

2018

Un Estudio de la Ética y los Métodos de Traducción, con una Traducción de *Instrucciones para Salvar el Mundo* por Rosa Montero

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Un estudio de la ética y los métodos de traducción, con una traducción de *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* por Rosa Montero

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A Thesis Submitted to Fulfill the Requirements of the Honors Program at Assumption College

December 2017

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Introducción

Considere este escenario: se camina a una biblioteca local, se escoge un libro y se sienta en una silla, lista para leer. En la parte inferior de la portada del libro, se da cuenta que hay un subtítulo muy pequeño que dice *Traducido por:*, y es seguida por un nombre que no es el del autor. Novelas, libros de textos, menús y transcripciones de discursos son textos que están traducidos regularmente en nuestra cultura de hoy, pero muchas personas dan esto por hecho. La traducción amplía e interconecta culturas, lo que les permite a los individuos experimentar ideas y pensamientos de otros países y culturas a los que de otro modo no estarían expuestos.

De hecho, ¿que exactamente es la traducción? Es el proceso de tomar un texto en la lengua original (LO) y transformarlo en la lengua término (LT) (Vásquez-Ayora 17). Es diferente de la interpretación, aunque a menudo se confundan las dos. La interpretación se enfoca solamente en la lengua oral mientras la traducción está basada en textos escritos como la literatura, la poesía, los artículos, los ensayos y los cuentos cortos. Una traductora puede transformar el texto de origen de muchas maneras diferentes: puede enfocarse solamente en una traducción literal; puede enfocarse en una traducción libre; o puede encontrar un medio entre las dos (Albir 242). La traducción libre es cuando la traductora tiene en cuenta la cultura de la LO y la cultura de la LT, por encontrar modismos equivalentes culturales en la LT, o que explica, por notas a pie de la página o por otro modo de explicación dentro del texto, cualquier referencia a la cultura, la ubicación o la historia en el texto original (TO) que los lectores de la LT no entenderán. Históricamente, la traductora ha preferido la opción literal, eligiendo quedarse lo más invisible posible dentro del texto traducido (TT) en un intento de preservar el tono, el poder y la maestría del autor. La traductora intenta mantener la belleza de la elección de las palabras

presentes en el ST, porque el autor elige todas sus palabras deliberadamente; el pensamiento es que los traductores deben hacer lo mismo.

Se ha producido un debate durante años sobre la controversia del rol de los traductores y sobre si deben o no deben ser visibles en el TT. La traducción ha empezado a evolucionar a medida que la globalización se ha vuelto más prominente y más y más traductores están decidiendo que necesitan enfocarse en ambos la traducción literal y libre para hacer que la literatura sea más accesible a una población de individuos más grande y para exponerla a la lengua del texto. Sin embargo, no existe un consenso en este debate. Los códigos éticos en diferentes organizaciones de traducción tienen cláusulas que dicen que todos los traductores deben crear un TT con un mensaje equivalente al del TO y esto debe ser imparcial, sin permitir que ninguna opinión política ni personal sea visible en el TT que no esté presente en el TO. Por otro lado, hay algunas personas que dicen que es imposible traducir un texto exactamente, sin ningún cambio (van Wyke 112-113); que una persona siempre va a transformarlo debido a las elecciones de la traductora — el tiempo verbal, el género de la voz narrativa o poética, o la incorporación de la cultura de la LT en el TT. Todas estas elecciones causan una traducción que no es equivalente.

Según Hans-Georg Gadamer, un filósofo alemán nacido en 1900, “all understanding has a practical orientation in the sense of being determined by our contemporary situation” (Malpas). Gadamer tenía la idea que los eventos contemporáneos no eran lo único que podría afectar el estilo de traducción; los eventos históricos podrían tener un efecto también. Por ejemplo, una traductora que vive en Japón va a tener experiencias muy diferentes que las de una traductora que vive en los Estados Unidos. Nuestras lenguas “[are] not merely some instrument by means of

which we are able to engage with the world, but as [sic] instead the very means for such engagement” (Malpas). La lengua y la cultura de una persona afectan cómo interactúa una persona con el mundo y, por eso, afectan como traduce un texto. Sin embargo, todavía hay esta idea de los traductores que el propósito del TT debe ser igual como el del TO. Eso significa que la fuerza del texto debe ser igual en ambos el TO y el TT. La traductora debe centrarse en mantener el tono y la voz particular de la autora, que no se debe confundir con la voz del narrador.

En este proyecto, yo voy a enfocar en los métodos y la ética de traducción, así como aplicarlos prácticamente por traducir *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008), una novela escrita por Rosa Montero, una escritora contemporánea española. Ella nació en 1951 en Madrid, España, durante la dictadura de Francisco Franco. Empezó a trabajar como periodista en 1970 y en 1977 empezó a trabajar en *El País*, un periódico muy conocido. *El País* tenía una responsabilidad muy importante durante ese tiempo después de la muerte de Franco y al comienzo de la democracia. Fue “uno de los medios desde los que se procuró acercar España a Europa y el mundo, después de cuarenta años de aislamiento” (Pedrós-Gascón 54-55). Desde 1977 hasta hoy en día, Montero escribe artículos sobre los eventos actuales (“Rosa Montero”). En 1980, ella tomó una posición como directora del *Suplemento dominical* por un año (Pedrós-Gascón 55). Montero era parte del movimiento progresivo durante y después del final de la dictadura y sabía que sus palabras tenían -- y tienen -- un impacto fuerte, especialmente porque ella era una mujer en un mundo de hombres. Al final de la dictadura y al comienzo de la democracia, hubo un florecimiento de un tipo de periodismo que se llama periodismo de urgencia. Con este tipo de escritura, los periodistas escribían con el intento de “mostrar... la

alienación del individuo dentro de la sociedad capitalista” (54). Montero seguía este tipo de escritura, intentando enseñar a los lectores sobre los conceptos abstractos pero importantes y urgentes, como el “vivir en la libertad” o la lucha por la igualdad, lo que era especialmente importante durante la transición a la democracia después de la muerte de Franco (54). Había algunos temas que eran muy pronunciados en la escritura de Montero durante ese tiempo: el aprendizaje de la democracia, la libertad y la responsabilidad social del intelectual y del ciudadano (58). Después del final de la dictadura, Montero empezó a escribir novelas y algunas de estas han ganado muchos premios, como la Medalla de Oro del Círculo de Bellas Artes de Valencia en 2000, el Premio Don Luis a la Excelencia literaria, La Rioja en 2014 y, más reciente, el Premio Nacional de las letras en 2017 . La mayoría de sus obras son ficticias, pero algunas son biográficas, libros para niños, entrevistas o artículos (“Rosa Montero -- Spanish Journalist”).

Montero escribe sobre lo que son parte de la condición humana como “poder y género, planteamientos éticos, la exploración de la identidad y la otredad, la referencialidad narrativa y la metaficción autobiográfica” (Cibreiro 50). Muchas personas ven una perspectiva feminista en sus trabajos, también. Sin embargo, Montero dice que esto no es su propósito -- ella simplemente está escribiendo desde su perspectiva de vida, lo que está afectado por su género y por el sexismo que existe todavía. Ella dice que cree “en [su] conciencia de mujer más que nada; el hecho de escribir como mujer ha tenido un impacto enorme” (52). Estos temas e ideas están prevalentes en todos sus trabajos, incluso en *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*.

Los temas presentes en este texto hacen a la novela relevante para una audiencia global; por ejemplo, Montero habla sobre el feminismo y el calentamiento global, que son problemas que están discutidos en una gran mayoría de países a través del mundo hoy en día. Teniendo en

cuenta el aspecto cultural, fue interesante traducir este texto porque había muchas referencias culturales que tenía que considerar para hacer el texto completamente accesible a todos los que lo leyeran, incluso pero no limitado a modismos y expresiones culturales, además de jerga que no tiene una traducción al inglés. También tenía que enfocarme en asegurar que el tono y el estilo particular de la escritura de Montero todavía fueran prominentes en la traducción.

Sin traducciones, nuestro mundo no estaría tan conectado. Las únicas personas que podrían experimentar las ideas de otros países serían las personas que dedicaron años al estudio de una lengua para leer esos textos específicos. Habría menos intercambio de ideas y el mundo sería mucho más segregado y aislado debido a eso. La traducción ayuda a compartir experiencias culturales con una población que puede ser completamente diferente, con ideas o conceptos diferentes que nunca se experimentan simplemente debido a una falta de lengua. Lo maravilloso de un texto traducido es que ofrece acceso intelectual a muchos lugares, personas, culturas, autores y tiempos diferentes a través de palabras en una página. Pero también, siempre se pierde algo, porque no es posible tener una traducción exacta debido a la cultura que está enraizada en las palabras y las expresiones. Mi proyecto trata de iluminar y añadir a las tradiciones y los métodos de traducción a través de traducir parte de una novela de Montero que hasta ahora nunca ha sido traducida al inglés.

Ética, normas y métodos de traducción:

Revisión de la literatura

I. Introducción

Como dijo Friedrich Schleiermacher, “every human being is... the power of the language he speaks” (46). Los autores crean un mundo completamente nuevo para los lectores, pero los traductores hacen que este mundo sea accesible a todos. La lengua les da a los humanos el poder de comunicar ideas a través de culturas, pero la traducción permite que estas ideas sean entendidas. La traducción, que ha existido desde la división de sólo una lengua en el mundo en muchas, ha cambiado constantemente con los tiempos. Este campo de estudio está vivo; los métodos de traducción se refinan constantemente a medida que se realizan más investigaciones centradas en la traducción. Aunque está presente en muchas culturas hoy, la traducción es la fuente de mucha controversia con respecto a las metodologías y normas diferentes que muchos traductores tienen.

II. La ética y las normas de traducción

A. *La ética y las normas*

En el curso de la historia de la traducción, ha habido muchos debates con respecto a la visibilidad de una traductora en el TT. ¿Debe incluir la traductora sus propias perspectivas a través de sus elecciones lingüísticas? ¿O simplemente debe traducir el texto literalmente, dejando que los lectores busquen la información que no entiendan?

En el pasado, se había esperado que los traductores usaran el método de traducción literal. Ben van Wyke cita traductores tan temprano como 20 A.C., quienes expresan que una traductora no debe añadir ni quitar ninguna cosa del TO, en cambio debe ser invisible, haciendo

igual la traducción con las palabras originales del autor en el TT. Esta perspectiva ha continuado hasta la historia reciente. Dentro de esta perspectiva, los traductores reconocen y aceptan que los textos que están traduciendo no son sus propias obras, sino que pertenecen a los autores originales (111). En 1697, el traductor John Dryden describió su campo de trabajo en las palabras siguientes: “he who invents is a master of his thoughts and words ... slave we [translators] are, and [we] labour on another man’s plantation” (van Wyke 111). Aunque esta metáfora es anticuada, todavía es verdad — los traductores trabajan para hacer un texto accesible a poblaciones diferentes, pero el autor es la persona a quien los lectores recuerdan. Este concepto de invisibilidad forma parte de diferentes códigos de ética. El Código de Práctica Profesional de la *Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs* se afirma que en sus trabajos los traductores deben ser imparciales y no deben imponer sus opiniones, sean políticas o personales (van Wyke 112). Se espera que los traductores traduzcan las obras literalmente y que los lectores investiguen lo que no entiendan.

Pero, se ha desafiado este método de traducción en los años recientes. Joyce Tolliver dice en su artículo que las traducciones nunca pueden ser exactamente lo mismo que los originales debido a las desigualdades entre los componentes lexicales de una lengua y otra, tanto como las diferencias entre las culturas (33). Sin embargo, la influencia más grande que tiene una traductora es sus elecciones con respecto a la ambigüedad del género, que puede ser presente en las lenguas que usan verbos sin sujetos pronominales. Esto ocurre frecuentemente en la lengua española, especialmente en el imperfecto; cuando se conjuga este tiempo con el final de -aba o -ía, puede significar cinco sujetos diferentes: primera persona, tercera persona femenina, tercera persona masculina, tercera persona impersonal, o segunda persona formal. En casos como estos,

una traductora debe tomar una decisión cuando está traduciendo a una lengua en que el sujeto necesita ser definitivo — como en inglés. Tolliver apoya su idea que las elecciones de género que hace una traductora puede hacer una diferencia en la literatura con dos traducciones diferentes de un poema escrito por Rosalía de Castro — una versión traducido por S. Griswold Morely en 1937 y la otra traducido por Anna-Maria Aldaz, Barbara Gantt y Anne Bromley en 1991 (35). En la primera traducción, se usa un pronombre masculino, mientras con la segunda se usa un pronombre femenino. La traducción de Morely simplemente refleja las normas de su tiempo, donde el masculino era aceptado como el género universal, mientras las traductoras hembras hacían una elección consciente de cambiar lo que estaba aceptado y decidieron usar un pronombre femenino en el texto (36). Sin embargo, ambas de estas traducciones cambian el significado de la obra original, que expresa a propósito la ambigüedad. Por eso, los estudiosos creen que una traductora no simplemente puede traducir literalmente, porque no siempre es posible en ciertos idiomas.

Aquellos textos que utilizan la comunicación no verbal para transmitir un mensaje frecuentemente plantean un problema para traductores porque no siempre pueden mantenerse invisibles en el TT. Según “Beyond Language Translation Theory: Translation and Nonverbal Communication” por Daniela Ene y Marian Panainte, una traductora debe hacer una elección consciente cuando está traduciendo estas comunicaciones no verbales porque no necesariamente hay gestos equivalentes en la LT. Por ejemplo, en la cultura japonesa, la comunicación no verbal es diferente que en la cultura inglesa. En Japón, se considera descortés mantener el contacto visual con alguien que está hablando, pero en la cultura inglesa se considera descortés evitarlo. Cuando se traduce esta comunicación no verbal en la literatura a la LT, no tiene el mismo

impacto. Es difícil capturar este sentido con las palabras porque se pierde el significado cultural. Ene y Panainte también citan el ejemplo de la falta de una traducción exacta por la palabra “gracias” en la cultura india porque ellos creen que una persona debe mostrar sus gracias en vez de decirlo — no hay una palabra para gracias en esta lengua (96). ¿Cómo se puede traducir algo que no tiene una traducción exacta? Según estos autores, una traductora necesita hacer una elección consciente sobre cómo va a traducir un gesto o una práctica que tiene especificidad cultural; al hacerlo, la traductora se hace visible en el texto. La visibilidad de la traductora está más y más aceptada en el campo académico de la traducción para hacer la literatura más accesible al mayor número de personas. Sin embargo, hay algunas desventajas a este método; Ene y Panainte dicen que si una traductora interpreta mal la información no verbal en la LT, esta información incorrecta se confundirá y desconcertará a los lectores (97). Una traducción inepta de la comunicación no verbal, para conformar a la cultura de la LT, también puede resultar en una pérdida de la distinción cultural; es decir, se pierde información que pertenece específicamente a la cultura de origen (98). Por eso, una traductora necesita investigar los dos objetivos antes de añadir su propio conocimiento sobre las culturas y hacerse visible en el texto.

Otro aspecto de este debate ético es el papel de las normas en los estudios de traducción. El artículo de Christina Schäffner titulado “Normas de traducción” se enfoca en la definición de las normas y sus roles en la traducción. Ella define una norma como “a socially shared notion of what is correct or adequate” (237) y expresa que frecuentemente los traductores internalizan estas nociones. Según Gideon Toury, un teórico de traducción, se puede dividir las normas en tres categorías siguientes:

1. Normas preliminares, que le pueden ayudar a la traductora a decidir su estrategia global para la traducción y la elección de los textos que serán traducidos,
2. Normas iniciales, que concierne la decisión de traducir según las normas que están prominentes en el TO o en la LT,
3. Normas operacionales, que controlan qué decisiones se toman durante la traducción y que se puede dividir en:
 - a. Normas matriciales, que refieren a la integridad de una traducción y si hubo omisiones o reestructuraciones grandes.
 - b. Normas lingüísticas textuales, que conciernen las elecciones estilísticas, sintácticas y léxicas hechas por una traductora y las elecciones de las materias textuales que se está traduciendo; por ejemplo, la traducción de un ensayo tendrá características diferentes que una novela (Schäffner 238).

El primer y el tercer conjunto de normas (las normas preliminares y las normas operacionales) son las que se relacionan más a la pregunta que está al principio de esta sección — ¿debe ser visible una traductora en el texto que traduce? Estas normas le ayuda a determinar sus estrategias para la traducción y si será visible en el texto, basado en sus normas personales e internalizadas, sus elecciones estilísticas, la cantidad del texto que será reestructurada o omitida y las normas de la traducción basadas en la investigación actual. Todas estas condiciones influyen la visibilidad de una traductora.

Lawrence Venuti, una figura prominente en el campo de estudios de traducción, discute lo que significa ser una traductora ética en su artículo “The Difference a Translator Makes: The Translator’s Unconscious.” Para Venuti las diferencias irreducibles entre lenguas y culturas

significan que una traducción literal nunca puede ser perfecta (216). La traducción simplemente magnifica esta diferencia, aunque la traductora no es consciente de eso. Por consiguiente, “the goal we should set for translation studies is rather the ultimately ethical one of developing methods of translation... practices that describe, explain, and take responsibility for the differences that translation inevitably makes” (216). Venuti está sugiriendo que la ética, en relación con la traducción, debe centrarse en encontrar la forma más apropiada de traducir un TO sin perder el poder de las palabras del autor, mientras se mantiene la integridad estructural de la obra y la cultura del texto original. Venuti también declara más tarde que aunque los códigos de ética por diferentes asociaciones profesionales de traducción dicen que una traductora no debe incluir sus propios prejuicios y/o opiniones políticas en un texto, esto es casi imposible porque ciertas elecciones de palabras añadirán prejuicios en el texto sin el conocimiento de la traductora (227). Él cita como ejemplo una traducción del poema “En ti la tierra” por Pablo Neruda, específicamente, la traducción de Donald D. Walsh en 1972 (224). Algunas de las líneas en la traducción evocan imágenes del poema patriótico “America the Beautiful,” como la línea “I can scarcely measure the sky’s most spacious eyes,” que suena como la línea “O beautiful for spacious skies” (224, 226). En una traducción más literal se traduciría la línea original de “los ojos más extensos del cielo” a “the most expansive eyes of the sky” (my trans; 224). Walsh involuntariamente está transformando un poema de un autor comunista chileno a un poema que refleja el amor para su propio país, los Estados Unidos (Venuti 227). Por eso, parece posible que una traducción pueda reflejar la parcialidad política de la traductora inconscientemente a través de selecciones simples de palabras. Esto es muy lejos de un código de ética, que generalmente

dice que no puede haber ninguna inserción de la traductora en el TT. Para Venuti, la traductora ha hecho una elección inconsciente, que no hace su traducción inmoral.

Como uno puede ver, la perspectiva con respecto a la presencia de una traductora en el TT ha cambiado a través de la historia del campo académico de los estudios de las traducciones. Aunque una vez se lo consideraba tabú insertar sus propias parcialidades e ideas a una traducción, teóricos recientes han declarado que es imposible tener una traducción que no incluya alguna indicación de preferencia, bien sea en las elecciones con respecto a cómo traducir señales no verbales, el género de verbos ambiguos en la LO u otra situación lingüística no paralela entre la LO y la LT. Como los estudios de traducción continúan evolucionando, también lo hará el debate sobre la visibilidad de los traductores dentro de un texto.

B. La anotación de la traductora

En la traducción, hay una estrategia muy disputada que se usa para definir y explicar las palabras que están impregnadas de cultura; se llama la anotación de la traductora. Algunos traductores están a favor del uso de la anotación porque creen que le permite al lector a entender más el TT, porque la anotación le provee el conocimiento cultural necesario. Otros traductores piensan que estas anotaciones no son éticas porque se alejan de la idea de la invisibilidad de la traductora. En sus opiniones, una anotación toma al lector fuera del texto. También, le causa a la traductora ser más visible en un texto porque añade sus propias palabras, distintos del texto con su explicación. Algunos estilistas consideran una “translation sprinkled with footnotes to be terrible in regards to appearance” (Ordudari). Por eso, debido a razones estilísticas, muchos traductores que utilizan la anotación minimizan el número de notas para mantener la apariencia

original del texto. Ioana Durdureanu está de acuerdo, diciendo que demasiadas anotaciones pueden ser consideradas inapropiadas en un texto porque perjudican el aspecto físico (58). Sin embargo, ella defiende el uso, diciendo que “they can explain for the target audience many of the source text contents...” porque la anotación realiza “at least two functions: to provide supplementary information and to call attention to the original’s discrepancies” (58). Aunque pueden ser desagradables a la vista, las anotaciones son útiles para ayudarle al lector a entender y comprender el texto.

María Carmen Toledano-Buendía añade a las dos funciones de la anotación que introdujo Durdureanu, nombrando dos tipos de anotaciones, las “explicativas” y las “discursivas”. Se consideran las anotaciones explicativas complementarias al TO y se usan con la intención de educar al lector sobre la cultura que está presente en el TO (157). Según Toledano-Buendía, estas anotaciones no agregan nada a lo que ya está presente en el texto; al contrario, la traductora las utiliza “to compensate for the information lost in the process of text transfer from source language and source communicative situation to the target text” (157). La traductora simplemente está tratando de llevarle al lector al TO con una interrupción mínima de la historia. Las anotaciones de este tipo simplemente están aclarando la información que puede no estar clara para el lector del TT, quien posiblemente tiene poco o ningún conocimiento de la cultura del TO (158). Las anotaciones explicativas, en breve, ayudan con la comprensión de lectura en un TT.

El otro tipo de anotación, la anotación discursiva, se enfoca más en los comentarios de la traductora (157). En ésta, la traductora se centra en la justificación de las acciones de los personajes o en las opiniones de la traductora. Esencialmente, la traductora está interfiriendo

explícitamente en el texto por dar su propia opinión, lo que puede crear prejuicios en el lector y cambiar su interpretación del texto. Sin embargo, a veces la traductora tiene una razón para usar este tipo de anotación: para evitar la censura del texto, si el tema está en contra de unas normas culturales en la sociedad de la LT (159). Toledano-Buendía da un ejemplo de una anotación en una traducción de *Tom Jones*, en que la traductora le pidió al lector suspender sus juicios en una sección particular del texto (159). Sin embargo, esto todavía crea distancia entre el lector y la historia, e interrumpe el flujo de la historia más que una anotación explicativa. Algunos traductores consideran esto lo más antitético porque produce mucha visibilidad de la traductora en el texto.

Cuando está utilizada, la anotación puede crear poca o mucha desviación del TO. Muchos académicos discrepan sobre el uso de la anotación y sobre cómo pueden utilizarlo mejor, sin causar una distancia entre el lector y el texto. Un lado dice que no es ético usar anotaciones porque esto rompe las normas de los códigos de las éticas, los que promueven la invisibilidad de la traductora. Pero otros creen que la educación del lector sobre la cultura del TO es necesaria para aumentar la comprensión del lector. Por eso, cada traductor necesita tomar una decisión personal con respecto al uso de la anotación en sus traducciones.

III. La equivalencia formal

Uno de los métodos de traducción que se puede usar para traducir el lenguaje figurativo y otros aspectos del TO es la equivalencia formal, que en el campo de los estudios de traducción se define como la que imita la forma de lo dicho en el SL (Pym 8). En otras palabras, la equivalencia formal es el método de traducción literal que fue popular más temprano en la historia de la traducción. Pym dice que este método funciona en algunos casos pero no en otros,

como con la traducción idiomática y metafórica, como se ha discutido anteriormente (8). Con la equivalencia formal, se intenta mantener en el TT el mismo valor del TO al nivel de la forma, con la meta de lograr el mismo número de palabras en el TT como en el TO (7-8). Los traductores que utilizan la equivalencia formal se esfuerzan a traducir de una manera más literal, concentrando solamente en las elecciones de palabras del autor del TO.

Alice Leal propone una definición de la equivalencia formal ligeramente diferente, describiéndola como “enabling target readers to slip into the shoes of source readers” por dejar el lenguaje del autor y no hacer ninguna alteración en la elección de palabras; por lo tanto, lleva al lector hacia el autor (41). Leal sugiere que la equivalencia formal era el método principal de la traducción hasta los finales de los años setenta (42). Antes de este período de tiempo, la equivalencia formal se usaba como un criterio para evaluar la calidad de una traducción tanto como un término para describir la relación entre el TO y el TT (40). Un TT que seguía las palabras originales del autor se consideraba una traducción buena. Sin embargo, el problema con respecto al lenguaje figurativo y al lenguaje cultural todavía estaba presente y un lector en el LT no siempre entendía el significado de las expresiones. Aún así, los traductores seguían las normas de sus tiempos y pensaban llevar al lector hacia el autor.

Friedrich Schleiermacher dice que la equivalencia funcional, o formal, le permite al lector en la LT “take pleasure unhindered in the beauty of a work”, pero que una consecuencia de este método es que un lector “is ever conscious of the difference between this language and his mother tongue” (51). Sin embargo, la equivalencia funcional preserva las elecciones de las palabras que escoge un autor, elecciones que se hicieron por una razón. La traducción literal

también reduce las posibles variaciones de traducción y así limita la parcialidad de la traductora o las opiniones personales que pueden insertarse en el texto (51).

Milton M. Azevedo está de acuerdo que, en casos específicos, la equivalencia formal es el método más útil de la traducción. Él introduce la idea de congruencia semántica, que “concerns the fit between the denotative meaning of a lexeme... in the source text and the corresponding lexeme in the target language” (113). La congruencia mide bien la equivalencia formal. Si el lexema en la LO concurre con el lexema de la LT, la equivalencia funcional es un método útil de traducción porque la traductora sabe que el producto final va a tener sentido. Azevedo también dice que cuando se sigue el método de equivalencia formal, se debe mantener en el TT el tono, las voces de ambos los personajes y el autor y el estilo individualizado del autor porque todo ello contribuye al énfasis dramático en el TO (119). La equivalencia formal es importante debido al hecho de que el autor mantiene prominencia en el TT. Su elección de palabras, su estructura de frases y sus ideas son las que le hacen el texto valer la pena leer y traducir. Sin estos elementos originales, no habría la necesidad de compartirlo con el mundo. Por eso, la equivalencia formal conserva al autor y sus ideas.

Andrea Schäpers dirigió un estudio en que observó estrategias de resolución de problemas que los estudiantes usaban cuando estaban traduciendo de su lengua nativa (el español) a su lengua secundaria (el alemán). Ella enfocó parte de su estudio en las estrategias de consecución que los estudiantes emplearon cuando encontraron un problema lexical durante el acto de traducción. Las estrategias de consecución intentan mantener la fraseología original en el TT lo más cercano como posible al TO (120). Ella encontró que la estrategia de consecución más común que los estudiantes usaron para hacer sentido de lo que estaba ocurriendo era la búsqueda

situacional, en la que el estudiante buscó una equivalencia literal en la LT que coincidió con la lengua original del texto mediante el uso de la exposición previa a vocabulario en ambas lenguas (126). La mayoría de los traductores amateurs, cuando no saben cómo traducir un pasaje específico, traducirán de una manera literal. Después de eso, evaluarán su traducción y decidirán si la traducción tiene sentido. Si no, lo revisarán. La equivalencia formal es la base a la cual la mayoría de los traductores reaccionan cuando no pueden traducir un pasaje específico o hacer sentido de lo que está ocurriendo en el texto, usan estrategias de búsqueda, su experiencia y conocimientos previos.

La equivalencia formal lleva al lector hacia el autor por un cambio mínimo del lenguaje del TO, de modo que el lector puede experimentar el texto como si estuviera leyéndolo en la LO. Pero, el enfoque de hoy ha desplazado este método basado en el lenguaje hacia un método más basado en la cultura.

IV. La equivalencia dinámica y el funcionalismo

Unos académicos arguyen contra la equivalencia formal y proponen otro método de traducción: la equivalencia dinámica, la que enfoca en el propósito de un texto en lugar de las palabras. Según Germain de Staël, “translating... does not mean picking up a compass and copying the dimensions of a building. It means filling a different instrument with the same breath of life” (282). Las dimensiones del edificio referido representan la equivalencia formal, mientras el instrumento diferente representa la equivalencia dinámica. El aliento de la vida es el espíritu o el propósito de la literatura traducida y esto debe ser preservado, porque es lo que hace único (281). Sin el espíritu y la cultura, la literatura sería plana.

Según Anthony Pym, se define la equivalencia dinámica como “activating the same or similar cultural function” que en el TO (8). Esto significa que la traductora reemplaza una palabra o una frase basado en la cultura con uno de la misma importancia en la LT. Él le da el ejemplo del viernes 13, que en la cultura americana es un día de mala suerte. Pero, una traductora que utiliza la equivalencia dinámica reemplazaría esta expresión con martes 13, porque se considera este día uno de mala suerte en la cultura española. La idea detrás de la equivalencia dinámica es que la traductora trae al autor hacia los lectores del TT por utilizar unas referencias culturales que ellos entenderán en vez de referencias a la cultura del TO (Leal 41). Schäpers sugiere que esta equivalencia dinámica ocurre con mayor frecuencia a través de la reducción (la eliminación de palabras y expresiones irrelevantes en el TT) y a través de la paráfrasis (126). Schäpers está de acuerdo con Negro Alousque, quien dice que la paráfrasis es la opción ideal para la traducción, en lugar de la reducción, porque cuando uno disminuye lo que parecen ser palabras o frases irrelevantes en el TT, se pierde una parte importante del TO (138). El autor ha incluido estas expresiones por una razón. Por eso, hay que avanzar hacia la paráfrasis de las referencias culturales cuando es necesario para que el lector del TT todavía pueda comprender lo que está pasando en el texto.

Una teoría popular con respecto a la equivalencia dinámica es la teoría del *skopos*, lo que sugiere que los traductores deban enfocarse en el propósito, o *skopos*, de la traducción y para qué se la utilizará (van Wyke 113). La equivalencia dinámica también puede denominarse el funcionalismo, o la idea que la función o el propósito de un texto es la característica más importante, que significa que la traductora puede reemplazar cualquier expresión cultural que no tendrá sentido al lector del TT, con tal de que el propósito y *skopos* de la literatura siga siendo el

mismo en el producto final (Schäffner 236). Van Wyke dice que una traducción nunca puede ser perfecta y, simplemente, va a transformar un texto (113). Por eso, cualquier forma de traducción, ya sea formal o dinámico, nunca puede replicar un texto exactamente.

Negro Alousque debate la equivalencia dinámica y su uso en su artículo titulado “Cultural Domains: Translation Problems.” Hay cinco subestrategias de que una traductora puede escoger cuando una palabra cultural que no traduce directamente a la LT.

1. Un equivalente cultural: la traductora intercambia la palabra cultural en la LO por una palabra cultural en la LT (137). Un ejemplo es la expresión “sweet sixteen” en inglés, que una traductora reemplazará con la palabra quinceañera en español.
2. Un equivalente funcional: la traductora reemplaza la palabra cultural en la LO con una palabra o expresión que es culturalmente imparcial. El ejemplo del artículo es la palabra *baccalauréat*, que la traductora traduce como “French secondary school leaving exam”.
3. Un equivalente descriptivo: Se describe la palabra cultural de la LO en el LT (137). Un ejemplo de eso es la palabra *mole* (SL), que la traductora describe como “a sauce made of hot chiles and chocolate” (LT).
4. Domesticación: la palabra cultural en la LO está adaptado a la LT; se conforma a la cultura de la LT en vez de la cultura de la LO (137). Un ejemplo de eso es la sustitución de los nombres de las autopistas; por ejemplo, I-495 en los Estados Unidos por el M-30 en España.
5. Exotización o extranjerización: se deja la palabra cultural en la LO para poner énfasis en la cultura del TO (137). Un ejemplo de eso será dejar la palabra *mole* en español para hacer hincapié en esta matriz cultural .

Hay mucho debate sobre la utilidad de estas estrategias y la medida en que cada uno debe ser utilizado. Menos traductores hoy en día optan por la equivalencia formal, pero todavía hay quienes lo usan. Negro Alousque dice que “literal translation may not fully render the meaning of the culture bound words because they do not have the same semantic range in the source and target languages” (138). En esencia, una traducción literal posiblemente no comunica el significado que el autor intenta transmitir con sus palabras. Alousque cita la palabra *pain* (pan, o “bread”), en francés. Esta palabra tiene una connotación cultural muy grande y representa el orgullo nacional. Es un símbolo cultural. La palabra “bread” en inglés no lleva tanto poder (138). En este caso, una traductora posiblemente utiliza uno de estas cinco estrategias que se menciona anteriormente para traducir la palabra mientras mantiene el énfasis o la idea del autor.

Se puede traducir una referencia cultural de muchas maneras diferentes. Se debate si una traductora debe conformar estas referencias a la cultura de la LO en la LT, o si debe dejarlos. A medida que los traductores han tendido a la equivalencia dinámica, la práctica de cambiar las referencias de la cultura de la LO en el TO a referencias de la cultura de la LT para tener sentido se ha vuelto más y más común.

A. La traducción del tono y registro

Se encuentran el tono y el registro en cada obra en el mundo; son lo que hacen dinámica la literatura y lo que les da personalidad a los personajes que existen dentro de estas historias. Se define el registro como “la variedad lingüística que se utiliza en función de la situación comunicativa en que se encuentra el hablante” (“Registro”). Por otro lado, el tono es “el carácter de la expresión y del estilo de una obra literaria” (“Tono”). El registro es lo que dice un personaje

y el tono es como lo dice. Estos son muy importantes para la literatura porque, sin estos, la obra sería confusa y no habría una distinción fuerte entre los personajes y sus vidas y experiencias diferentes.

Washbourne enfoca en la traducción del tono de la literatura en su texto *The Manual of Spanish-English Translation*. Según ella, “mistakes in tone are perceived emotionally and can lead to a visceral rejection of a text” (113). Por eso, una traductora necesita tener cuidado cuando está traduciendo porque no quiere perder la importancia de lo que dice el personaje. La traductora necesita pensar en el contexto y en lo que dice el personaje en la LO para usar el método más correcto de la traducción. Según Clifford E. Landers, el método que se usa depende de la frase y del contexto; a veces, la traducción literal es más apropiada, es decir, la equivalencia formal, y otras veces la traducción dinámica es más útil (61). Esto también es verdad para el registro. La traductora necesita considerar el texto entero y la caracterización del personaje antes de traducir.

Landers, en cambio, se enfoca en la importancia de ambos el tono y el registro, porque estos dos están conectados. Según él, “consciously and unconsciously, human beings equate words and expressions, grammatical constructions, even intonation patterns, with socially-defined non-linguistic characteristics such as class, status, and educational level” (59-60). Lo que está diciendo es que el registro y el tono están muy incrustados en el contexto de la obra de literatura. También, por eso, es muy importante encontrar un equilibrio entre el literalismo y la modernización de las frases para que la traducción tenga sentido en el periodo en que se está traduciendo (64). La traductora debe considerar el contexto del texto, el lugar en que estaba escrita y la historia del tiempo en que fue escrito para traducirlo correctamente. Una traductora

debe considerar también que siempre habrá veces en que el tono y el registro serán menos importantes que otros elementos, como la caracterización de los personajes, el propósito de la frase o el diálogo entre dos personas (61). Por eso, según Landers, una traductora no puede traducir correctamente sin conocer el contexto.

Azevedo está de acuerdo con Landers, diciendo que el desafío de una traductora es preservar el tono del diálogo, a la vez que la calidad vocal de cada personaje (125). Pero él tiene una perspectiva interesante sobre la traducción; dice que una traductora “[has] to think temporally as well as culturally” (113). Usualmente, una novela no siempre se traduce inmediatamente después de su publicación en la LO; sería posible que esta traducción ocurriera años o siglos después de la publicación. Por eso, otra vez, el contexto es muy importante y debe ser considerado por la traductora. Según Azevedo, la traducción no es estática y la traductora debe pensar en la equivalencia dinámica cuando está traduciendo el tono y el registro. El dice:

Because a translation should reflect the decisions speakers would make in the context depicted, the task of translating entails an on-going cross-cultural analysis of variables such as gender, age, social class, occupational status, relative standing of characters, and the context of communication. (108)

La traductora necesita pensar en todas estas cosas y sus relaciones con las costumbres de la cultura de la LT en el tiempo moderno para que la traducción tenga sentido.

El tono y el registro son muy integrados en la literatura y no hay un método singular para traducir estas dos características de una obra. Por eso, la traductora debe aprender sobre el contexto dentro de la obra literaria y también sobre lo que estaba pasando en el mundo cuando fue escrito. El método depende de estos contextos y de lo que el texto mismo dice.

B. La traducción de la lengua no normativa

En cada lengua y en cada cultura del mundo, hay palabras que se consideran “malas.” Estas palabras están etiquetadas como *jerga* o *maldiciones*, y causan algunos problemas para los traductores, porque a veces hay tabúes sobre esta lengua en algunas culturas. Esto le deja a una traductora con una decisión ética — ¿debe traducir la jerga o las maldiciones a la LT y arriesgar que no se lo publique o que se lo censure, o debe quitar la palabra y arriesgar la honradez de su traducción? Es un dilema moral para la traductora. Pero, en los años recientes ha habido un movimiento hacia la liberalización de este tipo de lengua; ahora, es más natural oírlo y usarlo (Fernández Dobao 222). Pero, todavía existen culturas que no aceptan esta lengua.

Ana María Fernández Dobao da el ejemplo de *Pulp Fiction* en su artículo; esta es una película que es reconocida por su jerga y maldiciones. Es un marcador estilístico para la película. Ella dice: “when the use of swearing or any other form of bad language is so frequent that it becomes a stylistic marker of the text, the equivalence of style becomes as important as the semantic equivalence” (223). Este estilo necesita ser presente en el TT. Pero, esto es muy complejo porque no siempre existen traducciones exactas de este tipo de lenguaje entre dos lenguas diferentes. Muchas palabras de jerga o maldiciones son expresivas y estos significados expresivos no siempre tienen una frase o expresión equivalente en otras lenguas (224). En este caso, la tarea de la traductora, dice Fernández Dobao, es buscar la expresión con la máxima equivalencia para conservar el sentido.

Según Kelly Washbourne, una traductora no puede ser aprensiva. En su opinión, “if an insult or a curse word is strong, it cannot be softened in translation to suit a translator’s sensitivities” (142). El TT debe tener la misma fuerza como el TO y los traductores están

obligados a dejar la lengua — es lo que escogía el autor; por eso, se añade al propósito o al *skopos* del texto. Washbourne sugiere que por eso el método más apropiado es la traducción libre y no literal (142). Con esto, la traductora puede encontrar algo casi equivalente que retrata el mismo sentido.

Las maldiciones siempre existen en la lengua y se usan mucho en la lengua oral y escrita. Hay muchas variaciones entre estas dos lenguas, según María Jesús Fernández. Algunas formas son universales, pero algunas son más específicas a una cultura. Según ella, hay una gran diferencia entre ser gramaticalmente correcto y ser socialmente correcto. Por lo tanto, un método de traducción dinámica sería más apropiada. Según la autora, “above all, the ‘sense’ of the swearing and the appropriate level of intensity should be communicated to the target audience” (Fernández). Esta lengua ayuda al lector a darle sentido a lo que está leyendo. Además, esta lengua es parte de la cultura de ambos la LO y la LT. Por eso, una traductora debe pensar en esto cuando está traduciendo.

Sin embargo, una traductora necesita decidir lo que va a hacer. Cada traductor está afectado y influido por su cultura; por eso, a veces va a seguir las normas de su país y su cultura. Todavía hay un debate sobre el uso de este tipo de lengua en la literatura y el papel y la obligación que una traductora tiene con la jerga y las maldiciones.

C. La traducción idiomática y metafórica

Otro rompecabezas que los traductores necesitan resolver se centra en la traducción del lenguaje figurativo. Este tipo de lenguaje, que incluye modismos y metáforas, no se limita solamente a la poesía y el texto expresivo, sino también puede aparecer en cualquier género de

literatura y texto escrito (Washbourne 139). El lenguaje figurativo ayuda a pintar una imagen intrincada de las palabras para los lectores del TO, pero es una fuente de mucha frustración para los traductores. Las metáforas, según Washbourne, difieren en el uso entre idiomas. En francés, por ejemplo, están usados en textos muy técnicos, aunque en inglés, no sería tolerado en un texto profesional (149). Por lo tanto, una traductora necesita reflexionar sobre la lengua y la cultura del TT antes de empezar la traducción. También, Washbourne dice que las metáforas pueden ser integradas en una cultura sin que nadie se dé cuenta. Un ejemplo de eso en el idioma inglés es la metáfora “to feel blue.” Uno no puede sentir el color azul, pero representa el sentido de tristeza. Sin embargo, esta expresión, cuando está traducido, posiblemente no tiene sentido en la LT, haciendo esta metáfora más difícil de traducir; la traductora posiblemente no se da cuenta que esta expresión es una metáfora, o que posiblemente hay una equivalencia diferente en la LT.

Primo Levi propone las dificultades que a menudo enfrentan a los traductores amateurs cuando se les presentan modismos en el TO. Las expresiones idiomáticas están presentes en todas las lenguas pero son únicas en cada una. Muchas veces un hablante o un lector de la LO no se da cuenta que la expresión es un modismo, pero cuando está traduciendo estas expresiones no tienen sentido al lector (4). El problema con respecto a los modismos es si la traductora debe traducir de manera literal, que le deja confundido al lector, o si debe reemplazar el modismo con uno del mismo mérito en la LO, que intencionalmente modifica el texto. El ejemplo que usa en el artículo es el modismo italiano “Quanti anni hai?” que se traduce a “How many years do you have?” en inglés (Levi 4). A un anglohablante, esta expresión no suena correcta, porque él dice “how old are you?” La misma estructura está presente en español. Levi postula que la única cosa que puede ayudar una traductora es su sensibilidad lingüística — esto no se enseña, más bien es

una habilidad que se desarrolla con el tiempo a través de una exposición a la LO. A través de eso, una traductora sabe cuando la expresión que está traduciendo de la LO no fluye bien en la LT, o cuando no tiene sentido (5). Una traductora, entonces, necesita tener un conocimiento bueno de la LO, la LT y ambas culturas para traducir exitosamente. Ene y Panainte están de acuerdo, diciendo que los modismos casi siempre son considerados un problema para los traductores debido a las dificultades de encontrar las expresiones en la LT que corresponden exactamente al modismo en la LO y tienen el mismo sentido. Los autores también dicen que los modismos son difíciles debido a “the impossibility of transferring their entire meaning in a foreign language by means of equivalence structures” (96). No hay una equivalencia exacta entre dos lenguas diferentes porque los aspectos culturales afectan la creación de los modismos; por eso, su significado se pierde con la traducción, si esa traducción es literal o libre.

Isabel Negro Alousque llega a la misma conclusión de los otros autores; siempre habrá alguna pérdida léxica durante una traducción interlingüística (139). Como dice, “la lengua está impregnada de cultura” (133); por eso, la traducción depende de la condición en la cual la palabra aparece. Negro Alousque ofrece tres métodos posibles para la traducción de los modismos: la traducción literal, la sustitución o la adaptación y la paráfrasis. Dice que la traducción literal es el menos utilizado en la expresión idiomática hoy porque la expresión trasladada no tendría mucho sentido ni tendría el mismo poder en la LT como en la LO (138). Negro Alousque dice que “la paráfrasis siempre conlleva una pérdida del valor figurativo de la expresión que produce una pérdida estilística” (138). Una traductora puede perder la fuerza de las palabras cuando parafrasea el TO. Finalmente, ella discute la sustitución, la que es mucho más común en las traducciones porque, en muchos casos, una expresión idiomática equivalente

que expresa la misma idea existe en la LT. Ella da el siguiente ejemplo: se traduce “to eat humble pie” a *morder el polvo* en español. Las dos expresiones transmiten la misma idea pero no tienen la misma traducción literal; *morder el polvo* literalmente significa “to bite the dust,” que en inglés significa algo diferente (138). Según este artículo, el método más apropiado para la traducción de expresiones idiomáticas y para metáforas es la sustitución de una expresión idiomática en la LO por una en la LT, porque esto minimizará la pérdida léxica entre las dos lenguas.

El lenguaje figurativo, particularmente las metáforas y los modismos, causa muchas dificultades en los estudios de traducción debido a una falta de equivalencia entre la LO y la LT. Las palabras impregnadas por la cultura tienen un efecto grande en este tipo de lengua, lo que siempre causa una pérdida de algunas referencias cuando la traducción ocurre entre dos culturas diferentes.

V. Conclusión

¿Es la equivalencia dinámica un método ético para los traductores, o deben quedarse con la equivalencia formal? A fin de cuentas, la traductora elige el método de traducción que va a utilizar, lo que depende en parte de sistemas personalizados e internalizados de normas y éticas. Ha habido algunas discusiones con respecto a una estandarización de los métodos de traducción entre la equivalencia dinámica y formal porque había controversia sobre cuál de estos métodos y sus subcategorías siempre deben ser utilizados; no hay un consenso si una traductora debe utilizar un método sobre otro o un método nuevo que incluye los dos. Como está demostrado, el debate continúa.

Mi experiencia personal

Durante el año pasado, he traducido diez de los treinta y siete capítulos, ciento y uno de los trescientos dieciocho páginas, de *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* por Rosa Montero. A lo largo de esta experiencia, tuve que tener en cuenta los métodos de traducción que yo había investigado para la revisión de literatura. Lo que encontré es que no hay un único método de traducción que funcione todo el tiempo. Yo tenía que pensar sobre el propósito del libro, el contexto de lo que estaba ocurriendo en la historia y la perspectiva del personaje y su caracterización. Debido a eso, cada frase tardó mucho tiempo en traducirse. Fue más difícil de lo que pensé que sería antes de empezar.

Yo elegí traducir esta novela porque la había leído en una de mis clases de español — SPA370: Escritoras de la España contemporánea — y me gustó mucha la novela. Los temas de los eventos actuales, la muerte, la vida y las relaciones sexuales fueron distintos para mí. Nunca había leído novelas que se trataron tan abiertamente sobre estos temas. Fue interesante analizar estos temas desde una perspectiva doble como lectora y como traductora. También, la elegí porque ya la había leído para una clase y estaba familiarizada con la caracterización de los personajes principales y la secuencia de la historia. Esta novela no había sido traducida al inglés, aunque la mayoría de las obras de Montero ha sido traducida a muchas lenguas diferentes, incluso seis al inglés. Además, yo había estudiado la historia de la dictadura de Franco y la democracia de España y cómo había influido las vidas de los ciudadanos y la literatura. Aunque la novela de Montero es de 2008, ella nació durante la dictadura de Franco y esto ha afectado su perspectiva de la vida de la sociedad contemporánea. Su novela muestra lo malo o lo indecible — lo tabú — que no se expresó públicamente durante la dictadura debido a la censura. Escribir

sin censura es un regalo de la libertad. Por eso, este conocimiento previo me ayudó a traducir mejor la novela.

Después de investigar y leer muchos artículos sobre la ética y los métodos de traducción, yo decidí elegir un método de traducción para usar principalmente, pero si lo necesitaba, usaba otro método. Usé el método de traducción literal cuando pude porque quería acercarme lo más posible a lo que escribió el autor. Intenté mantener las mismas estructuras de las frases cuando pude. No obstante, había algunos momentos en que no podía mantenerlas porque, sin ningún cambio, la frase no tendría el mismo poder lingüístico en inglés. Por ejemplo, tuve un problema con esta oración al principio de la novela. En español, la frase es: “ésta es la historia de una larga noche. Tan larga que se prolongó durante varios meses” (Montero 9). En inglés, con una traducción literal, estas frases dirían: “this is the story of a long night. So long that it lasted for many months”. Aunque esta traducción es técnicamente correcta, es demasiado abrupta y no fluye tan bien en inglés como en español. Entonces, decidí usar el método de traducción libre con estas frases. Ahora, es: “this is the story of a long night, a night so long that it lasted for many months”. Combiné las dos frases separadas y añadí las palabras “a night” para que fluyera mejor en inglés. Pero ahora no usé mucho este método de traducción libre, sólo cuando lo necesitaba porque no quería cambiar el texto demasiado.

Había tres otras situaciones en las que necesitaba decidir si debía usar la traducción literal o libre: primero, con los modismos y las metáforas; segundo, con los juegos de palabras; tercero, con la lengua no normativa. Los modismos, como expliqué en mi revisión de literatura, están enredados en la cultura; por eso, una traducción literal no es la mejor porque la traducción al inglés no tiene sentido. Por ejemplo, un modismo que encontré es: “estar en la inopia” (28).

Cuando se traduce al inglés literalmente, es: “to be in destitution or distress”. Esto no tiene sentido en el contexto del libro — una traducción mejor es “to be distracted” en referencia a no estar enfocado en lo que se está pasando. En este ejemplo, decidí emplear el método de traducción libre. Para hacer esto, decidí usar una de las estrategias sugeridas por Isabel Negro Alousque: la equivalencia cultural, en la cual la traductora reemplaza la expresión de la LO con una expresión equivalente en la LT (137). Por eso, usé “to be distracted”. Otro ejemplo de los modismos ocurre cuando Montero usa “siempre llueve sobre mojado” (66). Si se traduce esto literalmente, es: “it always rains on the soaked”. Aunque tiene sentido, no tiene el mismo significado que un modismo en inglés. Por eso, otra vez decidí usar una traducción libre. En mi traducción, usé “when it rains, it pours”, lo que está más cerca del sentido de la frase en español. Por lo tanto, decidí usar la traducción libre cuando una traducción más literal causa una pérdida del significado o del tono.

Otra dificultad que tenía ocurrió con los juegos de palabras. Esto no es algo que yo había investigado pero todavía era una dificultad. Montero utilizó estos juegos frecuentemente a lo largo de esta novela. Esto fue difícil de traducir porque lo que es ingenioso o astuto en español no tiene el mismo impacto en inglés si uno lo traduce de modo literal. Por ejemplo, a través de la novela uno de los personajes principales, Daniel, está obsesionado con un videojuego que se llama “Second Life”. En la novela, el nombre de este videojuego, está en inglés porque es un juego mundial desarrollado en los Estados Unidos. Por eso, Daniel se refiere a esto en inglés. Pero también la novela refiere a “Segunda Vida” que, para él, significa otro intento de vida donde puede tener control sobre lo que pasa. En la novela, Daniel hace una distinción entre el inglés y el español. Dice “ahora bien, Second Life, y ahí radicaba su atractivo, no era un juego:

era una Segunda Vida, como indicaba su nombre” (38). A través de la novela, él usa “Second Life” para indicar el juego y “Segunda Vida” para indicar las cosas que querría cambiar si pudiera empezar de nuevo su vida. Usa el español para indicar lo que no puede cambiar en la vida real. Por eso, fue difícil de traducir porque si yo hubiera traducido los dos al inglés, habría perdido esta distinción importante. Debido a eso, decidí dejar el inglés en inglés y el español en español. Con esto, un lector puede ver la diferencia cuando lee y puede darse cuenta que hay una diferencia entre los dos.

Había otra parte en que Montero usó los juegos de palabras en que fue muy difícil encontrar una solución de traducción. Otro personaje principal, Matías, lee algo en una pared que le hace atacar a otra persona pero cuando lee la pared cuando está más cerca, se da cuenta que las palabras no dicen lo que pensaba, aunque parece muy similar. Desde lejos, la pared dice “Matías... Ésta es tu misión” (32). Sí, dice su nombre, pero más cerca, la pared dice “estévez dimisión, Alcalde chorizo,” (34) no “ésta es tu misión”. Esto fue difícil de traducir porque la primera frase es “Matías, this is your mission” mientras la segunda frase es “this time resignation, Mayor Crook”. La confusión de las palabras no es la misma; las palabras no se parecen similares. Por esto, yo necesitaba hacer una elección: ¿debería traducir literalmente, perdiendo la confusión de la escena, lo que es muy importante a la historia? ¿O debería traducir libremente, haciendo cambios a lo que escribió Montero para asegurar la comprensión del lector? Decidí hacer los dos. Yo dejé las palabras en español y después yo añadí las palabras en inglés. Por eso, el lector puede ver la diferencia entre el significado de los dos, pero también puede ver como Matías podía confundir los dos. De nuevo, no hay una manera de traducción que siempre

funciona con frases como estas. Una traductora necesita elegir lo que funciona para cada frase en particular.

Finalmente, yo necesitaba hacer elecciones sobre el método de traducción con respeto a la lengua no normativa. Necesitaba enfocarme en el significado de lo que estaba diciendo en el texto, no en la palabra misma. Algunas palabras no normativas tienen más impacto en español que en inglés y viceversa — especialmente las maldiciones. En inglés, hay maldiciones que son más malas que otras, y lo mismo ocurre en español. Pero las que son más fuertes no son las mismas entre las dos lenguas. Por ejemplo, hay una frase en que el personaje dice “qué jodido era ser viejo” (10). Literalmente, se traduce a “how fucked up it was to be old”. Pero esta maldición tiene más fuerza en inglés que en español. Cuando se lo traduce literalmente, la condenación sale más fuerte. Por eso, decidí traducirlo como “how shitty it was to be old”. Esta maldición, en cambio, tiene menos fuerza. Había muchos otros ejemplos de esto en la novela, en que yo necesitaba escoger la palabra que mejor comunicaba el mismo sentido. De nuevo, una traductora necesita hacer una elección sobre el método que va a usar en su traducción con respecto a las palabras no normativas.

Yo decidí no usar la anotación en esta traducción porque aunque hay muchas referencias culturales, los lectores pueden descifrar el significado usando las claves del contexto en la novela. Por ejemplo, hay referencias a la M-30. El lector puede adivinar que esto es una autopista debido al contexto. También, hay referencias a las autonomías de España. Esto no detrae de la novela; siempre va a haber referencias a las regiones de otros países que un lector no conoce; esto ocurre en la literatura estadounidense, también. No hay ninguna referencia que el lector no puede entender, salvo el epígrafe por Shlomit Levin. Lo sigue una explicación de que

ella es la abuela de Amos Oz. A veces, un lector no va a saber quién es. El trasfondo cultural o la educación de cada lector es diferente, lo que puede influir el conocimiento de personas famosas o importantes de una cultura específica. Con los epígrafes, las palabras a menudo son más importantes que la persona que las dijo. Por ejemplo, Amos Oz es un escritor israelí y su abuela es de Israel, también. Los dos probablemente no son muy conocidos en España ni en los Estados Unidos. Por eso, decidí no incluir una explicación. Creo que si el lector quiere saber quién es, puede investigarlo. Si no, todavía puede leer y entender la cita. Debido a que no quería cambiar la experiencia de lectura desde la lengua original a la lengua traducida, no incluí anotaciones en mi traducción de esta novela.

En conclusión, la traducción fue difícil de hacer. Necesitaba pensar mucho sobre cada palabra y cada oración además del contexto y la caracterización de cada personaje. Sin embargo, este proyecto fue muy divertido para mí porque podía pensar sobre los temas y la novela como lectora y como traductora. El segundo fue un papel que nunca había tomado antes. También, necesitaba enfocarme en y aprender más sobre la gramática en español — tenía que repasar las estructuras más complejas en la novela que no veo ni uso mucho para traducirlas adecuadamente. En resumen, he aprendido mucho sobre el español, el inglés, los métodos y la teoría de traducción, y la literatura española a través de este proyecto.

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Instructions to Save the World

By Rosa Montero

Translated by: Jessica Ferronetti

If you have no more tears, do not cry; laugh.

Shlomit Levin

(Grandmother of Amos Oz)

Humanity is divided into those who enjoy tucking themselves into bed at night and those who become distressed by going to sleep. The former consider their beds to be protective nests, while the latter feel that the vulnerability of dozing is a danger. For some, the moment of lying down means the suspension of their worries; for others, darkness provokes a rampage of painful thoughts and, if they could, they would sleep during the day, like vampires. Have you ever felt the terror of the night, the drowning in nightmares, the darkness whispering at the nape of your neck with its breath so cold, that, even though you don't know how much time you have left to live, you feel like nothing other than a death row inmate? And yet the next morning life bursts again with its happy lie of eternity. This is the story of a long night, a night so long that it lasted for many months. However, everything began during one November sunset.

It had been drizzling sleet during the morning, but during those hours the sky was a dry leaden sheet. The cold rose from the headstones and the hard earth and licked at one's ankles like an icy tongue. The oldest gravedigger stealthily wiped the mucus from his nose with his sleeve. It was the last dead of the day, his kidneys ached despite the girdle, and he was wishing to finish. Furthermore, it was one of those shitty burials where no one came, apart from three or four people, a tragedy, and worse with this horrible day, with this darkness, with this cold. The solitary burials and the burials of children, those were the most difficult. The old gravedigger took a breath and gave the coffin a shove in order to right it over the guides so that it entered straight on into the niche. How cold, hell, he said, frozen stiff. Of course, the dead will be colder in there, he added routinely, as always. He glanced at his young companion, who was strong like an ox and who sweated and puffed with his brute-like face. This one has no problems, he thought

with malice: he, on the other hand, was closer to the grave every day. How shitty it was to be old. He placed his hands over his aching kidneys and went over to the mourner.

“Should we proceed?”

The question received no reply: the man seemed to have turned to stone. The gravedigger gave an inquisitorial look at the other man, who felt obliged to do something and gently shook the arm of the widow.

“Matías... Matías...”

“What?”

“The men are asking if they can proceed.”

“If they can... what?”

“If they can close the grave,” clarified Rita’s cousin uncomfortably.

“Oh, yes, yes.”

Matías made an effort to concentrate on what he was seeing. The cousin was kicking the ground to warm up; the big gravedigger was holding the tools; the other was putting dirt in the mouth of the hole. The blade scraped against the rock. A small, wrenching sound. The undertaker approached him, whispering something incomprehensible; he was carrying some papers in his hand and a pen that he produced quickly between his fingers. Matías figured that he had to sign the papers and made two scrawls where the man indicated with his fingernail. This was somewhat difficult because everything he saw was far away, very far away, on the other side of a dark tunnel, at the wrong end of a telescope. From that distance, the graves looked like the luggage lockers at a train station. Rita was going to laugh when he told her.

“I’m very sorry, Matías.”

“Yes, yes.”

“She was a stupendous woman.”

“Yes.”

The gravediggers had already disappeared and now the rest were beginning to leave. The nurse. The cousin. Rita’s boss in the private agency. Uncomfortable, rushing. Anxious to escape the great icy night that was falling over the widow. Ashamed of being one of very few. “If I had known, I would have put myself in charge of letting people know, but this man won’t let anyone help,” justified the cousin to the nurse when they left; he felt obliged to save the honor of his family. None of them knew then that he would not see Matías again. Even if they had known it probably would have mattered little: pain possesses a negative magnetic charge, it is like a magnet that repels instead of attracts. There went the three at full speed, leaving like shotguns from the cemetery.

However, Matías did not feel pain. No. In reality he felt nothing. He did not feel the cold that rose in puffs from the damp ground. He blinked and looked at the sky. It was black like... black like... he could not find a simile for that sky, because it was blacker than the blackest thing he had ever seen, more black than the word blackness. The night had fallen very quickly. Where am I?, he asked suddenly, confused, with a sudden awe, a pinch of panic, dizziness. In the cemetery, he answered. I have just buried Rita. And again, the quiet nothing in his interior. Not a beat in his chest, nor a little memento in his memory. The stillness of death quieted everything.

He left the Sacramento without thinking, his feet looking for the path and moving on their own. He got into the taxi, pulled out, and drove to the nearby M-30 with the same automatic numbness. The city shone around him, everything glowing and full of life, crowded with cars.

Matías submerged himself in the metallic river and was carried away. He had always like to drive. Driving without taking into account what he was doing, protected by his taxi driver habits. While his hands hung on to the steering wheel, he thought of a train. Or, better, a subway. The rumble of the approaching convoy, the wagon rushing over him, snorting and grating, and without being able to stop, the wheels that crushed and tore. And he thought of death as a tranquil place in which he could take refuge, a hiding place one could go to. He also thought about the razor that he always carried in his glove box; and he tried to imagine the brief and cold pain that its edge would cause upon slitting his neck. But then, for the first time in many hours, he remembered Chucho and Perra.

He left the rotary and headed towards his house. It was a road he knew very well, but the closer he got to his neighborhood, the farther away he felt. Far from the world and from himself, far from normality and sanity.

“Good evening. To the Cuatro Caminos roundabout, please.”

Matías turned around, amazed, and contemplated the passenger that had just climbed into his taxi, who was taking advantage of his stop at the traffic light.

“To the Cuatro Caminos roundabout, please,” repeated the man.

Matías felt a roar boiling in his chest, a geyser of rage and of despair.

“Get out of my car! Get out right now!” he howled with a phenomenal scream that vibrated in his lower gut.

The passenger shrank into the seat, dazed and terrified. He was a timid forty-nine year old computer tech who had never had to face an outburst of violence similar to this, which, in the times we live in, was certainly lucky.

“Get out, imbecile!” bellowed Matías again with all of his might, noting that, upon leaving his mouth, the words scratched his vocal cords.

The man lurched wildly, trying to open the door, until finally he got it and threw himself out of the car. Matías pulled out furiously, trembling, scared by the intensity of his hate. He would have killed the man. In truth he would have liked to be able to kill him. He swallowed his saliva with difficulty. With a remnant of sanity, he shut off the green light and put the occupied sign on his taxi. The taxi was jolting like a drunk. Some drivers beeped, but the noise of the city came to him dampened, remote. Something happened to his ears and to his eyes, something that prevented him from seeing and hearing with normality. He felt very tired; he could not remember how many days he had gone without sleep. And without food. He was arriving already at his street, but he could not recognize it. The city was vibrating, blurring, beating like a living turbid mass in time with the painful beating of his temples. He parked at the corner. He was afraid to go into the empty house.

Luckily, the entrance was closed and the concierge was nowhere in sight. He turned on the light in the landing, which started to tick like an old taximeter. How could he have forgotten about Chucho and Perra? They must have gone at least two days without food. And without going out. He heard them whimpering on the other side of the door. Very quietly, because they were strays that Rita had picked up, and the outdoors had taught them to be discreet and polite. He opened the door to the house and they scurried to tangle themselves in his legs. Small, sickly, shabby, animals that were truly runts. Chucho, brown with spots and with rat hair. Perra, greyish and chubby, with a fang twisted outside of her snout and bulging eyes. One couldn't give real names to such ugly dogs, he had said to Rita when she rescued them from the street. For that

reason they had stayed with Chucho and Perra. Matías remembered them curled in his wife's lap when the disease had already erupted like a bomb. When the end had begun.

He forcefully swallowed the pain that had grasped at his throat and looked at the inside of the house. The hallway was lost in the darkness.

“No,” he said in a loud voice. “No.”

He shut off the light in the landing and the darkness fell over him. Matías felt a spasm of panic and slapped at the wall until he hit the switch. At his feet, the dogs whined and licked his ankles with desperate enthusiasm. He squatted and took them into his arms. He then closed the door with a pull and went down the stairs at full speed. He didn't stop running until he arrived at his taxi and deposited the mutts into the passenger seat, where the animals stayed extremely quiet, cowering. He started the car, knowing very well where he was going. To a plot of land. To the house that he and Rita were making in Villaviciosa de Odón. That is, to the house that now would never be made. At this hour, without traffic, hardly twenty minutes later he arrived in town. Before entering the residential area, he stopped at McDonald's and bought some hamburgers for the dogs. The hot and greasy stink, which had always disgusted him, nevertheless flooded his mouth with saliva. He discovered, ashamed, that he was hungry, very hungry. How could he be hungry when he was living the end of all things? Humiliated by the needs of his body, by the determination of his body to live (the livid and suffering body of Rita, the drainage tubes, the bruises, the sores), Matías got two more hamburgers for himself. Although the journey to the plot of land was very short, the taxi became impregnated by the sweet stench of the food.

He had built that roof with his own hands, tile by tile. He had raised those modest walls, in his free time, because as a teenager he worked as a laborer and he wasn't a bad bricklayer. The

little house was already roofed, the windows and the exterior door were hung, the radiators installed, the downstairs bathroom finished. But the inside doors, and the kitchen, and the paint were missing, and the floor was only pure cement. There was electricity, but his only source of lighting consisted of a light bulb at the end of a very long cable, and the water came from the end of a green hose in the garden. Of course, neither was there a garden, although Matías called it that. The plot was fallow land, brown and hard, covered with debris, sandbags, and various tools for construction. In the middle of that dirty and desolate nothingness, the house, small and solid, seemed like a solitary tooth in the mouth of an old man.

He tried to light the bulb, but it must have blown out. Groping, trying to not step on the nervous dogs, Matías felt along the floor until he found the old portable television that they had brought to the plot of land when Rita began to feel bad, when she already could not stand to read, so that she could entertain herself by watching some movie while he continued working on the house. He turned on the device and shut off the sound. From the screen came a mobile and muted glow that illuminated the room poorly. The wind blew through the badly sealed windows and it was terribly cold. A sepulchral cold, thought Matías; and he seemed to hear the gritty scrape of the gravedigger's blade against the ground. He was in the room that was meant to be the living room: a rectangular room with two windows. The sad and irregular glow of the television made shadows dance on the walls. There were two reed chairs with the bottoms half missing, the rocking chair in which Rita used to sit, a jumble of tools and brushes, a pair of pans with the remnants of paint tests, rolls of oilcloth that covered the roof before he tiled it, and a ladder. There was also a bucket, two mops, half a dozen canisters with cleaning products, rubber gloves, and a disheveled broom. Everything was placed in a corner in perfect formation, a small

domestic army that Rita had brought during the good times to clean the house. I will never finish this house, he fiercely promised to himself. And he was right, he would never finish it.

Half blind, in the bluish shadows, he cleaned one of the pans and gave the dogs water, and then grabbed one of the rolls of oilcloth, spread it out in a corner, and sat on it, leaning his back against the wall. He took out the hamburgers that were still hot thanks to their insulated cases,, and shared them with the dogs. The effort of eating used up the little energy he had left. He felt a kind of stupor, a extreme fatigue similar to death. On the mute screen of the television there was a pretentious and airy blonde who laughed a lot. Matías dropped on his side until he lay on the floor, in the fetal position, wrapped in his thick cloth jacket. Shivering. The dogs curled themselves into the hollow of his stomach, tightly packed against him., looking at him without blinking their round eyes. They were scared by the changes in their routine, by the absence of Rita, by the odor of Matías' pain, which came so clearly to their noses. The pain smelled of cold metal, the dogs would tell you if they could. Matías touched their rough and warm bodies; they were a relief in the freezing night. He grabbed the excess part of the sheet and covered himself as best he could with it. That day, he remembered suddenly, was his birthday. He was forty-five. So much unnecessary pain, he thought. And he fell into a dream like a rock falls into a well, while the light and shadows of the televised images danced silently over his face.

Daniel was convinced that his girlfriend was with him for the mere pleasure of tormenting him. Brick, brick, brick, a triple piece, two holes. As for him, no matter how much he wondered about the reasons that made him stay with her, he could not respond satisfactorily. Well, yes; because he was a slacker. And perhaps a coward. Because he always allowed himself to be tempted by minimal effort. Nevertheless, to break up was not that difficult. But they were not even married, for the love of God! And, fortunately, they never wanted to have kids. Attention, blast-hole! Three rows evaporated! There was the question of the apartment, oh yes, and the half-paid mortgage. He crushed his cigarette in a small corner of the overstuffed ashtray and, right after, lit a new one, because thinking of these things made him very nervous. Buying a house with someone was a mistake. He was shackled more than he would be by marriage. But even that had a fix; they could always sell the property, distribute the money, and separate. He gauged this possibility mentally and had to admit that it seemed as remote as becoming a tourist on the Space Station. Where had the joy of the world gone? Vertical brick, row complete. What had happened to the luminous lightness of the past twenty years, when life was like a great Christmas gift that just needed to be opened? How had he managed to get locked into an existence that was so small and miserable?

“You go on, say yes, keep burning the few neurons you have left with these idiocies hour after hour. It’s amazing to see how you throw away your life.”

Dammit, she had already caught him. Normally, every time he heard Marina’s footsteps in the hallway, Daniel changed the screen on the computer, so that his woman wouldn’t see him playing. Or, if he noticed her arrival in time, he would rise from the table with a jump and looked at the spines of the books on the shelves, to pretend, or he would go to the bathroom, feigning an

emergency. On this occasion, however, he had been thinking, and this had distracted him. To think was the worst thing he could do. It was precisely for this reason that he played computer games for hours. To stop his thinking for a little while. He glanced at the clock; nine at night. Since five o'clock he had been putting electronic bricks into a hole, trying to avoid virtual holes.

"I just started playing," he said defensively.

"Yeah, sure."

"Anyway, I'm tired and need to relax. Leave me in peace, for the love of god!"

Did Marina not realize that he was the first one to be ashamed of behaving like this? As a matter of fact, he was so ashamed and despised himself so much that now he had to go to the kitchen to make himself a whiskey. Marina also didn't like that; that was another one of her excuses for being disdainful and scathing. Marina would curse him every time that he resorted to drinking. Which was every night. And it was of no use for Daniel, as a doctor, to explain to her that alcohol was the best medicine. Perhaps she would rather he be crammed with tranquilizers and walking around with his jaw hanging open? But what the hell did that woman want from him?

"Look at yourself, Daniel, aren't you embarrassed? Here, locked up, in the dark, tied to the computer screen, enveloped in a stinky cloud of tobacco, with the television talking to itself... What a shitty life."

So much hate, so much frustration in that shrewd and slightly nasal voice of his woman. Daniel turned the chair around and looked at the television that, indeed, was on, as always. He liked the noise in the background; and that the room quieted at nightfall. He liked to be in the dark in his little room, lit only by the cold glow of the two screens. He liked to feel wrapped up

in these velvet shadows, in a shadow where the moving flashes from the television and the computer seemed to turn into something liquid. In a protective and amniotic bubble.

“Get out of here. I want to watch the news,” he grumbled.

Watching the news was a socially acceptable activity. She couldn't criticize him for this. But Marina continued to lean against the doorjamb, without leaving. A pang of anguish squeezed his chest. For an instant he pondered the possibility of getting up, forcefully taking her out of the room, and closing the door. But if he gave her a push, things would still get worse, that was for sure. For the love of God, he only wanted a little peace.

“Daniel...”

Marina pressed the lamp switch. The light hit his eyes; he blinked, annoyed, and continued to look at the television with a frown, in a vain attempt to ignore her.

“Daniel.”

“What do you want?”

“Don't think that I've forgotten that today is your birthday....”

“No, of course. How could you forget? You're perfect.”

“You're forty-five.”

“Stupendous memory.”

“Let's go out to dinner to celebrate.”

The words rolled around in Marina's mouth like pebbles inside of a bottle: hard, tinkling. He saw that she wanted to lower the tension, that she wanted to be friendly, but dry residual rage and years of frustration weighed down the words.

“I don't feel like it. And it's very late. Another day.”

“Another day won’t be your birthday. Come on, cheer up.... You never want to do anything, you’re a bore.”

“As you will understand, I don’t feel like going out to dinner with you, with how unpleasant you are. Also, you could have come earlier.”

“I didn’t come earlier because I couldn’t! I was working. Unlike you.”

Yes, of course. That, on top of everything else. Marina was of an overwhelming industriousness and put in endless hours in a little jewelry and gift shop, which she had started with another partner, a woman, a precarious business that was sustained thanks to the monumental effort of his woman. Apart from work. Marina cooked complicated dishes, and had cabinets ordered with manic neatness, and found time to go to the gym and even to read. Daniel wanted her to do that now: to leave his room, to go and be efficient and laborious elsewhere, to cook or read or do a handstand and leave him in peace. But Marina kept leaning on his doorjamb.

He did not see her but he felt her behind him, a demanding presence, an irritated silence. He tried to concentrate on the screen. He saw an ambulance, a bundle that was covered with a blanket, bystanders, police.

“Given the similarities of the *modus operandi* in the three crimes, experts are already talking about a serial killer,” said the young reporter with a radiant expression of happiness on her face: thanks to the interest that the murders aroused, she had gotten to talk directly to the camera for the first time. “Until the autopsy is done, it cannot be confirmed that the latest victim died from the same causes as the previous victims, by a massive dose of insulin given intravenously, but it seems as though the old woman has the same smile as the other two victims, a smile that is not natural according to the coroner, but instead has been made and forced by the

killer onto the cadaver. A macabre detail which has caused the criminal to be known in police circles as the *assassin of happiness*.”

The word is full of loonies, said Daniel with indifference, immersed in the blessed ignorance of the present and without yet knowing that the crimes of the *assassin of happiness* would end up seriously complicating his life. But for now he was distracted and he felt only a vague interest in the case, like the rest of the world. The vultures of the press already spent days pecking at the first two deaths, excited by the strangeness of the details: lonely elderly people killed without forced entry into the homes, without theft, with no more violence than that which killed them. And, above all, the disturbed craziness of the smile. To get the petrified gesture, the killer would have had to stretch the corners of the mouth and hold them for half an hour, or maybe more, until rigor mortis set in. Not to mention the intravenous insulin. Maybe the criminal could be a doctor? And how could he give them the injection? Would he drug the elderly before or would he convince them to let themselves be injected?

“Take your gift. And I want you to know that it is not from the store.”

Absorbed in the news, Daniel had not noticed that Marina had abandoned her position as an ill-humored watchman for a few moments. She was back now, next to him, and had thrown a package onto his lap like someone throwing trash over the edge of a ship. Daniel contemplated the bundle wrapped in a bright red paper and adorned with a gold ribbon. It offered such a shrill and artificial image of bliss that it was obscene.

“I don’t want gifts.”

Marina shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s already bought. It’s yours. Do what you want with it,” she said without bitterness.

That was the worst: when his girlfriend softened on the inside and looked at him drowning in self-pity. A doctor. Or a nurse. The criminal must have been a woman, without a doubt. Women were the true assassins of happiness. He looked at Marina: forty-three years old, white hairs strung together in her dark mane, with a slightly rounded belly on which she crossed her hands when she was about to lecture him, a gesture that irritated Daniel profoundly. He looked at her face, so well known that it was invisible to him; and her fine white skin, furrowed by a delicate web of wrinkles. He had witnessed the slow formation of all of these folds. Especially the one that frowned at him, the mark of his progressive sulking. They had been together for fifteen years.

Daniel violently grabbed the package. The shiny paper crackled like a cheerful fire as it crumpled between his fingers. I'm not going to open it, he said, or yes, I will open it and it won't matter to me, I won't give a damn about the predictable jersey or the striped shirt, none of this means anything, it's stupid, it's conventional. But grief flooded his chest with a heavy pain, because deep down he longed for a gift that wasn't a pantomime, a pretense. He felt something that seemed like love flutter inside of him, an echo of his former will to love her. And for a moment he wished to recover the destroyed affection that was buried under the damage. But no, this was impossible. It was a naive yearning, unrealizable. Because Marina was the assassin of happiness; yes, therefore, she was like all other women: so hard, so relentless, so insatiable in her demand for perfection. There she was, clinging to him like a guard dog, demanding everything and a little bit more, demanding that he be better than he was and humiliating him with that perpetual contemptuous look that was like a mirror of his defeat. The true failure consisted of failing with a woman next to you who magnified your misfortune with her magnifying glass

gaze. But why were they like this? Why do women always demand that men live up to their damned dreams? Daniel didn't ask Marina this, for the love of God, in that at least he was better. He might have been useless and a loser, but at least he didn't ask her the impossible, dammit. He was truly more generous and was content with surviving.

He was awoken by his own groan and by the insistent wet touch of Perra's tongue on his nose. He opened his eyes and came across the ugly and pug-nosed face of the animal a couple of centimeters away, and an instant later remembered that Rita had died. Every day he went through the same painful routine. He emerged from his dream protected by a daze, with no emotional baggage, innocent and amnesic, and then the memory falls on him like a guillotine. Rita was dead and he was alone. Without moving, Matías breathed deeply a few times, trying to calm himself down, while Perra looked at him thoughtfully. Like a mother, said Matías with bitter irony. But he then remembered that his own mother had never shown that much concern for him.

“Okay, Perra. Okay. Thank you. I'm okay.”

He carefully removed her and got out of the jumble of wrinkled blankets that had served as his bed since he returned from the cemetery. The first night that he slept on the floor he was so stiff and aching when he got up that he began to think that he would never stand up straight again. But later he bought the blankets and he got used to it. Besides, he almost preferred to wake up with that edge of pain hitting his bones; that way he could occupy his brain by feeling his body instead of giving in to the bad memories, to those unbearable images that chased him and that from time to time assaulted his head and drove him crazy.

He looked out the windows; the sun had already set. It was the blue hour, gloomy from the last sunset. A sad hour. And it was also the time at which he was waking. Since Rita's death he had gotten into the habit of sleeping during the day and working at night, in part because he couldn't conceive that life could continue as normal without her, and in part because the bad memories seemed to grow and become more evil, more invincible, and obsessive under the protection of the darkness. It was better to spend the nights distracted, working, and to fall

exhausted into his nest of blankets during the day, with the solar light helping to keep his anxieties at bay. Once in awhile, when he met up with a taxi driver he knew at a stop or in the bars at sunrise -- in Tanatorio Sur, for example, or in Oasis -- his companions approached him to interrogate him: but what are you doing, how are you, we haven't seen you. But he was not communicative and the others put in too much effort; he never had much of a relationship with the other drivers. Nor with anyone, to say the truth, except for her. And that would have sufficed, because she was always close, even in the past when he was a boy, when Matías' mother came home so drunk that she lay down to sleep on the floor and he had to empty his mother's pockets to collect money for the bus so that he was able to go to class. Yes, Rita was already there, even then, curing his wounds from life.

He had replaced the defective light bulb and he already had electricity, so he hung the cable from the back of one of the reed chairs and lit the bulb. Its naked glow obscured at once the early night on the other side of the window. The dogs stirred and panted at his feet like old asthmatics. He unwrapped the rest of a tenderloin sandwich that he had bought from the Oasis at dawn and distributed the leftovers between the two animals. Luckily they were small and they managed with little. He watched them devour the grub, immensely happy while they chewed with gluttony. They, at least, do not have to suffer anymore. That's what Rita used to say. We can protect them. That's what she used to say. It was so easy to make a dog happy. With absolute happiness, perfect.

He opened a can of sardines in oil and, lacking bread, he ate them for breakfast with a few stale cookies. The mix of oil fish with the sweet cookie disgusted him. He found some comfort in this disgust. He had dreamed again that he had killed someone. It was not clear who

the victim was, but in his dream he knew that he had committed an atrocious act, an irreparable crime that would ruin the rest of his life. And the worst was that, when he woke up from his nightmare, the horror was still there. Even awake, he felt that his anguish was somehow real. Even awake he knew he was guilty.

So he should be punished.

He put the hose in the bathtub and, putting his arm out the window, he opened the tap that was outside. Then he undressed, stood on the porcelain, and showered at full speed with a little soap. He clenched his teeth until they ground because the jet from the hose was freezing; but he had not washed himself for many days, and the previous night a client had said that he stunk and had gotten out before the end of his ride. Besides, bathing wasn't a terrible sacrifice, either; although the water was too cold, the weather was good, very mild. In reality he had only been truly cold during one week, precisely the final week of Rita's agony, as if the whole world was shivering in the face of her suffering. But as soon as she was buried, the thermometer began to rise like crazy. It was the mildest winter in history, at least the mildest on record; he had heard it on television. It was a thing of that damn climate change that everyone was talking about. A warm winter for his icy life.

He left the shower, shut off the water, and dried himself with one of the two new towels. He had bought everything new: towels, blankets, some garments of clothing. He preferred to go to the store before he went home; he could not bear the idea of going in there. There was also a new electric razor that he shaved himself with. As he didn't have a mirror, he blindly moved the small and roaring device and always left some island of hair. He rummaged through the pile of wrinkled clothes that he had on the floor and chose a shirt that was only somewhat dirty and his

newest jeans, which were already starting to get baggy because he continued to lose weight. The cabbie sighed and passed his hand over his face, feeling the hardness of his bones beneath his tired flesh. The outline of his future skull. Lately, he saw nothing but death everywhere. Death was the only truth of life.

That should be the opinion of the *assassin of happiness*. The night before they had said on the television that there were five victims. Five smiling old men and women. They didn't smile naturally, that Matías knew, but the killer repositioned their mouths. He also decorated their houses and brought them a birthday cake, colored balloons, and streamers. As if it were a party. The poor elderly abandoned to their fates, as alone as Chucho and Perra when Rita took them in. I'm sure that the elderly weren't smiling when the assassin gave them the injection, Matías said. Thinking about the syringe caused a chain of associations that made an unbearable image explode in his head, one of those memories that lurked like buried mines in his memory. He saw Rita's arm stuck with needles, her busted and burned veins, her skin full of pitiful wounds, the bruises like obscene footprints of martyrdom. The smell of excrement and medicine came alive again, the moans from the sick, the animalistic panic, the brutal discomfort that produces pain, the grief of knowing that there is only more pain until death.

He leaned against the wall, soaked in a cold sweat, trembling. Under the dusty light of the naked bulb the air seemed solid and unreal, as if it was full of gelatin. Matías felt that he couldn't breathe that thick air, he felt that he was drowning, that he was dizzy, that the world lost its verticality, that everything floated vaguely in space, a drifting reality, the remains of a shipwreck. Stumbling, Matías crawled towards one of the windows, opened it, and inhaled with anxiety. The

window had bars and he regretted installing them, because now they enhanced his sensation of asphyxiation and oppression. Everything was bad. Everything was very bad.

Matías's house was at the end of a modest housing development. It was an isolated enclave and apart from that had grown chaotically, so that the street was nothing more than a clearing with neither asphalt nor sidewalks, with a grimy wall that separated the colony from the lands belonging to the neighboring municipality. The only streetlight in the area gave off a disheartened and depressing light. Five years later a fraudulent reclassification of land will lead to the demolition of the wall and the construction of an enormous shopping center and an entire neighborhood block of semi-luxury housing, but at that time it seemed like the end of the world. Grasping onto the window bars and gagging like a fish out of water, Matías contemplated the rugged suburban landscape and the wall covered in graffiti. At the very edge of the radius of light from the street lamp, an inscription seemed to shine more than the others, as if it were made with fluorescent paint. He squinted his eyes, attempting to overcome the distance and the shadows. Maaa... he read. Ma... tí... as. A hand of fire squeezed his stomach. Matías. It showed his name. That illuminated graffiti had his name. It was as if the graffiti wanted to be seen by him. As if it called him. He held his breath and struggled to continue to decipher the message: *És-ta-es-tu-mi-sión*. Th... is... is... yo...ur ... mis... sion. *Ésta es tu misión*. This is your mission. That's what it was saying. He had a mission. But, what was it?

Then, a shadow appeared. A young guy, skinny, medium height. Dark-skinned, added Matías, when the man penetrated the bubble of light from the street lamp. He carried a small backpack on his back and walked along the wall without making a sound. Cat steps in tennis shoes. Suddenly the cabbie remembered, with a flash of memory, the description that had been

given on T.V. about the possible appearance of the *assassin of happiness*, according to the data provided by an alleged witness: young, skinny, brown, of medium height, with a backpack and sneakers. More exact, impossible. Matías felt his back straighten, the muscles in his neck tighten, becoming alert. Besides, there was something about that man, he was not sure what, that made him suspicious. He walked like someone running away or like someone stalking, with the stealth of a thief, looking cautiously everywhere. The intruder was about to leave the luminous halo when he stopped and looked around again, as if to verify that no one followed him; and, just in that moment, Matías saw it all. He saw the enormous arrow graffitied on the wall, an arrow with a shaft coiled like a spring that pointed unequivocally at the dark young man. He saw the message with his name flashing in the shadows: *Matías, ésta es tu misión*. Matías, this is your mission. And he thought: what is this guy doing here at this time? And why was I just then peeping out the window when he appeared? He thought: and what if he is the *assassin of happiness*? And what if he carries the tools for his sinister task in his backpack: the cake, the balloons, the fatal syringe? With hypodermic needles that kill and torture, that break veins and lives? A type of red light blinded him, a cloudy and wrathful light that came from inside. He ran towards the door, left his house, and in four strides pounced on the man with the backpack and grabbed him by the neck. The guy screamed and tried to break free but, in spite of how much weight he had lost, the cabbie was still a very big man, taller and stronger than the boy, because he was a young boy; Matías saw that now as he pressed his throat with his hands. A boy that moaned and sputtered something in a foreign tongue. And then he began to repeat please, please, with a foreign accent while he bent his legs and fell to the floor, kneeling. The collapse of the boy forced Matías to lean forward to continue holding his prey; he almost bumped into the wall,

and that made him look at the graffiti. It vibrated and broke down under his eyes. A moment. Goodness, a moment. There was no *Ésta es tu misión*. No *This is your mission*. It said *Estévez dimisión*. This time resignation. Blinking, stunned. Yes, there was no doubt. It said *Estévez dimisión*. This time resignation, and a little bit farther down, *Alcalde chorizo*. Mayor Crook. He released the boy, who was crumpled like a rag on the floor, mumbling his squeaky list of pleases. Nevertheless, *Matías* was written above, that was the truth. And it was also true that there was a big spring that ended in a point that pointed to the boy.

“What are you doing here?” asked Matías, with a hoarse voice.

“I live here... I live here,” stuttered the guy, pointing to the house next to Matías’s with a trembling finger.

“What are you carrying in your backpack?”

The boy looked at him with a face without understanding, stunned by his panic.

“There. Give me that. What are you carrying?” he repeated, grabbing the bag.

He opened it with a swat and took out what was inside. A rolled up mat tied with twine, a couple of books printed with strange symbols, a piece of cheese covered in a transparent plastic sheet, a wool cap, a loaf of bread, a purse, a cheap cellphone, a bus pass. For some reason, the sight of the bus pass seemed to be the most irrefutable proof of his mistake and his brutality. Matías felt lightheaded. He passed a hand over his face; what had he done? Goodness, what had he done. He had lost his mind. He, who always had been a peaceful man, a friendly big guy, was now possessed by spasms of chaotic violence. He noticed that another panic attack was approaching him, a wave of unreality that made the world tremble, and he was terrified of the idea of going crazy. He put everything back in the sack and clumsily handed it back to the boy,

“Excuse me,” he muttered, while attempting to concentrate and control his fear.

“What?”

“Excuse me. I confused you with another. I don’t know what happened to me. Excuse me.”

The boy stared at him from the ground hugging his backpack as if he was someone being protected by the sack, still incredulous but with a growing expression of cautious relief relaxing his face. Poor boy, what a fright I have given him, though Matías. How could I have done something like this? He was amazed. His eyes filled with tears. He had not cried once for Rita, but now he was about to do it for this boy. Or perhaps for himself.

“I’m sorry. Let me help you. I am truly sorry.”

He grabbed him by the arms and pulled him to his feet. The boy trembled.

“Look, I live there. Just to your side. Excuse me. I don’t know how... anyway, come to my house, if you want. I don't have anything to drink, but I can give you a glass of water, to calm your nerves...”

“No, no... I’m leaving...”

“The thing is, you know? I thought that you could be the *assassin of happiness*... do you know what I am saying? That killer of the old people. I know that it is absurd. I don’t know how that occurred to me.

Matías talked and talked to try to maintain his mounting anguish. He wanted the boy to forgive him. To not fear him. He wanted to return to normal.

“Okay, it doesn’t matter,” murmured the other, wishing to go.

It was clear that normalcy was over. Nothing could return to normal without Rita. Matías panted, because the anxiety hardened his chest, and he forced himself to center his attention on the boy. So this boy was his neighbor. He looked toward the nearby plot; it had always drawn his attention, because there was never anyone and because it was a ramshackle and miserable shack, almost a slum. Poor boy. Without doubt he was an emigrant and had no money. He noticed with exasperation that the tears reappeared.

“Right. I’m sorry. Really, I’m normally not like this.”

And, with nothing else to say, he realized that in reality, he did not really know who he was.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it,” repeated the boy, more calm but scrutinizing his watery eyes with mistrust.

“Where are you from?”

The boy hesitated for a moment.

“I’m from Morocco.”

“Ah, right, from Morocco...” repeated Matías mechanically.

The boy raised his head with an almost imperceptible gesture of spiteful pride.

“These things do not happen there.”

“What things?” said Matías, fearing and believing that he was referring to the assault that he had just perpetrated against him.

“There, killers don’t kill the elderly. And they don’t live alone, the elderly. The elderly are very important in my country. And family. But here... You all believe you know everything and you know nothing.”

Rita did know, thought Matías. Rita did know but she left, and since then there was only this chaos, this fury, this perpetual night, the sadness of living under an eclipse.

Daniel had not put a single electronic brick in a damn hole for two weeks, two weeks without once playing any of his computer games. A record abstinence from gambling that he never would have believed himself capable of. Of course, in those two weeks, he had discovered Second Life, the most famous internet virtual world, and he had become fascinated and hooked; now he spent hours there. In reality he had changed one addiction for another. Well, *Segunda Vida*, and therein lay its appeal, was not a game: it was a Second Life, as indicated by its name. A 3D parallel universe with an infinite number of different regions, with houses that you could buy and furnish, with shops, museums, and newspapers; with beaches, mountains, and castles; with warehouses and universities. It was like real life, but much more free; because in SL there was everything from dinosaurs to centaurs; because you flew and you transported yourself from one region to another in two seconds; because inside the screen you could transform yourself into anything, man or woman, vampire or poodle. Even more, you could change your avatar, your look, however many times you wanted. You could change your life, change your personality, change yourself. What an immense relief for someone who, like him, had been dragging his own ruined self arduously for so many years.

Daniel was abducted by that other binary reality; in fact, lately he devoted himself only to that. To that and to his on call shifts at the hospital; he did so many because they were the only way he could make up a little bit for his miserable salary. But, as soon as he left, he was embedded in his computer screen. He lived at night, halfway between the shabby sections of San Felipe, the old and battered social security hospital center where he worked, and the most modern, futuristic, and brilliant landscapes of Second Life. He passed through the walls of cracked white tiles, the unstable formica chairs half unscrewed from their rails, and the leprous

linoleum floors of the medical center to the revolutionary steel skyscrapers or the fabulous aerial gardens of the virtual territory without any sense of continuity. And from Anton, the head of the service, a pot-bellied and miserable ass, to the magnificent avatars of SL, succulent women with silver hair, women with coats of tigresses or even dragons with breaths of fire, a stream of impressive sparks and without doubt preferable to the stink of sewer in Anton's breath. It seemed like a lie that there could be worlds so different in the same world.

SL was not a game, but shortly after entering into that alternative reality Daniel realized that, therein, he had allowed himself to play with feeling. He had almost forgotten what it was like to have feelings, because he had been anesthetized for too long. One day he realized that he had become emotionless; they had been disappearing over the course of his life in an imperceptible but continuous way, exactly the same as the hairs that had been deserting his head by means of a cowardly and stealthy escape. He discovered this loss at once too when, looking at himself casually in the mirror of a fitting room in some big department store, he saw with horror that he had a circle of disheveled hair on top of his head through which shined the skinned hide of his skull. Well, the same thing had happened with the emotions. One day he had looked at himself in the mirror of his intimacy by pure chance and had realized that, where before there were nerves and breathtaking desires and hopes, there was now only a kind of lethargy. An emotional and heavy baldness.

In fact, he didn't really understand what had happened. His life had not been especially bad nor especially hard, and there was nothing that could justify the growing dismay of things. Where had the happiness of the world gone? Perhaps Daniel would not have been a fighting or passionate kind of guy, but he remembered that in his youth he had unrealistic hopes, like

everyone. He remembered the pride that he felt finishing his medical degree, thus fulfilling the dream of his parent, who was a clinical assistant; and not only the pride, but also, and above all, the immense relief, because he thought that, by getting his degree, he was free from being like his father. He also remembered in a hazy way, like a dreamer, the trembling of his hands and his stomach while he danced with his first girlfriend in a disco; the erotic drunkenness of having her tight against him, the tearful romanticism of the slow music and of believing he was loved. Nevertheless, later all these lights shut off, like those on a Christmas tree in the garbage in January. Later, work became a brutalizing routine, first because he needed to harden in the face of the pain of the sick, but also because the shifts were stressful, the means subpar, and the salary small, because flattery for his boss was plentiful and he shirked from it. At the beginning, Daniel, who was an intern, had entered the ER believing that this service would be a good stepping stone in order to climb the ladder. At that time he believed in public health, or so he seemed to remember, although now it was difficult to imagine himself enthusiastic about anything. But then the years went by, and legions of younger and more inexperienced doctors were rising to diverse departments while he continued in the ER, postponed, trapped, nothing, buried professionally for eternity in that damn basement. What had gone wrong? For a time he said that the others were miserable ass-kissers and that they forged their paths with flattery; but when he in turn tried to suck up to the bosses, it did not work either. And so, every day more despondent and more apathetic, Daniel had already completed two decades in Emergency Care at San Felipe, getting carried away like a cork in water and investing the minimal amount of effort possible in his profession; he had not opened a medical book nor studied a new therapeutic method in fifteen

years. Of all the excesses that a man can commit, the most frequented by Daniel was that of laziness.

In that, and in everything, every day he seemed more like his father, dead years ago and whom Daniel always considered to be a poor wretch. If he wasted his time in front of the computer, the old man had squandered his time doing crosswords in an obsessive way. That small life of his father, routine, dry and passive, had caused real horror in his adolescence, but now he had discovered himself to be a carbon copy of him. Even worse: it was as if his father had returned from the next life and was possessing him, because that sudden and shameful bald patch was like his, the same as the cowardly paunch that had begun to ride over his belt, or those listless shoulders that now fell forward. The old man was incarnating himself in Daniel and Daniel was giving birth to his father, perhaps because he had not been able to have a child.

His existence, in the end, had been shrinking like a cheap sweater. The wide horizons of his adolescence had been reduced until they turned into a tiny jail: a bad job, a bad relationship, a bad life. That's why he liked Second Life so much: it had been like opening a window in the blank wall of a jail cell. In Second Life he was young again: to portray himself he had created a tall and muscular avatar, with a lot of hair and a spiky red beard. Because he spoke pretty bad English, he mainly frequented the Spanish-speaking regions: a Spanish nightclub, an Argentinian surfing beach, a Caribbean bar. In only two weeks he had made friends and he had flirted with many spectacular women -- he, who in real life barely had a handful of acquaintances and who had gone years without feeling a flutter in his heart. Right now he was lounging on a bench in a park in SL, contemplating the play of water in a fountain, listening to the subdued sound of the poplars rocked by the breeze, and chatting calmly with an avatar that had just sat at his side, a

curious type with the head of a cat, who was called Lup. It walked on two legs and had the height and the movements of a human, but its body was also furry and it sported sharp talons on its hands and feet. Daniel, who in SL was called Nilo, looked at it with a certain curiosity because he could not guess the cat's gender in RL, that is, in Real Life. And this indefiniteness made him a little nervous.

“Can I ask you if you are a man or a women in reality?” tapped out Daniel.

“Hehe, Nilo, this is SL. Leave the secrets of RL alone,” answered the avatar.

“I don't have secrets, Lup.”

“I do, and I think that you would be afraid to know them, hehe.”

The mania of hehe-ing from the veteran avatars irritated Daniel. Anyways, he felt pricked by his curiosity, and even a little uneasy. But it was an interesting uneasiness.

“You're really not going to tell me anything, Lup?”

“Well, I will allow you to ask another question. Ask me one more question and maybe I will answer you.”

Daniel thought a little. He then typed:

“What do you do in real life?”

“Mmmmm... I plan birthday parties,” answered the swindling cat.

That's a weird job, thought Daniel. But suddenly, coming from nowhere, a crazy idea crossed his mind like a lightning bolt: what if Lup was the *assassin of happiness*? And what if, on the other side of the blackness of cyberspace, that hairy and nice person whom he was talking to in a sunny park was in reality a sinister psychopath? The image lit up in his head like a scene from a movie: a modest room in darkness illuminated only by the light of the computer screen,

the dark and imprecise shape of a man typing in front of the screen and, a little further, on the corner of the table, a packet of festive balloons, a meringue pie, vials of insulin, a syringe. Daniel suddenly felt at risk, as if the computer connected him to evil, and he left SL without saying goodbye to Lup and so fast that, in his urgency to move the mouse, he burned his finger with the ember of the cigarette that he was smoking. God almighty, couldn't you even feel safe in the refuge of your tiny room behind the protection of a screen? Was there no possible sanctuary in this world? Daniel's neck was soaked in a cold sweat and his heart was racing. He thought about himself; he was also a dark and imprecise man typing in a modest room in complete darkness. He only needed the tools for the crime to become a mirror image. In reality, he already had the conscience of a criminal; he often dreamed that he had killed someone, that he had committed a murder and, although he never came to know who his victim was nor why he did it, when he woke up he continued to maintain a sense of guilt, of permanent harm, of fatal and irreversible error. Yes, at some point in the past he must have done something wrong that had ruined his life. Something that had taken him off of his path, like a train that accidentally went down a dead end.

Daniel got up, emerging from the cloud of smoke he had been immersed in, and went to the kitchen to make a whiskey on the rocks. Removing the cubes from the ice tray was annoying because the fridge was old, the freezer worked terribly, and the tray always became a small and unmanageable Arctic iceberg. He hated having to extract the ice from its mold day in and day out for his frequent drinks. Life was full of those small desperate things, life was a pure accumulation of tedious and uncomfortable moments. One has to shave every day, for example; and travel by car during rush hour down Buenos Aires Avenue, which lead into the hospital; it was no more than one kilometer of street divided by three stoplights, but sometimes it took him

an extra thirty minutes on the way. Another nuisance: having a monumental hangover after having just run out of aspirin. Or needing to write down important information and the pen won't write. Even worse: putting your hand into your pocket and having it come out all smeared because the ink had leaked from a felt-tip pen. And since we are talking about ruined shirts, what do you say when the housekeeper puts your favorite sweater in the washing machine and it comes out like a little coat for a chihuahua? Or when you go to make breakfast and there isn't a drop of milk left in the carton no matter how much you squeeze it? You're in line for a movie and someone cuts in line. You're in line with your car to take a crowded exit off of the M-30 and a load of rude people cut you in line. You arrive at the hospital and the lot is full. You're about to fall asleep after hours of insomnia and the garbage truck begins to regurgitate trash and makes loud mechanical sounds underneath your window. Or you light the wrong end of the last cigarette you had left. And so on, almost every hour and every day. Frequently something disconcerting happens, something hateful, something detestable, perhaps something small but with enough magnitude to bitter your life, like when you have to slash a damn iceberg to get ice cubes, leaving your hands painfully frostbitten, running the risk of cutting off your fingers. Not to speak of the evil tendency things have to break: the freezer created in the South Pole, every two of three lightbulbs that melt, the washing machine that jumped halfway through the kitchen, spouting water, the cell phone that turned off by itself, the ADSL that disconnected intermittently, the intercom that was always broken, which forced him to go down to the door to open it. All in all, it was necessary to recognize that life had very bad intentions.

He took two sips of whiskey and appreciated its comforting warmth. Alcohol was the best medication, he always said. Through the kitchen window he could see the narrow side street,

vacant at these early hours of the morning, and the building in front, everything shut off. Like so many other nights, Daniel felt like a vampire, a being against the grain of the rhythm of humanity, isolated as he was from others by the strange hours of the on-call shifts and by the long insomnia that caused his disrupted schedule. He took another sip from his glass, lit a cigarette, and looked down; the only streetlight that he could see illuminated a line of trash barrels, shiny and colorful recycling bins, in perfect military-like formation. They looked like tiles from a construction game for a giant child. Now, with the blessed peace from the alcohol that was infused into his veins, he found the sudden fear that he had experienced in Second Life to be ridiculous. How could he have thought for even a moment that Lup could be the psychotic murderer? All in all, certainly one of the attractions of SL was the ambiguity, not truly knowing who you were talking to... it was even hypothetically possible that any one of the seductive and exotic cyber women whom he had been flirting with was Marina, his girl. He let out a small laugh at the absurdity of that idea, but then he kept thinking that perhaps it wasn't so crazy. After all, what did he know about Marina? They had gone ages without talking and since his birthday they had barely spoken when they passed by each other in the kitchen or in the bathroom. Daniel hadn't told Marina about his discovery of Second Life and Marina had not told him anything at all. Well, actually, she had told him that they were redoing the store top to bottom and changing lines and providers, and preparing for the Christmas sales, and that's why she was travelling so much lately, and that's why she had not come home to sleep that night. Or rather, that day, because the sun was almost up. Daniel felt a kind of suffocation, a small affixation, which probably was from the whiskey, or rather from that damn warm winter. He opened the window and breathed in the morning breeze; in the background he heard the noise of traffic coming from

the main streets, a deafening rumble of metallic waters. No, said Daniel as he served himself more whiskey, Marina couldn't be on Second Life. She hated those computer games; she thought that they were childish or foolish. And besides, what would she need that virtual world for? She already had everything in the real world. Including, surely, some lover. That was a *Segunda Vida*, damnit.

There were workmates of Matías who were very distrustful. Some did not work at night, because they were afraid; and many rejected more than one route because the passenger gave them a bad feeling. A few had put up the inconvenient protective screen and still were nervous; others had a mental map of the city full of black zones -- destinations that they never went near. These fearful guys had reasons to be like this; usually, they had been assaulted, robbed, maybe even injured. Safety was an obsessive theme for the taxi drivers, an endless inventory every time they met or crossed paths: last night, they put a screwdriver to Fulano's neck, they say that in Las Ventas they beat up someone from Radio Taxi, in Moratalaz they had split open the head of one of their companions. Like the whores, thought Matías. Exactly the same as the whores. Sometimes he heard them talking to each other when he took them to a call, or in the Oasis, where they tended to meet up to drink a coffee or eat something during their breaks. They also talked about the first incidents, a meticulous recount of the most recent misfortunes, and warnings. These small threads of rumors roamed through the black night, like those ropes loaded with bells which used to be placed around campsites when an enemy's stealthy arrival was feared. And it is that the city, at night, was a different world, a dormant war, a besieged square. A flimsy campsite in wild territory.

However, nothing violent had ever happened to Matías. Perhaps it was because of his size, because of his solid back and his gorilla hands on the steering wheel. Or because he had not been driving taxis for that many years. One night he took a very young and very insightly boy near the Fuencarral cemetery, when the area was still under construction and with the block of apartments half-built. The boy directed him until they came face to face with some fences and excavations that blocked the way. Matías stopped to back up and turn around when he heard his

passenger stuttering something. “What?” He asked. And again he whispered unintelligibly. So Matías rested his arm on the passenger seat and turned so he was looking at him. “What did you say?” And then, to his astonishment, the boy opened the door and threw himself out of the car as if his life depended on it. It was twelve o’clock in the morning, he didn’t see anyone around, the ground was full of debris and holes, and the boy didn’t seem to be very steady, in such a way that as soon as he got out he tripped on something and bashed his head open on a rock. Matías got out to help him, but he had to use all his might to get him back into the car because although the boy was stunned, his face dripping with blood, he fought like a rabid cat to prevent the taxi driver from picking him up. It was only later, much later, after leaving the boy at the hospital, that Matías began to understand what had happened. He was cleaning the blood from his taxi when he found a small kitchen knife on the floor and then, in an auditorily illuminating moment, he deciphered what his passenger had wanted to say with his unrecognizable babbling: “This is a holdup, give me all your money.” Matías’s tranquility and the innocence with which he turned to ask him what he said must have been taken as a challenge, for the overwhelming serenity of someone who knows that he is stronger and that is going to make you swallow that damn knife. From there the flight, the fear, the struggle. He didn’t report the boy, and he didn’t mention the incident to the other taxi drivers. Of all the excesses a man can commit, the one Matías committed most was that of silence.

Perhaps because of this lack of traumatic experiences, he was never intimidated by the route’s destination, the darkness, or the threatening looks of a client. For example, right now he was circulating through the desolate clearings northeast of the M-40 with a passenger of sinister grimness behind his back. It was four o’clock in the morning and the beltway was almost empty;

occasionally a solitary and fast car passed them, buzzing like an insect. In reality Matías didn't exactly know where they were going; the guy had only told him to take the road in the direction of the Burgos highway. He took a look at the guy in the rearview mirror: a profile that was as sharp as an ax, a mean chin, a scraggly and dirty beard, red and feverish eyes. It was a brutish and nasty face. Matías turned to look forward. In the distance he saw the skyline of the city, the newest half lit skyscrapers and the orange glow of the urban lights that, glued to the profile of the horizon, seemed to be the mist from the breaths of the buildings. But before arriving at this kingdom of power and wealth, to that display of steel and kilowatts, there was the dark stain of the suburban clearings that they were now passing through, arid fields that, centuries ago, must have been farmed, but that were now no more than dirty wastelands invaded by a horde of drug addicts and the poor. Lands humiliated by trash, the crimes and pains accumulating there year after year.

“Here, man, here! I'm telling you, stop here!”

The guy nervously hit Matías's shoulder with his hand, which caused Matías to wince with displeasure. He turned on the emergency lights, stopped the car on the side of the road, and turned to look at him. But the passenger was counting out the money to pay Matías and didn't notice the taxi driver's anger. They found themselves in the middle of nothing, on one of the straight parts of the road, surrounded by a curtain of black night. The man got out of the taxi, jumped over the guardrail, and started walking across the field. He walked with his head tucked between his shoulders, with constrained and quick steps, looking at the ground. Like a hyena in one of those animal documentaries, thought Matías. An alert predator. In the distance, in the clearing below, he glimpsed among the shadows a wavy sea of shacks. That's where he's going,

the taxi driver thought. And he was right: the guy was going to a tin shack where, eight months later, during a sweltering summer night, he will beat his wife to death with a stick, unhinged by drugs and the frantic chirping of the cicadas. But all of that had not yet occurred and Matías almost felt sorry for him, almost pitying the extreme solitude of the scoundrel.

The taxi driver continued to look at the man until his silhouette disappeared into the darkness, and then frowned uneasily. Not far from this slum was another, even more terrible place. It was the Poblado, the most dangerous neighborhood in Madrid; it was surrounded by a strip of bonfires and the skeletons of burned cars that formed a kind of exclusion belt, a defensive wall that no one dared to cross. Even hell had its slums; he could always find a place that was a little bit worse, the same that he could always feel a little bit more pain. Less now. Now, thought Matías with a shudder, he had arrived at the heart of the pain, at the very center of the pain. He could not suffer anymore and for that reason the world had been emptied of any meaning and seemed like it was about to break into a thousand pieces, like a fine sheet of ice over a dark lake. Matías grabbed the steering wheel so that he would not fall into the immense chasm of those dark waters. He needed to find an explanation for the inexplicable, a justification for Rita's death. He needed a message or a punishment. Something that could put things into place.

He was shaking, but he couldn't stay stopped on the shoulder of the road for much longer, not even at this time in the morning and with barely any traffic. He started slowly and drove with a dull effort, without having a clear idea of where he was heading. Without stopping to think about it, he turned around and turned around via the exit, and then left the M-40 by a small road that snaked through the dry fields. He immediately began to see the first bonfires that signaled

his proximity to Poblado, and the ghostly figures cut out in black above the flames. He stretched out his hand to lock the doors, but at the last second decided not to: whatever happened happened, that would be his destiny, that the answer. He circulated slowly along the edge of the border of the barbarian territory and reached an underpass underneath the railroad tracks, a narrow and inconceivably dirty tunnel where among the litter of crushed cans, dead rats, and indiscernible rags one could find numerous personal documents, ID cards for municipal swimming pools or video game stores, opened coin purses and squashed women's bags, an avalanche of waste discarded by a legion of thieves. And there, just outside the exit of the tunnel, he read graffiti on the wall that said "Revenge will set you free." In the background the shimmery line of the city was visible again, with its dream of luxurious skyscrapers and its menacing nightmare of filth and misery.

The Oasis had a long L-shaped bar and half a dozen formica tables with apple-green colored plastic chairs. It was open twenty-four hours, but business really got going at night. It was located close to La Coruña highway, a stone's throw from a large gas station and, above all, next to the Cachito, which was one of the most well-known whorehouses in Madrid's surroundings, a freestanding three-story building bathed in the sticky light from a bunch of pink neon lights. The Cachito shone like a galactic chewing gum in the middle of nothing, but its reputation was quite dark. In fact, the regulars at the Oasis called it the Cachete, or the Slap, a notorious euphemism, because sometimes the girls appeared glum and sore as a consequence of Draco's correctives, the owner of the place (who didn't hit them in the face so as not to spoil the goods) and, also, there was a morbid rumor about the sexual games that they were forced to accept, because part of the brothel's business was dedicated to sadomasochism.

Aside from some special whores who held certain privileges, the majority of the prostitutes lived in the whorehouse. In theory Draco prohibited his girls from leaving the building except to do some previously arranged service, but in reality he allowed them to take a couple of breaks every night and allowed them to come to the Oasis. During his scrawny and cruel thirty three years, and having been leader of a band of criminals since he was fourteen, Draco had learned to tolerate small infractions of his own rules, fostering in his victims a useful and grateful Stockholm syndrome. In addition, he could always use the transgressions to punish the girls whenever he saw fit. Draco was an evil genius. He would not still be alive at this age otherwise. And he was also an evil with ambitions; he wanted to transform the Cachito into the most modern whorehouse in all of Europe, an authentic emporium of sex *a la carte*. Sometimes,

thinking of all that he had already achieved despite starting from the bottom, he was thrilled with the magnitude of his projects and with his own business audacity.

The bulk of nighttime customers at the Oasis were whores and taxi drivers. They leaned against the bar and took advantage of the continuous schedule, of the grill that was never shut off, and of the good atmosphere that the place had. It was a quiet location, one of those modest places where the whores could take a break and protect themselves from the world and from the streets; a true oasis where no one messed with them and where the taxi drivers could get a cup of coffee with their companions and forget for a moment the fears of the night. It was a family-friendly bar, although it was a sad kind of family of the uprooted and the nocturnal. But what family doesn't exude a few drops of sadness, when one looks closely?

Since Rita's death, Matías had gotten into the habit of spending every night at the Oasis, taking advantage of whatever service happened to be near him. At the bar he ate his only hot meal of the day, giving the leftovers to Perra and Chucho. Today he had arrived early ; it had only been a few hours since he'd woken up and he wasn't hungry, but he forced himself to eat a plate of tripe with chickpeas that had been served to him by Luzbella, the Colombian waitress,, because he didn't know if he could come back later. He was sitting in his usual place, on a stool and at the shortest part of the bar, close to the wall. At the longer part of the L, four of his taxi driver companions were standing up chatting very animatedly. Matías knew them superficially and they also knew him; therefore, because they knew of his reserved character, they had limited their greeting to him to a movement of their heads. The short part of the counter seemed to be the section for the lonely and the self-absorbed, because it was where the regulars who did not want to be disturbed sat. To the left of Matías was a very young black whore whom he remembered

having seen before because her beauty was so unforgettable. And it wasn't that Matías wanted her, it wasn't that at all, because after Rita, that, for him, was over. But the girl seemed to carry a light inside of her; she was a resplendent creature, a precious and fragile being whom one immediately felt an urge to protect. Damn it, she was young enough to be his daughter, the daughter that he and Rita could never have. He remembered that this soft and exquisite thing worked in the Cachito and he felt such desolation that he had to turn away and look the other way.

On the other side, supported by the wall, was Cerebro, the most regular Oasis customer. She always sat on the same stool and was as inherent to the place as the nickel-plated beer tap. Cerebro arrived at the beginning of the night and left at dawn, and in the meantime dedicated herself to slowly drinking red wine. It seemed as though she was always drinking the same glass, but in reality Luzbella discreetly refilled it once in awhile. Thus, sipping sparingly and deliberately from her cup, she had to end up knocking back a considerable amount of alcohol; nevertheless, she never raised hell nor showed any signs of being drunk. She only became a little bit more rigid as the night passed, and when she left at dawn she walked as stiffly as a hussar and with suspiciously slow movements, as if she was making a titanic effort to control herself so that her blind-drunkenness would not be noticed. And she did it; no one noticed. But in any case, Matías distrusted her; the taxi driver, who detested people who drank, was sure that, although she hid it, she was a damn drunk. Cerebro looked like she was in her seventies and was a very thin, withered-looking woman, with greyish hair and perpetually reddened eyes. Nevertheless, she cared for her appearance: she was wearing clothes that, although worn, must have been good, and were clean and ironed. Her nails were cut evenly, her grey hair meticulously gathered into a

braid down her back, and two tiny earrings shone with cheap opaque crystal in her ears. She was a lady who was as sharp and neat as a surgical instrument, and her gestures had a natural arrogance, something hard and haughty. No one dared to talk to her and she did not seem to care about anyone either. And that was how Matías had come to sit next to Cerebro: the security of not being troubled. If the widowed liked to come to the Oasis, it was precisely because he could be calm and alone. Matías was the quietest taxi driver in the world and since his wife's death, he had put himself into a shell of supreme solitude that surrounded him like armor: the emptiness of his half-finished cottage, the bubble of self-absorption in which he lived, the isolation of his taxi, that rolling box in which he was locked inside. Especially since, in the final days of Rita's agony, he had ripped off the antenna that linked him to Radio Taxi headquarters: he couldn't bear the monotone and insistent voice of the operator, that atrocious proof of the indifference of the world. Thus, isolated and mute, his car transformed itself more than ever into a kind of metal coffin with which he was able to share the hopeless solitude of the dead.

So that night, while he was finishing his food, Matías started to watch the news on the bar's television, something that freed him from having to look at his neighbors. The television was an accomplice of misanthropy. But the news is a window into the world and sometimes can throw harmful or dangerous images at you. That was what happened on that occasion: that which Matías saw on the small screen ended up triggering furious events that were close to ruining his life. And what he saw was the wrinkled and fragile face of an old man.

“Fuck!” exclaimed the taxi driver, jumping on his stool.

Yes, yes, he knew that aged rodent's face, which looked like that of a toothless and defenseless rabbit.

“Fuck, yes, it’s him, it’s him, it’s the old guy from Almansa Street!” he said in a loud voice, agitated, astonished.

Luzbella looked at him, surprised, from the other side of the bar and, noting his interest, turned up the volume of the television with the remote control.

His name was Felipe Varela. That’s what the newscaster just said. Matías hadn’t known his name, of course, but he was sure that the old man had gotten into his taxi on Almansa Street the night before. It was a face that was impossible to confuse thanks to the blemish that he had on his cheek, a type of birthmark in the shape of a half moon. Yeah, it was barely twenty-four hours before that he brought him to the emergency room at San Felipe. He had even talked with him a little bit, because the old man didn’t feel well and was scared! He was dizzy and the taxi driver had accompanied him to the door of the hospital. He couldn’t believe it.

“It’s not possible... I brought that man to the emergency room last night and he was fine... at least, he was alive...” he babbled, incoherent and frightened.

And now he was dead. Murdered. Damnit, they had killed him. Now the newscaster was explaining that he had been found in his home, already dead, with the frozen smile on his face. The poor grandfather had become the latest victim of the *assassin of happiness*. Matías couldn’t believe it. And to think that he had brought him to San Felipe! Above it all. Among all the hospitals in Madrid, they had gone right to that fateful place: the scene of Rita’s torment. What a horrible succession of coincidences. He felt the cold hand of darkness brush against his back and he shuddered.

“Yesterday he was fine... Yesterday he was fine...” he repeated incredulously.

“*Vulnerant omnes, ultima neecat,*” murmured a grave and raspy voice next to him. “They all hurt. The last one kills.”

Matías gave such a start that he almost fell off of his stool. He turned towards Cerebro, who was the one who was speaking, dumbfounded by surprise. The woman stared at her cup with indifference.

“The hours...” whispered Matías with anguish. “The answer is the hours.”

Cerebro gave him a sidelong glance. Her thin and withered mouth pressed into a slight smile without happiness.

“Well. I see that you know the classic riddle. Yes indeed, the hours. And the inevitable end. What’s so scandalous about the death of an old man? Life is like that.”

The taxi driver closed his eyes and grabbed the edge of the counter, because the Oasis had started to spin around him. “They all hurt. The last one kills.” That was what Rita used to say. It was one of her favorite sentences. Especially after they diagnosed her tumor.

“There are too many coincidences,” he muttered, dizzy and wishing he could vomit. “I took that man yesterday in my taxi and now I see that he has been murdered... And we went to San Felipe, which is where my wife died... and now you’ve just said the same thing Rita used to say when she was very sick...”

Cerebro took a sip of her wine and frowned.

“When did your wife die?”

“A month... a month and a half ago...” he murmured in a strangled voice, because the words clawed at his throat.

“I see. I’m sorry,” remarked Cerebro.

And she said it without fuss or drama but with a rare authenticity. She said it as if she really meant it. As if it were not an overused phrase but instead an offering of solidarity: listen, I know what it's like to suffer and I can be with you for a few seconds on this journey. Matías grunted, frightened by his own weakness and by the spark of closeness that he just felt with Cerebro, and that put him on guard. Remember that she's an alcoholic, he thought. Remember that one cannot trust drunks and their sentimental gushings. Like his mother, when she hugged him and filled his cheeks with kisses and snot that smelled like cheap gin. Until his tears stank of alcohol. He felt a sudden, exasperated rejection of his companion at the counter. Damn drunk old women. In the end they were all the same, although they hid their symptoms of drunkenness as well as Cerebro. But then, once the taxi driver had already managed to balance out the woman, she spoke again:

“As for what you say about coincidences, you should know that it's something that is very common. Something so frequent that there have even been scientists who have studied it.”

Matías raised his eyebrows, reluctantly interested.

“There is Kammerer's law, for example... this law postulates that when one coincidence occurs, there are always many more. In a manner of speaking, the coincidences coincide. But you don't know who Kammerer is...” added Cerebro.

“No.”

“No, of course. That's natural.”

Excited by the idea that coincidence coincide, Matías had forgotten his decision not to trust the woman. He remained silent, with the hope that she would continue to speak. But

Cerebro was twirling her glass of wine between her fingers and seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

“Who is he?” the taxi driver finally asked.

Cerebro frowned and gave him an icy stare.

“Who is who?”

“The man from that law. The scientist you were talking about.”

“Kammerer... bah. It’s a long story and you’re not going to be interested.”

“You’re wrong. It does interest me.”

“It might be, but I don’t feel like telling you about it,” the woman said sharply. “I don’t like talking to people I don’t know.”

Matías became irritated: “I know that I’m not a stranger to you. We’ve seen each other here many times.”

“Well that’s worse. Because I prefer not to become close with anyone. Ultimately humans are always a nuisance,” said Cerebro in a cutting way.

There was not the slightest trace of the empathy with which she had said “I’m sorry.” Confused and humiliated, Matías waved over Luzbella, paid for his food and left the Oasis without saying goodbye. He stopped at the door, unsure and indecisive. In front of him, the Cachito seemed to float in the darkness, a giant cube in screaming pink color. His legs were trembling and he felt faint. He was afraid but he didn’t know of what. Of the murder of the old man, of his visit to San Felipe, of Cerebro repeating the words that Rita always said to him. He was afraid of horror, and of pain, and of going crazy. He needed someone to help him organize his world. He inhaled deeply and went back into the Oasis. He hesitantly approached Cerebro.

“Look, I don’t feel well,” he murmured, swallowing his pride. “Please tell me this story about coincidences. Maybe it’s nothing, or maybe it will help me. I need to be able to understand. I’m just so confused.”

The old woman looked at him surprised. The thinly veiled hardness in her eyes seemed to soften a little.

“You truly want to understand? You truly want to learn? Fine. After all, you’ve given me the solution to my riddle... That’s not very common. Okay, let’s say that I’m an oracle and you’ve just earned my response by answering well...”

And she said that with a small and bitter laugh, as if she were mocking the situation and herself. Her laughter briefly showed a few broken teeth and a black hole from a lost premolar and canine. She covered her mouth with her hand in an unexpected gesture of shame; but then she lowered her arm, closed her lips, and recovered her proud and haughty demeanor.

“But I won’t allow for a single interruption. Be quiet and listen -- as if you were in class,” she ordered.

She settled into her bar stool and took a sip from her glass.

“Paul Kammerer was an Austrian biologist that, back in 1920, was one of the most famous scientists on the planet. But who knows about him today? Absolutely no one. You see how the glories of this world vanish. Kammerer was an evolutionist, a support of Lamarck’s theories; therefore, he sustained that living beings could acquire physical characteristics throughout their lives to adapt to the environment and were then capable of transmitting these changes to their offspring. While Darwin stated that evolution was the result of the action of natural selection over time, and that what an individual learned throughout his life could not be

transmitted genetically. Over the years Darwin won the war, but then the battle was very fierce, and Kammerer performed some experiments on a nice little toad, a midwife toad, which got suckers that it didn't have before, and then transmitted them to its offspring, which seemed to definitively prove that it was Lamarck who was right. It is because of this that Kammerer was so famous. The bad thing is that they later discovered that the suckers were falsified with Indian ink and that the experiments had been tampered with. Kammerer shot himself in 1926, leaving a letter in which he said that he was innocent. The poor fellow was not capable of bearing the torment of the scandal. You must be very strong so that you are not torn apart when all of society turns against you, when all the people that you know turn into your executioners.”

She emptied her glass in one gulp and stayed quiet and thoughtful. Matías remembered what was said about Cerebro in the bar: that she has been a very important scientist and a professor of something complicated. Hence the nickname she had been given, although Cerebro's brain had already spent too many years marinating in alcohol. To know what would have happened in her life, so that things would be spoiled in that way. Of course, Matías knew very well how easy it was for the world to suddenly collapse; thinking of this, the taxi driver looked over at the frail woman with vague empathy. But the old woman remained self-absorbed.

“And the coincidences...” muttered Matías to motivate her.

Cerebro came back to herself:

“Indeed, of course, now I'll go to that. Between toads, Kammerer published a very curious book entitled *The Law of Seriality*, in which he presented his theory about coincidences. Kammerer was a collector of coincidences; he began to write them down in his twenties and when he put out his book, nearly two decades later, he had included one hundred cases in his

collection. Most are very boring; for example, that his wife was reading a book starring a character named Equis and that, going to the train, he saw a passenger that resembled one of his friends who was also called Equis, and later, in the afternoon on the same day, the same friend appeared suddenly and unexpectedly in Kammerer's home... Things like these, tremendously humdrum and perfectly useless. But with his examples, the scientist wanted to signal that coincidences come in series, that are not isolated incidents, and that this perception is part of popular wisdom since the beginning of time. All the players know that there are spurts of good and bad luck, and in every language there are refrains that reference this, like "when it rains, it pours," and "misfortune never comes alone."

There were misfortunes that didn't need to come with company, reflected Matías. Misfortunes that were so enormous that they occupied everything and didn't leave space for even the smallest trouble... or maybe they did? For example, the fact that he had driven that old man in his taxi last night, was that a misfortune? Even worse; this coincidence, was it announcing that more misfortunes were coming? And the fact that they had gone precisely to San Felipe -- what did that mean? All these coincidences had to make some sense. He looked expectantly at Cerebro; more and more overpowered by her words.

"Kammerer sustained that there was a general physical law which makes the universe tend towards unity. According to him, there exists a force of attraction comparable to that of gravity, but instead of attracting masses, it attracts facts, objects, similar forms. In other words: the universe, as the second Thermodynamic law establishes, tends towards entropy, that is, towards disorder; but Kammerer assured that, on the other hand, the universe also tends towards order and harmony, towards that elegant symmetry that one perceives in a salt crystal or in the

structure of a snowflake. And coincidences would be a consequence of that law, of that force that would go grouping similar facts and objects in time and in space. Anyways, when the book was published it was well received. Einstein himself said the theory was original and that there was nothing absurd about it. But six or seven years later came the toad scandal and Kammerer's death, and everything became buried in oblivion."

"But that's a shame, people should know that this law exists..." said Matías, unable to contain himself, because he found Kammerer's explanation to be sensible.

"You don't understand it; it is an absurd theory, scientifically unsustainable," grunted Cerebro. "No researcher takes it seriously and, in reality, it isn't science -- it's poetry. It is a beautiful idea, of course. To think that there exists a drive for order and harmony in the universe is a poignant and consoling idea. Anyway, that is all I can tell you. You can see if it helps you."

Yes, Cerebro must have been a professor of something, because despite her initial reluctance, the pleasure of teaching, of explaining, was noticeable in her. Matías did not care that the theory of coincidences had not been accepted by science. How many times had famous scientists been mistaken throughout history? Matías was a self-taught but reasonably cultured man. He liked to read and learn new things. In fact, maybe his love for reading combined with his dislike for soccer had contributed to his isolation within the taxi drivers union. The fact is that Matías knew of the relativity of scientific knowledge throughout history, and how the pioneers had often been brushed aside.

"You know what?" added Cerebro suddenly, as if she had been listening to his thoughts. "The worst thing is that now some biologists that have studied Kammerer's experiments, like the famous Stephen Jay Gould, have come to the conclusion that it is very probable that the midwife

toad truly developed those suckers... there is a Darwinian explanation of the matter that is too long to tell you, but that demonstrates that possibility. What probably happened is that then the war came, the toads died, and Kammerer perhaps had difficulty reproducing the experiment. Maybe then he himself or some other person committed the Indian ink fraud which, of course, is unjustifiable. But the point is that the poor fellow must have been right.”

That was all that Matías needed to hear. If in the end it had been shown that Kammerer had been right with the toads, why couldn't he think that one day the same thing would happen with the law of seriality? Suddenly he was certain that a great truth was hidden there. Of course: coincidences had to have a *why*. To have met the old man the day before his murder and to have brought him precisely to San Felipe, some meaning must have been hidden by some force. It was a message that destiny was sending to him. And even more coincidences could be added! Like the fact that he had come to the Oasis earlier than usual, and therefore could have seen the newscast with the news of the murder. And that Cerebro formulated the riddle about the hours and then told him the story of Kammerer! Think, Matías, he thought with anguish, think a little, all of this has to serve for something, you have to *do* something with all of this. You have to understand what the message is. After the weeks of chaos and stupor that he had lived after Rita's death, after so many broken and lost hours, maybe the world could regain some sense.

Before he was a taxi driver, Matías had worked for one of the major moving companies. And before that, he had been a bricklayer. And even before that, he had been in a correctional facility for robbing car radios. He was fifteen years old then, spending the days smoking joints, and he was like a feather that, perched on the edge of an abyss, could fall into the void with the smallest breath. But, when he left the reformatory, Rita decided to save him from himself. Rita, his neighbor, had already helped him before, had already been there to dry his eyes as a kid or to make him a *tortilla* when his mother was drunk and there was nothing left to eat in his house; but it was when he left the correctional facility that Rita truly took hold of the situation when she looked for the stonemason job and forced him to continue studying at night. Plus, she brought him to the movies, made him listen to classical music, and helped him to discover that reading could be an exciting thing. Finally, that same Rita, with soft white skin, welcomed him into her heart and into her warm belly. When they made love for the first time, he was seventeen and Rita had just turned thirty. By then he had already been with other women, but with her, everything was different. When he entered the juicy refuge, in the splendid nest that Rita guarded between her legs, Matías felt as if he was returning home.

Shortly after starting to live together, they left Valladolid and moved to Madrid. They fled from the rude and alcohol-fueled insults from Matías' mother, from the slander from their neighbors, from the morbid curiosity. It was a radical change of life, a sharp cut; in fact, Matías never returned to see his mother. He didn't even know if she was alive and he didn't have any desire to know. The scandal at the beginning of their relationship impacted them so that, during the rest of their lives together, even when the age difference was hardly noticeable, they lived apart from everyone else. They were the kind of people that everyone seemed to appreciate, but

in reality, they were not friendly with anyone else. They had each other, and that was enough, and when Rita got sick, Matías fell into a vortex of misanthropy. His dry monosyllables discouraged the calls of concern from their acquaintances until he got them to give up, Matías didn't tell anyone about Rita's fast deterioration and ended up throwing his cellphone into a trashcan in San Felipe. His wife's death required everything from him, in the same way that he had enjoyed her life before.

Rita was a teacher and loved her job, but after she got with Matías she stopped teaching forever. No doubt she feared being that much more vulnerable to the poisonous rumors if she continued in her job. She was a woman who had a gift for pedagogy; she taught with ease and with modesty. She liked to share what she knew and the taxi driver liked to learn. So then Matías became her only student.

When they arrived in Madrid, Rita worked as a secretary in a computer company and later in management, he began working in a moving company as a delivery guy and was promoted until he was responsible for the team. His size and his strength helped him to move the heaviest furniture, but he also knew how to handle and pack fragile objects better than anyone else, because Rita's body had taught him to touch with wisdom and with delicacy. Eventually, Matías had to leave the job because of back problems, but he did so with regret because, despite the difficulty, he liked it. He enjoyed the exhausting explosion of energy that was present in every move, the challenge of circus-like speed that the team imposed on itself to finish as quickly as possible, the sensation of being a kind of surgeon for other people's lives that violently imposed order into their houses. Because, when he was making a move, everything came out: they opened drawers that hadn't been opened for years and emptied closets whose

bottoms had not been touched for over half a century. It was like slitting open an abdomen with a scalpel and beginning to take out the tangled mess of bowels, the endless detritus that humans begin to collect due to our sickening desire to hoard. Throughout his professional life, Matías had filled cases and cases of filthy junk, of useless filth, well packed and labelled, taking up space in the truck and that, he knew, would be thrown into the trash as soon as they got to the new house. Thus, he restored a minimal order, thus he combated the chaos that proliferated in the dark corners. At least until those useless objects returned to grow, disorderly, in the new home like mushrooms in the shade. Now that he thought about it, with his job at the moving company, he had also contributed to that universal harmony that Kammerer had talked about.

Daniel was lying down, naked and face up, on a wooden horse. Tight iron shackles attached his wrists and ankles to the apparatus. Standing next to him, a woman raised a whip with seven tails that ended in metal balls, and released a formidable blow onto his back. The doctor twisted in pain from the lash of the whip. Although, to be exact, the one who was writhing was Nilo, his muscular, redheaded avatar in Second Life. Daniel contemplated the scene on his computer screen, feeling a vague sexual excitement and, at the same time, considerable frustration, because the three dimensional drawings on SL were nothing more than drawings, and because the avatar's movements were repetitive and mechanical: the woman always whipping in the same way, Nilo shivering in the same way, and his virtual skin remaining smooth and unscathed. What a dumb perversion, he thought. The situation seemed grotesque; nothing was as pathetic as an innocent vice. It was the first time in the doctor's life that he become interested in the world of sadomasochism, and he felt disappointed.

"Truthfully, I don't see the fun in this, it's quite boring, let's leave it," he typed on the keyboard.

Lup stopped immediately.

"Are you feeling uncomfortable?" she asked.

"No, I feel ridiculous. It's a bore and it's nonsense," answered Daniel, loosening the shackles and standing up.

"I'm sorry. Do you want to try a different device?"

They were in the crypt of a cliché gloomy stone castle. Along the length of several rooms lit with big smoking torches were dozens of torture instruments, every one with a small instruction guide so that, when using them, the avatars executed the proper movements for the

punishment, like the lashes or the twisting from pain. In order to go down to the crypt, they had to get tickets from the ticket office located upstairs, because the place was a club and a recreation center for the sadomasochists, or rather, the fans of BDSM, which was what the Yankees now called sadomasochism, as Lup had explained to him; apparently it sounded better. Politically correct things. Daniel had discovered, to his surprise, that in Second Life there was a lot of sex (a lot of *Slove* and *Slex*, as the residents of SL said), and above all weird sex, a lot of sadomasochism, a lot of slave and master play or mistress and slave play. Daniel did not come looking for this when he entered SL, but his sex life was so catastrophic, so non-existent as of late, that when one of his friends insinuated something in the virtual world, it excited his crotch in the real world.

“No, thank you. I don’t want to try anything else. I’d rather we sat on one of the couches in front of the fire and chatted for a bit. But wait a minute for me to get dressed, please,” he wrote.

Lup waited patiently with her arms crossed over her lavish chest. His friend Lup no longer had a cat head and was no longer his friend, but his friend who was a girl, because it turned out that Lup was a woman after all -- or so she said., and Daniel believed her. Now Lup’s avatar was a real woman, tall and athletic, with jet-black hair gathered in a large ponytail down her back. She wore a transparent black lace suit that was very form-fitting, extremely high stilettos, black gloves that went over her elbows, and thick spiky brass bracelets over her gloves. Scary and very attractive. Daniel again felt a faint tickle in his sensitive area. Now he knew that Lup could not in any way be the *assassin of happiness*, because she lived in Canada, around

Vancouver, thousands of miles away and in another timezone; his night was her day. In fact, Daniel had brought his laptop to his shift so that he could run into Lup in SL.

“Perhaps you felt assaulted by the lashing, Nilo?” asked Lup politely. Daniel had discovered that the perverts in SL were very well mannered.

“No, no! The opposite. I mean that I found it to be very stupid,” he answered after resting on a red couch with gold tassels.

Daniel was one of those people that, when they were unaware of something, tended to appear scornful and superior, as if they were better and no one could teach them anything. That’s why he started to think that the individuals who participated in BDSM in Second Life were, in reality, fools, sissies who didn’t dare do it for real. He was eager to prove his theory and decided to interrogate Lup:

“Can I ask you a personal question? Have you ever done sadomasochism in real life?”

“Of course! That was how I met my husband twenty years ago. It was wonderful doing BDSM... but then he turned into another person, and now we don’t have much of a relationship, as you know.”

Yes, he knew. He and Lup had confided in each other the past few days. He knew that the woman was forty-eight years old, that she had been born in Barcelona, that she didn’t have kids, that she got along badly with her Canadian husband, that she was in charge of a small party-planning business, that she had to get up at five-thirty in the morning to go to work, that all of her free time -- including weekends -- was spent stuck in SL. That was all he knew about her, but that was enough. And now he had to add that revealing fact about her sex life. Wow, she was an actually sadomasochist... Daniel felt a small repulsion, a pinch of displeasure, paradoxically

intermixed with a certain admiration. With a fascination of the wild. So her relationship with her husband had deteriorated because he no longer hit her in bed -- or because he didn't let himself be beaten. How strange life was.

“Doctor Ortiz, sorry, but...”

The nurse opened the door suddenly, startling him. He tried to hid the forbidden cigarette he was smoking and quickly shut off his computer.

“Yes, yes, I'm coming.”

As the night had been quiet, he had told the residents that he was going to take a nap in the break room. But they never let him rest for long. He went out, pissed off, and went to the examination rooms.

“What's up?”

“It's just that I think that this is clearly battery, and I told her that we have to report this to the police, but she doesn't want us to...” said a very young and nervous R1.

And he then moved to the side, letting Daniel see the splendid and fulminant spectacle of the most beautiful woman that Daniel had ever seen in his life, a willowy black woman with luminous skin and a long, flexible neck. She had such natural elegance that the stretcher on which she was seated was transformed into a throne. The woman looked at Daniel with a tranquil expression on her face.

“It was an accident, doctor. And it would not be good to report it to the police.”

She had an unexpectedly severe voice, resonant like brass, and she spoke very good Spanish adorned with a mild flutter of an exotic accent. Daniel neared the girl, still stunned by her beauty, and took the arm that she held outstretched. He noticed with astonished disgust that

his hands trembled a little when he touched her warm and smooth skin; it seemed unbelievable that a veteran and middle-aged doctor such as himself let himself be rattled by a beautiful woman. He forced himself to maintain a professional distance, using the doctoral and superior tone that always had been so protective, and studied the sweet forearm of the girl, scowling scornfully. On the top part, halfway between her wrist and her elbow, there was a bloody cross, about three centimeters in height by three centimeter in width, a very profound and precise cut, without a doubt executed by a firm hand and a very fine and sharp blade. It was a professional cut worthy of a surgeon. He snorted with genuine sorrow and he grabbed the girl's other arm and lifted her sleeve; there was a thin mark, already healed, the same cross. Daniel had seen that type of wounds before on other girls. Including, one time, on a cheek. He looked at the girl.

“It wouldn't be good to report it for whom?” he asked with a grunt.

“It wouldn't be good for me, doctor.”

The girl had spoken with a gentle firmness and now looked fixedly at him. Those perfect caramel-colored eyes, the perfect oval of a Renaissance virgin, those full and perfect lips, those... Daniel again felt that he was losing his footing. She was certainly a whore, but she was also a goddess.

“Where do you work?”

She shook her head without saying a word.

“Don't worry, I'm going to sew you up and we will not file any complaints,” he said quickly. “It was simply personal curiosity.”

The girl looked at him thoughtfully, as if she was evaluating the meaning behind his words. She then seemed to come to a conclusion and smiled briefly.

“I work at the Cachito. You can come see me whenever you want. It’s on the La Coruña highway.”

“I know where it is!” blurted Daniel, dying of embarrassment.

It was obvious that the girl had believed that in exchange for attending to her and not reporting her, he had asked for payment in kind. He noted how embarrassment heated his cheeks. But he had never gone to the whorehouse. He detested the idea. He began to work on the wound with exaggerated diligence to hide his distress. He cleaned and sewed it, trying to concentrate on what he was doing, but he couldn’t avoid smelling her marvelous aroma, and felt the promising animalistic warmth that was discharged from her body. When all is said and done, he thought, she’s still a whore... maybe I could go to the Cachito one day and... the idea provoked half an erection and, at the same time, a disgust in himself and an anguish so great that he knew he would never do that. But by God, he said, if these poor people are like slaves, look what they have done to her. Are you going to go there to be her executioner, too? He noticed that his erection was fading and sinking more and more, until it was hidden in the last corner of his crotch. He finished sewing and bandaged her forearm.

“Don’t worry. You owe me nothing. Absolutely nothing,” he said, perhaps too empathetically, once he was finished.

The girl, who was called Fatma, looked at him curiously. She was convinced that the doctor wanted her, so his rejection could mean that he despised her for being a whore; but that, on the other hand, mattered little to her. What mattered was that she needed to be cured and had been, that she had to avoid police complications and she wasn’t going to have them, and she had achieved all of this without indebting herself in any way. Fatma considered herself lucky and

smiled with all the light and harmony in the world in her even teeth. And then, for the first time in a long time, Daniel felt almost at peace with himself.

Matías had been parked in front of San Felipe for two hours. Not at the hospital's taxi stand, but at the corner of the opposite street, with his lights and engine turned off, intending to go unnoticed. From his watchful position he could see the entrance to the ER very well. Exactly where, barely twenty-four hours before, he had left the poor old man that had been killed. Since he had seen the old man on TV, he couldn't get him out of his head; the memory was as insistent as a stomachache. His anxiety got to be so great that, finally, he decided to give up on work that night and park himself in front of the hospital. In reality he wasn't sure what he was going to achieve by doing this, but it was the only thread that he had to wind the tangled skein in his head. Because he didn't know what he was looking for, he decided to stay alert and take a good look at everything to see if he found a meaning to things. It was that strange time of morning, too late for the night owls and too early for the early birds, that moment of despondency and of emptiness that announced the death of the night. The street was deserted, save for in the immediate vicinity of the door for the ER, which maintained a constant flow of movement; taxis that came and went, private cars parked in double rows, ambulances that shut off their sirens as they got close but with their alarm lights continuing to mutely flash, doubly alarming in the silence.

There was so much wind that the taxi moved. It rocked like an old boat. The people that entered and left the hospital walked inclined toward the gale, lowering their heads and ramming forward, with their coats flying away from them. It was a gritty gale filled with reddish sand, excessively hot for the month of December. Matías hated wind, any wind, even if the wind wasn't as dirty as this one. He remembered trying to sleep in his little room as a child, which looked out onto a ventilation patio as narrow and long as a chimney. The wind howled there like

a demon, whistling on high like the chimney was a flute. And there he learned to have this fear; or at least to feel grief upon hearing it. Matías shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His back hurt and he was hot, but the hurricane prevented him from opening the window. What an unpleasant winter it had been, with no rain, with no snow in the mountains, with no true cold. A winter in which he sweated in his coats. The air continued shaking the taxi with irregular shoves, and a dozen plastic bags fluttered erratically in the piece of street that Matías was able to see. That was another consequence of the wind in the city: on the windy days, the streets were taken by an infinity of dancing bags coming out of nowhere, white plastics like small ghosts, turning furiously, getting underneath wheels and hooking into the mudguards. The crazed dance of the trash.

Now there came a man with a small child in his arms and, from the way he ran, Matías guessed the severity and the fear. The end of the good times. How many of those who were now hurrying into the ER were about to lose their life of happiness for forever? And how many of them knew? Within the vast and unsuspecting variety of sufferings that the death of a loved one provoked, the taxi driver was especially hurt by the regret of the lost time. Thinking that the good times had ended forever and that they had not enjoyed them as they should have filled him with despair,; until Rita got sick he had not truly appreciated what he had. Like the father that had just arrived at the ER with his son in his arms; if his little one dies, he will regret not having enjoyed things more before the misfortune came! He will regret not being thankful for every minute of his happy and ignorant life! Thinking of these things, Matías experienced a pain so deep and so acute that it became something physical, as if his guts were being stirred with a knife. It hurt so much that his breath almost stopped.

He stretched in his seat and he forced himself to fill his oppressed lungs with air. He shouldn't think such morbid thoughts; surely the boy that just arrived was fine; surely his father had brought him for some stupidly small thing, temporary diarrhea, a broken tooth. He imagined them inside, waiting their turn, and he shuddered. Matías knew San Felipe's ER well. He could describe the inside with all the details. Just entering, on the right was the admission desk, which was a big open window in the wall. Passing the desk, also on the right, restricted access to the care area. In front of admission, the waiting room, a square and shabby space with walls covered in old white tiles, a greenish linoleum floor and various rows of plastic orange chairs bolted to the thick black rails. In the background, two vending machines, one for water and drinks and the other for sandwiches and chocolate bars. It wasn't a very big room and, in addition, several of the chairs were broken, so when it was crowded it was difficult to find a seat. Matías spent hours on his feet there every time he had to bring Rita, when her fever caused deliriums, or when she was vomiting blood, or on those occasions, towards the end, when the pain became something unbearable. Sometimes, when he was waiting to be called by the loudspeakers so that he could go into the restricted area and talk with the doctors, he looked around at the people that crowded the room and asked himself if the others were aware of what waited for them, if they knew that dying was so difficult, something that was difficult and hurt so much. Damn it, sputtered Matías in a loud voice, feeling as though his throat was constricting from sorrow; damn it, if that bastard doctor had paid a little more attention, Rita might still be alive. And, he was amazed as soon as he said it, because it was the first time that he was thinking about it. Yes, that doctor was at fault, the one that attended to them when they came to the ER with great pains in her kidneys. That had been about a year before, and the doctor didn't listen to them, nor did he bother to acknowledge

Rita nor ask her anything, and at first glance said it was renal colic, gave her Buscopan, and washed his hands of her. And so they lost two months, eight whole weeks, a crucial time to overcome cancer. Great heavens, he had just read in a newspaper that ninety percent of cancers that were diagnosed early are curable! And in the hospital, he knew of mountains of cases of people who had overcome the disease. Yes, the true problem had been the incompetence of that useless doctor, Matías now realized. He had to come here and spend half the night in front of San Felipe in order to understand it. That was the message that was waiting for him, hidden inside the folds of the events. What strange paradoxes life had: thanks to the *assassin of happiness* and the death of the poor old man, he had been able to find the origin, the cause of his pain. Matías felt that all of his anger and grief organized and concentrated itself on that point, that the blind desperation that had been driving him crazy recently crossed through his body like an electrical current and fell like lightning on the memory of that damn incompetent doctor. Hate flooded him like a life project.

In that moment he saw her leave and he recognized her right away. Only she possessed that long and vibrant body, that elastic lightness. It was the beautiful black whore from the Oasis. How had she come to be at San Felipe? At the start of the night, they had been next to each other at the counter of the bar, precisely when the reporter talked about the old man, and now he found her again, here. A new coincidence that confirmed to Matías the hidden design of his destiny. The girl walked on the sidewalk, flailing against the pushing wind as if she were about to take flight. When she stopped next to the empty taxi stop, Matías started his taxi and crossed the street, arriving next to her. The girl entered the car, enveloped in a rough swirl of warm air and hurried to close the door, although for this, observed the taxi driver in the rearview, she made a strange

movement, because she didn't pull the handle with her right hand, which is what would have been normal, but with her left.

“Good evening. We're going to La Coruña Highway, please...”

Matías then turned around and noticed the reason for the unnatural movement: the girl wore her jacket over her shoulders and the forearm of her right arm was covered by an immaculate bandage. So she had come to San Felipe for that.

“What happened to you?” he asked brusquely.

The girl returned his look and said nothing, but the hand of her healthy arm touched the edge of the bandages slightly, like someone caring for a sick child. Matías felt fury flowing through him again like a flash of lightning. What have they done, he thought. What have those degenerates done to you, damnit.

“I'm sorry,” sputtered Matías. “I know you. I don't know if you remember me.”

She nodded her head.

“You're the widowed taxi driver.”

The phrase hit him like a slap. Matías was unaware that, like Cerebro was known as Cerebro in the Oasis, everyone there called him the Widower. He swallowed. He didn't know what to say, so he straightened up in his seat and pulled out. He drove for a few minutes without saying a word.

“You're going to the Cachito, right?” he asked without turning around.

“Yes.”

More silence.

“Where are you from?”

“Sierra Leone.”

Matías didn't really know where that was. In Africa, of course. And Africa was a place full of misfortunes. Who knows what life the poor girl must have had. Suddenly, Matías thought that he could no longer bear even more suffering, neither his own nor that of another. The world was a terrible place and his grief weighed on his chest like a ball of iron. He looked at the girl through the mirror: she was leaning against the back seat, with closed eyes and an expression of fatigue. He wished he could protect her dream and let her rest in the refuge of his taxi, but the city was still pretty empty and, even though he tried to drive slowly, they soon arrived at the Cachito. He stopped the car at the door and turned toward his passenger.

“Do you want to get something at the Oasis? Breakfast, maybe?”

“No, thank you. I'm a little tired,” she answered.

Her taut and smooth skin looked like plastic underneath the artificial glow of the pink neon. She put her good hand in the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a couple of bills.

“No, no! Don't pay me. The ride's on me.”

The girl smiled. He had never seen her smile. It lit up the world.

“Thanks.”

“Don't thank me,” said Matías bitterly. “I'm very sorry. I really wish I could help you.”

She looked at him and weighed his intentions. She had learned to read people with a single glance because her life depended on it, and she got the impression that the taxi driver, unlike the doctor, was not interested in her in a sexual way. It was quite possible that he was simply trying to be a good person.

“Why are you saying that? What are you sorry about?” she asked cautiously.

The two gorillas at the door of the Cachito had not taken their eyes off of them since the taxi driver had stopped the car. Matías cleared his throat.

“I don’t know, everything... What happened to you today, if something did happen to you, although I think that something did happen...”

He was rambling.

“I’m sorry that things are very hard and that the world is disgusting and that life is unbearable...”

The girl smiled.

“No, no, no, friend that is not true. You don’t know what life is worth.”

She spoke softly and persuasively, like someone who has to convince a child. She raised her good hand and pointed with her index finger towards the outside of the taxi.

“Look.”

Matías obeyed and looked. And he discovered that it was beginning to get light out. That was what the girl was pointing at, the slight line of new light that clung to the distant profile of things, cutting the shadows and separating the sky from the earth.

“Do you see, friend? The night has a belly full of light. They say that in my country.”

In that moment, the gorillas, perhaps suspicious from the long chat, abandoned their refuge at the entrance and walked towards the taxi with a slow, swaggering arrogance, swaying against the gale. The girl glanced dismissively at them and opened the door to the taxi.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said.

And she disappeared, leaving behind a pinch of dirty wind and a faint aroma of lemon and cinnamon.

Daniel leaned his hot forehead against the glass window and looked down; a carpet of lights shimmered in the darkness. He was on the twenty-sixth floor and the picture window in the modern skyscraper extended from floor to ceiling, so that approaching the transparent wall caused a sense of vertigo. A perfectly recognizable sensation to him, because it was the same as flying on a starry night in Second Life. Daniel let himself become rocked in one of those brief and vague stupors that he had been experiencing with more and more frequency since he had entered into that virtual world. Sometimes, it seemed to him that real life was less real than Second Life, and there had been moments in which he, like now, confused the borders between the two worlds, and for a microsecond he seemed to be inside of his computer. The floating tangle of luminous points, the beautiful and futuristic urban landscape, the way of hanging up there, on top of nothing and on top of the night. God. Daniel breathed deeply and returned to his earthly skin. Behind him, Marina chattered in a voice that was stung by alcohol; too shrill. He listened to her happiness, and Daniel once again envied how easily she enjoyed chatting about nonsense. It was Christmas Eve and they were having dinner at Marina's brother's house: a luxurious and newly built apartment in *las torres*, the new apartment buildings in the north of Madrid. Daniel looked nostalgically one last time at the wide panorama and the cozy darkness and turned to reintegrate himself into the group. A dozen people, family and friends, savored their drinks during after dinner conversation, sunken into pistachio green Italian sofas. Daniel let himself fall into a hard and complicated designer chair that must have cost more than three months of his salary, and poured himself a 21-year Chivas from the tray that was on the table.

"It's awfully hot. Why don't you open a window?" he said too loudly, cutting the conversation like a knife.

His brother-in-law turned towards him with a gesture of sympathy and condescending patience that Daniel hated so much.

“It seems hot to you? That’s possible. Does everyone else feel the same?”

“Come on, open it up,” grunted Daniel.

The owner gave him a narrow, somewhat forced smile.

“I can’t open it, Daniel. The windows don’t open here. It’s a smart building.”

“Smart, you said? How stupid! So you’re all locked up in here like butterflies inside of a box?”

“There are no windows. They’re crystal walls. How do you want them to open?” The brother’s wife haughtily intervened.

“You always have such a positive mindset, Daniel. Always so positive. It’s a pleasure going out with you,” barked Marina acidically from the other side of the room.

“Relax, there’s a perfect ventilation system and air conditioning. I put it on and it’s done.” His brother-in-law hastened to appease him, directing a remote control towards the living room ceiling. A very Second Life gesture.

Daniel wanted to say something, something brief and short, witty and sarcastic, but he couldn’t think of anything good enough, so he leaned back back in his uncomfortable chair and shut up.

“What’s incredible is that on December 24th, we are having the heat that we are having. I’m a little afraid,” his brother-in-law said, perhaps to relieve the tension.

“Yeah, we’re destroying the planet,” a woman full of tinkling bracelets said with a feverish passion. She was an insurance broker and drove the biggest and most polluting SUV in all of Madrid.

“Well, in reality, we aren’t destroying the planet, but rather civilization,” specified his brother-in-law with a certain pedantry. “Nothing is going to happen to the planet, it will readjust and continue existing. But the floods and the desertification caused by the thaws and the heat will cause millions and millions of people to go up north... there will be wars and massacres and horrible famines. They say that at the end of this century there will only be a few hundred million people living at the North Pole. That by then it will be like Asturias, where there are green meadows and mild temperatures.”

“So what the planet is doing is shaking us off, like a dog shakes off fleas. Because that’s what we are, some damn parasites,” said cousin Koldo, a forty-year old university professor that didn’t know that that was the last Christmas of his life, because next August he was going to fall off a small mountain while scaling it. If he had known, he might not have wasted his precious time at a family dinner that seemed tedious to him.

Daniel drained his glass in one gulp and served himself another with the intent to drown out the growing grief that filled his chest. Alcohol, as one knows, was the best medicine. He was a bit drunk, but, above all, he felt out of reality, floating in a land of no one, a little crazy. He didn’t know what he was doing there, at a Christmas Eve dinner, as if these traditions mattered to him; in his brother-in-law's house, as if he were part of the family, when that wasn’t true; accompanying Marina as if they were a couple, when in reality they weren’t. How long had it been since they fucked?

“Yes, of course, these apartments have all the ecological advances. Solar panels and everything,” said his brother-in-law’s wife in response to someone’s question.

Somewhat drowsy, Daniel smoked one cigarette after another and listened without paying attention to the buzz of the general conversation. But, for the love of God, how could one be a plastic surgeon? That’s what Marina’s brother-in-law was. A plastic surgeon. A doctor that chose to specialize in aesthetics knows very well why he was doing it: to get a luxurious apartment like this, to be a millionaire, and to have a lavish life as false as the implants that filled his patient’s breasts: quivering lumps of slippery and flabby silicone, like jellyfish. Disgusting. Suddenly Daniel felt very alone. And miserable. Nothing seemed to make sense; he was nothing more than a dry leaf swept up by the air, a plastic bag tossed from here to there by dirty wind. He remembered Lup, his virtual friend from Second Life. She was a true alien, but at least she was an alien in need of love. He had tried some more of her torture games again with her, and had also stripped and gotten into a more conventional bed, a soft bed full of floating balls that had to be clicked to start the sexual programs: missionary position, anal sex, cunnilingus... He continued to feel ridiculous playing this Disneyland porn -- it still seemed absurd and uninspiring, but at the same time he felt the frustration growing within him, an anxious restlessness that was too much like a hunger, an animalistic need for affection and company, for the rubbing of a burning skin against his, for an explosion of ferocious sex that would manage to get him out of his self-absorption and his melancholy. Dying of sex to forget that he was half dead.

“And the most interesting thing is that money is already taking position in the face of global warming,” said the stupid know-it-all woman with all of the bracelets. “I just read in

Citigroup's Private Banking magazine that a change in investors is already happening. And I will tell you that one of the first beneficiaries is my sector. People have begun to put more money into insurance companies because, of course, the increase of natural disasters, with all of these floods and tsunamis and hurricanes that we are having, is going to make the policies increase a lot. Another obviously interesting sector to invest in is water, which soon will cost more than gold. And then, of course, all of the alternative ecological technologies. There's also something that Citigroup didn't say, but that I think would be wise to do: you have to start buying land in the North. A piece of Canadian forest, for example. Get going, guys, that money is already moving, and he who does not move with it will be left behind."

The insurance broker's name was Belén, who was closer to forty than to thirty and had a centaur body that, from the waist up, was fine and fragile, with small bosoms, bony arms, and a small and triangular face like a raptor; but, from the waist down she thickened like a hippopotamus. Together this caused a strange effect: she looked like a bird perched on the round and powerful hips of a mare. Daniel thought about this animal simile and felt some joy in his crotch, some pleasure when faced with her buttocks. He moved around in his seat, disgusted; it truly had to be very bad for him to be attracted to a woman like Belén, who to him had always seemed to be horrible and insufferable. But, what was happening in the world? What was happening to all of them? That same morning, while he was on SL, Daniel had seen Lup appear on the screen. And for her, that was at five-thirty in the morning. She often did that. Sometimes Lup went onto Second Life for a moment before she had to leave the house to go to work. Daniel imagined her to be almost fifty, tired, still getting up at night in her depressing and boring middle-class apartment, in the cold winter of Canada (yes, it should still be cold there), without

exchanging not a word, nor a look, nor a touch with her husband. He imagined her hurriedly slurping a coffee, standing in the kitchen, so that she could spend a few minutes in SL before she took to the streets and commuted for an hour to her stupid job. He imagined her plugging herself into the computer in order to feel alive, like so many other pathetic individuals who had to do the same all over the world, in Tokyo and Berlin, in Buenos Aires and Barcelona, in Chicago and Rome and Madrid. Like himself, Daniel, pathetic like the rest and connected to others who needed affection, to the vast and dark web of singles, through the umbilical cord of Second Life.

“Hey, brother, don’t you think it’s cold enough?” said Marina.

The guests were standing up to leave and, indeed, they huddled, stiff with cold, anxious to bundle up in their coats. Daniel noticed that he was also freezing; the tip of his nose was like an icicle. He noticed a malignant joy rising up in his throat like bile. A lump of acidic impertinence that he tried vainly to repress:

“Ha! Here is the smart building. A little bit more and your famous air conditioning system would have cryogenized us.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry... It’s my fault that I don’t know the commands yet. Guys, these automated houses are like spaceships, very complicated...” apologized his brother-in-law with tiresome patience.

In the blink of an eye they all said goodbye, descending in the supersonic steel elevators and, after exchanging hurried goodbyes in the streets, disappeared on the way to their cars. Marina and Daniel walked a couple of blocks in the warm night until they found the car.

“I’ll drive,” said Daniel.

Those were the first words he had spoken since they had left the building. Marina didn't answer. All of Marina's verbosity, that wit and that talkativeness that she happily squandered on meetings with her friends turned into stony silence as soon as they were alone. Daniel frowned and tried to concentrate on driving through the vapors of the alcohol. The traffic was quite thick and surely the rest were also somewhat drunk. The doctor looked around, and it seemed that all the cars were similar to his and were occupied by identical couples, frowning men and women staring fixedly ahead. Not talking to each other, not paying attention, with an irritated and a hateful expression. Survivors of the obligatory happiness of Christmas Eve. Remnants of familial destruction. He shuddered; again, he seemed to be a part of a dark web of the shipwrecked. Or perhaps of idiots.

"My brother's house is beautiful," said Marina.

Daniel bit his tongue. He bit it a little bit. But not well enough.

"Well, it seemed ridiculous and absurd to me."

"Ah, did it? Why?"

The tone of her voice was ominous and Daniel knew well where all of this was going to take them. But the first step was already taken, the small landslide of stones that would later turn into an avalanche had already begun.

"Okay, well it's evident, it's a pretentious and very uncomfortable apartment, a claustrophobic place without windows; anyway, it's clear that he bought it for a mere show of status; it's like a tacky builder who buys a Mercedes. But, of course, what can you expect from a plastic surgeon?"

"Of course. What else could I expect from you?"

“What about me?”

“What I’m saying is that you’re full of jealousy.”

“Me? I’m jealous of your brother? Because of the house? Or the job that he has? You know very well that my priorities have never been about money. And you used to think the same thing, or so you said, because you’ve always said so many things... But please, look, being a plastic surgeon... What a way to practice medicine.”

“Of course. What you do is much better.”

“You’re right. At least I’m in public health.”

“How easy, right. Disguise your own failure in ideology.”

“How so?”

“What are you doing with your work and with your life; let’s see, Daniel, can you tell me? It’s been years since you lost your love for practicing medicine. You’re becoming a mushroom, you don’t read a single book, not about medicine nor about literature, you spend the day rotting your brain in front of the computer. At least my brother goes every year with Doctors without Borders and uses his vacations to help people!”

“Ha! He goes to a clinic in Africa for fifteen days to kill his nagging conscience and then spends a month and a half on his boat in Majorca. Because your little brother takes all the vacations he wants...”

“But at least he does something, Daniel, damnit! At least he moves, and wants things, and likes his profession! At least he has a nagging conscience, as you said! And you? What the fuck do you do? I’m sure that even at this point you’re a bad doctor. I wouldn’t want you to look after me, you can be sure of that.”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t even if you were dying.”

They both lowered their chins at the same time and shut their mouths, sinking back into the sullen silence. Bitter expressions, thrusting foreheads. And some drops of ice on their hearts. Daniel lit a cigarette, even though he knew she hated when he smoked in the car. He noticed that Marina was shaking in her seat, furious, but, because she had decided to punish him with her silence, she couldn’t say anything. Annoying Marina gave the doctor a little bit of pleasure, but it was a bitter pleasure that left him with a disgusting aftertaste. Why didn’t they break up? Why were so many poisonous couples staying settled in the venom? Like Lup and her husband, the old ruined sadomasochist. Lup had sent Daniel an email with a catalog from the business that she was manager of. It was called Happy Days, and essentially was dedicated to organizing birthdays for kids and adults, silver and golden wedding anniversaries, and even celebrations for dogs and cats birthdays. It was a horrific catalog full of sugar flowers, noisemakers, colored candles, golden crowns for the princes and princesses of the house, meatball cakes for poodles, garlands of plastic hearts that went on and off with bright fuschia beats. Daniel imagined Lup selling those foolish bunches of synthetic happiness to her clients: the Family Pack, the Complete Deluxe, the Happy Days Special -- all of them stuffed with hearts in their most diverse and hallucinogenic varieties, cookies, candies, heart-shaped sandwiches and pastries; balloons, plates, paper lanterns, and even doormats in the shape of a heart. And there she was, smiling like a fool, stuffed into prudish and banal blue overalls but wearing the Strict Dominating Master underwear underneath, all leather, chains and nipples in the air. But, for the love of God, wasn’t real life much more delirious and incredible than the imaginary life in SL? With Belén the centaur explaining how to better invest in the planetary catastrophe? And with his poor virtual friend -- at

first, Daniel believed Lup was for Lupus, Wolf, but now he knew that it came from her actual, meek name, Guadalupe, Lupita -- crying from pain because she could no longer express her love for her husband by whipping him? And not to mention the *assassin of happiness*, who in reality was like an extreme version of Lup's business. Yet more altruistic, because the assassin didn't charge. That criminal must be out there, in some place in the black night of Madrid, perhaps preparing for his next strike, or perhaps knocking off another grandparent. That would be most appropriate at this time, thought Daniel; nothing like Christmas Eve to irrefutably demonstrate that the distance between dreams of happiness and the possibility of completing them was insurmountable. So they all went home with those bitter faces, he said to himself looking at the passengers of the other cars: the ferocious gestures, frowning and fatal, that rusty expression of those who have turned into little balls of steel from repressing so many tears. Where had all the happiness in the world gone? Daniel didn't understand why happiness was not working; in reality it didn't seem like something that was so hard. For example, at this point it would be enough for someone to love him. For someone to love him in the knowing and complete way that he had imagined during adolescence. With the love he thought he felt for Marina when they met. But now, after so many years of sleeping together every night, sharing the supreme intimacy of sweat and flatulence, that old love that was buried under geological layers of resentment and sorrow. What a strange thing that, after having wanted so much to love each other, they were not able to, Daniel said to himself. Oh, Marina, Marina.