Number 223

Frivolidad
(Working title: Frivolity or Flamboyance)

from a novel by Juan
Forn
Translated from the Spanish by Julian Cooper

Latin American Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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Latin American Program Working Papers
The Woodrow Wilson Center
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Washington, D.C., 20560

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Introduction

The publication of this working paper revives an honored tradition of the Latin American Program - nurturing Latin American literature, both its creation and its academic analysis. Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and José Donoso are some who spent periods of time working on their novels in the Wilson Center. Juan Forn wrote the final chapters of his novel Frivolidad in one of the many towers of the Center, as a Guest Scholar. The novel has been published in Argentina, in Spanish, and received an enthusiastic reception from the local critics. We are pleased to offer a preview of the first three chapters of the English translation of Frivolidad so that more of the friends of the Latin American Program can have an opportunity to meet Juan Forn.

Joseph S. Tulchin
Director, Latin American Program

FRIVOLIDAD

(Working title: FRIVOLITY or FLAMBOYANCE) a novel

by
JUAN FORN

Translated from the Spanish by Julian Cooper

I am grateful to the
Woodrow Wilson International Center (Washington DC)
and the National Endowment of the Arts (Buenos Aires) for their support during
the writing of this book.

In contemplating things of the spirit we are like marine
creatures
gazing at the sun through water, believing that liquid to
be
the most transparent of elements. HERMAN

MELVILLE

You have to die first to give a
full account
of certain events. ARAM

ELDERIAN

1.
IRISH HORDES IN PALACE

Five or six hours later we would discover what the place's name meant in Japanese: when there was little left of the Imperial Palace of Delicacies; when the four of us had managed to control Manú and pry free the windpipe of the Nihonjin in charge of the Ko San Tei; when the terrified waitresses reappeared through the swinging doors and the signs that it was all finally over had settled over what remained of the party.

You needed perhaps to be twenty, and I was the only one among the guests whose age did not exceed that figure by an ample margin to observe that, in the five or six nocturnal hours of September 19th 1990, those attending had not only aged five or six hours but, knowingly or not, minute by minute, had moved further into a middle age already broadcast by their bodies, a plateau where youth lay visibly behind them and the old age ahead was a good deal closer than they would hitherto have preferred to admit.

If the scandalous nature of the evening, as it had begun in the mind of Leo Ferradás a couple of months before, lost during those few hours a good deal of the pizzazz he'd originally intended it to have, even so the outcome bore his unmistakable directorial signature.

One icy morning in July Ferradás visited the restaurant then under construction, grandly ignored the cold which had the rest of us on the verge of extreme Parkinsonian agitation, talked to the owners while examining sketches of the main dining room and the adjacent ones, and decided that the search for an ideal spot should be called to a halt. The production team of Data would take care of the rest: reserve the entire Ko San Tei for the night of September 19th three days before its opening to the public, order a strictly Japanese menu, and send the invitations, accompanied by a stern RSVP, to thirty-five years' worth of former pupils of Saint Ethan's.

The deal to convince the school authorities to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary in this manner had been closed that same day. Data would pick up the tab for the dinner but would demand from every guest a donation of two hundred dollars to the Saint Ethan's Trust, a natural filter to exclude the failures and striplings. Obviously the school's consent was essential if one was going to do it right.

The secret aim of this costly gesture, so meaningless and so typical of Leo Ferradás, was to recycle the event as a brash feature in Data or even devote an entire issue to it. Why? Because a fair proportion of the upper crust (social, artistic, sporting, and political) in our dear old country were Saint Ethan's alumni. And Data was the keyhole through which ordinary mortals could gaze at the caste of the Beautiful and the Damned, the provocative mag, for good or ill, that freeze-dried anyone who was anyone, not in the style of Hola or Paris Match, of course, but with that combination of malice and cunning which, in our country, passes for intelligence (especially if accompanied by unquestionable good taste in design and printing).

Leo Ferradás belonged to the first generation of Saint Ethan's, when the school was still in Calle Alsina and among its pupils there were more Armenian, Italian, or Jewish surnames than native thoroughbred or Anglo-Saxon ones. At the time, only the occasional cassock was on view in chapel (a more symbolic area of the premises, and less frequented than the sickbay or the bursar's office), and the running of the school, as well as all the teaching, was in the hands of drunken, fearsomely dedicated Irish Rotarians. The tuition fee was like an endowment share, the only sports facility was the schoolyard, and more than half of the pupils lived on the wrong side of the Avenida Santa Fe frontier. But alcohol and teaching, embarked on simultaneously, have secondary effects, and the Irish lay educational community in Argentina was never particularly large.

So the clergy began to arrive at Saint Ethan's, moving on from temporary replacement in easier

subjects to offering divinity classes, spiritual retreats, and joint parent-pupil prayer meetings. For every soggy Rotarian sinking under weekend marathons of booze, a new Father Patrick would arise before each class. Around that time the first bequest arrived, accepted at once by the teaching body (by now, in the main, clerical): a huge open space off the Pan-American Highway which became the school sportsground, allowing the priesthood to reveal themselves as something hitherto unnoticed by their pupils, physical fitness freaks.

The cause-effect relationship of what followed would never become clear: whether an increase in pupils led to the school's move to the heart of Barrio Norte or whether the move, strongly encouraged by the newborn parents' association, made room for more Ethanians. The end result, however, was that the teaching staff became swamped by all the new students, and the consequent decisions spelt the end for the neighbourly, chaotic, lay Saint Ethan's I never knew, because I hadn't been born yet. (Ferradás would describe this Saint Ethan's to me, night after night, after Valentina and the maids had gone to bed and the two of us were left alone in the mansion in Palermo Chico; when, tired of beating me at snooker, he'd toy with the idea that, at his age, I would sit down to write his biography, typically ignoring my views, and taking it for granted that one day I'd get to be his age.)

The Saint Ethan's staff council then decided that, to encourage a rise in priest imports from Ireland, fees had to go up. The upping was accompanied by an almost magical expansion in College prestige. Although the additional outlay led to a pitched battle with the parents' association and the subsequent exodus of a sizable number of the original cohort of pupils, the new syllabus on offer (more English, more religion, more sport) and especially the nature of that new order (sound English, presumably free from snotty-nosed Britishness or tasteless Americana; intensive religious instruction, presumably free from the mediaeval Spanish or Italian variants; and games like rugby, presumably involving a boy-scout ethos lacking in soccer) resulted in all vacancies being instantly filled and the beginning of the Saint Ethan's myth.

Víctor Jesús Leonardo Ferradás was one of the very few Ethanians to be there when the school began. Víctor Jesús Leonardo Ferradás was at the time equally fat, ambitious, and brilliant, though with a lot less money. In fact, the year after the schism between priests and Rotarians, when his mother lost her husband and her rapid decline into senility made it necessary to send her to an old people's home, he was offered a scholarship, the only one Saint Ethan's awarded, so he could go on studying there. Six years later he graduated, a gold medallist all the way.

It was unlikely any of the guests at the thirty-fifth anniversary dinner was in a position to remember that (their mental Ferradás file was extensive but began mainly in the seventies). It was also unlikely anyone knew that, six months after leaving the College in 1967, Ferradás disposed of his mother's belongings following a solitary wake in the city morgue, took legal action against the taxi driver who had knocked her down and the old people's home she'd fled seconds before, coolly accepted the out-of-court settlement offered, and left the country with the cash.

His return to Buenos Aires, the way Leo replaced Víctor Jesús, the exquisite fine tuning with which he impelled his hundred and five kilo persona, first into one of the most outstanding former pupils of Saint Ethan's College (by now a shithole unapproachable in its snobbery), next into a solid press baron (owner-manager of the country's top selling mag), and last into one of Argentina's social arbiters (not to mention his marriage to my elder sister, Valentina Schiaffino, one of the Schiaffino twins), was something vouchsafed to only a few, seemingly chosen at random, in the odd tidbit from an emergent bigwig revisiting certain murky areas of his own past.

The night of the 19th began with a welcome and unexpected wind, taking with it the last vestiges of the light and damp which had been exhausting the city all day. After that wind the only thing to expect was a storm, but by nine-thirty the night air was unusually tepid for September and the sky above the dead silhouette of the buildings downtown was erupting with stars. This was when the first guests began arriving at the Ko San Tei, tamely taking their places in the enormous reception area encircling the main dining room.

The first impression offered by the Ko was a bit overwhelming. The place blended refined Japanese asceticism with the overstatement of a five star international hotel: the traditional partitions of

rice paper and black lacquer containing, not tiny low-ceilinged rooms with sliding doors, but a vast cascade-irrigated stone garden framed by gigantic bonsai trees; its washed-out watercolour murals displaying abstract designs and eastern ideograms, while the ad hoc muzak was faint, percussive, tuneless.

The haphazard guest list appeared to inhibit those attending as much as the Ko did. On arrival almost everyone searched among the crowd for faces they still saw reasonably often, as friends, colleagues, or out of sheer inertia, and homed in on them, with hardly a sideward glance. That was the reaction of the chosen ones. Or more precisely, the ones chosen because they'd be unwilling to miss any of the party or, as Ferradás would put it, the trimmings without which no turkey is ever properly garnished.

Remarks such as that one were a giveaway to Leo's big obsession: the private world he alone inhabited, assuming it to be the real Argentina the rest of us lived in too. In that abstract world the party was a version, tailored for the nineties, of post-'29-crash soirées when, as other nations tottered, our country suavely turned its back on planetary concerns. In that world people did as Ferradás believed they were entitled to, Data glossily recorded it, and the magazine's success was taken by him as proof that things worked the way he imagined them to.

The unease of the party's first half hour was relieved by a panchromatic selection of booze, nimbly delivered by geisha-costumed waitresses. By the time the place was nearly full, the guests had defrosted enough to wander the circular expanse, ending up sooner or later with an almost forgotten someone, or a someone they'd not had a chance to forget.

If it is weird to discover what's happened to a face anonymously familiar ten years ago, imagine the same effect multiplied by three hundred. To a greater or lesser extent, these fleeting encounters awoke in every pilgrim a compulsion to know what would have happened to his life had he acted, or simply been, otherwise (more self-assured, less conventional, more ruthless, less unfaithful) along with an irrepressible need to know how others were sizing him up.

Rubbing shoulders in that hall were the fifteen-year-old rugger stars we idolized at ten (evolved now into spent office workers barely able to afford the time for a shower, shave, and change of clothes), former pimply swots (now millionaires in la City, or high-living politicians, or reptilian corpses fresh from one orgy and taking time out before heading on to the next), dilettantes unchanged ten years on (their bulletproof aura enhanced by the odd white sideburn or wrinkle), schoolmates of indeterminate taxonomy, hatched now into colourless, adequately remunerated executives, resigned to living in posh suburbs and holidaying on the most sought-after beaches.

Japanese food is quite different from Chinese, even in Argentina, and the depth of the gulf between them was another Ferradás yardstick to separate the sheep from the goats among the partygoers: those attuned to the Difference and those still bonded to the parental estancia's beefsteak, prone to the same old mannerisms, foibles and platitudes they'd been nursing ever since high school.

Leo had not as yet made his appearance. Later it transpired he was ensconced in the Ko's second floor offices, surrounded by the gear needed to edit at high speed a video of the event in progress, designed to be shown between dessert and his speech. The video consisted of brief replies to faux naïf questions posed to the guests, whispered for the most part by Ferradás himself into the earpieces of the camera crews prowling the Ko premises.

When the doors of the main hall opened we discovered everyone had a placecard at the tables, and those who hadn't as yet felt compelled to talk to semi-strangers were forced to do so during the next couple of hours. But a certain atmosphere of temporary unreality already reigned (generated either by alcohol, the exotic locale, a rediscovery of collegiate comradeship, or the unadmitted suspicion that we were the fall guys in a puppet show), and we accepted being unable to choose our neighbours in exchange for the giant aquarium with its alien fish, the Japanese cooks juggling knives at bewildering speeds, and the nonstop pageant of Imperial delicacies the geishas kept plying us with.

The dinner itself was not recorded, but the proceedings at our table are probably reasonably representative of goings-on elsewhere. No need to give names; enough to know our sample included a banker, a congressman, two executives, a polo player, a television talk-show host, a judge, a film

director, a precocious university emeritus fresh off the plane from Cambridge, an advertising hotshot, and Manú, of course, Manú Pujol (plus a couple of faces like mine, the kind you find hard to remember should you happen to hear they've died suddenly).

Following a rudimentary democratic attempt at fraternization with the rest of us, Executive One crossed swords with Congressman regarding the week's privatization scandal, Banker shared the latest Presidential gem from the latest Bankers' Association luncheon, Emeritus began delivering an apocalyptic scenario on the condition of society, Ad Hotshot and Judge agreed things weren't all that bad (the one because he saw the remarks as leftist and dated, the other because he'd been leftist and didn't want to look dated), Film Director and Polo Player discovered they'd shared the same Panamanian heiress, TV Host quizzed Executive Two on his relationship with the government and Congressman raised a scornful eyebrow at the stonewall answer, Film Director asked Executive One if he was still knocking off the actress from his last movie, Executive One told him to fuck off, Emeritus congratulated Film Director on the movie and Film Director told him to fuck off, Banker wanted to know how Manú's marriage was going, TV Host asked if it was true Myriam had sacked her managers and taken over the helm at the Haeff empire, Judge and Polo Player ignored TV Host and asked how she was, because the likes of Myriam Haeff couldn't check in for a dryout without someone noticing, and that seemed to be what was happening, and Executive One, who'd fleeced old Haeff a few years back, was also eager to know.

From the beginning Manú followed the chit-chat without any concern for the direction it was taking, confining himself to the odd, mildly obtuse comment and murmuring in the ear of the geisha who regularly filled his cup of sake. When Banker, Polo Player and Judge breathed the name of Myriam Haeff he gave us his anorexic Buddha smile and said:

"You can always rely on Myriam's understanding of the delights of the marriage contract."

That was all. Or enough, at least, for everyone to join once more in ever more extravagant opinions about the state of the nation. At one point Manú asked me softly to point out Ferradás' table. "Runs in the family," he said, adding quickly: "knowing who the host is."

If he had not still been upstairs, Ferradás' ego would have taken a nasty dent had he overheard Manú. But the rest of the table seized on a different interpretation of the remark. It would have been useless for Manú to explain that, although he did know who Leo Ferradás was, he hadn't fully registered his presence. Some people appear destined to become an eternal topic for the gossip of others. Although the same revelation may be recycled time after time, although distortion of something heard months before may have a ludicrous degree of unreality, although magnificent lies may cover feeble, ugly truths, the effect remains the same and the subject exerts the same magnetic attraction. And Ferradás had always loved producing that effect.

What was said of him thereafter was certainly not much different from what might have been remarked at the other tables, and belonged to the catalogue of commonplaces, none particularly true or false, usually repeated about him: his journalistic nose for, and sporadic use of, blackmail; his gargantuan excesses and bouts of greed regarding his and the magazine's money; his extramarital oddities (and those of Valentina, who had posed naked for Data's first anniversary cover long before marrying Ferradás); the mysterious injection of capital which led to the relaunching of the magazine at the beginning of the eighties, with the return of democracy; the alleged financial chaos now threatening Data despite its success, airily refuted by Leo with public gestures like this dinner; the unresolved case of the bomb explosion in Data's original offices during the seventies with the Junta in full swing, where Ferradás lost a hand (God, how often would we have to hear about that plastic hand of his?) which also caused, depending on the version, the deaths of one to six people.

Manú gave a sigh when the subject appeared to be exhausted and even consented to try his only solid nourishment of the evening: stuffed lychees served by our geisha as invisibly as she'd delivered the endless parade of delicacies preceding dessert. That was more or less when the lights were killed and a voice-over announced we were about to see a group portrait of the occasion, "a trifle unpolished perhaps, but redolent in its way of the Ethanian esprit de corps we've managed to conjure

up." The voice faded with a chuckle, and the first visuals of guests entering the Ko and confronting Leo's cameras flashed on the giant screen.

By the time Ferradás himself appeared in view (seated in an armchair on the restaurant's second floor, beside the console where the video had been edited), thanking us all for our attendance that evening, almost a third of the guests had gone. Of those who remained, some felt as uncomfortable as those who had walked out (or more so, as they'd not even managed to react yet) while the remainder licked their wounds, hoping that what followed would blend with their own replies on camera. Such as:

"Because it's years since I've seen most of us. Not at all, I thought it was a great idea." (What made you decide to come? Do you feel you arrived a bit early?)

"Ten. Or twelve. Why? Does it show?" (How many kilos have you put on over the last ten years?)

"That is sub judice. It's four months since negotiations began with the creditors. But I could name a few who dropped me in it." (Do you owe money to, or did you ever swindle any of those present?)

"Because I'm the black sheep of the family, perhaps?" (Why do you imagine your brothers were not invited, since they also attended the College?)

"Pissing, actually. No, no, you just took me by surprise, that's all." (What were you doing? Do you mind being filmed in the gents? Why did you hide when you saw us, then?)

"Missionary, country doctor, things like that. Yes, quite satisfied. I've just donated a tomograph to the Mu, iz Hospital. You'll have to ask my wife." (What did you dream of being when you were little? Are you happy with what you have achieved? How much do you pay your maid?)

"That's really too much. Even coming from Leo Ferradás." (Is it true that for your last film they made you take an HIV test?)

"Telling some woman friend about her purchases of the day. She sees her lover later on in the evening." (Have you any idea what your wife is doing right now?)

"No, never. I hope it's not too off-beat." (Have you ever tried Japanese food before?)

"Gin and tonic. My second. With lots more tonic this time, actually. When does dinner begin?" (What are you drinking? Is this your first one?)

"Sometimes." (Do you believe in God?)

"A lady at the wheel of an ancient, battered Mercedes is holding up traffic. When she finally gives way to the car behind, a Japanese convertible, its driver lets fly at her. The lady replies, unruffled: "Know what? You're first generation with a car and I'm first generation without a chauffeur'." (Tell us a joke.)

"Never. I have no idea. My family, certainly. I really couldn't say." (Were you ever kidnapped? What ransom do you think they'd ask? Would your family pay, or would the company? Do you think it's right to pay kidnappers?)

"Of course. I'm a rugby player, brother, not an agitator." (Do you believe in universal equality? Aren't you a bit ashamed, then, to have played in South Africa?")

"Psychologist. Well, that was a while back. Afterwards, believe it or not. With a woman friend at university." (Present occupation? Why did you hang up your cassock? Did you lose your virginity before or after the seminary? With a man or a woman?)

"Which one? Jaguar. You cheap **bastards." (How many rooms are there in your house? What car do you drive? Are you still on good terms with those Bolivian associates of yours?)

"Two. The boy, yes, until he can think for himself. I can't see why not." (Have you any children? Do they go to Saint Ethan's? Do you plan to make them all follow your footsteps?)

"I'd lie, I suppose. Umm...not for the moment." (How would you describe your appearance to a blind woman? Do you plan to return to public life?)

"I prefer fruit juice. None of your business. I said, none of your business, fuck it!" (Why don't you drink? When did you go on the wagon? Any backsliding?)

"Absolutely. I've six children; I have no choice but to believe, do I? No, none; I own land."

(Does the country have a future, do you think? Do you have a foreign bank account?)

"It's not a painting, it's an ideogram. I'm in no hurry; I've only just arrived." (Would you like to buy that painting? Why haven't you sat down yet, like everyone else?)

That last reply was from Manú. Over the close-up of his face, already turning away from the camera and floating out of frame, came darkness, a hoarse chuckle and then, gradually, the figure of Leo Ferradás in his armchair on the first floor of the Ko.

"I hope you're not disappointed with our little party. I'm sure you'll agree the occasion demanded a slight departure from the conventional. All credit to Saint Ethan's, don't you think? It's not every day one gets to celebrate a 35th anniversary along with guests such as... ourselves, if I may say so. By the way, one of the specialties of Japanese cuisine, one we've been able to enjoy at such a superb level, is a delicious fish called fugu. As delicious as it is dangerous, I might add. It seems the sex glands of the fugu contain an extremely poisonous fluid which works its way into its tissues. If the glands are not cleanly removed in preparation, the inoffensive fugu becomes deadly. The problem is, there's no way of knowing whether it's been properly cleaned... until you've tasted it. What I ask myself now is: what would become of our country, if at this precise moment all of us? You're aware things like that happen all the time. What would they do without us? That's why I say, all credit to Saint Ethan's. As for the country, let us not kid ourselves: at most there would be fifteen minutes bloodletting among the piranhas over the vacancies. The world is cruel, and at heart we're hopeless softies. We like to think they need us because we let ourselves feel they care for us. Ah yes, the fugu. It's only found in Japan; don't worry. In the words of someone from our dear old College's early days, someone I'm sure none of you got round to meeting: 'Nor is there giddiness in success'. An Irish independent, an ex-bomb thrower called O'Banyon, who in his frenzied history classes kept repeating this curious phrase ad nauseam. Again: 'Nor is there giddiness in success'. May the old soak rest in peace; at least one of his victims still recalls his most oracular teaching. The second half of that phrase was said to me long ago by an old Russian émigré in New York, after I'd told him I wouldn't work for him any longer. He said: 'The higher you get, the nearer you are to the top and the farther you go when you fall.' Dear friends. In my humble opinion we live in a country of squat buildings with too many balconies. No vertigo and not that risky if you fall.

Agreed? I have this naïve vision of watching one of us scrape the clouds or dig a deep hole with his body when he hits the ground. A magnificent, over-the-top gesture. Even if a trifle megalomaniac. And seeing we're in a confessional mood let me add: this is what Data's for. No more, no less. To register it when it happens and make sure everyone in the country knows about it. Will one of you make the bigtime? Or at least one of your sons? Great idea, right? Let us raise our glasses, then, to the next thirty-five years of Saint Ethan's. And to thirty-five more years' life for us. Let us drink to whatever takes our fancy. And please make yourselves at home. I'll be with you in ten minutes."

Having faded to black, Ferradás sprang one final thespian gimmick: the hall was re-illuminated not by ceiling lights, but from spots on all sides at floor level. Faces emerged out of the shady lunar penumbra. Champagne was served. The return of geishas and muzak relaxed things, and empty spaces at nearly every table gave the bolder ones an excuse or an incentive to wander.

It was as though the party then assumed the Protean, predictable nature Ferradás had hitherto denied it: people swapping financial ploys or sporting tips; drunks immobilised by alcohol or put into perpetual motion by it; a couple of pathetic hustlers in pursuit of champagne-dispensing geishas; guffaws in response to prehistoric, clapped-out jokes; trance-like stupor of the many and baying voices of a few.

That is what Leo must have seen on descending. But by that stage of the evening he must already have gathered more than enough material for the special issue of the magazine, because he progressed through the hall greeting table after table with a beatific smile, aimed with pitiless selectivity. He lowered his hundred and five kilos onto one of the vacant chairs at our table and closed his eyes until normal breathing returned. Ignoring a proffered glass of champagne, he addressed Manú:

"And you are Pujol, Myriam Haeff's prince consort."

Manú's finger circled the rim of his sake cup. He nodded once for every complete revolution.

"Great video," he said at length.

Ferradás extended his head toward the void behind him, and having bellowed "Sake!" turned his attention to the other tables until it was our turn to be served.

"Yes, a great video. And a lot of work. Ezequiel here is a witness to that. We had to contend with the Old Boys' Association, convince the priests, comb through all the College magazines and goodness knows what else. And you know what? Amid all that rubbish we found two real gems. Let's see if I can remember: a eulogy on yogurt in glass pots and a set of harebrained commandments on the benefits of involuntary chastity. Am I right, Ezequiel?" But he didn't wait for my answer. "Oldies. One must have been in '78 and the other in '79, both brusquely signed Pujol."

"'77 and '78, I think," said Manú, after another of his unnerving pauses.

"I want you to write for Data, Pujol. I want an article from you in every issue."

Before Myriam, Manú had been to Ascochinga for a six month detox.
And for nearly a decade before that he had roamed our bent globe, unhurried and with no fixed destination, the last three years in the grip of heroin. That and his impromptu marriage in Montevideo to Myriam Haeff, with no ceremony or invitations; that and his easy charm, which provoked in others a wish to know if all was well with him, and a mild surprise at his persistent good luck, was what the world, or I at any rate, knew about him.

Manú sat as though attempting to guess the sake's route through his body. At last he said:

"Why?"

"Because as a Prince Consort you'll go to the dogs."

And, to forestall what threatened to be another Manú silence, mystical or alcoholic, Ferradás added:

"Isn't that enough? Or are you in need of further ego-massage?
Ask Ezequiel, then, who discovered you. I don't know how good you are, to be perfectly honest. But I have an inkling it's worth the risk of finding out. For me, of course, not you."

"Of course. And what am I to write about?"

"That's your problem. The world according to Pujol, in monthly, three-hundred-line installments is enough for me."

"Just that?"

"More if you can manage it."

Manú drained his sake cup. It was instantly replenished, but this time he paid no attention to the geisha. He demanded a pen, inscribed a sum on his cloth napkin and passed it to me.

"Too little?" he asked.

Ferradás grasped the napkin between two fingers, spread it on the table, took out his own pen and signed below the sum written by Manú. When he reached over to put the napkin in Manú's pocket he knocked over his own sake, and so toasted with my cup. The cups did not touch; they both raised them with the same vaguely bewildered expression.
Then Ferradás put my cup back on the table, gave an ox-like snort and stood up.

"Monday at the office, Pujol."

"Hai, Sensei," said Manú, both hands over his heart. Ferradás responded with the ghost of a smile, patted me on the cheek and left us alone at the table. As he watched his brand new boss cruise the dining hall, Manú said: "Ezequiel, or whatever your name is, how long is three hundred lines, exactly?"

And I observed, behind sake-clouded eyes, a confusion more toxic than drunkenness. Perhaps it was not then but an hour later that his eyes revealed the blind alley his future had been until then. During that white downtime of my brain things happened which would surely improve this report's continuity. No use attempting to trace them: they will remain an eye-blink, a smooth editing special effect, which left the hall almost empty, apart from the table where Manú pontificated, the last six or seven guests left in the Ko San Tei allowing him to hold forth at will and I looked on, while an alcoholic mixer panel balanced the scene's colour, sound, and brightness.

“Let’s see if I have made myself clear. It’s got to be crystal clear, because it could be useful to you sometime. There’s no point in reading the fine print of a contract. Believe me; it’s never any use. Let’s take an example. I discover one day I can no longer be Mr. Myriam Haeff. Never mind how. Let’s say I was briefed. So? Myriam keeps her millions. That’s fine. Someone has to keep them. Among other things, because millions are never as real as the feeling of having them. And it takes too long to learn to feel that, let alone pass it on to others. But that’s not the important bit. The small print in the contract, that’s my point: it’s not worth the effort. Do you want to know why? Because it says one thing when you draw it up and another when you read it later. Always happens. And I’m not talking about money here; I’m talking about love.”

The last two phrases had been delivered standing up, toying with the napkin in his hands. Presently he tied a knot in one end and began pouring champagne over it. His smile didn’t change a bit as he whirled it faster and faster, until the origami lantern decorating the centre of our table had been smashed to bits. The effect did not appear to satisfy him, because he mounted the nearest table and took out its lantern with a kick. Oblivious to the laughter he strode from table to table, booting whatever lay in his path, glasses, empties, Japanese porcelain cups, paper lanterns, and with every kick exhaling two syllables, one before and the other after impact: “Ban-Zai!”

Having run out of tables he was nonplused for a second or two, until he spotted the headwaiter, a diminutive oriental in a dinner jacket, a mute witness to all that had happened, and made for him, asking what the fuck did Ko San Tei mean in Japanese. By the time four of us pinned down Manú and freed the little captive, he had not only translated the three words for us but confessed in JapSpanish that all the décor in the joint was actually from Hong Kong, and not by any means as irreplaceable as it looked.

Manú seated himself with apparent composure, drained his cup of sake and gave me a wink. But before we had time to convert his savagery into something comic, he jumped up and trotted towards the aquarium by the entrance with a chair above his head. The impending catastrophe teetered. He seemed to think better of it, flung the chair to one side, and grabbing in the same movement a heavy lacquer stool buried it in the glass wall facing him.

A cascade of water, broken glass, and coloured fish poured onto the carpet. No one was laughing. No one did anything besides watch the emptying aquarium. Running water and fish flapping on the carpet covered in broken glass were the only sounds until Manú turned and faced us.

“The food wasn’t bad, but no decent Japanese restaurant would call itself the Palace of Imperial Delicacies. That’s just faggy chinoiserie," was all he said.

As he headed dripping towards the exit he slipped, regained his balance with a couple of awkwardly balletic movements, and disappeared from the Ko San Tei without a hint of a farewell gesture.

2.
THE PUJOL TREATMENT FOR DAMAGED HEARTS

"Iván Pujol," said Manú and the password carried him into the depths of the Martorell Rest Clinic For Nervous Diseases, as it said on a bronze plaque he'd spotted on entering. Rather a posh sanitarium, in Manú's view. The library was just another of the humungous ground floor rooms in the mansion facing the River, and Iván ran the library: food, lodging, and the odd pill, in return for devoted care of the books.

Iván had been placed there twenty months before. Having recovered from his one brief relapse, his clinical file had hovered between discharge and a threatened return to stagnancy, until the staff proposed new terms of residence as a librarian cum resident outpatient, free to leave during the day or on weekends. Even so Iván seldom ventured out. Mild agoraphobia, according to the doctors.

Anthropophobia, Iván would have called it. Theworldoutsidephobia, thought Manú. The world outside was where Iván had no wish to see people. The world outside was where he had no wish to be. Because the world outside was where they fuck you up; and the one thing that mattered to Iván at this stage of his life was not being fucked up again.

That was the drift of Marisa's, Iván's older sister's, explanation the night before: since his transfer to the library there had been no relapses but no major sign of progress either; the medication was minimal, the costs almost nonexistent, and whether Iván stayed or left the clinic was entirely up to him. In short the guy was still playing his aloof role, though his audience was now a roomful of battered old books. That's how Manú pictured Iván: surrounded by dusty inert volumes, gifts in the main from local gentry who, stumped as to what to do with poor dead Auntie's library, thought: "Either we junk it or we score like Maecenases with the Martorell Board."

In filling out the form they made him sign, Manú had avoided writing Ibáñez Pujol, his real surname, and filled in the blank for "relationship with patient" not as first cousin but former colleague. Just in case. Marisa's note requesting he be allowed to go straight in only said the bearer, "Suppose your brother won't see me and I make the trip for sweet fuck all," Manú had argued the night before, but even that simple ruse proved unnecessary, given the Martorell's rusty security.

Manú still had no clear plan as he followed the male nurse along overlit corridors with barred windows, but he knew something would happen simply because things almost always did when he was around. Having managed to be left alone, he silently opened the library door. Iván was on his knees, arranging books on a lower shelf and didn't hear. A symptom? Bullshit, thought Manú, he's been acting deaf all his life. He approached on tiptoe and whispered in Iván's ear:

"My style is the art of fighting..." Iván froze with an automatic grunt:

"...without fighting." Only then did he turn his head, not sideways but backwards so his chin and Adam's apple pointed at the ceiling.

"What are you doing here?"

What if he really is mad, Manú thought, beginning to regret what he had come to do. The whites of Iván's eyes were grey, with scores of little red filaments. A bit edgily, Manú looked down at his cousin, stepping back when Iván's head grazed the bulge in his jeans. Iván was smiling. Or maybe thinking, hard to say.

"Strange. Remembering the phrase but not who said it."

"Don't look at me," Manú said. "You're the book freak. I never had a clue what you were on about when I withstood your verbal seizures. By the way, I'm feeling a bit dizzy already, among these

books.

"Who? I have to remember. I must write it down."

But Iván didn't move; he looked fixedly at the shelf before him and began moving his head gently up, down, up, down, for almost two whole minutes. "Then came Lanza del Vasto and Akhmatova. But it wasn't them either. Nor Elderian. Nor Ouspensky or Merton. Zen. Buber maybe, though not his style. A film? It wasn't a film, was it?"

Manú's eyebrows said: Your problem. By now he was dead sure he needed a plan, fast. He couldn't see himself back in this dump within a thousand years at the earliest.

It wasn't from a film, the "fighting without fighting" bit. According to Manú at least, it belonged to one of his favourite fetishes from a former age. Of all his gifts, the one nobody ever questioned was a prodigious memory for the totally useless. And at one time, the golden age, as he began to dub it during his detox shift at Ascochinga, Manú had been seriously afflicted by the trash movie virus. He couldn't help dragging Iván to the pictures or listening to him afterwards chuntering endlessly on about what they'd witnessed, the movie's oddities and incongruities emerging from Iván's words as the very reason for Manú liking the movie, in the meantime abandoning himself to the impulse, and mimicking the movie's characters (now a show-off smoker or drinker, next a monosyllabic moron), ignoring the chicks with them, eyeing the world with apathetic wisdom, until Iván would blow it all ("Manú. Something wrong? Your mouth's like twisted.") and suddenly the hollow situation would come into sharp focus: his fake attitude, the girls' ingenuous vacancy, Iván's monologue now sour and boring.

"Can't think on my knees," said Iván, rising.

Manú gave a further step back and evaluated his entire cousin for the first time. Had it been so long? Was he equally clapped out, he wondered with some alarm, his thumb automatically twisting the Tibetan ring he'd worn as a talisman for the last three years. Books, aging, bars, nutters: bad karma. Bad karma.

"Quite right," he said with fake ardour. "Let's take a walk, OK?" And suddenly he knew that there was no need to plan, or dream up likely stories, or even invoke the truth to get Iván out of this nuthouse. All it required was a bit of the old time magic. An appeal to complicity. Something as simple as: "Want to see my flat? Want to step outside, and head for my new flat? Like now, right away. See if you like it. And stay. Long as you like. Instead of this. I mean, leave this craphole. Forever. Now. What do you think?"

Iván's eyes bounced off Manú's and stayed coolly motionless, unblinking. Then something bent his mouth into a free adaptation of a smile.

"Bruce Lee. Enter the Dragon. Right? True, it wasn't a film, not for you, anyway. Still running? Still watch it?"

It was definitely not going to be easy. Manú patted his cousin's cheek, combed the room with his eyes. Should he roll him up in the carpet? Wouldn't get ten yards toting that vegetable. A disguise, yes. But where the fuck would he find the right costume in this cuspidor?

Besides, what would be the point? The problem was not the clinic's staff. If Iván was classified as an outpatient, he could leave anytime. The point was to get him out voluntarily. And then convince him to stay out.

Iván had taken two steps toward Manú and was now touching his cousin's hair.

"It's different. What happened?"

"White hairs. A couple of rinses. Who cares. Would you kindly explain what's so wonderful about this dump?"

No reply from Iván.

"Why won't you come with me, then?"

Silence. A different mental speed? Or were they keeping him farther out than Marisa supposed, however out he may have been as a patient? Iván's eyes returned to Manú's face and then darted away again, not to the window this time but to the carpet, and from there to the wall. Manú thought he could tell what he was about to say next, but couldn't avoid feeling, right there and then, that he was the

younger cousin again, the one who always had to surprise everyone and who, sometimes, only sometimes, said or did what his revered elder cousin expected of him, thus attaining parity for a while, perfect parity in a perfect world as it once was.

"Because we have to give notice," said Iván, dorkily.

"Wrong. We don't have to at all. You know better than I do," Manú heard himself say.

But did Iván's have mean only the two of them or did it include some Mysterious Friend of Certain Loony Outpatients? Didn't affect the issue, so forget that. Plan B. What would it be?

"Listen carefully," said Manú, as though reciting a nursery rhyme: "Then we went into the garden, and we headed for the gate, then we walked right through the gate and we jumped into the car that I left parked outside."

"Outside." "Outside, right."

Still no motion whatsoever. Manú closed his eyes, moved his head from side to side, imitating Iván's voice and his own in a monotonous ping-pong rally. "Outside? Yes, outside. Outside? No, inside. Inside? No, outside. Outside is when we are not inside and inside is when we are not outside." Then he opened his eyes and said:

"Don't you play the nutter with me." He tugged Iván's arm, opened the door, and added: "Some day you'll thank me for this, cuz. Believe me."

(In Iván Pujol's own handwriting)

ENTRY INTO INSTITUTION: Voluntary, almost.
NEXT OF KIN: No one in particular.
PROGNOSIS: Undefined.
TREATMENT: Rest, for now.
PATIENT WILLINGNESS TO UNDERGO PSYCHOTHERAPY: Apparent disposition to reconsider, veering towards positive.
FAMILY HISTORY: Father deceased (age of patient at the time: 13); mother disturbingly bright (remarried five years after becoming a widow; currently abroad). One sister, happily married, four children. Maybe not as bright as mother but far more tuned in (or at least more suburban and sporting).
ALLEGED MENTAL ILLNESSES IN THE FAMILY: Very dubious subject. Meningitis, for a start. Must one talk about this? A useful approximation, then, to the patient's still undefined prognosis, as stated by a blood relative who should be ninety by now: "The men in this family can't stop the women forcing them to undergo the curse at least once a month". Name of relative: Galo Pujol.
HOSPITALISATION OF FAMILY MEMBERS: None for mental disorders (nor for geriatric reasons).
SUICIDES: None.
ATTEMPTS: None known of.
CONTACTS WITH PSYCHOANALYSIS AND OTHER FORMS OF THERAPY, OF THE PATIENT OR OTHER MEMBERS OF FAMILY: None, to date.
LENGTH OF HOSPITALISATION: Still undefined.
VISITS AUTHORISED BY PATIENT: Galo Pujol, Manú Ibáñez Pujol (provided they present their death certificates).
FURTHER REMARKS: Life's a bitch.

It was a standard situation, Manú said in the car, that's why it was so easy to define. The odd thing was, if it was so easy, why did no one ever put it in plain and simple terms? Like:

If two people, certain kinds of people living together, become gradually less and less capable of making each other happy, while their capacity for mutual disappointment remains undiminished, the thing was to prevent matters going too far. Namely, avoiding Her, as we'll call her, ever getting to the stage of hating in you the things which, two weeks or two years before, had made her fall for you. Keep her feeling positive about you. Renew the façade of what about you, or at least maintain Her in a neutral zone by every available means, making sure She never even starts to hate it. Even restrain yourself from doing those very things for a while. Or set up a smoke screen simulating change, for the time being, until some new trick becomes available. In other words, retain, or, if you were lucky, renew, the mystery which would avert the beginning of irreversible hostilities.

That's where a tiny part, but a very important one, in Manú's eyes, of the battle of the sexes lay, the love battle taking place daily, minute by minute, in every corner of the planet. Aim? To fight time and delay the end of love indefinitely; to keep alive the acrobatic changes of camouflage, the idyllic, almost fraternal appearance belligerence adopted, so that the dark side, the squalid aspect of things, never appeared: namely, the moment when She reached the depths of you and began the return journey, finding at every step what lay behind whatever She had seen before ("Why do you always...," "You used to be more...," "Will you ever want to know whether I...," and so on) and, sooner or later, the end of love.

But Manú had learned lately that this was only one approach, and a rather candid one. There was at least one other: You could feel all the above things, while She did nothing, absolutely nothing, to stop it, except perhaps show you the fine print in the contract, regretting or ignoring what you were going through meanwhile.

This is what he had learned in the ninety-six hours before getting Iván into the car parked outside the Martorell Clinic, and then into the top floor of the flat offered him temporarily by his brand new ex-wife, Myriam Haeff. And this is what he tried to explain to Iván during the drive downtown, partly to update him on recent mishaps in his life, partly to distract him from the signs of insanity his cousin appeared to detect in the street.

Iván listened to the monologue with vegetable attention. Every now and then he emerged from silence, though not stiffness, to confirm that such and such a bridge or building were indeed new additions to the townscape or had been formerly gone unregistered. At the third interruption, Manú began to feel edgy, until he remembered these were the kind of questions he himself had asked on returning from Europe. Why is it we need to leave our city to learn to observe it more or less attentively? Apart from those topographical interjections, Iván did not open his mouth until they were up in the flat. He refused to enter the drawing room until his cousin had lowered the Venetian blinds of the studio window, with its view of half the city and a faraway tongue of brown river.

"Right. Now I'm going to tell you what I need," said Manú after he'd lowered the blinds. Iván remained standing by the door. "What, too dark for you now? It's because you're still accustomed to the light outside. Don't be a bitch, cousin. Please sit down and listen. What I need...." And he realized he didn't quite know how to start.

Could a presumed madman be trusted to brief you about his own symptoms? "Take your time, but what I need is for you to tell me everything that might bother you, or make you feel uncomfortable if you lived here."

Iván did not take a seat, but he did enter the darkened living room. Two sofas clashed with a block of stone set between them as a table. The walls were bare. The only lamp was a curved iron bar with a bulb in a conical lilac shade. In the passage linking the two bedrooms were cardboard boxes filled with rumpled clothes. Kitchenette and living room were connected by a table topped by glass bricks and two appalling flaky metal chairs. Iván closed the fridge, reconsidered, left it open as before, looked at his cousin and said:

"It's very high up here."

"Does it make you dizzy? Are you liable, without warning, to jump out of windows? A little effort to be specific, please. Can't you see I'm doing all this for your own good?"

"You live here? All the time?"

Manú bit his lip and waited for calm to return. Fifteen seconds later it was still absent, so he said:

"True. Can't compare it to the palace you lived in up to an hour ago, so? But at least it's not full of nutters who shit themselves, talk all night and shove it up you while you are asleep. Just look on the bright side."

A cigarette packet lay on the table. Manú delved inside: empty. Searched his pockets. Nothing there either. A couple of minutes later he reemerged from the bedroom with one lit. The pile in the ashtray was on the verge of a landslide. Ignoring it, Manú flicked his cig beside the chair, Iván staring at the toppled ash on the parquet.

"I don't clean," he announced. "Don't say. What else?"

"I don't smoke. I don't use shaving cream. I don't go out into the street. I don't keep ginger ale in the fridge."

"Still drink ginger ale? Your problem. May I ask how you shave, before you add to your list of don'ts?"

"In the shower."

"Not with an electric shaver, I trust."

Either Iván didn't find this in the least amusing or he didn't get it. No more jokes, decided Manú and asked what else. Apparently there wasn't anything else. Or Iván had short circuited. Manú added his stub to the pile in the ashtray and said:

"Anything wrong?"

A plane's roar swallowed the reply. Manú waited, eyelids drooped, for the return of silence. But whatever Iván had said, he didn't repeat it. After breathing in deeply and exhaling from the corner of his mouth, Manú looked at him.

"Iván, it's me. Remember? Your cousin, your pal. Ease up, give yourself a break. No one's treating you as a screwball anymore. No more barred windows, no more bullying nurses, no more stupefying pills or patronising doctors. The end. Finito. You're beginning a brand new life. Good, bad, but yours, no one else's."

Iván didn't even blink. Manú focused on the spot of parquet his cousin was gazing at and licking his fingertip removed the ash with surprising dexterity. He shook it into the ashtray, wiped the finger on his trousers, walked to the tabletop in front of Iván, covered his cousin's hands with his own and looked him firmly in the eye.

"I haven't suddenly become Mother Fucking Theresa of Calcutta.
I'm just as sanely selfish as ever: the thing is I also need a hand to get me out of a black hole. Can't you see I'm in the same fix as you? Up shit creek, as it were."

What Manú didn't bother to report then, before, or after, was his own medical condition: namely, the cold midnight sweats, the lack of appetite, the unexpected bouts of insomnia and narcolepsy, the total absence of tumescent symptoms in his genital apparatus, not to mention the pills in their attractive colours prescribed for him after surviving the worst of the cold turkey at Ascochinga, untouched in the bathroom cupboard ever since Myriam's valedictory: "Bye. Fun while it lasted. But I have a company to run," exiling him to the flat.
Nothing, as a whole, to worry about, in Manú's rather subjective diagnosis.

Iván's hands were motionless, not feeling or not acknowledging the weight of his cousin's, and for a moment Manú felt proud he and Iván belonged to the same family: a family untainted by the sweaty hand gene. Emerging from his DNA fingerprinting reverie he said:

"There's nothing out there, buddy. What's out there doesn't matter. And I can guarantee, believe me or not, that cases like this don't recover languishing in nuthouses, or in fetal attempts to plumb lower depths, waiting for bad karma to kindly step aside. What we're into now is real fringe medicine: the Pujol Treatment for Damaged Hearts. What do you say. Shall we risk it? Or shall we go back to the Martorell and you find me a place there too? Blink once if we stay, twice if it seems crazy.

Evidently the guy was not on the black humour wavelength. Not even a polite smile.

"We don't need you to answer today, of course," Manú said.

A laugh track: that's the first thing he'd have to go out and buy if this vegetable agreed to stay in the flat. Iván removed his hands from the tabletop and shoved them in his pockets. His eyes moved from the room's lowered blind to the flat's entrance, avoiding Manú in their pan. Then he said: "I'm not a mental defective. And I didn't go dopey."

Manú looked quickly at his shoes to avoid his cousin's eyes. But he felt the throbbing in his neck and face were as evident as the mute flashing light of an ambulance in the dark.

"I'm just mixed up about a few things. I know what they are, but for now I can't do anything about them."

"Course," Manú whispered, as soon as the pumping under his scalp had eased. "So what? We're all mixed up about something. It's just a matter of sorting things out. I know all this looks chaotic. But it can be fixed in minutes." Without raising his head, he added: "About us again: do you really think we're mad? Do you want to go back to the clinic?"

"I cook, but I don't shop," said Iván after an unbearable eternity. Still without smiling or moving.

There was dignity in those words: agitated and asthmatic but it was there. As though Iván knew, for at least a moment, the few things he was still capable of, among that enviable arsenal he had once had, or which Manú had attributed to him. As though he knew that, despite everything, he was still the elder cousin. Temporarily machine-like and dependent, largely an alien to himself, but incapable on hereditary grounds of being his younger cousin's younger cousin: "I cook, but I don't shop."

"Don't worry," said Manú. "I'll do it. What else?"

Iván turned, hands still in pockets, an elbow airily closing the refrigerator door. Manú laughed inside and stepped back for a better view and to hide his smile.

"Go on. Say whatever you're thinking."

Iván was going to sit on one of the sofas but stopped halfway. He rested an open hand against an ear, as though trying to hear inner voices and said, without looking at his cousin:

"If the doorbell or the phone rings.... Is there one?

"Yes there is. OK, don't ever answer. I'll take care of it. What else? There's a TV and a VCR. Books, you're wondering. Right? Make a list and I'll bring them. We can put up a few shelves somewhere. In your room. There are plenty of spare clothes and it seems we're still the same size. So. Want to see your bedroom?"

Iván followed his cousin along the corridor, seemingly less concerned with finding his bed than losing sight of Manú. The first room they entered was rather dark, with a medium-sized mattress, a floor lamp, an open empty wall cupboard and a small window facing the rear of the building. Manú said from the doorway that he could settle in there himself, if Iván didn't like it. But without giving him a chance to reply, he added: "Let's try first. If you're not comfortable, we'll work something out," and carried on with the guided tour.

They'd have to share the bathroom, and the TV, he explained from the other bedroom. Iván approached. It had a wall to wall window, air conditioning, a double bed against an enormous mirror, a TV set and a VCR balanced on a chair facing the bed. The blinds were down.

"Don't tell me: I know we're short of furniture. We'll crack that one soon. Like the books... and

the computer, of course."

You know about computers?, Iván was about to ask, or so Manú assumed from his expression. Because he sat on the bed, he raised his head to give Iván the full benefit of the charm-treatment and spoke:

"They told me in the clinic you used one. To file books and so on. Right? I figured it would be dreadful to lose the habit, so I thought of a little job you could do here, without going out, using the computer I'll get us. A sort of partnership. Just the two of us, sharing the work, sharing the profits. What d'you think? Don't tell me: you want to know the details. It's a rather long story. Wouldn't you rather sit down?"

Iván sat at a cautious distance from his cousin, looking at him, not from the side, but his head tilted almost horizontally, like a fly. Manú couldn't face this for long. He flung himself on the mattress and addressed the ceiling.

"There was a party recently to celebrate some Saint Ethans' anniversary. I checked: they didn't invite you. You know better than I do what sons of bitches they can be when they want to. I've no idea why I turned up: guess it was to get out of this mausoleum. The thing is, this guy made me an offer.... I bet you don't remember the crap you used to write for the college mag. You know, my ten different ways of wanking off and the manifesto against yogurt in plastic containers. We laughed ourselves shitless doing them, remember?"

Manú twisted his head but only succeeded in seeing his cousin's deadpan nape.

"No matter, I'll dredge them up so you can see them. The thing is, this guy read them and invited me to write for his magazine. There's a stack of money in...."

"What's it called?"

Manú looked at his cousin again. "Data. Know it?"

Iván's head said yes. Manú raised himself on one elbow and asked whether he also knew Leo Ferradás. Knew him too.

"He offered me the job. And organised the party. An old Ethanian. Sort of tycoon, always doing crazy things, like that party. So. Wants me to write every month. Three hundred lines. Seem a lot?"

Iván said nothing. Or didn't know what to say. Manú breathed in deeply, closed his eyes and began.

"As I see it, it can't be that hard. We already did it once. And, if the guy liked that, more than likely he'll like whatever we do now. What does he want of us? Our view of things, or at least our opinion on certain events, people. Great. I go where I've got to go, see who I have to see, ask the right questions, trust my radar to catch the details. You know I'm good at that: people end up confessing the most bizarre things to me. Then I'll pass them on to you and you'll write them down. Dead easy. Think of it as an occupational version of the Pujol Treatment: the two of us together make a much more effective whole than either one individually. See? And as we convalesce, we'll be doing just about the only thing we can do that doesn't hurt where it hurts. Isn't that perfect?"

Iván wore his favourite nothing expression, the one Manú found so exasperating.

"Hang on, I haven't finished yet. I'm due to turn up on Monday, but the first few days will be all red tape, I bet. Those magazines are into planning ahead, so they'll have the next issue ready by now. Which means we have time.... No. I have a better idea. Most of the new issue is on this party I was telling you about. Leo Ferradás is that kind of guy. What's the word, trend-setter? Whatever. I've been checking him out. And since I was at the party, since I stayed until the end...."

"Remember Galo?" asked Iván, without looking at Manú. "How could I not remember our grandfather?"

"Remember how he used to tell us we didn't add up to a whole?" Manú remained quietly thoughtful; he did a serious rummage
through his childhood's dusty attic but was unable to come up with anything remotely like that phrase.

"You don't remember."

"Remind me, then," said Manú with some impatience.

"When we sat at the piano, you on flats, me on sharps and he made us play what he'd just done two-handed."

Manú tensed his lips, not entirely aware of why he didn't want his cousin to see him smiling. Then he said:

"Another good reason: prove to the old thing, wherever he may be, that we can do it."

Iván looked at Manú again, but merely said: "I'm a bit hungry."

Despite the non-response to his appeal to greatness, Manú discovered he, too, was ravenous. And it was good to be ravenous, good for them both to be feeling the same thing. Out of the bedroom's dimness he thought he saw a first glimmering signal of this partnership working. And from the black depths of his karma, he felt in that hunger the first signs of a cure produced by the Pujol Treatment on its first two patients.

"I guess we deserve a good pizza before getting down to work," he said. "Don't worry. No need to go out. We'll order it over the phone. A good argument in favour of the phone, in spite of everything. Pizza delivery."

And when he looked at Iván, unexpectedly, his cousin was smiling.
For a tenth of a second, at least.

3.
WHAT IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN
HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

Most of Data's staff were installed in a labyrinth of partitioning barely a metre and a half high. Even my office was there. All the same, Bahiana and Ferradás had placed Manú at the far end, either wishing to isolate him from endemic vices or regarding him as on trial, a bird of passage amid the brisk hyperactivity of the magazine.

The only real office on the whole floor was a bunker with black lacquer double doors, real walls, ceiling-high (no septa for dwarves as elsewhere) and no evidence of secretarial sanctuary guards. One of the doors was ajar. Manú entered without knocking first.

The big windows facing the street were smoked glass and soundproofed. The huge carpeted room must have seemed to him, as it did to all who first entered it, an island of silence and deep-sea lighting. I don't know whether Manú spotted us and anyway I don't believe he remembered me. Ferradás, from one of the sofas, called his attention with a silent wave of his orthopaedic hand, but Manú looked like an animal newly placed on a patch of zoo jungle, while we watched from outside. When at last he reacted and came to join us, Manú made no attempt to avoid looking at the prosthesis jutting from the sleeve of Ferradás' jacket and lying inert on his crossed legs, like a real hand at rest. The coffee table between the sofas held a chaotic heap of books, magazines and newspapers. At the top of the pile, by Ferradás' shoe, Manú recognised certain typewritten pages.

"An interesting version of our little party," said Leo. "A shade astigmatic, but I do reckon a personal angle is important. Do you really believe they liked there being no women? It would have ruined that quote, marvelous mood of testicular bonding, end quote. A shade overripe for the magazine, but witty. And speaking of women: you fooled me the other night. Prince Consort, balls. How long is it since you left la Haeff?"

Manú gave a weary smile and closed his eyes, but Ferradás allowed no time for a reply.

"No matter," he was saying. "I'm sorry. And may I say it could have been worse, from what I know of her and of the people around her. But that's none of my business."

I was beginning to see why Leo had wanted me there and had asked me, a short time before Manú's arrival, whether Consuelo was back in Buenos Aires yet or still in the air. And I wondered how my sister would have reacted had she seen Manú's closed eyes: that ivory mask with two violet pits in the only area capable of transmitting vitality.

"Coffee? I won't either. So, let's get on with it, shall we? As you well know," said Leo, rotating his preposterous anatomy towards Manú, "in this country we don't only have players and spectators. We have prompters too. You know, the eternal public optimists and pessimists who feel a constant need to be heard, due to verbal incontinence, narcissism, or genuine conviction. The pessimists argue that progress is a set of 3D glasses in a world without cinemas; that hope has become a masochistic exercise, like trekking-tours. And that the common good boils down to," here Ferradás began counting on the fingers of his good hand: "a) the dubious charms of public TV, b) the no smoking in public places policy, c) the refinancings of the foreign debt, and d) AIDS as the final triumph of discrimination."

Manú appeared to await the optimistic blueprint as though curious to learn to which lot he belonged.

"The optimists, on the other hand," Ferradás continued, "say it's not so bad, and to prove it cite the Iron Curtain's beneficent collapse, the advance of ecology, the limitless potential of cybernetics, and the fading social appeal of cocaine and other drugs. But to the mortification of both, our country is the habitat of the standard average Argentine. And not only does the standard average Argentine have the

rudimentary wisdom not to give the mildest fuck about all that verbal diarrhoea; he is not even aware he doesn't."

Manú barely smiled, as though at last identifying himself with one of the categories.

"That is Data's readership, whether we like it or not. Everything the magazine publishes must be tailored to them. If you want to preach, do so in church."

Ferradás paused, and when he spoke again his last remarks seemed light-years away.

"Have you talked to an eleven-year-old lately? It's remarkable how the world looks from that angle. Not us at eleven; or even Ezequiel here; but the mentality of a kid of that age now: the way adult ambition cohabits with childish desire, the way money is involved in nearly all his games. Blame it on television, or the way the world keeps speeding up, or the lack of space and mystery between today's parents and their children. Doesn't matter. I think we're all eleven most of the time: Ezequiel, you, me..."

What can I say about the next fifteen minutes? That Ferradás had a devilish way of making any project, however harebrained, sound easy? That Manú faced life with a comparable lack of awareness? That Ferradás wanted to extract from Manú that near-blind faith and that almost perfect osmotic capacity to absorb this world's many worlds, which Data of late had been failing to reflect as it had in its best moments? That Manú did not find, in Leo's pyrotechnic monologue, anything he felt particularly incapable of doing, or of later transmitting to Iván?

Or, more likely, that neither was capable of or cared about knowing the other's opinion of him: Ferradás' demiurge assurance to present as a revelation every late-night whim; Manú's kamikaze faith in life's ebb and flow?

When Ferradás had finished his explanation he stretched his animal bulk against the back of the sofa.

"I'm a guy whose hunches are rarely mistaken, Pujol. You appear to be the same. Am I right?"

Manú displayed his favourite almost-but-not-quite-a-Buddhist expression. When he rose to go, and I did likewise, Ferradás lightly indicated with his shoe the typewritten pages on the top of the table pile.

"One last thing: I prefer relaxed prose and predictability in the behaviour of those who work here. Put your personal stamp into your writing, like that departure of yours from the Ko San Tei. The next destructive outburst will be deducted from your salary. Understand?"

It has to be said in Manú's favour that he uttered no reproach to me, not even an accusatory glance on hearing Leo's final words. He only said:

"Crystal clear."

For a moment I thought he had said that to avoid going speechless, as we all did sooner or later in the presence of Ferradás. I was wrong.

"By the way," he added, "I was wondering whether I might have an advance on my salary. There are some expenses which.... Some expenses," he added, with a shrug.

Ferradás gazed at him in silence for a good while and Manú held his gaze: as though both knew it was irrelevant what kind of expenses were involved.

"I'll advise Accounts," Ferradás said at last. "Then Ezequiel can show you the way."

That was all. Leo answered his cordless phone and waved his orthopaedic hand, as if that were all that was required to make us vanish from his presence, and Manú looked to me to escort him out of the boss' office.

How was it Ferradás had described what he wanted from Manú the night of the party: The world according to Pujol? The Pujol bit got lost. What Manú now had to do was find a kid of eleven who was completely average: middle class, standard ordinary family, not too brilliant or too stupid, all the common denominators. He could be from Buenos Aires or any big provincial city, but he had to be absolutely average and be twenty-one on January 1st, 2000. Manú was to stick with him day and night for all the time it took, at home, at school, at the club, in church, in the street, at the video arcade, until the kid had told him everything he thought: about his family, friends and teachers, about money,

television, the future, God, the planet and his older or younger brother or sister. Manú was to treat the kid like a grownup without him noticing, record every response, and so glean a picture of the average 21st century Argentine, ten years ahead of the other magazines.

On leaving Ferradás we headed together for the offices. In the harsh midday light streaming through the windows, the dark rings around Manú's fully open eyes were a bit less intimidating.

Perhaps that was the moment to do one of the things Ferradás always did to adjust what he called "fate's boring plans." Perhaps it was time to ask Manú who he planned to lunch with and drag him with me to the restaurant where I was due to meet Consuelo and introduce them. But what can a twenty-year old virgin do for or say to someone newly separated? What can he contribute if he doesn't even understand in the first place why people marry, let alone drift apart?

It was easier to introduce him to those we happened to run into. First we stopped at Accounts where they said Manú's cheque would be ready the next day. Then we toured the editorial offices. Asked how he felt about his first day at work, Manú said he was beginning to find the magazine's atmosphere stimulating (by now there were more people at their desks, but as he spoke his trademark expression of mildly dazed languor was locked on to a waste paper basket, where he had deposited the typewritten pages returned by Ferradás).

He didn't appear too concerned about his task for the next issue. He didn't even react when I told him the deadline. He said, though, that he preferred to write at home and to appear, say, twice a week to report on progress. By now we were in my cubicle, I seated on my chair, he on the ventilating system with his back to the window, looking as though he'd just dropped in, with nothing better to do than smoke his cigarette and watch the comings and goings of the staff.

At one thirty-five I asked him whether he wasn't having lunch. "I thought you'd never ask," he said, jumping up like a spring. As we emerged from the lift and headed for the street I began to feel a huge mistake was about to happen: I pictured an impatient Consuelo in the restaurant looking at her watch, her impatience becoming edginess when I reached the table with Manú at my side. In my mind, by the time we arrived at the restaurant entrance, Consuelo's edginess had escalated to icy anger and I hardly noticed when Manú patted me on the back and strolled coolly on.

The next afternoon Manú learned he would be required to travel to Rosario to record for posterity the weltanschauung of Marcelo Omar Martínez, Argentine national, born 1979 in Santa Fe Province, only son of Raúl Ernesto ditto and María Eva Luchessi, sister Nora Patricia five years older. Production had made all the arrangements, the Martínez family was apparently delighted to welcome Manú at their home near Parque Independencia for all the time required. A seat on the shuttle was booked for that evening, money for expenses waited at Accounts and the photographer would follow a couple of days after, to shoot the pictures for the piece.

Having pocketed the plane ticket and the advance, Manú headed for his office to have a smoke while deciding whether to tell Iván he'd be out of town for a few days or stay put until the last moment and just tiptoe for his bag while his cousin slept. To his surprise, he found his cubicle already occupied.

"No one bothers to take the scenic route here. One good reason for envying this desk: the one and only peaceful oasis in the office," said the stranger. She sat on his chair, one bare foot on it, chin on exposed knee emerging from jeans, fingers twisting a curl of her red hair.

Rather than an oasis of peace Manú continued to see it as an ordinary back room, with its two disparate chairs, its Formica desktop all burns and scratches, its 1989 calendar with Pei's Louvre pyramid yellowing on the wall, and a parched vine in a huge pot under the window. The only nineties manifestation was the new computer on the desk. And her, of course. In her ragged jeans, the three undone buttons of her shirt exposing a flat chest, and that smile, a product no doubt of the peace the walls exuded, its beatific effect barely attenuated by the shock of a nose, huge beyond redemption.

Manú helped himself to the empty chair and picked up a magazine on the desk between them.

"I brought you the latest issue. Hot off the press," she said.

And while he flipped the pages, killing time as though in a dentist's waiting room, she asked him his birth date.

"Gemini, I could have sworn it," and as though reading off the ceiling, she began to recite: "Mars in the Eighth House. What we feel is about to happen has already happened. The world turns and we turn with it. Something enters us, something leaves us. These are the symptoms: passion, as though the air between lung and nostril were tiny particles of burning ice, as though we feared inhaling alien newness and exhaling our own selves. May health be neither the slave of love nor the mistress of work. Those are the watchwords."

Manú looked up awestruck, no longer by the nose but by all of her. She had voiced an almost perfect transcript of the words relating to Gemini in Data's astrology column.

"What am I supposed to do now," he asked. "Check the other magazines at the end of the month, compare them with your column and see who got closest?"

"Why?"

That was a good one; he could think of no answer. Instead he looked again at the column's title: Tomorrow Today. And its byline.

"So you are Berenice."

"Bahiana," she said. "I sign it Berenice, but everyone here calls me Bahiana."

Manú wondered how tall she was. Probably as tall as he, and with a better bone structure, despite being so thin.

"Don't get me wrong, but I always imagined it was mandatory for pythonesses to be old, fat, and overdressed."

"And I always thought journalists starting a new job spent more hours in the office. At least for the first few days," she said in her baritone voice. "Barring an emergency."

Manú took time to answer.

"Not even if I'd known my horoscope could I have guessed what happened a few days ago."

"Oh yeah?" Bahiana said.

"Though I dare say those attentive to astrological forecasts come to miss that kind of surprise, wouldn't you say?"

Maybe it was her pensively raised eyebrows, or her dilated outsize nostrils, but either was enough for Manú to realize of a sudden that he had confided much more than he had imagined. Need he remind himself of a certain recent event? Was he supposed to enter that closed room of his recent past called Myriam, so as to put it behind him once and for all, or keep ignoring it as best he could? Like for a couple of years? Enough. Too early to face that kind of dilemma. Especially in that light. Especially facing someone like this.

"Depends," Bahiana said. "The stars are less eloquent about natural-born survivors."

Manú twisted the Tibetan ring on his finger. He couldn't decide whether to be offended by her remark. But he was certain he'd pirate that phrase of hers. Absolutely.

When he asked her, a few seconds later, whether she really was from Brazilian Bahia, she removed the lock of hair brushing her lips (as though dispensing with the chit-chat, ready at last to explain her presence there) and Manú discovered the office phone worked. It was Bahiana who lifted the brand-new receiver. "I'm on my way," she said and hung up. In the same movement she stretched her hand leftwards, her long, bony fingers grazing the computer screen. Manú saw a tiny crescent moon in the upper corner and resigned himself to learning its magical protective powers.

Bahiana spoke in Portuguese. What Manú managed to understand was:

"Always use floppies. Never leave anything good on the hard drive. I mean, if you plan to reveal any of the brilliance you are alleged to possess. Good ideas are in shorter supply here than generosity and decency." Vacating his future chair and moving across to his side as she left, she added: "Welcome aboard, handsome."

So it had been a kind of secret rite: the magazine's witch delivering an introductory hazing cum warning about office pitfalls. Manú wondered whether he'd just appropriated a guardian gargoyle, or whatever those androgynous astral creatures were called. And for the umpteenth time in his life he

avoided asking himself why so wide a variety of people found him so fucking worthy of confidence and protection. He avoided asking it because the Iván business was still pending. And at the back of his mind, almost unbidden, an idea had begun to take shape. Then, once more, he sensed the emanation of Bahiana, her husky voice whispering behind him, against his neck:

"By the way, I adored that word, pythoness." "I could have sworn it," said Manú, resigned.

The laughter behind him had a two-packs-of-black-tobacco-a-day vibrato and remained airborne long enough for Bahiana to return to the empty chair, his one supposedly.

That Bahiana should reappear just then; that she should park herself facing him; that she should answer his involuntary sigh by saying her day hadn't been all that wonderful either, all this was taken by Manú as yet another of the lucky breaks governing his life. Little thought was required for him to know what to do next. It dawned on him a second before or a second after Bahiana made her reappearance.

First he opened her hand, parsimoniously, genuinely surprised at her ticklishness, while his ballpoint jotted down his phone number at the flat. Manú could get away with that sort of thing. And say the kind of thing he said, after writing his cousin's name under the phone number on Bahiana's hand: that he had someone living at home, a guy called Iván, rather mystical and a bit unhinged, who was emerging from a contemplative phase yet unwilling to venture outdoors until he had got over it completely.

Something in the way Bahiana raised her eyebrows made Manú add that it was nothing serious. Not the sort of thing one could tell just anyone, but he had the feeling she would understand. Especially the cabalistic reasons for not mentioning this confinement to Iván, should they meet.

Bahiana raised her eyebrows again. Manú mimicked her until she laughed and then announced the magazine was sending him to Rosario that night. And what difference could there be between asking someone, someone like her, to drop in once a day to water the plants or ensure the harmless hermit was supplied with food and videos?

"Oh. An astral brother," Bahiana said. Manú unthinkingly

assented:

"Right, something like that." And continued: "Won't be long.
Three days, four at the most. And he takes quite good care of himself. The fridge is full. The video store delivers and the movies he likes are all old; no-one ever wants them."

"Didn't you say he was rather mystical?"

For a tenth of a second Mann felt nonplused:

"It's kind of offbeat, this mysticism of his. He doesn't answer the phone, for example. But he sometimes listens to the recorded messages. He reads. But always the same books. He drinks ginger ale. But flat, at room temperature, never out of the fridge. If I showed him your column in the magazine he'd say it isn't practical. As a compliment. He's not exactly nice. But the world hasn't been particularly nice to him. That's what he's trying to do, I guess: make his connection with the world more bearable. That's where we come in. Or you, now that I have to go to Rosario. The only thing you are supposed to do is phone him up..."

"No use phoning him if he won't answer."

"...say who you are and leave your number. Tell him you're Bahiana. If he needs something, when you phone back he'll answer. That's about it. Is it too much to ask, to phone him once a day?"

"Just that?" "Just that."

Before she delivered her answer the office door opened and gave way to someone who unabashedly ignored Manú, greeted Bahiana with an aerial three-fingered piano riff, and without the least urge to justify her abrupt entry, announced: "I'm here." Bahiana extended her arm and with the new arrival's hand in hers, theatrically informed Manú:

"Talking of astral brothers, or sisters. You're not the only one with links like that." And looking at her friend: "Didn't you say ten sharp in the restaurant?"

"Yeah, but I parked the car in the basement and thought I'd come up and check whether you were going to stand me up."

"Have I ever done that?" Bahiana said.

"I know. But anyway," said the newly arrived one, applying gentle pressure to her friend's hand, then releasing it to examine her watch. "Damn, eight thirty. I'm late."

"And we all know how much our star politician hates to be kept waiting. In a restaurant or otherwise. Even by his favourite daughter," said Bahiana.

"Ten sharp, then. Promise?"

Manú had ignored the new arrival's presence, waiting for Bahiana's answer as though they were still alone. When Bahiana noticed this, however, she first nodded towards her friend, saying: "Promise." Then she rotated to point her nose at Manú and added, as though part of the same conversation: "All right, all right, I'll call him," while rising to walk her friend out.

"No introduction to this astral sister of yours?" said Manú, slouching against the back of his chair.

Neither of the others knew how to take that unaffected, empty smile. Because apart from Manú, any other male between the ages of eleven and eighty-five would have instantly associated Bahiana's friend with the giant reproduction of Data's anniversary cover spread across an entire wall of the magazine's front entrance, and felt the advance of an irrepressible erotic longing at the mere sight of her. That naked female figure, gilded and against a gilt background. That face whose perfect features had lent their attraction to the most unlikely products in all manner of advertising photographs. That vain, universally irresistible creature, who was an astral sister to Bahiana, a more-than-terrestrial sister to Consuelo and Ezequiel, and Valentina Schiaffino Ferradás to everyone else.