles’ rights, Débora; that is the business that worries this two-bit lawyer, who is wasting his time waiting for the verdict of a worthless legal code. The rights of people who are in quarantine and the unimaginable silence of their families, their lack of complaints, the incomprehensible absence of complaints from those mothers who every day at the 18th hour lose their children, husbands, and others. We are doing nothing about that. That is what is bothering me!”

Débora stared at me without blinking. The only thing I noticed was that her sweetness gradually disappeared. I waited a moment; I was not used to that serious look. My elbows on her desk were starting to hurt and my being so close to her became a bit too intimate and uncomfortable. Erasmo stopped pouring the watered-down coffee and stopped still, standing with his back to us, silent and waiting.

After a while, Débora looked at her fingernails and whispered to me:

—“We can speak about whatever you like, Nicolás. What’s more, I understand you are anxious and you feel you have to deal with your worries without delay but I won’t put up with your being such a jerk. I won’t put up with your coming in here in a really bad mood, shouting, showing a desire for justice and trying to make us believe that you are the only one who has been trying to find the formula for gunpowder. I will tell you this once and for all: don’t consider yourself better than others, you jerk. And, don’t you dare risk other people’s lives unless you have an overall plan. If all you bring in here is just platitudes, keep them to yourself.”

I didn’t know Débora knew how to pronounce the

word ‘jerk’, a real discovery that helped me overcome my prejudices of her. The whole scene, though, made me confused. I was speechless. Erasmo gave me that look math teachers give to the good student who thinks he is very smart, but fail the subject because he didn’t do his homework.

Débora had never treated anyone like that. I simply said I was sorry, sat down at my desk and calmed everyone down saying the only words that came to my mind:

—“The fact is that there are some issues that keep me awake at night. I won’t do it again. I promise.”

I tried to make them understand that I really meant what I had just said so I spent the whole day sitting calmly at my desk, reviewing articles in the Criminal Code of Procedure project we were working on. I tried to look as enthusiastic about what we were doing as I had been the previous days. At exactly 5:30, when it was time to leave and say good bye to Débora, I thought she would at least give me a comforting smile but she didn’t. I didn’t expect much but I have always been a little childish with this type of things, like always needed some cheering up before exams. And for the 18th hour exam, that was what I needed the most.

Erasmo and I walked along the path in silence. We reached the river and started to cross it joyfully as we usually did, we went down the bridge racing along the stony path until we reached the end. Not only did I lost the race but also sprained my ankle when I slipped on a wet stone. Soaked and in pain, I leaned on my friend’s shoulder to stand up. We cracked jokes on the chances of a guy with a sprained ankle and another one with an injured vertebra having to reach the finish line. I

took off my shirt to use as a bandage for my ankle, and we made it back in time for the examination. Before getting in line, Erasmo grabbed my arm and said:

—“Nicolás, you are not the only one who thinks about the quarantines. We all think about them. Try to understand Débora. She won’t confess that she has already forgiven you for what you did today and never expect her to do so. Certainly, she forgives you and understands you, but she will never show it.”

—“I don’t understand why.”

—“Because of the reckless way you burst into the office today and talked about your issue so self-righteously, without being aware that someone might be listening in on you. I thought you were very careless as does Débora. She said as much. If she lets you get away with it, you will put us all at risk.”

—“Yes, I know, but I immediately apologized, Erasmo... Anyway, it doesn’t matter. It is over.”

—“There is something I think you should know about her. Two days ago, when we left the office to come to the public baths, I forgot the book I was reading and came back, do you remember?” I answered that I sure did, “Well, Nicolás, I found her crying. You asked why I was delayed but I didn’t want to tell you anything. She is such a strong woman but seeing her crying made me feel sad and uncertain, so I asked her what was wrong. She was very worried, poor Débora! She begged me not to tell you anything. She told me she was tired of seeing us leave every day to go to the 18th hour lottery. She loves us, Nicolás. You may think it is foolish, but I am not that lonely when I am with you guys; you are older than me so I feel you are my

parents somehow. I need you guys to help me to feel safe. Débora tries to do it, I'm asking you to do the same."

—"Wow, I am getting moved, Erasmo."

—"Well, I need you to be strong. I told this to her and I am telling it to you. That is why Débora won't back down about what happened today. She will be a bit serious until she knows you won't do anything reckless like that again."

—"Now it's clear, buddy. No problem, you can be sure I learned my lesson. You're a pretty smart guy, so you know a good night sleep will help me to get my thoughts back together, so let's go, finish this errand and go to have dinner with Franky and Deb."

Erasmo smiled at me. He looked like a kid. An intelligent but, yet, very young boy.

We went through the examination holding hands for as long as we could, as we always did. This time I didn't wipe my tears with the lake's water. This time I looked furtively back to see when Roque, the kitchen assistant, was taken out of the line, his hands tied. His wife screamed and screamed; two border guards hugged and comforted her while she kept on crying. Then, when her legs couldn't support her weight anymore, they helped her to her feet again. They helped her to take a bath and dried her. While I was getting dressed, I saw some men in white who looked like puppets covered in waterproof suits from head to toe. They entered Roque's house and sprayed it with some sort of disinfectant. They then locked up the house and put up warning signs. The woman was taken, as was customary, to a small cottage. The exiles' families

were normally sent to houses, on the west side of the town, which were far from the smaller neighborhoods in the west. All the members of the family who had lived in exile had to undergo examinations five or six times a day for two or three days in a row. After that, everything went back to normal.





FAMILY

On my way back home,
There's a dream that glows.
On my way back home,
I build a better world.

On my way back home,
I can see your face,
On my way back home
I really hear your name.

Cause in my dreams I have a family.
We need our daydreams to survive.
Cause in my dreams I have a family,
Is there a better hope to have?

On my way through trees,
I believe I see
A secluded house,
A garden and a dog.

Complete the picture with
Doormat with a smile.
And there's you and me,
So we can make a start.

Is there a better hope to have?

On my way back home...

Cause in my dreams I have a family.
We need our daydreams to survive.

Is there a better hope to have?

Cause in my dreams I have a family,
We need our daydreams to survive.

Imagination builds
A new reality.
It's time for us to see
We live in family.

That night Déborah, Franky, Erasmo and I had dinner together. Good Francis had been able to get a deck of French playing cards, so he made me fulfill my promise to teach them to play “tutesillo”. They learned really fast so we played our first game that same night; it lasted until 2:00am. The atmosphere created by candlelight at Franky’s cottage was the only thing I wouldn’t have changed of the Great Disaster. Our faces were played upon by the orange and yellows shadows cast by the flicker of the candlelight. Franky had made it to make the terracotta color he wanted for his tapestry, and had painted the coffee table and stools in a dark brown. The only thing missing for it to be a one of the best night of our lives was some books of Poe.

Franky won the game. We razzed him about it just being beginner’s luck. I told him he had just been too lucky and blamed the Jack of Diamonds for my losing the last hand. It had blocked me and I had to pick up all the cards left on the table, and being the last person dealt and I couldn’t make my bet.

—“I will keep this jack with me for the rematch so I make sure you don’t put one of your lab spells on my jack and make me lose again,” I put the card in my jeans’ pocket.

There was no rematch. At least four people are needed to play “Tutesillo” and, from that moment on, we weren’t four. Not anymore.

The following day went as usual. We were not in a hurry at the Legal Studies Department so I decided to sleep in. I arrived at eleven, bringing flowers. Débora asked me why I was late and I answered I had to work hard to get a clay vase, which I proudly showed

to everyone. I had had to wash Mrs. Domínguez's underwear for a whole week. Débora waved a hand in the air like saying she was sick of my bad taste stories and lies. Erasmo asked how Mrs. Dominguez was and I answered: "Fine, thanks, I believe her old ass smells much better thanks to me," I said this without taking my gaze of Débora, of course.

After a lunch of rice and canned roast beef, which Débora meticulously examined and dissected to remove every piece of grease from, we read a notice we had received from Cipolletti. Our Town Representative of the Ministry of Justice, Don Enrique Gómez Piña, had been working there those days. He had written:

"CRIMINAL PROJECT ACCEPTED. FEW SMALL CHANGES.
CONTINUE PROCEDURE. MEETING FRIDAY"

We were very happy. Small changes might not mean anything, but at least not imply starting from scratch. And we could move ahead with Criminal Code of Procedure which only Erasmo had been working on. There was going to be a lot to do. From the first articles, we noticed that Erasmo had been overly generous with the deadlines. It was a Crisis Code. The reasons for Justice's intervention in a Code designed for regular times were very different. The discussion got heated when we discussed which criminal charges should require short proceedings and which longer ones. In my opinion, sexual crimes should take medium term proceedings, subject to immediate preventive detention without exceptions when having two pieces of evidence (we all agreed on bringing legal relevance of evidence

back). Débora thought that medium and long term proceedings wouldn't be a good idea because of the diverse opinions regarding preventive detention in the different towns.

—“What do we know about life in the capital, in Cordoba, in Rosario, Nicolás?! Lawyers may not be able to rule in a reasonable time as they did in the past, so if there is a preventive detention involved during the prosecution, it might result in a never-ending punishment with no conviction at all. Don't forget that we are under a state of siege and are expected to write a Code of Procedure for the whole country.”

It was necessary for me to whisper my answer.

—“Deb, Erasmo, come here.”

They did so.

—“I don't know what you guys think about life in the capital. I doubt there is life up there, at least not as we mean life to be; I strongly believe that we, down here, are writing down a code to organize life in the different towns that have emerged but which are not in a state of chaos. As you might have noticed, the meeting the representative attended wasn't held either in the capital, nor in La Plata, or even in Bahía Blanca. It was held in Cipolletti, guys. The capital may not exist ...and if it does, nobody there gives a damn about the Code we are writing.”

—“We don't know that, Nicolás,” said Débora staring at me angrily and disapproving my being so direct. She gave Erasmo a sidelong look so he interrupted the argument:

—“Don't try to protect me, Débora. I think Nicolás is right. And so are you. There is no need to hide

what we think. Let's write the Code of Procedure for the Towns keeping in mind the only Town that we know. We did the same with the Criminal Code and it worked, didn't it?"

—"You are right... OK, Let's do it," agreed Débora and hitting the table with her plump hand (I loved Débora's perfect combination of plump limbs and body, rounded face and almond-shaped good eyes). I adored her so much.

—"Good," I supported her. "I suggest taking our time to think on our own. If we discuss the issue beforehand, we may miss that someone's interesting point of view.

And that was what the three of us did. That day, for the last time.



I guess it's time to feel the fear.
My friend, we have to go.
I'll be beside ya, no need for tears.
My friend, we have to go.

18



[3] | My friend, we have... my friend, we have to go.
Oh, maybe we have...

My friend, we have...
My friend we have to go
/my friend it's time to go.../
My friend, we have to go. [2]

I guess it's time, I guess it's time to feel...
My friend, we have to go. [2]

We'll walk and talk, then we'll be here.
May be, but I don't know.
You take my hand, I need you near.

My friend, we have to go...

I guess it's time to feel the fear.
To feel the fear.
I'll be beside ya, no need for tears.
My friend, we have to go.

We'll walk and talk, then we'll be here...
Maybe, but I don't know.
You take my hand, I need you near.
My friend, we have to go.
My friend, we have to go.

Again, it's time to feel the fear. [2]

All the days we had to work
We made jokes,
Our laughter took the hours,
We built our lives...

We built our lives.

It was soon five thirty pm and I didn't realize it at all. I hadn't experienced that since the time we were working on the Criminal Code for Crisis. Reality slapped me in the face once again. It was a wonderful day, the sun was glorious, we had worked hard developing complex and interesting ideas, but everything was being brutally interrupted by the oppressive, unpleasant situation we were immersed in. It broke my heart. "The worst thing about this time is that it has no glamour," I said to myself to joke around and lessen the impact.

Débora couldn't help sighing anxiously. She immediately went on working and hardly said good bye when Erasmo and I left.

—"See you for dinner, Débbie."

—"See you, Nico... Bye, Erasmo."

My ankle was better during the day but it had swollen up. Erasmo wanted to calm me down by saying that that day both of us would be walking slowly. He took his left shoe off and showed me a worrisome deep cut. He didn't want to worry me and smiled:

—"I foolishly hurt myself. Last night I had a nightmare and woke up feeling thirsty. I went out of cottage bare feet and, 'bang!', I hit a tree stump, lost my balance and stepped on a splintered log with this foot."

—"Didn't you have anything to drink in your cottage?"

—"My next door neighbor leaves a jar with delicious blackberry juice at her doorway. . . it is so refreshing! She told me I could help myself to it anytime I wanted."

—"Erasmo, that foot doesn't look good. We'd better

go and see Franky; he knows the best doctors and will be discreet.”

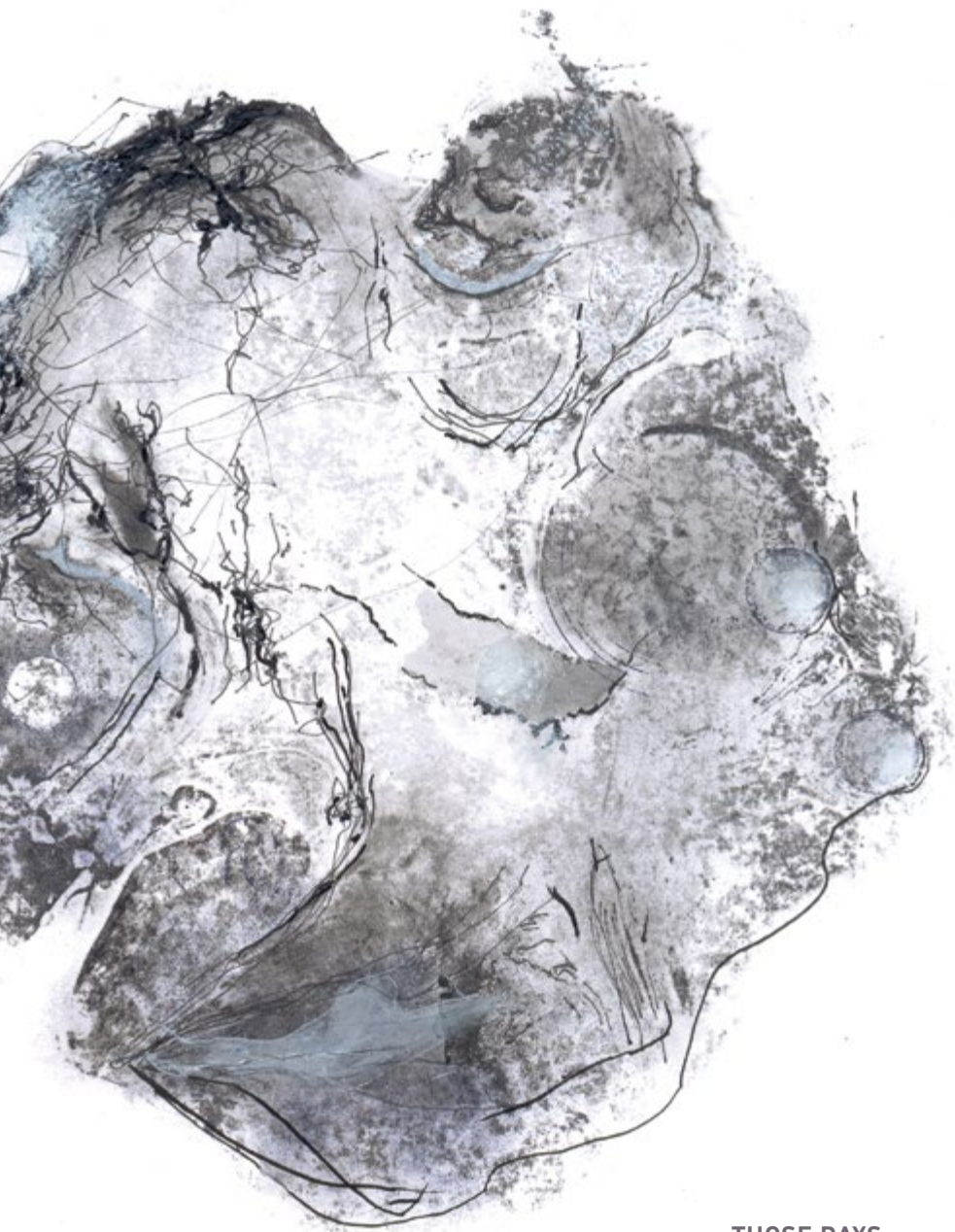
—“No, it is fine. Let’s finish this daily procedure and see Francis later to have a good time as usual.”

—“Let’s go now, Erasmo. The worst thing they can do to us, if we skip the examination, is a spank on the behind and a check up afterwards. I’d feel better if Franky examines you before they do.”

—“Don’t overdo it, Nicolás. I am fine. I only need to change the dressing once in awhile. Let me put a new one and we get this examination topic off our backs. I don’t want them to spank me or interrupt our ‘tutesillo’ game or dinner with a stupid checkup. Don’t bother me with that. Let’s go. PLUS, I don’t like attracting the border guard’s attention. No spanking. Let’s go to those showers.”

—“As you want...”





THOSE DAYS

What can I do,
What can I prove,
What can I show,
Where can I go
With all the innocence we've lost.

What can I do,
What can I prove,
What can I show,
Where can I go
With all the innocence we've lost.

Maybe we'll heal,
Maybe we'll die,
Maybe we'll fall,
Maybe we'll flow,
With all the innocence we've lost.

Is there a road,
Any new hope,
Is there a force
Or any code
In all the innocence we've lost.

We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.
We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.

All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.

What can I do,
What can I prove,
What can I show,
Where can I go
With all the innocence we've lost.

What can I do,
What can I prove,

What can I show,
Where can I go
With all the innocence we've lost.

Maybe we'll heal,
Maybe we'll die,
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Any new hope,
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We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.
We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.

All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.

We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.

We'll miss all these days,
The shadow... (entered, my friend).

We'll miss all these days,
The shadow has entered, my friend.

We'll miss all these days...
...entered, my friend.

All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.
All the innocence we've lost.

I was such an idiot! Débora never forgave me for that. I am not sure... I do know I never forgave myself.

When we stood in line in front of the lake, we had a look at Erasmo's gait. It was ok but I didn't like the wound. I assumed the cold water wouldn't be bad so I was hoping to finish the thermometer and swabs procedures fast and take a good bath.

A nurse with cold light eyes rubbed the skin in different parts of my boy with swabs and put them on the screens for the test. As soon as the nurse started the procedure, I let go of Erasmo's hand. If we wanted to stand in line together and pray and support each other, we didn't have to let them think we were lovers or even brothers. So, as soon as the examinations started, we let go of our hands and interrupted our prayers.

When I noticed that the border guards were behind me, I immediately turned around thinking the cold-eyed nurse, who was examining me, had called them. Having being pointed out under those circumstances was the most terrifying feeling I had ever experienced in my whole life. But, it had not been my nurse who had called the guards but the nurse who was examining Erasmo. My young friend looked incredulous yet confident. The poor boy believed it was a mistake. I was 31; I was old enough to understand it had not been a mistake. My heart was beating violently, as if it were going to beat out of my chest before the incident was over. It was not clear yet what continued contaminating people in the Town, even people who were far from contaminated water for more than a year. Franky's team had been able to spot some areas affected by

toxins similar to the green muck which had caused the Great Disaster and, those areas had already been closed for more than six months. Erasmo's case and all the other cases were hard to understand. Erasmo's infected wound case was even more difficult to understand. He had incubated the crap for less than twelve hours and its clinical signs had already been detected... I should have believed, as Erasmo did, that it was a mistake. But, there had never been mistakes, there had only been people examined, taken out from lines, isolated and missing for ever.

My conscience suggested that there was some sort of lie in all that, that nobody was infected; but, at that moment, I didn't want to believe that we were all trapped in some madness.

I saw him leaving...

... barely. A border guard mercilessly pushed me:

—"Come on, buddy, move it, otherwise we will be here all night. Move!"

One more push and I found myself facing the lake. That lake where I had thrown up so many times and where I had shed the tears I didn't know I could have shed in my entire life. That time I cried and trembled with shame, sadness and despair... That day I knew what losing someone was about and I would remember it forever, with a name and a face. I had never met my parents, either because I had lost them or never had ones; I didn't even know their faces. This loss was different, full of broken love.

The throbbing grief and subsequent abandonment and loneliness I had experienced as a child —when liv-

ing among the aseptic odor of the care center, and later in various moments of my life— came back and hit me like a slap in the face, but this time it was my fault...or so I thought it was.

And this time I had lost...practically a son.





Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
Couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Don't forsake me,
I'll always be your friend.

Now again, it's time to heal.
Now again, it's time to heal.

Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Don't forsake me,
I'll always be your friend.

You made me feel this place was safe
But I am dying.
You made me feel this place was safe
But I am dying.

Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Please don't hate me,
I couldn't leave this game.
Don't forsake me,
I'll always be your friend.

Come again, it's time to heal.
Now again, it's time to heal.
It's time to heal.

PLEASE, DON'T HATE ME –TO DEBORAH

Now again, it's time to heal.
Now again, it's time to heal.

But I am dying.
You made me feel this place was safe
But I am dying.

But I am dying.

But I am dying.

The anger came quickly. That same night I knew, looking at Franky's eyes, that he had already guessed it all, and a fiercest anger was coming. I didn't know though that my anger would be his and, my courage his own. We were both sick of that situation.

Débora didn't want to meet us that evening and she didn't go to work for twelve days. When she finally came back she looked sick and lost. She was still very gentle but she was like a ghost; she was somewhere else and it was hard to recognize her.



Franky and I talked a lot. I begged him to tell me all about the misery and what happened to those who were exiled. Franky didn't know much. He assumed more than he actually knew about the situation, but he suspected that there were many atrocities.

—“Beef, imagine the worst. Imagine that infected people are being tested while they are still alive, then killed, subjected to full autopsy and none of their bones is kept in its place. Done. And then what? Who will complain if they are using that method to find out how people are getting sick and a way to overcome this disaster? The one who solves this puzzle will receive the Nobel Prize in Medicine. If hundred years from now someone finds out that atrocious methods were used to solve the problem, nobody will care. This is the way epidemics work. Haven't you read ‘The Decameron’? Until Erasmo was taken away from us we were able to spend our days telling stories and entertaining ourselves like Boccaccio's characters. Maybe, those days are over. Or maybe, we should continue doing the same. Now, I don't know and I feel too bad to think about it.”

—“I am dead Franky. I let them take him away from us.”

—“What do you think you should have done? They would have taken him anyway, and if you had tried to be a hero they would have taken you too. Town people wouldn't have defended you; they are too afraid of being infected even if they know that this pandemic is not passed on by physical contact. All of them would have walked 300 feet away from you. And if you had tried to use the force, your own neighbors would have invented some false accusations to force the army to

Forget forget my life;
I'll find my way.
Forgive me if you can;
What can I say...

Hope for no mercy 'cause I know
I did not save someone you loved.

T R A V E L

I'm travelling.

So long...

No need to wait for me.

I'm travelling.

So long,

No need to wait...

Forget the time we spent

Together, every day.

Forgive this loss I know

you shall recall.

Beware of this madness we are in,
I hope you'll find some kind of peace.

[3]

I'm travelling.

So long...

No need to wait for me.

I'm travelling.

So long,

No need to wait...

[4]

Forget my life,

Forget our dreams.



take you away. You should know better how fear works. You have read enough to know it. Four or five frightened cowards among hundred just people are enough for an effective witch hunt.”

—“I know there are things you are sick of in this mess, Franky, and yet you are not telling me about them.”

—“It is just that... I can’t, Beef. I don’t want to hurt you more.”

—“At this point, I don’t care about being hurt any more. I don’t really know if the people who are being taken away are infected or if it is a pure hoax.”

—“This is the worst moment to tell you about these things. And I also think that, at this point, there can’t be infected people in this Town at all. We examined them all. It is almost impossible.”

—“I want to go to Buenos Aires.”

—“What for? What do you know about Buenos Aires?”

—“Or to La Plata... or to Bahía Blanca at least.”

—“I don’t understand why we should leave this Town, especially to go to Buenos Aires province or the capital; since recently we haven’t heard news from any city beyond Cipoletti.”

—“To understand and face what is going on. To fight for something. I don’t have a name, Franky, you know very well what my last name signifies, so you understand I have never had anybody. Erasmo told me that Débora and I were like his parents. So, now tell me where Erasmo is, tell me....he is not in Disneyworld; Daddy Nico and mom Deb hadn’t decided to take him there yet. He is in the mysterious quarantine and the

answers I want to know about are to be found in those cities of which we have heard nothing for months.”

—“There are legionaries, let’s say... elite groups which emerged overnight and who are badly trained. They are worse trained than young recruits in the old days. If you want to join them, go ahead! You can go to Bahía Blanca, of what is left of it.”

—“Tell me what is going on there, Franky. Tell me where all these people are being taken.”

—“Listen, Nicolás. Something terrible is happening. They are fighting against deformations. Do you understand? I am sure that, at least in Buenos Aires, that is what is happening. And you’d better keep your mouth shut from now on... My older sister is in Bahía Blanca. I want to join the groups to rescue her from that place which, for sure, must have become a hell by now. And of course you are right; I am fed up with all this death, horror and with this pretending that nothing happens in the best Town where I had the chance to live just because I am the Institute’s pet. I am here while I know that what is left of my family is serving as a nurse in what once was our city and is now the appalling ruins left by those bastards who made tons of money in a poisonous flash. Deplorable greed has taken wonderful people’s lives and it might have also taken my sister’s. It’s been a hundred days since I’ve heard anything from her.”

For the first time, Franky looked at me without hiding the fragile and uncertain despair in his eyes.

—“It is over, Franky.” I stood up in front of the biologist and stretched out my hand to help him up. “Let’s go and find her right now. I am not kidding.

After what happened to Erasmo I am almost dead. But if don't do anything for your sister, both of us will be dead soon. I don't want to see that. If they have to kill us, then they will do it for real; I won't be a zombie like Roque's wife and I won't accept you becoming a zombie either."

Franky stood up and after a deep breath told me the last thing I needed to know:

—"They dope them."

—"What?"

—"They dope the relatives of people who are in quarantine; that is why they don't complain. They don't even realize that they are drugged. And by the time they find out the truth they have already attended a series of 'Clockwork Orange' type of lessons that convince them that what they are doing is actually right, even allowing their relatives to be taken. It would be better for you if no authority finds out that you are sad for Erasmo? Ok, Please Beefy."

—"There is no reason for me to stay here, Frank. I have already realized that. Find a way for us to join the Elite team as soon as possible. I am going to pretend I am an enthusiastic fool and keep my anger in check until we have found your sister. I am not interested in coming back here without your sister."

—"Ok but I ask you to think it over. What is going on with my sister is my business."

—"And you are the only 'business' that is left in my life, Franky; I can't even be any good to Deb anymore. I don't need to think it over."

There was a long pause. Silence was never uncomfortable with Franky and it was not going to be uncom-

fortable at that moment either. Franky was a smart, clear-headed person doomed by the loneliness caused by an uncivilized world, devoid of beauty and by the lack of connection between his being so sociable and cheerful and his inability to share his highly refined thoughts and deep truthful feelings with others. Above all, Franky was a highly sensitive person. He was comforted sharing with me that sad business that might result in not finding his sister alive but, he was also worried about having to lose me too.

It's incredible the loneliness that an extremely intelligent, truthful man has to face!

All my life, I have never been ready to compromise with the truth. Someone like Franky was the best connection I could have ever looked for. The only possible one, strictly speaking.

I loved enjoying that long silence between us but that day I decided to interrupt it. Everything had been said. I picked up my backpack and started walking and stopped when he said:

—“I promise I will take care of you, Beef, but I am not sure what level of madness we will find out there.”

—“I don't mind; I imagine the worst.” I didn't even turn around; I had already made up my mind.

Two days later I received the drafting note. Franky had proposed them to enlist both of us together. He has the power to convince everyone. I had no recommendations but his word was enough for them. He was very clever and good at convincing people. I had heard that anyone who volunteered to join the forces was being trained whether he was a good slim athlete or a short physically mediocre person like me. Being with Franky

in the same team gave me strength. We might travel together to Bahía Blanca and take part in the same missions. A friend had told me, there were too few forces and the areas all around the country were too large to cover. There was no doubt that in the north of Town XII there was complete chaos; we agreed on that due to the fact that we had heard nothing from any of the cities beyond Cipolletti.

At our first night as conscripts and after a training session, which more than a training was a brainwashing attempt (unsuccessful at least for Franky and me), I lost any idea of chronology.

The trainers tried to pump us with heroic motivations which were impossible to believe seeing the ostracism of Town XII's armed forces; on the contrary, it made us think of fear, ineffectiveness and sordid secret. A young guy asked if we were going to be taken to the capital and the answer given was that that was classified information.

A tall big man with a round red face like a pomegranate came close to me and abruptly asked me if I was ready to die for my country. He pointed at me with his chin. The worst thing about his attitude was that I could tell he was not ready to die for anything. The lines on his left arm indicated he was a sergeant. I answered that I was; I was ready to die for my country and for its people.

—“And, why?” he asked.

I couldn't hesitate. At that point, I wasn't sure that there was such thing as a country, but I had to answer quickly.

—“Because it is high time to start living as a country again.”

—“And what does it mean? Isn’t this your country just the way it is now?”

—“Yes, sir. It is. But my country is united and hard working; it is not divided in towns, but in provinces. It is a country that must get over this Great Crisis and come out stronger than ever.”

He was satisfied. He expected no less. I had always thought about getting married some day and if the bride wanted a church wedding I had to be ready to pass the test regarding any creed.

Boys with a country. Anyway. They wanted to tell us that we were boys who were able to save such an important thing. Considering the conscripts’ appearance, the state of affairs must have been terrible. There, nobody was ready to face even his own armor. Some of the recruits were boys who were not older than 16 and men who were more than forty. An impossible ragtag force. Casualties must have been huge in order to be willing to accept all of us... to accept me for starters, a very short guy with a smoking habit.



*Come over,
Just come to me!*

Nicholas!

Nicholas!

*Screamed this morning again and again,
Is the forest calling my name?
Nightmares weaken my skills and my strength.
Is the shadow calling my name?*

*It's calling again for you.,
It's calling your name, it's true.
It's calling, it's calling again.,
It's calling again for you.*

*Is the forest calling my name?
Is the shadow calling my name?*

*It's calling again for you,
It's calling your name, it's true.
It's calling, it's calling again.,
It's calling again for you.*

It's the forest, my friend!

Come to me!

Nicholas!

Is the shadow calling my name?





F O R E S T

The break gave me the chance to walk around campus without having to look at anyone. The cottage's front yard gravel path crunched under my new army boots and the camp's grass visited me with its natural glory and unquestionable purity. However, the distraction caused by this new soldier experience couldn't prevent me from feeling more dead than alive. Nothing helped me to forget about Erasmo's arrest.

My feeling like a living death made me either forget what was going on or ignore what I was feeling and immerse myself in the present moment, which resulted in a state of constant angst. The break was a way of being with myself, my sorrows, and the memory of Erasmo ruthlessly hurting me. I unlocked my hands, which were crossed behind my back, and sat on a stone next to a mayten tree. Feeling miserable, like my chest had turned into a crumpled piece of paper I let myself drop with my legs sitting crossed like an Indian chief. My body bounced on the ground and I felt a bit dizzy. When I was able to see properly again, the camp was no longer before my eyes, instead I could see a garden full of red currants, jasmines and azaleas dancing to the beat of the humid spring breeze on a sunny day. The sleeves, where my thin hands and long fingers were coming out, called my attention; I was wearing a red hunting jacket, a white shirt, and a small bag with munitions crossed over my shoulder. The grass had just been cut; I could tell by the touch of my hands on the fresh milky sap and the intense grassy smell.

The azalea bush moved unexpectedly. Some bronze curls and a white and pink smiling cheek popped up for

a second and disappeared again; while from there came a child's giggle.

Before I could even think, I said:

—"I saw you my girl."

—"Hehehehe," the little girl laughed nervously.

I knew it was my daughter.

"I see you my little girl, my darling girl with your rosy cheeks, silky hair and hugging arms. Run and hide now or I'm gonna catch you and eat you up... Here I come!"

I allowed myself to be immersed in a different type of life and I did so with true joy and without doubts or feelings of guilt.

I continued playing with the little girl, feigning to chase her, and encouraging her to find another spot to hide while I kept running after her again and again.

I stumbled on a protruding tree root which was sticking out of the tree I was sitting next to and fell flat on my face against the camp stones which left red spots on my face similar to the ones one gets when shaving with a worn-out razor blade. When I got back on my feet, I noticed a soldier was staring at me; he was truly perplexed. I must have either spoken in a loud voice or been in a complete trance or, who knows; maybe I had been gone for a while and come back with my face on the ground. The truth is that that man kept on staring at me for a while with a weird expression on his face. But those were times in which a soldier had to take care of important stuff and not of a miserable guy like me who was taking a break from his scaffold by borrowing better lives. Finally and without understanding

what was going on, the soldier turned around and left while I was trying to come back to real life.

I don't know if this happens to everybody. Every time that life was about to take my breath away, every time that I felt that I could no longer handle life's burdens, some experience of marvelous trails saved me, grabbed me by my shoulders and made me walk again. If that day, during the camp recess, after listening to that empty patriotic speech, I had simply stayed leaning on the mayten tree thinking about my sadness, the pain I was feeling would have taken away what life what was left in me.

In another place, some place in the torn pages of my historical encyclopedia, I was raising a five-years-old girl and I went there. To a better life, with a hunting jacket and fine hands *d'une vraie belle vie*.

To then return to the future.



Airplanes with foreign rossettes waiting,
Your silence lies within,
Can't believe what I am seing.

SILENCE LIES WITHIN

Trucks droved by humanoid sentinels,
Tough guides whose eyes are dead,
Maybe we'll become the same.

Then are we close to the consciousness?
Is this the truth that we are meant to spell?
Our lives given to Hell,
Our pride bleeding in pain,
Our hands will kill our people,
We're forsaken and betrayed!
You, let me defy our hell,
(My only freedom)
You, let me defy our hell,
(My only freedom).

Will we dig up dreams by killing people,
Can we live the lust of this morbid skills,
Or are they means justified by purpose,
Maybe we're dreaming, oh, maybe we're dreaming,
Maybe we're dreaming, oh, maybe we're dreaming.

Airplanes with foreign rossettes waiting,
Your silence lies within,
Can't believe what I am seing.

Trucks droved by humanoid sentinels,
Tough guides whose eyes are dead,
Maybe we'll become the same.

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Is this the truth that we are meant to spell?
Our lives given to Hell,
Our pride bleeding in pain,
Our hands will kill our people,
We're forsaken and betrayed!

Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Barabam Silence lies Within!
Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Bam
Bam, Bam, Barabam

One day, they considered we were ready to leave. We immediately enlisted to go to Bahía Blanca and we were accepted. Franky and I didn't care if we were not ready either to shoot a gun or read a map. I didn't care about the little information we had received in the camp which basically consisted of how to put on our combat gear, tie our boots, fix our oxygen masks and reload our pistols, machine guns, flares and oxygen tubes. We had to rescue Victoria, Francisco's sister.

Who cares whether we hadn't been properly trained or if Buenos Aires province and the capital had been eaten up by a monster with two heads or invaded by aliens. Nobody had been willing to give us that type of information, so we played the fools and pretended to believe their patriotic message.

Anyway, our love for the country was over when we reached Bariloche's airport, where we saw a lot of planes waiting for the many conscripts of all ages who formed Towns XI, XII and XIII troops. Two hundred men were going to Bahía Blanca, a thousand to Buenos Aires and four hundred to La Plata. Every day, there were hundreds of flights with US, France, Canada and the United Kingdom's insignias. Things must have gotten really bad.

There was only one old helicopter with the Argentinian insignia, a monarch's dinosaur: a Sea King.

Franky laughed frankly. "We are going to hell, Beef." I felt I was already there and, to tell the truth, every time I tried to settle down I found myself in hell again. So, I didn't care much. But Franky's eyes were serious; his laugh couldn't hide his distress and anguish for Victoria and for us.

When we arrived at Bahía Blanca airport it was very foggy. An American agent walked down the plane's aisle asking us to put on our oxygen masks which he was carrying on a stewardess' cart.

—"Just precaution, gentlemen, just precaution. Please, use them now. Just precaution."

Franky was pale. But I had a good idea:

—"If there were danger of suffocation there wouldn't be anybody in the city and they wouldn't need two hundred recruits, Franky. Don't worry until we don't see more."

He looked at me seriously and nodded like saying thanks for that little bit of comfort. I felt I was already dead but someone needed me to be alive for the second time since what had happened to Erasmo, so I couldn't let him down.

It was hard to see what the city looked like. Not until the night of our first mission. My friend grew desperate every day. He was furious, ironic and hurtful.

After arriving at the airport we were put in vans with windows painted black and a black net which divided the van and prevented us from seeing the driver or even the vehicle's windshield.

We were left in the garage of a building which happened to be our headquarters.

—"Brunito," Franky said to a recruit who seemed to have been in the Bahia Blanca's bunker for a while, "How about telling us what we should expect here? C'mon, I am all ears Brunito."

The guy didn't know what to say. He looked down and I noticed that his ears turned red, so did his fat cheeks. He was in his thirties and was noticeably

fearful. By his red ears and well-trimmed nails I could tell the poor guy was more cut out to be a paper pusher than a soldier.

—“Bruno, I think you are not the type of brave guy who is gonna unnecessarily risk his neck,” Franky insisted, “so, since you are the bitch in this bunker, you could at least open your mouth, couldn’t you?”

—“Franky..,” I said to interrupt him.

—“Shut up, Nicolás. This guy has been here way before us and he can tell us something. What is all this bending your head, blushing and being quiet about? I came here to find my sister. In order to do that I had to buy into all that training and patriotic message shit, but you, Brunito, can start by telling me something about those oxygen masks and what’s awaiting us here. I want to know if there’s anyone alive in the city.”

Brunito kept silent and looked at me trying to find a way out.

—“What are you an idiot?!” shouted Franky. I had to take him out of there dragging him by the arm. I whispered:

—“You will ruin everything. Let me take care of fatso.” In the meantime I winked at Bruno and made a gesture to ask him to wait for me. When Franky finally went to his room I went back to talk to the guy:

—“Look, he is very nervous about his sister. We came here to look for her so don’t get me nervous too, Bruno. If you tell anybody about what just happened I will fill you with bullets; as simple as that. I am a good guy, but I am determined to take care of my friend and help him find her sister, even if that is the last thing I do. If you rat on me I will kill you, is that clear?”

—“Don’t you bother me; leave me alone. I do my best with what I can here. Sure, they don’t call me for the missions because I am a wimp. Yeah I am such a coward that I will keep any secret; got that? I am not going to say anything about you guys. But please, just leave me alone.” The fat slob almost started crying.

—“Crystal clear; thanks for that. Now, you’ve got to tell me what we will find out there. Something, the most important things, and I swear I won’t say anything.”

—“There are infections and death, lots of death. And there are mutants; people who have morphed, dogs mutated... all that shit. They are really strong. They are armed and can live in sewers. They are also well organized. I don’t know what else to tell you. You must have been called to take back the hospitals, clubs, labs and bases. Those are the places where scientists and doctors work and where the wounded who could not be relocated in the Towns are treated. There are still a lot of people but the most important thing for the Government (our Government or a foreign one, I have no idea who is in command now) is to take back control of the military bases. When all this happened, numerous countries filled our arsenals with weapons, transportation units and equipment, but the worst thing is that these mutants can fly planes and spread their trash everywhere, even throughout the rest of the world. That’s why the Europeans and Yankees are here. In fact, they have already bombarded Port Belgrano. Oh... , there is something else... yes, I am pretty sure that there are people that... people that are being turned into robots or something like that. I am

not saying that the mutants are doing that. The ones who command us are doing it; we ourselves are making robot men.”

—“Do you mean that the mutants are the enemy and the robots are our men?”

—“I think so, but you will have to check each particular case. What I am trying to say is that we are working for people who are not at all innocent. Each day I understand less and less.”

—“If I run into a mutant, what should I do? What can he do to me?”

—“He will eat you up. Like in those old movies. To be clear, if a mutant even slaps you, he can rip your head off. And you? Well, you can shoot him with your machine gun and run away.”

—“Got it. You see Bruno? It was enough just to tell me. Thanks for keeping our secret. And pardon my rudeness, but in these situations you have only two options: say “thanks’ or ‘I’ll fill you with lead’”, you know what I mean?”

Franky didn’t like what I had to tell him. Luckily, on my way to his room, I confirmed that we were going out on our first mission that same night. That news helped the biologist-turned soldier, regain his composure. We needed to do something with all that pent up adrenaline.

We had already realized that nothing was normal; nothing was as it used to be. But the truth, even the little truth we had now in our hands, was not only different but awful.

*

We were finally called. They put a red fabric coin with a number on it inside a plastic on my overalls' sleeve.

My number was 343.904 and Fran's 343.905.

—"I am a little bit more expensive than you," Franky joked and blew me a kiss.

In spite of the fact that our numbers were very close, we were assigned to two different groups. Room 3 in the bunker was my waiting room and room 4 was his. We agreed to talk by phone every three hours.

That deserved another kiss but we were already too serious.





A N G E L

Oh, angel, please tell me something,
Don't erase, come clear before me,
Reality's full of shadows.

Send me your light, share your wisdom,
Your love makes me breathe, I need you,
My mind now is full of nothing.

Humanoid clones stand in arms;
I don't know
Which is the dream, what is false...
Anymore.

Oh, angel, please stay one moment,
Embrace what's alive in my heart;
My spirit feels cold and hollow.

And maybe you'll find the right way
To make believe we should live
Free from any need to narrow.

Humanoid clones stand in arms;
I don't know
Which is the dream, what is false...
Anymore.

The angel makes me understand
We'll be strong
If after all we shall bear
There is love.

I didn't have to wait long and soon I was taken to a huge warehouse or a large hangar, I think. All I knew about my mission was that we were supposed to take back the hospital.

Camouflage clothing helped a lot. Not the khaki or green-colored type, but the night black ones. I tried hard not to complain about the equipment's weight or the lack of oxygen caused by my smoking habits. There was no sign of Franky. The black Zulus that had been entrusted to us (God knows why) openly looked down on my being just five-foot five tall, my reading glasses and clumsiness. Being with them I felt like a full-time idiot. Somehow though, I don't know how, I stopped thinking about that. A vision carried me away to another place: an angel approached me and even though she was not moving her lips, she comforted me.

The vision disappeared in the blink of an eye but was more vivid than any other life experience. And I was sure I had met the person who was the angel in my vision. That was clear, even though I could not picture her in any real context. It was a beautiful woman. Her skin was as white as milk, her lips smiled without moving and her eyes showed past sadness, but also calm and peace. But whatever I may say about that makes no sense. But in order to speak about that vision I can only cry, let that feeling slap me in the face and cry in front of you, because that night I knew how much I loved that angel, even though I didn't know for how long, or why...

My body was numb; all my attention was on a lonely empty place. I was dressed as a warrior, just as in my childhood I had imagined a soldier in the future

would be. I was experiencing the magic influence of an ancient and mystical epic, like an encouraging breeze at my back. It was the angel's influence. Everybody else was in a cold fifteen-by-thirty foot warehouse lit by a dim white light, waiting and not knowing what was coming, while I had been taken by an angel to a desert land of golden sand in the company of a horse which was running against the wind and sand, barely aware it was carrying me. I was alone, silently asking that spirit why she hadn't told me her name so I could at least die for *that* name, since I had never had one myself. Expósito and lost. Nothing. But someone had thought of me, someone cared for me and had come to guide me. It was only a vision, but at least there was someone. Someone to do whatever was needed to be done, someone I deeply loved. Because, during the time the vision lasted, looking at her face and her eyes staring at me tenderly I knew for certain how much I had always loved that woman.

Someone to die for. Because what was coming couldn't be good.

Communication, at least.

One of the huge black guys gave me a good shove, pushed me forward in the line and almost made me fall. I bumped against another black guy whose back helped me keep my balance. It was impossible to say what there was in front of the line, there were too many people; but a person always wants to know. Far in the distance, it seemed that the entrance door to the warehouse had been opened; I could feel the fresh breeze coming in. We walked a few meters and were then forced to walk in line through paths marked by

tapes. It reminded me of the concerts I used to go to at the Vélez, River and Ferro soccer stadiums, and wondered what was left of those places in Buenos Aires. I had heard that at the beginning of the disaster, River and Vélez had been turned into quarantine shelters. I guess that even those damned Rosario fans*** had become somewhat good during that time.

The men who were leading us were huge and it was impossible to see their faces, just the tips of their noses and mouths and chins. They were grayish men. Their suits were gray and so was their skin. A quick glance to both sides was enough to see that the guy on my left and the guy on my right were twins. One gave me a machine gun and the other a small manual: a miserable folded leaflet. The leaders of the two lines next to mine were also identical twins like the other two. My whole body froze. I looked around and saw that all the huge, serious gray figures giving orders looked alike. The leader on my left grabbed my arm so hard that he could have broken it if I hadn't skillfully accompanied his movement; without saying a word he made it clear that I had to be cautious and prudent so I stood in line, looking ahead and keeping up with everybody's pace. Then, I understood that I hadn't had a vision: I had truly been visited by an angel.

Although I knew we were part of a death army and that we had freely offered ourselves to be horror's arms, I was happy to be living those moments under the protection of the light that she, my personal angel, had impressed in the retina of my happiest memory.

*** (T.N.) Rosario is a famous Argentinean soccer team, just like River, Vélez and Ferro previously mentioned.

I had never had anything up until that moment.
Nobody.

What I was feeling in my chest, a sort of breeze, a sigh, a voice, a greeting... or maybe that was what I preferred to imagine it had been. The caress of a soul like a voice that after leaving seemed to have never been there and made me believe she loved me; that was better than dying alone.

One can remember the past but can also happen the other way around.

One day my story will mercifully be forgotten because what astonished me in mid 21st century will be platitudinous truism in the future. But my fate was to live in the Never, in No Time, more than one life at a time.



Since that night:

The line leaders, clones of an insensitive gray young man with no childhood, made us move forward throughout the warehouse. I was more or less in the middle of the warehouse and, like a cow which had accepted to go to the slaughterhouse, I kept walking and following the orders given by the clones and imposed by the huge black guys who walked behind me.

THE SUN

The World you knew past away.
The World you knew past away!

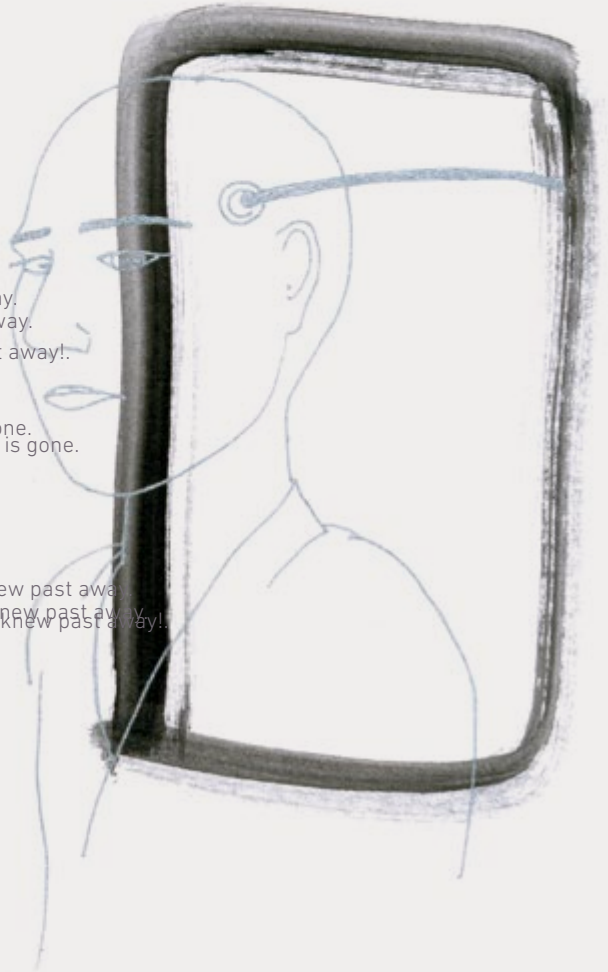
The sun you saw is gone.
The sun you saw is gone.
The sun you saw is gone.

The World you knew past away.
The World you knew past away.
The World you knew past away!

The sun you saw is gone.
The sun you saw is gone.
The sun you saw is gone.
The sun you saw is gone.

The sun you saw... is gone.

The World you knew past away.
The World you knew past away!



Suffocated by the crowd, I looked towards the only thing my eyes could reach, the ceiling. I was dozing off while the rectangular lights move slowly and took me to another vision. My back on a stretcher and hospital lights. I looked at both sides and it was then when I saw that woman again, the one who had been my angel before; this time she was not ethereal, I could see the passing of time in her wrinkled face. She was looking at me with that tender love that only the person who knows everything about you can have. Her hand was resting on my left arm but whoever was pushing my stretcher was doing it so fast that decided she couldn't come with me. So, she lifted her shaky warm fingers put them on her lips to give them the kiss she would blow me with her eyes full of tears. I felt so lonely after all that love and feeling of belonging that I had to force myself to shake off the spell and concentrate in the fact that I was getting to the end of that corridor that would take us out of the warehouse.

I was breathing heavily; each breath wasn't long enough as to avoid the sense of being suffocated. Those were not visions; they were real and vivid opportunities. As real as that damned path full of machine guns and weapons.

Dozens of trucks were waiting for us outside the hangar. Before getting on the one I had been assigned to, together with two of the black guys, someone grabbed me by the right sleeve of my overalls. As I was turning around, Franky handed me something small and closed it in my hand. On the verge of tears he asked me to forgive him. What would Franky know

now that made him almost cry? I kept my hand tight shut and tried to tell him something with my eyes, to calm him down, I don't know; but it was impossible: Franky was getting on another vehicle; he was also dressed as a soldier and carried a machine gun. I did not know enough about the situation to calm anybody down, much less realize that he had come to greet me just in case that was the last chance we had to see each other again. I was able to breathe well again only when we got to open air; my feeling of despair got better too. I had to survive. Franky's van was number 21. I tried to keep my eyes on him as long as I could to be able to go and find him in case he got lost. There was no reason for me to have gone to that enterprise with no preparation, no tools and no idea of what was going on. I tried not to think about that biologist's tears: he had been the person I had loved the most in that life of complete loss. I wasn't sure, but something was telling me that I could do a lot for him.

I don't know how it all happened; there is something inside each one of us that has already been decided even though we may not know it. Anyone who believes they have no purpose in life needs to be sure that his inner self knows how to retrace the steps that he has taken. When I got in the van 7 I sat on the right aisle in front of two black guys; they were 7 feet tall and we were going together to the slaughterhouse. We were escorted by two other soldiers as frightened as me. I took my elite suit, my machine gun, my pistol and read the leaflet. It indicated that the machine gun ammunition could be fired either single shots or in a sequence, but we should try not to waste them be-

cause staying **ALIVE** could depend on them (written in boldface and underlined). The instructions also said *'When confronted by an alien assailant, this units has an acid ejector, that should be used judiciously and only in the case that the attacker had lost its essential features of humanity'*. The second page of the leaflet had the same thing written in Spanish.

A border guard handed us a bandolier, two spare acid containers and showed us, like the hostess steward on a plane, the machine guns shooting positions and how to load the acid clip. All in less than two minutes. I should have died of fright but it was too late for that. We had to die for something worse than that border guard's explanation. The soldier sitting next to me couldn't help but throwing up. I hold him and rubbed his back. They handed us bulletproof vests and helmets with night vision.

I continued with one of my hands still clenched tight. My soul felt the same. I sat in the front row of the van to be able to see what Franky had handed me teary-eyed and almost desperate: a glass capsule shined between my fingers. There was a note handwritten by my friend: IF YOU ARE TO DIE MAY IT BE WITH THIS. I LOVE YOU BEEF.

The pill was wrapped inside the note.

*

Inside the van, beyond fear there was peace. The vehicle was rocking from side to side. We were sat on opposite sides, facing one another, gently jostling back and forth, side to side in complete silence; we could smell the fear as well as that connection among

total strangers who had nothing to say to one another but were handing in their own stories, composed of their childhood, growth and discoveries, to fate's complete liberation. That is what always happens in life, I thought. Only in agony do we suddenly see our common destiny and how completely unique our own experience is; and it is only then can there be absolute empathy among fellow human beings.

When the van stopped, a sergeant opened the van's door and gave just one instruction:

—"Gentlemen, we are going to take back Penna hospital. Here you have a map for each one of you," and he started handing them out. "Shoot anything not to your liking or that's deformed let's say. Is that clear? If you feel that someone or something is a threat to you, just kill it. The leaders will shout "taken" when an area has been taken back; the areas have different colors, if you find yourself in an area that has been taken, hold the position. And the most important thing: have mercy on no one; if they look or seem aggressive or have mutated, kill them all."

After the speech, we were divided into platoons of eight people, with a leader and his deputy who signaled to us to enter the grounds by different paths. There was no sign of Franky...I followed my group. Before putting on my helmet I smelt a musty odor that stuck in my throat. That odor would symbolize what was left of my life as a soldier.

As soon as we entered through the door, which my leaders kicked down, I ran to a recess in the corridor; as did the others who hid in different corners. My eyes fell upon a tattered sign hanging from the ceiling

which read “EMERGENCY ROOM”; it was splattered with blood. It felt nauseous. My hiding place was near a door that suddenly opened. I was about to turn around when I heard a child’s voice calling his mother. I think I lowered my gun, but I can’t remember it clearly. The boy was about five years old and looked sad and lost. He was dirty and covered in blood from head to toe, all my senses became alert. He was carrying a stuffed animal in his right arm. I kept looking at that hand which had greenish scabs all the way up his elbow.

I was trying to compose my thoughts when I was deafened by an explosion and I saw, clearly saw, how the boy’s head was blown off. A gray leader had shot him right at his forehead. All I could see was that little body falling down and his skull being blown out. I fell on my knees. Everything was fast. Suddenly, my body was dragged down the corridor and the leader made me stand up; that cold being with an impassive, gray face yelled at me:

—“No mercy! Wake up!”

It was the first time I saw someone being killed. At least, in *that* life. I was queasy and my body did not respond. I couldn’t say anything to the leader about that madness I was starting to experience in the worst of ways. I couldn’t stop seeing the transformation sequence: the scared look on the boy’s eyes, the gunfire, his brains being blown out and his body falling down into oblivion like a sack of rotten potatoes.

*

The leader let go of me and joined the other soldiers. Lights in the corridor were extremely dim; the walls of

canvas, like cloudy and stormy skies, were dotted with purple and ochre fireworks as if painted, a mixture of short-circuits, beheadings, anger, madness and deformation. The queasiness in my stomach stopped and with liberating determination, I decided that I didn't want to live in a place like that. I ran down the corridor and joined the rest of the platoon, determined to stop being who I was, convinced that I had become a monster in a monsters' world, devoid of the hope to believe in something called humanity.

As soon as I accepted my human defeat and tore out the neat pages where I had tried to write my existence, I suddenly felt as if my body became light and happy. I bounded off to join up with the others with a hysterical laughter.

From that moment on, I hardly hid and was the first to attack. A woman with her face covered by a sort of green bubbling acne came out and tried to grab my arm. I shot at her stomach so many times that I could see through her. I immediately regretted having wasted so many bullets; my first crime, which took place ten seconds after witnessing my first murder, was as unnoticeable as my soul escaping my body, leaving me empty. I continued killing as many people as everyone else, knowing that it was the only way to survive; a lot of killing, and little or no thinking. A scared and confused conscript fell into the hands of a group of deformed doctors who seized him and ripped him apart with their teeth. We didn't wait to see if our mate was dead, we simply killed all there was in that place. The leader and his deputy quickly checked the place and shouted out:

—“Taken!”

They communicated with the others while the six of us, who were left, defended the place. The adrenaline in my body prevented me from standing still. I knew taking a rest, even for a brief moment, would get me killed. Not my soul, which had already abandoned me, but my body and mind which still had some traces of truth and kindness, though covered by my filthy actions and by that new vice of killing what had been transformed by men and mutated by some kind of industry, but which was still life and nature’s sacred property.

We started opening all the lockers, glass cabinets and closets in the emergency rooms on the ground and first floors. Other two victorious platoons joined in. While another soldier and I were classifying and putting away the medical supplies we had found and our group’s deputy was teaching us how to destroy the old locks and replace them with new ones, I heard sobs coming from the room nearby. I grabbed my gun and went there. Three soldiers were helping an ill woman and an exhausted nurse to get out of the cabinet where they had been hiding. After staying who knows how many hours or days in there, feeling hungry and thirsty, the two women looked exhausted and their bodies could not react even to the reality of finally being free. But, the nurse was still aware of her duty and was trying to help her patient recover by slapping her on the back, but to no avail. The soldiers took both women and made them lie down on the stretchers in another room. Before the nurse fell asleep, I run to her showing no consideration for her condition. I had to know...

—“Are you Victoria? Are you Victoria Skliar?”

She was puzzled and exhausted and looked at me as if she wasn't able to understand what I was saying, so I insisted demonstrating I was not going to accept her silence.

—“I asked you whether you are Victoria or not!”

—“I am not...”, the young woman answered, turning her head that was laying on a pillow, and fainted.

I was sick of my platoon. I didn't want to be there doing nothing. The leader of the other platoon was informed that help was needed on the third floor so I didn't hesitate and offered to go.

—“I am coming with you.”

He raised his helmet's visor and I saw two dead, robot's eyes. My leader's exact twin, an atrocious, immortal and relentless gaze.

He paid no attention to what I had said so I decided to go with him without waiting for his reaction. I took my backpack and checked on my ammunitions. I was glad to see I still had a good amount. They would allow me to leave this world having gotten rid of the anger that had replaced my departed soul. That joy may one day shame me in the future, but I doubted it.

While I was trying to catch up with the leader I run into two conscripts who were pushing the nurse's stretcher along the corridor. Her weak fingers brushed against my arm.

—“Victoria, I know her. The last time I saw her...,” she said.

I run after her stretcher and made it stop paying no attention to the soldiers who continued pushing it.

—“The last time I saw her she was going to the clubs’ shelter. . .”

—“Where, for God’s sake? Where?” I asked.

—“She had been sent to the ‘Oasis & Rock’ . . .”

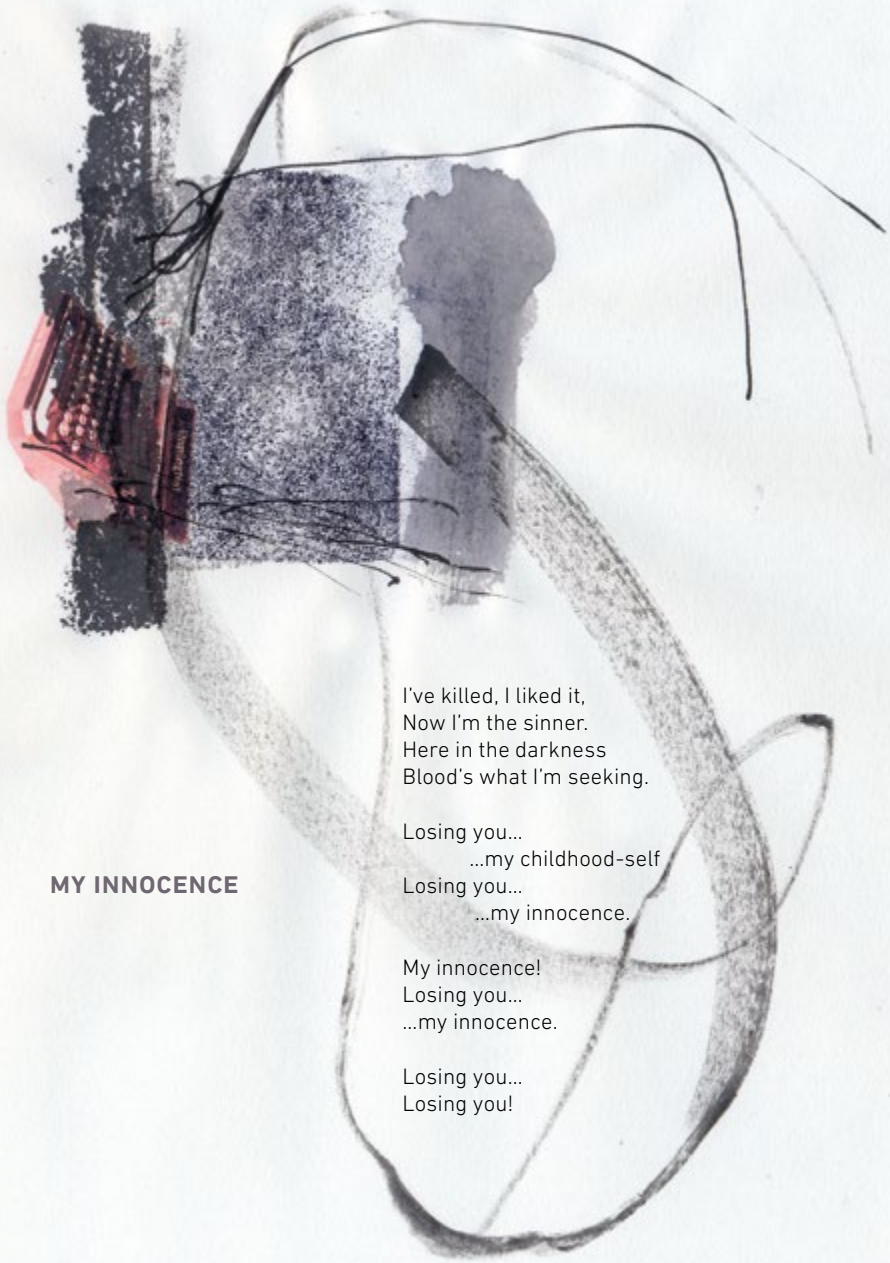
Back to the gas station. It made me recall that day in the gas station where I used to turn on my computer and organize my weekends; yes, I did organize my weekends better than my working days! It was a gray winter day in my gray city. I was served a steamy latte but refused the croissants. . . The clerk mentioned that nightclub to her coworker. My mind told me then: *“if you go there you will die; so don’t you ever do that”*. It was telling me the same now but of course I didn’t care.

I called Franky. He answered but I couldn’t hear him, all I could hear was noise:

—“Your sister was working as a nurse at the ‘Oasis & Rock’, Franky! Your sister was working as a nurse at the ‘Oasis & Rock’ and she could be there now, Franky
Silence.







MY INNOCENCE

I've killed, I liked it,
Now I'm the sinner.
Here in the darkness
Blood's what I'm seeking.

Losing you...
...my childhood-self
Losing you...
...my innocence.

My innocence!
Losing you...
...my innocence.

Losing you...
Losing you!

What happened after (if there are such concepts as ‘after’ and ‘before’) was a massacre. The third floor was foggy; a fire, its extinguishing and the endless and deafening alarms. No sound, not even the leader’s loud orders and commands could go through the wild and inconsolable sirens wailing on the third floor. I only had my sight to trust and the vibrations of my body. Immersed in clouds of flames, I fired at three civilians who were coming out of a room coughing. “You screwed up,” a doctor shouted at me and forced me to put my gun down; “you screwed up!” I was only able to understand what he was saying by reading his lips. I had made a mistake; they were not mutants and I had shot without paying attention. I ran to one of the bodies; it was a man who was still breathing with his eyes wide open; I asked him to forgive me in the hope that he could read my lips just as I had the doctor’s. As his eyelids strained to stay open I kept shaking his body to keep him awake. Then I felt that his arms went limp, I closed my eyes and screamed at the top of my lungs. My eyes were so tight and my cry so loud that, in that inner world of mine filled with the crap I was learning and which I was trying to get rid of, I felt like Munch’s man; surrounded by a brilliant orange, and pale-blue reality formed by these colored curves around my body, while my integrity was unavoidably vanishing. New budding curves were forming, showing that we all inevitably get blurred out sooner or later. Just like in that painting where the spiral of paint is about to envelop the shouting man, along with the passerby, bridge, water and sky; twisting and twirling the colors

until the mixture –thrust towards the future– becomes a oneness of cement and cemetery.

The sound of the alarms was so loud I couldn't hear my own scream. If that intolerable sound had been music and would have required a title, it would have been, 'Atrocity'. Without holding back the tears rolling down my face and with my body shaking all over, I stood up and pushed the doctors around me away. I followed some recruits into a room where they were electrocuting mutated bodies until carbonized. I figured that one of these procedures had caused the fire, and went away feeling stunned and alienated. My teetering body still stayed alive at this my moment of extinction.

I wondered what the hell we were supposed to find in that place: what the hell could be so important in that hospital... Carrying my gun ready to shoot at anything again and again, I decided to walk around the building without a guide. I couldn't care less if my anarchic behavior resulted in my being shot down. I almost wanted that.

It was then when I understood, after many years of refusing to do so, that even if the great majority of human beings search for harmless happiness, the power of benevolence was no greater than that of greed and possession. Two images; the first one was on the second floor. I came across Walter Brihuega, my neighbor in Town XII who had been taken out of the line at one of those awful 18th Hours. I tried to talk to this friendly human being who connected me to my days of innocence. He fixed his eyes on me as the gray leaders did. Dead, unreachable. His temples had those holes similar to headphones plugs or other electronic device. I

became pale and left him before he could say or do anything. The second image: the hospital lab, it had turned into a small experimental center. There were plugs and wires to connect Walter Brihuega or anyone else taken at an 18th Hour. I got out of there. I understood that in my country it was all about experiments and power. A country this world could care less about. Something had gone wrong and an attempt to regain control had ensued. There was nothing left to understand...and if there was, who cared. All my life I had known that the world was capable of shipping useless medicines to countries that needed medical care; a world that used lies to invent wars, to bomb cities full of life. What was going on this time was not important. It had always been the same. Light versus darkness; darkness using light to filter its fear. Lies. Lies... Lies were taking my mind to distant memories; to Débora smoking for the first time in our hideout and both of us laughing at her beginner's cough; to the night when Franky read a torn piece of paper with the famous lines of Mujica Láinez's 'The Great Theater'; to Erasmo taking off his bandage and showing me his wounded foot. And to NN, me, who became Nicolás Espósito alienated from my personal truth my whole life. Should I be surprised about lies once again? About cruelty? Innocence sounded so stupid to me! I couldn't understand—as I had before—either the friends that came to my mind or any sense of serenity, peace or truth. I staggered towards the hospital. I wandered around the streets of my city with almost no light. As I was walking I saw the moon hanging in the sky, that friendly moon that had never given up on me, and that would certainly never do so, until the end

of any of my lives. That invariable good luck charm of all my lives.

*

As I tell you this, well, as I type this on a brand new typewriter, which is the E. Remington & Sons' granddaughter, now just called Remington, I can smell lunch, which is almost ready, a few meters away from my office, and which makes our cook whistle triumphantly. I am a doctor and I have borrowed this happy life in 1943, far away from a war that, on this other side, the world is not interested in; I am convinced though that all forms of evil matter, regardless of where they occur. My daughter is playing in the garden I can see her from my window, and the woman who was my angel during the Great Disaster, is my wife. She is also in our garden and just minutes before she looked at me with tender love. Every so often she asks our daughter to wave to me and then they wave together.

I am a doctor. I have borrowed this happy doctor's life and I am married, loved and have a beautiful daughter in 1943. I remember this past life and I love it. I am devoted to my sweet and beautiful wife, and to this existence. I love this life that I once lived, and to where I have decided to come back. But I have travelled without forgetting about life in the future, that life I am telling you about as I struggle to type these pages. My daughter, that joyful girl that I see from my window, may one day hug her own grandchildren without ever knowing that they will have to go through the 18th Hour.

And I have been writing all this because for many

months, when I fall asleep, I wake up in different lives of my human history. After these trips, which at first were short, but now are getting longer each time, I always come back here to my life with Ada who is probably the great love of all my lives, maybe the love I keep on searching for in all other women. I know that in this life I will die in a hospital, and her face will be wrinkled, but that will make her more beautiful still, and her skin will be as white as it is today though her lips won't be as colorful as the pink roses in our garden. I know she will blow me a kiss with her hand as her loving eyes hold back her tears. But I have made up my mind. I will leave this life, tonight, but instead of letting me be taken by an arbitrary existence, I will return there to where I got lost; to the 'Oasis & Rock' nightclub where I am supposed to find either the death of all my deaths and peace or where I most probably will become a monster.

Now I only have two things to do: finish telling you about the Great Disaster, about my walk on dark streets under the moon and what happened after that (or in that future) or at least what happened up until the time I lived in the life I will be coming back to today.

I can't keep on walking with you down this path anymore Ada. I know that we live in eternity anyhow and that this life lasts in the stillness of everything that happens.

I have to go back to that incomplete world of the unknown Nicolás Espósito, otherwise I was convinced nothing would make sense.

Tonight, while she sleeps, I will beg my wife to accompany me once again as my angel to the "Era

of 'Tainted Water". I can no longer live in 1943; the happiness of this life must have forgotten about the 21st century. But I can't live those various lives I am transported to each night being a person full of memories, lying in a nightclub with a poisonous pill between his fingers. I have to come back. Last night I woke up in the 25th century; I got so scared to see what it was like that I woke up again here. I don't even want to talk about that; it is atrocious.

I have no objective proof to suggest that I will be able to come back when I want. I only know that I *can* do it, because I am a doctor and thanks to what I have studied. I just *know it*.

I now continue the story I have to recount notwithstanding this feeling of suffocating inertia.



Under The Moon

The moon shows her face,
Her iced bony face...
Mistress, we re both dead.

Walking down the streets,
Laughing at the trees,
I could be so good
But I'm cold and mean.

Walking down the streets,
Laughing at the trees,
I could be so good
But I'm cold and mean.

Now that I have killed,
Blood is all I need;
I despise myself,
I would poison me.

Now that I have killed,
Blood is all I need;
I despise myself,
I would poison me.

Blood and fear, Blood and fear,
Food and hunger. Food and hunger.

Now that I have killed
I despise myself, I despise myself,
I would poison me.

Laughing at the trees...
But I'm cold and mean.

Now that I have killed,
Blood is all I need;
I despise myself, I despise myself,
I would poison me.

Blood and fear, Food and hunger.
Blood and fear, Food and hunger.
Blood and fear, Food and hunger.
Blood and fear, Food and hunger.



I walked under the moon which often was my only light. From that moment on, when I transited to 1943 I always looked for her, every two or three days, needing a few hours of her light's influence. I was like a werewolf hiding a secret exclusively shared with that pendant jewel, with my invariable good luck charm.

I walked down cobblestone streets throughout the city avoiding those foamy ochre puddles, hidden alleys and paved paths eaten away by acid. I became friends with the shadows and I dodged light. I haven't mutated but turned into a nocturnal animal, a dauntless and clever spy and killer. I still felt dizzy; maybe my lungs had been filled with too much smoke at that hospital. But the city's acrid air revived my evil intentions. They helped me to go the whole way. On those dark, dying Bahia Blanca's streets I learned to control that anxiety caused by the desire to kill, to be cynical enough to wait lurking, raise my silent gun, aim at my target, anticipate its movements and shoot my target, be it a mutant, a gray guard or a mad dog, right in their forehead. Death... death...death! I only had to take care of one life, that of unknown Victoria Skliar. For her I had degraded myself as well as for her brother Franky: excuses to explain either my survival instinct or the resilience of my withering capacity to love.

I stopped in front the porch of an apparently abandoned house and put down my backpack to check what there was inside. I ate a piece of chocolate and chewed a painkiller. My head was still spinning. I heard a noise coming from inside the house, so I quickly hid in the shadow of the building next door. I noticed that the mechanic level of survival didn't even allow me to feel fear; all sensitivity was gone. The house's front door opened and a young woman appeared. I could see her face and next to it the brightness of an axe's metal blade. She peeked out onto the street and then went back in the darkened house for a moment. She reemerged with a young boy of about eight by her side. She hugged him and they went outside together.

The boy was carrying a medium-sized revolver in his right hand, along his right leg and pointing down to the ground. Adversity is the best teacher. I looked at the woman who was carrying an axe with the same hand she was hugging the boy with and carrying a 9-mm handgun in her other hand. They ran across the street and when they reached the door of the house, the woman took out a bunch of improvised wires and was able to open the house door in five seconds with one of them. I knew that that technique had taken a lot of practice and understood that was not the first time they had changed houses.

At that moment, those who I assumed to be mother and son would be looking around their new house, so I came out of my hiding place without much precaution. The way to the 'Oasis & Rock' was taking more than two hours and I was only halfway there.

Walking more than twenty blocks lightens the body

and alleviates the mind's duality. Integral, the wanderer stops fighting against all his various facades. Notwithstanding the attachment to shadows I was forced to develop, my apprehensions and tiredness, I was able to blend in with my surroundings, and as one step followed the other, I was forgetting all past experience to the point of feeling a sort of music in my muscles. I could have thought I was going crazy but it was something I had experienced more than once. A woman's soprano voice accompanied me, entering every fiber of my body. She didn't sing but whispered familiar sounds, old and new, sounds of humanity, that struggled to convince me that there was still something good in me. I thought it was foolish to pay attention to them, but that music which my memory played transported me to a peaceful place inside myself where there were no conflicts; just pure emotion –childlike and profound.

A rhapsody of sensations and feelings, an everlasting and eternal impersonal heritage. Music subtly accompanying an anonymous, stateless and lost survivor.

Nourished by songs of war and by the strains of a soprano voice joined by a choir of martyrs, the music confided to me that also in the afterlife I should continue fighting for goodness, beauty, art and aesthetics; that even after death we need to defend love.

I tried to avoid the city center so my road was even longer and more tiring. As I was getting closer to the club neighborhood I had to move more carefully, not just hiding but pretending to be one of them, part of the reconnaissance and reconquest army whose platoons I had already left just few of hours before. I quickened my steps towards the 'Oasis & Rock' and

was about five blocks from my destination when there was an explosion that knocked me 10 feet to my left; I ended up crashing my back against a house door that smashed into pieces behind me. My helmet and backpack had saved my head and back. The guards and recognition teams were everywhere followed by dozens of alarms going off...Sirens once again! A crazed reaction in buildings and patrol cars; the deafening sirens transformed the silence into a force that took up all space and physically forced exile. I would have gone crazy if I had stayed there so I started running. Five tanks were approaching a line of soldiers and a single cannon shot was enough to destroy the place where they were and leave no trace of them. I felt out of place... Either there was a human resistance against our army or otherwise mutants had taken the military bases... I remembered that Bruno had said something about it... maybe it was Bruno, I was not sure...but it didn't matter. I started running. I had to get to the 'Oasis & Rock'; they said it had been turned into a medical shelter. My body reacted without heeding my tiredness. Staying alive is such a basic animal instinct that it can define beings more than any other characteristic. I ran desperately. Victoria Skliar meant absolutely nothing to me but her life had become the only reason that I had to protect in my own life. My throat felt raw as if cut on the inside, a result of all I had smoked during the Great Disaster. It was hard to run. But I ran and ran...

Five soldiers hurried towards the door of the Oasis & Rock's main entrance and they were about to seal it.

I got there on pure determination...,
...screaming out loud:

—“Come on, come on, come on boys! Let’s end this once and for all!” actually I ordered them to do what they were already trying to do, but by now I was inside the building. It worked; everybody was too terrified of the enemy to question the command of a fellow soldier.

The club’s laser lights and black lights were on, swinging and frantically illuminating at every corner of the club. The three quarters of a block that the club took up had been separated by semi-transparent dividers which formed different areas. There were also different colored blocks, similar to bricks, which formed lanes and pillars and made it difficult to reach the large medical rooms. Everything was carefully arranged and judging by its appearance was very expensive so I assumed the dividers were not just made of simple acrylic but were likely bulletproof glass.

I walked past the main lobby which led to the medical cubicles and chose the main corridor, formed by the translucent dividers, because it appeared there was no security there. However, suddenly a guard appeared and stood right in front of me. He must have been sitting in one of the cubicles I didn’t see.

—“Where are you going?”

—“I have to deliver classified information to nurse Victoria Skliar.” I answered.

—“Identify yourself.”

I complied with the order and showed him the identification number on my overalls and the verification chip that had been inserted under my skin on the right side of my body. To do this, I had to unzip my overalls almost completely. The man placed his watch on

the inserted chip and seemed to be appeased with the result.

—“Let me in, please. It’s urgent. Tanks are on their way here!”

—“Tell me your captain’s name, soldier. I need to verify if what you are saying is true.”

—“That’s impossible. I don’t know him...”

—“What do you mean?”

—“It is impossible. I don’t know who my captain is. I see you don’t know how the platoons get here. I had a leader for five minutes and he never mentioned his name. His deputy sent me here. We are about to be attacked right here. Tanks are coming! It’s a miracle I even got here.”

The guy didn’t trust me.

—“Stay here!”

I convinced him to have a look at the club’s entrance doors. Dozens of border police were there.

The guy seemed to believe me and let me in.

“. The nurse you are looking for is over there, Stretcher 23.”

I hurried up and reached the cubicle that read 22/23.

Before getting there, the building shook; tanks had shot again outside and something had been blown up... Maybe, it was one of the armored vans I had seen before arriving to the building. I ran and entered the cubicle where I was supposed to find Victoria Skliar –or what was left of her... .

The stretchers were lit by round led lights which were attached to the dividers, giving the patients’ faces a sinister look. On the first stretcher there was a con-

script like me; he was in his forties and was wearing overalls that were completely torn. The skin on his chest and left arm was practically carbonized. On the other stretcher was a very skinny, almost skeletal-like woman. I looked around but didn't see any nurse Skliar name there. I didn't know if it was better to go look for her in the room next door. Suddenly my eyes fixed on the sick woman on stretcher 23, and it was then that I noticed she was wearing a nurse's smock. I ran to her and grabbed her right arm:





Into The Invaded Dance Club



Oh!

Hang on,
I feel my heart's beating hard,
I'm sure
Salvation's near.

Again
I feel this rage in my blood,
I know
I'll find you here.

Moving fast, I'm running fast.
Rushing hard, I'm rushing hard.

Running fast, I'm running fast.
Rushing hard, I'm rushing hard.

Oh!

Hello,
I came to aid you. No! (I just came to aid you...)
Don't fall! (we won't let them kill us now)
Victoria, please!

Come on,
I'll hide you somewhere now.
Trust me,
Success is near.

Help us, Frank, (Ah...)
Just help us, Frank. (Running, running fast)

We're coming down,
We're coming down. (Running, running fast)

(We're coming down)

I'm moving fast, I'm moving fast. (Monsters come!)
Monsters come, the monsters come!

—“Are you Victoria Skliar?”

Her eyes which a few minutes ago had been lost tracking the lasers on the ceiling, constantly and randomly moving from one side to the other, suddenly became fixed on me.

—“Yes.” Her voice was a faint whisper, barely a voice almost just air being expelled.

—“I came here to rescue you, Victoria. I am a friend of your brother Franky.”

—“I can’t move.” I had to read her lips. Her eyes smiled kindly, supplementing her faint words. She was not asking for sympathy but was sorry for the effort I had had to make to find her in that condition. I thought she was the sweetest and bravest person in the world; she hadn’t lost her peace –or selfless resignation.

—“Well, I will get you out of here... The place is being attacked. And if we can’t leave, I will stay with you. I travelled far to come get you...”

The building shook again. But this time the noise meant that a missile had actually struck the building and pieces of masonry and electrical fixtures were falling from the ceiling. I threw myself over Victoria but luckily only pieces of foam and fiberglass fell on me. After things stopped falling, I cleaned Victoria’s eyes and nose of the dust and pieces of fiber that made her sneeze. I took her in my arms and exited the room. She was all skin and bones and I felt as if I was taking care of a very important artist’s work, I don’t know, one of Minujin’s famous works from the beginning of this century or end of the previous one, or a wire doll with joints made of tiny fragile magnets. I didn’t know what to do, or where to go. But a corridor offered the chance that there could be more rooms ahead and there were. I put Victoria down in a small safe place, had her sit and told her to wait. She looked scared but didn’t lose that strange serenity.

It took me less than ten seconds to retrieve two pillows, a small mattress and blanket and get back to where she was. I covered her with the blanket and

made her lie on the mattress, which didn't fit in the small space I had found, so she had to remain half-seated, but at least was somewhat comfortable. I put one of the pillows under her bottom and another one behind her neck. I closed the door that led to the corridor.

I took my cell phone but it had no signal.

—"Stay here," I told her, she looked at me confused as if to say she didn't have the strength to do anything else.

When I got to the corridor my cell phone got a signal. I called Franky but he didn't answer. I left a message:

"Franky, I am with her; I am with Victoria at the 'Oasis & Rock'. Please come, you have to help me to get her out of here."

I went back in.

—"I am a gentleman, but considering these circumstances, I need to ask you why you are so thin, Victoria." I was noticing that not only had I retained some of my gentle voice, but also some remnant of my soul had remained with me.

—"A virus, it makes me weak... I can't digest food and can barely eat."

—"I understand. I am going to look for some IV bags... or what else?" As I was saying that my gun hit me in the head as I tried to lean on the wall. I had forgotten that it was hanging on my back along with my backpack.

—"Look for some solution bags over there at the end of the corridor. I don't know where we are going but take at least seven of them. I don't want to die..."

Her eyes teared up even though that “I don’t want to die” sounded more like an important fact to note, opposed to a sign of despair.

I was about to stand up when Victoria grabbed my hand, and with a cold, serious look in her eyes, repeated:

—“I don’t want to die...not before curing everybody of this nastiness they have created. Please...”

I got closer to her until I was less than 2 inches from her face. You cannot communicate confidence otherwise.

—“I will help you do it, V. But now, let me go and you focus on your health.”

Before leaving the room I peeked down both ends of the corridor, first to one end and then to the other end; I was afraid someone would ‘steal’ Victoria or mutants would enter and kill her. I saw a platoon shooting from the building and three soldiers launching a bazooka, but I also saw someone that made my chest swell with happiness: it was Franky.

Perhaps, if hopes can be realized Franky had the same thing reaction when he saw me.

He ran to me and ducked into the hiding place I had chosen for her sister. While they were hugging each other and crying I ran out into the corridor and grabbed a bunch of IV bags, as well as other bags that appeared to be serum, but whose labels I was not able to understand. Six boxes of antibiotics and then...Another deafening roar. This time it caused me crash into a glass cabinet behind me (luckily my back was covered by my backpack) and many thin splinters of glass fell on my head. When I managed to stand up, I desperately ran through the corridor. I was terrified when I

saw three mutants at the end of the corridor. I started firing at them continuously until the monsters fell, but even more showed up, who I then killed shooting with another dozen bullets. I continued shooting as I raced towards the door of the hiding place. I opened it and shouted to Franky to grab his sister and run behind me. I didn't even turn around. I sprayed the place shooting constantly. I felt Franky brush against my backpack as he was leaving and one of Victoria's feet hit my arm. Then I shot my machine gun from side to side trying to splatter anything that may appear from the end of the corridor. A few seconds later, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Franky going through a door I had seen when I was picking up the supplies and that led to an emergency exit, carrying Victoria in his arms. I again looked down the corridor again and realized that I had made a terrible mistake when I stopped shooting. A huge mutant was coming towards me pointing his gun at me. Just as I was about to move aside, he fired and struck me in my shoulder. Then shot again and hit me in the stomach. I felt a sharp burning and an aching pain which had been described to me many times, but which I had never experienced until that moment. I managed to shoot the huge puppet that was approaching me; two shots of my Browning M2 rifle with the acid injector were enough to knock him down. Although I was confused, terrified and in pain, adrenaline helped me to quickly calculate how many bullets it had taken me to kill one of them: at least eight. There were a maximum of fifteen left in the fifth bullet clip I had used so far. But luckily I had stolen three more belts,

and taking into account that I had used 80 shots in the last two minutes, I decided I better try to save a few.

I loaded the next clip into the chamber but before finishing doing so I felt a shadow over me.

Before I had time to react a mutant fell on me and knocked my helmet off...He cut my scalp with his teeth and scratched my face and mauled the right side of my jaw and neck. My machine gun was pointing right at the middle of his abdomen so I shot with such a fury that I continued shooting him even when I knew he was already dead; I didn't breathe, my heart was quiet and I relished the splatter sprayed on the walls caused by my extreme reaction.

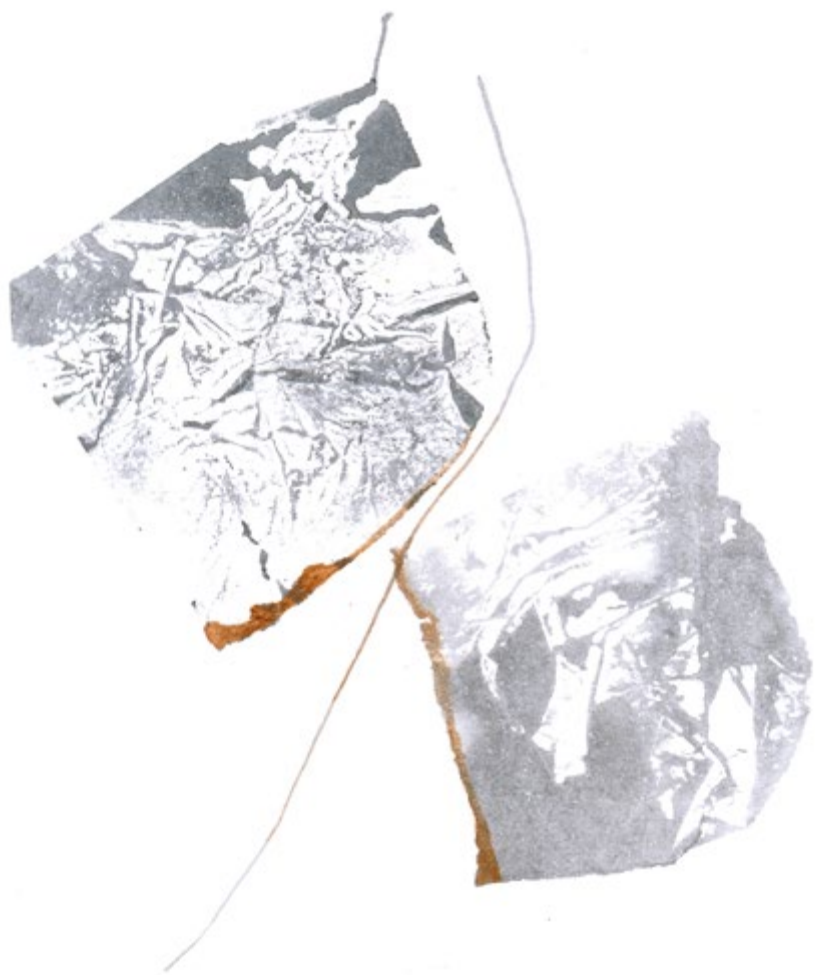
I dragged myself to the hiding place where I had been with Victoria, lay on my back and kicked the door closed.

I could feel the warmth of my own blood streaming down from my neck and shoulders and my torn right masseter muscle. I started to cry. The realization that one's face will never be the same is quite shocking, more than one can imagine. Aesthetic issues may seem irrelevant, but hope, that stubborn hope, always makes you think that life will return to normal. Thinking about that possibility relieved my anguish and helped me not to focus on the bullet holes I also had in my shoulder and abdomen, which were also bleeding abundantly, not to mention the monster's bites and scratches which would probably turn me into one of them. After all, if those mutants were fighting against our country or the countries that were trying to get rid of them – that is what I believed was happening–, they were right and they were doing good. But, I had already mutated

enough in just one day: I had lost my soul and couldn't recognize myself inside my own skin, I was sick of it all and felt destroyed, not just physically but also deep inside, so I was determined not to let that monster's poisonous saliva turn me into whatever. Crying like a baby, my body shaking all over and calling for my nanny who looked after me when I was a child, I managed to reach my right hand into my overalls' right pocket. My trembling hand found that poisonous pill Franky had given me. It's never easy to commit suicide. However, before I was able to do so, I passed out and came to in the year 1943.



L I F E



I have nothing else to tell about that.

I am a doctor from another life who abandoned his secret story and worn out bullet-ridden body, trapped in a small room, awaiting the effects of the viscous liquid injected in his skin and muscles by a mutant. After having travelled to those different lives I had gotten to live during those crazy trips and especially after returning to this happy life, far from all wars (including the Second World War) I feel sorry for that poor man without a name, who was left alone in a room with a disfigured face, experiencing the worst of all loneliness. I imagine him feeling sad, alone, and aching all over waiting for someone to comfort him, or help him swallow a pill and bury him with a tombstone and epitaph. It might seem crazy but I don't want my wife to give me her smiles, here in this 1943 life anymore. Every day, I pray to return to be that man that I once was, or will be (who cares how it's best to say it) in order not to let him die alone. Having her, my friends, my daughter and a peaceful life makes me feel more and more uncomfortable, out of place...and sad. I can't let *that* man stay there alone...

So tonight I will keep him company. I will enter into *his* soul and fill it again offering him the warmth of the blessed, kind man I am here. I am sure that I will be able to remember, and when I enter into that man's body lying on the floor, I will also be the doctor who didn't want to leave alone; I know *he* will remember.

Tonight I will whisper to my wife to come travel with me, like the angel she used to be in that other life of mine, to give courage to that alter ego I have abandoned.

*

Night.

I will write no more. All will remain in my memory and travel with me. The light coming from Ada's nightstand reveals the transparency of her undone and messy hair and makes illuminate the blond outline of her body shine, while projecting a grey shadow around the pink skin of her back, which I kiss again and again. She takes my hand tightly holding it to her chest even if I can tell by her deep and peaceful breathing that she is soundly sleeping. I smell her perfume, that perfume I never wanted to decipher and now unlock of its ethereal layer of sandalwood and wildflowers, in order to take it with me where I have to go, to recognize it in any sweetness, even that of death's.

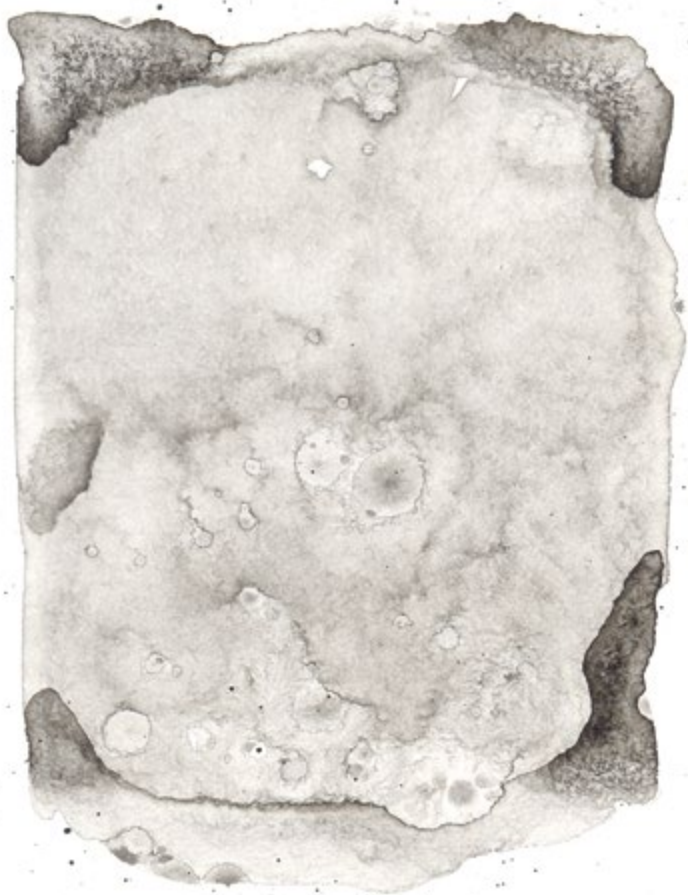
I close my eyes.

Don't leave me, Ada. Come and join me because I have nothing there and you are the only angel who has helped me to endure. Don't fail to come, my dear Ada.

The dream weighs on me. I am scared. But I am glad that when I put my Remington aside after dinner I had drunk so much liquor and taken so many pills that I couldn't change my mind... because I would have.



This War (To Franky)



You'll lead me forward through this war.

You'll find the key.

You'll lead me forward 'cause

This friendship is the gold that we achieved.

You'll tell the truth about this war.

You'll speak for me.

So say Humanity

Has battles that can never be incomplete.

You'll lead me all the way.

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

You'll lead me all the way.

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

Until this battle is over just lead me.

Against the demons around us

And reach me.

'Till death we're fighters and saviors.

Won't fear.

Defend our essence and fight 'till the end.

You'll lead me forward through this war.

You'll find the key.

You'll lead me forward 'cause

This friendship is the gold that we achieved.

You'll tell the truth about this war.

You'll speak for me.

So say Humanity

Has battles that can never be incomplete.

You'll lead me all the way.

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

You'll lead me all the way.

(as every sea washes the shore...)

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

(...I'll cure your heart)

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

You'll lead me all the way.

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

You'll lead me all the way.

You'll lead me on, you'll lead me on a prayer.

You'll lead me on a sparkle through this game.

Until this battle is over just lead me.

Against the demons around us

And reach me.

'Till death we're fighters and saviors.

Won't fear.

Defend our essence and fight 'till the end.

Until this battle is over just lead me.

Against the demons around us

And reach me.

'Till death we're fighters and saviors.

Won't fear.

Defend our essence and fight 'till the end.

Dear Franky.

It's been so beautiful to know you.

I'd be glad if we could share some more time.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

Don't wanna say goodbye...

It's been so beautiful to know you.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

Don't wanna say goodbye.

You'll lead me on.

You'll lead me on.

—“Ahhh...”

Breath returns to me. I think I have fallen asleep. Once again I dreamt of another life. No. Once again I lived another life. I must have stopped breathing because now my lungs required from me all the air there is in this cubicle, again and again...

I don't know how to describe it, but even if I know that at some time before, it was me who spent almost a year in another existence, I feel gratitude for that person I was, as if I were a different person; I am grateful to him for not having left me here, and I feel his presence, I feel he is me again, but with new resources that allow me to spend those moments with some kind of strange happiness. My hands tremble less as I hold Franky's pill in my right hand.

The clock tells me I have spent less than a minute locked in here.

The burning pain in my neck and face, as well as the sharp pain in my shoulder and stomach return. The blood stains around me keep growing. I think I can tear my pants with my pocket knife; I need to dress my wounds. The saline solution... How should I administer it... maybe..., like this?

—“Ouch! Damn needle! Ahh... what if I hang the bag here...”

What is it preventing me from dying? I thought I had been wishing to die the whole day, and even before that when Erasmo was taken at the 18th Hour... But the 18th Hour seemed like a mirage now and maybe Erasmo could still be alive; he might be here with those computer jack holes in his head ready to be plugged into some kind of machine, I don't know, just like Brihuega... But at

least he will not live feeling like an orphan like Franky and I.

Antibiotics, saline solution, I am not that bad... makeshift bandage for my face, neck, shoulder and abdomen...not enough, but there is nothing else I can do; I am tired...

...Dammit! I have no face and no name...God... nanny...why?

Ok, I need to calm down; I have to stop pouting...

I don't think anyone imagines where he will die. But I imagined it, that day at the gas station; I knew if I came to this place I would die. Something in me has died already, that is crystal clear, but am I supposed to die for real here...in this hole?

I can't take it anymore...

*

My angel appears with her magnolia-like smile, white teeth and soft gaze; she comes close and kisses me. Ada, your name is Ada. I don't know why you take care of me, or perhaps I know that you once loved me. I don't know why you appear, or why I imagine you so full of light. I know that I love you, I have always loved you, and hundreds of intersecting lives, like endless deserts, have revived the hope to meet you again. I am not sure if it is either the light that you take with you or the magic aura that envelops you, but I feel time isn't time, and space does not matter and I finally understand once again why I have chosen this life, which despite giving me only banishment from affection, has also allowed fate to give me the chance to meet you again. Light, light and you. I want to stay here. I don't want to go anywhere

else, to any other existence other than this one. Those warm, majestic beings that accompany you also fill me with love. And I guess that was what I came to miss: love; and I just happened to fully understand it when I didn't have it anymore... It doesn't matter; I am happy. I did what I could each time, and my reward is your caress. Don't tell me I have to go back; I can't understand why I should go back there or to anywhere else. Don't tell me, Ada, that you are going to give me one last kiss before I leave, because it would be a cruel kiss, which will remain in my soul and will come back to me and to my soul after I am dead and gone. Please, don't... Ada, I sense you are leaving, I sense you lose your light and that another light replaces you. Yes, I know you will wait for me when I come back and, even if this time it is hard for me to leave, I forgive you because I know I will see you again. I will certainly tell them about it. I will certainly tell them there is hope and here, where you are, love is born and can also triumph there. I know; you don't need to ask me. You come close and kiss me once again. It is the sweetest kiss I ever received in my history of forgotten travels. Shadows...

Shadows...

Shadows in the light...

—“Please, Nico... Please, react, you fool, I love you, bro...”

—“Franky?”

—“Yes! Yes, it is me!”

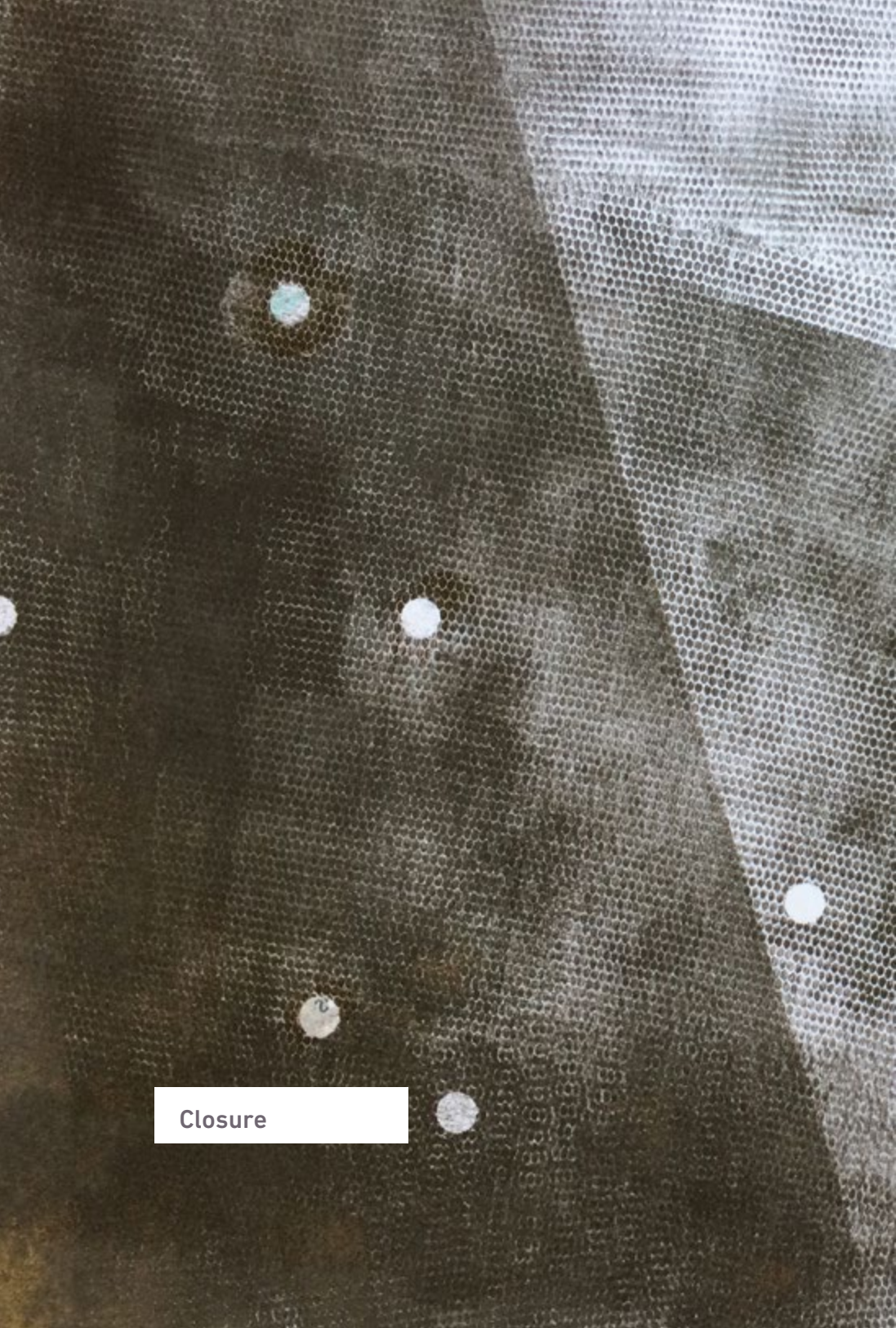
—“Damn it, you interrupted an awesome kiss...”

—“Stop dreaming, wimp.”

Franky hugged me. A hug that was as good as Ada's kiss. I am once again inside my body, once again some-

how enveloped in my own flesh, in Franky's suffocating embrace. I feel a delightful sensation that I am loved, and that love, more than life, is pouring out of me. Could I have reclaimed my soul? Has the doctor given it back to me? Franky looked at me with tearful eyes as my own tears started to fall.





Closure



—“*And Victoria?*” I anxiously ask him.

—“*She is coming with us. We are in an ambulance now. She gave up her spot for you... just to let you know what sort of shape you are in! We had to bring you back to life. You died in the Oasis, fool... Thank goodness Victoria kept insisting on shocking you with those electric paddles. She insisted so many times that I thought I would see you scorched and dead. It’s my first day as a paramedic!*”

—“*Where are we going to so fast?*”

—“*To the plane.*”

—“*What?*”

—“*We are leaving this place, Beef. We are leaving and you will see to where.*”

*

I slept for hours and hours. If there was a plane trip, I didn’t realize it. I slept without dreaming, without travels to other lives. I slept away all my tiredness and during all my recovery. Now, I am awake and being taken on a stretcher which makes my body bounce and bump. My eyes are tired and the light hurts them. But through my eyelids I can distinguish a plot of land, a field. A quiet grove and the scent of eucalyptus and wild flowers. All sweetness reminds me of Ada, just as I had promised to do and so am doing.

There is a cottage further on and we are going there. Wood and lime. Shining sun and blue sky which offer me both space and shelter. My face and neck ache. The rest of my body is still numb. Suddenly I am panicked by the thought, “But...I was bitten by a monster! I remember! What am I going to become...? Something calms me down but I am not sure what it is... red, something red.

*

—“Beef, Roast Beef... Nico!”

—“Franky...”

—“Wake up. I want you to try this broth. Have some, I have to go back to take care of Victoria.”

—“How is she? How am I? How on earth am I alive and why haven’t I turned into a gnome or something worse?”

—“ha, ha, ha... I transfused you with my blood. A lot of it. We are brothers now.”

—“Is being saved that easy?”

—“No it is not; only if you haven’t been bitten too much. You were lucky”

—“Weren’t you scared of me becoming one of them?”

—“I sure was. But I was not going to leave you. You saved Victoria. The rooms in the area where she was before you took her out were blown to pieces, Nico. She also asked me to rescue the “soldier friend” as she decided to call you. There’s no escaping it, having a name just isn’t for you, Espósito. Hurry up and drink this broth, I have to go.”

—“You are a piece of work, Franky. Where are we?”

—“Mendoza. We flew here and we are hiding in a friend’s cottage. The doctors operated on you while we were on the plane. You have no idea; to get sick.”

—“Why are we hiding?”

—“Because the clearance I used to get the plane is false. Actually it is forged.”

—“I don’t get it.”

—“Let me summarize it for you: I did some research to learn how to avoid infection from those monsters. I

learned that blood transfusions are useful in cases of early infection and only when the bacterium which entered in the bloodstream is not excessive or hasn't progressed to an advanced stage. For example, the guy who bit you didn't transmit a lot of saliva and had only recently mutated, because if he had mutated even a couple of days earlier, he would have had enough bacterium that would have mutated again inside him, which is to say re-degenerated bacterium. Cleaning your head wound and giving you three blood transfusions was enough to save you. I know, don't worry...the blood in you is not only mine. I had to ask the pilot and a local guy as soon as we got here. Let's just say you will be a nothing but a type A positive common whore. Anyway, the fact is I had already negotiated for the plane to save my daughter some time before arriving in Bahía Blanca. They immediately agreed because, besides those discoveries I made, I promised many others... which I actually haven't made yet."

—“They will kill you!”

—“No, they need me. I sent them some early research results. The file I gave them had a lot of material but I encrypted it for confidentiality. Actually, I needed time. They don't know if I am in Mendoza, Chile or wherever else. They can't waste time tracking me, and besides they need my reports. You want to know what the encrypted information was I gave them with the true reports?”

—“Yeah, what?”

—“Your stupid Civil Code project! Ha, ha, ha!”

—“You are so cynical, Franky...”

—“Yeah, I know... Thanks, Beef. And thanks for

saving my sister. I don't want to lose you again. Either you or my sister."

—*"Fran, tell me something. What happened in this country? What got us into this mess?"*

—*"We sold ourselves out. We let other countries do certain experiments. Well, they went really bad and half the world here mutated. But that was not the worst thing that happened. Did you happen to see those people with holes in their temples?"*

—*"Yeah! I wanted to ask you about that... I saw our neighbor Brihuega with them ..."*

—*"Well, before enlisting I found out that the 18th Hour business was all a big lie. We couldn't get infected or mutate in Town XII. They just needed people to turn into machines, conformist. I guess you know what that means. Forgive me for not having told you before, but Erasmo...you know...well."*

—*"Is the world at war? I don't understand any of this."*

—*"Our world is leaving this Earth. Not just yet, but let's say that for now cheap labor is being recruited. Zombies with plugs. I'll give you more details later."*

—*"Yes, I know we are not going to live on this beautiful sphere much longer; I know it is strange but I saw it Franky, I need to tell you something..."*

—*"What? Get to the point!"*

—*"There is another life, let's say, a different, a true one. When I died, as you said, I saw something of it. It is very beautiful. And there are other lives there too, and in other places. And they make sense."*

Franky looks at me; he is confused and troubled because to explain to him what I am telling him would

take a longer conversation, and he has to go to take care of Victoria.

—“Well, I just wanted you to know. Go to see your sister, go.”

—“Ok, but tell me more about this later. Bye.”

Franky stands up; he has been sitting next to the perfumed bed where they had laid me down. There is a pill on a piece of paper on the nightstand to my right.

—“Nico..., Beef...”

—“What, Frank?”

—“Of course, they make sense.”

He closes the door when he leaves. I keep looking at that wooden door and the cluster of herbs hanging from it, and which continues swinging after the door closes shut.

Then, I look at the paper beneath the pill.

It says: ‘Definitely take this one; it is the antibiotic you need to take at six’

At the 18th Hour...

My watch, with its broken glass in the shape of a cross, reads 17:13.

I look out the window. Light is coming in my room, and outside there is a peace which reminds me of the life after life, but which suddenly then also reminds me of my childhood in a catholic orphanage. Expósito; abandoned and alone. I remember having run along the yards and squares with three faithful friends who I used to escape with. When we returned, we would bribe the nuns for forgiveness with flowers. Good nuns that I never saw again. Life is such a mystery.

Pain.

Absence.

Misery.

And all this just to understand what chronologically comes first: Love.

Who will find the Remington typewriter I left there, in late 1943? Maybe my other self. Or he may have vanished as soon as I came back. Perhaps, if I had better understood my country's horrors in the mid-21st century, I would have been able to prevent them in 1943. But I know it is not about that.

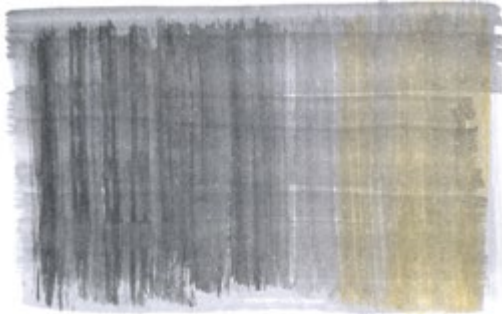
It is all about growing up in grief and doing all the good one can, without losing the joy of being together, without forgetting about unconditional love, like I forgot those good nuns. If I remember the horror I saw, even the horror I committed in desperation, I will forgive it all, in them and in me.

At least I forgive it all in those of us who didn't want to become poisoned by anger, greed and all those emotions that disfigure us...

That transform us into mutants.

That steal away all of our lives.

THE END





This short story was written in between July and October 2012 and reviewed between 2013 and 2014. It is dedicated to all my loved ones but specially and affectionately to Fran Kuhar who inspired me to create Franky's character. The title 'The 18th Hour' was chosen to honor Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu wonderful work "The Twentieth Hour" hoping that it may never be forgotten and could be re-issued once and for all.

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