

Fascinating Years

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translated by Alex Woodend

Two night trains

In 1998, at the end of December, Isabel and I were traveling in Spain, I wasn't sure where to, but I was already grateful to Judge Baltasar Garzón for Pinochet's arrest, to Isabel for earning her place on the military's black list, and to Amnesty International for financing the trip. It was a wonderful break from tests, teachers, aides, and classrooms. "The best thing in life, Marcial, is travel. Travel, walk, and eat while travelling—apart from having good sex, of course," Isabel said, and at one point while walking around Madrid, while the wind's cold cut my face, or in the movie theater seat before the next film started—sometimes we saw several a day, at any hour—she took from her enormous, fragrant leather purse some bread wrapped in aluminum foil, a hearty loaf that treacherously scratched the palate during each bite, the pain heightening my impatience to taste the acidic, salty flavor of the jamón serrano. I rubbed my tongue against the dry mass of crumb splinters stuck in my gums, unable to feel satisfied by that fermented and elusive flavor, while at the same time the dryness made it necessary to clear the mess with a gulp of cold Coca-Cola from a small, fluted 200 milliliter bottle, its slightly oval sides like the transparent sea-green petals of an exotic flower, slender and octagonal, which had fused with my senses by recurring in each city, and whose mere presence next to a glass in front of me created a feeling of return and rest while still intriguing me as an abstract object, since I didn't know when or where it came from and could not relate it with anything more than the chemical or mineral syrup it guarded, which in spite of Isabel's reproaches—she always refused to buy us soda at home but now gave in out of pity—I drank every time I could, especially to make use of its sweetness, neutral and dark, to sink and clear the salty ball of the sandwich from my mouth,

nearly erasing the frustration of almost sensing the taste while chewing and swallowing the mixture of bread and ham whose taste I needed nostalgically to pursue again, to again chew the flavor of aged leather, hard and thin. But I may be lying, because Coca-Cola, with its silky, electric typography, at least in the miniature 200 millimeter bottles, was not something you could get anywhere. It was available in bars, cafes, and stations or in said station's bar or the dining car of a train, so the bottles could be given back empty; in places where they serve, also, and at a standard price, the same baguette with jamón serrano we padded my mother's purse or backpack with—sometimes with the bread more toasted or the crumbs scratchier and damper from the tomato—and which the waiters or bartenders dispatched almost the instant we ordered them, on a basic ceramic plate next to a napkin, teasing me slightly, with Isabel joining in, if I asked for Coke to accompany it, as if I wanted to put ketchup on an expensive steak. If years ago I sucked my thumb to sleep, now what comforted me was bread with ham and Coca-Cola, for being so similar, repeatable, familiar, simple, easy, available, and recognizable, like a home that received me, a refrain that filed down the strangeness of the avenues, the bus stops, shops, bookstores, and buildings, like when Isabel bought me the sandwich and Coke in a cafe after going through the second giant museum of the day, and I ate it hearing about the trip she made with her father to Madrid, when the snow covered everything, as if the cars, trees, and sidewalks were made of whipped cream or pineapple frozen yogurt and she saw her father sitting at the table in the apartment with relatives he hadn't seen in twenty years. He took her to the Prado Museum. Isabel was horrified by Goya's painting in which giant Saturn emerges from the shadows devouring one of his already headless, inert children. When she showed me the painting I felt familiarity, it reminded me of *Alien*, for example, and compared with the paintings of Bosch and Bruegel it was a children's story like Hansel and Gretel, who nearly became sustenance themselves. These

paintings weren't boring because they were monstrous, but they were the exception. The exhausting museums with millions of corridors, paintings from rare schools and styles made my calves cramped and gave me a feeling of contemplative bullying, indigestion from the excess of stimuli which led to rejection, a kind of brain retching, until without realizing it my stomach was growling from hunger, and I would have burned the precious canvases in exchange for some churros with chocolate or glazed donuts, a ham sandwich with Coke, things that didn't ask you to grovel like the paintings and were delivered plainly and immediately to your taste buds. But the tour of the Thyssen-Bornemisza continued through the immense expanse of Renaissance paintings, and we had to keep walking over the tiles and past the white walls, trying to observe, though it was already impossible to observe anything. We got that drip of oils in our eyes like we were geese forced to eat fat to make foie gras, which I encountered weeks later at a farm with my father and his second wife Antonia while touring castles in the south of France in a rented Renault: a venerable old woman walks us through her pens full of geese whose necks are gripped by metal claws that keeps their mouths open so a pipe can tunnel feed down their throats until their livers burst and they're ready for electrocution and the removal of the rotting organ which later appears as puree, bottled and labeled in glass, all of which didn't at all diminish our desire to buy a couple containers and taste the delicacy as the sun set over the countryside.

From then on the pleasure of eating foie gras, or even the tube of pate from PF Alimentos, was tied up with guilt from the sad eyes of the obese geese forced to explode, and each time I put that pate on bread or biscuit I faced the same struggle, repeated so often it became funny, between the delicious taste of rotten liver and the idea that the suffering of pigs and geese was bad. And the force feeding of the geese brings me to Isabel's father, who, on returning to Chile, was made to swallow a liter of pisco, before they broke his neck and killed

him by kicking his head against a stairwell. He abstained not only because alcohol sometimes triggered his migraines but also because he was determined to keep his imagination and lucidity sharp. He was an editor with ironclad political principles who was also capable of commercial successes, which was clear when he convinced Quimantú, a publisher founded by Allende's government, to let him be cheesy and print Becquer's collected poems which then quickly sold out. Even Isabel said that she only saw her dad relax his sobriety when a handful of his republican friends got out of prison in Spain; my mom, at twelve, went down and sat on the stairs and saw him drunk for the first time, standing in the living room, surrounded by friends drinking wine and malt liquor, throwing toasted flower in their mouths and shouting, "Pam-plo-na! Pam-plo-na!" a white, powdery cloud released with each syllable. In the house where they tortured and killed him there were also literary parties celebrated with whisky and canapés. The owner of the house, Michael Townley—who in '98 was living on a beach in Maine under the witness protection program—admitted that he left a couple times to scold the interrogators for the terrible screams my grandfather made while they were torturing him: "I left to tell them to dial it back. We were in a residential area." And although I never heard his screams, and they weren't depicted in the plays, movies, or novels featuring that story of electric prods, Sarin gas, and literary networking, every time I go to a book launch or some similar party I strain my ears in search of such cries in the background, in case someone is being gagged and tortured by professionals in a room with poor ventilation, which doesn't mean I stop drinking wine and talking with the guests, in the same way I haven't deprived myself of foie gras or the option of buying pork pate in a pinch, even though they instantly remind me of the trapped geese, sick and surrounded by their own vomit.

The Goya painting didn't frighten me, but it was threatening when Isabel mentioned in passing that on that winter trip my grandfather saw his mom for the last time. I quickly eased my fear at the thought of losing my mom by chewing the last bit of bread and soda. That combination had such a strong effect on me that before we got on the trains, in the stations, I asked Isabel if there was a car with a bar and food. It turned out one of the trains didn't just have a bar but also a real dining car with clinking glasses and waiters in suits and bowties which I had only seen on an overnight train to Concepción with my father, Fernando, and his second wife, Antonia. I learned what a restaurant car was, with its jumble of voices under the light of oval lamps shaped like flower buds, which sealed the darkness outside in the windows in order to reflect us sitting at the table covered in a white tablecloth, which we left full of bread crumbs and wine stains after we ate juicy steaks with French fries. We went to the country home of Antonia's grandmother, which presented me with the possibility of another family, where there was a Steinway grand piano that I would play with awkward insistence until one of the aunts came and showed me the chords and arpeggios on the white keys. Fernando and Antonia decided that I should begin studying the instrument. We visited a Russian teacher in an old apartment invaded by darkness and furniture who had me tap for five minutes on her upright piano and warned me that that learning required discipline, rigor. When I saw Sofía again I regretted not continuing with that blond teacher and her inhuman blue eyes. Nevertheless, instead of awkwardly trying to collaborate on the radio drama's scripts—we didn't agree on anything—I offered to do the musical arrangement, happily avoiding the barbed-wire tangle of words.

Fernando paid for my cultivation on the piano with his portion of the inheritance from his father. He took him out of the nursing home at least twice a year to have breakfast at Café Tavelli. I took the opportunity to order a sandwich and desert. Before, we used to visit him in his

small apartment on Luis Thayer Ojeda where grandpa would stay seated in an armchair where he was cared for by a nurse. By that time my dad was already starting to resign himself to the fact that inside that shell of his father only a glimpse remained of the man who three years prior still remembered his name and home address. He'd forgotten who he was, but he knew that his brain was probably that of a senile dementia patient. Being a doctor, the old man knew his own diagnosis perfectly well. So my dad told me to bring my biology homework, to go over it with grandpa, adding, "He's an amazing doctor." I think it was a joke or a way to distract himself.

I was incapable of doing any homework. When I arrived at my mom's or dad's house, school vanished from my mind out of an instinct to survive, to preserve my mental health. I never had pencils and lost my notebooks, or their covers jumped off their spiral binding. During state testing, they sent me home for three days under the pretext that I do a project on an indigenous people—the Mapuches—whose existence I never verified, instead preferring to describe them as an extinct prehistoric race. The point is, I never took any homework to go over with my grandfather, and Fernando understood my desire to remain apart from the seriousness of the encounters by concentrating on finishing my double chocolate ice cream without wasting any glaze. The conversation between Fernando and his father fluttered around the American croissants and cappuccinos. Amid their silence, grandpa's clumsy chewing caused Fernando to issue some words of reproach before leaning over the table with a napkin to clean avocado off the old man's chin. Because the truth is I'm not sure if grandpa would have been able to look over homework, or that Fernando thought he could. At most my father imagined that every Saturday the old man would explain the minutiae of his illness to me, always forgetting that he'd already taught me about it last time—the neurons that start to shrivel like figs, the loss of short-

term memory, the forgetting of names, until he was free only to the aseptic present of the home and Tavelli.

The morning he died was a Saturday like any other. We visited as usual, but instead of taking grandpa to Tavelli, Fernando called the funeral home and filed a claim with the insurance company. The nursing home was a big, old house in Providencia. We walked around the garden and went in through the back. The room seemed small to me, filled by three or four people, smelling of enclosure, a sweet smell, of medicine and moth balls. In a tall, thin cot the corpse cooled. I walked around the place, and it seemed that all the rooms stank of old man piss and breath. Only years later did I find out grandpa had somehow transmuted into the piano that was in my house, which I should be playing, according to the instructions of my teacher, who was not that Muscovite but an Asian subscriber of the Suzuki method, which was founded by a Zen master for Japan's post-nuclear babies who were to learn classical music without rigor, in a harmonious, stable environment where the musician would have a natural chance to practice the instrument like an everyday game, not a severe discipline. Master Suzuki wished to educate the sensibilities of children so they would have good hearts instead of becoming virtuoso soloists eager for fame. But the environment around my practice was far from being stable, and in retrospect I would have preferred to have my childhood traumatized by the rigor of Russian academicism. At least I would have had something better to do with Sofía, playing duets while earning money together in some tourist spot in Bellavista or Alto Palermo—her with her training from karaoke. In the end, I gave up the instrument for lack of dedication, for my more human or stupid interest in going out with friends and doing the same crap as them.

Packing my suitcase before going back to Santiago, in Madrid, I found the book of scores and the CD with the songs I was supposed to listen to everyday to keep from interrupting my

progress, but I hardly remembered bringing them. Years later, I learned that the house where the Steinway was had been burned in a native “land reclamation.” I’d forgotten the enormous rustic building, and it only appeared in my memory because of the fire that disintegrated it, leaving only the stone chimney standing, as shown in a newspaper which accused the Mapuches, no longer relegated to pre-history in my school project. But above all, the fire stoked the memory of the train trip with Fernando and Antonia, which reascended to my consciousness while in the dining car with Isabel, and I felt I inhabited both moments at the same time, partially due to the way the night erased or swallowed the surrounding landscape.

After the French fries with Isabel I entertained myself in the bunk bed with an *Alien* comic in which an android cut in half lives with his girlfriend in an old scrap metal transport ship on the run from the interstellar army which forced them to undertake a suicide mission on a planet infested with predatory bugs. There is permanent, frustrated sexual tension, because the android doesn’t have a pelvis, apart from some hanging electrical viscera, and has to settle for giving pleasure to the woman. The only background noise while I read was the majestic rhythm of the machinery on the rails and the dripping of the small sink next to the beds. Isabel was in the bottom bunk. Our feet faced the edge of the window exposed by a vermilion curtain. Distracted, I saw my reflection and approached the glass until my breath made it misty, my hands turned it into a screen. Outside, in the scant light of the train emerged the speeding contours of bushes, trunks, pastures, stones. Farther away were some stars and the dark countryside. I felt insignificant, or I finally realized I was insignificant, that I was just someone who went to the movies several times a day with their mom, traveling on buses and trains, reading magazines among the passengers, eating bread with jamón serrano and Coca-Cola. I looked at my bed, ready to sleep, and found myself acting out a scene in which the character resigns himself to

death, though I wanted to stay awake until the following morning or never sleep again. I turned to look out the window and some familiar places and faces came to mind, but they all seemed far away, illusory, even the most recent, the apartment where my grandma received us, in Madrid, the exact size of the rooms, the store next door where we bought donuts for the cold, opaque evenings in which there was nothing to do but play cards or spend an hour in the parking lot working on ball control, kicking it against the wall with winter boots on, because the shoes with rubber studs that my dad bought in Irarrázaval had been left in Santiago.

IX

Upon returning to Santiago, Marcial and Guillermo visited Valentín who lived in a private housing complex recently built in the suburbs. He showed them how he killed time: picking up a stone in the driveway and throwing it with all his might, high over the wall, in a random direction. The size of the housing complex guaranteed that the stone would fall inside, whether on animal, person, child, or window no one knew—that was the thrill. As the three of them threw stones, Marcial said he had visited museums and cathedrals, rivers and monuments, that he traveled in fast trains and ate duck with plums and jamón serrano. “And you cried?” Valentín asked seriously.

Later, they played ping-pong.

“Amanda likes a new guy,” Valentín informed Marcial.

“Who is he?”

“He’s two grades older.”

“He skateboards”, Guillermo added.

“He has a band too, apparently.”

“Yeah, and a tag.”

“What do you mean a tag?” Marcial asked.

“A *tag*.”

“What is a tag?” Marcial repeated.

“What’s his tag?” Valentín asked.

“I don’t know, I can’t remember,” Guillermo said.

“Liar, you do remember,” said Valentín.

“He’s a poser,” Guillermo said.

“What is a tag?” said Marcial.

The school had expanded into a modern cement building designed by a trendy architect. An ex-minister of Allende had just bought it after coming back from the U.S. with an MBA in some new business philosophy of leadership and entrepreneurship. The school had been a hippie hangout where everyone was guaranteed the privilege of feeling more or less irreplaceable, but now the class size of each grade had tripled and teachers didn’t know everyone’s name.

Since Amanda liked a new guy, Marcial wanted to be like him. He asked his dad to buy him khaki pants, hopefully Dockers, baggy enough to hang off his butt, and a skateboard. Next Amanda liked a boy who painted his nails black, wore tight pants, also black, sometimes using suspenders, and had hair hanging over his face. Everybody poses, Marcial told himself. He would have preferred the school to require uniforms. Valentín wore a uniform even though it wasn’t mandatory. Guillermo said that made him even more of a poser. At parties they didn’t dance, they stayed seated, Valentín showing off his uniform, Guillermo showing off—unintentionally—his long, curly eyelashes, and Marcial showing off political statements he’d heard from Isabel or Fernando, even though they contradicted each other. At midnight, his mother parked her dark blue Citroën Station wagon outside the party, so she could go in and look for Marcial, convinced some intelligence commando might kidnap and beat him. But Amanda hadn’t even arrived yet. So Marcial preferred the weekends with Fernando, who had produced a second child Antonia and moved to a large house in Providencia, where Marcial could arrive late with his friends.

At Marcial's father's house Guillermo's parents would pick him up early the next morning, while Valentín would stay to take part in Sunday brunch.

"How old is that?" Valentín once asked Fernando and Antonia, pointing at the stroller where the baby slept.

Antonia paused and asked, "Why do you say *that*?"

Valentín acted confused like his word choice was obvious. "Oh, because I want to learn its name."

"No," Fernando said, losing his patience, "why do you call it *that*. It is a boy."

"Oh, excuse me. What is that first-born son's date of birth?"

"Right," Antonia said diplomatically, "cause if you say *that*, it sounds like you don't care."

Valentín acted confused, "If I say what?"

"Quit playing dumb, pal," Fernando said, "you know what she's saying."

"I play dumb?" said Valentín, as if to himself, with a slightly exaggerated, stupid smirk.

Academic demands increased. Valentín asked Guillermo to help him avoid being held back, and when Marcial chafed against the new discipline, Isabel said, "Do you want to drop out of school? But you'll have to work. My grandfather dropped at thirteen and later won the National Literature Prize, imagine that." Marcial just then noticed that the dusty swell of books on the walls were the old man's.

He consulted his grandma who told him, "*War and Peace*, Tolstoy, it's all there."

And Fernando, "Start with *The Gambler*."

After the only night he read *Crime and Punishment*, Marcial dreamed of opening the shed in the yard behind Isabel's house and finding Fernando and Antonia reduced to a pair of dismembered torsos, hanging silently, pierced with metal hooks and bleeding like slaughtered cattle. He knows it was him, he's a murderer, he'll have to die over many years in prison. He closes the door and locks it. Then he's eating in the pizza place where Fernando and Antonia used to take him. Every time he touches their wallets in his pocket, he feels a sense of guilt and the imminence of the trial.

Marcial suspected the wisest thing would be to abandon school, learn a craft, and read his home library. Instead, he strengthened his addiction to computer and console games. His favorite was *Metal Gear Solid*: the soldier Solid Snake must infiltrate a military base on Alaska during a rescue mission. In the middle of the game, unfailingly, Solid Snake is captured and subjected to torture. Marcial's technique didn't permit him to press the recovery button rapidly enough, so Snake caved and turned over secret information. Only Marcial's older brother, Nataniel, could endure the torture in silence, hitting the button with both index fingers.

He also played *The Sims*, the game about building a house, buying furniture, finding a job, getting promoted, having friends, romantic relationships, and maximizing quality of life goods. When Marcial already had the mansion and all the fancy products, he ordered his avatar to take a bath and, once he was submerged, paused the game, sold the bathroom door, and filled the space with bricks. After two hours bathing, the character got out of the tub and complained. Marcial paused it again, bought the vintage pinball machine and put it inside the bathroom. The character endured a week of sleeping on the tile floor, drinking water from the sink, bathing, and playing pinball until he passed away.

Valentín was failing eighth grade and had been kicked off the soccer team. In the middle of the year, he was caught smoking weed on the playground and they put him in another school. They kept hanging out together, Guillermo, Valentín and Marcial. During the national holiday, they printed raffle numbers, whose reward was a big-screen TV, sound system, and washing machine, to sell at the school festival. If you bought two numbers for 250 pesos each the third was free. Everyone paid with the 500-peso coin that had just started to circulate. The funds collected were allocated to a Ziploc bag, and they bought bus tickets to the beach with the cash. Marcial told his dad he was going to Fantasilandia and would sleep over at Guillermo's afterward and left him a phone number for a line that was always busy. They bought a bottle of Ron Silver and a bottle of Sprite and sat on the beach, facing the sea. Their drinking habit had started with capfuls of digestive liqueur and spirits at Valentín's and later some mixed drinks at parties. Marcial got emotional and cried while invoking past epochs. The anarchists of days gone by who practiced sobriety and died during the Spanish Civil War, then he leaped without transition to the nostalgia for the 60's, psychedelia, and free love. They had never drunk a whole bottle before. After the first cup, Marcial didn't feel nauseous, but the sea breeze made him dizzy when he stood. He drank straight rum.

That night he was hospitalized in an intensive care unit for treatment of alcohol poisoning. He woke up the next day in an orthopedic collar and a diaper, strapped to a gurney, vomiting a green liquid. Isabel was in Madrid, negotiating at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and couldn't shorten her trip. Guillermo had called Fernando after Valentín slapped Marcial, causing him to fall face first on the boardwalk steps. When Fernando arrived after dark he found Marcial sprawled on the ground, unconscious. Valentín was still drunk, talking to himself as he walked in circles.

Valentín tried to do two years of school in one. He failed again. He hung out in the housing complex's plazas with some neighbors his age. Then, disdaining those pastel colored, three-story homes, he began to cross the complex's pointed fence, toward the projects and houses patched with tin and wood pulp. He unfriended Marcial and Guillermo, because they were always playing on their consoles—"consoling yourselves," he told them. He hung out with gangbangers, punks, rappers—all the same, they grabbed bottles and fought at the end of parties. A history teacher tried to teach Valentín "an alternative to Western alienation" through pre-Hispanic cultures, but the two worlds seemed irreconcilable, and, what was more, how could he, in his fifteenth year, acquire Peyote, Ayahuasca, or San Pedro? With luck, he could buy weed buds, but more often he got joints cut with junk like spackling paste or coca leaves, which do actually have Andean roots. In the summer, he bought one hundred thousand pesos of bad weed and went to the coast to sell it. Upon his return, he stole car radios, was arrested a few times, and got to know the Peñalolén police station. One day, he was surrounded in a square at the housing complex. Dizzy, he hardly offered any resistance as he was beaten to the ground with sticks and chains, two of his teeth broke and fell out of his mouth. His mom found him unconscious and took him to a dentist before his gums could scar over.

They put him in a rehab center. Three times a day he recited some kind of prayer or moral code reinforcing personal responsibility and rational thinking. The center's method was to impart a sense of care and self-worth through the acquisition of habits, beginning with bed making, cooking shifts, and dishwashing during the four daily meals, and getting into hygienic routines for taking care of their bodies, the center, and their outfits, which were not allowed to feature bright colors because they stoked vanity. It was important to set fixed

schedules for leisure and labor, which consisted of cooking breads, empanadas, and sweets to distribute to artisanal fairs and neighboring bakeries or to sell at the stop lights of adjacent intersections. Valentín was there for a year.

Marcial played around five hours daily on the computer or PlayStation, sometimes recalling he didn't know how to do anything else. He visited Valentín only once, accompanying Guillermo. Before greeting the visitors, in the reception area, the patients huddled in a circle and sang a song to fortify their spirits. Then the guests were invited to some dark plastic tables and chairs on a paving stone terrace. Valentín seemed like a show house in his housing complex, empty with blank walls, sitting in the middle of an empty landscape. Or like a city that had disappeared after an explosion. He was like a resigned evangelical or one of Dostoevsky's pilgrims after a shower, wearing new clothes. After the three of them were seated, Guillermo mocked the tribal song the patients had chanted. Valentín laughed. Guillermo went on to say at least Valentín was no longer the oldest like he was in the two-years-in-one school. Now it was like he was on the accelerated track.

While Valentín talked about his routine, Marcial realized his friend had trouble organizing his ideas and expressing them coherently. He seemed defensive of a humble pride while enumerating the stew, beans, rice, meats, legumes, and empanadas he had learned to cook. After hearing about his progress, it could be deduced that, instead of enrolling kids in school, parents should send them straight to the rehab center. Valentín was almost evolved, erased, as if during the exercise of his functions as a little punk with a knack for drug dealing, this strange semi-reformed, hardened guy was already incubating in him, dog-faced and free of romantic ego. The role fit him with terrifying ease, especially when he started shivering as a symptom of withdrawal: in the middle of the visit, the nervous shake in his knee spread, and

his body begun to quiver in spasms. Luckily, the moment prior to the convulsions, which turned Valentín's greenish skin pale, Marcial had remembered the airplane joke about the Chilean, the Argentinean, and the Peruvian, so Valentín, between each shudder and involuntary contortion, could pretend guffaws until nausea and heaving opened his mouth and swelled his veins and eyes.

The alcoholic coma left Marcial with an unequivocal revulsion to liquor, wine and beer, which effectively isolated him. Isabel offered consolation: "My dad, your grandfather, didn't drink," or, "the old anarchists didn't drink." This was the only thing he knew about the anarchists. Then Guillermo convinced him to enter the Communist Youth. At the committee parties, he said he gave up drinking for ideological reasons. Then he gave up the Youth too, the assemblies and duties reminded him of that kind of Boy Scout camp his father signed him up for one February, the month of summer vacation he spent with him: the small bus picked Marcial up Monday to Friday at 8 a.m. and departed to Club Médico, where they had a membership through Marcial's grandfather. Once there, Marcial's hope of swimming in the pool was frustrated by the lunches of spaghetti with cheap sausage and the official competitions, including choreography competitions for songs like "La Macarena:" kids forming lines, facing a small stage where the instructor dances and teaches them the steps to the rhythm of the banging music. "Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena/ Que tu cuerpo es pa darle alegría y cosa buena/ Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena/ Eeeh, Macarena/ ¡Aaahé!"

With some practice, Marcial learned to coordinate the half turns, the movements of arms and hips, murmuring the chorus and lightly swaying his head, anticipating the verse: "Macarena tiene un novio que se llama/ Que se llama de apellido Vittorino/ Y en la jura de bandera del muchacho/ ¡Se la dio con dos amigos!/ ¡Aaahé!"

“Let’s see,” said the instructor. “What did Vittorino’s friend give to Macarena?”

The kids yelled: “*La bandera!*” which means flag.

“Good! You, young man!” he pointed at a boy. The boy went up the stage. The instructor gave him the torso of a headless life-sized doll, warning him, “Careful giving her *la bandera!*” Everybody laughed except the instructor. That was his power, to remain serious while being grotesque. The kid kneeled with the doll between his legs and the instructor played the song again. Later, the instructor taught a cardiovascular recovery technique to the rhythm of “La Macarena.” Marcial was picked once, but he didn’t want to go up.

“Faa-got, faa-got, faa-got, faa-got!” the kids chanted.

It was a hard period, 2001-2004. Guillermo left their high-school and when he and Marcial met, he would insist that the activism of Marcial’s mother was too limited to a “juridical-political superstructure” and had no impact on the “social contingence.” Marcial understood the words but soon forgot them.

One weekend, Guillermo invited him to a house party thrown by one of his new classmates. Marcial felt ashamed to be showing up at a party. Ashamed of what? He was so wrapped up in his mother’s protection he couldn’t remember. He felt too delicate to show up in front of everyone and pretend to be a part of it, that is, pretend to be as frivolous and juvenile as the rest—to seem like he was enjoying the party—but different enough to be desired—and justify his presence there. But nobody at the party would know him, so he didn’t have any persona to maintain, while in his house he would keep being himself, irrevocably, all night. He went out then, as if to go and disappear.

At the party—where nobody took interest in analyzing him—Guillermo introduced him to a classmate, Sofia, who was repeating the first year of high school. They were at the

kitchen and Guillermo left them alone after offering them drinks. Sofia declined, saying that there were too few people and that she didn't want to call attention to herself, like the party was too small for her. Marcial said that he hadn't drunk since he was thirteen, as if he were an alcoholic on the road to recovery from a more tumultuous life. Instead of talking to each other, Sofia and Marcial listened to someone who seemed to be the host's older brother. Or they acted like they were listening. Marcial's focus, at least, slackened immediately as he felt the warmth from one of Sofia's hips, which she casually leaned against him. The older brother looked wasted, red-faced. Between hiccups he complained that the devil had stolen his woman, taken her to Bogotá, snorted a bag of cocaine, impregnated, and married her. Sofia smiled and said, "You have to eat the ice cream before it melts" as she pushed her hip a bit harder against Marcial. Soon they gave in to a kiss, long and strangely affectionate. When they opened their eyes, the older brother was gone. They stayed in the kitchen, talking, and anyone who came in asked if they were siblings or a couple.

During the week, Guillermo told Marcial that Sofia was known as a slut, easy, and liked to be spanked in bed. Marcial downloaded books by Sade and Bukowski, comics by Manara. Later, still seated at the computer, he waited for the intermittent shimmer in the top bar of the chat window, announcing a new message from Princess Sophie. His life was illuminated by that intermittent shimmer, it became his arrhythmic heartbeat.

One afternoon, Sofia invited him to have a tea. Marcial never thought of having tea with another kid. Regardless, he was invited, so he was a desirable person, and his existence was justified. And they both liked Bob Dylan—what could go wrong? On his way, though, on the bus, he was afraid his penis was too small. The porn he downloaded through iMesh consistently showed male members double his size. Nonetheless, Sofia and he agreed on the

fact that there was no culture anymore in Chile, that the dictatorship had erased everything. He hoped Sofía would open the door, hug him and kiss him on the mouth. They would close their eyes—Chile erased and he a desirable person.

Marcial arrived at the house and thought no one was home, because the windows were dark. But Sofía opened the door. There was a kerosene smell in the hall and a dim light shining from the kitchen. They went in. Her dad, Rafael, was at the small table in the corner, drinking coffee.

“This is the one I told you about,” Sofia said. “Isabel’s son.”

“Oh, yes. How is she?” he asked Marcial. “Did you know that we know each other? Is she still nuts, your mom?”

“Dad, control yourself,” said Sofia.

“Well, he’s laughing too!”

And while Sofia served the tea, he asked, “Don’t you also want a shot of cognac?”

“He doesn’t drink.”

“He doesn’t drink? These boys from your school are so weird.”

“He’s not from my school, I told you.”

“Ah,” said Rafael, smiling at Marcial. “I have a bad memory, luckily. And since how long have you been Isabel’s son? Or this is something that came up just now, as a vocational thing?”

“Stop it!” Sofia said.

There was another girl in Sofia’s room, Laura, who was rummaging through the closet. Sofia apologized to Marcial: she had gotten a call from work and had already called a taxi. She could leave him at the bus stop. Then she sat on the bed to keep sewing a skirt and

talking with Laura. Marcial couldn't understand what they were saying. His attention was reduced to a duffle bag on the carpeted floor covered by a pile of clothes with sequins, lace, leather, and zebra print next to a wooden dresser with three mirrors that had washed-out photographs stuck in the frame.

He asked if a picture of a girl wearing a tutu was Sofia. "Yes," Sofia said, "when I was a child I was undecided between becoming a dancer or a firefighter. A firefighter to save the buildings," she pointed out, "not the people." Marcial sat on the bed, and when he started talking about the piano lessons he abandoned, Sofia screeched, dropped the fabric, and shook her hand. She looked at her finger and started laughing. "I'm sorry," she said. "Look." Marcial took the hand she offered him and looked at the finger. Blood seemed to pour from the juncture of nail and flesh. He looked up and saw Sofia's lips in a pout. Marcial leaned forward until he kissed the little, dark red puddle on her finger. Sofia looked complicitly at Laura, who was watching her with a slightly scandalized look. Sofia's hand didn't move like it was asleep. Then she said, "Thank you," and left her hand resting in Marcial's, which he put on his lap. Sofia's gaze was still absorbed by the finger, and Marcial noticed that she was slightly cross-eyed, which gave her an innocent, stubborn appearance. "Look!" she said. "More." She put the finger on Marcial's lips. He kissed it. But it seemed that Marcial hadn't understood, because Sofia didn't pull the wound away but gently pushed the finger inside his mouth. First, he didn't know what to do, then, embarrassed, he sucked and tasted the iron stain.

"Sofia," Laura said.

"What."

Marcial continued.

Sofía unhurriedly pulled the finger out and said, “Thanks.” Her cellphone rang. She put the skirt in her bag, covered herself with a fuchsia raincoat, and gave Marcial a pink umbrella. They said goodbye at the fence because Sofia was late. Marcial walked to Irarrázaval Avenue. It was empty. The wind sprinkled rain on his face. He tried to cover himself with the umbrella, but soon the wind flipped it inside out and broke the rods. He threw it away before getting on the bus.

Marcial got over his revulsion to alcohol after finishing high school, on a New Year’s Eve in Valparaíso, in a square on the Atkinson Promenade. Sofia was coming from a costume party and all she was wearing was a laurel wreath and a white toga. She looked apprehensive. Marcial made his way through crowd then greeted her dizzily. He asked what was happening. Sofia said, “Nothing,” looking around as if she was trying to find someone.

“I’ll take you home,” Marcial said. “Wherever you want, I’ll take you.” He took a reverent bow.

“How nice, some chivalry in this place.”

Marcial continued, saying that, of course, he really wanted to be her serf, he could think of no greater destiny than to pay tribute to her and obey her every day of his life.

Sofía laughed and Marcial asked her if he could hug her. Sofia didn’t understand. Marcial told her that he wanted to hug her and began to cry and tell her that he wanted her, that all this time he had loved her, that he had understood her always. Sofia asked why he hadn’t told her before, that he was a stupid child, that she loved him too, and she wanted him and no one else.

After that, they got into an after party at an underground venue. Marcial woke up on his hands and knees, vomiting in Victoria Square as Sofia tried to feed him coffee and bread with condensed milk. They took a cab to the beach. They lay in the sand near the embers of a fire where campers were playing guitar. The heat of morning rose. They walked to the street, attracted by the tables and well-dressed people in a restaurant's window. Sofia offered to treat him. They ordered sea food stew, muscle soup, and steak with French fries. They ate and drank wine, silently, folding into the gentle manner of the restaurant atmosphere. Soon, they went to the hostel, where they found Guillermo asleep in the top bunk. They lay in the bottom one. The creases in the pillow and sheets slowly appeared in the shade of an old rag which served as a curtain over the tiny window. They hugged and looked into each other's eyes, whispering, and sometimes they had to stop talking and kiss each other's lips and sigh. They kept on whispering, imagining going on a trip together during summer vacation, until they fell asleep.